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By **EDWARD
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A Race Williams Novelet

By **CARROLL JOHN DALY**

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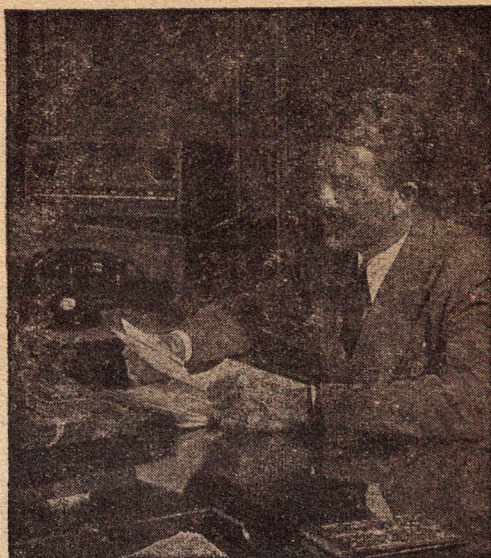
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THRILLING DETECTIVE

Vol. LXV, No. 3

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

April, 1950

A Race Williams Novelet



THE STRANGE CASE OF ALTA MAY

By CARROLL JOHN DALY

When a private eye takes the trail of a fake heiress in a mystery of mayhem, millions and murder, the pathway's littered with corpses and leads right to—a dead end!

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A department where readers, writers and the editor meet

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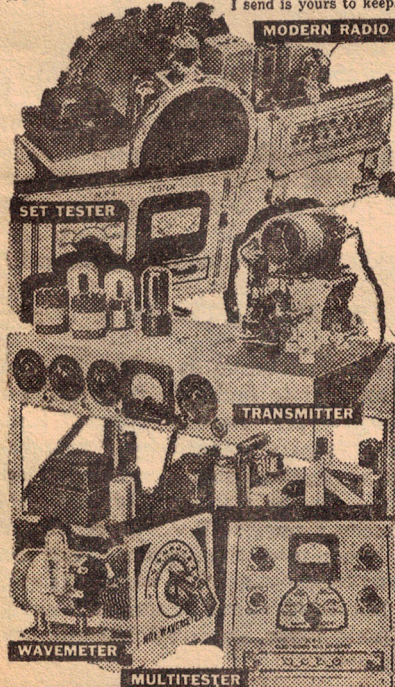
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Headquarters

HOW would you like to be married to a girl you know you never saw before? Yet here is the marriage certificate, dated September 11, 1943—and here is your name and there is her name! Everyone says you are married to her. You know, too, that she hates you. Well, that is exactly what happens to Barney Johnson in **THE MAN WITH THE PLASTIC FACE**, a novelet by Edward Ronns coming next issue!

The first intimation that Johnson has that he is even married comes when Stephen Murch, who used to call on him at the hospital, tells him to visit "Uncle Steve"—his wife's uncle. His wife's name is Lenore—Lenore Holmes before Johnson married her. Even the doctor, who did that wonderful job on his face after those months of pain, tells him to go back. But all Johnson remembers since coming back from overseas is the premature explosion of a hand grenade and the misery of a German prison camp.

How can a man be married and not even remember it? He meets the beautiful Lenore in the luxurious home of "Uncle" Steve Murch, but she ignores him and treats him coldly. She also informs him that through her lawyer, Andrew Temple, she is suing him for divorce. She insists on occupying her own apartment, which is on the floor above the bedroom assigned to Johnson.

A Scream of Terror

Barney Johnson soon has a good reason to remember that bedroom. He is in the midst of one of his nightmares—that recurring nightmare wherein he feels the sharp spike of a woman's heel grinding in his newly-fashioned and tender face. There is a scream of terror from the room above and the sound

of a shot. When he reaches his wife's bedroom, there is the body of a man on the floor. Alongside the body is a revolver.

Johnson reaches down and picks up the weapon. There is a blinding flash and he knows no more—except that the grinding of that high heel in his face is very real now.

Of course Johnson is arrested for the crime. In vain does he protest to Lieutenant Dagget of Homicide that he does not even know who the dead man is and never saw him before. Upon that point he is duly enlightened. The corpse is that of one George Stryker, assistant to "Uncle" Steve Murch, who runs an art gallery for questionable profit on Fifty-seventh Street.

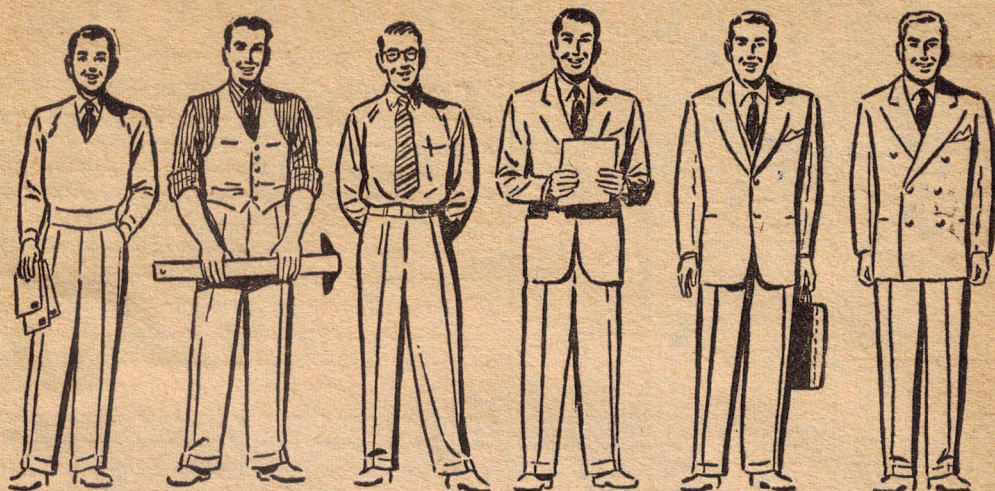
Stryker, it seems, has always been in love with Lenore and came that fateful night to protest against her acceptance of the husband everyone thought was a war casualty. Strangest part of it all is that Johnson finds that heel imprint to be no dream. Some woman did grind her heel in his face as he lay there helpless. Could it have been Lenore? Could she have hated him that much?

Two Missing People

When Barney Johnson is released from jail, he is amazed to find that it is Andrew Temple, the lawyer, who has "sprung" him. The attorney is accompanied by a snappy-looking and very personable secretary named Sue Babson. By the fluttering of her eyelashes, Johnson is assured that the secretary's interest in him is more than casual. They are both anxious to know about a certain trunk. They also inform him that Lenore is missing and so is Uncle Steve. Doesn't Johnson know where they are?

(Continued on page 8)

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HEADQUARTERS

(Continued from page 6)

Even in the short space of time between his arrest and subsequent release, things have apparently happened. Inasmuch as Stryker was killed with Lenore's gun and in her room, coupled with the fact that the dead man had been enamored of her for many years, the police are about to arrest her for the crime—if they can find her. Also where is Uncle Steve who gave her the gun?

Throughout their talk, the lawyer and his sultry secretary keep referring to the missing girl as "poor" Lenore. By their tone they seem to infer that the lady he married was sort of a psychopath. It seems she was the only one who believed Johnson was alive when the government reported him missing. Yet, meeting him face to face, she palpably hated him. But how can you hate someone you don't know?

As for the trunk—it is from Lenore herself that Johnson learns something. He meets her in that little hideaway cottage, where the doctor has sent her. Didn't he remember sending it to her from Bavaria? She had kept it all these years. She knew it held his souvenirs. Wasn't there something else?

Naturally Johnson never knew he had such a trunk. Furthermore, if she wasn't sure what was in it, how could he be expected to know? It was quite obvious, however, from bits of conversation they all let fall, that the police, the doctor, Andrew Temple and his secretary Sue and even Uncle Steve, were more than anxious to lay hands on that trunk.

All along, way in the back of Barney Johnson's mind—coupled with the nightmarish memory of that grinding heel—many things point to the affable Uncle Steve. But when Johnson learns that the police have found Steve's body—

Of course, folks, we could still confuse you by asking you a lot of misleading questions. We will, though, throw just four leading ones in your direction. Bear them in mind. Are Barney Johnson and Lenore really man and wife? Who killed George Stryker and Uncle Steve? What is in the trunk that came from Bavaria? Is the man with the plastic face really Barney Johnson? These and other questions are answered in **THE MAN WITH THE PLASTIC FACE**—next issue! Look forward to a grand mystery.

Also in the next issue—**DEATH IS MY BUSINESS**, a novelet by B. J. Benson.

If ever the Finger of Guilt was wrongfully pointed at an utterly guiltless person, it is in this stirring tale of the untimely end of Henry Horton, aged sixty-two, dealer in stocks and bonds and sundry gilt-edged investments. Henry Horton is found dead in his own office, his gray head slumped forward on his arm, while his right hand holds the receiver of the telephone, almost free of the cradle. He has been shot with a .25 caliber automatic. Ask any policeman—a woman's gun!

Everybody in town knew who Henry Horton was—president of Horton and Company, investment counsellors. His wedding had but recently called for headlines in all the local dailies—especially the sensational ones. He had been married for the second time, just two weeks prior to his death, to one Lona Blake, "third from the end" out of the Casablanca line. To put it in plain language, Horton married what is technically known to the layman as a "chorus girl." The consensus of opinion is—it serves the old fool right!

This is the proposition placed into the hands of our wisecracking investigator, Clifford Clift, by his boss, Oscar R. Elwin of Seaboard Life. Horton has carried a hundred grand policy on his life. A case of murder being looked upon as an accident means double indemnity for aforesaid life insurance company. Moreover, Horton had changed the beneficiary from a charitable institution, to that of his intended spouse, just before the marital knot was tied.

Open and Shut

So, thinks Cliff Clift to himself, if ever there is an open and shut case, this is it. To add fuel to the already roaring blaze, it is common gossip that the sumptuous Lola has an ever-persistent boy-friend by the name of Nelson Paddock. Gosh—why did Elwin give him an easy one like this? Santa Claus must be just around the corner. Of course there is the simple matter of proving it. That should be taken care of by a little judicious cross-questioning.

Now Cliff is prepared for a looker—but scarcely for the eye-filler that sets him back on his heels. For a cookie like this, Cliff would take out more than two hundred grand insurance. His reputation as a woman-hater is getting extremely wobbly. It also turns out that the gorgeous Lona hasn't a leg to stand on—speaking figuratively of course, no

(Continued on page 95)

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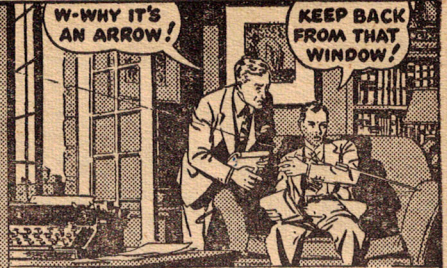
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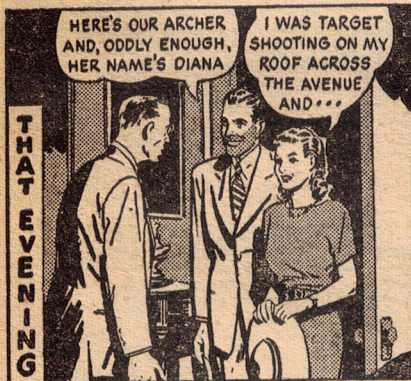
INSPECTOR MOON WON HIS BET AND THEN...



IN A LOFTY NEW YORK APARTMENT, DETECTIVE INSPECTOR JIM MOON AND A MYSTERY WRITER, H.H. KYNE, ARGUE OVER THE PLAUSIBILITY OF THE LATTER'S NEWEST "WHO DONE IT" WHEN...



...AND SO, WHILE AUTHOR KYNE TRIES ARM-CHAIR DEDUCTION TO FIND THE MYSTERIOUS ARCHER, INSPECTOR MOON VISITS SPORTING GOODS STORES



The Strange Case of **ALTA MAY**

CHAPTER I THE LYING GIRL

HE LOOKED money. He looked class. He looked like the idle son of wealth. He swung into my office with a cane over his arm and a flower in his buttonhole. Big, broad shouldered, handsome. Honest blue eyes. Nothing dissipated about him. I'd put him at close to thirty. The twenty side of it. He spoke his piece easily.

"I've read about you, Mr. Williams. Like the Canadian Mounted, you always get your man." And with that pleasant smile, "Though this time,



A Race Williams Novelet

by **CARROLL JOHN DALY**

When a private eye takes the trail of a fake heiress, the pathway is littered with corpses and twists and turns amazingly to—a dead end!

Race Williams Follows Misleading Clues in

it is a woman. The point is, what do you charge to listen—if you refuse a case?"

"Nothing," I told him. "But I listen better with a check in my hand. If I'm not interested, I'll return it. Any objection to that?"

"None whatsoever." His white even teeth showed. "But my bank might not like it. May I talk anyway?"

"Of course." Maybe I was not quite so cordial now. "You do have some means of digging up my fee, though?"

"With your aid, I believe so." And his smile went and his lips tightened somewhat. "I could spend hours over the story with an enthusiasm and dramatic emotion that would surprise you. But I've boiled it down to cold facts. Shall I let you have it?"

"Let me have it," I said, "without the dramatics."

"My uncle," he began, "was Jarvis Harrington. He had no children of his own, but he adopted a daughter—Katherine. It was all legal and above board. Aunt Clara—that was Uncle Jarvis' wife—died, and Uncle had the girl on his hands.

"She had a tough life. I guess he wanted her to be proficient at everything. So she simply messed around with music and painting and the classics—and stuff like that. She couldn't have boy friends and she couldn't have anything a young girl normally should have.

"I guess Katherine had spirit though, for in the long run she jumped the traces and married Uncle Jarvis' secretary, Tom Bronson, a man who really wanted to paint. Uncle Jarvis didn't just chuck her out and disinherit her. He hounded—yes, just like in an old melodrama—he hounded the man she had married. I guess he even accused him of stealing. Anyway, he fixed it up so Bronson couldn't get a job again. And I think he finally put it right up to Katherine. That if she didn't throw over Bronson—divorce him—why he'd press criminal charges and send him to jail."

For a moment, he paused, before continuing, "Then, according to my mother, there was one more big scene between

Uncle Jarvis and his adopted daughter, Katherine. And it was the daughter, this time, who made the threat—against Uncle Jarvis! Katherine laid it on the line. If Uncle Jarvis so much as made one crack, one hint of accusation against her husband, Tom Bronson, Uncle Jarvis would never see her again. Nor her child, Alta May Bronson."

"So there was a child?" I mused. "How did the old man take the threat? And what made the adopted daughter think he'd want to see her again?"

"Yes, there was a child. What made her think he'd want to see her again? Well, I don't know. I guess Katherine thought Uncle Jarvis really cared." And after another pause. "And I guess she was right. When he died last year he left his entire estate to her, or in the event of her death, to her daughter. You see, Uncle Jarvis did threaten Katherine once more. And he never saw her or her husband or the little girl again."

"Did he hunt her up?"

"I don't know. He never said. He wasn't a man you'd ask about it. My father had died and my mother always thought I would get Uncle Jarvis' money. I ran second, so to speak—all or nothing. I got nothing. It was a lot of money. Five million dollars."

I INHALED a bit—recovered—said, "What do you mean, all or nothing?"

"Well, if the adopted daughter was still alive, it went to her—or her heirs. If not, I got it. Well, Katherine Bronson and her husband, Tom, were killed some eight years back. So when Uncle Jarvis died, their daughter Alta May, now grown, got the money."

"And this Alta May—the one who inherited the money—she's got it now? What is your beef?"

"My beef," he said slowly, "is that the girl who got the money is—is not Alta May Bronson!"

"An impostor, eh?" I shook my head. "It's hard to impersonate someone else when such a fortune is involved."

"It has been done, hasn't it?"

"Yes," I told him. "But then you

a Mystery of Mayhem, Millions and Murder!

don't need a detective. You need a lawyer. You can contest the will—claim fraud—I don't know what the legal terms are. It won't take a good lawyer long to find out if there is any cause for your suspicions. If he thinks there is, he'll fight it for you and take a nick out of your pile of the spoils."

He had an answer for that one. Not too good an answer, though. "I wouldn't want it dragged through the press."



RACE WILLIAMS

"Silly," I told him. "You want what rightfully belongs to you. There is no disgrace in that."

"No, no, none whatever." He started to hunt for a cigarette, took the one I offered him and said, "If I were wrong, I'd look quite an ass, wouldn't I? Not that I haven't made quite an ass of myself on other occasions. But think of the girl." And when I refused to think of her, and waited, he leaned forward and spoke almost confidentially. "There are other complications—at least one. You see, Mr. Williams, I'm in love with the girl."

"And she?"

"Is Alta May in love with me? I don't

know. I did think so. I did hope so anyway. Now, I doubt it. She won't see me any more, and I don't blame her for that."

"Tough," I told him and then truthfully, "I'm not of a romantic turn of mind, Mr.—" I looked down at his card which was inscribed, Frank Huntington Roberts—"Mr. Roberts. What are your reasons for believing she's an impostor? I can understand your reason for wanting to expose her."

"No, you can't," he told me and meant it. "I suppose I want what money belongs to me. But I want to marry the girl."

"And you think if your positions were reversed, things might be better?"

"Decidedly." He smiled, and when I didn't smile back, "Oh, I wouldn't threaten her or anything like that, Mr. Williams. I'd hope to make her love me again—in time."

"Very fine. Give me the grounds for your believing she is an impostor. Without the love interest, please."

ROBERTS' even, white teeth showed again. He seemed to have an unshakable good humor.

"I was away." He went right back to his rehearsed part. "When this girl who calls herself Alta May came back, took over the Yonkers house, the Southampton place, and the lodge up in Maine—" He seemed to watch me there to see if I was impressed and, even if I didn't show it, I was. "Naturally I was disappointed that the property and the money didn't come to me. But I got curious, and since she was spending the season up in Maine, I went up there and had myself introduced to her under another name."

"Another impostor."

"Exactly." He was not ruffled, and he didn't redden. "Now for the damning evidence. Alta May was not too familiar with the family, with her family, with my family, with the names she should have known."

"You questioned her—even though you were an impostor yourself?"

"Why not? I noticed she seemed to be avoiding the people she should meet—I mean those people her mother and father might have known. Well, there was the big scene—love scene, I mean. And of course I told her who I was and—and—"

"That ended that."

"That ended that," he agreed emphatically. He sucked in his lips and ran his tongue out over them. "Alta May was more frightened than angry at my revelation. More shocked than surprised."

"Any explanation—why she wasn't familiar with past events?"

"Yes. I'm afraid I was a little rough on her there. She said that her mother spoke little of such things. In fact, fragments only. That left her with no idea she was an heiress. She was surprised when she was—found."

"That," I told him, "would be natural of her mother, under the circumstances."

"That—" he didn't like the words nor the sound of his voice when he used them—"that would be the natural thing for her to say, too, if she were an impostor."

I agreed on that one. I went over things again with him. The difficulties of impersonating someone else. And when he tossed in more facts that only bore out what I was saying, I went on with it. It meant crooked lawyers, and he admitted that the firm in question had represented his Uncle Jarvis for years and were highly respected. It meant fooling the court. In fact, it meant it couldn't be done. And we came back where we started by my admitting to him that on occasion it had been done.

I wasn't interested. Roberts had good references. He was highly respectable. He was in a brokerage firm and quite frankly admitted he sold securities because of his connections. He was on his feet, but before I could dismiss him, he leaned over the desk and turned on his dramatics.

"I didn't yet mention the fee," he said. "Five hundred thousand dollars—one half million dollars, Mr. Williams, as soon as you put me in possession of the Harrington estate. As soon as you establish my right to the inheritance. It's

a lot of money."

"But you haven't got it." I grinned at him.

"It's a lot of money," he said, "whether I have it or not."

"Sit down, Mr. Roberts," I told him. "Your dead right it's a lot of money—whether you have it or not."

CHAPTER II

TWO DEAD MEN



WHEN he was seated again, I said, "Now give me one reason why you came to me."

"Then you've taken the case?"

"Not at all," I told him. "I have simply agreed that half a million dollars is a lot of money."

"Well, I came to you because you are a man who can be relied upon and because you are a man of discretion."

"There are plenty such men." And, with a grin, "If not in the detective field, certainly among top estate lawyers. I am a man who is called upon as a last resort. A man who is hired to face danger—generally death—" And, leaning forward, "mostly murder."

"All right," Mr. Roberts rose now and started to pace the room. "I did hire a detective. If you want death, I'll give you death. If you want murder, I'll give you murder. The detective working for me was shot through the back of the head."

I was interested. "What was his name?"

"Slavin—Jimmy Slavin."

I nodded. "Slavin works out of the Gregory Ford Agency. Then you went to Gregory Ford. What happened? What did Gregory Ford tell you?"

Roberts didn't like that one. He hesitated for some time. Then he said, "I ran out of money."

"But what did Gregory Ford tell you?"

"Okay, Mr. Williams." Roberts' boyish enthusiasm was back a bit. "I didn't want to go into that. Gregory Ford told me to go home and forget it." And with an effort, "He said that Alta May Bronson was not an impostor. Is half a mil-



Roberts felt the gun go
smack into his side

lion a lot of money?"

"It is not as much as it was before," I told him honestly enough. "What did he say about Slavin?"

Roberts didn't like that one either, but he answered it. "He said that Slavin was killed because of something else—that's all." And when I just looked at him, "Okay, Mr. Williams." He came to his feet. "I'm convinced there is something wrong—terribly wrong. Alta May was frightened. I know fear when I see it and hear it in a voice. Now, I'm not going around begging anyone to take this case. I offer you a flat half million—take it or leave it. I want a yes or a no."

"Like that?" I asked him.

"Just like that."

"Okay then." I picked up a letter I had been reading before he came in. "The answer is no."

I said it as if I meant it. And perhaps I did. Anyway, I might as well. He turned around and walked right out of the office. I dropped the letter back on the desk—grinned and waited. Then I stopped grinning. He didn't come back.

I knew I was right. It would have cost me time and money—for nothing. Common sense told me that you couldn't go around impersonating five million dollars. I dismissed it from my mind. It didn't make sense.

That is, I dismissed it until close to twelve o'clock that night. I bought a paper right outside of Willie Chaffey's Feed Box—and it stood my hair right up on end and set my fedora wavering.

It was spread across the front page. The ink was hardly dry. If it didn't smear my fingers, it sure felt like it. Frank Huntington Roberts, scion of a prominent social family, had been shot not much more than an hour ago while entering a taxi. It was as if you'd shot a half million in folding money right out of my inside jacket pocket.

It wasn't his name so much that made the headlines I guess. It was the time and the place and the daring behind the shooting. He was plugged almost in front of the Mercury night spot, and a dozen people had seen the shooting—and the police would have the man who did it at any moment. He had been recognized by a man on the street.

That is newspaper work for you. They had a lot of details considering the time the shooting happened. But they didn't have how seriously Roberts was hurt, though this particular paper dramatically hinted that the shot would be fatal. And it gave the name of the hospital he had been "rushed to."

I DIDN'T get in to see Roberts until after the police had questioned him. It appeared they were convinced that he was shot by mistake for another man. Roberts had stated that the gunman had called him by another name just before he fired.

Frank Roberts was smoking a cigarette and he grinned up at me. It was simply a flesh wound in the side.

"I'm no good to you," he said. "You want a body. But you do get around. So it isn't a cold war any more."

"It looks," I told him, "like a hot one. Anyway, the shooting has started. What's this yarn about the lad calling you by another name? True?"

"No." He grinned. "I didn't want Alta May Bronson dragged into it. I told you I intend to marry her."

"You still love her after this bit of shooting? Certainly you believe it has something to do with your sticking your nose into the thing—into the money."

He shook his head. "I won't believe she engineered the shooting. I won't believe she had any part of that. Now, Mr. Williams. Still interested in that half-million—if I have it or not?"

"Forget the half million," I told him. "I'll charge you enough if things work out all right." And while he gaped at me, I added, "Tell me about it."

He did, and there was little to it. He was stepping into the taxi when he felt the gun go smack into his side. He never could explain how he knew it was a gun. But he did know, and he suddenly thought of Jimmy Slavin. Anyway, he switched his body in a split second. That was all.

I told him to take care of himself. Then I left. Did the police really have any idea who shot him—and when they found the man—well, would the man make up the same sort of story that Roberts had? That is—that he thought Roberts was someone else?

I ducked into the subway and rode up to Kingsbridge. I'd see Sergeant O'Rourke of Homicide. He was a good friend of mine.

I got the sergeant out of bed. He gave me a drink. Told me to talk as loud as I wanted to, the missus was used to visitors at all hours. Showed me the picture of his latest grandson, which now made five. Told me about his youngest girl—who had a scholarship at Smith. Then he came down to cases.

"What's on your chest, Race—wasn't just in the neighborhood?"

I didn't exactly lie to him, but I did quibble with the truth.

"It's about the Roberts shooting," I told him. "His family is worried. They wonder if he—well, if he made an enemy—'such a romantic adventuresome boy' was the way they put it. And they wonder if he told you the truth when he said he was mistaken for someone else."

"We wondered too." O'Rourke leaned back and laughed. "I was on my way home when it happened, and I saw the boy in the hospital. If he lied, he lied well, and at the time I was inclined to think he lied well." And then, "We work fast sometimes, Race. Eddie Moran shot him. Now he didn't mean to shoot Roberts—unless, of course, Roberts has some pretty good friends, some friends pretty handy with a gun."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, about twenty minutes before you arrived, Detective Cohens called me up. Eddie Moran was found shot to death. Oh, we'll look Roberts up of course—but we don't think he had that kind of friends. You see, a bartender recognized Eddie Moran when he shot Roberts—that's how we know it was Moran. Tell the family not to worry. And charge them double for not leaving things to the police."

"Thanks," I told O'Rourke. "That should kill any scandal. I won't keep you up longer."

"Don't you want to know where the body of Eddie Moran was found? Well, it was found over on Eighth Avenue. Looks something like the fur racket."

"Why?" I was just making conversation before I closed the door.

"I don't know." O'Rourke stifled another yawn. "Inspector Nelson has fun-

ny ideas in the back of that head of his. It's just about the same place where the body of that private eye Jimmy Slavin was found. Good night."

And I was standing on the steps in the dark as O'Rourke closed the door. It would have been coincidence enough if someone had tried to shoot Roberts in mistake for another man just after Roberts had left me. But it would certainly be stretching the long arm of coincidence far out of its socket to have the body of Eddie Moran, who had shot Roberts, found at the same place as the body of Jimmy Slavin—who had been working on the case for Roberts.

Sure, it looked as if the five million was in the bag. Impossible as it may sound, it looked as if a five million dollar fraud had been put over on the Surrogates Court of New York. I'd call on Jimmy Slavin's boss, Gregory Ford, the first thing in the morning.

CHAPTER III

RACE INVESTIGATES



GREGORY FORD had the biggest agency in the city. It wasn't hard to get in to see him. Half the time he thought he might learn something from me and the other half he thought maybe I'd work for him—though my methods certainly would have given him many a sleepless night.

Gregory Ford sat behind a big desk in a big office and looked exactly what he was—the head of a private detective agency. There were the beetle brows, the steady stare, the thick cigar. Even in these times he would have put on a derby hat if he thought that was what a client expected. Gregory Ford wasn't a phony. Not by a long shot he wasn't. Years ago he figured that was what the people wanted and expected and he gave it to them. It became part of him over the years.

"Sit down, Race," he said. "Sit down, boy. A cigar, a cigarette—a drink now? No—well, what's this about Jimmy Slavin and the Bronson heiress?" He was referring to my phone call of course.

"Slavin," I said, "got killed investi-

gating the Bronson heiress—right?"

"Now, now." The brows came down and the eyes grew steady. "I wouldn't put it that way. Jimmy Slavin was killed while he was working on that little affair, yes. But he was working on other things too. He was smart, Race, as good as there was. He wasn't on my pay roll you know—just so much per day. He was good on documents and estates." After a long pause. "I think he got himself mixed up in a fur racket and—playing both ends against the middle—got knocked over. Nice boy, nice boy. Sad, but inevitable. His wife sings around cafes."

"What has that to do with it?"

"Nothing, except she can take care of herself. I expect she had to anyway."

And when I came down to gold tacks about the Bronson set-up, Gregory said, "I took that case for young Roberts. Yes, I know. He was shot. You add two and two together and get five million instead of four. This girl who calls herself Alta May Bronson is exactly that. Alta May Bronson. There can be no mistake about it." And when I just looked at him: "Do you think I'd toss over a case of that magnitude? Commonsense should tell you it couldn't be done."

"Your full report came from Slavin, didn't it? Mightn't he have been hiding something—intending to cash in on it—and been bumped?"

"Yes, yes." Gregory nodded. "The report came from Slavin. And certainly he might have hidden something. But I checked and double checked it. There wasn't much to it. The Bronson girl's mother and father left New York in 1926. She was two years old then. They arrived in Paris, changed their names to La Verne, and two years later went to live in the south of France. Bronson went in for painting. Did fairly well at it—under the name Henri La Verne. But he kept his own name too. That is, he was in touch with things here to a certain extent. The family—still with the little girl—fled to Switzerland—"

parents were killed in an automobile accident. I think that was September, the latter part of 'Forty-two. A Swiss family—Blanche—took care of the little girl. Money certainly was not mentioned to them or anticipated by the girl. Let me see. Jarvis Harrington died in—oh, last year sometime. Six weeks later, they had located the girl."

"Who?"

"The law firm of Stevens, Ronalds, Blake and Stevens. You see, Stevens, Senior, took charge of all Jarvis Harrington's business. When he died a year or two back, young Mr. Stevens—" Gregory Ford permitted himself a grin — "he must be close to fifty now—had that end of the business. Wait, Race. Young Mr. Stevens, Charles Holland Stevens, was made executor of the Harrington estate. Harold Ronalds, one of the smartest, the wealthiest and the most respected men in his profession drew up the will. He was visiting Europe last year and picked up the girl himself and brought her back."

"Did the Swiss family have any idea that Alta May was the Bronson heiress?"

"Not the slightest."

"Did she?"

"Not that she was to be an heiress, no. But that she was a Bronson, yes. You go talk to Harold Ronalds if you wish. The Bronson girl wasn't supposed to know, but little things here and there that parents will talk about gave her an idea that she was someone else. Her parents did tell her a little when she questioned them. But the money came as a surprise."

"It sure is odd." I was disappointed all right. "What a coincidence that—"

"Yes, I know. You don't believe in coincidence. But it does happen. And I can see Roberts' viewpoint. Nice boy, nice family—but a little hard up. He expects the money, doesn't get it, and can make himself believe anything."

"Did you check it all personally?"

"I don't know what you mean by *all*," Gregory said. "If you mean did I go to Europe, no. If you mean did I interview Harold Ronalds and young Stevens, who has complete charge of the estate, yes. I didn't bring Roberts' name into it. I spoke vaguely of a claimant in France."

HE REFERRED to some notes on his desk. "Lucerne it was. That would be just about the start of the war. Her

"That is all you did?"

"Well—" Gregory reddened a little and then laughed. "I guess I had dreams like you, Race. When Slavin was shot, it startled me. To be perfectly frank with you, I went to see the Surrogate himself—and not only was convinced but was laughed at. There wasn't the slightest irregularity in the entire procedure—not the slightest question. You should know what a reputation Judge Blenheim has in such estate matters."

I did. And I did listen to Gregory's suggestion that I take over his Chicago office.

"We need a good rough tough man there right now, Race," he told me. "I could go to a pretty good figure—in fact, a very good figure, if you'd like to take a crack at it."

I shook my head and left. Sure I was let down. I had thought for sure I had my finger on a five million dollar swindle. I looked up Stevens, Ronalds, Blake and Stevens. That afternoon I went in to see Harold Ronalds.

I GUESS I wanted to be impressed, and I was. He was a white haired man, crowding seventy. Pleasant, too, as he looked down at my card.

"I have heard about you, Mr. Williams." He smiled at me. "Now I am not going to ask you who this mysterious foreign client of yours is. There isn't a bit of doubt of the—er—Miss Alta May Bronson's identity. I know. No doubt you are working through a firm of lawyers. Speaking for the firm and for young Mr. Stevens, who is sole executor of the Jarvis Harrington estate, I might say that under no circumstances would we consider paying out a penny to any claimant, under any circumstances. I don't know how well you have investigated the past of Miss Bronson or her parents. But we have investigated that past most thoroughly since Mr. Ford came to see us. We find nothing, absolutely nothing that would justify any intimidation of our client into settling rather than—"

"Oh nothing like that," I came in. "I'm just to make a report."

"Certainly, certainly." And when I was about to leave, he called to a man passing in the outer office. A rather



"I'll take the bag,
Miss Bronson"

chubby little fellow with gold pince-nez on his nose and his black hair streaked with gray. "Oh, Charles—one minute please," he called.

Charles came. I shook hands with "young Mr. Stevens."

"Charles," Harold Ronalds said. "This is Mr. Williams—a well known private investigator. It's regarding Miss Bronson again—a question, I believe, of her identity."

"Well, well." Charles Stevens seemed a lively little lad. "He'll have to work fast then. She's using quite a bit of the money. I've read about you, Mr. Williams. Like a detective of fiction. But Mr. Ronalds here will have to enlighten you. I am entirely on the financial end of things. If he brought back the wrong girl, that is his lookout. Dear me, Ronalds, you did a remarkable job of establishing her identity—and you picked a very charming young lady for the role."

"I am afraid—" Ronalds permitted himself a slight smile which he wiped off at once—"that, Mr. Williams, or at least whoever he represents, would hardly appreciate your levity, Charles. Again Mr. Williams, we are not entirely unused to such investigations, such claims."

"Miss Bronson," I said, "does not seem overanxious to associate with the relatives of her late foster-grandfather."

I knew the moment I said it that I had rubbed Harold Ronalds the wrong way.

"Really," he said, "I am not familiar with—nor would I consider it proper to discuss—Miss Bronson's social activities."

"Why would she want to have anything to do with them?" I was surprised at the way Charles Stevens' little eyes snapped. "They all treated her mother most shabbily and—"

Charles Stevens stopped. He coughed. Cleared his throat. And grinned at me. His teeth were even and white and I was positive his own.

"Of course, Harold," he said to Ronalds, "of course you are right. Miss Bronson's actions and opinions are hardly a part of our function. I have a deep admiration for the young lady, Mr. Williams." He turned to me. "Let me con-

gratulate you, too, on your efforts in behalf of someone else. You must excuse me now."

Charles Stevens walked out of the office, leaving the door open behind him. Harold Ronalds stood looking at his back. "You know," he said, as if speaking into space, "that is the first time I ever remember Charles losing his head. Do you know, I believe young Stevens is smitten with the girl!"

CHAPTER IV

ROGUES GALLERY



HAT was when I left. But somehow I didn't believe young Stevens had lost his head. He had seemed quite natural and quite himself—though what "himself" was, I didn't know. I, too, had an idea that young Stevens might have ideas of marrying five million dollars. It bothered me at first—then it didn't. Who wouldn't entertain such an idea? A young wife and five million in cash would not be too unpleasant a way of spending your declining years.

When I reached the street, I was wondering what the inheritance tax would be. It made me sick to think of it. Under the circumstances, I thought young Stevens was bearing up very well indeed.

So—I didn't have any specially exhilarating news to take to a young man convalescing in a hospital, dreaming of five million dollars and the girl he loved.

I'd see one more person. The widow of Jimmy Slavin. Maybe he had told her something.

It was after lunch when I reached the now deceased Jimmy Slavin's apartment. Uptown and a walkup. Mrs. Slavin was home. She was a nice bit of goods. If she was missing Jimmy, she didn't show it too much.

She invited me in and sat down on the arm of a chair.

"I'm a mess," she told me. "But I just had something to eat. I'm working a new cocktail lounge—night spot to the patrons—and what with rehearsals in the late afternoon I don't get much time."

And when I apologized for bringing

up the unpleasant subject of the late lamented Jimmy, she said, "That's all right, Mr. Williams. It's like a relief. Not that I didn't love Jimmy, but I didn't know what was going to happen next. Being a detective, he always found out too much—then wondered how he could make more money from what he had found out. He wanted to do big things for me, and almost did—always *almost*. About his shooting. Well, I don't know."

And to my next question:

"Yes, I knew about the heiress racket. He was always enthusiastic. Just before he got—got it, he said, 'Dolly, ten or twenty grand will only be small change pretty soon. I'm onto something big.'"

"Then—" This was my first break. "Then he had discovered she wasn't—this girl was an impostor?"

"Oh no." Dolly Slavin shook her head and knocked me off the ladder again. "He said she was the heiress all right, but there was big money around just the same."

"Around her—for him?" And when she looked at me. "Are you sure of that?"

"Well, I thought I was." She frowned, then brightened up. "Anyway, he wasn't disturbed too much on her being the heiress—the right one, I mean."

"Do you think that had anything to do with his death?"

"His death—his death? Oh no, no. I don't like to talk about that."

"Sentiment?"

"No." She seemed reluctant now. "I just don't want to talk any more about it, Mr. Williams. I've kept out of the rackets—always. And I'll say this for Jimmy. He never tried to bring me into them."

"The fur racket?" And when her eyes widened and she seemed frightened, I added, "Don't you want to know who killed your husband, Mrs. Slavin? Don't you want to have him punished?"

"I want to be out of it!" she cried, standing up and facing me. "I don't want any more of it. I know who killed him—and that's enough. Ed Moran was here to see him—and—" She put both her hands on my shoulders. "Jimmy was to meet Ed Moran the night he died. But don't you see, Mr. Williams? I'm through with even the thought of that

life. I knew Jimmy would go too far with his easy money."

JIMMY SLAVIN, the man working on the Bronson case, was killed by Ed Moran, the man who had tried to kill Frank Roberts. Roberts, the man who thought he was entitled to the millions. . . .

Complicated—and how. And I like my crimes straight.

I guess I'm a tough guy to satisfy, though. Okay—so maybe I didn't believe any more that the Bronson girl was a phony. Or maybe I didn't want to let myself believe it. I had interviewed about everyone connected with the case but the heiress herself. But—well, now I went to see Roberts. He was home in his small apartment and felt fine. The police weren't bothering him any more.

"I never felt better," he said. "And the papers aren't giving it much of a whirl—except the mistaken identity." He grinned at me then. "Too many mistakes in identity in this thing, Mr. Williams. I see that the man who shot at me got himself killed by— What's the matter?"

"I haven't done much looking at the newspaper," I told him, and then I gave it to him flat. "It's a washout, fellow. The girl is the real thing. There isn't a crook mixed up in the whole deal but the dead Jimmy Slavin—and you brought him in."

"You mean you're giving up already?" And, half climbing out of bed, "You can't, Mr. Williams. You haven't seen the girl. You didn't see the look on her face that I saw when I questioned her about being unfamiliar with any of us—of Jarvis Harrington's relatives. Before she knew who I was, she asked me if I'd love her if she was a fraud and a cheat. She's playing a part, I tell you. And what's more, I'm in love with her. Go to see her. You've got evidence that she's not the real Alta May Bronson. I'm that evidence—the fear I saw in her."

"Where is she now?" I asked.

"Yonkers." He leaned forward and gave me the address. "You can't miss it."

"I have an idea that might work out," I said, "if it doesn't land me in jail for disturbing the peace."

"Look." He had that nice smile working again. "I won't see you foot all the bills. I'll pay for the taxi up to see her."

"No." I shook my head. "So far, your case has cost me forty cents. Considering that my time is of some value, let us call it a half dollar flat. Not so much," I went on sarcastically, "when you think of a half million or more."

So Roberts had seen fear in the girl's eyes. Okay then, I'd go up and have a look at her, see what I'd find. And I'd take along a little picture—a photograph to make things interesting.

I didn't know much about Ed Moran. So I went down to a newspaper office, got in to see Billy Frazier, who gave me not only a photograph of the gentleman in question but a good deal about his life.

"He don't sound like any fur racket business to me," Billy said. "Look at this picture. Isn't it a beaut?"

YES, it was at that. Moran was dressed up in top shape. Nothing flashy, understand. You might take him for a banker.

"Gentleman Ed Moran," Billy went on. "That's what the boys called him. In a way, Race, I suppose he has been a confidence man. But he took that up after he got a jolt for forgery about fifteen years ago."

And in answer to another question, Billy told me, "It's hard to tell what a man would do, Race. As far as I know, he was never found with a gun on him. And certainly he wouldn't kill a man for hire. But, if it was personal, if his whole future depended upon it, well then I think he'd shoot."

Forgery. That word stuck in my head.

"Did he come into money lately?" I asked.

"I don't know." Billy shook his head. "And I don't think you could find out. He was used to big money at one time, Race. He'd know better than to toss it around."

Billy was pretty well informed on Gentleman Ed Moran, just as he was pretty well informed on just about everything in the newspaper morgue. But he couldn't put his finger definitely on who Moran worked with. Confidence

men and forgers usually worked very closely with someone. But we boiled Moran down to three possible buddies.

Then we checked up on them. One of them was dead. Another had been in jail for the past three years—which left one. George Granger. I hadn't told Billy anything about the doubts about the Bronson heiress.

"If you have the fur racket in mind," Billy said easily, "forget George Granger, though he might be the agent for the foreign stuff. He speaks several languages, is highly educated and smooth as glass. It's a wonder how such people get into crime."

I took the picture of Gentleman Ed Moran. I also had a good look at a picture of George Granger—and a promise of a copy later if I wanted it.

"George has always been sort of in the background of things," Billy said. "He's always in and out of the country. He hasn't been in England much. He likes the Continent—South of France—Monte Carlo. These are not young fellows, Race. I'm afraid they are out of your line."

"Perhaps." I thanked him. "But I'll try and put them in my line."

CHAPTER V

HEARD IN THE DARK



IT WAS a nice night. Pleasant for a drive. The traffic was not too bad and the home of Alta May Bronson was in the old Park Hill section of Yonkers—not too far over the city line. It was late for a call, but it was my last stand. I'd clear things up in twenty-four hours or be through with it. I'll admit forgers and smooth guys and a lad who traveled the Continent and spoke several languages gave me quite a shot in the arm.

I liked the Yonkers place. There was a wall around it and the house was set back in the trees and it wasn't too big.

Another car ahead of me swung into the gate. Curious? I'm always curious. There were no sidewalks so I ran my car up a bit and parked off the road close to the wall of the property beyond.

Then I went back on foot.

That car was new, a four thousand dollar job, and I wanted a look-see at such a classy caller. I hopped the low wall in time to see the owner of the car—one person, and I thought male—pass into the house.

I looked at my watch. It was ten minutes after nine. It was a nice night, no moon, so I wandered around a bit, circling the house. I wanted to see the girl alone.

Before a tile patio there was a light through some French windows. Not a bad place to peek through. I crouched and made sure that no one was in that patio. I was ready to slip into it when one of the French windows opened. A man stood in the light. I knew him at once of course. It was young Mr. Stevens.

"Alta May," he half called, half whispered. "The maid said you were out here."

"Yes," came her answer. A figure in black suddenly materialized in the patio and came into the light.

That was how near I had come not only to being seen, but caught. Roberts was right. She didn't need five million to make a man want to marry her. In fact, a guy might need the five million to do as well, shopping any other place. Her voice was nice.

"Mr. Stevens, I was not expecting you—or anyone."

He came forward and took her hand and held on to it. "Try to call me Charles, Alta May," he said. "I'd like that."

"All right—Charles," the girl said. "You haven't come to admonish me?"

And that was the first time I noticed a trace of accent in her voice. Then I thought, why not? She'd lived abroad since she was two.

"Not admonish you, child—for in many ways you are like a child. But I would be lax in my duty to you, to myself, and to the memory of your adopted grandfather, if I didn't speak out. Now, Alta May. I know you have great wealth, but it is a tremendous lot of money you have drawn."

"Isn't there plenty of money there?"

"Well, yes. But I did have to liquidate some rather valuable bonds. And I'm thinking of the purpose for which you use it."

She came rather close to him and whispered something.

"Of course, of course," he answered. "You told me that." He seemed just a trifle impatient. "These people were good to you—the child you liked so much needed an operation. I understand that. But I'm talking about much more money than that."

"I am sorry, Charles, if I appear extravagant."

"It's not that." And suddenly he put his arms around her. "I love you, Alta May," he said. "And—and God help me—I feel that you are being blackmailed."

SHE pushed him away, but he went on talking. He talked about blackmail breeding more blackmail. A stop should be put to it at once. If there is something that had to be bought off, it should be bought off and finished with.

[Turn page]

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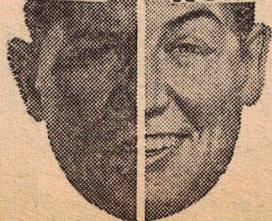
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That the greed of a blackmailer was "insatiable."

All of it was good and all of it was true—if she were really being blackmailed. And then I saw the thing in her eyes that Roberts had seen—fear.

"Good heavens," young Mr. Stevens said suddenly, "it's not Roberts—demanding what he considered his share of his uncle's estate?"

"No," she answered quickly. "He never would do such a thing. There has not been one penny for him, though I thought—that he might—that he should receive some of it. I was going to ask you to advise me on that."

"No." Young Mr. Stevens was emphatic. "At least, not yet. It might be misunderstood by him and his family as an admission that he was really entitled to some of it."

"And isn't he?"

"No."

She looked straight at him. "Are you absolutely sure?"

"Absolutely. Understand, Alta May, he has no legal claim. As for any other claim. Well, my father drew up Jarvis Harrington's will. Our Mr. Ronalds was present at the signing of that will, and he's fully versed in its contents and Jarvis Harrington's desire in the matter."

"Then what makes you think that Frank Roberts feels I should give him money?"

"Because he's been investigating, and I know he illusions that his uncle's will is not being properly administrated. There was a detective who talked of a foreign claimant—but Mr. Ronalds readily saw through that."

Then Young Mr. Stevens went ardent. He took the girl's hand and begged her to marry him. He waved aside the difference in age. He tossed in his gray-ing hair—called it premature—and lied when he let it lightly slip out that there was hardly more than fifteen years between them, though the girl couldn't possibly be more than twenty-five.

Alta May looked over his shoulder and I saw her blue eyes plainly. She was giving it thought all right. No doubt about that.

"It wouldn't make any difference," she asked almost speculatively, "if I

weren't an heiress?"

"Only the difference that I would have spoken sooner," he told her. "I have plenty of money. And, Alta May, I'd protect you from whatever it is your fear. No, don't deny it. I see it in your eyes now. I've seen it there before."

"Could we go away?" she asked. "Travel? Change our—my name—forget I ever inherited a fortune?"

"Why you'd change your name of course." He tried to put a jocular note in his voice. "You'd have my name. I'd protect you. You will tell me everything. It can't be so bad, Alta May. And no matter what it is, don't you see—I wouldn't care."

ALTA MAY was almost in his arms. Then she pulled back.

"No!" she cried out. It was torn right from inside of her. "I don't love you, Charles. But it isn't only that. You're too good, too fine. I wouldn't let you throw yourself away on me. I—" She straightened now. "I tried to get money from the bank today—and couldn't!"

"Really?" He came back to business pretty good, I thought. "But there's plenty money there for you."

"They didn't have it in my account. Don't you know? Didn't they call you?"

"Yes," he said, as if he didn't want to speak. "That's why I came tonight. One hundred thousand dollars, Alta May. You said it was for some property in Europe you wanted to buy. In Europe—as vague as that."

"And you didn't believe it?"

"No," he said, "I didn't believe it."

"You—" She put her hands to her face and her body shook, and I could see the sobs and the hysterics coming. But I was wrong. She lowered her hands, and her eyes were dry.

"It was a lie, about wanting the money for some property," she told him. "It will be the last. Get this money for me, Charles, and I'll do whatever you want me to do afterwards."

"I don't want you to do or not do anything," he said. "And the money is not mine, but yours."

"Get me the money," she said, "and I'll marry you." And when he stood staring at her, "That is what you want—that is what you told me was the dear-

est wish of your life."

"I'll see that the money is there," he said somewhat stiffly. "It is your money. You are entitled to it. I love you, Alta May, very deeply and very sincerely. I'll propose again at another time. Good night."

He turned toward the window, but she ran after him and took him by the arm. I don't know what she said. I don't know what he said. It went on inside, behind the French windows—closed French windows now. But it wasn't very much for I was standing close against the side of the house by the front door a few minutes later when the four thousand dollar job purred softly into life and speed easily down toward the gate.

I took to the wall and left as I had come. No, I didn't think this was the time to see Alta May Bronson. I had seen the fear in her eyes. So had young Mr. Stevens, who didn't seem too bad a lad at that, even if he lied about his age. But there was no reason to believe that her fear was because she was not the rightful heir to the Harrington millions. Certainly young Mr. Stevens didn't entertain any such fantastic idea. And young Mr. Stevens was in a position to be pretty well informed.

The next day I played bodyguard to one hundred grand. Also I ducked seeing Frank Huntington Roberts. I talked to him on the phone. I didn't give him any information—nor any encouragement. I didn't see yet where there was anything in it for him—either the girl or the money.

But I had a plan. . . .

CHAPTER VI

DEAD MAN'S FACE



DETERMINEDLY, I watched that girl and I watched that money. It wasn't hard to follow her. I simply trailed her back to Yonkers and watched the house after she went in it. After it grew dark, I went into the grounds again.

A little after eleven o'clock she slipped out a small side door and went to her private garage.

I was in my car and swung in behind her when she left the gates. It wasn't too difficult. Oh, she skipped along a bit down Broadway, but she didn't break any laws after she turned toward the river. She took me well down town. She would up by a warehouse.

She turned into a narrow street and stopped. Luckily, I found a particularly dark spot, parked, and jumped out. I ducked behind a loading platform as she left her car.

She clung close to the huge building and so did I. I didn't see the door, but she did. I think she used a key. She took some time at it. I was on her heels when she disappeared into the inky blackness. And she did what I hoped she'd do—and, yes, rather expected she'd do. She left the door open a crack. Sure, that was the most natural thing in the world. She was afraid. Subconsciously she would not shut out the outside world and what she thought of as her way of escape.

I pushed in and closed the door about the same—stood listening. And I heard her breathing. Yes, we were that close together and the place was in pitch darkness. Then it wasn't.

A tiny beam of light made a circle on the floor. The girl had switched on a small electric flash. She followed that beam of light now—and so did I.

Alta May Bronson had no thought of being followed. She was simply in a hurry to get it over with, and her breathing was hard and labored, very hard for such a slip of a girl. I had worked a gun into my right hand and a flash into my left—not the little pencil of light she had, but a torch that would show up something when I let it go.

I didn't like the stairs. They were narrow and walled in and the door we passed through worked on a spring and swung shut. Sure she might spot me any moment. But it was too late for me to think of that. Too important that I stick to her—that I stick to the money. I climbed the stairs with her, not over a dozen steps behind her quick moving heels.

The door at the top of the stairs had even better springs. I took it with my arm crossed over my chest and had my fedora knocked down over my eyes for

a moment. Then we were in a loft together. She didn't go far into the loft—a few steps and stood waiting, listening, though I doubted if she could hear anything above her own breathing.

She moved on again.

This was the easiest shadowing job I ever had. I followed her light across the loft floor, dodging the huge packing cases as she avoided them. There was a door finally. The girl hesitated, then opened the door and went into a small room.

I saw the room. I saw the old desk and a couple of chairs. And I saw the shadow of a figure there.

"Come in, Miss Bronson," a man said. "Ah, you have the stuff!"

For a split second I saw the briefcase as she flashed it from under her long light coat. Then the door closed and I was on the outside.

Was that my cue to enter? If it was, it would have to be a dramatic and dangerous entrance. For a key had turned in the lock.

I COULD have tossed my weight against the door and got it on the first or second pound—maybe. On the third one—sure. But a lad could spray lead up and down that door, through it and into me. I didn't want things that dramatic.

I dropped to my knees to listen. I heard only a mumble of voices.

Now what? What could I do? I had plenty on that girl already—enough to scare her into talking. That is, if I could do my scaring before someone advised her that she hadn't broken any law by going to a warehouse and paying out cash that belonged to her. She would no doubt come out the way she had gone in. And the man, too, for that matter.

I listened for a few minutes more. Then there was a familiar sound. The closing of a door—another door. Feet moved. Then a creak. That door had been opened again.

My guess—and I didn't like that guess—was that the girl had left when the door first slammed. And now the man, or whoever she had met, had left—leaving that other door open behind him.

Then my listening brought results with a vengeance. The blast of a gun.

A space of time when you might count three—and I heard the thud of a heavy body, a human body crashing down on hard bare wood. Count five this time—and then the slam of a door.

Okay, count ten again. Then I was up and hurling my shoulder against that door. I've busted in doors before. My heart was in this thrust, my weight behind it. The door splintered, tore loose from its hinges and I was hurtled into the room.

I went to one knee. My left hand hit the floor, but my right was up and my gun was in it—and I was blinking at an empty room. I mean empty of life. A desk, three chairs—a clothes rack on the wall. And—yes. A dead man on the floor.

I bent down and looked at him. I've seen dead men before. I knew what had taken place in that room just as if I had seen the man killed. Someone had stuck a gun against the back of his neck, not over an inch or two away, and blown the back of his head in. He lay flat on his face. A big man. Well dressed.

I didn't like it. I didn't like the job. One of his hands was under him as I straddled the body and lifted it slightly. But no briefcase or anything else was under him.

The back of his head was a mess all right. I put my hand down, slipped it under and onto his face—lifted it slightly and twisted his head so I could see the face.

I whistled softly. I knew the man all right. I had seen his picture that afternoon in the newspaper office. Billy Frazier had shown it to me. It was George Granger, the partner of Gentleman Ed Moran.

CHAPTER VII

A FRAUD REVEALED



CAREFULLY, I looked about the floor for footprints. But it was swept clear of dust. I looked up at the single light blazing down on the gruesome sight. Certainly he had been on his feet when he was killed. Witness the way he laid on the floor. Witness, too, the crash

I had heard of the falling body. It hadn't been the sound from a man toppling off a chair.

I didn't go through the man's pockets. But I patted them for anything big—like wads of money. All I found was that he was packing a rod—and of all places in his right hand jacket pocket. I didn't lift it out, but a dollar will get you ten it was a thirty-two.

A question there. Was the man unfamiliar with carting a gun? Or was it in the right hand jacket pocket so he could keep his hand on it and shoot? Your guess is as good as mine. He had been a high class confidence man. A first class forger. A lad like that might not be used to a gun. Also, a man like that, especially if he had turned to blackmail, might need a gun, where his right hand could rest on it.

A couple of minutes later I was back in my car and on my way to Yonkers. The girl had a start on me. But the girl was not too familiar with the city. She couldn't be. I shot up the express route along the river, then cut toward Broadway. I made time—and hoped that I'd know the cop who stopped me.

I passed her just above 242nd Street, not over a minute after I cut out from under the tracks of the subway where it is elevated at the end of the line.

If she was frightened, she wasn't driving in the madness of panic. I saw her white face for a moment behind the wheel. And although it might be easy to imagine things, she just looked like any other woman driving a car.

This time I was standing by the rear door of her garage when she came out of it and walked toward the house. Her step was quick and steady enough. But fear was in her all right, for it made her more alert. I tripped along behind her to the side door of the house, but I knew even before she reached it that she knew I was there. At least, she knew someone was there.

She had a handbag over her arm. She was opening it when I put my hand on her arm.

"I'll take the bag, Miss Bronson," I said, and as she spun around and faced me I clapped a hand over her mouth. I had seen the parted lips and the white teeth. She was about to scream.

"I wouldn't do that," I told her. "I'm a detective. I'd like a word or two with you inside—and I'm sure you'd like a word or two with me."

Then I dropped my hand. If she wanted to holler, I couldn't keep her quiet forever. "Yes, of course—inside," she said.

"What," I said, "were you looking for in your bag?"

"The key to the door."

"Allow me." I opened the bag, stuck my hand in, and then handed her back the bag. "Okay," I said. "Get the key out and open the door."

That's right. There was no gun in the bag. I should have known that when I hefted it. Anyway, only a good size rattler would have made that hole in George Granger's head.

HER HAND shook as she opened the door, but she didn't say anything. I followed her inside, even took her arm. I didn't like the dead silence. I didn't like her quick breathing. It was that of a desperate woman ready to do a desperate act. Or of a terror stricken woman just come from murder.

It was a man's room she led me into, no doubt Jarvis Harrington's den. It wasn't big enough for a library, yet it was practically surrounded with books up to the ceiling on three sides. There was a fireplace, some easy chairs, and a flat table that served as a desk. It was the French window room that gave on to the patio.

Alta May let me close the door and switch on the light. I turned her around to face me. Still she didn't speak. I even had to help her take off her coat.

"Have a cigarette," I said then.

I don't think she heard me. Or if she did, I don't think she quite understood me. I lit a cigarette for myself, put one between her lips and held a match for her. After a while she got the idea and drew in on it, and reached up and took it from her mouth.

"Sit down," I said.

She sat. Her blue eyes were wide and staring and her lips were colorless. I put my hand inside my jacket pocket and produced the picture of Gentleman Ed Moran. If it was meant to startle her, it failed.

"You knew him?" I asked. And when she looked up and nodded, I said, "Did you kill him?"

"Kill him?" She looked at the picture again. "Is he dead?"

"Yes." I nodded gravely. "And so is the other one—George Granger." And when that didn't register, I explained, "A big man—gray suit with a stripe in it. Bulging eyes. He was killed in the warehouse tonight. Shot through the back of the head. Murdered in cold blood just after you gave him the money—"

I broke off. She was on her feet, swaying. I could feel her whole body vibrating as I held her in my arms and choked down the scream. And I knew then as I looked into those eyes that she hadn't done it. The slam of the door must have been when she left—the opening when someone else came in and—killed Granger.

After a bit, the shaking died down, and she nodded her promise not to scream. I let her go. She choked, but got the words out clear enough.

"I don't believe you. I saw that man in the warehouse tonight. He's—he's—I didn't kill him. I didn't. You're the police. I knew it couldn't last. Well, I don't care any more. No, I'm not the real Alta May Bronson." She flopped back in the chair. "I didn't want the money. I don't want it now. I did it for—for that poor little crippled child, and the few thousand it took, and now—I've robbed, stolen, so much money."

AND there it was. A five million dollar swindle. And the girl confessing to it. The girl was talking. Popping it all out—all of it.

She had never heard of Jarvis Harrington. Had never heard that she might inherit money. Yes, her father had been a painter—just like the real Alta May Bronson's father was. Ed Moran and George Granger had come to her in the little Swiss mountain home, though of course she knew them under different and fancier names. They talked her into it. They said the real Alta May Bronson had died.

She went on, calm now.

"It was my fault that little Celia was like that—would never walk again. I didn't watch, and she fell. No, the Ver-

dou family never blamed me. But I blamed myself. These men said my impersonation could never be discovered. They said the real girl had known little about Jarvis Harrington, so I wouldn't have to pretend or fake anything. They told me just a few things—things the real Alta May's mother might have told her. They had everything, as they said, fixed. And I thought of the good I could do with the money." She broke down then and cried. "Later, I thought I could run away and the rightful heirs have it."

"But you didn't run?"

"I couldn't. Always they demanded more money. To fix this—fix that. And always the threat of going to jail."

"Were the lawyers in it? Mr. Stevens?"

"Oh, no," she said. "He handled only the Harrington estate. Mr. Stevens, they said, was a simple honest man. Mr. Ronalds was given all—all forged papers. Now what will you do with me?"

Sure I questioned her while I had her going.

My head was whirling a bit. The girl made no excuse for herself.

"I suppose I took advantage of Mr. Charles Stevens," she said simply. "He—he seemed to like me. It had been my intention to give the money to Mr. Roberts, then disappear. But Mr. Stevens' father, and later Mr. Stevens, were very close to Mr. Harrington. And Mr. Stevens told me that Jarvis Harrington did not want Mr. Roberts to have his money. And then came the fear of prison, and these men threatening me with exposure and arrest, and—and now you are the police and it has happened!"

"I'm not the police," I told her. She looked at me with disbelief and then fear. "I represent Mr. Frank Roberts. We'll do nothing, say nothing, until I consult him."

She watched me go to the phone, lift and call my number. Roberts answered almost at once.

"Race Williams, eh?" he said. "Where have you been?"

"I've got news for you," I told him. "Come to the Harrington house in Yonkers at once. At once, understand." And when he started to question me, "If you haven't got money for gas, charge it.

Tell them you're worth—what's left of five million."

CHAPTER VIII

THE LAW ARRIVES



SLOWLY, I cradled the phone. I told the fake Alta May to sit down.

"Look," I said, "the lad who was robbed in this transaction is Roberts. It is up to him to decide what to do about this swindle. What the

law will do, I don't know."

"I make no excuse," she said flatly. "What I did was a reprehensible thing. I knew that Mr. Roberts suspected me. The child might have lived anyway, but forever horribly crippled. Now, the child will walk again—run and play. I knew I would pay a price. I am willing to pay it."

"That," I said, "is between you and my client and the laws of the state. It has nothing to do with me. But there is another thing, Miss Bronson."

"Miss La Verne," she corrected.

"Well, Miss La Verne then. A man was killed tonight. Murdered in the loft building where you were. I found the body."

"But I had nothing to do with that."

"Maybe not the actual killing. But you were there. You delivered the money. It was in a briefcase. When I found the body, both the money and the briefcase were gone. It's murder, and I'm calling the police."

I went to get that done before Roberts turned up. I didn't want to be convinced that it would be worth my while not to call the police. Not that Roberts was such a good talker, but he had a lot of money to talk with now.

The girl said nothing. I buzzed Sergeant O'Rouke. He didn't answer at once. He wasn't wide awake and waiting, nor did he demand where I'd been. I told him.

"Ed Moran's partner, George Granger, was knocked over tonight, O'Rouke." I gave him the location of the warehouse. "How do I know? I was there, and heard the shot, and found the body."

I gave him details of where the body

was. No, I wouldn't meet him at the warehouse. I was working on the case in his interest. He'd be wise to keep my name out of it for the time being. It might involve big names—and certainly a lot of money. Then I told him where I was. Yes, I'd wait for him. No, my client wasn't near the warehouse.

I lit another cigarette and sat down. I had a lot of thinking to do. I did a lot of thinking. I looked at the girl. The fear and horror were going out of her face. I watched the change come over her.

"You—you look relieved," I said after a bit.

"Yes." She tried to smile, but it wasn't too good. "I am relieved. I'm glad it is all over with. I always knew I'd have to pay. I told myself over and over I'd gladly die if it would help that child. Why, then, should I cry and scream now against the loss of my freedom?"

That was one way of figuring it.

The door bell rang and I went to let Roberts in. I opened the door and we were both surprised. It wasn't Roberts. It was young Mr. Stevens.

"Williams, the detective," he said. And, in sudden alarm, "What has happened?"

With that he pushed by me and headed straight for the den. I could have stopped him, but why? If anyone needed a lawyer, that girl did.

I followed him into the den. Watched him walk across the room and put an arm around the girl. He swung then and faced me, looking indignant. But I spoke first.

"Remember our little talk?" I said simply. "Well, she's not spending any more of the money. Hold tight, Mr. Stevens. Miss Bronson is not Miss Bronson anymore. She confessed to the fraud a few minutes ago."

"Yes," the girl said. "I know it must be an awful shock to you, Mr. Stevens."

THERE was a blank incredulous look on his face. But the lawyer came out in him then.

"Not a word, Alta May. Not another word," he cautioned her. Then, to me, "I'll talk to the young lady alone, Mr."

Williams." And when I shook my head, he straightened and said, "I am her lawyer. Just how do you propose to stop me?"

"We'll—" I smiled at him— "I won't serve you with any injunction, if that's what you mean." And then, having no desire to pull the strong arm act on him, "I've been in touch with the police. I've been ordered to keep her in my presence until they arrive."

"The police?" he said. "Coming here? But what—what can she have to do with the police?"

"Well," I told him, "if you don't find much harm in her masquerading as another woman and copping off a few million dollars, how will you like murder? Sure. She was at a warehouse when a man was shot to death tonight."

"How—how do you know she was?"

"She won't deny it," I told him. "If she does—I was there too."

That got him. He hadn't seemed to mind her flim-flamming good old Stevens, Ronalds, Blake & Stevens. Or maybe he didn't believe it. Maybe he didn't believe the murder part either, but it threw him. He dropped his arms from the girl as if she was—well, a cold potato. He pushed a hand up inside his collar and pulled at it slightly, as if it were choking him.

"I—I must use the phone," he said then. "Mr. Ronalds must know about this."

He went out of the room on rubbery legs. But he was right. His law partner, Mr. Ronalds, sure should know about it.

Roberts came in then. That is, he came to the little French windows and tapped and I let him in. He stood there facing the girl. She looked straight at him.

"You were right, Mr. Roberts," she said finally. "I am not Alta May Bronson. I am Alta May La Verne. I've thrown your money away to swindlers—and cheats."

Roberts looked at the girl. "Now—now. It is not as bad as that. We'll straighten this thing out, you and I. And Race Williams here of course." He brought my name in as an afterthought. "There must have been very good reasons for what you did."

"There's more." The girl looked straight at him. "Mr. Williams is holding me for the police—for murder. Do you think there is a very good reason for that?"

And then Roberts did it. He walked right over and swung her into his arms. Not like young Mr. Stevens. He did it as if she belonged there. As if she belonged to him.

"That," he said, "I simply don't believe."

"No one," said a voice from behind us at the open French windows, "likes to believe in murder. You seem completely recovered, Mr. Roberts. The young lady—is she a relative of yours?"

Roberts wasn't thrown. He turned and looked at Sergeant O'Rourke.

"This young lady," he said, "I intend to make my wife."

"Really!" O'Rourke turned to me. "Well, Race—I sent the boys down to the warehouse and came up here myself. Let me know what gives."

I was halfway through what I had to say when O'Rourke interrupted me.

"I think," he said, "we had all better go down town and discuss this matter—"

"I think—" young Mr. Stevens put in, entering from the hall—"we had better go very lightly on this matter until proper explanations—"

"Interested in the young lady?" O'Rourke turned those sharp eyes on Stevens.

"The young lady," said Stevens stiffly and he did it well, even better than Roberts, "is to be my wife."

"Well—well." O'Rourke rubbed his hands. "So now we have intended bigamy." Then the light tone went out of his voice. "And who may you be, sir?"

"I am a member of the firm of Stevens, Ronalds, Blake & Stevens. My father is dead. I am young Mr. Stevens." And Stevens said it simply and with a certain amount of dignity.

NEXT ISSUE

MURDER IS MY BUSINESS

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CHAPTER IX

KILLER AT BAY



VEN I was impressed. But then it was an impressive sight. Five million dollars is a lot of money. Harold Ronalds sat behind the big long table in what was known as the main library of Stevens, Ronalds, Blake & Stevens. Alongside him was Mathew J. O'Donnel, Commissioner of Police. Pacing the room in sartorial splendor was Gordon Ritter, the District Attorney. I recognized in the worn busy looking little man the Chief Clerk of the Surrogates Court. There were a couple of other clerks with him.

Inspector Nelson had joined the party and I had gone out into the hall to talk to Sergeant O'Rouke.

"Just how did you happen to find the briefcase?" O'Rouke asked me for the fifth time.

I told him again.

"Believe it or not, O'Rouke, I was looking for it. That's why I stayed at the house. I know it isn't often I use my head—and I didn't use it in this case until after you decided to invite everyone down to Headquarters. The briefcase was hidden in the patio outside the den windows. The gun was inside of it. Not money—but negotiable bonds worth a hundred grand on the market today. The bank would have taken down the serial numbers of bills, I don't suppose there were any fingerprints on the gun."

"No." O'Rouke shook his head. "But I think it's the gun all right. Ballistics will give us that soon enough. It looks bad for the girl and young Roberts running off like that."

"Like what?" I smiled at him. "They weren't under arrest. Why, you hoped they would skip out! You boys always figure that flight is a sign of guilt. But it can be a sign of fright, too, even panic." And with a shrug. "Even a sign of love. Besides, you can pick them up when you want to."

It was O'Rouke's turn to grin now. "Even in Greenwich, Connecticut," he told me. "Now listen, Race. You found

that gun and briefcase after Frank Huntington Roberts went in that window. He was your client and maybe you didn't see him put it there. He lives in about the center of the city. You had to drive to Yonkers. Roberts could have been home an hour—well, forty-five minutes anyway, before you called—and still have killed George Granger at that warehouse. He could have hired Ed Moran and George Granger to blackmail her. Then he held out on them. Ed Moran shot him. Roberts decided to kill Moran and have no witnesses—and he did."

I shook my head. "It doesn't wash," I told O'Rouke. "Too many things all wrong. Why would he blackmail the girl out of his own money—and don't give me the love angle again."

"Oh well," said O'Rouke, "maybe he didn't have proof she was a phony. They want us inside."

When we went into the main library, Harold Ronalds was on his feet talking. His dignity was unruffled. He paused politely when I came in.

"Take a chair, Mr. Williams," he said. And when I sat down, "The authorities are facing a situation of great gravity—in which I am concerned but not involved. The District Attorney, the Commissioner of Police, the good Inspector here, are now thoroughly convinced that there is no room for the slightest doubt that the girl we know as Alta May Bronson is in fact beyond dispute the real Alta May Bronson, and is entitled to the Harrington estate." He raised his hand when the District Attorney started to speak. "One moment, and I will be through. There was never the slightest doubt at any time as to the girl's identity. There is none now."

The District Attorney came in then. "But Mr. Williams has made a sworn statement to the fact that the girl confessed that she was not Alta May Bronson."

"Not confessed, Gordon." Ronalds permitted his lips to part in what might have been a smile. "Let us say she made a statement to that effect. I have not the slightest idea why she made such a statement. If she made it, it was false. I presume from the whole sordid and unpleasant story, as Mr. Williams un-

folded it, that Miss Bronson was black-mailed. Perhaps in fear or panic—or under pressure—she made such a statement. But the statement is false. You have ample proof, gentlemen.”

“Is that true?” I looked over at Ritter, the D. A.

ALL the men nodded solemnly.

“But she ran away—” Inspector Nelson said.

“Ran away?” Harold Ronalds had a nice inflection in his voice and a neat way of raising his eyebrows. “Ran away from what? Certainly not from shooting a man. Mr. Williams has explained that she hardly could have done that. And certainly, Inspector, you must be glad that you did not charge her with fraud in disposing of some of her own securities. Gentlemen, I am surprised that you would entertain the thought for one moment that such a fraud could be perpetrated upon the courts of this city.”

“But Miss Bronson herself said—” and I stopped. Light was beginning to break. “Yes,” I went on, thinking aloud, “she said it, and she meant it.”

“She might have told you that you were the man in the moon,” said Inspector Nelson turning sharply on me. “And you might have believed her.”

“I might have believed she meant it at that.” I pulled a grin, a weak one. But things were shaping up. Clattering around in my head, but falling into place just the same.

“Are you suggesting that Miss Bronson is not in her right mind?” Harold Ronalds came in then.

“No,” I told him, “I’m not suggesting any such thing. But I was with Miss Bronson and heard her make the statement. You are all convinced that it was not a true statement. You must be right. I believed it—because Miss Bronson believed it. That’s it, gentlemen. The girl herself doesn’t believe she’s the real Alta May Bronson.”

“But why?”

“Why?” I said. “Because she was told she wasn’t. Don’t you see? Someone got to her before she was notified of the inheritance. These two men, Ed Moran and George Granger, came to her and told her they could fix it up so that

she could pose as the Bronson heiress. Understand, she never suspected she was actually an heiress. Her mother and father took that other name, La Verne. They never mentioned the name Bronson to her—or Jarvis Harrington. Harrington had put the girl’s parents out of his house—threatened to frame the husband, send him to prison. Why should they ever even mention Jarvis Harrington to their daughter? Oh, they might have if they had known they were going to die, but they didn’t. And these two men told Alta May they could pass her off as the heiress.”

“But how would they know? How would they find her?” The D. A. was tossing the questions now. “Yes, yes—I can see how easily they might blackmail her, if it happened as you say. I can see, too, how a young girl who never had any money could more easily believe that she was a false heiress than a real one. But my dear Williams. Two such well known crooks could not hope to get away with that for long. Certainly the lawyers for the estate, the executor, would suspect.”

He turned now and looked at Harold Ronalds, but Ronalds had turned and looked at young Mr. Stevens. In fact, they were all looking at young Mr. Stevens now. Young Mr. Stevens’ tongue came out and he licked at his lips.

“Well, yes,” he said. “I did suspect something, but it was her money and—and—”

“I know.” Harold Ronalds nodded his head at him a bit sadly. “You were in love with the girl.”

“Oh, when we find the girl and question her,” the D. A. slammed in, “we’ll get to the bottom of it. Things that were said, things that were done. Come, Mr. Stevens. How much did she confide in you?”

“Not a thing,” young Mr. Stevens said. “Not a thing. I had hoped, indeed she led me to believe, that my affection was returned—and—”

“And you’d marry her and do the paying of the blackmailer for her,” I came in fast then. “Sure, Mr. Stevens—young Mr. Stevens,” I said sarcastically. “You were the only one she could trust. The only one who could see she got the money in a hurry without anyone else

knowing about it. A secret that she would keep, and a secret that you would keep. And after you married her, you'd pay the whole estate into the pocket of the blackmailer—not blackmailers anymore. Just one blackmailer. Don't stand up and glare at me. You killed Ed Moran and you killed George Granger. Look at his face!" I let that one go to the District Attorney. "What other man could have engineered the whole business? No other man. Young Mr. Stevens ran that show. Harold Ronalds knows it—now."

HAROLD Ronalds looked steadily at Charles Stevens, and if the dignity hadn't gone, the nice inflection and the raised eyebrows were dead.

"You have always come to me for advice, Charles," he said in a low tired voice. "Why didn't you about—the huge sums the girl wanted?"

It was there written on Charles Stevens' face. He could lead the band all right, but he couldn't turn around and face the music. Sure he denied it—

violently. But I think we all were certain now.

Inspector Nelson had the single thought, "Where were you last night?"

Even before Charles Stevens broke down—and he did break hard—Nelson was pushing him about what he did with the gun that killed George Granger. I came in there.

"What did he do with the gun?" I said. "He had it in the car with him—it and the bonds George Granger had received from Alta May Bronson. Stevens had no idea he would be suspected. He drove leisurely out to the Bronson place in Yonkers—straight from shooting Granger through the back of the head. He wanted to be sure the girl got home all right. The light was on, so he came to the door. He got a shock when he saw me. He got more of a shock when he discovered I knew about the murder. He left the room to telephone. I guess he did. But the police were coming. His car might be searched—the bonds and the gun found. And then he got a break.

[Turn page]



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He saw Roberts go in the French window. He parked the gun and bonds outside that window."

"To plant the crime on Roberts?" the D. A. asked me.

"Yes, if they were found. If not, he could slip back and get the bonds. I think he preferred the money. But Roberts was making trouble and I'll bet young Mr. Stevens was afraid Roberts would put it straight up to the girl and she'd tell him the truth. Roberts hired the detective Jimmy Slavin, and Slavin found out something—enough to die. Whether it was Granger or Moran or Stevens who killed Slavin, I don't know, but I think it was Stevens. The other two were not killers. Witness the mess Moran made of his attempted murder of Roberts. But we should be able to pin one murder on Stevens anyway—the murder of George Granger in the warehouse."

It was the low voice of Harold Ronalds, however, that got results.

"You have sought my advice in all things, Charles," he said. "I'll give you that advice now. If you are guilty, nothing will save you. A close questioning of Miss Bronson should reveal much. A close scrutiny of your finances will reveal more. A closer scrutiny of your movements will no doubt reveal the truth. The gun may be traced to you. This young girl—your responsibility and mine—may be this very moment go-

ing to marry a man who will, by reason of her distracted condition, benefit by her fortune."

And young Mr. Stevens said, "Jarvis Harrington, at the end, wanted them to share the estate. He made a will to that effect." And after a long pause, and as if it were the worst and only crime he had committed, "I—I tore that will up."

Is there more? I suppose young Mr. Stevens (for I will always think of him as that) should have whipped out the murder weapon and shot himself dead—or taken poison. But this was life, and he didn't. Also he should have gone to the hot seat. But this was law, and he didn't, though he'd be behind bars for the rest of his days. Harold Ronalds fought the thing hard, with the best criminal lawyers in the city to back him up. He believed young Mr. Stevens insane. He couldn't believe otherwise. It didn't even enter his head that a member of that great firm which he headed could have been in his right mind and done such disgraceful things.

I guess Frank Roberts and Alta May Bronson shared the estate all right, as Jarvis Harrington had wanted them to do. They did get married. And they were in love. Anyway, the check I got was signed by both of them on a joint account.

No, it wasn't for half a million dollars. But it wasn't for doughnuts either.



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Manuscript of Murder

By PETER WARREN

*Literary agent Carter learns
that truth is
stranger than fiction!*

WILLARD Carter put down the phone and ran his fingers through his thick dark hair in a gesture of annoyance. There was a frown on his strong face as he glared at the bald-headed man who sat opposite Carter's desk.

"Authors—they're driving me mad!" Carter said. "Why I ever became a literary agent when I might have picked some nice quiet job like being shot out of a cannon, is beyond me. That was Gay Gilweather I was talking to over the phone. She was on the best seller lists last spring. Her next book is due at the publisher tomorrow, and she tells me it is only half finished and she is going to Miami for a rest."

"The bombastic type," Russell Holmes said, gazing sadly at Carter. "I was afraid of that. Exactly the sort of individual that I abhor."

It suddenly dawned on Willard Carter that this was the first time in his life he had ever seen the tall, bald-headed man who sat across from him. Russell Holmes had arrived at the literary agency just a few minutes ago. He had found Carter there alone and announced he was a writer seeking an agent.

Carter had taken Holmes into his private office, but before he could do any more than learn the man's name, the phone call from Gay Gilweather had interrupted them.



There was a desperate struggle

Now Carter felt strangely uneasy, there was something about Holmes' eyes that reminded the literary agent of those of a dead fish.

"Judging from what you just said, Mr. Holmes," Carter remarked dryly. "This doesn't seem like the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

"Night and day for the past three months I have dreamed of this moment," Holmes said in a strange voice, completely ignoring what Carter had just said. "The moment when I would find you alone." He suddenly drew a small revolver from his pocket and covered Carter with the gun. "When I would have a chance to kill you, Willard Carter!"

"Very dramatic," Carter said, staring at the gun and not caring for the looks of it in the least. It was much too realistic. "I suppose this is the opening of the first chapter of your detective novel and you are acting it out to impress me."

"I'm disappointed," Holmes snapped icily. "I thought you were a better judge of character than that, Mr. Carter. Surely you don't actually believe that Russell Holmes would stoop to such childish actions. This is real. I came here to kill you, and I am determined to do it!"

"I suppose you will permit me a few hundred last words to learn just why you are so anxious to make me into a corpse," Carter remarked. "You know—the murderer gloats over his intended victim."

CARTER was gradually growing more and more convinced that the bald-headed man was some sort of a nut, and the best thing to do was humor him, particularly while Holmes had that gun in his hand. In Carter's estimation, Holmes talked more like a ham actor in an old-fashioned melodrama than a real killer.

"All right," Holmes said. "Perhaps it is only fair that I let you know that I am cognizant of the dastardly deed you have perpetrated."

"Soft lights and slow music, Professor," Carter murmured, and then as he saw Holmes glaring at him, "Beg pardon, what did I do?"

"Perhaps if I mention the name of Howard Allen you will understand," Holmes said.

"Howard Allen is a new writer on my list," said Carter. "But his first novel, 'Tomorrow's Sorrows' really is something. The first publisher I submitted it to grabbed it up at once. They are sure it is going to be a best seller, and one of the book clubs selections. I got Allen a two thousand dollar advance on the book, and he is going to make plenty of money out of it. Strange sort of a bird—lives in a little town out West and refuses to come to New York. All my contacts with him have been by long distance phone, and through letters and wires. What about him?"

"There is no such person as Howard Allen," Holmes said. "I wrote 'Tomorrow's Sorrows.' I sent it to you to market for me under my name. Two months ago I read in a Texas paper about you having placed 'Tomorrow's Sorrows' by Howard Allen. At first I thought you had decided to bring the book out with Howard Allen as the author, for some reason, and that you would doubtlessly explain the reason to me. There has been no explanation. No royalty advance check has come from you."

"But that's impossible," Carter said. "You couldn't have written that book. I've talked to Allen over the long distance phone as I told you, and he assured me that he had received the check for the advance."

"Very clever, Mr. Carter," Holmes said coldly. "You received and sold my book under the name of Howard Allen. You pocketed the two thousand dollar advance and plan to keep on taking the money. In time it will probably amount to thousands if the book is a best seller and some motion picture company becomes interested."

"Have you a carbon copy of the manuscript?" Carter asked. "If you have, we can compare it with the original at the publishers. If they are the same, I'll believe that you did write 'Tomorrow's Sorrows.'"

"I neglected to make a carbon copy," Holmes said. "I have nothing to prove I wrote the book save my own word. I realize that I can't hope to collect any of the money from you. I never will be

able to do so—but at least I will have the satisfaction of knowing that you are dead. That you can't steal any other writer's work as you have stolen this one of mine!"

Holmes rose to his feet so swiftly that Carter leaped up in alarm. As he did so, the literary agent knocked over the chair in which he had been sitting. The two men circled around the desk, so that Holmes was now behind it.

Abruptly Carter lunged across the desk. With his right hand he caught Holmes' left arm, while his left hand grabbed the bald-headed man's right wrist. This was the hand that held the revolver.

A quick twist and Carter forced Holmes to drop the gun.

"Let me go," Holmes snarled. "I suppose you will murder me now to keep me from talking."

SUDDENLY Carter released him and stepped quickly around the desk and grabbed up the gun. Holmes shuddered and walked over and dropped into a chair.

"You realize that I could turn you over to the police on a charge of attempted murder," Carter said coldly.

"I know," Holmes answered bleakly. "I must have been mad—insane. But this thing has been on my mind for the past two months. I live alone in a little house in a small town called Springview out West."

"Springview," exclaimed Carter. "Go on."

"My writing means everything to me," Holmes went on. "I have sold some short stuff, but the book was my best work. It took me two years to write it. When I had it nearly finished, I wrote you asking if you would handle it for me. I didn't even have a title for it then. You wrote and said you would be glad to look the book over. When it was finished I sent it to you."

"I don't remember ever having received a manuscript from you," Carter said. He was puzzled. While Holmes' attempt to kill him could only be considered the action of a crazy man, Holmes now sounded like he was telling the truth. "Tell me what happened after that?"

"Nothing," said Holmes. "I was quite sure you had received the manuscript since it was not returned to me. I waited to hear from you, and then read about 'Tomorrow's Sorrows' in the paper as I told you before. Then I decided I would come to New York. By this time I was sure you had tricked me and I got the crazy idea of killing you."

"Under the circumstances you were quite justified in feeling there was some crooked work upon my part, Mr. Holmes," Carter said, picking up the chair and again seating himself at the desk. He dropped the gun into the side pocket of his coat. "I received the manuscript of 'Tomorrow's Sorrows' from Howard Allen in Springview, Texas."

"But it is a very small place and I know everyone there," said Holmes. "There is no one by the name of Howard Allen in the whole town."

"My secretary is home ill with a cold," Carter said. "So I am working alone today. I've an idea though. Suppose that I call Springview long distance and try to talk to Howard Allen there? You listen on the phone in the outer office and see if you recognize the voice. There's a chance you might be able to do so."

"Splendid!" said Holmes. "I'll do that."

Holmes went into the outer office as Carter picked up the phone and put through a person-to-person long distance call to Howard Allen in Springview.

"Please hold the wire," said the long distance operator.

Carter frowned as the door of his office swung silently shut. There was no reason for Holmes closing that door if he was listening on the other phone. But while Carter was holding the wire, he did not want to put down his phone and investigate now.

He heard his operator tell the operator in the nearest big town in Texas that she was calling Springview. Heard the Texas operator say, "Are you paid?"

Then when the New York operator said it was a paid call, the Springview operator was given the number and started ringing it.

After what seemed a long time to Carter, the New York operator told him there was no answer. She asked if he

wanted her to try again later. He told her never mind and hung up.

Carter went to the door of his office and opened it. He stood there staring into the outer office and feeling strangely weak and sick. Russell Holmes was sprawled face downward on the floor, a knife sticking out of his back. His overcoat and hat that he had taken off when he first arrived at the literary agency, were placed neatly on a chair. There was no one else around.

The door of the outer office opened and a short, stocky man stepped in. He looked at the still figure on the floor and then blinked. He glanced at Carter.

"Now what?" Jim Lang asked. He wrote humorous books and was always in character. "I know authors bother you at times, but don't tell me you have started murdering them."

"Very funny!" Carter said bitterly. "But this happens to be a real murder, providing Holmes is dead. I fail to see anything funny about the situation."

Lang frowned. In his earlier days he had been a newspaperman. He had covered a few murders and knew what to do. He knelt down and checked for pulse and heartbeat but there was none. It was obvious that the man on the floor was dead.

Carter moved closer and stood watching Lang. He noticed that Holmes was tightly clutching a crumpled envelope in his right hand.

"He's dead," Lang said, getting to his feet. "Better phone the police and report a murder. How did it happen, Will?"

Carter glanced at the glass paneling of the outer door. The transom above the door was half open and he thought he caught a fleeting glimpse of a shadowy figure moving outside. It looked like there was someone out there listening.

"I'll phone the police in a few minutes," Carter said, raising his voice a little. "Holmes was alone here as far as I knew when it happened, but I think I know who killed him."

"How do you know?" Lang asked.

"Because Holmes left a clue as he was dying," said Carter. "He still has it clutched in his right hand. Come on into my office and I'll tell you about it,

Jim. Staying here with the corpse gives me the creeps."

LANG stepped into the private office. Carter followed him and closed the door. The literary agent swiftly told the writer about Russell Holmes' visit, his attempting to use the gun, and the story of the apparently stolen manuscript.

"This is Holmes' gun," Carter said, drawing it out of his pocket and moving to the door with the revolver in his hand. "He was going to kill me with it."

Carter suddenly drew the door open. A small gray-haired man dressed in a dark overcoat and dark hat was bending over the body of the dead man and tugging the crumpled envelope out of Holmes' hand. He quickly stood erect and thrust the envelope into his pocket.

"Who are you?" Carter demanded, covering the gray-haired man with the revolver.

"Why I'm Howard Allen," said the stranger. "If you are Willard Carter you certainly have a strange way of greeting your authors."

"Sorry, Mr. Allen," said Carter, but he did not lower the gun. Lang stood behind him in the doorway watching and listening. "But since there has just been a murder here, as you see, we have to be a bit careful. Doubtless, you know the deceased, since you and Russell Holmes both came from Springview."

"I knew him by sight," Allen said. "He lived at four-twenty-six River Avenue, a mile and three-quarters south of the post office." The gray-haired man frowned. "Who killed him?"

"You did," Carter said quietly.

"I did?" Howard Allen stared at the literary agent in amazement. "You're crazy! Why should you suspect me?"

"Because you stole the manuscript of Holmes' book, 'Tomorrow's Sorrows' and sent it to me to be sold under your name," said Carter.

"I don't see how he could possibly have done that," Lang said as he listened. "He didn't sneak into Holmes' house and steal the manuscript of the book. If he had, Holmes would have mentioned it to you, Will."

"Who was the one man who was in a position to grab that manuscript when Holmes sent it out and place the Howard

Allen name on it?" Carter demanded. "I'll tell you. The local mail carrier who only knew Holmes by sight, and yet knew his address was four-twenty-six River Avenue and a mile and three quarters south of the post office. Only a postman who had that route would be so sure of the exact distance from Holmes' house to the post office."

"But I still don't quite see how it was done," Lang said.

"Holmes told me he lived alone," Carter continued. "The man he was most likely to talk to was the postman, and yet he might not even know the mail carrier's name. He probably was all excited over finishing the book and told the postman he expected to make thousands of dollars out of it when it was published. The temptation was too much for this mail carrier."

"I get it now," Jim Lang said. "Probably Holmes was tired and didn't want to walk nearly three miles to the post office and back again. So when Allen, the postman, came around, Holmes gave him the book manuscript all ready for mailing."

"Exactly," said Carter. "But Allen didn't mail the manuscript right away. He changed the name and address on the manuscript and envelope to his own and then sent the book on to me. I knew only Allen's handwriting. As far as I was concerned, Russell Holmes had nothing to do with 'Tomorrow's Sorrows.' I was working only with Howard Allen."

Allen suddenly turned and darted for the outer door. Carter raised the revolver and shot the gray-haired man in the right arm. Allen howled in pain.

"Don't shoot again!" he wailed. "I'll admit everything. It happened just the way you said. But when Holmes told me he was coming to New York to see you, I followed him. I knew you had never seen him or knew his signature. I hoped that you would think Holmes was crazy and not believe the story about the book having been written by him. I thought my signature would clinch it."

"But when you learned that I was beginning to believe Holmes you got frightened and killed him," Carter said. "I suspected the killer might be listening outside so I mentioned Holmes' having left a clue that told me the identity of his murderer."

"The crumpled envelope, you mean?" Lang asked.

"In a way it is a clue," Carter said. "Holmes may have been trying to tell us it was a postman who killed him by that envelope, but it meant nothing to me. I was just bluffing. I was right about the postman angle though."

"You sure were," Lang said.

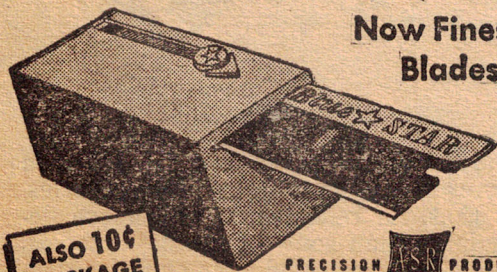
"Phone the police while I keep Allen covered, Jim," Carter said. "Tell them we have had a murder here and the killer is waiting for them." He smiled grimly. "Maybe they won't believe the story of the crime. It's too much like fiction!"

NEXT ISSUE

GETAWAY GIRL, a Thrill-Packed Story by PRESTON GRADY

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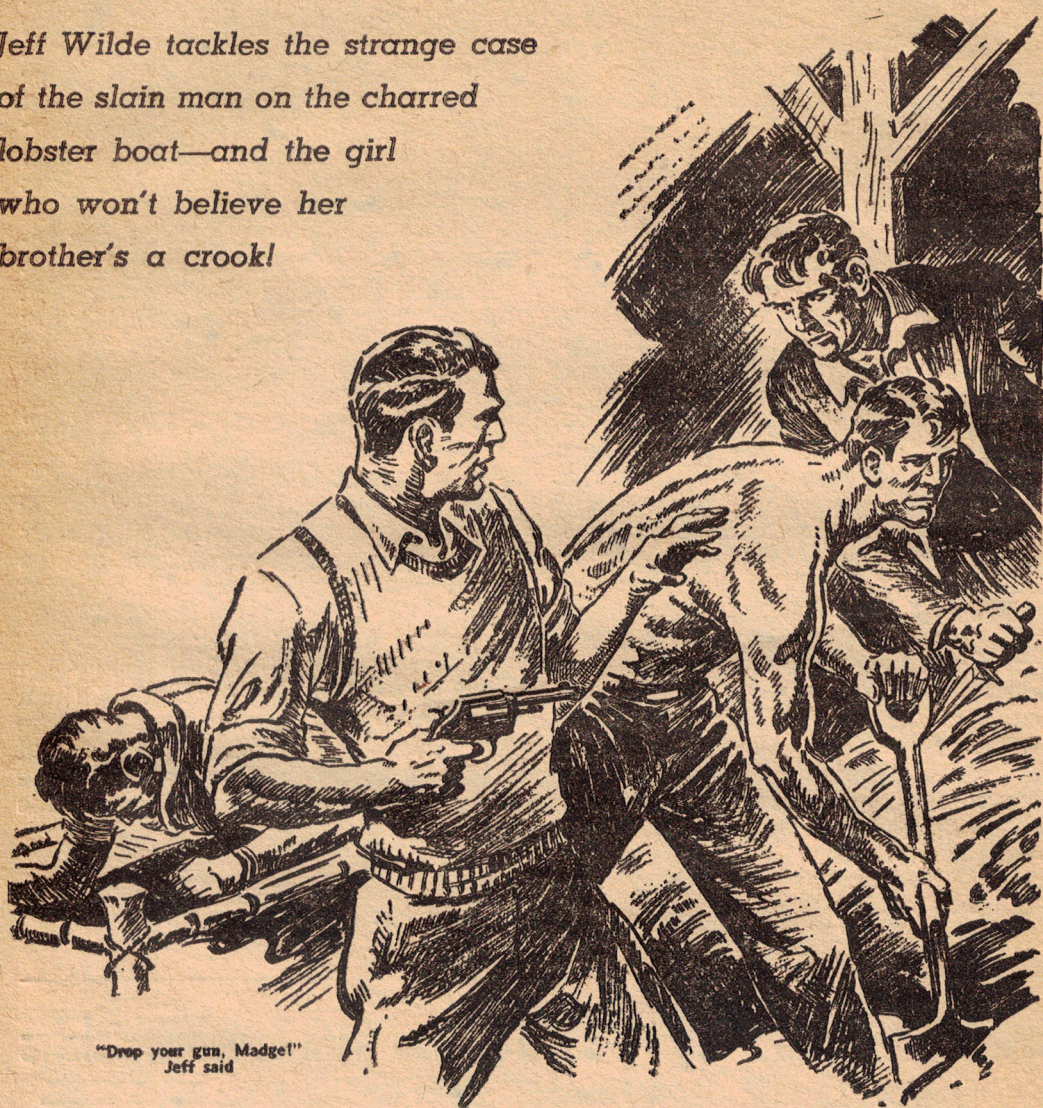
Blue STAR

**SINGLE
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**DOUBLES
EDGE**

Murder at Blue

Jeff Wilde tackles the strange case of the slain man on the charred lobster boat—and the girl who won't believe her brother's a crook!



"Drop your gun, Madge!"
Jeff said

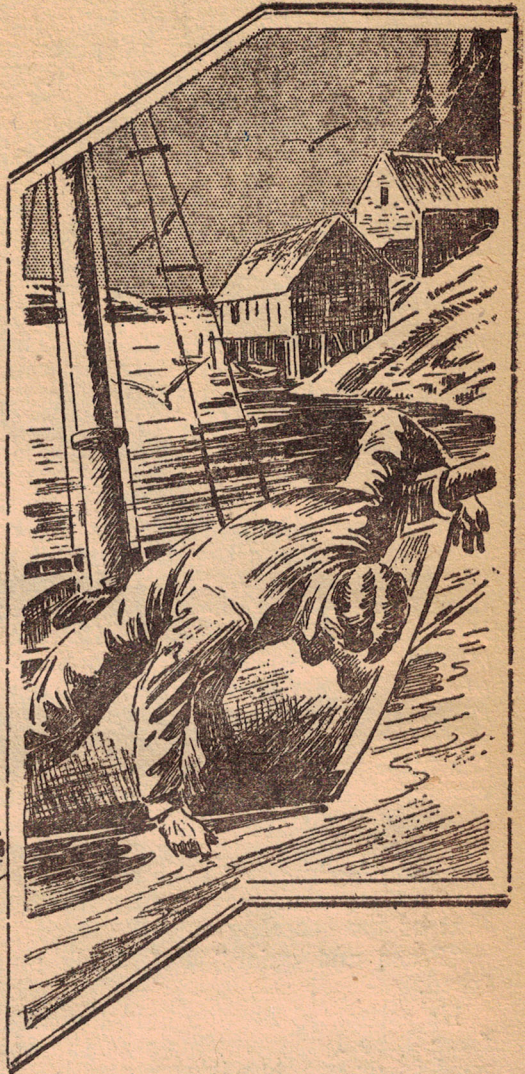
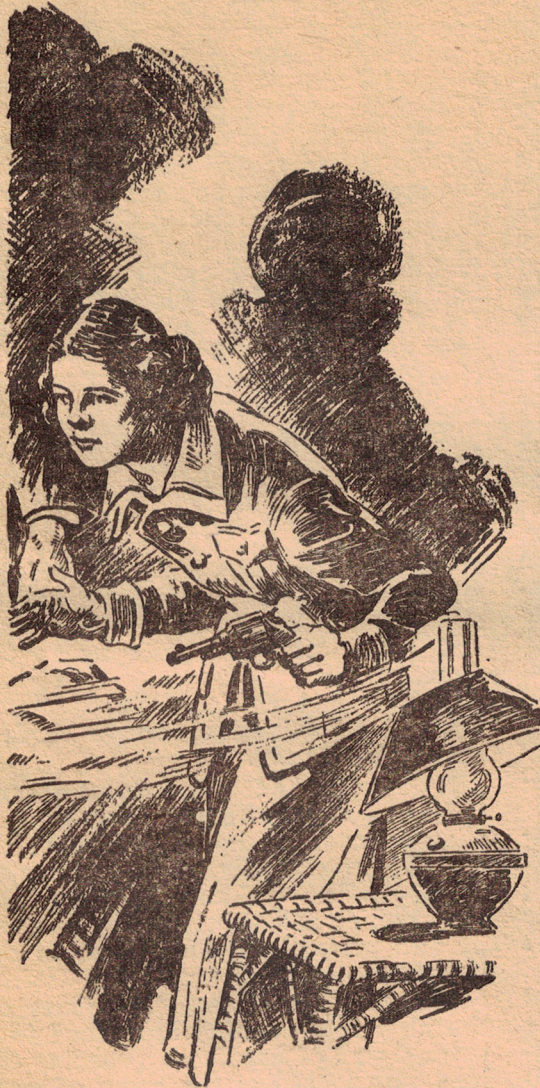
CHAPTER I

BOAT IN THE COVE

JEFF WILDE eased the car to the side of the road at the end of the white-painted guard rail, and remembered to leave it in gear, the hand brake being faulty. It was an old car,

of pre-war vintage, and he resented having to put up with its idiosyncrasies. At that, he reflected, it was more dependable than some of the new models. Bessie had protested once or twice dur-

Harbor



a novelet by
EDWARD RONNS

ing the long trip up the New England coast, but there had been no serious difference of opinion between Jeff and the car.

The loneliness of the place smote him

almost like a tangible blow, now that he had stopped. He frowned at the jet of steam hissing from under the radiator cap, and paused to wipe the back of his neck with a sodden hand-

kerchief. The road had recently been tarred, and the pungent, oily smell mingled with the scent of pines and the fresh impact of the sea air. Far down the drop on the other side of the guard rail, the surf rolled and muttered, engaged in its endless struggle with the dark rocks.

It was still fairly early in the morning, and the tide was going out, revealing a narrow strip of shingle in the cove below. Jeff looked down the precipitous slope and swore softly. The heat was stifling, oppressive. There was no breeze. There was no sound except the muted protest of the surf and the grating of his shoes as he walked back around the bend of the road.

The lobster boat was there, where he had first glimpsed it from the car as he came around the curve and down the grade. A small boat, with a closed deck forward and engine aft, lying on its side on the tiny beach, its stern still in the water but caught by a ridge of rock that thrust up out of the coarse sand. Fire had burned down the gunwales around the motor and exposed the little vessel's ribs, gaunt and black against the aching glare of sunlight. A man's figure was sprawled on what remained of the bow, one arm and one leg dangling limply to the sand. There was no sound or movement other than that of the receding surf.

"Peace and quiet," Jeff Wilde muttered.

He estimated he was only five miles from Blue Harbor. This was the only road in or out, but it was possible his was the first car along this morning. If there had been others, the burned lobster boat hadn't been noticed. He swore again, jammed the sweaty handkerchief into his back pocket, and straddled the tough wire of the guard rail to slide cautiously down the gravel slope to the beach.

Jeff was a tall young man with dark red hair and a sunburn that was just turning brown. He wore a yellow singlet, sneakers, and khaki trousers that was all that remained of his CPO Navy uniform. He was in good physical condition, but the heat made him short of breath—or perhaps it was the close-up

view that he got of the boat and its occupant.

THE man draped over the bow was dead. A startled gull suddenly took wing from the port side of the wreck, screaming annoyance at Jeff's interruption. Jeff paused, leaning over the charred bow, not touching anything. The fire had obviously started in the stern, around the flame-scorched engine, and had spread forward, driving the boat's occupant up here. There was a raw, sickening odor in the morning air. The dead man had been dressed in fisherman's clothing, most of which had been burned off his body, except for the cowhide boots. It must have happened during the night, Jeff decided; the little derelict had floated in on the tide in the early morning hours.

The seagull screamed impatiently as he leaned his weight on one of the charred ribs of the lobster boat. The craft tilted suddenly, without warning. The dead man slid with heart-choking suddenness from his spread-eagled position on the bow. His body flopped stiffly to the beach, hit shoulder first, and lay on its back, face up to the morning sun.

But he had no face. There was a charred, sickening mess where his face should have been.

Something had fallen to the sand from the boat with the dead man, a charred patch of coarse cloth, and Jeff picked it up carefully, his mouth pursed in a soundless whistle. He glanced at the wheeling gull, saw it had been joined by two others, and looked out to sea beyond the crashing surf. The horizon ached with emptiness. The pines on the high shore behind him stood in a massed wall of loneliness, guarding the land. He looked at the scrap of cloth in his fingers. The printing on it read: *Bank of Blue Harbor, Me.*

He made a little sound in his throat and took his handkerchief to wipe the back of his neck again. He picked thoughtfully at a patch of peeling skin on his sunburned elbow, and forced himself to look at the dead man once more. He still lacked a face. Most of his sturdy fisherman's clothes were burned off, but the left hand and sleeve had

somehow escaped the flames, and he could see the glinting fingernails, almost as if the dead man had coated them with nail polish. He turned the hand over and examined the smooth palm with a frown—

Something small and hard rammed with painful violence into the small of his back.

A man's deep, heavy voice said: "Just take it easy, Jack."

The newcomer had crossed the beach behind Jeff without a sound. His big frame fitted his burly voice. Although Jeff was over six feet tall, he looked like a slender red-headed boy beside the big man.

The gun in the other's hand was a long-barreled .38.

JEFF met the other's level gaze without concern.

"What's all the excitement? I just found him."

"How long ago?"

"Just now. Do you make a habit of it?"

The man said: "Make a habit of what?"

"Coming up behind people with a gun."

The big man didn't put the gun away, although he lowered it a few inches until the muzzle pointed to the sand. He was wearing a Block Island fisherman's cap and a thin checked shirt that was pulled taut by his heavy chest muscles. He was sweating freely in the hot sun, and his mouth hung open, his small dark eyes ranging carefully over the gutted lobster boat and the dead man. He wagged the gun at the charred body.

"You recognize him?"

"I'm a stranger here myself," Jeff said wryly. "I'm on my way to Blue Harbor. I don't know anybody around here."

The big man said: "That's Andy Matlock. It's his boat. Everybody knows Andy."

"Not me."

"Well," the big man said, "he's sure dead. Never deader, hey? Some accident, all right. He could have swum ashore, I reckon, except Andy couldn't swim. So he fried."

FOR a moment Jeff thought this over, staring thoughtfully at the big man. Jeff said: "We'll have to report it." "You said you were headed for Blue Harbor?"

"That's right."

"Tourist?"

"No."

"Business?"

Jeff said: "Maybe you're my business. I'm looking for a man named Mark Hudson. You look like you ought to be him, from the description I was given."

"I'm Hudson. Owner and publisher of the *Blue Harbor Sentinel*."

Jeff nodded. "I've come to buy it from you."

"Oh. Then you're Wilde?"

"Jefferson T. Wilde. The paper is still for sale, I hope."

"Sure," said the big man. "But you want to look over the plant first, don't you?"

"If we ever get started," Jeff said. "We'll have to take care of this, though."

"Let's go," said Hudson.

Neither man offered to shake hands. The gulls came gliding smoothly back to the beach as they climbed to the road. . . .

Blue Harbor was not a tourist trap. Its fishing industry was very much alive, and the town's position as county seat gave it an independence and importance of its own, distinct from the marks of the seasonal influx of tourists. Any quaintness it possessed was simply a stamp of its individuality. Jeff Wilde looked at the town and approved. He felt relieved. He had been buying a pig in the poke, and he felt better now that he saw what sort of community the *Sentinel* served.

The harbor was small, rock-bound, and busy, dotted with pleasure craft and green draggers and seiners that went about their business with serene indifference to the summer sailors. The main street, halfway up the side of the hill, made a half loop around the harbor, and gave an impressive view of the neat white houses and green hills that watched the sea. Across from the courthouse on the town square was a squat colonial structure rebuilt with a large

plate-glass window with firm gold lettering on it:

BANK OF BLUE HARBOR
Jessica Matlock, Pres.

On the side of the square facing the sea was a white-painted, two-story building housing the *Sentinel*. Just around the corner on the cobbled street that pitched sharply down to the waterfront was an ultra-modern Mariner's Club, complete with neon sign and glass-brick front that stuck out like a sore thumb from among the neat picket fences and maple-shaded houses.

Sheriff Patelli's office was on the third floor of the Town Hall, which jointly served both Blue Harbor and the county. Patelli was a short, stout little man not much older than Jeff, with a weathered face and the hard, rope-calloused palms of a fisherman. He looked as if he knew what he was doing. His shoes were highly polished, and he wore a white linen suit that somehow managed to preserve its press in spite of the wilting heat. He listened to Jeff's story without once taking his eyes from Jeff's face, nor did he interrupt until he had all the facts. When Jeff was finished, he reached behind him and switched on an electric fan.

"You talk like a newspaperman, all right. You know how to tell something. Where did you work before?"

"Philadelphia and Newark," Jeff said.

"That's a long way from here."

"I don't mind. I've been wanting to buy a small paper of my own for a long time. I heard about Mr. Hudson and the *Sentinel* and came up here to look into it, prepared to buy."

"Sure thing." Sheriff Patelli nodded. "Welcome to our little community." The stocky little man looked at Mark Hudson, bulking near the office door. "Mark, you sure the dead man is Andy Matlock?"

"It's his boat." The big man shrugged, his face gleaming with sweat. "Nobody could be sure for certain, maybe, but it's Andy's clothes, and his figure. I'd say it was."

"All right." Patelli turned his head abruptly to a side door and called: "Jessie! Jessie, come in here!"

The side door opened almost at once and a girl came into the room. "What is it, Luigi?"

CHAPTER II

GIRL WITH THE GUN



JEFF felt a quick stir of interest. Any man would be interested when this girl walked into the room. She was tall, with a slim figure in a seersucker suit, and her blonde hair was bleached a strikingly light tone by the sun, sweeping gracefully to her shoulders. Her gray eyes were wide and worried, touching Jeff, Mark Hudson, and then the sheriff in turn. She wore a minimum of makeup, but she could have done even without that, Jeff thought. She was frowning anxiously.

Sheriff Patelli said: "Listen, Jessie. This man here, this Mr. Wilde, just brought me some news. Some information. It concerns you, I guess. But you take it easy, you hear?"

The girl sounded a little breathless: "What sort of news, Luigi?"

"Well, Mr. Wilde found Andy's lobster boat. Happened on it just a few seconds before Mark did, too."

"Andy's boat? Where?"

"Over in Crooked Cove, where the road goes by. The boat was a wreck. It was burned at sea and the tide took it ashore."

Color drained from the girl's face. "And Andy?" she whispered.

"He was in the boat. He's dead, Jessie."

The girl lifted a hand suddenly, as if he had slapped her. Her blonde hair swung on her shoulders. She went white, and her eyes were stricken like an injured puppy's. Jeff could barely hear her voice.

"That's not so! It couldn't be!"

"That's the way it is, Jessie." Sheriff Patelli's voice grew heavier. "What's more, Mr. Wilde found the remains of a money sack from the bank, there in the boat."

The girl turned blank, uncomprehending eyes on Jeff. Behind the fat little sheriff, the fan snored softly on

the window sill. The noises of the town and the clatter of machinery from the fish cannery came faintly through the open window. The girl put a trembling hand over her mouth.

"Who are you?" she asked Jeff.

He told her he had come to buy Mark Hudson's newspaper. She still looked as if she didn't understand. Or if she did, she regarded him with deep suspicion, her eyes flicking from Jeff to the big figure of Mark Hudson beside him.

Hudson said throatily: "I'll have to sell the *Sentinel* now, all right. Guess you might as well know what's going on here, Wilde, since it will soon be your business to know the news. Jessie's bank was robbed last night, busted wide open. It was an inside job, Patelli thinks. The crook got away with over forty thousand dollars in cash and all my diamonds."

"Diamonds?" Jeff asked.

Patelli said: "Mr. Hudson is our town's wealthiest man. You might as well know that, too." He sounded weary. "He collects gems. About a week ago, he was told by his insurance company to keep 'em in Jessie's vault, or else. Now the insurance company is going to be out a pretty penny."

Jeff's eyes darkened. Mark Hudson was leaning against the hall door, grinning. He didn't look unhappy about anything as he turned toward the stricken girl.

"Anyway," Hudson said, "your brother Andy is deader'n a mackerel. He must have swiped the stuff last night and tried to make Portland by boat, figuring the alarm would make the roads unsafe."

The girl's eyes filled with horror. "Mark Hudson, you're lying! Andy wasn't a crook. My brother wouldn't have anything to do with a bank robbery. Why, it's practically his bank, too!"

HUDSON'S big face glistened with pleasure. He laughed at her, and it was as if he had struck the girl blindly. She didn't give him any warning. Her move was casual as she went to Patelli's desk and opened the left-hand drawer. After that it was as if all hell had broken loose. Her hand came up with a Colt, and the crash of the gun

drowned out Patelli's roar of alarm. The girl's lips were compressed into a tortured line, her eyes filled with hate.

The heavy slug splintered the door. Mark Hudson cursed and his hand streaked for the gun in his pocket. He had it half drawn when Jeff jumped him, his shoulder crashing into the big man's chest. Hudson was thrown back against the door with a solid thump. His gun roared and the fan jumped off the window sill behind Patelli's desk. Jeff closed his fingers on Hudson's wrist and twisted. Nothing happened. He might as well have tried to bend a bar of steel. Hudson shoved him aside and stood with his legs braced, his black eyes venomous, the gun up.

"You crazy wildcat!" Hudson yelled.

Jeff moved in again and slapped the gun from Hudson's hand. It took the big man by surprise this time. The gun hit the floor and Jeff scooped it up, almost in one motion.

Patelli let out a long, whispering breath. "Let's all take it easy, folks."

He had retrieved his own gun from Jessie Matlock, and the girl had turned to bury her face in his shoulder. Astonishingly, her slim body was wracked by sobs.

Jeff slid Hudson's gun to the sheriff's desk.

"Do all the citizens of Blue Harbor pack artillery?"

Hudson drew a deep breath. "I carried the gun this morning because I was looking for Andy and my jewels."

Patelli released Jessie Matlock and picked up the electric fan, replaced it on the window ledge, and gave it an experimental whirl. It started up again with a high, keening noise. The stout little man grimaced and shut it off.

"Let's all sit down and talk it out." His gaze fixed on Jeff. "You said there was no money in the boat?"

"I didn't look thoroughly. But I got the impression that the piece of sack-ing was all that was left by the fire."

"Do you think the money was all burned?"

"I don't know," Jeff said. "But if Hudson's jewels were among the loot, they wouldn't have burned."

"Then Frankie's got 'em."

"Frank?"

"Finney. Our local bad boy. He runs the waterfront, but I've never been able to pin a charge on him. It's just a guess, but a good one, I hope. Even if Andy did pull the bank robbery, it isn't likely he did it alone. Maybe we got a robbery and a hijacking to consider here. I just don't know yet." Patelli stood up, sighing, and put his arm around Jessie Matlock's shoulders. "Stop crying, Jessie . . . You're supposed to be tough. Hush, now. I'll check on everything. Andy was a good boy—maybe a little wild, but I figure he was all right. All the Matlocks were a little bit wild. Now hush."

He eyed Jeff and Mark Hudson who turned and left the office.

After all, Jeff thought, none of it concerned him directly. He took a room at the Fisherman's Tavern, for which he fortunately had a reservation, and after breakfast he walked through the tourist-crowded streets to the offices of the *Sentinel*. He spent two hours looking over the press, type racks, and past issues of the little daily.

Pleased with what he saw, he felt a pleasurable excitement at the prospect of at last being the publisher of a small-town newspaper. He came back to the front office carrying four bottles of beer hooked between his fingers and plunked them down on the desk of the little gnome who seemed to be the sole employee of the *Sentinel*. The little elf's name was Orrin Layton, a shriveled little fellow with a halo of white hair fringing his pink scalp and the wise eyes of a monkey in his wizened face. He regarded the beer kindly.

"You decide to buy the place, young feller?"

"I'm thinking of it," Jeff said. "Drink up."

ORRIN unhooked the beer cap on the drawer pull of his desk, and sighed heavily. "You're being stung, you know. It makes no matter with me, of course, but I hate to see a nice young feller like you be jobbed by Mark Hudson."

"What's the matter with the *Sentinel*?" Jeff asked.

"Nothing," the elf grinned, "except for one thing. Nobody reads it, nobody buys it, nobody advertizes in it."

"It's losing money?"

"Steadily. You don't think Mark Hudson would let go of a good thing, do you?" Orrin wagged his round old head and tilted the beer bottle for a long moment. He regarded Jeff's red hair and tall figure sadly. "Paper's dead on its feet, run right into the ground by Hudson's stiff-necked policies. Circulation's down to nothing minus nothing. You're being robbed, Jeff."

"Maybe it can be remedied," Jeff said. "I didn't expect a bargain."

"You ain't getting one, either. You'll have to fight."

"Who?"

The old man grinned. "I like that. Not what, but who. Mark Hudson, naturally. He owns the town, or has people fooled into thinking he does."

"That can be remedied, too," Jeff said. He tried the beer and found it good. "What about Jessie Matlock? How does a young girl like that get to be president of a bank?"

"Tom Matlock left it to her," Orrin said. "Tom was a fine man, and Jessie and Andy were fine kids. Andy was in the war when Tom died, and Jessie had been really running things for three years before that, anyway. The board of directors voted her in as president and she's been fine at it ever since."

"I didn't think she had the temperament for a position like that."

Orrin chuckled. "She's a wildcat, when she gets stirred up. No mistake about that."

"And Andy?"

"A fine lad," Orrin said flatly.

"Did he rob the bank?"

The old man hesitated. "I don't know."

"Do you think it was Frank Finney?"

"Reckon maybe. But you're askin' for trouble if you stick your two cents into it, young feller."

"What's a newspaperman for?" Jeff grinned. "Have another beer, Orrin. We'll get along."

He secured the name of a reliable attorney from the old man and then went to the law office to have the legal papers for the sale drawn up. By noon the day was one of the hottest of the season. Back at his room in the Fisherman's Tavern, he showered and shaved

and changed from his singlet and sneakers into a quiet gray business suit. The collar and necktie seemed dedicated to the proposition that they were designed to strangle him. But he endured it. He decided to have lunch.

Jessie Matlock was in the hotel dining room, seated at a corner table, eating cold lobster. A glass of ale stood on the red-checked tablecloth before her. Through the window, the vista of harbor, sails and the tangled masts of the waterfront made a picturesque pattern. The girl's eyes showed no traces of the tears she had shed. Jeff crossed the dining room and sat down, facing her. The blonde girl looked a little startled at his gray suit. Her mouth trembled a little, but her voice was firm.

"I heard you registered here. I've been waiting for you. Has Patelli discovered anything yet?"

Jeff shrugged. "No money, no jewels. I don't know if he's talked to Frank Finney yet. Where does the local bad boy hang out?"

"The Mariner's Club," Jessie said. "But talk won't get anything out of him."

JESSIE'S blonde hair swung as she looked abruptly out over the harbor. "Is it true you're buying the *Sentinel*?"

"I plan to."

"You'll have tough sledding."

"I've had tough sledding before," Jeff said.

"You won't like Blue Harbor. Not the way it's run these days."

"You mean Patelli?"

"Oh, no. Luigi's all right. It's Mark Hudson. He runs things."

"That needn't be a permanent condition," Jeff said. "We can start changing things."

"How?"

"You can tell me about your brother Andy."

She regarded him with sober gray eyes. "It's true that Andy hadn't been—well, dependable, ever since he got back from the war. You see, Dad always aimed his life for the bank, and Andy hated it. The freedom and activity and excitement he got during the war gave him even less taste for seden-

tary work, you might say. He refused to take my place in the bank and started lobster fishing."

"He was actually a fisherman?" Jeff asked.

"Of course. All the old families got their start by way of the sacred cod. The Matlocks are no exception. Andy was simply reverting to type."

Jeff tried some of the cold lobster he had ordered. "Where was Andy last night? Do you know?"

She hesitated. "At the Mariner's Club."

"With you? Or with a date?"

Her gray eyes wandered to the harbor view again. "He went alone, as far as I can find out. He—he was interested in Madge Lucas. She runs the Mariner's Club, you know, with a Portugee named Alois Frehn—believe it or not. Andy was just infatuated. He was bound to snap out of his interest in Madge."

Jeff waited.

Jessie said: "Madge used to have a roadhouse down the coast. She was quite successful, and moved into town to build that modern eyesore among our maple trees."

"Does this Finney lad ever hang out there?"

"Usually, yes."

Jeff nodded, called the waitress, paid the check, and went back upstairs to his room. From his worn and battered suitcase he took out an equally worn, but carefully oiled .38 automatic, a weapon he had liberated in Italy. He felt mildly surprised at the feel of it in his hand. He sat at the window and smoked a cigarette, his eyes thoughtful, and then after a while he dropped the extra magazine in his pocket, together with the gun and went out.

CHAPTER III

TORTURED MAN



THE sunlight made a hot, fierce glare on the glass and chromium of the Mariner's Club. Jeff snubbed out his cigarette, walked around a sidewalk artist who offered to do his portrait in crayon, and pushed inside. Cool,

air enveloped him, and he stood blinking in the indoor gloom after the bright sunlight outside. There was a small foyer, decorated in nautical fashion, with a gangplank leading into a shadowed dining room. There were Venetian blinds over the windows facing the harbor, and a small band shell was tucked into one corner of the big room. A boy was sweeping the lush carpet that led forward. The boy looked at Jeff and yawned and went on with his chore. Nobody else was in sight.

Jeff turned through a round doorway like an enormous porthole to a flight of stairs going up, past a wall of luminous glass brick. The place was an architect's nightmare, considering the town it was set in, and the thought gave him an encouraging idea. The murmur of voices from an office at the end of the upper hall led him on. He was in time to see a short, rosy-faced man come softly out of the office doorway and close the door behind him. The man paused at the sight of Jeff's tall figure.

"Yes?"

"I'm looking for Madge Lucas."

"She isn't in."

Jeff said: "You're Alois Frehn?"

"Quite so. Can I—ah, do anything for you?"

"Tell Madge I want to see her. The name is Jeff Wilde."

"Wilde." Frehn nodded his round head. "I'll do that."

"Now," Jeff said. "She's in. I heard her talking to you in there."

The Portugee stared at Jeff. It occurred to Jeff that there was more Dutch in the man than Portuguese. His eyes were as expressive as those of a dead fish. Turning, Frehn called: "Madge!"

Without warning, then, his fist lashed at Jeff's face. Jeff ducked and came up on his toes, as lightly balanced as a dancer. He drove his left into Frehn's pudgy middle, and as the Portugee grunted and doubled forward, he used his right in a short hook that slammed the man against the wall. Frehn made an odd hissing sound and his face went purple. A trickle of blood was smeared on a corner of his open mouth. He seemed to twitch—and a knife flicked into his hand.

Jeff said: "Tell Madge I'd like to see her."

The knife in Frehn's hand glittered toward him. But Jeff wasn't in position to receive it. He ducked forward and to one side, then drove the Portugee against the wall again. He uncorked everything he had in his right hook this time. The sound of his fist against the man's jaw was hard and flat and decisive. Alois Frehn dropped to the floor and stayed there.

Jeff picked up the knife, aware of sardonic applause from the office doorway.

"Alois is too zealous," said the girl who appeared there. "He likes to protect my privacy. Come in, Mr. Wilde." . . . She looked coolly at the unconscious man. "Never mind about him. He'll keep."

Madge Lucas looked as if she belonged in the ultra-modern Mariner's Club. She was tall and sleek, with dark hair drawn tightly back in a heavy knot at the nape of her neck. Her clothing and her poise gave the impression of having just stepped from a Fifth Avenue shop. But there was a thin stiffness to her mouth that spoiled her beauty. Her voice, when she spoke again, was low and throaty and compelling. Jeff felt uneasy as he followed her suave figure into the small office.

"I heard you were in town to buy the *Sentinel*," she said. "Mark Hudson is a fool. He's losing money on it, as you probably know, but the owner of a newspaper has a great influence on public opinion."

"Does Mark Hudson need that influence?" Jeff asked.

The girl smiled. "I should think so."

"And you?"

SHE stopped smiling. "You should give yourself a little time to get oriented in this town, Mr. Wilde, before you ask impertinent questions."

"I'd have liked that," Jeff said, "but events seemed to have pushed me into the middle of a rather tight situation."

"You mean Andy Matlock's death," Madge Lucas said.

"Yes."

"You would like some information from me?"

"Andy was here last night, before the robbery. This place is practically next door to the bank. You could help, I'm sure."

"So." The dark-haired woman went around her modern desk and sat with her back to the light of the glass brick wall behind her. Her face was in the shadows when she tapped her long fingernails on the desk. "If you are really going to be the owner of the *Sentinel*, I suppose I should give you whatever information I can think of. On the other hand, I dislike getting involved."

"You'll help me," Jeff said.

"I will?"

"I think we're dealing with a case of murder—not an accident, as everyone prefers to suppose."

The woman stared. "Murder? But what makes you believe that?"

"Call it a hunch. But it's a good one."

Madge Lucas said flatly: "Perhaps Alois should have done a better job with that knife of his."

"But he didn't," Jeff said easily. "Do we talk about Andy Matlock now?"

"Very well . . . But there is little I can tell you that Sheriff Patelli doesn't know already. A lot of people were here last night. My little club is popular. I couldn't pay too much attention to the comings and going of my patrons."

"Was Finney here last night?"

"Of course. But so was Sheriff Patelli, the mayor, various selectmen, Andy Matlock and Mark Hudson—everybody drops in here at least once a night."

"But not Jessie Matlock?"

Madge grimaced delicately. "I'm just as pleased to have that wild vixen stay away from here."

"Where is Frank Finney now?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Where should I look for him?"

"I still don't know."

"But you know that Andy Matlock was in love with you. You don't seem shocked by his death, or the fact that he seems to have robbed the bank."

The woman shrugged. "Andy was a strange boy. I'm not responsible for the fact that he was in love with me." She seemed restless under Jeff's steady gaze, and apparently came to an abrupt de-

cision. "All right, I'll tell you about it. Frank Finney was in here last night."

"What time?"

"About eleven o'clock, just as the place started to fill up. Finney sat with Mark Hudson for a while, talking, but I didn't go over to hear what they were talking about. Then Andy Matlock came in. He was a little high. He pestered me a bit, but I was too busy to bother with him, and Finney called him over to the table with Hudson and the three of them talked for half an hour. After the midnight show, Finney got up and walked out. Andy followed him a little later. They came back together about one o'clock."

"Both of them?"

"Certainly. They spoke to Hudson again, in the bar, and then all three left for the night. Frankly, Andy was drunk by then. I heard about the bank robbery and about Andy's death this morning, when Sheriff Patelli dropped in to ask me about it. But that's all I know."

"Could you find out some more?"

"I might," she said huskily. "But perhaps your next call will be in the nature of a social visit, rather than business."

Jeff met her gaze with a grin. "Why not?"

WHEN he left the office, the corridor outside was empty. Alois Frehn was gone. The boy downstairs was still sweeping up.

He spent the rest of the afternoon with his new lawyers and Mark Hudson, at the bank. Jessie Matlock wasn't there, nor did he see Sheriff Patelli. By four o'clock he was legally the new owner of the *Sentinel* and a monumental mortgage. He decided to celebrate his new status as a newspaper publisher by sharing some bottles of ale with old Orrin Layton in the *Sentinel* office. The old man was dubious, perched on his roll-type desk like an elf.

"I like you, Jeff. You look like you might turn out a good newspaper, given a chance. But the boys have three strikes on you to begin with."

"What boys?" Jeff asked.

"Hudson, for one. Maybe Finney, too. Hudson hasn't as much money as he pre-

tends to have. That jewel collection of his and this paper was all he had left out of a sizable fortune, I reckon. Now the paper is yours, and Hudson's jewels are gone, and you're stuck with a broken-down plant and a broken-down editor—namely me."

"We can wake up the town and the whole county to the fact that the *Sentinel* exists," Jeff mused.

"How's that?"

"By getting at the truth of Andy Matlock's death."

"And how do you figure you can do that?"

"With your help, Orrin. Have another ale, and put on your thinking cap. Then try to figure out where we can find the mysteriously missing Frank Finney. . . ."

* * * * *

At eight o'clock that night, Jeff was in his room at the Fisherman's Tavern. The wind had changed, and a cool sea breeze swept the muggy heat of day farther inland. It had been a trying day, without any tangible clues to the solution of the robbery. He had called Jessie Matlock's house at least once every hour, but the girl seemed to have disappeared, too. He couldn't get her out of his mind.

At ten minutes after eight, his telephone rang. It was Orrin Layton. "Jeff? That you? You alone?"

"Yes."

"Can you meet me on Nanson's Wharf? It's important."

"Have you found Finney?"

The old man chuckled. "I got a clue. I ain't done leg work like this for a long time, but I guess I'm not so bad at it, I reckon. I'll look for you in fifteen minutes."

"I'll be there," Jeff promised, and hung up.

He had no difficulty in finding Nanson's Wharf, though it was dark when he got there. The only light that penetrated to the outer end of the sagging pier was from Harbor Stret, which paralleled the water. The tide was coming in again, and the night was filled with the creaking and sighing of the fishing boats tied up all around.

Jeff stumbled once over a broken lobster trap and felt his way carefully around the shed at the end of the wharf. The smell of fish and tar and marine oil brought to mind the essence of all the harbors in the world. Across the dark water he could see the glowing lights of the fish cannery building on the State Pier.

"Orrin?" he whispered.

The little man materialized at his elbow. "Right here, Jeff. I got us a dory. It's the best way to get there with the tide in. The causeway's broken down since last year, and your car would only get stalled."

"Where are we going?"

"Madge Lucas had her old roadhouse down the coast. It's really on an island, but somebody once built a causeway out to it a long time ago. Can't reach it by car now, though. That's why I snaffled us the dory."

"What's to be found out there?"

"I wish I knew," Orrin chuckled. "But it occurred to me that it's the last place anybody would look."

"I'll take the oars," Jeff decided. "Just point me on the right course."

IT WAS twenty minutes before the bow of the dory grated on the shingle that loomed up out of the night. Fortunately, the moon was up over the horizon of the sea, and the night was calm. There was enough light to make out the bulky shape of the rocky little island and the long line of broken causeway that led across the dark water to the mainland. Behind them, only a glow in the sky indicated the position of Blue Harbor. For the next ten miles down the coast, there wasn't a town or a house to be found.

Jeff made the dory fast, and waited until Orrin splashed ashore beside him. Both men were dark, silent shadows as they turned away from the beach and climbed the rocky slope to the opposite shore. The Casino was there, low and rambling in the moonlight, a frame house that was rapidly wearying of its struggle against the wind and the sea. The wide veranda had sagged in spots, and some of the windows gaped like empty tooth sockets where the glass had been broken or fallen out. There were

no lights, no signs of life anywhere.

"Could be I guessed wrong," Orrin whispered cheerfully. "But we've got nothing to lose by looking, hey? You take Madge's old house—she lived here, behind the Casino. I'll take the inn. Meet you at the back door as soon as we know something."

Jeff nodded and turned to the little frame house that stood apart from the main building. The wind was stronger on this side of the island, and the surf crashed in sullen monotone through the dark of the night.

He paused on the rickety front steps to listen. But there was no sign of alarm in that scene of desolation. Orrin had disappeared, swallowed up by the night. Jeff opened the sagging screen door and went inside.

Moonlight dappled the barren rooms. There were only a few pieces of abandoned furniture in the front of the house. A flight of stairs led him upward, but the bedrooms were equally unrewarding. He was about to check the back of the house when he heard a man moan.

The sound came from below, in the direction of the kitchen. Jeff paused to listen. For a moment, all he could hear was the ever-present beat of the surf on the nearby beach. From the window, the little island looked deserted, silver and black in the moonlight. Then the man groaned again.

Jeff took out his .38 and went silently downstairs.

CHAPTER IV

KILLER AT LARGE



LEADING into the kitchen was a short hallway. From behind the door came a rustle of clothing, a thumping that was repeated three or four times, and then a man's long sigh. The door was closed.

Jeff paused a moment, his hand on the metal knob, and then he twisted it and went in.

The Dutch Portugee, Alois Frehn, lay prostrate on the kitchen floor, in a pool of bright moonlight. His shoulders were hunched curiously by his effort to rise

on his elbows. The back of his head was dark and clotted with blood. His left hand made a curious scrabbling motion, as if he were trying to dig his way through the wooden floor. His hand looked inhuman. Even in the moonlight, Jeff could see that each finger had been smashed to a pulp.

Jeff's voice was quiet.

"Frehn!"

The man on the floor didn't seem to hear, but he stopped the motion of his battered hand and tried to hump himself toward the back kitchen door. For the first time, Jeff noticed that it stood open to the sea wind. Frehn's body shuddered in a convulsive tortured movement. He gained about two inches toward his goal.

"Frehn," Jeff said again.

He started through the doorway, whirled halfway about, and then froze. A huge shadow bulked against the peeling paper of the kitchen wall. It was Mark Hudson. The big man was grinning in a tight, mirthless manner. He had his big Colt in hand, pointed at Jeff. "Hello, Wilde."

Jeff's gun was pointed at the floor. He didn't lift it. He looked from Hudson to the tortured man on the floor, and said:

"This seems to be a popular place, after all. Is Frehn somebody's idea of providing a floor show?"

Hudson's broad face glistened in the moonlight. He glanced without concern at the man on the floor. "I just arrived. I found him like that."

"I didn't hear you come in."

"But I heard you, upstairs. I thought maybe you're the one who gave Frehn that hand. Somebody worked him over, all right." Hudson paused and licked his lips. "Did you?"

"I don't know why I would," Jeff said.

"Well, I didn't do it, either. What are you doing here?"

"Just looking. Who do you think did this to Frehn?"

"Hanged if I know."

"I think you do know," Jeff said quietly. "I think you did it."

The big man said: "I can see maybe I made a mistake about you. You think too much."

The big man swung his gun without warning at Jeff. Jeff ducked, but the heavy barrel slammed down on his shoulder, numbing his arm. His own gun jumped from his hand and went skittering out of sight under the kitchen sink. He staggered backward, stumbling over Alois Frehn's body, and collapsed against the table. The rickety furniture splintered into a dozen pieces under his weight—and the next moment Hudson followed up his savage advantage by jumping him, his massive weight descending like a pile-driver.

Jeff felt the breath smashed out of him. He heaved upward, tried to get out of the tangle of broken table legs and Hudson's pressure. The big man smashed a heavy fist into Jeff's face. Jeff clawed for one of the table legs and swung it hard. Hudson grunted and pulled back a moment and scrambled to his feet, away from Jeff. In the moonlight, a trickly of blood across his jaw looked dark and ugly.

"You asked for this," the big man rasped. "Nobody asked for you to interfere here."

JEFF wasn't quite sure what he was doing. He drew a shuddering breath, aware of the clamor in the back of his head and a rising nausea. He gathered his legs under him and lunged upward at his opponent looming over him. He swung wildly and missed. Hudson moved, his figure vague in the moonlit shambles of the kitchen—and then something clutched hard at Jeff's ankle. He looked down and saw Alois Frehn on the floor, like a snake, grabbing for his legs. And Hudson moved swiftly. Darkness exploded all around Jeff. . . .

He was stunned, but not out. He was aware of time going by, but he didn't move. After a while the thunder in his ears resolved itself into the normal mutter of the surf outside and he rolled over, pushed himself erect, and staggered across the kitchen toward the sink. Mark Hudson was gone. So was Alois Frehn. But his gun was still there, under the kitchen sink. He groped for it and stood swaying, gun in hand.

The water from the kitchen tap was cold and refreshing when he ducked his head under it. The raw sea wind that

slapped his face as he stepped outside made him feel even better.

No one was in sight on the deserted, moonlit beach. But a power boat, sleek and rangy, was tied up at the end of a small pier that led to a side entrance of the main roadhouse. The motor of the cruiser was idling, muttering a latent song of power. A sign swung on creaky hinges battered by the wind, announcing that the building was *Madge's Casino*.

Jeff's shoes made soft gritty sounds as he stepped from the sandy beach to the pier. There was no one aboard the cruiser. He turned back to the low silhouette of the roadhouse, wondering where Orrin had gone, a sense of worry over the little old man like a cold knot in the pit of his stomach.

He stood still for a moment in the deep shadow of the veranda that encircled the roadhouse. The sign creaked noisily in the wind. Another creaking sound seemed to echo the sound of the rusty hinges. It came from around the corner of the dark house, and he moved in that direction on noiseless feet.

Alois Frehn had just stepped from the main entrance of the building and was walking across a sandy dune toward what appeared to be a small barn, nestling in the hollow beyond the grass-grown ridge. He hadn't noticed the little building before, because of its secluded location. A dim bar of light lay in a distorted oblong on the sand, seeping out from under the wide barn doors. The light suddenly enlarged as Alois Frehn opened the small door to one side and stepped inside.

It took Jeff a full minute, moving cautiously, to encircle the building and locate a window through which he could see into the interior of the little barn. He stood rooted, startled by the sight.

The barn had once been arranged for summer living quarters. The light inside came from an oil lamp standing on a wicker table in the center of the room. A man was spread-eagled on a cot against the opposite wall, his wrists and ankles lashed securely to the iron frame of the bed. Madge Lucas, tall and dark-haired, in a trim blue slack suit, stood a little to one side, a long-barreled gun in her hand pointed at a second man

who was digging in the sandy floor of the room. He had dug a pit that was already knee deep. The man was sweating, his face streaked with grime. He had his shirt off and his huge muscles bunched and knotted around his hairy shoulders as he labored with the shovel. The man was Mark Hudson.

THROUGH the window, Jeff could hear Madge Lucas' husky voice: "Make it deep and wide enough, Mark—deep enough to hold the two of you."

Jeff swore softly, wondering again where Orrin had gone, and then he quit his position by the window and went around to the main door of the barn. Mark Hudson was the first to see him come in. The big man froze suddenly, shovel in hand.

Madge Lucas made an annoyed sound and started to turn, the long-barreled gun in her hand coming up. Jeff's voice was unnaturally harsh as he rapped: "Stay just the way you are!"

The woman's startled eyes flicked like the lash of a whip toward the stiff figure of Alois Frehn. The little Portuguese whispered frantically:

"I've been trying to tell you, Madge—Hudson knocked him out!"

"Down, but not out," Jeff said. "Drop your gun, Madge."

She wasn't going to obey. Her face paled and her eyes narrowed to vicious slits and her gun jerked up. At the same moment, Mark Hudson heaved upward from the pit he had been digging and swung his shovel in a short, deadly arc at the dark-haired woman. The shining blade caught her arm. Her gun bucked and roared and Hudson's big body crumpled to the sand floor of the barn.

The roar of Jeff's .38 drowned out the woman's scream of pain and hate. His shot coincided with Frehn's snake-like movement with the knife in his left hand. The knife twinkled, and Jeff was conscious of a hot, searing burn along his cheek. The Portuguese was slammed backward by the impact of Jeff's slug. The man sat down abruptly against the cot, then wriggled to his feet and ran crazily in a staggering course for the back door of the barn.

Madge Lucas screamed: "You little

fool!" She had switched the gun to her good hand, and now she fired at Frehn's back. The little man threw up his arms and pitched face down on the threshold. He didn't move again.

Madge turned to Jeff, her shattered arm hanging crookedly at her side, but the gun in her left hand was still effective.

Afterward, Jeff wasn't sure whether he would have shot her as she stood, or not. The decision was taken from his hands by the appearance of Orrin Layton in the back door. The little old man was grinning as he stepped over the body of Alois Frehn. The gun in his hand looked as big as a howitzer, and his appearance caused Madge a second of indecision. It was enough for Jeff. He left his feet in a desperate dive that drove hard into the tall woman's body. She screamed in fury and tried to bring up her gun. Jeff knocked it down, twisted it away, and slapped her face hard.

"Now behave," he gasped.

The woman gazed at him with blank, uncomprehending eyes, then she made a queer little moaning sound and crumpled to the floor at Jeff's feet. She didn't move after that. Jeff watched her cautiously for a moment. Then, ignoring Orrin's voluble excitement, he turned for the first time to the young man who was spread-eagled on the cot.

"All right, Andy," he said. "We'll have you out of those ropes in a moment. . . ."

Orrin was still chattering, minutes later, when Jeff's attention was turned by the sound of a motor outside the barn. In a moment, Sheriff Patelli and Jessie Matlock appeared, breathless in their hurry. It seemed that old Orrin had taken the time to summon them during his search of the roadhouse, using the telephone that was still connected in the hideout.

SHERIFF PATELLI'S squat figure paused in the doorway, his quick eyes taking in the mess of the barn. He grunted, looked suspiciously at Jeff, and idly toed Alois Frehn's body. He sounded disappointed.

"So, Orrin, it looks as if you called us too late for the party."

Jeff drew a deep breath, not surprised to find himself shaking visibly. He touched the cut on his cheek where Alois' knife had slid by, felt the tender lump on the back of his head, and grimaced wryly. He turned to Jessie Matlock. The tall blonde girl was staring at him with incredulous eyes. It occurred to Jeff that she looked lovely. He had never seen any girl lovelier.

"Don't look so dismayed, angel," he said. "Your brother Andy isn't dead. He's right here. He'll be all right."

THE girl swung past him with a choked sob, darting to Andy Matlock's side, helping the tall young man to his feet. Sheriff Patelli made a queer clucking sound. He didn't seem too surprised. He said to Jeff:

"For a stranger in town, you certainly get around, Mr. Wilde. Seems to me you might be as good at making news as you ought to be publishing it. I'd appreciate an explanation of what went on out here."

Jeff said: "It was Frank Finney who robbed the Blue Harbor Bank, and he pulled the job alone. From what I've heard about Frank, he didn't need any help. He was at the Mariner's Club last night, and he simply left the club for a few minutes, walked up the street to the bank, broke in through a skylight and took his time opening the vault. With the loot in his car, he went back into the Mariner's Club for a drink with Andy and Mark Hudson, perhaps to establish a better alibi. But that was his mistake. Somehow, Madge got wind of what was going on. Finney's scheme, working with Mark Hudson, was to get Andy drunk, toss his body into his own lobster boat, set fire to it and make it appear as if Andy and the loot had been lost in the fire at sea.

"In spite of what Madge told me, she was somewhat in love with Andy herself, and she had no intention of letting Andy be the fall guy. So with Mark Hudson, and with Alois Frehn's help, they killed Finney, drugged Andy, switched their clothes. It was Finney who took the ride in the lobster boat,

and Finney's body we found this morning.

"Hudson, of course, was in this to collect the insurance on his jewels. We'll find them around here somewhere, when we get a chance to look. The scheme would have worked pretty well, I suppose, except for the problem of what to do with Andy Matlock. Alois and Hudson sneaked over here to kill Andy, anyway, against Madge's wishes. Madge caught Alois and smashed that hand of his, and by the time Hudson arrived, Orrin and I were already on the scene and the fat was in the fire."

Sheriff Patelli looked dissatisfied.

"It listens all right, the way you tell it now, but what made you think the setup was phony in the first place?"

Jeff looked at Jessie Matlock.

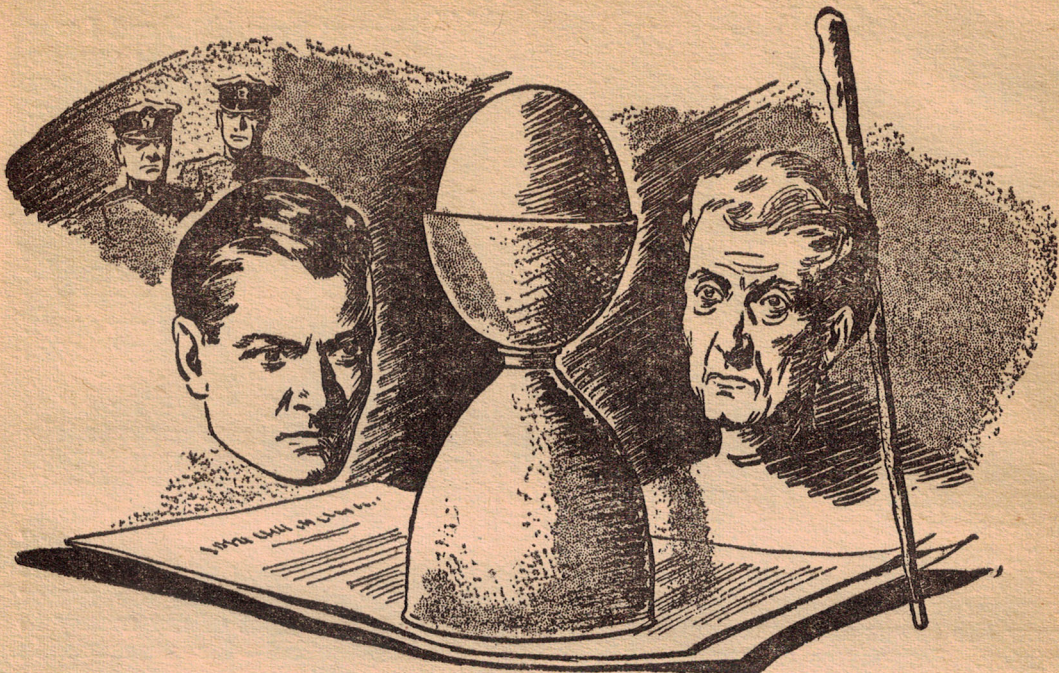
"I knew Andy wasn't the dead man. I knew the body in the lobster boat couldn't be Andy Matlock, because Andy was a fisherman, and the body in the boat had soft hands and manicured nails—hardly the hands of a man who goes lobstering every day. Of course, I didn't know Andy was a lobster fisherman until Jessie mentioned it later this afternoon. And even then, being a newcomer in town, I thought I'd feel my way around first rather than take a chance on talking to the wrong party."

Sheriff Patelli grunted again. "For a stranger, you get around all right. I suppose you know this is the biggest news story that's hit Blue Harbor in many a moon?"

Orrin Layton answered for Jeff. "We'll be lucky if we can print enough copies to keep up with the demand for tomorrow's edition!" The old man chuckled happily. "I reckon people are going to wake up to the fact we've got a newspaper in town, finally."

Jeff didn't pay much attention to the little man's prophecy. He was thinking of the future, but not in relation to the Sentinel's circulation. He wondered whether Jessie Matlock would have dinner with him tomorrow. He didn't think she would refuse. After that, he had a pretty good idea that his future in Blue Harbor would take care of itself.

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FATAL BEQUEST

By ARTHUR T. HARRIS

One mistake may not convict a man, but four spell death!

THEY'RE talking my case over now in the warden's office. I have a hunch the warden is standing by the phone, in case the governor's secretary calls. But there won't be any reprieve.

Old Miss Whitney, whose death I contrived to hasten, was too much of a fixture in this state.

If I had it to do all over again, I wouldn't. I mean, I would look at it with more of a sense of perspective. Give it time to jell, as it were. After all, everybody has to die sometime.

Even as you. And I . . .

I remember so well when I came to Sherman Medical School, the largest unit in the state university, two years

ago. I'd transferred from the University of Chicago, because I wanted a quieter atmosphere in which to live and study.

As for room and board, that was another problem to lick.

"I'd like to save on expenses," I told the girl in the registrar's office.

"Who wouldn't?" she agreed. "Hmm—would you be open to a proposition?"

"As long as I live and breathe."

She was only partly amused. "Okay, eager beaver—but you asked for it, remember that." She wrote down a name and an address. "Go see Miss Whitney. She's just about your speed, I'd say."

Now that, of course, is a moot point. Miss Whitney, as I soon found out, was

about sixty-five, a lean, birdlike woman with stringy white hair, high-laced shoes and a cane.

The cane, I learned, was not an aid to walking. It was like a conductor's baton. With it, Miss Whitney directed the small orchestra of her life. The milkman—put the milk in the icebox, please. The mailman—thank you, and will you please post this letter? The grocery boy—Tom, those potatoes are wormy. Take 'em back, and bring me five fresh pounds!

WHEN I run into a close deal, I play it slow and easy. Miss Whitney, I saw, would have to be handled. She offered room and board for fifteen dollars a week, a snap in times like these. There were strings, sure.

"I want a man around the house," she told me. Her voice was twenty years younger than her body. "Somebody to mow the lawn; keep the walk free in winter. Sometimes a fuse blows. At my age, I don't like to go down to the basement to fix it. Small errands have to be run, bills paid. Are you agreeable?"

"Well, Miss Whitney—" and I gave her my best, sure-to-kill smile—"when I pay your bills, I'll make an honest accounting."

Her shrewd brown eyes looked me up and down. "You'd better, young man," she said. "I don't like to be trifled with."

I began to respect the old gal. I even began to like her, in my way. More, I found she could be entirely useful to me—if I played my cards for keeps.

"I'm leaving all my money to the college," she told me, one night at supper. Just like that. "My father, Dr. Jabez Whitney, ran the medical school for thirty years until his retirement."

I looked up from my veal stew but said nothing. I was a bit startled.

"He died of a heart condition," she went on. "It runs in the family. I'll go that way too, John, when my time comes."

"You mustn't talk like that, Miss Whitney. You're in the best of health!" I protested.

She could last for years if she took care of herself. *If nothing went wrong.*

If . . .

The year went by quickly, and I was back again in the fall. There was no correspondence between Miss Whitney and me—we just understood each other. That understanding grew during the semester. I was as sweet to her as though I had a mother complex, and in the spring, Miss Whitney lay abed for a few days.

I called in a cardiac specialist, and he looked concerned as he examined my future benefactor. He didn't say much.

"Well—how long, Doctor?" Miss Whitney asked sharply.

He shook his head. "No, it's not that bad, believe me. But you've got to take it easy. Never tax your strength, Miss Whitney. Just take care of yourself, and you'll be gadding about as usual!"

"You're a gentlemanly liar, Doctor." But her wry smile took the edge off her words. "Have you heard the rumor that I'm leaving most of my money to the medical school—for research in heart diseases?"

The doctor broke into a grin. "Women—God bless 'em—always planning years ahead!"

"Scant sympathy I get from you," Miss Whitney snorted. "Just to spite you, I'm getting up in a couple days!"

She did, too. She looked wan and she really used her cane now to get upstairs. I arranged to spend more time with her, brushed off a Saturday night date. If there was to be a payoff, I'd better be around when lightning struck.

I was. One Sunday, as we sat on the porch, she let me in on the secret, without fuss or feathers.

"I've added a codicil to my will, John."

I'd turned the porch light on for the lawyer the evening before. I nodded; and my face burned with pulsing blood.

"Don't be embarrassed, young fellow. You know what it was for—you don't miss a trick, John."

My mouth was dry, my hands clammy.

"You're what they call a fast worker, John. You do the right thing at the right time. I don't know how you'll make out, and it's really none of my business. But I've revised my will.

Now you'll be able to pursue postgraduate work in psychiatry—if that's what you want."

A twinge of greed and fear ran through me. Postgraduate work? Why, the bequest would be at least five thousand dollars! I could do things with that money. I could study my fool head off, here and in Europe. I could grind away, stuff my brain full of medical knowledge, work, grind, sweat, strain my baby blue eyes.

I could in a pig's eye.

ONE evening I brought Miss Whitney up a cup of tea. She complained of feeling uncomfortable and said she had an aching back. But there was good color in her face, I saw.

I propped her up in bed and waited while she sipped her drink.

"When I go, have my will read immediately, John. I'm not to be buried before my will is read! I told my lawyer, but he's a sentimental old fool and might forget."

Who are you trying to kid? I thought mentally, and tried hard not to meet her eyes. All you want is a little attention, and, sister, you're going to get all you can take. Even if I have to smother you with it.

So I put on an act. "Now Miss Whitney, stop trying to make me feel bad. You've lots of good years ahead of you!"

She put her thin, veined hand on mine. Her eyes were suddenly soft. I gulped and felt remorse for what I was about to do.

"I'm just a crabby old maid, John. It's been grand, having you around the house the past two years. As long as I live, there'll always be a place here for you."

So when I left her, I went up to my room and sneaked a shot of raw gin. I can't stand people that trust a guy. It makes me feel—well, uneasy.

That being the case, I decided I'd better put my plan to work, before the nasty little rats of doubt began to gnaw at my conscience. The next morning, the maid handed me Miss Whitney's soft-boiled breakfast eggs. It was early—seven o'clock—but I'd made it a point to wait on her before my first class.

I'd had the arsenic in my room for

a couple weeks. I didn't sprinkle too much on the egg dish. In heart cases, even those not overly serious, the body can't stand much of a real shock.

Miss Whitney was waiting a bit impatiently for her last meal. She added butter, salt and pepper to her eggs, as I knew she would. Yellow egg yolk—yellow arsenic—I couldn't wait to take the tray away. I had to be off to class. I could only hope that as soon as Miss Whitney had eaten, the maid would remove the tray—and wash the dishes.

It was a calculated risk, but it was worth it. Me, they would never suspect.

As it happened, they didn't. Later that morning, a call was switched through to me in the medical laboratory. I was sweating, for I knew this was it.

"I just found Miss Whitney on the floor! In her bedroom, kind of doubled up, like. She's—she's—"

"All right," I told the maid quickly. "Call the doctor, anyway. I'll be right over."

I didn't tell her to phone the lawyer. That was my little job, all mine.

When I got there, the cardiac specialist had just finished his examination.

"Her heart, of course," he told me. "But I certainly didn't expect her to go so soon." He shook his head. "I guess it was just one of those things."

"Just one of those things," I agreed. . . .

Naturally I phoned the lawyer. That very afternoon, in the presence of medical school officials, Miss Whitney's will was read. I wasn't there. I wasn't supposed to know about that codicil, apparently. Or perhaps the lawyer, agitated, had forgotten to notify me.

In any event, I was in the lab again that night, pretending to be more conscientious than usual. I had to keep busy, somehow. Later, I would go away for the week end, get completely drunk, plan how best to spend my new inheritance while I nursed my hang-over.

Along about ten o'clock, the lab door opened. In walked the dean of the college and two policemen. The way they looked at me, my heart stopped cold, almost as cold as Miss Whitney, lying

now on a slab at the undertaker's.

I stared at them, a test tube held shakily in my hand. The dean licked his lips.

"John Davis," he said finally, "these men have a warrant for your arrest. I—I just can't understand it. It's purely circumstantial, but—"

MY MIND exploded in a flashback whirl. How I'd rushed back to the house that morning. How, shortly, I'd gone down to the kitchen, noted that the maid had washed those fatal breakfast dishes. How I'd seen the ambulance take the body away. How I'd told the maid I wouldn't be home until late that night. How I'd phoned the lawyer...

"W-what do you mean?" I stammered.

"It's this way, Davis." A cop stepped forward with the warrant. "Did you know Miss Whitney had you down in her will for five thousand dollars?"

My look of surprise, I hoped, was convincing.

"Well, anyway, in her will Miss Whitney directed that an *immediate autopsy* be made on her body. A complete autopsy, Davis, with special attention on the heart. She wanted the medical school to study her heart. Her father had made the same request when he died.

"Two hours ago, Davis, they found arsenic. In the vital organs."

"It was the maid!" I screamed—and

choked at my stupidity.

The three of them exchanged glances with each other.

"That's as may be, Davis," said the cop. "You're both being taken in on suspicion of murder. We'll test your clothes for traces of arsenic. The rest is up to the jury."

They couldn't prove I knew, in advance, about my bequest. There was arsenic impregnated in my clothing, yes, and none in the maid's. But my lawyer said I had a right to use arsenic in lab experiments. I'd been working on toxicology that week.

Four things, though, I couldn't explain away: Why I'd insisted on carrying the breakfast tray. Why I'd taken Miss Whitney's eggs into the butler's pantry that morning instead of going directly upstairs from the kitchen. Why, later, I'd told the maid to be sure to wash the dishes. Why I'd stayed away from the house all that fatal day, instead of being on tap in case I was needed.

"Guilty conscience!" the prosecutor thundered.

I'd hate to tell you what the judge said, later, when he sentenced me.

In any event, that's all arsenic over the eggs now, if you get what I mean. The game's up. Hmm. I see by my watch that the warden and the prison chaplain should be here any minute.

Ah, there's the key in the cell block. Here they come.

I wish my knees would stop shaking.



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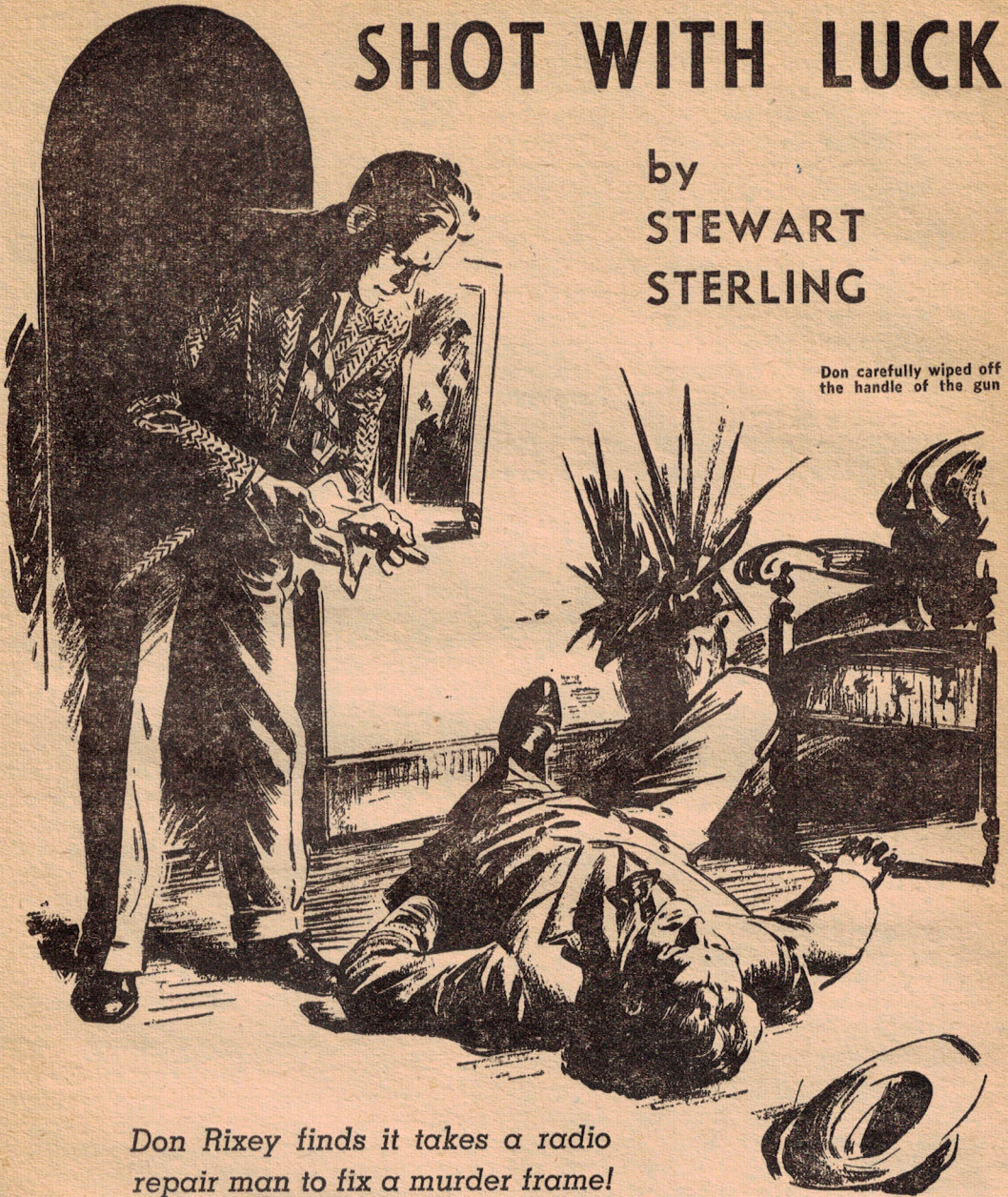
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SHOT WITH LUCK

by
STEWART
STERLING

Don carefully wiped off
the handle of the gun



*Don Rixey finds it takes a radio
repair man to fix a murder frame!*

DON RIXEY gnawed gloomily at the combination Ham and Hamburger. "Certainly is terrible," he said. "Certainly is."

Annalou Kenyon turned from the grill, tossing taffy-bright curls in mock indignation. "If you're finding fault with my cooking, before we're even married!"

"Not the san'wich!" He poked impatiently at the nicked napkin-container on the counter. "Your not bein' able to get off tonight."

"Is it my fault—" her dimples deepened, her pert mouth firmed—"if my relief happens to have an uncle who manages to get himself shot in that terrible payroll holdup this morning and is in

the hospital practically at death's door?!"

"I didn't say it was." The candid blue eyes in the square, amiable face watched her hungrily as she moved from the malted mixer to the fountain. "I only said it was a tough break you can't go with me to look at that apartment tonight."

"I don't see that it matters so terribly much." She slit open a couple of buns, deftly. "Even if it wasn't rented by the time we got out there—which it probably would be—and even supposing we could afford the rent—which we probably couldn't—what would we put in it, besides us?!"

"That'd be enough for me." He grinned. "The best things in life are free."

"Huh!" Annalou wrinkled her nose at him. "That three-room Bride and Groom Special at Mammoth Furniture isn't, though!"

"I've enough to make the down payment." He reached across the counter to grab her. "And a license."

Annalou squealed prettily. "Quit! Before I let you carry me across any threshold, there are a few other trifling little items to be considered, Mister Rixey. Such as dishes, silver, linens, blankets, curtains, rugs—"

"I bet I could worry along without a rug, if I had you."

"Hmph! The future Mrs. Donald Rixey doesn't intend to start housekeeping on any shoestring. I'd like to see that apartment, too, but what would we use for money?"

"Money isn't everything." He finished the burger, sipped his coffee.

"I never noticed it was any hand-cap." Annalou served a couple of bobby-soxers down the counter. When she came back: "I wish I knew where we could get our hands on a great big hunk of it, that's all!"

"Maybe I'm in the wrong business, baby." Don tapped the newspaper which lay propped against the salt-and-pepper rack. "Maybe I oughta get me another set of tools an' go in competition with the guy. He got his hands on a great big wad of it, all right!"

"Don't you ever say a thing like that, Don Rixey! Even kidding!" She

squinted at the big, black headlines:

BANDIT SHOOTS PAYMASTER

John M. Whalen of Clark-McGeekin in Critical Condition at Memorial—Murderer Makes Escape with \$28,000 in Payroll Cash

Don finished the java. "The radio repair biz isn't what you'd call a gold mine, these days, exactly. Still an' all, it's better'n that racket. Trouble with that is, even though he's got his hands on a lot of moola, he won't be able to hold onto it. Cost him dough to make his getaway. He'll have to shell out to somebody to hide him for a while. If they catch him, his lawyers'll get it all. And, anyhow, he won't be able to spend it, where he's going."

"They're sure to catch him," Annalou peeled lettuce leaves off a head of iceberg. "They got a good description of him. Half a dozen people saw him."

"I just missed seein' him myself." Don glanced in the back mirror at a couple who'd taken the two stools at the far end of the counter. "I was over at Clark-McGeekin's yesty, tuning up their inter-office amplifiers. Might just as easy been this morning!"

ANNALOU shivered. "Oooh! Makes my skin crawl, just to think about it." She went over to take the order.

"Strawberry ice-cream," the girl ordered. She was about twenty—tall, slim, haughty—with a thin, small mouth that was a slash of carmine in a long, pale face. "And none of that marshmallow goo you put on it, to imitate whip cream. Just plain ice-cream, understand?"

Annalou was coldly polite. "Yes, miss." She turned to the man. He was older than his companion, maybe thirty; well-dressed, good-looking in a short, plump and mustached way.

"Gimme one of these Combination Ham 'n' Lamburgers. Plenty a pickle-willie, huh?" His soft brown eyes surveyed Annalou's trim figure in lazy admiration. "An' lissen, cutie,—no mustard but a big, thick slice a raw onion, huh?"

"One combo with raw." Annalou scribbled it on her pad, blandly.

Don laid a quarter beside his cup. "You're gonna be busy. I'll be hittin' the breeze."

"You going out to that apartment without me?" Annalou slammed the refrigerator door, slapped the cake of meat on the french top with a sizzle of grease.

"Say not. No fun in that. I'll go back to the shop, rewind a couple armatures—see if I can earn enough to pay for one pillowslip, maybe."

"Be back at nine?" she asked wistfully.

"On the dot." He swung around, pushed off the stool, went out to his truck.

As he shut the screen door behind him, he heard the girl with the red wound of a mouth laugh and say "Patsy" to the man beside her.

Don eyed the extra-body-length job parked beside his half-tonner—a sleek, black Cadillac with double aerial whips slanting jauntily over its gleaming top.

You seem to be doin' all right for yourself, Patsy, Don thought. But you could have twice your dough an' here's one gent who doesn't envy you! Money ain't everything—not by a darnsight! I wouldn't swap girls with you for all the rice in China. . . .

He was putting a coat of shellac on a two-gang condenser when the phone made him jump. Who'd be calling him here at the shop? Not his friends. They all knew he spent Satty peeyems with Annalou. . . .

"Regal Radio Repairs; Don Rixey talkin'."

"Oh, Mister Rixey! I'm in the most awful jam!" A girl's voice, high-pitched, gushy and affected. "I've a whole bevy of guests here and everybody's been dancing, having a perfectly marvelous time . . . and then *blooie* . . . my stupid ole radio set goes on the blink."

"Like to help you. But I couldn't get to it tonight." Why'd these emergency calls always come just when he was ready to quit? "I'm closing up—"

"But you've simply *got* to help me! I mean you really *have* to! I've all these people here . . . I've tried to call a dozen repair men and you're the only one who answered. Please, Mister Rixey! I'm sure there's hardly anything the matter with the ole fool set . . . probably only a silly little tube or something you can fix in a minute!"

"Where you live?" If she was way across town, he wouldn't bother with it no matter how she squawked. He'd promised to get back to Annalou at the Outside Inn by nine and it was eight-thirty already.

"Forty-two Chestnut. At Highland. Know that big apartment house at the corner?"

"Sure. Which apartment?" Chestnut was only six blocks over; he could make it there in a hop-skip.

"Three B . . . name's Garnet . . . Mrs. Francine Garnet. How soon can you make it, Mister Rixey?"

"Oh, five minutes or so. What kind of set you got?"

"It's a Klaravox . . . one of those console things . . ."

"Okay. Be right over."

IT MIGHT BE a five-dollar job at that. The Chestnut Street address was pretty ritzy—anybody who owned one of those big Klaravox boxes ought to be willing to pay more than a two-buck service fee, for overtime work, and a rush call. Annalou could use that five for her hope-chest fund.

He put some extra toggles and trimmers in his kit, checked the chart for the tube numbers and added them—took along his loan-out portable in case there might be something he couldn't fix offhand.

He parked his truck in front of the apartment. That '*Ring Regal for Rapid Repairs—Main 4266*' sign on the side of the panel looked a little out of place, jammed in between the snazzy station wagon and that convertible with its canary-yellow leather upholstery—but maybe the free advertising would drum up a little extra business. He could use it. . . .

There was no one in the lobby. No row of mailboxes, as in more modest apartment houses.

The elevator was upstairs. He'd walk up the two flights anyhow, rather than risk some gold-braid flunky snooting him by asking why he hadn't used the service entrance.

The door to 3B was open a couple of inches. The radio across the hall was tuned up full blast on the night ball game; he couldn't hear any partying in-

side the Garnet apartment. He thumbed the buzzer.

"Come in . . ." Mrs. Garnet's voice, from somewhere inside.

"Radio man." He pushed into a small, shadowy lobby with bulbous gilt antique mirrors and spindly-legged gilt chairs.

"Come right in here." She was evidently calling from the living-room beyond the arched doorway.

He took off his hat, marched in. He got two steps beyond the arch when the roof fell in on him!

An overpowering screeching in his brain, as if some gigantic oscillator was vibrating out of control. A searing flare like a million flash bulbs exploding simultaneously. Then *Voom!* Blackout!

Instantly, the nerve-torturing screech again. The piercingly painful light once more. It penetrated his closed eyelids— or did it?

He opened his eyes. Dazzling light blinded him with a nauseating glare. The light wouldn't stay still. Kept zooming up close to him, then receding. He tried to recoil from it, found he couldn't. He was flat on his back. The light was a chandelier overhead.

Walls swam dizzily into focus. The screeching became a fierce, grinding ache at the back of his head.

"Hey!" He managed a thick-tongued mumble.

No answer.

"HEY!" Cold fear numbed him as memory poked through the haze of pain. "What happened?"

Still no answer. He rolled on his side. He still had his kit. No. It wasn't the leather handle of the repair kit—it was cold metal. A gun!

He dropped it as if it were a live wire. Stared at it as if it really was alive. A heavy, blue-steel, ugly-nosed automatic!

He pushed himself back on his haunches, blinked around. He wasn't alone, after all!

But the man on the floor behind him wasn't going to be able to explain what had happened. Three bright scarlet threads flowed from blackened holes in the white triangle of shirt which showed above his vest, down toward his right armpit, out of sight beneath his coat.

Don lurched to his feet.

Maybe the dead man couldn't talk. But his half-open eyes, showing nothing except the red-veined bloodshot whites . . . the gaping mouth where slack muscles had let his jaw fall open—they said plenty!

They said "Murder"! And "Frame-up!"

DON bent, whipped out his handkerchief, wiped off the butt of the automatic, dropped it on the carpet again.

He looked around for his kit. There it was, against the wall. He grabbed it, stumbled toward the arched doorway.

Probably the smart thing would be to search the place, see if "Mrs. Garnet" was still there, dead or alive.

But Don didn't care about being smart. All he wanted was out.

He had his hand on the knob of the hall door, when he remembered his hat. He turned, his eyes searching the lobby, the little corridor leading to the living-room. No hat on the floor anywhere.

He didn't dare leave that here. He started back.

"That's it," a voice behind him commanded harshly. "Don't turn! Just stick your thumbs in your ears! And stand still! I said—don't turn around!"

Don froze rigidly, head tipped back, hands tensed at his sides. He held his breath waiting for the shock of the bullet. Sweat trickled down his nose, dropped to his chin.

An ugly, blood-caked face stared at him from the round gilt mirror on the wall directly in front of him. His own face, distorted by reflection in that convex surface! But the blood smear wasn't any optical illusion; half his face was covered with reddish-brown streaks.

"Give him the pat!" The harsh voice. But it wasn't addressed to Don.

Thick fingers fumbled at his hips, armpits, belt.

"Clean," announced another, less aggressive voice close behind him.

In the mirror, Don saw the man's cold eyes and hard-jawed face.

"Poosh him in," ordered Harsh Voice.

A gun poked into the small of Don's back. He stalked stiffly into the living-room.

The hard-jawed man moved the muzzle of his gun up a little, so it prodded

Don's spine between his shoulder-blades.

"Ha. A casket case. Why'd you kill him, bud?"

Don let his breath go out in a long whoosh. "I didn't. I never saw him before in my life until a few minutes ago. You cops?"

Harsh Voice came around Don to inspect the body. "You think we was brush salesmen?" He was a barrel-chested individual with a face like a prize fighter's, battered, flattened nose and scarred eyebrows. "Siddown there." He wagged his revolver at a lowslung chair. "Call in, Eddie."

Don thought he was going to be sick, soon, as he plumped down into the chair. It wasn't merely the cobblestones being cracked, up there in the top of his skull, either. It was the realization he was in a very nasty corner indeed.

"Say you never saw this lug before?" The broken-nosed plainclothesman squatted beside the corpse, his gun still aiming carelessly toward Don's wishbone.

"Not until about five minutes ago. When I came out of it after somebody dropped the boom on me." Don heard Eddie, out in the hall, asking for Lieutenant Wiley at headquarters. That might be a break. Don and Annalou both knew Wiley; the Lieutenant and his prowl partner sometimes dropped into Outside Inn for a snack, late at night.

Frank stuck out his lower lip. "How you happen to be here, alone with this stiff?"

Don told him.

"Anybody with you when you got this phone call, Rixey?"

"No . . . I don't have anyone working for me in the shop."

EDDIE came back. "Lieutenant'll be over in two shakes, Frank."

"Sniff around, see if you can get onto that dame who phones in that tip." Frank dismissed his side-kick. "See anybody on the way over here, Rixey?"

"Nobody I know."

"Ha. An' you never did get a peek at this dame you claim phones you this hurry-up call?"

"No." Don was about to say he'd

know her, on account of her voice, if he ran into her again. But then he remembered how affected she'd been on the phone—probably she'd been disguising her voice, anyway.

"Say you didn't see the party who you figure slugged you?"

"Didn't see anybody. Until I came out of my fog an' found him . . . on the floor beside me."

"You couldn't of got that smack on the conk, *fightin'* with Slenz, could you?" Frank lifted the muzzle of his pistol speculatively.

"Slenz?" Don was hypnotized by the black, staring eye of the gun. "No. I wasn't fighting with him. Or with anybody. I tell you I never saw him before. Didn't even know his name."

Frank rocked back on his heels.

"Don't recognize him, hah?"

The hair at the back of Don's neck prickled. He hadn't really looked at the man's face until right now. The bullet wounds, the gaping mouth . . . they'd kept him from noticing the cleft chin; the sharp hawk-beak of a nose—the small, delicate ears.

Don recognized him now, all right—from the descriptions in the papers!

"This is the gun goof who shot that paymaster an' got away with thirty yards this morning," Frankie corroborated Don's guess. "I don't suppose you been anywheres near Clark-McGeekin's fact'ry recently?"

"Not since yest—" Don caught himself. But too late . . .

Frank was up on his feet. "Keep on pourin', Rixey. We'll get all this stuff sooner or later, anyway. Just save yourself a lot of trouble if you spill it now."

"The office manager called me over yesterday to tune down the amplifiers on the office intercom system," Don said. "That's all! I don't know one single thing about the robbery!"

"Lessee." Frank's chin dropped to his chest in concentration. He scratched his ear with his free hand. "You case the job. Slenz pulls it. You come here to get your split. He won't give it to you. You mix it up . . ."

Don pointed to the Klaravox console against the wall, beyond the dead man. "I came to fix that radio. For Mrs. Garnet. Thats all. Period. You can't

ring me in on any holdup!"

Frank stepped over the corpse, snapped the ON knob of the big set. "I never hear of a radio man acting as caser for a mob. But they's a first time for everything."

The radio began to emit a queer, muffled croaking, as a popular song came over the air.

"I guess a little tunin' is all it needs," Frank said.

"No!" Don cried. "That's—"

The hall door opened abruptly. Frank wheeled around, eyes on the arched doorway.

Don came out of the chair, got to the console. He swung it out from the wall, was peering in the open back of the set before Frank realized it.

The detective's pistol swung in a sharp arc.

"I tol' you to sidddown. You want to be able to plead, in court tomorrow, you stay set! Hear?"

Don backed over to the low-slung chair, dropped into it. "I—" he began.

"Shuddup," growled Frank. "Hello, Lieutenant. I think we got this ball a yarn pretty well wound up, already."

THE body'd been removed. The camera crew'd come and gone. Tarpaulin covered the carpet stains. The console had been shoved back against the wall.

Eddie and Frank were combing the building for the mysterious informant who'd phoned headquarters. Only Lieutenant Wiley remained in the living-room with Don and Annalou.

She'd been there long enough for worry to congeal into cold fear. When the patrol car picked her up at Outside Inn, she'd been angry—after waiting an hour for Don to show up.

When they brought her to the apartment she was horrified at the murdered man—at Don's battered head. Now—watching the skepticism on Wiley's long, collie-dog face—she was panicky. Plainly, the Lieutenant didn't believe a word Don was saying:

"This dame is tall, thin, holds herself kind of stuck-up. Maybe twenty years old. Not much color in her face—uses lipstick that makes her look like her mouth'd been cut with a razor. Wearin' a sort of grayish suit—"

"Powder blue," Annalou corrected. "Hat to match."

The Lieutenant ran fingers through silver curls at his temples. "Thought you told Frank you'd never seen her."

"Didn't realize I had. Came to me just a minute ago. She was at Annalou's counter, around seven. When she came in with this boy-friend of hers, I was telling Annalou how I'd been at Clark-McGeekin's yesterday on a job. Then I said I'd go back to my shop an' work till nine."

Annalou nodded. "That's right, Lieutenant. Because—"

"One at a time." Wiley was sardonic. "Hard enough to follow him."

"My truck was parked there," Don went on, earnestly. With Regal's phone number on it. All she had to do was come back here to her apartment, ring me up. Why I'm so sure it was her—just when I was leaving the Inn, she says something to this guy with her about a Patsy. She meant me . . . to be the patsy. She thought it would be a cinch to frame me."

Wiley blinked. "A dame says 'Patsy' and you decide she's a killer. You see her out on Route 60—so you figure she lives here on Chestnut. You never saw her but that once—you don't know what her name is—she's gotta be this Mrs. Francine Garnet!"

"I know it sounds wacky," Don protested, "but—"

"It doesn't even sound that good!" Wiley turned to nod to Frank, in the doorway.

The plainclothesman held out a briefcase. Battered pigskin with a brass side-lock. Frank held the flap up so Wiley could see the lettering burnt on the under side. PROPERTY CLARK-MC-GEEKIN CORP. LIBERAL REWARD IF RETURNED TO PAYMASTER'S OFFICE.

"Where'd you find it?" Wiley glanced inside to make sure it was empty.

Frank looked sourly at Don. "In his truck. Under the front seat."

Annalou cried, "No! No!!"

Don swore beneath his breath.

"There's a locked compartment, in the back of the truck, Lieutenant," Frank said. "Maybe they's something else stashed in that."

Don took out his keys, tossed the

leather case to Wiley.

"If you birds think I'd be dumb enough to hide that briefcase in my own truck—"

Wiley handed the keys to Frank. "Haven't time to tell you how dumb I think you are, Rixey. Take all night."

Frank went away.

Annalou jumped up excitedly. "Every single word Don says is absolutely true!" She ran to the Lieutenant, grabbed his arm, put her face down close to his.

WILEY threw a leg over the arm of his chair, shifted his position, pointedly avoiding her gaze.

"I bet those two came to Outside Inn in the first place just to see if they could learn anything about Mister Whalen's condition, from Marie!"

"Who's Marie?" Wiley asked patiently, still keeping his eyes away from her. From Don, too.

Don reached for the kit which Annalou had rescued from the lobby. He slid noiselessly out of his chair, backed toward the kitchen.

"Marie Whalen. My night relief at Outside Inn. Mister Whalen's her uncle. So of course when she heard he'd been shot and might die any minute, she telephoned me she wouldn't come to work tonight..."

Don was in the passageway, catfooting toward the kitchen. Even that far away he could hear Wiley's:

"You two are tangled up in this worse'n a couple pups in flypaper—hey! Rixey!"

Don slid up the window by the refrigerator, slipped out on the fire escape, raced down.

His heart pounded faster against his ribs than his feet did on the iron rungs. At any second there might be a shattering blast from above—and the tearing shock of a slug!

Maybe, technically, he wasn't escaping. They hadn't actually arrested him. But even if he managed to get away now, he'd only be getting himself in deeper. On the other hand, the cops were pushing his head under, every chance they got, anyway. Wouldn't listen to him, wouldn't believe him when he tried to tell them what he knew.

He dropped the last ten feet to the ground. The weight of the kit sent him to his knees. He scrambled up as a shout from above roused the neighborhood:

"Stop! Or I'll shoot!"

He didn't stop. But he slowed, when he got to the end of the alley opening onto Elm. No uniform in sight. No prowling cars.

He walked briskly to the next corner, heard wailing sirens approach. He stepped into a dark doorway until the flashing red eye of the patrol coop had passed.

Blocks away he went into a drug-store, used the classified directory.

In the phone booth he cupped his hand around the mouthpiece: "Mike Brewer there? . . . Oh, Mike, this's Don Rixey . . . fine, how you? . . . oh, I get a little job here'n there, now'n then . . . say, you could do me a favor, you want to . . . well, 's like this . . . I was working on a set tonight . . . Klaravox console . . . dame named Garnet . . . over on Chestnut . . . an' I saw your sticker on the back of the set . . . you remember workin' on that one? . . . yeah, Chestnut . . . No? . . . Wouldn't you have some record at your shop? . . . y'll? Suh-well! Meet you there, ten minutes."

While he waited in front of the flasher-display at Brewer's-for-all-things-Electric, Don worried about Annalou. Maybe Wiley had her in jail by now. It wasn't a pleasant idea.

MIKE BREWER'S round face was ghostly under the greenish glow from the emerald cone over his desk.

"Here y'are, keed." A fat fist extracted a Customer Card. "Yates, Templeton D. Klaravox Console, Model XT '47." He chuckled. "One those 14-tube contraptions, guaranteed to bring in such world-wide reception as Paris, Kentucky, London, Ontario an' Moscow, Idaho. Condenser replacement, rectifier tube."

"That's th' set. Where'd Yates live?" Don asked. If it was the Chestnut Street address, that would only mean Yates had sold the set to the Garnet dame, when she'd moved in. If it was something else, maybe Yates had lent it to his girl-friend to use in a furnished

apartment. Those gilt chairs in the Garnet place had looked like the kind of stuff landlords fixed up to rent.

"Hundred eighty-one Crestview."

"Happen to recall this Yates?" Don described the man who'd been at the Outside Inn.

"That's the joe. I remember that Man of Distinction mustache. Wouldn't have trusted him with a burnt match."

"You're a life saver, Mike." Don shook his hand.

"Yeah? Whose life?"

"Mine, maybe. Tell you later. S'long." He hurried away.

The apartments at 181 Crestview weren't as toney as the Chestnut Street setup; there were brass letter boxes in the lobby. But no Yates on any of them.

Don found the janitor, a wizened ancient who said:

"Mister Yates? He moved away three, four months ago. Nope, dunno where he went." The old man noticed Don's sharp disappointment. "Y'might ask over to the Apex. Think he still keeps his car there."

"A big black Caddy?"

"Yes sir, that's Mister Yates' car. Fine bus, that is. Fine gentleman, too—you ask me."

"Where's this garage?" Don asked.

"Two over, one south."

It was ten minutes to midnight when he reached the neon sign: APEX GARAGE—TWENTY-FOUR HOUR SERVICE. There was a night light in the office, but he didn't see anybody around.

He went in swinging his kit, as if he was on a job—spotted the shiny double aerial whips right away. The long, sleek Caddy was over in the corner.

He tried the doors. They were locked. He still had hold of the handle beside the driver's seat when a voice at his elbow said sharply:

"Whatch doon, bud?"

A car washer, muscular in undershirt and rubber boots.

Don swung his kit bag onto the front bumper carelessly:

"Rush job for Mister Yates. Guess I'll hafta get the keys from the office."

"Reckon so." The washer followed along, suspiciously, as Don strode toward the office.

A scrawny, gaunt-faced man, smell-

ing of whisky, came up out of the chair in which he'd been dozing, beneath the ticket rack.

"You got the keys to Yates' heap?"

Don heard the washer's boots clumping close behind him. "Sent me here to stick a new amplifier or something in th' radio."

The gaunt man hesitated, clearing his throat. "I don't have no keys to Mister Yates' car. But," he gestured vaguely toward the door of the men's room, "I guess if he sent you over here . . . why . . ."

The lavatory door opened slowly. The plump man with the mustache smiled at Don. He was wearing a light topcoat. He had his right hand bunched in the pocket. And it was not a nice smile.

"This boy's tellin' the truth," Yates said affably. He moved close to Don, took his arm. "Come on, fella. I'll show you what has to be done."

DON stood stock still, wondering how he could get a call through to Wiley on that phone on the ticket desk.

The washer spoke up, behind him. "I thought he was tryin' to pull a fast one, Mister Yates."

Yates pulled gently at Don's arm. "Aw, now. He'd know he couldn't get away with that, around here."

They got you, Don told himself bitterly. You walked right into this one! You sure stuck your chin out this time! If you try to tell this crummy car washer what the score is, you wouldn't last a minute. And that night man—he'd do anything Yates told him to. . . .

He let Yates lead him back to the Caddy.

The thin girl with the scarlet gash of a mouth was standing by the car, with the door open.

Yates laughed softly. "This fella says there's something needs fixing in our car, Mimi."

The girl smiled tightly. "Let's get it fixed right away, then." She took something out of her handbag as she got into the rear seat.

"The cops know where I am, Mrs. Garnet," Don said.

"Thing is," Yates waited until the girl had her stubby automatic ready for use, "do they know where you're goin'?"

to be?"

Don got in the front seat. "Why pick on me? Whyn't you leave me alone?"

The girl waited until Yates had the big car rolling out to the street. "You're such a perfect Patsy, pal!" she said. "That's why."

The Caddy rolled southward at an easy thirty, past the High School, the ball park—past a lot of places that had been a part of Don's life. Places he wouldn't be seeing again. . . .

He was wringing wet with cold sweat. He shivered. If he'd only had sense enough to phone Wiley soon as he learned about Yates! But no! He'd been afraid the Lieutenant would have ignored his information. So now he had something to be *really* afraid about!

He squirmed around in the front seat.

"Ah, ah!" The girl hit him lightly across the ear with the barrel of the automatic. "Sit up straight. While you can."

"Don't see why you want to kill me," he muttered. "Cops think I shot Slenz. If you kill me, they'll know I didn't."

"Who you kidding, bud?" The girl was scornful. "If they think you're guilty—why'd they let you loose?"

"They didn't," Don said. "I just beat it, when they weren't looking."

"How deceitful of you!" Yates braked for a red light. "You should have learned from what happened to Slenz—it never pays to deceive. If that crud hadn't tried to hold out on us, he'd be sunning himself in Havana now, instead of lying on an iced slab."

So that was it! Slenz had gotten away with that briefcase full of bills, but before he met his partners he'd lifted part of the loot. When the amount stolen had been reported in the papers Yates and the girl had gotten sore, killed him.

That would be why Yates and the girl were still around, instead of getting out of town right after the robbery. They'd been trying to find the rest of the dough.

It gave Don an idea. "Say! Suppose I could tell you where the rest of that money is. Would you let me go?"

"Why should we let you go?" Yates speeded up to beat a light at the intersection near the gas works. "We'll find a way to make you tell us anything you know before we're—done with you."

The Caddy zoomed across as the traffic light changed from amber to red.

"Take it easy," the girl warned Yates. "There were a couple of Little Boy Blues there on the corner."

THE twelve o'clock shift, Don thought. The night patrols coming out to relieve the boys on beat. If he'd only had foresight enough to disconnect the tail lights on this bus, before he'd gone to that garage office for the keys. Maybe some of the officers would have noticed a thing like that and halted the car!

The girl touched the back of Don's neck with the muzzle—his heart skipped a couple of beats.

"Might be an idea to pump this well before we get too far out of town," she said. "Case he does know something, we wouldn't have so far to drive back."

Yates put on more speed. "I'll cut off on a side road here in a minute. Right now," he glanced up at the rear-view mirror, "I think we ought to keep moving."

Don caught a gleam of red, reflected from the windshield. Somebody with a blinker signal, following them! Of course it could be an ambulance. An ambulance wasn't going to do him any good! And hearses didn't use red flashers!

Ahead loomed the stop light at the intersection of Route 60. The light was green. But there was a red light there, too. And it wasn't any Bar and Grille sign! Another patrol car!

"Boxing us in," the girl called. "Watch it, Yatsey!"

"No room to turn." Yates spoke through his teeth. "I'll crash him, if he don't get out of the way!"

The police car swung across the road, a quarter-mile beyond. A siren screamed behind them, kept screaming—closer and closer.

There was a ditch at the right. The railroad embankment at their left.

Don chose the ditch! He stamped, across Yates' legs, at the foot brake. The effort threw him to the right, against the car window.

A deafening blast filled the interior of the Caddy. A hot wire touched his left ear. The windshield shattered.

Then they were swerving, skidding,

toppling over into the ditch. . . .

The Caddy lay on its side, in a ditchful of glass and twisted metal. Don lay on his back on a stretcher.

The starchy interne felt of the bump on Don's head:

"He's all right to go home. Nothing but a slight concussion, Lieutenant."

"He didn't get that in the smashup, anyway," Annalou cried. "He was slugged, earlier, by—by one of them."

She looked toward the ambulance where patrolmen with revolvers in their fists watched two stretchers being loaded into a long, white car. The things on the stretchers were very quiet.

"Are they dead?" Don asked.

"Not yet," Wiley said bleakly. "You know you're shot with luck to be alive, yourself?"

"Yeah." He felt the caked blood on his left ear-lobe. "I still don't figure how you picked up the Caddy."

Wiley pointed. "Three minutes after you do that Brodie down the fire escape, there's a three-state alarm going out for you on every police band. Describin' you . . . an' that repair kit you were lugging."

"How it ever got on the front of the Cadillac!" Annalou wondered. "Some policeman saw the car at an intersection . . . and there was Regal Radio Repairs painted on the side of your kit, staring 'em smack in the face!"

Don sat up, groggily. "Hey, Lieutenant! You don't think I was . . . was with 'em? Tryin' to make a getaway?"

Wiley pulled down the corners of his lips. "Give us credit for knowing a *little* about our business, Dick Tracy. That holdup was a professional mob

job. You rattle around too much up here," the Lieutenant touched his forehead, "to be hooked up with a smart set of crooks. Anyway, we knew there was something off-beat about that phone tip—you'd never have parked your truck right in front of the apartment if you'd meant to go in and murder a man there."

Don put an arm around Annalou, weakly. "They shot Slenz because he gypped 'em on the split. I tried to get 'em to let me go, in exchange for tellin' 'em where the rest of the dough is—but they wouldn't."

Wiley screwed up his face in a knot. "Mean you know where Slenz hid it?"

"Well, I don't know for positive," Don admitted. "But when I heard the fuzzy tone from that loudspeaker in the Garnet's set—I'd be ready to bet somebody shoved a wad of something inside that speaker cone and it muffles th' tone. I've had sets where mice built their nests in the speaker horns—and it sounds the same way."

"Mice!" said the Lieutenant, wryly. "Bills hid in radios!" He shook his head. "And they claim this is the day of scientific crime detection." He touched his foot to the wrecked Caddy. "They'll be glad to get the rest of that dough back. But I don't think there's any reward offered."

"We don't want any reward!" Annalou's arm tightened around Don. "This is all the reward we want."

"Yeah! Only—" Don looked at her fondly, "these Clark-McGeekin people make blankets, hon. We're goin' to have a use for blankets, pretty quick. Maybe we could make a deal—for wholesale."

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With the pressure of the gun against his body, Dillon slowly lifted his arms

NAKED TRUTH

By O. B. MYERS

Cupidity and curiosity help a sleuth bring a killer to light!

CARNEY DILLON picked up the three-day-old Olean Gazette and unfolded it. A three-column headline screamed: NUDIST MURDERED!

He put it down again, wriggled out of his coat, and hung it underneath the luggage-rack. He loosened his tie and unfastened the top button of his shirt. The back of his neck was wet with perspira-

tion. As he sat down again the train started.

Olean was his home town, but he hadn't seen much of it in the last six years. He was enroute there now, but there was another reason for his interest in the stale Gazette. Yesterday morning, Henrihan, head of the Missing Persons Bureau, had called him into the front office and greeted

him genially.

"You start on vacation the end of this week, Dillon? Going to Olean, I understand. How'd you like to take an extra day?"

Dillon stared. "What's the catch?" he asked.

"Combine business with pleasure, so to speak. They've got a body up there they can't identify. We got a routine description, but it's too vague—might fit any one of twenty of our 'unlocateds.' Take those twenty folders with you, and see if you can pin it down. Start tomorrow night, instead of Friday. But mail the folders right back."

The folders were now in his bag, up on the rack. He read the article through slowly. A naked body had been found, with a bullet through the heart, lying on a back road just outside the boundaries of a nudist camp, four miles from town.

The body was that of a middle-aged man, and he had evidently been dead for several hours when a local ice-dealer stumbled over him at six-thirty in the morning. He was unknown in Olean. Both Dr. Aaron Harksett, head of the society which operated the nudist colony on the former Mandeville estate, and Harold Golding, the resident manager, had viewed the corpse in the county morgue and declared that the victim was not a member of the colony and had never been seen inside the camp.

This threw considerable doubt on the nudist angle. But the editor of the *Gazette* knew local color when he saw it. He had illustrated the article with several photographs of the camp, evidently taken from treetops outside the boundaries. The local police, on a theory of robbery, had arrested an unsavory character named Steve Coyne, and were working on several clues.

"The local police," muttered Dillon. "That means Ford Lister."

He dropped the paper and headed for the club car.

When he descended from the train in Olean the next morning, he went into a telephone booth and dialed police headquarters. Ten minutes later he was seated across a desk from the Olean detective.

"Glad to see you any time, Carney," boomed Ford. "How are things in the big city?"

THEY were, Dillon admitted, about the same as ever. He could read the curiosity in the other man's eye. Ford had never quite been able to decide whether to be jealous of Dillon or not. Their careers were parallel, in that they were both police officers.

Ford, here in Olean, was a big toad in a small puddle. Every phase of crime was right in his lap. Dillon, in New York, moved in a much larger puddle, but was undeniably a smaller toad. In Missing Persons he handled only one small phase of police work, and had never even been present when an arrest was made. Yet, to Ford, he wore the glamour of the big time.

Dillon explained tactfully why he was there. "Not to try to solve the crime—that's your job. All I'm interested in is the identity of the dead man. But the one may help solve the other."

Ford nodded. "It would sure help if we knew who he was," he said. "But with no clothes, we haven't got much to work on. We've scoured the woods out there, but can't find so much as a sock."

"You think he was wearing any clothes?" asked Dillon.

"On account of that nudist outfit?" Ford shook his head. "I did at first, but don't now. I think the murderer killed him, robbed him, and then undressed him at that point just to give us a bum steer."

"What makes you think he was undressed *after* being killed?"

"Several things. He was shot once, square through the middle of the heart. That means either precise marksmanship, extraordinary luck, or very close range. Yet there were no powder burns on his skin. It's a dirt road, where he was found, and we could see that the dust was mussed up under his body, as if his clothes had been dragged off while he lay there. Also, his left arm was broken. The coroner says that according to the autopsy, the fractured arm was moved after being broken, as it could have been in the process of undressing."

"That must have been kind of painful," commented Dillon.

"If he were alive, it would have been painful," replied Ford. "His hip was bruised, too. The contusion shows the imprint of a seam, as if he was wearing pants when he was kicked or struck. It

all looks as if he put up quite a struggle before he was killed."

Dillon was thoughtful. "If his arm was broken before he died, and not after. And if he was killed at the spot where he was found."

"We don't know that," admitted Ford frankly. "It's possible that he was murdered miles away, brought there in a car, and dumped out. But in that case there would certainly have been blood in the car, and we've inspected a lot of cars without finding any bloodstains."

"But you've made an arrest?" queried Dillon.

Ford scowled. "Yes. Steve Coyne is a bad actor," Lister replied. "He's been in trouble before, and he has no visible means of support. A number of witnesses have seen him out near that nudist colony lately, and he won't tell us what he was doing there. Actually that's about all we've got on him, but we're holding him till something else turns up."

Dillon grinned faintly. "I suppose he's not the only one who might have been observed hanging around near the nudist camp?"

Ford chuckled. "As a matter of fact, we've had no trouble over that sort of curiosity. They've been there four or five years, and the folks around here have got used to the idea, I guess. The Mandeville place covers sixty or seventy acres, you know, and has a wall around everywhere except where the woods block it off from the road.

"The main residence burned down ten years ago, and the family never came back. They're living somewhere in Florida, and lease it to this nudist group headed by Doctor Harksett. There are a lot of other buildings on the estate. They live in those when they come for their vacations, during the summer season. In the winter it's closed up."

"Who wants to be a nudist in the winter?" cracked Dillon. "What do you know about this Doctor Harksett?"

"Oh, a very respectable character—especially with the bankers. He's not a medical doctor at all. I believe he has an LL.D. degree from Syracuse University. He's a wealthy, retired business man. Seems to have made his money in the manufacture of woolen underwear, in Rochester."

Dillon guffawed. "Yet he's a nudist?"

"Well, he is now, anyway. Maybe it gave him the itch—I wouldn't know. He's certainly hipped on the subject of nudism, and apparently quite sincere. But come out there with me this afternoon, and you can talk to him yourself. Or listen to him, anyway."

Dillon cocked an eyebrow. "You going out there this afternoon? I thought you'd decided the nudists had nothing to do with the crime?"

Ford's ears were pink. "Oh, there are a couple of angles that I haven't quite cleared up. But say, you want to look at the body first, don't you? It's in the morgue—that's upstairs over Henshaw's funeral parlors, you know. Tell Henshaw I sent you around. And let me know if you get anything definite, huh?"

DILLON found the morgue without trouble. It was insufficiently refrigerated for July, and the body, unembalmed for more than five days, had undergone an autopsy. However, he was accustomed to viewing corpses for identification and felt no unconquerable repugnance.

Hair sandy, eyes brown, medium height, hands calloused. He was meticulous in his examination, taking more than an hour to check carefully through the folders that he had brought with him. When he had finished he wrote a brief report in longhand, enclosed it together with the folders in a large manuscript envelope, and dropped it at the Post Office on his way to lunch.

Shortly after one o'clock he and Ford Lister were in a police car driving out Route 16 toward Hinsdale. After a couple of miles Ford turned off on a narrow dirt road that meandered into the gentle hills. A mile or so farther he slowed and stopped where a dense growth of beech bordered the road on the right.

"There's the spot, right there," he pointed out. "It would be pretty dark here at night, by these woods, and little or no traffic. The only place beyond the estate, on this road, is the Newhall farm. You want to get out and examine it?"

Dillon shook his head. "This is your angle, not mine." Nevertheless he peered about him. "Is that a path, through the woods there?"

Before the other man could answer,

a horn tootled behind them and a light blue sedan, skirting the left-hand ditch, shot past. Its horn blared again, and the driver raised his hand in greeting.

"A friend of yours?" asked Dillon.

"That's Harold Golding," was the reply. "He's not a member of the nudist society himself—he's a salaried employee, paid to run the place at a profit. He's the big-shot, executive type or at least he thinks he is. Lives upstairs in the lodge at the entrance gates. But you'll be meeting him yourself in a few minutes."

They drove on. Where the woods ended, a wall began, cemented fieldstone about six feet high. Not too difficult for an agile man to climb, but enough to warn the curious to keep out. After surmounting the crest of a gentle knoll, the wall curved back from the ditch and sprouted a pair of gateposts. The opening was barred by a single, hinged rail similar to those used at grade crossings. To the rail was nailed a painted sign:

NO ADMITTANCE INQUIRE IN LODGE

"We'll leave the car here," said Ford, parking expertly.

The lodge was a small house of stone and clapboard just inside the gate. The ground floor had been converted to offices, for the handling of mail, deliveries, and incidental administration. A couple of desks and some filing cabinets stood in what had been the living room, just to the left of the open front door. Ford led the way and Dillon heard him say, "Hello, Anne!" A girl got up from the first desk.

She was tall and not too slender, and moved with a lazy, languorous grace on high-heeled platform sandals. Her pleated skirt sacrificed any pretense to the new look to display shapely calves that were evenly tanned. Above a bare midriff she wore a halter that covered her curves without concealing them. Her hair was a deep, glossy chestnut, and her lively dark eyes had a trick of sliding into the corners under the long, heavily made-up lashes that suggested the flirt.

While Ford introduced them: "Carney, this is Miss Bland, Mr. Golding's secretary," Dillon thought to himself, I can see that this is one of those angles that he hadn't quite cleared up. The girl

looked at him with a gleam of amused but wary interest.

"Mr. Golding went upstairs for a moment," she murmured.

"There's no hurry," injected Ford Lister.

She gave him a sideward glance that told him she knew what he meant, then moved toward the hall. "I'll tell him you're here."

Ford answered Dillon's unspoken question in a low tone. "A stenographer from Utica. She's here on vacation, and eases expenses by helping out the manager, here in the office."

Dillon's lips twitched. "If people knew they'd be greeted by a number like that, the camp would get a lot more customers," he said.

Ford's faint grin faded as the manager now appeared.

HAROLD GOLDING did not merely come in—he actually made an entrance. He was that type, to the hilt, the aggressive, forceful executive. He crushed Dillon's fingers in his quick grip, looking him straight in the eye, as if to say that now he would never forget either the face or the name. His eye was keen, his voice firm, as he stepped behind the larger of the two desks and gestured toward chairs. On the otherwise barren desk top a framed motto said: **GET IT DONE!**

"We just wondered if anything new had developed," Ford began.

"Not to my knowledge. As I told you before, there is really nothing but coincidence to connect this unfortunate accident to our establishment here. We know nothing more about it than you do."

He discussed the facts. The telephone rang.

There was an instrument at Golding's elbow, but he never even glanced at it. He waited until Miss Bland had picked up her phone, murmured into it, and told him, "Mr. Fisher for you, Mr. Golding."

"Fisher? Ah, yes! Thank you, Anne." He grabbed his own phone and barked into it—then slammed it into its cradle.

"Anne, make a note in my diary that I'm to meet Mr. Fisher—Mr. Adrian Fisher—for dinner tonight, at six-thirty, sharp."

Having concluded that important trans-

action, he permitted his attention to return to his visitors, after his eyes had lingered appreciatively on his secretary, her shining dark head bent over a notebook. Dillon noticed that when he addressed her as Anne, his tone lost its businesslike crispness and acquired a somewhat personal note.

The discussion recommenced. But then Golding jumped to his feet. Through the window he had seen an approaching figure.

"Ah—Doctor Harksett! You are just in time for our visitors! Mr. Lister you know, don't you? And this is Mr. Dillon, an identification expert from New York. Our chief, Doctor Harksett."

Dillon greeted a tall, elderly man who had white hair and pink cheeks. If not a medical doctor, he had all the usual attributes—his blue eyes twinkled easily and his manner was as gentle as an old shoe.

"New York? I hope that doesn't mean further notoriety."

Golding emitted a brief chuckle. "Doctor Harksett doesn't believe that this has been exactly the right sort of publicity. I tell him that advertising is advertising, good or bad. As Sarah Bernhardt said—"

Dillon had already heard what Sarah Bernhardt had said. He turned to the old gentleman, speaking of his boyhood in Olean. When he mentioned the nudist camp, the doctor took him up immediately.

"Are you interested in nudism? I'd be delighted to show you around."

Dillon hesitated, glancing at Ford. The latter, carefully avoiding looking toward the secretary's desk, said, "Go ahead, Carney. I've been over the estate before. I'll wait for you here."

Dillon followed the old gentleman through the front door and up the curving drive. After fifty yards or so his guide struck off on a wide path that led between flowering shrubs. Dillon could not keep from glancing curiously right and left. The doctor, smiling benignly, noticed this.

"Are you looking for our guests? I'm afraid you won't see many."

"But aren't they—they don't stay indoors, do they?"

The doctor chuckled. "People get exaggerated ideas about nudists, think of them as going to extremes. Actually, we're

just as civilized as the folk on your city streets. In fact, we are the folk on your city streets. We don't run all over the place with no clothes on. Full exposure, when we practise it, is carried out in secluded spots, and of course the groups are screened, the sexes separated. There is nothing more improper about it than riding on the subway. And once accustomed to the idea, the virtues are boundless."

He went on extolling those virtues. While they cut across the lawn to pass the greenhouses, walked through the barns and garages which had been remodelled into dormitories, and inspected the guest cottages scattered about near the swimming pool, the doctor talked steadily and enthusiastically. There was nothing about nudism, he made clear, which did not improve a sincere disciple, mentally and morally as well as physically. He himself was obviously sincere to the nth degree.

"You've got a beautiful layout here," admitted Dillon, as they came out on a different section of the drive after nearly an hour.

"It is," agreed the doctor, "though it's been a bit of a strain on my finances. That's why I hired Golding, to try and put the camp on a paying basis. Our lease is rather expensive, you see, and we could easily accommodate twice as many guests as we get. I don't look for a profit; and would be satisfied just to break even. Harold was recommended to me by the firm that used to handle my advertising, as a young man capable of applying modern methods. He's quite a good business man, don't you think?"

"He's quite a business man, all right," murmured Dillon cautiously.

He glanced up over his shoulder. The air, which had been sultry and hot, had suddenly turned cooler, and the sun was vanishing behind the edge of a black cloud. Then he noticed something over the treetops.

"What's that, over there?" he asked.

"Oh, that's the main house—or what's left of it. Would you like to see it? We don't use it and there's only a shell standing."

They turned off on a flagged walk and had to push their way through the crowding branches of overgrown shrubbery.

They halted in a gravelled court facing the skeleton of what had been a huge, rambling structure. The walls, of stone to the first floor, were standing, but the window openings gaped blankly. Floors and partitions had burned out, and most of the roof had fallen in. The cellar, too, was a heap of weed-grown rubbish. It had a desolate, abandoned air, heightened because the untended shrubs cut it off from sight.

"I say!" cried the doctor, as a few large drops splattered on the leaves. "It's going to rain!"

Dillon turned. "A thunderstorm. Can we make the lodge?"

"It's nearly a quarter of a mile." The sky was black, the drops huge. Neither had a coat. "I'm afraid not. We'll get soaked." He seized Dillon's elbow. "Come, let's get in here.

SWIFTLY, the white-haired doctor led the way to the left, where a small wing, jutting at right angles to the main structure, still retained half of its sloping roof. They clambered in through a window without sash just as the rain began to come down in earnest. They stood there, panting, on a small section of mouldy flooring, staring out at the slanting storm.

The doctor began again on his favorite topic of nudism, talking as if he had never been interrupted. For fifteen minutes he talked steadily, glowingly. Dillon's interest, which at first, had been keen, descended to the merely polite. A man as daft on one subject as that, he reflected, could be a little daft in other matters, too. The shower stopped as suddenly as it had begun, the sun came out, and the landscape began to steam. Harksett talked right on.

Dillon, leaning against the stone, stared down at a flat, brick-paved terrace. The family had doubtless once served tea there, of an afternoon, under gay striped awnings, or perhaps the butler had carried out a tray of frosty cocktails. There was no trace left of the awnings now. The level surface of the bricks, streaming with water, was drying rapidly under the hot sun. He noticed that in some places it dried much more rapidly than in others.

"Shall we get back to the lodge now, Doctor?"

"Eh? Oh, yes! As I was saying . . ."

Five minutes later they entered the lodge just as Ford Lister had finished telling a joke. Anne Bland, her elbows cocked comfortably on the desk, was showing white teeth in a flashing, seductive smile. Golding was laughing politely, but with a certain restraint.

"Well, did you get wet?" demanded Ford.

"No, we made out all right. A beautiful place."

"And did you learn anything bearing on your business?" asked Golding.

Dillon shook his head. "Can't say that I did." His steady gaze moved from one to the other. "But I may as well tell you folks something that I wouldn't want to put in the newspapers, quite yet. There's a strong possibility that that dead man may turn out to be Herman Molheim."

Four pairs of eyes stared at him questioningly.

"You never heard of him? He's pretty well known to us in Missing Persons, in New York. He's middle-aged, a former diamond merchant, retired several years ago. He's slightly haywire and lives like a penniless hermit in a furnished room up in the Bronx, and wanders off on trips by himself every once in a while. His neighbors have reported him missing four or five times, but he always turns up.

"Although he pinches every nickel he spends, he's reputed to be wealthy. But he doesn't trust banks, or any kind of paper. In a lifetime on the diamond market, he learned that stones never lose their value. He carries his fortune, said to be worth several hundred thousand dollars, in the form of uncut diamonds sewn in the lining of his clothes."

His four listeners stared at him, their faces registering various degrees of astonishment, fascination, and curiosity.

Suddenly Ford began, "Gosh, why didn't you tell—"

"Of course I'm not sure yet," interrupted Dillon. "I'm still checking with New York. In the meantime, I'm inclined to agree with Ford, here, that the crime had no direct connection with this camp, but was outright robbery. However, I can't be sure if the thief knew who it was he was robbing. In that case, he may have rifled the victim's pockets but overlooked the vaster fortune in the seams. So you can understand why I don't want

it published."

The brunette, wide-eyed, drew in her breath and gasped, "Diamonds—perhaps over a hundred thousand dollars!"

RUMINATING strangely, Dillon thought, Doctor Harksett stroked his chin, his eyes gleaming brightly. The manager sat rigid, as if bolted to his chair. Ford Lister climbed to his feet, smacking one fist into the open palm of the opposite hand.

"Uncut stones—they're going to be devilish hard to trace! Is there any way of getting a description of them?"

Dillon shook his head. "They're as anonymous as ten-dollar bills. Let's get back to your office, Ford, and see if there's any word there for me from New York."

There was no message for Dillon at headquarters.

Later he ate dinner with Ford Lister. Later still, after picking his way along the path through the woods in the dark, Dillon climbed through the same window he had entered that afternoon and posted himself there to wait. He waited while the hours passed.

It was surprising how cool it became, after midnight. The moon, bright and clear in the early evening, was now in and out of small, drifting clouds. The demolished, crumbling walls threw fantastic shadows which waxed and waned in intensity with every change in the sky. Field mice, or perhaps rats, scurried beneath the sagging flooring. His craving for a cigarette became well-nigh irresistible.

At first he had been able to see, through the foliage, faint pin-points of light from the direction of the guest cottages. These had long since vanished, leaving the night black and silent. The nudist colony, the whole world even, seemed to be fast asleep. Or was it?

He tensed, steadying himself against the cool stone coping of the window. A faint rustling came from somewhere below, although there was not breeze enough to turn over a leaf. The rustling ceased as a figure appeared, moving furtively across the wiry, unkempt grass.

It was a man wearing a long, colorless raincoat, but because the collar of the coat was turned up and the soft hat pulled

low, Dillon could not see the face. He was carrying a shovel and a couple of smaller tools as he crossed directly to the edge of the brick-paved terrace, a dozen feet below Dillon's crouching watchfulness.

He laid the small tools carefully in the grass and went to work first with the shovel. After he had loosened a few bricks, he discarded the shovel for a trowel. The bricks came up easily, having originally been laid on a bed of cinders without mortar. He laid them carefully aside, in the exact order and relation in which he lifted them, so that each one should go back in the same space from which it had come.

Dillon, without moving his feet, leaned forward onto his toes. The man below him had finished with the bricks now and from a shallow hollow he was lifting something else. Something that looked like a double armful of rags.

The man carried this armful a few feet along the terrace to a point where the moonlight fell clear and pale. Here he spread the garments out. From the shapes Dillon could identify a shirt, a pair of trousers, socks, and underwear. The light was fairly strong, but the figure, his back to the window, was still unrecognizable.

The man below was feeling the seams, tearing out the pockets. Dillon watched, holding his breath. He heard, or thought he heard, a quick intake of breath. The other's movements ceased. Then the rain-coated figure, rising slowly from its haunches, stepped nimbly back toward the hole under the bricks. Passing it, the man continued toward the corner of the wing, his feet making no sound in the long grass. In a moment he had disappeared from Dillon's line of vision.

Dillon pondered, motionless. There had been no sound, no movement, to cause alarm. The cache lay open and exposed below him, the meagre clothing spread near it in the moonlight. Then, staring down at the terrace, he got a shock of dismay.

The moon, slipping from behind a cloud, was clear and full. Directly behind his left shoulder, its rays slanted downward where there was no roof to block it. Streaming through the window opening onto the terrace below, it outlined there that opening in black and white—and out-

lined with equal clearness the silhouette of his own head and shoulders as he stood squarely in the opening!

At once he drew back. But his lower ribs struck an obstruction which halted his movement. A voice behind him explained what it was.

"That's a pistol! Get your hands up in the air, and high—or I'll blow your insides out!"

WITH that threatening pressure against the base of his spine, Dillon obeyed. As he lifted his arms, he knew the voice for Golding's.

"Higher!" A hand patted his pockets and felt under his armpits. Dillon never carried a gun. It would have done him no good now if he had. "All right. Now turn around."

Dillon turned. The moonlight fell full on his face.

"Ah, the smart cop from New York! What in blazes are you doing here, and why did you come?"

Dillon snorted scornfully. "Since your game is finished, it can't do any harm to tell you. Harksett and I sheltered here this afternoon from the shower. We stood here for several minutes after the rain stopped, and the terrace was drying off. I noticed that one spot, near the edge there, dried much faster than the rest.

"I saw that the water ran down between the bricks, because the hole underneath furnished drainage, and because the cracks were not tightly filled. That suggested to me that the bricks had been recently taken up and replaced, although the eye could see no difference in the surface. So I figured it couldn't hurt to keep a watch on this place."

The gun glinted in the moonlight while Golding's hand was shaking with rage and tension. "Clever detective, eh? Thought you had me trapped, didn't you? Well, you've just trapped yourself! Turn around!"

Dillon could not see the facial expression under the shadow of the low hat brim, but he could hear the rasping note of fear and keyed-up determination in the voice. There is nothing, he knew, more dangerous than a man crazy with fear. He thought fast.

"Look, Golding—you don't have to shoot me."

"No? Why not? I might as well be charged with two murders as one. Besides, after you are under those bricks, I won't be charged with any. There'll be no one to guess where anything is hidden, and I can take my time about selling the diamonds, one by one, next fall."

Dillon knew that Golding was kidding himself. The truth of this whole affair was bound to come out eventually. But it is scant satisfaction to know that a murder will be solved after you yourself have been the victim of that murder. Sweat was cold on his brow.

"Did you find the diamonds, Golding?" he asked suddenly.

The other hesitated. Then he growled. "No. I didn't find anything yet. But I will."

Dillon tried to keep his voice level. "Maybe you won't. It takes an expert, a man with experience, to locate stuff hidden in seams. It can be tucked away very cleverly, you know. You'll probably never find more than half of them. Now look and don't be a fool. I know how to do it, quick and easy. I'll go down there with you, and you won't miss any. I'll take a split; say about one quarter. I'll keep my mouth shut about the whole deal, and you'll never have a thing to worry about."

The silence seemed to stretch endlessly. Dillon could sense the battle going on in the other man's mind between fear and cupidity. He also realized that another thought was suggesting itself to Golding. He could shoot this smart cop just as well after the diamonds had all been safely recovered as before.

The hand that held the pistol lifted.

"Walk slowly," grated Golding. "Keep in front of me. Go down this back way—the way I came up. And don't make any breaks, because this gun is right in your ribs."

Dillon moved very carefully. He crossed the few feet of rotten flooring, stepped from it to a pile of broken bricks and dirt. Picking his way through what had been a side door, he turned left along the end of the jutting wing. In the dank grass he could not hear even his own footsteps, but he knew that the other was at his back.

Passing the corner of the wing, in deep shadow, Dillon walked slower still. He

stepped on the balls of his feet, and his fingers were clenched until the nails bit into his palms.

"Get along," growled Golding, behind his shoulder.

Dillon spoke quietly. He said, "Fliv-ver!"

On his right a huge rhododendron shrub gone to seed came suddenly to life. Branches crashed and snapped.

Dillon whirled. Golding had spun just ahead of him. Dillon grabbed the right sleeve of the raincoat and bore down with all his weight. The gun spat once, the bullet burying itself in the soft turf.

Golding emitted a strangling cry of rage, and struggled to jerk free. But then Ford Lister, charging out of the bush, hit him like a battering ram. All three went down in a scrambling heap. But it was only a couple of seconds before Dillon had the pistol, and used it like a black-jack. Golding lay still. The other two got to their feet.

When he had caught his breath, Dillon prodded the recumbent figure with his toe. There was no response except a faint moan.

"I must have hit him a little too hard.

Looks like we may have to carry him as far as the car. Well, you grab his feet and I'll take his shoulders."

They bent to the task. But suddenly Ford straightened.

"Hey, wait a minute! Those clothes! We wouldn't want to go off and leave all those diamonds lying around loose."

Dillon grinned in the moonlight. "If you can find any diamonds in those rags, I'll be the most surprised man in the State."

Ford's face was a picture of chagrin and disappointment. "What, no diamonds! But I thought you said—"

"Sure I said. I had to get the party who buried them there to come back and dig them up somehow, didn't I? Otherwise we would identify the victim, but not the murderer. But we'd better take them along, anyway, because they're evidence. Here, pile them on his chest."

The first time they put their burden down for a breather, Ford said ruefully, "Then there isn't any Herman Molheim?"

"Sure there's a Herman Molheim. He's pretty much as I described him. Only it

[Turn page]

Do We Have To Die?

Thirty-nine years ago in forbidden Tibet, behind the highest mountains in the world, a young Englishman named Edwin J. Dingle found the answer to this question. A great mystic opened his eyes. A great change came over him. He realized the strange power that knowledge gives.

That Power, he says, can transform the life of anyone. Questions, whatever they are, can be answered. The problems of health, death, poverty and wrong, can be solved.

In his own case, he was brought back to splendid health. He acquired wealth too, as well as world-wide professional recognition. Thirty-nine years ago, he was sick as a man could be and live. Once his coffin was bought. Years of almost continuous tropical fevers, broken bones, near blindness, privation and danger had made a human wreck of him, physically and mentally.

He was about to be sent back to England to die, when a strange message came—"They are waiting for you in Tibet." He wants to tell the whole world what he learned there,

under the guidance of the greatest mystic he ever encountered during his 21 years in the Far East. He wants everyone to experience the greater health and the Power which there came to him.

Within ten years, he was able to retire to this country with a fortune. He had been honored by fellowships in the world's leading geographical societies, for his work as a geographer. And today, 39 years later, he is still so athletic, capable of so much work, so young in appearance, it is hard to believe he has lived so long.

As a first step in their progress toward the Power that Knowledge gives, Mr. Dingle wants to send to readers of this paper a 9,000-word treatise. He says the time is here for it to be released to the Western World, and offers to send it, free of cost or obligation, to sincere readers of this notice. For your free copy, address The Institute of Mental Physics, 213 South Hobart Blvd., Dept. L-462, Los Angeles 4, Calif. Readers are urged to write promptly as only a limited number of the free books have been printed.

isn't Herman Molheim who is lying in your morgue. I'd have recognized him in the first sixty seconds. But it didn't hurt to let our friend here think that it might have been Molheim he had killed, did it? Ready for a little more carry?"

Ford looked down. "This mug is beginning to come around. Let's wait long enough to smoke a cigarette, and then make him walk."

NEXT morning these two sat in Ford's office. On the desk between them lay the clothes—poor, threadbare garments.

The left hip of the slacks was torn, and showed a pale stain of paint.

"I've ordered Steve Coyne turned loose," said Ford.

Dillon nodded. "He was probably doing no worse than calling on the luscious Miss Bland," Dillon remarked. "Maybe she was selling him on nudism—or maybe vice versa. But it's against the doctor's rules to have visitors hanging around the grounds at night, so both of them kept their mouths shut about it."

Ford's ears grew pink. He changed the subject. "That looks like light blue paint, the color of Golding's car. And here's the bullet-hole in the jacket—only the powder burns are on the inside! How do you figure it, Carney?"

"Golding was driving back to camp late, and struck a pedestrian. He drove right on and put his car away, but then he went back on foot, with his gun. He found a stranger, injured and unconscious. He saw that it meant a peck of trouble for him—he'd probably been drinking. There went the soft job he had just gotten, his reputation, his license to drive, and perhaps a liability judgment that would take

him years to pay off.

"But he did some fast thinking with that businesslike brain of his. He's an advertising promoter, and his job was to promote publicity for that nudist camp. What better way than to have a nude body found, just outside the walls? The more mystery the better."

Ford stared. "So he undressed the corpse?"

"It wasn't a corpse yet. The movements of that fractured arm probably brought some signs of life. So he wrapped the jacket around the pistol, to muffle the report, and settled everything with one shot. That's why the powder burns are on the inside."

"And then hid the clothes where he thought they'd never be found."

Dillon nodded. "I doubt if he ever thought of robbery, at the time. But the bait of several hundred thousand dollars in diamonds is enough to make any man's palm itch."

Ford leaned across the desk. "Well, Carney, you sure gave me a lot of help in solving this case."

Dillon grinned crookedly. "I'll get no credit for it. When I get back to New York, the chief will ask if I identified that dead man, and I'll have to tell him no. Then he'll start thinking about transferring me to night duty in the morgue."

Ford fingered the soiled, mouldy shirt. "Say!" he exclaimed, "here's a laundry mark!"

It took ten days, but the laundry mark did it. The victim was a tramp printer named Jonas Peck, fired from a job in Pittsburgh for drunkenness, and hiking toward Buffalo to look for a new one. Because he had no family, he had never been reported missing.

NEXT ISSUE'S GRIPPING MYSTERY HEADLINERS!



THE MAN WITH THE PLASTIC FACE

A Suspenseful Novelet by EDWARD RONNS

MURDER IS MY BUSINESS

A Swift-Moving Novelet by B. J. BENSON

GETAWAY GIRL

A Baffling Mystery Yarn by PRESTON GRADY

MAN With GUN

Men have been killed before, but few as beautifully as Terzo could arrange it!



Tony fell hard and bounced a little

by LEW TALIAN

THE West Side's exciting to everybody not concerned with it, thought Tony Terzo. It's close to the best things of Chicago without ever letting on. You make a buck sometimes, and you don't ask fancy odds to take a chance once in a while.

The girl sitting at the kitchen table didn't like Terzo's cold water flat any

more than she did the man. Tony smiled, allowing her to speak first. She was one of those chances.

"One hears quite a bit about Tony Terzo," she said. "Or do you just give that name to the cops?"

"That's my right name. Cops know it."

She smiled. She was good at it.

"What do you want, Glora?"

"You know my name, huh? Tell me something nice about Glora Darlin."

Tony was itchy with the heat. It had been ninety-eight all afternoon. Now it was dark and hot. Heat without sunshine was almost like a cheap dame in a two hundred dollar outfit.

"Glora dresses well," he said.

She breathed some more. "Okay, Tony. I'm in trouble, a lot of trouble. I need a tough boy."

Gossip says you bought a night coop. Tarney Jambrillo wants the place, but Glora won't sell at a seventy-five per cent loss."

"Loss? Tony, I'm grossing over three grand a week with my club, and netting eight-fifty. I do my dances, and don't have to hire a star performer. The Glorious Club is my chance to make some real money. But Tarney says he'll book me in hell if I didn't sell."

He lit a cigarette. "What do you want me to do?"

"Make him change his mind."

He blew smoke at a couple of flies.

"Five hundred, Tony."

"Don't insult me again."

"Okay, it's a thou job, and we know it—don't we?"

"Cartridges are expensive."

"Not a cent over fifteen hundred."

"No dice."

Her face saddened. "What do you want?"

He had her, and she knew it. "Fifteen down and ten more, Glora—that's when the job's finished."

"Twenty-five hundred! Hell with you! I'll blast him myself!"

"Cut it out. Pipe down. There's people next door."

"Fifteen flat, Tony."

"Scram."

"You win."

He rubbed out the cigarette. "You're a lousy business woman." He smiled at her.

"I like you too." She got up, tried to straighten out her sticky girdle. It made sucking little sounds. "You can catch Tarney alone sometime."

He nodded.

"It's a deal then?"

"Yes." He tried to kiss her, but she said it was too hot. So he let her go.

HE WOKE up at 4 A.M. He couldn't fall asleep again. He kept dreaming that somebody was in the room with him. It was always that way with him before a big one.

He got up and threw four big Idaho potatoes into a pan of water and put his wrists under the cold water. He felt better, and scraped the jackets from the potatoes and fried them.

He ate them scalding hot from the frying pan, liking the way they burned and filled him. Some guys couldn't eat a peanut before going out on a job. He was always starved. He never liked the needle.

He put on the lightest suit he had and went downstairs, cursing the weather he'd prayed for last February. Nothing made sense anymore.

Two old ladies and little Sammy were on the front stoop.

"Too hot for you, Tony?" said Susy.

"Yeah."

"Goin' fer a swim?" The kid came awake. "Kin I come—huh?"

Susy reached over and slapped him. "Shut up."

"Let him talk." He gave the kid a half-buck. Buy yourself some lemonade."

"Gee thanks."

He felt better, walking away. One of the old ladies said, carefully enough for him to hear, "Sammy, you buy three dioxies like Tony said."

He cut down Harrison street and kept on walking. A street car barged past at a good clip. Poor creep piloting the thing was afraid to stop for the five kids on the corner who didn't have a dime between them.

When he reached Halsted he was tired, so he waited for a trolley. He boarded a Central and sweated it out to Dearborn street.

The Loop was quiet. Kids were necking in store doorways. Shiny cars skimmed over the car tracks and those in them tried not to look, and embarrass the twitchy little girls getting pawed. Chicago was ready to go to sleep, and didn't know it. They were fighting the feather-man snore for snore.

It was too early to do what he had to do.

He thought of Nancy. Good little

Nancy. "She got my number all right," he thought. But she was good and clean. Not like some others.

He walked to the Tip Hat Cafe on North Wabash and gave her his hat. There were a few couples leaning over coffee-cups up front.

Tony smiled at his Nan. She was this tall—which made them a nice looking couple. And she was that way about him, which gave him every break.

"Tony! Good to see you." Her tanned face was plain, with the exception of her smile with her white teeth showing. She was a different sort of girl. She could make herself look different when she wanted to.

"I had to see you, Nan."

"But it's nearly five. Oh, Ton, don't let Mel catch you hanging around here. I've got to clean away the mess in the booth."

He started to unbutton his coat. She stopped him in time. "Please, Tony, there'll be trouble. Mel's awful. Oh, please."

He laughed and touched the bone on her wrist. "Skip it."

He went outside and waited till 5:30, her quitting time.

"Let's go to the Lake," she said, after he'd kissed some color into her face.

"Good."

It wasn't a long walk to Lake Michigan, and they didn't speak. She was enjoying the air too much. It was good feeling the swish of her skirt against his side. Just glancing at her made him feel good. She had a springy little walk that made him follow her one time about five months ago. After twelve heartburns at the Cafe, she consented to listen to him.

He threw his coat on the grass for her. She looked at the water. She still was shy. Finally she sat on his coat. Then she was bawling and he told her that he'd marry her pretty soon.

"Soon's I get some money, hon."

"Mrs. Terzo," she said, and her voice was full of tears. Sobs shook her while he held onto her.

"It's not that bad—or is it!" He made it come off all right.

She giggled, and they swapped soft words. She was a good mimic, and she was a good pal, so he didn't try any-

thing. He happened to be in love with her.

He saw her to the bus stop on Michigan avenue and hopped a southbound bus himself.

IT WAS one of those peaceful little streets with trees that make noises against your windows at night. His building was two storeys high and of a forgotten color. He walked to the door and pressed the door bell. Five minutes later it swung open and Pete swore at him.

"I got a job for you," said Tony, brushing past him.

"Yeah?" He rubbed some of the sleep from his little eyes. "Real job, Ton?"

"A thousand worth."

"Nice."

Pete brought out a bottle of whitish liquid and they had a drink. It tasted like wintergreen. It sure had a strong kick. It reminded him of all the hard smells in the world.

"Last job only paid off five hundred, Tony." Pete's big shoulders were stiff.

Tony wondered why big men made the best gunners. "That's because it's Jambrillo this time, Pete."

"You crazy? He's poison. Too many friends."

"That's why you're getting nine hundred."

"Nine? Thought you said a thousand."

"I get my ten per cent."

He didn't say anything.

"If you don't want the business, Pete—"

"I'll take you on."

"Tomorrow. The party paying wants it quick."

Pete swung the minute Tony lifted his eyes from the laces of the gunman's shoes. Tony fell hard and bounced a little. He ducked the shoe and got to his feet and ran around a big, round dining room table.

Pete pushed the table and Tony into a corner. "You're lying, you little rat. You're lying about the whole deal."

Tony made a run for it and tripped over his foot. Pete kicked him high on the back. Pain burned through his little body.

"Tony, you want more?"

"No."

"How much did you say the job's worth?"

"Thousand."

Pete picked him up by the hair. "Maybe you're saying the truth, but the word is that you sometimes make more than the gunner. That ain't true—is it, Tony?"

"No."

"Okay, kid, give me half now."

"Ain't got it."

"I'll look." He searched Tony and found a ten spot.

"Give me bus fare," said Tony.

Pete reached into his pocket, dragged out a crumpled single. "I'll give myself some hooch with the ten. I need it more'n you."

"Okay."

"Sore, Tony?"

"No."

"Guy's gotta look out for himself."

"Sure."

"Keep a hundred and fifty for your slice of the deal."

"Thanks. Tomorrow it has to be done."

Tony went to the Club Glorious and Glora gave him the fifteen hundred advance. He made one of those mental notes to make a little phone call after the news of Jambrillo's shooting hit the papers. Jambrillo's friends would be mighty pleased to hear the name of the gunner who'd wiped him out.

THE next day, Tony took Nan up to Wisconsin—one of those lakes—for swimming. He needed the alibi. It was nice watching Nan in the bathing suit. When she laughed, excited little quivers danced through her body.

"Look at the cows, Tony." She pointed to the fence across the little lake. They looked at the cows.

He said, "Maybe that yegg who wants the chicken farm is right."

"Oh, I hate chickens."

They went into the resort house and Keena, the proprietor, grinned.

"Ever have champagne with your lunch, Nan?" Tony asked.

"No."

They sat at one of the little tables on the porch and broke a bottle and stuffed tender chicken and Kena's egg salad down their gullets. They laughed

at everything. They were having fun. You could forget with a Nan.

They kicked around the beach some more, and went into the little town, bowled and drank beer, and went back to the house. Nan expected him to propose any minute, but when a man is very gentle with a woman, she won't hint at anything. Tony was very, very gentle. Prudish.

He put her in the car he'd borrowed and headed for Chicago. Pete should have finished his job by now.

Twenty miles from Chicago, she said, "I feel married."

"Just sit tight. I love you. I just kissed you six times!"

She laughed.

Stopping for a light on Jackson, he gave her a long look. Her face was weak with sleep, her jaw muscles sagged and a streak of face powder was crooked against her cheek. Poor kid, he thought. With her night job and me—

"Don't drive me home, Ton. I'll hop a bus. Papa'll blow his top if he sees you."

"Fix up your face."

"Is it that bad?"

"Sorry I dragged you out."

A newsie started to yell and Tony asked for a paper. The headline stated that one Tarnella Jambrillo had been shot. He read enough of it to make sure Jambrillo was dead.

He was dead.

"Tony?"

"What?"

"Don't bite my head off. What's the matter?"

"Still want to marry me?"

"Oh . . ." She was too sleepy to make as much of it as she probably thought she could have.

He squeezed her hand. "I've got some money saved."

"No more—no more running around. Promise, Ton?"

"No more," he said, and meant it. With her, it wouldn't be too hard trying to keep a good record. "We'll leave Chicago, hon. Too many people know me around here."

"Dar- dar-ling."

He pulled away. "Still want to be let off at the bus stop?"

"To hell with Papa!"

Afterwards, he went to call on Glora. Her blonde hair was loose and messy as if she'd been pulling at it. A bottle of Scotch whiskey stood on the cluttered desk. She was slightly drunk.

"Now you know how Li'l Abner stands," Tony said.

"I read the papers, if that's what you mean."

"Give me the other thousand."

She opened a drawer, tossed a large white envelope on the blotter of the desk. He opened the envelope. It was all there.

"Okay. Thanks."

She laughed, most of the sound sticking in her throat. She was losing her nerve—and quick.

"Lay off the whiskey, Glor."

"Yeah?" she snapped. Her face cracked a grin, and her age showed around it.

"Think of it as a business deal," he said. Then he left her.

HE WENT into a drug store and made a phone call. He told a guy called Lefty about a guy called Pete.

"Big Pete knocked off Jambrillo. Never mind who this is."

He hung up. They were interested. Oh, were they interested!

He went into a movie house when it started to rain. The picture was an English film. His mind was sick. There was no help for it. It was sick of him. He finally left the theater.

It was still raining. A nice, soft, summer rain. He walked under it for a long time. He went home.

The old block looked good. There was nobody on the front stoop. He walked up and keyed open the door. Someone was inside.

Lefty was short and broad. His friend was tall and broad. They were sitting on the sofa.

Tony didn't know the tall one's name.

"Hi, Lefty."

"Hi."

"What can I do for you?"

"Put up your hands," said the big one. His voice was weak and shrill.

Tony stared at their guns. Lightning flashed outside and thunder cracked, and the guns leveled with his mid-section. He put up his hands.

"See if he's rodded, Walt."

"Hey! What goes?" Tony sounded all right as he said it.

Lefty grinned. "Just checking, Tony."

Walt gave him a good feel and took the money from his inside pocket. He grinned.

Lefty counted it. "Lotta money." He looked happy.

"I'm going to get married," said Tony. "I picked it up 'cause I'm getting married." He began to sound silly.

"Who is she?" asked Walt.

"You don't know her."

"Too bad," Walt said with his kid-voice. "You got good judgment with broads. Me, I'm stuck with a pig."

"Why did you finger Jambrillo?" Lefty said.

"I didn't." Tony cursed. "You guys're nuts. I'm going to get married. I had my girl out in Wisconsin all day."

Walt laughed. "Wisconsin's nice."

Lefty cursed. "Pete says you ordered him to gun Jambrillo. A guy says the truth before he dies."

Tony started to sweat. "Pete lied. Pete owes me a grudge. He hates me. Lefty, be reasonable. Hell, Pete beat me up. I'll show you the marks. I'm not a gunner. You know Pete is. Take the money, and I'll forget this."

"Let's see the marks," said Lefty. "When'd he fist you?"

"Why yes—" Tony began. Then he saw Lefty's face wasn't very pleasant any more.

Lefty said, "You musta saw Pete yesterday, to order the job. He beat you, 'cause you're a rat. Even if Pete lied about you, you know now that we killed him. You know how it is, Tony."

Walt said, "That lousy Glora babe killed herself before we could get to her—"

"You fool. Shut up," snapped Lefty.

Walt went to the radio and screwed it on. He found some music, twisted the power on full blast.

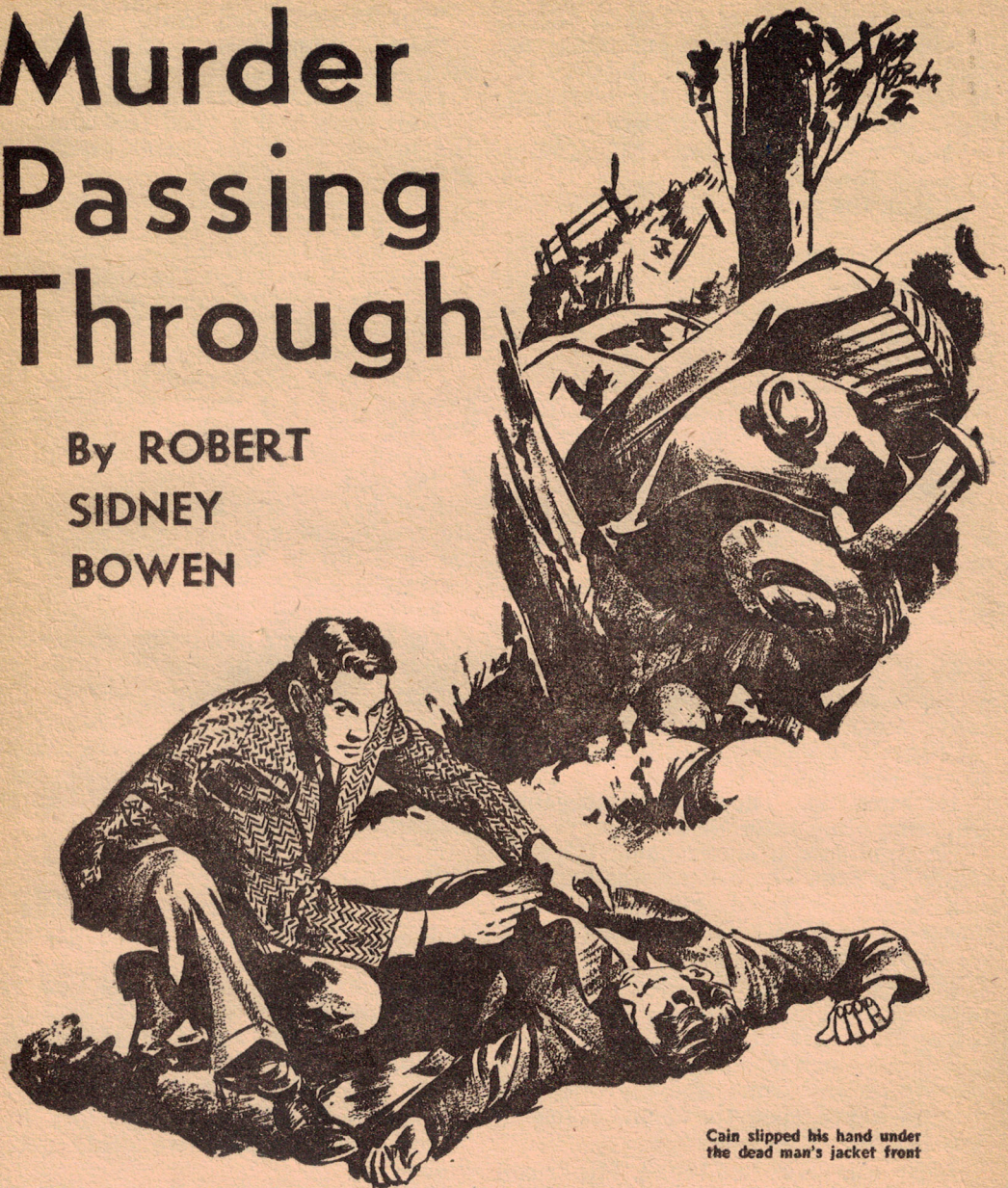
"Tony," yelled Lefty, "close your eyes."

He closed his eyes.

The radio should have been deafening, but it seemed awful sweet. The radio was playing *In the Good Old Summer Time*. Tony didn't catch the next chorus. . . .

Murder Passing Through

By ROBERT
SIDNEY
BOWEN



Cain slipped his hand under
the dead man's jacket front

JOHNNY CAIN swung his car around the blind turn in the wide, cement mountain road, and then eased off speed as he spotted enough room to park off the road just up ahead. Braking the car he rolled up onto the shoulder, came

to a full stop just short of some bushes, and killed the engine.

It was one of those kind of afternoons that make you feel glad that your alive. Particularly if you haven't a care in the world. As was the case with Johnny

Johnny Cain follows the red-hot trail of a blue sedan!

Cain. Four years ago he had stopped shooting guns for Uncle Sam and taken a job writing Sunday feature stuff for a large newspaper back East.

However, four years on the same job was too much like being in the army for Johnny. He had itchy feet, and a fair piece of change he had managed to save up. So he had to quit his job, packed everything he owned into a single suitcase, dumped it in his 1941 Chevvy, and just started out. To nowhere in particular. He'd make up his mind as he went along. Even get himself a job on some sheet—if he felt like it.

Drinking deep of the nice smelling air he looked across the road, and beyond the rather flimsy wooden guard fence at the picturesque panorama of valley scenery that stretched out into the distance. When he'd had his fill of it, he took a road map from the glove compartment and spread it out on his lap. A couple of moments of checking placed him about four miles from a town called Preston, with a population of about eight thousand.

He decided that Preston should be a good place to spend the night, and he was refolding the map when suddenly he heard the howling whine of two cars traveling at terrific speed. As he jerked his head up he saw the gray blur of a coupe streak by in the direction from whence he had come. And almost abreast of it on the inside was a big blue black sedan.

The howling rush of the two cars racing past, and then Cain had opened the door and leaped out onto the ground. Memory of the fairly sharp blind turn had flashed through his head, and he was leaping out on impulse to take a look. And a quick look was all that the terrific speed of those two cars allowed. But what he saw froze him stiff, with his mouth open to yell words that refused to come out.

When the gray coupe was exactly half way around the turn the blue-black car seemed to fairly leap forward and swerve into it broadside. In practically nothing flat the coupe crashed through the guard fence, as though it were made of tooth-picks, and disappeared from view down the mountainside. The black car swerved back to the center of the road, and dis-

appeared from view around the blind turn.

FOR all of ten full seconds Johnny Cain gaped pop-eyed at the opening in the shattered guard fence, then ran as hard as he could toward the spot. When he reached there he was able to see the gray coupe with crumpled fenders and top, jammed fast between two trees a good seventy yards down the mountainside. The door on the driver's side was completely torn off and the huddled figure of a man in a blue suit was motionless on the ground some ten to fifteen feet from the wrecked car.

For a brief instant Cain hesitated. Just long enough to look up and down the road. Then he eased himself down off the lip of the road, and made his way down to the huddled figure. One look was all he needed. The man's eyes were open, but in their depths was already the glassy glaze of swiftly approaching death.

For a fleeting instant, though, the glassy eyes seemed to focus on Cain's face as he bent closer. Then the lips moved, and the faintest of whispered words trickled off them.

"Tell Bill—tell Bill Stacey—"

That was all. The man on the ground suddenly stiffened and went limp as death claimed him. Johnny Cain crouched by the man for a few moments more, until he was sure. Then he straightened up and glanced quickly at the crumpled car. There was nobody else in the car. The man in the blue suit had been riding alone.

Johnny stood frowning down at the dead man. Presently curiosity got the best of him. Crouching down, he gently slipped his hand under the dead man's jacket front. A wallet was in the inside pocket. He opened the wallet. Three lodge cards, and an operator's license, were all that he wanted to look at. Each said that the dead man was Walter C. Hobson, of 3245 Grand Avenue, Preston.

Sticking the lodge cards and the license back, Johnny quickly replaced the wallet in the inside pocket and scrambled back up to the road. A disquieting thought had come to him to evaporate any further curiosity on his part. Hobson was dead, so there wasn't

a thing he could do for him. But if somebody coming along in a car should see him down there, complications might pop up very fast.

After all, his car was parked no more than fifty yards from where the gray coupe had gone through the fence. How could he prove he hadn't taken the turn wide and forced the gray coupe to swerve and go over? Also, Johnny Cain was a total stranger in these parts. Also he was footloose and fancy free. And wished to remain so.

Conscience, however, particularly when it is coupled with perpetual curiosity, is a very tough thing to keep down. And so as Johnny Cain drove along the mountain road toward Preston he thought over many things about the way the driver of that blue-black sedan had deliberately forced the gray coupe through the guard fence, and of the dying man's last faintly whispered words. When he reached Preston he had made his decision. The only one possible for any kind of a newspaperman in a similar spot.

He pulled up alongside the first traffic cop he came to, and stopped. He nodded at the cop and played a long shot.

"Do you happen to know a man in this town by the name of Bill Stacey?" he asked.

The cop glanced at him sharply, then grinned. "Sure. Everybody knows Bill Stacey."

Cain asked, "Where do I find him?"

The cop stepped down off his curb high stand and pointed an index finger up the block.

"See that building?" he said. "*The Preston Press*. That's Bill Stacey. Owner and publisher of the *Press*. You'll probably find him in that building, right now."

THANKING the cop Johnny Cain drove a block or so up the street until he found a place to park. Walking another half block to the *Preston Press Building* he wondered a little why he was going about the thing this way? In fact, why was he bothering at all? Why not just call the police and report the accident, and let it go at that? He didn't have any of the answers.

The place smelled exactly like fifty

other newspaper plants he had been in, and for a moment nostalgia nudged him hard. He shook it off and made his way to the owner-publisher's office on the third floor. A woman old enough to be his mother sat at the desk in the outer office. He asked to see Stacey.

Johnny told her, "I want to see him about a man named Walter C. Hobson. A friend of his, I think."

"Very much so," the woman said, and gave Cain a funny look. "Just a minute please."

She picked up a hush-o-phone and spoke into it. A moment or two later she put the instrument back on the desk, nodded, and pointed.

"Will you go in, please?" she invited. "That door there."

William Stacey was in his middle fifties and handsome. He had coal black hair, steady steel blue eyes, and a good square chin that probably more than one fist had bounced off harmlessly. He nodded at Johnny, as the vacationing Sunday feature writer entered, and gave him the quizzical eye. Cain nodded pleasantly in return, took his Guild card from his wallet and placed it on the publisher's desk. Stacey glanced at it and then looked up with a quick frown.

"You using Hobson's name to plug for a job?" he demanded.

"No." Johnny shook his head. "Is Walter Hobson a good friend of yours?"

"Certainly!" Stacey snapped. "He is also my managing editor. What are you getting at?"

"Was your managing editor," Johnny Cain corrected. "Walter Hobson is dead. I've a hunch he was deliberately murdered. That card is just to tell you who I am."

Stacey opened his mouth to speak. Then he slowly closed it and stared hard at Cain, and right on through him.

"Tell me what you know," he suddenly said evenly. "Sit down there."

Johnny sat down, and in the matter of a couple of minutes he gave the newspaper publisher all the details he knew.

"Just a blue-black sedan?" the man echoed heavily when Johnny had finished. "You didn't see who was in it? Not even the license plate?"

Cain shook his head and snapped his fingers.

"Didn't have the chance," he replied. "It happened just like that. Both cars were practically by me before I saw them."

William Stacey didn't say anything for a moment. His face seemed to sag a little and age. And he sat with his two clenched fists pressed hard against the edge of his desk.

"Walter shouldn't have tried to do everything alone," he suddenly spoke as though to himself. "It was too dangerous."

A little bird inside Johnny Cain suggested now was a good time to be on his way. He had done all he could. Instead, Johnny leaned forward a little in his chair.

"I don't like murder, and I'm certain it was," he said. "What's the story behind it?"

The publisher seemed not to hear. He picked up Cain's Guild card, studied it for a moment, and then handed it back.

"Would you be able to recognize that car again, if you saw it?" he asked Johnny.

"I might," Johnny shrugged. "There certainly should be some gray paint on both right fenders. But would I be likely to see it again?"

"You might," Stacey said almost absently. "There's just a slight chance that you might. Look, Cain, I'll give you the story in brief. Three years ago a man by the name of Harry Craven came to Preston and bought the High-Top. That's a dinner, dance, and gambling place six miles out on the Range Road. Looks like a lighted Christmas tree at night. Anyway, Craven bought it, and also bought himself a lot of protection, and started up in business."

QUICKLY the publisher pulled open a drawer, took out a photograph, and slid it across the desk.

"That's Harry Craven," he said hopefully. "Maybe you did see somebody like that in the sedan?"

Johnny Cain took a long look at the photograph. Craven was somewhere between thirty and forty, and very run of the mill looking. The only two items at all outstanding were his wavy hair, and his ears that stuck out a little like wing flaps. Johnny shook his head and slid

the photograph back.

"There could have been a dozen people in it, and I wouldn't have seen them," he said. "Just a flash of it from the rear was all I had. Maybe it wasn't even blue-black."

Stacey sighed a little, stuck the photograph back in the drawer and closed it.

"Craven did a land-office sucker business right from the start," he said. "People began to complain. But anonymously by letters to us. We tried to do something about it but we couldn't get very far due to the complete lack of flesh-and-blood witnesses. We even turned over all the letters to the district attorney's office, but no results there, either. Frankly, though, I don't think the district attorney was any too eager to get results."

The publisher stopped talking and drummed with his finger tips. Johnny Cain stayed put.

"Two or three weeks ago," Stacey went on, "Walter told me that he was on the trail of something he hoped would bring Craven out into the open, and force the D.A. to take action against him. Under the promise of secrecy Walter told me that he expected shortly to obtain proof that Craven was not his real name. Also, that he was an ex-con wanted by a certain Western state for violation of his parole. How Walter got that information, I didn't ask. A reporter's sources of information are his secrets."

"So Craven found out, and had one of his boys force Hobson off that mountain?" Johnny Cain murmured. "I'm afraid that sounds a little thin."

"To you, perhaps yes," the publisher nodded. "To me, no. On the police blotter right now are two unsolved murder mysteries. Two men who came to Preston a year ago and set up business in direct competition with Craven. One body was found at the bottom of Sunset Canyon. A mere two-hundred-foot drop. A prowler car found the other body at three o'clock one morning. Apparently the victim of a hit-and-run driver. Add those two to Walter's brutal death, and what do you get?"

"A slight case of suspicion," Cain admitted. "So?"

"So I'll make you a flat offer of one thousand dollars, if you can find that car."

you saw today," the publisher said bluntly.

"Interesting money," Cain grunted. "Any suggestions where I might start looking?"

"The High-Top," Stacey said instantly. "Craven keeps a flock of cars garaged there. If that blue-black sedan is his, that's where you'll find it. And I make my offer to you because you're my best bet. You're a stranger in town. You'd have plenty of chance to nose around and not be noticed."

"And if I find it, then what?" Johnny asked. "That still wouldn't prove Craven drove it."

"You find that car, and I'll take it from there," Stacey said grimly. "Phone me here, or at my home, and I'll have experts who can prove it was the murder car out there in nothing flat."

"It still sounds like the cops are your best bet," Johnny said with a frown.

"If I knew one I could trust absolutely!" the publisher snapped. "And one Craven and his boys wouldn't spot a mile away. No, you're my only hope, Cain. Walter was my best friend, and a newspaper man. I'm asking you as one newspaper man to another."

A warning little bird in Johnny Cain squawked loudly, but he stood up, pocketed his Guild card, and nodded.

"Okay, I'll give it a try," he said. "But don't expect a bull's-eye. After all I'm just passing through on vacation."

"You're a big-time newspaper man," Stacey said.

FIVE or six minutes later Johnny Cain slid in behind the wheel of his parked car, stuck the key in the ignition, and stepped on the starter. He was shifting into first when the door on the far side was suddenly jerked open and a big man with a flat face, and shaggy black brows crowded in beside him. Johnny flipped the gear lever to neutral and looked at the man.

"What's the idea?" he said. "This isn't a taxi!"

The big man grinned and brought his right hand into view on his lap. In his right hand was a short, snub-barreled pistol that was pointed at Johnny's abdomen. Cain glanced at it for a second and then glanced past the man at the

sidewalk traffic. The big fellow chuckled.

"Go ahead, chum," he said. "This baby spits a big slug. I just want a friendly little chat, see? So get this heap rolling."

Cain hesitated, decided that a bullet in the stomach was not a good diet, and tooled his Chevy away from the curb.

"Any place special?" he asked with an effort.

"Just straight on out," the big man said. "What are you doing in the *Press Building*, chum?"

More ice coated Johnny's heart, but he managed to keep his voice casual enough.

"Looking for a job," he said. "Any law against that?"

His shaggy browed passenger gave him a sharp look.

"Newspaper man, huh?" he grunted.

"That's right," Johnny nodded, and stared ahead in vain for a traffic cop.

"And you were looking for a job?" the big fellow murmured. "Or maybe did you have a story you wanted to sell?"

Cain jumped inwardly but let no trace of it show on the outside. He drove on for another block in silence, bitterly cursing the distressing lack of traffic cops on this particular street.

"Story?" he finally echoed. "What story? I just happen to be passing through. Decided to try for a job."

"Yeah, just passing *through*!" the other said and grinned. "Who'd you see in the *Press*?"

"Man by the name of Stacey," Johnny said with a shrug. "They said he was the owner."

"And you just asked for a job?" the big man grunted. "Just asked for a job, huh?"

The ice was thick over Johnny's heart, now, and sliding slowly down toward the pit of his stomach. He was beginning to add two and two and get a very definite four. He took a chance and put a strong pinch of annoyance in his voice.

"Yes, a job! Anything wrong with that? And just who are you to find it, anyway?"

"Calm down and take the next left!" the big man growled.

"The blazes I will!" Johnny bit off, as the tension snapped a little in him.

"Blazes you won't, chum! I don't fool!"

Fingers of steel closed about Johnny's upper right arm and began squeezing the muscle to pulp. Also the little pistol darted over to within six inches of his belt. He swallowed hard and turned left at the next cross street. The big man let go of his arm, and settled back a little.

"I'm trying to give you a break, chum!" he said. "Stop lying or I'll stop you, see?"

Johnny Cain didn't say anything for a couple of moments. He waited for the stabbing pains to recede from his upper right arm, and for the touch of giddiness to go out of his head. The road over which he now drove the Chevvy led past the city limits and up into the mountains. It was a good road, and state highway marked, but there was no other car in sight ahead, or in his rear view mirror.

"So you didn't have a story to sell?" the big man repeated. "Nothing about an automobile accident, maybe?"

THERE it was out, to make two and two four right enough! A cold clammy sweat oozed out all over Cain's body, and began trickling down his skin.

No need to guess any more. The big man had been in that blue-black sedan, and obviously seen his parked Chevvy just beyond that blind mountain road turn. Either that, or the man had turned around at some place down the road and come back to see him scramble down the mountain to Hobson's car, or scrambling back up and driving off in the Chevvy. And then had trailed him to the *Press Building* . . . and waited.

To play it dumb any more wouldn't get him a thing that he'd like. He'd have to play it another way. He turned his head and stared wide eyed and frightened at the bushy browed one.

"Hey!" he gasped. "Are you the guy that forced that gray coupe through the fence?"

The big man looked at him out of half closed eyes, and chuckled.

"Finally getting bright, eh?" he mumbled. "No story at all to sell the *Press*?"

A sudden flash of inspiration came to Johnny Cain. He took the fright out of his eyes, and dragged down one corner of his mouth.

"You said it, no story!" he snapped.

"The guy I plugged for a job, Stacey, gave me the brush-off. No openings. I said I'd trade him a story for a job, but he wasn't even listening today. Who was the guy in the gray coupe, anyway? That drop killed him."

The big fellow chuckled, and seemed to relax all over. He even let the barrel of his pistol sag downward.

"What guy in what gray coupe?" he grunted. "Stop the car, chum."

For an instant Cain could only gape blankly. Then as the big man made a little gesture with his pistol, Johnny pulled over to the side of the road and stopped the car. The big man looked at him for a long moment without grinning. Then suddenly he spoke.

"Lucky for you, chum, you're not as nosey as some newspaper guys. Keep it that way, and *keep* going, right on out the way you're headed. Show your face around Preston, and it might get hurt. Like *this*!"

It happened so fast that Johnny Cain didn't even have the time to blink, let alone duck. The little pistol whipped up and came down across his cheek. It was like white flame had seared his cheek, and for a couple of seconds he could see only blurs. When vision cleared the big man was out of the car, and grinning back in at him.

"Get on with passing through, chum," he said. "And *keep* going!"

Cold fury lashed at Johnny Cain, but his folks had not raised any stupid children. Biting his tongue against the burning pain in his cheek, he shifted gears, and sent the Chevvy on up the road. A couple of hundred yards further along the road made a sweeping turn through some woods. Johnny took one more squint into the rear view mirror and saw the big flat faced man turn around and start walking back toward Preston.

Nine miles farther along Cain came upon a whistle stop the highway sign proclaimed as Mountain View. He drove along the single business street and parked in front of a tavern. A check in the rear view mirror showed that a lot of the ugly red had gone out of the two-inch scrape on his right cheek. But the sight of that bruise on his cheek did nothing at all to quench the fires that still raged in his heart.

He got out and went along the street until he came to a drug store. He entered the drug store and was able to buy what he wanted, a detailed map of Preston City and environs. He took the map back to his Chevy, unfolded it, and spread it out.

Dusk was coming but there was still light enough for him to study the map. He found Mountain View on the map and then traced a cross country route that would take him onto Range Road where Stacey had said the High-Top was located. The route cut into Range Road just seven miles outside of Preston. Stacey had said the place was six miles out.

PRESENTLY, he folded the map so that the cross country route, he had marked heavily with pencil, was clearly shown. Placing the folded map on the seat beside him he got out of the Chevy again and went into a restaurant. When he finally came out with a good meal under his belt, it was quite dark.

And with the darkness there came to him a couple of moments of tormenting indecision. Why not let well enough alone, and just keep on going as the flat-faced guy had so pointedly suggested? What was there to be gained, now, by a visit to High-Top? There was certainly no resemblance between the flat-faced guy and the photo of Craven that Stacey had shown him.

Okay, one of Craven's boys sent to check on him, maybe. Well, he'd satisfied flat face or the man certainly wouldn't have sent him on his way. So, don't be a nosey sap! It still wasn't any of his affair, really. Get going, and *keep* going!

Those and a hundred other arguments presented themselves to Johnny Cain. But even when lumped together they still weren't enough.

After all, he was a newspaper man, and murder had been done. He had also promised Stacey that he would at least give it a try. But perhaps more compelling than either of those truths was the fact that Johnny Cain had never before slunk away from a violent shoving around. And he wasn't beginning, now. So, he got back in the Chevy, started the engine checked the first part of the

penciled route, and drove away from the curb.

A little over an hour later his sense of dogged determination was at a low ebb. He was driving along a fairly good road that seemed to twist and turn endlessly through woods. He hadn't met a car, nor seen a single light, since he'd turned onto it some twenty minutes before. More important, though, he had not spotted the turn-off he should take according to the route he had penciled out on the map.

He was certain that he had passed it, and he was searching for a spot wide enough to turn around in, when suddenly a turnoff to the right showed up in the beam of his headlights. Speeding up he made the turn and started rolling down grade on a fairly narrow road. Seventy yards along the road turned. He made the turn, and then as his heart leaped up into his throat he slammed on the brakes. The brakes held and he came to a full stop no more than a dozen yards from a weather-beaten wooden barrier across the road on which the words ROAD CLOSED were just barely visible.

Another dozen yards beyond the wooden barrier was a deep rock studded ravine, and across it stretched a time-battered bridge, so rotted that it looked as though its own weight would carry it down into the ravine at any moment. Eyes popping and throat and mouth very dry Cain stared at what showed up in his headlights. Then he put the car in reverse and began to back out. As luck would have it there was a small bush choked opening in the trees to his right. He was able to back the car into the opening and make his turn head on out onto the road.

Retracing his path to the intersection, he turned and continued to retrace it in the direction from which he had originally come. And after a couple of miles he came upon the turn that somehow he had completely missed. Determination riding high again he turned into it, and in the matter of another five minutes he had swung onto the broad Range road and was driving along it toward Preston.

A mile almost to the tenth and he saw the lights of High-Top just a short distance ahead. Stacey had aptly described it as looking like a lighted Xmas tree at

night. It was all that and more. And as Cain drove closer he saw that the place was built something like a castle with a tower of color lights at each of the four corners. A four-car wide driveway led up to a huge parking space in front and along one side.

With butterflies beginning to fly around faster and faster in his stomach, Cain slowed down for the turn and then rolled the Chevvy up the driveway. He parked as near the open end of the driveway as possible, took the key out of the ignition, and got out and looked around. Several couples in evening dress were walking from parked cars up toward the wide, brilliantly lighted entrance to the place. And through that wide entrance came the soft sweet music of a darn good band.

TAKING his time, but keeping close to the double row of parked cars, Johnny strolled slowly forward. Constantly, though, his eyes swept each and every car he came to, just in case. A lot of them looked like that blue-black sedan, but none had marked or dented fenders. Nor did he expect to find any. He was pretty certain that all the cars in the parking space belonged to customers. And for that very reason he kept on easing down the side parking area toward a five or six-car garage he could see just in back of the main building.

It took him all of fifteen minutes to get around in back, for the reason that a customer or one of the employees suddenly appearing into view caused him to duck behind the nearest car. And when he finally had worked his way around back, his hopes didn't soar to any new high. All the doors of the garage were closed, and there wasn't a single light showing from inside. That, however, was because the garage didn't have any windows on the front side.

Hugging the dark shadow cast by a car for a moment, Cain stared hard at the garage almost as though in so doing he might suddenly see through to the inside. Finally he made his way toward the end farthest from the main building. There luck was with him. There was a small window at arms' length over his head, and light was shining through it.

[Turn page]

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For a moment Cain hesitated, then he stepped close and reached up with his hands. He was able to get a good hook with his fingers over the protruding window sill. But it was a whole lot more than that to pull his one hundred and sixty-five pounds up by only his fingers. He made it, though blood pounded in his head. He looked at eye level through the window to the inside.

At first he saw only four cars. Then he saw that one of them was a blue-black sedan. What's more, a couple of men in cover-alls were rubbing down the right front fender. There was still a big dent to be knocked out, and as Cain swept his eyes back he saw streaks of gray paint on the door.

That was all he saw, except one more thing. From around the other side of the car suddenly appeared a man in evening dress. He had wavy hair, and his ears stuck out a little like wing flaps. In that instant he glanced up. His eyes met Johnny's, and popped wide open. Even as Johnny let go and dropped, he saw the wavy haired man open his mouth to let out a yell.

Whether the yell ever came out, Cain never knew. The instant his feet touched ground he spun and started running. As he rounded the corner of the garage one of the doors was flung open and light flooded everything. Cain put on speed without bothering to look around. The echo of shouting hit his ear drums, but he was unable to make out any words, nor did he try.

Running as he had never run before he sped along the two rows of parked cars, and finally reached his own. He piled in, stuck the key in, and kicked the engine into life all in a continuance of the same motion. Gears clashed, and the rear wheels spun, as he snapped in the clutch. His Chevy shot forward like something from a gun. But even as he made the turn toward the driveway opening on the main road the head lights of a car streaking from the far end of the parking space caught him full in their glare.

Because of the sudden glare of light he almost didn't see the car that was in the act of swinging into the driveway from the main road. He missed it by inches and had no chance to make the

turn that would take him back toward Preston. He was forced to turn away from Preston, so he did and gave the Chevy's engine all that it could take. He had a good hundred-yard lead when glaring headlights turned out of the High-Top driveway, and came after him.

Foot jammed to the floorboards, Johnny Cain fervently blessed the fact that he had had a valve-and-ring job done before starting on his vacation journey to nowhere in particular. The Chevy was primed with pep and go, and as he tore along Range Road the glaring headlights behind did not draw up any closer.

AT LEAST they didn't draw any closer for the first half mile. But when the road suddenly became arrow straight cold fear started to rise up in Cain to grip him by the throat. The glaring headlights began to close up the gap, foot by foot and yard by yard, to make one of two things very plain to Johnny Cain. The driver of the car behind either wanted to get well away from High-Top before he tried anything, or else he had waited for straight string road before he made his speed bid.

Even as both realizations flashed through Johnny's brain he saw the turn off up ahead. It was the road he had taken to come onto Range Road. On impulse he slammed on the brakes for an instant and then made the turn on practically two wheels. Slamming the gas to the floor he shot forward again. But even as he raced around a turn he saw the glare of those other headlights in his rear view mirror again.

He lost them on the turn, and then they were there again. Even closer he thought. And fear seemed to freeze his pumping heart solid. He hunched low over the wheel and kept the gas pressed all the way to the floorboards. And then in almost nothing flat he came to the road he had got lost on. For a fleeting second he started to turn in the direction that would take him back to Mountain View. But flashing memory checked him. That plus the certainty that the car behind would overtake him long before he could reach Mountain View.

So, with a sob gagging in his throat he yanked the wheel to the right. The Chevy lurched crazily, and seemed on

the point of turning turtle. It came back on all four tires, however, and shot forward at maximum speed. All of the following seconds were as years to Cain. Fear hacked at his taut nerves with a razor blade edge. And then into the beams of his headlights came the closed road turn-off he had taken by mistake.

The instant he saw it he swung as far to the left as he could. The wild turn he had made back there had regained a little precious distance between him and the other car. An equal gain now was all that he prayed for. Now gripping the wheel with all his strength, and bracing his body, he breathed a fierce prayer, and lurched the Chevy around into the closed road.

Like a bolt of lightning he went down grade toward the turn. But even as he reached the turn he was jamming down on the foot brake, and hauling back on the hand brake. Rubber whined, and the Chevy swung crazily. He held it desperately with one hand, and as he skidded around the turn he pulled down hard on the wheel, and went plowing into the shrub choked opening in the trees. An instant later he had killed the engine, switched off his lights, and was flinging himself out of the car.

He crawled blindly through the darkness for several yards. Then he stopped as the whole surrounding woods seemed to light up. The thunder of a powerful car shook the trees. And then there was the ungodly screaming of brakes. A wild human yell hit the air, and almost instantly there was a terrific grinding crash of wood and metal. Finally the bumping rumble of distant thunder, and then silence and darkness.

Frozen on his hands and knees Johnny Cain couldn't move a muscle. Then as though an inner string had been parted all the strength flowed out of him, and he was sick as a dog. All of five minutes ticked away before he was able to force himself up on his feet and grope his way through the dark woods back to the Chevy.

When he reached it he was forced to lean against it a couple of moments while more strength returned. Then he unsnapped the glove compartment, took

[Turn page]



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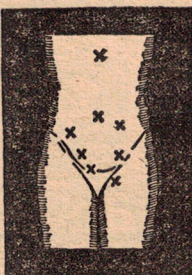
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out a flashlight, and pressing the button he turned and walked out onto the road and down to the lip of the ravine. . . .

TWO hours later Johnny called Stacey from a booth in Mountain View.

"This is Cain," he said when the publisher answered. "I've got another car accident for you. Take the first left past High-Top. Then the next right, and the next right. Take the last slow, and keep slow. There's a ravine with a Buick in it. Also Craven and a flat-faced guy. Both are dead from broken necks."

"How'd it happen?" Stacey shouted wildly.

"They were in a hurry," Cain replied. "And look, if you get out to High-Top fast, you can grab that murder sedan before they've fixed it. It was there, all right. Well, I guess that wraps things up for me."

"No, wait, Cain!" Stacey cried. "A couple of things. A check for you for a thousand. And a job on the Press. I can use a man like you, Cain. Permanent!"

Johnny pressed a hand to his aching head, and glanced out of the booth and through a window to a sign across the street that said, Mountain View Hotel.

"Drop the check in the mail to me at General Delivery, Mountain View," he said. "I'll pick it up in the morning. And thanks for the job offer, but— Well, I'm just passing through on vacation, and I've still got itchy feet. Thanks just the same."

"Just as you say, Cain," Stacey sighed after a long pause. "I'll mail the check now. But, remember, if and when you go broke, just send me a wire, collect, see?"

"Okay, sure, if and when I go broke," Johnny Cain said, and hung up.

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HEADQUARTERS

(Continued from page 9)

double entendre intended. She has practically no alibi.

She claims to have called up her husband at 7:30 but he did not answer. The M.E. claims he was shot about 7:15. She admits the gun was hers and that Mr. Horton "did not want her to have it around." She doesn't know where it is now. Strangest of all, in the office where the investment tycoon met his end, the door was locked from the inside.

Just because the case against the ex-chorine is so believably strong, Clift decides to believe every word of her story. The body was discovered by old man Gregg, faithful employee, who lives alone with his housekeeper, Martha Sims. As for the mystery of the locked door of the office—that is easily explained. There was a private elevator, leading directly into the office. Outside of Horton himself, only two people had a key—Gregg and Lona. Still, Clift is confident it wasn't Lona, who, in spite of all outward appearances, really loved her husband in a sort of December-and-May romance.

Learn how wisecracking Cliff Clift, he of the alliterative name and the delightful sense of humor, solves this knotty crime in a way that you'll never guess!

Both of next issue's are way off the beaten track. We know you will like them. There will also be our usual quota of top-flight mystery and detective stories to round out a humdinger of an issue you're sure to enjoy.

OUR MAIL BOX

WELL, well, well—of all the hundreds of letters we've received, we've never before received the complaint that we treat our correspondents "quite shabbily." Why—because we don't print ALL the letters we receive? If we did, friends, our issue would contain nothing but your letters. That wouldn't be particularly interesting, would it? There would be no room for the stories. Furthermore we are accused of discriminating against Canadian readers. To quote in part from a certain letter:

Between my friends and I we have hundreds of THRILLING publications on hand, quite a monu-

[Turn page]

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ment to our faith in your editors. Yet none of us can remember seeing a letter published from a Canadian—

We think the writer of that epistle is somewhat in error. All we have to do is to go through our files and mention the names of several of our correspondents that we have published letters from. Not even going back too far, we find published letters from Arthur D. Hall of Great Village, Nova Scotia, Ron J. McCarthy of the Provincial Police in the same province and Mr. William Draper of Toronto, to mention a few.

We would certainly like to print all the rest of this gentleman's letter as it is interesting and well written. The usual situation prevails however—we just haven't the space. But here's as much more of it as we deem would interest our readers:

We like detective fiction however, but not as much as we did some years ago. To-day the authors are cruelly hard boiled. Of course, who or what isn't nowadays? This trend may have gained respect for the law but not for anyone else. The other laws have been forgotten, such as being human.

The law does a fine job because it has to face life in the raw. We can preach till doomsday that we can't escape justice, yet crime will always exist. It has become more real than ever. The police and John Doe have to face the law of reality.

The war was hard-boiled enough. We fought, died and were maimed to abolish that. Instead we came back to find it had become a theme of living. We cannot appreciate this hard-boiled presentation in detective novels.—John R. Ednie, Toronto, Ont., Canada.

We try very hard to please everybody, Mr. Ednie—but as you see, it is rather difficult. Your point is well taken however—perhaps it was the war that was responsible for this "hard boiled" wave you describe. Thanks, anyway, for an interesting letter. Be sure and let us hear from you again.

Make room for a compliment from a reader:

SING A SONG OF MURDER, by G. T. Fleming-Roberts, in a recent issue, was the finest mystery story of its type I ever read. With yarns like this one, **THRILLING DETECTIVE** takes its place on top of the heap. It held me enthralled and enchanted from start to finish.—William Overton, Boston, Mass.

Another voice in the chorus of praise:

Your December issue, featuring the G. T. Fleming-Roberts yarn, was tops. Give us more stories like it.—J. T. Rantlong, Houston, Texas.

Thanks, folks. The two letters quoted from above are typical of dozens received about the same story. We knew it was a great story when we printed it, and we're happy at this hearty confirmation of our belief. We're happy, too, to receive notes like the following:

THRILLING DETECTIVE is my favorite of all magazines. I can't wait for each issue to come out and read every word every issue. Keep up the good work and I will always be a satisfied reader.—Mrs. Katherine Lys, New Haven, Ct.

Now here's a brickbat—this time a very real one and from a very young lady:

How could you miss this very open error in your April publication of **THRILLING DETECTIVE**? Here it is, cut from page 84 and 85 directly opposite from each other. I do believe I could even do better and I am only twelve.

—Martin Rawley was sprawled back in a chair, dead from a bullet in his heart.

—Death was caused by a bullet, apparently a twenty-two lodging in the brain of the deceased," said the doctor. "Rawling must have died instantly."—Virginia Englast, Croton, N. J.

Good for you, Virginia! Grandma, what big eyes you have! No matter how hard we try, those things crop up every now and then. It is most reprehensible and we have no defense. As Dempsey said after his first fight with Tunney—we "forgot to duck." But as for doing "better yourself" Virginia—let's take a look. You've given us the name of the magazine, the date and the page. What, however, is the name of the story? You see—you make mistakes too! Anyway, we appreciate your interest and thank you very much.

Virginia's beef, by the way, was written on a postal card. See how much you can say on a card! So keep 'em streaming along—letters, cards, differences of opinion, points of view. Be it a knock or a boost, we'll run it if we think it'll interest our readers.

Send all communications to The Editor, **THRILLING DETECTIVE**, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Let's get together again next issue—and above all, happy reading to everybody!

—THE EDITOR.

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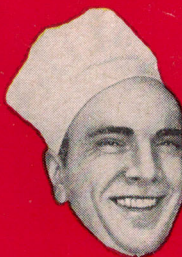
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