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MURDER STEALS THE SCENE

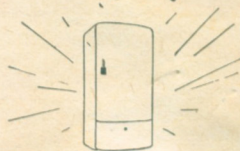
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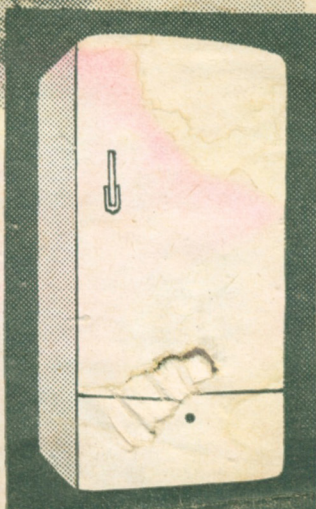
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THRILLING DETECTIVE

Vol. LXVI, No 2

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

August, 1950

A Nick Ransom Novelet

MURDER STEALS THE SCENE

By ROBERT LESLIE BELLEM



When baby movie mogul Norma Delwyn frolics to the tune of a pair of unredeemable murders, Hollywood's private pry takes a whirl at unscrambling her bad-egg omelet! 9

Two Other Complete Novelets

THE SILENT PASSENGER..... Benton Braden 34

Jeff Baxter might have guessed murder came with this odd bargain!

WALKER IN THE SHADOWS..... Eleanor Hammond 54

The Carter mansion held a secret that changed nightmares to reality

A Detective Novel Classic

QUEST FOR A KILLER..... Norman A. Daniels 83

An encore of a short mystery novel in which Steve Ashely inherits his aunt's estate—and four fresh murders!

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His name was Smith—but there was nothing commonplace about his courage

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Taking risks was all in the day's work for Detective Hugh Manning

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The girl had a date, and kept it with—death!

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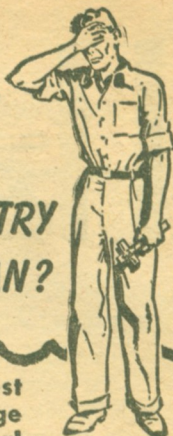
A department where readers, writers and the editor meet

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Headquarters

FOLKS, step up and meet Don Marko—solid, rugged and prematurely gray-haired Don Marko, Chief of Store Protection in Fifth Avenue's Pride, Nimblett's, an emporium of reputation and tradition. Don Marko comes to us for the first time in **THE FRIGHTENED FACES**, a novelet by Stewart Sterling featured in the next issue!

The story opens with a huge truck bearing the revered name of Nimblett's rolling along the shore of Long Island Sound. The regular driver, nicely trussed, is ordered out by a rough voice. A revolver is waved in his face. Not much later, there is a terrific splash as the huge truck slides into muddy water. . . .

We meet Don Marko as he answers the phone. It is his confidential assistant, Alice Stein, in charge of the undercover operatives on the main floor of the department store. Alice explains that she has been watching a frightened girl who is helping herself to handfuls of cheap costume jewelry. A kleptomaniac, Marko suggests, but Alice explains that the girl lacks the effrontery of those poor creatures who steal for the thrill of it. More likely an amateur or some frustrated lass from the country, trying to raise her room rent.

The Mystery Voice

There is one thing that neither Marko nor Alice can understand when they finally bring the girl into the store detective's office. Her attitude is not only defiant—it is downright brazen. She admits that she is shoplifting and almost begs to be arrested. At the same time, she acts with the vacant stare and faraway manner of a seleepwalker. She seems almost like a zombie—an automaton, with

someone else pulling the strings.

The frightened girl gives her name as Betty Wheeler, which is all too palpably assumed. Even while they are questioning her, a mysterious voice comes over the phone telling them her name is Georgia, but refusing to add her last name. The request is to let her go and any expenses incurred will be taken care of. The girl apparently recognizes the voice coming over the wire. With an animal-like cry, she swoons, while from her shoulders there slips a silver-fox furpiece. Alice is sure it came from Nimblett's own exclusive stock.

From the girl's handbag Marko extracts a shoe-check on a place known merely as Amadeo's but with the word "Cuban" scribbled on the back. He also finds a match-folder advertising the Chick Inn. From these clues he gathers that the girl frequents the Greenlace section of Jamaica. This seems more than a coincidence as one of his most trusted employees, Sam Carr, also lives there.

Wheels Within Wheels

Don Marko is still further flabbergasted when he learns that the girl Georgia is Carr's sister. Wheels within wheels—plot and counterplot!

On a secret visit to Sam's house, Marko is greeted by a jimmied window, a floor covered with the flamboyant french-gray paper with the cerise stripe made famous by the Nimblett store. He is also greeted with a terrific sock in the head and a glimpse of a hideous, grinning face seen in a mirror.

Of course we know by now that all this is tied up with the wrecked truck and the trussed driver, mentioned in the opening of this preamble. The truck was driven by

Lyle Burger hitherto trusted employee and contained, among other valuables, some \$75,000 in sables, much of it earmarked for an Eastern potentate.

In **THE FRIGHTENED FACES** we will also meet Stella Burger, the defunct driver's wife, who accuses him of running around clandestinely with Georgia Carr. That is scarcely to be believed, however, as most people knew of the affair Georgia has with the mysterious "Freddie." There is Jacques, rival furrier. There is Zilberkiet, head of the fur department at Nimblett's. Of course they could ask Sam Carr a lot of things—only they find his body, too!

That just gives you an inkling of the enthralling complications in this stirring tale. It's going to have you on tenterhooks!

We know you are going to like the honest-and-above-board, sincere and clever "store" detective, Don Marko. You'll find him not only a new kind of private eye, but a mighty exciting one besides!

Facing the Music

Our co-featured novelet next issue is a brilliant mystery entitled **KILL ME NEVER** and written by Dean Owen.

This gripping story is narrated by Jim Foraway, just out of San Quentin, who used to push a typewriter ribbon for the old *Globe*. He'd been one of that newspaper's best sports columnists.

Detective Lieutenant Dave Hennick, who had seen to it that Foraway had been properly incarcerated, now wanted to know why the ex-con hadn't got off at L.A. and not here at Glendale, where our story opens. Foraway knew only too well that the gravel-voiced policeman was just waiting for the day when he could send him back.

Hennick grudgingly assured Foraway that he wouldn't be bothered as long as he obeyed the terms of his parole. Fine homecoming and a fine greeting, especially from the brother of glamorous Myra, Jim Foraway's ex-wife!

Anybody who didn't remember Jim Foraway could easily review the whole case by looking up the newspaper morgue and reviewing the headlines. "Reporter Absconds with Charity Funds" for the opener, followed by "Foraway Indicted" and "Foraway Gets Fifteen Years." The banners went on

(Continued on page 126)

Dave Saves the Day

Puts "NEW LIFE" in his trusty Ford!



ON SUNDAY THE GANG IS GOING UP TO SWAN LAKE. WHY DON'T WE GO ANY PLACE ANY MORE?

CAN'T HELP IT, DEAR. WHEN A FORD HAS AS MANY MILES AND YEARS ON IT AS OURS HAS, IT NEEDS REPOWERING



I FIGURE THERE'S NO SENSE IN NOT GETTING THE BEST—THAT'S WHY I CAME HERE TO GET AN AUTHORIZED RECONDITIONED ENGINE FOR MY FORD

YOU'RE RIGHT! IT'S RISKY NOT GETTING THE GENUINE ARTICLE. IT'S LOW-PRICED AND WE CAN WORK OUT AN EASY PAYMENT PLAN FOR YOU

DAVE, IT RUNS LIKE A NEW CAR! WE'LL BE UP AT SWAN LAKE BY THE TIME THE REST OF THE GANG GETS THERE!



YOU SAID IT, HONEY! AND NOW OUR CAR WILL LAST US FOR MANY MORE THOUSANDS OF MILES

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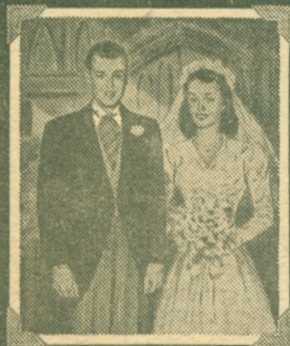
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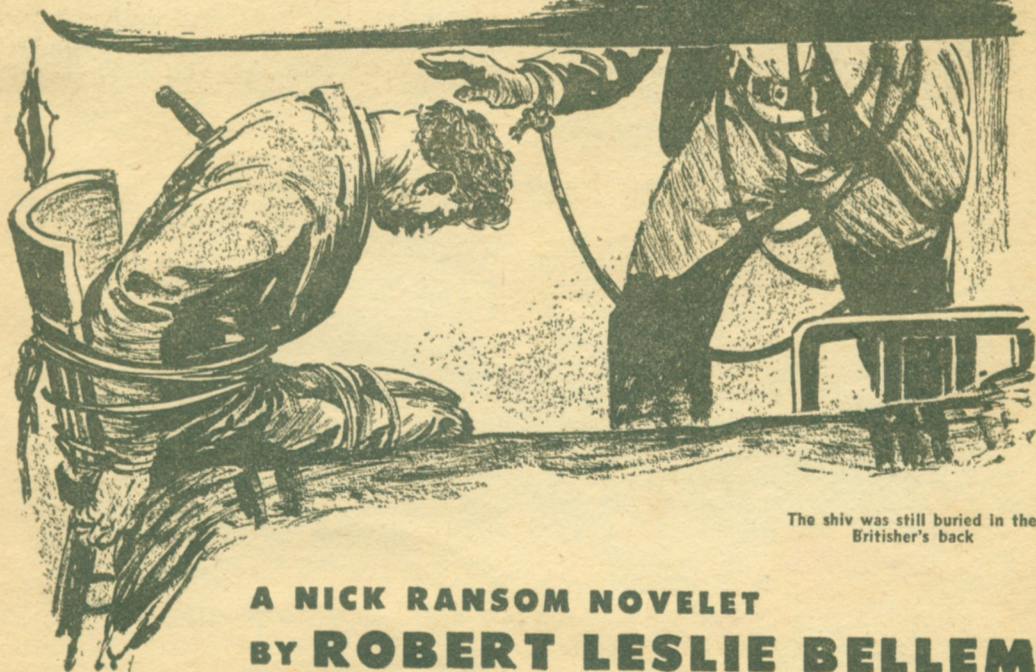
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MURDER STEALS THE SCENE

CHAPTER I

FORGERY'S FOIL

DRIVING toward a sunset that stained the sky as red as a danger flag, I shivered to the first chill hint of October dampness blowing in saltily from the Pacific. Later, with nightfall, fog would ride the air like the ghosts of drowned sailors; and when I caught myself harboring thoughts like that I decided I'd been seeing too many horror movies recently. My nerves were acting up and my mind was morbid and I wished I had remembered to bring along a bottle of



The shiv was still buried in the Britisher's back

**A NICK RANSOM NOVELET
BY ROBERT LESLIE BELLEM**

When baby movie mogul Norma Delwyn frolics to the tune of a pair of unredeemable murders, a private pry unscrambles her bad-egg omelet!

Nick Ransom Sings a Sizzling Money-Crusted

Scotch in my jalopy's glove compartment.

But then maybe my unknown client wouldn't like a private pry wearing booze on his breath. She might think I was strictly a "B" picture shamus; hesitate to hire me. This I didn't want to happen; her voice on the phone had sounded so appetizing I yearned to get better acquainted with her.

I wheeled up the long westward grade, topped the wooded crest and tooled down the other side. Dead ahead, a hawk with extended claws and back-swept wings swooped like a dive bomber; pounced on something in the underbrush. There was an explosive puff of dust, a flurry of gray fur; then the hawk took off with his talons full of fresh meat for supper. Just like Hollywood, I reflected. Stick your neck out and blooie, you're a gone rabbit.

The road curled now through a narrow winding canyon brilliant with wild pyracantha, the berry-clusters so scarlet they looked as if they'd been dipped in fresh blood. More gore seemed to have been spilled on the occasional clumps of English holly, the red droplets glistening against silver-bordered leaves. Then, abruptly, the ribbon of blacktop looped to the left around a rocky promontory; disgorged me onto a flat shelf of land high above the ocean. I quit thinking about blood and violence; drew in my breath at the gorgeous grounds in front of me.

Originally the high flat shelf had been just a barren and desolate ledge, but money had widened it to a plateau by chewing pieces off the mountain with steam shovels, leveling the terrain with graders and scrapers. More money had installed a stately row of fully-grown palm trees along the outer edge; had landscaped every inch of ground with lawns like a carpet of powdered emeralds, terraced gardens as gaudy as a Technicolor travelogue.

And finally a fortune the size of the national debt had erected the Hotel Vista del Sol-Mar. Loosely translated, this monicker meant that for fifty bucks

a day—and up—you could glom an exclusive gander at the sun and sea. Meals extra.

The Vista del Sol-Mar was a far cry from city hotels. It had a main building, but this housed merely the lounge, cafe, cocktail bar and administration offices. The guest quarters proper consisted of modernistic glass-and-redwood cottages arranged in a crescent around a swimming pool shaped like a diseased kidney. The pool's tiles were a deep crimson, making the water look as if somebody had been stabbed in it; you got the impression you could use it for a transfusion. It gave me the fantods.

I rolled through a glittering chromium archway, dropped anchor on the parking lot. The attendant was a tall, snappy punk dressed in a monkey-suit festooned with about seven pounds of gold braid. He strolled over and sneered at my coupe because it wasn't a Cadillac, but I didn't mind; he probably sneered at Cadillacs too unless they had solid platinum fenders and uranium hubcaps. I left the motor running, piled out and said, "Okay, Admiral, she's all yours."

"You're much too good to me," he said, and added, "Sir," as a deliberately insolent afterthought. "Are you sure you don't want it back or are you always this generous with the hired help?"

I CHUCKLED, surveyed his resplendent livery, reached forth as if to flick a fleck of lint off his left epaulette. Instead I made a vise of my thumb and forefinger, tightened down on his gullet before he could guess my intention and back away.

"A little more respect for your elders, bub," I said. "Unless you'd like me to extract a fifth of cider from your Adam's apple." I squeezed to let him know I could do it.

"Hey—aww-wwk!" He tried to emit a yodel but I had his larynx over a barrel. "Glarg glam ig—!" His knee started to come up at my groin but I outsmarted him, stepped on his toes. "Gleekus glie, gll-owtch!"

I let him go; dusted my hands. "Get-

Blonde for Plenty Do-Re-Mi in a Red-Hot Case!

ting fresh with Nick Ransom is like manicuring your nails on a buzz saw, sonny. Very hazardous indeed. Eleven times out of ten you get hurt. Next time I'll bust your rank from admiral to seaman second class."

"Nick Ransom?" his glims widened.



NICK RANSOM

"The private dick who used to be a Hollywood stunt man?" He managed to rub his throat and fawn on me at the same time. "Are you the famous Nick Ransom?"

"I could show you my credentials if you were important enough. You're not, though, so I won't bother. And quit with the flattery, it feeds my egotism too many vitamins." I dredged a gasper out of my pocket, smiled as he almost broke his wrist scratching a match to light it for me. "Which way is Cottage del Paramount? If there is any such implausibly-named wigwam," I added dubiously.

He was all eager beaver, now. "Oh, yes sir. There is. All our guest bungalows are named for studios, sir. I'll show you the way, sir." He led me past swanky cottages honoring M-G-M and Universal-International, Columbia and RKO, 20th Century Fox and Eagle-Lion. There were even two smaller igloos vaguely resembling stables, labeled Republic and Monogram; then, at the seaward end of the crescent, we came to Casa del Paramount.

"Clever idea sir, don't you think, sir?" the admiral asked me in prideful accents, as if he owned the layout personally.

I said, "Yeah, but what ever became of Warner Brothers?" Then I slipped him a nickel tip. "Buy yourself a pint of brass polish for your buttons, buster, and get lost. I can make it the rest of the way on my own." He scrambled, whereupon I barged to the portal of Casa del Paramount; gave it a discreet knuckle-dusting.

Nothing happened.

I bunted the woodwork a trifle harder. This time the door was pulled open about an inch and a half, which was half an inch more than the space between the narrow-set female eyes that peered suspiciously out at me. The eyes were pale metallic gray flanking a smeller like a tomahawk, and they held the welcoming expression of two ball bearings. Maybe they didn't like my appearance, which made us even; I didn't like theirs either.

There was a mouth under the eyes and the nose. I've seen kissers less predatory on stuffed sharks in a museum. The thin-lipped orifice pushed out words as gritty as the bottom of a parrot cage. "What do you want?"

"Depends on what you've got," I said. "You phoned for a snoop, namely, me. Nick Ransom is the handle."

"Oh." There was a pause. "You're here sooner than we expected. You'll have to wait a few minutes." The door closed in my face and I heard the lock click with steely impoliteness. Inside the stash, muffled footfalls rapidly receded.

Mentally I added fifty hermans extra to the retainer I intended to charge; in

my book the only way to match rudeness is with avarice. I torched another gasper, stared out across the landscaped grounds to where the vanished sun had left its reddened memory on the horizon.

There was no blueness to the Pacific now; it had turned as cold and gray as Shark-Mouth's eyes. Beyond the distant blurry smudge that was Catalina Island a fog bank was forming. I hoped it would hurry up and blow landward; maybe it would help cool my rising temper.

TO MY left, an angular dame in maid's uniform blipped toward the swimming pool carrying a white terry-cloth robe. She had all the feminine curves of a bed slat and her profile was so sharp you could have chopped wood with it. I recognized her as Shark-Mouth; she must have left the the bungalow by the back door. Now she hurried to the edge of the red-tinted pool, waved the robe at somebody in the water and said something I couldn't overhear.

Responding, a goddess emerged from the pink drink—a quail so captivating I nearly swallowed my coffin nail, ashes and all. She had a fitted rubber bathing cap concealing her tresses so that you couldn't tell whether she was a blonde or brunette, but her figure was gorgeous enough to make a marble gladiator whistle like a piccolo with hiccups.

For a fleeting instant I had the flabbergasted fancy she'd either neglected to wear a bathing suit or had lost it cavorting in the moisture; then I realized my peepers were playing tricks on me because of the thickening dusk—or maybe I was a willing victim of wishful thinking.

Actually the chick was embellished in flesh-colored silk swim togs, but they were as brief as the disappearing twilight—scanty, skin-tight trunks and a halter cut to precise specifications, so that an inch more cloth would be regrettable surplus and an inch less would incite a riot.

"Yipe!" I whispered as I goggled at her lyric hips, her slender waist and her sundry other points of interest. I'm no more impressionable than the next guy, but for once in my dissipated career I was lamping a lassie who gave me the numbed sensation of having been hit

on the head with a loaded sandbag.

With fervent admiration I reflected that if this cutie turned out to be my anonymous client I would gladly forgive her servant's surliness and cancel the extra fifty bucks I had planned on adding to my fee. I watched her slide gracefully into the robe and scamper around back of the Casa del Paramount with Shark-Mouth trailing by three lengths. Then, presently, the front door swung open to admit me and the maid rasped, "All right, we're ready for you," in a voice like rubbing false teeth along a nutmeg grater.

"Thanks," I said, and barged eagerly over the threshold. Then I froze. "Hey, what the—"

The muffin in the white terry-cloth robe stood across the room drawing a bead on me with a silver-filigreed .25 automatic that appeared capable of strewing my giblets plumb to Pomona. "Surprise!" she greeted me sardonically. "Stand still, heel. This afternoon I trapped your partner. Now I've trapped you. And unless you return that footage you stole from me, you'll both be dead forgers."

CHAPTER II

DICK IN DUTCH



THREE sides of the living room in the Casa del Paramount were paneled in combed blondwood; the fourth was of pale blue glass commanding an unparalleled view of the Pacific, though battened down now by means of a mammoth chrome-plated Venetian blind with slats the length of flagpoles. The carpeting was blue to complement the picture window, and the furnishings were strictly out of a studio set dresser's disordered imagination.

There were four floor lamps shaped to resemble cameras on tripods; other lamps extended from the walls on fixtures like microphone booms, the lights being camouflaged as microphones. In front of a fireplace big enough to barbecue an elk stood a davenport the dimensions of a casting couch, while the scattered chairs looked like everything



The muffin drew a bead on
me with a silver-filigreed
.25 automatic

except objects to perch on.

One was a barrel spotlight quarter-cut and cushioned; another rode on tracks like the saddle of a camera dolly while a third was patterned of two bull fiddles with interlaced saxophones forming the seat. All the joint needed to send you screaming for a psychiatrist was one of Salvador Dali's gelatinous pocket watches melting over the edge of a table in the middle of the room. The table was there but the watch was absent, thus preserving a small segment of your sanity.

I took dizzy note of all this dopey decor as I first ankled into the drop, and if my mind hadn't been on more important matters I'd probably have fallen flat on my mush in a drunken stupor. But with the cutie aiming a gat at me, the background scarcely registered.

Catching a close-up of her, I realized she was even more dazzling than she'd seemed from a distance. She had removed the bathing cap, disclosing tawny hair cropped short in a feathery bob as impromptu as a tossed salad, as unconventionally beautiful as spilled gold. Her complexion was like sunlight on ripe peaches and her mouth was made exclusively for kissing purposes; there was a dimple in her forthright little chin and a slight tip-tilt to her nose.

Her eyes were an amethystine purple reminding you of violets shyly hiding behind improbably long, curling lashes; but there was nothing shy about that roscoe in her fist. It was firmly pointed at my tripes, businessless and steady, and its muzzle looked bigger than the Third Street tunnel in downtown L. A.

"Wh-wha—hunh?" I strangled.

She repeated frostily, "I want that footage you stole and the note you forged. This is one time your crookedness isn't going to pay off, Mr. Gumshoe Ransom."

"Now just a condemned minute, sister," I said testily. "Let's back up and start over; your dialogue doesn't make sense. An hour ago you phoned me at my office in Hollywood, begged me to spur myself out here to this seaside shebang for an important conference, a matter of life or death—"

"Your death if you insist on being stubborn."

Ignoring that, I went on, "You wouldn't tell me your name but you lured me with the promise of a fat fee if I handled a certain case for you. It's a forty-five minute drive but I smashed eleven speed laws rolling here in half an hour flat. Now you've got the unmitigated brass to pull a heater on me, demand the delivery of something I never heard of. What's all this sheep-dip about forgeries and stolen footage? I don't get it."

"You've had it," she curled a lip. "Now you're going to give it back or take the consequences."

"Coffin consequences," Shark-Mouth put in her oar.

I snarled, "You keep out of this." Then, to the blonde, "Your popgun doesn't intimidate me one lousy bit, Tutz. I eat little roscoes like that every morning for breakfast. Put it away before it buys a spanking. In Technicolor."

"Brave, aren't you? So was your partner—until the chips were down. He's singing a different tune now."

"Will you cut it out?" I said. "I haven't got a partner. Even in my stunting days as president of Risks Incorporated I was sole owner of the business—and I've kept it that way since I switched to snooper. Quit with the crazy talk."

She studied me the way you'd inspect something dredged out of a cesspool. Then she spoke to the shark-mouthed maid. "Annie, go bring those ropes from the car."

"Yes, Miss Norma." The servant hypered to the door, hesitated there. "Don't let him get the jump on you while I'm gone." She lammed, leaving me alone with the blonde doll; which was a break for me and tough luck for the blonde.

I WAITED a brief instant, then made my play. The massive couch was to my right and I dived at it in a sidewise cartwheel motion—the one direction the jane didn't anticipate, wasn't prepared for. It caught her flatfooted and she gasped with surprise, started to cry out an indignant command for me to stand still or get plugged. Before she could utter a sound, I scooped a couch cushion; hurled it.

The cushion hit her gun hand, deflected the gat itself. While she was trying to recover from this unexpected sally I slammed myself at her in a flying tackle, caught her at the knees and floored her. The impact sent the automatic sailing from her fist into a corner; popped her terry-cloth robe wide open and rucked it south off her creamy shoulders as far as the white silk Bikini halter.

A wail welled to her parted lips; turned to a muffled moan as my tonnage crushed her to the carpet. Considering that I'm six feet plus and weigh one-ninety, I did a pretty good job of crushing.

She squirmed, struggled, but I pinned her down and mashed her. "You're through, hon," I growled in my menacing voice, the one I use for frightening little children. "You may as well give up and say Uncle. And while you're saying Uncle, let's hear the rest of the scenario." I tightened my gasp on her. "Slip me the pitch, pet. Tell me about the forgery and the stolen footage; you've got my curiosity in a swivet."

She said bitterly, "You know as m-much as I do. More. Let me g-go, you're hurting me."

There was a naughtily enticing aura of fragrance clinging to her, something subtle and languorous and expensive, probably imported from France at five hundred clackers a drop. It tickled my smeller, charged me with tingles to match the high-voltage jolt her proximity gave me. The more she tried to unlatch herself from me the harder I held her; you don't often get a chance to mix business with pleasure and I made the most of my opportunity.

By the same token, I kept one wary glim glued on the door; if the shark-mouthed Annie barged in I wanted to be on guard against ambush. Meanwhile I kept squeezing my dainty captive, urging some conversation out of her. "Come on, sugar, tell papa what's behind this hassle. We'll start with your name. I heard your maid call you Miss Norma. Norma what?"

She panted, "Delwyn—as if y-you didn't know."

"Norma Delwyn? Well, for pipe's sake!" I said as her monicker registered

like a spotlight cutting through darkness. This Delwyn doll was the daughter of the late James Bannion Delwyn, one of Hollywood's truly great picture pioneers, a guy who had commenced his career back in the days when a two-reeler was an epic feature. By sheer genius he'd graduated from shoestring status on Poverty Row to ownership of his own independent studio, Del-Lux Pix.

At his death a few months ago he had left the lot to his two kids—Norma and her older brother Wally. But it was Norma who took charge and who now ran the outfit, Wally being a confirmed tosspot who was generally too plastered to know his neck from third bass.

"So you're Norma Delwyn!" I said. "The big wheel of Del-Lux—the cookie who's kept her studio solvent in spite of folks saying you were too young and beautiful to have brains."

"Please—y-you're hurting me!"

I SAID, "No wonder you keep yakking about stolen footage. You must mean a spool of film from one of your productions. Now we're getting somewhere. Next, let's discuss the forgery angle, huh?"

"Stop p-pretending to be innocent!" she flared. "What is there to d-discuss? You know the trick you pulled, you—you thief!" An angry glint came into her amethystine peepers, somewhat moistened by incipient tears. "Let m-me up! It's b-bad enough that you and your partner are trying to b-bankrupt my studio, but do you have to m-maul me, too?"

"Come, come now," I said, relaxing the pressure a trifle. "In case you didn't hear me when I mentioned it before, I haven't got a partner—and I'm neither a forger nor a thief. Once you get that through your cute little noggin maybe we can be friends. I'd like us to be friends," I added earnestly.

Her struggles suddenly subsided. She gave me a tremulous smile. "We could be friends—if only you were honest with me."

"Shucks, sugar, I've been leveling with you right along," I responded piously. "It hasn't won me any prizes, though."

Her voice took on a sultry timbre.

"Would you call—this—a prize?" she murmured. Then, abruptly, she twined her arms about me and clung like wet spaghetti; pasted her lips to mine and dished me a kiss that scorched all the way to my rubber heels.

The unexpected maneuver startled me, made me forget to keep my guard up. For a blissful moment my entire attention was on the delectable tomato melting in my embrace, warm and ardent and full of fervor. Her lipstick tasted like nectar and ambrosia, her fingers dug into my back and her tawny tresses trailed across my glimmers as she nestled her cheek on my shirt-front. Sparks danced through me, I began to run a fever, and live steam spurted out of my ears.

Then she said, "Hit him, Annie!"

Too late, I realized I'd been suckered; too late I knew Shark-Mouth had skulked silently back into the stash. I tried to break away from the Delwyn cupcake so I could repel boarders, but she stuck to me like Scotch tape; impeded my movements and loused up my defenses. Her feminine contours flattened against me as she repeated, "Annie—hit him!"

Annie obeyed orders, clouted me on the conk with the proverbial blunt instrument; in this instance a bronze book-end. I folded up like a collapsed concertina, and a stunned numbness spread through my framework. I wasn't completely out, but I was paralyzed from the scalp down; couldn't move a muscle. This gave Annie her chance to truss me with loops of clothesline—a job she handled very deftly indeed. Within two minutes she had me hogtied.

And before another hour had passed I was cooped up in company with a corpse.

CHAPTER III

DEATH SET



MY BELFRY ached like an abscess but that was nothing new; in the ferret racket you expect your share of lumps. To be a successful dick you need a skull like granite; or, putting it in plainer terms, a private pry must have rocks

in his head. He must have or he'd take up some other line of work—something less risky, like striking matches in a dynamite factory or preaching capitalism in the Kremlin.

Okay, so I was a private eye with a knob on my dome as big as a postman's bunion where Annie had flailed me. But I was durable; therefore I was alive. A little cloudy in the thinking department, maybe, but definitely alive. My headache had diminished from its initial intensity to the soothing rhythm of a tomtom; presently my paralysis would pass, I would free myself of my fetters and be practically a new man.

I hoped the new man would be an improvement over the old one; I was a trifle dissatisfied with the current model Ransom. He had turned out to be a fairly feeble specimen, I reflected dourly. I could hardly wait to trade him in. For sale, one slightly used detective, needs overhauling.

I looked foggily at Pat Freecroft, who was sharing my captivity. "Want to make me an offer, Pat?"

"My word!" he said blinking. "I didn't realize you were conscious, old boy. Er, ah, listen, Nick, there's something I'd like to explain before you jump to conclu—"

"I couldn't jump if I wanted to," I cut in solemnly. "I'm not only tied up in these confounded ropes but I'm paralyzed, due to circumstances beyond my control; to wit, a minor concussion. Some sympathy, please."

He grunted, sighed.

"Oh come now," I said. "You can feel sorrier for me than that. Put some feeling in it."

He just stared at me, glassily. Like a wax dummy. Or like a corpse. Disinterested.

"All right," I thought, "be calloused to my troubles. But don't come whining to me for a loan the next time you're broke. You'll fast-talk no more dough out of me, you Piccadilly creep. The day will come when you need a pal to save you from eviction out of that rat-hole hotel room you infest, and I'll laugh at you. I'll tell you to go climb a darned needle."

Gluing the resentful glower on him, I remember back to when I'd been a

stunt expert and this very Pat Freecroft had braced me for a job. He'd been a lean, stringy, straw-haired remittance man from London, a languid bozo with a monocle and an adenoidal Oxford accent thick enough to slice like cheese. His semi-annual check hadn't come and he wanted work, anything to turn a fast buck. He would wrestle a bear, crawl across an acre of rattlesnakes, set fire to himself and leap off a mountain or even, if necessary, clean cuspidors.

There was something amiably engaging about the guy and I found a few spots for him in cinema thrill sequences. Later, when I opened my detective agency, I continued tossing him stray crumbs such as shadowing or escort-and-bodyguard assignments too dull for me to handle myself. If broke he would tackle anything—waxing cars, dish-washing, baby sitting, walking dogs for dowagers, whatever he could find that would win him a little loot. And when everything else failed he would bite me for ten or twenty, though he often forget to pay it back.

But things would be different from now on. Here I was with my noggin fractured and he merely stared at me like a dead man. Just for that I wouldn't tell him how it had happened. Stew him. I'd keep the lurid details to myself and he would miss hearing the dizziest plot since the Perils of Pauline.

I let my thoughts drift hazily back an hour in time, miles in distance. In retrospect I was again at the Hotel del Sol-Mar; I was stretched out on the floor of the Casa del Paramount where the shark-mouthed Annie had bashed

me, hogtied me and shoved a gag in my yapper. Like a sound-track playback, in my mind's ear there was the memory of Norma Delwyn's worried voice.

"... Are you s-sure you didn't hit him t-too hard, Annie? He's so still, so inert!"

"He's breathing, isn't he?" the maid sniffed cynically through her tomahawk beezers. "And if he's breathing, he's okay. After the way he tried to make love to you I should think you wouldn't care whether he lives or dies."

"But he didn't make love to me, Annie. I made love to him, so he wouldn't notice you sneaking up on him." The blonde doll leaned over me, her seductive fragrance seeping into my torpor. "Help me move him, Annie."

I was too heavy for them. They tried to lift me, carry me toward the back door.

They threw snake-eyes.

Annie puffed, "Look, Miss Norma, maybe you'd better telephone your brother to hurry down here and lend a hand."

"No, he's guarding that studio set and he mustn't leave until we take Ransom there for a showdown." The tawny-haired muffin hesitated. Then, "I've got it! We'll ask Cecil to help us. You know, the parking lot attendant."

"That boy? But—"

"He's movie crazy; he'd do anything for a break in pictures." The Delwyn wren's voice was excited now. "I'll offer him a screen test, a chance at a bit role in our next Del-Lux production. Hurry, Annie, go bring him!"

[Turn page]

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SHORTLY Cecil was there. Cecil, admiral of the hotel's jalopy harbor; the parking punk with the gold braid and the vulnerable Adam's apple. "You're not ribbing me, Miss Delwyn? You really mean Ransom is a crook?" He sounded as disillusioned as a kid catching Santa Claus butchering his reindeer for Christmas dinner.

The blonde cookie sighed. "I know it's hard to believe. It's true, though. Ransom and his partner forged my brother's name to a promissory note for a hundred thousand dollars; a note with a sort of mortgage clause, a lien on our studio's latest picture, stipulating that the final reel of master negative was to be collateral against the alleged debt." "Jeepers!" Cecil's tone was awed.

Norma Delwyn went on. "Using the forgery, they got the spool of footage from the processing lab that does our developing. Now they won't give it back unless we pay the face value of the fake note. But we haven't that much cash available; we're in temporary financial straits until we release the new production, and how can we release it with the final reel missing? We can't even reshoot the closing scenes, because the star of the picture is in Rome doing a film for another company."

"In other words it's like these rats sort of kidnaped the negative so they could shake you down, hunh? Ransom is holding your reel for ransom." Cecil giggled at his puny pun, then he sobered. "Gosh, Miss Delwyn, if I can help you—"

"You can and I'll make it worth your while. I've got Ransom's partner tied up at the studio; now I want to take Ransom there too. We'll have a showdown, force them to tell where they've hidden the stolen footage. Will you do it, Cecil? For me?"

Cecil would and Cecil did. Moreover, in toting me out to the Delwyn cookie's Lincoln Continental he clumsily succeeded in banging my cranium against a fender and I blacked out again, so that the journey back to Hollywood was a complete loss as far as I was concerned.

The next time I woke up I was being trundled across a Del-Lux sound stage. Cecil had my shoulders; my gams were grasped by a chunky, red-haired lush

who lurched erratically and hiccupped at every alternate stagger. Norma Delwyn, clad now in skirt and a white Angora sweater, ankled beside this chunky bozo; and from the way she talked to him I realized that he was her tosspot brother.

"Wally, you're d-drunk!" she said reproachfully. "I told you to keep away from the bottle and stand guard—"

"Haven't abandoned my peek, pahic, post a single minute. Our prisoneek, heek, prisoner is still where you put him. And I'm not drunk, just mildly intoxicikoot — intaxiheek — hic — a little swacked." He belched resoundingly. "Parn my indigestion. Something I ate no lehic, doubt."

Keeping pace on his other side, the shark-mouthed Annie sniffed in monumental disapproval; you got the impression she would enjoy tanning Wally Delwyn's breeches, though I doubted that it would have reformed him. He'd been spoiled since infancy and fried since he was nineteen, and he was past caring what an old family retainer thought of his capers.

We came to a door.

Norma opened it. An instant later she plucked the gag from my mouth; then her brother and Cecil shoveled me over the threshold, dumped me on my duff in a rectangular room lighted by one very dim overhead bulb hanging from rafters as high as the Alps. The portal slammed shut and a bolt snicked home; and there I was locked up in the cubicle with friend Pat Freecroft again for company.

MY PRISON was a movie set constructed to counterfeit a ship's stateroom; there were two bunks, a chair and a single porthole in the rear wall. Instead of a ceiling, the top was open so you could see up into a maze of parallels and catwalks where lights and cameras could be placed for a downward bird's-eye shot. I regarded all these details with a jaundiced glim, then copped a slant at my fellow-prisoner, the English remittance man who'd been borrowing geet from me for years.

He was bound to the chair, and the chair was jammed against a wall. This struck me as very peculiar indeed. I felt

sorry for him. But when I asked him for a little sympathy in return, he spurned me with a disinterested grunt and a subsequent sigh like air leaking out of a punctured tire.

Okay, I thought, I'll show him where he gets off.

"Hey, wait a minute!" I choked. Something was dawning on me; a sudden realization that exploded inside my gray matter like atomic fission. "I know why the Delwyns snatched you and then fetched me here to confront you. You're the louse behind that forged note and stolen footage caper! And when Norma nabbed you, you tried to weasel out of it by implicating me. You're the dirty rat who dragged me into it by pretending you were my partner!"

He didn't answer. His head had a macabre tilt and he seemed to have stopped breathing.

But he'd been breathing a moment ago when he had said, "Listen, Nick, there's something I want to explain—"

Then he'd grunted and sighed and relaxed against his fetters; and now he was as motionless as a quarter of beef in a deep freezer.

An ugly hunch snailed down my spine, leaving a trail of goose-pimples. I stirred, discovered I could move; my paralysis was fading. I worked on it. I worked hard. And when I recovered the use of my muscles, I worked even harder on the ropes that were wrapped around my wrists and ankles. In my stunting days I'd learned something about escape tricks; I'd never been a Houdini, but there are certain knots you can untie by manipulation if you know your stuff. Luckily for me, those were the knots Annie had used on me. I went into my act.

And got out of my bonds.

Scrambling unsteadily upright, I tottered to Freecroft; yanked him away from the wall, chair and all. Then I felt the short hairs prickling at the nape of my neck.

Some dirty disciple had stabbed the Britisher through the canvas wall. No wonder he had grunted, sighed and stopped breathing. The shiv was still buried in his back, hilt-deep to the heart, and he was deader than the Petrified Forest.

CHAPTER IV

CORPSE ON THE LAM!



NOT a prop, but genuine, was the stateroom's only door. And it was barred from outside. I tried to smash it open with my catapulting poundage and all it bought me was bruises.

So I tried the walls. They were of heavy canvas painted to resemble planking; and I figured if a man could be stabbed through the tautly stretched material, another man could rip the knife-slit wide open and plunge forth from confinement. Logic, it's wonderful.

I was wrong.

Heavy timbers supported the walls on the outside, four-by-four uprights and equally substantial cross members forming a lattice you could feel by running your palms along the tight cloth's painted inner surface.

I poked and probed every lousy inch; couldn't discover a single spot big enough for me to wriggle through even if I were to bother ripping the canvas away. The network of lumber caged me like a trapped mouse; all I needed was a piece of cheese in my kisser and you could type-cast me.

Mouse Ransom—with a defunct rat named Pat Freecroft to share the trap with me—Freecroft, who obviously had lied me into this jackpot in the first place. But a fat lot of good it did me to understand the setup now that he was deceased. I couldn't even tax him with it, slug a confession out of him. And minus his admission of guilt, how was I going to convince Norma Delwyn that I hadn't been his partner in the forgery caper, the theft of the missing movie footage?

When I thought of the tawny-haired Delwyn tomato, little shivers of apprehension rippled my mind. Had hers been the hand that rammed a dagger into Freecroft's clockworks? I disliked the idea but I had to entertain it. After all, she'd kidnaped the Britisher because of the extortion gimmick he had pulled on her. She'd also kidnaped me, threatened me with a gat and commanded her maid

to commit assault and bashery on me, thereby subjecting me to a clout on the conk—among other indignities.

All of which proved that the cutie was capable of violence; and yet, somehow, she didn't look as if she would extend it to murder.

Or was I allowing a pretty mush and a gorgeous figure to sway my judgment? Maybe I was too easily influenced by seductive feminine conformations, I reflected. More than one guy has struck out when some shapely cookie pitched him a curve.

For a thoughtful moment I considered her drunken brother. Wally Delwyn didn't seem like a killer, either; but an alcoholic is frequently unpredictable when in his cups. Along with his sister, he'd been convinced I knew where the stolen cinema reel was hidden; that I'd been in cahoots with Freecroft on the shakedown. Perhaps Wally figured he could frighten the footage out of me by croaking my alleged partner while I looked on helpless.

"Yeah," I whispered. "Could be."

Or shark-mouthed Annie might have done it for the same misguided motive. In fact, maybe Norma had ordered her to stick a dagger in Freecroft's tripe; and Annie was a servant who wouldn't hesitate to obey that brand of command—as attested by the lump on my noodle where she'd flogged me with a bookend.

Whichever way you studied it, though, the finger always seemed to swing back toward Norma Delwyn herself. And the law would consider her just as guilty whether she'd stabbed Freecroft personally or ordered it done. I shivered again when I pictured her being installed in the San Quentin smoke house; then another notion hit me and I shivered even harder. The party who had bumped the Britisher was equally capable of cooling me; and the longer I stayed in this locked stateroom set the slimmer my chances might be of scrambling undamaged.

Something had to be done about it, pronto.

I started doing it.

First I listened for voices outside the set; heard none. The silence was something you almost felt with your fingers, like the black plush lining of a coffin.

I picked up the ropes that I'd escaped from; coiled them over one shoulder.

Next I kicked a series of holes in the lower part of the canvas wall; punched out others slightly higher, spacing them so that they came one above another at intervals where the outer horizontal lumber latticework would make like a ladder. Climbing these heavy rungs, I reached the top of the roofless room and perched there surveying my surroundings. Nobody was in sight. So far, so good.

STRADDLING the top of the wall, I tossed a rope end upward toward a catwalk just above my reach. The rope sailed over the narrow wooden planking and its loose end dangled back down for me to grab. I hauled on it until the dangling end matched the one I had retained. I tested it with my unsupported weight to make sure it would hold.

It held. I swarmed up the rope, gained the catwalk and hauled myself over the edge; retrieved my rope, coiled it again for possible future use. As a detective I was still a pretty good stunt man.

Suspended on scaffolding in the dim upper spaces of the sound stage, my narrow platform branched off into a myriad others, like the maze of tracks in a railroad yard. I chose one at random, commenced skulking across the dizzy heights. Presently I heard a murmur far below me; peered over the brink and piped Wally Delwyn directly under where I stood. He was talking to Cecil, the Vista del Sol-Mar parking punk; and neither had the foggiest notion of what was about to happen.

I made a lasso, widened the loop and twirled it; paid out the rope and made my throw. Before you could whistle Beethoven's Fifth Symphony I'd dabbled my noose over the heads of the two unsuspecting characters beneath me; and when I jerked the lasso tight it cracked their skulls together with a sound like the clunking of two ripe coconuts. Both guys sagged in a stunned semi-coma; then the loop settled around their throats, throttling them so they couldn't make a bleat.

I raced to a ladder, skinned down to the stage floor, blipped to my victims and trussed them like a pair of turkeys

for the oven. Using their own handkerchiefs, I also gagged them; and when I frisked the red-haired Delwyn bozo I discovered he was packed with heat. My heat—the .32 automatic I always tote in a shoulder clip.

His sister must have glommed it from me while I was unconscious in her seaside hotel bungalow. "Welcome, little stranger," I said, fondling the gat. "A friend in need is a friend, period." Then, jacking a cartridge into the firing chamber, I started on the prowl for additional victims.

The reason they call a dick a gumshoe is because he wears rubber soles and heels. Mine were recently retreaded and I sneakfooted through the gloom-filled barnlike building making as much noise as moths eating a wool sweater. Then, remotely, I heard more voices—distant, subdued, the indistinct words unintelligible, though you could tell the speakers were a man and a woman. I lengthened my silent strides, came to the conversation's source.

This turned out to be a dismantled set at the rear end of the cavernous stage; and when I peeped around a screening backdrop I stiffened in surprise. Norma Delwyn was standing at a sound mixer's control panel with a headset clamped over her yellow tossed-salad tresses and both hands on the console's volume rheostats. At the moment, however, she wasn't listening to the earphones; her attention was on a guy alongside her, a broad-shouldered, curly-haired character in casual tweeds.

Cecil, the hotel admiral, and Norma's drunken brother were there, too, but, it was the broad-shouldered bozo who startled me. I had known Curly Terhune since the old silent days when he was just starting to make the grade as a reporter on the Los Angeles *Record*, long since defunct. I'd watched him go into press agency when the *Record* folded under him. I'd seen him switch to legwork for a Hearst columnist, then grab a column of his own on the *Daily News*. For a while he'd been one of Hollywood's hottest gossipists, his stuff syndicated and his by-line good enough to make the fan mags.

The war and its paper shortage, its newsprint rationing, had knocked him

back to flack work again; but in the past year or two he had once more begun to climb. He now wrote signed pieces for a big Valley throwaway sheet and you heard unconfirmed but persistent rumors that he and the Delwyn muffin were secretly engaged.

I hadn't bumped into him for quite a while, so I didn't know how true this was; but if you could judge by the way he was talking to the blonde quail now, he was pretty thick with her.

"... I tell you you can't get away with it, Norma! Kidnaping's a Federal offense. You little idiot, you and Wally could wind up in prison!"

SHE regarded him icily. "Is this the thanks I get for phoning your office while you were out, leaving word for you to come here and get the biggest scoop of your life?"

"We don't call them scoops any more; they're beats. And the instant I called my paper and got your message I hurried right here; that proves I was interested—and grateful. But when you tell me you've abducted Nick Ransom and this Freecroft fellow, imprisoned them on a locked set—good lord, Norma, that's dynamite!" He made a worried gesture. "Forgery or no forgery, theft or no theft, you've left yourself wide open for trouble. Bad trouble."

She said, "Not if I prove Freecroft and Ransom faked my brother's name on that promissory note and used it to steal the reel of negative so they could demand a hundred thousand dollars for it." Her violet glimmers were smoking. "When I get that film back from them I'll have the evidence to send them to prison. And as for kidnaping—I'll say I made a citizen arrest, which is perfectly legal."

Citizen arrest! This chick was certainly smartened up to all the angles. She reminded me of a she-male finagling lawyer—but not of a killer.

"Evidence!" Curly Terhune said explosively. "How the devil do you hope to do all this? How are you going to make them kick back the note and the footage, force them to admit their guilt? Men as clever as they are won't confess just because you're holding them in a locked room. Or are you planning

some more foolishness, like torture? The third degree?"

"Guile. Subterfuge. Trickery." She held a hand to her crimson lips. "Shh! Stop talking and let me listen. I've got a live microphone planted on that set. When Ransom comes to, he'll begin discussing things with Freecroft. They may even let slip where they hid the stolen reel."

I frowned at the relief I felt surging through my mind. If the blonde twist expected to eavesdrop on a conference between me and Freecroft, then obviously she wasn't aware that Freecroft was deceased. And if she didn't know this, she couldn't be the murderer. On the other hand, though, maybe she was covering herself; trying to establish her innocence with Terhune so he would testify in her defense, in case the cops accused her of the kill.

The broad-shouldered newspaper guy shook his head. "The whole setup is wrong, Norma. You should have had them pinched, open and aboveboard."

"No!" she answered sharply. "I don't want the news to leak out that we're in financial hot water. If our creditors ever learned we've got every dollar tied up in the sabotaged production they'd come down on us like vultures. We've got to get the missing reel back secretly; then you can splash it in big red headlines. By that time we'll be safe; the picture can be completed and released and money will start flowing in."

He argued, "I still say you'd better turn Ransom and Freecroft loose—"

"She won't have to," I announced, showing myself and flourishing my roscoe. "I'm already loose. And Freecroft never will be, on account of he's dead."

Terhune gasped, "Nick!" and the Delwyn doll choked, "Mr. Ransom!" They stood rooted, goggling at my gat. I let it goggle back at them. It stared them down. It broke them to an uneasy stirring, a restless shifting on their feet. And when they recovered their voices to blurt questions at me, I waved them quiet.

"I'll do the talking," I said. "And Curly, you'll get your big red headline story; but it won't be the one that Norma was telling you. It will be about

a knife in Pat Freecroft's back and his murdered corpse tied with ropes, tied so he couldn't have defended himself even if he'd know the shiv was coming at him. Premeditated kills are never pretty but that kind is uglier than most."

Then I herded the four of them across the stage to where there was a phone; kept them covered while I jingled headquarters, got my friend Ole Brunvig of the homicide squad and dished him the scenario from beginning to the current moment. Ole listened and said crisply, "Be right with you, Sherlock. Hold the fort. And if you let anybody lam I'll brain you."

Not wanting him to brain me, I didn't let anybody lam. Or anyhow I didn't let any of the live ones cop a sneak on me. The only guy I forgot to guard was Pat Freecroft.

So when Brunvig arrived with a tech crew and I led them to the stateroom set I found out I'd pulled a boner. The joint was empty. Freecroft's corpse wasn't there any more.

CHAPTER V

VANISHED VIRAGO



TOOK one incredulous look at the vacated stateroom and yelled, "Annie, by gad!" at the top of my tonsils.

Ole Brunvig swung around, impaled me with a glare like sharpened icicles. His tall, spare form quivered with mounting choler in its loose-fitting black serge suit that looked as if he'd borrowed it from an undertaker, and anger contorted his elongated face to the grimace of a horse with chronic dyspepsia. But he managed to keep his rumbling voice deceptively mild for a moment, which told me he was on the verge of erupting a Roman candle with a delayed fuse. Mildness in Brunvig is always a warning to dash for the tall timber or you'll get your pinfeathers scorched to a pink blister.

"Annie?" he purred. "What Annie?" I caterwauled, "Shark-Mouth!"

"Ah. Calling me names, hey? Adding insult to—"

"Not you. Annie. Shark-Mouth Annie,

the maid. Norma Delwyn's maid. I told you about her when I sang you the story over the telephone. You remember Annie. The dame that bashed me."

"Oh, her. What about her?"

I said, "She's not around. I forgot her."

I indicated the redhaired Wally Delwyn and the gangling Cecil in his parking lot admiral's livery; I jerked a thumb at the blonde Delwyn frail and at the newspaper bozo who stood apprehensively near her, Curly Terhune.

"When I captured this crowd of creeps I neglected Annie. I was so busy I didn't even remember her. She wasn't on deck, which proves the old adage—out of sight, out of mind."

"Adage, schmadage. Make your point."

"It's perfectly obvious!" I railed at him. "While I was rounding up these others, Annie must have got busy concealing evidence; must have made off with the corpus delicti. See for yourself."

I aimed a finger around the stateroom set. It looked pristine and unused, the chair properly in place, the floor free of stains where Freecroft had leaked gore. Even the canvas walls were restored to original condition, so adroitly patched that you couldn't see the slit where the murder knife had come through; couldn't tell where I had kicked foot holes to climb upward.

"She lugged the body out and stashed it, repaired all damages and took a powder."

Brunvig blew his lid. "What kind of hogwash are you trying to dip me?" his enraged roar rattled the rafters. "Look at this room. Clean as a pin. Nobody on earth could sweep up a kill without leaving at least some traces. You're lying, Hawkshaw, and I'm going to find out why if I have to pull it out of you with forceps!" Breathing fire and brimstone, he reached for my lapels as if determined to rend me limb from limb.

"Lay off," I snarled, backing away. Then I turned on my heel; faced the Delwyn squab. "Look, dreamboat, do you deny you fetched me here from that beach hotel and dumped me in with Freecroft? Do you?" When she

wouldn't answer me I swung to Cecil. "How about it, Admiral? Let's hear your version."

The punk gulped noisily, like water going down a faulty drain. "Well, I ah, that is—" He cast a sidewise slant at the blonde cutie, his worried glims asking her to coach him.

"All right, Cecil," she said quietly, as if she'd come to a reluctant decision. "I won't ask you to lie for me; I don't want you to get in trouble for something that doesn't concern you. I guess it's t-time to tell the truth."

Curly Terhune patted her arm. "That's the wisest thing, Norma. You've got nothing to lose, really."

"I hope you're right," her voice held bitterness. She squared her shoulders as she looked up at Brunvig; drew a deep breath that pouted out her alluring sweater. "Part of Mr. Ransom's story is true, Lieutenant. About the forged note and the stolen scene from our new picture. It's also true that I locked him in this set with Pat Freecroft. But I don't know anything about a m-murder. I can't believe it ever happened. It's—it seems impossible!"

Ole glowered, trying to keep his gaze off the sweater and its distracting contents. "Hm-m-m. Then how do you explain Freecroft not being here now?"

"I think I can answer that," her chunky red-haired brother inserted himself in the dialogue. He seemed to have sobered up in a hurry, considering how sozzled he'd been a short while ago. Maybe he hadn't been as drunk as he pretended, I thought. Maybe it had been an act. He said steadily, "Ransom freed himself, then released Freecroft, who escaped. Ransom could have got away too, but we had humiliated him and he wanted to get even. So he captured us; then he phoned you that preposterous story about a killing."

CLEVER, I reflected admiringly. The guy was an opportunist, so quick on the uptake that he could digest an unexpected situation and twist it to suit his own uses, like a producer stealing ideas at a story conference. And Brunvig was buying it. He must be growing slightly soft in the steeple, I decided. Or perhaps Norma Delwyn's sweater had

something to do with it.

He said, "It sounds reasonable," and surveyed the scene uncertainly. You could almost see his mental cogwheels clicking, wondering how he could make a wholesale pinch on my say-so when there was no corpse to corroborate my contention. His ire commenced to seethe again as he eyed me.

"A shenanigan, eh, Sherlock? Dragging me out here on a false alarm, hunh? I ought to haul you down to the cooler and—"

"We'll give you better grounds for arresting him," Wally Delwyn cut in, feeding the flames of Ole's wrath. "We'll charge him with forgery and theft and attempted extortion, not to mention assault and slander. Take him downtown and hold him, Lieutenant. We can sign the papers in the morning." He flashed me a brief, amused glance, vindictive and sardonic.

I said, "Don't be a fool, Brunvig. He just wants to brush you and your cops out of here, and me along with you. Then when we're gone he'll hunt up Annie, find Freecroft's body, dispose of it so the murder never can be proved. You're being suckered, pal. Don't fall for it."

"Quiet," he grunted. "Let's see your hands."

"My hands? What for?"

"The bracelets, bright-eyes. Don't look now, but you're in custody. Come on, stick out your fins for the nippers."

The Delwyn blonde had a sudden uneasy expression in her lovely violet optics, as if an unexpected notion had just seeped into her and she wasn't too pleased with it. "Wait, Lieutenant," she moved a hesitant step toward him. "I remember now, there's a du—"

"Quiet, Norma!" her brother said harshly.

"Wh-what—?" she looked at him as if he'd been somebody she'd never seen before.

"I'm handling this. You started it but I'm going to finish it. I'm going to see that Ransom gets what's coming to him. Go ahead, Brunvig, put the cuffs on him and take him out of here."

She said, "But Wally, that dupli—"

"I told you to shut up. I meant it." He slapped her across the kisser, hard.

His palm smeared her lipstick, left prints in bold relief against the abrupt pallor of her complexion. She gasped in pain and shocked amazement, and there was a sickness in her glims when he whapped her again.

Instinctively I dived at him to teach him some manners. Curly Terhune beat me to the punch. "You scum!" he yeepped and caromed forward. He swung the red-haired bozo around and laid a haymaker on his jaw.

Chaos boiled over.

There were three plain-clothed flatfeet and a harness bull in Brunvig's tech crew, and all four of them churned into the hassle as Terhune and Delwyn started slugging it out. Somebody tripped; fell headlong into the fracas. The others went down with him in a squirming tangle of arms and legs and curses. Norma screamed and crouched aside, cowering as her brother and Terhune became the bottom layer of the pile.

Out of the tail of my eye I lamped a furtive movement of goldbraided livery on the sidelines; that was Cecil trying to cop himself a sneak from the carnage. At the same instant, Ole Brunvig's neck swelled and his muscles bunched as he poised to fling himself at the fray. Everything was happening at once, like an invisible chemist stirring up equal portions of pandemonium and confusion in a Mixmaster.

I HAD my choice of blocking the parking lot admiral's run-out powder or buttonholing Brunvig before he became embroiled and swallowed up in that flapping riot on the floor. At this point, Cecil was about as important to me as cirrhosis of the liver, whereas I needed Brunvig and I needed him right now. A dragnet would get the parking punk sooner or later, but if Brunvig got himself maimed in the free-for-all his usefulness would be impaired and I would wind up behind a nice ripe eight ball.

Having come to this swift conclusion, I acted on it. "Hey, Ole, I've got a hunch!" I yodeled, and glued the grab on him.

"Confound you, let go!" he said in furious accents, aiming an awkward roundhouse buffet at my dewlaps.

I ducked the punch, tied him up in a

clinch and refused to let him shake me off. "Ix-nay!" I caterwauled. "Your minions can take care of Terhune and Wally Delwyn. Simmer down; I want to show you something—if I can find it."

"If you don't take your stinking paws off me I'll— Huh? What do you mean, you want to show me something?"

"Now you're being sensible," I said as he quit surging in my clutches.

"What's on your alleged mind?" he demanded.

I began tugging him across the vast reaches of the stage. "It was Norma Delwyn who gave me the tip-off," I said. "Did you hear what she was trying to say when Wally smacked her?"

"Yeah. Something ridiculous about dew, or dupes."

I said, "No. She got as far as 'dupli' before her brother whanged her in the mouth. And I think it explains Free-croft's absent cadaver and the damage-repair job on that stateroom set. She was trying to tell us, but Wally didn't want her to."

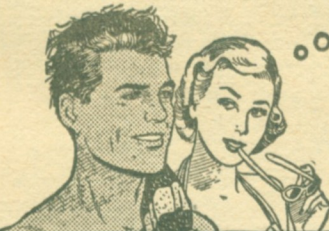
"She was trying to tell us what?"

"Look," I said, still dragging him on a zig-zag course through the barnlike building. "The word Norma wanted to say was duplicate. In the flicker business they sometimes construct two sets exactly alike, for production reasons. Maybe one is to be destroyed; fire, flood, shipwreck or what-have-you. The duplicate set is sort of a stand-by arrangement in case retakes are required after the original has been torn up. Get it?"

He growled, "No. Where the devil are you taking me? This blasted place is like a maze. First thing you know we'll be lost."

"I'm hunting something," I told him patiently. "Listen. Suppose there were two identical staterooms located in different parts of the stage. And for the sake of argument, suppose I made a mistake when you arrived here with your cohorts; assume I steered you to the wrong stateroom set. Not the one where I'd been locked up with Free-croft, and where I'd left his corpse; but the identical duplicate. The body

[Turn page]



oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

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wouldn't be in that one, natch. And there would be no sign of the knife slit or the holes I kicked in the walls. Now do you savvy my drift?"

"I think you're full of fertilizer," he rasped; but he didn't sound as if he meant it.

I went on. "Let's presume the Delwyn bozo realized I had led you to the wrong stateroom but he allowed all of us to go on thinking it was the right one. That gave him a chance to call me a liar—and convince you there hadn't been a murder. Then he demanded my arrest, figuring that you and your coppers would cart me away from the studio; whereupon he would have plenty of time to rush to the original stateroom set and dispose of Freecroft's corpse. But all of a sudden the truth dawned on Norma and she was decent enough to try and spill it. Wally stopped her."

"Theories, theories!" Ole complained. "Why don't you quit flapping your lip and show me some proof?"

As if on cue, I spotted the very door I was looking for, a barred wooden portal leading into a small rectangular room constructed of heavy criss-crossed timbers with taut canvas forming the inside walls. I yelped, "Eureka, bejeest!" and sprinted forward, unfastened the bar, swung the door open. "Glom a gander, chum. Maybe you'll believe me now!"

And I pointed to the original stateroom, showed him Pat Freecroft's lifeless remnants.

Brunvig winced as if I'd stung him across the chops with a decayed herring. His inflamed optics inspected the murdered guy and the holes I had kicked in the canvas; the other hole where a shiv had slashed through to Freecroft's back.

"Well I'll be odd burned!" he strangled. "You were leveling! There was a kill!" Then he whirled like a dervish with the hotfoot. "Come on, Hawkshaw, we've got some pinches to make!" And he seized my sleeve, commenced hauling me back toward the other end of the stage where the duplicate stateroom was located.

We didn't complete the journey right away, though. This was because of a

gruesome interruption when we circled around the original set to take a short cut. Directly behind the cubicle we stumbled over something soft, yielding.

It was Shark-Mouthed Annie, stretched out on the floor looking up at the high catwalks without seeing them. Somebody had busted her neck and she was as dead as chopped bait.

CHAPTER VI

NEGATIVE CASE



YOU could have lighted a cigar by holding it to Brunvig's map. He turned the fiery red of a blast furnace; stooped down and touched the murdered servant as if hoping to convince himself she was a figment of the imagination.

She was no figment, though. Nobody in the world could have dreamed up, a figment as ugly as Annie—or as dead.

"Two sets!" Ole lifted his peepers toward heaven as if asking for strength. "And two kills! What is this, a flicker factory or a slaughterhouse?" Then he rallied his reserves and headed for the other stateroom at the remote far end of the vast sound stage.

At the duplicate set, the riot was still bubbling. Norma Delwyn was where we had left her on the sidelines, crouched, whitefaced, trembling like a kitten coughing up doorknobs. Curly Terhune stood beside her, trying to soothe her but not making any mileage. Every time he touched her she brushed him off; apparently the course of their true love had been strewn with boulders.

I broomed the vicinity with my optics, saw no sign of the goldbraided Cecil. It was obvious that the punk had pulled his freight, which was no more than I'd expected. But I was slightly astonished when I surveyed the writhing clot of brawlers on the floor. No matter how I counted them, there were only four.

There should have been five, according to my reckoning.

And the fifth one should have had red hair.

Instead, the brawling quartette consisted only of three dicks in plainclothes and one copper in uniform. They were

locked together in fabulous combat, gouging eyes, punching noses, kicking out teeth and mopping up the stage with one another's complexions. It was terrific, but it seemed a little useless when you considered that Wally Delwyn was no longer a participant in the slugfest.

He had touched off the explosion, but where was he now?

Looking somewhat seedy in his torn tweeds, Terhune left Norma and came over to me; seemed to read my mind. "Don't ask me where Wally went, Hawkshaw," he answered my unvoiced question. "He and I were going around and around when those cops piled on us. And the next thing I knew, I was taking all the punishment."

"Delwyn had wormed free?"

The newspaper guy nodded. "He must have. So I figured, shucks, if he could do it why couldn't I? By the time I crawled out of the tangle, though, Wally was long gone. And of course Norma wouldn't tell me which way he went. You'd hardly expect her to. After all, he is her brother—even though he did slap her face." He shrugged. "So I've been watching these cops destroy themselves. Quite an illuminating spectacle, huh?"

Ole Brunvig had been listening to Terhune's gab; and now, as he realized the situation, he flew apart like a two dollar alarm clock. Uttering shrill bleats of rage and indignation, he descended on his four battling bulls; waded into the core of the ruckus and started swatting right and left with his hat like a guy fighting off hornets.

"You scatterbrained featherheaded nincompoop sons of witches!" he shrieked from the pinnacle of a furious frenzy. "Stop scrapping, you idiots! Stop it, you hear me? Cut it out! You haven't got a prisoner, you lost him and you're putting the slug on yourselves! Quit it or I'll rip the badges off you and shove—Ouch!" he added as somebody kicked him on the shins.

Then, in desperation, he extracted a shiny police whistle from his vest pocket, rammed it to his kisser and blew a piercing blast, so violent that the nickel plating peeled off and the little pea shot out, sailed away with

the high whining shriek of a dum dum bullet.

THIS did the trick. The four headquarters heroes scrambled upright, noticed Ole and commenced saluting him with both hands. He responded by pointing in all directions at once like a weathervane in a cyclone.

"Go after Delwyn!" he caterwauled apoplectically. "You lost him—now find him or I'll unfrock every lousy man of you and have you transferred to the street cleaning department. Go on, get moving." Then he reached forth, collared the one hapless harness bull. "No, not you, dopey. You stay here and guard this girl. Don't let her out of your sight, hear me?"

Having thus placed the quaking blonde cupcake under technical arrest, he joined his remaining three minions and they scattered faster than rice at a wedding; sprinted for the various exits and disappeared.

Curly Terhune looked awed. "Gosh, Philo, if two murders make him act like that, what would he do at a masacre?"

"Split like an amoeba, probably," I said. "How did you come here, your own bucket or a taxi?"

"My own car. Why?"

"Let's go," I said. "I need transportation and you're elected. Come on, get the lump out of your elbow; time's running out and I have places to go, things to do." I fastened onto him, began propelling him toward a nearby door.

The Delwyn doll wailed, "Wait! You m-mentioned t-two—"

"Sorry, sugar. You're in a corner pocket and I've got no time to inhabit it with you." I called back over my shoulder.

A moment later Terhune and I were outdoors, spurting across the Del-Lux lot. Curly took the lead as we threaded our way along studio streets, around looming monolithic sound stages and darkened outdoor sets, past the minarets of an Arabian mosque and the counterfeit greenery of an African jungle, the false-front stores of a Western cow town and the rusty hull of a plywood tramp steamer that would never sail on any-

thing but cement pavement.

Presently we came to the administration building and the parking area alongside it. Terhune pointed to a snazzy four-holer convertible.

"Mine," he said. "And the finance company's. Now what?"

I said, "Pile in and stir up the engine, pal."

He obeyed, and I bounced in beside him. "Where to?" he asked me.

"Aim for the general vicinity of Hollywood and Vine. Show me some velocity."

He gushed a blurt of ethyl to his silken cylinders and we lit a shuck for the main gates; whooshed out onto the street and took off in a shower of peanut brittle. "I guess you know what you're doing, Sherlock. But danged if I do."

"I'm playing a wild hunch," I said grimly. "If I'm lucky maybe I'll win all the marbles. Marbles meaning missing footage—and perhaps Wally Delwyn for a side bet."

He tooled casually around a streamlined streetcar, scraping off a small sample of its yellow paint as we passed. "Questions I ask you, double-talk you give me," he complained. "I never was very clever at riddles."

I said, "Forged note, stolen reel, Wally Delwyn. Add them fast and what do you get?"

"Nothing but mystification. Sorry, shamus."

"Okay, I'll take it step by step. This whole clambake evolves from a certain promissory note with Wally's signature forged to it. Right?"

"So Norma told me tonight."

"You mean that was the first you'd heard of it?" I said. "But I thought you were engaged to her. I thought you were in her confidence."

HE MADE a wry mouth as we whammed into a left turn on proteasing tires. "She gave me back my ring two weeks ago. Not a lovers' quarrel; we simply agreed our engagement had been a mistake. You see, Sherlock, I sometimes drink."

"So does her brother. To excess."

"Yes. He and I did some drinking together and she felt that I was a bad influence on him. Oh, we're all still

friends," he tacked on whimsically. "She even phoned my paper tonight, left a message for me, had me come to the studio so I could get a news beat. But Norma and I are strictly platonic; romance is out."

Then, to forestall my condolences, he added, "Skip it, Nick, skip it. Sooner or later my broken heart will mend. It always has in the past." He grinned. "Let's get back to the forged note, shall we?"

I said, "Okay. Pat Freecroft had this marker for a hundred G's. He used it to gain possession of a reel of Del-Lux film; demanded full payment of the hundred grand for the return of the negative. When Norma kidnaped him today he claimed I was his partner on the caper."

"Were you?"

"Of course not!" I snapped peevishly. "Freecroft was running a bluff. He probably figured my rep as a tough guy would scare Norma into turning him loose; it's the only plausible explanation I can think of for his getting me involved, although we'll never know for sure—he's too dead to deny or confirm it. And it's not important now, anyhow. The important thing is the forged note. Where did he get it in the first place?"

"You tell me."

I said, "He could have faked it himself, except that I happen to know his penmanship was pretty shaky; I've watched him endorse checks I'd given him, and his hand had a nervous twitch whenever he tried to write. Sort of a tic, not quite as bad as palsy but on that general order. Lots of people are like that."

"Yes, so I've noticed."

"Therefore I can't quite see Freecroft doing the actual forging of Wally Delwyn's signature. I don't believe he could have faked it well enough to fool anybody."

Terhune beat a traffic light just as it shifted through amber to red. "Meaning he had someone else do it for him?"

"There's the possibility. Then again maybe he got Wally's signature on the note legitimately—not for a hundred thousand bucks, but a smaller amount. Assume Wally was fried one night, ran out of dough and needed a quick touch.

Assume Freecroft advanced him say a hundred dollars and took a note for it, then altered it; raised the face amount."

"Now that's an angle!"

I said, "Yeah, and here's another that I like even more. What if Wally and Freecroft were in cahoots on the deal? You know what the score is at Del-Lux. Norma runs the lot, holds the check book. She does her brother an allowance; keeps him strapped so he can't go on too many benders. He rents playing second fiddle to her; a guy naturally hates knuckling under to a younger sister. He proved that tonight when he slapped her and tried to take command of the situation."

"Yes, but—"

"So suppose he decided to cut himself a slice of Del-Lux cash by rigging this stolen-footage gimmick," I said. "Assume he actually signed a note for a hundred grand, gave it to Freecroft so he could get possession of an important reel of negative. It would be one way of squeezing a stack of lettuce out of the studio's coffers; and after all, Wally is half owner of the outfit. In his own mind he might justify it to himself by saying he was only glomming part of what already belonged to him."

"I see what you mean," Terhune said as he barreled us east on Sunset. "He'd keep the lion's share for himself, split maybe ten thousand or so to Freecroft for helping him— But wait, Nick! If that's the case how do you account for Freecroft's murder? And Annie's?"

"Norma was responsible."

He shook his head vigorously. "No, I refuse to believe it. Nobody could convince me that Norma—"

"Innocently responsible," I amplified my statement.

"How do you mean?"

I SAID, "She loused the scheme by snatching Freecroft and locking him up, trying to make him disgorge the reel. He tried to weasel free by involving me, and that backfired too. Instead of getting scared, Norma kidnaped me the same as she had the Britisher. Now let's assume this put Wally Delwyn in a panic. He started worrying; maybe the ultimate showdown would spill the beans. Freecroft might turn stool pigeon,

put the finger on him. There's only one sure way to stop a squealer. Bump him."

"Good lord! And Annie?"

"Maybe she saw Wally shove that knife through the canvas wall of the set; eye-witnessed the kill. So Wally had to croak her too. It figures."

"I'm afraid it does," the newspaper guy admitted ruefully. "I hate to agree with you, but that's how it looks. So now what?"

"So now we test the theory," I said. "This fleabag hotel we're heading for is where Freecroft lived. It's the frowziest rat hole you ever gandered, but he was usually so broke it was the best he could afford; and when he was in the chips and could pay for something better he always had other uses for his dough—dames, whisky, gambling."

"He must have been quite a character."

"Yeah. He stayed in this joint for years, and yet he was sensitive about it; rarely told anybody his address. Ashamed of it. He even got his mail at a post office box so nobody would know where he really hung out."

"But you knew, eh, Nick?"

I nodded. "I was one of the very select few. Okay; now presuming Wally Delwyn was in cahoots with Freecroft on the forgery-and-theft caper, then it's reasonable to assume that Wally also knows about this hotel. Right?"

"Well, yes."

"And since Wally wouldn't dare have the stolen reel hidden in his own wigwam, for fear Norma might accidentally find it, we can also guess that he let Freecroft hide it in his hotel room. Make sense?"

Terhune said, "It adds."

"All right. Wally is now on the loose, lamming from the cops. Looking at it from his viewpoint, what would be the first place he'd head for? Freecroft's room. Why? To dig out that spool of negative, plus anything else in the way of evidence that might hook him into the theft or link him with Freecroft."

"So that's why you're in such a hurry! You're hoping to catch him there with the stuff in his hands; nab him with the goods and get the deadwood on him. Smart, Sherlock. Plenty smart." Ter-

hune swung north on Gower, then to the right along a dismal side street as narrow as an alley, as somber as an unlighted tunnel. He parked in front of a three-story ramshackle clapboard building and latched his brakes. "Well, here we are—"

His voice broke off and he stiffened at the wheel. Behind us, in the convertible's rear compartment, a sneeze had sounded.

I yelped, "What the devil!" and whipped out my roscoe, squirmed around, peered backward and downward.

We had a stowaway on the rear floor. It was Cecil, the parking punk.

CHAPTER VII

RED FADEOUT



DRAWING a deep breath, I snarled, "You eavesdropping crumb!" Then I blipped my poundage over the front seat, landed in the back, straddled the gold-braided ginzo and rammed my gat close to his frightened pan. "All right,

Admiral, you've had your earful. What do you plan to do with it?"

"Cripes, Mr. Ransom—please—honest, I wasn't listening. That is—I—I didn't mean to. Don't sh-shoot me. I'll come clean—I'll level with you! It—it was like th-this. The way things were shaping up at the studio I figured I'd got myself in a jam by helping Miss Delwyn put the snatch on you. So when that fight started, it looked like my golden opportunity for a getaway. I was scared, Mr. Ransom, honest I was."

"Yeah."

"So I made with the absence. But when I got out on the lot, I sort of—well, it was dark and I couldn't find the main gate, and I wandered around getting lost and lost. And then I heard the police coming out of that sound stage, yelling and rushing every which way, flashing their torches and hunting somebody. I figured I was the guy they were looking for, and I saw this four-hole job and I thought I'd hide in it until the heat died. Which I did. So then you and your pal, there, came along

and got in the front and we started rolling, and—and—jeeze, I was afraid to let you know I was back here. I stayed on the floor, and then I had to sneeze—listen, Mr. Ransom, don't plug me. I'm sorry I helped Miss Delwyn fetch you away from the Vista del Sol-Mar. I—I—"

I said, "This will make you sorrier," and fed him a left hook to the jaw. He relaxed, out for the count.

"Nick!" That was Curly Terhune up front. "Do you think he was telling the truth? Or could he be mixed up in the murder, somehow, some way we didn't suspect?"

I said, "It remains to be seen," and worked on my rod. "Have you got a gat on you, Curly?"

"No, I never carry one. Why?"

"Take mine." I straightened up, handed it to him. "Keep Cecil covered when he comes out of his coma."

"But—what about you?" he said as I piled out onto the paving. "Where are you going?"

I aimed a thumb. "Up to Freecroft's room after a killer. Wish me luck." And I barged into the hotel's threadbare, shoddy lobby with the morbid feeling you always get when you're near the end of a chase and you know you're about to start somebody on the one-way road to the cyanide squat.

Along with the gloom there was a tightness to my scalp, a tension in my elly-bay—the taut-nerved sensation that walks hand in hand with danger. I've had it in the cinema stunt racket; I've had it as a snoop. It always spells out the foreboding of peril, and I don't like it. The tips of my fingers felt cold.

They were colder when I scuttled into the lobby's phone booth and made a quick call to headquarters; the coldness had reached into my palms as I rang off, came out of the booth and made for the rickety staircase. The treads creaked and I took them two at a clip to speed my upward journey.

I wished I had time to stop and smoke a gasper, but time was running out. I wished I had a snort of Vat 69 to warm my hands and narcotize the caterpillars crawling through my clockworks, but as far as I was concerned the nearest fifth of Scotch was a million miles away,

and maybe a million years as well. There are no such things as time and space—if you're dead.

Second floor.

I kept climbing, each step a memory of the last time I'd been here. A year ago, and Pat Freecroft boiled to the ears, and a pal of his named Nick Ransom carrying him bodily to his room, blotting him to bed.

I saw the room again, a dirty-tidy room, a room where everything was neatly in place and yet you knew there was accumulated grime under the worn carpet, grime in the unwashed woodwork, grime beneath the blistened wallpaper. The bed was tightly made, but you knew the sheets and blankets hadn't been laundered for a long long while. Too long.

Third floor.

I walked along the hallway that smelled of must and dust and stale beer and cheap muscatel hangovers. I came to Pat Freecroft's door and touched the knob that Freecroft would not touch again. I turned it and it resisted me, locked either from outside or from within. The key-ring gimmick I used to unlock it made no more sound than rain falling on a new grave. Just a whisper, slightly sad.

I pushed the portal open, clicked the wall switch by the lintel and jumped sidewise.

NOBODY shot at me. Nobody was in the room. Nobody had been in the room since Freecroft left it for the last time. There were no indications of intrusion, no signs of search. Everything was meticulously neat—and incredibly dirty.

I changed the neatness to scrambled disorder. I had to. There was no time to be tidy, to replace the things I moved as I made my frisk. I tore the room apart and left it that way. I didn't think Freecroft would mind; and it certainly wouldn't matter to his murderer.

What did matter was the flat circular steel can I found deeply buried in a closet, under a stack of *London Graphics*. The can contained a reel of processed and developed movie negative with a Del-Lux imprimatur—plus an envelope that had a promissory note in it. At

long last I had found the forgery and the stolen footage. I was at the end of the trail.

Furtive creaks sounded outside the room, slow, measured, inexorably ascending the noisy stairs. Then they were in the hallway, coming closer, like the approach of doom. I felt sweat forming in my armpits, trickling down my ribs as cold as a glacier's breath.

The footfalls were very near, now, but you couldn't tell whether they were being made by a heavy-set, chunky guy like Wally Delwyn, or a gangling punk like Cecil. The hotel was so old and the corridor floors so weak with dry rot that the boards would have voiced complaint even under the featherweight tread of a diminutive doll like Norma Delwyn.

I held the polished, tin-plated film can up to my peepers, inspecting it. My back was to the room's open door and those footsteps paused at the threshold. Somebody's breathing was audible; it could have been my own. Then, behind me, there was a surge of movement; a headlong rush.

Rushing motion and an upraised automatic were reflected in the polished surface of the film can I was holding for a rearview mirror. I hurled my tonnage sidewise just as the clubbed roscow bashed at my noggin and hissed harmlessly past my shoulder.

I landed on the bed, bounded off, whirled around. "You missed me, Curly," I said to the newspaper guy. "And now you're finished. This is the final fadeout."

Dark anger clouded Terhune's map. "Too bad you saw me, Ransom. Too bad—for you. I'd have been satisfied to knock you cold, take the reel and the note, let you think somebody else had slugged you. But you had to play it clever. Too bad, fella."

"Cleverness is comparative," I said. "You wouldn't have fooled me. I've known for quite a while that you were the killer. Put down the gat; it won't help you now."

He scowled and kept me covered. "You—knew I was the killer? That's absurd."

"But true," I said evenly. "You gave yourself away back there on that Del-Lux sound stage. You made a remark

about Ole Brunvig when he and his cops took off after Wally Delwyn. You said to me, 'Gosh, Philo, if two murders make him act like that, what would he do at a massacre?'"

"And so what?"

"So nobody had mentioned two kills. You'd heard me claim that Freecroft had been croaked, but nothing had yet been said regarding our discovery of Shark-Mouth Annie's corpse. I wondered how come you already knew. Maybe it was guilty knowledge, an unsuspected murderer letting something slip."

"I see," he said thoughtfully.

I WENT ON, "I decided to test you, I trap you. I requisitioned your chauffeur services; and while you were driving me, I worked the dialogue around until you spoke again of the second bump—and you actually mentioned Annie's name as the other victim. By that time I was pretty sure of you."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Here you are, a former big shot columnist, but working now for a giveaway sheet; a guy with expensive tastes, like fourholer Buicks, but your car in hock to a finance company. Maybe you got engaged to Norma Delwyn because she's half owner of a studio; as her husband you'd be up in the bucks. But she had busted up the engagement, given you back your ring. Maybe you decided to extort a hundred grand from her by way of revenge; or perhaps the money itself was your only motive. Either way, it added up. It pointed a finger at you."

"A very slender finger," he said.

I shrugged. "Not so slender. It would be easy for you to get Wally Delwyn plastered, loan him a little dough, persuade him to sign a promissory note and then raise the face value. You could hire Pat Freecroft to front for the caper. And when Norma kidnaped him you'd be scared he might squeal on you."

"All of which applied equally well to Wally, as you yourself theorized."

"I was kidding you along," I said. "Wally had been left standing guard over Freecroft all afternoon. If he had wanted to croak him he would have done it while he was alone with him;

he wouldn't wait until there were possible witnesses on-stage. No, Wally was innocent.

"The only reason he scrambled from the cops was because he had tried to pull a fast one on them. He knew about the duplicate stateroom sets; and he realized that if Freecroft really had been murdered, the corpse would be found in the other stateroom sooner or later.

"He may have thought his sister had something to do with the kill and he wanted to protect her. So he tried to get me pinched, tried to brush everybody out of the studio so he could dispose of the corpus delicti. When this didn't pan out, he saw he was in a jam—so he powdered."

Terhune said, "You have everything neatly figured out, haven't you?"

"Yeah, including how you pulled the bump-off. When you received Norma's telephone message and learned that she had Freecroft locked up on a sound stage set, you decided to cool him before he could stool on you. You rushed to Del-Lux, sneaked in unseen and stuck a shiv in the Britisher's back. Then, much later, you showed yourself; pretended you were just arriving.

"Actually you'd been there quite a while. Long enough to commit two murders. Annie must have eye-witnessed the Freecroft kill; therefore you had to break her neck so she couldn't testify you into the smokehouse."

"Are you through, gumshoe?"

I said, "Not quite. I needed a clincher to prove you were the guilty ginzo. And I got it by tricking you. I told you I intended to frisk Freecroft's hotel room for the note and the reel. I told you how ashamed he was of the joint he lived in; how he kept its location a secret. I deliberately neglected to give you the address—and yet you drove me spang to the door. That was more guilty knowledge; a final nail in your casket."

"A bad blunder," he admitted.

"Bad enough. And the accident of Cecil stowing away with us—that gave me bait for my trap. While I was in the rear compartment with him, knocking him out, I slipped the clip of shells out of my gat and then handed it to you. Empty. I knew you would follow

me up here to this room. I knew you would crack down on me and try to take the reel and the note away from me. I was waiting for you and now I've got you. Drop the roscoe, Curly; it has no slugs in it."

"You're wrong."

I stared at him. "Drop it. I'm coming at you, pal. I'm going to take you."

"Stand still. This isn't your empty gun. This automatic is my own. And it's loaded."

"Like that, eh?"

"Like that, Nick. I've killed twice tonight. You'll be number three on my death parade. Sorry, Sherlock. It's your life or mine. Say hello to the devil for me."

I dropped flat as he squeezed his trigger. The cannon sneezed, *Ka-Chow!* and a red ribbon of flame streaked to where my skull had been an instant ago. Then, from the doorway, a heavier gun belled thunderously, its echoes bouncing off the walls of the room.

It was a service .38 in Ole Brunvig's fist. Ole's bullet took Terhune in the

back, dead center; knocked him down as if he'd been hit by an invisible sledgehammer. He fell flat on his mush; quivered once. A .38 token through your spine can be very permanent indeed.

I said, "Thanks, Ole. You must have got the message I phoned to headquarters from the lobby downstairs."

"They short-waved it to my car radio. I got here just in time to hear the guy confess. And to save your life," he grinned bleakly.

I gave him back his grin with compound interest. "I've already thanked you. What more do you want, gold medals?" Then I barged toward the door. "You clean up the details chum. I've had enough and I'm hauling bunions."

"Oh, yeah? Where?"

"To find the Delwyn muffin, give her back her reel and the forged note. I want to let her know her brother is in the clear—and I crave to collect my fee for services rendered."

He wagged his head. "Fee, fee, fee! Don't you ever think about anything but money, Hawkshaw?"

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A NOVELET OF SUSPENSE

By **BENTON BRADEN**

*Jeff might have guessed
a murder came with the
bargain when he started
across Texas in that car
a stranger had paid him
cash to take!*



The SILENT

CHAPTER I

ROLLING HOME

LAS VEGAS, Nevada, doesn't exactly throw out the welcoming mat for a hitchhiker with three bucks in his pocket. That omission didn't bother Jeff Baxter as he stood on the corner of the brilliantly lighted street and waved cheerily at the truck

driver who had picked him up at Victorville, California, and brought him across the desert. Jeff watched until the truck had turned a corner and disappeared.

Even though Jeff was fifteen hundred miles from home and practically broke he wasn't worrying. All he had to do

Jeff swung him around
just as she fired



PASSENGER

was get back to Tulsa and big Jim Healy would give him a job and enough dough to tide him over to payday. Big Jim was a driller who had run a shoe-string up to five million, a big-hearted guy who had never been known to let down an old friend. And Jeff Baxter

was a good worker. He could dress tools, keep the pumps going on a producing lease, work as a roustabout if it was necessary.

Jeff's trouble was that he had itching feet and wouldn't stay put long. That explained his present situation. Jeff

looked up and grinned at the blazing lights. He was about thirty, lanky, and a mass of blond hair topped his good-natured face.

Jeff blinked at the lights and said aloud, "They sure don't spare the juice in this town."

If Las Vegas doesn't welcome impetuous strangers, it likewise doesn't ask questions of them. The first floor gambling houses have their doors wide open and ask for no financial statements from visitors. So Jeff strolled across the street and walked into the Golden Nugget.

Jeff had no idea that his arrival in Las Vegas had attracted the slightest attention. He was unaware that a short, dark-complexioned man with a diamond stickpin in his tie had watched curiously as Jeff had alighted from the truck. Now the short man crossed the street and also entered the Golden Nugget.

Jeff watched a blackjack game for a minute, then went on to a crap table. His eyes brightened as he watched the dice roll. It was hard to keep that three bucks in his pocket.

Jeff looked on for almost thirty minutes, then shrugged his shoulders and turned away.

The sides of the big room were lined with slot machines. Scores of tourists who had no stomach for the sterner stuff were cheerfully donating to the bandits. Jeff watched a man drop ten quarters into one of them without getting a return. Jeff figured that machine was about due to pay off. He pulled two quarters from his pocket, played them. Still no payoff. Jeff took a step backward.

"I think you're goin' to hit there, buddy, right away. Here's a couple more quarters. Drop 'em in and we'll split if you win."

Jeff turned and looked at the short man who had spoken to him. The man was well dressed, and the diamond stickpin in his tie was more than a carat. Jeff took the quarters. On the second pay the machine disgorged twelve quarters.

"That's a buck and a half apiece," the short man said quickly. "Let it go at that. When you get ahead of one of those machines, it's time to quit. You

a stranger in Las Vegas, too? A tourist like me?"

"I wouldn't exactly say I'm a tourist," Jeff replied, chuckling. "Just passing through. Heading east."

"Driving?"

"No. At least not my own car," Jeff said frankly. "I got pretty low on funds in L.A. so I decided to get back to Tulsa where I have friends and can get a job. I'll hitch rides when I can get 'em."

"H'mm." The short man blinked, then looked thoughtful for a moment. "I might make a deal with you. I've got a little problem of my own. I've been combinin' business with pleasure on this trip. I'm in the air-conditioning business. This morning I heard a new hotel is going to be built here. Talked to a man about the air-conditioning end of it. He was interested in the proposition I put up to him. I'd clear about ten thousand if the deal went through so I don't like to walk off and leave it. On the other hand I have to be in Dallas Saturday for a conference. I can't stay here a couple of days and make it if I drive. But I could fly and make it if I had somebody to drive my car through. What's your business, friend?"

"I'm a tool dresser," Jeff told him. "I've worked for big Jim Healy a lot. You may have heard of him."

"I have," the short man said glibly. "You got a driver's license?"

"Yes." Jeff took his wallet from his pocket and showed his driver's license.

THE short man studied it a moment, then nodded his head. "That's okay, Baxter. I've got a new Buick coupe. If you want to drive it through for me and leave it at the Fairmont Garage there, I'll stay here and try to close this deal, then fly back."

"It'd be a break for me," Jeff admitted.

"It's a deal, then. My name is John Hayward. You said you were low on funds. I'll give you fifty bucks. That ought to get the car to Dallas and you on to Tulsa."

"Easily," Jeff said.

"When do you want to start? You can dodge some heat by driving on to Williams or Flagstaff tonight. If you're not too tired."

"I'm not," Jeff denied. "I got a ride over here in a truck and dozed all the way. I'd rather get on to Flagstaff before I hit a bed. It'll be cool there."

They left the Golden Nugget, and the short man took Jeff down the street a block and stopped where a shining Buick coupe stood. He took the car keys from his pocket and handed them to Jeff.

"When you get to Dallas just leave the car at the Fairmont garage and they'll take care of it for me," the short man said. He opened the door of the coupe and took out a suitcase. "I'll need this." He took out his wallet, removed two twenties and a ten, gave them to Jeff. "Just changed the oil and the gas tank is about full so you're ready to go."

An hour later Jeff Baxter had rolled through Boulder City, driven over the dam, and was well on his way to Kingman. It was fairly cool out here on the near desert at night, and Jeff was congratulating himself. It had been an almost unbelievable break for him when he had met the prosperous Mr. John Hayward. Now he was riding in an almost new car that was performing perfectly and he had better than fifty bucks in his pocket. Jeff was so enthused with his good fortune that it did not occur to him that Mr. Hayward's knowledge of air-conditioning might have been limited to occasional visits to a movie theater.

Jeff stopped in Kingman for a cup of coffee, filled his tank with gas, and sped east on Route 66. He didn't make another stop until he reached Flagstaff. There he stopped at a modest motel and slept eight hours. It was almost dark by the time he had eaten his dinner and started eastward again.

The sun was high the next morning as Jeff approached a small town in Texas, and he was beginning to tire. A sign at the side of the road said, "Stone City, Population 6000."

Jeff drove on into the town. As he reached the business district a truck pulled out of an alley and Jeff had to brake sharply. His tires shrieked a little—and the right front one blew out. The car swerved and careened a bit but it was already slowed to thirty miles and Jeff had no difficulty in holding it

while it rolled to a stop at the side of the street.

He got out and looked at the blown out tire. Jeff frowned. That tire looked just as new as the others. According to the speedometer it had only five thousand miles on it. Jeff grinned again. After all, he was not entitled to complain just because he would have to change a tire. He took the car keys and went back to open the rear compartment to get at the spare tire.

Jeff frowned again. He tried both the keys again and again but they didn't work. He concluded that the lock must have been jammed or stuck in some way. He looked up at the buildings and saw that he was almost in front of a Buick agency. He went in, found the service manager, asked that a man be sent out to repair the tire and replace it. Jeff explained that he hadn't been able to unlock the rear compartment and get at the spare.

A few minutes later a man came out into the street, removed the right front wheel from the Buick, and rolled it inside. He pried the tire off the wheel and pulled out the tube.

"You got a bad inside cut in this casing," he told Jeff as he pointed. "Somebody put a boot over it and did a poor job of it. It's a wonder you got two hundred miles on that tire. I wouldn't even try to repair it. You'll have to have a new casing. I can patch the tube."

Jeff looked closely at the inside of the casing. The break didn't look like one that had been caused by the tire striking a sharp object such as a rock. It looked like it might have been cut with a knife, a long, diagonal, deep cut.

"Go ahead and fix me up with a new casing," Jeff nodded.

The service manager had come up and looked at the tire. "I've got some extra keys here," he announced. "Just a chance that one of 'em might unlock that rear compartment of yours. You might need that spare pretty bad if you had a flat out on the road. I'll go out and see what I can do."

It was about three minutes before Jeff had picked one of the new tires that the man rolled out for his inspection. Then he turned and went back out

to the street. Just as he reached the sidewalk he saw the service manager raise the lid of the rear compartment.

"It was the last key I had that did the trick," the service manager called out. "Mighty lucky I had one that—"

The service manager's mouth dropped open and his eyes bulged. He took a quick look at Jeff and slammed the lid of the compartment shut. He turned and sprinted back into the building. He was back in the street in five seconds and he held a .45 pistol in his hand.

"Call the cops!" he yelled as he leveled the gun at Jeff. "Don't you make a move, Mister, or I'll blow a hole through you. No wonder you didn't want to open that rear compartment, you killer. You didn't want anyone to see that dead man you got folded up in there!"

CHAPTER II

THE WRONG MAN?



JEFF was so stunned he couldn't have moved or spoken even if he hadn't been covered with the gun. He stood there until the sheriff and a deputy rolled up. The deputy took charge of Jeff while the sheriff and the service manager went to the rear of the Buick and lifted the lid of the compartment. The deputy prodded Jeff with a gun and they moved to the rear of the car.

Jeff saw a shoe first, then a leg, then a gray suit that clothed the jack-knifed body of a man.

"What's your name?" the sheriff demanded.

"Jeff Baxter."

"Where do you live?"

"Tulsa—mostly."

"What's the dead man's name?"

"I don't know," Jeff replied.

"Now there's no use stallin'," the sheriff said harshly. "Anybody can guess what happened. You were hitch-hiking and this man picked you up. You repaid him for his kindness by knocking him in the head and taking over."

"It was a flat tire that upset the appiecart," the service manager said importantly. "He came in here and asked

us to repair a tire and put it back on the wheel. Said he couldn't get this compartment unlocked. I crossed him up when I was lucky enough to have a key that unlocked it. He probably planned to drive on somewhere and ditch the car, figurin' that nobody would ever be able to tie him up to the murder."

"You don't claim that this is your car?" the sheriff asked Jeff.

"No," Jeff told him. "The man who asked me to drive it through to Dallas said his name was John Hayward."

"And where did you meet this John Hayward?"

"Las Vegas, Nevada."

"Got any witnesses to testify that he turned this car over to you to drive to Dallas?"

"No," Jeff admitted. "I met him in a gambling house, the Golden Nugget. I was playing a slot machine when he came up and spoke to me."

"What time of day was that?"

"After midnight. It must have been nearly one."

"What time did you leave Las Vegas in this car?"

"About one-thirty."

"You mean to tell us you met a perfect stranger and in thirty minutes or so he lets you take his car and start out on the road with it. That's about the weakest yarn I ever heard, Baxter. Who else did you meet or talk to in Las Vegas?"

"No one," Jeff had to admit.

"How long were you there?"

"Not much over an hour, I guess," Jeff said. "I got a ride on a truck from Victorville to Las Vegas. When I left the truck I walked into the Golden Nugget to look around. I watched a crap game for a few minutes and then I met this John Hayward and—"

"We're just wastin' time here!" the sheriff snapped. "He wouldn't tell where this John Hayward really picked him up. Bet he wasn't in Las Vegas at all. The guy that owned this car picked him up on the road somewhere. We'll take him up to the office. Sooner or later he'll get all tangled up in his lies and have to come through with the truth."

Thirty minutes later Jeff Baxter was sitting in a wooden chair in the sheriff's

office with his back to the wall. The sheriff and prosecuting attorney sat in front of him. A score of other people had crowded into the small room.

The sheriff was disappointed in one respect as they plied Jeff with questions. Jeff told his story over and over and didn't vary in any of the details. He realized that his story sounded more like fiction than fact but he didn't flinch when they ridiculed his statements and branded the facts as preposterous and incredible.

A deputy sheriff came in and interrupted the questioning. "Look what we found in the car, sheriff," he yelled. "There was a cut in the upholstery in the back of the seat at the left side. This stuff was jammed down in there. Here's a fine wrist watch and a wallet with a hundred dollars in it. John Hayward's driving license and some lodge cards. And here's the key that opens that rear compartment. The dead man is John Hayward all right but this Hayward never turned that Buick over to Baxter to drive through."

"Why don't you tell the truth, Baxter, and get the whole thing off your chest?" the sheriff said. "Where did Hayward pick you up? Where was it that you hit him on the head, then stopped the car, and jammed his body into that rear compartment? You know you never met Hayward in Las Vegas."

"I can see now that I didn't," Jeff answered steadily. "But I met a man in Las Vegas who said his name was John Hayward and he gave me fifty dollars to drive that car through to Dallas."

"Describe the man you say hired you to drive the car through."

"He was short, dark-complexioned, dark brown hair, a little heavy for his height."

"That's a fair description of John Hayward, Baxter. The real John Hayward, the dead man." There was disgust in the sheriff's tone. "Looks like you could have been a little more original and at least have described a different man. We're not going to waste any more time on you. We'll take you up to a cell and you can think things over while Dillman, here, is preparing a charge of murder against you. Dillman can convict you before any jury on the

evidence we've already got. You thought you were safe, that you'd ditch the car somewhere and no one could ever connect you with the job. You even threw the piece of pipe you hit him with in the back of the car with the body. We found it there."

Jeff wasn't disturbed in his cell the next day. But one of the jailors told him that the widow of John Hayward had arrived by plane and made identification of the body. The jailor also said that Hicks, the sheriff, and Dillman, the prosecutor, had phoned Las Vegas police in an effort to trace John Hayward's movements. They had found out that Hayward, the real John Hayward, had left Los Angeles in the Buick on the morning of the same day that Jeff had left. Hayward, in so far as they knew, had driven alone.

IN THE afternoon of the second day, Jeff was removed from his cell and taken to a room where Hicks and Dillman were waiting. There was a third man with them, a tall, stern-faced man in his sixties with snowy white hair. It was the latter who spoke first.

"My name is Jonathan Crane. I'm your lawyer."

"You mean," Jeff asked, "that the court has appointed you to defend?"

"No. I've been employed by a friend of yours who read about the case in the paper this morning. Man by the name of Jim Healy in Tulsa. Called me on the phone. Said you wouldn't kill a flea. Said he was ready to lay a million in cash on the line that you didn't kill Hayward. Must be a pretty good friend of yours."

"He is," Jeff smiled.

"What he thinks doesn't mean a thing to me." Jonathan Crane raised his voice and it came in a booming baritone that seemed to shake the walls. "Healy dared me to prove you were the killer, and I'm going to take him up. Now you answer my questions and you'd better tell the truth."

For an hour Jonathan Crane shot questions at Jeff. His voice roared in the room as he tried to shake Jeff's story, tried to trick him into the wrong answers. At last Crane leaned back in his chair and shook the heavy white

locks on his head.

"You got the wrong man, boys," he said quietly. "This lad isn't the killer. He's the fall guy."

"That's just your opinion," Dillman snapped. "I've got an almost airtight case against him."

"Airtight? Your case is full of holes," Jonathan Crane snorted. "I've already talked to Harry Lane who took that tire off the Buick. He said it looked like that tire had been fixed so it would blow out. Looked like it had been cut with a knife and the boot put in so it would hold it for only a few miles. Didn't see how Baxter got from Las Vegas to Stone City on it. Then Lou Jones, the service manager, told Baxter that he had some keys and would try to unlock that rear compartment. If Baxter had been guilty, known that the dead man was locked up in that compartment, he'd never have let Lou try a key on it. But Baxter didn't come out until Lou was putting his last key in the lock."

"He didn't dare protest," Dillman objected. "Besides he figured there wasn't one chance in a hundred that Lou would have a key that would work that lock. I don't care what you think, Crane. Baxter will be tried for murder!"

Jonathan Crane smiled broadly. "Where, Dillman?" he asked. "As I understand it, from the small knowledge that I have gleaned in forty years of criminal practice, a man must be tried for murder in the state and the county where the crime was committed. You'll certainly never prosecute the case, because it is obvious that the murder was not committed in Texas. It could hardly have been committed in New Mexico, according to Doc Webb's opinion. John Hayward may have been murdered in California, Nevada, or Arizona. The authorities in those states won't try to extradite until they're convinced they have jurisdiction. Looks to me as though you have quite a little problem there, Dillman."

Dillman frowned heavily and rubbed his chin. "I'll put a charge against him and hold him here until a thorough investigation can be made."

"That's reasonable," Jonathan Crane said affably. "In the meantime, as I am

convinced that Baxter is innocent, I'll get out a habeas corpus."

"I'll fight it!" Dillman said angrily. "You don't think I'll agree that he be turned loose, do you?"

"Of course, not, Dillman. But it may take months to get at the real facts of this crime. I think I can prove to the court that this case against Baxter is pretty weak. It follows that Baxter ought to be released on bond."

Dillman frowned again and looked thoughtful. He could see that if Jeff Baxter held to his story and no further evidence was uncovered the case was going to be a headache to him. None of those other states was going to be enthusiastic about indicting Baxter without definite evidence that the murder had been committed within its jurisdiction. From Dillman's angle, if Baxter were lying, he might have committed the murder in Colorado or any other state within two days' driving distance. In any event, there would have to be a long and tedious investigation.

The result was that Jeff Baxter sat in Jonathan Crane's office the next morning, temporarily a free man.

"I caught Dillman off guard a little," the old lawyer chuckled. "He doesn't know too much law and didn't know just what to do. He finally agreed to set bail at twenty-five thousand, thinking you wouldn't be able to furnish that kind of bond. Your friend, Jim Healy, had a surety company wire their agent here to make the bond and here you are.

"But," Crane said sternly as he pointed a big forefinger at Jeff, "don't get the idea you're in the clear. They'll check your story. They'll probably find that truck driver who brought you from Victorville to Las Vegas. If the Las Vegas officers find any evidence that John Hayward was murdered in that city, they'll issue a warrant for you and pick you up right off. You know what public sentiment is against hitchhikers who rob and kill. The average jury wouldn't look much beyond the fact that the dead owner of the car was stowed away in the rear compartment and you were driving the car. In other words, it'd only take an ounce more of evidence to put you in the Nevada gas chamber. I think that's what they use out there."

"I can see that," Jeff nodded.

"I explained all this to your friend, Jim Healy, over the phone last night," Crane said. "Healy wired me a fee. He also wired five hundred dollars for you. He said for you to get busy, beat the officers to the evidence. He said for you to get busy and prove your innocence. Said to hire a detective if you needed one and to call him if you ran out of cash. That's good advice and you're lucky to have a friend like Healy. So get busy, Baxter. After all, you know more about this case than anyone except the man who actually murdered Hayward. If you'll do some hard thinking, you ought to be able to find an angle to work on."

CHAPTER III

AMATEUR SLEUTH



DURING the next few hours Jeff did some hard thinking. His first idea was that he should go back to Las Vegas and try to check on the man who had turned over the Buick to him. But sound reasoning told him that the fake

John Hayward wouldn't have lingered long there. Furthermore, that man was sure he hadn't left any trail that could be followed from Las Vegas. It was reasonable to assume that the killer had got a ride with the real John Hayward when the latter had left Los Angeles. He had killed Hayward somewhere on one of those lonely stretches of road on the desert leading to Las Vegas.

That man hadn't been any ordinary hitchhiker. He had been well-dressed and he had worn a valuable diamond stickpin in his tie. A hitchhiker who had turned killer would have left the car somewhere and walked off. Neither had that man been an ordinary killer with robbery as his sole motive. A robber would never have forked over fifty dollars of his take to Jeff; he would have ditched the car somewhere and vanished.

That fake John Hayward had needed a fall guy for his purpose and had gone to some trouble and slight risk to get

one. He had fixed that right front tire, figuring that Jeff wouldn't get far, that he'd probably be hauled right back to Las Vegas and charged with the murder. That man must have a motive that went deeper than simple robbery. His purpose in involving Jeff was to cover up that motive, to take suspicion off the real parties who had profited by the murder. Jeff felt sure that the real motive behind the murder of John Hayward hadn't originated in California or Nevada.

The real John Hayward had been a resident of Burford, Texas. His widow, who had flown from there to make identification of the body, had taken the body back to Burford for burial.

Early next evening, Jeff alighted from a bus in Burford, Texas, a town of about five thousand population. He stepped into a cigar store to get some information and without so much as asking a question, got some quick information as well. John Hayward had been buried that afternoon, and his murder was a principal subject for discussion. A tall, red-faced man was speaking forcefully.

"It's a good thing that hitchhiker that killed Hayward didn't blow out his tire in this town. There'd been a quick necktie party. The nerve of him! Killin' Hayward, stuffin' him in the back of the car, and then drivin' on as cool as a cucumber. They say he lived in Tulsa. If they hadn't caught him in Stone City, he'd have driven on up into Oklahoma and parked that Buick somewhere and walked off. Chances are they'd never have caught up with him. He'd been careful to wipe off any fingerprints from the car. Anybody that picks up a hitchhiker these days is crazy. But Hayward was a nice, easy-goin' fellow who couldn't pass 'em up, and it cost him his life."

Another man took it up from there. In fifteen minutes Jeff, with no more effort than listening, found out that John Hayward had owned farms and buildings in Burford of a total value of something like two hundred thousand dollars, that his widow's name was Ethel and they had no children, that Mrs. Ethel Hayward would inherit everything, that Ethel was about forty years old, that she was not very well liked by

other ladies in the town but that they were all standing by her in this hour of distress.

During the next three days Jeff Baxter found out a great deal more about the Haywards. It appeared that since the death of her husband Mrs. Hayward was not seeing anyone but her lawyer, Henry Finch whose office she visited every day. Jeff got a good look at her once when a resident of Burford pointed her out as she left Finch's office. Jeff thought Finch might be the lead he was looking for. Finch might have defended criminals who would have undertaken a kill for him, particularly if he had something on one of them.

Jeff was disappointed on that angle. Finch's practice was wholly restricted to civil cases. He had an excellent reputation in the community.

Jeff visited the beer joints and the small road house just beyond the city and got a line on the criminal element of Burford. There were several who had done time and a few others who had bad reputations. But when Jeff looked them over he found none that resembled the fake John Hayward of Las Vegas. Further inquiries convinced him that the killer wasn't a Burford man.

Jeff felt that he wasn't getting anywhere but he was determined to leave no stone unturned. He decided to check the real John Hayward's background to see if he could turn up a lead there. He contacted some of Hayward's close friends, tried to make his inquiries seem casual. One of those friends, a Richard Barton, proved to be the talkative type, fond of elaborating on small details.

"Hayward was a quiet fellow," Barton said. "He was worth a couple of hundred thousand dollars but you'd never guess it to look at him. He was conservative about everything. Always wore plain blue suits and nothing else. But I guess everyone has a streak of vanity in him. Hayward had one. He had a diamond pin that he always wore in his tie. Never saw him without it."

A vision of the fake John Hayward flashed across Jeff's mind. The impostor had been wearing a diamond pin in his tie. Perhaps he also had a streak of vanity in him that he couldn't quite suppress. Jeff had difficulty in conceal-

ing his excitement when he spoke.

"But the story I read in the papers didn't say anything about a diamond tie pin," he said. "The story said they found his wallet with all his cards in it and a wrist watch. It didn't say anything—"

"Hayward didn't have that diamond pin when he was killed," Barton interrupted to explain. "He had been in Los Angeles about ten days. He wrote his wife that he had lost it two days after he reached there. So, naturally, it wasn't mentioned as a factor in the case after she explained that."

It took Jeff ten minutes to get away from the loquacious Mr. Barton. But here, from an unexpected source, he had got the break he was looking for. Ethel Hayward had been lying about that diamond pin. Hayward had never written her that he had lost it in Los Angeles. Ethel didn't want that diamond pin publicized. Why?

Jeff wanted to find out all he could about Ethel Hayward and he wanted to do it quickly. Jeff had already inspected the Hayward residence. It was a comfortable brick house, located on a spacious corner lot. There was a small neat white cottage on the next lot east. Jeff found out that an elderly widow, a Mrs. Logan, lived there alone. He went to a drug store, bought a box of fine soap, went to Mrs. Logan's house and rapped on her door.

Mrs. Logan, a plump, gray-haired lady in her seventies, surveyed him curiously when she opened the door. Jeff took a step inside and placed the box of soap in her hands.

"Mrs. Logan," he told her, "you have been elected by our company to receive a box of our finest soap. No obligation whatever. Just use it and if you like it you can tell your friends what fine soap it is."

"Why, thank you," she smiled. "You're sure that you won't ask me to pay for it later?"

"It's absolutely free, Mrs. Logan," he assured her. "Just a form of advertising our product. I have some more to give away and I'd appreciate it if you'd recommend some of your neighbors. Now this large brick house on the corner. Do you think the lady who lives there might

appreciate a gift like this?"

Mrs. Logan's face clouded a little.

"I doubt if she would," she replied. "Her name is Mrs. Hayward. She always slams the door in the faces of salesmen. She probably wouldn't even talk to you. Besides, she's had a tragedy lately. You may have heard about it. Her husband was murdered by a hitch-hiker. It was terrible. I don't think you'd better call on her at this time."

"I hadn't heard about it," Jeff said. "I'm a stranger in town."

Mrs. Logan was eager to tell the details of the tragedy. Jeff found himself sitting in a chair and learning much about the life of the Haywards.

"Mrs. Hayward worked in a millinery shop here when they were married," Mrs. Logan began. "They'd been married just four years."

"She'd lived here a long time?"

"No. She'd only been here a few months."

"Where did she come from?"

"I couldn't tell you that," Mrs. Logan replied. "She always changed the subject when anyone asked about her past. I understand she told some ladies who tried to pin her down that her early life hadn't been pleasant and she didn't want to talk about it."

"It seems strange, that after four years, nobody would know where she came from," Jeff observed.

The old lady leaned forward and lowered her voice, spoke in the tone of one who is imparting a choice bit of gossip. "I think I know where she came from," she said. "I think she came from Illinois."

"She let something slip, sometime when she talked to you?"

Mrs. Logan shook her head. "No, she didn't let anything slip. But one day the postman delivered a letter here by mistake. Her number is 415 and mine is 413 and the person who wrote the letter was a poor writer so the five looked like a three. I just happened," she smiled knowingly, "to notice the postmark and the return address. It was from Joliet, Illinois."

"There was a name on the return address?"

"No. It was printed. Just a box number."

"What was Mrs. Hayward's name before she was married?"

"Estill. Ethel Estill."

That was all the pertinent information that Mrs. Logan could give him, Jeff found out, after half an hour. It wasn't until he was half way to town that he recalled something. Hadn't he heard or read somewhere that there was a penitentiary at Joliet, Illinois? And didn't institutions like that just use a box number on their printed stationery?

Jeff left for Dallas late that night and when he arrived sent a wire to a nationally known detective agency in Chicago. He received a reply the next afternoon:

JOLIET RECORDS SHOW A DAN ESTILL SERVED TERM FOR ARMED ROBBERY PAROLED TWO MONTHS AGO SHALL WE CHECK FURTHER

CHAPTER IV

JEFF WINDS IT UP



TWO days later Jeff Baxter was in Chicago, walking along a shabby street on the west side. He turned into a grimy building and went up a flight of stairs. For a moment he stood in the dark gloomy hall, then walked to the second door on his right. He listened, then rapped on the door. He waited about ten seconds and rapped again. He heard feet shuffling. The door opened.

Jeff smiled very faintly and it was a grim smile. The man who stared at him didn't recognize him at once but Jeff recognized him. He was short, dark-complexioned, unsmiling.

"What do you want?" he growled.

"Several things," Jeff said. "First there is the matter of the diamond stick-pin you were wearing in Las Vegas. The pin that Mrs. John Hayward failed to squawk about when it wasn't with the watch and the wallet that you planted in that Buick. She knew you had held it out and she covered you by saying—"

That was enough for Dan Estill. He tried to kick the door shut but Jeff hit it with his shoulder and lunged into the room, driving Estill backward. Estill

was going for his gun. He got it in his hand but Jeff was on him, grabbing the gun with his left hand before Estill could get it up. In almost the same motion he smashed a hard right into Estill's face. The gun dropped and Estill staggered across the room, bringing up with a jolt against the wall.

Jeff picked up the gun and dropped it in his pocket. "You slipped up when you held out that diamond pin, Estill," he said. "When I went to Burford and found out that John Hayward always wore such a pin and that Ethel had covered up the fact that you had held it out, I knew I had the right lead. I knew Ethel had a friend somewhere who had done the job. Of course, I never suspected that she had a husband who had just done a stretch for armed robbery. She never bothered to get a divorce, did she? The marriage to Hayward was bigamous, wasn't it? You're still her husband, aren't you?"

"You know so many of the answers, you figure it out for yourself," Estill snarled.

"The whole play is simple enough to see now, Estill. Ethel went to Texas and got a job in Burford after you were sent up. She married Hayward for his dough. Ethel got bored with life in Burford. She decided she had just as well have that two hundred grand for herself, be free to have the dough and live the sort of life she preferred.

"She put it up to you to do the job when you got out. She tipped you about Hayward's impending trip to Los Angeles, gave you the name of his hotel, told you just how to do the job. You managed to meet Hayward out there, got him to give you a lift to Las Vegas. You killed him on the way there."

Estill didn't say anything, just stared at Jeff.

"But you had to have a fall guy," Jeff went on. "If you'd just ditched the car with Hayward's body in it, there would have been an all around investigation with some inspection of Ethel's angle because she would take his whole estate. But with a hitchhiker, caught with the car and the body, the cops wouldn't investigate too much. They'd just jump at conclusions and call it a day and Ethel wouldn't be bothered.

"You spotted me when I hopped off that truck in Las Vegas. From your viewpoint, I was made to order. You turned over the Buick to me and came on back to Chicago. You figured there wasn't a chance in a million for anyone to ever hook you up to the job."

Estill was still staring at Jeff, almost insolently. He didn't seem to be worried at all. "You overlooked a bet, Baxter," he said coolly.

"No thanks to you, Dan!" It was a woman's voice. Ethel stepped from the doorway that led into the rear hall. She had a gun in her hand and it was leveled at Jeff. "You did some good snooping down there in Burford—but I did a little snooping too. That's a small town and news gets around. You asked so many questions it got around there was a dick in town. I heard about it.

"I hadn't seen you but the sheriff at Stone City had printed you and taken your picture. He showed me the pictures. I spotted you on the street once and knew who the dick was. I also happened to see you when you called on that nosy old dame who lives next door to me. You were in her house so long I knew she had spilled something to you. When you left I went over and made her tell me everything she had told you. She admitted she had seen a letter Dan wrote me and noticed the postmark and return address. I knew you'd be smart enough to follow the lead.

"But it was the stickpin that tipped you off first. I could kill Dan for that. He's got the same weakness that Hayward had, nuts about diamonds, got to show off. He held it out when he should have planted it with the wallet and watch."

"I was low on funds," Dan Estill grumbled. "I held on to it so I'd have something to hock if I needed cash."

"And that little error will cost us two hundred grand—unless we can figure something out mighty quick," Ethel said stonily. "It's lucky I found out Baxter had left Burford. I figured he'd come up here and find you. I beat him to it by an hour."

"What are we waiting for?" Dan Estill demanded. "Let him have it and let's get out of here."

"I'll do the thinking for both of us

from here on out, Dan," she said. "A shot might bring the cops before we could get clear. You can tie him up while I hold the gun on him. Then we'll leave him here."

"Just one small question," Jeff asked. "Do you leave me here dead or alive?"

"Go 'round behind him and get hold of him, Dan," she ordered, ignoring Jeff's question.

Jeff had an idea what would happen. The minute Dan got behind him and grabbed his arms Ethel would step in and hit him over the head with the gun. They'd finish him somehow without making any noise. Jeff decided he wouldn't wait for that.

He let Dan take two steps and start to sidle around behind him. Then Jeff leaped. Ethel swung her gun over, fired—and missed. Jeff grabbed Dan and swung him around just as Ethel fired again. Jeff felt Dan's body jerk a little as the slug found the wrong target. Ethel let out a scream and tried to work to the side to get in a clean shot at Jeff. Jeff met that maneuver by charging straight at her with Dan's body in his arms as a shield.

ETHEL lost her nerve, turned and streaked for the door. She ran into a big man who was coming into the room. The big man caught her, took the gun away from her and shoved her over against the wall. Jeff let go of Dan who dropped to the floor, moaning.

"Looks like you got into a little trouble here," the big man said to Jeff.

"I did," Jeff admitted. "Are you a cop?"

"You might say I am. My name is Flexner. Sam Flexner. You're not a bad detective, Baxter, except you never bother to see if you are being tailed. I was on the plane with you from Dallas. I was on the train with you from Burford to Dallas. I was on the bus with you from Stone City to Burford. Dillman wasn't as dumb as you thought he was. He could have kept you from getting out on bond. But he wanted to give you a little rope. He thought that if you were guilty you'd give yourself away. Or just run for it.

"My instructions were to tail you, find out where you went, maybe get you drunk and get you to talk later. Well, when you went to Burford and started nosing around I figured you were innocent, honestly trying to break the case. I just hung on. I saw you come into this building. Of course, I had no idea that Ethel Hayward had tumbled and got here ahead of you."

"I didn't either," Jeff said. "She was in the bedroom back there. After I had disarmed Estill she walked in and put her gun on me. I suppose she'll have a story ready, claim that I got her to come here—"

"Won't do her any good," Flexner grunted. "I had come on up the stairs. I stood outside and heard practically everything that was said. They're a cinch to get convicted of murder in Las Vegas—unless Estill wants to confess the job was done on the California side. Now, I'm a deputy sheriff, Baxter, even if I am a little bit outside my bailiwick. I'll just stay here and take charge while you run out and hunt a cop."

AMAZING THING! *By Cooper*

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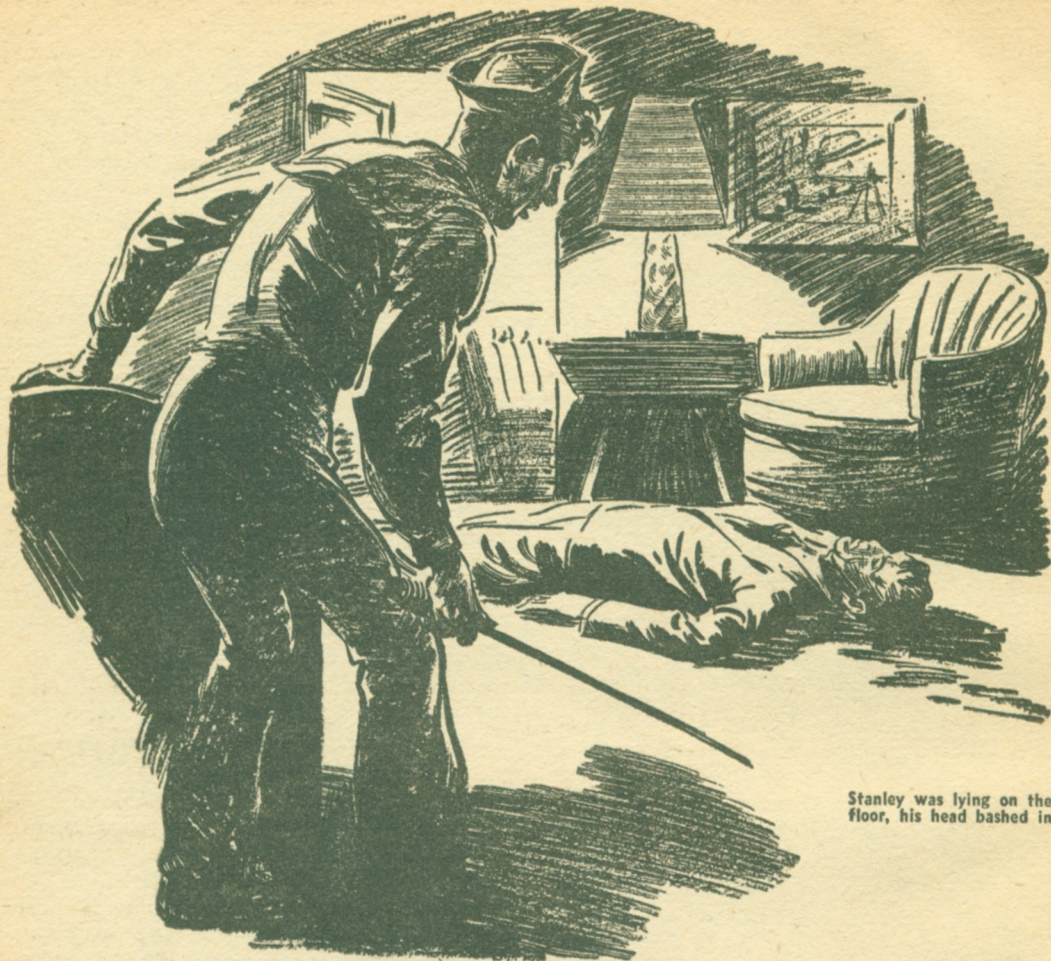
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Stanley was lying on the floor, his head bashed in

FRISCO FOUL-UP

By DONN MULLALLY

THE chaplain on our flat-top would have been proud of me. Here was Kirkpatrick, clean and sober after four hours of his first Stateside liberty in a year. No hard liquor or dames; strictly a recruiting poster sailor. So I was perched on a high wooden stool at the end of a bar that had done duty on

the Barbary Coast. So this was a waterfront joint. I could've been doing a lot worse. In San Francisco—I'm not kidding.

I was minding my beer and my own business when the parrot-faced bartender eased up to his side of the mahogany. "Chief," he said in a loud, nasal

Chief Boatswain Kirkpatrick gets into a fine kettle of fish when he attempts to keep one of his boys out of the drink!

whisper, "do me a favor?"

This could lead to anything, but I said, "Yeah?" with plenty of reverse English on the question mark.

He jerked a fat thumb toward the far end of the bar. "There's a sailor down here I'm afraid's gonna cause me some trouble, Chief."

"Why tell me?"

The bartender batted his pop eyes a couple times. "Why—I—thought—" he stammered.

"Look," I told him. "Don't let these five hash marks fool you. I'm not the sea-pappy of every boot in the Navy. You sold him the booze—you worry about him!"

He backed away from me, his jaw and hooked nose working together. "Okay," he snarled, "I'll call the Shore Patrol!"

He would, too. He was that kind of a guy. He'd keep serving liquor to any kid who wandered into his dive, until the punk was broke or unconscious. Then yell for the cops.

"Go ahead," I shrugged, sipping my beer, "call the Shore Patrol—and I hope they slap an Out of Bounds sticker on your door."

That slowed him down. I'd hit him where he lived—the cash register. His eyes got small, glittered as he figured the percentages. It was five o'clock on a Saturday afternoon; the kid and I had a corner on his trade. With no Navy he'd be out of business.

He turned and waddled angrily over the slats to the other end of the bar. The kid's end. One poor, little sailor who was causing about as much trouble as a bundle of old dry cleaning. I saw Fat Boy grab the collar of the lad's jumper, jerk him off the stool. Right there Daniel Kirkpatrick, Chief Boatswain's Mate, U.S.N., lost his taste for beer. Temporarily. The kid's face, a gray mask in the freak light from the neon in back of the bar, rang a bell.

I knew I had to have a part in this rhubarb.

WHEN I got back there, the barkeep still had the sailor by the collar, waltzing him in a circle on his rubbery legs, his arms milling empty air.

"Knock it off!" I said.

The boy sagged, his jumper choking

him as he grinned sheepishly. "Hi, Chief."

"You don't look so good in there, Verducci," I said. Over the kid's shoulder I could see the bartender's florid face, a vein standing out big on his forehead. "This is one of my boys," I explained. "I'll take care of him."

"He's all yours," the man said.

With that he let go of the kid and we fell into a clinch. Me and Angelo Verducci. I had a choice of holding him up all night or finding a place where he could lie down. So I walked him to the gin-mill next door and dropped him in the first empty booth. I thought maybe black coffee was the ticket.

But Verducci was having no mud. He gurgled that he wanted a boilermaker, which he needed like I need another head. However, Kirkpatrick had nursed too many drunks in his life to argue.

"Okay, kid," I told him, "we'll have one for the road, then I'll take you home."

I had to promise the barmaid on my Sea Scout oath that I'd look out for the lad, before she'd bring the drink. I watched him scuttle that boilermaker like an old China hand.

"What gives with you, Verdooch," I wanted to know. "What're you celebrating? Somebody leave you a million bucks?"

The black curly hair hanging over his eyes made him look like a Kerry terrier. But unhappy. "What's it to ya?" he hiccuped.

"Not a damn thing," I admitted. "But if you got misery you want to unload, I can let you use an ear."

Even drunk, he was a handsome kid—in a strictly pastrami way. Dark eyes and skin, rounded features, maybe not quite enough chin, but well-built. Right then his head acted a little loose on its mooring.

"Why should I tell you?" he blurted.

I got to my feet. "Okay," I said. "That's settled. Let's go."

But he dragged me down into the booth again. His face was close to mine; breath one hundred proof. "Kirkpatrick," he whispered so nobody across the Bay could hear him, "I'm gonna kill a guy."

"There's a rumor out that you can get

the gas chamber for that, Verdooch."

"I don't care, Chief." He wobbled his head.

"You've got the proper attitude, sailor. Now how's for us shovin' off?"

"No!" barked Verducci, clamping on to my arm. "I wanna drink!" With his free hand he tossed a wad of crumpled bills on the table. "Buy a drink, Chief!"

I should've lowered the boom on him right then. But Verducci was a good kid, ordinarily. I'd had him in my division over six months and had an idea he'd make a pretty fair coxwain someday. Not like this.

While we were waiting for the girl to bring another beer-and-shot, I got my arm clear and helped him light a cigarette. I knew it was like trying to bail a whaleboat with an eye-cup, but I had a go at touting him off his idea.

"Lad," I said, "will you listen to old man Kirkpatrick? I've probably felt like killing a few more guys than you have. I don't know what your beef is; maybe if I did, I'd bear a hand. But—"

"I don't need your help," he growled.

"Sure, but—"

"You wanna know my beef, huh?" He was wrapped around my neck again, puffing in my face. "Awright, Chief, I'll tell ya!"

Well, he did. It seemed his wife worked for a big jeweler here in San Francisco. A Hugo Stanley; she was his private secretary. According to Verducci, she'd been putting in a lot of overtime in the boss' apartment and the local night spots. He'd heard about it from his folks while we were still selling Uncle Sugar's good will in the Mediterranean. When we got in, he'd gone direct to his wife to have it out.

"You should've seen her, Chief," Verducci mumbled. "I don't think she's been sober in a month. Y'know how a drunk gets?"

I looked at him and kept my mouth shut. I understood he thought it was Stanley's fault she was drinking, and that might be. But if this wing-ding of his was a sample, the little woman hadn't been exactly sheltered from booze.

Verdooch fumbled a picture out of his wallet; a snapshot of him and his wife. As much as you can tell from a

snap, Patricia was an attractive blond mouse, a head shorter than him, with a nice smile. I made all the usual comments about her trim appearance, handed the picture back.

"Look, kid," I told Verducci, hoping he was in a sentimental mood, "why don't you be a really big guy about this thing? Forget the kill talk. You got a sweet little wife there. So her foot slipped. How about you that time in Nice—yeah, I know—I saw you go in. Here's the point, kid, the meat. If you think Pat's an alcoholic, the best move you can make is to see she gets into a hospital."

It was a shame, but all I got from my boy was something he gurgled and which I took to be: "Kill the no-good—" and he passed out. Well, at least he was in no danger of following through on that, now.

I WAS so sure, I didn't ride down to the ship with him. I just poured him in a cab and told the driver where to deliver it. Verducci could square himself with the Officer of the Deck when they carried him aboard. I still had some plans for my night and they did not include wet-nursing a boot seaman.

It must've been about midnight when I got back to where I'd left the old *Bunker Hill*. She was tied up at Pier 5, looking like a society dowager at a slum kids' Christmas party. She was bigger than anything around there and, if you go for carriers the way I do, prettier. She hated the sludge and garbage washing against her gray sides.

I was glad to see her. It had been raining for the last hour, and my topcoat was heavy, cold. As I trotted up the floodlighted crew gangway, I had one thought in mind—a mug of fresh, hot coffee in the Chief's Mess. I could almost taste it.

I don't know why I had to think of Verducci at a time like that. But I did, just as I started down the ladder to the quarters. I went back and asked the Boatswain's Mate of the Watch if my boy was on board. He checked the division liberty cards. No Verducci.

The J.O.D. looked at me kind of funny when I saluted him again and said: "Permission to go ashore, sir?"

He was a tender young jay-gee. "Shove off," he said with a smile.

I'd started running down the gangway when he yelled after me: "Hey, Chief, if she's got a friend, I rate liberty tomorrow!"

I waved, kept going.

The Ferry Building hack stand was my first objective. Then I had the cabbie pull in at an all-night service station and wait, while I dug Stanley's address out of the phone book.

He lived in an apartment building which looked like an overgrown fugitive from a perfume counter, but all right for the west side of Russian Hill.

I paid off the cab ten numbers down the street and splashed back to Stanley's address. There was no reason to expect the front door to be unlocked, and it wasn't. But I kept my big Irish paw off the bell. All I knew about this guy was what Verducci had told me. That could be an alcoholic dream.

Just the same, I had to know my boy wasn't on the premises. I stepped to the sidewalk where I could see the whole building. If there was such a thing as a fire-escape handy, I figured I'd find out what kind of a burglar I'd make.

I'll never know now because while I was rubbering at the different sides of the apartment house, I spotted Verducci passing under a street lamp a quarter of a block away. Even at that distance I was sure it was Angelo. Only a love-sick kid would be out in this California dew with no pea-coat. So I galloped after him.

It was the kid, dazed, soaked. His white-hat looked smart as a washrag, and his black, curly hair was plastered down on his head. He was not overjoyed that I'd found him.

He couldn't be hurried, even toward a neon sign down the street that advertised a bar. I finally got us inside and ordered a couple of hot rums. My teeth were chattering, too.

The first thing the kid said to me was: "I did it, Chief. I killed Stanley!"

I strangled on the buttered grog I was trying to swallow. "Say that again!"

He did.

"Fill me in."

"There isn't much, Chief." The kid was talking straight now. "I remember

telling a taxi driver to take me to Stanley's place. The next thing I knew he was shaking me. I paid him, went up and rang Stanley's bell. Blackout again. When I came to, Stanley was lying on the floor, his head bashed in and I had a poker in my hand. I dropped it and ran out the back way. That's it."

"Where were you bound when I caught you?" I asked.

"I don't know—guess I was just going to walk until I found a cop."

"For a start," I told him, "scratch that idea. The last place you'll go is to the police."

"Why, Chief? Why shouldn't I give myself up? I killed Stanley. I'm willing to—"

"Stow it. How do you know you killed him?"

"H-how?"

"Yeah. The way you tell it, the first you remember about his nibs, he's on the deck. How do you know he wasn't there when you entered his apartment?"

"The poker—I—"

"Nuts to the poker. You said you had it in your hand, but do you remember swinging it?"

The kid was confused. He never planned on having to sell his story. "I—B-but Chief," he stammered, "I had to, he was lying there. Maybe there are some blank spots, but I know— Look, Chief, I've killed that man a thousand times in my mind. I must've done it! I'm satisfied I did."

"Maybe you are, lad—" I wagged my head at him—"but Kirkpatrick's not. Not by damn sight. And I'm not letting you sign for that one-way cruise across the bay to San Quentin."

"What're you going to do?"

"Right now—take you back to the ship!"

THIS time I hung onto Verducci until I had him peeled out of his wet clothes and in his sack. Of course, he argued every step of the way, but I paid no attention to him. I turned him over to the biggest coxswain in my gang.

"If you have to," I said, "sit on his chest. I don't want him off the ship!"

Then I headed for Stanley's Russian Hill apartment. I let myself in the service entrance, up the back stairway. It

was no problem to get into the flat. Verducci, or somebody else, had left the kitchen door open. I felt my way through a darkened passage to a door that showed a light under it.

Stanley's living room was hardly any bigger than our hangar deck. But it was comfortable; expensive modern furniture, an original doodle by Dali on one wall. I couldn't have felt more out of place if I'd suddenly discovered it was a ladies' room.

Stanley was right where Verducci said he'd be, on the desk with the top of his head caved in. He might've looked bigger alive, but now he was flat, like one of those paper cut-outs kids play with. A small, gray-at-the-temples stiff. The poker was lying on the woolly rug beside him, also as Verducci had said. Yeah, everything was acey-deucey, except for one small discrepancy.

The fireplace was a phony, a gas log job.

I had to wonder why a guy would need a poker in that kind of a lash-up; or a little copper shovel like the one standing in a rack beside the fireplace. I dropped my handkerchief over the handle of the shovel and hefted it. A toy! The same for the poker. It might have been possible to beat a man's brains out with it, but not without bending it into a pretzel. And this poker, which Verducci claimed he had used, was straighter than an Irishman's line to a saloon on payday.

I liked my hunch much better than Verducci's lie. That series of blackouts might go over with some people, but not with Kirkpatrick. No. It was pretty obvious the kid was covering up for somebody, and this poker clinched it. I had a good idea who it was, too. How many folks were there in the world Verducci would go to the chair for?

Right! His old lady.

He must've seen her leave the place, then come up to have it out with Stanley and found him dead. He'd figure Pat had only saved him the trouble and he wouldn't let her be hurt for that. So he took the poker, smeared it with blood and fingerprints, then went looking for the law.

Too bad Kirkpatrick didn't believe in chivalry. Not the booze kind. A hang-

over is bad enough without having it in jail. In the death house.

Patricia Verducci was in the phone book, an address in Pacific Heights. I got out there in a hurry and found myself looking at an old red brick mansion loaded with gingerbread and cut up into separate flats. At the front door, I found the usual battery of doorbells and a *whozit* squawk box. I worked Mrs. Verducci's bell until I got a rumble from the speaker. A sleepy, slurry voice said something.

"Western Union, Ma'am," I sang, and the electric lock snapped at me.

I hustled up the stairway. On the third landing a door was open a crack. That would be the one I was looking for. I charged into it with my shoulder. I'm no flyweight. The chain holder ripped out of the jamb, and I sprawled into the apartment on top of a lady.

I was a gentleman about it, helped her to her feet. That was work. She wasn't just rubber; sponge rubber is more like it. I took hold of her, high on her arms, and my fingers sank to the bone. She was spooky as a cloud of cigar smoke.

But it was Patricia. For a very bad minute I wasn't too sure. I'd only had one quick look at a snapshot taken a couple years ago, and this girl was a badly faded copy. She was thin, sick; her blond hair matted, eyes dull. She had on an old pongee wrap over her slip, was in her stocking feet. I didn't need an M.D. after my name to know she was crocked to the gills.

"Wha' ya want?" she bleated after I'd shut the door.

"I came to see you, honey," I told her, "about your husband, Angelo—remember him?"

I watched her head start to roll forward, like a cat going to sleep. She caught the name, forced her chin up. "What about him?"

An old suit of clothes came to life on her divan. There was a face hanging out of it; pasty, drawn, red-eyed. He sat up, wobbled a thumb at me.

"Who's this guy?" he asked Pat.

"I don't know—he just broke in."

"Yeah?" He swayed to his feet, stumbling toward me. "Well, he can break out. Get the hell out, Mac!"

"Take it easy, mate," I warned him.

"I'm not going anywhere until something's settled."

HE DIDN'T see it my way. He shuffled across that lived-out room, his hands balled; telegraphed a big, round-house swing. I hated myself, but I had business with Patricia. I picked off his fist with my left hand, punched his ticket for Queer Street with a short right. He wasn't hurt bad, but he fell into my arms, limp. I tossed him back on the davenport.

"All right, honey," I said to Pat, "now let's you and me have a talk. Angelo's one of my kids," I explained. "He told me tonight—about you and him and Stanley."

"Cigarette—give me a cigarette," she whined.

I didn't see any harm in that, but I had a bad time trying to catch up with her trembling hands to light it. I let her have a couple free drags.

"You probably think it's none of my business," I went on. "Believe me, I wish it wasn't. But when Angelo told me about you guys, he said he was going to kill Stanley. That makes it my business."

I gave her a straight look. "You're takin' this awful easy, if you don't mind my saying so. Murder's a serious thing, even when you've got a good excuse for it."

She flopped into a chair, leered at me. "Angelo is always going to kill someone."

"Then you don't think he'll murder Stanley?"

"No, I don't."

"You might say you're positive?"

Her face colored, but it was a muddy green like an old bruise high on her cheeks. "What do you mean by that?"

"You're positive he won't murder Stanley, because you know Stanley was killed earlier tonight!"

She shook her head violently. "I know nothing—"

"Stop it, Pat," I snapped. "Stop lying. You were there. Angelo saw you leave the apartment."

That's where Kirkpatrick was when the lights went out—inside my skull. A sixteen-inch shell exploded on the back of my head, and the floor came up with

a rush; but I never knew when I hit.

I was riding out a storm in a Mae West; soaking wet, cold, rising part way on the waves, having them break over me, pump, pump, pump. Then I ran aground, opened my eyes and watched the room stretch itself into shape. There were three people standing over me. I'd been sick.

Pat's friend took me under the arms and dropped me on the divan. The new man looked at me over the end of a cigarette. Everything about him—the deep creases in his face, sunken eyes, knobby, blue-veined hands—showed a better than speaking acquaintance with death. They must've slept together.

The burnt line under his nose moved. It was a mouth. "You oughta be more careful playing shamus, Chief. It's a very rough game."

I knew what he meant. I should've searched the apartment *before* I started on Pat; saved myself a bump on the head. This character was probably in her bedroom all the time. There was no point in crying over that now. I didn't think I'd get a second chance.

They convoyed me downstairs, loaded me in the back seat of a brown Plymouth sedan. The joker they called Chuck, the boss, crawled in with me. The muzzle of his gun rested against my ribs. The other guy drove, Pat up front with him. This was it.

The conversation on that ride was a little flat. Chuck said: "Drive out to Devil's Slide." That was all. The windshield wiper ticked off what was left of Kirkpatrick's life.

We cut across town to the Great Highway, went past the Cliff House and Playland-at-the-Beach with all its ten-cent rides. Pretty mild stuff compared to my personal merry-go-round. Then we were driving down the Ocean road, going by little towns, roadhouses, gas stations, hamburger stands; all as far away as a travelogue.

Devil's Slide meant only one thing to me. A sex maniac was supposed to have thrown a bobby-soxer over it. All they ever recovered were some scraps of torn cloth that had snagged on the rocks. When we turned off the road, I could see a rock table which seemed to go out about as far as the headlights. Then

nothing. The car stopped, the lights were snapped off and the storm shook us, drummed on the tin overhead.

"Okay, Chief—end of the line," Chuck growled.

The driver reached back and opened the door beside me. Chuck's gun prodded deeper into my ribs. I got out.

CHUCK walked behind me until we were clear of the car. The second I felt the pressure of his gun slack off, I stopped. My stomach was bucking. "What're we waiting for?" I asked.

The storm lashed across the face of the rock, tore the words out of my mouth. Chuck's quiet rumble sounded far away. Like he was calling out of a wind tunnel. "I'm not going to shoot you, Chief—unless I have to."

"So why're we out here?" A dumb question. But I wanted to keep him talking. I wanted to keep living—long enough to lunge backward at him. I must've telegraphed that play big.

"I wouldn't do that, Chief," snorted Chuck. "We're about ten yards from the edge of the slide. I want you to start walking. Remember, that white hat cover makes a good target, so don't try any cute tricks."

I stood there braced against the wind blowing in from the north. It and what he'd just said about my hat cover added up to the only break I was going to get tonight. I began measuring those ten yards, a step at a time. At six I brought my hand to the peak of my cap. Chuck didn't crack. At seven I sailed the cap straight out ahead and broke at right angles, running low to the ground. I kept expecting Chuck to start blasting. It didn't happen.

But something else did. The ground opened under me and I was falling. In that chip of a second, I don't recall my life passing before my eyes. I did think: "The dirty heel double-crossed me!"

Then I crashed, and my eyes were full

of stars and lightning. Afterwards darkness. I wasn't out; I couldn't breathe for a minute, but I knew I was alive.

A light sliced over my piece of sky. Headlights? It seemed too broad for a flashlight. But I waited, counting my blessings. I seemed to be wedged in a crevice a skinnier guy would've fallen through. I didn't want to think—through to what.

About five thousand years later I started to jimmy myself free. Then, bracing my back against one side of the crevice and picking a way with my toes and fingernails at the jagged rock, I scratched and swore my way by inches to the top. I lay there, gasping, trying to see through the night and rain. I decided the car was gone; as gone as the knees of my pants, the skin of my hands.

The wind gave me a bearing and I staggered out to the highway. I was a spent, shivering, beat-up sailor. If anyone drove by, I'd never get them to stop. Not tonight. Not the way I looked.

Kirkpatrick, the funny man, thinking he'd have a chance to be turned down for a ride. I'd plodded a couple miles before I realized how funny. There were no cars, no houses. Not even a dog to bark at me. I owned the whole Pacific Coast—the mountains, the surf, the rain pelt-ing in my face. And you can have it!

Then I saw this big sedan parked on the shoulder of the road. If there was anybody in it, I'd be the last guy in the world they'd want to see. I knew that. I knew I stood a good chance of having my head blown off by some trigger-happy Romeo, too. But I couldn't walk all night, either; not in my shape. I came up as quickly as possible. There was a dim light inside, probably a radio; and two cigarette tips.

Here was a situation I'd like to drop in Emily Post's lap. Should I walk up and knock on the glass, say, "Pardon me, folks"? Or maybe it'd be better if

PAL
HOLLOW
GROUND

Your Best Blade Buy

Shaves You Better... Costs You Less

I started to whistle. While I was working on it, one of the cigarette tips blinked out. The car door squeaked, and a spotlight on top of the sedan swung around, pinning me to the landscape.

"Awright, Mister," somebody grunted, "you're covered. What d'ya want?"

My jaw moved, but nothing happened. Was this Chuck? Were they waiting to make sure they'd finished me?

The radio sounded off, a flat, raspy voice reading a police bulletin.

"What's the matter with you?" asked the guy in back of the spotlight. "Were you in an accident?"

"Brother," I said, "you are so right!"

I took a step forward and fell flat on my puss in a ditch bigger than the Grand Canyon. When I came to, I was in the back seat of the police car, and a broad-beamed state trooper was holding salts to my nose. I sneezed.

"How do you feel?" The cap asked.

I kept nothing from him. I had to do my story twice, the second time slow, spelling out names and addresses for the officer in the front seat. Then he put it on the air to headquarters, with a description of Patricia and her boy friends.

I'm really sorry I missed the show-down. The police were waiting for them when they got back to her apartment. It must've been quite a shock. They were still looking dazed when I saw them at the Hall of Justice. Or maybe they thought I was a ghost. Maybe they weren't far wrong!

WELL, that about cleans it up. Chuck and the other guy are doing ninety-nine years for murdering Stanley. As for Patricia—all Angelo had told me was true, except he didn't go far enough. It came out at her trial. When the booze got the best of her, Stanley lost interest, handed her the big brush.

She began haunting saloons, talking too much about her ex-boss, how he was about expensive rocks. When he got

a really big stone in his shop, he'd take it home with him; like a miser with his dough, Stanley had to have it close to him so he could touch it. She was a natural for Chuck's mob.

Chuck-boy played along with her, fed her booze until she was ready to finger Stanley for him and his pal. Then they went to see Stanley, together. They used Pat to get into the jeweler's apartment. Period to Hugo Stanley, lover of beautiful gems and other men's wives. The cops found over a hundred grand in stones hidden around Patricia's flat.

Pat's lawyer lined up a battery of high-powered neurologists, pathologists, psychiatrists, and some just plain doctors. When these big guns ceased firing, Patricia was the victim of this whole thing. A sick girl. I thought so, too. And the judge—he sent her to a state hospital instead of jail.

I guess Angelo's forgiven me for busting up his act. I didn't think he would for a while. He was pretty set on taking the rap for Patricia. But just today he came up to me all smiles.

"Chief," he said, "I owe you an apology."

"Forget it." I turned away.

Verducci hung on. "No, Chief, I do. There was a letter in the last mail call from Pat's doctor. She's going to get well!"

"I said, forget it!"

"Chief, I—"

"Don't stand there with your mouth open," I snapped. "Go draw a chipping hammer and get to work on that hatch combing aft of the galley."

"Okay, Chief," mumbled the kid, disappointed.

"What'd you say?"

"Aye, aye, Chief."

"That's better."

He was just another suit of dungarees far down the hangar deck when I turned around. I'll bet he gave that hatch combing hell!



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WALKER in the SHADOWS

CHAPTER I

RECURRENT NIGHTMARE

THE SOUNDS raised an unreasoning, nightmare terror in her. She quickened the tap of her own heels along the dim, tree-shadowed street. She wanted to run—run with all the speed she could muster—away from that curious three-cornered tread.

"That's ridiculous!" Madeline Vane told herself.

She knew there must be a thousand,

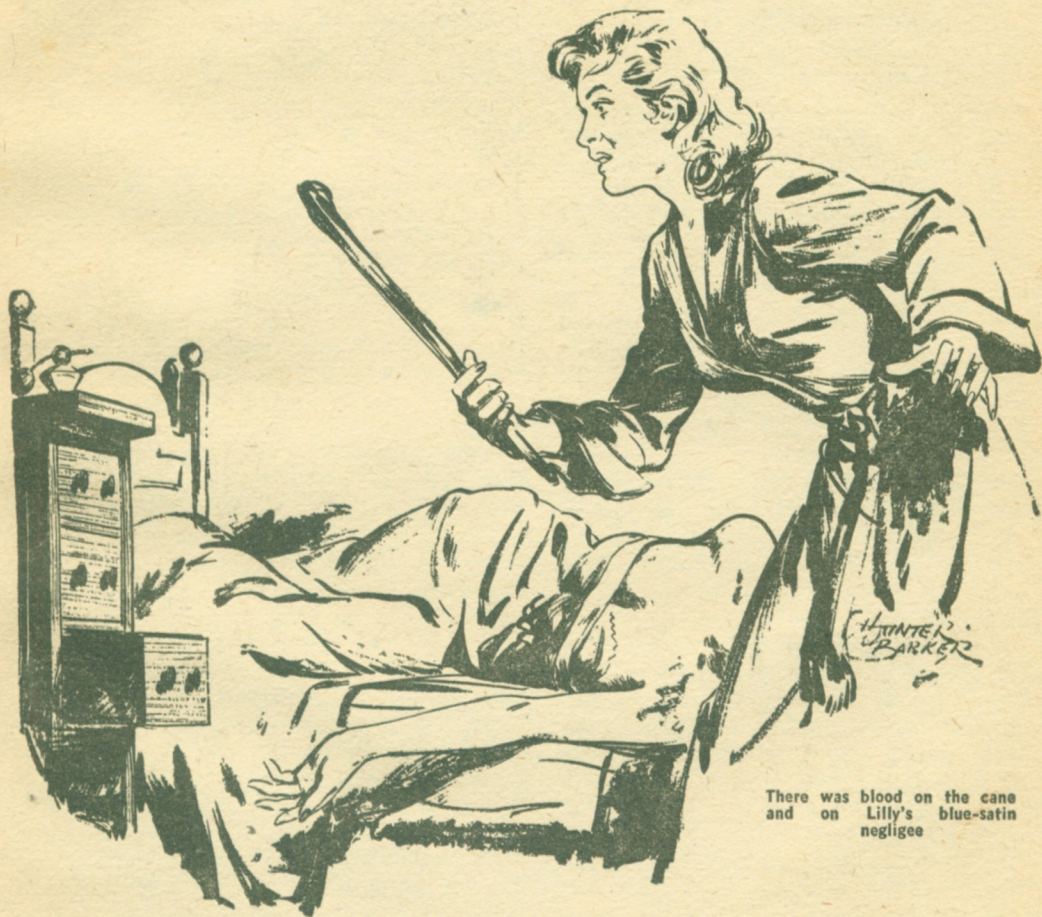
or five thousand, people in the city who limped and walked with canes. If somebody with a cane were coming along Addison Street at midnight, he was not following her.

All that had happened seven years ago. Derek was dead now.

She forced herself to walk at a reasonable pace, not to look behind her. She crossed the last street under the glow

a novelet by ELEANOR HAMMOND

Eerie and mysterious, the Carter mansion held a secret of stalking death that changed Madeline Vane's fearsome dream to stark reality!



There was blood on the cane
and on Lilly's blue-satin
negligee

of the corner streetlight, not running, acting as if the *thump-limp-tap, thump-limp-tap* of the walker in the shadows meant nothing to her, was not the echo of sounds she had heard in nightmares for seven years.

She hurried her steps only a little when she turned in at the brick walk that led through the dim garden to the steps of the tall, old mansion, standing

in the middle of its block of grounds. It was a huge house, far too large for the people who now lived in it. The taxes on the property, now that the downtown business district had crept so close to it, were enormous. But Madeline's aunt, Gracia Carver, was unwilling to sell.

Gracia's grandfather had built the house, with bricks shipped around the

Horn in a sailing ship, and had planted the elms and Japanese cherries and magnolias around it. The "Carver House" had been one of the show places of the young Western city. Gracia, last of the Carver name, would not let the house be torn down.

Madeline's sharp young ears noted the fact that the limping footsteps had not turned up the brick path behind her, and she drew a quick breath of relief. She called herself an imaginative fool. But her hand trembled a little as she fitted her key into the heavy front door.

"Somebody did draw that little house on a paper napkin in La Favorita," Madeline remembered.

Did anybody—anybody except Derek Muire—draw little houses with two round faces inside the two square windows, twin faces but with the tiny mouth on one turned up at the corners while the corners of the other mouth turned down? Did anybody but Derek draw "Grin and Grim"?

The paper napkin was still tucked inside Madeline's handbag. But Derek couldn't have drawn the little house on it. Derek had been dead for five years.

MADeline closed the oak door quietly behind her. She hoped Gracia, her aunt, was asleep. Madeline felt weary and curiously shaken.

She stepped softly across the dim hall, lighted by the small globe inside the fluted blue glass shade which had once housed a gas flame, above the newel post. The house was quiet. The slow ticking of the tall clock at the side of the hall was the only sound.

But there was a narrow crack of light from the library door beyond. Gracia must still be up. It couldn't be Tommy. Madeline knew her husband would not be home for hours yet from his fraternity banquet—not Tommy, who liked to party until all hours. None of the servants would have business in the library after midnight.

She felt too weary to talk with her aunt. Far too worn to renew their argument about selling the old house. She hoped she could reach her own room on the second floor, unobserved.

The library door opened silently as

Madeline reached the second stair. Then quick, pattering steps came down the hall toward her. It was not Gracia's tread, not Gracia's tall, imposing figure.

"Maddie, darling! I couldn't go to bed without a glimpse of you, dear child!" The little, pink-enameled monkey-face under the improbably golden coiffure beamed and blinked up at Madeline in an arch and familiar manner.

"Cousin Lilly! I didn't know you were here." Madeline suppressed a weary sigh. "When did you come?"

"Just a flying visit, dear, on my way back to Hollywood. I arrived this afternoon late. You had already left. Dinner and a show downtown, wasn't it?" Lilly's small claw, affectionate and insistent, fastened on Madeline's gloved hand. "Do come into the library for a chat before we retire."

There would be no escaping Lilly, at least until she had made her semi-annual plea for a "small loan"—a loan which never would be repaid. Lilly swept up the train of her blue-satin negligee, a very elegant negligee worn to pathetic fringes along cuffs and hem. Madeline followed her resignedly into the firelit library.

Only Lilly's bright, sunken old eyes betrayed the fact that her age was the same as Madeline's grandmother's would be, were she living. Lilly—Lilly Lacey in the early days of the silent films—thrice married and divorced, now cut off by her third husband's death from the alimony which had paid for the blue-satin negligee—Lilly still radiated a vague and musty glamour.

Her sharp old eyes studied Madeline's face. "You don't look quite your usual self, dear child," Lilly pronounced. "Perhaps a drop of brandy? Surely Gracia trusts you with the key to the liquor cabinet?"

Madeline smiled faintly. "There's nothing wrong with me. I'm just a little tired. But if you'd like a nightcap, Lilly, I'm sure Tommy has some cognac."

"That will be delightful, dear. Just a drop or two."

With the small bubble-shaped glass in her hand, Lilly curled her tiny body deep in the softest chair. Almost purring, Madeline thought—purring like a wiry old cat that has managed to slip in out

of the cold for a moment, a half-starved cat that is no longer anyone's pet, that is eager to lick a drop of cream from the bottom of anybody's teacup.

Lilly was too pathetic to resist when she asked for a "tiny loan." Madeline knew she would not be able to resist the plea as Gracia always did, although Gracia was far better able to afford such charity. Madeline sighed inaudibly and waited. But Lilly did not bring up the familiar subject immediately.

"Something must have given you a bad turn, Maddie," Lilly said. "You looked as if you'd just seen a ghost when you came in."

It was impossible to evade her sharp, questioning eyes.

"I heard somebody limping along Addison Street as I walked home from the theater," Madeline exclaimed. "It was late and dark. For a minute I imagined that the person with the cane was following me. It was a silly thing to get upset over."

LILLY pursed her small, seashell-pink mouth. She held the bubble-shaped glass toward Madeline. "Just another drop, please, Maddie!" She tipped her too-golden topknot to one side, studying first the cognac and then Madeline.

"No, I don't suppose anyone was following you," she went on. "Still, one reads about such terrible things in the newspapers sometimes. And that experience with Derek years ago. It must still haunt you, even now when you're happily married to dear Tommy."

Madeline thought of the recurrent nightmare. But she shook her head. "Derek is dead. He's been dead for a long time," she said slowly.

"Yes, of course, dear. And you're quite right to try to forget him. Though it is hard, and one keeps on having a vague hope in these cases where a man is reported 'missing, presumed dead.' One glimpses a chance resemblance in somebody on the street or in a restaurant. I've hurried after some complete stranger a dozen times myself, because something about him reminded me of Derek Muire. Whatever Gracia accused Derek of doing, I shall always have tender memories of the dear boy, Maddie. It may be he loved not wisely, but too

well.' But nobody will ever convince me that, at heart, he was a murderer."

Lilly's synthetically bright head nodded over her third drink of cognac. She was ready to accept Madeline's weary suggestion about retiring.

* * * * *

Madeline wished her husband would get home. She lay staring at the high ceiling above her bed, listening to the muffled sounds of Lilly's elaborate bedtime toilet in the guest room and across the hall, to the faint groans and creaks of the old woodwork as the big house huddled into itself in the frosty autumn night.

There was no sense in staying awake until Tommy returned. He might not stumble in until dawn. Tommy would find plenty of old pals at the reunion to have a few more drinks with afterward. Everybody liked blithe, free-spending Tommy Vane.

Even Gracia, her aunt, liked Tommy and was more tolerant of his high-spirited extravagance than Madeline would have expected. Though, of course, Gracia did not know that some of the debts she had paid off for Tommy were gambling debts. And Madeline would never tell her.

Her conversation with Lilly ran through her head. It was curious that Lilly should speak of Derek, after so long, when Derek had been a forbidden subject in Gracia's house for so many years. Lilly couldn't know about the paper napkin with the drawing of the little house on it—the little house that had brought back so many bittersweet memories to Madeline herself.

"But I spoke about somebody walking with a cane, somebody I thought was following me as I came home," Madeline told herself.

Of course, that was what had reminded Lilly of Derek, even though the heavy blackthorn cane Derek had used seven years ago was standing dusty and unused in the hall closet under the stairs now.

Madeline shivered when she thought about it. She tried to relax. Finally she achieved the misty borderland of sleep.

The limping tread began faint and

far away. It came on inexorably, approaching her through dark curtains of rolling gray mist, coming after her with a terrible three-cornered sound—*thump-limp-tap, thump-limp-tap*.

Madeline sat bolt upright. She moved one slim bare arm across her face, trying to brush the nightmare away, trying to free her vision from the clinging, cobwebby thing which she knew was a dream—a dream that had haunted her for seven years.

She stared around the dim bedroom, drew a long breath. She had thought she was free of the recurrent nightmare. It was months now since she had heard that walker in the shadows. It was months since she had tried to flee, running between endless lines of dankly dripping elms, up mile-long stairways and along flickeringly lit corridors—away from the shrouded, faceless figure that walked after her with a limp and the tap of a cane.

CHAPTER II

A DOG DIES



MADLINE brushed her hand across her face again. The motion did not take away the sharp, barking sounds echoing from the other side of the house. Skipper, the old dog, was barking frantically. Madeline could envision the elderly beast lunging as far as his chain would allow.

Was somebody in the garden? Could the limping steps have been real? There were confused noises. Could somebody be knocking on the kitchen door?

She left her bed and went to lean far out the open window. Skipper had stopped barking. There were no sounds now from the vicinity of the kennel beside the back steps. Nothing moved in those parts of the shadowy garden she could see from the bedroom window. Madeline went slowly back to bed.

"Skipper probably barked at a prowling cat," she was thinking. "Must be back in his kennel now."

She had the jitters. She was imagining things. She pulled the satin cover up to her chin. Breathe in, breathe out,

relax— But she lay awake tense and listening, for a long time.

Even so, she did not hear Tommy when he came up the thickly carpeted front stairs. She started awake when he opened the door from the upper hall.

"Tommy?" she said softly.

"It's me, baby! I didn't mean to wake you."

Drunk or sober it was Tommy, sane, cheerful Tommy. Tommy with his broad football-player shoulders, his thatch of unruly brown hair and wide little-boy grin. Madeline had not been so glad to see her husband in months.

"I'm so glad you're home!"

"You miss me, sweetheart? I miss you, too, every minute I'm away from you! But you know how it is—stag party, fraternity brothers haven't seen for long time. Couldn't refuse few drinks in Ole Pinky's hotel room afterward."

Fleeting Madeline hoped the few drinks hadn't been accompanied by a poker game with stakes as high as Tommy enjoyed playing for, and almost always losing. Still, Tommy had so few faults, so much sweetness and charm. In most ways, he was so steady. Nightmares, bittersweet old memories, foolish nervous fantasies, could not lodge in the same room with Tommy.

Madeline ran her small, slim hand through his tousled hair as he bent to kiss her. He turned on the rose-shaded lamp beside his bed. She sat up in hers.

"Tommy, I hate to ask you this at this time of night. I know you want to get to bed. But I'm worried about Skipper. He barked some time before you came in."

"Skipper's always barking. Gracia ought to keep him in the basement at night. Then he wouldn't always be seeing ghosts."

"I was afraid to go down alone, Tommy. But if you'll go with me— There were some odd noises. I'll sleep better if I take a look at the back of the house."

Tommy struggled into his shoes again. "Anything you say, baby."

It seemed a very long way down the narrow back stairs and through the back passage and butler's pantry, across the

enormous kitchen and latticed back porch. Rooms had been made spacious in Great-grandfather Carver's day.

Skipper did not put his grizzled head out of his kennel nor give his customary wheezy grunts of greeting. The dog made no sounds. Nothing moved. Madeline peered around uneasily.

Then she screamed.

The flattened, froglike thing at the end of the chain couldn't be the old dog! Nobody, no sane person, could beat a harmless old animal into a flattened, sodden thing like that!

TOMMY was very sober, sympathetic and sensible. "You won't be able to tell the police much, Madeline darling. You didn't see anything from your window. It faces the other way. I don't think the police have much chance of locating the brute who killed Skipper."

Madeline's head ached and her eyes smarted. She had slept, after the sedative Tommy had persuaded her to take, but she still felt unutterably tired.

"We must call the police," she repeated wearily.

Gracia Carver agreed. "The police should have been told last night, as soon as you discovered Skipper," Madeline's aunt pronounced in her firm contralto. She eyed Tommy reprovingly across the breakfast table. "I wish you had seen fit to wake me."

Nobody had been wakened by Madeline's muffled scream. Lilly in the guest room and Gracia in the master bedroom at the end of the hall, the servants on the third floor, had slept through the disturbances of the night.

"I was thinking of Madeline. She was close to hysterics, in no shape for police questioning," Tommy said contritely. "I'll call the police now, Gracia."

Sergeant Duffy's investigation seemed perfunctory to Madeline. The brick walks and springy lawn grass showed no footprints in the morning light. The weapon with which the old dog had been killed was nowhere in the grounds. No one but Madeline had heard the sounds that accompanied Skipper's killing.

"You aren't sure if you heard somebody that limped and walked with a cane, or if that part was a dream, Mrs. Vane," the beefy young policeman re-

minded Madeline. "Your husband thinks the dog had been dead a good while when you two found it. He came in the front way and didn't see a thing. Doesn't give us much to go on, when you all say you don't know of anyone who specially disliked the dog, or anyone with a grudge against the family, who might take it out beating your pet to death." Sergeant Duffy shook his head.

"It was obviously the work of an insane person," Gracia Carver told him. "The dog was chained, and quite harmless."

"Could be, lady." Sergeant Duffy took off the hat which till then had appeared to be glued to the back of his head—a half-conscious tribute to a woman who was used to dominating most people and situations she met. "Could be the fellow has a screw loose. But we haven't had any other reports about animals in the city being killed that way—and screwballs like that are usually repeaters."

He promised to have the officer on the beat keep an eye on the Carver property. "And I'd lock up nights, if I was you. You never know in cases of malicious mischief. Could be some one who has it in for you people, even if you don't know about it."

Madeline shuddered. She shuddered at odd moments even after the policeman had departed.

She did not feel like meeting Tommy downtown for lunch, but Tommy had insisted she should get away from the house for a while. Madeline began dressing slowly.

In the autumn sunlight slanting through the tall windows, her reflection in the mirror of the old walnut bureau was pale. Her gray-green eyes were shadowed and there were faint hollows under her cheek bones.

"I'll need a lot of make-up," Madeline was thinking, when the light tapping came on the bedroom door.

As Madeline turned her head, Lilly's golden topknot came in sight. "May I come in a minute, Maddie dear?"

Lilly was perching herself on the corner of the rose-colored coverlet before Madeline answered.

"I'm meeting Tommy for lunch. I have to dress."

Lilly swung her tiny foot in its high-heeled slipper. "I was just wondering, dear child, if you could lend me a few pennies. It's so awkward trying to cash checks on my Hollywood bank here. Always being asked for identification and so forth. And I have a few things to buy."

FOR A moment, Madeline hesitated. She had only a few dollars in her purse. She was far from sure of the current figure in the joint checking account, against which Tommy, too, could draw. Tommy's expenditures seemed very large sometimes.

"I'm afraid it will have to be only pennies, Lilly," Madeline said. "Tommy's law practice doesn't amount to much yet. He had to borrow his office rent from Gracia last month. And my allowance from grandfather's estate isn't large, and always seems to evaporate long before the end of the month."

"Allowance!" Lilly shook her head indignantly. "And when by rights half your grandfather's estate should be yours, Maddie. Your mother was as much Elias Carver's daughter as Gracia."

Madeline sighed. "I was only ten when grandfather died and Gracia became my guardian. Mother was dead."

"At any rate, the Carver property will be yours when Gracia goes, I suppose." Lilly brightened slightly. "Gracia has no other heir—and she'd hardly will your grandfather's property to some charity, would she?"

Madeline smiled faintly. "Not unless she changes her will," she told Lilly. "I've always understood that it leaves me the bulk of the property. And a rather nice bequest to you, too, Lilly. Twenty thousand dollars, I think."

For a moment Lilly's small monkey-face registered surprised delight. Then it lost its brightness. "Gracia is only in her fifties—fifty-six, isn't it? And just between you and me, dear child, I am a bit older than that. I may not be here to enjoy the bequest."

"You're sure to reach the century mark, Lilly." Madeline tried to make her tone light.

She had finished dressing and began checking the contents of her handbag.

Keys, compact, coin purse—A square of flimsy white paper fluttered out and fell on the cream-and-blue Chinese rug.

"Here, dear, I have it!" Lilly darted upon the paper napkin as nimbly as a little old cat. She spread it inquisitively on her knees and stared at the drawing of the little house. "What in the world? Where did you get this, Maddie?"

Madeline's frayed nerves almost gave way. She wanted to scream. Instead, she held out a slightly shaking hand for the napkin.

"It's nothing, Lilly. A paper napkin. I picked it up in the little restaurant where I had dinner last night."

It seemed a long time ago. She could see the half-truth was not convincing Lilly.

"There's something familiar about that drawing," Lilly insisted. "You must have noticed that, too, Maddie. Of course! It's the little house Derek used to draw! Doodling, don't they call it? I suppose these psychologists would say it had some mysterious meaning—the way Derek was always drawing pictures of little houses, and those funny twin faces in the windows."

Reluctantly, Lilly handed the flimsy square of paper back to Madeline.

CHAPTER III

QUEER HAPPENINGS



LUNCH with Tommy was not a gay meal that day. Madeline's nerves were taut. Her husband's usual good temper was in eclipse.

Half through the soup, Tommy brought up the last subject Madeline wanted to discuss with him. He asked Madeline if she had succeeded in persuading Gracia Carver to sell the old house.

Madeline shook her head a trifle impatiently. Like Tommy, she believed it would be wise to sell when a good cash customer wanted the valuable block. But, unlike him, she had never believed she could influence her name-proud aunt to part with it.

"Why don't you forget the whole thing, Tommy?" Madeline told him, nibbling a cracker she did not want nor

could taste. "If your arguments and the offer of a hundred and fifty thousand dollars don't move Gracia, why should you think I can do it?"

She reflected, a trifle bitterly, that for almost as long as she could remember, Gracia's judgment had been the last court of appeal, that she herself had seldom had the courage to question Gracia's decisions.

"I think you might make the effort, Madeline, when you know how much it would mean to us both!" Tommy looked like a sulky little boy. "If Gracia would sell she couldn't make this 'property-poor' excuse when we need cash. And, after all, the Carver estate is half yours, by rights!"

Madeline smiled wanly. "It isn't half mine legally so long as Gracia lives," she reminded him. "And Gracia will probably live to be as old as Lilly. We should be able to get along on what you make and my income from the trust fund. Lots of couples would feel rich on less."

She welcomed the approach of the waitress with the check. She had been very close to quarreling with Tommy, more impatient with his extravagant ideas about new equipment for his office than she had ever felt before.

She hunted in her handbag for her coin purse. Tommy had no change for the tip. The rumpled paper napkin she had thrust there after taking it back from Lilly, fell to the floor.

"What's this thing?" Tommy stared at the drawing of the little house, after retrieving the napkin.

"It's a thing I found on the table in a restaurant where I had dinner last night," Madeline said.

She was in no mood for confidences. But Tommy was curious, and insistent.

"Derek used to draw doodles like that," Madeline told him finally. "He was always drawing things, maybe because he was an artist. A sort of nervous habit he had. A little house with faces in the windows was his favorite doodle. So, it startled me when I found that. It seemed such a curious coincidence—though, of course, it probably isn't hard to explain. A lot of struggling artists used to eat at La Favorita. It was a sort of meeting place for people like Derek.

One of his old friends probably drew that!"

Tommy's laugh sounded harsh. "You're still rather sentimental about Muire, aren't you, Madeline?" Tommy said. "Rather a curious thing, considering he just escaped being hanged, though, of course, in this state we don't hang murderers."

WHEN she was alone in her room late in the afternoon, Madeline turned out her handbag. Of course, it made little difference how or when the paper napkin with the drawing of the little house had disappeared.

"It could have fallen out when I paid for the hosiery or for the bath powder," she told herself. "Perhaps I didn't pick it up from the table in the restaurant."

Her bag, along with her brown fur jacket and small hat, had been on the hall table for a while after she reached home, because Gracia had summoned her to the library when she entered. Somebody—somebody as inquisitive as Lilly—might have opened her bag and "borrowed" the napkin for a second look at it.

The flimsy piece of paper could be of no possible value to anybody! But Madeline frowned.

She felt irritated with herself for having picked up the thing, more annoyed that Lilly and Tommy had glimpsed the little drawing of the house, and asked questions about it. She had put Derek Muire out of her thoughts for a long time, a very long time.

Now, suddenly, it seemed as if Derek had not died, blown to unidentifiable fragments on a German battlefield. It was as if he were there in the room with her, looking at her with that familiar brooding intensity of dark-blue eyes under very black brows.

Madeline passed her hand across her eyes, trying to brush away such fantasies.

"Derek *couldn't* have drawn the little house on the napkin! He *couldn't* have been in La Favorita!" she told herself. "Derek *couldn't* be alive!"

Because if Derek were alive, if he had come back, he would have come to find her!

For a moment utter certainty filled

Madeline. Then a dark mist of uncertainty rolled soundlessly across her mind. She shivered in a sort of waking nightmare.

"No!" she told herself in a whisper. "Perhaps Derek wouldn't try to find me!"

And limping steps in the darkness meant nothing, less than nothing. Derek had recovered from the broken bones that called for the use of a cane long ago, before the army took him.

That night, Madeline felt utterly exhausted, too tense to sleep. Tommy's regular, untroubled breathing, from the other side of the room, seemed a long way off. It seemed to have nothing to do with her, lacked the reassurance which Tommy's nearness usually gave her.

She tried to build a strong, unremembering wall between her thoughts and the memory of Skipper's wild barking, the memory of limping steps outside the house.

She was half afraid of sleep—sleep that might be nightmare-haunted—sleep in which she might find herself fleeing from the shadows in her mind—sleep from which she might waken to find she had really been moving about the great, dark house.

At last she dropped into a deep gulf of utter weariness. She did not wake until Ellen, the elderly maid, set a breakfast tray beside her bed. The rose-enameled Swiss clock on the bureau told her she had slept until close to midday.

"Your aunt wished me to waken you, Miss Madeline," Ellen told her. "She would like to see you in the drawing room when you're ready."

Madeline nibbled the crisp toast and boiled eggs and emptied the small silver coffeepot. Autumn sunlight streamed in between the flowered chintz drapes cheerfully. She felt refreshed, almost as if nothing terrifying had happened, as if this were any bright October morning.

Gracia's message did not seem disturbing. Gracia habitually sent summonses of that sort to the people who lived under her roof.

It was not until she reached the foot of the stairs, half an hour later, that Madeline's small brown loafer shoes

halted abruptly. She stared through the open door into the formal and little-used drawing room.

"Gracia! What on earth—"

GRACIA CARVER turned slowly to face her niece. Her tall, solid body was as erect as usual, her iron-gray head was held as high. But her still-handsome face was faintly and curiously twisted.

"I wished you to see it before I had the picture removed, Madeline," Gracia said. "And before I called the police."

The portrait of Gracia at eighteen, which Grandfather Carver had had painted and which had hung above the white marble mantel for almost forty years, had been slashed to tatters.

"It is vaguely possible you heard or saw something that might throw light on this vandalism," Gracia stated.

Madeline shook her copper-brown head, puzzled and horrified.

"A knife, which seems to have been used, wouldn't make much noise," the original of the once-beautiful painting said.

It was terrifying, in a way more terrifying than the killing of Gracia's old watchdog. Nobody knew when the portrait had been slashed. Nowadays, the formal drawing room was seldom opened, except when Ellen did her weekly cleaning there.

"The picture was all right last Saturday when I dusted," Ellen said. She was close to tears. "I'd have come told you, Miss Carver, if it had been cut up this awful way then."

"You can't suspect anybody in the house, Gracia!" It was Lilly's voice, twittering excitedly. "The dear old servants are all above reproach. They've been here for years. And certainly no one in the family—" Lilly threw up her tiny clawlike hands in horror. "You are always most careful about locking up at night. So, unless somebody had a key—"

"No one in the family has mislaid a house key that I am aware of," Gracia said icily.

"Then such a thing simply couldn't happen," Lilly fluttered. "Only, there it is! So horrifying! So mad!"

When the police came, they found no clues to cast any light on the destruc-

tion of the painting.

"You still say you don't think anybody has a grudge against any of you people." Detective-sergeant Duffy sounded aggrieved. "And you won't have it that anybody living in the house might be a little crazy, doing things in their sleep or something like that."

"Both such explanations are completely impossible, Sergeant," Gracia Carver told him firmly.

* * * * *

"I'm sure it would do you a world of good to go out to a show," Lilly told Madeline. "I should greatly enjoy seeing the musical at the Parkway myself. And dear Tommy is free to take us tonight."

Madeline smiled wanly. She couldn't huddle in the huge, shadowy old house forever, she told herself, stay behind a locked door in her own room. Besides, it was inside the house that the small but terrifying things kept happening—Gracia's photograph as a child taken from the family album and torn across, lying on the veranda—a record that Gracia had disliked, because Derek had given it to Madeline years ago, playing loudly in the library, smashed on the hearth there by the time anybody went downstairs to investigate—a mysterious odor of smoke that nobody could trace to its source.

"We all need to get away from this haunted house for a bit, dear child," Lilly twittered insistently.

Madeline felt tempted to say that there was nothing to keep Lilly from going to Hollywood any time she wished. She realized that she was irritable from strained nerves, and she tried to make her smile normal and cordial.

"Of course, we'll go to a show if you like, Lilly," she said.

CHAPTER IV

DEREK RETURNS



HE WOULD have been glad to walk home after the theater. The brisk autumn air might help her to sleep. The last few elm-shadowed blocks would have no terror if Tommy and Lilly were traversing them with her, Madeline thought.

But Lilly was delighted that Tommy hailed a cab to take them the short distance.

"Your pumpkin coach, Cinderella!" Tommy seemed his charming, light-hearted self as he handed Lilly into the taxi.

Madeline envied his steady nerves, his sane ability to dismiss troubling things from his mind. Or did Tommy only seem to have dismissed Skipper's killing and the other unsolved, malicious mysteries, Madeline wondered fleetingly.

The show had been long and it was past midnight as they went up the brick walk toward the steps. The hall light, dimly blue through the pane in the front door, was the only illumination visible. The house looked very big, very grim.

Gracia's bedroom windows were dark. Madeline knew her aunt must be home from the committee meeting she had meant to attend, must be asleep by now.

Tommy paused with his key in the front door, looked around sharply.

"What—what's wrong, Tommy?"

Tommy's smile was reassuring. "Nothing, I hope. Did you hear something around at the back?"

Madeline had heard nothing. But she had been listening to Lilly's chatter, not wanting to think of other things—things that happened in the middle of dark, seemingly empty nights.

"Maybe I should take a look." Tommy's tone was sober. "You girls go into the library. I'll join you there just as soon as I make sure there's nobody around."

"I'll go with you, Tommy."

But Lilly clutched Madeline's arm. "I'm sure it's wiser for us to go to the library. And a drop of brandy to settle our nerves would be a help."

She could not leave Lilly alone. And Tommy had already disappeared around the corner of the house, into the darkness.

Madeline knew Tommy could not possibly be gone as long as it seemed. Minutes seemed like hours and normal sounds, like strange, horror-filled noises, when one's nerves were strained with waiting and listening. There were sounds—like a commotion on the second floor, feet on the back stairs, voices in the

basement. There was a terrifying odor of smoke.

"Perhaps we should go to see what it is, Lilly," Madeline suggested.

But Lilly clutched her arm. "No, dear child! After the things that have been happening, we don't know what we might encounter if we began wandering around this huge house in the dark!"

Lilly was finishing her third glass of cognac when Tommy finally hurried into the library. He was grimy and disheveled, his face strangely flushed. He was nursing a burn on one hand.

"It's lucky I have a nose like a hound!" Tommy was trying to speak lightly. "If I hadn't smelled that smoke, we might have been burned in our beds!"

"Fire!" There was fear on Madeline's face.

He nodded. "Somebody started a nice little bonfire in the front corner of the basement, near the pile of fireplace wood. Luckily the fire hadn't taken hold well when I found it, though it was more than I could handle alone. I went upstairs and roused old Peter. Between us, we got it smothered. I think we're safe enough now. I'll take another look at it before I go to bed."

"Fire!" Lilly was shaking all over. "Oh, it's too horrible! We might have all been burned to death! And Gracia must be asleep upstairs. And the servants on the third floor—"

Tears streaked Lilly's pink cheeks and she uttered shrill peals of hysterical laughter.

Tommy shook her. "Help me get her upstairs, Madeline. And get a couple of those sleeping pills for her. You'd better take one to settle your own nerves, too, sweetheart."

Madeline took Lilly's other arm gently, but Lilly balked. "It's better not to disturb Gracia," she gulped. "I'll just sit here and have another cognac to calm me. That's all I need. I shan't be able to sleep a wink until Tommy has made sure the fire is completely extinguished. . . . You didn't see anybody, Tommy?"

"Whoever set that fire can't have been gone long, but I didn't see a soul," Tommy told her. "I suppose the firebug thought we were all asleep upstairs, be-

cause the house was dark. A window at the back of the basement was open."

"You—you'd better call the police," Madeline said.

Tommy agreed. "And I want to put some ointment on this burn. It's nothing a bandage and an aspirin won't fix up, but it's painful."

"I'll help you bandage it," Madeline, offered. But Tommy shook his head,

"Look after Lilly, and get her to bed," he suggested.

Lilly was nodding, but her eyes opened, fully alert, when Tommy had gone.

"Maddie, I didn't want to say anything until we were alone," she said. "I didn't want to embarrass you. You know I was always fond of Derek Muire. Derek was always very kind to me. I can't bear to think any evil of the boy. But Derek did hate Gracia. And he did have a key to this house at one time."

"Derek? Oh, no Lilly!"

"And we can't be entirely sure Derek is dead," Lilly persisted. "Not after your finding that napkin with the little house drawn on it!"

MADELINE took the sleeping tablets Tommy shook into her hand, but they seemed to have no effect on her fluttering nerves. It would be no use trying to go to sleep. The police would be there in a few minutes to investigate this latest outrage. They might wish to ask her questions.

Tommy was wrong, she thought, in refusing to have Gracia wakened. Gracia was a sound sleeper. The walls in the old house were nearly soundproof. Gracia did not seem to have been aroused. But Madeline felt sure her aunt would wish to take charge of matters when the police arrived.

Gracia had been mistress of the house, had ruled it with a firm hand, ever since Madeline could remember.

She paced the floor of the bedroom, listening for the sound of a police car, for Tommy's steps returning from the basement, for faint, sinister cracklings in the woodwork. She heard the patter of Lilly's slippers going along the hall toward the bathroom, returning, going toward the top of the stairs, tiptoeing.

She forced herself to lie down on her

bed, to try to rest. When she lay down, she realized she was exhausted. The room seemed to be filling with mist and her eyes were closing.

Far off in the fog, the limping steps began—

Madeline sat up shivering, fighting sleep, trying to escape the horrible, recurrent nightmare. She wanted to scream, but she was not screaming. It was someone else screaming!

She stood in the middle of the room, quivering with terror. The screaming was real! Who was uttering those shrill, fearful sounds?

Madeline threw open the bedroom door and looked up and down the hall. There was no one in sight. The house seemed full of confused noise, but over it all the screams went on and on. They were coming from the room at the end of the hall—Gracia's bedroom.

Madeline stumbled toward the horrible sounds. Gracia's door was open. Lights from the ceiling fixture flooded the hideous scene in the room.

"Lilly!" Madeline clutched the door frame.

Lilly went on screaming insanely, went on standing beside the bed, clutching the heavy blackthorn cane in her claw-like hands. There was blood on the cane and on Lilly's blue-satin negligee.

There was more blood on the bed, where all that was left of Gracia Carver lay. Gracia's head was a bloody pulp.

Horried, Madeline tried not to believe the implications of Lilly's small but strong hands holding the heavy weapon, the half-mad glitter in Lilly's sunken eyes. Madeline did not scream. This horror was beyond any vocal release. She stood frozen, shocked into utter immobility.

Someone began shaking her shoulder. "Go back to your room and lie down, baby!" Tommy's voice, strained to an unnatural pitch. "Do as I say! Go lie down!"

Tommy, gently but insistently shoving her away from Gracia's door, where Lilly was still standing, still uttering hideous, cracked noises. Sounds coming from all over the house, voices, doors opening and shutting, hurrying feet.

Madeline turned dumbly, back along

the corridor. The hall seemed filled with gray fog, her eyes half blind in its dim light. It seemed to stretch ahead of her like the endless passages in the nightmare.

Suddenly the door at the head of the back stairway was opening and a man's figure was materializing out of the shadows there. A tall, dark-browed shadow out of nightmare fogs—something that was not real, that could not be real.

Because Derek Muire had been dead for five years!

Madeline pitched forward, felt herself falling slowly, like something in a slow-motion picture, falling into a welcome black abyss that had no bottom.

ELLEN'S straggling gray hair was capless and she was wearing a faded bathrobe. Her eyes were red-rimmed.

"Miss Madeline, you're all right?" she said, voice faltering. "He didn't harm you?"

Madeline moved her hand in a vague motion. "Who Ellen?" She was lying on her own bed. Ellen, sitting beside it, was chafing her hands anxiously.

"They say he's mad, just out of a hospital. *Hospital*, they call it! But the police have him now. Mr. Tommy caught him there in the hallway beside you. He must have struck you down, Miss Madeline."

"Nobody struck me. I—I must have fainted."

Madeline struggled to sit up. She tried to smile reassuringly at the old servant, but her lips quivered. Full consciousness and dreadful memories flooded back.

Somebody had beaten Gracia to death with the old blackthorn cane. Derek Muire had been in the house!

A little later, time seemed to have stopped moving. They seemed to have been sitting in the chilly library forever, waiting—waiting for the police to finish their work upstairs—waiting for the officer beside the library door to give them permission to move, to speak—waiting for the detective in the next room to summon them for questioning.

Tommy looked haggard in the chair by the fireplace, nursing his burned hand. The servants huddled together on the leather-covered couch by the windows, seemed like ancient shadows of

themselves. Lilly, nearest to Madeline in the chair pushed close to hers as if for protection, looked older than her actual age, sunken into herself, a small, painted ghost. Only Lilly's eyes held a spark of life still.

Derek, looking so utterly alone, at the far end of the room, closest to the policeman beside the door. But he was not handcuffed, not under arrest. Madeline's eyes met his level gaze from under his black brows for a moment, and looked away.

They were all suspects. They were all under police surveillance.

CHAPTER V

MADELINE'S STORY



HER HANDS folded tightly in her lap, Madeline sat across the table from Lieutenant Miller of Homicide. She felt drained, bankrupt of emotion. How many hours had his quiet, courteous questions been coming across the table toward her? How many days, years, centuries had she been trying to answer the quiet man's queries? He wanted to know about Derek.

"I met Derek Muire first a little over seven years ago, a few months after my eighteenth birthday," she began. "I ran over him on a dark street near the waterfront one rainy night. I was driving fast, didn't see him till it was too late to avoid hitting him. One of his legs was badly shattered. It took some difficult bone surgery and weeks in the hospital to save the leg.

"My aunt had the car fully insured, but I felt terribly guilty. I went to see Derek in the hospital nearly every day. We fell in love. We were married a few days after he was discharged from the hospital."

"Later you divorced him?" Miller suggested. "The marriage didn't turn out well? Tell me about the marriage, please, Mrs. Vane."

"We were terribly happy for a while. I had never been in love before, not really in love, with anybody. And Derek was wonderful!" She stared at the table, not seeing it, seeing the shabby but colorful

studio with windows overlooking the harbor.

"But I wasn't much of a housekeeper. And I had never learned to handle money. My aunt had always done everything for me, even bought my clothes. I wasn't a good wife for a struggling artist, though I tried hard. I was learning."

"And Miss Carver, your aunt, was unwilling to help you financially?" Miller asked.

"Derek was terribly proud. He did commercial art work so we'd have money enough to live on. He didn't even want to touch my allowance—the money that came from a trust fund my grandfather had arranged for me. Our first quarrel was about that. It was the first time I ever saw Derek angry, and I was very much upset."

"Derek Muire has always had a violent temper? He showed it at other times?"

Madeline looked across the table, looked away quickly. "We made up the quarrel. We didn't quarrel often. He was sweet, and very patient with me when I made mistakes. There were so many things I didn't know how to do. I'd never been taught to cook, nor anything very useful. We'd always had servants at home. I made terrible messes sometimes. Sometimes I felt dreadfully discouraged about my failures."

"Your aunt disapproved of the marriage?"

Madeline nodded. "Very much. She thought Derek had married me for my money—the money I'd have some day. She said I was too young to know my own mind. She tried to make me go home. One day she came into the studio and found me crying, because I was tired and I'd burned the stew I was trying to make. She took me home with her. When Derek came, she told him I was ill. She wouldn't let him see me."

"And he was angry?" Miller said.

"Yes, I think he must have been angry."

"He quarreled with your aunt, threatened her?"

Madeline shook her head unhappily. "I don't know. Gracia, my aunt, wasn't used to having anybody dispute her wishes. But Derek was stubborn too.

In the end we came to a sort of compromise. Derek was to live in the house here."

"That didn't work well?" the homicide man questioned.

"Not at all well. Derek was moody. My aunt tried to order his life, as she had always ordered people's lives. I think they grew to hate each other. It was dreadful for me. I felt like a bone between two snarling dogs. I loved Derek, but I was very young, not very brave. My aunt had always told me what to do. I was used to thinking she knew best. Finally, when Derek left, I didn't go with him. I stayed with my aunt. She had the marriage annulled. I had been a few weeks under eighteen when we were married and we had run away, not gained her consent."

"That increased Derek's hatred for your aunt?" Miller prodded. "He tried to kill her."

Madeline stared at her clenched hands. "Somebody has told you that?"

"I'd like you to tell me the details, Mrs. Vane."

THE LIEUTENANT was so quiet, so courteous, but Madeline felt that the sharp-faced man across the table was picking her mind clean, shredding away every vestige of information she might wish to conceal.

"I didn't see Derek for several weeks," she went on, low-voiced. "He may have tried to see me. I don't know. Then one night I was coming home alone after dark, and I heard somebody limping after me. Derek was still walking with a cane. It took a long time for his leg to grow strong. Derek caught up with me. He came into the house with me. My aunt came out of the library and ordered him to leave. She was very haughty, as if Derek were a tramp she was ordering off her property. He said he was my husband, he had a right to talk with me.

"Then she told him my marriage hadn't been legal, that it had been annulled. It made him very angry. He shouted he'd like to beat her brains out. He raised the cane—"

"And then?"

Madeline shook her head. "I don't know. I was terrified. I ran up to my

room and cried. After a while I heard Derek slam the door and limp away. I cried until I was ill.

"After a while my aunt came upstairs. She told me that Derek was a murderer at heart, that he would have killed her if Peter, the gardener, hadn't wrested the heavy cane away from him. She said if Derek ever came again she would call the police to arrest him. But Derek didn't come back. He didn't try to see me."

"You didn't see Muire again until tonight?"

"No. I heard about him sometimes, from friends of his. There is a little restaurant where artists in the neighborhood of Derek's studio eat sometimes. I used to go there, but I never met Derek. I couldn't go there often. I heard he was in the army. Then his name was in a casualty list as 'presumed dead.' I hoped for a long time he might be alive, might come back to me. But—he didn't."

"This cane?" he asked after a minute. "It's the same one that was used to kill your aunt tonight? It has been in the house ever since Muire left it here seven years ago?"

Madeline shuddered. "It belonged to my grandfather originally. I had lent it to Derek to use. Yes, it's been in the hall closet for years. At the back."

"Then anyone in the house or familiar with the house could have got at it easily?" Miller went on.

Madeline said she supposed so.

"You handled it yourself sometimes, Mrs. Vane. Why was that?"

She stared at him in horrified surprise. "I? No, never! I hated the sight of it! I knew my aunt kept it there to remind me—to make me afraid to see Derek again."

"Your finger prints are on the cane in several places, Mrs. Vane," Miller said quietly. "Fairly fresh prints."

She gasped. "But how could they be?"

"It's true, isn't it, that you walk in your sleep sometimes?"

Lilly could have told him, or one of the servants, Madeline thought. Even Tommy, perhaps. Though the night-mares had been very few in these past months.

"I used to walk in my sleep when I was a little girl," she explained. "After

my parents were killed in an accident and I came here to live. My aunt used to have to lock me in my room at night. I outgrew it. But after Derek was gone I had nightmares. I started walking in my sleep again."

"Would you mind telling me something about these dreams that accompanied the sleepwalking?"

She sighed wearily, tried to describe limping horror from which she fled.

He nodded. "I won't keep you much longer, Mrs. Vane. I suppose you know the terms of your aunt's will?"

She knew, unless there had been recent changes. "I believe I inherit the bulk of grandfather's property. There is a legacy to Lilly—Mrs. Lacey. Small-er bequests to the servants."

"Mrs. Lacey is not well off financially?"

VAGUELY, she watched his pencil moving on the notebook page in front of him, wondered if its movements indicated notes, or if some, at least, were random lines—doodles, like the little houses Derek used to draw. She wondered if Derek still scribbled pictures of "Grim and Grim," the good twin and the bad one, when he was thinking.

She realized she was very tired. Her thoughts kept wandering. The gray man across the table looked tired, too. And he was waiting for an answer. "No, Mrs. Lacey isn't very well off."

"What was the relationship between her and Miss Carver?"

"They were cousins of a sort. Lilly was my grandmother's cousin—a first cousin of Gracia's mother."

He smiled thinly. "I was thinking more of how they got on together," he said.

"They weren't particularly close. Gracia tolerated Lilly because she was a relative." Madeline would not put into words Lilly's dislike of her aunt. Not after what she had seen in Gracia's bedroom a few hours ago.

But he seemed to know. "Do you think that a good-sized legacy—one she was never likely to come into in the natural course of things—might move Mrs. Lacey to murder someone she disliked already?" he asked.

It was a ghastly possibility. But she

shook her head.

"I don't see how money—any amount of money—could make any sane person do what was done to my aunt."

"Somebody killed your aunt," he reminded her quietly. "It's quite possible her murderer wasn't entirely sane. There seems to be a pattern of rather insane destruction in this whole case."

She could not keep back the question. "Derek—is it true that he's been in a hospital for mental cases, Lieutenant?"

Miller shifted the papers on the table. "Yes," he said. "He was found in a German prison camp at the end of the war, one of very few survivors there. He was in bad shape, mentally and physically. He has been in an army hospital until quite recently." He smiled at her thinly, then. "Just a couple more questions to-night. Your present husband—Mr. Vane—how did he get on with your aunt?"

Madeline drew a long breath. "Quite well. They didn't always agree, but they never really quarreled. Tommy has a wonderful disposition, and on the whole Gracia approved of him and of my marriage. Tommy made no objection to our living in the house here until his law practice was better established. It was Gracia's suggestion."

"And you have been married how long?"

"A little over a year now."

His next question made her start. "Did you telephone Derek Muire at his studio any time tonight?"

"Telephone?" She shook her head. "How could I? I didn't know Derek was in the city, didn't even know he was alive!"

"Muire claims somebody telephoned and asked him to come here."

"He—he thought it was my voice?" she exclaimed.

"He says he couldn't identify the voice, wasn't even sure it was a woman, because the speaker whispered and he was only half awake. He claims the call came after he was in bed."

"Lilly?" Lilly had suspected Derek was alive. She could have looked in the telephone directory. Never Gracia. Not Tommy, surely.

"He thought it might be Mrs. Lacey," Miller said. "But she denied making the call. Later she admitted it, said she was

so upset that she had forgotten about it. Her statements are rather confused."

Lilly's statements would be, even when she had been under less strain, Madeline thought fleetingly.

CHAPTER VI

A DREAM



IN THE long minute of silence that followed, Madeline thought he was about to let her go. Then Lieutenant Miller pushed a scrap of paper across the table toward her, apparently a section torn from the edge of a newspaper. No, not torn! Burned! One irregular edge was charred.

"Does this mean anything to you, Mrs. Vane?" he asked.

She stared wordlessly. On the white space somebody had drawn a little house, with twin faces inside the two square windows. Grin and Grim! She gasped. The drawing seemed to burn itself into her eyes.

"I never saw that paper before. What—what is it?"

"Something we found in the basement," he explained. "It seems to be part of a newspaper that was used in starting the incendiary fire there tonight."

"Who do you think—" she started and knew the question would be foolish.

Lieutenant Miller shook his head. "I'm only collecting facts so far—not thinking," he told her. "You may go now. You'd better try to get some sleep, Mrs. Vane. It's only a couple of hours until dawn. I'm leaving an officer on guard in the house, so you won't be disturbed."

Madeline felt as if she could never sleep again. Predawn blackness filled the room, the world. It was a terror-filled blackness, in spite of the policeman on guard. Lieutenant Miller's questions circled darkly in her mind, a sinister eddy with secret depths she could not see, an eddy that tossed up fragmentary horrors.

The police did not know who was the murderer, so suspected them all. Lilly. Derek. The servants. Even Tommy, perhaps. Even herself!

They all gained in some way by Gracia's death. All except Derek. And Derek had once hated Gracia, had a history of recent mental collapse.

The scrap of newspaper from the incendiary fire burned in her mind. The small faces, one grinning, one scowling, leered at her from the windows. Grim and Grin. Grin and Grim. Angel and devil—twins that lived in every little house—a right guy and a wrong 'un—two sides to everyone's nature, Derek had told her, laughing, a long time ago—a long, long time ago.

The drawing on the paper napkin, the drawing on the scrap of newspaper—She wondered vaguely.

Angel and devil. Even in her own nature! "But I couldn't have beaten Skipper to death, nor my aunt! Not if I walked in my sleep, even if I picked up that cane in my sleep a hundred times!" Madeline shuddered.

Finally she slept, a deep half-drugged slumber.

SHE WAS running along the endless corridor, climbing the mile-high staircase. She was far, far ahead of the limping steps, so far ahead that she knew they could not overtake her. But she had to keep on climbing.

It was somewhere at the top of the stairway. She had to find it. First, before anyone else found it.

"What is it you're hunting for?" A familiar voice was asking, a dream voice.

"I'll know when I find it!"

She bent above a dusty trunk—a chest a mile deep. Her hair was like cobwebs falling about her face. Her hands groped deeper and deeper among the shadows that filled the huge chest. It was a small slippery fish, a little oblong white fish, that darted among the sedges that filled the gray shadow-tank. The fish dived and slipped mockingly, now scowling, now grinning at her, always staying just beyond her reach.

The fish had two faces—a grinning face and a scowling face. The two-headed fish darted in one of the windows of the little house. It split down the middle with a ripping sound. The two round heads nodded at her from the two windows—one scowling, one grinning. She

grasped the little house with both hands, laughing with triumph. This was *it*. She held it in her hands!

But she could not hold it! Somebody was pulling it away from her. She was filled with sudden terror. Somebody had crept out of the mists and taken *it*. She must flee again. She began running toward the light at the end of the endless corridor, the light that looked like a square window.

Suddenly strong hands clutched her shoulders, pulled her back. A voice that was not a dream voice beat against her eardrums, low but insistent.

"Tell me, why did you want them? Why did you want my old letters, Madeline?" Derek's sea-blue eyes questioned her from under Derek's black brows.

He was standing close beside her, there in the huge, dim attic at the top of the old house, between her and the square window. She was in her flimsy silk nightdress.

She stared at the thin package of papers in Derek's hand, the notes he had written to her seven years ago on days when she could not visit him in the hospital—the dear, funny, intimate little letters that she had never shown to anyone, that she had never thrown away, even after she married Tommy.

"I don't know! It was something in a dream. I was walking in my sleep. How did you get here, Derek?"

"I never left. It's a big house. I wanted to keep an eye on you, on everybody." He looked again at the letters he had taken from her, at the drawing of the little house which decorated the back of the top sheet.

Madeline looked at it, too. "Grin and Grim!" she cried. "That old picture of the little house!" It struck her like a blow. She knew now. "It's proof, isn't it—"

The real blow struck then, so sharply, so suddenly that she went down without any cry. She barely heard the sound of the shot that kept a second blow from being struck.

Her head ached but she was desperately eager to understand what Lieutenant Miller was trying to explain to her.

"I was giving everybody plenty of rope in hopes the murderer might hang

himself—as he did."

She shuddered at the detective's too-appt phrasing.

"I'm sorry I cut it quite so fine. I should have saved you this headache, Mrs. Vane. But he acted very quickly. He must have grasped the significance of the drawing on that letter as soon as you did. And I didn't know what it was all about until later. No one had told me the truth about that charred scrap of newspaper, except Muire. And I had no reason to believe him."

"I told you the literal truth—that I had never seen that piece of paper," Madeline said.

He smiled wearily. "I knew, of course, that something about that half-burned drawing jolted you. Now I realize why you kept to the literal truth—a mistaken idea of protecting the man you had once loved."

"I still didn't believe Derek could be the murderer," she said slowly. "It didn't seem in character, and I had known him very well. He had a quick temper, but he was not a cruel man. I didn't think he would *plan* a brutal murder, build up to it by killing an old dog—" She pressed her hand to her aching forehead.

"You didn't believe that Mrs. Lacey was a murderer, nor that your husband was one, did you?" Miller asked.

"No. It's still very hard to believe."

"You have a good-sized bump on your head to prove that somebody in the house did not mind cracking skulls," he reminded her.

It was too horrible, too unbelievable.

"I doubt very much if either you or Muire would have got out of that attic alive, if I hadn't followed the three of you up there and managed to shoot the length of pipe out of Vane's hand before he could strike again," Lieutenant Miller said. "He was desperate when he realized the mistake he must have made, and that only you and Muire would recognize it. He had very little to lose by cracking a couple more heads."

Madeline shuddered. Tommy had never seemed worse than a greedy and extravagant person. But he had tried to kill her. He had broken down and confessed to her aunt's brutal murder.

"I never suspected it could be Tommy," she said. "Derek or even poor

old flutter-brained Lilly might have done it, in a fit of insanity. But not Tommy! He always seemed so sane, so normal!"

"I think no murderer is really normal," Lieutenant Miller told her. "But Vane is not insane in the ordinary sense of the word. He had the commonest motive in the world—money. He was being hounded by creditors. Your aunt had grown tired of defraying debts, was probably beginning to suspect that his debts were not all legitimate ones. You could not touch the family estate so long as your aunt lived. So he planned to get rid of your aunt."

"Framing your first husband for the crime, making it appear to be the work of a madman with a grudge against your aunt, must have seemed very clever to him. And it very nearly worked."

Madeline sighed. "But how could Tommy know that Derek was still alive? Where to telephone him last night so he would be caught in the house?"

"Quite simply. Muire tried to locate you as soon as he came back to the city, a month ago. He found Tommy instead, and Vane convinced him that you were happily remarried and the only decent thing he could do was to leave you undisturbed."

MADeline shook her aching head. She had lived with Tommy Vane for a year, had thought she was fond of him. Evidently she had never really known him.

"Vane is gone. He won't be back." The thin-faced detective smiled at her kindly. "You can stop having nightmares now."

She raised her head. "Tommy was never in the dreams," she said slowly. She realized with a pang that Tommy had never really or deeply been part of her life at all. "I never saw the face of the person who was always following me in the shadows, always threatening me with that cane. But I know now who it was. It was my aunt!"

"It's just as well you didn't tell me that last night, Mrs. Vane. I might have

put you at the top of my list of suspects, instead of at the bottom."

Madeline smiled faintly. "I had a few horrible doubts about myself, after you told me my fingerprints were on the cane. I have done odd things in my sleep sometimes, but never—"

"There were a great many prints on the cane," he told her. "Mrs. Lacey's were all over it, because she picked it up when she stumbled over it. Vane must have worn gloves that left only smudges. But there's no doubt we have the right murderer."

She was glad it wasn't Lilly, even a little happy about the legacy that would be Lilly's now, to squander in her flighty, short-sighted way.

Very glad it wasn't Derek, that Derek was not mad, that Derek was waiting in the next room for her to join him there. But it could never have been Derek. It could never have been the husband she had loved so deeply, and never stopped loving.

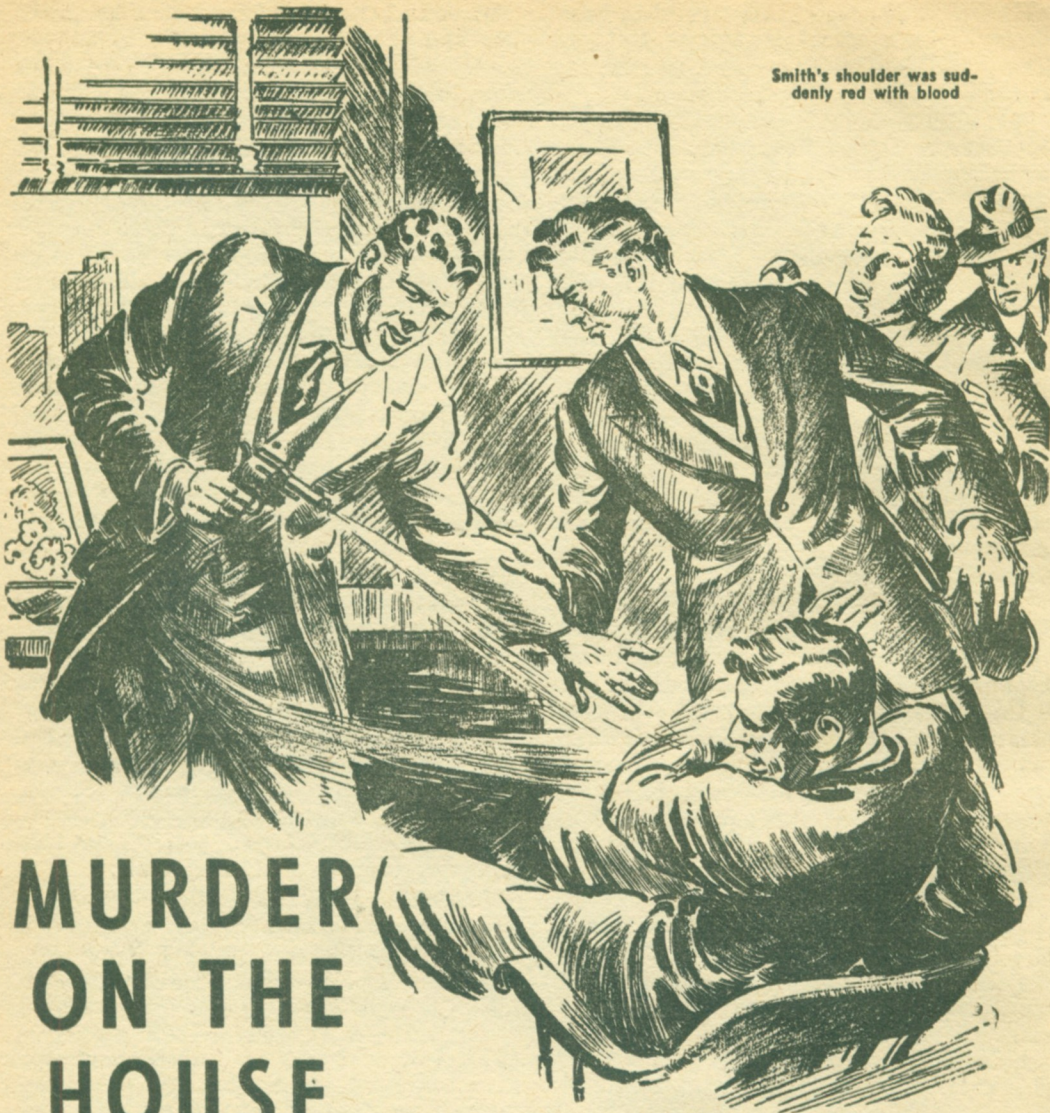
"Your walking in your sleep to get the old letters with Muire's drawings on them clinched the matter neatly," the detective was saying. "Once I was certain the picture of the house on the burned scrap of paper was a forgery, everything fell into place, including Vane's attack on you."

Madeline frowned. "I should have known where the letters were, but I'd hidden them in the attic a long long time ago and I didn't know where to look. I kept the paper napkin that I found in the restaurant, meaning to compare it with the little house drawings that I knew Derek had made. I suppose Tommy stole the napkin to copy the picture."

"Like a lot of criminals, he tried to leave too many clues pointing to somebody else," Lieutenant Miller said.

"I thought something was wrong with the picture on the burned paper," she said. "Tommy's copy was very good, but he'd got Grin and Grim turned around. He put the smiling twin in the left-hand window—and Derek always put him in the *right* window, because Grin was the right guy."

Smith's shoulder was suddenly red with blood



MURDER ON THE HOUSE

By D. L. CHAMPION

He answered to the ordinary name of Smith—but there was nothing commonplace about his courage!

THE DOOR opened and the big, melancholy man with the commonplace name entered the office. The dingy lettering on the glass panel proclaimed dispiritedly that this was the sanctum of Clem Smith, that he was a private investigator and that confi-

dential matters were his specialty.

He closed the door behind him and nodded impersonally in my general direction. I nodded back. In my six months tenure I had learned that words were used sparingly in this office.

Smith strode across the room to his

desk, which was bare save for a green blotter, a thin vase of wilted flowers and a framed photograph. His huge hand held a paper-wrapped bouquet.

It wasn't necessary to watch him to see what he would do. His morning routine was as well known to me as it was to him. He snatched the nodding flowers from the vase and disposed of them in the wastebasket. Fussily he arranged the fresh blossoms, dusted the glass of the photograph and set the vase in front of it.

The picture was that of a woman in her twenties. She wasn't beautiful, but her eyes were gay and her smile wistful. I had not the slightest idea who she was, but her presence on the desk of Clem Smith constantly puzzled me. As a matter of fact, it rather annoyed me, since its presence clashed with my estimate of my employer.

In the half year I had worked for him I had learned little of his past. I knew that some years ago he had been chief of police in a thriving industrial town on the other side of the State. He had resigned suddenly and inexplicably. He was a stanch churchman, who hated liquor, profanity and criminals as a mongoose hates a cobra.

He possessed no friends, and as far as I knew he was unmarried. For the most part he was uncommunicative and when he was not, he was gruff and to the point. His private life, if any, was conducted behind an iron curtain.

He was gray, burly, and in his middle fifties. His eyes were as blue as the Polar Sea and as cold. He certainly was not the type who went about patting stray dogs or tossing pennies to urchins. He gave the impression of being as sentimental as a guillotine. Thus, I could not fit the picture on the desk and the daily flowers into my idea of his character at all. It nettled me almost as much as it puzzled me, and it puzzled me even more that morning after the advent of Louis La Moyne.

LA MOYNE came in a little after eleven o'clock and slammed the door quickly behind him. He was a tall man, something on the far side of thirty. I recognized him immediately from the pictures I had seen in the press.

He was dressed like a neon sign. His suit was of a baffling color, perhaps closer to purple than anything else. His shirt was green and silken, his tie a flaming scarlet. Diamonds glittered on his fingers and his wristwatch was a beautiful thing, indeed.

He flashed a personality smile at me, waved an affable hand and sat down in the chair at the side of Smith's desk.

"I've got a job for you," he said briskly.

An odd, mirthless smile flickered over the old man's lips. He said in a strained voice, "You're got no job for me, Mr. Louis La Moyne."

La Moyne cast a swift, appraising glance about the office.

"You can't be doing very well," he said. "How does five G's sound to you?"

I watched Smith with interest. He grossed little better than five thousand in a year. I was sure he had no cash stowed away. Five G's, I knew, sounded like a fortune. But Clem Smith was a man of principle who insisted on knowing the genealogy of his fee, and whatever cash La Moyne had in his possession certainly bore a bar sinister on its face.

La Moyne had moved into town a few years ago and attached himself to the perimeter of small-time gambling circles. His rise had been rapid, and splattered with blood. Although he had been arrested on several occasions the police had never accumulated enough evidence to convince a grand jury of his guilt. He was, at the present moment, a powerful man who was an influence in the underworld and a strong voice in the political councils of the county.

Clem Smith cleared his throat. He said quietly, "Will you get out and leave me alone?"

La Moyne turned his head slowly, until his gaze fell on the photograph and the vase. He bit his lip and frowned thoughtfully. Smith was staring at him with strange, and I thought, helpless appeal in his eyes.

"Well," said La Moyne, "if you won't help me for money, let us put it on a sentimental basis."

"Will you get out?" said Smith grimly. "At once!"

La Moyne smiled. "You once held my

mother in great regard. I gather from this touching floral tribute before her picture that you still do, even though she is dead. She would want you to help me. If you won't do it for cash, will you do it for her?"

I blinked in spite of myself. La Moyne represented everything on earth that Clem Smith detested. But apparently La Moyne's mother was the single sentimental memory in Smith's hermitlike life.

Across the room, Smith cleared his throat again. He closed his eyes for twenty seconds. Then he opened them.

"What is it you want?" he said, then.

"Help," said La Moyne. "Fast and efficient help. I'm being framed. For murder."

Clem Smith lifted his shaggy eyebrows. "Framed?"

"Framed," said La Moyne harshly. "I know you'd believe I'd killed Furness. So would everyone else. That's why I need help."

"Furness?" echoed Smith. "Alfred Furness?"

La Moyne nodded briskly. I frowned and glanced at the morning paper on my desk. Furness was an inspector of police who, recent rumor had it, was conducting a secret investigation of gambling, bribery and kindred activities. If he had been murdered it certainly would have hit the front page.

"It's not in the papers," I said.

"Not yet," said La Moyne. "The body was just discovered. He was killed with my automatic, which was lying on the floor in the room where Furness was shot."

Clem Smith wrinkled his rugged brow. "How do you know?" he said. "I was tipped off by a friend. By phone."

"Who was the friend?"

La Moyne seemed to consider the question. After a minute, he shook his head. "I can't tell you that. I can't sell out a pal."

"Well," said Smith, "when did you get this call?"

"Just before I came here. It was exactly at ten o'clock."

"Alibi?"

La Moyne shook his head again. "According to my information, Furness

was killed some time between midnight and six this morning. I was in bed at my hotel. Alone. No witnesses."

"Can they pin a motive on you?" the boss asked.

"Of course they can. It is said that Furness was supposed to be investigating matters which involve me. Even if he wasn't, the coppers would say he was. The coppers don't like me. That's why it's impossible for me to ask them to investigate my being framed. That's why I've come to you."

CLEM SMITH drew a deep breath. He said quietly, "Assuming you're telling the truth, what can I do?"

"You can use your head," said La Moyne. "That gun was in a bureau drawer in my hotel room at noon yesterday. I saw it. You can snoop around and find out if anyone entered my room while I was out. After that, do whatever private eyes do. I don't know. I'm no dick!"

He uttered that last word as if it were obscene. Smith ignored his intonation and said, "It seems pretty thin, but I'll try it. Where will you be? You'd better not go home, if you're ducking the police."

"Me? I'll wait here. This is as safe as any place."

"For Heaven's sake!" said Clem Smith. "Do you think a private investigator is Sherlock Holmes? Do you think that I'll be back in an hour or so with evidence which will clear you and send someone else to the chair?"

La Moyne nodded blandly. "I've a lot of faith in you," he said. "I'll expect you back in less than an hour. I'm confident you'll turn up something. Here, take my keys with you."

Smith looked him full in the face. For moments they stared at each other. I thought I detected an air of mutual suspicion and antagonism. At last, Smith ran a hand through his sparse hair.

"All right," he said, "wait here. We'll lock you in. Eddie Allen and I will have a look around. . . . Come on, Eddie."

I got up and reached for my hat. As I opened the door, Louis La Moyne said, "Well, thanks a lot. You're do-

ing me a favor I'll remember."

Clem Smith turned and looked at him. His gaze traveled from La Moyne to the photograph on the desk.

"Keep your thanks," he said, in a thick, strained voice. "I'm not doing this for you."

He slammed the door and I followed him to the elevator.

The Hotel Azure, where Louis La Moyne lived, was as flashy, as ornate as La Moyne himself. The lobby was a glittering field of white leather and chromium. The bellhops were dressed in red and gold. The hat-check girls were carefully painted and smartly outfitted.

Clem Smith handed me the key to La Moyne's room. "Go up there," he said, "and snoop around. I'll ask some questions of the staff, and join you in a little while."

I went up to the fifth floor and entered La Moyne's suite. It was an elaborate setup, the chief feature of which was a short mahogany bar with brass fittings. There were two rooms and a serving pantry. The hair brushes, the shaving outfit, the luggage all bore three purple initials, "L.L.M."

Snooping around is a task at which I am not too proficient. I had only been at this job for six months and most of our assignments did not call for frisking hotel suites. However, recalling what I had read about such things, I began at one end of the living room and worked carefully toward the window.

I reached a writing desk halfway across the room without turning up anything that the most cynical detective could have considered a clue. Then I came to the wastepaper basket. Dumping its contents on the floor, I examined them closely.

For the most part I found myself scrutinizing old, crumpled newspapers. I paused as I noted that one of them was an evening paper from Marple. Marple was a town in the northern part of the State, about a hundred and fifty miles away.

I unfolded the sheet and looked at it. Pasted on the front page was a name in blue ink, below that an address. Doubtless it was a subscriber's

copy which had been sent through the mail. I read the name slowly, and whistled.

At that moment the door opened and Clem Smith entered, followed by one of the red-and-gold bellboys from downstairs. He nodded at me.

"This," he said, indicating the boy, "is Jimmy Burns. He has some information for us. . . . Go ahead, Jimmy."

"Well," said the boy, "I was on this floor yesterday afternoon about four o'clock. I happened to pass the door of Mr. La Moyne's room and I saw a man putting a key in the lock."

"It wasn't Mr. La Moyne?" said Smith.

"No, sir." The boy was certain.

"Who was it?"

"I don't know his name. He's a big man, with gray hair and a white scar on his left cheek. He had a newspaper in one hand, and he unlocked the door with the other."

At the word "newspaper," I started.

"So," said Smith, "if it wasn't Mr. La Moyne why didn't you stop him from entering the room?"

"I'd often seen the man with Mr. La Moyne," the boy explained. "I knew he was a friend of his, so I thought Mr. La Moyne had given him the key."

Clem Smith nodded slowly. There was an odd expression in his cold, blue eyes. He said sharply, "What sort of suit was this man wearing?"

Jimmy Burns shook his head. "I didn't notice."

Smith seemed annoyed. He said, "Let's get this straight. At four o'clock you saw this man you've described entering this suite. He carried a paper in one hand and unlocked the door with the other. Naturally, the paper would have been in his left hand and the keys in his right. Correct?"

The boy nodded. "Yes, sir."

SMITH handed him a half dollar and dismissed him. No sooner had the door closed than I said excitedly, "Say, I've got the paper! The newspaper. I found it in the wastepaper basket. He must have put it down while he looked for La Moyne's gun. It's got his name on it."

Clem Smith did not share my excite-

ment. "I expect it has," he said evenly. "It's Stacey's name, isn't it?"

"You knew it from the boy's description, didn't you?" I felt slightly crest-fallen.

He nodded. "Do you know anything about Stacey?"

I knew a little. He was a plain-clothes copper with a none-too-savory reputation. I had heard that one of Furness' tasks had been not only to clean up the town, but to weed out the coppers who it was believed worked hand in glove with the underworld. I told these things to Smith, and as I spoke everything cleared in my mind.

"La Moyne is clean," I said. "It's simple. Listen, Furness was digging into the dirty work in this town. He got something on Stacey before he had anything on La Moyne. Stacey killed him with La Moyne's gun. But Stacey doubtless subscribed to an out-of-town paper. Probably his home town. Check and see if he doesn't come from Marple. He let himself in here with a pass-key, left the paper after he had found La Moyne's gun. He killed Furness, knowing that since Furness was investigating La Moyne, the coppers could easily figure motive. The very fact that the bellboy says he was chummy with La Moyne proves that he was somehow connected with the crooks of this town. It's perfect!"

CLEM SMITH drew a deep breath. "Perfect," he repeated. "Eddie, it's just *too* perfect."

I thought that over slowly. "You mean, maybe, that La Moyne really killed Furness and he's trying to frame Stacey?"

He shook his head. "Somehow, I don't think that's the answer exactly. Come on. I want to do a little checking at police headquarters before we go back to the office."

At headquarters, Smith left me waiting downstairs while he went up to interview Chief of Police Hartley. I smoked three cigarettes before he came down again. He was not alone.

Hartley, a fat, red-faced man wearing a harassed frown, was with him. Bringing up the rear was a tall individual with a three-inch white scar on his

left cheek. It was Stacey.

"Get a taxi, Eddie," Smith said to me. "We're all going up to our office."

We rode uptown in silence. I gathered from Stacey's concerned manner that Smith had not told him of our discoveries in the Hotel Azure.

I unlocked the office door and the four of us walked in. Louis La Moyne sprang to his feet as we entered. His eyelids narrowed suspiciously as he stared at us. Stacey looked at him and for the first time a flicker of apprehension crossed his face.

Clem Smith's gesture embraced the office chairs. "Sit down," he said. "All of you."

"What's this all about?" asked Stacey.

Hartley answered him. "It's about Al Furness and his murderer. Or so Smith tells me."

La Moyne licked his lips. He shot a glance of pure hatred in Stacey's direction. Stacey lit a cigarette. He had the wary look of an animal who has heard an alien sound in the forest.

"Go ahead, Clem," Hartley said. "What have you got?"

Clem Smith hoisted himself to the edge of his desk. His face was hard and impassive. His blue eyes were like jagged pieces of turquoise. He said quietly. "I have two of the lowest rats in the country." He paused, then added in a voice thickened by contempt, "I give you the Messrs. Louis La Moyne and Samuel Stacey!"

La Moyne half rose from his chair. "Is this a double cross? he demanded angrily. "I—"

"Shut up!" said Smith, and there was thunder in his tone.

"Get to the point," Hartley said. "What about Furness?"

Smith ignored him. He said, "These two snakes, Stacey and La Moyne—one of them, I know, is a killer! Both of them are devoid of an atom of human decency. They don't even recognize honor among thieves. They are friends, professionally. Yet neither of them has hesitated to try to send the other to the chair."

La Moyne blinked slowly. His anger seemed to have evaporated. Stacey shifted uneasily in his chair. Color flooded his face and the white scar

stood out in ashen relief.

"Take Stacey," went on Smith. "He finds out that Furness has enough on his, Stacey's connections with the crooks of this town to cost him his job and maybe a prison sentence. He wants Furness out of the way. So one day when he is in his pal La Moyne's suite, he swipes his automatic. He makes sure it is left in the room where Furness is murdered. And at this stage of the game, La Moyne is his *friend*. But what's friendship to a rat?"

THERE was a deadly silence in the room. Both La Moyne and Stacey were staring intently at Clem Smith, tense as they listened to his words.

"And what does La Moyne do?" Smith continued. "When he learns that he has apparently been framed, he tries to pin the murder job on *his* pal, Stacey. He bribes a bellboy to swear he saw Stacey entering his room yesterday afternoon, with a newspaper in his left hand. La Moyne knows very well that Stacey subscribes to his home-town paper.

"This morning, right after ten o'clock, he dispatches one of his men to break into Stacey's apartment and swipe yesterday's Marple newspaper. He plants it in his own wastepaper basket. He thus fixes his own frame against Stacey. At that time he has no idea that Stacey's trying to cross him. But what's the odds? He may as well sell a friend down the river as anyone else."

The silence was more intense, now. Police Chief Hartley broke it.

"You seem to be saying that one of these guys killed Furness," he ground out. "Which one was it?"

"Stacey," said Smith. "He killed him with La Moyne's gun. He tipped La Moyne off that Furness was dead and that La Moyne's automatic had killed him. He expected La Moyne would take a powder then and no one would suspect Stacey."

"You mean," said Hartley, "that Stacey tipped off La Moyne that Furness was dead?"

"It couldn't have been anyone else. According to your records at headquarters, the report of the murder came in at nine-fifty-one. La Moyne got his phone call at exactly ten. Stacey was just waiting for the report to come in, to phone La Moyne. Moreover, if it had been one of La Moyne's boys who'd discovered the corpse, they would have removed his automatic from the scene of the crime. It was Stacey who tipped him off. Ask La Moyne. Now that he sees the fact favors him, he'll admit it."

La Moyne nodded his head eagerly. "It was Stacey, all right. The rat tried to frame me!"

"You didn't know that when you tried to frame him," said Smith. "You didn't know that when you planted that newspaper and bribed the boy to lie for you."

"How did you know the boy was lying?" I asked.

"Because Stacey is left-handed and the boy said he held the paper in his left hand and unlocked the door with his right. Oh, Stacey swiped La Moyne's gun, all right, but he didn't do it yesterday afternoon and no witnesses saw him do it, either."

"You are saying," said Hartley, "that Stacey killed Furness?"

[Turn page]

THOUSANDS EVERYWHERE ACCLAIM THIS

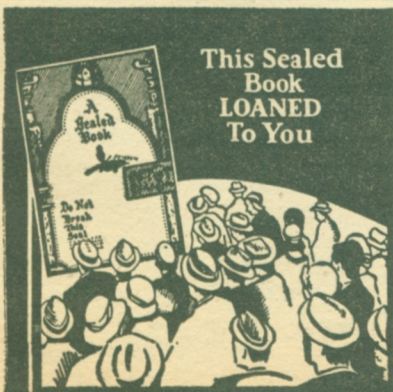
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"Obviously. The man who called La Moyne killed Furness. Who else could know that the automatic was in the room? It had to be a man who knew that, and who also knew when the police report of the killing came in. Stacey only falls into that category."

"Why didn't he play safe," I said, "and wait until after the coppers got to the scene before calling La Moyne?"

"He wanted La Moyne to have time to scream, as he thought he would. It was simpler for him if La Moyne conceded his guilt by flight. Stacey didn't realize that La Moyne was as great a double-crosser as he was."

Hartley nodded. He stood up. "I'll take you both in. You, Stacey, for murder. La Moyne as a material witness."

Stacey moved out of his chair. His lips were contorted with rage. He glared at La Moyne.

"You rat!" he said. "You tried to frame me!"

This was certainly the pot calling the kettle black, but no one had time to mark the irony of the situation.

"The only good thing about murder is that you can commit it twice for the same penalty," Stacey said. "The second killing is on the house!"

His hand shot into a shoulder holster and reappeared an instant later with a Police Special.

Its muzzle was aimed directly at La Moyne's heart. As Stacey's finger tightened on the trigger, Smith uttered a harsh cry and sprang at him. The gun blasted like dynamite throughout the room. Smith's shoulder was suddenly red with blood. Stacey's free hand smashed hard against the old man's jaw and he fell to the floor.

The gun fired twice more before Hartley and I got to Stacey. And by that time, Louis La Moyne lay still in his chair, his purple suit an incongruous shroud.

Clem Smith was conscious when they took him out on the stretcher. He looked up at me painfully as they took him through the doorway.

"Eddie," he said, "be sure to get fresh flowers for my desk in the morning."

AT NINE the following day I placed the fresh flowers before the photograph, then I went down to the hospital. Clem Smith was sitting up and taking nourishment. There was a strained expression on his face. I asked him the question which had puzzled me all night.

"I know that you detest men like Louis La Moyne and everything they stand for," I said. "Therefore, I can only assume that you must have been a great friend of his mother's in order for you to risk your own life to save his."

His blue eyes met mine coldly. Then a little warmth crept into them.

"Friend?" he said. "I was more than a friend. I was her—husband!"

I blinked. "Husband? Then La Moyne—was—"

"Our son," he said quietly. "He was a crook at the age of sixteen. He broke his mother's heart. He made me resign a job I was proud of. I couldn't remain a police chief in a town where my son was the principal criminal."

He sighed and paused for a long moment. "He was a wild kid who wanted money and flash. The ordinary things wouldn't do. Even his name wouldn't do. He hated to be called Smith. He changed it to Louis La Moyne. Flash, all flash."

He closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them again, the coldness had gone from them. They were warm and they were moist. He said in a scarcely audible voice:

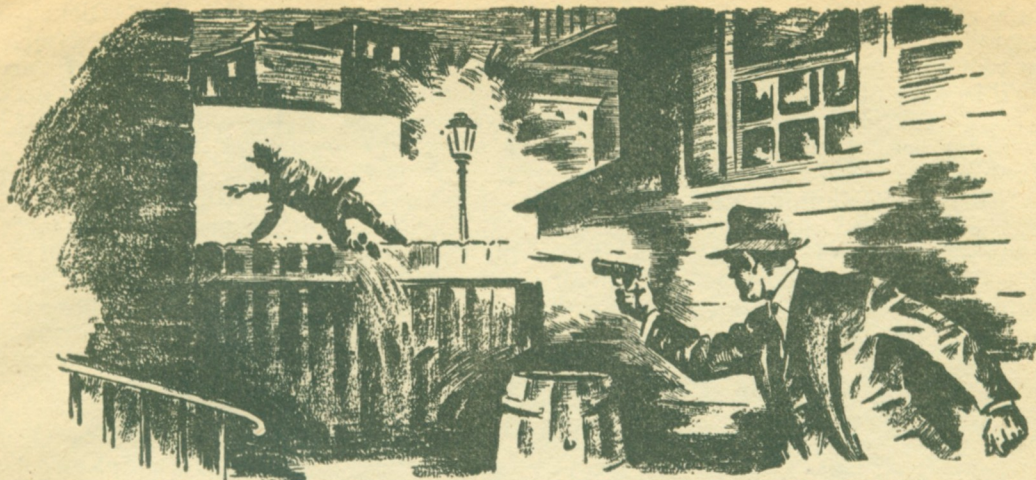
"May God have mercy on his soul."

FEATURED NEXT ISSUE

THE FRIGHTENED FACES

An Exciting Complete Mystery Novelet

By STEWART STERLING



Dickenson made a flying leap over a wooden fence

POLICE BUSINESS

By JOHN L. BENTON

Taking risks was all in the day's work for Detective Manning!

HUGH MANNING bought a newspaper at the newsstand and stood reading the headlines. People milled about the entrance of the arcade that led to the elevators of the 191st Street I R T subway station. Manning watched everyone without appearing to do so. When you have been a detective for fifteen years, checking the faces in a crowd becomes automatic.

It was 6:30 in the evening and fairly warm for early fall. People were returning to Washington Heights from their work downtown. They came by subway and by bus and some of them in their own cars. Across St. Nicholas Avenue an uptown bound Fifth Avenue bus rolled to the curb in front of the combined butcher and grocery store and passengers descended. The next stop two blocks away was the end of the line.

In the arcade a big elevator brought up a load of passengers from the subway tracks ten floors below. The crowd surged toward the street, flowing around Manning like a rising tide. They paid no attention to the stocky man in

the gray hat and the gray suit.

"That's Dickenson in the brown suit and brown hat," a thin man said softly as he drew close to Manning. He did not even look at the detective as he spoke. "Better take over."

Manning watched Detective Frank Page as the thin man swung to his left on the sidewalk in front of the newsstand and stationary store and headed toward the 191st Street corner. Then Manning casually folded up his paper and started down the avenue, trailing the man in the brown suit and the brown hat.

It was strange about this case. Manning lived in an apartment one block west over on Wadsworth Avenue. He was off duty and had been home alone a little over half an hour ago. His wife and ten-year-old son had gone down to 181st Street to see an early movie. The phone rang and Manning answered it. It was Frank Page on the wire.

"I'm at the Times Square subway station tailing a man named Russell Dickenson. He's getting a shoeshine now,"

Page said. "He lives in the Heights up around Fort George Avenue. Think he suspects I'm following him, though. He'll be sure of it if I keep trailing him after we get uptown. How about taking over for me when we get up there, Hugh?"

"All right," Manning said. "I'll wait at the entrance to the arcade at the Hundred-and-Ninety-first Street subway. If you don't show up in an hour I'll know there's no use waiting any longer."

"Good," said Page. "I think Dickenson knows something about—" he broke off. "He's leaving. I'll tell you later."

PAGE had hung up before Manning could ask any question. Now the stocky detective was trailing a man he had never seen before and without even knowing why. Page had said that Dickenson knew something—about what? Manning hadn't the faintest idea.

He did feel there was something decidedly wrong about the man in the brown suit heading down St. Nicholas Avenue. If Dickenson lived on Fort George Avenue and was going home he should be walking in the opposite direction. St. Nicholas Avenue ended at Fort George Avenue at the top of the hill.

As they went on down the hill Manning suddenly discovered there was no one within a block of him on this side of the street save the man he was following. Dickenson stopped and stood looking at the display in the window of a photography store. Manning was too experienced in shadowing a man to do such an obvious thing as stop and gaze into another shop window until Dickenson moved on.

He walked on down the street unconcernedly and started past Dickenson. Apparently the man in the brown suit meant nothing to Manning one way or another.

"Nice night, Mr. Manning," Dickenson said casually.

That Dickenson knew his name was so startling that Manning halted and stared at the other man in amazement. Russell Dickenson smiled. He was husky, dark haired and apparently in his late thirties.

"You don't remember me," Dickenson said. "But Dickenson is my name. I usually get the Sunday papers from Ben late Saturday night just as you do. I've seen you in there often. In fact I asked the owner of the stationery store who you were."

"Ben told you?" Manning asked.

"Why, yes," Dickenson said. "He told me that your name was Manning, that you were a Headquarters detective, but that you lived up here in the Heights."

"That's nice," Manning said dryly. "Did he tell you how old I am, what size shirt I wear, and a few other little details?"

"No," Dickenson said with a laugh. "But he did tell me that attractive blond woman and the light haired little boy I have seen you with were your wife and son. I'd know them anywhere." There was sudden menace in Dickenson's voice. "Why, I could give anyone a description of the woman and the boy so they would recognize them at once."

Manning noticed that Dickenson had his right hand in the pocket of his brown suit coat all the time he was talking. The detective strongly suspected those hidden fingers were clutching a gun. Manning carried an automatic in a shoulder holster, but he had no desire to reach for it now.

"Let's stop playing games, Dickenson," Manning said coldly. "I'll admit that I'm a detective, and have a wife and little boy but I don't see how that concerns you."

"When one man that I suspect is a detective follows me all the way uptown from Times Square, I start wondering," Dickenson said. "Then when that man drops the chase, and I find you are trailing along after me, Manning, I'm glad I always play it safe."

"Play it safe," repeated Manning. "What do you mean by that?"

"I've had a feeling that you might be after me," Dickenson said. "Just the idea made me uncomfortable—so I told some friends of mine about it. You wouldn't like them at all if you knew them. You would consider them tough gunmen."

"Go on," said Manning quietly as Dickenson stopped speaking. "What's the rest of it?"

"These friends of mine have been watching the apartment building where you live over on Wadsworth Avenue for nearly a week now," Dickenson said. "Perhaps you have noticed three men working on an old car out in front of your place. They've had a hard time getting that motor running right."

"I've noticed them," Manning admitted.

HE HAD paid no attention to the three men. Someone was always working on a car out in front of the apartment building. He found himself wishing desperately that he knew whether Russell Dickenson was wanted for any particular crime. If only Frank Page had told him just a little more about this man.

"Where are Mrs. Manning and your son now?" Dickenson asked.

"They went to the movies," Manning said.

"I don't think they ever reached the theatre," Dickenson said.

"What do you mean?" Manning asked tensely.

"Those friends of mine worry about me so," Dickenson said. "They get the strangest ideas. Why they even think that you might place me under arrest on suspicion, Manning."

"Why should I?" Manning demanded.

"You know that part of it as well as I do," said Dickenson. "But we were talking about those friends of mine. Why they would even snatch a detective's wife and little boy and hold them prisoners until my friends were sure the detective didn't get any foolish ideas about me."

A chill shook Manning though the night was not cold. Had those three men that Dickenson was talking about actually kidnaped Nancy and Tommy? Or was Dickenson merely bluffing? Manning could not be certain, and he didn't dare take a chance on it. He knew that he had to act and act fast.

"What happens if I do place you under arrest?" Manning asked.

"I'm afraid you'll never see your wife and son again alive," Dickenson said. "You see I phoned my friends from downtown at five this afternoon. They told me that they had just taken care

of some business for me."

"Meaning that they had snatched my wife and boy," said Manning bitterly. "That they have got Nancy and Tommy?"

"Exactly," said Dickenson. "They have got Mrs. Manning and Tommy."

"Four men," said Manning. "Counting you and your three men. Seems to me that it was four men who pulled off that hundred-thousand-dollar robbery on Park Avenue a few nights ago. Let's see, there is something about it in the paper tonight."

Manning lifted the evening paper that he held rolled up in his right hand. But instead of opening it to look at the front page, he swung hard and slapped Dickenson across the face with it.

The action was so unexpected that it left Dickenson dazed for a moment. Before he recovered Manning caught his right arm and gave it a twist. Dickenson dropped the gun he had managed to draw out of the side pocket of his coat.

The gun and the paper that Manning had dropped were lying on the sidewalk.

Manning released his grip on Dickenson's wrist and then the detective was covering the other man with his automatic. A woman, who had stepped out of a store and seen the two men struggling, suddenly screamed as she saw the automatic in Manning's hand.

"Help!" shouted Dickenson. "He's trying to rob me."

A police patrol car that had been rolling down St. Nicholas Avenue saw the gun in Manning's hand and pulled up to the curb and the two officers leaped out, their guns drawn.

"What's going on here?" one of them demanded.

Dickenson suddenly turned and ran, racing west along 189th Street. Manning raised his automatic with the intention of stopping the fleeing man by putting a bullet in Dickenson's leg, but one of the patrolman grabbed the detective before he could fire.

"Quit it!" snapped Manning angrily. "I'm Detective Manning from Headquarters and I was placing the man who got away under arrest."

He showed the two officers his shield

and then raced in pursuit of Dickenson. The two policemen ran back and got into the prowl car, planning to circle around the block and head the fugitive off that way.

Manning ran fast, the automatic still in his hand. He saw Dickenson turn into an alleyway between two houses. Manning saw that by circling around the nearest house, he might gain on the other man. It was a short cut. He made it, and found he was close to the fugitive now.

DICKENSON made a flying leap over a wooden fence between two buildings, blocking off the yard from the street beyond. Manning raised the automatic and fired. The bullet got Dickenson in the left leg and he fell on the other side of the fence.

When Manning reached the street, the patrol car was there ahead of him and the two officers were bending over the wounded man who was lying on the sidewalk moaning.

Another patrol car stood in front of an apartment house across the street. Manning blinked in amazement as Detective Frank Page and two more policemen marched three tough-looking men out of the building. Page was carrying a big traveling bag.

"We've got the whole gang that pulled off that Park Avenue robbery," Page said as Manning joined him. "And I see you have Dickenson. He was the brains of the gang. I had a hunch and found out his address; got these officers and raided the apartment. We captured these three men and found the loot from the robbery."

"You didn't find my wife and boy at the apartment?" Manning asked.

"Of course not," said Page in surprise. "What made you think they might

be there, Hugh?"

"Dickenson had me pretty well convinced that his men had snatched Nancy and Tommy," Manning said. "Until he made one slip. He said he had phoned his men at five this afternoon and they told him they had kidnaped my wife and son."

"What was wrong about that?" Page asked and now the wounded man was also listening.

"At five o'clock Nancy and Tommy were still home," said Manning. "I was there then, too. They didn't leave to go to the movies until five-thirty. So I was almost certain that Dickenson was lying. I would have arrested him anyway. After fifteen years on the Force, I know my duty."

Half an hour later the four robbers were being held in jail and Hugh Manning started back to his apartment. As he unlocked the front door he could smell lamb chops cooking.

"That you, Hugh?" Nancy called to him from the kitchen.

"Right," Manning answered.

Tommy came running down the hall to greet him. "We saw a swell picture, Dad," the boy said. "All about gangsters and police with lots of shooting in it. There was another picture, too, about love and stuff, but I didn't think much of that. Mother liked it though."

"That's right, Tommy," said Nancy as she stood smiling at her husband. "I liked it." She looked at Manning. "Where have you been, Hugh?"

"Taking care of some police business," he said putting his hat on the hall table. "Those chops smell good—I'm hungry."

"Police business," Nancy said. "Anything special?"

"No," Manning smiled. "Nothing special."

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NEXT ISSUE

KILL ME NEVER

A Mystery Novelet of the Prize-Fight Game

By DEAN OWEN

And Many Other Stories!

QUEST for a KILLER



A short mystery novel

by **NORMAN A. DANIELS**

A CLASSIC OF DETECTIVE FICTION

QUEST FOR A KILLER



STEVE ASHLEY

Steve Ashley knew he was heir to his aunt's estate, but didn't know it included four fresh murders as well as a near fifth—his own!

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CHAPTER I

DEATH OF AN OLD LADY

GRACE ASHLEY was dying and no one knew this any better than Grace Ashley. She didn't care much. An old lady gets very tired. Friends were gathered around her bedside. They, too, knew that this was a good-by.

She opened her eyes. They were the palest blue, for years had washed out their original color. "What time is it?" she asked.

Aging, overweight Dr. Quillian bent over the bed. Although death was by no means a stranger to him, his eyes were moist.

"It's ten o'clock, Grace," he said. "Don't you feel like resting any more?"

"I'll rest long enough before morning," Grace Ashley said grimly. "Where is Steve? Why isn't he here?"

A heavily starched uniform crackled as Norma McBain, the trained nurse on duty, came forward. She was a plain girl who wore glasses. She was sharp-featured, with a nearly lipless mouth. Yet she was kind and gentle.

"Steve left about two hours ago, Miss Ashley," she said. "He said—"

"Yes," the old woman lifted her head a bit. "What did he say? Or wait—I'll tell you. He said, 'No Ashley dies this quickly. They hang on for days, fighting like tigers.' Isn't that right?"

"Yes, Miss Ashley. Almost exactly."

The old woman smiled, "That's like him. He's a good boy. He's like his father, who was my youngest brother. What if he doesn't like to work? Does a man have to toil when he has money enough? Those who criticize him are just jealous."

"Please, Miss Ashley," Norma McBain urged, "don't excite yourself."

"I'll excite myself all I please," Grace Ashley said flatly. "I'm a tired old woman. I'm dying. Doctor—will it be much longer?"

Dr. Quillian took a small bottle from his medical bag, opened it and dumped a minute pill into the palm of his hand. He stepped to the bed and signaled. Grace Ashley obediently stuck out her tongue and the doctor placed the minute pill upon it.

"There's no telling how long you'll live, Grace," he said quietly. "It may be

tonight—a week—a month. I warned you about it long ago."

She swallowed the pill. She turned her head to one side and looked at the other people in the room.

"Jim Butler," she said. "Come here."

James Butler, who for long had been her attorney, walked over to the bedside. "Don't worry about me, Grace," he told her. "I'll be here any time you want me."

"Jim," she said haltingly. "I can't seem to remember very well. My will—it included Latham, didn't it?"

"Yes." He glanced at a man across the room.

"Tell Latham to come here," she ordered.

DWIGHT LATHAM, tall, clumsy and middle-aged, shuffled forward.

"Latham," Grace Ashley said, "for more than twenty years you ran my antique shop. You are one of the best worm-hole borers in the business. I should have called you termite."

Latham shuffled his big feet and grinned like an eleven-year-old boy. "Aw, I just did what I thought best, Miss Ashley," he mumbled. "Both of us did. Ain't our fault the business never made much money."

"It's a lemon," Grace Ashley told him. "It's also yours, every stick of cracked bent wood. I arranged for that, Latham. I hope you make more money than I did out of it."

Latham thanked her and backed away. She raised one hand.

"Major," she said weakly, "come here. Are you afraid of me? The rest of you leave us, please. Oh, Jim—Jim Butler—see if you can find Steve for me."

Major Alvah Ross placed a chair beside the old woman's bed. He was a man of about sixty but didn't look it. His iron-gray hair was carefully combed. His gray eyes were friendly and he had a smile that lit up his whole



Ashley hit the masked man so hard that pain shot the full length of his arm (CHAP. XI)

face. There was not an ounce of surplus flesh on him. One of the costliest gymnasiums saw to that.

"Well, Alvah," Grace Ashley said with a faint smile, "it looks like the parting of the ways. We've been friends for years. You asked me to marry you fifty times each year. That makes about a thousand times. A thousand times I made a fool of myself by refusing."

"I warned you." Major Ross chuckled. "Oh come now, Dr. Quillian says you have a good chance of pulling through."

"I don't want that chance," Grace Ashley said. "My heart—for years I've catered to it. I've stood for the punishment it has inflicted upon me. I've been on the verge of dying before—several times. Now I don't want to pull through. I'm satisfied. Alvah—look out for Steve. He's going to get a great shock. He'll need sound advice."

"I'll talk to him," Major Ross promised. "He'll stay on the beam, as they say these days. No Ashley ever got off it. Is there anything else I can do?"

She closed her eyes as if the last few moments had been a terrific effort. Major Ross got up quietly and tiptoed out of the room. Dr. Quillian was in the hallway with Norma McBain. The nurse immediately went to Grace Ashley's side.

Dr. Quillian kept frowning. "Major," he said, "you're an old friend of Grace's. She hasn't anyone of much importance any more. I know she trusted you and so will I. Major, I don't like things as they are."

"What do you mean by that?" Ross asked.

"Bluntly, Grace should not be dying. I gave her nitroglycerine an hour ago, another pill just before I left the bedside. Those pills should have a definite reaction if her heart is failing and it's missing. To my mind something more than a weak heart is killing her."

Major Ross seized the doctor by both lapels and yanked him close. His eyes were cold and unrelenting.

"Do I understand you believe Grace is

being murdered? Poisoned?"

Dr. Quillian shook himself free of Major Ross' grasp. "That's exactly what I mean. She hasn't a long time left. Her pulse is thready, her respiration low. She's suffered from that heart condition for seven years. Three or four times she almost went out but nitroglycerine saved her. I administered it, I saw how the drug reacted and this time there is no reaction. Something blocks the drug. Some counter-irritant perhaps. Yes—I'm inclined to think she has been poisoned."

Major Ross ran fingers through his hair, lit a cigarette and puffed on it nervously. "Why don't you try to save her then?" he demanded. "If it isn't her heart, you might do something."

"She's too far gone," Dr. Quillian said. "Her resistance is poor. No one can help her. I mentioned this only because I believe we should investigate after she is dead. An autopsy."

"But, Doctor"—Ross wagged his head from side to side—"who in the world would want to murder her? Her lifetime has been devoted to helping others. She hasn't an enemy in the world."

"I could be wrong," Quillian admitted. "It's just that I don't like the looks of things. As you say, there is no one with a motive for killing her unless—unless it's that shiftless nephew of hers. Steve Ashley should have been horsewhipped ten years ago and put to work."

"Oh, Steve's all right," the major assured. "Grace pampered him too much, that's all. And as for him murdering her—good heavens, man, Steve wouldn't harm a fly! He's the direct antithesis of violence. That's his failing. Of course Grace's money will take the boy a long way."

"He'll go through it in one year," Dr. Quillian prophesied. "Well, I'd better go back and see how she is. No signs of Steve yet, eh?"

"Butler is calling the night clubs," Ross said. "Tell Grace he'll be here soon."

Dr. Quillian reached for the door

knob, hesitated and turned around again. "Mind you, Major," he cautioned, "I don't want what I've said broadcast. Symptoms err sometimes, you know, and Grace's time was up months ago. She may live through the night, get another grip on herself and fool us all."

The door behind Dr. Quillian had opened as he spoke. Norma McBain, the old lady's nurse, said, "Doctor, the patient is dead."

CHAPTER II

STRANGE INHERITANCE



THE center attraction at the swanky bar was a young man, handsome, wearing well-tailored clothes and with the easy manners of fine breeding. Steve Ashley was engaged in putting the touches into his glass structure.

The base of the fortress was made up of beer glasses and seidel. The middle part was of highball glasses. On top were pony glasses. The whole thing looked as though it might tumble with the addition of one more glass and that was what Steve Ashley was trying to find out.

He used swizzle sticks for flag poles, tore cocktail napkins into thin strips and fastened them by moisture to the glass rods. One of these went into each pony glass—and the job was done.

Walter Lonergan, a famous building expert, rubbed the side of his nose and grinned. "Son," he asked, "did you ever think of going in for architecture?"

"You should see what I can do after I put away ten Martinis in a row," Steve chuckled. "Study architecture? No, Lonergan, I think not."

Arty Bray, another idler at the bar, listened to all this, a slightly stupid expression on his face. He'd had too much to drink and showed it. Furthermore, Arty Bray was sore about the way everybody clustered around Steve Ashley.

"Him—an architect?" Bray derided. "Lonergan, you should know better. Steve never did a day's work in his life. You wouldn't want to spoil that record." Ashley turned around, smiling broadly. "Hello, Arty," he said. "You're right. I don't think I'll ever work. You see—I don't have to work. People toil and sweat just to get money. My aunt furnishes me with all I need. So why should I take a job that someone else wants? Come on, Lonergan, I'll make my expenses playing gin rummy with you."

As they walked away, Walter Lonergan eyed the younger man sharply. "You're a funny sort, Steve," he said. "I'll lay odds you could thrash any man in this room if you got mad enough. Come to think of it, I never did see you sore. There's such a thing as too even a disposition, you know."

"I know." Steve Ashley nodded. "Here we are. Sit down and I'll send for cards."

"Wait a minute," Lonergan said. "If I were a psychiatrist, I'd find you highly interesting. How is your aunt, by the way?"

STEVE ASHLEY kept rotating the ash tray. "Not too good," he said. "She hustled me out of the house to-night. Said she'd promise not to die before I got home. She looked so—darned helpless when I left."

"I know how you feel," Lonergan said sympathetically. "I suppose you'll be a pretty rich young man after it's over. Quite a few people know how wealthy she is and they're speculating on the size of her fortune right now."

"It will be enough, I suppose." Ashley nodded but he didn't look up. "You know, Lonergan, I really meant what I said to Arty. About the reason why I don't want a job. Why should I take one away from a man who really needs it? Strange philosophy, perhaps, and perhaps based a bit on laziness. I don't know. Frankly, I don't care. Shall we start playing now?"

But the waiter who approached the table didn't carry any cards or score pad. He carried a message and Steve Ashley sensed what it would be. He went to a telephone. Attorney Butler was on the wire.

"Oh," Ashley said softly when he heard the message. "I'll come right home."

Lonergan had followed Ashley out of the main room. Ashley got his hat and coat. "She's dead," he said in a monotone. "She knew she was going to die tonight. That's why she sent me away. Didn't think I could take it, I suppose."

"Maybe," Lonergan objected wisely, "she was afraid she couldn't take it, Steve. Want me to drive you?"

"I'll take a cab," Ashley said. "Won't do me any good to hurry. Not now."

There were strange thoughts in Steve Ashley's mind during the ride home. He remembered, as people do when death strikes close, times past. Remembered a doting aunt who gave him too much money, who pampered him, got him out of scrapes and provided a costly thorough general education. Now she was dead, but that wouldn't stop her generosity. Ashley knew he would be her only heir.

There was a note of somberness in the big house when he entered. He flung his coat on the back of a chair, threw his hat on top of it, and lit a cigarette on his way to the library. Norma McBain was busy with her nurse's duties upstairs. Dwight Latham, clumsy looking even as he sat in a comfortable easy chair, was frankly red-eyed. Major Ross nodded at Steve Ashley and then walked out of the room. So did Latham. Dr. Quillian and Jim Butler, the attorney, stayed.

"Why didn't somebody phone me before—while she was still alive?" young Ashley asked.

"I called every one of your haunts," Butler said. "It was just bad luck you were at one of the last ones on my list. It really made little difference, Steve. Your aunt would rather you were not

here when she—died. She would have wanted to spare you."

Ashley lit a cigarette with deliberate motions. "I wonder if anyone will ever come along who'll think I've grown into a man," he said musingly to Dr. Quillian. "That it isn't necessary to spare me. Doc—it wasn't difficult for her?"

DR. QUILLIAN shook his head. "No. It was extremely easy. She was conscious up to a few moments before the end. I wasn't at the bedside. Miss McBain was, though. Happened so fast I suppose she didn't quite realize."

"McBain is a funny dame," Steve Ashley said. "Sometimes I could swear she is violently in love with me. I'm not boasting and heaven knows I'm not in love with her but I catch her looking at me now and then. Well, Doc, I suppose Mr. Butler, as my aunt's attorney, will make all the arrangements. Everything out of my hands, as usual."

"Yes. Those were your aunt's instructions to him. I've something on my mind, Steve. It concerns your aunt—but never mind. It really isn't important and probably quite silly. Shouldn't have mentioned it. I'll send Butler in, Steve. He wants to see you alone."

Ashley watched Dr. Quillian walk to the door and the young man frowned deeply. Whatever the doctor had on his mind was neither silly nor unimportant. He could tell that. Then James Butler came in, all business.

"Steve," he said at once, "I thought I'd better give you the news as quickly as possible. Sometimes two shocks close upon one another aren't quite as difficult to take. Your aunt gave away one item of property. Her antique shop—that expensive hobby—went to Dwight Latham. Otherwise, everything she left is yours."

"You can tell me how much it is some other time," Steve said. "I'm not especially interested in money now."

"No, Steve, I'll tell you now. It's necessary that you know—because your aunt didn't leave a dime."

ASHLEY blinked slowly a few times. "What was that?" he asked.

"She left nothing but this house which is mortgaged to the hilt. Whatever jewelry she had was sold months ago. Your aunt died a poor woman. Steve—you'll have to go to work."

Steve Ashley exhaled. "No wonder you mentioned another shock. So I'll have to go to work. Butler, how does a man look for a job? I can't quite understand this. She did have money?"

"A great deal, Steve. Don't ask me where it went because I don't know. She refused to tell me. Told me it was none of my business."

Ashley smiled. "I'll bet she did. Mr. Butler, how could she have spent so much money in such a short space of time?"

Butler shrugged. "Improperly handled money doesn't last long. You'll find that out. Yet she did provide something. Not more than two weeks ago she had me buy up a certain business enterprise. That is left to you, lock, stock and barrel, including a couple of employees. Why, in heaven's name, she selected such a business is beyond me. Frankly, Steve, I often wondered if she was quite in her right mind."

Steve Ashley crushed the cigarette in an ash tray. "Look here, Mr. Butler," he said indignantly, "you know as well as I do that Aunt Grace had a level head on her shoulders. Well—what kind of a business. Scavenging?"

"No, it's an agency, Steve. A detective agency."

"A *what*?" Steve Ashley stared. "Detective agency? But I don't know anything about that kind of a business. Mr. Butler, is this some kind of joke?"

"Far from it, Steve." The attorney shook his head soberly. "I'll show you the papers in the morning. Now take my advice. See what you can do about the agency. To me it seems practically extinct so far as business is concerned. But it's yours and she wanted it that way."

Ashley nodded slowly. "Yes, I realize

that. Aunt Grace was practical in all things, Mr. Butler. She had a reason for every move she ever made and there's one behind this too. I mean to find out what it is."

"I don't want to disillusion you, Steve," Butler said, "but I believe it was the only thing she could afford to buy. The price was four hundred dollars. That includes some furniture in an office and the good will. There is a combination stenographer and woman detective in the place and a male operative. I've written down the address and I'll leave it on the table here. Good luck, Steve. It's going to take everything you've got to put this over."

"Yes, I know." Steve Ashley stared into space. "Maybe that's what Aunt Grace had in mind. I think I'd like to be alone for a while if you don't mind. Tell Major Ross to see me before he goes. Also Latham. They were good friends of Aunt Grace's. I hope they remain my friends."

"There is one other thing," Butler said hesitantly. "Dr. Quillian wants to do a post mortem. That will take your written permission. I've drawn up the papers."

"Post mortem!" Ashley gasped. "Why?"

"I don't know," Butler confessed. "Quillian is rather reticent about it all."

"I'll see Dr. Quillian later," Ashley said.

Butler left the permit blank on the table beside the address of the detective agency. Steve Ashley didn't even get up to look at them. He sat quietly, trying to think lucidly. For twenty-seven years he had never known want. Money had come to him as fast as he could spend it. Now he was broke. The owner of a run-down detective agency.

What had happened to Aunt Grace's money? It wouldn't just have run out because she had had too much for that.

Ashley rose and walked into the hallway. Nobody was around but he could hear voices upstairs.

He didn't want to talk to anyone so he

returned to the library and extinguished the lights. He could think better in the dark. He sat there for perhaps fifteen minutes until his brain ached. He was on the verge of giving up the whole thing when he heard a scraping sound.

The library was a long narrow room with a window at the opposite end. Ashley recognized the scraping sound as that made by the window when it was slowly opened.

CHAPTER III

DETECTIVE AGENCY



STEVE ASHLEY didn't move. The window was half open. A hand came between the curtains and when a flashlight was turned on Ashley had no opportunity to duck. The light fastened on him for about one second, winked out and he heard the sound of someone running madly away.

Ashley rushed to the window, peered out, saw nothing. The night was too dark. He turned back toward the door when someone tapped. Ashley opened it and Major Ross came in.

"Sitting in the dark, Steve?" he asked. "That's not good for a young chap like you."

He turned on the light and Ashley resented it somehow. He resented a lot of things the major did. He always seemed to take over situations in that easy manner of his and dominate them completely.

"Major," young Ashley said, "is there anything in this house that people might want to steal?"

Major Ross looked amazed. "I don't quite understand."

"Someone opened that window, shoved a flashlight through it and, when he saw me, ran away."

"Good heavens!" Ross went to the window at once. "Sure it wasn't your imagination, Steve? You've been under a strain the last hour or two. Butler

told me about the estate."

"I'm no more imaginative than you, Major," Ashley answered somewhat tartly. "I ask again—is there anything in this house I don't know about which would be attractive to a burglar?"

"There are ornaments, silver, and things of that kind. There are no jewels, no money. If a burglar did try to get in he probably selected the house at random. After all, it does seem to represent wealth."

Steve Ashley did not answer. He went upstairs to his own room, ferreted around until he found a flashlight, then slipped out the back door. He proceeded to a point just outside the library window. The grass was thin near the house, soft from recent spading.

He knelt and grunted in surprise. There were footprints there all right, faintly outlined. These prints were made by someone with high-heeled shoes which had dug deeply. A woman!

There was nothing more that could be done about it. And in the stress of things that needed all his attention Steve Ashley all but forgot his mysterious woman caller.

Two days later Ashley walked to the rather shoddy section of town where his inherited business was located. On the way there his mind turned back to the night his aunt died and the intruder attempted to get into the house.

The only woman of whom he knew who had been around was Norma McBain, the trained nurse, and she wore low-heeled shoes. Ashley had found high-heeled ones in her room, though, and had discovered that those heels would fit the mark in the ground.

Reaching the building, he looked up and scowled. On the second floor two windows were decorated in faded gold letters that read:

AJAX DETECTIVE AGENCY
RELIABLE PRIVATE
INVESTIGATIONS

Ashley climbed the stairs for there

was no elevator. He paused in front of the door to his offices. *His* offices! He smiled wryly and went in.

There were two people in the room. One was a man of about thirty-five, wearing light green trousers, a tweed coat that hung like a sack on his bony shoulders, a shirt that needed laundering and a ready-made bow tie. He didn't even look up and Ashley was not completely aware of him after the first discouraging glance.

The other occupant was a girl. She had dark hair, eyes of an indescribable color but with undeniable stars. She was young, a break-your-heart type, except for a determined expression around her mouth.

"Well," she asked, "what are you staring at? Leave the bills on the desk. Our new boss will show up any day now. He bought the place three weeks ago, but darned if he's come near it."

"I suppose there are a lot of bills," Ashley said slowly.

"A lot?" the girl said, and laughed shortly. "My desk is full of 'em. Who are you from?"

"I'm the new owner Steve Ashley."

HE DIDN'T know what reaction to expect from her, whether she would laugh or turn icy. She did neither. Her reply was primly practical.

"I'm sorry, I spoke out of turn, Mr. Ashley. Your office is in there. Toddy—Toddy Tiner has his nose in a book over there. He's the—a—detective."

"Toddy" Tiner looked up. "Hi!" he said and went back to his book.

Steve Ashley marched behind the girl into the private office like an automaton. It was neat, no dust, waste basket empty, a few papers on the desk.

"It isn't so much, is it?" he asked.

"Good enough," she answered. "My name is Shaw. Elizabeth Shaw."

"Miss?" he asked.

"Miss," she confirmed.

"We'll get along," he told her. "It's almost noon. Shall we begin with lunch?"

"I'm sorry." She had turned away. "I usually have lunch with my fiancé."

"Oh, it's like that," Ashley said. "Well, all right. Say, what do we do about getting clients?"

"Nothing," she replied. "They either come or they don't. Some agencies make connections with insurance companies but you have to have a pretty good lay-out to impress them. Otherwise nothing doing."

"I see," Ashley said. "Thanks for the warning. We'll have to fix the place up a bit—if we can find any money. I'm Grace Ashley's nephew but don't let that fool you. She died broke. For some reason or other she left me this business. Must have spent her last few dollars acquiring it."

"Perhaps she wanted to see if you could make a go of something," Elizabeth Shaw suggested. "I don't want to appear forward, Mr. Ashley—but isn't it a rather well-known fact that you've never worked in your life?"

Steve Ashley sat down behind the desk, leaned back and almost did a somersault. The restraining spring on the swivel chair seemed to have departed this earth. He got straightened up again and smiled.

"Whatever I did or didn't do is in the past," he said. "I'll make a go of this. I've got to, don't you see?"

"Yes, sir." Elizabeth Shaw nodded primly. "If there is anything you wish I'll be outside. The buzzer on your desk is a fake. You'll have to sing out. When I go to lunch Toddy stays here. Will that be all, Mr. Ashley?"

"Yes, thank you. I need time to prepare myself for this. Of course, if anyone comes, I'm available. Won't you—wish me luck, Miss Shaw? Or wouldn't your boy friend approve?"

"Good luck, Mr. Ashley," she said with real heartiness. "You know, I've a feeling you can put this over."

Ashley started to rise but she left hurriedly and he sat down again. He looked through the desk drawers. They were empty. He looked into the filing

cabinets. They were empty too.

He was pacing the floor when the office door opened. Toddy Tiner was standing there and for the first time Steve realized he was a runt. What's more a skinny runt.

Toddy laid a dog-eared book on the desk and gave Ashley a wan smile. "I wanted to give you this book," he explained. "It's one of the best volumes ever written in the field of detection. The author was Aloix Tissler. British. A great detective. You'll learn a lot from his work, I'm sure."

"Well, thanks," Ashley said affably. "I could do with a liberal education in this business. Did he handle any important cases?"

"Not many. But he understood things. Had an insight into human nature. He'd have gone far, Mr. Ashley. But they hung him."

"Hung him?" Ashley gasped. "Who? Crooks?"

"No, sir. You see, he had a weakness. He couldn't keep from taking other people's property. One night the owner of some property objected and—and he was killed. They hung Tissler in the Tower of London. Quite an honor, I understand."

"Yes indeed," Ashley said. "I'm also understanding a few things. I'll see you later today, Tiner."

"Thank you," Toddy said with that same absurdly serious mien. "Be careful with the book, won't you? It's part of my collection. Bound in buckram by Blakely, the great British binder. The paper is vellum too and the printing is real Gothic script."

"I'll be very careful with it," Ashley said. "By the way, you mentioned your book collection. Do you make enough money to buy books like these?"

"I haven't been paid for weeks, Mr. Ashley." Toddy backed toward the door. "I don't buy the books. No, sir. I couldn't afford to. They are way beyond my means."

"Well, how do you get them then?"

"I steal them, sir."

THE door closed and Steve Ashley sat down heavily. He wasn't only blessed with a business as dead as Toddy's Mr. Tissler but one half of his staff was a crook. Ashley groaned and massaged his forehead.

Ten minutes later he perked up noticeably. Even Toddy Tiner seemed excited as he admitted a portly broad-faced man who sat down and stated his business without the preamble of a greeting.

"My name is Curtis, sir. I've a case for you. A divorce case. I understand firms like this take them. I need evidence against my wife. How much?"

"Why, I don't exactly know," Ashley said. "I have to be told something about the case first."

Inwardly, he had never felt so elated. Here was business walking right in.

"You have your usual fees," his new client said. "I won't be gypped. I warn you."

"Five hundred," Ashley said promptly and thought of the times he had squandered four times as much.

"Three hundred," the man countered.

"It's a deal," Ashley said quickly. He was not going to let three hundred dollars get away from him. "Now give me the facts."

"It will necessitate two operatives, of course. Divorce cases always do. This afternoon, go to the Hotel Brésson. It's half a dozen blocks from here. The desk clerk will hand you a key to Room Five-eleven. In it you will find my wife and a man. All you have to do is notice what is going on. Later you will have to testify in court. I'll be at the hotel myself."

Ashley winced but the allure of three hundred dollars was still strong. He arose and proffered his hand. Curtis did not appear to notice. He walked out, calling one last sentence over his shoulder.

"You'll be paid when you deliver the goods. Good-by."

He passed Elizabeth Shaw on his way out and slowed up considerably.

"Miss Shaw!" Steve half shouted.

CHAPTER IV

MYSTERY CLIENT

"We've got ourselves a case. A three-hundred-dollar one. Grand, isn't it?"

"What kind of a case?" she asked pointedly.

Ashley's elation cooled somewhat. "Divorce," he said. "Why?"

"Nothing. Just curious. Mr. Ashley, I'm sorry—but I must tell you that this is my last day here."

"Your last day?" Ashley repeated in a dazed voice. "But you can't do that. I don't know anything about this business. I need you here. You'll be paid. I'll give you something on account right now if you wish."

"No, Mr. Ashley," she said quickly. "It isn't a matter of money. I have enough to get along on. It's because of my fiancé. He doesn't want me in this line of work any longer."

"Sit down—please," Steve Ashley begged. "Elizabeth, what in the world is this boy friend of yours like? Tell me about him."

She seemed a trifle startled but sat down.

"Why he's about your build, I think," she said musingly. "His eyes are like yours too. Of course, the resemblance stops there. His name is Smith. Yes, Hugh Smith."

"And you love him?" Steve demanded. "Yes."

Ashley groaned. "If you leave, I've only this—this Toddy Tiner left. He's practically admitted just now that he's a thief."

"He takes things, if that's what you mean," she told him. "He doesn't mean to. If there is anything in the way of a clue, he usually steals it. Not for profit but just to examine it in his own careful way."

"He's a screwball," Ashley asserted. "Betty, please—"

"My mind is made up, Mr. Ashley," she said.

"All right, but you'll have to help me with this one last case. It's the only way I'll be able to pay you off and continue to eat."

"I'll help," she agreed.



USUALLY Steve Ashley and Elizabeth Shaw walked to the hotel where Ashley had a rendezvous with work. He made no pretenses to himself that this was not exactly his idea of making a living. But he never mentioned any reluctance on his part to Elizabeth.

"We're going to arrive too early," he said. "Why did you wish to start so soon? Curtis said three o'clock."

"You're new at the game, Mr. Ashley. I thought you agreed to take my advice for a few days."

"I'm in your hands, Betty," he said and wished she were in his arms.

It was odd the way she affected him. For years he'd had the pick of any girl he chose and had preferred none of them. Now, when he discovered one who really intrigued him she was engaged to be married.

The hotel proved to be one of the frowziest places Ashley had ever seen.

"Betty," Ashley said, "before we begin work, won't you reconsider and keep on working for me? This case is just a starter. I'll tell you what—we'll be partners. After all, I own a business of which I know nothing and you are the brains I need."

"I'm sorry," she replied evenly.

"All right," Ashley said. "I won't mention it again."

"You're rather bound to make money out of this, aren't you?" Betty said.

"Why not?" He shrugged. "It's legal, profitable and if I don't do it someone else will."

They entered the hotel and Betty at once displayed the fact that she was a trained operative. The desk clerk was quickly amenable to a couple of dollars and provided them with a key.

"No use breaking doors and your shoulder when you can buy your way in," she commented dryly.

They went to the fifth floor, found the

proper room and Betty advanced toward the door.

"Hey, wait," he admonished. "We're not to go in there until the proper moment. Remember, we're after evidence."

"I'm going in," Betty said.

She knocked on the door and a woman's voice answered. A moment later the door was opened and a strikingly handsome woman of about forty-five looked at them inquisitively.

"We're detectives," Betty said before Ashley even thought of anything to break the silence. "For your own good let us in."

The woman stepped back, still silent out of sheer amazement. Betty closed the door. "You're Mrs. Curtis?" she asked. "What are you doing in this hotel room?"

"I don't see that it's any of your affair, but it happens I'm waiting to meet my brother," the handsome woman said.

"Betty!" Ashley implored.

"Keep quiet," she said shortly. "Mrs. Curtis, did your brother personally tell you he'd be here?"

"I had a telephone call. He asked me to check in here and said he would take the room. I really don't understand—"

"You're having trouble with your husband," Betty said. "You are suing him for divorce and the alimony you probably deserve. Well, your husband doesn't want to pay it. In a short time someone will appear. He'll say your brother was detained and he'll offer to keep you company for a time. Things will happen fast after that, culminated by a visit from your husband and a pair of detectives. We're the detectives."

Mrs. Curtis' expression changed from amazement to firmness. She made a grab for her belongings on the bed.

"Better wait and see it through," Betty advised. "Then, when this trick is tried, you'll have your own witnesses. That husband of yours won't even contest your action after this is over."

Steve Ashley sat down. He suddenly realized what kind of a fool he was.

"I'm grateful," Mrs. Curtis said, "but if my husband employed you, why should

you be telling me this? I haven't much money."

"We're not after money," Betty said. "At least, I'm not. Private detective agencies, Mrs. Curtis, operate quite honestly. Most of them, at any rate. Now stop talking. The machinery of a beautiful frame-up will start to work in a few moments and we'll gum it up."

Betty Shaw sat down near Ashley. He leaned close to her and dropped his voice to a whisper. "Betty, why didn't you tell me what kind of a case this was?"

She smiled. "After today I don't care what you do, but I'm still an employee of your agency and it isn't going crooked."

There was a tap on the door. Ashley stood against the wall so the opening door would shield him. Mrs. Curtis turned the lock. A greasy-haired man, flashily dressed, sauntered in. He saw Betty and stopped short. Then he saw Ashley and slow realization dawned on him. Without a word he turned and started to run for it.

Ashley got in his way. His fists moved fast. The greasy-haired man sat down most abruptly and stayed there. Ashley was staring at his knuckles.

"Get the facts," Betty said.

Ashley came out of his trance. "All right. You," he snapped at the man on the floor, "how much did Curtis offer? Come on!"

"Don't hit me again. Sure, Curtis paid me. A hundred dollars. He'll be here in a couple of minutes."

"Give this girl your name and address, back it up with identification, then get out of here," Ashley said. "I'm going into the hallway to meet Curtis."

Betty was jotting down the name and address when she heard a shout of alarm, a brief scuffling and then the floor shook.

"Steve met your husband." Betty looked over at Mrs. Curtis. "You can go now. If that heel tries to alibi himself you have us for witnesses—and this well-oiled heel also."

She and Ashley walked out of the hotel. Suddenly, and for no reason at all, he began whistling off key. Betty took his arm and moved a bit closer.

"Steve," she said, "I've changed my mind. I'll stay."

"You will?" he said eagerly. "Betty, that's great! Let's go back to the office and sit around. Maybe next autumn somebody else will show up with a case."

TODDY Tiner was there when they returned. He looked up, waved a hand and stuck his nose back in the book he was reading. They went to the inner office. Ashley sat down, leaned forward and slowly picked up an envelope inscribed with his name in care of the agency.

"What's all this?" he asked. "I didn't think anyone knew I was connected with this place?"

"Toddy!" Betty called out and the spectacted scarecrow sidled in.

"Oh, that," he said without being asked. "It was delivered about an hour after you left. Any luck with the case, Mr. Ashley?"

"Very good luck," Ashley smiled. "Who brought the letter?"

"Did you hit him very hard?" Toddy asked, disregarding Ashley's question.

"Hit who? Oh—you mean Curtis. Yes, I walloped him. What made you think I would?"

"I just figured you were that kind of a guy. The letter came while I was busy. I didn't look up, figuring it was just another bill. Whoever brought it left it on your desk."

"Close the door!" Ashley shouted. He glanced over at Betty. "I wonder how much longer I'll be able to stand him—or afford it?"

"He just paid you a compliment—did you know that?" Betty asked.

"Betty," Ashley said, "did you quit just because I took a case of that kind?"

"It wasn't a nice case," Betty reminded him. "Of course, I didn't realize just how naive you were. Suppose you open the envelope. It might be a case."

"More likely a threat," Ashley grinned.

He slit the seal, thrust his fingers into the envelope and drew out five hundred-dollar bills.

"Real," he said. "Honest to goodness

real, Betty."

"Read the letter," she urged. "Steve, this is something."

He extracted the letter. "We'll probably take the money back and sock the guy who sent it," he said.

"Steve, what is it?" Betty demanded.

"Wait a minute," he answered. "This doesn't make sense."

He handed her the letter without a word. It read:

Mr. Stephen Ashley
Ajax Detective Agency
412 Carmody Street
City

Dear Sir:

Enclosed you will find five hundred dollars in cash to serve as a retainer. I wish to engage your services for an unspecified time on an extremely difficult case. From time to time further funds will be forwarded until you have satisfactorily completed the investigation.

At present it is impossible for me to make myself known but I assure you my interests are entirely within the law.

It is my opinion that I have been badly cheated by a shrewd organization to which John Black and Company is a party. You will begin by investigating that firm and determining if their business operates honestly. Look particularly for any tendency on their part to sell investment advice from which they will later profit.

Upon completion of this phase of your work insert a personal advertisement in the *Globe*, stating Black is white, if you find they have not cheated. Or Black is black if they have. Further orders will be forwarded to you shortly thereafter.

The letter was unsigned, carefully typed, and on plain paper.

"What do you know!" Betty marveled.

CHAPTER V

THE BROWN BOTTLE



OVER a double steak with accessories, wine and coffee, Steve Ashley looked across the table at Betty Shaw and mentally cursed her fiancé, whoever he was.

"Well, we've had an auspicious beginning," he said somewhat proudly. "Not that I was responsible for it. What do you think we should do about this Black and Company?"

"Just as the letter requests," Betty said. "Go there, ask for investment advice and see what they say. Check up later and that's all there is to it."

"That sounds simple but—well, anybody in the investment or financial advising business knows how much money I've got. They'll recognize me too because I hang out at the same places they do. If I have no cash, they'll suspect something."

"I could go there," Betty said, "except that they'd probably make a quick check on me and laugh me out of the place. Steve, can't you borrow the money just for a couple of hours?"

"Why not?" he said brightly. "There are plenty of friends who'd let me have it. Dr. Quillian, for instance. Or Major Ross could easily spare it that long anyway. I'll see Quillian first though."

"What's the matter with Ross?" asked Betty. "Did you say he is a major?"

"Retired," said Ashley. "Ross is an odd sort. Likable enough and willing to help but I can't help feeling he's always resented me. He was my aunt's close friend so he must have been all right. Don't worry. I'll find it somewhere. I won't let this case down."

Betty pleaded a date with her fiancé after dinner was over. Steve Ashley walked away. A glance at his watch informed him that Dr. Quillian's usual office hours were just about over. He'd have to hurry to catch him in. Ashley hailed a taxi to save time.

He entered the office building where Dr. Quillian rented a suite, rode the night elevator to the twelfth floor and walked into Quillian's waiting room. It was lighted and the consultation office door closed. Ashley sat down, twirling his hat idly.

Ten minutes went by. There were no murmurs of voices from the other room. Ashley rapped on the door. There was no answer and he sat down again. During the next ten minutes he determined not only to borrow five thousand dollars from Dr. Quillian, but also get the results of the post mortem he was supposed to have performed on his aunt.

The jangling of the telephone inside the office made him jump. This kept up until it made him wince. Dr. Quillian wasn't there but whoever was calling certainly expected him to be.

Ashley approached the door again and tried the knob. The door was unlocked. He flung it wide open—and gasped it horror. Dr. Quillian lay on the floor beside his comfortable old swivel chair. His gray hair was blood-soaked, his face ashen white.

Avoiding smears of blood, Ashley bent over and gingerly felt the doctor's wrist. There was no pulse. The phone jangled again and he jumped nervously.

For a moment he was tempted to answer it. Instead he looked around the office. Beside the doctor's head lay a large scalpel. That was the weapon of murder.

The office looked as though a tornado had slashed through it. Cases were open, a cabinet forced and its contents of bottles strewn around. Quillian's instrument bag lay on its side, contents all over the floor.

The telephone rang again insistently. Ashley cursed it as he stepped over to Dr. Quillian's files and found them likewise ransacked. But behind the card indicating his aunt's name he found Quillian's history of the case and attached to it was a report from a toxicologist. It stated that an examination of the organs showed no trace of poisoning of any kind. Grace Ashley's card showed a history of treatments given her. The last ones consisted mainly of nitroglycerine for the heart.

THE phone had stopped ringing and the silence was oppressive. Ashley glanced at Dr. Quillian's corpse and pondered his next move. Obviously it was to notify the police but he hesitated. In the first place he didn't want to become involved. There would be all sorts of publicity, perhaps ridiculing references to his detective agency. Ashley didn't want such derision.

Yet if he didn't make a report and anyone discovered he had been in Dr.

Quillian's office the results might be catastrophic. He wished Betty were here.

Finally he made up his mind to call the police, take his chances and at least have an easy conscience. He wrapped the telephone receiver in the folds of his handkerchief, lifted it and reached to dial. As he did there was a voice in his ear.

He said, "Hello."

"Hello," a woman's voice answered. "Who is this? Where is the doctor?"

"He stepped out," Ashley replied. "Is there a message?"

"That's odd," the woman said. "He never did such a thing before. This is Mrs. Quillian. I suppose it is quite all right. Will you tell him I shall be late for our appointment—perhaps an hour? Oh, yes—he wanted me to remind him that his graduation picture is crooked."

"His graduation picture?" Ashley repeated automatically.

"I know it sounds silly," said the woman, "but that's what he told me when we talked over the phone an hour or so ago. He said the graduation picture must be straightened and I was to impress that on him when I phoned."

"Thank you," Steve Ashley said. "I'll be sure to tell him. Good-by."

He hung up and turned the desk light so that it illuminated the walls. Sure enough, there was a graduation picture of Quillian and it was definitely askew.

He went over the picture, touched it and something slid from behind to land with a thud on the carpeted floor. It was a small brown bottle. He looked behind the picture again. This time he found a piece of paper which turned out to be a death certificate made out in the name of George Morrow. The date of death was today, the time only two hours ago, the cause endocarditis. The same heart condition from which Ashley's aunt had suffered. Steve Ashley held the bottle up and studied the label.

MOULDED
TRITURATE
100
NITROGLYCERINE
TRINITRIN
1/100 Gr.

"That's the same stuff Aunt Grace used to take," Ashley muttered. He thrust the bottle and the death certificate into his pocket, decided it was about time to get out of here.

Moments later he pressed the elevator button on a floor three stories below the one on which Dr. Quillian lay dead. He rode to the lobby and walked rapidly out, his mind in a maelstrom.

What he had just done constituted a crime of some kind or another. Not even a private detective could get away with it and, Ashley recalled, he wasn't even licensed.

An urge to contact Betty was squelched. He didn't know where she lived—something that had to be remedied the next time he saw her. Utterly on his own, forced to think for himself, Ashley found the experience exciting.

There was something odd about the way Dr. Quillian had acted in connection with his aunt's death. Also in the strange message he had given Mrs. Quillian about the graduation picture. It was almost as if Dr. Quillian had expected something like this to happen, had known he had to preserve certain evidence.

Steve took out the death certificate again. He made a snap decision.

OBTAINING the money necessary for tomorrow's work could wait. He squandered seventy cents on a taxi ride to the home of the late George Morrow. The house was all lighted up. Ashley probed his mind for an excuse to talk with the widow or any other survivor and got one. A red-eyed woman let him in.

"I'm terribly sorry, Mrs. Morrow," he said. "You have the heartfelt sympathy of myself and my company."

"Your company?" she asked in a puzzled tone.

"Yes indeed—the insurance company, you know. I merely called to advise that you locate your policies as quickly as possible. We shall do our part. Your husband—was he ill long?"

"Yes—almost two years," she said. "It was his heart. I never knew the insur-

ance companies sent representatives so soon after—"

"Only the one in which your husband was insured, Mrs. Morrow," he told her quickly. "We realize you may need the cash promptly. You know, my aunt died just a few days ago too, of the same ailment. The doctor used to give her nitroglycerine. It was supposed to ease any pain and to strengthen the heart."

"Yes I know," Mrs. Morrow said dully. "George took it too. Dr. Quillian who came as soon as I called him gave him some. George had a mild attack about six o'clock tonight and he swallowed a pill. Then he became worse and Dr. Quillian gave him more. They didn't seem to do any good."

"You mean your husband showed no response to the stimulant?" Ashley queried.

"I think that was it," she said. "Dr. Quillian couldn't understand it."

Steve took the small brown bottle from his pocket. "Dr. Quillian took the pills from a bottle like this?" he asked.

"It looks like the very bottle," the widow said.

"Thank you." Steve Ashley opened the door. "I'm sure you will have no trouble with the financial end of this unfortunate affair. Good night, Mrs. Morrow."

She placed a restraining hand on his arm. "Please—this is all so mysterious," she said anxiously. "Do you think there is anything out of the ordinary in connection with my husband's death?"

"What on earth makes you ask?" Ashley asked quickly.

"I don't know." She shook her head. "My husband's brother Ralph was with him when he died. So was Dr. Quillian, of course. I thought the doctor seemed excited but my brother-in-law was even worse."

"It was just the shock," Ashley sympathized.

"I thought so too at first but now I'm not so sure. Ralph isn't an excitable type. We expected my husband's death, although it did come suddenly. Yet Ralph refused to talk to me about it. He went out telling me he wanted to take a long

walk so he could think."

"And he hasn't returned yet?" asked Ashley.

"No. A short time before you arrived he phoned. He seemed nervous and evasive, not at all like himself. He said he had to see Dr. Quillian and he was going to find him if it took all night."

Ashley felt his heart begin to pump. That meant Dr. Quillian's corpse would be discovered at any moment.

"Perhaps Ralph would like to talk with you," Mrs. Morrow went on. "If you would leave your name—"

"Yes, of course." Ashley took a pencil and some paper from his pocket. "You understand, Mrs. Morrow, I don't work directly for the insurance company, but only as an investigating source. I'm really a private detective. Here is my name and address. Please have your brother-in-law call on me first thing tomorrow. Tell him—that I also agree with Dr. Quillian."

CHAPTER VI

ROB THE DEAD



ASHLEY almost ran from the house. Aunt Grace had been murdered! There was no question about it!

Steve Ashley whistled frantically for a cab and had himself driven to the nearest drug-store. There he systematically phoned every chemist in town.

He finally found one whose establishment was open and went there at once. He turned over the bottle. "I want you to analyze half a dozen of these pills," he said. "It's a heart stimulant and I want to know if the stuff is still effective."

"It should be," the chemist stated. "This stuff is stable enough."

"Just check it anyway," Ashley said. "Frankly, a certain smart cousin of mine insists the stuff would be good for a hundred years while I say he's wrong. We've a bet on."

The chemist shrugged, motioned to a

chair and went into his lab. He wasn't gone long. Ashley took the bottle he prof-
ferred.

"Well?" he asked. "How about it?"

"I can't say who should win the bet. You see, those pills contain no nitroglycerine at all. They're pure chalk. If I were you I'd throw this stuff away. Dangerous to keep around if anybody in your house depends on it to give him relief."

Ashley paid the bill, tucked the bottle into his pocket. Now that his hunch had been confirmed he was cool. No wonder Dr. Quillian had been suspicious. Neither Aunt Grace nor Mr. Morrow had died of poisoning but simply because of a lack of heart stimulant.

Someone had switched the contents of the bottle, replaced the beneficial pills with inert ones. That was murder just as patently as if a violent poison had been substituted. When Morrow died Dr. Quillian's suspicions must have been completely aroused. He must have even guessed who had tampered with his pills.

As Ashley stumbled down the street he had never felt so alone in his life. Almost automatically he started toward home. He wanted the peace and quiet of the place, the solace of being near the things that now represented his aunt.

Norma McBain let him in. The trained nurse had stayed on, asking Ashley's permission to do so because for the present she had nowhere else to go. Ashley didn't notice the warmth in her eyes, the half smile of welcome on her lips. He dropped his hat on a chair and walked toward the library.

"Mind if I talk to you?" he asked. "Something important has come up."

"If it's money—" she said hesitantly.

"Thanks—no. Sit down. I—what the devil?"

Ashley rose and walked toward the wall beside the fireplace. A picture of his father usually hung there. It served the dual purpose of being doubtfully decorative and concealing the wall safe behind it. Now the picture was on the floor. The safe was wide open!

"Mr. Ashley!" the nurse cried. "You've been robbed."

"You're right," he replied. "That safe was closed and locked when I saw it last night. In fact I wanted to get an expert here to open the darn thing. I thought only Aunt Grace knew the combination."

"So did I," Miss McBain stared at the yawning aperture. "Mr. Ashley, you don't think I—"

"Of course not," Ashley assured her. "I wonder what was stolen. Miss McBain, were you here all evening?"

"No, Mr. Ashley," she said. "I went to a movie and got home only a few minutes before you arrived. I hope you don't mind."

"Mind?" Ashley repeated. "Why should I? I'm glad you've stayed on."

"Oh, are you?" Her eyes lighted up but he didn't notice.

"Yes," he said. "You see, Miss McBain, I've reason to believe my aunt was murdered." He looked at her then, saw her face go white as she staggered to a chair.

"Murdered?" Her voice was hoarse. "Mr. Ashley, what in the world gave you such an idea?"

"Several things," he said firmly. "You were usually with Dr. Quillian when he treated her?"

"Yes, of course," she said faintly. "But Dr. Quillian—why he wouldn't do such a thing! He—"

"Dr. Quillian," Steve said, more firmly, "is the one person on earth I'm sure did not kill her. Not knowingly, at any rate. But those nitroglycerine tablets he gave her lately, out of his own kit, were made of some inert substance without a trace of nitro in them."

NORMA McBain gasped. "So *that's* what did it! I knew Dr. Quillian suspected something. Your aunt did not respond as she should have to the tablets."

"Somebody," Ashley declared morosely, "wanted Aunt Grace to die quickly."

"Oh, no!" Norma McBain cried. "There must have been some mistake. Even carelessness on the part of Dr. Quillian. Possibly the drug firm which sold him the pills. Mr. Ashley, it couldn't be—murder!"

"If you knew all the facts, you wouldn't doubt," he said grimly. "I'm going out again. While I'm gone will you do me a favor and straighten up this mess? I mean the safe. Take everything out and put it on the desk. I'll inventory it later and try to determine what's missing."

"Yes, Mr. Ashley," she said. "Will you be gone long? I—I took the liberty of getting something to eat for you. I could have it ready in a few minutes."

"Not now, thanks," Ashley replied absently. "I—hey, wait a minute! Why are you spending your money to buy me food?"

"It's nothing," she answered, "and I expect to pay my share of the expenses while I live here. You're sure you don't mind? It will be only for a short time."

"I'm glad to have you," he told her. "I'll be gone about an hour. Have to see Major Ross and try to borrow some money. If he is reasonable it won't take long. Otherwise—"

"I could loan you some," the nurse offered hesitantly.

"I'm looking for five thousand dollars," he said. "That's not your kind of money nor mine. Thanks just the same."

"But I have five thousand—more than that," she told him quickly. "Please, I'd rather you borrowed it from me."

"Not on your life." Ashley was taken aback by the fact she had so much cash although he did his best not to show it. "I may lose the whole business. Major Ross can afford it."

She just looked at him while he jammed on his hat and hurried to the door. When he was gone, she peered through a window, watched him turn onto the sidewalk, then hurried over to the safe and ran through the papers in it.

MAJOR ROSS resided in a decorous home. Its furnishings were stately and stiff. His tastes ran to money. He greeted Steve Ashley at the door.

"How is it going, Steve?"

Ashley grinned and sat down. "The business I inherited is all right," he assured. "I got a five-hundred-dollar fee

already and a neat case which promises action and more profit. Aunt Grace knew what she was about in buying me that agency."

"Five hundred in one day!" Ross whistled in surprise. "That is something. What kind of a case, Steve? Nothing off color, I hope."

"I had one like that and I pasted my client on the nose." Steve Ashley chuckled. "Major, I've really come to ask for a favor."

"Of course. Anything you wish."

"Nice of you," Ashley said.

"How much?" Ross went on, knowingly.

Ashley laughed. "You're pretty smart. Maybe I should hire you as a detective. Yes, it is money. A loan of five thousand dollars for no more than eighteen hours—without interest, of course. The fact is, Major, I need that money to help me carry out my investigation. The money is just to flash. I won't spend a penny."

Major Ross wrote a check, handed it to Ashley and resumed his chair. "That's little enough to ask of me, Steve," he said. "Take your time about paying it back."

"Not on your life," Ashley retorted. "I'm on my own now and I won't start things by running into debt. You'll get this money back tomorrow. Thanks again, Major."

"Don't be in a hurry, Steve. You know I was mighty fond of your aunt. She asked me to watch over you. I'd like to be of help. Now what kind of a case are you investigating?"

"I can't talk about it—not yet," Ashley replied. "I—"

A soft-footed servant of tremendous size entered. His manner was smooth, courteous and in direct contrast with his appearance. His face was scarred, his lips thin and eyes beady.

"Yes, Matthews?" Ross inquired.

"Sorry to intrude, sir," the servant murmured, "but Attorney Butler is on the wire. He says it is most urgent."

Ross excused himself. Ashley waited, knowing exactly what Butler wanted. Dr. Quillian's corpse had been found.

CHAPTER VII

DEAD MEN NEVER TALK



WHEN Major Ross returned, he was obviously affected by the news he had heard over the phone.

"Dr. Quillian has been murdered," he said grimly. "In his office. I've got to see if there is anything I can do. Butler is meeting me in a few moments. Like to come along, Steve?"

"No, thanks," Ashley said. "Dr. Quillian dead? Why on earth should he have been murdered?"

Ross shrugged. "Butler says it looked like the work of drug addicts. Quillian's office was thoroughly ransacked and all of his narcotics supply is missing."

Steve Ashley thought rapidly. "Major," he said abruptly, "I'll take you up on that invitation. I *will* go along, only please don't mention the fact that I'm a private detective. I'm curious and Dr. Quillian was a friend of mine."

"Come along," Ross said.

They were driven straight to the office building Ashley had left only a short time before. It was no longer quiet. Police were outside and inside Quillian's offices. A middle-aged, strikingly handsome woman sat in a corner, quietly sobbing. Ross stepped up to her, called her by name, offered his sympathies.

Dr. Quillian's widow looked up. "Thank you very much, Major. It's all so mysterious. The police think ordinary drug addicts killed him. I don't believe so."

"Have you anything to back up that statement?"

"Yes," the widow said. "I phoned the doctor several times to tell him I'd be late for our appointment. He was going to take me home. Someone answered the phone. It was a man and he told me the doctor had stepped out and left him to take messages. I firmly believe I talked to the murderer and he did not sound like any drug addict to me."

Ashley found himself growing distinctly uncomfortable and backed away

a few steps. Ross saw him do this and looked around.

"Don't go, Steve." He faced Mrs. Quillian again. "That voice—would you recognize it again?"

"I think so," she replied. "Anyway the police doctor tells me my husband must have been dead for nearly half an hour before that man answered the phone. Therefore he lied. My husband's body must have been at his feet."

Ross nodded. "I'm no physician, Mrs. Quillian, but I have seen drug addicts. The first thing one of them would have done would be to take a portion of the drugs he'd stolen. Given a few moments, his nerves would have been quite normal, his voice as steady as mine."

"But why should my husband have asked me to remind him to straighten his graduation picture when I phoned? That picture on the wall of his private office."

"Picture?" Ross frowned. "I can't understand that."

There was an interruption. Two patrolmen came into the office with a hulk of a man in tow. He was Dwight Latham, the man to whom Aunt Grace had left her antique shop.

"Latham!" Ross cried.

A police lieutenant stepped up. He held the doctor's appointment book in his hand. "Calm down, Mr. Latham," he warned. "I sent for you because there are a few questions I think you could answer."

"Tell me then, why I should be literally hauled out of my store and dragged here under protest?" he demanded.

"He wouldn't listen to reason," one patrolman said.

"Mr. Latham," the lieutenant said, "Dr. Quillian has been murdered. Your name appears on his appointment book. You saw him at eight-twenty. We figure he was killed about half an hour later. Did you notice anything out of the ordinary?"

"I wasn't even here," Latham retorted. "Quillian phoned me and said I was to come here. I'm a business man now. I own my own place and I don't

hop when anybody starts demanding things—unless it's a customer."

"Did you agree to come?" the lieutenant demanded.

"Well, yes." Latham shrugged. "Quillian was so darned persistent. But I got busy about that time and forgot all about it."

The lieutenant took Latham's arm and piloted him into the office. Perhaps he hoped Latham might crack when he saw the corpse. The door was closed, so Major Ross and Steve Ashley knew nothing of what went on in there.

"I never knew Latham to act that way," Ross said. "Getting that place from your aunt must have gone to his head."

Latham came out half a minute later, no longer aggressive. "I told you the truth," he said. "I don't know what Quillian wanted with me. He just said it was important. You've got to believe me. I'm a good man. Ask Major Ross. Or young Steve Ashley there. I worked for his aunt many years."

"He's right." Ashley stepped forward. "Latham has always been honest to my knowledge. I don't know why he should have killed the doctor."

There was a half-smothered scream behind him. Ashley turned quickly. Mrs. Quillian had half risen and was pointing straight at him.

"That voice!" she accused. "It's the same one I heard over the telephone."

Steve Ashley never was quite sure how he stood up under that or just how he got away from the office and home. But the next morning he awoke in a cold sweat induced by a nightmare in which Mrs. Quillian appeared a hundred times and pointed accusing fingers at him.

IT HAD been an uncomfortable hour in Dr. Quillian's office. He shuddered when he thought of what might have happened had they searched him. But the brown bottle and the death certificate were now well hidden. At least, he hoped so. Hopping out of bed, he hurried to a vase, dumped it upside down

and found the two items. With a sigh of relief he tucked them into his suit pocket when he dressed.

Norma McBain had a hot appetizing breakfast waiting for him. She sat across the table while he told of what had transpired. "But you did get the five thousand dollars you wanted?" she asked.

"I forgot all about it! Have to rush. Sorry."

He bolted his coffee and hurried away. Enroute to the office he cashed the check. Betty Shaw was waiting for him when he arrived at the office. Toddy Tiner was nowhere about.

"He's gone to begin an investigation of John Black and Company," Betty explained. "Don't worry—he'll just study the window signs and determine they are in such-and-such style of lettering with so-and-so gold paint used. I told him if he dared to go inside, I'd personally strangle him."

"Betty," Steve Ashley said seriously, "I'm in a jam. Last night I discovered that my aunt was murdered. The one man who might have told me what it was all about was also killed. That was Dr. Quillian. I stumbled on Quillian's body and a couple of clues but when I tried to phone the police Quillian's wife was on the wire. She heard my voice and later last night she identified it in front of a mess of cops."

"Steve!" exclaimed Betty. "Did you have an alibi?"

"How could I? I was at the scene of the crime. I told them I was right here at the office."

"So was I," Betty answered promptly. "We were both here, hard at work. I'll be your alibi, Steve."

"Would you do that for me?" he asked wonderingly. "Betty, I—oh, darn it, how can a fellow talk to a girl who is engaged to some other man? Anyway, I'll take you up on that offer because I need time to work. I've got two cases now."

He went on to give Betty all the details about the bottle of tablets, the death of George Morrow, the possibility

that Morrow's brother might show up at the office.

"He knows something," Ashley concluded. "I feel sure of it. Dr. Quillian may have confided in him. However, we must begin work on John Black and Company. Major Ross loaned me five thousand. Here—take it but be doggone careful. That's maybe more than I'll make in a couple of years."

She tucked the money into her purse. "Just how will we go about it, Steve?" she asked.

"I'll go down and have a talk with them," he said. "I'll say Aunt Grace really did leave a little and I want to double it fast. Give me ten minutes and then you come in. Insist on seeing the big boss, as I will. They'll park you in the reception room. When I come out I'll blink. Twice to indicate you must watch your step. Once if I find nothing at all suspicious. Right?"

"Right," she said. "When do we start?"

"Give them time to open up. Meanwhile, suppose we look over some of the bills and pay a little on each one."

Betty was all business. She knew which bills to pay and which to let slide. "The phone company had better have a sizable payment," she said. "We need a phone and they're just about ready to cut us off. I'll take it down to them myself. Now the rest can be stalled. I—someone just came in, Steve. I'd better go."

As she stepped out the door the phone rang. Ashley picked up the receiver and a man's voice answered. He was sure he had heard it before, but at the moment he could not place it.

"Don't ask my name," the man said, "I've a case for you. An important case and I must have your answer right now as to whether or not you'll handle it."

"Shoot," Ashley answered briskly. "I'll handle anything within the law and without too much of a stench. No divorce stuff."

"No, this is a personal matter. I can't be involved. There are certain letters a

party wrote to a woman. She is trying to blackmail him. I want you to see if you can get those letters back. Believe me, you'll be on the right side, too."

"I'm listening," Steve Ashley picked up a pencil. "Give me names and addresses."

"My friend is willing to pay, but he must have the letters back. If you can't steal 'em buy 'em for a reasonable sum. Be certain they are retrieved. Do you follow me?"

"Right on your heels," said Ashley. "I don't like blackmail any more than the next man. What's the woman's name?"

Betty entered at that moment and shut the door behind her. "A man named Ralph Morrow is outside," she said in a low voice.

Ashley motioned for silence. His caller gave a name and an address, mentioned a sum of money and then Steve Ashley was lifted out of his chair by a horrible scream from the front office.

Betty whirled and raced out. He heard her cry out. Mumbling something about holding the phone, he rushed out—and stiffened in horror.

Ralph Morrow sat in one of the chairs. He was obviously dead. A knife had been driven into his back, hilt deep. Morrow hadn't screamed. That devastating yowl had come from Norma McBain who must have entered right after the murder.

CHAPTER VIII

THE BARONESS MUNCHAUSEN



USHING to the side of the dead man Ashley saw quickly that there was nothing he could do.

"He told me you wanted to see him," Betty said. "Then I entered your office—this crime was committed during those few minutes I was with you!"

"Miss McBain"—Ashley faced the nurse—"did you see anyone on your way in?"

"No," Norma McBain said quickly. "I happened to be passing by and I wanted to see what a detective office looked like. No one passed me either on the steps or in the hall. I came in, saw this man and didn't notice anything wrong until he started to slide out of the chair."

Steve Ashley remembered his phone call. He hurried back to the desk, picked up the phone, and discovered there was nobody on the wire. He hung up slowly. Betty and Norma McBain watched him.

"I've a hunch that phone call was made to keep me busy while the murderer waited for a chance to get at Morrow," Ashley said through tightened lips. "Now we *are* in a mess. The police will surely think I had something to do with this."

"But how could you?" Betty moved to his side quickly. "Steve, you never even saw the man. I can prove that."

"Yes, but after what happened last night they'll ask a lot of questions. Oh, Betty, this is Miss McBain, the nurse who took care of my aunt. She's living at the house temporarily. Miss McBain—Betty Shaw, my assistant."

Neither girl spoke. Steve Ashley didn't notice that. He picked up the phone and called Police Headquarters, asked for the lieutenant he had met the night before and made a report.

"Lieutenant," he said, "last night you figured that perhaps I'd had something to do with a murder. Well, murder came calling on me just now. There's a dead man in my office—stabbed through the back of the neck."

He groaned as he hung up. "I don't like the way those cops say. 'Stay right where you are,'" he muttered. "And this throws our whole plan of visiting John Black and Company off the track, Betty. Well, it will have to wait."

Norma McBain walked back into the outer office and then into the hall. Betty watched her. "So she lives in your house," she said. "Just the two of you."

"That's right." Ashley mustered a grin. "Not so bad, is she? What's more, I think she's madly in love with me."

"Steve, I forgot to tell you. If the police don't arrest the lot of us, I've a luncheon date with my boy friend. You don't mind?"

"No—that's swell," Ashley said. "I'll take Miss McBain out. Come to think of it, I never did take her anywhere."

There was a terrific clatter on the stairway and Norma McBain hurried back into the office. Steve Ashley took a firm grip on the arms of his chair and said, "Brace up, honey. Here come the bloodhounds."

Ashley had a problem then. He couldn't tell the police the real reason why Ralph Morrow had come to his office. Yet the widow of Morrow's brother could involve Ashley badly if the police got to her. He had to take the chance because he was playing for time.

He told Lieutenant Cassidy a simple believable story—that a private detective might expect people to be in trouble when they sought his services. Ralph Morrow had come on a mission dangerous to his murderer so the killer had struck.

The lieutenant had to believe him. There was nothing else to do because both Norma McBain and Betty backed him up. Even Central had a record of the phone call which had stalled Ashley at the telephone. It had been made from a pay station not far from Ashley's office and the caller had talked over-time so, a notation had been made.

"Just the same," Lieutenant Cassidy told him, "you'd better stick around town. And for the love of Mike, if you smell murder again, let me know before it happens."

The excitement died down at noon. The only souvenir was a spot of blood on the outer office floor. Norma McBain went on home—without being invited to lunch—and Steve Ashley sat behind his desk again, slightly dizzy. Betty Shaw calmly put on her hat, studying herself in the mirror.

"Betty," Ashley said, "did it occur to you that Norma McBain arrived almost

too opportunely?"

She turned rather quickly and stared at him. "Steve, you don't think—"

"I'd suspect anybody. The person who killed Ralph Morrow knows something about the murder of his brother—and my aunt. That's the man I'm after. Furthermore, I'm calling three men who may have something to do with this and asking them to establish an alibi."

"That might be a good idea," Betty said. "Sorry I can't stay."

"Go ahead." Ashley waved toward the door. "It's much more important than to help me solve this case which is what I'm paying you for."

"Oh," Betty said brightly, "are you paying me?"

Ashley had to grin. He half arose and Betty fled. He got on the phone then. He called Major Ross' office first and the major stated that at the time of the murder he had been in conference and gave names to prove it.

Lathan claimed to have been in his store but admitted nobody had been there with him. Attorney Butler was in court, which was about the best alibi a man could have. Steve Ashley hung up with a grunt of disgust.

He hated to think that Norma McBain was involved, but it was odd that she should drop in on him at any time, let alone at that most crucial moment when Morrow had been stabbed to death. In fact, Ashley couldn't recall ever telling Miss McBain where his office was located.

HE GAVE UP, felt a gnawing sensation in the pit of his stomach and decided two things—he was hungry and already hardened as a detective. Then he thought of Betty and didn't feel quite so brave.

On the way down, he met a man in denims who wielded a mop in the lobby. Ashley handed him a cigarette.

"You the detective?" the janitor queried in a friendly manner.

"Yes. Are you the janitor?"

"That's me—name of Jim." The man grinned. "Business is looking up too.

Must be." The janitor started swinging his mop again. "When they bump off a client before he even gets to talk with you. Yes, sir—some detective agency."

"Don't rub it in." Ashley moaned. "Or hand that line to my assistant. You know—Betty Shaw. She ran the office before I took over."

"Y'mean to say there's been a woman detective in that office all the time? I been around here every day and night for four years now. Never been no woman up there. Just that screwball who swiped my mop pail four nights in a row—until I tanned him with the mop handle."

Ashley's broad grin slowly faded. He walked out to the street in a semi-daze. Why on earth had Betty given him to understand that she had been connected with the place so long? Obviously, it was a lie. He turned left at the next cross street, saw a restaurant sign and ambled toward it.

Betty was in there, sitting alone at a small table for two. The other side wasn't even set. Steve Ashley got away from that vicinity, elbowed himself to a counter seat in a drugstore and had a sandwich and a glass of milk.

Betty came back fifteen minutes after Ashley got to the office. She smiled at him but didn't remove her hat.

"I'm ready to start work, Boss," she said. "You were to precede me into that investment counseling house."

"Yes." Ashley nodded. "We'll start at once. We can walk nearly to the place together. Have a nice lunch, Betty?"

"Perfectly swell."

It required considerable effort on Ashley's part not to dwell further on her obvious lying, but he thought it best to let matters develop. Anyway, he needed her badly in the work.

They parted six blocks from the business house of John Black and Company. Steve Ashley went on alone. Nearing the place he saw Toddy Tiner and for the first time felt immeasurable relief that Toddy hadn't been around when the murder at the office had occurred. Somehow, Ashley gathered, Toddy could

probably gum up the works far better than any ten men of average ability in that line.

Toddy touched the brim of his hat in what was supposed to be a salute.

"Hi, Boss," he said. "I've been making progress. Got a good business in there. I counted sixty-four people entering since they opened this morning. Fifty-nine came out."

"What happened to the extra five?" Ashley asked. "Wait—don't answer. I haven't the time. Toddy, I see a gold fountain pen clipped to your vest pocket. Where did you get it?"

Toddy opened his mouth, closed it again quickly and bolted down the street. Ashley shook his head and decided that Toddy was finished. He could take just so much.

Ashley had a pleasant chat with John Black himself, a portly distinguished-looking man. He gave young Ashley facts and figures, names of stocks, the addresses of the best brokers to do business with. Furthermore he didn't charge him a cent.

"We shall list you as a new client, Mr. Ashley," Black said. "Therefore I want to help you as much as possible. Prove the worth of our firm, as it were. When you realize upon the investments I just described to you, then you will know we operate wisely and honestly."

Ashley shook hands and walked out. Betty was in the waiting-room. He blinked his eyes once in a signal Black seemed to be on the up-and-up. As he went out the door he saw Betty being piloted into the lion's den. Ashley shrugged. For his money Black was okay. He would report that according to instructions.

On his way back to the office he passed one of his usual hangouts. Le Cheval Bleu, its ornate blue horse suspended above the mirrored entrance. Ashley hesitated. After all, he had almost five hundred dollars in his pocket.

Then he resolutely walked past. He was no longer a member of the idle rich. He was earning this five hundred dollars.

After he got well beyond temptation, he studied his mind to try and find why he had wanted to enter so badly. Usually it was to forget something. But what did he have that weighed so heavily he wanted to forget.

It came to him in a flash. Betty! Elizabeth Shaw, the double liar. He was in love with her.

CHAPTER IX

TROUBLE ENOUGH



BACK at the office Ashley found Toddy deep in a new book. This one dealt with inks and fountain pens. Ashley perched on the edge of Toddy's desk.

"Look, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," he said, "when I interviewed Mr. John Black, he was much put out because somebody had swiped an expensive gold fountain pen from him. Of course, that couldn't be you?"

"How'd you know?" Toddy looked innocent enough to slaughter.

"Toddy, pack your stuff and scram. You're all done."

Toddy smiled from ear to ear. "You can't fire me, Mr. Ashley. I got a contract. Yep, I was sold with the business and the contract says I can't be fired. Want to see it?"

"No!" Ashley roared and slammed the door to his own office. He needed just one more thing to hie himself over to Le Cheval Bleu.

Betty returned half an hour later, looking somewhat worried. "Remember one thing," she warned him. "You blinked once at me. I took your word for it."

Ashley had an awful premonition of what was coming. "Go on," he prompted. "Unveil the bad news."

"Well," Betty said, "Mr. John Black fawned on me, told me how lovely I was and then advised me to put my five thousand dollars into Vista Oil. He gave me the address of a reputable stock

firm I'd never heard of before. I started to leave and most conveniently, one of the partners of that firm came in. Steve—I parted with the five thousand. I had to. They called my bluff."

Ashley's groan could have been heard on the sidewalk. "Okay, Betty," he told her. "I guess you did the right thing—I hope."

Ashley got up slowly, put his hat on, carefully adjusted it in the mirror. "I'm going out," he said. "I'll be at Le Cheval Bleu if there happens to be another murder in my office. Call me there. I shall be at the bar."

"Please don't," Betty said.

"Please don't," Ashley mimicked her. "You don't even know what Le Cheval Bleu is."

"Yes I do. I was there. Twice. My fiancé took me there."

Ashley sighed deeply. "Betty, you are absolutely the most beautiful—liar I ever saw in my life. No woman ever set foot in that joint. Not one. It's strictly stag including Sundays and holidays. Furthermore, it costs two thousand dollars to belong to the club. I happen to be paid up to the first of the year. Did your boy friend ever squander two thousand that way?"

"He has more sense," Betty snapped.

"I," Steve Ashley said firmly, "am going to get plastered."

But he did not. He didn't even enter Le Cheval Bleu. Instead he kept going until he reached John Black and Company again. Fresh air had cleared his mind and he had a definite plan of attack in view.

Before he braved the glittering front of the investment counselor's firm he stopped in a drug-store and phoned Betty. "Look," he said, "I've decided to stay sober for another hour. Call John Black personally. When he answers start mumbling. Tell him something must be wrong with his receiver because you are speaking plainly and you hear him well, I want him to leave me alone in his office for about two minutes. Ask some more questions about your money. Got it?"

"Got it, Steve. And thanks."

"For what?" he grumbled.

"For not getting pie-eyed. You shouldn't, you know, on your income. Besides, it's bad for the liver and absolutely death to a private detective's license. I got one for you already. Even a pistol permit and the most beautiful automatic. I'm crazy about it."

"Just leave off the last two words," Ashley advised. "That explains everything. Now take care of John Black."

Twenty minutes later Steve Ashley emerged from the investment counseling firm with the names of almost twenty clients. He had picked them at random from Black's personal file.

Then Ashley learned what it was like to really earn money. He walked for three hours, until his feet felt like those of a rookie after his first ten-mile hike under full gear.

But his eyes sparkled. He really had something. On a quiet corner he stopped, put a slip of paper against the wall of a building and after eleven different names, wrote one word—*Gypped*.

THE broker was not responsible when a stock failed. Neither was John Black and Company. They gave their advice only after careful study of present conditions and were certainly not to blame if those conditions altered without warning. It seemed that most of the stock they recommended did alter—for the worse.

At the bottom of the list, Ashley grimly wrote Betty's name and the figure \$5,000. Then he crossed out Betty's name and, twice as grimly, replaced it with that of Major Ross.

Next, he stopped at the advertising offices of the *Globe* and inserted an ad which he found gloriously cheap.

The ad read:

Black is black and how!

Then Steve Ashley found himself walking faster than his sore feet enjoyed. But he was heading for the office and Betty. He wanted to see her, to

brag about his work.

She was at his desk when he arrived. There were no signs of Toddy. He was the most invisible employee Ashley had ever heard of.

"I've cracked it wide open," Ashley said. "The ad is inserted and believe me Black is black."

"How did you do it, Steve?" Betty asked curiously.

He told her, carefully and in great detail.

"You're beginning to think and act like a detective," she told him. "One of these days you'll be really great in this field."

"As great as Allington?" Ashley asked.

Betty looked at him quickly. "Allington is suppose to be the biggest and best agency in town. In the country, for that matter. What made you mention them, Steve?"

He grinned sheepishly. "I looked in the phone book. They carried the biggest ad. I just wanted to see what kind of competition I had. But Black and Company are crooks, in league with at least two brokerage houses, and dragging in the suckers beautifully. They didn't take a chance with me because I looked too smart and had a reputation."

"Uh-huh," Betty said softly, "and what a reputation. Steve, that means I've been buncoed too. Should I sell out?"

"No—we can't let them know we suspect them. I'll stall Major Ross somehow. After all—"

The outer door slammed. Toddy's voice came stridently clear. He spoke before he looked in the main office. "Betty, it checks! This is it!"

"What checks?" Steve Ashley asked.

Toddy suddenly had a wild look in his eyes but he conquered it quickly enough and became the slow misfit Toddy Tiner again.

"It was just some ink, Mr. Ashley. I been studying inks lately. I told Betty I could determine if one pen wrote two different things. With the same ink, I mean. She didn't believe me. So I went

to her house and did some checking I told her she used the office pen to write a lot of stuff."

"I'll search him," Ashley said wearily. "He's probably got every pair of precious silk stockings you ever owned in his pockets, to say nothing of numerous other little odds and ends."

"I didn't swipe anything." Toddy turned his pockets inside out quickly. "Honest, Mr. Ashley, I wouldn't steal from Betty or from you."

"Well, thanks," Steve Ashley said. "I appreciate that but just the same I'll keep an eye on my back teeth. Now run along and earn the money I don't pay you each week."

Toddy smiled contentedly and ambled out, closing the door behind him. Ashley picked up the phone. "After listening to that crackpot," he mumbled, "giving Major Ross the bad news won't be so tough. Get ready to grab me if he bowls me over."

But Major Ross was properly sympathetic, gave Ashley all the time he needed to get the money back. Ashley grinned happily.

"See what kind of friends I have? By the way, are you seeing your boy friend for dinner or is there a chance for me?"

"We're going dancing," she said. "I'm terribly sorry, Steve."

"It's all right." He shrugged. "By the way, I don't know your home address or telephone number. Better leave it."

She wrote down the address. Ashley tucked it into his vest pocket. "Well," he said, "we just sit now until our mystery client sends us another little token of his esteem and some further orders. Right now I could use an even thousand dollars. It's a profitable business, my dear. Ah, yes."

"Sure it is," she agreed. "You lose five thousand dollars to earn five hundred. That's the way to get rich—in reverse. Steve, you still haven't a full realization of values, have you?"

"Perhaps not so far as money is concerned," he admitted. "My upbringing was lacking on that score. But I do

possess an excellent sense of values as to truth. Don't you think that is just as important?"

Betty bit her lower lip, pivoted neatly and walked out. A moment later the door slammed and she was gone. Steve Ashley cursed himself. He shouldn't have said that.

Ashley slid open the top drawer of his desk, looking for paper onto which he planned to copy the list of Black's victims. Lying before him was a blue-black automatic and a license to carry it. He hefted the weapon and it felt good in his grasp. The thing was fully loaded even to a slug in the firing chamber. He checked the safety twice and then shoved the weapon into his back pocket. It felt like an ingot of pig-iron.

The phone rang and he waited for Toddy to take it outside but the phone kept ringing. Toddy had quietly departed. Steve Ashley grumbled, answered and it was Norma McBain.

"Steve," she said in a whisper, "something strange has happened. Dwight Latham just came to the house and said he wanted to see you. He's here now. I'm talking from the kitchen extension."

"What's so strange about that?" Ashley inquired.

"I told him I didn't know when you'd be home," Miss McBain replied. "He said he'd wait. I caught him prowling around. He was lifting up chairs and looking at the upholstery beneath them. Then he started on the pictures and finally the rug. I'm scared."

CHAPTER X

VANISHED FORTUNE



HANGING up, Ashley had started to arise when a messenger walked in, handed him a plain white envelope addressed with his name, demanded a receipt and waited for a tip. He got both.

Ashley leaned back, slit the seal and

fished out ten hundred-dollar bills. His eyes opened wide. Of course this was from his mysterious client.

He pulled out a short note and read:

Dear Mr. Ashley:

You have done very well indeed. Now you must determine whether or not R. H. Mathers, brokers, are involved with Black and Company. Get a list of Mathers' clients if possible. To aid you in this I am enclosing a key which will open the door of their offices. Don't get caught. Advertise as before. Use the name of Purple for Mathers. Purple is black or purple is white, according to your findings. Good luck.

Steve Ashley shook the envelope and a shiny, newly fashioned key fell out. He smiled contentedly and dialed the home number which Betty had written on that slip of paper. She answered so quickly that he said, "Expecting me to call, Betty?"

"No, Steve. I feel terrible about the way I acted this afternoon. If you fire me I have no right to complain. I thought, when the phone rang, it was my boy friend."

"Oh," Ashley said unhappily. "Well, anyhow, I have good news. I just received one of those anonymous letters. That fellow works fast. The papers haven't been on the streets any longer than half an hour or so. He enclosed—now hold your breath—one thousand dollars!"

"Good," Betty said cordially. "That should give you lots of faith in yourself."

"Good gosh, I forgot! Miss McBain called a few minutes ago and said something was wrong at the house. I've got to get up there. Sure you won't change your mind about tonight?"

"How can I?" she argued. "Why, Steve, I've even bought me a brand new yellow evening gown for the occasion. See you tomorrow."

She hung up and Ashley wondered how to overcome the competition offered by this ghost sweetheart of Betty's. He had the main office door open when Lieutenant Cassidy arrived and put all thoughts of romance out of his system.

"You're pinched, Ashley."

On the way to headquarters in a detective cruiser Cassidy explained, "You didn't tell the truth, Ashley. Not by a long shot. I'm not accusing you of murdering Ralph Morrow. You're alibied on that one. Better than you were in the death of Dr. Quillian—but you forgot to tell me that Morrow came to see you by invitation, that you interviewed Mrs. George Morrow under false pretenses and you showed her a brown bottle of pills over which you were quite excited. What do you say? Come clean about the whole thing and I'll arrange it so you can go free."

"And if I don't?" Ashley inquired.

"We'll petition the commissioner to withdraw your agency license. You'll be locked up unless you can furnish bail. All in all it won't be so pleasant."

"I'll take my chances," Steve Ashley said promptly. "I want you to understand, however, that this case happens to have a very personal interest for me. I'm not trying to fight the police. Heaven knows I may need you before it's over, yet I want to handle it my own way."

"Suit yourself," Cassidy said. "I don't see what you can do about bail though unless you have friends. I did a bit of checking up and you're broke."

A desk captain set the bail at a thousand dollars. Steve paid over the bills he had held on to for about half an hour. It was heart-breaking to see them slapped into an envelope. To him that money represented success and the satisfaction of a client.

They had not searched him so he still retained the gun, the letter and the key which was supposed to fit the offices of J. P. Mathers. He thought Norma McBain must be practically frantic by now so he took a taxi home.

She met him at the door and her right eye was swollen and rapidly becoming a shiner. She plainly had been crying before Ashley's arrival.

"He's gone," she said. "Latham's gone. He hit me! I fell down and before I could get up or even scream for help he was gone."

"I'm terrible sorry," Ashley apologized. "I meant to get here sooner but a policeman had other ideas. Just what did Latham do?"

"He told me he would wait," said Miss McBain. "I left him alone. I heard noises and peeked into the room. He had every piece of furniture on its side and he was fussing with the bottoms of the chairs and everything. I didn't let him know I'd seen him. That's all there was to it."

"Latham is going to explain it," Steve Ashley said stoutly. "After all, this is a heck of a way to repay my aunt's kindness. Are you afraid to stay here while I go out again?"

"I'm not afraid," she replied. "Steve—that girl who works for you is very pretty, isn't she?"

"Gorgeous!" Ashley agreed ecstatically and then realized he had made a slip.

Norma McBain colored, looked away, then hurried to the kitchen. Ashley swore softly. It was plain that she was in love with him. The girl he was mad about was engaged.

He proceeded to the home of James Butler. He needed a lawyer and Butler was a good one. He was due to face a judge in two days and the magistrate might not be quite as lenient as Lieutenant Cassidy.

Butler lived in a house as big and imposing as that of Major Ross. It was dark—every single window. Ashley groaned but decided to arouse the servants if there were any. He punched the doorbell, heard it clamor inside, and almost instantly the latch was turned and the door opened. All he could see was darkness. "I want to see—" he began.

A LONG ARM reached out, grasped him by the shoulder. He was yanked through the door. He couldn't gather his outraged senses fast enough to dodge the punch that slashed at his chest. It hit directly above the heart and he reeled backward, fighting for breath.

The door slammed and whoever had attacked him came again to finish the affair as quickly as possible. This time the darkness impeded the attacker too and his punches did not land against any vulnerable spots.

Steve Ashley lashed out and connected but it was a body blow that only brought a snort of rage from the man in the darkness. They suddenly encountered one another head-on and went into a clinch.

Ashley felt huge arms squeeze with terrifying strength. He couldn't get loose and there was danger of his ribs cracking. He kicked out and struck the man's ankle. That brought a howl of pain, a sudden relaxation of the bear hug and Ashley tore himself loose.

The man turned suddenly and dashed toward the rear of the house. Steve Ashley went after him, stumbled against chairs and tables, finally gave up. That man knew the house because he brushed against no furniture while Ashley himself practically switched all the furniture about. He lit a match, located a light switch, turned the lights on.

The house was a shambles. Chairs had been slashed open, pictures removed from the walls and their backing ripped away. The rug was thrown into a corner after having been slit to ribbons.

Someone stepped on the porch. Ashley raced back to the door, opened it a crack, then crouched. The only light came from the dining room and was none too strong, so when the caller pushed his way in, Ashley leaped upon him. It was only after he'd brought the man to the floor that he saw it was James Butler.

Ashley helped the lawyer to his feet. He was badly disheveled and there were scratches and bruises on his face. Ashley had not inflicted those—unless Butler was the unknown man he had struggled with a few moments before.

"What is the meaning of this?" Butler demanded. "First, I'm attacked as I turn into my own path and again when I enter my own home. Steve, what on

earth is wrong with you?"

"Who attacked you—outside, I mean?" Ashley demanded.

"I don't know." Butler shook his head. "Never had a chance to see the man's face but come to think of it he was quite a bit taller and bulkier than you. Now, Steve, I'm entitled to an explanation."

"Let's sit down," Ashley suggested. "My knees are shaking and so is my brain. Mr. Butler, I came here to see you. I rang the bell, the door opened and I was yanked inside. I had a terrific battle with a man who was possibly the same one who attacked you outside. He got away. And take a look at your house."

James Butler did and groaned. He began setting chairs back on their legs and finally gave up. "That man broke in here and searched for something," Ashley said. "What are you hiding, Mr. Butler?"

"Hiding?" The lawyer looked surprised. "Why, not a thing. If I had anything of value it would be in my office safe or my bank vault."

"The man who did this"—Ashley waved his hand—"didn't seem to think so. I had an experience something like this myself. Dwight Latham gave my furniture a going over, socked Miss McBain in the eye and got away. I wonder if Latham could have come here and attacked me."

"And me," Butler put in quickly. "Why would he do such a thing, Steve?"

"Murder," Ashley answered curtly. "Don't ask me anything else now. Mr. Butler, I'm free on bail as a material witness in the killing of a man who came to my office. Day after tomorrow I have to appear in court. Will you take care of my interests?"

"Certainly," Butler said. "Steve, how in the world did you get mixed up in a murder case?"

"A murder case?" Ashley said derisively. "Mr. Butler, there are four of 'em. Now don't start asking questions. I can't answer them at the moment but

before we face a judge I'll tell you everything. Why not look around and see if anything is missing—just to change the subject from murder?"

"I keep nothing important here," Butler said. "It's quite clear this wasn't the work of a plain burglar, Steve, I don't like the way you're eyeing me."

"It just occurred to me that the man I fought in here was mussed up a bit," he said. "Just as you are mussed up now. I've been wondering if you could have been that man, alibiing yourself by stating you also encountered an attacker."

"Steve," Butler said earnestly, "I have no reason for trying to kill or hurt you. My job is to help you for the sake of your dead aunt if nothing else. Please believe me, I told you the truth."

"I think you did, at that. It's just the detective in me rising to the forefront, full of suspicion and accusations. You know us dicks, Butler. We instinctively dislike lawyers. Seriously though, have you anything to tell me about my aunt's estate? What happened to it?"

"If I knew, I'd tell you in a moment," Butler said. "Something did go wrong. Less than a year ago the estate was worth at least two hundred thousand dollars."

CHAPTER XI

LEGAL BURGLARY



FOR half an hour Ashley walked the streets, then his footsteps automatically turned in the direction of Betty's address. He wanted to see whether or not she had lied again. There were other and more important things to be done, like inspecting the files of J. P. Mathers, but everything went by the board now.

He reached the neighborhood and whistled softly. Nobody lived here who wasn't worth a small fortune or whose income didn't run into five figures. Of all

the apartment houses, she resided in the most ornate and the most expensive. Ashley even knew the building, for a friend of his had occupied 7B and had thrown more than one party there.

Ashley walked into the lobby and checked Betty's name against the mail and bell listings. She lived in 2B, an apartment identical with the one his friend had leased. He walked to the second floor, paused in front of her door, wondered what kind of reception he would get if she was at home.

He pressed the bell, heard it ring, waited patiently for two or three minutes. Finally he turned away. Oddly enough he felt cheated because she had told him the truth.

Outside he looked back and stopped dead. The lights of her apartment were burning. The living rooms of these suites all had a narrow, ornamental balcony outside the window. Someone moved past that window. Ashley's ire started to rise. She was home and had deliberately refused to answer his ring.

He went back but realized that if she had made up her mind not to let anyone in it wouldn't be changed now. He was just angry enough to be insistent. Therefore he made his way into the area just below the balcony window.

He clambered onto the first floor balcony. Standing on its iron railing he could reach up and seize the lower part of the second balcony. He drew himself up, got a higher grasp, finally lodged his feet in the spaces at the floor of the balcony. He saw now that heavy red drapes had been pulled closed but that did not deter him.

He reached out and grimly moved them aside until they were parted a few inches. He saw Betty then. She was in a straight chair across from the window drapes, dressed in a gorgeous yellow dress. A twisted rag had been inserted between her lips and her eyes stared at him in what was sheer disbelief.

Ashley started to climb over the railing. Her eyes slowly blinked—twice. The signal that everything was not

exactly safe. Ashley nodded. He already held his automatic in hand. Using it, he swept the drape aside. A blackjack lashed down at his wrist but missed because Steve Ashley was prepared for anything.

He drew back, leveled the gun and his fingers tightened against the trigger. Before he could shoot the lights went out and he heard a scampering of feet. Ashley clambered over the rail, plunged through the window and was instantly attacked.

By the feel of the man and his strength, he guessed it was the same man who had met him in Butler's home. Ashley drew away, maneuvering to face the window. Dim light shone through and would silhouette the attacker if he stood before it.

As Ashley expected, the man did exactly that. Betty was now struggling on the floor, giving vent to sounds of rage that were muffled by the gag. Ashley could not help her now. He saw the man an instant later. He was huge, a mask covered part of his features and he was half crouched to attack.

Ashley lunged forward. He aimed his right fist straight for the man's left eye. He wanted to mark him, mark him well. He guessed that he accomplished this by the pain that shot the whole length of his arm from the impact.

The man gave a howl of pain, thrust one arm out like a football player and sent Ashley reeling backward. He stumbled over Betty and hit the wall on his way to the floor. His gun was ready, however, and he transferred it to his right hand for quicker and more accurate shooting.

A door slammed somewhere, was opened again almost instantly and slammed once more. Steve Ashley got to his feet, found light switches and flooded the place with light. He sped to the door, looked into the hallway and saw nothing. Then he returned and looked down at Betty, who was slowly growing purple from her efforts to get loose.

"That boy friend of yours plays rough." Ashley grinned at her. "He must be a pretty jealous guy. Betty, did he get sick of hearing you talk?"

She gurgled and kicked out at him savagely. He danced out of the way, then freed her and removed the gag.

"Steve, you utter fool!" she choked. "There were two men here—both masked. They heard you at the door. Naturally, I couldn't let you in. Then they heard you again, climbing onto the balcony. One of them hid behind the drape and held a blackjack ready to crown you. The other stood behind me with a gun in his hand. To shoot me if I gave any signal to you or if you actually got into the room."

ASHLEY sat down, crossed his legs and lit a cigarette. He puffed deeply.

"My, the stories you tell," he said meaningly. "Where was this boy friend of yours while all this happened? Don't tell me he stood you up like he did this noon at lunch. Yes, I saw you eating alone."

For a moment he thought she would burst into tears, then her moist eyes flashed dangerously.

"Steve," she said firmly, "this is no time for horse-play. We really ran into something with John Black and Company. I gave them my right name and address. These two men came here a short time ago. I—I thought it was my fiancé. You can see I'm all dressed up and ready to go. I was seized, tied and questioned."

Ashley lit another cigarette from his own, handed the second smoke to Betty. "Questioned about what?" he asked.

"That deal I made at Black's. They wanted to know who sent me, what I was up to, what was behind it. They threatened to kill me and, Steve, I think they really would have if you hadn't appeared. Steve, why did you come?"

He looked steadfastly at the glowing end of his cigarette while he answered.

"Curiosity, that's all. I wanted a look

at this boy friend of yours. That is, if he exists."

"He does," Betty answered quietly. "Take my word for it, Steve, he does exist and I'm terribly in love with him."

"Let's forget it," Ashley suggested, shrugging and smiling wryly. "Right now we have business which needs attention. I have a key which is supposed to fit the offices of J. P. Mathers. Want to turn burglar with me?"

She jumped up. "Of course I do. The sooner we settle this the quicker we shall be out of danger. Give me five minutes to change."

She fled from the room and Steve Ashley settled back to do some heavy thinking. It seemed to him that the four murders he had encountered were possibly associated with the ring engaged in cheating wealthy victims. Otherwise, why the attack upon Butler? The lawyer was concerned only with Steve Ashley's aunt unless he were mixed up in the racket and the others of the gang mistrusted him. Butler was in an excellent position to pick victims and engineer the first stages of the game.

Then there was Dwight Latham. Perhaps his clumsiness and dull wit were a mask to shield his true nature. Certainly he had managed to induce Aunt Grace to will him her antique shop.

Betty's return put an end to these speculations and they went out together. At the street door Ashley took a long look around in case plans had been made to waylay them. He saw nothing suspicious and they walked to the nearest bus line.

Twenty minutes later they gazed thoughtfully at the office of J. P. Mathers. The firm had a street entrance in one of the huge financial buildings downtown. Ashley fingered the bright new key which had been sent him.

"By the way," he told Betty, "I'm pinched. Did you know that? Lieutenant Cassidy made the arrest and I had to bail myself out with the thousand dollars that our unknown client mailed me."

"Steve, they don't think—"

"That I killed someone? Hardly. If they did I'd be in the pokey right now. Betty, suppose I couldn't have raised the bail. Would you have helped me out?"

"Of course," she replied.

"Then tell me where a fifty-dollar-a-week detective's assistant who hasn't been paid in weeks would get a thousand dollars. At the same time, explain how you live in an apartment that costs three hundred dollars a month. If you want to explain, that is. Please don't think I'm prying."

"Then I have never known what prying was before, Steve," she said spiritedly. "I won't talk. Not now. Anyway, we have our business to attend to. Are you going in?"

Betty took up a post on the deserted street while Ashley stepped into the doorway. He inserted the key, found that it fitted perfectly, hissed a signal to Betty.

They entered the darkened offices and made their way to the inner sancta where the officials held sway. There they both went to work, inspecting files. Twice they had to duck when a patrolman idly tried the door.

They had to work without lights but Ashley finally solved that problem. He took a sheaf of papers into a supply closet, lit matches and studied them behind the closed door.

Betty was examining desk drawers when he bolted out of the closet waving a bunch of papers excitedly. He spoke aloud, forgetful in his excitement that they were really burglarizing the place.

"Betty, look here! My aunt's name is mixed up in this business. She was a client of this place. They got her money, doggone them! That's where it went. She even may have asked the advice of John Black and been sent here."

Betty was at his side. "Then the murders and the case our unknown client gave us tie in," she said. "Steve, I've had a hunch they would all along. What are you going to do?"

"See J. P. Mathers," Ashley said promptly, "smack him one and then sue the daylights out of him. I'm the heir to my aunt's estate. If they got her money away illegally I'm entitled to get it back. Think of it! I'm not poor any more. I'm Steve Ashley again with all the money I need. Betty, I can't believe it. I can't—"

"Put everything back including the papers concerning your aunt. Put them back, Steve."

"But I could—"

"You'd get into a mess of trouble and before you extricated yourself the birds would have flown. No, Steve, we've got to get them with facts."

CHAPTER XII

FLIGHT



DRIVING in a taxi to Steve Ashley's house Betty sat so close to him in the cab that he almost forgot the amazing developments of the evening. It was not midnight yet.

Twice he almost reached over to take her hand but stopped in time. There was still that mysterious boy friend to contend with.

"I've always wanted to see how you rich people live," Betty said.

Ashley grinned. "Lady, when it comes to soft living that apartment of yours isn't exactly the Mills Hotel."

Norma McBain let them in. She greeted Ashley with a cordial smile that faded promptly when Betty stepped into view.

"You two have met under rather grim circumstances," Ashley said. "I remember there was a corpse between you. Miss McBain, we just dropped in to do a little work. Miss Shaw is my assistant, you know."

"How are you, Miss McBain?" Betty said cheerfully and then she clucked her tongue. "My, what an eye you've got! Doors do get in the way, don't they?"

"I was assaulted." Norma McBain

turned and walked hastily away.

"Imagine that!" Betty said. "Shall we go into the living room, Steve?"

"Now just a minute." He checked her at the door. "Have you ever been in this house before?"

"Certainly not," she said.

"Then how did you know that is the living room?"

"I'm psychic," Betty explained seriously. "Shall we go in, Steve?"

He turned on one table lamp and cursed Betty's fiancé again. In this light there were definite possibilities that he might progress a little beyond the detective business. Instead he dropped into a chair facing the divan on which Betty had seated herself.

"Steve," she said, "let's start with the possibility that your aunt was murdered because she knew J. P. Mathers and possibly John Black had cheated her. Someone with access to Dr. Quillian's medicines substituted a bottle of inert pills for the nitroglycerine which would have kept her alive."

"You mean—her?"

He inclined his head toward the part of the house into which Miss McBain had disappeared.

"Perhaps." Betty nodded. "Anything is possible. Now, whoever did that endangered the lives of other patients whom Dr. Quillian was treating for the same illness. That's how George Morrow died. He was given the same inert pills."

"I guessed that long ago," Ashley said. "I also know that when George Morrow died the only person present were his brother Ralph and Dr. Quillian. The doctor might have voiced his suspicions to Ralph Morrow. Ralph became excited, wanted to cool off, said nothing to his sister-in-law. Instead he went out for a walk."

"That's it!" Betty cried. "On returning, Mrs. Morrow told him of your visit. He came to the office the next morning but the murderer had discovered Ralph Morrow knew too much and murdered him before he could state his suspicions.

Steve, it seems to me that Quillian knew, at Morrow's death-bed, the identity of the murderer."

"Granted," Ashley said. "You seem to be carrying the ball. Go ahead."

"Dr. Quillian returned to his office, tested the pills, discovered they were inert. He didn't file Morrow's death certificate. Instead he hid it and the bottle of inert pills behind his graduation picture. Then he phoned his wife and casually mentioned the picture in such a way that she was bound to remember it."

"May I talk now?" Ashley implored. "Or does my employee solve the case for me?"

She smiled at him.

"Quillian," he said, "then phoned the people he suspected of the murder. The murderer came to the office and promptly killed Quillian. He tried to make it appear that drug addicts had committed the crime and that worked nicely because the killer tore the place apart searching for the bottle of inert pills. He had to have them because they were a dead give-away. Dope addicts would have searched the same way."

BETTY arose and began pacing the floor.

"I wonder if Dr. Quillian really suspected the man who killed him?" she mused. "It seems to me that the murderer struck suddenly because, as I understand it, there was no evidence of a fight."

Ashley studied her for a moment and she stopped walking. "Betty," he said slowly, "we've reached the end of our rope. I can't go on unless you tell me your connection with the case. I never mentioned a word about the scene at Dr. Quillian's office. How come?"

"Be quiet," Betty said tartly. "It could be that lawyer Butler, of course. He knew your aunt's fortune. Or Latham might have done it. Perhaps there was even a fresh motive we've never thought of. For instance, some precious antique which Latham swiped

before he knew your aunt was presenting him with the whole business. Or Major Ross—there we have an enigma. Or is he an enigma? Steve, we're a couple of dopes."

"Yeah," Ashley grumbled. "I'm the biggest. Betty, you must tell me—"

"Major Ross!" She disregarded his plea. "Those men who came to my apartment knew all about the five thousand dollars, showing they were sent by John Black and his associates. But why should they suspect me of being involved? Just because I handed over five thousand dollars? Hardly—but it was the identical sum Major Ross loaned you. And Ross could have guessed what you were going to do with it."

Steve Ashley forgot about the mystery, that surrounded her. He jumped to his feet and grasped both her arms.

"That's it!" he exclaimed. "Black knew darned well I'd show up. He never asked me for money, never framed me into parting with it right there in his office like he did you. Instead he gave me some sound advice. If I'd had the money to follow it I could have profited. But when you came, a stranger, he let you have both barrels. That stock you bought must be phony."

"Not phony," Betty countered. "Just weak and probably controlled by the interests behind this scheme. I checked. It's dropped already. I've lost two thousand of that five. I've expected them to call me and ask for more money."

"Which is exactly what they would have done under ordinary circumstances," Ashley said excitedly. His voice rose. "Only they suspected the five thousand you gave them may have come from me. That we worked together. It certainly would have been easy to check that. We're in the same firm."

"Then let's do something about it," Betty suggested.

"No," he answered resolutely. "Not until you tell me all about yourself. I refuse to carry on until I know the truth."

She spoke in a whisper, her lips barely

moving. "Not now. I'm facing a mirror and the nurse is outside the door listening to us. I see her reflection dimly."

Ashley whirled and started a mad rush to the door. It slammed almost in his face. He got it open, heard Norma McBain running wildly through the house, went after her. The back door slammed before he could reach it and he almost tore an arm out of its socket trying to open the door. The nurse had taken time to transfer the key to the outside and lock it.

Ashley grabbed up a chair, smashed a window, and dived through. Headlights illuminated the interior of the garage. Then one of his aunt's cars shot out. He saw Norma McBain at the wheel.

"You fool!" she yelled stridently. "You terrible fool, Steve."

Then the car was gone. Betty came out to join him and she held a flashlight. Ashley groaned.

"Whether it is Major Ross, Mr. Butler or Latham, the guilty man will doggone soon know we're wise," he said with a sigh. "Betty, this case has me down. It's too much for me. Why, the safe in the living room, for one thing. And I don't even know what was taken. Wait! It can't be Latham. Otherwise, why did he slug Miss McBain? If they were in cahoots she'd have helped him search for whatever they wanted."

"Skip that," Betty said. "What else happened?"

"Soon after my aunt died somebody opened a window downstairs and started to climb in. A woman, Betty. I suppose now it must have been the nurse, since she has shown her true colors. Come here—I'll show you where it happened."

He took the flashlight from her unresisting grasp and they walked to a spot just outside the window.

"Whoever it was," he said, "managed to reach the window, raise it and shoot a flashlight into the room. I sat at the other end. Right over there."

He pointed and Betty moved a little closer. Then Ashley pointed the beam

of the flash at the ground.

"Right here is where I found the marks of high-heeled shoes," he said. "There they are, still intact. I—Betty, you just stepped right beside the original footprints and your shoes left an identical mark. Exactly the same. Betty, *now* I demand an explanation. How do I know but that you aren't behind this scheme?"

She started to move a little closer, her lips parted, her eyes wide. Then she turned and bolted away into the night. Steve Ashley ran after her a score of half-hearted steps. He gave up and walked like a tired old man back to the house, his brain more confused than ever.

CHAPTER XIII

LIFE OR DEATH



IT WAS impossible to think in the house. The place was too vast, too lonesome. So Steve Ashley returned to his office and found the somewhat frowsy place a welcome and comfortable spot.

First there was the important mystery of Betty Shaw to solve. Why had she run away without an explanation? Why had she tried to enter his house that night? To solve the first question Ashley got up and searched her desk in the outer office. It was exceptionally bare but he did find a spare vanity case which gave off a perfume bringing a tantalizing memory of her.

He did notice that the meager furniture near the part which Toddy Tiner occupied had been carelessly pushed in all directions. He pulled a chair over to Toddy's desk and sat down to search the drawers. The first thing he discovered was a plaster cast. A small, square white object.

Ashley took the key to J. P. Mathers' offices from his pocket and found it fitted perfectly into the cast. His frown grew deeper than ever. Now the apparently

worthless and dumb Toddy took on a new light. He had made the key which had been sent to Steve Ashley through the mails. Was Toddy the mystery client then?

Ashley went to his own office. He recalled that the three suspected men all had ironclad alibis for the time when Ralph Morrow was murdered. Yet one of them might have used a professional killer for the job. Certainly, there had been two men in Betty's apartment trying to make her talk.

He also recalled that one of those men must be sporting a savage black eye because he, Steve Ashley, had put plenty of steam behind that punch which he had planned to have identify the masked man to him.

But thinking about these things was a highly unsatisfactory method of solving them and Ashley decided upon direct action. He figured Latham should explain his presence at the Ashley house and why he had assaulted Norma McBain.

He had alternately to ring the bell of Latham's antique shop, kick the door and pound on the panels with his fists before the ungainly owner aroused himself and let his caller in. Latham blinked sleepily and did not seem overwhelmed with happiness at the sight of Steve.

"Come in," he said grudgingly. "This is a fine time of night to wake me up. Just because you're a playboy and night owl doesn't mean decent people don't like to sleep."

"Latham," Ashley said bluntly, "why did you visit my home tonight? I want the truth, because if you lie I'll know it and you'll be involved deeper in the murder of Dr. Quillian."

That removed the sleep from Latham's brain.

"I didn't kill Quillian!" he exclaimed. "I don't know any more about it than I told the police. Yes, I went to your house tonight. I wanted to see you but as usual you weren't there. So I just went ahead and looked for the chair."

"What chair?"

"An antique. It belonged in the store. I couldn't find it here so I figured maybe your aunt took it home with her before she died. She was mighty fond of that chair."

Steve Ashley stared at him. "Latham, my aunt left you this business as a token of her respect for you. It's a fine thing when you believe she may have taken her own property."

"Now wait," Latham interrupted. "I didn't say I was going to take the chair. I just wondered if somebody had swiped it from my store. If it was at your house I'd have shut up about it. Anyway, the whole thing was a mistake. I ran through my books and found I sold it myself last October."

"You could prove that without any doubt," Ashley said slowly. "But it doesn't explain why you socked Norma McBain in the eye."

Latham's jaw dropped a notch. "Me, hit her? Good gosh, I was afraid of that female. Hit her? Heck, no! I just sneaked out, that's all. Never saw her after she let me in."

"All right," Ashley said. "I believe you. Go back to bed now and good luck in this business. I'll drop in some day."

Steve Ashley walked away with his brain in a turmoil. Latham was out of it. That left James Butler and Major Ross. The major's home was the nearest, so Ashley went there. Major Ross himself let him in, welcomed him, led him into the study. He proffered a cigarette, lit one himself, eyed Steve narrowly.

"If you've come to see me about that five thousand dollars," he said at once, "forget it, Steve. I've money enough. Is there anything else you'd like?"

ASHLEY said, "Yes. A highball. And I'd like your servant to prepare it. I mean that big fellow I saw here last time I called."

"He's off tonight," the Major said. "I'll get the drink myself."

"No, never mind, Major. I really wanted a look at that servant. What's

his name again?"

"Matthews. Why did you want to look at him?"

"I'll come to that," Ashley said. "Major, you know I'm operating a detective agency. Therefore, please grant me the favor of surmising I can at least do some investigating and gain some facts. I've discovered that you knew I loaned your five thousand to my assistant, who in turn put it into the hands of John Black and Company as an investment which is a flop. I've also discovered that a lot of people were similarly victimized, including my aunt.

"Tonight a pair of hoodlums attacked my assistant. They demanded to know all about the five thousand dollars. Now listen carefully. Only you and I knew about the money. It's perfectly true that investing five thousand in cash happens many times each day but in this case it would have been simple to determine that Betty Shaw worked for me. Am I going too fast, Major?"

"No, indeed," Major Ross said with a smile. "Oh, Matthews just came in. He's standing right behind you, Steve."

Ashley half arose, twisting himself around. Matthews was there all right. He had a gorgeous shiner—and a gun in his fist.

"Get up, all the way!" Matthews barked. "Keep your hands in the air, too. Well, well, the brave young man carries around an automatic. I'll bet he's even got a tin badge."

Ashley glanced at Major Ross. The major shrugged as if there were nothing he could do. "I'm sorry, Steve," he said. "I would much have preferred it any other way but you turned into a better detective than I figured. Thanks for coming here. It saved me the trouble of sending for you as I have already done for the girl, Betty."

Ashley started forward and Matthews grabbed him around the throat. Major Ross gestured and Steve Ashley was dragged in that manner into the hallway, down the cellar steps and flung into what seemed to be an old wine

cellar. It had no windows, was dimly lighted from the main cellar and had a door with a barred grill. This door was slammed shut as he attempted to dodge out and grab Matthews.

The big servant leered at him through the barred grill.

"Later on," he promised, "I'll give you a *couple* of black eyes, besides maybe a slit throat for socking me. You've got that coming. Make yourself at home, Mr. Ashley. This used to be a wine cellar, so you ought to feel right at home after all those bars you hung out in. If you get lonesome the dope in the corner will talk to you."

The lights went out. Steve Ashley turned, trying to penetrate the darkness and see who his fellow prisoner was.

"I'm Steve Ashley," he said aloud. "Who are you? Are you all right?"

"Me?" a familiar voice said. "Sure, I'm okay. Funny place to meet the boss. Yes, it's me, Toddy. That big gorilla came to the office and carted me away."

"Well, that's something," Ashley grumbled. "At least I have you cornered. Toddy, you acted the part of a dope. Somehow, I think it was only an act. Come clean. You made the impression of a key that fitted J. P. Mathers place, didn't you?"

"I won't talk," Toddy's voice exclaimed. "Not until Miss Betty gives the word. Listen! They're coming down. Better get set in case they intend to knock us off."

But it was only Major Ross who peered through the grilled window in the door. "Steve," he said, "you'll have to tell me where to find Betty. She wasn't at the office nor at home. I'll give you two minutes and then I'll turn Matthews lose on you. It may mean a broken neck."

"Then turn him loose," Ashley snapped, "because you'll learn nothing from me. Of all the scoundrels who ever marred the earth you're at the top. You practically made love to my aunt and cheated her at the same time. Major, I'll do some neck-breaking of my own if

I get out of here."

"Two minutes," Ross said. "Matthews will come then and if there is no answer he'll come into the room and start work. Two minutes."

Ross disappeared but a moment later a bulb lit up overhead. Toddy, who was lying on a pile of burlap, rose slowly. He had a stick of wood between his teeth and chewed on it slowly. "Think he'll carry out that threat?" Ashley asked.

"I know it," Toddy answered. "When he comes in jump out of the way as soon as the door opens. Take him from behind if he starts getting the best of me. Remember, this scrap is life or death."

CHAPTER XIV

SOME EXPLANATIONS



MATTHEWS came down the steps with eager strides. He walked up to the door. Steve Ashley merely glared at him. Matthews inserted a key in the lock, flung the door wide and stepped in. There was plenty of room for a brawl. He started toward young Ashley.

"You'll have to take me first!" Toddy shouted.

Matthews stopped, astonished at the challenge. He saw Toddy half crouched, his hands in a position that indicated he was ready to lift something heavy and invisible. Matthews closed the door, kept one eye on Ashley, made a dive at Toddy.

His huge arms were spread to envelop this small man and crush him with one embrace. But somehow they didn't close. Instead Matthews found his wrist gripped, twisted and the whole arm used as a lever to lift him from the floor and crash him against the wall. Before he could arise, Toddy was upon him and Steve Ashley joined in the fight. Between them they gave Matthews an unmerciful beating and didn't stop until he was unconscious, his other eye swol-

len out of shape.

Toddy quickly tied him up with some expertly constructed knots. He arose and grinned at Ashley. "I had to break my act that time," he said. "What do you think of judo? Comes in handy at the strangest times. Now let's go upstairs and bust the major's neck."

"I'll ask the questions afterward," Ashley said. "Come on."

They reached the ground floor, proceeded lightly toward the study and Ross whirled around in time to see Steve Ashley standing there. Toddy quietly slipped out of sight. Ross yanked a gun from his pocket.

"I don't know how you did it, Steve," he said, "but I suppose I'll have to do the job myself. Honestly, I hate to do this. If you'd kept your nose out of my affairs we could have avoided it all. But now—"

The gun came up and at that moment a heavy vase went sailing straight toward Ross. Ashley was brushed to one side by Toddy as he rushed the major. He flew forward in a tackle. Ross, unbalanced, gave a wild sideward lurch and the gun went off, tearing a hole in the ceiling. Steve Ashley rushed forward and hurled himself into the fight.

He was dimly aware that there was a terrific pounding on the door. Then a window crashed, but he paid no attention. He was too intent on hammering home short, hard blows to Ross' face while Toddy pinned the major's legs to the floor.

A firm hand gripped Ashley's collar. He jumped up to meet this new menace but it was Lieutenant Cassidy, looking somewhat grim. Behind him was Betty, a serviceable gun in her hand. She held it as though she knew how to use the weapon.

"Sorry to stop this," Cassidy said, "but you don't want to be sent up for killing a heel. Let the state do it for free."

Betty dropped the gun into her purse, hurried forward and Ashley took her in his arms.

"Oh, Steve," she choked, "I had an awful time convincing Cassidy but he finally listened. We picked up John Black and J. P. Mathers. They talked their heads off. It was all a racket to cheat wealthy spinsters and widows. Major Ross got in with them, determined how much money they had and then turned them over to the wolves. He murdered your aunt because she was beginning to understand him. She realized he was responsible for her loss of the money she intended leaving to you. So Ross substituted the pills."

"Yes, sure, I know," Ashley said gently. "Let's go some place where we can talk. An audience gives me stage fright."

"Take my car," Cassidy offered. "I'll be busy here. Hey, Toddy, I didn't recognize you at first. What's the best dog-gone private dick in the business doing here?"

Steve Ashley walked over to Toddy and offered his hand. "Betty will probably explain," he said, "but let me say you're as good an actor as you are a detective. And, Cassidy, can this boy scrap! Wait until you see the hunk of hamburger in the cellar."

ASHLEY and Betty did not eat. Neither seemed hungry, but they did order coffee and over it he asked questions while Betty, her eyes aglow, answered them.

"We'll begin with you," he said. "Why did you try to break into my house?"

"I was after the stock certificates they issued to your aunt," Betty said candidly. "She had them in the safe. I saw you and ran away—just as I did tonight. I got those certificates later, however. You found the safe open."

"Are you a safe cracker as well as a detective?" he asked, grinning. "Only my aunt knew the combination of that safe."

"She gave it to me, Steve," said Betty. "Those certificates were what Ross was after—why he came to my apartment. Ross was rapidly realizing what this

was all about."

"You knew Aunt Grace?" asked Ashley, surprised.

"Very well." Betty smiled. "She was my client. Now let's rake up Toddy. He's worked for me a long time and is one of the best men in the business. For your benefit he put on an act. We weren't sure of you, Steve."

"Yes, Toddy made the key which fitted Mathers' lock. He also stole a gold desk fountain pen from John Black. We wanted to check a phony signature on your aunt's stock certificates. I was sure Black put a fake name on the certificates and he did. The same pen and the identical ink were used."

"Maybe you even know how Ross had an alibi for the time when Ralph Morrow was killed in the office?" Ashley suggested.

"I knew that right afterwards," declared Betty. "Major Ross was the man who phoned you to hold your attention while his servant killed Morrow. Ross called from a phone booth at the place which he used for an alibi. Any more questions?"

"Millions. You said you knew Aunt Grace. How come?"

Betty smiled. "It was sort of a dirty trick, Steve. I had to carry it out because your aunt demanded it. She was a remarkable woman. You see, Steve, she knew she was dying. She also suspected someone was trying to make her die before her time but she wasn't sure who it was. So she retained me. My job was to see that you ran the detective agency properly, that you learned to like it, that you actually became a man."

"She loved you, Steve. She wanted you to make something of yourself. Her method was quite simple. If you solved this case the money stolen from her would revert to you. You'd have earned it too. That was her whole idea and I helped. Your Aunt Grace, Steve, is your mysterious client. I wrote and mailed those letters. Everything was done by her order."

"I'll be doggoned," Steve said weakly.

"Norma McBain puzzled me. I had her picked up however after she left the major's house. She talked because she became frightened at the thoughts of being involved in murder. She was. It seems she overheard Dr. Quillian telling Ross he suspected your aunt was dying because she'd been poisoned.

"Right there, the major decided that Quillian would have to die also. He killed him of course. He found out about your visit to Mrs. Morrow and murdered her brother-in-law because he also knew too much."

Ashley shook his head slowly from side to side. "That explains all but two mysteries. Who socked Miss McBain in the eye for one?"

Betty smiled again. "I did, Steve. Remember you told me there was some trouble at the house? I went there, thinking Major Ross might be caught searching for those certificates. Instead I ran into your Miss McBain and I had to slug her. Mad at me? She was in love with you, you know."

"I suspected it," Ashley said morosely.

"She had an odd quirk in her brain," Betty told him. "She actually helped Ross because of her love for you. An unspoken hopeless love but she figured if you never got that money back you'd be poor and more likely to fall for her. I should be jealous."

"You?" Ashley said quickly. "Why, you're practically married to that—that invisible man of yours."

She nodded. "I agree, Steve. I really think I am. Steve, I bought that little agency for your aunt. It was just a blind. I own the Allington Detective Agency, the biggest one in town."

"Wait!" Ashley threatened. "Wait until I get going and I'll show you some real competition. You and the lug you'll marry. Who is he anyway? Do you really love him? Does he love you?"

"He has never said so," she replied slowly. "And I have never told him I was in love with him. Yet I am. I have been for a long time, even before he knew me. Steve, do you think I should tell him?"

"No!" he barked. "If he's so dumb he can't see it or appreciate it, let him go to the devil!"

"I think I'll tell him, anyway." Betty's eyes were brimming. "Steve—I love *you*. That's a heck of a thing for a girl to say but I can't help it. I've loved you ever since your aunt pointed you out to me weeks ago. Darn it, Steve, you are dumb. I should let you go to the devil. I—I—Steve."

Steve Ashley was on his feet. He was pale. One hand knocked over a water glass. His mouth opened and he emitted a yell rivaling anything a screen Tarzan could have done.

All movements in the restaurant stopped. Waiters and customers were frozen in their places.

Then they all began to smile. They grinned broadly—then they laughed.



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Eddie landed a wallop
that would have jolted
a buffalo

FAREWELL

By ELIZABETH STARR

DEAR JOE,
Being as how I was too mad to talk to you on the phone, I am writing you this letter to tell you how mad I am—which I certainly am. Also I am returning the pressure cooker you gave me on my birthday. You can give it to some other girl in years to come, but I am through, Joe.

Bad enough you should stand me up two nights this week. But when it comes to you casting asparagus on my old friend Eddie, which I only went out with last night because you had stood me up the night before . . . well, that

is going too far. Besides, Eddie is not either a big ape, you are simply undersized. Eddie is a very smart detective, and will get a promotion because of solving a murder last night. Think that over! I don't notice you getting any promotions in the trucking business.

As for you saying Eddie never should have got me mixed up in a murder, that is far from fair, since I insisted on going with Eddie. He called me up just ahead of our date, and said, "Listen, Tess, I'm sorry, but I've got to work tonight. Some dame got herself bumped off, and the Chief says—"

The Girl Had a Date, and Kept It With—Death!

"A murder!" I cried, naturally being very excited and thrilled. Then I started to plead, "Oh, please, Eddie, let me come and investigate with you! Oh, please, let me come, Eddie!"

"But I've got to go there right away," Eddie said. "We just got the call. We have to go to the dame's apartment and all that. She's *dead*, Tess. You don't want to see somebody who's—"

"Oh, yes I do!" I said. "Come right on over and get me, please, Eddie! Please!"

"The Chief—" Eddie began.

But I cut him off in a firm voice by saying, "With all the suspects and things, the Chief'll never even notice me, Eddie. I'll be waiting for you."

Then I hung up, and put on my black picture hat, and when I was going to a murder, and waited.

EDDIE was still protesting when he came for me, but I got in his car anyway, and he finally had to drive me to the murdered girl's apartment. I was right about nobody noticing me. The little apartment was full of cops and fingerprint men, and they had the landlady on the pan in the living room, and a big young guy with blonde hair who was a suspect. Maybe I passed for a policewoman, or a gun moll, or something. Anyway, the Chief told Eddie the body was in the kitchen, and I just tagged along right after Eddie, with my heart bouncing around like a busted yoyo.

Then when we got in the little kitchen, I didn't feel so good. I mean, I wasn't thrilled anymore. Because here was this girl lying on the floor, and she didn't look much older than me. She was taller and heavier, and she had lots of makeup on, but still she wasn't more than twenty-three or twenty-four at the most. Her hair was red and pretty, and her legs were sort of twisted under her, but they were pretty too, with nylons and spike-heeled red shoes on. There was blood all over the front of her dress, where she had been stabbed.

I didn't want to go right out of the room for fear Eddie would call me a sissy, but I turned my head away while he was examining the body.

Near one of the kitchen windows

there was a table set for two people, and a lot of food was still left on the plates. There was also a fire escape out the window, so I took my mind off the corpse by figuring out how the murder had happened. I figured the girl was having supper with whoever killed her, and probably a quarrel got started. Then the murderer went out the fire escape, maybe.

Eddie straightened up from the body, and took me by the arm. "Come on," he said.

We went back into the living room. It turned out I was right about the murder. The Chief told Eddie what they knew so far, with the landlady sobbing and putting in her two cents every minute.

"Probably a jealousy motive," the Chief said. "The girl had two men fighting over her—"

"Oh, poor Miss Loring," the landlady burst out, mopping at her face. "Only this morning she told me, 'I'm having my date come in for supper tonight, Mrs. Hoskins. Is that alright?' she asked me. If I'd only known—"

The Chief was a nice fellow, gray-haired, with the prettiest blue eyes. But he cut in sharply, "Just a minute, Mrs. Hoskins," and went on explaining to Eddie, "The Loring girl got a kick out of playing the two men against each other, making them jealous. Robbery's out, and so far we haven't dug up any enemies. Besides, she expected one of those two men tonight." The Chief shrugged and smiled. "That's it. Which one?"

He pushed his way across the small living room, past Mrs. Hoskins and the cops who were milling around, with us following him. We went over to the big blonde guy, who was just standing, looking kind of lost, in a corner.

"This is Dan Lucas," the Chief told Eddie. "One of Miss Loring's regular dates."

Just like in the movies, Dan Lucas burst out on cue, "I didn't do it!" and looked at Eddie desperately. "She told me she had another date tonight—that she wouldn't see me!"

"The boys are bringing in the other man," the Chief added. "They ought to be here in a couple of minutes."

I went over and sat down in an arm-chair, feeling sort of weak from all the excitement. Mrs. Hoskins was talking again, telling all about what had happened. She had heard voices arguing up here, Miss Loring and a man's voice, and a lot of quarreling, and then a scream. But by the time she got in and went to the kitchen, the poor girl was dead as a mackerel, and the killer had lammed it down the fire escape.

I WAS thinking just as hard as I could think. Eddie was talking to one of the cops in a corner, and the Chief was talking to Mrs. Hoskins. Dan Lucas was still standing by himself, not talking to anybody. I looked him over. He was tall and strong-looking, but his face was pale as anything in the lamplight. He glanced nervously at me when I looked at him. I pictured him stabbing a knife into Miss Loring, and it gave me the creeps all over again, thinking about her lying dead in the kitchen, all dressed up for her date.

Then, suddenly, as I was thinking that, I had an idea. I couldn't get real excited about it till I knew one thing—but I jumped up from my chair and went over to Eddie, and pulled on his arm. "Eddie!" I whispered.

He stopped his conversation with the cop and looked at me, a little mad. "What's the matter?"

"Come here. Come on out in the kitchen a minute," I hissed. "I got to talk to you, Eddie. It's important."

He sighed, but he followed me down the little hall. We got to the kitchen.

"Listen," I said, real fast before he could get bored. "Do you know what the other guy looks like, the one the cops are rounding up now? The other date?"

He frowned. "According to Mrs. Hoskins, he's short, dark-haired. What's it to you?"

I beamed and glowed, I was so pleased. I had a feeling from the start that Dan Lucas was a killer, because I could imagine him doing it so easy! But now I was sure of it, and I said, "Oh, Eddie. That character in there is the murderer! It isn't the short one, honest!"

"Oh, for Pete's sake," Eddie said disgustedly. "What makes you think you

know anything about it?"

"Because I'm a girl," I told him proudly. "And Miss Loring was a girl, too—and she's even a lot taller than I am! But she's wearing spike heels, Eddie! And if you think she'd do that when she was expecting a little short man for supper—then you just don't know women! Dan Lucas killed her."

Eddie looked down at the dead girl's feet, blinking. I could see him remembering how big and tall Lucas was, just the right height for a tall girl in heels.

But before he could even answer me, there was a sudden scuffling sound out in the hall, like running footsteps! And Eddie got out of that kitchen as if jet propelled, so that the first thing I saw when I poked my head out into the hall was him leaping on Dan Lucas! I realized Lucas must have heard what I said in the kitchen and got scared, because he was struggling to get to the door out of the apartment.

"You're not going to get me for this!" I heard him cursing and saying. "She deserved it! She deserved to get killed!"

As they were struggling, a cop rushed out to help Eddie, with the Chief behind him, but they needn't have bothered. Eddie landed a wallop on Lucas' jaw and the big guy went down cold!

"Oh, Eddie!" I yelled, rushing over and flinging my arms around him.

But then my eyes turned toward the entrance door of the apartment, which was opening, and I just stayed glued where I was, with my mouth hanging open. Because they were bringing you in, Joe! Two cops were bringing you in—and in a horrible flash of intuition, I knew it was you that had been seeing Miss Loring when Dan Lucas wasn't! You were the other suspect that I had just cleared—having a secret friendship with another woman, while we're supposed to be going steady!

That is why I was too mad to talk to you on the phone today, Joe, and your explanation that it was all platonic does not interest me. After all, I can be platonic as good as she can. And any steady of mine that gets himself to be a murder motive, he can drop dead.

Eddie is my steady now, and with him I can wear high heels. Farewell,

Tess.

HEADQUARTERS

(Continued from page 7)

to tell of the divorce, the re-marriage and a touching little tribute about Detective Lieutenant Dave Hennick being "best man at the wedding of his sister."

It all might have been touching to some. Jim Foraway finds it extremely nauseating!

You see, the whole thing had been the sportswriter's idea—the getting together of the two middleweights, the selling of the tickets through his own column, for the benefit of the Eastlake Boy's Club that had burned down. He even had the money—the whole \$32,000 in a black bag. Then the drinks and the last thing he remembered in a sort of misty vortex, was Myra's beautiful face.

Then he passed out.

Now he was back to face the music, to take that charity job on the paper Mack Dermott offers him. It would be something menial—after all, beggars, and particularly convicts on parole, couldn't be choosers. Foraway even went to his former hang-out, the old Altmont Hotel. The sandy-haired clerk didn't know him. His name on the register, didn't even raise an eyebrow. Well, that was better than a snub—or the customary snarl.

"Get Out of Town!"

Assigned to Room 303, Foraway went down the long, dingy hall to the self-service elevator. As he stepped into the dark cage, the door closed and the car wheezed down to the basement. Foraway felt the insistent thrust of a gun against his spine and when the door was opened again saw a man in a plaid suit and tie. It was one Bert Dailey, whom Foraway knew as a hanger-on around Foster's Gym.

In one hand the man held an automatic, in the other an envelope. He shoved the envelope forward.

"Here's five grand," he said. "Take it and get out of town."

Sure, Foraway had expected a few ripe tomatoes in his face, or a ride on a rail or even some tar and feathers, if they still did those things.

"Who wants me out of town, Bart—the same guy who stole the thirty-two grand?"

Then Foraway dove for the tout's gun-hand. They wrestled for the gun all over

the concrete floor—

Have we told you enough? Naturally, we know Foraway is innocent. Also we have more than an inkling that Detective Lieutenant Hennick isn't the noble and upright policeman the city pays him to be. Also the slinky and seductive Myra isn't all she's supposed to be. This, friends, is that proverbial peek under the curtain we give you—and this time it's a preview of as stirring a mystery and as action-packed a tale you've ever set your eyes on. For if ever a man had every—and we mean *every*—hand against him, Jim Foraway was that man! You'll follow his brave fight with eager interest as this suspenseful narrative races toward its smashing, surprising climax!

A Crime Classic

Also in our next issue we will have another crime-classics section. This issue we bring you that great tale, *QUEST FOR A KILLER*, by Norman A. Daniels. Now we have lined up another all-time prizewinner—*FOCUS ON MURDER*, by John L. Benton, which will be our especially selected crime classic for our next issue!

Jerry Wade, more familiarly known as the Candid Camera Kid, didn't care for the assignment the *Morning Globe* had sent him on. He was supposed to go to a funeral and snap a picture of the corpse. It seemed like dull, routine stuff, for the person had died a natural death and Jerry's meat was photographing only red-hot news, crackling with punch, drama and excitement. He was prepared to be bored.

Then he noticed that the man in the coffin was not the one who was supposed to be in there at all! And, skulking in the background, disguised by a beard, was the man who should have been in the black burial box!

And when a man comes to attend his own funeral that is news—red-hot and crackling!

When you read *FOCUS ON MURDER*, by John L. Benton, you'll agree that it's one of the outstanding detective yarns of our age!

Look forward to a humdinger of a mystery!

Of course in addition to our two big featured novelets next issue and *FOCUS ON MURDER*, there will be our usual selection

of shorter mystery and detective stories by your favorite authors.

Look forward to another splendid big issue containing a veritable feast of entertaining fiction!

OUR MAIL BOX

WE'RE going to start right off with a very interesting letter—as interesting as we have ever printed, and we realize that's going some! We've had to cut it a little, for it ran overlong—but we haven't changed the sentiment a particle. Here it is:

Thank you for publishing the letter by John R. Ednie in **THRILLING DETECTIVE**. I have been wondering for some time when someone would present such views on the matter of hard-boiledness in detective fiction. I have long felt that there must be quite a number of people who would be offended by the tough tactics of so many of the present day detectives. But detective fiction is, after all, only a means of entertainment. Only when one compares the various subdivisions of the field itself, is it possible to evaluate fairly the field as a whole.

I feel that characters like Philip Marlow, Nick Charles and Race Williams are classics in this field. Yet there are other characters of the same

[Turn page]

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nature who have really cluttered up the field with a mass of mediocre junk especially Nick Ransom and others of his ilk. The main point is, while I recognize its faults, I personally don't feel that the hard boiled type of detective fiction is, as a whole, detrimental to the field. And I doubt that it was the war that brought an interest in this sort of thing.

To other matters, I have been particularly interested in the stories by Edward Ronns: while Mr. Ronns is apparently a very prolific writer, he somehow has the rare ability to make each story he writes seem as if it were one he had literally spent years working on—not so much is this noticeable in style, which is naturally smooth, but in treatment of theme. I am sure Mr. Ronns makes no conscious effort to inject this intangible element into his work. It is just that he is a good writer. In closing, allow me to compliment you on THRILLING DETECTIVE—everything considered the best of its kind.

—Rex E. Ward, El Segundo, California.

Thanks a million, Rex, and I'm sure Mr. Ronns will be pleased. We are amazed, however, by your classification of Nick Ransom. As a matter of fact, we don't even consider the ex-Hollywood stunt-man hard-boiled. Glib, brash and wisecracking perhaps; but scarcely of the two-fisted knock-down-and-drag-out school that seems to be so popular nowadays, irrespective of the cause. We think a lot of Nick Ransom, and most of our readers agree with us—but we respect your honest difference of opinion. Read the Nick Ransom story in this issue, Rex, and you may change your mind about this character!

Speaking of the old sock *per se*, here's a lady up around the Gateway to the Adirondacks in old York state, who also seems

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to us to have something interesting to say:

I like your **THRILLING DETECTIVE** Magazine best of all those in the field. One doesn't read detective fiction for literary values. I am well aware of that. I read it for relaxation and find that nothing relaxes me more. The penalty for reading so many detectives seems to be that I notice a similarity between them. Certain incidents seem to crop up in practically all detectives—the principal one being where the detective gets hit on the head with something and proceeds to pass out.

Can't authors think of something else when they need a blank space in a story? In many of your stories the detective gets conked on the bean three or four times. Even the women take their turn making the smart cop "black out" with a flatiron or what have you. Maybe your detectives ought to come on the case wearing a steel helmet. Let's cut out the old sock on the bean for a change.

—Mrs. L. K. Smith, Fonda, N. Y.

Okay, Mrs. Smith, and thanks for writing in. But we must take issue with you. We feel that the detective story has decided literary value, and that its ablest prac-
[Turn page]



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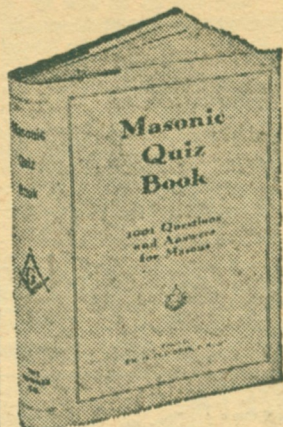
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tioners are first-rate writers. This type of literature has a long and honorable history behind it, and among celebrated authors who have written detective stories are such giants as Voltaire, Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, Conan Doyle, Edgar Allan Poe, and innumerable others of like standing. Our present-day detective writers have a great tradition to follow and we feel they are living up to it. Don't sell the "whodunit" short. It is one of the most logical and interesting forms of writing, and a type of reading enjoyed by some of our greatest statesmen and scientists.

As to the conk on the head angle—we admit it's a fairly common occurrence in detective yarns. It also happens to be a danger that every real detective faces some time in his life, so you can't claim it's unrealistic. However, your point is well taken, and we'll watch out to avoid such similarities whenever possible. Incidentally, wonder if those go-gettem boys like Race Williams and Nick Ransom would look cute in a helmet!

A note from a New York reader:

Enjoy your book mightily, especially such swell characters as Race Williams and Nick Ransom. Keep up the good work and you'll have me as a lifetime reader.

—Herbert Mansel, New York City.

We certainly hope so! Here's wishing you many hours of reading pleasure with **THRILLING DETECTIVE**. And now a few kind words from the Windy City:

Don't pay too much attention to these little complaints that come in to your wonderful **THRILLING DETECTIVE** Magazine. You can't please everybody as you must have found out after all these years. Just keep up the good work. Ninety percent of your readers like the magazine a whole lot.

—Nels O. Engstrand, Chicago, Ill.

Thanks, Nels—you've expressed yourself briefly and creditably. Hope we please everybody as much as we have you. But we're always willing to listen to criticism. Keep those letters and postcards pouring along in, folks. Every word received is read and carefully considered. Kindly send all your communications to The Editor, **THRILLING DETECTIVE** magazine, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N.Y. A postcard will do as well as a sealed letter.

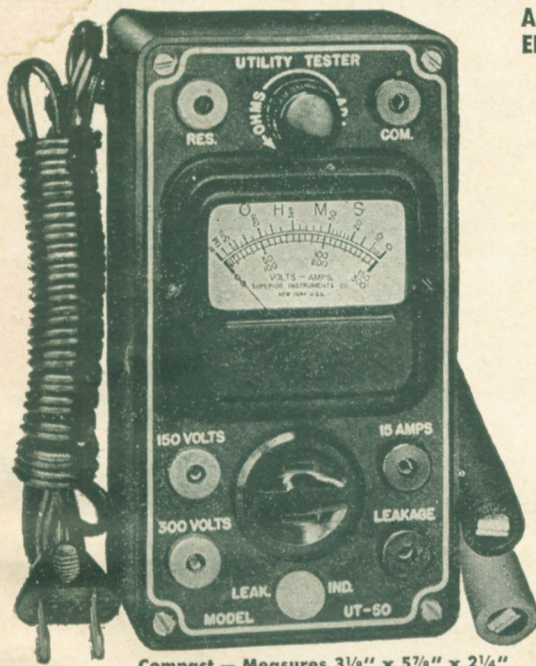
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—THE EDITOR.

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