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EXIT THIS WAY

A DESMOND SHANNON
MYSTERY NOVEL

By **M. V. HEBERDEN**

Originally published as a \$2.50 book
by Doubleday and Company, Inc.
SLIGHTLY ABRIDGED



MIRACLE MEDICAL DISCOVERY BY FAMOUS SKIN DOCTOR GROWS HAIR ON BALD HEADS



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(NOTE: Since these cases were taken from the Doctor's private files, actual names have not been used, and pictures of professional models have been substituted to assure privacy to actual patients described.)



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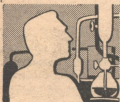
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THRILLING DETECTIVE

Vol. LXIX, No. 1

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

December, 1951

Featured Mystery Novel Classic



EXIT THIS WAY

By M. V. HEBERDEN

They told Private Eye Desmond Shannon he was through in New York if he mixed into the Gerelli affair—but he took the case

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Alexander Samalman, Editor

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Headquarters

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It is Les Burns who narrates the story—the strange and terrible story of charming Laura Lee, successful woman newspaper columnist, who had the masculine world at her feet. It is a grim and enthralling story of murder and intrigue, crime and conspiracy, sex and society—**MURDER ONCE TOO OFTEN**, by Whitman Chambers, coming next issue!

A Husband Is Slain

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We can't reveal much more about the story—we don't want to spoil it for you. But we can tell you that you have a great yarn in store for you, packed with surprises and written with expert skill.

You'll be astonished at the consequences when Laura trades upon her beauty once too often—and this time finds that the patience of Nemesis has been exhausted!

Harsh and Realistic

Whitman Chambers, the author, is one of the most popular writers of the hard-boiled detective novel school. **MURDER ONCE TOO OFTEN** is a noteworthy successor to his previous best-seller, "Thirteen Steps," and like that masterpiece, it, too, is a harsh and realistic novel of tense conflict and unbridled passions.

Formerly published as a hard-cover book at \$2.00 per copy, **MURDER ONCE TOO**

OFTEN comes to you next issue in a version which is slightly abridged for faster reading, but packs full thrill-power from the first page to the last. Look forward to this novel for the ultimate in detective reading—it's tops.

In addition to the novel, our next issue will also contain other headlines—short stories of superior quality, handpicked to please, representing the best current output of America's leading spinners of mystery yarns.

Letters Are Welcome

Now a special word to our readers. We've appreciated your splendid letters of advice and encouragement, and they have helped us improve the magazine from issue to issue. Everybody—write! Tell us which stories you like and which leave you cold—because that's the only way we can know whether we're pleasing you. We're always grateful for a note like the following, containing some pleasant praise and also pointing out a boner:

I have been a reader of **THRILLING DETECTIVE** for some time and must say I enjoy it. But there is one thing that demands an explanation. In the recent story, **JOHN DOE, MURDERER**, by Norman A. Daniels, this paragraph appears: "John Doe sat down in a corner and tried to figure it all out as he walked along."

I have laid down, sat up, stood up and run, and I still can't figure that out. Can you or Mr. Daniels give an explanation? Thanks for such grand entertainment in reading.
—D. E. Jones, O'Brien, Oregon.

Thank you, Mr. Jones, for your nice words about the magazine. As to the paragraph you quote, we quite agree with you. We've never yet been able to sit down and walk at the same time. There is no explanation, we're sorry to say, except that the type got mixed up somehow, which makes things pretty embarrassing all around. But we've printed your letter because we think there's quite a chuckle in it, and we know our readers will pardon us for the slip. We're glad you caught us, and if we ever pull another one like that just holler.

See you all next issue when **MURDER ONCE TOO OFTEN** appears—and while waiting for that exciting whodunit, please drop us a line. Address The Editor, **THRILLING DETECTIVE**, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. So long, everybody, and thanks for joining in our Headquarters chat.

—THE EDITOR.



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ENDURED WITH THE
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WHENCE came the knowledge that built the Pyramids and the mighty Temples of the Pharaohs? Civilization began in the Nile Valley centuries ago. Where did its first builders acquire their astounding wisdom that started man on his upward climb? Beginning with naught they overcame nature's forces and gave the world its first sciences and arts. Did their knowledge come from a race now submerged beneath the sea, or were they touched with Infinite inspiration? From what concealed source came the wisdom that produced such characters as Amenhotep IV, Leonardo da Vinci, Isaac Newton, and a host of others? Today it is known that they discovered and learned to interpret certain *Secret Methods* for the development of their inner power of mind. They learned to command the inner forces within their own beings, and to master life. This secret art of living has been preserved and handed down throughout the ages. Today it is extended to those who dare to use its profound principles to meet and solve the problems of life in these complex times.

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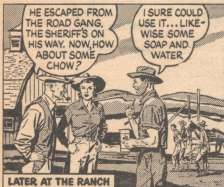
ADDRESS

CITY

CHUCK HEARD A SCREAM AND THEN...



HOPELESSLY LOST IN THE RUGGED CANYON COUNTRY, DIANE BLAIR WISHES SHE'D TAKEN MORE SERIOUSLY THE "DUDE RANCH" RULES AGAINST RIDING ALONE... AND THEN...



CRIME CAPERS

THE CRIMINAL MIND is capable of many vagaries, some of which provide a chuckle for the busy sleuth. Here we've rounded up a few of the more colorful items that have spiced the current crime news.

LONG BEACH, CALIF., POLICE were looking for a man with a super-duper little black book. An introduction service reported that a burglar had taken its entire file of 1000 lonely women's names, plus addresses, telephone numbers, physical specifications and income.

IN WASHINGTON, D. C., a man was fined \$25 for stabbing his father in an argument over who was eating the most cabbage.

WHEN A BANDIT held up a liquor store at Amesbury, Mass., and took \$60 from William B. Miller, the whole town went downright mad. It was the town's first holdup in 50 years.

THE MANHOLE covers theft situation is improving in Chicago. Last year only 125 were stolen. The year before it was 500.

IN MUNCIE, IND., BURGLARS broke into a fuel company and stole the electric eye burglar alarm.

INVESTIGATING A LOUD radio complaint, Los Angeles Officers M. G. Hutcherson and D. K. Duggans entered a room in which they found five men engaged in a game of draw poker. As the policemen



herded them off to jail, the men thoughtfully lowered the radio.

A YOUNG LAMBERTVILLE, N. J., man set fire to the town's beauty shop in order to get even with his girl friend.

WHILE A FARMER at Ashford, England, was out fox hunting, a fox came along and raided his poultry.

AN 82-YEAR-OLD LOS ANGELES landlady was discovered to be puncturing the tires of her tenants' autos when they did not pay their rent on time.

IN KEENE, N. H., a vacuum cleaner salesman bumped his head against an attic rafter in his enthusiasm to demonstrate his product but made no sale. He was fined \$21.89 by the court for throwing a snowball through the housewife's window as he was departing.

A MAN WAS SENTENCED to 455 days in jail in Washington, D. C., for expressing his dissatisfaction with a crap game by taking an axe and splintering up all the furniture.

IN MILWAUKEE, a janitor set fire to two rooming houses because the occupants "hounded me for too much heat."

IN LA VIUVIERE, BELGIUM, a 21-year-old jilted lover turned up at a dance wearing a loin cloth, waving a dagger and bellowing Tarzan jungle calls. When he tried to carry off his former sweetheart, police intervened.

—Harold Helfer

EXIT THIS WAY

A Novel by M. V. HEBERDEN

CHAPTER I

COP KILLER?

TOUCH this case and you're through in New York." Commissioner Marshall was angry; very angry. He was a good police commissioner, incorruptible and, according to his lights, just. He was also quick-tempered.

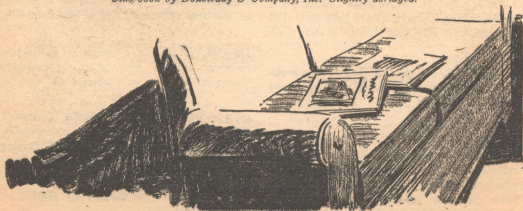
The object of his wrath was negligently propped against a file cabinet. Desmond Shannon's draped six-foot-three of bone and muscle had the same repose as that of a tiger; it suggested latent power. His green eyes were hard but his voice was even as he answered, "It wouldn't be the first time I've taken a case after repeal has been denied."

"Gerelli's guilty as hell and you know it."
"I haven't investigated yet."

"He killed a cop." Marshall's lips compressed with his rage. "You know damn well he's been behind the killing of a dozen other men, though it was never proved. You've got away with a lot in this town, Shannon, and we've overlooked a hell of a lot of rough stuff you've pulled, because in spite of your illegal methods you've always been on the side of the law in the long run."

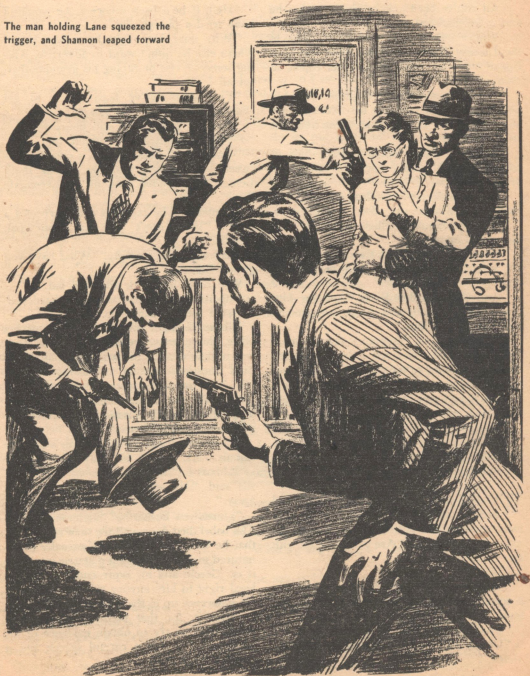
"So when I propose doing something perfectly legal, you haul me down here and threaten me."

Copyright, 1950, by M. V. Heberden, and originally published as a \$2.50 Crime Club book by Doubleday & Company, Inc. Slightly abridged.



*They told Desmond Shannon he was through in New York if
he mixed into the Gerelli affair—but he took the case*

The man holding Lane squeezed the trigger, and Shannon leaped forward



A Red-Headed Private Eye Dodges Bluster and Bullets

"Gerelli was head of the biggest crime combine this town has seen since Dewey broke up the rackets."

"All you've been able to prove is that he was a professional gambler."

"You've only got to look at the files in the License Bureau and see what the Vice Squad's got on him. Woods has copies of them all."

"They're that high." Captain Woods's heavy face was a study in bewildered anger as he measured off a distance some four feet from the floor.

"None of which would convict him in court," said Shannon, "or he'd have been brought to trial."

"He was convicted of killing Ryan," Marshall retorted.

"And you figure you'll do what the Feds did with Capone."

"They got him, didn't they?"

"Sure. But he had gyped the Income Tax."

"And Gerelli killed Ryan. And for fifty grand you'll go out and frame someone to take the rap for him."

A small scar on Shannon's temple stood out like a cord. His red hair accentuated the sudden pallor of his face. His green eyes glinted dangerously. "I don't frame men, Marshall, and you know it."

"That's what you say."

"And there's only one reason for you to be in such a sweat about my investigating this, and that's if you framed Gerelli yourselves." He snatched his hat and walked out.

WOODS said, "Excuse me, sir," and hurried after him. He didn't manage to catch up with him until Shannon was on the main steps going out. "Are you going on with this?" he demanded.

"What do you think?"

"What's got into you, Shannon? Ryan was a square cop. A bit bullheaded, but on the level."

"That's got nothing to do with it."

"Gerelli had a fair trial and he was convicted."

"It wouldn't be the first time a man had been convicted of a crime he didn't commit," countered Shannon.

"Hell, if he'd been innocent, he wouldn't have tried a phony alibi."

"Why not? He might have been somewhere else he didn't want to advertise. Killing someone else or raping his grandmother, for all I know."

"Five years we've been trying to get something on him," said Woods.

"And his rackets are still flourishing."

"They'll disintegrate without him."

"You hope." Shannon put a cigarette between his lips and went on. "Why don't Bentek and his mob want me to investigate this?"

"Bentek?" The captain's eyes narrowed a little. "Why don't you ask your pal, Gerelli?"

Shannon asked casually, "What have you got on Bentek?"

"Do some leg work and find out."

Imperceptibly Shannon's face hardened. He said softly, "Suits me. . . ."

When Shannon opened the door of his office, every crime reporter in New York was milling around the waiting room. They fired questions at him as flashlights went off. The questions were all variations of, "What did the commissioner say?" "Why d'you think Gerelli is innocent?" "Have you got some fresh evidence?"

Shannon had noticed Miss Lane's distress signals. He shoved his way over to her switchboard. "Mr. Boothe is in his office," she said. "He wants to talk to you, right away."

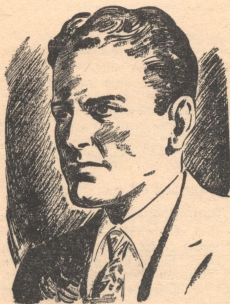
"Quiet, you buzzards," Shannon shouted. The babel died down; all the men recognized that he wasn't in his normal, casually good-natured mood. "You want a statement. Here it is. Gerelli and his representatives have a legal right to hire anyone to try to establish his innocence up to the time of his execution, or after it, for that matter. I have been approached to try to obtain evidence of his innocence." It was a careful speech and it didn't satisfy them.

When He Runs Afoul of Gangland, Politics and Law!

"Are you going to do it?" "D'you believe Gerelli's innocent?"

"Ask me after I investigate."

"Davis of the D.A.'s office said, quote, there are always some people who try to defeat justice. There are always some irresponsible private detectives who will do any-



DESMOND SHANNON

thing for a fee. Unquote. Any comment?" A man looked up from his notebook.

"I've always said the License Bureau should be more careful," replied Shannon.

"You haven't told us what the commissioner said."

"Why don't you ask him?"

"Is it true you've been threatened if you take this on?"

Shannon demanded, "Where did you get that?"

"Somebody phoned it in. Is it true?"

"No comment."

A lot more questions were shot at him. He parried them, and finally, grumbling that he was dummying-up like a blasted Russian, the press left. Miss Lane adjusted her glasses and said, "Mr. Boothe is upset."

"I was afraid he would be. Any messages?"

There were a batch of them, and taking them in his hand, Shannon went into the senior partner's office. Mr. Boothe seldom came to the office since his illness; he looked fragile and old now as he looked up from behind the big desk.

"I don't like this, Desmond."

"Fifty thousand dollars ain't hay," Shannon told him.

Boothe ignored the remark. "Since I first opened this office there have been as many cases turned down as there have been accepted. What happened with Marshall?"

Shannon gave him a brief résumé of the interview. He ended, "If they had a good case against Gerelli, what's he fussing about? I won't be able to turn up anything, and he'll go to the chair."

"It's a dirty case," said Boothe.

"You don't imagine I've any illusions about Gerelli, do you?" Shannon asked with a short laugh. "He's as crooked as they come and he's had a finger in every criminal deal that's been pulled in this town for the last ten years."

BOOTH glared at him. "He's a public menace," he snapped.

"So whether he killed Ryan or not, it's a good idea to send him to the chair. The end justifies the means." Shannon lighted another cigarette. "If our judicial and legal system is going to operate on that principle, fine and dandy. But let me know beforehand. I try to abide inside the framework of the laws."

"I'm not arguing the legality of your procedure," Boothe said quietly. "I'm arguing against it ethically and financially. Ethically, on the same principle that we've often in this office inveighed against unscrupulous lawyers who keep criminals out of jail where they belong. Financially, because I don't think it will pay in the long run. Lane told me it was twenty-five thousand dollars down and another twenty-five thousand dollars if you find the murderer."

"You're talking like Marshall, as if I intended framing someone." The telephone rang. Boothe picked it up, then handed it to Shannon. Miss Lane was saying that there was a man who wouldn't give his name. "Put him on and get on the other line." A minute later a voice said, "Shannon? Bentek ain't gonna warn you again. Drop this Gerelli deal or make your will."

"I've made it—and I didn't leave you anything."

There was a click. Lane said, "D'you want me to try to trace it?"

"Waste of time. Let it go." He turned back to Boothe. "I think the ethics and finances are academic now. Marshall says I'm through if I take it. And that's the second time one of Bentek's mob has phoned to say 'Drop the case or else.'" He shrugged. "You know what that means. If I drop it, I'm through in this town. Every gangster and hoodlum will figure he can push me around."

After a minute's silence Boothe nodded. "Watch yourself, Desmond. They're unscrupulous and completely ruthless."

Shannon grinned cheerfully. "Uhuh. So am I."

The press had vacated the outer office and the four regular operatives were standing round Lane's desk. "I want reports on everybody in any way connected with the Gerelli trial," he told them. "The porter, the men in the poker game, Streber, et cetera. Divide it up between you. Johnny, you and Lewis get out and see what you can pick up on Bentek and his policy racket on the Jersey side. And this is going to be a twenty-four-hour-a-day job till it's finished. We've only got till Saturday. . . ."

J. R. McComus was silent and morose most of the way out to Ossining. The Gerelli case had been a sore point with him in spite of the large fee he had received. It didn't pay the trial lawyer to be made to look a fool. And that was what Gerelli had done. To go into court with an alibi which the prosecution had torn down in less than a day's cross-examination didn't happen to the great J. R. Or it hadn't happened before.

Shannon wasn't disposed toward conversation either. He was mulling over what he

knew about Gerelli and his various enterprises known as the "Syndicate," also about the mob headed by Bentek who mysteriously, but urgently, did not want the murder of Detective Ryan, eight months before, investigated.

It wasn't until they were on the last ten minutes of their trip that the lawyer broke the silence. "I'm damned if I know why Gerelli's getting you in."

"You say you think he's innocent," said Shannon. "Why?"

"Damned if I know." McComus produced a cigar from his vest pocket. "Hunch, I suppose. You get so you can smell it."

"Your olfactory sense isn't evidence," grumbled Shannon. "Your client better give me something more to go on."

"You've got everything I had."

"It's not enough. Where th' hell was he the night Ryan was killed? If he wasn't killing him."

"Perhaps he'll tell you. He hasn't told me."

At the prison gate the red tape took longer than usual, although they were in possession of a special permit allowing them to visit after hours. Finally they were taken to the room where condemned prisoners are permitted to interview their lawyers and visitors.

THEODORE GERELLI was forty-nine years old. His unsavory career had ranged from petty thievery as a boy through various unsuccessful confidence tricks, bootlegging during prohibition to drug running, pimping, and murder; all of which had left no telltale lines on his heavy face. It was smooth and less troubled than that of the average businessman. He was of medium height, squarely built, and with an incipient bay window. His brown eyes were wary under heavy eyebrows. The muscles in the nostrils of his well-shaped nose gave away his feelings; the mouth, which managed at the same time to be sensuous and hard set, never did. He said, "You're the man to get me out of this."

"Where were you when it happened?" asked Shannon.

A tight smile stretched Gerelli's mouth and

he hitched up his trousers; men who come from the condemned cell don't have belts or suspenders. "Bring in the bastard that killed Ryan and the cops won't ask any more questions."

Long experience with crooks told Shannon that he was wasting his time. But he tried once more. "I didn't say tell the cops. I said, tell me."

"Why?"

"Perhaps I'd be more inclined to believe you innocent."

For a moment disbelief swept the man's swarthy face. "But why'd I get you in if I wasn't? And put down fifty grand. It's a lot of dough."

"Won't do you any good if you fry."

"All you gotta do is bring in the louse that done it." Mr. Gerelli's grammar, which was usually laboriously correct, was slipping.

"There isn't much time," said Shannon. "I need help."

"I was framed."

"Sure. Every punk that's ever been in your spot was framed. The cops in this town don't often frame men, Gerelli."

"It wasn't the cops. But they didn't look for anyone else."

"If it wasn't the cops, who was it?"

"Bentek."

"Why?"

"What's that matter?"

"Look, Gerelli, if you expect me to do anything for you, you've got to answer my questions. Or get yourself another boy."

"Fifty grand's a lot of dough."

"Not for the headaches it's going to give me. Make up your mind, Gerelli. Answer my questions and send word to your mob that they've got to answer my questions—and all questions I see fit to ask—and do what I tell them. Or the deal's off before it's begun."

"Asking a hell of a lot, aren't you? How'd you know I want to broadcast all my business?"

"Those are my terms." Shannon knew it was unnecessary to state that a client's confidences were safe. Gerelli knew that or he wouldn't have sent for him.

Gerelli knew men; he knew now that he had to take the terms offered him or get

nothing. Finally he said, "Okay. Except for one thing. No questions about where I was."

Shannon nodded briefly. "Why d'you think Bentek would frame you? What have you done to him?"

Gerelli smiled complacently. "Nothing—yet. But we're going to take over his territory."

"Any other reason for thinking it was Bentek?"

For about five minutes Gerelli explained with clinical detail just what a louse Bentek was and what a collection of lice and even less pleasant things composed his entourage. When he'd finished, Shannon said, "All you've got against Bentek is you don't like him."

"Why wouldn't he do it? He's a louse."

"I don't suppose Bentek wants newspaper headlines of the 'Are gang wars starting again?' type any more than you," observed Shannon. "Also, he knows as well as you do that killing a cop is bad business for you all."

"If he didn't, who would have?"

Shannon didn't answer. He said, "This alibi of yours, that fell down. Why did you leave the poker game?" Even as he asked the question, the tiny movement of the muscle in Gerelli's nostril told Shannon it wouldn't be answered. "Was it an appointment you'd made before? Or did someone call you to the phone?"

"I was called to the phone like I said at the trial, and don't ask any more questions about it, see?"

AT THE end of the time allotted, Shannon felt that none of the information he had been able to glean was of the slightest use. As he got up to go he said, "Are you quite sure you didn't kill him? Because if you did, you're going to fry for it anyway."

"I didn't. It's worth fifty grand to you to find the guy that done it. And it ain't going to be healthy for you if you don't."

Shannon grinned. "Can't ever forget the days you were a gun-toter for the Kansas mob, can you? Be seeing you. . . ."

"Y'know," said McComus as they were

driving back, "there's something naive about Gerelli. I've never seen anyone so surprised as he was when they brought him in guilty."

"Naive because of his faith in you to get him off?" inquired Shannon.

McComus gave a short laugh. "He hasn't got faith in anybody. But he has a queer incoherent faith in the system." Shannon waited, and after a bit the lawyer went on. "He's innocent, he says. He figured, no matter how black things looked, that if he really was innocent he couldn't be convicted. In other words, he's got a fundamental belief in the justice of the system."

"So he's naive. You haven't that same faith, I take it?"

"Well, have you?"

It didn't seem necessary to answer this. "What about this other lawyer that handles most of Gerelli's stuff—Streber?"

"We're going there now. Streber knows as much about the whole setup as anybody."

CHAPTER II

BIG SHOT LAWYER



IT PAID to be Gerelli's lawyer, thought Shannon as McComus's sleek car drew up at a house on lower Fifth Avenue. A butler opened the door and led them through a magnificent hall into a library. A middle-aged,

medium height, squarely built man rose from an armchair. Everybody called Godfrey Streber distinguished-looking, probably because his dark hair had streaks of silver in it. But he looked like a hundred thousand other middle-aged professional or business men.

There was nothing remarkable about his gray-blue eyes under heavy dark brows. His nose was well shaped. One felt that the outthrust chin had been developed as an attitude rather than the result of strength of character.

"Say your piece, McComus, as Gerelli told you," said Shannon, "and then Mr. Streber and I can talk."

McComus said that the boss' orders were that Shannon was to be told anything he

wanted to know and that the organization was to be at his disposition. "So, I guess I'll leave you two. Anything I can do, of course—"

After the trial lawyer had gone, Shannon turned to Streber and said, "Now spill it. Everything you know about it."

Streber knew nothing. "In fact, that night I had dined with the Schwenglers—Representative Rowton and his son were there—and we went on to the Two by Four Club and stayed there till half-past two or three."

"I'm not looking for your alibi," Shannon reminded him dryly. "I'm looking for one for Gerelli."

"What I am trying to explain is that I have no idea of his whereabouts."

"Who wants him out of the way, besides Bentek?"

Streber shrugged. "He has dozens of enemies."

"Anybody in the bunch getting too big for his boots? Wanting to take over?"

"None of the boys would—" began Streber and stopped. "But even if one of the bunch had wanted Gerelli out of the way, why do it like that? It would be liable to put a crimp in everything."

"Someone called him to the phone at this poker game. He wouldn't have gone out unless it was someone he knew. He wouldn't have gone if Bentek called—or one of Bentek's men."

"I see, but—"

When the lawyer didn't go on, Shannon said, "Gerelli hasn't spilled anything about the organization to the cops, has he?"

"Gerelli won't talk. He's a gambler first, last, and all the time. He'll gamble now on your coming up with a fall guy."

The detective gave a thin smile. "Then he'll lose. If the murder was committed by someone else, I'll come up with him, with luck. But no fall guys. And Gerelli knows it."

"Does he?"

Something in the man's voice made Shannon look up.

"Such as?"

"Now don't get me wrong. Gerelli figures you're on the level. I said he's a gambler. But occasionally he likes a little insurance."



Shannon took Moron by the elbow and shoved him toward the booth

"His insurance won't help him after he fries." Shannon didn't pursue the subject. "I want to talk to all the men who were in this poker game. How can I locate them?"

"There'll be a game tomorrow night."

"Where and when?"

"I'll let you know. The boys never fix on a hotel until the last minute."

"The police have been all over the stuff in the Theger Holding Company office, haven't they? That was his main company?"

"Yes. 'The'—'Ger'— took the name from the first three letters—Theodore Gerelli. The police went over the place with a fine-tooth comb and found nothing.

"What about women?"

"Not much there. He lived with his mother, as you know."

"McComus certainly rubbed the public nose in at the trial how good he was to his dear old ma."

"He always did live with her. Then there's Rita Prince—the Princess. She's been his girl now for four or five years."

"I want to know who's fronting for the various subsidiary corporations. Who's running the mobs. I could dig it out for myself, but I haven't time. And I want to see the bosses. Get them together tomorrow afternoon."

"Used to getting your own way?"

"Any objections?"

"Not if you produce results."

Shannon stood up. "His mother lives at the Nautilus Towers, doesn't she? What's the Prince girl's address?"

HED JUST jotted it down when a burst of mirth came from the hall. The butler's voice was saying, "Your father's got a guest, Mr. Jack."

A young man's voice answered thickly, "Whassa masser with the guest? Belong to the W.C.T.U.?"

"Evenin', Counselor." Another male voice, also thick and slurred, spoke.

In the hall were four young men, three of whom were remarkably drunk; the fourth looked cross and miserable. Just at the moment that Streber said, "Marsha, what on earth—" the detective saw that there were also two young women, both sober.

"My good deed for the day," answered the one addressed as Marsha. "Bringing my brother home before you had to bail him out." Her voice was cool, detached, and a bit disgusted.

"Aren't you going to offer ush—ush—drink?" one of the others wanted to know.

"I told you damned fools to stay in the car," said the sober young man.

"Hello, Bob," Streber greeted him a bit more cordially. "I don't think I know these—"

"This is Ramon and thish is Drexel—my father—most dish—dish—nev' mind—he's a lawyer." Jack Streber's sweep of his arm almost threw him off-balance. He started reeling toward the stairs. When one of his figure eights brought him opposite Shannon, he glared and demanded, "Where's the shtairs?"

"Behind you," Shannon told him.

"Wish they'd keep shtill—"

Marsha Streber was standing taut and erect in front of her father, her brown hair blown back from her smooth forehead. "Met some of your friends tonight, Father," she said in the same cool voice. "Meyer and Coffman."

Streber's face tautened. "Just clients, dear," he corrected her gently.

"Let's get going." Bob addressed the two other young men. But one of them had said

something in an undertone to the second, who promptly hit him. With automatic efficiency Bob moved the other girl who had remained completely silent, out of the line of flying fists.

The butler leaped forward, to receive a back-handed slash from one of the combatants which nearly bowled him over. Bob grasped one of the flailing figures. Shannon grabbed the other, clipped him lightly on the side of the jaw, and let him slide to the floor.

Jack Streber had finally found the stairs, but climbing them was too much of a problem. He slid down on the bottom step, and stayed there.

The young man Bob was holding said, "Lemme go. All friends. Lesh have a drink."

The one whom Shannon had clipped was rubbing his jaw and looking as if he were about to be violently ill.

"Get on your feet," Bob told him, "and I'll decant you home."

"You've got a handful, Bob," said the girl by the door. "I'll get a cab."

"But I don't like—" began Bob.

"I'm sure Consuelo can take care of herself," said Marsha. There was annoyance in her voice. "Thanks for helping with Jack." She started to walk up the stairs, ignoring her brother, who was sleeping peacefully on the bottom step.

Bob, looking at the hiccupping hero who was struggling off the floor, said, "Maybe you'd better, Connie."

"Sorry the boys got out of hand," she said to Streber. "They've done a bit too much celebrating."

"I noticed," said the lawyer.

Shannon helped load the drunks into Bob's car and returned to the house. Streber was watching the stairs where Marsha had disappeared, and his face was suddenly that of an old man. Feeling almost an intruder, the detective said, "I'll call you in the morning. Good night."

Consuelo was standing on the curb. "That guy down there is either asleep or else he doesn't want customers," she said.

At that moment the cab she had pointed to, which had been parked in the middle of

the next block, came toward them, slowing down. Shannon waved it on.

"What did you do that for? Want to stand here all night?"

SHANNON looked over her tall, slim figure approvingly; firm breasts, long thighs, and she wore her clothes well. Her make-up was effective, her hair genuinely blonde, and her piquant nose and wide-set gray eyes would put her in the winning brackets of any beauty contest. "I wouldn't mind, in such charming company," he assured her. "How about walking round the corner and having a drink?"

"You might have asked me before you let the cab go," she objected. "And I hate these Village dives, anyway."

"We'll go to a dive uptown." Another cab cruising on the far side of the avenue wheeled and came over. "Get in, Consuelo."

She said "Consuelo?" with a rising inflection as she got in. Shannon directed the driver to the Barberry Room and said, "I don't know the rest of it."

"Bevan."

"Mine's Shannon. That make it okay?"

She laughed and asked, "Why did you pass up that other cab?"

"Your mouth was made for much more interesting things than asking questions."

"That's what it does best—and eating," she answered. "You and I are going to have just one drink and then I'm going home. I've a job tomorrow at ten."

"Model?"

"Photographic. And they don't like you to arrive looking like a three-day hangover."

"Why not? They could use it as a caption. Our latest creation, the Hangover Hat. How to look your best with a hangover."

"Something with a heavy veil to cover the face?" suggested Consuelo.

"A bromo on top and a design in aspirin round the brim."

At the Barberry Room they got a table and their drinks, and Shannon said, "You seem worried about something."

"Oh no—not really. I was just wondering if Bob got those two drunks home all right."

"Bob seemed quite a capable young man,

if a bit annoyed."

"Oh, he is. I mean capable. And I don't blame him for being annoyed."

"Has he got a name?"

"Bob? Oh—of course. Bob Rowton."

"The congressman's son?"

"He's a nice boy," she said with elaborate indifference.

"Is he a friend of the Streber kids?"

"He's known them for ages," she announced. "He and Marsha were engaged—or sort of—then she gave him the air. But she still expects him to hang around."

"I imagine you'll soon put a stop to that."

"Me? Oh, Bob and I are good friends. That's all. Bob isn't being an idiot about her." She broke off the engagement, but when she wants anything done she expects Bob to do it. When she wants to go anywhere she is all upset if he has another date. She was mad tonight because he didn't want me to go home alone."

Shannon asked, "Why did she break it off?"

"I don't know. They're a queer lot, the Strebers. Jack's never sober. I keep seeing him around, plastered to the gills. And he doesn't even seem to enjoy it. Except in a funny sort of way. I'm not explaining it at all well."

"Yes, you are. Go on."

"It's as if he set out to get plastered. I can see it happening if you don't know how much you can take. But to set out deliberately to get drunk! I don't see how there would be any fun in it."

"Wonder what Streber makes of his off-spring?"

She shrugged. "Now Bob never gets drunk. He gets a bit of a bun on once in a while. But he never gets—well—out of hand." After a pause she went on, "Bob's told me you are going to investigate the Gerelli case. He says they think you'll clear him."

"Who are 'they'?" murmured Shannon.

"Streber and all that crowd, I suppose. Streber's Gerelli's lawyer, isn't he? You know, I met him once at a party. Gerelli, He seemed such an ordinary man. Amusing, but one wouldn't have noticed him particularly."

"Was Streber there?" inquired Shannon idly.

SHE NODDED. "It was a big do given by a man called Schwengler for some Western congressman or senator or something. Schwengler called a fellow at the Apex Studios, where I've worked quite a bit, and asked him if he could bring some girls over. It was kind of stuffy, with nothing but middle-aged wives. Three or four of us went. Sometimes one makes useful contacts at those sort of things. I met a woman on a party once who was art director for *Young & Chic* magazine and she's given me a lot of work. Not that it isn't interesting anyway to meet all sorts of people," she added hastily, as if conscience-stricken about her remarks concerning the Schwengler's hospitality.

"Even Gerelli," remarked Shannon.

"I hardly talked to him, but it seems so odd to think that someone one had met, and such an inoffensive sort of man, should be going to the chair. It's horrible."

"I've heard a lot of words applied to Gerelli," remarked Shannon drily, "but never inoffensive."

She laughed and then said, "One funny thing happened that night. Marsha and Jack Streber were there, and Gerelli must have asked them to go on somewhere with him when he was leaving. Streber was furious. I couldn't hear what he was saying to Gerelli, but he did the heavy father and took Marsha home, as if she were a kid."

"She's not very old."

"She's twenty-two."

"Practically senile," murmured Shannon.

"You know what I mean. Bob didn't come to that party, and I think Marsha was peeved."

"Was this before or after she'd given him the air?"

"After. But she still expected him to come when she whistled, as I told you. But Bob's firm had a contract—he's an engineer, you know—and he had to work late to get some plans finished. It was for a hydroelectric plant in Iowa. Bob tried to explain it to me, but most of it was over my head. But I love trying to learn about it. I bought a book

called *Elements of Engineering*, but it was too difficult. . . ." She went on for some time talking about engineering, liberally sprinkled with "Bob said—" and "Bob explained—" and "Bob told me."

She didn't say anything useful about the Strebers, or Gerelli's crowd before Shannon took her home. He stood for a moment in the doorway of her apartment house on East Sixty-first Street. Another taxi had stopped at the corner of the block as he had helped Consuelo out. It had backed around the corner onto Third Avenue, and now he could see only the hood. Of course the driver might have gone into some place to eat. The detective wondered.

"Go to Fifty-fifth and Park," he told his own taxi driver, "and stop on the corner."

At the corner Shannon dismissed the man and stood for a moment, shielded from the view of anyone on the crosstown street. A taxi had gone along it just as his cab put him down. It stopped for a second in front of his apartment house, for hardly longer than the time necessary to slow down and see if there were a fare, then picked up speed and went on west.

A black car was parked where the taxi had slowed down. It was starting up now. Shannon watched; the starter was giving trouble. He turned into the hotel on the corner. The night porter knew him well and didn't even comment as he went to the telephone. He called the nearest precinct. "There's a suspicious-looking black Buick parked on the downtown side of Fifty-fifth between Madison and Park—men in it look like hoodlums," he said briefly and hung up.

The porter thought it was a nice night. He chatted about the weather, his wife's kidney troubles, and the bad manners of modern tenants. The police radio car came. The moment it rounded the corner from Park, the Buick's starter recovered. It ran through the red light at Madison with the prowler car behind. Shannon said good night to the porter and started to walk down Park.

"Aren't you going home yet?" inquired the porter, who knew he lived on Fifty-fifth.

"I just wanted to know if I'd guessed right about something," Shannon told him. "And I think I did."

CHAPTER III

GANGSTER'S MOTHER



AT THE office, Shannon sent home Lewis, who'd been on the switchboard, took off his coat and tie, and settled down to the transcripts of the Gerelli trial which McComus had sent him. He read again the details of the murder of Detective Ryan.

The prosecution had introduced numerous photographs and a model of the lobby of the Mercedes Building. The lobby was always open, as there was a subway entrance in the basement. The ground plan showed a door opening from the main lobby to a passage leading to the service and freight entrance. Just beyond the door was a small cubicle. The door, it was stated, had been open, but from it only the express elevators could be seen and not the circular lobby. In the center of the rotunda stood a portable sign, used at night to indicate which door to the street was open.

The night watchman, Patrick O'Rourke, had made his twelve o'clock round of the building and was sitting in the cubicle reading a newspaper. At twelve-thirty he had heard a shot. He had rushed out and found Detective Ryan lying in the center of the lobby, close to the sign that said EXIT THIS WAY. He had been shot in the back. The watchman stated, he had seen Gerelli going to the exit. Gerelli seemed to have come from behind the local elevators. The medical evidence bore out the theory that the murderer had shot from the direction of and at the distance of the local elevators. The watchman had been definite in his identification. He knew Gerelli well by sight, as he frequently took him up to the Theger offices late at night.

Shannon came next to the alibi which was such a sore subject with McComus. There had been six poker players in the game in the Park Ardsley Hotel and which was described as "Just a friendly game—no high stakes." At first they had stated that Gerelli had been with them from nine-thirty until four forty-five A.M., when the game broke

up. Under cross-examination, however, the true story had come out. At twelve-fifteen Gerelli had been called to the phone. Nobody knew whether it had been a man or woman who called. Gerelli had spoken for a few minutes and then left without any explanation.

Another unwilling witness was his chauffeur, who at first had said that he had not seen Mr. Gerelli until four forty-five and later admitted that Gerelli had come out at twelve-twenty, told him to go home, and taken the car himself.

Shannon found himself more impressed than ever by two things which had struck him during a casual newspaper perusal at the time of the trial. What was Ryan doing in the lobby of Gerelli's office building at 12:30 A.M.? Who telephoned Gerelli, and where had he gone?

He went on to the report on the victim. According to the police, Ryan was a square cop. He was married, with no known domestic or financial difficulties. He was attached to the Vice Squad and, two days prior to his murder, had been taken off the case on which he was working, which concerned some call houses believed to be operated by the Syndicate. His reassignment had not been due to any slackness on Ryan's part but simply because the call-house investigation had temporarily reached a dead end. The new investigation to which Ryan had been assigned had nothing to do with Gerelli or the Syndicate. Ryan had been described as ambitious but a bit bullheaded.

As Shannon put aside the report on Ryan, he was considering another curious fact that didn't make sense. That was Bentek's opposition to his investigation. It fitted in well enough with the theory that Bentek had framed Gerelli, but that theory in itself did not seem plausible.

He went on to a folder marked "STREBER" and learned that the lawyer had been born in Davenport, Iowa, had been valedictorian of his class, had joined the Army and gone overseas in 1918, returned and hung up his shingle in New York, marrying Madeline Ames of Trenton, New Jersey. There were only the two children, Jack born in 1920 and Marsha in 1927. His wife had died in 1947.

He appeared to have been in poor circumstances until the middle thirties, but now owned the house on Fifth Avenue, belonged to several clubs, played golf, and frequented the more expensive night clubs.

THE HISTORY of Mr. Patrick O'Rourke, the watchman, who had been held as a material witness, was not helpful, nor were the thumbnail sketches of four of the five other men in the poker game. On the fifth man there was nothing. He was said to be a Mr. Jones of Chicago. He probably was just the usual Midwesterner who came to the big city and wanted a game. It would take time to find him, and time was what Shannon hadn't got. He couldn't break this by the usual patience and leg work. It would hang or fall on a hunch.

He made a note for Miss Lane to have Schwengler and Congressman Rowton checked on and noticed that daylight was streaming through the window. When he put out the light the clock said ten minutes to eight. . . .

"Treated my Pat like a criminal, they did," the wife of the watchman said bitterly when Shannon explained his errand. "All my life I've been telling him he talked too much. Now perhaps he'll believe me. Don't pay to get mixed up with the law."

Patrick O'Rourke came out of the bathroom. "And it was a sorry day I heard that shot," he said. "Will you look at me now? Have to get up at half-past seven and work all through the decent daylight hours."

"Don't like your changed shift?" The building had put O'Rourke back as an elevator operator after his absence.

"Sure and it's nothing but up and down and crowds and people expecting me to know where everybody in the building works when there's a directory there. But devil a one of them bothers to look. And the noise is a disgrace to the town. Sure and a man can't hear himself talk." With some difficulty, Shannon got him to the night of the crime. "And will I ever forget it till my dying day?"

Shannon said, "Are you quite sure you couldn't have been mistaken?"

"I've got eyes in my head and I can use them. Many's the night I've taken Gerelli

up in the car."

"He had his hat and coat on?"

"Sure and his white scarf. It was a bitter night. Snowing outside."

"And the gun in his right hand or his left?"

"Haven't I told it often enough? He had it in his right and was slipping it into his pocket."

"And he was walking fast?"

"Sure. I went to see what I could do for the poor soul lying on the floor, and when I looked up he'd gone. But it's a sorry man I am that I should be the one to send the poor soul to his doom, and many's the night I've lain awake thinking of him up there knowing the day is coming and him with his sins on him. 'Tis a frightful thing to be sending a man to his death."

"If you're telling the truth, he sent Ryan to his death," Shannon reminded him.

"And that's what Father Dale's after telling me, and it's the truth, so help me God, but—" He shook his head.

"Aged him ten years, this has," said his wife as Shannon left. "It isn't right to put that on a man."

One Hundred and Eighth Street, where Ryan's widow lived, was Shannon's next objective. Dorothy Ryan was a faded blonde in her middle forties. But when Detective, then Patrolman, Ryan had married her she had been pretty. Daughter of a man who had a small stationery store in Brooklyn, she and her parents had considered that she was condescending to marry a mere policeman.

"I heard you were trying to get Gerelli off," she told Shannon.

"If he's innocent."

"He killed Joe."

"Why? He had no reason to."

"He's a rat. All these crooks are alike. Rats."

"Why was your husband in the Mercedes Building that night?"

"I don't know and I'm sick and tired of being asked."

"Had he talked about the Syndicate?"

"He told me he'd been assigned to something else."

"Was he disappointed?"

She shrugged. "No opportunities in the

police force. Just as a man gets some results on a case, some higher-up gets jealous and sidetracks him. It wasn't the first time it had happened."

"Did he think he'd been getting results?"

"Joe'd been working on it four months. They wouldn't let him follow his own line. Jealous. They'd listen, then send some other man out with his idea, pretending it was their own. Hard for a man to get a credit."

"Unless he worked on his own time," suggested Shannon.

"My Joe did that. He wasn't work-shy."

"So that's what he was doing in the Mercedes Building."

"Four months he'd put in on that case," the woman went on bitterly. "Then they switch him off it, so's a favorite of some higher-up can get any credit that's going. It ain't what you know but who you know."

"Even without pull, if he'd got something on the Gerelli Syndicate, he'd have been in line for promotion."

"He should have been lieutenant years ago, if he'd had his rights," Mrs. Ryan said.

"D'you know what line he was following on the case?"

But she didn't. Patience produced only the fact that Ryan had once mentioned having a "stoolie they don't know about downtown." But there was no name or clue to the stoolie.

SHANNON rode downtown on the subway and cut across to Park Avenue to the Nautilus Tower Hotel, where Gerelli had lived in a penthouse with his mother until he had changed his lodgings for the castle on the Hudson. In the lobby he met Streber. As they rode up together in the elevator the

lawyer complained about Mrs. Gerelli sending for him at nine in the morning.

The gangster's mother was dressed to go out. A woman nearing seventy, she had coarse hair which was still almost black, a figure for which no amount of corseting could do anything, and a face the peasant origin of which no amount of make-up could hide. It was a large face, flat and expressionless, with small, hard dark eyes. She was wearing a kelly-green suit over which she evidently intended putting the fox cape which lay on a chair. A green hat with red feathers, suitable for a twenty-year-old, sat uncomfortably astride her broad head.

"Very gay this morning, Ma," Streber greeted her and introduced Shannon.

"Theo likes me in something bright," she announced. "I'm going up and see him this morning."

"But, Ma, you ought to wear something conservative. There are still reporters hanging around."

"I'm sick and tired of them dingy black things I've wore ever since the trial. So's Theo."

"But McComus and I—" began Streber.

"None of your advice done Theo any good, has it?" retorted the woman.

Streber cleared his throat. "We're hoping Shannon will be able to help us."

"Ain't got much time."

"What did you call me about, Ma?"

"Money," stated Mrs. Gerelli laconically.

"But I gave you a thousand two days ago."

"That ain't all that comes from them shares in my name. It was different when Theo was fixing things himself."

"There's going to be a meeting this after-

[Turn page]

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noon. We'll talk about it."

"Nothin' to talk about. Them's my shares."

"But, Ma, you know why Theo did that. It was because of taxes."

"Sure I know." She was silent for a moment, her flat face expressionless. "And I know them boys, too. Figger with Theo outta the way they can cut his share and mine between theirselves."

"Theo's share is being kept for him, Ma. Yours too." Streber looked uncomfortable. "I don't think this is quite the time to talk about it. If you need some more—"

"I want the accounting."

"I'll take it up with the boys. Meanwhile, you remember what the Big Shot said about Shannon? Anything he wants to know is okay."

"Yeah. I'll expect the accounting tomorrow."

Streber went out between exasperation and defeat. Mrs. Gerelli looked after him. "Nice set to his suit," she said.

"He can afford a good tailor, I expect."

"Same tailor as Theo. Theo always admired his clothes."

"What can you tell me that'll help your son, Mrs. Gerelli?"

"What d'you want to do—help Theo or help the cops?"

"If your son is innocent, the cops want to know that, too."

"Who're you trying to fool, mister?"

"D'you think the cops framed him?"

"I don't reckon it was the cops. But he was framed and they didn't even bother to look."

"If it wasn't the cops who framed him, who was it?"

"If I knew that, Theo'd be free this minute."

"D'you suspect anyone?"

"You got to be my age, you'll know better than trust anyone."

Shannon was getting nowhere fast. "Who phoned him to leave the poker game?"

"I don't know."

"Where did he go?"

"Don't know that either."

"Did he usually confide in you?"

"I knew most went on round here."

"Why did he want Ryan out of the way?"

"He didn't. Ryan was just a dumb cop. Wasn't bothering us none."

"But he had been working on the investigation of call houses."

"How much are the cops paying you?"

THERE WAS a tabloid on a table, and Shannon pointed to a caption, "Commissioner's statement on Private Detective." "Don't you believe what you see in the papers?"

"Nope. And not a lot else besides."

"That happens to be true."

"That's what you say."

"If your son hadn't decided he could trust me"—Shannon's voice held a note of exasperation—"he wouldn't have passed word to answer my questions."

"If he hadn't trusted some other folks, he wouldn't be in the condemned cell now."

"And as the only way of saving him from the hot seat is to find out who did kill Ryan, if he didn't, you'd better take a chance on me. Theo can't be much worse off than he is."

"What d'you wanta know?" she asked at last.

"Who would he leave a poker game for if they called him?"

But after fifteen minutes it became obvious that Ma Gerelli didn't know. Always she came back to the same thing. "He'd go maybe fer Rita, but I know it weren't her. He'd-a told me."

"He usually told you everything?"

"If I asked. He knew he could trust me."

"And Rita?"

"Guess men have to have a woman." Ma's enthusiasm was negligible. "He coulda done worse. But—"

"But what?"

"She was getting notions about getting hitched. Theo coulda done better fer hisself."

"How?"

"Got a dame with some dough."

"He was making plenty."

"Some more never hurt." The woman's dark eyes considered Shannon obliquely, then she went on. "You don't know, mister. I was born on Tenth Avenue. Theo's father was a two-bit gambler. I learned then, ain't nothing that matters 'cept money, and it's

something you can't get too much of. I had six children. Theo was the first and the only one lived more'n a year. I told him, all his life, I told him. Get out and get the things the rich people have. Ain't no happiness without."

"He certainly followed your advice," said Shannon drily.

"He's done good, my Theo." For the first time there was something other than blankness on her flat face. "There's been times when there's been more money comin' in than we could spend." She paused and then said, "That's why I aimed to let that Streber know I knew. That's one thing I learned when Theo began to do good. Got a guy to come every mornin'. Funny little runt he was. No more'n five feet high. Been in some kind of trouble with a firm he'd worked fer in Wichita. But he could do accounts good. And he learned me."

"What d'you think of Streber?"

"He's useful, I reckon. Knows the law."

"Is he a good friend of Rita's?"

"Watcha mean, good friend? He wouldn't—"

"Did he want to?"

"You know Rita, huh? She's got what gives guys hot pants. When I was a gal I usta wish—well, never mind." She shook her head. "Streber? No. He's still carrying the torch fer that stuck-up wife of his died two years' back."

"What about other women?"

She shook her head again. "Theo was steady with Rita. Didn't two-time her none."

"Before Rita?"

"He'd a blonde bitch, but she talked outta turn."

"What was the bitch's name?"

"Joan La Ruba. Took her out of the line at the Hotsy Totsy in Kansas."

"Where is she now?"

"Last I heard she had a sea-food joint in East Shoreby."

"Connecticut?"

"Yeah. Calls herself Joan Moore."

"You don't think he sees her any more?"

"La Ruba!" Ma gave a short laugh. "She knows better than try coming round. No, mister, Theo was steady with Rita. Why don't you go talk to her?"

"I'm going to." Shannon got up. "I'll probably be around with more questions later."

"If you're really trying to help Theo, you can count on me," she told him.

He walked down the few blocks to the equally luxurious marble-halled palace called the Sayle Hotel, where Gerelli maintained the Princess. There was a phone in the lobby, and he called his office and dispatched Pete Elliman up to East Shoreby with instructions to find out all he could about Joan La Ruba, alias Joan Moore.

Rita Prince's apartment was on the top floor. As he put his hand toward the bell Shannon heard a voice from inside saying, "—teach you to come into a lady's house and insult her, you phony do-gooder!"

Shannon tried the knob, but the door was locked, so he rang the bell. He could hear a man's voice speaking, but not what he was saying.

The door opened and a colored girl thrust a startled face around it. Shannon pushed her aside and walked in. "Get outta here before I throw you out!" he heard as he reached a painfully modern living room.

CHAPTER IV

THE WOMAN IN HIS LIFE



HANNON had seen enough tabloid reproductions of the blonde in the middle of the room to recognize her as the Princess. A large, heavy-faced man with a camera was standing opposite her and saying sonorously, "In doing the work of the Lord, young woman, I've many times had harsh words said to me—"

"What's going on here?" demanded Shannon.

The self-styled worker for the Lord dug his hand inside his breast pocket. Before his hand could come out of his pocket he found himself covered by a businesslike automatic. He dropped the camera, and also the card he had produced from his pocket. "I only asked this poor sinning girl for some material on her life to be a warning to her other fall-

en sisters and help save them—"

"Why, you—I'll give you fallen sisters," muttered Rita.

Shannon holstered his gun. "The door's behind you."

"I am not afraid of your threats. The Lord—"

"Open the door," Shannon told Rita. She obeyed. He walked over to the man and said, "You might pray to the Lord to teach you some manners, if you don't want to get your teeth knocked out one day," he said.

Then somehow, the Lord's worker never quite knew how, one of his arms was twisted and held behind his back, a most ungentle hand had him by the collar, and he was being propelled to the door. He threshed like a puppy being held by the scruff of its neck. Shannon threw him bodily along the corridor. He sprawled on his face and slid along on his stomach. The elevator door opened and two men stepped out.

"Taking swimming lessons, buddy?" asked one.

Rita picked up the camera. She threw it with venom but no accuracy. It hit the man who'd inquired about the swimming lessons. He said, "Hey! Princess—whaddaya—" and hurried to the door.

"Meet Shannon," said Rita. "Lefty and Sep."

Lefty said, "That was you, was it?"

"He wanted a picture with only a veil, and I told him, I don't pose nude fer strangers. Him and his talk about the Lord and fallen women. Whatinhell does he think I am?"

"Probably figured you'd make a nice picture with a veil—or without," suggested Shannon.

"Why, the big lug—" began Lefty, turning back to the door. "I'll learn him he can't—"

"I think he'll have got the idea by now. You boys live here or what?"

"Naw. Jest go out wit the Princess since the trouble, account of newspapers and such."

"Guess I won't be going out today," Rita told them. "If I wanna go to a show tonight, I'll call you."

When they'd gone she settled herself on a built-in settee and said, "I'm obliged to you,

Mr. Shannon. You've no idea what it's been like since— I don't know where they all come from. I thought I knew all the magazines, but there's always one popping up I never heard of."

"Pretty nice place you've got here."

"Yeah, rent's seven grand a year," she said complacently. "See this rug? Gerry gave seventeen grand for it. He won't have nothing but the best around." Shannon looked with proper respect at the rug, and she went on, giving him the prices of most of the other pieces of furniture. "Same with clothes. Never says a word about what I spend. He says, 'Only the best's good enough for you, Princess.' Always calls me Princess." She ended with a little laugh.

"You knew what was going on better than most people," said Shannon. "You ought to be able to help me."

"Gee, if I only could. But every time I've suggested something they've always laughed and said it was no good."

"Who have?"

"Streber and McComus. Gerry says he's the best trial lawyer in New York, but he sure bitched everything up. Why didn't they let Gerry say he was with me that night? I'd-a stuck to the story. You wouldn't have broken me down, not when Gerry was depending on me."

"But they wouldn't let you?"

"Said the police could prove he wasn't here," she said and went over to the little bar and got herself another drink. "Lawyers!" she snorted. "It was McComus made him give himself up. Said it was the smart thing to do. If he hadn't-a done that, he'd be free now."

"He'd have to keep under cover all the time."

"I'd-a gone with him," she said quickly, "and when he wasn't so hot he could-a made some kind of deal."

"Pretty hard to make any kind of a deal when a cop's been killed."

"Gerry says if you got enough money and are smart, you can fix anything. After a while they might have found the guy that really done it."

"You don't think Gerelli did kill Ryan?"

"Are you crazy? Of course he didn't."

Ryan wasn't bothering him none, and anyways, Gerry's too smart. If he had wanted him outta the way, he wouldn't have done it hisself. I don't know how many times I haven't heard him say, 'Never kill a cop and don't tangle with the Feds.' No, mister, Gerry didn't do it."

SHANNON smiled at his glass. "If he did kill him, I'd be wasting time looking for the guy that did it, wouldn't I?"

"Oh yeah. I hadn't thought of that. Take my word for it, it was Bentek. Leastways, one of his mob."

"Bentek had no reason that's so far come to light to want to kill Ryan, and why would he go such a roundabout way to eliminate Gerelli, if that's what he wanted? Much easier to have him shot."

"Gerry was pretty careful, even though he didn't trail a huge bodyguard around. Most often there was a coupla of the boys somewhere close. 'Nother thing, Bentek knew the boys would get him if he got Gerry. This way, he figgers he's safe."

Shannon switched to the fatal night.

"I never call Gerry when he's in a game," Rita explained. "Gets him sore."

"It had to be someone who knew where he was playing, to call him."

"Yeah—yeah. That's right." Her eyes were abstracted, as if this obvious point had started a train of thought.

He waited, but as nothing was forthcoming, asked, "Where were you that night?"

"Here. Gerry brought me home round nine o'clock and went right out to the game. I didn't expect him back. Those games go late, and when it's after four he doesn't come back here."

"Who else would he leave a game for?"

"Nobody I can think of, 'cept Ma Gerelli. He always jumped when she whistled." Her face hardened.

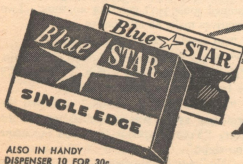
"Not too easy to get along with, is she?" Shannon said carelessly. Rita had picked up another cigarette, and he studied her face as he lighted it for her. She was still good-looking, but it took a careful make-up these days to cover lines and puffiness round the eyes; the blonde hair, too, was touched up,

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though the job was well done.

"Guess every mother figgers no girl's good enough fer her son," she said after a while. "Guess maybe I ain't, but he picked me and a man's gotta pick fer hisself. She doesn't want me to call him Theo. She does. And since he's been away she's watched me like she thought I was going to two-time him. She says she has Lefty and Sep go out with me account of me being bothered by newspaper guys, but I think it's so they can watch me. And it's her that's kept me from going and seeing him. She says McComus and Streber say it wouldn't be smart, but I know it's her."

"What d'you think of Streber?"

"Guess he's smart. Gerry always says so."

"I didn't ask what Gerelli thought of him. I asked what you did?"

"He's stuck-up. Always acts like he felt we weren't good enough fer him. And I'd like to know where he thinks he'd be if it weren't fer Gerry. Why, he couldn't even pay his office rent when—" The doorbell pealed violent. "That'll be Doc."

"Doc?"

"He's not a doctor. He's a professor. An idea of Gerry's. Smart, too. He figgered some of the boys fronting for the corporations didn't act like businessmen. Not refined enough. Though I must say a lot of businessmen I've met didn't act the way I'd expect a gentleman to act. Anyway, Gerry hired Doc to learn 'em. I figgered it was a good idea till Gerry got him to work on me. I'm supposed to study this." She held up a book called *Common Mistakes in Grammar and Pronunciation*. "And I don't like to stop it, with Gerry up there—Ada, whatin' hell are you doing out there? Are you deaf?"

Shannon wondered if the pronunciation of "deaf" was given in the book as the colored girl hurried to the door.

"Besides," Rita was going on, "it gets lonesome without Gerry. Nothing to do 'cept go to the movies."

A SLIGHT scuffle in the hall and the maid's voice saying reproachfully, "You's been drinking again," preceded the swaying entrance of a stout, dark elderly man. The professor's clothes were a bit rum-

pled, but his shirt was clean. The most outstanding thing about him was that he had shaved the left side of his face and omitted the right.

"Ain't I told you not to come here when you're stinking?" demanded Rita.

"Haven't I told you," corrected the professor automatically.

"I know," said Rita irritably. "Go on home and sleep it off."

"My dear young lady, it ish quite unnecessary for me to be shober to super-superintend your shtudies—" He was in the center of the room, far from any wall or piece of furniture to steady him.

Rita looked at Shannon. "That's a hell of a note! He can't even talk straight but he can learn me how to."

The professor sighed. "Teach me. The verb 'learn' ish intransitive. My enunciation may be slightly blurred, but my shin—shin—"

"Syntax," supplied Shannon crisply.

"Thank you, sir. Is correct." This effort was too much for him and he swayed perilously. Shannon crossed rapidly to him and held him up by placing a hand on his chest. The professor looked up at him and said, "They grow bigger eash day."

"Where d'you want him?" asked the detective.

"Throw him out! Damned souse ain't good fer nothing except lie in a gutter and sleep it off." Rita's annoyance made her grammar deteriorate progressively.

"Incorrect," said the professor.

"It's the truth and ya know it, ya drunken bum."

"Ish the truth—incorrectly expreshed. The damned souse isn't good for anything. Two negatives make an affirmative."

"Go peddle ya—" Rita stopped.

"I'll put him in a cab," offered Shannon. "Thanks for the information, Princess. I'll be back later for more, probably."

"I mush give my lesson," protested the professor as he was propelled toward the door. "Your shuperior size dosh no^t make you right."

"No," agreed Shannon, "but I do get my own way quite often."

"The pattern of hishtory down the ages.

Whish makes ish shtudy so dishcouraging. Don't ever specialize in hishtory, sir. Ish 2 record of the crimes of man, and even wors— the futilities."

The elevator came. The professor stood moderately steady in the car. They reached the street level. To the right there was a pillar with a couch seat surrounding it. A man was just sitting down. As they stepped out of the car, he slipped behind the pillar and hurried out through the front door.

"Is there a back way out?" Shannon demanded of the elevator operator, putting his hand in his pocket.

"That door at the end." The operator watched the hand hopefully. "Passage to the right. Brings you out on Sixty-eighth."

"Come on, Doc."

"Thish ish not necessary. I shall not make an exhibition of myself on Park Avenue."

"No, but you might make a corpse," Shannon told him curtly, pushing him through the door. The passage led to the service entrance. A taxi was cruising eastward and Shannon hailed it. "Get in." He pushed the unprotesting professor in and said to the driver, "Wait. I'll be back in a couple of minutes." He returned to the front lobby and found the same elevator man. "Get the porter for a moment." When the man came, he asked, "Any car parked outside with someone in it and engines running?"

"One drove up a few minutes back. Stopped right on the corner, just past the hydrant. Black Chevvy. Sedan. Two men in it. The engine's running—"

Shannon tore a page out of his notebook and wrote:

"Were you waiting for me? Shannon.

He handed it to the porter with a bill and said, "Give this to the men in that car and tell them that the red-headed guy who gave it to you left five minutes ago by the back way."

Shannon returned to his cab. "Go slowly to the corner. There's a black Chevrolet sedan parked just past the hydrant," he told the driver. "Follow it and don't get spotted."

An unmistakable snore was coming from the corner of the cab. The professor was asleep. The driver reached the corner in time to see the black Chevrolet pulling away

from the curb. "If he heads downtown and hits the midtown traffic at this time o' day, we ain't got much chance," he grumbled.

Shannon was perplexed. He had not been followed when he left Ma's, and the only person who knew he was going then to visit the Princess had been Ma.

The black Chevrolet kept straight on down Park until it reached Fifty-fifth, then it turned west. Shannon's driver managed to catch the same light when, at Sixth Avenue, it started once again downtown. It didn't go far, but stopped in front of a shooting gallery long enough for one man to get out.

"Drive past the gallery and stop."

"Can't park here."

"Wait as long as you can. If you have to move, circle the block."

"What about him?" The driver jerked his head toward the gently snoring professor.

"He's happy. Why wake him?"

As Shannon crossed the sidewalk he read the sign: MAMMOTH AMUSEMENT ARCADE (Gaylands Corporation). He went in. The man who had got out of the Chevrolet was at the far end, talking to the man in charge of the rifle range. A juke box was blaring. Sunny weak-looking youths were operating machines which might or might not give them a prize if they managed to make a shovel pick up the item they intended. The selection of clay pigeons, smaller birds, and disks were traveling on their belts across the reinforced wall at the back. An enormously fat woman was trying to wedge herself into the seat in front of the photomat.

Shannon saw the man he had followed suddenly leave the man he'd been talking to. Neither was looking in his direction. The man who'd been in the Chevrolet picked up a rifle and started to shoot.

The detective's eyes scanned the line of pigeons. At the side was a mirror, so arranged that whoever was in charge could see people entering without turning round. He went to the end of the counter, picked up another of the chained rifles, and took his place next to the man he had followed. The man had already brought down three of the birds. Now he missed twice. "Nervous?" inquired Shannon.

The man turned and said, "Huh? Me? Noivous?"

Shannon brought down four birds in rapid succession without appearing even to look at his targets. There were times when showing off paid dividends. "Yes, you," he answered.

"I ain't noivous."

"Who sent you?" The detective picked off another bird.

"Dunno what you're talking about."

The man in charge moved up. "Whatcha trying to do? Make trouble here?"

The detective turned with the light rifle held so that the butt caught the attendant square in the midriff. It knocked him onto the counter where the other rifles and shells lay. Shannon said, "How careless of me! What was it you asked? Did I want to make trouble?" The other man, in the meantime, had put down his gun and was starting for the door. Shannon tossed his rifle alongside the semi-prostrate attendant and said, "Don't you try to make it, either." He caught up with the man he'd followed near the photomat. "What's your name?"

"None of your business," snarled the man.

Shannon looked at him with disfavor. "I shall call you Moron for purposes of identification."

"That ain't my name."

"It ought to be. Now, Moron, who sent you and what were your instructions?"

"I dunno what you're talking about."

"What were you doing outside the Sayle Hotel?"

"Never heard of it."

THE FAT WOMAN was coming out of the photomat now. It gave Shannon an idea. He took Moron by the elbow and shoved him toward the booth. "Anyone as handsome as you, Moron, ought to have a picture made. Get in there."

"You can't do that— you—" Moron's hand was moving up.

"I know you've got a gun and I know you've no permit. Get in there unless you want to be handed over to the cops."

"You can't pull that."

"D'you want to find out?" Evidently Moron didn't, because he unwillingly allowed himself to be pushed into the booth. Shan-

non put a quarter in the slot. "And don't make faces. Or is that your natural expression?"

"I tell ya—"

"Smile. Sorry I haven't a birdie for you to look at." He reached in a powerful hand and yanked the man's shoulders around so that his face was to the camera. "That's it. Smile nicely."

Moron was sweating. Twice he opened his mouth to protest, but a sideward glance discouraged him. The lights went off.

"Just sit there and relax. We'll have them in a minute."

"Abe!" Moron stuck his head around the curtain and let out a yelp in the direction of the attendant. The man came warily.

"Moron's shy," Shannon explained. "Doesn't seem to like having his picture taken. Who is he?"

"Never seen him before," said the attendant.

"He just calls everyone Abe, does he?"

"Get a lot of crazy guys like that. Call everyone George or Henry er summat."

"Ya gotta help me, Abe."

"Expects strangers to do a lot for him, doesn't he?" the detective observed amiably.

"Shut ya trap and get outta here," Abe told Moron.

"Ya louse, ya gotta do something. He'll get a pitcher—"

"Does seem to know you," said Shannon.

CHAPTER V

THE RIVAL



HE completed strip of pictures, still wet, came out of the machine. The attendant made a grab for it, but Shannon was before him. Moron came out of the booth and reached toward it. Shannon held it high, letting

it dry in the air.

"Must be a strong camera. Didn't break. Don't snatch, Moron. That isn't nice. I'll give you one." He tore the end one from the strip and handed it to the man. "You can hang it up some place to frighten babies."

"It ain't so bad." Moron was studying it.

"The resemblance to a human being is purely coincidental," murmured Shannon.

"Ya gotta get me outta this, Abe." Moron stopped looking at the picture.

"Get outta here before I throw you out," Abe replied unfeelingly.

Moron made one more ineffectual grab for the photos. "I've got to have something to remember you by," Shannon told him and walked out. He found his cab with the professor still sleeping peacefully. He woke him and asked his address.

"Y'know, I never did like this business of getting up early," the professor announced firmly as they entered the small apartment on

several times. Mr. Streber had also called. There had been several calls from a man who asked if Mr. Shannon was in and then hung up. He dialed Streber's office and got the lawyer, who said, "I don't approve of this whole idea, but the boys will be at the Theger Holding Company offices this afternoon at four-thirty."

"I'll be there."

Shannon hung up and called the Streber house. Marsha Streber said, "I've got to talk to you. Can you meet me somewhere?"

He told her to be in the Ambassador Bar at one-thirty. After he put down the phone he stared at it thoughtfully, then picked it up again and dialed a number not to be found in directories. The citizen who owned it kept a good many of his activities veiled from prying eyes, particularly if the eyes belonged to the police. But Shannon needed information about Bentek.

"Lay off that whole setup," the phone advised him. "It stinks."

"I agree," said Shannon, "but I'm in it now. I need some information. What d'you know about Bentek?"

It boiled down to a good many "they says," only one of which interested Shannon. "They say he's been muscling in on the Syndicate's territory."

"Where'll I find him?"

"Easiest way is to go to Mike's Steak Grille around lunch time. He don't hardly ever go to his office. You can catch him at night at the Diamond Way. . . ."

PROGRESS

THINGS are certainly different than they used to be. For example, in Iowa in 1807 a law was passed which required every land owner to include a prescribed number of squirrel scalps with his yearly income taxes. The actual amount depended on the size of his property. If he couldn't shoot his quota he could make up the difference via a cash fine of three cents per. Today, however, it's against the law to—

A—Ride horseback while fishing for trout in Colorado.

B—Hunt rabbits in Hayden, Arizona.

C—Set traps for mice without obtaining a license for hunting, if you happen to be in the State of California.

—Bess Ritter

Third Avenue and weaved toward the bedroom.

Shannon looked around. Books lined the place from floor to ceiling. Evidently the professor had specialized in French history. A superficial search brought to light a Harvard Alumni magazine. Donald Rierison—Class of 1910. Shannon went into the bedroom and saw his charge was already asleep again. He took off the man's shoes, loosened his belt and tie, threw a blanket over him, and returned to the living room. He picked up the phone and dialed his office.

Miss Lane read out a list of messages. Among them, Captain Dowd of the —th Precinct wanted him. Miss Streber had called

IN THE OFFICE at the back at the police station Captain Dowd slammed shut a file cabinet and muttered something about a knowledge of the alphabet being essential to a good filing system and why didn't policemen learn the alphabet. He included Shannon in the comprehensive scowl with which he swept the office.

"Got a couple of questions I want to ask you." Shannon sensed the hostility in the man. He had felt it, too, when he walked through the charge room.

Dowd was continuing. "A complaint was received here early this morning about a suspicious-looking car parked on Fifty-fifth between Park and Madison. When our car

rounded the corner, a parked car immediately started, ran through a red light on Madison, and finally was abandoned by the two men in it at Twenty-third Street and the river. A sub-machine gun and a high-powered rifle were found in it. The car was reported stolen last month by J. J. Klaver of Bismarck." Captain Dowd looked up from the report to which he had referred. "What have you got to say about it?"

"What d'you want me to say? Congratulate you for getting back Mr. Klaver's car?"

"You know something about it. What was that car doing there?"

"How should I know?"

"You'll dummy up once too often."

"What's the beef, Captain?"

"You phoned in that complaint."

"Out of the eight millions in New York, why pick on me? And phoning in a warning about a suspicious car is doing a public service. Not committing a crime. Your informant must have been a good guesser."

"You live in the apartment house the car was standing in front of."

"I do live in Fifty-fifth Street. Was the car in front of my house?"

"You know damn well it was."

"So if it was?"

"They were gunning for you. Why?"

"I'll bite. Were they? And if so, why?"

"Stop stalling. Who were the men?"

"I don't know."

"Then why did you phone?"

"I haven't said I did. Anyway, I don't know what in hell you're complaining about. You got back a stolen car and you found an arsenal. You ought to be grateful."

"These guys weren't sitting in Fifty-fifth Street at four A.M. for their health. They were in front of your house. They were there to get you."

"There are some fifty other tenants in the building," Shannon reminded him mildly.

"And the only one liable to have someone gunning for 'em is you. Downtown is interested in this car."

"Why? Find any bodies in it?"

"There were two men in it. Who were they?"

"I don't know."

"I don't understand this deal," complained

the captain. "The men got away." Then: "What's your game in this deal, Shannon? You know we've been after Gerelli for years. What are you in on his side for?"

"I'm so tired of explaining in words of one syllable so even you can understand! I'm not on anyone's side. I'm trying to find out the truth."

"You're not working on our side," persisted Dowd. "So why did you call about the car?"

"A public-spirited citizen doesn't like suspicious-looking people in his street. Also"—Shannon's voice took on an edge—"whether I'm working with you or not, I'm entitled to the protection to which any citizen is entitled."

"You admit you need protection?"

"I admit nothing." Shannon stood up and jerked his hat back onto his head. "Why don't you find out who was in that car? Or d'you expect me to find out for you?"

Stung by his tone, the captain said, "We've a very good lead on who the men were. It's pretty sure one of them was Manny Gesheim."

"And what are the special benefits that Gesheim confers on the world?"

"He's been hauled in five or six times about hot cars. And the Syndicate's law firm—your friend Streber—has got him off. Why should he be gunning for you?"

Shannon shrugged. "If you find out, let me know."

It made no sense, he decided as he hailed a cab and directed the man to Mike's Steak Grille.

MIKE'S restaurant was clean but uninspiring and there was an all-pervasive odor of sauerkraut.

"Bentek here today?" Shannon asked the bartender.

The man's eyes flickered to a table where four men were seated. Shannon didn't wait for him to answer but said, "Thanks," and started over to the table. He saw the instinctive wariness in three of the men; saw the slight shifting of their chairs, so that hands might be more ready to guns. It was the ingrained fear of their kind.

Only one man had not moved. A thin,

hard man with a pinched nose and darting eyes that searched everything in sight. Antonek Bentek still had about him the indefinable nervous quality he had brought with him from his native Poland when he had immigrated as a youth thirty years ago.

"Relax, boys, I only want to talk to your boss," Shannon told the other three men. "Alone."

They looked at Bentek. His eyes reflected a faint amusement. With a graceful wave of a hand with astoundingly dirty nails, he said, "We were going to have another cup of coffee. Join us."

Shannon sat. "Are you nervous, Bentek?"

"I've no reason to be. I've paid my taxes."

"Then tell your boys to go play tidly-winks for a bit."

Bentek jerked his head in the direction of a booth at the side. The three men got up and went to it. The waiter came and Bentek ordered two coffees. He lighted a cigarette and said, "I was told you'd be along to see me. What's on your mind?"

Shannon took from his pocket one of the pictures he had made of Moron in the shooting gallery. "Know him?"

Bentek studied it, then shook his head and handed it back. "Nope. Who is he?"

"A stupid little runt with bad nerves. That's all I can tell you about him."

"Why should I know him?"

"People have been slinging your name around pretty carelessly," observed Shannon, "saying it suits you pretty well to have Gerelli fry."

"I ain't gone into mourning," agreed Bentek.

"Gerelli's friends think you might even have helped him get there."

"Yeah. I know. I didn't, but I ain't going to help him get out, either. Like you said, it suits me pretty good."

"Don't much like him."

Bentek shrugged. "Gerelli's greedy. Ain't content to win. Gotta break the bank. I ain't got no use fer gamblers. Soon's I find a man's gambling, out he goes."

"Policy is usually considered gambling," observed Shannon drily.

"Hell, that's business. That ain't gambling."

"Maybe you're right," agreed the detective. "So Gerelli's greedy, is he?"

"You're working for him. You oughta know. He's got the betting, the slot machine, the call houses, and the drugs sewed up in this town and halfway across the country. Ain't he satisfied? No, he wants to muscle in on policy. It's jest he can't stand to see some other guys make anything. Don't pay in the end. An organization gets too big to handle. Too many people know too many things. And someone spills."

"Maybe that was why Ryan had to be eliminated," suggested Shannon. "I'd have thought Gerelli was too smart to kill a cop."

Bentek shrugged. "Ya never know with gamblers."

"With Gerelli out of the way, there won't be any more muscling in on your policy preserves, I suppose," said Shannon carelessly.

He saw the man's face harden. "Look, mister, you don't even know who runs the numbers round here. It ain't healthy to know too much."

"Wouldn't be healthy either if all Gerelli's bunch get the notion you framed their big shot," answered Shannon with a thin smile.

"Hell, why should I want Ryan shot? He wasn't getting in my hair."

"Why did you have a man call me and tell me to lay off this case?"

"Me? Are you nuts?" Genuine astonishment swept the man's face.

"Someone called yesterday, twice, and said, 'Bentek says lay off or else.'"

"It wasn't me," Bentek stated with conviction. "Lemme see that pitcher again." He held out his hand for it and, when Shannon gave it to him, frowned over it for half a minute. Then he called over one of his men. "D'ya know this punk?"

The man shook his head, passed the picture to the other two, who also shook their heads, then as he was going to hand it back he looked at it again. "Wait a minute. Yeah. I ran across him onct. Fixed a car fer me. I hadda—uh—kinda accident. It hadda be fixed quick. This guy done it."

"Why d'you wanta know?" cut in Bentek.

"I think he wants to kill me," said Shannon.

The bodyguard said, "Huh?"

"Expect me to hold your hand?" asked Bentek.

"I'd like to know who he is and why he wants me out of the way."

"He don't work for me," said Bentek flatly.

The bodyguard's face had been contorted with his efforts of memory. "Manny something or another," he said at last.

Shannon's face was expressionless. "There are a hell of a lot of Mannys in the world," he said. "Still, it's better than nothing. Thanks. Be seeing you."

"That's something to look forward to," muttered the bodyguard sarcastically.

"Remember what I told you," Bentek reminded him. "It won't be healthy for you if Gerelli's bunch gets notions we framed him."

"The line of people who want to upset my health forms on the left," Shannon told him as he went out.

CHAPTER VI

UNSUSPECTED STOOLIE

MARSHA STREBER was seated in a corner at the Ambassador Bar, a drink and a newspaper in front of her. The moment Shannon came in she moved her bag and other paraphernalia with which women always seem to litter tables in cafés, and said, "I was afraid you'd forgotten."

Shannon apologized for being late, ordered a double Bourbon and a roast-beef sandwich, and waited for her to say something.

"You must have got a most weird impression of us last night," Marsha began tentatively.

"Because your brother found the stairs eluding him? Stairs are apt to get elusive after a certain amount of alcohol."

"It had been quite a night," she replied.

"Evidently." After a fairly long wait Shannon said, "Well, what is it?" He could see the girl winding herself up to what she wanted to say; her cool poise was somewhat less than skin deep.

"Do me a favor, Mr. Shannon, and don't

mention this conversation to my father," she said.

"So far there hasn't been a conversation. But go on."

"Please. Will you promise?"

"Very well."

"I want you to do something for me, and there isn't any reason in the world why you should. I know I'm a fool for asking. But it's the only thing I can think of, now."

"Nobody ever got shot for asking."

She leaned forward across the table, appealing and earnest. "Drop this case, Mr. Shannon."

"Why?"

"He's guilty—guilty of thousands of things. Things much worse than the killing of Ryan."

"What do you know about it?"

"He's built up an evil empire, like a huge octopus that reaches out, spreading evil, gathering people into its clutches. When he is destroyed his empire will fall. Can't you see you're trying to perpetuate it?"

"Suppose he didn't kill Ryan?"

"Does it matter? He's killed other men."

Shannon had finished his sandwich. He sat back in his chair and considered her serious young face. There was determination in it. The mouth and chin were stubborn and the brown eyes reflected a will of her own. "I've heard a lot of arguments based on the end justifies the means about this case."

"Don't you believe it ever does?"

"Briefly summed up, it's this. We think Gerelli's done a lot of nasty things, but we can't prove it to a jury. We don't think he's an ornament to the community, so let him fry, whether he killed Ryan or not."

"That's rather brutal."

"Truth often is. Is it the business of a doctor to say to his patient, 'You beat your wife, you abuse your children, you rape your maiden aunt, you steal the blind man's pennies. Get out and die in the gutter.' It's not my job to pass on the morals of my clients. They hire me to do a job. Provided the job is legal, I take it. This investigation is perfectly legal."

"Is there nothing that will make you drop it?"

"Gerelli is my client." Shannon's voice hardened a little. "What have you got against him?"

"I'll try and explain. I have to go back to when Jack and I were kids. There wasn't very much money, but I guess that doesn't bother kids much. Then Father began making money. We moved. We got a car. We used to hear Mother arguing with him, and there'd never been arguments before.

"Then suddenly she sent us away to school. The best schools. Everything changed. We never came home for holidays. We went to camps, or Mother took us on a trip somewhere. Then, as I got older, the other girls used to ask me to visit them for vacations. There people would ask me questions about my family, and I wasn't asked to visit again—not by the people I wanted to know.

"And when Mother would invite them out, they made embarrassed excuses. And just before Mother died, Molly Ten Eck wanted me to come for Christmas and she'd written home. When the answer came, she wouldn't show it to me and she made up some story about their house being full. I asked Mother what was wrong with us, and she just laughed and said it was my imagination, and that we were going to motor to New Orleans and we'd have much more fun."

SHE paused a moment before she went on. Shannon waited.

"I finished school the month after Mother died, and I came home. At first I went out with the bunch I'd known, and one by one they dropped me—the people I really wanted to go with.

"You know what I went through. I felt like the girl in the ads—what your best friend will not tell you." She gave a dreary little smile. "Jack was back from the Navy. He finished law school and went to work in Father's office. When I asked him questions or repeated things I'd heard he used to say, 'Goddamned bunch of snobs. Tell 'em to go—' Well, you know. After a while he gave up saying that and wouldn't discuss the office at all.

[Turn page]

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"So I made it my business to meet these clients of Father's. I made Jack take me to some of their parties. I went to Gerelli's birthday party. And I began to see why Molly's folks had their house full at Christmas."

"What did your father say?"

"He didn't know about that. But every time I talked to him he'd say business was business and for me not to worry my head over it. He'd say, 'Even if you have been hearing exaggerated stories about Gerelli, he's still entitled to a lawyer,' and ask me if I didn't want to go out and get a new hat or a fur, or wouldn't I like to go to Nassau with Mrs. Schwengler. The only time I remember Father being really angry with me was when I asked what Mother had thought of it."

Shannon signaled the waiter for another drink. "I don't quite see what it's got to do with the Ryan killing."

"Am I to go through my whole life like a leper because of Gerelli?" she demanded. "Aren't you exaggerating?"

"I was engaged to Bob Rowton," she went on, "and then I found his father is tarred with the same brush."

"Rowton? Where does he fit into the picture?"

"Everybody knows he's protected Gerelli's mob," Marsha said impatiently. "So, if I'd escape from it in one direction I'd have headed straight into the same thing in another."

"So you gave Bob the air?"

"Why should I suffer for it? It isn't my fault."

Shannon wasn't going to be sidetracked. "Why would the death of Gerelli help you?"

"Without him the whole thing would fall apart and soon be forgotten. People have short memories."

"If you've enough money."

"I have a right to happiness, to hold my head up," she went on. "To meet the people I want to meet without feeling an outcast. Mother wouldn't fight for it. She was too good, too sweet. He made her life a hell, but all she'd say was, 'Your father and I look at things differently. Let's not talk about it.'"

"Seems to have been a comfortable hell," remarked Shannon. "House on Fifth Avenue—cars and so on."

"What good are they if you're always an outsider everywhere?" demanded Marsha bitterly. "He has no right to make me be."

"Don't seem to like your father much."

"I can't forgive him what he did to Mother—what he's doing to my life and Jack's. He's made enough money now. Why does he have to go on?"

"It isn't always easy to get out of these things," Shannon defended the lawyer.

"He could if he wanted to," she snapped.

"Perhaps he doesn't want to."

"Then I'll make him. There are ways." She was silent for a moment, her jaw set in a line of stubbornness. "With Gerelli out of the way, the Syndicate won't last."

Suddenly across Shannon's mind flashed the words of Ryan's widow: "A stoolie whom they don't know about downtown." It was an utterly fantastic idea. He played with it for a moment and then said carelessly, "If you want to abolish the Syndicate, you can always go to the police."

"It has to be without their knowing."

"That can be arranged."

"I know. But it isn't so easy, and since Ryan—" She stopped and there was a sudden fear in her eyes. "Since Ryan was killed they've been very suspicious and jumpy."

Shannon was lighting a cigarette. "How much had you told Ryan?"

"I? Told Ryan? What on earth gave you that idea?" She spoke much too quickly.

HE MOVED a bit impatiently in his seat. "Obviously you'd told him something, and equally obviously someone had found out about it."

After five minutes of pointless fencing, Marsha said unwillingly, "He was with the police that raided a party. They were smoking marihuana and the place was raided. Ryan said I'd no business in a mess like that and he let me slip out. He was awfully kind, and when I tried to give him something he refused."

"So?" prompted Shannon.

"After I'd found that nothing I said made

any difference to Father, I called Ryan up. But I didn't know anything definite enough to be any use, he told me. He asked me if I could get the records of the Theger Company and told me how to make copies of the office keys. It wasn't difficult."

"My God!" breathed Shannon, but he only said, "So you met him at twelve-thirty in the Mercedes Building that night."

"No—no. I didn't. I didn't."

"What happened?"

"I was ill." She must have seen Shannon's upraised eyebrows, for she went on desperately, "I was out to dinner with the Schwenglers. And we went on to the Two by Four. I don't know whether it was something I ate or drank, but I nearly passed out and I had to go home."

"You didn't go to the rendezvous?"

"I didn't even know what had happened until Father told me late the next evening. And I—it was ghastly—I felt as if it were my fault somehow."

Shannon made a noise in his throat which might have meant anything. "Had you told anyone about the meeting?"

"No—no. Do try to understand. I wouldn't have done it if I hadn't been desperate. I couldn't see any other way." As he didn't answer, she went on in a low voice. "You don't know what it's like, always to have a secret you're ashamed of, which isn't a secret really, because other people know it and they are looking at you, knowing it, and never saying anything. And there's no one you can talk to about it."

"D'you know who killed Ryan?"

"No—no. If I knew—I mean, if I knew it was not Gerelli, I couldn't let—"

"You couldn't let him go to the chair?" Shannon finished with a short laugh. "But you'd like me to let him go to the chair even though I'm pretty sure he didn't kill Ryan. You want your dirty work accomplished, but you want the blood to be on someone else's hands."

"That's not fair."

"But it's fair to send a man to the chair for a crime he didn't commit."

"I was a fool to expect you to understand," she said bitterly.

"I understand," he told her, "but you

don't. You don't understand that I'm not going to double-cross my client because you want to get in with the Ten Ecks or whoever." He called the waiter and said, "Check."

Marsha picked up her pocketbook and stood up. Shannon handed her gloves to her and she almost snatched them.

With a queer mixture of defiance and anxiety she said, "You promised you wouldn't repeat this to Father."

"Don't worry. I keep my word. That's what I was trying to explain to you. . . ."

THE old man who ran the service elevator in Shannon's office building looked at him without surprise as he came through the service entrance and said, "Someone laying for you?"

Shannon nodded. As the car stopped at his floor he said, "The worst thing about being a detective, Pop, isn't being shot at. It's not being able to get to bed nights."

Bill Ames, of the *Bugle*, was sitting on the edge of Miss Lane's desk, talking to her and Sam Ross and squinting thoughtfully at Bob Rowton, who was pacing up and down.

As Shannon came in Miss Lane said, "Just a moment," into the phone and waved the instrument at him. Bill Ames began to say, "I wanted to talk to you—" Bob Rowton stood squarely in front of the detective and said, "Where's Marsha?"

Shannon pushed Rowton absent-mindedly aside and took the phone from Lane. "Y'know what you was asking about this morning," said the voice of the man he had called before lunch. "There seems a lotta people round town are sore or noivous account of your mixing in it. Figgered I'd tip you off."

"Hear anything definite?"

"Nope. Just two of my boys heard a bunch in a bar talking about you. One of 'em was laying a thousand on the line you'd be having a slap-up funeral in three days. I'm jest tipping you off, see? I ain't told you nuttin'."

"Thanks." Shannon put down the phone thoughtfully and picked up Lane's little pile of messages and started to look through

them, his eyes down, lips thin.

"I haven't got all day——" began Bob Rowton.

Bill Ames said, "I've been waiting an hour for the privilege of an audience."

"Where's Marsha?" demanded Bob.

"This isn't the Lost Persons Bureau," Shannon said acidly.

Bob's pleasantly homely face flushed. "You can't brush me off like that."

"Sit down there and wait." Shannon pointed to a chair. "Come in, Bill."

"That's the congressman's son, isn't it?" asked Ames as he closed the door of Shannon's office. "What's he doing here?"

"Apparently looking for Marsha Streber. What's on your mind?"

"I was downtown today trying to get a story on your private war with the police force. It's impaired the commissioner's vocabulary."

"I'd thought it would have given it added fluency," said Shannon drily.

"It's limited him to four-letter words and other profanity, and the *Bugle* does not print them."

"So you came to tell me about it."

"After that I saw Woods. We had quite a long talk."

Shannon had reached the end of the messages. He picked up the phone and said, "Get me Rita Prince." To Ames he said, "Does Woods's vocabulary reach to polysyllabic words?"

Ames had come round and opened the bottom desk drawer and found a bottle of whisky. "There was no great atmosphere of brotherly love when I mentioned you to Woods. He doesn't understand this maneuver of yours."

"When a cop gets killed they don't think straight," said Shannon shortly. "Water in the bathroom if you want it."

"Water!" Ames shuddered, then went on. "Woods told me a long story about one of their stoolies they'd contacted last night. He says Gerelli's hoodlums have worked out a highly involved plot. Sounds like the result of a Hollywood C picture crossed with early Edgar Wallace."

Shannon, who knew the uselessness of trying to hurry Ames, said, "What is this

horrendous plot?"

"That your row with the commissioner was staged deliberately so you could get into the confidence of the Syndicate and turn them over to the cops."

The phone bell tinkled and the detective said, "Did the Prince girl say what it was that was so urgent she wanted to talk about? No. Well, keep on trying her." Then he turned back. "Did Woods ask you to tell me?"

Ames grinned. "Not exactly. But he did inquire if I was going to see you. That was subtlety. Like a herd of charging elephants."

"Did they get anything else out of the stoolie?"

"No, but the obvious corollary was that various people might try to remove one Shannon from this vale of tears."

"They had their guns parked outside my house last night, and they've been tailing me all day when they could find me."

AMES considered him for a moment, and when he spoke again it was with an unwonted note of seriousness in his tone. "There's a nice obit of you in the *Bugle's* morgue. I don't want to have to get it out."

Sam's voice outside saying, "You heard the boss tell you to wait," made Shannon get up. He opened the door and found Bob Rowton, looking belligerent, confronting Sam.

"Let the urgent young man come in, Sam. And, Bill, stick around a bit."

Ames picked up the whisky bottle and squinted at the contents. "This'll occupy me for an hour or so," he said and went into the adjoining office.

As soon as the door had closed behind the newspaperman, Rowton said, "Marsha met you somewhere today." As he received no reply to what was, after all, a statement, he insisted, "Didn't she?"

"Just how's it your business?" asked Shannon, considering the young man with a bit more attention than he had done the night before. His mouth and chin were stubborn; the brown hair would have been a crew cut if it had been any shorter. Well-marked eyebrows surmounted steady brown eyes which

reflected a mixture of irritation and worry.
 "You've no right to run her into danger."

"Why should I?"

"You know what they'll think, knowing she was talking to you. They'll get the idea she's dangerous. What d'you want to drag her into this mess for?"

"Why are you mixing in this? She's got a father and a brother to look out for her."

"Her father doesn't know what she's doing, and Jack's always stinking these days. Don't know what's got into him lately."

"Are you in love with Marsha?"

"Good Lord, no, but I've known her since she was a kid and I'm not going to see her running into danger."

"Why come to me?"

"D'you deny talking to her?"

"I imagine Marsha Streber's talked to a good many people since you've known her. D'you go round cross-examining them all?"

The young man ignored this; he was getting progressively irritated. "All you're interested in is getting information for your

case. So you can have some more headlines. 'Another Triumph for Shannon.' You don't give a damn who suffers as long as you break the case, or who gets killed as long as you keep a whole skin. And there's another nauseating article on 'Has Private Detective a Charmed Life?' I'd like to write the truth for them one day. Say 'He puts the little men out in front to be shot at and then sits back and takes the credit for breaking the case.' You never mention the people who've been killed because they gave you the information that broke the case."

"Feel better now?" The amusement in the detective's voice nettled the young man further.

"You can sit there and sneer. You're so used to a fawning bunch of yes men around you who don't know the difference between a man and a grandstander and agree with everything you say because they're afraid of you. I'm not."

"Did you come here with such urgency to tell me what you thought about my character,

[Turn page]



oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

"... IMAGINE ME dancing with a scarecrow! How can he be so careless about his hair? It's straggly, unkempt, and ... Oh-oh—loose dandruff! He's got Dry Scalp, all right. He needs 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic."



*Hair looks better...
scalp feels better...
when you check Dry Scalp*

HE TOOK HER TIP, and look at his hair now! 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic can do as much for you! Just a few drops a day check loose dandruff; keep hair naturally good-looking. It contains no alcohol or other drying ingredients. Gives double care to both scalp and hair; and it's economical, too!

Vaseline HAIR TONIC
TRADE MARK

Listen to DR. CHRISTIAN,
 starring JEAN HERSHOLT,
 on CBS Wednesday nights.

or did you have something to say?" inquired Shannon equably.

"Don't drag Marsha into this mess. If you do, you'll have me to reckon with."

"That terrifying threat will, of course, deter me."

"I've a damn good mind to shove that grin of yours down the back of your throat."

Shannon didn't move. "I like a fight myself sometimes, but it's bad for the furniture, it wastes time, and it seldom clarifies anything."

The green eyes held a warning as well as mockery. A bit unwillingly Rowton recognized it and said, "I've told you——"

"You've told me you don't like me, which probably won't keep me awake at night. But, as I said before, I doubt whether that was why you rushed up here. Instead of blowing your top like an undisciplined school kid, begin at the beginning and tell me why you think Marsha is in danger, or why talking to me should endanger her."

CHAPTER VII

IMITATION OF D DAY



FOR A HALF MINUTE young Rawton remained balanced on the balls of his feet, then slowly the weight became more evenly distributed.

"Marsha's father being a lawyer for the Syndicate," he began finally, "they probably think she knows something about it. She doesn't, of course, but such people don't wait to make sure. If they find out she's been talking to you——" He broke off. "You know what it adds up to."

"Did she tell you she was going to talk to me?"

"She phoned me about going to the opening of some show on Friday. I couldn't make it, so I suggested lunch and she said she was going out to meet you. I told her it was dangerous, and when I asked her to wait until I'd had a chance to talk to her, she said she'd be late and hung up. I went to the house, but she'd already gone."

"I'm only investigating the death of Ryan. Why should the Syndicate get nervous over

what Marsha might say to me?"

"Everyone knows it's just a put-up job in the hope you'll get something on them!" Bob burst out impatiently.

"Surprising unanimity," murmured the detective. "Who is everyone?"

"This business with the commissioner wouldn't fool a ten-year-old."

"Who is everyone?" repeated Shannon.

"I—for example."

"I'm sure you're important in your own estimation, but you're not the whole population. Who else? The elevator man? The cab-driver? Or Streber? Or your father?"

"They all know it."

A thin smile crossed Shannon's face. "So everybody's wise except Gerelli."

"How could he be, up in Sing Sing?"

Shannon asked, "Just how much do you know about this racket?"

"Everyone knows you can't monkey with them. Marsha has no idea what men are like when they're in a corner. I've tried to tell her."

"Did she ever talk to you about Ryan?"

"She told me about his getting her out of a jam when she went to a marihuana party. I was furious with Jack for letting her go, but he said he couldn't stop her and she said she had to know what went on."

"That all she said about Ryan?"

"One time she said she'd a good mind to give Ryan the dope to smash the Syndicate. She doesn't know anything, really, but I knew it would be dangerous for her to have any contact with Ryan—just as it is with you."

"Why don't you ask your father to protect her?" inquired Shannon.

"What d'you mean by that?"

"Don't you know?"

For a moment Bob Rowton stood very still. When he spoke it was with the disciplined anger of a man. "Explain that."

The telephone buzzer gave three quick, sharp rings.

Frowning, the detective picked up the phone. There was no reply. "Go through that door," he snapped, pointing to the bathroom.

"The hell I——"

"You heard me. Go!" The tone was something the Army had taught Rowton to rec-

ognize. Between anger and bewilderment and hardly knowing why he did it, he headed for the bathroom door. Shannon came around his desk to the other door. His gun was in his hand. He stood at the side of the door and kicked it open.

Six shots crashed through and embedded themselves in the desk. A scream from Lane accompanied them, blending weirdly into their reports, fading away in the smoke, as if the sound were mingled with the smell of cordite. Shannon moved into the space through which, a second before, the bullets had winged their vicious path.

Sam was standing in the corner, his hands above his head; a man was holding a gun trained on his midriff. Another stood just outside the rail that separated the waiting room from Lane's desk. The third stood with his back to the switchboard, holding Lane in front of him.

Shannon fired once—and then again. The man behind Lane realized that his target was in front of him and squeezed the trigger.

THE man covering Sam clutched his belly. Sam lunged forward and grabbed his gun hand. The third man fired one wild shot and turned and ran. The man holding Lane let go and slumped down, concertinawise. Shannon leaped the intervening six feet and caught Lane as she pitched forward. "Get after him, Sam," he ordered.

For a moment he stood quite still, his gun trained on the man who had been covering Sam. At the form which lay at his feet he didn't even look. He had aimed between the eyes. The wounded man was groaning and trying to hold his guts together. The switchboard buzzed. Gathering Lane up, Shannon stepped over the still form, swiveled around her chair, and sat down, hoisting her onto his lap.

"Why th'ell don't you tell a fellow when there's going to be a war?" Bill Ames, fumbling frantically with a flashlight, emerged from Boothe's office.

"What in God's name——" Rowton also appeared.

With a hand still holding the gun, Shannon put in the plug. "Boothe & Shannon,"

he said, and after a pause, "I've no idea when he'll be back. He went out to reserve a padded cell for himself."

Bill Ames was snapping pictures left and right. He said, "Let me have a wire."

Rowton said, "Who——"

"Did you think you were the only person in New York who didn't like me?" Shannon asked him and turned to Ames. "Give me five minutes before you call your blasted sheet."

"Is she——" Rowton seemed to have noticed Lane for the first time.

"Lane disapproves of violence and passes out on general principle when it happens," Shannon carried her into his office and laid her on the couch. "And, incidentally, she probably saved my life."

"How?" from Rowton.

"That hysterical buzz she gave on the phone. She never rings like that. I knew there was something wrong. Look after her, Rowton. Give her some whisky and don't let her come out."

"What are you going to do?"

"There are a couple of things I want to know before I call the police," Shannon closed the door of his office firmly. "Bill, go back into Boothe's office. I'll give you a line there."

"What——" began Ames, but a look at Shannon's gaunt face stopped him. "Okay."

When that door was closed also, Shannon went over to the wounded man. "Who sent you?"

"Fer God's sake get me to a doctor!" moaned the man, who didn't look more than twenty.

"Who sent you?"

"I can't stand it. Didya have to shoot——" It tailed off into an animal moan.

"Who sent you?"

"Get a priest—I'm dying——"

Again, icily cold and indifferent, "Who sent you?" dropped into the silence.

"Priest——"

"When you've told me who sent you."

The man's pallid face was contorted, and he framed the words with difficulty. "Eddie——oh, help——"

"Who is Eddie?"

"Arkan——" The weak mouth quivered in a spasm of agony and the man lay limp.

The door opened and instinctively Shannon swung to face it. But it was Sam, looking crestfallen. "Lost him, Boss. He caught a car from the floor below."

"Doesn't matter." Shannon dialed the police.

As he finished explaining that he'd a corpse and a prisoner he wanted removed, Rowton came from his office and announced in a frustrated voice, "Miss Lane doesn't believe you're all right."

"Lane? How d'you feel?" Shannon went in and stood by her. "I'm okay, thanks to your warning."

"I was afraid——" She took off her glasses because they were getting fogged from tears.

"You've a nice young man to look after you, so don't cry."

ROWTON was watching Shannon curiously. For a second he saw reflected in the green eyes something that he couldn't read. Then the big detective said quietly, "They wouldn't have left Sam and you alive for witnesses. Just stay here for a while."

The wounded man was groaning again. Shannon went back to the switchboard and dialed another number. "Denbigh? Get down here and bring something to fix up a guy shot in the guts."

"Returning good for evil?" inquired Ames.

Shannon looked sourly at him. "I want him alive." He looked around the room and said, "I'm going to have a metal partition put across there—with a shatterproof-glass window—and have something rigged so that Lane can open and close the door and window from her desk."

"Maybe you should," agreed Ames.

Rowton came again from the inner office. "Did you send for the police? Because I'd better be getting along."

A hard smile curved Shannon's mouth. "Beat it and don't forget to ask your father that question."

"Wonder if Dad's been mistaken about you." Rowton headed for the door and nearly collided with Dr. Denbigh coming in, bag in hand.

The doctor looked over the scene without

surprise and went to the wounded man. "Don't people in this building even notice shots?" he asked, adding, "You weren't damaged?"

"Only a rip in my coat." Shannon fingered a tear in the right shoulder of his coat, then sat at the switchboard again. He got his friend and lawyer, Hough. "Send one of your men downtown right away." He explained briefly, "I'm busy and I don't want to take a chance on being delayed."

As he hung up, the door flew open and what appeared to be about half the police force streamed in. Lieutenant McIntyre, in charge, said, "Killing again, huh?" rather disagreeably and added, "Captain Woods is on his way."

The medical examiner pushed aside two large policemen and said, "Well, where is it? Or do I have to smell it out?" He followed the direction of McIntyre's pointing hand, muttering querulously that they seemed to expect him to have a divining rod for corpses. He knelt down, examined the body briefly, and snorted. "Killed by a bullet between the eyes. Neat piece of work. Yours?" He looked up at Shannon, who nodded wearily.

Denbigh said, "That's all I can do here. If you get him to a hospital some time before Christmas, he might live."

The wounded man was removed on a stretcher. McIntyre said, "What's the story, Shannon?"

Again he was aware of the hostility, but gave no sign that he had noticed it as he told them laconically what had happened.

"Miss Lane," said McIntyre when Shannon had finished.

"The first man came in—the one they took to the hospital," began Miss Lane, still looking green. "He asked if Mr. Shannon was in and said he'd come about the advertisement. I told him if he wanted to wait I'd find out. Then the other two——" Lane stopped, added in a disappointed tone, "One got away."

"Remind me to use a machine-gun next time," Shannon told her.

"The other two came in," she resumed, "and the first man said, 'Okay, he's in,' and he stepped through the gate and said,

'Get up, lady,' and he had a gun in his hand. I flashed the signal on Mr. Shannon's phone as I got up. I hoped he'd know something was wrong. And the man grabbed me and held me in front of him. One of the others was covering Sam. Then Mr. Shannon's door opened and they started shooting. I must have fainted, because the next thing I knew I was lying on the couch with—"

"Me giving you whisky, of which you disapprove," interrupted Shannon, shooting her a warning glance.

"Sorry to disappoint you," said Shannon. "Lieutenant, I know this punk." One of the police had been staring down at the corpse. "Barney Mace. We picked him up once for the Philly police. He was in a stolen car."

WOODS arrived and listened to McIntyre's résumé, eying the pile of things from the late Mr. Mace's pocket, none of which gave any clue to his activities when he was not attempting to commit murder.

Who Done It?



by an analysis of the testimony given by 20,000 persons. Results seem to prove that eye witnesses on the average claim that the criminal is five inches taller than he really is, and eight years older. They get the color of the hair wrong, too, in 83% of the cases.

In one particular outstanding instance, which took place in a Boston criminal court, the accused had to be identified. Seventeen people who did not know each other came forward of their own accord and emphatically declared, "That's the man who passed me a worthless check." Later on, however, he was proven to be absolutely innocent and released from jail because the real forger was captured and confessed. The guilty man and the innocent one, by the way, did not resemble each other in the slightest degree!

Mr. Average Man and Woman is equally faulty when it comes to identifying victims. A glaring example of mistakes of this kind took place in the state of Kansas. A woman had been shot to death on a highway. Forty different people identified the body differently at the morgue, where it was described as being the late sweetheart, wife, sister or roommate of each of the claimants. Later on every one of these "victims" turned out to be alive and they were all probably surprised when they learned what had happened.

—William Carter

McIntyre turned to Sam, "That right, Ross?"

"Yes. They figured on getting the boss when he opened the door. Thought he'd be afraid to shoot on account of Lane."

"You agree, Ames?" McIntyre flung the question at the reporter.

"I didn't come out of the other office until I heard something that reminded me of D Day," Bill Ames told him.

"Clear case of self-defense," muttered McIntyre.

Lewis had come in at the same time as Woods. "I've been over in Jersey, Boss. The Syndicate took over the North Jersey ring two years back. Bentek was operating in Harlem and uptown before the Syndicate started mixing in the numbers racket. The story is they made Bentek a cash offer and he wasn't interested. Then they started sending runners into his territory. First he had some of them beaten up. Then two were killed. So Gerelli started a whispering campaign that Bentek's outfit fixed the number

and had been cheating everyone for years. They're scared to talk. They all repeat: 'Don't pay to know too much about the numbers.' But the grapevine says Bentek's bringing in outside guns."

Shannon's eyes flicked to the corpse, covered now with a rug, out of consideration for Miss Lane's feelings. So Bentek was bringing in outside guns, was he? Yet somehow Shannon had had a hunch that Bentek had been telling the truth when he had denied being the instigator of the "Drop the case or else" message.

"Why did these punks try to rub you out?" Woods was asking.

"I don't know."

"You shot 'em."

"Use your head, Woods," Shannon said irritably. "Three men I've never seen before come into my office, hold up my staff, and, when I open the door, start shooting. What th'hell d'you think I was doing? Asking why they were shooting at me? One's dead, one got away, and the third is in no shape to answer questions. How am I to know why they came or who sent 'em?"

"You won't get away with that with the commissioner—not this time."

Shannon's eyes narrowed. "One of Hough's firm is on his way downtown. If you try to hold me, he can get bail posted in any sum you can dream up. Also we have the press, as represented by Mr. Ames of the *Bugle*. An article tomorrow about the aggrieved citizen whose office is entered by armed men, whose staff is held at pistol point, who defends himself and staff and is then held by the police, would hardly help the commissioner. And even he has the brains to know it."

Woods' bulldog face was almost purple in shade. "Thought of everything, haven't you?"

"I try to," said Shannon modestly.

"I'm on my way," said Ames and then grinned at the captain. "I delivered your message."

"Crazy as a coot," mumbled Woods as the door closed behind Ames. "I didn't give him any message. Let's go. . . ."

The offices of the Theger Holding Company were on the fifteenth floor of one of the

better and more conservative buildings on Fourth Avenue. In the waiting room, which had been designed by one of the better and more conservative office decorators, the receptionist looked up unwillingly from a magazine story, picked up her telephone, and said, "Mr. Shannon is here." She put it down and said, "Inside and second door on your left," indicated a door with a languid wave of her crimson-tipped hand, and returned to the perusal of the magazine.

There were five men in the room that Shannon entered. Streber got up from the table where they were all seated and said irritably, "Considering that it was you wanted this meeting, you might have been on time."

"Sorry. I was delayed."

"What happened?"

"Nothing important." As he spoke the detective was raking the faces of the four other men with his eyes. If anyone was surprised to see him alive, he had time to get over his surprise.

Streber introduced them rapidly. "Meyer—Coffman—Fischer."

Shannon nodded and transferred his glance to a small, thin man at the far end.

"Hasn't he got a name?"

"That's Marras. He don't count." A big, pot-bellied man who, Shannon remembered, had been attached to the name of Meyer, laughed.

Marras' thin face twitched and he adjusted his glasses nervously as he mumbled something which might have been a greeting. Shannon said, "Glad to meet you."

"We was beginning to be afraid something had happened to you." A large nose, behind which lurked the man called Coffman, emphasized all the remarks its owner made.

"Figgered you might have tripped over your garter and broke a leg," contributed Meyer. This was evidently considered funny, as everyone laughed.

SHANNON pulled out a chair, twisted it round so that its back was to a wall, and sat down. "If Gerelli didn't kill Ryan, he was framed," he began.

"Sure," said Coffman. "We know that."

"By Bentek," contributed Meyer.

Shannon moved irritably in his chair. "You'll repeat like parrots, 'He was framed. It must have been Bentek.' There's not a scrap of evidence that it was Bentek. If you expect any results in the short time before your Big Shot fries, you've got to do better than that."

"Whatinhell's the Big Shot paying you fifty grand for if you don't find out things?" asked Fischer.

"I didn't hire out as a magician or a clairvoyant," said Shannon. "I'm a detective, and detectives need evidence. Why did Bentek frame him? What was his motive? How did he do it?"

This produced a prolonged silence. At last Meyer said, "Who th'hell else would want to?"

"Why would Bentek want to? If he just wanted to eliminate Gerelli, there were hundreds of easier and surer ways of doing it."

After another pause Coffman said, "Figured it wouldn't be traced to him."

CHAPTER VIII

LITTLE MAN WHO DIDN'T COUNT



DESMOND SHANNON broke the next silence himself. "Let's take some other angles," he said to the assembled men. "You're the heads of the various branches of this—uh—organization? You furnish reports each week or month?"

"Daily on policy and weekly on everything else," said Streber.

"Each of you runs some other company?"

"Sure. There's always a front, of course." That from Coffman.

"Just what are you being so nosy about?" Meyer wanted to know.

"There might be other fields in which Gerelli's activities met opposition besides policy," Shannon told him smoothly.

"Not in mine." Coffman pointed a finger toward some clipped typewritten sheets on the table. On one was the name Schwengler Realty Company.

"Hell, d'you think we haven't thought of

that?" said Meyer.

"When used you to see Gerelli?" asked Shannon.

"He came to the meetings every week," said Coffman. "Otherwise you saw him when he sent for you."

"You all knew where he lived?"

"I don't know what you're driving at, Shannon," said Meyer. He seemed uneasy. "We've been to his house. We all know Ma. But we didn't go up there 'less we was invited."

"Suppose one of you had trouble?"

"You handled it yourself," Meyer told him with grimness.

"If someone had called his home the night of the murder, would they have been told how to reach him at the Park Ardsley Hotel?"

"No," Streber put in. "Ma would have called and given him a message."

"Ma said nobody did call," said Coffman.

"Someone called the hotel. If you're going to frame a man for murder, you have to make

[Turn page]



Blended Whiskey—80.6 Proof—70% Grain Neutral Spirits
Mr. Boston Distiller Inc., Boston

sure he has no alibi. If Bentek had Ryan killed and framed Gerelli for the job, it was Bentek who had him called away from the game. So Bentek must have known where he was."

This produced another silence heavy with thought. Streber shrugged and said, "Someone must have talked."

"Couldn't-a happened any other way," agreed Meyer.

"How did Bentek know where Ryan would be?" said the detective. "How did Bentek know how to find Gerelli? How did Bentek persuade him to leave the game without telling anyone where he was going? If Bentek decoyed him out, why won't Gerelli say where he went? Gerelli was framed, but I don't see how Bentek could have done it."

Streber's eyes were fixed speculatively on Shannon, but he did not speak. At last Meyer spoke. "D'you realize what you've said?"

"I've been waiting for you to realize it," Shannon looked around the faces. The expressions ranged from anger through incredulity to bewilderment. Marras, the thin little man who "didn't count," had his eyes fixed on Meyer with a deadly hatred. Shannon was pondering the cause of the hatred when Coffman spoke.

"You figure he was framed by one of his own mob?"

"Meaning one of us?" Meyer asked in a hard voice.

"Someone who knew where Ryan was, someone who knew where Gerelli was, someone who could make him leave the poker game and not talk afterward. What does it add up to?"

Meyer didn't raise his voice as he said, "That's a dangerous idea, Shannon."

The detective smiled but it didn't reach his eyes. "Always awkward, finding double-crossers in your own mob," he agreed. "Who hated him?"

There was a chorus of "Bentek."

"Think of someone else," he told them.

"You better round up someone to take the rap," said Meyer, "if you want the rest of your fifty grand. And it mightn't be too good for you if you don't."

The phone rang and Streber said, "That'll

be for me. I told Rapapopulous to call me here." He spoke into the receiver and a little later said, "Yes. Yes. Shannon's going over. 'By." He turned to the detective. "The game's at the Park Ardsley, room five sixteen, tonight, if you're going."

Shannon got up. "Any of you see Joan La Ruba recently?"

"That was the broad——" began Fischer and stopped.

"He got rid of the La Ruba dame five years back," said Meyer.

"He shoulda done it before," muttered Fischer. "I always said it was her got Jeff Markey sent up."

"Why?" asked Shannon.

"She talked too much," said Meyer sourly.

"Well, so long, boys. Streber, I want a word with you." Shannon paused with his hand on the door. "As a bunch of loyal henchmen trying to get your boss out of a tough spot, I don't think a hell of a lot of your cooperation."

THERE was complete silence after he left, except for Meyer's voice, which said "Shut up" before anything had been audible. Shannon smiled grimly and wandered into the outer office. The receptionist had gone home. He sat down and waited. Fischer came out first, followed closely by Coffman. They both said a grudging "Good night."

Meyer was about two minutes behind them. He gave the detective a hard look and said, "I don't get your game, Shannon. But doublecrossing pays dividends in lead. Think it over."

Streber came out and said, "Are you any further forward?"

Shannon ignored the question. "What's Fischer? I mean officially."

"Runs the Gaylands Corporation. Operates shooting galleries."

"Meyer?"

"Blue Ribbon Used Car Company."

"Coffman?"

"Indo-Mechanics Company. Distributes juke boxes, slot machines, et cetera."

"Marras?"

Streber's tone dismissed him. "Bookkeeper for the Theger Company. A pensioner of Gerelli's. Broken-down killer."

"Where does Schwengler fit in?"

"The Schwengler Realty Company owns the buildings where they operate. The separation is for tax purposes."

"Doesn't Schwengler come to these powwows?"

"He has nothing to do with the running of the businesses, except managing the real estate." The lawyer passed a hand over his eyes.

"What's the matter?" asked Shannon. "Are you ill?"

Streber sat down and took a small box from his vest pocket. "Give me some water, will you?" When Shannon brought it he took a pill and said, "Have to watch my heart these days. What did you ask me?"

Shannon said, "Come a long way since you were valedictorian of your class. Pretty good going, to work your way through college to be valedictorian. You were going into the Army, weren't you? When you came back you were going to devote your life to the building of the future of America based on law and justice. Yes, wasn't a bad speech. A bit on the idealistic side, but youngsters are apt to be."

There was scarcely veiled hatred momentarily in Streber's eyes. "I'm flattered at your appreciation of my virgin efforts," he said with heavy sarcasm. "But I don't quite see what it's got to do with finding Ryan's murderer."

"I was wondering how you got into the racket."

"My dear Shannon, you appear to be confused between a participant in what you term a racket and the counsel who defends one."

"I imagine if you made that speech today, you wouldn't bracket law and justice together."

Streber got up. "Only a fool does not learn as he grows older."

"Depends what he learns," said Shannon. "Good night."

In the lobby Shannon went to a telephone booth and dialed Rita Prince's number. Still no reply. He watched Streber go out, walking slowly like a very tired or ill man. The lawyer pulled his black hat down, squared his shoulders with visible effort, and went

out. About three minutes later the thin little man who didn't count came down.

Marras headed east to Lexington Avenue and Forty-fourth Street. About five doors from Second Avenue he turned into an entrance, producing keys from his pocket.

Shannon looked at the walk-up, found the name of Marras, and rang the bell. The buzzer clicked and he pushed open the door. On the third floor Marras was standing in the doorway of a room, regarding him with perplexity and apprehension. He said, "What d'you want?"

"Hospitable soul, aren't you? I climb all these stairs and you don't even ask me in."

"Sure. Come in. I only just got back." Whether the second part of the sentence was an apology for the disorderly state of the room, the unmade bed, the dirty coffee cup on the table or not, Shannon couldn't tell. Marras cleared some newspapers off a chair for his guest to sit down. "How d'ya know I lived here?"

SHANNON didn't answer. He was fascinated by the pictures that covered every inch of the walls. Al Capone—Karpis—Dillinger. "Starting a rogues' gallery of your own?" he inquired.

"Gerelli's the last of 'em." Marras looked at a newspaper photograph among them captioned, "Theodore Gerelli, wealthy New York realtor, leaving the track at Saratoga."

"Last of what?"

"The big ones. Why, back in the Twenties—" He broke off and said, "What did you come up here for?"

"Thought you could tell me a few things." Shannon took cigarettes from his pocket and held the pack out to Marras. "What's your angle on this killing?"

"The Big Shot didn't do it," answered the man promptly.

"You're sure?"

"He's too smart."

A slight smile twisted Shannon's mouth. "Everyone figures that. But if he didn't, who did?"

"Why don't you figger it was one of Ben-tek's mob?" queried Marras.

"I told you. It doesn't make sense. Lots of other people might have done it."

"Like you said—one of his own mob."

"Exactly."

"But why? Without the Big Shot the mob won't hold together."

"Possibly someone thinks he's strong enough to hold it together," suggested Shannon.

"Sure. Meyer. But he can't."

"You don't like him."

"That big mouth? I hate his guts." It was savage.

"What's he done to you?"

"I ain't got no guts now. I know it. There's things happen take the guts out of a man. Back in the Kansas City days Karpis used to send for me when he had a tough job. And Doc Barker himself said one time I was the best—" Marras suddenly stopped his account of his glories among the elite of gangsterdom in a bygone era. It might not be wise to advertise these triumphs against the law to this man who was said to be trying to get information for the police.

Shannon didn't appear to notice the sudden suspicion. He asked, "What happened?"

Marras shrugged. "I got shot up one time, and after that I hit the needle and I wasn't any good any more. I holed up where the mob usta lay low when the heat was on. Jest looked after the place. Then they broke up and a lot drifted East. I didn't do so good. Gerelli put me on as pin boy at a place he had over in Union City. Said I'd be lucky to him. Dunno why. He never would tell me.

"One time the cashier in the joint was sick and I did his work. I always kinda liked figures. Gerelli he says to me, 'Get yourself learned something about bookkeeping and I could use you. I gotta have a man I can trust keep the books.' I found a feller'd been a C.P.A. in a bar over in Newark and got him to show me.

"And I told the Big Shot, I says, 'I learned bookkeeping,' and he puts me to work in the office that was his front then. Meyer joined up, bringing his mob with him. And he says, 'I don't want no broken-down killers in this outfit. Ain't but one use fer a broken-down killer and that's pushing up daisies,' and the Big Shot says, sharp-like, 'I hire and fire,' and that shuts Meyer up." He stopped a moment, then added, "But he nev-

er misses a chance to get off some crack, and he treats me like something that crawls. Me, that Karpis usta send fer."

"Did Meyer have much trouble with Gerelli?" asked Shannon after a suitable pause of sympathy.

"Yeah. He don't obey orders. Trying to make like he's a big shot hisself."

"And he thinks he could hold the mob together if Gerelli fries."

"But he can't. He'll run everything to hell. Ain't got no idea of business. The Big Shot says to me one day, he says, 'Marras, times has changed. You can't run a town open-like, the way the big fellow ran Chicago and Cice-ro. Ya can't send out a bunch of torpedoes and shoot up a half-dozen palookas that's muscling in, to show 'em who's boss. That don't go any more. Ya gotta do things businesslike. Like them big corporations done. D'you think,' he says, 'they weren't as crooked as anything that's been pulled by any mob in this country? Why,' he says, 'they was so crooked, makes us look like school kids pinching a coupla pennies off a blind man. But they did it quiet and smooth and, when they could, legal.' And it's paid off. Look at the Syndicate."

The detective nodded.

"DIDN'T Meyer agree with him?"

"Meyer allus says the one guy you know won't hurt you is a dead guy. Knock off a few of any bunch and the others'll come to heel. He runs his own mob pretty good." Marras acknowledged that grudgingly. "But the Big Shot kept a close watch on him. Allus knew everything that was going on, the Big Shot did."

"Informers in each mob?"

"He got reports," Marras agreed evasively.

"Did Gerelli always come to these weekly meetings?"

"Regular."

"And Streber?"

"Most always. The Big Shot didn't do much without asking him. Says it's smart to know where you stand before you start and not to have to pay your mouthpiece for getting you outta the jam after. And most of the time there's more'n one way of doing things,

and one way's legal and the other ain't. Me, I can't see the difference, if you get the same things done, how you do it. But," he went on hastily, as if he feared this observation might be construed as a criticism of Gerelli, "the Big Shot was right every time."

"Thanks, Marras. You've been a help." Shannon got up.

"You are going to clear the Big Shot, ain't you?" The little man looked up at him with a mixture of pleading and calculation in the eyes behind the large glasses.

"Sure. Why?"

"Meyer says you've only got into this to find out what you can and then you'll turn your info over to the cops and won't spring the Big Shot."

Shannon's lips curled into a thin smile. "So it was Meyer who figured that out."

From a drugstore Shannon called his office. Lewis, who was on the switchboard, said, "Pete called."

"Did he get anything on La Ruba?"

"She arrived in East Shoreby five years ago with a pile of dough," Lewis read from his notes. "Bought the Lobster Paradise from a Greek. Didn't do well and last season was badly in the red. Kept stalling her creditors with a story about getting capital. Creditors got tired of waiting and wouldn't extend her credit. Nine months back she sold the fixtures, packed up, and left for New York on February third."

"And Ryan was killed early on February fourth," said Shannon. "What else did Pete get?"

"He managed to locate a couple who were

friendly with her, who said they'd written her at the Cyril Hotel, where she said she was going, and the letter came back marked 'Unknown.'"

"Is Sam there?" asked Shannon. "Tell him to check with the Cyril. The usual routine. Anything else?"

Lewis read some more messages, but they were not specially interesting. Shannon depressed the bar, got out another nickel, and once again dialed Rita Prince's number. Still no reply. He looked up the number of the apartment hotel itself and got a porter who said he didn't remember seeing Miss Prince go out. But he'd ask the elevator men. After two nickels' worth of waiting, the phone said that the elevator men didn't remember taking Miss Prince down. Shannon took a cab up to the Sayle Hotel.

"D'you think anything's wrong?" asked one of the elevator men after they'd all confirmed what the porter had said on the phone.

"D'you have a master key?" Shannon said.

"It's a special lock. When she moved in, there was a lot of work done there. Regular fortress, the place is."

"How does the maid get in?"

"She has a key, I guess."

Shannon found the back porter and ascertained that the maid had a key and usually came at nine and left at two.

"Did you see her leave today?"

The other man had been on duty he was told. A telephone call to the other man elicited the fact that the maid had left early, at about one, and that she had not seemed upset in any way.

[Turn page]

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"It's the top floor, isn't it?" asked Shannon. "Any way of getting from the roof onto her terrace?"

"That's easy. Only the door to the roof is locked." The porter's eyes flicked to a rack of keys, all conveniently labeled. Shannon's hand came out of his pocket with a bill. The porter found the view of garbage cans most absorbing.

CHAPTER IX

POOR PRINCESS



RIDING up in the service elevator, Shannon walked along a passage to an iron staircase. The door at the top yielded to his key and he found himself on a flat, unfenced roof. A convenient rain pipe allowed him to slide without difficulty onto Miss Prince's terrace.

One of the windows onto the terrace was open. Shannon moved along cautiously, standing at the side of the open window for some seconds. The room inside was almost dark and there was no sound of movement. It was the living room. He stepped carefully in. He could smell the heavy perfume the Princess used. He turned up the lights. The room was empty. He went on into the bedroom. Also empty. The housecoat she had been wearing that morning lay on the bed. He walked into the bathroom. His search was ended.

It was a pink-and-green bathroom. Pink tiles and porcelain; green curtains and frills. A pink stool stood on little green legs beside a pink scale. Pink towels with green monograms hung on the aluminum rails. Rows of perfume and cosmetic bottles sat on the glass shelves. A huge jar of geranium bath salts was in an angle of the tub. And now the Princess was quite, quite dead among it all.

The woman was naked, her head under water. Shannon picked up one arm. She had been dead for some time. As he turned away he noticed a small bottle on the washbasin. The cork was beside it. Nembutal. He bent down so that he could see without touching it. There appeared to be a half-dozen or so

tablets in it. He shook his head slowly.

He went to the telephone, called the police, and announced succinctly what had happened. Then he went back to the bedroom and stood looking at the bed. The housecoat lay where it had been thrown, but there was no sign of underwear. Perhaps she had not been using any. He remembered that her bare feet had been thrust into velvet slippers he could see beside the bed. Again he went into the bathroom and stood for a while, a puzzled frown on his face. Something was wrong with the picture.

He went and opened the front door, then called Lewis and explained, and added, "Call Ames and tell him to get over here."

Two men from a radio patrol car arrived first. They went into the bathroom and looked. "She was a nice-looking dame," said one when he returned. "You broke in, you say?"

The detective explained.

"Sounds phony to me," said the other policeman.

Detectives from the precinct came a few minutes later. They also looked into the bathroom. They agreed that she'd been a nice-looking dame and made a number of suggestions as to what profession she'd been best suited for. Shannon repeated his explanations.

The medical examiner arrived and, right on his heels, Captain Woods, followed by McIntyre, fingerprint men and photographers. Woods greeted Shannon dourly and said, "Let's have your story."

Once again Shannon repeated it with boredom. The porter was brought up, looking nervous. "I questioned the porter," Shannon said, "and while he was attending to something else I took the key. It wasn't his fault."

"Why were you so all-fired curious to get in?"

"She phoned around lunch time and left word that she must speak to me and it was urgent. I've tried to get her a number of times since. I wondered what had happened."

Woods grunted and went into the bedroom. From the bathroom door he asked, "What have you got, Doc?"

"Have to wait for the autopsy before we

know if she drowned or if she was dead when her head went under the water. Or if she'd taken the nembutal." Dr. Butler jerked his head toward the little bottle. He was looking curiously at her throat. Finally he just repeated, "Have to wait for the autopsy."

"Could have just taken the pills, gone to sleep, and drowned," suggested Woods. "All right, wise guy. So you know it all. Suicide or accident?"

Shannon raised his eyebrows. "Murder."

"Nuts," said Woods.

SHANNON shrugged and got up.

"Okay. You know where to find me when you want me."

"Not so fast. There's a hell of a lot of questions you've got to answer."

"Make 'em snappy. I'm tired."

"Why are you so sure it's murder?"

Shannon muttered impatiently and led the way to the bedroom. "This kind of dame—ex-chorus girl—with a bedroom fixed up like a high-priced floosie's, doesn't drop off her housecoat and walk naked into the bathroom. Not in October. She'd either take it off in there and hang it on one of the pegs or she'd put some fancy kind of bathrobe on before she went in."

"She might have sat on the bed and taken it off."

"She'd been lying on the bed or placed there. Look at the indentations. And her slippers are turned wrong way if she'd been sitting on the bed and just stepped out of everything."

"She might have taken them off before."

"All right. Come here." Shannon went to the bathroom. The doctor had finished. "D'you suppose she'd get into the bathtub with her watch on?"

"If she was committing suicide."

"Why the bathtub, anyway, in that case? There's plenty of nembutal there to kill her. If she took it."

"She must have taken it," said Woods.

"What in? Most people take a drink of water or something to help a pill down. None of those glasses have been touched."

"Remember that fellow recently who'd been suffering from insomnia and he took

sleeping pills and got in the tub?" persisted Woods. "Figured it would relax him. And he went to sleep."

"I remember. But she didn't."

"Then who killed her?"

"I wasn't here."

One of his assistants called Woods. Shannon wanted dinner and he wanted to sleep, and he didn't see any prospect of either in the immediate future. From the bedroom he heard a man's voice saying, "Beats me, Captain. Ain't no underwear around. Didn't she wear none?"

"You would notice that, Freyer," Woods growled back.

"I wish you'd looked more like an energetic sleuth instead of trying to pose for the Sleeping Beauty." Ames's voice spoke from the front door. "What's the dope?"

"You know as much as I do," Shannon told him.

Woods came out and said, "How th'hell did you know about this?"

"A little birdie told me."

"Shannon."

"I never thought of him as being particularly birdlike," said Ames. "And you're wrong. He is not the only fount of wisdom in this city."

Shannon got up and said, "I'm on my way."

Woods's eyes narrowed and he looked at Ames. "Protection?"

The detective looked at Woods' purple-hued face and said, "Do I need it?" as he went out.

Ma Gerelli was enveloped in a brilliant purple housecoat, listening to the radio. Briefly Shannon told her what had happened. Her hard eyes questioned him without even a fleeting pity for the victim.

"Theo'll be upset," she said. "Who done it?"

"I came to ask you that, Ma."

"It wasn't easy to get in there. Theo'd fixed that."

"Easy enough from the roof."

"Did you see them steel shutters on the terrace windows?"

"They weren't closed."

"Theo didn't figger she was in no danger," said Ma, "er he'd have had some of the

boys keep an eye on her."

"Someone thought she knew something. What?"

The woman shrugged. "Rita knew how to keep her trap shut. I'll say that for her."

"What did she know?" persisted Shannon. "Who are Lefty and Sep?"

"Them two boys? They wouldn't-a done it. Them's good boys, Shannon. I figured it wouldn't do no harm to have 'em go out with Rita. Y'know, as the months go by and a man's still up there and another feller comes along—" She ended with her usual shrug.

"How did Gerelli meet Rita?"

"Remember back when the Clay Pigeon and his mob put on a show here?"

VAGUELY Shannon remembered that Legs Diamond had been interested in some kind of a musical show, largely so that his gang and friends could put their girls into the chorus.

"Rita was in the line. She went out on parties that Theo gave, but he was going with La Ruba then. That was a jealous bitch. I don't reckon Theo paid much attention to Rita then. Anyways, Rita didn't do so good in shows and she went to work for a feller had a flower concession in the Freyborn Hotel. Theo had a suite there"—she called it a soo-ett—"and he bought stuff off her. And then he split with La Ruba. She opened her yap once too often. He got to taking Rita out and then it got steady."

"If La Ruba was jealous, perhaps she had it in for Rita."

"La Ruba's in Connecticut. Theo give her a stake and told her if she ever came round again er opened her big yap, she'd go in concrete in the river. I still say it was account of her that Jeff Markey was sent up. Damn the dirty little bitch. Jeff was a good boy."

"Theo didn't believe it was her fault?"

"He's funny that way. But he knew." She nodded her head, her dark eyes looking into the past. "He knew."

"Know who Rita's folks were, Ma?"

"She comes from Pennsylvania some place. Don't reckon her family much approved of her life. Times when she got drunk she used to cry because her pa and ma wouldn't write and they sent back the money she used to

send to 'em." Ma snorted derisively.

The doorbell rang. Shannon said, "That'll be the cops. I'm leaving."

"I fergot," said Ma. "Did Schwengler get you this morning?"

"Schwengler? No."

"Said he wanted to talk to you before the meeting. I told him to try Rita's." Ma opened the door and confronted Woods, flanked by McIntyre.

The captain glared at Shannon and said, "What are you doing here?"

"Playing the harpsichord," said the detective. "Can't you see?"

On Park Avenue he found a cab and had himself driven to Rierson's address. The professor opened the door of the book-lined room and greeted him with, "How did we get here this morning?"

"Taxi."

"You put me to bed?"

"Uhuh."

"That's bad."

"Why?"

"Not in the morning. No. That's bad." He appeared to be sober now. He went to a closet and returned with a bottle.

Shannon squinted at it and said, "If it's so bad, how about giving it a rest?"

"It's not morning now." Rierson shot an apprehensive glance toward the window, as though he feared the dawn might have sneaked up on him. Reassured, he started to pour drinks and said, "I don't expect you to be a reformer."

"I'm not. You'll have the headache tomorrow."

"But tonight I'll sleep."

"And forget that you remember and dream that you forget."

The professor's eyebrows went up. He asked, "Where did you hear that?"

"Oh, I got exposed to some education, a bit sporadically," Shannon told him. "And I did once read a book."

"Then you should know that forgetfulness is the greatest gift of the gods."

"Gift? I have to pay for mine. Seven bucks a fith."

"Buy quarts, my boy. Full quarts. Cheap-er that way." Rierson finished his drink, nearly half a tumblerful, and looked regret-

fully at the bottle. "I must be sober tomorrow. The poor Princess. Usually she does try, but this morning—" He paused. "Tomorrow I must resume the hopeless task of trying to persuade her that a plural pronoun requires a plural verb."

SHANNON told him what had happened and, through sheer force of habit, Rier-son's hand reached for the bottle.

"She was kind to me, Shannon, in her way." A half smile twisted the professor's mouth. "She was a sentimentalist and a ro-

Gerelli said Bentek had tried to get this man in Philadelphia to fix it so that it won."

"The idea being to break the banks, then walk in with the cash for a half interest, I suppose."

"Something like that. It didn't work."

"How many of them did you teach?" inquired Shannon suddenly.

"On and off, twenty-five or thirty. The only one that learned anything was Gerelli himself." He gave a short, bitter laugh. "I tried to teach them grammar, but that was a forlorn hope, so I concentrated on what to do

Guilty as Charged



ALTHOUGH it may seem incredible, inanimate objects like books and firearms have been put on trial in formal courts, found guilty, and punished accordingly. This, as a matter of fact, has been commonplace legal practice in Spain for centuries, whenever deaths were accidentally caused by pistols and other weapons. One of the most recent such trials occurred in the 1930's when a gun was court-martialled and "executed" with a great deal of ceremony.

France also felt that the things people manufactured ought to be treated punitively when they were responsible for illegal activities. That's why a countless number of books were found locked up in cells in the Bastille in Paris when it was being destroyed by the Revolutionists on July 14, 1789. The books had been correctly accused of containing adverse criticism of the past four kings, and had been punished just like live prisoners for their offenses—after being arrested and tried in courtrooms!

—J. L. Benton

mantic. She saw Gerelli as a knight-errant—a Robin Hood. He is generous to all kinds of retainers, you know. Gambling was high romance to Rita. God knows she lived close enough to it to know how sordid it was and how crooked."

"Just how crooked is it?" inquired Shannon idly.

"They fix the number. I forget how. Some fellow on the Philadelphia exchange is bribed, I think. I never paid much attention. When there was trouble with Bentek, I remember hearing them talking about it. Said he'd got at their man there."

"Had he?"

"I never knew. It was a day that some particular number was a heavy favorite, and

with a knife and fork and when to take off your hat. Donald Rier-son—professor in etiquette to gangsters!"

"Tell me something about Coffman."

"An ex-pimp with an inferiority complex. Bad mixture."

"Wasn't he a friend of the Princess's before she met Gerelli?"

"Depends how carelessly you use the word friend. He knew her." Rier-son shook his head, again reaching for the bottle. "The Princess had boy friends before Gerelli, and maybe they gave her presents. She is—she was, God rest her soul—a mighty good-looking girl. But she wasn't a professional hustler."

"Was Coffman one of her boy friends?"

"She didn't like him. She used to complain he was always mauling her at parties when Gerelli wasn't looking."

There was a knock at the door and, grumbling, the professor went and opened it.

"Hello, Doc—" began a voice, and stopped as its owner entered sufficiently to see the detective. He recognized the distinguished features of "Moron" Manny Gesheim that he had recorded for posterity in the shooting gallery. "What's he doing here?" Manny demanded.

"Discussing philosophy and the waters of Lethe, friend Moron."

"Huh? An' I told you this morning, my name ain't Moron."

"D'you realize, Shannon, that if you weighed this cretin's brain, the weight would be little different from that of an Einstein?"

"Presumably quality counts," observed Shannon.

"What's he doing here?" repeated Manny.

"A one-track mind," said Shannon. "I came, Moron, for the same purpose as you."

"Yeah? What's dat?"

"Don't you know why you came?"

"Sure I know. What d'you think I am? A dope."

"Certainly," Shannon agreed cheerfully. "Go ahead and talk to the professor. Don't mind me."

There was a troubled frown between Manny's overhung brows. Finally he decided to give up the whole puzzle and deliver his message. "Listen, Doc, Meyers says to tip you off some louse has rubbed out da Princess and the cops'll be here and look out what you say. Jest tell 'em you give her lessons, see? Not all of us. See?"

"With remarkable clarity," agreed the professor.

"The boss don't trust him neither." A jerk of the head toward Shannon accompanied this irrelevant statement.

"The boss?" queried the detective.

"Yeah. Meyer."

Shannon whistled. "So that's the way the wind blows. Meyer's the boss now."

Manny looked worried. "Er—uh—until the Big Shot gets back, of course."

"And if he doesn't?"

But Manny was wary now. "Meyer says it

won't be healthy fer you, mister, if you don't spring him."

"Meyer is like you, Moron. He has a one-track mind. Run along and tell him I said so."

"YOU—uh—well, don't ferget what I told you, Doc." After a look of mystified apprehension at the two men, Manny hurried out. Shannon went to the window which looked out onto Third Avenue. He saw Manny crossing the road without waiting for the lights. He went to a car parked at the far side and had a conversation with the man in the driver's seat.

"What are you looking at?" asked Rier-son.

"Nothing," Shannon told him, but he didn't move from the window. After another minute Manny went into a delicatessen. A round sign on the front of it announced that there was a telephone inside. The car moved slowly and turned west on Fifty-third Street. Shannon would have been willing to bet that it parked just out of sight round the corner. He turned back into the room but he did not immediately pursue the subject of Gerelli or the Princess. He picked up a picture which stood, dusty and a bit lopsided, on the desk. "Your wife?"

"Put that down." With angry eyes Rier-son lurched toward him and snatched it.

"And leave me alone!"

"Handsome woman," continued Shannon mercilessly. "I noticed it this morning."

"Why don't you get th'hell out of here?" said Rier-son wearily.

"Not before I know where you stand in this deal."

The professor turned away a bit unsteadily and reached once more for the bottle. "What's it to you? It won't tell you how Ryan was killed."

"How did you get in with them?"

"It's a long, sad yarn, my friend," the professor said.

"What isn't?"

"You may have a point there. From Socrates to Freud—"

"Even the Bible says man is full of woe. But I want to hear your particular brand of it," Shannon said.

CHAPTER X

THE COMPANY OF CROOKS



ULPING down his drink, Rier-son's mood seemed to change.

"Listen, my friend," he said to Shannon, "and I will tell you the epic of one Donald, a boy who grew up in an old-fashioned home where there were books

and people read the books. They weren't just placed there to cover a blank spot on the wall. And this naive child learned to read books and to love them. And when he went to school and college he wasn't interested in anything else. Books. He thought they were important. He thought it was important that we should know the story of our species—the mistakes—the crimes. Everything that people call history.

"He didn't take any part in the athletic or social life of his schools, and so he never learned to deal with other people. He knew the theory of humanity but not the applied science of how to deal with it. He was happy in the escape world of his books and his studies. He didn't know it was an escape from his own shyness—his own fears. I said he was a stupid young man."

Rierson paused long enough to refill his glass, then went on. "He received an appointment to teach at a Southern university. Inevitably he met a woman. She didn't know that our stupid friend was alive. The only way he got up the courage to go to a party when he was asked—which was not often—was to get a half-dozen drinks under his belt. He was a bad teacher for the same reason. It was agony to get up in the lecture hall. He longed for the good will of his pupils, their approbation and friendliness, but he couldn't overcome his shyness. He taught history, but he had not learned its lesson himself.

"Then he discovered that if he took about eight drinks, people thought he was amusing—a good fellow. So he did. The girl didn't realize it. He was drunk when he proposed to her, or he'd never have had the courage to do it. He was drunk the day he got married. But in those days he could drink. His legs and speech didn't go back on him.

"After he married he stopped drinking. But his wife was gay and young. She liked to entertain, but her friends always said what a dull fellow her husband was. It hurt her. He could see that. So again the poor fool thought it mattered what people thought of him and started drinking again. And again he was such an amusing fellow.

"Eventually he lost his job and discovered, as he would have known if he'd understood anything outside his books, that all the people who came around when he was such an amusing fellow took any opportunity they could to give him a kick in the face. His wife went home to her people to have a baby and died. The baby, too. And that was the end of our stupid friend Donald. A saga of futility."

"Not quite the end," said Shannon. He wasn't looking at Rierson. There had been a masochistic bitterness under the sentimentalism and self-pity that hurt.

"He drifted from one job to another, always being fired. One day he was in a bar and couldn't pay for his drink. Gerelli was there. There was a horse in the next race called Old Souse. Gerelli paid the check and put five hundred on the horse. It won. The next day in the bar Gerelli said, 'You're lucky to me.'

"He had Coffman with him and was sending him somewhere. He said to him, 'Don't forget you're a successful businessman, not a torpedo from Kansas.' I was plastered and I said, 'Waste of time, with his grammar.' It gave Gerelli the idea. He hired me and said, 'I want to make the boys gentlemen.' He thinks it's been accomplished if they get through a party without a brawl and I say they've been pretty good with their knives and forks. Still, if he'd had an education—" He gave a short laugh. "If he'd had an education, he might have ended as a drunken bum."

"Who does he distrust in his own outfit?"

"Everyone, except Ma."

"Even his keymen? Coffman, Meyer, Streber?"

"Them most of all."

"And you agree with him?"

"Any one of them would doublecross his own grandmother if there was a nickel in it.

Stristly a cutthroat business."

Shannon had gone again to the window. Manny was standing in the shadow of the doorway next to the delicatessen. "How right you are," murmured the detective. "You want to see Gerelli cleared of this killing?"

"Odd though it may seem, I shtill have an elementary sense of loyalty to the hand that feeds me—and provides my liquor."

Shannon nodded thoughtfully. "Good night. I'll be seeing you."

"I'll not get up—because I can't."

DOWNSTAIRS Shannon waited until a heavy truck was passing, then slipped out and into the sea-food restaurant next door. He went out through the other entrance of the restaurant, which he had noticed was next to the stairs leading down to the Eighth Avenue Subway. He took an E train downtown to the next station and walked the short distance to his office.

Lewis was at the switchboard and Sam and Pete were playing blackjack. They looked relieved to see him. "I'm all right," he told them irritably. "Who's called?" He sat down near the switchboard. "What did you get?" he asked Sam.

"A Joan Moore did check in at the Cyril Hotel on February third," reported Sam. "In the register Moore is checked out as of February seventh, but the clerk says she went out the evening of the day she arrived and never came back. She only had an overnight bag,

and they've still got it, but there wasn't anything that would identify her. I'd better luck at the station. There's three trunks and two crates over there, checked in from Shoreby and labeled Moore, which haven't been claimed, and they'll be sold pretty soon if storage isn't paid. But no forwarding address."

"Had she made any phone calls?"

"Couldn't find out. The only thing they've got is this register."

"I got a couple of pictures," said Pete, displaying two photographs of a hard-looking blonde. "She had 'em taken in Shoreby."

The switchboard buzzed. Shannon answered and heard Ames' voice. "Get out the bottle. I'm coming up."

"Go on, Pete," said Shannon.

"The local people in Shoreby are on the stuffy side, and they'd found out she'd worked in night clubs. The only couple who seem to have visited with her were the fellow and his wife who run the liquor supply. They're the ones that wrote her at the Cyril. But even they didn't seem to know much about her."

"First thing in the morning, Sam, get on the trail of any unidentified corpses that have turned up since then. If you think you've got her, don't make identification yet."

"Think she's been bumped?"

Shannon shrugged. "Why didn't she come back for her bag? Why hasn't she claimed her baggage?" He looked at the telephone messages Lewis had given him.

THE ADVENTURES OF

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NOW YOU HAVE EARNED

"And bring me whatever you've got on Schwengler. And Rowton."

The material so far on Isaac Schwengler was sketchy. His financial rating was high. *Who's Who* didn't notice him, nor did the Social Register. He had first been heard of engaged in some highly profitable real-estate deals in Florida. The general feeling was that had there not been some gambling and bootlegging attached, the investment would not have shown such high returns. After that he was thought to have been in Cuba and Nassau. He reappeared in Reno. He came to New York and, through Congressman Rowton's influence, obtained some Government construction contracts. From then on his financial condition attracted the approbation of the credit-rating lists. There were some investigations, and though nothing came of them, Mr. Schwengler did not receive any postwar government contracts.

Shannon asked Lewis, "This Rowton who phoned—was it Bob or the Congressman?"

"Congressman," Lewis told him. "Very annoyed he couldn't get you. Said he'd called your apartment and they didn't know when you'd be back."

Shannon turned to the report on Rowton. It was a typical success story of the East Side boy who made good. Son of an Armenian mother and Lithuanian father, he had worked his way through law school. He'd been mentioned in various graft investigations, but they'd always petered out. There was a long list of organizations to

which he belonged. He did all the right things to curry favor in his district. His record in the House was one of driving energy. No matter what question came before the House, Representative Rowton was in favor of doing something vigorous about it. What was done seemed relatively unimportant so long as it was noisy and energetic.

AMES CAME IN while he was reading it.

"Whatever the worthy captain lacks in brains he makes up for in energy," he groaned. "Give me liquor. I swear I haven't sat down since you left."

"Any results besides corns?" asked Shannon, giving him a drink.

"A good deal of sound and fury. They're trying to pick up Streber for questioning."

"Streber?"

"Woods got the day shift of porters down and questioned them. One says he took Streber up between one and two and another says he brought him down between one and two. About three o'clock two men came and went up and then came down again shortly after. Can't fix the exact time, because a different man took 'em up and brought them down. One was a big beefy man and the other a little runt. Woods has taken them all downtown to look at pictures and see if they can identify someone connected with the gang."

"The porters hadn't seen the beefy gent

[Turn page]

UNCLE WALTER

IT SMOKES SWEET



—HAPPINESS FOR ALL CONCERNED!
—with Sir Walter Raleigh!

IT CAN'T BITE!

SIR WALTER RALEIGH'S BLEND OF CHOICE KENTUCKY BURLEYS IS EXTRA-AGED TO GUARD AGAINST TONGUE BITE, AND SIR WALTER RALEIGH NEVER LEAVES A SOGGY HEEL IN YOUR PIPE. STAYS LIT TO THE LAST PUFF.



It costs
no more
to get
the best!

and his side-kick before?"

"They didn't recognize him. Doesn't prove he hadn't visited the gal before. She probably had plenty of men visiting, with that chassiss."

"And Gerelli as her boy friend?" queried Shannon with raised eyebrow.

"It would be a bit like trying to date a Borgia's current favorite," agreed the reporter. "What does the great mind make of it all?"

Shannon called out, "Lewis, ring Schwengler's house and find out if he's at home or where he can be reached. I don't want to talk to him."

"Schwengler?" Ames pricked up his ears. "The Schwengler who gave fifty thousand for research to some college the other day?"

"Same one. Know anything about him?"

"Nothing. Except we gave it quite a spread."

"That ain't hay. And he's given away other large sums, too."

"His income tax must be troubling him," said Ames cynically.

Lewis came in and said, "He's taking Dr. and Mrs. Raines to see South Pacific and going on to the Two by Four."

"Where are you going?" demanded Ames as Shannon got up.

"Spare your corns and finish the bottle." The detective pushed him back into the chair. "I call you when I've something for you, don't I?"

In the outer office he said, "Sam, go on home now and get started looking for corpses early."

"One of us ought to be with you, boss," protested Sam.

"I'm taking Pete. Get yourself over to the Two by Four, Pete, and hang around the bar. You don't know me."

"You're tired, Boss," persisted Sam, "and you know what Mr. Boothe always says, a tired man is a careless man. These guys are just waiting for you to get careless. One of us ought to be at your apartment."

"Mind telling me when I'm going to get a chance to go to my apartment and sleep? I don't know what I'm paying rent for. Go on home, Sam. Someone's got to be able to stay awake tomorrow...."

The Two by Four had the usual arrangement of a dance floor, surrounded by tables, with the orchestra platform at the far end and a bar in the entrance decorated with pseudo-French sketches in dubious taste.

Shannon went to the bar, noticed Pete at the farther end, and let his eyes rove over the roomful of people, trying to decide which might be Schwengler. His glance fell on Streber with a party of four at a ring-side table. Shannon ordered a drink and went up to the man on the rope, who said, "No tables right now."

"Did I ask you? Tell Mr. Streber that Shannon wants to talk to him in the bar."

THE LAWYER came promptly and greeted him with, "Why didn't you tell us about this attack on you this afternoon? I didn't see a paper until dinnertime."

"There seem to be some people who don't want this business investigated any further," Shannon observed obliquely.

"D'you think Bentek sent them?"

"No."

"What did you tell the police?" asked Streber.

"The truth. I usually do." Shannon paused and said, "The police are looking for you."

"Me? They know where my office is."

"They think you were the last person to see Rita Prince alive."

"Rita—alive—" Streber stared. "What are you talking about?"

"She was murdered this afternoon."

"Rita! Murdered! But—" The lawyer stopped. "I haven't been home since I saw you. Had dinner and a show with this fellow, Alsina. Owns a property Gerelli made an offer on." He threw in the explanatory parenthesis. "But when did it happen? Who did it?"

"That's what the cops want to know."

"I saw her, around lunch time."

"Why did you go up to see her?"

"I took up some papers for her to sign. Shares in her name. For tax purposes."

"Had she anything special on her mind?"

Streber shook his head. "She was worried, of course. Asked if I thought you'd really clear Gerelli. Why?"

"She'd called my office and left word she had something urgent to tell me."

The lawyer smiled a trifle. "She was always calling me with some idea she thought would help. Mostly they weren't any good. Strong on loyalty and short on brains."

"More than can be said of most of this gang," observed the detective. "What was her latest idea?"

"I don't know." He frowned. "It must have been something you said to her that gave her the notion that one of the boys in the poker game had tipped off somebody outside to phone him."

"What did you say?"

"I said it was possible, of course. Hell, Shannon, in the spot she was in, I couldn't tell her it was one of the first things we'd thought of and it was no dice. If it gave her hope and bucked her up a bit—"

"How was she when you left her? Cheerful?"

"Trying to be. She told me she hadn't been sleeping and that she was going to try to get a nap."

"Anyone telephone while you were there?"

"Not that I remember. No. It's going to upset Gerelli pretty badly." The detective made a noise at the back of his throat but didn't comment. Streber finished his drink.

"I'd better get in touch with the police and tell them I only just heard."

"Let me know if they've got anything new."

Shannon watched while Streber went over to his friends, evidently explaining that urgent business claimed his attention, then bought back his hat and coat from the check-room girl, carefully adjusted his white scarf round his neck, jerked his hat into place, and left. Shannon found himself thinking of Ma Gerelli, who'd said "Nice set to his coat."

Shannon went back to the man on the rope and asked him to request Mr. Schwengler to come and speak to him in the bar. The waiter dispatched with the message made his way to a foursome in the corner. The big, hearty-looking man to whom he delivered it seemed distinctly put out. He appeared to be questioning the waiter, who merely shrugged his shoulders and glanced backward toward the entrance. Finally the man got up.

ISAAC SCHWENGLER greeted the detective in a voice which he tried to make cordial. "Mr. Shannon? Glad to know you."

"You were trying to reach me yesterday," said the detective.

"I was? Guess you must have got your wires crossed somewhere."

"Ma Gorelli told me you were."

"Oh. I'd forgotten. I just figured maybe we should have a talk before the meeting yesterday afternoon. Meyer said you'd asked Streber to call one. Why don't you come to my office in the morning?"

"Gerelli fries Saturday, unless something's done about it," Shannon reminded him.

"I'm entertaining Dr. Raines. He's president of—"

"The fund you endowed with fifty thousand dollars," interrupted the detective. "Shall we go to your table? He owes his fifty thousand to Gerelli, so he should take an interest in his welfare."

"If you think that's funny, I don't," snapped Schwengler.

"I want to know something about the set-up of your realty company."

Shannon thought he was going to refuse flatly to answer, but he changed his mind. "Too many people listening to things that don't concern them," he said.

"Let's sit over there." Shannon pointed to a small table at the side of the bar.

"I'd really rather not be seen—" began Schwengler.

"I'm often seen in the company of crooks," Shannon said unpleasantly and led the way to the table. "Part of my job."

"It won't get you anywhere, taking that tone with me."

The detective ignored the remark. "You got a number of your wartime contracts through Rowton, didn't you?"

Schwengler's eyes jerked and color darkened his face.

"Congressman Rowton has always been a good friend of mine, but all this has nothing to do with—" He stopped.

"Ryan's murder? I wouldn't be too sure. How did you meet Gerelli?"

"Through a business associate in Reno. He was operating there in the Thirties."

"And?" prompted Shannon.

"We discussed various ideas, but at that time there was no construction work going on except WPA and nobody had any money, so nothing came of it. Then a few years later he rented a property I had in Florida."

"Gambling house or booze?"

"Night club. Business is business, Shannon. One doesn't inquire too closely into what goes on, if the tenant is a good one."

"Straight rental or split the profits?"

"I don't see what this has to do with—"

"So it was a split of the profits," said Shannon. "These shooting galleries and used-car lots and garages—you own them and Gerelli runs them through one of his men. Right?"

"More or less."

"And your split is just what comes in through them or percent on the whole syndicate?"

"It's a regular business practice for a real-estate operator to put people in to run a property."

"The Big Shot sent out word that his organization was to cooperate with me," said Shannon thinly.

"Anything I can do to help Gerelli, of course—"

"You get a cut on the whole Syndicate?"

CHAPTER XI

A LITTLE PLAIN TALK



CHWENGLER uneasily beckoned to the waiter. When he'd ordered another drink he said, "All this is irrelevant. All our operations are strictly within the law. No gambling is allowed in any of the galleries."

"I'm sure it isn't. But they are shops for policy slips. They are fronts for call girls."

"I've told Gerelli I wouldn't stand for anything of that sort."

"So you go in business with a man who you know damn well is up to his ears in those rackets."

"Gerelli's other activities are no business of mine. When you buy stock in a company, Shannon, do you inquire into every detail of how the company is run?"

"Possibly not, but I don't buy stock in brothels."

Schwengler looked as if he were going to surge out of his chair and start a brawl then and there, but either the recollection of the publicity that would result or the hard, wanton light in Shannon's eyes, made him desist. The waiter arrived and put down the drinks.

"Did Gerelli meet Rowton through you, or the other way about?" asked the detective.

"Through me."

"What's Rowton's cut?"

"Meyer said you were putting your nose into a lot of things that don't concern you. I don't know."

"If Gerelli fries, who's going to run the Syndicate?"

Schwengler's eyes were fixed speculatively on Shannon. "It's a corporation. It will continue."

"Who will control it?"

"I haven't the least idea," answered Schwengler with a great appearance of frankness.

"Of course you've never discussed it with your pal Meyer," observed Shannon with heavy sarcasm.

"Ma Gerelli owns a controlling interest in the Theger Holding Company which gives her nominal control of all the companies." Schwengler tried to say it casually, but behind his tone was an irritation of long standing. "One of Gerelli's little dodges to keep everything in his own hands."

"And what d'you think Ma would do?"

Schwengler shrugged. "Can't tell with that old battle-ax. But I rather think she'll chuck everything."

"And turn it over to whom? Streber?"

"He wouldn't run it on a bet. He'd like to get out of the whole business, anyway."

"You, perhaps?"

It suddenly dawned on Schwengler where Shannon's questions were trending. He said sharply, "I run my real estate business, Shannon, and I'm not legally responsible for what tenants do on my premises. My operations are strictly legal."

"Sure—sure," agreed the detective. "Let's get to the night that Ryan was murdered. You and your wife, Streber and his daugh-

ter, Rowton and his son all had dinner together at your house. Right?"

"Yes."

"Who mixed the drinks?"

"I did." The man looked surprised.

"And what did Marsha Streber drink?"

"I can't remember now. Damn it, it's over eight months ago. I remember she passed out after. Streber took her home. When he came back he said she was sleeping and that if she wasn't all right in the morning, he'd get the doctor, but he thought it better to let her sleep."

"Did nobody seem surprised or upset about the girl passing out?"

Schwengler shrugged. "Streber was worried, and young Rowton. Half these young people can't hold their liquor. She may be one of these gals who take a couple of drinks and then slide under the table. Anyway, sometimes a drink hits you more than at others. If you're tired or something."

"Or if it's got chloral hydrate mixed with it," said Shannon.

SURPRISE and anger struggled in Schwengler's face. "Are you accusing me of doping the girl?"

"Not at the moment. Did you?"

"Good God, no! Why should I?"

"A lot of curious coincidences happened that night. Gerelli, who never interrupted a poker game, left one without telling anyone where he was going. Ryan was expecting to meet someone after saying that he had a new informer. Marsha, who normally doesn't get drunk, proceeds to pass out, and Ryan is murdered."

"She didn't tell you she'd been doped, did she?"

"How did you know I'd talked to her?"

"Er—someone mentioned seeing you with her."

"Your friend Meyer, no doubt."

"I've forgotten who it was." After an uncomfortable silence he said, "Are you going to clear Gerelli?"

"D'you want him cleared?"

"Of course. Of course. I'm sure he had nothing to do with it."

"Say it some more. Maybe you'll believe it then."

"I don't like that crack."

"Too bad."

"You seem to think I don't want him cleared."

"I think," said Shannon obliquely, "that quite a number of people connected with his organization don't want him cleared."

"Such as Marsha Streber, for some extraordinary reason," said Schwengler.

"Did she say so?"

"After the trial she shot off her mouth. Thought she was safe because she was Streber's daughter, I suppose. He shut her up."

"She isn't the only one," observed Shannon, "not by a long shot."

"There's been resentment over some of his highhanded dealing, I've heard," Schwengler said carefully. "Some feel they should have more freedom of enterprise."

"So you've heard," said Shannon drily.

Schwengler was stung by the tone, but he was suddenly conciliatory. "Shannon, I don't know why you and I are fencing with each other. There's a big future in—shall we say real estate—for people who are smart now."

Shannon smiled unpleasantly. "I'm hired by Gerelli."

"Sure. Of course. I know."

"Thought maybe you'd forgotten."

Schwengler searched with unnecessary vigor for cigarettes. "I'm sure you're going to be successful clearing him," he managed at last, with false heartiness. "Well, my party'll think I've forgotten them. Good night."

Shannon watched him go back to his table. He himself ordered another drink, caught Pete's eye and nodded. As his drink arrived he saw that Schwengler and his party were leaving and his wife did not seem pleased. Pete drifted out after them. Shannon finished his drink and, as he paid his check, said to the bartender, "Schwengler owns this place, doesn't he?"

The bartender's hard eyes narrowed a trifle. "Owns the building," he corrected laconically. "Fischer runs the club."

Shannon said, "That's what I thought," and went on out.

Although it was twenty to three and the prospect of sleep was getting every minute more alluring, he did not turn in the direc-

tion of his apartment. The poker game was again at the Park Ardsley Hotel, where it had been the night that Ryan was killed. He walked to the hotel.

In the otherwise deserted lobby a man was sitting reading a morning paper and another was picking his teeth contemplatively. As Shannon went across to the elevators, the tooth picker went to the house telephone.

The door of Room 516 was already slightly open as Shannon came down the corridor. "Your lookout told you I was on my way up," he said and went on in.

Two of the men he knew by sight—Myhren Rapapopulous and Nicholas Gravidian, both well-known in the higher gambling brackets. Myhren introduced the other three men—Dave Irwin, Mr. Clark of Columbus, Ohio, and Mr. Skyles of Cincinnati. Toward the man who had opened the door and another man who stood lounging by the window he waved a hand and said, "A couple of the boys to see we aren't interrupted."

Shannon nodded to them and said, "Looks like you're winning, Myhren."

"Myhren always wins," said Gravidian sourly, looking at his own diminished pile of chips.

"Want to sit in?"

"May as well for a few hands. Give me a thousand. Where's the bathroom? Through here?" As he turned he added, "Cash or credit?"

"Your credit's good," Myhren told him.

THERE WAS no one in the bedroom or bathroom and there was no fire-escape. Shannon returned and met a grin from the Greek. "Satisfied?"

"I don't seem very popular these days," said Shannon and sat down.

As Myhren explained the stakes and limit, Shannon studied the gentlemen from Columbus and Cincinnati. Just out-of-towners who thought they could play poker and were learning they couldn't the hard way.

"You don't usually sit in this kind of a game, Shannon," Gravidian remarked a little later.

"Depends on whether I'm on my own or the losses go on the swindle sheet," Shannon told him with a grin.

"Gerelli paying for this?"

"Maybe he won't have to pay." Shannon fingered his pile of chips.

"Meaning he'll fry?"

"Meaning I might win something."

"No law against trying." Myhren was dealing and conversation stopped. Shannon picked up a couple of pots and ran his chips into a more respectable pile.

"If you win, who gets the profits?" asked Dave Irwin.

"Who d'you suppose? However, seeing Gerelli furnished the capital, let's have the low-down on the game that night."

"Listen, feller, we been over it so often it isn't funny."

"Once more won't hurt." The detective looked at his hole card. "I'll stay." Mr. Clark was eagerly raising. He'd a pair of kings face up and was behaving as if he had the third king in the hole. The others dropped out. Shannon had a pair of deuces and an ace showing. One other king was visible round the table. He pushed forward his chips to meet Mr. Clark's last raise and added, "Raise you five hundred."

It would take the last of Mr. Clark's pile. He looked from the ace and the pair of deuces in front of Shannon to his own pair of kings, then shook his head. As Shannon raked in his winnings, Mr. Clark was trying to see the hole card that the detective had tossed, with the others, in the direction of the dealer. Myhren slapped down his hand sharply and said, "If you want to see people's hole cards, you got to pay."

"Well—er—after all, the pot's his," stammered Mr. Clark.

Shannon laughed and said, "Mr. Clark hasn't been having very good luck this evening. We'll have to excuse him."

"I guess I'm about cleaned out. I'll be getting along."

"You bought five thousand and you owe"

—Myhren consulted a piece of paper beside him after checking the small pile of chips handed in—"seven thousand four hundred."

"I can give you five thousand in cash, but you'll have to take a check for the rest. Is that okay?"

"If the check is, and I guess you know it better be."

Mr. Clark wrote it, shakily. First his pen wouldn't work, then it splashed ink all over the table.

"Fresh deck," Myhren said to one of the men lounging by the door. As he took the check he handed Clark the old deck, slightly ink-splashed, and said, "Take it for a souvenir, buddy, so you can see it isn't marked."

Dave had fetched a bottle of Scotch from the bedroom. He offered Shannon a drink and, when the detective refused, said, "Scared?"

Shannon shook his head. "No. Tired. Let's hear about the game that night."

"Okay. Okay. I'm getting so I repeat it in my sleep."

"Me, too," growled Gravidian.

"There was six of us playing and the two boys—same as tonight," began Myhren. "There was me, Dave, Gravidian, and Nick Eikon—a big-time feller from the Coast—and a guy named Jones from Chicago. Jones wasn't nothing to do with the bunch. He comes to New York every once in a while and wants a game. Always pays cash. Says he's married and his wife don't approve, so he can't play in Chi. Anyways, it was a big game. Nick took us all to the cleaners. He cleared thirty thousand. Gravidian broke about even. I dropped eight grand. Dave, here, dropped twelve."

"Fourteen," interrupted Dave sourly.

"Fourteen, then. Gerelli was in a couple grand. We started playing around ten o'clock. Around a quarter after twelve the phone rang. It was in the bedroom, same as here. Slim answered, figgering it was the feller downstairs—Hey, Slim, you tell him."

"Like he says, I figgered it was Jake, who was lookout. But this voice just said, 'Mr. Gerelli,' so I figgered it must be someone he'd told to call him, account of no one knowing where the game is until pretty late."

"Man's / voice or woman's?" asked Shannon.

"Could have been a husky kind of woman's voice, or a man's, if you know what I mean. So I tell the Big Shot there's someone on the phone, and he says, 'Is it Ma?' and I says, 'No,' because Ma don't sound like that. So he goes to the phone and I come back in the room they're playing in."

"And you didn't hear anything he said?"

"Nope. Jest heard his hello, but nothing more."

SHANNON looked at the others. "Nor you?"

"No. He said, 'Deal me out,' and we went right ahead. It was noisy anyway. Right on the street." Dave supplied this information.

"What happened next?"

"He came back and said to Myhren to cash him in and take care of it, as he'd got to go out. He said, 'Maybe I'll be back later.' And that's the last we saw of him. We broke up the game round a quarter of five." Gravidian shrugged.

"I asked him if he wanted one of the boys, and he said, 'My car's downstairs,' " Myhren supplied. "And I knew he always had someone in the car, so I didn't think no more about it."

"But when he got downstairs he dismissed the man and didn't say where he was going," observed Shannon.

"Yeah. I know."

"He didn't say anything that would give you a clue to who'd called?"

"Nope. And you don't ask the Big Shot questions."

"Did he seem upset?"

"Kinda hard to tell with Gerelli."

"Was he long on the phone?"

"Maybe three, four minutes. We weren't through with the hand when he came back."

"Are we going to play?" asked Mr. Skyles of Cincinnati in a mild voice. He was badly bored with the conversation.

"Sure, Mr. Skyles. We're going to play." Myhren picked up the fresh deck and broke the seals. "I don't know what the Big Shot thinks you can do at the last minute, Shannon, when all his boys have failed."

"I wonder how hard some of them tried."

"I've always told you that sonofabitch Coff—" began Dave eagerly and broke off at a hard glance from Myhren, which traveled on to Mr. Skyles, who wasn't at all interested.

"What about the sonofabitch you started to name?" inquired Shannon.

"He's a lot of hot air," Myhren dismissed him.

"He figgers he could take the Big Shot's place," persisted Dave.

"Him?" said Gravidian. "Don't make me laugh."

"I'm telling you. You don't know him. He's got—he's got——" Dave stopped, bogged down. "There's a name fer it. One of them fancy names."

"Delusions of grandeur," suggested Shannon.

"Something like that. He's allus saying, 'If I was the boss of this mob——' or, 'What we oughta do is——' and he hangs around the Princess, too."

"Anyone else suffering from ambition?" Shannon asked a couple of hands later.

"It's jest that fellers that have run their own mobs—well, every once in a while they don't like being organized," answered Myhren. "But they ain't so dumb they don't see it pays off. What's the thing the feller said we learned at school? Something about union is strength and divided we fall."

"They might want to be big shot of the united group," remarked Shannon and got up. "I'm about even, boys, and I'm dog-tired. Guess I'll quit." As he collected his modest winnings of four hundred dollars he said, "Hope they get the guy that murdered the Princess."

The effect was electrical. Evidently none of them knew of it. "We shoul'da got a paper," they said and besieged him for details, to the continued annoyance of Mr. Skyles. But they had no useful suggestions to make, and with a recommendation to send down for a morning paper, Shannon left them.

HE STEPPED out of the elevator into the lobby warily. The lookout was still there, still picking his teeth. The man who had been reading the newspaper had disappeared. Mr. Clark of Columbus was seated watching the elevators. Now he jumped up and came over. "Mr. Shannon, I want to talk to you."

"What about?" Shannon answered him absent-mindedly, scanning the alcove where the telephones were, the entrance to the flower shop, and the arch going to the service quarters over the top of his head.

"You're not one of them, are you?"

"One of whom?"

"This gang or whatever they are. I've read about your cases in the papers."

"That would seem to answer your question, then." The detective's eyes narrowed a little as he considered the main entrance. The revolving door was bolted for the night and a door a little to the right was in use instead.

In the shelter formed by the revolving door a man was standing. Shannon couldn't be sure, but he thought it was the man who had been reading a paper in the lobby when he'd come in.

"Tell me something—was that game on the level?" Mr. Clark was asking.

"Sure."

"I lost twelve thousand four hundred dollars."

"You play," said Shannon flatly, "extraordinarily bad poker."

"I play five nights a week at the club," Mr. Clark announced indignantly.

"You must be very rich to be able to afford it."

"At the end of the month I'm usually up."

"Then the other members of your club must play even worse than you."

"Are you sure that deck wasn't stacked or marked or something?"

"I think it's most unlikely. That bunch don't do business that way. They just play good poker. They don't need to stack the deck with fellows like you."

Mr. Clark looked crushed. "Would you like a bite to eat, if there's anything open around here?"

"No, thanks. You'd better get along to wherever you're staying."

CHAPTER XII

A LITTLE PRESSURE



NOW SHANNON was quite sure about the man in the doorway. He said to Mr. Clark, "You'll be a hell of a lot safer if you walk out by yourself."

"Safer?" The man from Columbus was startled.

"Yes. Safer. Good night."

"There was one other thing I wanted to ask you."

"Write me a letter about it."

It dawned on Mr. Clark at this point that his presence really was not desired. He said "Good night" huffily and walked toward the main door. Shannon wandered over to the lookout. "Who's the punk in the doorway?"

"Him?" The lookout stopped picking his teeth for long enough to answer. "Dunno. He was setting there reading a paper for two, three hours."

"I saw him when I came in."

"Figger he's laying fer someone?"

"Kind of dull way to spend an evening if he isn't," said Shannon.

"Figger he's going to try and heist the game?"

Shannon shook his head. "Do me a favor. Come over to the other side there, where the passage goes to the service entrance. I'll make like I'm going along it. Tell me what he does."

They strolled across the lounge and stood for a moment, then Shannon stepped back into the archway. The lookout stood, his back to Shannon, nonchalantly surveying the lobby. "Hey," he said sideward out of his mouth. "He's beat it. In a hurry."

"Thanks, buddy," Shannon started for the main entrance. "Good night."

The only vehicle in sight when Shannon emerged was a Sanitation Department truck. He hailed the driver. "What's it worth to you to drive your truck round the block?"

"You drunk?" inquired the man and stopped as he saw the bill in Shannon's hand. "What's it all about?"

Shannon swung himself up into the cab. "Won't take you five minutes. Get going." "We ain't allowed—"

"Twenty bucks for five minutes. That's four dollars a minute."

The gears were grinding. "Hey!" yelled his partner, who was on the sidewalk holding one of the barrels of garbage from the hamburger emporium next door to the hotel.

"Back in a minute," yelled the driver, already halfway round the corner.

Opposite the service entrance of the hotel a dark blue Packard was parked, "Go slow past the Packard," Shannon said.

There were four men in the car; one of them the man who had been standing by the revolving door. The detective didn't recognize the others. He took the number.

"Okay, drop me on the corner of Broadway as you turn."

"What's it all about?"

"Twenty bucks, so what do you care?"

"Just wondered, that's all."

On Broadway he picked up a cab. He started to give the address of his apartment, but was in no mood to spend the rest of the night dodging gunmen. He gave the address of the office.

Lewis was sleeping in an easy chair near the switchboard. As the door opened, he woke, hand on his gun.

"Go on home now," Shannon told him. "I'm going to catch a couple of hours' sleep, and if the phone rings I'll hear it."

"I'm staying," announced Lewis firmly.

Shannon didn't argue. He went into his own office and sprawled on the couch without even bothering to loosen his tie or take off his shoes.

"Boss," said Lewis, "Pete called in that Schwengler had gone home and about five minutes later gone out and up to the Drake Hotel."

"Rowton lives at the Drake," muttered Shannon and went to sleep. . . .

At seven-thirty Shannon opened his office door and growled, "Coffee, and don't get dishwater."

"There's the coffee maker that Miss Lane brought," said Lewis. "And there's a pound of coffee."

"Put it all in," Shannon went to the shower.

Lewis followed him. "Pete called again. Schwengler stayed forty-five minutes at the Drake, then went home. Ten minutes later a heavy-set man arrived and stayed about twenty minutes. Pete thought it was Meyer."

Shannon grunted approval of this information, and Lewis went on, "Johnny wants to know if you want him to keep after Bentek's policy runners any longer. He says he's getting nowhere."

"We can forget Bentek. He stinks of red herring. Have Johnny come in and stick around. I may need him later."

Streber telephoned at eight and said he'd been questioned by the police for a couple of hours, then they'd let him go. "One of the elevator men has tentatively identified the big man who came later in the afternoon as Meyer, and I haven't been able to reach him."

"Keeping out of sight, probably," suggested Shannon.

"D'you think she could have taken the sleeping pills and dozed off in the tub?"

"She might have."

"Woods seemed to think that."

When Shannon finally got rid of Streber he called to Lewis, "Find out who belongs to this car." He gave him the number of the blue Packard.

After two cups of Lewis' coffee, generously laced with brandy, Shannon felt much more human. The phone rang again. "My God, everybody gets up indecently early," he grumbled as he picked it up.

It was Congressman Rowton. "I left word for you last night to call me. I've got to talk to you."

"What's Schwengler been telling you?"

"Schwengler?"

"He didn't hotfoot it up to you at four o'clock this morning to tell you a bedtime story, did he?"

"How th'——" The tone altered considerably. "I don't think it's wise to discuss it on the phone. Come up to the hotel."

"When I get time. 'By."

Miss Lane came in and regarded the coffee with strong disapproval. "Have you been up all night again?"

"I slept here," he told her, without adding that it had been for only two and a half hours. "You might call the apartment and get any messages, if there are any."

Before she could do it young Rowton was on the wire. "I've got to talk to you. I'm coming in on my way to the office."

Lewis brought in the newspapers. Shannon looked through the stories under captions which ranged from *Gerelli's Moll Slain* to the *Times's* noncommittal *Woman Found Dead in Tub*. He ran his eye over the editorial pages and found several articles which stated that it seemed a pity that Mr. Shannon, who was famous for his successful cases always

on the side of law and order, should be trying to upset a verdict, and mentioned the innumerable times committees had investigated Gerelli only to end up with insufficient material to satisfy a grand jury.

"Car's registered in the name of G. Mar-ras—East Forty-fourth Street," Lewis came in and told him.

"I'll be damned," said Shannon.

Several newspapermen arrived, wanting a story on Rita Prince. Bob Rowton came at their heels and seemed worried to find them there. He produced a large handkerchief, and started blowing his nose. Shannon got rid of the reporters and said, "They've gone, so you can stop giving an imitation of a young man with bad manners and flu."

"I don't want to land in the papers," muttered Bob as he followed Shannon to the inner office.

"What's on your mind?"

After a good many false starts Bob came out with his question. "Just how deep is Streber in this Gerelli mess?"

"Why don't you ask him or Marsha?"

"Marsha doesn't know, and I can't exactly ask Streber."

"Ask your own father, then."

"That's the second time you've made a crack like that."

"Did you ask him the question I told you to?" Bob nodded, and Shannon went on. "What did he say?"

"That you'd stuck your neck out and were just trying to smear everyone to cover up. He told me to stay clear of you. But I can't help feeling that Marsha's in some kind-of trouble."

"And?"

"As I told you, we were more or less engaged. Dad took it for granted and so did Streber. Then when she told me she wanted to break it off, she was—" He broke off, flushing a bit. "It's hard to explain. She was so indefinite. As if she still wanted to, but—"

"But was afraid, or what?"

"I couldn't get a straight explanation out of her. Anyway, I got to thinking it was a good thing. We'd got engaged more because everyone seemed to expect it than for any other reason. I am fond of her—more

like a brother—and if she's in a mess—not her, but her father——” He bogged down completely.

Shannon waited, one half of his mind revolving the unexplained disappearance of Joan La Ruba. There must be some way of getting at the old records of the Cyril Hotel. He realized Bob Rowton was speaking again.

“You see, there's another girl. I've been seeing a lot of her, and——”

The detective moved irritably. “Do I look as if I ran an Advice to the Lovelorn column? Whatinhell d'you want me to tell you?”

Bob flushed. “You're the only person who can tell me if Marsha's in some kind of a jam. If she is, I can't let her down, can I?”

“If she told you she couldn't or wouldn't marry you, that lets you out,” said Shannon.

The telephone rang and Miss Lane's voice said, “A Mr. Clark of Columbus.”

“What th'hell,” grumbled the detective. “Put him on. Yes. Yes.” There was a pause. “You're at the station. What d'you expect me to do? Come down and wave to you?”

“Mr. Shannon”—the Midwestern accent came with great earnestness over the wire—“what was your hole card last night?”

The detective laughed. “The ace of spades.”

“Then you weren't bluffing?”

“I never do, Mr. Clark. And I'd advise you not to. Have a nice trip. Good-by.” Rowton was looking mystified, but Shannon didn't enlighten him. “What are you fussing about? Marsha says she won't marry you. You evidently want to marry Consuelo——”

“Con—— How did you know?”

“You're her main topic of conversation. She seems like a nice girl and she's certainly easy to look at. For God's sake go and marry her.”

“That's what I want to do. Except I just have this hunch that I wouldn't feel right in leaving Marsha in the lurch. She sort of depends on me.”

“There's nothing more asinine than marrying a woman you don't love because you're sorry for her. Particularly when there's one you do love ready and waiting.” Shannon reached for the phone and said, “Line, please.” He produced a piece of paper from

his pocket and dialed. “Marsha never asked you to wait, did she?”

“No.”

“You've no responsibility, legally, morally, or in any other way.” He spoke into the phone. “Consuelo? Shannon. What are you doing? Well, call them and say you have mumps. Why? Because they're nice and infectious. I've a young man here who's drooling and panting to take you to lunch or breakfast, or whatever th'hell you can be taken to at this hour of day, and propose to you. You talk to him.” He handed the receiver to Rowton and said, “Don't hang on too long. I want the lines clear. 'By.”

In the outer office Lane asked, “When will you be back?”

“I'll call you,” Shannon looked at the name on the door as he opened it. Boothe & Shannon, Investigators. “Maybe we'd better have Marriage Brokers put up,” he said.

While Bob was talking on Shannon's phone, the detective was en route to the luxurious suite which Rowton senior maintained at the Drake.

The congressman was a short, bull-necked man tending to corpulence, with scant hair and bad teeth; there was a certain peasant strength about his heavy face. Friends of his late wife swore she had died of a broken heart because she never could make him appear more distinguished than a hod carrier. He greeted the detective with a guarded cordiality.

“If I ever catch up with the guy that started the ‘write a letter to your congressman’ idea, I'll strangle him. Everybody in my district who stubs a toe writes me to know what I can do about it.” Rowton's eyes were bloodshot and there were pouches under them, but they were keenly appraising. “Like some coffee, or have you had breakfast?”

Shannon seated himself, lighted a cigarette, said he'd had breakfast, and waited. This interview had been Rowton's idea, so Rowton could talk.

“I'm familiar with your record, Shannon. You've been lucky.”

“I've done all right,” he admitted.

“You've stuck your neck out this time. Can you deliver?”

“I suppose you stayed awake all night

worrying over whether I could nor not."

"There's no need to take that attitude with me. I want to see justice accomplished."

"I've heard you tried your best to arrange the justice before Gerelli's trial." Shannon made the remark at random, thinking it fairly probable that Rowton had made some attempts until he realized that the cause of a cop-killer was too hot for him to handle.

Rowton's face hardened. "Ideas like that can be dangerous, particularly when you can't prove them."

"I haven't tried, so far."

"Let me remind you of something. You depend for your living on your license. There are ways of canceling it."

"Hasn't your familiarity with my record also familiarized you with the fact that I don't threaten worth a damn?"

"I'm just reminding you." The derisive grin on the detective's face made Rowton realize that he was using the wrong tactics. "There's no reason for you and me to quarrel, Shannon. We both have the same object in view. Justice. I know the stories current about Gerelli. Some may be true; others may not. The only thing I am concerned with is—was he guilty of the particular crime for which he was convicted? If there has been a miscarriage of justice, I'll bend every sinew to correct it. Never mind what other crimes a man may be suspected of, I am concerned only with the one of which he was accused. As far as the others are concerned, until the police and the D.A.'s office can produce evidence to the contrary, Gerelli is an innocent man. I stand for justice for every man, regardless of what people may suspect about his past. He is not on trial for his past, only for—" He stopped. "What are you looking for?"

Shannon turned his head back and said, "The crowd of voters."

For a moment Rowton looked as if he'd spring across the desk in sheer rage. Then he laughed. "I do get carried away. It is a subject very near my heart."

"Your heart? Do go on."

"Are you getting any results in the case?"

"Didn't Schwengler tell you?"

"Schwengler says you're trying to involve

him because he had some business dealings with Gerelli."

"He involved himself. I didn't do it."

"Nothing is gained by trying to smear people, Shannon."

"If they don't want to be smeared, they shouldn't play with mud."

"If you're smart, you'll lay off him." The tone had altered again. Gone was the pseudo friendliness. "And also keep your hands off my son."

"All coming too near home, eh?"

"Bob had never heard of Gerelli before this case."

"He's heard of him now."

"What have you been telling him?"

"Scared?"

"I've nothing to fear."

"What were you spending a sleepless night about, or do you suffer from insomnia?"

"Look, Shannon"—the tone was conciliatory again—"I've been in public life long enough to know that when mud's thrown, no matter how unjustified it is, some of it sticks. It won't help your case to sling mud at me."

"Who d'you think in Gerelli's mob was suffering from ambition badly enough to try to liquidate him?" asked Shannon suddenly.

"I don't think it was an inside job."

"You trail with the Bentek theory?"

"Seems the only plausible one." When Shannon didn't comment, Rowton went on. "What's this Schwengler tells me about your accusing him of doping Marsha Streber?"

"I was checking on the night Ryan was killed. Did you leave the party at any time?"

"No, I don't think so. Why?"

"Looks as if someone doped the Streber girl."

"Good God, why?" demanded the congressman.

"That's what I want to know."

"You've been making inquiries about a lot of things which have nothing to do with the killing of Ryan," snapped Rowton.

"D'you know who killed him?"

"Of course not."

"How d'you know my inquiries have nothing to do with it?"

"Maybe they have and maybe again they haven't. But it's not a smart idea to run

with the hare and hunt with the hounds."

"It seems to pay off sometimes." Shannon looked round the apartment. "Nice suite you've got here."

"If you'll take a little advice off the record, I'd confine myself to finding out who killed Ryan, if I were you." Rowton was making an obvious effort to control his temper. "And don't forget the commissioner is sore enough now. A little pressure in the right place and you might find yourself without a license."

CHAPTER XIII

SMART, BUT NOT POPULAR



OFFMAN'S OFFICE at the Indo-Mechanics Company was Shannon's next stop. Behind the showroom, with its display of machines for vending everything from peanuts to toothbrushes, was the office.

"Poor little Princess," Coffman said, his big nose accenting each syllable.

"You were a friend of hers before she met Gerelli," said Shannon. "How good a friend?"

"Er—I took her out once in a while, bought her a few drinks."

"After she started going with Gerelli, did it continue?"

"I didn't see anything of her any more, except once in a great while, at parties."

"And since Gerelli's been in prison?" Coffman rubbed his nose and shifted uneasily in his chair. Shannon repeated. "Have you seen her since Gerelli's been in prison?"

"No—no. Of course not."

The man was obviously lying. "Did you meet her outside or did you go to the apartment?"

"I—er—I said I hadn't seen her."

"I know that's what you said," Shannon answered drily.

"Er—oh—I forgot. I did go up one time, just to try to cheer her up. It was pretty dull for her, sitting there."

"Just once?"

"She was afraid Gerelli might hear something."

"So you made a play for her and she wasn't having any?" said Shannon brutally.

"She was scared stiff of Gerelli." Coffman bit the words out savagely. It was evident that his vanity wouldn't allow him to consider the possibility that Rita had not been interested in him. "He always hogged the best of everything for himself. And if you got in his way, crrk!" He made an expressive gesture toward his throat.

"I thought he was the one who advocated non-violent methods."

"So long as nobody interfered with his preserves. Then the tune changed."

"Don't like him much, do you?"

"D'you know anybody who does?"

"But you're doing pretty well for yourself."

"Looks nice, don't it? But I can't turn around without wondering if I'll be hauled on the mat because Gerelli don't like this or that. I can't take a trip because Gerelli says I have to stay on the job. Everything I do—and there's always spies ready to run to him."

"So you wouldn't be too sorry if he never came back."

"I didn't say that." Fear shadowed the man's eyes. "Gerelli's a mighty smart man."

Shannon smiled cryptically. "Wonder who'd take over the Syndicate," he said idly.

"Meyer thinks he would," said Coffman.

"So I gathered. What do you think of the idea?"

"He hasn't got a brain in his head. I wouldn't have let him have as much authority as he's had up to now. He couldn't run the Syndicate."

"Well, who could? Streber? Schwengler?"

"Streber don't want to. Always says he's a lawyer and won't do anything but advise. Schwengler—he's just a big bag of wind."

"Brings us down to Fischer or you."

"Fischer understands policy, but nothing else." Coffman's nose twitched a bit. "I could run the outfit, but Ma's got it in for me. And when she gets it in for you—"

"Who was in Gerelli's confidence?"

"That guy didn't trust his own shadow. They say he trusted Ma. Maybe he did, but

I don't think he told her everything."

"How about Streber?"

"Trust him? No more than anybody else. He had to tell him things so Streber could give him legal advice. Right in this room I've heard Streber say, 'Unless you tell me what you're going to do, I can't tell you if there'll be trouble or not about it.' No, I tell you, Gerelli didn't trust his own shadow."

"He isn't dead yet," said Shannon mildly.

"Er—huh?" Coffman looked startled.

"You keep speaking of him in the past, as if he were already dead."

"Er—oh—I mean—it was just——"

"A slip of the tongue."

"That's right. A slip of the tongue."

A TAXI deposited Shannon at the Mercedes Building, and a few minutes later he was in a small office where Mr. Marras had been comparing strips from adding machines.

"I want to talk to you about your car," Shannon told him as he took the chair the little man placed for him.

"Car? My car? Are you crazy? I don't have no car."

"You've a Packard registered in your name."

"Oh—that. That ain't mine. We often put cars and stuff in one of our names."

"This is a dark blue Packard," Shannon read off the number.

"That's used by Meyer's mob."

"That's what I wanted to know."

Marras looked up nervously. "How did you know about it?"

"It has odd habits. It's always outside buildings where I am and always full of gunmen. Curious, isn't it?"

Marras digested this, then said, "You think Meyer——"

"Or someone in his mob."

"Maybe it ain't you they're looking for."

"What about the three guys who tried to get me in my office yesterday?"

"I seen it in the paper. You said you didn't know who sent 'em."

"Meyer runs the used-car lots out of town too, doesn't he?"

"Yeah, but——"

"Out-of-town gun-toters don't come

charging up to New York to try to kill just for fun. Somebody was paying them."

"A guy like you's got enemies."

"Meaning Meyer?"

"Could be others," Marras paused. "Anyways, why should Meyer want to rub you out?"

"I'll give you three guesses."

"You think he——" Marras stopped, then began again. "You think he bumped Ryan?"

"It's a possibility."

"I don't see any other reason he'd want you outta the way."

"Maybe Meyer doesn't know who killed Ryan but doesn't want Gerelli back."

"Why, that stinking, lousy, low-down——"

"It's just a possibility."

"Did you tell Ma?"

"What?"

"About these here attacks."

"One attack and a lot of watchful waiting," corrected Shannon. "Not yet, Why?"

"Tell her. You jest tell her. Then we'll see something."

"Maybe you've got something there," murmured Shannon. "By the way," he said casually as he got up to go, "how come the cops only found the Theger Company records they were supposed to find?"

Marras gave a pleased grin. He went to a grid in the floor which opened onto some of the mechanism of the air-conditioning system. The whole unit lifted up, revealing a chute underneath. "The office below is rented by an import and export jobber. He don't know nothing except he's paid two hundred and fifty dollars a month for a big steel safe down there. The chute goes into the safe and we've got the combination. The Big Shot had air conditioning put in on purpose. Smart, ain't it?" Marras still had his pleased grin on his face as Shannon left.

At the Cyril Hotel an elegant young man with wavy hair looked at Shannon with disfavor and said, "I told your man yesterday that the present management, Mr. Milk, took over on February tenth, and our records do not go back before that date."

"Who owned and operated the place before?"

"Mr. Milk."

"Granted there may be one man with the

extraordinary name of Milk, how come there are two of them?"

"Mr. Milk is Mr. Milk's uncle."

"Nephew Milk is running the joint now?"

"I've just explained that to you."

"Where can Uncle Milk be found, if he took all the previous records with him?"

"I'm sure I couldn't tell you."

"Where's Nephew Milk?"

"They don't speak."

"Meaning they're dumb or they've quarreled?"

"They've quarreled, of course."

"All the same, if Nephew Milk took over from Uncle Milk, he must know of a bank or a lawyer or something through which arrangements were made."

"I can give you Mr. Milk's lawyer."

"Uncle Milk?"

"Yes. Let me see, now. Yes. Snyder, Snyder, Snyder, and Foreman. Somewhere on Wall Street."

THE telephone book provided the address of a Snyder, Snyder, Snyder, and Foreman at 63 Wall Street. So, mentally cursing the grouping of most lawyers' offices at the furthestmost tip of Manhattan, Shannon took the subway down.

One of the Mr. Snyders—he never discovered which—was sympathetic.

"I understand your position, Mr. Shannon. Of course we do not give out our clients' addresses. I'd like to help you in any way I can——"

"Then call up Uncle Milk and explain to him and ask him if he will see me."

Mr. Snyder complied. After a few preliminary questions Uncle Milk was agreeable. He lived on Central Park West.

Mr. Milk turned out to be elderly, bald, and disposed to be helpful. "All the records of the hotel were moved to storage," he explained. "Except those that were destroyed. I can't tell you, offhand, how far back the telephone records were kept for."

Shannon's spirits sank. "Any way of finding out, short of uncrating all the stuff?"

Mr. Milk said, "I believe the crates were labeled as to contents."

"That's something," agreed Shannon, not too hopefully. "Who sorted out the stuff

and decided what should be kept and what thrown out?"

"It wasn't sorted. When the deal was finally arranged, it called for immediate possession. As I do not care to come in contact with my nephew and certainly do not wish to ask any favors of him, I ordered everything crated and sent to storage."

Shannon's spirits rose a little. In that case there was a chance the phone records were still there.

"Where are they?"

"The Manhattan Storage and Warehouse Company."

"Will you give me authority to put a man in to go through them?"

"I should not like my nephew to know the details of the receipts," said Mr. Milk.

"Anything my man finds will be confidential, and he certainly won't look at receipts. They're no use to us."

Finally Mr. Milk agreed. After he'd called the warehouse and made the arrangements, Shannon called the office. "Who's there?" he asked Lane. She told him Pete Elliman and Johnny Wier. "Tell Johnny to get over to the Manhattan Warehouse. I'll meet him there in an hour if I can."

Ma's apartment was a scene of unusual activity when Shannon arrived there a half-hour later. Five or six men were sitting round the living room, including Lefty and Sep and "Moron" Manny Gesheim. After Shannon had greeted Ma he said, "You must be tired, Moron."

"Who, me? I ain't never tired, an' I told you my name ain't Moron."

"How long did you stand outside that delicatessen on Third Avenue last night? I was going to come and tell you to go home, but I forgot."

"What's this all about?" Ma demanded.

"Manny's girl friend must have stood him up last night. He was waiting and waiting on Third Avenue. Damned if I'd wait that long for a woman."

"Waiting on Third?" Ma's dark eyes narrowed. "What was you doing?"

"Aw, he's kidding you, Ma. I was hanging around waitin' fer a guy. He owes me thoity bucks." Manny had an inspiration and began to embroider the story.

"You ain't never had thoity bucks to loan," retorted Ma scathingly. She shot a rapid glance over to a tall, bony man who was idly rolling dice on the top of the grand piano. "There's something going on here I don't get."

"Was he out all night too?" inquired Shannon. "Ought to make your boys keep earlier hours, Ma."

"What do you know about this?"

"He likes to kid, Ma," said another of the men.

Again Ma's eyes searched the whole group. "I hadn't noticed it," she said drily. "But there's other things to do now."

"What's the conference about?" asked Shannon.

"I was fixing to give Rita a real slap-up funeral, like Theo would want," explained Ma. "Do it right. Just as soon as the cops finish with her. I told that Captain Woods last night. And this morning he phones me and says they got her kinsfolk and they arrived at eight this morning and they're claiming the body and as soon's it's released, they plan to take it to Pennsylvania."

SHANNON shrugged carelessly.

"Save you the expense and bother," he suggested.

"I got the dough," said Ma. "It ain't right. They ain't got no money. They can't do it the way Theo would want it."

"Like fer one of us to go talk to 'em?" offered the bony man, looking up from his solitary dice game.

"They ain't never done nothing fer her. Wouldn't even write her ner take the money she sent 'em. And now she's dead they want to horn in. It ain't right."

"If I talked to 'em—" suggested Manny.

"With all the cops in town looking for you? That would be smart, wouldn't it?" Ma's withering sarcasm silenced him.

"What about a compromise?" suggested Shannon.

"Huh?"

"See if they wouldn't be willing for you to have a service here and then take the body down to Pennsylvania afterward. That's often done."

"What d'you want two funerals for?"

asked Lefty with a thoughtful air.

"It's an idea," conceded Ma. "Streber was going to see if he could do anything with them. He's a good talker. Maybe he'll make 'em see it ain't right. But if he don't, we could try what Shannon here suggests. Meantime, get all the cars lined up and speak to Clovelli about flowers."

"What day, Ma?"

"Tomorrow should be okay. They won't hold her beyond that."

"But tomorrow's the day—" began Manny.

"Shut your big mouth, you!" Ma turned on him with sudden savageness. "Now git, all of you."

CHAPTER XIV

AUTOPSY



WHEN they'd gone, Ma stood for some time looking out of the window, but it is doubtful if she even saw the East River beyond. There was an indefinable gap to her square shoulders.

"What's on your mind, Ma?" asked Shannon.

"Guess I'm a bit tired," she evaded.

"There's something else."

"Have you got any hopes of finding the louse that killed Ryan?" she demanded.

"Are you even looking any more?"

"What's somebody been saying to you?"

"Ain't nothing nobody said. I don't pay no attention to them windbags."

"Something's happened."

"Yeah. It's—"

"Come on. Out with it, Ma."

"You see that pitcher?" She pointed to a landscape on the wall behind the settee; a large supply of tulips in front of a windmill advertised its Dutch inspiration. "It was Theo's favorite. He paid a hunk of dough fer it. Said the man who done it was famous."

"It's okay." She seemed to expect Shannon to say something.

"This morning, when I come in here, it had fallen. Right in the corner of the sofa. Here." She pointed to the corner nearest

the fireplace. "It's his seat," she almost whispered. "Theo's. He allus sits there when he's home."

"Ma—" Belatedly Shannon remembered the old superstition. "You don't believe that kind of rubbish, do you?"

"The night before Theo's father died, a pitcher fell. A pitcher of the Virgin it was. And the next day Theo's father died. Sudden. Of a heart attack." She paused, then added, "He didn't amount to much, but he was a man around the house."

"If there isn't anything worse worrying you than a picture falling off a wall, Ma, you're lucky."

"You don't understand. The cards ain't good, neither," she went on stubbornly. "I know." She turned to the window again. "Theo knows too."

"What d'you mean?"

"When he had his horoscope cast for this year—that's reading the stars—they wouldn't tell him nothing, except it wasn't a lucky year and he'd better be careful and not start no new business. He says to me, 'Ma, I don't like this. There ain't nothing after October.' And he says, 'Maybe I'd better go away fer a while.' He was talking about it yesterday, when I seen him."

"Did it warn him about any of the people in his own mob?" inquired the detective.

"Warn him?"

"Say he ought to look for treachery in his own mob?"

Ma's eyes lost their discouraged, faraway dullness and slitted back to their usual gimlet sharpness. "Say what you mean."

"Your son passed the word that the mob was to ooperate with me in every way, didn't he?"

"Ain't they?"

"Scarcely one of them has told me the truth. Yesterday a bunch of half-baked punks came to my office and tried to shoot me. I was followed all day. Last night, when I left the poker game, a car full of gunmen was parked outside the hotel."

"There could be other guys after you."

"The car last night was one used by Meyer's mob."

"Why, that lousy, double-crossing——" She stopped. "I'll deal with him."

"Now don't run off half-cocked, Ma."

"There ain't time to waste," she said harshly. "Leave this to me."

"One other thing. About La Ruba. Has she made an attempt to communicate with Gerelli recently?"

THE old woman shook her head.

"She knew better. Like I told you, it was Theo got her outta town. The boys didn't have no use fer her after Jeff Markey went up. Theo was the only reason she wasn't pushing up daisies."

"Well, if you're sure—"

"What have you been hearing about her?"

"Nothing. That's the point. She isn't in Connecticut."

Ma stared. "Are you sure?"

"She left some months ago."

"Theo'd have told me if she'd been around. He tells me everything." Was she saying it to make herself believe it, or did she really believe it? "Funny thing about kids," she went on after a while. "You raise 'em. Try an' teach 'em to fight for themselves. On Tenth Avenue that's the most important thing they gotta learn. And then they get on—do well. So's you can be proud of 'em."

"Look at Theo. He didn't have nothing. There was times when there wasn't nothing to eat in the house. Times when he couldn't go to school because I didn't have no decent clothes to put on him."

Shannon said, "He's come a long way."

"And never forgot his ma. Never. I mind the first money he ever got. A bunch of kids took it from the till of a candy store. Divided it up between 'em. Theo's share was four cents. He brung it home to me. He says, 'Half's yours, Ma.' He weren't more'n five. And then when he got into the big time he sent fer me to come out to Kansas. He says, 'Ma, I gotta have someone around I kin trust.' Yeah," she repeated, "he tells me everything." She pulled herself out of her reverie with a jerk. "You git going. Leave this to me. You jest keep your trap shut."

As Shannon left the Nautilus Towers, Streber was getting out of a taxi in front. The lawyer's face showed the signs of a

sleepless night. He said, "Been seeing Ma?" When Shannon nodded, he went on, "She's all upset about Rita's funeral."

"She's counting on you to get it fixed," said the detective.

"I've had a hell of a morning." On the opposite corner was a cocktail bar. Streber looked at it. "I need a drink. Come in for a moment."

When they'd got drinks in front of them he continued. "The girl's parents have come up and they're stubborn as mules. Wouldn't have anything to do with her while she was alive, leading, according to them, a life of sin, but now she's dead, they'll fight like tiger cats for the body. I don't understand how people's minds work."

"They do set great store on corpses," said Shannon.

"They haven't any money worth the name, and when I pointed out the financial advantage of having the funeral expenses borne by Ma, they said, 'We bury our own dead.' It was a painful session." The lawyer passed his hand over his eyes wearily. "This morning's seemed like an eternity."

"Rierson and I left her alive and well at about eleven-thirty," said Shannon. "She called my office at twelve-twenty and spoke to my secretary. You saw her when?"

"Between one-fifteen and one forty-five, as near as we can fix it, and she certainly was all right then."

"And two unknown men came shortly after three—one of whom may have been Meyer."

"Wish I could get hold of Meyer," muttered Streber, then went on, "I wonder how accurately they'll be able to tell when she died."

"Did she have any outside friends that you knew of?"

"I wouldn't know. I never had much to do with her. I've seen more of her these last months because I've had to take papers to her to sign, and when the bills came in I had to take care of them, and every time she wanted to do anything she called me and asked me if I thought it was okay. We had told her she'd better keep out of the public eye. We didn't want tabloid stuff about Gerelli's love nest or tripe of that kind. Goes

against a man at a trial, if you get women on the jury."

"She must have had some other friends."

"Gerelli was pretty much of a little tin god to Rita. So long as he took her out two or three times a week she seemed content to sit in the apartment the rest of the time. She'd go shopping in the mornings. The junk that girl could buy! And in the afternoons she'd go to the movies."

"Rather a lonely existence."

"She did have a couple of girl friends who dated back to her night-club days. She'd take them to lunch sometimes, at the most expensive places, and she helped them out with clothes. She was big-hearted."

"And that satisfied her?"

STREBER shrugged. "D'you ever know with a woman? Gerelli gave her everything she asked for. Clothes, jewelry, a Pekinese one time, a car she could use—"

"Depends on the woman, of course," said Shannon vaguely.

"Whatever you do for a woman, it's wrong," Streber went on after a while. "They nag you if you don't make money, and then if you do, there's something else wrong."

"You sound bitter about it."

"Bitter? Perhaps I am." Streber signaled the waiter for another drink. "You're not married, are you?"

"No."

"Then you don't know what bitterness is."

"Your marriage wasn't happy?"

"I did everything to give my wife what she wanted—a fine home, money to educate the children, and—" He broke off. The waiter placed the fresh drinks in front of them. "Well, she's dead now, these two years. It's water under the bridge."

Shannon recognized the note of finality and didn't pursue the subject. "Talking about women, I wish I could find out more about this La Ruba."

"I told you, she's in Connecticut," snapped Streber. "Why d'you keep harping on her all the time?"

The tone surprised Shannon, but he only said, "If she wasn't doing so well up there,

she might have tried to contact Gerelli to see if he'd help her out."

"She knew damn well he wouldn't. He'd told her if ever she came back he wouldn't stop the boys, and she knew what that meant."

"If she had wanted to contact him, how would she have gone about it?"

"Why ask me?" Nervous irritability was noticeable in the man's voice.

"You'd be the logical person for her to come to. She'd know you'd be able to find Gerelli."

"She could go to the Two by Four and ask the bartender. He wouldn't tell her, but she could try, I suppose. Anyway, she didn't come to my office."

"Well," said Shannon, "I've got things to do if Gerelli isn't to fry in the morning."

"For God's sake, must you use that expression?"

"Be electrocuted suit you better?"

"Sorry," said Streber. "I'm tired and my nerves are shot."

"I could use twenty-four hours' sleep myself," said Shannon.

A telephone call to the office produced the information that Miss Consuelo Bevan had been waiting for a long time and must see him urgently, that Mr. Rowton was not with her, and that Miss Streber had called three times. Shannon pondered the problem of the absence of Mr. Rowton as he rode down in a cab.

Consuelo looked strained and worried. She almost jumped from the settee as he came in and caught hold of him. "Thank God you're all right."

"I'm glad you're so pleased about it," he replied. "You're in the minority."

"No fooling, I've been sitting here for hours, and I haven't said so many prayers since I was in convent school."

"Come inside and tell me."

She followed Shannon to his office and then showed no signs of talking. At last she said, "It's difficult to make you understand."

"You haven't tried yet. Except for some reason you're glad I'm alive. I'm duly flattered. If I were twenty years younger I might get hopeful about it." He squinted thoughtfully at her pale face. "How about a

drink? If you don't mind it alone—"

"I could use one," she admitted.

After he'd poured her a good stiff one he said, "Now tell me what's happened. When I left here Bob Rowton was talking to you on the phone. I expected the next thing to be a wedding invitation."

CONSUELO smiled a bit wanly. "I've loved Bob since I first met him," she said suddenly. "Only I never thought he— You see, I knew about Marsha Streber, and I always thought she'd come to her senses and realize what a swell person he is and that would be the end of my seeing him."

"And then this morning you knew different."

"Yes. I was so— Have you ever been so happy you're scared it won't last? You pinch yourself to know if you're awake."

"You pinched yourself and what happened?"

"Bob wanted to go right up and tell his father. So we went. Mr. Rowton was nice, and then I said something about you having called me and he hit the ceiling. He said, 'Bob, have you been seeing the so-and-so after what I told you? And he went on talking about you and wound up, 'Anyway, he's being taken care of,' and Bob asked what he meant, and Mr. Rowton said, 'The less you know, the better. Keep away from him and his office.' Bob asked me to leave the room and I did. And it was a half hour later that Bob came out, and he was frightfully upset."

"We walked across to the park. At first he wouldn't tell me anything. I asked what his father meant by 'He's being taken care of.' Finally he said, 'I'm not sure, but I'm going to find out.' I asked how, and he said he thought he knew a way. And I said we ought to tell you. And he said not until he was sure."

"I don't know, Mr. Shannon, but I was frightened. In spite of what Bob said, I came down here. I know he's Bob's father, and I feel like a traitor to Bob—but I couldn't—I mean if they really— Oh, I didn't know what to do." It ended in confusion.

"I'm grateful to you for coming," Shannon told her sincerely

"I've read about these things in newspapers," she went on, "but I never took them seriously. That isn't what I mean, exactly. They just didn't seem real. Then, as I told you the other night, I'd met Gerelli at a party, and when his trial came and he was convicted, I began to wonder about some of the other people I'd met here in New York. I'm explaining very badly. Back in Vassar, where I come from, we know who everybody is and——"

"Life is simpler."

"Here, one never knows. If even Bob's father——" She stopped again, then hurried on, earnestly. "Mr. Shannon, what do you really think he meant by saying you're being taken care of?"

"Rowton has a certain amount of influence," Shannon evaded. "He might try to make trouble for me with the License Bureau."

She looked straight at him, her eyes clear and questioning. "That wasn't what Bob was afraid of."

"Rowton is hardly in the murdering business himself," Shannon assured her. "He might go so far as to hint to a friend that I was a nuisance, but he won't do anything himself, if that's what you're afraid of."

"No, I know." She flushed a little. "I'm not as naive as all that. But it's just as bad if he——"

Shannon shrugged. "Suppose you don't worry about it. You've warned me, and your responsibility ends there."

"I want to know."

"I don't think Bob is mixed up in any of these—shall we call them side lines of the congressman's? I don't think he knew anything about them until the past few weeks, and now he's only guessing."

"I'm sure he's nothing to do with them," she answered quickly.

"Then what's the trouble?"

"It's hurting Bob—badly. Suspecting these things about his father."

"He'll get over it with you to help him. By the way, nobody knew you came here, did they?"

"No."

"Well, don't tell anyone."

"All right, if you say so. But I don't

see why I shouldn't tell——"

"Nor do I. But as I repeatedly tell people, the reason that I have reached my present advanced age is that I am a cautious man."

HE ESCORTED her to the outer door of the office and, when he'd closed it after her, turned to find Lane gazing with rapture after the model's retreating figure.

"Isn't she lovely?" she sighed.

"Pretty girl," agreed Shannon. "Models have to be."

"Wouldn't it be wonderful to look like that?"

The man shot her a quick glance. "I don't know, Lane. It wears off, you know, after a few years. And she must wonder all the time which man asks her out because he really likes her and which because he just wants to be seen with a woman who'll make the other men stare. If you think about it, the drawbacks and advantages are about even."

"They say that about having a lot of money, too," answered Lane with a flash of humor, "but I've often heard you say you wouldn't mind seeing what it's like."

"I'll try out a couple of million any day if someone will hand 'em to me," agreed Shannon, "but you never heard me pining to be handsome."

"But you are handsome."

"Lane! For God's sake! I have to look at my face every morning when I shave." He was leafing again through the telephone messages.

"It's not just me," protested Lane. "The newspapers are always saying 'the handsome red-headed detective.'"

"Newspapers," said Shannon absently, "tell a lot of lies." After a moment's silence he said, "Try to locate Ames. If he's not downtown, try his usual bars and give me a line. I'll clear up some of these messages." As he went into his office he was wondering why the Streber girl hadn't called again.

A few minutes later the phone rang and Ames's cheerful burble came. "The great sleuth comes to the humble news gatherer for tidings."

"First time I've known you to be hum-

ble, if you are. Give."

"The lady was dead when she got into the tub," announced Ames. "Remarkable, isn't it? Leads one to suspect she had some help getting in."

"Dead of what?"

"Strangulation plus a spot of smothering."

"No traces of nembutal?"

"None. She'd had lobster for lunch."

"Have they fixed the hour?"

"They're distressingly vague or holding out on me. I'm not sure. They say 'between one and five.' Depends on whether the water was hot or cold to start with. Then it appears it's difficult to tell with lobster. It doesn't always digest the same, or some such yarn. I think they made it up. Though there have been times when I've thought lobster didn't digest at all. She'd also been drinking quite a bit." Ames finished and waited. Finally he asked, "Is that noise I hear the great brain cerebrating?"

"No, the fire brigade going past," Shannon told him. "Anything else?"

"The time is narrowed down a bit by Streber's story and the maid's. She left at one o'clock—an hour early, because her husband has a cold. Rita was okay then. Streber says he arrived between one-fifteen and one-thirty and left at about a quarter to two."

"How about the identification of the two men?"

"That's going to blow up, I think. They got some more pictures of Meyer, and now the men say they don't think it was he. They're trying to pick up Meyer for a line-up, but they haven't found him. He's notably missing from his usual haunts. Woods figures they've been reached and scared off—the porters, I mean."

"I don't somehow see Meyer going about a murder like that," said Shannon.

"Streber?" suggested Ames and then answered his own question. "Except one doesn't arrive to commit a murder when, as far as he knew, the maid would be there as a witness. And that brings us back to the great unknown—X." He stopped for a moment and then said, "Are you going to break this tonight?"

"It's got to be tonight," Shannon answered grimly.

"Because that slave driver I work for wants to send me to cover the execution."

"It's a nice drive up to Ossining anyway," Shannon said noncommittally. "By."

CHAPTER XV

TWENTY-FOUR HOURS TO GO



OUTSIDE, Miss Lane was confronting a sharp-nosed little man with furtive eyes as Shannon came out.

"What's the trouble?" asked the detective.

"I represent Mugsy Walter. My card." The little man flipped out a printed card: MR. J. SAMUELS, Attorney. "On the fourteenth of January, Nineteen Forty-eight, you assaulted and brutally beat my client, with the result that he spent five days in hospital and since has been incapacitated from following his vocation. I am about to bring suit on account of my client against—"

"Are you?" It was quietly spoken, but the detective took a step forward as he said it.

"It would be extremely inadvisable for you to have an action brought on such grounds at the present moment." Mr. J. Samuels backed a little. "My client is willing to listen to a settlement."

"As I remember your client," said Shannon deliberately, "he's a louse with three broads on his string. Furthermore, he took five bucks to finger me for a mob that was gunning for me. He's damned lucky he's alive. Tell the little squirt to shut up or I'll finish what I began, and next time he'll go to the morgue. You too, if you come round here again."

Mr. Samuels was edging toward the door. "I shall apply for police protection."

"You haven't got it now," said Shannon ominously. "Get out you yellow-bellied, chicken-livered descendant of a line of lice." His invective was wasted. Mr. Samuels had left. "Sorry, Lane." Remembering her horror of profanity, Shannon turned and found her eyes shining with pleasure.

"It's what he needed," she said spirit-

edly. "The unspeakable little—er—"

"Small-time jerk," prompted Shannon with a grin.

"Well—er—he was sort of slimy. I wonder why in the world he came round now, threatening an action about something that happened back in Nineteen Forty-eight?"

"My pet and my sweet, hasn't it occurred to you that these bright people read newspapers? They've decided that I've got myself into a spot, that I'm through. They'll all come round with their actions or grudges." He gave a short laugh. "Just watch 'em."

"But you aren't." She looked up with a faint worry dimming the blind faith that he could get out of any and all predicaments.

"Aren't what? Through?" He grinned down at her. "Oh, no. I'm like the guy who said I've not begun to fight. John Paul Jones or whoever the hell it was." He picked up his hat and started for the door.

"What about Miss Streber?"

"Tell her if it's that urgent go find herself a booth and sit by it till the bell rings. I'll call in. And, Lane—can you fix to stay late tonight, in case I need the boys?"

"I've brought some sandwiches and hard-boiled eggs," she told him, adding, "just in case there's no time to get dinner."

The receptionist at the Theger offices studied the photograph of Joan La Ruba and shook her head. "No. She's not been around. Who is she?"

Shannon countered with another question. "Were you here in February?"

"Sure." The girl's eyes took on a sudden interest. "You mean about the time—"

"About then."

She shook her head. "Haven't been any women ask for Mr. Gerelli. Except his mother sometimes."

Shannon next displayed his photo to Streber's switchboard-receptionist, who looked like the original model for all cartoons of old-maid schoolteachers. "Hm. Looks theatrical." Coming from her, the remark was utterly damning. "I'm sure I'd remember if there had been anyone like that come up here. The only theatrical type of person who ever came was the unfortunate girl whose murder was in this morning's papers. Miss

Prince, I believe her name was."

"You don't remember anyone inquiring for Gerelli's whereabouts during February?"

"I don't. And what's more, it wouldn't have done them any good if they had."

"Well, well—Mr. Shannon. What are you trying to do? Corrupt our Miss Vertigne? It can't be done." Jack Streber appeared from an inner office and confronted the detective. His face wasn't as it had appeared on the memorable night when the staircase was eluding him. He was sober now, but obviously had a hangover. "She's discretion itself."

"She needs to be," remarked Shannon.

STREBER said, "Come inside. I'm sure you're being frightfully clever, but I'm not very bright today."

"Another large evening?"

"So what?"

"Nothing," Shannon assured him as he seated himself in the comfortable private office.

"Mr. Shannon, just what are you trying to do?"

"About what?"

"Gerelli."

"Don't you read the newspapers?"

"One of the few benefits of a higher education is that it teaches you not to believe most of what you read."

"I thought your father might have told you. You're the junior partner of the firm, aren't you?"

"Not yet. That day will come, so my father assures me—if I'm not dead of alcoholism and we're still out of prison."

"I'm sure your father didn't say that."

"We're too smart to commit crimes here. Pays better to profit by other people's."

Shannon nodded. "Crime has paid me well."

"That's not what I mean. You're taking Gerelli's money—" Jack stopped, his haggard eyes searching the detective's face. "You don't ask how he made it."

Feeling vaguely sorry for the nerve-ridden, hungry young man, Shannon said, "Haven't you better be careful, talking about your father's star client?"

"I'm grateful to Gerelli. Don't mistake

me. He and his—well—business put me through college, gave me a car, sent me on a trip to South America as a graduation present, and installed me in this super-plush office. I've no complaints."

"What's the matter then, except a hang-over?"

"What were you trying to find out from Miss Vertigne?"

"Routine inquiry," Shannon assured him. "Checking on Joan La Ruba."

"La Ruba! Wasn't she the girl before—" Jack looked puzzled. "Before Prince?"

"What are you scared of?"

"Nothing. I just—" Jack broke off. "Everybody's nerves are on edge. With tomorrow—"

"Uhuh. Not nice having your friends and clients slated for the hot seat," agreed the detective carelessly. "By the way, you don't happen to know where your sister is, do you?"

Jack shook his head. "Stood me up for lunch. I was late this morning and she'd gone out before me, leaving a message to say would I meet her for lunch at Longchamps. I pulled myself together and staggered over there, and she didn't show up or even phone."

"Got detained, I suppose," said Shannon vaguely.

"She's getting neurotic or something. Oh, I suppose you can't blame her—" He stopped and then said irrelevantly, "I wish to God I'd stayed in the Navy."

"Don't like being a lawyer?" When Jack shook his head, Shannon went on, "Can be a pretty good profession."

"D'you think so?"

"Ever read your father's valedictory speech?"

"Sure. Grandpa had it printed and bound. Why?"

"It's the kind of speech your grandfather would have been proud of and had bound. Read it again sometime. And try a whisky sour. It's better than anything I know, except not mixing them the night before." Shannon got up and, as he turned to the door, said, "What's the name of your father's tailor?"

"Now what in the name of God— Liebling, East Forty-eighth Street. Between

Madison and Fifth. But I don't see—"

"Just checking. That's all. Gerelli went there. That's why I wanted the name."

"Gerelli likes good clothes and good food. Lots of both of 'em." Jack gave an almost perceptible shudder and added, "I suppose he'll order a fancy breakfast tomorrow."

"Seems to be getting you."

"I've seen plenty of men killed—blown up and smeared all over the deck. But this business of telling a man you've got so long, so many days, so many hours, then nothing. It's barbaric."

Shannon shrugged. "Process of law in a large number of allegedly civilized countries. Gives him time to repent of his sins and put his soul right."

"D'you believe that?"

"We were talking about Gerelli," Shannon reminded him. "Try a whisky sour," he repeated as he closed the door.

FROM the lobby he telephoned the office.

"Sam's on his way uptown," Miss Lane told him. "He sounded excited. Johnny called him from the warehouse. They won't let him stay, as it's after four, and he hasn't found anything yet."

"I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

He found a taxi, drove to East Forty-eighth Street, and went into a sartorial establishment that advertised itself as "Tailors to gentlemen of distinction."

Mr. Liebling was quite willing to talk. Yes, Mr. Streber had brought Mr. Gerelli originally. He found it hard to believe the stories they told about Mr. Gerelli. Always bought the best and paid his bills promptly. "In fact, he'd ordered another topcoat from us. I still have it here."

Shannon nodded. "May I see it?"

Mr. Liebling was only too happy to show it. He pointed out its expensive features.

"I'll pay you fifty dollars for the loan of it until tomorrow," offered Shannon.

Mr. Liebling put his head on one side. Behind his black eyes were questions, but finally he only repeated, "Fifty dollars? And you will not damage the coat?" When Shannon nodded agreement, he said, "Where shall I send it?"

"I'll take it."

With the coat over his arm, he stopped at a men's hatter and bought a black felt hat, then went up to the office.

There was a bunch of reporters, causing Lane distress. An elderly man pushed his way forward.

"Mister, you run a detective agency, don't you?"

"I don't blame you if you mistook it for the anteroom to a booby hatch," Shannon told him, giving a bleak look at a reporter who was constructing a rickety tower from paper water cups.

"My daughter came to New York three months ago, and I want you to find her." The elderly man persisted in his business.

"Come in and I'll have one of my assistants talk to you."

"I want you to do it yourself," said the man stubbornly.

"Then come and see me next week." Shannon took another pile of messages from Lane and made his way toward his office, where he could see Sam, burning with news.

"Hey, Red—on the level—are you going to break it?" called one of the reporters.

Shannon eyed him with disfavor. "If I get a chance to do some work, Baldy," he answered. As he closed his office door he said, "Okay, Sam. Let's have it."

"Boss, I think I've found the corpse for you." Sam triumphantly exhibited a photograph. Shannon looked at the depressing nude revealed as he reached his hand to the telephone. "Get me that warehouse," he told Lane.

"Look," went on Sam, "it says, found ninety feet off the Merritt Parkway on February seventh. Naked and been dead three days. Well preserved on account of the snow. Like as not that's why it wasn't found before. Aged between thirty-five and forty-five. Female. Blond. Appendectomy scar. Indications of—" He stopped. Shannon was speaking on the telephone, shaking his head and muttering.

Shannon was having trouble with the warehouse. Rules were rules, and people could not have access to the storerooms after four o'clock. "I'm willing to pay the salaries of a half-dozen armed guards to stand over my man while he works," Shannon ex-

plained, "but it must be done now."

At the end of fifteen minutes it was arranged.

"You did a swell job, Sam," Shannon said. "Tell Lewis to get after the details. You stick around. I'll be needing you later."

Sam was studying his employer's face shrewdly. Even after the years he'd worked for him, Sam still couldn't read what was behind its granite hardness, and the green eyes completely masked thoughts and feelings. He said, finally, "Is it going to work out, Boss?"

"Yes, but nobody's going to like it," Shannon answered cryptically. "Give me the folders of the trial and the other reports, Sam, and tell Lane I'm not to be disturbed. I'll speak to the Streber girl if she calls. Otherwise nobody."

IT WAS a quarter past five when Marsha Streber finally called again. "I've been trying to get you all day," she complained. "I've got to talk to you. Something terrible has happened."

"Sure. There's a war in Korea and the Russians have got the atom bomb. Anything else?"

"For God's sake, Mr. Shannon, this is no laughing matter. I must talk to you—at once."

"I'm at my office."

"I can't come there. I—I can't explain. Will you please come? I'm in a terrible jam."

Shannon's expression was enigmatic as he asked, "Where are you?"

"At a teashop—Two-thirty-one A East Fifty-first Street. Will you please come?"

"Sure. In about a half hour."

He hung up and went into the outer office. "Sam—got your gun?" Sam sat up on the couch and Pete put aside a *Reader's Digest*.

"Sure. Where are we going?"

He told them, adding to Lane, "Get me Streber."

"A teashop?" Sam looked disapproving. "What d'you expect?"

"Not tea, at any rate. I don't know, Sam. Perhaps nothing. But I'm getting a bit tired of being shot at and laid in wait for. I mean to even up the odds this time."

"How about my coming, too?" asked Pete.

"No. I want you to get the night watchman, Patrick O'Rourke, and have him at the Mercedes Building at ten o'clock. See he remains in exactly the spot he was in when he heard the shot that killed Ryan."

As Lane dialed Streber's number she said, "Headquarters has called three times and Captain Woods, personally, twice."

"So-o. Woods called, did he? I'll call him later." He took the extension phone she held out to him. "Streber? Yes. No. I've been busy. Will you come to my office at ten? I want to make an experiment that I think will clarify things, and I want you to see it. I'll tell you later. What's that? Oh, yes. I'm hopeful. I'll count on your being here."

Shannon was silent and preoccupied as he and Sam walked over to Second Avenue and downtown to Fifty-first. As they neared their destination he explained. "Fifty-first's a westbound street and this teashop should be about the middle of the block. D'you know the Streber girl by sight? No. Five-five. Brown hair and eyes. Retroussé nose, mulish chin. Seems to go in for dressmaker suits and large bags and seldom wears a hat. You'll spot her. She'll probably be sitting alone. Go in first and get a table. I'll join you in a couple of minutes. If any fireworks start, watch my back."

When Shannon approached the "Bite to Eat" Tea Shoppe, he found it was worse even than its name. It had a door with a pink frilly curtain which rang an irritatingly tinkling bell each time it opened. It was furnished with antiques which had been made last year. The tables had pink tablecloths, and three or four artificial flowers in artsy-and-craftsy vases stood on each one.

The elderly woman at a desk near the door was evidently the owner. Another elderly woman, wearing a hat she'd probably inherited from her grandmother, was eating a salad composed of marshmallow on top of a canned pear which in its turn rested on top of a nest of cottage cheese. Opposite her an earnest young woman with straggly hair was reading a notebook and eating corned-beef hash. Beyond her was Sam, and almost opposite him, Marsha Streber, alone and looking drawn and anxious.

To complete the roster of clients, a policeman was drinking a cup of coffee, and a small, bald-headed man in the corner was reading a newspaper and plodding through the corned-beef hash in the indefinable manner of a habitu  who knows the cooking is atrocious but lacks the energy to seek a new place.

CHAPTER XVI

MURDER PLOT—QUITE ELABORATE



XPRESSIONS of relief and nervousness came to Marsha Streber's face as Shannon came in. Then a puzzled frown replaced the look of relief when he seated himself with Sam.

Sam said in a low voice, "That car up the road—"

"I expect so." A waitress in a pink apron came. Shannon said "Coffee," and beckoned Marsha over. She pointed to the seat at her table, but he shook his head. At last she came over.

"Mr. Shannon," she said loudly, "I thought you'd never get here."

"I said half an hour." He didn't even get up, but moved a chair out a little. "What's your trouble?"

"But—who—"

"Sam Ross—Miss Streber. Anything you can say to me you can in front of Sam. He is a tomb of silence."

"I thought you'd come alone."

"I know you did." Shannon smiled thinly. "But bodyguards are being worn in the best circles this season."

When the silence grew too uncomfortable she began, "I learned several things today."

"Never let a day pass without learning something," said Shannon. "Some famous person said that."

"Probably Benjamin Franklin," growled Sam, who had a habit of attributing all sayings and quotations to Mr. Franklin.

There was another silence. The man in the corner had finished his corned-beef hash and was now confronted by a messy-looking dessert.

"I don't know—" began Marsha and

stojed. "May I have a cigarette? I seem to have smoked all mine."

"Sam, cigarette for the lady." Sam produced a cigarette and lighted it for her. There was yet another silence.

"Ever notice, Sam, how uniform caps, like policemen's, always leave a mark on the forehead and a particular set to the hair?"

Sam looked instinctively at the uniformed man. There was no mark on his forehead. "But—" He stopped. "I get it."

Two more policemen came in. The one who'd been eating got up and laid a dollar on the desk for his check. The two new arrivals came to Shannon's table.

"They want you downtown," said one of them, and his hand was on his gun.

Shannon got up, and as he did he swung with his left hand and gave the man nearest him a punishing blow in the midriff, while his right sent the table with a good deal of force against the other man. This spilled Marsha and her chair and some coffee on the floor, but that wasn't worrying Shannon. Sam had swung at once on the man who'd been there earlier.

There were several feminine screams. The man who'd got Shannon's left had instinctively bent over, and before he could get a guard up or haul out his gun he found the left followed by an even more punishing right to the side of his neck. His companion, disentangling himself from the table, tablecloth, and assorted debris, waded in to his assistance. A crash indicated Sam and his opponent overturning a table.

Shannon closed with the second man, driving him backward with sledge-hammer blows toward the marshmallow lady. She fled screaming just before the man backed into her table, going down with it. The first man had got his gun out. The detective swung a chair onto his head with sufficient force to break it. He turned to see the second man aiming a gun.

The elderly owner was dithering to and fro, with utter futility, and screaming. "You'll smash everything! Stop it!"

Marsha had picked herself up from the floor, drenched with coffee, and was staring at the man with the gun in the proverbial rabbit-hypnotized-by-snake manner. With a

none too gentle shove, Shannon thrust her aside and launched himself onto the man. The report of the revolver, a sting of fire in his arm, and renewed screams were simultaneous.

The gunman found himself with a knee, behind which was two hundred pounds of bone and sinew, in his stomach, and a hand like a vise was twisting his right arm. He tried to use his left to reach the chin which was temptingly near, but the remorseless twisting of his right arm drained the strength out of him. He grunted with pain and the gun slipped from his fingers to the accompaniment of a nauseating crunch. He gave a hoarse scream of sheer animal pain.

SHANNON let go the broken arm and reached for the gun, sending a quick glance backward to his other adversary, lying peacefully among the shattered ruins of the chair. Only then did the detective remove his knee from the gunman's stomach and get up.

Sam, with unholy glee, was belaboring his victim, whom he had backed against the wall near the man who was waving a spoonful of dessert and urging Sam to "Hit him! Hit him!"

Sam needed no urging. His victim, held upright only by the wall, slid down it and lay still. Sam looked round for other foes.

"Didn't work out as you expected, did it?" Shannon asked Marsha.

"Oh my God, what's going to happen?" she kept repeating. "What are you going to do?"

"We'd better get out of here," he told her.

She shrank back, gasping and half sobbing.

Shannon picked up a glass of water from a neighboring table which, miraculously, hadn't been upset and said, "Drink it. It's good for frogs and hysterics."

"Look at what you've done!" The owner, in despair over the scene of destruction, had recovered her courage. "And the young woman left without paying her bill! If you think just because I'm a woman you can come here and wreck my place—I've collected these antiques for years—"

Shannon dug in his pocket. "You can buy all the antiques in the place for two hundred

dollars at Macy's. That'll pay for the damage."

"—always came because it was so quiet," the marshmallow salad was complaining. "And I hadn't even finished my dessert. I hope you don't expect me to pay for my dinner after this disgraceful—" She suddenly looked at Shannon and stopped.

"Come along, Marsha."

Frightened, but quieter now, the girl obeyed.

"What about that car?" asked Sam.

"Only one man in it. I don't think he'll try anything."

"What am I going to do?" The owner, with the two hundred dollars in her hand, waved at the still forms on the floor.

"Call the police and ask them to remove the casualties."

As they reached the street Sam, with a sudden anxiety, said, "I suppose they really were phonies."

"If they weren't we can ask for adjoining cells," Shannon told him.

"Where are you taking me?" asked Marsha tremulously.

"Want to stay there and try to explain to the real cops? You'd take a rap for attempted murder."

"But it wasn't!" It was a wail.

Shannon was watching the parked car, whose driver was leaning out, looking in the direction of the tearoom.

"You don't understand—" began Marsha, then her eyes fell on her beige skirt, soaked with coffee. "I can't walk through the streets like this. Get me a cab to go home."

Shannon gave a short laugh. "How easy you have it, young lady. You try to get a man murdered one minute, and then expect him to call you a taxi because you don't like walking through the streets with a stained dress!"

They had reached the corner of Third Avenue now, and it gave Shannon an idea. "If Rierson's in, we could use his place."

The professor was in and sober. His permanently bloodshot eyes took in the disheveled appearance of the two men, showed a momentary surprise when they rested on Marsha, but he asked no questions. He set out a bottle.

"Are you hurt?" Rierson was looking at blood on the detective's hand.

Marsha gasped and looked away. "I can't bear the sight of blood. It always makes me ill."

"Too bad. Shouldn't try to get people shot, in that case." Shannon took off his coat and rolled up his right sleeve. The injury was superficial but messy. "If you've got a bandage and some adhesive, Doc, I'll fix it."

"But you seem to think I wanted to get you killed—" began Marsha.

"You made a damn good try for an amateur. With a bit more experience, they might make you into a first-rate fingerman."

"Will you listen to me?" she burst out.

"When you say something that makes sense." He held out his hand for the first-aid paraphernalia which Rierson was producing. "I'll wash it in the bathroom."

"Need any help, boss?" offered Sam.

"No."

AS THE WORD floated back from the bathroom, Marsha looked from Sam to the professor and back again. Plain disgust was written all over Sam's homely features, and there was nothing particularly encouraging about Rierson's expression. Neither of them spoke. Finally Shannon returned and selected a pad and a bandage. Marsha turned away. Shannon laughed and held out his arm to Sam.

When the job was finished, he rolled down his sleeve and asked, "Whose plan was this?"

"I can't tell you," Marsha said. "But it wasn't what you think. It was just to keep you out of the way until after—until after tomorrow morning."

"Try again, sister."

"Don't you believe me?"

"D'you expect me to?"

"It's true. You can't think I'd try to get you killed."

"If it suited your purpose and you thought you wouldn't be found out, I'm sure you would," Shannon told her, getting into his coat and seating himself comfortably. "Where's my whisky gone?" As Rierson handed it to him, he took a drink and added, "You'd probably like someone else to fire the gun."

"But you can't believe that!" Bewilderment momentarily submerged the fear in her brown eyes.

"You're willing to inform on your father, you finger me for a bunch of out-of-town gunmen—" He shrugged. "What d'you expect me to believe?"

"I didn't know until today," she whispered.

"What?"

"How much Father was implicated. I thought at the worst that he knew more about it than he should because Gerelli was his client. But to find that he— Oh, how could he? It's so unfair!"

"Like father—like daughter," murmured Sam.

"You brute!" Marsha rounded on him. "Can't you see I'm fighting to save something out of the wreckage? I couldn't face the publicity—the papers. I'd never hold my head up again."

"What's that got to do with your trying to put me on the spot?" asked Shannon.

"I didn't!" she shouted. "It was just to get you out of the way."

"Uhuh. Permanently. We'll let it go for the moment. What's it got to do with it?"

"They all know you're just trying to get information about the Syndicate and that the row between you and the commissioner is just a put-up job."

"Go on."

"After Gerelli—I mean, after tomorrow—"

"After Gerelli fries," he suggested.

"You won't have any more excuse for getting information."

"If 'they all' knew I was getting the information for the police, why did they give me any in the first place?"

"Because of Ma Gerelli. She thought you were really trying to find the murderer and she made them tell you. You fooled her as much as you fooled me."

"You certainly are changeable," complained Shannon. "Yesterday you wanted to smash the Syndicate all on your own, and today you're ready to do murder—oh, pardon me, to put people out of the way—to protect it. Because you've suddenly discovered your father is in as deep as any of them.

Who told you?" He suddenly dropped the tone of semi-amusement.

"I can't tell you."

"Perhaps you don't realize your position." There was a hard edge to his voice. "Nobody knows you are here. And I'm sure the professor won't interfere with anything I do."

Rierson shook his head. "As I told you yesterday, I never argue with people your size."

Marsha was staring. "But you couldn't—"

"My dear young woman, if you want to play cops and robbers with grownups, it's okay by me. But you must expect to run the risks of the game."

"What do you mean?"

"You can't expect to get a man shot at and then say, 'Please, I didn't mean it,' and get away with it just because you're a woman."

"But I never thought you'd fight against three men. That's why there were three, so there'd be no fighting."

"That's the story they gave you, eh? And you believed it?" Shannon laughed. "I told you yesterday, Sam, that she was dumb as hell, but I didn't believe anybody could be that dumb."

SAM grunted. Shannon hadn't even mentioned Marsha the day before.

The girl flushed angrily and said, "How was I to know that you'd bring him with you?"

"Did Schwengler or Meyer dream up this little plot?" Shannon asked casually and knew from the little catch of her breath that he was right. I wonder what your father's going to think of your goings on."

"He mustn't know. You promised not to tell him."

"I promised not to tell him you wanted Gerelli to fry, but my promise didn't cover assaults, mayhem, or attempted—uh—kidnaping. So Schwengler dreamed this up. I think you'd better tell us from the beginning." As she said nothing, Shannon turned to Rierson and said, "Wouldn't be too hard to pin the Ryan killing on her. A sudden indisposition is easily faked. She had an appointment with him. She'd given him information before and perhaps changed her mind, as she's

so changeable. She goes home ill, slips out and kills him—and returns, knowing nothing about it all.”

Stark fear looked out of the girl's eyes. “But I was ill,” she stammered at last.

“That's your story.”

“But you must believe me. I didn't do it. I couldn't!”

“If you'd tell the truth about something,” remarked Shannon, “I'd feel more like believing you.”

Finally he got the story. Schwengler had called her that morning and asked her to come to the house, saying it was urgent. There he told her bluntly that her father was involved to a point where if the Syndicate were exposed, Streber would inevitably stand in the dock with the other members of the illustrious combine. He'd explained that Shannon had not, so far, obtained any damaging information but he was on the verge of getting some. If he could be kept out of action until after Gerelli was dead, he would be harmless. They needed her help to get Shannon out of the way, for her father's sake.

Schwengler had then called a telephone number and simply said that everything was okay. She was to be picked up by a car outside his house and the driver would give her instructions. The driver had taken her to the Two by Four, entering through the back. She'd been told to call Shannon from a booth there. As he had not been in, she had remained there, calling the number when she was told to. After she'd finally talked to Shannon, the driver had made a phone call, then taken her to the corner of Second Avenue and told her to go on to the teashop. The first man in policeman's uniform had already been there when she arrived.

“Quite elaborate,” commented Shannon when she'd finished.

“Guess they figured the police uniforms would fool us just long enough for them to get the drop,” said Sam.

Shannon was dialing a number. He said, “Wonder when criminals will learn that these overcomplicated plans seldom work.” He got Lane and asked, “Anything from Johnny?”

“Not yet. Miss Bevan called and seemed upset. Says it's urgent and will you call her

at once. She's at home. Congressman Rowton called twice. He says it's urgent, too. Will you call him or he'll come to the office. He's waiting at the Drake to hear from you.” Shannon frowned. That sounded most unlike the last he had heard of the congressman. Lane was going on. “Captain Dowd called. He wanted to know where you were and if you left some wounded men in a teashop. I said I didn't know but that you seldom went to teashops. Captain Woods called again. Mr. Ames is here.”

“What does Ames want?”

“He says he thinks there'll be more excitement here tonight than in the death house and he's going to stick around.” There was a slight pause and then, “The whisky bottle in your desk drawer is empty.”

“Give him another,” Shannon said absently. “You know where it is. Has Pete left yet? Then tell Ames to go with him. I'll call the others.” As he put down the phone, Rierson was getting out another bottle. The detective reached over and took it from him. “Sorry, Doc. You've got to stay sober for a while. There's something I want you to do for me.”

“Just one more?”

“Not even one.”

WITH a resigned sigh Rierson sat back in his chair. “What am I to do?”

“Go to Ma Gerelli and tell her what you've heard here.”

There was complete silence for a moment, then in a low voice Rierson said, “You're breaking up the Syndicate.”

His remark was drowned out by Marsha's frantic outburst: “No! No! You can't do that! They'll—”

“You'll be given protection, if you need it,” Shannon said coldly.

“She'll tell Father, and—” She saw that Shannon was paying no attention to her as he had taken up the phone again. She threw herself across the room and clutched his hand. “For God's sake, I'll give you anything. I'll do anything! But don't let them know! You can't! Please—” Her brown eyes were filled with unreasoning panic as she sobbed out her plea.

Rierson got up and jerked his head in the

direction of the bedroom. Shannon detached himself from Marsha. "Stop whining," he said as he went to join the professor. In the bedroom for several minutes Rierson didn't speak. "Get it off your chest, whatever it is," Shannon said.

"Are you honestly trying to clear Gerelli?" Rierson asked. "I told you yesterday, even I have a sense of loyalty to the man whose money I take."

"Gerelli will be cleared of the murder of Ryan before midnight," said Shannon evenly. "You can tell Ma that, too."

The professor's bloodshot eyes were fixed squarely on his, and for a moment Shannon could see the ghost of the graduate student who had specialized in French history. Rierson didn't comment directly; he was evidently satisfied with what he saw in the detective's face, for he just nodded and said, "And for the rest—divide and conquer."

Shannon shook his head. "There'll be a disintegration from within." He went back into the living room and heard Sam's voice.

"D'you imagine they'd have let you go to squeal on 'em if they had got the boss?" he was asking. "They'd have got you at the same time. I know crooks. Doublecrossing buzzards, every last mother's son of them."

Shannon grinned and sat down again at the telephone. He called Consuelo's number and said, "What's wrong?"

"I'm worried about Bob. I haven't heard from him since this morning, and he was going to come here and take me out to dinner at six-thirty, and it's eight now. When he didn't come I called his apartment and there was no answer, and then I called the congressman, because I knew Bob was going to have a drink there when he left the office to meet an engineer from Puerto Rico. And Mr. Rowton said he hadn't seen him and didn't know where he was. And I called Bob's office and Mr. Mathews was there, working late, and he said Bob hadn't been in all day and he'd had an important appointment this afternoon. Mr. Shannon, d'you think . . ." The breathless recital trailed off as if she were afraid to put her fears into words.

Suppressing a desire to swear at this added complication, Shannon said, "He's probably


being an amateur detective and hasn't had time to phone. I'll see what I can do. Call the office if you hear from him." He was still scowling at the phone as he put it down.

Rierson had taken his hat from its place on top of an empty bottle and was dusting it with his sleeve. "Any other message?" he inquired, and when Shannon shook his head, "D'you want me to start now?"

"Sooner the better. Don't stop at any bars en route."

CHAPTER XVII

RECONSTRUCTION

 JUST AS SOON as Rierson had gone, Shannon called Rowton. The congressman hardly waited for Shannon to identify himself. "Have you seen Bob? My son?"

"Not since early this morning, Shannon said. "Why?"

"He's disappeared." Rowton repeated what Consuelo had said. "I sent my secretary over to his apartment and had the porter open it, but he isn't there. I must see you at once." The jerky sentences were unlike the smooth-spoken man who had talked to him that morning.

"I'll stop in at your hotel in about ten minutes." Shannon depressed the bar and then dialed and got Woods. "You called me."

A snort came from the other end. "Did you tip off Meyer to keep out of sight?"

"Has he disappeared?"

"You know damn well he has." There was a pause, then Woods said, "Maybe you should be interested in him."

"Why?"

"That punk you shot. The doctor got him around so he talked. Said Eddie Draper, known as Arkansas Eddie, sent him."

"I don't know Arkansas Eddie or any reason why he should want to remove me from circulation."

"So there is something you don't know," Woods said complacently. "The Philadelphia police have tried to tie Arkansas Eddie in with the used-car lot run by Meyer down

there. They never got far. And the guy you killed, Mace, also hung round there. Now are you interested?"

"It begins to look as if Meyer didn't like me."

"Shannon, just whatinhell are you doing?" Woods's voice was a blend of exasperation and worry. "Are you starting another gang war?"

"I was going to call you and ask you to do yourself a favor."

"To do myself— Huh?"

"D'you want Ryan's murderer?"

"We've been all over that. He's up-river and he'll fry in the morning."

"It'll be a drumhead trial in that case," said Shannon.

"You've got the goods on someone?"

"Get yourself to the Mercedes Building at ten. Go behind the elevators to the watchman's cubicle. You'll meet Pete and your star witness there."

"And then?"

"Await developments."

"That's what happened to Ryan." Shannon drew in his breath sharply but didn't answer. Woods said, "Okay, I'll be there."

"Bring a platoon if you're nervous, but keep them out of sight," said Shannon and hung up. He turned to Sam. "You stay here and keep an eye on her."

Sam didn't look pleased. "Aw, Boss, how long will it be?"

"I'll call you and let you know when you can turn her loose."

"But they know—" Marsha babbled in an incoherence of fear. "Haven't you got any feelings?"

"Uhuh. And it's damn lucky for you I keep 'em under control, or you'd be in the morgue, sister."

Rowton's secretary opened the apartment door and said, "Thank God you've come, Mr. Shannon. I've never seen him so—" But before he'd finished, Rowton himself called out, "Is that Shannon? Send him in here and beat it."

The congressman's heavy face had become the sagging mask of a badly frightened man. He spoke jerkily and with difficulty. "We didn't part on very good terms this morning."

"I don't like being threatened," observed Shannon.

"Now I'm in a spot where I've got to ask your help." Rowton got it out finally. "You must find Bob."

"Can't your pal Schwengler help you? Or any of the rest of the mob you protect?"

"I've got it coming to me, I guess. Look, Shannon, my cards are all on the table. I'll give you whatever you ask. I'll crawl, if that's what you want." For once in his life Robert Rowton was absolutely sincere.

Shannon said, "Tell me what happened. You had a row with him this morning?"

"He brought this girl he wants to marry and she said something about his having been in your office again. I didn't want him hanging round your office while all this Gerelli mess is going on. I don't want him involved. We both got pretty sore and he—" A frown crossed his face and then he went on, "He accused me of a lot of things. And he said he was going to find out the truth for himself."

"You haven't told me quite all the story," remarked the detective. "You told him I was being taken care of."

ROWTON looked uncomfortable and said, "Perhaps I did use those words. It's what—"

"It's what Schwengler had told you," said Shannon.

"He went to Schwengler," said Rowton. "Bob asked a lot of questions and he told him to go and ask Meyer."

"Passing the buck?"

"You know Meyer does all Schwengler's dirty work," Rowton said impatiently.

"So I gathered."

"I wish to God—" Rowton broke off with a short laugh. "I wanted the kid to grow up with right ideas. I didn't want him to have to do the things I had to. I'm not excusing them. Like as not, if I had my time over again, I'd do the same. I came up the hard way, Shannon. Every man for himself and no holds barred. Anything you could get away with was okay."

"But there was no need for Bob to have to fight like that. That's why I sent him to good schools—to college. His mother warned me. She said, 'He'll grow up to be ashamed of his

father.' I only laughed at her. Funny, I never thought of the things I did as things to be ashamed of. I get all I can for my district. I look after people that get in a jam. And anything else— Well, I know plenty of others do the same things.

"But Bob doesn't feel that way. Since he's come back from the Army—well, we don't see so much of each other. I'm most of the time in Washington, and he went into the engineering office and got his own apartment. And I figured it was just as well, because I didn't want him to—"

"Find out too much," suggested Shannon.

"I love that boy, Shannon. I'd give everything I've got for him. But my hands are tied—"

"Why?"

"Gerelli's clever," Rowton said bitterly. "He—or his mob—could do me more harm than I could do them. They'd do a horse trade, but not unless I've something to trade. And I haven't. I can't go to the police without spilling everything, and Bob would hate that worse than—" Again he stopped, as if fear paralyzed his throat. "You've got to help me."

The earnestness of the man was painful. Shannon knew what it had cost him to send for him, to lay his cards on the table. He loved his son, and it rendered him curiously defenseless.

"Okay. I'll see if I can get the truth out of Schwengler or Meyer."

"I can't locate Meyer," Rowton told him. "Schwengler's at home."

"I wonder if he still is," said the detective, as he reached for the phone. "What's his number?"

A maid answered. He'd received a telephone call a few minutes ago and gone out in a hurry.

"I think I know where to find them both," said Shannon.

Rowton came to the door with him, mumbling incoherent thanks. "D'you think—"

"I think they may be leery of killing him," was all the comfort the detective could give him.

Ten minutes later he was ringing Ma Gerelli's doorbell. The speakasy-type grille opened and Lefty's eyes peered through. "I

want to talk to Ma and Meyer," he told the eyes.

"It's Shannon, Ma, and he knows Meyer's here," Lefty relayed, and a moment later opened the door.

Before Shannon could take in the tableau before him, Ma came over and said, "How did you know?"

"You're an advocate of direct action, Ma. I guessed it." He looked across at Schwengler, who was sitting on the edge of the settee under the picture of the tulips, looking uncomfortable and sweating profusely.

Meyer was even less happy than Schwengler. Lefty and Sep and the man who always rolled dice by himself were in their shirt sleeves. The guns in the shoulder holsters looked incongruous and menacing.

Shannon looked for Rierson. Finally he said, "Where's the professor?"

SILENCE greeted his question.

Shannon waited and then said, "Speak up, someone."

"You tell him, Ma," said Lefty.

"He killed him," she stated simply, jerking her finger toward Meyer.

"It was an accident. I didn't—"

"What happened?" Shannon's cold voice cut through the protestations.

"Doc came and told us what had happened, like he said you told him to. And Meyer says he's a liar and jumps up and socks him before the boys can get hold of him. He went down and split his head open against this." She pointed to a square china pot containing a Chinese tree. "I had him laid on the bed, decent. Until we could figure what to do."

When Shannon returned from the bedroom his eyes were cold and his face was set. Ma said, "What Doc said—that you'd have Ryan's killer by midnight. Is that right?" Shannon nodded without speaking.

"He's lying to you, Ma," said Meyer.

The woman looked from Meyer to Schwengler and finally back to Shannon. "We'll set here and find out," she said.

"But I got an appointment—" began Schwengler.

"You ain't going nowheres," Ma said flatly.

"Unless you want to sit around with two

corpses, Ma, you'd better make this punk cough up where Bob Rowton is. Old man Rowton's ready to blow the whole Syndicate open to find him."

"Don't believe him, Ma," put in Schwengler. "Rowton knows he can't do that without getting himself in jail."

"He knows it," agreed Shannon, "But his son happens to be more important to him."

"Aint nothing going to happen to him," said Meyer. "He just got nosy and had to be kept quiet a while."

"Where is he?"

"Where you won't find him."

"There's been one accident here tonight to a better man than you'll ever me," said Shannon softly. "D'you want another?"

"Can't ya see he's lying to ya, Ma?" said Meyer desperately. "Like he's been lying to ya all the way along."

"The man I shot in my office has talked, Meyer. He says Arkansas Eddie sent him. Eddie works for you, doesn't he?"

Meyer's face went pale green. He looked at Ma and read no pity in her broad peasant face, then back to Shannon, in whose green eyes he could find only an implacable anger.

"I don't know anything about all this," said Schwengler suddenly in a loud voice.

"Why, you—" began Meyer and stopped.

"Where's Bob Rowton?"

"Better tell him, Meyer," said Ma.

Once more the man looked round, the fear deepening in his eyes. At last he said sullenly, "At the Blue Ribbon Garage."

"Where is it?"

"Second and Sixty-first."

"You're going to telephone and tell them to set him free. And don't make a mistake. We don't want another accident." He handed Meyer the phone, so that the gun in his shoulder holster was visible.

"Who's that? Andy? Meyer." Meyer looked up at Shannon, then wet his lips and went on. "Turn young Rowton loose. Yeah. You heard me. Right now."

"Have him come to the phone," ordered Shannon.

"And put him on the phone," obediently repeated Meyer.

Shannon took the instrument. After a couple of minutes he heard Bob's savage, "Mey-

er? What d'you want?"

"Are you hurt? They'll let you go now. Go straight to Consuelo's apartment. It shouldn't take you more than five minutes. I'll call there. Got it?"

"Looks like he don't trust you, Meyer," said Lefty as Shannon put down the phone.

Ma returned to a table where she had evidently been sitting before and picked up a deck of fortune-telling cards. She laid the cards out, puzzled over them, then shuffled them and began again.

"I tell you, Ma, I've got an appointment." Schwengler tried again in a dry voice.

"Set still."

SHANNON smoked and watched the time. He let eight minutes go by before he reached for the phone and dialed Consuelo's number.

"Shannon. Is—"

"He's here! He's all right! Oh God, you don't know how relieved I am! He's just this minute come in and—"

"Put him on the phone," Shannon cut through her joyous voice. "Bob? Call your father and tell him you're okay. He's had a pretty tough evening. Give my love to Consuelo."

"Ma, are you gonna let him go?" Meyer's voice had a hysterical note in it.

Ma looked up from the cards. "While there's time, I'm giving him every chance to clear Theo."

It was a quarter to ten when Shannon reached his office.

"Anything from Johnny?" he asked Lane.

"Not yet. Shall I call the warehouse?"

"He'll phone as soon as he's got anything." He laid a piece of paper in front of her. "Call this number and tell Sam to let the girl go and come on down here."

A few minutes later Streber arrived. "What's this all about?" he wanted to know.

"You'll find out in a little while," Shannon told him. "Sit down for a minute. I'm waiting for my assistant."

The lawyer sat wearily. His face was gray with fatigue. "Not as young as I once was. Besides, it hasn't been a restful day."

"Thinking of tomorrow morning?" asked Shannon.

"Ma telephoned that she won't go up until after midnight. She said she was more use to him here."

"Are you going with her?"

Before the lawyer could answer, Lane held out the phone and said, "Johnny."

Shannon listened and said, "Yes. Yes. It had to be that. Right. No. Go on home." Sam had come in as he was phoning. "Sam, in my office there's a brown paper parcel. Bring it along. Let's go, Streber."

"What's all the mystery about?" asked the lawyer as they went out.

"Like magicians, detectives have to have a certain amount of hocus-pocus in their effects," replied Shannon with a smile.

Conversation languished. Shannon flagged a cab, gave the address of the Mercedes Building. They rode the short distance in silence.

"There's usually one of the express elevators working at night," said Streber, as they entered the lobby.

"We don't need it." Shannon looked round at the marble and bronze decorations. The two blocks of elevators formed a church-like aisle off the rotunda, in the middle of which stood the wooden sign with the words EXIT THIS WAY and an arrow pointing to the door. Shannon headed straight across, past the elevators to the space behind, where the telephone booths were situated.

"What on earth—" Streber was muttering. Instinctively he'd lowered his voice, as if he were in church.

"Open the package, Sam." Shannon looked at both of them thoughtfully. "You're too big, Sam. I'm too tall. You're the best build, Streber."

"What are you talking about?" The lawyer was staring at a dark topcoat, a black hat and white scarf that Sam was unwrapping.

"An experiment I want to make." Shannon looked at Streber's clothes and laughed. "Well! No need to dress you up. Your own things will do. Stupid of me not to have noticed. Needn't have brought the package along."

"I still don't follow." Streber spoke nervously.

"Put your collar up. It was a snowy night at the beginning of February. And pull your

hat down a bit more over your face. That's better." The lawyer submitted to Shannon's arranging of his costume. "What's the matter? Nervous? Expecting ghosts? Sam—you be Ryan."

Sam nodded and walked over to the door; he'd had his instructions before. Shannon went on talking. "So we can reproduce as nearly as possible what happened—"

"But the police did that," protested Streber, looking down at the gun which Shannon thrust into his unwilling hand.

"That makes it just the same as it was that night in February, doesn't it?"

THE LAWYER turned his pallid face and said, "How do I know?"

"Don't you?" asked Shannon softly. "Now he's coming in. You can watch him. But you're not a very good shot and you want him nearer and in a better light. After all, he's a cop and he'll have a gun. You'll only have one chance. If you miss, he'll get you." Shannon cast a quick glance toward Sam, who had paused elaborately and was making quite a business of looking at his watch. "He's a bit early. Even if he does look in this direction, he won't see you. Ryan didn't, did he?" Sam started in the direction of the sign saying "EXIT THIS WAY." "You couldn't miss at this range," Shannon's voice went on. He had another gun in his hand, loaded with a blank in the chamber. Sam was standing now by the sign. He turned his back and looked toward the door as a man might who expected someone to arrive. Shannon fired the blank. The noise reverberated in the emptiness. Sam spun round, clutching his chest in approved movie style, and then fell.

"No—no!" It was a hoarse whisper from Streber.

"Go on. Run. Run as you did that night." Shannon's voice was insistent. With his left hand he propelled the lawyer forward. As if he had no volition of his own, Streber started hurrying toward the door.

From the other side of the elevators came a voice: "Good God! It's himself! Gerelli!"

The instant he heard the voice, Shannon started with great loping strides after Streber. He was at the door now. "That's far enough, Streber." The lawyer halted and

turned. His face was sweat-streaked and ashen. For the first time he seemed to realize he had a gun in his hand. He raised it and spoke with a queer distinctness. "You'll never take me to trial."

"You don't think I gave you a loaded gun, do you?" asked Shannon.

Stark panic swept the man's face. He pulled the trigger, once, twice, and a third time. There was only a click. He threw the gun toward Shannon and turned and ran. Before he'd reached the sidewalk, Shannon overhauled him and caught him by the shoulders. The lawyer fought with the sudden strength of terror and despair, but he was no match for the detective.

Woods, looking comically surprised, came and caught hold of the lawyer. His first words were, "But where in hell was Gerelli?"

Shannon shrugged. He explained briefly about La Ruba. "I've had a man going through the records of the Cyril Hotel all day to find out what calls she made. She only made one. To Streber's office. Apart from the men in the poker game, Streber and Ma were the only people who knew where Gerelli was."

"Look, Boss, what's—" began Sam. He was looking at Streber, who was being held immobile between Shannon and Woods. The grayness of his face was deeper now and there was a blue line round his mouth. He was breathing with difficulty.

"He has stuff to take," said Shannon. "Let's get him flat."

While they were doing it, the porter was standing mumbling to himself. "May the Holy Virgin and the saints forgive me. I could have sworn it was himself I saw that night. It was the truth I was telling as I believed it, so help me God. And now it's for perjury that they'll be trying me and maybe put me in jail, me that never had trouble with the police in my life. And it was the truth as—"

"We know that. Shut up." Woods turned from making a pillow of a coat. Shannon had found the medicine in Streber's pocket. Pete brought some water. Woods said, "D'you think we'd better call the ambulance?"

"Yes. I want a confession. I've got my client to think of," Shannon had to remind

him of that. Gerelli would die unless . . .

Woods said bitterly, giving the detective a bleak look, "I'll call. It'll be quicker."

The medicine had worked by the time the ambulance arrived, but the interne said, "He'd better be kept resting for a while. He seems to have had a shock." Woods took the interne aside, and explained.

"Glory be," said Pete, who had had charge of the night watchman. "I'm glad this case is finished."

Shannon looked at him for a minute. "It isn't," he said briefly. "Call Lane and tell her and Lewis to go home. You and Sam, too. I shan't need you tonight."

CHAPTER XVIII

FUNDAMENTAL JUSTICE



ELLEVue Hospital always depressed Shannon. He found a telephone and called McComus, whose comment on his announcement was, "Well, I'll be a—" which was tribute enough, coming from that lawyer with the ready tongue. Woods came out of another booth and said, "The commissioner is bringing Farquaharson from the D.A.'s office."

Time went by while more police arrived from somewhere. The commissioner arrived and was frigidly polite to Shannon. Farquaharson arrived and said, "Now we'll have to start investigating Gerelli all over again, thanks to you." Shannon nodded abstractedly, and the D.A.'s man asked, "Aren't you enjoying your triumph?"

McComus came and said, "So he was innocent all the time."

"Will you call Ma and tell her?" asked Shannon.

"Why don't you do it?"

"I'm tired."

The lawyer looked curiously at Shannon. There was something he couldn't read behind the green eyes. But he didn't ask any questions except, "Where's the phone?"

A doctor came eventually and said, "You can go in now. But be careful. Another attack like that and he'll die—in bed."

Streber's haggard eyes canvassed the faces of the men who came and stood round his bed. Woods' and the police stenographer's, both belligerent and angry, because it was a cop he had killed. The commissioner's, hard and set. McComus', disgusted and still surprised. And Shannon's, which showed only fatigue. It was to Shannon he finally spoke. "I couldn't have gone through with it anyway," he said. "You knew that."

"Why did you do it?" asked Shannon quietly.

The story was pretty much what he had pieced together. His wife had always been bitterly opposed to his connection with Gerelli, even to the extent of keeping his children away from him. When they had finally come home, after her death, Jack had found out what the score was, and then proceeded to drown it and his ideals in a bottle. Marsha had given him a cold hatred as her suspicions grew, though she still had had no idea how deeply he was involved.

On February third Marsha had telephoned Ryan to tell him that she had the key to the Theger Company office safe and she would meet him at twelve-thirty. Stupidly, she used the telephone in her bedroom, and Streber had heard the conversation on the downstairs extension.

He had been desperate. He knew Ryan couldn't be bribed. What he didn't know was how much Marsha had already told him. He was caught between fear that Marsha would find out the truth, and fear for her if Gerelli or his mob found out that she was informing. The plan to kill Ryan began to take shape. Then that afternoon he had a stroke of luck which he thought would accomplish the perfect crime—silence Ryan permanently and send Gerelli to the chair for his murder. La Ruba telephoned she was in town and must see Gerelli. Here was the person who could get Gerelli out—alone.

He told La Ruba he would arrange it and call her later. As soon as he knew where the poker game was going to be, he had phoned her and told her to telephone Room 416 at the Park Ardsley at twelve-fifteen precisely, and to call from a booth near the hotel. He made her promise not to say he'd told her.

Meanwhile he administered a small quantity of chloral hydrate to Marsha in her drink, which rendered her incapable of meeting Ryan and gave him an excuse to leave the party for a time. He took her home hurriedly, left her with the housekeeper, and went to the Mercedes Building, arriving a few minutes ahead of time.

THINGS had worked even better than he had anticipated, owing to the night watchman's mistaking him for Gerelli. Streber had often been annoyed with the gambler's penchant for ordering practically identical clothes from his tailor, but this was one occasion when it had been useful.

"What on earth possessed the girl to inform on her own father?" muttered the commissioner as Streber's weary voice stopped.

"Thought she could blow up the Syndicate without involving him," said Shannon. He turned back to the man on the bed. "Why did you kill Rita?"

"That was him too?" exclaimed Woods. "You'd said something to her about it having to be someone who knew about the poker game. She suddenly said, 'You knew'—and I could read it in her eyes. I grabbed her by the throat. I had to stop her saying it. She struggled and I took a cushion. Then she stopped struggling. Afterward I remembered she'd said she took nembutal and I thought—" He closed his eyes.

"Better let him rest awhile," said a doctor. "Why didn't that damnfool Gerelli tell the truth about where he was?" demanded McComus.

"I wonder," said Shannon. "Good night. . . ."

Shannon's sleep was shattered a few minutes after eight by Captain Woods. "Your client is on his way into town with McComus."

"What d'you expect me to do? Meet him with a brass band?"

Woods ignored this. "Meyer's got seven slugs in him." He added, unnecessarily, "Dead."

"Good," said Shannon savagely. "The syndicate is disintegrating."

"Gerelli'll pull it together."

"Aren't you ever satisfied?"

"Got another corpse," went on Woods. "Donald Riersen. Found in an alley with a cracked skull."

"The boys sure had a busy night . . ." Shannon paused. "If nobody claims the body, I'll bury Riersen."

"You?" Woods sounded incredulous. "Why, in God's name?"

"Never mind," Shannon told him, and hung up.

Consuelo called, ecstatic with gratitude. Rowton called, less ecstatic, but also grateful. "The whole thing's incredible," he said. "I'm going away for a rest."

"Cuba's a good place," said Shannon. "Have a nice trip."

Jack Streber, haggard-eyed but sober, came in person. "It's like a nightmare. Dad wasn't responsible. He was trying to protect Marsha and me. I can see how it happened. He got into the thing without knowing where it would lead, and then it was like a quicksand. He'd tried to break away—but he couldn't." After a while he said, "Marsha's left for Florida." Finally he came to the point. "McComus says Father's best chance would be to turn state's evidence."

"If he does, with his heart condition, he'll get off with a light sentence," said Shannon. "Otherwise——"

"State's evidence!" Jack winced. "Even breaking the crooks' code."

"They haven't got one," Shannon said irritably. "The only reason a crook doesn't squeal when he doesn't is that he's scared."

"You agree with McComus, then. You'd advise Dad to—he stopped a moment, then said with brutal bitterness—"squeal."

"It would be the smartest thing to do," replied Shannon.

Shannon sat silently scowling at his coffee after Jack had gone. He hated the wreckage that any case, particularly a murder case, always left in its wake. Finally he shook himself and went into the shower. Bob Rowton arrived while he was still in it. Bob evidently hadn't slept. Shannon cut short his thanks and told him to help himself to coffee or make some more.

"I had a long talk with Dad last night," Rowton said as he watched Shannon take a shirt out of a drawer. "He's not going

to run for re-election next year. Things were different when Dad started, Mr. Shannon. He didn't have any of the advantages he's given me."

Bob watched a tie go into place, then said, "I'm worried about Marsha."

Shannon groaned. "Haven't you got over that yet?"

"She's in a hell of a spot. I've called the house twice this morning, but they're not answering the phone. I feel I should stand by——"

"You'll have to stand by in Florida, then," Shannon told him. "She's run out." An ominous sound coming from the serving pantry made him add, "And the coffee is boiling over."

WHEN the coffee was rescued, Bob said, "Are you sure?" After Shannon explained, Bob said, "She might have stuck—for Jack's sake, if not her father's." Thinking of some of the rest of Marsha's behavior, Shannon said nothing. Bob went on, "My firm's got a branch in Cincinnati. They want me to go out there. Consuelo's willing."

"Then why don't you?"

When he finally got rid of Bob, Shannon decided he might as well go to the office. When he reached the corner of Fifty-fifth and Madison he saw the man who'd been rolling the dice on Ma Gerelli's piano leaning against a scaffolding. The fellow lounged over and said, "The Big Shot wants to see you."

An unpleasant smile twisted Shannon's mouth, but he only said, "Why couldn't he phone and say so?"

"He wants to see you, not the cops or your press pals," the dice player answered. "Fred's circling the block. I've been hanging round here an hour."

A car drew up alongside and Shannon didn't reply. It was empty, save for the driver, who must be Fred.

"Where are we going?" Shannon inquired, motioning the dice player to get in ahead of him. After a moment's hesitation, the man complied.

"The Two by Four."

"Quicker to walk," remarked the detective.

"The Big Shot figured it would be safer to keep away from the apartment for a while," the dice player explained. "Don't know how much Streber will spill."

In the manager's office at the Two by Four, Theodore Gerelli was seated behind the desk. Sep was leaning against a safe. The dice player followed Shannon in and parked himself near the door. Gerelli greeted Shannon warmly. "Always knew you'd deliver. Played my hunch and it was right. Sit down."

The detective sat, not in the chair Gerelli indicated, but in one which had its back to a wall.

"Glad to be back, I guess," said Shannon, as he was evidently expected to say something.

"Yeah. Everything would be dandy if it weren't for the Princess."

"Sorry about her," said Shannon.

"I'd like to get that killer myself for that," replied Gerelli savagely. "How'd you get on to him?"

"Only person who fitted all the facts," answered Shannon. "It had to be someone on the inside. Did it surprise you?"

"I never trusted him, but I didn't think he'd have the guts to kill," observed Gerelli.

"It doesn't take guts to kill, Gerelli."

"No?" the gambler looked at him curiously. "Maybe you're right."

"I hear Meyer's been shot."

"Yeah. He musta had an accident. I always thought he was too thick with that doublecrossing Schwengler. Got it figured out nicely to take over everything between 'em. Schwengler's disappeared." Gerelli paused, then added, "He won't get far." The dice player was rolling his dice on the top of the safe; they made an irritating click. "Well, I guess you came to collect," said Gerelli. "You've earned your dough. Here it is." He threw a roll onto the desk. "Count it."

"I'm sure it's correct." Shannon stood up and took the roll, starting to shove it into his pocket. "Thanks. I'll be getting along."

"You're not going anywhere," said Gerelli in a flat, hard voice. "You know too much."

The detective said softly, "About the Syndicate or about the murder of La Ruba?"

It shook the gambler just a brief instant

while he didn't realize that the hand that seemed to be shoving the roll of bills into Shannon's pocket was right on his gun. Gerelli's hand started to come up from the open desk drawer. Shannon shot once and swung to cover the other two, his right foot kicking a chair straight at the dice player. Gerelli's voice, hoarse with pain, cried, "Get Shannon——"

The dice player fired, but the chair had sent him sufficiently off balance for the shot to go wild. Sep was aiming. His gun and Shannon's roared at the same time, then the detective's voice said, "Get your hands up."

THE dice player obeyed, dropping his gun. Sep had fallen. He lay still, and suddenly Shannon remembered that he had never heard him speak a word. Gerelli, grimacing with the pain of a shattered right arm, was trying to reach his gun with his left. He had it, at last. Either Shannon's overworked guardian angel warned him or perhaps the faint hope in the dice player's eyes as he stood with his hands high above his head. Shannon pivoted in time to see Gerelli raise the gun. Again he fired, and the gambler slumped on the desk.

The door burst open and Fred rushed in saying, "I didn't think you was gonna do it here——" He got no further. The menace of Shannon's gun and the scene of disaster was enough for him. His hands went up in a hurry.

The detective, still covering the two men, went to the phone. He got the police. Gerelli moaned a little. "Get him lying on the floor," Shannon ordered the men. "Put something under his head. And no tricks."

They obeyed, too cowed to start anything. "Got a handkerchief or something?" asked the dice player.

Shannon tossed one over. The man opened Gerelli's coat and vest and tried to make a pad. He pulled out something soaked in blood and looked at it. "Rabbit's foot," he said. . . .

Three days later Farquaharson of the D.A.'s office was sitting in Shannon's office, beaming contentedly. "And with the information we've got from Streber, we can wipe out the Syndicate, lock, stock, and

barrel, here and in all the other towns where they operated. All the others we've picked up have talked too. All that is, except Ma and a little runt called Marras." The phone rang and Miss Lane announced, "Mr. McComus."

The trial lawyer came in and said, "What's the police force doing out in the office?"

"The amende honorable of the commissioner," Shannon told him.

"He did kill their Big Shot," said Farquaharson, "and there are plenty of small fry belonging to the mob who might decide to get even."

"You should have seen Gerelli's funeral," said McComus. "Ma sure did him proud. Bronze coffin and couple of dozen truckloads of flowers."

"The swan song of the Syndicate," said Farquaharson. "Did I tell you they've finally made definite identification of La Ruba's body?"

"It's a hell of an alibi to have for a mur-

der," said McComus. "That you were out committing another." He paused and then asked curiously, "Did you expect Gerelli to pull a stinking trick like that when you went to the Two by Four?"

"I never trust a crook, McComus. I was glad he did."

"Glad?"

"He solved a problem for me."

"You solved all of his, finally," remarked McComus.

"I'd discovered about the murder of La Ruba while I was working for him," Shannon reminded him.

McComus nodded. "Client's confidence. Yes, you couldn't have talked." The lawyer was silent for a while and then he said, "Remember I told you he had a belief in the fundamental justice of the system?"

"Well, he knows it now," said Farquaharson.

"I doubt whether he appreciated it much," remarked Shannon.



**LAURA LEE WAS BEAUTIFUL BUT DANGEROUS — AND SHE THOUGHT
SHE COULD GET AWAY WITH ANYTHING UNTIL HER
HUSBAND WAS KILLED, AND IT PROVED
TO BE A CASE OF . . .**

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The Case of the Spying Spinster

By NICHOLAS ZOOK

I CLOSED my eyes to the squalor of the two-room apartment, with its worn linoleum, faded and tattered wallpaper, and the clutter of cheap furniture that made the rooms seem smaller than they were.

In the other room, the two children began to whimper again. Pathetically. And I was anxious to end the interview.

Phillip's widow said through hysterical ears, "Burt wouldn't do such a thing. He was faithful and good. Always. You must believe me. Put it in the paper that way. For the sake of the children."

My pencil glided over copy paper, taking it down in quick phrases. But the written words failed to convey the heartbreak, the intense conviction in her voice.

"It was a mistake," she sobbed. "You believe me, don't you? He was never in that neighborhood before. Somebody is lying, blaming Burt even when he's dead."

I nodded self-consciously, thinking it was always a mistake. That Burt was the guy who made the mistake by getting caught. You get cynical in newspaper work.

"It was a mistake," she wailed again, her small frame shaking with sobs. She dropped her head between her arms on the stained

kitchen table and the bitterness of her weeping increased.

I walked out, phrasing in my mind the yarn I would write.

Ordinarily, the paper would have dismissed the case with a page two story in six paragraphs. That was all it rated—a quick rundown of the sordid details of a sordid crime.

It was a slum parallel to the old love-nest triangle. In the sunless stretches of tenement houses and refuse-littered streets of the East Side, violence was nothing new. It thrived among the petty bickerings, the hunger for luxury, the disillusion.

But the boss had a bug on human interest angles. He called it life in the raw. And I was the guy he assigned to dig out the sob stuff that will keep gum-chewing typists reading on with breathless excitement.

The story was as old as time.

THOR ENGEL was a jealous husband. Later, a neighbor, Miss Agnes Durfew, told police he had a right to be; that Thor's wife, Hilda, was friendly with many men.

Thor came home unexpectedly one afternoon to find Hilda alone with a strange man.

The Wife Had Too Many Friends—the Husband, Too Few!

The guy was a salesman, Burt Phillips. His line of brushes were strewn around the living room table.

Hilda and Burt Phillips were chatting when Thor burst in, letting loose with a 38-caliber revolver and a string of oaths. Then Thor calmly walked to police headquarters and gave himself up for murder.

With Thor booked on charges of second-degree murder, his lawyer was making a good case for him from the testimony of Miss Agnes Durfew, the neighbor who apparently spent all her time spying on others in the neighborhood.

Miss Durfew insisted she had seen Phillips enter the house across the street many times while Thor was away.

The one-room hovel on the second floor of an insecure, tired wooden dwelling was my next stop. It was what Miss Durfew and her four cats called home.

She rocked in her chair, dividing her attention between me and the window through which she could observe the world outside. She was an ancient woman, about seventy, with the righteous look of a self-satisfied witch.

Two bony hands with parchment-thin skin fondled an oversize cat on her lap.

"I saw it all, young man. Terrible thing." She bobbed her head with righteous dignity. "But the hussy got what was coming to her, she and her man-friend."

She lost interest in me, peering through the window while an untidy woman of middle age laboriously climbed the stairs of a house across the street. Her watery blue eyes were slits of concentration.

She grunted slightly and leaned back again in her rocker. I doodled an outline of a scaffolding on my paper and frowned.

I asked, "Her husband, Thor Engel, how do you suppose he found out about her men-friends?"

She pointed to a worn Bible on the kitchen table. "Thou shalt not commit adultery," she cracked. "I saw them all, all the men. And I felt it was my duty to tell Thor. Not that I went out of my way, mind you.

"Thor knew I kept my eyes open," she said proudly. "He came up those stairs to see me often enough. Sometimes he brought

me chocolates. The soft-center kind."

She rocked more violently in her chair, squinting hard at me, as though I might produce a box of chocolates out of thin air.

I said, "How did you know his wife, Hilda, was unfaithful. These men: Couldn't their visits have been just friendly?"

She tossed her head. "That's how much you know of this wicked world, young man. She was a hussy, the painted-up kind. I knew well enough."

"And this man Phillips. You're sure he called on her often?"

"Many times," she snapped. "He always acted sort of sneaky. Once he looked up at my window and, for a minute, I thought he saw me. Oh, yes, he was one of her regular callers."

I thought of Phillip's widow and the way in which she insisted Phillips had never been in the neighborhood before. I scribbled Miss Durfew's reply and sighed.

"That afternoon when Thor came home. Did you see him go in?"

SHE looked mysteriously out of the window and about the room, as though to convince herself no intruders were hanging somewhere in mid-air. She leaned forward, her thin lips curling in a secret smile.

"I'll tell you a secret, young man," she said. "Thor asked me to call him the next time a man called on her. He wanted to catch them alone, to make her pay for her sins. When Phillips came to her, I decided it was time to do my duty. I called Thor at his shop and told him."

My grip on my pencil tightened and the lead point snapped. I stared at her, open-mouthed, recalling the inconsolable grief of Phillip's widow and trying to reconcile it with the bald statement Miss Durfew had just made.

Just as surely as though she had provided the gun, Miss Durfew was responsible for the double killing. I tried to sort my thoughts to cope with the new turn of events.

Miss Durfew stopped her triumphant rocking and darted bird-like to the window. She expelled her breath with a sharp hiss. Her thin, prim mouth tautened and the contours of her face were pinched in a growing

tension of excitement. She drew back one of the lace curtains and pointed with a trembling forefinger.

I found myself drawn to her side, peering down at the street below. A thin man with black hair and a pale skin strolled jauntily past.

"There," Miss Durfew hissed, "there's another one looking for the hussy. That fat man with the dark complexion."

I stepped back, almost upsetting the rocking chair, a sickness growing in my stomach.

I remembered the brushes that Phillips had neatly laid out on the table of Thor's house. I remembered Phillip's widow and her insistent statement that Burt had never before been in the neighborhood.

Understanding jarred my mind like a horrible nightmare. My fingers clawed at the newspaper in my pocket. I unfolded it. Holding it four feet away from Miss Durfew, I indicated the two-column picture of a man on the front page.

"Miss Durfew," I said shakily, "have you ever seen this man before?"

Her eyes became slits as she peered carefully. "Never," she said emphatically, "never."

The photo was one of the President of the United States, almost a duplicate of one that hung in a cheap makeshift frame on the wall.

Miss Durfew was almost blind, too blind to recognize Phillips or anybody else through the long distance between her window and the sidewalk across the street.

I moistened dry lips, about to declare that she was responsible for the death of an innocent man, of a salesman who had innocently wandered into the wrong house at the wrong time.

But Miss Durfew had already lost interest in me, was probing the outside world with that watery, intent look of hers.

I left. I had my story, all right. A human interest yarn guaranteed to make any typist chew her gum faster. But I knew I wouldn't write it until I had sopped up half a dozen drinks to chase away the bad taste in my mouth and mind.

The Accuser

*We see the convicts come and go,
Hear cell locks click behind them.
To many a place, the records show,
The law must go to find them.
Whether they come from far or near,
By easy roads or stony,
One witness mostly brought them here
With sure-fire testimony.*



*If this accuser you would meet,
Seek out no bon-ton section.
You'll find him on a downtown street,
Busy with his detection.
There he develops truth's design,
And tells the world its story.
His doorway bears a simple sign.
It reads, "Crime Laboratory."*

—by Clarence Edwin Flynn



Williams screamed
as the blade sank
into his chest

Wash Away the Blood

By RAY CUMMINGS

THE scene was so startling that Lee Artton froze at the living room window, holding his breath, staring. His cousin, Jim Williams, was seated by the lamplit table, his pudgy body wedged like a toad in the armchair. He glared from under his bushy, gray-black eyebrows, scowling at his housekeeper who was standing before him.

"And I just don't like you, Mrs. Grady. I'm frank about it." The window was open a little and Williams' rasping voice floated out.

"Why—why Mr. Williams!"

It was startling because the fat, jolly little Mrs. Grady and her employer had always gotten along extremely well.

"I don't like you and I'm going to do something about it." A big dagger was

lying on the table and abruptly Williams seized it, stabbed with it. Mrs. Grady screamed.

It happened so swiftly that neither Artton nor Mrs. Grady had time to move. For that second Artton thought that the gleaming dagger blade had sunk deep into the woman's plump shoulder. But mingling with her gasping cry came Williams' pleased laugh.

"Hah! Fooled you that time, didn't I?" He waved the gleaming dagger. "See? It's perfectly harmless." He pressed the dagger point against his chest. "You think the blade sinks into me but it doesn't! It just slides back, up into the hollow handle."

Another of Williams' jokes. He was always playing them, delighted as a

A Killer Learns that Some Jokes Aren't Funny

child. This time he had certainly fooled Mrs. Grady—and the watching Lee Arton also.

"Oh, Mr. Williams!" Mrs. Grady was trying to laugh. "I should have known you were joking."

"Sure you should. But I didn't give you time." He fondled the trick knife. "Just got it this evening, clever little gadget, eh? Look, you can even let people inspect it. If I twist the end of the handle—see, like this—the blade doesn't go in and it's a real dagger."

MRS. GRADY quite evidently didn't appreciate it very much, but she kept smiling respectfully. "Well Mr. Williams, I just came in here to ask if I can go off duty."

"And I got another new one tonight," Williams chuckled. "I won't spring it on you—hah! I couldn't very well fool you with anything else right now, could I? Some other time."

"Yes, sir. I just came to ask—if you need anything more from me tonight."

"No, not a thing," Williams beamed. "Go ahead to bed, Mrs. Grady. If I want a sandwich later, I'll get it myself."

"Yes sir. Thank you. Good night."

The housekeeper withdrew. Williams, still chuckling, fondled his trick dagger for a moment more, then put it on the table beside him and picked up his newspaper. Out on the moonlit terrace Lee Arton quietly moved back from the window. Wicker lounging chairs were here, and a small wicker table. It was still too early for Arton to go up to bed. He had just returned from a day in the city. The autumn night was comfortably balmy, and now he sat in one of the wicker chairs, staring moodily down the grassy wooded slope beyond the gardens of Williams' luxurious country home.

Lee Arton was a tall, slim, blond fellow. He worked in a haberdashery shop in the nearby village, an ultra-smart shop, and in appearance he certainly matched it, for always he was a figure of sartorial perfection. He lounged gracefully now in the wicker chair, with

his light gray fall topcoat draped around him. He put his pearl-gray felt hat on the little table so that the night-breeze fanned his flushed forehead. He stood his pearl-headed cane against the side of the chair.

Somehow the incident of that trick knife made Lee Arton want to sit here alone in the moonlight. To him queerly now it wasn't a funny joke but something suddenly sinister. Queerly too, it brought him with a rush into pondering the blank wall of his accumulating troubles, the impending loss of his job, his mounting debts, Gloria's impatience to have him produce some of the big money he always so glibly promised. It was ironic how quickly his inheritance from Williams would fix everything—this country place and the New York restaurant Williams owned. Arton would put a floor show in the restaurant, with Gloria's dancing and singing the chief attraction.

Lee Arton sighed as he moodily stared across the moonlit terrace. It was a feast of Tantalus. Everything almost within his reach—almost. He was aware suddenly that in the living room Williams had come to the terrace window, pulling closed its sash, locking it, He saw Arton; his hand went up in greeting. Then he seemed to make a sudden decision. He switched out the living room lights; and instead of going upstairs, in a moment he came out the living room door onto the terrace.

"Hello Lee," he said. "Didn't know you were out here." His short pudgy arm dangled by his side with his hand partly behind his leg. He was smiling at first, but abruptly he wiped off the smile and scowled. "So you got back at last, did you?"

"Hello," Arton said. "Beautiful night. Sit down." He was conscious that his heart was queerly racing.

Williams came waddling forward. "Look," he said, "I might as well be frank about things—I just don't like you, Lee. I don't like you and I'm going to do something—"

Getting ready to spring the stabbing joke again! Arton brought his feet to the floor and sat up briskly. He laughed. "Quit it," he said. "I'm onto you. Some new joke? What's that you've got in your hand? Let's see it." His voice was oddly breathless.

"Oh, dear!" Williams was like a crest-fallen child. He grinned sheepishly as he produced the knife and held it out. "It worked fine with Mrs. Grady a while ago. Look what-I just got tonight. A trick dagger!"

HE handed it to Arton. He was chuckling as he enthusiastically explained it. The feel of the cool, sleek handle sent a tingling shock through Arton's sweating fingers. A temptation, and suddenly now it was irresistible.

"—and the blade just slides harmlessly up into the handle," Williams was saying. "But if you want to let people inspect it, you just turn the end of the handle."

"Like this?" Arton heard his own voice as though it were detached, like somebody else talking. He couldn't think of anything but the feel of the weapon.

"Yes. Now it's a real one." Williams' chuckle mingled with his startled exclamation as Arton sprang to his feet. The slashing blade somehow hit Williams' throat, with gushing blood a crimson horror in the moonlight. Williams screamed, an agonized cry, blurred and choked into a rattling gasp as the stabbing blade sank deep into his pudgy chest.

Arton staggered back, gasping as the body of Williams tumbled and lay at his feet, twitching for a moment and then motionless with his trick knife buried in his heart. To Lee Arton, in that moment of startled horror at what he had done, everything was gone save the instinct of self preservation. Williams had screamed! It would bring Mrs. Grady down here! He heard her in another instant, calling from upstairs. Arton stooped swiftly, and with the lapel of Williams' jacket, he wiped off the knife

handle. There was blood on Arton's hands. He wiped them off against Williams' clothing, snatched up his hat and cane.

Now he could hear Mrs. Grady coming downstairs. His instinct was to jump from the terrace and run down the moonlit lawn. But Mrs. Grady would see him. He realized it as he reached the back end of the terrace. It would be better to get into the house and out the back door.

"Mr. Williams! What's the matter?" She was calling from the front hall now. Arton darted through a little door from the terrace into the dining room. Then he was in the dark back hall. He heard Mrs. Grady's scream, out on the terrace as she discovered the body. In the dark little washroom here, the panting Arton stopped just an instant to wash the dried blood smears from his hands. Then silently he darted through the back hall, the kitchen and out the back door where a steep little path led down through the trees.

Mrs. Grady may have fainted on the terrace. But she weakly answered Arton's greeting when a moment later after circling the base of the hill, he came sauntering up the front roadway. Lee Arton was replete with sartorial splendor now. He had verified that there were no blood smears on him. He had put on his gray suede gloves as he went through the kitchen and down the dark back hills. He had even picked a blossom for his lapel. He came sauntering now up the moonlit driveway with his hat at a jaunty angle and his cane hooked on his arm.

He saw Mrs. Grady. He called, "Hi there, Mrs. Grady." Then he saw the body; he gasped, came running. . . .

"No, Lieutenant, I didn't hear any scream. I suppose I was too far away. Such a nice night, I walked over from the village. As we've told you, Mrs. Grady was on the terrace."

Arton told it over again, quite carefully. He and Mrs. Grady had waited in the front foyer, after Arton had phoned

for the local police. Mrs. Grady was in her room now; Arton was still in the foyer. He sat with his gloved hands on the head of his cane between his legs and his hat beside him. So far as the investigation had gone, this Police Lieutenant Jamison seemed to be in charge. Mrs. Grady had told him about Williams' trick knife; of course.

"We figure this killer must have known about the knife," Jamison was saying now. "He turned the handle to lock the blade."

"Curious," Arton murmured. His handsome thin face had a faint smile. "The comedy of a joke, turning into tragedy. Life is often like that, isn't it, Lieutenant? Comedy and tragedy intermingled."

Jamison didn't seem to appreciate the philosophy. He shot Arton a sharp glance. "Quite so," he said. "This killer not only knew about the knife, he was familiar with the house."

"I was wondering," Arton said. "Could it have been suicide?"

SEVERAL of the men had discussed that before. They didn't seem to think it likely. The police fingerprint man was here in the foyer now. He snorted. "Sure," he said sarcastically, "he ripped at his throat, then pushed the blade down into his heart. Then he wiped his prints off the knife handle! After that, he died!"

"Oh," Jamison said. He wondered if anyone suspected Mrs. Grady. He decided that it would be pretty absurd to mention it. He added, "What makes you think the killer was familiar with the house, Lieutenant?"

This Jamison was no fool. "Mrs. Grady's third floor room faces front," he replied promptly. "First thing she did was look out the window. She'd have seen anybody dashing down that front lawn in the moonlight. Her room doesn't quite show the terrace, but the lawn is in plain sight."

"I see," Arton nodded.

"We figure he went into the house, and out through the back door. Mrs. Grady had closed it, but we found it open."

"Lieutenant, come here a minute!" One of Jamison's men called him. They stood whispering in the back of the foyer. They all looked excited, and several of the other men joined them. Then they all went back past the dining room.

Somehow it struck a chill into Arton, but he sat quiet. In a moment the men came back. Jamison said,

"The killer got blood on his hands evidently, and it seems he stopped to wash them as he went out through the back hall."

"Did he?" Arton murmured.

"A little washroom there. You can see evidences of it in the basin. And he used a little cake of soap that's there."

How well Arton remembered it, his panic of haste in the dark little washroom, then putting on his gloves and dashing out through the kitchen!

Now suddenly Jamison stooped, gripped one of Arton's gloved hands. "Let's see, Arton! Maybe you didn't get your hands as clean as you think!"

"My—my hands? I don't know what you're talking about!" As Arton stammered, vaguely in the background of his terrified mind came memory of how Williams had had another joke he wanted to try on Mrs. Grady. Something he had planted back there in the little washroom by the kitchen?

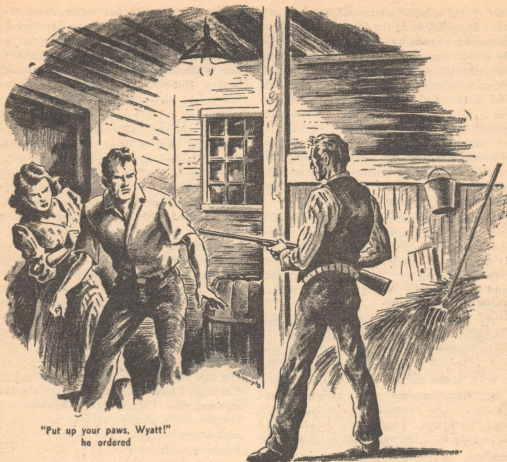
"My hands?" Arton was gasping. "You're crazy!"

But the protest froze in his throat. His gloves came off. His hands were smeared black; they looked filthy with grime!

"That was trick soap you used!" Jamison said.

Trick soap and the more you wash your hands the blacker they get! And one of the policemen jibed, "Washed off the blood and what he got was worse! That's funny! That's a good joke!"

But Lee Arton didn't think so.



"Put up your paws, Wyatt!"
he ordered

The Farmer Takes a Life

By ROBERT TURNER

A lady lures Chris Wyatt into a barn—where death waits!

IT WAS the waiting that got Wyatt. For a month, a racking, dull, life-long month he listened to the radio and played solitaire and tried to keep from blowing his wig. He never saw anybody except the Peasant. Marker, the old guy, was always gone out to the fields by the time Wyatt got down for breakfast. He ate lunch and dinner in his room. The Peasant brought it up to him.

She never said anything. Chris Wyatt thought maybe she was scared of him. She didn't have to be. He hardly looked at her. She was just somebody that came into the room and then went out again and that was all.

This night it was bad. It was still early summer but already very hot and the air was tight and weighted with a storm that had

been trying to break all day. Cheesecloth curtains hung limply at the farmhouse window. Somewhere in the west heat-lightning ripped the night's muggy blackness. Wyatt sprawled restlessly on the bed, playing solitaire and cheating whenever he got stuck. He could feel tension and irritation coiling and tightening in him like a spring. Outside, the guinea hens were squawking to be fed. He was sick to the ears of farm noises—chickens clucking, cattle lowing, hounds yapping. He wanted to hear taxi horns again and the hammering pulse of the city all around him. He was tired of being buried.

Where was Flynn? What was he waiting for? What had gone wrong? Don't worry, they'd said, if Flynn's a couple of weeks late. It won't mean anything, just that the right time didn't come up. You just sit tight, they told him, have yourself a nice rest, a little vacation, Wyatt.

He picked up the pack of cards and practised shuffling, his quick, desperate, impatient fingers reflecting the anger and frustration in him. The cards made a sound like a stick being rattled along a picket fence. Then, from the corner of his eyes he became aware of The Peasant and she had caught him by surprise. He dropped the cards in a fan on the floor, swinging around toward the door.

"Why don't you make some noise?" he snarled. "What are you sneaking around like that for?"

She said: "I didn't mean to startle you, Mr. Wyatt." It was the first time he'd really heard her voice, really heard it. All she'd ever said before, was "yes," or "no," or just nodded her head. There was a sort of husky breathlessness to her voice. "I—I was watching you handle the cards. Your fingers are so graceful and sure. I've never seen anybody handle cards so expertly before."

HE LOOKED at her. This was The Peasant—and yet it wasn't. She was different tonight. He'd never seen her in anything but dungarees and a sloppy checkered man's shirt two sizes too large, with a big, bright neckerchief covering her hair like a babushka. He'd marked her off in the beginning as uninteresting. With the dun-

garees rolled up to her calves, with those ugly, mudcaked flatheel shoes, her legs had seemed too stocky. She hadn't used any makeup and her features were large and she was apple-cheeked and strictly from the bushes. But not now. Not tonight.

She was wearing a simple red and white candy-striped gingham house dress with puff sleeves and she had everything it took to wear that kind of dress. It not only fitted her, it looked as if she'd been born and grown up in it. There was no babushka tonight. Her hair hung in loose waves and then rolled about her shoulders. It was blonde but touched with reddish tints as though flameglow was on it. The high cheekbones were expertly toned with rouge. The eyes were wisdest and for the first time Wyatt saw that they were a strange, tawny yellow under their thick lashes. That mouth that had looked too big and broad was now moist and shining red with lip paint dexterously applied and now it looked sensuous and inviting.

"What's the matter?" she said. "Don't you like me this way?" She pirouetted and the dress flared and her legs were sheathed in sheer silk. They no longer looked stocky but gracefully sturdy, curving up from the high-heeled rep pumps she wore. Wyatt had trouble getting his gaze away from them.

"Yeah," Wyatt said. He tried to remember what her name was. In his mind he'd called her The Peasant so long it was hard to remember. Then it came to him. "Yeah, I like you, Kate. What happened? Where'd you get the outfit? You ought to fancy up like that more often."

Color spread from the rouge spots all through her face. "The stuff came from the mail order house in Chicago, today. I don't dress up much. There isn't reason way out here in nowhere—usually."

Wyatt kept looking at her. A slow grin began to form on his thin, almost savagely good looking features. Some of the loneliness, some of the boredom slipped from him. He got up from the bed, walked toward her. For a moment she looked flustered and scared and as though she might turn and run from him. But at the last minute she didn't. She just took a deep breath and held it and

swung her eyes away from his, not looking at him. But she stood there.

"You've got reason, now," he said. "You can dress like this all the time now. For me. Just for me, Katie."

His hands caught the tanned roundness of her upper arms just below the little puff sleeves. All the restlessness and the boredom of the past month, all the smouldering heat of the night, seemed to gather in him. The electricity of the unbroken storm ignited it and the thing was like an explosion all inside of Wyatt. Still holding her by the arms, hunching up her shoulders, he pulled the girl hard against him. His mouth caught at hers just as she was starting to turn it away. He held her lips tightly with his all the time that she was trying to twist them free and then when she finally surrendered them to him, he suddenly stopped kissing her. He looked down into her face with his newly awakened expression, with the eyes closed and the tiny pulses beating in the dark lids and her nostrils flaring with the swiftness of her breathing.

"Baby," he whispered. "I've been here a month. A long, lousy month. All that time wasted!"

She put her cheek against his chest. "I know," she said. "You didn't even know I was alive, did you? You never even looked at me. I don't blame you. *He* made me dress like that, wouldn't let me use makeup or fix my hair. He didn't want me to be attractive. He did his best to make me ugly. But that's all over now."

"You mean Marker—old man Marker?"

"He's not so old. He's only forty. He just looks older, all weather-beaten and all. But I've known *you* were alive, Mr. Wyatt. From the first day you came here. I used to watch you while you were eating. I used to be so lonesome, so horribly lonesome and then you came here and even though you didn't speak, didn't look at me, I was no longer lonesome any more. But I never could come up here to see you, until tonight. He'd have killed me."

"Never mind the *Mr. Wyatt*." His fingers found the coolness at the nape of her neck, under her hair. "It's Chris. Say it. Say Chris."

She said the name, looking up at him, very serious, her eyes very big. It suddenly came to him that he didn't even know what old man Marker was to this girl. He hadn't been interested. He'd never asked and Marker had never said. He'd just assumed that she was his daughter or step-daughter or something. He asked Kate that, now.

"Daughter?" Her red lips curled back from her teeth. Her teeth were good, straight and white. "You don't know, Chris? I'm his wife."

He pushed her away from him but still holding onto her arms. He shook her. "Wife? Are you crazy, coming up here like — Get away from me. Get out of this room. I don't want any of that kind of trouble." He flung her from him.

She staggered back a few steps, then rubbed the marks of his fingers on her arms. A forelock of hair tumbled down over one eye and she shook it back.

She looked at him, a little hurt, a little puzzled.

"What's the matter, Chris?" she said. "There's nothing to be afraid of. He can't bother us."

"Where is he? Where is old man Marker? Suppose he'd come in here while I—while we—"

"He couldn't have," she stopped him. Her voice went so low he had to strain to hear it. "He's out in the barn. He's out there dead, Chris. I—I killed him." She was smiling a little around the corners of her mouth when she said it. She had said it like a kid telling about how he'd killed his first squirrel, a little proud, a little triumphant.

When he could stop staring at her and close his mouth, he went over to the rickety old dresser and took a cigarette out of the pack. His eyes went back to her, watching her over the flare of the match as he lit the cigarette. He felt panicky and confused. What was he going to do about this? How was this going to affect him? This screwball backsticks little chippie kills her middle-aged husband and everything was all of a sudden badly fouled up. He couldn't stay here now. Where would he go? What about Flynn? Damn Flynn, anyhow, why couldn't he have gotten here before any of this happened?

ANOTHER picture flashed into his mind and it almost made him sick at his stomach. It was the picture the authorities were going to see, the local law, sheriff or whatever he was called, when they heard about it. A young guy living in a lonely farmhouse miles from anywhere with an aging dirt farmer and the farmer's wife, twenty-odd years younger than her husband, about the young guy's own age. And the young guy a city guy, a stranger, with no good reason he could give about why he was there, why he'd come there. Who couldn't tell about Flynn and the other stuff.

The girl, Kate, stood quietly, watching him, as though waiting for him to say or do something. Words finally exploded out of him. "What kind of a dame are you? You kill your husband and then get dressed up and come up here to me and let me hold you and kiss you and you tell me how you've sort of had an eye on me right along? Hell, Kate!" His sullen good looks showed his disgust. That face of his that hadn't let itself be surprised or shocked by anything for so long, couldn't take this.

She shook her head slightly. Her hands were folded in front of her. Now they smoothed the front of the dress. "I—I didn't come up here to do that," she said. "I came up here to tell you what happened, to tell you you'd better take me to the sheriff's office over in Leeksville. That's the county seat. I reckon you expected me to feel bad about what I've done, to be ashamed or sorry maybe. I'm not, Chris. I hated him. I should have done it a long time ago. And I *had* to do it, tonight, to protect myself. He hasn't been drinking, he hasn't beat me since you came. But tonight he started in again. When he knocked me down out there in the barn, when he kicked me, I just suddenly couldn't take any more. I picked up the handle of a grubbin' hoe and I brought it down across his head. He—he didn't bother me any more then, Chris. He was dead."

While she was talking, now, her eyes got dark with hate, remembering, and fear, too, even though he was gone now and couldn't hurt her any more, harsh, animal-like fear. "He had an old buggy whip," she said. "I wish I could show you the marks on my

back, Chris."

"Why didn't you run away?" he asked. "No woman has to put up with that kind of stuff. Or have him arrested?"

She looked away from him. "I couldn't do either. Where would I run to, where would I go? I have no family, no friends. I don't know how to *do* anything—only farm work and housekeeping. When I once said something about having him arrested, he laughed at me. He said he'd tell the law that he'd caught me fooling around with some drummer. He said that'd be the end of it; they'd be more likely to give him a medal than arrest him. He was right, too. They've got old fashioned ideas about marriage here in the red clay country."

Wyatt could see that. He could see the two strikes against her, a young kid like her being married to a sun-dried old goat like Marker. People would be ready to believe the worst of her. He listened now, with only part of his mind, to her telling him why she'd married Marker in the first place. Something about her being hired out from a Home when she was fifteen and Marker's first wife was still alive, to work on the farm, and then, two years ago when Marker's first wife had died, he'd practically promised her the moon if she'd marry him. It was a choice of that or going back to the home. And she'd been a dumb young kid. She'd figured she'd have security and that Marker would at least be kind to her. She hadn't even known anything about love. But the first week she'd been married she saw what a mistake she'd made.

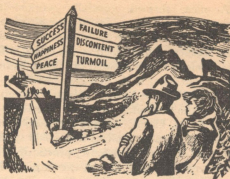
Wyatt listened to all this and at the same time he was trying to figure what he should do. What *could* he do? If he let this girl go to the local law the place would be swarming with hick police in an hour or so. Suppose Flynn arrived at the farm in the middle of all that. He wouldn't come near the place. He'd be scared off for good and all time. That would be the end of the hundred grand Wyatt was supposed to take from Flynn. Good-by to the fat bonus he'd been promised for bringing the cash back. And he could forget about ever getting an agency job again. He could settle down to a nice career of peddling insurance or something.

They'd told him back there in the Baltimore office of United Investigations, Inc.: "This is a sweet assignment, Wyatt. You'll have a nice little vacation on a farm, with nothing to do until Flynn shows up. It may be only a few days. It may be a couple of weeks. Anyway, you stay planted there until you either see Flynn or get a message from us that it's all off. Brother, I wish I was young and a field agent again, getting soft touches like this. A vacation on a farm, at full salary, a bonus when the job's done. And maybe you'll even find a cute little farmer's daughter to help you pass the time. Who knows. Heh-heh-heh!"

WELL, he'd had that nice quiet vacation, which had just about driven him nuts and now he had the farmer's-daughter—heh-heh-heh. But he didn't have Flynn or the hundred grand in bank money he was supposed to take from him. What he had was a nice mess of murder which was lousing up his whole deal, which might even get him involved.

United had been very clever about this whole deal. They had worked carefully and surely. The whole deal had looked foolproof. When Flynn had knocked off that suburban branch of a Baltimore bank, snared the hundred grand, all in thousand-dollar bills, he hadn't known the money was hot, that the serial numbers were listed. But he'd found out in that night's newspapers. He'd gotten several thousand in smaller denominations at the same time. United figured it would take him a little while to get rid of that and then he'd need more cash. He'd go looking, then, for a man named Koenig, who specialized in buying hot money.

Word had been spread around through the underworld grapevine that when Flynn was ready, he could do business with Koenig on a hide-away farm owned by a man named Marker. The only thing was, Flynn wouldn't know that hot-money-man Koenig was sick and dying in a Baltimore hospital and that Flynn would find a "high-jacking young crook" waiting for him on the Marker farm, instead. United investigator Chris Wyatt being the same.



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A nice, shrewd, carefully worked-out scheme on the part of United Investigations, Inc. Except that they hadn't figured on old man Marker getting killed by his young wife, Kate, before Flynn showed up. They hadn't told Wyatt what to do in a case like that.

The girl's voice brought Wyatt's thoughts back to the present. "What do you think I ought to do, Chris? Maybe the sheriff will let me go when he realizes that I *had* to kill him, that it was self defense, practically. Is there anything else I can do, except go to the law, Chris?"

He put his hand up over his eyes, tried to think. This was crazy. This whole thing had caught him so by surprise, the girl coming up here, all dressed up and good to look at in the first place, the way she'd returned his kiss, the calm, casual way that she'd told him that she'd just killed her husband. The whole thing just about had him floored.

He suddenly took his hand away from his eyes. He'd just thought of something. "Listen," he said. "How do you *know* you killed him? You said you hit him over the head with something. How do you know he's *dead*? Maybe he isn't."

She looked surprised. Her mouth stayed open a moment before she answered: "I—well, I don't know, I just—just *knew* I'd killed him. There was blood all over his head and he lay there, so still and all. I was just pretty sure he was dead."

"Pretty sure!" Wyatt said, mimicking her tone. "Let's get down there and find out. If he isn't dead, maybe you can get a doctor, say that he fell out of the haymow or something." He turned and looked at her sharply. "Hey, maybe even if he is, you can still get away with that. Maybe we can rig up something." It came to him that he was contemplating helping this girl to get away with murder. It also came to him that if her story was true, it had been justifiable. But he would make his decision about that when and if he saw that old Marker really was dead.

He followed Kate out through the door and along to the stairs. They went through the big, sparsely furnished dining room, the kitchen, smelling of sour milk and freshly churned butter and out into the back yard. Outside, Wyatt noticed that a breeze was

starting to come up, hissing and whispering through the trees. To his left, lightning streaked, fairly close now so that it lighted up the whole littered farmyard and thunder crashed and rolled. It looked like the storm was finally ready to break.

They took a path through a grove of fig trees, past a mule shed, toward the bulking blackness of the barn and the dull glow of light shining through a doorway. Wyatt didn't think anything about it when Kate stepped to one side at the doorway to let him go in first. But the instant he stepped inside, he realized that it hadn't been the natural thing for her to do. He thought about it, then, when it was too late. He thought about it a lot as he looked at the old man, Marker.

MARKER was a gaunt, stoop-shouldered man with thinning gray hair and a face lined and weather-beaten to a leathery texture. His dark, bird-bright eyes were heavily sun-wrinkled at the corners. And Marker wasn't dead, Wyatt saw. He was a long way from being dead. He wasn't even unconscious. He was standing to one side, facing the barn door and he held a huge, single-barreled shotgun in both hands, pointed right at Wyatt's stomach.

"Put your paws up, Wyatt!" Marker told him. Then, to the girl, he said: "Is he armed, Kate? Did he bring his gun? If he did, get it from him."

"No," Kate said, from the doorway behind him. "He hasn't got the gun."

Wyatt remembered then the way her hands had clutched him when he'd held her and kissed her. She'd been looking to see if he was wearing the shoulder-rig under his loose fitting sport shirt; he realized now. The shoulder rig with the .38 which was back at his room in the house, in his suitcase under the bed. Where it was doing him one hell of a lot of good right now.

He saw, now, too, that the girl had told only a partial lie. It wasn't Marker but there *was* someone out here in the barn who had been hit hard over the head, who was sprawled out on his back on the straw covered floor, just at the edge of the cone of light coming down from the single bulb hanging by a wire from an overhead beam.

A short, blocky-shouldered man in a pea-green silk sport shirt. A bald, bulldog-faced man whom Wyatt recognized instantly as Flynn, the bank robber. Flynn was here. He'd finally gotten here. But Flynn was also dead, which was no help.

A few feet away from Marker was a small overnight bag, expensive ostrich-skin covered. Wyatt had an idea the bag had belonged to Flynn and that it held a nice fat package of one hundred thousand-dollar bills.

"What happened here?" Wyatt finally managed to say. It sounded silly. He wished he'd taken the dumb-sounding curse off of the question by making it mocking and light with the catch-phrasing "Wha' happened?"

Marker grinned, showing a mouthful of big, twisted teeth and part of the wad of tobacco tucked under his lower lip. "I've been figgerin' you were a crook of some kind, Wyatt, but it weren't none of my business. You were payin' me good money to sit in your room for nearly a month and never come out and I don't ask any questions. What I don't know don't hurt me none." He jerked his head toward the dead man on the floor.

"When this other gent showed up tonight and come here to the barn and asked for someone named Koenig, I told him to go to see you at the house, like you paid me fifty dollars to say. But then when he asked me to describe you and I did, he said never mind, to forget about it, he must have the wrong place. He started to leave. By that time I'd got up some curiosity about that fancy lookin' bag he was holdin' so tight to. When he turned away to leave, I fetched him a wallop across the back of the skull with that there grubbin' hoe handle. If I was wrong and that there bag wasn't stuffed with greenbacks like I had a hunch, why, I was just goin' to apologize to the gent and explain that there handle must've fallen from the loft and conked him. But I wasn't wrong. That bag is full of money, nice crisp, clean currency."

He looked at Kate and winked. "I told Kate, here," he said. "Nobody comes onto that much money and lugs it around with him, honestly. I figgered nobody would care much if I sort of relieved you two crooks of

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all that cash. So when this here mister started to come around again, I fetched him another wallop with the handle that finished him."

Wyatt didn't say anything. He didn't know what to say. This was something else that United Investigations, Inc., hadn't counted on. They hadn't told him what to do about this, either. A dumb farmer who wasn't so dumb, who had a great fat streak of larceny in him. Who would think nothing of killing for a hundred thousand dollars.

Finally, Wyatt thought of something to say. Swiftly, he told Marker the whole setup, about the money, how the money was hot and no good to anybody unless they wanted to take the big chance of getting caught trying to pass it. And thousand dollar bills weren't easy to pass without question.

Marker let him go all through it. He kept the shotgun trained on Wyatt's middle all the time he was talking. Then Marker said: "That's just dandy. When your company comes here looking for you, I'll just tell 'em that you met this other gent here and the two of you went off together. They'll probably figure you two made some kind of deal. And don't you worry none about me gettin' rid of that money. If we have to, me and Kate, we can sell the house to get enough cash to take a trip to Mexico or South America or somewhere. We ain't got no criminal record. And I reckon we'll find someone in a foreign country to take a chance on those thousand-dollar bills."

Wyatt didn't try to argue with him. He turned to Kate. She was standing there, her hands rubbing up and down nervously against the sides of her thighs now. Her eyes restlessly avoided his. "That was nice work, kid," he said. "That was a beautiful act you put on to get me down here. You underplayed it nicely. All you needed was a violin playing 'Hearts and Flowers.' You should have heard her, Marker, saying how you always beat her with a buggy whip, so she had to kill you. She even left it up to me to suggest that maybe you weren't dead so we'd better come down here and find out. She—"

"She told you that?" Marker cut in on him. His dark bright eyes got long and

narrow. His lips pursed tight so that the bulge of the tobacco under the lower one showed. "She told you I whupped her and that she'd killed me?" He flashed a glance at the girl. "What'd you tell him that for, Kate? I didn't say to tell him that. I said just to get dressed up and lure him down here. Why would you say you killed me, Kate?" His face was ugly with anger and suspicion. His voice lowered. "Maybe you've been thinkin' of *doin'* that, have you?"

SUDDENLY Kate's trim figure slumped. She put both hands up over her face and her shoulders began to shake. Wyatt could see the tears smearing wetly between her fingers. He could hear the tearing sound of her sobbing and between those sounds, her words in a frightened voice: "I don't care! Part of it was true. You do beat me! You do! I only went up there and made him come down here because I couldn't stand for you to—"

"Kate!" Marker's bellowing voice stopped her. "Git up to the house. You hear me. Git out of here. And don't get any fool notions about running off or anything or I'll cut you to pieces with that bull whip!"

With her hands still over her face and her shoulders bent, she whirled and fled from the barn. Wyatt watched the anger fade from Marker's lined, ugly face, watched an almost apologetic smile creep into its place. "She ain't quite right," he explained. "I hit her on the head with the butt of the whip a couple months ago by mistake when she was tryin' to squirm away. She ain't been quite right since. But no matter. We don't need her." He stepped sideways and kicked a spade toward Wyatt. "Pick that up and march on out of the barn. Take the path to the right. They's a little hollow down back of the barn where you can dig a hole for me to bury this other fellow in."

Marker grabbed a lantern from a hook on the wall, lit it without ever taking his eyes from Wyatt, holding the shotgun in the crook of his arm. Then he ordered Wyatt to turn around. With the shotgun muzzle boring into Wyatt's spine, they marched out of

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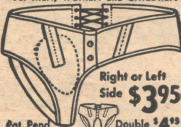
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the barn, took the path up over a small hill and down into a hollow of ground almost surrounded by thick shrubbery.

"This is it," Marker said. The wind had come up high now, the storm almost on top of them. It was blowing the lantern, flickering the tiny flame inside its glass shield. It was soughing through the trees. Lightning crackled almost continually against the rumbling of the thunder. "A good little burial ground this," Marker said. "Start diggin' fast, bub. We got to beat out that storm comin' on. I'd hate to see you standin' out here diggin' a grave in the rain."

Wyatt put the blade of the spade to the ground, put his foot and his weight on top of it and sunk it into the soft dirt. After several shovelfuls, he began to wonder if it would work if he suddenly flung a spade full of dirt into Marker's face, if it would give him a chance to rush him, grab the gun. He stopped to wipe the chilled sweat from his face and he saw that Marker was smart, wasn't taking any chances. He was standing nearly ten feet away and the wind was from his back, and blowing hard enough to blow back any dirt tossed his way.

"Don't let up, boy," Marker said. "You got a long way to go. That hole's got to be long and deep to hold you both. Get me real impatient and I might not decide to give you a few minutes longer to live, to dig your own grave along with that of the other feller. I might finish you and take the job myself."

Wyatt's stomach suddenly felt as though a big fist had caught hold of it, squeezing tight. Right along he'd known, deep inside of him, that Marker was going to kill him, too, that he had to do that. But he hadn't ever let the thought break out in his brain. He'd been kidding himself. Now, though, Marker's cold, deliberate words made that impossible.

At the same time, anger, quick and uncontrollable swelled all through him. It made him forget the shotgun in Marker's hand or not give a damn about it. It made him a little crazy. He would be damned if he'd do the man's work for him, if he'd do like he said and dig his own grave. If he was going to die, Wyatt decided, why prolong it. Let it happen now. He let the spade drop from his fingers. He turned toward Marker. He saw

a look of surprise slide across the farmer's lined, sin-mean face, saw the shotgun jerk up stiffly and the thick, gnarled finger tighten over the trigger.

The same instant, the bushes around the hollow, back and to the left of Marker broke aside and the girl, Kate, was standing in the clearing, a slender ghost-like figure in the faint glow of lamplight touching her, her hair blowing wild in the wind. Something glinted in her hand and there was a faint slap-sound, carried back away from them by the wind. There was also a flash of flame from Kate's hand. Something whistled over Marker's and Wyatt's heads.

"She's got your gun!" Marker screamed. "The crazy little fool's got your revolver!" He spun around and raised the shotgun.

It seemed to Wyatt in that moment that he'd never get the muscles in his legs moving. They seemed to paralyze on him, to refuse to work now when he needed them so badly. But then, without feeling any sensation of moving, he saw Marker's figure seemingly rushing toward him and he knew that his legs hadn't let him down. They might be numbed with fright and shock but they hurtled him toward the other man.

He landed on Marker's back just as the shotgun blasted. At the same time thunder broke right over their heads with a crash like the sound of the end of the world and the whole clearing was white-bright with lightning flare. And the rain started to fall as Wyatt bore Marker to the ground. Wyatt could feel the big drops, big as half dollars, spattering his back, wet and cold.

Marker was wiry and tough. He rolled under Wyatt, screaming and cursing and he got a knee into Wyatt's stomach. His big, gnarled fists beat at Wyatt's face and the rain broke in full deluge and sluiced down over them both and soaked them to the skin but neither of them noticed as they locked in death struggle. Marker was the first to break loose. He lurched away from Wyatt's clutching fingers, his face a bloody mask and slithered over the now muddy ground toward the shotgun that had been knocked to the ground. He never reached it. Between thunder claps the flat *splat* sound of a re-

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after

volver shot came again. Marker threw up his arms and pitched forward in the mud.

Wyatt stumbled over the slippery ground to where Kate was lying, still clutching his .38. He saw that one shoulder of her candy-striped dress was blood smeared and torn where a few balls of bird shot from Marker's shotgun blast had winged her. Her face was white and streaked with dirty tears. "I told him," she said. "I told him that some day I'd kill him!"

He scooped her up in his arms and started back through the pelting rain, toward the farmhouse. Somewhere on the way, she fainted. He set her limp figure down in a kitchen chair. He eased the ripped dress away from her shoulder to see how much of the bird-shot she'd taken. The wounds didn't look too bad, he saw and then she sort of toppled forward in his arms and he got a look at her back and shoulders where the dress had been ripped away. They were covered with whip-lash scars.

"You poor kid," Wyatt whispered softly. "You weren't lying were you." He sucked his breath in through his teeth, looking at those scars and his fists clenched and he wished that old man Marker wasn't dead so he could get at him with his fists again.

She came to, then, abruptly, shudderingly and looked up at him out of her haunted, frightened eyes. Wyatt smiled as gently as he could. He said softly: "Everything's going to be all right. You understand that? All right. Nobody's going to do anything to you. I'm going to drive you to a doctor in the old man's Ford and then I'll go to the sheriff, tell him the whole story. Nobody'll hurt you, I promise you that."

Kate looked as though she half believed him and she took his arm confidently as he helped her up from the chair. Her waist felt very small with his arm around it as Wyatt led her toward the door. He wondered if the right kind of treatment would be able to undo the damage done to her by old man Marker. He had an idea that it would. Psychiatrists could do wonders these days. And Wyatt figured it would be worth while to him to spend the whole five thousand bonus he'd get from United for this night's work if it was needed. Well worth while.

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