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By SAM MERWIN, JR.

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By LEE E. WELLS

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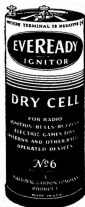
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THRILLING MYSTERY

VOL. XXI, No. 3

EVERY STORY BRAND NEW

Spring Issue

A Complete Mystery Novel

THE STONES IN THE SCRIPT

By **SAM MERWIN, JR.**

Strange Murders and Deadly Menace Stalk Press Agent Breckenridge Barnum as He Seeks the Elusive Key to a Baffling Secret that Spells Intrigue, Crime and Tragedy! - - - - - 11



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March, 1944, Issue

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Oysters Can Talk!

JOHAN DUFANG, an oysterman for thirty years, assisted the police in an amazingly strange way some years ago when there was a murder in Dufang's fishing town.

Old Timothy Martin, also an oysterman, was found stabbed to death. His money belt, containing several hundred dollars, was missing. There was no clue whatsoever. It was believed that some passing robber had committed the crime. The police were baffled.

Dufang bought Martin's oyster-beds and equipment from Martin's widow, giving her a fair price.

One night Dufang was opening a large oyster when his eyes stared in bewilderment.

He didn't see a pearl, but on the inside of the top shell was a vivid silhouette of a man holding a knife as though ready to stab someone. It was a freak of nature—but the head was quite clear.

Exceedingly concerned about the phenomenon, Dufang showed it to his neighbor, the Chief of Police.

"Why—I know that profile," said the Chief. "That's Wolf Dennermann, who used to work in Tom Wilson's saloon as a bartender. He was fired and blamed Pop Martin. Good God! I don't understand it—but I have a hunch."

And the hunch worked. The Chief located Wolf Dennermann in a distant town and dra-

matically accused him of the murder of Timothy Martin.

Shocked by the sudden accusation, the "Wolf" incriminated himself by his impulsive retort; and realizing that he'd given himself away, finally confessed.

The picture on the oyster-shell faded three days later. Dufang remembered what Pop Martin always said:

"Oysters can talk!"

Orchestra Voice

IT IS believed by some people that psychic energy utilizes a property of electric frequency which in certain respects resembles radio vibrations.

Wilford Forbes was an assistant in the control room of a Western radio station. For weeks he had been worried about a personal problem concerning his younger brother, John.

The brother was showing signs of insanity. Doctors advised commitment in an institution, calling the case hopeless; and for days Forbes debated whether or not to sign the papers putting his brother in an asylum for the rest of his life.

Forbes remembered his mother's dying words:

"Take care of Johnnie—he is so frail."

Wilford had to make up his mind. As he kept his hands on the studio dials one night

(Continued on page 8)



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MYSTERY-SCOPES

(Continued from page 6)

during a symphonic concert, his mind was on his mother and John.

Suddenly, as a violinist completed a beautiful solo and the orchestra leader paused for a moment before raising his baton for other instruments to continue, Wilford heard a distinct word spoken through the microphone by an elderly woman. The word was "No."

Through the glass he could see no woman near the microphone. He turned to an assistant in the control room:

"Did you hear that woman's voice?"

The assistant shook his head as the orchestra swelled into the symphony.

Wilford Forbes was bewildered. What had he heard? He didn't know—but he followed a hunch and did not commit his brother.

Weeks later he was glad of his decision, for his brother John completely recovered his sanity.

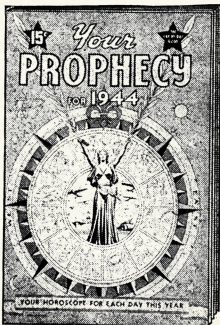
Mind of Death

AN OLD Indian squaw died recently in Oklahoma. Her grandson, Jeremiah Kanawah, an ex-sheriff, when interviewed about his lovable grandmother, said:

"It was through her help that the notorious Heegan gang of rustlers were brought to justice."

Just before the turn of the century, the gang killed a rancher and drove off his cattle. Jeremiah, then a deputy and a member of the posse trailing the rustlers, came to a dead-end road facing a mountain. The cattle could

JUST OUT!



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not have been led over the mountain—it was too steep.

Forced to give up, Jeremiah told his grandmother what had happened.

"Take me to the ranch," she said. "Maybe I can be of help."

To humor her, the deputy drove the old lady to the scene of the murder. She asked him to build a camp-fire over the blood-soaked spot where the rancher's body had been found.

Several hours passed, it was growing dusk; but the squaw just sat as though in a trance. Jeremiah dozed—when suddenly he heard his grandmother's excited voice.

He jumped up, half asleep and looked where the squaw was pointing. Through a strange smokelike mist he saw a herd of cattle. The animals were being driven through a mountain trail which resembled a creek-bed he had seen the day before. He remembered a certain rock formation. Then the vision disappeared and the deputy stood bewildered.

Although believing it all a dream, the next day he urged the sheriff to take a posse down that mountain stream. The Sheriff halfheartedly agreed. And within two hours they came upon a hidden valley.

The rustlers were there—a perfect hide-out! And justice triumphed. The reason the posse had lost the trail the previous day was because the rustlers had purposely driven the cattle to the dead-end mountain and then driven them back to the creek bed, a clever scheme.

Later, when Jeremiah asked his grandmother to explain—all she said was:

"At the scene of a murder, the trail of the killers can be discovered by concentration."

Chemical Phantom

CHEMISTRY has played a big part in crime solution—but one case is outstanding. Some years ago an old German merchant in an Eastern city was robbed and slain. Although the police suspected a certain dope-fiend, "Goopy Lawson," they had no evidence.

But a young city chemist, Ronald Burke, who made a hobby of "Black Magic," sug-

(Continued on page 95)

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The hilt of a knife protruded from the old man's chest

THE STONES IN THE SCRIPT

By SAM MERWIN, JR.

Strange Murders and Deadly Menace Stalk Press Agent Breckenridge Barnum as He Seeks the Elusive Key to a Baffling Secret That Spells Intrigue, Crime and Tragedy!

CHAPTER I

Death Throws a Knife

THE old man was tired. He was, he reflected sadly, too far along in years for all this bustling about. Four trips to the city from his comfortable little home in Montclair inside of one week had eaten heavily into his slim reserve of vitality.

With a sigh, he dropped a nickel into the telephone slot, worked the dial with unsteady, parchment fingers, waited patiently for his response.

"Yes," he said finally, and his voice, while still deep, had lost the timbre that

once could keep an entire courtroom hanging on his every word. "This is O'Connell. Yes, I know. . . . But I'm doing all I can. He's just been busy, I fear. I'm going over there now and explain the whole thing. . . . No, I'm in the Tubes terminal. I'll walk it. It's about the only exercise I can take now."

On the sidewalk he stood still for a full two minutes, gazing like a sightseer at the three-dimensional immensity of Manhattan around him.

Tall, with white hair clustered beneath the narrow roll brim of his high-crown derby, he seemed a pallid survival of an era already buried in the pages of history. His black coat had faded to

A GRIPPING COMPLETE MYSTERY NOVEL

brown, his trousers were of the old sort that are pressed on the sides instead of fore and aft. Even the magnificent gold cable of his watch-chain with its massive gold and jade seal fob was heavily and awkwardly obsolete.

How the city had changed! Even in the last year. The elevated, which once made a grotto of Sixth Avenue, had vanished. Why, he could remember when steam locomotives ran along the vanished trestle, tooting and belching as they bore Harlem commuters on the long journey to their jobs downtown.

HE STROLLED up the newly cleared avenue, leaving the Empire State building behind him, its burnished catholicism gleaming in the late afternoon sunlight. Past Herald Square he ambled, an aged figure who moved with the formal dignity of his day, past Bryant Park, a study in spring green pastels against the gray towers around it.

His mind, however, was no longer occupied with his immediate surroundings. He was thinking of the completion of his task, now, after five years, drawing to a close.

Breckenridge Barnum should not be difficult, if he remembered that young man at all. Nice fellow, Barnum. A bit too radical, perhaps, but he had probably settled down by now. At any rate he had seemed busy enough on the old man's three previous trips to see him. Well, this should wind it all up today, wind it up fairly, with all parties satisfied. And for the old man there would be peace and naps in the sun in summer or before a fire in winter.

He stepped cautiously off the sidewalk, waiting for the light to turn in his favor before he crossed the avenue. A car, which had been following him slowly from the Tubes terminal, picked up speed and swerved down on him. He never even saw it.

But Providence was kind. A woman screamed behind him, making him jump and, to his vast annoyance, lose dignity. He whirled around with unexpected speed, and his move caused the car to whiz past him. The woman, a plump creature wearing one of those foolish red hats, had fainted. A policeman and a cluster of others were taking care of her.

Silly creatures, women. He turned again and crossed the street. . . .

Dorothy Cochrane came into Breck's office and parked a softly attractive figure on the glass top of his desk. Her lipstick was slightly smeared in the corner where the cigarette burned. She squinted her eyes to keep them clear of smoke, fluffed dark brown hair back with both hands.

"Well, Breck," she said, stretching. "Another week done. What do you know? Got anything?"

"Just a 'Sounds in the Night' for Winchell," said Breck Barnum, lifting his cigarette from the ashtray before him. "How do you like it?" He picked up a sheet of paper. "'Overhead at the Jamaica Inn—She has a heart like a steel trap and a mind of gold.'"

The girl wrinkled her nose. She was pretty in a bright, acquisitive way. "Not bad," she observed. "If you could cook up one of those every day, you might rise to be one of Jack Benny's gag men. That would be wonderful, wouldn't it?"

"Oh-oh," said Breck, ducking and lifting his arms as if to fend off a blow.

"Seriously, Breck, darling," she said, tamping out her cigarette, "do you want to spend your life letting other people pick your brains in this racket? You don't want to be a press agent forever. Why don't you get busy and . . ."

"And finish that cursed book," he concluded for her. He stood up, a massive red-haired six-feet-one whose all around bigness made him look shorter than he was. Pacing the floor, he had a slight limp, the result of twelve years of football. It was this trick knee that had kept him out of the army.

"Exactly," agreed Dorothy, jumping off the desk and taking hold of a tree-like arm. She barely came to his shoulder, but her personality stood eye to eye with his. "You're a fool to let two years of work go to waste. You promised you'd bring it down today and let me see it."

BRECK'S book was a sore point between them. Five years earlier, he'd been in a public relations firm which dealt in good will for a big-time financiers. He had worked on the account of old Tom Flanders, the carburetor king, until that incredible, insatiable buccaneer died. And then Breck had tried to



Without warning,
Soranno swung the
gun, and Breck hit
the floor

write a book explaining the Flanders' abilities and point of view to a not uncurious world.

The manuscript, what there was of it, now reposed in the bottom drawer of his desk at home, where it gathered such dust as could filter in.

Dorothy, ambitious for Breck as well as for herself, had launched without warning in the week just ending, a thorough blitz campaign to get Breck to finish it. She even offered to finish it for him, which made him shudder, knowing the limited intensity of her intellect and education. It was getting to be an issue.

"See here, Dotty," he said, pulling her close so that she had to look almost straight up at him. "I want to forget about the Flanders' biography. I set out to do a job, and I wasn't able to finish it. When the Flanders' place on Fifth Avenue burned down, all the papers I was using for research went with it. I *can't* finish it. So that's that."

"Please let me look at it, darling," begged Dorothy. She reached up and put two arms around his neck and held her soft lips provocatively within an inch of his own.

"Oh, all right," he growled.

She kissed him, then pulled away smiling, almost radiant. "I'll tell you what! I'll come to your place tomorrow, and we'll go over it together. I can bring stuff for breakfast. How about it?"

"That will be swell," he replied with enthusiasm he did not feel. Brooklyn and the Giants were playing at the Polo Grounds and Bill Corum had asked him to sit in the press-box. Good-by ball game. But this business was getting in his hair, and he decided to get it ended once and for all.

"How about coming with me to the Jamaica Inn tonight?" he asked. "You don't have to get up tomorrow, and I promised Lou I'd be over. I have to hold his hand once in awhile or he gets panicky."

"That's what I don't like about this racket," she protested. "In any other job, you're through at five or six. Here you start at ten in the morning and go on till four A.M. Then you need a couple of hours to taper off in. So you don't get any sleep. And for what? To make Lou Latham think he's the god of American dance music? Don't you see what I'm driving at?"

"Sure I see," said Breck. "If you feel that way about it, what are *you* doing here? Come on, give me an answer."

"That's easy," she retorted. "I'd rather get sixty dollars a week here as your assistant than twenty or twenty-five as secretary to some old four-eyed buzzard who takes liver pills and makes me run errands for the wife."

"Hey! What are we fighting for?" said Breck, grinning.

He flattened the tip of her nose with a forefinger.

"I don't know," she said wearily. "Sometimes it just doesn't seem any use. I'm going home to get some shut-eye. Maybe I'll feel better then, darling. You go ahead and make the rounds alone tonight. Baby here needs some sleep."

"Okay, spinster," he told her, patting her shoulder. "I'll be seeing you in the morning. If I can see."

"You'd better be able to. Eleven o'clock. Good-by, you lug." She stood up on tiptoes to kiss him, then left him standing by his desk alone.

Moodily he looked out the window at the geometric peaks and valleys of the city, fading away in the mists of early evening far to the south. Then, absent-mindedly, he wiped lipstick from his mouth and sat down in his chair. No sense in leaving early. It merely meant joining the mob somewhere and getting started too soon. And there was a long evening ahead.

Breck Barnum was pretty well known around New York. His earliest fame, of course, had come as an athlete, first in college, then, for a couple of seasons, with the New York Giants of Tim Mara—the football Giants.

In the off season, Breck had used his salary to get himself a Master's degree in English at Columbia. When a bad knee injury forced him to give up active athletics, he had obtained a job with a public relations firm on the Tom Flanders' account. Old Tom, it seemed, had been a fan of his gridiron exploits.

When the old man died, Breck, having made something of a name for himself, had been snapped up by Coster and Gregg and given a couple of Broadway accounts. He had solidified himself by bringing Lou Latham into the Coster and Gregg fold and was on the road to a junior partnership.

LATHAM was a good musician with a good band, but the world's worst hypochondriac, mental and physical. His band was doing its second return engagement at the swank Jamaica Inn, had a major radio commercial, a seven-night-a-week wire on a national hookup, and was selling records almost as fast as the Dorseys. Latham was clicking merrily, and the peak was not yet in sight. Yet Latham worried.

He was a chap who'd faint if he scratched his finger, who paled when he heard of someone else's failure for fear the fickle public would suddenly desert his standard for newer idols.

Altogether, he was the strangest bundle of complexes Breckenridge Barnum had ever met, and it was on this human medicine chest that a good deal of his success depended.

Breck was doing well too, darned well. If his job was a headache, it was a paying one. Some day he supposed, he'd either have this business or one of his own. But perhaps Dorothy was right. Even at best, it wasn't anything to shout about. He scratched his red head, lit himself another cigarette, glanced at the cover of *Life*.

The telephone rang, and he picked it up. The voice of the girl at the switchboard grated through.

"A Mr. Flanders wants to talk to you," she said, "and the old gentleman is still waiting in the foyer."

Breck was puzzled.

"What old gentleman?" he asked. "No one told me anything about him."

"He says his name's O'Connell. That you know him."

"O'Connell?"

"Yes, he's been here four times this week. He's very old—you know, old-fashioned."

Breck remembered then, hooking it with the Flanders' name, but he didn't get it. O'Connell, he must be the one who was Tom Flanders' attorney. Nice old chap. Breck would have been glad to see him at any time. He wondered why he hadn't been told. It must have looked pretty rude, keeping his waiting like this.

"Tell Mr. O'Connell to come in and put Flanders on," said Breck.

The smooth tones of T. Coleman Flanders II, only son and youngest child of Old Tom presently came on the wire.

"Barnum? This is Flanders—T. Coleman Flanders. You remember me, I'm sure."

"I'm sure, too," agreed Breck, with a faint shudder of distaste for the pretentiousness of the speaker's voice. "What can I do for you, Flanders?"

"I've got a proposition that might interest you, old man," said Flanders diffidently. "It has to do with that book or whatever it was you were writing about the governor. Since the records are burned, I might want to buy it myself. Sort of a memento, you know. Does it sound attractive?"

"It sounds all right to me," replied Breck, puzzled. He decided to play his hand out. "The only hitch is that I've been thinking of doing some more work on it. I have a chance to get it published." This was a black lie, but he wanted to bait the other.

"But look here, you can't do that," protested Flanders. "You really can't. There are some things that shouldn't be made public. I'm sure if you'll let me talk with you we can see things eye to eye."

"All right," said Breck, "when?"

"How about lunch tomorrow?"

"Sorry. It's taken," said Breck. Then he gave way to his natural curiosity. "How's for cocktails?"

"Fine," said Flanders. "My place. Five o'clock."

Breck hung up, looked at the usually pretty switchboard operator, who had appeared suddenly, her face green beneath its powder.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked.

She opened her mouth, but no words came. Then she pointed toward the foyer.

"The old gentleman," she gasped finally.

Something must be wrong in the front of the office, Breck gathered. At a limping trot, he passed through the other rooms, now deserted, and entered the foyer which had been furnished as a waiting room.

Mr. O'Connell was sitting in a chair with a magazine on his knees. His head was bent forward, and he might almost have been asleep.

But the hilt of a knife protruded from his chest, and the magazine on his lap was crimson!

CHAPTER II

Mystery Woman

THE next half hour was a whirling confused time for Breck. He summoned the police, tried to revive the switchboard operator, and was caught in the first wave of official attention. Finally, he came out of it back in his own office, leaning against the wall while a tired little man whose clothes needed pressing, sat behind the desk and questioned the sick girl.

"You say he gave his name as O'Connell?" the detective asked. His voice was soothing, controlled, apparently disinterested. The girl nodded, still finding it difficult to speak.

"Ever see him before?"

"Yes, sir. This was the fourth time he's come this week."

"And he always asked to see Mr. Barnum?"

"Yes, sir."

The detective swung the chair around and stabbed Breck questioningly with a pair of unexpected light blue eyes that were incompatible with his lined, nondescript face.

"It's the first I've heard of it," declared Breck, flushing, despite the fact that he spoke the truth. "I'd never have made him wait if I'd known. Mr. O'Connell is—was, blast it—a swell old fellow."

"Did you tell Mr. Barnum, O'Connell was here?" the little detective asked. Breck suddenly remembered that the interrogator had introduced himself as Lanning, Sergeant Lanning. He seemed to know his business, and Breckenridge Barnum decided to watch his step.

"I told Mr. Barnum's assistant, Miss Cochrane," volunteered the girl. "She came out and saw him."

"Did you hear what she said?"

"No, sir. But they talked almost half an hour on Monday."

Breck cursed Dorothy. He was suddenly very angry. His assistant's instinct to protect him put him on the spot if he denied what the switchboard operator said. If he agreed with her he put Dorothy on the spot. All at once, he began to wonder if his ever loving assistant had acted from the purest motives.

Something very funny was going on.

Dorothy had been asking him all week to let her see that obsolete manuscript on the Flanders' clan. Young Flanders had called him up and expressed a desire to purchase the half-finished book less than an hour ago. He wondered what poor old Mr. O'Connell had wanted to see him about. It was all very queer indeed.

"And you say the last person to leave by the front door of this office was Miss Cochrane?" Lanning was asking.

"Yes, sir," replied the girl, who was beginning to regain her poise. "She went out just a few minutes ago. I was getting ready to go home when Mr. Flanders called Mr. Barnum. And then I remembered that poor Mr. O'Connell was still waiting, so I told Mr. Barnum about it."

"What'd he say?"

"He seemed surprised and asked me to send him in. I called Mr. O'Connell through my window, but he didn't answer. I thought he might have got tired and left, so I went out and took a look. I—I found . . ."

"All right, miss," soothed the little detective, "you can go now. Leave your home address and phone number with the sergeant outside. We'll get in touch if we want you."

Lanning's attention now swung back to Breck. He leaned back in the chair, and regarded him somberly.

"I'm not going to kill you," began the little detective. "As a matter of fact, I used to watch you play. You are the Barnum who played football, aren't you?"

"That's right," answered Breck.

"I'm pretty sure you didn't know O'Connell was out there," observed Lanning, with a faint quirk on his lips that might have been a smile. "You've been showing all the guilt of an outraged innocent man. You're red as a cocktail cherry right now."

BRECK took the hint, and digging into his desk, came up with a bottle of whiskey. Both men had a needed drink and Lanning downed a fat five ounces without the quiver of a muscle. Then his face grew grave, and he leaned forward earnestly.

"A fine old man was murdered out there today," Lanning declared. "I remember him when he was the best trial

lawyer in New York County. He was killed by an expert. When that knife was slipped into his heart, he didn't even have a chance to squeak.

"He's been trying to see you, and either you wouldn't see him or were prevented by a third party. I believe the latter at the moment. Today, when he was waiting it out, he was killed. Tell me, Barnum, why do you think someone was so anxious to keep the two of you from getting together?"

"I honestly don't know, Sergeant," replied Breck. "We were never more than acquaintances. I worked on the Flanders' account right after I quit the Giants until Old Tom died. Then I saw him in the family's private library once or twice while I was digging for that book. That's all—until just now."

"Old Tom Flanders must have been quite a character."

"He was," assured Breck. He suddenly visualized the leonine old pirate as if he were sitting in the room.

Huge headed, undyed, truly black hair at seventy-three; black eyes aglow with malicious relish in living; wrists, fingers, waistcoat, tie, ablaze with diamonds. Next to the great Brady, Tom Flanders had been most lavish walking male jewel shop since the Renaissance. Lanning's thoughts must have been similar to Breck's, for he made a remark about the famous jewel sets.

"Selling them must have been the toughest thing Old Tom ever did," declared Breck. "But he was hit like everyone else. It was like him not to admit he wore phonies the last five years. He trusted to his reputation to make people think they were real."

"Well, Barnum, what in blazes do you think this assistant of yours has been up

to?" Lanning flung out.

"I don't know," Breck said, shaking his head. "She's either been mistakenly trying to protect me or trying to do something on her own."

"Got her address?"

Breck wrote it down, and Sergeant Lanning then made ready to leave.

"Thanks for the drink, Barnum," he said. "I'll be seeing you. Know where I can get in touch later if I need you?"

Breck told him and then accompanied Lanning to the foyer, where the medical examiner's men were completing their grim task.

For the first time in months, Breck was glad to be within the plush-roped doors of the Jamaica Inn. He had tried to call Dorothy and warn her about the murder but her phone had not answered.

The full impact of poor old O'Connell's murder was not a pleasant sensation, and Breck found himself welcoming the diversion that the Inn and Lou Latham's latest set of woes offered.

The orchestra leader, a tall, lean young man with wavy black hair, joined Breck at a table on the terrace behind the orchestra stand, where there were few diners.

"Business smells," he observed gloomily after a survey of the garishly handsome, half-filled dining room.

"It always does at dinner," soothed Breck. "But do you pull 'em in, Lou!"

"Do you really think so?" asked Lou, and for a moment he almost looked pleased. This was an old routine between the two men. Lou Latham needed more moral security than a banker about to hand out a million dollar loan. Then his face fell again. He fumbled in his waistcoat pocket and pulled out a small

[Turn page]

WHAT DO YOU SEE?

All the same except one . . . which is the odd picture?



ANSWER

Number five. He is only "two-haired"

WHAT DO YOU SAY?



box from which he drew a crimson capsule.

"You'll spoil the cut of your clothes, carrying all that stuff around," warned Breck. "That's a new one, isn't it?"

"Yeah." Latham looked at the capsule as some people stare at a new car. "It's nitroglycerin. I had a heart flutter last night, and the doctor prescribed it for me." He popped it into his mouth, chased it down with water.

"You'll trip over something and explode if you don't watch out," Breck said, finishing his Scotch.

The orchestra leader ignored him, launched into a detailed description of a trivial quarrel with his arranger and whined on until it was time for him to return to the stand. For once, however, Breck didn't mind listening to his complaints. It got his mind off the horror in the foyer of his office.

HALF smiling, purposely thinking of nothing at all, Breck sat alone, and let the music fill his veins. Idly, he reached for his drink without looking—and it wasn't there. A dark-haired sweet dream, female gender, was just in the process of putting it down empty on the table.

"Hey!" he cried, outraged. "What gives?"

"You do," countered the girl, and twinkled at him imperturbably. "Thanks."

She was a cross between the lovely and the sensational, and in spite of himself Breck felt his expression soften.

"That's better, Barnum," she purred, reaching across the table to pat his big hand with a slim, carmine-tipped white one.

Breck found himself staring at her long, loose black hair unimpeded by a hat, the black eyes that sparkled at him maliciously. There was something familiar about her, but he couldn't pin it down. "So you know my name," he said warily.

"That's right. I tried to see you at your office this afternoon, but a very ungracious Miss Cochrane informed me you were out."

"She did, did she!" flared Breck. After another long and uncooling look at his unexpected table partner, his feelings toward Dorothy were by no means improved.

"She did," repeated the girl. "It took me five phone calls to find you hang out here nights."

"Okay," said Breck with a weariness he no longer felt, "so I suppose you want a screen test or an audition."

"No," she denied deliberately, pursing her lips.

"That's good," he told her, wishing she wouldn't do that to her mouth unless she meant it. "Because tonight we have no screen tests, no auditions, no autographs, no appointments. Next please."

"Do we have a drink?"

"But we—or rather you—just had one," reminded Breck, beginning to enjoy himself. She stared at him, her almost straight, rather thick eyebrows level. "An excellent idea," he acquiesced finally.

"When I saw you sitting here," said the girl, and her voice was softly Anglo-American with certain important husky undertones, "I went into conference. I said, 'Miss Smith, that Mr. Barnum looks like a tough nut to crack. But you could handle him like a baby.' And here you are."

The drinks came, and to Breck's utter amazement, she twirled her glass seven times, before she would take a sip of her drink. She accidentally jarred the ice as she set it down—and repeated the process six more times. Breck, with a curious scowl, set down his drink.

"What's that for?" he asked.

"What? Oh, you mean this seven business. Well, when I was a little girl, someone told me seven was a lucky number. I was at the age where I counted stairs and cracks in the sidewalk. I began to do it in sevens. And I still do. You should see me brush my teeth."

"I should at that," he replied, leaning forward. "Now tell me, Miss Smith, if that is your name, which I doubt very much, what the devil is this all about?"

"Nope," she said. She shook her head, and her hair swirled in a gleaming black fan. "It would probably shock you. Meanwhile, if you don't like me, I can come back later. I merely want you to take me home. If you'll tell me what time, I'm sure I know lots of boys who'd be awfully glad to take me out in the meanwhile."

"I'm sure of that," agreed Breck. "I just don't get it, that's all. Okay," he said, lifting his glass. "I may be a dope,

but I'm not that much of a dope. What do I call you?"

"Miss Smith" she answered, dimpling. "My parents couldn't think of a first name, so they just called me Miss."

"What are you going to do when you marry?"

"Isn't it a little early in the game to talk about that?" she replied, and he gave up. Coming, as she did, on the heels of the murder, the amusing and most attractive Miss Smith was a perfect antidote. True, he was probably being made the butt of a gag of some sort, but Breck found he didn't care.

NEVER could he remember enjoying himself so much. He got himself a little too tight, but he laughed harder than he had in many months. Miss Smith danced so well that he could forget about his game leg, and, between sets, even Lou forgot to complain about his imaginary ailments and joined in the mirth.

Finally, when the evening grew into early morning, Breck, who by this time was treading on unbreakable eggs, led her to a cab. She whispered an address to the driver, and he sat back, waiting to see where she lived. Dorothy or no Dorothy, he intended to see the mysterious Miss Smith again.

"Hey!" he cried, rousing himself as the vehicle pulled to a stop in front of an apartment house in the East Sixties. "This is where I live."

"I know it," said the girl. "This is what I meant when I said I was afraid you'd be shocked. Now be a lamb, pay the man and come along."

In haze of alcohol, bewilderment, and gratification, Breck led her to the elevator. "This isn't even Leap year," he protested.

"We'll have to fix the calendar, I guess," she murmured.

They got off at his floor, the tenth. It was as Breck fumbled his key into the lock that the man stepped up beside him.

It was Johnnie Soranno, one of the minor mob chieftains of the town, slick untousness exuding from the coarse hair that bleamed under his hat to the highlights on his pointed shoes.

"I want to come in, Barnum," he said.

Breck turned, a little unsteadily, and scowled at him.

"Beat it," he warned. "You don't belong here."

"I said I want to come in," announced Soranno in a passable imitation of George Raft.

"Wrong night," Breck snapped. He was rapidly losing his temper, "It's always the wrong night to you. Now are you getting out, or do I have to . . ."

The world exploded, but Breck never saw what hit him.

CHAPTER III

Appointment with Murder

WHEN Breck came to, he was stretched out on the bed in his apartment, his head humming like the tank assembly line of the American Car & Foundry Company going at full blast. The overhead light was on, but no one seemed to be in the room with him. And suddenly he remembered that a minor racket man, Johnny Soranno, had slugged him while he was in the hall with Miss Smith.

He staggered to the bathroom and stuck his head under the cold shower. It felt clearer, but pain still stabbed at his brain and there was an eggish lump behind his ear. Slowly he made unsteady progress to the living room and sank onto the sofa. Here again the lights had been switched on, but there was no one in evidence.

What was this all about, anyway? Poor O'Connell had been murdered in his office after Dorothy had prevented the aged lawyer from seeing him. Dorothy had been after that useless old manuscript of his, as had T. Colman Flanders.

And now a mysterious Miss Smith as well as Johnnie Soranno had yet to be accounted for.

Even in his muddled condition, Breck realized that the manuscript seemed to be the crux of the matter. With a groan he got up, and dizzily made his way to the maple desk by the windows. When he bent over to open the bottom drawer, his head did a tailspin, and he thought he was going to be blotto again. It was easier to sit down on the floor and look inside.

The two-hundred-odd page bulk of the manuscript was missing! After collecting dust for a good two years, some-

body had gotten to it ahead of him. How long a time ahead he couldn't even guess. Helpless, bewildered, Breck tried to decide what he must do.

This whole messy business was beyond him. Why should anyone, or rather, so many people want that useless old script? There was little doubt now in his throbbing head that those typed pages lay behind the old man's murder.

All at once he knew what had to be done. Dragging himself to his feet, he stumbled to the telephone and called the police department. Lanning would have to know.

It was well after three in the morning, but the little detective arrived within a few minutes, bringing a perturbed, dinner-jacketed, T. Colman Flanders with him.

"I was questioning Mr. Flanders when you called," Lanning remarked without preliminaries. "He asked to come along. Seemed to be interested."

"I am," said the other arrival. "I just offered to buy the script. Do you know who took it, Barnum?"

"I do not," Breck told his guests what had happened that evening, excluding, as before, only his suspicions of Dorothy.

"Who brought you inside?" Lanning asked, puzzled.

"I don't know," muttered Breck. T. Colman, Breck noted, seemed uncommonly interested in the description of the mysterious Miss Smith. He could have sworn Flanders recognized her from his word picture, but his spoken denial refuted the gleam in his eyes.

"My offer's still open as soon as you recover it," Flanders declared then, with slight mocking emphasis. "If, of course, you haven't been taken up by a publisher. So drop by for a drink tomorrow and we'll go ahead as if it hadn't been stolen. It may turn up."

"What's your interest in this script?" Lanning asked warily.

"Just that I'd like to have it in the family's hands," Flanders replied. "It seems to me that's where it belongs."

"Quite so," agreed Lanning, turning to Breck. "Has any one of your friends a key to this apartment?" His emphasis was pointed.

"Not to my knowledge," said Breck. "If anyone had, why hit me over the head with a brick wall?"

"Let me see your key," asked the detective, and Breck handed it over. Under the light, Lanning spied something in a crease of the metal and dug it out with a pin. "Wax!" he exclaimed. "Somebody certainly could get in here without help from you."

"Well, that doesn't make things any simpler," said Breck wearily.

"No, it doesn't," Lanning said. He look suspiciously from one man to the other. "And don't forget Johnnie Soranno is very much in this somehow. How lately have you seen him, Barnum?"

"To talk to? Not in eighteen months," replied Breck. "Johnnie isn't exactly my ideal. That's why I tried to brush him off so fast when he waylaid me outside."

"And, of course, the alluring Miss Smith wouldn't have had a thing to do with your Garbo instincts," reminded T. Colman, smiling faintly. "Well, I've got to get to bed. I hope you find the book soon, Barnum. I'm willing to pay more than fairly for it."

BRECK, whose head was feeling better, went into the kitchenette and mixed Lanning a drink. He had no desire for one himself for his stomach still felt much too queasy.

"So you get picked up by this girl," began Lanning after a comfortable quaff of whisky. "You bring her home. Johnnie Soranno is waiting for you in the hall, and one of them saps you. When you come to, the script is gone, and I find your key's been waxed."

"That's it," confirmed Breck. "What do you know?"

"Not much," said the little detective. "This is a real wacky case. In the first place, nobody knocks off old O'Connell until the fourth time he comes to see you. And he can't get to see you. Then your girl, Dorothy, who's supposed to be heading for home and bed, drops out of sight. And now you find another female in the case and get sent to daisyland for your pains. With Soranno and the missing script and the key business, it leaves lots of nice loose ends."

"What do you want me to do?" Breck asked testily.

"Stay healthy," said Lanning. "There are too many trails to be tied up for you to feel safe."

"I'll be good," assured Breck, "but I'd like to run into Johnnie Soranno in a nice light alley with no one around."

"He's a sucker if he gives you the chance." The little detective finished his drink. "Well, I'll be on my way, Barnum. I guess guarding you now would be the old barn door business since that script is stolen. But remember what I said about being careful."

"Okay, Lanning," said Breck. "Thanks for showing so fast. There's nothing the matter with me now that sleep won't fix up."

He saw the little sergeant out the door, came back, and got into pajamas. But he wasn't as sleepy as he had expected, so he lit a cigarette, lounged around. His head felt as it had after one terrible game against the Chicago Bears during the heyday of the great Bronko Nagurski.

The doorbell rang.

Who the devil could that be, Breck wondered, as he stamped out his cigarette. He rose up, hesitated an instant, then armed himself with a heavy agate paperweight and cautiously approached the door.

He was, however, entirely unready for what did come in when he finally opened the door.

A gun muzzle bruised his ribs and he backed away as a golden blond, be-slacked female, pushed into his apartment, and snapped the door shut with a deft flick of a gracefully sturdy ankle.

But he wasn't looking at her legs. The gun in her hand and the cool intensity of her blue gaze occupied every ounce of his battered powers of concentration.

"All right, you," she drawled, taking the paperweight from his unresisting fingers with a scarlet-tipped hand of surprising strength. "On the sofa and don't keep a lady waitin'. Stir those stumps and head for home."

Breck flopped down with a thump that drew protest from the sofa springs. He was utterly flabbergasted. This creature was a sunburned Junoesque beauty. Tall, her slimly big-boned figure revealed pleasantly in the gray slacks and white blouse she wore under a powder blue jacket.

With a practised agility, she spun her gun, then swung herself onto a chair, straddled it, and sighted the revolver

over its back. It was aimed at a point just below his collarbone.

"All right," she said in her quiet drawl, "where is it?"

"If you mean that ratty manuscript, it's gone," snapped Breck, staring at the girl. In that light, there was something reminiscent about the modeling of her cheekbones. But, as in the case of the gay and evanescent Miss Smith, he was unable to find her in his memory.

HER blue eyes were boring through him, her expression a mask of determined disbelief. The revolver still pointed steadily at his heart.

"What'd you do with it?" she demanded. "Come on, big fellow, make a pitch, and don't throw any curves. If you do, I'll drill you, so help me."

"I didn't do a thing with it," he answered weakly, and he was frightened. This wild woman meant what she said, he could tell from the incisive curve of her jaw. "I was sluggish coming in a little while ago, and somebody swiped it. Look . . ." He bent his head, pointing to the large lump he was wearing as a memento of his earlier encounter. "I just had the police up here."

"Yeah?" she countered, her voice a whip of doubt. "Since when has T. Colman Flanders the Second been on any force?"

"He isn't," said Breck. "The fellow with him is. Flanders came along because Lanning was questioning him, and he's been trying to buy my copy. Naturally he was interested in its theft."

"I'll bet!" drawled the girl sarcastically. For a moment, she lowered her gun. Then her lips set tight, and again the gun pointed directly at Breck's cardiac artery. "Cut it, Barnum," she said firmly. The muzzle of her weapon was suddenly depressed, so that it pointed at his legs. Her knuckles whitened.

"Hey!" he yelled, jumping aside.

But she didn't fire. For the first time since she had forced her way in, she was grinning.

"So you're scared of a little bullet," she mocked. "My, my!"

"You're darned right I'm scared," he retorted. "Listen, whoever you are. I'm telling the truth. I don't know anything about any of this. You can't get things I don't know out of me. That script was swiped tonight, and I was

knocked silly."

"I suppose you'll tell me next that you didn't kill poor Mr. O'Connell," the girl taunted softly.

Breck gestured helplessly.

"I didn't, and the police don't think so," he asserted.

"So what!" snorted the girl. "Police do a lot of funny things."

This was insane. Breck suddenly realized that this girl, like Miss Smith, had called him by name.

"Listen," he pleaded. "I'm in a fog. I didn't kill O'Connell. I didn't even know he'd been trying to see me until he was dead. I haven't got the manuscript, and I don't know who you are or how you got here. That's the honest truth."

"If you didn't have that lump on your head," said the girl, sullen disappointment spreading over her more than pretty face. "If you're tellin' the truth, Mr. Barnum, I'm sorry. But a lot of things are gone wrong. I've just got to get my mitts on that manuscript."

"Would you mind telling me why?" Breck asked.

"I can't," she said, shaking her golden head. "Not until I see it."

This didn't make sense. Breck eyed her warily as he rose to his feet, rubbing the lump on his head. "I suppose you think you've got a right to look at it," he said. "Why didn't you get in touch with me in some regular way?"

"I tried," she replied promptly. "I went to your office this afternoon. Your secretary said you weren't there."

"For the love of heaven!" he exploded, his anger at Dorothy rekindling. What sort of a game was she up to? "You're the second person that's happened to," he went on. "O'Connell was the first." His eyes turned on her suspiciously. "You say you were there this afternoon? How come you didn't see the old gentleman?"

"I did," she retorted coolly. "He was already dead. So I decided to wait outside and follow you. Okay, Mr. Barnum. If that's all you can tell me, I'll be gettin' along. I hope I haven't played too rough for you. I'll be in touch later."

So quickly and gracefully did she move that she seemed to have vanished before Breck's eyes. The hall door clicked, and Breck sprang for the house

phone, and excitedly told a sleepy attendant to hold the blonde invader at all costs until the police came.

He had hardly hung up and begun to fumble his way into some clothes when his private phone rang.

"Breck!" whispered a woman's low voice. It was Dorothy, and she sounded frightened. "Breck, I'm afraid."

"You should be," he told her. "Wait til I get my hands on you. Where in blazes are you? And what's the great idea?"

"I can't tell you now," she murmured, and there was a note of hysteria in her tone. "But Breck, get here and get here fast. I'm in nine twenty-four at the Connecticut. For heaven's sake, darling, hurry. Come alone, but be ready for trouble."

She hung up, and Breck debated his course of action as he struggled into a pair of trousers. He had promised to keep in touch with Lanning, but Dorothy had begged him to come alone. This was a murder case and he couldn't afford to get in trouble with the police. But at the same time, Dorothy had meant a lot to him. And she was in pretty deep, somehow. He didn't have the heart to call the little detective.

THE elevator boy greeted him curiously, as did the doorman in the lobby. Neither of them had seen the blond Juno, either coming in or leaving. Breck warned them that she was armed, and was informed they already had summoned a prowler just in case.

Then he was on his way in a cab for the Hotel Connecticut, in the Grand Central Area, where Dorothy had announced her hiding place. He felt strangely guilty about making this move while leaving the little detective in the dark, but he was worried about Dorothy.

She certainly had a lot to explain both to him and to the police. It was unpardonable the way she had kept people from seeing him on the matter of the manuscript. Unless, of course, she had some sound if hidden motive for her odd behavior.

The cab whizzed up over the viaduct by Grand Central Station and took a ramp down from the upper deck to a side entrance of the hotel.

Nine twenty-four, that was the room number Dorothy had given. Breck hur-

ried through the empty, drearily plush-and-palm lobby, repeating the number to keep it in his head.

He was already in the corridor before it suddenly occurred to him that the whole setup might be a trap. Dorothy could have been forced to call him. Well, he could take care of himself.

Squaring his shoulders, he walked to the door of nine twenty-four and rapped it sharply with his knuckles. The door swung open a little.

Which didn't seem right. Nor did the pitch blackness that greeted him as he slipped quickly inside. Fear galloped through him, as he paused, just out of line with the lighted rectangle of the door.

His eyes gradually adjusted to the darkness, and he now could make out the faint opaque squares of the drawn window-shades. And then his ears made out something, too—irregular breathing.

A long moment elapsed before Breck or the other person moved. He thought of calling Dorothy's name, but some inhibition held his lips. This wasn't right. If Dorothy were there, she'd have greeted him. And if whoever else was there had a right to be there, the lights would have been on.

Unexpected footsteps sounded in the corridor close outside, paused at the door, which was pushed open against him. Somebody screamed, and then the room was flooded with light. Two shots rang out, and Breck instinctively dropped to the floor.

Dorothy was there, yes. She was lying on her back in the middle of the rug. And blood was flowing slowly from a wound near her heart.

CHAPTER IV

Mara Flanders

IN THE tense seconds that followed, many things happened. A door by the windows, evidently leading to an adjoining room, was closing, and as Breck looked, the muzzle of a pistol caught the light and vanished. Then the door to the hall behind him was slammed shut. Breck who was rapidly regaining his bearings, now saw the gun on the floor beside Dor-

othy's body, and grabbed for it. It was still warm from somebody's grip.

Cautiously, he opened the hall door, and looked out. But the hallway was empty. He swung back to cover the door through which the gun had vanished, and for the first time saw—Miss Smith.

She was standing in a far corner, apparently frozen with horror. She gasped a little, as his eyes fastened on hers. A hand flew to her agonized lips.

Breck could afterward never satisfactorily explain why he did what he did then. He was in danger, and he had committed the stupidest of all acts—picked up a pistol from beside a dead body. There were much too many active persons with weapons still about, and Dorothy was lying there on the floor with a bullet through her heart.

But when Breck saw that girl, whose name he did not know, cowering there in the corner with horror in her eyes, he was overwhelmed by a single impulse. He had to get that girl out of there and get her out fast.

Somehow, in his still half-groggy brain, he remembered to pull out a handkerchief and wipe the pistol he had been holding, free of prints. Then, still clutching it in the kerchief, he grabbed her by the arm and rushed her out of the room.

They ran down two flights of stairs, rang for the elevator, and much to Breck's surprise and relief achieved the street unmolested.

Once more, Breck was beginning to function at normal speed, and as they entered the cab, Breck knew that he would have no peace until he talked to this girl and found out what had happened in that room on the ninth floor of the hotel. Until he heard her story, he could not bring himself to turn her over to Lanning for the investigation sure to follow.

"Thanks, Breck," she said sharply, from the corner of the cab. Breck, who had given a false address, checked through the rear window to see that they were not followed before answering her. Then he lit a cigarette, gave it to her, lit one for himself.

"I'm supposed to know better than this," he began. "I'm supposed to be a very smart guy in this town. So now I'm sticking my neck out a mile for you, and I don't even know you, *Miss Smith.*"

She opened her mouth to speak, but he laid a huge hand across her lips, nodded toward the driver, whose window was open. They stopped at the Plaza at the foot of Central Park, walked through one of the big hotels, then continued on foot to the Jamaica Inn.

"Best place I could think of," observed Breck, fitting a key into the lock of the night club. It was after four, and the resort was officially closed. But Breck, who knew the ropes, slipped into the manager's office with the girl without being noticed by any of the tired waiters who were groggily piling chairs on tables.

She sank wearily onto a sofa, her eyes enlarged by the dark circles beneath them. From his perch on the manager's desk, Breck looked down on her. He had an instinctive flair for using every one of his seventy-three inches of height.

"Nothing deadlier than a closed club," he said softly. "We'll be safe enough here for awhile. Now, don't you think you owe me just a little explanation of what's been going on tonight? If I had any ideas harmful to you, I'd never have gotten you out of the hotel. Dorothy was a friend of mine. Who killed her? Was it you?"

"Oh, no!" protested the girl, her eyes growing wide again as his question recalled the horror she had witnessed. "I didn't kill her. I don't know who did. She was like that when I came in and saw her."

"Okay," said Breck, puffing on his smoke. "So how did you get there, and what was your idea in going there to see her?"

"What was yours?" she parried, with a trace of her earlier flippancy.

Breck stared her down before he answered.

"She called me," he said quietly. "She asked me to come. She was a friend as well as my secretary. So naturally I went over there fast. She was scared."

"She was a friend of yours, and you left her there like that and brought me out," Miss Smith said evenly, staring at him. "I don't suppose you could give me any rational explanation of that."

To his annoyance, Breck felt himself go into a slow blush. "Sorry," he said, in a way that was meant to be offhand and wasn't. "I suppose it was one of those things. Call it reflex action."

"I see." Her tone implied a great deal more than the words. "Maybe so. Well," and then she was grinning, quickly and unexpectedly, "perhaps in that case I do owe you an explanation. You see, I'm so darned mixed up and so blamed scared. I don't know whether I've been really living this or whether it's something I ate."

"Well, no lobster Newburg put this egg on my head," he said, showing her the bump. She looked concerned, and immediately, as he glimpsed the expression on her face, he knew, somehow, who she really was. For the first time that night, he found himself smiling. "And if it's hard to start talking, just begin at the beginning, Mara."

HER mouth dropped open, and she blinked. "How — how long have you known?" she stammered.

"Since just now," he answered. "It's been eluding me all evening. I should have guessed sooner."

"And I did so many things to my face," she murmured, shaking her head so that her hair swirled around it again.

"You couldn't keep those Flanders' features under very long," he remarked. "Now that I get it, you're Old Tom all over."

"Miss Smith" was Mara Flanders, Old Tom's granddaughter and T. Colman's niece. Breck could have kicked himself for being so slow on the trigger in spotting her. After all the work he'd done for old Tom Flanders, all the time he'd spent gathering facts on the whole Flanders' clan for his suddenly fatal book.

Mara Flanders — about twenty-three now. She'd been a big-time debbie five years ago, had vanished into the obscurity that had encompassed the entire family when the patriarch had died. Twenty-three, parentless, well-bred and educated. He wondered what she'd been doing, why she wasn't married.

"I guess I'd better begin with Grandpa's death," she volunteered. "You know he didn't leave anything like the amount he was supposed to, and taxes really made a meal of the rest. T. Colman, as the only surviving son, got most of what there was. I didn't like living off him too well, so I went to work and supported myself."

She paused, read the question in his eyes, and continued.

"I was a salesgirl for awhile in Sak's. Then I got a chance to be a buyer. I always used the name Smith. Too many people wanted to know why a Flanders had to work for a living, and some of the other girls in the store might not have liked it. It hasn't been bad."

"Okay for background," said Breck. "Now let's get down to cases. I'm still deep in a dream about this horror tonight. And I want to know what the devil this is all about. I've been slugged and shot at, and I'll probably be accused of murder. So give."

"Well, poor Mr. O'Connell started it all. I received a letter from him saying that he'd been holding out a special bequest of Grandpa's until some sections of the estate were settled. So I went to see him last week.

"He told me that this bequest was contained in some of the papers that had been burned when the old house caught fire, but that you'd made a copy of them. As soon as he got in touch with you everything would be fine. Naturally I got all hopped up about it.

"And then I found that poor Mr. O'Connell was getting a runaround. It seemed to be coming from you. He said he'd given the facts to your secretary, and that she'd assured him he'd have your manuscript for reference at the earliest possible moment. But I couldn't see any reason at all for a delay."

"I'm beginning to understand," observed Breck thoughtfully. "Please go on."

MARA Flanders begged another cigarette. Telling her story seemed to have restored her poise, for her voice had regained its well-placed depth of tone.

"I decided that I'd see you today whether Mr. O'Connell did or not. When your late secretary brushed me off, I hung around outside. I'd seen you years ago, and you aren't a type that's so very hard for a girl to remember."

"Thank you for that," acknowledged Breck, bowing low from the desk.

"At any rate, I remembered you, and when you finally came out of your office, I followed you. I couldn't think of any other way, so I marched right in and lifted your drink. I knew I'd get some reaction."

"Okay," he said. "Now where does

Soranno come in?"

"I don't know," she replied. "I wasn't expecting him any more than you were. After he hit you, he dragged you inside, then searched your living room while he made me sit on the sofa. Apparently, he knew who I was and where to look. I was helpless."

"Tell me," asked Breck. "Did he have a key to my place?"

"No." She shook her head. "He had me take the key from your pocket. And was he sore when he couldn't find what he was after. It was that manuscript of yours, I guess.

"Then he got tough. Told me I better stay put and keep my mouth shut—or else. And when he thought he'd scared me enough, he backed out and left me there on the sofa."

"What'd you do then?" Breck pressed. He was still a very puzzled young man. As nearly as he could figure out, Dorothy and Soranno appeared to be behind the whole mess. O'Connell and now Dorothy had paid with their lives.

"I went after him, of course," answered Mara promptly. "It seemed to me I'd stand a better chance of finding the manuscript if I followed him than if I stayed with you."

"Determined young lady, aren't you?" observed Breck.

"Sure," Mara admitted coolly. "When I think I'm in the right. Well, I ran to the corner, hoping to pick up a cab, but there was nothing in sight. I was just about to give it up then, when I noticed that my man's cab had pulled up at a drug store on the next corner. He was in the store for almost fifteen minutes, so it gave me time to pick up a cab of my own. When he came out again, I tailed his taxi to the Connecticut."

"I don't get it," said Breck, frowning. "I don't see how Soranno comes into this case at all. Still, go ahead with what happened."

His face lengthened as he thought of Dorothy and the price she'd paid for whatever game she'd been trying to play. He was pretty sure now that it had been his secretary who had copied his key and stolen the manuscript. O'Connell had probably told her enough about it to give her some idea of the hidden value of the unfinished book and then she had gone ahead on her own.

Mara Flanders hesitated, wet her low-

er lip with her tongue. It was obvious to Breck that the memory of the scene in room nine twenty-four had left a searing mark on her memory.

Yet, despite what had happened, Breck could not help but be drawn under her spell. He only hoped she was telling the truth.

"Following him once he was inside the hotel was not easy," Mara went on. "He knew me, and he'd ordered me to keep away from him. But the hotel lobby was almost empty, and he was the only passenger in his elevator. So when the doors closed, I watched. The elevator stopped on the ninth floor, so I took another car to the same level."

"I don't suppose," Breck interrupted dryly, "that you thought of calling the police."

"No," she replied, "I didn't have time. Things were moving too swiftly. Just as I reached the ninth floor, and looked around me, not knowing which room to turn to, I heard a shot. Somebody slammed a door around a corner of the corridor. I ran toward the sound, and noticed a door in the corridor was ajar. Somehow, call it woman's intuition or something, I knew this was the room I wanted. So I went inside."

SHE paused, working her hands together until her smooth knuckles were bloodless. Horror once again filled her eyes, and her face suddenly lost its animation.

Breck would have liked to go to her, put his arms around her, and tell her to forget the whole terrible business, but he knew that this was not the time.

"It was dark in there," she said tremulously. "I tried to find the light. And then my foot stumbled into something—something soft. Somehow I—I knew what it was. But I just stood there, unable to move."

"Then I heard somebody in the next room. The door intervening was ajar, and a streak of light showed through. I tried to get out then, must have made a noise, for there were no more sounds in the next room except the click of the light going off."

"Then you came in—I could just make you out crouching against the wall. Everything after that was pretty confused," Mara concluded. "The door opened, the lights went on, and people

started shooting. All I remember was that one of them was a blond girl."

"No!" exclaimed Breck, jumping off the desk and angrily jamming his hands into his pockets. This business of the blonde had him thoroughly stumped. Every time he thought he had this puzzle put together, there seemed to be important pieces that just didn't fit. He ran a hand through his red hair, shook his head.

"Have you any idea who this blonde was?" he asked tensely.

"No," she said. "I only had one quick look before she started to shoot. Then I yelled. But I'll swear I never saw her before."

"So far, no good," he muttered, pacing the rug.

Suddenly he stopped in mid-stride, cocked his head. Heavy footfalls sounded in the corridor, and an instant later someone was rapping hard on the office door.

"Open up in there," ordered a voice with an official rasp. The knock was repeated.

Breck swung back toward the girl, moving with surprising speed for so big a man, but she was already on her feet, the color drained from her face.

"Come on," Breck said, grabbing Mara's wrist. "There's a getaway entrance from here."

Swiftly he led her through what looked like a closet, down a narrow corridor to a glass-paned door through which the gray of dawn was making itself faintly apparent. Nervously, he pulled back the bolt.

"Through here," he whispered softly. "Then run like the wind through the alley. I'll be with you. We're in no spot to be pinched."

"You're telling me," she answered quickly, and darted through the opening as he swung the door back. He dashed through after her.

And wound up on his face on the concrete of the alley. It was a jarring fall, and his whole frame quivered. Hurriedly, he scrambled to his feet, looked around.

Sergeant Lanning was grinning at him and massaging a shoe. Mara was being handled none too gently by a large uniformed officer of the law. And beside the sergeant, her tanned face grim, was the blond girl in slacks!

CHAPTER V

The Puzzle in the Manuscript

SERGEANT LANNING did not look pleasant.

"We've been expecting you," greeted the little detective sweetly. "You've got a foot like the late *Panay*, Barnum. Good idea of yours, picking this spot. We won't be disturbed here at this hour. Let's go back inside."

Life didn't look too good to Breckenridge Barnum just then. He would have wanted his story better set before facing the light blue eyes of Sergeant Lanning.

Back they went to the manager's office, which was now swarming with police. Lanning dismissed them, then sat down at the desk, and casually lit a cigarette.

"All right, Barnum," he said, shattering the tenseness. "What'd you do with the gun?"

Breck felt his throat go dry. The cursed weapon was still in his hip pocket. His only purpose in taking it had been for self-defense. But now he was caught. He pulled the gun out, handkerchief and all, and laid it on the desk.

"This is probably it," Lanning said, looking at it briefly. "Dorothy Cochran was killed with a thirty-two, and this is the only one that's showed up. There were thirty-eight and forty-five caliber bullets in the walls of the room, but it was a thirty-two in the body. All right, Barnum. Who is this? Your mysterious Miss Smith, I suppose."

"That's right," admitted Breck wearily. "Sergeant Lanning, meet Miss Mara Flanders." He gestured toward Mara, who was sitting back in a chair, powdering her nose with fingers that were not quite steady. The blond girl, who had been standing against the getaway door like a silent statue of vengeance, made a sudden half-exclamation, then checked herself, scowling.

"All right," proceeded Fanning quietly. "Which one of you two did it and why? Or do you want me to tell you why? Maybe I know a thing or two about it at that. But you can save me an awful lot of time."

"Neither one of us did it," replied Breck flatly. "And how about Miss

Whoosis here? She broke into my room with a gun, and the last time I saw her she was shooting into Dorothy's room over her dead body. I brought Mara down here to find out what it was all about before talking to you, and if you think I took that gun for anything but self-defense, you're wrong."

"Okay, okay," soothed Lanning. "A jury wouldn't agree with you. How come you knew it was a murder weapon?"

"It was lying by poor Dorothy's body," answered Breck.

The little detective continued looking at him steadily from half-lidded eyes.

"How'd you happen to go up there and murder her?" he finally snapped.

"I didn't murder her," shouted Breck. "For the love of mike, that girl was a friend of mine, whatever she's been trying to pull! She called me and told me she was scared. She didn't want the police. And believing she was badly mixed up in this mess, I didn't call you."

"Fascinating," observed Lanning. He swiveled his chair to face Mara. "All right, Miss Smith-Flanders. Let's hear yours."

Impassively, Mara told him what had happened, and the little detective listened imperturbably until she had finished. Then he shook his head, ran nicotine-stained fingers through his thinning hair, and shoved his hat far back on his head.

"Every blasted one of you ought to be under arrest," he announced. "Including you, Miss Tremaine." Lanning glanced briefly at the tall blonde. "But I'm inclined to lay off for the moment."

"Thank you, Sergeant," said Mara, smiling faintly. She eyed the blonde as if she were a new species of female. "Are you Sandra Tremaine?" she inquired. The blonde nodded, and Mara walked over to her and held out her hand. "I guess I'm sort of your half niece, then. I'm very glad to meet you."

THIS situation was so ridiculous and so unexpected, that it snapped the tension that had gripped the room. The blonde, after a suspicious look at Mara, grinned like a boy and extended a big brown calloused mitt. Lanning's face twitched, and Breck gave way to a nervous snort of laughter.

Sandra Tremaine was a half aunt of

Mara. Old Tom Flanders, twenty years earlier, had broken away from his family, gotten a Mexican divorce, and married a Vanities girl, Billy Tremaine, from Texas. The millionaire's family had succeeded in having the divorce invalidated, and so forced him reluctantly back into the fold. Later, this girl, Sandra, had been born, but her mother, despite a fat settlement had hated the name Flanders so much that she refused to use it.

"Where have you been all this time?" Mara asked.

"Mostly Texas," she said. "I've been pitchin' for a gals' softball team the last two years. I just came on when Mr. O'Connell got in touch with me."

So that was what had held up the bequest. Breck understood now. Tracing a roving female softball player must have been a good deal of a chore for the old lawyer.

She and Mara kept looking at each other, then suddenly burst into a fit of giggles.

"All right!" barked Lanning, slamming a firm hand down on the desk. "Get busy and play ball, or I'll lock you all up. The way you've all been galloping around and withholding facts, maybe I should."

Mara was grave as she walked to the desk and stood over the little detective.

"You want your murderer, don't you? Well the only way to get him is to find Breck's manuscript. Miss Cochrane must have stolen it in the first place, and was killed trying to get it. And it seems to me you could do a lot worse than find Johnnie Soranno."

"My sacred aunt!" exclaimed Lanning. "I know I could do a lot worse. But the department hasn't come up with him yet. And how can we stop our man unless we know what was in that bloody manuscript in the first place? I've got everything but the Knickerbocker Grays looking for Soranno now. He's the main reason I have to believe the cockeyed yarns you've all told me. That and the fact they all fit together. I happen to know neither of you two runouts could have fixed it with Miss Tremaine."

"How does Soranno figure in this, anyway?" Breck asked curiously.

"One of his rackets is a silent partnership in a private agency. Inquiries," explained Lanning. "His firm was the

one that ran Miss Tremaine to earth for O'Connell. Begin to get it?"

Breck whistled.

"Holy Pete!" he said. "He probably got hold of enough facts to decide to make a play for himself."

"Evidently," said Lanning dryly as if tired of the obvious. He drummed on the desk with his fingers.

Suddenly Breck swung to face the girls.

"Did Mr. O'Connell tell you what part of my manuscript had this devilish bequest in it?" he asked, scowling.

"It was in the final private statement he issued to the family," they chorused in their varied accents.

Breck's scowl deepened. He walked toward the door, running his hand through his read hair, then swung back and stopped.

"Maybe we're all right!" he announced "Maybe we won't need to chase that missing script of mine after all."

Lanning and the girls stared at him curiously, but it was the little detective who finally put their hopes into words.

"You mean you have another copy of it?" he cried.

"Rats, no!" Breck said. "I didn't have enough of it done. But I didn't do my typing in the Flanders' library. Old Tom hated typewriters. So I *did* take a mess of longhand notes. There's just a chance that I may have what you need. I remember writing that statement down as a big time buccaneer's unrepenting, self-written obituary. I began the book with it."

A battery could have been charged in the atmosphere of that room just then. The girls goggled at him, unable to believe what they heard. Even Sandra whose nickname, it appeared, was Sunny, went pale under her tan. Mara licked her lips again before she dared to speak up.

"Do you remember what you did with it?" she asked.

"I'm not too certain," Breck explained. "My mother died a couple of years ago and left me a lot of furniture. I didn't want to throw it away, so I stored it. And it seems to me I stored those notes and a lot of other stuff along with it."

"What are we waiting for?" shouted Sunny, following this with a Texas yell that brought a blue-capped head poking through the door.

"Take it easy," Breck said, motioning at her with both hands. "I'm not sure. It might have been thrown out. I can't swear."

"Listen, brother, you've given us a life. What else do we want right now?" said the irrepressible blonde. A moment later, she was charging outside and climbing into a police sedan, letting the others trail after her. "Where to, Bar-num?" she asked.

He gave the address, that of a storage house far over in the West Twenties. When they arrived, the night watchman, after some difficulty located the room in which Breck's stuff was stored. It took four policeman and two employees more than an hour to dig out the heavy steel file which Breck promptly recognized as their only hope in the matter of the manuscript.

IMPATIENTLY, he opened the file, looked with disgust, at the disordered papers in it. It took him another ten minutes, while his audience looked on nervously, but at last he came up with a thick pile of copy paper, clipped together at one corner. A quick look at

the top sheet satisfied him.

"This is it," he cried. "If it's not here, we're cooked."

They left the warehouse and adjourned to Breck's apartment, where he took time out to order breakfast for his guests. Then he went to work on the copy paper.

"Here," he declared finally, scowling at his own handwriting. "I guess this is it." Clearing his throat he began to read.

"These are to be my last words before the finish. I know too well you await it—you will search every smallest cranny of the estate I was so long building. I'm on the beach, however. The best laid foundations can be pulverized. The till that I built for you has about gone to rot and ruin.

"Don't let this terrify you. There will be enough, if you are not greedy or stupid, to keep each one of you in comfort. You will learn that after I am gone. Since you have been so insistent that I maintain my fabled success, even to my own destruction, you deserve to have something to show for your labors.

[Turn page]

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When you use Thin Gillettes, my boy!
These blades last long—four cost a dime—
You look well-groomed, save dough and time!**



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"I have given you that, even if it is not as much as all of you have hoped for or expected. I never thought I could enjoy failure, but with two exceptions among you, and my son, perhaps because he is my son, the disasters of the past two years have been strangely pleasant. If only because I knew what they would mean to you after I am gone. And I know this is my finish.

"I trust you will try to adjust to modest apartment life and find study or work to occupy profitably your days and nights.

Thomas C. Flanders."

"Is that it?" Breck asked.

Both girls nodded. Lanning suggested that four copies of this remarkable bequest be made, and Breck quickly finished typing them just as breakfast arrived.

"You know," remarked Detective Lanning over his coffee, "this is probably a code of some sort. I'd better let our friends down at Headquarters go over it. It doesn't tell us much as it is."

"Except that poor Grandpa wasn't very pleased with the family," observed Mara quietly. She turned to Sunny. "I never was allowed to know much about it, but I guess he never forgave them for breaking up his marriage to your mother. It seems pretty rotten."

"That's sure decent of you," acknowledged Sunny in her drawl. She frowned at the bacon piled on her piece of toast, then suddenly turned to Lanning.

"You go ahead and take this to your experts," she declared. "I'll lay four to one we can dope it out here. I've been doin' crypts in the back of magazines since I was fifteen. And this doesn't look like any crypt I ever saw before in all my life. I'll make it bigger odds it is a straight cipher puzzle."

"Go ahead and try it," suggested the little detective, smiling. He turned to Breck. "Incidentally, Barnum I want you to promise me something."

"Sure," interrupted Breck. "I know. You want me to keep my nose clean and sit tight until you've cleared this mess up. Is that it?"

"Home run," said Lanning, swallowing coffee.

"Here are your orders. You can keep your date if you still want to.

Find out what he wants—if he wants it now. But outside of that, stay close to the girls. They're wilder than you are. And I don't want this case sprouting any more corpses until it's wound up. Since our man has the manuscript already or at least thinks you haven't got it, I hardly think you'll be bothered. But I'll leave a man downstairs just in case. Don't hesitate to call on him."

"Those orders aren't hard to take," said Breck, and smiled to the girls.

"Hey!" Sunny exclaimed unexpectedly, her face alight. "I think I got it! It's a snap except that Gran'pa led off kind of funny. Start at the second sentence and take every fifth word. I don't know if it makes sense or not, but something comes out."

"I know too well you await it"—Breck read, "you will search every smallest cranny of the estate I was so long building. I'm on the beach, however. The best laid foundations can be pulverized!"

Sunny looked doubtful.

"It reads to me as if he wanted us to search the long beach foundations, whatever that is. But Long Beach is in California. It seems a dirty shame to go way out there. . . ."

"Long Beach is also on Long Island," reminded Lanning quietly and not without a certain Eastern pride. "Did your grandfather have a house there?"

"He did," confirmed Mara, and there was a tremor of excitement in her voice. "We still have it—that is, my uncle has it. It's a great big barn of a place that eats taxes three times a day. We haven't been able to get rid of it."

"Just a minute." Lanning sounded tired but there was a new light in his eyes. He picked up the telephone, called Headquarters, and asked for a line to Long Beach. While he waited for the connection, he snicked his fingernails.

He seemed immensely relieved when he learned the house was still there, that no trouble had been reported.

"The way this case has been going," he told them after he hung up, "I half expected to hear that it had burned down or been blown away in the night. Now you kids know what to do. Remember, Seranno is still loose, and there's always the chance he might make

trouble. So for the love of Pete play it safe and stay close together."

"Yes, Papa," said Mara, irreverently. "Will you be home for supper?"

"I'm just going to take a run out and get it started." Detective Lanning was blushing. "We can get a warrant, all right. The department will pay for any damage."

"You can tear it down for all I care," flung out Mara. "You'll have to take that up with T. Colman."

CHAPTER VI

Underworld Ultimatum

WITH Lanning gone, Breck now became more sharply aware of his need for sleep. The swift-moving events of the night and morning had taken full toll of his rugged system. But much remained to be done, now that the bequest had been discovered.

A cold shower and a change of clothes, however, proved just the sleep-chaser Breck needed. Refreshed and alert, he was presently sauntering back to the living room, where he found the girls in consultation over the desk.

"Come here, Breck," said Mara. "Sunny's just come up with something else. Look at this." She held up the blond girl's copy of the statement for him to see. Several other words beyond those originally interpreted had been underscored heavily. It read:

"These are to be my last words before the finish. I know too well you await it—you will search every smallest cranny of the estate I was so long building. I'm on the beach, however. The best laid foundations can be pulverized. The till that I built for you has about gone to rot and ruin.

"Don't let this terrify you. . . ." he read, and then whistled. This latest version certainly cast a new light on Old Tom Flanders' final trick on those around him. For he now said, "You search the Long Beach foundations till you rot," which certainly didn't sound so good.

"I wonder what it means," ponders Breck, studying it. "That 'My finish' business looks important. There are just ten words in the sentence, and

the code runs in fives. But it doesn't add."

"You're telling me," said Sunny briefly, refusing a cigarette. "I got this slant just after you started your shower, and I haven't got it straightened out yet. That first sentence must be a key of some sort. It certainly isn't there for nothing. Heck, I've beat my chops." She rose to her full five-foot-eleven and stretched like a big cat. "Aunty's goin' to take it easy for a minute." Tossing herself full length on the sofa, closed her eyes.

Breck looked at Mara, and there was a sudden tightening of the bands of his heart as her eyes met his. Somehow he found himself beside her, and in another instant they were in each other's arms. When Mara drew away, she looked at Breck with troubled eyes.

"How much did Dorothy mean to you?" she asked gravely, her eyes searchingly examining Breck's face.

Breck ran his hand through his red hair, perplexed, for that question had been troubling him, too.

"I don't know," he answered honestly. "But apparently I didn't mean so much to her. All I do know is that something wonderful happened to me when I saw you last night. And if it were wrong, I'd feel wrong, wouldn't I?"

Mara smiled at his boyishness, and it was not long before Breck was again tilting her radiant face, and kissing her possessively.

Suddenly there was a long yawn from Sunny, and she rose from the sofa stretching her lithe arms above her head.

"If you two love birds don't mind," she drawled, "I think Aunty'll take another crack at the Flanders' jigsaw puzzle." She flexed her muscles again, then fluffed her long yellow hair.

"Are you here to play ball?" Breck asked, as he watched her idly. He suddenly had remembered that she was a professional athlete.

"Sure I'm here to play ball," she snapped, walking to the desk and sitting down. "We got a game in the Garden Sunday night. Against the Astoria Leopards. I'm pitchin' for the Longhorns."

"I'll be there," assured Breck. "Now suppose we get to work and see if we can dope out anything from this cipher of

Old Tom Flanders."

The afternoon went galloping by, as all three of them, with their separate copies, pored over the mystery of the bequest.

It was almost five o'clock when Breck remembered that it was time for his appointment with T. Colman Flanders. Reluctantly, he rose to go.

"I'd better hurry if I'm going to see your uncle," he told Mara. "I guess he's expecting me. He hasn't phoned, anyway. And I said I'd be there. Shall I give him any sweet messages from you girls?"

A pair of icy stares greeted him.

"I'm mad at T. Colman," Mara declared. "If he'd gotten that script from you as he tried to, Sunny and I'd have been lucky to see a cent. He's the tightest old dodo about giving money to anyone else—and the loosest with it when he's spending it on himself."

Breck left them with a warning to behave and not leave the house, and took a cab to T. Colman Flanders' apartment in the Eighties.

T. COLMAN did himself well. His living room was furnished in obviously genuine Chippendale, and the hangings on the French windows that overlooked a large terrace were expensively unobtrusive.

He greeted Breck pleasantly, rang for a drink, which turned out to be an excellent Martini.

"Glad you came," he said. "I don't suppose the police have turned up your story yet, have they?"

"Not yet," replied Breck.

T. Colman clucked sympathetically. "A pity," he said. "Oh, well, bring it around when you find it. I'm prepared to pay you well for it. The old man always liked you, you know. So you must have got a lot of stuff he kept from us. He never cared for us much after we pulled him out of that jam he got into. You know what I mean."

"I remember all too well," affirmed Breck, who had handled one of the Tremaine suits from the angle of its effect on public good will and Old Tom Flanders. "Yes, he was always swell to me. That's why I wanted to write the book. Not making him a plaster saint, mind you but giving people what I hoped was a flesh and blood picture of Old Tom

Flanders as he was. Which was what I think he'd have liked."

"I'm sure of it, Barnum," said T. Colman quietly. "Awful business, the O'Connell thing, isn't it? I've been sick about it all day. I hope it's cleaned up quickly. Be a relief."

"I suppose you know they got my secretary, Dorothy Cochrane," Breck volunteered.

"I did see the headline in the afternoon paper," T. Colman said with concern. "How awful! Do you suppose it's connected with poor old O'Connell's murder?"

"I suppose so," said Breck.

"By the way," T. Colman said, tapping a cigarette before putting it in his mouth. His dark eyes gleamed over the flare of a lighter. "I don't suppose you've seen the alluring Miss Smith again. She sounded fascinating as you described her."

"She was," assured Breck coolly. "I've been overrun with them. Miss Smith and another unexpected visitor—a blonde from Texas who calls herself Sandra Tremaine. They've been the one pleasant feature of the last twenty-four hours."

He had wanted to shock T. Colman Flanders, and now he knew he had succeeded. For a moment his host's mouth literally fell open, his eyes goggled. Breck, recalling Mara's remarks about his miserly instincts, enjoyed the moment heartily. He could almost read T. Colman's mind as he reviewed the unpleasant idea of dividing whatever turned up three ways instead of two at the very most.

"You don't mean!" the millionaire's son managed finally.

"I do indeed," Breck asserted. "The famed Billy's daughter. And she's right in there pitching—in every sense of the word. She tosses them for a woman's pro softball team."

"But how the devil!" exclaimed T. Colman, frowning. "Poor O'Connell seems to have dug her up somehow," Breck answered. "I gather finding her is what's delayed this bequest and that is probably what all the shooting and stabbing is about."

"A female ball player!" muttered T. Colman softly but with plenty of stress. The idea of such a person even half in the family was apparently too much for

him. He poured another cocktail for both of them, drained his glass at a gulp. "Mother would have been killed by this," he observed, refilling his glass.

"It seems to me she's already dead," Breck remarked flippantly.

For a moment T. Colman scowled at him. Then his brows relaxed. He shook his head.

"Well," he said, "I guess it's not too much of a surprise at that. After all, the girl's mother was a chorine."

"So were lots of our best people's," snapped Breck. T. Colman was beginning to annoy him. He felt an almost primeval urge to plant a fist in the exact center of those well-groomed features. But that, he told himself would not do him any good. And in some devious way, it might complicate things for Mara.

The doorbell chimed softly and, ghostlike, the butler slipped by to answer it. There were muffled voices in the hall, and then the servant was walking slowly back into the room, his lifted arms trembling as he held them over his head. Stalking him with an automatic in his hand was a savage-looking Johnnie Soranno. Behind him two other men, both of them swarthy and blue chinned, slipped into the living room and took places on either side of the door. Their pockets bulged menacingly.

FOR a few brief seconds it was like something out of a movie. Then, quickly, it was more shocking than any movie had ever been. With a jerk of his head Soranno beckoned to one of his boys. The man came quietly around behind the trembling butler.

"This mouse would like eyes in the back of his head," said Soranno with a faint smile. "Suppose you make an opening for him, Nick."

Nick, the man behind the butler, pulled a pistol from his pocket, reversed his grip on it, and struck his helpless victim squarely behind his left ear with the butt. The servant pitched forward on his face and lay still, out cold.

"Leave him there," ordered the mobman in his flat, George Raftish voice. "If he starts to wiggle, hit him again. We don't want to be disturbed, do we, boys?"

The "boys" shook their heads in unison, not saying a word.

Soranno seemed to know just how to stage a scene of this sort so as to get the maximum of menace into it. And the silent efficiency of his henchman was a strong factor in his success. They continued to stand by the doorway, both of their weapons once more concealed. Soranno tucked his gun away, lit a cigarette.

"Hi, Mister Flanders," he greeted. "Hi, Barnum. How do you feel today?" Rocking on his heels, he stood in front of the sofa on which the two he was addressing, sat. "Finding the two of you together like this is a surprise," he went on. He smiled brightly. "Need I add, a most delightful one? I've been meaning to call on you both. This is really a pleasure, bumping into you like this."

"All right, Soranno," flared Breck finally, after T. Colman, with surprising courage, had stared back at their attacker without saying a word. "What the devil do you want?"

The bandit cocked his head.

"My, my," he mocked. "Don't tell me a big fellow like you suffers from nerves. Too many beatings in football, maybe? That it, Barnum?" He paused, and all at once his eyes became serpent-like, and the smile on his face was clouded under by viciousness.

"You know what we want," he snapped. "We want to know where it is. And one of you guys must know. We're going to stick around until you tell us. We aren't fussy about which one. But one of you tell us quick, or there'll be a lot of trouble."

Breck shot a quick look at T. Colman, whose head shook a faint sign of ignorance. Rising to his full height, Breck looked down on the sneering Soranno.

"I wouldn't," warned the mobster gently. "I really wouldn't, Barnum."

"Maybe you wouldn't, but I would," contradicted Breck. Suddenly all the red-headedness in his makeup came to the surface. He'd been slugged, shot at, tripped, accused of murder, and he'd had enough. Disdaining science, he tossed a murderous right at the point of Soranno's chin, grabbing the bandit's shoulder with his left so that Soranno wasn't able to duck the punch that came whizzing toward him.

But the blow never landed.

Quick as a torpedo, one of the henchmen had slipped from his post by the

door at the first sign of trouble. He raised his right hand, reversing the pistol it held as he did so. The blow caught Breck on the muscle of his forearm and his punch slid away to nothing. For a paralyzed second Breck thought his arm was broken. Then the pain of screaming muscles began, shooting clear into the side of his neck, and he had to bite his lips to control it.

"Papa slap wrist," murmured Soranno smiling as if he had just looked at something beautiful. He reached down, pulled T. Coleman Flanders from the sofa, held him with both lapels clutched in a hairy hand.

"All right, Flanders," he said, his nose an inch away from the other's. "Now give. We want to know where the stuff is. So far we've been getting a run-around. We were willing to just cut in at first, but with two murder raps hanging over us, we're not giving any hand-outs. It's your own fault, buddy, for not agreeing in the first place. So start talking or you'll wish you were dead."

"Take your hands off me," roared T. Colman with a revulsion that was obviously not faked.

Soranno paled with anger.

"Why you . . ." he began. Then, deliberately, he pulled T. Colman back to face him and spat full on his cheek.

T. Colman countered by kicking the gangster in the shins, and Breck could hear the solid crack of hard leather on the exposed tibia. Grunting with pain, Soranno released T. Colman, who calmly pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his face.

Breck wished his arm were in action, for it would have been a good spot for a crashing diversion. T. Colman's unexpected resistance had taken all present by surprise. The moment passed, however, and Soranno pulled out his gun. Holding it flat in his hand, he slapped T. Colman across the cheek, dragging the blow so that the ridges in the side of the weapon drew blood. T. Colman staggered, flailed the air with his hands, and fell back onto the sofa.

Soranno stood back and surveyed his handiwork, an amiable smile again on his face.

"My, my," he said to his men. "What do you suppose has happened to the dignity of T. Colman Flanders the Second, now? Maybe a little more treatment will

loosen up his tongue, eh?" Soranno hefted his gun criminally, and moved closer to his victim.

The imperative ringing of the telephone came as a welcome interruption to Breck.

"See if there's an extension in the bedroom," Soranno snapped at his henchman, Nick. The man whisked away, came back, nodding. Soranno motioned Breck toward the phone. "Take it," he ordered. "Pull any fast ones, and both of you suffer. But Flanders gets his first. Remember."

Breck picked up the phone, and his heart sank as he heard Mara's voice.

"Breck," she said, "is that you?"

He assured her it was.

"We've found where it is!" she blurted excitedly. "Sunny and I worked it out together. It's all in the last paragraph. That's what 'my finish' meant. It simply means that it's in the finish of the statement!"

CHAPTER VII

The Stones in the Script

BRECK racked his brains to think of some way to check Mara's excited flow of talk. But after the unsuspected courage T. Colman had shown, he couldn't bring himself to do anything that might inflict further reprisals on his host. Moreover, Breck knew that Nick, on the bedroom extension, was mentally filing every word that Mara spoke.

"You remember that last paragraph," she was saying. "It went like this: 'I hope you will try to settle down to apartment life and find study or work to occupy profitably your days and nights.' Well, every fifth word of that reads, 'try apartment study profitably.' Can you hear me, Breck?"

"I hear you," he assured grimly.

"Don't you see what it means?" Mara continued. "It means that the Long Island house lead is just a blind! Lanning's got it all wrong. Sunny and I are going over there now. Tear yourself away and join us. You see Grandpa had an apartment in a building he backed. It was a ninety-nine year lease thing, and it isn't rented now. I can get the keys

from the superintendent as a member of the family. And I know that study like a book."

"Don't go over there now," said Breck, trying to keep his voice casual. "Wait until Lanning gets back and let him handle it. Remember what he told us about sitting tight."

"Fat chance," cried Mara brightly. "If we could find it, so can the others who have the script." She paused, then said the words he dreaded to hear most. "It's at 17½ East Sixty-second Street. Apartment 9C. See you there."

With a feeling of sick helplessness, Breck replaced the phone in the cradle. The man Nick came in from the other room, flashed a malignant smile in his direction. For a wild moment, Breck hoped that the mobster might be planning a doublecross on Johnnie Soranno. But, no, he was taking his boss aside, talking rapidly in low tones.

As he listened to his henchman's report, a beatific smile lit up Soranno's face, and he patted his man on the back. He scribbled the address on a piece of paper, then marched to the center of the room.

"Carmen, you stay here," he directed. "Nick's coming with me. If either of these tomatoes get smart, you know what to do. I'll call you the minute we have the stuff and tell you where to meet us." Grinning triumphantly, Soranno led the way from the room.

Carmen immediately pulled his gun out, and took a chair by the door. He motioned Breck back to the sofa, where T. Colman looked at him curiously through the mask of blood that was his face. His torn lips framed a question.

"What was it?" he asked weakly.

Breck sighed, seeing on reason, now, to keep it from his host.

"It was Mara—Miss Smith, your niece," he answered. "She and Sunny Tremaine just solved the cipher in that document. It had a false lead to the house at Long Beach, but the stuff, whatever it is, is really hidden in the study of old man Flanders' apartment."

"No!" whispered T. Colman, wincing with the pain speech caused him. His voice was husky and dry. "What are they going to do?"

"The girls are on their way there now," said Breck. "And so are our friends who just left. I couldn't stop

Mara from talking." Despairingly, he looked at T. Colman and found equal despair reflected in the swollen eyes of his host. It was a rotten moment. Carmen, who had been listening with interest, told them to shut up.

With a hammering urgency, Breck knew now that he had to do something, anything, to get out of this mess. Feeling had returned to the fingers of his right hand, and that was encouraging. Carmen, with his gun, was a good twenty feet away. Surely he could think of a way to rush that gun.

AS BRECK speculated on the effectiveness of various maneuvers, he suddenly felt T. Colman's elbow in his ribs and looked at him furtively. T. Colman's face might be bloody, but his dark eyes were gleaming. He made the faintest possible jerk of his head toward Breck, then nodded toward his right. Next he indicated himself by dropping his chin a fraction of an inch and rolling his eyes to his left.

Imperceptibly Breck nodded understanding, but his stomach felt lifted, both at the danger the scheme threatened and the chance of success it offered. T. Colman intended that both of them should rush Carmen at the same time from opposite sides, bewildering him by offering a divided target. It was risky, but it might work.

"Hey! What goes on?" demanded the mobster, whose eyes had never left them. Breck felt T. Colman's fingers pinch him, once, then twice. Carmen decided he was imagining things, and his eyes lost their wariness for a moment. Then T. Colman pinched the third time.

Both men launched themselves sideways from the sofa, splitting apart by half the length of the room. Carmen's face set, and the muzzle of his gun came up. For perhaps half a second it wavered as he tried to decide at which target to fire.

That half second was enough. By the time he discharged the shot Breck had sideswiped him, chair and all, in a savage football block, sending Carmen and his chair flying through the air into a mission table, which spilled them both. The bullet went into the ceiling, and T. Colman, his eyes ablaze, charged in and kicked the gun out of his hand. Breck picked it up and covered the mobman.

Missing Page

Mara were at the other side of the door. And in center of the doorway stood Soranno.

Without hesitation, the girl from Texas went into action. She took one quick step forward as her arm snapped back. Then, with a perfect underhand motion, she hurled the emerald in a straight line of flashing green. It headed straight for the bridge of Nick's nose, and unswervingly hit its mark. As if a giant lawn mower had cut him down, the gangster fell over on his face, his gun clattering on the bare floor.

Breck snapped to then, swung on a startled Soranno, who was a bare half second too late. T. Colman Flanders scrambled for the fallen gun, swiftly retrieved it, and, without an instant's hesitation, shot the mob leader through the heart. Soranno collapsed without a word, dropping in a heap against the wall. Breck knew he was dead, for presently, the blood ceased flowing from his vest.

"What in blazes did you do that for?" Breck shouted, shocked and angry. For it had been a cold-blooded and needless job.

But T. Colman Flanders did not reply. His eyes blazing, he was walking to an astonished Breck pointing the smoking pistol directly at Breck's heart!

"Drop your gun," he ordered quietly, but there was no mistaking the urgency in his voice. "By the far wall, all of you. Come on, hurry it up. You don't think I'm missing this chance, do you? Thanks, girls, for finding the stones for me."

"What are you going to do?" Breck asked.

But even as he said the words he had a shockingly clear picture of what this was all about.

JOHNIE SORANNO had not been guilty of the murders, after all. He had wanted the stones, no question, but Soranno was too seasoned and well known a killer to risk murder when his role in the case could so easily be traced. Breck understood now why the dead gang leader had allowed them to remain alive in T. Colman's apartment.

T. Colman Flanders was the man they had been after. He must have killed O'Connell while he sat in the anteroom of the office, then made that phone call

offering to buy the manuscript, giving Breck the impression he was calling from his home. And now that he knew the secret, he would have the jewels all to himself.

No one, not Mara or Sunny, or Breck, could stop him now.

For he would probably kill them all, make it look as if he were the sole survivor of a shooting bee. His torn face and the testimony of his butler would probably acquit him if any suspicion were directed toward him.

Helplessly, Breck looked at Mara who stared back at him with incredulous eyes. Sunny, equally unbelieving, stood against the wall as if paralyzed.

She had saved the situation once, but the challenge of this latest menace was too much for her.

"I'll make it merciful," said T. Colman Flanders mercilessly. "I'm a good shot. I've hunted a lot." He picked up the other two pistols with a handkerchief, laid them on the desk. It was evident he was figuring out whom to kill with which pistol so that it would look more like a fight instead of a massacre. Finally he put down the gun he had been pointing toward them and picked up Johnnie Soranno's. But so swift was his movement that there was no chance for Breck to intercept him.

"Okay, Breck, you first," he announced tonelessly.

He lifted the gun. Then Mara screamed, flung herself in front of Breck, trying to shield him.

"Get her away, Barnum," snapped T. Colman, and now there was an edge of nervous anger in his voice. "Get her away from you or I'll shoot her in the kidney. You know what that's like."

"Go ahead!" flung out the girl. "What's the difference."

But even in her determination, she was not strong enough for Breck, who pushed her from him by main force and held her at arm's length.

"Okay, Mister Rat," Breck said. "Go ahead, if you've got the nerve." He closed his eyes and waited for the sound of the shot he would never hear.

But it came, loud and echo-raising in that dusty, now death-filled room. Oddly enough Breck felt nothing at all.

Then someone screamed, and the voice was that of T. Colman Flanders II, in an agony of pain and anger and fear.

CHAPTER VIII

Lanning Explains

BRECK blinked his eyes to see T. Colman writhing on the floor, clutching at his wrist and screaming, while blood flowed from between his fingers.

And there was Lanning standing at the door to the hall of the apartment, mopping his brow with a handkerchief and holding a smoking Police Positive in the same hand. The little detective sighed audibly, then motioned to a couple of men in uniform who appeared behind him. And T. Colman Flanders, still screaming, was jerked to his feet, while one of the men slapped a handcuff on his uninjured wrist.

"Boy!" Detective Lanning explained "That was close! Things got away from me a little there at the finish." He sighed again, leaned against the desk. "Take the stiff and the rat on the floor with you, too. Flanders"—this to T. Colman who was being led past him, weeping with pain from his shattered wrist—"I'm holding you on charges of first degree murder on three counts until you want to sing. And no lawyer's even going to hear about it until you do."

The millionaire's son bowed his head as he was led from the room. Lanning looked after him thoughtfully, then spat on the floor. Then his eyes swiveled to the stones on the desk, and then to Mara, Sunny, and Breck, who were still grouped dumbly against the wall.

"I'm sorry, kids," Lanning said, his voice kindly once more. "If I hadn't gotten ambitious, this wouldn't have happened. But I'm darn thankful none of you got hurt."

"You're thankful!" snorted Sunny, rapidly recovering her poise. "How do you think we feel? That heel was going to stage a Saint Valentine's massacre right here—with us as Bugs Moran's boys. Whew! I really thought they'd written 'curtain' right across us that time."

Breck placed a comforting arm about Mara's shoulders. She was trembling, but then, so was he.

"Praise Allah you got back from Long Island in time," he said to Lanning. "By

the way, how'd you ever get here at all?"

"Well, you see, I never went to Long Island," the little detective explained. "I was in Army Intelligence in the First World War. And I picked up solving crypts and ciphers sitting around in stationhouses. So I knew what that little statement of Old Tom Flanders meant before you kids had even started." He paused, mopped his brow again, and blushed. "I'm a great guy to be boasting," he added modestly.

"Why, Sergeant," teased Sunny. "Are you trying to tell us that you were after the crown jewels, too? Now, really."

"No," replied Lanning. "I thought if I left you kids fiddling with the puzzle and pretended I'd gone to Long Island, you'd be safe until I'd cleaned the case up. But I didn't bring a crew with me, and I couldn't find the stones. Then, when I went out to get help, things started happening. That's what I meant when I said I was too ambitious on it."

"Did you suspect my uncle?" Mara asked.

Lanning nodded. "I was pretty sure of it once I got the three of you unraveled and Miss Cochrane was dead. It only left Flanders and Soranno. And if Soranno'd been doing it, he'd have killed O'Connell before he tried to see you at all, Barnum. Only an amateur, trying to make up his mind, would have waited till the fourth visit.

"And that story he told about wanting to buy the manuscript sounded funny—funny enough to be true until you kids told me that O'Connell had explained the script's worth in his letters to you. Those two things started me after him. Hey, where are you going, Miss Tremaine?"

"Home and get some sleep," she flung over her shoulder. "I'm pitchin' tomorrow."

THE next evening Mara and Breck were in the Garden, watching two teams of girls, trim in satin shorts and blouses, battling on the runt diamond that the game of softball demands. The girls were amazingly fast and efficient, and they handled themselves almost as well as the men's teams which had preceded them.

Thanks to the flood of newspaper publicity about her rôle in the case and her unexpected appearance as an heir to the

Flanders' jewels, Sunny Tremaine, on the mound for the Longhorns, was something of an overnight celebrity. Her blond hair tucked up under a baseball hat, she was pitching to kill.

The Astoria Leopards had made two hits off her delivery in seven innings, though they'd gotten one run on a walk and a couple of infield errors. The Longhorns had failed to score. Every time Sunny rifled the ball past a flailing Leopard bat, Breck could see again that huge emerald flying through the air.

"She's wonderful," said Mara nudging Breck's elbow. "This game looks like fun."

Breck turned to look at Mara more fully. With a solid twelve hours of sleep, and release from the tension of the past menace-charged days Tom Flanders' grand-daughter was worth looking at. Her smooth skin glowed with health and good spirits and her eyes sparkled.

He stretched out one of his immense hands and enveloped her slim fingers. Mara leaned against him contentedly and, then for a long moment, she closed her eyes.

"Break it," ordered a dry voice behind them, and they both jumped. Lanning, drawn but smiling, eased himself into a seat on the other side of Mara.

"It's all over," he announced, pushing his hat back. "He finally talked. They booked him half an hour ago."

"Why'd he do it?" Mara asked.

"Nothing unusual about it," Lanning explained. "He's gone through all the money he had, and the wolves were breathing on his neck. When he got O'Connell's note about the bequest, it was a real windfall. He figured out it must be the stones, and he knew their worth. He needed every cent of it by his lights, so he set out to prevent a split.

"He thought he could deal with O'Connell, but the poor old boy held out on him. Then he decided to kill him, and get the script from you for peanuts. He tried to kill the old man while he was on his way to your office—hired a drive-it-yourself and tried to run him down. But he missed, and so he slipped into the office, made one last effort, and gave him the knife. He'd learned how to use it from his hunting trips."

"The rotter," murmured Mara softly.

SERGEANT LANNING nodded his head in confirmation.

"Your secretary spoiled his plan, Barnum," the little detective. "She got an idea in her head and stole the manuscript from your place Friday night while you were at the Jamaica Inn. At least it was gone before Soranno got there, according to his boys. They'd been trailing her when they couldn't get at you.

"She thought she could make a deal with Flanders, but with one murder on his hands, he wasn't making any. Somehow she guessed it and called you. That caused the mix-up at the Connecticut. Everybody got there but me, it seems. But T. Colman got there first and made off with the script. He was the one who slammed the door you heard, Miss Flanders. He fell for the same gag you did and went out to the Long Island house that night. Needless to say, he didn't find anything.

"When you came around, Barnum, he was stumped. And when Soranno and his mob turned up, he had to take it. If he hadn't he'd have given himself away to all of you. The rest was sheer opportunism. If I hadn't beaten him to the punch on that cipher, and turned up when I did, he might have even gotten by with it. We wouldn't have had much tangible evidence against him, and with the jewels in his possession, he could have hired some tough lawyers."

"What a triple-plated rat!" declared Breck, shaking his head. "What was the matter with him, anyway?"

"I guess it was an inferiority complex," remarked Lanning slowly. "He was always under the heel of his father's power and success. And he wanted to grab some for himself. But he'd come up the easy way and had none of his old man's human qualities. Ruthless and spoiled to begin with, the lack of success turned him bitter. He must have been heading wrong a long time."

The crowd around them suddenly cheered, and they returned their attention to the game. It was the last of the ninth, and the Longhorns were at bat with two out and a girl on first. Sunny Tremaine walked up to the plate, discarding bats like a Babe Ruth. Her chin was out, and even from the box Breck could see that cool, determined gleam in her blue eyes,

She swung at the first one so hard she did a complete turn and wound up in the dirt. The second one she fouled off behind the plate. But with the third pitch she connected solidly, all the power of her husky young frame behind it. It rose on a straight line and had only begun to drop when it lodged in the upper tier.

As she trotted around the bases, with

the crowd roaring, she looked over at Mara and Breck and Lanning and grinned like a schoolboy. Her thumb rose to the tip of her pretty nose, and she wagged her fingers in happy derision. The crowd hooted like one person.

"What a girl!" said Breck, grinning.

"What a girl?" echoed Mara. "What an aunt!"



Newspaper Editor Doc Bagden is Thrust into the Center of a Web of Mystery and Intrigue Woven About His Favorite Hobby—the Nonsense Verses of Lewis Carroll

IN

THE JABBERWOCKY MURDERS

A Baffling Complete Mystery Novel

By

FREDRIC BROWN

COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE

Now She Shops "Cash and Carry" Without Painful Backache

Many sufferers relieve nagging backache quickly, once they discover that the real cause of their trouble may be tired kidneys.

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

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nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

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

THE BRINE OF GOOD LUCK

By TOM MARVIN

Joe Kinsella Could Sense Good Fortune—and Bad—and He Sensed Plenty of Trouble When Dice Were Mixed With Opals and a Girl!

THE mulligan was simmering on the cookfire and I was sketching a box elder against the night sky when this 'bo moved in on me.

He slogged across the grass of the tourist park and stepped into my circle of orange firelight and he seemed to bulk eight feet tall. Tattered as a beachcomber, but his smile was white in a face as friendly and matted as a spaniel's.

"Grub hot, pal?" His booming voice carried down to the river. "My name is Speega. I'm heading west."

Well, the road's the road.

"Sit down," I said. "I'm Joe Nash. Moving south."

The 'bo was carrying a bindle, a small zipper pouch, from which he fished a harmonica, and squatting on his heels he began to play "Caissons" and "Ramblers" and a medley of road tunes. Even squatting he seemed immense. He was handy on the mouth organ, too, a second Larry Adler.

Divvying the mulligan, I caught a good gander at his face and I stopped being sore that he had barged in. It was a craggy, gypsy face, beaky nose and flare brow, and I got the old itch to put it in my sketch book.

The 'bo had a bottle of whisky, A-1 stuff, not hobo liquor, and we thawed out and chinned while we ate mulligan and woodsmoke.

"Where you bound, Joe?" he asked suddenly.

"Still south," I told him easily.



There stood Pop Pringle behind Buckles' back

The 'bo Speega grinned, unrebuffed. Pretty soon he tramped off into the night and returned with an armful of hay.

"Better get some, Joe," he advised, "Good bedding."

I went out into the dark and dropped silently to the grass and lay still as a log, watching him. He frisked my bindle.

He wasn't finding much. Razor, toothbrush, extra sketch pad and \$50,000 in stage money. But, watching him, I got mad and began to shiver, and that was a sign I'd do something about it.

GATHERING an armful of hay, I realized that Speega was a muscular guy, nobody to fight on a black night in a deserted tourist camp on the edge of a strange town. Not for \$50,000 in phoney money. But I was going to do it.

I went back to the fire.

"That fifty grand is stage money, Speega," I said.

"A baby could tell, Joe," he said unconcernedly. "You ain't sore because I cased your bindle? A man ought to know what kind of a gee he's traveling with."

"Well, now you know. Or do you? And I'm sore."

I threw a quick left hand, too high on his cheek. Reeling back, he blinked and the spaniel curls quivered on his leonine head. But his eyes glinted. He rushed me low, picked me up and dumped me into my hay pile. He dropped on me like the sky falling. One iron arm tied me up and the other cuffed the daylight out of me.

I took a pasting, yet when he let me up I wasn't too badly nicked. Winded, a raw patch under one eye and my ribs felt frozen.

Speega smiled at me.

"Now we ought to get along swell, Joe."

So he figured on staying. Well, the crease was still in my trousers and \$42 nestled in my shoe. So I shook his dirty paw and downed another slug of his excellent booze and we turned in.

I let him snore for a half hour. Then I got up and went through his bindle. I found a 6x8 envelope and took it out

and built up the fire for a look-see.

The envelope contained a picture of a guy I recognized. Me.

On the back was my right name—Joe Kinsella—and a careful description down to my polka dot necktie. Height 5-10; weight 168; eyes gray; hair blond; build slender; cut scar left thumb. Cop stuff.

I went over to Speega's haypile and stopped his snoring with a kick in the ribs. He grunted with amiable thickness:

"Whatsa matter, Joe? Indians?"

"Crawl out. We got talking to do."

Yawning, the big guy followed me over to the fire and we hugged the heat and I showed him my picture.

"Aw, Joe!" He sounded injured. "Going through a buddy's bindle thata-way!"

"A man ought to know what kind of a gee he's traveling with," I reminded him, "and what kind are you?"

His hawk face showed only amusement. But I was getting the shakes for action again, even though my chances in another fight assayed low.

"Your pa sent me, Joe," Speega said with a grin.

My shakes stopped. Guess I was relieved to know I wouldn't have to smack another buzzsaw.

"You a private detective, Speega?"

"Naw, just a handyman, but your pa has used me before. I got all the dope on you here." He tapped a notebook in his shirt pocket.

"You're thirty years old, Joe, and you think you're an artist. You manage a woodworking shop for your old man. He hired some big money experts to tell you you're a lousy artist, but you're stubborn. Every onct in a while you lam out on the road with a sketch book. You got a little hobo in your soul, too. And you got a reputation for lucky gambling. Only sometimes you get into trouble on these road trips, so . . ."

"So my dad wants you to bring me home?"

"No," said Speega, "but I got to trail along with you and keep you from getting killed. Your pa gave me \$500 expense money."

"Your company is welcome," I said, "but my dad's five hundred isn't. I

make these jaunts on my own cash. You got to wire that five C's back to him pronto if you want to stay with me."

"Aw, Joe, how we going to afford first class whisky like we had tonight?"

"Come on, we're going into town and find a telegraph office."

Speega grumbled a little, but we banked the fire and headed for the lights. I lugged my bindle. Later I certainly wished that Speega had taken his.

I WIRED the \$500 and wrote out a gag telegram to my father:

HAVE UNMASKED YOUR STOOGE
WHERE SHALL I SEND THE BODY
JOE

The telegraph clerk was a skinny guy sporting a butter colored mustache. One look at my wire and he was outside whistling for a cop.

We had a little trouble chuckling it off, but finally the cop said:

"What a crummy looking pair! You guys scoot right back to that tourist park. And keep away from the north end of town."

Rain was beginning to fall as we parted company from the cop, so we pulled up our collars and took a bearing on the river.

We headed north. What a mistake that was!

The town was sprawled on a bight and its north end was a collection of flea-bitten saloons. Choosing one called "Digger's Den," we went in and blew twenty cents for a brace of beers and bought a couple cigars at a nickel a smash. Saloon, cigars and the bartender all smelled as dank as the river.

"Where you roosting, gents?" the barkeep asked sociably.

"In the tourist park," I answered before Speega tromped meaningly but too late on my toes.

We moved over to a corner table and I proposed a game of cards. I carry a deck like some guys carry a fountain pen.

"Make the stakes low, Joe," Speega said.

"Just a thousand dollars a point, bud."

Digging the \$50,000 out of my bin-

dle, I halved it and we played some high-low-jack. In ten minutes I had Speega's pile. I returned it and we tried casino. I cleaned him at that, too.

Speega was no gambler. Flush, he played as cautiously as a deer at a drinking hole; when his stack ran down he tried recklessly for a killing. He misjudged odds, tipped his mitt a dozen ways. He had too much uncontrolled imagination for sharp gambling; he concentrated so hard on the things that might go wrong, darned if they didn't happen. You've got to gamble with confidence or keep your money in your jeans.

Some people claim that fear and danger and impending death have odors that can be smelled. Actually smelled. I wouldn't know about that, but I can smell good or bad luck when a card falls. Call it foolish. Good luck smells like brine to me. Bad luck like a wine cellar. That's as close as I can describe it. Call it foolish, but gambling men will know what I mean.

Speega went broke three times and I had collected a cool \$75,000 in no-good currency.

"Lend me another ten grand, Joe," he said.

The greasy bartender stopped chewing on his toothpick. His head came around slowly. Picking up a bartowel, he wandered over to our table and began to mop up the beer rings, his little eyes darting. Then he detected the phoney bills and he laughed.

"Well, a guy can dream, I suppose," he said.

"Sit down, friend," I said, "We'll make it three-handed."

"I got the shorts," the barkeep laughed, "I only got four, five thousand bucks on me."

He looked as if he had only four, five cents on him. His name was Digger, a wiry guy with a bumpy face and a gray apron.

Digger's Den had the shorts on customers, too. There were only two other guys in the place, an overalled and white-mustached farmer named Pringle and a well set-up gent in the monkey suit of a chauffeur, named Buckles.

"Hey, Buckles," said Digger jovially, "Here's a couple tinhorn mil-

lionaires. Think you ought to notify Opie?"

THE chauffeur brought his drink over to our table, his flat face, slash mouth, black eyes showing no amusement at our little joke.

"The boss don't play for fun," he said. I can recognize a mean guy when I see one and this baby qualified.

Digger was no violet himself but he fell in with our gag. "Let's all sid-down and play some five handed dealer's choice," he urged.

Buckles took a seat and Pringle, the farmer, came over readily, chuckling. "Ain't had my hands on a thousand dollars since '29."

So we rationed the illegal tender and started out, five guys on a rainy night with \$10,000 apiece to risk and nothing to lose. Not a devil of a lot to gain, either.

But what there was to collect, I collected.

Good luck was smelling briny as a pickle factory.

Stud or draw, the tickets were there when I looked at 'em. I didn't even have to look; I KNEW they were there. Like pushing a button. I rode my luck to the end of the line and then carried it piggy-back. Nothing failed me. I had a barrel of fun and no profit to show for it, but I smelled a big night.

"Son," said Pringle, the farmer, admiringly, "you're hotter than thermite. I sure wish Opie were here to see you now."

The chauffeur stood up. "Maybe the boss ought to know about this," he said, and then went over to a wall telephone.

That was fine. I wanted to get a look at Opie, too.

When finally he arrived he fitted perfectly into the mental groove I had ready for him. Good clothes, white carnation, pink shave. Snooze all day; gamble all night. A pro. Heavy stakes. Take chances for a living. A ponderous guy but not fat, wearing a fire opal in an old fashioned tie pin, another opal winking in the claw setting of his heavy ring. He was Opie, right enough.

From sharp blue eyes in a controlled

granite face, the gambler's gaze hit me like a needle shower.

"I hear you're hot," he said mildly.

"Medium rare," I said.

"But with stage money. Maybe you choke up on hard cash?"

"I don't cough worth a darn."

"I can use a hot player," Opie said, "if I'm sure he's on fire. You got any honest money? How about cutting cards with Buckles? The brand of luck I'm looking for will show up in card cutting."

I unleashed the forty-two dollars from my shoe.

"Ten bucks a cut," I said.

But Buckles protested.

"Not with his own deck, boss!"

The chauffeur went behind the bar and made a show of rummaging in a drawer.

Returning with a pack, he fanned them out wide on the table.

"Maybe his luck changes with the color of the tickets."

The new cards had a head picture of a Mexican on the back. The Mexican wore a sombrero adorned with little doodads. If your eyes were good and you knew where to look, you could tell the doodads weren't identical. The pasteboards were "readers," marked cards.

So I picked myself an ace.

But Buckles didn't attempt to tie me. He drew a king. And he gave me ten bucks.

Next I pulled a queen. Buckles picked up a seven. He gave me another sawbuck. This guy was losing on his own cold deck!

I made nine straight passes. On the tenth shot, just for the fun of it, I drew a trey. Buckles managed to find a deuce!

"That's hot enough for me," said Opie. "I got a job for your luck tonight. You'll make a hundred dollars, win or lose."

The gambler gave me no opportunity to demur. He was already at the wall telephone and when he got his number his voice flattened.

"Idaho," he said into the mouthpiece, "Haul out those beauties. I'm coming after them."

By this time I was too nose-y to act sensible and back out.

SPEEGA and I followed the gambler out of Digger's Den into the rain. The farmer's truck, a mud-stained half-ton with "Clay Pringle, RFD 7, Melons," daubed on its side, huddled at the curb. Parked behind it was Opie's shiny car. We got in, Buckles took the wheel and we skimmed out of town on a glistening hard road.

The car pulled off the highway into a double row of evergreens at the head of which a house bulked huge and white as a circus tent in the rainy night. Lights blazed from it and a neon sign flashed "Maison Idaho." Under the carriage porch Buckles let us out and we followed Opie across the foyer of a tony night club into a diminutive automatic elevator.

"You two go up and wait for me," Opie commanded. He slammed the door and we ascended to a small penthouse of two rooms. The first, done in Chinese decor, held a divan, desk, pool table and some oriental chairs. The second apparently was a dining room, complete with a large Jacobean fireplace flanked by two huge tanks of tropical fish.

There were no exit doors. Only the elevator. Grille-work on the windows looked as tough as Joliet bars.

"This is a neat layout for gambling," Speega said, "Raid-proof. Highjack-proof, too. But even a rabbit makes two holes to his house."

We began to hunt for a secret exit. Pressing on panels did no good and Speega finally decided it was the fireplace.

"Them ashes," he said, "have been there so long they got dust on them."

Removing his shoes, he crouched in the fireplace and peered up, then replaced his shoes and stepped back into the room without leaving ashes on the rug.

"That's the getaway," he reported, "The chimney has steel rungs in the side, like a ladder. You go up there and I bet you can get off the roof easy."

"Something tells me we should have stayed in the tourist park, like the cop suggested," I said, "Did you know that Buckles deliberately lost those card cuts to me?"

Speega didn't get it. Any more than I did.

"But why, Joe?"

"How should I know? This is the north end of town, brother."

We heard the elevator door open in the outer room and we pretended to be interested in the tanks of tropical fish. The tanks had brightly colored gravel on the bottoms. The fish were as gaudy as the gravel; the pictures in the room were daubs, too.

"You admire my pets, gentlemen?" asked a woman's voice, a richly liquid voice. Before I turned around I pictured her: Latin brunette. But I was wrong.

She was gold. From stem to gudgeon she was gold. Varnished gold hair; paler gold skin; rusty gold evening gown and slippers; green gold cross dipping into the valley of her throat.

"This is Idaho," said Opie, standing behind her.

UNTIL she smiled I hadn't noticed that her lips were red, her eyes brown, eyebrows charcoal. Motionless, she looked as gold as a double-eagle.

"Which is the lucky one, Opie?" she asked, "That Romany giant?"

"The blond guy," Opie pointed at me. "Let's get started."

"But perhaps they would like to see them first." She was carrying a jewel case and opened it to reveal two large opals on a satin bed. "Aren't they lovely?"

They looked just like a couple opals to me, but Speega was appreciative.

"Some grapefruit," he applauded.

"And so unlucky for Opie!" she laughed warmly. "He has lost thousands trying to win them. Opie, so entranced of opals. It is almost womanish."

"Why doesn't he buy them?" I asked.

"Because I won't sell them," the gold lady said. "I only bet them against Opie's money. And he cannot win them. They are horribly bad luck for him. So you are going to win them for him?"

"If my nose isn't lying, madam."

"What shall we play? Poker, perhaps?"

"Craps," I said. "Short and sweet."

The gold lady looked inquiringly at Opie who muttered:

"He's running my end of the show. Here's the money."

It was parceled in two stacks. I couldn't tell how much, but it was a hatful.

"One pile, one opal," Opie said. "Let's go."

Placing the jewel case on the refectory table, Idaho picked up my hands and gave them a long scrutiny.

"You're faded," she said at last. "And remember, I know all the dodges."

"Me, too, lady," I told her.

The four of us went back into the Chinese room and gathered at the pool table to inspect the dice. They were pure as sunshine.

The gold lady clicked them and blew on them like a nickel-fader in an alley and spun them across the baize.

Eight.

She threw a nine, a six, came back with a Decatur.

Pushing across one stack of the bills before me, I got the scent I was waiting for. I smelled bad luck on the lady in gold.

She threw the cubes again. Five. And then she threw a seven.

I got back my stack and the dice passed. They flicked off my fingers and banged against a cushion and came up 4-3. Lucky seven.

"That's one pet for Opie," Idaho said.

"And here comes its mate," I promised her.

THE house lights were growing a little dim, as if a giant refrigerator had switched on somewhere in the night club, and I waited for them to brighten. But they didn't, so I threw.

The cubes clicked solidly on the table just as the lights failed completely and the dark of night spread into the penthouse.

"It's dice!" Idaho said sharply. "Don't anyone touch the table! We count them as they lie!"

That was her tactical error. I could smell that seven in the dark.

"Strike a match!" the gold lady ordered.

On the second try Opie's cigar lighter blazed and in its wavering light we leaned over the table. Six-ace.

"They're all yours, Opie," Idaho said. "What will you do with them?"

Make a dog collar? Dammit, let's have light!"

Idaho got a double candlestick going and by its flicker we counted noses.

No Speega.

Like one fat man, the three of us tried to jam through the diningroom door together. Speega wasn't in the dining room, either. The jewel case still rested on the refectory table where Idaho had left it, but as Opie stumbled toward it I smelled the luck change.

In his hands the empty jewel case showed only its satin lining.

"Stolen!" Idaho gave a hard laugh.

Candlelight glittered on her varnished hair and the shakes suddenly hit me like a fullback. I saw the smudge of footprints etched in ashes on the rug and the skin tightened on my face.

Opie lunged for me. I slapped Idaho hard on the arm and the candlesticks banged on the floor. In the dark Opie yelled, "Idaho! Drop to the floor! I'll plug anything that moves. He can't get to the elevator."

Her peal of laughter covered the rustle of my crawling toward the fireplace.

"If the gypsy got away, this one will, too!" Her laughter mounted. "Kiss those opals goodbye, Opie. Opals are fools' stones."

Fumbling for the first rung in the fireplace, trying not to scrape my shoes, I crawled up the cubicle and dropped to the roof. Cold rain drenched me instantly. Bent over, I ran to the rear of the roof. A steel trellis stretched up the back wall of the night club, strong as Jacob's ladder and certainly not meant for roses.

Down the trellis I scrambled and leaped for a clump of shrubs. A hand closed over my mouth. Another gripped my neck, and as I struggled Speega's voice hissed:

"Dummy up, Joe."

"Hey," I said, "did you swipe those things?"

"No, but I know where they are. I couldn't catch the guy going back up the chimney. . . ."

"Opie and Buckles are coming this way!"

"Let's get back to camp and pick

up my bindle and lam. I'll write Opie a letter about those rocks. . . ."

A gun spit flame and lead clipped through our bushes.

"Scatter!" Speega barked and gave me a push.

I ran in a crouch for the blackest part of the night, then circled back toward the tourist park. It didn't sound safe, but we had to get Speega's bindle. It contained my picture and some information the cops would dearly love to have.

WHEN I dogtrotted into the park our campfire was sodden and Speega was stretched out serenely in his haybed as if he had never left it. He was on his back, with his chest unnaturally arched, as if he were lying on a rock, but it was a knife that propped him up so, and he was dead.

That cooked me. I couldn't run another step. My legs were stuffed with sawdust and when I closed my hot eyes I saw Roman candles. But two cop cars came howling along the road and I had to crawl away in the slimy grass.

Flashlights bobbed around the dead campfire and the rain-laden air brought the gabble of voices to me when they found Speega.

"That's one of them," a cop said, "They was down to the telegraph office tonight, arguing about \$500, and one guy sent a wire he was going to kill the other guy and bury his body.

More searching produced Speega's bindle.

"That's a pitcher of the blond guy," the cop said. "Don't get it wet. The dead guy must a knowed his number was up and left all this poster stuff for us."

"This lucky guy," this was Buckles' voice, "was at Digger's place tonight, flashing some queer money and running a cold deck game."

"I told them bums to keep out of the north end," the cop said.

How I wished we had! Counterfeiter, card sharp, jewel thief, murderer, all in one evening! They began to talk about dogs. Could the hounds pick up a scent on a wet night? Let's try them.

That put a little fight back into me.

I inched on my belly toward the river, but there was no strength in me for swimming, so I waded upstream through some sedges, then climbed the bank and headed away from the water. I crawled through a wire fence, crept through a culvert. Another fence, a cornfield, a timber lot. I forced myself to move, like a hunter afraid of freezing if he lay down in the snow.

And when daylight broke I found myself back at the river. I gave up. I saw the weatherbeaten shed, shelter-loft and fell asleep.

Pails rattling in the pig sty awakened me. Through a crack in the shed I saw a muddy truck inscribed "Clay Pringle, RFD 7, Melons."

The farmer who had sat in our poker game at Digger's Den was feeding his pigs, spitting tobacco juice into the pails, and when he finished he came to the loft ladder and yelled:

"Come on down, lucky feller!"

Holding weakly to the ladder I went down and said, "Hello, Pop, don't be afraid. I won't hurt you."

"Shape you're in," he grinned, "I could kill you with my baccy juice."

"You going to turn me in?"

"Soon as I finish the chores. Pigs is a mess, ain't they?"

We got into his truck and bumped up to his house. We passed a pen of hounds.

"Them's my dogs," the farmer said.

"Rent 'em to the county for trailing. Wouldn't let the sheriff have them last night, though."

He gave me a long look.

"Too bad you went and tracked down the dogs, son. I had a heap of fun in that poker game."

Tea and scrambled eggs and a bath in Pop's washtub restored me.

"They claim your partner went south with Opie's stones and you done him in for them," the farmer said.

"Why should I steal two opals? I wouldn't know how to get rid of them. As for Speega, he was getting to be a good friend of mine."

"I seen you duck in my shed this morning, but I let you sleep." The old man leaned forward meaningly. "I ain't required to turn you in this minute. You set there and think, son."

He was more than half on my team.

BUT my thinking was strictly off-center. In a sort of weary slow-motion I went over the scenes and events of the night. Buckles' reverse cheating; Idaho's rococo layout, Chinese room, Jacobean fireplace, horrible pictures; Opie's pink face. I replayed the crap game. I followed Speega up the chimney; I lay doggo in the bushes with him . . .

"What you rabbiting your nose for?" the farmer said.

"Because I smell something, Pop!"

"Pigs ain't carnations but they're a living."

"I'm smelling the luck shift, Pop. Listen, you got to come all the way over to my side. You got to help me play a long shot."

"Such as?" He was suspicious.

"What do you know about those people?"

"Well, Opie is a honest enough gambler. Buckles is open to doubt. Never had bad reports on Idaho, except what church folks say, gamblin' and booze sellin'."

"Could you find Buckles at Digger's place today?"

"He don't hang around there much, but I might."

"Pop, you go there and wait until Buckles comes in. Then drop a hint that the cops have a tip where the opals are. I give my word I'll be here when you get back."

"Can't you explain a mite more, son?"

I shook my head.

"Danged if I ain't interested anyway," the old man said.

He rattled away in his truck and it was dusk before he returned, mellow with beer.

"I drunk a skinful before Buckles showed up," he reported. "I was jabbering with Digger and I said real loud, 'Hear tell the police has a tip where the jewelry went.'"

"What happened, Pop?"

"Nothin' happened. Sure your luck is holdin'?"

"It's strong as bilge water," I said and I talked myself into believing it.

We played hearts for \$1,000 a point until ten o'clock, then headed for town in Pop's truck. From a drug store I telephoned Idaho.

"Idaho, this is Joe Kinsella, the fugitive. I'll be in your game room in twenty minutes. Don't be alarmed. We can solve everything."

Her voice, at least, didn't bat an eyelash.

"Come ahead, Mr. Kinsella. I'll shoot you if necessary."

But she must have instructed her doorman to pass us, because Pop and I walked boldly into the little elevator and rode upstairs unchallenged. Only the minute I stepped into the room I saw the trap.

IDAHO was the lady in gold again; she glittered in another gold gown and she seemed glad to see me, too, but apologetic. Everything in the room looked the same, except that a six foot screen splashed with painted poppies had been added.

"Who's behind the screen, Idaho?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Kinsella, but I had to let them know."

Opie and the cop from the telegraph office stepped out from behind the poppies and each held a gun.

"It was nice of you," Opie said grimly.

"What you scheming to do around here?" the cop said.

"I just wanted to shut off the lights and wait a while," I said. "The guy that pinched Opie's pets and knocked off my buddy is going to pay us a call, down that chimney."

"Now Sandy Claus done it!"

"Opie," I appealed to him, "I know where those gewgaws are. Either I try this stunt or you'll never get them back."

Pop Pringle plugged for me.

"Dang it, give the man a chance!"

Opie hesitated, then nodded to the cop, and they let me set the floor plan.

We went into the dining room and I stationed the cop behind one of the fish tanks at the fireplace. Pringle and Opie sat on the floor. Borrowing the cop's flashlight, I turned out the wall lights and dropped into a big chair and pretty soon someone came over and sat on the arm. I smelled violet scent. She patted my shoulder encouragingly.

Sitting silently in the dark, not talking or smoking, made each minute seem ten, even with a beautiful woman hold-

ing my moist hand. I thought the cop might call it off, but occasionally Idaho squeezed my hand and I knew she wouldn't let him.

I got so interested in that violet scent that I leaped when I heard sounds on the roof. Soft tiptoe sounds. Then a welcome scraping of shoeleather in the chimney. His foot scuffed on a steel rung . . .

I snapped on the torch and outlined a man straightening up at the mantel.

"Digger!" Idaho cried.

Everyone jumped together. The cop for Digger, Opie for the light button. We nailed Digger to the floor and the cop gyved him.

Puffing hard, Pop Pringle got up and announced:

"Let me out of here. I need a short beer."

He went down in the automatic elevator to the bar.

"This don't make sense," the cop said with a broad hand twisted in Digger's collar.

"It will," I promised, "when we get Buckles."

"Is he comin' down that chimney, too? Damned if it don't seem like Christmas Eve, somehow."

"Has Buckles got my opals?" Opie interrupted.

"Idaho has them," I said.

THE gold lady stared at me angrily.

"But I haven't!"

"Pardon me," the cop said, "but why do we want Buckles?"

"Because he's the engineer."

I felt like myself again. I smelled the brine of good luck, too, but strong.

"As Opie's chauffeur he knew how Opie coveted those knickknacks. He wanted to get them and sell them to Opie through a fence.

"Buckles got his idea when he saw my luck running in the poker game at Digger's place. He figured that if he got Opie to hire me to gamble for the stones, that would get them out of Idaho's vault and make the swiping easier.

"So Buckles brought Opie to Digger's place and deliberately got beat in the draw game so that Opie could see how hot I was. Opie fell for it."

The cop had some trouble holding

Digger still. He bumped Digger's head against the fish tank, hard. I was glad to see Digger acting up, because it tipped me that my reconstruction was somewhere near the fact. The cop wanted to know how Buckles pulled the job.

"He enlisted Digger," I said. "Digger looks like he could use some fresh. Anyway, he closed up early and met Buckles outside here. Digger came down the chimney and Buckles threw the switch at the electricity box. Only they didn't have a chance to work out their timing and things went wrong.

"Digger was supposed to hijack us with a gun and mask. But he saw the opals on the table and grabbed them. When the house went dark, Speega thought of the opals and came into this room. Digger heard him moving around in the dark and he ditched the stones and beat it back up the chimney. He didn't want to get caught with them and he figured he could come back later and get them, he hid them that well."

"How come the killing?" the cop asked.

"After Digger got outside he began to worry that Speega knew where the opals were cached and would lift them himself. Or maybe that Speega already had them. Digger knew we were bunking in the tourist park, so he hotfoots over there and lets Speega have it with a knife."

Nobody was listening to me.

They were staring over my shoulder at the door of the Chinese room and the cop was putting up his hands. I smelled trouble. I smelled Buckles with a gun, so I turned around and put up my mitts, too.

"Guess I'm too late to shut up Big Mouth," Buckles said.

His gun was steady.

"I told Digger that the hayseed was a plant when he came to the saloon today and said the cops had a lead on the stones. But Digger had to come see."

"Put your gun away, Buckles," Opie said.

"I took my last order from you. This thing turned into murder so I'll be moving along. So-long, all."

Buckles backed across the Chinese

room to the automatic elevator, his burnished puttees sparkling, his blue uniform crisp, his pistol, oh, so businesslike. Reaching behind him, he pressed the button for the elevator. It came up, the door opened, and there stood Pop Pringle, behind Buckles' back.

Pop's mouth hung open and a bottle of beer dangled limply in his gnarled hand. I thought he never would bring the bottle down on the back of Buckles' stiff cap. But he did.

WE HEAVED Buckles' peaceful frame onto the divan and the cop went to telephone.

"Now," said Opie, "if we're through frittering around, let's get down to business. Idaho, I want those opals."

"You got an opal for a heart," I said.

I went over to one of the fish tanks and flashed the electric torch into it, but that wasn't the one, so I searched in the other tank and found the two gimcracks resting among the colored rocks on the bottom. You could have looked in the fish tank a thousand times without spotting those opals unless you knew they were there.

Speega had said, as we crouched in the bushes outside:

"I'll write Opie a letter about those rocks . . ."

He meant ROCKS!

We got rid of everyone at last, the cops and their two handcuffed boys, Opie and his baubles, even Pop Pringle. Idaho didn't seem in any great hurry to shake me, however.

"The secret of my fireplace will be all over town by morning," she said. "You might as well know where I hide my telephone."

It was in a samovar on the buffet. The gold lady phoned down to her kitchen and ordered supper for two. Mallard duck in burgundy wine, button mushrooms, unpolished rice. . . .

She came over and sat on the arm of my chair.

"Want to play some Russian Bank while we're waiting, Joe?"

"For a thousand bucks a point?" I said.

"Well, for something special, anyway."

The golden lady smiled and the brine of good luck was all mixed up with violet scent.

Coming Next Issue: DEATH DRAWS A FULL HOUSE, a Smashing Novelet Featuring Undercover Jones, by LEE FREDERICKS

*DON'T BE CHEEKY,
MISTER!*

*WHY NOT?
I SHAVE WITH
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TELL A TALE OF MURDER

By SAMUEL MINES

Sometimes a Silent Corpse Can Be Eloquent!

THE phone tore Nat Chambers from a dark abyss of sleep. Wiping the fog from his eyes, he automatically noted the time—three a.m.—as he picked up the receiver.

"Lieutenant?" said Sergeant Cassidy at headquarters. "Sorry to wake you up. We just got a flash on a suicide." He hesitated.

"Yes?" Chambers said impatiently.

"Friend of yours, Lieutenant. Charley Judson."

The receiver sagged in Chambers' hand. He felt a little sick. Charley Judson a suicide? He saw him—big, blond, vital, overflowing with energy, with good humor. Judson was a trained athlete, a crank on physical culture and health. Does a man who fusses about food and clothes and ventilation kill himself?

"Hello, hello!" Cassidy called. "You still on, Lieutenant? Listen, Judson's wife is throwin' hysterics all over the place. I thought you'd want to go out there."

"Yes, Cassidy, sure. Thanks."

Judson's wife. Lieutenant Chambers' face became harshly unpleasant. He and Charley Judson had been college chums. They had played football together, lived together, would have worked together had not Chambers followed his bent into police work, while Judson had inherited a prosperous business and a sizeable fortune from his father.

There had never been a quarrel between them until Judson had married Edith Laverne. Chambers knew too much about her. As a cop he had heard about her background, her unsavory tie-up with men like "Chimp" Cronin, racketeer.

Charley Judson had been carried away by Edith's lush blond beauty and Nat Chambers found himself on the spot. He tried to warn Charley tactfully. The result was a quarrel. And Charley had married her.

Because of the strained feelings, Chambers didn't see much of Jud-

son after that, but he had the gloomy satisfaction of hearing that things went wrong at once with the marriage. There were rumors of fights, of a separation, that Charley and Edith were not living together.

And now he was dead. Nat Chambers heard the hysterical sobbing of Charley's wife as he climbed the steps of the brownstone house and pushed through the still open door. Uniformed cops, from two prowling cars outside, covering the premises, saluted him.

He found Edith Judson face down on a couch in the living room, tearing the cushions to pieces with her fingernails.

She was wrapped in a thin negligee which clung to the opulent curves of her figure in a manner which might have been disturbing at any other time. Her blond hair looked as if she'd been pulling it. In all, Chambers thought, a good performance for a girl who'd never gone further than burlesque.

"The body's in here, Lieutenant," a cop said, opening the bedroom door.

Chambers went in to look at his friend.

Judson lay on his back in bed, his blue eyes staring up sightlessly from the pillow.

He was wearing pajamas. A thirty-eight calibre automatic lay on the bed near his outflung right hand. There was a purplish hole in his right temple which had bled hardly at all, just a thin trickle down into his hair.

Chambers went back to the living room and put his hand on Edith Judson's shoulder.

"Mrs. Judson, this is Nat Chambers. I want to talk to you."

The sobbing checked. She sat up and lifted a distorted face towards him.

"I can't talk about it," she moaned. "It was horrible."

"Try to compose yourself. You must tell us what happened."

"I came home very late," she gulped, "Charley was asleep. I tried not to wake him. But he woke up as I was getting



NAT CHAMBERS

undressed. He started the old quarrel again."

"What quarrel?"

"I told him I was leaving him. I couldn't stand his jealousy, the constant fighting. He begged me not to do it. Said he'd kill himself if I left him."

"Where was he all this time?"

"In bed. I was over near my vanity, brushing my hair. He reached into the drawer of his night table and took out that gun. It's his. He said he'd shoot himself if I didn't promise to stay. I thought he was bluffing—I laughed, said go ahead. Then I heard a shot. It was—it was horrible!" She buried her face in her hands.

Chambers waited for her to get control of herself. "All this time," he asked, "Charley stayed in bed?"

"Yes."

"And he was asleep when you came in?"

"Yes, I've already told you that!"

Chambers ignored the waspish snap of her voice.

"Had you left him before, Mrs. Judson?"

"Yes. We quarreled almost as soon as we were married and I left him. He was jealous, nagged me all the time about other men. We patched it up and I came back. But he was just the same. I was going to leave again."

"So you've hardly lived with him at all, have you?"

"Hardly," she agreed. "Why? Why do you ask that?"

"I'll tell you in a minute. Just one more question. As Charley's widow you inherit a sizeable fortune, don't you?"

"What are you driving at?" she flared.

"Just trying to establish the motive," he said calmly. "We always do that in cases of murder."

IT TOOK a moment for it to sink in. "Murder?" she screamed. "I told you Charley shot himself—I saw it!"

"Yes, you did. And you were lying." He got up and took her arm. "Come along and I'll show you."

He propelled her past the staring policeman into the bedroom where Charley Judson glared up from his pillow.

"You were so anxious to establish your alibi of quarrels with Charley that you didn't live with him long enough to get to know him, Mrs. Judson. You didn't know him as well as I did. For example, you forgot that Charley was left-handed when you shot him in the right temple and laid the gun near his right hand."

"I—I—" she started to struggle.

"And that isn't all," Chambers went on, holding her tightly. "You told me he shot himself while lying in bed. I say Charley was shot *before* he was put into that bed. Because there's something else you didn't know about Charley, Mrs. Judson. He was a crank on physical culture and he never slept with a pillow. So when you said you came home and found him sleeping like that and he shot himself while lying there, I knew you were lying—I knew that you shot him first and then put him in that bed."

The woman was sagging in his grasp as though her knees would not hold her up.

"I didn't!" she screamed. "I didn't kill him! It was Chimp Cronin. He made me, forced me to cover him so we could get the money."

"I thought so," Chambers said harshly. "I knew you didn't have the courage to do it." He turned his head towards the uniformed cop. "Murphy, send out a general for Chimp Cronin. And then take Mrs. Judson—his lip curled over the name—"down and book her. Accessory to murder."

He passed her over to the cop and he made a half-high embarrassed salute with his finger before he closed the door on the body of his friend.



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A Good Investment

By

BURTON RASCOE

*World-Famous Author and
Literary Critic*

GREAT SURPRISE was expressed in some quarters of England during the last war when it became known that G. Bernard Shaw had invested the bulk of his fortune in British War Bonds and was adding to his holdings by purchases out of current income. For Shaw's open and persistent criticism of David Lloyd George's government in the conduct of the war had caused his patriotism to be called into question by some of the more illogical and hysterical patrioteers.

They could not reconcile Shaw's financial "support" of a government toward which he was so caustically antagonistic.

Shaw's explanation was typically Shavian in that, by expressing an obvious truth baldly, without any sentimental overtones, he produced an effect of daring paradox.

He said "patriotic" motives did not enter into his consideration and in the purchase of war bonds: that he was a hard-headed and foresighted business man who insisted upon a fair and safe return upon any capital he invested; and that, in war time, investment in Great

Britain's primary obligations, secured as they were by the vast resources of the British Empire and paying as they did, a relatively high rate of interest, was simply the wisest use he could make of his money.

What Shaw said of British War Bonds is equally true of United States War Bonds. So much emphasis has been laid on patriotic appeal to stimulate the sale of War Bonds that many people are under the erroneous impression that their War Bond pledges are some sort of "contribution" to the war effort—like a charity donation.

It is nothing of the sort; it is the soundest, safest, most sensible investment you can make. It is your insurance against any post-war depression. It is a form of interest-bearing savings against your future needs.

Moreover, the complete absorption of all war bond issues by the people, rather than by the commercial banks, is the surest hedge against inflation.

The wise man will not hesitate. He will invest in War Bonds to the limit of his ability!

MURDER ON DELIVERY

By LEE E. WELLS

Artist Val Jones Wanted to Paint the Indiana Countryside, but Found Himself Too Busy When a Brutal Murder Suddenly Entered the Picture!

CHAPTER I

A Piece of Coconut Pie



N ARTIST has no business being a sheriff, but Brown County did it to me. I was more interested in getting the twisting valleys of the district on canvas than I was in catching up with chicken thieves and wife-beaters.

But even murder came into the picture—a murder all messed up with a pie knife, a little coupé and the hair from the head of a blonde.

It all sounds wacky enough, but Brown County, deep in the heart of Indiana, is that kind of a place. It used to be a peaceful stretch of hollows, gullies and hill farmers, until some long-haired enthusiast painted a picture down there.

Now you can add to the hard-headed farmers a frothy layer of poets, a dramatic group whose intentions are far better than the acting and artists of all kinds.

As a fill-up, use a dash of wealthy dowagers with more money than brains, who seem to finance the whole madhouse. You got Brown County, you got the votes that made me Sheriff.

I ran to please a girl up near Bean Blossom who struggled hard at sculpturing. It was really all a joke. It was more of a joke when the ballots were counted, and I had an office in the Nashville courthouse.

If it hadn't been for Lem Turner and Tuck Axe, my deputies, I'd have never held the job. Joke or no joke, I'd been elected, and I thought the only fair thing was to be as good a lawman as I could.

But there'd never been a crime wave in Brown County, not even so much as a ripple, so I kept my fingers crossed and took office.

A lot of little things happened—nothing to get excited about. A chicken thief, a slapping bee among the art set, an argument over a lost dog.

Then came murder.

I WAS doing a canvas over near Robin's Peak that sunny morning. From where I sat, I could clearly see the winding road that climbed up from the Peak, curving before a long, white farmhouse.

The old Chevy had steamed almost to the top of the hill when I first saw it. I knew something was up when a shout echoed my name among the close-pressing hills.

I waved my arm to acknowledge the call, and started folding things up.

Tuck Axe had wedged his bulk between the seat and the steering wheel, and he was half asleep when I got up to his old car. I was pretty well loaded down with paraphernalia.

"What's up?" I asked.

Tuck twisted his moon face, and blinked his sleepy, blue eyes at me.

"Ye'd better come along, Sheriff. Zelma Daniels blowed her face in with a shotgun."

I had started toward my own car, and I halted in mid-stride. I didn't like the sound of that. It would be very messy. I swallowed.

AN EXCITING COMPLETE NOVELET



Val ducked and the bar cut the air a scant inch above his head

"I guess you and Lem had better handle it, Tuck, I—I don't know much about that sort of thing."

Tuck shook his head until his red, fat jowls quivered.

"Cain't, Val Jones. You're the sheriff, and you and the coroner got to view the re-mains. It's over to the Daniels' farm. I'll lead the way."

I was very unhappy as I climbed under the wheel. Tuck meshed gears, backed his jalopy, and expertly turned it around in the narrow space between the dirt walls. I followed him, not so expertly. In no time, we were at Robin's Peak and heading for Stone Face.

At Stone Face, Tuck took the turn on a couple of wheels, shaking and jouncing his way toward Nashville. Soon I glimpsed a whole bunch of parked cars in a farmyard down the road. It must be the Daniels' place, I guessed.

Sure enough, Tuck slowed up and successfully made the turn into the yard. I came to a halt right behind him.

Lem Turner came up with that long, loose, scarecrow stride of his. His lean jaws moved steadily on tobacco, and his brown eyes were as placid as the cows I could see over beyond the barn. He pushed his battered felt hat forward on his long nose.

"I see Tuck got ye, all right. This is mighty messy, Val, and I don't right git why Zelma had to do it."

"Married?" I asked.

"Yup." Lem nodded soberly. "Her husband's here—and he's taking it mighty hard. Hal Daniels' has a rural mail route west of Nashville."

He jerked his thumb toward the gaunt, white house.

"Ye'd better see Doc Mack. He's upstairs with the body. I reckon I'll give Tuck a hand."

I hurried up the neat little path to the narrow porch. The Daniels' home was a two-story affair, with a high-peaked roof and a dour primness about it that reminded me of New England. I didn't like the place.

There was quite a group inside the boxlike living room, where bearded ancestors stared out of dark, heavy frames on the walls.

A man of about thirty sat on an uncomfortable sofa, his dark head in his hands, his shoulders heaving. A neighbor woman and a sun-wrinkled farmer

were trying to get him quiet.

He looked up when I came in. His black eyes were red-rimmed from weeping and his wide mouth was all screwed up with pain. He was dressed in a leather coat, an open-front shirt and blue work trousers.

Wordlessly he was staring at me, and slowly came to his feet. The farmer tried to get him to sit down again, but he threw off the restraining hands.

"Sheriff, ye got to do something. Zelma's dead, do ye hear! She's dead!"

It went through me like a knife, and I could feel myself getting all watery inside. I spoke a little gruffly to cover up my helplessness.

"You must be Hal Daniels. I'll do what I can, you can bank on that. I'll want to talk to you in a few minutes."

I pushed past, and he turned, so that the last thing I saw as I went up the narrow stairs was his tear-stained face.

THE body was in the little, low-ceilinged room to the front of the house. There was Doc Mack and a couple of other men in there when I shoved through the door.

The first thing I saw was the shotgun tied firmly to the kitchen chair so that the gun pointed through the back toward another chair, where the body lay.

Doc Mack's tubby bulk hid the body for a moment, and then he stepped aside. I took one gasping look and then the sweat popped out on my forehead.

Zelma Daniels, from the soft curves of her body, had been a young woman. But that's all that suggested beauty. From the mouth up, her face was a bloody mess of bone, cartilage and brain. The shotgun blast had practically torn her head off.

Mack thoughtfully put a cloth over the thing that had been her face and hurried to me. I had a glimpse of myself in a dresser mirror across the room, and it scared me. My thick lips were hanging open like a fish, and I looked slightly greenish.

Mack eased me down.

"You'll be all right, Val."

It made me mad. Rats, I was sheriff, and here I was, acting like an anatomy student with his first cadaver.

I took a good grip on myself and looked around. There was a string from the trigger of the shotgun looping down

and then up to the dangling hand of the dead woman. It was tied to her finger.

"That way?" I asked. "She just sat in line with the barrel and pulled the string?"

"That's it." Doc Mack nodded his bald head. "To save my soul, I don't know why Zelma would have done it. She was young, ain't been married to Hal for much more'n two years."

I was feeling better by the minute.

"Finances?" I asked.

Mack followed me as I crossed to the body, sprawled limply in the chair.

She wore a house dress, a bit soiled with flour and a fleck of what looked like meringue to me. I touched her arm. It was cold. She'd been dead some time.

Doc Mack caught my frown.

"Hal found her just like this. He claims he touched nothing. He ran over to the Martin house, down the road, and phoned your office." Doc touched me on the shoulder. "That's the way she looked before this happened."

He pointed to a photograph on the dresser. I saw a narrow, pointed face, laughing red lips, and brown eyes that must have been dancing with fun. It was hard to look from that to the thing sprawled in the chair.

I gritted my teeth, and lifted the dead hand that had pulled the string. She had tied a slip knot and placed it over her finger. The knot hung slack. I studied it, frowning.

"How about money worries?" I asked again.

Doc Mack shrugged.

"I never heard of none. Maybe Bill Brennan can tell you about that."

I nodded and carefully lowered the hand. Most of the people of the county did business with Brennan's bank in Nashville and the old man always gave me the information I wanted. I turned away and walked out of the room.

There was a short hall outside, a front and back stairs leading to it. Turning, I walked to the rear of the hall and down the back stairs. It brought me into a sunny kitchen, clean as a hound's tooth, except—

The pie on the cabinet drew my attention. It was coconut, with a heavy cover of meringue. A quarter slice had been cut out of it. On the table was a single plate, holding a thin scattering of flaky pie crust.

I scratched my head, frowned, and then walked into the front room. Hal Daniels was still sitting on the divan, staring hollow-eyed at the far wall. Never was a face more deeply etched with tragedy.

JUST then, Tuck Axe shoved his bulk in the front door, and I had him clear the house of everyone but Hal Daniels, Doc Mack and myself. I called up the stairs for Doc to come down, and then returned to the front room. Presently, Doc came in, looking at me with a puzzled expression.

I sat down in front of Hal Daniels.

"Did you discover Zelma's body immediately after you came in?"

He nodded and his voice trembled.

"Yes. I went upstairs to change clothes, and there she was."

"You didn't go out to the kitchen?"

He shook his head, looked up sharply.

"No, I didn't. I tell ye I walked straight to that door there and right upstairs."

I leaned back, sighed. Doc Mack shifted his weight and his chair squeaked in protest. I turned to him.

"You see this as suicide?" I asked.

"That's it." Doc Mack's wide face looked gloomy. "But I sure can't see a reason."

"There isn't a reason." I arose. "It's murder, Mack, murder made to look like suicide."

Hal Daniels jumped to his feet, and Doc Mack threw himself back in his chair, staring at me. Daniels' strong hands gripped my arms.

"Ye mean someone killed her! Ye mean they was someone lowdown enough to do that to Zelma!"

"Just that," I answered gravely.

Doc Mack shot me a quick upward look from under shaggy eyebrows.

"How do you figure it murder?"

"Hal claims he went straight upstairs. Yet someone cut a piece of fresh pie in the kitchen and ate it. Maybe Zelma ate the pie. But I can't see anyone eating a quarter of coconut pie and then committing suicide."

Doc Mack considered this a moment, then slowly nodded.

"It doesn't sound right, Val. Still, you can't tell."

I stepped forward, meeting the old doctor's puzzled stare. "The clincher is

upstairs right on the body. Zelma apparently used a slip knot when she tied that string around her finger. If she had pulled the trigger, the knot would have tightened.

"It isn't tight—it's loose. That knot was tied after Zelma Daniels was dead. And someone else ate that pie, either before or after the crime!"

CHAPTER II

The Blond-Haired Man

EVEN Tuck Axe, leaning against the door, wasn't sleepy any more. Doc Mack slowly whistled and nodded. Hal Daniels was as quiet as a bronze statue, all expression erased.

I turned to Tuck.

"Have Lem run to my studio, Tuck, and get my camera. I want pictures before we have to move anything. Tell Lem not to spare the horses."

Tuck gulped noisily, and pushed his bulk through the door again. From the sudden rise of voices outside I knew Tuck had spilled the news.

I suggested we go to the kitchen. Hal and Doc followed me. I showed them the cut pie, the dirty plate—and then suddenly I knew what had bothered me before. There was no stained knife or fork in the kitchen. Whoever left a dirty plate wouldn't bother to wash a knife or a fork, I reasoned.

It had me stumped. Why should the pie knife be gone? And where? A lot of the farm folk down this way ate with a knife, so I wasn't worried much about the fork.

I rummaged in the cabinet drawers, looked behind the stove, the cabinet, under the chairs and the table. I even went outside and searched the ground, thinking the knife might have been thrown away. But it didn't show up, and all I could do was forget it for the time being.

When I returned to the house, Lem was back with my little Dollina camera. He'd even remembered to bring some flash bulbs and a gun.

For the next hour, I was busy taking all the pictures I thought necessary to record the full scene of the crime. Then I gave Doc Mack permission to turn the body over to the undertaker.

I was glad to get out of the house, and so were Lem and Tuck. We formed a little group around my car. Lem was still chewing with steady regularity on his tobacco, and Tuck looked like he needed a place to sleep.

"So it's murder, ye say," Lem scratched his long chin. "Now what do we do?"

I looked thoughtfully down the road.

"I'll talk to Arnie Martin. Maybe he saw something. Lem, you and Tuck make inquiries up and down the road."

We parted. I drove the short distance to the neat little Martin farmhouse, and Arnie was out in the yard, leaning over the fence. He was slight and thin, with a long, twitching nose, and thin lips.

"Did you see anything unusual down the Daniels' way?" I asked, without much preliminaries.

Arnie took his time answering.

"Well, I don't rightly know. The Missus says she saw a black coupé a couple of times. I saw a man come out of the house and walk around the side. Then I heard a car drive away, but I didn't see it."

"The man?" I pressed. "Did you recognize him?"

Arnie shook his head.

"It's a right good piece down there for eyes as old as mine. All I noticed was he had mighty light hair."

I couldn't get much more out of him. The coupé had been seen just before noon, and Arnie had seen the blond man right after the dinner hour. That was something, but I didn't know exactly what to do with it. I began to think maybe the stranger was the man who had cut and eaten the pie.

Presently, I was back at the Daniels' place. Hal was out in the kitchen, brooding over a cup of coffee. Zelma's body was still upstairs, but Doc Mack was sending a hearse out from Nashville for it.

HAL DANIELS silently arose and got a cup and spoon for me. I sank down at the table, hardly knowing how to start on a guy who had just lost his wife. Hal placed the black brew before me, then sank back in his own chair, and stared, far-eyed, out the window.

"How old are you, Hal?" I asked.

"Twenty-nine," he replied dully. "Zelma was just twenty-six."

"You deliver mail?" I suggested.

"Were you on the route today?"

He nodded and then turned to look at me, his eyes big and watery.

"Yes, the mail—and the Indianapolis newspapers of an afternoon. I'll have to be leaving pretty soon. There ain't no one to take the route for me."

"I'm sorry, Hal. Maybe I can get someone in Nashville."

"No need," he said, shaking his head. "I'd rather be working. That's what I was doing this morning."

I took a long drink of the coffee and carefully replaced the cup on the table.

"Know anyone who might want to have killed her, Hal?"

He jerked his head around, and I had the impression that he had a name on the tip of his tongue. Then he snapped his lips tight, shook his head.

"No one, Val. There ain't no one, leastways anyone that I'd name. Ye'll find Zelma was mighty liked."

That was that, and I gave up after awhile. Lem and Tuck drove up and I decided to leave. I told Tuck to hang around and keep Hal company until after the body was taken away.

Mulling over the problem, I drove back to Nashville. Hal had a good alibi in his mail route. Only Arnie Martin had seen anyone suspicious, but there must be hundreds of blond men in Brown County, and just as many black coupés. Hal drove a blue sedan, and I just ruled him completely out of the picture. He was the innocent bystander who got badly hurt when murder struck.

Before I went on to the courthouse, I stopped at my studio to unload my palette and canvas and look at my mail. There was nothing but a circular from the Nashville Players that Wednesday night they were presenting a play. I wadded up the note and threw it away. Fat chance I'd have of enjoying a play, or anything else, until this killing was straightened up.

There was nothing new at the office. I met Doc Mack on the street and he told me there would be an inquest the next morning. I was to see that Hal Daniels was there. I nodded soberly and went on to the bank.

It was just a minute before closing time and old Bill Brennan was in a mel-low mood. He closed the door of his office and poured me a shot of his own private bottle. It was nice to relax for

a change.

I leaned back, sighed and looked warmly at old Bill. His white hair was badly mussed and his black string tie was pulled clear to one side. He had a big, round and wrinkled face, the tan of the skin making his hair seem even more silver. Shrewd blue eyes watched me as I downed the first shot. Without a word, Bill filled the glass again.

"Hear there's been a ruckus down on the Daniels farm," he began. "Zelma was a mighty pretty girl, and I sure am sorry she killed herself."

I shook my head.

"Someone did it for her and tried to make it look like suicide."

BRENNAN'S eyes widened a little but that was all. I doubt if anything could startle the old man.

"Now that's mighty bad. Any idea who?"

"Nope. Arnie Martin saw someone around the place, but he didn't know it was."

"Arnie's getting along in years," Brennan observed. "He's still the biggest he-gossip in the county, though. I wonder he didn't mosey down to see who it was."

"He didn't, worse luck," I said, grinning wryly. "All he knows is the man was a blond and drove a black coupé. That's not much to go on."

"I reckon ye'll have to be doing some big city detecting, Val," he warned. "I've heard some talk an artist is a mighty poor person to be sheriff. Reckon this will tell the folks, one way or the other."

I frowned down at the glass in my hands.

"I guess it will, Bill. What was Zelma's name before she married? Where did she live?"

"She was a Durham," Bill rumbled. "Lived just north of town here. Her folks were sort of shiftless, but Zelma herself was pretty spunky. She had a couple of worthless brothers, Pete and Armin. Pete's just back from a year in jail. Been hanging around town."

"Blond?" I asked, leaning forward.

"Nope, redhead. Ye know, Hal and Bret Howard was both courting Zelma at the same time. Bret took it mighty hard when Hal married her. Bret swore he'd kill her and himself, but he just never got around to it."

I felt a little excited. I placed my

glass on the corner of Bill's desk, thanked him for the drink and his time.

"Glad to see ye, Val. That's more'n I can say for most of these artist fellers. By the way, don't jump too fast to any conclusions about Bret Howard."

I thanked him again and left the bank. The Howard Hardware Emporium was just down the street in the square beyond the courthouse.

So Bret Howard had talked something about killing when Zelma was married! I'd heard other tales about the young man. He was hot-headed, emotional, nervous.

This, I hoped fervently, would be the lead that might break the case. I crossed my fingers, pushed into the hardware store.

Bret Howard was the first person I saw, and he had a shock of corn-colored, blond hair.

CHAPTER III

Village DuBarry

I LOAFED around until Bret finished with his customer and then came over to me. There were only the two of us in the store and it was pretty quiet. Somewhere down the street toward the hotel an auto backfired and it sounded like a gunshot.

Bret Howard was pretty big, about my size. His face was square-cut, bony. His gray eyes sat far back under heavy ridge bone and his cheeks were lean, so that he somehow looked hungry.

"What's on your mind, Val?" His voice was soft, surprising in so big a man.

"A few questions, Bret. Can ye talk?"

"I guess so." He leaned against a counter and his big fingers toyed with some porcelain towel bars.

"You heard about Zelma Daniels?"

"Yes." A spasm of pain crossed his face and his mouth dropped. "It's awful. Why did she do it?"

I let him have it straight.

"She didn't, Bret. She was murdered."

It was like I had hit him with my fist. His whole body flinched and for a moment he swayed on his feet.

He cleared his throat a couple of times. "Who?" he managed at last.

"I don't know—yet. I'm following every lead I can get. That's why I came to you."

He looked up, his eyes clouding. I saw his lips abruptly thin, and I didn't like the way his nostrils flared.

"What help can I be?"

"You were in love with Zelma. I heard you took her marriage to Hal pretty hard. You made some promises—"

I saw his hand sweep up just in time. I ducked, and the towel bar cut the air a scant inch over my head. His face was contorted as he drove at me. I parried the next blow of the bar, catching his wrist with the edge of my hand. The bar flew over the counter and broke in a thousand pieces on the floor.

Bret swung at me, and his knuckles burned along my jaw. It set me back on my heels and all I could do was cover. His fists pounded at me, one sinking deep in my stomach. I catapulted back, my breath blasting from my lungs. I couldn't see for the agony that drenched me.

Madly, I fumbled at my hip pocket and finally got the gun hammer loose from the pocket lining. When he caught the flash of the weapon, Bret pulled up short. Slowly I straightened, my chest heaving. Bret just stood still and stared at the gun.

I leaned weakly against the counter. The aisle space looked as though a tornado had torn through the store.

"That was a foolish play, Bret," I managed to gasp. "You must want me to believe you're guilty."

He still stared at the gun, but I could see the dull red creep up his neck from below his collar.

"I lost—my head," he stammered. "Sure, I threatened a lot of things when Zelma got married, but I didn't think very straight in those days."

My ribs still ached and my head rang where Bret's fists had caught me.

"I'm not accusing or arresting you, Bret. Think I can put this gun away and we can talk like civilized people?"

He nodded. I watched him a minute and saw that the fight was all gone from him.

"Have you been in the store all morning?" I asked, gingerly touching by my aching jaw.

"No," he replied. "My clerk opened up and handled things until a short while

ago. I was—out.”

“Where?”

He looked up quickly.

“That’s none of your business.”

“You got all the wrong angles, Bret,” I warned. “Right now it is very much my business. What kind of a car do you drive?”

“A Ford coupé.”

“Black?”

“Sure. What of it?”

I stared at him, my brain racing. This was adding up pretty quick, checking right in with Arnie Martin’s story. I leaned forward a little.

“A blond man in a black coupé was seen at the Daniels’ home this morning, not long before Zelma was killed. Were you out that way?”

HE LOOKED up and I saw the sudden fright that crowded his eyes and tugged at the slack muscles of his face.

“I guess it is your business, Val,” he admitted weakly. “I wasn’t near the Daniels’ place and that’s the truth.”

My brows arched and my voice sounded like I didn’t quite believe him.

“Where were you?”

“I don’t like to talk about this, Val.” He flushed and looked uncomfortable. “You’ll understand. Some of the clackety tongues around town could make a mess of it. I was with Darene Arnold and we went up to the Abe Martin Lodge. We had some drinks and talked awhile and then I took her home.”

I began to understand why Bret didn’t want to talk much. Around Nashville, you said Darene Arnold in the same way you said DuBarry. Yes, one of those, on a small scale, of course, but just as much potential dynamite as the more famous courtesan had been.

I checked back to statements he had made before, but I couldn’t shake his story, and that was that.

“Better keep right inside Nashville, Bret,” I advised him. “I might want you in a hurry.”

“I’ll stay around,” he answered heavily. The fight was all gone out of him.

I left the store and walked slowly back to the courthouse. Once in my office, I sank down wearily in the swivel chair behind my desk and stared out the window, thinking.

I wanted to hear from Lem and Tuck

before I did anything else. They might have turned up a better description of the mysterious man hanging around the Daniels’ house.

Doc Mack’s hearse rolled sedately by my window, and the sight of it gave my stomach a nervous twinge. I could picture the bloody cargo it carried.

Finally Lem and Tuck came in, within a few minutes of each other. They were a strangely matched pair, one tall and lean, the other short and fat. But they both had that calm, slow, yet clear-thinking way of the country. They knew everybody and everybody’s family history clear back to the fourth generation, amen. I couldn’t get along without them.

Tuck sank in the nearest chair and wheezed awhile. He yawned a couple of times and then reported complete failure. I looked around at Lem. He just shook his head and kept his jaw chewing. I sighed deeply. We were no further along.

I told them about Bret Howard and what I had learned in town. Tuck looked half asleep as I talked, and unconsciously I turned my attention to Lem. But it was the little, sleepy, fat man who had the first comment to make.

“Bret sells shotguns and shells at his place, Val. Bret’s a blond, he drives a black coupé.”

I looked from Tuck up to Lem. His prominent Adam’s apple bobbed.

“Ye’d do well to check his story, Val, I’m thinking.”

Tuck nodded his head and his little blue eyes looked a trifle less sleepy.

“If I hadn’t checked, I’d suspicion that shotgun might have come from Bret’s. It didn’t. I reckon Hal’s pappy had it before him.”

“Well, I’m calling on the Venus of Nashville, boys,” I announced, pushing my hat on my head. “Get yourselves a bite to eat and hang around close. I may need you later.”

DARENE Arnold lived in a little cottage at the south edge of town. I suppose the big city police departments would list her as “without visible means of support,” but you wouldn’t believe it. She was always dressed to the minute, had a car of her own, and didn’t run any bills at the local stores. The draft had threatened to cramp her style, but she

simply pushed up her own age limits.

I stopped in front of her place, pushed open the gate in the picket fence. There was a moss-brick sidewalk, a wide porch, and then I was knocking on the door.

Darene herself answered, and I felt my blood corpuscles sit up and shout.

She was tall, one of those leggy girls with curves here and there that make a man's eyes linger. She gave me a deep look with violet eyes, and her red lips formed a little, uncertain smile.

I sensed a trace of nervousness in her manner. She knew me well enough and figured the visit at least semi-official. I took the cigarette she offered and she flicked a lighter. As I bent forward to accept the light, I caught her provocative perfume.

I inhaled deeply and studied her. In a subtle way she was trying to give me the works.

"I hear you and Bret Howard spent some time together this morning?"

"Did we?" Those violet eyes widened in surprise. Her fingers absently toyed with the blond curls just back of her ear.

"Yes," I asserted. "I'll have to ask you to tell me about it." She looked flustered, prettily so, and spread her hands in a little gesture of weakness.

"But I don't understand, Sheriff Jones. If we were together there was no harm done."

"No," I agreed. "I just would like to know. By the way, I should tell you it concerns Zelma Daniels' murder."

"Murder!" She said it in a little shriek, and her eyes grew wider. "But I heard she shot herself."

"Papers and gossips can't be believed," I grunted. "Now will you answer my question, Miss Arnold?"

"Of course." Her hands were clenching the edge of the davenport as she leaned forward. "Bret called for me early this morning and we took a drive. We stopped at the Abe Martin Lodge and had a drink or two. We talked for awhile and then left. Bret brought me home and I guess he went to his store."

I nodded, but I wasn't too pleased. It all checked with what Bret had told me, and just when I was beginning to see him as a prime suspect. But a man shouldn't let his ideas distort the facts, so I arose and made my apologies for taking her time.

Just at the door, I had an idea.

"Miss Arnold, do you know if Bret Howard likes coconut pie?" I asked abruptly.

I admit she had a right to look surprised.

"What a strange question! No, he doesn't, Sheriff Jones."

"Okay and thanks again." I sighed elaborately, and made for the door.

As I saw it, there was no time like now to check both Bret and Darene Arnold's story. At the main corner I started the car north on the road to Morgantown. The Abe Martin Lodge was out this way, a half mile off the main highway. It was a swell place to eat and served possibly the best drinks in the State.

IT WAS pretty close to dark when I finally swung off on the graveled road and started climbing one of the sharp ridges that are common down here.

Shadows lurked like creeping things beneath the dark trees, and the last fading light of the day cast a peculiar yellow-purple glow over the sky. Everything seemed to have suddenly stilled, and breathing was oppressive.

I wheeled in at the circular drive of the Abe Martin Lodge, a big rambling log affair. When I stepped into the big main room, I couldn't see any one but Charley Davis. He stood behind the bar polishing some glasses. Then I heard a low, soft laugh from one of the booths toward the rear and I knew Charley had at least two customers.

"How are you, Sheriff?" He kept polishing the glass. "I've paid my license, I don't sell to minors, and there's no games of chance around."

"Keep it that way." I climbed on a stool. "I'd hate to close a place that serves good drinks. I'm doing a little checking, Charley. Was Bret Howard around this morning?"

Charley nodded his bald head and reached for a bottle of Scotch.

"Yep, he was here."

"And Darene Arnold?" I accepted the slug he poured.

Charley nodded again and his thin lips parted in a wise grin.

"She was here, too. That dame gets around, Val, like nothing I've ever seen before. Seemed like Bret had no more'n time to get her home, than here she was back with another man."

The Scotch was good, but I wasn't exactly shouting. The more questions I asked, the further I got from a solution to the killing.

"That blond plays everything both ways from the jack," Charley chuckled, and started polishing glasses again. "Hal Daniels and Bret Howard both in the same day. I bet you she's back tonight with a third."

I stopped fingering the whiskey glass. My mind was racing at fifty thousand rpm. I had the sudden thought that a blond dame in slacks at a long distance might resemble a man. Maybe we all had been looking at things from the wrong angle. Maybe—I broke my thoughts off sharply and arose from the stool.

"Thanks, Charley, for the information. Maybe I'll catch your murderer some time."

"God forbid," he protested, laughing. "One gives you ten I die in bed."

I waved my hand and hurried toward my car. Darene Arnold was getting more important by the minute.

Now if I could hook a mysterious black coupé and a missing pie knife to the dame, I might have something. But that pie knife was going to be a problem. I wished that the killer hadn't liked coconut.

CHAPTER IV

Unexpected Corpse

IT WAS too late to tag Darene when I got to Nashville. She had left for an evening in Indianapolis with someone and I figured she'd not get home until morning. I was disappointed, but it gave me time to rest and get something to eat.

When I finally wandered over to the jail and the office Lem Turner was waiting, patient and uncomplaining.

"Carl Higgins was in town," Lem said quietly. "He lives up toward the Daniels' place. Val, he seen that black coupé. Just about the time of the murder he saw it, and he swears he spotted it several times during the past week."

I frowned. That cursed coupé again! "Did he know who owned it?" I asked testily.

"Nope. He just had a glimpse of the

driver. It was a man—blond, Carl said, and that's about all he saw."

I sank down behind my desk.

"Lem, suppose our murderer was a woman? No one has ever seen this person clearly, and women can wear slacks."

Lem studied this over for a long time. At last he spat elaborately into a brass spittoon my predecessor in office had left.

"New fangled things! A woman in pants, Val, is bounden to get in trouble. I reckon ye might be on a good trail there."

"So do I," I agreed, "and I got the girl picked out to question. But there doesn't seem to be any straight connection between her and Zelma Daniels. I'm getting to Darene in the morning. I'd talk to her tonight, but she's in Indianapolis."

"She ain't," Lem negated.

"How do you know?" I asked snappishly.

"Heard tell," Lem jerked his calloused thumb toward the courthouse where the loafers sat along the curb of an evening. "Her feller drove down for her. Been to her house and all over. She ain't around."

I thought that one over.

"She broke the date," I essayed.

"Sure," Lem agreed. "But who with?"

That started another train of thought. Was she with Bret Howard after I had questioned them both? How about Hal Daniels? She had been seen with him at the Abe Martin Lodge, and Hal was supposed to be in love with his wife. Maybe a guilty conscience had made him all the more grief-stricken when his wife was murdered.

I shifted, ran fingers thoughtfully through my hair. Suddenly I dropped my hand flat on the desk, and Lem jumped.

"I think I'd better find Miss Darene Arnold, I announced. "You hold down the place."

Quickly, I walked the dark blocks to her house. There was no light, no sign that anyone was home. I pushed open the gate and went up the walk. Gently, I tried the door. It was locked.

Uncertain and puzzled, I walked back to the courthouse. I stood outside a minute, watching the lights at the two cafés and in the big white hotel on the corner. I checked all three places, and

came out drawing blanks. No Darene.

Back at my office I called the Abe Martin Lodge and got Charley Davis right away. No, Darene wasn't out there. Then I was stumped. I told Lem about my fruitless trip and we sat together staring aimlessly at the desk top. It wasn't getting us anywhere, but I had a terrific hunch that I'd better be on my feet and finding that dame.

Wearily, I rose up again. I didn't say anything to Lem. Just went outside, climbed into my car, and headed out toward Stone Face and the Daniels' farm.

On the way out, I stopped at Howard's brick country home. It was dark and the car was gone from his garage. I cursed my luck and drove on down the road. I didn't pass any cars after I made the turn-off at the bridge beyond the State park entrance.

The night was black as pitch and most of the farmhouses were dark. I couldn't help but think that this was a swell night and place for murder. I shuddered the thought away.

BEFORE I made the last turn to the Daniels' farm, I switched off my lights. I lowered the speed to a crawl and kept peering out the windshield. There was no one moving around Arnie Martin's place, and then I was at the Daniels' home.

When I sighted the blank, dark windows, I just sat and cursed. Was everyone in Brown County on the prowl tonight! I scouted around, trying to be quiet. Hal's blue sedan was gone.

I went up to the house and tried the door. It swung open.

The room was black, only the windows were slight, dim blobs. Striking a match, I crossed to the kitchen. Another match showed a pile of dirty dishes where Hal Daniels had eaten. A partially cut loaf of bread stood bare on the cabinet and a coffee pot still stood on the stove. I noticed an empty pie pan among the dishes.

I didn't linger long, turning and feeling my way up the stairs. The murder room was closed, and, so far as I could see, undisturbed. And that was all I learned.

Back in the car I sat thinking for awhile, wondering why all three people—Darene Arnold, Hal Daniels and Bret

Howard—should be missing at the same time. Why had Zelma Daniels been killed?

The motive, so far, was completely obscured.

Finally I drove back to Nashville, and found Lem Turner curled up on the desk top, peacefully asleep. I sent him home and locked up the office. After all, it was my job.

Then I wandered out to the sidewalk and stared toward the south of town. On sheer impulse, I decided to give another look for Darene Arnold before I drove to my studio and a much-needed bed.

It was still dark in the cottage, and right then I gave up hopes of finding Darene. Still, just to be sure, I walked to the porch. It was just as empty as it had been before. Cursing a little under my breath, I walked to the far end of the porch, peering around the corner of the house.

Instantly, I caught the dull gleam of black metal and a faint sparkle from a reflector. Either Darene was home, or someone else was here. With quick, rapping steps I walked back to the door. I raised my knuckles to knock—and then froze.

The door was standing slightly open, and it had been locked when I had come before. Suspiciously, I looked around, trying to probe into the shadows that clustered in the yard. I carefully tugged my gun out of my hip pocket and extended my arm.

The tips of my fingers gently swung the door back into darkness. I stood crouched there, probing into the room, seeing nothing but opaque blackness. My ears strained for sound, but there was none.

My fingers tight on the gun, I stepped softly inside. I remained still, listening. Satisfied, I reached for the door and gently closed it. There was a peculiar stillness to the house, as though even the walls were as tensed as I. With my hand forward and low, I took a couple of cautious steps forward.

There was only a faint whisper of sound, but it was right beside me. Instantly, I whirled, and a heavy object caught me a glancing blow across the head. It dizzied me, sent me stumbling. A dim shadow came closer, towered over me, and I hit the floor on one knee.

DESPERATELY, I raised the gun and the shot sounded like a cannon in the small room. The figure faded back and I straightened. Again my assailant closed in, strong fingers gripped my gun wrist. Then that thing connected with my head, hard and true this time.

My brain started spinning like a cartwheel, my fingers clawed out, clutching for support. I touched something like hair and grabbed. The nap of the carpet scraping along my cheek was the last thing I remembered.

I don't know how long I was out. When I blinked open my eyes, I was still lying on the floor, the house inky dark.

My fingers clutched the gun. Groggily, I heard faint shouts of alarm through the closed door.

Then my brain snapped awake. I pulled myself to my feet and staggered to the door. It was still unlocked and I opened it, hanging onto the frame. There was a little knot of excited people out by the walk. My fingers struck a wall switch and I snapped on the porch light.

"The sheriff," someone exclaimed and I could see the tension go out of them. They hung around, curious, and I turned inside and switched on the room light.

A chair had been knocked over and the rug pretty well ridged by our scuffling feet. There was no indication who my assailant might have been. I saw the telephone, sat down and dialed Lem Turner's home.

As quickly as I could I sketched what happened.

"There are some folks outside might get curious, Lem. I need you around to keep them at a distance."

It was then I saw the two blond hairs caught on a button of my vest. I carefully pulled them out, examined them. Immediately, I thought of Darene and Bret. My lips were pretty grim as I carefully placed those hairs into an envelope.

I turned then and went toward the back of the house. The next room was obviously for dining, and off this was a bedroom. I reached inside and snapped on the light.

And then my eyes goggled in horror.

Darene Arnold lay across the bed, the cover of which was crimson with blood.

Her throat had been cut.

My stomach turned over a couple of times, and then I got a grip on myself. I jumped across the room and yanked down the blind on the window. Then I turned to the bed.

I touched Darene's arm and there was still just a faint trace of warmth to the dead flesh.

For a minute I stared at her shapely body. Then my eyes shifted and I saw something lying on the floor under the bed.

It was a knife, stained red. A long blade with a spring release in the handle. Definitely, it was not a woman's weapon.

I noticed that someone had filed the blade to shape it into a peculiar hook like nothing I had seen before. Gingerly I turned it over and my eyes got big. At the top of the blade was a spot of dried substance, just a fleck. It looked to me like long-dried meringue.

I knew I had found the pie knife!

There was a knock on the front door, and I hastily placed the knife on a cluttered vanity and hurried to answer the summons.

It was Lem a bit tired with all the goings-on. My news shocked him awake and he scooted back down the street after Doc Mack. I returned to the bedroom and the body.

It wasn't long before the wheels started turning. Doc Mack made a shocked examination and set the time of death. She had been murdered some time between my first and second calls here, but where she had been before that was still a puzzler.

Of course, the news was all over Nashville by the next morning, and there was a lot of talk about "having a real sheriff around these parts."

I was pretty grim by the time the beauty shop opened up.

Belle Norton was friendly and co-operative. She was one of these smart, intelligent girls who keep studying in her profession. I banked on her as the only one this side of Indianapolis who could answer my question. I showed her the hairs I had placed in the envelope the night before.

Hard thinking had swung me right around to the old theory a blond man had done the killing. And I wanted Belle Norton to check my ideas. I knew the hairs had come from my assailant of the

night before.

Belle held them under a strong light, felt their texture.

"How sure you want to be, Val?" Her bright, birdlike eyes peered at me through glasses.

"Very sure," I replied grimly.

"Then I'll put it through my lab. Make yourself comfortable." She swung away toward the back of the shop.

I did, sprawling in one of the leather and chrome chairs and I dozed off for awhile. When Belle finally awakened me, all my theories were tossed into a cracked hat.

"Are you kidding, Val?" she asked surprisingly. "Those hairs are from a woman's head. She would be middle-aged. But there's been no life in them for a long time. They're brittle with age."

I just stared at her, gulped, and thanked her. Avoiding her questions, I left the place. For awhile I walked aimlessly up and down the street, then dropped into the café for breakfast. While I ate, I stared out the window, beyond the courthouse square to the old barn where the dramatic society gave its shows. This new upset had my brain whirling, and I don't know how long I eyed those hand-painted playbills posted up before the theater.

THEN I got it. It hit me hard and hot right between the eyes. The playbills, the theater, had handed me the solution to the blond hairs! The idea propelled me out of the booth in such a hurry I forgot to pay my bill.

I practically ran across the courthouse lawn to the play barn and was lucky to find Jean Hoagland. He was the director, a swishy sort of a guy, but you liked him, somehow.

I told him what I wanted and he let me look over the membership list. I turned away, disappointed. The name I had hoped to see wasn't there.

Then Jean came to my rescue.

"Val, I intended to report this a day or two ago, but it slipped my mind. The loss was small, a couple of wigs have been stolen."

"Blond ones?" I whooped and grabbed his coat lapels.

He nodded, staring, and I was off like a shot again.

I burst in the main doors of the bank

and scooted back to Bill Brennan's office.

I shot questions at him hot and heavy. Yes, Darene Arnold owned a black coupé. Yes, she sometimes loaned it and no one was surprised when someone else rode around in it. Sure, Bret had been playing her. Sooner or later she got them all, even Hal Daniels. Then I asked him about Zelma.

"She had no money, Val," Brennan answered thoughtfully. "None whatever. But I know she carried a couple of life insurance policies. Ye'd sort of overlooked that angle, eh?"

"Just got around to it," I corrected. "See you later, Bill."

Down at the Arnold house, I roused Lem, we locked the place up tight, and I sent him hurrying after Tuck Axe. The lean, gaunt deputy just stared at me as I gave him quick directions.

He disappeared toward Tuck's home and I rushed back to the courthouse office. I hastily pawed through the desk drawer until I found a pair of handcuffs. I reloaded and checked my revolver, and by that time Tuck was sleepily pushing his bulk through the door.

"I'm playing a long hunch that may trap the man we want," I snapped to him and Lem. "There may be a little excitement, but I want you boys around."

"I reckon we can handle what comes along, Val," Lem assured, patting the new bulge in the hip pocket of his overalls.

It wasn't long before we pulled up before the Daniels' farm. Hal met us at the door, and his face still looked grief-stricken.

"We want to take another look around, Hal," I said, and he silently stepped to one side.

Once in the house, I gave Lem a signal and went upstairs. Lem and Tuck stayed with Hal and kept him down out of my way.

I looked every conceivable place, drawers, closets, and couldn't find what I wanted. I tore up the bed and still drew zero.

I began to think my fine theories had blown up in my face when I thought of the mattress. I turned it over and, sure enough, there was a fresh rip in the ticking. My fingers groped and I came out with a blond wig. Inside was a blue stamp-mark, "Nashville Little Theater."

That did it. I returned to the lower

floor by the way of the kitchen. Hal's dishes were piled higher in the sink. I went on into the front room where Hal stood by the window.

He turned the second I entered. Instantly, his eyes froze on the wig I held in my hand.

Slowly, I spun it around on my finger. "You know what it means, Hal. Your whole scheme has gone haywire."

HAL DANIELS' eyes bugged out in horror. I pulled the snap-blade knife out of my pocket.

"This is yours, too. I found it at Darene Arnold's last night. It had slit her throat. It has at one time cut a piece of coconut pie right back there in the kitchen."

Lem and Tuck were both goggling at me like they'd seen ghosts. I kept watching Hal, my eyes wary.

"I see it this way, Hal. You and Darene Arnold had been running around together and you were tired of Zelma. All she did was make a home for you, see to it that you were comfortable. Darene, of course, was something else again. She had class, glamour."

"Zelma's insurance would give you a stake to start somewhere else with Darene. So you slugged Zelma and then set up the suicide stage properties. You actually pulled the trigger of the shotgun to blast away the marks of the blows that knocked Zelma out."

"But before that, you'd been setting the stage. You stole this wig in Nashville, borrowed Darene's black coupé and let yourself be glimpsed several times in the neighborhood."

Hal had raised his hand to his throat and his fingers dug into the skin.

"To establish an alibi, you left here for your usual time on the mail route. You used Darene's car and the wig, came back here and killed Zelma. Then you drove like blazes to your own blue sedan. But first you had to wait here awhile to make the time alibi stand up. That's when you ate the piece of pie."

"You still don't wash your dirty dishes, Hal, and that's what tripped you. I found the dirty plate, but the knife was missing. That didn't ring true to my mind."

"Now I know why I couldn't find the knife. It's the one you carry with you all the time. That hook in the blade

is for cutting the tough hemp on bundles of newspapers. You planned the whole murder very well, Hal Daniels. It looked like suicide. If we happened to see through that, Bret Howard's old threats would throw the suspicion right on him."

Hal choked a little, took a half step forward. I felt my muscles tense.

"It had me fooled and I had Bret tagged in my mind. That's why I was questioning Darene, but you didn't know that. You were afraid I was on the right trail. You were afraid that she'd talk. So, last night you killed her, after spending the evening trying to learn what she actually had told me."

"I happened in at the wrong time and you had to get away. In the fight a couple of the hairs from that wig happened to catch on me. So here we are, Hal, and you're under arrest for the murder of Zelma Daniels and Darene Arnold."

He stood away a minute and I thought he was going to faint. That fooled me.

ABRUPTLY, he snapped erect, and his fist sent my feet flying from under me. Then Hal whirled, jerked opened the door, and was racing for the line of cars.

I struggled to my feet. Tuck stood at the door, his bulk filling it. I heard the crack of a gun, and a man scream.

"Hal's through running," Tuck said, his revolver still smoking in his hand.

Hal was far from dead, but he didn't know it. He gave himself but a few minutes to live, and frightened words just poured from his throat.

His confession sealed the case and confirmed my guesses. He had killed for five thousand dollars' worth of insurance, and down here that's a young fortune.

Lem and Tuck loaded him into one of the cars and drove away.

After they were gone, I stood looking at the peaceful appearing, gaunt farmhouse. I'd cracked the case, but the memory of violent death took the edge from my pleasure.

Just then the sun came out from behind a cloud, bathing the old farmhouse in a golden glory. Behind it were the high rugged ridges of Brown County. That would make a swell landscape, I told myself. I turned and hurried to my car.

Now that murder was over, maybe I could get to my canvasses.

DEATH GOES FISHING

By
LAURENCE DONOVAN

*They Called Him the Snoop—
but Snooping Can Be Mighty
Handy When a Slaughter
Rap Is Hung on You!*

MARSH mud was up to my knees when I heard the *whooming* shot. I swore at the sticky going, at the icy wind, and at my client. Being a hunter in family trees, I don't often trail my quarry into a swamp. I prefer chasing them in the parlor branches.

I had lost what trail there had been around Mud Lake. Whatever hardy pioneer dubbed it that had been one hundred percent correct. I had come perhaps a mile, with another mile to go. If I had waited for sunrise the going might have been easy.

"I hope Red Pepper appreciates what this may do for her, before she goes too far with the whiskered goat," was my disgusted mutter of complaint. "I had a hunch all the time she was class and her family would rate, but I'll bet old Jaeger won't add one mangy sawbuck to my fee for discovering his matrimonial risk turns out to have half a million in her own right."

I pulled my waders out of the mud and climbed onto an old, fir log, breathing hard. For a one-time newspaper guy who had gone in for the too often questionable business of being a "love investigator," I had too much conscience.



The human hand came up slowly, in a ghastly gesture

Sure, I know, my former colleagues had another name for me in my self-elected profession. It was short and to the point. They referred to me as the "Snoop." To them I had become about as lowgrade as one type of columnist.

Still I got in some good licks at squaring right gals and guys, and slapping down the wrong ones. Mostly I was retained by the mammas of glamour gals to dig up the dirt, if any, about this and that dubious boy friend of the nighterie cocktail circuit.

So I hadn't, up to this time, ranged the wilds and sniffed for the smell of skunk in a tule marsh on a lake named Mud. But then, at this time, I wasn't trying to nose out the ancestral and current blood kin of one of the male species.

Old Otis Jaeger was my client. The timber fortune Jaeger, you know. His grandfather had been a tin pants and skidroad logger, but the generation of old Otis Jaeger had touched haughty heights since the family's chuck-camp days.

Old Otis had been shopping around for his third, or perhaps his fourth wife, when he had heard "Red" Pepper singing a blues tear-jerker in a Portland night spot. She was cute and sweet, and hot with her voice only, so far as I had gleaned the facts of her brief career of song.

Her right name was Marlie Pepper, and the color of her hair, with her impudent red lips, had earned her the "Red" monicker. Well, Otis Jaeger wasn't so old as part baldness and his bristling side whiskers seemed to tag him.

He was old enough though to have been Marlie Pepper's father. He went down for the long count only after several weeks of listening to Red Pepper sing the blues. During this time he had, with Jaeger family caution, made a close, personal investigation of Red Pepper's goings and comings.

She resided at the YWCA, so there were no "goings on" in her sweet,

young life that old Otis could discover.

Perhaps it had been the circumspect drabness of the YW, or the certainty that sooner or later a blues singer must inevitably be purchased drinks by the nighterie customers that had broken down Red Pepper's spirit. Anyway, old Otis was one way out and up, if a gal could become accustomed to finally being nuzzled by bristly gray side whiskers.

SO MUCH for Red Pepper and old Otis, and everything but the final putting of the Jaeger family jewel on her finger. That was where I came in. That was why I was here in the swamp, four in the A. M., Wartime, which is a punk time to be in a mountain-top swamp, believe me.

As I started out, I heard the *whooming* shot. That would be old Otis cracking down a morning bird, possibly a Mallard, I thought. Red Pepper was with him in the duck boat, with its small motor. I could picture her cute figure huddled against the morning cold.

She was as nice a sweater gal as Hollywood ever tried to censor, too. But she would need more than a sweater to work up enthusiasm for one of old Otis Jaeger's ideas of fun.

"Among other things, Mr. Lake, my wife will have to learn to become a companion in all of my outdoor sports," old Otis had told me. "While you're getting a line on her uncles and aunts and cousins, it's a great opportunity to see if Marlie can learn to like my favorite recreation."

Thus, for the fifth morning in a row, a somewhat discouraged, but still game and smiling Red Pepper was shooting, or watching old Otis shoot, innocent birds foolish enough to be up at four A. M., Wartime.

In the meantime I had received a sudden, night wire from Portland, relayed up here to the Mud Lake lodge only a short time before by a sleepy, small-town operator.

Putting it straight to the chin, Marlie Pepper was about to become the sole heiress to a cold half million, even after the inheritance war tax and attorney fees were subtracted.

Therefore, one Tom Lake, love investigator, or the Snoop, was on his immediate way to perhaps end his own chosen career. It was my conscientious, if not righteous intention, to doublecross a paying client, for the first and probably the last time.

I was going to give one little gal known as Red Pepper her great, big out, and no strings attached. And I was penetrating this Mud Lake swamp at this hour to be sure she had the news before the little semi-finale of slipping the Jaeger family jewel on her finger took place suddenly.

Even mountain fog has to lift some time. Perched on the old fir log, I could look out across the gray surface of Mud Lake. The duck-gun explosion I had heard had not been followed up. There were no birds flying that I could see.

As I got my bearings for another plunge through the marsh toward Otis Jaeger's duck blind, the prolonged silence chilled me. I had a feeling that something ominous was impending.

I heard a splashing. Tules rustled and the dried top of a down spruce rattled back of me, away from the lake. I could see nothing moving. It might be a deer, a mountain cat or even some smaller raccoon or porky foraging for breakfast.

Whatever it was, the disturber moved away, and the noise ceased.

I was preparing to get off the old log when other explosions shattered the morning peace. This was a series of staccato blasts. It could be only the motor of a boat, presumably that of Jaeger's flat-bottomed duck boat.

THE sound indicated it was heading from its blind out into the lake. I swore at myself audibly. Here I had waded a mile of marsh with the

quixotic notion of informing Red Pepper she was little Miss Big by sudden inheritance. I was prepared to witness the reception Otis Jaeger, my client, would give this news.

I hadn't any interest greater than a personal desire to see a sweet, little gal escape from a tough spot, even if Red Pepper had seemed a little on the dumb side in her ambition to climb into an upper stratum of social life and affluence.

And now the duck boat was swinging into and up the lake. This put it up to me to walk back as I had come. I didn't like it, and I so informed the benighted marshland in bad language.

Suddenly I ceased abusing nature for my poor judgment. The flat duck boat came into view. It was some hundred yards off shore. My breath rasped through my dry throat.

I could just see the hunched figure of Red Pepper. She was in the bow of the boat where there was a line for steering with the outboard motor. But apparently she was not piloting the boat.

The flat, clumsy craft veered this way and that, yawing about in a zig-zagging line at the will of the uncontrolled motor. Red Pepper appeared to be looking straight ahead along the lake.

It wasn't the girl's position or the movement of the unpiloted boat that got me. Red Pepper was alone. The freeboard of the boat was so low that Otis Jaeger could not possibly have been lying on the bottom.

I opened my mouth to shout. I closed it, staring, and I was sick. I had seen a human hand stick up perhaps twenty feet behind the boat. The white hand came up slowly, as if in a ghastly gesture.

The hand disappeared. I could see then it was because the body of Otis Jaeger was rolling over and over. There were taut lines stretched from the stern of the boat to the body. They appeared to be firmly attached to Otis Jaeger's ankles. He was being pulled

along feet first, a veritable death tow.

As I looked, I saw a number of painted duck decoys slip along the bottom of the boat. They caught and held again in a tangle on the stern seat. Otis Jaeger was being hauled along the lake by the stout cords used to anchor the decoys near the duck blind.

All of this impacted upon my shocked brain within twenty seconds. The boat was zigzagging up the lake, directly toward the hotel lodge more than a mile away.

It was evident that Red Pepper was too stunned to handle the steering line, or it might be something else. At last I shouted hoarsely.

"Miss Pepper! Hiya! It's Tom Lake! You hear me?"

The girl gave no sign. Just remained crouched, looking directly ahead. I recalled the one *whooming* gun blast I had heard.

"Sure! Sure!" the words came from between my tight teeth. "Old Otis met with an accident! He shot himself! And then——"

My better reasoning told me I was hoping rather than being realistic. I was thinking that old Otis had plunged overboard, tangling his feet in the decoy lines as he fell.

Red Pepper was a tiny girl. Perhaps she tried to pull him into the boat. She found she lacked the strength. She had been scared. In desperation, she had started the motor. That way she was towing old Otis Jaeger back to the lodge.

ONLY Red Pepper wasn't steering the boat. My repeated shouts brought no result. Perhaps, I was hoping again, she had become paralyzed with terror, after she had the motor going.

The duck boat was veering away fast. I plunged off the old log, wading and floundering, unable to make any speed through the marsh mud. The boat went off at a wide tangent. It was moving toward the opposite

side of Mud Lake, perhaps a mile away.

I could still see old Otis's white hand coming up, turning in a slow circle as if beckoning me to follow, then disappearing as his body rolled on over. I was compelled to abandon watching, as the way through the marsh cut off my view.

Otis Jaeger was my client. Understand though, I was here at Mud Lake lodge, high in the Sierra merely as an individual guest. It had been arranged I was to have no open association with my client.

My business was to discover what gave the various branches of the Pepper family a right to be on earth, from the Jaeger point of view. Old Otis had brought Red Pepper here, after learning she had an aunt and some assorted cousins residing in the Mud Lake vicinity.

I had learned that Red Pepper's Aunt Jane was an old woman with a small farm, and some income from a war pension left by her late husband, Red Pepper's blood uncle. There were several cousins.

One cousin, Joel Pepper, owned the Mud Lake hunting lodge. By Red Pepper's own invitation, at old Otis Jaeger's request, another cousin and his wife, had come up to the lodge from Seattle. They were to meet and be approved by old Otis, who was cautious that way, even if he had gone all out for Red Pepper, the blues singer.

To be sure, these Seattle cousins, William and Laura, had it from Red Pepper the other way around. They had been invited, it was made to appear, to give their approval and blessing to Red Pepper's matrimonial catch.

I, Tom Lake, known as the Snoop, was supposed to dig up such dirt as there might be among these assembled Peppers. Perhaps to old Otis's amazement Red Pepper's immediate kin could speak English, read and write, didn't eat with their knives or use toothpicks at the table.

In fact, William and Laura Pepper, from Seattle, had social standing, of a sort, William being employed as a bank teller.

So it had seemed that Otis Jaeger was wasting his fee for my best efforts. The passing over of the five centuries I charge was undoubtedly due to give old Otis a sour feeling, or it had been. The whole setup went through my mind as I came out of the Mud Lake marsh and sighted the log lodge on the higher shore. It was at the upper end of the lake.

I was sick all over again as I glanced at the lodge wharf. The duck boat had not yet appeared. I saw bearded Joel Pepper down by the boathouse looking down the lake.

I was near exhaustion from fighting through the muddy marsh. I stopped for a breather. Joel Pepper shaded his eyes against the rising sun, coming up in red glory.

A BUZZING cleared from my brain. I heard the throbbing of the boat motor that had taken Joel Pepper's attention. Then, as I came past the lodge, and went down the slope toward the wharf, I saw Otis Jaeger's duck boat appear.

Joel Pepper stared at me. No one at the lodge knew of my pre-sunrise jaunt into the marsh.

"What the tunket, Mr. Lake?" exclaimed Joel. "You been huntin' or just moseyin' around for your health? You ain't got your gun, and you didn't say you was goin' for birds, or we'd had a snack fixed for you."

It hadn't hit me until then that my mysterious mission in the marsh might call for some explaining. And as a former newshound, I could foresee the skepticism with which my explanation might be received.

I couldn't very well just say, "Why. Miss Marlie Pepper fell heir to half a million bucks, and I got lost in the swamp because I wanted to be the first to tell her."

Sure, I could have said it, more than

an hour or so back. But the duck boat now approaching wasn't bringing any confirmation of a fantastic story. Besides, I wasn't supposed to be employed by or associated with old Otis Jaeger or Red Pepper, and I hadn't a thing but a verbal agreement with old Otis.

My verbal agreement was crossed off now. It was silenced behind the oncoming duck boat.

"What in tunket's wrong with Mr. Jaeger?" exclaimed Joel Pepper. "Why's the gal comin' back alone? I don't like the looks o' that!"

He could not yet see what I knew to be behind the slowly moving duck boat. Because I knew it was there, and was watching, I saw a white hand describe a slow circle, then disappear about twenty feet behind the boat.

What hit me harder now was that Red Pepper, known only as Cousin Marlie to her kin here, was really steering the boat directly toward the lodge wharf. As the sun glinted on her red-gold hair, I saw her white face turn a little.

Perhaps she hadn't been conscious of my shouts an hour before. Perhaps the duck boat had been without a pilot because the girl had been stunned.

But the stark fear in her white face now was evidence she knew that old Otis Jaeger was coming along behind the boat. As she sent the boat up to the wharf, the white hand of the dragging corpse appeared again, gesturing, then the body sank as the motor was cut off.

"Great thunderation, Marlie? That wasn't Mr. Jaeger I saw?"

Cousin Joel's shocked exclamation was followed by a little scream. Laura, Mrs. William Pepper, ran part way down onto the wharf, cried out, and fainted as old Otis's body floated up and his shot riddled head and face came into view.

RED PEPPER'S voice was shaky, her eyes wide with terror.

"I tell you, I don't know! I don't

know! Perhaps I heard a splashing in the water. It seems I did. Then something like a damp cloth came over my face. I fought to get it off, and then I don't remember anything, I tell you, until I was out in the lake. The boat was going in a circle, and I saw him. You have to believe it was that way. I never could start the boat's motor."

Red Pepper was even prettier with fright in her eyes than I had ever seen her. Sheriff Buckley had come up the valley with a deputy coroner. He was both kindly and hard.

He shook his head as Red Pepper repeated what she had told half a dozen times. He held a long envelope and an official looking paper. He turned to Red Pepper's cousin, Mrs. William Pepper.

"You found this in Marlie Pepper's room after the thing happened?" said Sheriff Buckley.

"Yes—yes," said Cousin Laura, dabbing at her eyes. "But it couldn't mean anything, I know. Marlie's always been the sweetest and dearest child. Mr. Jaeger told us about this. He said he wanted Marlie to have everything she should before she met his family."

"H'mm! Looks as if she would have a great deal," said Sheriff Buckley. "Twenty-five thousand cash, this check calls for, and the paper says Marlie is under no obligation whatever on account of it."

This little arrangement being made by Otis Jaeger had come as a shock to me.

"Why don't you say it?" Red Pepper cried out. "Someone come out with it! You think I killed him so I would have the twenty-five thousand and not have to marry him! Say it, someone!"

"Marlie, child, no one thinks that," soothed Cousin Laura, her arm going around the girl. "It must have been just an accident. You were shocked and frightened, and you can't remember what happened."

Cousin Laura's voice was low and gentle. She might be saying the wrong thing, but apparently she meant all right.

I had known what was coming. I hadn't been a police reporter for nothing. Sheriff Buckley's blue eyes hardened as he turned to me, taking in the dried mud on my waders and clothes, and the scratches from pushing through marshland brush.

"You haven't said yet just why you were wandering around in Mud Lake marsh before sunup," said Sheriff Buckley. "But you have admitted you were away down the lake toward the dead man's blind. How about a reason, and it'll have to be good?"

Although I had been in the city several years, I had often been up in this country hunting and fishing. I knew the mountains around the range and the Mud Lake vicinity. I also knew Sheriff Buckley.

As the law, Buckley was stubborn-minded. I had adequate reason in my own mind for my apparently crazy foray into the swamp. But I wasn't screwy enough to spill it—not just yet.

Perhaps the phone operator and the telegraph office would do me that little favor, but why stick my head into the noose before I had figured all the angles?

YOU can see what I mean. Suppose I told it offhand:

"Sure, sheriff, I just got word that Marlie Pepper had become heiress to half a million dollars, and I waded a swamp before sunrise to carry the message to her. I knew she planned to marry Otis Jaeger, and this inheritance might change her ideas."

Add that up. Two and two make four. Me not having a line to show that Otis Jaeger had hired me to get the lowdown on the Pepper family.

"So that's it!" The sheriff would be positive. "Found that out, snooping around, and wanted the gal for yourself! Okay, you can put on the

steel wristbands!"

If ever there was an open and shut case, there it was. Even if I could prove Otis Jaeger had brought me here, and owed me a fee, it wouldn't alter the fact of the girl's coming into half a million, and me probably having my own ideas.

I hadn't replied to the sheriff. I saw Red Pepper's brown eyes widen with perplexity as she watched me. Or was it that?

From where I stood, that unexpected twenty-five thousand dollars, pre-marital cash to prepare the girl to meet Otis Jaeger's exacting family, was something to be considered. Especially since Red Pepper had been in process of becoming an old man's darling for financial and social reasons, as I saw it.

For the first time it hit me hard. Had Red Pepper been really stunned when I had shouted? Or had she been putting on an act, pretending not to have heard me?

And that could only mean she was the killer, and had hoped by her bizarre manner of bringing back the body to make it all seem to have been an accident?

Then she had heard me shout, had learned I was in the marsh, and had concocted this other story of being overcome by someone she had not seen?

Perhaps it was no more than half a minute I hesitated, thinking of all these angles. There was something else. I had learned of Red Pepper's sudden inheritance by a snooping act.

And that brought in William and Laura Pepper, from Seattle. Again I looked at Red Pepper. No. I couldn't believe she was a killer. For the first time, I discovered that she meant a lot more to me than just one side of a regular investigation.

My reply, after apparent long thought, brought in William Pepper, the cousin and husband of Laura. Instead of answering Sheriff Buckley's demand as to my purpose in being in

the marsh, I asked a question:

"Did William Pepper go trout fishing again this morning?"

He was absent, so I was sure he had. William had been fishing every morning for a week. The nearest trout were in Tumble Creek, four tough miles away, and he always started long before daylight.

Each morning he had been bringing six or eight fine rainbow. It was Laura, his wife, who replied, bristling as if she sensed a reason for my question.

"Yes, William left for fishing around three o'clock, as usual," she said tartly. "Why do you ask, Mr. Lake? You know he has come back every afternoon with a nice catch, and that he's a fool for fishing."

SHERIFF BUCKLEY'S blue eyes grew harder.

"Suppose you stick to your own end of this, Mr. Lake," he advised harshly. "I'll do the asking about others. Again, what took you into the marsh this morning? It seems to me you have an air of knowing more about the murdered man and Miss Pepper than you're telling."

And suddenly I knew I wasn't talking. Not just yet. I had just recalled hearing what had seemed to be some wild animal crossing the marsh before I had seen the duck boat towing the corpse.

The coroner was unarmed, and he was still fussing around the body. Joel Pepper had been standing, open-mouthed. Sheriff Buckley was a big, hard man.

Because I am light and don't look the part, the sheriff was a little careless, seeing that he had to suspect me directly. His old-fashioned revolver was still on his hip.

"Well," I began slowly, "I'll have to tell——"

I moved my right hand up, rubbing my face nervously. It was an old trick, but it worked. The sheriff wasn't watching my left. I felt the jolt of his granite jaw all the way to

my shoulder as I pitched that left. I had to arc in with my right, aiming for the button.

I've always been good for a lightweight. I wasn't quite good enough for the old one-two and out though. I had to drive my toe into Buckley's kneecap, then feel my knuckles crack as my left came up to meet his chin coming down.

That did it. I saw the surprised Joel Pepper move, but I had Sheriff Buckley's revolver. I waved it, backing away, while the sheriff took a brief nap on the ground.

Red Pepper cried out. What she said hurt more than she knew.

"You did it! You killed him! But why? I liked you—"

Joel Pepper had recovered and acted. A deer rifle cracked as I made the first rocks and bushes back of the lodge. The bullet sang too viciously close to be comfortable.

"You screwball!" I grunted this to myself as I ran. "Why not tell the truth and take your chance? This way, Tom Lake, you'll be lucky if you don't come back feet first, convicted by a bullet without a trial!"

I headed up the mountain, keeping the twisted Tumble Creek trail to one side. I could hear the roaring voice of Sheriff Buckley, and Joel Pepper replying.

I had been up here and I knew the shortest trail to Tumble Creek. But I heard Joel and Buckley in the bush, the sheriff having recovered fast.

As I crossed a short open space, I learned that both Joel and Buckley now had rifles. They were cutting to get me and no fooling about that. Lead trimmed a heel of one wader and my foot went numb.

But I made the shelter of bush and rocks again. As I lost the sound of voices, I kept generally close to the Tumble Creek trail. According to his other days of fishing, William Pepper would not be coming down the four miles before noon.

Shortly after noon each day, he had

been bringing in good catches of trout. He would have to be later, today, if there was anything to my suspicion. For William would have had to climb four miles after instead of before sunrise, have luck with his fishing, and return.

Eight miles of tough trail and time out for catching his trout, would put William to the middle of the afternoon, if he was the "wild animal" I had heard.

ON the other hand, if he returned about the same time, and had the usual number of trout, then I was on a hot spot. More so because of slamming Sheriff Buckley.

Funny, I wasn't thinking so much of that. I knew now why I had wanted to tell Red Pepper about her half million. I hadn't wanted her to marry Otis Jaeger.

I hadn't wanted her fortune, either. It was plain enough. I wanted Red Pepper.

And now I wanted more than anything else to prove to myself that Red Pepper hadn't murdered Otis Jaeger, preferring twenty-five thousand dollars in cash, to more money and life with the Jaegers and old Otis.

Having given Joel and Buckley the slip, I rested. I could hear the muttering rumble of a big storm far back in the range, above Tumble Creek. The sun was shining brightly here. But I recalled having heard that same storm before daylight, and of seeing distant flashes of lightning.

Judging the time now, I figured that William Pepper could not have been long up on Tumble Creek, if he were guilty. There had been a lapse of two hours before the sheriff had arrived with the coroner.

That tough four miles to the creek was nearly two hours of climbing any day.

Rested, I kept close enough to the trail to see if William Pepper came down. I saw no one. Undoubtedly the sheriff would rouse up a posse to

hunt me out. But I intended in the end to surrender, anyway.

"The next time I take a case, if there is a next time, I'll be damned if I'll take any personal interest in a dame," I growled, as I finally reached the nearest point where I could see Tumble Creek.

Tumble Creek was always good in season for the right angler. William Pepper had proved he was a fisherman. I knew he might be anywhere within four or five miles, up or down the creek.

If he had been in the marsh on Mud Lake at sunrise, he would not yet have his usual catch and be on his way to the lodge. I wanted conversation with William Pepper.

I climbed a rock where I could get a view of some of the Tumble Creek trout holes. And I climbed right down off of that rock.

What I saw sent me hurrying back down the rough mountain. That I was going straight back into Sheriff Buckley's arms, with my own bad break and his anger against me, failed to hold me back.

"I might as well face the music one way as another," I said grimly. "The moment there is inquiry, that phone call I got will be remembered, and the message I got by cable all the way from Buenos Aires will be enough to give me a one-way ticket out."

For that was where I had cabled, and from where I had received a reply. The law firm was in Buenos Aires. A letter that had been written to Marlie (Red) Pepper, and forwarded from Portland, had been opened before she had received it.

Sure, I'm a snoop in a way. But I hadn't opened that letter. I had snooped on two persons who had. They were William and Laura Pepper who had been given Red Pepper's letter by mistake.

FINDING out what was in that letter had been simple enough. My room adjoined their room at the lodge.

You would be surprised what an ordinary wine glass will do if you put the top tight to a wall, then apply your ear to the bottom of the glass.

It acts like a stethoscope over a man's heart. You can hear clearly through the wall. So I had heard William and Laura Pepper discuss the letter they had opened.

They had taken a broad view of it, too broad. In fact, they had agreed that if Red Pepper got this letter, informing her of half a million legacy left by her father who had been gone for years, she would undoubtedly throw over Otis Jaeger.

William and Laura were two thoughtful persons. They desired very much to have Cousin Marlie become Mrs. Otis Jaeger, the way I had heard them talking. That way, it seemed they hoped they might be able to horn in on quite a slice of that half million.

And my quest for William, now apparently ended, had been based upon the idea that perhaps William and Laura had thought more deeply upon the subject of Cousin Marlie's half million legacy.

If it were proved that Cousin Marlie had coldbloodedly killed Otis Jaeger for a measly twenty-five thousand dollars, then William and Laura undoubtedly could sit in for her half million legacy.

That was how my mind had worked, or at least had hoped.

But you see how that complete story would sound to the law, and to twelve more or less good men and true. My foray into the marsh to be first to give Red Pepper the glad tidings couldn't have given the real murderer a better out if it had been planned that way.

Red Pepper or William Pepper?

If either were guilty, I was still on the short end of convicting circumstances. I couldn't even prove I had been retained by Otis Jaeger.

And, if I could, that would make the circumstances all the worse. It

would seem that I had been double-crossing my client, and I had, to grab off half a million of girl who was a prize even without the dough.

Little wheels buzzed 'round and 'round in my head as I came in sight of the lodge. I had to rest and get up nerve now to give myself up. I stayed a few minutes in the tules at the edge of Mud Lake.

I wondered if any other mug had ever put himself on a hotter spot, although entirely innocent, and having acted with the best of intentions?

I could hear the murmur of voices down by the lodge. Perhaps Sheriff Buckley was forming his posse now. It wouldn't be needed, I thought. I kicked viciously at the mud.

A couple of dead rainbow trout, about a pound each, were floating in the edge of the lake. The sight of those trout was like a shot in the arm.

"Mud Lake never had trout," I muttered. "They can't live in the swamp hole. They never could."

A MINUTE later I reached the last bushes above the lodge. I saw Sheriff Buckley, Joel Pepper, several new arrivals, and William Pepper. I had gone all the way to Tumble Creek to find William, and here he was.

He was standing beside Sheriff Buckley. He was a tall man with a bladelikey nose and a small mouth. Red Pepper certainly had the blood of some other branch of the family.

Anyway, I took the sheriff's gun and tossed it straight toward him. I walked out then with my hands well up.

"Hold 'em that way!" exploded Sheriff Buckley. "I ought to hang one on your jaw for that trick! You givin' up now? Want to do some talkin'?"

Before I could speak, Red Pepper came from the lodge. The redness around her brown eyes, from crying, only made her prettier. She looked at me as though I was something that

had crawled from under the mud.

"I haven't anything to say yet," I said, and felt steel go around my wrists. "I thought I might as well come in and have it over with."

I was looking at William Pepper and his eyes were boring into me.

"You didn't happen to be in the marsh around sunrise, about the time Otis Jaeger was shot, did you, William?" I asked casually.

The sheriff answered for him. His sore jaw toned his speech.

"It's no good, Lake!" he said harshly. "You were the only person down toward the duck blinds! William Pepper being away, it is a good thing he has a clean alibi no one can dispute."

"Alibi?" I murmured, watching William. "I thought his wife said he went fishing as usual about three o'clock this morning?"

"That's right, Lake," said William. "And I got sunrise fishing on Tumble Creek. Snagged eight dandies. Best morning I've had. I got back here just as the sheriff and Joel were trying to stop you with rifles."

"That's one alibi can't be busted," said Sheriff Buckley. "It covers less than three hours for eight miles, and an hour or so of fishin'. The highest trout are in Tumble Creek, and if William Pepper had been in the duck blinds at sunup, as you're trying to hint, that would have added four miles of swamp trail, making it impossible for him to have had the fresh trout he brought in."

"He couldn't have been back yet," I said thoughtfully. "If he caught eight good trout up in Tumble Creek."

I slid my handcuffed hands under my leather jacket suddenly. Because I wanted one smash, the feel of his grinning face against my knuckles, I jumped, swinging with my handcuffed wrists.

The sheriff knocked me sideways, but not before I had hammered several teeth back into William Pepper's throat. As I partly recovered, and

dropped my hands, I laughed.

Two dead trout lay on the ground. I had taken them from under my jacket. Sheriff Buckley and the others were staring at them.

"There's two trout didn't come from Tumble Creek, Sheriff," I said. "And there haven't been any trout caught in Tumble Creek today. I'm thinking you'd better change these steel babies over to William Pepper, and prepare to give him the old paraffine test, seeing you don't shoot trout."

SPUTTERING, William Pepper lunged toward me. I just put up one knee suddenly and let him run into it with his stomach. He groaned and collapsed. The sheriff was ready to hand me another crack for what I had done to him, but he stopped suddenly.

I glanced toward the top of the mountain. Sheriff Buckley turned his keen eyes in that same direction.

"Well, by thunder!" he exclaimed. "I never thought of that! Lake, you mean—"

"That Tumble Creek is roaring from a cloudburst some time after midnight," I said. "You couldn't get near a trout hole, and the trout couldn't see a fly in all that debris and mud."

"And William Pepper had those fresh trout in a live box in the lake, is that it?"

"Right," I said. "Which gave him plenty of time to put over an accidental murder, making it appear that

Red—Marlie Pepper—was getting rid of Jaeger for a measly twenty-five thousand. That would have rated William and Laura next for the half million left by Marlie's father in Buenos Aires, they having opened a letter notifying her.

"I listened to their reading of the letter and confirmed it by cable. I had a reply by phone after midnight. I started out to give Marlie Pepper the glad news, with the idea—"

"With the idea, young man, that she might consider you—"

Buckley's direct question was interrupted by a whirling tornado. This was two women and one was red-headed. Laura Pepper was screaming and Red Pepper was doing a fairly good job of hair pulling until Buckley interfered.

"I'll teach you to open my mail!" flared Red Pepper.

Then Red Pepper was looking at me.

"Don't think I had any ideas, Red," I muttered. "It's just too bad, the way I see it, that you have half a million. I mean too bad for me. Now I guess this is where I came in. So—"

"Listen, Tom Lake," said Red Pepper. "This is where you stay in. I'll need someone with your brains to manage any money there may be and —"

Sheriff Buckley chuckled softly.

"Good luck, son," he said cheerfully. "Never argue with a redhead. I married one."

BE A PAID-UP PATRIOT!

BY MARCH 15th fifty million Americans will have had to file income reports and make payments, many of them paying taxes for the first time. All single persons earning more than \$500 and every husband and wife either of whose individual incomes was \$624 or more and everybody who paid or owes a tax on 1942 income must file a return.

This year taxpayers must compute income tax, Victory tax, and possible percentage of the partially forgiven 1942 tax as well as make an estimate return on the current 1944 income! Salary and wage withholding taxes have not relieved us of the obligation of filing returns.

Don't delay, patriots! File your returns early to help Uncle Sam. Don't wait until the last minute, discovering too late that you need expert advice, or making a bottleneck jam for the Bureau of Internal Revenue. To help you, there are accountants and lawyers in tax offices and banks throughout the country who will advise you free of charge. There are simplified tax forms and explanatory booklets.

War is expensive. Remember that ninety-five cents of every tax dollar goes directly into the war effort. The sooner the war is over, the sooner taxes will fall to normal levels. We all know the job must be done. So be a Paid-up Patriot!



The gun barked and the flash stabbed at Lola

TOO HOT FOR MURDER

By J. LANE LINKLATER

Sergeant Tony Laird Looks Up His Buddy's Girl on His Furlough, and Walks into a Date with Death!

SERGEANT TONY LAIRD was nervous and ill at ease. Nice people, no doubt, but he didn't know them. However, he'd promised his pal Bill North he'd go out to Swinton and see his girl and kid brother.

"Don't go near Lola's folks," Bill had said. "She's got a brother and sister but they're poison to me. Go to Bill's Hamburger Shop—that's my

own place—and ask Stumpy Pettyjon to put you in touch with Lola."

Stumpy Pettyjon was the guy who was running the Hamburger Shop for Bill while he was away.

Well, here was Bill's Hamburger Shop. It was on Main Street, but out of the high rent district. Off by itself. Neat little joint. It was now early evening, and quite hot.

Tony walked into the shop. He

was tall and awkward, and he had trouble getting his legs between the stool and the counter. A short little man with a bald head and blue eyes that twinkled through heavy brows, grinned at him, and then at another customer. She was a hearty-looking girl who seemed quite at home.

"Uh, gimme a hamburger, please," Tony said.

The little man went to work. Well, this must be Stumpy Pettyjon, and he did a good job on the hamburger.

"Bill North is my pal," Tony said a few minutes later.

THE smoky air was suddenly electrified. The little man seemed almost to jump on the counter.

"You know our Bill?" he asked.

The girl moved to the stool next to Tony.

"Welcome, soldier! Boy, are we glad to see anyone that knows about Bill! How is he?"

"Swell." Tony peeked at the girl. "You ain't Lola, huh?"

"Lola? Me, Lola!" The girl laughed, a hearty pleasant laugh. "No, soldier. I'm Gus Graney. I bet Bill never even mentioned me."

"Yeah. He did, too." Tony remembered Bill talking about a girl named Gus. A swell pal, Bill had said. A red-headed power-house of good nature. "Well, I'm Tony," he added awkwardly. "Tony Laird. I promised Bill I'd call and see Lola, and Ted, too."

"You'll see 'em," Stumpy said eagerly. "But for gosh sakes tell us about Bill."

Tony grinned. "He's okay. Anyhow, he was the last time I saw him. He's a long way from here and he gets kind of homesick for the gang. And for Lola."

"Lola will be here most any time now," put in Gus. She wagged her head. "Did Bill tell you about her folks?"

"He just said not to fool with them."

"You may see them," Gus said. "Lola's got a brother and sister. They're a lot older than she. Her brother is Roland Kent. He's the cashier of the bank and a darned old stuffed shirt—but not so old, about

thirty-three. Her sister is Lillian, and she's about thirty. One of these mincy bridge-party minxes, that's Lillian."

Tom shifted uneasily. "So they don't like Bill, huh?"

"They've got nothing against him," Gus said savagely. "Only he wasn't born into the money. Bill started this hamburger joint after he got out of J. C., and was studying engineering on the side. The war came along and off he went! Jeepers, I hope he comes through all right!"

"He will," Tony assured her. This Gus was sure comfortable to be with. He was beginning to lose his shyness. "Bill's a great pal. Well, like I said, I told Bill I'd come out here and then write him a letter. Y'see, I got bungled up a little—not bad—and they sent me home for a spell, so—"

"Here's another hamburger," Stumpy cut in.

"Thanks," said Tony, and put a dollar on the counter.

"What's that for?" Stumpy said indignantly. "You ain't got a dime, see? Not around here you ain't."

"Well, thanks," Tony grinned. "As I was saying, Bill told me—"

"Here she is now," shouted Gus.

The door behind Tony had opened. The girl who came in was small and dainty. Just the kind for Bill, thought Tony. Yes sir, she sure was pretty. Dark hair and eyes. The eyes were serious-looking. She had a pretty up-tilted chin, the kind that showed stubborn loyalty.

She smiled at Gus and she smiled at Stumpy.

"I hope I'm not late," she said.

"Whoa, there, sweetie," Gus cut in. "We got a guest here."

Lola looked at Tony and she smiled at him, too.

"I don't believe I know—"

"This soldier knows Bill!" Gus said. "This is Tony, and he's Bill's pal. He promised Bill he'd call and see you!"

Something happened to Lola's eyes. It was as if all sorts of things had pushed up inside of them and they were brimming.

"Bill!" she whispered. "You know Bill! Oh, how—how is he?"

"Fine," Tony said. He told me to say—well, he said to tell you he sure is crazy about you!"

"Bill!" said Lola. "Oh, Bill!"

No one said anything for a moment, and then Stumpy said: "You better get outside a hamburger, Lola. It'll be time to shove off soon."

"Oh, yes." She smiled at Tony. "You'll come with us?"

"Any place you say," said Tony.

"I haven't told Tony yet," Gus said. She grinned at Tony. "It's a baseball game."

"Swell," said Tony. "A night game, huh?"

"Yes. It's the soft-ball league. Pro stuff. The Swinton Tigers against the Logan City Lions. Lola and I play. Lola's our star pitcher, and I'm the regular catcher."

"This is the final game of the season. The Tigers and Lions are tied for first place and tonight decides it. Bill's kid brother Ted will be there—he's the ticket taker."

"I've got a feller coming in to run the joint here for me, so I can go," said Stumpy. "Wouldn't miss it."

IT WAS dark when they left the Hamburger Shop. Gus had a coupe, and they decided they could all ride in it. They were just crowding in when a long, shiny black car drove up rapidly and stopped just in front of them. A plump man stepped out. He was wearing white shoes, slacks, a green silk shirt, no coat.

"Oh-oh," Gus muttered. She and Tony were already in the coupe, Lola and Stumpy still on the sidewalk. "Here's old fuzzyface."

The man was approaching Lola.

"That ain't her brother, huh?" Tony whispered to Gus.

"No. That's Mel Summit. Mel is a kind of second cousin. He's the only relative she's got except for Roland and Lillian—and does he go for her!"

"Glad I caught you," Mel Summit was saying to Lola. "Roland is on the warpath and he might make trouble. Thought I'd better let you know."

"Thanks," said Lola.

"Quite all right." He smiled all

over his fat face. "Can I drive you down to the field?"

"No, thanks," Lola said. "We're all going out together. Oh, we have a friend of Bill's here—came especially to bring us word of Bill. Isn't that wonderful!" Lola introduced Mel to Tony. "I'm practically breathless," she added.

Mel Summit beamed vividly at Tony. "Nice of you to come. Staying long?"

"Just a little while," said Tony.

Mel Summit waved a hand and returned to his own car.

"The darned old smoothie!" Gus muttered.

THE ball park was on the south edge of town. There were little clumps of trees all the way around and Gus parked her coupe under one of them. Between the trees and the wire fence that enclosed the field was an open space, where the fans' cars were parked.

At the entrance to the ball park was a small ticket office. At the turnstiles nearby, a young fellow was taking tickets. He was about eighteen, tall and slender, and he had a nice grin.

"Soldier, meet Bill's kid brother, Ted," Stumpy said. "And Ted, this is Tony, Bill's pal."

Ted beamed all over. "Sure glad to meet you. See you after the game. No, you won't need any ticket."

"Well, thanks," said Tony.

In a little while Tony and Stumpy were sitting high up in the grandstand, watching the girls down on the field warm up under the arc lights. The grandstand was nothing fancy, just a series of long wide planks, arranged in tiers.

"Boy, this is the life!" Tony said.

Stumpy nudged him. "See that frozen-faced bozo down there?"

Standing in the passageway below, close to the wire screen, was a tall well-dressed man, his sharp-featured face grim and pale. He was staring bitterly out on the field. One thing was noticeable about him, he was wearing a light coat, while practically all the other men were coatless because of the heat.

"That's Lola's brother, Roland,"

Stumpy explained.

"Looks like a tough one, in a refined sort of way," said Tony. "What's eating him?"

"I can't figure why he's here," Stumpy mumbled. "I think this is the first time he's ever been here."

"Ain't he ever been here to watch Lola play?"

"Heck, no. He thinks it's terrible, Lola playing ball in public. Even Lola was a little afraid maybe Bill wouldn't like it. I know she never told Bill about it in her letters."

"If I know Bill," Tony laughed. "Lola could play Lady Godiva on an elephant's back and it would be okay with him."

"Well, Roland and Lillian were riding her so hard about what she should do," Stumpy continued, "she finally left home and got her own little place. She wouldn't take any money from them, either. But she tried out and found she was a darned good ball player. So she makes ten bucks a night playing ball, two or three evenings a week."

"Good for Lola," Tony said warmly.

Stumpy was peering down toward the screen.

"Funny, Roland hanging around—aw, there he goes now."

Roland Kent had turned suddenly and had disappeared back toward the turnstiles.

Someone down on the field yelled: "Play ball!"

A great game, Tony thought. Those girls sure played bang-up ball. Most of the time he couldn't keep his eyes off Lola. And Gus. Especially Gus. He was strong for Lola, she being Bill's girl, and he could see she was a thoroughbred. But that Gus, she was something!

He marvelled at the way a little girl like Lola could shoot that ball down the groove and strike out one batter after another. And he gloried in the way Gus's more ample figure swung and swayed rhythmically with each ball she caught and flipped back to Lola.

The crowd was tense, and at times went wild. There were over five hundred people in the stands, and that, Tony figured, was a capacity at-

tendance for a town like Swinton.

Once—Tony thought it was in the third inning—Stumpy went down to buy a cigar from the small stand near the ticket office. But he was back in a few minutes.

At that time no one had scored.

"They play seven innings," Stumpy explained to Tony. "That's a full game, seven innings."

The game sped on. In the first half of the fourth, the visiting team, the Logan City Lions scored one run. In the last half of the fifth, the Swinton Tigers evened it up. One all. In the sixth, no one scored. The seventh inning opened with the score still tied.

"Boy, what a game!" muttered Tony. "Wish old Bill was here!"

IN THE first half of the seventh, the visitors scored one more. Now two to one for the Lions, against the Tigers.

The Swinton Tigers came in. It was their last chance. And it was the tail end of the line-up. The crowd was uneasy. It looked like a sure loss for the Tigers. One girl came up. She was out on a fly to left field. Another came up. She struck out.

Two out and nobody on! The crowd groaned in pain.

Up came Gus, swinging her bat viciously.

Tony got up on his feet and swayed on his long legs.

"Hit 'er, Gus!" he yelled.

Deliberately, Gus turned around and grinned at him. Then she turned to face the pitcher. Here came the pitch. Gus swung. *Whang!* Out to deep center for a double!

Now came Lola. The crowd was hushed. They all liked Lola, but she was a pitcher, not a slugger. And she looked too small, almost tiny, standing there at the plate.

"Smack 'er, Lola!" Stumpy bawled.

Lola just stood quietly, gently fanning the air with her bat.

Here came the pitch. Lola swung sharply. Crack Out between second and third, out into left field for a clean hit!

Gus raced to third, kept going, made home standing up. Lola was

running fast. She reached second. That hit had been a natural double and she should have stayed on second. But she didn't. She kept on. The unexpectedness of it seemed to jam up the fielders. The ball had been flung toward second. The girl on second took it as Lola was streaking for third. She threw to third. It should have caught Lola there. But it didn't. The throw was wild.

Lola didn't pause for an instant. She rounded third, sped on. The girl at third had recovered the ball and she hurled it toward home. It was close. Lola leaped and then slid. It was very close.

The umpire at home plate flattened his hands in an outward gesture—safe!

Lola had scored!

The Swinton Tigers were victorious—it was three to two.

Tony was exuberant, as wild with joy as if he had lived in Swinton since the day of his birth. The Tigers had done it! Lola had done it! Gus had done it! Good old Gus!

The crowd pounded and shrieked and blew the top off the night.

Suddenly, Tony was aware that Stumpy had stopped yelling, that someone was talking to Stumpy. It was a man who had climbed the planked grandstand from below, a big man with a policeman's cap on.

Tony listened, and in spite of the uproar he could hear the big man saying, "We found him right under the grandstand."

Stumpy was looking very serious. "Well, I dunno a thing about it, Joe. He's dead, huh?"

"Deader'n a fish a week out of water. Ice pick in his back—and that sure means murder!"

Tony listened intently. And he knew that they were talking about Lola's brother, Roland.

BILL'S HAMBURGER SHOP was a sad place. It was getting near midnight and Tony was in there with Stumpy. They had been talking about the murder. It certainly had been a tough break, and Lola had been hit pretty hard. As Gus had said, afterwards, maybe Roland was a

stuffed shirt, but he was still Lola's brother, and, in her quiet way, Lola was stricken with grief.

Tony was thinking about what he'd have to write to Bill.

"Lola's mother and dad are dead, huh?" he asked Stumpy.

"Yeah."

"And now all she has left is her sister, Lillian?"

"That's all. Except for that second cousin, Mel Summit."

"Does Mel Summit work in the bank, too?"

"Yeah." A kind of vice president. But he was under Roland."

Just then the door opened. Stumpy and Tony looked up.

Well, here was Mel Summit now, and there was a young woman with him. She was a good-looker, all right, Tony thought. But her eyes were too chilly. Too much dignity to suit Tony, and in spite of the heat, she was wearing a fur jacket.

Tony noticed that Mel Summit was having trouble with his right eye. It seemed to be bloodshot. No, he couldn't have gotten that in a fight; it was just the eyeball that was irritated, not the flesh.

"I'm looking for my sister," the young woman said coldly.

Stumpy and Tony exchanged glances. Sure, they knew where Lola was. Instead of going to her own place, she had gone to Gus's apartment, where she could be off by herself for a little while, with no one around but Gus herself. It was a new place Gus had rented just a couple of days before.

"Well, I guess she'll give you a ring when she's ready to see you," Stumpy said.

"I want to see her right now," Lillian Kent insisted tartly. "I'm her sister, and she should be with me at a time like this."

"I guess she can figure that out for herself," retorted Stumpy.

"Surely you understand the situation," Mel Summit put in placatingly. "It's a family matter. How will it look to the community if it becomes known that two sisters are not even speaking at a time like this?"

"That's all you fellows ever think

about," Stumpy snapped. "How will the whole thing look! The heck with how it looks!"

Mel Summit spread out his hands. "But doubtless you know where—"

"If I did, I wouldn't tell you," Stumpy cut in.

"Where'd you get the bum glimmer, Mr. Summit?" Tony asked.

"What? Oh, you mean my eye. An insect of some kind flew in it. Probably a mosquito."

Tony nodded. "Lots of 'em around," he said. "Say, I heard Mr. Kent was robbed after he was killed."

"Robbed?"

"Yes, sir. Something about a big wallet missing from his coat pocket." Tony turned to the young woman. "Maybe you know about that, Miss Kent?"

Lillian Kent frowned. "Roland always carried money and important papers with him, in a large wallet," she said sharply. "Yes, the wallet is missing. But will you tell me where my sister is?"

"No."

"Let us go, Mel," Lillian Kent said in a cold rage, and the door banged after them.

"Nice people," Stumpy growled.

"I been wondering," said Tony. "I sure would like to see this thing cleared up. I got to write to Bill—"

"Listen," Stumpy interrupted. "Do me a favor."

"Anything you say."

"Maybe you remember that along in the third or fourth inning I went down to get a cigar."

"Sure, I remember."

"Well, forget it!"

Tony gaped. "You mean—"

"I mean if anyone asks you, I never left your side!"

Tony didn't hesitate. He said, "Sure."

"Thanks, soldier." Stumpy's worried grin showed a line of sweat along his upper lip. "Some day I'll tell you—"

He stopped abruptly. The door had opened again. The policeman who had first reported finding the body came into the shop.

"Hello, Joe," Stumpy said. "What goes?"

THE policeman sat on a stool and exhaled a noisy breath.

"You got to come along to the station, Stumpy," he said.

Stumpy turned off the gas flame under the iron plate. "Sure," he said genially. "What's the chief want me for?"

"Now, Stumpy, you and me are old pals, so I'm going to give you the lowdown, which I ain't supposed to do. There are two guys who are on the spot in this murder job."

"Yeah, two. Young Ted North is one. And you're the other!"

Tony, watching, thought Stumpy's grin was pretty sick.

"Ted and me, huh?" he said.

"Yeah. And it ain't funny. The way things look they think it might be either Ted or you. Or it might be both of you together."

"Thanks for telling me, Joe."

The policeman hesitated. "Like I say, I shouldn't be telling you. Well, first, like everybody knows, you was sore at Roland Kent on account of Bill and Lola, and also because he's been trying to get this joint shoved off the main street by special ordinance. And Ted, too, was sore at him on account of Bill and Lola."

"So we was both sore at him," conceded Stumpy.

"Yeah. Now look. Roland Kent shows up at the ball field tonight. The girl who was selling tickets says he came up and asked to see Lola. She told him Lola was on the field and all he could do was to see if he could get her to come up to the screen. Ted was taking tickets and admits seeing Roland pass through but says that's all he knows."

"Well, Ted is no liar," said Stumpy.

"But he lied this time. Now, the ticket-selling girl closed her window at the end of the third, like always, and went along the passage toward the front of the grandstand so she could see the game. She saw Ted and Roland under the grandstand, quarreling."

"Sounds pretty thin to me," Stumpy said angrily.

"Well, there might be something else. Now, about you."

[Turn to Page 86]

To be read before the 4TH War Loan Drive

ONE DAY SOON you will be asked to lend your Government at least an extra \$100. To put at least an extra \$100, over your regular Bond buying, into War Bonds for the 4th War Loan.

Don't say you can't afford it even though you may wonder how you're going to get that money.

If you think that getting the money is going to be hard, why, before the door bell rings, look at the faces of these dead countrymen of yours. Read their stories.

Then think how hard it would be to have to tell Americans like these that other Americans can't afford to lend at least an extra \$100!



Captain Albert H. Rooks was commanding officer of U.S.S. Houston. Engaging an overwhelming Jap force, the Houston smashed into them and went down, guns blazing. Rooks went down with his ship.



Lieutenant George H. Cannon, U.S.M.C., was mortally wounded during the Jap bombardment of Midway, Dec. 7th. He refused to be taken to a hospital till all his men had been evacuated, and as a result, he died of loss of blood.



Lieutenant Alexander Nininger, fought his way into the Jap lines on Bataan. Wounded 8 times, he continued to advance until he was killed. When his body was found, a Jap officer and two Jap soldiers lay dead around him.

Keep Backing the Attack!

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THRILLING MYSTERY



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"Heck, I was watching the game the whole time. Me and Tony here together. Up on the grandstand."

"That's right," put in Tony. "Me and Stumpy—"

"That won't help, Tony," said the policeman, "because the ticket-selling girl saw Stumpy come off the grandstand and go back toward the turnstiles right after she saw Ted and Roland."

"Well, maybe the girl made a mistake," Tony offered.

Stumpy grinned. "Thanks, soldier. But I guess that ain't no good. Sure, I went down to buy a cigar, that's all."

"Did you buy one?"

"Sure."

The policeman smiled sadly.

"No good, Stumpy. The kid that sells the cigars went home after the first inning. He was sick."

Stumpy grinned feebly. "From now on, I ain't talking."

"How about the ice pick?" Tony put in.

"Well, there was a kid selling ice-cold pop, and he had ice on his little wagon. He was all sold out by the end of the second inning, so he left his wagon right there by the turnstiles—and he left the pick on the wagon."

"So let's get going," said Stumpy.

"Okay," said the policeman. He looked at Tony. "You're going to be around town?"

"Guess I'll stay a while," said Tony.

"I noticed a hotel down the line. I'll go there."

AFTER Stumpy and the policeman had left, Tony went to the hotel. But he didn't stay there. Gus's apartment was only three blocks away. The front door of the building was not locked, so Tony went in and rang the bell beside Gus's door. Gus herself opened the door, saw who it was and let him in.

"Sh-h!" Gus pointed at a door. "Lola's in the bedroom. The poor kid is supposed to be sleeping, but I doubt if she is. Sit down, soldier."

Tony sat down in a big chair that had a small doily over the head-rest.

"Well, it don't look good," he said.

"I was afraid of that. What's happened?"

Tony told her.

"Jeepers," said Gus, "that's tough. Both Ted and Stumpy! I hope we won't have to tell Lola for a while. . . ."

But the bedroom door had opened and Lola was standing there. Her eyes were very big, but her voice was calm.

"Tell me everything, Tony."

"But I—"

"Everything," Lola said firmly.

Looking straight at those big eyes, Tony couldn't lie.

For a little while, Lola was very quiet. Then she said, "I'm sorry about Roland. He had his faults, but in a way I loved him. So I'm sorry. But both Ted and Stumpy are my friends, and I'll stand by them whatever happens."

"Sure you will, Sweetie," soothed Gus. "But you can't do anything now. Please go to bed."

"I don't need sleep—"

"Gus is right," Tony put in. "I want Gus to go out with me for a while. We can't do that if you don't go to bed."

Lola looked at him and then smiled faintly.

"I know how it is," she said. "You two go on out. I'll go to bed."

The bedroom door closed after her.

Tony noticed a telephone on a small stand and crossed to it. He picked a number out of the directory and called it.

A man's voice answered.

"Mr. Summit?" Tony said. "Please tell Miss Kent her sister is in Apartment three at sixteen forty-seven Bell Avenue . . . Okay?"

When he hung up, Gus was staring at him moodily.

"Soldier," she said. "I don't think I like that."

"I'm not sure about it myself," said Tony.

The two of them left the apartment quietly and went down to Gus's coupe. Then Tony asked Gus to drive down to the ball park.

Gus looked at him queerly, but said nothing. In a little while they were on the outer edge of town.

"Not too close," said Tony. "Park out of sight."

GUS stopped the coupe a couple of hundred feet back from the park under some trees, and turned off the lights. Directly ahead of them was the ticket window, the turnstiles and the rear of the grandstand. The outlines were vague in the darkness.

"Now, suppose you'd been parked back here while the game was on," Tony said. "You could see through the wire fence to where Roland Kent was standing under the grandstand, the place he was killed."

"You can't see now," said Gus. "Too dark."

"Sure. But while the game was on, the field lights would send some light down through the grandstand, being as the stand ain't boarded up at back and is only a lot of planks laid along the framework."

"Okay. But what does that get you, soldier. Do you think someone sitting in a car back here saw the whole thing?"

"No," said Tony. "I doubt if anyone saw that. But, it was light enough under the grandstand to see some things—"

"See what?"

"Who was there. Now, Roland comes to the grounds to see Lola. She is out on the field and he can't get to talk to her until the game is over. So he waits.

"Being as he was like he was, he didn't want to wait where he could be seen, so he went back under the grandstand. Then the game goes on. He gets curious. After all, Lola is his sister and he wants to see how she's doing."

"Sure. He couldn't help but be curious."

"Well, here comes the end of the third. The ticket-selling girl looks up and goes front to watch the game. She sees Ted quarreling with Roland, and she sees Stumpy. Now, being as they were seen anyhow, Ted will probably say it was just an argument over Lola and nothing came of it and that after Stumpy left, he left, too, and went to watch the game. But—"

"Don't you believe him?"

"It could be," conceded Tony, "that Ted and Stumpy are not sure of each

[Turn Page]

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other and are trying to protect each other. If we could tell what happened to Roland's wallet, it would help."

"Roland's wallet?"

"Well, they say he carried a big wallet with papers and money in it, and it's missing. Now, suppose the guy who killed him took the wallet. What could he do with it? Almost nobody was wearing a coat, because it was so hot. So now suppose the killer has the wallet, he could put it in his hip pocket, but it would stick out. And if he was seen with that wallet, it would be a dead give-away. So what—"

"Look!" Gus's hushed voice was startled.

Tony looked. Through a small grove of trees some distance to the right a woman came, walking fast. A small woman. She was heading straight across the open space toward the turnstiles.

"Oh, good grief!" murmured Gus. "It—its Lola!"

"It sure is."

Gus gripped his arm. "Listen, soldier! If I find you're putting up a job on Lola—"

"Wait and see how things work out," Tony pleaded.

Gus didn't like it, but she kept still.

LOLA was still walking fast. She reached the turnstiles. With easy grace, she vaulted over, and drifted like a moving shadow in the darkness under the grandstand.

"She's stopped," whispered Gus.

"Right where Roland was killed," Tony added.

"Now she's moving again."

"Yeah. Just like she's counting off her steps."

Lola was barely visible. She was going some distance, along the outer edge of the grandstand. The top planks of the grandstand were high above her head.

Suddenly, she stopped again, then stepped farther under the grandstand. She was reaching high, groping, fumbling in a cross-brace made by the timbers under one of the planks.

"She's found something!" Gus muttered.

[Turn to Page 90]

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Tony said nothing. Lola was retracing her steps now, quickly. In a few moments she had reached the turnstiles again, had leaped over, then walked swiftly off to the right.

"I'm going after her!" Gus said vigorously. "She must be in trouble."

"I guess she is," Tony agreed. "But we got to be careful."

Gus stared at him. "You know what you're doing, soldier?"

"I hope so. I ain't sure. Listen, we'll follow her, but keep out of sight."

They scrambled out of the car, and moved quietly after Lola who was vanishing into a clump of trees. In a few moments they were on a pathway leading through the trees.

"This path comes out on a clearing beyond here," Gus said.

"She's out of sight," Tony whispered excitedly. "Let's hurry. I'm kind of worried."

The path twisted through the trees, and suddenly came out on a clearing. A few yards beyond was a road. Low voices came from a car parked there. They saw Lola waiting at the car for someone who was getting out of it.

Tony held Gus back.

"I got it," Lola was saying clearly, calmly.

The man who had stepped out of the car said: "Give it to me," and he took something from Lola's hand.

Lola started to get into the car, but the man said, "Wait."

"Wait?" Lola turned. "But why—oh, you must be crazy!"

"Not so crazy," said the man. "Sorry, but I can't take any chances."

A faint glimmer of moonlight skated along the gun in the man's hand. He was bringing the gun upwards.

Tony sprang across the space. The gun barked and the flash stabbed at Lola. But the man had been disconcerted and his aim was bad, so the bullet cracked through the car's windshield.

The man turned toward Tony, snapping his gun about. But Tony was at him. Tony's fist caught him against the jaw, hard. The man dropped and lay very quiet.

Tony stooped over him.

"I guess he's out cold," Tony said.

Gus rushed up and knelt beside the fallen man.

"Jeepers!" she cried, "it's Mel Summit!"

"Yes," said Tony. "Mel Summit killed Roland. We'd better get him to the police." He glanced over at Lola. And we'd better get Lola home. It's been a hard night for her."

WHEN they had left Mel Summit at the police station, Gus and Tony took Lola home. Then Tony went back to the station again to see how things worked out. When he returned to Gus's apartment, he had Stumpy and Ted with him.

While Lola and Gus made sandwiches and coffee, they talked over the events of the day.

Stumpy thumped Tony on the back. "Some smart work you did, soldier," he said.

Tony grinned at Stumpy and Ted. "It would have been easier," he said, "if you two hadn't been so anxious to protect each other."

"We did kind of suspect each other," admitted Stumpy, "being as we each knew the other knew Roland was under the grandstand there. But how come you suspected Mel?"

"I just sort of blundered along," Tony said. "First thing, when Mel

[Turn Page]

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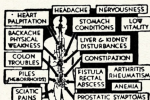
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Summit showed up at the Hamburger Shop, before we went to the game, I couldn't figure him. He acted like he was warning Lola, but it looked to me like he was really trying to get Lola to avoid seeing Roland."

"What else?"

"Well, along about midnight, when Stumpy and me was at the Hamburger Shop, Mel Summit showed up with Lola's sister. He said she wanted to locate Lola, but I thought maybe Mel Summit had got Lillian into the mood to locate Lola because he wanted to get at her."

"Good guess," said Ted.

"The way it turned out," agreed Tony. "Well, Summit's right eye was bloodshot. He said an insect did it, but I thought to myself, suppose it was Summit who had killed Roland under the grandstand, would he cock his head upwards to see if someone sitting above him might be looking down through the planks? And, if he did, couldn't someone sitting up there shuffle his feet and maybe kick some dirt off the plank and down into Summit's eye?"

"Smart figuring," said Stumpy.

Lola put a hand on Tony's shoulder. "I want to thank you. I'm glad Bill has such a swell pal. And, if you don't mind, I think I'd better go to bed now."

TONY blushed, got some words mixed up. After Lola had gone into the bedroom, talk about the murder was resumed.

"Mel Summit kicked through with the straight stuff, huh?" Stumpy asked.

"Yes," said Tony. "He caved in when he saw it was hopeless. Seems that Mel had secretly married Lola's sister, Lillian. They kept it secret because they knew that Roland would blow sky-high if he knew. And Roland had caught Mel in some shenanigans at the bank, too. "Well, yesterday Roland found out about the marriage. He wanted to see Lola about it. Seems he figured it was a kind of family crisis and that's why he had to see Lola."

"And Mel wouldn't want Roland and Lola to get together, huh?" Ted asked.

"No. He figured he'd lose everything if they did. He already had the notion of getting rid of Roland and now he had to do that job before Roland got a chance to tell Lola. Mel was really after the Kent money.

"He followed Roland down to the ball game and parked out of sight. From his car, he saw Roland waiting under the grandstand. When the ticket window closed, Mel figured it would be his best chance.

"He had a gun, but as he got over the turnstiles he saw the ice pick. That was better—no noise. So he stuck the pick in Roland's back.

"Then he had to take Roland's wallet, because there might be something in it that would be bad for him. But he had maybe a hundred yards to go to his car. He might run into somebody on the way.

"If he was stopped with that wallet on him, it would finish him. And, like most everyone else, he wasn't even wearing a coat he could hide it under. So he stepped off so many paces and hid it up under the grandstand where Lola found it."

"But he couldn't leave it there very long," Stumpy suggested.

"No. The police would be sure to search the ball grounds more [Turn Page]

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thoroughly in the daylight. But Mel didn't dare go back there himself, because he might be caught at it. His best chance was to get someone else to do it for him. Who? Well, why not Lola?

"He'd been playing up to Lola, making her think he was her pal. And he could tell her that he had arrived after the murder and had hidden the wallet because he believed there was stuff in it Roland wouldn't want the police to know about."

"But he didn't know where Lola was," said Ted.

"Not until I told him. I phoned to Lillian's house and he was there. I told him to tell Lillian where Lola was, but I was pretty sure he wouldn't. He went and got Lola and drove down to the ball park, just as I figured. He planned to let her get the wallet for him and then he'd kill her!"

"I always knew he was a low inside pitch," Gus said bitterly. Ted suddenly turned toward the door.

"Well, me and Stumpy got to be going, Gus," he said.

"Not me," said Stumpy. "I like it here."

"We got to be going," Ted repeated firmly, and his eyes waggled between Tony and Gus.

"Huh? Sure," Stumpy said sheepishly. "We got to be going." And he followed Ted out of the room. When they had gone, Tony fidgeted uneasily. Before, he had been very comfortable with Gus, but now he was disturbed.


"Well, I guess I'll be going, too," he said.

Gus smiled pleasantly. "What's the hurry, soldier?"

"Well, I dunno. It's late. I got to write a letter to Bill."

"Sit down," Gus smiled again. "You have lots of time."

"Well, I dunno." He grinned, feebly, and dabbed at the dew on his face. "Guess I could stand another cup of coffee."



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MYSTERY-SCOPES

(Continued from page 9)

gested a plan to make Lawson break. The chemist was quite a voice impersonator and could imitate the voice of the old German.

One evening they brought Gooley Lawson into the "dark room" for questioning. Arrangements had been made by Burke so that at a psychological moment some sulphuric acid would be automatically spilled into a bowl of aluminium.

At a given signal, the chemicals were mixed, causing a hissing vapor to arise above the table in a ghostlike cloud—and at the same moment, Burke, behind a partition, spoke in a solemn voice resembling that of the dead merchant:

"Gooley Lawson killed me. . . . I come for my revenge."

It was spectacular. Even the Chief of Police trembled. Gooley could not take it. He jumped up screaming:

"Don't let him get me. . . . I confess. . . . I killed him."

After the conviction, Gooley Lawson insisted he had actually "seen" the old merchant's ghost. The Chief of Police didn't call Gooley a liar in that instance—for the Chief admitted there seemed to be something more than chemicals in that uncanny vapor!

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A posse trailed Blut to the small swamp behind the farm and surrounded it. Foot by foot they closed in on the killer, until after several hours of careful search they met in the center—but found no sign of Blut.

"He must have slipped from a bog and sunk in the quicksand," said the sheriff. "But I wish we could recover the money for the poor widow."

It was like looking for a needle in a haystack. However, several deputies volunteered to search the swamp for the body.

Three days passed. All gave up hope except Alex Rowan, who was determined to recover the money for the poor mother and her children, whom he knew so well.

The sun was going down after a day's quest. Rowan was emerging from the swamp heart-sick. His prayers went out for the widow.

Suddenly he saw a shadowy figure about a hundred yards to his left. Was Blut still alive?

Hopeful, Rowan aimed his gun and fired. The shadow seemed to fade into the slime beneath it. Believing he had hit the killer, Rowan rushed to the spot, jumping daringly from bog to bog.

The quicksand was tranquil. No man could have fallen in it only moments before.

Sure of what he had seen, he called for help. And before dark Blut's body and the money were recovered. [Turn page]

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The doctor reported that the killer had been dead for three days. And he had not been shot!

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Dear Chakra: Is it true that witch doctors of the jungle can cause motors in airplanes and cars to stall at will?—*Walt Case*.

Dear Mr. Case: Many explorers, including Commander Attilio Gatti and Harrison Forman and others, have so stated. In fact, Commander Gatti could not get the motor of his truck to start until he gave a lift to a witch doctor who wanted to be taken to the next village. The moment the witch doctor alighted, the motor worked and the heretofore unlucky trip continued without further trouble.

Dear Chakra: I have heard it said that the present King of England, George VI, is a reincarnation of his great-grandfather, Prince Albert, husband of Queen Victoria. Is this true?—*Mel Schuster*.

Dear Mr. Schuster: No one can know that. The reason this is believed is that the present King was named Prince Albert and was born on December 14th, the same day of the year that Prince Consort Albert died. He lived 42 years—and it was 42 years between the birth of King George and his coronation.

Dear Chakra: Who are the greatest mind-readers in the world today?—*Helen Koepfel*.

Dear Miss Koepfel: Dr. Franz Polkar and Joseph Dunninger are considered the most remarkable mind-readers in the world.

Dear Chakra: What are the so-called "Nine pillars of human life"?—*George Dickster*.

Dear Mr. Dickster: They are bone, flesh, blood, glands, nerves, emotions, mind, spirit and soul.

—CHAKRA.

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Next Issue's CALENDAR OF MYSTERY



DOC BAGDEN was a small man, getting gray around the temples and thin on top. He was a drinking man, too, but he handled his liquor very well. That is, he always had until he made the acquaintance of Mr. Yehudi Smith one night on his own front porch. Doc Bagden, you understand, was the editor of a small town weekly newspaper, and he was perfectly content with that position in life.

His avocation or hobby was chess and the works of Lewis Carroll. Thus, when Yehudi Smith met him at his door and started talking about Vorpall Blades and other things found in "Alice in Wonderland" and "Through the Looking-glass," he hit Doc Bagden right where he lived—and we don't mean the editor's little cottage, either.

One thing leads only to others, until the good editor and all the rest of us become involved in a murder mystery maze that is fully as baffling and puzzling and astonishing as the story is interesting. Doc Bagden tells the story himself, and he does a whale of a swell reporting job on it, too.

Such is the setup for **THE JABBER-WOCKY MURDERS**, the featured novel for next issue, by Fredric Brown. From this whimsical and wacky beginning the story moves rapidly through an amazing web of intrigue that is a perfect blend of elegant writing and nice spooky, horror atmosphere. Once you start reading **THE JABBER-WOCKY MURDERS**, if you can lay it down before you finish it—you're a person of great will power.

A fitting companion yarn to this novel is the novelet, **DEATH DRAWS A FULL HOUSE**, by Lee Fredericks. This exciting yarn is laid in Havana, Cuba. The hero is a Puerto Rican detective—our old friend, Unofficial Jones. Jones is a famous undercover agent for the United States State Department, and he gets up to his ears in a deadly game of death with a lethal gang of Fifth Column agents and Nazi spies who are, among other things, tipping off Axis submarines about United Nations shipping in the Caribbean.

In addition, there will be as many gripping and hair-raising short stories as we can crowd into the issue. And Chakra will be back with more authenticated and almost unbelievable true tales of the uncanny.

Won't those of you who have not yet done so write in and tell us how you like our magazine? We always welcome suggestions from readers. Simply address your letters or postcards to The Editor, **THRILLING MYSTERY**, 11 East 39th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Until next issue, then!

—THE EDITOR.

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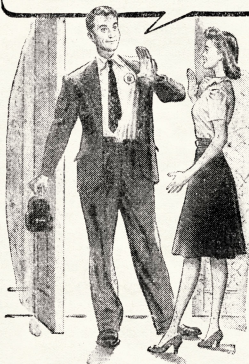
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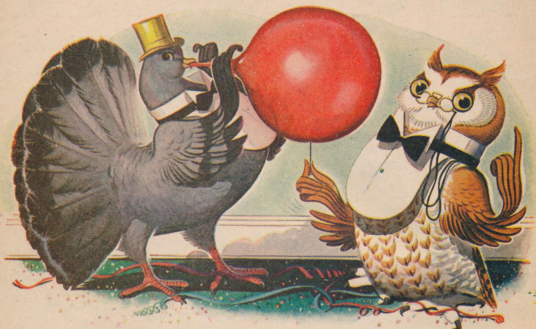
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Keep prices down! For Victory and your own post-war security do these seven things: 1. Buy only what you need and make things last. 2. Pay no more than ceiling prices. 3. Pay increased taxes willingly. 4. Pay off old debts and avoid new ones. 5. Live within present income. 6. Build up savings and life insurance for the future. 7. Buy and hold more War Bonds.



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