ALL Mystery

OCT. – DEC. 25¢

DELL

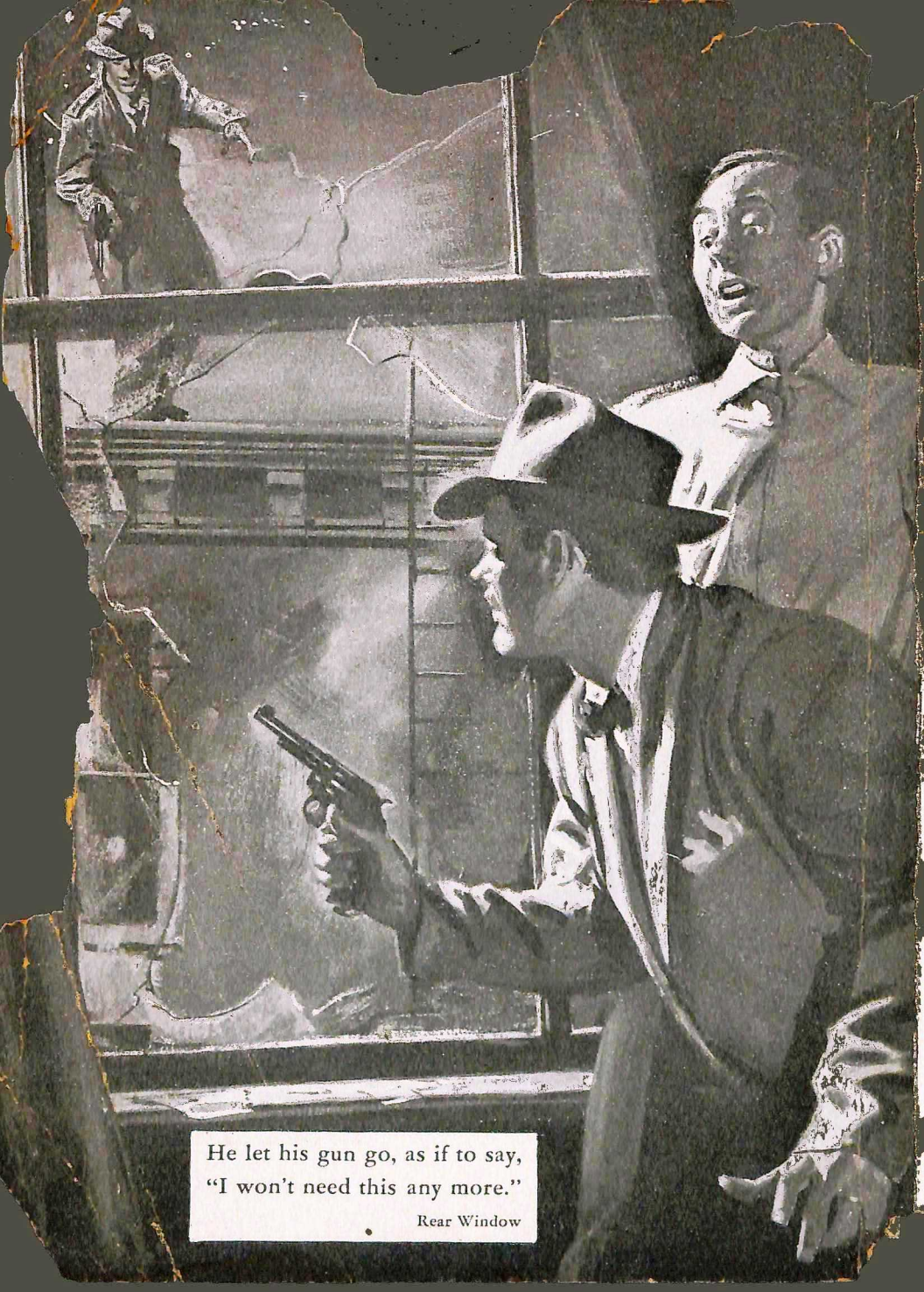
MURDER MIXUP

A Flash Casey Novelette

by GEORGE HARMON COXE

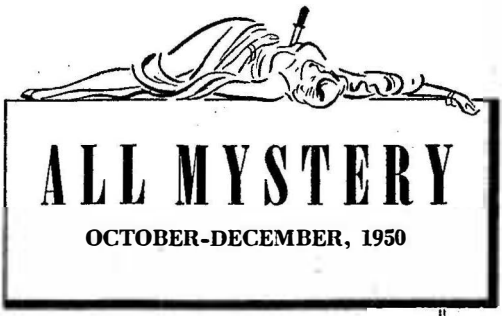
ALSO DETECTIVE STORIES

by Helen McCloy, William Allan Vaughan Elston, Vincent Starrett



He let his gun go, as if to say,
"I won't need this any more."

Rear Window



ALL MYSTERY

OCTOBER-DECEMBER, 1950

Front cover, illustrating "Murder Mixup," by Bob Stanley—Back cover, illustrating "The Nameless Clue," by Bob Abbett—Inside front cover, illustrating "Rear Window," by John Murray—Inside back cover, illustrating "One More Murder," by Jack Stevens—Black and white illustrations by Ferd Wagner and Earl Sherwan.

Published by

DELL PUBLISHING CO., INC.

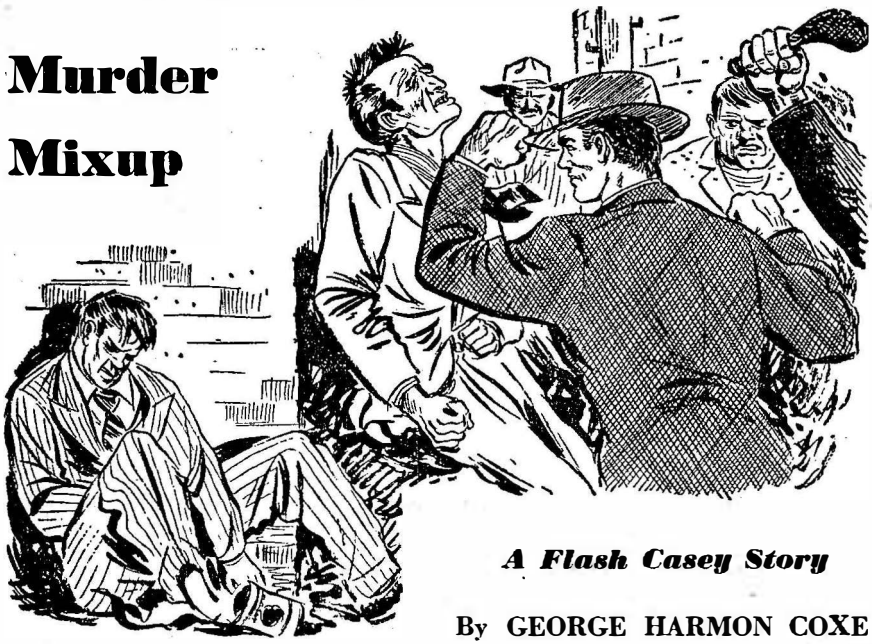
George T. Delacorte, Jr., President • Helen Meyer, Vice-President

Albert P. Delacorte, Vice-President

261 Fifth Avenue, New York 16, N. Y.

Printed in U. S. A. Address all manuscripts and editorial correspondence to All Mystery, 1220 Mound Avenue, Racine, Wisconsin. Single copy 25 cents. Designed and produced and copyright, 1950, by Western Printing & Lithographing Company.

Murder Mixup



A Flash Casey Story

By GEORGE HARMON COXE

News pix and homicide and whisky make an accustomed diet for Flash Casey. If the mixture's stomach-unsettling it calls for another slug or two of liquor—and one of extra-curricular sleuthing.

CHAPTER ONE

Stiff Engraver

CASEY, number-one camera for the *Express*, opened the door violently and came into the room with a rush, as though he had expected some resistance. Once inside he closed the door quickly, leaned back against it with a sigh, said:

"Hah! Can I come in?"

Four plain-clothesmen strung around the room glanced up in surprise, and two of them began to grin. A fellow who had been searching a table drawer stopped to look. Captain Shanley, of Station 8, spun about, eyes widening then receding into an exasperated red-faced scowl.

Casey's dark gaze kept moving, hesitated on the dry-eyed but obviously frightened woman who sat on a straight-backed chair in front of Shanley. Recognition came instantly and Casey's glance slid to the man on the floor beside, and partly obscured by, the knee-hole desk.

"Who tipped you off, Flash?" Shanley asked. "I gave strict instructions to the Telegraph Bureau just so guys

like you wouldn't get in on this and–"

"That was naughty," Casey said.

"–if there's a leak," Shanley went on, as though he had not heard, "I want to know it. How'd you get here?"

"I thought you'd want to know," Casey said dryly. "Do I stay?"

"If you behave"–Shanley blew out his breath and shook his head irritably –"and leave that camera alone."

Casey put his camera and plate-case on the floor and began to move slowly forward, heading for the desk. "I got stooges," he said airily. "My own Bureau of Investigation. Newsboys. Street hustlers. When one of my crew sees something screwy he calls me up. Personally. Very simple."

He kept moving as he talked, finally stopped beside the man on the floor. In life this man had been very tall and thin. About forty-five, Casey thought. There were freckles on the hands and wrists, but not on the bony face. Just the pallor of death. The vest had been unbuttoned, suggesting that the examiner's man had already been here; and the left side of the shirt was one large bloodstain.

Casey's eyes narrowed and grew thoughtful. His lips drew up to fashion a whistle that never came and he said, "Herman Elwood, huh?"

"You know him?"

The voice was crisp and incisive. Casey glanced up. The man at the table, a well-dressed competent-looking fellow about Casey's age, was coming across the room. His face was lean and unsmiling, and his icy-blue eyes were direct and coldly steady.

Before Casey could reply, another man stepped from an inner hall and said, "Nothing there."

The first man nodded at Casey and said, "He knows him."

The newcomer studied Casey and was studied in return. He was older than his partner; there was gray at his temples and more lines in his face. But he had the same kind of eyes.

"Just what," he asked quietly, "do you know about him?"

Casey frowned, glanced questioningly at Shanley, who grunted, "Boucher and Floyd. Secret Service–Treasury Department."

Casey said, "Oh. Well–I don't know much about Herman. We weren't buddies or anything. But he used to work on the *Globe* when I was a cub. An engraver until he got in some kind of a jam with a girl from Classified and got canned. They tell me he was too good for newspaper work anyway. An expert at detail. He went up to the Ad-Art Engraving Company, but I haven't seen him in a couple years."

The two Treasury Department men exchanged glances and the younger fellow said, "We can't keep the lid on this, Floyd."

Floyd pushed his lips out and rubbed three fingers across the point of his chin. "We've been looking for this guy for two years," he began, addressing Shanley. "In the past year a half million in queer money has been shoved in circulation. Tens mostly–and so good they fooled plenty of bank tellers. This is the bird"–he glanced down at Elwood–"that made 'em. Or at least made the plates.

"We located him about a week ago, but we've been waiting until we could be sure and get the plates. And we wanted the big shot that's promoting the queer. I don't think Elwood did anything but make it. Somebody bought that output. So far we only had Elwood and a line on a fellow named Petty down on Falk Street."

Floyd shook his head and his eyes were troubled. "And when we get close somebody knocks him off. We've got to start all over again. We've located the plant, but we haven't got the plates or the guy behind it."

Casey glanced about the spacious living-room, keeping his eyes away from the girl Captain Shanley was questioning. It was a man's room. Rather somber, well-furnished with heavy pieces and lots of ashtrays and two leather chairs; the prints, half of them nudes, that spotted the walls, were good. His eyes came back to the girl.

"You'd better come clean," Shanley was saying. He stood very close to the girl and right in front of her, glaring down at her, fists on hips and thick legs spread. "You admit you're the one that reported this. But you ran down to the corner drugstore to do your phoning. Why? I'll tell you. Because you had something to hide. And if the janitor hadn't happened to see you come out of here we'd never got a line on you at all."

"Oh, I know that was wrong." The woman's voice rose and choked slightly. "But I told you why. I didn't know if he was dead and I wanted help quickly. But I didn't want to get mixed up in it. The publicity and—"

"Aw—" grated Shanley. "You were here and you—"

"You don't think she did it, do you?" Casey grunted. "She could be telling the truth."

Shanley spun with a snarl in his throat. He was a big man, very bald, and his pate was the color of his red face. His thick bristly brows were threatening even in repose; now they seemed to stiffen like a porcupine's back and there was a bad look in his eye.

"You," he rapped angrily, "keep your yap shut!"

Casey shifted his weight awkwardly and leaned back against the wall. There was a reason for his speaking out of turn. He knew the woman in the chair, and knowing her, something within him had risen to her defense.

Rose Nielson was no longer a girl in the usually accepted sense. She was about thirty, a dark, quiet woman in a coral-red woolen dress. She was not pretty, not the fluffy type, but she was nice-looking, clean-looking, with a clear, smooth skin and soft, brown eyes.

Until she fell and broke an ankle she had been a dancer of the night-club caliber, but that life had not hurt her or hardened the quiet reserve that was hers. She had gone out with many men because men liked to be with her. She was a good sport, but she was square. For the past two years she had been a partner in a beauty parlor. Handicapped by a no-good brother whom she partially supported, she had not gone out much lately; when she had it was with Sam Hobart.

Now there was a strained, almost rigid look to her face. She sat erect, arms stiff, with her hands gripping the edge of the chair seat; her frightened eyes were riveted on Shanley. At that her chin was up as courage and character mustered their defiance.

"You were chiseling!" Shanley barked. "You ran around with Sam Hobart, and sneaked in here to see Elwood on the side. About an hour before you called Hobart was here and had a row with Elwood—about you, huh?"

"I don't know," Rose Nielson said faintly.

"And that brother of yours," Shan-

ley went on. "He had trouble with Elwood, too. The janitor knew all about it. Now one of 'em came back here and put the slug on him, and you were in that bedroom and you know which one it was."

"I tell you I don't." Rose Nielson let go of the chair, clenched her fists in her lap. "I was here talking to Herman when somebody knocked; and for some reason he didn't want me to be seen here. He made me go down the hall to the bedroom and shut the door. I waited there. I heard voices—"

"Whose?"

"I don't know. It was just a loud mumbling. I didn't listen at the door, didn't know anything was wrong until I heard the shot."

"Oh," Shanley snorted sarcastically, "you heard the shot, huh?"

"I was too frightened to do anything for a moment. When I finally went out there was no one here but Herman and he—he—"

The outer wall of reserve broke suddenly and Rose Nielson buried her face in her hands. Dry, choking sobs filtered through. Shanley slapped the hands to one side.

"You're lyin'!" he rasped. "You're protecting somebody and I'm gonna find out who if I have to—"

Shanley's voice grated on. Casey's hands moved restlessly at his sides. He pushed out from the wall and stood scowling, a burly, thick-chested figure who weighed 210 and still had a stomach like a washboard. His dark hair was shaggy at the nape, gray-streaked at the sides; his rugged face was set, with a faint curving at the lips, as though he had a bad taste in his mouth.

He began to button his ulster, kept his eyes on Rose Nielson's face and watched the tears finally come. Those dark eyes rarely mirrored illusion; they were hard, smoldering now. This act was not new. He'd seen it before, would see it again, yet he never quite got used to the sight. This time he happened to like the victim and there was an uneasiness at the pit of his stomach.

For an instant his eyes flicked to the door, took on a new enigmatic glint. Then he turned back to Shanley and the eyes were again brooding.

"There's ways of making you talk," the captain was saying.

"Sure," Casey said disgustedly. "You might try a club."

Shanley's breath came out in a noisy rush. His hands dropped from his hips; he straightened his crouch; he gave each of the plain-clothesmen a hard, individual stare, turning as he spoke.

"O'Brien, Levy, Lumbert, Hoxie." He completed his turn to glare at Casey. "Out!"

Levy dropped his cigarette in an ashtray and got up from the divan. Lumbert looked pleased and took a hitch in his belt; Hoxie buttoned his coat. Casey stooped, slung the platecase over his shoulder, and picked up the camera.

"I was just going," he said flatly.

He palmed the doorknob, rattled it two or three times, wasting a few seconds. Then he pulled the door toward him quickly, stepping behind it as he moved.

From a point beyond the doorway came a quick burst of blue-white light. Casey, watching Shanley, saw him blink. There was a moment of absolute silence; then Shanley began to curse and Casey stepped into the doorway, blocking it off as he looked into the hall. Running footsteps pounded toward the stairs.

Three or four men hit him in the back, strained there, pushed him into the hall. He turned, facing the raging Shanley.

"What was that?" Shanley fumed.

"It was a camera," Casey rapped, looking angry. "You don't give me a break, but some other guy stands here in the hall and cops a picture of the room and—"

"Nuts!" lipped Shanley. His lips worked silently and his fists opened and closed; then he thrust out his jaw at Casey and leered, "Well, you're out, anyway."

Casey waited until the door slammed, then trudged down the stairs. Tom Wade was waiting on the sidewalk, his round boyish face cracked in a grin and his blue eyes popping.

"Did we time that one?" he raved, slipping the plate-holder from the back of his camera and putting in a fresh one. "I got the girl and the dead guy from the waist down, Shanley and a couple other guys. It oughta be a knock out."

Casey didn't return Wade's smile and there was still a growl in his voice.

"It's a good thing we doped out an idea and the doorknob signal. I didn't think I'd have a chance with a roomful of cops." He tugged at his hat brim, turned to face the apartment entrance. "What a racket. Always trickin' somebody so we can do our job." He spat on the sidewalk. "At that," he added resentfully, still thinking of Rose Nielson, "it's better than bein' a cop."

An ambulance swung into the curb as he finished and two white-coated interns yanked a stretcher from the back and went into the building.

"Beat it," Casey told Wade. "They may be comin' out. Shanley's sore enough without knowing you're with me."

Casey was right and soon after Wade left, the interns carried Herman Elwood's body down the steps and across the sidewalk. Casey took two pictures, waited another minute or so until Shanley and Rose Nielson led a phalanx of plain-clothesmen out of the house.

He got one more shot of the procession and then, as though they had sprung from the snow-bordered pavement, the street and sidewalk were alive with reporters and cameramen. Taxis screeched to a stop, spilled more newspapermen to the sidewalk. Casey, no longer interested in the huddle around the police car, climbed into one of the vacant cabs.

CHAPTER TWO

Mutiny!

CASEY stopped in Steve's and had two drinks on his way to the office. The liquor warmed him, took the edge off his rancor, and as he lolled back in his chair in the studio anteroom a half-hour later he was in a tolerant, well-satisfied mood. He nursed the mood, enjoying it, until the door banged open. He did not look around until a thin, sarcastic voice said:

"Well, well. So you're back?"

Casey swiveled the chair, and when he saw the newcomer was Blaine, the city editor, he straightened his legs and clasped his hands behind his neck in a gesture of sheer laziness.

"Yeah. I'm back."

"Splendid," Blaine said. He shut the door quietly and moved toward Casey, a slender, immaculately clad figure with a lean, hawklike face and prematurely gray hair. The gray eyes were cold, sardonic. So was his voice.

"It might interest you to know that we've been looking for you for nearly an hour. Somebody saw you and Wade go out, but nobody knew where."

"What a pity," Casey said.

"And while we were stuck without a camera we find out that the smartest counterfeiter in the country has been murdered down on Jennings Street. Of course"—Blaine smiled, a true indication of his anger—"you probably would have muffed it but we'd at least had some representation."

He leaned forward. "Now where the hell were you?"

"Taking pictures," said Casey.

"You should have been here on call. I've got a damn good notion to—"

"You mean," Casey cut in, "for two cents you'd fire me."

Wade strolled out of the darkroom corridor whistling. He glanced at Blaine, cocked an eye at Casey, and handed him four damp prints.

"McGrath will hear about this," Blaine fumed.

Ordinarily Casey would have been glowering, holding his anger in check—because Blaine's sardonic manner had that effect. Now he lifted his brows and spoke wearily.

"We get paid to take pictures, and we take 'em. How we get 'em is our business. Here." He held out the pictures. "You'll love 'em."

"I don't want 'em!" Blaine clipped.

Casey half-closed one eye at Wade. "He says he don't want 'em. Is that gratitude?"

Blaine choked, leaned down and thumped the desk, a most unusual demonstration for him. "I want pictures on that murder," he fumed.

"Aw, give us a break," Casey pleaded mockingly. "Look 'em over anyway." And, as Blaine automatically glanced at the prints, he added dryly, "The guy on the floor with only his legs showing is the counterfeiter, Herman Elwood."

Blaine's eyes went wide and his jaw hung slack. "Where—" he finally wheezed, "How did you—why didn't you say so?"

"Am I burned?" said Casey in a tone that, contrary to his statement, showed he was getting a huge kick out of the situation. "Here Wade 'n' me go out and make the old college try for the good ole *Express* and what do we get? Questions, arguments, abuse. Tsk. Tsk. It's mutiny."

Blaine got his mouth shut after a struggle. His face was taut and getting crimson at the cheekbones. His sense of humor—what he had—couldn't stand the shock and he whirled, stamped to the door, and jerked it open.

"Go ahead," Casey cracked. "Slam it if you want."

Blaine did just that.

Wade began to laugh, finally collapsed in a chair. "The payoff," he managed to say. "For once he didn't have an answer."

"And on that," Casey said, opening the desk drawer and hauling out a half-filled pint of whisky and a glass, "I buy a drink."

As he handed Wade the bottle, his eyes were bright with a silent laughter that was good to see. Because, genuine and coming from within, it changed his appearance, made him younger, erased the so often somber lines in his face.

When he had taken a drink he said, "This bright moment makes up for a lot of grief. Maybe it ain't such a lousy job at that. It makes a guy feel good, and I can stand a little of that feeling." He offered Wade another drink, stood

up, and tapped a few clumsy steps.

Wade, making a face as he swallowed the whisky, said, "Just like Fred Astaire, only you make more noise."

"I gotta do something," Casey said, polishing off the remainder of the pint. "On account I feel swell. It won't last"—his voice sobered in reflection—"but right now I feel as young as you act. And that reminds me."

He swept the telephone from the desk, got the circulation department, and asked for MacShane. "There's a kid hustles papers on the corner of Jennings and South," he said. "Name of Petroni. Get word to him to come in sometime tomorrow. He's got ten bucks coming. Yeah. A tip he gave me."

Wade looked regretfully at the empty bottle, sighed. Studying Casey, who was slouched in his chair again staring sightlessly at the pencil-scribbled wall, he said:

"Do you think that Nielson woman killed Elwood?"

Casey made a growling noise in his throat. "What a guy," he grumbled. "Always thinkin' of things."

"But do you?" Wade persisted.

"No."

"You think she knows who did?"

"Maybe." Casey frowned and lit a cigarette. "But what of it? You couldn't expect her to turn in Hobart, or her brother—if they did it?"

"She liked Hobart, huh?" Wade mused. "An old bootlegger, wasn't he? And tough."

"Tough enough," Casey said. "But not tough just to be tough." He hesitated, continued absently, putting his thoughts into words. "And he wasn't a bootlegger, exactly. He was sort of the business end, contact man for the crowd that handled most of the stuff on the Cape. He was tough enough to keep a New York syndicate from muscling in, but he was no gun waver. Not a bad guy. Quiet, minds his own business. He's been running a fleet of trucks since prohibition and doing pretty well, so they say."

"But he could've done that job this afternoon," Wade said.

"Sure, and if he didn't want to he knows plenty of guys he could hire for the job."

"And about the brother?"

"Now there," said Casey disgustedly, "is a punk for you. Clyde Nielson. Never did a day's work in his life. Sold pool slips, chiseled here and there—on his sister mostly—and finally worked up to be a two-bit gambler. He was dealing one of Ben Alger's games the last I heard and—"

The telephone rang, and when Casey swung up the receiver Blaine's voice, as crisp and incisive as though nothing had happened, said:

"The Nielson woman has been released at Headquarters. Rosenfield, Hobart's lawyer, appeared for her. So look her up. We want a posed picture of her and if you find her and take three or four, one of them might be good enough to use. Oh, yes. And if you don't mind, I'd like it tonight."

Casey slapped down the receiver and sighed in weary irritation. "He's off again," he said, reaching for his coat and hat.

Wade looked glum a moment as Casey explained, said: "We shoulda gone out to supper." Then the youthful energy and enthusiasm that was an integral part of his makeup asserted itself and he rolled his chunky body out of the chair, yanked his hat down over his blond hair. "Anyway, it'll be better than sittin' here."

CHAPTER THREE

Alley-Go-Round

IT WAS nearly eight-thirty when Casey and Wade stepped from the cab to the darkened quiet of Jennings Street. The night sky was low and very black and it had begun to snow a little, the vertically drifting flakes small and far apart, almost invisible unless seen against the background of a street light. Three or four interlined tire tracks scarred the thin white veil covering the pavement.

Casey and Wade climbed stone steps already footprinted, walked through the remodeled vestibule of the old brick house, and mounted carpeted stairs to the third floor. Continuing past the door of Elwood's flat, they stopped at the last door on the left, just short of the back stairs. A name card fitted in the slot on the dark panel said:

Rose Nielson
Clyde Nielson

The man who opened the door in response to Casey's knock was of average height and rather plump. He wore a velvet-collared Chesterfield over his smart business suit, and his thin black hair was combed straight back above a heavy face that looked hard rather than fatty. For a short instant he held the doorknob, watching Casey with his small, sharp eyes.

Then, as Casey said, "Hello, Alger," he turned and spoke over his shoulder.

"Flash Casey's out here. Is it all right for him to come in?"

A woman's voice said, "I guess so," dully.

Alger stepped aside and Casey moved through the doorway with Wade right behind him. The high-ceilinged room looked old. So did the furniture; old but comfortable. Rose Nielson was standing in front of the sofa, her face very white and drawn, a hat in her hand.

"What is it, Jack?" she asked.

Not many people called Casey by that name and he noticed it. Noticed also that the woman's voice was shaky. He took his hat off and cleared his throat, said, awkwardly:

"Sorry, Rose. It was a tough routine this afternoon. I don't want to make it worse, but they sent us down to get a picture of you. It won't take a minute and—"

"Oh, no." Rose Nielson spoke jerkily in an unnatural pitch. "Please, Jack. I couldn't."

Alger said, "Just a nice friendly call, huh?"

Casey faced Alger and a brief flash of the man's history streaked through his brain as he watched the steady, hostile eyes. Alger was a gambler, had always been a gambler. There was some talk of other extra-legal activities, but nothing very definite. A quiet-spoken sort, he avoided publicity and kept to himself. He ran a club on the North Shore that catered to a polite crowd with a penchant for gambling and wire betting; he ran two or three floating games that met nightly in various apartments and hotel rooms—a different one each night. It was in this capacity that Clyde Nielson worked for him.

Casey thought of this as a sullen resentment at his job and the circumstances boiled over.

"With me it's just a job," he said flatly. "I don't always like it, and guys like you don't help things any." He turned to Rose Nielson. "It'll be easier

this way than to sneak one on the street, Rose."

"No. No, I couldn't."

"Why don't you beat it?" Alger asked pointedly. "She's had trouble enough."

"Please go," Rose Nielson begged. "Some other time when—"

"You heard her, Casey," Alger added.

Casey, thinking of some answers he could not speak, stood helpless for a moment, trying to find another approach. Then Rose Nielson made a choking sound and turned quickly, half ran down an inner hall.

Casey put on his hat and told Wade to open the door. To Alger he said, "Thanks, pal," sourly.

In the hall Wade said, "We didn't go so hot."

Casey made no answer, strode grimly to the stairs and stared down, his face sullen and head bent forward. He was still wrapped in his thoughts when he stalked through the vestibule, and as a result he nearly barged into the two men who were just coming in.

Swerving, he looked up as he passed the second man, a well-dressed fellow of thirty-five or so with a firm-jawed, angular face. Casey's eyes widened and for an instant his step faltered; then he jerked his head around quickly, continued down the steps to the sidewalk.

"So what do we do now," Wade wanted to know.

Casey was staring at the doorway, thick face thoughtful. He put down his plate-case, set the camera on top of it. Without shifting his gaze, he unbuttoned his ulster, got out a cigarette and lit it.

Wade said, "What's eating you?" impatiently.

"An idea," Casey answered slowly. "The second guy that went through that vestibule was Sam Hobart. I think the other one was a punk called Marty. I wonder if this could be something."

"He looked tough, that second guy," Wade offered. "And he had a bad look in his eyes. Let's wait and see."

"You wait," Casey said. "I'm goin' back and park in that upstairs hall."

"Then why can't I help too?"

"It would help if you quit arguin'," Casey said. "We got two things to do: get a picture and try and find out where Hobart goes when he leaves here. The cops were looking for him and as far as I know they haven't found him. I'm gonna wait up there and if trouble starts I'll be there.

"If nothing happens and they come out, you'll be right here to grab a picture and maybe get a chance to tail Hobart."

"But suppose—"

"Have you gotta suppose?" Casey rapped. "Hell, I don't know the answers. If you want to go up, go on. And I'll stay here and grab a picture."

"Well—" Wade faltered, beginning to accept the idea.

"And I can't draw you a map," Casey went on. "Use your head if you can stand the strain. You may have to run for it. Anyway I'll be down to give you a hand."

Casey started up the steps with Wade's "Okey," sounding in his ears. He went hurriedly to the third floor, and was halfway to that rear door when he heard the sound of men's voices. He lengthened his stride. There was a muffled cry, a woman's voice rising just once; then the hall floor vibrated faintly under his feet and synchronized with a distinct thudding sound.

Stopping opposite the door, Casey

listened. A man's voice was saying, "You're coming with me."

The doorknob rattled and Casey stiffened, glanced wildly about. Two long strides took him to the angle of the back stairs, and he went down three steps as he heard the door open. The voice, plainer now, said:

"Just walk along easy and don't make a fuss."

Casey peered around the corner of the stairwell. Sam Hobart had Rose Nielson by the arm and was guiding her to the front stairs. Marty, a thick-bodied fellow in his belted coat, followed behind and was just slipping an automatic into an inside pocket.

When Casey ducked into the hall and opened the door of the Nielson apartment, a moment later, Ben Alger was on his hands and knees, his Chesterfield draped tentlike over his buttocks. His head hung down between stiffened arms and the thin hair was mussed, bloodied a little near the crown from a scalp wound. Casey dropped his plate-case and grabbed one of the fellow's arms, helped him into a chair.

"Did Hobart snatch her?" he demanded.

"Yeah," groaned Alger. He put his hands to his face and rocked back and forth in the chair. "I tried to stop it but—"

There were a lot of things Casey wanted to find out, but he knew he could not stop to ask questions. If Hobart or Marty were getting tough Wade might need help—and there might be a chance to see where Hobart took Rose Nielson.

"You'll be okey now," he told Alger, and ran from the room and down the hall.

By the time Casey reached the front steps a taxi was moving west about fifty yards away. There was no sign of Wade, but another cab was angling out from the curb in front of the corner drugstore. Casey ran into the street. The cab did not slow down much and he slipped on the snow as he leaped for it, nearly fell under the wheels. At the right moment the rear door opened and a hand reached out, steadied him on the running-board.

"That was a smart one," the driver said. "Suppose you got hurt."

"I'd've sued you," Casey said, and climbed in back.

"I didn't see you come out," Wade said. "And I wanted to—"

"Is that the cab ahead of us?" Casey asked curtly.

"Yeah."

The taxi rolled down Andrews Street and slid around the corner into Gray, a slush-covered thoroughfare near the waterfront where darkened loft buildings interspersed vari-colored neon signs and the lighted windows of cheap restaurants and bars and cut-rate radio stores.

The lead taxi stopped in front of a darkened store front next to an alley. The three occupants crossed the sidewalk, stepped into an entryway. Casey and Wade approached from the opposite side of the street as Hobart unlocked the door and led the way inside. Presently a light flashed on in a rear office and the sign *Atlantic Trucking Company* on the front window stood out in sharp relief.

For a few seconds Casey studied the layout, noting the adjoining alley and the restaurant next to it. Then he turned to Wade and said:

"Watch the place. I'm gonna get a phone and call Headquarters. If I can get Logan up here in time we might

get some pictures." Then, remembering something else, he added, "Say, did you get one of Hobart and Rose Nielson coming out of the house?"

"Sure," Wade said. "At least I took one. I was on the other side of the cab they used and when the flashbulb went off I legged it down the street. Only they didn't follow me so I—"

"Nice goin'," Casey cut in. "Watch this place. And don't get ideas. Just watch it."

Casey had no trouble getting Logan. He was gone not more than three minutes, but when he returned Wade was not in sight. Grumbling, worrying just a little, Casey crossed the street and peered through the front window. The light in the rear office was still on behind a frosted-glass partition.

"Now what the hell!" Casey turned, looked up and down the street, studying the shapes of the few pedestrians that spotted the slushy sidewalks. He groaned half aloud, moved to the mouth of the alley, started slowly down, keeping to one wall.

Two steps and the lighted sidewalk area was behind him and his eyes became accustomed to the darkness. He thought he saw a car parked at the end, two or three vague shapes. Then a voice said, "Now wait a minute, will yuh?"

Casey's muscles stiffened and he lengthened his stride. The voice was Wade's—and it sounded anxious, disturbed. Casey was quite close now and he saw that there were three shapes, standing quite close together.

Another voice said, "Wait, huh?"

A third growled, "We're gonna bend your ears down, guy!"

Casey accepted the situation and kept on going. Wade had stuck his nose into something, and he needed help, and the odds looked all right to Casey. He came up to the trio, put down his plate-case, and said:

"Who's gonna bend whose ears down?"

After that the cyclone struck. Too late Casey saw that the side door leading to Hobart's office was open, that three men stood there looking on. One of the original pair socked Wade, and his partner swung at Casey, who blocked with an elbow and knocked the fellow down. Then the three men in the doorway were on top of him, and they had teamwork.

"*We're* gonna bend—" the first fellow drove a fist to Casey's stomach.

"*Your* ears—" a rap to the face.

"Down!" the third man caught him high on the jaw.

Casey staggered but kept his feet. Grunting, he waded in, both hands swinging and the art of boxing forgotten. The rest of the melee had no sequence to him. He felt no pain. He kept knocking men down, and they got up and knocked him down—or so it seemed. The blackout came abruptly with an explosive burst inside his head.

The next thing Casey knew he was sitting on the cobblestone floor of the alley, holding his head. When he got his eyes open there were no men around, no car, nothing but a shapeless lump on the opposite side of the alley. He heard somebody chuckle, looked around with a painful effort and saw a dim face topped with a chef's hat hanging out a rear window of the restaurant.

"You sure socked 'em around some," cheered the cook. "You kept two guys in the air and one on the ground all the time you were in there. You

would've taken 'em if a guy hadn't sapped you. Boy, how you can go!"

"Yeah," grumbled Casey having difficulty with his words, "but they pay off on the winner."

He began to feel of his face. He touched his nose and it promptly began to hurt; he spat blood from his mouth, felt of a swollen jaw. A lump on the back of his head began to throb in earnest.

The shapeless mound on the opposite side of the alley sat up and groaned.

"Are you all right?" Casey croaked.

"No," Wade moaned, "but I'm still breathin'."

"Maybe next time"—Casey painfully staggered erect and began to sop slush from his coat tails—"you'll stay put and do what I tell you. Of all the crazy—"

A car stopped in front of the alley and a quartet of men spilled out and ran toward him. Casey said, "The marines have arrived," and then Lieutenant Logan sprayed a flashlight beam in his face.

Chapter Four

Fourteen to the Pint

LOGAN came out of the side door of Hobart's office and said irritably, "if you'd waited for us we might've got Hobart and the girl. Maybe after this you'll let me be the detective."

"Aw," Casey growled, "I didn't—"

He broke off angrily. What the hell? What was the use of alibiing by explaining that Wade had started the snooping. It didn't help any now and he didn't *have* to run in and get tough. Or maybe he did have to. What difference did it make?

"Did you find anything?" he mumbled.

"This," Logan said, and held a thick sheaf of ten-dollar bills in front of Casey's nose. "Phony—I think."

"So Hobart was in with Elwood," Casey said. "And probably knocked him off and then came back for the girl—to be sure she wouldn't talk. And he had a bunch of truck drivers here to—"

"You must've scared 'em off," Logan interrupted. "The chef don't know much. Only that a flock of guys and one woman ran out and got in the car after they laid you away."

The alley was well filled with curious onlookers by this time, and as Casey looked around for his plate-case and camera he could not find them.

"You got my case?" he asked Wade.

"No. I thought you had mine."

Casey said, "Hell!" and began to search the alley.

"They're gone," he told Logan angrily a minute later. "And you know why? Because Wade got a shot of Hobart and Marty and Rose Nielson, and they didn't know which case was which so they took both."

"So that makes everything just dandy, huh?" Logan said.

A quick burst of light checked Casey's angry retort, and he spun about to see Yates of the *News* lowering his camera.

"Hey!" Casey rapped. "You can't do that!"

"They'll think you've been battling Joe Louis," Yates cracked.

"Well to hell with that," Casey said. "I'll get razzed enough without having my pan spread across your lousy sheet and"—he started for Yates, who didn't like the way things looked and began to run Logan grabbed Casey's arm and as the big photographer jerked loose he said:

"You can't take it, huh?"

"I've had enough trouble."

"So have other people, but that never stopped you from making it worse by grabbing pictures of them. Now you know how some of them feel."

"Yeah, but this is different."

"Not different, personal. Like I said. You can't take it."

"But it ain't news."

"When anybody slaps *you* around this bad it's news."

"All right, all right." Casey shrugged his coat collar up. "You get a kick out of it, huh? Well I hope they blow it up to five columns. It'll show the public the kind of police protection they're gettin' for their money.

"Come on, kid." He took Wade by the arm and began to press through the crowd. "Let's go to find a drugstore and get somebody to work out on my face."

Casey and Wade trudged into Frank and Eddie's a half-hour later with coat collars up and hat brims pulled low. Looking neither to the right nor left. and ignoring "Hi, Casey," and "Hello. Flash ol' Flash," Casey led the way to the last of the row of booths opposite the bar and slid across the seat.

"A pint of *Four Roses*," he told the waiter.

"We only sell by the glass," the waiter said.

"Get Frank," Casey said.

He opened his coat and pushed back his hat a bit. The lump on his head didn't show, but the other decorations did. There was an inch-long strip of adhesive over a gash on his cheekbone, one corner of the left eye was bluish, and the brow was matted with dried blood. He had a smaller piece of adhesive over his upper lip, his jaw was lumpy and his nose swollen and red. What was left of his face was warped in a glum, sullen expression.

He looked over at Wade. The natural, eager light in the blue eyes was replaced by dejection; his face was even glummer than Casey's, but aside from a bluish lump on his chin, unmarked.

"You get all the breaks," Casey groused. "Look at you. Only one little mark. The minute somebody taps you, bingo! Down and out. I think a china jaw would save me a lot of grief."

If Wade heard, he gave no sign. He said, "Imagine going back to the office without our cameras and stuff."

"We ain't through yet, kid," Casey said.

"But what're we gonna do?"

"I don't know."

Frank came to the booth. He was a round-bodied man with two or three chins—depending on how he held his head—and fat red hands.

"Hello, Flash," he said. "What's on your mind?"

"A pint of *Four Roses*."

"This ain't no package store," Frank said.

"You mean I can't get it?"

"Yeah. We sell by the drink."

"Okey," Casey muttered, his good brow cocking. "Bring us two tall glasses full of soda and ice. Now how many drinks in a pint?"

"Twelve—maybe fourteen."

"Bring fourteen small glasses and a pint and I'll buy it by the drink and keep you happy."

Frank went away, shaking his head. and Casey said to Wade, "Call the office and get Eddie. Tell him to pick up an extra camera and case and bring it down here. Tell him to keep away from the city room too."

When Wade came back from the telephone, Frank was ready with the order. Casey took the two soda glasses and pushed them out of the way; then, as Frank placed the small glasses down, Casey arranged them in rows.

"Now crack that pint," he ordered, "and fill 'em up!"

The glasses were all empty, and although the big photographer had put away nine of them, Wade's eyes were more glazed than Casey's.

"I feel better," Casey said. "Not much, but better. I can't feel my face."

That, he told himself, was his one consolation. He didn't feel as well as he thought he would, but it was an improvement. Physically, he wasn't so bad—the whisky felt warm and comforting in his stomach. Mentally he was a bit groggy. Yet one thought was crystal-clear and he could not shake it. He had to get some pictures. With something hot, he could stand the razz he'd get for the beating. There was a chance that the cameras might be recovered. Even if they were lost, MacGrath, the managing editor, would not crab much if there were pictures.

"I knew it wouldn't last," he snorted.

"What?" Wade asked thickly.

"That swell feeling I had in the office. An hour ago I was clowning; now we're a couple of bums. Boy, will Blaine rub this in." He reached across the table and shook Wade's shoulder. "Think, damn it! We've got to find Hobart or Rose Nielson or something. Get our cameras."

"Yeah," Wade said, "thass right." He picked at his nose, wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. "Gotta think of something. Maybe if we went back to the dame's apartment we'd find her brother. Maybe he'd give us a lead."

Casey's mouth came open to reply, stayed open in silence. Wade's idea was unconscious—true to form—but good. He, Casey, had forgotten about Clyde Nielson. Logan hadn't said anything about finding him either. Only if he was involved he'd never go back to his sister's place.

Casey craned his neck around the corner of the booth, studied the dozen or so men lined up at the bar and called:

"Joe."

A thin, sleek-looking fellow with a pasty face strolled over to the booth and said, "How'd it happen?"

"I got run over by a truck," Casey said. "Listen. I owe Clyde Nielson some dough. I tried his sister's place but he ain't there. Has he still got those business rooms over on Revere Street?"

He waited, trying to disguise his interest. Nielson always had had a private apartment apart from his sister's place. There had been a flat on Revere Street some months ago and—

"Ain't been there in six months," Joe said patronizingly. "It's on Falk Street now. Four hundred twelve, I think. Four-something, anyway."

Casey bought Joe a drink, paid his bill, and he and Wade waited at the entrance until Eddie showed up with a spare camera and plate-case. Giving Eddie a half dollar, Casey flagged a cab and pushed Wade inside as he gave the driver the address.

"There's a chance the cops might not know this place," he said as the cab got under way.

"What place?" Wade mumbled vacantly.

"You're gonna be a big help," Casey said.

CHAPTER FIVE

Cold Clyde

FOUR hundred twelve Falk Street was flanked on the high-number side by a vacant lot, and Casey told the cab to wait, pushed past a street-level glass door that bore the name: *The Ralston.* Wade staggered unsteadily into the vestibule and propped himself in the corner while Casey began to read the name cards tacked under the gilt mail boxes.

Casey read all the cards, said, "Hell," and read them all over again. "Probably under another name," he mused. "Should've asked Joe." He began to read again, slowly, practically spelling the letters. And this time he did not read far.

When his eyes fastened on the third name in the row, something clicked in his brain, burrowed deeply, and stuck there. He sucked in his breath and his eyes widened. The name was Clarence Petty.

"Petty!"

Casey straightened up and grabbed Wade. "Come on. This might add up."

"What?"

"Petty," Casey said, opening the inner door. "I told you what happened at Herman Elwood's place. Petty is the fellow that those Treasury guys were suspicious of. And they said he lived on Falk Street."

Wade just said, "Oh," and stumbled down the first-floor hall after Casey.

Behind the stairs, the hall widened out and there were apartments on both sides. Casey glanced at the numbers as he passed, continued in stiff-legged strides to the last door on the right which bore the brass number 1-E. The door was locked and he had a bunch of keys out by the time Wade trudged up with the plate-case.

None of the keys worked. Casey muttered an oath and fished a thin strip of celluloid from a vest pocket. After a moment he was able to force it into a crack adjoining the lock; then he slipped back the bolt, and, reaching forward, opened the door warily.

The room was dark, and he felt for a light switch along the wall, snapped it on, still reaching around the edge of the door frame and keeping most of his body in the hall. When light flooded an empty living-room he exhaled and stepped inside.

The interior was cheaply furnished and rather messy, with newspapers and magazines strewn around and ash-trays overflowing. The air was stale and hot. Steam hissed in a radiator under the windows. Casey and Wade made a circuitous tour to the open doorway opposite the entrance. Casey groped for another light, snapped it on; then he stiffened that way, his hand on the switch, his breath sucked in.

The dead form of Clyde Nielson was sprawled on the floor near the head of the bed.

A stiff heavy silence crowded the room, was finally broken by Wade's wheezing "Jeez!"

Casey's tension snapped. His eyes clouded and he moved over next to the body and stared silently down at it.

Death had made the figure seem thin and shrunken. The face was gray-white and wedge-shaped and very cold-looking. Wide-open brown eyes stared sightlessly at the ceiling and there was a lot of dried blood matting the dark hair and the rug next to it.

The sight seemed to sober Wade. He blew out his breath, put down the plate-case. After a moment he moved

around the foot of the bed and then Casey heard him gasp, "And take a look at this!"

Casey did not turn immediately. It was not the sight of death that held him, or any great feeling of sympathy for Nielson. Yet a sense of pity stirred within him. He was thinking of the woman. That rotten break that involved her in Elwood's murder. And now this—her brother. He finally shook the mood aside and looked at Wade just as the youth held up a fistful of new ten-dollar bills and cracked:

"Here's that five grand I owe you."

Casey went around the foot of the bed quickly. There was an open suitcase on the floor. It was partly filled with shirts and things, and on top was another stack of money.

"Put it down!" he rapped irritably. "First thing you know some of it'll stick to your pocket or something. And those Federal babies'd just as soon throw you in the clink as look at you."

Then he saw something else: two plate-cases, his and Wade's, resting against the baseboard in the corner. Wade dropped the bills with a look of regret and pulled the plate-cases out from the wall.

"Is this a break or is it?" he cheered.

"It's a mess," Casey said and continued absently as he tried to figure an answer. "Elwood dead. Nielson dead. Rose in a jam and then snatched by Hobart. And the whole screwy bunch mixed up in this counterfeiting."

His head came up, like an animal scenting danger. His eyes were troubled, reflecting the uneasiness he felt.

"There's something phony about this, and it ain't just the money. I don't like it. Let's grab a couple shots and get the hell out of here."

"Let's not. Just grab air, guys!"

The command came from behind, but instead of looking around Casey and Wade exchanged glances. Slowly their hands went up. Casey's look was one of resignation, as though he was prepared for the worst and nothing could be a shock any more. Wade's blue eyes were very round and startled, but he managed a sheepish grin and said:

"I guess it just ain't our night."

The two men stood in the door of a closet on the other side of the bed. One was a slender, well-dressed blond with pale eyes and an egg-shaped face. The other fellow was short, thick-set. His ears were twisted and his small eyes seemed lost in a scowl that looked permanent. He looked mean, and not very bright.

Casey did not know either of them, but he knew they had met before—earlier. The blond had a nicely decorated black eye and his partner's upper lip was split and puffy.

The blond waved his automatic carelessly. "The same two chumps, Sully," he drawled.

"Ain't that nice," Sully said, moving around the foot of the bed. "I think the big lug likes trouble. It'd be almost a shame to put away a guy that can hit like he can."

The blond said, "Watch 'em," and backed from the room. A few seconds later Casey heard him say, "Temple 9725."

There was a pause, then a telephoned explanation of how Casey and Wade had come into the apartment and been held up. "Now what do we do with 'em?" the fellow finished. "Yeah . . . yeah. Sure we got 'em. Okey . . . yeah, Sully can handle 'em. Okey."

When the blond came back to the room Wade began to giggle.

Sully said, "It's funny, is it?"

Casey, sensing that this might be part of an act, said, "He's drunk, that's all."

"He smells it," Sully said.

"And if you'll give us back our cameras," Casey began earnestly, but without much hope, "we'll clear out of here and—"

"Can you handle 'em alone, Sully?" the blond man asked.

"Can I handle 'em?" Sully was indignant.

"Then I'm shoving off ahead of you."

"Why?"

"Orders. Not to take chances and come together." The blond motioned Casey and Wade into the living-room, then went back to the bedroom. When he came out he had the two plate-cases with him. "Come along in five minutes," he told Sully as he went out.

Casey lowered his hands and Sully said, "That's okey if you don't reach for anything."

Wade lowered his hands, staggered a little, lurched into a red-plush chair. Casey continued to watch Sully. He didn't know what the next act would be, but he didn't look forward to it. And as the minutes ticked on he made up his mind to have a go at Sully. All he needed was a chance to get close. It was no setup, trying to watch two men. Sooner or later Sully would get confident.

The sullen anger that churned through Casey's brain was at a low heat, but very intense. He was tired of getting pushed around, and something told him this might be his last chance to get some pictures; might very well be the last chance he or Wade would ever have to do anything.

He was still thinking about this when Sully said, "All right, guys."

"Where we going?" Casey asked, acting frightened.

"Bye-bye."

"Well, let us bring our other camera and case then."

"You won't need it," Sully said. He leveled the gun, sidled toward Wade, and cuffed him with his free hand. "Come on, you! Up!"

Wade chuckled, hoisted himself out of the chair. Casey began to get nervous. Wade was full of wild ideas and Casey had long since given up hope of accurately predicting what he might do.

"Take it easy, Tom," he cautioned. "This guy'll be all right if we behave."

"You're smart," Sully said, backing to the door and opening it. "Now just march out nice. I'll be right behind you—and so close I won't miss either."

Wade pushed away from the chair. Casey kept his eyes glued on Sully. And then Wade stumbled and dropped to his knees; and Sully cursed, and for just an instant his small eyes swiveled sideways to make sure of Wade.

Casey moved with the flick of Sully's eyes. Muscles held in check for five minutes exploded in lightning-fast action as both hands moved at the same time, doing different jobs. He saw Sully's eyes jerk back, saw the gun hand stiffen and the trigger finger tense. But by that time Casey's left hook was inches from the fellow's chin and his right hand was clamping around the cylinder of the revolver, holding that cylinder as Sully strained to the trigger.

The left fist smashed a rugged jaw with a shock that jarred Casey clear to the shoulder. Sully's fingers slipped out of the trigger guard. He let go of the gun, rocked on his heels and dropped heavily to one knee. Casey jerked the gun back, set himself, and

let go with the left again.

This time he caught the fellow under the ear and the force of the blow swept him off his knees. Sully hit the floor on his side. He groaned once as he rolled over on his back; he flexed his right leg two or three times, straightened it and was suddenly very still.

Wade drew a breath that was so loud it was raucous. His grin, his eyes were admiring, and the way he said, "Boy—" was a tribute.

Casey pocketed the gun, looked down at his left fist, licked the skinned second knuckle. His eyes shifted to Sully, to Wade, and he said, "The drunk act was okey—only he might have plugged you."

"But he didn't," Wade countered. "And now we've got a start. We oughta go to town. Remember that phone number. Temple 9725. We can check it, can't we? And when we get the address we can nose around and—" he checked the outburst and watched Casey step over to the telephone.

"Temple 9725," Wade prompted.

"I guess that last drink was too much for you," Casey said flatly. To the telephone operator he added, "Police Headquarters."

Wade's face fell. "But—"

"But hell," growled Casey as he waited for the connection. "It's about time Logan soaked up a little of the grief on this layout. It's his job, ain't it?"

Chapter Six

Feds Don't Fool

LIEUTENANT LOGAN, Homicide Squad, was a lean, competent-looking fellow with black hair and steady dark eyes. He was about Casey's age and height, and he had a flair for clothes, a way of wearing them so that they always looked new. A good cop and more intelligent than most, he was hard without making a business of it, and he generally called his shots.

Sitting on the arm of the red-plush chair, he watched Casey, listened patiently until he heard the story. Then he lit a cigarette, glanced over at Sergeant Manahan, at the glowering Sully who sat morosely next to the sergeant, then back to Casey.

"You're still gonna be the detective, huh?"

"Nuts!" clipped Casey. "I've been taking the beating and I'm gonna collect. There's only one way to figure it. Nielson is stiff. He's been dead quite a while. He and Hobart and Elwood were mixed up in this counterfeiting, and Hobart must've knocked the two of 'em off. Maybe he was jealous of Elwood, maybe because the Feds were closing in and he thought Elwood would squawk. Then Hobart had to get Rose out of the way before she cracked —and she sure as hell would when she found out her brother stopped one."

"And where does Alger come in?" Logan asked dryly, glancing down at his cigarette.

"He knew Rose through her brother. Maybe he just happened to be there. Hell, you've got a badge that says Lieutenant on it; think up some answers of your own."

Casey stopped, took a breath. When Logan did not reply he added:

"But me. I know where I stand. Trace Temple 9725. When I get the address I'll know where our cameras are, and if you don't think I'm gonna get them you're crazy. You've had your tip, and I've played ball, and if you want to go down with the riot squad,

okey. If you don't think I'm right, okey too. But I'm going. And damn soon, before they run out on us."

Logan stood up, crossed to the telephone. When he hung up a couple minutes later he said, "269 Bruce Street. Name of Lafferty."

"Probably a phony," Casey said. "Ten'll get you twenty that Hobart and Rose Nielson are there." He turned and strode over to Sully. "Aren't they?"

Sully scowled more fiercely, said nothing.

Casey grabbed him by the necktie and jerked him erect.

"If you think it'll get you anywhere," Sully choked, "yes, you smart baboon!"

Casey pushed Sully back on the sofa with the heel of his hand and moved to the door. "Come on, kid," he said to Wade. And to Logan: "You want to come?"

Logan's smile was thin, but understanding. Those dark eyes of his could see beneath many surfaces and he knew that Casey, in spite of his bluster, was dead-serious and meant what he said; that he was just angry enough to go alone.

"Wait here with Sully for the examiner and the wagon," he told Manahan. "Call in. Have a car stop by for you and come down to 269 Bruce.

"You could be right," he said to Casey in the hall. "But Marty, the guy that was with Hobart when he came for Rose Nielson and took her to the trucking-place, was picked up about an hour ago with a fractured skull. That doesn't click."

"Sure it does," Casey scoffed, feeling better now that he was on his way to recovering the cameras and perhaps getting some pictures. "Maybe I hit him too hard down there in the alley. Sometimes I wonder if I know my own strength."

"Your face don't back up your words," Logan said sardonically.

"I'm still not convinced," Logan said as they stood in front of the Bruce Street address ten minutes later. "The hell of it is, I can't take a chance. I've got to find out."

He stood in the slushy pavement behind one of the rows of parked cars opposite the entrance, and studied the three-storied, squat-looking apartment, the half-dozen lighted windows in the severe façade. Turning to Wade he said:

"Stay here. Casey and I'll—"

"Aw, hell," Wade grumbled.

"—go up. You wait for Manahan. If we don't come out or get in touch with you before he comes, tell him to come up. Now wait'll I get the number." He stepped into a narrow entrance foyer. came back a minute later and said. "3-B."

The third-floor hall was chilly with a musty dampness that was oppressive. The rubber runner down the center of the floor was muddy and the plastered walls were dirty and beginning to crack. A loud, wise-cracking dialogue from a radio in a front apartment was the only sound on that floor.

Logan walked slowly, silently, looking about as he moved, to the rear, left-hand door. "This could be a bust," he whispered. "But it might not. You got a gun?"

"Yeah," Casey said, fingering Sully's revolver in his coat pocket. "And listen. If you don't want to crash it, why don't I knock? When they see me they'll think they're safe. Then you can rush in with a gun and—"

"You've done enough chiseling on my job for one night," Logan said. He

knocked sharply. "This sort of thing is my racket."

Casey whispered, "Tell 'em it's Sully."

"Let me think of just one idea all by myself, will you?" Logan hissed.

The faint sound of movement beyond the panel came to Casey as they waited. Muffled footsteps shuffled close, stopped. A voice said:

"Who is it?"

"Sully," said Logan gruffly.

The key clicked and the knob turned. When the door started to open, Logan moved with it. Not forcefully, but keeping his shoulder close so that it could not be shut in a hurry. The door kept opening. When it was wide, Logan, gun in hand, was practically standing on top of the well-set-up, angular-faced man who held the knob.

"Hello, Sam," Logan said, and stepped laterally so Casey could get inside.

Sam Hobart backed to the center of the room and his tight-lipped expression did not change. He stood there silently, a sort of defeated look in his blue eyes.

"So I could be right, huh?" Casey exulted. He put down his plate-case and began to unstrap it. When he glanced up again Logan was moving toward the telephone, and Casey kept busy with his camera.

"We've been looking for you, Sam," Logan said softly. "After I call we'll have a talk and look around a bit and—"

"Put the phone down, copper!"

Casey's head came up with a jerk. At first he saw only Hobart, and Logan with the service revolver still in his hand. Then he followed the lieutenant's fixed stare to the partly opened door of an adjoining room. This room was dark, but jutting from the opening were two automatics.

The door swung slowly. The automatics held steady, and then, with the door wide, Rose Nielson moved slowly into the room. Right behind her, with a gun pressed against her spine, was Ben Alger.

Casey froze, slack-jawed, staring. Logan held on to his gun but knew enough not to use it then. The two threatening automatics moved into the light until Casey saw the two men holding them. A third fellow brought up the rear.

Alger said, "Better put 'em up, Logan. Till we get that gun."

Casey felt a sense of suffocation as trouble and dejection settled over him. He swallowed, wet his lips, finally forced himself to speak, trying to keep his voice indifferent.

"So this sort of thing is your racket, huh?" he told Logan.

"Yeah," Logan said thinly as he let his gun be taken from his hand. "And you had it all doped out for me."

"We knew it wasn't Sully," Alger said. "He would use a different knock. So Hobart was nice enough to front for us."

"Because you held a gun on him, or in his girl's back," Logan said.

Hobart's face relaxed into a tired and harassed mask and he said, "Sorry," with a faint shrugging gesture.

Casey realized he had a tripod in his hand, and he spread the legs, set it up on the floor. Unable to figure a reasonable sequence for this final act, he studied the occupants of the room.

Rose Nielson's face was dead white, and had the expression of one walking in a trance. The brown eyes were defeated, hopeless; other than this she seemed incapable of either conscious thought or feeling.

Alger's heavy-jowled face, blue-tinted from his beard, was set like a mastiff's. His small gambler's eyes seemed to have receded, and taken on a new light: something hard, pitiless. The three men who fanned out behind him all bore marks of their earlier encounter with Casey. One of these was Sully's blond partner; of the other two one was small, ratty-looking; the other was a red-faced bruiser with sloping shoulders and a bullet, neckless head.

Alger's voice interrupted Casey's study. It was still a quiet, reserved voice. "Where's Sully?"

"In the can, I hope," Logan said.

"I told you you were a fool, Greer," Alger said, glancing at the blond gunman, "to let them hear the telephone number."

"Well, I thought we'd be bringing 'em in," Greer said. "Then it wouldn't matter."

"No. If you'd brought them in—if Sully had."

Logan began to smile, a tight, mirthless warping of the lips. "So you rubbed out Elwood, huh?" he asked coldly. "You knew the Feds were due to clamp down on him, and you wouldn't take your chances."

"There was too much at stake," Alger said evenly.

"Sure," Logan said. "Your skin, and the plates, and probably a lot of the queer in your sock." His eyes found Rose Nielson and his voice hardened. "You'd been better off telling Shanley the truth this afternoon."

The accusation seemed to startle the woman out of her trance. Her eyes fluttered. "Yes," she said hollowly. "Yes." She hesitated, then the words came out with a rush.

"Oh, I know. I'm as guilty as anyone. But it was Clyde. I—"

"You knew Alger was the one," Logan rapped.

"But don't you see," Rose Nielson wailed. "Clyde worked for Herman and he worked for Alger. At first I didn't tell because I knew it meant prison for him. After that—well"—her chin sagged—"I couldn't. Because Alger said he'd have Clyde killed if—"

"Then," Casey's voice boomed out, "it begins to add up." His one thought now was to stall. Manahan should be on the way with help. There might be a chance.

"Alger was giving you the business when I came to your flat, huh?" he asked Rose Nielson. "You had a hat in your hand. You were going out—with Alger. And you didn't know it, but he had his plans made then. He was going to put you away so you couldn't change your mind and squawk. Only Hobart came and grabbed you to—"

"We can do without all this," Alger cut in. "It's time to move out." He turned to the little, rat-faced man. "Get those cases, Leon."

"I grabbed her," Sam Hobart went on bitterly, "because I didn't like the setup. Alger had given her a song and dance about protecting her brother and she didn't want to come with me. But I knew what Elwood had been doing—that's why I went there and told him to leave Rose alone. And I knew Clyde was mixed up with him—and he worked for Alger. It didn't smell so good. So I went to get her. I was going to put her some place where she would be safe until I could find out where we stood."

"And Alger's thugs," Logan said, "were waiting for you, watching your office on Gray Street when you and Marty came along." He glanced at Casey. "If you'd been just a little tougher

in that alley you might've spilled the play at that."

"He was tough enough," Greer snarled.

Leon came into the room with the two black plate-cases and Casey said:

"Hey, what—"

"Don't you know what they used 'em for, yet?" Logan clipped. "They didn't swipe 'em to get Hobart's picture, you lug. They got 'em to cart the phony dough around."

Casey said: "Well, for— Am I dumb?"

"Plenty," Greer leered.

"Get going, Leon," Alger said. "Keep your gun in your coat pocket and your hand on your gun." He turned to Greer. "Tie Sam's hands again."

Greer pulled rope from his pockets, tied Hobart's hands behind his back, and pushed him down on a straight-back chair. Leon shrugged a plate-case strap over each shoulder and went out.

Right then Casey felt new fear. Wade. He wouldn't know what was in those cases. When he saw Leon, he'd be crazy enough to walk up and stop him. And he was alone, and Leon—with that gun—

Color seeped from Casey's face until the skin nearly matched two adhesive patches and the bruised eye stood out black and swollen. There was still that gun in his pocket, but he didn't have much time. He concentrated on keeping his voice resigned, closed the tripod, said, "Well, I might as well pack up," and dropped to one knee, putting the tripod in the case.

Logan looked over at him, his dark eyes curious, then hard, as though he knew that when Casey talked like that he was apt to be dangerous. Then Logan began to speak, sharply, incisively, alert eyes studying the room.

"Clyde Nielson had the money in his room, huh? And you, Alger, rubbed him out earlier but couldn't wait to get it. So you sent two punks back tonight with empty plate-cases to—"

"Rubbed who out?" Rose Nielson echoed.

"Your brother!" Logan rapped. "Don't you know he's dead?" His voice got brutal, seemed to be striving for an effect. "Don't you know Alger crossed you? He killed your brother—like he killed Elwood!"

It took a moment for the words to penetrate the dulled faculties of the woman. But when she finally grasped the truth it was as though someone had struck her full in the face.

"Dead?" she cried. Her head seemed to jerk in recoil. She stiffened all over and her voice shrilled in a throaty moan. "Dead! Murdered! No. *No. No*—"

She collapsed suddenly, completely, the will, the courage, that had supported her escaping as the dam of her resistance shattered. She sagged back against Alger's automatic and started to slump to the floor.

Logan was moving before the last word left the woman's mouth. So was Casey. Resting on one knee, braced, his hand found the gun in his pocket and he whipped it out.

Logan was six feet from the red-faced gunman when he leaped forward, but he made his play in the apparent desperate gamble that he could reach the fellow's automatic, or stand up under a slug long enough to do some good. At that he would never have made it if it hadn't been for Casey.

Theoretically the big photographer had three targets: Greer, Alger, and the red-faced fellow. Actually, and at the moment, he had but one. Logan

came first, and Casey aimed at the red-faced man's chest and squeezed the trigger.

The heavy gun roared and he felt the welcome slap of recoil at his wrist. After that the action, a riot of spontaneous teamwork that was all over inside of three seconds, was hazy for Casey.

He saw the red-faced man's coat jerk as he stumbled under the slug, saw Logan's shoulder hit the fellow and smash him backward to the floor. From the corner of his eye he saw Rose Nielson fall against Alger's legs and throw him off balance as she dropped.

Casey swung his gun toward Greer. The man's slender figure was set. His right arm was outstretched, the automatic already leveled. Casey had time to realize he'd never shoot first, maybe not at all. But he kept trying. Then, as Greer's trigger finger tensed, Hobart, sitting slightly in front of the fellow, kicked upward like an expert punter.

The toe of his shoe hit Greer's wrist as the gun barked. A slug went wildly over Casey's head and the gun hand jumped up under the impetus of the kick, as though in a gigantic recoil. The automatic spun nearly to the ceiling and as it fell another shot roared. Casey's eyes flicked to Alger, saw him stagger back and grab his chest with one hand; knew he had not fired that last shot. Then Greer's automatic hit the floor.

Greer, without a gun, stood rigid, motionless. The red-faced man was on his back. Alger braced himself, spread-legged; his gun came down at the end of a limp arm, dropped to the floor beside Rose Nielson's head. Logan, on both knees, slowly lowered the red-faced man's automatic.

Sweat rolled down into Casey's brows. He got shakily to his feet, stood dumbly for a second. Then, somewhere on the street below, a gun cracked through the night—just once, and he said, "Oh, hell!" and jerked open the door.

Casey ran, tried not to think, tried to put down the relentless fear that gnawed at his brain. He half stumbled down the two flights of stairs, holding his breath, afraid. He hit the ground floor on one foot just as Wade and the two Treasury men, Boucher and Floyd, swung through the entrance foyer.

For a moment Casey's relief was overwhelming and he just stood there, big chest heaving, sweat flooding his face. Boucher and Floyd each carried a plate-case. They nodded to him, but continued past without speaking, their faces grim, and began to climb the stairs.

Casey grabbed Wade's arms. "What the hell happened? Where's the little hood?"

Wade's blue eyes seemed distant, filled with wondering. He shook his head, turned and pointed toward the street. Casey could make out a huddled shape on the sidewalk and Wade said:

"Jeez, those babies don't fool." He started up the stairs with Casey. "They pulled up in a car three or four minutes ago, saw me and began to buzz me. I told 'em what I knew and we were standing out in the street talking when this guy comes down with the cases.

"I says, 'Hey, those are our plate-cases,' and started for the fella. The Feds went with me and stepped up to the guy and one of 'em said, 'Where you goin', buddy? What've you got

there?' Well, the guy swears and yanks out a gun. I duck, and somebody shoots. Only it wasn't him. The next thing I know he's folding up on the walk."

Chapter Seven

Lousy—but All Right

CASEY was taking pictures. Wade was staring pop-eyed at the two opened plate-cases which were piled full of new ten-dollar bills. Alger and the red-faced man were on their way to the hospital and four or five plain-clothesmen, Manahan's crew, had finished working on Greer and were poking about and looking important.

Logan came out of an inner hall and moved up to Casey. "That photograph junk from those cases is out back. We'll collect it and bring it down to you." When Casey did not reply Logan went on, as though talking to himself.

"I never knew a guy that could be so wrong and yet be right." He took out a cigarette, lit it lazily. "I always said you had the kind of luck that falls smack into the breaks. And Wade—he's even luckier. When the two of you get together it's tremendous."

"You're satisfied, are you?" Casey growled. "You oughta be. You drift in and grab the credit and I take the beating for the whole damn police force."

"You did this time," Logan said, studying Casey's puffed and patched face. "And I'll hand you one thing. When you get an idea—right or wrong—you sure crowd it and keep swinging."

"For me," Casey grumbled, "it's just the same old grief."

"You get pictures, don't you?" Logan's smile was in his eyes because he knew crabbing was as much a part of the big photographer as his two arms. "And think of the fun you have."

But for once Casey did not respond to Logan's kidding. His reply was a sour and contemptuous "Nuts!"

He began to collect his things and Sam Hobart, who had apparently heard Logan's speech, came up and said, "You were right enough for me, Flash." He held out his hand. His thanks were in his grip and in his eyes, and he finally added huskily:

"Rose wants to see you a minute."

Casey went into the bedroom. Rose Nielson's face was chalky, a mask of utter weariness. But she tried to smile, said:

"I'm sorry I didn't give you your picture, Jack. Will you take it now?"

Casey was tired, sore in body and in spirit. And this simple offer increased his uneasiness. She'd been through enough, hadn't she? And he knew how it was to have your picture taken: the way he'd crabbed at Yates, of the *News*. To hell with it. And to hell with Blaine if he didn't like it.

"It can wait," he said gruffly. "Tomorrow—some other time."

"You said it was your job." Rose Nielson said quietly. "And I don't mind now. Really. Let me do something—if you still want it."

"Okey," Casey said.

In the taxi Wade said, "This oughta rate us a bonus. Or anyway we ought to get a drink on it."

"We will," Casey said. "And then I'm gonna give Blaine these pictures and then we're gonna get drunk. And we're gonna sleep all day tomorrow and—"

"We'll probably get canned," Wade finished.

"There's other jobs," Casey said. "And anyway, this one's beginning to

wear me down."

At Steve's they had two double whiskies and water. The jolt of that liquor was more than Casey had anticipated. He couldn't remember when he had eaten, and on a completely empty stomach the effect was that of ten drinks. When he got out of the cab in front of the *Express* building he felt a little tipsy, unsteady on his feet.

"Come on," he told Wade, and when there was no movement in the rear seat, he reached in and shook the youth. Wade was sleeping in the corner, dead to the world. Casey shook him again and said, "Hey."

"Passed out," the driver offered.

"He's just all in," Casey said. "Put up your flag and wait for me."

He went upstairs, developed and printed his plates, and twenty-five minutes later swung into the city room, looking for Blaine. Blaine, they told him, wasn't in; so Casey continued to a short corridor, saw a light on a glass door that said *T. A. MacGrath*, and went in.

The managing editor should have been home and in bed. But MacGrath was more than a managing editor. A thick-necked, heavy-faced man with shrewd gray eyes, he was the driver who ran the *Express*. Looking up from his desk and swiveling the cigar that was a component part of his features, he said:

"Hello, Flash, I see you made page 3 of the *News*." He pushed a wide-open copy of a bulldog edition across the desk, adding, "It flatters you. You look even tougher than that. What've you been doing?"

"Horsin' around," Casey said, and his breath filled the room as though a bottle of whisky had been dropped on the floor. He glanced down at the picture of himself and swore softly. "Pretty, huh? Boy, if any job can make a bum out of a guy this one can."

MacGrath's thick brows lifted. He was a keen judge of men, MacGrath. He knew human values and his gaze was both searching and understanding.

"What're you sore at?" he asked levelly.

"I ain't sore," Casey growled. "I'm sick—of this job. It's a lousy racket. It stinks." He hadn't intended to go into detail, but for the moment he was tired and his face ached and he was fed up with himself and his job and everything else. So he said a lot more, expanding the idea as the words rushed out.

"I'm fed up, that's all," he concluded. "I got a good notion to quit and get me an easy job, like a truck driver or a night watchman or something."

"You wouldn't like it," MacGrath said. "If you couldn't get a front-row seat to fires and accidents and shooting—if you didn't have some excitement and get slapped around a bit you'd go nuts. You're the best camera in the city, you get the most money, and you lie if you say you don't like it. There's nothing the matter with the job; it's just that every job seems lousy some of the time."

Casey thought that over and he was sober enough to know that MacGrath spoke the truth. After a moment a faint smile relieved the set, bruised lines of his face.

"Maybe," he said. "Maybe it's all right sometimes. But right now—for tonight anyway, it's a lousy job." He pulled one hand from behind him and tossed the new pictures on the desk. "Only don't say it ever licked me."

MacGrath's eyes got bright with interest as he shuffled the damp prints.

When he finished his study he said, "These call for a bonus. See me tomorrow."

"Can't," said Casey. "Won't be in tomorrow—me and Wade. We're gonna take a day off and sleep." He lurched to the door and MacGrath said:

"Where you going now?"

"I'm goin' down and put Wade to bed," Casey said. "And then I'm goin' out and get drunk."

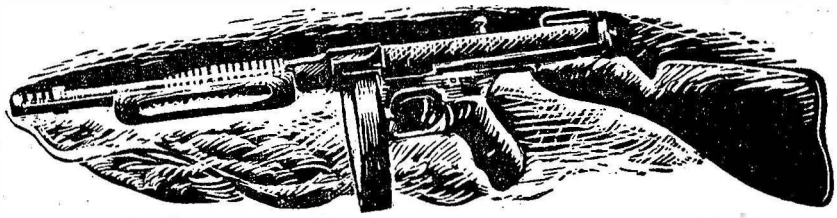
"You mean drunker," MacGrath said.

"Drunker," Casey agreed.

"Not a bad idea," MacGrath said as Casey opened the door. "And if you didn't have such a start on me," he finished, speaking very much as if he meant what he said, "I think I'd go with you."

He sat staring at the door after Casey slammed it, a smile etching his broad face, putting lights in his eyes. Then he picked up the telephone and asked for the night editor.

"I got some pictures for the final," he said. "And I want you to make a note for Blaine. Yeah. Casey and Wade won't be in tomorrow." THE END



George Harmon Coxe, former newspaperman and creator of that sterling pair of adepts with clue and camera, Flash Casey and Kent Murdock, has been writing good solid mystery fiction since 1932. He was one of the most popular authors ever to write for the famous Black Mask, *in which "Murder Mixup" was originally published. His first book made its appearance in 1935; his latest,* Eye Witness, *is his twenty-seventh. During World War II, Mr. Coxe served as a war correspondent; since then he has lived quietly at his Connecticut home. Many of his fast-moving, highly readable mystery novels have been reprinted in the Dell Book series of pocket-edition books. Currently available in this series are:*

MURDER IN HAVANA

MURDER WITH PICTURES

THE CAMERA CLUE

Look for these three George Harmon Coxe mysteries, on sale at newsstands and many other places where Dell Books are displayed. If you cannot obtain these books locally, send 25¢ for each title desired to Dell Publishing Company, Inc., 261 Fifth Avenue, New York 16, N. Y., and your order will be sent postpaid (in United States only). Order by title.

THE DEFENSE RESTS

by

ALLAN VAUGHAN ELSTON

An overcoat, a phone book, a pair of scissors—will they convict or acquit Paul Vincent's pretty client of an ugly murder charge?

"THE defendant will take the stand."

Paul Vincent's voice, calling Jessica Dale as a witness, rang out with clear confidence. He took his client's arm and smiled reassuringly. His calm brown eyes said:

You are innocent, so you have nothing to fear.

His opponent, Prosecutor Alex Corrigan, was surprised and elated. "He's sticking her neck out!" he whispered to his associates.

Now the State would have an opportunity to cross-examine, and that was a break for Corrigan. What could Vincent hope to gain by putting her on the stand? She'd assert her innocence, naturally, but she'd already done that in her plea of not guilty.

Corrigan put five horny fingers against five, knitted bushy brows, and leaned back to watch and listen. He saw Jessica Dale sworn and identified. He heard Vincent inquire:

"You were the murdered man's secretary?"

"I was," Jessica said. Her voice wasn't dull. It sparked, as did the black eyes with which she flashed defiance first at Corrigan and then at the jury. She'd be smarter, Corrigan thought, if she'd look just a little bit helpless and persecuted. She was about twenty-five and with the sort of face which usually charms a jury. *Just the same,* Corrigan thought, *he's sticking her neck out. Why hasn't he told her to look pitiful?*

Then he remembered. Maybe because of the unusual relationship between the accused and her counsel. They were engaged to be married. It had kept the courtroom packed all through the trial. There'd been sensational headlines like ATTORNEY FIGHTS FOR SWEETHEART'S LIFE. One tabloid called it a Portia-in-reverse act: "Inspired by the rugged courage and confidence

of her fighting fiancé, the accused girl, Jessica Dale . . ."

Paul Vincent was saying quietly, "Now, Jessica, please tell the court just what happened the morning of November tenth."

Corrigan whipped out a pad to take notes.

"I came to the office as usual," Jessica said. Her eyes were fixed now on certain witnesses who, having testified earlier for the State, were seated just back of the rail. "The mail came, and Mr. Merton found in it, as usual, a number of checks from clients. He entered the checks in a book, then told me to take them to the bank."

"How far is the bank from your office?"

"About three blocks."

"You went there, made the deposit, then returned to the office?"

"Yes."

"How long were you gone?"

"About thirty minutes."

"What did you see when you re-entered the office at the end of those thirty minutes?"

"I saw Mr. Merton sprawled over his desk. I thought for a moment he'd had a stroke."

"What did you do?"

"I leaned over him for a closer look. Then I saw a wound in his throat."

"Did you know then that he was dead?"

"I wasn't sure. But I knew I must call the police."

"How did you go about calling the police?"

"I remembered there are instructions just inside the front cover of the phone book that tell you how to dial in emergencies. So I reached for the phone book."

"Where was it?"

"Right there on Mr. Merton's desk. But a pair of shears lay on the book. I picked them up so I could turn back the front cover. Then I saw they were sticky with blood. Just as I dropped the shears to the floor, a voice in the

doorway said, 'Blood! What's going on?' "

"Who was the person in the doorway?"

"A Mr. Arkright, one of Mr. Merton's regular clients."

"Do you see Arkright in the courtroom now?"

"Yes." Jessica's gaze had, in fact, been fixed on Wilbur Arkright during most of her testimony. He was a pudgy man with a short, brown mustache, seated just beyond the rail.

"Is he the witness," Vincent asked, "who testified for the State, saying he found you standing by the victim with the bloody scissors in your hand?"

"He is."

Paul Vincent waved a disparaging hand at the jury. The gesture said eloquently: *So much for fingerprints! So much for the circumstance of a weapon seen in hand!* Of Jessica he asked gently, "Except to remove them from a phone book so that you could open the book, did you at any time that morning, or for any other purpose, touch the scissors?"

"I did not touch the scissors!" she said.

"What," Paul asked, "did you do then?"

"I turned the cover of the phone book back and read the instructions. Then I called the police. They came and photographed the office, questioned me, then sent me home. Later that day they arrested me."

"Is that absolutely all you know about the crime?"

"Absolutely all."

Vincent turned to Corrigan. "Your witness."

Corrigan strode toward her, glowering, his head forward like a charging bull.

"Miss Dale," he bellowed, "your entire savings are invested in Calex Oil stock, are they not?"

Vincent lashed out with an objection.

"Sustained," Judge Porter murmured.

"Very well." Corrigan's tongue curled in his cheek. "You testified, Miss Dale, that you went to the bank and made a deposit. Did you do anything else at the bank besides make that deposit?"

"Yes. I spoke to Mr. Blake, the cashier," she answered.

"The Mr. Blake who has already testified for the State?"

"Yes." Jessica was looking at him. He was sitting by Arkright.

"What did you say to Mr. Blake?"

"I asked him to sell some stock for me."

"Your Calex stock?"

"Yes."

"What did he say?"

"He said it was worthless."

"He said it was a dead cat, didn't he? A dead wildcat that never had been any good from the day it was issued?"

"Something like that."

"On whose advice had you bought the stock?"

"Mr. Merton's."

"Did you hear the testimony of Mr. Blake, the bank cashier, when he described your reaction to the bad news?"

"Yes."

"Was his testimony substantially correct?"

"He said I was mad. I suppose I was."

"You were furious, weren't you? And in that temper you went back to the office? For a showdown with Merton?"

"Objection!" Vincent snapped savagely.

"Counsel," the bench admonished, "will re-phrase his question."

"How," Corrigan demanded, "did you feel toward Carl Merton when you went back to his office?"

"I suppose," Jessica acknowledged, "I was resentful and bitter. Who wouldn't be?"

"*I'm* asking the questions. So you stormed in and demanded that he make good the loss?"

"No, because I found him already dead."

"Isn't it true," Corrigan roared, "that you quarreled with him, and he laughed at you, and you snatched up a pair of scissors?"

"No," the girl said quietly. "That isn't true at all." She was holding her chin high, now, and looking straight at the jury.

Corrigan, like a pitcher with a change of pace, spoke quietly himself. "You admit that Arkright came in and found you holding the bloody scissors. You heard him testify that he stood by while you phoned the police. He said that neither he nor you moved anything until the police came. Is that true?"

"Yes."

"What is the first thing the police did when they arrived?"

"They photographed the office."

Corrigan took an exhibit from the clerk. It was a police photograph and had already been introduced in evidence. "Look at it closely, Miss Dale. Take your time. Is it a true picture of the office furnishings as you last saw them—at the time of the crime?"

"Yes," Jessica said.

"Note the articles shown on Merton's desk. What are they?"

"A basket of correspondence, a phone, and a phone book."

"Is it the same phone book on which, in your direct testimony, you *claim* a pair of bloody scissors was lying?"

Corrigan put heavy irony into the word "claim." He wanted to make the jury realize that this scissors-on-book business was a bit incredible, or at least unnaturally fortuitous. Why would a murderer *happen* to drop his weapon on a phone book, the very book that the defendant would need to open in order to call the police?

"Yes," Jessica said.

Corrigan took another tagged exhibit from the clerk. This was a city phone directory with a reddish stain on its top cover.

"Something phony about it," Corrigan punned, his puffy eyes all but winking at the jury. He handed it to the witness. "Do you agree that this is the phone book shown in the police photograph?"

"I do." She couldn't mistake it because the name, *Carl Merton, Investment Consultant*, was stamped on the cover.

"I place the book on the table here," Corrigan said. "On it I place Exhibit B, which has been established as the murder weapon. Will you step up to the table, Miss Dale, and look up a number in the book? Any number."

Vincent sprang up to object, but a cool nod from his client made him sit down without speaking. "Certainly," Jessica agreed. She went to the table.

Carefully she picked up the scissors, laid them aside, then opened the book. She went through the motions of looking up a number. "Is that what you want, Mr. Corrigan?" She smiled at him sweetly.

A titter ran through the courtroom

and Corrigan grimaced. It was a trap, but she hadn't fallen into it. He'd hoped she'd pick up the book by one corner, letting the scissors slide off without being touched.

Jessica stepped gracefully back to the witness chair. Corrigan growled, "Did your attorney coach you to do it just that way?"

"He did not."

"Do you think it's normal for a fastidious young lady, like yourself, to go snatching up a pair of bloody scissors? You could have got the book out from under them without touching them, couldn't you?"

"Perhaps I could. But I didn't."

"They were red," Corrigan shouted, "with your victim's blood. Red to stain your hands as you stood there, guilt-splattered, before the witness Arkright." He shook the phone book at her. "This book is green. The red of blood on glossy green makes a garish clash. And yet you didn't shrink from it?"

"Not," Jessica insisted, "until I'd picked up the scissors and saw the blood."

He had her, Corrigan gloated. He could tell it by the faces of the jury. There were women on that jury. Any innocent girl, they'd be sure, would shrink from touching those bloody shears. "That's all, Miss Dale."

As Corrigan sat down, Vincent came forward for re-direct examination.

His face flushed with sympathy, Paul seemed uncertain how to repair the damage accomplished by Corrigan. As he hesitated, Jessica leaned forward and spoke to him in a low voice.

"Witness," Judge Porter admonished sharply, "will make no remarks inaudible to the jury."

But Vincent had already caught the import of her whisper. The young attorney picked up Exhibit A, the photograph which Corrigan had presented for the girl's scrutiny. A shrewd expression came to Vincent's eyes as he looked closely at the photograph.

Next Corrigan saw him pick up the blood-stained phone book, and thumb through it. With an odd smile Paul Vincent then began his re-direct examination.

"What was the weather, Jessica, on the morning of November tenth?"

"It was chilly," Jessica said.

"So when your employer, Carl Merton, arrived at the office, did he wear an overcoat?"

"Yes, a gray, knee-length overcoat."

"Upon entering the office, what did he do with it?"

"He hung it on a rack just inside the office door."

"Was it hanging there when you left for the bank?"

"It was."

"You returned from the bank, found Merton dead. Arkright intruded, and in his presence you phoned the police. The police came and immediately took this photograph. Look at it again. Do you see the coat rack?"

Jessica looked at the photograph again and said, "Yes, I see it."

"Is there an overcoat hanging on it?"

"No. Nothing is hanging on it."

Vincent turned with a mock bow toward Corrigan. "May I thank the prosecutor for calling witness's attention to the photograph? Otherwise this extremely significant point would have been overlooked."

Corrigan felt his ears getting red. As a buzz went through the room, Vincent resumed: "Jessica, our friend the prosecutor was also kind enough to show you another exhibit. The phone

book. He even asked you to look up a number. Did you comply?"

"I did."

"What number did you choose to look up?"

"I was facing Mr. Arkright," Jessica said. "His name was conveniently in the A's, and so I looked it up."

"Did you find it in the book?"

"No."

"Why not? Why couldn't you find his name?"

"Because the page listing his name is torn from the book."

Paul Vincent handed both the photograph and the phone book to the judge. "Your Honor, I ask that these exhibits be passed among the jurors, so they may see that coat rack has no coat on it and the page listing Arkright's name is missing from the book."

"Object!" barked Corrigan. "Irrelevant and immaterial. Counsel is merely trying to becloud the integrity of people's witness."

"On the contrary," Paul Vincent retorted. "I'm trying to expose the truth about a murder. Two things disappeared from the office during the thirty minutes my client was gone to the bank. Some human agency took them away."

Judge Porter looked at the photograph. He verified the fact of a certain page missing from the book. Over his glasses he stared quizzically at Paul Vincent. "Is defense counsel prepared to connect these angles with the guilt or innocence of defendant?"

"In an effort to do so, Your Honor, defense requests a two-hour recess. The missing coat and page cause us to reconstruct our entire case, and we feel that a two-hour recess is well within reason."

"The people object!" roared Corrigan.

Judge Porter was a fair man. He looked at his watch. "I will give counsel five minutes in chambers," he said. "If sufficient reason for a recess is there shown, court will adjourn for two hours."

He got up and walked into his private room. Vincent and Corrigan followed. When the door was closed, the judge eyed Vincent sharply. "Are you just stalling for time, young man? Or do you really hope to prove anything by this new line of yours?"

"I hope to prove," Paul said, "that the known visit of Arkright to Merton's office was his second visit of the morning. That on the first visit, he murdered Merton. After which, his clothing being stained by Merton's blood, Arkright left the building wearing Merton's overcoat for the purpose of concealing those stains."

Porter smiled dryly. "Counsel is an optimist," he murmured, "if he hopes to establish that in two hours. It explains your contention about the coat. What are your contentions about the missing page?"

"So far," Vincent admitted, "I have no contention on that—only a theory. It's that Merton looked up Arkright's number in the phone book. With the book open in front of him, he called Arkright and asked him to come over. Arkright came. They quarreled and Arkright stabbed him. But the stabbing caused blood to stain the page of a phone book open at the victim's elbow. It was a page which listed Arkright's name. So Arkright tore out the page, closed the book, put on Merton's overcoat and hurried away. After disposing of the overcoat and changing clothes, he returned to Merton's office. It seemed safest to do so, in case some-

one knew that Merton had phoned him to come."

"Fantastic!" Corrigan derided. "You can't build a case on just an empty coat rack and a missing page from a book."

"Can the State," Paul challenged, "offer any alternate explanation for the empty coat rack and the missing page from the book?"

On the spur of the moment, Corrigan could not. While he hesitated, Vincent said earnestly to the judge:

"Your Honor, my client's life is at stake. I request that the court be recessed for two hours and that I be given a warrant to search Arkright's house. I might, perhaps, find in his incinerator or furnace the charred remnants of Merton's overcoat. If not, then possibly something else connecting him with the crime. I further ask that Arkright be instructed by the bench to remain in court during the recess, and to be available for my questioning thereafter."

Corrigan started to object, then thought better of it. Vincent was burning his last bridge. Arkright, if guilty, would be too smart to leave any evidence at his house. In two hours Vincent would have to report failure. In the eyes of the jury, he'd be worse off than if he'd never brought up the coat angle at all.

"Since the prosecutor offers no objection," Porter said, "the request is granted."

Two hours later, Corrigan returned to the courtroom. It was full to capacity. Everyone stood up as Judge Porter took the bench. Arkright was in the same seat, just back of the rail.

Jessica was in her place at the defense table. Only her attorney was missing. Porter, opening court, frowned and looked at his watch. The two hours were more than up.

Then the rear doors opened and Paul Vincent came striding down the aisle. Under his arm were two packages. By their shapes Corrigan concluded that neither contained an overcoat. He turned to study Arkright's face. It was confidently at ease.

Paul Vincent put his two packages, one large, one small, on the defense table. He smiled at Jessica. Then he faced the judge.

"Defense will proceed," the bench ordered.

For his next witness, Vincent called a man named Roy Logan. Logan took the stand and was identified as the proprietor of a men's clothing store on Main Street.

"On the afternoon of November tenth," Vincent inquired, "did a customer enter your store and buy a knee-length, gray overcoat?"

"Yes. I waited on him myself."

"Was that just a few hours after the reported murder of Carl Merton?"

"Yes."

"In asking for the coat, did the customer specify length, color and material?"

"He specified length. For color and material, he showed me a sample. It was a scrap of gray serge about an inch square."

"You sold him such an overcoat and he walked out wearing it?"

"Yes."

"Did he leave the sample with you?"

"No. He took it away with him."

"Who was the customer?"

"Wilbur Arkright."

"Do you see him in court?"

"Yes. There he is." Logan pointed.

"That will be all," Vincent said.

Corrigan waived cross-examination.

"Wilbur Arkright," Vincent summoned, "will you take the stand?"

Arkright swaggered to the witness chair.

Vincent inquired, "Did you purchase a gray, knee-length overcoat on the afternoon of November tenth?"

"Sure," Arkright admitted.

"It's just been observed that you have at your house two other good overcoats, a brown and a blue. Do you need *three* overcoats?"

"Sure," Arkright smirked. "I can afford 'em and I like variety."

"On the morning of November tenth, did anyone see you wearing a gray overcoat?"

"Nope, because I wasn't wearin' one. I got mine in the afternoon."

"Did you get it as a protection, in case anyone *had* seen you wearing one quite like it, as you emerged from a certain building in the morning?"

"Objection!" Corrigan shouted. "Question poses an assumption, and witness has already answered fully."

"Objection sustained," Porter said.

But the point was made. Vincent had insinuated it into the jury's minds. Corrigan seethed, but there was nothing he could do about it. It was also clear what had directed Vincent to the haberdasher Logan: a label on a new overcoat found at Arkright's house.

"You were a customer of Carl Merton's?" Vincent asked.

"Yes."

"You sometimes bought stocks either from him or on his advice?"

"Sure. Lots of people did."

"Then lots of people, including yourself, may have been misadvised just as the defendant was?"

"Objection," Corrigan snapped.

"Sustained. Witness need not answer."

"Now, Mr. Arkright," Vincent resumed in a more genial tone, "did you enter Merton's office more than once on the morning of November tenth?"

"No," the witness said. "Only once."

"On your admitted entrance, did you see the defendant in the office?"

"Yes."

"Did you see Carl Merton?"

"Not right away. The girl was standing between me and the body."

"Did she have anything in her hand?"

"Yes, a pair of bloody scissors."

"The approximate size and shape of these?" Vincent opened his smaller package, taking from it a pair of ordinary office shears which he had purchased during the recess.

"Yeh," Arkright admitted, "about that size."

"Did you touch them?"

"Not me." The witness made a grimace.

"You exclaimed, 'Blood! What's going on?' "

"Something like that."

"So you were instantly sure the scissors were blood-stained?"

"Certainly."

"You could tell it by the red stains that showed on them?"

"Sure."

"How red were they? As red as this?"

Paul Vincent opened his other package. It was a half-gallon can whose printed, commercial label identified it as red paint. He plunged the shiny new scissors into the can and held them up, dripping, before Arkright's eyes.

"As red as this?" he repeated.

"Sure," the witness grinned. "As red as that."

Corrigan gasped. So did the judge and all the jury.

Paul faced the bench triumphantly. "Your Honor, we found no charred or stained clothing at Arkright's house. But in searching, we found this." He produced a paper and laid it before the judge. "It's a rejected application, dated in 1942, wherein the witness applied for an Army commission. Reason given for the rejection, under the signature of the Surgeon-General, is color blindness. The defense rests."

Corrigan stared, punch-drunk. He knew when he was licked. His own final summation, if he made it at all now, would be futile. Whether or not Arkright was implicated, he was at least disqualified as a witness against Jessica Dale. Decision was already stamped on every juror's face.

For the stained shears which Vincent waved at them, far from being red, were a bright *green.*

The man in the flat opposite seems to be acting strangely—just how strangely becomes, slowly and surely, more apparent to the unseen watcher . . . .

REAR WINDOW

By WILLIAM IRISH

I DIDN'T know their names. I'd never heard their voices. I didn't even know them by sight, strictly speaking, for their faces were too small to fill in with identifiable features at that distance. Yet I could have constructed a timetable of their comings and goings, their daily habits and activities. They were the rear-window dwellers around me.

Sure, I suppose it *was* a little bit like prying, could even have been mistaken for the fevered concentration of a Peeping Tom. That wasn't my fault, that wasn't the idea. The idea was, my movements were strictly limited just around this time. I could get from the window to the bed, and from the bed to the window, and that was all.

The bay window was about the best feature my rear bedroom had in the warm weather. It was unscreened, so I had to sit with the light out or I would have had every insect in the vicinity in on me. I couldn't sleep, because I was used to getting plenty of exercise. I'd never acquired the habit of reading books to ward off boredom, so I hadn't that to turn to. Well, what should I do, sit there with my eyes tightly shuttered?

Just to pick a few at random: Straight over, and the windows square, there was a young jitter-couple, kids

in their teens, only just married. It would have killed them to stay home one night. They were always in such a hurry to go, wherever it was they went, they never remembered to turn out the lights. I don't think it missed once in all the time I was watching. But they never forgot altogether, either. I was to learn to call this delayed action, as you will see. He'd always come skittering madly back in about five minutes, probably from all the way down in the street, and rush around killing the switches. Then fall over something in the dark on his way out. They gave me an inward chuckle, those two.

The next house down, the windows already narrowed a little with perspective. There was a certain light in that one that always went out each night too. Something about it, it used to make me a little sad. There was a woman living there with her child, a young widow I suppose. I'd see her put the child to bed, and then bend over and kiss her in a wistful sort of way. She'd shade the light off her and sit there painting her eyes and mouth. Then she'd go out. She'd never come back till the night was nearly spent. Once I was still up, and I looked and she was sitting there motionless with her head buried in her arms. Something about it, it used to make me a little sad.

The third one down no longer offered any insight, the windows were just slits like in a medieval battlement, due to foreshortening. That brings us around to the one on the end. In that one, frontal vision came back full-depth again, since it stood at right angles to the rest, my own included, sealing up the inner hollow all these houses backed on. I could see into it, from the rounded projection of my bay window, as freely as into a doll house with its rear wall sliced away. And scaled down to about the same size.

It was a flat building. Unlike all the rest it had been constructed originally as such, not just cut up into furnished rooms. It topped them by two stories and had rear fire escapes, to show for this distinction. But it was old, evidently hadn't shown a profit. It was in the process of being modernized. Instead of clearing the entire building while the work was going on, they were doing it a flat at a time, in order to lose as little rental income as possible.

Of the six rearward flats it offered to view, the topmost one had already been completed, but not yet rented. They were working on the fifth-floor one now, disturbing the peace of everyone all up and down the "inside" of the block with their hammering and sawing.

I felt sorry for the couple in the flat below. I used to wonder how they stood it with that bedlam going on above their heads. To make it worse the wife was in chronic poor health, too; I could tell that even at a distance by the listless way she moved about over there, and remained in her bathrobe without dressing. Sometimes I'd see her sitting by the window, holding her head. I used to wonder why he didn't have a doctor in to look her over, but maybe they couldn't afford it. He seemed to be out of work.

Often their bedroom light was on late at night behind the drawn shade, as though she were unwell and he was sitting up with her. And one night in particular he must have had to sit up with her all night, it remained on until nearly daybreak. Not that I sat

watching all that time. But the light was still burning at three in the morning, when I finally transferred from chair to bed to see if I could get a little sleep myself. And when I failed to, and hopscotched back again around dawn, it was still peering wanly out behind the tan shade.

Moments later, with the first brightening of day, it suddenly dimmed around the edges of the shade, and then shortly afterward, not that one, but a shade in one of the other rooms—for all of them alike had been down—went up, and I saw him standing there looking out.

He was holding a cigarette in his hand. I couldn't see it, but I could tell it was that by the quick, nervous little jerks with which he kept putting his hand to his mouth, and the haze I saw rising around his head. Worried about her, I guess. I didn't blame him for that. Any husband would have been. She must have only just dropped off to sleep, after night-long suffering. And then in another hour or so, at the most, that sawing of wood and clattering of buckets was going to start in over them again. Well, it wasn't any of my business, I said to myself, but he really ought to get her out of there. If I had an ill wife on my hands—

He was leaning slightly out, maybe an inch past the window frame, carefully scanning the back faces of all the houses abutting on the hollow square that lay before him. You can tell, even at a distance, when a person is looking fixedly. There's something about the way the head is held. And yet his scrutiny wasn't held fixedly to any one point, it was a slow, sweeping one, moving along the houses on the opposite side from me first. When it got to the end of them, I knew it would cross over to my side and come back along there. Before it did, I withdrew several yards inside my room, to let it go safely by. I didn't want him to think I was sitting there prying into his affairs. There was still enough blue nightshade in my room to keep my slight withdrawal from catching his eye.

When I returned to my original position a moment or two later, he was gone. He had raised two more of the shades. The bedroom one was still down. I wondered vaguely why he had given that peculiar, comprehensive, semicircular stare at all the rear windows around him. There wasn't anyone at any of them, at such an hour.

It wasn't important, of course. It was just a little oddity, it failed to blend in with his being worried or disturbed about his wife. When you're worried or disturbed, that's an internal preoccupation, you stare vacantly at nothing at all. When you stare around you in a great sweeping arc at windows, that betrays external preoccupation, outward interest. One doesn't quite jibe with the other. To call such a discrepancy trifling is to add to its importance. Only someone like me, stewing in a vacuum of total idleness, would have noticed it at all.

The flat remained lifeless after that, as far as could be judged by its windows. He must have either gone out or gone to bed himself. Three of the shades remained at normal height, the one masking the bedroom remained down. Sam, my day houseman, came in not long after with my eggs and morning paper, and I had that to kill time with for a while. I stopped thinking about other people's windows and staring at them.

The sun slanted down on one side of the hollow oblong all morning long,

then it shifted over to the other side for the afternoon. Then it started to slip off both alike, and it was evening again—another day gone.

The lights started to come on around the quadrangle. Here and there a wall played back, like a sounding board, a snatch of radio program that was coming in too loud. If you listened carefully you could hear an occasional clink of dishes mixed in, faint, far off.

The chain of little habits that were their lives unreeled themselves. They were all bound in them tighter than the tightest straitjacket any jailer ever devised, though they all thought themselves free. The jitterbugs made their nightly dash for the great open spaces, forgot their lights, he came careening back, thumbed them out, and their place was dark until the early morning hours. The woman put her child to bed, leaned mournfully over its cot, then sat down with heavy despair to redden her mouth.

In the fourth-floor flat at right angles to the long, interior "street" the three shades had remained up, and the fourth shade had remained at full length, all day long. I hadn't been conscious of that because I hadn't particularly been looking at it, or thinking of it, until now.

My eyes may have rested on those windows at times, during the day, but my thoughts had been elsewhere. It was only when a light suddenly went up in the end room behind one of the raised shades, which was their kitchen, that I realized that the shades had been untouched like that all day. That also brought something else to my mind that hadn't been in it until now: I hadn't seen the woman all day. I hadn't seen any sign of life within those windows until now.

He'd come in from outside. The entrance was at the opposite side of their kitchen, away from the window. He'd left his hat on, so I knew he'd just come in from the outside.

He didn't remove his hat. As though there was no one there to remove it for any more. Instead, he pushed it farther to the back of his head by pronging a hand to the roots of his hair. That gesture didn't denote removal of perspiration, I knew. To do that a person make a sidewise sweep—this was up over his forehead. It indicated some sort of harassment or uncertainty. Besides, if he'd been suffering from excess warmth, the first thing he would have done would be to take off his hat altogether.

She didn't come out to greet him. The first link, of the so-strong chain of habit, of custom, that binds us all, had snapped wide open.

She must be so ill she had remained in bed, in the room behind the lowered shade, all day. I watched. He remained where he was, two rooms away from there. Expectancy became surprise, surprise incomprehension. *Funny,* I thought, *that he doesn't go in to her. Or at least go as far as the doorway, look in to see how she is.*

Maybe she was asleep, and he didn't want to disturb her. Then immediately: *But how can he know for sure that she's asleep, without at least looking in at her? He just came in himself.*

He came forward and stood there by the window, as he had at dawn. Sam had carried out my tray quite some time before, and my lights were out. I held my ground, I knew he couldn't see me within the darkness of the bay window. He stood there motionless for several minutes. And now his attitude was the proper one for inner preoccu-

patlon. He stood there looking downward at nothing, lost in thought.

He's worried about her, I said to myself, *as any man would be. It's the most natural thing in the world. Funny, though, he should leave her in the dark like that, without going near her. If he's worried, then why didn't he at least look in on her on returning?*

Here was another of those trivial discrepancies, between inward motivation and outward indication. And just as I was thinking that, the original one, that I had noted at daybreak, repeated itself.

His head went up with renewed alertness, and I could see it start to give that slow circular sweep of interrogation around the panorama of rearward windows again. True, the light was behind him this time, but there was enough of it falling on him to show me the microscopic but continuous shift of direction his head made in the process. I remained carefully immobile until the distant glance had passed me safely by. Motion attracts.

Why is he so interested in other people's windows? I wondered detachedly. And of course an effective brake to dwelling on that thought too lingeringly clamped down almost at once: *Look who's talking. What about you yourself?*

An important difference escaped me. I wasn't worried about anything. He, presumably, was.

Down came the shades again. The lights stayed on behind their beige opaqueness. But behind the one that had remained down all along, the room remained dark.

Time went by. Hard to say how much—a quarter of an hour, twenty minutes. A cricket chirped in one of the back yards. Sam came in to see if I wanted anything before he went home for the night. I told him no, I didn't—it was all right, run along. He stood there for a minute, head down. Then I saw him shake it slightly, as if at something he didn't like.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"You know what that means? My old mammy told it to me, and she never told me a lie in her life. I never once seen it to miss, either."

"What, the cricket?"

"Any time you hear one of them things, that's a sign of death—someplace close around."

I swept the back of my hand at him. "Well, it isn't in here, so don't let it worry you."

He went out, muttering stubbornly, "It's somewhere close by, though. Somewhere not very far off. Got to be."

The door closed after him, and I stayed there alone in the dark.

It was a stifling night, much closer than the one before. I could hardly get a breath of air even by the open window at which I sat. I wondered how he—that unknown over there—could stand it behind those drawn shades.

Then suddenly, just as idle speculation about this whole matter was about to alight on some fixed point in my mind, crystallize into something like suspicion, up came the shades again, and off it flitted, as formless as ever and without having had a chance to come to rest on anything.

He was in the middle windows, the living-room. He'd taken off his coat and shirt, was bare-armed in his undershirt. He hadn't been able to stand it himself, I guess—the sultriness.

I couldn't make out what he was doing at first. He seemed to be busy in a perpendicular, up-and-down way rather than lengthwise. He remained in

one place, but he kept dipping down out of sight and then straightening up into view again, at irregular intervals. It was almost like some sort of calisthenic exercise, except that the dips and rises weren't evenly timed enough for that. Sometimes he'd stay down a long time, sometimes he'd bob right up again, sometimes he'd go down two or three times in rapid succession.

There was some sort of a widespread black V railing him off from the window. Whatever it was, there was just a sliver of it showing above the upward inclination to which the window sill deflected my line of vision. All it did was strike off the bottom of his undershirt, to the extent of a sixteenth of an inch maybe. But I hadn't seen it there at other times, and I couldn't tell what it was.

Suddenly he left it for the first time since the shades had gone up, came out around it to the outside, stooped down into another part of the room, and straightened again with an armful of what looked like varicolored pennants at the distance at which I was. He went back behind the V and allowed them to fall across the top of it for a moment, and stay that way. He made one of his dips down out of sight and stayed that way a good while.

The "pennants" slung across the V kept changing color right in front of my eyes. I have very good sight. One moment they were white, the next red, the next blue.

Then I got it. They were a woman's dresses, and he was pulling them down to him one by one, taking the topmost one each time. Suddenly they were all gone, the V was black and bare again, and his torso had reappeared. I knew what it was now, and what he was doing. The dresses had told me.

He confirmed it for me. He spread his arms to the ends of the V, I could see him heave and hitch, as if exerting pressure, and suddenly the V had folded up, become a cubed wedge. Then he made rolling motions with his whole upper body, and the wedge disappeared off to one side.

He'd been packing a trunk, packing his wife's things into a large upright trunk.

He reappeared at the kitchen window presently, stood still for a moment. I saw him draw his arm across his forehead, not once but several times, and then whip the end of it off into space. Sure, it was hot work for such a night. Then he reached up along the wall and took something down. Since it was the kitchen he was in, my imagination had to supply a cabinet and a bottle.

I could see the two or three quick passes his hand made to his mouth after that. I said to myself tolerantly: That's what nine men out of ten would do after packing a trunk—take a good stiff drink. And if the tenth didn't, it would only be because he didn't have any liquor at hand.

Then he came closer to the window again, and standing edgewise to the side of it, so that only a thin paring of his head and shoulder showed, peered watchfully out into the dark quadrilateral, along the line of windows, most of them unlighted by now, once more. He always started on the left-hand side, the side opposite mine, and made his circuit of inspection from there on around.

That was the second time in one evening I'd seen him do that. And once at daybreak made three times altogether. I smiled mentally. You'd almost think he felt guilty about something. It was

probably nothing, just an odd little habit, a quirk, that he didn't know he had himself. I had them myself, everyone does.

He withdrew into the room again, and it blacked out. His figure passed into the one that was still lighted next to it, the living-room. That blacked next. It didn't surprise me that the third room, the bedroom with the drawn shade, didn't light up on his entering there. He wouldn't want to disturb her, of course—particularly if she was going away tomorrow for her health, as his packing of her trunk showed. She needed all the rest she could get, before making the trip. Simple enough for him to slip into bed in the dark.

It did surprise me, though, when a match-flare winked some time later, to have it still come from the darkened living-room. He must be lying down in there, trying to sleep on a sofa or something for the night. He hadn't gone near the bedroom at all, was staying out of it altogether. That puzzled me, frankly. That was carrying solicitude almost too far.

Ten minutes or so later, there was another match-wink, still from that same living-room window. He couldn't sleep.

The night brooded down on both of us alike, the curiosity monger in the bay window, the chain-smoker in the fourth-floor flat, without giving any answer. The only sound was that interminable cricket.

I WAS back at the window again with the first sun of morning. Not because of him. My mattress was like a bed of hot coals. Sam found me there when he came in to get things ready for me. "You're going to be a wreck, Mr. Jeff," was all he said.

First, for a while, there was no sign of life over there. Then suddenly I saw his head bob up from somewhere down out of sight in the living-room, so I knew I'd been right; he'd spent the night on a sofa or easy chair in there. Now, of course, he'd look in at her, to see how she was, find out if she felt any better. That was only common ordinary humanity. He hadn't been near her, so far as I could make out, since two nights before.

He didn't. He dressed, and he went in the opposite direction, into the kitchen, and wolfed something in there, standing up and using both hands. Then he suddenly turned and moved off to one side, in the direction in which I knew the flat-entrance to be, as if he had just heard some summons, like the doorbell.

Sure enough, in a moment he came back, and there were two men with him in leather aprons. Expressmen. I saw him standing by while they laboriously maneuvered that cubed black wedge out between them, in the direction they'd just come from. He did more than just stand by. He practically hovered over them, kept shifting from side to side, he was so anxious to see that it was done right.

Then he came back alone, and I saw him swipe his arm across his head, as though it was he, not they, who was all heated up from the effort.

So he was forwarding her trunk, to wherever it was she was going. That was all.

He reached up along the wall again and took something down. He was taking another drink. Two. Three. I said to myself, a little at a loss: *Yes, but he hasn't just packed a trunk this time.*

That trunk has been standing packed and ready since last night. Where does the hard work come in? The sweat and the need for a bracer?

Now, at last, after all those hours, he finally did go in to her. I saw his form pass through the living-room and go beyond, into the bedroom. Up went the shade, that had been down all this time. Then he turned his head and looked around behind him. In a certain way, a way that was unmistakable, even from where I was. Not in one certain direction, as one looks at a person. But from side to side, and up and down, and all around, as one looks at—*an empty room.*

He stepped back, bent a little, gave a fling of his arms, and an unoccupied mattress and bedding upended over the foot of a bed, stayed that way, emptily curved. A second one followed a moment later.

She wasn't in there.

They use the expression "delayed action." I found out then what it meant. For two days a sort of formless uneasiness, a disembodied suspicion, I don't know what to call it, had been flitting and volplaning around in my mind, like an insect looking for a landing-place. More than once, just as it had been ready to settle, some slight thing, some slight reassuring thing, such as the raising of the shades after they had been down unnaturally long, had been enough to keep it winging aimlessly, prevent it from staying still long enough for me to recognize it. The point of contact had been there all along, waiting to receive it. Now, for some reason, within a split second after he tossed over the empty mattress, it landed—*zoom!* And the point of contact expanded—or exploded, whatever you care to call it—into a certainty of murder.

In other words, the rational part of my mind was far behind the instinctive, subconscious part. Delayed action. Now the one had caught up to the other. The thought-message that sparked from the synchronization was: *He's done something to her!*

I looked down and my hand was bunching the goods over my kneecap, it was knotted so tight. I forced it to open. I said to myself, steadyingly, *Now wait a minute, be careful, go slow. You've seen nothing. You know nothing. You only have the negative proof that you don't see her any more.*

Sam was standing there looking over at me from the pantryway. He said accusingly, "You ain't touched a thing. And your face looks like a sheet."

It felt like one. It had that needling feeling, when the blood has left it involuntarily. It was more to get him out of the way and give myself some elbow room for undisturbed thinking than anything else that I said, "Sam, what's the street address of that building down there? Don't stick your head too far out and gape at it."

"Somep'n or other Benedict Avenue." He scratched his neck helpfully.

"I know that. Chase around the corner a minute and get me the exact number on it, will you?"

"Why you want to know that for?" he asked as he turned to go.

"None of your business," I said with the good-natured firmness that was all that was necessary to take care of that once and for all. I called after him just as he was closing the door, "And while you're about it, step into the entrance and see if you can tell from the mailboxes who has the fourth-floor rear. Don't get me the wrong one now. And try not to let anyone catch you at it."

He went out mumbling something that sounded like "When a man ain't got nothing to do but just sit all day, he sure can think up the blamest things—" The door closed and I settled down to some good constructive thinking.

I said to myself: *What are you really building up this monstrous supposition on? Let's see what you've got.*

Only that there were several little things wrong with the mechanism, the chain-belt, of their recurrent daily habits over there. 1. The lights were on all night the first night. 2. He came in later than usual the second night. 3. He left his hat on. 4. She didn't come out to greet him—she hasn't appeared since the evening before the lights were on all night. 5. He took a drink after he finished packing her trunk. But he took three stiff drinks the next morning, immediately after her trunk went out. 6. He was inwardly disturbed and worried, yet superimposed upon this was an unnatural external concern about the surrounding rear windows that was off-key. 7. He slept in the living-room, didn't go near the bedroom, during the night before the departure of the trunk.

Very well. If she had been ill that first night, and he had sent her away for her health, that automatically canceled out points 1, 2, 3, 4. It left points 5 and 6 totally unimportant and unincriminating. But when it came up against 7, it hit a stumbling-block.

If she went away immediately after being ill that first night, why didn't he want to sleep in their bedroom *last night?* Sentiment? Hardly. Two perfectly good beds in one room, only a sofa or uncomfortable easy chair in the other. Why should he stay out of there if she was already gone? Just because he missed her, was lonely? A grown man doesn't act that way. All right, then she was still in there.

Sam came back parenthetically at this point and said, "That house is Number 525 Benedict Avenue. The fourth-floor rear, it got the name of Mr. and Mrs. Lars Thorwald up."

"Sh-h," I silenced, and motioned him backhand out of my ken.

"First he want it, then he don't," he grumbled philosophically, and retired to his duties.

I went ahead digging at it. But if she was still in there, in that bedroom last night, then she couldn't have gone away to the country, because I never saw her leave today. She could have left without my seeing her in the early hours of yesterday morning. I'd missed a few hours, been asleep. But this morning I had been up before he was himself, I only saw his head rear up from that sofa after I'd been at the window for some time.

To go at all she would have had to go yesterday morning. Then why had he left the bedroom shade down, left the mattresses undisturbed, until today? Above all, why had he stayed out of that room last night? That was evidence that she hadn't gone, was still in there. Then today, immediately after the trunk had been dispatched, he went in, pulled up the shade, tossed over the mattresses, and showed that she hadn't been in there. The thing was like a crazy spiral.

No, it wasn't either. *Immediately after the trunk had been dispatched—*

The trunk.

That did it.

I looked around to make sure the door was safely closed between Sam and me. My hand hovered uncertainly over the telephone dial a minute.

Boyne, he'd be the one to tell about it. He was on Homicide. He had been, anyway, when I'd last seen him. I didn't want to get a flock of strange dicks and cops into my hair. I didn't want to be involved any more than I had to. Or at all, if possible.

They switched my call to the right place after a couple of wrong tries, and I got him finally.

"Look, Boyne? This is Hal Jeffries—"

"Well, where've you been the last sixty-two years?" he started to enthuse.

"We can take that up later. What I want you to do now is take down a name and address. Ready? Lars Thorwald. Five twenty-five Benedict Avenue. Fourth-floor rear. Got it?"

"Fourth-floor rear. Got it. What's it for?"

"Investigation. I've got a firm belief you'll uncover a murder there if you start digging at it. Don't call on me for anything more than that—just a conviction. There's been a man and wife living there until now. Now there's just the man. Her trunk went out early this morning. If you can find someone who saw *her* leave herself—"

Marshaled aloud like that and conveyed to somebody else, a lieutenant of detectives above all, it did sound flimsy, even to me.

He said hesitantly, "Well, but—" Then he accepted it as was. Because I was the source. I even left my window out of it completely. I could do that with him and get away with it because he'd known me years, he didn't question my reliability. I didn't want my room all cluttered up with dicks and cops taking turns nosing out of the window in this hot weather. Let them tackle it from the front.

"Well, we'll see what we see," he said. "I'll keep you posted."

I hung up and sat back to watch and wait events. I had a grandstand seat. Or rather a grandstand seat in reverse. I could only see from behind the scenes, but not from the front. I couldn't watch Boyne go to work. I could only see the results, when and if there were any.

Nothing happened for the next few hours. The police work that I knew must be going on was as invisible as police work should be. The figure in the fourth-floor windows over there remained in sight, alone and undisturbed. He didn't go out. He was restless, roamed from room to room without staying in one place very long, but he stayed in. Once I saw him eating again—sitting down this time—and once he shaved, and once he even tried to read the paper, but he didn't stay with it long.

Little unseen wheels were in motion around him. Small and harmless as yet, preliminaries. If he knew, I wondered to myself, would he remain there quiescent like that, or would he try to bolt out and flee? That mightn't depend so much upon his guilt as upon his sense of immunity, his feeling that he could outwit them. Of his guilt I myself was already convinced, or I wouldn't have taken the step I had.

At three my phone rang. Boyne calling back. "Jeffries? Well, I don't know. Can't you give me a little more than just a bald statement like that?"

"Why?" I fenced. "Why do I have to?"

"I've had a man over there making inquiries. I've just had his report. The building superintendent and several of the neighbors all agree she left for the country, to try and regain her health, early yesterday morning."

"Wait a minute. Did any of them *see* her leave, according to your man?"

"No."

"Then all you've gotten is a second-hand version of an unsupported statement by him. Not an eyewitness account."

"He was met returning from the depot, after he'd bought her ticket and seen her off on the train."

"That's still an unsupported statement, once removed."

"I've sent a man down there to the station to try and check with the ticket agent if possible. After all, he should have been fairly conspicuous at that early hour. And we're keeping him under observation, of course, in the meantime, watching all his movements. The first chance we get we're going to jump in and search the place."

I had a feeling that they wouldn't find anything, even if they did.

"Don't expect anything more from me. I've dropped it in your lap. I've given you all I have to give. A name, an address, and an opinion."

"Yes, and I've always valued your opinion highly before now, Jeff—"

"But now you don't, that it?"

"Not at all. The thing is, we haven't turned up anything that seems to bear out your impression so far."

"You haven't gotten very far along, so far."

He went back to his previous cliché. "Well, we'll see what we see. Let you know later."

Another hour or so went by, and sunset came on. I saw him start to get ready to go out, over there. He put on his hat, put his hand in his pocket, and stood still looking at it for a minute. Counting change, I guess. It gave me a peculiar sense of suppressed excitement, knowing they were going to come in the minute he left. I thought grimly, as I saw him take a last look around: *If you've got anything to hide, brother, now's the time to hide it.*

He left. A breath-holding interval of misleading emptiness descended on the flat. A three-alarm fire couldn't have pulled my eyes off those windows. Suddenly the door by which he had just left parted slightly and two men insinuated themselves, one behind the other. There they were now. They closed it behind them, separated at once, and got busy. One took the bedroom, one the kitchen, and they started to work their way toward one another again from those extremes of the flat. They were thorough. I could see them going over everything from top to bottom. They took the living-room together. One cased one side, the other man the other.

They'd already finished before the warning caught them. I could tell that by the way they straightened up and stood facing one another frustratedly for a minute. Then both their heads turned sharply, as at a tip-off by doorbell that he was coming back. They got out fast.

I wasn't unduly disheartened, I'd expected that. My own feeling all along had been that they wouldn't find anything incriminating around. The trunk had gone.

He came in with a mountainous brown-paper bag sitting in the curve of one arm. I watched him closely to see if he'd discover that someone had been there in his absence. Apparently he didn't. They'd been adroit about it.

He stayed in the rest of the night. Sat tight, safe and sound. He did some desultory drinking, I could see him sitting there by the window and his hand would hoist every once in awhile,

but not to excess. Apparently everything was under control, the tension had eased, now that—the trunk was out.

Watching him across the night, I speculated: *Why doesn't he get out? If I'm right about him, and I am, why does he stick around—after it?* That brought its own answer: *Because he doesn't know anyone's on to him yet. He doesn't think there's any hurry. To go too soon, right after she has, would be more dangerous than to stay awhile.*

The night wore on. I sat there waiting for Boyne's call. It came later than I thought it would. I picked the phone up in the dark. He was getting ready to go to bed, over there, now. He'd risen from where he'd been sitting drinking in the kitchen, and put the light out. He went into the living-room, lit that. He started to pull his shirt tail up out of his belt. Boyne's voice was in my ear as my eyes were on him, over there. Three-cornered arrangement.

"Hello, Jeff? Listen, absolutely nothing. We searched the place while he was out—"

I nearly said, "I know you did, I saw it," but checked myself in time.

"—and didn't turn up a thing. But—" He stopped as though this was going to be important. I waited impatiently for him to go ahead.

"Downstairs in his letter box we found a postcard waiting for him. We fished it up out of the slot with bent pins—"

"And?"

"And it was from his wife, written only yesterday from some farm upcountry. Here's the message we copied: *Arrived O. K. Already feeling a little better. Love, Anna.*"

I said, faintly but stubbornly, "You say, written only yesterday. Have you proof of that? What was the postmark-date on it?"

He made a disgusted sound down in his tonsils. At me, not it. "The postmark was blurred. A corner of it got wet, and the ink smudged."

"All of it blurred?"

"The year-date," he admitted. "The hour and the month came out O. K. August. And seven-thirty p.m., it was mailed at."

This time I made the disgusted sound, in my larynx. "August, seven-thirty p.m.—1937 or 1939 or 1942. You have no proof how it got into that mail-box, whether it came from a letter carrier's pouch or from the back of some bureau drawer!"

"Give up, Jeff," he said. "There's such a thing as going too far."

I don't know what I would have said. That is, if I hadn't happened to have my eyes on the Thorwald flat living-room windows just then. Probably very little. The postcard *had* shaken me, whether I admitted it or not. But I was looking over there. The light had gone out as soon as he'd taken his shirt off. But the bedroom didn't light up. A match-flare winked from the living-room, low down, as from an easy chair or sofa. With two unused beds in the bedroom, he was *still staying out of there.*

"Boyne," I said in a glassy voice, "I don't care what postcards from the other world you've turned up, I say that man has done away with his wife! Trace that trunk he shipped out. Open it up when you've located it—and I think you'll find her!"

And I hung up without waiting to hear what he was going to do about it. He didn't ring back, so I suspected he was going to give my suggestion a spin

after all, in spite of his loudly proclaimed skepticism.

I STAYED there by the window all night, keeping a sort of deathwatch. There were two more match-flares after the first, at about half-hour intervals. Nothing more after that. So possibly he was asleep over there. Possibly not. I had to sleep sometime myself, and I finally succumbed in the flaming light of the early sun. Anything that he was going to do, he would have done under cover of darkness and not waited for broad daylight. There wouldn't be anything much to watch, for a while now. And what was there that he needed to do any more, anyway? Nothing, just sit tight and let a little disarming time slip by.

It seemed like five minutes later that Sam came over and touched me, but it was already high noon. I said irritably, "Didn't you lamp that note I pinned up, for you to let me sleep?"

He said, "Yeah, but it's your old friend Inspector Boyne. I figured you'd sure want to—"

It was a personal visit this time. Boyne came into the room behind him without waiting, and without much cordiality.

I said, to get rid of Sam, "Go inside and smack a couple of eggs together."

Boyne began in a galvanized-iron voice: "Jeff, what do you mean by doing anything like this to me? I've made a fool out of myself, thanks to you. Sending my men out right and left on wild-goose chases. Thank God, I didn't put my foot in it any worse than I did, and have this guy picked up and brought in for questioning."

"Oh, then you don't think that's necessary?" I suggested dryly.

The look he gave me took care of that. "I'm not alone in the department, you know. There are men over me I'm accountable to for my actions. That looks great, don't it, sending one of my fellows one-half-a-day's train ride up into the sticks to some Godforsaken whistle stop or other at departmental expense—"

"Then you located the trunk?"

"We traced it through the express agency," he said flintily.

"And you opened it?"

"We did better than that. We got in touch with the various farmhouses in the immediate locality, and Mrs. Thorwald came down to the junction in a produce truck from one of them and opened it for him herself, with her own keys!"

Very few men have ever gotten a look from an old friend such as I got from him. At the door he said, stiff as a rifle barrel:

"Just let's forget all about it, shall we? That's about the kindest thing either one of us can do for the other. You're not yourself, and I'm out a little of my own pocket money, time, and temper. Let's let it go at that. If you want to telephone me in future I'll be glad to give you my home number."

The door went *whopp!* behind him.

For about ten minutes after he stormed out my numbed mind was in a sort of straitjacket. Then it started to wriggle its way free. *The hell with the police. I can't prove it to them, maybe, but I can prove it to myself, one way or the other, once and for all. Either I'm wrong or I'm right. He's got his armor on against them. But his back is naked and unprotected against me.*

I called Sam in. "Whatever became

of that spyglass we used to have, when we were bumming around on that cabin cruiser that season?"

He found it some place downstairs and came in with it, blowing on it and rubbing it along his sleeve. I let it lie idle in my lap first. I took a piece of paper and a pencil and wrote six words on it: *What have you done with her?*

I sealed it in an envelope and left the envelope blank. I said to Sam, "Now here's what I want you to do, and I want you to be slick about it. You take this, go in that building 525, climb the stairs to the fourth-floor rear, and ease it under the door. You're fast, at least you used to be. Let's see if you're fast enough to keep from being caught at it. Then when you get safely down again, give the outside doorbell a little poke, to attract attention."

His mouth started to open.

"And don't ask me any questions, you understand? I'm not fooling."

He went, and I got the spyglass ready.

I got him in the right focus after a minute or two. A face leaped up, and I was really seeing him for the first time. Dark-haired, but unmistakable Scandinavian ancestry. Looked like a sinewy customer, although he didn't run to much bulk.

About five minutes went by. His head turned sharply, profile-wards. That was the bell-poke, right there. The note must be in already.

He gave me the back of his head as he went back toward the flat-door. The lens could follow him all the way to the rear, where my unaided eyes hadn't been able to before.

He opened the door first, missed seeing it, looked out on a level. He closed it. Then he dipped, straightened up. He had it. I could see him turning it this way and that.

He shifted in, away from the door, nearer the window. He thought danger lay near the door, safety away from it. He didn't know it was the other way around, the deeper into his own rooms he retreated the greater the danger.

He'd torn it open, he was reading it. God, how I watched his expression. My eyes clung to it like leeches. There was a sudden widening, a pulling—the whole skin of his face seemed to stretch back behind the ears, narrowing his eyes to Mongoloids. Shock. Panic. His hand pushed out and found the wall, and he braced himself with it.

Then he went back toward the door again slowly. I could see him creeping up on it, stalking it as though it were something alive. He opened it so slenderly you couldn't see it at all, peered fearfully through the crack. Then he closed it, and he came back, zigzag, off balance from sheer reflex dismay.

He toppled into a chair and snatched up a drink. Out of the bottle neck itself this time. And even while he was holding it to his lips, his head was turned looking over his shoulder at the door that had suddenly thrown his secret in his face.

I put the glass down.

Guilty! Guilty as all hell, and the police be damned!

My hand started toward the phone, came back again. What was the use? They wouldn't listen now any more than they had before. "You should have seen his face, etc." And I could hear Boyne's answer: "Anyone gets a jolt from an anonymous letter, true or false. You would yourself." They had a real live Mrs. Thorwald to show me—or thought they had. I'd have to show them the dead one, to prove that they

both weren't one and the same. I, from my window, had to show them a body.

Well, he'd have to show me first.

It took hours before I got it. I kept pegging away at it, pegging away at it, while the afternoon wore away. Meanwhile he was pacing back and forth there like a caged panther. Two minds with but one thought, turned inside-out in my case. How to keep it hidden—how to see that it wasn't kept hidden.

I was afraid he might try to light out, but if he intended doing that he was going to wait until after dark, apparently, so I had a little time yet. Possibly he didn't want to himself, unless he was driven to it—still felt that it was more dangerous than to stay.

The customary sights and sounds around me went on unnoticed, while the main stream of my thoughts pounded like a torrent against that one obstacle stubbornly damming them up: how to get him to give the location away to me, so that I could give it away in turn to the police.

I was dimly conscious, I remember, of the landlord or somebody bringing in a prospective tenant to look at the sixth-floor apartment, the one that had already been finished. This was two over Thorwald's; they were still at work on the in-between one. At one point an odd little bit of synchronization, completely accidental of course, cropped up. Landlord and tenant both happened to be near the living-room windows on the sixth at the same moment that Thorwald was near those on the fourth. Both parties moved onward simultaneously into the kitchen from there, and, passing the blind spot of the wall, appeared next at the kitchen windows.

It was uncanny, they were almost like precision-strollers or puppets manipulated on one and the same string. It probably wouldn't have happened again just like that in another fifty years. Immediately afterward they digressed, never to repeat themselves like that again.

The thing was, something about it had disturbed me. There had been some slight flaw or hitch to mar its smoothness. I tried for a moment or two to figure out what it had been, and couldn't. The landlord and tenant had gone now, and only Thorwald was in sight. My unaided memory wasn't enough to recapture it for me. My eyesight might have if it had been repeated, but it wasn't.

It sank into my subconscious, to ferment there like yeast, while I went back to the main problem at hand.

I got it finally. It was well after dark, but I finally hit on a way. It mightn't work, it was cumbersome and roundabout, but it was the only way I could think of. An alarmed turn of the head, a quick precautionary step in one certain direction, was all I needed. And to get this brief, flickering, transitory give-away, I needed two phone calls and an absence of about half an hour on his part between them.

I leafed a directory by matchlight until I'd found what I wanted: *Thorwald, Lars. 525 Bndct. . . . SWansea 5-2114.*

I blew out the match, picked up the phone in the dark. It was like television. I could see to the other end of my call, only not along the wire but by a direct channel of vision from window to window.

He said, "Hullo?" gruffly.

I thought, *How strange this is. I've been accusing him of murder for three days straight, and only now I'm hearing his voice for the first time.*

I didn't try to disguise my own voice. After all, he'd never see me and I'd never see him. I said, "You got my note?"

He said guardedly, "Who is this?"

"Just somebody who happens to know."

He said craftily, "Know what?"

"Know what you know. You and I, we're the only ones."

He controlled himself well. I didn't hear a sound. But he didn't know he was open another way too. I had the glass balanced there at proper height on two large books on the sill. Through the window I saw him pull open the collar of his shirt as though its stricture was intolerable. Then he backed his hand over his eyes like you do when there's a light blinding you.

His voice came back firmly: "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Business, that's what I'm talking about. It should be worth something to me, shouldn't it? To keep it from going any further." I wanted to keep him from catching on that it was the windows. I still needed them, I needed them now more than ever. "You weren't very careful about your door the other night. Or maybe the draft swung it open a little."

That hit him where he lived. Even the stomach-heave reached me over the wire. "You didn't see anything. There wasn't anything to see."

"That's up to you. Why should I go to the police?" I coughed a little. "If it would pay me not to."

"Oh," he said. And there was relief of a sort in it. "D'you want to—see me? Is that it?"

"That would be the best way, wouldn't it? How much can you bring with you for now?"

"I've only got about seventy dollars around here."

"All right, then we can arrange the rest for later. Do you know where Lakeside Park is? I'm near there now. Suppose we make it there." That was about thirty minutes away. Fifteen there and fifteen back. "There's a little pavilion as you go in."

"How many of you are there?" he asked cautiously.

"Just me. It pays to keep things to yourself. That way you don't have to divvy up."

He seemed to like that too. "I'll take a run out," he said, "just to see what it's all about."

I watched him more closely than ever, after he'd hung up. He flitted straight through to the end room, the bedroom, that he didn't go near any more. He disappeared into a clothes closet in there, stayed a minute, came out again. He must have taken something out of a hidden cranny or niche in there that even the dicks had missed. I could tell by the pistonlike motion of his hand, just before it disappeared inside his coat, what it was. A gun.

It's a good thing, I thought, *I'm not out there in Lakeside Park waiting for my seventy dollars.*

The place blacked and he was on his way.

I called Sam in. "I want you to do something for me that's a little risky. In fact, damn risky. You might break a leg, or you might get shot, or you might even get pinched. We've been together ten years, and I wouldn't ask you anything like that if I could do it myself. But I can't, and it's got to be done." Then I told him. "Go out the back way, cross the back-yard fences, and see if you can get into that fourth-floor flat up the fire escape. He's left

one of the windows down a little from the top."

"What do you want me to look for?"

"Nothing." The police had been there already, so what was the good of that? "There are three rooms over there. I want you to disturb everything just a little bit, in all three, to show someone's been in there. Turn up the edge of each rug a little, shift every chair and table around a little, leave the closet doors standing out. Don't pass up a thing. Here, keep your eyes on this."

I took off my own wrist watch, strapped it on him. "You've got twenty-five minutes, starting from now. If you stay within those twenty-five minutes, nothing will happen to you. When you see they're up, don't wait any longer, get out and get out fast."

"Climb back down?"

"No." He wouldn't remember, in his excitement, if he'd left the windows up or not. And I didn't want him to connect danger with the back of his place, but with the front. I wanted to keep my own window out of it. "Latch the window down tight, let yourself out the door, and beat it out of the building the front way, for your life!"

"I'm just an easy mark for you," he said ruefully, but he went.

He came out through our own basement door below me, and scrambled over the fences. If anyone had challenged him from one of the surrounding windows, I was going to backstop for him, explain I'd sent him down to look for something. But no one did. He made it pretty good for anyone his age. He isn't so young any more. Even the fire escape backing the flat, which was drawn up short, he managed to contact by standing up on something. He got in, lit the light, looked over at me. I motioned him to go ahead, not weaken.

I watched him at it. There wasn't any way I could protect him, now that he was in there. Even Thorwald would be within his rights in shooting him down—this was break and entry. I had to stay in back behind the scenes, like I had been all along. I couldn't get out in front of him as a lookout and shield him. Even the dicks had had a lookout posted.

He must have been tense, doing it. I was twice as tense, watching him do it. The twenty-five minutes took fifty to go by. Finally he came over to the window, latched it fast. The lights went, and he was out. He'd made it. I blew out a bellyful of breath that was twenty-five minutes old.

I heard him keying the street door, and when he came up I said warningly, "Leave the light out in here. Go and build yourself a great big two-story whisky punch; you're as close to white as you'll ever be."

Thorwald came back twenty-nine minutes after he'd left for Lakeside Park. A pretty slim margin to hang a man's life on. So now for the finale of the long-winded business, and here was hoping.

I got my second phone call in before he had time to notice anything amiss. It was tricky timing but I'd been sitting there with the receiver ready in my hand, dialing the number over and over, then killing it each time. He came in on the 2 of 5-2114, and I saved that much time. The ring started before his hand came away from the light switch.

This was the one that was going to tell the story.

"You were supposed to bring money,

not a gun; that's why I didn't show up." I saw the jolt that threw into him. The window still had to stay out of it. "I saw you tap the inside of your coat, where you had it, as you came out on the street." Maybe he hadn't, but he wouldn't remember by now whether he had or not. You usually do when you're packing a gun and aren't an habitual carrier.

"Too bad you had your trip out and back for nothing. I didn't waste my time while you were gone, though. I know more now than I knew before." This was the important part. I had the glass up and I was practically fluoroscoping him. "I've found out where—it is. You know what I mean. I know now where you've got—it. I was there while you were out."

Not a word. Just quick breathing.

"Don't you believe me? Look around. Put the receiver down and take a look for yourself. I found it."

He put it down, moved as far as the living-room entrance, and touched off the lights. He just looked around him once, in a sweeping, all-embracing stare, that didn't come to a head on any one fixed point, didn't center at all.

He was smiling grimly when he came back to the phone. All he said, softly and with malignant satisfaction, was "You're a liar."

Then I saw him lay the receiver down and take his hand off it. I hung up at my end.

The test had failed. And yet it hadn't. He hadn't given the location away as I'd hoped he would. And yet that "You're a liar" was a tacit admission that it was there to be found, somewhere around him, somewhere on those premises. In such a good place that he didn't have to worry about it, didn't even have to look to make sure.

So there was a kind of sterile victory in my defeat. But it wasn't worth a damn to me.

He was standing there with his back to me, and I couldn't see what he was doing. I knew the phone was somewhere in front of him, but I thought he was just standing there pensive behind it. His head was slightly lowered, that was all. I'd hung up at my end. I didn't even see his elbow move. And if his index finger did, I couldn't see it.

He stood like that a moment or two, then finally he moved aside. The lights went out over there; I lost him. He was careful not even to strike matches, like he sometimes did in the dark.

My mind no longer distracted by having him to look at, I turned to trying to recapture something else—that troublesome little hitch in synchronization that had occurred this afternoon, when the renting agent and he both moved simultaneously from one window to the next.

The closest I could get was this: it was like when you're looking at someone through a pane of imperfect glass, and a flaw in the glass distorts the symmetry of the reflected image for a second, until it has gone on past that point. Yet that wouldn't do, that was not it. The windows had been open and there had been no glass between. And I hadn't been using the lens at the time.

My phone rang. Boyne, I supposed. It wouldn't be anyone else at this hour. Maybe, after reflecting on the way he'd jumped all over me— I said, "Hello" unguardedly, in my own normal voice.

There wasn't any answer.

I said, "Hello? Hello? Hello?" I kept giving away samples of my voice.

There wasn't a sound from first to last.

I hung up finally. It was still dark over there, I noticed.

Sam looked in to check out. He was a bit thick-tongued from his restorative drink. He said something about "Awri' if I go now?"

I half heard him. I was trying to figure out another way of trapping *him* over there into giving away the right spot. I motioned my consent absently.

He went a little unsteadily down the stairs to the ground floor and after a delaying moment or two I heard the street door close after him. Poor Sam, he wasn't much used to liquor.

I was left alone in the house, one chair the limit of my freedom of movement.

Suddenly a light went on over there again, just momentarily, to go right out again afterward. He must have needed it for something, to locate something that he had already been looking for and found he wasn't able to put his hands on readily without it. He found it, whatever it was, almost immediately, and moved back at once to put the lights out again. As he turned to do so, I saw him give a glance out the window. He didn't come to the window to do it, he just shot it out in passing.

Something about it struck me as different from any of the others I'd seen him give in all the time I'd been watching him. If you can qualify such an elusive thing as a glance, I would have termed it a glance with a purpose. It was certainly anything but vacant or random, it had a bright spark of fixity in it. It wasn't one of those precautionary sweeps I'd seen him give, either. It hadn't started over on the other side and worked its way around to my side, the right. It had hit dead-center at my bay window, for just a split second while it lasted, and then was gone again. And the lights were gone, and he was gone.

Sometimes your senses take things in without your mind translating them into their proper meaning. My eyes saw that look. My mind refused to smelter it properly. *It was meaningless*, I thought. *An unintentional bull's-eye, that just happened to hit square over here, as he went toward the lights on his way out.*

Delayed action. A wordless ring of the phone. To test a voice? A period of bated darkness following that, in which two could have played at the same game—stalking one another's window-squares, unseen. A last-moment flicker of the lights, that was bad strategy but unavoidable. A parting glance, radioactive with malignant intention. All these things sank in without fusing. My eyes did their job, it was my mind that didn't—or at least took its time about it.

Seconds went by in packages of sixty. It was very still around the familiar quadrangle formed by the back of the houses. Sort of a breathless stillness. And then a sound came into it, starting up from nowhere, nothing. The unmistakable, spaced clicking a cricket makes in the silence of the night. I thought of Sam's superstition about them, that he claimed had never failed to fulfill itself yet. If that was the case, it looked bad for somebody in one of these slumbering houses around here—

Sam had been gone only about ten minutes. And now he was back again, he must have forgotten something. That drink was responsible. Maybe his hat, or maybe even the key to his own quarters uptown. He knew I couldn't come down and let him in, and he was trying to be quiet about it, thinking

perhaps I'd dozed off.

All I could hear was this faint jiggling down at the lock of the front door. It was one of those old-fashioned stoop houses, with an outer pair of storm doors that were allowed to swing free all night, and then a small vestibule, and then the inner door, worked by a simple iron key. The liquor had made his hand a little unreliable, although he'd had this difficulty once or twice before, even without it. A match would have helped him find the keyhole quicker, but then, Sam doesn't smoke. I knew he wasn't likely to have one on him.

The sound had stopped now. He must have given up, gone away again, decided to let whatever it was go until tomorrow. He hadn't gotten in, because I knew his noisy way of letting doors coast shut by themselves too well, and there hadn't been any sound of that sort, that loose slap he always made.

Then suddenly it exploded. Why at this particular moment, I don't know. That was some mystery of the inner workings of my own mind. It flashed like waiting gunpowder which a spark has finally reached along a slow train. Drove all thoughts of Sam, and the front door, and this and that completely out of my head. It had been waiting there since midafternoon today, and only now— More of that delayed action. Damn that delayed action.

The renting agent and Thorwald had both started even from the living-room window. An intervening gap of blind wall, and both had reappeared at the kitchen window, still one above the other. But some sort of a hitch or flaw or jump had taken place, right there, that bothered me. The eye is a reliable surveyor. There wasn't anything the matter with their timing, it was with their parallel-ness, or whatever the word is. The hitch had been vertical, not horizontal. There had been an upward "jump."

Now I had it, now I knew. And it couldn't wait. It was too good. They wanted a body? Now I had one for them.

Sore or not, Boyne would *have* to listen to me now. I didn't waste any time, I dialed his precinct-house then and there in the dark, working the slots in my lap by memory alone. They didn't make much noise going around, just a light click. Not even as distinct as that cricket out there—

"He went home long ago," the desk sergeant said.

This couldn't wait. "All right, give me his home phone number."

He took a minute, came back again. "Trafalgar," he said. Then nothing more.

"Well? Trafalgar what?" Not a sound.

"Hello? Hello?" I tapped it. "Operator, I've been cut off. Give me that party again." I couldn't get her either.

I hadn't been cut off. My wire had been cut. That had been too sudden, right in the middle of— And to be cut like that it would have to be done somewhere right here inside the house with me. Outside it went underground.

Delayed action. This time final, fatal, altogether too late. A voiceless ring of the phone. A direction-finder of a look from over there. "Sam" seemingly trying to get back in a while ago.

Surely, death was somewhere inside the house here with me. And I couldn't move, I couldn't get up out of this chair. Even if I had gotten through to Boyne just now, that would have been too late.

There wasn't time enough now for one of those camera-finishes in this. I could have shouted out the window to that gallery of sleeping rear-window neighbors around me, I supposed. It would have brought them to the windows. It couldn't have brought them over here in time. By the time they had even figured which particular house it was coming from, it would stop again, be over with.

I didn't open my mouth. Not because I was brave, but because it was so obviously useless.

He'd be up in a minute. He must be on the stairs now, although I couldn't hear him. Not even a creak. A creak would have been a relief, would have placed him. This was like being shut up in the dark with the silence of a gliding, coiling cobra somewhere around you.

There wasn't a weapon in the place with me. There were books there on the wall, in the dark, within reach. Me, who never read. The former owner's books. There was a bust of Rousseau or Montesquieu, I'd never been able to decide which, one of those gents with flowing manes, topping them. It was a monstrosity, bisque clay, but it too dated from before my occupancy.

I arched my middle upward from the chair seat and clawed desperately up at it. Twice my fingertips slipped off it, then at the third raking I got it to teeter, and the fourth brought it down into my lap, pushing me down into the chair. There was a steamer rug under me. I didn't need it around me in this weather, I'd been using it to soften the seat of the chair. I tugged it out from under and mantled it around me like an Indian brave's blanket.

Then I squirmed far down in the chair, let my head and one shoulder dangle out over the arm, on the side next to the wall. I hoisted the bust to my other, upward shoulder, balanced it there precariously for a second head, blanket tucked around its ears. From the back, in the dark, it would look—I hoped—

I proceeded to breathe adenoidally, like someone in heavy upright sleep. It wasn't hard. My own breath was coming nearly that labored anyway, from tension.

He was good with knobs and hinges and things. I never heard the door open, and this one, unlike the one downstairs, was right behind me. A little eddy of air puffed through the dark at me. I could feel it because my scalp, the real one, was all wet at the roots of the hair right then.

If it was going to be a knife or headblow, the dodge might give me a second chance, that was the most I could hope for, I knew. My arms and shoulders are hefty. I'd bring him down on me in a bear-hug after the first slash or drive, and break his neck or collarbone against me.

If it was going to be a gun, he'd get me anyway in the end. A difference of a few seconds. He had a gun, I knew, that he was going to use on me in the open, over at Lakeside Park. I was hoping that here, indoors, in order to make his own escape more practicable—

Time was up.

The flash of the shot lit up the room for a second, it was so dark. Or at least the corners of it, like flickering, weak lightning. The bust bounced on my shoulder and disintegrated into chunks.

I thought he was jumping up and down on the floor for a minute with

frustrated rage. Then when I saw him dart by me and lean over the window sill to look for a way out, the sound transferred itself rearward and downward, became a pummeling with hoof and hip at the street door. The camera-finish after all. But he still could have killed me five times.

I flung my body down into the narrow crevice between chair arm and wall, but my legs were still up, and so was my head and that one shoulder.

He whirled, fired at me so close that it was like looking a sunrise in the face. I didn't feel it, so—it hadn't hit.

"You—" I heard him grunt to himself. I think it was the last thing he said. The rest of his life was all action, not verbal.

He flung over the sill on one arm and dropped into the yard. Two-story drop. He made it because he missed the cement, landed on the sod-strip in the middle. I jacked myself up over the chair arm and flung myself bodily forward at the window, nearly hitting it chin first.

He went, all right. When life depends on it, you go. He took the first fence, rolled over that bellyward. He went over the second like a cat, hands and feet pointed together in a spring. Then he was back in the rear yard of his own building. He got up on something, just about like Sam had—

The rest was all footwork, with quick little corkscrew twists at each landing-stage. Sam had latched his windows down when he was over there, but he'd reopened one of them for ventilation on his return. His whole life depended now on that casual, unthinking little act—

Second, third. He was up to his own windows. He'd made it. Something went wrong. He veered out away from them in another pretzel twist, flashed up toward the fifth, the one above. Something sparked in the darkness of one of his own windows where he'd been just now, and a shot thudded heavily out around the quadrangle-enclosure like a big bass drum.

He passed the fifth, the sixth, got up to the roof. He'd made it a second time. Gee, he loved life! The guys in his own windows couldn't get him, he was over them in a straight line and there was too much fire escape interlacing in the way.

I was too busy watching him to watch what was going on around me. Suddenly Boyne was next to me, sighting. I heard him mutter:

"I almost hate to do this, he's got to fall so far."

He was balanced on the roof parapet up there, with a star right over his head. An unlucky star. He stayed a minute too long, trying to kill before he was killed. Or maybe he was killed, and knew it.

A shot cracked, high up against the sky, the windowpane flew apart all over the two of us, and one of the books snapped right behind me.

Boyne didn't say anything more about hating to do it. My face was pressing outward against his arm. The recoil of his elbow jarred my teeth. I blew a clearing through the smoke to watch him go.

It was pretty horrible. He took a minute to show anything, standing up there on the parapet. Then he let his gun go, as if to say, "I won't need this any more." Then he went after it. He missed the fire escape entirely, came all the way down on the outside. He landed so far out he hit one of the projecting planks, down there out of sight. It bounced his body up, like a

springboard. Then it landed again—for good. And that was all.

I said to Boyne, "I got it. I got it finally. The fifth-floor flat, the one over his, that they're still working on. The cement kitchen floor, raised above the level of the other rooms. They wanted to comply with the fire laws and also obtain a dropped-living-room effect, as cheaply as possible. Dig it up—"

He went right over then and there, down through the basement and over the fences, to save time. The electricity wasn't turned on yet in that one; they had to use their torches. It didn't take them long at that, once they'd got started. In about half an hour he came to the window and wigwagged over for my benefit. It meant yes.

He didn't come over until nearly eight in the morning; after they'd tidied up and taken them away. Both away, the hot dead and the cold dead.

He said, "Jeff, I take it all back. That damn fool that I sent up there about the trunk—well, it wasn't his fault, in a way. I'm to blame. He didn't have orders to check on the woman's description, only on the contents of the trunk. He came back and touched on it in a general way. I go home and I'm in bed already, and suddenly pop! into my brain—one of the tenants I questioned two whole days ago had given us a few details and they didn't tally with his on several important points. Talk about being slow to catch on!"

"I've had that all the way through this damn thing," I admitted ruefully. "I call it delayed action. It nearly killed me."

"I'm a police officer and you're not."

"That how you happened to shine at the right time?"

"Sure. We came over to pick him up for questioning. I left them planted there when we saw he wasn't in, and came on over here by myself to square it up with you while we were waiting. How did you happen to hit on that cement floor?"

I told him about the freak synchronization. "The renting agent showed up taller at the kitchen window in proportion to Thorwald, than he had been a moment before when both were at the living-room windows together. It was no secret that they were putting in cement floors, topped by a cork composition, and raising them considerable. But it took on new meaning. Since the top-floor one has been finished for some time, it had to be the fifth. Here's the way I have it lined up, just in theory. She's been in ill health for years, and he's been out of work, and he got sick of that and of her both. Met this other—"

"She'll be here later today, they're bringing her down under arrest."

"He probably insured her for all he could get, and then started to poison her slowly, trying not to leave any trace. I imagine—and remember, this is pure conjecture—she caught him at it that night the light was on all night. Caught on in some way, or caught him in the act. He lost his head, and did the very thing he had wanted all along to avoid doing. Killed her by violence—strangulation or a blow.

"The rest had to be hastily improvised. He got a better break than he deserved at that. He thought of the apartment upstairs, went up and looked around. They'd just finished laying the floor, the cement hadn't hardened yet, and the materials were still around. He gouged a trough out of it just wide enough to take her body, put her in it, mixed fresh cement and re-

cemented over her, possibly raising the general level of the flooring an inch or two so that she'd be safely covered. A permanent, odorless coffin. Next day the workmen came back, laid down the cork surfacing on top of it without noticing anything; I suppose he'd used one of their own trowels to smooth it.

"Then he sent his accessory upstate fast, near where his wife had been several summers before, but to a different farmhouse where she wouldn't be recognized, along with the trunk keys. Sent the trunk up after her, and dropped himself an already used postcard into his mailbox, with the year-date blurred. In a week or two she would have probably committed 'suicide' up there as Mrs. Anna Thorwald. Despondency due to ill health. Written him a farewell note and left her clothes beside some body of deep water. It was risky, but they might have succeeded in collecting the insurance at that."

By nine Boyne and the rest had gone. I was still sitting there in the chair, too keyed up to sleep. Sam came in and said, "Here's Doc Preston."

He showed up rubbing his hands, in that way he has. "Guess we can take that cast off your leg now. You must be tired of sitting there all day doing nothing."

Her victims may not have totalled forty-two, as one account had it, but she seems to have sent an impressive number to early and unwanted graves.

BELLE OF INDIANA

By STEWART H. HOLBROOK

HAD it not been for an unfortunate hired man and a fire, Belle Brynhilde Poulsatter Sorenson Gunness might have been in business to this day; and a very profitable and interesting line it must have been. She was an extremely retiring and uncommunicative person and until fire destroyed her home near La Porte, Indiana, on April 28, 1908, she was practically unknown except to a circle of what one shudders to call her intimates.

Belle first appeared in La Porte in 1901. She was then the Widow Sorenson, relict of Mads Sorenson who died in 1900 leaving her with two children and eight thousand dollars in life insurance. From sale of the Sorenson home in Illinois the widow received another five thousand dollars. Thus she was financially well fixed when she bought a forty-eight-acre farm about a mile out of La Porte and moved there with two children of her own and another youngster, Jennie Olson, daughter of one Antone Olson.

The Widow Sorenson was forty-two years old in 1901. Neighbors describe her as "rugged," which would seem wholly inadequate. She was five feet seven inches tall and weighed two hundred pounds, most of which was pure brawn.

When her household effects arrived at the farm, the truckers were amazed at the ease with which she juggled heavy trunks, boxes, and crates. One of them, who may have been drinking that day, swore that he saw the woman pick the big upright piano clean off the floor of the porch, lug it unaided into the front room, and set it down as gently as she would have handled a basket of eggs.

"Ay like music in home," Belle had beamed.

"Weigh three hunnert pound, easy," the awed trucker said later, referring to the piano.

In spite of her retiring disposition, neighbors soon learned that the Widow Sorenson was an accomplished farmer who could pitch hay and milk cows and who did her own butchering of hogs and calves, the meat of which she sold in La Porte.

She wasn't a widow long. How they first met isn't clear; but in April of 1902 she married Peter Gunness, a Norwegian who seemed to be a jolly, honest person and became well liked by neighboring farmers. But Peter wasn't long for the world. In December, after only seven months of wedded bliss, he was killed when, as Mrs. Gunness explained the matter, he was struck on the head by a sausage grinder that fell from a shelf.

It is of course idle to speculate on whether or not the shelf had been jiggled. The La Porte coroner was called and, although later he admitted that the sausage-grinder affair "looked a little queer," he found officially that Peter Gunness, God rest his soul, had been the victim of an accident.

The Widow Gunness, who henceforth was known as Belle Gunness, was no doubt glad of the four-thousand-dollar life-insurance policy which the oddly animated sausage machine had liquidated. But she continued to live modestly, even frugally, and it soon became apparent that in spite of her forty-three years Belle was in an interesting condition. A son whom she named Philip was born in 1903. In addition, her brood included Daughters Lucy and Myrtle by her previous marriage and the Jennie Olson she was caring for. (I dislike to use the term "caring for" in connection with *anything* in which Mrs. Gunness was concerned, but it must suffice for the present.)

Although it was not known until later—tragically later—Belle Gunness was addicted to the use of matrimonial journals. That is, she advertised in them—listing, as was the custom, her desire for a good husband and being not too coy regarding her own personality and qualifications. What Belle wanted, it seemed, was a man of Scandinavian birth, preferably Norwegian, who was kind and honest and who would help a lovable and hard-working widow to lift the mortgage on her little farm. The "kind and honest" part of the desired man's qualifications might be winked at, one gathers; but the mortgage-lifting end of the deal was nothing short of imperative. "Trifiers," Belle's advertisement said coldly, "need not apply."

A photograph of Belle Gunness at this period shows a squat, powerfully built woman in a long plain dress with puff sleeves, a Gibson Girl hair-do, and an exceedingly dull and heavy face. Looking at the photograph, one is hard put to explain the undoubted attraction the woman exercised on a large number of men. To term the woman in this photograph "plain" is mere flattery. But either this picture is a gross libel on Belle or her personal charm was such that no photograph could catch and hold it.

Shortly after the death of Mr. Gunness, Belle engaged a hired man to work around her place; but she herself was still active in butchering pigs, of which she had many, and in caring for the garden. The hired men changed from time to time, some of them very suddenly indeed; but none of them entered Belle's life very deeply until the next to last one, of which more later.

In 1906 a Mr. John Moo arrived at

Belle's farm from Elbow Lake, Minnesota. He was a husky, good-looking man of about fifty years of age, well dressed by country-town standards, and a native of Norway. His object was matrimony, and he had been fetched by one of Belle's advertisements in the wedding-bells periodicals. With him John Moo brought one thousand dollars to "pay off the mortgage" on his intended's farm.

John was introduced to callers and neighbors as Cousin John, and for almost a week he was seen about the house every day. Then, one day, he wasn't there. That was forty-four years ago. John Moo hasn't been seen since.

Hard on the heels of the disappearing Moo came George Anderson of Tarkio, a village in the northwestern corner of Missouri. George, like both Peter Gunness and John Moo, was a native of Norway. Living in Missouri must have given him some of the skepticism for which that state is famous: George Anderson did not bring very much money with him to Belle's place.

He was mighty glad he hadn't. Long afterward he related why.

Attracted by Belle's description of herself in one of the marriage papers, Anderson had made the long trip to La Porte with the intention of matrimony. After the usual amenities—and by now Belle must have been getting pretty good at amenities—the woman brought up the little matter of raising the mortgage. Really charmed by the husky Belle, George was seriously considering returning home to get what might be termed the entrance fee and then marrying the woman.

Early on his visit at the farm, however, he suddenly awoke in the middle of the night. "All in a cold sweat," he recalled. Bending over him and peering intently into his face was Belle herself, a lighted candle in her hand. What she intended to do, if anything, George Anderson never found out. He was so startled at the odd expression in the eyes and on the usually phlegmatic face of his intended bride that he let go a yell.

Belle ran out of the room. So did George. He put on his clothes and got the hell out of there as fast as he could go, and kept going until he reached the La Porte railroad station, on foot, where he got a train for Tarkio, Missouri.

After Anderson's departure there *may* have been a lull, a sort of brief hiatus, between the arrivals of men with matrimonial intentions. Again, there may have been no break at all. It is difficult to say. In any case, Belle was not idle. She changed her advertising copy in the wedding-bells journals, and she also engaged a new hired man—a rather dim-witted young French-Canadian by name of Ray L'Amphere, who presently anglicized his name into plain Lamphere. What his relations with Belle were, other than as hired man, are not positively known; but probably they were rather interesting, as events were soon to indicate.

Either just before or just after Lamphere came to live and work at the farm, young Jennie Olson, the sixteen-year-old girl who had been put in Belle's care by the child's father, Antone Olson, disappeared. Possibly "disappeared" is too strong a word to use at this point, for Belle explained everything to neighbors. Jennie had "gone to California," she said, and was in school there. It certainly is a fact that Jennie went somewhere in midsummer of 1906. That was forty-four years ago. She hasn't been seen since.

During the lull in the mortgage-raising Belle began to be something of a mystery woman in the neighborhood. Hack drivers of La Porte told of delivering trunks to the Gunness farm at night. One of the drivers was Clyde Sturgis. One night he drove out there with a big, heavy trunk which was well bound with rope. Sturgis, always a helpful man, unloaded the trunk and started to cut the rope with his jackknife. Belle was at him in a fury.

"What are you trying to do!" she fairly screamed. "I'll take care of this trunk." And with that she picked it up off the porch like a box of marshmallows and lugged it inside.

Added to the business of the mysterious trunks, which doubtless became more mysterious every time it was retold, was that neighbors noted Belle kept the shutters on her house tightly drawn, both day and night, for a long period. And farmers going by late at night often saw Belle herself on the prowl, around her barn or in a small yard some fifty by seventy-five feet which Belle had recently enclosed with an *eight-foot* fence of stout and fine wire mesh. Entrance to this yard was by a rugged gate of tough oak which rumor said was always locked and to which Belle alone had the key.

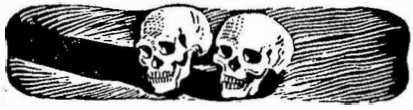
The cellar of the house, too, was always kept locked except at hog-butchering season. At these times a stray neighbor or two had happened to call when Belle was in the cellar, her sleeves rolled up, wielding knife and cleaver like the best man Mr. Swift or Mr. Armour ever had. The cellar was admirably rigged for such work. It contained a long heavy table of hardwood, twelve inches thick, and a large tub for scalding purposes. In the ceiling over the tub was a hook and pulley. Leather strips along the wall held a professional assortment of fine butcher's implements.

The lull in the stream of callers—if lull there was—came to an end in April of 1907. In that merry spring month Mr. Ole Budsberg, a native of Norway but long a citizen of Iola in Waupaca County, Wisconsin, packed his extension suitcase and took a train of steamcars for La Porte. Belle met him at the station in her own buggy.

The loving couple had long since exchanged photographs, as is the happy custom in mail-order matrimonial circles, and they had no trouble recognizing each other. You can say what you want to about Belle, but not that she ever attempted to seduce men by retouched pictures; the ones she sent out to prospective mates looked cruelly like her.

Mr. Ole Budsberg was a middle-aged man, the father of several grown sons. He had done very well with certain logging jobs in the white pine of Wisconsin and had saved his money. With him to La Porte he brought two thousand dollars in cash. This was, as one might guess, for the purpose of raising that apparently immutable mortgage on the forty-eight acres of the Widow Gunness.

Mr. Budsberg arrived on the farm late in April of 1907. That is forty-three years ago and he hasn't been seen since.



NINETEEN HUNDRED AND SEVEN had been a rather slow year at the farm, but 1908 opened very auspiciously indeed when Mr. Andrew K.

Helgelein arrived at the place in January and was made welcome by the charming chatelaine of what soon was to be known as Abattoir Acres. Mr. Helgelein was a native of Norway, but for years past he had been living near Aberdeen, South Dakota, where he successfully raised wheat.

Mr. Helgelein came with the most honorable intentions of matrimony. In his big wallet he carried no less than three thousand dollars in cash, with which to—but never mind. What had fetched him was obviously a series of letters, the last one of which happily has survived to give a good sample of Belle's literary style and general technique. It was written in Belle's own clear hand on January 13, 1908, and was inadvertently but fortunately left at his South Dakota home by Mr. Helgelein when he started for La Porte. Wrote the Belle of Indiana:

To the Dearest Friend in the World: No woman in the world is happier than I am. I know that you are now to come to me and be my own. I can tell from your letters that you are the man I want. It does not take one long to tell when to like a person, and you I like better than anyone in the world, I know.

Think how we will enjoy each other's company. You, the sweetest man in the whole world. We will be all alone with each other. Can you conceive of anything nicer? I think of you constantly. When I hear your name mentioned, and this is when one of the dear children speaks of you or I hear myself humming it with the words of an old love song, it is beautiful music to my ears.

My heart beats in wild rapture for you. My Andrew, I love you. Come prepared to stay forever.

And, by God, he did. That was forty-two years ago and he hasn't been seen since.

Now affairs at the farm departed from their usual humdrum quiet. Ray Lamphere, the hired man, had a frightful quarrel with Belle. He, like many another poor man, had fallen in love with her and he was jealous of the latest star boarder, Helgelein. In a terrible temper he packed up his belongings and left. In La Porte he told friends that Belle owed him back wages. He said he knew enough about Belle to make her pay him not only his wages but to keep his mouth shut, too.

Lamphere must have done a deal of talking, for it got to Belle's ears. She promptly had him arrested on complaint that he was insane and a menace to the public. He was given what passed in those days for a sanity hearing and was found sane. He made a call on Belle at the farm. They argued heatedly about something. She had him arrested again, for trespass.

Lamphere was a man who could take it. He paid a fine for trespass and he remained in the neighborhood. It is even thought that he called on Belle again. He also continued to make various veiled threats about her, and once mentioned to Farmer William Slater that "Helgelein won't bother me no more. We fixed him for keeps."

Trouble also assailed Belle from another quarter. She got a letter from Mr. Asle Helgelein, a substantial citizen of Mansfield, South Dakota, who wanted to know what had become of his brother Andrew. Belle wrote in reply that Andrew had gone away, doubtless on a visit to his native Norway. To this whimsey Asle Helgelein answered that he was positive his brother had done no such thing.

Now we get a real sample of how Belle met a challenge of this sort. She sat right down and wrote Asle that she wished he would come to La Porte to aid her in a search for Andrew. She intimated, too, that searches of this kind cost money. If Asle replied to this invitation it is not of record.

For once in her life Belle Gunness was worried. Or so she seemed to M. E. Leliter, prominent attorney of La Porte, to whom the woman came on April 27, 1908. She told him she was mortally in fear of Ray Lamphere, the ex-hired man. He had threatened to kill her, she said. He had promised to burn her house around her ears. In view of these things hanging over her she wanted to make her will. It is significant, perhaps, that she did not ask for police protection from Lamphere.

Attorney Leliter drew up a will and she signed it. It left her estate to her two children by the late Mr. Sorenson and her one child by the late Mr. Gunness. In case the children did not survive her, the estate was to go to a Norwegian children's home, a sort of orphanage, in Chicago.

Leaving Mr. Leliter's office, Belle proceeded to the La Porte bank—where she paid off a five-hundred-dollar note. Then she returned to the farm.

Early next morning farmers on the McClung Road saw the Gunness home in flames. It burned to the ground. Only the hired man, one Joe Maxon, escaped, and he said he barely made it. Noise of the flames licking at his room had awakened him, he said, and he jumped out his second-story window in his underwear. He vowed that just before jumping he had shouted loudly to wake Mrs. Gunness and the children but had received no reply. They had been in the house when he went to bed.

When the embers had cooled slightly, searchers found four bodies. Three were readily identified as those of Lucy and Myrtle Sorenson, Belle's daughters, and of Philip Gunness, her son. The other corpse was the headless body of a woman. All four were found on a mattress in the cellar. On top of them were the charred remains of the pride of Belle's parlor, the fine upright piano.

Sheriff Albert H. Smutzer was called. He viewed the scene and arrested Ray Lamphere, the farm hand who had been doing so much talking about Mrs. Gunness. Immediately upon his arrest and without so much as one question asked him, Lamphere asked one of his own.

"Did Widow Gunness and the kids get out?" he inquired.

But Lamphere denied any knowledge of how the fire started, even when he was confronted by John Solyam, a neighbor's boy, who identified Lamphere as the man he had seen running from the Gunness place just before the flames were noticed.

"You wouldn't look me in the eye and say that," Lamphere asserted.

"Yes, I will," the lad said, and continued, "You found me hiding behind the bushes and you told me you'd kill me if I didn't get out of there."

Lamphere was indicted for murder; and a charge of arson was left, as you might say, hanging over him, just in case the other charge wasn't sufficient. The victim named in the murder charge was of course Mrs. Gunness. But, and the doubts began piling up one on top of the other, *was* the headless body that of Mrs. Gunness?

Swan Nicholson, neighboring farmer who had known Mrs. Gunness over a

period of six years, viewed the headless corpse and said, without qualification, no, it wasn't that of the hefty widow. It wasn't tall enough, it wasn't big enough, and, well, it just didn't look like her at all. C. Christofferson, another farmer who had often called at the mystery place to do plowing and other work, was as positive as Nicholson had been. No, he said, that body had never been Belle. And so said Mrs. Austin Cutler, an old acquaintance.

From Chicago came Mrs. Nellie Olander and Mr. Sigurd Olson, sister and brother of the Jennie Olson who had lived with Belle and had "gone to California" not long before. Mrs. Olander and Mr. Olson told authorities they had known Belle ever since they could remember and that the headless body was of someone else, not Belle.

A tragic visitor at this time was Antone Olson, father of the missing girl. He came from Chicago to view the charred bodies. Jennie's was not among them. Mr. Olson told police he had planned to visit the Gunness home on the following Sunday to see if Jennie was all right. He said he had dreamed a few nights before that the Gunness home had been burned to the ground and Jennie was in the fire. It had worried him.

Physicians measured the charred remains of the headless woman. Making proper allowances for the missing head and neck, they concluded that the corpse was that of a woman five feet three inches tall and weighing about one hundred and fifty pounds. Belle, as those who knew her agreed, had not been a hair under five feet seven and weighed at least one hundred and eighty-five pounds, possibly more. Swan Nicholson was quite definite. The Widow Gunness, he said with sober assurance, weighed two hundred pounds if she weighed an ounce.

Clerks in La Porte stores who had sold Mrs. Gunness various articles of wearing apparel were interviewed for their knowledge of clothing sizes. These figures were compared with estimates of acquaintances. Physicians had meanwhile made careful measurements of the corpse. The two sets of measurements, one real, the other estimated, indicated that the body found in the cellar must be that of someone other than Belle. This is how they compared:

	Victim (inches)	Mrs. Gunness (inches)
Biceps	9	17
Bust	36	46
Waist	26	37
Thigh	25	30
Hips	40	54
Calf	12½	14
Wrist	6	9

Despite these discrepancies and admitting they would like to have more definite proof, police authorities said the headless corpse was that of Belle Gunness. Three rings on the left hand were considered additional proof. One was set with diamonds and had no markings. A plain gold band was engraved *M.S. to J.S. Aug. 22 '94;* another gold band was marked *P.G. to J.S. 3-5-'95.* It was reasonable to believe that these rings had to do with Belle's first marriage, to Mads Sorenson, and her second, to Peter Gunness. Because of the condition of the flesh it was impossible to say if these rings had been on these fingers for a long time.

Presently, as in all such cases of doubt, there came forward those witnesses who are apparently present in swarming numbers, when any skulduggery has come to light. Half a

dozen persons volunteered the information that they had seen Mrs. Gunness driving a woman to the farm on the night of the fire. Descriptions of this mysterious party varied from "slim" to "fairly stout." All agreed she had been "a dark woman."

What the harassed authorities needed was a head for the corpse, or at least a skull. Search of the barns and outbuildings and of the near-by swamp revealed nothing in the form of a head. The sheriff was prepared to call it a day—to let the whole confusing matter rest as it was and to go ahead with prosecution of the farm hand, Lamphere, for murder of Mrs. Gunness.

Doubtless that is exactly what would have happened had it not been for the appearance on the scene of Asle Helgelein of Mansfield, South Dakota. This was the brother of Andrew, the man Belle had reported to Asle as on his happy way to Norway. Asle had not known of the Gunness fire until his arrival at La Porte. He had come simply to find his brother.

Asle went to Sheriff Smutzer with his suspicions that Andrew had somehow been done in by this woman he had come to marry. The sheriff didn't seem very interested, but Asle was persistent and the sheriff finally agreed to make another inspection of the premises. In the high-fenced yard, the gate to which had to be broken by police, were noted several soft depressions in the ground. Joe Maxon, Belle's last hired man, the one who barely had escaped from the burning house, told officers that Belle once had him wheel dirt into the yard to level the partly filled holes. Contained rubbish, Belle had said. At the urging of Asle Helgelein deputies took shovels and started digging.

The first layers under the soft earth were indeed rubbish—old cans, bottles, and so forth—but suddenly a digger let out an exclamation. He came up with a good fat gunny sack. In it was a body well hacked but still in fair condition, everything considered. Helgelein looked closely at the remains.

"That's Andy," he said.

The deputies now dug with a right good will. Before sundown that day, which was May 3, 1908, they had uncovered the remains of at least four more bodies. One of these was identified as that of Jennie Olson, the girl who "had gone to California." One of the others was of a tall man with a dark mustache. The two others were of children.

Next day the yard yielded four more bodies. On the third day only one body was found. That made a total of ten in the yard. If the four in the cellar were added, the grand total was fourteen—an impressive number for so small a farm.

When he was informed of the bodies found in the yard, Lamphere, the ex-hired man, screamed in his cell. "Bodies, murder, Helgelein!" was his curious cry. "My God, that woman! Now I know what was going on!"

Not all of the bodies could be identified, but positive identifications were made of those of Jennie Olson, Andrew Helgelein, John Moo, and Ole Budsberg. For reasons that need not be gone into here, three other bodies were presently presumed to be those of one Olaf Lindblom and one Eric Gerhalt, both Norwegians who had come, separately, to visit Belle, and that of a hired man whose name was never known.

The remains of several *other* bodies were mere fragments—fingers and oth-

er small bones for which comparative skulls and trunks were missing. As physicians attempted to sort the hundreds of spare parts, the heavy table and the vat in the Gunness cellar took on a possible new meaning that made strong men shudder. Had that vat been used for purposes other than the scalding of hogs? One couldn't know, but police and physicians now looked at the several cleavers found in the ashes with new interest.

With Belle's private boneyard apparently exhausted, police felt that the investigation was completed—finished. They hadn't reckoned with the growing public rumor about that headless corpse and its possible connection with the mystery woman seen with Belle in her buggy on the night of the fire. New witnesses came forward. They had seen this same dark woman get off the evening train from Chicago. Belle had met her at the La Porte depot. They had driven out the McClung road together, toward the farm.

Maybe so; but Joe Maxon, Belle's final hired man, had seen no strange woman that night, although he admitted it was possible one could have been in the house without his knowledge. "It sure was a queer place," he allowed in what was a fair attempt at an understatement.

No matter what Joe Maxon said, local opinion had it settled that the headless corpse was that of a woman the crafty Belle had imported to the farm for just such a purpose. Belle herself was safe elsewhere, somewhere. So the story grew and solidified.

Dr. Ira P. Norton, La Porte dentist, had been very busy at the time of the Gunness fire and had not then connected the fire with a former patient. With the Gunness farm and its odd harvest now on the front pages of the nation's press, Dr. Norton recalled that he had done some dental work for the late Mrs. Gunness. He told police he could easily identify his own work, which was a bridge of gold and porcelain.

Police doubted Dr. Norton would have anything to work on. They said that fire hot enough to consume a head would also consume, or at least melt, both gold and porcelain. Not so, said Dr. Norton. The gold caps would not fuse under 1800 degrees Fahrenheit. The porcelain would not disintegrate at less than 2000 degrees. "That would call for a blowpipe flame," the dentist said.

The next problem was how to sift the ashes and debris of a large house and find a few small teeth—even if they existed, which the police seemed to doubt. Louis Schultz, a public-spirited citizen of La Porte, heard of the quandary and went to the officers with a suggestion. He was an old sourdough, he said, not long since returned from the Yukon, and if he had a little lumber and some encouragement he would build a regular gold-mine sluice box right there on Belle's place. With plenty of running water handy he would sluice every jeasley bit of stuff in the ruins of the house, and if there was any gold to be found in the claim he damned well would find it.

This Louis Schultz was plainly God-given. The sluice was built in Belle's front yard; water was piped from the barn; and old Klondike Louis, the ninety-eighter, went to work on the strangest mining job of his career, while thousands cheered.

The thousands who cheered Louis at his work came not only from La Porte and surrounding towns but from Chi-

cago, where the daily papers were whooping up the biggest story of the year and one of the best horror stories of all time. Klondike Louis, indeed, was a sensation. With his sluice box roped off and scores of extra deputies needed to handle the huge crowds, he shoveled tons of debris and washed it down over the riffles before the largest audience a sourdough ever had. At that time newsreels were in infancy and seem not to have caught the epic event; but newspaper photographers were all over the place, catching Louis in pose after pose.

Bets were made on the outcome. Chicago bookies formed pools on the day and hour Louis would strike pay dirt in the Belle Gunness Mine. Vendors of popcorn and tonic circulated in the crowd, which on its peak day was estimated to be six thousand persons. On May 19, after four days of hard work, Klondike Louis struck the vein. Washed out from the muck and debris of the house was a piece of dental bridgework containing two lower bicuspids capped with gold, and four porcelain teeth betweem them.

Dr. Norton looked closely. "My work, positively," he said. "Those are Mrs. Gunness's teeth."

IN NOVEMBER, Ray Lamphere, the ex-farm hand, went on trial in La Porte for the murder of Mrs. Gunness. He was ably defended by Wirt Worden and was acquitted. Tried for arson, he was convicted. Obviously the jury did not believe Mrs. Gunness was dead. Lamphere was sent to prison at Michigan City, where he died in 1909.

Before his death Lamphere told a long and sometimes disconnected story of his affairs with Mrs. Gunness to a trusty at the prison by name of Harry Myers, and after Lamphere's death Myers retold it to prison officials. High lights of this account were that Belle did *not* die in the fire. Despite the evidence of the dental work, the body was that of a woman Belle had lured from Illinois on the promise of housework, then killed and beheaded to preclude identification. The head had been destroyed by use of quicklime, "in a hole dug in the swamp."

Lamphere painted a horrible picture of the female monster on the prowl. With the stand-in woman butchered, Belle went methodically to work on her own three children, killing them one after the other with practiced hand, then piled the four bodies onto the mattress after dressing the woman's in some old clothes that would readily be recognized as Belle's clothing.

In all, Lamphere said, Belle had lured forty-two men to her house. (I was immensely relieved to come across this figure "forty-two" in the record. There is something magic about forty-two in connection with apocryphal accounts of murders in series. Folklore has it, for instance, that Harry Orchard killed forty-two men; that Bill Gohl of Grays Harbor, Washington, killed forty-two; that Lydia Sherman of Connecticut accounted for a similar number.) Only one had escaped, presumably the alert George Anderson of Tarkio, Missouri, who had awaked to find Belle standing over his bed peering into his face so intently.

From her dupes Belle had got amounts of cash varying from one thousand dollars to thirty-two thou-

sand dollars each, Lamphere said. Usually she first drugged their coffee, then bashed in their heads while they were in a stupor. She then dissected the bodies on the big table in the cellar, tied the parts into neat bundles, and buried them in the locked yard. On occasion she varied the monotony by putting the bodies into the hog-scalding vat and adding generous amounts of quicklime.

Lamphere admitted to Myers that he had helped Belle bury "several bodies" but denied he ever had a part in the killing. Jennie Olson had been killed because "she knew too much." It was the same with Belle's own children. The other unidentified children had been put in Belle's care by mothers or fathers of broken homes.

As for the late Peter Gunness, alleged victim of the bounding sausage grinder, Belle had killed him with an ax. This part of Lamphere's story was given weight when a youngster of La Porte recalled having heard little Myrtle Sorenson, Belle's daughter, remark that "Mama brained Papa with an ax. Don't tell a soul."

Not all of the dying Lamphere's story made sense. No doubt it was also grossly exaggerated. Some of it was sheer fantasy. And he was oddly silent regarding his own relations with Mrs. Gunness. But on the subject of the headless corpse he was positive; it was not Belle. She was safely away.

And that is the opinion today of many oldsters around La Porte, who believe that Belle, who left only a small amount in her bank account, had killed the unknown woman, fired the house, and left for other parts.

On a somewhat different plane Belle lives on just as Ambrose Bierce, the old journalist, did for many years in spite of his probable death in Mexico in 1916. As recently as 1931 Belle was "seen" in a Mississippi town. In the same year the body of a woman found in Los Angeles was thought to be hers. It wasn't. For more than twenty years the sheriff's office at La Porte received an average of two queries a month about Belle—Belle the Hoosier Monster, the Queen of the Abattoir, the Female Bluebeard. During the past decade the queries have been fewer, but they continue.

Belle Gunness, in fact, seems assured of an enduring place in the folklore of the region. I base this guess on the fact that she is the subject of at least one ballad, and when a person or an event gets into song it is not likely to be forgotten as soon as one not in a ballad. The literary or musical merit of the ballad has nothing at all to do with its lasting qualities, as witness the doggerel about Jesse James, Jim Fisk, Floyd Collins, and other folk heroes.

The ballad about Belle I heard sung to the air of *Love, O Careless Love*, and the verses I have been able to unearth are as follows:

Belle Gunness lived in In-di-an;
She always, always had a man;
Ten at least went in her door—
And were never, never seen no more.

Now, all these men were Norska folk
Who came to Belle from Minn-e-sote;
They liked their coffee, and their gin
They got it—plus a mickey finn.

And now with cleaver poised so sure
Belle neatly cut their jug-u-lur [sic]:
She put them in a bath of lime.
And left them there for quite some time.

There's red upon the Hoosier moon
For Belle was strong and full of doom;
And think of all them Norska men
Who'll never see St. Paul again.

One of the last direct links between Belle Gunness and the present day is an old, old woman confined in the Longcliff Hospital for the Insane at Logansport, Indiana. She has been a patient there for a good many years and is one of the characters of the institution. She worked at Belle's place for several months and is not averse to talking about it.

The favorite question asked this old woman is "What did Belle Gunness do with all those men?" And the invariable reply, accompanied by a truly horrible leer, is "She fed 'em to the hawgs."

On the subject of Belle being alive or dead the old crone is noncommittal. "Who knows?" she says.

If Belle still lives, as many believe, she is ninety-one years old. That's getting on, as they say; but should I happen on a farmhouse in some back-country place and the proprietor is a husky old woman who kills her own hogs, I'll be on my way—no matter the road or the weather.

FOG OVER HONG KONG

A Spy Thriller by Vincent Starrett

Up the mountainside and through the clinging gray mists—to a sinister house that shelters a wealth of Oriental curios, violent death, and a puzzle.

THIN wisps of fog were blowing in from the water as Coke descended at the door of his hotel; there was a hint of dampness in the air. He paid off the rickshaw boy who had brought him across the city and hurried through the crowded lobby, glad that the day's adventuring was over. Glad, too, that his commitments of the evening involved nothing more fatiguing than climbing into dinner garments. Glad, finally, that he was again to smile across a dinner table at Stella Markwood. She completed the decorations of a dining-room as well as anybody he had ever known.

He managed to tell her so almost as soon as they were seated. "Hong Kong," he observed significantly, "is in some ways the most exciting place I have found in the Orient."

She colored under his direct gaze, and Tom Banning nodded. "It should

be duck soup for you, Mr. Coke," said the plane agent. "It's right here, you know, that three international influences collide—British, Chinese, and Japanese. Look around you here in this room. From where I sit I can see arms salesmen of six nations. And over there in the corner is the famous Captain Yardley of the British Military Police, keeping a friendly eye on things. As a writer of mystery stories, what more can you ask?"

"Nothing," admitted Coke. "It's all here. Story-book characters in every alcove!"

"May I be in your next story, Mr. Coke?" teased Stella Markwood. "Oh, please!"

"Why not? And Banning, too—the hero and the heroine, eh? I'll get you into difficulty and—*er*—get you out again."

"I hope your characters in the alcoves aren't thinking up new ways of stopping our shipments," Banning laughed. "*There's* a mystery for you. Solve that one, Mr. Coke."

The novelist was lighting a cigarette. "Delighted," he said. "The process of deduction and solution goes forward—*er*—night and day and requires—*ah*—no oil." He tossed away the match. "What's it all about?"

"The Japanese are dynamiting our plane shipments. Mr. Markwood's planes come from America in British bottoms, consigned to me. I receive them and turn them over to the Chinese. Somehow the Japs have been finding out about them. They leave *here* safely enough, but somewhere along the line they come to grief." Banning shrugged helplessly. "A lot of workers know about the shipments, of course; but we pay them well to keep their mouths shut."

"Somebody else pays them better to open them," said Coke. "You don't need a mystery specialist to tell you that."

The plane agent agreed. "You're probably right. Double-crossing isn't a new idea."

Stella Markwood was indignant. "Just the same, I can't believe it's any of our own people."

"Who *are* one's own people where money is concerned?" smiled Coke.

"It's always the Chinese who lose," Banning continued. "We get our money when we make delivery—sometimes before we make it. If it goes on this way much longer—" He interrupted himself and said abruptly, "Here's Kira now!"

The two men stood up together to greet a young woman who was approaching their table. "Well, well!" said Coke, in surprise.

He looked into the sea-green eyes of the newcomer and marveled at the change a few short months had made in the appearance of Kira Baranova. She had been attractive in Shanghai, the previous winter; but here in Hong Kong she was the most seductive creature he had ever seen. Before her astonishing glitter Stella Markwood looked almost drab. The woman was glorious. What mischief, he wondered, was she up to, here at this seething crossroads of the world?

She was laughing and saying, "But Mr. Coke and I have met before. How do you do? It's so nice to see you again. I heard you had left Shanghai, and wondered where you had gone."

Coke bent over the extended hand. "This is delightful, Kira," he murmured. "Yes, I spent the winter in Peking. When I came down again, this month, you too were gone. So, of

course, I didn't stop."

They laughed together, each knowing the other to be an amiable liar.

"But I mustn't stay," she continued. "I just stopped for a word with Mr. Banning. I shall hope to see you again —*Powell!*"

Coke bowed and watched her cross the dining-room with Banning at her side. They passed through the red curtains of the doorway and vanished in the corridor beyond.

Stella Markwood, he saw, was troubled. "Kira was to have had dinner with us," she said sharply. "I hope nothing has gone wrong."

"You know her well?" asked Coke.

"Oh, yes! She's almost our right-hand man. I don't know what we would do without Kira. She's Rusian, you know—one of the kind that can't go back to Russia. But you probably know her as well as we do. She called you by your first name."

Coke thought it possible he knew her even better. "In Shanghai," he said, "where I—*er*—met her a number of times, it was whispered that she might claim a title, if she cared to—and if there were any Russian titles left to claim. You mean she works for you?"

"Good heavens, no! Not in the office. Kira's a—what was she when you knew her in Shanghai?"

"A singer and dancer—in the theater."

"She's a singer and dancer now," said Stella. "But Kira is invaluable as a—a contact agent, I suppose you might call it. She has the gift of languages, she knows everybody, and everybody likes her. She's immensely loyal, and she hates the Japanese like poison."

"In fact, she is a go-between," said Coke.

"I suppose so, yes. But she's really very charming."

"Oh, quite!"

Miss Markwood lost interest in Kira Baranova. She welcomed Banning back with pleasure. He was a good-looking young Irishman, and Coke envied him his luck. Young Mr. Banning's brow was creased with worry.

"What is it, Tom? More bad news from the front?"

"Not yet," said Banning. "Kira's heard rumors, that's all. The Germans are laughing. It looks as if they might know something. If there should be another 'tip-off' tonight, the Chinese would have a right to be angry."

Coke raised a curious eyebrow.

"We're making another delivery," Banning explained. "I was hoping this time we might get away with it."

"I see," said Coke. "Money already paid over?"

"It will be before midnight; within the next few hours."

"To Kira, I suppose?"

"We—*er*—do sometimes use her in that way," admitting Banning. "Forgive me," he added. "I'm not trying to be secretive. I'm just worried."

"I don't wonder," Coke said. "You've got *me* worried, too! May I speak to you frankly?"

Stella Markwood sat up quickly. "Why not?" she said, leaning across the table. "Of course he may, Tom! But I'm afraid he's going to say something against Kira."

"That would be ridiculous," said Banning.

"Would it?" The mystery writer smiled. "I'm not eager to be unfriendly, and I rather like Miss Baranova. But I also like you and Miss Markwood. My ridiculous sense of duty forces me to tell you that when I knew

Kira, in Shanghai, she was a secret agent of the Japanese."

For an instant the plane agent stared; then he burst into a shout of laughter.

"It isn't possible," he cried. "*Kira?* Don't make me laugh, Mr. Coke! Kira came to me with letters that simply *couldn't* have been faked. But you're joking, of course. You're solving the mystery as you do it in the magazines. The beautiful Russian adventuress, eh?"

Coke shrugged. "Perhaps she has reformed," he agreed politely. "I should be happy to think so."

"Is this true, Mr. Coke?" asked Stella. She laid a hand on his sleeve.

"Quite true. I, too, have Kira's record on unimpeachable authority." He smiled agreeably. "But she's impartial, I'll say that for her. While she was a Japanese agent, in Shanghai, she was also an agent for the Chinese and the Germans."

"My God!" said Banning. "And she knew *you* knew all that about her? Weren't you afraid of getting a knife between your ribs?"

"I never revealed my knowledge to the lady herself. She may suspect me—I don't know."

"I won't believe it," said Banning harshly. "I think you're wrong, Mr. Coke. I'm not that easily fooled." He gnawed his upper lip. "It's infernally awkward, though, with tonight's business coming up."

"Why didn't she have dinner with us?" asked Stella suddenly.

"Something interfered—I didn't ask her what. I've always trusted her," said Banning simply. "But it puts a doubt into the mind," he confessed. "She usually stays with us until midnight. Then I tell her where to go and what to say. She collects the money and I meet her afterward—with the car—and take her home."

"But tonight," said Stella, "she saw Mr. Coke and realized what he might tell us."

"That's one way of looking at it."

"Well, it's too late to follow her," shrugged Coke. "I think the Chinese are going to lose another plane shipment, Banning. She's probably in a telephone booth, right now."

But Banning shook his head stubbornly. "I doubt that, anyway. If Kira is selling us out to the Japs—which I don't admit—she wouldn't telephone. She'd go directly to Kutani."

"Kutani?"

"He's the fountainhead of Japanese mischief on this island. He pretends to be retired; but Japs, when they retire, don't usually settle in Hong Kong. He pretends to be a collector. His house is filled with Chinese curios and things; all the loot of Shanghai and Peking. His villa is one of the show places of the port." The plane agent crushed his napkin in his hand. His lips tightened as he reached a decision. "I've got to see Kutani," he growled.

"And poke your head into a lot of trouble," cried Stella sharply. "As if he would tell you the truth!"

"Somehow I've got to find out if Kira is there. If she is, I've got to change our plans. I know Kutani; he can't very well throw me out. He's invited me often enough to see his damned curiosities. Well, I'm going to see them tonight!" said Banning. He glanced at Coke appraisingly. "Are you interested, by any chance, in—*ah*—curiosities, Mr. Coke?"

"Having cast doubt on the young woman's integrity," said Coke, "I should either prove my words or eat

them. If *I* get into trouble," he grinned, "it will be an American 'incident!' When do we start?"

The plane agent reached a hand across the table. "Thanks," he said. "You can help best by taking Stella home. Then follow me in her car, if you will; she'll tell you how to go. When you reach Kutani's, wait outside the house. If I come out with Kira—or without her, for that matter—just trail along and join me when I give the signal. If I *don't* come out—well, use your own judgment!"

He caught the alarmed glance of his fiancée.

"But there won't be any trouble," added young Mr. Banning, with considerable optimism.

THE fog was still gathering around the great peak that dominates the island colony of Hong Kong. It was moving in, threatening to blot out the hill slopes and the rambling villas whose tiers of lights were still faintly to be seen along the zigzags of the mountain roads. It settled in the throats of Coke and his companion and made them cough.

"I'm afraid it's going to be a bad night," said Stella, glancing upward with familiar eye. "Lucky for you I know all the roads, Mr. Coke. We'll take my car, as Tom suggested; it's a good hill climber and less noisy than a taxi."

Coke laughed as he climbed in beside her. "That sounds as if you were going with me. Too bad it isn't possible."

"Oh, but I am," she told him briskly. "You couldn't possibly go alone with this fog coming on. You'd drive over the cliff."

"Now look here, Stella," said Coke severely, "if you think for one minute—"

"But it's all settled," she interrupted. "Don't oppose me, Mr. Coke! You may be glad to have me before we get through. We'll just sit quietly outside the house and keep the motor running, in case we have to make a quick getaway. That's always the way it's done."

"You have caught the technique of conspiracy admirably," agreed Coke. "But I'm taking you home just the same."

"Very well, I'll get a taxicab and follow you."

"You do, and I won't put you in my next novel," said Coke. "Now tell me how to get to Kutani's after I've dropped you off."

He left her behind with regret, however. It would have been very pleasant to have her with him, he reflected—and the fog *was* a nuisance.

He stopped at a garish restaurant, close by, long enough to make a telephone call; then her powerful car took him swiftly to the winding motor road that led upward into misty darkness. The fog, as yet only a gray threat, opened around him as he drove, revealing belated residents hastening to their hillside homes by rickshaw, chair, and motor.

On the island side, as he climbed, the trees were thick and fragrant; cheerful lights burned in the handsome villas set back on spacious lawns; but seaward the view was increasingly depressing. The little islets in the bay beneath were monsters of the deep in the distorting influence of darkness.

Kutani's place was quite near the

top, Stella had told him, and the road was splendid all the way. The fog was all he had to fear. One thing he had accomplished, at least: Stella Markwood believed him, even if Tom Banning did not, he reflected; and even Tom was a bit shaken. Apparently she was in love with Tom, and no doubt Tom was in love with her—at any rate, they were engaged to be married—but there seemed to be just a trifle of jealousy in the situation. He suspected that Stella was more than a little worried about the influence of the Russian woman. Perhaps that was why she was so ready to believe ill of her.

He climbed upward in the deepening darkness until the air was damp and cold around him, until the fog wraiths drifting in from sea were almost tangible forces of evil. Then, suddenly, he dimmed his lights and turned sharply into a lateral roadway, bringing the car to a stop.

The big house beyond the next curve was the place he was seeking. Tom, of course, was already there. It would be better to approach on foot and loiter around the gate, he reflected, until he had learned the geography of the villa and its grounds.

Closing the car door quietly, he strode off along the curving auto road, now just visible in the fog. Almost at once the car was lost to view, and automatically he began to count his paces.

A low stone wall lay at his right hand; he followed it around the curve and came presently to an iron fence over which poured a cataract of bougainvillia, scenting the air for yards around. Through groups of trees, bulking dimly in the mist, he saw—well back in a wide garden—the lights of an attractive villa. Then a great iron gate confronted him, unlatched and slightly ajar.

There was no sign of Banning's car at the curb. He hesitated, walked past for fifty feet, and returned to the gate. It was quite definitely open. Without further hesitation, he pushed it wide and stepped into the path.

Well, there he was, but he could hardly ring the doorbell and ask for Banning. The absence of guards was puzzling and perhaps portentous. The inviting openness of everything suggested a trap.

He cut across the grass and stood motionless in a clump of trees, waiting for some figure to cross the lighted windows; then, advancing cautiously, peered into a window that looked out onto the side lawn. There was a living-room beyond, a wide chamber that ran across the whole front of the house—an extraordinary room that for a moment engaged his whole attention.

Filled with extravagant trophies, it was obviously the show room of a collector whose purse was equal to his greed, and whose taste was very decent—very decent indeed, reflected Coke, who also knew a good thing when he saw it. Jade, ivory, and bronze were there, in ordered confusion, and silken hangings richly threaded with gold, and fine scroll paintings from the ceiling almost to the floor. From a central niche a female figure looked out across the chamber with blank, cold eyes and a smile of infinite duplicity. This was Kuanyin, the Goddess of Mercy, Coke knew at a glance; he always felt an impulse to strangle her on her pedestal.

There was no living figure in view; no sound but the light stir of leaves and branches from the trees. The lower house appeared to be deserted.

An oppressive sense of tragedy stole

over Coke as he waited. Something inside him whispered that he had come too late—that whatever deed of evil had been planned to focus in this silent house already had been enacted. The *thing* was done. Already the participants had vanished into the silence and mystery of all things oriental.

One corner of the room was not visible; the corner nearest his window. He laid his cheek along the glass, trying to force a view; and thus it was that he saw the buckle.

It was a metal shoe buckle set with gleaming stones, and just beyond it was the tip of a woman's evening slipper. Presumably there was a foot inside the slipper. Someone was sitting quietly in that invisible corner of the living-room. He strained his eyes for a number of long minutes, but the buckle did not move.

Suddenly Coke swore and ran quickly to the front door of the villa. He touched the handle gently and the door swung inward. Recklessly he pushed into the entrance hall beyond and peered into the lighted chamber—

Kira Baranova was seated in the corner, in a great chair that seemed to swallow her up. Her chin had fallen forward on her breast; she appeared to be sleeping. One slender foot was thrust forward. It rested on the edge of the rug, and the lights gleamed on the metal buckle set with glittering bits of glass.

"*Kira!*" he whispered; but he knew that she would never answer him.

With a little rush he crossed the room and bent above her, noting at once the curving handle of the knife that was buried in her breast.

"*Kira!*" Coke said again, in a shocked whisper.

A clipped voice answered from across the room. "Thank you!" it said; and in a doorway, shrouded by silken hangings, a man was standing, idly fingering an automatic pistol.

Coke straightened and smiled. His shoulders expressed a gentle resignation.

"Sorry! I seem to have walked into something."

"You have walked into something that does not concern you," agreed the voice in the doorway. "You are a very foolish man."

"Mr. Kutani?" questioned Coke, and added, "I admire your taste in everything but goddesses."

Beside the body of the murdered Russian girl was a heavy basin of bronze, mounted waist-high on a pedestal of teak. A collector would have raved about its patina, about its spots of ruby coloring caught from the grave in which it had been buried a thousand years before Christ walked the earth— With a single motion of his arm Coke seized the missile and hurled it accurately at the sneering voice.

There was a crash, and the pistol exploded harmlessly and thudded to the floor.

Then he was outside on the wet grass, with splinters of the windowpane adhering to his garments. He had dived headfirst into the darkness.

A second shot hummed past him as he fled across the lawn; and in a moment there was a third. The fourth was dangerously close.

And then miraculously he reached the gate and was out in the road, running wildly in the fog and darkness, while voices called behind him; and all around him were the clinging arms of gray ghosts from the water, and in his lungs was the damp, exhilarating breath of danger.

A hundred yards lay between him and the crossroad in which he had left the car. The grade was downhill to a sort of landing-stage or terrace. But he could barely see the road before him, and out beyond, somewhere, the water waited.

Fifty yards! Thirty! And now ten—

He ran recklessly across the terrace and turned into the crossroad; then stopped, appalled.

The car was gone. He stood alone, in the midst of a vast silence, while the mists moved whitely in from sea, filling the roads and lanes of the island with impenetrable fog.

HOW long had he been wandering? It seemed to Coke that weeks had passed since he had begun his flight; and here he was still walking. It was as if he had been walking in his sleep.

He stumbled and felt his sense of balance leaving him. A sort of vertigo seized him for a moment and left him shaking. Then again he pulled himself together and began once more his slow shuffle in the dark, the gray dark. It was as if all the lights of the world had been extinguished, he told himself, and he was the last man living upon earth—faltering toward an unimaginable destiny—

What nonsense! thought the analytic novelist, somewhere inside. He was simply a man lost in a fog. Come to think of it, he had once written a story about a man in a similar predicament. What was it the fellow had done?

Somewhere he remembered reading that a man lost in a fog moved round in a circle and came back at last to the point from which he had started. For all he knew he might now be back in the very neighborhood of Kutani's little trap for foolish novelists. But no—he was still moving downward; he could tell that from the way his feet behaved when he set them cautiously ahead of him.

The cliff was over there—somewhere on the right—in this white smother that was strangling him. He must be careful to bear always to the left. Left, right—left, right—hayfoot, strawfoot—hayfoot, strawfoot—

It was damn' funny, this fog! It made a man feel the way he felt in nightmares, in which he encountered formidable obstacles and passed right through them. Sooner or later, he supposed, he would crash into someone's gate and the relief would be too much for him. He'd go blubbering to someone's door.

There were no cars on the hillside; no one but himself, he supposed, was fool enough to risk his neck in this hellish mist. Banning, he realized, was probably in serious trouble of another kind, but he had no time to spare for Banning. What a blessing it was he had not brought Stella with him! He could never have escaped Kutani if he had been obliged to look after Stella too.

Poor Kira! He had been fond of Kira, after a fashion, he realized. They had had some good times together in Shanghai. Kira was good company, if one took her for what she was and didn't make the mistake of trusting her too far. Whoever had murdered Kira would have to be punished, quite adequately.

But surely he was going the wrong way if he really intended to solve this mystery of Kutani and the planes, as

he had promised. He was actually running away!

Cautiously, with widespread arms, he reversed himself. His movements might have been the first steps of an extraordinary dance. He stumbled forward a few steps and stopped. Now, he told himself, he must remember to bear always to the *right*, unless he wanted to go over the cliff. *Do you want to go over the cliff, Mr. Coke?* There would be headlines in the papers.

The way was upward now; he could feel the little rise under his feet as he climbed. He groped forward a few yards and stumbled again—his sense of balance deserted him and the quick, transitory vertigo came back. An unfamiliar timidity shook him. He was almost afraid. He *was* afraid.

He bore quickly to the right and crashed into a stone wall bordering an invisible estate. His hands moved awkwardly over the rough surface until they found a resting-place, and clung there. For a number of minutes he leaned against the blessed wall, breathing heavily. He wanted to sink down in the road and just lie there—very quietly—for a long time—

How long this singular condition lasted Coke never precisely knew. After a time he knew his giddiness had passed, however; he was numb and cold, but wide awake again. Almost immediately he was aware that someone was approaching.

Faintly at first, then more clearly, from the near distance, came a curious sound—a hollow, tapping sound—rather like the irregular clicking of a telegraph key, except that it was not so fast. The sound was like that of metal striking on metal, or of metal on stone.

Coke flattened himself against the wall and listened.

The sound was louder now and clearer; it was close at hand— Now it was just beyond him in the mist—*tap, tap—tap, tap*—and sometimes the tapping was in triple time and held a happy note.

Then a footstep sounded, slow and shuffling, but human. The gloom opened before him and an odd figure stepped into view. From throat to ankles it was garbed in the long blue gown of the Chinese people, and it carried a staff that trailed lightly, with rhythmic melody, on the pavement. Coke held his breath until it hurt.

The apparition paused suspiciously and seemed to sniff. From under a disreputable felt hat a pair of keen eyes seemed to peer at Coke, and instinctively he shrank away. The voice that spoke was hollow as an echo in a cavern; but the words were English.

"There is somebody here," it said reflectively; and then with a different inflection, "There is somebody here?"

Long hands were groping outward—

"My God!" cried Coke. "A blind man!"

In his alert mind was born at once a magnificent idea. A *blind* man! It was perfect. For this poor native there was no fog, no sunshine. He walked in perpetual darkness.

"Only poor coolie, Master," mourned the hollow voice. "No bad man! Kuang Ko go homeside; no do any harm."

"Wait!" said Coke. He laid a hand on the native's sleeve to detain him. "Listen, Kuang Ko! I'm lost—*lost*, you understand? I'm lost in the fog. You can lead me out. I'll give you money. You understand?" In his impatience he shook the man's arm roughly.

"Can do," the blind man answered. "No matter money, Master. Where you

want to go?"

Where the devil *did* he want to go? Coke wondered.

"Who lives here? Who lives along this road, Kuang Ko?"

"Many people, Master," grieved the hollow voice. "English people—" It paused and considered. "'Melican people—Japanese people—"

"That's good enough. Take me to one of the English people, Kuang Ko. Anybody will do. Let's go," he added impatiently, and tugged at the native's sleeve. "Here, I'll give you money now!"

"No matter money, Master," said the blind man courteously; and arm in arm the pair moved into the fog.

It was miraculous, the novelist thought—miraculous! Of all the opportune arrivals in history or fiction, surely this was the most fortunate. Of all men to encounter in a fog—a blind man! He could not have arranged matters better in one of his own tales. It was perfect.

After a time they passed a stone wall, obscurely visible in the shifting darkness, then skirted an iron fence over which poured a cataract of bougainvillia; scenting the night for yards around— A tremor of apprehension stirred in Coke's arteries; he gripped the blind man's arm more tightly.

"Quickly, Kuang Ko," he whispered. "We must get past here quickly!"

The tall gate was still open, much as he had left it. From it were now stepping the dark forms of men, moving swiftly against the sheeted night. There was a quality of nightmare about the episode; it was a sequence from some dreadful picture without words or music.

"Quickly!" repeated Coke, in a sharp whisper; and then their hands were upon him, and in an explosion of despair the novelist knew that his brief freedom was at an end.

Kutani's pistol was against his side; his own was being taken from him. Rough hands were forcing him through the gate. He was walked quickly up the path and up the steps into the house. After a time he stood blinking in the living-room.

His eyes became accustomed to the light, and he looked around him. In the corner of the room that had been invisible from the side window there was now only an empty chair. The body of Kira Baranova had been removed. He caught again the simpering smile of Kuanyin, Goddess of Mercy, and longed again to tear the creature from her niche. His mind cleared.

"I still dislike your taste in goddesses, Mr. Kutani," he said. "And what have you done with the body?"

"You are a very clever man, Mr. Coke," answered the Japanese, "but, as I have said before, a very foolish one."

"You know my name," retorted Coke, with a smile. "Until you mentioned it, I was sure you must have mistaken me for someone else." He saw that Kuang Ko was standing humbly in the doorway. "Kuang Ko is part of your establishment?"

For the first time the Japanese smiled. "We, too, are clever, Mr. Coke. A number of my assistants were looking for you in the fog."

"This man is really blind?"

"Oh, yes!"

Coke sighed and shrugged. "I should have known there was a catch in it when he refused my money. He heard my voice, I suppose, when I was here before. Well, it's still a good situation,"

the novelist added, and smiled at the other's bewilderment. "That's something you will never understand, Kutani."

"Take him away," said the Japanese.

They took him through splendid rooms, hung with old paintings and old silk, to a passage leading into one of the wings. Then a door was opened and he was pushed through. The door closed behind him, a bolt smashed home, and the footsteps of his captors could be heard retreating along the corridor. He was alone.

But no, not quite alone—Stella Markwood was there!

She lay upon a *k'ang*, against the farther wall, her wrists and ankles bound, a towel around her head and mouth, her blue eyes wide with fear and anger.

"Stella!" he said, and tore away the wrappings that were smothering her.

They had not troubled to tie his hands, an astonishing oversight—if it *was* an oversight. The fools had even left him his pocket knife! He cut the thongs that bound her and she collapsed in his arms.

For some minutes he let her cry; then, releasing himself, he lighted a cigarette and gave it to her.

"Pull yourself together as soon as you can, my dear," said Coke. "You followed me, I suppose, and now we are both in a mess. But this is a funny setup! There's something screwy about it." After a moment he asked, "How long have you been here?"

Her sobs subsided. "I don't know. They got me almost as soon as I arrived. They surrounded the car, in the fog, and brought me here. They tied me up a little while ago." She put a hand on his arm. "I—I hoped *you* were safe."

Coke nodded. "I've had quite a time of it myself," he said. "I'll tell you about it, some time. Make a good motion picture!"

There were bars on the windows, he discovered, and the frames had been nailed shut. He came back again and sat down beside her. After a time he put his arm around her and kissed her.

"Mr. Coke!" she breathed.

"To hell with Tom," said Mr. Coke.

He moved about the room, while she watched him with anxious eyes, pausing finally at a second door, leading into a room beyond. The door was locked, but the lock looked pretty flimsy.

" 'Curious and curiouser,' " he quoted, rattling the doorknob gently. He bent an ear to the keyhole and suddenly straightened. "There's someone inside! I heard something that sounded like a groan."

They looked at each other significantly, and Stella Markwood came to stand beside him. They stood together for a moment, linked, looking at the second door.

"Well, here goes!" said Coke.

He crashed a shoulder against the panels, which protested but withstood the shock. Coke thrust again, and heard the lock snap like a broken bone.

"Be careful," she whispered.

He pushed quietly at the door and watched it swing inward, away from him, on oiled hinges.

The room beyond was as dimly lighted as their own. Like their own it contained a *k'ang;* and in this room, too, there was someone lying on the *k'ang*. A low sound came from the lips of the man who was lying there.

Coke crossed the room and bent over the body of Tom Banning. The plane

agent was bound and gagged. His eyes were closed.

"It's Tom," Coke said in a low voice, and Stella Markwood's breath was drawn in quickly. He laid a hand on the plane agent's shoulder, and Banning stirred again and moaned.

Coke wandered away and tried the door leading into the corridor, but it was stoutly locked. He returned and took the gag from Banning's mouth, then cut the cords that bound him. He slipped an arm behind the Irishman's shoulders and raised him slowly until Banning was sitting upright on the couch.

"Banning!" he said imperatively.

His hand slid swiftly inside the plane agent's jacket. There was a short, sharp struggle, and it emerged holding an automatic pistol. Banning lunged upward and Coke stepped away.

"*Coke!*" roared the Irishman. "What are you doing?"

"I don't know," said Coke. "What *am* I doing, I wonder?"

He raised the pistol until it was pointed at the ceiling. His thumb released the safety catch. The walls echoed to the report.

"You fool!" cried the plane agent, springing to his feet.

"Don't move," said Coke. "Maybe I'm crazy. Maybe I don't know what I'm doing. Stand away, Stella! Get into the corner."

He fired again at the ceiling, bringing down a chaos of plaster; then sent a third shot through the windowpane, out into the night.

In the corridor there were the sounds of running feet. Hands were fumbling at the bolts; the door was flung open and in the aperture was the Japanese, Kutani, with half a dozen servants.

At the same moment Stella Markwood cried out wildly, "Look out! He's got another pistol!"

Coke fired again, this time with greater care, and Banning yelped and dropped his weapon. The plane agent swore bitterly, looking at his bleeding fingers.

"Come in, Mr. Kutani," said Coke. "All of you, come in! And don't be so surprised. I haven't killed Mr. Banning, and he hasn't killed me. Before anybody is killed there are some words to be said, and I propose to say them. So, damn you, listen!"

IT WAS like the final summing-up in a mystery story, thought Coke. Now everything was supposed to slip into place, with little clicking sounds, and fit together like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. He hoped he had all the pieces.

It was Banning who spoke first.

"Be careful," he said, addressing Stella Markwood, "not to believe a word this man is going to say. He's the fellow who has been selling us out. An hour ago he murdered Kira—here in this house."

The plane agent stood quietly enough now, contemplating his mutilated fingers.

Coke nodded appreciatively. "So that was the story you planned to tell! *I* killed Kira, and *you* killed *me* while trying to protect her."

He turned to Stella. "Kira didn't stop tonight, you remember, after she saw me at the table. She had something private to say to Mr. Banning. Can you doubt what it was? Mr. Banning was troubled when he came back

from that interview with his assistant —and I had become a dangerous enemy."

Coke shrugged and gestured. "Kira, too, had become dangerous, for she knew me and she knew the truth—that it was Banning, himself, who was selling you out."

He stopped Kutani's slow advance. "Just a minute, Mr. Kutani, until I finish; then you may kill me, if you care to. I just want you to know what fools you have been from the beginning. I didn't reach these conclusions suddenly. I wasn't sure of anything until a few minutes ago. When Banning betrayed himself. But it was clear from the beginning that Banning was either a rascal or a fool.

"He ridiculed my story about Kira, but ultimately decided to test it. It was he who suggested this visit and showed me its possibilities. But why did he want to go on ahead, leaving me to follow—alone? It was fortunate that Miss Markwood followed me. I can understand how her presence upset your plans. Some fast thinking was necessary to get the plot into shape again. And Miss Baranova, meanwhile, had been murdered! But I helped you out: I trapped myself, the first time, by my own foolishness."

He smiled at Kutani. "You gave me the first clear answer to my questions a little while ago when you called me by name. Only Banning would have told you that, and that I was coming to this house. You verified my suspicions by leaving me unbound, by leaving me my pocket knife.

"I was to release Miss Markwood, and then together we were to discover Banning, after he had moaned a little to call attention to himself. I was to release Banning, and he was to shoot me as the murderer of Kira. A lot of hocus-pocus to convince Miss Markwood that Banning was your prisoner and not part of the conspiracy."

Coke swung an arm with unnecessary drama. He appeared to be listening.

"But Banning had a pistol! Your prisoner—bound and gagged—had a pistol in his pocket! From first to last I saw that the episode had been arranged, and not too well arranged at that. But I don't think there will be any doubt in Miss Markwood's mind, or in the minds of the British authorities."

Kutani's face was that of a gargoyle. His gold teeth shone. His laughter was appreciative and sincere.

"It is too bad, Mr. Coke," he said in his precise tones, "that neither Mr. Markwood nor the British authorities will have an opportunity to listen to your explanation. I am sorry for Miss Markwood, but—" He shrugged lightly and glanced at his servants.

Banning was white and shaking. He turned his face away.

"Just one minute," begged Coke. "I could kill you, Kutani, with one of the shots left in this weapon. You owe me something for not doing it. There are only a few words left to say." His face was pale, and again he appeared to listen.

"You have called me a clever man, which is kind of you. My cleverness began to function before I left the city. I telephoned an English friend of mine, at the hotel, to say where I was going—to ask him to call for me here, at midnight, if I had not communicated with him again. He's a little late; but he is on the way—and my shots already have told him there is trouble in this house."

"If that is true," said the Japanese, "we must do quickly what we have to do."

Coke agreed. "I have been talking against time for several minutes," he confessed. "A few moments ago I heard a car outside your gate. I talked quickly to keep *you* from hearing it too. It is only a few seconds from your gate to the front door. Even now my friends are arriving."

A door thudded in the distance. There were swift footsteps in the long corridor. A cry of apprehension arose from the servants clustered in the doorway.

Tom Banning swore brilliantly and snatched the pistol from the hand of the Japanese at the very same instant that Coke flung himself to the floor. The shot hummed past Stella Markwood's ear and buried itself in the wall. But the feet were nearer now; they were running hard in the corridor.

Then the doorway was filled with the caps of British military policemen.

Kutani's gargoyle grin still twisted his heavy mouth. His gold teeth gleamed.

"I am afraid," said the Japanese in a silky voice, "that I am innocently involved in something I do not understand, Mr. Coke. I have been made the —what you call the victim of a conspiracy. May I hope that there are no hard feelings?"

Coke turned his back. "One of these men, Captain Yardley," he said, "is the murderer of Kira Baranova, a Russian woman. You will find her body somewhere on the premises. Mr. Banning has just attempted to murder *me*."

He looked at Stella Markwood. "There are no further doubts?"

"No doubts," she told him.

"It was your own doubt—your determination to find out the truth—that made you follow me. You suspected both of them, I think—and hated yourself for it. But in Banning's case you didn't know whether it was just infatuation—or treachery."

"I had to be sure," she said. "And I was afraid you might be going into more danger than you expected."

Nobody was paying any attention to them. Everybody was too busy.

"Do you still want a part in my new story?" asked the mystery writer, with a smothered laugh.

He tilted her chin with slow deliberation and kissed her on the lips.

"*Mr. Coke!*" she breathed.

One More Murder

by

G. T. FLEMING-ROBERTS

Star reporter Barney Ghent plans the perfect killing—and the girl he loves is caught in a murder trap.

CHAPTER ONE

Not Quite Dead

FROM across Martindale Street, Barney Ghent noticed that the door of the old Pomeroy house had opened. Somebody came down the short approach to the sidewalk. A woman. She turned north and ran, holding her purse up tight against her breast. She wasn't Mrs. Taylor, Harry Pomeroy's housekeeper. She was younger than Mrs. Taylor and her skirts were short. Barney hadn't seen anything of her face in the darkness. He didn't know who she was, didn't think it was important anyway.

Inside his tan balmacaan, Barney Ghent's shoulders shrugged. When there was nothing left of the fleeing woman except the *skish-skish* sound the toes of her shoes made on the concrete, he turned and moved without haste down the steps of Sam's Subway, the basement cafe in the Martindale Apartment Building. The smell of food sickened him, but he opened the door and went in anyway.

The place wasn't crowded. A woman sat a little apart from the table nearest the door, as though she waited for somebody. One of her knees was over the other and she dangled a blue kid pump from a silk-stockinged toe. She wore a black skirt and a blue-fox jacket that was open to reveal the frothy front of a white blouse. Pale gold hair rolled up from her brow and seemed to be important in securing a silly, brimless hat. A closeup might have discerned lines that were fortyish about her eyes and mouth and the shadowy prophecy of a double chin. But not even another woman could have made an uncomplimentary remark about her figure.

When Barney Ghent showed himself in the door, the woman uncrossed her legs, slid her foot into her pump. She gave the impression of standing erect

without leaving her chair.

"Barney," she said, and raised gloved fingers toward a pretty mouth. "Barney Ghent!" It was as though she was seeing a ghost. And possibly she was

Barney kept his right hand in the pocket of his coat, his fingers on the still warm revolver there. He raised his hat with his left hand. He thought ironically that he was still "Gentleman" Ghent, formerly police reporter on the *Evening Star*, and there was still time for him to notice an attractive woman like Marsha Hopson. He might have been surprised at finding her here except that surprise was one of the emotions he was forced to deny himself in order to live a little longer.

He asked Marsha Hopson if he might sit down, and when she didn't seem to hear him he sat down anyway. A dying man ought to have some privileges.

Marsha, he noticed, had not yet relaxed, as though she still doubted his substance.

"I–I thought you were–were–"

"Dead?" he concluded, smiling. "No, I'm not dead."

Only dying. He had perhaps six days before that thin-walled bubble in the arch of his aorta would let go.

As Dr. Fritz Wulfing had explained it to him, the gunman's bullet had nicked the big artery leading from the heart, causing a weakness in the wall. Under pressure of the blood surging from his ticker, a sort of blister had been formed at this point, growing larger all the time, like a tire's inner tube getting ready to blow. An aneurism, Wulfing had called it. Death might come any time, with the next breath. Or then again, if the Ghent luck held out, he might live for nearly a week if he completely avoided every sort of excitement.

He wasn't supposed to leave his apartment, or his bed for that matter. Yet this afternoon he had discharged his nurse, dressed himself, and here he was living on time borrowed from the undertaker.

"Care to pinch me?" he asked Marsha.

A smile trembled on her mouth. "I'm glad, Barney," she said and sounded as though she was. "When Mat came back from visiting you, he sounded awfully pessimistic about your chances."

Mat Hopson was attorney for the *Evening Star*, and Marsha's second husband. Her first was Harry Pomeroy, who lived just across the street.

This was Sunday night, and Mat had visited Barney Ghent on Friday. Barney remembered Friday particularly, because that was the day that Dr. Fritz Wulfing had brought him the revolver–the revolver that was at the moment in Barney's right coat pocket, its barrel still warm. He'd asked Wulfing for the gun as a protective measure, he claimed; he didn't want some other hophead killer to steal the fragment of life that was still left to him.

Barney Ghent laughed with less restraint than at any time since Dr. Wulfing had told him the bad news about himself.

"That was because I told Mat I couldn't smoke," he said. "Mat probably figured that a Ghent without a cigar is a Ghent without hope."

Marsha shuddered. "It must have been terrible." She referred to the shooting, of course, "They got the man, didn't they?"

Barney nodded. The gunman was in jail, maybe praying that Barney Ghent would live, so that he might escape the chair. The joker was that probably

no one had told the killer that Barney Ghent was going to die.

"What was it all for, Barney?" Marsha asked.

He gestured without lifting his hands completely from the table. "One of those things. A newspaperman uncovers somebody's protected racket, blows the story into headlines, thus ruining somebody's chance for re-election. And the newsman's byline turns out to be a death warrant."

"Well, it's not something that happens twice," she said. "I mean, you'll take precautions."

He grinned, thinking, *No, it won't happen again. And the dead don't have to take precautions. They don't even care.*

"What are you doing here?" he asked aloud. "Haunting the old haunts?" He meant the Pomeroy house across the street, her home when she was married to Harry Pomeroy.

Marsha lowered her lids and he noticed that the blue of her eye shadow was startling against the sudden pallor of her face.

"I've been waiting here for over an hour for Mat," she said and studied the designs she drew on the tablecloth with a pointed fingernail. "This is our first wedding anniversary."

"Congratulations," Barney said.

"And Mat and I met here, you know," she went on anxiously. "That night Harry Pomeroy and I had gone round and round. I slammed out of the house and came over here to eat. Forgot my purse, of course. Mat was here and came to the rescue."

Marsha raised her blue eyes above Barney Ghent's face and to the door. She smiled a little. "He's been my hero ever since," she concluded quietly.

Barney Ghent looked over his own thick shoulder and saw Mat Hopson coming in the door. He was a tall, trim man with a certain sort of dignity that was not overbearing. He could get by with a Chesterfield overcoat, a derby, and mustache wax. He could carry a cane in the Middle West without exciting suspicion. Women looked from him to Marsha and envied her. To the *Evening Star*, Mat Hopson was the sort of personality who could settle a libel suit out of court without losing the newspaper subscription of the plaintiff.

Barney Ghent stood up, put out his right hand to Mat Hopson's gloved fingers.

"You've made a remarkable recovery," Mat said, pumping Barney's arm. "Downright startling! Look, here, old man, aren't you pushing things a little too fast?"

Barney looked from Mat to Marsha. He forced a laugh. "Fifteen minutes with your charming wife and I'm a well man. The doctors ought to discover her!"

Then he turned so that Marsha could not see his face and put a finger on his lips. Mat Hopson understood and nodded almost imperceptibly. Hopson knew that Barney was going to die, but Barney didn't want Marsha to know it. He didn't want sympathy. He didn't need it. He was having a hell of a good time tonight and sympathy mustn't spoil it.

Barney declined to join Mat and Marsha at dinner, lifted his battered hat to Marsha, and left the basement cafe. That was at thirty-eight minutes after eight. He took four full minutes to walk to the end of the block, where he stood on the corner and listened to the approaching wail of a police siren. His pulse quickened, and he knew that

was danger to the thin-walled sack of his chest.

He turned abruptly from Martindale Street, walked west into the cool wind that drove scant, spitting rain out of the dark sky. He pushed his hat up from his forehead and lifted his face to the wind and rain. He was feeling all right. There was no pain except the stiff soreness of the bullet wound itself. Dr. Fritz Wulfing had told him there would be no pain at the end, but then Fritz Wulfing was a friend as well as a physician.

"And how the hell does he know?" Barney whispered into the darkness. Then his lips curled bitterly and he tried to consider himself objectively, like a corpse in a crime story.

He was pretty good, at that. He might have written his own obituary, except that that hinted of dramatics. Lord, how he hated dramatics! When a story broke, Gentleman Ghent got the facts, put them down tersely in good newspaper style. He was a damned good reporter. Never be an interpretative writer. Never drift into fiction, because he wouldn't know a dramatic situation if he met one. And he'd met plenty. He was calloused to dramatic situations.

He guessed that was why he could think coldly about his own death. Maybe he was the nucleus of a dramatic situation and didn't know it.

He came around the block and into Martindale again. The siren was silent, but the red eye of the squad car was beaming down the street from a point directly in front of the Pomeroy house. This time Barney crossed Martindale to the east side, instead of walking by Sam's Subway again. And he went toward the narrow, red brick dwelling that belonged to Harry Pomeroy.

Behind the police car was a small, shiny new coupe with press plates bolted on about the licenses. That would belong to Benny Dean, who had ridden into the police-reporter job that had been Barney's. Barney grinned at the coupe and walked up the approach to the front door. A cop named Fitzgerald stood on the steps talking to some neighbors or passers-by who wanted to know what this was all about. Barney shouldered up to the cop, said hello.

"I heard you were sick with lead poison, Barney," Fitzgerald said, and stared incredulously.

"Just released today." Barney jerked his thumb toward the door. "What goes on?"

"Harry Pomeroy got it," the cop said.

"Bad?"

"As bad as they come. Go on in, Barney. That cub from your paper will have to grow a crop of corns to fill *your* shoes!"

Barney went into a narrow hall that was all Turkey-red carpet, somber walls, worn plush settee, and walnut stairway. Benny Dean hung on a wall phone that had cost Harry Pomeroy fifty cents a month less than the other kind. He was asking for Caster at the city desk with one side of his mouth and trying to bite through a candy bar with the other side. He didn't see Barney.

Barney Ghent walked behind Benny and jerked the receiver away from Benny's ear.

"Hey, who the—" When Benny saw who it was his chubby face fell almost far enough to bounce on the floor.

"Barney!" he gasped.

Barney pointed with his forefinger at the phone. "When you address that

big cluck call him *Mister* Caster, son, and you'll get to be famous and get shot at like me." He leaned over the transmitter and hugged the receiver to his ear.

Caster was yelling, "Barney! Is that you, Barney?"

"Me," Barney admitted. "I'm taking over for Dean."

"But you can't, damn it! You—you're supposed to be—be sick!"

Barney chuckled without mirth. "Just one more murder, Chief. Then I promise to stay out of your hair for life. I'm really going to enjoy this one, Chief."

He could hear Caster punishing his gum. In his mind's eye he could see the lean jaws chopping up and down. He grinned at the phone. This was tough for Caster, because Caster knew that Barney was going to die and knew, further, that Barney didn't want sympathy. It was almost pathetic the way Caster had dropped into Barney's flat every now and then, all the while Barney was in bed, to tell lies about all the big plans Henishaw and the other big shots at the paper were making for Barney's future. Caster had even worked himself up to such a pitch of enthusiasm over Barney's non-existent future that he had promised to send him to Germany to cover the cold war.

"Okay, Barney," Caster said finally. "It's fine of you to sort of show Benny the ropes before the paper sends you to South America."

Barney Ghent hung up and turned to Dean.

"Benny, one of the things you want to learn is not to phone Caster until you've got something besides the fact a guy was shot. He likes you to have your story first, see?"

Then he turned his back on Dean and went up the carpeted steps to the den on the second story where Harry Pomeroy's body lay. Dean followed, his mouth slightly ajar and his camera bouncing on his belly.

Chapter Two

Tap, Thump—Blotto

DOG-TIRED, Barney Ghent flopped on the plush settee in the hall of the Pomeroy house. He had just phoned his story to Caster. It was hardly a story, but rather a series of closely linked facts. Harry Pomeroy, dominant power behind the local political machine, had been found shot to death in the study of his home on Martindale Street. The body had been discovered by Mrs. Taylor, Pomeroy's housekeeper, at eight-thirty. Death had occurred somewhere between 7:45 and 8:15. There were two bullets in Pomeroy's chest, both .32 caliber. One bullet had penetrated Pomeroy's heart.

There was no chance of suicide, as the murder weapon had not been found. The housekeeper, Mrs. Taylor, was not a good witness, though she had been in the house at the time of the shooting. She could not remember hearing the shots, which might be explained by the fact that Pomeroy's den was in a remote quarter of the second story of the house, or perhaps because Mrs. Taylor was totally deaf in one ear.

To Mrs. Taylor's knowledge, no one had entered the house, though a man selling magazine subscriptions had knocked at the door at about eight o'clock. Mrs. Taylor had not admitted the magazine agent. Further, she could not describe him in any detail, because she was extremely near-sighted and

had had the misfortune to break her glasses late Saturday afternoon.

Those were the facts as the police knew them. Barney Ghent sat with his heels together on the floor and his knees far apart, the lean muscles of his abdomen relaxed, his head lowered. Interns from the City Hospital brought the body down the carpeted front stairway and along the hall, but Barney did not raise his head.

He could still see Harry Pomeroy slumping in his chair in the den upstairs, his shirt-front dark with blood, the stingy yellow light from the ceiling fixture falling on the waxlike dome of his high, bald head. Recalling that Pomeroy's position had been extremely similar to his own, Barney pulled himself upright.

Across the hall, behind the half-drawn portieres, Barney could hear Lieutenant Macallum of Homicide questioning Mrs. Taylor, the housekeeper. Barney got to his feet, crossed to the doorway of the portieres, and looked into the parlor.

Mrs. Taylor was a full-bosomed, thin-lipped woman. She sat stiffly in a chair, her plump fingers basket-clasped in her lap. Her hostile eyes followed Macallum's thick-waisted figure as he paced back and forth in front of her. Benny Dean and a couple of cops were standing near the doorway.

Barney Ghent hooked one hand over Dean's shoulder and clung to the portiere with his other.

"Who done it, pal?" he asked Dean, but his fat successor didn't answer. Macallum had the floor, was pounding it with his brogans, firing questions at Mrs. Taylor.

"Your quarters are in the first floor rear," Macallum was saying. "Now, Mrs. Taylor, you're perfectly certain that, in spite of your handicap, you could have heard anybody enter the back door? You could have heard anybody going up the back steps to Mr. Pomeroy's den?"

"Yes," she snapped. "I ain't as deaf as all that!"

"And you were in your quarters between a quarter to eight and eight-fifteen?"

"Except for when I came into the front hall to answer the telephone. That was some time just before eight o'clock."

"How long did you talk on the phone?" Macallum persisted.

"Maybe five, maybe ten minutes."

"Who to?"

"I don't know. It was some sort of household survey. Some woman was asking me a lot of questions about the kind of soap I used, where I bought groceries—that sort of thing."

Macallum nodded vigorously. "And you previously stated that both the back and front doors were night-latched. Now, at about eight-thirty you came into the front hall again to adjust the furnace thermostat and you found the front door standing open. How do you account for that, if the front door was also night-latched?"

"I told you," Mrs. Taylor said, "that I figured Mr. Pomeroy had stepped out. I called up the steps to him to see if he was in or out. He didn't answer. I went up the steps to the den to make sure, turned on the light, discovered him sitting there in the chair, dead. I don't attempt to account for the open door. That's your business."

Barney asked Dean in a whisper, "How's she so sure of the exact time she made every move, Benny?"

"She had her radio going in her room," Benny said. He was wide-eyed

and excited. "She was laying for her favorite program, which was to come on at eight-thirty."

Barney yawned. "Well, I'm going home now, Benny. Feel weak in my pins."

"Sure," Dean said. "I know—when I had the flu, I was like that."

"Give me a ring if something turns up. The guy who killed Pomeroy ought to have a medal."

Barney patted Dean's shoulder and then went out into the hall and through the front door. He said good night to Patrolman Fitzgerald and shoved his hands into the pockets of his coat as he went down the approach walk. The short-barreled revolver in his right coat pocket was cold now.

He took a taxi back to his flat, was thankful that he had only one flight of stairs to climb. At the top of the steps he stopped and pressed his hand over his heart. It was beating fast, hard, and steady. He took a deeper breath than he had heretofore allowed himself and walked down the hall to the door of his apartment. He felt as though all the blood in his body had drained down into his legs. He was light-headed and leaden-footed. He unlocked his door, pushed it open, went into his living-room, and sat down in a chair without stopping either to close the door or remove his coat.

He sat there, staring across the room at a decanter of whisky that rested on the table. He'd never known a time when he wanted a drink more than he did now. But because whisky was one of those pleasant things which would hasten the rupture of that nasty little sack in his chest, he resisted.

He got to his feet, walked into the short hall where there were doors to bathroom and closet. He opened the closet, tossed his hat on the shelf, and hung up his coat. He was still thinking about the whisky.

Barney went back into the living-room and over to the table. He picked up the decanter and a short glass, poured himself a drink. What did it matter now, anyway? He lifted the glass. *Here's to a short life and a merry one,* he thought, and drank.

He put the glass down and gasped. The whisky hit his empty stomach hard and burned like lye. It stunned him a little, because there was something in the back of his mind which he had intended to do and couldn't quite remember. Oh, yes. The gun.

He walked a little unsteadily back into the hall, opened the closet, removed the revolver from the pocket of his coat. Then he carried it into the bedroom and turned on the light. The gun was a short-barreled Swiss Chylewski .32. He took it over to the dresser, opened the top drawer, tossed the revolver in on top of a pile of socks. He closed the drawer, went over to his bed, sat down, and began to take off his shoes. He got as far as untying the laces when he remembered that the light was still burning in his living-room and that he had not closed his front door. He got up and walked through the short hall, stopped.

He felt pretty certain he had not turned out the living-room light. It was out now. He was conscious of a cloying odor that nagged at his memory. Frowning, he stepped into the darkness, moving toward the door. If the door was closed and locked, then his mind was beating his body to the grave.

There was a sound—something that tapped once against the floor, followed by a soft, padded thump. Barney's

pulse quickened. He turned half to the left before something beat down upon his head. All consciousness was eclipsed even before he hit the floor.

Chapter Three

Old Stuff—With a New Angle

WHILE there had been no time at all for him to expect that this blow on the head would finish him, there was still some element of surprise in his return to consciousness. At first he thought that this was some sort of a dream that dipped into his immediate past; he had so often in the days before come awake to find Dr. Fritz Wulfing bending over him, Wulfing's grave, gray face bracketed in the ear pieces of a stethoscope.

Wulfing murmured, "Thank God!" Barney rolled his head a little on the floor and closed his eyes.

"Barney," Wulfing said. "Barney!"

Barney opened his eyes again, stared up at Fritz Wulfing's face. The wrinkles in the doctor's lean cheeks were deep and black. Something close to desperation showed in the gray eyes. Wulfing drew his upper lip down, set his lower teeth on the fringe of his gray mustache.

"Barney, Harry Pomeroy has been murdered!"

There was unexplained anxiety in Wulfing's usually dull voice. Wulfing was no friend of Pomeroy's. In fact, Harry Pomeroy had been the cause of a recent estrangement between Fritz Wulfing and his daughter, Betty. Wulfing knew Pomeroy for what he was, had refused to let Betty have anything to do with him. Betty had promptly packed her clothes, taken them to her art studio. She had been living in the studio for a couple of months now.

"Barney, can't you hear me?" Dr. Wulfing pleaded.

"Sure," Barney said weakly. "Pomeroy's been murdered. Old stuff. I covered the case for the paper, phoned the story hours ago."

He squinted across the room at the electric clock on the table. It was two in the morning. Whoever had socked him had done a pretty thorough job of it. Or maybe his weakened condition had something to do with it. It was funny he'd come out of it at all. He raised his hand to his chest, patted himself.

"Am I all here?"

"Then you knew about Betty?"

He wasn't all there. Somebody had slipped his wallet out of the inside pocket of his coat. He tried sitting up, couldn't have made it without the doctor's help. He turned, looking at Wulfing.

"What about Betty?"

"Then you don't know," Wulfing said. "Lieutenant Macallum has arrested Betty for the job."

Barney stared dully at the lined, worried gray face. "Get me a drink," he said. Wulfing shook his head, and Barney repeated: "Get me a drink!" When Wulfing made no move toward the decanter, Barney gripped the doctor's shoulder and hauled himself to his knees.

"Who the hell you trying to save, Fritz," he asked bitterly, "me, with three or four days left, or your own daughter?"

Wulfing let go, and Barney crawled on hands and knees to the table, got hold of the edge, pulled himself to his feet. He leaned against the table, got hold of the decanter and glass, poured himself a drink.

"Macallum's crazy," he said, and

tossed off the drink. He began to feel better at once.

"Barney, you ought to be in bed," Wulfing said.

"I'm not," Barney chuckled. "Why did you come here, if you didn't expect me to get on my feet and help you?"

"I just wanted advice. You know the police better than I do. I wanted to know what would be best for Betty." The doctor sat down in his chair and tried to bite the fringe of his mustache again.

Barney said, "Stop worrying. Betty didn't do it, see?"

He just recalled the woman who had run from the Pomeroy house earlier that evening. Betty! If the poor kid had discovered the body, she wouldn't have known what she was doing. Maybe she dropped some incriminating piece of evidence.

"As soon as I get my hat and coat we'll go downtown and spring Betty," Barney said, and went into the hall where the closet was.

"But how?"

Barney reached for his tan balmacaan. "We'll tell Macallum that I killed Pomeroy." He stepped back into the living-room, smiling at Fritz Wulfing's incredulous expression. His smile quirked a little as he shouldered into his coat because when he moved his arms the wound in his chest hurt.

Wulfing gripped the chair arms. His jaw drooped. He kept shaking his head back and forth without saying anything. Barney stepped back to the closet for his hat.

"Sure," he said to Wulfing. "What's the difference? I won't even be tried. There won't be time."

All that was taut went out of Wulfing. He was suddenly as old as he looked. He rocked forward in the chair and buried his face in his hands, old, tired.

"I can't let you do this, Barney," he said slowly, his voice muffled by his fingers.

Barney grunted. He frowned slightly as he walked over to Wulfing's chair and looked down at the silver-streaked head. Fritz Wulfing thought Barney was playing the hero; thought that Gentleman Ghent, who was doomed to die anyway, intended to confess a crime he hadn't committed just to save Betty—

"Look, Fritz," he said. Wulfing raised his head a little. His eyes were haggard.

"I never went in for dramatics, Fritz, and I'm not playing the hero now. Not that I wouldn't in this case if things were a little different."

"What do you mean?" Wulfing whispered.

Barney laughed. "Why in hell do you think I asked you to lend me a gun—just to protect the paltry five or six days of existence left to me? That's what I told you, but I didn't think you'd believe it. Fritz, I'd never kill a man just to save what's left of my own life."

Wulfing still didn't understand. Barney rested a hand on the doctor's shoulder.

"I killed Harry Pomeroy, Fritz. Somebody should have killed him a long time ago. I did it because I thought it was the greatest service I could render this town before I have to shove off. You got that?"

"Yes," Wulfing said hoarsely.

Barney stared at him. The way Wulfing said that, the look he was giving from his gray eyes, you could tell he thought Barney was lying. Well, Barney wasn't lying.

He said, "Let's go downtown and spring Betty, Fritz."

Barney Ghent had intended this to be a murder without solution. If he had more of a flare for dramatics he might have written a letter to be read after his death in which he confessed to the crime and explained why he had killed Harry Pomeroy. He had fully intended to dispose of the murder weapon the following day, lest the gun be traced back to Fritz Wulfing, the original owner. Now he was glad he had put that off.

On the way downtown in Dr. Wulfing's car, he explained why he had killed Pomeroy. This town didn't belong to the people. It was Pomeroy's town. Pomeroy ran the elections through a powerful machine of his own building. And because there was scarcely a public office from the courts to the council that had not felt the weight of Pomeroy's iron heel, the city had become honeycombed with vice and rackets. And every crime that flourished paid for its protection, so that when another election rolled around Pomeroy's machine never lacked the funds to bring victory to its party. The rackets Pomeroy had fostered got away with larceny in the open. Graft in high office pilfered the public funds, heaped tax upon tax. And murder—nobody knew how many honest people had died because they had refused to play ball Pomeroy's way.

"Look at me," Barney said. "I'm a small cell of yeast, but I'm an example." He tapped his chest. "My ticker wouldn't be due to run down right now if it hadn't been for Pomeroy's machine. I expose a numbers game that has been running wide open in the Negro quarter. I can't put my finger directly on Pomeroy without running the paper into libel, but I do name a few names that have taken their share of protection money.

"And I'm small potatoes, Fritz. There have been cop killings nobody has explained to my satisfaction. Murder goes hand in hand with Pomeroy's business. And I thought if he died the teeth would be stripped from the central cog in the machine. But there was another reason."

Barney stopped speaking, stared straight ahead through the windshield at the deserted street.

"Well?" Wulfing prodded.

"I don't know why I should tell you this, Fritz. Maybe you'll understand. It wasn't jealousy. Neither revenge for what Pomeroy has done indirectly to me nor jealousy enter into the picture at all. But ever since I've known your kid Betty, I've loved her. She never looked my way. That was all right. I'm ten years older than she, and what's a newspaperman got to offer anyway? But you'll remember that she announced her engagement to Harry Pomeroy just before I got this slug in the chest. That hurt worse than the slug, because I knew Pomeroy would be poison to her."

Wulfing choked, a dry, hacking sound. "Barney," he said, "that's how I always wanted it—you and Betty. Maybe I talked you up too much. Maybe that's why she insisted on going around with Pomeroy. If I hadn't been so obvious—"

Barney laughed harshly. "Does there have to be an 'if' at this late hour, Fritz?"

He was glad that the blue lights of the police building were visible just ahead. There would be no long silence,

no chance to think about what might have been.

Chapter Four

Not Enough Motive

THEY found Mat Hopson standing in the corridor of the building, talking to Lieutenant Macallum. He left the Homicide man and came forward to meet Barney and Dr. Wulfing, derby in his hand, his Chesterfield open. Macallum kept apart, a somewhat resentful look on his flat, blond face, as though he figured that the other three were hatching some plot against him.

Mat Hopson's dark eyes were grave, but his smile attempted to be reassuring. He pumped Wulfing's arm.

"Got your message, Doctor, and came right over," he said. "I want you to know I will do everything in my power to get Betty out of this difficulty. We can't, of course, offer bail on a murder charge."

"Just how bad is it, Mat?" Barney asked.

"Well, the big difficulty is that Betty refuses to answer questions," Mat said. "That's what I gathered from Macallum. You know and I know that Betty couldn't have done this thing. Down in his heart, I don't think Macallum thinks she did it. But you know how it is. Pomeroy was a friend of the Chief of Police. Macallum's being pressured, undoubtedly."

Barney snorted. "I'm going to talk to Macallum. I'll get him to let you see Betty, Fritz." He started across the corridor toward the lieutenant, stopped, looked over his shoulder to the doctor. "But, Fritz, not a word to anybody about what I told you, understand?"

There was a dazed expression in Wulfing's gray eyes, but he nodded.

Barney went over to Macallum, a big, shapeless man whose body might have been made out of a sack of grain with stovepipes attached for arms and legs.

"Mac," Barney said, "Wulfing can see his daughter, can't he?"

"Sure, Barney." Macallum crooked his finger to a plainclothes cop who was leaning up against the wall not far from the door of the Homicide office. When the detective came up, Macallum said, "Take Dr. Wulfing and Mr. Hopson to Miss Wulfing."

"And I want to talk to you alone, Mac," Barney said.

"Sure," Macallum agreed. He stepped to the door marked *Homicide*, opened it for Barney. They crossed to Macallum's private office and Barney slumped down into a chair. Macallum sat down slowly and carefully behind his desk, as though his stuffed waistline didn't bend easily.

"What's on your mind, Barney?" he asked.

"Plenty." He smiled. "Look here, Macallum, Betty Wulfing didn't kill Harry Pomeroy. I saw her leave the Pomeroy house. She may have discovered the body, but that's all. All she really did that was open to question was fail to report the murder, and you can't blame her for that, considering the state of mind she must have been in. What ever led you to her in the first place?"

Macallum's flat, fishy eyes were fixed on Barney's face; they were expressionless with a certain hypnotic quality about them.

"Letters Pomeroy had. A tear-stained handkerchief with the girl's initials in the corner. The fact that a neighbor in the apartment next to the Pomeroy

house saw a girl answering to Miss Wulfing's description enter the Pomeroy house during that interval of time in which the murder was committed."

"That's merely circumstantial," Barney said. "She didn't have any motive. She was going to marry Pomeroy."

"She had a motive," Macallum said. "That's it. She was going to marry Pomeroy. Her engagement had been announced. But Pomeroy wasn't legally divorced from his first wife. That's motive enough for a girl like Betty Wulfing."

Barney scowled. "Where'd you dig up that dirt about Pomeroy not being divorced?"

"We didn't. Dr. Wulfing did. Pomeroy had claimed a Reno divorce. Dr. Wulfing, who never wanted Betty to marry Pomeroy in the first place, checked with Reno. There's no record of the divorce proceedings. That's what's got Mat Hopson standing on his ear right now. It means he's not legally married to his present wife."

Barney plucked his lower lip thoughtfully. To a proud, high-minded girl like Betty this could be made to look like sufficient motive for murder. Barney dismissed all that with a flat-handed gesture.

"Forget it, Macallum. You're making it hard for yourself. I killed Harry Pomeroy. I've always hated him and everything he stands for. I'd been told I had about six days to live, at the outside. Pomeroy was indirectly responsible for that little piece of bad news. So I killed him. He was dead before Betty Wulfing ever entered the house. The only reason she was able to get in without knocking and arousing the housekeeper was that, when I went out after the job, I didn't close the door tight."

"Miss Wulfing had a latchkey to the back door," Macallum said flatly.

Barney came forward in his chair, bared his teeth. Then he forced himself to a calm. He couldn't risk kicking off here in Macallum's office, with the homicide man still unconvinced of the truth. Barney had to live—had to live long enough to see this thing through.

"I don't believe it," he said quietly. "Betty Wulfing wouldn't have the key to any man's house, whether she was engaged to him or not."

Macallum shrugged. He knew what he knew. "How did you get in, Barney?"

"Through the front door. Remember, Mrs. Taylor testified that a man selling magazine subscriptions called at the door? That was me. If her glasses hadn't been broken, Mrs. Taylor could identify me as that man. I've used that gag before to get in where I wasn't wanted. I guess a lot of newspapermen have. I stood in the open door, handing Mrs. Taylor a sales talk, my back to the side of the door frame that has the socket plate for the lock bolt. I had a rubber plug, cut from a hard eraser, in the hand behind my back. I wedged that into the socket where the bolt of the snap latch would ordinarily go. I was irritating to Mrs. Taylor. She slammed the door as soon as I stepped back, and the snap-lock bolt never went home because of the rubber plug."

"Newspapermen don't have any patent on that," Macallum said without enthusiasm. "All you've got to know is what kind of lock the door has."

"I knew that," Barney said. "I'd visited Pomeroy's house before on interviews, election forecasts, and the like."

He reached into his pocket and took

out an oblong of rubber. A thin piece of brass, a little larger than the end of the plug, was cemented to the rubber to prevent the plug from going too deep into the snap-bolt socket. He tossed the plug onto Macallum's desk. Macallum had seen such things before. He didn't take his eyes off Barney.

"You had plenty of time to fix that up after you learned we had picked up Miss Wulfing."

Barney shook his head. "When I returned to my flat tonight from covering the murder I had committed, I carelessly left my door open. Some prowler caught me off guard, knocked me out, and robbed me. I spent the rest of the evening on my living-room floor until Dr. Wulfing brought me around."

Macallum shrugged stiffly. "Go on. After you had plugged the lock, and after Mrs. Taylor had retired to her rooms at the rear of the house, I suppose you pushed open the door and walked in."

Barney nodded. "I wonder if you noticed the makeshift electric wiring in Pomeroy's den? That house was built before electric lights, and some things that the insurance underwriters wouldn't approve of have been done. For instance, the wire from the lighting fixture in the den is stapled across the ceiling, through the door, and tapped off the fixture in the hall. The den light turns off and on with a pull cord, but it can be turned off from the bottom of the stairway by means of the switch controlling the hall fixture. I had noticed that on previous visits to the house, also.

"I turned off the switch at the bottom of the steps and went up to hunt Pomeroy in the dark. He was sitting in his chair, in a direct line between the door of the den and the window of the same room. I stepped just inside the door and shot him. I didn't know whether Mrs. Taylor could hear the shots or not, what with her radio going. Apparently she didn't.

"I wanted to be certain I'd killed Pomeroy before I lammed out of there. I came closer to his chair, but not so close I'd risk getting any blood on me. I lit a match and held it up. Blood was sopping the front of his shirt. He was dead, all right, and I don't think he knew what hit him."

"I'll substantiate that," Macallum said. "Medical testimony suggested that he was in a drunken stupor when he was killed. He hadn't moved from the chair. You're pretty convincing, but I don't think you've got much motive. Not for murder!"

Barney got out of his chair. He planted big fists on the top of Macallum's desk. He was trembling a little and he could feel the jarring beat of his heart throughout his body.

"No motive? Listen, Mac. Suppose you're a Russian. You hate like hell the things the Soviet machine has done to your country, but you've played up to Stalin because you've had to stay alive. Some accident or something happens to you, and a doctor tells you that you've got six days to live. Would you hang onto what was left of your life, or would you risk throwing it away in an attempt to kill the man who had ruined your country?"

Macallum sighed. "Sure, I'd gun Stalin. But not Harry Pomeroy."

"It's the same thing on a small scale," Barney said. "Pomeroy made this town what it is. You ought to know what it is. You've been as close to the vice rackets here as I have, and I've seen kids from high school on the

skids and coasting to hell because of the protected vice in this town. You cops haven't done anything about it because you haven't been allowed.

"Pomeroy's machine has taxed and spent—spent to buy the votes to perpetuate control. When the honest, thinking people got up on their hind legs to fight, what happened? You'll find names from the cemeteries on the registration list. Pomeroy's men vote early and often from dawn to dusk on election day, going from one precinct to the next, voting under different names. The machine has seen to it that aliens have registered. The machine has intimidated the ignorant."

"Sure, sure." Macallum admitted impatiently. "That's a motive, Barney. But there's a better, stronger motive for a guy they call Gentleman Ghent coming in here and trying to lie himself into the chair."

"It's the gospel truth, Mac," Barney said through clenched teeth.

"A pretty girl like Betty Wulfing kills a guy who ought to be killed anyway. Betty's the daughter of a friend of yours. You're going to die before you could face trial anyway. You're in love with the girl."

"I am like hell!" Barney lied savagely.

"All right. So you don't have to love her. But I think enough of you to believe you'd try a thing just like this. And I wouldn't believe this confession of yours if you swore on a stack of Bibles a mile high."

Barney took so deep a breath that the wound in his chest pained him.

"I've cracked a few cases for you, Mac, and I'll crack this one. If you'll come to my flat I'll *prove* I killed Pomeroy."

"Okay." Macallum got out of his chair as though he was trying to keep his stuffed body from splitting somewhere.

"Why, Mac," Barney said, "I'll prove it if it takes me the rest of my life!"

Chapter Five

Four-O'Clock Caller

IN THE company of Macallum, Mat Hopson, and Dr. Wulfing, Barney saw Betty before she was handed over to the custody of a policewoman. There was no use telling Betty to keep her chin up; she did that without being told. She even managed a courageous smile as she said good night to her father. Barney went over to her, looked down into her sweet face, into her sober brown eyes. He patted her arm a couple of times.

"Hello, Barney," she said.

The only time Barney liked the sound of his name was when she spoke it. Maybe it wasn't so much the sound as it was the kick he got out of watching her soft lips say it.

Barney took off his hat. He swallowed. He wanted to tell her then that whatever he had done that night he had done for her. He wanted to say that killing Harry Pomeroy had been a double pleasure because it had kept Pomeroy away from her. But he didn't say anything like that. What good would it have done? When she did find out he had killed Pomeroy, she'd hate him. And even that wouldn't make any difference to him, where *he* was going.

"Kid," he said, "I'll have you out of here by dawn."

"I'll count on that," she told him. "Ever since I was a high-school punk I've been counting on whatever Gentleman Ghent says. It's the truth be-

cause you read it in the papers."

"'Night," he said, and turned away.

He rode back to his flat with Dr. Wulfing in the physician's car. Right behind them were Macallum and Hopson in the lieutenant's roadster.

"You're feeling all right?" Wulfing asked.

"Fine, Fritz. I worked up quite a sweat in Mac's office. The air feels good." Barney thought it was funny that Wulfing closed the window after Barney had said that. "You afraid I'll catch pneumonia?" he laughed.

Wulfing coughed dryly. "I wouldn't want you to pull another fainting fit like the one you had in your flat. There's too much depending on you now."

"I didn't faint," Barney said. "Somebody bopped me on the head. You're a *swell* doctor!"

Wulfing looked at him sharply. "I thought you collapsed and hit your head on the floor. Who hit you?"

"I don't know. I'd left the door open. Somebody swiped my wallet."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"You didn't ask and there wasn't time. You told me the cops had pinched Betty for the Pomeroy killing. That seemed to be the only thing that mattered, right then."

Now, though, the attack on him by that prowler seemed to attain new importance. What if something else had been taken? He discarded the idea immediately. Why would anybody steal the murder weapon? No motive. It was crazy.

Crazy or not, the fear nagged him all the way to the flat. As soon as Wulfing stopped the car, Barney sprang out and hurried into the apartment building. He all but ran up the steps and lost all the time he had gained fumbling with the keys. Wulfing caught up with him and so did Mat Hopson and Macallum from the other car.

"Say! You better take it a little easier, Barney!" Mat said.

Barney got the door open, strode through the living-room and the hall and into the bedroom. He switched on the light and went immediately to the drawer in which he had put the gun. He opened it, dug into the pile of socks and handkerchiefs it contained. The gun wasn't there. He wheeled, went back into the living-room.

Macallum and Wulfing were standing on either side of the door. Mat Hopson was beside the table, reaching into Barney's cigar humidor. Barney lunged across the room and seized Hopson's wrist before he could withdraw his hand from the box. Hopson turned, his mouth open, a blank expression in his fine dark eyes. Barney looked down at the lawyer's fingers. They were clutching a cellophaned cigar.

"I've got to search you, Mat," Barney said.

"Search me? What for?" Hopson laughed. "You told me the other day you wouldn't be smoking any more cigars. I thought I'd help myself. I'm sorry if I shouldn't have."

Barney hauled the unresisting Hopson away from the table, slapped the lawyer's pockets, searching for a gun. Until tonight, after he had returned from the Pomeroy house, Barney had kept the gun Wulfing had given him in that cigar humidor. He didn't know but what he had returned it to the humidor instead of the drawer in his bedroom. That Mat Hopson had slipped the gun from the humidor was a dumb idea, but then a lot of dumb

ideas are born of desperation.

Mat said, "What's the matter with you, Barney?"

"The murder weapon. It's gone! Somebody stole the gun!"

"You mean the gun that killed Pomeroy?" Macallum asked.

"Of course. I put it in a drawer in my bedroom, I'm certain. It's not there now."

"So that's your proof?" Macallum asked. "You could have saved me the trip out here! We found the murder gun in Miss Wulfing's studio!"

Barney stumbled over to a chair and sat down. He shook his head in an effort to clear it. Everything was muddling up. He asked, "What kind of gun? A Swiss revolver?"

"A Chylewski .32," Macallum nodded. "And we're positive of the identification, since the slugs in Pomeroy checked with the barrel. I figured Miss Wulfing took the gun from her father's collection." Macallum turned his flat, strange eyes on Dr. Wulfing. "You had a Chylewski in your house, didn't you?"

"He *had* one," Barney said. "But he gave it to me Friday. Didn't you, Fritz?"

Dr. Wulfing twisted his mouth, and the long, dark wrinkles in his sunken cheeks twisted too.

"Yes," he said. "The Chylewski. I gave it to Barney." He ran his finger around inside his collar as though it was choking him. "That was Friday I gave you the Chylewski, Barney."

Macallum turned as though his neck was stiff and looked at Barney. The small muscles of Barney's brows ached from scowling, he was trying so hard to think this thing through.

"When did you pick up Betty at the studio, Mac?"

"Little after midnight."

"And it was about ten-thirty when I came home here and got knocked out." Barney's eyes met Macallum's. "Was Betty in her studio say between eleven o'clock and the time you picked her up?"

"Not according to her. She claimed she'd been out walking for several hours. But just where she walked she didn't know."

Barney thought that she wouldn't know. After finding Pomeroy's body she'd walk and walk, trying to pick up the pieces of her world and stick them back together.

"She was framed, Mac. You can see that, can't you?"

Macallum said, "I think you and Doc are trying to put something over."

Barney stood up, went over to the table, took a drink of whisky. He licked his lips, put down the empty glass.

"You gentlemen help yourselves," he said, indicating the decanter. "I've got to step out for a moment."

Mat Hopson said, "I could use a drink. How about you, Doctor?"

Dr. Wulfing didn't say anything. His eyes followed Barney across the room and out the door.

Barney went down the stairway, out the side door of the apartment building, down a walk that led to the garages at the rear. He was thinking of a half-finished portrait he had seen in Betty Wulfing's studio when he had visited her a few days before that hophead killer had sent a slug into his chest. It was a portrait of Mat Hopson. Betty had told Barney that Mat was having the portrait made as a surprise for Marsha.

Barney went to his garage, slid back the door, got into his coupe. He hadn't

touched the car in weeks and had a little trouble starting it. He had discarded the danger of driving in his present physical condition because of the graver danger to Betty Wulfing. He was desperately determined that he was going to live to see this thing through. He just couldn't die until his job was done.

He backed the car out into the alley and headed for the street. Except for sharp stabs of pain in his chest brought on by the exertion required to steer the car, he felt fine.

His mind went back to that portrait of Mat Hopson. Mat had made a mistake, not telling Marsha why he was visiting Betty's studio. Marsha was an extremely jealous woman. If she had seen Mat going to Betty's studio, she would have come to some definite and wholly inaccurate conclusions. Who but a jealous woman would have framed Betty Wulfing for this crime? And it *was* a woman who had knocked Barney out in Barney's flat.

He wondered why it hadn't occurred to him before. It just hadn't seemed important because when he had come to Fritz Wulfing had told him the police had arrested Betty. That news had knocked everything else out of his head.

Now that his mind was definitely fixed on Marsha, he recognized that cloying perfume he had smelled in his apartment as hers. He recalled the sharp tap and the thump he had heard just before the knockout. That had been Marsha taking a step toward him with one high-heeled pump on and the other in her hand, raised for a blow to Barney's head—

Barney got his car onto Thurman Boulevard and kicked down on the throttle. He drove madly, translating the exultation within him into speed. Betty was going to be all right. He had a witness now to prove he had killed Harry Pomeroy. How would Marsha have known where to find the murder weapon if she hadn't witnessed the killing, or at least seen him dash from the Pomeroy house after the killing? Marsha had been just across the street at the time, waiting for Mat.

He braked his car in front of the modernistic concrete bungalow that belonged to the Hopsons. A dim light burned in the living-room in anticipation of Mat's return. Barney went to the front door and thumbed the bell push. It was a little while before Marsha opened the door. She was wearing a quilted satin robe over her nightgown. Face cream had restored pallor and shine to her face. There were sleepless blue circles under her eyes, and just now she looked all of forty years.

"Barney!" she gasped.

He took off his hat. "Mind if I come in a moment?"

"But it's nearly four in the morning! Where's Mat?"

"At my flat," he said, and pushed his way into the living-room. She stepped back, left the door open. Barney closed the door, then walked over to a squarish red-leather chair and sat down. Marsha stood there, holding the front of her pink robe up tightly about her throat. She was shivering.

"Sit down," Barney said. "I've got to talk to you."

She went over to the davenport, sat down, brought her slippered feet up under her.

He said, "Betty Wulfing has been arrested for the Pomeroy murder, but I guess you know that. She didn't kill Pomeroy. I killed him, and I guess you

know that as well." He creased and re-creased the crown of his felt hat in his big hands. "The point is, Marsha, you've got to tell the police that you know I killed Pomeroy."

"But—but Barney, I don't know anything. Not anything at all! You killed Harry?"

"Sure. I had a couple of good reasons to do it. One of them was that I didn't want him marrying Betty. You, Pomeroy's ex-wife, can appreciate that. Maybe I shouldn't say ex-wife, Marsha, since there was something phony about that Reno divorce of yours."

Marsha picked at the satin of her robe, watched what her fingers were doing studiously. She didn't say anything, but her lips trembled.

"I'll get back to that divorce business later," Barney said. "That and your bigamy. Right now, let's talk about that visit you paid to my flat about ten-thirty tonight. Tell me about that."

She didn't say anything. Her face was like wax.

"Then I'll tell you," he said. "You had seen me leave the Pomeroy house after the killing. I had the murder gun in my pocket when I was sitting there in Sam's Subway talking to you. At ten-thirty when I went home to my flat, you followed me. I made the mistake of leaving my door open. If I hadn't, you'd have got in anyway by simply knocking at the door and paying me a call. You were after the murder gun. My leaving the door open gave you a swell chance. You came in, turned off the light when I went into the bedroom. When I came out again, you had one shoe off. And there isn't a better blunt instrument anywhere than a woman's high-heeled slipper. That's what you hit me with.

"You swiped the murder gun out of my bedroom. You took my wallet also, to make it look like simple robbery. You took the gun to Betty's studio, and again you played in luck. Betty was out, walking herself out of a threatening spell of hysteria. You planted the murder gun there. Why? Because Mat had been visiting Betty's studio regularly. You thought there was something between Mat and Betty, Mat being the dashing ladies' man that he is. You knew that Betty's being engaged to Harry Pomeroy wouldn't make any difference to Mat. But you didn't know that Betty wasn't that kind of girl. Maybe you judge all women by yourself."

Marsha's face flushed as though she had been slapped.

"With Pomeroy dead, you pictured Mat and Betty hooking up, with you out in the cold. You've always worried about losing Mat, haven't you?"

Marsha stood up. She was rather tall and looked it in the long robe she wore. When she was angry, there was a certain majestic arrogance about her. She pointed to the door.

"Get out! I'm not going to sit here and let a cheap newspaper reporter insult me!"

"Sit or stand," Barney said, without moving from his chair, "but you're going to listen, because I'm back to the phony divorce decree. You were the one who went to Reno to get that divorce from Harry Pomeroy. But Dr. Wulfing checked up, desperately trying to find something that would put an obstacle between Pomeroy and Betty. There wasn't any divorce at all. You'd bought yourself a forged decree. It can be done—has been done before."

Marsha put both of her palms on her hips. "Why would any woman do

that?"

"No decent woman would. But you like money, Marsha. You expected Harry Pomeroy to marry again. Then you'd blackmail him for his dough. A man of his political weight couldn't risk bigamy charges. You didn't know then that you were going to fall in love with Mat Hopson, and that, in spite of the fact that you yourself were committing bigamy, you were going to marry Mat."

"I met Mat before I ever left Harry," she said, trying to poke holes in his argument.

"But you didn't intend to marry him," Barney persisted. "You thought you were proof against Mat Hopson, but you weren't. After you'd fallen for him, you didn't dare tell him that you were still legally married to Harry Pomeroy. You loved Mat too much to risk losing him."

Barney settled back into the cushions of the chair. A grin curled the ends of his wide mouth—a sort of sly grin.

"But don't take it so hard, Marsha. Didn't good old Gentleman Ghent fix things for you by knocking off Harry Pomeroy? You're a widow now, and you and Mat can get married all over again, or just let things ride as they are. Who's going to be the wiser? Fritz Wulfing, a doctor, can certainly keep your secret. Betty won't care to tell. As for Macallum, he and Mat are good friends, and I imagine some sort of deal can be arranged. The only person who knows all and will tell all is that same Gentleman Ghent. Unless—"

Barney paused, then broke into a cheerful laugh. "You get my point? You tell the cops how you saw me leave the Pomeroy house, how you stole the murder gun from me, and how you framed Betty Wulfing. Do that and we'll manage to hush up the bigamy."

Marsha toyed with the idea a moment, her lips parted, her blue eyes fixed on Barney's face. Then with a swish of satin, she turned to the table that was back against the wall, opened a drawer, took out something. She returned to Barney and handed him his wallet.

"Well, thanks, Marsha!"

Eyebrows arched high on her beautiful forehead, she looked down at him.

"You've made yourself a bargain," she said. "Everything you've said is the truth. I'll testify against you, clear the Wulfing girl."

"Thanks, Marsha," he said again. "Better get dressed."

"Now?"

"Sure, now. I told Betty I'd have her out before dawn. That doesn't leave us much time. Go get some clothes on. I'll wait."

Ten minutes later, Marsha returned wearing the same outfit Barney had seen her in at Sam's Subway. Hastily applied makeup had dropped years from the age of her face. Barney stood up and mocked her by adjusting his tie.

She said, "You actually seem anxious to go to the electric chair, Barney."

"My dear lady," he said, "I won't live that long. They won't even get me to court."

Chapter Six

No Time to Die

AS THEY left the house and walked out toward Barney's car, a man appeared suddenly on the sidewalk and walked in their direction. As Barney

opened the car door, the man thrust out his hand in a motion like a traffic cop's signal to halt.

"Hey," the man said.

Barney turned. In the dim light he could see nothing of the man's face, but he was short and heavy.

"Your name Ghent?" he asked, coming up to Barney. He had an unpleasant nasal voice.

"Yes," Barney said.

"Well, I've got something for you."

The man drew his right hand from his pocket and Barney caught the blue-black gleam of an automatic.

Marsha Hopson had not yet got into the car. She was at Barney Ghent's side and a little behind him, now that the gun had appeared in the hand of the short man. She moved still farther toward the nose of the car as the man with the gun crowded Barney.

Barney slammed the car door, fell back against it. And then he kicked a hard fast one to the short man's middle. The man went back and down, but that stuff that padded his body wasn't beef. It was rubber, and he bounced. He came at Barney, waving the automatic above his head. Barney guessed there wouldn't be any shooting and stepped out to meet the short man. He tried a left hook, and the short man ducked, came on with head lowered to butt Barney in the chest.

Barney was thrown back against the car, and maybe it was the car door handle that got him from behind just as the short man's head got him in the front. It was a sort of pincers movement. And it was howling agony for Barney. The breath went out of him, but that was the least of it. The most of it was the pain in his chest. He doubled over, started to slide down the side of the car. The short man caught him, straightened him, raked the barrel of his gun across Barney's face.

Something inside Barney told him he couldn't shove off now—not with Betty in the hooks of the law. He tried with his left again, savagely, and with double effect. The short man backed under the impact, but the rubber body of him seemed to have sponged up all the fight in Barney's body. He slid down on the sidewalk and the back of his head banged on the running-board of the car. His hat was gone from his head, and the short man stooped, got a handful of hair, used it as a handle to thump Barney's head against the running-board a couple of times.

Barney rolled over on his face. He would have crawled under the car if there had been room, he was that sick with pain. He gagged and gasped in air. He lay there with his chin on the curb, the top of his head touching the running-board.

The short man was pawing over him, rifling his pockets. But Barney didn't have anything that he cared about hanging on to except a few hours in which to live and to save Betty Wulfing from a murder rap.

The short man got Barney by the coat collar, lifted him back from the curb, and dropped him on the pavement. Barney lay still. Blood from the cut on his face trickled down to the corner of his mouth. He heard the whine of a car starter and the blurt of the exhaust. Then there was complete silence.

"Marsha, give a guy a hand! Get a doctor!"

He said that mostly with his mind. His lips scarcely moved. And then there was a long period of complete blackout, broken by a glaring flash of

white light and dim white figures moving about a room. The smell of iodine, the saw-edged bite of it on the raw cut on his cheek cleared his vision somewhat. He knew that he was in the emergency hospital. He had probably been picked up by a cop.

"Doc," he grunted, as the iodine swab burned down his cheek again, "that hurts like hell!"

The pink, young face of the doctor bending over Barney broke into a friendly smile.

"If you play rough games, Mr. Ghent, you're bound to get hurt."

Barney struggled to sit up on the cot. The doctor had long, delicate fingers, but the pressure of those fingers on Barney's chest was enough to flatten him.

"Be good until I get this dressing on, Mr. Ghent."

"Listen." Barney gripped the doctor's hand. "Where's Marsha Hopson?"

"I don't even know the lady," the doctor said. "Are you going to let me dress that cut or do I have to use three men and a boy to hold you down?"

"Doc, they've got to find Marsha Hopson! It's important. Get the police!"

"All right, all right, Mr. Ghent. We'll find your lady friend. Now stop squirming, will you?"

"My chest," Barney said. He reached up weakly and put a hand over his heart. "Never mind my face, Doc. Inside my chest. An aneurism in the aorta. I've got to shove off. Die. But not now. You've got to keep me going. There's a girl—"

He broke off suddenly because there wasn't breath or strength to go on. A nurse came over to the cot and began swabbing the inside of his arm with alcohol. She was a pretty blond girl with freckles and a tilted nose. Barney closed his eyes and saw her still. And then her features changed and her hair darkened. Her eyes became dark-brown, trusting and grave. Betty, as she had looked when he'd told her he'd have her free by dawn.

The sting of a hypo needle in his arm brought his eyes open.

"Now, Mr. Ghent—" the doctor cautioned.

"Listen, Doc, what time is it?"

"About five in the morning."

Barney groaned. He rolled his eyes at the hypodermic syringe. "Lay off that stuff, Doc! I've got to get out of here. I don't want to sleep! I tell you I've got only a few more hours to live and I've got a lot to do. No time to sleep. No time to die."

The doctor gripped Barney's arm and kept pressing on the plunger of the syringe.

"You're all right, Mr. Ghent. Just close your eyes." The doctor removed the needle, and Barney tried to get off the cot. He would have rolled off onto the floor if the doctor hadn't stopped him.

"Miss Williams," the doctor called to the nurse, "will you please help me hold this man? He's mildly off his trolley!"

"The hell I am!" Barney said weakly. And he kept saying that with his lips and then only with his mind as the effects of the sedative clouded his senses and brought sleep.

He slept for a long time, and when he awoke he found himself in a room in the City Hospital. There was a nurse at his bedside.

"How about some supper, Mr. Ghent?" the nurse asked.

"On the taxpayers?" He eyed the tray hungrily.

The nurse laughed. "On the taxpayers, Mr. Ghent." She put the food down on a table and cranked up the head end of the cot. His torso felt as stiff as he had imagined Lieutenant Macallum's was. He complained about that.

"The doctor strapped your chest to make you a little more comfortable, Mr. Ghent," the nurse explained. "Now eat your supper. I'll help you if you like."

Opening his mouth to eat hurt the side of his face where the cut was, but he managed and gradually the stiffness wore off.

"I want to see the doctor who's stationed at the Emergency Hospital," he said.

The nurse shook her head. "You can't. He isn't allowed to leave his post this time of day."

Barney wanted to know what the strapping around his chest was for. The nurse explained that he had some bruises—nothing serious, but uncomfortable. Then she told him that after he had finished eating Dr. Bhuel of the hospital staff was going to pay him a visit. Barney didn't want to see Dr. Bhuel.

"I've got to get out of here," he said. "I haven't much time!"

Dr. Bhuel, a middle-aged man with thick side whiskers and ribbon-dangled *pince nez*, came eventually into Barney's room. He introduced himself, showed false teeth in a smile.

"Mr. Ghent," Dr. Bhuel said, "Dr. Mason at Emergency informed me that you said you were suffering from an aorta aneurism."

"I'm not suffering from it," Barney said. "I've just got one. And unless I get out of here in a hurry you'll be suffering a lot more than I am!"

Dr. Bhuel chose to ignore that. "Who is your physician?"

"Dr. Fritz Wulfing," Barney snapped.

Dr. Bhuel pursed his lips. "A fine man! Very fine indeed. However, the best of us make mistakes, and I am delighted to inform you that Dr. Wulfing has made a mistake in diagnosis. This may be quite a shock to you, but a pleasant one, I'm sure. The bullet which penetrated your chest did crease the aorta, shall we say. Dr. Wulfing had every reason to believe that a serious aneurism would develop. But you are a man of unusual recuperative powers, a splendid constitution, and our most careful examination fails to reveal—"

"You mean I'm *not* going to die?"

"Die?" Dr. Bhuel's laughter was somehow like the mockery of the gods. "No, indeed, Mr. Ghent. At least not for a good many years, if you scrupulously avoid further contact with rapidly moving bullets!"

And that was water over the dam, a picture unalterable. Death was the card cheat, Barney Ghent the sucker, while the blind dame on the other side of the table dragged in the winnings and weighed them on her scales.

"Why," Dr. Bhuel said, as he wiped the tears of laughter from his eyes, "you'll be out of here in twenty-four hours, after you've had a good long sleep!"

"Don't tell any more jokes, Doc," Barney said. "I'll die laughing!"

Chapter Seven

One Slug Too Many

HE AWOKE in the morning with the taste of brass in his mouth and the dream indelibly etched on his mind. Bhuel came in to see him after

breakfast and after a careful examination and some admonition regarding rest and relaxation, decided that he could leave.

Barney took a taxi to Police Headquarters, determined to get the agony over with as soon as possible. Lieutenant Macallum eased out of his swivel chair and came forward to shake Barney's hand.

"I hear you got batted around a little Monday morning and one of the boys had to pick you up and take you to the hospital," Macallum said.

"Have you got Marsha Hopson?"

Macallum's flat blue eyes stared at Barney. He didn't get it. Why should he have Mrs. Hopson?

"I told that doc who patched me up to have the cops hold Marsha Hopson! Do you mean to tell me you haven't got her?"

Macallum shook his head. "I saw Mat this morning. He came in to talk to Betty Wulfing. Mat said his wife had gone to Chicago."

"Like that, huh?" Barney grunted. "Listen! Marsha Hopson was with me when I got batted around on Monday, as you call it. I was bringing her down here as a star witness. She can prove I killed Pomeroy, and she'll confess she framed Betty Wulfing by planting the gun in Betty's studio. If she's gone to Chicago, it's to avoid testimony. She wants Betty to take this murder rap because she thinks Mat has been playing around with Betty."

"I ought to slap you in jail, Barney. You've perjured yourself so damned often, just to confuse the issue. Miss Wulfing confessed she killed Harry Pomeroy about thirty minutes ago."

"She *what?*"

"You heard me the first time."

"She—she can't do that!" Barney tapped on his chest with the tips of his fingers. "I killed him! I killed Pomeroy! Marsha Hopson can *prove* I killed him!"

Barney leaned forward, his hands on the edge of Macallum's desk. He swallowed. He looked into Macallum's immobile face. His voice dropped in quiet, earnest appeal.

"Listen, Macallum, they told me in the hospital that I'm not going to die, so the motive you gave me for lying is shot to hell. I'm telling you the truth. If Betty confessed, it's because she's trying to shield somebody."

Macallum sucked in his lower lip. He didn't say anything.

"Let me talk to Betty. Let me talk to her alone."

Macallum shook his head. "I can't do that. I can't have you two comparing notes."

"All right. Let me talk to her right here with you. You've still got her here, haven't you? You haven't sent her to the jail yet?"

"She's down here in the lock-up," Macallum said, "but I've had enough of this run-around you've been giving me. If Miss Wulfing is shielding somebody, I'll find it out. Now you get the hell out of here!"

Barney Ghent stood up. He said, "I'm going after Marsha Hopson."

"Go anywhere you like, Barney, just so it's a long ways from my office!" Macallum said.

Barney slammed out the door, went through the Homicide office and into the corridor. Benny Dean, Barney's successor on the *Evening Star*, was sitting on the golden-oak reporters' bench outside.

"I got a bone to pick with you, Barney," he said, catching Barney's arm.

Barney turned savagely. "Let go, fat

boy, I'm in a hurry!"

Dean didn't let go. He walked along, holding to Barney's arm.

"I'm in the doghouse for a boner you pulled, Barney. That story you phoned to Caster Sunday night on the Pomeroy murder was all wet. And I got hell for your slip-up."

Barney stopped. "What was the gripe?"

"Our sheet printed that there were two bullets in Pomeroy, and the *Trib* came out with *three* bullets."

"There were two bullets," Barney said. He was certain of that because he had fired only twice.

Dean shook his head. "I checked with the cops. Three slugs from a .32 revolver."

"All from the same gun?"

"Sure. The Swiss Chylewski they found in the Wulfing babe's studio."

Barney got Dean by the back of the neck. His lean fingers pinched hard into fat.

Barney shouted. "If you're kidding me, I'll kill you!"

"Leggo me!" Dean squealed. "You can ask Macallum!"

A cop sauntered toward them, wanted to know what the brawl was about. Barney let go of Dean's neck.

"So, Barney, I'd sure appreciate it if you'll square things—"

"Shut up!" Barney said.

"I get it," Dean said. "The Thinker, only with clothes on."

Three slugs in Pomeroy from the same gun— Barney was certain he had fired twice. But he had no reason to doubt Benny Dean's word, and he certainly couldn't go in and ask Macallum about it. Because Macallum might get the idea that Barney was beginning to doubt his own guilt. And if there were three bullets in Pomeroy, Barney just wasn't the murderer.

Who, then? Betty? Barney had seen the girl leave the Pomeroy house after Pomeroy was dead. But had she entered the house after Pomeroy was dead? He didn't know.

What about Marsha? She had the opportunity. She was in the neighborhood when the killing took place. She had taken pains to tell Barney that she had waited there in Sam's Subway for over an hour.

But Betty had confessed. If she was shielding somebody—who? Not Marsha, certainly. Certainly not Mat Hopson. Barney, then?

Barney snorted. He got up and walked to the end of the corridor where the door into the traffic court was. Benny Dean followed him. Barney stepped into a pay-telephone booth in the corner and slammed the door in Dean's face. He slotted a nickel and called Dr. Fritz Wulfing.

"Fritz," Barney said, "stay where you are. I'm coming right over."

Barney left the building and went out for a taxi. He ordered the driver to take him to Sam's Subway in the Martindale apartment. It was nearly noon and Sam would be open for the luncheon trade. He got out in front of the basement cafe, told the driver to wait. Then he went in to see the cashier, whose cage was directly opposite the table at which Marsha Hopson had been sitting when Barney had run into her Sunday night. The cashier, who was Sam's eldest daughter, remembered Barney—she had noticed the blue-fox jacket Marsha was wearing.

"She came in about seven-thirty and sat at that table until her fella came in, Mr. Ghent," Sam's eldest said, chewing gum close to Barney's ear.

"That was her husband," Barney

said. "And Mrs. Hopson was right at that table all the time? She didn't leave your sight?"

"Not once," the girl said. "I guess she was sore at her husband for standing her up that long. She musta telephoned him and burned his ear for him."

"Then she did go out to telephone?" he asked.

The girl shook her head. "I wouldn't kid you, Mr. Ghent. She telephoned from our booth right here."

"When was that?"

"Before you came in, quite a bit. It musta been about ten minutes to eight and she talked a good six minutes. I figured she was jawing her husband."

"Thanks," Barney said.

"And what got me, Mr. Ghent, it's the brass of some people coming in here and sitting at a table, soaking up heat, and not buying a meal. Shortly after her husband turned up—just after you'd gone, in fact—she up and decides she don't want to eat here anyway."

"Thanks," Barney said again.

Barney went out to his cab, gave the driver Dr. Wulfing's address.

In front of the big red-brick house in which Fritz Wulfing lived and worked alone, Barney got out of the cab, paid off the driver. He entered the house by the side door which led into the office waiting-room. The consultation-room was closed, the clock card turned over to indicate that the doctor was in.

Barney knocked on the closed door with his knuckles. Wulfing jerked the door open, stood there staring, a thin, worn gray man with grave eyes deeply socketed.

"Barney," he said. "What did you do to your face?"

Barney grinned wryly.

"Don't worry, Fritz, I'm not going to die."

"So you found out?" he asked weakly.

"Yeah," Barney said. "I found out." He walked into the room and sat down. "Betty confessed to the murder of Pomeroy," he said.

On the other side of the glass-topped desk, Dr. Wulfing buried his face in his hands.

"How long have you known I wasn't going to die?" Barney asked quietly.

"Since two o'clock Monday morning," Wulfing said, "when I found you on the floor of your own living-room. I intended to tell you then, just as soon as I had told they had arrested Betty. I knew then that I had made a mistake in my diagnosis. But then you start in telling me how you had killed Pomeroy, and I saw a way out for Betty if you told that story to the police."

Wulfing raised his head. "Can you forgive me, Barney? I was afraid if you knew you were going to live you wouldn't be willing to lie to save Betty."

"Lie?" Barney's eyes narrowed. "How do you know I didn't kill Pomeroy?"

"I knew you couldn't have killed him with that gun I gave you. When you asked for a gun, I knew it wasn't for self-protection. So I fixed up the bullets so they couldn't do any harm."

"How?" Barney asked. "I thought you might try panning off blanks on me. I looked to see. They looked all right to me."

"I removed the lead from the cartridges and substituted some ordinary lubricating graphite I had in the garage," Wulfing explained. "I mixed the graphite with some adhesive cement, molded it to fit the cartridge cases and

look like bullets. I knew as soon as the shells went off the graphite would disintegrate harmlessly."

Barney's eyes narrowed. "Then you had two Chylewski revolvers in your collection? Two identical guns. I might have known that if a gun collector like you gave away one of the guns, he'd have a duplicate on hand."

"That's it," Wulfing said. "The gun found in Betty's studio was the mate to the one you had. It was the murder gun. But I couldn't tell you all that, Barney. I just couldn't!"

"Forget it," Barney snorted. "If there's no other out for Betty, I'll still take the rap for her. I'm just trying to get some things straight in my mind. I shot at Harry Pomeroy in the dark, though his figure was perfectly targeted against the night glow from the window. Then I lit a match to check up. There was blood on Pomeroy's shirt front, and I naturally thought I'd done the job. I was so sure of myself that when I telephoned the story of the killing to the paper, I said there were two shots in Pomeroy, when actually there were three."

"Someone stole that second Chylewski, the murder weapon, from my collection some time Sunday afternoon," Dr. Wulfing said. "You know my reception room is always open. I was out on a call. Anybody could have unlocked that door between the reception room and my residential quarters with a ten-cent skeleton key."

"And you think Betty stole it?"

"I—I don't know."

"And didn't it strike you queer that, out of all the guns you have, this gun thief should happen to choose the mate to the gun you gave me?" Barney asked.

"Well, yes."

"When did you find out from the Nevada authorities that Harry Pomeroy was not legally divorced from Marsha?"

"I got a telegram Saturday night," Wulfing replied.

"Who did you tell besides Betty?" Barney asked. "Didn't you tell Mat Hopson, too?"

Wulfing nodded. "I told Mat about it the first thing Sunday morning. I told him before I told Betty, as a matter of fact, hoping for some legal advice."

Barney reached for the doctor's telephone and also the directory. He looked up the number of the only business-survey bureau in town and dialed. When the connection was established he asked:

"Were any of your operators conducting a survey by telephone last Sunday night to find out the various products used by housewives?"

"We have not conducted a telephone survey in this city for nearly six months," was the immediate response.

Barney put the phone down. He looked at Wulfing and grinned.

"Well, we've got the killer. And it isn't Betty. Betty undoubtedly found the murder gun in her apartment, recognized it as yours, and thought you'd killed Pomeroy. She's been shielding you."

"Good Lord, Barney! Betty surely didn't take my threats seriously!"

Barney laughed. "So you threatened to kill Pomeroy?"

"I told Betty that, rather than see him marry her, I'd kill him—yes."

"Well, then you can't blame the kid," Barney said. "Let's get in your car and go catch us a murderer. And you'd better pick up one of your guns on the way. And no phony bullets, either!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

Honeymoon's Off!

FIFTEEN minutes later, they stopped the doctor's car in front of the white concrete house of Mat Hopson, went up to the door, and knocked. To Barney's surprise, it was Marsha who opened the door.

"I thought you were in Chicago," he said.

Marsha was obviously dressed to go somewhere.

"Just going," she said. "In fact, we—I'm late as it is. You don't mind if I don't ask you in, do you, Barney?"

"Not at all," Barney said.

He took off his hat and suddenly shoved Marsha back with his arm. He went through the doorway and Wulfing followed. Mat came out of the back bedroom.

"Well, Barney!" he said. "Glad to see you. But say, you'll have to excuse us. We're off on a second honeymoon, as it were. That beastly divorce mix-up—"

"Yeah," Barney said. "We know all about that. We can also figure that Harry Pomeroy died intestate, so that all the money he's milked out of this town and hoarded goes to his legal wife, friend Marsha here."

"That's perfectly true," Mat said, smiling. "A fortunate circumstance which somehow compensates for an unfortunate one."

"Awfully damned fortunate!" Barney said. "And as soon as you found out that Marsha was still legally married to Pomeroy, your legal mind figured out all the fortunate part of it. Marsha originally planned the phony-divorce scheme so that she would still have a hold on Pomeroy and his money, but you didn't know about that until Sunday.

"Sunday afternoon, you went to Wulfing's place and swiped a gun. You deliberately took a duplicate of the Chylewski which I had. Wulfing brought me my gun on Friday and I put it in my cigar humidor. Later, on Friday, you visited me. I told you to help yourself to a cigar, inasmuch as I wouldn't be smoking them any more. You saw my revolver then.

"The idea was to shoot Pomeroy with the gun you stole, then trade guns with me. You didn't mind framing me, because you knew I was going to die anyway. And my hatred of Pomeroy has never been any secret.

"Sunday night, after she had learned from her father that Pomeroy was not legally divorced, Betty went to Pomeroy's house. That was after you had killed Pomeroy and I had tried to kill him. Betty wanted to break off with Pomeroy, have it out with him about this divorce business. Marsha, who was stationed across the street in Sam's Subway, saw Betty go into the Pomeroy house. Betty must have passed on Sam's side of the street before crossing over. All of which gave Marsha an idea.

"You had planned to frame me for the killing. You and Marsha were watching my flat, waiting for me to turn up. Evidently you'd found some difficulty in forcing your way into my rooms. Marsha argued that she ought to be the one to switch the guns in order to frame me. You let her go to it. Marsha knocked me out. She looked for my gun in the cigar humidor, which you had told her was the place I usually kept it. Not finding it there, she searched until she found it in a drawer in my bedroom. She took my gun, but did not replace it with the murder weapon. She left my flat, con-

cealed the murder gun in her purse, gave you my gun, and told you she had carried out instructions."

"This is fantastic!" Hopson said.

"You didn't think it was fantastic in the wee small hours of Monday morning when you came to my flat with Macallum, Wulfing, and me," Barney said. "About the first thing you did was to check up on Marsha by taking a look into my humidor where Marsha *said* she had planted the murder weapon.

"Marsha wanted to frame Betty because she thought you and Betty were cheating on her, so she planted the murder gun in Betty's studio. And she also planted the latchkey to the rear door of the Pomeroy house. That was something you had overlooked. That latchkey belongs to Marsha. As Pomeroy's wife, she still had the keys to Pomeroy's house—a duplicate set which she had never given back. You had used that key to enter the house."

Hopson smiled, but not quite so confidently. "You are ignoring the testimony of the Pomeroy housekeeper, Mrs. Taylor. She said she would have heard anyone entering the house."

"Not if she happened to be telephoning at the time," Barney said. "Mrs. Taylor, being deaf in one ear, holds the receiver to her good ear. She'd be deaf to anything except what was coming out of the receiver. That's why she didn't hear you come in, go up the back stairs.

"Mrs. Taylor was on the phone when you killed Pomeroy because Marsha, planted across the street at Sam's Subway, was on the job, talking to Mrs. Taylor and pretending she was some sort of survey artist. Marsha called when she saw you approach the Pomeroy house, and she kept Mrs. Taylor on the phone until you were in the clear.

"Later, when I left you and Doc and Macallum in my apartment you suspected I was on the scent and had a short, heavy guy—some tough egg you'd played mouthpiece for in the past—tail me and beat me up out here in front of your house. I guess you must have figured that a good beating was about all it would take to put me away for good."

Mat Hopson was pretty casual about putting his hand into his suit-coat pocket, but not so casual about taking it out. He had a revolver in his hand, and Barney all but laughed as he recognized it as the Swiss Chylewski Fritz Wulfing had given him.

Mat said, "Marsha, go get the car out. When I've finished, I'll join you."

Barney clenched his fists, legged across the room toward Mat. Mat pulled the trigger and the short-barreled gun barked, blew black powder from the gun muzzle. A puzzled expression came over Mat's face. He fired two more times in rapid succession as Barney closed in. The shots didn't stop Barney. Mat ran toward the bedroom door.

"Hold it, Mat!" Fritz Wulfing warned. He'd pulled an ivory-handled .45 from somewhere inside his coat and covered both Mat and Marsha with it.

"You'd better get the police, Barney," the doctor said quietly. "I want Betty released as quickly as possible."

"Yes," Barney said. "We'll do a little switching around ourselves, such as substituting the real murderer for the principal false suspect."

He walked over to the phone, and with a life ahead of him to live, and half a chance with Betty— Well, there wasn't anything to keep him from trying, anyway. THE END

Smitty knows all about Hannah—how she does her hair, what perfume she uses, what she likes for breakfast. And then he finds her . . .

"Well, are you coming in or not?"

Good-By Hannah

By STEVE FISHER

THE captain said, "You've been drinking," and that was all he said about it so Smith thought he couldn't be looking so badly; yet Smith knew it wasn't the whisky—or anyway, not just the whisky—that made him look as if he had been hit in the face with a ton of wet towels. His skin was a grayish-white; and there was that glazed ebony in his eyes; and, there were lines coming around his mouth.

Oh, he was different, everything about him had changed, it was only that in the gray suit, and the felt hat that was shoved back on his head, and the unlit cigarette which hung in his mouth, he looked *somewhat* the same, so that people hadn't begun yet to really notice.

"Listen, Smitty," the captain went on, "what I called you about was 277, a new one, see? I want you to look at it. It might be Hannah Stevens."

Smith grew rigid with pulse throbbing in his throat, and light flaring in his eyes. He gripped the captain's arm, and the captain looked around and down at where his hand was.

"What's this?"

Smith released the grip and gradually found his voice. "You mean you think you've got Hannah here?"

"Well, we don't know. Suicide, nose-dive. Battered head—no face that you can recognize. No other identification, either."

Breathing again, Smith said, "Oh." Then: "Let's have a look at it."

They moved through the morgue along the rows of numbered ice vaults. The captain was saying, "Since you've got that case you'd know if it was her if anybody would. You know all about her, don't you?"

He said, "Yes, all about her. What kind of perfume she used, and where she got her hair done, and what movie stars she liked the best. I know what time she went to bed every night, and what time she got up. I know what her breakfasts were, I—"

"What are you—her brother?"

"No, I've never seen her. I'd never heard of her until you handed me the case three days ago. She was just another missing person. How many thousands have we every year? She was just a name on a card—"

But he stopped talking suddenly for the captain had turned in front of vault 277 and was pulling it out. It slid like a drawer. Smith's heart was massaging his chest, but he knew he had to look down and he did. There wasn't much of a head left. The hair had been copper. The body had been beautiful and young.

The captain said, "And still they come to New York in droves every year to act or model or write or marry a millionaire. I wish they could see her."

Smith was looking at the body and saying, "It isn't Hannah Stevens."

"It *isn't?*"

"No."

"How can you tell?"

"Hannah had a scar on her little toe. The hair on her legs was lighter, and there was a mole just over her hip."

"Listen, screwball, are you sure about that?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

"Okay," the captain said, and he shoved back the drawer. "Another one unidentified, that's all." They started walking back toward the office. "What kind of a dame is this Hannah Stevens?"

Smith was looking straight ahead of him. "She's beautiful," he said. "She's the most beautiful thing that ever walked on the earth. Her parents are worth half a million. She made her debut in Boston three years ago and then her folks moved to Newport and she spent most of her time in New York with the young crowd. I have a dozen pictures of her and so have about six of the town's biggest detective agencies."

"Well, you seem to know as much about her as—"

He held up his hand. "I haven't begun to know anything about her yet. She was engaged to a young man by the name of Ronald Watt. I intend to interview him. After that—"

"Listen," said the captain, "I think you've gone whacky, but it's all right. Just keep your face clean and let me know anything new that develops."

"Okay," said Smith, and he turned the cigarette around so that the dry part was in his mouth now. He moved past the captain and through the door.

He sat in his room with a bottle of rye on the table beside him and a lot of peanut shells scattered across the floor. He sat there with his hands fold-

ed, staring at the wall, or past it; and then he got up and did a turn around the room and came back, pouring more rye. Now he fixed his gaze on the dresser where her pictures were lined like a display in front of a motion picture theater.

He picked up the first picture and looked at her shining eyes. Someone had told him they were gray and her hair was the color of crystal-clear honey. He saw the strong cleft of her chin, and the thin, yet definite, nose line. He saw her beauty in a radiance that blinded him and he put the picture down and picked up the next.

He kept doing this, going over the pictures one by one, and then going back for another drink of rye. He had long ago ceased trying to reason with himself. He had quit looking at his vision in the mirror and saying, "You're going nuts, Johnny. They're going to come and get up and slap you in a straitjacket if you don't snap out of it." There was no longer comprehension, understanding, nor sanity of motive.

The pictures, her history, the fragments of things he had learned about her; the odor of her perfume that was on the handkerchief that was in his drawer; the torn stocking that he had picked out of the wastebasket in her apartment; the spilled face powder that he had scooped up and wrapped in tissue paper, all of these things he had of hers, all of the stories he had been told of her; everything second-hand, everything old and used; memories of someone he had never known, told him that he loved her.

At first it had been fascination and this had grown to obsession, and then beyond obsession, beyond all reason. When he tried to sleep he thought he heard what they had said was the rich lilt of her voice; he saw her in a shimmering gold gown, walking and talking and dancing; set against a background of a dazzling cut-glass Fifty-second Street cocktail bar, he saw the honey of hair on her shoulders, and he saw her lift a drink to her lips—

The clangor of the telephone jarred him. He went back to the bed and sat down. He picked up the instrument. "Johnny Smith," he said.

"This is Mrs. Stevens," said a soft, restrained voice. "Hannah's mother."

"Yes, Mrs. Stevens."

"I hope you don't mind—you said I could keep in touch with you. It helps, you know."

"Yes," he said, "I know it does." Then: "Have the private detectives—"

"No trace," Mrs. Stevens said.

There was a silence. . . .

"I see."

Emotion lifted her voice for the first time. "We all loved her so—we all want her back so badly, I can't understand why—"

"I know," said Johnny, quietly.

"I'm sending Ronald Watt over to your hotel," she went on, "you wanted to see him."

"Yes, thanks. It may help."

He talked to her for a moment longer and then hung up. He sat there wondering if Hannah's voice had been something like that—if it had had the same softness?

He put the liquor away and cleaned up the peanuts, after a fashion, brushing them all into one corner; then he got up and straightened his tie. He stuck an unlighted cigarette in his mouth and let it dangle there. Then he went to the window, waiting; he looked down ten stories on Manhattan. All of those lights she had known and

loved. Where was she? Why had she gone?

He stood here for some time, and then there was the telephone again.

"Mr. Watt downstairs."

"Send him up."

When Watt tapped on the door Johnny opened it, standing there, the cigarette in his mouth, his eyes flickering. "Come in," he said. He looked after the young man as he walked past him into the room; and then he closed the door, leaning back against it. He stood leaning against the door, not saying anything, watching Ronald Watt.

Watt was wearing country tweed but he would have looked better in tails and white tie, Johnny decided; his face in one way seemed weak, and in another showed strong possibilities. He had a high forehead, and brown eyes—bleak now—a drooping, though handsome mouth. His hat was in his hand and a boyish cowlick of hair overhung his forehead. He sat down on the edge of the bed.

"She was engaged to you?"

"You mean Miss Stevens."

"I mean Hannah Stevens," said Johnny.

"Yes, we were engaged." Watt was nervous.

"When did you see her last?"

"On the night before she—she disappeared."

"Explain everything leading up to that. I know after she left you she was seen in two other places alone, at the bars. I know she got in a taxicab and said to the driver, 'Just drift around the park, please,' and that she got out of the cab, in the park, at around Ninety-sixth Street, and that no one, apparently, has seen her since. But tell me up to the point where she left you. *Everything!*"

"Why, there isn't much to tell, Mr. Smith. For a month she'd been avoiding me. I kept calling at her apartment. I kept leaving messages; several times I sat all night in front waiting for her to come in, but she never did. And she wasn't at home. But finally she gave in and saw me twice for lunch—that is, twice in succession, and then she agreed to go to dinner with me. Well, we'd had dinner, and we were drinking cocktails, and everything seemed swell again; she seemed to be her old self, warming up to me, and I thought pretty soon I'd say, 'Honey, let's hurry up and get married. I can't stand being without you.' Then she saw someone pass through the dining-room."

"Who?"

"I don't know. I asked her and she laughed and said, 'Only the friend of a friend,' but after that she seemed nervous, and finally she took my hand and looked at me in the way that only she can, Mr. Smith. She said, 'Angel, you're rich and spoiled, and a no-good scoundrel, but I love you. Always remember that, will you? That I love you.' She said that, and then she got up. I thought she would be right back. So I sat there. I sat there for an hour and a half."

"That's the last you saw of her?"

"That's the last," said Watt. He had noticed the pictures of Hannah on the dresser and was looking at them.

Smith said, "Why did she call you a scoundrel, Watt?"

"Just an affectionate term. Nothing—"

"Don't lie, Watt."

Ronald Watt leaped to his feet. "I'm not!"

Johnny grabbed the front of his coat and shoved him back down on the bed. "You are, you little punk and I'm go-

ing to wallop the head off of you if you don't tell me the whole truth. I told you I had to know everything. I don't know what's the matter with those private cops you've hired, but to me it's obvious that she disappeared on account of you."

"That's a—"

Johnny slapped him across the mouth. "The sooner you talk, Watt, the better."

"Let me out of here!"

"You're not going to get out, and you're going to talk if I have to kill you."

"Blast you, you let me out," Watt said between clenched teeth, and he rose, shoving against Johnny. Johnny clipped him under the jaw, and then he held him up against the wall and slapped him. When he finally let him drop to the bed Ronald Watt sat there with his face bloody and said:

"I don't know what you want me to tell you. Unless it's why Hannah turned cool toward me in the first place. I was doing a little gambling." He looked up, his face pale now. "Old story, isn't it? My family didn't know, no one did except Hannah and she found out by accident. Well, I got in pretty deeply. Damn deeply. I didn't dare open about it to my father and Nicki said I had my choice. He said welshers, no matter who they were, usually had a bad time of it, if I knew what he meant, and I did. They had *accidents*, maybe playing polo. At least that was the rumor, and I was scared stiff."

"I'll bet," said Johnny.

"So he said I had my choice, either that or—or I could work for him. My family was social and—well, he just wanted a little information now and then and—ah, letters and things I might be able to pick up."

"You mean you were to be the go-between for a blackmail racket that Nicki was running."

"Well—"

"That's what you were. Well, the last mug that did that got made the fall guy when the thing fell through—and landed in prison. But go on."

Watt's face was strained. "What could I do? I pleaded with them, and—as it turned out—"

"I suppose Nicki told you to go home and forget it. To forget you owed him money, that he had reconsidered and decided you were too nice a guy to do work like that."

"No," Watt said, "not exactly that. They let me play again one night. I won back every cent I had lost and more on top of it. So what could Nicki do? He had to let me go. That's why I saw, and still see, no reason for telling it. I never did the work. It was just a proposition, and then I got out of it by—"

"—By winning back the money. Fool! You didn't win it back. Nicki *gave* it back to you! Know why?"

"Why?"

"Hannah!"

Ronald Watt stared for a moment. and then his jaw gaped open, and his face turned crimson.

"Now get out," said Johnny. "Get out before I kill you."

When Johnny Smith got outside, it was raining. He ducked across the sidewalk and got into a cab. He slammed the door and mumbled an address, and then he sat staring at the shining streets, and the lights along Broadway, at the street cars, and buses, at the night clubs, and the big cars pulling up in front of theaters; he sat seeing the rain slap against the window, and hearing the music from the radio, and

remembering the words Watt had told him Hannah had said before she left.

He remembered that Hannah had taken his hand and said to Watt: "You're a no-good scoundrel, but I love you. Always remember that, will you? That I love you?" He thought of this, and of a song Noel Coward had written: *Mad About the Boy;* and he kept watching the rain on the window of the taxicab.

The cab stopped at an apartment on Ninety-seventh Street near Central Park West, and Johnny got out, looking at the entrance of the building. He walked across and went inside, and showed the elevator man his badge, and put a twenty-dollar bill in his hand, saying, "I want a passkey, and directions to Nicki Spioni's apartment." He had no trouble at all. The elevator man unlocked the door for him and then beat it.

Johnny stepped inside, closing the door behind him. There were a man and two women in the living-room, drinking cocktails, and then Nicki, squat and hard-faced, came in from the kitchen with a drink in his hand. He saw Johnny and the drink slipped and fell, the glass breaking. He said:

"What is this, mister?"

"Get your friends out, Nicki," Johnny said.

"Listen to him," said Nicki.

"I came about Hannah," Johnny murmured.

Nicki's face changed. "Who are you?"

"I'm a cop."

Nicki looked at his friends and they got up, staring coldly at Johnny but not saying anything. They found their wraps and got out. Johnny locked the door. When he turned around Nicki had a gun in his hand.

"All right, copper, now you can tell me just what kind of a caper this is."

Johnny smiled thinly and put an unlit cigarette in his mouth. "Too bad you weren't at your club tonight. I telephoned, had a couple of federal men go down to look at your books; couple of city cops went along, think they might pick up a little evidence that will send you up for blackmail."

Nicki gulped, his Adam's apple bulging from his throat. "Is this—a pinch?"

"Not this," said Johnny, "the pinch will come later. But not from me."

"Get out of my way then," Nicki said, "I'm getting out of here."

Johnny put the sole of one foot against the door and folded his arms. "You aren't going yet. I have a few questions about Hannah."

Nicki's face muscles flinched. "I don't know nothing about her."

"No?"

"No, I don't. And you'd better move, or one of these slugs will move you, and I'll roll you aside."

"You won't shoot," Johnny said. "You're too yellow to shoot anybody, Nicki. You go in for blackmail. You go it the dirty way. But you wouldn't kill anybody. You're too afraid of the chair. We both know that, so you can put the gun down and tell me about Hannah or you'll go to the chair anyway—for *her* murder."

"What do you mean?"

"You were the last one to see her. She got out of a cab at Central Park near Ninety-sixth, and came over here. What happened then?"

"She didn't, she— How do you know what she did?"

"Listen, Nicki, we won't go into that. I just want to know what happened."

The squat man was sweating. He put

his gun in his pocket, and mopped his face with a handkerchief. But the sweat came faster than he could wipe it off. There was a wild look in his dark eyes; he raised heavy brows, said:

"What else do you think you know?"

"That you made a bargain with her. She was a pawn for Ronald Watt. What did you tell her you were going to do to Watt?"

Nicki was trembling, he seemed to go all to pieces. He suddenly put his arms up over his face and sat down on the divan, he sat there for a moment, and Johnny stood at the door watching him.

"Somebody told me—about her—" he whispered. His fists were clenched. "I told her I was going to use Watt but if she could get the money he owed it'd be okay. She tried—couldn't get the money. Couldn't explain why she needed thirty thousand dollars. She got an allowance, but I wouldn't take payments on installments from Watt so why from her? Then I—I got that idea—I told her after we'd used Watt awhile we'd kill him. I made her think Watt didn't have a chance, and the little punk didn't. I wouldn't have killed him, that was bluff, but *he* thought I would, and so did she—" He stopped.

"Go on," Johnny said.

"I told her—if she'd come around—if she'd be regular to me—if she wouldn't see anybody but me for a month and—"

"Never mind the details."

"Well," Nicki went on, "that was all right. It was all right, see? I let her see Watt win back his money. I let her see that he was clear. He told her he'd never gamble again. So she thought—that she had saved his life—or I had, and—"

"So what happened?" said Johnny.

"That's it," Nicki whispered, "that's it. I've wanted to tell somebody." He pounded his chest. "It's been here, up inside me. It's been killing me. She was a good sport. She was the squarest kid that ever lived. Never a peep out of her, do you see? Never a squawk. There was never a finer woman ever lived—" Nicki's hands were in his hair now; it was awful to look at him. "Then do you know what happened—"

"Tell me," said Johnny quietly.

"I fell in love with her. Me, Nicki Spioni, I fell in love with her. I was crazy for her. I wanted to marry her. I told her I'd marry her and go straight—just run my club or go away, out West, to Honolulu, anywhere. I'd give her jewels, money, anything in the world she wanted. But she had all that. All of it. She was no cheap chorus girl. She was no Cinderella model, no ham actress. She had everything, I wasn't giving her a thing, I was taking—taking—"

"I don't want to hear that, I want to know what happened."

"The month ended, and she started seeing Watt again. She was crazy for that yellow bastard. I don't know why. She loved him like I loved her. She ate and slept and dreamed him. There wasn't anything in the world she wouldn't do for him. I had taken her pride, I had taken everything from her, but she thought she could go back to him because it had been his jam, and she had gone to bat. She figured that put them on the same plane, and they could go on and be happy even though she'd never tell him about it.

"I was crazy with jealousy. I wanted to kill the guy. I wanted to shoot myself. I was going nuts. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't eat. Just the thought of her

with him turned me inside out. But I couldn't do anything. She had kept her bargain and I was supposed to keep mine. I was supposed to but finally I couldn't. I couldn't, see? I cracked, do you get it? Went whacky!

"I found out where she was dining with Watt and sent one of my boys there. He passed the table and gave her a signal. When she went out to meet him he told her I wanted to see her, and double quick, or Watt was going to get bumped. Well, she went to pieces then. She had thought I'd be square, too. Oh, what a fool she was to trust *me*—to think that Nicki Spioni could keep his word!" He sucked in breath.

"Well, she came up here to have it out with me," Nicki went on, "she came up here, and I was blind drunk. She was going to marry Watt and she never wanted to see me again. I did everything to keep her. I cried. I got down on my hands and knees and begged. I crawled on the floor for her. But she wouldn't listen. I kept drinking. The room was spinning in a waltz. All I could hear was her saying: 'No! No! No!' I went out in the kitchen and got a knife and said if I couldn't have her nobody would. I said that, then I changed it and said if she went out I'd cut my throat right there in front of her.

"I said everything and anything that came to my mind. But she started to go anyway. She started to go. I tried to stop her, and there was a scuffle. But she got out. I stood there looking at the door and then I came back here to the divan sobbing. Oh, I know men don't cry. But I did, I tell you. Like a damn kid. I fell on the divan crying, tearing out my heart, and then I passed out cold. I haven't seen her since."

"You didn't kill her?"

"No! I loved her! I loved her!" Nicki said.

"But more than that—?"

Nicki looked up, his face strangely white, his voice suddenly quiet. He seemed to be looking past Johnny. Then he slipped to his knees. He looked like nothing human. "One of—the boys—thought he saw her—on Seventy-second Street."

That was all he said, Johnny couldn't make him say another word. When the federal agents came about the tax evasion he was still there on his knees looking as if he had lost his mind. He didn't seem to see them at all. When they led him through the door he leaned on them for support as though the flame that was Hannah had burned his eyes from his sockets, and had taken his soul from his miserable body.

West Seventy-second Street: rain and sleet, night after night. You start at West End Avenue, at the drugstore on the corner and walk up. An apartment here, a hotel there. The corner of Broadway, the subway island, on across, the cigar store, the bank, a fur shop, the automat . . . up and down . . . faces, old, young, haggard, painted. Eventually a repetition of faces—the same faces, the same people, up and down . . .

Night after night.

He knew every store by name, he knew every merchant, he had been in every apartment and hotel. Over and over he had said: "Beautiful—the most beautiful creature that ever walked on this earth. Honey-blond hair, about five feet four, carries her shoulders back, has a proud walk. Beautiful, the most beautiful creature—" The echo of his descriptions. Laughter. Parties. The

Sunday papers on Saturday night. "Her name is Hannah Stevens, she's the most—"

He watched her name fade from the papers as other news crowded out the story of her disappearance. The last news he read was that anyone who discovered Hannah would receive ten thousand dollars reward. He read that and smiled grimly, and kept walking. At night he looked at her pictures, and talked to them. Other cases were piled a foot deep in his file. Missing persons. Family hysteria. Descriptions. Suicides. The click of ice vaults, in and out. "Is this the man you were looking for?" "Is this the child you lost?" "Is this your mother who wandered off last Tuesday night?"

Everything in a swirl. His mind going—gradually. Hannah dominating every thought. The captain's lectures. "Lay off the drinks, Smith." The sobbing women at the office, the laughing husband: "My wife just disappeared." The cranks: "I'm going to commit suicide, so don't look for me!" The captain again: "Now, Smith, you've *got* to find this one, she's probably right over the bridge in Brooklyn; didn't she have a boy friend who—"

But the nights were his own. Seventy-second Street. Up and down, heavy steps, nodding to the merchants.

He saw her on Saturday of the sixth week.

He had been in a market looking for her when she brushed by him and he caught the odor of the perfume and the powder, though it seemed heavier than he had imagined Hannah would use, and he turned to see her back, to see her moving off down the street. He stood watching, trembling, petrified. He had not seen her face and yet he knew that it was she. He knew her better than she knew herself.

He began following, watching the even swing of her legs. He ran a little to catch up, and he heard the click of her high heels on the sidewalk. She walked down to Riverside Drive and turned right. In a moment she entered an old apartment building. He hurried now to stop her, but the door clicked shut, and locked, and she went on in, through the inside door. He had seen no more than her back, the honey color of her hair, but he knew it was she.

He waited there, hearing the traffic on Riverside Drive, seeing the lights on the Parkway beside the Hudson. He had always known, had always been certain that someday he would find her, but now that he had he could not diagnose his emotion beyond a feeling of great triumph. To see her, to talk to her in the flesh, not to her picture.

He climbed the steps of the apartment and scanned the names under the bells. Her name was not there, but she had changed it, of course. He rang the manager's bell. It buzzed and he went in and stood in a dimly lit hall. A fat woman clad in calico waddled out and looked him over.

"Can you tell me where I can find a blond girl who lives here. She's the most beautiful creature that—"

"Upstairs, first door on your right. Only blond we have in the house."

"Thank you," he said. "Thank you." He hurried up the stairs, making a lot of noise, and then he stood in front of her door. In front of Hannah Stevens's apartment. A door opened down the hall and a young woman clad in a kimono looked at him. She kept standing there. He looked the other way, and then another door opened. He did not glance toward it. Hannah's door opened finally. She was there, there in front

of him. Her cheeks were rouged, and she was dressed in a red kimono.

She smiled woodenly. "Come in, honey," she said.

But he stood there, staring at her, and at a jagged knife scar that was slantwise across her cheek. It was puffed and red and made her look ugly. Words tumbled through his mind.

"*I had the knife and I told her I was going to stab myself, but she tried to go anyway, and there was a scuffle. . . . One of the boys saw her on Seventy-second Street. . . .*"

He remembered these words, looking at her, into her gray eyes, at her honey-colored hair; then he remembered farther back than that, the last thing she had said to Ronald Watt: "*You're rich, and spoiled, and a no-good scoundrel, but I love you. Always remember that, will you? That I love you.*"

"Well, are you coming in or not?"

"No, it—it was a mistake."

He fled down the steps like a fool, rockets exploding in his temples.

At the corner of Seventy-second and West End Avenue he went into the drugstore and telephoned.

"Listen, Captain," he said, "remember that old case—Hannah Stevens? Well, I've found out that I was all wet. Yeah—ain't that funny? I was screwy. First time in my life. I just found out tonight. She was the corpse in ice vault 277—that one with the battered head—"

When he hung up the telephone, he whispered, "Good-by, Hannah," and then he put an unlighted cigarette in his mouth and got up and left the booth. He walked briskly toward Broadway.

THE UNLOVING WIFE AND THE MALICIOUS LANDLADY

JAMES WHALE, a man of good character who lived in Sussex in the 18th century, took to wife a young woman named Anne, who had a violent temper and acquaintances of dubious social standing. Following a misunderstanding between Anne and Sarah Pledge, their landlady, he forbade Sarah to enter the Whales' apartment. The two ladies having composed their differences, Sarah proposed to Anne that they get rid of "the devil" (meaning poor Whale). The none-too-devoted bride queried how it could be done and Sarah brightly suggested some poison. Anne readily assented to the proposed project, perhaps hoping thus to relieve the ennui of daily existence.

Their first sally into this novel field of endeavor showed imagination —they roasted spiders and introduced them into Whale's beer—but proved quite ineffective. Whale survived—perhaps with a belch or two above par. Sarah then made the rounds of the apothecary shops and finally secured some poison. Anne quietly and happily added a copious portion of it to some hasty pudding which she fed her husband for supper. Whale died the next day—"hasty" pudding indeed!

But alas for the enterprising pair: foul play was suspected; accused, the ladies confessed. Before a great gathering, Sarah was hanged and Anne, the self-made widow, strangled and burned at the stake.

(Adapted from "The Newgate Calendar")

Let's Play "Poison"

By RAY BRADBURY

"WE HATE YOU!" cried the sixteen boys and girls rushing and crowding about Michael in the schoolroom. Michael screamed. Recess was over, but Mr. Howard, the teacher, was still absent from the filling room.

"We hate you!" and the sixteen boys and girls, bumping and clustering and breathing, raised a window. It was three flights down to the sidewalk. Michael flailed.

They took hold of Michael and pushed him out the window.

Mr. Howard, their teacher, came into the room. "Wait a minute!" he shouted.

Michael fell three flights. Michael died.

Nothing was done about it. The police shrugged eloquently. These children were all eight or nine, they didn't understand what they were doing. So.

Mr. Howard's breakdown occurred the next day. He refused, ever again, to teach. "But, why?" asked his friends. Mr. Howard gave no answer. He remained silent and a terrible light filled his eyes, and later he remarked that if he told them the truth they would think him quite insane.

Mr. Howard left Madison City. He went to live in a small near-by town, Green Bay, for seven years, on an income managed from writing stories and poetry.

He never married. The few women he approached always desired—children.

In the autumn of his seventh year of self-enforced retirement, a good friend of Mr. Howard's, a teacher, fell ill. For lack of a proper substitute, Mr. Howard was summoned and convinced that it was his duty to take over the class. Because he realized the appointment could last no longer than a few weeks, Mr. Howard agreed, unhappily.

"Sometimes," announced Mr. Howard, slowly pacing the aisles of the schoolroom on that Monday morning in September, "sometimes, I actually believe that children are invaders from another dimension."

He stopped, and his shiny dark eyes snapped from face to face of his small audience. He held one hand behind him, clenched. The other hand, like a pale animal, climbed his lapel as he talked and later climbed back down to toy with his ribboned glasses.

"Sometimes," he continued, looking at William Arnold and Russell Newell, and Donald Bowers and Charlie Hencoop, "sometimes I believe children are little monsters thrust out of hell, because the devil could no longer cope

with them. And I certainly believe that everything should be done to reform their uncivil little minds."

Most of his words ran unfamiliarly into the washed and unwashed ears of Arnold, Newell, Bowers and Company. But the tone inspired one to dread. The little girls lay back in their seats, against their pigtails, lest he yank them like bell-ropes, to summon the dark angels. All stared at Mr. Howard, as if hypnotized.

"You are another race entirely, your motives, your beliefs, your disobediences," said Mr. Howard. "You are not human. You are—children. Therefore, until such time as you are adults, you have no right to demand privileges or question your elders, who know better."

He paused, and put his elegant rump upon the chair behind the neat, dustless desk.

"Living in your world of fantasy!" he said, scowling darkly. "Well, there'll be no fantasy here. You'll soon discover that a ruler on your hand is no dream, no faerie frill, no Peter Pan excitement."

He snorted. "Have I frightened you? I have. Good! Well and good. You deserve to be. I want you to know where we stand. I'm not afraid of you, remember that. I'm not afraid of you."

His hand trembled and he drew back in his chair as all their eyes stared at him.

"Here!" He flung a glance clear across the room. "What're you whispering about, back there? Some necromancy or other?"

A little girl raised her hand. "What's necromancy?"

"We'll discuss that when our two young friends, Mr. Arnold and Mr. Bowers, explain their whispers. Well, young men?"

Donald Bowers arose. "We don't like you. That's all we said." He sat down again.

Mr. Howard raised his brows. "I like frankness, truth. Thank you for your honesty. But, simultaneously, I do not tolerate flippant rebellion. You'll stay an hour after school tonight and wash the boards."

After school, walking home, with autumn leaves falling both before and after his passing, Mr. Howard caught up with four of his students. He rapped his cane sharply on the sidewalk.

"Here, what are you children doing?"

The two startled boys and girls jerked as if struck upon their shoulders by his cane.

"Oh," they all said.

"Well." demanded the man, "explain! What were you doing here when I came up?"

William Arnold said, "Playing poison."

"Poison!" Their teacher's face twisted. He was carefully sarcastic. "Poison, poison, playing poison. Well. And how does one play poison?"

Reluctantly, William Arnold ran off.

"Come back here!" shouted Mr. Howard.

"I'm only showing you," said the boy, hopping over a cement block of the sidewalk. "How we play poison. Whenever we come to a dead man we jump over him."

"One does, does one?"said Mr. Howard.

"If you jump on a dead man's grave, then you're poisoned and fall down and die," explained Isabel Skelton, much too brightly.

"Dead men, graves, poisoned," Mr.

Howard said, mockingly. "Where do you get this dead-man idea?"

"See?" said Clara Parris, pointing with her arithmetic. "On this square, the name of the two dead men."

"Ridiculous," retorted Mr. Howard, squinting down. "Those are simply the names of the contractors who mixed and laid the cement sidewalk."

Isabel and Clara both gasped wildly and turned accusing eyes to the two boys. "You said they were gravestones!" they cried, almost together.

William Arnold looked at his feet. "Yeah. They are. Well, almost. Anyway." He looked up. "It's late. I gotta go home. So long."

Clara Parris looked at the two little names cut into the sidewalk. "Mr. Kelly and Mr. Terrill," she read the names. "Then these aren't graves? Mr. Kelly and Mr. Terrill aren't buried here? See, Isabel, that's what I told you, a dozen times I did."

"You did not," sulked Isabel.

"Deliberate lies." Mr. Howard tapped his cane in an impatient code. "Falsification of the highest caliber. Good God, Mr. Arnold, Mr. Bowers, there'll be no more of this, do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," mumbled the boys.

"Speak up!"

"Yes, sir," they replied again.

Mr. Howard swung off swiftly down the street. William Arnold waited until he was out of sight before he said, "I hope a bird drops something right smack on his nose—"

"Come on, Clara, let's play poison," said Isabel hopefully.

Clara pouted. "It's been spoiled. I'm going home."

"I'm poisoned!" cried Donald Bowers, falling to the earth and frothing merrily. "Look, I'm poisoned! Gahhh!"

"Oh," cried Clara angrily, and ran away.

Saturday morning Mr. Howard glanced out his front window and swore when he saw Isabel Skelton making chalk marks on his sidewalk and then hopping about, making a monotonous sing-song with her voice.

"Stop that!"

Rushing out, he almost flung her to the pavement in his emotion. He grabbed her and shook her violently and let her go and stood over her and the chalk marks.

"I was only playing hopscotch," she sobbed, hands over her eyes.

"I don't care, you can't play it here," he declared. Bending, he erased the chalk marks with his handkerchief, muttering. "Young witch. Pentagrams. Rhymes and incantations, and all looking perfectly innocent, God, how innocent. You little *fiend!*"

He made as if to strike her, but stopped. Isabel ran off, wailing.

"Go ahead, you little fool!" he screamed furiously. "Run off and tell your little cohorts that you've failed. They'll have to try some other way! They won't get around me, they won't, oh, no!"

He stalked back into his house and poured himself a stiff drink of brandy and drank it down. The rest of the day he heard the children playing kick-the-can, hide-and-seek, Over-Annie-Over, jacks, tops, mibs, and the sound of the little monsters in every shrub and shadow would not let him rest.

Another week of this, he thought, *and I'll be stark staring.* He flung his hand to his aching head. "God in heaven, why weren't we all born adults?"

Another week, then. And the hatred growing between him and the children.

. . . the hate and fear growing apace—the nervousness, the sudden tantrums over nothing, and the silent waiting, and now—this!

The hate and the fear growing apace. The nervousness, the sudden tantrums over nothing, and then—the silent waiting, the way the children climbed the trees and looked at him as they swiped late apples, the melancholy smell of autumn settling in around the town, the days growing short, the night coming too soon.

But they won't touch me, they won't dare *touch me*, thought Mr. Howard, sucking down one glass of brandy after another. *It's all very silly anyhow, and there's nothing to it. I'll soon be away from here, and—them. I'll soon—*

There was a white skull at the window.

It was eight o'clock of a Thursday evening. It had been a long week, with the angry flares and the accusations. He had had to continually chase the children away from the water-main excavation in front of his house. Children loved excavations, hiding-places, pipes and conduits and trenches, and they were ever ascramble over and on and down in and up out of the holes where the new pipes were being laid. It was all finished, thank the Lord, and tomorrow the workmen would shovel in the earth and tamp it down and put in a new cement sidewalk, and that would eliminate the children. But, right now—

There was a white skull at the window!

There could be no doubt that a boy's hand held the skull against the glass, tapping and moving it. There was a childish tittering from outside.

Mr. Howard burst from the house. "Hey, you!" He exploded into the midst of the three running boys. He leaped after them, shouting and yelling. The street was dark, but he saw the figures dart beyond and below him. He saw them sort of bound and could not remember the reason for this, until too late.

The earth opened under him. He fell and lay in a pit, his head taking a terrific blow from a laid water pipe, and as he lost consciousness he had an impression as of an avalanche, set off by his fall, cascading down cool moist pellets of dirt upon his pants, his shoes, upon his coat, upon his spine, upon the back of his neck, his head, filling his mouth, his ears, his eyes, his nostrils. . . .

The neighbor lady with the eggs wrapped in a napkin, knocked on Mr. Howard's door the next day for five minutes. When she opened the door, finally, and walked in, she found nothing but specules of rug-dust floating in the sunny air, the big halls were empty, the cellar smelled of coal and clinkers, and the attic had nothing in it but a rat, a spider, and a faded letter.

"Funniest thing," she said many times in the following years, "what ever happened to Mr. Howard."

And adults, being what they are, never observant, paid no attention to the children playing "Poison" on Oak Bay Street, in all the following autumns. Even when the children leaped over one particular square of cement, twisted about and glanced at the marks on it which read:

M. Howard—R.I.P.

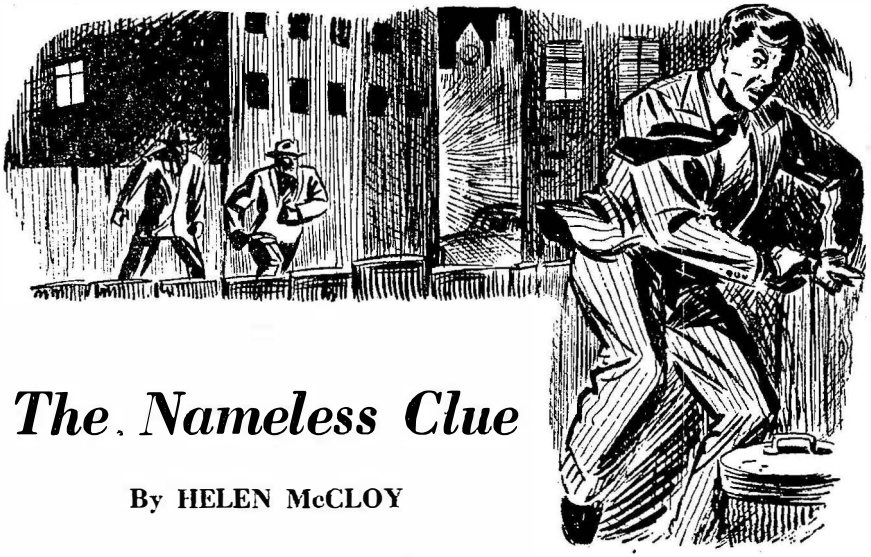
"Who's Mr. Howard, Billy?"

"Aw, I guess he's the guy who laid the cement."

"What does 'R.I.P.' mean?"

"Aw, who knows? You're poison! you stepped on it!"

"Get along, get along, children; don't stand in Mother's path! Get along now!"



The Nameless Clue

By HELEN McCLOY

Of course there IS a clue, but even when Alec Norton finds it he doesn't know what it is, or how it fits into the case of the murdered actress.

CHAPTER ONE

Second-Rate Corpse

ALEC NORTON was startled. He could only echo his chief's words. "You want me to sleep in a room where murder has just been committed?"

"Why not?" The feature editor of the Syndicated Press stood in his office, his back to a window overlooking New York harbor. His head was dark against the pale winter sky. A grin tugged one corner of his hard mouth. "Afraid of ghosts?"

Alec gave him look for look. "Fun's fun, chief, but I'm no detective. I'm a feature writer and—"

"You won't be a feature writer for long unless you learn to take assignments without squawking!" snapped the chief. "This may be a big story—bigger than you think. There's been too many unsolved murders in Pearson City lately."

"Okay, I'm a wage slave." Alec subsided, grumbling. "Let's have the dope."

"Diana Beauclerk was murdered in a suite at the Hotel Westmore in Pearson City. There were signs of a violent struggle—chairs overturned, blood on the rug, blood in the bathtub where the murderer appears to have washed his hands. But there were no clues—absolutely no clues of any kind."

The chief paused.

Alec responded slowly and distinct-

ly, "Baloney!"

"That's what I think. Where there's been a struggle there are bound to be clues. But the police have dropped the case. I want you to go to Pearson City and find out why—first-hand stuff for your modern-crime series. Take the same train Diana Beauclerk took and get there at the same time. Go to the same hotel and occupy the same suite —1105."

"Will the hotel rent it so soon after the crime?"

"Why not? The police have finished with it. When a murder is committed in a hotel, the scene of the crime is always rented sooner or later. The number of the suite hasn't been published in any newspaper. To the hotel people, you'll just be an innocent tourist who happens to ask for that particular suite."

"Still, they may not want to rent it."

"That's your headache. Once inside, keep your eyes open!"

"For what?" Alec was growing more and more skeptical. "The police will have gone over every square inch of the place with a fine-tooth comb. The hotel people will have scoured and vacuumed it. Ten to one, it's been redecorated!"

"There's always a chance they may have overlooked something," returned the chief. "I'm betting on that chance. Interview the bellboy and chambermaid who waited on Beauclerk. Study the topography of the suite. Soak up local color. Re-enact everything Beauclerk did. Try to imagine you're going to be murdered yourself the night you arrive between eleven p.m. and one a.m."

Alec smirked. "Cheerful way to spend an evening!" A sudden thought wiped the smirk from his face. "Holy cats! Suppose the murderer should return to the scene of the crime!"

The chief's eyes gleamed. He spoke softly. "That is exactly what I'm hoping for. After all, the murderer is still at large. And the key to the suite is still missing."

On the train Alec refreshed his memory of the Beauclerk case by reading teletype fiimsies—spot-news stories about the crime sent out by the *Pearson City Star*, a member of the Syndicated Press.

Diana Beauclerk was a second-rate actress living in New York. Two weeks ago she had gone west to Pearson City. Daniel Forbes, her divorced husband, lived there. So did the firm of lawyers who had got her the divorce, Kimball and Stacy. She reached Pearson City at nine p.m. and went straight to the Hotel Westmore. She telephoned the junior partner of her law firm, Martin Stacy, and asked him to call at her hotel that evening.

At the time of her divorce Forbes had promised to pay her a lump sum in lieu of further alimony if she remarried. According to Stacy, she told him she was planning to re-marry and she wanted him to ask Forbes for the lump sum. Stacy replied that it would bankrupt Forbes, who had just sunk all his money in a real-estate venture.

Stacy said he left her suite at nine-forty-five p.m. She was in good health and spirits, but still determined to get the money from Forbes. No one saw Stacy leave. No other visitor inquired for her that evening.

Next morning she was found dead in her suite with a bullet from a .22-caliber Colt revolver in her brain. According to the medical examiner, she was shot between eleven p.m. and one a.m.

Her door was locked and the key was missing. So was the gun.

When Alec finished reading he was sure that either Forbes or Stacy had killed Diana Beauclerk. Forbes had a motive and Stacy an opportunity. Find a motive for Stacy or an opportunity for Forbes and the case would be solved.

Chapter Two

Setup for Murder

THE Hotel Westmore proved to be one of the older hotels in Pearson City. Alec's first impression of the lobby was gloomy, Victorian dignity—black walnut and red plush, a black and white tiled floor and Persian rugs.

He studied the night clerk as a man measures an adversary. "I'd like the room I had the last time I was here."

"Certainly, sir." The clerk was young and limp with a tired smile. "Do you recall the number?"

"It was 1105."

The clerk's smile congealed. "That suite is taken."

Alec's glance went to a chart of guest names and room numbers hanging on the wall behind the clerk. Opposite the number 1105 stood one word: *Unoccupied.*

The clerk's glance followed Alec's. "We have better rooms vacant now," he babbled. "Larger and more comfortable. At the same rate."

Alec's face was dark, blunt and sulky. He always looked impertinent and he could look dangerous. He was looking dangerous now. He raised his voice. "Anything wrong with the plumbing in 1105?"

There was a sudden stillness in the lobby. Two women, who had been chattering like parrots, were struck dumb. A man, lighting a match for his cigar, paused until the flame burned his fingers. Even the bellboys on their bench were listening.

The clerk's eyes flickered. "Of course not!" Everyone was tense, quiet.

"Anybody with a contagious disease been in there?"

"No!" The clerk was almost hysterical. "It's just that—well, 1105 is being redecorated."

"I don't believe it." Alec leaned on the desk, holding the clerk's eyes with his. "Suppose you tell me the real reason," he drawled. "There might be a story in it."

"St-story?"

"I'm with the Syndicated Press. Feature Service. Either I get the story—or I get the suite."

It was blackmail and the clerk knew it. "There is no story," he piped tremulously. "Front! Show this gentleman to 1105!"

The stillness persisted as Alec followed a bellboy across the lobby to the elevator. He could feel eyes on his back. He wished it had not been necessary to announce the number of his suite quite so publicly.

The corridor on the eleventh floor was dimly lighted by electric globes at intervals of thirty feet. A thick, crimson carpet muffled every footfall. At the end of the corridor Alec noticed a door marked: *Fire Stairs.* It was a neat setup for murder.

The bellboy unlocked a white door numbered 1105. The room was dark but a neon sign flashed and faded beyond the window. A few snowflakes sifted down through that theatrical red glow, languid as falling feathers. Hastily the boy switched on a ceiling light.

The room looked normal and even

commonplace. There was no hint of a violent struggle now. Deal furniture with a mahogany finish was neatly arranged as if it stood in the window of a department store. The blue rug was suspiciously bright and new. It had never been stained with blood. Table covers and towels were clean, ashtrays empty and supplied with fresh matches. The mirror over the bureau was a blank eye, round and innocent.

Alec played the part of an innocent tourist. "Is there anything wrong with this room?"

"N-no." The boy dropped his eyes.

"Afraid you'll lose your job if you don't keep your mouth shut?"

The boy raised his eyes. "Listen, mister. If you want my advice, pack up and take the next train back to New York."

"Were you on duty here two weeks ago?"

The boy hesitated. Then, "I'm not talking. But I wouldn't spend a night in here for a million bucks!"

He was in a hurry to get out of the room. Alec gave him a quarter and let him go.

Alone, Alec examined the doors. There were three—one leading to a bathroom, one to the hall, and one to the room next door. It was immovable—locked or bolted on the other side. Alec locked the hall door and put the key with his watch on the bedside table. It was just quarter of nine.

As he ranged his belongings on the bureau he noticed a film of white dust on the dark surface of the wood beyond the linen cover. Not gray like the dust that collects in an unused room, but white. Women didn't use white face powder nowadays, he recalled. They used pink, tan, or cream powder.

Alec glanced into the bathroom. *Blood in the bathtub where the murderer appears to have washed his hands.* It seemed clean now, but Alec decided against a bath. He crawled into bed and switched off the light.

In the darkness he could see the rosy reflection of the neon sign on the wall opposite the window. It winked steadily as a metronome—on, off—on, off. In less than five minutes, Alec was asleep.

He never knew just what woke him. Yet suddenly he was wide awake. There was no sound and apparently no movement in the room but the noiseless pulsation of the red light on the wall. He lay still, listening to the silence, watching the light. Somewhere in the city a big clock sounded twelve solemn notes—midnight. *According to the medical examiner she was shot between eleven p.m. and one a.m. . . .*

Alec heard a faint sound. His heart seemed to swell and knock against the wall of his chest. For the sound was inside the room.

He let his eyelids droop and breathed heavily, feigning sleep. The sound was coming nearer. A monstrous shadow fell across the illuminated wall, distorted and indefinable. When the neon sign faded out, the shadow disappeared. When the neon sign flashed on, the shadow was still there. It stretched to an impossible height, climbing the wall to the ceiling. That meant that something between the light and its reflection on the wall was moving closer to the source of the light, in this case the window.

Cautiously, Alec tensed his muscles, ready to jump. The bedsprings betrayed him with a creak. The shadow vanished. Someone had moved beyond the range of the light from the window.

Abandoning caution, Alec leaped out

of bed and groped for the light switch. Before he could snap it on, a stinging blow caught him in the ribs. He lashed out blindly with his right. There was a thick, squashy crack of fist on flesh. Something hard grazed his knuckles. He put everything he had into the next and aimed down where the stomach ought to be. Rough cloth rasped his fist. There was a grunt, curiously inarticulate, like an animal in pain. Something heavy shook the floor as it dropped.

Alec waited a moment, on guard. Nothing happened. Again he groped for the light switch. This time he snapped it on.

The blue rug had been rolled up and stacked in one corner of the room. On the bare floor boards a man lay face down. He had a short, heavy, powerful body. Alec turned him over and discovered a round, lumpy face with narrow, slanting eyes—a primitive Tartar face from Russia or the Balkans. The man's shoes were too pointed, his overcoat too broad at the shoulders and too narrow at the waist.

There was a slight bulge under the left armpit—shoulder holster. Alec promptly removed the gun. He was familiar with this type. He had seen it in the line-up at Police Headquarters in New York, in Broadway night clubs and Seventh Avenue pool rooms, in the criminal courts. But he was surprised to meet it here. Diana Beauclerk had no connection with the underworld.

A professional gunman would not have killed her with a weapon of such small caliber as a .22. Nor would he choose a respectable hotel as the scene for a killing when it would be so much safer to take his victim for a one-way ride on a lonely country road.

The man's eyelids fluttered. He opened his eyes.

"What are you doing here?" demanded Alec.

The man made no reply. His eyes were dazed. His lips were bruised and swollen where Alec had hit him.

"Did you kill Diana Beauclerk?"

Alec expected an indignant denial, but there was no response at all.

"Oh, come on, snap out of it! Or I'll turn you over to the police!" The silence was getting on Alec's nerves.

The man opened his mouth, but no words came. Only that curious, animal grunting Alec had heard during their fight.

"Don't you speak English?" cried Alec.

The man opened his mouth wider. A forefinger pointed toward his gullet. Alec leaned forward to look. There were hideous scars inside the throat and the palate was mutilated. Apparently some terrible accident had destroyed the organs of speech.

For a moment pity and horror made Alec forget everything else. A moment was all the man needed. His right shoulder rose and a blinding blow crashed against Alec's jaw. Darkness was spangled with a rain of stars. Then there was only darkness. . . .

Chapter Three

Half a Clue

ALEC seemed to be swimming through heavy seas. He could taste salt water in his mouth and hear the pounding of the surf. His eyelids were made of lead. With a great effort, he lifted them. He was lying on the floor. The neon sign was turned off. A gray dawn lay beyond the window, but even that wan light seared his raw eyeballs.

The salt taste was his own blood. The pounding of the surf was the throbbing of his own pulse in his ears. Gingerly, his fingertips explored his jaw. It was swollen and tender but not broken. He clenched his teeth. None were loose. He had merely bitten his tongue when the blow fell.

He got to his feet. The floor tilted like a ship's deck in a storm. He clung to a bedpost. Slowly, the floor settled back into place. He looked about the room. No one else was there. The rug was still rolled and stacked in a corner. The furniture had been moved out from the walls as if the intruder had been searching the floor for some small object that might have lodged under the rug or between wall and furniture. Nothing else was disturbed. Alec's belongings were ranged on the bureau just as he had left them. Bedclothes and mattress were intact. The cushions of the upholstered chairs were not even turned over.

Alec emptied his trouser pockets. Everything was there—return ticket to New York, gold watch, silver cigarette case, wallet containing seventy dollars in cash and three hundred in travelers' checks. An ordinary hotel thief would have made for those trousers the first thing.

Alec looked into the bathroom. Nothing disarranged. He tried the door into the hall. Still locked. He tried the door that communicated with the next room. Also locked. The uninvited guest must have used a skeleton key—or the key that had been missing ever since the murder.

Alec picked up the phone. "Will you send some black coffee to 1105 as soon as the restaurant opens? And a morning paper—the *Star*."

He went into the bathroom and turned on the shower. The impact made him wince, but he forced his aching head under the stream of cold water with the rest of his body. He was going to need that head today. He alternated hot and cold water. Heroic treatment, but already head and eyes were clearing.

He frowned as he noticed a drift of black dust on the shallow ledge where the white enamel of the tub ended and the white tiles of the wall began. His fingers drew white pathways through the dark film. He looked at his fingertips—lampblack. A low, tuneless whistle escaped his pursed lips. Black dust on the white tub, white dust on the dark bureau could only mean one thing—fingerprint powder. In spite of the new rug and fresh towels, the suite had not been cleaned thoroughly since the police investigation.

Alec climbed out of the tub. A blast of cold air from the open window in the next room shivered his wet body. He slammed the door, grabbed a rough towel, and rubbed himself vigorously. A glow of warmth ran through his veins. He felt almost human again as he wrapped himself in a flannel dressing-gown and slid his feet into leather bedroom slippers.

Hand on the doorknob, he paused. There was a sound of movement in the room beyond. A bellboy with coffee? Or the uninvited guest again? All he wanted was a chance to show that mug a thing or two! He balled his right hand and threw the door open with his left.

Abruptly he was conscious of bare shins and damp hair. A girl knelt in the middle of the room examining the floor.

"Oh." She rose. "I'm sorry. I must've mistaken your room for mine." Her

startled eyes were a deeper brown than her hair. There was character in the firm line of her chin, tenderness in the soft curve of her mouth. Alec appreciated both. But his eyes remained wary.

"Looking for something?" he asked.

"No. I just dropped my—my handkerchief."

She was lying. There was no handkerchief in her hand. Yet she didn't look like a sneak thief or a tramp. Everything she wore was the best of its kind—dark brown to match her eyes except for a tweed coat that matched the light, tawny brown of her hair. She thrust one hand in a pocket of the coat and drew out a key with a hotel tag.

"This is my own key. It must fit your lock as well as mine." His unsmiling stare kindled a flush in her cheeks. "You don't believe me!"

"No." There was a ripple of amusement around his mouth.

"You're disgusting!" She was through the hall door in a flash. It slammed behind her.

The ripple became a grin. But only for a moment. His face was sober enough as he began to dress. In less than twenty-four hours two people had searched for something in this room. And both had searched the floor—

As soon as he was dressed, Alec went down on his hands and knees. Now the rug was rolled aside, he could see a dark, irregular stain in the middle of the floor boards. It was streaky where a half-hearted attempt had been made to remove it with some solvent. But nothing else about the floor boards suggested murder. He was still studying them when someone tapped on the door.

"Coffee, sir!"

Alec scrambled to his feet. A bellboy came in with a tray balanced on one hand and set it down with a flourish. Then he pulled a folded newspaper from his pocket and laid it beside the tray. His blue eyes were bright as his brass buttons. He had sandy hair that curled close to his head. Alec fished a quarter out of his pocket and tossed it to the boy.

"Than*kew!*" But the boy missed the catch. The coin rang as it hit the floor and rolled away. The boy went down on his knees and scanned the floor boards Indian-fashion, eyes level with the surface.

"Under the radiator!" He slid a hand back of the valve that connected with the pipe from the furnace. "Aw, gee, this ain't your quarter!" The boy held out his hand, palm up.

A disk lay there, the size and the thickness of a quarter; round, except for two slots opposite each other shaped like tiny keyholes; black, with a smooth, hard-rolled finish. There were no fingerprints on it, only smudges. Even in Alec's strong fingers it wouldn't bend. It weighed less than a quarter. When he dropped it on the table it rang faintly as it spun and settled. But it was not the shrill resonance of metal.

"What is it?" asked the boy.

"I don't know," answered Alec. "Never mind the quarter. Here's something better."

"Five bucks!" The boy eyed the bill Alec was peeling from his roll. "Gee!"

"That's not for bringing breakfast. That's for answering questions."

"But I ain't answered no questions."

"No. But you're going to." Alec smiled. "What's your name?"

"Gus—Gus Williams."

"Were you on duty here when Diana Beauclerk was murdered?"

The boy's face changed. "Are you a dick?"

"No."

"Then I ain't talking."

Alec held up the black disk between thumb and forefinger. "Ever see anything like this before?"

"No." Gus rubbed his curly head. "You think maybe it's one of them clues? Like in a book?"

"It might be."

"Then I don't want nothing to do with it!" Gus backed away.

"I know how you feel," said Alec. "The killer is still at large. I'm not sure he wasn't in this room last night."

"Last night?" A constellation of freckles stood out vividly as the boy's face whitened. "It couldn't be."

"Why not?"

"They got him last night."

"The devil they did!" Alec's hand went to his swollen jaw. "What time?"

"Nine o'clock. But they only give it to the papers this morning."

Alec's eyes searched the bellboy's face. "If the murderer is in jail why are you still afraid to talk?"

"Listen, mister. I ain't no hero. This here case is dynamite. I don't wanna be mixed up in it. If you know what's good for you, believe me, you'll leave it alone! I guess I've earned that five bucks by telling you so!"

He edged out the door. Alec turned to the morning paper.

STACY ARRESTED FOR BEAUCLERK MURDER

Pearson City, Tuesday, Jan. 17—

Martin Stacy, junior partner in the law firm of Kimball and Stacy, was arrested last night for the first-degree murder of Diana Beauclerk, divorced wife of Daniel Forbes of Wickford, near-by suburb. The arrest was announced by police shortly after midnight just as a writ of habeas corpus for the production of Martin Stacy was issued to Clement Kimball, probable candidate for the U. S. Senate at next year's election, who is also Stacy's senior partner and legal representative. Mr. Kimball told reporters that Stacy was held incommunicado by police without a warrant for three hours prior to his formal arrest in violation of his constitutional rights.

"Martin is incapable of murder," added Mr. Kimball. "He's been like an adopted son to my wife and myself. We have no children of our own and Martin came to the firm direct from his graduating class at law school five years ago."

Asked why there was a bruise under Stacy's right eye when he appeared in court, a police inspector said: "He fell downstairs. Can you see the boys pulling any rough stuff on a guy who's a lawyer?"

Alec could. He had once been a police reporter and he knew that prisoners don't fall downstairs unless they are pushed.

He let his coffee grow cold as he studied the black disk once more. Could it have been dropped by the intruder during the struggle last night? Then why did the intruder roll back the rug prior to the struggle? Both man and girl had been looking for something on the floor. The disk was the sort of thing you would expect to find on the floor if it were lost—a round, flat object that would drop and roll out of sight like a coin. It had been hidden behind the radiator valve—the

one piece of furniture that could not be moved out from the wall during an ordinary search of the room.

The disk could easily have lain there for two weeks, unnoticed by frightened maids cleaning a "haunted" room in a hurry and detectives who were either careless or corrupt. Detectives who fell back on third-degree methods were usually one or the other. But would they have been any wiser if they had found the black disk? What was it used for? What was it called? A clue without name or function was only half a clue! It must be evidence—but evidence of what?

Whistling tunelessly, Alec slipped the nameless clue into his wallet and reached for his hat. In the long, dim corridor he passed a linen closet. A chambermaid was sorting clean towels and sheets.

"Hello! What's your name?"

"Marie, sir."

"Marie what?"

"Marie Chester."

Alec leaned against the door of the linen closet. "I'm in 1105. Are you the maid for that room?"

"Yes." Her eyelids dropped when she heard the number. She went on sorting linen. Black hair framed her pale face, thin and worn as a profile on an old coin. It was a mature, intelligent face with a discontented mouth.

"Do you dust behind the radiator?" went on Alec.

She paused and braced herself, one hand against a shelf. Her brows knotted, her narrow lips hardened. She had a temper. "If you have any complaints, sir—?"

"Oh, no," interposed Alec. "But I found something behind the radiator this morning. I thought it might have been dropped by a maid." He fished the black disk out of his wallet. "Yours?"

There was no gleam of recognition in her eyes. "I don't even know what it is!" She spoke scornfully. "It certainly doesn't look valuable."

"No." He tossed the disk into the air and caught it with one hand. "Was it there the last time you dusted behind the radiator?"

His casual tone caught her off guard. "I haven't dusted behind the radiator since—" She stopped short.

"Since—?" he prompted gently.

"So you're a cop! I might have known!" Naked fear looked out of her eyes. The work-roughened hand on the shelf began to tremble. Even her voice shook. "Two weeks ago I tried to tell the cops my story. Those men wouldn't even listen. If there'd been a woman detective working on the case, she'd've listened. But nobody can tell men anything! The reporters listened, but they didn't print a word I said."

"I suppose there were no women reporters either?" said Alec with a half smile.

"If there were they wrote all their stuff in the office. They never came here. And the men weren't interested in me. If I'd been ten years younger with bleached hair and a come-hither eye— But perhaps it's just as well I'm not."

"Why?"

"1105 has been vacant ever since the cops cleared out. But yesterday morning when I went in there the furniture was all moved around and the rug rolled back. Do you think I'd stop to dust behind radiators in a place like that? 1105 hasn't had a real dusting since the morning before the murder. The housekeeper won't go in there at all and I wouldn't myself without the

bathmaid!"

"Was there a black disk behind the radiator when you dusted there the morning before the murder?"

"No!" She was almost shouting. "Now will you leave me alone?"

Alec studied the mature, intelligent face. "What are you afraid of? Ghosts?"

"Ghosts?" She laughed cheerlessly. "No, mister! I ain't afraid of ghosts! But I'm afraid of him."

"Him?"

Her answer came in a whisper. "Leo Benda."

"Who's that?"

"I've said too much already." Her thin lips clamped together. "Get along with you! Lemme alone!"

Chapter Four

Scapegoat

OUTDOORS, winter sunshine was pale and thin as lemonade. Alec picked his way through drifts of dingy city snow to the offices of the *Pearson City Star*. The newspaper's "morgue" was a long, light, airy room filled with filing-cabinets. Three men sat at a table clipping stories from yesterday's paper.

"Syndicated Press," announced Alec. "Got a file on Diana Beauclerk?"

One man thought the case was too recent. But another intervened, "Sure there's a file. I just sent it up to the city room. If you'll wait awhile you can have it when it comes back."

After twenty minutes, a copy boy trotted in carrying a manila envelope stuffed with newspaper clippings. Alec dumped them out on the table and rearranged them in chronological order.

It was the cuts illustrating the various stories that interested him. One picture was obviously a snapshot enlarged for newspaper use. It showed a boy and girl arm in arm. She was hatless, short hair blowing in the wind. Her eyes were darker than her hair. There was character in the firm line of her chin, tenderness in the soft curve of her mouth. Alec looked at the caption:

Last Man To See Diana Beauclerk Alive—Martin Stacy with his sister, Jean, at the opening of the Melbrook County sheep dog trials.

Alec turned to other clippings: *The police are leaving no stone unturned . . . Miss Beauclerk's death is a great loss to the American stage. . . .*

One item was not clipped from a newspaper. It was a strip of galley proof.

MYSTERY WOMAN IN BEAUCLERK CASE

Pearson City, Monday, Jan. 8—

Marie Chester, chambermaid at the hotel where Diana Beauclerk was murdered, told reporters today that police are making a big mistake in assuming that the murderer is a man.

"A woman killed Miss Beauclerk," insisted Miss Chester. "I was substituting for the night maid on the night of the murder and I saw a woman leave Miss Beauclerk's suite shortly after midnight. She went down the corridor and passed through the door leading to the fire stairs. I told the police but they wouldn't pay any attention to me. I couldn't see the woman's face but she was wearing a long, brown coat."

On the wide margin of the galley proof four words had been rubber-stamped in red ink: KILLED IN

FIRST EDITION.

Alec showed it to one of the men at the table. "How come?"

The man grinned irreverently. "The big boss himself phoned down to the printer just as we were going to press and said to kill the story."

"Why?" persisted Alec.

"The police psychiatrist says Marie Chester is an unreliable witness subject to hallucinations, sex antagonism, and spots before the eyes. Rumor says the yarn was killed because Mr. Leo Benda no likee. You pays your money and you takes your choice!"

"Who is this Leo Benda anyway?"

The man stared. "Who is Joe Stalin? Hasn't New York ever heard of Leo Benda? They'd call him a *fuehrer* in Europe, but here, in our crude Western way, we call him a racketeer. He owns Pearson City lock, stock, and barrel. Everything from slot machines and clip joints to bucket shops and poultry markets."

"And the police department?"

The *Star* man laughed and winked. "I wouldn't know about that."

Alec's next stop was the district attorney's office. His press card from the New York police department gained him admittance to the property clerk. Diana Beauclerk's belongings were spread out on a table: one coat, red velveteen with a fox collar; two dresses, day and evening; one hat, also red velveteen; some flimsy rayon underthings and shabby toilet articles. No wonder she had wanted that lump sum from Forbes! She must have been living through one of those financial crises that come so often to stage people.

The sun had set when Alec reached the sprawling white frame house in the suburbs where Jean Stacy had been living with her brother Martin. A golden afterglow lingered in the west as Alec crossed a windswept terrace and pressed the doorbell. The door was opened by an old Negress in a spotless white apron.

"Please tell Miss Stacy I'd like to speak to her about her brother. It's important. I think I can help him. My name is Norton."

"Yessuh!" A tremulous smile on the old brown face told Alec that Martin Stacy was loved by his household.

Alec waited in a broad hall furnished like a living-room, shadowy in the early winter twilight. Jean Stacy came down the wide stairs alone.

"Did Marty send you?" She peered through the shadows. "Oh!" She had recognized Alec. Her lips grew as firm as her chin. "What is this? Blackmail?"

"No. I'm perfectly respectable." Again he produced his New York press card.

Her anger turned to scorn. "I thought women did the sob stuff. Or do they just use rubber-stamps? 'I found Miss Stacy a clear-eyed, upstanding American girl. I felt for her deeply'—at eight dollars a column."

"Oh, I get more than space rates," returned Alec lightly. "And I'm not here for sob stuff. I really can help you—if you'll let me."

"What's Marty to you?" Her voice shook with repressed feeling.

"Nothing."

"Then you're just a reporter looking for a thrill?"

"Say a trouble-shooter."

"What's the trouble in Pearson City?"

"Too many unsolved murders lately. My chief suggested I look into it. So

I've been working on the latest—the murder of Diana Beauclerk."

"But—" Jean's lips lost their firmness. "The case is solved now. I mean, they think it is. They think Marty did it."

"'They'?"

"The police."

"I wonder if they really do?" returned Alec. "They seem to be suppressing the testimony of a chambermaid who saw a woman leave Beauclerk's suite the night of the murder. Your brother wasn't arrested until I reached Pearson City. There were plenty of people in the lobby last night when I asked for Beauclerk's suite. I said I was with the Syndicated Press. Someone in the lobby crowd may have reported my interest in the case to the police. They may have decided it was time to provide press and public with a scapegoat. So your brother was arrested."

Her face twitched. "You mean they're just going to—to railroad him?"

"They're going to try."

"Oh, God!" The exclamation was a prayer. "As long as they believed him guilty, all we had to do was to prove him innocent. But if they don't care whether he's guilty or not—what can we do?"

"Appeal to public opinion. If the Syndicated Press publicized evidence of his innocence throughout the country the police here couldn't railroad him."

"You're right." Her expression changed. "I'm going to take you on trust!" she cried impulsively. "I have nobody in the world but Marty and Uncle Kim and Uncle Kim's too old to handle this."

"Uncle Kim?"

"Clement Kimball, Marty's senior partner. We call him uncle and we call his wife Aunt Margaret. Our real parents died when we were in our teens. What do you want me to do?"

"First, answer some questions," he responded briskly. "What were you looking for early this morning when I discovered you in Diana Beauclerk's suite?"

"The papers said there were signs of a struggle when the body was found and the rug was rolled back as if the murderer had searched the floor for something after the murder. Little things do come loose in a struggle—buttons, hairpins, things like that. I hoped there might be something the police had overlooked—some little thing that would point to the real murderer and clear Marty. I never dreamed the room would be rented to anyone else so soon after the murder. So I bribed the night chambermaid to let me use her passkey."

"That was taking a big risk."

Her eyes looked enormous as she went on, speaking rapidly.

"I was frantic. The police took Marty away yesterday evening at nine o'clock. They wouldn't let me or Uncle Kim see him all night long. We knew they must be giving him a third degree—they had no warrant for his arrest. I just couldn't sit still and think about it. I had to do something. But, of course, it was silly to do what I did. The police don't overlook things."

"They did this time." Alec brought out the black disk.

She was puzzled. She turned it over with one long, pink varnished nail as it lay on the palm of his hand. "What is it?"

"I don't know. I was hoping you could tell me. I found it on the floor in Beauclerk's suite behind the radiator. The chambermaid said it wasn't

there before the murder. Someone else besides you tried to search the suite last night—a man who looked like a crook. He paid particular attention to the floor. I couldn't question him because he was a mute. He outwitted me and got away, but—he may have been looking for this."

"Then we've got to find out what it is! But how?"

"We can begin by finding out what it's made of. Do you know any industrial chemists?"

"There's one on Water Street!" Jean sprang to her feet, eyes shining. "I'll drive you back to town. Just wait till I get my coat."

Chapter Five

Invitation to Depart

IT WAS an exhilarating drive in a little two-seater open to the burning chill of the January evening. Jean didn't seem to feel the cold in her fleecy tweed coat. Her light-brown head was bare to the wind. Her shapely hands were ungloved as they rested on the wheel. A nice girl, thought Alec, and not too rich—

The chemist received them in a musty little anteroom. He seemed more anxious to get home to his dinner than to collect a fee for analysis. He took the black disk to a strong light and studied it under a magnifying glass. "Good Lord! You don't want me to analyze this, do you?"

"Why not?"

"It's nothing but cardboard!"

"Are you sure?" cried Alec. "It looks harder and smoother than cardboard."

"Ordinary pasteboard is soft, pulpy stuff," returned the chemist. "But there are better grades of cardboard almost as hard as vulcanite. This is one of them. Any paper manufacturer can tell you which. I don't know the commercial name for it."

"And the black color?" persisted Alec.

"Some dye, probably tar."

Jean intervened. "Can you tell us what purpose this disk is used for?"

The chemist looked at her and thawed a little. "I'm sorry, but I can't. It looks as if it were a small part of some larger object. By itself, it's hard to identify. If you saw the inside of a golf ball without the rest of the ball you wouldn't be likely to recognize it. People always identify a part by its relation to the whole."

"Then this disk may be part of something we see every day of our lives?"

"Quite possibly."

Alec and Jean went outside. They had left the street in twilight; they returned to find it night. Jean slid under the steering wheel. Alec stood on the sidewalk.

She said, "What now?"

"I'd like to meet the other people involved in this case—your brother and his lawyer, and Diana Beauclerk's divorced husband, Daniel Forbes. Could it be managed?"

"Of course. Uncle Kim will do everything he can to help us. Meet him at his office tomorrow morning at ten."

"Okay." Alec smiled down at her. "Don't give up hope until we see how Forbes reacts to the black disk!"

She returned the smile with steady lips. "Don't worry about me. I'm no quitter. Can I drop you anywhere?"

Alec's eyes were on the rear-view mirror. He saw a man standing just behind him. The face was in shadow, but there was something unpleasantly familiar about the short, heavy body wrapped in an overcoat too broad

across the shoulders and too narrow at the waist. Alec's one idea was to get Jean out of the way.

"No, thanks," he said. "I want to explore the city on foot."

"All right." Her car moved forward. The light from a street lamp turned her light-brown hair to bronze and touched the chromium fixtures of the car with the shine of silver. Then darkness swallowed both. Alec started to turn around. Something hard and round prodded his back just over the kidneys. A heavy hand pushed him toward a car parked at the curb. It was all done quietly, neatly, professionally.

Alec had read about things like this. Nothing of the sort had ever happened to him before. He looked at the dark street bright with lights, mobile with men and women who hurried about their business unaware of his plight. He wondered if he would ever see all this again. His knees felt limp as rubber bands. He could hardly walk.

The car was a sleek, black limousine with dark silk shades pulled down over each window. The man with the gun followed Alec inside and pulled the door shut. A lighted globe in the roof shone on blue broadcloth upholstery and panels of blond walnut, beautifully figured and highly polished. The metal fittings were gold. It wasn't like a car. It was like a commodious little parlor.

The car did not move. The man with the gun shoved Alec into one of the little seats and sat himself in the other. He was the man with the Tartar face and the mutilated palate.

Facing them both, on the back seat, was a man with a puffy, pasty face; white hair, brows, and lashes. His dull, round black eyes were like two raisins set in floury white dough. He was dressed with the gaudy, spurious elegance of the successful crook—pearl-gray fedora, velvet-collared overcoat, black-pearl stickpin in a gray satin tie, gray suede gloves with black stitching. But when he spoke in fluent, academic English with hardly a trace of foreign accent, Alec realized that this was no ordinary slum-bred racketeer. This was the most dangerous type of criminal—the educated man without a conscience.

"What is your interest in the Beauclerk case?" he inquired softly.

"Nothing personal." Alec was a little surprised at the firmness of his own voice. "I'm a feature writer for the Syndicated Press doing a modern-crime series and it's one of the crimes."

"Is that the only reason you insisted on occupying suite 1105 at the Hotel Westmore last night?"

"The only reason."

Before Alec could go on, a voice came from outside. "Wha'd'ye think this is? A parking-lot? Ye've been here thirty-five minutes if ye've been here a second! Doncha know nobody can't park on Water Street longer'n twenty minutes?"

The man on the back seat raised the shade beside him and lowered the window. A big policeman stood just outside.

"Were you speaking to me?" said the man on the back seat.

"Oh—" Alec had never seen a blustering cop so swiftly deflated. He seemed to shrink to half his normal size. "I sure am very sorry, Mr. Benda."

"You should've recognized my license plates."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Benda. I'm sorry." The cop saluted and retreated, yelling at a truck driver to cover his own confusion.

"So you are Leo Benda!" murmured

Alec.

"Yes." A smile hovered around the colorless lips. "I am Leo Benda, thirty years ago a poor immigrant boy and now—" His gloved palm stroked the rich fur of the lap robe that lay across his knees. "And now one of the most successful businessmen in Pearson City."

Alec suppressed a grin. "Businessman" was good.

Benda went on, "Let that little incident be a lesson to you, Mr. Norton. The police have great respect for my judgment, and they know that I am entirely satisfied with their conduct of the Beauclerk case."

"How did you know my name?"

"I took pains to find out all about you after Max reported your presence in 1105 last night. He had visited the suite the previous evening and found it vacant, so he was greatly surprised to encounter you when he returned last night to search the place more thoroughly."

A sardonic smile touched Benda's lips lightly. "My men have been watching you all day, Mr. Norton. I am disturbed by their reports. I hope that I may persuade you to leave Pearson City at once. If you are wise, you will forget that you ever heard the name Diana Beauclerk."

"And if I don't?"

"It would be a pity—a great pity." The black eyes in the blanched face looked unnatural as eyes peering through a pulpy, papier-mâché mask. "I'm afraid you're not taking this seriously, Mr. Norton."

Alec saw that Benda was trying to frighten him. For that very reason, Alec no longer felt afraid. If Benda had wanted to kill Alec, he would have been a dead man by this time. Obviously Benda wanted Alec out of the way but Benda didn't want to kill him—for whatever reason.

So Alec answered boldly, "Do you expect me to take this seriously?"

"You are a brave man." Benda's voice was softer than ever. "I am sorry. I had hoped you would have what Meredith calls the grain of common sense at the heart of all cowardice. I'll give you twenty-four hours to leave Pearson City, Mr. Norton. There's a New York train tomorrow evening at five-fifty-three. I sincerely hope you will decide to take it. Max!"

Benda turned to the mute and spoke in a foreign language Alec did not understand. Max opened the door and got out.

"Good night, Mr. Norton," said Benda.

Alec stepped down to the curb, paused, and turned. "How did your friend Max lose his palate?"

Benda smiled slowly and unpleasantly. "Almost anyone in Pearson City can tell you. It's an old story. Perhaps I shall tell you myself some day. Good night, Mr. Norton."

Max climbed into the driver's seat and the car glided away smoothly. There was nothing left but the mark of tires in the snow to show Alec that he had not been dreaming.

Chapter Six

Squealers' Special

AT TEN the next morning Alec entered the offices occupied by Kimball and Stacy, lawyers, on the twenty-first floor of Pearson City's tallest skyscraper.

A clerk showed him into a library walled with calf-bound tomes of the law. Already waiting there was a wom-

an in a long, supple mink coat. She had dark hair turning gray and dark, tragic eyes. She waited restlessly, crossing and uncrossing slim ankles, playing with doeskin gloves, lighting one cigarette after another from a tortoise-shell case.

At last Clement Kimball appeared. He was a big, pleasant-looking fellow in his early fifties, with shrewd eyes and a genial mouth. He was surprised to see the woman. "Why, Margaret!" he said.

She crushed her cigarette in an ash-tray and crossed the room to his side. "Any news about Marty?" There was deep feeling in her voice.

"No." Kimball's answer came soberly.

"Isn't there anything I can do? Anything?" Her voice was urgent.

"My dear, we're doing everything we can." Kimball's big hand lay gently on her shoulder. "Better go home. Get some rest."

"I'll go home. But I can't rest." She pulled her coat collar up around her ravaged face and left them without another word.

Kimball turned to Alec. "Mr. Norton? That was my wife. Forgive me for not introducing you but she's in such a state. She couldn't be more worried if she were Martin Stacy's own mother."

Kimball drove Alec to the city prison where Martin Stacy was being held. An officer led them down a long, bleak corridor with the cool, earthy smell of a cellar. They entered a small room divided by a grille of steel.

On the other side of the grille stood the boy Alec had seen in the newspaper cut with Jean. His tumbled hair made him look younger than he actually was. There was still a bruise under his right eye where he had "fallen downstairs." No wonder he looked dazed and uncertain of himself.

"I have just one question to ask you," said Alec. "Have you ever seen anything like this before?" He held out the black disk.

Martin strained his eyes through the grille. Police regulations forbade him to approach within ten feet of it. "No," he said at last. "What is it?"

"Are you sure you saw nothing like this in Diana Beauclerk's suite when you were there the night of the murder?"

"Quite sure. If it was there I didn't see it."

Outside again in the pale winter sunshine Kimball turned his car toward Wickford, the real-estate project promoted by Diana Beauclerk's divorced husband, Daniel Forbes.

Kimball drove in silence until Alec spoke. "Have you any idea who the man was Diana Beauclerk planned to marry?"

Kimball frowned. "The police think it was Martin. They got to know each other when Martin and I handled her divorce from Forbes three years ago. The police claim that they were lovers—that Martin got tired of her and killed her when she threatened suit for breach of promise. Of course it's nonsense. She was ten years older than Martin. He barely noticed her."

Wickford was a raw, new development. Tarred roads and asphalt sidewalks divided meadow and wasteland into checkerboard squares. There were only two houses—one finished, the other in the lathe-and-plaster stage.

Kimball halted his car before the finished house, a naked cube of white stucco without shrubbery or trees. A

billboard proclaimed the office of Daniel Forbes, dealer in real estate. Lots 100 ft. x 75 ft. Price $5,000.

Forbes himself answered the doorbell. He was young, but his face was set in a permanent frown of worry. He wore practical country clothes—shoe packs laced to the knee, an old pair of riding-breeches, and a mackinaw.

"Oh, it's you." His face fell when he saw Kimball. "I thought it was somebody come to buy a lot." He led the way into a roomy, plainly furnished office.

"How's business?" asked Alec after introductions.

"Not so good." Forbes's grin twisted wryly. "I suppose that gives me a motive. I could never have paid the lump sum Diana wanted. And I haven't an alibi either. My wife and I were alone together all evening and a wife's testimony doesn't carry much weight in a case like that. Everybody assumes she'll lie like a lady to save her husband's life. But I didn't do it." His grin faded. "Diana must've got her claws into some other poor guy and he shot her. I don't believe it was Stacy."

"Why not?"

"He's just starting his career. Not enough dough for Diana. Too much like me. She wouldn't make the mistake of marrying a poor man the second time."

When Alec and Kimball rose to go, Forbes went with them to the front door. Two people were coming up on the porch—a little girl in a scarlet ski suit and a big girl in a shabby old rabbit's-fur coat. Both were pink-cheeked, wholesome, and gay. Forbes introduced them with pride.

"My wife and daughter."

The little girl had trouble curtsying in her ski suit. "My pants are too stiff," she explained solemnly. The big girl hailed Kimball with outstretched hands. The seam of one glove was mended with tiny, looped stitches. There was a neat darn in one stocking. Obviously she did all her own mending. She didn't seem to mind. But Alec thought:

If she belonged to me I'd hate asking her to go without things so I could pay Diana Beauclerk alimony. Forbes had a double motive: Beauclerk was driving him to bankruptcy and he couldn't face it with a second wife and a child to support.

Alec showed Forbes the black disk—casually, as if it were an afterthought instead of the purpose of this interview.

Forbes eyed it without apparent interest. "Doesn't mean a thing to me."

Alec looked up and met Mrs. Forbes's gaze. Her cheeks were a bloodless white now. Her eyes were glazed and stony, fixed on the black disk.

"You recognize this, Mrs. Forbes?" ventured Alec.

Her face seemed to grow sharper, like that of someone stricken with a heart attack. "No." Her lips formed the word, but only the thinnest sound came from her throat. She tried again. "I've never seen anything like it before."

Alec knew she was lying.

As they drove back to Pearson City, Alec gave Kimball a detailed account of the finding of the black disk.

"I'd like to hear the chambermaid's story from her own lips," said Kimball. "She's an important witness."

But when they stopped at the hotel, the management couldn't find Marie Chester. None of the staff had seen her for some hours.

"She must be out at luncheon," suggested the housekeeper. "Try again after one o'clock."

Alec and Kimball lunched at the Stacy house with Jean. Coffee was served in a long room with windows overlooking a winter landscape of acid-pale sunshine and yesterday's shopworn snow. They sat around a roaring fire of birch logs that gave the room color and light as well as warmth. Alec told the others about his interview with Benda. He ended with his questioning Benda about Max and Benda's unpleasant tone.

"I've heard the story about Max." Kimball's coffee cup rattled in its saucer. "Not a nice story."

"Tell us, Uncle Kim!" pleaded Jean. "We can take it!"

Kimball lit a cigarette. A thin blue veil of smoke drifted across his handsome face. "Did you ever hear of the Hand of Satan?"

"No. It sounds dreadful."

"It is. It's an instrument invented in one of the Balkan countries and used there by pseudo-political secret societies to punish turncoats and squealers. It's made of steel and looks something like a skeleton hand with five fingers. The nails are pointed and razor-edged.

"When a man has talked too much to the wrong people the men he has betrayed capture him and force the Hand down his throat. It lacerates the palate, rips the vocal chords and other delicate tissues of the throat to shreds. The throat is cut from the inside. Usually the victim bleeds to death. Sometimes he dies more slowly of infection. But if he is unusually lucky, he recovers and remains a mute for the rest of his life."

"And—" Jean's hand went to her own throat. She spoke through white lips. "And Max was—lucky?"

"According to legend it happened in Bucharest and Max was rescued before the Hand had been pushed all the way down his throat. The police there urged him to make a written statement accusing his assailants but he refused. He was afraid he might not be so lucky next time.

"It may be just a yarn—I wouldn't know. They say this Max has never learned the sign language of mutes. He can still hear and read and write but only in one language—Rumanian. As Leo Benda is the only person in Pearson City who speaks Rumanian, this makes Max his absolute property."

"Very convenient—from Benda's point of view!" exclaimed Alec.

"That, I imagine, is the only point of view that interests Benda," returned Kimball.

"It's too horrible to think about!" cried Jean. "Mr. Norton, you must take the next train back to New York."

Alec laughed and looked at the clock on the mantel-piece. "It's only two p.m. Benda gave me until five-fifty-three. A lot can be done in nearly four hours—perhaps more than he realizes."

"I wish you would go." Jean's voice wavered. "I can't help feeling Benda is up to something. I saw him once in a night club. He was—" she searched for a word—"evil."

"I've had the same feeling," agreed Kimball. "I've seen him in the criminal courts when his men were on the witness stand. He looks like a sadist—a man who enjoys cruelty for its own sake. Perhaps it would be better if you did go back to New York, Norton. I can take the black disk to the district attorney and tell him the whole story. He'll jump at the chance of getting something on Benda. The governor ap-

pointed him for that very purpose and he has a staff of trained detectives who should be able to identify the black disk more quickly than you could."

"When was he appointed?" asked Alec.

"Six months ago."

"And he hasn't got anything on Benda yet? He must be either crooked or incompetent! Our Mr. Benda doesn't hide his light under a bushel. I wouldn't trust a district attorney like that with the one concrete clue in the case."

"Then—you're going on with this?" Jean's eyes were wide and bright with fear.

"I'm not a quitter either!" Alec grinned. "You should be glad of it. Your brother is still in grave danger. The fact that Benda wants me to leave town proves that he is in the plot to protect the real murderer and railroad your brother. But I don't believe Benda will dare to try any tricks on me. After all, he's only a racketeer with police pull in a middle-sized Western city and I am an employee of a national organization, the Syndicated Press. If I were killed or injured the S.P. would make things so hot for him he'd burn to a crisp and he knows it. That's why he didn't dare lay a finger on me yesterday."

"Just what are you going to do?" Jean's voice was taut and brittle.

"Identify the black disk and trace it back to the murderer who dropped it in Diana Beauclerk's hotel suite."

Jean rose. "When do we start?"

"We?"

"Sure. I'm in on this. Marty is my brother. My car's at the curb."

Alec shook his head. "It's one thing to take chances for myself, but I'm not going to take chances for anyone else."

"You're not taking chances for me—I'm taking them for myself." Jean lifted that firm little chin. Her eyes were shining, her cheeks pink. "And you said there was no danger to an employee of the Syndicated Press. Can't I be your secretary or something? Temporarily?"

Alec admired pluck in man or woman too much to refuse her. But Kimball shook his head, looking suddenly older and frailer.

"I don't like this," he muttered. "I don't like it at all."

In the hall Alec consulted a classified telephone directory. From a dozen companies listed under *cardboard* he chose one at random—Elk River Mills Inc. As he climbed into the car, he gave Jean the address.

"Don't look now." Her eyes were on the rear-view mirror. "But there's another car following us. Black limousine—Cadillac 1941."

"Sure?"

"I'll make sure." She took the next corner on two wheels and just skinned through a changing light. Alec glanced back over his shoulder. A Cadillac 1941 had halted for the red light. It was a black limousine.

"That settled their hash!" cried Jean gleefully.

"I hope so." Alec's voice was uneasy. He wished he had thought to notice the make of Benda's car yesterday.

Chapter Seven

Grisly Warning

THE Elk River Mills had large offices in a modern building. Alec and Jean passed from secretary to secretary until they reached a "Mr. Grimes"—a small man with a big office all to himself. He examined the edge of the black disk under a magnifying glass.

Then he measured the thickness against a little steel gadget with adjustable jaws.

"Bindersboard!"

Alec and Jean were no wiser than before.

Mr. Grimes explained. "Most cardboard is made by pasting two or more sheets of paper pulp together. That's why it's called pasteboard. But bindersboard is made from a single sheet compressed at a pressure ranging from two hundred to four hundred tons. The finished board is almost two and a half times thinner than the original sheet. Density gives it exceptional stiffness and a smooth, hard-rolled finish like vulcanite. What is this funny little disk used for?"

Jean groaned aloud. Alec said, "We were hoping *you* could tell *us!* Can't you hazard a guess—now you've identified the grade of cardboard it's made of?"

"Good heavens, no! Bindersboard is used for dozens of things. You'd better see Stubbs. He's a jobber who buys all grades of cardboard from us and other mills in large quantities and then sells it in small lots to manufacturers of cardboard objects. He might be willing to give you a list of his customers for bindersboard and you might find some company among them who manufactures disks like this. Stubbs's address is 225 Greenwood Lane."

The sun had disappeared. The city was colorless as a black and white print, stone buildings and leafless trees dark against a pale, pearl sky.

As the car started, Jean said quietly, "That man's here again."

Alec looked in the rear-view mirror. A black limousine was just behind them, a Cadillac 1941. In the treacherous half-light it was impossible to see the driver.

"Better go home and let me take over," said Alec.

"Certainly not! Where is Greenwood Lane? It sounds rustic and quaint."

It was neither. It ran through the older part of the city, a dusty region of small factories and warehouses. It was hardly more than an alley, paved with cobblestones. On either side stood dingy, brick houses that must have been comfortable homes seventy years ago. Now they were used as warehouses by distributors of wholesale goods. Delivery wagons parked before yawning double doorways made progress difficult.

Again Alec looked in the rear-view mirror. No sign of the Cadillac now. He frowned. He liked his enemies to be where he could see them.

No. 225 was hardly more than a shell. Every floor and partition had been torn away, leaving the house one big storeroom four stories high. Every window had been bricked up. A single, bald electric bulb made little impression on the cavernous darkness within. Workmen were loading a truck with rolls of pasteboard. A foreman in overalls was comparing a bill of lading with a ledger. To him Alec explained their errand.

"Boss ain't here, but I guess there's no harm in letting ye know what companies use bindersboard, seeing as old Grimes sent ye." He flipped the pages of his ledger.

"Fletcher Bindery uses it for bookbinding—Mannering Body Company for the insides of sedan cars—Singleton Brothers for boxes—Ashley and Marx for cartridges—Daniel Fuerst and Company for lining upholstered furniture—Artists Supply Company for etching boards—Diamond Pattern Company for templet board—Machinists Acces-

sory Company for gaskets—Sophisticated Lady Hosiery Company for spools—Dunlap Shoe Company for stiffeners—Fur Workers Supply Company for furriers' accessories—Ideal Toy and Counter Company for game boards and—"

"Hey, wait a minute!" Alec was scribbling frantically on the back of an old envelope, wondering what a "templet" was and what you did with a "gasket." "Are there any firms connected with real estate or house construction that use bindersboard?"

"Blake and Brandt use it inside the walls and ceiling of a house."

"Did they build any of the new houses at Wickford?"

"Couldn't say offhand. But they probably did. They get all the fat construction jobs around here."

"Ever see anything like this before?" Alec dropped the black disk on the ledger.

"Naw." The foreman squinted as he held it up to the light. "Cut with a die. That's funny."

Alec's attention quickened. "What's funny about it?"

"Bindersboard is so tough it wears out the cutting edge of a die quicker than pasteboard. Manufacturers who die-cut cardboard into little shapes like this here use pasteboard to save wear on the die."

"But there are exceptions?"

"Never saw one before. But this disk is made with bindersboard and it was cut with a die."

Alec's eyes brightened. At last he had discovered something unique about the black disk—something that might prove significant.

It was only five o'clock but the stars were out, the street lamps lighted.

"Let's go to a drugstore," said Alec. "I want a telephone directory."

Jean released the clutch. The car swerved to avoid a delivery truck and bumped over the cobblestones. At the corner where Greenwood Lane emptied into Brickett Street, Jean slowed down. At this hour there was little traffic in the neighborhood. Its factories and warehouses were empty except for an occasional night watchman. Its street lamps were the only source of light.

Again Jean released the clutch. The car had hardly moved a yard when she stamped on the brake. A big, black limousine without lights shot out of another side street parallel with Greenwood Lane. The limousine cut in front of Jean's two-seater, so close it almost grazed her radiator. Its door swung open. Something long, inert, and shapeless fell before Jean's front wheels. The limousine gathered speed. Like a phantom car it disappeared into the darkness without noise or lights. The license number was veiled in shadow. But Alec recognized the familiar silhouette of a 1941 Cadillac.

He pushed open the door beside him and tumbled out of the two-seater. Jean was at his heels.

"Don't come," he warned her. "This is going to be nasty."

She stammered, "It—it was a body, wasn't it?"

The headlamps of the car shone like twin spotlights on a woman huddled face down in the roadway. Gently, Alec turned her over. Dark hair framed a pale face, thin and worn as a profile on an old coin. The eyes were glazed and vacant, the lips parted. Dark blood bubbled out of her mouth, trickled down her chin to her collar. But she was still breathing.

"W-who is she?" Jean's hand was on his shoulder, shaking.

"Marie Chester, the chambermaid whose story was suppressed." Alec was so angry that he forgot to be afraid. He would have made a splendid target kneeling in that blaze of light. But he wasn't thinking of that. He was searching for a wound. Blood pouring from the mouth usually meant a wound in lungs or stomach. The wound must be staunched before he moved her.

"Were we—meant to find her?"

"I don't believe in coincidence," Alec answered without looking up.

"What have they done to her?"

Alec hadn't the heart to answer that question. There was no wound in lungs or stomach. Yet blood continued to pour from the throat. The Hand of Satan was no myth. It had been used.

"We must drive to a hospital," said Alec. "Quick!"

At the hospital Jean waited in an anteroom while Alec interviewed the chief surgeon. When he returned his face was hard and bleak as granite.

"Marie Chester is dead. She insisted on leaving a written statement describing what she saw the night Beauclerk was murdered. She had to write it herself. She couldn't dictate. She couldn't utter a sound."

Jean caught her breath. "It's unbelievable!"

"Benda wanted to silence a witness," retorted Alec. "He used a barbaric method in order to frighten other witnesses. These things do happen. Ask any police reporter. In New York she might have been sealed in a block of wet cement and dropped into the East River as soon as the cement had hardened. Its weight keeps a body from rising to the surface so there's no evidence of murder. Benda doesn't care if there's evidence or not because of his pull with the police department."

"He threatened you!" cried Jean. "You must leave Pearson City at once!"

Alec shook his head. "I thought I was pretty plucky defying Benda yesterday—the little tin hero! Now I see it differently. I was never really in danger. As I said this afternoon, Benda would think twice before attacking an employee of the Syndicated Press. But my stubbornness put other people in danger—all the other obscure little people without pull or money who are involved in the case, people whom Benda is not afraid to attack. That's what makes me mad! I'm responsible for what happened to Marie Chester. I'm going to get Benda if it's the last thing I ever do and I'm going to get him quickly before he has time to hurt anyone else."

Jean didn't hesitate. "I'm with you. What can I do?"

"Too dangerous."

"But—"

"No buts." Alec rose.

"Won't you tell me where you're going?"

"I'm going to take you home first."

"And then?"

"The less you know the safer you'll be. I want you to go home and stay there—no matter what happens."

"You'll let me know what happens?" She sounded almost meek.

"By eight p.m. at the latest."

When Alec left Jean at her house his glance fell on the clock in the hall. It was just five-fifty-four. Benda's ultimatum had expired.

Alec walked to the nearest cigar store. In the telephone booth he found a classified directory and made a list of the companies listed under *dies*. Al-

together there were eleven. He thought longingly of Jean's little two-seater, but it was too well known to Benda's men by this time. Alec hailed a taxi and set out to visit the die companies one by one.

The first two were closed for the night. The third and fourth were still open but no one at either place recognized the black disk. The fifth was just closing as Alec reached the sales department.

"I want a little information," he explained to a clerk. "I want to know if this disk was cut by one of your dies?"

The clerk looked at the black disk and frowned. "Another complaint? Do you think I have nothing better to do than listen to your bellyaching? The die we sold you would've lasted years if you'd used pasteboard like everybody else! No die in the world will stand up to bindersboard for any length of time!"

"Just a minute," cried Alec. "There's a misunderstanding."

"You betcha life there's a misunderstanding!"

"Just tell me one thing," interrupted Alec. "What company has been using your dies to cut disks like this from bindersboard?"

The clerk stared in astonishment. "Don't you know? I thought you came from them!"

"'Them'? Who?"

"Why, the Fur Workers Supply Company, of course!"

Chapter Eight

No Longer Nameless

SAMUEL STERN of the Fur Workers Supply Company was just shutting up shop for the night. He received Alec in a low-ceiling room behind the shop. On the work table were the tools of the furrier's trade—rubber skulls and glass eyes for mounting fox heads, dyes and knives and needles and thread for working in fur, great bolts of heavy silk for lining fur coats, wadded cushions for lining muffs.

"Can you tell me what this is?" asked Alec.

Stern took the black disk and smiled as if the question were absurdly simple. "It's a button fastener."

"And what is a button fastener?"

"A button is never sewed to a fur coat," explained Stern. "Fur skin is so tender that the pull of the threads would soon wear a hole in it. So you take a flat disk with slots on either side, pass a narrow piece of tape around the disk, through the slots, and knot it. Then you cut a small slit in the fur skin and slide the disk in edgewise. Once it is lodged between fur and lining you turn the disk so it lies flat and flush with the fur. Then the diameter is too wide for the disk to slip back through the slit it entered edgewise. The two ends of knotted tape hang down outside the slit on the fur side. They are passed through a loop on the underside of the button and knotted again. This holds the button firmly in place without wearing a hole in the fur. We call such a disk a button fastener. As long as it is in place, the button cannot fall off."

"But if great force were exerted?" said Alec. "If someone seized a button and tugged with all his might? Wouldn't the flat side of the button fastener press against the slit in the fur until it was split wider? Then wouldn't button and tape and button fastener all come loose together and fall off the coat?"

Stern looked at Alec with eyes

bright under bushy gray brows. "People don't often indulge in a rough and tumble when they're wearing fur coats."

"What if someone wearing a fur coat committed a murder and the victim seized a button in the death struggle?"

"It would happen just as you described it."

"And the button fastener might fall on the floor and roll away by itself?"

"Certainly—if the tape came unknotted." Stern touched the nameless clue—no longer nameless. "I have heard of buttons being found at the scene of a crime. But a button fastener is something new."

"One more question." Alec was tense as he leaned across the work table. "Is there any way of distinguishing this particular button fastener from all others so it can be traced to the coat from which it was torn?"

Stern held the disk under a desk lamp. "You may call it luck, or you may call it Providence, but this particular button fastener is unusual. So unusual that I believe it might be traced to one particular coat."

"How?"

"Usually button fasteners are made of pasteboard or leather. Only one manufacturer of furriers' tools was ever foolish enough to make button fasteners of bindersboard—myself. My son is just out of college and full of bright ideas that won't work. This is one of them. Bindersboard makes fine button fasteners but it wore out our new die in a few days. We've gone back to pasteboard. So far we've only sold one sackful of button fasteners made from bindersboard. That sack went to Newton and Brill, retail furriers here in Pearson City. They can give you a list of customers who have bought fur coats containing button fasteners made from bindersboard. As Newton and Brill only bought the sack a few weeks ago, there won't be many names on the list. Indeed the chances are that only one of those names will be connected with the murder you are investigating."

Alec looked at his watch. "The shop will be closed by this time. Can I reach Newton or Brill tonight?"

"Brill lives at 52 Reade Street."

Alec had dismissed his taxi. Now there was none in sight. He set out on foot for Reade Street, hoping to pick up a taxi on his way. He was still in the business section where there was little traffic at night. The street lamps were too far apart for comfort. Islands of light around each lamp only made the shadows between more confusing than ever. Where the light did shine, the long, gray asphalt street looked as empty as a bowling-alley. After a while he heard footfalls behind him.

He quickened his pace. The footfalls quickened, too.

A light, cool sweat broke out on his forehead. Had he been wrong in assuming that his Syndicated Press job would protect him from Benda? If any of Benda's men had trailed Alec to Samuel Stern's tonight they must realize that he had identified the button fastener and that he would soon be able to identify the murderer. That would make Benda desperate. Courage was one thing, foolhardiness another. Alec began to run.

The footfalls were running, too.

They caught up with him at a corner where there was no street lamp. He turned and lashed out with his right. There were two men. He couldn't see the faces under the hat brims. He thought the shorter figure was Max.

One parried Alec's blow and drove a short jab into his ribs. The other seized Alec's left wrist in both hands and twisted his arm behind his back.

Red-hot pain seared Alec's shoulder. They pushed him toward the mouth of an alley. He clamped his teeth together. No matter what they did, he would not open his mouth—

The man in front reached out two knuckles and pinched Alec's nostrils between them. He could no longer breathe through his nose. Already his lungs were bursting. He would have to open his mouth sooner or later.

The man moved his other hand. Something grazed Alec's cheek—something pointed and razor-sharp. Into his mind's eye drifted a vision of glazed, vacant eyes, white face, and dark blood bubbling up from a tortured throat. Only the face was no longer Marie Chester's. It was his own.

Panic gave him the strength of a maniac. He bent forward from the waist as far as he could. The movement was sudden and powerful. The man clinging to Alec's arm was jerked forward. He lost his balance. His feet left the ground and he hurtled over Alec's head. He collided with the man facing Alec. All three collapsed on the sidewalk in a sprawling heap. Alec was the first to rise. He ran down the alley as he had never run in his life before.

He climbed three fences before he dared stop to catch his breath. He was in a lumber yard deserted for the night. Sweat poured from his body. His breath came in great gasps. Blood trickled down his neck from the scratch on his cheek.

Now he saw the folly of fighting Benda's gang singlehanded. He needed help and the only man who could help him effectively was Kimball. The district attorney would have to listen to a man as influential as Kimball. It would be time enough to interview Newton and Brill in the morning, but Alec must see Kimball and if possible the district attorney tonight before Benda made another move.

Kimball's house was near the Stacys' on the outskirts of the city. It took Alec nearly two hours to reach it on foot. There were no taxis in the dark back streets he followed. He dared not cross the broad, brightly lighted streets of the theatrical and restaurant section where there were plenty of taxis for fear he would meet some of Benda's men. So far as Alec knew he was not followed. But he could not be sure. He took every precaution as he approached Kimball's house. It would be unbearable to be captured now in sight of his goal.

The house faced the state highway at the top of a little hill. It was a solid, red-brick building with a white porte-cochère at one side. Keeping within shadow cast by rose bushes in winter overcoats of straw, Alec made his way up the starlit drive.

The front of the house was dark but he saw an oblong of light shining on the snow from an unshaded French window on the right side. If Kimball was there, Alec could tap on the window for Kimball to let him in. Alec had no wish to kick his heels for five or ten minutes under the porte-cochère while he waited for a servant to answer the doorbell. A lot can happen in five or ten minutes.

He came to the window and looked inside. The room beyond was a library. Lamplight shining on wine red damask chairs and curtains looked warm and inviting to Alec as he stood outside in the windy winter night.

Kimball was relaxing in an armchair with a book in one hand and a highball on the table beside him. Mrs. Kimball had just come in from the street. She was casting her wraps aside on the sofa. As Alec watched she sank into a chair and lit a cigarette. They were talking but Alec could not hear what they said. It was like a scene from an old silent film.

Alec tapped on the pane of glass before him. Both the Kimballs started and lifted their heads. Alec pressed his face against the glass, hoping the light from the room would reach him. It must have done so for Mrs. Kimball smiled and sank back in her chair while Kimball rose and came forward to open the window.

"My dear Norton, what on earth?" Kimball's gaze took in the bleeding scratch on Alec's cheek, his rumpled clothes and snow caked shoes. "Man, you need a drink!" He unlocked an old-fashioned tantalus and brought out a cut-glass decanter.

"You poor boy!" cried Mrs. Kimball. "You look half dead!"

"I am." Before Alec sat down he closed the window behind him and drew the curtains across it. Then he dropped into a chair and took a long pull at the drink Kimball handed him.

"Mr. Norton—my wife."

Alec started to rise but Mrs. Kimball smiled and said, "Don't get up. You really look exhausted and I can see that you want to talk to Kim. I'll leave you two together but I hope you can stay for dinner, Mr. Norton."

"Thanks—"

She left the room and they heard her go upstairs. Kimball sat down behind his writing-table and looked at Alec.

"Well?"

"I've had a tough time," said Alec. "But I've got the murderer."

Kimball was startled. "Are you sure? Suspicion is one thing and legal evidence another."

"Here's the evidence. You're a lawyer and you can tell me if I'm right or wrong." For the last time Alec produced the black disk. As he outlined its history Kimball grew more and more perturbed.

"Marie Chester has testified there was no black disk behind the radiator the morning before Diana Beauclerk was murdered," concluded Alec. "Diana Beauclerk didn't drop the button fastener herself because she didn't have a fur coat with her. I saw all her belongings at the district attorney's office. Her only coat was velveteen. The disk couldn't have been dropped by a man. Men don't wear fur coats. That rules out two chief suspects—Daniel Forbes and Martin Stacy. It also rules out Max and Benda and the hotel men, bellboys, detectives, policemen, and reporters who visited the scene of the crime after the murder.

"There were no women detectives or women reporters working on the case—that was one of Marie Chester's grievances. The only women who have visited the scene of the crime were the hotel maids and Jean Stacy. Maids don't wear fur coats when they're cleaning a room. Jean was wearing a tweed coat.

"Therefore, the button fastener must've been dropped at the scene of the crime by some other woman who had no legitimate business there and everything suggests that this woman was the murderer. Diana Beauclerk was shot with a woman's gun—a .22. Marie Chester saw a woman leave Beauclerk's suite the night of the murder. She went down the corridor to

the fire stairs and she was wearing a long, brown coat—doubtless a fur coat, though Marie didn't recognize it as fur in the dim light of the hotel corridor."

"It's quite plausible as far as it goes," admitted Kimball. "But there are so many women in Pearson City who own long, brown fur coats and this button fastener could have come from any one of them."

"Oh, no, it couldn't!" A gleam rekindled in Alec's tired eyes. "That's where luck steps in—or Providence. This particular button fastener is made of bindersboard instead of the usual pasteboard or leather. Only one retail furrier in Pearson City has been using button fasteners of bindersboard —Newton and Brill. They've only been in use the last six weeks. It's a cinch Newton and Brill have sold only one fur coat in six weeks to a woman who knew Diana Beauclerk. As soon as we see Newton and Brill in the morning we'll have the murderer's name in black and white. This little disk of bindersboard is going to send her to the chair. I might be sorry—if I hadn't seen Marie Chester after Leo Benda's gang got through with her."

"What did they do to her?" demanded Kimball.

Alec told him. His face, usually ruddy, turned a sick, cheesy-white. He muttered incoherently. "Unspeakable—monstrous!"

Alec nodded grimly. "Mrs. Forbes deserves all that's coming to her."

"Mrs. *Forbes?*" The name was a shock to Kimball.

"What other woman had a motive for murdering Diana Beauclerk? Mrs. Forbes was wearing a long, brown rabbit's-fur coat when I saw her and she recognized the button fastener the moment she saw it. She's the sort of woman who would do anything to help her husband. Perhaps she rationalized the murder by telling herself she was protecting her child's future. There are such types in criminal casebooks."

"No doubt, but—" Kimball passed a shaking hand across his forehead. "I've known Nancy Forbes all my life! I'm not a criminal lawyer and I'm not used to this sort of thing." He rose. "I'd better phone the district attorney and see if he can come over at once. Excuse me—"

Chapter Nine

The Coat

ALONE, Alec finished his drink and helped himself to a cigarette from the box on Kimball's writing-table. A fat, oval Turkish cigarette—Kimball certainly did himself well.

As Alec's gaze wandered around the room he wondered if he would ever be successful enough to own a home like this where the lamplight brought out ruby highlights in the gleaming surface of wine-red damask and old mahogany. Out here on the edge of the city it was extraordinarily quiet and peaceful. Alec heard no sound but the moaning of the wind outside and a distant grinding of gears as some motorist on the state highway shifted into high at the top of the hill.

Suddenly, his heart contracted. Then, as if to make up for seconds lost, it pounded double quick, shaking his chest wall, swelling the veins in his temples until they felt tight. These symptoms of shock were caused by the most commonplace of all objects—a telephone.

It was standing on Kimball's writing-table—a perfectly ordinary dial telephone with a French handset in black

composition. Superficially, there was nothing alarming about it. But—Kimball had left the room in order to "phone the district attorney."

Why hadn't he phoned from here?

Alec put the receiver to his ear. He heard the dial tone. The instrument was not out of order.

He replaced the receiver. Again his glance swept the room but this time it was alert, puzzled, searching. On the surface everything seemed normal—green-shaded reading-lamp, book shelves rising row on row until they were lost in the shadows of the lofty ceiling, cut-glass decanter of whisky glinting amber and gold in the lamplight.

Alec's glance came to a halt. Mrs. Kimball's wraps were still lying on the sofa where she had cast them down—a brown velvet hat, brown suede gloves, and the dark, supple mink coat she had worn at Kimball's office the first day Alec saw her. *A long, brown coat.* A *fur* coat—

In four strides he crossed the room and seized the coat. Sewn to the rich brown satin lining was a label—*Newton and Brill.* In the pelt, under the button, where there should have been a neat slit, there was a wide, jagged tear. The button had been wrenched off and then replaced by someone ignorant of the furrier's craft. The lips of the tear were roughly basted together with brown silk and the tape on the under side of the button had been sewn to the surface of the fur. There was no button fastener inside. But the other buttons were held in place properly by a tape passing through a neat slit in the pelt to the inside of the coat. Under each button Alec's probing fingers felt a round, flat disk concealed between fur and lining.

He snatched a pair of office shears from Kimball's writing-table and sawed at one of the slits until it was two inches wide. Then he pulled the button. It parted company with the coat. On its under side, dangling from a loop of tape, was a button fastener—stiff and black, with a smooth, hard-rolled finish. Bindersboard—

A loud report shattered the stillness. Alec looked up. A bullet splintered a Florentine mirror on the opposite wall. The jagged glass distorted the reflection of a woman—Margaret Kimball.

She stood in the doorway behind Alec. She was aiming a small revolver at his back—a .22. Her painted mouth was crimson against cheeks that had gone chalk-white. But the hand that held the gun was steady.

"You fool!" Her voice was as firm as her hand. "I heard everything you said to Kim. I came downstairs in my stocking feet and listened at the door. As soon as you mentioned the button fastener, I knew you had to die."

Alec summoned all his self-control. "Won't you have trouble explaining a dead body in your living-room?" he suggested.

"You came in here by the window. The servants will swear they didn't admit you by the front door. I'll swear you attacked me and I shot you in self-defense."

"I see." Alec's thoughts were racing. Any woman like Nancy Forbes who did all her own sewing and mending might recognize the black disk as a button fastener from a fur coat without knowing what particular fur coat it came from. She must have thought Alec knew what the disk was. She was wearing a fur coat herself and she had a motive for murdering Beauclerk.

She had been frightened for fear he would accuse her of the murder on the strength of those two things. But that didn't prove she was guilty.

Lamplight struck a steady beam of light from a diamond ring on the hand that held the gun. Alec fixed his eyes on that beam. If he could say something to make it waver—just once—

He spoke calmly, almost conversationally. "So Kimball was the man who loved Diana Beauclerk—the rich man she wanted to marry. And you shot her because you were jealous."

"He never loved her!" Margaret Kimball's voice sharpened shrewishly. "That Beauclerk woman was a passing fancy—nothing more!"

"Then why did you kill her?"

"Because she wanted him to divorce me and marry her. And he was so weak—he might have done it!"

"You call that a 'passing fancy'?" Alec managed to laugh.

"Kim wouldn't have protected me after I shot Beauclerk if he hadn't loved me!"

"Kimball wanted to be a United States Senator," retorted Alec. "The *Star* said so in its first story on Stacy's arrest. A man whose wife has murdered his light of love hasn't a dog's chance of getting into the Senate. But do you suppose Kimball loved you after your crime forced him to frame his junior partner in order to save you and himself? Kimball no more loved you than Leo Benda, who only protected you because his racket depended on your husband's political machine for police protection. Kimball framed Stacy to save his career—not to save you! He must have hated you!"

"That's a lie!" The diamond ring flashed like a tiny heliograph. Her hand was shaking uncontrollably.

All in one motion, Alec turned and crouched and dived at her knees. A second shot rang out, reverberating in the closed room. Something biting as a whiplash stung Alec's neck. She was writhing in his grasp, lithe and fierce as a snake. The hand that held the gun twisted toward him.

He grabbed at it and missed. Unbelieving, he saw the muzzle aimed at his forehead. It was so close now he could smell the acrid fumes of cordite. Was he really going to die so stupidly—shot by a woman half-crazed with jealousy?

He heard voices and footsteps. A woman's foot in a high-heeled shoe streaked into his range of vision and kicked Margaret Kimball's hand. She squealed. Her fingers relaxed. The gun skated across the rug beyond her reach.

"Alec!" It was Jean's voice. "Are you hurt?"

"No." Alec struggled to his feet. "What are you doing here?"

There were three strange men with Jean. Two of them lifted Margaret Kimball to her feet and snapped handcuffs on her wrists.

"You said you'd come at eight." Jean's voice was taut and brittle. "When you didn't come, I got worried. I knew the city police were under Benda's thumb, so I phoned the district attorney, and— Oh, Alec!" Tears stood in her eyes. "It seems the district attorney suspected Aunt Margaret all along. So we came here."

One of the strangers interrupted. "It was Kimball, not Mrs. Kimball, we suspected. We knew there was a man higher up in Benda's racket—some solid citizen with political pull and no obvious underworld ties. We thought Kimball was the man but we couldn't

prove it. That's why we didn't arrest Benda. We wanted Kimball, too."

"You'll never get him!" Margaret Kimball stood between two county detectives, reckless and defiant.

"We have got him," answered the district attorney. "When I heard Miss Stacy's story I sent men to patrol the highway where it crosses the state line a few miles south of this house. I thought Kimball would try to escape that way if things got too tough for him—and he did. He talked plenty when we nabbed him. He hadn't known how Benda planned to dispose of Marie Chester. When Norton told him, it broke his nerve. When Norton explained the significance of the button fastener, Kimball realized the jig was up. He phoned a warning to Benda and made for the Mexican border in his fastest car. We caught Benda on the same road and now we're rounding up the rest of the gang."

"So that was why I heard a car changing gear just after Kimball left me!" cried Alec.

Margaret Kimball's face worked wryly. "He warned Benda, but he left me to face all this alone—without warning—" She lifted tragic eyes to Alec. "You were right. He hated me."

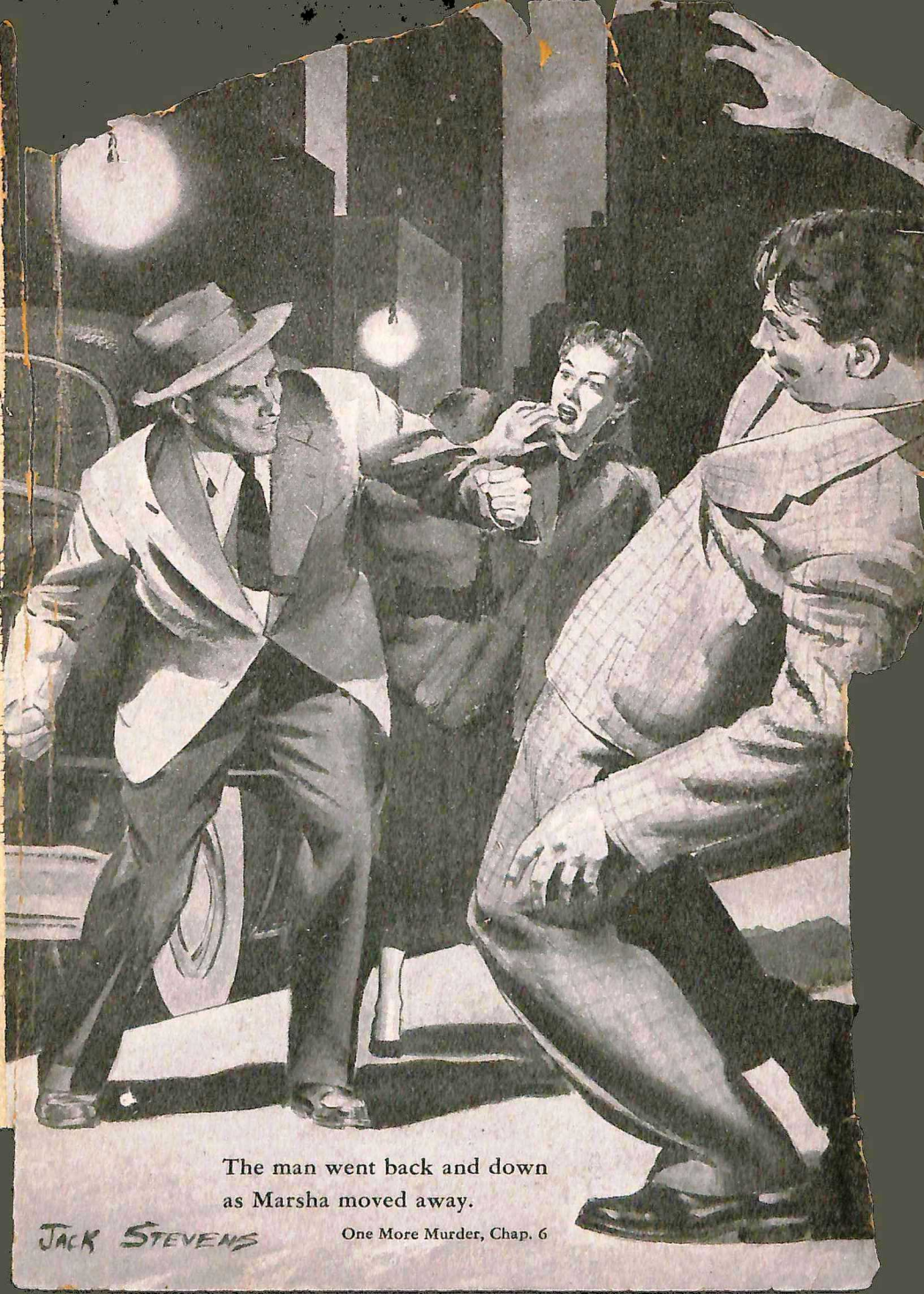
Jean drew Alec out into the hall. The air was fresher there. "You've saved my brother," she said simply.

"And you saved me." He looked at her quizzically. "Didn't I say something earlier this evening about your going home and staying there—no matter what happened?"

"But I couldn't!" she retorted. "I knew you were in danger and I was afraid you'd be hurt."

"Did that make so much difference to you?"

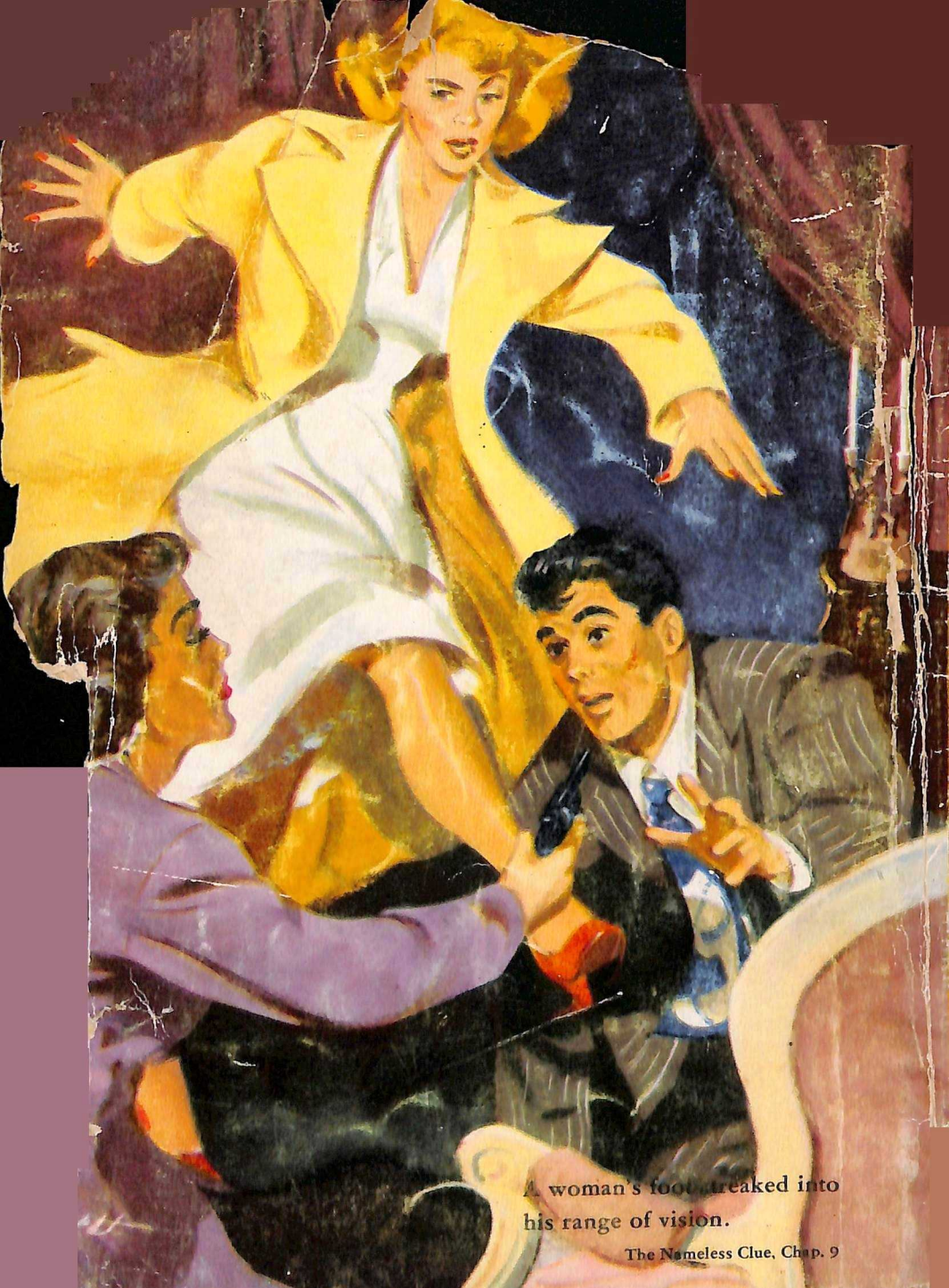
Jean colored. Her lips were trembling but she forced them to smile. "What do you think?" THE END



The man went back and down
as Marsha moved away.

JACK STEVENS

One More Murder, Chap. 6



A woman's foot streaked into his range of vision.

The Nameless Clue, Chap. 9