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BLACK MASK*



DETECTIVE STORIES

MANHATTAN
WHIRLIGIG

by

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TINSLEY

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APRIL
1937





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BLACK MASK

A MAGAZINE OF GRIPPING, SMASHING DETECTIVE STORIES

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F. ELLSWORTH, *Editor*

J. B. MAGILL, *Managing Editor*

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IN MAY
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P. C. CODY, President and Circulation Director

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29x4.50-20	2.35	30x3.75	2.55
30x4.50-21	2.40	30x4.00	2.65
28x4.75-19	2.45	30x4.25	2.75
29x4.75-20	2.50	30x4.50	2.85
28x5.00-19	2.65	30x4.75	2.95
30x5.00-20	2.85	30x5.00	3.15
28x5.17	2.90	30x5.25	3.25
29x5.25-19	2.95	30x5.50	3.35
29x5.25-19	2.95	30x5.75	3.45
30x5.25-20	3.15	30x6.00	3.55
31x5.25-21	3.25	30x6.25	3.65
29x5.50-18	3.35	30x6.50	3.75
29x5.50-18	3.35	30x6.75	3.85
29x5.50-19	3.35	30x7.00	3.95
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x7.25	4.05
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x7.50	4.15
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x7.75	4.25
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x8.00	4.35
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x8.25	4.45
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x8.50	4.55
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x8.75	4.65
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x9.00	4.75
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x9.25	4.85
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x9.50	4.95
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x9.75	5.05
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x10.00	5.15
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x10.25	5.25
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x10.50	5.35
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x10.75	5.45
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x11.00	5.55
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x11.25	5.65
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x11.50	5.75
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x11.75	5.85
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x12.00	5.95
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x12.25	6.05
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x12.50	6.15
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x12.75	6.25
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x13.00	6.35
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x13.25	6.45
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x13.50	6.55
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x13.75	6.65
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x14.00	6.75
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x14.25	6.85
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x14.50	6.95
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x14.75	7.05
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x15.00	7.15
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x15.25	7.25
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x15.50	7.35
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x15.75	7.45
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x16.00	7.55
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x16.25	7.65
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x16.50	7.75
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x16.75	7.85
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x17.00	7.95
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x17.25	8.05
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x17.50	8.15
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x17.75	8.25
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x18.00	8.35
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x18.25	8.45
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x18.50	8.55
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x18.75	8.65
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x19.00	8.75
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x19.25	8.85
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x19.50	8.95
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x19.75	9.05
30x5.50-19	3.35	30x20.00	9.15

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Size	Price	Size	Price
30x5.50-17	2.90	30x5.50-18	3.10
30x5.50-18	3.10	30x5.50-19	3.30
30x5.50-19	3.30	30x5.50-20	3.50
30x5.50-20	3.50	30x5.50-21	3.70
30x5.50-21	3.70	30x5.50-22	3.90
30x5.50-22	3.90	30x5.50-23	4.10
30x5.50-23	4.10	30x5.50-24	4.30
30x5.50-24	4.30	30x5.50-25	4.50
30x5.50-25	4.50	30x5.50-26	4.70
30x5.50-26	4.70	30x5.50-27	4.90
30x5.50-27	4.90	30x5.50-28	5.10
30x5.50-28	5.10	30x5.50-29	5.30
30x5.50-29	5.30	30x5.50-30	5.50
30x5.50-30	5.50	30x5.50-31	5.70
30x5.50-31	5.70	30x5.50-32	5.90
30x5.50-32	5.90	30x5.50-33	6.10
30x5.50-33	6.10	30x5.50-34	6.30
30x5.50-34	6.30	30x5.50-35	6.50
30x5.50-35	6.50	30x5.50-36	6.70
30x5.50-36	6.70	30x5.50-37	6.90
30x5.50-37	6.90	30x5.50-38	7.10
30x5.50-38	7.10	30x5.50-39	7.30
30x5.50-39	7.30	30x5.50-40	7.50
30x5.50-40	7.50	30x5.50-41	7.70
30x5.50-41	7.70	30x5.50-42	7.90
30x5.50-42	7.90	30x5.50-43	8.10
30x5.50-43	8.10	30x5.50-44	8.30
30x5.50-44	8.30	30x5.50-45	8.50
30x5.50-45	8.50	30x5.50-46	8.70
30x5.50-46	8.70	30x5.50-47	8.90
30x5.50-47	8.90	30x5.50-48	9.10
30x5.50-48	9.10	30x5.50-49	9.30
30x5.50-49	9.30	30x5.50-50	9.50

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Size	Price	Size	Price
30x5.50-17	2.90	30x5.50-18	3.10
30x5.50-18	3.10	30x5.50-19	3.30
30x5.50-19	3.30	30x5.50-20	3.50
30x5.50-20	3.50	30x5.50-21	3.70
30x5.50-21	3.70	30x5.50-22	3.90
30x5.50-22	3.90	30x5.50-23	4.10
30x5.50-23	4.10	30x5.50-24	4.30
30x5.50-24	4.30	30x5.50-25	4.50
30x5.50-25	4.50	30x5.50-26	4.70
30x5.50-26	4.70	30x5.50-27	4.90
30x5.50-27	4.90	30x5.50-28	5.10
30x5.50-28	5.10	30x5.50-29	5.30
30x5.50-29	5.30	30x5.50-30	5.50
30x5.50-30	5.50	30x5.50-31	5.70
30x5.50-31	5.70	30x5.50-32	5.90
30x5.50-32	5.90	30x5.50-33	6.10
30x5.50-33	6.10	30x5.50-34	6.30
30x5.50-34	6.30	30x5.50-35	6.50
30x5.50-35	6.50	30x5.50-36	6.70
30x5.50-36	6.70	30x5.50-37	6.90
30x5.50-37	6.90	30x5.50-38	7.10
30x5.50-38	7.10	30x5.50-39	7.30
30x5.50-39	7.30	30x5.50-40	7.50
30x5.50-40	7.50	30x5.50-41	7.70
30x5.50-41	7.70	30x5.50-42	7.90
30x5.50-42	7.90	30x5.50-43	8.10
30x5.50-43	8.10	30x5.50-44	8.30
30x5.50-44	8.30	30x5.50-45	8.50
30x5.50-45	8.50	30x5.50-46	8.70
30x5.50-46	8.70	30x5.50-47	8.90
30x5.50-47	8.90	30x5.50-48	9.10
30x5.50-48	9.10	30x5.50-49	9.30
30x5.50-49	9.30	30x5.50-50	9.50

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MAY BLACK MASK

MANHATTAN WHIRLIGIG



BUTCH came into the penthouse bathroom without knocking. He always did. The fact that Jerry Tracy was taking his pre-evening bath meant nothing to Butch. He told his pint-sized employer with simple dignity:

"Dere's a screwy guy outside with a full-time grouch. He wouldn't gimme his name. Says either you come out, or he'll come in and yank you out. Do



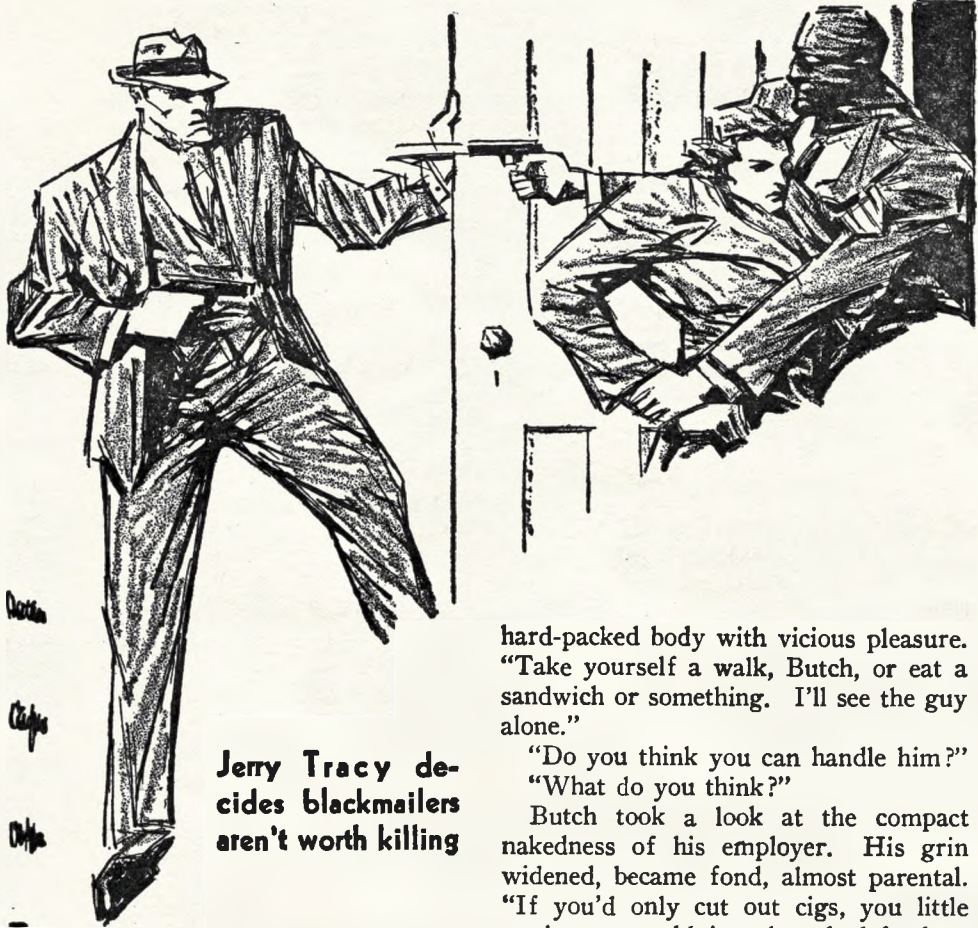
you wanna see the guy or shall I brush him off?"

Jerry grinned, rubbed lather out of his ear. A small man, he looked pink and microscopic in the enormous tub. It was probably the biggest tub on the island of Manhattan.

"What's he burned up about?"

"He says he wants to talk to you about a duck."

By THEODORE TINSLEY



Jerry Tracy decides blackmailers aren't worth killing

Jerry laughed at that, a brief chuckle without warmth or amusement. Stony triumph swam for an instant into his eyes. "I wondered how long it would take the harpoon to start hurting. Is he a tall gent with iron gray hair, ditto on the mustache, a gray goatee tucked under his lower lip?"

"Kayo. You know him?"

"Yeah." The *Daily Planet's* famous scandal columnist heaved upward out of soapy water. He stepped onto a thick white rug and began to towel his lean,

hard-packed body with vicious pleasure. "Take yourself a walk, Butch, or eat a sandwich or something. I'll see the guy alone."

"Do you think you can handle him?"

"What do you think?"

Butch took a look at the compact nakedness of his employer. His grin widened, became fond, almost parental. "If you'd only cut out cigs, you little punk, you wouldn't make a bad featherweight." His big palm made a smacking sound below Tracy's spine. He lumbered cheerfully away.

Jerry drew on his silk robe, kicked into flat slippers. He had looked forward to this interview with cold pleasure. Like a man who waits for a snake to glide from under a stone so that he can mash it with one clean stroke of a club.

"How do you do, Doctor?"

His visitor bounced upward from a living-room chair. Tense with rage, he came striding toward the columnist, a

crumpled copy of the *Daily Planet* gripped in his clenched hand. His knuckles were white. He shook the rolled tabloid under Tracy's nose.

"You slimy little rat! You can't get away with this, do you understand? If you think for one minute that I'm going to sit idly by and allow a cheap newspaper jack to make a laughing stock of my daughter and ruin my professional standing in the community—"

His words stuttered passionately. Tracy didn't move an inch backward. He was utterly calm, his eyes hard with dislike.

"Let's cut out the yelling and get down to brass tacks. You're Dr. Andrew Stoner, a gentleman, a scholar, and Park Avenue's swankiest psychoanalyst. I'm Jerry Tracy, a rat from a Broadway sewer. So what do you want?"

"You know damn well what I want! An apology printed in tomorrow's column, or I promise you that you'll wish you'd never—"

"Oh, you mean the duck squib? You mean this?"

Deliberately he read the paragraph aloud, clipping the words out with slow, nasal amusement:

RAISED EYEBROWS DEPARTMENT

Seen yesterday on Park Avenue. Over-rich, over-dressed deb, creating Gloria-sensation by public stroll with pet duck. . . . Deb is daughter of prominent dream-book doc. Can it be that the duck stroll is a tie-up with papa's biz slogan? Quack! Quack!

Dr. Stoner's face was purplish. He said, menacingly, "Are you going to retract?"

"No. I'm going to print one twice as amusing tomorrow—and every day after that—until I've run you out of town on a wave of ridicule. If you don't like it, sue! The *Daily Planet* keeps a smart lawyer on a yearly retainer just to take care of crooks like you."

"Crook? What do you mean?"

"Don't you call a blackmailer a crook, Doctor?"

The red faded from Stoner's aristocratic face, leaving it white and pinched. Tracy shoved past him, strode toward a desk in the corner, his silken robe fluttering backward from his naked legs. There was a portable typewriter on the desk and the columnist slid a blank sheet around the cylinder. He made the keys rattle like a machine-gun. Then he spun about, his voice as metallic as the machine.

"Here's tomorrow's squib. How do you like it?"

It was Jerry who was angry now. Stoner had regained his self-control. The typed sheet was steady in his hand. He read the paragraph with lidded attention:

What wealthy Park Avenue psychoanalyst is the town's smoothest magician? He has only one trick—but one is all he needs. . . . He turns a breakdown into a shake-down. Duck that one, Doctor!

Stoner's teeth showed like nicks in a razor blade. "How much am I supposed to pay you, Mr. Tracy?"

"Not a dime. If you've got the sense I think you have, you'll link arms with that snooty blond daughter of yours and take a well bred sneak for Penn Station. Try Kansas. I haven't any friends there for you to bleed."

"Do you mind telling me what particular friend of yours I've bled?"

Tracy's throat rattled impatiently. "The name doesn't matter. If you think I'm bluffing, get this! I know all about the appointment for tonight at nine-thirty. I know the street and the brownstone house where the dough is to be passed. It's only a grand tonight, because my friend is a minor victim and has to be squeezed with caution to make the gravy last."

"I think you're insane."

"Out! I've just taken a bath and I want to stay clean. Is that plain?"

"Let's both be plain," Stoner said slowly. His words seemed to crawl up out of his throat from a long way down.

"I don't know what your game is, Tracy, but I know danger when I see it. I have no intention of going to the police. I'm perfectly able to protect myself and my daughter Gloria from scandal. I'll be watching the *Daily Planet* to see if that second squib appears. If it does, it will be the last paragraph you ever write. I mean that literally and exactly, Mr. Jerry Tracy. Good evening."

His face veered menacingly over his shoulder from the foyer, then the penthouse door clicked.

Tracy said, "Nuts!" in a hard, angry murmur. He was uncomfortably aware that he had said too much. He should have kept his mouth shut about the brownstone and the appointment for nine-thirty, but the clever Stoner had stung him into foolish verbosity. Well, it couldn't be helped now. He rubbed damp palms against his silken robe and yelled grimly for Butch.

He gave him the typewritten paragraph that Stoner had tossed contemptuously on the rug. "Take this down to the *Daily Planet* office and hand it to McCurdy—no one else. Tell him I want it run at the top of the column. Scram."

Butch hesitated. "You goin' out tonight, Boss?"

"Yeah."

"Me, too?"

"No."

"O. K., pal. You needn't bite me head off." He clumped off, worried but obedient. Whenever Tracy was in that curt, monosyllabic mood, Butch knew better than to argue.



HALF an hour later Jerry Tracy was in a taxicab, riding swiftly through windy darkness toward the modest east side apartment of Al Redman. The thought of Al and his wife made Jerry's jaw harden. Al and Florence! Two of the swellest humans a guy could know. Florence was completely unaware of the

mess in which her husband was tangled.

At this hour she was probably preparing dinner in the huge kitchen of their old-fashioned, comfortable flat. Al would be in the living-room pretending to read the paper. Tracy had already phoned Florence that he and Al were going to a hockey game that night. It was an easy out. Florence had an amused indifference for any kind of competitive sport.

It was hard to couple Al and Florence with the suave Park Avenue racket of Dr. Andrew Stoner. Geographically and socially they lived on different planets.

Al Redman was cashier of the Times Square branch of the Mercantile Bank. He walked to work every morning from the East Forties, had an apple and a glass of milk at noon, and walked home again every night with his evening paper. He was a tall, gangling man with placid brown eyes and a shy, friendly smile. Nothing of the hard Broadway glaze about Al.

Perhaps for this very reason friendship had grown between the quiet cashier and his dapper columnist customer. Not that Jerry saw Al often; that was impossible for a feverish little comet like Tracy. But they did go to fights and hockey matches occasionally, and after Jerry had met Florence, he got in the habit of spending a pleasant evening in their cosy walk-up apartment over near the East River.

After a hectic day rubbing elbows with the phonies, the snides and smoothies along the Main Stem, an evening with the Redmans was like a vacation along a leafy trout stream. No wisecracks; ale instead of daiquiris; good solid talk about things remote from the headlines.

Al's noon-hour visit to the Tracy penthouse had been utterly unexpected. His voice over the telephone wire had sounded high-pitched, strident. The moment he walked in, Tracy knew that something was desperately wrong with

the man. Not from his appearance, although his smile seemed taut and twisted. It was the way Al's feet tripped over the edge of the rug with unseeing awkwardness, the manner in which his bony fingers vised around Tracy's extended hand.

"Jerry, I've got to talk to you. God knows I don't want to drag you into anything unpleasant, but I don't know where else to turn."

"Trouble?"

"Yes."

"Florence know about it?"

"No."

Tracy grinned. "Let's tackle it. What sort of trouble, Al?"

Redman said faintly, "This sort: I debated for nearly an hour in my cage at the bank, whether I'd use my lunch time today to come to you for advice, or to go to a certain doctor's office on Park Avenue and kill him."

There was silence for a moment.

"Sit down, Al," Tracy said gently. "I'll mix you a drink and then we'll—"

"No drink. I've got to hand a thousand dollars in hundred-dollar bills to a blackmailer at nine-thirty tonight. He's already taken every penny of my personal savings. Now he wants me to get it from the bank. Do you understand? From the bank!"

Tracy nodded. "I'll do the worrying about the dough, Al. You give me the facts, as straight as you can talk. Take a deep breath. O. K. Shoot!"

He listened, watched the rug. Years of listening to the troubles of frightened people had taught Tracy the value of the averted face, the inclined ear, the impersonal silence of the confessional.

Al Redman blurted it out, relief in his racing words. The crook was Dr. Andrew Stoner. Al had gone to him for treatment following a breakdown from overwork in the bank during the hectic days and nights that had followed the market crash. Stoner had cured him—and trapped him. How thoroughly he had been trapped, Al didn't realize until months later, when he had

received a curt telephone summons to a brownstone house on the lower west side. The nature of that summons filled him with sick dismay.

Al had given Florence a fake excuse and gone. He was met at the brownstone door by a masked man with a gun, conducted to a room, handed a sheaf of typewritten pages and told to read. He found it to be a photostatic copy of every word he had uttered months earlier in the secluded quiet of Dr. Stoner's study on Park Avenue.

Included in the pages was a secret that Redman was unaware he had divulged, lulled to hypnotic peace by the polished discs that always rotated during the psychoanalyst's treatment. It was a confession that Redman had falsified the books of the bank where he was employed and had borrowed two thousand dollars.

"Borrowed, I said—not stolen!" Al gasped.

Technically, it had been theft; actually, it was not. Redman had needed two thousand dollars for an emergency operation on his wife. He took it, knowing he could replace every penny of it within ten days from savings that were temporarily frozen in an investment. The money was replaced, the books adjusted.

The masked man with the gun had demanded three hundred dollars as the price of his silence. He had pointed out deftly that the sum demanded was not large; that blackmail was cheaper than ruin. The bank officials might sympathize with the motives of a trusted employee, but they could scarcely keep him any longer. Nor would they recommend him to any other bank. Redman would not only lose the only livelihood for which he was fitted; he would be blacklisted for life.

Tremulously he had agreed to pay and was conducted from the house by the masked blackmailer with the gun. From that moment he had paid again and again at intervals nicely calculated to keep him from growing desperate.

Tonight he was expected to pay a thousand dollars which he didn't have. His tremulous plea that he was broke amused the masked man who always interviewed him. He suggested with a chuckle that Redman repeat his knowledge of bank procedure and hide the theft with a dummy transaction on the books. Nine-thirty tonight or else. . . .

Tracy's voice was very steady in the high-ceilinged penthouse room. "You're certain the guy with the gun was Dr. Stoner?"

"I'm sure of it. Same height, same build. His voice was disguised—metallic, like a damned cricket—but I knew him. And there's a small, crescent-shaped scar on Stoner's hand—an acid burn. I've seen that same crescent on the blackmailer's hand every time I've kept an appointment. I tell you, it's Stoner himself, shuttling like a damned Jekyll and Hyde between Park Avenue and a musty old brownstone on the fringe of Greenwich Village. God knows how many fools like me he has—"

"We'll let the rest take care of themselves," Tracy said curtly. "I'm a columnist, not a cop. I've got enough when he tries to put the heat on a pal of mine."

The rasp went out of his voice. Smiling, he rose. "You've got just about time enough to make it back to the bank. Scram, or the vice-president in charge of time clocks will be giving you a dirty look. Forget about blackmail. I'll take care of the doc."

"But—"

"I'll call Florence and tell her I've got you dated for a hockey game. What time do you generally eat?"

"Six-thirty."

"I'll drop in while Florence is busy in the kitchen. I'll give you final instructions then."

He got rid of the dazed cashier by using what he called the Vaudeville Push. It consisted of loud, jovial, reassuring talk while the victim was propelled steadily to the door and out. He knew

that Al's ragged nerves were close to a break. But once he reached the street he'd get a grip on himself. Having spilled his secret to Tracy, there was no immediate danger of his going haywire with a gun. The grooves of habit would slide him swiftly back to his cage at the bank.



THE TAXI in which Jerry Tracy had ridden eastward through windy darkness halted in front of the modest apartment building in which Al and Florence

Redman modestly lived.

"Stick around," Jerry said. "I'll be down in about five minutes."

The hackman eyed the expensive derby, the imported Chesterfield, the flash of dinner clothes exposed by the V of the silken muffler. When guys said stick around, it meant either extra business or a gyp sneak. This guy was O. K. With a grunt the chauffeur unfolded a tabloid, swore when he found it was too dark to read, and went into a doze.

Al Redman opened the door upstairs. He said in a quick whisper, "She's in the kitchen."

"Swell."

They moved quietly into the living-room and Tracy closed the door. He handed Al a sealed envelope. "Stick it in your pocket. Quick."

"What is it?"

"A thousand bucks. Ten centuries. Keep that date at nine-thirty. Let the doc think you stole it from the bank. I'll get in touch with you later tonight or tomorrow morning."

Al's face went white. He said slowly, "I can't let you throw a thousand dollars away like that, Jerry."

"Nuts. I spend a grand every year buying my hat back in restaurants—and think of the fun I'm getting. . . . You do exactly what I told you and leave the rest to me. So long, keep."

He squeezed Al's cold hand briefly

and left the apartment as quietly as he had entered it.

Tracy climbed back in the cab, feeling a little edgy. He wanted to dine alone and do a little thinking before he attempted to crash the brownstone. He hadn't told Al, but he had decided that was the only thing to do. He wanted to be hidden inside the dump and see the money passed. It might lead to gunplay, but it seem the only logical way to crimp Stoner's racket. Tracy was confident he could talk the smooth doc out of trouble, once the cards were laid on the table. Stoner was just as vulnerable to police publicity as his frightened victim.

Smiling faintly, the *Daily Planet's* little columnist drove to Raoul's. The swanky Park Avenue atmosphere of Raoul's would keep his mind on business. It amused him to see the doorman touch his hat respectfully, to see the headwaiter skim toward him with a fawning smile. Even at Raoul's publicity in Tracy's famous newspaper column was not to be sneezed at.

He was conducted to his usual table and his favorite cocktail was brought—even to the added dash of gin—without Tracy having to utter a word.

He was sipping meditatively, his back toward the other diners, when he happened to glance at an exquisite mirror on the draped wall. He stiffened, remained staring.

Two more customers had just come in. A tall, serious-faced young man was ordering drinks at a near-by table, his eyes frowning intently at the wine list. The girl opposite him was Gloria Stoner. In spite of himself Jerry had to admit that Gloria was physically gorgeous, a knockout. Tall, well-bred, coolly sure of herself, she sat back against her furred wrap, her shoulders like cream above her silver evening gown. She was watching Tracy.

Tracy sipped some more, set down his cocktail glass. Gloria's deft glance in the mirror had conveyed very accurately to the columnist the sense that

she considered him a small bug in a black Tuxedo—though possibly an interesting bug. He could tell from the tightening of her lips that she knew who he was.

The man with her was Hadley Brown, her fiancé. Except for rather sullen eyes, he looked boyish in dinner clothes. A bit like a Harvard tackle with a grouch, Tracy thought. Actually he was a broker who did most of his business at polo fields and golf clubs.

Hadley Brown's frown deepened as Gloria spoke to him in a low voice. He shook his head, turned to stare at Tracy's back. Tracy's interest quickened as he realized what was happening. The girl was getting rid of her companion. She did it so deftly, so competently that it was a pleasure to watch it.

Hadley Brown stood up. He shrugged at the girl, his face politely blank. He started toward the cloak room, then abruptly changed his mind. Veering, he came toward the table where Jerry sat amused and a bit mystified by the whole peculiar procedure.

Brown leaned close over Tracy's shoulder, so that the columnist had to turn slightly to look up at him.

"Listen, you."

"Yes?"

"I don't know what your game is—"

"I like solitaire, if you don't mind."

They both spoke in undertones. It was impossible for anyone else to overhear the conversation. Tracy kept smiling. Brown's face was taut, hostile.

"This isn't the time or the place to create a scene, Tracy. I just want to tell you that I know you're trying to cause trouble of some kind for my fiancée, and I'm warning you to watch your step! If you don't, I'm ready to go the limit to make you stop. Is that clear?"

"Sorry I can't offer you a drink, Mr. Brown," Tracy murmured. "I would, only I don't care either for you or your manners."

"Remember, if you bother Gloria—"

"Good evening, Mr. Brown."

For an instant the watchful columnist thought that the angry young man was going to reach out and throttle him where he sat. Instead, Brown straightened, continued his quiet way toward the cloak room. Except for Gloria no one could possibly have guessed the savage tension that underlay Brown's momentary pause at Tracy's table. He was gone with a light, springy step. It was as though he had merely halted to exchange a polite, low-voiced greeting with an acquaintance.

The only queer note was the blaze in his narrowed eyes. Tracy knew danger when he saw it. This very swanky guy wasn't bluffing when he said he'd go the limit. Not by a damned sight!

Tracy thought with cold excitement: "Mr. Hadley Brown, eh? Where the devil does he fit into this little affair of the doc, the duck and the daughter?"

He had a hunch the daughter was going to make the next play.

A few moments later he saw without surprise that Gloria's waiter was drifting discreetly across the room toward the table where Jerry sat toying with his empty glass.

The waiter said, "Miss Stoner presents her compliments to Mr. Jerry Tracy, and asks if he won't bring his drink to her table and join her at dinner."

Tracy grinned. This was stuff he liked. When he spoke his voice was nasal, very clear. "Why not? But tell her the pleasure is all hers."



LORIA and Jerry Tracy had a cocktail together. He found he wasn't as calm as he thought he was. He knew it when Gloria cancelled her

dinner order, her blue eyes cold with mockery.

"I see by the papers, Mr. Tracy, that duck seems to be in fashion at the moment. Perhaps you'd better bring me roast duck, Henri."

"A swell idea," Tracy said harshly. "Eventually your duck will be cooked. Now's as good as any time."

But he couldn't get a rise out of Gloria. He wondered why the hell she had sent for him. She looked wary, tense, but he couldn't lead the conversation to her father. Perhaps she was nervous because of the decorous silence in the restaurant, the presence of so many other diners.

Jerry got angrier at himself as the meal progressed. There was smiling chit-chat between them, the crisp crackle of nastiness sugared over with amusement. Tracy let his barbed tongue go to work, but Gloria was as clever as he was. It was only after the liqueur glasses had been drained that Jerry got his chance to grin. It came when Gloria asked grudgingly for the check.

"One always pays for entertainment," she said with cool impudence. "I'll sign for both of us, Henri."

To Jerry's delight, Henri shrugged, dropped his voice to a confidential whisper. "But, Madame, there ees no check. Dinner at Raoul's, eet ees always complimentary for guests of Mr. Tracy."

Grinning, Tracy helped Gloria with her furred wrap. She waited while he got his coat and hat at the check room. There was no sign of Hadley Brown. Tracy was still puzzled by this whole apparently senseless interview. Was it chance or a carefully designed maneuver?

Tracy got his answer when the two passed through the revolving door to the starlit chill of Park Avenue. The doorman's husky whisper to Gloria made things crystal clear.

"Well, I see you found him, Miss Stoner."

"Yes. I seem to be lucky tonight."

They moved toward the cab at the canopied curb. Tracy gave the girl an edged smile. "I get it now, sister. A deliberate pick-up, eh?"

"Of course. How else would one meet a Broadway columnist?"

"O. K. You win. If you'll excuse

me, I'll be getting back to the good old gutter."

He stepped over the curb, got into the taxi. Before he could slam the door, Gloria slipped in beside him. Sat down with a cold little smile he didn't quite like.

"Over to Fifty-ninth," she said clearly to the driver. "Then up through Central Park."

Tracy looked at his wrist watch. The time was not quite eight-thirty. He had a little more than an hour before he was due at the brownstone house on the fringe of Greenwich Village.

He said abruptly, "I don't know what the gag is, babe, but I'm busy. I'll give you to Fifty-ninth to get down to brass tacks. What do you want?"

"I want to talk sense to you."

"Shoot."

She turned slightly and he saw that her silver evening bag was open. The furred edge of her wrap hid the snout of a tiny automatic pistol. It was squat, steady—but no steadier than the sound of Gloria's whisper.

"One move out of you and I'll put lead through that cheap shirt front of yours."

"It's not half as cheap as a gun bluff, sister."

The taxi whirled through the plaza at Fifty-ninth, turned into the park. There were not many cars on the dimly lit road. Gloria kept her eyes and the gun on Tracy.

"I'd like to know just what you've got against my father."

"Why don't you ask him?"

"I'm asking you."

"How do you want it? On a plate with mayonnaise, or straight?"

"As straight as you can talk."

"O. K. Your old man is a crook. The rottenest kind. He's been putting his dirty finger on a personal friend of mine—and holding it there till it hurts. So I'm running him out of town, and you with him, babe, because I think you're a crooked chip off the same block of ice. And you might as well shove

that rod back in your bag because I've been gunned by blondes a hell of a lot tougher than you."

He still didn't like the look in her eyes. They were slitted counterparts of her father's. Her voice made him think of Stoner, too.

"Have you any proof of all this?"

"I don't need proof, sweetheart. I'm not a cop. I told you once, I'm just a pal of the victim."

"I think you're a liar. There isn't any victim, except Dad. So get this! If my father can't protect himself, I will. You print one more of those slimy squibs about us in your moron newspaper, and—"

"Sure. I know. You'll kill me."

"Not at all," Gloria Stoner said. "I'll see that you're killed, Mr. Tracy. A slight difference in method. Get your hand away from that window!"

But Tracy continued calmly to revolve the handle of the taxi's window. The cab had stopped at a red intersection light. A park cop was leaning against the metal traffic pole, kicking his cold shoes together. Tracy stuck his grinning face out the opened window.

"Hello, Mike! How's tricks?"

"Oh, hello, Jerry. For gosh sake! What are you doin' way up here?"

He ambled across the road, his heavy patrolman's brogans making a slow slap-slap on the frozen pavement. The girl beside Tracy slid her automatic back into her expensive evening bag. It was like a pleasant family reunion. Gloria smiled, Jerry smiled, the cop smiled.

Jerry got out of the cab and closed the door. The traffic light changed to green, but Jerry didn't get back. The cop looked puzzled. So did the driver of the taxi.

Gloria bit her lip, said harshly, "Good-by, Mr. Tracy. It was so nice to meet you. Go ahead, driver! What are you waiting for?"

Her face, framed in the open window, was stiffly menacing. "Remember that slight difference I spoke of, Mr. Tracy,"

she called. "I'll see you later—or perhaps someone else will."

Tracy shrugged imperceptibly. He watched the crimson tail-light dwindle around a curve like a blood-red will o' the wisp.

"Flag me the first empty cab that comes along, Mike."

"Boy, that was an expensive blonde! She looked sore. How come you're leavin' her?"

Jerry chuckled suddenly. "She lured me into a cab and tried to get fresh. I wouldn't mind if it was Spring, but—"

"She could get fresh with me any time she liked," Mike said, his eyes thoughtful.

He held up his gloved hand presently and halted another cab. "So long, Jerry."

At Tracy's order the cab left the park, turned into Fifth Avenue and headed swiftly south. Tracy glanced at his watch, saw that he had plenty of time to get down to Greenwich Village. He felt better. Still, that gun of Gloria's was no phony! She certainly had meant business.



THE BROWN-STONE house was on Brixton Street, a quiet cul-de-sac where the village plays crooked tag with Varick Street. Jerry

Tracy covered the last two blocks on foot, walked past the joint on the opposite side. He thought of it as a joint purely through habit. To him, any edifice from the St. Regis to the Automat was either a joint or a dump.

Actually, the brownstone looked respectable enough; a high front stoop and area-way, neat blue shades drawn halfway down on the windows; a couple of empty ash cans at the entrance to a clean paved alley that went down six steps behind a grilled sidewalk gate.

There weren't any lights on in the house, nor any enameled name plate in the parlor window. That was the only

difference from its somber neighbors. Most of the others showed doctor or dentist signs. If this quiet dump with the side alley was really a blackmail spot, the canny Doctor Stoner had picked his number with a shrewd eye for conservative privacy.

Tracy continued to the corner, braced himself against the sweep of the circling wind. Nine-ten. Twenty minutes leeway before Al Redman was due to spend Jerry's grand. The *Daily Planet's* shivering columnist crossed the street, came back on the proper side. What a sap he was to be wearing a Chesterfield! The thing felt like cold tin against his ribs.

He tried the grilled alley gate, found it unlocked, went through and down the steps. He was old enough at the skulking racket to know that witnesses never noticed a casual pedestrian. The muggs who hesitated and peered and tiptoed were all long since in the can—or acting thug rôles for the movies.

There was a small yard in the back hemmed in by a high board fence. The cellar door was locked. Windows all dark; shades half drawn, same as the front. But there was a light shining from one of the side windows.

Tracy found a wooden tub filled with empty bottles. He laid the bottles on the ground and carried the tub back to the alley. By standing on it and stretching, he was able to hook his fingers over a stone sill. The window at the head of the alley was built dormer style, and its massive bulge screened him from the view of any chance passerby on the sidewalk.

He chinned slowly, peered through the dusty lower pane. Dark velour curtains left a vertical three inch gap. Through it Tracy could see nothing but a brightly lit unfurnished room and the white blur of a knob on a closed door.

Gingerly, Tracy drew up one knee and anchored himself on the cold stone of the outer sill. He still had about fifteen minutes before Al Redman arrived with the ransom money. If Jerry

could get inside, witness the transaction from concealment, he'd have no qualms about showing himself to the wise Doc Stoner.

Pistol fire would make things just as tough for the sleek psychoanalyst as it would for Tracy. There'd be a dangerous moment or two; then Jerry and Stoner would get down to brass tacks and talk business. Jerry was no white knight for the general public. He'd offer Stoner an even swap: You lay off Al Redman, and I'll lay off you!

He put even pressure on the lower window, and to his delight it moved slightly. Unlocked! He lifted it steadily, inch by inch. Eagerly intent on masking any betraying squeak from the warped frame, he forgot completely about the possibility of an alarm.

The staccato clamor of a bell froze him into startled rigidity.

Instantly, he lowered his body, hung like a taut pendulum. But inside the brownstone dwelling things were happening with startling speed.

The door of the lighted rear parlor burst open. A tall figure was visible, bounding toward the opened window. A black mask where the man's face should have been. A gun in his hand. And on the clenched hand—Tracy saw the thing with instinctive, photographic clarity—the bluish outline of a small crescent-shaped scar. The acid burn that Al Redman had sworn was on the back of Dr. Stoner's aristocratic hand!

Tracy's dropping feet hit the wooden tub and he bounced, crouching, to the pavement of the alley.

Stoner was leaning out the window, his gun a dull glitter. Tracy felt his back crawl as he raced pell-mell for the alley steps that led upward to the sidewalk. But Stoner fired no shot. Instead, Tracy heard the short, bubbling bleat of a whistle.

He was half way up the steps when he heard it. It brought sanity back to his panting body. A signal! An ambush!

The thought halted Tracy's flying legs.

Peering through the grilled gate, he saw a figure rising noiselessly from behind the newel post of a stone stoop. The head was bent queerly askew like the pose of a violinist. Its cheek cradled the stock of a rifle. The rifle was short-barreled, with an ugly protuberance clamped to its muzzle.

As Tracy threw himself backward, flame spat in a thin streak from the silenced rifle. There was a muffled *plop-plop plop-plop* like a series of wheezing coughs. Bullets whizzed through the bars of the alley gate and chipped stone from the wall of the house.

Tracy gave a strangled yell as he plunged backward down the alley steps. The sound was involuntary, ripped out of him by fear. But he had sense enough to realize that his yell might make that 'possum dive of his look like a natural.

He pitched limply down the steps, rolling over and over like a dead man. Spread-eagled at the bottom, he held his breath, his body slack against the freezing pavement.

He knew that the killer was at the gate, staring down at him. He could hear quick, eager breathing. Then there was a soft patter of retreating feet, followed by the faint slam of a car door.

A motor roared. Gears clashed with rattling urgency.

Tracy bellied cautiously up the alley steps. His eyes, level with the sidewalk, caught a swift glimpse of a vanishing coupé and the man behind the wheel. A plump, dough-like face on hunched, heavy-set shoulders.

Car and gunman were gone in the shrill whine of an accelerating motor. The whole affair had happened with extraordinary precision. Except for the ugly chipped spots where bullets had drilled the alley wall, there was no evidence to show that murder had missed a very frightened little newspaper guy by a margin so narrow that Tracy's heart seemed to be beating way up near his tonsils.

He glanced backward along the alley. The window was closed. Stoner had

evidently vanished the moment he had blown his signal whistle. Tracy had recognized the dough-faced gunman with a gasp of wonder. He was a man whose bullets Tracy had never dreamed he would ever be called upon to dodge.

Yet, thinking about it as he lay crouched against the alley steps, Tracy could see how logically a guy like Tick Anderson fitted into the picture. A little business deal, that was all. "Strictly business," was Tick's favorite motto.

Tracy's derby was still lying upside down on its crown where it had wobbled. He scooped it up, jammed it tremulously on his head, made a quick sneak for the sidewalk. No pedestrians in sight.

Wind nipped eastward at him from the Hudson like an iron claw. He hurried to the corner, his eyes peeled to snare a rolling cab. A belated pat at his hip pocket told him that he had lost his .32 somewhere back in the alley, but he was damned if he was going back to get it!

He was waiting there breathlessly, his shoes scuffed, his Chesterfield rumpled and dusty, when he caught sight of the crimson neon light of a shoe shine parlor. It reminded him that he looked like a bum. He went in grimly, had himself shined up and brushed off.

The Greek attendant looked curiously at this pint-sized little dude who had all the ear-marks of a booze spill in the gutter, except that he was obviously a long way from being drunk. Sorta angry looking, too, the Greek decided. He made no comments and was rewarded with a tip that made him bow low at the waist.



OUR minutes later Jerry Tracy was in a cab rolling north.

"Blue Grotto," he told the driver. Tick was probably back there by this time, sipping a very dry Martini at his favorite table. His car garaged, his rifle parked, and an alibi handy in case he needed one.

Try as he would Jerry couldn't summon up any vicious anger against the guy. It was like hating a paper-hanger because he hung paper. Rub-outs were Tick Anderson's business. Everybody in town knew it, including Tracy.

Outside of that, the guy was as cheerful and friendly a mugg as you'd want to meet in a week of Sundays. The fact that he and Tracy were casual pals, bumping into each other at prize fights and hockey matches, had nothing to do with the main idea.

Tick would have bumped the Mayor of New York if the proposition was right and the dough was laid on the line. His code of ethics was simple: If suckers got themselves lined up for a kill, that wasn't Tick's fault. He considered himself a high-class merchant, same as Rogers Peet. Only Rogers Peet sold pants and vests.

The Blue Grotto was a bright glitter just north of Times Square, where Broadway cuts a slashing chunk out of Seventh Avenue.

Tracy said "Hello, Andy!" to Manhattan's toothiest doorman and got a delighted, "Hi, Jerry, howth trich?" Andy's uppers and lowers were brilliant to look at, but they made his speech a little disconcerting. An ex-pug, he'd had most of his real teeth extracted by leather. Drunks sometimes amused themselves by paying Andy to hiss. Tracy had immortalized him in the column as "the sthpittin' image of an admiral."

"Tick Anderson around?" Tracy asked.

"Yeah. Inthide thomewhere."

Within the blue-glass front of the joint, noise hit Tracy like a hot, pulsing wave. Manny Bloom and his Tooting Troubadours. Clatter of dishes, clink of knives and forks. Fat, gravy voices. Lean, querulous voices. ". . . so I sez, sure I'll take thirteen weeks on a network program. But I ain't woikin' for apples. . . ." Broadway with a napkin under its chin. "Hello, Jerry. What's the rush? Who d'you like in the third

tomorrow at Hialeah Park? Sheik?"

Tracy plodded past them with his glazed celebrity grin. Some were tramps; some were the real McCoy, good guys; but he didn't have time for any of 'em tonight. He had a little business with Tick Anderson. He could see Tick already, exactly as he had expected to find him—large as life at his regular table in the corner, his doughy face staring quietly at the dry Martini in his hand.

"Hi yuh, Tick."

The face jerked upward at Jerry's breezy salutation. For a second the merest flick of a frown darkened his eyes. Like a cloud blowing across a blue lake. It was gone instantly and he was up on his feet, his beefy hand extended in welcome.

"Jerry, you little bozo, it's good to see yuh. You don't know how damn good it is, pal."

"Maybe I do, Tick. How's for a Martini?"

"Sure thing. Sit down, pal. Hey, waiter! Hey, you with the tray! Double Martinis here. Dry, or you kin take 'em back!"

Tick Anderson beamed. He was like a host in a tavern. Twinkling, cheerful, genuinely pleased with himself and with Tracy. The only flaw in the picture was a certain embarrassed reticence in the back of his blue eyes. The drinks came and they touched rims and sipped.

Smilingly, Tracy pinned him down to the murder attack. Smilingly, Tick admitted it.

"How come, Tick? Any special reason?"

"How the hell would I know?"

"How much did I bring?"

"Five grand."

"It's nice to know that I rate a top price," Jerry said quietly. "I hope it wasn't C.O.D."

Tick said reproachfully, "Now, Jerry! You know me better than that. I get it in advance, rain or shine." His pudgy hand reached out, patted the

fingers of the columnist that were twined loosely about his glass stem. "I'm damned glad, pal, that it didn't rain tonight. Listen, kid, why don't yuh gimme a friendly break? Why don't you blow town for a few days?"

"You think there'll be more rain?"

"I dunno, pal. If there is, I hope to geez you'll show a little sense and duck."

"It wouldn't be ethical, I suppose, to ask you who the paymaster is?"

Tick said again, with the same embarrassed inflection, "Now, Jerry!" He played with his empty cocktail glass.

Tracy changed the subject abruptly. "How's Jane?"

"Swell. Gimbel's gave her a raise last week. She's got three dames under her now. That kid's got clever ideas, Jerry. She oughta be runnin' a high-class—you know, snooty—little dress shop of her own. She could clean up in no time."

"She looked a little thin the last time I saw her, Tick." Tracy's voice became casual. "It's a damn shame she won't let you—"

"Yeah." The enthusiasm faded from Tick's eyes, leaving them pinched and morose.

Jane's eyes were a lot like her brother's, Jerry remembered. Same shade of blue. So bright and alert that they were startlingly like blue enamel when they flashed on you in a smile. But there was no doughy flesh in Jane's countenance. She was thinner, taller than her gunman brother, with high cheek bones and a kind of delicate tension around the lips that had missed her brother altogether.

Tracy was one of the few people on Broadway who knew that Jane existed. She lived in a cheap walk-up flat in the Seventies, adjoining the El on Columbus Avenue. Worked in Gimbels and made twenty-three-fifty a week. She was the only thing on earth that Tick Anderson really cared about. Tick cared enough, Jerry noted, for his jaws to go ridgy like iron at his

helpless inability to do for her the things he wanted to do.

"Yank her out of Gimbels!" his jaw said. "Get her out of that—tenement flat!"

But Jerry knew that while life ran in either of them there'd be no dress shop, no cosy apartment, no neat little Packard for Jane Anderson—not unless she bought 'em out of twenty-three-fifty a week at Gimbels.

Even Tick knew that now. They each had their blind spot and it was no use arguing. Over two Martinis Tick could prove logically that his occupation, while illegal, was as fundamentally honest and necessary as that of a garbage man. Furniture and clothes wore out their usefulness and guys were paid to lug it away. Saps got in bad with big timers. Ditto.

For the life of him Tick couldn't see a hell of an inch of difference. He'd been complimented by cops for some of his jobs. On vague hearsay, of course. But Tick could never make Jane see his point.

Jane's code of ethics was as peculiar as his. She'd have rotted in jail before she'd have tipped the police to any phase of Tick's methods of livelihood, but she wouldn't take a dime from any of his earnings. From the time that Tick had swung into the big money, Jane had resolutely stuck to Gimbels and her walk-up flat on Columbus Avenue. They saw each other often, loved each other devotedly, but—well, no use arguing. . . .

A waiter came by, caught Jerry's nod and the two had another drink. Smilingly Jerry reached for his Chesterfield and derby which he had parked on an unoccupied chair against the wall.

He said in a low voice, "I'll try to remember to duck in case it rains later on. But I still think you're silly, Tick, to spray at guys that write columns for newspapers. It might some time cause trouble for Jane."

Tick's hand moved like lightning from its cushioned laxity on the table-

cloth. His fingers clamped on Tracy's wrist, bit until the pressure hurt like hell. The muddy cloud had drifted over the blue lake of Tick's eyes. He didn't raise his voice, but there was ruthless menace in the jut of his head.

"What do you mean by that crack?"

"No crack," Tracy said, his lips compressed a little from the pain in his wrist. "Just advice."

"Listen, mugg. If you're thinkin' of putting the heat on Jane— If you raise a single lousy fingernail to cause that kid any trouble—"

"I'm not. You know me better than that."

"I don't know nobody where my sister's concerned, pal!"

"Let go, sap," Jerry breathed warningly. His head, twisting partly aside, had given him a quick glance at two men who were hurrying toward the alcove table. Tick let go his grip instantly, faked a grin.

"Well, so long. Keep your neck in, pal."

Jerry rose, resisting the impulse to rub his aching wrist. Doctor Stoner and Hadley Brown were standing together, just back of Tracy's chair, glowering at the *Daily Planet's* columnist. Tracy wondered whether either of them had heard those last tense interchanges between himself and the moon-faced gunman.

He saw Stoner's glance and Brown's, too, move past him toward the now placid figure of Tick Anderson. Tick stared at both of them as a subway guard might stare at a couple of passengers on his car platform.

"Take it easy, Hadley," Dr. Stoner said in his suave, perfectly modulated voice. "Remember we want information, not a scene."

"Where's Gloria?" Brown growled.

"You talkin' to me, pal?" Tick replied amiably.

Again Stoner cut in with a bland murmur. His hand lifted to his gray goatee, smoothed it. He smiled patiently.

"We may be mistaken, of course, but Mr. Brown thinks and so do I, that you may be able to cast some light on the rather erratic movements of my daughter tonight."

"What makes you think that?"

Tracy was eying the back of Stoner's lifted hand. On it, clearly distinct, was the bluish outline of a small, crescent-shaped scar.

"Gloria had dinner with me at Raoul's on Park Avenue, if that's what you mean." Tracy's smile glinted mockingly toward the doctor's sullen companion. "Mr. Brown can tell you about that, I think. He was a party to the—dinner arrangement."

"Where did you take her afterwards?" Brown growled.

"She took *me*. We went riding in Central Park. The conversation became boring and I left her." Tracy's quiet voice got cooler. "What am I supposed to do? Follow the gal all night and turn in a half-hourly report? I think you must have me mixed up, Doctor Stoner, with some other guy. Someone that you've hired, maybe? For five grand?"

Tick Anderson sat playing with the stem of his cocktail glass. He seemed not quite interested, not quite aloof. Stoner frowned as he noted that diners were staring across from near-by tables. The restaurant orchestra blared suddenly into a noisy swing number. Under cover of the brassy din, Stoner leaned toward Gloria's fiancé and whispered an inaudible sentence. Hadley Brown shrugged, nodded. The two walked away.

Jerry Tracy let a waiter help him on with his Chesterfield and adjust the velvet collar above his silk muffler. "So long, Tick. Be seeing you—and I hope I see you first."

His gibe brought no response from Tick. Hadley Brown's sullenness seemed to have transferred itself to the heavy-featured gunman. Tick's blue eyes were sultry. After a brief, unpleasant pause, the *Daily Planet's* dapper little column-

ist clicked briskly through the noisy warmth of the restaurant and twirled himself out through the revolving sidewalk door.



AXTHI, Mithter Trathy?" the doorman spluttered cheerfully.

Jerry shook his head. He turned, heeled it northward along the cold sidewalk. The bite of the wind in his face felt good, seemed to wash him clean of tobacco smoke, breaded veal cutlets and jazz. The exhilaration lasted for three blocks, then he began to get cold again. It was ridiculous to think of walking all the way to Jane Anderson's flat. That was where he had decided to go—Tick or no Tick.

This was one of those damned confidential things where Jerry's police connections were of no use whatever. Jane was on the level, a good friend of Tracy's. If she knew that Jerry's life was actually in danger, she might take a hand, tell him things. She'd never betray Tick; but to imagine her sitting idly by and allowing Jerry Tracy to be sprayed into a graveyard with bullets—well, that was unthinkable.

He hailed a cab, climbed into its heated interior with a wriggle of pleasure. The taxi followed Broadway's crooked slant across town. Tracy grinned, thought of a mild little squib for the column: "Broadway—consistently crooked from Bowling Green to 103rd." A punk gag—but what the hell—you can't always be good.

He watched street lights wink past, blurred and blobby outside the frosted window of his cab. At Lincoln Square the driver swerved into Columbus Avenue and racketed expertly north under the gloomy structure of the Elevated.

Tracy paid him off at a windy corner in the Seventies. Jane Anderson lived on the top floor rear of a dismal old barracks. It gave Jerry the creeps just

to look at the cheap brown varnish on her apartment door.

There was no immediate answer to his ring and he was about to push the button again, when the door opened on a hesitant crack and Jane was staring at him.

"Oh! Hello, Jerry." Her smile was quick, forced. He could see tension in the thin, sensitive lips. There was a sort of angry hangover in her eyes that he couldn't understand. "I—I never expected to see you tonight. What are you doing so far from Times Square?"

She was trying to be offhand and making a botch of it.

He grinned. "Now that I'm here, sweetheart, don't I get asked in?"

"Listen, Jerry, if you don't mind—some other time. . . ."

A voice said with cold clarity from inside the apartment. "Mr. Jerry Tracy, eh? By all means, have him in!"

It was a cool, high soprano, edged with contempt. The familiar sound of it pulled Tracy's brows together. Gently he shoved the door open in Jane's hand, so that he could step past her and in.

There was no foyer to cross. He found himself standing in a shabby living-room, staring grimly at Gloria Stoner. She had laid aside her furred wrap and had made herself comfortable on the sofa. She was still wearing the silver evening gown, one shapely leg crossed comfortably over the other. A cigarette waved him welcome.

"How do you do?" she said, her voice a nasal mockery of Tracy's. But the cigarette gesture was jerky. Her eyes had the same angry tension as Jane's. Tracy knew that the crossed legs and the cigarette was a build up, a swift pose decided on the moment she had heard his voice outside the apartment.

He turned away as though he hadn't seen her. "I didn't know you went in for blond bims from Park Avenue, Jane. What's she doing here?"

"I sent for her."

"Why?"

Jane didn't answer.

"You're always talking about brass tacks, Mr. Tracy," Gloria said from the sofa. "How about opening a box of them right now, and sit down?"

Tracy's fingers reached out, cupped Jane Anderson's slack hand in his. She flushed under his probing stare. "I think I understand. She's here because you're worried about me. Right?"

"Yes."

"We won't mention any names because it's not necessary. You found out that somebody has hired somebody else to gun me to death. You figured that Gloria is part of the crooked setup. So, knowing how hopeless it would be to argue with—"

"Tick—isn't that his name?" Gloria interrupted spitefully. "We've been through all that before you came. Your girl friend with the blue eyes has just finished threatening my life, if I don't call off a mysterious gunman named Tick who, I gather, is her brother."

"O.K. So what are you gonna do about it?"

"Do?" Gloria rose abruptly to her feet. "I'm going to protect myself and my father. I've heard talk about blackmail and extortion until I'm sick of listening. I knew before I came here that—"

She sprang to her feet, faced Tracy with blazing eyes.

"You think I'm a fool, don't you? You think I'm a pampered, over-soft deb, and that I don't know what it's all about. Well, I do! It's plain enough to me now what I'm up against."

"For instance?"

"A wise, undersized little crook, using your newspaper prestige to hide the fact that you're a criminal racketeer. Pretending to be so damned noble, and in league with a killer and his moll. The Broadway type—a man who would sell out anything or anybody for the dirty dollars it brings. All right! Let's talk business—your kind of business!"

Eying her warily, Jerry drew in a quick breath of instinctive admiration. Gloria's rage had stripped away all of her cool poise, all the sophisticated Park Avenue veneer. She was like a sinuous, vital young animal—a damned beautiful one, too.

"What's your price, Mr. Tracy? How much do you want to call off this clever hold-up of yours?"

Tracy smiled. The momentary gleam washed out of his hard, practical eyes.

"No bribes, thank you. Maybe I know about your type, too. The Park Avenue type. Everywhere you go— butlers and footmen and grafters with their palms out! Drop a little perfumed dough in somebody's palm, and no more worries, huh? As far as you're concerned, you think everybody is a butler. Well, I'm not, sweetheart, and you can't square me with a cash register!"

Sobbing, Gloria swung away from the tight-lipped columnist. Jane recoiled as the girl swished fiercely toward her, her bare arm outflung passionately.

"Jane, for God's sake, why don't you stop this—this horrible farce? You know exactly what's going on. Your brother's a gunman. Do you want him used as a stupid catspaw by Tracy? Do you want him hounded by police, arrested for conspiracy, sent to jail?"

"No, no. I—" Jane's face was ashen. She shook her head as though trying to clear it of doubt and dismay. "Jerry, are you sure that—that you—"

"Forget it, Jane. I'll talk to this dame. She's got a swell act, but there's one little question Gloria hasn't answered yet. She's going to, right now!"

With a quick gesture Gloria threw her furred wrap across the satin sheen of her shoulders. She moved regally toward the door. Tracy stepped in front of her, slightly shorter, not so rigid, but immovable nevertheless.

"Wait a second, babe. Why the big rush?"

"I'm leaving, Mr. Tracy!"

"You told me in the park that if I kept bothering you, you wouldn't kill

me yourself—you'd have me killed. Remember that 'slight difference' you talked about?"

"Get out of my way!"

"You wouldn't be coming here to try to put the finger on somebody, would you, Miss Stoner?"

She slapped him stingingly across the face.

Jane Anderson cried out breathlessly, sprang toward the other woman. But Tracy, his cheek dead white except for the four red marks where gloved fingers had struck him, fended Jane away. He bowed to Gloria, stepped out of her path.

With her hand on the knob, Gloria turned. Her eyes were startlingly like her father's. The same lidded look. Then the door clicked and she was gone.

The roar of a passing El train made the floor quiver. Jane was looking at Tracy, dull incredulity in her gaze.

"Jerry."

"What?"

"Did Tick really—"

"Yeah. He did."

"My God!"

"Come over here, Jane. Let's sit down. We've got to figure this thing out some way. Did Tick tell you I was lined up?"

"He sort of hinted," Jane whispered.

Tracy nodded. "Queer guy. Funny, the cockeyed slants he has. I was talking to him a little while ago over in the Blue Grotto. He told me how glad he was he missed. And he meant it, too."

"That won't stop him from trying again."

"I know it."

The carpet was faded in front of the sofa. So were the brown curtains that hung in the doorway between the living-room and Jane's bedroom. Spotlessly clean, though, with the proud neatness of poverty. You could see where the nap was worn down from Jane's restless feet. Poor kid, she had plenty to make her restless, even after a long day on her feet at Gimbels.

"Do you think there's any truth in this

stuff," she said faintly, "about bones and skull pressure and—" She picked at a loose thread on the sofa cushion.

"You mean a surgical operation? Nuts. Tick's trouble goes deeper than that. It's his way of thinking. The guy's got no imagination. He likes me as well as anyone, but if he popped me tomorrow I'd be just a tin can on a fence to him. He—well, he's just incapable of seeing that when a guy gets killed, he dies. That's as close as I can get to it. Does it make sense to you?"

The rumble of an approaching El train drowned out Tracy's hesitant words. He stared dully across the room at the brown curtain in the bedroom doorway. Some wiseacre on the editorial desk had told him once that a kid run over by an ice-wagon in front of his mother was a more poignant tragedy than the end of two million anonymous Chinks in a rice famine. There was a connection with Tick somewhere.

Suddenly Tracy stiffened. He was staring at a small ominous O in the vertical gap where the brown curtains were slightly parted. He saw a gun muzzle, a gloved hand. . . . The muzzle was swaying infinitesimally sidewise, toward the end of the sofa. Toward Jane's averted profile. . . .

Tracy's body moved like a steel spring. His hand clutched at Jane's arm as flame spat from the curtain fold. The grinding roar of the passing El train masked the sound of the explosion. Jane Anderson fell head-first to the floor with Tracy tangled on top of her. There was a dusty bounce against the back of the sofa as if something had slapped it.

He heard something hit the living-room carpet behind him and he whirled on his knees. The fleeing killer had tossed his weapon into the room. It was lying on the floor, a small automatic, with thin grayish vapor rising from its muzzle.

A door slammed somewhere as Tracy dove for the gun. Before he could wrench the brown curtains aside he heard the distant click of a bolt. He went bil-

lowing into the bedroom, fighting awkwardly to free himself from the tangling curtain.

The door he had heard slamming was on the opposite side of the bedroom. He tried it fiercely. Locked. He flung himself against the panel a couple of times before he realized he was too small a man to break it down. With the killer's pistol still in his hand, he raced back to where he had left Jane.

She was up on her feet, the sleeve of her house dress ripped from shoulder to elbow where Jerry had clutched at her.

"You hurt, Jane?"

"N-no."

"What's on the other side of that bedroom door?"

"Bathroom and kitchen."

"Is there a fire-escape in the kitchen?"

"Yes. It's the only one there is. Did you—did he—"

"The guy made a getaway, if that's what you mean," Tracy snapped. "He's gone—powdered—on the lam." His glance moved downward to the pistol in his hand. Suddenly he gave a queer bewildered exclamation. "Here's a funny one. It's *my own gun!*"

"Yours?"

"Yeah. I lost it earlier tonight in an alley down in Greenwich Village." He examined the weapon and found that just one bullet had been exploded. No fingerprints except Jerry's; the killer's hand had been gloved. He had meant Jerry to pick up the discarded gun; the tossing to the floor had been planned, not accidental.

Jerry shivered as his glance moved from the brown curtains to the bullet hole in the sofa. He guessed, instantly, the whole purpose of the attack. Frame-up!

He explained the frame jerkily to Jane. A girl dead; a slug from Jerry's .32 in her body; Jerry's own prints on the weapon. And a brother who loved the girl with fanatical devotion, racing to the apartment on a lying tip that Jerry had gone there to strong-arm her.

"Tick?" she gasped.

"Who else? Tick and I had an argument about you before I left him at the Blue Grotto. Stoner came up in time to hear the tail end of it. He sees his chance for a beautiful double-cross, playing on Tick's one weakness. He thinks that Tick deliberately missed that alley ambush and allowed me to get away. But if he could make Tick hate my guts, what a beautiful out for the doctor! The kill would look like a personal vendetta. Stoner's real motive would never appear—which is to wipe me out and end the threat to his black-mail business."

"But the frame-up didn't work."

"You think so?" Tracy murmured huskily. His face was toward the apartment door. He seemed to be listening while he talked. "Try and make Tick think it's O. K. when he sees my gun and the bullet hole in the sofa, and that ragged rip in your sleeve where I yanked you to the floor."

"He'll never believe me," Jane gasped.

"He's got to believe you. Sssh! Listen!"

Outside the apartment a faint thudding sound became audible; the hurrying rush of feet ascending stairs. It grew swiftly louder, approached the door. There was heavy breathing audible, then the swift rattle of the knob.

"Has Tick got a key?" Tracy breathed in Jane's ear.

"Yes."



TANDING rigidly beside the girl in the center of the room, Jerry waited. He had tossed his gun over to the sofa. He felt icy-cold along the spine as he heard the lock click open.

Tick's muddy-white face appeared in the doorway. The gunman's left hand closed the door gently behind him. He remained rigid, watchful, only his clouded blue eyes moving. They took stock of Tracy and his sister; noted the

long jagged rip along her sleeve; swung toward the gun on the sofa and the bullet hole above it.

His own gun lifted. He began to circle sidewise.

Jane threw herself desperately in front of Tracy. "Tick! You've got to listen to me. You've got—"

"Get away from her, Tracy."

"Don't do it, Jerry. Don't move." Jane's voice was shrill, pleading. "I know what you're thinking, Tick, but it isn't true."

"The hell it isn't."

"The hell it is!" Jane retorted. Terror left her as if by sudden magic. Her words became taut, steady. Tick gaped at her, disconcerted a little. He had never seen her so coldly imperious. Not a shrinking line in her whole slender body. Jerry had wisely kept quiet. He saw that with every passing second, Tick's mastery of the situation was slipping. Tick was confused, uncertain.

"Have I ever lied to you?" Jane said. "Do you think I'd double-cross you—for Jerry Tracy or anyone else on earth?"

He said thickly, "I got eyes, ain't I?"

"It's brains you need, Tick, not eyes!" The hardness swept away from her. She made a queer laughing sound, more sob than laughter. There was impatience in it, the half-amused anger of a mother with a stubborn child. "Oh, Tick, Tick! It's so hard to talk sense to you!"

"Tracy came over here to rough you up, didn't he? He fired that gun, or maybe you grabbed it and—"

Jane shook her head. She told him in a level voice exactly what had happened. Tick blinked. When Jane talked like that, looked like that, it was the pay-off. Good enough to cash bets on.

There was a long silence. Tick put his gun away.

He said to Tracy, "Who do you think it was?"

"Are we on the same side, Tick?"

"The guy tried to kill my sister, didn't he? For — sake, Jerry, how much guarantee do you want?"

"O. K. Who hired you to rub me out?"

"The guy was about Stoner's build. He had a black mask on that covered his whole pan when I talked to him. Spoke damn little. But he sounded a hell of a lot like Stoner. Come to think of it, so did the voice on the phone that told me to come tearin' over here."

"Where was the dough paid?"

"In a brownstone dump down in Greenwich Village. 79 Brixton Street. Same place where I blasted at you in the alley."

There was no embarrassment in his voice and none in Tracy's.

"That's what I thought, Tick. What's your idea of our next move?"

Tick's idea was simplicity itself. He was all for visiting Dr. Stoner's Park Avenue home, enticing him out to a car on some pretext, and dropping his body in a vacant lot somewhere. Queens County would probably make the best cemetery, Tick thought.

Jerry talked him out of that. Jane wasn't much help; she looked sick, forlorn. Jerry had saved her life, she had saved his. The reaction left her spent and weak.

Grimly Jerry Tracy outlined the situation as he saw it. Stoner's attack from behind the bedroom curtain had been made so swiftly that in all probability Stoner was uncertain as to whether his scheme had succeeded. He or some agent of his was undoubtedly down in the street, waiting to see if the duped Tick Anderson hurried out with a pale and terrified Jane. If that happened, it meant that Tracy was cold meat upstairs and the doctor was sitting pretty.

"On the other hand," Tracy said, his smile knife-like, "if Tick and I walk out arm in arm, it's proof positive that the frame-up failed. It means that we're both wise. Worse than that, Stoner will know that he's got to get rid of not only me but Tick. His life won't be worth a nickel from now on. He'll have to make a protecting move, and make one damn

fast. And that's how we're going to take him."

Jane said tremulously from the sofa, "Promise me you won't let Tick do any—gun-work."

"Guns are out," Tracy said. "We don't want cops in on this set-up any more than Stoner does. I gave my word to a damn good friend of mine to pull him out of a blackmail hole without publicity. All I'm after is to end the doctor's graft and drive him out of town. What do you say, Tick?"

"Yeah."

They started for the door. Tick paused suddenly. He was staring at Jane, and for the first time Tracy saw fear in the man, a kind of wincing horror back of the hard blue eyes.

"We can't leave the kid here. She might be killed. I'll stick."

Tracy shook his head. "She's safer here alone. The further away we are, the safer Jane is."

"I guess you're right." He walked hesitantly toward the sofa, ran his hand for an instant through Jane's dark brown locks. He said roughly, "Keep that door locked. Get me?"

Jane nodded, didn't reply. When the door had clicked behind them, she sat motionless until the sound of their feet vanished. Then she rose suddenly.

She walked through the connecting doorway to the bedroom. By craning her neck out the window, she could see along a rear yard to the street. Beyond the edge of a fence was the black interlaced blur of the Elevated structure on Columbus Avenue. Under it, where the corner turned, a taxicab was parked.

Watching steadily, her hand braced on the cold stone of the sill, Jane saw Tracy and her brother approach the cab. Tick got in first, Tracy after him. The taxi rolled out of Jane's vision.

She drew back into the bedroom, hurried to her clothes closet. Breathlessly, she slipped out of her torn house-dress, pulled a street dress over her head. She had only one decent coat, a brown sport coat without fur trimming. It was on

her in a twinkling, her brown felt hat pulled deftly over forehead and one eyebrow.

An address was as clearly in her hand as though the letters were printed on the inside of her skull. 79 Brixton Street. The place where Tick had said he had been paid his blood money. Where the criminal father of a well-fed blonde — Jane didn't finish framing the ugly word or the sentence.

She opened a bureau drawer, took out a small pearl-handled gun. Tick had given it to her once, made her keep it for protection, in spite of her protests that she was afraid of weapons. She slipped it with a steady hand into the pocket of the brown coat.



JERRY TRACY and Tick Anderson raced along in the taxicab through chilly darkness. Jerry wasn't certain whether their arm-in-arm exit from

the tenement had been noticed or not. A man had been buying a newspaper at the corner stand, another loitering aimlessly in the doorway of a cigar store. Just for luck Tracy gave the cab driver his penthouse address before he got inside. Gave it in a loud, clear voice.

If there were any fireworks due to start, they might as well come right now—tonight. He felt elated, wound up, tight as a clam. Beside him Tick seemed dopy, half asleep.

The taxicab swerved presently into a wide side street with a hundred foot clearance from curb to curb. Tracy's penthouse was invisible from the street, perched on a granite set-back that concealed his paved terrace and a palisade fence of split cedar that didn't look like much but had set Tracy back plenty. The roof of the apartment building seemed to scrape the stars. Tracy always felt an inch taller when he looked up at it. Not a bad dump for a little guy!

The night hallman was out at the curb,

flicking open the cab's door and bowing with one motion.

"Good evening, Mr. Tracy. I have a message for you."

"When? Who from? Phone call?"

"Just a few minutes ago. From a Mr. Al Redman. A phone call; yes, sir. I typed a memo report."

Tracy turned to his dough-faced companion, tapped him briefly on the shoulder. "Wait here in the cab, Tick. I'll be out in a minute." To the chauffeur he said with a faint grin, "Maybe I can build up your meter some more."

The switchboard alcove inside was done in marble like a chapel crypt. Tracy ripped open the envelope and read the neatly typed memo:

Mr. Al Redman states that he is calling from a drugstore on the corner of Brixton and Varick. He would like to meet Mr. Tracy as soon as possible in the cellar of a brownstone house which Mr. Tracy knows about. The rear cellar door is unlocked. Mr. Redman said to make it quiet clear that the matter is urgent.

Tracy smiled, shoved the message in his pocket. "Thanks," he told the hallman and hurried outside to the waiting cab. His crisp order sent the taxi buzzing over to Lexington Avenue where there was an all-night drugstore on the corner.

Knowing Redman's methodical habits and the layout of his apartment, the *Daily Planet's* columnist had no hesitation in calling him at this late hour. Al always went straight to the kitchen for a snack before he retired. If he'd gone to a movie after the brownstone appointment as Jerry had advised him, he'd probably be just about home. The telephone was on a small bracket near the kitchen door. Al's quick grab would choke off the ring of the bell before it could awaken Florence in the bedroom.

Tracy's guess was good. The bell buzzed only once. Then there was a click and Al's voice whispered cautiously, "Hello?"

"Jerry."

"Thank the Lord. I've been waiting

in the kitchen to hear from you. Jerry, something darned queer happened tonight. I—”

“Wait a minute. Did you try to get me on the phone a little while ago?”

“Phone? No.” He sounded puzzled.

“O. K. Forget it. Did you pay the dough tonight?”

“No. That’s what I want to tell you about. I got there right on time and rang the front door bell, same as usual. Nobody answered. I rang about six or seven times. Then I left—afraid to stand there too long. I went to a movie so’s not to get home too early.”

“That’s swell. You hop to bed now and don’t wake up Florence.”

Tracy hung up.

Jerry’s taxicab sped down Seventh to Greenwich Village. At Sheridan Square, Jerry said “Here.” He and Tick walked the five blocks down Varick to Brixton. He explained to Tick in a grim whisper.

“That phone message to the penthouse was the dumbest kind of a fake. Stoner must be pretty jittery to think I’d fall for it. We’re going to call on him, but not through his conveniently unlocked cellar door. We’ll try the last place he’d think of; the alley window with the burglar alarm.”

Tick looked doubtful. “Won’t he hear the bell?”

“Don’t be a sap.”

There were a couple of shivering bums hanging around the Varick Street corner, but Brixton Street was deserted, a crooked tunnel of darkness. The wooden tub on which Tracy had climbed from the alley pavement to the back parlor window was lying upended where he had left it. The window above was closed. He didn’t try to raise it.

Propped darkly against the sill by the big hands of Tick, he removed the lower pane very neatly with a diamond cutter which, he told himself savagely, he should have used on his original visit.

He passed the square pane down to Tick, who laid it flat on the alley pavement. A moment later Tick was up on

the sill and into the pitch-black room. They stepped cautiously toward the wall and Tracy’s lips breathed a low-pitched whisper into the gunman’s ear.

“Don’t move. You’re too heavy. I’m sneaking out that door and down the hall. Stoner’s probably down in the cellar, just inside the rear door. I want to see if he’s got a light on.”

There was no carpet on the parlor floor but Jerry’s small, expensively shod feet made no creaks. He passed through the parlor door and into the hall. It was so dark that his extended hand was invisible. He had taken barely three or four steps when he heard a queer sound from the room he had just quitted. It was a quick gasp, like the loud exhaling of air from a man’s throat. Almost instantly there came to the startled columnist’s ears the dull thump of a falling body.

Tracy whirled, tiptoed noiselessly back to the parlor. The room was wrapped in profound silence. It was too dark to see anything but the outline of the window. Moving with infinite care, Jerry stepped closer to the wall and approached the spot where he’d left Tick.

His foot touched Tick’s ribs before he saw him. The gunman was flat on his back, his body rigid. Jerry felt Tick’s face. The eyes were wide open. Yet Jerry, bending above him, running his hands over Tick, could feel no blood. Puzzled, he laid a quick palm on Tick’s heart and felt it beating faintly.

Without warning something touched Tracy with numbing agony on the flesh of his neck. He fell forward, twisted, paralyzed, every muscle in his body locked with pain. He knew that the breath had sucked out of his lungs, but he was powerless to breathe in again. Too late, he realized what had happened to Tick. Electricity . . . the numbing shock of high voltage. . . .

The thought burst like a pale rocket in his brain, exploded into streaky blobs of light, then the lights drifted downward, downward into darkness, carrying Tracy with them into oblivion.



DUMPING of his body down a wooden staircase brought Jerry Tracy dazedly back to consciousness. Someone was dragging him callously along as though he were a sack of potatoes. His wrists were bound securely behind his back; his fettered feet went thump-thump down wooden steps to a concrete floor.

Each step hit Tracy soddenly, bruising every inch of his body. His eyes jerked open.

Bright illumination from an electric bulb showed him a low, whitewashed ceiling, wooden bins for coal, the squat pot-bellied shape of a furnace. He was in the cellar of the brownstone, alongside the similarly trussed figure of Tick Anderson.

Laughter rustled behind him. Turning his aching neck, he was able to see the tall figure of his assailant. A hooded black mask covered the man's head and face.

"Intelligence versus stupidity," the blackmailer said slowly, his voice pitched deliberately to a metallic throatiness. "You should never have locked horns with a psychoanalyst, Mr. Tracy."

It was impossible to detect in the voice any trace of the suave Doctor Stoner. But there was so strong a hint of self-satisfaction and conceit that Tracy took the cue immediately. Huskily, he called himself a sap, asked humbly for the details of his capture.

"Simple enough. I knew you had the Broadway mind, which is to say, the mind of a child. A child would check on my telephone message and discover it to be a fake. A child would assume I was waiting in the cellar. A child—or a Broadway columnist, if you prefer—would decide that a burglar-proof window would be the last place I'd think of; particularly when a previous attempt had failed so dismally at that same window."

"You used electricity, of course?" Tracy said quietly.

"Naturally. House current stepped up to a paralyzing voltage by a compact device in the parlor closet. There was a chance that even in the darkness you might have noticed that the closet door was slightly ajar, but you were so convinced that I was in the cellar and so anxious to hide *your* presence, that you never thought of *mine*."

Again the slurred laugh chuckled behind the mask. "In short—"

He stopped. Whirling, his masked face jutted intently toward the cellar steps. From the floor above had come a sudden clattering sound, the crash of something overturned.

Before Tracy's opened mouth could yell, the masked man crashed the butt of a pistol against his forehead. As Tick tried to roll away the gun struck again. Both victims were hauled swiftly to the open door of a coal bin and thrown inside. The door closed. There was a faint click of a padlock, followed by a complete and sinister silence.

Lying half across Tick, his forehead warm with a trickle of blood, Tracy knew that the silence was a blanket covering the noiseless ascent of a killer up those cellar steps.

He was about to scream a warning, when again he stopped. This time his action was voluntary. In the dim half-light that trickled through the cracks of the coal bin, he saw a figure rising slowly from behind a pile of empty barrels in the corner. A girl in a brown felt hat and a brown sport coat. Her face deathly pale, a finger laid warningly across her lips. Jane Anderson!

Sobbing, she sprang at the two prisoners. A small penknife slashed desperately across their bonds. Tick waddled bear-like to his feet, caught his sister as she swayed.

"Gawd, kid, what are yuh doin' here? How did you—"

"I was afraid you might—get into trouble. I sneaked in the rear cellar door. The light was lit and there was

no one in sight. Then I heard him coming downstairs and I hid in the coal bin—"

Tracy was hurling himself desperately against the padlocked door. The barrier held and bounced him backward. From the floor above came a shrill scream, the horrified cry of a woman. "Father! Help!"

Tick seemed dazed, witless in the emergency. Tracy yanked him away from Jane, snarled at him in high-pitched fury: "Quick! Kick that door down!"

The padlock held but the cast-iron hasp snapped. The door went outward in a rending crash of wood. Tick got up, his body automatically shielding his sister from the empty stairs. Tracy went past him like a track sprinter. His .32 was a bright glitter in his hand. Over his shoulder he clipped, "Stay here! Stay with Jane!"

"No, no!" Jane cried. "Help him, Tick!"

He took the stairs recklessly, aware that he was risking death. He had recognized that scream from the floor above. The voice, vibrant with terror and horror, was Gloria Stoner's.

There was a light on in the hallway at the top of the stairs. The narrow hall led to the front of the house. As Tracy raced through he heard a faint moan from a front room. Whirling, he sprang through the doorway and threw himself sidewise with almost the same motion.

Gloria Stoner was rising dazedly from the floor in the opposite corner. Her temple and cheek were stained with blood. There was a gun in her upflung hand and she pointed it at Tracy, her eyes shiny with madness.

The gun flamed as Tracy ducked aside. He caught at the back of a spindly chair. He felt the breeze from a bullet, heard its harsh *thwack* as it hit the wall above his bent shoulder. Then he sent the chair sailing across the room.

It hit Gloria's legs and buckled her backward. Before she could fire again

he was on her like a panther, wrenching the hot weapon from her hand, hauling her roughly to her feet.

"Where's your father? Where is he?"

Her head rolled drunkenly under his grim tug. She was paralyzed, incapable of speech. He could hear Tick's voice, the sound of feet racing along the hall from the cellar stairs.

"Jerry, where are you?"

Jane was there, too. She and her brother stared inward from the threshold of the hall doorway.

"Did you see Stoner?" Tick roared. "Where did he go?"

"I don't know. Keep an eye on both these women. I think—"

He saw Gloria stare suddenly over his shoulder. She fainted, went slack in his arms, toppled to the floor.

Jane Anderson darted forward. "Look out, Jerry! Behind you! The kitchen door!"

It was opening slowly on a crack. Now it flew wide. Too late, Tracy saw the masked face, the level menace of a gun. Jane's arm flew out wildly as the gun flamed. She struck at the wrist, knocked it upward. The bullet smashed into the plastered ceiling.

But in the same instant, Jane Anderson caught in an enveloping clutch, was swung like a helpless shield in front of the masked gunman—and Tick's gun was blazing!

To Jerry's horror Tick's bullet struck the girl. He saw Jane slump sidewise in the blackmailer's grip. Blood stained her throat crimson. Her captor tried to hold her upright, firing from behind the limp protection of her body.

Tracy crouched backward for an instant against the wall, powerless to make a move across the line of gunfire. Tick's heavy gun jerked in his hand as he pumped bullets. He was revealed starkly for what he was, and always would be—a killer. Tracy's yell of horror went unheard in the din.

To Tracy the desperate gun duel seemed to endure for minutes. Actu-

ally, barely five seconds had elapsed from the moment the little columnist had crouched against the wall. He gritted his teeth and hurled himself forward.

As he did, the blackmailer pivoted suddenly and fired. The flash was so close to Jerry's face that he could feel the heat of it across his cheek. He caught gun and wrist, bent the smoking weapon upward between the man's shoulder blades.

Across the room Tick Anderson was standing very stiff and straight. There was a round black circle on his forehead as if a fly had suddenly come to rest there. Tick's gun clattered to the floor. As he pitched forward, his left hand started to waver weakly toward his forehead. The blind, dying gesture was never completed. Tick fell flat on his face, lay there without motion.

Tracy began to wrestle desperately for his own life. The masked man tried to twist away from the jiu-jitsu hold of the maddened little columnist. Jerry wouldn't let him. He shoved his foe's bent arm upward behind the straining back, forced it higher, higher, until a scream burst from the blackmailer's tortured lips and his gun dropped from wide-opened fingers.

Tracy clipped him savagely across the skull, sending him sliding to his knees. Again and again Tracy struck at him until the slumped blackmailer lay inert on the floor.

The room was very quiet.

For an instant Tracy remained swaying on his knees, his stomach tied in sick knots. The sight of the motionless bodies of Jane and her gunman brother snapped him out of his nausea.

He sprang hastily toward the girl. Blood from her throat dyed the columnist's handkerchief a bright crimson. His hand shook like a leaf as he dabbed at the wound. But even the hasty swab he made disclosed that the wound itself was shallow, a horizontal rip across the flesh, not a perforation.

He thought numbly: "Thank God for that."

He turned Tick Anderson over. Tick was stone dead. The bullet from the trapped blackmailer's gun had crashed into his brain. Staring at Tick's relaxed face, Tracy recalled with astonishment that last futile brushing gesture of Tick's hand as he fell. Cold-blooded, hard-dying to the last. . . . Tracy was glad, suddenly, that Tick was dead. He knew him clearly for what he was. Likable, good-natured—but a killer. A hopeless misfit in a world of normal, decent people.

The blackmailer began to groan suddenly. Tracy turned. He saw that Jane, too, was recovering consciousness. Her eyelids were beginning to flutter. He caught Tick by the shoulders, dragged his body out to the hallway where Jane couldn't see him.

Jane's eyes were wide, glassy. She cringed as she saw the masked figure lying close to her.

"Dr. Stoner?" she gasped. "Did he—"

"Not Dr. Stoner," Tracy said. There was certainty in his tone, a grim sureness. "Look, let me show you something."



JERRY TRACY picked up the slack wrist of the blackmailer, eyed the bluish scar on the back of the hand. With a sudden gesture he drew his blood-soaked handkerchief across the scar. It made a smear on the flesh, but it did something else. The scar wiped off like a picture.

"My guess," Tracy said slowly, "is that our very wise pal here is a rat named Hadley Brown."

He ripped the black mask away.

"Not a bad guess for a guy with the Broadway mind," he added harshly. His voice was brisk, purposely hard, peremptory. He wanted to keep Jane's fuddled mind from the thought of her brother out in the hall.

"It took me a while to get wise to

Gloria's crooked fiancé. The thing that had me fooled at first was that Gloria and her father seemed to—" His head craned and he sprang to his feet. "Where is Gloria? Where did she go?"

There was a slow shuffling sound from the kitchen. Gloria Stoner appeared in the doorway, supporting her father. Dr. Stoner's face was pale; blood from a ragged wound in his scalp made a trickle down his face, touched his gray mustache and goatee with a fleck of crimson. Tracy shoved a chair forward and the psychoanalyst crumpled into it with a groan. But Gloria remained upright, unwinking, pale as marble.

"I found him jammed in the kitchen broom closet, where he was dragged after we were both attacked."

Her voice trembled. She was staring at Hadley Brown, at the ripped mask that lay on the floor beside him. Brown was sitting up, very quiet under the menace of Tracy's gun. His eyes were slitted, watchful.

"I rather guess our marriage is off, eh what, darling?" he jeered with a dreary attempt at jauntiness.

Gloria took the bitter shock like a thoroughbred. Turning, she said in a numb, curiously gentle voice, "Thank you, Mr. Tracy, for—the truth."

"I knew it in the cellar when he began to talk to me—in a disguised voice. It had to be either your father or Hadley Brown, because they were the only two people who knew Tick and I had quarreled about his sister in the restaurant. The blackmailer advertised the fact that he had a scar on the back of his hand. The fact that he disguised his voice to me in the cellar told me instantly he was not your father. Why show the scar and hide the voice? He was not Stoner, but Brown, coolly using his fake scar to incriminate Stoner in case he ran into trouble."

Doctor Stoner said feebly from his chair, "We came here tonight suspecting you and Tick Anderson. Gloria heard enough in Jane's apartment to let us know that the whole conspiracy was

centered in this house. We entered by a window, hoping to trap you both; but I was clumsy enough to knock over a chair, and—"

Tracy was staring steadily at Hadley Brown. "I want the photostatic copies of those case histories you stole from Doctor Stoner's study."

"Go to hell," Brown snarled.

Tracy remained unruffled. "None of us wants publicity in this affair, including you. You can hand over those photostats to me or I'll call police headquarters and we'll let cops go to work on you. Think it over for sixty seconds."

Hadley Brown's hesitation was brief. His lips moved sullenly. He pointed jerkily.

Tracy sprang across the room to a sofa, threw it upside down with a quick heave. On the under side of the upholstery was a square section of cloth held in place with snapper fasteners. Tracy ripped the snappers loose and a bulky manila envelope tumbled out. Inside the envelope were the typed case histories photographed from Doctor Stoner's files—nearly two hundred sheets of thin onion-skin paper.

Tracy's voice was savagely low: "I hate like hell to turn a rogue like this loose, but if we prosecute it means agony for decent, respectable people. Tomorrow I intend to visit each one of these victims and return their case histories. If they destroy the evidence with their own hands, they'll *know* their secrets are safe. That will end Brown's racket forever. In the future, Doctor, I'd advise you to be more careful in your methods of guarding your medical records. You needn't worry about Brown. I'll damn well see to it that he gets out of the country and stays out."

His flinty eyes made the blackmailer quail.

"Try South America. If you ever come back, I'll arrange damn quick to have you electrocuted for murder."

Hadley Brown shrugged. In silence they watched him leave.

Jane asked faintly, "Where's Tick? He—he's all right, isn't he?"

Tracy didn't hesitate. He knew there was only one thing to do—to shock her into merciful oblivion and get her out of the house without delay.

He said curtly, "Tick is dead. He was shot to death."

"Dead?" Jane stared at the white face of the *Daily Planet's* columnist, knew that he was speaking the truth. She moaned, swayed. Tracy caught her as she fainted.

Gloria said swiftly, "We've got to get her out of the house while she's unconscious. If there's any way that we can help you—"

"Have you got a car outside?"

"Yes. It's parked down the street."

"Take Jane home with you. Keep her overnight. Feed her something to make her sleep like hell. I'll come up to your place tomorrow. By that time I'll have some plan worked out to take care of her until she gets over the shock." He blinked sweat out of his haggard eyes. "It's a tough deal for Jane, but I think I can manage her, once I get the police end of this thing straightened out. Jane's name is not going to be printed in murder headlines—or yours or your father's."

"You're pretty swell, Jerry," Gloria said.

"Hurry up. Get your father in the car. Start the motor. I'll take care of Jane."

He watched from the doorway until he heard the muffled clamor of the automobile's engine. It was very late now and Brixton Street was cold and silent, swept clear of any sign of pedestrians. Tracy was panting when he reached the car and slid Jane to the rear seat alongside Gloria.

Gloria propped the girl upright with one circling arm, let the slack head rest against her shoulder. To any prying eyes Jane would pass for a girl who had had one drink too many.

Dr. Stoner sat hunched behind the car's wheel, wiping the streaks of blood

from his face with a tremulous hand.

"Are you all right now, Doctor? Can you drive?"

"Yes. Are you coming along with us?"

Tracy's grin was a tired blur. "Can't. I've got a couple of jobs yet. Scram!"

The car purred softly toward the corner, swung around it out of sight. Tracy hurried back to the brownstone house.

With a steady hand he picked up the telephone from a table in the front parlor and called police headquarters. He asked for Inspector Fitzgerald, had the call transferred to the inspector's home. He and Fitz were close friends, veteran collaborators on dozens of tough cases. Tracy said damned little, but what he did say was concise and to the point.

When he hung up he had Fitz's promise that there'd be no tip for the reporters and as little publicity as possible. Fitz knew that Jerry Tracy would drop casually into the inspector's private room at headquarters the next day and spill him the complete truth of the affair, with not a single fact held back. It was the way the two always worked. Fitz, grimly elated by the welcome news of Tick's sudden end, would keep the scandal under wraps as a routine gang feud. The public always took stuff like that for granted.

There was a bulging manila envelope under Tracy's arm as he plodded with tired steps to Varick Street to find a night hawk cab. He drove to the Forties and east to the Redman's apartment.

It was Al Redman who opened the door. It was Florence, his wife, who said quietly, "Come in, Jerry." A robe was thrown loosely over her nightgown. She took one look at the *Daily Planet's* columnist and the shuddering tension left her gaunt face.

"It's all right, Jerry?"

"Of course, it's all right." He swung angrily toward Al. "What the hell did you tell her for?"

"I couldn't hide it."

Tracy stopped glaring, patted Al's shoulder. "Sorry. I'm as edgy as a razor blade. Here, take a look at this."

He handed the bank cashier a packet of sheets from the manila envelope. Al's trembling fingers made the thin pages rustle as he flipped them over. He said thickly, "Jerry," and could say no more.

Tracy's gaze, swinging away in embarrassment, saw a portable typewriter on a desk over near the wall. The sight of it whipped the lines of weariness from Tracy's mouth. He jerked the cover off the typewriter, spun a sheet of paper around the cylinder. He sat watching it for a while and the faces of Doctor Stoner and Gloria were bright in his mind.

He hit the keys with a clattering touch that sent the carriage dinging back and forth.

Readers of this column will remember a couple of squibs I wrote about a Doctor, a Deb and a Duck. I was wrong about the Doctor, the Deb AND the Duck. The Doctor is on the up-and-up. The Deb is a square-shooter. As for the Duck, he's entitled to the last word—and it will serve me right if it's a wise-quack. . . .


Tracy grinned bleakly, stuck the paper in his pocket. He was walking toward the apartment door, his body drooping with fatigue, when a hand turned him gently around.

"Where you going?" Florence said.


"Home, lady. I'm so tired it's not funny."

"You're doing nothing of the kind. What you need is food. I'm going to fix you the best hamburger sandwich you ever ate in your life."

"Darn you, you're a mind reader." Tracy's smile was blurred. "I'll have mine with onion."



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PROBAK JUNIOR

I KILLED A GUY

By JOHN K. BUTLER

Dead men do
tell tales



phone rang and it was Joe Bloomgarten. He talked so low and mumbled so much I could hardly hear him. I got the idea he had his mouth pressed tight against the speaking bell.

"Listen, Fred, will you come right over?"

"Nix, I'm going to bed."

"Listen, Fred—"

"Nix."

With Joe, you had to stand your ground. He was an after midnight party-getter-upper. Not always, though. Eleven months and three weeks out of every year, back in his home in Kansas City, he was a model husband and father. But on that other week, when he trekked out here on business, he cut loose in a big way. He behaved like adolescent twenty instead of adult fifty. He went to nickel dance palaces and picked up gaudy blondes and generally

THE FIGHTS had been lousy. I came home feeling tired and disgusted and cheated. A Filipino named Speedy Mendiola had slapped Castillo three times in the first, and after that Castillo wouldn't fight.

I was just hitting the hay when the

spent his money with happy abandon.

He was an awful nice fellow, though. He worshiped his wife and the three kids. They didn't know, naturally, about daddy's annual spreeds.

"Listen, Fred—"

"Not a chance," I told him. "I've got to work tomorrow."

I'd been out all night with him Wednesday and I figured that ended my obligation.

"You don't understand, Fred. It's not a party. I'm in a jam. Trouble. It's serious, Fred."

"How serious?"

"Well . . . it's pretty serious, Fred."

I chalked him off as tight, and evidently he guessed I chalked him off that way, because immediately he said something in a voice perfectly sober but tensely strained and terribly worried.

I didn't quite get it. "What's that?"

"I killed a guy, Fred."

"*You what?*" I'd heard him all right this time, but it left me so stumped I couldn't say anything except: "*You what?*"

His voice choked up and became indistinct. "For God's sake, Fred, I can't keep saying it on the phone. Will you come over?"

"Sure," I said, "sure, Joe. You at the hotel?"

"No, I'm at an apartment house. It's called the Egyptian Manor."

"What street?"

He made a moaning sound in the phone. "I don't know. I came with some friends. I don't know what street it is."

"Can't you find out?"

"No. I don't think I better speak to anybody." He made that moaning sound again, and then his voice brightened and he added quickly, "I can tell you this, though; it's just down the block from a main boulevard. Up at the corner there's a gas station, an auto sales room, and an undertaker. I remember the undertaking parlor because somebody in the party made a crack

about it when we passed. It had a Neon sign in the window . . ."

"Stanton Brothers, Morticians?" I asked.

"Yeah! That was it, Fred! Sure."

I said, "O.K., I know the district. I'll be there in twenty minutes."

"I'm in apartment 303, Fred. You hurry up, huh, boy? I'm beside myself. I—"

"Twenty minutes," I assured him.

It was going on one A.M. now, and a light rain fell steadily as I drove up Embury to Sunset and out Sunset. The street lights glistened in bright pools on the liquid black of the pavement. There wasn't much traffic, just the occasional stay-out-lates. I made good time over Sunset.

Stanton Brothers, Morticians, had a somber stucco building at the corner of Sunset and Granville. It wasn't a very well known undertaking parlor, nothing swank about it, but I remembered it for a definite reason.

A year ago I went to a party that turned out to be a brawl, and one of the features of the brawl was a game called Scavenger Hunt. You had to race around town collecting whatever they told you to collect, such as an old maid's toothbrush, a cop's topper, a three-day-old newspaper, and so on. One of the things this gal and I had to collect was a necktie off a corpse. That stumped us for a while, but finally we slipped in the back door of Stanton Brothers. It was the gal's idea. There was a night attendant on duty in the undertaking parlor, and instead of calling for the law, he took a shot at us.

That was why I've always remembered Stanton Brothers. I also remembered the gas station and the automobile salesroom at that intersection. So I didn't have any trouble locating the Egyptian Manor.

It was a cheaply ornate structure half-way down the block on Granville, a narrow street with big old pepper trees along the curbing, lacing their fine-leaved branches overhead, and hid-

ing the street lamps. The apartment had only three floors. It had a stucco sphinx on the doorstep and some cheesy hieroglyphics painted on the walls of the foyer.

The front door wasn't locked

I entered a hot, smelly lobby. At one time there had been a clerk on duty, but now the switchboard had been torn out and the desk had a potted palm on it and a cardboard sign which read: "Vacancy—see Manager in Apartment Two." Over in a corner there was a small booth with a pay phone in it.

I used the automatic elevator to the third floor and walked on worn carpet to a door marked 303.

I knuckled the panel lightly, and inside a muffled voice asked, "That you, Fred?"

"Yeah."

"Come in, Fred."



JOE BLOOMGARTEN was sitting all hunched over in a straight-back chair. He was sitting as though his thickish body didn't have a spine. He had his elbows on his knees, his face in his hands. When he looked up at me, he didn't take his hands away. He looked at me through the bars his spread fingers made.

"I had to call you, Fred. I didn't know who else to call. I can't seem to think."

I nodded, closing the door. A man lay face down on the floor. He wasn't sprawled and limp. He lay there heavily stiff, one arm straight down along his side, the other reaching out on the floor at right angles. His head, rigidly turned to one side, came within inches of an iron gas radiator. You couldn't miss that the man was dead.

I asked, "Who is he, Joe?"

Bloomgarten's fat shoulders gave a sudden shudder. A gasping sob caught in his throat, and he closed his fingers over his eyes, hiding them. "I'm not

sure, Fred. I think they said his name was Garfield. I was pretty tight, Fred."

"How did it happen?"

"Well, there was a sort of scuffle. He sneaked out of the bedroom there and jumped on my back. I threw him off. He fell, and I guess his head hit that radiator. What shall I do, Fred?"

"Did you call the police?"

"No. I just called you. I hate to think of a scandal, Fred. It would get back to K. C. and it would—well, it'd mess my whole life. I figured as long as you worked in a district attorney's office you might know what to do. My God, I didn't *mean* to kill him!"

There was no use kidding him. I walked over and put a hand on his shoulder. "You'll have to face a little music, Joe. I know how you feel—your wife, the kids. . . ."

"My business, too. Isn't there some way we can hush this up? Think of something, Fred. I don't mind paying; I could pay a couple of thousand—I could even pay more than that. Money don't matter."

I sat down on a battered sofa. The room had seen lots of wear and punishment from parties. Wet glass stains marked the tables, even the hardwood floor. There were highball glasses here and there, some dead bottles, a bottle half filled. A woman's compact lay broken in spilled powder over by the wall. Somebody had drawn a cartoon with lipstick on the bathroom door.

I said, "Party, huh?"

Bloomgarten nodded his head without taking his hands away. "Five of us, counting me and—and Garfield here."

"Where're the other three?"

"They ran away. After this happened. You can't blame them. Maybe I should've run away, too, but I couldn't. Not then. I passed out from the drinks I'd had. Then I came to, and I didn't know whether to beat it or not. If I beat it and got found out, it would look bad. I didn't know what to do.

So I went downstairs and called you on a pay telephone."

"Where do these other three live?"

"I don't know—I don't know." He sobbed heavily and thickly into his hands.

I said, "Come on, Joe; you better pull yourself together. Tell me from the beginning. Where'd you meet these people?"

He took his hands down, held them between his knees. His eyes strayed over to the dead body and winced. He fixed a stare on the carpet by his feet. "Well, I met Margie at the hotel bar. In the afternoon."

"Stranger?"

"Yes. We just got to talking. You know how it is."

I told him I knew how it was.

"Margie's a pretty good sort. She used to dance with the Fanchon and Marco circuit, she said. Margie Mawson—that's it, Mawson. She was just waiting for her brother at the bar when we got acquainted."

"Who did the initial ice-breaking?" I asked directly.

"Huh?"

"Did you speak to her first, or did she speak to you?"

"Well—well, I think she said something about how . . . I don't remember."

"That's enough," I told him, "I get it. Then what?"

"I met her brother. Bill Mawson. We all had dinner and went to some bars and I danced with Margie at the Tropic Roof. Bill had a car. He said he knew a couple of guys I ought to meet because they were in my line of business. So we all came over here."

"Who were the couple of guys?"

"One was—I just remember his first name. It was Courtney. They called him Court. He was a little red-headed man with freckles. About thirty."

I nodded toward the body. "The other was Garfield?"

"Yes. Court didn't live at this apartment. He was just around taking care of Garfield."

"What was the matter with Garfield?"

"He'd been on a bat. That's what Court told us. Court brought him home and put him to bed. Garfield was out like a light back there in the bedroom."

"Then what?"

"Well, we all had drinks. I got pretty tight. We all got tight."

"Even Garfield?"

"No, Garfield was still sleeping in the bedroom. I guess he didn't wake up till the scuffle started."

"How'd the scuffle start?"

Bloomgarten sighed deeply. "We were all tight; you know how it goes. Court got fresh with Margie and her brother got mad."

"Bill Mawson?"

"Yeah. They got to popping each other. I tried to break it up and Mawson hit me. I guess I hit back. We got to fighting pretty hard and even Margie mixed into it. She kept kicking my shins. I didn't see where Court went, but I guess he ducked into the bedroom."

Next thing I knew somebody was on my back, had my throat. I threw him off. I thought it was Court till I turned around. Court was standing over a man on the floor. It was Garfield. The way Court tells it, Garfield jumped out of bed and joined the fight. Court tried to hold him back. It was ten minutes before we realized Garfield was dead. We just thought he'd been knocked out."

"Then what?"

"We were plenty scared. The thing hit me hard and I was dizzy; I could hardly think. We all took some quick drinks. The last one was too much for me. They were running in circles trying to figure out what to do. Margie was crying. I passed out."

"When you came to, they were gone?"

"Yeah. Like I said, I went downstairs and phoned you. My God, Fred, what can we do?"

I rubbed my jaw and tried to get thoughts working. "It's tough. If they ducked, you're in a spot for witnesses. We may be able to trace them down by

checking all the friends Garfield had."

He stared at me. Fright made a mask of his face. "We can't hush it up?"

"I'm afraid not, Joe. But we'll sure save you all we can."

I went over to the body and turned it over. It turned clumsily and stiffly, like a heavily stuffed dummy. It wore crumpled pajamas. The blouse had pulled up from the trouser tops as I turned the body. The flesh had a yellowish whiteness and there was an ugly scar on the abdomen.

I stared at it.

The thing was a new scar. It looked as though somebody had made a slit with a knife not long ago, but it hadn't been bleeding. The queerest thing about it was the fact that the long sliced cut had been drawn together with crude stitches. I got the idea that some careless surgeon, or maybe an amateur, had sewed up an incision.

"That's damn funny," I said half aloud, automatically. "Garfield looks like he was knifed a while back—maybe yesterday, and some doctor. . . ."

"Huh?" Joe Bloomgarten stared at me. There was only half sanity in his eyes. "What would I knife him for? I never met him till tonight. I didn't even meet him then, because he was passed out."

"I didn't say you knifed him."

"Well, I didn't. I just threw him off my back. If I'd wanted to kill him, I'd use my gun."

I turned around sharply. "Have you a gun?"

He looked startled. "Why, yes, I carry one."

I went over and put out my hand. "Give."

He took a .32 revolver from his coat pocket and placed it in my palm. I broke out the cylinder. The cartridges were fresh, the barrel clean as a whistle.

"What do you carry this for?"

He stroked the nape of his neck. "I don't know. I just carry it."

"Got a permit? Is it registered to you in K. C., or anywhere?"

"No."

"Good. I'll keep it. Don't mention it to anybody. If we're going to prove you never had murderous intent in your heart, we can't have the cops find a rod on you." I dropped the gun into my pocket.

"Will you defend me, Fred?" He asked that in the sobbing voice of a pleading child.

I shook my head. "Since I work in the county prosecutor's office, I can't. But I'll help you under cover, Joe. And I'll get a smart lawyer for you."

He hid his face in his hands again, muttered huskily, "You're an awful good guy, Fred. You're a real friend."

"Forget it."

Once more I bent over the body of Garfield. He seemed to have been a middle-aged man. His head was partly bald. I couldn't see the eyes; they were rigidly closed. He had sagging jowls and a nose that was like a wad of putty in the middle of his face. His thin-lipped mouth was clamped shut tightly.

I said over my shoulder, "How long ago was it?"

"You mean—the accident?"

"Yeah."

"Well, it must've been—of course, I passed out—but I'd say it was around eleven o'clock."

"That makes it a little over two hours ago."

"Yes, Fred." He stared at me gapingly. "Why? What's the matter? What makes you get that funny look?"

I ran my fingers through my hair trying to scratch into my brain through the skull. Something was buzzing there. "Were you sober all afternoon, Joe?"

"Why, sure. It was just this party. Why?"

"Then you couldn't have killed Garfield—I mean gotten into the accident—a lot longer than two hours ago, could you?"

"Of course not."

"Maybe you've been passed out for half a day and didn't remember."

He half rose from the chair. "That's impossible. I didn't really get tight till we came here. That was at ten." He batted his eyes sluggishly. "What're you getting at?"

I didn't tell him. For one reason I didn't want to, not then. For another reason, I couldn't. The door to the apartment had swung open abruptly and three people came crowding in and halted suddenly and just stood there, saying nothing, eying me.



HE GIRL was blond with the kind of shape you noticed immediately. She dressed in a way that made you notice it. Her face was fairly good looking, in a hard way, full-lipped, sleepy-eyed, but it was the shape that got you.

She said, "Oh!" and stared at me narrowly.

Behind her there was a short red-headed man with freckles. His longish face bore a naturally somber expression. He had his hand on the door jamb and stood in a sort of tense crouch, as though getting ready to make a fast duck-out into the hall.

The other man was tall and slump-shouldered. He'd come in first and was half-way into the room before he saw me. When he did, his slump shoulders gave an involuntary lurch and his face got as white as the parchment lampshade.

"Who are you?" he asked suddenly.

Joe Bloomgarten pushed out of the chair and said, "This is a friend of mine; this is Fred Marshall. We used to be friends back in Kansas City. Fred, this is Bill Mawson."

I nodded to the slump-shouldered man, and Joe went on, "The young lady is Margie Mawson. Bill's sister. This other chap is Court. I never got the last name, Court?"

"Burnside," said Court reluctantly.

"You better shut the door, Court," Joe Bloomgarten suggested.

Court Burnside nodded. A lock of red hair fell down over his pale and freckled forehead. He exchanged a quick glance with Bill Mawson and shut the door behind him, saying to Joe, "We decided to come back. I guess we were all a lot of sheets to the wind. All we could think of was scrambling out of trouble. We didn't mean to leave you holding the sack, Joe."

"That's all right," Joe mumbled nervously, "I realize how you felt."

"Who else knows about this?" Bill Mawson asked, eying me steadily.

"Nobody," Joe Bloomgarten put in quickly, "I just called Fred here. I didn't know what to do."

Bill Mawson looked at the red-headed man and said, "We've got to figure out what to do. Joe's just an acquaintance, but we've got to stand by him. We'd want anybody to do the same for us. It was just an accident." He shifted his eyes to me. "Did he tell you how the accident happened?"

I nodded. "A lot of drinking and a scrap."

"Sure. We got to mixing it up and Garfield jumped out of bed and rushed in here and landed on Joe's back. Joe tossed him off. Garfield's head hit that radiator, I guess."

Joe Bloomgarten cracked his knuckles nervously. "Fred says we better call the police. He was just about to go downstairs and call them."

Mawson and the red-headed man exchanged sharp glances. I tried to remember where I'd seen that solemn faced little red-headed guy before. I couldn't. When you work in a D. A.'s. office, you meet a lot of people. I studied him. For some cockeyed reason I was sure I hadn't met him in a business way. But I'd seen him somewhere.

Bill Mawson said to me, "Do you really think we ought to call the law?"

"I think so."

The girl said, "We've got to do something." She said it rather inanely, her fingers toying with the clasp on the leather purse she carried.

"O.K." Bill Mawson shrugged his slump shoulders loosely and looked at Court Burnside. "We might as well tell the police the straight of it. Just like we decided. It'll look worse than an accident if we try to cover it up, or duck out."

"Sure," Joe Bloomgarten agreed quickly, tensely. "Sure. Let's get this over with."

I started for the door. The red-headed man opened it, saying, "Bill and I'll go down with you." He turned to the girl. "You stay with Joe, Margie."

The girl nodded.

I walked through the doorway with the two men following me. The door was shut, leaving the girl and Joe Bloomgarten in the room with the corpse. I walked straight for the automatic elevator. It was hung at the third floor; I could see its interior lights through the frosted glass.

I slid the doors back and held them, motioning for the two men to enter. I did it casually. Bill Mawson slouched into the waiting car, but the red-headed man caught the spring-door and suggested easily, "Go ahead, Mr. Marshall."

I stepped quickly into the car and backed into a corner. "Cigarette?" I asked. I stuck my hand quickly into my coat pocket and grasped the butt of the .32 Colt I'd taken from Joe Bloomgarten. I didn't get a chance to draw it. They were fast; we were two to one.

Bill Mawson slugged me with the heel of his fist. He connected with the base of my skull. Court Burnside let go of the spring-door, jumping into the elevator. He tried to kick my groin but his shoe just scraped along my side.

The hammer of the Colt had caught in the cloth of my pocket. I had no time to fish for it. I yanked my hand free and took a wild swing at Mawson. It got him in the chest. He staggered back against the elevator wall, and my next swing sent my fist smack to the red-headed man's face. Blood spouted from his nose. He slid down the wall

to the floor, snapping, "Bill, get it going—noise. . . ."

Bill Mawson punched the elevator button. There was a clanking and whirring of machinery. The elevator was still bucking and jumping from the battle. It sank now in the shaft.

Mawson pulled a gun. I rushed him, throwing both my fists in fast hooks. I kept smashing each side of his face, rocking his head. Then I grabbed for the gun, whirling around as Court Burnside slapped me with a sap.

The first blow of the sap on my head slipped a little. It didn't hurt. I tried to hit him and Bill Mawson had my arm, jerking me. The second blow of the sap hurt. I tried to duck the third. It hit me. It didn't hurt. I was out.



"GOOD place, here," a voice said.

I seemed to be lying, all twisted like a pretzel, on the tonneau floor of a sedan. We were moving through the dark rain. I could hear the suck and swish of the tires on wet pavement.

I wasn't tied, but Bill Mawson sat on the seat above me with a gun in his hand, resting the gun idly in his lap. The street lights we passed flickered over his face.

He looked down at me and noticed I was conscious again. "This is where you get off, you lousy son of a —"

The red-headed man sat up front, driving. He pulled the sedan sharply into the curb and jumped out. The door by my head jerked open. He grabbed me by the shoulders and dragged me to the sidewalk. His shoe kicked me hard and low.

"Can you keep your nose out of other people's business for a while?" he snapped.

Bill Mawson stooped, getting out of the rear of the sedan. "I know one way. Take him over in that lot."

I tried to get my feet under me, but

my legs had gone to rubber from the sapping and my shoes felt like they had anchors on them. Court dragged me into the lot, into the thick wet weeds.

"I'm going to give it to him," Bill Mawson announced slowly.

"No," Court objected, "don't be a damn fool!"

"I'm going to give it to him," Mawson said again.

I couldn't seem to make my hand move. I could feel the Colt still in my pocket, but I couldn't get my hand to go for it.

"You put that gun down!" Court ordered Mawson. "All we have to do is put him out for a stretch. The thing's gone sour and we'll get what we can and let it go at that. I've got a bottle of the Mickey Finn. That'll do the trick."

The neck of a small bottle clicked hard against my teeth, jabbed into my mouth. The liquid gurgled and tasted bitter. I closed my throat and let it leak out of my mouth and down my chin. In the dark they wouldn't see it; or I hoped they wouldn't. Both of them were pretty nervous over the whole thing.

When the bottle was empty I groaned and pretended to go limp. I said in a nutter, "Pull up the covers. I'll get a chill. Get another blanket. . . ."

Court's voice laughed harshly. "What'd I tell you? The guy's practically out now. That stuff's dynamite. He'll sleep for hours."

Bill Mawson's voice was coldly solemn. "I don't know. It didn't work so good the last time."

They kicked me twice in the ribs. I didn't budge.

After a while I heard their shoes swishing away through the weeds. I heard the sedan start up and move down the street in the dark.

I rolled over and tried to get up. It was twenty minutes before I could walk. My head had sharp deep pains from the blows of the sap and I was groggy from being out so long.

I hadn't swallowed any of the stuff, the Mickey Finn. I had a guess what it was, dissolved chloral hydrate crystals.

I staggered four blocks to the drug-store and drank several glasses of water. I called a cab.

"Where to?" the driver asked, eyeing doubtfully my battered, bleeding face and the mud on my clothes.

"Sunset and Granville," I told him. I slipped him a tenner. "Don't spare the horses."

The driver let me out where my car was parked. I walked back under the dripping pepper trees to the Egyptian Manor.

I went through the lobby, still empty and smelly, and used the elevator to the third. Stains on the floor of the automatic lift still showed. I remembered how I'd socked that red-headed guy's nose. I still wished I could remember where I'd seen him before.

I had the Colt revolver in my hand when I tried the knob to apartment 303.

The door swung in. I entered and looked around. There was nobody. Even the corpse of Garfield was gone. The place was as empty as a furnished apartment can be when it's a vacancy and there's nothing evident but the management's few pieces of furniture.

The broken compact was no longer on the floor; the spilled powder had been swept up. I didn't see any glasses or bottles. I walked into the bedroom, and except for the mussed covers on the bed there was no sign that anybody had been there. The closets had only wooden clothes hangers on the hooks and the poles. The bureau drawers were empty.

I stood in the living-room and stared at the place where the dead man had been. The whole thing was screwy, crazy, yet I knew there was plenty of sense to it somewhere.

I went downstairs, pocketed the Colt and knocked on the manager's door. It was a woman. Her hair was done up

in curl papers. I showed her my county official credentials.

"Who rented 303?" I asked.

"Why, Mr. and Mrs. Smith. Just yesterday."

I gave a grin. "Smith, huh?"

"Yes. A very nice couple."

"Not a man named Garfield, huh?"

"Why, no!"

"Did you know they checked out?"

"No!" She looked astounded. "Why they only took the apartment yesterday. They paid!"

"O. K.," I cut in. "Did you happen to see a red-headed man. Short. Solemn face. Sort of like an undertaker?"

"Why, no. Mr. Smith was tall and—what's the matter?"

I snapped my fingers. I had told myself something. In a few words I had told myself what I wanted to know. It wasn't coincidence, of course. My subconscious mind had known all along who the red-headed man was. When I started to word a description of him, the truth popped out.

That truth led to another truth. I saw the whole thing now. My mind went dizzy with ideas.

I strode through that cheap lobby in nothing flat and hiked rapidly through the rain under the trees. I went around the corner on Sunset and planted my thumb against the night bell of Stanton Brothers, Morticians.



I PITCHED my weight against the door as it opened a crack. It slammed hard against the man behind it, sending him stumbling back to the far wall of the corridor.

"Jeez!" he grunted.

I stepped fast through the doorway as he was fumbling in his pocket. He got the sap only half out. I had the Colt in my right hand. I swung it in a chopping arc, connecting with his forehead.

He kept his feet, but the sap slipped

from his limp fingers and he stood there swaying, propped against the wall. I heeled the door shut behind me and grinned.

"Remember me?" I asked sourly.

He touched his forehead gingerly where I'd hit him. Red hair fell in two sweeping locks over his eyes. His face looked very white and the freckles stood out sharply.

"I don't remember you," he grumbled. "Maybe you made a mistake."

"You remember me all right. Just a little while ago you tried to slip me a Mickey Finn. I spit it out. You thought I was still lying out there in the weeds. Your name isn't really Courtney Burnside, is it?"

He didn't answer.

I went on, "If you'll think farther back than tonight you may remember me in connection with something else. There was a Scavenger Hunt. Me and a gal friend had to swipe a necktie from a corpse. We decided to bust into an undertaking parlor. We chose this place. I remember you very well. You're the night attendant. You took a shot at us."

He eyed me sullenly. "You're nuts. What do you want?"

"Don't kid me, Court." I stepped over and poked the barrel of the Colt deep into his belly. "The first thing I want is a Cook's Tour. I want you to take me around. I want to see every corpse in the parlor."

He started to mutter something. My hand closed in a hard grip on his left ear, and I spun him around and sent him stumbling through a curtained doorway into the main room of the funeral parlor. Then I stepped up behind him and got a firm hold on his collar.

"Light some lights," I said.

He wiggled to the wall, pressed a button. Dim electricity shone yellow in the room. It was a big somber chamber—something like a church without the altar. Two gray coffins rested on sawhorse pedestals at the far end. Flowers clustered about them.

Pushing the red-headed attendant

along before me, I went to the first coffin and looked in the upper section that was opened. The corpse had a stiff, wax-looking face. It was an old lady.

"Let's try the other," I said.

Court Burnside squirmed under my hand. "You must be crazy!"

I pushed him over to the second coffin, letting him feel the sharpness of the gun in the small of his back.

I peered into the casket. The wax-like head of another old lady lay on the satin pillow. Her set features were in unnatural sleep, the sunken cheeks rouged, the eyes peacefully closed, showing the mortician's work.

"Where do you keep the rest of them?" I asked.

"Rest of what?"

"The stiffs."

"That's all there is. We've got a body coming in from Monte Sano Hospital in the morning."

I lifted the Colt and slashed the top of his head with it. "Come on; give! Where's the laboratory?"

He shrugged dismally. "All right, wise guy. It's this way."

I still held to his collar. He led me through a narrow door into a room that was lined with gleaming white tile. A naked dead body lay stretched on an enameled table in the center of the lab, under bright electricity. It was the body of a man.

"I was just embalming him," Court said.

Still holding the red-headed man by the collar, still keeping the gun in his back, I stepped over and looked at the body.

I knew the partly bald head, the sagging jowls, the crudely sewed slash on the abdomen. I'd seen that body in pajamas on the floor of an apartment in the Egyptian Manor, not very long ago.

"So this is what became of the late Mr. Garfield." I put my face inches from his. "You guys worked pretty fast, didn't you? Got the body out of

the apartment, made 303 a vacancy in nothing flat."

He squirmed under my hand, tried to ease away from the pressure of the Colt I kept dug into his spine. "Look," he whined, "you're a friend of Joe Bloomgarten, aren't you?"

"So what?"

"You don't want to see him mixed up in a lot of trouble, do you?"

"What the hell do you think I'm doing all this barging around for, except I want to help Joe?"

He winced, blinked his greenish eyes. "Well, we're trying to help Joe, too. He doesn't want to get mixed in any scandal. We figured out how we might dispose of Garfield's body." His voice settled into a soft confidential whisper.

"Don't you get it? I work for this undertaking parlor. I can dispose of Garfield's body so nobody will know what happened to him. I can work an undercover cremation. After all, what happened to Garfield was just an accident, and there's no use dragging Joe Bloomgarten and the rest of us through a lot of scandal."

I flashed a grin that was more sneer than grin. He wasn't fooling me any. "You think pretty fast, don't you? But you'll have to think faster than that."

For a moment he didn't say anything, didn't look at me. It was very quiet in the laboratory of the undertaking parlor. I could hear the metallic drip and clatter of the rain in drain pipes from the flat roof. The appearance of the rigid naked corpse on the enamel work table made the silence seem deeper.

Finally, Court Burnside spoke. "What do you mean? What are you driving at?"

"The real facts. There wasn't any accident in apartment 303 of the Egyptian Manor. Joe Bloomgarten had nothing to do with any accident."

He gave a slight nervous cough. "You mean—you mean you think Garfield was—er, murdered?"

"Listen," I told him flatly, "I happen to work out of the D.A.'s office and I've

got plenty of drag around this town. I'll railroad you through a trial so fast you'll hardly be able to say your real name from the witness stand."

He lifted a thin white hand and rubbed his eyes as though his vision had become foggy. His breath came in tight gasps, through his mouth. "You're trying to bluff me," he managed feebly.

"About what?"

"About being in the D.A.'s office."

With my left hand I got out some papers, a card. I got out a Deputy Sheriff's badge and a City Police shield. I placed these on the table by the corpse's stiff legs. "You want to see any more?"

His face flushed crimson, then drained to a ghastly white. "What can I do?" he muttered thickly. "I mean to save myself some of the rap?"

"You can give me a little help."

"How?"

"Where's Mawson and the girl—his so-called sister?"

"Well—well, you see," he whined slightly. "I can't squeal on them."

I shrugged casually. "O.K., then take your rap right on the chin. We'll find those rats anyway."

I started to drag him through the laboratory toward a side door to Granville. All at once he gave a violent shudder. For a second I thought he intended to make a break. He didn't. It was just nerves.

"I'll take you to 'em," he snapped. "You make it easy for me afterwards, will you?"

I opened the door and frisked his pockets thoroughly. He didn't have any weapon now that he'd lost the sap. I shoved him out on to the dark sidewalk.



WENT to an old frame duplex over on Palmdale. I had made Court Burnside, or whatever his real name was, drive my car, and I sat close to him and ready to take him if he tried any monkey business. I was

fairly sure he wouldn't. He was scared clear down to his shoes, and he was a little man anyway, and not nearly so brave now that he didn't have Bill Mawson around and his own sap in his pocket.

We parked the car two doors down and walked back to the duplex.

"It's upstairs," Court said.

I could see the glow of lights on drawn shades. We went up the wooden steps, soundlessly careful. The stairs rose at the side of the building. At the top there was a narrow landing and no lights burning.

I got Joe Bloomgarten's Colt in position and punched Court in the ribs with it. He nodded and pressed the doorbell.

Voices made a low drone inside. Now the voices ceased suddenly.

The undertaker's attendant put his cheek close to the door and called softly, "Hey! It's me."

I'd told him very definitely not to say it was Court, or Courtney, or Burnside. I knew blamed well the name was a phony and, if he used it now, the muggs inside would get wise something was up. For the same reason I told the red-head not to use one of their names either—not Bill Mawson, or Margie Mawson.

As it was, they recognized the voice and the door opened right away. I gave the red-headed guy a hard push that sent him stumbling half-way across the room. I followed right in, holding the gun.

Bill Mawson jumped back and reached under his coat.

"Take it easy!" I clipped, putting the Colt on him.

The willowy blonde was sitting on a davenport by a gas fireplace. She bit her lip and spilled part of a highball into her lap. "My gosh!" she said inanely.

"Hello, Fred," said Joe Bloomgarten.

He got out of an easy chair and grinned at me stupidly. He had a drink in his hand. He blinked at the gun I was holding and wagged his head. "No, Fred, don't do that. Put it down. We're all friends here. Everything's

fixed up. You just sit down and Bill'll get you a drink and we'll tell you about it."

"Nix," I said, "I'll tell *you* about it."

The tall slump-shouldered man had half raised his mitts over his head, smirking at the gun I held. He backed up and sat down on the arm of the davenport next to the girl.

"You sit down too," I called to the undertaker.

He blinked his eyes worriedly, sidling over to the davenport and seating himself gingerly on the edge of it.

Joe Bloomgarten came toward me, holding his drink out. "Here, you take mine, Fred. Have a drink. You don't understand. We fixed everything up. I'll tell you how it was."

"Sure," I nodded bitterly, "you tell me how it was, Joe."

"Well, you see after you went home—"

I grinned over at the trio on the davenport. "Oh, so that was the story? So I went home, did I? First time I knew my home was a wet weedy lot over on East Forty-second."

They didn't say anything.

Joe Bloomgarten sipped the drink he'd offered to me and went on, "After you decided to go home instead of phoning the cops, Bill and Court came back to the apartment and we figured the best thing to do was hush up the whole accident. Of course, this is a little unethical, Fred, but you said you'd help me under-cover, and I know you'll back us up. You see what we did was—well—"

I said slowly, "You ditched the body, cleaned up the apartment, and vanished. That way nobody could prove there was any accident."

Joe Bloomgarten gazed at me. "Why, yes! How did you know, Fred? Did Court tell you?"

"No, I guessed. I'm awful smart at guessing games."

Joe just grinned foolishly over the highball. "You know what we did? It's rather gruesome, Fred, but, my gosh, the

man was dead anyway, and it was an accident, and there was no use getting all of us into a scandal—"

"I know what you did," I interrupted. "It was *their* idea. They disposed of the body. Do you know how, Joe?"

"No. You see, Court here—"

I said, "Joe, you're the damndest fool I ever met! Can't you get it through your thick skull that there wasn't any accident in 303? You didn't kill Garfield, you sap! You had nothing to do with it."

His jaw dropped idiotically. "Huh?"

"The man they call 'Garfield' was stiff as a board. I'm not an M.E. or a doctor, but I've worked on enough cases to know a body doesn't arrive at complete rigor mortis in two hours! Garfield was dead long before you ever got to the apartment, Joe. He must've died early in the day."

Joe kept gaping in that foolish way. The two men on the davenport stared stolidly at the designs on the carpet. The girl glared at me, and her sharp painted fingernails attracted my attention; her slim hands were like claws. I could tell she longed to scratch my eyes out. She was that kind of a blonde.

Joe Bloomgarten swallowed the rest of his drink in one pull, choked, and eyed me owlishly. "How could he have been dead?"

"You didn't see him walking around, did you?"

"No, but he was sleeping in the bedroom. You see, he'd been on a bat and passed out and Court was nursing him."

"Nuts," I cut in. "Garfield wasn't sleeping in that bed; he was dead in it. They only told you he was sleeping. You were too tight to know the difference."

Joe rubbed his red forehead blearily. "But that can't be true, Fred. Garfield came out and jumped me."

"Don't be so thick-witted! You didn't actually see Garfield jump you, did you?"

"Well, no. He jumped on my back."

"The hell he did! While Bill Mawson and his alleged sister here kept

you busy in a scuffle, this red-headed guy dragged the body out of the bed, came along back of you, threw the body at you and grabbed your throat. You thought afterwards that it was Garfield grabbed you. But corpses don't grab people. It was Court. They had you so tight, and they framed it so well, you fell for it all."

Joe Bloomgarten sat down heavily, staring at me. "But, Fred—"

I kept giving it to him. "After the body fell, you all bent over it. For a few minutes they pretended the man was unconscious. That was just baloney to drive further into your mind the phony idea that Garfield really had been living and jumped you."

"But, Fred—"

"Then you all had some drinks. They slipped a Mickey Finn in yours. The idea of that was so your mind would be plenty groggy when you finally woke up; then anything they suggested would sound reasonable to you."

"But, Fred—"

"After you passed out, they left you lying in the apartment they'd rented for the job yesterday. They figured you'd be out for hours. There was no reason why they should sit there all that time with a drugged man and a corpse. They probably dropped out to some beer joint to pass the time. They must have locked the door, though. Did you have to unlock it when you went downstairs to phone me?"

Joe Bloomgarten blinked dully. "Why, yes. The bolt was shot, but of course you can turn it from the inside."

"Sure," I said, "but they didn't figure on your being awake to turn it. You came to. That Mickey Finn didn't work like it was supposed to. You had a mental shock from the 'killing accident' and that shock probably had something to do with erasing the effects of the knock-out stuff. On top of that they couldn't have slipped you enough of it."

"When they came back to the apartment you were conscious and I was there. That was a monkey wrench in

the works. They had to get rid of me. Courtney tried to put me to sleep with some of his pet Mickey Finn—only I didn't swallow it."

Slump-shouldered Bill Mawson glared at me with a lemonish expression. "Smart guy, huh? I told Court I should've put the heat on you."

I looked away from him. "Joe, there was a slice in the dead man's belt line, a long cut. It had been sewed up. That got me to thinking, too."

Joe rose clumsily and excitedly from the chair. "I understand now! I see how it was, Fred! I was victimized. They'd murdered this man with a knife and they wanted to frame it on somebody. Margie picked me up and—"

I shook my head, grinning at Court. "No, Joe. They didn't murder Garfield. Garfield wasn't ever murdered."

"But the knife wound?"

"That was from a surgeon's scalpel. The man they called Garfield died in the surgery of some hospital, probably during an emergency appendectomy. The operation didn't save his life. The surgeon just pulled the incision together. The patient was dead; no use being careful about the stitches. So the body was removed to the Stanton Brothers Funeral Parlors for embalming and burial. There's where the racket began."

"What racket?"

"The killing racket they pulled on you, Joe. How much did they make you pay for ditching the body you were supposed to have killed?"

Joe blinked his eyes. "Well, I only had five hundred and eighty-five dollars in my wallet, but they said that was enough to take care of it."

I laughed. "It had to be enough. Ordinarily, in this racket with out-of-town suckers they probably make the victim kick through with several thousand bucks. But I butted into this case and they couldn't ask you for a check because I might be wise enough to have you stop payment and watch the banks for them when they tried to get the cash. So they decided to pull out for whatever

you had in your wallet and let it go at that."

"Good Lord!" Joe wailed dismally.

"It's blackmail. A sort of 'dead man' racket. They use real corpses but they don't have to murder anyone for the game. Since Court here is alone on the night shift at Stanton Brothers, they merely borrow a corpse for the evening, some poor guy who died a natural death and who's waiting for embalming and the funeral. Margie is the pick-up artist. They spot guys like you in the hotels—out-of-town party boys with plenty of jack and a family somewhere. Guys like you make easy suckers."

Bill Mawson, or whatever his real moniker might be, took his hands down and placed them on his knees. He smirked at me coldly. "All right, smart guy, we heard your sermon out. Now what?"

"You're all pinched."

The blonde's lips curled. "The hell we are!" She jumped to her feet glaring from Mawson to Court. "Are you two heels gonna just sit there and take it? Why don't you do something?"

The two men just sat there. It infuriated her. The knuckles of her clenched fists showed white under taut skin. "Drugstore cowboys!"

There was a telephone on a stand by the kitchenette door. I nodded toward it, saying to Joe, "Phone Mutual 8668. That's Headquarters. Give them this address and have some law around."

Joe Bloomgarten swayed a little on his feet. He hardly heard me. He stared at the two men and the blonde, a flush coming to his cheeks.

"They tried to blackmail me," he announced angrily. The whole idea was just taking definite shape in a brain that had been held paralyzed from the night's drinking and the knock-out drops. "Why, the dirty tramps! They victimized me! They . . ."

In a way it was funny to see the worm turning. He'd been such a docile sucker.

"You bet I'll phone!" he growled.


He only took about three steps and I saw the blonde rush at him. I yelled a warning; I couldn't do much else. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the blonde take a swing at him. It was a healthy swing. There hadn't been anything like it in the lousy fights I'd seen early in the evening.

Bill Mawson tried to jump off the davenport at me. I stepped over and poked the gun at him. He sat down again, peacefully.

I heard a *crack* sound, and when I glanced around quickly the blonde was stretched out on the floor, her skirt twisted about her legs, her face partly cradled in her arms. She didn't move, didn't twitch.

Joe Bloomgarten stood over her, casually caressing his right fist. "I socked her," he said. "Right on the button. I don't care if she was a woman. She had it coming."

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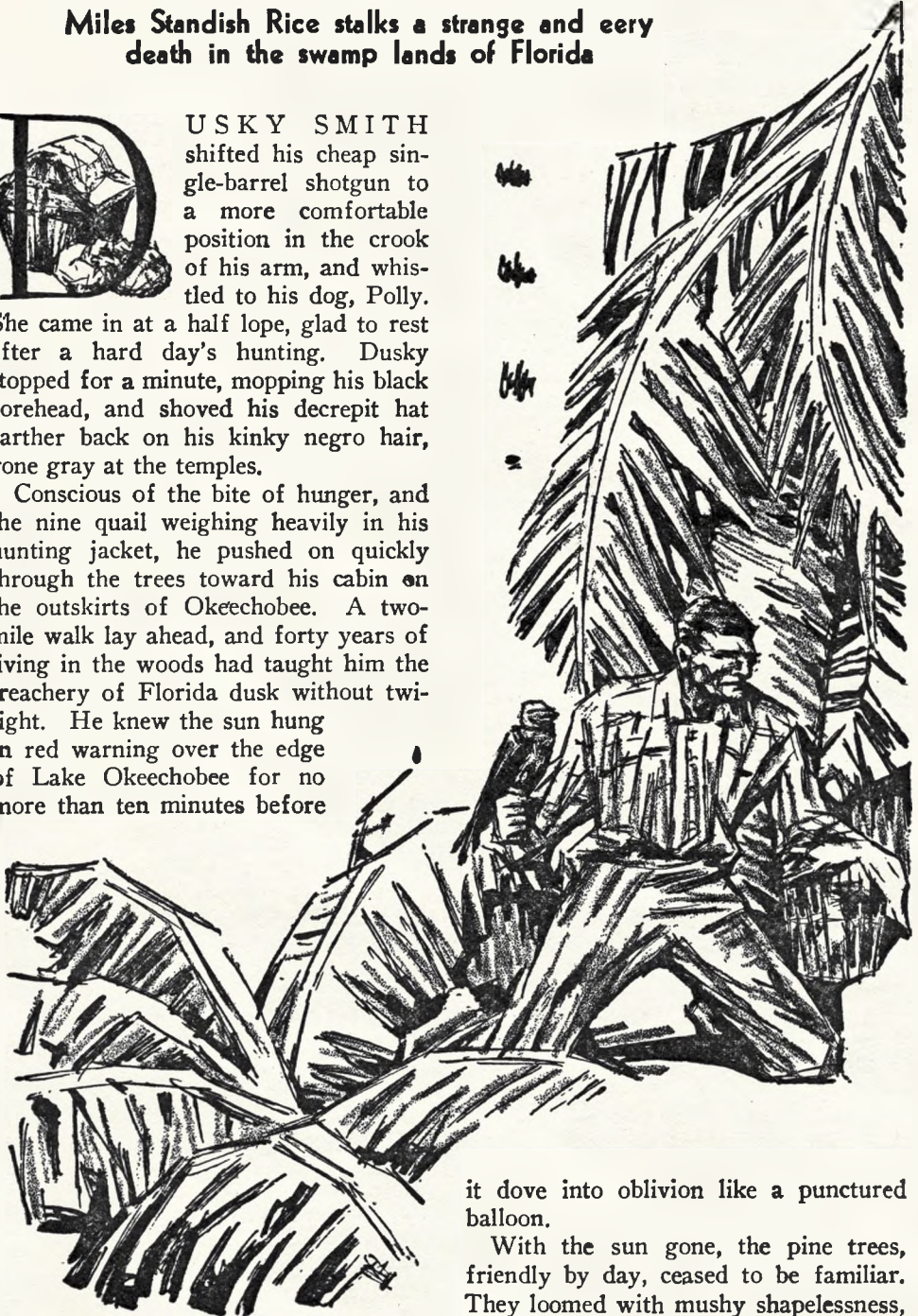
WHITE BIRDS

Miles Standish Rice stalks a strange and eery death in the swamp lands of Florida

DUSKY SMITH shifted his cheap single-barrel shotgun to a more comfortable position in the crook of his arm, and whistled to his dog, Polly.

She came in at a half lope, glad to rest after a hard day's hunting. Dusky stopped for a minute, mopping his black forehead, and shoved his decrepit hat farther back on his kinky negro hair, gone gray at the temples.

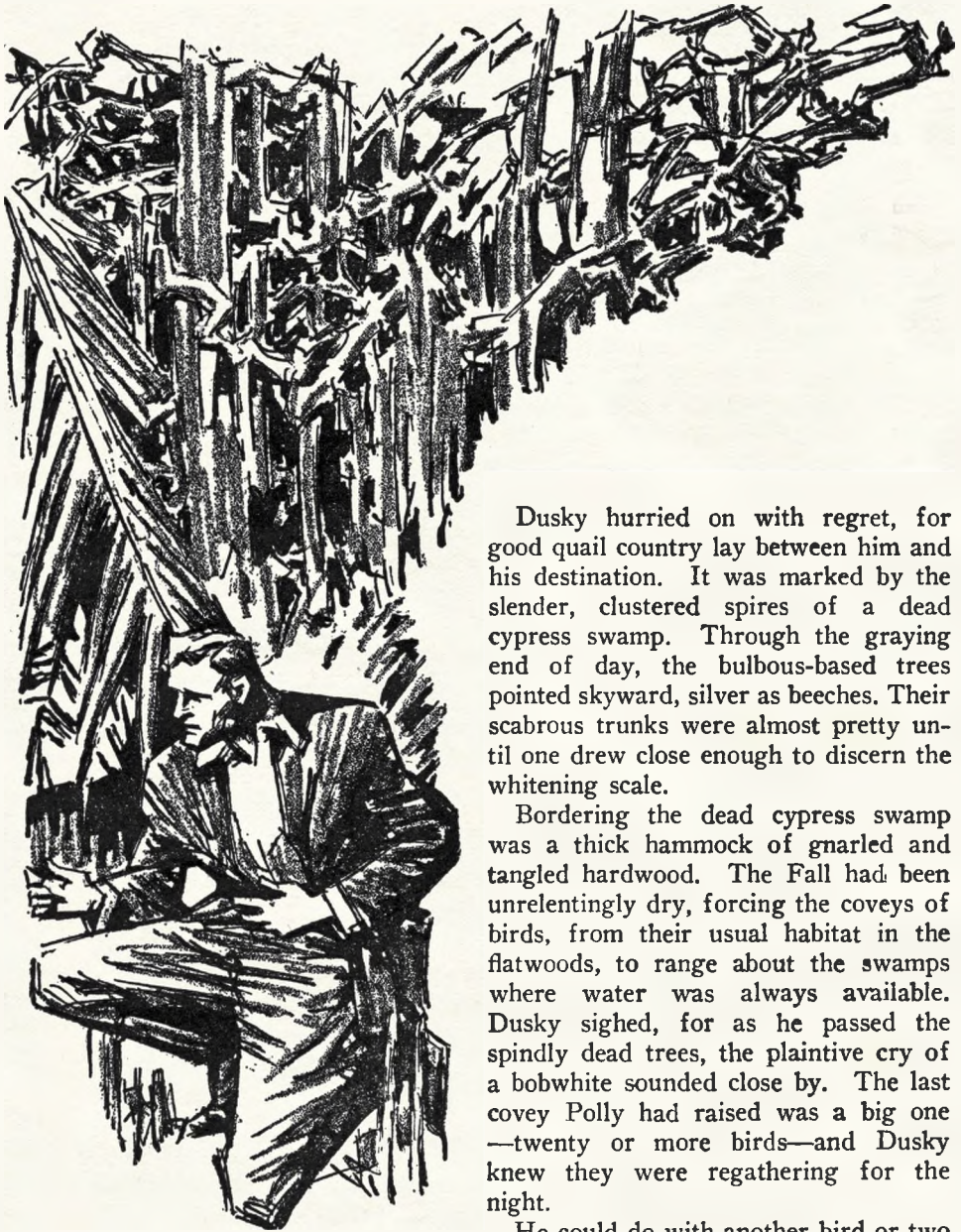
Conscious of the bite of hunger, and the nine quail weighing heavily in his hunting jacket, he pushed on quickly through the trees toward his cabin on the outskirts of Okeechobee. A two-mile walk lay ahead, and forty years of living in the woods had taught him the treachery of Florida dusk without twilight. He knew the sun hung in red warning over the edge of Lake Okeechobee for no more than ten minutes before



it dove into oblivion like a punctured balloon.

With the sun gone, the pine trees, friendly by day, ceased to be familiar. They loomed with mushy shapelessness,

By BAYNARD H. KENDRICK



a forest of black velvet pillows. Palmetto bushes sprouted bayoneting thorns, impeding progress. Wet places, ankle deep by daylight, metamorphosed themselves into clutching quagmires.

Dusky hurried on with regret, for good quail country lay between him and his destination. It was marked by the slender, clustered spires of a dead cypress swamp. Through the graying end of day, the bulbous-based trees pointed skyward, silver as beeches. Their scabrous trunks were almost pretty until one drew close enough to discern the whitening scale.

Bordering the dead cypress swamp was a thick hammock of gnarled and tangled hardwood. The Fall had been unrelentingly dry, forcing the coveys of birds, from their usual habitat in the flatwoods, to range about the swamps where water was always available. Dusky sighed, for as he passed the spindly dead trees, the plaintive cry of a bobwhite sounded close by. The last covey Polly had raised was a big one—twenty or more birds—and Dusky knew they were regathering for the night.

He could do with another bird or two for supper. Three pickaninnies, added to his wife and himself, made heavy demands on a meager larder. He stopped and squinted in the direction of the call. It was almost too dark to see, but if

Polly could find the single straggler and flush it, he might, by kneeling, be able to get a shot as the swift flying bird was silhouetted against the grayness of the swamp.

He pursed his lips and whistled softly, imitating the bobwhite's cry with inborn skill. The bird answered; then, after a moment, closer by and to his right, a second call sounded. Dusky swept out his arm, and Polly circled in four quick arcs; then, belly to ground, picked up a hot scent. Creeping, she nosed it out to a point, stiffened, and stood graven, a patch of liver-and-white gleaming dully through the encroaching darkness.

Dusky was close behind her when she started to move again. The bird was running. Polly followed it gingerly for twenty-five feet, and stiffened the second time. They were closer to the edge of the swamp, and Dusky knew his chances of getting the bird were slight. Slowly, he walked past the dog's head, his gun at full cock. The single quail flushed, tearing the air with whirring wings. Dusky Smith knelt and fired, but the tiny fugitive sagaciously circled, shielding itself with darkness, and zoomed into the safety of the swamp.

Dusky remained kneeling where he was, too paralyzed to move. As the speeding quail vanished beyond the outermost trees, the air overhead was suddenly filled with the beat of wings. Furious and fast they fluttered, circling above him, coming from nowhere. They massed together, slid in greased silence twice above him, and were gone. A covey bigger than he had ever seen—a covey such as he prayed to God he would never see again.

"Lordy! Lordy!" he moaned to the trembling dog before him, "help dis nigger out o' these woods. That's a ghost covey, Polly. We done seen a ghost covey! Dem birds is white, dawg, an' white quails means death fo' mawning! O, Lordy, Lordy, save dis nigger f'om dem ghost birds!"



MILES STANDISH RICE compressed his six feet plus into a swing on the porch of the bungalow on Indian Creek. The December Sunday afternoon, living up to the advertised qualities of Miami Beach, was balmy and soporific. Stan was filled with a vast peace, and monumental slabs of roast beef, which he considered his due share of dinner, just past.

He shut off a flow of reminiscences which were lulling him to sleep, and unscrambled himself into a sitting position. A brown Pierce Arrow roadster, showing the dust of a long trip and back-country driving, swung up to the curb and stopped. Its single occupant was a girl—attractive enough to bring a man, less susceptible than Stan, smartly to attention.

He made an attempt to smooth out his crumpled suit of spotless white flannel as the girl came up the steps of the porch. She was worth looking at, he decided, worth looking at twice—or possibly an unlimited number of times.

Hatless, her brown hair shone silky and bright under the afternoon sun. It was in wild disarray from the wind-blown drive, but under it, deep brown eyes were frank and still. A brown silk shirt stayed half closed at the throat, assisted by a yellow silk handkerchief tie. Light brown corduroy slacks were tucked into the top of soft leather riding boots. Stan's quick judgment in matters feminine told him the hidden legs were bound to be in keeping with the rest of the picture.

She paused on the top step, and said uncertainly, "I'm looking for a Mr. Rice—a Mr. Miles Rice."

Stan shuddered. "Please, lady, please! A Christian New England mother gave me my name at birth, and I can't deny it, but I beg you with a thousand begs, don't call me Miles! It sounds like such a distance. I despise wasted energy."

She openly studied him, appraising his

deceptively slender form, from wavy yellow hair to expensive sports shoes. Brown and blue eyes met, and she read in his blue ones high intelligence and quick sympathy. She smiled slightly, and abruptly said, "Somehow, you don't look like a detective to me."

"Now you're being kind." His white, even teeth showed in a grin. "I'm not. I'm a sportsman, a lover of rare wines and old women—or is it old wines and rare women? Now, if I can be of service to you in that direction. . . ."

Her lips tightened, the slight smile gone.

Contritely Stan realized that she was tired and worn, fighting a dread which could not entirely overcome her unusual beauty.

"Sit down, won't you? You're in trouble." He drew a comfortable wicker chair close to the swing, and noted how wearily her slender shoulders drooped.

"I'm Alice Lorraine from Okeechobee. My father, Louis Lorraine, has a stock farm there. I believe you've met my brother Blanton while fishing at Long Key. He's mentioned you several times."

Stan balanced his long form against the porch railing, watching her intently. "I remember your brother well," he said. "Wait a minute."

He went inside the house and returned with two large Scotch highballs in frosted glasses. He gave one to the girl, saying, "This will buck you up. You look all in."

He settled himself in the swing, smiling at her over the edge of his glass. Louis Lorraine was the biggest cattle owner in the South, an extremely wealthy man and a power in State politics. By dint of pressure and education, he had successfully enacted legislation forcing the smaller cattlemen to dip their stock. Primarily he was responsible for stamping out the Texas fever tick, which for years had prevented Florida from taking its rightful place as a cattle raising State.

Reminded of the connection, Stan im-

mediately saw the resemblance between Alice Lorraine and her brother; the same clear, direct gaze, finely molded nose, and strong chin.

She eagerly gulped down part of her drink, and brightening a bit, admitted: "I needed that. I drove here from Okeechobee in three hours, and I have to be back before dark."

Stan shot an approving glance toward the brown roadster at the curb. A hundred and fifty miles in three hours along that wavy and tricky road was pushing along, even taking into account the lightness of traffic between West Palm Beach and Okeechobee.

Some desperate emergency must have caused Alice Lorraine to maintain a speed far above the danger point. She did not look like a reckless girl, or one who would risk her own life and the lives of others for pleasure. He was interested, but his interest momentarily collapsed at her next statement.

"My father's been missing some valuable steers."

"Oh." Stan poked the ice down into his drink. He was not flattered, although he knew his own reputation caused people to seek him out with many strange requests. Never before had he been solicited as a missing-persons expert for cows!

He suppressed a desire to remark that Okeechobee had a splendid sheriff in the person of Binge Thatcher, and that if Mr. Louis Lorraine's capable cowhands were unable to locate the errant steers, it was hardly a job for the acute faculties of Miles Standish Rice.

He smiled wryly and there was an edge in his voice when he asked, "So your brother suggested that I might be able to find lost cows, did he?"

Long-lashed lids veiled a fleeting flash of amusement as she caught the hint of artistic grief in his question.

"None of my family knew I was coming. They think I drove to Clewiston on the other side of the lake to see some friends."

Slightly mollified, Stan swished the ice

around, and took another sip. Alice Lorraine was charming enough to be forgiven. Girls were peculiar anyway. Besides, there was grand hunting in the Okeechobee section. It might prove most diverting to go after cattle rustlers and game at the same time, particularly if Alice Lorraine could be persuaded to aid.

"There's more," she said, after a moment of watching him. "I took a chance when I came here that you'd think I was extremely foolish. Sitting here in the sunlight, I almost decided not to go on, but you can hear what I have to say and judge for yourself."

She paused, searching for a cigarette, accepted one from Stan, inhaled nervously, and continued: "I've been brought up around cattle and I'm not scared of the woods. I come and go around Okeechobee, by car or on horseback, day or night. But I'm frightened now, Mr. Rice."

"Then missing steers were not the entire reason for this trip?" Stan set his glass on the floor by the swing, and leaned slightly forward.

"Missing steers are only one of the reasons. This morning I went out early on the lake for ducks—" Unsuccessfully, she was fighting the creeping onslaught of terror. Stan sensed it, felt it in the veiled contraction of her words which slipped through heightened breathing. "I found father's prize bull, Emperor, down on his side by the edge of the lake."

"Dead?" Stan asked.

Brown hair swung in a negative shake. "He was bellowing pitifully. I thought at first he'd been bitten by a snake, but I was wrong. I shot him, Mr. Rice, for both his front legs were broken."

"He might have bogged down," Stan remarked.

"Yes, he might have bogged down." Alice Lorraine's repetition was curiously low. "But he didn't. And he didn't step in a gopher hole either, Mr. Rice—not with both front legs. And he wasn't lassoed. Cowhands don't break

both front legs of a bull when they throw him with a rope."

"Did you tell your father?"

"No. Nor my brother. I haven't told anyone, except you."

"That hardly seems natural." Stan rested his head on the back of the swing, and stared at her.

"It isn't natural," she admitted, not shifting her eyes, "but neither is my father natural, nor Blanton. They haven't been for the past thirty days. The hunting season opened on November 20th. Father and Blanton have ten of the finest bird dogs in the State. They haven't been out for quail once! Two weeks ago I started out by myself with two of the dogs. Blanton stopped me. His excuse was the dogs were sick, that eight of them had an epidemic. But I know dogs as well or better than Blanton. The dogs are sick from not being hunted, that's all. This morning I slipped out duck hunting unobserved."

"Has your father reported the missing cattle to Sheriff Thatcher?" Stan interrupted.

Again she shook her head. "No."

"That another item you can add to the unnaturalness you spoke of."

"But I did. I reported it. Not to Binge Thatcher, but to Anson Carter. He's chief deputy, and I've known him since I was a little girl. It was he who taught me nearly everything I know about hunting and fishing. He started to investigate."

"How long ago was that?" Stan interrupted again.

"Ten days. Two days after I told him about the missing steers, his horse wandered riderless into Okeechobee. They found Anson out near Bitter Swamp with a broken arm and a crushed skull. He's not dead, but has concussion of the brain and hasn't spoken since." She paused, and added, "That is, he hasn't spoken much. Dr. Yale doesn't know whether he'll live or not."

"Why are you avoiding telling me what really brought you here?" Stan asked abruptly. "I can't help unless I

know the whole story. I can't do anything unless I know what Anson Carter said."

"It sounds so unutterably silly." Her eyes narrowed. "Dr. Yale claims Anson was delirious." Fear broke unleashed through her reserve. "I don't think so, Mr. Rice. There's been strange talk around Okeechobee. Nigger talk. About a covey of white quail."

"White quail!" Stan snapped to attention, sitting up straight.

She nodded mutely. "A nigger, Dusky Smith, started it, the second day of the hunting season. It's grown since, and gets bigger with each hunter who sees it. The birds are never seen except right after the crack of dawn, or at dusk." Her voice lowered to a whisper. "They call it 'the death covey.'"

"And Anson Carter?"

"Babbled of it for an hour to Dr. Yale. 'Through the trees,' he said. 'Rustling through the trees—breaking down the branches until they got me. The death covey. The ghost covey.' Will you come and help me, Mr. Rice? There's something terribly wrong."

"I'll be there tomorrow," said Miles Standish Rice, "but you don't know me—never've seen or heard of me before. Understand?"

"Yes," she said firmly, "I understand."

He got up and held out his hand. "Get back as quickly as you can, but watch your step. Keep your mouth shut, and don't worry." Then he added thoughtfully, as she was going down the steps, "I wonder if white quail are good to eat."



TAN RICE spent the following morning closeted with his friend, Captain Vincent LeRoy, of the Miami Homicide Squad. He consumed an enormous lunch, for his memories of eating places in Okeechobee and vicinity were dark and doleful. There was one

restaurant in the sprawling lakeside town of eighteen hundred where the food was passing fair, but Stan had a congenital hatred of vegetables served in canary bathtubs, and his mind filed an unforgettable picture of each place which served coffee too dark to fish in, but not quite black enough to drink.

It was almost dusk when he turned his Buick sports coupé right at Canal Point for the balance of his run around Lake Okeechobee to the town. The waters of the broad shallow lake, set like a miniature ocean in the lower center of the State, lay at his left. Hyacinths and lily pads rippled on the edges, stirring in a late evening breeze. Small arms of water, covered by short bridges, stretched out under the road like reaching fingers. He sighed as the Buick flashed over each of them, for they bespoke quiet resting places for large bronze back bass.

To his right lay an interminable stretch of sawgrass and swamp land, broken only by the stark trees of an occasional cypress swamp. It was drear and desolate country, but the land was rich muck, pushing vegetables swiftly up into luscious greenness for those hardy enough to brave its wetness and vicious mosquitoes. Occasionally an ugly black moccasin wriggled off the warm hardness of the road back into the lake as the car went by. Stan saw several which had been too slow and had paid the penalty under the tires of previous cars.

He breathed deeply, and increased his speed. The first lights of the town were twinkling far ahead. He loved Florida. Its very flatness, wildness and ruthlessness charmed him. Its warmth and the heavy scented late-day smell of cooling vegetation were pleasant and comforting to him. It was a State full of surprise, replete with the gamut of living, from life to death.

Nowhere else in the world was a town exactly like Okeechobee. For years it never seemed to change. A group of unattractive square houses sprawled around on dead flat land, covering a hundred

times the space they needed. A strange town, where next door neighbors seemed to live two blocks apart; a town without outskirts, making it difficult to determine when you entered and when you left; small, but somehow vast as the big lake behind it, and the unoccupied mucklands hemming it in.

He stopped the car by the gas pumps in front of a general store to the right of the road, and told an overalled boy to fill the tank. He climbed stiffly out, stretched his long legs to get out driving kinks, and walked inside.

His white flannel suit of the day before was replaced by high top leather boots and cord riding breeches. A pocketed hunting coat covered his soft khaki shirt, its loose folds concealing the blue .38, set in a .45 caliber frame, which nested under his left arm.

Most of the time Miles Standish Rice disdained carrying a revolver. A trained marksman of exceptional skill, he nevertheless disliked the encumbrance, preferring to depend on his lightning speed as an amateur boxer, his well concealed ability as a rough-and-tumble fighter, and his nimble wits to extricate him from tight places. The presence of his gun attested to the fact that he was more than puzzled by Alice Lorraine's story. He was thinking of her as he stepped into the store.

Just inside the door, he stopped, struck motionless by a feeling that the several men in the store were even more apprehensive than Alice Lorraine on her visit to Miami. A tall, pleasant-faced old man stood back of the counter. He stopped speaking as Stan entered, shortly biting off his words. His face turned quickly toward the door. Just as quickly, the other occupants of the store followed suit.

The front of the store was filled with a clutter of farm implements, shiny nickeled wood heaters, and a single expensive radio offered for sale, looming strangely out of place in its surroundings. Two big unshaded bulbs ineffectually lit the large emporium. They

formed two bright blobs hanging in the air, as light battered back against them from oil soaked bins and drawers of nails and bolts.

Three men were seated on bags of feed ranged along the wall in front of the counter. Their faces, hanging like surprised white masks in mid air, appeared to be the only things adequately lighted.

Stan took a few strides forward and stopped in front of the counter, smiling pleasantly. "Hello, Dad." He extended his hand. Closer, he could see a few lingering indications of just how black Dad Davis's white hair once had been. He had bought shells from the storekeeper many times before, but if he expected instant recognition, he was disappointed.

The old man twisted his face, even more bronzed than Stan's, into quizzical lines. Sooty eyes peered questioningly under the white brows. Behind Stan, tenseness grew until the storekeeper reached out a tanned, muscular, freckle-backed hand to meet Stan's proffered clasp.

"Rice, ain't it?" he asked after a moment. His lips widened, disclosing exceptionally fine teeth, slightly tobacco stained. An agile Adam's apple rolled up and down in the V of his gray shirt. "Hell, an' gone, mister, you're quite a stranger. Nigh onto four years, ain't it, since you hunted these parts? I heerd you done mighty well by yourself since then."

In back of Stan, one of the men stood up with a shuffle of feet. Dad opened his black eyes wide and looked over Stan's shoulder as though trying to penetrate the mixture of darkness and too much light.

"You all meet Stan Rice," he said on a rising note, releasing Stan's hand. He indicated the two men still sitting. "Ike Dolan and Ted Barry—coupla Florida cowhands." Dad laughed. "Spend most of their time rounding up hawgs, if I know anything about it. At least they're off relief, but I hear 'tain't much

better working for old man Lorraine."

The two men grinned in unison at Dad's jibe. Stan estimated them swiftly. Black soft hats and blue jeans tucked in boots. One of them wore one small spur. Both spoke in greeting with the hesitancy of the native cracker. The man standing was harder to classify. Dad introduced him as Joe Nulty.

Nulty wore heavy corduroy pants, rolled up at the bottom to accommodate his short legs. His shirt was gray, and his face matched it. He looked sick, and coughed into a dirty handkerchief as he nodded a greeting to Stan. A slight odor of fish lingered about him. Denying his delicacy, his grip closed trap-like when he shook hands.

"Stayin' long?" he asked.

"Depends on the hunting." Stan pushed his corduroy cap to the back of his head and smiled. "Are there many ducks in yet on the lake?"

"Right smart," said Nulty. He hitched up his two long trousers. The outline of a large pistol showed for an instant inside his waistband. "I s'pect you can get your share. I hear tell some folks been gettin' more than their share of quail." He showed bad teeth in a mixed grin and chuckle. "How 'bout it, Dad?"

"Tommyrot," said Davis. "Seems as though every year the niggers 'round these parts get crazier." He addressed Stan. "They're comin' in with stories about the woods bein' full of white quail now. Ghost coveys, bringing death to all concerned."

"Somebody must be making some powerful shine around Okeechobee," Stan suggested. He hoisted himself to a seat on the counter, and lit a cigarette.

"I wouldn't be so all-fired sure about that, mister," said Ike Dolan. "There's some right good men seen them birds, from all I can hear."

"I s'pose you'll be admitting to it next," his companion put in shortly.

"Not likely," said Dolan, "and I ain't admitting to nothing if I do. Come on, let's be goin'."

"What's the matter, Ike?" Joe Nulty asked. "Skeered?"

"No," said Ike, "I ain't skeered, I'm keerful. I got a hankerin' to keep myself all in one piece."

The two cowmen strode out of the store without a backward glance.

"They're worse than a bunch of old women," Joe Nulty said. Then, lowering his voice, he added: "Mebbe I'm a might oneasy myself. There's Anson Carter a deputy sheriff, laid up with a smashed in head, ravin' over them same white birds. He's a hard-headed, close-mouthed man, not given to ravin' over nothing. And the nigger who started the tale's been around these parts all his life."

Stan discovered himself peering into the darker shadows. He slid from the counter and faced Nulty.

"He's reliable?" Stan asked.

"Well," said Nulty, "Dad, here, has trusted him up high as forty dollars, which's a heap of money for a nigger. You might talk to Dusky efn you're curious. His cabin's out near the edge of the lake, about a quarter of a mile from town."

"I might," said Stan with a short laugh, "but I don't think I will. Think I'll tend to my hunting, and leave that to the sheriff."

"And I think you'll be avoiding a heap o' trouble, efn you do," Nulty advised. He edged toward the doorway.

At the door, he turned, and said, "I got a right good ducking boat and some decoys. If you needs 'em, mister, look me up. I'm just across the Kissimmee River, on the Lakeport Road."

"Thanks," said Stan. "I may do that."

Alone with Dad Davis, Stan turned and said, "Loosen up, Dad. What's eating everybody around here?"

The old man lifted the lid of a large icebox and produced a cold Coca-Cola. He set it on the counter, together with a half full pint of Old Quaker rye. Stan gurgled down a generous quantity from the bottle, and chased it with the soft drink. Dad Davis followed suit, and

wiped his mouth on the back of his hand.

"I can't rightly say," Dad drawled slowly, "but I'm most inclined to share with Ike—keep your mouth shet and hornets won't be buildin' nests on your tonsils."

The overalled boy came in then to announce that the Buick was filled and the oil checked. Stan paid for the gas, and said he thought he'd be getting along to the hotel to wash up. At the doorway he stopped, gazing up curiously at two long sheaves of grass, crossed to form an ornament over the door. The stalks were nearly twelve feet in length, and a quarter of the upper end bushed out into silky white tufts.

"Well, I've seen a lot of things growing around the Everglades," he remarked, "but never anything just like that. It looks like pampas grass."

"It is pampas grass," Dad Davis told him. "It grows in the mountings of the Argentine."

"That's interesting." Stan flicked his cigarette out through the door, watching its fiery arc. "It's a long way from home. Where the devil did you get it?"

"From old man Lorraine," said Davis. "He's been experimenting with it around his place."

There was no signs of Stan's usual merriment as he left the store. He hesitated before getting into the car. A black-hatted, black-clothed man, wearing leggings, was leaning against one of the lighted gasoline pumps. He stomped out a cigarette as Stan approached, and walked away into the shadows beside the store.

Stan clucked at himself as he got in the car, trying to shake off an impression that the man was unduly interested in the Buick. Many people stared at the shiny coupé; why was there anything unusual about it in Okeechobee? The town was getting on his nerves, and it had to be stopped.

Through the windshield he glimpsed the broad vacant squares, large as city blocks, which separated the two main streets. The single electric bulbs set

high on poles at each corner did little but accentuate the darkness. Underneath the lights the squares were like vast vacant windows in the ground, waiting for houses which would never be built. They were cleared, but unimproved, and gave Okeechobee a queer appearance, as if some giant hand had swept away all signs of habitation for eight or ten blocks, and left only scattered stores along each side. The jungle, the lake and the Everglades lay so closely adjacent to the straggling buildings that the feel of their squeeze was never lost.

Stan registered at the hotel, spoke a word of greeting to a crate salesman whom he had met before, and refused an invitation to play poker later in the evening. He dined in solitary discomfort at the restaurant around the corner, and was gazing at the posters in front of the picture show when someone touched his arm. He whirled around to face young Blanton Lorraine.



BLANTON was older than when Stan last met him, at Long Key—too much older, for the time elapsed. His brown eyes, once direct as his sister's, refused to fix themselves on Stan as he shook hands. They moved in odd, short jerks, prying out each corner of the single street with a fugitive air. His greeting was cordial enough, but under it lay furtiveness, perhaps dismay.

He hesitated before the ingrained Lorraine hospitality got the upper hand, but with Stan's mythical hunting trip explained, he said, "You must come out to the house. I want you to meet the family. You'll stagnate in town here, and I've some passable Scotch. As I recall it, you gave me more than a fair share of the same on Long Key."

Stan looked at his watch. It was ten minutes past seven. "If eight-thirty isn't too late, I'll accept," he said eagerly. "I have a couple of letters to write, and

I would like to change my clothes."

"Fine," Blanton told him, "but come as you are. We're not much on dressing."

He gave explicit instructions for finding the Lorraine house, and added as he climbed into a small sedan at the curb: "We have a police dog that's rather vicious, so blow your horn before you drive through the gate. I'll come out and open it for you."

Stan watched the tail light as it sped off down the road, then walked back to the front of the hotel where the Buick was parked.

Five minutes from the hotel, on the road to the lake, the hard surface ended, giving way to yellow gravel, and farther along, to deep sand ruts. Stan took a chance that he was going in the right direction. He did not want to make obvious inquiries about Dusky Smith in Okeechobee.

He ran on for a short distance, past a fork to the right which led through the flatwoods, and brought the car to a sudden stop. The headlights picked up tall sawgrass and palmettoes. He knew the waters of the lake must lie just beyond. He backed around, stirring up vast clouds of chizzywigs, the blind non-biting mosquitoes so numerous around Lake Okeechobee they blot out the headlights of a car.

Back at the fork, he took the woods road. A negro cabin lay at the left, a short distance back in the trees. He stopped and blew his horn, but there was no response from within. Disgustedly he climbed out and went up on the rickety porch to knock at the door. A yellow line of light showed at the bottom of one of the windows. Vigorous rapping finally brought a frightened question without the door being opened. "Who dar?"

"I'm looking for Dusky Smith," Stan announced. "I want to hire a guide to take me hunting in the morning."

Bolts creaked, and the face of a tall, gaunt mulatto woman appeared in the crack of the door. Evidently Stan's appearance reassured her, for she directed

him to keep left for two forks of the sand road, when he would see Dusky's cabin about a mile farther on. The door was closed and bolted again before he left the porch.

He found the cabin he sought without difficulty, an unpainted, four-room shack, showing up in the headlights of the car. Repeated blasts of his horn brought no answer, and again he climbed out and went up on the porch.

His knocks echoed hollowly, bringing back with them a hint of utter desertion. A cracked green shade left a gap six inches over the window sill. Stan bent and peered through. White net curtains allowed him to see only that a lamp was lit on a table in the center of the room. He knocked again, then tried the door. It was open, and he stepped inside, closing it softly behind him.

Five chairs ringed the table. Two of them were high chairs, made from soap boxes fastened to four long legs. The table was completely set for supper. A bowl of cowpeas stood at one end. A freshly baked cornpone was on a dish in the center. Stan touched the cornbread with a finger. It was warm. The stove was in the corner, exuding heat, and a bright tin coffee pot still simmered and emitted a faint aroma.

He walked back to the table, noting the position of the chairs. The two high chairs were turned slightly sidewise. One of the regular chairs had been pushed back three feet or more. The one opposite was close to the table, as though its expected occupant had not yet arrived.

"Dusky," he called softly, almost afraid of the sound of his own voice. Treading lightly, he returned to the Buick, switched off the lights, and secured his powerful five-cell flashlight from the pocket of the car. It disclosed only neatness in the other three rooms; two cribs made of large laundry baskets, and a cheap iron cot were in one. A white iron double bed in another was carefully made, and immaculately clean. The third room showed a rocker and a

decrepit easy chair, drawn up before a fireplace. A few out-dated magazines were on the table under an unlighted lamp with a cracked white shade.

The whole house was closed tightly, blinds drawn. Another door led from the living-room to a back porch. It was closed, but the latch was not caught. Stan pushed it open and stepped out, holding his flash on the door. It swung slowly back to its position. He clicked off the flash, and changed the adjustment at the end so the torch would shoot its straight white beam of light for three or four hundred feet. When it went on a second time, jutting out into the darkness in back of the house, Stan's blue .38 was in the side pocket of his hunting coat.

The light touched an outhouse, moved to a chicken coop, and came to rest on a small smokehouse. The door of the smokehouse was closed, but the piece of wood which served as a lock was straight up and down. The light came back to the steps, and found two semi-circular indentations near the bottom. They showed plainly in a place kept constantly damp by washing water thrown from the back porch onto the sand.

Reluctantly the light followed the tale of the running footprints. Stan left the porch and walked hurriedly to kneel by the grotesquely doubled up body of Dusky Smith, close by the fence.

The negro was quite dead, his knees drawn up almost to his chest, his black hands spread out wide. One eye was bruised badly, and oozing blood from the split eyebrow. The head was twisted horribly. Stan probed at the base of the negro's neck, moving his strong fingers in a circular motion.

It looked like Dusky Smith had fallen while running, turned two somersaults, and broken his neck. Stan snapped off the light and sprang to his feet. From close by a woman moaned, low and insistently, uttering a disconsolate croon. Gun in hand, he walked to the door of the smokehouse, flung it open, and shone the light inside.

Huddled in the corner, her arms protectively about three terror-stricken negro children, was a comely black negress. Eyeballs shone white and uncomprehendingly as Stan asked, "What happened here? Who killed Dusky Smith?"

The woman held one hand before her face, shielding it from the light. "The birds," she muttered. "Them white birds got him. I heard 'em comin' through the grass, and they wropped themselves round him—like the livin' dead—and lef' him there just where you found him."

Aware of the uselessness of questioning the frightened negress, Stan ordered her back to the house, giving her soothing assurance that she was perfectly safe. Apparently she was too terror-stricken to understand what he was saying. She continued to sit where she was, clutching her children about her, and intermittently moaning. Finally he left her, and started a hurried scrutiny of the small yard, striding off the distance between the back porch steps and Dusky's body.

Half-way between the steps and the fence, he stopped, impatiently snapping his fingers. He went through the house to avoid as much as possible the confusion of his own footprints in the yard, and secured a small powerful kodak, a tripod, and some flashlight bulbs from the back of the Buick.

During the next fifteen minutes he photographed the position of the body by the fence, and the intervening ground to the back steps. Satisfied at last, he packed up his things and drove back to Okeechobee to get Binge Thatcher, the sheriff, and Dr. Yale.

Stan found the sheriff at his home close by the county jail. Thatcher, a short stocky man in his late fifties, was red faced and taciturn. Stan had met him only once before, at a convention of peace officers in Tallahassee, where Stan had made a talk. Thatcher's perpetually bloodshot eyes belied his native shrewdness. He cut off his greeting in

the middle, reading trouble in Stan's abruptness.

The sheriff accompanied Stan in the Buick, ordering a deputy to follow with another car and pick up Dr. Yale. Stan explained briefly during the drive that he had gone out to hire Dusky Smith for a guide, and found the negro dead. If Binge Thatcher had other ideas, he made no comment concerning them. Instead, he confined his requests for information to a few terse questions.

"How do you think he was killed?"

"I don't want to say," Stan said, "until you see him."

Thatcher glanced at him sidewise in the car, but read nothing from Stan's face. "There's generally not much mystery about the way a nigger's killed."

"There generally isn't," Stan agreed. Both of them were silent after that until they followed the trail through the house to the back porch.

"He jumped," said Binge Thatcher. "Jumped from the porch and ran." Together they walked to the fence, Stan's light sweeping the ground between them. Thatcher bent over the dead negro, felt him quickly and rose to his feet. Deliberately he took tobacco and paper from a pocket of his black coat, and rolled a smoke. Over the flame, he looked at Stan, his eyes red ovals in the match light. "Why did you move him?" he asked, exhaling slowly.

"Why would you have moved him?" Stan countered.

Thatcher pushed his black hat back on his head. "I wouldn't have," he said, "unless I killed him, but his footprints stop half-way back there in the yard. I don't think he slid twenty feet to the fence, do you?"

"Hardly."

"Well, the answer's pretty simple, then, isn't it?" the sheriff declared. "He was lassoed by a man outside the fence. The lariat broke his neck, and the murderer dragged him to the fence so he could unfasten the noose."

"It's a pretty good idea, Binge," Stan moistened his lips. "I think you'll find

part of it's right. Dusky was killed by a man on horseback outside of the fence, but I don't think he was killed with a lasso, unless we can figure out why a murderer should want to hit a corpse in the eye hard enough to bust his eyebrow wide open."

The lights of another car shone in front of the house. Stan looked at his watch. "Dusky's wife's still in the smokehouse with the kids. I've got to be getting along to the Lorraines. You can find me there if you want me. You might think over what I said."

"I won't be thinkin' anything else for the next few days," said Thatcher.



THE LORRAINES occupied a rambling, white two-story house two miles northwest of the town. It was built on a knoll high enough a bove surrounding lowlands to avoid the dangers of occasional floods, and was mellowed with years of comfortable living. Stan approved of its wide verandas, cool white siding, and bright green shutters focused out of the darkness by the headlights of his car. The night was chill with the penetrating dampness of mid-Florida in the winter.

After Blanton Lorraine escorted Stan past the growling dog that heralded his arrival in the yard, Stan eagerly sought the blazing fire in the living-room.

Alice had turned, since the day before, into feminine adorableness through the simple transformation of a becoming gown. She acknowledged her brother's introduction without a sign she had ever talked to Stan before.

Legs widespread before the blazing logs, Stan chattered brightly concerning his hopes for the week's hunting. He was estimating and cataloging the Lorraines, studying intently every member of the prosperous family with a view to finding some possible connection which might bridge back to the grotesque form sprawled dead near Okeechobee Lake.

On the surface, there was nothing amiss, nothing awry, unless it might be that the family was too comfortably settled about the large room. A subdued air of expectancy hung over the assemblage.

Stan decided his unexpected coming was discussed pro and con before he arrived. Possibly it was not discussed openly, but he was certain father and son had weighed his help and rejected it for some unknown reason.

His gaze kept drifting back to Bella Lorraine, Alice's stepmother, an austere, hawk-nosed figure in severe black silk. In curious contrast to her jovial husband, Louis Lorraine, she sat humorless and unsmiling. An intricate piece of black tatting was alive in her fingers, a steel needle sucking up thread with deftness.

"They tell me most of the birds are in the swamps this year." Louis Lorraine's uncalled for laugh rang hollowly. "My son says you're a splendid shot. I'd be glad to have you try out our dogs but unfortunately, they've been sick."

"I might have a look at them tomorrow," Stan suggested. "I've bred a lot myself, and am something of an expert."

"We know what's the trouble," Blanton supplied hurriedly. "Could you do with a highball and some cold wild turkey?"

"You're speaking in a language which wrings my starved soul," Stan declared with fervor. He watched the relief sweep into Blanton's face as the young man left the room for the kitchen.

Alice took her place at a grand piano in the center, and swung into a popular melody. Stan left the fireplace to take up his post beside her. The cattleman was leaning back in a comfortable chair, but the magazine in his hands was a subterfuge. His brown eyes continuously followed Stan's movements.

Blanton broke a growing tension when he returned with the highballs and a platter of the cold game. Almost too obviously he turned the conversation to the fishing trip on Long Key, and held it

there while Stan added to an ever-increasing heap of bones. At last Stan pushed the plate aside with a sigh. It was a regretful moment to him when his appetite ceased to function.

"I rather hoped to get some ducks while I was here, Blanton." Stan wiped his hands carefully on a paper napkin. "You promised me the shooting was good. Can you make it?"

A silence, prolonged to embarrassment, answered him. It was broken by Alice. "Father and Blanton are just getting over a slight attack of flu," she said. "How about going with me?"

"Fine," said Stan. "There's nothing I'd like better."

Louis Lorraine started up in his chair, then collapsed back slowly, his face molded into a mask.

"I don't think you'll have much luck," Blanton protested. "You see—" He stopped, listened intently. From the rear of the house, purling softly, came the cry of a quail. Bella Lorraine's silk dress rustled as she rose to her feet. She glided, rather than walked, through the door to an adjoining room. Again, the call sounded. Alice's hands crashed out a chord, and she began to sing.

"I thought I heard someone whistling," Stan remarked blandly. "Shall I see?" He started swiftly across the room to a door which led to the rear of the house.

"Wait!" Louis Lorraine jumped from his chair and seized Stan's arm, digging his fingers into the flesh. "If you please, it's probably one of my men—Ike Dolan. He whistles for our hired girl like that now and again."

"Oh," said Stan. "I'm sorry. I'd hate to interfere with a romance." He was looking over Louis Lorraine's shoulder into the adjoining room. Bella Lorraine, tall and patrician in her black silk gown, was standing at the window of the darkened room, peering through a crack in the shade. Clutched in both her thin white hands, which had plied the tatting needle so deftly, was a 12-gauge sawed-off shotgun.



THE BARN-LIKE lobby of the hotel was deserted when Stan descended the stairs shortly before daylight. The chromium plate of the Buick, parked in front, gleamed dully through a vaporish mist rolling in from swamp and lake. Thoughtfully, before getting in the car, he ran his fingers over the serried rows of shotgun shells neatly disposed along the front of his bandoleer jacket. The mechanism of his full choke Winchester pump gun click-clacked in well oiled softness as he threw open the breech to make sure it was empty before placing it carefully in the car.

Almost as an afterthought, he reached for two green shells in the side pocket of his coat, slipped one in the chamber, closed the gun, and slipped the other into the spring clip of the magazine. He was going duck hunting—but the two green shells were loaded with buck-shot.

A single light, made frosty by the early fog, shone from a downstairs window of the Lorraine house. Alice Lorraine, a slim Diana in khaki, was already waiting for him at the gate.

"Leave your car here," she advised softly, quieting the watchful gray dog with a gesture. She led Stan through the front yard to a door at the end of the house. A moment later he was seated at a table in the grateful warmth of an immaculate white kitchen.

A symphony of sizzling sausage played music in a pan. A toppling stack of russet blond hotcakes appeared from a steel warmer, bearing their burden of fresh country butter. Coffee of royal glint and tang cascaded from a white pot into a porcelain cup. There was cream and real Vermont maple syrup in abundance on the table. Miles Standish Rice moved bodily from Okeechobee to Elysium.

Alice served herself and sat down before him, watching with admiration, not

unmixed with concern. She knew hunger bit hard in the frost of dawn in the woods, and the reputation of Miles Standish Rice, the Hungry, had preceded his arrival.

"I promised I'd fix you breakfast," she reminded him with an amused smile.

"Breakfast? A word too profane for such delectable diet!" he assured her grinning. "Coffee in Okeechobee is, in most places, made by towing a coffee bean around the lake with a rowboat, and catching the resultant brew in a fish trap. Alice Lorraine, a man well fed salutes you! I think we'd better go before his gratitude runs away with his natural good behavior."

They were in the Buick before he brought up the happenings of the night before. "Your family's frightened," Stan remarked, "your stepmother particularly. Have you any idea about it all?"

"I have ideas, yes, but they're only ideas." She paused to direct him to a road, arched with dripping Spanish moss. It led to the left. He swung the car from the highway. "Father's made a terrific drive on cattle thieves," she continued. "Perhaps he's been threatened."

Stan slowly shook his head. "He'd tell you that, wouldn't he?"

"He might not, if the threats were against me, and mother. It's still hard for him to realize that I'm grown up, able to take care of myself."

"And the quail call?" Stan dexterously eased the Buick through a cramped space between two trees. "Why did you try to blot it out with the piano?"

"I didn't," she denied.

"No?" He turned his head from his driving long enough to open his blue eyes wide, and veil them as quickly. "After all," he said, a new note in his voice, "you drove to Miami to get me to come here. I'm expensive company. I eat a lot—and charge a lot—if I think someone's wasting my time."

"You started for the porch. . . ." She

almost whispered the words. Out of the corner of his eye, Stan saw the surge of color to her face.

"Then that call wasn't for the hired girl?"

"No," she snapped out heatedly, "and it wasn't for me, as you're about to say! You needn't get suspicious of my father and brother, either. Everybody around Okeechobee knows the quail call. Did you ever hear of Robert White?"

Stan pursed his lips into a whistle. "He's rather a legend, isn't he?"

"He wasn't a legend when my father was a boy," she went on vehemently. "My father was in the posse who shot it out with the Bob White gang of cattle thieves at La Belle thirty-five years ago. The call of the quail was the call of the Bob White gang—but not a man of the gang was left alive!"

"So their ghosts return," said Stan, speaking more to himself than to her, "and they're whistling around houses at night—throwing the cattlemen into terror—and the ghosts of the birds from whom the dead band got its name have returned. They're whistling around the woods, and bringing worse than terror—death!"

"Death!" she echoed, like the sigh of wind through pines. "To whom?"

"Dusky Smith. He was killed last night. Ran from his house in terror, and was found with his neck broken in the yard. He was first to bring news of the white covey, wasn't he?"

"Yes. The first."

"It strikes me as all too delightfully perfect, Miss Lorraine. A phantom gang and a phantom covey!"

The woods road turned into a lane, rail-fenced on one side, tree-walled on the other. Dawn filtered through the trees, lighting up a diamond-studded spider web on a large wire gate.

"There's no use turning in," she said. "Emperor's not more than a hundred yards inside the gate where I shot him."

Stan shut off the motor, climbed out of the car and stretched, swiftly scrutinizing the branches of neighboring

trees, dark against the sky. He held open the gate for Alice to pass through. He knew the carcass of the murdered Emperor would not be there for him to examine. Not a buzzard was in sight roosting in the trees.

Twenty-five feet to the left of the gate, a giant caterpillar tractor loomed large alongside the fence. "Whose tractor's that?" Stan asked sharply.

Alice Lorraine caught her breath. "It's father's!"

"How many steers have you missed altogether?"

"Three," she said quickly. "That doesn't sound like many, but they were valuable blooded stock, and now—the bull. Of course they haven't all disappeared at once. It's been during the last three or four months."

"Well, the bull's gone too," Stan assured her. "Someone used your father's tractor to haul it to the fence so it could be loaded on a wagon and carted away. Three steers and a bull may not be a lot of cattle, Miss Lorraine, but it's a hell of a lot of beef, even to a man with my appetite!"

They were in time for the early morning flight of ducks. Alice Lorraine proved herself a skillful shot from the cleverly concealed blind on a grassy point not far from the pasture where Emperor met his fate. They accounted for eight duck, two mallards, two blue teal and four English.

Stan drove her to the gate of the yard and let her out, leaving her the eight ducks and an earnest assurance that he would show up for dinner at seven o'clock to help eat them.

"How far are we from Bitter Swamp?" Stan asked, leaning through the window, as she turned at the gate to wave good-by.

She walked back to the car and placed a slim booted leg on the running board before she replied. "You're going there?" Enjoyment left her face, replaced by anxiety.

"Anson Carter was found near there, wasn't he?" Stan remarked. "After all,

I'm here on business—your business.”

“Go back a mile along the road we just came,” she directed. “That’s the closest you can get. You’ll have to leave your car there. Walk due east through the flatwoods. They’re about half a mile wide at that point. You’ll come out into a clear space full of high palmettoes. The edge of the swamp is just beyond—you can’t miss it.” Impulsively, she laid a hand on his arm, and added, “You’ll be careful, won’t you?”

“I’m always careful,” Stan declared, “sometimes I’m too careful.” As he watched her straight backed figure stride up the walk toward the house, there was more than a zest for man-hunting in the blueness of his eyes.



TAN stopped the Buick twice between the Lorraines’ house and his destination, shutting the motor off quickly to spend a moment in intent listening. A slight breeze, which temporarily dissipated the fog at daybreak, had died away. The woods around him were dripping, clothed again in the gray gauze of mist which showed no signs of lifting.

He wormed the Buick into a concealing thickness of underbrush twenty yards from the road, reloaded his pump gun with buckshot, then opened the locker of his car and strapped a leather-mounted compass on to his left wrist. Following its guidance, he strode off eastward, noiseless as a trailing cougar.

He stepped from the flatwoods into a strange freakish world where visibility alternated with blindness. The fog hung in pockets, forming small private rooms ten feet square, carpeted with waist high palmettoes, which scratched at his belt as he walked. As he emerged from a wall of gray blankness into one of the natural chambers, he was struck with an incongruous screen of foliage to his left that grew up above the palmettoes, thick and luxuriant, apparently without cause.

Doubling his caution, he approached

to investigate. Few men knew Florida and its natural eccentricities as well as Miles Standish Rice. The foliage proved to be trailing vines. They hung from a stunted tree which grew not straight, but at an angle so sharp its branches appeared through the fog to be only two feet from the ground.

Stan dropped flat and wriggled through the palmettoes until he could place an arm around the base of the tree. His first surmise was correct. He was gazing down into a funnel-shaped sink-hole. Fingers of fog, ethereal and unreal, reached down into it, touching the lush vegetation of its sloping sides.

Such sink-holes, some of them apparently bottomless, are found in many parts of the State. The limestone substrata of Florida is honeycombed with subterranean streams and rivers. Sometimes they change their courses, leaving only a thin roof on a vast underground cave. Eventually, the land caves in. Similar deep pores have been known to appear during the night and drain an entire lake before morning.

Stan shuddered, and edged away. Sink-holes had for him the malign fascination of a beautiful snake. He was about to get to his feet and resume his walk toward the swamp when a voice said, startlingly close by:

“Nothing this morning. Why?”

“Tain’t due ’til tomorrow,” another voice answered curtly, and added, “shut up.”

Stan eased himself into the shelter of thicker bushes, and waited, but there was no repetition. Vainly he tried to judge from where the voices had come. They sounded slightly to his right, but noise in fog was deceitful. Pushing his shotgun cautiously ahead, he started to work his way back to the shelter of the flatwoods.

Ten feet farther along he stiffened to attention, twisting his neck sharply to look above him. Briefer than a fleeting prayer, myriad wings fluttered overhead. They were gone with a parting sigh, but the single bird Stan glimpsed speeding

whitely through the fog had no place in the wild life of Florida. He began to understand why death was following the phantom covey.

Slipping wraith-like through the woods back to his car, Stan stepped into a clearing where the fog had thinned away. The slinky uncouth form of Joe Nulty swung cat-like to meet him. The cracker's right hand was hidden in the pocket of his coat, clutching a gun which bagged the garment out of shape. Shifty pupils flitted from Stan's face to the barrel of the shotgun held at Stan's side, its muzzle pointing unwaveringly toward Nulty's flat stomach.

"Hunting?" Nulty asked, shifting his gaze.

"Hunting," Stan repeated, without moving the shotgun.

"You can't find many birds hereabouts without a dog," said Joe.

"You can't?" Stan's eyes turned cold and opened to roundness. "I'm glad to know that, Mr. Nulty. It's contrary to everything I've been hearing about Okeechobee. Anyway, I'm finding plenty birds." He moved slowly away.

Back at the Buick, Stan grinned, remembering the disconcerted expression on Joe Nulty's ratty face. The meeting may have been a chance one, Stan was not sure, but there was no question the cracker's nerves were on edge. Like many others around Okeechobee, he walked the woods armed for immediate action.

Once back on the hard road, Stan turned the car west, away from Okeechobee. He flashed over the Warren Harding bridge across the Kissimmee river, and a few miles farther on, turned south on to a road of graded sand clay. He was penetrating into the very heart of the Everglades. Sawgrass stretched endlessly about him on both sides.

An hour passed before the sun peeped weakly through overhead. He was not more than eight miles from a tiny farming settlement called Venus when he brought the car to a stop. The road was narrow, scarcely wide enough for two

cars to pass. He pulled as far as possible to one side, then climbed out and stood looking around over the desolate country. A small creek, not over eight feet wide, ran under the road, winding away snail-like through the thick sawgrass.

Stan cupped both hands around his mouth and uttered a single throaty, guttural cry. Slowly, he counted ten, and repeated it. It echoed forlornly over the rippling grass and died away. He climbed back in the Buick and lit a cigarette, watching the diminutive canal through the windshield.

Fifteen minutes slipped by before Stan leaned from the window and uttered the cry a third time.

Silent as the Flying Dutchman, a slender, double-prowed rowboat of unusual design slipped from the concealing grass and beached its sharp prow on the mud by the bridge. The figure sitting amidships in the boat shipped a gleaming paddle and stepped lightly ashore.

He was old, stooped, and wizened as a monkey. Into a pair of incredibly filthy duck pants, he had tucked the skirt of a faded dress-like garment.

The top of the dress covering his bent shoulders and withered arms, was of multifarious colors. The faded skirt bulged from the rear of the pants, ludicrously akin to a fleeing shirt-tail. His seamed face was the color of a cocoanut shell, and bore about as much expression, but the beady eyes piercing the wrinkles stared unflinching at Stan in the shiny Buick.

There was nothing ludicrous about the old man's advance toward the car. He moved with the effortless glide of a wild thing. By the door, he stopped, staring unblinkingly inside. Stan grinned and poured out a greeting in the mixed gutturals of the Seminole Indian, interspersed with occasional words of English.

The minute lines of the old man's face straightened infinitesimally; then, regretting such a untoward display of emotion,

they settled back into the mask they had held for nearly a hundred years. The hand Stan shook was soft as that of a debutante, and so old it was nearly translucent.

"Tommy Chunk welcomes his great hunter friend." The old Seminole's voice was throaty, seeming to come from far away. "Got cigarettes?"

Stan opened the locker on the dash and produced two packages. They disappeared into the voluminous folds of the gown.

"Got smoke?" the old man asked.

"Yes," said Stan, "got smoke." He took the cigarette from his own lips and passed it to the Indian. Tommy Chunk inhaled deeply and returned it. The preliminaries were over. He was ready for business. He climbed in the car beside Stan and settled himself in the comfortable seat like an ancient crone resting her tired bones.

He was one of the remaining pure blood Seminoles of a fast disappearing race, which the whole power of the United States had failed to conquer. The woods and the wilds held no secrets from Tommy Chunk. Like the rest of his people, he trusted few white men, but Miles Standish Rice was his friend.

"White birds have brought death to a man in Okeechobee," Stan told him. "There's much talk of white quail—a covey of evil spirits. Last night the negro who saw them first was killed."

"The negro died of fear," said Tommy Chunk, "not of white birds. I know all birds, but none that can kill."

"Yet this morning," said Stan, "I heard them pass above me in the fog, and saw one. They're there, Tommy, birds which do not fly wild in Florida. I want one."

The Indian turned his ageless gaze on Stan. "You have no fear, and your gun speeds true, like the arrow of a chief. Why do you seek out Tommy Chunk?"

"Because," said Stan, "I seek the one man who possesses the skill of all hunt-

ers. There's danger there, Tommy Chunk, great danger—not from birds, but from men intent to kill. To save the lives of innocent people, I must have one of those birds. Alive and unharmed."

"My hunters of the air kill with the stroke of the lightning god."

"Later I will need them," Stan told him, "but first I must have your skill. The white birds fly swift and high near Bitter Swamp in Okeechobee. They fly at dusk and dawn. Can you lure one down, and trap him alive?"

"We waste words here," said Tommy Chunk, "about birds in Okeechobee."

The double prowed boat vanished again through the reeds, bearing Tommy Chunk back to his inaccessible camp where he lived from the wilderness, gardening and hunting. He was back in half an hour, carrying a primitive, securely made cage of thatched palm leaves.

The Indian spoke hardly at all on their drive back to the outskirts of town. He was still a savage, almost untouched by encroaching civilization. Accordingly, he lacked the white man's curiosity for attendant circumstances. He learned facts in his own way, not by questioning. If Miles Standish Rice wanted him to trap birds alive, that was the job in hand. Since his faith in this white man was unbounded, it was unnecessary to inquire into the motive.

Stan let him out at the place where his car had been concealed earlier in the morning. The Indian's equipment was simple. A few coils of black horsehair hung from his arm. He carried the palm leaf cage tenderly in his left hand. A battered .30-30 rifle pointed from the crook of his right arm. He was out of sight ten feet from the car, although the fog was almost entirely gone.

Tommy Chunk would never have walked out into a clearing to face Joe Nulty or anyone else, either in fog or clear weather. He was naturally unnoticeable in the woods as pine needles on the ground.



NOTICE of a long distance call awaited Stan at the hotel. He got the Miami operator, and a few minutes later was talking to Captain Vincent LeRoy of the Miami Homicide Squad.

"You wanted to know about crooks in the vicinity of Okeechobee," LeRoy crackled over the phone. "Well, so far as we know, Carl Asher makes his headquarters there."

"Description?"

"If we had that," said LeRoy tartly, "every police officer in the State wouldn't be looking for him. He has four bank jobs to his credit—from South Jacksonville down—and seven homicides to pretty things up. We know his methods, Stan, but we've never seen him. He's a stay-at-home. If you're planning on tangling with him single-handed, I'll send flowers!"

"Thanks, Vince." Stan replaced the receiver softly, and left the booth to find Louis Lorraine pacing up and down in the lobby of the hotel. The cattleman's jovial manner of the night before was missing entirely. An unaccountable coldness started in the pit of Stan's stomach and worked its way upward.

"Can you come to the house immediately?" Lorraine's question was void of either inflection or life. "Alice has disappeared," he added unnecessarily.

Stan glanced about the lobby. The elderly clerk behind the desk was engrossed in a magazine. "Go ahead," Stan told Lorraine. "I'll follow you out in about ten minutes."

He found Ike Dolan and Ted Barry, Lorraine's two cowhands, in the front yard when he arrived. Dolan quieted the dog, and said, "The boss's waiting for you in the house."

Bella Lorraine, looking slightly younger in white, was engaged with her interminable tating. Her husband was hunched in a chair beside the fire. Blanton sat on the piano bench, nervously picking out a tune with a single finger.

He stopped as Stan came in without knocking.

Waiving preliminaries, Stan asked, "Do those two men outside know your daughter's disappeared?"

Lorraine nodded mutely, and Blanton added, "They found her horse."

Stan disposed of his long form in a chair, lit a cigarette and half closed his eyes. "Where was it?" he asked.

"About a mile from the house, between here and the lake," said Lorraine, speaking with an effort. "A ride she sometimes takes. The horse was down with a broken leg."

"Are you jumping at conclusions?"

"She didn't come home for lunch," Lorraine went on, "and it's not a long walk from here. Ike saw where the horse went down, and where she landed. He thinks she was injured and crawled off the sand road. He couldn't find any marks in the flatwoods. The ground's hard there."

Stan's eyes closed entirely. The room became so silent that the sound of Bella Lorraine's tating was audible. Louis Lorraine stood it for three minutes, then exploded.

"Hell's fire, man, don't sleep! My daughter's disappeared! She's been kidnaped!" His teeth closed with a click.

Stan moved enough to push his wavy yellow hair up off his forehead and lock his hands in back of his head. "What did you expect?" He sounded somnolent. "Your daughter's a grown up woman. You've been acting like she was a child—like you were a child. And your son. You're the one who'd better wake up, Mr. Lorraine. Why didn't you tell your daughter that you'd been threatened? And that the threats were against her and your wife? You frightened her so by your strange conduct that she drove to Miami herself to employ me. You and your son have been acting like fools. I can't help you without the truth; neither can Sheriff Thatcher. Suppose you let me have it."

Louis Lorraine wiped his damp fore-

head with a handkerchief and stared into the fire.

"I've told him the same thing," Bella Lorraine said with surprising firmness. "You'll learn when you get older, Mr. Rice, not to judge people too harshly. This country breeds strange fear in men who have lived here as long as Louis. There are criminals of the woods as desperate, and more so, as any of the gunmen you encounter in Miami or elsewhere."

Stan opened his eyes and fixed them on Bella Lorraine's strong face. Under his gaze she smiled softly, revealing some of the strange charm which had attracted her husband to her.

"I'm ready to talk if my husband isn't. What do you want to know?"

"Bella!" Lorraine sprang to his feet. "The girl's in their hands."

"Exactly," said Stan. "You've waited a little too long, held back a little too much, in fear of a single man—Carl Asher!"

Lorraine's face grayed like the dying ashes in the hearth. "How much do you know?"

"Quite a lot," said Stan, "but not enough. The police of the entire State are hunting Asher, but he's elusive as swamp light—the last of the old-time bandits of the Jesse James school. It's hard to cope with such a man. He pays well for protection, and feeds hungry people in the backwoods. You don't know whom you can trust, nor exactly where to search, and unlike the gangs of the cities, he has no headquarters. He's struck four times in the past two years. Robbed four banks in small unprotected towns, and left seven men dead behind him. Am I right in saying you received a warning right after missing your first steer?"

"Yes," said Bella Lorraine. "You're right. For years, we've had rumors, vague and unfounded, that Carl Asher himself lived here in Okeechobee. It was a matter no one cared to discuss."

Stan sat up in the chair and flicked his cigarette into the fire. "You started

to go to the sheriff, Mr. Lorraine?"

"That's right."

"Who knew about the missing steer?"

"Ike Dolan and Ted Barry."

"You employ others?"

"Two hired girls in the house. I doubt if they know anything about it."

Stan left the chair and went to the front door, beckoning in Ike Dolan and his partner. Hats in hand, they stood awkwardly inside the door, uneasiness in every line.

"Did either of you fellows mention around Okeechobee that Mr. Lorraine's cattle were being stolen?"

"Now that's right hard to say," said Ike after a moment. "There's allus talk of such things around a town like this. I don't think we ever brought it up deliberate."

"Thanks," said Stan, "that's all." He closed the door behind the two men.

"Fools," said Blanton. "Of course, they blabbed it all over the place. They're the only ones who knew it."

"Except," Stan reminded him, "the men who stole the cattle. What about the quail call, Mr. Lorraine? Why were you so terrified over that?"

Bella Lorraine supplied the answer. "It was the call of the old Bob White gang years ago. Louis got a note warning him that if he reported the missing steers harm would come to Alice and me. It had a line in it: 'If you don't want to hear the call of the quail, you'll heed this warning'."

"I've heeded their warning," Lorraine broke in fiercely. "I've seen my steers go, seen my best bull killed, and told no one! Now they've taken my daughter"—his voice broke—"for no reason at all. I'm going to tear this damn country wide open until the last of them is dead!"

"They had a reason for taking your daughter," said Stan. "Unwittingly, I'm it. But you'll get nowhere tearing the country apart, Mr. Lorraine. That's the one thing Carl Asher's prepared for. You'll find they'll promise to return your daughter safely if nothing is said,

and I'm removed from Okeechobee. Of course, after I leave, they'll probably decide to hold her for ransom."

"But why should they strike at me on account of you?"

"Several reasons, Mr. Lorraine. After each bank robbery, Asher disperses his gang to different parts of the State, but before each robbery, they're assembled together again, and work out from a single point. They're near here right now, and you've been feeding them."

"Feeding them?" Blanton said heatedly.

"Yes, your steers."

"But the bull?"

"Was probably fierce," said Stan, "or was mistaken for a steer at night. It attacked. Your daughter found it the next morning with both legs broken, and shot it. Then Mr. Asher decided that in a pinch it would also serve as meat. They think you personally called me in. They want me removed, because Asher's afraid I know too much. He's about to strike again, Mr. Lorraine, and I intend to find out where and when. While I'm at it, if you won't fly off the handle, I'll get your daughter back safe. But you'd better wait. If we move too quickly, she may not get back at all."

"Wait?" Lorraine repeated miserably, "with Alice in the hands of a gang like that! How long?"

"Two or three days at the most," Stan said sympathetically. "I'm afraid it's our only chance."

"I won't do it," said Louis Lorraine.

"Yes, Louis," his wife told him firmly, "I think you'd better." She laid her tating on the table, stood up and drew herself erect. "The information you have, Mr. Rice, shows me that you know what you're doing. We'll wait. When Alice is safely home, Louis will give you a check for five thousand dollars. If anything happens to the girl through following your plans and not taking this matter up with the authorities, the responsibility is entirely yours. I'll kill you, Mr. Rice, as cold-bloodedly as I'd shoot a moccasin that had murdered someone I loved."



INGE THATCHER and Stan that afternoon visited the house of the chief deputy, Anson Carter. A white-faced woman, who had once been attractive, admitted them. She stood silent, plucking at her dress, watching Stan and the sheriff beside her husband's bed. The lean, hard deputy was still unconscious. Dr. Yale had told them before they left Okeechobee how slim Carter's chances really were.

Stan gently pulled down the covers and opened the shirt of Carter's pajamas. On the right side, just above the breast, traces of an ugly bruise were still visible. The deputy's right arm was in a plaster cast. "His arm?" Stan asked Mrs. Carter. "Was it bruised, too, like his chest?"

"Yes," she said uncomprehendingly, "someone must have hit him with a club. He's a good man, Sheriff. Why should he be hurt like this?"

"I mean to find out, Mrs. Carter," said Binge Thatcher, "I really do."

At five-thirty Stan checked out of the hotel. He stopped at Dad Davis's store for gas. The pasty Joe Nulty was inside. Evidently his evening visits were of regular occurrence.

"Not leavin', are you?" Nulty asked Stan with a wink at Dad Davis. "Thought you said you were finding plenty of birds when I met you in the woods this morning."

Stan answered with a rueful grin and a shake of his head. "The only thing I found was a phone call taking me back to Miami."

"There's plenty of ducks on the lake," said Nulty.

Stan bought a package of cigarettes, paid for the gas, and left, but he was far from being on his way to Miami. It took him four hours to circle the lake through Pahokey, Belle Glade, Moore Haven and Childs. It was half past ten when he entered Okeechobee from the other side and ran the Buick into a garage in back of the Lorraines' house.

The moon was on the wane, faint through watery clouds. He waited ten minutes after closing the garage door, then left the sand road and took to the woods.

Thirty minutes later, Tommy Chunk put a hand on his arm, and said, "Come. Got two."

For an hour he was hard put to keep up with the tireless black shadow moving forward just ahead. They circled the south end of Bitter Swamp, then plunged straight into it on the other side. They were right on top of a small fire glowing faintly on a dry knoll in the midst of cypress trees when the Indian said, "Camp here." Tommy Chunk was at home.

"This fire," Stan asked, "can't it be seen?"

"No smoke," said Tommy, "no man near. Trees thick. No man can see." He squatted down beside the embers, his wizened lips puckered, blowing the embers to flame. When the fire was going, Stan saw there were two palm leaf cages hanging from a near-by tree. Tommy left the fire, took one down and brought it back. Stan reached for the flashlight hanging from his belt, and directed the rays through the grass-barred top. Two pairs of beady eyes stared back at him, looking strangely wide and open.

"You never saw birds like these in the woods, did you, Tommy?"

"No woods bird." Tommy Chunk spat eloquently, expressing disgust. "Him pets. Fly round, come down eat always, same as you. Snare with horse-hair. You want?"

"To let them go again," said Stan, "and see if you're smart enough to tell me where they're headed. They're carrier pigeons!"

"Easier to watch forty men, than one," said Tommy, wrinkling his nose. "Easier to watch forty birds. Why let one go? Tommy knows where forty went. Down sink-hole."

Stan smiled at the fire. "That's what I thought," he said, "but when you tell me, Tommy, I know it's true. The next

one that comes to the sink-hole, I want more than any—dead or alive. Can you get him?"

"I can't get him," Tommy declared, "but Chief Halwuk get him. He fly. I no can do."

The night dragged interminably. Stan sat with his back against a cypress tree, fighting mosquitoes with cigarette smoke. Tommy Chunk stretched on the ground beside the fire and slept. He was up an hour before daylight.

With the facility and lightness of a water-bug, Tommy led the way straight through the center of the swamp. When he stopped, he cautioned silence with a gesture, and drew Stan down to the ground. The slanting tree marking the entrance to the sink-hole was not more than a hundred yards in front of them, dimly visible in the early light. For an hour they lay watching, Tommy's wrinkled hand on top of the larger of the two palm leaf cages.

The coming sunlight splashed big streaks across the east, but there was no sign of the eagerly awaited birds. Tommy Chunk stirred and raised a withered arm with pointing finger toward the sky. His lips were close to Stan's ear. "Bird come now," he said. "You want?"

Stan felt his heart pound unbearably. He nodded his head in dumb approval. From the pocket of his pants, Tommy produced a small leather sack. Cautiously he opened a crack in the larger of the two cages and deftly slipped a hand inside. Still Stan was unable to see anything in the sky. The Indian raised the lid and lifted out a sleek, powerful bird which clamped strong talons onto his brown wrist. Its head was concealed by the leather hood, but its lines were those of a fast destroyer.

He clucked softly, then with a quick motion, removed the leather hood from the bird's head and raised his arm. The peregrine took flight, piercing the branches overhead and growing smaller with the speed of chaff before a hurricane.

For the first time, Stan was able to discern the other spot in the sky which Tommy Chunk had seen long before. It was coming straight for them, growing larger second by second, in an un-deviating course. With the falcon almost lost to sight, the other bird wheeled, spurred aside by the only emotion which could turn it from its goal—fear. It dropped swiftly, taking shape, opened strong wings and sped in a new direction, soaring upward again. Its speed was terrific, but not quick enough.

Chief Halwuk, Tommy Chunk's hunter falcon, literally fell from the sky. Its eyes were the keenest in the world, its aim the truest. Plummet-like, it struck its white prey from above, killing at a stroke. They landed together, not fifty yards from where the two men lay. Tommy Chunk was already gone, belly flat, through the palmettoes, a lure in one hand, and clucking softly.

He was back in less than ten minutes, the hooded falcon on his wrist, the dead homing pigeon in his other hand. Wordlessly, he tendered the white bird to Stan.

Attached to its leg by a small ring was a tiny light capsule. Stan's fingers trembled as he separated the halves and spread out the tissue parchment rolled up within.

The message read:

The Bakers at nine on Thursday. One by two-one-nine to one-nine-two. One by one to one-six-seven, if dry. Two by one to three-naught if wet. One by one to one-six-two, and all together at two-nine.

He copied it with care in his notebook, then removed the carrying device from the leg of the dead pigeon. "A live one now," he whispered in Tommy's ear. The Indian took one of the captured birds from its cage. Stan attached the capsule to its leg, held the bird up with both hands, and released it.

It fluttered wildly for an instant, caught the air and went aloft. Twice it circled overhead, then flew off strongly eastward. Stan sighed. It was headed heaven knows where. Then he saw it

turn, swing in a giant arc, and double back. Almost over the slanting tree, it slowed, dropped down and disappeared.

"Where forty birds go, he go too," said Tommy softly. "What can do now?"

"Wait here until tomorrow morning," Stan told him, "and help me get a girl."

"Squaw eat more than hunter," said Tommy, "but I stay and help."



FROM the Lorraine house Stan called Binge Thatcher. A short time later he and the sheriff, together with Louis Lorraine and his son, were poring over a large road map of the State. It was spread open on the dining-room table. Stan's notebook lay beside it.

"It's a slim thing to go on," said Thatcher. "I'll have to turn out all the police in eight counties. Suppose you're wrong?"

"I'm not wrong," Stan's lids drooped.

"Let's go over the message again." He picked up a blue pencil and began to retrace marks already made on the map. "There's only one place this message fits. 'One by two-one-nine to one-nine-two.' Road two-one-nine will be taken by one of the cars, wet or dry. It will drive south from there to Indialantic Beach, across the bridge on to U. S. road one-nine-two."

"He's right, Sheriff," said Louis Lorraine, "that's clear as can be."

"Mebbe so." The sheriff squinted at the notebook. "But the next one says 'one by one to one-six-seven'. Sounds like they're all going that way, but singly."

"That's what it sounds like," said Stan, "but that isn't what it means. It means one car will follow U. S. road one down to Sebastian where it intersects with State Road one-six-seven. That car will turn west, and there go to Keenansville, if it is dry tomorrow morning. The road one-six-seven is almost impassable in wet weather. If it's wet, then two cars, which will sepa-

rate in dry weather at Sebastian, proceed together to Vero Beach. There they turn left on the hard road to Yeehaw. That's State Road thirty. Get it?"

The Lorraines nodded together. Binge Thatcher held his glance on the map. He was still noncommittal.

"A third car comes down U. S. road one," Stan continued. "It proceeds to St. Lucie, and turns off on State Road one-six-two. It will run out past the county farm, and turn south to the hard road from Fort Pierce, which will bring it into Okeechobee. The assembly place is on State Road twenty-nine, between Fort Drum and Okeechobee. That's five cars. We have to take care of them."

"I wouldn't be so worried," Thatcher declared, "if I was sure of the town. But the 'Bakers'—what do they mean by 'the Bakers' at nine'? It sounds to me like Baker County. I'll look pretty setting a trap all down the East Coast, and having a job pulled off in the northern part of the State."

Stan's humorous mouth twisted at the ends. He shoved his yellow hair up out of his eyes. "Lack of imagination, Binge, is a fatal thing. There's only one town in Florida that fits the roads described in that message. There's only one town in Florida that fits the word 'Bakers.' Every since I was a kid, Binge, I've seen that fat serving maid with a cap on her head carrying a tray with a steaming cup. Yes, Binge, I'm ready to risk my neck—with my reputation—on the fact that Carl Asher's gang is going to pull a job at nine o'clock tomorrow morning on the Bank of Cocoa!"

"O.K.," said Thatcher, decisively, "I'll spike it if I have to call out the militia, but, mister, if you're wrong. . . ."

Stan raised a hand. "Don't say it, Binge. Mr. Lorraine's delightful wife has promised to work on me with a sawed-off shotgun if I don't have her daughter back safely before daylight. You tend to the Asher gang and I'll tend to the girl. I'm more afraid of Mrs. Lorraine than all the sheriffs in Florida!"

STAN waited five long minutes, timed by the luminous hands of his wrist watch. Stubble was sticking into a tender portion of his stomach, tickling him with fierce intensity. Gratefully, he slid along the ground another ten feet, flattened himself, and strained his ears to listen. The slanting, deeper blackness of the tree marking the sink-hole loomed dimly ahead. Somewhere, to his right, without sound, form or void, Tommy Chunk was closing in, too.

The moon was not up yet, but bright starlight blackened the palmettoes around him. Louis Lorraine and Blanton were posted near the edge of Bitter Swamp. Escape for anyone through the flatwoods was impossible. Ike Dolan and Ted Barry were covering the edge of the pines with automatic shotguns. Two of Thatcher's deputies were with them. They formed a murderous quartette, angry as only the Southern woodsman can get angry, when someone strikes underhandedly against a woman.

Stan's muscles ached wearily from the three-hour vigil on the ground. Two forms, indistinguishable in the darkness, had been allowed to pass unmolested during that time. It was no part of Stan's plan to spoil the coup at the Bank of Cocoa which would wipe out Carl Asher's bandits once and for all.

Impatiently, he writhed forward again. With Alice Lorraine prisoner in the sink-hole hideout, concerted attack was impossible. Even tear gas was out of the question. He knew the guard on Alice Lorraine would be lowered to a minimum, with most of the members of the gang covering an escape from Cocoa in the morning. He believed further that the one guard left would be the man he wanted—Carl Asher. Captain LeRoy had said Asher never went out on a job himself, and one man could easily guard a helpless girl.

The tree was close at hand. Stan freed his .38 from the clip holster, and shoved it firmly in the front of his belt, closer to his hand. He circled the tree with both arms, inched over the edge of

the deep hole and hung for a moment, digging in with his feet. The side was unbelievably steep, almost straight up and down. Somewhere around the crater he knew there was an easier way of descent.

Groping blindly, he found roots, clung to them, and began to crawl around, just under the edge. It was hazardous, difficult work, in which a slip might send him helplessly crashing to the bottom. He gave soundless thanks that the ground was sandy, without slipping pebbles which might betray him.

It took him forty minutes before he found a place where he considered it safe to attempt to descend. Stretched out full length to get all possible purchase, he worked along downward, using both hands and feet. Bushes gave way to ferns, thick about him, damp and cool on his face.

It was darker than he expected, and he dared not turn to look up and judge his progress. Six feet farther along his outstretched hand touched wood. He felt in both directions. A crude boardwalk, not over a foot in width, appeared to circle the sink-hole, concealed by the thick ferns.

Roughly he estimated he was half-way down, if any sink-hole had a half way. He moved himself around clockwise, spreading his arms wide to avoid rolling. With his feet on the narrow boardwalk, he stood up. He could see the stars far above, supernaturally bright, like a vision from a well. Their light somehow failed to penetrate, stopping abruptly at the crater. Even the doubtful comfort of shadows was gone. Out of the stillness came a single sound, tinkling and monotonous; the drip of water far below.

Darkness was close by, rotting vegetation, thick, sweet and smothering to the nostrils. It paralyzed him for an instant, like fumes of a luxurious drug, fanning his natural caution to sleep. Without realization, he was standing in a cleared space, making a pillar of rigid substance, with his back to the sky above.

Soft as the purr of a kitten, something

moved the air below him, stirring it gently with an almost inaudible whir. The sound grew, blotting out the drip of the water. It was pleasant, rather hypnotic, such a sound as a small boy might make lashing at nothing with a supple switch.

Starlight caught on whirling objects of white, rotating swiftly as small wild birds seeking escape from a circular cage.

Wakened into a frenzy, Stan clutched at his gun. The circle widened and spread, speeding toward him like evil spirits riding the wind. Stan's .38 flashed, thudding a bullet into soft ground across the sink-hole. Lights danced before Stan's eyes with the force of the impact as the white things were all about him, tying him up, checking him, dragging him down.

He clutched for shrubs at his sides, but his arms were helpless, pinioned dead. Still struggling to disentangle himself, he dropped down and down, splashed in warm, limy water, and was pulled under with the clinging weights. He freed one arm, and treading desperately against the pain of a cracked bone, made the surface.

On the bank by the edge of the water something moved slightly. Stan reached for it wildly with his free arm. If he sank a second time he felt he could never make the surface again.

His arm encircled sinewy legs. A heavy boot cracked against his hurt shoulder, sending a stream of agony through his pinioned arm. Exerting himself to the maximum, he pushed his shoulder against the shins and heaved, but the force of the tackle carried him under.

Luckily, the water was shallow along the edge. His feet scraped on the bottom. He attempted to rise and turn, but from behind an arm, with the strength of giant pincers, closed about his throat, threatening summary strangulation.

With his free hand, he groped for the .38 and found it gone. Then his fingers

closed around a slim rawhide thong with a heavy round piece of metal, slightly larger than a billiard ball, attached to it. Through a haze he realized this new weapon was wound about his arm.

Two turns partially freed it. Consciousness was slipping away. He put all his strength into a last effort. Holding to the thong three feet above the ball, he swung the murderous weight back over his head. The grip on his throat loosened, and he slipped limply to the ground.

Another figure moved on the bank, but Stan was too far gone to care. He lay quietly, fighting for breath. A match flared, disclosing the wizened face of Tommy Chunk. Stan saw the limy white water around him had reddened.

"Me come down sink-hole too. You got him plenty," said Tommy. "Him some dead with busted head. Him Dad Davis."

"He's Dad Davis around Okeechobee, Tommy," Stan gasped, "outside of Okeechobee he's Carl Asher—the last of the old Bob Whites!"



LATING a duck without a wine is like a grape without a vine, or like a girl without a beau, or like a handle with no hoe!" Stan drained his glass of Chambertin, set it down on the table with a sigh, and wiped the remnants of his third duck from his grateful lips.

"If you reach for another mouthful of food before you talk," said Alice Lorraine, "I'll carve your wrist off."

"And me with a cracked shoulder!" Stan told her reproachfully, "and besides, without my diet, my superhuman strength would become puny! My doubly giant brain would wither, and you'd still be tied up next to that dove-cote in the bottom of the sink-hole!"

"And the Indian," said Alice maliciously, "I suppose he had nothing to do with it. You got him out of town quick enough!"

Stan poured himself another glass of wine. "He's an old man," he declared sadly, "and the excitement of a great city like Okeechobee was apt to prove too much for him."

"And you talk more, and say less, than any six men I know."

"I'm brighter than any six men you ever met, Miss Alice Lorraine, but if you insist on exposing my charlatanism to your family, here goes! It will give me a respite before I start on the pie. It's really most simple. Your father was losing steers. Cattle thieves in Florida would hardly steal earmarked, blooded stock unless they wanted them for one thing—food. Captain Vincent LeRoy of the Miami Homicide Squad told me Asher was thought to be around Okeechobee, but could never be located. Food without money to buy it, or the inclination to buy it, sounded like men were assembling around here for some purpose."

"But the birds?" Blanton asked.

"Sounded like carrier pigeons from the first. There were a lot on hand. That meant messages were coming in steadily from the outside. Obviously a job was being planned. It was difficult to feed the pigeons in the narrow confines of that limestone cave at the bottom of the sink-hole. They let 'em out every now and again to get some exercise. They'd probably been training them to return there for months, and nobody noticed them before the hunting season opened, and Dusky came in with his wild story which cost him his life."

"Why?" asked Louis Lorraine grimly.

"Too much talk was dangerous, with the planned bank job so close at hand, so the respectable Dad Davis conceived another swell idea to terrorize the countryside. A mixture of a phantom covey and the old Bob White quail call. The quail call frightened Dusky even more than it did you. He fled from his house out the back, straight into his death, which his wife saw, but could only describe as the birds flying about him. Then Dad Davis added his crowning

touch. Here it is. This is what got me in the sink-hole. For a time, I thought it was ghost birds myself."

Stan took from the wide pocket of his hunting coat a long piece of rawhide. Fastened firmly at each end was a round iron ball, painted white. Exactly between the two balls, a shorter piece of rawhide was fastened to the long one. Another white ball was attached to its end.

Spread out on the table, it formed a perfect T, except that the top part was twice as long as the bottom and a ball was attached to each of the three points.

Blanton picked it up curiously and hefted its weight. "I never saw anything like it in my life," he said. "What is it?"

"It's what gave Dad Davis away," Stan told him. "It's a *bolas*—the weapon of the old South American gauchos of mixed Spanish and Indian descent. The *bolas* is whirled rapidly around a man's head and thrown with remarkable accuracy. The balls spread out until they strike their prey—then wind with a killing force. Dad Davis painted these balls white, because no nigger who ever saw them flying through the air at night to bring down a steer would fail to connect it with the phantom covey. It occurred to me immediately when Alice mentioned the fact both of Emperor's front legs were broken. The *bolas* will do that, just as effectively as it broke the neck of Dusky Smith, and nearly killed Anson Carter."

"But Dad Davis?" Louis Lorraine remarked sadly. "How did you ever connect him with this?"

"Pampas grass," Stan explained, "hanging over the door of his store. He said you gave it to him."

"I did," said Lorraine. "I experimented with it—"

"That isn't the point, Mr. Lorraine. Where do you think it grows?"

"On the plains, of course," the cattle-man said, his face puzzled. "*Pampas* is the Spanish word for plains."

"Exactly." Stan sipped his wine.

"It's called pampas grass, and nearly everybody thinks it grows on the plains, except those who have lived in South America. Dad Davis told me it grew on the mountains and that's where it does grow. The instant he said that, he tied himself up with a *bolas*! I think that's all I can tell you, except that at first I was suspicious of one of your most valuable citizens—Joe Nulty. Everybody around here began to take on a partridge-like appearance until I realized that Dad Davis—or Carl Asher—was far too smart to ever have any man connected with him appear at his store." Stan grinned. "You were here when I worked out the meaning of the note which caused the capture of sixteen men this morning."

Louis Lorraine nodded. The table was silent as Stan attacked his pie.

"How did you know that message was coming in, Mr. Rice?" Bella Lorraine wanted to know.

"I got a break," Stan admitted, smiling. "I overheard two men talking in the fog yesterday morning about something being due today. I just put two and two together."

"It makes six to me," said Alice. "I understand about the Baker's Cocoa, but I still can't get it through my head how you figured out about those birds."

"I'll tell you," Stan said soberly, passing his pie plate back to Alice. "The same thing that enabled me to find out about those birds is going to bring me repeatedly back to Okeechobee—to eat more ducks cooked by your skillful hands. I make it my business to know about birds. Birds that swim and birds that fly, and birds you can eat, and birds you can't, and I thought when you told me your story in Miami that if white quail were flying around Okeechobee, I'd better get busy!

"You ask Captain Vincent LeRoy in Miami. He'll tell you I'd drive a thousand miles to see one new bird good to eat, let alone a covey! He'll tell you that down there they call me Miles Standish Rice, the Hungry!"

THE AMATEUR DETECTIVE

FIVE DOLLARS FOR EACH LETTER PUBLISHED!

EDITOR'S NOTE:—This page is made up of contributions from readers. We shall pay five dollars for every letter we publish. Letters may be about unsolved mysteries, crime-busting, angles on detective work, legal processes, anything you think might be of interest to the readers of BLACK MASK. Was there an interesting crime solved in your home town? How did the detective ferret out the criminal? Maybe you know of some unsolved crime; how would you solve it? What is your opinion of capital punishment; of the third degree; of the parole system; of various current famous cases? We're running this open forum for readers with some unusually interesting letters which have recently come in to us.

The opinions expressed in these letters do not necessarily concur with those held by the editors of Black Mask. No entries can be returned and we cannot enter into correspondence about them. This is important:

ALL CONTRIBUTIONS MUST BE ACCOMPANIED BY THIS COUPON:

THE AMATEUR DETECTIVE
Name:
Address:
Address to: The Amateur Detective, Black Mask, 515 Madison Ave., New York City

Mutilation of the Murdered

Dear Editor:

Murderers are mistaken when they think they can beat the rap by destroying or mutilating the bodies of their victims. Human remains have been found in furnace grates, chemical vats, lime troughs and in marshes where rotting vegetable matter attacks both flesh and bone.

More often, however, the newspaper headlines scream about a "torso murder" in which the fiend has amputated legs, arms and head and distributed the parts over a wide area to prevent identification. Such was the method used by the slayer of Mrs. Grayce Asquith in Quincy, Mass., on or about September 19, 1936. From two dismembered legs wrapped in burlap and washed ashore in Boston Harbor, detectives working under Lieutenant Lawrence J. Dunn of the Boston Police were able to make certain the identity of the victim.

Aided by medical authorities, the detectives reconstructed an accurate picture of the slain woman. They found that the legs were those of a young woman, that she was a brunette, that she had fastidious tastes. The feet revealed that she wore a size number three shoe with medium high heels, and that she did more walking than the average woman. This description matched that of the missing Quincy woman, and positive identification was made when a bare footprint found on the floor of Mrs. Asquith's home fitted exactly with the foot of one of the dismembered legs.

Although the head and torso remained to be found, the district attorney obtained a "John Doe" warrant to be served on the murderer when he was apprehended by the police. A material witness, the last person to have seen the victim, was held in default of \$50,000 bail. Later this same man was indicted, charged with assault with intent to kill.

In holding the defendant, the district attorney stated that the law does not require the police to produce the body before a case can be brought to court.

Respectfully,
D. E. Dutch.

"Old Man Lubin"

Dear Editor:

In 1914 there was brought to the Kenosha Hospital in Wisconsin a man who was completely paralyzed.

Until his death eighteen years later he was an inmate of that hospital, expenses for his care being paid by the city. During all this time he was bereft of speech, and so completely helpless he was unable to indicate in any way his name or from whence he had come.

He was known as "Old Man Lubin"—a result of mistaken identification by a soldier. Later, when the real Lubin was found, hospital attendants continued to call the mystery patient by this name. On the cross over his grave is the simple inscription:

Here lies Old Man Lubin.

Perhaps his real name is to remain forever a mystery. Yet there may be people who know who he actually was, but for reasons of their own have preferred to remain silent. Possibly some reader of BLACK MASK knows the real name of this man, and may be willing now to reveal it.

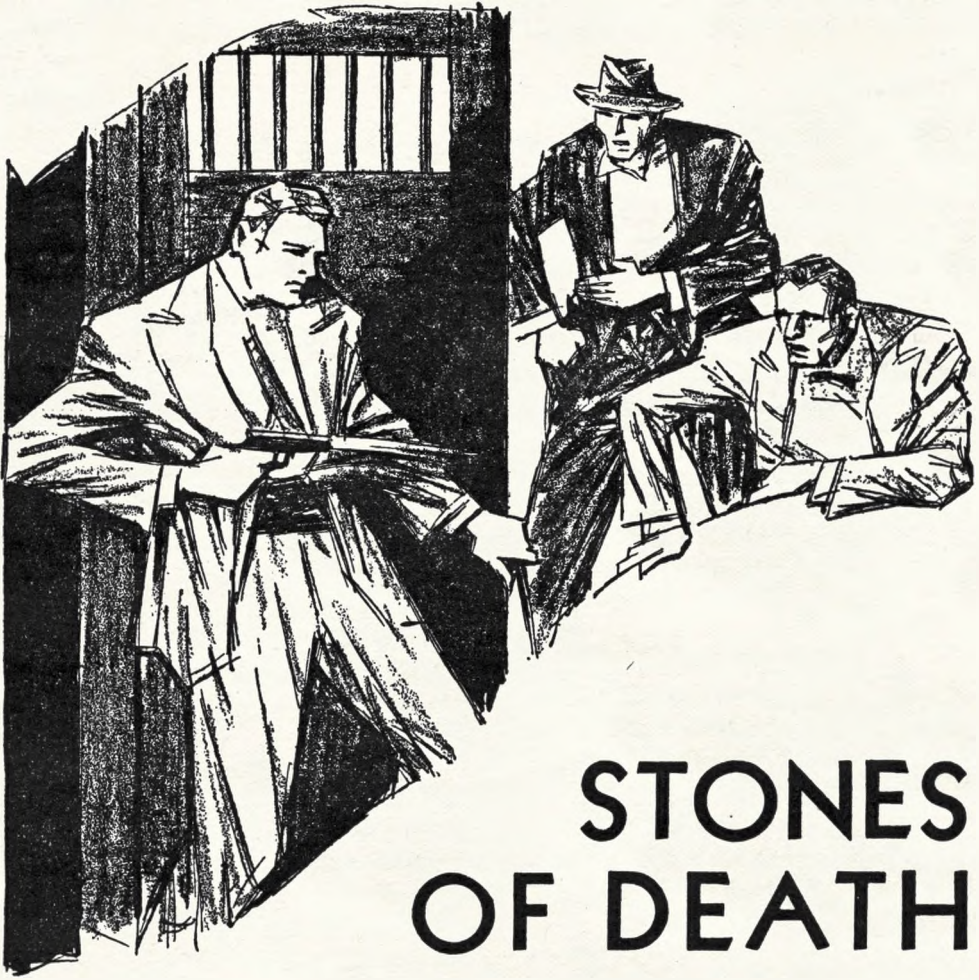
Yours very truly,
Wetherby Boorman.

Silence for the Kidnaper

Dear Editor:

To the murder of the Lindbergh baby, add that of little Charlie Mattson. Why don't we change our methods? Instead of letting the news become public and scaring the kidnaper from the ransom, why not hold the press and police in rigid check until the kidnaper collects the money and returns the victim? Then the blood money, more conspicuous than flagrant counterfeit, would blaze a trail to the kidnaper. This might save lives because even a kidnaper would rather have his money than a corpse.

Sincerely,
James A. Wallace.



STONES OF DEATH



I NOTICED the girl first. She was in blue, a powder shade with hat to match, and fair hair peeking out from under its edge. She was sitting on one of the stools before the spacious bar, a red leather and chromium pedestal, a throne for a goddess.

She looked like one to me. After six months in the bush any girl would have looked nice, but she was extra special.

She turned and looked directly at me as I came in. I thought she was probably Hollywood, south of the line for a week-end. She had class, and few

Americans in Lower California had class. Most of them were outcasts, hangers-on of the ragged edge of society.

The air in the bar tensed as I came in. This was foreign territory to me. The club belonged to Bob Hoyer. Since Caliente had closed, Hoyer's club was the biggest resort of its kind in *Baja California*.

I'd had trouble with him a year before and we weren't friends. In fact, we came pretty close to being enemies. *Baja's* like a small town; everyone on the peninsula more or less knows everyone else's business.

The bartender had had smallpox, and

Death was no novelty to a reckless
Border blade, but diamonds and
a lovely girl flayed
him to action



By W. T. BALLARD

someone had drawn a knife across his left eyebrow, so that the lid drooped, almost obscuring the pupil.

He gave me what he thought was a smile. "*Buenas noches, Don Tomaso.*"

I nodded curtly, never taking my eyes from the girl. She dropped her glance to the glass which she was turning with long, artist's fingers. "Good evening." I spoke in English—why, I don't know. Spanish was almost my mother tongue. I'd been born on the Border. My family had owned land in both countries, and I had spent at least half of my life in Mexico.

The depression, drouth, and poor cattle prices, had lost us our holdings

in the States. The new Mexican administration had confiscated our land below the line. I had some mining claims left, some hopes. Ask me why I stayed in *Baja California*—well, I like it there for one thing. There's something happening, something going on.

I ordered tequila. The bartender served me. "Yes, Don Tom."

The girl turned around. "Are you Tom Sherman? The one the peons call Don Tomaso?"

I stared my surprise. Then I made a little sweeping bow. The bartender was watching us. I looked directly at him and he moved away.

The bar was empty aside from us.

Although gambling is no longer open in Mexico, there are plenty of places. There were rooms at Hoyer's, too, club rooms behind closed doors.

I said, "You surprise me, *Señorita*. I did not know I was famous."

She made a tiny, impatient gesture with her hand. "One hears stories. Aren't you the local Robin Hood?" she said, and the way she said it wasn't flattering.

I grinned. "Hardly that. Remember, natives love to talk."

She said, "Maybe you're modest. Would you like to make a thousand dollars?"

My eyes got very narrow at that. A thousand dollars was a lot of money. I said, "What are you trying to hire—a murderer?"

Her teeth flashed. Then they were hidden by her lips, nice lips. "I might need one, at that."

I stared. I was getting interested. This girl was no actress from Hollywood. I couldn't place her, and it bothered me.

I said, "And what do I have to do to earn this thousand?"

She hesitated, playing with her drink. "Nothing."

"Nothing?" I was staring harder.

Her shoulders moved slightly. "I mean maybe it won't be necessary for you to do anything. Again, it may be necessary to do a lot. All you have to do is to be ready. I've got to have someone I can trust. Someone—"

I said, "You're taking a chance, sister."

She shook her head. "My name is—Smith, Mary Smith, and I've heard a lot about you. I'm not taking any chance."

My lips twisted. "You seem to trust me, Miss Mary Smith. Couldn't you have thought up a more original name?"

She flushed, then smiled. "If I had time I might."

I said, "There are a lot of Smiths here below the line, but skip it. It

would be the same if your name was Jones. What do you want done?"

She had been self-possessed. She got nervous now. "Really, I don't know. I'm not sure exactly what will happen. All you have to do is to be around tonight."

I shook my head. "Sorry. But I can't."

Her eyes widened, then narrowed. "But you said—"

"I didn't know that you wanted me tonight. I'm busy."

"But couldn't you?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. A friend of mine sent me a message to meet him here. He said he had a job for me."

She finished her drink. "It's none of my business, but what is he paying you?"

I grinned. "A hundred—dollars, not pesos."

She said steadily, "A thousand is a lot more than a hundred."

I nodded. "Ten times more. But you see other things enter into this. He saved my life once. I'm sorry, Miss Smith, but. . . ." My voice trailed off. "I'm afraid I can't help you tonight."

She spread her hands. "Well, that's that. You can't shoot a girl for trying. So nice to have known you." She slid from the stool and was gone, leaving me staring after her.

The bartender came toward me, dragging the spotted cloth along the dark, polished surface. "You know Miss Smith, yes?"

I said, "Pedro, I've known the Smiths all my life." I did not like his smile, his interest. I'd have questioned him about the girl had I dared, but I'd learned not to ask questions.

José Rameriz came through the door smiling. I had not seen him since he had returned from the south, had not heard of him, except for the note which had asked me to meet him here.

He wore white, a dark, handsome man, thirty-five, maybe older, but still

wiry, still with the litheness of a blade. He gave the room a searching glance, then moved directly toward me.

"Ah, Tomaso! You are prompt, *mí amigo*."

I smiled with my eyes only. "You mentioned a hundred dollars."

His white teeth flashed. "I heard things were not, as you say, so hot with you, since I have been in the City of Mexico. Well," he spread his hands with a typical gesture, "life, she is like that. Today we have, tomorrow we have not." He snapped his well manicured fingers. "A little brandy."

The bartender served him sullenly and José broke into sharp Spanish. I waited until the man was gone, then leaned forward.

"Just how am I supposed to earn this hundred that you spoke of in your note?"

He said, "A wise man asks no questions when fortune smiles. And you are a wise man, my friend, which is one reason I chose you. Another is that you are so trustworthy, and the gun, she make so slight a bulge beneath your coat."

My eyes narrowed. There were strange stories about this coffee-colored dandy, whispered guesses, and I had to be careful. The authorities didn't like me too well as it was.

I said, "I hate to go it blind."

José smiled. "I have something someone wants." His English was almost as good as mine. "Something someone will pay fifty thousand dollars for. If they do, instead of a hundred, I will pay you one thousand. It is your place to see that I am not—do you say—hi-jacked? Now, do you understand why I must have a man whom I can trust?"

I didn't understand a lot, but I had no chance to ask, for the bartender came forward and said to José in a low voice: "They expect you, *Señor*."

José rose. "O.K., Tom. Be ready. There might be trouble." He led the way toward one of the smaller rooms which opened to the right.



JOSÉ knocked on the heavy door, a voice called, and José pushed it open. I got a glimpse of the room across his shoulders. Three men about a single girl. I stared at her, stared my surprise. It was the girl who had spoken to me a few minutes before—Mary Smith. Her eyes widened when she saw me. Then they got very, very narrow. But I lost interest in her almost instantly and centered my attention on the three men. They too, were staring at me. It seemed I was an unwelcome guest.

Two of the men I knew and the hair at the back of my neck prickled. Spider Kelly was short, black, his features broad, Indian, his Irish blood submerged by the native strain. Hoyer was taller, lankier, a gambler known the full length of *Baja California*. He'd run a club in Tia Juana, in Mexicali, and was running this one in Ensenada.

His eyes, two lumps of blue ice, strayed across my face, as the three sat motionless, waiting, like hawks poised to strike. My coat was buttoned. I unbuttoned it, let it drop carelessly open to show the butt of the gun under my left arm-pit. Then I followed José into the room and closed the door.

They nodded to José briefly, sullenly. Spider Kelly's face worked, his thick lips drawing back from yellowed teeth. Then he muttered something under his breath in Spanish. Hoyer silenced him with a sharp look. The third man had not moved, but his hand was in his coat pocket, and I guessed that he was a smoke artist, that he was the one I had to watch.

Hoyer looked directly at me. "Where do you come into this, Sherman?"

My lips quirked. He'd tried to beat a native out of a mining claim six months before and I'd run him off, him and his rag-tail smuggler crew.

I said, "José is a friend of mine," and let it go at that.

No one spoke for almost a minute. The girl was a statue, not lifting her eyes to mine as we slid into our places. Kelly's voice was hoarse, guttural in English.

"Have you got them?"

José's teeth flashed whitely. "But of course, *Señor*. Otherwise, you think I would trust myself in such distinguished company?"

Sweat beaded Kelly's low forehead. His voice was a volcano of suppressed emotion. "Let's see them. Where are they?"

José laughed. "No, no, my friend. We move too fast. First the fifty thousand. Have you got heem?"

Hoyer broke in. "Certainly we have it. Show us the stones and you get the money."

José laughed again. "You are impatient. Better that you should take a lesson from my country—that there is a time for everything. It would not have been wise to bring the stones tonight. But they are safe, however."

Hoyer said, "You don't expect us to pay for them until we see them? You took a run-out on us once. Don't think we're going to give you a chance to do it again."

José said, "I have thought of that. I have brought my good friend, Don Tomaso, whom I trust as I trust no other man. Give heem the fifty thousand. He will stay here with *Señor* Kelly, this gentleman, and the so beautiful lady. You, Hoyer, come with me, and you shall have the stones."

Hoyer hesitated. José laughed. "Surely, it is not of me that you are afraid? Nor can you fear that Don Tomaso will escape your two men."

Hoyer said, "O.K." He pulled a long envelope from his pocket and tossed it across the table to me. José reached over, picked it up, and counted the bills.

"Correct." He handed it to me. "We go now. I leave my money—" He never finished the sentence, for the room door cracked open and a boy stood in the entrance.

A vivid scarlet scar started above his right cheek-bone and ran well up into his scalp. But it wasn't the scar which held my attention. It was the squat, black gun, ready in his right hand.

"O.K., you rats! Where are they?"

Everyone at the table was staring at him. It was José who moved. His brown hand snaked toward his coat pocket. But it never got there, for the boy's gun crashed, roaring out, and José collapsed across my knees. The lights went off as he fell. The bartender must have pulled the switch.

I had my gun in my hand, snapping shots toward the door, backing toward the rear entrance at the same moment. In the darkness someone collided with my shoulder.

I jammed the envelope of money into my coat pocket, reached out with my free hand and caught the girl's arm. She cried out as my fingers bit into the soft fabric of her sleeve.

I muttered, "Shut up." I was afraid of a shot, but none came.

The next moment I had the door open and we were through into the unpaved alley. She stumbled in the dust. Her heels were too high for easy running. I slid my left arm about her, steadying her as we came out on a dimly lighted street. The wind was blowing in from the ocean, bringing the rumbling of the surf.

I turned left sharply and we dodged through another alley, past a row of cheap cribs. The whole town seemed alive with people. That shot had really stirred things up, and I wanted to get as far away from the club as I could.

The girls, lounging in doorways, blowzily leaning from windows, yelled at us as we passed. There was a row of cheap saloons; stale whiskey, heavy on the night air. I expected trouble, but we were lucky. We covered three blocks before we paused for breath, then I looked at the girl. The blue hat was on one side of her head. She was short of breath, but still attractive.

I said, "Okay, sister. Where do you

want to go now? Over to the hotel?"

She shook her head. "I'm afraid to. Isn't there some place—some place where I can hide?"

I looked at her sharply. "Hide? From what?"

She said, "I can't go back to the hotel. I can't go back to the club."

I shrugged. "I don't know where else you'll go. After all, this is no metropolis. Where did you come from?"

"Mexico City."

I stared at her. José had just returned from Mexico City—and José was dead.

"If you're smart," I told her, "you'll try to get north across the line. Every one of us, everyone that was in that club tonight, is in a tough spot. The cops are going to ask questions, and if you think Mexican cops can't be hard, just try them out some time. Believe me, I know."

She said, "I didn't know you were on the other side."

I said, "What side?"

She didn't answer. Instead, she said, "I've got to trust you. At least, you're an American."

"Hoyer is an American," I reminded her, "although he's a pretty lousy specimen. You were with him. Why come to me?"

Her eyes seemed to flash in the uncertain light. "And I thought you were Tom Sherman—Don Tomaso, who wasn't afraid of man nor devil. I've been hearing about you ever since I've been in Mexico, and when I find you, you croak about the police."

I was getting sore. I said, "Come on, then. I've got a one-room shack out at the edge of town. The accommodations are lousy and the cops will probably get there before we do, but if you keep your trap shut and let me do the talking we may come through."

She said nothing as I turned and led her down the back street. I'll admit I was curious. She wasn't the type of girl that you usually find along the Border. At least, she didn't seem to be.

And yet, she'd been with Hoyer. She was mixed up in this, and I wanted to find out about the stones. José had been a pretty good friend of mine. But more than that, he'd hired me to protect him, and he was dead.

I had questions I wanted to ask. The cops wouldn't do anything about José's death unless it suited them, but I meant to. We walked for ten minutes. Then I turned into my shack, lit the lamp, and jerked my head toward the blanket-covered bunk.

"Here we are. I told you it wasn't the Ritz."

She looked around inquisitively, then pulled off her hat and laid it on the shelf. "Well, here we are."

I didn't say anything. There didn't seem to be anything to say. It was chilly in the square room. I walked across to the box stove, stuffed some papers into it, added a couple of chunks of mesquite, and stuck in a match. I helped myself to a drink of tequila from the bottle on the shelf. I didn't ask her if she wanted one, and she didn't raise her eyes from the stone floor.

Then she looked up. "Whose side are you on, Don Tom?"

I looked at her. "Side? I'm not on anyone's side. What are you talking about?"

She said, "I offered to hire you earlier this evening. That offer holds good. Are you interested?"

I appeared to hesitate. "But I've got to know what's going on. What do you want?"

She said, "I want the diamonds."

"What diamonds?" I stopped as there was noise from outside and someone pounded on the door.

The girl gave a startled look. I loosened the gun in my shoulder holster, called, "Come in."

The door pushed inward. I saw a couple of slovenly soldiers, the bartender from the club, and Rubio, the mayor.

I stepped forward, letting go of the gun. "Ah, Colonel! This is a pleasure."



COLONEL RUBIO was a stiff little man with waxed mustachios. He wasn't local. He came from Mexico City, sent in by the new administration. He clicked his shiny boots and bowed, his waist stiff.

"One hardly expected to find you home, Don Tomaso."

I raised my brows. "And why shouldn't I be home, Colonel *mío*?" I was laughing at him and he knew it.

Color swept into his darkly sallow cheeks. His voice was harsh. "Perhaps it would surprise you to learn that the rascal José Rameriz was shot, not fifteen minutes ago."

I said, "Why should it surprise me? I happened to be there."

He hadn't expected that. He hadn't expected me to admit being in the club, and for a moment he was at a loss for words. Then he swung around to the girl.

"And you, *Señorita*. You admit being present, also?"

His English was good, but stiff, stilted. She raised her eyes to look at him, and, watching her, a hint of admiration chased through me. She was cool, unhurried.

She nodded, said quietly, "I was there."

The colonel swung back to me. "Then maybe you can tell me who the murderer was?"

I shrugged. "I'm sorry, Colonel. But I never saw him before."

Rubio's mustachios bristled. He was like a game-cock ready for the pit. He said, "Careful, Don Tomaso. For a long time you have strained our patience, but there is an end to all things. The murderer was a *gringo*—that much we know."

I said, lazily, "There are a hundred million countrymen of mine north of the line. Surely, I'm not supposed to know all of them?"

He shouted, "You evade! You were

with José when he was killed. At least, you know why he was there."

I shrugged. "As it happens, I don't. I was having a drink when he came in. I hadn't seen him since he returned from the south. Then we were invited to join Hoyer and some friends in a private dining-room. We were all about to have a drink when the door burst open and this boy appeared with a gun. That's all I know."

Rubio's mustachios continued to bristle. "Since when have you been on drinking terms with *Señor Hoyer*?"

I said, "Since this evening. One can't carry on a feud forever."

He knew that I lied. He knew it and wanted to find out why, but he was damn sure I wouldn't tell him. He proceeded to give the cabin the once-over. I looked toward the girl, but she was watching Rubio.

I said, "There's a woodbox outside. Perhaps the murderer is hiding in that."

Rubio paid no attention. He looked toward the bartender and said something under his breath. The man nodded.

"*Si! Si!*" He was excited.

Rubio's eyes glinted with satisfaction. "José had money, a very large sum of money, and as representative for the government, I demand you turn it over to me."

For the barest fraction of a second I hesitated, then I smiled.

"Are you certain José had money?"

The colonel nodded. "I know he did. Pedro, here, saw it in an envelope—a huge sum."

I looked squarely at the bartender and his black eyes shifted, refused to meet mine.

I said, "Pedro is in error. Any money that he may have seen did not belong to José."

Rubio's eyes flashed. Anger seemed to choke him, make speech difficult.

"Three minutes, Don Tomaso. I give you three minutes to produce that money."

I said, "You can give me three hours

and I still wouldn't produce it." I put my hand on my gun. This was the showdown and I knew it. If I backed down I'd have to get out of the country and I had too many irons in the fire to want to leave. I felt it was my country. I liked the people, but I can't say as much for the officials. They were too much like officials in other places I've known.

We stood eying each other. The colonel knew me. He knew that I would shoot and he didn't like the idea. He started to back down. He started to mutter threats. He started to pick on the girl.

I said, "She's a friend of mine—an old friend." I lied, but I couldn't see myself turning her over to him. After all, she was an American.

They went finally, Rubio still muttering threats. He'd be back in the morning. He'd see that I left the country or he'd have me in jail. I shut the door and looked at the girl. She drew a long breath, giving me a faint smile.

"That was easy."

I shook my head. "Don't be fooled, sister. It was too easy. Rubio can smell a dollar further than any other man I know. He went, but one will get you five that he's still watching the house. We're in Mexico, and the colonel is the big boss. Don't kid yourself. If it suited him he'd have a firing squad out tomorrow morning. The only reason I got away with it was because he couldn't imagine anyone being dumb enough to carry fifty thousand dollars around in his pocket. He thinks I've planted it somewhere. He's waiting for me to lead him to it. He—" I stopped, for her eyes had changed, and I realized I'd made a mistake.

She said, "Oh! You do have the fifty thousand?"

I shrugged. "You didn't expect me to leave it on the table? After all, with José dead it's as much mine as anyone's. He had no heirs."

She said, "But it wasn't José's. It was given to him in exchange for some

diamonds. He didn't deliver, so you'd better return it to me."

I stared at her. "Return it to you! Just where do you come into this?"

She flushed. "Those stones belong to me. If you turn them over you can keep the fifty thousand."

"If I turn them over?"

She said angrily, "Don't stall, Don Tom. Don't think I'm a complete fool. You were with José. If you don't know where they are no one knows."

I moved my shoulders. "Then I'm afraid no one knows. I never even heard of the diamonds until we came into that room."

I could tell by her eyes she didn't believe me. I expected something, but I didn't expect the little gun which she suddenly produced from beneath her suit coat. It was a pearl-handled affair, expensive, but very small. She held it as if she were afraid of it. Her mouth was a desperate line.

"I don't want to have to shoot you."

I said, "I'm not particularly crazy about the idea myself. But if you must, better use my gun. That one would never do the job." My hand strayed toward the front of my coat.

She said, "Stop it!"

I could see her knuckles whiten where she gripped the gun. I knew suddenly that she would shoot. I let my hand fall to my side.

"Really, Miss Mary Smith, I haven't got the diamonds."

She still didn't believe me, but she couldn't bring herself to shoot, not unless I were reaching for my gun. Her voice sounded as if her throat were very dry.

She said, "Where's the fifty thousand?"

"It's in my pocket," I told her.

She watched me cautiously. "Bring it out—slowly."

I obeyed, drawing the crumpled envelope into sight. "Here." I stepped toward her. I was holding the envelope upside down with one thumb on the flap. I let the flap go and the bills

showered out, floating down to a scattered pile at her feet.

For an instant her eyes were off my face, on the scattered money that carpeted the dirty stone floor. In that instant, my hand closed on her wrist, twisted it sidewise, downward, so that the gun was useless.

Then I let my hand slide down until my fingers gripped the cool metal of the gun. I twisted sharply. She cried out as I wrenched the weapon from her grasp, clawing at my arm, trying to get the gun away from me, but I pushed her away.

She went backward to land on the narrow bunk. She landed hard. She bounced up, came toward me across the room. I pushed her back again.

"Behave."

This time she stayed where she was, her eyes sparkling with anger. I dropped her gun into my coat pocket, stooped and gathered up the bills. I straightened them, returned them to the envelope, opened my shirt, and slid it into my money belt.

I said, "O.K., sister. It's time for you to talk. Suppose you start spilling things. Who belongs to the diamonds you're looking for, and who really kicked through with this fifty grand?"

Her lips were stubborn, compressed. I looked at her, shrugged, and turned away. I was almost to the stove when I heard the door open. I spun, my hand leaping toward my shoulder holster, but I was too late.



SPIDER KELLY was standing in the opening, his animal-like face twisted into an ugly grimace. He came into the room stiff-legged, the big gun held loosely in his short-fingered hand, his smoky eyes flickering momentarily as he saw the girl.

There was a man at his heels, the third man who had been at the club. He also had a gun. He came through,

shutting the door, leaning his back against it, his eyes watchful, moving across the girl to me.

Kelly said, "Get 'em up, *Gringo!*" And I raised my hands, shoulder high, palms out. Kelly walked around me, got my gun from the shoulder holster, the girl's from my coat pocket. Not until he backed away did he speak to her. "So. You tried to cross us!"

She said, "You're wrong, Spider. I wasn't trying to cross you. I had to get away and I didn't know where else to go."

He hardly believed her, but he wasn't sure. His mind worked slowly. He said, "Who got the money?"

For a moment she hesitated, as if trying to decide, then she pointed to me. Kelly swung back. His black brows made a line across the bridge of his short nose.

"All right, *Gringo*. Where is it?"

I said, "In my money belt. I'll get it if you'll let me put my hand down."

He nodded. "Use your left and be careful."

I was careful. I pulled the envelope from the worn leather and tossed it to the floor at his feet. He stooped, caught it up, opened it, and riffled the crisp bills with a dirty thumb. Then with a sigh of satisfaction, he tucked it into his pocket.

"All right. Now where are the stones?"

I shrugged. "You got it wrong, Spider. I don't know anything about them."

His face darkened. "You'd better know. You were the only one José trusted."

I said, steadily, "He didn't trust me that much. I don't know where they are."

Without warning he stepped forward and slapped me hard across the mouth, bruising my lips. Anger ran through me, but I held myself.

He grinned. "How you like, *Gringo?*" Then the grin disappeared. "You know, Don Tomaso, they say you are hard.

Well, Spider wants to find out how hard you are."

A chill crept up my spine. I knew this man. He'd been a smuggler, a *bandido* all his life. At one time he had operated a boat bringing Chinamen across the gulf. He was absolutely cold, absolutely fearless. I didn't need anyone to tell me he was a past master at torture.

"I shook my head. "You're a smart man, Spider. You should be smart enough to know that I'm telling the truth. José didn't trust me. I never heard about the stones until we were in that saloon."

He did not appear to hear. With a sudden springing step he was at my side, his beefy arm locked about my waist, his short leg outstretched. With a heaving motion of his shoulder, he sent me down.

I landed on the stone floor—hard. The fall knocked the breath out of me. I groaned and tried to sit up, but Spider had a knee on my chest, pinning me down.

The man at the door moved in, so that his gun covered me. Kelly reached out, caught the first and second fingers of my left hand and spread them, twisting as he did so. I groaned and the girl bounced off the bunk.

"No, Kelly! No!"

He snarled at her. "Keep out of this, my little one. Hoyer isn't here to listen to your cries." He spat onto the floor beside my head.

The girl caught his shoulder, tried to pull him back. The man with the gun reached out a hand, locked it about her arm and jerked her away, sent her spinning toward the door. "I'm not so sure you didn't try to cross us."

I had a look at her face, at her staring, unbelieving eyes. Then she jerked the door open and jumped outside. The man with the gun swore and started after her. Kelly paid no attention. His face was close to my own. "One last chance, Don Tomaso. Where are the diamonds?"

I shook my head. I couldn't speak. Sweat beaded my forehead and my shirt was damp, sticky against my shoulders. I tried desperately to roll over, failed. He was prying again at my hand. Another moment and the bones would snap. I knew vaguely that the other man had not left the shack. He had turned and was coming back. I could see him through a red haze.

Then there was a slam as the door crashed inward, an oath from the man with the gun, a startled grunt from Spider as he twisted around, upward, clawing at his pocket.

A gun roared in the narrow confines, deafeningly, another and still another. Subconsciously I reached out and grabbed Spider's legs, bringing him down on top of me.

Men were shouting, yelling. Smoke eddied up. Then everything was strangely still, and the little colonel was standing over me.

"Ah, Don Tomaso! It seems we arrive in time."

I struggled to rise. Not until I was up did I realize that Kelly was dead, that I had had no need to pull him down, that he'd been falling.

The man with the gun lay beside the wall, one little soldier bending over him. The other stood just inside the door, a carbine still gripped in his grimy hands.

Rubio chuckled, white teeth gleaming in his dark face. He flicked an imaginary speck of dirt from his tailored sleeve, and touched Kelly with the toe of his polished boot.

"For years they chase him. For years they call him the pirate of the gulf. But when Rubio comes, he dies."

The colonel was very pleased with himself, but I did not smile. I stood there nursing my injured hand, hoping that there were no bones broken, that the fingers were only strained.

"I never thought that the time would come, Colonel *mio*, that I would be glad to see you, but I couldn't have been gladder if you'd been the United States Army."

He clicked his heels and gave me a little mock bow. "We begin to understand each other, Don Tomaso." He stooped, went through Kelly's pockets, found the envelope of money, and straightened with a grunt of satisfaction. "Ah! So you had it, after all!"

I didn't speak. It wasn't necessary. He had the money and no power short of a revolution could free it from his fingers.

His eyes were almost bird-like as they rested on my face. His voice was solicitous.

"That hand. A doctor should look at it. I insist, *Señor*. A doctor should look at it. You will report to the barracks, at once."

I stared at him directly. "Does that mean that I'm under arrest?"

He spread his hands. "But why should I arrest you? Have not you returned fifty thousand dollars? You are my friend, Don Tomaso."

I doubted that. I doubted if he were anyone's friend. And watching him I wondered if he knew about the diamonds. But his face was unreadable as he ordered the soldiers to clear the shack. I got my hat, helped myself to my gun, examined it and shoved it into my shoulder holster. The girl's I dropped into my pocket. I didn't know where she had fled. Then I turned and walked rapidly toward the center of town.



IT WAS still early. Families clustered in small baked yards before mud houses. I reached the business district, turned left and walked down toward the fort. A soldier blocked my passage, the gun which he held at port was bigger than he was. I spoke to him in Spanish. He grinned and allowed me to pass.

There was a button off the doctor's uniform. He was a fleshy man and his chest bulged, or maybe it wasn't his

chest. The bulge was a little low. He examined my hand, making sounds like a hen reproving her chicks.

"Ah, *Señor*. Perhaps you catch heem in a wringer?"

I said, "Perhaps I did."

His brown eyes, soft marbles in a sun-seamed face, stared at me, and his remaining teeth showed. "And what happened to the wringer?"

I said, "It's dead. It asked too many questions."

The doctor grunted and went about his work, which seemed to consist chiefly of binding my hand with tape. When he got through it was a shapeless mass of bandages. I surveyed it with distaste.

"It looks worse than an amputation."

The doctor sighed. "People are so healthy here. It is boring, *Señor*. Let me have my little fun."

I grunted and walked out. I was surprised when the sentry let me pass.

I didn't know what to do then. I walked down the beach to the hotel and took a turn at the wheel. There was a cruise boat in and the rooms were pretty well filled, noisy. People from Seattle, Frisco and Los Angeles, Americans having a large time for one evening.

The dealer winked at me as I took my place at the table. I placed two bets, then I thought of something. If the girl was really afraid, if she really wanted to get out of the country, why didn't she take the cruise boat out? It would sail at two thirty. I glanced at my watch. It was almost eleven.

I turned and left the gambling room, paused in the bar for a quick drink, then went up the four steps and across the lobby toward the entrance.

A mining man in laced boots, his breeches still stained with adobe, nodded to me, and motioned toward the bar, but I shook my head and went on outside. At the entrance I was surrounded by cabmen, peons in cotton trousers and shirts. I chose one with an old Dodge and we boiled down the road, back toward town, past the pier entrance, and drew

to a shuddering stop at the main intersection. I flipped him a *peso*, walked a block, turned down an alley, and went in through a side door of the club.

There was nothing else like it in *Baja*, not in the whole length of the peninsula. That is, not since Caliente has been closed. I went in through the side door, up a flight of blue tile steps. The tiles had come from England. I went along a hall, paused at the check room to leave my hat, conscious that the girl was staring at the enormous bandage on my hand. I grinned at her, got a smile in return, and went on through an arched door into the deserted dining-room.

A second door opened to the right into the patio. Tables set on tiers of raised steps surrounded the square tiled center. A string orchestra was playing, a girl in native costume swaying to the music.

The head waiter came toward me but I motioned him away. Mary Smith was nowhere in sight. I crossed one corner of the patio, went down the long corridor and into one of the small gambling rooms. Here, too, were people from the cruise ship, people from Hollywood, from San Diego, who had driven down the sixty miles of twisting road which led from the border.

Some of them stared at me curiously and I stared back. Four years below the line had given me a feeling of detachment, of nervous alertness to my surroundings. There were other people in the room besides tourists, officials, local dandies, and a sprinkling of Americans. But these latter Americans differed from the tourists. They were men of the Border, men without a country, fugitives.

A lot of them dared not cross the line. The law was waiting for them on the other side. I knew them all by sight, most of them to speak to. One doesn't spend four years in *Baja* without knowing them. But tonight there were no nods of recognition, no smiles of greeting. They had always resented

me. I'd been something of a lone wolf, keeping my affairs to myself. Tonight I was absolutely alone. At least two of them pointedly turned their backs. The rest were careful to look in the opposite direction. News travels on the very air of *Baja*.

I paid no attention. The bandage was working loose from my wrist. I stuck the tape back as best I could, then I walked directly across the room toward a door of Hoyer's office.

There was a Mexican in a blue suit beside the door. He took a step to block my passage and I stared at him coolly.

"I want to see Hoyer."

His face was impassive. "He's not in, Don Tom."

I knew that the man was lying. I said, "When will he be here?" and started to turn away.

"He won't be in tonight."

I simulated surprise. "He won't? Do you know where—" I took a quick step past him before he realized what I was doing. My good hand closed on the door knob, turned it, pushed the door inward. My bandaged one stuck out stiffly, hitting the guard's chest, stopping him as he tried to get between me and the door.

Hoyer was standing at the far side of the room. He pivoted at the sound we made, surprise lighting his sallow face.

"Sherman!"

I nodded. "Your guard made a mistake. He told me you weren't in."

The guard was still tugging at my shoulder, trying to pull me away from the door. Hoyer stopped him with a motion of his hand.

"Come in, Don Tom."

I shut the door in the guard's face and walked slowly across the room. Hoyer was watching me carefully, his eyes very narrow, alert. His lips smiled, but the rest of the face didn't join in the expression.

"What do you want?"

I said, "I suppose you know that Spider Kelly is dead?"

He nodded. "Spider was a useful man in his way."

There was no feeling in his voice, no emotion of any kind.

I grinned sourly. "His ways are pretty rough." I indicated my bandaged hand. "Where's the girl, Hoyer?"

"What girl?" Still his expression hadn't changed.

I said, "Don't stall. You know what girl I mean. The one that was with you tonight, the one that went out to my shack tonight."

Hoyer shook his head. He seemed to be thinking it over.

"She didn't show up here."

I couldn't tell whether or not he was lying. Some of my impatience showed in my tone. "Didn't show up? She must have shown up—she must have come here. Where is she? What would happen to her?"

Hoyer's shrug was elaborate. "Ensenada is a bad town for little girls to be running around in. A lot of things might have happened to her."

"But nothing did." I let my free hand slide inside my coat. "Let's stop playing games, Hoyer. I came over to see the girl and I'm going to see her. It's up to you whether you're around when I see her or not."

His eyes were on my hand. The tip of his tongue touched his lips. It was the only sign of nervousness.

He said, "Don't be a school boy, Sherman. I know you're good with that gun. But you can't get away with killing me."

I was bluffing. I said, "Oh, I don't know. Colonel Rubio and I came to a little understanding tonight. I might be able to get away with a lot of things. Where's the girl?"

Hoyer's manner changed suddenly. He came over and sat down at his desk. "What do you want with her, Sherman?"

I didn't tell him I'd gone soft-hearted. I didn't tell him I intended to send her north on the cruise boat. He wouldn't understand. If ever a man

was cold-blooded, Hoyer was. Money was the only god he worshiped; or was it? Maybe he wanted her.

I said, "Maybe I want some information. Maybe I want to ask her about those diamonds."

He started at that, stared at me. "Didn't Rubio get those diamonds?"

I shrugged. "He may have, at that. I didn't ask him."

Hoyer was getting excited. "Didn't he get them from you?"

I shook my head. "I suppose you still wouldn't believe it, but I don't know where they are. I haven't known where they were from the beginning."

His face got crafty. "Then what did you want to talk to the girl about?"

I said, "About the diamonds. Maybe I'd like to find out where they are, too."

He sat silent, staring at nothing, his gambler's fingers arching up to meet the tip of the fingers of his other hand. After a moment he came to a sudden decision and punched a bell on the side of his desk. I heard no sound, but the door opened and the guard came in.

Hoyer said, "Bring that girl in here, Ramón."

The guard disappeared, to reappear several minutes later through the rear door of the office, pushing her before him.

She stared at me in surprise, almost as one might stare at a ghost.

"They—they didn't kill you?"

I said, "I'm sorry, but they didn't. Rubio got there in time. Nice friends you have."

She looked at Hoyer. He said, "Don Tomaso was worried about you. He wanted to ask about those diamonds." There was a little smile about his tight lips.

The girl stared at him. After a moment she understood. It wasn't so hard to understand, at that. I got it too. Hoyer was suggesting that she work me over, that she pump me for any information that I might have. He must have thought I was dumb. He

made it pretty obvious. He glanced at his watch, then said, carelessly:

"I've got to see the manager. I'll be back in a few minutes." He put the watch back in his pocket and followed the guard to the door.



MARY SMITH and I looked at each other in silence. She was very attractive, too attractive, almost. Or maybe it was the four years that I'd spent in the bush.

She said, "I was worried about you, I really was. Spider's terrible when he gets started."

"You mean he was terrible," I told her.

Her brows arched. "Was? What do you mean?"

I said, "He's dead. Rubio took care of that."

"Rubio?" She drew her breath sharply. "Did Spider talk to him before he died? Did he say anything about the diamonds?"

I shook my head. "He had no chance to talk to anyone. He died quick, very painlessly. But let's talk about the diamonds, or rather, let's forget them. You don't belong down here, and I've found a way to get you out. There's a cruise boat in the harbor. I'll get you aboard it."

Color came up into her cheeks. "That would be— But I can't. Those diamonds. . . . I've got to get them."

I stared at her. Contempt lifted one corner of my mouth.

"There's a lot of things in life more important than diamonds, girl. It might be that they wouldn't be so pretty when you found them. They might be just stones of death."

She shuddered and got a grip on herself with visible effort. We had lowered our voices unconsciously until we were whispering.

"Did they catch the man who shot José?" There was something in her

voice that made me look at her sharply.

She looked away and I asked, "Who was he?"

She shook her head. "How would I know?"

"Then what do you care?"

She flashed, "What makes you think I care? I'm just curious, that's all. Isn't it natural that I should be curious?"

I took time out to light a cigarette. "Sure, it's natural, but listen, Mary Smith. You're stalling. That boy, whoever he was, didn't come in to shoot José. He was after something. I remember what he said. He said: 'Where are they, you rats?' What did he mean by 'they'? Could he have meant the diamonds?"

"I tell you I don't know." Her face was defiant for a moment, then it changed. She took a step toward me, rested her hand on my arm, a nice hand, brown, firm, long-fingered.

"Listen, Tom. I'm going to do something I've never done before. I'm going to beg, I'm going to ask you to trust me. I'd like to explain, but I can't. José told you where those stones were hidden. Give them to me. Tell me where they are."

I stared down at her. She was tall, but her fair head came just to my shoulder. She might have been begging, but there was nothing soft in the way she did it. It was man to man. I knew suddenly that she could be very swell, that she was the kind to take along, that is, if you could trust her. I wasn't sure about that. I wasn't at the moment very sure about anything, but I managed to keep all emotion out of my voice as I shook my head.

"It's no dice, kid. I've already told you I don't know anything about them."

She drew back sharply, her face whitening. "I'm a fool, I guess. I've heard of you for months. I thought. . . . But never mind what I thought. You're nothing but a cheap adventurer, nothing but a liar."

Anger stirred through me. "You've got a lot of guts, sister, but after all,

if I did have the diamonds, why the hell should I turn them over to you?"

She said, "There's no reason why you should, except that they're mine. Why lie to me? If you have the stones you'll either give them to me or you won't. I'd rather you'd told me to go to hell—I could have understood that—but to lie. . . ."

I said, "You're a funny kid. Doesn't it occur to you that I might be telling the truth? Or have you been running around with Hoyer so long that you don't recognize the truth when you hear it?"

She flushed again. "That wasn't needed, Tom Sherman."

I started to answer, then stopped. Suddenly I grinned. Here I was fighting with this kid, arguing about diamonds. I didn't care about them, believe it or not. What I wanted was to get her away. Away from what? Well, I wasn't sure; Hoyer, I guess. The thought made me impatient with myself. Some of it showed in my voice.

"For the last time, will you take that cruise boat, or won't you?"

She shook her head. "I can't! I can't go until I get those stones."

I said, "To hell with the stones! Say, if I got those diamonds for you, would you walk out on Hoyer, or would you slip him his cut?"

She was clutching my arm again. "You mean you've got them? You mean you'll turn them over to me?"

I said, "Not so fast. I asked if you'd give Hoyer his cut."

She shook her head. "What do you think?"

I was watching her closely. "I don't know what to think. You've got me guessing. I don't know who you are, where you come from, or why. All I know is that you show up here with Hoyer and Kelly, two of the worst bums below the Border. You're after some diamonds José had, and yet you're ready to cross Hoyer at the first opportunity. Why should I trust you?"

She said, "Look at me, Don Tom.

Look at me carefully and then tell me whether or not you trust me."

I looked at her. The blue eyes met mine directly. There was a glint of fire in them, a smoldering something that quickened my pulse, made my finger muscles tighten. But I didn't touch her. The hell of it was I did trust her, screwy as it sounds, but I wouldn't admit it.

I said, "I still don't trust you, sister. Trusting people gathers knives for your back in this country. There's only one thing that would make me trust you. Tell me what these diamonds are, who they really belong to, and where they came from."

She hesitated a moment. "My father had a ranch south of Mexico City. He—"

I said, "Hold it. Whatever else you are, you aren't a good liar. What are those diamonds?"

She was looking at me again. Suddenly her voice changed.

"O.K., Tom. That wasn't very smart of me, was it? But I'll make a deal with you. You get the diamonds, help me get out to the cruise boat, and I'll tell you the whole story. If you don't think I've a right to them then, you can take the stones."

I looked at her. "Is that on the level?"

"On the level." She put out her hand. I took it and she gave me a firm clasp. "You'll get them?" There was a trace of hysterical excitement in her tone.

I said, "I'll try."

"You'll try?" She was still staring at me. And I grinned.

"I'll be on the level with you. I don't know where the stones are, but I've got a hunch. José had an old place back in the hills, a mud house, one of adobe bricks he used as a safe. I'm going out there now. If there's a new brick in that place the diamonds are probably in it. I'll meet you at the end of the pier in an hour. You'll have to manage to get away from here yourself. I can't afford to stir Hoyer up."

Her eyes glistened. "It's a deal, Don Tom." She turned and walked toward the door. "I'll see you in an hour. *Adios.*" She was gone.

The guard came through and looked at me. I moved sidewise and he stepped across to block my path.

I stared at him. "What's the idea, hombre?"

His face was stolid. "Sit down, Don."

I said, "Sorry, but I'm leaving." I tried to sound confident, but wasn't very successful. I wasn't sure that I was leaving. Something in his face made me doubt it.

He produced a gun, said, "Sorry, but I've got to take yours."

For an instant I rocked forward on the balls of my feet, gauging my chances. I decided they weren't too good and raised my hands. He stepped forward lithely, snaked the rod from my shoulder clip, felt my coat. The girl's gun in my pocket was small. It didn't make much of a bulge. He missed it. He wasn't too careful. He knew me, knew that I carried only one rod.

He said, "Sit down."

I sat down. There wasn't anything else I could do. I sat there for perhaps five minutes, not saying anything. Then the door opened and Hoyer came in. He ignored the guard, gave no sign that he saw the man.

He said, "I'm glad that you're getting smart, Don Tomaso."

I raised my eyebrows. "Smart?"

He nodded. "I'm glad you're ready to deal."

I shook my head. "Maybe I'm dumb, Hoyer, maybe my brain isn't working as fast as it should. I've been pushed around a lot the last couple of hours, but frankly, I don't know what the hell you're talking about."

"You don't? You—" He broke off, at a loss for words. "You didn't make a deal with the girl? You didn't promise her you'd turn the stones over to us and take a third cut?"

I was afraid of a trap. I was afraid he was trying to get me to talk.

I shook my head. "You must be screwy. I've told you all along I don't know where the diamonds are."

He twisted, barked to the guard: "Find that damned dame! Don't let her get away. She's trying to pull a fast one." He broke into excited Spanish.

The guard's mouth drooped open. His mind didn't work too rapidly. It took him seconds to get it. Then he pivoted and charged from the room.

Hoyer swung back to me. "That girl— If she's putting over a fast one—"

I said, "Nuts! How could she? She doesn't know where the diamonds are any more than I do." I was stalling, trying to give her a chance to get clear.

Hoyer snorted. "If you think I'm going to let anyone get away with a half million in stones you're nuts. I planned this, worked out the details. The mistake I made was letting José take them from the plane."

I stared at him. It was beginning to click. My mind was working. A plane had crashed three months ago, crashed in the jungles south of Mexico City, an express plane carrying a half million in stones.

The plane had not been found until almost a month after the crash. When it was located there was no sign of the pilot's body, nor of the passengers.

Hoyer was still talking. "José thought he had crossed me. He expected to smuggle the diamonds into the United States. But the mistake he made was in contacting Spider Kelly. What he did not know was that Kelly was working for me, that he would come to me at once. I immediately closed every exit, every chance that José had to get the stones out of this country. He had to deal with me."

I stared at him. "Why tell me all this?"

He smiled mirthlessly. "Because the same applies to you. You haven't a chance. You know where the stones are, yes, but you can't move them. You

have no chance to cash in on them unless you come in with me. There isn't a smuggler south of the line that would dare do business with you if I turned thumbs down. I'm being generous. I'm offering you a third."

I pretended to be thinking it over. I said, "And where does the girl come in? What does she have to do with it?"

He shrugged. "Maybe I slipped on that one. Besides José and I, she was the only passenger on the plane. José wanted to kill her, but I'd been talking with her and she seemed like a smart kid. José got into the pilot's compartment, forced the pilot to land the ship, but he didn't make a good landing. He crashed.

"I think he did it on purpose. Anyhow, he was the only one that was hurt. He got a rap on the head. We got the stones, carried him away from the plane and left the girl with him while we walked to the highway and made contact with the men I had there to meet us. We started back and met the girl. She said that the pilot had died while we were gone."

My lips twisted. "That made it very swell for you, didn't it? I read the newspaper despatches. They think that the pilot is still alive, that he grabbed the stones. Some kid named Soulers, wasn't it?"

He said: "Yeah. It was swell except that the kid isn't dead."

"Isn't—" Then I had a flash. I remembered the boy standing in the doorway of the private dining-room, the boy with the vivid scar, the boy who had shot José.

"So the pilot came to life tonight."

Hoyer stared at me suspiciously. "Yeah, he showed up tonight."

"So the girl crossed you." As soon as the words had left my mouth I regretted them.

He snarled. "I guess so. She claimed tonight that she must have made a mistake when she thought he was dead, that she was as surprised to see him walk in as I was. If José had only not gone

for his gun—but he did, and the kid shot him. Well, Soulers won't get out of town. I've men looking for him, and there aren't a lot of places to hide."

I nodded. He said, "Come on, I've talked too much. Where are those stones?"

I stalled. I'd kept him talking purposely, trying to give the girl time to reach the cruise boat and safety. "It will take me—" I broke off as the guard charged through the door.

"I can't find her, *Señor*. She is not in the club. The doorman says that she went out hurriedly."

Hoyer swore and swung about. "Gone? Find her, fool!"

The man spread his hands. "The doorman says that she went toward the pier. There is a cruise boat in the harbor."

Hoyer swung back at me. "Did you give her the diamonds, Sherman? Does she know where they are?"

I shrugged. I figured the girl had had time to get clear. I had to get myself out now. I said, "Well . . ." and let my voice trail off.

Hoyer swore. "Watch him. I'll get her." He turned and charged through the door. The guard stared after him. When he turned around he was looking directly into the mouth of the girl's little gun in my hand. He didn't like it. His swarthy face got yellower.

I said, softly, "Come in and close the door."

He obeyed, turned the key at my command and flipped it to me. I could have tied him up. I suppose I should, but remember, I had only one hand. I got his gun, waved him into a chair and looked toward the windows. They were fastened by an iron bar that ran through catches half-way up the frame.

I turned, said to the guard, "I'm leaving, hombre, but if you're smart, you'll sit where you are. I can see this room from the roof outside." I figured he'd stay quiet for a couple of minutes, then it would take three or four more minutes before he could attract attention in the

club and get the door down. That would be all the time I needed.

I turned to the window. The bar was fastened at either end in the wall. That window had not been made to open. I wasted no time. I picked up a chair with my good hand and swung it against the glass.

The pane shattered outward. Someone was pounding on the door, yelling in Spanish. I paid no attention. There were heavy drapes at the windows. I jerked one from its fastenings, folded it across the jagged points of broken glass that still adhered to the casement and crawled through beneath the bar.



WAS on a flat roof. Ahead of me stretched an irregular sea of roofs, varying slightly in height, separated from each other

by two-foot passages between the houses. I ran forward, vaulting the low parapets, taking the two-foot spaces in my stride until I had covered a block. Then I dropped into a dark back yard.

I had no more than struck the baked dirt, packed hard by countless leathery feet, when I realized I'd made a mistake. A cur charged yappingly at me from the rear of the house. I turned to run and stumbled headlong over something. The smell told me it was a goat. The horns did also. Excited voices belched from the hut's interior. A light flickered. Then I was over the low fence and sprinting down the alley.

I found a car at the corner of the main street. Its owner had parked it lovingly, one wheel on the curb, the back end well out into traffic. The key was in the lock. People are careless about that in *Baja*. There's no point to steal a car since there is no way to escape.

It was an old Ford. I kicked it into motion with a starter which surprisingly worked, praying as I did so that there would be gas. There was. I backed the car around, went through an alley,

avoiding the main streets, scattering dogs and children as I progressed.

At the edge of town I turned left, followed a track which wound down around the edge of a rocky wash, crossed it a couple of miles from town and climbed upward into the brush-covered hills beyond.

As I progressed the track grew worse. The car had but one light, and that was poor. I crept along in second, wondering at what moment one wheel would get too far out and I would go tumbling down to the arroyo's bottom far below.

Maybe it was a miracle, but the Ford made the climb. It was boiling chuggily as I hit the top. Here the track widened, and I took the left hand branch back into the hills. I covered perhaps two miles, then I drove the car off into the brush and left it.

It was quicker to follow the path up to José's shack than it was to travel the torturous curves of the unused road. A moon far away in a milky sky gave a touch of light. I stumbled at least a dozen times, fell twice, before the hills suddenly opened and I came out into a little meadow.

Then I stopped, swearing my surprise. There was a light in José's shack. For a moment I stood motionless, staring unbelievably at it. Then I moved forward cautiously, wondering who it could be. It might, of course, be some wandering peon or prospector who had sought shelter. But something warned me that it was not. I reached the tiny window, then I swore again.

The girl was kneeling at the far side of the room, picking feverishly at one of the big adobe bricks with a very large butcher knife.

I worked my way around to the door, pushed it open and stepped in. She heard me, turned a startled face.

I grinned at her. "Hello, sister. My little girl-friend who was to meet me at the boat. Sure, I trust you, babe. You're the little girl who wouldn't double-cross anybody."

She was still on her knees, still hold-

ing the knife. She brushed the hair from her eyes with one hand, came up slowly to her feet.

"Tom, you don't understand."

I said, "No wonder I don't understand. There isn't very much to understand, is there? You're just what I thought you were at first—a little chiseler, crossing Hoyer, crossing José, trying to cross me. But you picked the wrong guy, sister. I'm not so easy as the rest. Get away from that brick."

"Tom! You promised to help me. You promised to get the diamonds for me. You promised to get me away on the cruise boat."

I nodded. "Sure, I promised. But the deal's off. You couldn't wait for me to get the diamonds. Maybe you were afraid I'd ask for a cut. Maybe you thought there wasn't enough for two shares in a half million worth of stones. So you played smart. You fixed it so Hoyer would hold me at the club while you came here to get them. It's a wonder you found the place, but nothing stumps you, does it? Nothing but me. Well, school's out. You're washed up. You couldn't even get away if I let you get them. Hoyer's watching the boat."

She was still staring. "You could still get me on the boat. I can still—"

I said, "Oh, no, you can't, because I'm not going to let you."

She said, "You don't mean that. You can't mean it. You don't understand what those diamonds are, you don't understand why I have to have them."

I said, "I understand a lot. I understand you were a passenger on that wrecked plane. I understand that you saw a chance to cut in on these diamonds and threw in with a bunch of crooks. But you couldn't even play fair with them, could you? You told them that the pilot was dead."

She said, "If I hadn't, they'd have gone back and killed him. If I hadn't strung with them they would have killed me."

I nodded. "All right. But does that

excuse you for trying to take a run-out from me?"

She didn't answer that. She'd come to her feet, still holding the knife. She took a step toward me. "I'm sorry things worked out this way, Tom." Her voice was perfectly steady. "I could have liked you a lot."

I grinned. "Maybe I could have liked you—once. Don't go into an act, baby. This cabin's a long way from places, but I don't trust you, that's all. And when I don't trust a person I'm washed up."

She said, "All right—if that's the way you feel—if there isn't any other way out."

I don't know where the gun came from, from under her light coat, I guess. Anyhow she got it out in a hurry, dropping the knife as she did so.

She said, "I don't want to have to shoot you, but I've got to get those diamonds, and I've got to make that boat."

I stared at the gun. It was a twin for the one I'd taken away from her earlier, very tiny, yet it might be very deadly, too.

I said, "That rather changes things, doesn't it?"

She nodded. "It does. You wouldn't believe me, but I didn't want to be ugly. I had to leave you at the club with Hoyer. It was the only chance I had to get away and I had to make the boat—I still have to. So, if you'll just take the knife and start digging. . . . No, don't come any closer," as I started toward her.

I stopped. She said, "I don't like threats. But if you don't start digging by the time I count five, I'll shoot."

I started digging. I've faced guns too often not to know when people mean business. And she meant it, meant it plenty. She was being driven by something stronger than herself, something I didn't understand.

I got the knife and started working on the adobe brick. It wasn't hard. José hadn't left it in the sun long. It

wasn't a bad idea, the brick safe. He'd thought it up a long time before. I'd seen him hide gold coins the same way. He'd mix the coins right in with the clay, shape the mass into a brick and let the sun bake it. Then he'd use it as part of the cabin's wall.

She made a little sound when the first one appeared. I did too. I swore under my breath. It was bigger than I had expected, a lot bigger, and there were a lot of them.

I got them out on the floor, the mud still clinging to them, beat the pile with the handle of the knife, chipping the adobe from their polished surfaces.

She had come closer, too close. I was very conscious of her standing above me. I laid down the knife and picked up one of the stones, moistened it and rubbed it against my sleeve. I judged that it was perhaps five carats, maybe a little heavier. I'm no jeweler and I had no glass, but I'm a pretty fair judge of stones.

There was a little flaw down at one corner, but the color was good and the flaw very tiny. I judge the stone would bring about five thousand on the open market—that would mean twenty-five hundred from a fence.

I said, "I don't blame you for getting excited, baby. Here." I held it up toward her, then I reached for a second one. As I did so my hand was inches from her ankle, my fingers locked about it, jerked her foot from under her, and she sat down hard.

The little gun went off, the bullet striking the mud wall above my head. I gave her no chance for a second shot. I twisted the gun from her grasp, pushed her away and got to my feet.

I grinned as I examined the gun. "Quite an arsenal I'm gathering. I'll have enough to start a war yet."

She didn't say anything as she slowly rose. I didn't either. The lump of bandage on my injured hand had pulled loose at the wrist. I stared at the gap, then I stuck her little gun into it.

The bandage made a swell holster. I

grinned at her. "Looks like it was made for that purpose."

She didn't say anything. She was pretty disgusted with herself. I stooped and started to gather up the stones. Then I stopped. I hadn't heard the door open. Neither of us had heard it, but it had. Hoyer was in the room, flanked by the guard from the club.



HOYER'S thin lips twisted as he saw the diamonds in my hand. "Thanks, Sherman."

I stared at him, at the two guns in the hands of the club guard. I was suddenly very tired, suddenly very disgusted, as disgusted with myself as the girl had been when I had grabbed her ankle and spilled her.

I said, "Mind telling me how you got here?"

He said, "You should have tied Ramón up. I guess you figured that he'd wait for someone to open the door. Well, he didn't. He went over the roofs after you. He trailed you to the edge of town, till you took this road, then he came back for me. It was pretty obvious where you were headed. There's not much up this way but José's shack and a couple owned by herders."

I didn't say anything. He had the diamonds and that was that. Maybe I'm a fatalist. I don't know, but I've found that when you buck Fate, things usually work around and come out about the same in the long run.

Hoyer scooped up the stones, poured them lovingly through thin fingers into a little buckskin sack. Then he moved toward me, helped himself to my gun, and the first one I had taken from the girl. He missed the one in my bandaged hand and my pulses quickened.

Then he stepped back. "This is swell. We've got both your guns. A bullet from yours in the girl, one from hers in you, should fix it very nicely."

I started. I'd hardly expected that, and yet, he couldn't afford to have us

running around. We both knew too much, far too much, about the stones. I tried to hold my voice level, but it jerked in my throat.

I said, "Aren't you forgetting one thing, Hoyer? Aren't you forgetting that the plane pilot is still alive?"

He said, "I know he's alive, but he's somewhere around. My men will find him, and anyway, he won't go to the police. Remember, they think he wrecked the plane purposely, that he stole the diamonds himself. There's a reward for him, dead or alive, and you know greaser cops. You know that they'd rather have him dead. No, Sherman, I don't have to worry about him. With you and the girl out of the way, Spider dead, and the pilot in the neighborhood, I'm pretty well set."

He swung around. "All right, Ramón. Let her have it. Use Sherman's gun."

The club guard said, "*Si, Señor,*" without emotion. He raised my heavy gun, slowly, deliberately.

I shot him with the little gun from my bandaged hand, shot him directly over the heart. My hands had been close to each other in front of me.

He was stationary for an instant. I feared that the nervous contraction of his finger would squeeze the trigger, send a bullet crashing into her. But it didn't. He swayed, then fell forward, directly onto his face.

The girl yelled. She didn't scream. It was a little startled sound, but still it was a yell. Hoyer was stunned for seconds, then he jumped in. I had fired through the roll of gauze which was the bandage.

I tried to get the gun free, to turn it on Hoyer, but it caught, stuck, and he charged me, the bag of diamonds slipping from his grasp.

He looked thin, but he was wiry, and his long arms had a lot of strength in them. I was hampered by the bandage. I hit him as he came in, a short chopping blow that checked him for an instant. Then he was at me, both arms wrapped

about my shoulders. We fell together, landing hard on the mud floor.

We rolled over, me still trying to free the little gun, Hoyer sliding up one hand to fasten his fingers at my throat.

I clawed at him with my free hand, struggling without success to break the grip. The room was getting dark, beginning to spin. I wrenched at his hand again, realizing vaguely that he had let go with his right and was fumbling at his gun. I shifted my hand from the arm at my throat to the wrist of his gun hand, trying to hold it down and not succeeding too well. Then, as if from a great distance, I heard the girl say:

"Stop it, I tell you! Stop it, or I'll shoot you in the back."

Hoyer twisted, releasing my throat and fired through his pocket directly across my body at the girl. She gave a half-smothered gasp and I knew she'd been hit. She couldn't shoot in return. I was a perfect screen for Hoyer.

I tried to roll away, but he had one arm still wrapped about me. I knew he was going to shoot again. I twisted, turned, trying to spoil his aim. He cursed savagely as my fingers tightened on his wrist, trying to drag the gun-hand from his pocket.

The girl was still on her feet. I knew vaguely that she was circling, that Hoyer was trying to shoot. Then I got a better grip on his wrist and twisted it about just as his gun exploded.

He stiffened, suddenly was very still. I crawled from under his circling arm and got slowly to my feet. My head was still spinning. The muscles at my throat were sore, bruised. The girl stared at me.

I said, "Thanks." It took an effort to say it, took effort to speak at all.

I stooped and began to put the stones back in the bag. Then I realized that the girl was staring at Hoyer in a kind of dazed way. "Dead?"

I shrugged. "I guess so. His own gun. It went off while we were fighting for it."

I jumped to my feet as she swayed,

steadied herself. "How badly are you hurt, kid?"

"I'm all right. Just creased my arm. I don't think it's more than a burn."

"You were pretty swell." I didn't look at her when I said it.

I began putting the stones in the bag.

"I guess you've earned these, sister."

She shook her head. "I wish I'd never seen them. They must have some kind of curse. Everyone dies who—"

I was still gathering them up. "Forget it. The trouble's about over. All you have to do is catch that boat."

"You'll let me take them?"

I shrugged again. "I'm no moralist. I suppose I shouldn't. I'd rather they went back to their owners, but—"

I broke off as I saw the door moving inward, made a grab for the gun that was lying on the floor, but it was too far away.



HE BOY with the scar was standing there in the doorway, and his gun was already in his hand.

The girl made a startled sound. The boy's eyes sprayed across the room, burning coals that seared as they crossed my face. The mouth was a grim trap of resolution. I remembered the last time I'd seen him, the only time, standing in the door of the private dining-room at Hoyer's club just before he had shot José.

His voice was a rasping husk as he said, "Give them to me."

In silence I tossed him the bag.

For an instant I was sorry for her. She'd gone through a lot for those stones. Then I wasn't as her choked voice said, "Hugh," and she ran to him.

He pushed her out of the way with his free arm. His eyes had never left my face. "I should kill you."

The girl caught his arm. "Hugh, wait. This is Don Tomaso, Tom Sherman. He wasn't in on this, he's the one I've been telling you about."

The boy's eyes were still hostile. "An officer, huh?"

"An officer!" I gaped at him. "What the hell are you talking about?"

The girl said, "Aren't you an undercover agent for the American Border Patrol?"

I laughed. "I most certainly am not."

She said, "But, that's what Spider Kelly told me. He really believed it."

I whistled. So that was the reason Kelly had been so hostile.

I said, "I'm sorry, but he was wrong. I'm exactly what I seem—what you called me—a cheap adventurer."

Her lips twisted a little. "Maybe I didn't mean that, but I wish I'd known that you weren't an officer. That's why I didn't tell you about the diamonds."

I looked at the boy, jerked my head. "Who is he?"

"He's my brother," she said. "I was on the plane with him. I wasn't supposed to be. My name wasn't on the passenger list. After the crash I realized that Hoyer and José were after the diamonds. I'd already been talking to Hoyer, amusing myself. I hadn't ever expected to see him again after the trip, so I flirted a little.

"When the show-down came I realized that they meant to kill Hugh. There wasn't anything I could do to stop them, so I pretended to fall in with their game. When they left me to go to the road, a native woman came along and I turned my brother over to her. It was the only chance I had. Then I started for the road, met Hoyer, and said Hugh was dead. Then I went along with them. I had to. They'd have killed me if I hadn't.

"Besides, there were the diamonds. The papers blamed Hugh at once. I wanted to try and get them back, but José who had them, crossed Hoyer and disappeared. We came up here, to Ensenada. I didn't know what else to do and the first man who met us was Spider Kelly. He said that José was here, that he had contacted him, trying to get Kelly to smuggle the stones.

"Hoyer was very angry, but he was very cold-blooded too. He sent José a note saying that he knew he had the stones, that he also knew that José couldn't get them out of the country, but that he would give José fifty thousand dollars for them because he didn't want trouble."

I nodded. "And that's where I came in, huh? José chose me as a body-guard. It was a coincidence that your brother should walk in on us at the club."

The girl shook her head. "It wasn't a coincidence. I got word to him and he came down on the cruise boat. I expected José to bring the diamonds with him to the club. I was going to have Hugh walk in, hold them up and grab the stones. I didn't expect José to go for his gun, didn't expect that Hugh would have to kill anyone."

"That's why I tried to hire you at first. I thought that we'd have you there, that we could hand you the stones, and as an under-cover agent for the American government you could turn them over to the Mexican police. Then when I saw you come in with José I didn't know what to think."

I looked at the boy. I was getting sore. "What the hell do you mean by letting your sister into this?"

She said, "He didn't!" She was sore, too, at me for thinking such a thing. "It was two months before Hugh recovered from that knock on the head. It took time for us to locate each other."

I cooled off a little at that. "But how'd he happen to show up here?"

She said, "He didn't happen to. When I got away from the club I raced down to the pier and sent a note out to the ship by the boatman. I knew where José's shack was. I'd come out here with Hoyer yesterday. We'd searched the place, but we'd missed the new brick. In the note I told Hugh to come ashore and meet me here. I was afraid I might have trouble."

I said, "You probably will." I glanced at my watch. It was a little

over three-quarters of an hour until the boat was due to sail.

"We'll have to hurry," I told them. "We've got to get those stones past the customs guard at the plank. Here."

I turned and took down an unopened bottle of whiskey, broke the seal and pried the cork out. "Drop them into this. The greasers are so used to seeing American drunks come aboard these cruise boats that they won't think anything about it if your brother goes aboard with this. But that scar. I don't know how he's gotten by with that so far. Hoyer's men are scouring the town for him."

The boy pocketed the gun, slapped a wide-brimmed hat on his head. The shadow of the brim covered the scar. "I've been careful enough to get by this long," he said. "I'll make it."

I nodded. "Come on, let's go."

He was a good driver. We swept through the town, turned left and drove down to the head of the pier. The last regular boat had gone, but there were several boatmen hanging around. I called sharply to one of them, thrust a handful of money into his dirty palm, and shoved the kids down the stairs. Then I turned as feet pounded the worn planks behind me.

Rubio, followed by his two soldiers, was running toward me, swearing. I loosened my gun and stood waiting. The colonel paid no attention to me. He reached the stair-head, panted quick orders to the boatman below. I shoved my gun against his side.

"Hold it, Colonel."

Surprise stopped his torrent of words. I said, softly, "Call to the boatman to go on, that you've made a mistake."

He hesitated and I jabbed him with the gun, hard. "One little squeeze, *mi amigo*, a little bullet, and I toss you off the pier."

He did not doubt me. I didn't doubt myself. That girl and her brother were going to get that boat if I had to shoot half the force stationed at the mud fort. He countermanded his order in a voice

that threatened to stick in his throat.

I said, "Excellent, Colonel *mio*. Now order these so brave soldiers to return to their posts."

He complied and they tramped off without a word or a backward glance. It was too dark for them to see the gun in their colonel's side.

I pushed him a little back from the stairs. Then I heard sound behind me and looked around. The girl was coming up. I swore.

"What are you doing here?"

She said, "You don't think that I'd walk out and let you take the rap alone, Tom Sherman? This was our trouble, not yours."

I said, "That's silly. There's nothing to worry about. I've got it squared, haven't I, Colonel?"

He said, in a suppressed voice: "It seems so, Don Tom."

She stared from one to the other of us. I said, "Hurry. That ship is about to sail."

She said, "Why don't you come with us?" There was a trace of something odd in her voice, something wonderful and strange to me.

I said, "I can't, now, but I'll meet you sometime."

"Where?"

I said, "In San Diego, at the General Grant Hotel. In a month."

"I'll be there." Then she turned and hurried down to the waiting boat.

Colonel Rubio said, between his teeth, "My friend, you'll not be in San Diego."

I smiled. "I thought you'd feel that way. Tell me, how did you know about the diamonds? About the girl and her brother?"

He said, "I know everything. I have spies at Hoyer's club, everywhere. I've known about them for weeks. I was waiting for Bob Hoyer to get them, then I was going to close in. Where is he?"

I said, "Dead. That boy didn't steal those stones, Colonel. Hoyer and José stole them."

Rubio looked at me in the darkness.

"Then why didn't he turn the diamonds over to me? After all, I am the government."

I smiled sourly. "Have you ever been in one of your own jails? Well, I wouldn't let him take that chance. His story was straight, but he might not make one of your judges believe it. This way, he'll turn the diamonds over to the customs officials at San Diego. Once the stones are recovered, I doubt if the insurance company will want to bring him back."

Rubio said, "That won't help him on José's death."

"No, but I will. José was reaching for a gun and the kid certainly had plenty of cause to shoot him."

"I'm afraid," Rubio's voice was a purr, "that you won't be around to help him, not after tonight."

I shrugged as I pocketed my gun. There was no further need for it. The ship was already under way. The small boat had delivered its passengers and was heading back for shore. There was no way that Rubio could stop the girl and her brother now.

I said, "Don't worry about me. I can take care of myself, especially since my good friend Colonel Rubio is the government here. The Colonel got fifty thousand dollars tonight, money that had belonged to thieves, but now belongs to no one.

"I'd hate to go into court, to have to tell about that fifty thousand. The Governor of the upper district of *Baja California* might be interested."

He did not speak. His silence was more a threat than words, but I felt no fear as he turned and started back along the pier.

I leaned on the rail, watching the lights of the ship as she slid across the dark water of the crescent bay. Music from the deck orchestra reached me faintly—and something else.

It was absurd of course, probably the wind, but I thought I heard a girl's voice call: "I'll be there, Tom Sherman. I'll be in San Diego, waiting."

DEATH DRINKS

Black Burton's deadly .38 punctures holes in an almost perfect murder



THE TELEPHONE rang, a low, discreet burr of sound. Burton looked up from the pages of "The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire," marked his place, watched Han Soy slide into the room, pick up the instrument and hand it to him. Even before he accepted it, he sensed something wrong. There were only two people of whom Han Soy did not demand their name: Vivian Burton, who was in London at the moment, and Lieutenant Ned Dalton, Homicide, New York City.

He said quietly, "Yes?"

It was Dalton's voice, all right. Gruff, tinged with something anticipatory:

"That you, Burton? Good! Or maybe bad! Hell's just busted loose and I want to know if you've got a cut in on it!"

Burton allowed an appreciable pause to intervene. Then he said, "Is this a game, Ned? What's up?"

Instead of replying directly to that, the detective barked out: "Listen! Give this to me straight, Burton. Have you seen or heard anything of Raoul St. Just?"

The gambler's face never betrayed emotion, even when there was no one to observe it. Across green baize and under harsh lights it had become through many years a bronze, emotionless mask; a mask out of which expressionless but somehow understanding eyes looked out with a certain detachment upon a world that they thought a little mad. Now the face did not change. Nor had the voice altered when Burton replied:

"I haven't seen anything of St. Just,



CHAMPAGNE

By NELS
LEROY
JORGENSEN

and I don't know anything about him except what the rest of the world knows. After his acquittal he took ship for France. He's been in Paris, I've heard, for six or eight months. Tonight's paper listed him as among the arrivals on the *Ile de France*. What else should I be able to tell you?" There was a slight irritation in Burton's eyes.

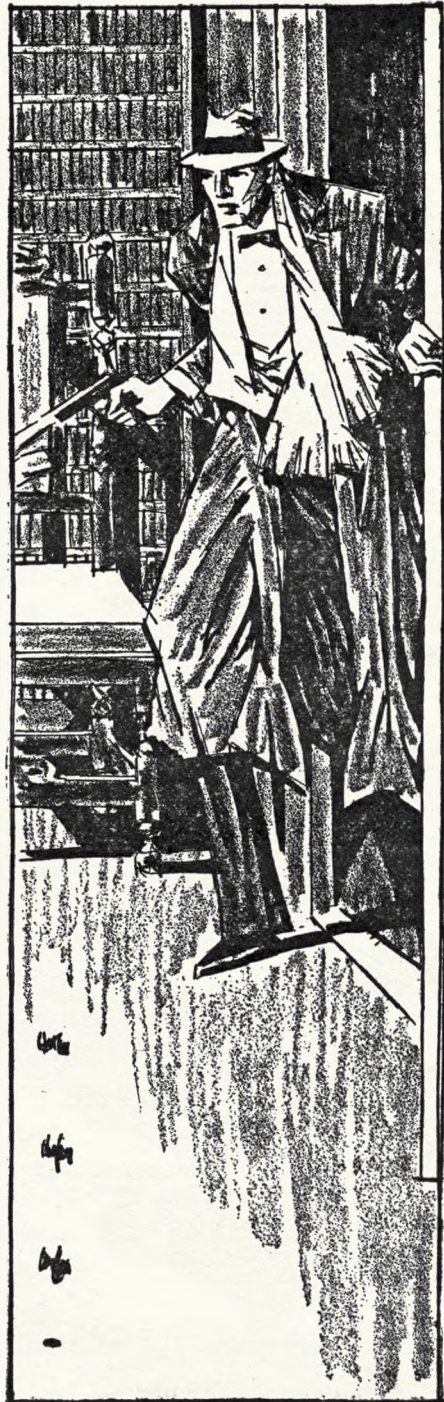
The New York gambler and the lieutenant on Homicide had been friends for many years. Together they had worked in a common cause more than once. They somehow complemented one another, the suave, always serene gambler and the burly, hard-fisted and hard-heeled detective who had worked his way up from a pavement-pounding assignment on the New York force to his present job.

Dalton's voice came back. "I'm lookin' for him. I had a hunch he might be with you—there."

"He's not." Only seconds later Burton was able to be grateful that the call had come at the time it had. In another few minutes he would have been forced to evade Dalton's suggestion. "What about him?"

"Nothing." Dalton's voice hesitated. "I guess nothing, if he's not there. And if murder's nothing! That's what I want to see him about—again! Hell, I'm coming down to see you. There's something blamed screwy going on around here and maybe you can give me ideas. I'll try and catch you in a little later."

Burton said, "All right," and hung



up. He turned away from the telephone, a dark, quietly handsome figure with the black tie and white front of his dinner clothes relieving the deep tan of his features. Over waistcoat and shirt he had thrown a purple brocaded dressing gown.

He murmured, "Murder! And Raoul St. Just—again!"

Han Soy stood in the doorway still, a troubled look on his face. The little yellow man would not speak, but there was something of sentience between these two, master and man, who had lived together for so many years.

Many years. Ever since that day, far in the past now, when the gambler and the wife he still adored had decided that their ways of life led too far apart. Now the beautiful Vivian he had married, loving society and the things it stood for to her, intent upon a life that was her own as much as Burton's was his, occupied an apartment uptown. The gambler, however, following his own tastes and inclinations, lived with only his Chinese servant in an apartment high above East Tenth Street.

At the moment, Burton was telling himself as he lit a cigarette, he was glad Vivian was on the high seas; she had sailed for London two days before. He always preferred her away when trouble loomed. And this—tonight—he knew was the beginning of trouble.

He was about to pass back to his chair and the tall, iced glass standing on the table alongside it, when a sound came at the apartment door. He brought up, in the foyer.

A heavy body had just rocked against the stout steel door frame. There had come the subdued sound of a bump, then silence.

Han Soy stepped back warily. Burton's hand dropped into the pocket of his dressing gown and he felt the cold steel of his automatic against his palm.

Then, with the merest significant gesture to Han Soy, he stepped forward and threw open the door.

Instantly there fell inward toward

him a tall, slim figure wearing well cut but recently misused clothes. The figure slumped; there was a gurgle in its throat. Burton cried out, low-voiced: "Raoul St. Just!"

With Han Soy at his side, Burton reached out and caught the intruder under both arms, hauling him into the foyer.

The amber illumination there shone down dully on the unexpected visitor. St. Just was taller than the gambler, younger. He was a handsome man, but he did not look handsome now. There was blood on his high cheek-bones, a smear of it along the left cheek; his hat was gone and his brown, close-cropped hair was disheveled. There was a wild gleam in his gray eyes.

This was Raoul St. Just, millionaire, world-notorious young gambler, playboy and darling of the night clubs of two continents. Raoul St. Just, who a few short weeks before had been freed from the shadow of the electric chair at Sing Sing instead of paying for the murder of a croupier at a gambling house he frequented. Only a last minute confession had saved him, just as the judge was preparing his final sentence. With his release he had gone abroad.

Burton found it not difficult to remember some of those melodramatic, wild scenes amid which he had last seen St. Just. They all came back with an etched vividness. They had been some of the tensest scenes ever witnessed in a New York courtroom.

That last day, especially, when "Playboy St. Just," as the tabloids called him, had been convicted of the murder of the croupier at Duprez's gambling house! The judge had seemed more than a little anxious to pronounce the death sentence. There had been the unimpeachable evidence of half a dozen witnesses to prove the fact that St. Just had loudly threatened the croupier—a Frenchman named Lefevre—for what he had termed was a dishonest roulette wheel.

And then St. Just's lawyer, Marvin Huston, had come hustling in with a

last minute confession. It was the confession of a dying man, a Basque named Jean Barre. He had died before the red tape to the electric chair could be prepared for him.

It had appeared that Barre had followed Lefevre to America, that he had obtained work at the Duprez establishment, and that his connection with the croupier had never become known. But at the trial the truth came out, flaunted in Marvin Huston's expert and adroit hands.

Barre had followed the man he had murdered across the Atlantic with but a single purpose. Revenge. It had had nothing to do with St. Just's threat. Barre had wanted to pay off a debt he had sworn on the body of the sister who had become a suicide in Monte Carlo because of Lefevre's betrayal of her. Duprez had afterward verified most of this story, though he had been acquitted of any complicity in the affair.

Anyway, that was the unpleasant and sordid tale. Somehow, Marvin Huston, a clever and ambitious young lawyer, had got hold of St. Just's case, had tracked his man down and obtained the confession. When Barre had at last been unearthed he had been dying of bullet wounds garnered in a shooting affray in the dark. He had never lived to name his slayers; and since the only interest he represented in the case was ended with his confession of the shooting of Lefevre, he was forgotten. The case had made Huston, whose clients up till then had not been the best people.

But the rest was not forgotten, the rest of that day.

St. Just had been cleared. That was important. But before that dramatic last moment Judge Robert Cresswell had made his bitter speech from the bench.

He had flayed out scathingly at St. Just and the class represented by the young orphaned millionaire. Playboys! He dwelt on their champagne guzzling. Careless of their own and other people's lives. The judge had recalled to the

jury that redoubtable St. Just of the French Revolution and he had harked back in reference to the scenes of that day. Bloody scenes, when an outraged society uprose to tear down at last the things that this Raoul St. Just of the present day and his namesake of the French Revolution had stood for.

And then suddenly the confession—and freedom!

It had been a little more than dramatic. Burton recalled anew the picture of Raoul St. Just standing up in the dock, a free man after weeks of torture there. He could recall the handsome, high-bred face, the scornful dark eyes, smoldering with a just resentment, and St. Just's reply to Cresswell's bitter peroration:

"I thank the Court. It is my hope that some day, Your Honor, we may be able to share together one of those glasses of champagne which you so despise. Believe me, Your Honor, it would not grieve me too much should it happen to be the last—for one of us!"

The courtroom had been shocked. It was only a little less than a threat. It might even have been a matter for contempt of court proceedings, except at that moment Judge Cresswell himself must have realized that, only a little while before, in his puritanical venom, he had overreached himself.

And the sensation-seeking papers were now entirely aligned with the "Playboy" they had jeered at.

But at the least it had been a subtle threat. . . .



AN SOY made a meaningful gesture. Burton nodded. His grip on St. Just's arm tightened. On the other side of the man the diminutive Chinese aided to uphold a form strangely limp. Between the two, St. Just was steered into the living-room and adjusted in one of the deep armchairs there.

Han Soy moved away. A siphon squirted. Presently he was back again and Burton was able to hold a cold brandy and soda under his guest's nose.

St. Just looked at the glass, looked beyond it at his host, then at last managed a twisted grimace that was meant to be a smile, and accepted the offering. As he raised the glass to his lips he said, a queer, oddly hysterical and mocking note in his voice:

"To crime! How often, my good friend Black Burton, how often have you dispensed a drink to a murderer?"

And he gulped down half the glassful. Burton's face registered nothing with the strange words. Quietly he said:

"You're no more a murderer now than you were when you stood trial months ago. That being the case, what are you talking about and why are you here?"

The younger man looked wildly at him. Helplessly. "Here? Because, Burton, out of all New York you're the one man I know whom I may expect to believe me. The one man who'll not be afraid to cover me if he thinks I'm telling the truth. And the one man who, God help me!—who can ever get at the truth." He stopped. "I didn't—I didn't kill him, but they're chasing me for it! Understand?"

"You didn't kill that croupier?" Burton frowned. He was thinking, aside from the words he spoke, of what Dalton had said, and a suspicion was forming. "Are we talking about the same thing, St. Just?"

"The croupier?" St. Just started up. "But haven't you heard? Hasn't your pal Dalton contacted you yet? The croupier, hell! Remember what I said to the judge on the stand the day of my acquittal? Remember what it sounded like?"

"I remember," the gambler said gravely. "It was a foolish thing to say. A foolish gesture to make. And what's more, I don't think you'd have gotten away with it except that Judge Cresswell himself knew that he might have been

too harsh on you all during the trial, and that both the newspapers and the public resented it."

When he stopped St. Just put down his glass and gave a harsh, cackling laugh that had not the slightest hint of humor in it. "So you haven't heard? Dalton didn't tell you?"

"Heard what?" Burton frowned down on him. "He told me little or nothing. But you'd better tell me, if it's important, as fast as you can. Lieutenant Dalton is due here any minute."

St. Just sat up. "Dalton! Oh, Lord! And that'll be why he's coming." Then abruptly: "Tell you! But believe me, I thought you knew! Judge Cresswell was murdered tonight. Murdered about five minutes after I'd left his house. And on the table were two empty glasses of champagne out of the case I'd sent him when I rang up to tell him I was calling on him tonight. It was—it was to be a grand gesture! My return to New York!"

And when the tumbling words had ceased to pour out of the young wastrel's mouth he fell back in his chair, limp and exhausted. Burton heard him say, in a strained, unnatural voice:

"And now Dalton's coming—here! Well, the last curtain is about due to be rung down!"

He was laughing, a laugh that threatened to become hysterical. Burton stepped over to him and gripped his arm hard. The gambler's cold voice commanded:

"Stop that! Stop it, do you hear? Dalton's due and I can see now why he's coming. I'll help you if I can. But you've got to pull yourself together and tell me the story first. How did you get all messed up this way? The blood, the bruises?"

St. Just looked at him for a moment as though he could not quite adjust himself. But he saw command in the gambler's eyes, a reserve of unleashed power.

He shook himself together, reached out for the brandy glass to discover it was empty. At a gesture from Burton,

the silent, hovering little yellow man came forward, picked up the glass, went away to refill it. When he returned with it St. Just thanked him with a grateful nod, took a gulp of the liquid, then said:

"The judge's servant must have sent out the alarm. I had left Cresswell's house, hopped a cab and went on down to my club. When I emerged from the taxi there were two cops waiting there to grab me. I heard the word 'murder'. I didn't know what it meant then, but I learned soon afterward. Anyhow, I acted on impulse; that word does something to me, after that—after the trial." St. Just shuddered.

"They roughed me up but I twisted away, smashed around the corner. It was dark and I'd managed to take the coppers by surprise. Ran. Found a cab. They took off after me. They were coming up; my driver wasn't any too willing to risk trouble with the police and the sirens'd started by then. So I shoved a twenty in the chauffeur's hand, told him to slow. Then I saw the lights ahead. On Sixth, that was, somewhere near Fourteenth. I took a chance, opened the cab door when we slowed for a yellow light that was just changing from green to red—and jumped. Then I somehow—thought of you and managed to get here."

Burton lit a cigarette and shook his head. He heard St. Just say: "Don't tell me you don't believe me!"

"I believe you. You couldn't possibly have made up a yarn like that. But it was a fool thing to do, from the beginning. All for a gesture!" Suddenly: "Did Judge Cresswell drink with you?"

"A sip. He seemed to be pretending to humor me. I told him I hated him, hated him for the way he'd pilloried me in that courtroom. He tried to lecture me."

"Must have been a rare tête-à-tête! But you were there with him—alone?"

"Yes. He's only got the one servant, a man, name of Haller. Disapproving sort of beggar."

"Stay long?" Burton asked it almost carelessly.

"Not very." St. Just was reacting to the brandy now and his voice had considerably steadied. "We weren't getting on too well. You can visualize that, perhaps. And then, too, I think I began to perceive that my jest wasn't in any too good form."

"Possibly." Black Burton's voice was dry. "Anyone else with him while you were there?"

St. Just gave a short, sharp laugh. "Nothing to bite on up that way," he said. "No one. Though Cresswell said he'd been receiving Huston before I came in. Remember Huston? My lawyer during the trial and the man who saved me by routing out that last-minute confession?"

"Marvin Huston. Did he know about—?"

St. Just swore. "Yes, I suppose so! When I got back from Europe he met me and laughed and said something about when was I going to have that last champagne with the judge. It put the idea into my head. But that's all he had to do with it."

"He knew you were going there?"

"I told him. Oh, yes, he knew all right."

"Strange that Huston should have been there. What could those two possibly have in common? Cresswell retired from the King's County bench a month ago. The Governor appointed him to a vacant seat with the State Supreme Court of Errors and Appeals; isn't that so?"

"That's right. He's not sitting here any more. That is—he wasn't," St. Just added hastily. He gave a little shudder. "And I have no idea what he wanted with Huston or vice versa. But I could think of a lot of things. Perhaps some extra-session matter that had to be settled before Cresswell got set in his new duties."

Burton accepted that gravely. "And that's all, all you have to tell me?" he inquired, with a glance at his wrist watch.

St. Just looked at his own time piece. "Yes," he said hastily. He got nervously to his feet with a glance at the foyer.

Burton excused himself for a moment, tearing off his robe as he left the room. When he came back his guest saw him strapping a shoulder holster into place. Han Soy helped him shrug his arms into his dinner jacket.

When Burton turned he found St. Just standing there looking at him, a helpless, befuddled expression on his good looking face. Hesitating a moment, the gambler said:

"For the present you're to stay here. I'll take the charge on my own conscience—harboring you. Though as far as I'm supposed to know there's no warrant out for you as yet. I'll meet Dalton below stairs instead of waiting for him here. Han Soy will take care of you. Don't leave till I return."

St. Just took an impulsive step toward him. "You believe me? You think you can do any good?"

"I believe you. And as to what good I can do—until I can locate the motive for this fantastic kill—I won't be able to tell you. That champagne business bothers me. But at least, with Lieutenant Dalton, I'll have the advantage of being on the inside."

"Which might turn out to be a damnable uncomfortable spot to be in, before you're through!" the young millionaire said. "I don't know. I'm not afraid, Burton, and I hate to see you fighting my battles. If there's trouble coming, let me be along!"

He made an appealing gesture with his hands. Burton shook his head and smiled grimly.

"No, but I'm glad to have heard you say that, St. Just. It helps. And you'd only be in the way. I wouldn't be taking a hand in the game unless I chose to; don't forget that. All you're to do is stay here and sit tight!"

Han Soy's slanting eyes held concern in their glittering depths as he made the door fast after his master.



ALTON was just pushing into the empty lobby of the Falcon Arms when Burton got out of the lift. A big, burly man, hard and toughened as he was square and sympathetic, the New York Homicide officer brought up with some surprise at sight of the gambler coming toward him.

"You weren't going to wait?" he demanded.

"On the contrary. You didn't say just when you were arriving and I knew you wouldn't have too much time, so I thought I'd save some. Your car outside?"

"Yes. Come on. Tell you what I know when we get under way. I knew you always liked that young St. Just and I thought it wouldn't be a bad idea to have your angle alongside of mine. The set-up right at this moment is such an open-and-shut cinch that I can't help seeming to smell something funny somewhere."

They climbed into the small radio patrol car that the detective had left standing a little beyond the marquee at the curb. The motor turned over, they shot out into the street. Once in high speed and headed uptown, Dalton talked.

"It's this way," he began. Then he broke off: "I asked you something a little while ago on the phone. Now I'm telling you. I want St. Just. I want him for murder. He's made good that half threat of his that he pulled on the stand that day of his acquittal. Sent up some champagne to Judge Cresswell. Followed it himself. They drank. No one saw St. Just leave. And Cresswell's plenty dead!"

"Poison in the champagne? Shot? Or—?"

Dalton shifted to manage a traffic light. When he was in speed again he said, "Knifed! And the bottle of champagne on the table. Two glasses. Cresswell's fingerprints and St. Just's all over the place." Dalton's voice challenged.

"Do you know where Raoul St. Just is right now?"

The gambler hesitated, but not perceptibly. Dalton was too preoccupied with his driving to be aware of it. The answer he got, when it came, was ambiguous.

"If I did know where he was," Burton said, "I don't think I'd tell you till I knew the whole situation. Between you and me, Ned, it has all the looks of a pretty frame."

"But who'd be in on the frame?" Dalton wanted to know. "This manservant, Haller? St. Just's lawyer—Huston? Some crook that maybe in the past Cresswell was too hard on? All possible. But you got to figure reasonably, Burton. I know you like St. Just and all that. And maybe I like him too. But you can't forget that crack he made on the stand—that and those bottles of champagne. He's that way, the kid."

As Dalton swung the car around a turn he could hear the gambler beside him say:

"If you've got it all figured out so carefully I don't see why you called for me. I wonder if it's because you think that by sticking close to me you'll run into St. Just."

"I wouldn't be a bit surprised if that was part of it," Dalton retorted grimly. "But that wasn't the only reason I wanted you. I think—" and he gave a short laugh that was not entirely merry, "I think it's because of the gambling element that enters into the case. And I don't want to be unfair."

"You were always pretty square, Ned," Burton's low voice said, reassuringly. And about then the patrol car was sliding to a halt behind a pocket of red and yellow lights.

Dalton switched off the ignition and said, "Here we are. Let's go."

He led the way. A uniformed policeman saluted him at the gate in a low enclosing wall. The house lay beyond there.

The officer said, "All bottled up, Lieu-

tenant. M.D.'s inside. Nobody's touched the body but him."

Dalton only nodded. Burton was at his side when he entered the small mansion.

The hallway was lighted discreetly. Another patrolman stood just inside the door. He saluted. Out of a room that opened off the hall a man came, a man of medium height, attired in sober black, with a white shirt front showing, and a white bow tie. He was a man of perhaps fifty, hair grizzled, haggard lines in his face.

Dalton asked abruptly, "You the butler? Haller?"

"Yes, sir. It was I who notified the police. I'm glad you've got here, sir. There's a policeman inside, and—but will you come with me, sir?"

Dalton and the gambler followed the servant down the hall and then to the right into a room that must open out on the garden that lay behind the small, charming house.

Another police officer stood inside. He waited grim and motionless by the door. The room was a quiet, ordered one, except for the presence of these aliens and the forbidding presence of the dead.

Over a safe that was built so that it looked to have been set in the wall hung a gloomy Corot. A large desk stood between the door and the safe; beyond was a corner with only a standing globe on its dais, making room for the windows when they swung back. Two walls were covered with bookshelves. Blackstone was predominant.

On the nearer side of the room the body of the murdered man had been laid on a low, comfortable divan.

Judge Robert Cresswell in life had been not a prepossessing figure, except when behind the high desk of his office. His face was wizened, dry, and his scant hair was gray.

And even now there was nothing of majesty in his face, except the majesty that there aways is in death. The eyes had been closed. The body had been

straightened. There was no blood to be seen anywhere in the room.

Dalton said, "How come he's been moved?"

The little doctor straightened up, nodded to him with a gesture that was like a bird's hop, and said, "It's all right, Lieutenant. I finished my examination first. This man," he indicated the servant, Haller, "asked if we might put his master's body on the couch here. It was found on the floor, you know. No reason not to agree. I'd got all we need."

"And what would that be?" Dalton asked, the truculence evaporating from his voice.

The M. E. pointed. "See the bruise on his temple? Not necessarily fatal, but it knocked him unconscious. Next move was simple." He picked up a long, wicked-looking paper knife from the desk, turned it over in his fingers musingly. "The killer used a knife. I think I could swear that it was this knife here. But we have a clever killer. I doubt, Lieutenant, if you'll find any fingerprints on this piece of steel now."

He tossed the blade down carelessly. It was wiped clean and in the light its brilliance seemed to mock at them. "No chance of prints—?"

"You'll have a chance to look, naturally. But you won't find any."

"Probably not," Dalton grunted, and bent over the knife. Nothing unusual about it at all except that it was exceptionally long and its haft had a curious Japanese design of dragons circling about it.

The M.E. was winding up. "Yes, that knife went down through the back of his neck after he'd been knocked unconscious by that blow on his temple. Knife probably pierced the jugular. Long enough anyway. Death almost instantaneous."

Dalton nodded almost absently. Burton's eyes had strayed from the corpse. They were on the table. A bottle of champagne sat there, its incongruous and out-of-place neck of silver and red tin-

foil protruding from a silver bucket half filled with melted ice.

Between the gambler and the bucket stood two glasses. Burton regarded them. He knew that Dalton was doing the same thing, for at that minute the detective's voice was saying:

"Get a fingerprint man on those glasses." And then, his voice disgusted, "Even though we do know what we'll find there! It wasn't the champagne that killed him. It was—"

He stopped abruptly. At the door Haller gave a sound and stepped aside. Burton turned.

A sharp exclamation and the newcomer had burst into the room. Burton recognized him instantly. It was the lawyer whose last-minute evidence had snatched Raoul St. Just from the electric chair—Marvin Huston.



SINCE the spectacular case of the People vs. St. Just, Marvin Huston had prospered. For one thing, his work in that affair had gained him the trusteeship of the St. Just estate. That alone meant a heavy income. But beside that it had gained him other things; the incident had dragged him from the quasi-dignity of a junior partnership in a large and well known firm to a practice of his own and clients who spoke of wealth. He had even been mentioned for a State bench.

He was a stocky, competent looking man of about forty. His hair had begun to gray slightly and it lent to his appearance. He had shrewd, resourceful eyes and a heavy, undershot jaw. He gasped out:

"I've just heard! Is it true?"

A space of silence fell. There was no need for words. Into the silence walked hospital men, stretcher bearers. With a certain callousness the clay of the honored jurist was rolled over onto canvas and hustled out. It was then that Dalton spoke:

"Heard what, Mr. Huston?"

"But about the—the happening! You—"

"And where did you happen to be when you heard, Mr. Huston?" Dalton persisted.

Huston looked at him at that as though seeing him for the first time. He blinked. Then recognition came and he flashed a quick, disarming smile.

"Oh, hullo! It's Lieutenant Dalton, on Homicide, isn't it? We've met before, I think, eh? You asked me what?"

"The last thing I asked you," Dalton went on in his emotionless voice, "was where were you when you heard the news?"

A film came over Huston's eyes. "That sounds remarkably like you're demanding some kind of an alibi of me, Lieutenant," he said. "Has anyone told you I was here earlier?"

"Yes. Haller told us. I still want to know—"

"Where I was!" Huston took it up brightly. "Quite! Well, you see I don't know just when it happened. Anyway, I was at my club. The judge and I had business tonight, as you might've assumed. I went from here down there to look up some data I'd promised to phone back to him. Haller can tell you that when he answered the phone he informed me the judge was dead. That's that. It all can, I suppose, be verified. Went straight there when I left here. But what I'd like to know right now is when the judge got it?"

Haller was nodding gravely. Dalton turned from him impatiently.

The medical examiner was at the door. "A little over an hour ago, Lieutenant." Then, moving into the hall, "That's in case you want to check alibis. Due to the prompt call from the butler here, we were able to get to the spot within fortunate minutes. Fortunate, I mean," he added dryly, "for everyone but the judge! But even as it stands we can't place the exact time any more than to within an hour or two. Good night!"

Burton had remained silent. He was

still staring at the table, at the champagne bucket and its gay contents, at the two glasses. It was obvious that both of them had been used.

St. Just's portentous words had to be recalled:

"Champagne, which you so despise. Believe me, Your Honor, it would not grieve me too much should it happen to be the last—for one of us!"

The hot-blooded young fool!

Huston was saying: "Where's St. Just?"

Dalton swung on him. "Maybe you can help us there, Mr. Huston! We'd like to know."

The lawyer looked startled. "You mean you—"

"I mean I want him—and badly—yes! He was here tonight and I understand you were here tonight, too. Different times. Apparently, however, St. Just was here after you left and so you're safe thus far. But later you'll have to explain your own visit. However, right now I'd very much like to know where your client is."

Huston looked at him, shook his head. At last, "So would I, Lieutenant," he said, and stood looking raptly at the spot where the murdered jurist had so recently been laid.

Dalton swung on Haller. In a tense voice: "Suppose you tell us what you know," he said.

The servant was ready enough. "As he's told you, sir, Mr. Huston was here tonight. He and the judge were alone for some little time. In here."

"Anything unusual about the visit?"

Haller hesitated. "Nothing unusual whatever, sir. But if there could be anything like that it was that Mr. Huston had never called here before."

Dalton swung his biting gaze at the lawyer again. "Was Mr. Huston here before St. Just, or after? Before, you said?"

"An hour or so before, sir. He had been gone for perhaps twenty minutes or so when Mr. St. Just came."

Burton put in: "And you saw the

judge receive Mr. St. Just afterward?"

Dalton flicked a quick look at him but the gambler's face was impassive. Haller answered:

"Yes, sir, I did. The judge came to the door here."

Burton subsided. Huston flashed him an odd look.

Dalton pursued: "And you heard no disturbance of any kind?"

"No, sir. I showed Mr. St. Just in. I went for glasses. I drew the champagne cork. Then I left the gentlemen."

"In that case you don't know when Mr. St. Just left?" Dalton leaned forward. "You didn't happen to see your employer alive after St. Just went out, too, did you?"

"No, sir."

Dalton nodded with a glint of triumph in his eyes. "Good! All I want now is to hear what made you come in here when you did. How you happened to discover your master and phone the police."

Haller made a good witness. He hesitated only while his pale eyes flicked toward the couch on which the murdered man had been stretched; then his gaze met the detective's. He showed normal signs of agitation but he was in control of himself.

"Simple enough, sir. At eleven thirty I was supposed to bring the judge his medicine. He took it after meals and before he went to bed. At eleven thirty I knocked on the door repeatedly and finally came in."

"And what did you find?" Dalton asked him sharply.

"The judge was as you saw him, sir."

"Alone?"

"Yes, sir, alone."

"Eleven thirty. And St. Just had just gone. And Mr. Huston had left before St. Just came in. Who. . ."

Dalton turned to the gambler and said in an oddly uncompromising voice:

"Maybe you'll be ready to agree now, Burton. St. Just managed to be somewhere else when Haller came in. So was everybody, damn it!"

Burton was standing there nodding soberly. His eyes roved over the innocent-looking wall safe. The sort of hunch that had carried Black Burton to many victories hit him between the eyes. Dalton heard him say, in a musing voice:

"With times checked as accurately as all this, it seems to me possible the killer knew exceptionally well what he was doing. That he came in here for something. And maybe he knew Haller was in the habit of bringing the judge his medicine at eleven thirty. And so the killer had to leave before he got what he was after." Burton allowed the rest of the speculation to trail off.

Dalton swore softly. "Maybe! And maybe any minute you're going to spring a new theory on me! But I think you'll have to agree now, at that. You've got to admit that the champagne trick is just a natural for that champagne-drinking pet of Huston's."

Burton nodded, his eyes clouded. They scarcely heard him say, mostly under his breath:

"Yes! Too exquisitely natural!"

It was Huston who broke in. He had been standing there looking baffled, at a loss. Now he exclaimed:

"Champagne-drinking pet, you said, Lieutenant. Does that mean you're trying to link up my client, Mr. St. Just, with this—this murder?"

Dalton turned on him witheringly. "And what would you think, Mr. Huston?" he demanded. Then: "Got your pencils sharpened, all your briefs and *habeas corpus* ready? Because you're going to have a nice new case of defense on your hands again—just as soon as I or my men get track of that champagne playboy of yours." Angrily he turned. "Come on, Burton. We'll get out and give Mr. Huston tinte to dig up bail!"

Burton, as he followed him down the dark hall, murmured: "You shouldn't lose your temper, Ned. I didn't want Huston to have to remind a lieutenant on Homicide that there's no bail for murder."



AUTION that had never failed him made Burton, after taking leave of Ned Dalton at Fourteenth Street, direct a taxicab to an address a block north of his own apartment building.

He walked south from the corner. It was late and there was no attendant at the switchboard in the lobby. One elevator was still in use and the dial indicated that it was stationary at the fifteenth floor.

Burton's quarters were on the eleventh. As his forefinger moved out to stab the summoning button he drew back. A thin flicker of warning struck his spine. He hesitated. But the warning was so insistent that he found himself brushing reassuringly at his left coat lapel, where he could feel the hard bulk that his .38 made on its shoulder holster there.

Upstairs Raoul St. Just would be waiting. But still there was something else. Burton had a feeling that he himself was in danger. He had entered this battle. Most of the principals in it knew by now where he had elected to stand. And he was well enough known to be feared. Fear breeds cowards, and cowards forget or ignore Marquis of Queensberry rules.

Burton nodded to himself, turned away from the elevator bank and commenced a silent ascent of the wide staircase.

Han Soy was upstairs, but even Han Soy was no proof against a knife. Or a gun.

And the enemy—whoever it was—might just possibly have guessed the direction in which St. Just had fled after escaping the cops. Many people knew Burton liked St. Just.

At the tenth floor Burton tossed a half smoked cigarette into one of the big urns that stood on each landing. He continued on up the thick-carpeted staircase. The elevator's indicator remained

fixed where it had been, at the fifteenth floor. He thought idly that there was a new and very petite French maid who had recently moved in with the family on that floor.

Outside his own door Burton paused. The butt of his gun was in his hand. He took out his key and let it slide with a minimum of sound into the Yale lock. It clicked gently.

As he pushed the door open he stepped lightly aside. And then he knew he had been wise. The voice of Han Soy struck his ears, in a thin, half choked scream:

"Look!"

That was all. Then came a crunching sound, the echo of a strangled choke. Burton flung himself sidewise, bent low and was inside the door, in the velvet gloom of his own foyer.

A shot came streaking out at him and lead thudded into the steel of the doorway edge.

Burton fired at the flash of it. A dim light still showed in his own library. Only one light, over his favorite reading chair. Below it, on the floor, Han Soy lay.

Burton's shot was answered by two flashes. His dark eyes gleamed. Two antagonists, then, and on opposite sides of the room!

In a half crouch, he made his first sight. Crimson spewed from the black mouth of his gun, charged like living flame across the dusk, and died. Lead made thudding sound as it found human flesh. A body jerked upright, gasped convulsively as one arm reached crazily toward the ceiling. Then the body shuddered backward to slam against the wall paneling.

Han Soy's diminutive form rose from the carpet, doubled up. As another vague figure showed the little Chinaman's body was charging for it.

"Look out, Soy!" Burton cried.

But just as the gun leaped in its owner's hands, just as the sights had come level with Burton's chest, the body of the Chinaman struck. It crashed into

a burly figure below knee height. The figure and Han Soy went to the carpet in a single sprawl.

A gun blasted once more. Han Soy was now entangled with Burton's would-be assassin. Burton swore softly under his breath. The man was using Han Soy as a shield for himself, in one last desperate effort to eke out the chance for another shot at the deadly marksman, Black Burton.

Again the gun blasted out its crimson charge. Burton could feel something pluck at his right shoulder, could feel it tug a little as it laid a crease in his flesh there. On the heels of it another red blast tore out at him.

But he had it now. Han Soy had known. Han Soy wriggled, jerked down a threatening arm, managed to roll clear just as the gun's menace came up once more.

But before it had leveled Burton had fired.

There was no beating that draw and aim to the flash. Burton had scarcely any need to sight. Others had discovered that before. But this man would never live to reassure himself with the knowledge.

Before Han Soy had time to spring himself backward in a single quick jerk, his assailant was dead.

Suddenly the apartment was very silent. The echoes of furious gun-fire still hammered back and forth from wall to wall, slowly dying out.

Han Soy was on his feet. In spite of the fury of the past few seconds he looked almost as calm and unperturbed as usual.

"I am so sorry," he breathed, in a voice that reeked with contrition. "They almost—"

"It's over, anyway," Burton cut in. "And you've nothing to be sorry about. If you hadn't had the courage to call out I'd be dead at this minute. Don't forget that. Those two had no intention of giving me a chance. Where's St. Just?"

"In the bedroom. They came in and

they tied him up first. Then they were going to wait for you, as they did. They put a gag in his mouth, too."

"Get him loose." Burton, now that the excitement was ended, moved across to survey the two men.

One lay on his face. He had to turn him over. Long he stared down into the weasel-like visage, the drawn-back lips, the pointed chin, before he nodded quietly to himself and murmured:

"Chick Morgan. I'm beginning to understand."

But Morgan would never tell him any more than his lifeless face had told. Nothing more than his very presence there had revealed. For as Burton turned to Morgan's companion recognition came into his dark eyes once more, and he straightened up at last with something of satisfaction.

"Chick Morgan and Tanner Owsley," he murmured. "That gets us all ready for the last act."

He turned as a low oath sounded behind him, from the doorway. St. Just stood there, pale and dazed looking. He was coatless, his hair straggling, his eyes bloodshot and uncertain.

"You— They didn't get you?"

"Not this time. Do you feel all right?"

St. Just stared at him, then broke into a wild chuckle. "Do I?" He swore fervently. "You're asking *me* if I feel all right! Certainly, except for some fuzz in the mouth and brain. But you— Good Lord, man, are you made of steel!"

"I'm quite all right," Burton said mildly. He handed Han Soy his gun and the little Chinese took it without a word, ejecting the clip as he pattered down the hall to get a new supply of cartridges. There was seldom need for words between Han Soy and his employer. Burton faced his guest, passed a silk handkerchief over his face. "What were these chaps intending to do with you?"

"Turn me over to the police, they said."

Burton nodded, looking down at the nearest moveless body. At last, "And

they were probably telling the truth," he said. "Morgan, I think, still has a private detective's license, although he's in bad with the police. And there might be a reward. But that isn't why they wanted you in the hands of the law. The idea is that you were the goat. With you for a dummy in the killing of Judge Cresswell, the real killer and the real motive, would never have become known."

"You mean you know the answers to those things?"

"Almost. I'll know 'em within the hour," Burton said. Han Soy came in then, handed him the refilled gun, and Burton slid it back into its holster.

St. Just was saying: "It's gone too far. I was thinking—even at the moment when those thugs broke in—thinking I can't ask you to place yourself in this position for me any longer. It's just too damn much to ask. Why, you might be dead, even now, and solely because you've shouldered another man's quarrel."

Burton set down his glass. "It might have been someone else's quarrel in the beginning," he said. "But it's mine now. I never did see any humor in playing target for anyone."

"But if you'd let me call Huston he might think of some way out."

"Leave Huston alone!" Burton's voice was peremptory. He continued: "I've gone into this thing thus far for you," he said. "The least you can do is to obey orders and stand aside while I see it through."

Burton turned away. "I'm playing the hand out," he said with finality. At the door he picked up his hat and turned. Han Soy stood watching expectantly. Burton's bronzed face twitched in the ghost of a smile for his servant. "Yes, Soy, you're right," he said. "It's quite possible Dalton may telephone. When he does tell him all about it. Tell him I expect him to account for the bodies. And tell him also that if he wants me very badly in the meantime, he's more than likely to find me at Cresswell's."



F BLACK BURTON was surprised he gave no sign of it. He only nodded, there in the dark, as though he had been prepared for what he found in this house.

Some three-quarters of an hour after he had left his own flat he had inserted a skeleton key—an almost forgotten gift from Ned Dalton—into the door opening at the side of Judge Cresswell's up-town house, off the porte-cochère.

He stood there alone in the darkness and the warm silence. But it was a silence that was filled with an ominous meaning. Alone, yes. But yet Burton knew that he was somehow not alone.

His exploring foot touched a body on the floor of the library. The limpness was alive; he could sense that. Alive but quite unmoving. A faint, whimpering sound came, to die instantly.

He bent down. The flabby huddle stirred faintly. Burton's hands felt tentatively over the body. They came in contact with a starched white shirt, a starched stiff collar. He knew the sticky wetness under his fingers, as the fingers moved over the face, for blood. In the dark he scarcely breathed it:

"Haller, our butler!"

Haller was not dead. He had been knocked out and he simply lay there.

Burton straightened up in the dark. Haller lay on the floor. The killer, as Burton had already surmised, had not had time, right after he had struck the first time, to obtain what he had come here for. And Burton could suspect at last what that something was.

When he moved at last away from the body, treading carefully over the thick surface of the rich rug underfoot, and made for the alcove near the high French windows, he knew what he expected to find. And he knew why.

"The champagne motif," he murmured to himself in the darkness, "was a little—just a little—too obvious."

Moving with the utmost stealth, Bur-

ton reached the short stretch of the rear hall. But there was no hesitation in his direction. He made straight for the study where the judge had been killed.

The door there was not entirely closed. He could make out a faint sliver of grayish luminosity beyond it. He reached it.

Listening for a long moment there in the dark, he stopped to nod his head. He had been right, then! There was someone at the wall safe—and it had to be the murderer!

He pushed open the door wide. In that first instant he could glimpse the half crouched form, whirling around to face him like some predatory animal surprised while crouched over its kill. The safe door on the wall was open.

A hand came out from its black interior as though an adder had bit at it from within. A snarl, and the first intruder into the judge's house was facing Burton with a wicked looking automatic leveled.

Burton had not yet drawn. He cried: "It's no use! I've got—"

But the resounding blast from the muzzle of a short ugly Mauser in the invader's hand broke in on his words. Burton's .38 had leaped out from under his left armpit with a speed that might have challenged the speed of light.

Then there were two guns blasting at once. Streaks of avid crimson flame sputtering savagely across the dark room. Outside the pallid moonlight washed down peacefully across the French windows. One of the windows stood partially ajar. A second crash from Burton's automatic ricocheted and a small glass pane tickled from it.

The figure in front of the safe was trying to mouth a curse. It was garbled, strange, eery, in its impotence. For the figure was toppling forward, the gun going to the rug first, the fingers of one hand still clutching at the papers.

Burton stepped back as the body crashed to the floor. His fingers explored and found the light switch. A piercing whistle sounded from some-

where outside and there came the sound of rushing feet, cries. Burton seemed not to have heard the sounds as he stood there staring down at his victim.

"Marvin Huston," he murmured aloud. "After all, it couldn't have been any other way."

He stood back against the wall, gazing almost without interest at the faint trickle of blood running down over his left wrist. His gun he shoved back into its holster.

Disregarding the hurrying feet, he stepped quickly across the room, bent down and took from the dead fingers of the lawyer the packet clutched there. A packet that had all the appearance of a legal document.

As the police arrived he was looking up from the crackling sheets of foolscap. He heard Lieutenant Dalton's raucous, commanding voice, other voices, garbled. He turned, the packet in his hand.

Dalton had taken in the scene with his first survey but there was inquiry in his hard voice when he said:

"What's all this supposed to prove?"

Burton said, "It had to be this way. Huston was here tonight because he was *summoned* here! Why? I haven't had the chance to look through all of those papers, but I can make a good guess as to what they contain. Cresswell had Huston up here before him with a threat. The threat was disbarment. Huston had evidently been up to some rather questionable practices, both before and after he struck the public eye in the St. Just case. Then Judge Cresswell, in his new position, still smarting, perhaps, over the way his bitterness in the St. Just case had boomeranged at him on that last day of the trial, went to work and dug up the goods. He presented proofs here tonight, to Marvin Huston. Huston visualized himself disbarred—disgraced, at the outset of what could have been a glorious career. So What did he do?"

"So *he* killed Cresswell!" Dalton looked baffled. But he turned again to the papers in his hand. "At that, it fits!

And he could've managed to leave that French window open when he was here, knowing St. Just would come later. But you—where do you fit in? What's the rest of the answers?"

"If I gave you time," Burton said quietly, "I have no doubt you'd see them all for yourself. But, you'll agree, Huston had to get those papers, all that evidence, back, or his career was finished. It was a mighty big stake for him."

Dalton nodded. "So far I'm following," he agreed. "But where does St. Just fit in? If any!"

"What you police are so fond of describing as the 'fall guy'." Burton smiled. "Huston had things all his own way tonight. St. Just was here. That deplorable threat was in the records. The champagne was here, and the glasses. Huston left, sure that he'd unfastened this window here. He waited then for St. Just to leave, entered this room via the court outside and the window he'd fixed. Did the kill. He had plenty of time left to plant alibis, too. The only thing that did slip up on him was the time element. But he'd probably been here before, unknown to the butler, and knew that he had to get out before eleven thirty, when Haller'd be coming in with the judge's medicine.

"That forced him to get out in a hurry. In such a hurry that he'd no time to get what he'd come for. I'd guess that he hadn't got his opportunity to stab the judge as soon as he'd expected, and that had delayed his search. In any event the servant came down

here and found his master dead. But the papers were still here! And so Huston had to return to get them. In themselves they form the motivation for the crime; they make a silent witness."

Dalton looked convinced. So did the burly sergeant of detectives who had arrived with him. The police lieutenant looked toward the body of the lawyer.

"Washed up," he murmured, but that was mostly to himself. Then to his sergeant: "The butler? Haller?"

"In the next room. He's comin' around, but slow."

Dalton was biting his lip as he swung back to Burton. "I suppose you know I went down to your apartment?"

"Like what you found?"

"Not at all. But I knew both the muggs. No loss. What was it?"

Burton shrugged. "You can probably answer that for yourself. Our pal Huston realized I was getting too close to the truth. He had to pick up St. Just and deliver him. Figured if he did that he was safe. So he got some cheap henchmen of his to try. Only I came in before I was scheduled. Can you guess the rest?"

Dalton nodded. "I can guess that you got yourself plenty in the way," he said. "But I still don't like the whole game. Where, for instance—perhaps you'll tell me now that he's clear—where is your friend St. Just?"

"If he's where I left him," the gambler said, "I should imagine he's down at my flat. Probably drinking champagne."

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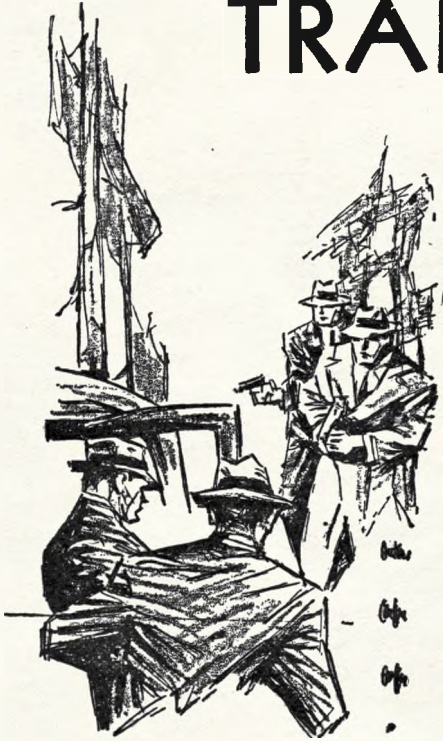
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TRAFFIC LIGHT

A Short Short Story

By LIVINGSTON GIBSON



MONK was the trigger guy on this job. A redhead is too easy to spot, especially with a ragged scar along his map. It was my home town anyway. I was waiting in the car, gunning the motor a little, nervous and hot and jumpy the way you always are just before a job. Then I heard the shot. It was faint, like back-fire a long way off.

I slid the gear-shift lever into first and then Monk was running the low steps from the wholesale company's office. I had the car moving when he piled in.

Monk is usually cold as ice but he wasn't now. His face was white and he looked crazy, like a hop-head. He shoved the leather payroll bag in back. "I hadda plug a guy in there. The mugg went for a gun. I tried to stop him."

We weren't looking for rough stuff,

but cripes, if the guy asked for it. . . . I poured it on and we were around the corner and straightened away, clean.

There isn't much traffic in this neck of town and I figured the lay so we'd only have to hit one light before we got to the Wop's. When we were a hundred feet away the light turned red against us. There was only one other car at the crossing—a model T junk with milk cans in the tonneau and an old guy in overalls driving. He had just started ahead. I could have eased up a little and let him cross and then slid through behind him, but I was feeling kind of wild and I thought, what the hell.

I gunned her out to forty-five and when the old guy saw us hit the intersection he jumped the brake so hard the model T reared back like a bronco and damn near shook itself apart, milk cans and all. I could have slapped his radiator, we were that close, and it all looked so much like a goofy cartoon I couldn't help laughing. I turned and the old guy shook his fist and yelled something I couldn't hear.

Two blocks later we turned into an alley, and there was Rico's garage in front of us with the doors open and the Wop in his greasy overalls waiting.

We drove straight through to the rear and then the false wall closed down behind us. I snapped on the parking lights and Monk found the wall switch.

We were a long time counting the dough. It was all in small denomination bills, just like it left the bank, and it was a slow job. After Rico's split it finally came to a little over twenty-six G's. A fair afternoon's work.

Rico brought some glasses and a bot-

tle and we sat back and relaxed. My jumpy nerves had settled down and I felt good. It was a good clean job and everything working out slick as grease. Of course it was too bad about the guy that got plugged. He shouldn't of been such a damn fool.

I looked at the dough and thought of the things it would buy. Things you think of while you're rotting in stir. Good clothes, thick steaks and a drink when you want it. Soft music in night clubs, and women. Things that drive you screwy just thinking about them.

After a while Monk looked up and asked, "Your pal Conlon still around?"

I laughed a little. "Yeah," I said, "but he don't know who I am. Why d'you think I been cooling off on that lousy P.W.A. job the last five months?"

Conlon is the bull that tripped me up before and sent me away for a three-year stretch. I hate his guts but even at that I got to admit he's a damn smart copper. A big hulk of a guy that looks fat and isn't. Little eyes in a moon face and a thin mouth like a knife scar.

It was getting dusk when we left Rico's. The hide-out we figured for ourselves was a natural. It was a deserted homestead adjoining my old man's farm. I used to play there when I was a kid and it's been vacant as long as I can remember. The buildings are back from the main road and screened by thick woods. We figured to lay over there a few days until things cooled off and then run West.

It was a dark day, damp and cold. In ten minutes we were out of town and into the suburbs. The houses gradually thinned out into woodlands and farm country, and then we turned off onto a narrow gravel road. I kept wondering what the old man would think if he knew I was so close.

The old dump looked as lonesome and dreary as a graveyard when we turned into the clearing. It was a spot to give a blind man the creeps.

I said, "Here's where we bail out."

We stopped the car beside the house

and got out to unload our stuff. And then, directly behind us, there was a sudden scraping sound and Conlon's voice hit us like the flat bark of a gun.

"Reach!"

We whirled around and Monk went for his gun but his arm froze half-way, and Conlon said, "Just like old times, eh Red?" His voice was mild but the muzzle of the Thompson gun looked black and wicked in the dim light. His men slapped the bracelets on us then and Conlon lowered the gun.

The dick grinned at me. "Likely spot. Just about right. Some of the boys are hangin' around your old man's place but I kinda liked this spot better."

One of the dicks looked up from an open suitcase. "The swag's here."

"Sure," said Conlon. "Where else should it be?"

Everything had happened so sudden I still couldn't seem to get it. My thoughts were just crazy flashes, like a movie machine gone nuts. I could see big gray walls and coarse uniforms, and smell the rotten grub. I could see plenty, but through it all I kept wondering over and over who threw the monkey wrench, where we had dummied.

It must have showed in my face because Conlon grinned again and said, "You punks oughta know better then go battin' through a red light. Scared a poor old fella outa a year's growth."

He was razzing us and liking it.

"All right, smart guy," I said. "Spill it."

"Ain't nothin' much to spill," he said. "Only Riley come along a minute later in his cruiser and the old guy sounded off. The time checked out just right."

None of this made any sense and I said, "What the hell, you big flatfoot, you didn't even know I was in town. Why hook me up with it?"

Conlon looked sort of amused. "I wouldn't have," he said finally, "except the old fella said a red-headed guy with a scarred mug turned around and laughed at him. That's what made him sore."



The Nut was punch-drunk, but this rookie believed in punches



HIS NAME was Weinbaum, but of course by the time he reached the goofy stage, his name and most of his past were forgotten.

The lads who hung around Johnson's Gym knew him as "The Nut" and dimly remembered that he had once fought under the tag of Tiny Tim Winters. Anyhow, he was harmless.

Detective Carney knew it, because Carney was an old hand. Patrolman Steve Dougherty, still green enough to

SHADOW

By HUGH B. CAVE

be gazing at his reflection in store windows, hadn't encountered The Nut prior to that night, or heard about The Shadow.

Steve had been a patrolman just twelve days and was doing his night shift for the first time. And of course he hadn't been told about Tiny Tim Winters. Rookies were never told about The Nut. Ready to laugh themselves sick, the wise boys just hung back and waited for the first encounter.

Almost always, after Johnson's Gym closed up for the night, Tiny Tim staggered down Harrison Street, then along Rigney to the subway entrance. That night, Steve Dougherty was all alone on Rigney. A clock uptown had just struck one A.M. and around the corner as usual came Tiny Tim.

"Drunk," guessed Steve.

Waddling like a duck, The Nut approached. He seemed to be hurrying, as always, but made little progress.

When within arm's reach of the patrolman, he suddenly struck up a fighting pose, went through some fancy footwork and took a few lusty jabs at the night air in front of Steve Dougherty's face.

"Got ya!" The Nut cried.

Utterly amazed, Dougherty gaped at him. "What the devil! Get on about your business, you crazy drunk, or I'll run you in!"

The Nut struck an attitude and sidled closer to paw at Steve's sleeve. "Listen," he whispered confidentially. "I'm bein' followed!"

"Huh?"

"I'm bein' followed, I tell ya!"

Dougherty's handsome, boyish face lost its shape in a black scowl. "By who?" he demanded distrustfully.

"I dunno. Only I'm bein' shadowed.

I been hearin' footsteps behind me. Ya gotta do somethin' about it. I gotta have protection!"

"You're drunk!" Dougherty growled. He didn't know The Nut never drank.

"I ain't!"

"Well, get on about your business. Be off with you!"

The Nut grinned. His feet scuffed the sidewalk as he delivered a knock-out punch to an imaginary opponent. "Got ya!" he yelped triumphantly, and then, waddling like a duck, continued on his way.

Steve Dougherty scowled after him and did some pondering. "Followed, huh?" he mused. "Now I wonder. . ."

But then, Dougherty was green. He didn't know that Tiny Tim was *always* being followed, that for years The Nut had been hearing footsteps and demanding protection from invisible pursuers.

Dougherty discovered the theft about fifteen minutes later when, hiking down Harrison Street, he saw the door of Angelo DiConti's store was open. It had been locked when last he had walked past.

Using his flashlight, Steve entered and looked around and instantly spotted the safe in the corner, behind the counter. The safe door had been hacked off its hinges. Watches, jeweler's tools and cheap junk of every description lay strewn about on the floor.

Dougherty remembered something. A while ago, when he had come on duty to relieve Bill Gilson, Gilson had said, "Keep an eye on DiConti's Jewelry Store tonight. He says he's got a valuable mess of rings in the safe."

There were no rings in the junk on the floor. Apparently the thief had pulled the junk out in order to get at the rings.

Dougherty pulled the store door shut after him and hurried to the nearest call-box. He was just finishing the call when Joe Lenehan, the lad who cleaned up the Eagle Pool Room after hours, came skidding around the corner from

Rigney Street and began yowling at him:

"It's The Nut! He fell down the subway stairs! I think he's croaked!"

Dougherty hesitated. By rights he should stay here to keep an eye on the looted store until the men from Headquarters arrived. But the subway wasn't far distant.

"All right," Dougherty said, and followed him.

Tiny Tim Winters would be pursued no more. His pitifully frail body lay in a crumpled heap in the gloom of the subway entrance, at the foot of the first flight of steps. Dougherty saw that he was dead.

Apparently he had fallen down the steps.

There was blood at the corners of his mouth, and both his spindle legs seemed to be broken, and he was dead. Dougherty carried him up the steps and around the corner to DiConti's store, where a police car at the curb was disgorging men.

One of the men was Matt Carney, of the Detective Division, who knew all about Tiny Tim. To him Dougherty told the whole of it.

"Followed?" Carney said, staring at him with hands on hips and a grin spreading. "The Nut—followed? Sure, sure! You want to look into that, mister. That may be the key to the whole situation!"

The others laughed, but Dougherty didn't understand their laughter. He flushed a little because he was sensitive; but being more bewildered than sensitive, he kept his peace.

Carney and the others trooped into the store and looked the place over, but it was Dougherty who picked up one of the watches on the floor and said, "It happened at ten minutes to one."

"Huh?" said Carney.

There was a tag attached to the watch, and Dougherty read it aloud: "Clean. Adjust stem. Mrs. Haggerty. Two dollars."

"And see," Dougherty said, "it's

marked O.K. That means it was running. It stopped when the thief dropped it."

He turned to stare out at the sidewalk, where lay the body of The Nut. Ten minutes to one, eh? After that, the thief had looted the safe, which must have used up an additional five or ten minutes. And then Tiny Tim had come weaving around the corner just as the clock uptown was striking one.

"Maybe *he's* the thief," Dougherty said, pointing.

Carney gaped at him, and the others laughed. "Now that is a possibility," Carney grinned. "If I was you, mister, I'd look in his pockets. Tiny Tim was a real smart character."

Dougherty felt a little foolish and resented the jeers of his companions, but again he kept his peace. After the others had finished their investigation and gone away, he did a lot of thinking.



MATT CARNEY made the DiConti case very interesting by accusing DiConti himself. It was open and shut, said Matt. "Listen. Weeks go by and there ain't a thing in that store worth stealing. Then DiConti buys a fistful of diamond rings from a pawnbroker uptown who needs money—and what happens? 'Thieves' break into the store!"

DiConti wailed his protests. To be sure, the stuff in his store was insured against theft. He admitted that. But why would he steal it? Was he not an honest man?

"Listen," said Carney. "No one else but you even knew the rings were in the store."

"That is not true! Solly Minkler, who sold me the rings, he knew I had them. And so did Officer Gilson, to whom I said, 'Please will you keep a careful watch over my store tonight!'"

Without tangible evidence Carney could make no arrests. He concentrated

on the task of locating the stolen jewelry.

About that time, Steve Dougherty, who did not know that The Nut had always been followed, arrived at certain grave conclusions and went to work. He asked questions first concerning the reputation of Officer Gilson, and learned that Gilson's record was of the finest. Then one afternoon when off duty and out of uniform, he strolled to the pawn shop of Solly Minkler.

It was a grimy little store, and Solly Minkler was a grimy little character with small, wide-awake eyes and a shrill voice. Dougherty took some long looks at Minkler and bought a second-hand camera.

"My name's Anderson. I got something maybe you'd like to buy," Steve said.

"Yeah? What?"

"Well, I got a friend who knows the fight game, see? Me, I ain't interested in fights much, but this friend of mine, he owns a collection of pictures that's supposed to be worth real dough. Maybe you'd be interested."

It was not a blind stab in the dark. A number of old-time fight pictures hung on the walls of the shop, and dozens of dog-eared, sporty lithographs were piled in the corner.

"Whatta ya mean, real dough?" Minkler demanded suspiciously.

"Well, they ain't junk like these. They're real."

Minkler hesitated, rubbing his chin. "We-e-ll, sometimes I buy stuff like that. You bring 'em in Friday, when Jake's here. I wouldn't buy no fight pictures without Jake's approval."

Having no friend who owned a collection of fight pictures, Steve spent the rest of the afternoon in second-hand bookstores, acquiring a collection, and went that evening to Johnson's Gymnasium.

"You remember Tiny Tim Winters?"

"The Nut? Sure!" said Johnson.

"He was pretty good once, wasn't he?"

"Sure. He fought some good fights in his day."

"Well," Dougherty said, "I want to get a picture of him in his fightin' clothes. You know—for a collection."

Amused, Johnson took a dusty one from the wall and gave it to Steve.

Friday morning he strolled again into Solly Minkler's hock shop.

"I brought the prints," he said.

"Yeah?" said Solly dubiously. "Let's look at 'em."

Dougherty spread a dozen large good prints on the counter. There were lithographs of famous fights and famous fighters—Cribb, Sayers, Mace of the old-timers, John L., Jeffries, Jack Johnson and others.

"Worth dough, eh?" he said hopefully.

Solly Minkler examined them and then walked to the rear of the store and opened a door. "Jake!" he called. "I want you should look at some fight pictures for me!"

A large individual with cauliflower ears came and looked at the pictures. He seemed impressed until he bent closer to examine one marked *Kid McCoy*. Then he stared at Dougherty, and expelled a prodigious guffaw.

"McCoy!" he bellowed. "Would you look at what the sap thinks is McCoy!"

"What's the matter?" Dougherty mumbled.

"What's the matter? This here ain't Kid McCoy, sap! This is Goofy Tim Winters! Who in hell wants a picture of him?"

"There must be some mistake," Dougherty faltered.

"McCoy!" Jake choked. "Tryin' to pass The Nut off for McCoy! G'wan, scam!"

Dougherty looked scared. He meant to look scared. Hastily snatching the bundle of prints, he hurried to the door.

Half an hour later, when the man named Jake came out of Solly Minkler's store, a shadow straightened in a doorway across the street and moved along

in stride with him. The shadow was Steve Dougherty and the rookie, despite his size, shadowed well.

"I TELL you," Carney declared, "Di-

Conti is guilty as hell. Look. He buys those rings and puts 'em in his safe. He tells Gilson to keep an eye on the place, when he knows that Gilson won't be walking that tour after six P.M. Then what? The thief got into the store without any trouble, because he had a key. As for bustin' the safe open—of course he busted it open! He had to, to make the job look real. We didn't find any fingerprints on that safe, did we? None but DiConti's!"

It looked very bad for Mr. DiConti but DiConti himself was still wailing his innocence. And Carney still had no proof.

Meanwhile, Matt Carney heard something. Heard it first from Murray Saunders, who ran the Eagle Pool Room, and later from others along Harrison Street.

"Sa-a-ay, Carney. What do you know about that new cop, that Dougherty?"

Carney grinned. "Dougherty? Ha! The dope is still trying to find out who was following The Nut that night!"

"Yeah, but listen. He's no sap. He may be drawin' a rookie's pay but he knows how to get more."

It seemed inconceivable, of course, but Carney discreetly checked around and discovered that it was true. Despite his faults, Carney was honest. It grieved him to hear that Steve Dougherty, for a price, was willing to overlook some of the things that went on around Harrison Street.

"Listen, kid," and the frown on Carney's face had roots that ran deep, "what's this I hear about your drawin' extra pay? Are they kiddin' me or is it true?"

Dougherty shrugged his shoulders. "Sure it's true. All cops do it, don't they?"

"Not in this department, they don't!"
"Well, I'm gettin' what I can."

Carney could have gone to those higher up, but didn't. "The kid's up to something," he told himself.

He wasn't there, though, when Steve Dougherty put through the important phone call. Dougherty was off duty that afternoon when he telephoned the pawnshop of Solly Minkler. Minkler's high voice answered.

"Listen, Solly," Dougherty said, his mouth close to the phone and his voice pitched low, "this is Whitey."

It had taken many days of cautious inquiry to unearth the fact that a Mr. Whitey Reynolds and the man named Jake—whose other name was Bartell—were Solly Minkler's two closest associates. Such things are not easily learned.

This afternoon, more than two hours ago, Whitey Reynolds had boarded a train for Albany. Dougherty had watched him depart.

It was now or never.

"This is Whitey," Dougherty mumbled. "Listen. I ain't left town yet. By accident I heard something, and I been checkin' up—and what I heard is true."

Solly Minkler listened most attentively.



STEVE DOUGHERTY stayed at home that evening. Home was a small, tidy two-room apartment on Beecher Street, just around the corner from Police Headquarters. Dougherty did a lot of other things while staying home, but when the phone rang he was at ease in his shirt-sleeves, stockinged feet propped on a chair, and a newspaper in his lap. Without disturbing himself he reached for the phone.

"Is this Steve Dougherty?" It was the voice of Jake Bartell.

"Yeah."

"Well, I'd like to have a talk with you, Mr. Dougherty. In person, I mean. You gonna be home this evening?"

"Yeah."

"Then I'll drop around. The name's Bartell. O.K.?"

"O.K.," Dougherty said.

Bartell arrived about twenty minutes later, alone. He knocked, and Dougherty shouted, "Come in. Door's unlocked. I figured you'd be around eventually."

Bartell didn't take a chair right away. He looked around first and seemed to think he might find something to justify the suspicions that were obviously gnawing him. He glanced through the open door to the bedroom and said, "I just gotta make sure, buddy." His right hand stayed in his pocket all that time, and when he came back to the table, Dougherty said, "Take it easy. I don't bite."

"This joint is too near Police Headquarters to suit me," Bartell muttered. "Anyhow, I guess you know why I got the jitters. I only found out today that—" His eyes widened.

"Sa-a-ay! Ain't you the guy that brought in the pictures?"

"Yes."

"Then there's somethin' screwy here! I was a sap to come here!"

"Take it easy," Dougherty said softly. "You'll be a bigger sap if you walk out. The pictures were just an idea, see? Just to find out what you and Solly Minkler knew about the fight game."

Bartell sat down, but kept a hand in his pocket. Sweat glistened on his face and the corners of his mouth twitched.

"What do you know?" he muttered.

"I know it all."

"Yeah?" Bartell's voice was not much more than a whisper. "Well, listen. You ain't no sap, Dougherty. I been around, checkin' up to find out what kind of a guy you are, and you ain't no dumb cop. Anyhow, it wasn't murder. The Nut was goofy, wasn't he? He woulda croaked anyhow in a little while. It was an act of mercy, almost."

"Sure."

"Now look, Dougherty. I ain't no millionaire, but I got a little dough, see?"

I inquired around before I come up here, and the wise boys tells me you're a regular guy."

"I might listen to reason," Dougherty said quietly.

Bartell relaxed a little and seemed to gain confidence. Then, with a crafty gleam in his narrowed eyes: "What makes you so sure I done it, anyway?"

"You were seen," Steve lied.

"Who seen it?" Bartell demanded hoarsely.

"That's my business."

"Well, look. It coulda been an accident—that's how easy I shoved him. So help me, I practically only slapped him on the back!"

"But the stairs were steep, Bartell, and that made it murder."

"You can't prove that!"

"You had the motive."

"You can't prove that, either!"

"No? You're forgetting that the police know exactly what time Di Conti's store was robbed. Between ten of one and one. And at one o'clock, or a few seconds after, Tim came walking around the corner, Bartell. So . . ."

"I could twist that around to prove The Nut stole the stuff himself!"

"He wasn't the type, Bartell. It proves only one thing: The Nut happened along and recognized you. You were scared. You knew he'd talk."

Bartell's lips were twitching again. "All right, all right. I said I'd pay you off, didn't I? How much?"

"I been wondering. Why should you dig down for the whole of it?"

Bartell's eyes narrowed. Apparently it hadn't occurred to him that he might pass part of the buck to someone else.

"Yeah, why should I? Minkler thought up the idea. I done the job alone, but he gimme my instructions. Why should I take the rap?"

"Who's got the loot now?"

"He has! All I got was a measly hundred bucks for doin' the job!"

"Well, how you handle Minkler is your own business," Dougherty said. "I've got my end figured out, and I'll

give it to you straight." His glance roved to Bartell's hands, which were now in the open. "See this?" he said softly, standing up.

He pushed the newspaper from his lap and exposed a small switch in his hand. A cord snaked from it down behind the couch and under the carpet to a large scrap basket under the table. Dougherty pointed to it.

"There's a dictaphone in that basket. I paid out ten dollars to rent it, so Police Headquarters could listen to you later!"

Most coppers would have told Bartell about the dictaphone after closing a cell door on him. Dougherty said later that he kept looking at Bartell's big hands, and kept remembering Tiny Tim Winters, and, well, the desire to mangle that smug, fat face was just too much.

Bartell gaped at the cord. The color ran from his face like paint from a cracked cup. It took about five seconds for the truth to seep home. Then he reached for his gun.

Steve Dougherty's head and right shoulder caught him plumb square in the chest at the end of a flying tackle. Bartell's contorted body broke through the back of the chair and crashed to the floor.

The gun stayed in Bartell's pocket. He couldn't get to it, so he used his fists instead and they weren't good enough.

He knew the fight game from first-hand experience in the ring, and outweighed Steve by thirty pounds. He used his knees, feet and elbows and tried to get a grip with his teeth. But although he threw all he had into every effort, fair and foul, it wasn't enough.

Dougherty said later he just kept thinking he was Tiny Tim Winters, getting even. He kept remembering that small, broken body at the foot of the subway steps.

He rid himself of that memory with blows that put Jake Bartell on ice. Then, in his boyish exuberance, he yelled at the unconscious Jake while he waited for Carney to answer his call to Headquarters.

"They think I'm a crook down at Headquarters, see? First they called me crazy for not believin' DiConti was guilty. Then they found out I was acceptin' bribes. Well, I had to. It was the only way to get you. I'm new at this game, and I had to plug along slow and easy, the hard way, with no mistakes.

"That money goes back now, Bartell. Back to the guys who gave it to me. But DiConti goes free and you and Minkler go up for murder, so it was all worth it."

It was all over when Carney and the lads from Headquarters arrived on the scene. Bartell was still out cold on the floor, and Dougherty was sitting near him, kind of groggy and dazed, but making gestures and elaborately explaining that business of the dictaphone—as if Bartell cared!

"Thought you were smart, huh, when you looked the place over? Well, I didn't think you'd be smart enough to look in the waste basket. I wasn't takin' no chances with you."

Carney and the others took Bartell

over to Headquarters, and it wasn't long before Solly Minkler was brought in to keep him company. They poured a lot of hot coffee down Steve's throat, and after a while the kid stopped talking to himself.

"Well," Carney said, admiringly messing over him, "I guess the booby prize goes to me."

Dougherty stared. "It had to be Solly Minkler," he said, still a bit dazed. "You see, it couldn't have been Gilson because policemen are honest. And it couldn't have been Mr. DiConti, because *he* wouldn't have thrown all that stuff around and broken Mrs. Haggerty's watch—not after he just finished repairing it. So it had to be Minkler or someone working for Minkler, and he had to know Tiny Tim, because if Tim hadn't recognized him. . . .

"Don't you see?" the kid rambled on. "When I told you what Tim said about being followed, you just laughed at me. And now, you see, he *was* followed."

"Kid," Carney declared humbly, "you're all right."



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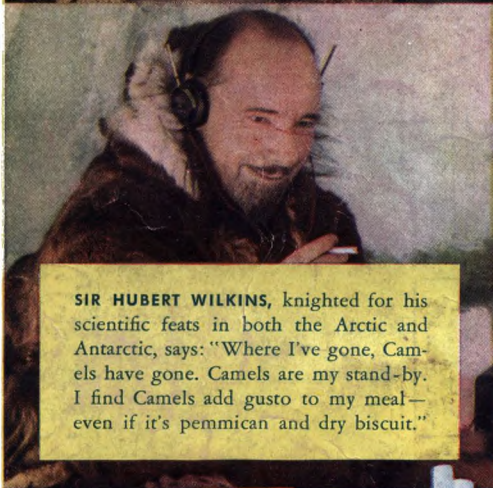
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