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BLACK MASK★



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MAGAZINE



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**DECEMBER
1938**



GARGLE LISTERINE... *at once*

Feel chilly? . . . Uneasy? . . . With just a hint of rawness and tickle in the throat?

Do something about it, quick! before there is actual pain in swallowing.

Don't Treat Symptoms Get At the Cause

The irritated throat-surface is usually the result of infection by germs. Help the system in its fight to repel these germs by gargling with Listerine Antiseptic.

Every one of these surface germs which it reaches is almost instantly killed by full-strength Listerine Antiseptic. It destroys not only one type of germ, or two; but any and all kinds which are associated with the Common Cold and Simple Sore Throat. And there are literally millions of such germs in the mouth.

The effect of Listerine is definitely *antiseptic* —NOT *anesthetic*. It doesn't lull you into a feeling of false security by merely dulling the irritation in the throat. Listerine acts to check the infection, and so gives Nature a helping hand.

Fewer, Less Severe Colds Proved in Clinical Tests

Many users report best results with gargling every hour. If the inflammation still persists, it is

advisable to consult your doctor.

Seven years of carefully supervised medical research established the clear-cut finding that those who gargled regularly with Listerine Antiseptic had *fewer* colds . . . and got rid of them *faster* . . . than non-garglers.

This winter, why not make a test of your own case? Get a bottle of Listerine Antiseptic, *the safe antiseptic with the pleasant taste*. Keep it handy in the medicine cabinet. Use it regularly.

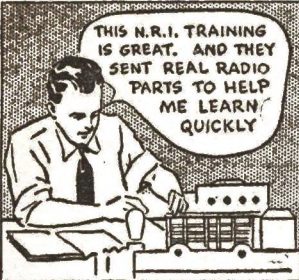
Then see if your experience doesn't check with that of millions who never accept anything but Listerine Antiseptic when they buy an antiseptic mouth-wash.

LAMBERT PHARMACAL CO.
St. Louis, Mo.

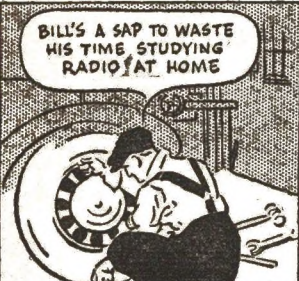




BILL SAID "YES" HE'S MAKING GOOD MONEY IN RADIO NOW



TOM SAID "NO" HE'S STILL WAITING FOR "LUCK"



I WILL TRAIN YOU AT HOME *in Spare Time* FOR A GOOD RADIO JOB



J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute
Established 1914

Many Radio Experts Make \$30, \$50, \$75 a Week

Radio broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, station managers and pay up to \$5,000 a year. Fixing Radio sets in spare time pays many \$200 to \$500 a year — full time jobs with Radio jobbers, manufacturers and dealers as much as \$30, \$50, \$75 a week. Many Radio Experts open full or part time Radio sales and repair businesses. Radio manufacturers and jobbers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, engineers, servicemen, and pay up to \$6,000 a year. Automobile, police, aviation, commercial Radio, loudspeaker systems are newer fields offering good opportunities now and for the future. Television promises to open many good jobs soon. Men I trained have good jobs in these branches of Radio. Read how they got their jobs. Mail coupon.

Many Make \$5, \$10, \$15 a Week Extra in Spare Time While Learning

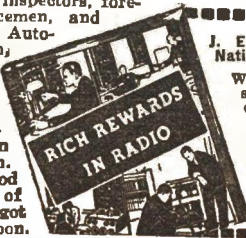
The day you enroll I start sending Extra Money Job Sheets; show you how to do Radio repair jobs. Throughout your training I send plans and directions that made good spare time money—\$200 to \$500—for hundreds, while learning. I send you special Radio equipment to conduct experiments and build circuits. This 50-50 method of training makes learning at home interesting, fascinating, practical. I ALSO GIVE YOU A MODERN PROFESSIONAL ALL-WAVE, ALL-PURPOSE RADIO SET SERVICING INSTRUMENT to help you make good money fixing Radios while learning and equip you for full time jobs after graduation.

time and full time opportunities and those coming in Television; tells about my training in Radio and Television; shows you letters from men I trained, telling what they are doing and earning. Find out what Radio offers YOU! MAIL COUPON in an envelope or paste it on a postcard—NOW!

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute, Dept. 8NM
Washington, D. C.

Find Out What Radio Offers You

Act Today. Mail the coupon for "Rich Rewards in Radio." It's free to any fellow over 16 years old. It points out Radio's spare



J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 8NM,
National Radio Institute, Washington, D.C.

Without obligating me, send "Rich Rewards in Radio" which points out spare time and full time opportunities in Radio and explains your method of training men at home to be Radio Experts. (Please Write Plainly.)

NAME..... AGE.....
ADDRESS.....
CITY..... STATE.....

PLEASE mention NEWSSTAND FICTION UNIT when answering advertisements

BLACK MASK

A MAGAZINE OF GRIPPING, SMASHING DETECTIVE STORIES

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F. ELLSWORTH, Editor

J. B. MAGILL, Managing Editor

VOL. XXI No. 9

December, 1938

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Cover painting by James Lunnon Headings by Arthur Rodman Bowker

IN JANUARY

"MURDER FOR PENNIES"

A PARSON NOVELETTE OF SWIFT DEATH AND JUSTICE

By JAMES DUNCAN

F. C. CODY, President and Circulation Director

F. ELLSWORTH, Vice-President

Issued Monthly by PRO-DISTRIBUTORS PUBLISHING CO., Inc., 2242 Grove St., Chicago, Ill.

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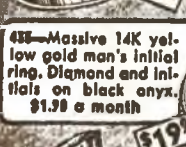
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ring. Diamond and initials
on black onyx.
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\$3975 R1224 — Bulova's
newest
feature — the Dolly
Madison. Tiny watch
with 21 jewel move-
ment. Case in charm
and color of natural
gold. Complete in
gift box.
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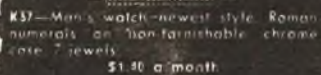
P270—Ladies' Tiny watch, 2 diamonds in
newest style case charm and color of
natural gold. 7 jewels. \$1.70 a month



P514—Small size 20 diamond watch—14K
white gold. 17 jewels. Worth \$65.
\$4.65 a month



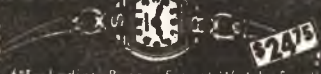
R37—Men's watch—newest style. Roman
numerals on lion-furnishable chrome
case. 7 jewels. \$1.80 a month



W188 — 10K yellow
gold engraved
Cross with Chain.
Size illustrated.
\$1 a month



**613—Bensus 17 jewel Sig-
net Watch with initials in 10K**
yellow rolled gold plate case. Mention
initials. \$1.98 a month



415—Ladies' Bensus Signal Watch. Small
size. 10K yellow rolled gold plate case.
Bracelet to match. 7 jewels.
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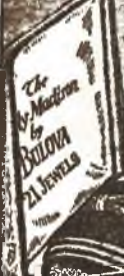
R129—Ladies' Bulova—a 17 jewel
feature in charm and color of
natural gold. \$2.82 a month

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Minute Man — 17
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charm and
color of na-
tural gold.
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30x5-50-19	3.00	32x4-10P	8.70
6-50-13	1.45	34x7	3.75
5-50-17	1.35	34x7	3.75
30x5-50-18	3.15	4-60-20	\$3.45
31x5-50-18	3.15	4-60-20	\$3.45
32x5-50-20	3.15	50-20	5.45
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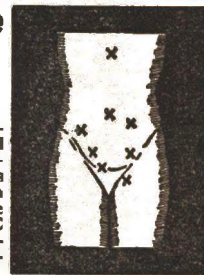
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Help protect your skin against Intestinal waste poisons

Ridiculed and shunned because of ugly, pimple-blemished skin? Get right at a common cause of the trouble—guard against intestinal waste poisons.

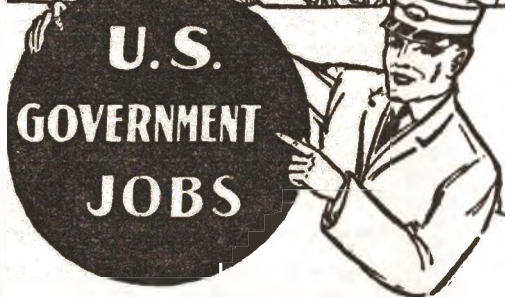
Between 18 and 25, the skin is apt to be over-sensitive. At the same time, poor digestion and elimination often throw waste poisons into the blood stream . . . that may be carried to the skin and cause repulsive, ugly pimples to break out.

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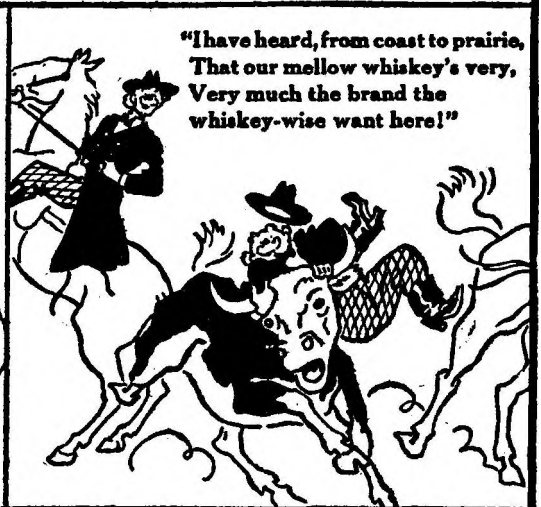
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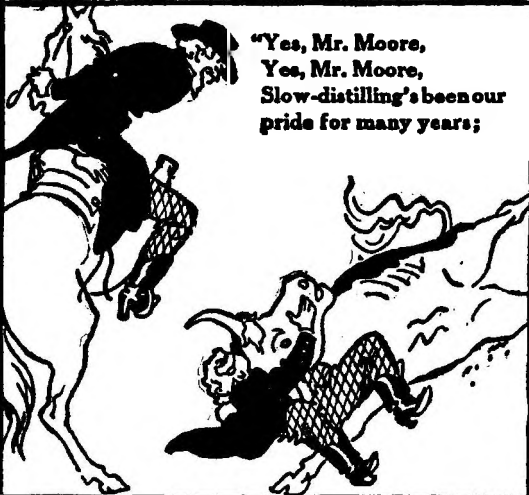
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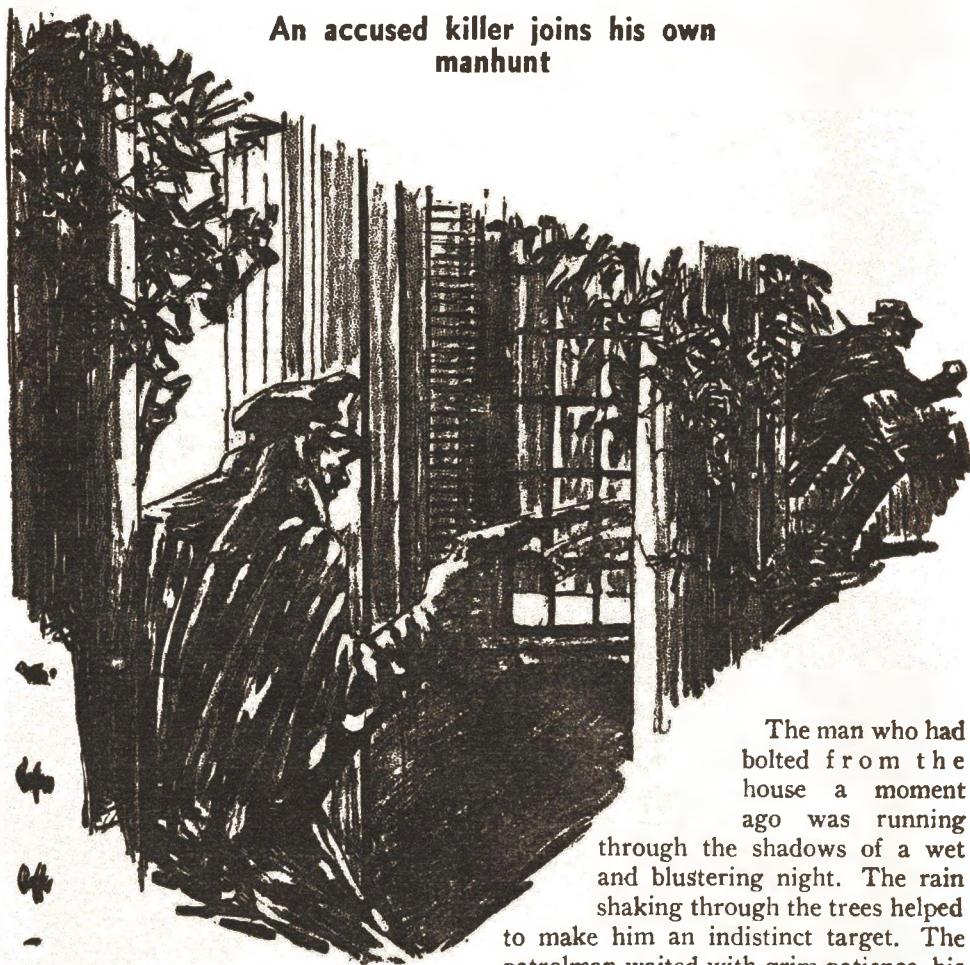
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STOP THE PRESSES

By **FREDERICK C. DAVIS**

An accused killer joins his own
manhunt



The man who had bolted from the house a moment ago was running through the shadows of a wet and blustering night. The rain shaking through the trees helped to make him an indistinct target. The patrolman waited with grim patience, his gun still lifted, while the fugitive moved toward the shine of the street light at the corner.



THE PATROLMAN came out of the dark door, crossed the porch and paused on the top step. In his right hand he was holding his service revolver. He lifted the gun and aimed with cool deliberation at the dark figure that was fleeing down Sycamore Drive.

The light was a hazard that the escaping man could not avoid. Suddenly he became clearly visible. Running with his shoulders hunched, his hat pulled low, a coat bundled under his left arm, he crossed the sidewalk with the obvious purpose of dodging into the darker side

street. At that instant the patrolman fired.

The shot was a flash of coppery flame, a thunderbolt that caused the fugitive to stumble. He seemed about to fall; but he caught himself and dove into the shelter of a hedge.

The patrolman sprang from the steps. Watchful for any flicker of movement, his gun poised, he hastened to the intersection. His wet rubber coat glistened as he paused, peering in every direction through the downpour. His quarry was nowhere in sight.

Quickly he turned about and hurried back to the house. The only light in the house was shafting up through the open door of the cellar. The patrolman gazed down the stairs and his ruddy face grew hard. His lips were thin, his chin blunt and his eyes calculating. In a confidently decisive manner he took up the telephone. The line was open. A voice was rasping over it when he tucked the receiver inside the flap of his rubber cap.

"Hello, hello, Orr!" the voice was saying.

"Patrolman Orr speaking again, Inspector. He made a break for it, sir—turned off the lights, ran out and got away. Better signal the Radio Bureau, sir."

"Give me his description."

"Age about thirty, sir. Good looking chap. Six feet, brown hair, blue eyes, wearing a gray suit. He grabbed up a hat and some kind of a topcoat on the way out, but I didn't get a look at them. I fired at him, sir, and I'm sure I hit him."

Patrolman Orr could hear Inspector Early talking to the Radio Bureau over the office dictograph.

"It's on the air now," the inspector informed him briskly. "Go back to what you were telling me when he made the break."

"Yes, sir. I was working my tour about ten minutes ago when I heard a couple of gunshots—muffled reports, like they'd come from inside one of the houses. I tried to locate the house, and

the next thing I heard was a chopping sound in the Wayne place, Number 5750 Sycamore Drive. I entered by the front door without knocking, and I walked right in on a murder."

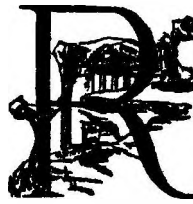
"You say Mrs. Wayne's body is in the cellar?"

"Yes, sir. She's not wearing anything but a nightgown, so he must have shot her upstairs in the bedroom, then carried her down. I found Wayne, her husband, down there with her. There's a hole dug in the floor underneath the stairs. Looks like he was going to bury her—hide her body."

"Stay right there until the Homicide Squad arrives," Inspector Early directed, "then come to my office and make a full report."

"Yes, sir."

Patrolman Orr disconnected, turned to the cellar door and descended into the cold cement room where the murdered woman lay. . . .



RAIN swept by in angry gusts. It pelted the streaming windows, poured off swinging signs and filled the gutters. Only a few cars and fewer pedestrians were braving the storm, but in the downtown section of the city scores of rubber-coated cops were on the prowl. Orders direct from the Chief's office had organized every available patrolman into a concerted manhunt. They tried the doors of stores that were closed for the night; they tramped through back alleys and dark yards; they peered into every doorway, their eyes alert for a fugitive wanted for murder.

As one of them appeared at the corner directly ahead of him, Stephen Wayne lowered his head. Through the water dripping from the brim of his sodden hat he gazed warily at the ominous black figure. His steps slowed. The cop was tramping toward him.

He turned to the only possible shelter near-by—the door of a cheap restaurant.

He went in quietly, concealing the anxious tension of his nerves, trying to appear to be a casual customer. The air in here was warm and heavy with the greasy odor of cooking. Two men were perched on stools at the white tile counter. Behind it another man who had a soiled apron wrapped around his paunch was frying two hamburgers on the grill.

Stephen Wayne opened his streaming coat and shook the water from his hat, using only his right hand while his left arm hung stiffly at his side. He slid onto another of the stools.

"Coffee," he said.

He saw the cop step into the doorway. The cop stood there, looking up and down the street. Watching him through the tails of his eyes, Wayne drank coffee. He drank slowly, while the patrolman remained in the doorway.

There was a midget radio sitting on a shelf. It had been playing but now its music was fading. Wayne sat motionless, listening to an announcement.

"From the editorial room of the *Queen City Chronicle* comes another dispatch concerning the murder of Mrs. Stephen Wayne. The police are still searching for the husband of the dead woman. The railroad terminal, the airport, the bus stations are being watched. All cars leaving the city are being stopped.

"Chief of Police Beckett has just issued a statement saying that he believes Stephen Wayne, wanted for the killing of his wife, has not succeeded in escaping the city. Chief Beckett is confident that Wayne's apprehension is only a matter of hours, perhaps minutes.

"The weapon of murder has not been found. It is believed that Wayne is still carrying the gun with which he allegedly murdered his wife. All officers detailed to the case have been warned that Wayne is evidently desperate to escape justice and that an attempt to capture him may mean a gunfight. Chief Beckett, who is known for his direct and drastic methods, has ordered his men, 'If it is necessary to shoot in order to

capture Wayne, shoot first.' The *Queen City Chronicle* will bring you more news concerning the Wayne murder as developments arise."

Stephen Wayne's mouth tightened. His cup was empty now. He saw that the patrolman was still blocking the door. He slowly moved his left arm and suppressed a pained grimace. His high forehead was covered with cold dew. His nerves were jerking and his stomach seemed about to capsize. Rising, he left a nickel on the counter and turned to the door in the rear that was labeled *Men*.

After a few moments he felt steadier. He sank the bolt into its socket, then worked himself out of his coats. The left sleeve of his shirt was crusty with dried blood. Rolling it up, he found that the bullet had hit him at a point three inches above the elbow.

Evidently it had been almost spent, for it was lodged in the tough muscle. It hadn't gone in very far. Wayne could feel the hard lump in his flesh. At first the wound hadn't hurt much, but now the numbness was gone. It felt hot and raw. It was swelling and throbbing. He folded his handkerchief and wrapped it around his arm, knotting it as tightly as he could with one hand and his teeth. He got back into his coat and topcoat, then released the bolt and looked toward the front door of the restaurant.

The patrolman was no longer there. Drawing an easier breath, Wayne walked through the restaurant and went out. Raindrops drove into his face. He leaned against the whipping wind, keeping close to the buildings. He turned the corner in an effort to escape the lash of the storm. Abruptly he stopped short.

Another patrolman was moving toward him. The patrolman's head was lifted and his eyes, shadowed by the visor of his raincap, were directed straight at Wayne. Wayne set his jaw. Knowing that the cop's suspicions would be aroused if he turned and hurried away, he went on.

Just ahead of him there was another

doorway. A legend was lettered in gold on the glass panes: *Queen City Chronicle*. Reasoning that a newspaper office would be the last place in the city that a fugitive would be expected to enter, he reached for the knob.

The glass showed him a startling reflection. The cop was also turning toward the door.

Wayne entered a foyer. On his right it opened into a large room. A sign hung overhead: Advertising Department. There was a counter bearing another sign, Classified Section, and behind it sat many desks. None of the desks was occupied, and most of the overhead lights were out, but two young women were working behind the counter. Neither of them looked up at Wayne.

He felt the surge of the wind as the entrance opened behind him. The patrolman was coming in.

Still moving, Wayne turned to a door on the left. It was lettered: Press Room, No Admittance. He stepped into a deafening din.

Two gigantic presses were roaring. A score of pressmen wearing inky overalls were busy around them. The air was hot. The heat, with an odor of scorched paper, was coming from the stereotype machines, with their tanks of molten type metal, at the farther end of the room.

Near-by two men were bending over a metal-topped table on which several page-forms were lying. One of the men had shaggy white hair. In one blue-veined hand he was holding a magnifying glass through which he was reading the type in a number of galley trays. He looked up curiously and said something which Stephen Wayne could not distinguish through the thunder of the presses.

Wayne glanced around quickly, searching for another way out; but the door behind him was opening. The patrolman was following him.

His nerves straining, Wayne checked a wild impulse to spin about, to thrust his way past the cop, to run. He forced

himself to pretend that he was paying no attention to the patrolman, and that he was here for a legitimate purpose. Then he saw the headlines on the front pages of the newspapers that were pouring out of the presses: Cop Surprises Husband Burying Murdered Wife in Cellar.

Wayne stood transfixed, staring at the damning black print. His throat dry, he watched several pressmen pick up armloads of the papers, deftly bind them with twine and send the bundles tumbling down a chute—news to be rushed to every point of the city and to scores of near-by towns.

Suddenly he was aware that the white-headed man was tapping his wounded arm.

"Looking for the city room?" the old man shouted at him.

Wayne eased his arm away. Over his shoulder he saw that the cop was still standing in the doorway. He had to swallow some of the fire in his throat before he could answer.

"Yes. Yes," he shouted back. "Where is the city room?"

"Upstairs," the hoary-headed man yelled. "Are you Lester?" He took Wayne's arm and Wayne stiffened with pain. He brought his colorless lips close to Wayne's ear. "Are you Chick Lester?"

Wayne chanced answering this question with a nod. The old man pulled him toward the door at which the cop was posted. He might have wrenched himself away if the cop had not, at that moment, wagged a comradely hand. The three of them stepped into the foyer.

"My name's Lamb," the old man said, taking Wayne's hand and pumping it. "Make-up editor. Gifford's waiting for you, Lester. Expected you hours ago. We've got plenty to keep us busy tonight." He turned to the patrolman. "Officer Harrigan, Mr. Lester," he introduced. "Bad night out to be hunting for a killer, isn't it, Harrigan?"

"It is that," the patrolman said, mopping his face with his handkerchief.

"Wet job, but we're hoping it'll soon be over. Not much chance of his getting away. Just thought I'd come in and wring a little of the rain out of me."

Wayne drew a breath and ventured, "A murder? Tonight? Where?"

"Lester's just come from Kansas City," Lamb explained to the patrolman. "Remember those pictures of the riot at the Amalgamated plant there? He took 'em—some of the best action shots I ever used. You're just in time, Lester. Gifford's been howling his head off about having only one lens man on the job tonight. Come along with me, and he'll tell you about it."



BECAUSE the patrolman was remaining in the lobby, Wayne was forced to accompany Lamb. They climbed three flights of iron stairs, then pushed through a pair of swinging doors into the city room. Wayne paused, wondering coldly if there was anyone here who might know him by sight.

Five young men and a girl were seated at desks, all pounding typewriters. They gave Wayne no more than a glance. At another desk in the far corner a man wearing a green eye-shade was rapidly reading a sheaf of copy and holding a blue pencil poised. Lamb touched his shoulder.

"Here's your new photog, Gifford."

Gifford reared up from his chair and grabbed Wayne's hand. He was a lanky young man whose clean-cut face looked feverish. His intelligent eyes were full of excitement.

"Lester! Am I glad to see you!" he exclaimed. "We've got the sweetest murder case in years. I've only had one cameraman since Samuels left—you're taking Samuel's place—and he's been running around in circles ever since the case broke tonight, trying to cover it single-handed. I want all the pix I can get, the more the better."

"Since I got to be city editor we're

using more pix in a week than we used to run in a month. You'll have to hop right out on this thing. Jenkins will steer you around until you get the lay of the land. Say, those riot shots of yours were swell. When Samuels quit I knew you were the man I wanted. What kept you? Is this storm tying up the roads?"

Wayne groped for an answer. "That's it. They're flooded in places. Nothing serious, but I had to take a detour. Sorry I couldn't get here sooner, but—"

A precipitous interruption came then. A door at the side of the room had opened and a dynamic little chap was inserting himself between Wayne and Gifford. He was redheaded and vociferously elated. He slapped several photographic prints, still damp, on Gifford's desk.

"There's the murder victim, lying right where Orr found her," he said in a rush. "She was a beauty, wasn't she? Spoiled as hell, though, you can see it in her face. Look how little she's got on. Boy, I wish we could run it. We can't, because it would shock the natives, but I had to get it. The other one shows the hole her husband was digging in the cellar with a big poker. He hadn't got very far with it before Orr found him. Boy, how this is building up!"

The photograph of Nadine was lying directly in front of Wayne: Nadine dead, clad only in a film of silk, lying on her back on the cement floor, with those two ghastly wounds in her chest. Beside her was the cavity in the cement, ragged and dark. A chill started prickling at the back of Wayne's neck and spread to his arms, down his spine. He closed his eyes.

The redheaded chap was saying, "There's a long shot of the cellar, showing the corpse under a sheet. We can use that one. There's a close-up of the cellar windows with burlap bags tacked over 'em so no light would shine out and attract attention. He'd been planning this thing, Giff, planning it a long while. According to the neighbors—"

Gifford was rattling the hook of his

telephone. "Press room!" he demanded over the wire. "Stop the presses!" he ordered. "Hold 'em, and break up page one for a new layout. Jenk just brought me some pix. Leave room for a four-column spread. We'll have to wait for the cuts. Damn it, Ape, quit yelling and stop those presses!"

Wayne saw Gifford handing the photographs to Lamb. Peering through his magnifying glass, Lamb immediately began working with brush and ink, preparing them for the engraver. Jenkins was still talking.

"Listen, Giff. What the neighbors are saying makes it all the tougher for this Wayne guy. The Homicide boys have been asking 'em questions and learning plenty about—"

"What about a picture of Wayne?" Gifford asked quickly. "I want to plaster that guy's mug all over the front page. It'll help catch him, if he's still on the loose tomorrow—help crack the case."

"I went all through that house, trying to snatch one, but Inspector Early said they couldn't find any," Jenkins answered. "The Waynes didn't move into town until a couple of months ago, and the cops haven't even uncovered any of their connections yet. Listen, Giff, about the neighbors. The Waynes were married less than a year ago, but their home life seems to have been one continual scrap. The people next door say they heard the wife once, yelling that she was going to divorce him and sock him for plenty of alimony."

"I get it. It got to be too much for Wayne to take," Gifford said. "Jenk," he added with a gesture, "this is Chick Lester."

Jenkins gripped Wayne's hand eagerly. "Lester! Mighty glad to know you. I'm glad Samuels decided to go to New York and freelance, so now we've got a real lens hawk on the job. I'm pretty new at this game, and I'm hoping you can help me along with a few pointers. What say? I'll get you acquainted with the burg, and you—"

"Got your camera along, Lester?" Gifford asked.

"No—no, I haven't," Wayne managed. "Not tonight. You see, my baggage—"

"Get him Samuels' old box, Jenk," Gifford directed. "Both of you boys are going to be hopping the rest of the night. You can't give me too many pix. Lester, I want you to give me a good shot of the cop who caught Wayne red-handed."

Wayne could only nod.

"Jenk couldn't get at him because he'd been called in to report," Gifford hurried on. "His name is Orr. He's your most important assignment, but I want you to shoot everything else that looks good. You'll probably pick up something new at Police Headquarters. Jenk, take him over right away and introduce him to Inspector Early and Chief Beckett."

"Sure thing!" Jenkins promised.

Wayne said quietly, "How about a— a press card?"

Gifford reached into a drawer of his desk. He took out a card, wrote the name of Charles Lester on it, then scrawled his signature. Wayne's fingers tingled as Gifford passed it to him. He saw it as a means of getting himself outside the police dragnet. Until the real Lester appeared — how soon, Wayne could not guess—it would enable him to conceal his own identity and escape to another city.

Determined to make the most of an opportunity that might vanish at any moment, Wayne was tucking the card into his wallet when a sudden opening of the swinging doors startled him.

The man who marched in was heavily muscular. His sleeves were rolled far up his hairy arms and he was wearing an ink-spotted apron of canvas. His head lowered and his eyes flashing with anger, he slammed his fist upon Gifford's desk.

"Don't start yelling at me, Ape," Gifford said quickly. "You've got to hold the presses for—"

"Great Gawd!" growled the big man. "Every time I start an edition rolling you howl at me to stop the presses, stop

the presses. Damn it, Giff, I can't change the train schedules. Whenever the mail edition misses, I hear complaints from hundreds of farmers who get the paper two days late. The big boss jumps down my throat for that, not yours. I'm not stopping my presses for you every time you get a new picture. I'm getting out my editions on time. And don't call me Ape. My name's Apperman."

The presses were, in fact, still rumbling in the basement. Wayne found a chance to take hold of himself while Gifford and Apperman argued. He allowed the eager Jenkins to lead him into a cubbyhole that was equipped as a darkroom. It was full of an acrid smell rising from the solutions in the white trays on the bench. The shelves were crowded with bottles and supplies—boxes of film and printing paper, cans of chemicals and piles of flash bulbs. As Wayne tried to clarify his thoughts Jenkins placed a camera in his hands.

"It's in good shape and the speed gun has just been checked," Jenkins said. "Here's a dozen holders in your case, all loaded, and plenty of bulbs. You're all set. Say, I've been looking forward to meeting you, Lester. I'm anxious to see how you work."

Wayne's mind was far beyond the camera that he was seemingly inspecting. "You've got plenty to do tonight, without having me on your hands, Jenk," he said quietly. "Just tell me where Headquarters is, and I'll find my way."

"Wouldn't think of it," Jenkins demurred happily. "It'll be a pleasure to show you around. The inspector and the chief are good guys, but you've got to know how to handle 'em. I'll be glad to give you the dope."

Wayne's lips twirled. "Altogether, you seem to be giving this Wayne chap the works," he said. "Apparently the police are sure he's guilty."

"Say, we're going to town on this, all right," Jenkins agreed. "It's open and shut."

Wayne swallowed. "No possibility that the police are wrong?"

"Not any," Jenkins assured him blithely. "Wayne is guilty as hell. Once the cops grab him, he's as good as hung. You might read about it in the galley proofs while I load up."



WAYNE eased from the darkroom and stood outside the door a moment. There was a peculiar chill gathering around his heart. He looked from one to another of the busy staff, numbly marveling that none of them realized a fugitive wanted for murder was in their midst. None of them? His eyes stopped on the face of the girl sitting at one of the desks. She had ceased belaboring her typewriter and was studying him with a puzzled expression.

For a moment they gazed at each other, the girl curiously, Wayne with sharp misgivings. Her questioning eyes were a deep brown. Her lips were parted slightly, as if she were about to speak to him. With her long-bobbed hair and jumper dress she almost looked like a school kid, except that she seemed so knowing. After a moment her eyes dropped to her work, but the puzzled expression remained on her face.

Troubled, Wayne went to Lamb's desk. A pug-nosed copy-boy was standing beside it, impatient to whisk the pictures away the moment Lamb finished retouching them. Wayne leaned over Lamb's shoulder. The white-headed man was about to hand the prints to the boy when Wayne reached for them. He turned to Gifford's desk.

"See here," Wayne said.

Gifford looked up.

"Notice this," Wayne went on. "The bottom of this hole in the floor is flat. It couldn't have been left like that if Wayne was digging with a big poker. In fact, no matter what tool was used, it wouldn't leave a surface as perfectly even as this."

Gifford inspected the picture. "Must be the lighting that makes it look that

way," he said. He gazed at Wayne again, with keener interest.

Wayne hesitated, but risked another comment. "Supposedly Wayne was about to bury his wife's body—conceal it. To do that he'd have to restore the floor afterward. But look at this other picture. It shows almost the whole cellar. I don't see anything that he might have used for the purpose. Jenk said Wayne had been planning all this, but—well, for instance, there isn't any bag of cement."

Wayne withstood the glint in Gifford's shrewd eyes. "Doesn't mean anything," Gifford said. "If he'd already provided himself with some cement for patching up the floor, it might be out of range of the camera, or in the garage, or somewhere else. Maybe he intended to buy some tomorrow. Don't worry, the cops will check on that. What're you driving at, Lester? Picking up a hunch that Wayne isn't guilty? Why?"

Wayne forced a smile. "It strikes me as a good angle, playing up both sides of the case. It would make a better story if we let the police work on their theory that Wayne is guilty while we try to find evidence to prove he's innocent."

Gifford wagged his head emphatically. "We don't try to show up the police department. That guy's guilty as hell. He hasn't got a chance. Hustle up that picture of Patrolman Orr as fast as you can, will you, Lester?" Gifford returned to slashing at a mess of copy with his blue pencil.

The copy-boy snatched the pictures from Wayne's hand and went out the swinging doors at a run. His shoulders sagging, Wayne turned from the city editor's desk. He picked up a fresh copy of the *Chronicle* that had just been brought up from the press room. The condemning headlines shouted at him. He scanned the body of the story. It read:

"Although the record of Patrolman George Orr, who surprised Wayne beside the dead body of Mrs. Wayne in the cellar of the house on Sycamore Drive, shows that he has been disciplined for

using his gun too freely, and also for insubordination and absence from his post without leave, he has, on the other hand, distinguished himself several times by capturing wanted criminals in the face of great danger.

"Orr's most important capture was made about four years ago near the place where Mrs. Wayne was murdered. The Sycamore Drive development was then being constructed. Orr discovered Leonard Nolan hiding in one of the unfinished houses. Nolan had committed a payroll robbery earlier that day at the Eureka Manufacturing plant. He had been recognized, but he had escaped with his loot. Following his capture by Patrolman Orr, Nolan was convicted and sentenced to the State Prison."

His mind stirred, Wayne rapidly read a short news item under a separate headline that followed these paragraphs.

"Leonard Nolan, convicted of stealing a \$20,000 payroll of the Eureka Manufacturing Company four years ago, completed his sentence at the State Prison yesterday and was released. Nolan has returned to this city."

Seeking information concerning his own status in the case, Wayne lifted his eyes to an earlier passage in the column.

"Mrs. Wayne had lived most of her life in this city, but Stephen Wayne is a comparative stranger, having come to the city about a year ago as an adjuster for a nationally known automobile insurance company. The police immediately set about obtaining a detailed description and a photograph of Wayne from the insurance company's files. At headquarters the theory was first held that Wayne might be concealing himself by—"

"O.K.," a voice said at Wayne's elbow. "Come along."

His nerves snapped. He looked up tensely, expecting to find himself confronted by a detective who had already penetrated his masquerade—but it was Jenkins. The redheaded cameraman had emerged from the darkroom, his case slung over one shoulder. Hot breath drained from Wayne's lungs. He tried to answer Jenkins' eagerness with a smile.

"Yes," he said quietly, "let's get going."

Turning, he saw that the girl was standing near him, her eyes still puzzled. Again she seemed about to speak, to question him. Wayne found himself dreading her unspoken words.

"This is Chick Lester, Sue," he heard the cameraman saying at his side. "Chick, this is Sue Carey. She's not only our society editor but she's such a wise little package, she writes the Beauty Hints column too."

Wayne forced himself to say cordially, "Hello, Sue. With—with such ability, you should be on the news end."

Sue Carey put her small hand into his. "I'd like to be, but Giff won't give me the chance. He doesn't like sob sisters, but one of these days I'm going to prove to him that I'm equal to the job." Her eyes were searching Wayne's. Quietly she added, watching his reaction, "I've got a hunch that maybe I'll soon find my chance."

"Well, good luck," Wayne said quickly.

Jenkins was at the swinging doors, signaling him to hurry. Full of mounting uneasiness, he was conscious that Sue Carey's gaze was following him. Jenkins' eager manner indicated that he had every intention of sticking close to Wayne.

"You've an assignment of your own, haven't you, Jenk?" Wayne said. "There's no need for you to waste time steering me around when I can just as easily—"

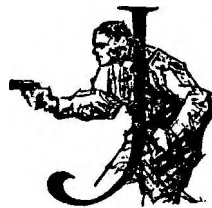
"I've got to stop in at Headquarters first myself," Jenkins answered. "It's just around the corner. Anyway, I want to see how you handle it when you get your shot of Orr."

Wayne's lips drew thin. Though his false identity was affording him a short respite from the manhunt of the police, a feeling of hopelessness weighed upon him. The odds were heavily against his avoiding arrest much longer. To face Orr, he knew, would mean his immediate unmasking. And soon, perhaps at any moment, the real Lester would show up and report to Gifford.

Even if Wayne made a break for it now, and succeeded in escaping the city with the aid of his press card, his movements would be traced and he would be dragged back. Inevitably, before the night was done, he would stand revealed as the fugitive wanted for murder. But until that moment came, he would have an opportunity to learn at first hand, as he could in no other way, how the case was building up against him. His decision, grimly made, was to continue to play his part as long as possible.

He examined his camera as he followed Jenkins down the iron stairway. He had never handled one like it. Compared with the little Leica he owned, the Speed Graphic seemed a complicated machine. The flash-gun affixed to it made it even more formidable—he had never used one. Though he was familiar with the principles of photography, he lacked experience with this particular type of equipment. He had scarcely time for a good look at the shutter and the range-finder before Jenkins was pushing out into the street.

The rain had slackened. Wayne slipped the camera into his case. Striding along with Jenkins, he became acutely conscious of his arm. The pain was sharpening. There was grave danger, he realized, that an infection might set in. He saw blue-coated patrolmen still moving about the streets. Abruptly he found himself at the door of police headquarters.



JENKINS escorted him down the corridor. They passed neat offices in which men were efficiently busy. His nerves tightening each moment, Wayne followed Jenkins through a door lettered: Inspector Early.

"Back on the job," Jenkins accounted to the crisp-looking man at the desk. "Inspector, meet one of the best lens-luggers in the business, Chick Lester. Lester wants to get a shot of Patrolman Orr."

Early's big hand closed over Wayne's. "Hello, Lester. Orr's busy right now. The Chief's talking to him. You'll have to wait until he comes out. You know how camera-shy Beckett is, Jenk."

The inspector jerked a thumb toward the adjoining office. The tight muscles across Wayne's chest eased a little.

"On your way to the morgue, Jenk? They've finished the autopsy on her. We've got the two bullets that killed her, one of 'em out of her heart. They're being photographed in the lab now. I expect they'll help to pin this thing on Wayne all the tighter."

Jenkins was getting ready with his camera. Watching him making the adjustments, Wayne duplicated them on his own box.

"Have you any idea where Wayne is, Inspector?" Wayne inquired quietly.

"Pretty close to the end of his rope," Early answered bluntly. "He's crazy to try to make a get-away. He doesn't stand a chance. . . . O.K., Jenk?"

Jenkins' shutter clicked and the flash-bulb glared. He stepped back, glancing expectantly at Wayne. Without being sure that his camera was set correctly, Wayne drew out the slide of the film-holder, climbed on a chair, aimed the lens downward at Early and pressed the shutter release. To his immense relief the shutter clicked and the bulb flashed.

"Nice angle," Jenkins said. "How about those bullets, Inspector? You're going to give me a couple pictures of them, aren't you?"

Early nodded, eying Wayne. "We'll work right along with you. You'll find we've got a first-class department here, Lester. Our lab is the best in the country outside of New York and Newark. We welcome every new scientific development that'll help us catch crooks. The whole department's on special duty in this case. Organization and advanced methods—that's the way we work. All the lawyers in the State won't be able to get Wayne off a first-degree rap."

"Not even if he's innocent?" Wayne asked softly.

Early guffawed. "Very funny," he remarked, as if Wayne had intended it for a wisecrack. "The case is all sewed up right now, but just for good measure we want to get our hands on one more piece of evidence. We'll probably find it on Wayne when we grab him—the gun he used. Anything else I can do for you boys?"

Wayne said, "I'd like to take a look around."

Jenkins turned to follow, but Wayne winked. With a knowing nod, Jenkins drew back, perched himself on a corner of the inspector's desk and invited further conversation. Wayne walked down the corridor and out the entrance.

The fact that Gifford was counting on him to deliver a picture of Orr sent him around to the side of the building. He was still determined to prolong his masquerade in order to pick up all the information possible. He walked through a parking lot until he reached the rear corner. The windows of Chief Beckett's office were above his head.

Wayne pulled the discharged flash bulb out of the synchronizer, sank a fresh one into the socket, reversed the plate-holder, then repeated the settings he had seen Jenkins make. With his camera cocked, he climbed onto a sedan that was sitting beneath the windows. He stood on the top, gazing into the office.

Orr was facing the chief's desk. Wayne vividly remembered his hard features and ominously confident manner. He could not hear the report Orr was making, but the man seated at the desk was listening intently.

Chief Beckett's bearing was severely military. His face was florid, his nose bulbous and red. Wayne aimed his camera, focussed carefully through the range-finder, then thumbed the plunger. The glare of the flash filled the office. Orr and Beckett spun about. Wayne jumped off the car, hoping grimly that the picture would satisfy Gifford and that in this way he could avoid coming face to face with Orr.

When he reached the entrance of

Headquarters, he met Jenkins coming out. Jenkins looked jubilant. He grasped Wayne's arm and pulled him away from the door.

"Nice work!" he exclaimed. "You're the first photog who ever caught Beckett unawares. He's so sensitive about that schnozzle, he won't let any of us turn a lens in his direction. He came out of his office roaring, so we'd better wait until he cools off. I hope your shot's good, Lester—it's just the sort of stuff Giff likes. Better hop back and put it through the soup. I'm going over to the morgue. See you later."

Jenkins hurried across the street. Wayne walked slowly toward the *Chronicle* office. His mind reverted to the paragraphs he had read in the early edition. There was something about them that bothered him, like a splinter caught in his mind. He was self-absorbed until he reached the entrance of the building. There he paused, gazing alertly at a taxi that was just stopping at the curb.

A thin young man was clambering out of it. He had a bulging suitcase and a smaller case like the one Wayne was carrying. Galvanized, Wayne opened the door, swung his own case inside, then turned back. The thin young man was paying off the driver.

"Hello," Wayne said. "You're Lester, aren't you?"

"That's right." Lester looked hurried and tired. "You on the paper?"

"I'm Gifford," Wayne said.

Lester gripped Wayne's hand. "Har'ya, Gifford? Sorry as hell I'm so late. The damned bus I was on got bogged down. I had to help pull it out of the mud. I'd have been here on time if—"

"That's O.K.," Wayne said. "We're busy tonight, but we've got everything covered. You look pretty wet. You'd better find yourself a room in a hotel. No need for you to work tonight."

Lester sighed with relief. "That's damned decent of you, Gifford. Fact is, if I don't get a hot bath I'll come down

with a lousy cold. I'll be around tomorrow, about five."

"Fine," Wayne said.

He helped Lester heave the cases back into the taxi. Lester gave him a farewell salute and the cab turned about. Wayne drew a deep breath as it swerved from sight at the corner. He turned back to the door—and stopped short.

Sue Carey was standing just outside the entrance. She had put on an oilskin coat and a jaunty little hat was perched on her head. Again she was gazing at him in that strangely wise way of hers. He went to her slowly.

"Think you're going to like it here, Mr. Lester?" she quietly inquired.

"Much better than the spot I was in before I came," he answered.

She walked out into the rain. Wayne's anxious eyes followed her a moment. He stepped in, took up his case, ran up the stairs to the city room and immediately turned to the darkroom. Gifford was busy and did not glance up.

Closing and bolting the door, Wayne peeled off his trench coat. He felt of his wounded arm. It was swelling and the blood was pounding through it hotly. His mouth set, he turned to the trays. He acquainted himself with the layout on the bench, then switched off the lights.

In total darkness, because he surmised his film was super-pan, he opened his holders. He remembered reading in a photographic magazine that newspaper cameramen, usually pressed for time, used rapid developers.

After two minutes he turned on the dim green light. In two more minutes the images on the films looked strong. He rinsed them, then slid them into the tray of hypo. The rapidity with which they cleared surprised him. While they hung in the circulating wash-water, he found a tray that smelled strongly of alcohol. That would be a rapid-drying solution.

He printed the negatives and, after using the rapid-drier again, turned on the white light. The shot of Early was crisp and clear. That of Orr and Beckett

in the chief's office was not quite as good. Strangely pleased, Wayne took the prints out to the city desk. Gifford scanned them quickly.

"Orr reporting to the chief," Wayne explained. "Instead of waiting, I tried a candid shot through the window."

"Good," Gifford said. "We'll use it. That's the type of stuff I want. But I still need a close-up portrait of Orr."

"He'll be busy a while," Wayne said quickly. "Won't this one fill the bill?"

"Get Orr again as soon as you can," Gifford insisted. "A straight shot. Also, try having him aim his gun straight at the camera, and see how it turns out. Any new leads?"

"I'm just getting acquainted with the setup," Wayne said, "but I may have something soon."

Gifford nodded, passed the prints to Lamb, and turned back to his blue-slashed copy. Wayne asked quietly of the white-headed man, "Where are the files—back issues?" Lamb indicated a door at the far corner of the room.

Beyond it, Wayne found racks loaded with bound copies of the *Chronicle*. Selecting one dated just four years ago, he split it open on a large tilted table and began flipping from front page to front page.

Presently he found the story of the payroll robbery at the Eureka plant and the capture of the criminal. Leonard Nolan's photograph, taken at Headquarters following his arrest, showed him to be a sunken-cheeked, sly-eyed young man with an expression of dazed defeat.

Another half-tone showed Orr characteristically hard-faced and confident, but thinner. There was a view of the Sycamore Drive development, showing half a dozen houses in various stages of development, with an arrow indicating the one, not far from Number 5750, where Nolan had been captured.

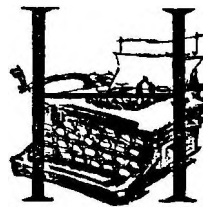
Wayne followed the story of the crime to the stage at which the headlines shouted Nolan's conviction.

"The deciding evidence at the trial was the identification of Nolan as the lone stick-up man by several eye-witnesses to the robbery. The defense pleaded that the lack of material evidence raised a reasonable doubt of Nolan's guilt, since the loot, not having been found, could not be directly connected with him. The police, in fact, are still searching for the stolen money, the loss of which was covered by bond.

"The testimony of the eye-witnesses, however, added to the fact that Nolan's alibi was proved false by the prosecutor, was deemed sufficient by the jury to. . ."

Wayne winced as something touched his throbbing arm. His breath stopped. He lifted his head quickly. Sue Carey was standing beside him, gazing at him with open-eyed apprehension, her lips parted, her breath coming rapidly.

"Why are you pretending to be Chick Lester?" she asked.



HIS SHOULDERS sagged. A feeling of nausea suffused him. He began in a husky tone, "What makes you think I'm not—" but his voice faded. It was no good, trying to put something over on this girl. Her eyes were too wise.

"I know you're not Chick Lester," she said. "I met him once, about a year ago, when I was visiting out of town. You're not anything like him."

Wayne made a gesture of despair. "That stops me," he admitted. He saw that Sue Carey was pale, that she was trying to keep herself from trembling. After a moment he asked, "Why haven't you told Gifford?"

"I want to learn the rest of it first—why you're impersonating Chick Lester, and who you really are. It's my story, and I want to spring it on Giff all at once, so he'll realize I *can* handle real news."

"I think you'll get your wish, Sue," Wayne said evenly. "You—you don't know who I am?"

She shook her head. "No."

He leaned toward her tensely. "Look

here. You want your chance, and I want one for myself. You'll have a bigger story than you expect, if you'll play along with me a little while. Can't we make a bargain between us?"

She hesitated. "I—I don't quite know what you mean."

"I'll tell you the whole story, if you'll listen, if you'll try to believe me. All I want in return is a little time, a few hours. Is there any place where we can talk alone?"

She thought a moment, uneasily. "My apartment is only a block from here."

"Giff won't miss us if we talk fast," Wayne said quickly. "You're not afraid to go there with me, are you?"

"Yes," she admitted. "Yes, I am. But if I let it make any difference I'll never be any good as a reporter. I think the— the chance is worth taking."

"Good girl," Wayne said. "You'll be all right."

He left the file room quickly. He was glad that Gifford didn't glance up. Sue followed him out the swinging doors. They walked through the rain rapidly. The girl glanced at Wayne repeatedly, anxious yet determined. Her apartment was cozy and quiet. He eased his arm and sank into a chair. She remained standing near the door, warily estimating him.

He smiled. "I won't hurt you."

"No—no, I don't think you will," she answered; but her voice was not quite steady. "You don't seem the type. You—you're not a crook, though, are you?"

"I'm Stephen Wayne."

She stood there staring at him.

"Don't let that frighten you," he said earnestly.

She was motionless.

"Judging from all I've heard," Wayne went on, "I haven't a prayer of clearing myself, but I've got to try anyway. I didn't deliberately set out to impersonate Chick Lester. I was sort of jockeyed into it. Then I realized it was a chance to work under cover and unearth some evidence in my favor, if there is any. That's why I want a little time, just a

few hours, so I can at least make a stab at it."

"Stephen Wayne working in our own city room!" the girl said in a hushed tone. "You expect me to keep quiet about *that*?"

His drawn smile faded. "I suppose it is too much to ask. It's the sort of story you've been dreaming about, isn't it? And all your own. Well then, perhaps you'd better listen. You'll have to have the facts, won't you?"

She said anxiously, "Yes."

"I wish you wouldn't be so nervous."

She moved to a chair and sat in it, stiffly. "You—you don't look like the sort who'd—" She could get no further than that.

"Thanks," he said wryly. "That's the first kind word I've heard about myself since it happened. I wonder if you'll believe me."

"I don't know."

"I can't blame you for being doubtful. Look here. Perhaps this would be easier for both of us if you were doing something while I talk. Would you mind taking a look at my arm?"

He shook off his coats. He felt Sue stiffen when she saw his bloody sleeve, but she helped him to roll it up. As she gazed at the wound her face turned white. She stepped quickly into the bathroom and opened the medicine cabinet.

"Have you a pair of tweezers?" he asked. "The bullet isn't in very far."

She came back slowly. "Did—did you kill your wife?" she asked, almost inaudibly.

"No," Wayne said.

She hesitated another moment, gazing at his wound. "That's a job for a doctor."

"I can't go to a doctor. He'd notify the police immediately. You'd lose your story, too. Do you think you can get the bullet out?"

"I can try—if you can stand it."

"Try," he urged.

He watched her gratefully while she sterilized the tweezers, boiling them in a pan on the gas stove in her tiny kitchen.

She brought bandages and adhesive tape and a bottle of antiseptic. Taking up the tweezers, she steadied herself.

"You won't hurt me," he said. "Get it out, that's the important thing."

His right hand clenched the arm of the chair. The sharp points of the tweezers felt white hot. Sweat broke out on his forehead. He could hear Sue breathing rapidly. Presently something hard fell into the pan of water. Lifting his head, he saw the bullet.

"Good work," he said hoarsely. "Didn't hurt a bit."

"This is iodine," she warned him.

The room began to spin. He clamped his eyes shut. Minutes passed before the burning lessened and became bearable. When he looked up again, the girl was taping a bandage neatly over the wound. Next she put a tall glass into his hand. It was half full of Scotch. He drank some of it.

"Thanks," he said. "It feels better already."

She sat opposite him, looking like a frightened child.

"I didn't do much talking, did I?" he observed. "I'm afraid I'm not the Gable type. For instance, I realize now that I was a damned fool to break away from that cop."

"Why did you?"

"I'm not sure," Wayne said. "I told him that whoever had killed my wife must be somewhere near the house. I tried to get him to go outside and look around. He wouldn't, naturally. All I could think of was that if somebody didn't go outside and try to find the murderer, he'd get away and never be seen again. That's why I ran out—hoping to find some trace of him. Of course I didn't. I hadn't a chance. After that I realized how black it looked for me, and there was nothing I could do but try to stay out of reach of the police."

Sue asked quickly, "What made you think that somebody was outside—and close?"

"While I was unlocking the front door

I heard somebody going out the back way."

"You mean you came home when somebody was down in the cellar, digging that hole in the floor?"

Wayne leaned toward the girl. "I'd just come from the office. I'd been working there alone, writing up some late reports. I realize this is no good as an alibi. I haven't any. I thought I'd better tell you everything from the beginning. My car is being overhauled, so I took the bus out to Sycamore Drive and walked the three blocks from the bus stop to my house. The house was dark. I thought Nadine had gone to bed. Evidently she had, but—"

"When you went in," Sue interrupted quickly, "are you sure you heard somebody going out the back?"

"I can't prove it, of course," Wayne said. "Whoever was down in the cellar, he'd heard me crossing the front porch. He had time to get out before I unlocked the door. I went into the kitchen to get a bottle of beer, and I noticed that the cellar door was standing ajar, and a light was shining down there. I found my wife lying at the foot of the stairs. The big poker, from the furnace, was lying across her. I picked it up, and just then the cop came down."

"Didn't the cop — didn't Patrolman Orr see anybody sneaking away from there?"

"He said he'd heard a pounding sound, and he'd been standing in the garden at the side of the house, listening and watching. He hadn't seen me come in. That's reasonable as there's a high hedge. And if the man who'd gone out the back way had ducked behind the garage, the cop wouldn't have seen him. All the circumstances put together—" Wayne clenched his hands. "Nadine and I were never happy. In fact, we were miserable together. We seemed to bring out the worst in each other, but it was never so bad that I'd be driven to kill her."

"You can't prove any of this," Sue said.

"Not one detail," Wayne admitted.

He searched her eyes. "But—do you believe me?"

"Somehow I can't help it."

"Thanks," Wayne said quietly. "Will you let me have the few hours I want?"

"But what can you do?"

"You're taking a chance, you know," he reminded her. "I may make another break for it as soon as I get outside your door. The cops may pick me up, and then you'll be left out in the cold on the story. Had you thought of that?"

"Yes, but what can you do, in so little time?"

"There's something my mind keeps grasping at," Wayne said quickly. "I know Nadine didn't have any enemies. Nobody hated her enough to kill her. She hadn't any lover so that angle is out. Something came in from outside, something that meant her death because she was in the way. It's very vague, but things connect up. Do you know where I can find a man named Leonard Nolan?"

Sue shook her head.

"Four years ago Nolan was captured not far from the house I leased on Sycamore Drive. Yesterday he was let out of prison. Tonight somebody came into that house, for some reason, and killed Nadine. Put it all together—that, and a lot more I haven't found out yet—and it means something. That's why I want a little more time, so I can try to learn the rest."

"Then—then you'd better get busy. You won't have long."

"No," Wayne agreed. "I won't have long." He rose and closed his hand on her arm. "You're swell."

"Maybe I'm crazy," she said, "but I don't think so."

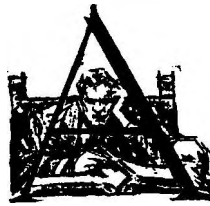
Together they stepped out of the apartment. Sue paused. "Just a minute," she said quietly. She went back in, closing the door. Wayne waited in the hall until she reappeared a moment later. She was still wary of him, but thoughtful. Walking quickly through the rain, they turned back to the *Chronicle* plant.

"I wish there was some way I could

keep the story for you, when the big news breaks, one way or the other," Wayne said. "You rate it."

"Maybe not," the girl answered. "Maybe Giff's right. Maybe I'm not built to be a real reporter. I could turn you in and get a by-line under a big screamer head, but somehow that doesn't seem to be the most important point. If I didn't give you the chance you want, if you were hauled up and tried and convicted and—and—" She pushed her hands deep into the pockets of her coat. "I'd always have to think that if it weren't for me, it wouldn't have happened that way. I guess my conscience means more to me than a few headlines."

Wayne's hand held her arm snugly. "Giff's right," he said gently. "But, Lord, you don't know how grateful I am for that!"



AS THEY reached the *Chronicle* building they saw Jenkins piling out of a taxi. They caught up with him at the door. Wayne stopped him and signaled Sue with a glance. She hurried in. Jenkins gave Wayne a puzzled frown.

"Have you any pix you'll have to put through right away?" Wayne asked quickly.

"I've got one of the woman in the morgue, but we probably won't be able to run it," Jenkins said. "What's up?"

"I've picked up a new lead," Wayne said. "It may build up into something big. I'll need you along. Listen. Leonard Nolan came back to town yesterday from the State Prison. Where can we find him?"

Jenkins shrugged. "He might've crawled into any one of a thousand different holes. What about him?"

"But isn't there any way we can connect with him?"

"Bill would probably know," Jenkins said.

"Who's Bill?"

"Bill Mahoney runs a saloon on the other side of the railroad tracks. He knows everybody."

"Get in," Wayne said.

He had signaled the taxi to wait, and now he pushed Jenkins into it. Jenkins gave the driver an address, and the cab ground away. Rain eddied in the windows and the street lights flashed past. The redheaded photographer gazed at Wayne curiously.

"What's this add up to?" he asked.

"I don't know yet," Wayne confessed. "It may come to nothing at all. On the other hand, it may crack the case."

"Pin it on Wayne? So far as that goes, the case is already cracked."

"Pin it on somebody else," Wayne said.

Jenkins snorted. "That's out! We're wasting our time. Say, you're a stranger here in town. How come you're going off on a crazy hunch like this? Where'd you get this cockeyed idea that Wayne didn't do it?"

Wayne smiled slowly. "That's my own peculiar angle," he said.

Jenkins studied him with a strange light in his eyes. When the cab pulled to the curb, he asked the driver to wait. Bill's place was a sooty brick building. The air inside was heady with the fumes of many years' sloppings of beer and liquor. An automatic phonograph was playing so loudly that the bass notes jarred the glasses behind the bar. Jenkins ordered two beers from the barrel-bellied man who was officiating at the spigots.

"This is Chick Lester, Bill," Jenkins said. "Just started working for the paper tonight. We're after a little friendly information."

Bill said nothing.

"Happen to know where Leonard Nolan is, Bill?" Wayne inquired.

Bill wiped his beefy hands on his dirty apron, scowling at Wayne. "Lennie's a good guy," he growled. "Lennie's all right. He took his rap and he's going straight. You guys leave Lennie alone."

"Sure he's all right," Jenkins said.

"We just want to talk to him, that's all."

"A guy just come outa stir oughta be let alone," Bill said. "There was a guy in here already askin' about him, wantin' to check up. He ain't got nothin' to hide. He took a room in the place down at the end of the block. Second floor back. Ain't seen him since mornin', but he oughta be there. I don't want you muggs to make any trouble for a right guy like Lennie. You oughta lay off a guy what's just come outa stir."

"Thanks, Bill," Wayne said.

They closed the door on the reek and the deafening music. Wayne signaled the cab driver, and he followed them to the farther end of the block. The rooming house was a sooty frame structure on the edge of the railroad yards. The lights in the hall were dim and the stairs creaked. Wayne knocked on Nolan's door. He turned the knob when he heard a groan. With Jenkins beside him, he went in quickly.

When they found the light and snapped it on, they saw that Nolan was stretched out on his back on the floor. He was wearing a cheap pair of pajamas. In semiconscious agony he was rolling his head from side to side. He was clutching the ragged carpet in his fists. His face was blotched with dried blood and his hair was matted. He groaned and mumbled.

Kneeling over him, Wayne and Jenkins saw that he had been beaten over the head. His scalp was gashed and the bare bone looked cracked.

"Judas!" Jenkins blurted.

Wayne shook him gently. "Lennie!"

Nolan muttered. "Get that light outa my eyes." The words were almost indistinguishable. Nolan's lips were split and swollen from other brutal blows. "Get it outa my eyes. I dunno where it is, I dunno. Who the hell are you? That light. Who—" He swallowed his voice.

"We've got to get an ambulance," Jenkins said in a hushed tone.

Suddenly Nolan shouted hoarsely,

"I'll tell ya! Quit hittin', quit hittin' me. I'll tell ya where I hid it!"

Again Wayne shook him. "Lennie! Lennie!"

Nolan groaned and gripped the carpet.

Wayne came to his feet. As he turned to the door, Jenkins stepped back with his camera lifted. An instant glare filled the room. Jenkins shifted for another shot while Wayne hurried out. In the lower hall Wayne found a pay telephone on the wall. He was disconnecting when Jenkins ran down the stairs.

"Who the hell did that to him?" Jenkins said quickly.

"I don't know," Wayne said, "but I've got a damned good idea why. I've just phoned for an ambulance. There's nothing we can do for him. Listen, Jenk. We've got to play our cards close to the chest. We can tell the cops about it afterward—if we find anything."

"If we find what?" Jenkins asked.

Without answering him, Wayne hurried out to the taxi. Jenkins clambered in after him. He told the driver, "Fifty-Seven Hundred block on Sycamore Drive, stop at the near corner." The taxi swerved off through the rain. Automatically busy with his camera, Jenkins peered at Wayne.

"For a guy who's been in town just a couple hours, you're certainly going places," he observed. "How come you had this lead to Nolan? What the hell's eating you? You look white as a ghost."

"Listen to this," Wayne said earnestly. "All the facts are printed in the *Chronicle*. Four years ago Lennie Nolan stole a payroll amounting to twenty thousand dollars. Within a few hours he was pinched, but nobody ever found that money. How far is it from the Eureka plant to Sycamore Drive?"

"Couple miles."

"How did Nolan happen to be hiding out there that night?"

Jenkins gestured. "A lot of half-built houses," he said. "A good place. No lights, plenty of holes to crawl into. Why not?"

Wayne was silent a moment. "Bill said a man came into the saloon today and asked about Nolan. Earlier tonight somebody walked in on him unexpectedly. That man kept a light in Nolan's eyes so he couldn't see. You heard him say, 'Quit hittin' me and I'll tell ya where I hid it.'"

"What did he hide?" Jenkins asked. Suddenly he realized. "The money! That twenty grand!"

"God knows where it is now," Wayne said. "Maybe there's been plenty of chances to ditch it somewhere else. Maybe not. It would be damned hot money if he'd been caught. Perhaps he didn't dare take it far."

"Who?" Jenkins said. "If *who'd* been caught?"

The taxi was turning to the curb. Wayne told the driver to wait. Jenkins swung into step with him as they walked toward the house at 5750. The windows of Wayne's home were lighted. Two cars were sitting in front of it.

"Cops," Jenkins said. "What the hell are you up to, Lester?"

"We've got to be quiet about it," Wayne warned. "We're going to take a look around, but we don't want them to know."



WAYNE was conscious of Jenkins' suspicious stare as they passed the house. When they were near the next corner, where the street light was burning—where the bullet had struck his arm—Wayne turned back. Jenkins followed him into the driveway. At the rear of the house Wayne paused again, scanning the grounds.

"He must have come this way," he murmured.

"Who?" Jenkins asked in a whisper.

"He didn't dare risk getting caught with it," Wayne said, half to himself. "He had to get rid of it somewhere and gamble that it would still be there when he came back. He didn't have time to

bury it. There aren't any refuse cans back here, nothing that would suggest itself as a hiding place. He had to move fast and—"

"Who?" Jenkins insisted.

Wayne turned to the garage. One of the doors was standing ajar. He tugged Jenkins in after him, then closed the door noiselessly. He snapped a switch and light glared down from a bulb overhead. There was no car in the garage. Wayne looked around.

"He hasn't had a chance to come back yet," Wayne said. "There have been cops in the house ever since she was found dead. He's had to stay clear and wait. It must still be somewhere around here." He gazed at the perturbed Jenkins. "We're looking for a bundle. Not a large one. Try to find it."

"Listen," Jenkins said. "Where the hell are you getting all these cockeyed ideas, Lester?"

Wayne opened a tool cabinet above a bench. No bundle was hidden there. He scanned the floor. It was cement, unbroken at any spot. In one corner an oil drum stood. He leaned over it, but the space behind it was empty. He was conscious that Jenkins, without knowing why, was also searching. He heard a sound and turned to see Jenkins probing into a large bag of cotton waste.

"Something hard in here," Jenkins said.

"Wait!" Wayne cautioned.

He pulled his camera out of its case and adjusted it. The click of the shutter caught Jenkins reaching into the bag. As Wayne reversed the plate-holder, Jenkins dug deeper. Wayne fired the second bulb when Jenkins had the bag spilled over, with some of the waste raked out. The soiled bundle embedded in the cotton was clearly visible.

Now Jenkins was moving almost too quickly, but Wayne flashed him as he was lifting the bundle. It was wrapped in old brown paper. Bits of earth, gravel and cement were clinging to it. Jenkins ripped off a corner of the rotten paper.

Wayne stepped closer and focussed on

the pack of banknotes protruding from the open corner, and flashed a close-up.

"The money Nolan stole!" Jenkins exclaimed.

Wayne's pulse was swift. He switched off the light, looked out cautiously, made sure the detectives inside the house had not noticed their operations, then hustled Jenkins along the driveway. Their strides stretched as they returned to the taxi.

"Chronicle building," Wayne directed the driver. The cab started up. Jenkins glanced at his strap-watch and revised Wayne's instructions. "Drop me off at police headquarters." Turning eagerly, he gripped Wayne's injured arm. Wayne winced.

"What's the matter? You hurt?" Wayne, busy inspecting the bundle, did not answer. The suspicion in Jenkins' eyes sharpened. "How the hell did you get into this setup so fast? How could you know—"

Wayne broke in. "This money is the reason Nolan was hiding out among those unfinished houses that night four years ago. He went there to hide his loot. The cement in the cellar of 5750 must have just been laid. It was still soft. He buried the money in it and smoothed it over. It's been there ever since. Nolan planned to come back for it—"

"Wait a minute," Jenkins said. "Nolan didn't get the chance. Somebody got to him and forced him to tell where he'd hidden the dough."

"That's it," Wayne said quickly. "Then that man went to the Wayne place tonight. There wasn't any car in the garage, so he thought nobody was at home. He got into the house some way, not knowing that Nad—Mrs. Wayne was asleep in the bedroom upstairs. She heard him digging and came down to investigate, probably thinking it was her husband, and she saw a stranger taking the bundle out of that hole in the floor. In order to keep it, he had to silence her. Just then Wayne came home and—"

"Wait a minute," Jenkins protested

again. "How do you know that? How do you know Wayne—"

Urgently Wayne interrupted again. "Here's Headquarters. Give me your shots of Nolan. I'll try to have them ready to print by the time you get back."

"But listen—"

Wayne all but spilled Jenkins out of the cab. His orders sent the taxi forward at once. Jenkins stared after Wayne before he hurried into police headquarters.



ENTERING the city room, Wayne dropped his case beside the door. Then his eyes stopped on Sue Carey.

She was perched tensely in front of her typewriter, hard at work. Wayne knew at once it was no cut-and-dried society item she was writing. She looked up and her cheeks reddened at sight of him. She went on typing, but more slowly.

Wayne smiled and said, "O.K., but make it your best." Then he went to Gifford's desk.

"My Gawd, Lester, where've you been?" Gifford asked in a harassed tone. "Apperman is beginning to roll the final right now, and you haven't got that new shot of George Orr. What the hell kind of a—"

"We've got some better pix than that one would be," Wayne interrupted, putting the bundle down in front of Gifford. "That's the payroll stolen by Lennie Nolan four years ago. Nolan was damned near killed tonight by somebody who forced him to tell where he'd cached it. Jenk and I found it. It had been taken out of that hole in the cellar floor of the Wayne place and transferred to the garage. Nolan's on his way to the hospital now."

Instinctively, his eyes rounded, Gifford had reached for the telephone. "Press room!" he urged. "Stop those presses, Ape! I said stop 'em! My Gawd, don't yell at me. Tear up page one. We've got a new lead and some

more pix. I don't give a damn what you say, we're holding the final!"

Rapidly Wayne repeated the story he had outlined to Jenkins. Gifford kept nodding and looking amazed, but there was a skeptical glint in his eyes.

"Wayne's out of this case now, Giff," Wayne argued. "Certainly he didn't beat that information out of Nolan. He didn't dig up that money. He didn't—"

"Why not?" Gifford interrupted. "He could have done all that as well as any other man. But suppose he didn't know anything about it. That doesn't clear him. If that spot under the cellar stairs was picked out by Nolan as the best place to hide the money, then Wayne picked it out as the best place to bury the wife he'd murdered. He turned up the money by accident, that's all. This is a swell break, Lester, but never mind the angles. Leave the question of Wayne's guilt to the courts. I'll get this written. You— Oh, Gawd!"

The doors had swung open and Apperman was charging in. Gifford threw up his hands in harried resignation and Apperman slammed his big fist on the desk.

"You hear those presses rolling?" the foreman bellowed. "They're going to keep on rolling. We've missed the deadline on the final already because you held me up on the mail. Distribution's cursing me from hell to breakfast because the whole system's shot. Nothing's going to stop those presses now, y' understand? And let me tell you something else. My name's Apperman, not Ape."

Gifford had no immediate opportunity to contest the point. Another swing of the doors produced Jenkins. The red-headed cameraman shouldered Apperman aside and slapped two photographs on Gifford's desk.

"There's the lab's pix of the bullets that killed the woman, magnified ten times. Did Lester tell you what we turned up?" He faced Wayne breathlessly. "We can't hold out on the police. They play ball with us, so we play ball with them. I had to tell 'em all about

it. Inspector Early wants to see you. He can't figure it out, and neither can I, how you can know so damned much about this case."

It was coming now, Wayne felt. His brief respite was coming to an end, hopelessly.

"Never mind, Jenk," Gifford said, swinging the ballistics photographs to Lamb's desk. "For Gawd's sake, put those new pix of yours through the soup." He swung upon Wayne. "I still want that shot of George Orr. I phoned him and got him to come over. He's waiting in that room right over there. You'll find a camera all set up. Go in there and shoot him and hurry up about it."

Wayne stood back while Gifford and Apperman resumed their altercation. Jenkins gave Wayne a queer look as he dug into Wayne's case for the exposed films. He hurried into the darkroom and closed the door.

Wayne was full of a numb chill. He turned away slowly. Sue had paused in her typing. Her fingers strayed over the keys as he bent over her.

"Looks like it's all over but the formalities," he said soberly. "I hope your story's all set to hand in, because it's going to break right now. You've left yourself out of it, haven't you? Helping me, I mean. No use getting yourself in a jam, you know. I want to say again—thanks. It isn't your fault that it didn't work out."

Sue said softly, "I'm sorry."

Gifford turned from snarling at Apperman. "Lester! Get busy! Get that shot of Orr!"

"Right away, Giff," Wayne said.

He went toward the adjoining room that Gifford had pointed out. Glancing back, he saw that Sue was hurrying from her desk to Lamb's. Pausing outside the connecting door, he noticed first the view camera set on a tripod, with a light craning up beside it. Patrolman Orr was sitting on the opposite side of the room.

Wayne fished out a cigarette and lighted it as he went in. Partially covering

his face with his hands, he felt a certain grim satisfaction in delaying Orr's identification of him as long as possible. Immediately, as Orr rose, he switched on the photo-flood. The blinding glare caused Orr to blink and lower his head.

"Stand right there between the windows," Wayne suggested. "It won't take a minute. Giff wants one of you with your gun in your hand. O.K.?" He added wryly, "Sorry I kept you waiting."

Orr squared his shoulders, hardened his face and lifted his service revolver from its holster. "That isn't you, is it, Jenk?" he asked. "Doesn't sound like you. I can't see through that light."

"I'm new here," Wayne answered, remaining in the shadow behind the camera. After focussing Orr's image on the ground glass, he drew the slide of the film-holder and set the shutter. "My first night." And his last. "I suppose you'd like to get your hands on that chap who got away from you?"

"Damned sorry I didn't drop him," Orr said grimly. "Wish I'd saved the State the trouble of stringing him up. Let's get this over with. Is this oke?"

"It would be better if you'd step back a little and aim the gun straight at the lens," Wayne suggested.

"Say," Orr said, complying, "your voice seems sort of familiar."

Wayne's thumb rested on the plunger of the shutter release. The glitter of Orr's gun was hard and bright and deadly. Orr's expression was confidently calm, yet merciless. He must have looked like that, Wayne thought, when he had fired at the fugitive dodging through the shadows on Sycamore Drive. A suitable caption for this picture would be, he reflected: Patrolman Who Discovered the Murder, Taken by the Accused While Masquerading as a News Cameraman. He was about to release the shutter when Sue Carey and Lamb appeared in the doorway.

"Lester!" Lamb exclaimed.

Sue had the two photographs which had been brought from Headquarters by Jenkins. In one hand Lamb was holding

his magnifying glass and on the palm of his other a bullet was resting. Wayne sensed at once that it was the slug which Sue had extracted from his wound. She had gone back into their apartment as they were leaving, to fish it out of the pan of water.

"Lester!" Lamb squeaked again. "They're the same. All three of these bullets came out of the same gun!"

Unconsciously Wayne leaned into the shine of the brilliant light, his gaze turning slowly to Patrolman Orr.

"Then this is the man who murdered my wife," he said.

He jerked back at the instant Orr fired. The click of the shutter was lost in the roar of the report. The thought lightened through Wayne's mind that he had a picture of Orr attempting to kill him. He tripped over the tripod as a patch of plaster broke out of the wall behind him. The camera fell toward Orr. Suddenly Orr heaved it aside and ran out of the room. Wayne flung himself along at the patrolman's heels.

Orr was pushing out the swinging doors when Wayne caught up his camera case by the trap. He swung it overhead and brought it crashing down to the back of Orr's neck. Orr plunged forward, parting the doors, and dropped inertly across the sill.

Wayne turned about, suddenly aware that the city room was full of commotion. Reporters were springing up from

their desks and running toward the fallen Orr. The door of the darkroom was open and Jenkins was staring out, a dripping print in his hand. At the city desk, Gifford and Apperman had forgotten their quarrel and were staring at Wayne. Lamb trotted toward them, gesturing with both hands, chattering something that Wayne could not hear. Before he followed, he saw that Sue was rapidly gathering up the pages she had typed.

"Orr is the man who killed my wife," Wayne said through a dry throat. "The bullets prove it. He was careless with his gun once too often. When he arrested Nolan four years ago he knew Nolan must have hidden the stolen money somewhere close at hand. Evidently he couldn't find it, but tonight he forced Nolan to tell him where the money was. He hurried out the back door of the house when I came in the front. He hid the money in the garage, then came around after me and— He's the one who—" Wayne paused with a tired gesture. "Sue has the rest of it."

"Stop the presses!" The words howled over the telephone, but the voice was not Gifford's. Gifford was standing stock still, staring in speechless admiration at Wayne. It was the big Apperman who was shouting so loudly that there was no need of a wire to convey his orders into the basement. "Stop 'em, stop 'em!" he bawled. "*Stop those presses!*"



MISSING! ONE GROUCH

The worst grouches go up in smiles when Star Single-edge Blades go in your razor. Star is so keen that wiry whiskers give up meekly — and tender skins bask in comfort. Invest a dime in 4 Star Blades — famous since 1880. Star Blade Division, Brooklyn, N. Y.



STAR SINGLE-EDGE BLADES 4 FOR 10¢
FOR GEM AND EVER-READY RAZORS

SMOKE IN YOUR EYES

The girl in a red cape pursues trouble and stumbles onto a plot where life means little

JOHN SMITH gazed with exaggerated tolerance at his fair companion. Of course it was not difficult to exercise patience with a young lady so scandalously lovely. He was, in fact, used to it.

"Ever so many men, Angel," he declared, "smoke long black cigarettes. Even I do at times."

"The heat, Mr. Edgeron, has made

They were dining in Polinoff's, and it had not been a good idea. Polinoff's on an August afternoon was far too hot, too stuffy, for the enjoyment of pig knuckles and spiced red cabbage.

"I'm thinking of abandoning Trouble, Incorporated, Angel."

"Said he, lying," she retorted.

"No, I mean it. Look. I've paid rent on that ninth-floor cell for eleven months now, and not a customer. Not a single client. A man's hobby, as I see it, should be more productive than that."

"It has been," Angelina said simply.

"Not financially."

"Mr. Philip Edgeron," she said, "makes quite enough money to support the hobby of John Smith. It's the heat, that's all."

"I suppose it is."

He reached out then and picked up the letter she had read to him. It was a neat little thing, written delicately in green ink on ten-cent-store paper which bore the gilt initials, M.A.B. It read:



you lazy. Otherwise you'd jump at a thing like this."

Smith's other name was Philip Edgeron. He hated it because it brought to mind too many memories of birthdays, Christmases and people sick in bed. He was head of a greeting card company. Now he put down his cocktail and leaned back.



By HUGH B. CAVE

"Dear Miss Kaye,

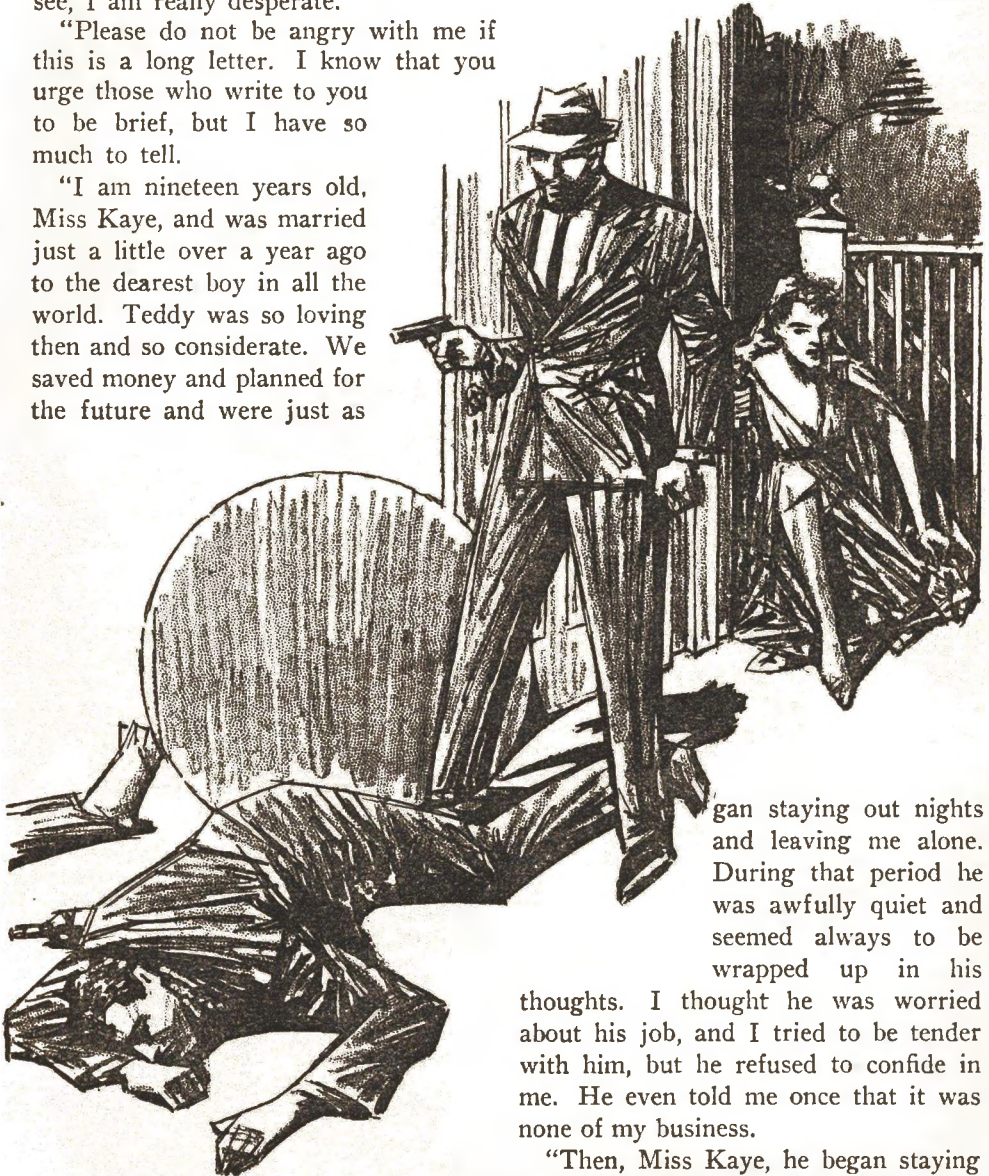
"This is the third time I have tried to write to you, but on each previous occasion my courage has left me before I could finish. This time, however, I am determined to go through with it. You see, I am really desperate.

"Please do not be angry with me if this is a long letter. I know that you urge those who write to you to be brief, but I have so much to tell.

"I am nineteen years old, Miss Kaye, and was married just a little over a year ago to the dearest boy in all the world. Teddy was so loving then and so considerate. We saved money and planned for the future and were just as

happy as two birds in a nest. And now all that is changed.

"I am not really sure when the trouble began. Now that I look back on it, I realize that Teddy acted queerly for days, even weeks, before he actually be-



gan staying out nights and leaving me alone. During that period he was awfully quiet and seemed always to be wrapped up in his thoughts. I thought he was worried about his job, and I tried to be tender with him, but he refused to confide in me. He even told me once that it was none of my business.

"Then, Miss Kaye, he began staying out late at night, sometimes until two or three o'clock in the morning, and I was

sick with worry. When I spoke to him about it he told me to leave him alone and stop nagging him, but I wasn't nagging him, I was just frantic that our love would die and he would drift away from me.

"It went on this way for almost a month, Miss Kaye, and then he began bringing these men to the house. Three or four times a week they came, and they were nice enough, I suppose. At least they always said hello to me, but instead of sitting in the parlor like ordinary friends, they and Teddy would go upstairs to Teddy's den and close the door and stay up there until all hours. Sometimes there would be three of them, sometimes more.

"Well, Miss Kaye, I do not pretend to be any judge of character, but I am positive in my own heart that these men are not good for Teddy. They are not his kind. They are older, for one thing, and they seem very wise in the ways of the world. One of them, whom the others seem to look upon as a sort of leader, is a foreigner, at least twenty years older than my husband, and he smokes long black cigarettes continually, and the house reeks from it. And furthermore, if these men were proper companions for Teddy, he would introduce me to them, wouldn't he? But he hasn't. He just said, "Boys, meet the wife." Which hurt me terribly.

"Please, Miss Kaye, tell me what to do to win my husband away from these men. I am worried to desperation for fear I will lose him, and for fear he is getting mixed up in something that will bring trouble to us both.

"Anxiously yours,

Margaret Arnold Burdick.

P.S. If you print this letter in your column, please sign it "Worried Wife" because if you used my real name Teddy would be angry, I'm sure.

M.A.B."

John Smith, president of Trouble, Inc., carefully folded the letter and

passed it back. "Do you get many like that, Miss Kaye?"

She frowned at him. Her name was not Katherine Kaye any more than his was John Smith. Her name, when she was not opening letters from love-sick wives at her desk in the *Star* office, was Angelina Copeland. Angel to her friends.

"You think it's a rib, Philip?"

"As phony, Angel, as some of the sentiments I'm guilty of perpetrating."

"I don't. I think it's on the level. I'm going out there. After all, Philip, you've bored me to death for months about that fool professor who smoked black cigarettes and here we have a guy who—"

"You know the address?"

She took from her purse an envelope which matched the letter. "Spencer Street, 154. You *could* drive me out there," she said. "Otherwise I'll have to go by trolley."

Edgerson heaved an elaborate sigh. It was a hot, sticky afternoon. From nine to twelve he had faithfully perspired through his duties as president of the Edgerson Greeting Card Company, watching the clock and looking forward to a long, cool drive into the country with Angel, a dip in some shady lake, dinner and dancing at some quiet roadhouse far from the city's heat.

Now he was to be John Smith again. It was inevitable.

He disliked this slyly Margaret Arnold Burdick intensely. He resented the fact that she had found it necessary to mention a large foreign person who incessantly smoked long black cigarettes. Because, after all, the thing was ridiculous. Dubitsky *was* dead. Dubitsky had been dead for at least four months. The Dubitsky whose strange death had intrigued him was gone forever. Margaret Burdick's foreigner would turn out to be a wrestler or a man selling carpets. Or a myth.

"I'll drive you," he said sourly, "but you'll regret it. Mark my words, Angel, you'll regret it."



AT LEAST half a dozen times since the birth of Trouble, Inc., Edgerson had been on the verge of closing the tiny office in the Mason Building and chucking the whole thing to the dogs. On each and every one of those occasions, Angelina had popped up with something "hot." It was she, not he, who kept his hobby, Trouble, Inc., going. He half suspected that the Trouble idea had been hers in the first place anyway.

When they reached Spencer Street on the outskirts of town, and found the house, he was relentlessly gleeful. He pointed to the sign in the window and said: "You see? I told you so."

The sign said "For Rent."

Angel frowned at it. The frown was most becoming to her beauty. Edgerson gently patted her shoulders. "We still have time for the ride into the country, the swim, the—"

"Apply at 27 Brook Street," Angel said.

"What?"

"That's what it says. 'For rent. Apply 27 Brook.' That's the next street over, Philip."

He said nothing, merely groaned and put the car in gear. Angel was silent, too, until he stopped the machine in front of a small brown cottage on Brook Street. "The trouble with you, Mr. Smith," she said then, sweetly, "is that you give up too easily."

He followed her up the walk, between beds of marigolds. She rang the bell. In a moment the door was opened by a plump female in flowered apron.

"How do you do?" Angel said in her nicest Sunday voice. "I'm Mrs. Smith. This is my husband."

The woman said, "How do you do?" wonderingly, and glanced at Edgerson and stared at Angel. Women usually stared at Angel. And envied her her

slimness, her remarkable blond hair and her more than pretty face.

"We noticed a house over on Spencer Street, for rent," Angel said.

"Oh, yes."

"Is it occupied at present?"

"No." The woman shook her head.

"We had a nice young couple living there, but they've moved out."

Edgerson, recovering from his shock at so casually being called "my husband," smiled slyly. He was John Smith now, and John Smith was at times a pretty fair detective. Angel, fishing for information about the nice young couple on Spencer Street, was going to encounter difficulties. The plump lady in the flowered apron was obviously not a talker.

"We've looked so long for a house," Angel said, "that I really don't know *what* I want. You know how it is, I'm sure. You go from one place to another and simply get all worn out."

The woman nodded sympathetically. There were chairs on the porch and she moved toward them. "Won't you sit down, Mrs. Smith?"

"Thank you," Angel breathed. "Thank you so much!"

"It's really a very nice house," the woman said. "My husband and I built it ourselves and lived in it four years. Then last year Mr. and Mrs. Burdick, the nice young couple I mentioned to you, moved in."

Angel looked thoughtfully at the tips of her fingers. "They didn't stay very long, did they?"

"No, they didn't. It wasn't because of the house, though. Mr. Burdick worked for the Glickman Company and lost his job. He had to go to another city to find work."

"Oh," Angel said. "That's too bad. And they'd only been married a year?"

"Only a year."

Angel widened her large brown eyes and looked soulfully at Edgerson. "You know, dear," she said, sadly shaking her head, "when you hear of the misfortunes

that beset other married people, it makes you realize how terribly fortunate we've been." She turned the soulful eyes on the woman again. "Married only a year, and so in love with each other! I just know they were!"

"Well," the woman said dubiously, "well, yes, I guess they were."

"And are they coming back some day? To visit you?"

"Well, I don't know. Theodore, that's Mr. Burdick, said they were moving to some place near Boston. Margaret went last Wednesday to put things in order, and he went Saturday, with the furniture truck. They may come back, but of course I couldn't hold the house for them. Now if you'd like to look at it, Mrs. Smith. . . ."

But Angel was looking at her "husband" again. "You know, darling, perhaps Mrs.—er—"

She glanced helplessly at the woman who said, "My name is Crandall."

"Perhaps Mrs. Crandall could recommend someone to move our furniture. Those last people we had were simply unbearable. I'll just never forgive them for ruining our twin beds."

Edgerson gulped.

"Could you recommend someone, Mrs. Crandall?" Angel cooed.

"Well, we like the Hartley people ourselves. If you're just moving a short distance, that is. The Burdicks used the McCullen Warehouse people."

"You saved her a lot of trouble," Edgerson thought. "She was going to ask you that in a minute. Twin beds! Of all things, twin beds!"

Angel stood up. "Would you like to look at the house now, dear, or come back tomorrow? It's quite late, and we did promise to meet the Burrs."

"Tomorrow," Edgerson said.

"Will that be all right with you, Mrs. Crandall?"

"Well, yes," Mrs. Crandall agreed.

"Then we'll see you tomorrow. . . . Come, darling. I really think we've accomplished something!"

In the car, Edgerson drew a slow deep breath and said, "You little hellion!"

She grinned. "It worked, didn't it?"

"It worked, but I've a mind to put you across those mythical twin beds and spank you."

Gnomes and pixies would have danced to her laughter. But then she was suddenly sober.

"This thing sounds ugly to me, Philip."

"Why?"

"First, that letter. I received it Wednesday, the day she left. She must have written and mailed it Tuesday. Then, more important, why the sudden departure? If she'd known that they were leaving the city, she wouldn't have written the letter at all. I never answer letters personally. When people write to my lovelorn column they expect to see the replies in print."

Edgerson, silent for a moment, said, "Would it be all right with you, Angel, if I did a little detecting myself for a change? After all, I'm president of Trouble, Inc."

"You're not a very ambitious president."

"I might surprise you." He turned the car onto a main street. "The McCullen Warehouse is on Canal Street, isn't it?"

"Yes. Why?"

"We're going there. Between your nutty curiosity and my interest in any guy who smokes black cigs like Dubitsky did. . . . I'll never believe that guy's really dead."

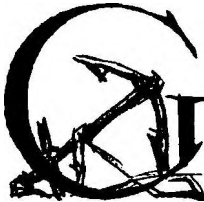
It was a huge red-brick building growing out of the damp, sticky smells of the waterfront. Smith went in alone and was gone a half-hour. Returning, he had a triumphant smirk on his angular face.

"They didn't move out of town," he said. "Their furniture is in storage, most of it. A studio couch, two easy chairs, a table and a large double bed—not twin beds, Angel—were trucked

over to this address as soon as the van reached the warehouse." He passed her a slip of paper.

She peered at it. "Gayland Avenue. That's an apartment house district. Very snooty."

"You know," Smith said, putting the car in gear, "this is beginning to show signs of promise. Maybe your lovelorn wife was in trouble."

AYLAND STREET was in a district of fancy dress shops, delicatessens and pomeranians, and the figure on the slip of paper was the number of an imposing structure housing a nest of apartments. This time Angel refused to sit in the car while he investigated. She went with him up the gleaming steps into the hallway with its glittering brass mail-boxes, and she looked with him at the long list of names beside the long row of bells.

Bell number 17 had no name beside it, but Smith pushed it anyway. The studio couch, chairs, table and bed had been delivered to Suite 17.

He pushed again and frowned. "They don't answer."

"I've been wondering something," Angel said.

"Yes? What?"

"If you were a young man fresh out of a job, Philip, would you feel able to afford an apartment in this neighborhood?"

Smith shrugged. "If we wondered at all the queer things people do, we'd wind up in a chuckle college."

"I'm serious, Philip."

"So am I. They don't answer."

Angel looked annoyed. She walked up two white steps and tried the door and it was locked. She said, "Damn!" and stood there glaring at it. All at once her eyes widened; she turned quickly, beckoned with an outstretched hand and said, "C'm'ere, quick!"

At her side, Smith peered through

the thick clear glass of the door and saw a man backing out of an apartment at the end of the hall. A suitcase lay beside the open door and the man was lugging out another. He closed the door and picked up both pieces of luggage and plodded down the corridor with them, staggering a little because they were heavy and he was a small, thin-legged, bald little lad without much strength.

Plouffe, by gosh! Plouffe, of all private dicks."

The little dick kept his head down until he reached the door, and by that time Smith had faded back on one side, Angel on the other. Plouffe put down his burdens, opened the door, held it open with a foot and picked up the suitcases. He squirmed out and the door clicked shut behind him. Then he saw Smith.

He dropped the suitcases again and said, "Well, my, my! Look who is here!"

Smith looked at the luggage. It was expensive but old. It was initialed.

"So you're demoted to bellhop," Smith said.

"Huh?"

"You make a very handsome bellhop, don't you, Mr. Plouffe?" said Angel sweetly.

Nick Plouffe pulled a large moist handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his brow. He frowned, using his whole face, and said sourly: "At least I don't have to give myself no fancy name like Trouble, Incorporated to get business."

"Of course you don't," Angel said.

"And I ain't a bellhop, see?"

"Of course you're not. You live here."

"Me? Live here? Say, are you nuts?"

"We're looking," Angel declared solemnly, "for my Aunt Agatha. Apartment eighteen. We have a key to Aunt Agatha's apartment—she's in Bermuda, you know—but no key to the door you're leaning against. Could you let us in, maybe?"

Nick Plouffe blinked, registering sus-

picion. It was hard for him to register suspicion, or anything else, because his moist little face was small and V-shaped and not very elastic. He did his best, though, and then grumbled: "Well, all right."

He fumbled for a key and unlocked the door.

"Thank you so much," Angel cooed. "Come, John."

She and John Smith paced down the hall without a backward glance at the suspicious Plouffe, and Smith said dryly, "There, my dear, is a scraping from the lowest stratum of the private detecting profession. Dumb but dangerous. A mouse, but a mean mouse. I met up with him on another case and caught him pretending to be a G-man. He asked me to promise not to tell on him. Did you note the initials on the two suitcases?"

"I did. M.A.B. and T.L.B."

"The Burdicks."

"Or a monstrous coincidence, because Plouffe came out of this apartment," Angel declared, stopping beside a door, "and it happens to be suite 17."

Smith glanced back, then, to make certain Plouffe had departed. Satisfied, he knocked. After a moment's wait he knocked again.

"They don't answer."

"Perhaps we should tail Mr. Plouffe," Angel suggested. "Or is it too late?"

Smith leaned against the door of apartment 17 and scowled at her. Scowled fiercely, because he knew from past experience that Miss Angelina Copeland—she had once been his secretary and had since become both the bane and the beacon of his existence—would talk him out of it unless he were savagely stubborn. "It's too late," he said firmly, "for absolutely everything except that drive into the country, that swim, and—"

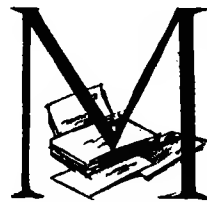
"But tomorrow we start in again. Promise?"

"No!"

She rolled her eyes at the ceiling and tapped a toe on the tile floor. "No

promise, no ride. It's for your own good, darling. If I didn't keep jabbing you, you'd turn into a Christmas card, and that would be such a waste of talent."

She took his arm. Smith sighed and went with her, muttering under his breath.



MISS MIGGSBY, who wore large rimless glasses, placed a sheaf of papers on Edgerson's desk and said, beaming: "We think, Mr. Edgerson, that these are simply delightful!"

Miss Miggsby had been Edgerson's private secretary since the departure of Angel. She possessed some of Angel's brains, none of Angel's disturbing physical attraction, and was very very easy on the nerves.

Edgerson gravely accepted the papers, glanced at them. The door of his private sanctum opened at that moment and he looked up. Looked up and groaned. He could tell by the grim little smile on Angelina's lips that something had happened.

Miss Miggsby fled. Angel, radiant in something ultra modern and startlingly yellow, came around the desk and looked over Edgerson's shoulder.

"Christmas?" she asked innocently. "Or just happy birthday to my ex-wife?"

He made sure that the door between Miss Miggsby's office and his own was closed before he answered. Then he said firmly, "Whatever you've found out, it's no go. I'm busy. I got in this morning with a prize hangover, thanks to your mania for daiquiris last night, and found enough work piled on my desk to keep three men busy for a week."

"Oh."

"Don't you ever work?"

"Uh-huh. I just finished my column. Look, Philip. I've discovered the whereabouts of Margaret Burdick."

"I'm not interested."

"You've got to be. It's terribly important." She cleared a space for herself on his desk and sat down, swinging a most attractive leg.

"First I went over to the Glickman Company where Mr. Burdick—Teddy, that is—used to work. I smiled my prettiest and found out that Teddy wasn't fired; he quit. He told them he had a better job offered to him in Boston. I deserve credit for that. The Glickman outfit is a big concern. They make chemicals and do a lot of work for the government. It took talent to go in there stone cold and come out with information."

"I'm still very busy," Edgeron muttered.

"So then," she continued, "I went over to that little dumpy hotel where your little Plouffe lives. The clerk told me he was in, so I slipped into a phone booth and called him and talked the way you'd expect Margaret Arnold Burdick to talk—after reading that letter she wrote me—and I told Plouffe to come right over because I needed him. And he fell for it."

Edgeron was not sufficiently surprised to show it.

"He fell for it," Angel declared, "and when he left the hotel I followed him. He didn't go far. He went to another grimy little hotel, the Lester, and that, Philip, is where Mrs. Burdick is hiding out."

"You saw her?"

"No, but—"

"What about her husband? Is he living there, too?"

"After all," she said, "I'm not the president of Trouble, Inc. I'm just an underpaid hireling. Don't expect too much."

"I can't see that you've done too much."

"But I haven't confessed all. Not yet. I've been to the morgue," she said.

That got him. His mouth sagged and he gaped at her.

"The newspaper morgue," she explained softly, "to check on Dubitsky.

Do you know why I did that?"

He said nothing.

"Because," she went on, "I discovered over at the chemical company that young Mr. Burdick is a graduate of our nice big university here where Dubitsky taught. And when I found that out, I got to thinking about the foreigner who smoked the long black cigarettes, and so I went over to the university and did some snooping. Guess what I found."

"If you don't stop beating around the mulberry bush," Edgeron said, "I'll fire you!"

"Young Mr. Burdick was a student in some of Dubitsky's classes."

"You mean it?"

"It's the truth. He was an honor student. One of Dubitsky's pets."

"I'm not," Edgeron said, "as busy as I thought. Go ahead."

"You mean it?"

"Go right ahead. I've always been intrigued with Dubitsky. The Christmas ditties can wait."

"Well," she said, "I've brought you some of the newspaper accounts of Dubitsky's death."

"I don't need them. I know the details by heart."

"Do you? Lead on, MacDuff."

"The great Dubitsky," Edgeron said, "left his bachelor apartment about six-thirty that night, intending to drive to a little camp he owned on Loon Cry Lake, sixty miles north of here. It was a miserable night, and he was alone. He stopped in Midville for gas, and the attendant warned him not to try the Loon Lake road because it was inundated and dangerous, and an electrical storm was coming up over the mountains.

"He went, and was caught in the storm. His car went over a cliff and caught fire, probably struck by lightning before it went over. The charred remains of Dubitsky were identified by a watch and a couple of rings."

"And I'll wager my next year's salary as nonpaid vice president of Trouble, Inc.," said Angel calmly, "that you believe Professor Dubitsky is still very

much alive. Now don't you, Mr. Smith?"

Edgerson scowled at a tiny image of Santa Claus which sat on his desk. It was a birthday gift from Miss Miggsby. "Now why," he insisted, "should a self-respecting professor of foreign languages, including the Malaysian, wish to plunge himself into oblivion?"

"What nationality is Dubitsky?"

"Darned if I know. German, Czeck, Russian, Polish—he might be most anything."

"The point is," she said, "he's not American. He came to this country six or seven years ago, to take up his duties at the university. No one knows much about him, except that he's a mental giant. Put two and two together, Philip Dubitsky. A mysterious accident. The Glickman Chemical Company. Young Burdick. It's positively sinister; that's what it is!"

"What," Edgerson said, "do you propose to do about it?"

"Have a talk with Burdick's wife. And you're coming with me. This, Mr. Smith, is the biggest thing that ever fell into the lap of our little organization, or I'm a monkey's uncle."

"I think a better move," Smith declared thoughtfully, "would be to call on Plouffe."

"Plouffe?"

"The girl might be a bit difficult. Plouffe, on the other hand, would hardly dare to be. I know too much about him. I might still talk about him impersonating himself as a G-man." He smiled, pushing himself out of his chair. "Trouble, Incorporated, is at work again," he said.



NICK PLOUFFE, when not at his hotel, could generally be found between bottles of beer in his office or between martinis at the Andolf Tap. He was in his office this time, suffering from the heat. A cheap fan sent the hot air surging about the room,

and Plouffe's handkerchief was sodden from face-mopping.

He peered suspiciously at his visitors and said: "Well, my, my! Look who is here!"

"You're surprised," Smith said.

"I am pop-eyed!"

Smith shut off the fan and eyed the half-empty bottle of beer on the detective's desk. He sat down without awaiting an invitation. Angel followed suit. Nick Plouffe stood beside the desk, mopped his pleasant, little face again and registered uneasiness.

"So what can I do for you?"

"You're not going to like this, Nick."

"I feel it in my bones."

"What we'd like to know, Nick," Smith said, "is how you got mixed up in this Burdick business."

Plouffe sat down. His tie was askew and his striped shirt was open down to the third button, revealing a moist undershirt and a few chest hairs. He said plaintively: "On a hot day like this you should come here to ask questions! What did I ever do to you?"

"Give, Nick."

"Give! Do I ask you to hand out professional secrets? Do I come barging into Trouble, Incorporated, and act like I was a partner?"

"You wouldn't want to be a partner," Angel said sweetly. "There's no money in it."

"Give," Smith said.

"So why should I?"

"Must we go through all that again? About how unhealthy our local jails are, and how bad the food is? Nick, you surprise me."

Nick Plouffe slumped lower in his chair. The desk hid most of him but his eyes were little gray bugs just visible over the rim.

"The Burdick girl is a client of mine," he mumbled.

"How come?"

"You would not be interested. So help me it would bore you, I swear it."

"I'll risk it. Go right ahead."

"Well, it is like this. It is very ordi-

nary. The Burdick girl comes up here and says she sees the name of my agency in the phone book. Then she spills a sob story into my ears, and so help me, Mr. Smith, it is nothing that would interest you. It is like every other sob story you ever heard."

"I'll hear it again," Smith said.

"But it will bore you stiff!"

"The food," Angel chimed in gently, "is really atrocious, Mr. Plouffe. They feed you bread and mush three times a day, and sometimes the mush is maggoty. If it isn't, I'm sure Mr. Smith can arrange to have them inject a few maggots, just for your benefit."

Plouffe mopped his face. "She has a husband, see? And he stays out late at night, and sometimes he doesn't come home at all. She says to me, he is keeping bad company and will I look into it? So help me that's the whole story."

"The bell-hopping was just your own idea, eh?" Smith said.

"Huh?"

"If that's all there is to it, Plouffe, why'd you move her from a swank apartment house to a frowsy dump of a hotel?"

"She—she couldn't pay the rent them vultures was asking."

"Maggots, Plouffe, are apt to make you hellishly sick."

"Well," Plouffe muttered, avoiding Smith's steady gaze, "I had to get some dough out of this business somehow, didn't I?"

"Meaning what?"

"She pays me to tail her husband. There wouldn't be no dough in that even if I could locate the husband, which I can't. So I have to tell the dame something, don't I? Would you want me to let her down and have her get a wrong idea about the private detective business?"

"The light begins to dawn," Angel murmured.

Plouffe looked at her gratefully and forced a grin. "Sure. She wanted service, so I gave it to her. There wasn't no harm in that, was there? All I told

her, I checked up on her husband and found out he was mixed up with some tough mobsters, and things looked pretty bad, and her own life could easy be in danger unless she put herself in my care for a few days until I got things straightened out."

"And she believed you?" Smith asked.

"Sure she believed me."

"And to make it more realistic, you moved her out of the apartment and obtained a room for her at the Lester."

"Yeah. Hell, if these dumb dames want adventure, Nick Plouffe sells it to 'em. Why not?"

Smith stood up. "I'm hiring you, Plouffe."

The gray little eyes grew to twice their normal size. "Huh?"

"You say you tried to locate Burdick and failed. Is that right?"

"Sure I tried."

"Hard?"

"I done all I could," Plouffe insisted. "I checked every lead the dame gave me."

"And you couldn't find him. Very well, Plouffe, he's missing. Something has happened to him. And if we're not careful, something may happen to the girl. Therefore, I'm hiring you to keep an eye on her."

"Listen," Plouffe said. "This don't make sense."

"It might, later. You're to watch the girl and keep in touch with me, report to me every move she makes. I'd do it myself, Plouffe, but I'm going to be busy. Very busy. So is Miss Copeland. And our staff at Trouble, Inc., is limited."

"Say, what's back of all this?"

"A certain crack someone once made," Angel replied quickly, flashing a smile, "about twin beds."

"Huh?"

"You wouldn't understand, Plouffe. Don't worry about it. Some day Mr. Smith is going to write a treatise on it. Then you'll know."

Smith turned to open the door. "You can get in touch with me, Plouffe, at

Trouble, Inc. If I'm not there, Miss Copeland will be. And I'll expect your first report about an hour from now."

Outside, Angel said sweetly: "What I like about you, Mr. Smith, is your uncanny faculty for persuading people to work for you—for nothing. Including," she added, taking his arm, "me."



SMITH was busy the next day. Visiting the university, he spent two hours investigating the history of Professor Benedetto Dubitsky and another hour on the records of Mrs. Burdick's Teddy. To his work as president of Trouble, Inc., he applied the same tenacity which had made him president of a prosperous greeting-card concern.

He then visited the Glickman Company's huge chemical plant and learned that Mr. Theodore Burdick, formerly employed there, had been hired in the first place because of flattering recommendations tendered by the university.

It dovetailed nicely. Just what it meant, Smith was not sure.

With Angel, in the tiny office of Trouble, Inc., he had a dinner which consisted of cold lobster and ginger ale, purchased at a delicatessen.

Angel was dressed, Smith thought, more like a devil. She had on a handsome evening dress that gleamed under a brilliant red opera cape. Its tiny hood was made to be drawn over her sleek hair.

"Why the fancy set up?" he asked.

"I thought you were going to buy me a dinner and dance. Instead I get this and a ride, I guess."

About that time Nick Plouffe, who had been calling every hour to make his report, phoned in again.

Nick Plouffe was excited. "Only two minutes ago," he wailed, "she give me the slip! I was watchin' the Lester, see? Like I been doin' right along. I'm standin' there earnin' the salary you don't

promise me, and all of a sudden she comes out with a couple of guys, and they get into a car.

"This car is parked in front of the Lester ever since around eight o'clock, and there's a ticket on it. I myself see the cop put the ticket on it. So they get into it. Mrs. Burdick and these two guys, and I pile into a taxi and tail them. And I lose them. On account of the taxi driver is dumb as all get-out, I lose them. Up around Mitchell Street and the Avenue is where I last see them."

"You get the number of that car?" Smith snapped.

"Yeah, sure. C-3145."

"Where are you now?"

"In a drug store on Mitchell."

"Get into your cab," Smith ordered, "and come over here as fast as you can. You may be needed." He cradled the phone and gazed solemnly at Angel. "C-3145, Angel. Think you can find out to whom that car is registered?"

"I can try."

She called her newspaper and four minutes later reported: "The car belongs to Alvin McKenna, 92 Follett Street, vice-president of the Glickman Company. Something?"

Smith, at his desk, wrote the name and address on a pad and stared at them, clicking the pencil along his teeth as a small boy would rattle a stick along a picket fence.

"McKenna—the Glickman Company—a ticket for parking," he mused. "And two men. Not one man, Angel, but two. Dammit, what's keeping Plouffe?"

There was a knock at the door. Angel opened it and Plouffe entered, out of breath.

"I got here quick like you told me, Mr. Smith."

"Now let's have it all. Plouffe. Slowly. Begin with the car. Did you see it pull up?"

"Sure I seen it."

"Two men in it?"

"Now that's funny," Plouffe said. "When the car drove up there was only

one guy in it. I was standin' right there and I couldn't 've made no mistake. The guy parks the car in a one-hour space and goes into the Lester."

"What kind of a car?"

"A Packard coupé."

"A man as wealthy as McKenna," Angel declared, "would have more than one car, Mr. Smith."

"I realize that. Now, Plouffe, how long was that car there?"

"More'n two hours."

"And when the two men came out, with Mrs. Burdick, there was a ticket on it?"

"That's right."

"One of those men was the driver?"

"Yep. One was the guy who parked it there."

"Did you get a good look at Mrs. Burdick? Did she look scared?"

"Without bein' no authority on women's looks, I would say she did. Definitely I would say she was at least uneasy."

Smith stared into space and drew meaningless circles and triangles on a desk calendar. The Smith brain was hard at work; you could tell by the roadmap of wrinkles that spread away from his eye- corners. He reached suddenly for the phone book, ran a finger down the long line of McKennas and impulsively snatched up the phone. Then slowly replaced it, shaking his head.

"If you want my opinion," Plouffe ventured timidly, "I'd say—"

"Quiet," snapped Angel. "He's thinking."

"Oh."

Smith seized the phone, dialed a number. Angel relaxed. "McKenna?" she asked softly. He nodded, waiting for the connection.

"I still think," Plouffe insisted, "that—"

"Quiet."

Smith registered impatience while waiting. He looked worried. Finally he slapped the phone down and stood up. "They don't answer," he said curtly. "Let's go."

"Out there?" Angel asked.

"Yes! Don't you see through it? McKenna's car—first one man, then two—and a deliberate ticket? It's plain as day!"

"Not to me it isn't," Plouffe complained.

Smith favored him with a scornful glance and went past him, grabbing at Angel's hand as he jerked open the door. Plouffe followed, not knowing what else to do.

"If you're thinking what I'm thinking you're thinking," Angel said on the way down the corridor, "I'll bet my year's pay that you're wrong. It's just your evil mind at work."

"You mean it's yours," Smith retorted. "Mine's away ahead of you. Come on, you two."



MCKENNA'S house was a twenty-room affair with an acre of manicured lawn cut by a driveway and a colored fountain out front. Alvin McKenna, forty-nine, was a widower worth plenty.

The house was in darkness. The car crunched up the drive and stopped, and Smith jumped out. Before ringing the bell he tried the front door. It was locked. After ringing the bell he waited only a moment, then broad-jumped a flower-bed and hurried around the side. Every window he tried was locked.

He paused, baffled, and Angel caught up with him. "Sometimes," she said pleasantly, "you surprise me, Philip. So athletic!"

He ignored her. To Plouffe he snapped: "How do we get in here?"

"You want to get arrested?" Plouffe gasped.

"I want to get in!"

"Well, it could be done easy enough, but—"

"Do it!"

Plouffe looked around, shaking his head, and then sidled to a window. It

wasn't easy but in a few minutes with a penknife he managed it. With a boost he was over the sill.

"I still don't like this," he complained.

Ignoring him, Smith leaned out and gave a hand to Angel. She climbed. Half-way over the sill she said, "Oh!" and when inside she looked down at her legs and said: "I'll send you a bill for that. My best stockings!" Then she said soberly: "What do you expect to find here, Mr. Smith?"

"I don't know. I'm just full of premonitions." He produced a flash-light, drilling the darkness with a thin sliver of illumination. "I hope," he said grimly, pacing forward, "I'm at least half wrong."

It was a bedroom. With Plouffe and Angel trailing, he went down a long hall to the front of the house, through two huge living-rooms, along another hall to a library. The house was a tomb.

Its owner was in the library.

Smith's light missed him at first. It played over the walls, yellowing rows of books, a small wall safe, a few large portraits. There was no need to illuminate the floor until he began to pace forward. Then he almost stepped on the thing because it lay just a few feet from the threshold.

He looked down, holding the light on McKenna's face, and behind him Plouffe said explosively: "Hey!" Angel put a trembling hand on Smith's arm and was silent. McKenna gazed at the ceiling.

He was a big man, wearing an expensive blue dressing gown over white flannel trousers and a white sport shirt. The white sport shirt was now a Jap flag, with its red moon of blood.

Smith stared a moment, then bent over him. "Shot," he said softly. Then he straightened and focused the light on the wall to his left.

The tiny beam came to rest on the wall safe. Smith strode forward, looked at the safe, looked down at McKenna again.

"Have you a finger-print outfit at your office, Plouffe?"

Plouffe nodded solemnly.

"Take the car and go get it," Smith directed. "Come back as fast as you can and don't say a word about this to anyone."

"But the cops oughta know about it! We'll get in trouble!"

"They'll know in due time. You do as I say." Smith glared at him and he went out wagging his head, mumbling protests. Smith and Angel heard him fumbling along the hall in the dark.

"Who did it, Philip?"

"I don't know."

"But you know something, or you wouldn't have come here."

"I think I know who'll be blamed for doing it. That's all."

"Who?"

"Burdick."

She stood there in the dark, scowling at him. "But why?"

"It wasn't McKenna who visited the Lester Hotel tonight," Smith declared softly. "It could have been, of course, but it probably wasn't. That's where you had me wrong when you tried to read my mind, Angel. This isn't any ten-cent clandestine love affair. Can't be. Too many angles."

"You think someone borrowed McKenna's car?"

"And deliberately got a ticket."

"Why?"

"Look. Burdick is missing. His wife goes to Plouffe for assistance. Guided by Plouffe, she takes a room at the Lester. Meanwhile this other thing—whatever it is—is moving on relentlessly to some kind of climax. Part of that climax is the planned murder of McKenna here. And McKenna's murderers are clever, clever enough to plan the alibi before the crime. They swipe McKenna's car, take it to the Lester, leave it parked where it's bound to catch a ticket. No one can deny now that McKenna's car was parked in front of Mrs. Burdick's hotel; the proof is down in black and white. You see? McKenna visits Mrs. Burdick at hotel with bad reputation. McKenna is found dead.

Angry young husband is arrested for murder."

"You're guessing."

"It's the best I can do. We'll know more when Plouffe gets back."

She was silent a moment, and the silence of the big house crept in to take possession. Then she said, "Why the finger-print outfit, Philip?"

"Why is McKenna dead?" he countered.

"You mean the safe?"

"It's possible."

"A man as brainy as McKenna wouldn't keep any big amount of money in a house like this."

"Maybe not, Angel. But money isn't the only thing worth stealing. You're forgetting that McKenna was vice president of a chemical company."

Angel voiced a little snort. "You'll be telling me next that you're a G-man, tracking down scurrilous agents of a mysterious foreign power!"

"I'm not, really. I'm waiting for a street car."

Very shortly Plouffe returned, with a small black case wedged under his arm and a flash-light gripped in his left hand.

"You have any trouble?" Smith asked.

"Me? Oh, no."

"Get to work then. What I want to know is this: Has anyone recently opened that safe, and if so, who?"

Plouffe opened his finger-print case and timidly stepped up to the safe. While he worked, Smith held the light for him, cupping it carefully to keep the glow from striking the room's only window.

Plouffe was good at this sort of thing. In a few moments he said definitely: "It's been opened all right. There's fresh oil from the hinges smeared down the side. Not long ago, either."

"I thought so."

"You see, Plouffe," Angel said sweetly, "Mr. Smith is really very smart. He sees all, knows all, tells nothing."

"This here," Plouffe declared, ignor-

ing her and handing Smith a thin sheet of celluloid, "is a pretty fair thumb-print."

"Good. Can you get a print of McKenna's thumb?"

"I guess so."

"Be careful," Smith warned, "where you leave your own prints around here."

"You're damn right I'll be careful!"

Finished with the safe, Plouffe knelt beside the dead man. In a moment he rose, handed over a slip of paper. As an afterthought he stooped again and with a handkerchief carefully wiped a smudge of ink from the dead man's thumb.

"Looks the same to me," he said, "though I ain't no expert."

"So it was McKenna who opened the safe. Probably forced to and then killed so he could never identify the thief. We can go now, Angel. We've a job to do. A most important job, and one that may take a long time. We've got to find Mrs. Burdick. And her husband."

Angel twisted her lovely mouth into a scowl. "All we have to go on," she said, "is that car. The one Plouffe trailed."

Smith shook his head. "No go. It's probably right here in McKenna's garage by now."

"It is," Plouffe said. "I seen it when I come back. I was meaning to tell you."

"Then," said Angel, "we're stymied. Unless," she added, glancing suspiciously at Smith, "that brain of yours is working overtime again. Sometimes that brain amazes me."



DGERSON did some serious thinking as he drove away from the elaborate home of the slain McKenna. It was high time, he realized, to do some thinking. Up until now this affair had been little more than a pleasant diversion, a relief from the monotony of being president of a greeting card concern. A hobby, like amateur theatrics or peep-hole photography. Now it was murder.

He scowled at the windshield and

mentally fitted together the pieces of the puzzle as he saw them. The pattern was a bit startling. "You know, Angel," he said, "the safest thing we could do right now would be to go straight to the police, tell them all we know and then go for a nice long ride into the country."

"Nonsense!" she said scornfully.

He sighed. "We'll do the next best thing. Plouffe, we'll leave it to you to phone the police and report McKenna's death. You can do it from a booth somewhere without leaving a trail."

"And what'll you two be doing?" Plouffe demanded.

"Pushing our noses deeper into affairs that don't concern us."

"Well," Plouffe said, "I don't like it."

"Neither do I."

Smith stopped the car at a restaurant. "There should be a phone inside," he said. "Use it, then go home. If we need you again, I'll call you."

"I still don't like it," Plouffe muttered, but he got out.

"And now," said Angel, when the car was under way again, "just what *do* we do?"

"What time is it?"

She looked at her watch. "Four-ten. Fine time of night to keep your best girl out."

"We drive to Warren Avenue now," Smith declared calmly, "and get out of bed a young man named Timothy Kenson. I don't believe you know Timmy."

"Who is he?"

"He works at the office. But for the past several hours he's been working at the Krashna Tobacco Store, downtown."

"Why?"

"You'll see," Smith said, "in due time."

She didn't like that. She glared at him. "He knows all, sees all, tells nothing." Smith ignored her and she adjusted her red cape about her angrily.

He drove in silence. The streets were deserted, and it was difficult to realize that on so calm and peaceful a night murder had been done. But Smith's

mind, agile now, was ahead of the murder and groping for the motive.

He knew, or thought he knew, the elaborate steps leading up to McKenna's death, and the probable aftermath. But the motive still evaded him. Unless, of course, the answer lay at the Glickman Company.

He turned the car into Warren Avenue and stopped. "You wait here," he told Angel. Climbing the steps of a brown cottage, he put his thumb against the doorbell. In a moment a light winked on and the door opened. A young, red-haired man in wrinkled pajamas blinked at Smith and said, "Oh, it's you, Mr. Edgerson."

"Any luck, Timmy?"

"Sure thing. He came in late this afternoon. I been trying to get you ever since."

"A tall, dark man, Timmy? With a beard?"

"Nope. He was a little runt. Crummy looking."

"Oh. You followed him?"

"Sure thing. He walked down the street a ways and got into a taxicab. So I did like you said. I jumped into another taxicab and told the driver to keep him in sight. He went into a house on Canal Street, down near the river. Wait a minute and I'll get you the number. I wrote it down."

He was back in a minute or two with a slip of paper which he thrust into Smith's hand. "Here it is, Mr. Edgerson. Number 23 Canal. Just a couple of doors down from the McCullen Warehouse, if you know where that is."

"Timmy," John Smith said, "you're a genius!"

"It was easy," Timmy said.

"It was masterful. Tomorrow you get a raise in pay."

Smith hurried back to the car, stuffing the slip of paper into his pocket. He said nothing to Angel, but the triumphant smirk on his face gave him away.

"You look," she said, "as if you just ate the goldfish. What's up? Where are we going now?"

"To the hideout of the dark foreigner who smokes long black cigarettes."

"What?"

"It was really quite simple. While you were holding down the fort I visited the only two tobacco stores in the city where a man can buy long black cigarettes. They're Cuban, you know. I discreetly asked questions. The man in the place on Fernald Street told me he used to carry them because he had a customer who came regularly, twice a week, for a large supply. The customer was Professor Dubitsky, and the fellow had sold no Cuban cigarettes since Dubitsky's death. But in the second store I had better luck, Angel. The man there informed me that he did carry them. He hadn't used to, he said, but about three months ago a customer placed a standing order with him, and the customer called twice a week to pick up his supply."

"The original Sherlock Holmes!" Angel gasped. "And all this time I thought you were just plain Philip Edgerson!"

"I got quite chummy with the man," Smith informed her, "and enlisted his aid. He agreed to let Timmy work for him. Timmy did so, and when the buyer of the Cuban cigarettes came in, Timmy followed him. That's all there was to it. Quite simple, you see."

"You mean Timmy followed Professor Dubitsky?"

"No. Dubitsky himself wouldn't come out in the open like that. But if we fail to find him at the address to which we're going, I'll be a most crestfallen sleuth."

She gave him a sidelong glance from beneath the red hood and then looked out the car window, noting the sinister section of town into which he was taking her.

"Are you armed, Philip?"

"I don't own a gun. You know that."

"Philip," she said in a manner of confession, "I have one. I borrowed it from my office."

He frowned. "Keep it," he said bluntly.

The car had entered the waterfront warehouse district, and at this time of night the streets were black, deserted, ominous. A short-lived downpour had beaten to life sour smells of fish and fruit, and the dampness held those unsavory odors in suspension. You smelled trouble. Danger.

Smith pulled the machine to the curb. "For you, Angel," he said firmly, "this is as far as the car goes. I may be a willing slave to my hobby, but I drag no hapless woman with me."

"It's not your hobby. It's ours."

"Nevertheless, you wait here—you and your silly popgun."

"That," she said, "is what you think."

"It's what I know," he said. Then, suddenly serious: "Look here, darling. We've not even the vaguest idea of what we're getting into. It may be as mean and dirty as the district it's in. I'd be scared stiff if you came along."

"So I'm to sit here and be scared stiff until you get back?"

"Or else," he threatened, "we go straight to the police. Although any self-respecting cop would arrest you in that devil's cape."

She was angry. He looked at her and saw that she was staring straight ahead, her lips tight-pressed, her chin rigid. He patted her knee and got out, walked away.

Just once, as he went past the warehouse a hundred yards or so distant, he turned his head to look back. The car's headlights owlshly stared at him. Uneasy about leaving Angel alone too long on a street so dark and unsavory, he quickened his step.

Number 23 was one of a row of tenements, all of which looked alike in the dark. A battered ashcan filled with refuse stood on the concrete stoop beside the door. The door opened when Smith pressed it.

He stepped over the threshold into a black, smelly hall. Stopped there, scowling, and realized that the house

had three floors and he had no idea on which level to concentrate.

His flash-light winked, threading a narrow beam through the gloom of the lower hall. A baby carriage stood there. He went past it, past the door of the first floor tenement, to the stairs. The building was a tomb, cold and damp and dark.

With the light cupped in his hand he climbed slowly, testing each ancient step before trusting it with his weight. The second floor landing came level with his eyes and he stopped again. The light showed him a small and black cigarette stub lying by a door. He smiled a tight, twisted little smile and knew that the door was his destination.

He stepped beside it, scowled, and snapped out the light. There was no sound anywhere.

The fact that he was unarmed did not greatly worry him. It never had before. The day he began to carry a gun, he told himself, Trouble Incorporated would cease to be a hobby. Besides, he had no permit.

He tipped his hat back on his head and loosened his tie. He opened his coat, rubbed a hand over the floor and transferred the dirt thus collected to the front of his shirt, blackening it. For good measure he pulled off two buttons, to make the shirt sag.

He dirtied his face and ruffled his hair, and put on a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles, the lenses of which were clear glass.

Then he seized the doorknob and rattled it, and then he banged on the door and cursed it and began talking to himself.

Results were not long coming. A couch squeaked inside and a voice said sharply, "Who's there? Who's out there?"

"It'sh Percy," Smith slobbered. "Lemme in."

"Who? Who is it?"

"It'sh Percy! You lemme in or sho help me I'll busht the door down!"

A key turned in the lock and the door

opened. It didn't open far. Just far enough to frame a short, thick-set man whose swarthy face was all scowl.

"Listen, buddy," the swarthy man said. "You're in the wrong place. Beat it."

"Who're you?"

"Never mind who I am. It's the middle of the night, see? And you're in the wrong alley. Scram!"

"Thish ish where I live," Smith snorted. "Don' you tell me I don' belong here. I know different."

The dark fellow was in no mood to argue with a drunk. He came a step closer, put his right hand flat against Smith's chest, and pushed. He slammed the door as Smith staggered away from it.

Smith smiled that tight little smile again and resumed his assault. If he made enough noise, the occupants of the tenement would do one of two things: Either slug him or try to reason with him. He didn't think they would slug him. This was a hideout. They would want to avoid trouble.

And they most certainly would open the door if he hammered on it long enough.

It opened. The swarthy man said savagely, "Listen, buddy, will you for Gawd's sake go away and leave us get some sleep? Or do I have to get rough with you?"

Smith's eyes glowered at him out of a slack, stupid face. "You lishen to me," he said. "My name'sh Percy Smith an' I live here. An' nobody'sh gonna keep me out!"

Behind the swarthy man an impatient voice said, "Let him in, Max."

"Oke, buddy," Max sighed. "Come on in."

"That'sh better," Smith said. "That'sh much better."

He walked in, weaving a little. Max closed the door.

"Now take a good look around, Percy," Max said, "and you'll see this ain't the place you thought it was.

You're drunk and you're in the wrong house."

"Who saysh I am?"

"Look around. See for yourself."

Smith looked around. The room in which he stood was a living-room, furnished with table, chairs and a couch. The swarthy man, Max, had evidently been sleeping on the couch, in his clothes. His clothes were wrinkled and he wore no shoes.

The other man was bigger. He wore gray pajamas which hung loosely from his lank frame, revealing a generous expanse of hairy chest. His hair was in his eyes and he stood with his hands hipped, feet spread wide, just back of the table. A door behind him led to what appeared to be a bedroom.

"I—I guessh I was mistaken," Smith mumbled apologetically.

"Convinced, are you?"

"I musht've got mixed up somehow."

"Well, if you're convinced," Max said, "just scam like a nice guy and don't make any more noise'n you have to."

Smith stood where he was. "I—I don't feel sho good," he said.

"O.K., O.K.," the other man said tartly. "Beat it! Be sick outside!"

"I wanna shtay here. I wanna lie down somewheres. . . ."

The two men exchanged glances. The man named Max took his right hand out of his pocket, where it had rested since Smith's entrance. They stepped forward. "Sure," Max said. "We'll help you lay down, buddy. We wouldn't think of puttin' a nice guy like you out in the street at this time o' night. No-o-o. Would we, Vick?"

"Of course not," Vick said.

They took hold of Smith's arms. That was their mistake. He had been waiting for it. Waiting to get them both together, both in reach at the same time. Any other way would have been fatal, because undoubtedly both men were armed.

Smith's heel came down hard, piston-fast, on a shoeless foot that belonged to

Max. At the same time he twisted, stabbed an arm out and caught the other man's wrist. He was suddenly not drunk any more, and before his adventures were over their amazement, Smith had the situation in hand.

You didn't need a gun. All you needed was a slight knowledge of the fine art of Oriental wrestling, plus a fair to middling physique and a nickel's worth of nerve.

Max yelped, bent double at the waist as pain streaked up from his tortured foot. He bent into an upthrust knee that smacked his chin and snapped his teeth together. He staggered against the table, dazed, and had sense enough left to reach gropingly for the pocket where his gun lay. But he was too slow.

Smith had hold of Vick's wrist. He yanked Vick off balance, stooped, caught the arm above the wrist and pulled it. Not hard. Really not hard at all. But fast.

Vick's feet left the floor. He lost his breath in an explosive grunt as his big frame looped through space. His hundred and eighty pounds crashed into Max and Max was finished. Vick sprawled to the floor, stunned, and Max fell over him.

Smith waded in. What little fight remained in Vick was dissipated quickly by a hard, clean punch to the button. For his trouble, Smith had nothing to show except a few minor beads of moisture on his face and forehead.

He stepped back and surveyed the wreckage, highly elated. Luck, he realized, had been with him. He turned then and strode into the bedroom. It was empty.

Scowling, he walked through the bedroom into a kitchen. That was empty, too.

He went back to Vick and Max, sorry now that he had knocked them so thoroughly out. There were questions he wanted to ask. Questions concerning the whereabouts of Mr. and Mrs. Teddy Burdick.

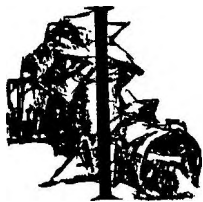
He stared at them for a moment, un-

decided what to do; then, stooping, he went through their pockets. Both men were armed. He removed the weapons and placed them on the table, careful not to blur any finger-prints that might be on them. One of those guns, Smith was reasonably certain, had murdered McKenna.

In Vick's pocket he found a slip of paper. Pencil words, written in a stiff, marching hand, said: "Fix up the girl tomorrow night, provided the papers are in our possession by that time. The following night take care of the husband. Carefully now—suicide."

Smith read it twice, then pocketed it. An ugly fear took hold of him. Fear that he might have come too late. That the thing had already been done. He went into the kitchen, found an empty tin can and filled it with cold water. Returning, he knelt beside Vick and poured the water over his face.

Behind him a voice said quietly: "We will omit that, please. We will stand up and put our hands high and turn around very slowly."



IT WAS a familiar voice. Quite a famous voice, in fact. Smith had heard it several times on the radio, had heard it also at university

lectures. He knew, therefore, even before he obeyed the command, that at long last he had come face to face with the supposedly dead Dubitsky.

It was not a pleasant sensation. He turned, raised his hands, and stared glumly at Dubitsky's face. The hall door was open and the professor stood just inside it, tall and stoop-shouldered and grim. The automatic in his hand was small but deadly.

"Your name, please?" Dubitsky said curtly.

"It's Percy Smith, mishter." It was worth a try, anyway, Smith figured. "These two men shaid I didn' live here an' I had a dishcussion."

"We will omit that, also," Dubitsky snapped. "You were not drunk when you came from the kitchen!"

Smith sighed. "I'm not drunk now, either," he said, hunching his shoulders.

"Why are you here?"

"Vick's an old friend of mine."

"Explain, please."

"Sure. Back in the old days, Vick and I used to work together. So when I met him on the street a while ago, he invited me up here, just to talk over old times. Me and him and this other guy here, we got into an argument. That's all."

"You are lying," Dubitsky said.

"So help me, it's the truth!"

"Is it? Suppose, then, you tell me Vick's full name."

"Huh?"

"I thought so," Dubitsky said. "You are an agent of the government." He came a step closer, his eyes flashing. "Well, my meddling friend, you are too late. Most of the papers are already on their way to an agent of *my* government. Except for minor details, my work is finished. And you, my friend, will not interfere with those minor details, I assure you."

Smith did not answer. His gaze was on the door and he was frightened. His upraised hands trembled and perspiration gleamed on his face.

Dubitsky misunderstood. He smiled. "You have good reason to be afraid of me, my friend," he said.

Out in the hall, Miss Angelina Copeland placed on the floor the shoes she was carrying. They were her own shoes. She had removed them before ascending the stairs. She looked like little Red Riding Hood, except Red didn't pack a gun. She measured the distance now between her outthrust hands and Dubitsky's broad back, and, still in a crouch, she set herself. Then she lunged.

The threshold creaked as she went over it, and Dubitsky whirled. He whirled too late. Angel threw herself at

his knees and bucked him off balance. Smith closed in and caught him.

Smith's hands closed over Dubitsky's wrist and twisted. He hadn't used that particular twist before. It was dangerous. In the gymnasium where he worked out, it was outlawed. You could break a man's arm with it.

Smith put all he had into it, and the arm snapped. He stopped then and threw Dubitsky over his head, and when the professor crashed into the door frame something else snapped.

Dubitsky shuddered to the floor and lay in a sprawled, unlovely heap. Smith straightened, gasping for breath.

"Lord!" he said. "That was close! Angel, you were marvelous! Why didn't you shoot, though?"

"I was scared to," she declared, picking herself up and still clinging to the gun.

"I told you to keep out of here!"

"I know you did. So I drove the car up and parked it just across the street. You didn't expect me to stay in the bleachers when the ringside was vacant, did you? Then I saw Dubitsky walk in here, and my woman's intuition told me I'd be needed."

Dubitsky had not moved. Scowling a little, Smith knelt beside him.

"Is it bad?" Angel asked.

"Bad enough," he said, holding a hand over the professor's heart. "I suppose he'll live, though. They usually do." Then he turned to her. "Put that silly gun away."

"You'll be answering a flock of awfully embarrassing questions, darling, if he doesn't live," Angel said, letting the gun swing loose in her hand.

He stood up, glancing at Vick and Max. "Speaking of questions, I still want to ask a few." Vick, he saw, was coming to. The cold water had begun to take effect.

He put a hand on Vick's neck, groped for a moment with one finger and then pressed.

"Hey!" Vick choked.

"Nice, isn't it?" Smith said quietly. "Hurts a little." He pressed harder.

Vick jerked clear of the floor and fell flat again with a spongy thud. There was a nerve back there that was really sensitive.

"You're killin' me!"

"I will, too," Smith promised solemnly, "unless you cooperate. Tell me now—what have you done with the Burdicks?"

"I never heard of no Burdicks."

Smith tickled the nerve. Not gently this time, but strenuously.

"They're upstairs!" Vick gasped. "For Gawd's sake, cut it out!"

"See if you can find some rope around here, Angel," Smith said. "If not, rip up a bedsheet. Now, Vick, it's my turn. I'll tell you what I know, or guess, and you can supply the rest."

"The place for that," Angel said, "is not here. Too much might happen. Let's take him with us. First thing you know, someone will walk in here with a machine gun, and then where will you be with your Chinese wrestling?"

"It worked, didn't it?"

"Yes, but even Steve Brodie didn't try it twice, darling. I'm going upstairs and collect the Burdicks."

She walked out. Smith glared at Vick and said grimly, "One thing I do want to know. What's so all-fired important about those papers?"

"You go to hell," Vick snarled.

Smith found the nerve again. Vick shuddered to the tips of his fingers.

"It—it's a formula," he gasped. "It's some screwy formula for a new high explosive. That's all I know. I swear it!"

"I think," Smith said slowly, "I get it. At least, I begin to. Our friend Dubitsky was sent here by a foreign government. He took his time. He planned things carefully. Through him, Burdick and one or two other students obtained jobs at the Glickman Company. Through Burdick, the learned professor obtained information on the whereabouts of the formula. But things were hot. He decided to vanish. As Pro-

fessor Dubitsky he did vanish. How right am I, Vick?"

"I wouldn't know," Vick mumbled. "Lay off of me, will you?"

"He found out," Smith said, "that the custodian of the secret was McKenna. With that to work on, he planned to rob McKenna's safe, and also, very cleverly, figured out an alibi because he knew he'd have to kill McKenna after he got him to open his safe. To cover up the murder Dubitsky planned that the police would discover after a while that McKenna was paying attention to Burdick's wife, and that Burdick himself, soon after McKenna's murder, had committed suicide. It would appear to be the usual sordid triangle, leaving Dubitsky and the real motive thoroughly obscured. I like to reason these things out, Vick. It's half the fun."

Angel, appearing in the doorway, said impatiently: "Mr. and Mrs. Burdick are now in your car, Mr. Smith. Could you cut it short, perhaps?"

"One more thing, Vick."

"Huh?"

"Who murdered McKenna?"

"You go to hell!"

Smith caressed the nerve again.

"He did," Vick groaned. "So help me, I ain't lyin'. Dubitsky did it. After gettin' McKenna to open the safe with them papers in it Dubitsky had to kill him to keep him from ever identifying him."

Smith sighed. "It really doesn't matter who shot him because I'm going to tie the three of you up, Vick, and as soon as I'm out of here I'm going to phone the police. You won't escape before they get here, Vick. Doing tricks with ropes is another of my little accomplishments, and you won't even wiggle when I'm through with you. So the police will come and find you, Vick, and find those two guns on the table; and if either of those guns fired the bullet that killed McKenna, the police will know it. Ballistics, you know."

"Here," Angel said, "are your ropes.

Mr. and Mrs. Burdick were wrapped up in them, upstairs."

Smith went to work tying them up while Angel stood by with her gun trained on them. Finished, he stepped back and surveyed the results of his efforts, and grinned.

He took Angel's arm. "Let's go, darling," he said.



"HAT'S right," Mrs. Burdick's Teddy said timidly. "I got the job through Dubitsky and then a couple of months later he died. And then he came to life again, and came to see me."

"And told you he was a Federal agent?"

"That's right, Mr. Smith. He told me he was a Federal agent, working to break down a spy ring. And I believed him. I guess I'd been reading too many stories."

They sat, the four of them, in the tiny office of Trouble, Inc. Teddy Burdick, Mrs. Burdick, Angel and Smith. Burdick was limp with gratitude. Mrs. Burdick was exactly like her letter—small, scared, not too gifted with brains.

"Dubitsky asked you then to help him. He told you the officials of the Glickman Company were under suspicion, and asked you to find out which of them had been entrusted with the safe-keeping of the formula. That it?" Smith asked.

"That's right. And when I did find out that Mr. McKenna kept it at home, he advised me to quit my job. He gave me a thousand dollars and told me to move to a small apartment somewhere and keep very quiet until the thing came to a head."

"What happened then?" Smith asked.

"Well, at the last minute, just when we were all set to move, he sent for me. He called me on the phone and told me to come to that address on Canal Street. When I got there, those two men, Vick and Max, jumped on me."

Smith leaned back in his chair, smiling. "You see it now, Angel?" he asked gently.

"There's one thing," Angel declared, "that still bothers me."

"Yes?"

"Look, now. Dubitsky planned this business very nicely, but right smack in the middle of it he 'died.' There must have been, at that time, a fear in his mind that he was being watched. In other words, government agents were closing in on him." She drew a deep breath and stared at the floor, marshaling her thoughts.

"Well," she continued, "he came to life again and went through with his plans. He got the formula. If Trouble, Incorporated, hadn't landed right kersmack on the back of his neck, he and his buddies would have disposed of Mrs. Burdick, to keep her quiet, and then murdered Teddy, making it look like a suicide to give the police an answer to the McKenna kill and steer the investigation away from Dubitsky and his pals. You follow me?"

There was a knock on the door. Smith got up to answer it. "So far, yes," he said. "Go ahead."

He opened the door and Plouffe stood there.

"Well," Angel said, scowling, "what I want to know is why the G-men, after getting close enough to scare Dubitsky into temporary oblivion, didn't see through his phony death and ultimately get their hands on him."

Plouffe, blinking his gray eyes at her, said: "So help me, Miss Copeland, you're clairvoyant. Meet my friend here, Mr. Toomey."

He stepped aside and a man walked past him. "Mr. Toomey," Plouffe said, "is a G-man. It seems he's been keeping an eye on me ever since Mrs. Burdick come to me for advice."

"On all of you," Toomey said quietly. He was a tall, gray-haired man with a pleasant smile. "You see, Mr. Smith, we were just warming up to this case when you stepped into it."

Smith stood up, his face sheepish.

"What Dubitsky was after," Toomey said, "was the formula for a new explosive being manufactured for the government by the Glickman Company."

"And thanks to us," Smith admitted, "he got it."

"No. He never would have got it. What he took from McKenna was the original formula, long ago proved to be worthless. I doubt if Dubitsky even knew that the original has twice been revised, and that the only existing copy of the approved, final formula has never been out of government hands. What you did do, Mr. Smith, was save the lives of Mr. and Mrs. Burdick and save us a lot of work."

"Oh," said Smith.

"He's really very smart," Angel cooed.

"Thanks to you, Mr. Smith," Toomey said, "the dangerous Dubitsky and his two associates are in custody. I'm here simply to offer congratulations."

He thrust out his hand. Smith took it. Angel beamed.

"You know," Plouffe said, "he's really a pretty good guy. Maybe we should ought to tell him the truth, Toomey."

"Truth?" Smith said.

"You owe me some money," Plouffe declared, pacing forward to the desk behind which Smith stood. "I'll match you to see whether I get it or not."

He took a coin from his pocket and flipped it. Slightly bewildered, Smith did likewise.

"Heads," Smith said.

Plouffe thrust out his hand with the coin on the back of it. It wasn't a coin. Not exactly. It was a gold identification disc of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Smith gaped at it.

"A lot of things," Plouffe said softly, with a smile, "are not what they seem. Believe it or not, when I let you hire me I thought you were after that formula, too. I deliberately let you believe I was impersonating a F. B. I. man so

you'd feel you had something on me. That way I might get onto a lot of things. Sorry, pal." He turned to Toomey. "Well, Toomey," he said, "let's go. And you and your wife, Mr. Burdick, if you'll come along too and answer a few questions, you can go home afterward."

They went out. Smith looked solemnly at Angel. "I," he declared slowly, "will be damned."

She said, "Nothing surprises me any more."

"I've another surprise for you," Smith told her, smiling.

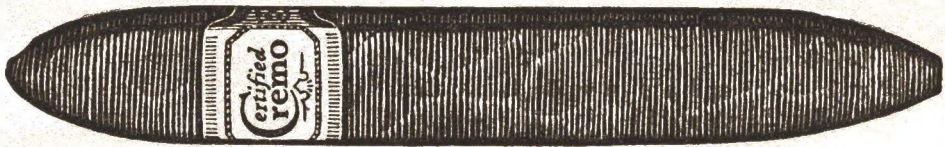
"Really?"

"I'm going to pay you for all the work you've done."

"No! You don't mean it!"

"But I do." He put his arms around her.

"Like this," he said, and kissed her.



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BEHIND THE BLACK MASK

"Where do you get your ideas?"

It's a question that continually plagues writers. I usually answer this way:

"Ideas for stories come from everywhere," I begin. "From the news printed in the morning paper, from the fact material that I am continually accumulating in the shape of a working library, from first-hand experiences—and sometimes I pull them out of the air. An idea, of course, is only part of a beginning. Usually two or three ideas, put together, are necessary to make a story." For instance, my mystery book, *Coffins for Three*, recently published by Doubleday Doran for The Crime Club, is based upon a combination of three major ideas and a round dozen minor ones.

Often new ideas blossom spontaneously while I work along on a given story. As another instance, my second book, tentatively entitled *Some Corpses Are Deader Than Others*, to be published by The Crime Club next spring, is based on a situation that occurred to me while I was plotting a short detective novelette. It didn't belong in the novelette, so I tucked it away in my plot file. While I was developing the plot for *Stop the Presses* I found myself making notes on

two other stories at the same time. These two are still in the file awaiting the propitious moment.

Every time I begin a new yarn, I open this file and pore over a collection of hundreds of story ideas. Some of them have remained there a long time. The chief idea behind *Stop the Presses* is one that incubated for four years before it struck a fresh spark in my mind and I went to work on it for Black Mask.

Studying a file card on which an idea is noted down, I begin building upon it and under it. Kipling's six faithful serving men get busy—the ones named Who, Why, Where, When, What and How. I make more notes, each on a separate card, always bearing in mind the all-important elements of suspense, character and dramatic conflict for my story.

Finally I write it, submit it to the editor and utter a hopeful prayer. Having learned long ago that a writer is no judge of his own work, I never know whether the story is good or bad until the editor tells me. By that time I'm hard at work on a new story, poring over my file of ideas that come from everywhere and nowhere.

—Frederick C. Davis.

COME CLEAN

By DONALD WANDREI

Cunning snaps the rope that twists around the fall guy's neck



NOTHING in the world sounded more attractive than a good hot shower. He was tired and dusty and full of aches that lurked under the crust that now covered him. As he

peeled his clothing off and tossed it aside, he half expected the various pieces to stand around as though he was still inside of them.

At seven o'clock in the evening, Iron Tooth Taylor made a



terrifying spectacle. His eyes stood out like two white saucers in a black face. That was where the goggles had protected him in the final race at the State Fair dirt track. He'd got his odd nickname the time he'd cracked up a couple of years back and sailed through the air with his teeth bared in startled surprise. He landed that way on top of the fence railing, and a lucky photographer got a picture before he somersaulted on. The mourners came tearing over but he picked himself up and grinned at them. Somebody said, "Cripes, the guy's got

iron teeth and they must of riveted his neck on."

The recollection brought a grin to his face as he tore his shirt off. He wasn't bad looking, what could be seen of him. He had the kind of lean, wiry build that seems peculiar to pilots and race-track speed demons.

He made a kind of hand to mouth living out of his nomad's life, which was traveling around the country from one meet to another. He had a sideline that was always good for a few dollars when his luck was down. He could do magic with ropes and whips. He could flick a cigarette out of a man's mouth at twenty feet with the curling tip of a bullwhip accompanied by a *crack* as sharp as a gunshot. He could make a rope tie itself into knots, and spin a noose that traveled upward from the ground and over his head and out away from him in a manner that fascinated people. Strangely, he couldn't lasso anything if his life depended on it. He never figured out the why of it. He didn't care enough. It was just sideline stuff.

He stretched and looked around with a sense of coming home after a long absence. He'd only been in town a few days. Often he didn't see the apartment for weeks or months at a time. It wasn't much to look at—a couple of big, old-fashioned rooms on the tenth floor of a twelve-story residential apartment hotel that must have been a sensation in the Nineties. Now it was half empty, and quietly dying in the dismal way that buildings do. He kept it because the rent was cheap and he needed a place to store his accumulated tokens, trophies, programs, and magazine files.

He went into the bathroom and started adjusting the water taps. It was always a risky venture in these old buildings. Just as you got in, under a comfortable temperature, the shower was apt to change into scalding steam that took your skin right off, and then as you made a frantic grab for the controls, it turned to pure ice water that congealed and paralyzed what was left of you.

He hung up his bathrobe after the shower was flowing at the right temperature. He walked to the tub and got one leg over.

The telephone started to ring. He froze with exasperation, and came as close as any man could to scowling from head to foot. He waited for the ringing to stop, but it didn't. A full minute passed. Finally he stalked out leaving wet right foot-prints in his wake. He grabbed the phone.

"Western Union," trilled a voice. "A telegram for Mr. Iron Tooth Taylor."

"Read it," Iron Tooth said. She giggled. "Yes sir. It reads, 'Congratulations on winning race lend me fifty thanks. Signed, Chuck.'"

He banged the receiver and hiked back to his shower. That was a hell of a note, touching a guy when he was trying his damndest to get clean. Get clean, he thought ruefully. Sure, cleaned out of pocket as well as skin. Maybe he'd send Chuck the fifty, maybe he wouldn't. He wouldn't know till he had that shower.

He got the same leg back into the tub, under the pleasantly spraying water. It felt good.

A muffled thumping came from the floor above. He waited a few seconds for the hammering to stop. It didn't. He'd heard it a couple of times before, but paid no attention. He might have ignored it again except that a piece of plaster smacked down, barely missing him. A little cloud of dust puffed up.

There wasn't much use taking a shower if you had to step out into dust and falling plaster. The thumping continued. Another piece of plaster fell down. He eyed the ceiling wrathfully, stalked out, and tried to get the management on the phone.

He waited for at least a minute, while the thumping went on, and pieces of plaster detached themselves from the ceiling. The management didn't respond. The phone remained dead for all his jiggling of the hook.

He tramped back to the bathroom to get his robe. The pounding increased

and a shower of plaster landed on his robe. Wearily he wrapped it around him, and went out to the hall.

An elderly lady looked at his face and robe and made clucking noises as she tottered to her room in a state of collapse. He did look appalling.

He took the emergency stairs three at a time. By the door to suite 1115, he listened, heard the muffled thumping, and rang the room bell.

After a while the door opened an inch on a chain lock and a curiously light blue eye with a piece of white eyebrow above it, a tuft of white chin whiskers below it, looked out. The inch of mouth said, "You need a bath, sir."

Taylor nearly choked with rage. "What the hell's going on here? Plaster's falling down. Stop that racket or—"

"Or?" said the voice briskly.

"Or else take that chain off and I'll fight it out to a finish right now."

A door opened down the hall. A shifty-eyed, gaunt-featured man popped his head into the hall. "Hey, you guys, go scrap somewhere else. Let a guy sleep." He popped his head out of sight.

White Hair said, "It will be over in just a few minutes. I suggest, sir, that you take a bath. You need it. Do you good." The door shut.

Boiling inwardly, Taylor strode back to his room. His bare feet made faint little thumps on the uncarpeted stairs.

Inside, he grabbed the phone and jiggled the hook. The desk clerk answered almost instantly this time. Iron Tooth said, "Outside," and a few moments later, "Police Headquarters? Send a radio car or something to room 1115, The Hillview. Yeah, hell of a racket." Then annoyance boiled over in him. He'd get the cops up here to stop it! "Sounds like a guy getting killed," he said angrily in the exaggeration of fury. "Who—me? My name's Taylor, in the apartment below, 1015."

He hung up, strode to the bathroom, and looked bitterly at the nuggets of plaster still sifting down. The shower ran merrily on, and for all the good it did

him, it might as well have been in the wilds of Tibet. He'd get caked with plaster in that shower. The thumping overhead continued for a few moments, then ended abruptly. There was a short silence, then a heavier thud than before. The sounds ceased. Granules of plaster kept dribbling from the ceiling.

He wandered out to the living-room, poured himself a slug of whiskey, and gulped it down. He had a worse case of jitters than he'd had at the race tracks. Sprawled out in an easy chair, he lit a cigarette and inhaled to take the burn off his throat. Probably he ought to tell the management. They'd let him use a shower in some other apartment, but he didn't think he would. He liked his own place where he knew where everything was. On the other hand, it would take time, hours at least, to fix the ceiling.



RON TOOTH smoked the cigarette down to the stub and tamped it out. The hall door suddenly opened and closed on a little man. His wizened monkey-face full of sober wrinkles. He had an automatic in on hand, and carried a big stuffed briefcase in the other.

Taylor cursed wearily, "Get the hell out of here."

"Don't move," the stranger said with easy command. He locked the door. "You're Iron Tooth Taylor, aren't you? That's fine. That's just dandy. I bet it was you called the cops."

"Righto," said Taylor. "The pounding got under my skin. So did the plaster, almost. Wave that cannon some other way. I don't like it."

"You will," the little fellow said easily. "I'm beginning to see my way clear now. Turn around."

"Go peddle your fish in somebody else's place," Taylor suggested.

"You're a sight with all that plaster

on you. You're really a sight," said the stranger, his trigger finger tightening. "You'll be a different kind of sight and a nasty one in about a minute. Then I'll have two dead men on my conscience. Move!"

"Look here, I'm only trying to take a shower," Taylor began, and stopped. Two dead men! Good Lord, he'd just got through making a sarcastic remark to the police about a killing.

"Turn around!" snapped the little man.

Taylor faced the wall, his head whirling. He heard metallic sounds. The voice continued, "You see, I'm in a jam. I killed a man a couple of minutes ago. You guessed it—Schweck, the white-haired fool, trying to hold out on me." He said it in the same casual, indifferent way that people do when they mention, "Nice weather we're having," offhand, like that. "When you came up complaining about the noise old Schweck didn't know yet I was going to kill him."

"That so?" Iron Tooth said politely.

The stranger said, "I've just cut your telephone wire. We don't want to be disturbed, do we? I cut the line in the apartment above, too.

"I feel sorry for you, I certainly do, but I guess there isn't much we can do about that, now, is there? Schweck and I had a—a difference of opinion. I expected to get away without interference, but you spoiled that with your bright idea of calling the cops. Not intentionally, of course, but effectively, just the same. I was coming around the corner when the elevator stopped and a cop galloped out. He didn't see me. I ducked back too fast. I came down the emergency stairs. There's a window I looked out of. Do you know what I saw?"

He sounded as if he was playing a game, unhurried, and sure of the consequence. Taylor, face still to the wall, didn't answer. The little man went on, "I saw a radio car down there. The second cop is lounging outside, watching the entrance. It looks bad for me, but I don't give up that easily. Oh no."

A couple of *clunks* and a *thunk* came from behind Taylor. The voice said softly, gently, "I'm making you a couple of presents."

A loud, peremptory knocking shook the entrance door. The little man whispered, "You can turn around now. The key's on the table. You'd better open up before they break in. I'll be in the bathroom. Don't warn the cops. I've got another gun."

Taylor saw what he meant. He had taken the clip from the automatic and tossed both pieces of the gun on the table. Beside them he left a thin package that he removed from the briefcase.

"Remember, don't warn them. And I'd advise you not to try to put the clip back in. It's empty."

The bathroom door closed upon the little killer.



HE KNOCKING became thunderous. Taylor snatched the key and ran to the main entrance. He jerked the door open. "Listen, there's a nut in the bathroom claims he killed a guy—"

A cop in uniform, big, stony-faced, thrust Iron Tooth back with a shove that sent him sprawling in a chair. The cop held a .45 that looked like a big Bertha. "Quit kiddin' me," he stated flatly. "And quit stallin'." He turned the key with his free hand and kept it clutched in a thick fist. "Come clean. Why'd you do it?" He added as an afterthought, "Say, you need a bath."

Taylor had cold anger in his voice. "I'm telling you there's a guy, a nut the squirrels missed, in there who—"

The cop jeered. "Don't pull that old gag. You done nothin' but pull old ones. Why'd you kill Schweck?"

"I didn't! I'm trying to tell you—"

The cop butted in, "Skip it. A guy down the hall upstairs saw you and Schweck tearin' at each other's throats fifteen minutes back. Says Schweck

slammed the door on you. So you barged down here and got a gun and went up and shot him. Then you called the cops. Old stuff," he said disgustedly. "Don't you know us cops always check up first on the guy that reports a murder?" He looked around.

"Look, you even been takin' the gun apart!"

Taylor said savagely, "I never even touched the damn thing! You won't find a single lousy finger-print of mine on it—"

"So you cleaned it off already," said the cop. "That won't help you much."

"The guy that killed Schweck wore gloves! He's still wearing 'em! My God, officer, you can't let him get away! He isn't twenty feet from you!"

"Sure," said the cop amiably. "I know it. Get some duds on and we'll scam." He picked up the flat package and tore a strip off the brown wrapping. "Nice plates, these. The Feds been lookin' for 'em for years. Schweck sure was a wiz of an engraver. They got him for passin' the queer and sent him up but they never found these. Schweck got out, oh, two-three years ago, and they kept tabs on him, but nothin' happened, so finally they lost him last year.

"Nice set-up. You pass the queer around the country at races and such. No reason for anybody to get suspicious. And while you were gone, Schweck pounded away on his hand-press, turning out new tens or twenties. Nobody was disturbed. Naturally, with nobody home here . . . Whadja do with the latest queer?"

Taylor's nostrils flared. "It's all there, in the bathroom."

"Now you're talkin'. Wait'll I get Mike, my side kick." He walked to the window, raised it, and blew the police whistle. He waited an instant, then looked satisfied. Not once did he completely take his gaze off Taylor.

A muffled crash came from the bathroom. The cop scowled. "What was that?"

"Plaster, and I hope it knocked the rat that framed me out cold."

"Still play-actin', hey?" The cop waved him to one side of the bathroom door. He had bravery, at least, of a blunt, unheeding kind. He flung the door open and glanced in. A loud report instantly blasted through the steady spray of running water. The cop made a queer jerk backward, then pitched forward.

Taylor sprang to his side. He didn't see the wizened-faced little stranger until he spoke.

"Don't," the stranger said. His face peered down from a hole two feet square in the ceiling above the space between the bathtub rear and the wall. A second automatic nestled in his hands.

The cop was folded over the rim of the tub. In a spasmodic gesture, the key flipped from his fist and slid down the drain vent. Now Iron Tooth was locked in his apartment with a dead cop. The cop's pistol lay under the shower, and the spray wet his head, running red from the hole that had replaced his left eye. He made no sound as he died. The shower flowed on, hissing, maddeningly monotonous, while a red line trickled down the middle of the tub.

"Too bad," said the little man sorrowfully, still peering from the hole in the ceiling. "You're in a hell of a fix. I guess you'll fry. You know what cops do to cop-killers. Did you think I chose your apartment just because I happened to be passing by? Don't be silly. Schweck and I took this place when we learned you were below us. You'd seldom or never hear the hand-press. We even cut through the floorboards, down to the lath and plaster of your ceiling. All that plaster fell on you because I was busy getting the stuff out. If the Feds caught up with us, we'd have a chance to drop down there and lam before they broke the door up here.

"Only it worked in reverse. I stood on the edge of your tub and poked the ceiling with a curtain rod. The cut section fell. I slung my briefcase up, jumped, and here I am. You tell the

cops all about it. They'll convict you on possession of the plates and the gun."

Taylor had a hollow feeling that the little man was right. If he could keep the wrinkled, crafty face there a little longer . . . how long would it take the second cop to reach the tenth floor?

He snapped, "The automatic you left down here couldn't have killed the cop."

The stranger clucked. "That won't stop them. Oh, my, no. They'll say you threw a second gat away. They'll look for it. They won't find it. But that won't matter. They'll claim it went down a chimney. Or hit a sewer grating and dropped through. Or landed in an ash-can and got carried away to a city dump. I'm afraid you're sunk. You have the gun that killed Schweck. You have the plates that he made. You were seen quarreling with him.

"And don't try to follow me up here. I left the door unlocked before. I was in a hurry. I still am, but this time I'll lock it so you can't get out. Bye-bye."

The wizened face vanished.



TAYLOR stood in moody thought. He couldn't get out of his apartment. The key lay tantalizingly below his fingertips in the bathtub drain. He couldn't swing through the apartment above. Schweck's kiler would close that apartment's exit with another key. The telephone wires were cut. He couldn't reach a fire escape except through the hall which he couldn't get to.

He turned and sprinted from the bathroom.

The hall door shook with sudden pounding.

He fished the coils of his rope act from a closet, looped the noose around a bed-post, and flung the rest through a window as the pounding continued.

He climbed over the sill and went down, his bathrobe flapping. He passed a window where a man was staring casually out, cocktail in hand. The man's

eyes boggled and the cocktail glass shattered. Taylor was getting fed up with was something escaped from a nightmare.

The rope burned his hands. He hadn't figured the distance do the ground. He didn't know if the rope would reach all the way, but he didn't have time to worry about it. The second floor slid by and so did the end of the rope. He dropped eight feet to the sidewalk.

A pretty young girl walking to taxi giggled. "What is it—a scavenger hunt?"

He ducked past her to the building entrance. The little man strolled out, jaunty, the briefcase under one arm, his other hand in a side pocket. Taylor dove. The pocket twitched and flame scorched his chest. He bowled the killer over. The briefcase dropped with a thud.

Pint-Size was dynamite. He bounced up, caught Taylor's waist, and heaved. He actually threw the race driver. He was yanking at the automatic when Taylor, dazed, rolled to the briefcase. The killer jumped for it. Taylor reached up and clutched an ankle. The wizened man dove headlong and hit the cement with his forehead.

The hand in his pocket automatically pulled the trigger. The bullet fanned Taylor's knees. . . .

Five minutes later, the second cop said, "That's Benny, Benny the Beaut. Race-track tipster. He just got out of stir a few months ago after a swindling rap. Nope, he's never been tied up with Schweck before. They must of met in prison, and Schweck waited till Benny got out before taking his plates out of hiding. Benny gets around a lot. He'd be a good one to pass the queer. Looks like he got piggish and killed Schweck to take all. Chances are he'd of gone clean, too. We had no reason to tie him in with Schweck—hey, what's the rush?"

Taylor said, "There must be some place a guy can take a bath in peace. I'm going down in the basement. If you want me, try the laundry room. They've got some swell big tubs there."

CARELESS KILLER

There's breath-taking suspense in Beek's pursuit of a murderer along this bleak and craggy coast

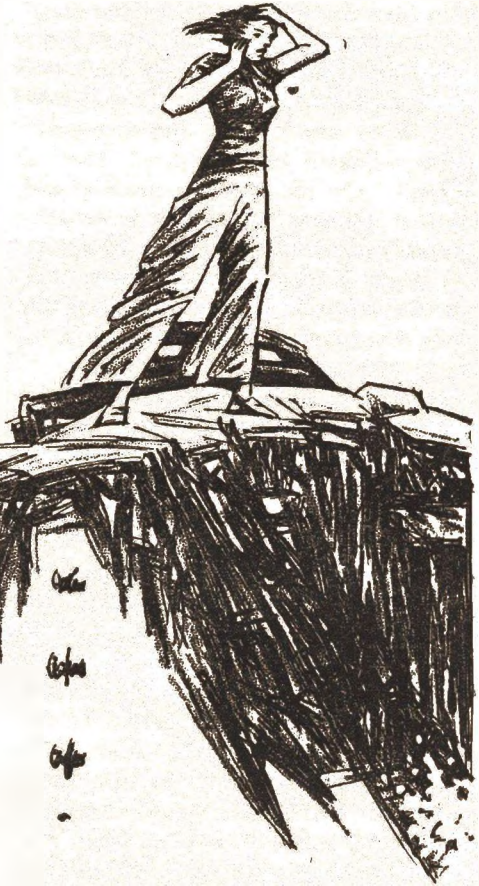


HE man in the cab of the truck saw me coming and gestured at the man standing outside. This one swung to face me and I saw he had a rifle in his hands. He had on a battered old hat and a ragged mackinaw and he looked lean and wolfish and mean. He hollered something, swept his arm at me in a forceful emphatic gesture that meant: "Stay back! Get out of here!"

He backed that up by leveling the rifle in a very business-like manner.

I stood on the brake and skidded the coupé to a stop, fifteen or twenty feet from him. I was suddenly mad. I'd come over from the roadway to offer to help them; I was being the good Samaritan and I didn't like to be met that way, repulsed and threatened with a gun. I cranked down the window at my side, stuck my head out and yelled: "What the hell's the idea? Don't point that thing at me."

The wind socked me in the face, tore the words out of my teeth. A regular gale was blowing off the ocean, carrying streaming wisps of fog. It brought me a heavy stink of putrefying matter that seemed to come from the truck. It was a light, open truck and the guy in behind the wheel had the motor roaring again.



Smooth rear tires were spinning, slipping in the muck they churned up, and the crate was lurching around frantically, getting nowhere.

This point of land that stuck out into the ocean was fenced-off pasture, gently rolling and green and wet with morning mists. You could drive practically anywhere on it, but the truck was over near the edge of the cliff in a hollow and couldn't get enough traction to carry it up and out. I'd come over to offer a tow, but the hell with that now.

By DWIGHT V. BABCOCK

The man with the rifle hadn't stopped pointing it at me. He jerked it in a gesture that told me to get going and started to come for me at a slow walk. I sat there and waited, watching him. I had my hand on the little hammerless .32 revolver I carried with me in the car or in the trailer when I was trailer-tramping. The old guy with the rifle stopped about ten feet away and licked his lips, looking at me. He had a thin, lined face and looked more wolfish than ever up this close. The stubble on his long jaw was brownish gray and one of his eyes was white, like the eye of a fish.

"Get out of here," he said through his teeth and I heard him this time.

"Nuts to you," I told him, but I don't think he heard me above wind and motor racket. I let

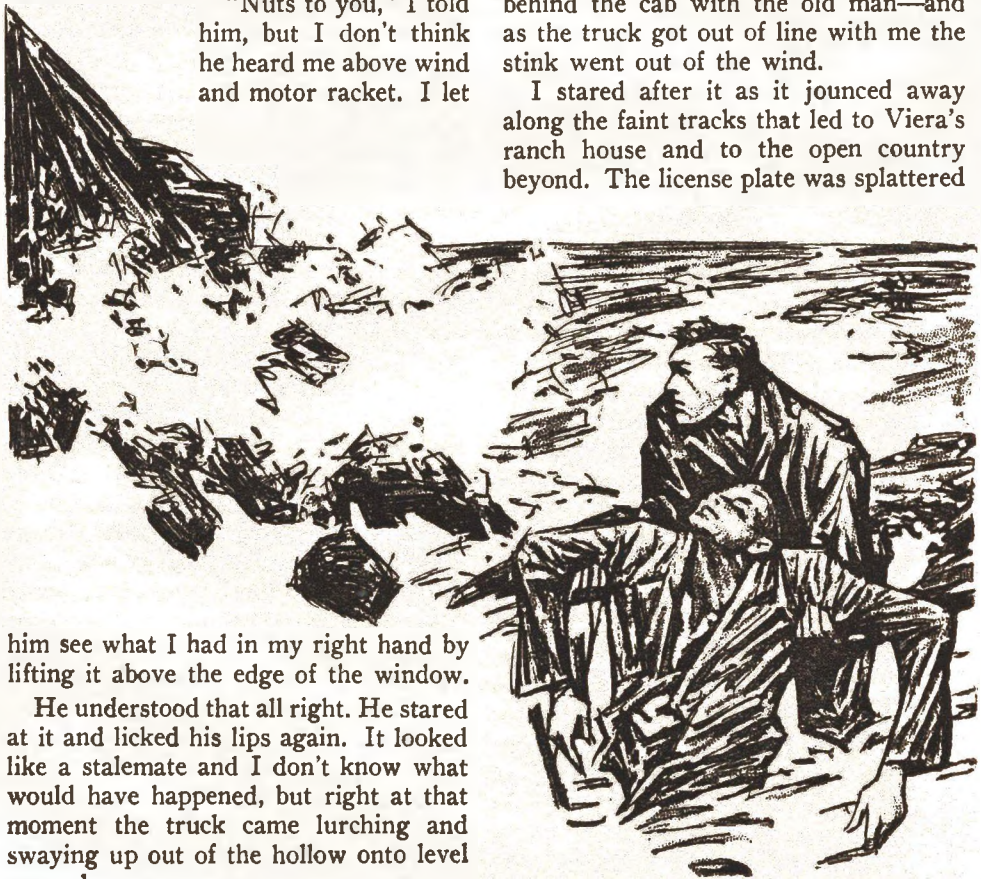
The old man shot a glance at it, then went sidewise toward it, keeping me covered with the rifle and his one good eye. The truck slowed as he came even with it and he swung himself up and over the tail-gate into the open rear section.

I took a closer slant at the driver as he gunned the bus forward and saw he looked a lot like the old man—battered hat and mackinaw, but the stubble on his face was black. He was a lot younger.

As the truck went away toward the road I noticed other things:

There was no printing on the sides or tail-gate, so it was evidently a privately owned hack. There was a shapeless, tarpaulin-covered mass wrapped and tied in behind the cab with the old man—and as the truck got out of line with me the stink went out of the wind.

I stared after it as it jounced away along the faint tracks that led to Viera's ranch house and to the open country beyond. The license plate was splattered



him see what I had in my right hand by lifting it above the edge of the window.

He understood that all right. He stared at it and licked his lips again. It looked like a stalemate and I don't know what would have happened, but right at that moment the truck came lurching and swaying up out of the hollow onto level ground.

with dried mud, but I'd made out most of the numerals and I penciled them on an old envelope, just in case. Something smelled about the way the two with the truck had acted, something besides the stuff they were carrying away under the tarpaulin.

I decided not to be bothered and let the truck get out of sight. There didn't seem to be another car out on this part of the point. I took a nip from my bottle, stuck it in my pocket and gathered up my gear, climbed out into the wind. I bucked it to the edge of the cliff and looked out and down.

The sky was gray and the wind was chill and clammy. The ocean looked leaden and cold under the mists that flowed across its surface, and right below me the water lapped and swirled around protruding rocks at the base of the cliff. It was an hour past dawn and I was too late to catch the minus tide at its lowest, but the tide was still out and those rocks down below looked like a good spot.

I decided to try it.

There was a strip of beach showing over to the left and I found a way down to it—a steep and slippery trail that had been used before. This rocky shoreline was a swell place to get abalone—I knew that from experience—but you really needed a minus tide to get far enough out and down low enough on the rocks to get them. A minus tide is an extra low, low tide, and they only happen at certain times of the year for a few days at a time, always early in the morning, usually before daylight.

The alarm clock in my trailer hadn't worked this morning and I'd got up too late. But I'd skipped breakfast and come out on the point to try my luck anyway. I didn't usually go after abalone alone, but my pal, Al, wouldn't meet me here until the next day and I had to do something to pass the time. He was coming up from San Francisco on his vacation, and I'd just come down from a jaunt into Oregon with the trailer. We'd planned to meet here.

I downed another swallow of whiskey before wading out into the water. It was cold, but I didn't feel it much because I'd been nursing my bottle ever since starting out here and the whiskey inside my belly had kindled a fire that kept me warm. My clothes helped too. You had to go into the water fully clothed, shoes and all, or else get cut up on the rocks.

I had a rope wrapped around my waist, a gunny sack tied to my belt, and a tire iron hanging from my wrist by a thong. The rope was for use in case of emergency, the gunny sack was to hold the abalone in case I got any, and the tire iron was used to pry them off the rocks. They stick to the rocks below the surface of the water and when you touch them they clamp down like giant suction cups. I had the tire iron tied to my wrist because I didn't want to risk losing it and having my hand caught under an abalone. That's happened a few times to others who couldn't get loose without help. And if you got caught that way and the tide came in, you'd be trapped, held under and drowned.

I waded out around a big crag that jutted into the water, slipping over submerged rocks and going in a hole once up to my chest before I got to the spot I'd seen from above. The ocean was above my waist here and I began feeling down as far as I could along the sides of the rocks for abalone. I kept moving around as I did this and I didn't see the body or realize it was there till I bumped it with my arm and it came back and bumped me in the chest.

"Ga-a!" I said, fighting down a spasm of revulsion and staring at the white face just below the surface of the water. I felt the whiskey burn out inside me and I was suddenly cold clear through. I shivered and swore reverently.

It was the body of a man, wedged in among the rocks, rolling a little with the movement of the waves. The ocean chuckled, gurgling as it lapped and swirled about it, rocking the body playfully, stirring the pale hair on its head.

I could hear the wind whistling across the top of the headland, and I thought of the two men with the truck who had acted so strangely up there minutes before.

I set my teeth and got my hands under the arms of the dead man, pulled his head above the water and propped his shoulders against a rock.

He wasn't a bad looking corpse. He was blond and smooth-shaven and had been about thirty years old or better. His skin was bluish-white but he hadn't been in the water long enough to get bloated. There were cuts in his face and scalp, washed clean and bloodless, that could have been caused by bumping around against the sharp edges of the rocks.

He didn't stay propped against the rock. He slid off into the water again and I reached for him. Up above me a woman's short, sharp scream cut through the wind.

I had hold of the front of the dead man's shirt when I looked up. She was silhouetted against the sky on the top edge of the cliff. She wore a rust-colored sweater and brown slacks and the wind plastered them against her, tore at her hair, carrying it out behind her in a streaming mahogany jet. She was staring down at me, her face twisted in a frozen grimace, and she cried:

"Don't! Don't!"

Then she turned and called something the other way I didn't get. Then she vanished abruptly, running.

"What the hell?" I said and got the body again under the arms.

The ocean lapped right against the base of the cliff and I had to drag him out around the crag that jutted into the water. It was a queasy job, but I made it to the narrow strip of beach, dragged him up on it. He was fully dressed in old clothes and a tire iron hung from his wrist by a blue cord. He was dead all right, but I got him jack-knifed over a handy rock to drain the water out of his lungs.

The girl with the brown slacks was coming down the trail from the top of

the bluff. She was coming fast and a man in a leather jacket was about ten feet behind her, following.

I stood and waited for them. The girl slipped, jumped the last eight feet to the sand, fell. She was up again in an instant and flashed by me to the body.

"Harry!" she cried and dropped to her knees, took the dead man's head in her hands and turned his face so she could see it. "Harry!" she said again, choking it off short and dropping her hands as though they had been burned.

She stood up slowly, fingers pressed over her mouth. The wind wasn't as bad down here, but it rippled her long mahogany-colored hair. She turned, stared at me.

"You killed him!" she said in an awed, hoarse whisper.

I shook my head. "Not me, lady."

Her eyes were wide open with horror and shock, and the threat of hysteria made them look glassy. They were gray eyes, flecked with green. Her face was angular with strain and there were a few pale gold freckles above her high cheek-bones, standing out clearly against the whiteness of her skin. Her breasts rose and fell rapidly under the sweater.

"Della!" the man in the leather jacket said. "He's not—he isn't—"

He'd reached the sand, stood staring uncertainly at me and the corpse. Now he crossed toward it and her gaze switched to him.

"Oh, Stewart! He's dead. He's dead."

Stewart looked at me with dazed, questioning eyes and I nodded. He was young, rangy and capable-looking, a clean-cut college-boy type with a long, good looking face. He was hatless and his hair was brown and straight, blown awry by the wind.

He set his jaw, swung abruptly to the body, pulled it off the rock onto the sand, straddled it and began to apply artificial respiration. The girl watched him anxiously, one hand holding her hair back from the side of her face. It was her left hand and she wore a wedding ring.

She wasn't paying any attention to me

now and I looked her over again. She wasn't a raving beauty, but she had something; I guessed it was strength of character. Her angular face was oddly attractive. Her nose was short and very straight. She had a high forehead and her mouth was large but well shaped, rougeless at the moment. She was about the same age as the man she called Stewart, in her twenties, and she had a nice figure.

My clothes felt cold and clammy. I took my bottle from its pocket and had a pull from it, put it back. I looked at Stewart and said, "That won't get you anything."

He stopped trying, gazed at me, then up at the girl, a sick hopelessness in his eyes. He had very expressive eyes.

The girl had started a little when I spoke. Now she turned on me again.

"You killed him," she repeated and her voice was low and level and very positive. She really believed I had. "I saw you. I looked down and saw you. You were struggling with him in the water."

"Take it easy," I said. "I didn't kill him. I'd just found his body and was trying to get it out of the water. I don't even know who he is."

"He's—he was my husband," she told me bitterly, still accusing me with her eyes. Her tone became cutting. "The name is Burke."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Burke," I said, meaning it. "My name is Beeker—Dave Beeker. And I didn't kill your husband. Why would I? I didn't even know him. Maybe he fell off the top of the cliff and drowned."

I was about to add that maybe he'd been pushed off the top by the two friendly souls in the truck I'd run into up there. But Stewart came to his feet. He had a queer shocked look in his eyes and his face was drawn and very white about the lips. He bit out tightly:

"The ambergris!"

I blinked. "The what?"

"The ambergris. It's gone!" He waved

a hand at the corpse in a bewildered gesture. "And Harry. . . ."

Ambergris is valuable, I knew that. It's some kind of an excretion from a sperm whale and is used in making perfume. There had been rare cases where lumps of it had been found floating on the ocean or washed up on a beach, and to smell it you'd never believe the stuff could be used in perfume. The two mangy looking customers with the truck had carried away a stinking, tarpaulin covered mass. . . .

"Listen," I said. "Let's get this straight. There were two men up above with an open truck when I got here and they had something that smelled plenty in it. They wouldn't let me come near and they drove off with it. They got your ambergris and if Burke was killed, they must have done it. I can show you their tracks up above."

Della Burke and the kid stared at me while they thought it over. I could see doubt come and go in their eyes. Deep breathing moved Stewart's nostrils and the corners of his mouth worked. The girl's shoulders finally slumped and she turned, buried her face against his chest, breathed hopelessly.

"Oh, Stewart!"

He put one arm around her, said through his teeth: "You're in it with them! You did this! You did it." The words fluted up and down with threatened hysteria.

"Nuts." I snorted. "Don't get melodramatic. I don't even know what this is all about. Suppose you hold onto yourself and tell me."



HE glared at me some more, then hung his head and after a second got a fitful monotone going, seemingly glad to tell it. He didn't give it all to me in chronological sequence, but sorted out and put in order it amounted to this:

His name was Stewart Hardesty and he and Harry Burke and Mrs. Burke

had come from San Francisco the day before. They'd camped out in the open land the other side of Viera's place.

Viera owned all this end of the point and had it fenced off for his milch cows—he ran a small wholesale dairy and trucked the milk fifty odd miles south every evening into San Francisco. He wouldn't let anyone camp inside on his property, but he did let abalone hunters drive through in the mornings any time there was a minus tide.

Anyway, Burke and Hardesty, who had been pals for years, had got up this morning before daylight and come out after abalone, leaving Mrs. Burke asleep in camp. They got down the cliff to the beach and stumbled over a mass of stuff that had been washed up on the sand, at a spot that was covered by water now. It looked and smelled like something out of a cesspool—gray with yellow and reddish streaks in it.

Hardesty didn't want to touch it, but Burke got excited. He'd heard about ambergris and thought they'd found some. They forgot all about abalone. One of them went back to the car for a blanket and they got the stuff onto the blanket and some of it in the gunny sack they'd brought along to put abalone in. They carried it to the top of the cliff and Burke, for some reason, wanted Hardesty to go and get Della and a gun he had in camp, bring them out and then they'd decide how they were going to cart the stuff away. He, Burke, would stay and guard the ambergris.

Hardesty went. It was about a twelve-mile drive—six each way—and he had to wait for Mrs. Burke to get dressed. He admitted passing the truck I'd told him about on the way back, and when he got here with Della Burke, Harry Burke was gone and so was the ambergris. They started looking for him and Della had seen me down below evidently struggling with him, holding him under water. . . .

"O. K.," I said. "I told you I was just pulling him out. We've got to get out of here; the tide's coming in. I'll

help you carry up Burke, but just don't try anything funny."

Waves were running up on the sand now, touching our feet, and the strip of beach was a lot narrower than it had been. In a very little while this spot would be under plenty of water and breakers would be pounding against the face of the cliff. We'd have to move fast.

Hardesty's eyes told me he still didn't trust me, but he nodded, moistened his lips. "All right."

All the fire and sap had gone out of Della Burke. She turned away toward the upward trail as I unwound the rope from my waist, got it tied around Burke's chest, under his arms, and looped about his thighs, leaving two long loose ends. The trail up to the top was too steep and slippery to carry him between us. We'd have to climb up with the loose ends of the rope, find a place where we could get a good hold, then pull him up to us, get him anchored there and go on.

I told the widow to go ahead and she nodded, dry-eyed, and started climbing. We followed, made it to the top finally, pulled our burden up and over onto level ground.

We had to brace ourselves against the wind up here and the chill of it got through my wet clothing. I was out of breath and feeling the lack of breakfast now; a knife of weakness was cutting at my stomach.

Hardesty picked that moment to jump me. He'd been looking at me oddly and I was a sap to quit watching him for a moment. He came at me in a low dive, his shoulder ramming into my breastbone and his arms wrapping about me.

"Stewart!" Della Burke cried faintly and then I was down and he was on top of me. The fall hadn't broken his hold. The kid was strong and he had my arms pinned to my sides.

"What's the idea?" I lipped, and heaved up and rolled.

I rolled the wrong way. He carried me right on over and I was on the bottom again, almost on the very edge of the cliff. I could hear the waves down below

and I felt sick. I was sore too. I brought up one knee and got him in the groin.

I felt him flinch, his muscles tightening convulsively, then getting loose while pain contorted his face. I wrenched sideways, broke his hold, rocked up and clipped him on the chin with my left fist, then grabbed him to keep him from going over the edge of the cliff. I pulled him back to a safe spot and then stood up and looked at Della Burke.

She had been hovering anxiously over us, and she wasn't worried a bit about me; she was just worried about the kid. She went to one knee beside him, said in a tired voice:

"Stewart, what are you fighting for? It won't do any good now. Why do you try?"

He was lying on the ground, propped on one elbow, his head hanging hopelessly, so low I couldn't see his face. He was sobbing, and I don't think it was from the pain. He was the picture of despair, but I was past feeling sorry for him. I was past feeling sorry for anyone but myself.

I'd tried to help the guy and he'd turned on me. I was tired of being pushed around on an empty stomach. Besides that, the pint flask of whiskey in my hip pocket was broken; I could feel it running down my leg.

"Yeah," I snarled. "Why try? When are you going to get it through your thick skull that I didn't have anything to do with Burke's death and that the two guys who took the ambergris aren't pals of mine? They must have knocked him off the cliff so they could get away with the stuff, and I've got their license number. I'll report it to the sheriff. You two can sit in your car till he gets here, and stay with the body."

Their car—a dark sedan—was parked over near the roadway. "Somebody's got to go in and report this," I went on, "and I'm going to be the one because I'm wet and I'm hungry and I'm fed up trying to be nice and helpful to people and getting it in the neck. From now on I'm looking after my own welfare. So long."

I turned on my heel and walked off toward my coupé. While I'd been making my pretty little speech the girl had gazed up at me with absolutely no expression, the wind whipping her hair about her face. As a widow, I thought, she certainly wasn't bowed down with grief.

But I almost relented and asked her to come along with me as far as Viera's, but I knew she wouldn't. That would be admitting she had been wrong about me, and even if she knew that, I didn't think she'd admit it. She was too proud.



ABOUT half-way back to Viera's ranch house I spotted a horseman ahead of me. He was going in the same direction I was, at a gallop, but I'd been stepping on it and was overtaking him. I got close enough to see that it was a pinto pony and the rider wore a flat, broad-brimmed black hat, a white shirt that had the glisten of silk, and a bright purple bandanna that fluttered from his throat like a flag in the wind.

He looked back at me and I got a glimpse of a dark face, then he wheeled the pony and took it off the roadway, up and over a rise. When I came even with that spot he was out of sight and I couldn't see man or horse anywhere. The land was rolling here and the point had widened out a good deal. The horseman had to be down in a dip somewhere or behind a hillock. It looked like he didn't want to be seen, and that was funny.

I drove on, thinking about it, and in another mile saw my first cow, then began to run through bunches of them, grazing and huddled together in the wind, moving slowly out to meet me. They were coming from the barns after the morning milking.

Barns and outbuildings were grouped over on one side of the ranchyard, and Viera's house was on the other. Everything was old and weathered, needing

repairs and a few coats of paint. The house was single-storied, with a long porch across its front. To get to it I had to get out of the car and open a gate before driving into the yard.

There were sounds of movement and activity from the barns, but I went up on the house porch and pounded on the door. A girl in a peasant-type cotton dress opened it and held it against the wind, smiling at me. I knew she was Joe Viera's daughter who kept house for him and cooked for him and the men he had working on the place. I'd seen her the day before when I'd got permission from Viera to pass through his property.

"I've got to use your phone," I told her. "A man's been killed out on the point. Where's Joe?"

Her name was Rosa and she was a pretty little thing in a primitive Latin way. She had large, bold eyes and she'd used them on me the day before in frank and open invitation. I didn't think she was old enough to vote, so I hadn't accepted the invitation. I didn't like to take chances with jail-bait.

Now her eyes got even larger for a moment and her dark red lips formed a round O. Then she exclaimed softly:

"A man was killed! Who?"

"A man named Burke," I said. "Harry Burke. Where's the phone?"

"Oh. . . ." she said and her long black lashes blinked twice. Then she stood back. "Come in."

I followed her into a living-room cluttered with ugly old-fashioned furniture. The odor of cooking came from the back of the house and started hunger gnawing in the pit of my stomach. Rosa showed me the phone on the wall by a door and said:

"I'll go get my father."

"Wait a minute," I told her as she was turning away. "Did you see a truck come by here this morning, an hour or less ago? A small open truck with two men in it."

She nodded. Her eyes had lost their boldness and she seemed awed by the news of Burke's death.

"Know who the men were?" I asked. I had my hand on the receiver, waiting for her answer before lifting it.

"Yes," she admitted hesitantly. "The Wallers. Ben Waller and his son. They have a chicken ranch somewhere over the other side of town."

I grinned. "Thanks."

She went outside after her father as I started to put my call through to the sheriff's office in town, which was about fifteen miles away. The sheriff wasn't at his office yet and I talked to a sleepy individual who was on night duty. I gave him the whole story which he had a hard time getting straight, and impressed on him the immediate necessity of capturing Ben Waller and son, supplying the license number of their truck. He told me he'd notify the coroner and someone would be right out.

Viera came in with Rosa while I was talking and heard most of it. When I hung up he shook his head dolefully and said:

"That is bad. That is very bad for this fella to be killed here. You find him, eh?"

"Yeah."

He was a big dark-skinned Portuguese and he was wearing dirty overalls that smelled of the barn, an old wide-brimmed black hat and a worried scowl. Rosa was standing still, looking at me silently and he waved a hand at her.

"You get on back to work now, Rosa."

She went with reluctant slowness through the doorway into the back of the house. He was still shaking his head and muttering:

"That Ben Waller and his no-good son, they bad ones. Very bad. They no-good bums, they won't work. What is this amber-stuff you talk about over the phone?"

"Ambergris," I told him. "It's valuable. They use it in making perfume."

"Is mine," he said. He faced me, sticking out his big lower lip and hitting his chest with a brown fist. "Is found on my property, is mine!"

"Tell that to the sheriff when he gets

here," I said. "And he'll have to catch the Wallers first."

His black hat reminded me of the lone rider I'd seen on my way in from the end of the point, but I knew it hadn't been Viera because the man had been smaller and more wiry. I described the white silk shirt, the purple bandanna, the black hat and the pinto pony, and I asked Viera if he knew the man.

He didn't answer me right away. His eyes were brown with reddish lights in them, and a sort of yellow film seemed to draw over them, whites and all. He finally shook his head slowly.

"No. I don't think I know that fella."

I knew he was lying for some reason but I let it go at that. I saw Rosa peeking at us through the doorway as I turned away.

"Well," I said, "if the sheriff wants me when he gets here I'll be at my trailer. I'm going to change my clothes and get some breakfast. See you later."

He nodded with somber dignity and I went out the front door.



HE wooded country on the mainland side of Viera's land was a game preserve owned by a sportsman's club. I didn't belong to the club, but the pal I was meeting here the next day did, and I had my trailer parked on the land in a grove of trees.

I left it at sundown with my gun on my hip. I was getting itchy and I couldn't stay still, knowing what I did. I was an ex-newspaperman and a murder story had broken right under my nose. I had the inside track, and the old urge to poke my beak into things was coming back. I pulled my hat down on my head and set out on foot along the roadway back to Viera's place, about a mile away.

The sheriff and the coroner had come and been gone by noon. Della Burke and Hardesty had gone to town with them, to stay at the hotel. The coroner had taken the body, saying that one

or two of the cuts on Burke's head could have been caused by blows that might have knocked him unconscious before he hit the water, but that death had been due to drowning.

After questioning me, the sheriff seemed to believe my story, but suggested pointedly that I'd better stick around. He seemed to be satisfied that all he had to do was catch the Wallers, but I knew I wouldn't be completely cleared of suspicion until they were taken and they hadn't been found yet. A reception committee was waiting for them at home but they'd never arrived there, and the sheriff had sent out their description over the State teletype. It might be minutes till they were captured somewhere, but if they'd gone in hiding, it might be days and weeks.

The sheriff was satisfied to wait, but I wasn't. I had other ideas. I wanted to see Rosa Viera alone again and I hadn't had a chance all day. I hadn't told the sheriff about the rider of the pinto pony I'd seen out on the point. I don't know why I'd held that out on him, but I wanted to find out who the guy was.

It was dusk when I approached the ranch house. The wind had died to an intermittent gusty breeze and I could hear sounds from the barns that were bulking against the sky. Light leaked out through slits in the walls. They were still busy inside with the evening milking.

I hoped Viera and Viera's dog would be occupied with the cows for a while, and I circled away from the road toward the back of the house, got over the fence. The front of the house faced the yard and, across it, the barns. Here at the back was a creaking windmill on top of a tank house, further off a chicken pen and shelter.

Windows at the rear of the house showed squares of light. Standing off at a distance I could see through them into a combination kitchen and dining-room that had a long table in it. Rosa seemed to be there alone, moving between the table and an oil stove, preparing a meal.

I moved up on a stoop to the back door

and knocked softly. For a moment there was no sound from within and I tapped my knuckles on wood again. Then her footfalls approached the door and there was a tense edge to her voice when it asked:

"Who is it?"

"Me," I said with my lips close to the edge of the door. "Dave Beeker. Open up, Rosa. I want to see you."

She opened the door and stared out at me. She had a big spoon in one hand and her large eyes were shining liquidly, the dark rouge gleaming on her full lips.

"What is it?" she whispered. "What do you want?"

She was still wearing the same peasant-type dress, and not much else if I was any judge. The light was behind her, showed the outline of her body through the cloth. It was mature, almost voluptuous.

I cleared my throat, said, "I want to talk to you about the rider who was out on the point this morning."

She sent a quick glance back through the room toward the front of the house. "Not here. I can't talk to you here!"

"Why not?" I asked. "What's the matter? Is Joe around?"

"No." She shook her head and excitement or fear made her voice swift and breathless. "But he might come in and catch me talking to you. I have something to show you too. Go out behind the chicken coop. I'll come out there."

"O.K.," I said, wondering just what she meant when she said she had something to show me. "Make it soon."

She nodded, closing the door. I went down off the stoop and out toward the chicken pen, moving around behind the shelter. It was getting dark enough now to show stars in the sky and, inside the coop, hens were fussing and clucking, settling down for the night. I lit a cigarette and wondered what Viera would do if he found me out here with his daughter.

She came in a very few minutes. I didn't hear her footsteps but she was suddenly there beside me, a small

shadowy form in the gathering dark. I smelled her hair before I saw her; it was perfumed with something that had musk in it. But even if I hadn't noticed that, I would have felt her presence. There was something about it that put excitement and the feel of danger in your blood.

She found my arm with one hand, pulled herself close to me without saying anything.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"I'm afraid," she breathed and shivered, pressing against me.

I could tell she hadn't taken time to put a wrap on over her dress, and there was a slight chill in the night air. I was suddenly very uncomfortable. I had to remember she was just a kid. I stood very still and said:

"How old are you, Rosa?"

"Almost twenty-one," she told me innocently. "Why?"

"You know why, you little liar," I said. "Look, you're a lovely kid and you have a lot of biological appeal. You do things to a guy when you turn it on. But I'm an old man. I'm past thirty. And you're just a kid. To me you're jail bait. So lay off. I didn't come here for fun."

Her hold loosened on my arm and she drew away from me a little. "I do not understand all that you say, but I think I know what you mean and I did not come here for fun either."

I puffed uneasily on my cigarette. "Oke. I want to know who that rider was on that pinto pony I saw out on the point this morning. Your father lied to me about not knowing him. Who is he?"

"That man," she said, her voice quickening with excitement, "was Charlie Gomez. He works for my father and my father likes him. He wants me to marry him. But I don't like Charlie Gomez. I don't want to marry him."

"Why did your father lie about him?" I asked.

"Because Charlie had a fight last night with Mr. Burke and he told Mr. Burke to get out of here and not come back. And then Charlie was out on the point

this morning after abalone and Mr. Burke was killed out there. My father did not want anyone to know that, for fear—"

"For fear someone might think Gomez instead of the Wallers had killed Burke," I finished. "What was this fight about last night?"

She hesitated a moment, then admitted slowly: "About me. Mr. Burke came last night after dark to ask about going onto my father's land to get abalone this morning. He was alone; he didn't bring the others with him from his camp. And when he left I was out to open the gate for him. He got out of the car to help me close it, and we talked.

"He—kissed me. Charlie Gomez saw us. He is jealous. He thinks I belong to him. He hit Mr. Burke and knocked him down. He ordered him off the place and told him not to come back or he'd break his neck."

"Oh-oh," I muttered, scratching my jaw. "Of course you just *happened* to be out there to open the gate for Burke. You didn't give him the works on purpose."

"It was harmless," she said petulantly. "Just a little kiss. I did not know he was married."

"Mmm. Some day you're going to get in serious trouble, making a play for every guy that comes along. As it is, maybe you got a man killed."

She moved and she was suddenly leaning against me, the musky odor of her hair in my nostrils. "I know it, but do not scold Rosa. She is not so bad. It is only that I want to get away from here. I do not want to stay here and marry a man like Charlie Gomez, and cook and work and slave for a bunch of dirty men. That is what killed my mother and I do not want that. I am too young and pretty. I want to get away. I would leave now—right now—if I had any money at all!"

Her voice was hot and low with emotion and by the quivering of her breath and body I know she was crying. I gripped her shoulders, pushed her erect and away from me.

"I get it, kid. Maybe I understand at that. Tell me, how come Gomez was out after abalone this morning instead of helping with the milking if he works for your father?"

She drew a deep breath, stopped her silent crying. "He has one day off every month. This was it. He is gone now, and here—this is something I found in his room when I was cleaning it this afternoon. I am afraid to show it to my father."

She pressed into my hands something about the size of a foot rule, wrapped in what felt like newspapers. It was heavy for its size. I knew what it was without asking, but I asked anyway.

"I found it under his mattress when I turned it," she answered. "It is one of those tire tools that they use to pry off abalone from the rocks. And—it has blood on it."

"My God," I said and then I was quiet for a long moment, feeling the coldness of the iron through the newspaper. I knew I had something and what I had sure seemed to upset the apple-cart. "You said Gomez is gone now," I rapped out finally. "Where?"

"Into town, I think. To get drunk probably."

"What does Gomez look like?"

She described him as a thin and wiry man with a sharp face and a thin black mustache. He was wearing a black suit now and a black hat like her father's. He liked to think he was a cowboy and he wore high-heeled riding boots and walked with a rolling swagger.

"O.K." I said. "And thanks, kid. You'd better get back to the house. I'm going into town."

She clutched my arm. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know," I told her. "But I'll probably go to the sheriff first."

"I wouldn't have told you this," she sobbed, "but if he killed him, I—"

"I know." She was trembling again, either with fear or the cold. I patted her on the shoulder. "You did right, Rosa. Don't worry about that."

I'd barely got that out of my mouth when someone bellowed her name from the house.

"Oh-oh!" I breathed and she shrank against me, tense, rigid.

"My father!" she whispered.

"Go and meet him," I told her, "before he comes out here and finds me with you."

"Ros-a-a!" Joe's heavy voice called.

"You won't tell him?" she said. "You won't let him know I gave you this?"

"I won't," I promised and pushed her away from me.

She went, crying, "Yes, Father," as he called her again.

I heard him say, "What you doing out there?" but she didn't answer, or if she did it was in too low a tone for me to hear.

I peeked around the corner of the chicken coop to see if he was going to be satisfied with finding her or if he was going to do any investigating of the premises. I saw Rosa go in past him through the back door, and he stood on the stoop for what seemed like long minutes, his big bulk silhouetted in the lighted doorway, staring out about the back yard as if he couldn't make up his mind. I held my breath till he finally turned and went inside, slamming the door.



WHEN I got back to the trailer I sat in my coupé, switched on the dashlight, unfolded the newspaper and looked at the tire iron.

The blood on one end of it had dried a crusty brown, and there were blond hairs caught in the stains. A heavy blue cord was tied to the other end of the iron, for the purpose of fastening it to the user's wrist when he was after abalone. I stared at it for a moment, then got it rewrapped in the paper without touching the metal as I didn't want to spoil any prints that might be on it.

A voice outside my car, over to the

left, said, "I got a rifle pointin' at you, mister. Don't make no funny moves."

The voice had a harsh nasal edge and it startled me. I got tight all over and sat there staring out. It was dark in here among the trees and the wind was only a murmur in the leaves. I couldn't see anything except the black columns of tree trunks, the vague ghostly movement of branches and undergrowth, stirred by the breeze. I couldn't see anyone, but he could see me in the dashlight glow.

My gun was in my hip pocket, the tire iron wrapped and on the seat beside me.

"What do you want?" I said.

"We want to talk to you. Keep your hands in plain sight and git outa the car. Open the door, son."

I knew there were two of them then and I knew they were the Wallers. There was movement out at my left. I didn't see anyone, but the handle was turned and the door swung open. Young Waller was keeping down, out of sight. I slid out and stood on the ground, holding my hands up by my shoulders.

We were only about twenty feet off the road but there was no traffic out here at all. The road only led to Viera's place and the point beyond. Ben Waller's nasal voice directed:

"Get his gun if he's got it, son, and walk him over here. Don't be nervous. I got this here rifle pointed plumb at him."

I heard young Waller's breathing as he got behind me. His hands felt my pockets, jerked away my revolver. The muzzle gouged my spine and he said, "Wu-walk!"

I walked.

"Here," Ben Waller ordered. "This way."

I walked that way, toward the sound of his voice. The gun stayed pressed to my back and young Waller was right behind it. We went into the thickest part of the trees and I saw old Waller's lean, gaunt form loom up among them. I thought I could catch a dull gleam along the rifle barrel that was pointed at me.

"That's good," he said. "Get back against that tree and stand there."

Gun pressure left my spine and I stood back against the nearest tree. Old Waller faced me at my left hand, about five feet away, and his son was on my right hand about the same distance from me. They had me if I tried to duck either way and the tree was behind me. I wasn't going to try to duck. I was in a spot and I knew it.

"Now what's all this fancy business about?" I asked. "I suppose you know you're wanted by the sheriff. They're on the lookout for you and your truck all over the State by now."

"Yu-yeah!" young Waller said hotly. "And that's yu-your fault! Yu-you told them about us!"

"Shet up!" old Waller snapped at him, and said to me: "We been in town all the time. We heard all about it and we stayed hid all day. We got friends. But we come out here at night to straighten out things. We didn't do no murder."

"Yeah?" I said. "What'd you come out here for? Why didn't you go and tell that to the sheriff?"

"Becuz he's got it in for us. He wouldn't believe us. We took that there ambergris, but we didn't kill no one. We want you to go tell him that. We ain't gonna give ourselves up until we know we ain't gonna be charged with no murder."

I was getting a strong suspicion that the Wallers were pretty close to being half-wits. I'd gathered from what I'd heard that day that they had the minds of vicious, destructive children. They were congenital sneak thieves, potential murderers if they hadn't killed already. They'd be likely to shoot first if crossed, and not even bother to ask questions later.

"Tell me all about it," I suggested soothingly.

"Well," old Waller said in a peeved, argumentative tone, "we just drove out there this morning to get some abalone and we found that there stinking stuff. It was on a blanket and there was a

gunny sack of it, but there weren't nobody around. I reckoned it was ambergris because I've heard of it before, and we took it, that's all. We found it, so it's ours."

"You knew it was someone's," I said, "because of the blanket and sack. And you thought it was mine. That's why you ordered me off with your rifle. You thought I was coming back after it."

"That ain't neither here nor there," he argued. "I've heard as how possession is nine or ten points of the law. But we didn't figure to get mixed up in no murder."

"O.K.," I told him. "But the best thing for you to do is to come in with me and give yourself up to the sheriff now. I was on my way there anyway. I got some new dope that'll probably help you."

"What dope've you got?" he asked suspiciously.

I made a mistake then. I shouldn't have told him, but I was trying to convince him. I was talking myself out of a spot and trying to get them to play it my way.

"Charlie Gomez was out on the point this morning when Burke was killed, and the murder weapon has been found in his room. I've got it—a bloody tire iron."

It took several moments for them to digest this. Old Waller stepped close to me, seemed to be trying to peer into my face.

"You kidding us?" he asked tightly and something about his nasal voice made the hackles rise on my neck.

"No," I told him seriously. "So how about coming along?"

"That there du-dirty Charlie Gomez!" young Waller sobbed. "He knocked me down once! I su-seen him in town, Dad."

"He's in town, huh?" the father said. "Y-yeah."

"We'll get him, son!"

"Hey!" I said. "You don't want to do that. You—"

Joe Viera's voice boomed out of the darkness. "You Wallers, you! I hear

you there. Is dark but I got shotgun. I kill you if I hear you move!"

The Wallers were tense, frozen.

"Hey!" I yelled. "I'm here too, Joe."

"Shet up!" Old Waller hissed at me, and he swung the rifle in the dark, bent its barrel over the top of my head.

My hat cushioned the blow some, but it knocked me to my knees. I stayed conscious long enough to hear the Wallers crashing away through the trees and the roaring blast of a shotgun. Then I keeled forward, sucked into blackness, whirling dizzily.



AIN brought me out of it—pain that rocked and rolled and slammed about in my skull. Someone was shaking me and it was almost more than I could stand.

I grit my teeth, got out:

"Hey—hey! Don't—"

My brain dived sickeningly into a heaving sea of red and yellow and green. My stomach turned over and I was sick, really sick, twisting my head to one side. After the spasm of nausea had passed, I became conscious of a weight pressing down on my chest; my arms were pinned to my sides.

A heavy, accented voice snarled, "Where is it? Where is it?"

"Where's what?" I mumbled thickly and opened my eyes.

I couldn't see anything, but I could feel Joe Viera above me. I was on my back on the ground and he was sitting on me with his big hands gripping my shoulders, his thumbs digging into my neck. He'd stopped shaking me and he said:

"Where is the tire iron my Rosa gave to you?"

My brain was still reeling around and I had to think for a moment before I could remember. While I thought, I could hear his breath pumping harshly, and I could tell by the tone of his voice he meant business. He jerked my shoulders again and my head bounced

on the dirt, exploding a flare of pain in my skull.

"Hey!" I yelled. "Don't do that!"

"Where is it?" he ground out and his thumbs began to sink into my windpipe.

"In my car," I said. "Now get off of me, you dirty——"

His thumbs just dug in deeper. "You did not give it to those Wallers?"

"No. Only if it's gone they might have taken it. So lay off! I haven't done anything to you."

"No? So what you tell those Wallers, hey?"

My throat was beginning to ache and a fire had started in my chest, was making a red smoky haze in my head. I could hardly say:

"Let me get my breath, you big ape. I told them they ought to give themselves up."

"And you tell them about Charlie Gomez, eh?"

"Yeah," I said, "but——"

"Aa-rg!" he snarled and clamped down on my throat, cutting off the explanation I wanted to make.

He jerked my head up high, then bounced it down hard on the ground. I went bye-bye once more, so abruptly there wasn't time to feel any pain.

I felt it, though, when I woke up. I was strangling, trying to swallow my tongue, and heat waves kept passing over me and going away, bringing with them cringing spasms of agony to my brain. Something was wedged into my mouth, prying my jaws apart and that's why I was strangling. My face seemed to be pressed against the ground and I couldn't move. Something was binding my wrists and my ankles behind me.

A voice came out of the night faintly, calling my name: "Mr. Beeker! Mr. Beeker!"

I struggled to move and the effort made my heart sledge against my chest, sent hot blood pounding up into my head. I forced myself to stay still, breathe slowly through my nose. The voice called again, seemed further away. I chewed desperately on the gag in my mouth; it

was a strip of cloth, sodden with saliva. I got noise past it that sounded like a baby's gurgle.

A glow of light moved somewhere through the trees above me, made a flickering reflection on the ground before my eyes. I gurgled again.

The voice called my name once more. It was a softly urgent voice—the voice of Rosa Viera.

The light got stronger as I kept making noises to guide it. Then she was at my side, crying, "Oh!" breathlessly as she dropped to her knees. She had a flashlight and its beam ate into my skull through my eyeballs. I had to squeeze my lids shut against it, turn my face away.

She put the light behind me then and I heard quick little sounds of movement. Her fingers were at the knot at the back of my head and the strip of cloth parted, was pulled from my mouth. I saw it was the tie I'd been wearing as she took it away.

"Oh, you've been hurt!" she said tenderly. "What did they do to you? What happened? Was it my father?"

My jaws ached and I couldn't make words right then. I was busy spitting the bad taste out of my mouth. She cut the rope that tied my wrists and ankles and I dragged my arms around, pushed myself up to a sitting position. The flashlight was on the ground and the beam was pointed at the base of the tree to which I had been tied. I recognized the rope as some I'd left outside the trailer when I'd decided not to put up the canopy that day because of the wind.

"Yeah," I muttered around a thick tongue. "Your father. First the Wallers and then your father. Geez, what fun."

She was still behind me and she put an arm around my shoulders, her other hand against my forehead, drawing me back to lean against her.

"You have been hurt," she breathed gently in my ear. "I am so sorry."

Her hand was soft, soothing, against my forehead. I closed my eyes and could smell the perfume of her hair. I felt

tired and dreamy. For a moment I didn't want to do anything but just sit there like that. Then I remembered the way I'd been kicked around and I began to get sore.

"Why'd you tell your father about that tire iron you gave me?" I asked.

"I had to," she said swiftly in a distressed tone. "He made me. He—he tortured me. He knew I'd been outside talking to someone and he twisted my arm till I told him all about it."

"A nice guy," I said. "I always thought Joe was a pretty good egg."

"I am afraid of him!"

I sat up straight, holding my head in my hands. My hat was gone and my scalp wasn't cut, but a big throbbing egg was standing up under the hair. I climbed to my feet and she came erect, helping me.

"What are you going to do?"

I was weak and shaky and dizzy. I bit out: "I'm mad and somebody's going to pay for it. The Wallers and your father think Gomez killed Burke and they've gone into town after him. At least the Wallers have. I wanted to tell them different, but they wouldn't let me. Now—"

"The Wallers have been here?" she said. She was standing before me with the flash-light beam pointed at the ground, showing her small and dusty blue shoes. Before I could answer her first question, she popped out another: "You mean Charlie Gomez did not kill Mr. Burke?"

I was leaning against the tree, trying to get some strength back. "If he was the killer," I explained, "I don't think he would have saved the murder weapon. The only reason he'd keep it would be because he saw the killing, found the tire iron after the killer had left the scene, and was saving it to use in a blackmail squeeze."

"But if Charlie Gomez did not do it, who did?"

"I don't like to say," I said. "Because I may be wrong. But I think I know who that tire iron belonged to and he's in

town. Gomez went to town, too, and that makes it look like he went in to try to make a deal with the guy—a shake-down. He can put the finger on the killer, and I'm going to find Gomez myself or tip the sheriff to him. I'm through getting kicked around. By the way, I didn't thank you for setting me free just now. Thanks, kid."

"It was nothing," she breathed and clutched my arm. "Take me with you."

"What for?" I asked, starting to stumble in the general direction of the trailer.

She was moving along at my side, steering me with one hand on my arm, playing the flash-light beam ahead of us. "I'm running away, even without any money. I can't go back! My father, he left me locked up, but I got away. He was very angry because I'd told about Charlie Gomez. I came to see if he had found you before you went in to the sheriff. He took the car and I think he went in to town to find Charlie Gomez. I can't go back there. He'll beat me—and I'll have to marry Charlie!"

"O.K.," I said. After all I did owe her a favor. "I'll take you in to the sheriff. He'll protect you against your old man till this mess is settled, anyway. Then you can take what little dough I have and get out of this devil's land."

The tire iron was gone from the seat of my coupé, of course. Viera had that. The Wallers had evidently got away from him and would probably reach town first. My gun was gone too, and I didn't like that either. I got a drink from inside the trailer—a long one of straight rye. It put new life in me, but it didn't help my temper any. I was sore and I was out to get even with someone, I didn't quite know who.



GAVE Rosa a ride into town. She was holding onto the seat until I slowed as we rolled into the outskirts. It wasn't much of a burg; off the beaten path and away from main

highways and railroad lines. There was only one business street about three blocks long, with lights at the intersections. A few of the store windows glowed and there was a scattering of cars parked along the street, but otherwise it looked dead and deserted even this early in the evening.

We coasted into it at one end and I said, "Maybe I'd better see the sheriff first. Where's his office?"

Rosa's fingers gripped my wrist. "Look!"

She was staring ahead through the windshield.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"That's Charlie Gomez!"

I followed her gaze. Up in the next block I saw a man walking. He was walking away from us and I could see him because of the corner street lamp beyond him. He was a wiry man and he walked with a slow rolling gait as though he had on high-heeled cowboy boots. He wore a black suit and a wide-brimmed black hat.

He reached the corner, disappeared, swinging around it to the right. I wheeled the coupé right too, into the street that paralleled the one Gomez had walked into.

"What are you going to do?" Rosa breathed.

"I'm going around the block to meet him," I explained.

"No!" she said, dragging on my arm. "No. Let me out here. I don't want him to see me with you."

There was real fright in her voice and I braked to a quick stop. "O.K. Get out and go for the sheriff. Find him and tell him about Gomez. I'll try to hold him up in the next block. Leave me your flash-light."

She was out, nodding breathlessly. "Yes, yes, I'll do it. Be careful."

I started the car forward again, leaving her there on the curbing, and swung left at the next corner into a dark slot of a street that was lined by tall trees and had no lighting. I didn't know just what I was going to do, but I was going

to be careful all right. I'd had her leave the flash-light on the seat because I didn't have any other weapon and it might do in a pinch, being a three-cell tubular type.

It didn't take long to run the length of the block, but I eased to a stop at the curb before reaching the corner, cut lights and ignition. I figured Gomez ought to be about half-way along the block by now and maybe I could surprise him at the corner. I sat there a second, then got out with the light and moved up to the side of a building on the corner which seemed to be a warehouse of some sort with blank brick walls.

I peered around the corner of the building and I didn't see Gomez. Instead I saw two figures in the otherwise deserted block—two men creeping up on the mouth of an alley, silhouetted by the street lamp at the corner behind them. Ben Waller and his son—and light glinted from the barrel of old Waller's rifle.

They stopped in plain sight at the entrance to the alley and I heard a muttered ejaculation from one of them. The old man disappeared for a moment into the alley, then was back in sight before I decided what to do, and they were both legging it my way, walking fast. I pulled my head back in and heard them break into a run that carried them closer.

Flattened up against the bricks, I peeked out again, then stuck out one leg as the first running man came hurtling around the corner. It was young Waller and he tripped over my foot and took a dive on his face. His father came right behind him and I swung my fist.

I swung hard and he was coming like a streak when my fist and his chin collided. The blow hurt me almost as much as it did him; it felt like I broke a couple of fingers. He sat down hard and the rifle in his hands went off with a spanging crash. It was pointed in the air and I felt the bullet snick past my face as I inhaled a gust of burnt powder.

I dropped the flash-light I had in my left hand, stepped out and grabbed the rifle barrel, wrenched it out of his hands

before he could use it again. He was stunned, rocking back on his spine, his white eye staring up at me. But he must have had a jaw like an iron casting. He sort of shook his head and started to get up.

I said, "Sit still!" and tapped him on the skull with the stock of the rifle. I remembered the way he'd sloughed me and I wasn't gentle about it. He got still but in a prone position.

I swung around and saw young Waller scrambling to his feet, clawing my gun out of his pocket. I used the rifle stock on his head with about the same force I'd used it on his dad's. He collapsed and became just as still as his father.

Seeing them like that made me feel better. I figured I'd sort of evened up my score with the Wallers. I flexed my sore right hand, leaned down and got the flash-light and my little hammerless .32 revolver that young Waller had dropped. Then I looked down the sidestreet.

A few figures had gathered under the street light at the intersection a block away, coming both ways from the main stem. They'd been attracted by the rifle shot, but it was too dark here for them to see me plainly. One man was running toward me from the alley, and another was on his way ahead of the group gathering under the street lamp.

The first man was big and he wore a black hat. He was Joe Viera. He slowed as he got nearer, staring at me and the gun in my hand as I stood waiting for him. He approached warily, gestured with one thick arm at the unconscious Wallers.

"Those Wallers!" he cried angrily. "They kill Charlie Gomez! They kill Charlie Gomez!"

"Yeah?" I said tightly. "Where?"

"Back in that alley."

He came closer, his breath making harsh puffing sounds, and he had his big fists knotted as he glared down at the Wallers. He wasn't carrying his shotgun now and he was worried about what I might do to him. I felt like hanging

one on his thick jaw, but that could wait now. I kept him covered with my gun, bit out:

"And where were you? Where did you just come from?"

"I follow them," he explained earnestly, gesturing back at the street. "Those Wallers. I see them go into this street and I follow them. I see them go to the alley and just now I find Charlie Gomez there. He is dead."

I swore. It looked like Gomez had been a liability to the killer and had been liquidated by him. It was a cinch he wouldn't be able to finger anybody now. "How do I know you didn't kill him?" I said through my teeth.

He shook his head, wagged both hands in protest. "No, no! I do not do it! I am looking for him to help him. I do not think he kill that Mr. Burke, and—"

"And I didn't either, you big dope," I snarled at him. "So what was the idea smacking me around tonight?"

"Oh," he said, wide-eyed. "I am sorry. I thought you would tell the sheriff that Charlie Gomez kill Mr. Burke. So I tied you up."

"You're sorry?" I said. "That makes it just swell. I ought to—"

"Here! Here you, put down that gun now!"

I looked at the man who had interrupted me. He was the one I'd seen coming from the corner of the main street. He stood ten feet away along the walk, a fat man with jiggling spectacles and a big six-shooter in his hand.

"Take it easy," I told him. "These are the Wallers. Who are you?"

"I'm the law here," he snapped. "I'm the town constable."

"Then take charge," I said. "The sheriff ought to be here any moment."

He moved in closer, staring down at the Wallers, not exactly sure of himself. I handed him the rifle.

"Here. And watch this big lug, too. I think the sheriff will want to question him."

I meant Joe Viera and the constable turned his big gun on him, blinking. I

stuck my revolver in my coat pocket and walked away. The constable was too confused by it all to stop me.

People were coming from the other corner now, following the lead of the constable, their fears overcome because nothing had happened to him. They stepped aside to let me pass, eying me curiously and some of them venturing questions about what had happened which I didn't take time to answer.

For some reason none of them had stopped at the alley and when I reached it I saw why. Darkness was black and heavy just within the alley mouth and I wouldn't have seen the huddled form on the ground myself if I hadn't been looking for it. I stepped into the alley and cut the dark with a knife of brightness from the flash-light.

Behind me someone gasped. I heard startled exclamations and the quick shuffling of feet as the vultures started to gather. Someone said, "My God, he's dead! Look at the blood!"

There wasn't much blood but it glistened wetly in the disc of light I held on the body. Charlie Gomez lay on his chest, his sharp, crafty face turned toward me, eyes unblinking in the glaring brightness, white teeth shining, exposed in a twisted set grin. His black hat had come off, rolled away from him. The blood was on the back of his coat, below his left shoulder blade.

Sound behind me had become a jabbered hubbub. "Stay back!" I ordered sharply without turning and kneeled, putting the light closer to the bloody part of the coat. There were two slits there from which the blood had come—knife wounds.

I stood up and swallowed, staring down the alley into the dark. Then I swung on the crowd that had gathered and was pushing into the alley. "Stay back!" I rapped out again. "And don't touch anything till the sheriff gets here."

That stopped their frantic shoving to get forward for a better view, temporarily at least, and I took the light away with me down the alley. I knew that it ran

along behind the main business block and that the town's only hotel was in that block—and I had an idea,

I went along, playing the light ahead of me, and had gone about half-way to the next cross-street when the beam picked up a wedge of metallic glitter that winked at me from the alley floor. I held my breath in my throat and closed in on the glitter, kneeled and made sure what it was.

It was a knife, a hunting knife with a bone handle and a wicked looking blade that was streaked with a thin film of blood. I'd been checking up on an idea, but I hadn't expected to find anything like this, and now that I had, it certainly let out the Wallers as the killers of Charlie Gomez.

I looked upward, saw lights in second and third floor windows and the black skeleton of a fire-escape that crawled down the back of the building to a point where an active man could reach it by jumping. I was behind the hotel.

"Boy, what a careless killer," I breathed. I got out my handkerchief, used it when I picked up the knife gingerly by the end of the handle. Carrying it in the cloth, I went back the way I had come to meet the sheriff.

He'd arrived and had the crowd under control, but Rosa wasn't with him; he'd left her in his office.



CONNERS was the sheriff's name. He was a lean man with iron-gray hair and an outdoors look stamped on him. He had a long brown face, creased and leathery, and his sharp eyes were nested deep in wrinkles. A shoestring tie drooped from the collar of his faded plaid shirt. He sat behind the flat desk in his little office and looked us all over, one by one.

On the desk before him, under a bright cone of light, were the knife I'd found, and the blood-encrusted tire iron he'd recovered from Joe Viera. Viera sat in

a corner chair, his thick brown face stolid and unexpressive now, his eyes like beads. Rosa was on the opposite side of the room, huddled in a chair behind me as if for protection, sending covert and fearful glances at her father who was ignoring her.

Except for the husky deputy at the door, Della Burke and Stewart Hardesty were the only others in the room, standing before the desk. The Wallers were in a cell and claimed they had come to town after Gomez with the idea of turning him over to the sheriff because they thought him guilty of Burke's murder and he could clear them. They'd seen him turn into the side-street, but when they got to the alley, from which place they planned to jump on him, they found him dead. No one had come out of the alley. A deputy had gone out to pick up their truck and the ambergris which they'd hidden in a friend's garage on the edge of town.

"There are no finger-prints," the sheriff said in his dry and drawling voice. He indicated the murder weapons on his desk, lifted his gaze to Hardesty's face. "But this tire iron has the same kind of blue cord on it as the one that was tied to Burke's wrist. It's your tire iron, Hardesty. And the knife that was used to kill Gomez was found below the hotel's alley fire-escape. Your room was at the back of the hotel, on the third floor. You could have gone down and up the fire-escape without being seen."

Hardesty had on trousers and a white shirt, open at the throat, a tweed sport jacket. His straight brown hair was neatly combed, but his good looking face was white and haggard with strain. He stared down at the tire iron on the desk with blood-shot eyes, his mouth twisting.

"But I didn't do it!" he denied, almost sobbing. "Why would I? Harry was my friend. I left him alive. That tire iron is mine, sure, but I left it with him. I've never seen that knife before and I didn't even know this other man—Gomez. Why should I kill him?"

The girl, Della, stood straight and

rigid at his side, her jaw level. She wasn't looking at the desk; she gazed at the wall above and behind the sheriff's head and her hands were clenched at her sides. This whole thing was an ordeal for her; she was holding her lips firmly together with an effort. She seemed stunned and she looked tired. There were dark smudges under her eyes and the angular shape of her face was less pronounced now. She still wore the slacks and sweater and her lovely hair was brushed back away from her high forehead, caught together at the nape of her neck.

The sheriff leaned back in his chair, gazing up through the light at Hardesty. "You killed him because he'd seen you kill your pal Burke, and because he tried to blackmail you with that knowledge."

Sweat glistened, standing out on Hardesty's upper lip. He mussed his hair with his fingers in an harassed gesture, grimaced. "But I didn't! And why would I kill Harry?"

As soon as the words were out, he seemed to regret asking. He sent a quick, almost furtive glance at Della Burke, then looked at me, and down at the desk. Della didn't move, but under the sweater her breasts lifted, held on an indrawn breath.

"The oldest motive in the world," the sheriff drawled. "You were in love with his wife. You wanted her and he stood in your way. I can't say as I blame you much." His gaze moved to the girl, back to Hardesty. "The evidence is plain enough and it all points right to you, young feller."

Color stained the girl's cheeks. Hardesty's mouth was drawn tight and his eyes were tortured. "No," he said. "No. . . ."

"All right!" The words came from Della Burke in an agonized whisper. She clasped her hands together and tears swam in her eyes. "Suppose he does love me! That's no crime, is it? I stopped loving my husband a year after we were married. He was always after other women—and worse. But, before God,

there was never anything between us." She groped for Hardesty's hand, found and gripped it. "I *know* he didn't kill Harry, and I know he couldn't have killed this man Gomez, because he was with me, in my room, all evening, from darkness on."

"Della!" Hardesty choked and she swayed toward him, hid her face against his shoulder, silent sobs shaking her body. He put his arms around her, glared at the sheriff, at me.

"An alibi, huh?" the sheriff said skeptically and leaned forward. "Of course she'd alibi you. Maybe she was in on the whole thing with you. That won't help you, son."

"Wait a minute," I said. "I gave you all this dope, Connors, and since then I been doing some thinking. How's about letting me put in my two-bits worth?"

They all looked at me. Rosa was behind me, but I felt her watching me too. The sheriff squinted down one eye, lifted the other brow at me. I sat on the corner of the desk and talked to him:

"An alibi *will* help Hardesty and, what's more, I believe Mrs. Burke. You were right when you said the evidence was plain enough. That's the trouble. I'm beginning to think it's too plain. It points to Hardesty as a very careless killer indeed—and he looks to me like too smart a youngster to be that careless."

Della Burke had lifted her head and her lower lip was caught between her teeth. Her eyes thanked me for that little speech, begged me to go on, to prove the truth of it.

The sheriff drummed knuckles on the desk, scowled sulkily. "But—"

"Listen," I said. "The very fact that both the tire iron and knife have been wiped free of finger-prints indicates that they were planted by the killer."

I glanced at Joe Viera and he was staring at me almost fearfully. "There is someone mixed up in this who didn't like Charlie Gomez," I went on slowly, "who had a motive for trying to frame him for murder and then later killing

him when it was plain the frame wouldn't stick. Someone who has a very wild imagination, a persecution complex, and a passionate and emotional nature, all of which made it possible for her to do what she did." I twisted around and looked at the dark-haired beauty in the chair against the wall. "Rosa—the lovely child murderess."

It got very still in that room for a minute. Everyone stared at Rosa and she just sat there looking at me, her great dark eyes open wide and her luscious lips parted, an utter lack of expression in the muscles of her face. Then in the other corner of the room a chair scraped the floor as Joe Viera came to his feet, cried brokenly:

"What you say? No! Is not so!"

"Sit down!" the sheriff rapped out. "Sit down and shut up, Joe! Watch him, Tim."

The last three words were an order to the deputy at the door. I kept my eyes on Rosa and said:

"She had a knife a while ago. She used it to cut me loose after Joe had left me tied up. Where is it now, Rosa? What did you do with it?"

A pulsing light began to burn in her eyes and her red lips curled back. She gripped the edges of the chair with both hands, hissed at me: "You're crazy!"

"Where did you carry it?" I hammered at her. "You had it on you. When I let you out of the car before going around the block to meet Gomez, you ran up the alley and caught him first. He would only have come into that dark alley if someone he knew called to him as he passed it or just afterwards. You knifed him and then ran back down the alley, purposely dropping the shiv under the hotel fire-escape because you knew from what I'd said that Hardesty would be suspected. That's why it took you so long to get the sheriff."

She sat there, her eyes burning hate at me, her high full breasts rising and falling with the sudden turbulence of her breathing. I slid off the desk and in one step was before her. I caught the hem

of her peasant dress, jerked it, yanked it up above her hips. She kicked at me, squirming sideways in the chair, and her hands flashed up and out, clawed fingers raking down my face, leaving burning welts.

But I held her, pulling her up off her feet against me, holding up the skirt of her dress to expose her threshing, shape-ly thighs. Her body jerked and wrenched while she kicked and spit and fought.

"Quit it, you little hell cat!" I snarled, and to the others who weren't doing anything but staring, I got out: "Look at the marks on her right thigh! She had a sheath for that hunting knife strapped there. She got rid of the sheath, but it couldn't have been so long ago because the marks are still there."

Then I let go of her, pushed her so she fell back in the chair. "That cooks your goose, little Rosa. You can lie by the clock, as you did to me tonight, but it won't get you out of this. You were out on the point this morning. Gomez saw you there, and I think your father knows it. That's why he's tried to keep you quiet."

"Yes, yes," Joe muttered.

"You went out there on the point on purpose to try to meet Burke again," I went on. "He must have arranged for the meeting the night before. That's why he sent Hardesty back alone to camp. And you struck Burke over the head with Hardesty's tire iron, shoved him over the cliff. You brought the tire iron back and tried to frame Gomez with it."

She glared at me, then drew herself up straight in the chair, tilted her chin and actually smiled, preening herself. "Mr. Burke," she said slowly, "attacked me. I only defended myself."

"No, no!" Della Burke cried. "He wouldn't have done that." She looked contemptuously at Rosa. "He wouldn't have to attack you."

Rosa almost spat at her. "You cold fish! That's what he thought of you. Your husband loved me—me, hear? He promised to take me away from here—keep me in the city until he could get rid

of you, Then after—after he made love to me, he tried to back out of his promise. The dirty scut! Why shouldn't I kill him?"

"And then you framed Gomez for it?" the sheriff said, almost gently.

"Sure I did! Why not? My father was forcing me to marry him and I hated him. I thought they'd take him away if I pretended to find the tire iron in his room. But they didn't somehow and he knew I'd killed Burke and he was forcing me—"

From behind me a long hopeless agonized groan came out of Joe Viera. I got a handkerchief to the bleeding furrows on my cheek.

"Shut up!" I said to Rosa. "With that defense you'll get off easy. You've got something that'll sway any jury of men in your favor."

"I don't care!" Rosa screamed. "I'm glad I killed them!"

I turned away and saw Viera slumped in his chair, his face buried in his hands. I wasn't sore at him any more. I felt sorry for him, but there was nothing I could do to change things. Someone always has to suffer in a murder case besides the killer. That's the hell of it.

Hardesty had his arm around Della Burke's shoulders and they faced me. Her haggard eyes looked levelly into mine and she said:

"We want to apologize for the way we've acted, and thank you. . . ."

"Yes," Hardesty said and held out his hand.

I gripped it, pulled them toward the door. "Forget it. Murder is never pleasant and it was enough to upset both of you. Try not to think about it any more. For Pete's sake, don't let it stand between you if you love each other."

"We won't," Hardesty said. "And we want you to have the ambergris. I'm sure—"

He looked questioningly down at Della Burke and she nodded, something that might have been a smile quivering on her lips for a second. "Yes," she whispered. "Yes."

"We'll talk about that later," I told them. "Now go on and get out of here."

The deputy at the door let them out and when they were gone the sheriff, with an explosive outlet of breath, said, "Well, I'll be eternally double damned!"

I swung to face him, made a tight grin. "You and Rosa."

She was still sitting erect in the chair, like a proud little queen, her chin tilted disdainfully.

"Hell," the sheriff said. "You should kick! You're going to get that ambergris and it's worth a lot of money."

"I'm not kicking," I told him, blotting blood off my face with my handkerchief. "But I earned that ambergris. I took a shellacking from just about everyone in the case but you. I ought to get something to salve my wounds." I let out a sigh I couldn't stop. "I'll probably be so sore tomorrow I won't be able to go after abalone when Al gets here."



CONCEALED WEAPON

McCarthy hits and runs after a hit and run driver

THE man came weaving down the hall of the office building and McCarthy said to Marge Chalmers: "Jeez! That guy's got seven dollars' worth of start. What a load!"

McCarthy turned and slammed his office door and the spring lock took hold with a click. The stranger in the hall lurched into Marge and would have fallen if she hadn't held him up with a short but sturdy arm. McCarthy said, pleasantly enough:

"Hey, guy! Take it some place else. You

The man proved it by quietly falling on the floor in spite of Marge's attempt at holding him erect. He went down in a loose and sodden pile, and Marge looked up from him and snapped: "Pat!"

McCarthy was already in action. He was stooping and tearing the man's coat open, and when he saw the blood mottling the white shirt he said:

"Oke, kitten! We won't move him. Call the ambulance and the cops. Quick! If we move him, it might make it worse."

"What is it, Pat?"

McCarthy pointed out a half-dozen holes in the bloody shirt. "Maybe an ice pick, I don't know. But they're in his belly, and that means he shouldn't be moved. Get going."



better go some place and sleep it off."

The man's face was a dingy white. Even with Marge's support he was standing bent and twisted. He muttered something and McCarthy said tolerantly:

"All right, guy! I didn't hear you. But you ain't the first to get this way."

Marge said, not tolerantly: "You should tell him that! You, of all people!" And then, with a total change in tone: "Pat! The man's hurt!"

By ROGER TORREY

Marge took his keys and opened the office.

The police came, after a little while, cars full of them, as did the ambulance. McCarthy watched Doctor Solari straighten up from the wounded man, and that smart young man said to him:

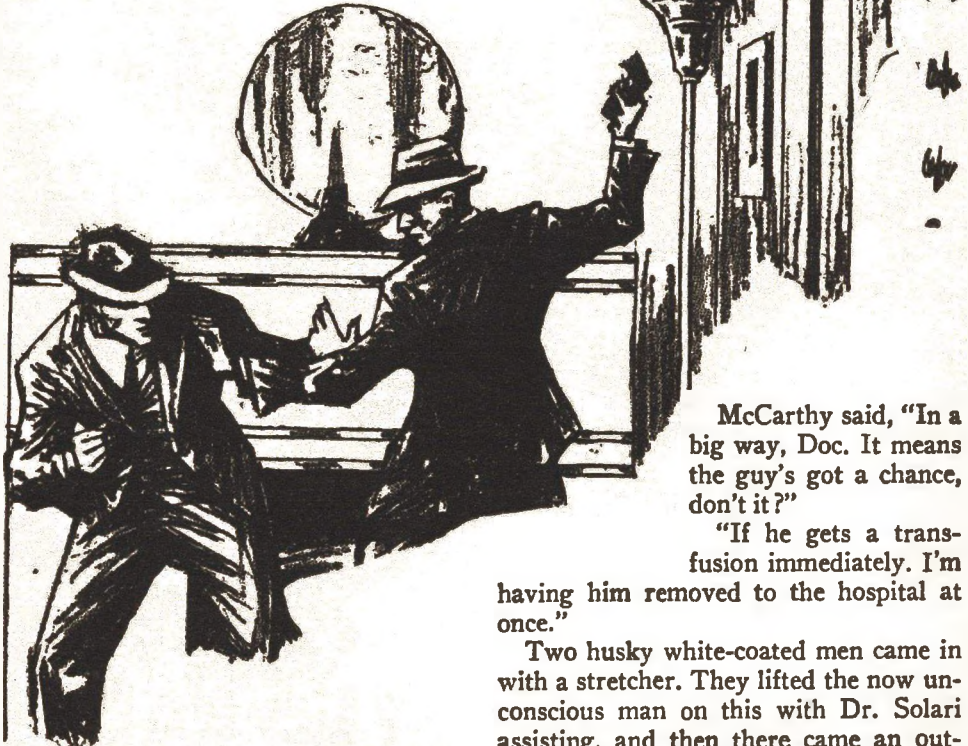
"Maybe we're in time. Unless the fellow gets a transfusion inside the next few minutes he'll be shaking hands with Saint Peter."

"How bad, Doc?" McCarthy asked.

Solari had a smooth and unlined face. He looked to be about twenty—but he had ten years and a reputation of being an authority on the sort of violence police are faced with added to the innocent look. He stared up at the ceiling, as though looking at something new and different, and said:

"Well, he's been pierced, through and through, with something. I'm not prepared to say exactly just what, but if

this had happened down in colored town I'd say the weapon was an ice pick. They favor that down there; ice picks don't come under the head of concealed weapons. Now this man has twelve wounds in his abdomen and has lost some blood. The shock was slight, owing to the nature of the wound. He will most certainly have peritonitis as his intestines are most certainly pierced through and through. He may get through it if he isn't too far along to react to a transfusion. Now does that answer you, Mr. McCarthy?"



McCarthy said, "In a big way, Doc. It means the guy's got a chance, don't it?"

"If he gets a transfusion immediately. I'm having him removed to the hospital at once."

Two husky white-coated men came in with a stretcher. They lifted the now unconscious man on this with Dr. Solari assisting, and then there came an out-

raged bellow from the outer office. A voice came out distinctly with:

"Hey! Miss Marge! I got to see the Chief."

McCarthy muttered, "That damn Benny!" and went through the knot of policemen and into the outer office.

Benny Cohn, McCarthy's pet cabbie, was at the door. He apparently didn't want to stay there but two policemen, who had him by the arms, were winning the argument about just where Benny was going. Or staying. Benny saw McCarthy and stopped struggling and said:

"Hey, Chief! I come up to see you and it seems I can't. They tell me I got to stay outside, they do, Chief."

McCarthy said, "Let him go."

Marge, who'd been awaiting the doctor's report, said, "Personally, I think one of us ought to see about a transfusion for this man. He fell into our arms in front of your office. How is he?"

"He might make it. . . . What d'ya want, Benny? I'm busy."

Benny said, "And so am I busy, Chief. Like I say, these cops won't let me in and see you. I got to see you, Chief. No fooling, I got to see you."

"What about?"

Marge broke in with: "Does the doctor think he'll live if he gets a transfusion?"

Benny brightened and broke away from the two policemen. He said to McCarthy, "Hey now, Chief! If it maybe is the guy needs the same kind of blood that I got, maybe you can fix it for me. I took the test—they give you thirty-five bucks for it and I got my name on the list for giving it. Maybe you can fix it for me, Chief; I got to have the dough."

"What d'ya want to see me about?"

"That's it, Chief. Dough."

McCarthy said, "Then I certainly will try to fix it. If you can earn it, it's better than me having to give it to you."

Marge said, "But, Lord, what will the harvest be? With the man full of Benny's blood!"



McCarthy fixed it with no trouble. The wounded man's blood was typed, in a hurry, and found to match that of Benny's. McCarthy and Marge left

the hospital, McCarthy grinning, and he said:

"That's the easiest thirty-five bucks I ever made in my life. I'd have had to give it to him if he hadn't made it this way."

"Why?"

McCarthy said uncomfortably, "Well, you know how Benny is. He never makes any dough out of his hack and now he's jammed."

"How?"

McCarthy sounded even more uncomfortable. "Well, he's been running around with some gal. He got in a little argument with her and slapped her. And she says unless he pays for the three teeth he knocked out she'll have him thrown in the sneezer."

"Swell kid, Benny is."

"Hell, baby, if Benny thought I wanted somebody's teeth knocked out he'd do it for me just as quick as he would for himself. He's that way."

"That's just it," Marge said warmly. "He's always getting you in trouble over things like that. You know he is."

McCarthy led the way into a Bar and Grill and charged the subject quite effectually. He fanned out five brand new hundred dollar bills and said nothing. Neither did Marge for a moment. Her blue eyes bulged and she finally gasped:

"Pat! Where did you get that?"

McCarthy said, in a complacent voice, "From the guy, kitten. Before the cops came—before they took him into my office. He had five hundred and forty bucks in his wallet, beside a few cards, and I left him the forty bucks and the wallet. I told the hospital I'd guarantee his bill, though, so it won't be all clear profit."

"But, Pat! It isn't your money."

McCarthy looked injured and dragged out some cards. He held one out to her and she took it and read: Billy Tucker's Roadhouse. She said:

"What has a man named Billy Tucker got to do with you taking the stabbed man's money?"

"Turn it over, kitten."

Marge did this. The card had McCarthy's name scrawled in pencil on it, as well as his office address. He said:

"See! It's got my name on it. The guy was probably on his way up to see me when he got stabbed. So this is my retainer; I can't be expected to work for nothing. And anyway, he can't use it right now and I can."

Marge shook her head and said, "Let's look over the rest of the cards. What d'ya suppose he wanted to see you for?"

"Probably to keep from getting stabbed," McCarthy said, spreading out the cards.

There was one that read: The Silver Slipper—Dine and Dance. One of a chop suey place and another advertising a particularly poor brand of bourbon and a bar that sold it. The Silver Slipper card had a telephone number written on it and an explanatory note that read: "Small; blonde; drinks Scotch; Marie." McCarthy grinned at this and said:

"The guy's got an idea. Card-indexing his women."

He put the card down by the one bearing his address and name, then frowned. He pointed out: "Hey, look! The same man didn't write 'em both. Look!"

The writing was decidedly different and Marge agreed that this was so. She said, "What difference does it make?"

"Probably none. Maybe the blonde wrote her name and number for him."

"She wouldn't have gone into details about the Scotch if she had, Pat."

McCarthy shrugged and looked at more cards. One was of Ira A. Halstead, Attorney-at-Law, and this was new and unsoiled. Another, equally new, was that of James R. S. Wilson. And

then there were two more bar cards, which McCarthy discarded after looking them over for more telephone numbers and descriptions of girls. He studied the lawyer's card and that of Wilson and said:

"This Wilson is a big shot broker. Very strict church member and the rest of that stuff. And this lawyer Halstead has something to do with him, but I can't remember just what."

"Why not ask him?"

McCarthy said, "Maybe he wouldn't tell me. I'll get a guy from a newspaper and ask *him*."



HET MORRIS was the newspaper man McCarthy picked for an information bureau. He was short, fat, and almost bald, and he had a notorious passion for checked and wildly patterned suits. McCarthy opened up with:

"Hi, Chet! That's new, ain't it?"

Morris looked down at the plaid affairs that made him look even more roly-poly than ever and said, "It's half paid for, anyway."

"It looks good."

Abe Goldstein, who worked the police beat for a rival paper, snickered and said: "It looks good, hell! It looks just gorgeous. Just too simply gorgeous."

Morris managed a sickly grin for McCarthy. He gave Goldstein a cold and haughty look and said, "Yah! Well, it cost me sixty bucks, anyway."

The unimpressed Goldstein said that the tailor had certainly seen Mr. Morris coming from a distance and recognized him as the chump he was. He also said his brother-in-law, who was in that business, could duplicate the plaid job for not a cent over thirty-five dollars but that the said brother-in-law ran a quality store and would not have a piece of goods with a pattern like that in the shop. Morris gave up the argument and said hastily to McCarthy, sniffing the press room:

"You want to see me, Pat? Let's go outside. I got to get fresh air, every so often around here."

Goldstein's voice followed them out with: "That's quite a breeze you got on your back, Chet, and you can't get an argument against it from the next five guys you meet."

"What d'ya know about Mr. James R. S. Wilson? A big shot, as I remember about him," McCarthy asked.

Morris took off horn-rimmed glasses and started a polishing job. He said, "Right. A very big shot. Chairman of the Community Chest drive last year. Selectman of the Trinity Church. President of Wilson, Marks and Linehan, Investment Brokers. A very big shot to be sure."

"What about a lawyer named Ira A. Halstead?"

"Another big shot. A different kind. He's the people's friend, if you know what I mean."

"I don't, Chet."

"Well, he takes damage cases against railroads and such. On contingency, of course. Some people might call it a form of blackmail but as long as it's a big company that's stuck, who cares? The jury always goes for the poor devil who's suing the heartless corporation, don't they? So that makes him the people's friend, because he doesn't ask for a retainer when he takes that kind of a case."

"What does he get?"

Morris put his glasses back on and wiped his bald spot with the handkerchief he'd used to polish them with. "Well, usually half the damages the jury gives the victim. Less expenses, of course. But he gets big damages for his clients and very often there's a few bucks left over for them. A very few though, I'd say."

"A nice guy, I can see."

"Not in trouble with him, are you, Pat?"

"Not yet, anyway."

Morris' round, good-natured face showed worry. "He's got connections, if you know what I mean. We lay off

him in the sheet. If that means anything."

"It does, Chet. Thanks a lot."

"Is that what you wanted to know?"

McCarthy said, "Yeah. It made me remember something. It made me remember that Halstead is the lawyer for some guy that's suing Wilson over a car accident. I remembered it when you said he took damage cases."

"Wilson is the sort of bird he likes to tackle," Morris agreed. "I don't keep up with things on this damn police beat. It's all I can do to keep up with the cops."

"And Goldstein," McCarthy suggested. "Abe can take the hide off a man's back with that tongue of his."

Morris said sadly, "Worse than that! He just about took this suit off my back a minute ago and the thing is brand new."

"I still say it looks good," said McCarthy, and left.

McCarthy went from the police press room to the paper Morris honored with his services. There he looked over the clippings on the car accident James R. S. Wilson was involved in, and he looked these over thoughtfully. He finally grumbled:

"My stabbed man can be either William Bowes or he can be Antonio Giovanni. And he didn't look Italian."

He left the newspaper morgue for a drugstore phone booth and telephoned the hospital. He said, "I'm McCarthy. What about the man who was stabbed in my office building?"

He held the phone, far from patiently, for ten long minutes before he got the doctor in charge of the case. The doctor said:

"He's doing as well as might be expected, Mr. McCarthy. The police are here now, waiting for the man to recover enough to make a statement. This in spite of my telling them the man will be in no shape to talk for at least twenty-four hours."

"They don't know who he is yet?"

"Apparently not. That fact seems to worry them, I might say."

McCarthy said, disagreeably, "It always worries the police when a man is stabbed. They're paid to worry about such things." He consulted the phone book and got Ira A. Halstead's address and telephone number and studied the phone thoughtfully for a moment. Finally he grumbled:

"Might as well go; he wouldn't tell me anything over the phone, anyway."

And then went hunting for a cab.



HALSTEAD'S law offices looked stately and dignified but Halstead looked like a boy barely out of college—like a boy who'd majored in athletics. He shrugged his bulky shoulders, lifted calm brown eyes from McCarthy's card, and said:

"My secretary told me it was about one of my clients, Mr. McCarthy. Will you explain?"

"I'm trying to identify a man," McCarthy explained. "He had nothing in his pockets but your card and I thought possibly you might be a help. He's a man of about forty and he weighs around one fifty. He's got sandy hair and eyebrows and when I last saw him he needed a shave. In fact, he'd needed one for the last couple of days. He wears a brown suit and hat and white shoes. The shoes needed cleaning. He has a scar along his jawbone, not very long but still noticeable. Can you think who that might be?"

Halstead studied the problem and then shook his head. "I don't recall any client who that describes. You say he had my card in his pocket?"

"And that's *all* he had," McCarthy lied, leaving out all mention of Wilson's card and the five new hundred dollar bills.

"I'm afraid I can't help you, Mr. McCarthy."

"It wouldn't be Antonio Giovanni, would it?"

Halstead laughed. "Antonio Giovanni is at least fifty. He isn't over five feet tall and he must weight at least two hundred pounds. He talks broken English, very broken English. He's been in this country thirty years or more but he acts like an immigrant to this day."

"What about William Bowes?"

McCarthy was watching Halstead's hands and he thought one of them tightened almost imperceptibly. And when he looked up he noted Halstead's eyes had lost their warm frankness and now looked wary. Halstead said, as though surprised:

"Now I never thought of him. Bowes *does* answer that description to an extent. By George, it might be Bowes at that."

McCarthy said, "I thought it might be."

"Is the man in trouble? He's my witness in a rather important case that's coming to trial shortly. As a matter of fact, the Giovanni case. By George, that's why you spoke of Giovanni! You associated the two in some way! Where is the man now?"

"In the hospital. He was stabbed."

Halstead shook his head and said, "Poor fellow. If he dies, it will be too bad for my client, I am afraid. I was depending on his testimony to show negligence on the part of the driver who killed his son."

"You mean Wilson."

Halstead nodded and smiled. The warm look was back in his eyes. He leaned forward and said, "That was an unfortunate thing. Mr. Wilson was driving along and struck young Giovanni, killing him instantly. Two days after that this man you speak of, William Bowes, got in touch with the elder Mr. Giovanni and told him he'd witnessed the accident. I may add that Mr. Wilson got in a panic immediately after the accident and drove around some time before reporting the matter to the police. You understand that makes him technically liable to a hit and run charge.

Bowes insisted Mr. Wilson was entirely at fault."

"How? How was he wrong on it?"

Halstead said, in as friendly a voice, "Mr. McCarthy, I am a lawyer. I can't ethically answer your question. I don't understand your interest in the matter unless you should be investigating the matter for Mr. Wilson. Mr. Wilson is opposed to my client and I can't very well tell you our case against him. I hope you will understand."

McCarthy got to his feet. "I'm not investigating it for anybody but myself. At least not as yet. But this man Bowes was stabbed in front of my office door, and there was a reason back of it. I'm naturally interested in it. Well, thank you, Mr. Halstead."

Halstead stood also. "Is the man in bad shape, Mr. McCarthy? Will he recover?"

"The medicos don't know yet. He's at the Sisters of Mercy Hospital; you can keep in touch with them."

"I'll certainly do that," Halstead said, following McCarthy to the door. "And thank you, Mr. McCarthy, for telling me this. As I said, Bowes is the backbone of our case. If he should die, I'm afraid we haven't one."

McCarthy shook hands and left the office. He stood on the sidewalk for a moment, then headed for another phone booth. He got the Central Station and Detective Lieutenant Shannon, and told that big Irishman:

"I think the guy that got stabbed in front of my place is named Bowes. William Bowes. You might do a little checking on it. He's a witness in a damage case against Mr. James R. S. Wilson, if that means a thing to you."

Shannon whistled and said, "He's flying high, Pat. I'll look into it. How'd you get it?"

"From Halstead, the lawyer who's suing Wilson. The lawyer this Bowes is a witness for. And Shan, here's something funny. I didn't crack about where the guy was or what had happened to him or a thing that would tip Halstead

off. But I talked as though something had happened to him and Halstead let it go. He seemed to think the guy was dead. Then he caught himself on it and changed it to asking questions. Does that mean anything?"

"What should it mean?" Shannon asked cautiously.

"Well, it should mean you should keep a police guard on this Bowes, if it's him, until he's out where he's got a chance to fight for himself. This Halstead is supposed to be a smart baby, that's why I talked to him the way I did."

"He's smart, all right."

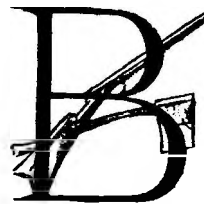
"He's too damn smart," said McCarthy. "I don't trust these baby-faced boys that don't look as though they'd ever spoken out of turn in their life. They're the kind I watch because they're too good to be true. I'll be seeing you, Shan."

"Why are you angling around on it, Irish?"

McCarthy said bitterly, "Well, I think the guy was coming to me for help when he got the shiv in him. I don't like to lose clients that way, even if I haven't really got 'em at the time. And then I'm a Socialist or something—the poor guy didn't have any money and everybody else that seems interested in him has. Wilson and this lawyer Halstead, both. I want to see the guy get a break."

"What do you get out of it?"

"Well, exercise, at least," McCarthy said. "And maybe practice."



BENNY COHN was waiting for McCarthy by the time he got back to his office. And Benny's nose was swollen out of shape and his left eye was a lovely green and adhesive tape held down a plaster on his left cheekbone. McCarthy stared at him and said:

"What the hell happened?"

"Didja ever see one of these iron things like they press pants with, Chief?"

Benny asked, in a plaintive voice. "Well, I take the thirty-five smackers I get at the hospital and I go down to pay off this gal I was telling you about and, Chief, guess what happens."

McCarthy said, "I don't have to guess. I know. She clouted you with the iron."

"Wrong, Chief, wrong. I dodge the iron, except for it bouncing off the wall and falling against my neck, sort of. But when I duck the iron, Chief, she unbuckles herself and comes at me with the ironing board thing and she lands with it. I run like hell, Chief, and no mistake."

"Did you give her the thirty-five?"

"I never had a chance. She started in throwing that iron thing when I put my head in the door and say to her 'Hi, sweetheart.' Right then she starts. I mail that thirty-five to her, Chief, I mail it. And I get another thirty-five from you tomorrow or the next day, the Doc says."

"From me!"

"The Doc says you're paying the shot, Chief, and that I should come to you for the dough. So I'll be here."

McCarthy estimated how long five hundred dollars would last if the man in the hospital had a daily transfusion at thirty-five dollars a copy. He groaned. Benny said helpfully:

"He must be a pal of yours for you to pay off like that. The Doc says he may be in there for the next six months, on account of his guts being all cut to hell. I bet it costs you a pretty penny, Chief, a pretty penny."

"Will you get out?" McCarthy said.

Benny went out. He poked his head around the door a moment later, however, and said, "Hey! I get thinking about getting smacked in the puss with that iron board arrangement and I forget. You're to call Miss Marge. See, Chief! Your phone it rings and it's her and she says to call her up."

"How long ago was this?"

"Just now, Chief."

Benny left, for the second time, and McCarthy called Marge's number. She

said in a rush, as soon as she heard his voice:

"Oh, Pat! I've been trying to get you. It's Chet Morris. He tried to get you and when he couldn't he called me. He went up to see that Wilson man and told him you were checking on that accident thing or something."

"I didn't tell him that."

"He said that after he talked to you he got thinking and remembered that lawyer was suing Wilson. And that he thought there might be a story in it and went up to see about it. He said Wilson was very nice, but that he got telephoned at the paper, almost as soon as he got back from seeing Wilson, and that somebody told him to lay off and keep out of what didn't concern him. He thinks that means you, too. He said he didn't want to see you get in trouble."

"Little Mother Morris," said McCarthy, sourly. "Why did he have to tell Wilson I was looking around?"

"He said he didn't think it made any difference."

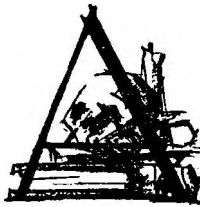
"Well, it probably doesn't," McCarthy said, and made a dinner date for eight that evening.

Marge said, "Why not at seven? I'm hungry now."

"I've got to see this Giovanni guy that's suing Wilson first, hon. It may take me a little time to find him."

"I see. You be careful, Pat. It worries me about what Chet Morris said."

McCarthy laughed and said, "You and Chet would make a good pair. You both worry."



ANTONIO GIOVANNI owned a small and messy vegetable store in the center of Italian town and it was there McCarthy found him.

Antonio was on the floor and on his face and he'd apparently been trying to crawl under a long tray-like metal affair that held vegetables beneath a spray-like arrangement. The tray, possibly four feet

wide, sloped down toward the front of the store for a display, and Antonio was sprawled partly under this and looking like a large and very dead frog.

Water from the spray had seeped through on him and washed part of the blood around him away, but there was still plenty left. He'd had long sweeping mustaches and one was soaking in blood while the other hung like a brush toward the floor.

McCarthy, without touching anything, knelt and looked—and thought he'd never seen such a pitifully ridiculous corpse. He saw three small, round, and purple holes in the cheek turned toward him, saw another in the part of fat neck in view. He cursed, silently and viciously, and stood, and then a voice from behind him said:

"Hey! Where's Tony?"

McCarthy turned fast. He saw a small and dirty boy of around ten with black curly hair and bigger and blacker eyes than McCarthy thought were possible. He gulped and said:

"Tony isn't here right now. You run along and come back by and by."

The boy said, "Ma says for him to come to supper. She says she won't wait, that it'll spoil. Where is Tony?"

"He's out right now."

The boy said reflectively, "Ma'll raise hell with him when he comes home. She says all he does is run along and talk to lawyers and that the store ain't run right any more."

"Is he your dad?" asked McCarthy, going a little sick. There was no resemblance between the dead man and the boy but he got the answer he dreaded.

"Sure! I'll go back and tell Ma he ain't here. If you see him, tell him supper's ready."

McCarthy said he'd surely do that and watched the boy swagger out. He decided that Tony had been an indulgent father and that the children had rather taken things into their own hands—basing this on the good nature still showing in the dead man's face and on knowledge of other decent, kindly, honest Italian

people he'd met. He went out of there, head down and deciding he would not be the one that broke the news of Tony's death to his family.

He called the station and told Shannon what he'd found, and Shannon cursed luridly and asked him to go back and stand guard until he could get a radio car on the scene.

And McCarthy did, praying the youngster wouldn't be back looking for his father.

CHET MORRIS was at Marge's apartment when McCarthy got there. He was again polishing his glasses and his mild, near-sighted eyes peered up at McCarthy as he said:

"I'm sorry, pal! I guess I spoke out of turn to that big, stuffed shirt. How was I to know he'd take it the way he did?"

"You told him I'd talked to you about him? That it?"

"Yeah! I didn't stop to think a thing about it." He put his glasses back on and this cleared his vision. He looked McCarthy over and said, in a different tone:

"What's the matter with you, Pat? You look sick."

McCarthy said: "I *am* sick. Marge, honey, how's about a drink? I thought I could take it but I guess I can't."

Marge brought the drink and said anxiously, "What's the matter, Pat? What's the matter with you?"

"I want to kill a man. This bird with the ice pick. Him or the man who hired him. That's all. I didn't know I could get so crazy mad that I'd be sick."

Morris asked, "What's happened?" and McCarthy told them both. Morris started toward the phone, saying: "I'll telephone it in. With the guy in the hospital getting it the same way, it's a story. They may not get the connection."

McCarthy said, with no inflection: "You touch that phone, Chet, and I'll beat you to a pulp. I'm praying God that nobody will see there *is* a connection. That other business didn't rate much

of a spread and maybe nobody will add 'em together. I'll work it my own way, Chet. Let the other boys handle it. You're off shift."

Morris said, "If you say so, Pat! But give me a break when the thing smashes."

"If it smashes," McCarthy said bitterly. "It's going to be hell to lay it on that guy. You don't accuse men like Wilson of having murder done unless you can prove it. And he's got no motive."

Marge said: "Chet told me all about it. This Italian man was suing Wilson for damages. If he was dead, he couldn't sue, could he? That's why that other man was stabbed, too. They tried to kill him so he couldn't testify. It stands to reason, Pat."

McCarthy said wearily, "Oh, use your head, Marge. Giovanni was asking for twenty-five grand, claiming Wilson was driving carelessly. Wilson is very wealthy and what's twenty-five grand to a man like that? He'd pay it in a second rather than have anybody killed. It ties up some way, but we haven't caught the angle yet."

The phone burred and Marge answered it and then said, "It's for you, Pat. It's Lieutenant Shannon." McCarthy took it and said, "Yeah, Shan?" and Shannon blurted out:

"You called the turn on it, Irish! You sure did. I had a man on guard up at the hospital and two guys came in and tried to kill that Bowes guy. One of them even got in the room. That's the one that got away, down the fire-escape. I should have seen that they put him some place where he was easier watched."

"What happened?"

"Well, this man, his name's Dugan, was sitting out in the hall. He admits he was talking to some nurse, or maybe it wouldn't have gone as far as it did. Two men come up the stairs and walk down to Bowes room and Dugan finally gets wise to himself and asks 'em what they want. One of them pulls a gun and starts using it and Dugan kills him. The other ducked in Bowes' room and down the fire-escape

and Dugan missed him three times hand running. He's going to put more time in on the range or get off the force and I told him so."

"Was Bowes hurt?"

"Hell, no! They've got him doped up so he won't roll around and tear himself up any more and he didn't even know anything happened?"

"Has he talked yet?"

"He can't. And the doctors wouldn't let him if he could."

"Who was the man the cop killed?"

"Some bird named Weeks. Just a hired hand."

"Did Dugan see the one that got away well enough to identify him?"

"No. He was talking to that nurse, like I said. He wasn't paying any attention to what he was supposed to be working at. I'm going to see he gets a month's suspension without pay if I have to resign to get it. . . . You coming down?"

McCarthy said not that evening and then he asked if the man the policeman had killed had happened to have an ice pick on his person, and found he hadn't. And then he said to Marge and Chet Morris:

"Let's eat! Chet, why don't you come with us?"

Morris said, "Don't think I'm not. I'm sticking close until this thing's settled. I'm scared, Pat, and I'm not fooling."

Marge said, "I'm afraid about Pat."

And McCarthy said, "And I'm afraid the cops will get to the ice-pick guy before I do. I want to be first."



I TOOK McCarthy the best part of a week to find that Mr. James R. S. Wilson was maintaining a small apartment in a discreet apartment house. And a small blond girl who fitted the apartment. The small girl's name was Mrs. Martha Abott, or at least that name was accepted. Her husband was Mr. James Abott, supposedly a traveling man, but his travels only extended from the Wil-

son brokerage firm or the Wilson house to the apartment.

It took twenty-five dollars of what was left of the five hundred for McCarthy to get details but he thought it money well spent. He said to Marge and to Chet Morris, who was arrayed in something new that shocked the eye:

"The guy's keeping her all right, but in this day and age that's no crime. And I'm damned if I can see that he's doing anything else. I've tagged him back and forth, from his house to his office, from there to this apartment, and I haven't seen him do one thing that would tie him up to any of the rough stuff.

"Of course I can't tell just who he sees in his office, but he's too cagy an old turkey to meet some hoodlum there where the help could spot it. I've got a boy on the day shift and another one on the night shift to tell me if he meets anybody there at this apartment and they say he doesn't."

Morris asked, "Does he know you're following him?"

"If he does, he hasn't done anything about it."

Marge said firmly, "He's a nasty old man. Or he wouldn't be doing things like that."

Morris said, "Did you ever see his wife?"

"No. Why?"

"Well, I did. When I went to see him. I don't blame him a bit. She'd drive a man to drink."

McCarthy asked what woman wouldn't and Marge slapped half-heartedly at him. She said, "What are you going to do now, Pat?"

"Keep after him, of course. He's bound to make contact with his hired killers before long and I want to see 'em. He's the only lead to them I've got."

"I wish you'd drop it. After all, it's none of your business."

McCarthy said, "You didn't happen to see old man Giovanni stretched out like I did. You didn't see this poor kid of his. You didn't go to the old man's funeral."

"Pat! You didn't go to the funeral!"

Chet Morris said, "Pat and some of the cops, mostly Shannon, and some of the boys on my paper paid for it, Marge. Even Abe Goldstein came in for ten bucks and the guy thinks money is something to hide in a bank. All of them had seen the family the guy left and it seems he'd given Halstead all the money he could raise to prosecute Wilson for running over his oldest boy. He'd mortgaged the shop he had and they took it away from the family before they could even have his funeral."

Marge said, "Oh, the poor people."

There was a knock on the door and Marge opened it for Benny. He came in, grinning, and said, "Another thirty-five bucks you owe me, Chief. I'm running you into dough—that's five of 'em."

"You always cost me," McCarthy said sourly.

"But not any more, Chief. It seems that I'm getting amnesia or something like that and the docs say I'm no good any more and that they're going to get another boy until I get fat again. Jeez, Chief, I lose ten pounds, but it's seventeen and a half a pound the way I figure it and that buys a lot of groceries."

"I'd rather pay you than some other mugg."

"Thanks, Chief, thanks. I like that."

McCarthy explained, "If I pay you, you don't have to borrow from me. If I pay somebody else I'm stuck with you again."

"Jeez, Chief, that ain't right. Don't I always kick it back to you?"

"You haven't yet."

"Well I never had it yet. When I'm in the dough I will."

McCarthy looked at his watch and asked, "You got the hack downstairs?"

"Sure."

"I'll ride with you then."

He said to Marge and Chet Morris: "I'll start after Wilson some more. He gets out of his office in half an hour; he's as regular as the old maid putting the cat out. See you some more."

Marge went to the door with him. She

said earnestly, "You be careful, Pat! I've got a funny feeling about this."

"Forget it, kid! He'll lead me to the right guys sooner or later. He has to—they'll contact him some time. And then I'll step in on him and them both."

Benny said, from where he was waiting in the hall: "Hey, the guy talked today. When I was doing my stuff with the docs and him. But all he wanted was a priest. He said he wanted to confess."

"Shannon know this?"

"Sure. But the guy wouldn't talk to him. He wanted a priest is all, Chief."

McCarthy said, "I'll put Wilson to bed, either at his house or at his apartment, and then I'll see Shannon and we'll talk to the doctors. If the guy can talk to a priest he can talk to the cops. And he knows things we have to know to get any place."

"Is he getting along all right?" Marge asked.

"According to the doctors he is."

He said good-by again and Marge watched him follow Benny down the hall with quick strides. She went inside and said to Chet Morris:

"This has Pat down. I never saw him get upset about anything like that before."

Morris said slowly, "Well, here was a case of the innocent bystander being the victim. Worse than that. That killing was so senseless, and there was no reason for the attack on Bowes. Twenty-five thousand dollars means little to Wilson—and the death of his oldest boy hit Giovanni pretty hard. From what his wife said, he only wanted the money for his family. And then he gets killed and leaves five kids, none of them over ten. Twenty-five thousand isn't worth that."

Marge said, "Maybe Pat's after the wrong man. Maybe he didn't do it or have it done."

Morris shrugged his gaily covered shoulders and said, "Don't be silly. If it wasn't Wilson back of it, why should the one witness against him be almost killed? Why should the man making the charge be killed? It doesn't make too much

sense, but he's the only connecting link between the two happenings."

"I wonder where the man Bowes got the five one hundred dollar bills."

Morris said, "I didn't know he had any," and Marge told of them. She defended Pat with: "He just took them so he'd have money to care for the man in the hospital. That was all."

"Sure," said Morris, with no conviction in his tone.

Marge said, "Poor Pat! I've got the oddest feeling about him. I'm really worried."

"If the cops find out Pat took the five hundred you'll have something to worry about," Morris told her.



McCarthy walked a hundred feet behind the sedate-looking James R. S. Wilson. But Wilson was alone and McCarthy wasn't. A thin, very dark man was on one side of him and a heavy but equally dark man was on the other. The heavy man was saying:

"Go ahead, shamus. You been following him and he didn't know it and we been following you and *you* didn't know it. Now we're all going to get together and get acquainted."

The heavy man had a hand in a side coat pocket and the pocket lumped out with more than hand. His thin partner was just as close to McCarthy and his pocket bulged in the same manner. He had a high whiny voice and he said:

"You're a stupid, shamus! You might've known we was keeping watch on him. You're stupid."

McCarthy admitted it with: "I've been told so before. By better men than you two punks will ever be."

"Sing high, sing low," the heavy man said. "But if you do it out loud I'll smear you all over the town. You guys out here think you know something but you're made to order."

The thin man said, "Yeah, tailor-made."

Wilson turned into the apartment house, first glancing suspiciously up and down the street, and McCarthy said, "Now what?"

"We go in. Just act right."

McCarthy acted right. He went inside and to the elevator as though expected, and the clerk looked at him casually and turned away. They rode up to 3C and the heavy man said:

"You know, Mike, I don't blame the guy for going with the gal here. She's a honey. I don't blame him for going for her."

The thin partner said, "Why should you? He's paying for it, ain't he?"

"And how!" the heavy man agreed. He said to McCarthy: "Just you knock on his door. When he opens it you just walk in like you owned the place. No funny stuff now."

The thin man said, "Hey, wait!" and reached over and snapped McCarthy's heavy gun from its shoulder sling. He stuck this in the waist-band of his trousers and said, "O. K. now. Go to it."

McCarthy knocked. He heard fluttering sounds inside and then a girl's voice said, "What is it?" McCarthy got a warning gun jabbed in his short ribs and held silent.

The heavy man said, "Electrician, ma'am!"

There was more fluttering and then the door opened. The small and blond and supposedly Mrs. Abbott stood framed it in, a black silk negligée wrapped around what appeared to be herself and nothing else. The thin man jammed his gun into McCarthy's ribs and said:

"In!"

McCarthy went in, accompanied by a small shriek from the blond girl. The heavy man said in an approving voice:

"Now that's nice, lady. That's the way to yelp. If you'd made any more noise than that somebody might have heard you and then there'd have been hell to pay for this chump."

She said, "Who are you? What do you want?"

Wilson's voice said, from inside: "What is it, darling?"

The girl didn't answer, just backed into the room where Wilson was, staring at the three men and the two guns that followed her. Wilson jumped to his feet, his face suddenly white, and the heavy man said:

"Don't have kittens, mister. We're friends. And I'll prove it to you." He said to his partner: "You watch 'em, Mike," and headed toward the French phone by the window.

Wilson said, "Why, what—" and the heavy man grinned back at him over one shoulder and said:

"Don't get in a lather, dad. I'm going to call Halstead. I'll get him to come up and we can sort of talk things over."

McCarthy said, "You'd better call the cops, Wilson. This has gone far enough."

Then the thin man hit him on the back of the head with his gun and McCarthy went ahead and on his face. And completely out.

HE came back to life in time to hear Halstead say, "This is going to complicate things, Wilson. This man possibly has somebody working with him. This is going to cost money to hush up."

McCarthy opened his eyes just wide enough to take in the room. He saw Halstead sitting composedly in a chair with the heavy man standing back of it and leaning on it. Wilson was standing in front of him and looking very unhappy. The girl was sitting on a couch, swinging and admiring an arched instep that held a high-heeled bedroom slipper. The thin man was at the window and looking directly at McCarthy. He said:

"Hey! Ain't it about time Sleeping Beauty woke up? I didn't rap him hard, Halstead. I just slapped him a little."

Halstead said to Wilson: "You're in this too far to back out now, Wilson. If Bowes gets a police guard, which he is very apt to do, there'll be hell to pay all the way around."

The thin man said, "We'll take him and his copper guard if we have to, Hal-

stead. I never liked cops anyway." He walked over to McCarthy and kicked him in the ribs, and McCarthy took it with a lax body and still half-opened eyes. It took what will power he had to do it but the thin man turned and walked back satisfied and McCarthy thought the effort worth it.

Halstead said, "You didn't do so well at the hospital, Mike. If that cop had been a better shot, you wouldn't have done well at all."

The thin man spat on the rug and the girl flared at him with: "Damn you! Don't do that. You're not in a barn now."

The thin man told her where he was, using good old English words, and the girl glared at him and used language equally strong. Wilson looked even unhappier and Halstead grinned and said to the girl:

"Shut up, Martha. I'll handle this. As I say, Wilson, it will cost you money. It cost money to buy Bowes off. If he'd gotten on the stand with his yarn, you'd have been tarred and feathered and chased out of town."

The girl said, "Yes, Daddy! Think of my reputation. It would have ruined me."

The thin man, who didn't seem to think a great deal of the girl, snapped, "Hagh! That'd be a day."

Halstead said thoughtfully, "There's only one thing to do. Let Mike and Jerry take the fellow out the back way while he's still out. If they meet anybody they can pretend he's drunk and that they're taking care of him."

"And then what?" Wilson asked.

Halstead said, "What can we do? He's wise to the setup. You're wrecked if we don't get rid of him for you. That was the reason for taking care of old man Giovanni. Bowes had told him the story and you couldn't afford to have him telling it around, could you?"

Wilson said miserably, "I—I didn't know what you were going to do."

Halstead waved his hand and said, "You're in it just as deep, whether you

knew it or not. And I'll never think you didn't know what was going to happen. Now do you pay for us taking this man out or shall we let him stay here with you? Think fast—he won't be out like that very much longer."

Then Benny said, from the hallway: "You're damn right he won't."

Benny was behind McCarthy and the shock of hearing Benny's voice brought his head around. Benny was in the center of the door, crouching a little and holding an iron jack handle in one big hand. Chet Morris crowded up behind him, holding a small gun, and he menaced the room with this and quavered:

"Hands up!"

That started it. The thin man went for the gun he carried under his arm and Benny went for the thin man with the jack handle. The heavy man jerked at his pocket and Morris closed both eyes and pulled the trigger of his little gun three times.

McCarthy was watching the heavy man and lunging to his feet at the same time, but Halstead's head was in his line of vision. He saw a black dot spring out at the side of Halstead's forehead and saw Halstead put his head down on his knees. And then the heavy man got his gun clear of his pocket and McCarthy hit him at his knees.

The man had a big gun and it drowned out the echo of Morris' small one when it exploded. But the man was falling backward when this happened and the slug smashed into the ceiling. The heavy man clubbed the gun at McCarthy, who was hanging stubbornly to his knees, and McCarthy took the blow on the shoulder and let go of knees with an arm gone numb. Then he heard a crunching sound about him and heard Benny say:

"Leave him go, Chief. I bopped the——"

McCarthy released the heavy man, who showed no further interest in the affair and whose face was now oddly shaped. He heard a screeching sound from the door and turned and saw the blonde pounding at Chet Morris with

her high-heeled slipper and saw Morris fending her away and not doing well at it. The girl was crying out:

"You shot Ira! You shot Ira!" and her voice was a high thin scream that didn't sound sane.

And then McCarthy looked for Wilson and didn't see him and heard a door slam above the noise of the girl's keening. He got to his feet and went to the thin man and saw he was lying with his head twisted in a line with his shoulder. He got his own gun from where the thin man had put it in his waist-band and when he got to the hallway he reached out and caught the blond girl by the hair and threw her back by it clear across the room.

Then he crowded past Morris and out into the hall in time to see Wilson dancing up and down in front of the elevator opening. He set himself sidewise, as though preparing to shoot at a target, and then called harshly:

"Wilson!"

And when Wilson stopped his mad hopping and turned, McCarthy shot him through the knee.

LATER McCarthy told Marge: "We're celebrating tonight, lamb. Chet Morris and Benny have already started it. They were plastered early this afternoon. They're to meet us here."

Marge said, "I can see the reason for celebrating but that's about all I see. I haven't seen you since it happened."

"I had to be with the cops, hon. I couldn't get away. There was a lot to explain—for that matter the cops are still investigating. I asked Shannon to come along, too, and he's too busy."

"What happened?"

McCarthy told her what had happened, dwelling with emphasis on Benny's work with the jack handle and on Morris's poor marksmanship.

He said, "At that it was a good thing. The guy was a good enough lawyer to maybe slide out of it. He can't slide off a morgue slab, even if Morris put him there by mistake. You should have seen

that little hell cat of a Martha go for Morris with a slipper, hon, it was really good. Benny and Morris saved the day when they followed me and came in."

"So Halstead was bleeding Wilson all the time? Halstead was back of it all?" Marge asked.

"In a way. Halstead had found out Wilson was running around with this tart of a Martha. It was his business to find out those things—he made most of his money by blackmailing. When Wilson ran over the young Giovanni kid the girl was with him, and he was afraid of the scandal and ran away. Halstead got to the girl and she told him the truth—she fell hard for him. He was a nice looking guy, honey."

Marge said automatically, "Nobody'll ever say that about you, Pat," and then: "Go on."

"That's about all. Halstead hired Bowes to say he saw the thing. He had to have a witness if he was going to shake down Wilson in a big way. Then Bowes got cold feet on the deal and started to back out. Then Halstead put him out of the way. Or had Mike, one of his two thugs, do it. This Mike used a ice pick, because they can be carried wrapped up and they can't be classed as a dangerous weapon if you're stopped by a cop. Get it?"

"I guess so. But why did they kill that poor Mr. Giovanni?"

"They had to tell him Bowes was a witness before the old man would consent to start suit. Bowes, when he got cold feet—he calls it religion, but he finally talked to both the priest and the cops, so you can take your pick—went to Giovanni and confessed it was a frame. So they had to kill Giovanni, too. Now is it all straight?"

"I guess so. I'm glad it's over, Pat."

McCarthy said gloomily, "It got over too soon to suit me, hon. I wanted that little thin guy that was so handy with the ice pick all to myself. Benny got to him first. I'll admit Benny did a good job—he broke his neck. The big guy'll hang and Halstead's dead and Wilson

will be laughed out of town as soon as he gets out of the hospital."

"Why did you shoot him? You didn't have to do that."

McCarthy said indignantly, "Hell, kid! If he'd been a man and faced the music, none of this would have happened. If he hadn't been drunk and out riding around with that chippy he'd have never run over the Giovanni boy. If he'd have stood the scandal like a man, the old man wouldn't have been killed. I should have aimed center instead of just crippling him a bit. He started the whole thing. . . . I take that Giovanni thing pretty hard, kid."

Marge said soberly, "I see what you mean." And then her eyes widened and she said, "My heavens! It isn't possible."

McCarthy turned and saw Benny and Chet Morris almost at the booth. They were both very drunk. Benny had a severe and formal Homburg perched exactly center on his head and this didn't go well with a shabby sweater and grease-stained slacks. He carried a pair of yellow gloves proudly in his right hand. His left held a half-full whiskey bottle.

Morris looked even more spectacular. He wore a cap on the side of his head and the suit he wore had been made for a taller, much thinner man. The green trouser cuffs dragged four inches on his shoes, which were an ugly yellow. The coat hung almost to his knees. He held two glasses and was saying to Benny:

"Le's stop an' have 'ittle drinkie. Thirsty, I am."

McCarthy said, under his breath to Marge: "Look at the poor—face. That's what the gal did with that high heel."

Morris' face was blotched and lumpy and both eyes were black. He looked as though he'd fallen down several flights of stairs.

Marge gasped, "And him so fussy!"

Then Morris looked up and saw them. He waved happily, almost falling down while doing so, and came to a halt in front of the booth. He beamed at them and said:

"Hi! What d'ya think of the new outfit?"

"Ain't it something, huh?"

Marge said, "I'd never deny it."

Benny came to a halt alongside Morris and said, "I got me a hat at the same place, Chief. Hey, look at me, too, Chief."

McCarthy said, "I can't help it."

Chet Morris said, in a confidential voice: "Like this, Pat, m' frien'. Benny and I we bust into Abe Goldstein down at the station while you was busy with the cops. Abe's got a brother-in-law who has a clothing store. So Benny and I and Abe take a couple of snorts or so and go down to get a new outfit. Abe says his brother-in-law's got the best stock in the city and he helped us pick this outfit out. Didn't cost us nothin' at all. How's it look, pal?"

McCarthy said, "Gorgeous! Simply gorgeous! Will you do me a favor, Chet?"

"Sure."

"Then let me be with you when you see Abe in the morning."

"Why? He won't take our clothes back. He *gave* 'em to us. S'funny, too, with him so stingy, but—"

McCarthy said, "Let's not spoil our fun tonight, guy. But there's reasons and you'll realize it tomorrow. Believe me you will."

Marge giggled and said, "It would be bad enough to look at that at any time. But with the hangover Chet'll have, it's liable to be fatal."

McCarthy agreed with: "Yeah, fatal to Abe."



LONG LIVE THE DEAD

By ALLEN BECK

Twisted hands and a twisted mind break a killer's alibi



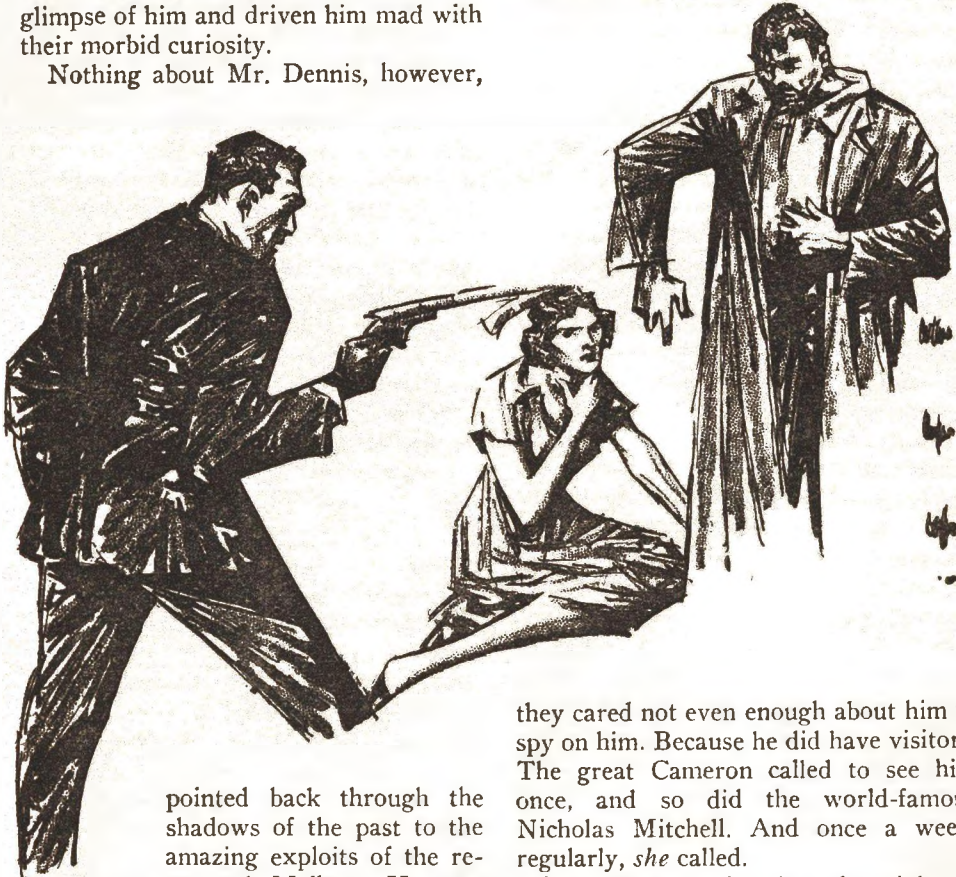
HEY called him a nut and avoided him, but some of those same people, had they known his real name, would have strained their necks for a glimpse of him and driven him mad with their morbid curiosity.

Nothing about Mr. Dennis, however,

He was not old. About thirty-five, his neighbors said. But queer.

"For three years he's lived there in that gloomy old cottage. And never a visitor!"

They were wrong about that, of course, but the error was proof of the fact that



pointed back through the shadows of the past to the amazing exploits of the renowned Malkar. He was simply Mr. Dennis, a thin, silent man who lived alone in a gray cottage near the lake. A recluse, whose past—or future—no one cared about.

they cared not even enough about him to spy on him. Because he did have visitors. The great Cameron called to see him once, and so did the world-famous Nicholas Mitchell. And once a week, regularly, *she* called.

He was expecting her the night of Brandon's escape from the asylum. He sat there alone in the dim light of that gloomy living-room, watching the door and listening for her step on the walk

outside. Sat there with his lifeless eyes wide and unblinking, his gloved hands on his bony knees. Waiting. And hoping she would not come, because of the danger.

"It's a lonely road," he thought, "and in the dark, anything might happen."

Three times in the past hour the musical program emanating from his small radio had been interrupted by reports of the search for the escaped madman. "Brandon is five feet eleven inches tall, weighs about one hundred sixty pounds. He has brown hair, brown eyes, dark skin. He is wearing a heavy brown overcoat over white cotton pajamas and is without shoes or stockings. This man is dangerous. He is cunning and clever. Residents of the Logan Lake district are warned to be extremely careful."

Mr. Dennis frowned at the door. "She shouldn't come," he thought. "She shouldn't come anyway. People will begin to talk." The clock on the table said nine-thirty.

At ten, convinced that she was not coming, he walked wearily into the bathroom and took a large bottle of oil from the cupboard. He carried the bottle into the kitchen and poured three inches of oil into an enameled pan and put the pan on the stove. And removed his gloves and looked at his hands.

They were not pretty. Eternities ago they had been famous; now they were stiff, yellowish claws—ugly bony claws covered with a paper-thin layer of scarred skin-tissue.

He looked at them and closed his eyes and groaned. "Three years," he muttered bitterly. "Three endless, useless years. Dear God, can't a man *ever* die?"

Three years ago those withered claws had amazed the world with their magical cunning. Now, cursing them, he dipped one gnarled finger into the warm oil to test its temperature, and then slowly, laboriously began the massage which the doctors had told him might some day restore life to shrivelled muscles and warped tendons.

He had no hope. That had died long

ago. But every night, as a kind of ritual, he went through the motions.

The kitchen door was closed, and he did not hear the front door open, nor did he hear the footsteps. His mind, choked with bitterness, was focused on events buried under three years of shadow. When the kitchen door creaked open, he turned with a startled intake of breath.

She stood there, staring at him. "I'm late," she said.

He stared back at her, his thin face convulsed. Abruptly he turned his back to her and groped with his twisted hands for the long black gloves which lay on the chair.

When he faced her again, his hands were hidden.

"You shouldn't have come at all," he said bitterly.

The girl said softly, "But I did. I always will."



OUR miles from Mr. Dennis's cottage, in the living-room of another cottage on a lonely back road, an old man with white hair played solitaire with a worn, grimy deck of cards. Papa Nickson they called him. "He's a grand old man, Papa Nickson. A bit feeble, of course, but always friendly, and quite a philosopher, too."

Everyone knew Papa Nickson.

He peered through thick lenses at the cards and played the game with grave deliberation, now and then cocking his head to hear some bit of music on the radio. He had begun that particular game of solitaire four hours ago, but there was no hurry. "People who hurry," Papa Nickson always said, "never get nowhere. That's a fact."

A voice interrupted the radio music and said: "Residents of the Logan Lake region are warned again to be on the lookout for John Brandon, dangerous madman who escaped a few hours ago

from the Logan Lake Asylum. Brandon is still at large."

"Still at large," Papa Nickson said, frowning. "That's bad. Still, I don't believe he'd harm anyone. I'm safe enough here, I reckon, even if I am all alone."

He put another card down, thumbing his chin over it, and then suddenly turned his head to look at the door, because someone or something had made a noise outside, on the veranda.

"Who's there?" Nickson asked anxiously.

For answer, someone knocked.

"Who's there?" Nickson asked again.

"It's me. Andy Slade."

"Oh."

He went to the door and opened it, and a gust of cold wind, off the lake, came in with the lean, long-limbed youth who entered. Papa Nickson closed the door quickly and shivered, and then frowned at his visitor and said, "Well! What brings you around, Andy?"

"I was just passing by."

"Oh. Sit down, then. Sit down. I've been playing solitaire."

Andy Slade slouched over to a chair and seated himself. For his age—eighteen—he was big and powerful, with big, heavy hands. It was a shame, Papa Nickson thought, that the boy's mind was so far behind his body. Of course Andy wasn't really a halfwit, as some people believed, but he wasn't normal. He sometimes had queer ideas.

"How's business, Andy?"

"What business?"

"Why, the last I talked to you, you were fixin' to be a guide. You know, to take people out fishin' and things like that."

The boy snorted. "Hell, there ain't no money in that."

"But you said—"

"Who cares what I said? What I want is real money, and I got an idea for gettin' it."

"That's fine, Andy."

"Sure it's fine. You ought to know. You got plenty of money."

"Have I?"

"Everyone says you have, don't they? You got it hidden around here; that's what they say. You been hoardin' it."

Papa Nickson leaned back in his chair and chuckled for a long time. "You believe that, Andy?"

"What do you think?"

"What—what's that you say?"

"I said what do *you* think? Why do you think I come here tonight?"

Papa Nickson narrowed his eyes and peered long and hard at his visitor. He didn't like what he saw. He didn't like the ugly smile that clung to the boy's moist lips. He said anxiously, "Why—why did you come here, Andy?"

"For money."

"I haven't any money. You know that."

"You got money all right. And I'm fixin' to take it. Money ain't no good to an old man like you." Andy jerked his head around sharply. He thought he heard a scraping noise at the black window, but his single-track, childish mind forgot it almost instantly.

"Andy, believe me, I haven't any," the old man said.

Andy Slade got out of his chair and took a step forward, clenching his fists. There was a strange, warped expression on his face, half snarl, half grin. He thrust out his hands and seized the old man's shoulders.

"I want that money," he yelled suddenly. "I want it and I'm gonna get it. See?"

He lifted Papa Nickson out of the chair and shook him. "I'm gonna get it! See?"

"I—I haven't any money, Andy!"

"You're lyin'!"

"No, Andy, *no!*"

"Then I'm gonna kill you," the boy said. "And after I kill you I'll find the money myself. I was gonna kill you anyway."

He took hold of Papa Nickson's neck, and the old man clawed at him, trying to scream. The old man's voice made a few scratchy sounds that died against the

four walls of the room. Andy Slade laughed at him—and squeezed.

He had huge hands. Powerful hands. When he squeezed and twisted, holding the old man's squirming body against his own, something snapped. The bone in the old man's voice box cracked, cut into an artery. Blood spurted from Papa Nickson's gaping mouth.

Andy Slade let go and the old man slumped to the floor. Andy looked at him, grinning. "No one will ever know I done it. Now I got to find that money."

He looked for it. For one solid hour he looked, emptying out drawers, turning up rugs, tearing down pictures. It was a small house but it had many potential hiding places. Once he thought he heard a noise outside but he couldn't see anything or anyone in the black night.

At first he was confident. Then sullen. Then violently angry. And then, after walking around Papa Nickson's dead body and stepping over it and looking at it time and again, he got scared.

"I can't look no longer," he muttered. "I got to get out of here. I got to get out before someone comes!"

He didn't forget, though, that he had planned the crime so that no one would ever point a finger at him. He stooped and gripped the old man under the arms and dragged him. Dragged him off the carpet, toward the door, leaving a trail of blood which would make people think the old man had crawled that distance after being assaulted.

There by the door Andy Slade took hold of Papa Nickson's right wrist and dipped the index finger of that hand in the dead man's own blood, and scrawled on the painted hardwood floor:

"Dennis did it. My money—"

That would help, but it wasn't enough. Even though everyone said that Mr. Dennis was a nut, it wasn't enough.

He fished in the dead man's pocket and found a handkerchief, and looked at the handkerchief to make sure there were no marks or initials on it. Wetting his hands in the blood, he used the hand-

kerchief to dry them. Then he tucked the blood-stained handkerchief into his belt and went out.

He didn't hurry. It was four miles to Mr. Dennis's cottage and the road was lonely, winding through the dark along the lake shore. He walked slowly, cursing Papa Nickson for not having any money. Maybe later, he told himself, he would go back and look again. Anyway, no one would ever know he did it—because, Andy laughed to himself, he was going to be smart and make 'em all think Mr. Dennis. . . .

The wind was strong off the lake and the waves beat against the shore, but he paid no attention. The darkness didn't bother him, nor did the occasional shrill cry of a catbird. Over across, lights winked in the asylum.

"Some feller escaped from there today," Andy mused. "Maybe they'll blame *him* for killin' Papa Nickson. Him or Mr. Dennis, I don't care, long as they don't say *I* done it."

After a while he saw another light, and it was a light in the living-room of Mr. Dennis's place.

He approached cautiously. He crept up to the front door and took the bloody handkerchief from his belt and dropped it. Dropped it beside Mr. Dennis's steps. Then Andy backed away, and turned, and ran. He made a noise, running, but apparently no one heard it.



NO ONE did. Mr. Dennis sat in the living-room behind drawn shades, and *she* was there, and they were talking.

"You can't give up like this," she said. "You're too young."

"I'm old," Mr. Dennis muttered. "When a man ceases to be useful, he's old. Old enough to die."

"Nonsense!"

He raised his gloved hands and looked at them. Even though covered, they seemed thin and crooked in the dim light of the lamp beside his chair. "I've done

everything possible," he said bitterly. "I've been to the best docotrs; I've done what they've told me to do. And it's no good. It's hopeless."

"But there *is* an improvement," she said in a low, pleading voice. "I've seen it, Andre."

"You've imagined it."

"No, no! Six months ago you were as helpless as a man with no hands at all. Now you can *use* your hands."

He laughed, but there was no mirth in it. "Yes, I can use them. I can open doors now. I can dress myself in half an hour, where before it took me all morning. I can even shave, if I'm careful. Oh yes, there's improvement."

"You see," she said triumphantly, "you admit it!"

He glared at her with smouldering eyes that frightened her. "Admit it?" he snarled. "I admit nothing—except that I'm beaten! Beaten, do you hear? Twenty years of my life I slaved to make these hands of mine worth something. For years they made me a living on every stage in the world. Now it's all been taken from me, and what am I? A pitiful parasite, useless, practically penniless, a miserable ghost of one who could have been great. Friendless—"

"Not friendless, Andre. You have me."

"I have you because you are mad! Mad enough to go on loving a wretch who will warp your life with bitterness."

"I love you. I have faith."

"*You* have faith. I should laugh at that. Are they *your* hands?"

"I wish they were," she said simply. "I wish I could trade with you."

"Trade with me! So you could sit here night after night cursing them, struggling to make them obey you. Sometimes, Marie, I think you *are* mad to keep on caring. I am sure of it. And so—we must end it. Tonight, when that door closes behind you, it sees the last of you. I won't have you spoil your life. You must not come here again."

"But I shall," she whispered.

"You shall not."

"You no longer love me, Andre?"

"Love you? No! What right have I to drag a beautiful woman down into the depths of my own darkness? My love for you died when these died." Raising his gloved hands from his knees, he glared at them.

She went to him and put a hand on his shoulder, "You're a lovely liar. You're not yourself tonight, my darling," she said softly.

"Then leave me."

"No. I shall stay. You need me."

"And if people talk?"

"Let them."

He shrugged. "Do as you like. I'm going to bed."

She helped him out of his chair and went with him to the door of the bedroom. There she held his arms, forced him to look at her. "Kiss me," she said.

He shook his head, freed himself and closed the door behind him, leaving her there. She turned and went slowly back to her chair, her eyes wet with tears.

The clock on the table said two A. M. and the radio, turned low, sent out a voice to smother the sound of the girl's sobbing.

"Station WPSO signing off. . . . Attention, please. Police have requested all radio stations in the state to issue a final warning to residents of the Logan Lake region. John Brandon, dangerous madman who escaped yesterday from the Logan Lake Asylum, is still at large. Shortly after midnight this man attacked and critically injured a member of a searching party and escaped with the man's gun. He is now armed and is therefore doubly dangerous. Local and State Police, aided by hundreds of private citizens, are combing the lake district in search of him. This man is cunning and desperate. A description of him—"

She shut the radio off and returned to her chair and sat there in the dim yellow glow of the lamp, sobbing. There was no sound anywhere but the sound of her sobbing. Once or twice she glanced at the door of the bedroom, but it did not open.

About an hour later she fell asleep.



MATTHEW KARKIN, known affectionately as Matt, was Chief of Police in Lakeville. He said he would do it alone, and he did. He was a brave man. He said, "I been the law in these parts for seventeen years without no help, and I can handle this without help. The feller may be a nut, but even so I reckon I can handle him."

His men and the townspeople didn't argue. They knew better.

He arrived at Mr. Dennis's cottage at seven-thirty that morning, and it was raining. Not raining hard, but drizzling enough to make the morning gray, the sky heavy, the lake ugly.

Scowling to himself and feeling vaguely uneasy, Karkin approached the front steps—and stopped. And picked up a bloody handkerchief.

He looked at the handkerchief for a moment, then wrapped it in his own clean one and thrust it into his pocket. He drew his gun and knocked.

He had to knock several times because the girl, asleep in the chair, waked slowly and was bewildered by the knocking when she did wake. Rubbing the sleep out of her eyes, she stood up, her body a vast ache from being curled so long in an awkward position.

She glanced at the closed bedroom door and then she said anxiously: "Who—who is it?"

"The law," Karkin said.

She opened the door and he entered, staring at her. Her presence confused him. He had been given to understand that Mr. Dennis lived alone and never had visitors.

"Who're you?" he demanded gruffly. And added: "Where's Dennis?"

She ignored the first question and answered the second. "He's asleep."

"Oh. Well, I want to talk to him."

"Who are you?"

"Chief of Police."

She said, frowning: "Can't I answer

your questions? Mr. Dennis needs his sleep so badly."

"Sorry," Karkin told her, "but my business is with Dennis."

She turned to walk to the bedroom door, but it wasn't necessary. The door opened before she reached it. Mr. Dennis, with a dressing gown over his wrinkled black pajamas, stood there staring.

"What is it?" he demanded.

Karkin, his gun back in its holster with his right hand resting on it, scowled and said, "You're Dennis?"

"Yes."

"Like to have a talk with you, then."

"Who are you?"

"Chief of Police. Matt Karkin."

Mr. Dennis thought he understood, and nodded. It would be about the escaped madman. The police were combing the region, and this was a routine visit. He paced forward, motioned Karkin to a chair and sat down himself. The girl sat, too, and stared uneasily at both of them.

"You ever hear of Papa Nickson, Mr. Dennis?" Karkin asked.

"Papa Nickson? No."

"You sure of that?"

"Quite sure. I know very few of my neighbors, Mr. Karkin."

"Who said he was one of your neighbors?"

"Well," Dennis said with a vague smile, "I assumed from the question—"

"Papa Nickson," Karkin declared gravely, "was murdered last night."

"Murdered?"

"Murdered," repeated Karkin slowly, his gaze falling to the long black gloves which covered the other man's hands and wrists, "by someone with mighty strong hands."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"It's rumored around here," Karkin said, "that Papa Nickson was what you might call a miser. Folks were of the opinion he had money hidden away. Last night or some time yesterday, someone tried to get that money."

"I see. And just how does this concern me?"

"It was a brutal murder," Karkin said. "Like I just told you, someone with mighty strong hands did it."

"Mr. Nickson was strangled, you mean?"

"Worse. His neck was broke. Matter of fact, his neck was near twisted off."

Dennis glanced at the girl. Her face was pale, her eyes very wide.

"It sounds," Dennis declared, "like the work of that escaped madman."

"It wasn't. We might've thought so, but Papa Nickson lived long enough to tell us the name of the man who did it."

"Oh. And his name?"

"Dennis."

Mr. Dennis sat quite still, staring at his accuser. His lean face seemed to dry up a little, but his other reactions were entirely internal. The girl was different. She stiffened spasmodically in her chair, leaned forward and said shrilly: "But that's ridiculous!"

"Is it?" Karkin said grimly. "Then maybe Mr. Dennis can explain this. I found it out by the steps, on my way in." With his left hand he fumbled the bloody handkerchief from his pocket, unwrapped it and held it up. His right hand remained on the butt of his gun.

"So I'm—accused of murder," Dennis said wearily.

"That's right; you're accused of murder. Maybe you'd have got away, but it so happened we stopped at Papa Nickson's early this morning for coffee, after searching for that crazy guy all night."

"You realize, of course," Dennis said, "that I didn't do it. That I couldn't have done it."

"Why couldn't you?"

"He couldn't," the girl said quickly, "because—"

A glance from Dennis silenced her.

"You say Mr. Nickson was murdered by a man with unusually strong hands?" Dennis asked.

"That's right."

"You think my hands are strong, Mr. Karkin? You think I wear these gloves

to conceal the fact that my hands are scratched, perhaps—or bruised, or bloody?"

Confused by both the question and the tone of voice in which it was put, Karkin scowled, said nothing.

"I'll show you," Dennis said quietly.

He held his hands out, and Marie gently removed the gloves. Rising then, he took a step forward and showed the Chief of Police his hands. Karkin gaped at them, stupefied.

"They've been like that," Dennis said wearily, "for three years. Once they were strong; I admit it. But a piece of apparatus exploded with my hands inside it—and now these fingers are not flexible enough, Mr. Karkin, to break a match, let alone a man's neck."

Chief of Police Karkin stared at the withered hands and shook his head, frowning. "Before Nickson died, he wrote on the floor—in blood—that you did it. Why would he do that if you're not the man who killed him?"

"Perhaps he was mistaken."

"Then what about this bloody handkerchief I picked up outside the house here?"

"That I can't explain."

"Well, neither can I," Karkin mumbled. "Those hands of yours sure couldn't break a man's neck; I admit that. But still. . . ." He stood up, shaking his head. "You'll have to come along with me, Mr. Dennis. Even if you ain't guilty you'll have to come along, because if you didn't do it—who *did*?"

"I'll get dressed," Mr. Dennis said wearily.

He went to the bedroom and Karkin followed him to the threshold, stood there and waited for him. Marie remained seated, her face still pale, her eyes wide and staring.

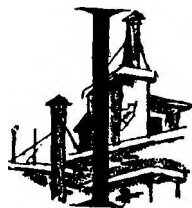
It took Mr. Dennis a long time to dress himself. Watching him, Karkin felt sorry for him. Certainly Mr. Dennis had not murdered Papa Nickson with those pitifully weak hands.

"I don't like to be doin' this," Karkin said, "but if I didn't, it would go hard

with me. You won't have no trouble proving you ain't guilty, Mr. Dennis."

Mr. Dennis came out of the bedroom and said: "I'm ready, Karkin."

Marie closed her eyes to hide the tears in them.



IT WAS Karkin who opened the door. He did it because Mr. Dennis was slowly and painfully pulling on those long black gloves. And when he opened it, he drew a quick, sharp breath and stood stiff.

A face stared at him. A bearded, gaunt face with abnormally wide eyes hung there in the gray of the morning, atop a muscular body as big as Karkin's own.

The face snarled, and Karkin reached quickly for his gun. That was a mistake. Flame spurted from a weapon in the visitor's left hand, and the Chief of Police bent double with a guttural exhalation of breath. Bent double in agony, and stumbled back, dropping his gun. And crumpled to the floor.

The report ran back and forth across the room in small, weird echoes. Karkin clawed at the floor, groaning. Marie clung rigidly to the arms of her chair. Mr. Dennis stood quite still, staring from Karkin to Karkin's assailant.

"John Brandon," the radio had said, "is five feet eleven inches tall, weighs about one hundred sixty pounds. He has brown hair, brown eyes, dark skin. He is wearing a heavy brown overcoat over white cotton pajamas and is without shoes or stockings."

This man wore shoes and trousers, but otherwise the description was accurate. This man was John Brandon.

Mr. Dennis backed slowly away from him as the madman entered and pushed the door shut. The radio reports, Dennis decided, had not been exaggerated; this man was both mad and dangerous. Color ebbed from Dennis's face and a queer numbness crept through him. Then abruptly he regained control of himself

and said calmly: "You've hurt him. You shouldn't have done that." And went to his knees beside Karkin.

It was not serious. The bullet had shattered Karkin's collarbone and deflected out through his shoulder muscles. It was a nasty wound. He would suffer, but he would live.

Brandon, snarled, "Leave him alone." "But he's hurt."

"I said leave him alone! Go sit down."

Mr. Dennis retreated slowly to a chair and sat down. The madman glared at him. A moment later Karkin groaned and the madman stepped forward; reached down with one hand and yanked the Chief of Police to a sitting position. When he did that, something at Karkin's belt, under his coat, clinked.

Brandon reached under the coat and pulled loose a pair of handcuffs.

He looked at them and grunted. Kneeling, he placed his gun on the floor for an instant, jerked Karkin's wrists together and snapped the cuffs into place. Then he rose, gun in hand, and stared at the girl. And licked his lips.

Mr. Dennis said quietly, with a calm he did not feel: "You mustn't stay here, Brandon. The police are looking for you."

"Are they? Let 'em look."

"They'll come here after you."

"Let 'em come," Brandon snarled.

You couldn't reason with the man, Dennis realized. A soft voice, gentle persuasion, an outward appearance of calm—all the artful devices supposed to be effective when dealing with a deranged mind—were useless here, because Brandon's gaze was on the girl, and that gaze was hungry.

Frightened by it, Marie shrank back in her chair and turned a white, pleading face to Dennis. The madman saw and was amused.

He paced behind the girl's chair and lifted an ornamental coil of rope from its place on the wall. Strong rope, new rope. Testing it, Brandon approached Mr. Dennis from the rear.

"Put your hands behind you," he said.

"Why?"

"Why? So I can tie you up the way they tied me!"

"But I don't wish to be tied up, Brandon."

"Shut up and do like I say!"

He made a thorough job of it. Marie, watching with fear-widened eyes, shuddered at his diabolical cleverness. Evidently at the asylum he himself had been bound many times, and had learned the secrets of twisting a rope.

Mr. Dennis did not resist. With his eyes closed and a queer, detached expression on his face, Dennis patiently endured the torture. His thin frame was almost limp.

The madman bound his arms and elbows to the chair and tugged on the rope until the detached expression on Dennis's white face changed to a look of intense pain. While he worked, his gun lay on the floor beside him and he raised his head continually to look at Marie, who sat facing him.

Finished, he said grimly, "You won't ever get loose from that, mister," and then pushed a chair close to the girl and sat down, staring at her.

Just sat there, staring, as if her beauty troubled him.

A strange silence crept through the room. The girl, cringing, tried to look away from the bearded face so close to her own, and was unable to. Behind Brandon, Mr. Dennis sat motionless. On the floor behind Dennis lay the Chief of Police, conscious now but too weak from loss of blood and too sick with pain to inch himself across the few feet of floor that would have brought him close enough to Mr. Dennis to reach the twisted ropes with his teeth.

"You're pretty," the madman said. "What's your name?"

"M-Marie."

"Marie. They didn't have girls like you in the place I escaped from. No, they didn't." He scowled at her. "But you don't like me, do you?"

"I—I don't know you," she whispered.

"You'd like me if you knew me?"

"I—might."

"It don't make any difference," he said.

"I'd have to kill you anyway, after a while, same as I got to kill those two." His head jerked in the general direction of Mr. Dennis and the Chief of Police, but he did not turn to look at them.

"Why?" Marie whispered.

"They sent me to that asylum."

"But they didn't! They never saw you before today!"

"All the same I was sent there, and I got to kill people for it. I got to get even. Only first I'm gonna look at you for a while. You're pretty."

He inched his chair closer and his breath was hot on the girl's face. Grinning at her, he put out a hand and touched her arm.

"It's a long time since I was this close to a woman," he said.



DENNIS sat in his chair and stared at the madman's back. He breathed hard and his face was white, strained, his eyes glittered with a strange kind of desperation. Swelling his chest with a prodigious breath, he tested the strength of the rope that held his wrists.

Agony crawled down his arms to the tips of his withered fingers.

He turned his head and tried to see how the rope was tied, but though the cords of his neck stood out in hard white lines, he could not move his head far enough. But his gaze did meet that of the Chief of Police.

The madman had leaned closer and was stroking Marie's hair. And saying: "You're pretty. It's too bad I got to kill you, ain't it?"

Mr. Dennis rolled his wrists, his emaciated useless wrists, in a desperate attempt to create slack in the rope. The agony came again, this time bringing

beads of perspiration to his face. Only two men in the world could have escaped from a rope so cunningly knotted—Houdini, the great Houdini, and a magician named Malkar.

Both were—dead.

Mr. Dennis exerted all his strength, defying the agony. It was not enough. Despair darkened his eyes and again a slow, creeping numbness moved through him. It was ironical, this. The dead could not return to life, even to save the living. And if by some monstrous miracle the dead did return to life—if by some amazing power of mind over matter those withered hands of his could be endowed with a strength and dexterity lost three years ago—those same crooked fingers would sign their master's death warrant. For Karkin was watching. Karkin would know then that the puny hands of Mr. Dennis were *not* too puny to twist a man's neck until it snapped.

The madman caressed Marie's face and said softly: "It's a shame I got to kill you. I ought to make love to you a while first. But I can't do that. I got to get out of here."

Ghastly pale, she looked past him and her gaze met that of Mr. Dennis.

The soul of Mr. Dennis groaned. He clenched his teeth. For three years he had tried in vain to make those withered hands work. Now he tried again, knowing the fate that lay in wait for him if he failed—and if he succeeded.

Perspiration poured from his face. Agony filled it. But he closed his eyes, sunk his teeth into his lower lip and reached back through three years of shadow to a flickering light which still glowed. A strand of rope snapped.

"I got to get out of here and I got to kill you first," the madman said.

Mr. Dennis's contorted face was black with agony, but he refused to give up. A second strand snapped, and a third. The madman didn't seem to hear. He was encompassed with furious passion. He got out of his chair and gripped the girl's white neck with both his hands.

She tried to scream, but his hands held the scream back. She clawed at him, raked his face with her nails. Her feet beat a tattoo on his legs. Angry, he cursed her and dragged her from the chair to the floor.

Mr. Dennis broke the rope. He jerked his hands around in front of him and stared at them, and his eyes were afire with a kind of madness. Then he hurled himself out of his chair and gained possession of the gun which had fallen from the hands of Chief of Police Karkin a long while ago.

"Stop it!" Mr. Dennis hoarsely shouted. "Stop it, Brandon! By God, I'll kill you!"

The madman turned, releasing Marie. In a half crouch he blinked his eyes at Dennis, who stood wide-legged, holding the gun.

A snarl curled Brandon's lips. He reached out with both hands and lurched forward to drag Mr. Dennis down.

Dennis shot him twice and stepped aside as the man fell sprawling.

The silence came back.

For some time Mr. Dennis looked down at the gun in his hands; then he placed it on the table and lifted Marie into a chair. He looked tired. His face wore an expression of misery.

The girl stared at him and her eyes were wide. "You did it, Andre!" she whispered. "You did it! Your hands—" "Yes," he said, "I did it."

He turned then and said to the Chief of Police: "Have you a key to these cuffs?"

"No," Karkin said.

"It doesn't matter." Mr. Dennis removed his gloves and quietly stripped a lace from one of his shoes. On his knees, he formed a loop with the lace and deftly worked the loop over the end of the screw. A quick tug snapped the bolt back and the cuffs were open.

Karkin rose to his knees. "You told me," he said slowly, "those hands of yours were weak."

"Yes."

"After what I just saw, I know you

lied. You'll have to come with me, Dennis."

"Yes, I know. For murdering Papa Nickson."

Karkin nodded. Sliding his gun from the table, he holstered it but kept his hand over it. "I hate to do this," he muttered, "after you saved our lives, but the law is the law. Maybe you had a good reason for killin' Papa Nickson, but it ain't up to me to ask you."

Mr. Dennis lifted Karkin to his feet. Lurchingly, the officer put a hand on Mr. Dennis's arm. "You gotta come with me."

Mr. Dennis said, as if to himself: "The dead live—and the dead die again."

"What's that?"

"Nothing," said Mr. Dennis, and stopped. "Wait a minute, Karkin. This madman isn't dead."

Karkin scowled and looked down at John Brandon, and Brandon reached out to clutch at his leg. Blood trickled from a corner of his mouth, but the mouth was grinning.

"You're makin' a mistake," Brandon laughed. "You're crazy like they said I was. He didn't do it."

"Didn't do what?"

"Kill that old man. A man he called Andy done it. I was right there, lookin' in a window. That's how smart I am! I heard them talkin' and I seen it happen, I did." He laughed insanely and blood came. "If you think this man done it, you belong where I come from. Andy done it. But I won't tell. I won't tell and they'll put *you* away!"

"Andy Slade?" Karkin breathed.

"That's right. Andy Slade." The blood came faster. "I was right there and I seen it, and I followed him here through the woods, and. . ." Brandon howled horribly in glee. "Hell, are you dumb! I seen it from the window, I heard it all. But I ain't telling you that I seen that kid kill the old fellow."

Karkin looked at Mr. Dennis. "I'm glad," he said. "I'm real glad, Mr. Dennis." He put out his hand and Dennis gripped it. Gripped it hard. "I'll go get Slade," Karkin said. "Get me help—from town."

Mr. Dennis started out to go to the village, and in a moment Marie joined him.

"The great Malkar is alive again," she said softly.

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933, OF BLACK MASK, PUBLISHED MONTHLY AT CHICAGO, ILL., FOR OCTOBER 1, 1938.

State of Illinois, County of Cook, SS:

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared F. Ellsworth, who, having been sworn according to law, deposes and says that she is the Editor of Black Mask, and the following is to the best of her knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business manager are: Publisher, Pro-Distributors Publishing Co., Inc., 515 Madison Ave., New York, N. Y.; Editor, F. Ellsworth, 515 Madison Ave., New York, N. Y.; Managing Editor, J. B. Magill, 515 Madison Ave., New York, N. Y.; Business Manager, Elmer J. Chambers, 515 Madison Ave., New York, N. Y.

2. That the owners are Pro-Distributors Publishing Co., Inc., 515 Madison Ave., New York, N. Y.; R. Feiner, 551 Fifth Ave., New York, N. Y.; L. Calder, 30 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company, but also in cases where the stockholders or security holders appear upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation, for whom such trustee is acting is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds or other securities than as so stated by her.

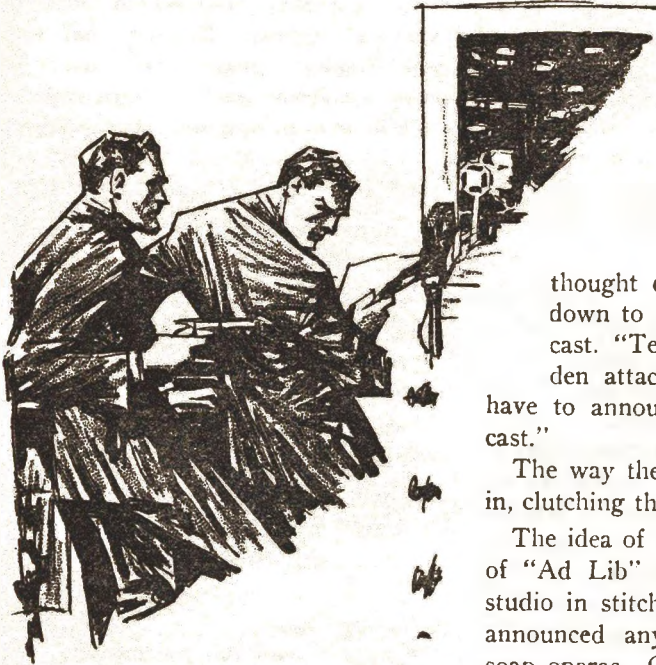
(Signed) F. ELLSWORTH, Editor.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 20th day of September, 1938. (Seal) Elmer J. Chambers. (My commission expires March 30, 1940.)

AD LIB

By M. P. HALL

A Short Short Story



face broadened as he finished the announcement, glancing up from time to time at poor old George's stunned face.

He was still convulsed when he thought of the message he'd sent down to George before the broadcast. "Tell George I've had a sudden attack of laryngitis and he'll have to announce the Lorimer broadcast."

The way the dope had come dashing in, clutching the script for dear life!

The idea of George's taking the place of "Ad Lib" Winslow had the whole studio in stitches. George who'd never announced anything but the morning soap operas. George who'd never once left the script to ad lib a single line in all his six years of broadcasting.

Funny the way he'd changed color when he got his real assignment. He was just to play studio nurse to the program guest, of course. George was always tagged for that. Something in his sober face seemed to quiet the nervous wrecks when they hit the mike.

Not that even George could steady tonight's program guest. The stool pigeon sitting there between George and Warden Morgan was openly quaking.

Winslow's mouth twisted ironically. One hundred words from that pallid piece of gangdom was costing the sponsor a cool ten thousand. But it was worth it. Every radio in the country



IT WAS a rare gag, all right. Winslow looked across the broadcasting studio at his victim and grinned. George still had a stunned look.

Winslow went on with his announcement, his smooth voice all the richer for his private joke.

"The Circle Broadcasting Company now brings you the radio scoop of the year. Tonight, Aromatics, sponsors of 'Gun-Toters,' give you an exclusive interview with a former member of the Lorimer kidnap gang. . . ."

The grin on Winslow's handsome

would be tuned in on this particular broadcast—and on the four plugs for the product.

“. . . in a few minutes, ladies and gentlemen,” the Winslow super-announcing voice flowed on, “you will hear a complete description of the man who snatched Peter Lorimer from his home three weeks ago—a description by a former member of the kidnaper’s own gang!”

His voice dropped to a vibrant murmur.

“Here in this small studio, with a single light above the desk, a man sits pale but unafraid.” Winslow grinned at the twitching terror on the stool pigeon’s face. “Ready to do his duty even though it may mean gang revenge—death! Here, beside Warden Morgan. . . .”

Winslow elaborated. Having George around him always gave him an added sense of power. It tickled him, now, to put in a couple of those descriptive ad libs for which he was famous. Just as if this was any broadcast. Just as if the big shot of Circle Broadcasting himself wasn’t listening to every word of this program on the set in his private office.

Neatly, Winslow scissored out a couple of script lines to even the time, listened to the first notes of the organ solo before the sponsor’s plug. Confidently, he glanced up.

From the control booth, the operator waved his blessing and turned back to his board.

A sibilant whispering from across the desk brought Winslow’s attention back with a jerk. The stool pigeon was leaning forward, cigarette in mouth, hoarsely urging the warden for a light in spite of the “No Smoking” sign prominently displayed.

Frowning, Winslow made a quieting motion—which froze in mid-air.

As the warden reluctantly reached for a match, the stool pigeon’s hand darted

lightning-swift to the older man’s coat.

In a split second, the warden’s gun lay in the ex-con’s hand and flicked around to cover the three men.

“Sit still!” The man’s eyes showed white around the iris. “I ain’t goin’ through with this. They’d get me for it! They’d—Damn you!” The gun veered to the white-haired warden. “You got me into this, you and your mealy mouth. Smart, ain’t you? So smart you didn’t need no extra guard—you’d handle me yourself. Had me down for a sucker, hey?”

Winslow made an unconscious, horrified movement. Ever so slightly, the warden shook his head, without taking his eyes from the crazed creature before him. Winslow’s stomach crawled.

The organ interlude had only about fifty seconds to run. The stool pigeon got up, darted around the desk to Winslow and the microphone.

Winslow went rigid. The gun was in his back. The stoolie’s panting breath rode his cheek as the man glanced at the script on the desk under Winslow’s trembling fingers.

“Organ,” read the red capitals, “two minutes. . . . Commercial, two minutes. . . .”

As the organ chords crashed to a close, the shivering creature suddenly calmed. “Get on with it,” he told Winslow. “And make it smooth, understand? Go on—talk!”

Winslow’s eyes swiveled wildly to George, then to the control room. Pete, up there, wasn’t even looking. With Winslow announcing, everything always went like velvet.

The gun prodded. Winslow bent to the mike. His mouth shook. His throat worked. No sound came. Not one small word.

The stool pigeon’s gun lifted, came down butt first on Winslow’s sagging

head. The gun veered to George. "You! You take it!"

Two seconds to go. . . .

Stiffly, George got up, went to the mike for his first big-time broadcast. With his script clutched in hands cold with sweat, he spoke in his sober, conscientious voice:

"And now the story. . . . But first let us give a word to the sponsors of this program, the makers of Lavendar Chips. Have *you* tried Lavendar Chips, those fragrant flakes that make hands whiter, skin softer? Lavendar Chips will give you that movie-star complexion you—"

The ex-con had backed to the door. In his twitching fingers, the automatic wavered between Warden Morgan and the man at the mike. With a snarling lift of the lip, he steadied it.

"—have always longed for," George went on, never lifting his eyes from his script. "Lavendar Chips in the bath. . . ."

The big leather studio door suddenly flung open like a battering ram, and the president of Circle charged in to demand: "What the hell is going on in—"

"Watch it!" Morgan's yell came a split second before the spat of the gun. The bullet went wild as the two men hurled themselves on the stool pigeon already thrown off balance by the open-

ing door. He went down, whimpering. . . .

When it was all over, and the exciting story of the events in the Circle studio had been machine-gunned to the listening audience, the president of Circle himself pounded George on the back.

"Couldn't believe my ears, at first—Aromatic Cigarettes paying ten thousand for this program and getting a spiel on *soap*. Gun-toters and Lavendar Chips! Fast thinking, er—what's your name? By Gawd, the greatest piece of ad-libbing in radio history!"

"Saved my life," said the Warden warmly.

Winslow, his head taped over the temple, came over. "Good old George—of all people!" he said incredulously. "Well, congratulations."

George squared his shoulders. "Thanks, Winslow," he said with dignity.

"Uh, no hard feelings about that gag message I sent you, hey, old boy?"

"No," said George. "Oh, no. No hard feelings," he said emphatically.

In his hands, he carefully crumpled the script he'd just used, the one he'd grabbed up in his excitement over that gag message—the script which read: "Have *you* tried Lavendar Chips, those fragrant flakes that make hands whiter, skin softer. . . ."



JANUARY'S JACKPOT

It works like this: You put in your fifteen cents and out comes the jackpot—a fortune in entertainment in the January issue of **Black Mask**. Here's part of the line-up:

"All-American Menace," a story of a college football hero on a spree. O'Hara is the man detailed to curb the All-American's exuberant feelings—and even the great O'Hara admits defeat, until some boys from the Big Town crowd him too much. It's a fast, roaring yarn by that prince of story-tellers, **H. H. STINSON**. Remember his "Ol Devil O'Hara" in the September issue?

BAYNARD H. KENDRICK contributes his share with a novelette of a killer lurking behind the searing flames that beset a panic-stricken Florida village. **"Arson"** will make you feel the bite of fire, the fire-fighters' dilemma, and the hidden threat of death behind the crackling sparks.

STEVE FISHER, a writer who has leaped from the pages of **Black Mask** to national fame, has written **"Jake and Jill"** for you. Two strangely assorted people go on a murder quest in the Hell Acre district of Hawaii. The sing-song of the kanakas throbs through the pages of this story and points the way to the killer.

That weird little man with the incredible draw and the fanciful heart, the **Parson**, is back in this issue. In **"Murder for Pennies"** he plays a cool and dangerous game of wits and bullets with policy racketeers and their women. **JAMES DUNCAN** has drawn a sharp, clear picture of crook fighting crook and the **Parson** wielding his remarkable power over them all.

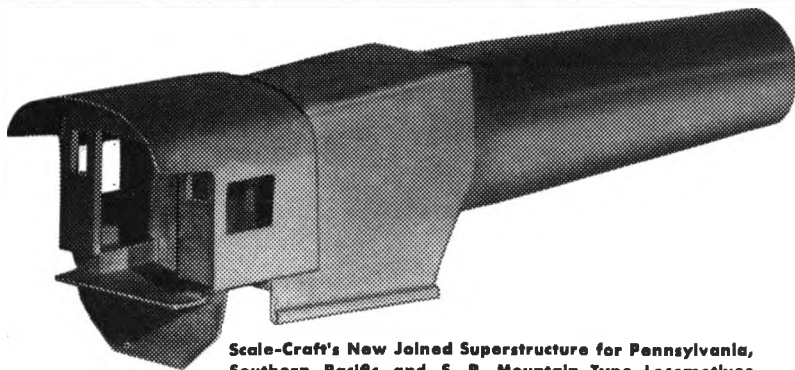
H. W. GUERNSEY has written a tale about a poor little beggar of a man, scurrying about the canyons of New York for the price of a meal, who suddenly finds himself in possession of a thousand-dollar bill. Hungry, unable to cash it, he has to flee from the vengeance and greed of the town's wise boys who've marked his trail with blood.

These yarns **and others** will be in that jackpot for you in the

January
**BLACK
MASK**

Good News!

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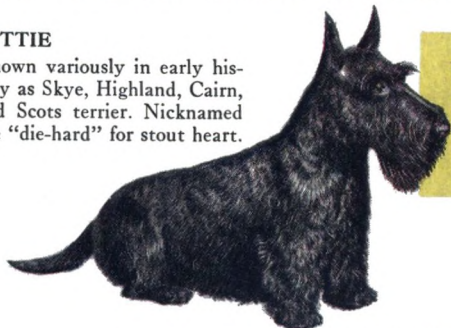
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