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*AN O'HANNA STORY
by DALE CLARK*



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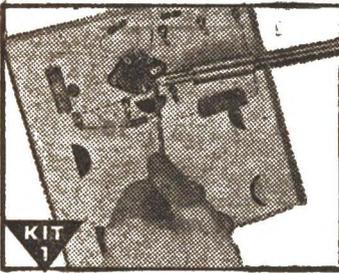
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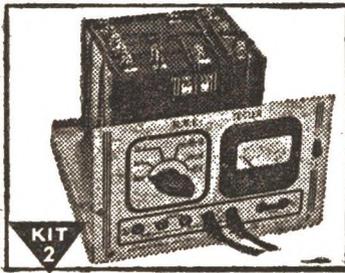


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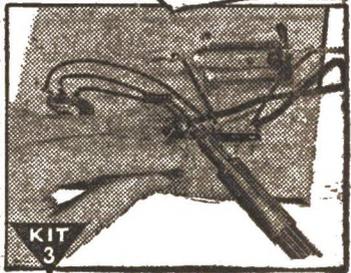
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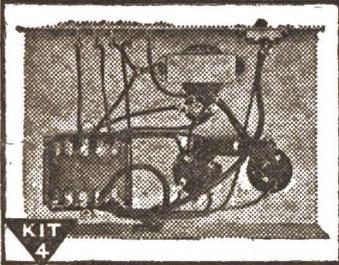
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I send you Soldering Equipment and Radio Parts; show you how to do Radio soldering; how to mount and connect Radio parts; give you practical experience.



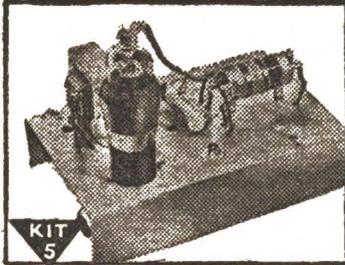
KIT 2
Early in my course I show you how to build this N.R.I. Tester with parts I send. It soon helps you fix neighborhood Radios and earn EXTRA money in spare time.



KIT 3
You get parts to build Radio Circuits; then test them; see how they work; learn how to design special circuits; how to locate and repair circuit defects.



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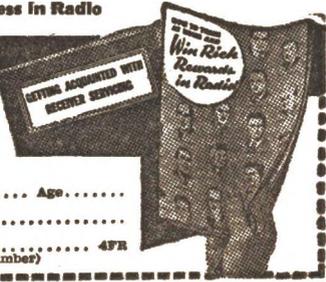
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NEXT ISSUE WILL BE OUT DECEMBER 19TH



BLACK MASK



K. S. White, Editor

VOL. XXVII, NO. 4



January, 1946

Contents

THERE'S DOUGH IN MURDER	C. G. Tahney	10
<i>A "Nickle" Novelette</i>		
<i>The two gun-toting grandmas thought the murderer such a lovely gentleman, and so polite, too. But Pat Sherwin and Nickie, that irrepressible Sherlock-in-short-pants, didn't think the killer charming. They had seen his carving and it wasn't pretty. A knife in the back never is!</i>		
I AIN'T GOT NO BODY	Dale Clark	37
<i>An O'Hanna Novelette</i>		
<i>Buddleigh Custain had earned a coast-to-coast rep for financial folly and fire-water frolics. Yet, incredibly, here he was at the swank San Alpa with an Ozark bride. Then the lassie's kinfolk turned up to give her an Arkansas shivaree—innocent hill-billy fun, even though it ended in deadly homicide.</i>		
HAND ME DOWN MY THIRTY-EIGHT . . .	Merle Constiner	48
<i>A Luther McGavock Novelette</i>		
<i>A sweet little town, Minnifree—if you didn't mind fishing stiffs out of your cistern. McGavock wasn't prepared for such doings, and no wonder. He thought he was up against a small-time thief, when this baby was playing in the big leagues—and not for recreation.</i>		
DATE WITH DYNAMITE	Julius Long	76
<i>A Ben Corbett Novelette</i>		
<i>Curtis T. Durbin was the scientific kind of sleuth, with emphasis on fast head-work. But, as Ben Corbett saw it, with a load of dynamite ready to explode you've got to use a little footwork, too—or you won't have a head to think with.</i>		
LIFTING THE FEBRUARY BLACK MASK		6
<i>A partial preview of our plans for the next issue of this magazine.</i>		
CAN YOU STICK TO YOUR GUNS?	Julius Long	6
<i>Another Quiz Program for Firearms Fans.</i>		

Cover painted for Black Mask by Gloria Stoll

Black-and-white illustrations by Peter Kuhlhoff

Every story in Black Mask is new and, to the best of our knowledge, has never before been printed in any publication

Issued Monthly by FICTIONEERS, Inc., a division of Popular Publications, Inc., 2256 Grove St., Chicago, 16, Ill. Editorial and executive offices at 205 E. 42nd St., New York, 17, N. Y.

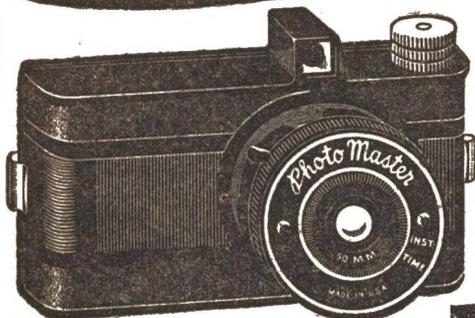
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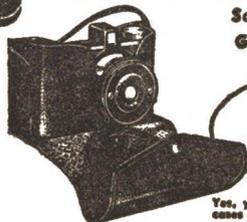
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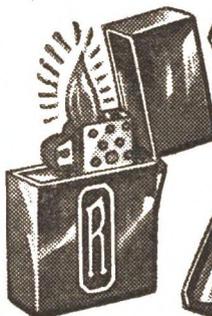
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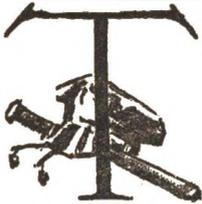
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LIFTING THE FEBRUARY BLACK MASK



THE best news we have to announce about the next issue of *Black Mask* is the fact that you're only going to have to wait one month instead of the customary two for its appearance.

Back in our May 1943 issue we said: *You all know about tires, coffee, sugar, shoes and many other commodities being scarce these war times. Well, paper is scarce, too, and being rationed in the same way. Our Government has requested all publishers to cut down their consumption of this essential wartime commodity. . . You know the rest of the story. Beginning with that issue and up to now our magazine has appeared every two months instead of monthly as usual. Now we're happy to be able to tell you that, despite the continuing lack of new tires for your old jalopy, even if you still can't have all the choice beef cuts to eat whenever you want 'em, or all the nylons you'd like to hand your gal-friend on her birthday, the paper situation has eased up perceptibly and Black Mask is back on the old pre-war schedule with an unusual array of fine detective fiction ready to be read about the middle of every month.*

In the forthcoming FEBRUARY issue, for example, JULIUS LONG brings back Ben Corbett to brighten the murder scene with a few *Flowers for Flanagan*. Curtis Durbin, that ubiquitous upstart and fly in the ointment of the attorney general's investigator, is back again to flourish his Ph.D. in criminology and prove that homicide as the textbooks teach it can lead to a hearse of another color than the kind you meet among its underworld practitioners.

DALE CLARK returns with that hard-luck house dick, O'Hanna of San Alpa, to con a con-man who was so far ahead of his confrères in crime that he applied the atomic theory to his peccadilloes and wound up in almost as bad a state as Nagasaki when his bomb backfired.

Plus thrilling long novelettes by THOMSON BURTIS, WILLIAM ROUGH and others.

This great issue will be out on DECEMBER 19th.

CAN YOU STICK to your GUNS?

Or Are You Stuck With Them?

By JULIUS LONG



Answers to the following questions and problems will be found on page 8.

1

A term still used in our speech is "to Buffalo." The term derives from the wild and woolly West. Below is listed a variety of behavior, all at one time common to the West. Can you tell us if a Westerner Buffaloes a man when he:

Ran him out of a poker pot with a pair of Jacks.

Beat him in a timed Buffalo-lassoing contest.

Dared him to beat him to the draw and saw his dare not taken.

Hit him over the head with his six-shooter.

Made him get out of town.

2

a) Officers of the law properly bonded are at all times exempt from firearms statutes. TRUE or FALSE?

b) When you carry a pistol openly beside you on the seat of an automobile you do not have to worry about any law against the carrying of concealed weapons. TRUE or FALSE?

3

The law known as The Federal Firearms Act does not prohibit an American citizen from buying, selling or shipping firearms or ammunition from one state to another unless he is engaged in the business of dealing in firearms. TRUE or FALSE?

4

Aside from responsibilities to the state and federal criminal laws pertaining to the possession and use of firearms, every firearm owner is civilly liable for their negligent ownership and use. The following problems illustrate the broad general principles of civil liability with respect to firearms:

a) You sell a pistol to a sixteen-year-old boy. He is skilled in the usage of firearms, but

(Continued on page 8)

what will YOU be doing one year from TODAY?



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(Continued from page 6)

accidentally he kills a next-door neighbor. You are liable for damages. TRUE or FALSE?

b) You own a pistol which you keep in a drawer of a stand beside your bed. A small child opens the drawer, removes the pistol and fires it at another child, severely injuring it. You are liable for damages. TRUE or FALSE?

5

You are a perfectly reputable and law-abiding citizen. You belong to a pistol club at the outskirts of your town, and while transporting your pistol to the club you are picked up by a traffic cop for speeding. He discovers your pistol concealed in a satchel. Your state has a law against carrying concealed weapons. The officer charges you with carrying concealed weapons. You're stuck for a fine at the least and a jail sentence at the worst. TRUE or FALSE?

Answers to Preceding Questions

1

A Westerner "Buffaloed" his victim when he hit him over the head with his six-shooter. It was the most disgraceful thing that could happen to a badman. It meant that he was held in such contempt that a bullet would be wasted upon him. Legend to the contrary, the famous Western peace officers Buffaloed many more men than they shot. Badmen thought twice before risking the ignominy of a Buffaloing by the Buntline Special of a Bat Masterson.

2

FALSE. A bonded officer of the law is no more privileged or exempt from firearms statutes than any other person *unless he is on active duty or going or coming therefrom.*

FALSE. The courts generally have construed the firearms laws against the carrying of concealed weapons to be applicable in nearly all cases where the firearm is carried in an automobile. *Accessibility* of the weapon seems to be a test along with concealment, and in some cases firearms have been held lawfully carried when actually hidden from view *under* the seat. However, in the case of a firearm carried on the seat, a court may hold, as in Missouri, that it was accessible and concealed behind the body of the driver.

3

TRUE. Casual or isolated sales by a person not a dealer in firearms may be legally made, and such shipments are accordingly legal. A firearms dealer must procure a license for such shipments in interstate commerce, unless his shipments are limited to .22-caliber ammunition. Of course, no shipments of any kind of firearms or ammunition may be made by mail.

4

a) TRUE if your state has a law against the

sale of firearms to minors of the age of 16 or under. In that case the sale of a firearm to a sixteen-year-old boy regardless of his skill with firearms makes you liable *per se*, as the discharge of the firearm is a natural and logical consequence of such a sale, and the killing of a person is accordingly a natural consequence of your act. However, if your state does not restrict the sale of firearms to minors of the age of sixteen (unlikely), you may assert as your defense that the minor was skilled in handling firearms and that the accidental killing of a neighbor was not the natural or logical consequence of your act.

b) TRUE. You are liable for damages to the party injured by a child who lays hands on firearms so located that a child may procure them. Firearms are considered inherently dangerous weapons and as such should be carefully kept so that neither children nor other irresponsible persons may remove them.

5

FALSE. A good defense to the charge of carrying concealed weapons is that you were engaged in a lawful business, calling or employment, that your intent was innocent of the commission of any crime and the circumstances justified your carrying the weapon. This statement must be qualified with the warning that in some jurisdictions a fanatic attitude toward firearms almost makes it a crime to look at a gun. However, every citizen is entitled to the constitutional trial by jury, so if you are an innocent citizen picked up on a technicality for carrying firearms, don't let a police magistrate bluff you into pleading guilty. Hire a lawyer.

I have at hand a communication received only yesterday from the National Rifle Association of America. The subject is the proposal by a politically ambitious mayor of one of the largest cities of my state. The mayor proposes that the state legislature adopt a gun registration law that would "go a long way in reducing crime." I am confident that this mayor is acting in good faith but misguidedly. As the National Rifle Association of America points out, the firearms registration law in England discouraged the use of firearms and their manufacture, the result of which was that patriotic Americans were asked to turn in their guns at nominal prices for their use in England and other foreign countries. Such a registration law could work only a hardship on sportsmen and do no positive good, for, as Attorney General Homer Cummings testified before Congress: "Of course we do not expect *criminals* to register their guns."

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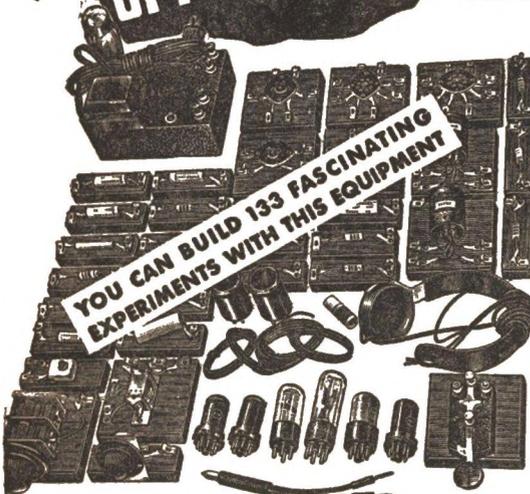
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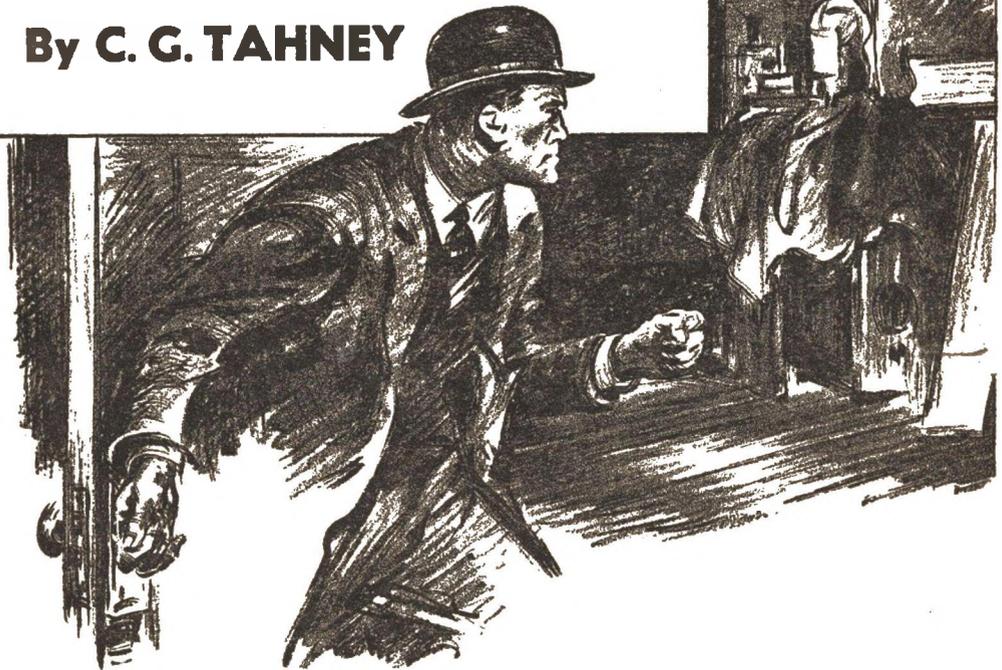
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THERE'S DOUGH IN MURDER

By C. G. TAHNEY



A "Nickie" Novelette

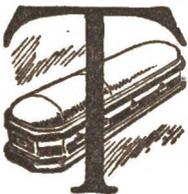
"Can you *blame* me for being excited? One doesn't often get an opportunity to speak with a murderer!" For which devout thanks ought to be given—except that this sweet old biddie thought the murderer such a lovely gentleman, and so polite, too. Pat Sherwin and Nickie, that irrepressible Sherlock-in-short-pants, didn't think the killer charming. They had seen his carving and it wasn't pretty. A knife in the back never is!



The two men faced each other across the body that lay between them.

CHAPTER ONE

The Gentlemanly Murderer



THE BEDROOM: It was a shabby orphan of a cubby-hole, opening off the big studio. The paint on its walls was cracked and swollen and peeling. Its window let in little light because of the encrusted dirt on the pane. It smelled of dust long accumulated and of mould in the frowzy mattress.

No, it was not much of a room, yet it now had a certain distinction. For it had just witnessed murder. . .

The big man in the yellow trenchcoat had no forewarning that death stood near him. It happened in the moment when he turned his back to the killer, reaching for a packet of matches on a night table standing near the bed.

The killer's right hand eased out a knife from beneath his coat. It was a Commando

knife, with notches for the fingers in the hilt. Light from the unshaded electric bulb dangling from the ceiling glinted evilly on its steel.

The killer took a quick step forward. He raised the knife, and expelled his breath in a throaty, effort-grunting sound. He drove the knife into the man's back, high up between the shoulder blades. The sharp point hesitated a split-instant as it struck a bone. Then it slipped in, on an angle, fast and smooth now—deep on into the hilt.

The man gasped and backed into the knife, rather than away from it, when it entered his body. His face bore an expression of shocked incredulity. He flung out his arms, arched his back and threw up his head. The muscles stood out thick in his throat. He looked for a moment like a fancy diver preparing to plunge into a swan dive. Then his legs buckled from under him.

THE FLOOR: He hit it hard when he fell. He buffeted it with his threshing body. He moaned: "Mother-dear-God-Jesus—oh-Mother-dear-God—" The cracked dry wood felt the warmth of his blood. And the scraping of his fingernails as he clawed at it with cupped hands, like a dog frantically trying to dig up a buried bone. It knew the trapped frenzy of his terror.

Several minutes passed before a prolonged sound issued from his throat. His body stiffened once again, then relaxed suddenly, and he was dead.

Only now the killer moved. He went to the door opening into the studio.

THE STUDIO: It was witness to his mood and moves shortly after the murder. He seemed cool and relaxed. Oh, he look tired—yes. But it was a tiredness he enjoyed. It was like the pleased and arrogant tiredness of a man who has just succeeded with a woman who has long resisted him.

Yes, he liked himself, the murderer. He was in a fine fettle. He flexed his gloved fingers, smiled, and suddenly made the gesture of an umpire declaring a runner safe on base. Then he walked toward the telephone near a studio couch. The click of the dial was brittle in the dead stillness as he called a number. . .

* * *

The brownstone house had been built and furnished at the turn of the century. The Victorian elegance of its front parlor bore with ill grace the intrusion of the streamlined telephone on a little stand. Otherwise, its only contact with the passage of years was the daily visit of dust, ruthlessly routed each morning. And its only submission was in the gentle yellowing of innumerable doilies scattered everywhere.

The two old ladies were having their afternoon tea when the phone rang. The one who

went to answer it, nibbling on a sugar cookie, looked like a tough old turkey, leathery and lean, save for the width of her rear. She leisurely slid out a chair, sat down and lifted the earpiece.

A few seconds later, she bolted from the chair with an abrupt agility that might have been inspired by a tack cushioned in her rump.

"Yes, Miss Bowman is here," she said, a shrill note now in her voice. "Just a moment, please."

She clapped a hand over the mouthpiece, turned and said in a hissing whisper: "This is it, Aggie! It's the *murderer!*"

There was a clattering sound as the other woman almost dropped her tea cup. She was a soft, plump little thing, with a smooth, pink face and the clear blue eyes of a child. She sat perfectly still for a few seconds, then suddenly squealed like a child delighted with some spectacular toy.

"Oh, Martha, dear, this is simply wonderful! I just *knew* he'd call and—"

"Don't keep him waiting too long," Martha warned. "And do try not to be too fluffsie when you talk to him. We can't make any mistakes now, you know."

"Yes, dear—only there's no such word as 'fluffsie,'" Aggie panted, crossing the room. "Good gracious, can you *blame* me for being excited? One doesn't often get an *opportunity* to speak with a murderer!"

Martha passed over the receiver and Aggie said: "Hello, this is Miss Bowman. . . Oh, how perfectly marvelous! I was so worried. . . Yes, of course, I can do that. I'm waiting now for my car to be delivered from the garage. I'll drive over just as soon as it comes. . . Oh, in an hour or two. Will that be all right? . . . Thank you. Where are you now?"

She made pawing motions and Martha handed her a pencil and a pad. In a fine Spencerian script, Aggie wrote: *Mr. Edward Paige, 217 W. 10th St., Manhattan.* She repeated the address, hung up and stared at Martha with wide-eyed solemnity.

"And that," she said, "is that! Darling, how can you remain so calm and collected? You've nerves of steel!"

Martha preened herself in a pleased manner, but her voice was prim as she replied: "I see no point in getting all fluffsied up. Another cup of tea, dear?"

"No, thanks," said Aggie. She went on dreamily: "He's a lovely murderer, too. So polite and gentlemanly. Just lovely, really. Shouldn't we go see Mr. Sherwin now?"

"Immediately, dear."

Aggie sighed.

"To think that the trick with the cat was *my* idea!" She squealed again, clapping her soft little hands. "Oh, Martha! This is simply wonderful!"

THE suite of offices bearing the legend *Patrick Sherwin—Private Investigator* on the entrance door was in its normal state of tranquil inactivity that Friday afternoon.

A chunky maiden by the name of Ella Bates presided at the reception desk in the outer office. The brooding tension she exhibited at the moment was occasioned by her horoscope for the month. It predicted what Madame Zorro had described as a "Venus-exerted influence that is fraught with danger." So Miss Bates sat there now probing the potentialities of a certain sleek-haired soda fountain clerk who buttered her English muffin every morning.

Behind Miss Bates, seeping through the communicating door from the inner office, came a sound that embodied the weird components of a spent animal's labored rasp, the hiss of a punctured tire, and a peanut vendor's aborted whistle. It was her employer—snoring.

Pat Sherwin's battered face, rested on one gorilla-like arm stretched across the desk. The bellows within his chest created the sound effects in the vents of his open mouth and the flattened nose that twitched contentedly at the completion of each cycle.

Like the amiable chimpanzee that he resembled, Sherwin believed in taking a nap when time hung on his hands. Former middle-weight champion of the world, he had retired from the ring with a tidy fortune salted away. His current venture into this vaguely functioning private detective agency was merely a concession to the one-must-do-something theory.

Hence he snored away, a contented man with a clear conscience. . .

Thus it was at three o'clock that Friday afternoon, a peaceful, live-and-let-live sort of atmosphere, when Nickie, Sherwin's orphaned nephew, entered the outer office.

A curly-haired, spectacularly handsome youngster, Nickie came in with the brisk efficiency of an inspecting general. He glanced at the door beyond which Sherwin was snoring. He cocked his forefinger, closed one eye and pumped two bullets into Miss Bates. Then he said in a bored manner: "Hi, dopy. Announce me to the boss. I got business with him."

Miss Bates hung on to her self-control.

"Look, you little snip!" she said with icy dignity. "I'm not going to mess with you, see? You heard your uncle tell me to throw you out if you ever showed up here again. So scram! Unless you want me to drag you out by the ear and—What're you staring at?"

His head cocked to one side, Nickie was now peering into the knee-space beneath Miss Bates' desk.

"I seen 'em that big on the waterfront once," he remarked casually.

Miss Bates gasped an outraged sound, drew

her legs under her and pulled down her skirt. Then a revolted sort of fascination prompted her to ask: "What're you talking about?"

"The rat," said Nickie. "The big fat rat in your wastepaper basket." He made a quick gesture with his hand and yelled: "Shoo!"

Miss Bates heard in the basket near her feet what was unmistakably the scratching of sharp little claws against metal. She exploded in a scream.

The prolonged and hideous sound booted Sherwin out of his chair. He hit the barricade of the desk, woke up, panted, "For the love of God!" and charged into the other office—to face Miss Bates' quivering tonnage now cringing on top of her chair.

"Hi, Pat," Nickie said cheerfully. "Some set of pipes she's got, eh?" He added, glancing up at Miss Bates: "O.K., relax, dopy! It's gone now. Ran out through that door I left open."

Sherwin passed his hands through the bristle-brush of stiff black hair standing on top of his skull.

"For Pete's sake, what's going on here? What ran out?"

"The rat!" gasped Miss Bates. "In the wastepaper basket."

Sherwin peered into the basket.

"Damn it, what would a rat be doing in a perfectly empty wastepaper basket?"

Miss Bates descended stiffly from her perch. She said bitterly: "How should I know why rats do things? This is no time to ask silly questions, Mr. Sherwin. I heard it scratch in the basket. I think I'll go downstairs for a cup of coffee to quiet my nerves. I should've joined the WAC, as I wanted to."



HE stalked out. Sherwin passed a hand under his flattened nose, tried to outglare the bland innocence with which Nickie faced him, and then wisely decided to let things stay as they were.

"All right," he said. "O.K."

I won't ask you why these cockeyed things happen only when you're around. We'll skip it. But when I told you to stay the hell away from this office, I meant it. So I'll say this just once. Beat it!"

"It's a good thing I ain't no sorehead," Nickie said coldly. "Look, I made a trip all the way up here just to do you a favor, see? How would you like to stuff your gut an hour earlier tonight? Eat dinner at five instead of six? I can fix it up."

Sherwin blinked, and went into a kind of mental clinch, thinking about Wimpie, his fat little maniac of a cook.

"Now wait a minute!" he said. "Wait—a—minute! Sure, I'd rather eat an hour earlier. You know that. You damn well know that."

You also know that Wimpie wouldn't change his schedule if you held a gun to his head. So what's the gag?"

"Just gimme a yes or no on this one, will you?" Nickie declared, hitching up his pants. "Would it be worth a buck to you to eat an hour earlier tonight?"

There was silence for a little while. Nickie waited with bored, detached patience. And Sherwin was again having trouble breathing.

"That's your idea of doing me a favor, eh? So that it costs me a buck?"

Nickie shrugged. "Did I pull a knife on you? You don't have to do it if you don't wanna."

Sherwin passed a finger inside his shirt collar.

"Look, this is nuts! How *could* you get Wimpie to change his schedule?"

"No buckee, no talkee," Nickie said gently.

Another pause—and Sherwin knew he was licked. His battered face a nightmare as he glared at Nickie, he drew out his wallet and extracted a dollar-bill.

"All right, here. Now how'll you work it?"

Nickie planted a kiss on the dollar-bill, cooed to it lovingly, rubbed it for luck against the back of his head and stuck it in his pocket. His black eyes sparkled with merriment.

"You still can't figger it out, eh? And it's so simple. How does Wimpie know what time it is? He uses your alarm clock. O.K., I was home for lunch and I pushed the clock ahead an hour. When Wimpie thinks it's six, it's only gonna be five. So—"

"So that'll be enough," said Sherwin, hanging on to his hair. "You don't have to draw me a map. You and your crooked schemes! How did you trick Miss Bates into thinking there was a rat in that wastepaper basket? Was that simple, too?"

Nickie grinned and snapped his fingers.

"Sure. As simple as *that!* You think it might be worth another buck to you? To find out, I mean?"

Sherwin lunged toward Nickie. There were a blurry few seconds of attempted escape, pursuit and capture. It wound up with Sherwin supporting one leg over the corner of Miss Bates' desk and Nickie dangling across his thigh.

"For once," Sherwin said quickly, "for *once*, I'm going to whack that skinny rump of yours black and blue!"

He took a deep breath, and lifted his paw. Suddenly he was aghast to realize the full significance of the spot he was in. Nickie had had a thousand near-lickings. Always, they had been nipped just in time, by one thing or another. Now there was no back-tracking. It was a crisis. It was a trap.

He gritted his teeth and closed his eyes. His

hand began descending, with barely enough force to bruise a fly. But it never reached its destination.

For at that moment a woman's outraged voice said: "Don't you *dare* strike that child! My goodness, a great big brute like you!"

Sherwin spun about—to face two old ladies who stood just inside the open door off the corridor. One was plump and pink and little. Her white hair supported a hat that was a miniature botanical garden. The other was tall and lean and horse-faced, wearing rimless glasses. She liked fruit on her hats. Both stood there regarding Sherwin as if he were a gorilla that might crash out of its cage at any moment.

The scene was frozen for a few seconds—until Nickie took over. He slid off Sherwin's thigh and beamed at the two women.

"Gee, they're all gone now," he announced happily.

"What are all gone?" the tall, lean one asked.

"Hiccups," Nickie replied. He gagged experimentally. "Yep! All gone."

"Hiccups?" the little plump one echoed. "Young man, it certainly looked more as though you were getting a licking."

Nickie jammed his hands in his pockets and appraised her coolly.

"I don't like to call an old lady a dizzy dame, but—look, my uncle wouldn't fight a *guy out* of his weight. He's a middleweight, goin' light-heavy. Me, I'm kinda goin' flyweight. So you see that it don't make sense."

The two women looked dazed.

"A midget?" the tall one asked Sherwin.

"My nephew," Sherwin replied shortly. "Twelve years old. Were you ladies just walking by or—did you want to see me?"

"Oh, dear me, you don't know us, do you?" the smaller woman said, cooing like the plump little dove she resembled. "I'm Miss Bowman. Most people call me Aggie. A dreadful name, isn't it? This is my friend, Miss Wyatt, Martha Wyatt. Should we have made an appointment with you? You know, you *do* look different with your clothes on."

Sherwin, who had not been able to get any further than just opening his mouth each time she asked a question, now managed a muffled: "Well, for Pete's sake!"

"I mean, the few times we saw you—well, you wore those cute little silk pants. In the ring, I mean. Martha and I are always going to prize fights, aren't we, dear? We thought you were simply marvelous. So when we needed a detective and looked through the agencies listed in the classified directory and saw your name—"

"Aggie, dear, must you run on so?" Martha reproved gently. "I see that you're cornbursing Mr. Sherwin."

"There's no such word as 'combursing', dear," Aggie said. "May we sit down?"

Sherwin made a vague gesture. They seated themselves on a leather settee. Aggie removed her gloves in the brisk manner of someone stripping for action. She leaned forward and said with restrained drama: "Mr. Sherwin, we will pay you ten dollars, or twenty, if you haggle just a little bit, to call on a certain party. Your job will be to determine whether or not this certain party is a scoundrel!"

SHERWIN watched the three rings, two diamond and one sapphire, glittering on Aggie's plump little fingers. Each stone had the circumference of a ten-cent piece. He decided that they could not be real—though the headache he felt sneaking up on him certainly was.

"What certain party?" he asked gloomily.

"You may explain, Martha," Aggie told her companion. "I don't want to be a pig about it all."

"Thank you, dear," Martha said. "Mr. Sherwin, we want you to call on the man who claims that he's found Fluffy. Fluffy is Aggie's cat, a big white Persian, beautiful and quite valuable. She got lost several days ago. Aggie advertised, posting a fifty-dollar reward. A man telephoned and said he had found Fluffy. Anyway, that's what he said!"

"You mean, you think he lied about finding 'he cat'?"

"No, but we don't think he found her," Martha explained coldly. "We believe that he stole Fluffy, in anticipation of the reward that he knew Aggie would post. Because Fluffy had never before strayed away from the house, and certainly Fluffy would not hide in a strange man's automobile. It's absurd!"

"It is, eh?" Sherwin said without much conviction.

"Of course! The man said his car was parked in the Gramercy Park section where Aggie lives, then he drove it to where he lives, and there was Fluffy on the back seat—he said!" She leaned forward and squinted at Sherwin along a bony, pointing finger. "Frankly, we don't believe his story."

"It could be true," said Sherwin. "And, anyway, ladies, what do you want me to do about it?"

Martha's pointing finger began making grim stabbing motions.

"We want you to call for Fluffy, pay the man the reward we promised and determine what sort of person he is. If he's obviously an honest citizen, then we're wrong, of course. But if he's some furtive character, in the racket of stealing pets for their reward, then certainly something should be done about it."

She glanced at Aggie, who nodded her snowy head and chirped admiringly: "That was really

nicely done. Simple, clear, direct. As I've always told you, you're a born executive, dear. Now it's my turn, I think."

She rose, approached Miss Bates' desk and opened an enormous handbag.

"Now here are—let's see—yes, two twenties and a ten. That makes fifty, doesn't it? It's the reward, Mr. Sherwin. And here are ten and five and five—that's for your services. Naturally, I've known all along, of course, that a man of your caliber would not haggle. So it's twenty dollars, Mr. Sherwin, and no protests, please. And here's the man's name and address. Dear me, this is exciting!"

Sherwin glanced at the scratch-pad sheet and read: "Mr. Edward Paige, 217 W. 10th St., Manhattan." It occurred to him that he would not have been a bit startled if the address were in London or Tokyo.

"I told the man I would call for the cat in an hour or two—just as soon as my car was delivered from the garage where it's being repaired," Aggie went on. "He promised to take good care of Fluffy. Of course, he doesn't know that we're sending a detective. That was Martha's idea. She's terribly clever, really."

"Now Aggie, dear, you mustn't give me all the credit," Martha said placidly. "Yes, Mr. Sherwin, I think we were wise in our decision to wait here in your office until you return with Fluffy—and your opinion of this Paige person. If the man is an underworld character, we certainly don't want any personal contact with him."

Sherwin looked at the money lying on the desk. A frugal man, he respected the value of twenty dollars. But he was also an honest man.

"Ladies, I'll be frank with you," he said. "The man probably told the truth. I advise you to go get the cat, pay him the reward, and forget about it. Why throw twenty bucks away for no good reason? It's foolish."

Nickie's clear young voice said indignantly: "So it's skin off your nose if they wanna be screwy with their dough? Boy, are you some lousy businessman!"

"Beat it!" Sherwin clipped: "Now!"

He tensed for a struggle, but Nickie merely regarded him coldly for a moment and sauntered out.

"Really, Mr. Sherwin," Aggie said, "if I choose to spend twenty dollars, which I can well afford, is it—I mean, is it skin off your nose, as that nice little boy so cleverly worded it?"

Sherwin shrugged. He pocketed the money and the address, paused near the desk to appraise the wastepaper basket, shook his head again and went into his private office. Lifting a derby off a clothes rack, he perched it atop his cauliflower ears. He adjusted an immaculate white silk muffler around his neck. He put on and buttoned a long blue overcoat.

As a result, he somehow achieved the paradox of looking simultaneously like a ponderously respectable citizen, the menace in a horror thriller and a chimpanzee dressed up for a film comedy.

Aggie was back on the settee with Martha, holding a whispered conference, which Sherwin's reappearance now interrupted. They beamed at him.

"Good luck, Mr. Sherwin," Martha said. "You leave with our absolute confidence that you will competently and efficiently execute your mission."

"That was beautiful, Martha, dear," Aggie cooed. "Just lovely."

Sherwin got out of there—fast and muttering to himself.

CHAPTER TWO

Ars Longa—Vita Brevis



RAIN washed the streets when Sherwin left the building, a nasty cold drizzle that felt like a clammy paw on the back of his neck. He rounded the corner where he had parked his coupe, approached it, wrenched open the door.

And Nickie said with a gay little gesture: "Hi, Pat, old boy, old boy."

"So who invited you to come along?" Sherwin snapped.

Nickie grinned and curled up more comfortably in the corner of the seat.

"You're supposed to pick up a cat, ain't you? Don't you need somebody to hold it for you? You want cat's hairs all over your new overcoat? You want a scared cat to go climbing on you and maybe make you have an accident? Besides I'm doing it for free. No charge, see?"

"Now that's pretty nice of you," Sherwin said, getting in. He smiled and reached over to rumple Nickie's hair. "I'll say one thing, anyway—you sure got one hell of a lucky fanny!"

"Talkin' about that," Nickie said casually, "I guess even you oughta know that a guy can't be tried twice for the same crime. I took my rap—it ain't my fault that them two old dames come in just then. Sure, I tricked Bates about the rat. I knew she wouldn't let me see you, so I hadda start somethin'. You wanna know how I done it? It's for free, too, 'cause I'm in a good mood."

Sherwin curbed the impulse to toss Nickie out on his ear.

"O.K., how did you do it?"

"Bates couldn't see the wastepaper basket under the desk near her feet. I came in with

some B-B's from Stinky's air rifle. Had 'em in my hand when I told Bates I saw a rat there. Then I threw in the B-B's. They made a sound like a rat scratching. You didn't spot the B-B's 'cause they're black, like the bottom o' the basket. Good trick, eh?"

Sherwin sighed and reached grimly for the ignition key. Awed by the devious machinations that found birth in Nickie's beautifully shaped skull, Sherwin often thought that his nephew was destined for the White House. But there were also moments, like the present, when Sherwin gloomily envisioned Sing Sing. . .

The Tenth Street address was a neat little apartment walk-up on a side street in the heart of Greenwich Village. Sherwin parked the coupe and they crossed the rain-blackened pavement to the vestibule of the building.

Brass mailboxes, with name plates and bells beneath them, lined the wall on the right. Sherwin located Edward Paige's bell, and saw a folded note—*Miss Bowman* printed on it—wedged by one corner into the slot of the name plate.

He detached it, unfolded the strip of brown paper, scowled as Nickie crowded in to take a peek at it. The message, neatly printed, read:

Dear Miss Bowman:

Sorry to detour you this way, but a friend asked me to mind her child at 217 Christopher Street, top-floor studio. Please call there for the cat.

Sincerely,
Edward Paige

Sherwin shrugged, then his eyes returned to where the note had been left. He had the uneasy feeling that he was overlooking something, and he realized what it was when he saw the edges of several envelopes visible through the slots in Paige's mailbox.

"I was wonderin' if you'd spot that," Nickie said. "Why didn't the guy pick up his mail? 'Course, it *could* be the afternoon mail, put there after he already left."

"Yeah," said Sherwin. "It could be lots of things. But there's no harm checking a little bit."

He pushed the bell button marked *Superintendent*. There was an answering click in the electrically controlled lock of the vestibule door. Sherwin opened the door just as a frowzy fat woman looked out from the ground-floor apartment.

Showing a mouthful of gold in his most affable smile, Sherwin said: "I've an important message for Mr. Paige and he isn't home now. Can you tell me where he works?"

"Try General MacArthur," the woman replied. "Mr. Paige is working for him out in the Pacific somewhere—except he ain't no mister nowadays."

"Who's staying in his apartment?"

"His mother. She's out of town now. Visiting relatives in Philadelphia. It's people like you," she added sourly, "who prevent me from getting my work done."

She withdrew her head and slammed the door. Sherwin did not need to ponder long over this abrupt slap-in-the-face sort of development. The pattern was simple—and sinister.

Nickie, looking like a terrier bristling with suspicion near a rat hole, said: "Gee, Pat, you'd better watch your step—if you know what I mean."

"I know what you mean," Sherwin replied grimly. "Those old ladies are getting their money's worth, after all. Come on!"

They returned to the coupe. Sherwin looked up and down the rain-swept street. Two soldiers stood morosely beneath a cigar store awning. A truck unloaded coal up the block, the driver huddling miserably against the driving rain. A man wearing a white coat stood yawning in the doorway of a barber shop. There seemed to be no one lurking nearby on the lookout for the old woman.

STARTING the coupe, Sherwin drove one block south to the Christopher Street address. It was a shabby old building, sand-

wiched between a warehouse and a grimy tenement.

"Wait in the car here," he told Nickie.

He got out, crossed to the dingy hallway, hesitated, and walked back to the coupe.

"Just one other thing, Nickie," he said quietly. "I often threaten a licking and somehow never do it. This time I mean it. Don't go following me upstairs."

"O.K., O.K., only I wish you'd carry a gun, Pat," Nickie said, a near-wail in his voice. "Gee, I never heard of a private dick who didn't even own a gat!"

"If I ever find I need a gun to stay in this racket, I'll get out of it—fast," Sherwin said brusquely.

This time he crossed the sidewalk obliquely, checking the hallway of the tenement next door. He saw no one there. He went into the other building. An out-of-order sign was posted above the row of bells. He tried the door, found it open. Entering, he started up the first flight, then came down quickly and peered into the semi-darkness beneath the slant of the stairs. No one there.

He shook his head and trudged up the stairs. There were two entrance doors on the landing where the main staircase ended. The instructions were to go to the top-floor studio, and there were two separate units here, each

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door with its own apartment number, bell and name plate.

The door on the left was ajar, lights turned on inside. Sherwin looked in. Either someone had just moved in here or was about to move out. A few rickety pieces of furniture, two suitcases and an open trunk with books piled up next to it made a mound in the center of an otherwise barren room.

"Hello," he said. "Anybody home?"

There was no answer. He walked out, stood frowning a moment, then glanced again at the narrow stairs on the right of the landing. He had thought it led to the roof. As he checked it now, he saw that it terminated in a door that had a heavy brass knocker on it. That must be the top-floor studio.

He went up and knocked.

"Come in," a voice called from inside.

Sherwin turned the knob and entered a low-ceilinged attic studio. It had a massive stone fireplace at one end and a huge, slanted skylight. An artist's studio, judging from the easels here and there and the canvases stacked against the wall. It also looked as if a drunken party had gone on here for days. The studio was a shambles, littered with empty whiskey and beer bottles, glasses, cigarette butts, dirty dishes.

None of this seemed to disturb the man sitting with one leg comfortably sprawled over the arm of an upholstered chair. Although he wore a French beret, a corduroy jacket and faded blue denim trousers, there was no look of Latin Quarter decadence about him. He appeared cool and healthy and competent, a blond, blue-eyed, chunky man, with a pleasant, ruddy face.

He was probing with a fork into a curled-back can of sardines. His attitude, as he appraised Sherwin, was one of only vague curiosity.

"Yes?" he prompted casually.

"I'm from the O. P. A.," Sherwin said. "One of the tenants in this building made a complaint. We're checking the rentals. You live here?"

"No, just visiting," the man replied. "I've a studio on the floor below. Technically, anyway. Moving out tonight."

Sherwin brought forth a pencil and a little black notebook.

"What's your name?"

"Hagen. Mike Hagen." He grinned and added: "If the landlord here was overcharging me, he sure as hell didn't gain anything on the deal. I'm three months in arrears on my rent."

"Who does live here?"

"A guy by the name of Lowry. Dennis Lowry."

"Where is he now?"

Hagen shrugged.

"Probably sweating over a drawing board

at Blue Star Comics. He's a cartoonist. I just barged in here on a bottle-and-food foraging expedition. Lowry is easy-going about things like that. And he conveniently leaves his door open."

"He lives alone here?"

Hagen probed another sardine out of the can, swallowed it, licked off the fork, and casually threw the can and the fork to join the debris on the floor.

"He used to share this joint with some dizzy friend, but he's all alone now." He added pleasantly: "You enjoy asking questions, don't you?"

"Sometimes," said Sherwin. "How long have you been here?"

"I think," Hagen murmured, "we'll stop right there—until you explain to me why in hell that should interest the O.P.A."

"O.K.," said Sherwin. "But first I'd like to use that phone there. You mind?"

"Go ahead."

The telephone was on an end table a few feet beyond where Hagen was sitting. Sherwin put away the notebook and pencil. He strolled leisurely across the room. As he passed Hagen, he swung in, cat-like. And the man gasped as Sherwin jerked him to his feet. With one swiftly continuous motion, Sherwin's hands slid along the man's body, brushing his chest, the pockets of the jacket and back down along the hips. Hagen was unarmed.

"Just wanted to check something," Sherwin said. "Now we can chat some more."

"Yeah, let's," Hagen panted.

Sherwin saw a hard, fast right slashing upward. He blocked it with practised ease, and his own fist moved four inches toward Hagen's stomach. He pulled the punch. It looked more as if he had merely pushed the man with his fist. But it was enough to double Hagen over. And as he half crouched there, gasping, Sherwin clipped him under the chin with the heel of his open hand. It sent Hagen sprawling into the chair behind him.

"When you're in close, the way you were, always go for the body," Sherwin said quietly. "Anyway, nobody got hurt—yet. Maybe nobody has to get hurt. I want you to tell me all about it."



REELING slightly, Hagen sat up. He looked more angry than frightened. He touched his chin with his fingertips, moved his jaw experimentally. His voice was cold and steady as he said: "Now look, pal. I took a poke at you because I don't like to be pushed around. Maybe it was a mistake. But I know damned well that we've got our signals crossed. What do you want me to tell you?"

"What you planned to do when the old lady showed up here."

"What old lady? I don't know what you're talking about."

Sherwin stepped in closer. His left hand shot out. It caught and twisted the front of Hagen's jacket. He half lifted the man, as he poised a big, heavy-knuckled fist within inches of Hagen's face.

"I'll smash your nose," Sherwin said in a low monotone. "I'll ram your teeth down your throat. I'll break your jaw. I'll put you in a hospital for months. And you'll still tell me what I want to know. It was going to be a stick-up, wasn't it? Start talking, damn you!"

It was a bluff. Sherwin, a gentle man despite his years in the ring, was incapable of brutality. But Hagen did not know this. Fear induced a pigment of its own into his graying face. His eyes rolled and became bright and shiny, like those of a man in high fever. He reached over and touched Sherwin's poised fist with the gentleness of a caress.

"For God's sake, you've got to believe me!" he said thickly. "I honestly and truly don't know what you're talking about. I walked in here about five minutes before you showed up. I thought Lowry might have a drink around. Damn it, man, I'm telling the truth!"

"Sock him one, Pat," Nickie's voice said. "Let him have it. He'll crack."

Sherwin spun about to see Nickie just inside the door.

He said ominously: "What did I say I'd do if you followed me up here?"

"Jeepers, I'd rather take a lickin' a million times than sit down there worryin' about you," Nickie said. "I just couldn't stand it, see? Go to work on him. You can take care o' me later."

Sherwin passed his hand across his eyes, then he slid it down over the rest of his battered face.

"I want you to tell me the truth, Nickie," he said slowly. "Did you really think I would beat him up? I want to know that. It's important. It's lots more important than—"

He paused as the sound of a sudden muffled crash came from beyond a closed door a dozen feet from where he stood. He walked toward it, pushed it open. And then he froze, his breath slammed out of him, a clammy paw suddenly fastening onto his heart.

It was a gray little bedroom. A man crouched with a gun near the open window. And a body made a still, blotchy island on the floor—the body of a man, lying on his side, with the hilt of a knife protruding from his back!

"Come in," the man invited softly. "Come in and close the door."

Sherwin took a step forward, swung the door shut behind him, stepped back so that he was up against the door. The two men faced

each other across the body that lay between them.

There was the sound of rain, sibilantly intimate as it came through the open window. There was the man's heavy, panting breathing. There was the silent scream of the knife between the dead man's shoulder blades. There was the poisoned feel of this gray world of murder.

And there was brutal understanding suddenly dawning on Sherwin. A killing here. The murderer had tried to get out on the fire-escape that traced an ugly lattice beyond the open window, and had upset a lamp the wreckage of which lay near his feet.

So there he stood, a killer thwarted in his getaway, aware that he now faced someone who could describe him, identify him. There stood a man with a gun who had already killed once and thus had nothing further to lose. Death was swirling in this little room...

"So I'm clumsy," the man said in a low, oddly impersonal, almost pleasant voice. "I'm clumsy in lots of ways. Don't you think so?"

He was a big fellow, bulky in a thick, camel's-hair overcoat which had an Army discharge button in the lapel. His face was broad and triangular, a high-cheekboned, Slavic face, yellowish with the heavy freckles on it. His eyes were bloodshot, his mouth crooked and bitter. Little balls of muscle bulged at the corners of his jaw. He looked like a man who had been on a long binge—still ugly drunk.

It was then that Sherwin saw something else that twisted his stomach into knots. A small figure crept into view on the outside fire-escape and crouched, framed in the open window, within three feet of the man swaying with the gun. It was Nickie, his face white and tight, his black eyes enormous.

Sherwin lunged forward. In a single cat-like leap, he cleared the body between them. And that was as far as he got. His foot came down on something treacherous and slippery. He felt himself slithering to the right, realized that he could not regain his balance.

He went down on his hands and knees, yelling as he fell: "Run, Nickie. Run!"

THERE was no crash of a shot. The gun must have jammed for the man now smashed down with it. Sherwin saw the sweep of the barrel slashing toward his head. He ducked the blow, reared up to his knees, and crashed a fist into the pale blob of face above him.

The man crumpled like a marionette suddenly severed from its control strings. His falling body brushed Sherwin's shoulders, and the automatic slid across the floor to touch Sherwin's left hand.

"Pat!" Nickie called from the window. "Oh, gee—Pat!"

Sherwin scrambled to his feet. He lurched

to the window, scooped Nickie inside. And Nickie clung to him, shivering, his arms frantic-tight around Sherwin's neck.

He said in a muffled voice: "I—I figured somethin' was wrong. So I tried the next room, and there's the same fire-escape. . . Gee, Pat, I don't feel so good!"

"Take it easy," Sherwin said gently. "Everything's all right now."

He turned as he heard the creak of a door opening. Hagen's chunky figure filled the doorway. Sherwin watched his reaction, and decided that if Hagen was in on this devilry, he was a splendid actor. His shocked amazement, manifested in the sibilant sound that he forced through his teeth, in the way he gaped at the two bodies on the floor, seemed genuine enough.

"You know either of them?" Sherwin asked.

Hagen looked up.

"Only Saxon. Lou Saxon. He's one of Lowry's pals."

"Which one is Saxon?"

"The pin-cushion for the knife."

"Jeepers, get me outa here, Pat," Nickie said, his nose buried in Sherwin's shoulders. "I don't like to be in the same room with dead people. Gee, Pat!"

Sherwin carried Nickie out into the studio, set him down and walked over to the telephone. Contacting police headquarters, he asked to be connected with Lieutenant Nelson of Homicide.

Presently, a lazy voice drawled: "Hello, Patrick, you luscious creature. What's on the griddle?"

"Murder," said Sherwin. "In Greenwich Village, at 217 Christopher Street, top-floor studio. You got that?"

"Check. What gives?"

"A man, stabbed in the back. I slugged the guy who did it. It looks like something all wrapped up in a nice little package for you."

"You're terrific, Patrick," said Nelson. "Is the maestro all through?"

"You might also check on a guy called Dennis Lowry, the guy who owns the studio, a cartoonist who's supposed to be working now at—just a minute." He turned to Hagen, who was watching him, fascinated. "Where did you say Lowry works?"

"A place called Blue Star Comics uptown somewhere."

Sherwin repeated it to Nelson, adding: "Lowry's nose may or may not be clean, but—"

"I catch on, Patrick," Nelson interrupted lazily. "O.K., pal, hold the fort. The Marines are on their way."

Sherwin hung up and told Nickie, huddled in a chair: "Stop looking so scared. It's all over now. Maybe you'd rather wait in the car, or go home?"

"Oh, I guess I may as well hang around.

Besides, I ain't scared. It's just the way I look when I'm figgerin' things, see?"

Sherwin scowled at him.

"You're not going to start that phony chiseling to pick up a buck or two, are you? Because if you do, if you try it just once when the cops get here—"

"I'll bring you a box to stand on," Nickie interrupted coldly. "I'll get you an American flag. You can't live without makin' a speech, can you? What's wrong with a guy exercisin' his brain?"

"Nothing, if you keep your yap shut," Sherwin said.

He realized the inadequacy of his retort, bowed to the futility of it all, and walked back to the bedroom. It was darker now in the little room, a gray dampness with the background dirge of the rain.

Watching the outlines of the two bodies, Sherwin felt a black depression beginning to creep over him. He had no curiosity about the why and wherefore of the killing. What mattered more was the evidence before him that men with diseased souls shared the world he lived in.

He switched on an overhead light and, in its harsh glare, was startled to notice that the murdered man's shoes were off his feet, lying nearby. Then he thought he understood—the body had been searched, thoroughly, methodically. The clothes were loose, unbuttoned, down to the vest and shirt. Several of the pockets were turned inside-out, linings showing, their contents spilled on the floor.

Even the hat lay with its sweat brim turned outward and the outer band disarranged. Searched for what? And had the killer found what he wanted?

He stepped around so that he might see the man's face in profile. It was a hard, swarthy, arrogantly handsome face of a man in his early forties, with sleek black hair, mustache and long sideburns. The eyes were open, glazed, staring.

A soft moaning sound from the other man shifted Sherwin's attention. He was lying on his stomach, one arm twisted under him, the other outstretched, as if still reaching for something. His fingers now moved a bit, drawing together. He was coming to.

Stooping over him, Sherwin first made sure he hadn't another weapon concealed on him somewhere. Then he lifted him off the floor and carried him out into the studio.

The man moaned again as Sherwin lowered him into a deep upholstered chair. His hat had come off, and now Sherwin noticed an ugly blue bruise at the hairline above his left eye. Caked blood outlined the welt. And fresh blood, due to Sherwin's knuckles, still trickled slowly from one corner of his mouth.

Quite suddenly, the man opened his eyes. He

remained in the slumped position a little while, his chin on his chest, evidently trying to catch up with himself. Then he sat up a bit and looked around slowly. Oddly enough, he seemed neither bewildered nor frightened. He merely looked around with his bloodshot eyes, then asked Sherwin in a voice that was steady enough: "What comes next?"

"The cops. You mind hanging around?"

Nickie pushed himself between them.

"If you shot my uncle, I'd ha' gotcha, boy!" he said fiercely. "I'd ha' gotcha if it took the rest o' my life, see? I'd cut you up in little teeny pieces and I'd feed 'em to the—"

"Shut up!" Sherwin snapped.

"Jeepers," Nickie wailed, "ain't I even supposed to get sore at somebody who might've knocked you off?"

Sherwin shook his head. And he thought drearily, *his fault?* Yet how could he have anticipated that the silly old women, the foolish business about the cat would lead to this? It would have been like expecting to find an obscene French postcard in an old family album. . .

He began pacing the studio. Minutes dragged. The man in the chair sat perfectly still, taking a beating deep in some private hell of his own. Then heavy footsteps sounded on the stairs. The door opened and Lieutenant Nelson led his retinue into the studio.

CHAPTER THREE

Blood is Thicker Than Water



NELSON was a big, bony-faced, sleepy-eyed man, with a taste in clothes that would have made a Harlem dandy drool with envy. His suit was a pleated green creation that might originally have been intended to cover a billiard table.

His Barrymore-type hat was a delicate fawn color, with spats to match. And the spectrum was fully represented in his silk shirt and hand-painted tie.

He looked around sleepily and grinned, delighted, when he saw Nickie.

"Well, whaddya know, Joe? The one-and-only old Nickie himself, the Sherlock in short pants, is on the job here! A full member of the firm now, Patrick?"

"Let's get something straight right now, Lieutenant," Sherwin clipped. "I don't want any of your sour humor where that kid's concerned. Lay off him!"

"You mean you're liable to get sore, Patrick?"

"If you want to take it that way, O.K."

"God forbid!" said Nelson. "You're my pal, Patrick, remember? Where's the bad news?"

"In the bedroom there."

"All right, let's go take a look, boys."

He Pied Pipered the others into the bedroom.

"Right away, the guy has to start arguments," Nickie sighed. "Over nothin', too. Jeepers, what a pill!"

"You'd better keep quiet," Sherwin warned. "I'm telling you!"

The man in the chair now stirred for the first time. He reached in his pocket, drew out a bag of tobacco and a package of cigarette papers. Without fumbling, his hands perfectly steady, he rolled a cigarette and lit it, taking long sighing drags. The expression in his bloodshot eyes was one of smouldering resentment. But he held a firm check-rein on his nerves.

At no time—and Sherwin had watched for it—were there any significant glances exchanged between him and Hagen, who shared a studio couch with Nickie. The man completely ignored Hagen, aside from the single slow look of appraisal when he had first come to. And Hagen, sitting with his legs drawn up under him, merely eyed him curiously from the couch.

Nelson came sauntering out of the bedroom. He bore on a tray, improvised from a piece of cardboard, various objects, which he explained as he placed it on a drawing table near Sherwin.

"Exhibit A, Patrick," his lazy voice declared. "On or near the stiff, we find the following: A forty-five Army automatic and a thirty-two revolver—former on the floor, latter in the dead man's coat pocket. Silver key chain, a couple of bucks' worth of change. Also a copy of *Variety*. And here's the gentleman's wallet. Patrick, you think I talk just because I like the sound of my voice?"

"I sure as hell do," Sherwin said.

"Yeah. O.K., so we pick up this wallet. We find a draft card—4F status—issued to Mr. Lou Saxon, whose current address is 226 Sullivan Street. He's got a suit at the Elite Cleaners—that he can be buried in. And he has a free pass, date expired—as is Mr. Saxon—to the Capitol Theater. That's about all, Patrick. You want to give now? In a few well-chosen words?"

"I'll tell you just part of it now, Lieutenant, so that these two lads don't get any ideas to incorporate into their stories. Some woman sent me here on an errand. I found Hagen here, the guy sitting on the couch. He told me that he lived on the floor below and had barged in looking for a drink. According to him, the person who owns this place is the Dennis Lowry I asked you to check on."

"Which same I did," said Nelson. "Lowry's been a busy little bee over a drawing board all day. Even had his lunch brought in. I sent someone to double-check it, and pick him up. Go on, Patrick."

"While I was talking to Hagen, I heard a noise in the bedroom there. I went over and

opened the door. You saw the mess on the floor. I saw it, too—the hard way. This guy”—he pointed to the man in the chair—“had a gat. He was about to sneak out on the fire-escape. I went for him. His gun must’ve jammed. Which,” he concluded grimly, “was a lucky break!”

“I’ll say it was!” Nickie chimed in. “Gee, Pat, goin’ after him the way you did is plain nuts. You seen me out on the fire-escape there when I sneaked around from the next room. You shoulda known I’d figger somethin’. And I did, too—only you didn’t gimme time. You shoulda waited until I shot the guy.”

“Until you *what*?” Sherwin yelled.

Nelson said cheerfully: “So Nickie packs a rod. Now that’s real cute. Let’s see the roscoe, Nickie.”

“Nuts, I wouldn’t pack a rod,” Nickie replied with cold dignity. “Me, I can take care o’ myself without one. I was gonna shoot him with this.”

He raised his left hand and exposed a rubber band around his thin wrist. Then he held aloft one half of a paper clip.

“I was gonna ping the guy on the back of the neck with this. Pat coulda gone after him right smack after I let him have it. It’d be easy, then. But that’s the trouble between me an’ Pat, Lieutenant. I never get no cooperation, see?”

Sherwin lifted a hand to his forehead and began kneading his temples.

Nelson made a whistling sound and said: “Time out, folks. Get towels somebody and wave. Good old Nickie, the one-and-only! But maybe we ought to get to work now. There’s the taxpayers’ dough to consider, and the majesty of the law can’t spend its time taking pratt falls. So, Brother Hagen, you were just visiting, eh?”

Hagen, startled by the question abruptly flung at him, dropped a lighted cigarette on his lap. He retrieved it and said: “Yes. And I don’t know a single damn thing about—”

“Maybe not, but tell us something anyway, pal. Pull a Mrs. Roosevelt on us. How did you spend the day?”

HAGEN shrugged. “O.K. Although I’m supposed to be a pretty good painter—an artist, Lieutenant—I’m also forced to be a member of the proletariat nowadays. A worker—in a toy factory. Hand-painted toys. I trotted off to work this morning, as usual. At twelve o’clock I went out for lunch. It was a liquid lunch, in a gin-mill. After I had a few slugs, I decided I liked it there. So I didn’t go back to work.”

“Just like that, eh?”

“Just like that. I stayed at the gin-mill until my money ran out and the bartender convinced me that my credit wasn’t good.”

“What gin-mill was that, and until what time

did you stay there?” Nelson prodded further.

“Harvey’s Bar & Grill, over on Sixth Avenue,” Hagen replied without hesitation. “It must’ve been between two-thirty and three when I left. You can check it with Eddie, the bartender there.”

“We will,” said Nelson. “Carry on, pal.”

“I sat in the park an hour or so, trying to figure out where I could promote a bottle. Then it began to rain. So I came home. I moped around in my place downstairs a little while, then I got the bright idea that maybe Lowry might have a drink up here. He never locks his door and he’s a pretty good friend of mine.

“I thought there was no one here when I came in. Certainly I had no reason to go into the bedroom. I looked in the kitchenette where Lowry usually keeps his liquor. There wasn’t any, but I did find a can of sardines. I was eating them when what’s-his-name?—Nickie’s uncle—showed up here. I guess this brings us to the end of the line, Lieutenant.”

“A good story-teller, eh, Patrick?” Nelson drawled. “If you’re awake, Johnson, you might, as a special favor to the lieutenant, frisk Brother Hagen. You’re looking for something small enough for the dead man to have hidden possibly in his shoe or the sweat band of his hat. That’s just to keep you occupied. A waste of time, actually, for, of course, our friend over here will tell us all about it.”

He strolled over and planted himself before the man in the chair. Three detectives also converged on it from the rear. One leaned over and put his elbows on the back of the chair. They went about it with unhurried, calm self-assurance, circling the man, hemming him in, already threatening without a word as yet spoken.

There was a sweat sheen now on the man’s broad, freckled face. But it was the only manifestation of tension he showed. Without looking at Nelson, who stood so close to him that their knees touched, he continued to puff leisurely on his cigarette.

Nelson said nothing, merely stood there. Soon the silence became audible. Silence—and the sound of the rain drumming on the skylight overhead. Silence that went on and on, ever-tightening. And still Nelson said nothing, seemingly asleep on his feet.

The man cracked. He half rose in the chair, dropped back and said thickly, his nostrils flaring, his big fists clenched: “Damn it, I’m willing to answer your questions. Ask them!”

Nelson looked surprised.

“Oh, I beg your pardon. I was thinking about something else. What’s your name, pal?”

“Wiley. Paul Wiley.”

“Thanks. You see how easy it is? Now just one more question, and we’ll be all through. Why did you shove a knife in that guy’s back?”

“I didn’t,” Wiley snapped. “I don’t—”

His voice broke off and he jerked back as Nelson suddenly lunged for him. Nelson's hands poised at the other's throat, then they dropped lower and he began adjusting Wiley's tie, straightening the knot, pulling down the shirt collar so that the triangular tabs rested neatly on either side.

Sherwin shook his head. The brutal things he had seen in the ring had never given him the queasy feeling that watching the beginning of this cat-and-mouse business by Nelson did.

Then Sherwin's eyes narrowed. Looking at Wiley, as he sat frozen while Nelson kept fooling with his tie, it suddenly occurred to Sherwin that there was something familiar about Wiley's face. Had he seen the man before, somewhere?

Nelson straightened and said in his lazy manner: "You know, the trouble with cops is that they're such damn busybodies. Persistent, too. I'll grant you that knocking a guy off can be private business. But I still think you ought to tell us about it. Why did you plant a knife in Saxon's back?"

There was a pause, then Wiley made a savagely helpless gesture.

"Maybe if you gave me a chance to explain. . . Look, I was strolling through the Village this afternoon and I passed an art shop that had some excellent abstractions—paintings—in the window. I was admiring them, when a man stopped alongside of me. A perfect stranger. ~~We got~~ to chatting. Lieutenant, does your man behind me *have* to breathe down the back of my neck?"

"Certainly not," said Nelson. "Halitosis, eh? Can't stand it myself. Back up, Smitty. So, Mr. Wiley?"

"The man told me that if I wanted to see some really fine work, I ought to call on a chap called Dennis Lowry, with a studio on Christopher Street. That's why I came up here. I knocked on the door. It was ajar a little bit. Someone said: 'Come in.' I stepped inside and boom!"

Wiley pointed to the bruise over his left temple.

"I was slugged. Knocked out cold. Didn't see who did it. When I came to, I was in that little room there, sick as hell. And lying next to me was a man with a knife in his back."

"Well, whaddya know, Joe?" Nelson asked in an astonished voice. "Just like a nightmare, eh? Dribble the rest of it out, Mr. Wiley. Just drop it anywhere."



HE feeling that he had met the man before somewhere strengthened within Sherwin until it became a conviction. There only remained two questions—Where? When?

Frowning, he kept staring at Wiley as the latter went on doggedly: "I was sick and I was scared. All I wanted was to get the hell out of there. I saw the open window and the fire-escape. I got up, took a step toward it, and knocked over a lamp. It made a crash. I heard footsteps approaching. I thought it was the killer returning to investigate. And then I saw that gun on the floor—" "Just lying there, conveniently within reach?" Nelson interrupted gently.

"Yes. I grabbed it." He jerked a thumb toward Sherwin. "You heard the rest from him. And that's the works, Lieutenant."

"You write scripts for the movies, Mr. Wiley?" Nelson asked politely. "No, you must be in the fertilizer business. You really expect us to believe a cockeyed story like that?"

"And maybe you got a cockeyed one on this end, too, Lieutenant," the detective who had searched Hagen volunteered. "Joe the artist here, who claims he stayed in a saloon until his dough ran out, has six bucks in his pocket. That, a draft card, two keys and a handkerchief is all I could find on him."

"Before you start reaching for the handcuffs, Lieutenant," Hagen said easily, "you can check in a minute that the bartender in that Sixth Avenue joint damn near knocked my head off when, absentmindedly—on-purpose, I

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ordered the last drink, finishing it before I sort of discovered that I had no more money. I met some merchant seaman I know just before I got home. He loaned me six bucks."

"Now that smells like a phony to me," Nickie said.

"What's phony about borrowing six bucks from a friend?" Sherwin said, annoyed. "It's just impossible for you to keep your mouth shut, eh? You're like that dizzy old lady who—"

He paused, swung to Wiley. His lips tightened as he suddenly understood why the man had looked familiar to him.

"You'd better hear the rest of my story now, Lieutenant, the part I held back on you," he said quietly. "It has a punch ending that just hit me a few seconds ago."

"Let it roll, Patrick."

Briefly, Sherwin told him about the two old women, what they had asked him to check, and the haymaker of a surprise delivered by the superintendent's wife when he had questioned her about Edward Paige, supposedly the person who had found the cat and the author of the note left at the Tenth Street address.

"So what I thought was a lot of damn foolishness suddenly made sense like—like a Tommy gun," he went on grimly. "Lieutenant, that old lady wore rocks on her fingers that would have knocked your eyes out. If some rats had her spotted, and if they either deliberately swiped her cat or just saw a lucky break in the cat being lost, it'd be a perfect set-up to lure her somewhere, wouldn't it?"

"Check, Patrick, and keep it rolling."

"But if a stick-up was all they planned—for the expensive jewelry she wore, for the fifty bucks they knew she would bring with her—why did they take the trouble to detour her through the Tenth Street address? I'm sure they just picked the name and address of someone in the neighborhood who had mail in his box, proving that he was off at work. Why did they do that? Why couldn't they have asked the woman to come here directly?"

"What'll you bet that, for his usual fee, the small sum of one buck, Nickie can answer that, Patrick?" Nelson murmured, his eyes no longer sleepy.

"I had it figured out a half hour ago," Nickie said matter-of-factly. "Heck, that's baby stuff. You want me to explain to the lieutenant, Pat?"

"Now, look," said Nelson, "maybe the lieutenant gets an idea, too, once in a while. In self defense, I think I'd better prove it. O.K., Patrick, the old lady might have told someone where she was going to pick up the cat. So they picked a name and address, left the note for her, which she'd be almost certain to take with her, that being the normal thing to do. And there the trail would end, so far as police investigation is concerned. Which means that we're not talking about a stick-up any more.

Now drive in the last nail, Patrick. Seal the cap. Why should anyone want to kill the old woman?"

Sherwin turned to Wiley. The big, red-headed man seemed indifferent to what was going on, his chin down on his chest. Hagen, leaning forward on the couch, his hands clasped on his lap, looked like someone in a hypnotic trance.

Approaching Wiley, Sherwin reached out a long arm. He cupped his fingers below the man's chin and jerked upward. He looked into Wiley's bloodshot eyes, into the swirling hell beyond those eyes.

"I was trying to place you before," he said slowly. "I thought I'd seen you somewhere. That was wrong. I didn't. But I saw and spoke to someone who looked like you, someone who has your high cheekbones, same width between the eyes, your nose. She's in my office now. If I picked up a telephone and asked her if she knew a man called Paul Wiley, what would she say?"

"Take your damn paw off my face!" Wiley whispered.

"If I take it off, it'll be to bash your face in! What would she say, Wiley? What would Aggie Bowman say?"

Wiley's eyes rolled. The freckles stood out starkly on his blanched skin.

"Yeah, I am clumsy. I sure am."

"What would she say, Wiley?"

"All right," Wiley panted. "O.K., damn you! She'd tell you that I'm her nephew."

"Suppose I asked her another question, that would run like this: 'Miss Bowman, is Paul Wiley in your will, and, if so, for how much, and does he know about it?' What would she tell me then?"

BLEAK despair now stared at Sherwin from Wiley's eyes. He turned his head away and replied in a precise, even, almost calm voice: "She'd say, yes, I'm in her will. She'd say that I do know it. She'd tell you that I'm in her will to the tune of two hundred thousand dollars."

Sherwin removed his hand from the man's chin.

"You rat!" he said softly. "You no-good, lousy, stinking rat!"

Wiley hit him then. He reared up out of the chair and slugged him at the moment when Sherwin turned to look at Nelson. It was a hard uppercut and it caught Sherwin on the side of the jaw, sending him staggering back against the wall.

"Hold it, Smitty!" Nelson clipped, speaking sharply for the first time. Then his lazy voice returned as he added: "He's all yours, Patrick. Take him apart."

Sherwin nodded and stepped away from the wall. He breathed heavily through his nose, his little chimpanzee eyes opaque now, and his

clothes suddenly looked too small for his body. He saw Wiley through a kind of haze, and he began advancing toward him, slowly, shoulders hunched and chin in, his long arms limp at his sides.

"Pat!" Nickie cried, sliding off the couch. "Gee, Pat!"

"Wait for me in the car," Sherwin said out of the side of his mouth. "Do what I tell you! Now!"

"Gee, Pat, I never wanna be scared o' you," Nickie said shrilly. "Not even for a second. Never, never, never!"

Sherwin stopped as if his body had struck some invisible steel wire stretched across the room. The brutal viciousness abruptly drained from him. It left him embarrassed and unhappy.

"That's right, Nickie," he said. "Not even for a second. We're going home."

"Now wait a minute, Patrick," Nelson murmured. "First, I want you to—"

"I said we're going home," Sherwin repeated curtly. "You've got your man, Lieutenant. What I want, right now, is air. I want to wash off the stink of this place. I want to forget there are guys in this world who, for dough, can plan to murder a sweet little old lady. I'm getting out of this lousy racket, Lieutenant."

"Now don't go blowing your top, Patrick."

"I already blew it—for the last time. So long."

"You're a strange guy, Patrick," said Nelson. "All I'd like you to do before you go, is to call your office. Tell the two women to wait there until I send a car for them. I don't want to have to start looking for them. And it seems to me you owe them some kind of a report, anyway, don't you?"

"Yeah, that's right," Sherwin agreed reluctantly. "I also owe them fifty bucks, the reward money for the cat. O.K."

He crossed to the telephone, dialed his office number, and was startled to hear a man's voice answer.

"This is Sherwin speaking," he said. "Who're you?"

"Me? Oh, it's Katz, the window washer. You should maybe want I should wash your windows today? It's stopping with the rain."

"I don't know," said Sherwin. "Since when do you answer my telephone? Where's Miss Bates?"

"On the floor. So it rings by the telephone, so I answer. You—"

"Wait a minute!" Sherwin interrupted. "Where did you say Miss Bates was?"

"On the floor. Breathing like a fish with the mouth. Maybe," hazarded Katz, the window washer, "by her it got faint on the heart?"

"Are you telling me," Sherwin said wildly, "that you walked into my office and found my secretary unconscious on the floor?"

"So what else am I telling you?"

"Isn't there anyone else there?"

"No. You should maybe want I should wash your—"

"Look, go get Dr. Bell in the building. And be quick about it. I'll be right over."

He hung up and Nelson said: "Keep Wiley and Hagen on ice until the lieutenant gets back, boys. You still in the Howe Building, Patrick?"

"Yeah. I've got my car downstairs."

"I don't like to walk, either. Follow mine. Let's go, Patrick—on the double!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Pistol-Packin' Grandma



HERWIN was racing down the stairs, Nelson close behind him, when a projectile shot past them. It was Nickie, using the faster medium of sliding along the banisters. He was waiting in the coupe when Sherwin reached it.

The big gray police car further up the block received Nelson and slashed away from the curb. Sherwin followed it. It was a wild ride. The cop driving Nelson had faith in his destiny, ignoring such things as lights, one-way streets and cross-traffic.

Sherwin had the jitters by the time they reached the office building. He ran inside, profanely stirred the languid elevator operator into a spurt of activity. Thirty seconds later, trailed by Nelson and Nickie, he burst into his office.

Miss Bates was now stretched out on the leather couch where the two old women had been sitting. Dr. Bell, a fat, bald-headed man, was making soothing sounds to her as he waved a bottle of smelling salts beneath her nose. The third person in the room was Katz, a wizened, gnome-like little character.

Sherwin's fears that Miss Bates might have been badly hurt were dispelled by the panting violence with which she now scrambled up off the couch. She focused on him a long, searching, up-and-down look.

"Thank God!" she said solemnly.

"That you're safe and sound. You *are* all right, aren't you?"

Sherwin shook his head.

"Let's get together here, eh? Of course I'm all right. Why shouldn't I be? I mean—"

"Those two monsters, those two old biddies, they were sitting right there." Dramatically, Miss Bates pointed to the couch. "The door was open." She indicated the door. "I was out there in the corridor." She swept her hand toward the corridor. "It was then that I heard it! Yes, Mr. Sherwin, I heard it just as clearly as if—"

"Now look, Miss Bates," Sherwin said grimly.

"I'm not giving you a screen test. Just tell us, quickly and simply, what happened to you."

"That's exactly what I'm trying to do. As I came up the corridor, I heard the two old monsters talking. The little white-haired monster said: 'Maybe we shouldn't have lied about the cat, but, on the other hand, we couldn't very well tell Mr. Sherwin that we sent him to keep a rendezvous with a murderer!' Then the tall, skinny monster said: 'Certainly not. Besides, we're already in trouble with the police, remember?'"

Miss Bates hissed the quotes and paused for dramatic effect. Sherwin shook his head, glanced at Nelson, took off his derby and passed his fingers through his hair. He said heavily: "Well, I'll be damned! Go on, Miss Bates."

"When I heard that—well, you can imagine!" said Miss Bates. "I came right straight in, turned the key in the door and stuck the key down my—well, I put away the key. And I said, politely but very, very firmly: 'You'll tell me immediately where you sent Mr. Sherwin and what this is all about, or I'll call the police.' The two monsters just stared at me. They wouldn't say anything. I turned my back to them for a second, to pick up the telephone. And it was then that the little white-haired monster—"

"Stop calling them that!" Sherwin growled. "Can't you just say—O.K., never mind. So?"

"So the little white-haired monster," Miss Bates repeated firmly, "said: 'Young lady, you'd better stop right there!' I turned, and there she was with a gun. Positively the biggest revolver I'd ever seen." She spread her arms apart as far as they would reach. "That big!"

"Jeepers, what a dope!" Nickie said. "A gun that big wouldn't fit in her purse. You measurin' for us a fish you caught?"

"You little punk, you'd better keep quiet!" Miss Bates warned. "Yes, there was that gun. And there was the mean murderous glitter in that little white-haired monster's eyes." She shuddered and concluded simply: "Things got black."

She went to her desk and settled down behind it like a ruffled hen that has just won a battle. Sherwin found himself shaking his shoulders, as if trying to throw off something foul clinging to them.

"Ten minutes ago," Nelson said dreamily, "she was a sweet little old lady, eh, Patrick? A sweet little old lady and a crummy nephew who, with another guy, was going to knock her off for the two hundred grand inheritance. Her reason for being suspicious about the man who said he'd found the cat made sense. Everything made sense. And then, Patrick, we got torpedoed! We didn't go back—we went under!"

He paused a moment, then continued softly: "Now we find that the sweet little old lady lied about the cat. She carried a gun in her purse.

She knew you were going to interview a murderer, which means that she knew about Saxon being killed in that bedroom. And the sweet little old lady is, in some way, in trouble with the police. Which last we can check quickly enough. And there's still our pal, Wiley, of course. So, Patrick, to horse! Let's go pound at Wiley some more."

"No, count me out," said Sherwin. "I had enough for one day."

"Come on, Patrick, don't be so discouraged." Sherwin tried to fight down the blind and vicious resentment he felt welling up within him.

"You don't get it, Lieutenant. I'm not discouraged. I'm disgusted. I don't want to dig in the muck. That's your job, and you're welcome to it. Me, I'll read about it in the papers."

"By the papers, it says no rain tomorrow," Katz put in politely. "You should maybe want I should wash your windows now?"

"I should want you should get the hell out of here!" Sherwin said. "You, Doc, thanks a lot, but I don't think we need you any more. Send me a bill. And I'll say so-long to you, Lieutenant. I've got a yen to be alone."

HE TURNED on his heels, walked to the communicating door of the inner office, paused, came back and grabbed Nickie by the scruff of the neck. Propelling his nephew ahead of him, he retraced his steps to the inner office. He slammed shut the door and plunked Nickie in a chair.

"That's so you don't get cute ideas about going with Nelson," he explained curtly. "You'll also keep your yap shut. There's nothing you could say now that I'd want to hear. Open your mouth just once and you'll get a licking. So help me, I'll do it, this time!"

Nickie settled back with an air of patient martyrdom. And Sherwin, pacing the office, felt as if he were enmeshed in something soft and hateful and treacherous that was beginning to stifle him.

It was bad enough that he had picked a lousy business which linked him with the world of the furtive and the slimy and the sinister. But he was also dragging Nickie into it. Nickie had chiseled himself in on half a dozen cases already. He was a bright kid. He was a damn bright kid. He was so bright that it sometimes frightened Sherwin.

And now that Nickie was learning about that other seamy, slimy world, was there so great a step between solving a crime and planning one? Did he really know what made Nickie tick? What went on inside of him?

"Right now," he said, pausing before Nickie, "this second, what're you thinking about?"

"That sorehead crack you made, that there's nothin' I could say to you now that you'd want to hear," Nickie replied promptly.

"What about it?"

"Well, you're wrong, see? There is somethin' I could tell you that you sure as hell *will* want to hear. I'll bet you a buck on it, too. An' you can be the judge. That's fair enough, ain't it?"

Sherwin stared at him helplessly.

"O.K., you're on," he said. "It's a bet."

Nickie waved languidly at the ornate little electric clock on the desk.

"It's ten minutes to five. Wimpie thinks it's ten to six. He's settin' the table right now. If you leave right away, you can just about make it. You want Wimpie to blow his top 'cause you're late for dinner?"

Sherwin nodded and reached in his pocket.

"There it is—one buck," he said quietly.

He walked out without further comment. But the ugly depression kept gnawing at him as he drove home with Nickie.

There were several reasons why Sherwin preferred to live in a tenement on the lower East Side. He had been born and raised in this squalid, teeming, poverty-stalked district. He was still a hero to the people who lived there—humble, hard-working people who trusted him and brought him their problems.

Also, a man of simple tastes, Sherwin considered any rental above that usually charged for a cold-water tenement flat to be a foolish extravagance.

He parked the coupe in front of the ugly red-brick tenement.

Nickie, breaking a silence that had lasted since they had left the office, asked coldly: "Jeepers, what you got to be sore about? I won the dough legit, didn't I? You don't have to sit there lookin' like Dracula!"

Sherwin wrenched open the door.

"I'm not an uncle to you, Nickie," he said with soft bitterness. "You don't think of me that way. I'm just a dope you're living with, a sucker who—Oh, hell, skip it!"

Nickie stared at him, wide-eyed, then he reached over and grabbed Sherwin's sleeve with both hands.

"We ain't neither gonna skip it! Sure, you ain't just an uncle to me, Pat. You're my pal, see? That's lots different. You get it? Gee, Pat!"

It lifted Sherwin out of the pit, up, up, fast, up to a mountain top and into bright sunshine. There was a sudden lump in his throat and fine, warm, shiny things stirred within him.

"I get it," he said. "O.K., Nickie."

He got out of the coupe, to be surrounded immediately by an admiring audience of a dozen ragged youngsters.

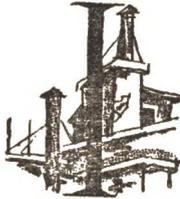
"Break it up, punks!" Nickie told them brusquely. "The Champ and me is tired. We had a big day, see?"

He strutted across the sidewalk, a pre-occupied man of affairs, and Sherwin grinned as he trailed him into the hallway.

This was the hallway in which, one bitter wintry night three years before, he had found the Bowery derelict whom Nickie had later christened Wimpie. Sherwin had carried him upstairs, revived him, listened to the most outrageous lies about Wimpie's supposed illustrious pre-Bowery past.

But one claim Wimpie *had* made good, when he had haughtily volunteered to prepare a meal. He *was* the best cook in the world! He had stayed on ever since, to Sherwin's never-ending amazement and gratitude, taking his wages in a quart of whiskey delivered to him each morning much the same way as other people get their milk.

Glancing at his watch, Sherwin saw that it was exactly five o'clock, which meant that in another minute his soul would again soar to esthetic heights on the wings of Wimpie's artistry.



IN A fine mood, the deviltry at the studio a forgotten nightmare, he trotted up the steps behind Nickie.

The hallway door from the stairs opened directly onto the kitchen, such being the quaint architectural arrangement of a railroad flat. Sherwin entered behind Nickie, and stopped dead in his tracks.

No marvelous smells permeated the kitchen, nor was the table set. Three elderly bums stared at Sherwin with shocked amazement. They were Wimpie's pals and co-sharers of his bottle, there every afternoon, with grim instructions from Sherwin to be out of the flat by a quarter to six. And there was the final evidence of the alarm clock near the stove. It showed the correct time—one minute after five.

Nickie looked around, bewildered, then he swung to Sherwin.

"Did you wind the clock this morning?"

No, I didn't, by God!" Sherwin replied, startled.

Nickie glared at him. With painful reluctance, he fished a dollar-bill out of his trouser pocket.

"So the clock stopped after I pushed it ahead," he said bitterly. "Wimpie went across to Mrs. Weinberg and got the right time. And *that's* got to cost me a buck!"

"Which just breaks my heart," said Sherwin. "Maybe it'll teach you that your crummy little tricks don't always work."

He added to the three bums who had skulked like so many old hounds closer to the door: "What's happened to Wimpie?"

One of the derelicts made a vague gesture toward the front part of the flat.

"Please, Mr. Sherwin, we didn't get our

rashers yet," he whined. "Can't we wait for our rashers?"

"Rashers? What's he talking about, Nickie?"

"Rations," Nickie explained impatiently. "Rations of grog. Wimpie is an admiral this month. That guy is gettin' nuttier every—" He paused suddenly. "Hey, Pat, don't it sound like Wimpie is talkin' to somebody?"

Sherwin flung open the inner door off the kitchen. Four under-furnished, immaculately sort little rooms extended in a sausage-link sort of arrangement. The fifth, terminating the railroad flat, was Sherwin's parlor.

It was from there that he now distinctly heard Wimpie's wheezy voice, saying: "Yes, you see before you a broken old man. Yet great power was once mine. Men quailed at my frown and fawned to curry my favor. And then I became enslaved by the fatal beauty of the woman who had started me along the road to ruin!"

Sherwin sighed and walked toward the parlor. He knew Wimpie too well to become alarmed by the gibberish he had just heard. Obviously Wimpie had tired of being an admiral, had decided to become an actor, and was now delivering a monologue before the mirror in the front room.

But an unexpected surprise greeted Sherwin when he entered the parlor. Wimpie, a little fat man with a huge bald head, the popping eyes of a frog and a nose that looked like a medium-sized sweet potato, was posed in a dramatic stance, brandishing his bottle of whiskey.

But Wimpie was not in front of a mirror. Nor was he alone. He had an audience—in Aggie Bowman and Martha Wyatt, ensconced comfortably on Sherwin's red-plush settee.

"Why, hel-lo, Mr. Sherwin," Aggie chirped brightly. "And there's that nice little boy, too. This gentleman has been entertaining us with some perfectly marvelous stories."

Sherwin took a deep breath.

"You tell pretty good stories yourself," he said grimly. "That was a slick chain of lies you and your friend dished out."

"This is preposterous!" Wimpie exploded. "Sir, how dare you imply that these charming gentlewomen—"

"Just one more word out of you," Sherwin interrupted, "and what's left in that bottle goes down the sink!"

Wimpie gasped and hugged the whiskey bottle to his breast with the fierce passion of a mother protecting her infant.

"It wasn't a chain of lies—exactly," Martha said coldly. "You needn't be so brutal about it. Once you hear our explanation—"

"Save it for the police," Sherwin clipped. "The only unfinished business still between us is the fifty dollars that was to be the reward for the cat."

"Oh, but you may keep that, of course,"

Aggie said. We intended all along to pay you for interviewing the murderer for us. Didn't we, dear?"

"Certainly," Martha said, nodding. "May I ask, Mr. Sherwin, why you refuse to listen to our explanation?"

"Because I know that in a couple of minutes you two will drive me nuts," Sherwin replied. "Damn it, I've had enough for one day."

"Ah, these masterful men!" Aggie cooed. "Of course, Mr. Sherwin, you will hear our explanation. It all began a week ago, when I first realized that I was being followed. By a man in a black hat and long overcoat. You are listening, aren't you, Mr. Sherwin?"

"I'm listening," Sherwin replied, nodding gloomily.

"I wasn't able to see the man's face, because he'd always follow me when it was dark, with his hat pulled down low and his collar up. The first time, he followed me home from the subway exit. Then I began to notice him lurking nearby whenever I came home. And then—it was last Wednesday, wasn't it, dear?—yes, Wednesday, it happened!"

"WHAT happened?" Sherwin asked uneasily, intrigued despite himself.

"I think I'd better tell it, dear," Martha said. "You'll get all fluffsied up. Aggie had been to a movie, Mr. Sherwin. It was after eleven, on a dark, drizzly night. Aggie parked her car in a garage a block from her home. As she walked up to the stoop, a man suddenly appeared there. And he lunged for her with a knife."

"Yes, a great big butcher knife!" Aggie corroborated in a thrilled whisper.

"Aggie screamed and ran. He would have caught her and killed her if a car hadn't turned the corner just then. It almost ran Aggie down, but the driver stopped in the nick of time. And the man disappeared. The people in the car did not see him."

"That's why the police were so skeptical," Aggie explained. "They thought I imagined it. Believe it or not, they thought I was crazy!"

"I can see how they might," said Sherwin drily.

"Well, she isn't," Martha snapped. "It's just that she sometimes gets all fluffsied up and sounds silly. Also the police at the stationhouse had another reason for being unsympathetic. We got into a bit of trouble a couple of weeks ago."

"How?"

"Oh, it was nothing, really," Martha said impatiently. "We thought we'd throw a party for a few servicemen. We invited fifty of them. I made a punch, but Aggie hates anything pink, so she put more white stuff in it to make it paler."

"White stuff?"

"Gin. It seems she put a bit too much in."

"To see fifty sailors, soldiers and marines roaring drunk under one roof is really stupendous!" Aggie reminisced happily. Then she added with quiet pride: "We probably had every Shore Patrol and M.P. in New York, as well as the police, rounding them up. It was really wonderful!"

"I'll bet it was," said Sherwin. "When do we get to the cat?"

"Oh, yes," Martha said. "Aggie, naturally, was frightened. She moved in with me and she dug up her father's pistol—"

"This," said Aggie, drawing a huge antique revolver from her purse. "Father used it in the Spanish-American War. I had a gunsmith come over to make sure it wasn't loaded. I thought it'd be enough just to point it—"

"Look," Sherwin interrupted, a strained note in his voice, "let's talk about the damn cat. You really own a cat?"

"Certainly I do," Aggie said. "Only Fluffy wasn't lost. I just made an awful fuss as if she were lost. And I put the ad in the paper. We thought if someone was still determined to murder me, the killer would see the advertisement, snatch at the opportunity to lure me somewhere and—murder away to his heart's content!"

Sherwin winced noticeably at her last few words.

"Someone did telephone, eh? That part of it was the truth?"

"Yes. We knew then, of course, it must be the murderer, since Fluffy was described so thoroughly in the advertisement that no one could possibly have confused her with another cat. Don't you, as a detective, Mr. Sherwin, agree it was a brilliant move to trap the murderer?" she concluded triumphantly.

"I, for one, most certainly do," Wimpie declared, interrupting a gurgling communion with his bottle. "Even in the years that I served as a special investigator for Scotland Yard and the French Sureté, I never encountered—"

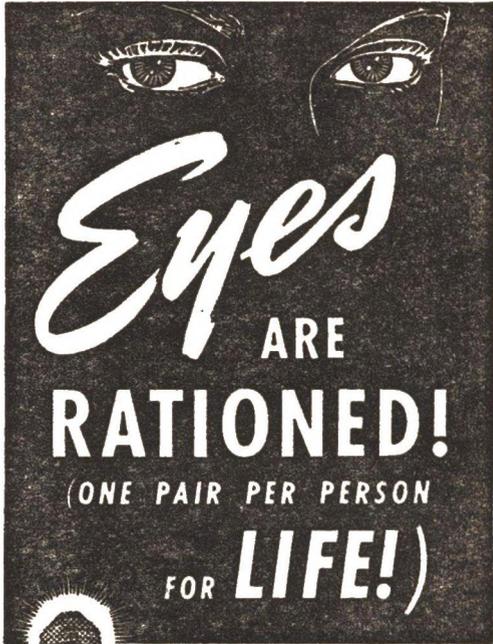
Sherwin silenced him with a scowl.

"There's one final question," he said. "Why didn't you tell me the truth, in the first place?"

"The police implied that I was out of my mind when I told the truth about the man attacking me with a knife," Aggie replied ruefully. "We were afraid of the same sort of reaction from you. We saw no reason why the killer should harm you. And we thought that once you met the man and saw he was a sinister character— You undersand?"

"Your secretary threw us into a panic. We didn't know what to say or do. I certainly had no idea she would faint. I merely wanted to stop her from calling the police. We fled from there and looked up your home address in the telephone book and— You're not too angry, are you, Mr. Sherwin?"

"No," said Sherwin.



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She beamed at him.

"Isn't he sweet, Martha, dear? And now, for heaven's sake, who was that horrible man? Why should anyone want to murder me?"

"Have you considered your nephew, Paul Wiley?" Sherwin countered quietly.

Aggie stared at him, aghast, incredulous. And then tears suddenly filled her eyes.

"That's who he was—Paul?"

Sherwin nodded. She bounced up off the settee, her eyes now very bright through the tears.

"Foxholes," she declared in the solemn manner of someone pronouncing judgment.

"Foxholes?"

"Isn't that what they call them? I mean, it's less than a year since Paul was discharged from the Marines. The boy was wounded twice and he had malaria, and there were all those awful months in foxholes. Where is he now?"

"Being questioned by the police," Sherwin replied. "He—"

"Now really, Mr. Sherwin!" Aggie wailed. "Weren't you just a bit hasty? Paul is a good boy. It's just that he's ill. He needs a physician, not a policeman. I don't want him to get into trouble with the police. Please, Mr. Sherwin, what do you think we should do?"

Watching her, Sherwin found himself unable at that moment to blurt out the brutal truth. He hesitated, annoyed by his own cowardice, aware that he was merely prolonging the inevitable.

"I think you'd better come with me," he said heavily. "Was that your taxi I noticed downstairs?"

"Yes. We instructed the driver to—"

"My car is the coupe parked in front of it. Tell the driver to follow it."

He turned and walked out, glad to escape for the moment.

CHAPTER FIVE

Blond Bombshell



NICKIE looked up with bland innocence when Sherwin wrenched open the door of his coupe.

"So it's getting to be a habit, eh?" Sherwin said wearily. "What's the excuse this time?"

"Does a guy need an excuse to take a little ride with his uncle? Besides, it'll give Wimpie a chance to finish dinner without bein' bothered, see?"

Sherwin recognized the veiled threat, and hadn't the energy to battle it out. He got in gloomily, started the engine and sent the coupe rolling when he saw the two old women enter the taxi behind it.

It was a short drive crosstown to the Greenwich Village address. The taxi swung in behind Sherwin as he pulled over to the curb. He got out with Nickie, lingered on the sidewalk until the two old women joined him, and then glanced over his shoulder as Nelson's big gray sedan slashed around the corner, parking in front of the coupe.

A thick-necked bruiser whom Sherwin knew as Johnson, one of Nelson's men, got out from the rear seat. He was followed by a tall, slender girl who wore a polo coat over her trim slacks. She had long auburn hair and a delicate, heart-shaped face. She looked frightened as she paused to stare at Sherwin and the two women.

"Aunt Aggie!" she cried. She darted closer to them, her high heels drumming on the sidewalk. "For God's sake, what's happened? This man—he's a detective—said there'd been an accident. To Paul or because of Paul—he wouldn't explain."

And then Sherwin saw a phenomenon. Plump little Aggie was actually at a loss for words for a moment. Then she replied cheerfully: "Oh, Paul's been sort of silly, Fay. It's nothing to worry about, really, darling."

"Of course not," said Johnson, grinning. He added, in answer to the query in Sherwin's eyes: "Wiley's wife, Pat."

Sherwin shook his head and led the way to the apartment building. Now he was sorry he hadn't told the old woman the truth. And sorry that Wiley's wife was such a sweet looking kid. It was a damned ugly mess, all right!

Whatever had been going on in the studio came to an abrupt halt when Sherwin led the group inside. There were bruises now on Paul Wiley's face that had not been there before. And the several detectives standing around the chair in which he was slumped looked as if they had been quite busy just a few minutes earlier.

Nelson lounged nearby, rocking on his heels, hands in his pockets. Hagen was still on the couch, his legs drawn up under him, exactly as Sherwin had left him. But another man now shared the couch with the artist, fidgeting nervously, a gaunt, sallow-faced man who, Sherwin guessed, must be Dennis Lowry, owner of the studio.

Nelson's lazy voice broke the silence.

"Well, whaddya know, Joe? Back on stage comes Patrick, my pal. And Nickie, the good old one-and-only. I see that brother Johnson has corraled Mrs. Wiley. And the ladies with you, Patrick, must be the pistol-packing' grandmas who like to live dangerously."

"Isn't he cute, dear?" Aggie gurgled. "Are you in charge here, sir?"

"But definitely. Lieutenant Nelson, at your service, madam."

"Well, Lieutenant, we've explained everything to Mr. Sherwin . . ."

"Which same Mr. Sherwin will now please re-explain to me, if you don't mind, Patrick?" Nelson put in. "I'm under the impression that it might save time."

"You're not kidding there, Lieutenant," Sherwin said.

He repeated what the two women had told him. It was more involved than he had thought, and he was sick of the sound of his own voice when he finally got through with the recital.

"Interesting," said Nelson. "Fascinating, in fact. Perhaps, madam, you now recognize as your nephew the man who followed you and tried to kill you?"

"Paul?" Aggie looked astounded. "Why, certainly not! That man was short and squat and bald-headed, with a horrible white scar across his face, and a patch over one eye. He was a Jap! That's what he was, a Jap! So you see," she concluded brightly, "it couldn't have been Paul."

In the brief silence that followed, a sudden derisive whistle came from Nickie.

"Jeepers!" he said.

Sherwin glared at him.

"Look, if you can't keep your mouth shut, I'll—"

"Relax, Patrick," Nelson murmured. "And there won't be any bucks paid out today, Nickie. The lieutenant is going to figure it all out himself, just to show off, see? Madam, I've already checked the description you gave the police. It was a nice try, though. What do you think of your aunt, Brother Wiley?"

Wiley blew out the match from which he had just lit a cigarette.

"She's terrific," he replied calmly. "Now I'll ask you one, Lieutenant. What's your impression of my wife? Lovely, isn't she? You'll also find that everyone will tell you she's as good as she is beautiful."

He smiled as he turned to the girl, and it was not a pretty thing to see—that twisted grin, while vicious hell flamed in his eyes.

"Why do you look at me that way?" she asked breathlessly. "Darling, what's happened to you?"

"Show her, why don't you, Lieutenant?" Wiley suggested.

"Sure," Nelson replied. "Why not? Come with me, Mrs. Wiley."

PUZZLED and frightened, the girl followed Nelson to the now-closed door of the bedroom. Nelson maneuvered it so that she paused, facing the door. He stepped back a bit, reached past her. With an abrupt gesture, he turned the knob and flung the door wide open.

The girl, startled, first jerked her head over her shoulder to glance at Nelson. Then she peered into the room. Sherwin heard a gasping sound from her. Her shoulders hunched and

her hands lifted to her throat. She backed slowly away from the door.

"A dead man," she whispered, in a horrified tone. "With a knife in his back. A dead man—"

She ceased speaking and stood there, dazed, her eyes wide with shocked incredulity.

"Wrong reaction, Patrick," Nelson drawled. "Very, very wrong."

"What're you talking about?" Sherwin asked tersely. "What reaction did you expect from her?"

"The reaction of a woman who abruptly sees her lover—murdered," said Nelson. "That's Wiley's latest. He changed his story."

"You mean he confessed to killing Saxon because the guy was fooling around with his wife?"

Nelson smiled.

"Nothing so simple. Hang on to your derby, Patrick. This time, Brother Wiley wrote a really spectacular script. It's a honey! And it goes like this: Wiley finds out that Fay is carrying on with Lou Saxon, to put it delicately, and has written Saxon a torrid love letter. So Wiley tears over to see Saxon. As a jealous husband with blood in his eye? Oh, no, Patrick. Wiley isn't mad. He merely wants to make a deal with Saxon to get that love letter and use it as divorce evidence to prove adultery on Fay's part. Because he hates her, see?"

"That's an understatement, Lieutenant," Wiley said quietly. "I loathe her. No, even that is inadequate. How would you describe the feeling of the inmates of Buchenwald toward their guards?"

"For God's sake, Paul, have you gone insane?" Fay said in a low, choking voice. She took a step closer to him, impulsively extending her arms, her lovely face white and drawn. "Darling, I don't know anyone called Lou Saxon. If it's the dead man in that bedroom, I never saw him before in my life."

The terrible twisted smile was back on Wiley's lips as he said casually: "I'll tell you something you don't know yet. Maybe even you will crack trying to deny it. I was in the little spare bedroom with the lights out. You didn't know I was home. You dialed a number and asked to have Mr. Saxon, of 226 Sullivan Street, paged to the telephone. That's how I found out his name and address. You spoke with him at least twenty minutes, discussing the beautiful weekend you'd spent with him, the love letter you sent him—"

"Stop it, Paul!" she said, a note of hysteria in her voice. "I can't stand any more of it." She pressed her hands to her temples. "You've had a nightmare, darling. I never made such a phone call. I wrote no love letters. Paul, you must be ill!"

"Of course he is!" Aggie confirmed quickly. "You must be patient with him, Fay."

She came over and placed an arm around the girl's waist. Martha edged in protectively on the other side.

"You've got to believe me, Paul," Fay whispered, tears now filling her eyes. "Please, darling—"

Wiley savagely flung away his cigarette. He reached up and tore loose his shirt collar and tie. He said evenly, without looking at her: "I read the letter. At first, Saxon denied knowing you. Then I made him a cold proposition—ten thousand dollars for that letter, if it was so worded that it would serve my purpose in a divorce court. That got him. He produced the letter, and held a gun on me while I read it. Your handwriting. Will you still stand there and deny that you spent last Decoration Day weekend in Asbury Park with Lou Saxon?"

"If she doesn't, I will!" a woman's angry voice cut in. "Because it's a damn lie!"



HE big blonde who, flanked by a detective, now entered further into the studio, hip-swished in a permanent spotlight of her own. No human being had ever been born with the color hair that fell in lustrous waves to her shoulders. She wore showy furs

and was laden with the kind of jewelry that has bulk and jangles. It was not her fault that her face was rather pretty beneath the war-paint. And although she overcurved plenty here and there, she still had really beautiful legs.

"Last Decoration Day weekend," she told Wiley, "Lou Saxon tended bar in a roadhouse called Twin Gables near Watertown, New York, which is more than six hundred miles from Asbury Park. What's more, I was with him, all the time. I don't know what you're pulling, brother, but that's stepping on my toes!"

Wiley stared at her, speechless. Nelson's lazy voice drawled: "We're moving again, eh, Patrick? Feel the breeze? By way of introduction, Fatima there is a gal called Betty La Mar who, according to Lowry, is supposed to be Saxon's sweetie-pie. I thought it might be interesting to bring her around, and it seems to be paying off fast. So what's your answer to her, Wiley?"

"She's lying!"

"Look, you dope," the blonde said curtly, "would I lie about something that can be checked in two minutes on the telephone? Lou's got his faults, but he never two-timed me."

"And he never will, either," Nelson murmured.

"Sure, I—" She paused and stared at him. Then she looked around the studio. Her eyes became wide and frightened as they re-

turned to Nelson. She said softly: "Do you mean what I think you mean?"

Nelson indicated the bedroom door.

There was a faint jangling sound in the dead stillness as Betty La Mar crossed to the bedroom. She looked in, and stood frozen for a few seconds. Then she shook her head, turned from the door, walked to a chair and sat down heavily.

"For some," she said, "it's a good world. And then there are people like me. Some day maybe I'll find out why, if there's a reason." She swallowed, her throat muscles constricting, and added bleakly: "What happened?"

"Wiley will tell us, won't you, pal?" Nelson said. "Write us another script, eh?"

Wiley lunged up out of the chair. A detective swung at him and missed. The big red-headed man knocked him down with a hard uppercut. And he kept going, plunging across the studio toward his wife. His eyes, his extended arms and hooked fingers, the bestial expression on his face, made obvious what he intended to do when he reached her.

He never did. Sherwin intercepted him. He hit him twice, and Wiley went down to his hands and knees.

"You can get up and take some more," Sherwin said quietly. "Or you can go back to that chair. Which will it be?"

Wiley remained on his hands and knees a moment, his head turtled upward, his blood-shot eyes watching Sherwin.

"It's the chair," he said. He smiled and repeated with new significance: "Sure, it's the chair. O.K., I'm through. That was the last spasm."

He had trouble getting up and he staggered when he went back to the chair. He lit a cigarette and said, turning to Nelson: "Sure, I'll tell you what happened, Lieutenant. It took me a few days to raise the ten thousand I promised Saxon for the letter. He called me this morning and made a date with me here for three o'clock. I was slugged, by someone I didn't see, the moment I passed through that door. I came to in the bedroom. Money gone. Saxon next to me with a knife in his back. Then Sherwin opened the door as I tried to get out on the fire-escape. You like that?"

"No," said Nelson.

"That's too bad, but it's what you're going to get, from now on. It's a record. Whenever you like, I'll put it on for you."

"Getting tough, eh, pal?"

"No. It's just that I don't give a damn any more."

NELSON smiled and swung to the blonde. "How about it, Betty? What do you think of Brother Wiley's script?"

"I can tell all I know in one sentence, I guess," she replied wearily. "When Lou left

this afternoon, he did show me a letter. An envelope, anyway. He said: "This is going to pay off ten grand, baby, and that's only the beginning."

"You're doing fine, Betty. Go on!"

The woman shrugged.

"There isn't any more. I asked Lou what he meant. He just laughed and walked out. He was always a secretive guy, and kept his business to himself. I've no idea what he was up to."

"He never talked about Paul or Fay Wiley?"

"Never."

"Was he chummy with Mike Hagen, the ruddy-faced gent sitting next to Lowry on the couch there?"

"Not as far as I know."

"How about as far as you know, Lowry?"

The gaunt, sallow-faced cartoonist jerked up and stared helplessly at Nelson.

"Why, no, I don't think so. As a matter of fact, it's been several weeks now since I last saw Saxon. And I had a fight with Hagen—"

"Why?"

"Oh, it's kind of silly, I guess, but he has a habit of passing out, with his radio going full blast. Like at four o'clock this morning, when I had to come down to turn the damn thing off."

"Now that's incriminating as hell." Hagen

grinned. "I'm still in the picture then, Lieutenant?"

Before Nelson could make any comment, Nickie said matter-of-factly: "Far's I'm concerned, you never left the picture. Sooner or later, I'm gonna figger it out."

"So you were quiet for a while, eh?" Sherwin snapped. "There's nothing to figure out. This whole damn thing is cut and dried."

"Nickie is still sniffing around for a buck, but there won't be any," Nelson drawled. "The lieutenant has made a vow. How do you add it all up, Patrick?"

Sherwin shrugged.

"Wiley is blowing a lot of smoke screen. Maybe he's already trying to set the stage for a last desperate attempt at an insanity plea. All I know is that somebody tried to kill Aggie Bowman. When that failed, somebody tried to lure the old lady here, falling for the trap that she herself had set. This 'somebody' turns out to be Wiley, who's in the old lady's will to the tune of two hundred grand. For Pete's sake, what else do you need?"

"Really, now, Mr. Sherwin, I thought you were on my side," Aggie said in an outraged voice.

"Well, whose side do you think I'm on?" Sherwin said, and scowled because it sounded so damn crazy.

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"Ignore it, Patrick," said Nelson. "And to conclude our summary—the Saxon angle fits in just as neatly. For ten grand, Saxon was going to help Wiley knock off his aunt. Only at the last minute, after the stage was all set here, Wiley figured he didn't need Saxon any more. Why spend ten grand and run the risk of being blackmailed for lots more? So he put a knife in Saxon's back, and hung around waiting for the old lady."

"If so," Wiley spoke thickly, "what happened to the ten thousand dollars that I brought here? You can check with my bank that I cashed in a bunch of bonds and other securities this morning, and walked out with ten grand in hundred-dollar bills. Where are they now? You searched me and—"

"The lad's tenacious, eh, Patrick?" Nelson said. "He's determined to go down fighting. Look, just because you drew the money from the bank this morning, doesn't mean that you couldn't have left it some place later, when you decided to pay Saxon off in cold steel. I'm pretty sure we'll find it, somewhere. And I'm hoping that by taking this joint apart we'll also find the letter."

Wiley tried to get up, and came within a hair's-breadth of being slugged by one of the detectives near his chair.

He stared at Nelson. "You agree, then, that there was a letter?"

"Fatima said there was, and I don't think she had any reason to lie about it. And somebody did spend considerable time and trouble searching Saxon. But I don't think it's the kind of letter that you described."

"What is it, then?"

"The ten grand you promised Saxon was just the down payment. There were supposed to be other instalments when you cashed in on your inheritance. So Saxon made you put something down in black-and-white, to make damn sure he got his dough. O.K.?"

"O.K.," said Wiley. He sat back and closed his eyes. "And that was the very last spasm. Yeah, I'm through!"

"What makes you think the letter might be in the studio somewhere, Lieutenant?" Sherwin asked.

"We know that Saxon left with it. Wiley hasn't got it, and he wouldn't have been in a panting hurry to destroy it if he had found it. You saw the way Saxon was searched, to the extent of practically undressing him, removing his shoes, looking inside the sweat band of his hat. I doubt if Saxon would've hidden it so carefully—on his person. But if he got here ahead of Wiley, if he had some suspicion that Wiley might slug him to get that letter back, Saxon might have got the bright idea to hide it in the studio somewhere. Maybe Fatima can help us a bit, too. What's on your mind, Betty?"

The big blonde was on her feet now, standing near the drawing table on which rested the contents of Saxon's pockets.

"This wallet—I gave it to Lou for Christmas," she said softly. "I bought him that silver key chain, too . . . The copy of *Variety* he got every week—he always had to read it through first before he'd let me look at it . . ." She bit her lower lip and looked as if she were choking. "Lieutenant, may I have the last copy of *Variety* that Lou bought?"

"You may," said Nelson. "And later I'll let you weep on my shoulder. Right now, just answer this—where did Saxon put the letter after he showed it to you and walked out?"

"The letter? Oh! Why, he just stuck it in the pocket of his raincoat."

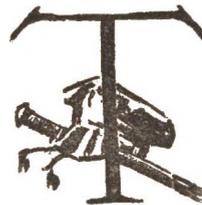
"Right. And so the lieutenant's henchmen will be busy little bees for a while. Go to work, boys. Start with the bedroom and cover every square inch of this joint."

Sherwin, standing at the bedroom door, watched them for a while. Then he heard Nelson's lazy voice behind him. "Hey, what's happened to Nickie?"

Sherwin spun about. Nickie was gone!

CHAPTER SIX

There's Dough in Murder



HE uniformed cop guarding the door said: "Yeah, the kid walked out maybe five minutes ago."

"Where did he go?" Sherwin snarled.

"Hell, Pat, how should I know? He just walked out and ran down the steps."

"Relax, Patrick," Nelson said. "I told Nickie there wouldn't be any bucks in it for him, so he probably got bored and took off."

"Nuts! Nickie wouldn't leave until it was all over. That kid's up to something. It scares me."

"Now you're talking like a fool, Patrick. What's there to be scared about?"

Sherwin brushed by him. There was a one-in-a-thousand chance that Nickie had decided to wait for him in the coupe downstairs. Ten seconds later, plunging out of the building, Sherwin found the car empty.

He got in and sat there, worry gnawing at him like a hungry rodent. Minutes dragged. Five. Ten. Then it suddenly occurred to Sherwin that Nickie might have telephoned the studio. He got out and tore up the steps.

"No," Nelson told him, "the good old one-and-only hasn't phoned. Patrick, I still think you're acting like a jittery dope."

Sherwin shook his head and picked up the telephone. On another one-in-a-thousand chance that Nickie had gone home, he dialed his

number, only to have a second surprise slammed in his face. The telephone rang repeatedly, but there was no answer!

"Damn it, Lieutenant, I can't understand it," he panted, hanging up. "Wimpie, my cook, never goes out!"

And then Wimpie's wheezy voice said: "Yes, that's true. However, this seems to be a special occasion. So, sir, I have braved the germs!"

Dumfounded, Sherwin stared at Wimpie, who had just come in. Nickie, next to him, held a foot-square package wrapped in newspapers.

"I used a taxi," Wimpie declared proudly. "Quite an experience. The creature who drove me to the pawnshop—"

"Shut, up, Fats!" Nickie snapped. "Just keep quiet, see? He added casually to Nelson: "Did you find the letter, Lieutenant? 'Cause if you didn't, I think I can tell you where it is. I mean, if it's worth a buck to you."

Nelson said dazedly: "Honest to God, that kid scares me! It's like meeting a talking horse. O.K., Nickie, we didn't find it. The lieutenant will renege on his vow, and it's worth a buck to him. Where's that letter?"

"This is just figgerin', 'cause I don't know for sure," Nickie said. "But that hefty dame told you that Saxon got *Variety* every week and she asked you for the latest copy that Saxon bought.

"Her askin' for that paper means that she figgered out Saxon bought it for a special reason. I checked downstairs that *Variety* comes out on a Wednesday, and today's Friday, so if Saxon got it every week, why did he wait two days before buyin' it? That there paper looks new, all wrapped up neat-like. So the special reason why Saxon bought it must have been to put the letter inside, thinkin' that if he was searched, nobody would think o' lookin' for it inside a—"

"Yippee!" said Nelson.

HE APPROACHED the blonde and snatched the rolled-up newspaper under her arm. Ten seconds later, he held aloft a pinkish envelope.

"Return address Fay Wiley, et cetera," he said slowly. "Mailed to Mr. Lou Saxon, et cetera. And inside . . ."

"Interesting letter, Patrick," Nelson's lazy voice droned. "In part one, Mrs. Wiley waxes poetical about the hours she spent in Lou's arms. And the romantic setting was, according to this, a cottage in Asbury Park last Decoration Day weekend."

"If you think I lied to you before," Betty La Mar said tersely, "all you have to do is to pick up that phone. Lou couldn't have been with her—"

"We'll check it," said Nelson. "To get back to this, in part two Mrs. Wiley makes a great to-do about warning Lou to watch his step.

because Paul is suspicious and would kill him if he ever caught up with him. Intriguing, eh?"

"Now wait a minute," Sherwin said. "If Saxon's girl told the truth, then this letter is a deliberate phony. Wiley's wife must've known Paul was listening in the bedroom when she phoned Saxon. She also knew that Wiley would be willing to pay a lot of money to lay his hands on such a letter. So it was just a deal she made with Saxon to lure Wiley into bringing ten grand here. Then Saxon hit him over the head, got the ten grand—and somebody knocked him off for the dough."

"You're on the right track, Patrick, but you ought to ride a little further. Since the letter is a phony, then so is the warning in it about Wiley going homicidal if he ever caught up with Saxon. It must serve some purpose, eh?"

"What purpose?"

"Think, Patrick. Suppose Saxon is found murdered here, and Wiley beats it down the fire-escape—he'd be a damn fool not to—and then later, with the cops trying to find out who knocked off Saxon, somebody contacts Wiley and tells him that he's got the letter in which Fay warned Saxon that her husband might kill him."

"That guy," Sherwin said grimly, "could shake Wiley down for all he's got. And Wiley would have two hundred grand more—if his aunt should happen to die. So that fits in, too!"

"Yeah, this is something for the book, all right. What're you thinking about Nickie?"

"That you still didn't pay me the buck you owe me," Nickie replied coolly. "If you come across with it, and maybe would like to spend another buck, I'll tell you who killed Saxon!"

"Here," said Nelson. "One, two, three, four bucks. Now who killed Saxon?"

Nickie jerked his head toward the couch.

"He did, Hagen!"

"Swell," said Nelson. "Now let's not stop. How do you know it was Hagen?"

"It's this way: Hagen said he stayed at the bar until his dough ran out. Then he tried to promote a bottle and couldn't. He came up here lookin' for a drink. And he had six bucks in his pocket."

"He explained that," said Sherwin. "A friend loaned it to him."

"Six bucks?" Nickie shook his head. "That sounded phony to me. You borrow a couple bucks or a fin or ten bucks. I never heard of anybody borrowin' six, unless he needed it for somethin' special. All Hagen wanted was a bottle. And, anyway, why didn't he get a bottle when he borrowed the six bucks?"

"Look, Nickie," Sherwin snapped, "how in hell does that prove that Hagen knifed Saxon?"

"That don't prove nothin'," Nickie explained with weary patience. "I just kept thinkin' that there was somethin' phony about him suddenly gettin' these six bucks, and then hangin' around

here. Then Lowry talked about Hagen's radio blastin' at four o'clock this mornin'. Did you look in Hagen's place on your way up here?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I did, too. And I didn't see no radio there. I got to thinkin' that maybe Hagen got the six bucks for hockin' the radio. So I went down and made sure there was no radio in his joint. And I found a hock ticket in his overcoat, dated today, six bucks on a radio. But why didn't he say that before? Why did he have to give a phony about borrowin' the dough? It just didn't smell right to me, Pat."

"Go on."

"I called up Wimpie and told him to hop a cab and bring some dough and meet me in the pawnshop where Hagen hocked the radio." He pointed to the package he had set down on the floor. "This it is—Hagen's radio. Now ask him what I found when I unscrewed the back plate and looked inside."



HERWIN had seen Sanitation Department men emptying ash cans with the grayish film on their faces that Hagen now showed. The artist drew his legs further under him and clasped his arms around them.

"You'll find that it's an incredibly expensive little radio," he said calmly. "I made four packages of the hundred-dollar bills, and I lined them inside, replacing the back plate. Then I pawned the radio. It seemed a smart way of getting rid of incriminating evidence—in case something unforeseen happened."

"What was supposed to happen to Wiley?" Sherwin prodded.

"You know, I'm rather proud of my nerves," Hagen said. "Wiley? Oh, I didn't think he'd come to as soon as he did. I meant him to find himself alone with Saxon's body, and I left a window, facing the rear fire-escape, conveniently open for him."

"And the old lady?"

"Would have gone with me—strangled and in my trunk—when I moved out tonight. Later, her body would have turned up somewhere, a supposed victim of a hold-up man whom she had tried to resist. Not being able to find the letter on Saxon after I had killed him was very bad. Fay, we botched things up!"

The girl flung out her arms. She looked as if she were crucified against the wall.

"We?" she said in a panting whisper. "I knew nothing about what you planned to do. I was drunk when I wrote that letter. It—it was supposed to be a joke! I never dreamed—"

"You're lying!" Wiley said savagely, rearing up out of his chair. "You built this up over weeks and months. You taunted me with it.

You defied me to catch you with your lover. You knew I couldn't tear down your reputation as sweet Fay, the model wife, the perfect housekeeper. I'll bet you'll still squirm out of it, somehow!"

"It'd be a bad bet, Mr. Wiley," Hagen murmured. "She won't! Fay, you, as the modern version of Lucretia Borgia, still fascinate me. I still think you're unique and marvelous. But your cloak of hypocrisy has great rents in it now. You may as well drop it. We went into this thing together. Fay, we're going down together."

"Mike, you can't do this to me. You—"

"Fay, you were here in the studio with me just before Wiley arrived," Hagen interrupted coolly. "You saw me hide something. The lieutenant's searching party hasn't reached this part of the room yet. The thing is still where I hid it. You want me to show it to you, Fay. You know how I'll show it to you, don't you?"

The girl began to sway on her feet. And Hagen, a crooked smile on his face, added gently: "You've five seconds, Fay. One—two—three—four . . ."

"He's got a gun!" she screamed. "Between the pillows of the couch! Stop him, somebody—"

Her eyes rolled, and she made a moaning sound as she crumpled to the floor.

"You see, Mr. Wiley?" said Hagen. "It would have been a bad bet."

Sherwin released the breath he had been holding. One of Nelson's men found and removed the small automatic wedged beneath a pillow on the couch. Another lifted the girl off the floor.

Paul Wiley, standing in front of his chair, looked like someone who had just emerged from a steam room in which he had stayed too long. Little Aggie Bowman now darted toward him. He took her in his arms.

"I'm a silly old woman," she said, "and I'm very, very tired."

Nelson's lazy voice said: "I'll bet Nickie isn't. There's dough in murder, eh, Nickie? What're you going to do with all the money you made tonight?"

"Oh, different things," Nickie replied casually, hitching up his pants. "A guy like me has got expenses, see? You can keep these two-bits, Wimpie."

"Thank you," said Wimpie. "Mr. Sherwin, I've been without a drink for an incredible period. I feel strange diseases stirring within—"

"We're going home," said Sherwin.

"Home Sweet Home, eh, Patrick?" said Nelson.

Sherwin looked at Nickie, who grinned back at him. He glanced at Wimpie, with his absurd derby and long overcoat.

"Yeah, that's it, exactly, Lieutenant," he said. "Home Sweet Home!"

An O'Hanna Novelette

Buddleigh Custain, the balding playboy, had earned a coast-to-coast rep for financial folly and firewater frolics. Yet, incredibly, here he was at the swank San Alpa, a respectable married man, with an Ozark bride. Then the lassie's kinfolk turned up to give her an Arkansas shivaree—inocent hill-billy fun, even though it ended in some pretty fancy knife-play.

There was a dead man folded up in the tub, a corpse with a red-stained shirtfront.



I AIN'T GOT NO BODY

By DALE CLARK

CHAPTER ONE

San Alpa Shivaree



HE bridegroom's name was Buddleigh Custain. He was in a bad temper. Glaring across the San Alpa hotel office, he declaimed: "Luxury resort, pfaugh! Honey-moon chalet, piffle! Why, there's dirt all over our bridal bed chamber!"

Endicott, the thin-faced, graying manager of

the California mountaintop inn, was hurt to hear it. Endicott was self-convinced that San Alpa's fifteen-dollar-a-day-on-up rooms were tops in hotel accommodations—except for the de luxe, fifty-dollar-a-day chalets Custain was talking about.

"But that's impossible!" the manager exclaimed. "I can't understand it, can you, Mike?"

Mike O'Hanna was the house dick. He didn't look like one. The million-dollar San Alpa resort was a playground for Hollywood celebs and West Coast socialites, so a derby hat and last week's shoeshine would have made O'Han-

na as conspicuous as the bonfires left in Japan by departing B-29's.

Disguised in paying-guest attire—loafer jacket and chocolate hued slacks—O'Hanna had been studying Buddleigh Custain. Marriage, the house dick mused, had caught up with Custain late in his playboy career. The groom was on the bald-headed side of forty, with circles like small-sized bicycle tires under his bad-tempered eyes.

"It's hard to understand, for a fact," the house dick agreed. "It's routine for the hotel maids to clean up as soon as one guest checks out—"

Custain cut in. "Phooey on your routine! All I'm interested in is the inch-deep filth in that chalet. It isn't just a little dust, it's quarts of dirt, broken glass, and what-not else!"

Endicott echoed: "Quarts? It sounds like sabotage. Mike, we'd better go right down there and see what's up. . ."

O'Hanna led the trio through the softly lighted, modernistically-furnished lobby out into the last stages of twilight, where night gloom was swallowing the scenery of manicured lawns, colossal golf course, and warmed salt water pool.

The way went downhill, for the chalets—actually glorified tourist cabins—lay tucked hither and yon in the landscaped seclusion of pine and rustic oak. In the California scheme of things, a luxury hotel's outside cottages rate about the same as penthouse apartments in New York and Chicago. And in the San Alpa layout, the privacy of these imitation Swiss chalets made them favorites with the honeymoon clientele.

So there was nothing unusual about this setup, except, of course, the honeymoon itself. Maybe it was telepathy which made Buddleigh Custain hurry to match strides with the sleuth, leaving Endicott slightly behind. "Wait a minute," the bridegroom worried aloud. "There's something I better explain before you meet Charlotte, my wife."

"Well?"

"She's different. She isn't a society girl. She isn't one of those bleached blonde chorines I've always played around with, either. She's a sweet, unspoiled child of nature!"

O'Hanna nodded. He wasn't being told anything that he hadn't already gleaned from the gossip columnists. O'Hanna already knew, for instance, that "Buddleigh" was a family name, dating back to an ancestor who'd struck it rich in the '49 gold rush—just as the "Custain" came from a great grandfather who'd struck it even richer manufacturing shoddy Civil War uniforms.

Buddleigh Custain's ancestors had accumulated the wealth—all their pudgy, balding heir had left to do was spend it. In the course of doing so, O'Hanna well knew, the playboy had

earned himself a coast-to-coast reputation for financial folly and firewater frolics.

And now, astoundingly, this perennial bachelor and man about town had turned up with a hill-billy bride! Apparently it had all begun with a trip to Hot Springs, Arkansas, for the purpose of drowning a hangover in Bathhouse Row. After that, he'd gone off on an Ozarks fishing trip and—this was the incredible payoff—come back a married man, wedded to some mountain lassie who, so the gossip columnists gaged, hardly knew what shoe coupons were for.

O'Hanna figured it must have been the novelty, that the marriage must have happened solely because the hill-billy bride had been so different from other women the groom had ever met.

O'Hanna didn't say so. He said instead: "You're a lucky man. Congratulations."

THEY'D reached the honeymoon chalet, and the bridegroom paused on the natural stone front steps.

"I know, everybody's laughing up their sleeves at my romance," Custain intoned grimly. "That's O.K. by me, I've been scoffed at before. Only, I want you fellows to realize Charlotte hasn't had much experience with high-class hotel life. But she's a sensitive girl, even if she is unsophisticated, so I hope you'll pass no remarks to hurt her feelings."

It was as well he'd warned them. They'd no sooner stepped inside than they encountered the evidence.

First, there was the litter in the front hallway. Custain hadn't exaggerated—there was actually a quart of dirt and gravel and glass heaped on the floor.

O'Hanna dropped to one knee, frowned over the queer accumulation. Some of it was plain dirt, but some of it was white and yellow pebbles, and the glass shards were of a definite curvature.

Aloud, the house dick wondered: "Where the hell did it come from?"

It looked just as if somebody had dropped, and stepped on, a pair of thick-lensed specs!

"What's the difference? Obviously it's here." Endicott was shame-faced, as guilty as those guys in the ads who use the wrong brand of hair tonic. "Naturally, Mr. Custain, the management will move you and your wife into some other chalet right away. . ."

The reply came in a feminine contralto, thick-coated with a down-south drawl.

"You-all will do nothing of the kind! We'uns are not moving nowhere else, not after I scrubbed on my hands and knees to clean up this h'yar cabin!"

O'Hanna came to his feet, face to face with an alluring vision who could only be Custain's bride.

She was framed in the chalet's bedroom doorway. And she was pretty as a pin-up picture in the frame. O'Hanna had to hand her that.

She was pretty even minus makeup. A San Alpa hand towel was pinned bandana-style around her head, letting escape just a few curls of auburn hair. Another towel was grasped in her hand, this one bath-sized and soapy, sopping wet. Her sleeves were rolled high, her skirt hem pinned above her knees and—as the gossip columnists had intimated—she wore neither shoes nor stockings.

Endicott couldn't believe his eyes. The manager gulped: "You mean—you swept and scrubbed the floor yourself, Mrs. Custain?"

"It's just as I told you." The bridegroom was nettled. "Charlotte's not used to hotel life. She didn't know all she had to do was telephone, that maid service is included in the bill."

O'Hanna peered at the bald, baggy-eyed Custain. "Yeah, but where were you while all this housecleaning was happening?"

"I had a business appointment."

"On your honeymoon?"

Custain was hostile. "Yes, sir. We arrived here just in time to have dinner with my business representative, Jeff Tarrant. I had to discuss certain transactions with him, details that are none of your business. Anyway, Charlotte returned to the cabin and found this mess. I knew nothing of it until I'd finished chatting with Tarrant." The groom waved a fretful hand. "That's all strictly beside the point! It seems to me you ought to be busy calling down your employees for their carelessness, instead of handing me this where-was-I line."

It didn't seem so to O'Hanna. Out of grim past experience, the house dick had learned to distrust San Alpa's paying guests when their vagaries included such activities as sweeping and scrubbing floors. Too often, these minor oddments proved to be straws in storm winds, forerunners of future trouble.

Maybe, the shamus pondered, there'd been something on the bridal chamber floor besides dirt, yellow and white pebbles, and smashed eyeglass lenses. Possibly the debris had included other items the bride hadn't wanted a hotel maid to see.

O'Hanna played it diplomatically, said: "You're right. I'm going to give the guilty employee hell. Only your wife didn't leave things as she found them—I can't confront the maid with the original evidence. So, Mrs. Custain, I'll have to ask you to show me just how you found things in the first place."

He stepped toward the bedroom doorway, but the bride's arm barred him, her voice shrill. "You're not either coming in h'yar!"

The house dick narrowed Irish-gray eyes at her. "Why not?"

The bride tossed her towel-wrapped head, stamped her bare heel. "Because the floor's still damp, is why! I won't have it all tracked up with yore boots!"

Custain chuckled. "She means it. She wouldn't let me in there, either. She says when a woman's worked a couple of hours tidying up, she doesn't want a mere man barging in and spoiling everything, ha-ha."

O'Hanna handed him back the ha-ha. He said: "Ha-ha, working women are like that. But after all, your wife hardly can be classified as a domestic laborer, can she? Suppose I do track up her floor, that'll be the hotel maid's worry. She'll have to think of some better reason to keep me out—"

Noise outside interrupted him. A loud, gong-like clatter that repeated itself several times.

Endicott gasped. "My God, Mike, what's that?"

"It sounded," O'Hanna diagnosed, "like a cowbell."

The words were hardly out of his mouth when another sound effect boomed, louder and tinnier than the first.

Endicott gaped. "That was no bell!"

"Nope," O'Hanna assented, "that sounded more like a hot lick on a dishpan."

A giggle came from the hill-billy bride. "Land alive, I know what it is. Folks have found out we're new wedded. I can't let 'em see me like this. I've got to put on my pretties before I'm fitten to be shivareed."

She whipped inside the bedroom door, slammed it shut, keyed the lock.

Buddleigh Custain was blank-faced. He asked: "Shivareed? What the hell does she mean?"



OR the moment O'Hanna knew he was licked. Obviously, he couldn't insist on breaking into the bridal chamber while the bride was putting on her pretties.

The house dick took the setback with a shrug. "A shivaree is an old south-of-the-tracks custom," he enlightened. "It comes from the French—the correct pronunciation is *charivari*. It consists of the neighbors serenading a newlywed couple by blowing whistles and beating on tin pans."

Manager Endicott quivered resentfully as the cowbell and dishpan orchestra again assaulted his eardrums. "Neighbors? What neighbors? The kind of folks who patronize San Alpa don't celebrate marriages in any such wild Indian style."

O'Hanna had to admit this was true. San Alpa's platinum-plated clientele no doubt included numerous acquaintances of Custain, but they'd hardly turn out to welcome the hill-

billy bride with barnyard and kitchen sound effects.

In fact, the house dick reflected, the only serenade Charlotte Custain could expect from her husband's social circle would consist of behind-the-hand whispers and smile-garbed sneers.

He turned to the bridegroom. "Maybe you know what it's all about?"

The playboy was bitter. "It's probably just some cheap gag. The idea must be to poke fun at my wife on account of her humble origin, I guess."

"I don't care what the idea is, it's got to stop right now. That infernal bedlam must be disturbing the whole hotel," Endicott complained bitterly.

He flung his thin, stooped figure to yank open the door and glower out into the inky darkness beyond.

"You out there!" Endicott shrugged. "Cut out that racket. Stop it, I say, or I'll have you arrested for disturbing the peace!"

Raucous laughter answered the manager's challenge. Indeed, the burlesque band seemed to redouble its ear-splitting cacophony. It was as if the cowbell and dishpan orchestra had been merely tuning up before.

Endicott slammed the door on the double-strength din, and turned a fevered face to the house detective. "Mike, you gotta do something quick!"

Custain chimed in, too. "Sure, call the sheriff and throw them all in jail."

"The county seat is sixty miles away, and it takes Ed Gleeson an hour to drive it," O'Hanna remarked reasonably. "There's an easier way. I'm south-of-the-tracks Irish myself. Shivarees and wakes were the big social events in my boyhood, and the way I remember it, shivarees always end when the groom breaks down and invites the gang in for free cigars and plenty of drinks."

The bridegroom's eyes were angry over their bike tire circles. He fumed: "I'll do nothing of the kind. I'm not going to begin my married life by knuckling under to cheap gags at my wife's expense. Anyway," he challenged, "it's your hotel, and it's up to you fellows to maintain peace and quiet around here. As Mr. Endicott admits—everybody else in the hotel is bound to be disturbed almost as much as I am."

He had something there. He had Endicott by the short hairs, judging by the manager's look of misery.

"Mike," the manager moaned, "you better think of something else quick. It's getting worse than a traffic jam at Hollywood and Vine out there!"

O'Hanna gave a listen, decided: "There's too many of them for me to lick single-handed, so I guess I'll have to join them. . ."

CHAPTER TWO

Any Body Here?



E headed from the chalet's hallway into its front room. Cowbells and dishpans weren't included in the interior decorations, but the house dick's eye lighted upon a copper shovel and bronze poker in the rack of open fire-place tools. O'Hanna caught up these articles and swung back into the hallway, making for the rear, service door.

Endicott raced after him, expostulating: "My God, Mike! You're not serious? You're not going out there and make it even worse?"

"Shh-h." O'Hanna waggled his tools. "It's undercover work."

Stealthily, he opened the back door just wide enough to squeeze through it into the dense shadows under the chalet's eaves.

This one, the house dick thought, was like all mobs. It had a ringleader, a guiding spirit. Collar that guy, and the rest of the orchestra could be easily handled.

It was just a job of finding out who was giving the orders to the others, and in the darkness, none of the dishpan bangers would be aware that another merrymaker had joined their ranks.

Experimentally, he whanged the poker onto the fire shovel.

The clatter worked fine. In fact, the result was better than he'd expected.

"Yoo-hoo!" That's what it sounded like, though the whisper was half-hushed and dry-throated. "Is that you?"

Surprise froze O'Hanna into his tracks. The whisper had seemed to come from inside the chalet.

The house dick made his own, answering whisper as toneless as possible.

"Yeah?" he muttered. "Charlotte?"

It was the bride, sure enough. She said so. She murmured, "Yes, here I am," and O'Hanna caught the glimmer of a white garment inside an open window. She was playing it straight now, with only the faintest trace of the Daisy Mae accent. "Here, it's in the bathroom. I can't manage it alone, you'll have to help. Be quiet, don't make a sound. He's got some men from the hotel in the next room. . ."

Actually, there was little enough to worry about on that score. The cowbell and dishpan symphony was going on steadily, providing a noise cover under which you could have moved a piano.

O'Hanna dropped poker and shovel, drifted along to the window. Over its sill, he could see nothing inside the bathroom except the ghostly glimpse of something white the bride wore.

But the darkness was just as disadvantageous to her, since in the act of muscling head and shoulders over the sill the detective blotted out any trifle of lingering twilight which might have betrayed him.

"Ooh-h, careful!" she gulped as O'Hanna wriggled inside, scuffing shoeleather on the tiled floor.

He used the same guarded, toneless whisper. "Uh-huh. Where is it?"

"Right here," she breathed into O'Hanna's ear. "It's in the tub."

She gave him a little push in that direction, so that his kneecaps bumped the tub's rim. But even at that close range, the shamus could make out no more than a shadow blob dimly visible where it blotted out the whitish glimmer of the porcelain surface.

"Don't drop it, it's awfully heavy," the bride warned.

O'Hanna dug into his loafer jacked pocket, found a matchpad, struck a light.

From his cupped hand, matchflare flooded into the bathtub and reflected off the polished porcelain whiteness.

There was a man folded up in the tub. A dead man, obviously. A corpse with staring, glassy eyes, a gaping gold-toothed mouth, a badger-gray goatee. A dead man with a red-stained shirtfront.

The matchlight showed O'Hanna the corpse, and showed Charlotte Custain a glimpse of O'Hanna.

The bride moaned a muffled whimper of fear.

O'Hanna straightened, said: "So that's why you scrubbed the floor, why you wouldn't let me in—"

She made no move, no gesture at all. So that wasn't where it came from.

O'Hanna felt it plenty as it clipped his head, hard enough to spin him completely around as he skidded to his knees.

That it didn't put him completely out might have been due to those earlier O'Hannas who'd survived shillelagh warfare.

O'Hanna heard the bride's panicky squeal of fright, thought it was a long-distance sound that came in over a bad connection and a buzzing wire.

SOMEONE else was through the window, landing heavily to stumble against the house dick and smash a blind, wild punch into his face.

The punch didn't quite put O'Hanna out, either.

He managed, somehow, to fall forward instead of backwards, thus thrusting himself into his assailant's arms. O'Hanna's own arms circled the guy and hung on.

Hands tried to push the house dick away but O'Hanna hung on, struggling to his feet. Now

the other tried to pull free. O'Hanna hung on, as before. The pair of them started circling in a queer, stumbling, straining waltz-me-around, a dance as weird as the symphony of cowbell and dishpannery outside.

Suddenly, the other man found a sudden, surprising burst of energy. It powered him into a headlong crash-dive that took O'Hanna along with him, and spilled them both through the bathroom door out onto the fresh-mopped, still wet bedroom floor.

They rolled, clutching and kicking.

O'Hanna heard Custain's wrathful bellow, heard the bridegroom raining kicks and blows against the locked door.

That he heard Custain proved he was doing better, like a fighter who needs only a nine-count to be almost himself again.

He'd used up several nine-counts by this time, so now he freed one fist, loosed a poke at his antagonist as they squirmed on the floor. It was no great shakes of a poke, or so it seemed to O'Hanna. It seemed otherwise to the recipient, however, and wrenched a whoosh of pain from him.

It began to dawn on the house dick that he was winning this fight by default, that his antagonist had run out of steam, was trying to scabble away across the floor.

With this dawning realization came the patting of the bride's bare feet as she sped past to unlock and throw open the door.

Ceiling globe illumination rayed onto Custain's in-charging plump form, followed by the thin-framed Endicott, peering anxiously about.

O'Hanna came up on one knee, alertly watching his erstwhile opponent. But the scrap was all over. The fellow was flat on his stomach, gasping in hooked-fish style as he looked wildly around.

"Charlotte!" Custain roared. "Good God, what's been going on here?"

The bride's white gown was askew. She fumbled to adjust cloth over a generous glimpse of rounded, cream-hued shoulder.

"Why—why that man broke in on me!" she lied amazingly. "The other—I don't know, I guess he tried to save me."

It took an instant for the bad-tempered bridegroom to grasp her meaning, and then he got it all wrong. He lunged at the gasping, straw-haired, blue-eyed loser of the scrap.

"Tarrant, you—you damned scoundrel!" the groom panted. "What the hell were you doing in my wife's room?"

Tarrant didn't reply. He couldn't, with Custain's thick fingers massaging his windpipe.

O'Hanna stood shakily, fingered a bruise on his forehead.

"Break it up," the house detective ordered. "I came in before he did, anyway."

The bridegroom loosed his clutch on his victim's jugular, heaved himself erect to blink at

O'Hanna. "You? You broke in here, and—and —attacked. . ."

O'Hanna grinned. It was a sour grin, like the glance he sent the bride.

"Yeah, but I wasn't the first one, either," he vouchsafed. "There was a guy in the bathroom with her ahead of me."

Charlotte Custain tossed her auburn curls indignantly. "Buddleigh, he's making it up. He's telling you lies."

Despite what was going to be a black-and-blue pigeon's egg over his left eyebrow, O'Hanna felt this was one of those moments when he enjoyed house detecting. He chuckled, said: "Let's ask the guy in the bathroom, the dead man in the tub! You can see for yourself—"

The house dick strode to the bathroom door, heeled it wide with his palm—and stopped short, swallowed lamely.

There was no dead man in the tub. Or any sign that there ever had been any such thing.



HE bridegroom wasn't the only bad-tempered one now. O'Hanna's eyebrows fenced down a wrathful stare, his curled lips spilled an oath, as he surveyed the innocently empty, corpseless tub.

One thing sure—the glassy-eyed man with the gold dentistry and the gray goatee hadn't skedaddled under his own power. He had been helped, and not by Tarrant. O'Hanna had been tangling with Tarrant all the while. It had been somebody else, and somebody with more muscle than the curve-endowed bride.

The house dick veered to the wide open window, only to hesitate as he peered into the darkness. The cacophony of cowbell and dishpan was still going on out there—indeed, it hadn't slowed up for an instant during this now-you-see-it, now-you-don't disappearing act. From the sound effects, there were a dozen to twenty noisemakers at work doing their best to rival the uproar of a presidential nominating convention.

O'Hanna reckoned he'd have no trouble raising human game out there. From his boyhood, south-of-the-tracks memories, a chase was part of the good clean fun. Any one of them would take to his heels as the house dick approached. Only, a dozen to one, it wouldn't be the right one. The right one would be quietly melting away all the while.

The worst of it wasn't the body-snatcher's advantage of a minute's head start. The worst of it was that, given chase, all the fellow had to do was drop the corpse behind a bush and defy anybody to prove which one of the shivaree revelers he happened to be.

Studied from that angle, the weird combination of slaughter and shivaree wasn't absurd.

It had its practical points, O'Hanna admitted.

Only by mere mis-chance had the outlandish scheme fallen short of entire success, merely by a split-second error in timing had it failed to whisk the gold-toothed and goateed cadaver utterly away.

Tarrant had stood up, was peering into the bathroom, too. He ran a chunky hand over his straw-hued hair, settled his necktie with a jerk.

"So your story won't hold water?" he giped at O'Hanna. "Your *corpus delicti* is lacking to substantiate your accusations, or maybe you made the whole thing up in the first place?"

O'Hanna looked at him with sullen interest. Only Charlotte Custain's indignant tones interrupted his train of thought.

"That's right. You've made some mighty big-mouthed cracks about me," the bride challenged. "You'd better say yo're sorry or yo're liable to be law-suited."

O'Hanna shifted his sullen interest to the young woman. "You're taking the words out of my mouth—a law court proceeding was just what I was thinking of, too. Incidentally, the charge is going to sound an awful lot like murder."

The house detective shouldered his way past the bride, found Custain blocking his path.

"You can't get away with that kind of talk," the bridegroom fretted. "Can he, Jeff?"

Forgotten was the fact he'd been at Tarrant's throat moments ago. Tarrant seemed willing to forget and forgive, too.

The straw-haired man shrugged. "Talk's cheap, but I don't imagine he can do anything much. He's probably not a qualified officer, and his citizen's right of arrest is confined to the commission of crimes he's actually witnessed."

O'Hanna grimly plunged past to reach the hallway phone. "Operator, I want you to call Ed Gleeson on a suspicion of murder case—"

Endicott tiptoed behind him. "Mike, my goodness! You can't get the hotel involved in murder charges when, as Mr. Tarrant says, you haven't even got a *corpus delicti* to begin with!"

Ignoring him, the house dick went on: "Yeah, and tell room service to send down a couple of boxes of Corona-Coronas and a case of iced champagne."

Ignoring, too, Endicott's instant worry about who was going to pay for these luxurious smokes and drinks, O'Hanna flung wide the chalet's front door. The shamus raised a hand in an appeal for silence outside. "O.K., boys," he said genially, "You win by unconditional surrender. The drinks are on the newlyweds, so come and get 'em."

They came a-running. O'Hanna retreated out the back door, started a five-minute skirmish through the adjacent landscaped garden. The corpse, though, was not to be found.

Frustrated so far, the house dick returned to find the chalet's front room already thick with Corona-Corona fumes, perspiring room service waiters already handing around seconds of champagne, and Endicott hovering in the hallway in a state of near collapse.

"Roughnecks!" the manager bitterly applauded the celebrants. "Common laborers! Why, half of 'em are even wearing overalls!"

Endicott was saying it to O'Hanna, but a big hand crushed onto the manager's frail shoulder, a hearty voice boomed: "So what! The guys who made this country what it is wore working clothes to do the job. And besides, we haven't worn overalls all our lives, either!"

O'HANNA'S glance dropped from the speaker's broad, dent-nosed face to the bronze eagle discharge emblem on his denim jacket. The house dick became cordial. "You're fresh out of uniform, I see. Army or Navy?"

The dent-nosed man denied proudly: "Neither one. I was in the outfit that graded ground ahead of the Marines—the Seabees. I bulldozed dirt on half of them islands west of Pearl before the malaria skeeters caught up with me."

"I see. And which are you related to—the bride or the groom?"

The dent-nosed man was amused. "It's the same answer again. Neither one. To tell you the truth, I just happened to be in a bar down in San Pedro a couple of hours ago, when I walked a guy who said he was getting up a shivaree because his sister had married a millionaire. Then he asked us all to come along and help shivaree her, so we piled in my truck, and here we are."

O'Hanna nodded. "Her brother? Which is he?"

"Why, Hughie Fanch. The big curly-haired fella with the cauliflower ear." Dent-Nose looked around, blinked, shook his head. "That's funny. He's gone. But he was here just a minute ago."

"You're sure he was here a minute ago?"

"Hell, yes. He's been right beside me all the time—he was the one with the cowbell outside. Now, why's he missing the free bubble-water, I wonder?"

"I wonder, too," O'Hanna agreed. He crossed the hallway into the bridal chamber. Custain, his bride, and Tarrant were in a tight-lipped huddle. The bridegroom greeted O'Hanna with indignation. "Damn it, what's the idea of inviting that mob in here?"

"Don't blame me," the house dick cut short the complaint. "Take it up with your wife. I've just found out the shivaree was her brother's idea all along."

The playboy was taken aback. He stared at his bride, asked: "What brother? You never even told me you had one!"

The auburn-haired girl became ill at ease.

She faltered: "Goodness, Buddleigh, I never supposed you'd be interested in my kinfolk. From the way you always talked about introducing me to high society, land alive, I never dreamed you'd care to meet any of my relatives. I don't see that it's so important, anyway."

O'Hanna gave the bride a dour grin. "It's important to me, because I've also figured out something else. Your brother's name is Hugh, and that's what you said. It wasn't *yoo-hoo*, it was *You, Hugh* that you called from the window."

Tarrant started up from a chair. "If that's what she said, you've got to admit it clears me."

"It's a point," O'Hanna agreed, "but there are others. Come on, I'll discuss 'em with you."

He steered Tarrant the short-cut way through the wooded grounds toward the main building. O'Hanna took the short-cut style of talk, too.

"Just what the hell were you hanging around outside Charlotte Custain's window for?" he quizzed.

The blocky ex-athlete refuted the suggestion indignantly. "I wasn't hanging around. I had a long, two-hour conference with Custain, then after he left I discovered he'd neglected to sign an important business paper. I was going down there to get his signature, ran into that shivaree thing, and saw a man climbing in through a window. I heard Charlotte cry out, so I grabbed a rock and threw it at you, then I climbed in and tackled you under the impression you were a crook of some kind."

O'Hanna said: "It's a pretty good story, if you've really got an important document for Custain to sign."

"It's right here. I'll show it to you as soon as we're inside. But it's a secret—you mustn't bandy it around to one and all."

O'Hanna slowed to a stop inside the lobby entrance, examined the paper curiously. It seemed to be an articles of incorporation agreement covering some proposition entitled the Greater Ozarks & Arkansas Diamond Development, Ltd., par stock values totaling \$250,000. Buddleigh Custain, O'Hanna gathered, was to be president in return for putting up the money, Jeffrey Tarrant to act as secretary-treasurer, taking his salary in a stock split of 125 shares.

"Diamonds in Arkansas?" the house dick gulped. "What kind of a gag gives here?"

"That's the secret, and it's no gag. Buddleigh actually stumbled onto a diamond mine down there."

"He's cuckoo!"

Tarrant said softly: "I don't think so. I'm so confident I'm investing my professional services on a strictly stock-sharing basis. I've investi-

gated, and Arkansas is actually the one state in the U. S. where for years diamonds have been taken out of the ground on a paying commercial basis. It's been going on for the past forty years! Of course, the stones are mostly small ones, with flaws, but for industrial use they're perfectly O.K., and a swell investment to the bargain. It's the historical truth some of the stones weighed up to forty carats."

"I can't argue with history," O'Hanna admitted, "but there's a slight geological angle. I've always heard diamonds in the rough don't resemble jewels at all. Unless Custain is a professional geologist, how could he find a mine everybody else had overlooked?"

"He's a fool for luck," Tarrant confided, sighing. "Custain wasn't exploring for diamonds at all. He was fishing for small-mouthed bass up some Godforsaken creek, when who should he come on but Charlotte in swimming! The guy's a wolf for women, so naturally he stopped to talk to her. One thing led to another, and pretty soon they were parked on the bank having a gabfest. She happened to notice some peculiar pebbles where they were sitting and never having seen anything like them before, she kept wondering what they were. Custain humored her by promising to find out. He found out, all right—he'd been flirting on the top of a diamond mine. It couldn't have happened to anybody else!"

The house dick wondered: "Would you like to lay a slight wager?"

CHAPTER THREE

Newlywed—Newly Dead



DARTING company with Tarrant, O'Hanna headed for the lobby desk. "I've got a hunch. My subconscious tells me somebody made a phone call to San Pedro a few short hours ago. Probably would have been a person-to-person call, and the party in

San Pedro might be a Mr. Hugh Fanch."

The clerk consulted records, then came back and said: "You're right on one count, wrong on the other. There was a phone call to San Pedro, but the party there was a Mr. Henry Hurlong."

"Uh-huh. And the party here?"

"It's charged to Aristides P. Baker, room 229."

O'Hanna went up to 229, passkeyed himself in. Room 229 had the lived-in look of a place in which a man—or several men—have sat around chain-smoking, filling the trays with butts. The tracks on the carpet looked as though a couple of other guys had pedaled to and from the bathroom on bicycles.

O'Hanna followed these tracks, snapped on

the bathroom light and stared disbelievingly.

There was a body in the tub. A folded-up body of a man several hours dead. A corpse with glassily staring eyes, a gaping, gold-toothed mouth, and a gray goatee.

O'Hanna stepped close and took a good, lasting look at him this time.

The blood had come from a small, half-inch wide, close-lipped wound in the left side of the man's chest.

A wallet bulged the inner, right-hand breast pocket of the coat. O'Hanna flapped the wallet open, conned its passcard compartments. Aristides P. Baker, so his identification papers asserted, hailed from Five Mile, Colorado. He must have been a prominent citizen there—he'd belonged to half a dozen lodges, the Izaak Walton League, and Ducks, Unlimited. A snapshot showed him grinning beside a hoisted swordfish, another showed an eight-point buck he'd presumably shot. Photographically, the snaps were nothing to boast about, since they'd come from over-exposed, scratched negatives, but at least they showed that Aristides P. Baker wore eyeglasses and got around the country during his vacations.

He'd carried thirty-eight dollars in plain sight, but it was one of those wallets with a hideaway pocket for hiding larger bills.

The hideaway contained one half of a hundred-dollar banknote that had been folded and ripped neatly across its middle.

There were other pockets, and one of them contained a bone-handled pocket knife. O'Hanna looked at the big blade, looked at the wound, then took the knife to a bridge lamp in the adjoining room. It was a rarity for murdered men to carry the fatal weapon neatly tucked away in their trousers, but there certainly were blood traces where this blade hinged to the handle.

O'Hanna turned to the phone. "Send Doc Raymond up," he requested, and then gave his attention to the clothes closet. Baker hadn't unpacked, and his things were still in the one suitcase. Or, anyway, he hadn't completely unpacked. There was an empty corner from which he might have lifted a bag of sand for a faint sprinkle of sand had seeped in among the overnight supplies of pajamas and extra shirts.

The phone jangled as the house dick completed his fruitless search for a further clue.

O'Hanna lifted the instrument. "Yeah?"

The voice was blurred, toneless. It blurted: "Baker, you dirty rat, you can go plumb to hell! You can keep your stinking hundred bucks, too. I'm wise to your rotten racket, and I'm through fronting for you."

O'Hanna gulped: "Huh? What racket?"

"You know what racket, you skunk. You'll never get those diamonds, either, you louse. . ."

The voice ran on, but O'Hanna had quit listening to it. At the noise of knuckles rapping on the door, the house dick eased down

the receiver beside the phone to whirl and welcome Doc Raymond. He waved a hand at the phone.

"Keep him gabbing! Just mutter *huh* under your breath every time he stops for breath!" O'Hanna urged.

HE SPRINTED out of the room. There was no time to dilly-dally waiting for elevator service. He raced for the end of the hall, three-stepped his way down the stairs past the messanine to the lobby level. Legging it past the cigarstand and front desk, the shamus wheeled into the privacy of the switchboard sanctum.

"That call into 229, where's it coming from?" he barked.

A peroxide blonde turned her head, told him: "It's on the house phone line."

O'Hanna went out of there as fast he'd come, sprinted across the lobby to the little panel-walled alcove containing the house phones.

The bulking figure was bent over the corner phone, hand-cupping a handkerchief over its face as it talked.

"—and what's more, you deserve to be killed!" O'Hanna overheard. "It's a wonder that nobody ever caught up with you before this!"

The house dick chuckled. "It's a wonder, but somebody's sure caught up with you right now!"

The figure whirled, jerking the handkerchief away from dent-nosed features.

O'Hanna gibed: "So you're a Seabee fresh from the Pacific. You just happened to be at a bar when you got accidentally invited to the party—"

A fist threw itself at the shamus's jaw. O'Hanna slipped the punch, sent a shorter one to the other fellow's jaw. The big man didn't bother to duck. He cracked right back, and this time O'Hanna didn't duck fast enough. The house dick went wobble-kneed, dropping both hands toward his shoestrings.

Dent-Nose jeered, "Buttercup!" and came in for the kill.

O'Hanna flexed his knees instead of wobbling them, brought the uppercut from down in shoestring territory. The dent-nosed man went down only after he'd gone straight up four inches.

A familiar, horror-stricken voice complained behind O'Hanna. "Fighting in the lobby! What will people think?"

O'Hanna hadn't realized it, but that one wallop had bounced him completely out of the phone alcove. In Endicott's eyes, the house detective was guilty of the supreme sin—he'd committed violence right in front of an amazed-eyed huddle of fifteen-dollar-a-day-on-up paying guests.

O'Hanna's black Irish was aroused beyond

caring. He barked: "So far they've seen only the knockdown. Now let them stick around for the drag-out."

Suiting action to the threat, he stooped, twined his fingers into the dent-nosed individual's jacket collar, and snaked him bodily across the highly polished, parquet floor into Endicott's office.

Ashen-faced and quivering resentfully, Endicott trailed behind. He closed the door, assaulted O'Hanna verbally, righteously indignant. "Good heavens, man, that was crude! You're lowering this hotel to the level of a New York night club!"

"It would have been cruder if I'd jackrolled him in public," the house dick soothed, jackrolling the unconscious man's denim jacket as he spoke.

He uncovered a newspaper clipping in Dent-Nose's pocket. **MILLIONAIRE WEDS MOUNTAIN BEAUTY** was the caption under a wire-photo of Charlotte Custain. It wasn't the only picture of the bride. The dent-nosed man was also carrying a snapshot showing Charlotte's form knee-deep in water. It was no great shakes as a snapshot, since it had evidently been printed from a scratched negative, but O'Hanna beamed appreciatively over it.

There was yet another item, this one a bank check that was a year old and bank canceled, recording the payment of two thousand dollars and no cents to the order of one Henry Hurlong and signed with a flourish by Aristides P. Baker.

The house dick straightened, sighed his satisfaction. "I'd say that leaves just one more lap to run in this rat chase."

Flashlight in hand, he started on the last lap. It was a hundred paces down the driveway that he found the panel body truck. A glance at the steering post card of certification supplied part of the story—the truck was in the name of Henry Hurlong. Another glance into the paneled rear provided another part. There was a tarpaulin in the back, and a two-wheeled dolly of the type used for transporting weighty loads.

O'Hanna swung toward the Custain chalet. The house dick made his way inside, cut through layers of cigar smoke to reach the bridal chamber door. There was another of those tight-lipped huddles inside, this one involving Custain, Charlotte, and a rangy youth possessing flaming curly red hair and a cauliflower ear.

O'Hanna asked: "Hugh Fanch?"

The youth glowered. "That's me. What's eating you?"

O'Hanna chuckled. "The California law keeps gnawing at my mind. In this state, it's illegal to transport a corpse unless you've first obtained a permit to do same from the local police authority."



HE game-kneed ex AEF sergeant, County Sheriff Gleeson, halted in surprise inside the chalet. He'd encountered crimes at San Alpa before, but never had the setup involved a dozen-odd men in working clothes puffing Corona-Coronas between sips of imported champagne in long-stemmed hotel glassware.

"What's going on?" Gleeson marveled. "A murder or a masquerade?"

"It's a shivaree," O'Hanna responded, "and a cover-up." The house dick stepped to the bridal chamber door. "O.K., the rest of you can come out and meet the sheriff."

The auburn-haired bride emerged, her face as starkly white as her wedding gown, followed by the wrathfully perplexed Custain. The dent-nosed Henry Hurlong came arm-in-arm with Hugh Fanch, steel bracelets linking the wrists of the pair. Tarrant was trailed by little Doc Raymond, and the mourner bringing up the rear was Manager Endicott.

Tarrant was coldly antagonistic. "As Mr. and Mrs. Custain's legal adviser, I protest this unheard-of invasion of their privacy. Furthermore, I forbid them to answer any questions without my consent."

O'Hanna shrugged. "Who mentioned questions? I'm not going to ask any. This isn't a quiz program, it's the story-telling hour. I'm about to relate the fable of the fisherman who went casting for bass and caught a beautiful mountain lassie instead."

The San Alpan swung to his cigar-smoking, champagne-sipping audience.

"I leave it to you guys. Let's assume each of you was in the Arkansas Ozarks on a fishing trip. You'd waded up some back-country creek, and you suddenly came upon a gorgeous red-head clad only in a next-to-nothing bathing suit. I'd like to meet the guy who'd look the other way, who'd refuse to stop and trade chit-chat with the willing lady."

No one said a word.

"Naturally," O'Hanna stated, "no red-blooded sportsman in his right mind would be apt to run away from such a situation. That's step one, and step two is when the girl happened to notice some unusual pebbles along the creek bank. Not every guy would fall for it, but plenty of them would be intrigued enough by her to be interested in the pebbles, too. Especially when the girl gave them the build-up by mentioning that valuable gems had been found in Arkansas before! Step three is when the fisherman took the specimens to a geologist or a jeweler and found out they were diamonds in the rough. Step four is obvious—he'd rush to buy the ground the gems were found on, only to find the land belonged to a guy named

Henry Hurlong in far-off California. Thereupon, the sucker rusher off a letter to Hurlong, explaining he was thinking of building a cabin in the wilds and how would Hurlong like to sell his real estate? The answer—Hurlong's price for his worthless acres is two thousand bucks.

"Too late," O'Hanna sighed, "the buyer would find out the sad fact that the only jewels on the property was the handful the bathing beauty had brought with her. Too late he'd realize he had no legal recourse against Hurlong, since nothing was said in the letters or the deed about valuable mineral rights."

The bridegroom was on his feet, storming: "You're wrong as hell! Tarrant thought of that. He had me go back there alone and pick up a hatful of samples from the same spot—"

O'Hanna spread his hands, said: "Whoa! What gave you the idea I was talking about you?"

Custain glared. "What gave me—hell, you're talking about how I met Charlotte, aren't you?"

"Certainly not. I've haven't half got to you yet," the detective soothed. "So far, this is only the story of what happened to Aristides P. Baker. It's the tale of the two thousand-dollar check he paid Hurlong. He remembered it when he saw a newspaper picture of Charlotte, and read how she'd married a millionaire."

O'Hanna turned his attention to the white-cheeked, tensely watchful young woman.

"It's why Aristides Baker packed his suitcase and hurried here to intercept the honeymooners with bad news. The bad news was he wanted his money back, or he was going to expose you as the contact gal in this salted mine swindle. The proof he brought with him," the house detective added, delving into his loafer jacket, "was this snapshot he took of you a year ago."

"Wait a minute, wise-guy. You can't pull anything that raw!" The dent-nosed Hurlong was indignant. "It so happens you swiped that pic out of my pocket!"

Endicott winced alarmedly. O'Hanna was unworried. "It so happens you—or somebody—took it out of Aristides Baker's pocket first."

"Maybe you'd like to prove it?"

The house dick nodded. "You're setting 'em up in my alley, I'll knock 'em down for you. . . Baker carried a camera on his vacation travels. He liked to snapshot the game he hunted and hooked, and once in a while he even snapped candid pix of a pretty girl who wasn't looking. Only his camera had the defect of slightly scratching the film he wound through it, and the scratches on this picture match the faults of the other snapshots in his wallet. It's one of the wonders of our age of science," O'Hanna continued, warming to his subject, "that photographic negatives can be traced to the camera they came from, just as typing can be traced to a particular typewriter. And undoubtedly,

a little police research in Five Mile, Colorado, would locate both the negative of this bathing beauty shot and the camera itself."

O'Hanna's glance rested on the bride. "If I were you, I'd think twice before I risked my life by testifying you never, never saw the murder victim before today."

As she hesitated, moistening her lips, Tarrant's voice interfered. "You don't have to answer that, Mrs. Custain."

O'Hanna declared: "It suits me—if she doesn't care to deny that Baker came here to see her, that she had an ace-high motive for murder."

THE bride spilled her breath in a panting, cornered animal gasp.

Watching her fright-stunned eyes, O'Hanna added: "I forgot to mention a few other damning details. Aristides Baker also brought along a sample of Arkansas real estate which cost him two thousand bucks—in case he had to convince her husband. I picked up some of the pebbles in the sweepings, plus some bits of the glasses he was wearing."

Charlotte Custain had had enough. With a lithe twist, she came out of her chair. "I—I didn't kill him! I—I only found his body on the floor!"

The bride said desperately: "I—I was alone. It was when I came back from dinner, leaving Buddleigh to talk with Tarrant. I was terrified. I knew people would say just what you're saying—that I killed him."

She wrung her hands. "I just felt I had to take that body and hide it somewhere else! But it was too heavy for me to lift, and besides it was still broad daylight. So—so I phoned Henry and Hugh to come and help me. I thought I could get the corpse into the bathroom and keep Buddleigh from seeing it . . ."

The house dick grinned. "Only you weren't quite so helpless. You were smart enough to take Baker's key, make your phone call from his room, and incidentally make sure he'd left no evidence lying about to incriminate you."

O'Hanna faced the wide-eyed spectators in overalls, noted that most of them had let their cigars go out. He declared: "Now it's plain why you boys were invited. Hurlong and young Fanch had the dangerous job of moving a corpse out of here while, for all they knew, Buddleigh Custain might be in the very next room. It'd be the penitentiary if the bridegroom happened to hear a suspicious noise, so they schemed the cowbell and dishpan commotion to cover up the proceedings. Hurlong went to the bar first. He helped sell you the idea of joining the shivaree by pretending to be a stranger himself. Then if anything went wrong he could swear Hugh Fanch had been in the party all along. He led the shivaree concert while the kid sneaked in through a window, wrapped the corpse in a tarpaulin, and

toted it back to the truck. There he loaded it onto a dolly, wheeled it in the hotel back door to the service elevator, and returned it to Baker's own room—incidentally removing all the large bills from Baker's wallet except for one half of a hundred-dollar bill.

"At this point, Fanch and Hurlong traded roles. The former rejoined the party, and Hurlong slipped out. By that time, they knew I'd seen the corpse here in the bathroom, and it was a cold certainty I'd have little trouble tracing the identity of a gold-toothed man with a goatee. Hurlong called Baker's room on the house phone line, and when I answered he fed me a red herring theory with the torn hundred-dollar bill as bait.

"Had it worked," O'Hanna finished, chuckling, "I'd have believed Aristides Baker was a doublecrossing crook trying to glauum onto a genuine diamond mine! I'd have assumed that neither Charlotte, Custain, Tarrant, Fanch, nor Hurlong could have moved the body! I'd have reasoned I had to find some other plotters, plus a hatchetman with half a hundred-dollar bill!"

The quiet comment came from Tarrant. "And you'd have been right."

"What the hell," Sheriff Gleeson snapped uneasily, "do you mean by a remark like that?"

"I mean this. So far I've kept quiet as a matter of professional honor, for the sake of my client, Buddleigh Custain. But since Charlotte has talked, contrary to my advice, I wash my hands of her. The diamond mine is unquestionably genuine. As Custain started to tell you before, he sent me samples of the perodite deposit. The mine may be worth a million or more, and Aristides Baker was shooting for half of it. He came to me first, demanding a half interest for not exposing Charlotte. He claimed her marriage to Buddleigh was bigamous, because he had photostatic evidence"—the lawyer paused—"she was already the legal wife of Henry Hurlong."

Custain flung around in his chair, stared blankly at his child-of-nature bride. Her hands were over her face now, her body shaken with sobs. The bridegroom caught at his attorney's shoulder. "My God! That can't be true! The dirty crook was lying, wasn't he?"

"I knew it'd break your heart, Buddleigh," Tarrant sighed, shrugged. "I put off telling you until I had a chance to question Charlotte privately. In the meantime, Baker threatened her—and she killed him. The truth is, when you fell for her she gambled the earlier marriage wouldn't be found out. Later she'd divorce you and split the alimony with Hurlong."

He turned to Ed Gleeson. "Sheriff, the trouble with your friend O'Hanna's theory is that Charlotte could have paid Baker two thousand dollars if that was all he wanted. It was the bigamy charge that drove her to murder."

(Continued on page 94)

HAND ME DOWN MY THIRTY-EIGHT

By MERLE CONSTINER



All at once he heard a faint rattle. He arose to a half crouch to meet the peril—and then it hit him.

A sweet little town, Minniffee, if you didn't mind picking bobcat hair out of your morning oatmeal, shooting centipedes out of your sheets at night—and fishing stiffs out of cisterns. McGavock wasn't prepared for this last attraction, and no wonder. He thought he was up against a small-time thief, when this baby was playing big time — and not for recreation.

CHAPTER ONE

Murder—Southern Style



LD ATHERTON BROWNE, of Browne Investigations, sat in the bay window of the ancient hotel and watched McGavock lug his Gladstone up the terraced hillside. Early winter dusk mellowed the lobby, veiled the cut-glass chandeliers, the antique beryl maple wicket desk, the bead-

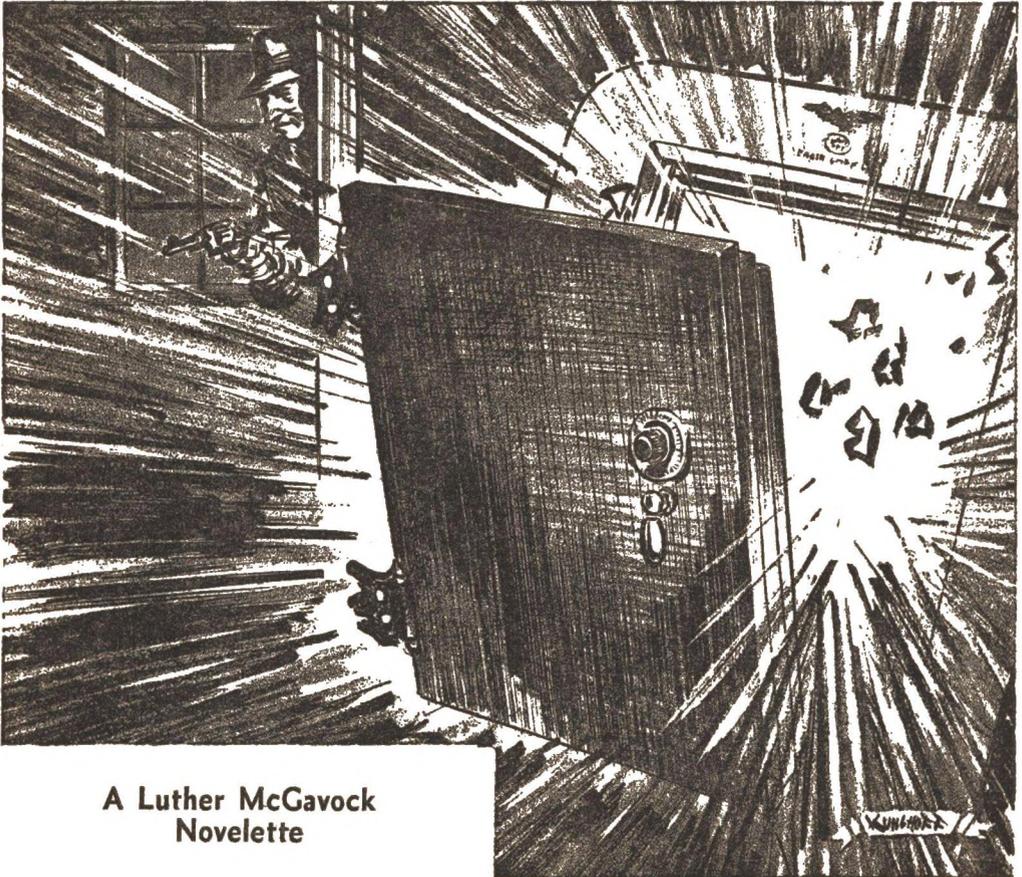
the antique beryl maple wicket desk, the bead-

and-bamboo curtain by the water cooler. Outside, the winter magnolias were like black cast iron in the twilight—the clay slope stretching down to the little hill town was laced by half melted skeins of wet snow. McGavock's hard heels sounded on the threshold. The old man turned on a table lamp, said fondly: "Luther!"

McGavock was buoyant. He set down his bag, nursed a newspaper-wrapped package to his breast. The old man asked mildly: "What's in the package?"

"Hunting boots. I borrowed them from Pete Coyle."

The oldster cleared his throat. "I'm afraid



A Luther McGavock
Novelette

you won't have much time for fripperies. I want you to check up on a homemade corpse. Also find out who's been stealing eggs and why."

Stunned anger furrowed McGavock's mouth. "But your telegram! You said you wanted me to join you on your vacation, chief. You mentioned deer!"

The old man's red-rimmed eyes clouded with concern. "Don't tell me I gave you the wrong impression! I simply meant I wanted you to join me here while I was on my vacation. I alluded to the deer to give the wire a—well, a sort of sociable, scenic touch. I hope you're not disappointed?"

McGavock began to shout. He was a small man, wiry and tough, with a touch of salt and pepper at his temples. There was something about him that stirred up instant animal antagonism in total strangers. He'd worked with about every major agency in the country, was a genius at getting results but was hard to take. He'd never had a real home until he'd tied up with old Atherton Browne's Memphis outfit.

Now he raged: "I won't stand for it! You can't do this to me! Eggs! He wants me to investigate some filched eggs!"

"You make it sound like a recipe, Luther. Filched eggs and parsley. Filched eggs and chicken livers. Filched eggs and shrimp sauce. I'm getting hungry." The old man smiled paternally. He was stooped, withered. As ancient as the ancient lobby.

McGavock said: "Excuse me if I don't join in the laughter." He scowled. "You were right here, yourself. Why didn't you handle it? Why send me a sneaking, treacherous telegram—"

"I'm getting along in years, Luther, and something's gone out of me. I'm not as brave as I used to be. And I have a feeling that this is mighty dangerous business."

Despite himself, McGavock looked interested.

Atherton Browne sighed, said: "Here's the setup. This is a sweet little town, this town of Minnifee, if you don't mind picking bobcat hair out of your morning oatmeal and shoeing centipedes out of your sheets at night. I've been coming here for years—"

"Then you know the town pretty well?"

"The town, yes. But not the people. I try to be pleasant, in my own way, of course, but they don't seem to respond to my pleasantries."

"I'll pass that one up. And—"

"Which suits me perfectly. I come here to rest. I rarely leave the hotel, except for an occasional stroll. However, by dint of great application, over a period of years, I did make one friend here. Knox Brackney was his name. I used to drop into his office now and then for a game of checkers. He was a good player but you had to watch him like a hawk. Used to work a sleight by making his move with the fingertips of his flattened hand and at the same time crooking his thumb under his palm and

making a second, secret move. It was quite a handicap until I learned to duplicate it. Good old Knox Brackney. He's dead now, of course."

"Of course. When did he die?"

"About twenty minutes ago."

McGavock was silent.

"I'll give you a little build-up on his character. He was lazy, likable, and, paradoxically, a man of violent temper. He was one of the two local bug-dust tycoons. Now please don't interrupt, and don't look so blank. These things are important back in the hills, you know. A bug-dust man is a part-time vendor, part-time peddler, who deals in insecticides, flavorings, extracts, game lures, snuff and other necessities of the life abundant. No backwoods church supper could be given without his cake colorings and pickle spice. Little sharecropper boys save his coupons and get steel traps, little girls save his coupons and get his hundred-and-forty-six-piece set of china for their hope chests. If you're a 'shiner's wife he'll bring you bottles from town and no questions asked. If he's liberal minded, that is. He knows his red letter Bible, the signs of the moon, and can add up a column of figures plus a profit in his head quicker than you can reach for a pencil. He generally deals in poultry and eggs on the side."

"Does he make money?"

"Who knows? I never heard of one starving, particularly if he handles a popular line and has a stranglehold on his people, his territory. This business of bug-dust territories is a touchy subject, to put it mildly."

"But to get back to my late friend, Mr. Knox Brackney. He came around here to the hotel the other night. First time he'd visited me since I've been coming to Minnifee. He had on his best blue serge and was boiling mad. He said he'd heard I headed a detective bureau and wanted to consult me professionally. Someone had been stealing his eggs. I told him I was on my vacation but he—"

"But he flattered you into it."

"He explained that eggs are valuable just now. Hens don't lay too much in the winter. They get wet feet and—"

"Let's omit the biology."

"Permit me to tell this in my own way." The old man blinked. "Sometimes you actually get under my skin, Luther. Well, I went down to his office with him and the more I looked into it, the less I liked it. He puts these eggs in cardboard cartons of a dozen each, and disposes of them to the local grocers. Three different times, on three different days, he had complaints from the grocers that a box was one egg shy."

"Just one egg?"

"That's right. That's what I didn't like about it. I couldn't reason it out. The cartoned eggs are kept in his office all night, under lock and key. That means on three different occasions

the felony of breaking and entering occurred. Loot—one egg. I wired you. Twenty minutes ago they told me Knox Brackney was dead." He paused. "What do you make of it?"

McGavock said absently: "The eggs were taken, of course, during the daytime, by some acquaintance of Brackney's. Why I don't know. My guess is that there was no burglary involved—simply petty theft. I don't like it either, to tell the truth. You get a feel in this business, and this gives me the creeps. There's plan, design, behind it. Figure it out yourself. Anyone can buy eggs, yet someone leaned over backwards to keep his acquisition completely anonymous. One at a time, on three different occasions. That's no prank, that's system. What happened to Brackney? How did he die?"

"A schoolteacher, a Mr. Lacey Frye, had broken the nosepiece on his spectacles and had left them at the jeweler's before he started home. All day there have been flurries of snow and right at that time it was pretty bad. He was driving home, half blind anyway, and turned into his yard. He ran Brackney down just outside the garage. No one knows what Brackney was doing at Mr. Frye's."

"What happened to Frye?"

"They're going to charge him with manslaughter. He said he saw an object sort of crouched in the swirling snow before him and threw on the brakes. He had on chains but the clay was wet and he couldn't stop in time."

McGavock nodded. "I see. And who is this other guy, chief?"

"What other—I don't—"

"You said Brackney was one of the two bug-dust tycoons. That means he had a rival."

"Yes. A man named Elam Gilmore. I never met him." Atherton Browne lapsed into pointed silence.

McGavock said quietly: "You liked this Knox Brackney, didn't you?"

"I'm too old to like anyone any more, Luther."

"You brought me clear from Memphis, and you're footing the bill yourself."

The old man said curtly: "I expect you to dig

up a client, and a fee." He turned off the table lamp. The room was suddenly sponged in gray shadows. The only highlights in the dusk were the glint of big-headed brass tacks in the worn carpet, the wink of glass eyes from a mounted quail on the mantelpiece, and the glow of the slumbering ruby in the old man's stickpin. He remarked casually: "I'll have your luggage taken to your room. Don't bother to report to me before you turn in. You may be out late. I'll see you tomorrow. Do a good job."

McGavock said, "Nuts!" and slammed the door behind him.

MAIN STREET was deserted. McGavock judged Minnifree to have a population of perhaps nine hundred. Folks were home, eating supper. Four clocks in the jeweler's window said in mechanical unison, six minutes after six. The sky had gone from indigo to jet as he passed along the abandoned sidewalk and now the snow began again, spasmodically, filtering downward in loose, moist flakes which dissipated against the sleek pavement and caught like milkweed in the fur of the wild, numberless dogs which wove in and out of light and shadow, ceaselessly, rhythmically, bent on nocturnal scavenging. There were no mockingbirds, no honeysuckle, no crinoline here. Just shabby shops, and dark, foul alleymouths, and a wet alien snow that was neither cold nor warm.

Snow and skulking, phantom mongrels.

At first he thought most of the shops were closed. Here and there a bright window threw a glaze of gold across the curb but for the most part the storefronts seemed lifeless and cavernous. Then he noticed that these, too, were open for trade. Far back in the entrails of the decrepit buildings he could make out their dim, frugal lights. Dusk had hardly vanished and already he had the sensation of being in a town of eternal night, a town where shops were kept by bats and mice.

Gilt letters on a windowpane said, Knox Brackney—Extracts. He cupped his hands and

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attempted to peer within, but it was as though he were peering against a polished black marble tombstone. He passed the square, vacant and desolate in the erratic snowfall, the stone steps of the stolid courthouse whitewashed by the opalescence from two ghostly, luminous globes.

On a side street back of Main, at the edge of the business district, he found the establishment for which he'd been searching. A one-story brick building, once obviously a shop of some kind, now converted to a semi-residence, sat back on a grassless, shrubless lawn as barren as a parade ground. A neon sign which squirmed across the porch like a mauve eel said, *Jno "Brother" Wilhoyt—Funeral Parlor*.

McGavock said, "We shall see what we shall see," and started up the pink cement walk.

There were two doors and two windows on the narrow porch. The windows had lace curtains and from the window on the left there came a pleasant rosy light. McGavock turned the knob and stepped inside.

He stepped into a cozy little living room. There was a comfortable powder-blue couch, several deep-cushioned overstuffed chairs, and an old-fashioned circular parlor table. A chunk of coal was burning in the little fireplace. The floor was honey colored with artificially grained varnish and covered with gay rag rugs.

A man and an eight-year-old boy sat side by side at the table. The man was chubby and clean, with twinkling blue eyes, and was dressed in a neatly-pressed cheap business suit. The little boy was wearing overalls. In feature and physique he was a diminutive replica of the man. The man looked up, smiled, said: "Salutations, suh. You've got the wrong door. This is my home. But enter and make yourself comfortable. I'll be with you in a second." The man paused. "I'm Brother Wilhoyt. Now let me see—"

On the table before him were three teacups and a quart fruit jar half full of buckshot. There was a puddle of buckshot on the tabletop, too. Brother Wilhoyt picked up the buckshot from the tabletop, put it in a teacup, and said to the child: "There you are. That's the answer. Just count them."

Interested, McGavock asked: "What goes on here?"

Brother Wilhoyt grinned. "I'm helping my son with his arithmetic homework. Occasionally he gets a problem he can't handle and I assist him. When John buys apples from Bill for \$10.38 and sells them to Charles for \$23.25, minus truck charges of \$5.00, and Charles sells 'em back to Bill for \$19.75, we find out how everybody makes out. I'm just a third-grader myself—so we do it with buckshot. This is the addition teacup, this-here is the subtraction cup, and this is the multiplication cup. It's tedious but simple. And now, sir, what can I do for you?"

"Do you have the body of Mr. Knox Brackney?"

"I do, brother."

"I'd like to see it, please."

"All of the town of Minnifee and half the county would like to see the body, brother." Mr. Wilhoyt beamed. "But it's not on display. It won't be released for public exhibition until tomorrow. Don't slam the door as you leave, brother."

"Stop calling me brother. I'm an infidel."

"That doesn't make things any easier, stranger."

McGavock said coldly: "Brackney was a friend of a friend of mine. I came here to contribute ten dollars for flowers. Shall I mail it to you from Memphis, or do you want it now?"

"You're leaving town immediately? That puts a different light on the matter. I want it now. You see Mr. Frye, who ran down Mr. Knox, is in the process of being charged with manslaughter and Sheriff Stites says lay low and fight 'em off." He got to his feet. "Sue Asbree was around with twenty dollars, by the way, and if she could see him, I suppose it's only fair—"

He led McGavock around a partition, through a door into the other side of the house. They passed through a display room of coffins and ferns and voile, and came into the workroom at the rear. Mr. Wilhoyt switched on a powerful reflector and the two men walked slowly to the middle of the room.

Knox Brackney lay on a crude trestle table. McGavock turned back the sheet. The bug-dust man was in his fifties, McGavock judged. His thin, almost fragile body was capped by a large intelligent head, a head with gaunt cheeks, a large horn-shaped nose, and a pendulous walrus mustache. He'd been badly mauled by the car and bore two sets of chain marks—one across his thighs, and one angling over his chest across his throat.

McGavock said: "Frye certainly slapped on his brakes, all right. Why are they charging him?"

"Frankly, because he isn't too popular, and Mr. Knox was well liked. Also he was driving without his spectacles. That was a criminal action, as he should well know. He's a school-teacher."

"You don't like this Frye either, I see."

"I don't dislike him. Folks just don't care for his manner, that's all. He claims if you haven't read Apocrypha in its original pagan gibberish, you're an ignorant man. Minnifee has been doing all right for a good many years, and I figure we can do all right for a good many more without—"

McGavock laid the sheet carefully over the body on the table, said: "Well, I'll be getting along. Thanks."



IN A vague chatty conversation with a talkative clerk in the drugstore, over a ham salad sandwich and a cup of weak coffee, McGavock learned some interesting things. Folks were mad, but not fighting mad, over Mr. Brackney's accident. Sue Asbree was a mighty good-looker, the daughter of Oglethorpe Choctaw Asbree, a once hell-on-wheels country criminal lawyer, now retired. Father and daughter lived in an old brick house on a knob beyond the cemetery. Everyone liked the Asbrees. Mr. Lacey Frye, *poovey!* lived in a yellow bungalow not far from the end of Laurel Street. Mr. Elam Gilmore was just Mr. Elam Gilmore, the extract man. He lived in his shop above the grain and feed store.

Just to test the reliability of his source, McGavock said: "There's an old man named Atherton Browne, out at the hotel. Do you happen to know him?"

"I've seen him," the clerk said dryly. "He's been in twice in five years. Once for a stick of gum and once for a postage stamp. Old as the hills and mean as home-brined kraut. I feel kinda sorry for him though. He oughta be able to find some gal who will stick him out."

"How so, my boy?"

"I've heered it knowrated that ever' spring he gits married and ever' winter he gits divorced. Come December, sure as heck, he gits off the train an' holes up over in the hotel. He claims he's on a vacation, but he cain't fool us. Who ever heered of a feller takin' a vacation in December? Fish stop bitin' about the middle of November! He's jest a-hidin' in that hotel room, lettin' his ole heart break, hopin' an' waitin' for spring so he can try it ag'in!"

McGavock said with relish: "It's true, my boy, every word. He's confessed it to me, over and over, from his own trembling lips. Don't take any of his checks, by the way. They're not worth the paper they're written on. And always wash your hands after he leaves. He's got a terrible invisible skin disease and it's very contagious."

The boy's eyes bugged. "Thanks for the tip."

McGavock said, "Don't mention it," and sauntered out the door.

Main Street was completely deserted and the dank pavement caught up McGavock's hard-heeled footsteps and flung them hollowly into the recessed entranceways. The snow had gone into drizzle, and the drizzle into haze, and now a fetid miasma hung in pearly vapor waist-high over the courthouse lawn, blanketing the macadam street, edging under the long marquee which sheltered the shopfronts. McGavock came to a casual stop before the door marked, *Knox Brackney—Extracts*. Once more he attempted vainly to peer into the impenetrable interior. No soap.

He took a ring of master keys from his pocket and was about to try the lock when the idea occurred to him to test the knob. The door was unlocked.

He wasn't sure whether he liked this or not.

He stood for a split second, thinking the situation over.

There were two plausible answers to this unlocked door. The first was that Brackney's office had been burglarized sometime during the evening. He cursed himself for not having tried the knob on his former visit.

The second answer was so simple and obvious that he almost overlooked it. Less than an hour before Knox Brackney had met with sudden and violent death. Ten-to-one, he'd merely walked away and left his office unlocked. Ten-to-one, the office—and its contents

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—were now, at this moment, exactly as he'd left them before he started on the mysterious pilgrimage which had ended so fatally. Silently, McGavock opened the door and entered.

Inside, he groped overhead, his fingers searching the top of the windowsill. Old offices such as this generally had a window blind. His touch located the roller. Quickly and deftly he drew down the broad runner of sized cloth. If the office had been dark before, it was Stygian now. The faint light of the street was cut off as by a knife.

McGavock reached for his flash—and the shots cut loose.

Three of them, heavy-calibered and almost overlapping, they slapped through the sleazy cloth at his side, whipped through the window-pane behind him. He took three noiseless steps to the right, dropped to his haunches. And listened.

He could see nothing. He could hear nothing.

Someone was in the rear of the long office. Someone who had watched him enter, who had no doubt waited and smiled as he pulled down the shade. His gun was in his Gladstone, far away at the hotel. McGavock was funny about his gun. He considered it a tool and never liked to carry it unless he thought he might need it. Well, he needed it now. He'd guessed wrong on this business. These babies weren't playing for recreation.

He began to imagine that his wrist watch was ticking like a dollar alarm clock and covered it with his hand to muffle it. He listened with an ear cocked to the street behind him. He wondered what kind of a town this was, anyway, where you could touch off three gunshots on Main Street and not have the law descend on you like a wave of seven-year locusts. Main Street was tranquil, quiet.

Five minutes went by.

All at once he heard a faint rattle. He arose to a half crouch to meet the peril—and then it hit him.

A shaft of heavy air hit him like a pile-driver, threw him to one side and slammed him against the quartered-oak door. A pattern of pain and noise flashed through his mind, the pain of numbed shoulders mixed with the sound of a short, explosive cough.

The next he knew he was on his hands and knees, fighting to stand up. His calves and back were seared with dull pain. As the cloud cleared from his brain he realized he'd been out, and wondered how long. Not long—for the odor of fulmination was still in the air. He got out his torch and flipped it on. Outside, in the distance, he heard an excited shout.

He played his beam about him. Halfway down the length of the room was an oldstyle, six-foot safe. Its thick door was hanging askew. On the floor was an old quilt, a box of razor blades, and a bar of yellow laundry soap.

Two small wires ran along the floor to the rear of the room and disappeared through a doorway.

"So that's it," McGavock muttered tightly. "A soup job. He knew the general principle but gave her enough to really go to town! Wow! He detonated it from the back room, out of harm's way, as the poet sayeth."

Out front were shouts, louder now, and racing footsteps.

McGavock walked past the wrecked safe, into a back room which was part wareroom, part living quarters, found a door to the alley, and stepped out into the night.

He strode along the treacherous, rutted alley for a full block, turned again onto Main, cut across courtyard—and headed for the home of Mr. Oglethorpe Choctaw Asbree, and daughter.

He was learning things, fast. And the most important thing he'd learned was that he was up against a deadly, cool-headed killer. It took a vicious, steady nerve to pull the stunt he'd just witnessed.

When he'd entered Brackney's office, and caught the lad red-handed, in the very act of safe blowing, his antagonist had played it shrewdly and dangerously. He'd taken his potshots at McGavock and then gone about his chore.

One thing McGavock knew now. He was either up against a very desperate person—or one of those rare madmen with absolutely no sense of human values. Neither prospect was particularly exhilarating.

THE house, rambling and indistinct, stood on the little knob, beyond a grove of leafless oaks, in half relief as though it were pressed into the humid winter night, into the shapeless, bottomless sky which hung over it. McGavock passed through stately wrought iron gates, now rusted and sagging on their hinges, and strode briskly up the old carriage drive. He half expected to see a chimerical carriage-and-four come barreling down upon him from the upper world, and to hear a stentorian spectral voice shout: "Out of my way, you blackguard, or I'll horsewhip you where you stand!" He even had a good answer, on the tip of his tongue, ready to shout back.

Winter-seared vines with dry leaves enmeshed the huge square pillars of the porch. The fanlight window above the massive door glowed blue and green and red in stained glass from the hall light within. McGavock mounted, the flight of five broad steps, crossed the wide veranda, and yanked the china-knobbed door pull. After a moment, he heard the clackety-clack of high heels and a girl opened the door. McGavock said: "Miss Sue Asbree?" He filled his words with grave implication.

The girl nodded curtly. He'd tried to pres-

sure her into inviting him in but she stood stockstill and staunch in the open doorway, suspicious and unfriendly.

She was small, and fairly young—maybe in her early twenties, with a rounded doll-like figure. Her hair, caught in an old-fashioned bun at the nape of her neck, appeared pure silver in the luster of the hall light behind her. Her frock was a modest print, but expensive—her shoes were expensive, too. McGavock was confused. He couldn't figure her out. She seemed to be three or four women at once, young and old, drab and yet insidiously attractive. He said: "Is Mr. Asbree at home?"

"Yes," she answered levelly, "but he's retired. He's had another attack of migraine and is seeing no one tonight."

"Fine. Then I'll come in. I'd like to talk to you—in private."

She said pointedly: "Sorry. I'm about to retire, too."

He registered surprise. "My God! What is this? Do the Asbrees have a milk route? It's just about seven-thirty, isn't it?" Before she could retort in anger, he said: "Very well. Have it your own way. I'll go. But let me give you a word of warning ere we part."

She eyed him with puzzled contempt. "Yes?"

His face contorted venomously. He said: "Stop writing those anonymous love letters to my brother-in-law. He's happily married and—"

Miss Asbree looked startled. She said: "Who are you and what in the world are you talking about? Maybe you'd better come in after all. This should be interesting. I'd like to hear it."

Out back, from behind the house, came a series of deep bull-fiddle barks. McGavock asked: "What kind of a cow is that? I never heard a cow bark before."

Miss Asbree said: "Those are my Newfoundlands. I raise them. I have five."

McGavock shook his head. "Think of that. Raising dogs in Minnifee is carrying coals to—" He followed her inside.

The hall light was an old-fashioned octagonal glass box, its low watt bulb insufficient to cut the shadows from the dark walnut woodwork. He hung his hat on an ornate, many pronged hat tree, wished he had an ivory-handled umbrella to put in the crockery umbrella holder. She led him past a drawing room where he glimpsed a wooden organ with a plush stool and high windows with mulberry drapes, past the dining room with a satinwood table and a sideboard gleaming with silver ware, and gestured him into her father's library.

The library was dank and chill. Its fourteen-foot walls were lined with books and in the interstices between the shelves were family portraits, primitives with salmon-colored flesh and staring geometrical eyes, children with the torsos of musclebound wrestlers, and ladies

and gentlemen in somber antique finery. A fire was laid in the tiled fireplace and, at Miss Asbree's request, McGavock struck flame to the paper. He tried three times before the kindling caught. Miss Asbree said: "I could have told you how to do that. But building a fire is a personal thing. It's like table manners—no comment is appreciated."

McGavock gave her a quick, hard look and sat beside her on the couch, facing the hearth. She composed herself, straightened her dress over her small round knees, said affably: "What's all this nonsense about love letters?"

The fire was blazing now, the fat pine kindling, dropping flaming rosin, was catching the quartered logs. McGavock said serenely: "I'm going to tell you the truth. It's a novel experience for me and I hope I survive the ordeal. I haven't any brother-in-law. That was just a gag to get me inside so I could talk to you—"

"Who are you?"

"My name's Luther McGavock. I'm a detective from Memphis." Outside, from the direction of town, he could hear a firebell banging away, hell for leather. Minnifee had discovered the wrecked safe, and the bullet holes in the office window, and Minnifee was telling the world. Main Street would be a hive of activity now and he was glad he was out of sight. It wasn't a good time for a stranger to be taking a promenade. In a few minutes the alarm would die down a lot of people would ask a lot of other people excited questions. Nobody could answer anything, and everyone would go home.

Miss Asbree asked: "If you're a detective, why do you come here to see me?"

"I'll put it this way," McGavock countered. "Why did you go to the funeral parlor a little earlier in the evening and pay twenty dollars to look at Knox Brackney?"



HE girl was thunderstruck. Finally, she said indignantly: "You twist it all around to make it seem horribly macabre. I didn't pay money to see him. I contributed toward flowers because"—her voice became almost a whisper— "because I was really the one who killed him. What's Knox Brackney to you, anyway? How do you fit into the picture?"

"He's a friend, Miss Asbree. Long ago, at the beginning of the case, he was a friend of a friend. But as things progress, we're getting more intimate. So you're the one who killed Mr. Brackney? Does Sheriff Stites know about it? I hear they're going to charge Lacey Frye with the *faux pas*."

She said earnestly: "In my own mind, I mean. I'm speaking of something that courts and

juries wouldn't understand. This afternoon I was downtown doing some shopping. Mr. Lacey Frye was standing on the curb, with his spectacles in his hand, tinkering with the nosepiece. I came up and said: 'Hello!' He squinted at me and said: 'It's Sue Asbree, isn't it? A week ago at the pie supper I mislaid my specs. When I found them some kid had broken the nose-piece so they won't sit right. I'm blind as a bat without them so I keep putting off having them fixed.' I said: 'Mr. Frye, there's no time like the present. There's the jeweler's shop right behind you.' You see?"

"He followed your suggestion, and went in the shop. So that killed Brackney?"

Her face was taut. "Of course."

He broke into a rough laugh. "Baloney!"

She said with dignity: "Perhaps I'm more sensitive to the complexities of life than you are."

"You sure are, sister, if that's the way your imagination runs!" He gazed unseeingly into the spluttering fire. "Tell me a little about yourself. Anything that comes to mind."

She said cautiously: "I'm just a girl—just an ordinary girl. I raise hundred-and-fifty-pound Newfoundland dogs and take care of my father. That's all."

"What do you mean take care of your father? Is he an invalid?"

"Of course he's no invalid. He can outwalk you and I bet he could outfight you if the notion struck him! That's just an expression. Unmarried girls always pretend that their parents need them, rely on them. It's just a conceit—"

McGavock asked harshly: "You people got money?"

She flushed, said frigidly: "I think you're being deliberately offensive so I'll try to remain civil. Yes, we have money. A little. We're not wealthy by city standards."

"I'm not wealthy by city standards either, but that's beside the point. How old is this Oglethorpe Choctaw Asbree?"

She said tenderly: "He's sixty-two."

"He's still young then. Why isn't he practicing law? They tell me he's retired."

She said calmly: "The heart went out of him when I was born twenty years ago. My mother died in childbirth. He's an old-time criminal lawyer, the kind you used to find in the backwoods, smarter than a vixen, a great presence, and with a law knowledge that's hard to beat. He was known through three counties and the boys at the courthouse can tell you stories about him all day long. He's a living legend hereabouts. When my mother died he began getting these migraine attacks and finally he had to shut up shop and retire." She folded her hands to hide their sudden trembling.

McGavock said: "Minniffee's a mighty nice town. Does it have any riffraff?"

Miss Asbree said viciously: "Lloyd Fawley's riffraff. I wish he'd leave town. When a hill-man turns bad he's poison."

McGavock nodded vaguely. All during their conversation she kept her eyes on a half-open door across the room. From where McGavock sat, the angle of the door made it impossible for him to see within.

He said solicitously: "Maybe if your old man would buy a hat he wouldn't have those headaches."

"But he has a hat. A black Stetson."

"Does he wear it to bed? There was no hat on the hat tree when I came in."

She wavered. "Sometimes he does take it upstairs, yes. Why?"

"You know as well as I do. You lied to me. He's not in bed with a headache. He's not even in the house."

He got to his feet, walked purposefully across the room and threw open the door. He'd expected to find a closet, but he was wrong. Beyond the door was a small room with a white enamel bed. The bedclothes had been turned back neatly. A man's dressing robe lay folded across the foot of the bed and on a taboret nearby was a half pint of whiskey and a bottle of Worcestershire sauce.

McGavock shut the door and faced Miss Asbree. She remained silent.

He spoke softly, rapidly. "So that's it, hey? That's Lawyer Asbree's chronic headache—drink. That's why he threw over his practice. Tonight, like every other night, he's out getting a skinful. Well, I suspected as much. You've got everything all ready for him, ready to put him to bed when he can't make the stairs. Ready to mix him his favorite pick-me-up come morning."

She said desperately: "There's nothing to do."

"That's what you think!" His eyes were dark, roiling.

She went with him to the front door. As he left, she asked seriously: "Would you say I was instrumental in Knox Brackney's death? I've got more than I can bear right now. And now this, added to the other things—"

McGavock paused on the porch step. He said pleasantly: "You didn't kill him unless you choked him to death with a, say, twelve-gauge chain. I've examined the body and it looks to me as though the chainmarks are of two distinct sizes. The tire chain marks on his chest and thighs are definitely larger than those on his throat. I seem to be the only person who has noticed—so I'm going to ask you to keep it to yourself."

She said slowly: "Choked with a chain. Why that's murder!"

"Yes, Miss Asbree," he declared modestly. "I came to the same conclusion." He slapped his hat on his head, turned up his coat collar, and started down the driveway into the mist.

CHAPTER TWO

The Missing Needlework



HE basement corridor of the courthouse was like a brick-lined cistern, narrow and vaulted. You got to it, McGavock discovered, by means of steep, half-spiral stone steps—not through a grating or manhole as seemed fitting and proper. It was lighted

by a feeble bulb set in a midget wire cage on the sweating wall. A man was industriously sweeping out the corridor with a frayed broom. He was a goatish little man and the red letters on the back of his baggy coveralls said, *Bert's Barbecue*. McGavock inquired for the sheriff's office and the man pointed wordlessly with his broom handle.

The big black capitals on the frosted pane read, *VIP STITES, OFFICE OF SHERIFF*. McGavock turned the knob and entered.

It was a small room, unpapered and untinted, left just as the plasterer had left it, and now, after years of dust, with the laths showing in streaks on the grimy white-coat sizing. There was a small filing cabinet, a big rolltop desk, and two dusty pictures on the walls, one of a little nightgowned girl in a snow storm putting a fistful of pansies on a grave marked *FATHER*, the other of a pioneer farm woman shooting a bear in the face with a flintlock while a rattlesnake curled about her leg and a foaming bobcat jumped down at her from leafy branches above her head. This one was marked, *An Afternoon in the Woods*.

A man lolled in a swivel chair with his feet in a pile of papers on the desktop. McGavock asked: "You Mr. Stites?"

The man said: "Yup." He was a big man, imposing, with a glossy black mustache and with reddish hair under his eyes. He wore a black Stetson and a black suit and was engaged in the fastidious occupation of picking infinitesimal and practically nonexistent particles of lint from his coat lapels with a pair of nose tweezers. He obviously didn't care to be interrupted.

McGavock said: "I'm afraid you people are off on a bum start. Knox Brackney was actually murdered."

Mr. Stites said heavily, without turning around: "You're too late, friend. We've already got it down as manslaughter."

The little geezer in the coveralls stuck his head in the door from the hall, waved his broom, said: "I gotta do the men's room upstairs, and then I'll be through." Mr. Stites nodded, went silently and studiously back to his lint-picking.

After a moment, McGavock tried it again. "I'm a detective from the Atherton Browne agency in Memphis."

"I never heard of no Atherton Browne."

"How about Memphis? You ever heard of Memphis?"

"Not lately."

"Let's break this down and go at it from the educational approach. As I say, I'm a detective. You know what a detective is, don't you?"

"I don't care to batter words with you, friend. I'm busy."

McGavock raised his voice, started to shout. He rocked back on his heels, finally controlled



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himself, said in a strained, hoarse whisper: "God bless Minnifee. This is a conversation I'll never forget. I tell you I have proof a man's been murdered and you say you're too busy to listen. When I clear this mess up, and the Browne agency's all over the front page, don't say I didn't give you a chance to cooperate. Well, just answer me one question and I'll leave you. Where can I find Lloyd Fawley?"

"Ah-h-h!" Mr. Stites grinned triumphantly. "So you're a buddy o' Fawley's! I should ha' knowed it! I'm double-sure now I don't want to have nothing to do with you. Listen, if Lloyd Fawley should come in here right now and say, 'Hello,' I wouldn't so much as speak to him. I'd make out like I didn't reckernize him! I would just that, 'y doggies!"

"No kidding?"

"That's the truth. The way I look on it, Fawley's a social outcast. He runs a blind pig back of Johnson's Art Shop. Johnson's as bad as he is. Blind pigs peddle illicit liquor which is highly illegal. According to my lights, I don't want no traffic with that class of humans, nohow."

McGavock opened his mouth to retort and the little man with the broom came swinging through the door, peeling off his *Bert's Barbecue* coveralls. If he seemed diminutive before, he seemed absolutely wispy now, as he shucked the baggy covering and stood revealed in a suit of shoddy herringbone. He turned to the big man in the black Stetson, said crisply: "All right, Wilbur, I'm finished. Git gone. I'll take over."

The big man said, "Yes, Sheriff," and got laboriously to his feet.

McGavock asked with interest: "How many shertffs does Minnifee have?"

"Just one," the little man said. "That's me." He took out a dollar-bill, handed it to the big man. "Stop at the hardware store and get a quarter's worth of roofing nails. Stop at the drygoods store and get a spool of darning thread. Stop at the drugstore and get a teething ring. Take the nails to Uncle Willie, take the thread to Miss Miranda Trimble, take the teething ring to Mort Prathers. That should leave you about thirty cents. Put a nickel in Baby Prathers piggy bank and keep the quarter left over. That's your'n. But don't spend it, save it. Got that?"

The big man said humbly: "Yes, Sheriff." He lumbered from the room.

Sheriff Stites turned to McGavock. "That's Wilbur Stites, one of my many kinfolk. They came down on me like yellowjackets at a picnic when I got elected. They make the world's worst deputies but they run mighty fine errands and shore keep my constituents pleasant-natured toward me. What's this you were sayin' jest now about Knox Brackney bein' murdered?"

THERE was a genial thin-lipped grin on Sheriff Vip Stites' lean face but his tiny, deep-cupped eyes were like crescents of blue, new-forged steel. McGavock's first impulse was to tell the truth, then he considered the advantages of a good round lie, and finally came back to his original impulse. He said: "I can show you my credentials, or better yet I can refer you to Atherton Browne, my boss, up at the hotel. Browne's been coming here for years for a week or so in December. A sort of rest period. He got to know and like Knox Brackney. Brackney was being pestered and Browne wired me to come down and—"

"Being pestered? How you mean?"

"Believe it or not, someone had been swiping eggs from his office. Well, I came out here to-night, and about fifteen minutes before my train pulled in, Brackney was killed. They'd told me that Lacey Frye had run over him with car chains. I immediately went to the funeral home and looked at the body. There are marks of car chains all right, and marks of another chain, too—about the throat. This second chain is much smaller. I think if your doctor posts him you'll find he died of strangulation."

Sheriff Stites thought this over. "Why come and tell me?"

"Because I love Minnifee. Here, in this little town all is sweetness and light. I want to do everything I can to help."

Sheriff Stites said sentimentally: "There's something about you that reminds me of a horsetrader that used to come through here when I was a kid. He loved Minnifee, too. But after he got out of town Minnifee didn't much love him. Maybe I'm a fool, but I'll take a chance on you. I appreciate your tip about them two different sized chains. I could kick myself in the pants because I passed 'em up. I'm sure pleased to hear it, but I ain't surprised."

"No?"

"No. I'm goin' to tell you something. I been figgerin' this Brackney business as a perfect crime all along, and now you back up and dump a load of real proof in my lap."

"You mean you spotted it as homicide?"

"I thought it was homicide but I had the idee I wasn't ever goin' to prove it. So I wasn't aimin' to say nothing. I was jest going to work like hell, from now till doomsday, sheriff or no sheriff, if it took me a million years." He smiled and McGavock felt a chill walk up his spine.

McGavock asked casually: "What got you so stirred up?"

"Little things that should be right was wrong. And above all, ever'thing was happenin' too dratted fast. Manslaughter, bond changing, and dry cisterns that wasn't dry at all."

"I'd like to hear about it."

"Ain't nothing you can lay a finger on but

I don't like it. First take the cistern. This cistern sets at the far corner of Lacey's garage, about six feet from where Knox Brackney was found. There used to be a barn where the garage is and the cistern was fed from gutters and a downspout on the old barn. The barn was tore down years ago for the garage. Last autumn we had a sanitation drive here in Minnifee and somebuddy recalled the old Frye cistern. Stagnant water gives folks fevers. They talked to Lacey and he said pshaw, it was empty. He showed 'em. It was dry as a bone. He said water couldn't ever get into it no more because there wasn't no way for it to feed with the old barn gone. The garage doesn't have gutters."

"I see."

"When we carted Knox away, it was mighty muddy. One of my deppities got some muck on his shoe and, without thinkin', walked over to the old cistern pump and turned the handle. Water come out. We looked in and she was high full."

"My Gawd! A miracle!"

"It sure looks that way and I don't like miracles and murder when they come hand-runnin'. I figgered maybe Lacey run a garden hose over to the cistern and filled it from the outside house faucet—we got a water tank in town. So then, without sayin' nothing to no-buddy, I looked up the clerk of the board and asked about Mr. Frye's water bill. Our rates here are pretty high. Lacey's meter had just been read that morning and it was about normal. It'd take a lot of time to fill a cistern with a garden hose and I don't consider it possible he done it between the time the meter was read at eleven that morning and when Knox was found."

"I don't either. It must have been filled some way at night, earlier in the game."

"But how, and why? And by who? There's other dry cisterns in town and they don't suddenly git full of water. Carryin' water in buckets would break a man's back!" Sheriff Stites was obviously fascinated by the labor angle. After a moment, he said: "That's the first thing that got me down. The second was why all the flubberoo about Lacey Frye's bond?"

"What do you mean? I hadn't heard—"

"You wouldn't because it was jest barely under the legal wire, I guess. When Mr. Frye hit Knox in his driveway, he got out of the car to see what was what. He half picked up the body and dragged it maybe five feet toward his garage. He said later he was trying to get it under the garage floodlight. Well, a local no-good named Lloyd Fawley was visiting a friend in the neighborhood. He was coming down the street and seen Lacey strugglin' with the corpse and reported it. The story got around that Lacey had hit Knox and was aimin'

to take him into the garage and hide him. Lacey isn't much cherished hereabouts and that set off a hell of a pressure on the sheriff's office. We picked Lacey up and charged him with manslaughter. Partly to keep folks quiet and partly because facts seemed to bear out the charge."

"What about this bond business?"

"I'm gittin' to that. We brought him up before the squire and his bond was set at ten thousand dollars. He was speechless. He didn't have no more than a couple of thousand in the bank and not a darn friend to he'p him out. Someone figured maybe his house and household goods would make the balance and his insurance policies on the property bore it out. So we took his house and chattels as bond and let him go. That was about a quarter of six. Along about seven-ten we heard from Pen-Wiper Johnson."

"Who's this Pen-Wiper Johnson?"

"He's an old coot who runs the Art Shop—where they frame pictures, and where kids get their school supplies. Well, Johnson called at the squire's and said he'd meet Mr. Frye's bond in cash. Money's money so the squire changed the papers, taking Johnson's cash and returning Mr. Frye's house to him in the clear. What do you make of that?"

"Plenty. Between the time you charged Frye and the time Johnson popped into the setup, Knox Brackney's safe was blown. Maybe that's where the bond money came from."

Sheriff Vip Stites shook his head. "Nope, not a chance. That safe-crackin' ain't got nothin' at all to do with the other business. It was did by a itinerant dope-fee'n."

"How do you come to such a delightful conclusion?"

"They ain't nobuddy in Minnifee that takes dope, so he musta been a outlander. That makes him itinerant. When I got on the scene, there wasn't nothing missing from the wrecked safe but a hypodermic needle stole out'n a kit of veterinarian's instruments. That makes him a dope-fee'n. There was twenty-five humnert dollars in bills on the premises. That shows he wasn't after kale."

"Brackney kept his savings in that safe, didn't he? How much was he worth?"

"Nobuddy knows—but he wasn't no rich man."

McGavock stood a moment, deep in thought. He rubbed his knuckles up and down the close-shaved stubble of his beard. After a while, he said: "Thanks, Sheriff, I think with a bit of luck we're going to get this straightened out all right. I'll be seeing you tomorrow, eh? In the meantime I think I can describe the murder weapon for you. Look for a chain with a ring welded in one end to form a slip-noose. The chain should be about twelve-gauge and maybe seventy-two inches long."

"If it was welded, I can find out who in Minnifee welded it—"

"This is a factory-made job."

"Factory-made?"

"That's right. It was ordered by mail. Maybe you didn't know it but there are factories that turn out these chains purely for choking. If you know where, you can get one for three or four bucks."

Sheriff Vip Stites' face froze with alarm. "I cain't hardly believe it! It's horrible!"

"They're better than a pistol. Quieter. And cheaper. Good night."



RIMY monkscloth hung from brass rings on a pole, half shielding the interior from passersby on the street. The single narrow window was filmed with dust and flecked with grime until it was barely translucent. The black and gold plate on the heavy door

proclaimed in big letters:

Johnson's Art Shop
Supplies, Crayons, Stationery
Circulating Library Picture Framing

The building was on the fringes of a slummy, run-down neighborhood. McGavock opened the door and stepped inside.

Just inside the door was a fly-specked old-fashioned glass showcase filled with penny candies for children. A counter stretched away toward the rear and halfway down the counter's length was a smoky kerosene lamp. Shelves behind the counter were filled with little things—ink bottles, school tablets, boxes of chalk, kites and dolls and jack-knives. An elderly man with a pink, fleshy head fringed with white soft baby hair was putting around a turntable lending library. He regarded McGavock much as though he expected him to proffer three pennies and ask for licorice whips.

McGavock asked: "You Pen-Wiper Johnson?"

The old man's eyes hardened, his moist, flabby mouth fluttered. "I am V. K. Johnson, the proprietor of this shop. I can do without the rustic humor. What did you want?"

"I want a pint of your poisonous, illegal whiskey."

The old man's hand trembled with rage. "I perceive you are a stranger, sir. Get out of here, and I mean now! Before I call the law and sue you for slander. What's the purpose behind this insolence?"

"The purpose," McGavock repeated calmly, "is to get a pint of your poisonous, illegal whiskey."

A thoughtful frosty light came into Johnson's bleak eyes. "Are you an Alcohol Tax man?"

"Don't you wish you knew!"

"I hardly think so. If so, you're certainly using a novel and ingenious approach. No, I think you're just another ill-bred, big-mouth traveling man—with maybe one or two stale drinks going sour in your stomach. Am I right?"

"No."

"Going to be difficult, h-m-m-n! I see. Well, your dollar is as good another's. And if you get troublesome, as it appears possible, well, we've run into that situation before, too. Just step back here, sir, and meet a friend of mine, a Mr. Fawley."

McGavock followed him through a flap in the counter, to the rear of the store, and through a small door behind a pot-bellied stove. Mr. Johnson said with distaste, "It's yours from here on in, Lloyd—he's a stinker," and withdrew.

The back room was lighted by a gasoline wall lamp. It was a barnlike room with a workbench in one corner containing paste pot and picture molding. In the center of the floor were three old-style ice cream tables with circular tops and twisted-wire legs.

There were two men in the room. One, a lanky, goateed gentleman in his sixties, sat at a table, a jelly glass of whiskey and a bottle of red pop before him. The second man sat alone on a kitchen chair by the workbench in the corner. When he saw McGavock enter, he got up and came forward.

Lloyd Fawley was big and mean and apelike. His enormous shoulders and hips and thighs stretched his fourteen-dollar "gabardine" general store suit to a skin tightness. His head was small and the features of his face—his piggish eyes and nose and mouth—so tiny and contracted that they could be almost covered with a teacup. He carried his hands half clenched as though the tendons were cut in them and there were leather wristlets strapped about each of his hairy wrists. He said dully: "So you're a stinker, are you? Glad to know you."

McGavock walked past him, ignored him, and sat at the table with the goateed man. He smiled at the goateed man, said: "I trust you are the eminent attorney, Mr. Oglethorpe Choctaw Asbree?"

Mr. Choctaw Asbree nodded with dignity, said: "Naturally, suh."

Fawley said angrily: "Git out of that chair, you! Johnson said yo're a troublemaker an' we don't serve troublemakers at tables. You kin buy it by the bottle an' take it out. How much you want?"

McGavock asked innocently: "How much have you got?"

Mr. Choctaw Asbree interjected: "Tsk, tskl They've got much more than you can drink. I know. I've been working on it for twenty years."

McGavock said: "Sure, sure. But that's all over with now. Drink down and let's get out of this dump. You're too good a man for this foolishness."

Mr. Choctaw Asbree folded his thin, white hands. "Would you mind clarifying your statement, suh? Are you saying you're here to—"

"To take you out of this rat-hole, yes. I'll introduce myself later. The clock in the steeple strikes one, old-timer. Your practice needs you, Minniffee needs you, and Miss Sue needs you—"

Fawley sauntered to the wall, pushed a button wired to a joist. Out front a buzzer sounded. He sauntered back, took up a position of stolid waiting. The door opened and Mr. Johnson stepped nimbly through.

Mr. Asbree studied McGavock with placid eyes. "Did my daughter send you here for me?"

"No. I came because it's a few minutes before my bedtime and I thought I might as well—" He pointed to the glass of whiskey. "Drink down and let's get out—"

Mr. Choctaw Asbree said graciously: "No, thank you. I don't seem to be thirsty. I've waited a long time for you, suh. It'll be a pleasure to have you accompany me to my domicile." He got to his feet.

Pen-Wiper Johnson's flabby face was livid with suppressed fury but his voice was solicitous, almost gentle. He asked: "Mr. Asbree, is this man annoying you?"

Mr. Choctaw Asbree said tolerantly: "No, but you are. Please remove yourself from my sight. Get back to your pen-wipers!"

FAWLEY's apelike body went into an animal crouch. His words were fluted and high-pitched with sudden unrestrained ferocity. He said, "Damn you, you meddlesome—" and brought up a haymaker for McGavock's jaw.

McGavock rolled with the punch and kicked back his chair, but before Fawley's blow had traveled six inches Mr. Choctaw Asbree's thin fist shot out and sunk with a sickening thud in the big hillman's throat. Fawley went to his hands and knees, shook his head, and stood up. McGavock stepped in on him. Dazed, Fawley lashed out with his heavy brogan, reached for McGavock with two bearish arms, to break or throttle anything his fingers touched, and McGavock got in three clean pile-hammers. Fawley wilted, out before he hit the floor.

All this time McGavock was dimly conscious of conversation.

He turned and witnessed an interesting tableau.

Mr. Johnson, his loose lips bared over stained, artificial teeth, was standing rigidly with a .32-20 Smith and Wesson clutched to his thigh.

Mr. Choctaw Asbree's voice rolled on, peace-

ful, patient, inquiring. ". . . yes, my dear suh, I am sure you are exhibiting that gun to me in the mercenary hope that it may take my fancy and I may purchase it from you. On the other hand, possibly you are merely overproud of owning such a well-cared-for weapon and have a habit of demonstrating it at every opportunity. One thing I'm certain of, however. You are not threatening me with it. Nor, certainly, have you any intention of shooting either this fine robust gentleman"—he indicated McGavock with a graceful flick of the thumb—"nor myself, for that matter. As a veteran attorney, with much experience along that line, I can truthfully inform you that the law is very, ahem, brusque about shooting-to-kill or assault with deadly weapon with felonious intent. How many times have I witnessed the sad sight of a jury filing in, the foreman clearing his throat and saying—"

Pen-Wiper Johnson put the gun away. Sweat stood out on his forehead. He said hoarsely: "It was just a joke, Mr. Asbree. The whole thing. Forget it, please."

Mr. Asbree nodded to McGavock, murmured: "If you're entirely finished, suh, we may as well be getting on."

Outside, on the street, McGavock introduced himself, said in admiration: "Partner, you've got nerves like guitar strings! Oglethorpe Choctaw Asbree! I guess that Choctaw business is no gag, eh?"

"I'm a very timid man," Mr. Asbree said stiffly. "The Choctaw in me goes back very far, I'm told. My great grandfather, I believe. The Choctaw people were a warlike branch of the warlike Muskohegeans. Their chieftains were known as 'tubbies'—not because of their physique but because, unfortunately, that was part of their war-name and meant 'killer.' How did we ever get on to this subject anyhow?"

"I wouldn't know, Tubbie. Maybe it's because you're such a timid man."

They parted at the watering trough in the hitching lot behind courtsquare. The overcast was breaking now and a high, white moon was slipping from the lip of black soggy cloud into a rift of clear, glassy blue sky. In the moonlight the courthouse seemed to be cut from black paper and the shadows of McGavock and Mr. Asbree were squat and distorted.

Mr. Asbree said: "I'm sorry you won't come home with me and have a cup of Sue's coffee. Please look me up tomorrow. How did you ever locate me, by the way?"

McGavock told him of his visit with the girl. "From things that were said I figured you had been hitting the bottle and were in a bad way. I kept bringing up the subject, indirectly, until I got your daughter agitated and then asked her if Minniffee had any riffraff. She almost yelled Lloyd Fawley at me and I knew who had been feeding you your whiskey."

"I see. Well thank you, suh. And good evening. This has been a momentous half hour."

"One thing more, Mr. Asbree."

"Yes?"

"Do me a favor. When you get home, go over your body, your entire body and look for the mark of a hypodermic needle. Call me at Lacey Frye's and give me a report of your findings."

"Certainly," Asbree said, "if you suggest it. Though I've never listened to a statement that left me more amazed." He hesitated, added with relief: "Oh, I think I'm beginning to understand. I think I can follow your line of reasoning. Someone blew Knox Brackney's safe and took a hypodermic. By trial and error, you're trying to discover whom the thief used it on. Your assumption is based on two fallacies, I'm afraid. First, it was a veterinarian's needle—second, if he intended to use it on a human, he's scarcely had time. It was just taken tonight. I know no one has injected me since suppertime. I can swear to that."

"Don't argue. Do what I tell you. And don't try to figure out my line of reasoning. To answer one point alone—the needle was discovered missing tonight, but it could have been gone for weeks. Good night, Mr. Asbree, and don't forget to call me."



HE Memphis detective was astonished to observe that Minnifee had a suburb. It reminded him of the old gag about fleas having lesser fleas ad infinitum. Minnifee's suburb was muddy and desolate with the nearest street light a

block away. Its clay road was unpaved and rutted, its cheap cement sidewalks cracked like the icing on a stale church supper cake, and dead sage and foxtails had taken possession of front yards and vacant lots. But you couldn't get around it, a suburb was a suburb. Four houses faced the pavement, four jerry-built cottages, each with its knee-high picket fence, each with two cone-shaped evergreens by the doorstep, each with its porch swing rigged up to the pine porch ceiling against the blasts of winter. McGavock stooped down, feeling silly, and opened Lacey Frye's midget gate.

He walked a few feet toward the cottage and took in his surroundings.

This was the so-called death scene. The driveway was at the far edge of the lot, running along the boundary of the premises and the garage at its end was as close to the neighboring cottage as to Frye's. The cistern pump, which had so worried Sheriff Stites, was at the far corner of the garage. Mr. Lacey Frye, schoolteacher, sans spectacles and half blind, had come barreling down the rutted street in

his jalopy, had turned into the drive in a flurry of snow, and had hit Mr. Knox Brackney's frail body just outside the garage doors. He'd hopped out, dragged the corpse a few feet—and then Mr. Lloyd Fawley had happened on the scene and summoned the law. That was the picture, as it had been given to McGavock.

He shook his head, said absently to himself: "I want to talk to Miss Sue Asbree again. I want to ask her about those hundred-and-fifty-pound Newfoundlands she raises."

He mounted the wooden steps to the porch. Beneath the half-lowered window blind he could see Professor Frye stretched out in a Morris chair, perusing a leatherbound book. McGavock put his thumb on the doorbell, the buzzer sounded, and Frye jumped as if someone had pinched him. A little high-strung to-night, McGavock decided.

Professor Lacey Frye was tall and gaunt and sinewy. The top of his boxlike skull was covered with a growth of flat red hair, neatly parted and so symmetrical that it gave the impression of a wig. He was unpleasantly arrogant. He was wearing a dressing robe and hightop shoes and his shanks were covered with wrinkled long underwear, like an emaciated acrobat wearing borrowed tights. Apparently he'd gotten his fatal spectacles back from the jeweler's for his little pearl-blue eyes peered at McGavock through thick lenses.

McGavock said: "I'm looking for a man. You know—a man." He pointed at the adjoining property, toward the house beyond the garage. "Who lives there?"

"Mr. V. K. Johnson lives there." Mr. Frye enunciated every syllable with vocal clarity, as though he were addressing a vast schoolroom. "You'll find Mr. Johnson downtown at his Art Shop."

"I don't want Mr. Johnson. I want a lad named Frye."

"I'm Frye," the professor said. "And I'm not a lad. Haven't been for many many moons, as Hiawatha would say. I don't believe I know you."

"We'll get that straightened out," McGavock declared, "if you'll join me in the living room." He eeled past the professor, into the hall.

Lacey Frye's living room was pleasant and mannish with applegreen walls and a thick blue rug. There were built-in bookcases on either side of the rough stone fireplace, and the books looked not only as if they'd been read, but as though they'd been used for killing mice and roaches. The chairs were staunch and good and well-upholstered. McGavock seated himself, facing his host.

Mr. Frye leaned back in his Morris chair, picked up a tumbler of milk from an end table. "A soporific, sir. Warm milk and butter, with a pinch of salt. A guarantee to slumber. Must be body temperature—I test it by dipping my

forefinger lightly into the saucepan. Permit me to get you a glass?"

McGavock glanced at the grimy forefinger with the crescent of dirt beneath the nail. "Not tonight, thanks. I've not much time for slumber tonight. I'm rather busy." He shook the moisture from his hat in a spray across the carpet, said curtly: "My name's McGavock. I'm a detective from Memphis. I'm working on Knox Brackney's death. I want you to help me."

Professor Frye sneered. "So that's it! I've told my story tonight until I'm weary. I've nothing further to offer. Besides—"

"Besides what?"

"Besides, to be perfectly frank, you don't impress me any too favorably. I don't know anything about the detective profession but I prefer the intellectual type to, say, the bloodhound type." The phone rang. Frye got to his feet, answered it, said: "It's for you, Mr. McGavock."

McGavock picked up the receiver, said: "Hello? O.K., I'll hang on." He began to whistle.

At the other end, Mr. Oglethorpe Choctaw Asbree said: "McGavock? I've been over every square inch of my body. I can find no puncture."

McGavock said: "O.K., Natchez, I'm ready. Let's have it."

Asbree's voice said: "What shall I do now?"

McGavock replied: "The diamonds are in the pantry in a box of dog biscuits. No, no! We never charge a fee, we're a philanthropic organization. That's all right. Good-by. Glad to be of help." He hung up.

Mr. Frye's eyes were popping out to his thick lenses in curiosity. McGavock said: "A guy in Natchez mislaid a fistful of diamonds. I had to find 'em for him. They call me all hours of the night and day."

Professor Frye said in awe: "That's pretty quick work!"

The phone rang again. McGavock snatched it from its hook, said rapidly: "This Birming-

ham? I thought so. Your grandfather isn't dead. He's just a cataleptic practical joker. No fee. Forget it, glad to be of help. 'By."

At the other end of the line, Mr. Asbree was saying: "I looked in the pantry. I don't know anything about any diamonds. Our dog food comes in cans so you must be wrong. The cans are sealed at the factory—" McGavock cut him off.

Professor Frye said in slow admiration: "For heaven's sake. You're like a walking stock market. I've never seen such activity!" He paused. "You people never charge fees?"

McGavock laughed hollowly. "What would we do with money? It's good will we want!"

"That, then, puts a different aspect on your visit. I'm sorry to say I'm in a very delicate position where it would be perilous for me to assume added financial obligations. However, if I can consult you, gratis, I should like to have your opinion on—"

"They've been kicking you around a little, haven't they, Mr. Frye? They've really got you in a fork."

"I'm in something of a dilemma, yes. But the circumstances are purely those of fate. If you were a scholar you'd know that human misfortune—"

"Such as manslaughter?"

"Exactly. Such as manslaughter. Such calamities are regulated in human affairs by a sort of cosmic mechanics."

McGavock said amiably: "Cosmic mechanics, phooey! Knox Brackney was murdered. Your car didn't kill him. He was strangled with a chain."

Professor Frye sipped his warm milk. For a long moment he was silent. You could almost hear his thoughts churning around in his box-like skull.

At last he spoke. "You must be wrong. I killed Mr. Brackney, I, Lacey Robertson Frye, through sheer unadulterated fate. Let me explain. If, as you say, Knox Brackney was murdered, that means I have been the victim of some nefarious plan. As the motion pictures

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have it, that means I've been framed. You see the absurdity?"

"No."

Professor Frye's eyes burned behind their spectacles like little copper wires. "That's because you don't really know me. No one really knows me. This thing that came upon me is not the work of a human agency, because that presupposes that the perpetrator was, and is, smarter than Professor Lacey Robertson Frye." He lowered his voice, said in a confident whisper: "There is no one smarter than Professor Frye. Not in Minnifee, certainly!"

McGAVOCK could hardly believe his ears. "You'd rather be found guilty of manslaughter than go scot free on an exposed murder-frame?"

"I'll not be found guilty of manslaughter. I'm reading law and I shall plead my own case. In answer to your question, I owe it to the citizens of Minnifee, who hold me in such reverent respect, to maintain my intellectual preëminence in their loyal eyes."

McGavock shook his head. "I wouldn't have missed this for a week's pay."

"Thank you, sir."

"Do you know a fellow named Gilmore?"

"The bug-dust man? Yes, by sight."

"Would he kill another man, say Knox Brackney, if he was a business rival?"

"The question is purely academic, I suppose? Yes, I'd say he might. Anybody in Minnifee might kill anybody else. This is quite a settlement. I've seen sharecroppers slay each other for dollar watches and, in arguments, over anything from soil conversion to barber-shop politics. I remember—"

"Are you acquainted with a Mr. Oglethorpe Choctaw Asbree?"

"Yes, but not intimately. Father and daughter, they make a tragic household. I wish I had the courage to tell you about it. You see Mr. Asbree is a pathetic wreck of what was once a—"

"How terrible. Now here, as we school-teachers say, is a little functional project for you. I want you to step into your boudoir, strip to your pelt, and go over every square inch of skin surface, looking for a hypodermic needle mark. They're easy to miss, so—"

"But I've taken no hypodermic—"

"That's what you say. And I hope you're right. I have a feeling there's a killer in town who has unloaded a toxic dose on some unsuspecting victim. So hie you away to the bedroom and make off with that long underwear. I'm not kidding."

Mr. Frye smiled tolerantly. "It is pretty difficult to give a person an injection without his being aware of it. I have no memory of—"

"You sleep, don't you? You don't stay awake twenty-four hours a day, do you?"

Frye bowed, said with resignation: "If you insist." He ambled toward the bedroom door, closed it behind him.

Alone, McGavock got noiselessly to his feet, picked up the leatherbound book the professor had been immersed in on McGavock's arrival. It was a copy of Cynewulf's *Legend of St. Guthlac*, in the original Anglo-Saxon, and held no interest for McGavock. He bent the covers back and shook the leaves over the table. A paper fell from between the pages.

It was a sheet of rough, school tablet paper. Printed in green crayon, the neat square letters said,

When you see a man with earth on his knees and the earth is dry, in the middle of December, you wonder where he's been, don't you? Maybe he's been out to the old Scaggs house. You should carry a whisk broom.

A Curious Friend

McGavock replaced the paper in the book, laid the book on the arm of the Morris chair. Professor Frye came into the living room, a condescending smile on his lips. He said: "No puncture any place. Nothing but slight razor scratch behind my ear. And don't tell me that's a serious thing because I remember when and how I did it. Yesterday morning while shaving I happened to—"

McGavock said casually: "People around town have been getting anonymous letters—written on school tablet paper and printed with a green crayon. Have you received any such epistles?"

"Not so far. What are they? Extortion notes?"

"We don't know yet. But it was a cinch to trace them to their sender. They're being sent by Pen-Wiper Johnson, your next-door neighbor. The paper and the crayons, of course, are school supplies from his Art Shop."

Professor Frye said dazedly: "Why didn't I think of that myself?"

"Pardon me?"

"Nothing. It's a habit I have, talking nonsense. Comes from the pressure of an overwrought, grade-A brain."

"A grade-A brain is a pitiful thing," McGavock declared sympathetically. "My aunt had a canary with a grade-A brain. He got that way from trying to fly full speed through the bottom of his cage. After that, he was different from other canaries. It's hard to put into words but, well, he was just different. Happy all the time. Didn't care whether he ate or not, didn't care whether it was hot or cold. Had a hell of a good time all night, when his cage was covered up and everyone else was hitting the hay, singing his little heart out. We had to chloroform him and that made him happy, too. Bless his nutty little soul."

Professor Frye said: "That sounds like a form of insanity known as habromania, or delusions of joyous self-competence. I don't seem to follow you—"

McGavock got to his feet. "He thought he could get along without any help from the rest of the world. If you'll excuse my changing the subject, are you in a jam of any kind?"

"Of course not. Whatever gave you that idea?"

"The funny way you acted when you got in trouble. All those shenanigans about first offering your house in bond, and then switching to cash. What the hell was all that about? Do you have old gold buried in the back yard?"

Professor Frye didn't think it was funny. "Of course not. Things moved so quickly that for a while I was confused. It was the first time I ever killed anyone and the manslaughter charge rather left me foggy. Mr. Johnson offered my house in bond for me and—"

"Mr. Johnson offered it?"

"That's right. He stepped in and sort of took charge of things. He explained that I couldn't offer my own bond because it wouldn't be legal. So I transferred the house to him and he put it up. This worried me, of course, and I went to his shop when I was released and talked it over with him. I was afraid something would happen to him before the trial. If he should die then my house would be part of his estate and would go to his heirs. He said he hadn't thought of it that way and saw my point. He then generously offered to meet the bond out of his own pocket. It was a pretty steep sum so I agreed to pay him the professional bondsman's percentage. Frankly, I felt a little better when I got back my house."

"I should think you would. But he had ownership and possession for a brief interval, didn't he?"

"For maybe a half hour—while I was at the squire's talking over the accident."

McGavock put on his hat, said: "Now you can get back to your warm milk. I'll be getting along. 'Night."

CHAPTER THREE

The Alligator's Double-Trouble



LAM GILMORE moved like a bird of carrion, like a rusty black vulture with a broken wing. He settled McGavock in a hickory rocker, fluttered about the room offering his guest a cigar, finding a match for it, adjusting the desk lamp

so that it wasn't in McGavock's eyes. McGavock watched and waited, eyeing his host with obvious distaste.

Gilmore was big and flaccid and unctuous, with pouches of red, vein-laced flesh hanging over his soiled collar like dewlaps. His meaty body moved awkwardly, clumsily, and he tilted his head at an oafish angle when he spoke. But his knoblike eyes, brown like glazed crockery, were just a little too stupid to be convincing. He wore a pinstripe suit with pleated shoulders and a belted back. He said affably: "You say you're authorized to sell out the late Knox Brackney's stock, customer list, and general good will?"

McGavock glanced about him. He'd had a bit of difficulty locating this place. It was at the end of Main Street's business section, at the back of the building. You got to it through the alley behind Main, by a crude timber stairway that ran up the rear face of the building. And Gilmore, answering his knock as he stood on the four-foot landing, hadn't wanted to let him in.

If this man Gilmore was Knox Brackney's bug-dust rival, then he had a bit to go before he offered any real competition. Brackney had a front, downstairs office, with a storeroom behind. Gilmore's dump was half living quarters, half office. There was a cot with a tangle of dirty blankets, a stove with a skillet in which lay a stale wad of turnip greens and bacon rind, a cheap desk, and pine lumber shelves lined with jars, bottles and boxes of spices and extracts and home remedies.

Gilmore said servilely: "I'm not a wealthy man. I can't offer much. But if you're kinfolk to Knox Brackney, and in a position to sell his business lock-stock-and-barrel, then maybe we can get together. In a business like bug-dust and extracts good will is the thing, of course. I'd expect you to ride through the hills with me for, say, two weeks, introducing yourself and telling Brackney's customers that I'm the bigshot now."

McGavock said genially: "Hold on to your hat, and watch your blood pressure. I'm not authorized to sell anyone anything. I just said that so you'd let me in. We've got things to talk over."

Mr. Gilmore picked up a twenty-two rifle from its resting place in a corner. McGavock asked mildly: "You aren't going to blast me in cold blood just because I—"

Mr. Gilmore put the gun to his cheek, aimed it at an angle out through the closed window, down into the night. He declared woodenly: "Conversation with me, under such conditions, costs five dollars per fifteen minutes. Just lay the money on the desktop."

McGavock did. Mr. Gilmore tucked the bill in his vest, restored the rifle to its place in the corner. McGavock said: "What the hell?"

Mr. Elam Gilmore lowered his vast body into a chair, said succinctly: "Let's have it. What's on your mind?"

"O.K. I'm investigating Knox Brackney's demise. They tell me you're his local competitor. Any chance you knocked him off for his country trade?"

Mr. Gilmore shook his head. "I could have bought him out, or I could have gone into partnership with him. But murdering him, no. Even if I covered up, it would have hurt my hill-country business. You can't fool a hillman."

"It's been done, my friend. About supper-time, Brackney's safe was blown. The sheriff found twenty-five hundred dollars in the safe. Have you anything to say on that subject?"

"Plenty. What became of the other twelve thousand? I knew Knox well. He had his life savings in that strongbox. Nearly fifteen grand."

"Now, we're getting somewhere," McGavock remarked. "When Brackney's body was discovered this evening, he was only a stone's throw from Pen-Wiper Johnson's home. Any reason you can think of for Brackney to have been in that neighborhood?"

"He may have gone there to visit Frye. Certainly not Johnson. Brackney was as straight as a ruler, and Johnson was born with larceny in his very backbone. The two didn't even speak. Brackney wouldn't have lowered himself to traffic with a man like Johnson. And that's a fact!"

"If Brackney had caught Johnson in a criminal scheme, would he have reported him to the law?"

"If he was absolutely sure of himself, yes. No doubt about it."

McGavock knocked cigar ashes in a broken teacup. "I guess that's about all for now. Can you think of anything, anything at all, that might explain Knox Brackney's death? He was murdered, by the way. Strangled. It'll be all over town tomorrow after the doc gets a look at his lungs."

Mr. Gilmore said thoughtfully: "I presumed he was murdered or you wouldn't be wasting your time on me. Strangled, eh? Now I wonder who did such a beastly thing as that?" He sunk into a long, moody silence.

McGavock waited.

Finally Mr. Gilmore said softly: "Salt!"

"How's that?"

"I'll wager you ten-to-one that the salt has something to do with it! I saw Knox Brackney on the street sometime ago and I said: 'How's business?' You see we bug-dust men have a lag in bad weather when we can't get out into the hills. Knox grinned, said: 'I'm gettin' by. Leastways I sold two fifty-pound sacks of salt to a party the other day. Think o' that. It's a heap o' salt, ain't it?' I said: 'It's too darn cold to be makin' ice cream this time o' year. Who you sell it to, and what they using it for?' He said: 'The party asked me to keep it quiet.

I ain't got no more idee than you what they're using it for! After that he kidded me a bit and slapped me on the back and left. You figger you got your five dollars' worth?"

"Yeah man!"

In the doorway, as he left, McGavock said: "I'd like to ask you one more question. A personal question."

"O.K., let's have it. You've paid your way."

"It's this. A minute ago, when you put the bite on me for five dollars, you took your rifle and pointed it out the window. What the hell kind of a bluff was that?"

Mr. Elam Gilmore's brown crockery eyes studied McGavock emptily. "That was no bluff, brother, and you were smart enough not to call my hand. That's a little trick I figgered out a long time ago, a sort of private safeguard. Down in the alley, there's a corner of the bank's back window—burglar alarm and all. It's kinda lonesome up here where I am, and unprotected. Should I ever need any help I'll just shoot into the bank window. Off'll go the burglar alarm and, believe me, that'll bring the whole town on the run. If you hadn't come across, I'd have called thief. I'd have held you here at gunpoint and simply claimed that you tried to stick me up. It would have been very embarrassing for you indeed."

McGavock began argumentatively: "I'd have told them—"

"You wouldn't have told 'em anything, brother. You're a stranger. I'm an old settler. Min-nifee's mighty sentimental about such things."

On the street, McGavock found the town marshal sitting alone on a bench in court-square, smoking a corncob pipe and cutting a curl of leather from the sole of his broken-down shoe. McGavock introduced himself as Alonzo Scaggs, an advance man for *Scaggs Brobdingnagian Carnivals*, and inquired courteously as to the likelihood of his having any kinfolk in town. The marshal listened with interest but said, with regret, that he'd never heard of any Scaggs hereabout. There was an old Scaggs house out on Cherry Street but as far as he knew it had been a derelict long before they shot Mr. Howard and laid poor Jesse in his grave. McGavock thanked him and departed.

HE KNEW it when he saw it. There wasn't any doubt about it. It fit the murder picture perfectly—and there couldn't be another like it in the entire county. This was the Scaggs house.

It was a large house, pallid in the shifting moonlight, brick with stone trim and indescribably melancholy. The windows were boarded and the gingerbread cornices had long ago rotted from the eaves. McGavock took the brick walk, completely matted with long, dead grass. The high front porch sat

about three feet above ground level. McGavock mounted the sagging steps, crossed the porch, and pushed open the weathered door. Instantly the heavy, musty odor of foul, imprisoned air engulfed him. He stepped inside, shut the door softly behind him.

By his elbow was the hall newelpost with its dusty mahogany ram's horn. His main interest was in the cellar but, methodically, he searched the whole house, from attic down. He climbed the stairway to the upper hall, located a flight of steps to the garret, and began his inspection. There was nothing in the attic but bird droppings. The bedrooms of the second floor were thick with dust and lay empty and undisturbed with the minute refuse of decades.

The rooms of the main floor were empty, too, but here there were distinct traces of recent occupation. There was a large drawing room, a dining room, a music room, and a kitchen. In the first, the dust had been smudged on the marble mantelpiece, in the second there was a broken matchstick, in the others, too, he sensed a recent prowler—a scuff on the floor, a tiny smear of clay on a hearthstone.

In the drawing room, he found a cigarette stub and the dottle from a half-smoked pipe.

He located the cellar stairs in the kitchen. The letter to Mr. Frye had accused the professor of having dry earth on his trousers. Dry earth in the winter. In Minnifee, where all was wet, soggy red clay! Dry earth sounded mighty like a cellar.

He descended the narrow steps—and received his first shock.

There was no dry earth in the Scaggs cellar. It was a small, old-fashioned cellar extending under the kitchen alone. The walls and floor were of fieldstone, firmly mortared together. McGavock went over the room with his flashlight, like a scientist with his microscope. The mortar was old and sound. Nowhere had it been so much as scratched. It was exactly as it had been left by the mason a half century and more before.

He returned to the main floor, stepped out onto the front porch and stood a moment in the shadows trying to work out the problem.

He tried to visualize his home when he was a kid. Dry dirt from the Scaggs house, the note had said. Suddenly he grinned. Not in the cellar—but *under the house*. He made his way down the rotting steps, hooded his torch with his handkerchief, and, skirting the building, began a careful inspection of its foundations.

As he'd observed, the house was raised about three feet from the ground. The space between the ground and the sleepers of the building was shielded by panels of ancient latticework. At the side of the house, by a tangled lilac, he found a lattice panel which had been dis-

turbed. He swung it out, stepped inside, and found himself in a queer unearthly cave. Below him was the spongy, dry earth, above his stooped body were dusty cobwebbed floor rafters stretching into the murk, supported here and there by brick pillars, reaching under the vastness of the whole building.

He beamed his flash downward and immediately saw footprints in the loose earth. Narrow, long footprints. The footprints of Professor Frye's high-topped shoes. They disappeared into the gloom.

McGavock followed them. They went here and there, sometimes suddenly multiplying themselves and obliterating themselves. Here, McGavock decided, the professor had halted to listen, to listen to something which was occurring in that room which lay directly above.

Finally, the footprints came to what was obviously their destination. The professor had spent some time here, listening to something, perhaps some conversation, which was transpiring above him. The marks showed he'd tried to make himself comfortable by squatting on his haunches and had finally been forced to rest on his knees. The knee depressions were plain in the earth.

McGavock took a penknife and a lead pencil from his pocket. He split a long cedar sliver from the pencil, thrust it upward through a crack between two floor boards, made his way from under the house, and re-entered the building through the front door.

He located his splinter, up-thrust, in the center of the drawing room floor. This was highly interesting because it was here that he'd found the pipe dottle and the half-burned cigarette.

He re-examined the bare room—this time with tedious care.

At last he found it. An envelope, slipped down between the loose baseboard and the wall. It was a cheap linen envelope. In the upper left-hand corner was typewritten, *For the week December 9 to 15—Payment for seven days in full.*

The envelope contained one hundred dollars in ten-dollar bills.

McGavock's eyes burned with fatigue as he climbed the hill to his hotel. He'd had little sleep for five nights and then there'd been the long haul on buses and backwoods trains from Memphis, topped off with a busy night of safe blowing and murder and fisticuffs.

The lobby was dark but for a student lamp burning behind the wicket-desk. The hotel clerk, an anemic youngster in gold-rimmed glasses was working over accounts. He handed McGavock a key, said pleasantly: "You're Mr. Luther McGavock? Your luggage is in your room, number two-eleven. I hope you have a good night. By the way, Mr. Atherton

Browne, in two-oh-one asks that you drop in a second before you retire."

Room 201 was at the head of the stairs, just beyond the rotunda. McGavock hammered angrily on the door panel, entered at his chief's cheery invitation. It was a big old room with maroon wallpaper, a faded rose-and-violet carpet, and a bed like a golf course. The Old Man was sitting up in bed, the shade tilted on the bedside lamp, reading a tattered paperback novel entitled *Ted Harper, Lone Scout—or, The Counterfeiters of Skullbones Cave*. He looked annoyed at McGavock's entrance.

McGavock said: "Move over. I'm all in."

Old Atherton looked startled, said: "You have a bed of your own, back in two-eleven. Sit down there on that chair and give me your report."

McGavock shook his head. "I'll give it standing." He paused, added: "Boss, this business is a mess."

"Too much for you, eh, Luther?"

"Not at all," McGavock declared indignantly. "I'm finding out plenty. I just meant I don't like what I'm uncovering. Knox Brackney was knocked off, as you intimated. I've definitely established that part. I think I know who did it—and why. But that's only the beginning. I've run into a pretty vicious setup. This is one of the cruelist and most devilish crimes I ever ran up against."

The Old Man listened intently. "How," he asked, "did they kill Knox?"

"Strangled him with a chain choke-collar. Choke collars, in case you don't happen to know, are used to train dogs to the leash. It's not as inhuman on canines as it sounds. It's a noose that goes around a dog's neck and when he strains too hard on his lead, it slows him down. Choke leads come in leather and chain. This one was chain, to confuse us with the tire chains."

"And you know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, who killed my friend Knox Brackney with one of these chain nooses?"

McGavock sounded irritated. "Of course."

"Then go to your room, make out a detailed written report, and get a little sleep. Tomorrow you can catch the morning train back to Memphis."

"I can't. Brackney's just the beginning. I've got to find out about the egg whites."

"About the what?"

"The egg whites. You remember those eggs that were swiped from Brackney's office? The reason they were swiped, instead of being bought in a respectable way over the counter, is because they were slated to be used as poison."

"They weren't poisoned eggs, Luther. They were, well, just eggs."

"That's what I'm trying to tell you. Eggs and hypodermic needles together are bad

stuff." McGavock glowered. "If they get away with it it'll be a perfect crime."

"Of course it will be, Luther. It generally is, when they get away with it."

"Don't bait me. You know what I mean. Listen here—egg white, given with a hpvo, is as deadly as a bullet in the heart. And it leaves no trace. Just plain old egg white! There's a trick to it, though. You've got to give the victim two shots, over a period of about two weeks. Chief, the first shot has already been given. Someone here in Minnifree is carrying around a load of potential death!"

Old Atherton Browne blinked. After a long moment he said: "That shouldn't be too difficult to run down."

"That's what you think! The first injection leaves no ill effects. It just sensitizes the victim. The second injection is curtains. Someone is going to keel over dead one of these days, someone I know—murdered. And no one is going to know what killed him. Or her."

"Or her? Are you playing around with women, Luther? Please explain that."

McGavock took a big breath, held it a moment, said: "Nuts!" He left the room, slammed the door, and started down the corridor for two-eleven.



WHEN McGavock awoke, sunlight was playing across the polychrome crazy quilt and striking the foot of the old brass bed into bars of molten gold. From where he lay, almost suffocated by the deep feather mattress, it looked like a midsummer morning. He rolled to the edge of the bed, stood up, and flinched. The floorboards beneath his bare feet were icy cold. He walked mincingly to the window and looked out. Sometime between midnight and dawn the sky had cleared and the temperature had dropped. In the vacant lot behind the hotel, out of the sun's rays, frost hung like white fur on dead ironweed and Queen Anne's Lace. The temperature would be a little below thirty, he judged, the ground would be crisp and crystallized.

It would be a wonderful day for a deer hunt.

He cursed, pulled off his pajamas, and took a quick sponge at the porcelain washbowl. He went to his Gladstone and took out his .38.

He found a cozy little restaurant on a side street, the lower floor of an old two-story frame residence. The sign in the window said, *Aunt Matilda's Southern Cooking*. He entered, found it was run by a lone Chinese, and had a marvelous breakfast of cornbread, sugarcured ham, squash, and spiced peaches. The rare old grandfather's clock in the corner said nineteen minutes after eleven.

There was a gala air along Main Street and he realized it was Saturday. Faces were whipped apple-red by the tangy air. Men stood with their hands in their pockets. Folks were visiting in little groups and the conversation was mainly about pigs and butchering, for a cold snap in the hill country meant killing weather. Knox Brackney's door was locked, and through the window pane McGavock could see the wrecked room and the damaged safe.

He made his way to Mr. Johnson's art shop. Here, too, the door was locked. He rattled the latch, got no response, and started back toward courtsquare and the sheriff's office. He was passing an alley mouth when he heard someone say: "S-s-s-t! S-s-s-t!"

Lloyd Fawley's big apelike form stepped out from behind a wagon. He was wearing a shoddy topcoat over his fourteen-dollar gabardine suit. His little head was sunk in his muscled shoulders and his face registered concern. He raised a calloused forefinger and beckoned.

McGavock said with distaste: "Disperse! I'm not interested in your wares. I never, or rather, rarely, quaff before sundown."

Fawley said desperately: "This ain't business. This-here is social. I gotta talk to you." He paused, coaxed: "Step back here a minute, will you?"

"Certainly," McGavock said. "I'll never be missed." He followed the big hillman into the narrow passage.

The alley was a lateral between Main Street and the arterial alley behind Main. The passage was so narrow that McGavock could touch the brick walls on either side and above his head the second stories of the adjoining shops were joined in an overpass. There was no sunlight here, and the air was unclean and musty. Fawley, walking a few feet ahead, turned into a gaping doorway. They passed through an abandoned barbershop, a hole-in-the-wall with a rusty half-dismantled chair, its walls plastered with 1917 pin-up girls, and entered a small back room littered with plaster and laths and crumbling bricks. A faint light came to them through a tiny, grimy skylight. Mr. Lloyd Fawley kicked out a wooden box for McGavock, found one for himself, said: "Set. This is going to take time. Cain't no one hear us here."

McGavock pulled up his trouser creases, sat down. He said politely: "Thank you, Mr. Fawley. I trust the jaw is feeling tolerably comfortable this beautiful morning?"

Fawley said sociably: "You shore pack a wallop. And don't call me mister. I keep thinkin' yo're talkin' to my pappy. My friends all call me Alligator. That's because I kin eat

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the meat off'n a leg o' beef before you kin—"

"I get the idea, Alligator. What did you want to see me about?"

Mr. Alligator Fawley took out a pint of water-clear whisky, offered it to McGavock who declined. Fawley took a pull which would have floored a bull, set the bottle on its side in the rubbish, said: "I heered yo're a city detective. Why didn't you say so last night before we got to, ahem, tusslin'? Brother, I need a friend like you. I got double-trouble!"

"So have I," McGavock confided. "You tell me your troubles and I'll tell you mine. I haven't done this since I was a kid. What's getting you down, schoolmate?"

"They's somethin' mighty funny goin' on here in Minnifee, brother. I'm in it. An' I want to git out!"

"Then why don't you?"

"Cause I don't know what the hell I'm in. I think Pen-Wiper Johnson is playin' me for some kind of a sucker, but I ain't shore. Yo're a feller that's been around. You must be a judge o' human nacher. What you think o' Johnson?"

"A delightful old gentleman. Mighty, mighty charming. Why, Alligator?"

"He ain't no gentleman. He's meaner'n a bitch panther and twice as tricky. For one thing, I think he knows who slew Knox Brackney. Doc Malbert's been fussin' over Knox's body and he says he was kilt. The story's all over town. Knox was destroyed, by hand, with a trace chain."

"It was a dog chain, Alligator."

"A chain's a chain, trace or dog. Now I was the guy that caught Lacey Frye with the body. Mebbe you've heered about it. It was jest about twilight and there was a flurry of snow in the air. I turned into Frye's drive and I seen him draggin' ole Knox toward the garage. I called the law."

"You say you had turned into the driveway? What were you doing on Frye's premises?"

"That's the part that bothers me. I was sent there. By Pen-Wiper. From his art shop. He asked me to slip a envelope under Frye's door. I got so excited about the death an' all that I forgot to deliver it."

"You have it now?"

"No. I tore it up, and told Pen-Wiper I delivered it. I read it first, though, and kin tell you what it said. It was wrote in green crayon on a sheet of tablet paper and said, 'Haven't seen you around the old Scaggs house lately. Hope these letters aren't scarin' you.' It wasn't signed."

"Now let me get this straight. Johnson was in his shop when you saw Frye and Brackney?"

"That's right. When I left the store, Pen-Wiper was sittin' at his counter, puttin' a watch together. The watch was his old gold watch

that I know so well. He had little screws and such all laid out on the glass before him. Reporting it to the law, and all, it was a half hour before I got back. He had his watch all assembled and running. That's a tedious job. He was workin' at it all the time I was gone, he had to be." Fawley batted his stupid eyes. "Anyway you look at it, it gives him a durn good alibi."

"Then why do you suspect him?"

"My Redeemer! I don't suspeck him of killin' Knox! I jest say he must know about it—or why would he send me out with such a foolish letter, *jest when Frye was movin' the body!* And that ain't all. There's other things. There's Mr. Oglethorpe Choctaw Asbree."

"So I've noticed."

Mr. Alligator Fawley picked up the whiskey bottle, drained it. "Here's what I mean. Miss Sue hates licker and them that sells it. Mr. Asbree never carries no money in his pocket. He don't need to hereabouts. He's a rich man and his credit is plenty good. For years he's been comin' into Johnson's place, drinkin' himself out o' this world. On credit. Now, the gal handles all the household expenses. So you know what?"

"What?"

"She pays the old man's licker bill. To Johnson. By check, the first o' every month. Like a grocery bill. It runs about ninety-six dollars a month. I've seen lots o' these checks. I've took them to the bank and deposited them in Johnson's account." Alligator Fawley screwed up his eyes, looked cagy. "Why does she do it? By law you cain't collect no moonshine licker bill. She ought to know it. Her old man's a lawyer."

"Maybe she respects her father and insists on meeting his obligations. Maybe she has a sense of honor. Have you ever heard of a sense of honor?"

Mr. Fawley looked nettled. "Shore I've heered o' a sense o' honor. I've got one myself. My ole pappy beat it into me with a hickory ramrod. A sense o' honor fixes you up so you won't tolerate none o' yore neighbors' hawgs a-rootin' around in yore sorghum pumice, or even yore sweet-pertater patch! But who's a-talkin' about hawgs? All I'm sayin' is she ain't tryin' very hard to break her father o' drinkin' if she's payin' Pen-Wiper Johnson nigh onto a hunnert bucks a month to keep him saturated."

"You think that's funny?"

"I think it's damn funny. And you would, too, if you knew Miss Sue Asbree."

McGavock got to his feet. "Very interesting. Is that all?"

Mr. Fawley stood up, said: "Yep. That's all. It's got me worried." He held out a horny hand for a handshake.

McGavock took off his hat with both hands, whipped it against his knee, knocking off the

cobwebs. He said vaguely, "Well, Alligator, I'll doubtless run into you again," and left.

MCGAVOCK stopped in at the corner drug-store. He bought a pad of cheap paper, a box of crayons, an envelope, and a postage stamp. He tore a sheet from the pad, selected the green crayon from the box, pocketed them and left the discards on the counter. He affixed the stamp to the envelope and pocketed that, too. From the phone booth he called Mr. Choctaw Asbree.

Mr. Asbree answered. McGavock said cheerfully: "This is Luther. How's the hangover today?"

Mr. Asbree's voice answered stiffly: "We'll not mention hangovers, please." His tone became suddenly warm, enthusiastically cordial. "I'm feeling fine, thank you. I owe you a debt I can never repay. When are you coming out to see me?"

"Later," McGavock declared. "Later. Now here's why I called, Choctaw. Take off the warpaint and meet me at the doctor's office at, say, four o'clock this afternoon. Be there. Don't fail me."

"Always orders, and never any explanations." Mr. Asbree chuckled. "Very well. Dr. Dalie's, at four sharp."

McGavock grinned, hung up. He called Mr. Lacey Frye, made an appointment with the schoolteacher at his home for two, and started at a leisurely pace through the brittle sunshine in quest of Miss Sue Asbree. Things were heading up fast and there were a few questions he wanted answered.

In the gay, brilliant sunlight, the Asbree home seemed a different place entirely from last night's sepulchral mansion of mist and menace. Its old brick was soft rose and lavender in the noonday light, its windows sparkled in shot gold, and its stone steps were scrubbed to a dazzling snowy white. He passed through the wrought-iron gates, crossed the broad lawn studded with ancient, leafless oaks. He was headed for the front veranda when he saw the girl off to the left in the grove, and changed his course.

She was standing near a small gray building enclosed by a high fence of welded wire and as McGavock emerged from the trees he observed that she was not alone. Mr. Pen-Wiper Johnson was also present.

The girl was holding a black dog on a leather leash. The dog was a giant, not many inches short of three feet, McGavock judged, and as McGavock approached, the dog began a deep-throated, coughing rumble accompanied by airy sweeps of his tail. McGavock said: "Hi, Sue. What's that dog saying?"

Mr. Johnson nodded coldly. The girl laughed. "He's telling the world he likes you."

The gigantic dog strained on the leash, the

girl held him firmly. McGavock said: "Tell him for me that his love is unrequited. I don't like anything that has more feet than I have. If I have to travel, I don't want to be chased by something that has a two-to-one pedal advantage over me. Hi, Johnson."

Pen-Wiper Johnson said icily: "I've already spoken to you, sir." He stood rigidly, a thimble-shaped hat on his pink, fleshy head. His white, baby-soft hair fluttered in the brisk breeze. He was a peculiar picture, a mixture of weakness and selfish strength. There was cruelty in his little rosebud mouth, cruelty and cunning and the shadow of controlled hysteria. He bowed to Miss Asbree, said servilely: "I'll be going."

The girl said tonelessly: "Good-by, Mr. Johnson." He started off through the dead oak leaves.

McGavock said loudly: "Sue, how much insurance does your father carry?" Mr. Johnson came to a dignified halt.

The girl met McGavock's eyes squarely, said calmly: "I understand I'm to be well taken care of if anything should happen to him. Why?"

McGavock said roughly: "They tell me around town that you handle all his moola. How much has he got salted away in the bank?"

Mr. Johnson wheeled slowly, returned. He said pompously: "Miss Asbree, is this stranger bothering you? I've never heard such insolent effrontery in my whole life—" He folded his arms and anchored himself. His manner said: "Here I am, to stay as long as you need my protection."

McGavock said: "Scram, Johnson. This is a private conversation." Mr. Johnson arched his eyebrows, remained stonily silent.

McGavock pointed to the dog, said to the girl: "I see you hold him on a leather choke. Many people prefer a chain choke."

Miss Asbree nodded gravely. "I do myself. I had my chain lead hanging on the back porch but someone seems to have stolen it."

McGavock said carelessly: "Maybe someone needed it worse than you did. Is your father at home?"

"No. He's out. He's taking his morning stroll."

"I see. By the way, how's his health? I'm not referring to his craving for Pen-Wiper's bad booze. I mean his general health."

The girl thought this over cautiously before she answered. McGavock studied her with close attention. She was pretty enough, if you liked the type. The winter wind fluffed her expensive big-city print frock about her rounded, little-girl figure, caught wisps of pale-blond hair from the bun at the back of her neck and flicked them across her bland forehead. In the sunlight, her eyes were cool.

Finally, she spoke. She said stolidly: "My father's health is perfect. As I told you last night, he's a man of steel. He has better lungs, better nerves, a better heart, than either you, or I, or Mr. Johnson, here. Now I must ask you to leave me. I'm very busy this morning. Good day, sir."

McGavock nodded. He could feel their eyes on his back as he strode down the hillside, out the gates, to the pavement.

It was two minutes of two, and little fleecy white-bottomed clouds lay against a chill turquoise sky, when McGavock crossed the rutted red-clay street, now frozen and treacherous, and opened the slatted gate to the tiny knee-high picket fence in front of Mr. Lacey Frye's.

He ascended the porchsteps and knocked on the flimsy jerry-built door. Professor Frye was prompt in his response. He yanked the door open, invited McGavock in, seated him in the pleasant living room with its applegreen walls and soft blue rug. The schoolteacher's black broadcloth suit was rumpled and unkempt, his long horse-jaw was stubbled. He looked harried, cornered.

McGavock said quietly: "The time has come, Professor, for you to give. You're involved in murder. Why not make a clean breast of it? Let's have the truth. You're in a jam, but it's no reflection on your grade-A brain."

Professor Frye patted his neatly parted red hair, said falteringly: "I haven't the slightest idea what you may be—"

"O.K. O.K. Put it this way. If I show you how to get a half-Nelson on Pen-Wiper Johnson, show you how to fix him so he'll keep his mouth shut, will you talk?"

Frye thought this over. He said slowly: "I'll take a chance on you. Yes, I agree to your proposition."

McGavock took out the green crayon and the paper. Carefully, he printed, *For goodness sakes, Johnson, quit sending me these notes. You don't scare me. Do I scare you?* He showed the message to Frye, tucked it in the envelope and sealed it. Frye suddenly smiled.

McGavock said: "Just address it and mail it to him. I'd like to see his face when he gets back one of his own green crayon, poison-pen letters. I'll wager that's the last you'll hear from him."

Frye guffawed. McGavock asked: "What did he have on you, anyway?"

"Nothing criminal. But something that, harrumph, puts me in a rather shameful light." Professor Frye sighed with relief. "I'm glad to get it off my chest." He looked embarrassed. "I'm an inquisitive man, you know. I have the scientific aspect toward life. I like to find out things."

"And you found out more than you could handle, eh? I see. Let's have it." McGavock

walked restlessly back and forth across the thick carpet.

Professor Frye composed himself. He said: "I'm bothered with insomnia. Sometimes I take walks at night. About two weeks ago, about three in the morning, I left my bed, dressed, and took a stroll. I walked out by the old Scaggs house."

"And you saw a light through one of the boarded windows?"

"Yes, and an automobile a half block away at the curb. An auto meant that the prowler was a person of some significance, not a tramp. I tried to peer in but, as you mentioned, the windows are well boarded. I cudgelled my brain for some means of entrance. I was raised here in Minnifree and all at once thought of how, when I was a child, I used to play under the floors of this very house. I searched about and found where the lattice was loose at the foundation."

"Then you sneaked under the floor, scurried about, listening to the footsteps over your head?"

"Yes. But you make it sound very undignified. Finally the footsteps stopped. I knelt down and waited. Then I heard voices."

"You heard voices?"

"Yes. Two people were talking low, arguing. One seemed to be threatening the other. I became a bit frightened and left." Professor Frye paused, added dryly: "Then, on the way home, I met Mr. Johnson. It was his car I'd seen. He was just getting into it. He noticed the earth on my knees then, I guess, but he gave no sign at the time."

"So Johnson was one of the persons in the Scaggs house that night. Who was the other?"

"I haven't the slightest idea. I couldn't even swear it was Johnson. His notes, however, appear to convey certain knowledge—"

"Has he ever made demands on you for money?"

"No."

McGavock was staring out the window. In the foreground was the garage, just beyond it was the cistern with its old pump, beyond the cistern he could see a corner of Mr. Johnson's back porch. His eyes rested on the cistern and suddenly the sunlight struck the cistern platform in a spangle of broken, yellow lights. Little specks of fire—as though someone had dropped four or five topazes. He asked: "What's that sparkle out on the cistern?"

Professor Frye said pensively: "He's never asked me for money, no. But somebody wants something from me. Strange things are happening and somehow I always seem to be on hand—always of my own volition. Like crawling under the Scaggs house. Like finding Knox Brackney. Like the box in my basement."

"What box?"

"Just come with me. I'd like you to take a look at it. I happened to discover it this morning. It wasn't there yesterday. My guess is that it made its appearance last evening while the Squire and his cohort were accusing me of manslaughter." He arose and left the room.

McGavock followed him into the hall, down a steep flight of steps. Professor Frye said, with a hollow laugh: "The absurd feeling has been growing on me that I'm somehow being manipulated by a master-mind—by an intellect even greater than my own. It's just an illusion, of course, but someone is meddling with me and my home!"

CHAPTER FOUR

A Little Knowledge Is a Dangerous Thing



ACEY Frye's basement was small and square. It had cement walls, a cement floor, and a chipped enamel sink. Seven soapy socks hung from a clothesline. There was a mousetrap set with bacon rind, a shelf of preserved fruit in glass jars, which the professor had bought at church bazaars, and a spring-and-rope body builder.

McGavock saw the box instantly. It stuck out like a sore thumb. It was about three feet square and at first seemed suspended halfway up against the wall. Then McGavock noticed that a waterpipe emerged from a small hole in its side. They walked over to it.

Professor Frye lifted the lid from its top. The box appeared to be full of loose, coarse salt, Professor Frye scraped a handful of salt to one side and exposed a metal cylinder with a numerical gauge. "My water meter," he said. "Wait here a minute. Watch those numerals."

He scrambled up the steps and a little later McGavock could hear the distant sound of faucets running. The numerals on the dial quivered but showed no other movement.

Upstairs, the flow of water stopped. McGavock joined his host in the hallway. Professor Frye said heavily: "Did you notice? No meter reading. I had everything on, hot and cold, kitchen and bathroom."

"It's an old gag," McGavock declared. "Packing the meter with salt."

"But why? Why my meter? Why should anyone—"

"I couldn't say. You'd better dismantle it before you get into trouble. Town council isn't going to like it." McGavock eyed the gaunt schoolteacher owlishly. "A charge of chiseling on your water bill would be harder on your reputation than a paltry charge of manslaughter."

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ter. Let's go out to that cistern. I want to see what that was sparkling in the sunlight."

There was a broken bottle on the wooden cistern platform—an ink bottle, once containing red ink, now smashed to shards. Professor Frye picked up a bit of the gummed label. He was stunned. "My bottle! I use this red ink in making out my grade sheets!"

"And Mr. Johnson sells it in his art shop."

"No," the professor said slowly. "Not this brand. I order it by mail from the factory. By the dozen. Nobody else in town uses it, or has ever heard of it, I'll bet!"

The ink lay in a tiny pool of crimson on the warped planks. In the late afternoon sunlight it looked like thin, chemical blood.

McGavock bid the professor a fond adieu and started down the cracked sidewalk in the general direction of town. About sixty feet away, when he had reached a position where Mr. Johnson's house blocked out the schoolteacher's, McGavock back-tracked.

He approached the shopkeeper's cottage from the flank. On the north side, the far side, there was a shallow brick porch roofed with a narrow shelf of shingles. He knocked, waited, and knocked again. There was no response. He tried the knob, found the door locked, and got out his ring of skeleton keys. With a little juggling, he threw back the bolt and entered. He found himself in a small alcove.

Experimentally, he called: "Any rags, any bones, anybody home?"

No answer, not even an echo. He began a thorough search of the building.

Mr. Johnson, it was soon evident, was a frugal man and surrounded himself with the bare necessities of life. There was a small stove in the kitchen, and a cane-bottomed chair pulled up to the sink shelf served as a dining table. The furniture in the parlor was meager and shabby.

The bedroom boasted a four-poster bed, second hand, a marble-topped washstand, badly chipped, and a footstool. The bed was neatly made but there were no clothes in sight. No shoes under the bed, nothing but wire hangers in the closet. McGavock sauntered into the bathroom.

The bathroom, too, was tidy. McGavock opened the medicine cabinet. Razor, toothbrush, shaving cream and toothpaste were absent. There was, however, a pair of rusty barber's clippers. McGavock examined the washbowl.

Caught on the grilled drain was a tangle of fleecy white hairs. The last time he'd seen those hairs they were fringing Mr. Johnson's pink, fleshy head. McGavock stood a moment, in deep thought, trying to visualize a Mr. Johnson with a cropped and shaved head. He'd present a new and strange picture.

Nowhere in the house was there a traveling bag or suitcase.

McGavock locked the little side door as he left. He frowned in annoyance.

Dr. Dalie's office was above the hardware store, across the street from the courthouse. Mr. Oglethorpe Choctaw Asbree was sitting stiffly in an imitation paper-and-wire wicker armchair, reading the ads in a farm magazine. He smiled as McGavock entered, said: "Do you ever read these advertisements, Luther? They knock fifty years off your age. It says here I can have my choice of a six-foot pocket telescope, a pair of homing pigeons, or a ten-bladed jackknife complete with can-opener and bung-starter. All I have to do is introduce to my neighbors three gross of Kiss of Egypt perfume!"

McGavock said: "I know. I've taken the same trip myself. Is the doctor in? Do we have our appointment? Good. Now I want you to step into his office and have him go over you, with a reading glass if necessary, for a hypo puncture. You're the baby that's got it, I'm sure of that. Go in there and don't come out until you're got a positive report."

Mr. Asbree started to debate the point, suddenly changed his mind. He placed his broad-brimmed hat carefully across his gold-headed walking stick on the wicker table, and strode gracefully into the examining room.

McGavock picked up a magazine. He read a long article on how a farmer in Nebraska nearly saved a two-headed calf, and was half through another called "Tips for the Homely Homemaker," when the office door opened and Mr. Asbree appeared accompanied by a boyish little fellow in a spotless white smock.

Mr. Asbree seemed tranquil as ever. He said: "Mr. McGavock, Dr. Dalie."

Dr. Dalie was worried. He nodded absently, said: "I can't understand it, Mr. Asbree. It's there, all right. Under your arm. An injection in the armpit indicates that an attempt was made to conceal it. I don't like it."

McGavock said wryly: "Neither do I. Let's go, Choctaw."

Down on the street, McGavock put on the pressure. He said: "How about it? Do you want to live?"

Mr. Asbree pondered. "I haven't given it much thought, but offhand I should say, yes."

"O.K. Then here's what you're to do. Follow these instructions implicitly. Go to the hotel, go upstairs to two-oh-one, just beyond the rotunda. That's the room of Atherton Browne, the old geezer who owns me. Tell him I sent you. When you get inside, don't leave. He'll raise hell because he likes his privacy, but stick with him. If he gets obnoxious, just hand it right back to him. Remember, *don't leave him for a second!*"

Mr. Asbree demurred. "I've never made a practice of inflicting myself on a total stranger—"

"It's fun. Try it. I'll get in touch with you later."

McGavock crossed the street and headed for the courthouse. He had a communication for Sheriff Vip Stites.

MCGAVOCK'S wristwatch said five after eleven when he touched Sue Asbree on the elbow, said, "Here we go!", and started up the brick walk of the old Scaggs place.

As they mounted the steps to the high porch, the girl said calmly: "I've changed my mind. I'm going home. I don't know you well enough to—"

McGavock said amiably: "You'll know me better before the night's finished." He opened the weathered door and they stepped inside.

Instantly, the foul air of the abandoned house enveloped them. McGavock switched on his lantern, led Miss Asbree into the great, bare drawing room. A voice said, "Is that you, Luther?" and Sheriff Stites appeared in the blackness of an adjoining doorway.

McGavock said angrily: "That's a good way to find out. Just inquire. Yes, it's me. Get back where you can watch the hall."

Sheriff Stites said politely, "Good evening, Miss Asbree." He switched a long-barreled pistol from his right to his left hand, so he could tip his hat. "The place is clean, Luther. I been all over it."

"Fine," McGavock said. "Then he won't come down the stairs on us. It'll be the back door probably. But keep an eye on the front, too. Now get out of sight. Miss Asbree and I have things to discuss."

The sheriff vanished. McGavock set the lantern on the mantelpiece, stared moodily about the empty, barnlike room. "So this, Sue Asbree, is where you passed your blackmail money."

Her eyes narrowed. She said coldly: "I don't know what you're talking about."

He said wearily: "I've a hundred dollars, in ten-dollar bills, which you left behind that baseboard. I'll return it to you at the proper time and under the proper conditions. Don't lie to me, honey-child, you're just making it harder. Strictly speaking, I guess, it isn't blackmail, it's a vicious form of extortion!"

She was trembling now. "What do you mean?"

McGavock's cheeks were white with rage. "Your father was a brilliant lawyer who let the bottle get him down. He came home drunk, disgraced himself, and nearly drove you crazy. So a good friend of yours stepped in and told you how to cure him."

Her eyes were wild, terrified.

He raised his voice. "This friend gave you a hypodermic needle loaded with a whitish substance, directed you to give the dose to your father, under the arm. Which you did one night

when he passed out. From then on, you've been living in hell. For by giving your father the hypo you put yourself in the power of this skunk, and you've been paying for it. Paying one hundred dollars per week. Waiting for your father to die."

She said weakly: "But why should I pay—"

"Because after you dosed your father, this friend told you he'd made a mistake. That you'd given your old man a shot of slow poison. This was balony, of course. Old Choctaw will outlive either of us."

Color came back to her cheeks. She said: "Is that really true? Do you mean that?"

"Of course. That was part of the scheme. Your friend gave you egg white in the needle. The shot you gave old Choctaw was in itself harmless. But it sensitized him for the big lethal dose. This friend was the one who was going to knock your father off. Then things would happen. You'd believe you had killed him and would be ripe for a big squeeze. About that time you'd inherit, and there would be life insurance. This helpful friend would really go to town on the Asbree bank roll."

Suddenly she screamed.

He thought she screamed at him but later realized that she'd been staring past him. Things happened fast.

A shot slammed through the empty room and McGavock pivoted toward the hallway. He had his .38 out from under his belt buckle when Sheriff Stites stepped nimbly through the door at his side, firing twice, rapidly, from the hip. Behind McGavock, a man said: "Don't! Don't! I'm through!"

McGavock turned. Behind him, a weird sight met his eyes. A three-foot panel in the floor was partially lifted and Lacey Frye, like a strange sea-animal, had head and shoulders in the room. The professor was standing on the earth beneath the house. He tossed an old ivory-handled six-shooter into the hearth and climbed into the room.

McGavock said: "Howdy. The grade-A brain! So you decided to join the party."

Miss Asbree exclaimed: "Mr. Frye, is it true what he said? Is Father all right?"

McGavock said: "Yes, ma'am, it's true. A little egg white won't hurt anyone—if you don't take too much."

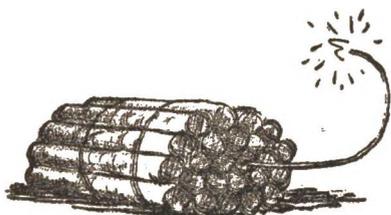


SHERIFF STITES was shocked. He said indignantly: "I ain't surprised, Luther. We folks in Minnifee never much cared for the professor. What'd he do?"

"He exercised his superior intellect and bungled worse than a grade-A fool. His trap for the
(Continued on page 96)

DATE WITH DYNAMITE

A Ben Corbett
Novelette



By **JULIUS LONG**

Having a former professor of criminology in the attorney general's office is a case of fighting with your back to the wall, though with a guy like Durbin it's good to have your back up against something. Durbin was the scientific kind of sleuth, with emphasis on fast headwork. But with a load of dynamite ready to explode, you've got to use a little footwork, too—or you won't have a head to think with.

76



CHAPTER ONE

TNT for Two



IN THE first place I felt bad because I had felt too good the night before. In the second place, I felt even worse because this guy Durbin had not only taken over my job, but my girl as well. So when I picked up the morning paper and saw that Attorney

General Burton H. Keever had recommended a state firearms registration law I really blew up.

As chief investigator in Keever's office, I wouldn't have been hurt by the law, but it jarred my sensibilities as a gun crank. I could see the fine flabby hand of Curtis T. Durbin, Keever's new trained seal, in this legislation. When Keever was quoted as saying the proposed new law would "go a long way toward reducing crime," I recognized Durbin's soapy voice. It was the kind of corn he had taught in



When he turned around he was holding a Winchester '97. "I told you I'd take care of you, son," the old man snapped.

a college three pastures east of a mid-western creek.

Professor of Criminology, that's what Durbin had been. He had taught one of those courses in which they call a two-time loser a recidivist. He had taught how to make fingerprint tests without teaching cons how to leave fingerprints that anybody can test. And now he was streamlining criminal investigation in our fair state under the sponsorship of the Honorable Burton H. Keever, who had finagled a naive legislature into creating the job of "State Criminologist" and paying him three times the salary I was paid.

Of course I still rated my title of Chief Investigator in the attorney general's office, but Durbin had become head man. About all I'd had to do lately was to see that Keever's six other investigators didn't get run over when they crossed the street. To a man they were brothers-in-law of country politicians in various parts of the state, and all their jobs meant to them was their salary and what they could steal.

More humiliating than anything else was the way Kay, the office Betty Grable, had gone nuts over the new white-haired boy. I hadn't rated a date with her in a week, and when she had turned me down again last night in favor of Durbin, that had done it. As I just said, I'd got stinkin' from drinkin'.

I folded the newspaper, stuck it into my pocket and tottered into the Front Street State Building, which houses Keever's spacious offices. I certainly didn't feel like showing up for work, but it was a case of fighting with my back to the wall. Where a guy like Durbin is involved, it's good to have your back up against something.

He was the first character I saw when I entered the outer office. He was sitting on Kay's desk and handing her the usual line of baloney. I grunted a hello to both of them, hardly looking at Durbin, for a pastel yellow shirt with blended tie was not what my stomach needed.

I grabbed the knob of Keever's door and was about to twist it when Kay said: "You wanted to see Mr. Keever, Ben?"

"I didn't think this was the men's room."

"Well, I'll have to ask if you can go in." Kay began using the inter-office phone, while I just stared. So Durbin had finally put it over. No more was I to have access to the boss's inner sanctum unless previously announced. Durbin twisted around on Kay's desk, and his smile was twisted, too. I've nothing against mustaches, but the one he wore looked as if it had been grown to cover up a pimple on his lip.

He got off the desk and walked nonchalantly into Keever's office, letting me know how it was. Kay put down her phone.

"Mr. Keever will see you, Ben."

I WENT inside, and, so help me, Durbin was sitting on Keever's desk, too. Keever regarded me with annoyance.

"Well, Ben? I hope it's important. I'm very busy."

I got the paper out of my pocket, opened it and shoved it across the small part of the desk not covered by Durbin's rear.

I said: "A typographical error, I assume."

Keever's brows drew together with annoyance.

"I've no time for levity, Ben. Of course that article is printed exactly the way I gave it to the reporters."

I feigned amazement.

"But, boss, are you trying to commit political suicide? Don't you realize that all organized sportsmen will be pitching against you in a matter of hours? This registration law would tax every person ten bucks per gun each year! That means that the private ownership of firearms in this state would be virtually abolished!"

"Exactly," Durbin said proudly. "With the private ownership of firearms abolished, there will be no firearms crimes. Even *you* should be able to figure that out, Corbett."

I turned on Durbin. "Listen, you, I can figure out anything you can and a lot faster! It also stands to reason that if you abolish automobiles there won't be any automobile accidents! But people would still rather have automobile accidents as a necessary evil than have their liberty to own automobiles taken away from them. They feel the same way about guns. This is a nation of sportsmen, and when the boys all get home again, it'll be even more so. Every soldier will want a carbine, and he'll want his kids to have a twenty-two. And it's a damn good thing! If this country ever has to go to war again, the army won't have to teach its men how to shoot—unless nitwit guys like you stop them!"

Durbin clapped his hands almost inaudibly in mock applause.

"A very nice speech, Corbett. You should hire a hall!"

Keever was eyeing me thoughtfully. "It's odd

for you to proselyte, Ben. I suppose it's because you're such a gun crank. Do you really think there will be popular antipathy to Durbin's idea?"

I knew I had pulled at least one rug out from under Durbin. If anything gave Keever the horrors it was the prospect of losing a single vote. He would have espoused kilts for men if he had thought it would win him an election—and I'm serious about that. So I pressed my advantage.

"It'll really raise a rumpus, boss! Besides, it won't curtail crime anyway. You don't expect criminals to register their rods, do you? They're probably tickled to pieces at the idea of such a law. It means less chance of anybody shooting back at them when they pull a job."

"Nonsense!" Durbin exploded. "Look at England! There's a fifteen-dollar registration fee on every gun in England. And it has the lowest firearms homicide rate of any country in the world!"

"Sure, they never had prohibition in England. The firearms law's the reason England begged this country to ship them guns when the war started. They didn't have them or the factories to build them! I want to see crime curtailed, but I'm not willing to buy it at the price of civil liberty or jeopardy to our country. Think it over, boss. This scientific criminologist has handed you a hot one you'd better let go of."

Keever looked thoughtful, but he failed to commit himself. I had the pleasure of seeing Durbin looking very much worried. Keever coughed and changed the subject.

"I'm glad you're both here. It happens that I want to give an assignment to both of you. You can each handle it your own way. Durbin will tackle it with a scientific viewpoint and you, Ben, will go at it in a cop's way. It should be a challenge to both of you."

"A challenge," said Durbin, smiling complacently, "which I accept with alacrity."

"Let's have it, boss," I said.

Keever cleared his throat. "Did either of you ever hear of Kyser Lake?"

Durbin looked blank, but I said: "Yes, I once fell into it. I was shooting at a duck at the time. I can still hear it laughing."

Durbin eyed me incredulously, knowing that no duck can laugh. Then he said: "I believe I have heard something of Kyser Lake. It's a low-class summer resort, isn't it?"

Keever frowned. "Maybe millionaires don't go there, but it's the largest resort in the state. The lake covers nine thousand acres of land, and it's state property. The state makes much more out of fishing and hunting licenses than the upkeep of the lake costs. We have a superintendent and an assistant down there, as well as a whole staff of conservation officers. But they don't seem to be able to handle the problem they've got."

"I'm anxious for a crack at it," said Durbin eagerly, eager to cover up his tactless crack about the low-class trade at Kyser Lake. "I don't recall reading anything about any trouble there in the papers."

"No, you wouldn't. So far it's been kept quiet. The local conservation officers as well as the county sheriff have been working on the quiet on the theory that such a policy will pay off. But they've failed to turn up anything. They haven't the slightest idea as to who planted the dynamite."



DYNAMITE!" Durbin's mouth fell open.

"Yes, dynamite. Perhaps I should explain that Kyser Lake is an artificial one constructed seventy-five years ago as a reservoir for the Kyser Canal. You've probably never heard of

the Kyser Canal because it was abandoned a few years after the lake was built. The lake was still kept intact because of its possibilities as a state park and conservation center.

"Right now it's a multi-million dollar enterprise. There are ten thousand cottages around the lake—in fact, they completely surround it except for the bank road at the south side. This bank road is so called because it's on a bank which actually is the main dam flung up to flood the entire basin. It's a mile and a quarter long. It was in the middle of this dam on the lake side that the dynamite was found.

"As I said, there was enough of it to blow a hole through the road and bank, flooding all the lowlands for miles around. The damage to crops would have been tremendous, especially at this time. It would also have ruined the resort business for the rest of the season. It still would. The dynamite was found two weeks ago, but it's still four weeks till Labor Day."

"Why, who in the world would want to do that?" Durbin ejaculated.

Keever shrugged. "That's what I want you men to find out. I'm going to send both of you, and you can each take as many of my investigators as you wish."

"You can have them all," I generously informed Durbin. "I wouldn't care to assume the responsibility of keeping them from falling into the lake."

Keever turned his frown on me.

"I hope I don't have to warn you, Ben, that this matter is a very serious one. Lives may be lost if the criminal should plant dynamite again and this time be successful."

"Why give him a chance? Aren't guards posted along the bank?"

"Of course. But the bank on the lake side has been washed away in some places so that there is an open space under the road. It would

be possible for someone in a boat to get under the retaining wall during the night and leave his dynamite."

"What kind of detonation was used the first time?"

"Chemical. Two chemicals separated by a lead plug would have produced enough heat to detonate a fulminate cap when the lead was eaten through. The process had almost taken place when a fisherman happened to spot the stuff."

"Was the dynamite traced?"

"Yes. It was some stolen from the storehouse of a dynamite blaster named Jack Smith. We've checked on Smith, and there's no possibility that he could have had anything to do with the crime. He had reported the theft of the dynamite several days before."

"Was the entire lot of stolen dynamite used?"

"Only half of it. The thief has enough left to do the job all over again. As for the lead pipe and plug set-up, the material could have been picked up at any plumber's shop. The chemicals used are also common, though this specific use of them would be known only by someone who had given the matter a lot of thought."

"Have the local officers run down any suspects?" Durbin asked, to show he was right there clicking.

"Well, they've questioned two men. One is Dave Sloan, a former superintendent of the lake. He was fired for renting out the bucket dredge to private property owners and pocketing the proceeds. He's made several vague threats at various beer joints, but he has an alibi for all the time required to plant the dynamite."

"And the other man?"

"His name is Nathan Grant. Last summer his wife and three children were fishing in a rowboat when a speedboat went by at such a speed that the rowboat was capsized. Grant's wife and children were drowned. The driver of the speedboat could have rescued them, but he didn't stop. He's never been identified. The whole thing was witnessed only from a distance of a mile. Grant almost went insane. It's thought he might have planned to ruin the lake as a gesture of blind revenge."

"He have an alibi, too?" I asked.

"No. But the officers up there can't prove anything, and I don't really think they believe him guilty."

"Well, I think he ought to be thrown into the clink for observation, or at least have a tail put on him."

"The men up there are taking care of him. His farmhouse is watched. Whenever he leaves, the officers at the lake are notified."

"This other suspect, they watching him, too?"

"No. His alibi cleared him of any suspicion."

"He could have hired the job done."

Durbin said quickly: "That's psychologically

impossible. The criminal seeking revenge wreaks his havoc by his own hands."

"This is all very educational," I told him and he solemnly acknowledged the compliment.

Keever said: "Well, there it is. You men can handle it any way you like, I've instructed the lake superintendent to give you whatever information and assistance you may need. I thought you might have better luck if you each attacked the problem separately."

"That's a foregone conclusion," said Durbin. "My only request is that Mr. Corbett in no way interfere with my scientific approach to this problem. When you see me coming, Mr. Corbett, just pretend you don't know me."

"That would be a pleasure."

MY PREVIOUS experience at Kyser Lake had told me that there was only one good hotel there, Barkley's-on-the-Lake. So that was my first stop.

"Sorry," said the desk man, "no accommodations of any kind for the rest of the season. All reservations have been taken."

I took a deep breath.

"Well, where can I find some?"

The desk man shrugged pessimistically. "You might be able to rent a cottage in the slough. That's opposite the lake on the bank road. The only trouble is you can't get your car down there, and if you could you'd never get it out because of the swampy ground. Besides, they tell me that some of the mosquitoes are four-motored."

I spent the next two hours convincing myself that the desk man wasn't a liar. Everything was sewed up, everything, that is, except the cottages opposite the bank. They were on tall piles, but still you looked down on their roofs as you drove along. There was a narrow parking space reserved along the road, but no way to get a car down there.

I parked and walked down wooden steps to a cottage labeled, *Tim Timmon's De Luxe Cottages*. I went inside.

"You Timmons?"

The old guy nodded. He had a hatchet-face and a corn-cob pipe stuck in his mouth.

"Well, I'd like a cottage. Got any?"

"Son, you're born under a lucky star! It ain't been fifteen minutes since them folks gave up the Evelyn, my best de luxe cottage!"

"Well, let's take a look at the Evelyn and see how de luxe it is."

The Evelyn turned out to be slightly larger than the others, but if its inside was de luxe, I'd hate to see the others. A ragged carpet covered the center of a bare, unfinished floor. A pair of old steel beds stood against one wall. A faded, torn curtain, hung on a wire, and I surmised that privacy was obtained by pulling it in front of the beds. There was a gas stove but no running water. I turned to Timmons

and spoke above the buzzing of the mosquitoes.

"How much?"

"Thirty bucks."

"But—" I broke off, fished out three tens and forked them over. Thirty a week for a hole like this was worse than stealing from babies, but there was nothing to be done about it.

"Thanks," said Timmons. "You brung a woman along?"

"No."

Timmons shrugged. "Some do, and some don't. It ain't really necessary."

He started out with his thirty dollars.

I said: "Wait a minute. I didn't even give you my name."

Timmons kept on going. He disappeared without looking back.

The first thing I did was to get out of there. It was depressing to walk out on your front veranda and look up at the road. Traffic swished by, also some girls in bathing suits. The view was good but not that good. I went up the steps again, got my car and spent the next hour finding a place to eat.

I found a Greek joint in Lake Point, down at the end of the bank road. The food was good. I'd just finished when a couple of khaki-uniformed conservation officers came in and sat down at the counter. They wore .38's and cartridge belts.

A balding man walked up behind the counter to them and said: "Well, what's new? Found out who put that dynamite there yet?"

Both officers shook their heads. One of them said: "It ain't our baby no more. The attorney general's office is sending some men up here. All we're supposed to do is help."

"That so? Well, I hope they nail that guy pretty soon. Business'll be shot to hell if they don't. People don't come to a lake they can't swim and fish in. And we still got all of August to go."

The officers shrugged and ordered their suppers. I sat still a while. Somebody had handed the Honorable Burton H. Keever the business. In the first place, the attempt to dynamite the bank road was common knowledge around Kyser Lake. Worse, it was no secret that Keever's office was active in the matter.

I thanked my lucky stars I hadn't put in an appearance at the state conservation office. These loose-mouthed boys would have made me a marked man by nightfall. Well, I'd had a break there, but it was going to be a plenty tough case. Whoever had planted that dynamite was certainly to be on his guard. He would be careful the next time.

I asked for my check. I said the food was good, but so was the price.

"Did you ever hear of OPA?" I asked the waitress. She turned up her nose.

"If you don't like our prices, you know where you can go."

I took the check to the cashier's desk. The balding man who had spoken with the conservation officers was behind it. I took it for granted he was the proprietor.

"You've sure got a sarcastic waitress," I said, laying down the check and two bills.

The proprietor winked, picked up the check and rang up the money in a very understanding manner.

"You're telling me! That's my wife!"

I picked up my dime change as casually as possible.

"What's this I hear about somebody dynamiting all the water out of the lake? Anything to it?"

The balding man nodded his head very seriously.

"I'll say. It's got all of us worried. This'll be the best season we've ever had—if somebody doesn't blow up the bank road."

"That would be a calamity. What part of the road was the stuff found at?"

"Down where Tim's cottages are. You can't miss the sign."

"Yes, I know. Well, that wouldn't be so good for Tim's cottages if the water went out right there, would it?"

The restaurant man laughed uproariously at that one.

"It's sure been tough on Tim," he said sympathetically. "Since the dynamite was found he can't rent his cottages at all! Even with the shortage, he can't give them away!"

"The hell he can't!"

My stomach was turning over slowly, counter-clockwise. And I had let that old robber soak me thirty bucks for his crummy cottage! I made up my mind I was going to get my money back even if it was on an expense account.

I lingered to ask another question.

"Anybody got any idea who did it?"

The man shrugged. "Could have been a couple fellows, they say. Dave Sloan and Nate Grant. Both had reason enough to be sore about the lake, I guess. Only I wouldn't say that about either of them."

"That would be a pretty dirty trick, wouldn't it?"

He said it would. I left, got my car and drove down the road to Tim's cottages. I parked, descended the steps again. I hadn't noticed before that there was no sign of life around the cottages, a fact which will go hard against me if ever I'm arrested for impersonating a detective.

I headed straight for Tim's cottage then.

It, too, was empty. I went out back, looked vacantly into the swampy weedland and yelled. Nobody answered. I decided to go back to my alleged cottage and wait.

When I opened my door there was a shrill scream.



STARED. I don't suppose she was wearing less than the girls going by up on the road, but what she was wearing wasn't supposed to be worn on the road.

"Would you please," she said, "get out of here?"

I closed the door. Then I said: "Get something on, will you? This happens to be my cottage."

A minute later, the door opened. She was wearing a wrap. It looked expensive. So did her hair-do. There was plenty of it, and it was all red. It looked natural. She had a terrific complexion. I'd already had ample proof that the rest of her was all right.

She gave me a dirty look and said: "What's the gag? Why did you come barging in like that?"

"It's my cottage. Ask Tim."

The girl looked thoughtful. She said begrudgingly: "It could be. I always get this cottage, but then Tim didn't know I was coming."

I looked beyond her. There was a small traveling case that had cost easily seventy-five dollars anywhere. I wondered why an expensive looking dish like this was using a shanty for a hangout.

"Well," I said, "you're welcome to stay. I haven't moved in yet, and the rest of these chicken coops will do as well as this one. Only I don't think I want one. My advice to you also is to move out. Haven't you heard about the dynamite planted in the bank right here?"

The girl laughed. "Of course—who hasn't? You certainly don't think the nut who did it will try it again at the same place?"

"Will it make any difference where he plants it, as long as it's in the bank road? All this lowland will be flooded. Personally, I want no part of it."

"Nobody's making you take any of it. I'm not that easily frightened. If the dope really does blow up the road, he'll try it far enough away so that the blast will wake me up in time to scam out. I'm a light sleeper."

She said it in a way that put an end to the conversation. I saw Tim coming down the steps, so I turned away. The girl stood in the door watching as I walked up to Tim.

"Listen, pal, when you rented me that mosquito-trap you forgot to tell me that a lunatic is loose dying to dynamite the lake right into the living room. So I want my thirty bucks back, and I'm not here to fool."

The old man looked me over. Then he shrugged and said: "Come into my cottage, son, and I'll take care of you."

So I went into his cottage. There was an old cupboard at the back wall, and Tim opened its door. I supposed that was where he kept

his money. It wasn't. When he turned around he was holding a Winchester '97 leveled at the paunch I am beginning to develop.

"I told you I'd take care of you, son. Now, if you don't get out of here fast, you'll get out of here slow, with your feet first!"

I thought he was bluffing. There was no point in calling his bluff. I shrugged.

"All right. So you can keep your thirty bucks, and I'll keep one of your cottages. Only you'll have to give me another one because a redhead's taken over mine."

Tim's brows lifted. The gun muzzle dropped a fraction of an inch.

"What? Ain't you heard about the dynamite?"

"Sure."

Tim's brows went even higher.

"Well, I declare! You're the first sucker's come along that didn't want to get right out of here and his money back when he found out! Naturally I can't be giving everybody their money back!"

"Naturally!"

"Well, I reckon if you're fool enough to want to stay, it's your right. Only it would play hell with my business if everybody took that attitude!"

"What do you mean, play hell with your business? I thought you said your customers were scared away!"

"Sure! That's what makes business good! Before the dynamite was found, I could only get the regular rent out of each cottage. But since everybody wants out right away, I get to rent 'em four and five times a week! Never had such a season in all the thirty years I've been here!"

I laughed from the belly, which was possible, as Tim had put aside his Winchester.

"You old scoundrel! Maybe *you're* the guy who planted the dynamite!"

Tim scowled. For a moment I thought he was going for the Winchester again. So I laughed hard, showing him I was only kidding. He relaxed.

"Listen, mister, I reckon it wouldn't do no good for the man that put that dynamite in the bank if ever I laid hands on him. If it had gone off, it would have killed me, and I ain't so sure it won't yet."

"Couldn't it be somebody had that in mind?"

Tim's jaw dropped. "Why, why would anybody go to all that trouble just to kill me? I got no enemies!"

"Maybe you have. You live here alone or are you married?"

"I live alone, and I got no enemies. 'Cause why? 'Cause I mind my own business. I stay here rentin' my cottages and payin' my bills. I don't ask nothin' of nobody, and nobody asks nothin' of me. I'm without a care in the world."

Tim's gaze wavered to a posted pin-up of a

Hollywood siren as he concluded this little speech.

I said: "Do you know where the dynamite was found?"

Tim eyed me sharply.

"You wouldn't be a detective or something?"

I made up my mind quickly. I fished out my badge.

"State attorney general's office. I'm down here to find who cached the stuff. How about showing me where, if you can?"

Tim became very much excited.

"I sure will! I was back under there only yesterday. Come on, I'll take you in one of my boats."

We climbed the steps to the road. Tim had a boat landing on the opposite side and half a dozen fourteen-foot fishing boats were there. Tim selected one that looked as if he kept it for personal use, shoved it into the water, and we both got inside.

"You'll have to duck low when we go under the road," Tim said. "You got a match?"

"I've got a lighter."

Tim pulled expertly away from the landing. There's something artistic about the way a boatman can handle a boat. Tim made the thing cut through the water without apparent effort. After fifty feet he pulled in toward the bank.

Then I saw the opening. The concrete retaining wall had been broken away, and a gap two and a half feet high would just permit a boat and prone passenger to go under.

As the bow moved in, I said: "You're sure it's safe under there?"

Tim cackled. "What do you think I'm taking you in there for?"

I wondered.

CHAPTER TWO

Murder Is My Business



LAY flat. There was plenty of room to straighten up inside. The water reached ten feet under the road. I got out my lighter and gasped when I saw what an excavation had taken place.

"Ye gods!" I said. "It's a wonder the road doesn't

cave in."

"It really is," said Tim. "The state's supposed to be doing something about it for the last three years, but I reckon it'll be another three before they do. That place right over there is where the dynamite was found."

I regarded the ledge he indicated. It was on the inside.

I said: "The guy who thought up this scheme really picked the weakest place in the bank.

Surely there are no other spots washed out this bad."

"No. Some's dug in pretty far, but none like this. I figure the man knew what he was doin' when he picked this spot."

"It looks like it. But it would still take a lot of dynamite to blast through the rest of the bank. It must be thirty feet thick. Besides, the dynamite was placed on a ledge above the water."

"There was enough of it," said Tim. "Jack Smith, the man the stuff was stole from, told me that. He says dynamite has such a quick blast that it knocks out anything in its way, which is why most people think it always blasts down. Jack says the stuff would have cleared a break thirty feet wide and all the way through. Jack knows what he's talking about when it comes to dynamite even if he is a Democrat."

"Well, let's get out of here before I use all the fluid in my lighter."

We got out. Tim rowed back, and we pulled the boat up on the landing. I went up on the road and did some calculating. My car was parked right over the cavity. I went to it and backed it up so that it was on the solid part of the bank, staying under the wheel as Tim came up.

"You ain't scared away, are you?"

"No. I'm going down the road to Turkey Point a while. I'll be back. In the meantime, don't tell anybody who I am."

"I won't."

"By the way, who's that redhead in my cotage?"

"I won't tell a soul."

I was satisfied. I drove the rest of the bank road, but at the end of it I had to stop. Traffic was tied up ahead. Presently it began to move on. I saw that a highway patrolman had taken charge, and slowed when I came to him.

"What's the trouble, pal? An accident?"

The patrolman frowned. He twisted his thumb toward a bathing beach on a little island a hundred feet from the road.

"That's no accident. Keep moving!"

I saw what had stopped traffic and came to almost a dead stop. Posed on the edge of a pier was a gorgeous creature in a yellow bathing suit which went admirably with her golden tan. It was enough to stop traffic anywhere. She was wearing dark glasses, but I knew that shape.

"I said get goin', bud!"

I got going. I wondered what the devil Kay, the office beauty, was doing at Kyser Lake. I thought I knew. Curtis T. Durbin had brought her here, the louse, probably aided and abetted by Keever himself!

I burned while I drove on to the Barkley Hotel. They had phone booths there. I went into one and phoned Keever's residence, where

I figured he would be at this time. He was.

"What's the idea," I demanded, "sending Kay up here?"

"A very good idea, Ben. It wasn't mine, but Durbin's. A stroke of genius, I'd call it. He decided that he would arouse less suspicion if Kay accompanied him as his wife. So—"

"What! Why, I'll murder the bum! Wait till I get my hands on him! I'll—"

"You'll be pulled off the case if you don't do something on it," said Keever severely. "Have you done anything thus far except pad your expense account?"

That did it.

"Don't I always crack your cases for you? Hell, I've got the dynamiter under my thumb right now! I'll have him in the cooler by midnight tonight! I've been working while that jerk Durbin's been horsing around!"

"Well, I hope you aren't kidding," said Keever. "Since you've got the case practically in the bag, I think I'll drive up tonight. So long, Ben."

HE HUNG up. I was in a grave of my own digging. I might have known Keever would be sure to be in on the kill when it took place. Now that he was coming to Kyser Lake on the strength of my lies, I had to make them good or else listen while Durbin laughed. To know how bad that would be, you had to hear Durbin laugh.

I stepped from the phone booth and stopped short. Durbin was coming into the lobby. He marched grandly to the desk. The desk man listened obsequiously, then I heard him say: "No, Mr. Brown, Mrs. Brown isn't back yet."

Durbin displayed mild annoyance, then turned away. He caught sight of me. To my horror, he walked straight to me.

"You dope!" I said, moving my lips as little as possible. "Wasn't it your idea we shouldn't even know each other?"

"Oh, yes, I believe it was. But there's no necessity for concealment now. I've got the case in a bag."

"Is that so? And where've you got the bag?"

"In my suite upstairs."

"Suite? How did you rate a suite when I couldn't even rate a room?"

Durbin's smile was indulgent. "Oh, that was simple enough. The lake superintendent arranged it for me. He simply called here and asked for the Governor's suite. What the superintendent says goes around here. Nice fellow. You should meet him."

"I've encountered a couple of his men. My guess is that if there's anybody around the lake who doesn't know who you are by now, it's the Swami down on the boardwalk. And the same will be true of me in maybe fifteen minutes."

"Well, it's of no importance now. As I said, I've already solved the case."

"Do you mind telling me how you performed this miracle of modern deduction?"

"Certainly not. I'm glad you're here. I had hoped Kay would be here, too. She's supposed to be Mrs. Brown, you know. Very clever idea, if I do say so."

"If you do say so, you're crazy. Mrs. Brown, my eye!" I stopped short. I had noticed a turning of heads and a stretching of necks. Kay was crossing the lobby. She was wearing a beach robe, but even the robe was powerless to camouflage the equipment beneath.

"Ah!" said Durbin. "Here's Kay now! She's just in time to witness my triumph." He motioned grandly, and she came forward. I scowled. Kay scowled back, as if to say it was a free country and I could go to hell.

"Hello, Kay," I said. "Stopped any traffic lately?"

The scowl deepened. "That silly patrolman! Imagine his nerve, asking me to move over on the other side of the island so he wouldn't have trouble with the traffic! If I weren't here incognito, I'd have told him off—but good!"

Durbin showed his indignation. "I'll personally attend to that patrolman, Kay. There's no use for secrecy any longer. I've solved the case."

Kay stared.

I shrugged. "He's being a little coy about how he did it. The pay-off's supposed to be in his—ah, pardon me—your suite right now. How about unveiling it, Durbin?"

"Follow me," he said, stepping aside for Kay to precede him up the stairs. It was a sprawling, two-story hotel, covering lots of ground along the lakefront. We walked along one wing to Durbin's suite. He knocked. There was no answer.

"Is there supposed to be someone waiting?" I asked.

Durbin frowned. "I left one of my men here. Damn it, I wonder where Pittman can be?"

Pittman was one of Keever's cockeyed investigators, the brother-in-law of the executive chairman down in Clark County. If Durbin wanted to guard anything, he'd have done better to entrust it to a four-year-old child.

Durbin got out his key and opened the door. I beat him inside. The first man I saw was Pittman, but I paid no attention to him. I knew the second man was dead. I knelt beside him and confirmed it. Somebody had got him with a lead pipe, and I mean got him good. The pipe on the floor was bent to fit his head.

I looked up at Durbin. He was pale as a sheet.

"Know who this is?"

"Why—why, I suppose, that is. I'm not sure, but I think—"

"Who was supposed to meet you here?"

"The dynamite man, Jack Smith. Pittman was to let him in and stay with him until I

got back. My God, have they killed Pittman, too?"

"I'm afraid not. Toss some water on him, and he'll regain as much consciousness as is possible in his case."

Kay was already attending to this. She came out of the bath with a water-soaked towel and applied it to Pittman's head. He groaned, opened his eyes and sat up.

"What happened?" Durbin asked coldly. Pittman groaned again.

"I thought it was you. I opened the door and at first I didn't see anybody. Then I looked out and—oh, my head! He hit me terrible hard!"

"Didn't you see who hit you?"

"No. Oh, my head aches terrible!"

"What does it ache with?" I asked pleasantly. I turned to Durbin. "Would you mind telling me why Jack Smith came here?"

Durbin reddened. "To see me, of course. I found out he'd discovered who had stolen his dynamite."

"Oh, you had, had you? And how did you come across that miscellaneous piece of information?"

Durbin reddened still more. "Well, he called me up here at the hotel. It seems he'd found out somehow—I really don't know how—that I was from the attorney general's office. He wanted to talk to someone responsible. All he told Pittman was that he'd definitely found out who had stolen his dynamite. So Pittman told him to come on up and that he'd send for me, which he did."



TURNED to Pittman, who was groaning in a chair by now.

"When did Smith call you?"

Pittman rubbed his head. Then he reached into his pocket and pulled out a notebook. He read: "Sev-

en-thirty-four." He was more of a cop than I had given him credit for. It was now eight-eleven.

"You called Durbin right away?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"He was at the state conservation office."

I eyed Durbin. "That's five minutes away. You took your time."

Durbin fidgeted. "But Smith said he couldn't be here before eight-fifteen. Isn't that right, Pittman?"

Pittman nodded. I asked: "Did either of you tell anyone about Smith coming?"

Both shook their heads. Then Durbin said: "See here, Corbett, you're acting as if you're in charge of this investigation!"

I nodded. Durbin turned redder than ever as I turned again to Pittman.

"What time did Smith get here?"

Pittman consulted his notebook again. "Two minutes before eight."

I whistled. "And when did you get slugged?"

He didn't have that in his book, but he said quickly: "It wasn't more'n a minute after." That's why I thought it was Durbin comin'. I—"

"Then somebody should remember seeing the killer come and go," I said. I walked to the phone and got the clerk. I told him it was murder and to send the manager. Only seconds elapsed before the door burst open and a graying man rushed inside. He stared at the body and seemed ready to keel over.

I asked: "You the manager?"

"I—I'm the owner, that is, one of the owners. I'm George Barkley."

I told him who we were and asked him if he could identify the corpse. He said he could, that Smith had done dynamite blasting on some of his property. I told him I wanted every person in his employ to be brought immediately to his office. He agreed and went out at once.

I tried Pittman once more "You talked to Smith. Didn't he mention knowing something about this case, the dynamite case, I mean?"

Pittman shook his head, slowly. "No. He didn't want to talk none, and I figured it wasn't my place to ask him any questions. He didn't say nothin'."

I walked out of the room. Durbin trailed behind.

"See here, Corbett, this is as much my business as it is yours."

I whirled on him. "Listen, you dumb dope, it's your doing, if that's what you mean! If you hadn't horsed around at the conservation office and downstairs in the lobby, Smith would be alive now, and the big dynamiting deal would be solved. Why the devil didn't you put Smith under guard—I mean real guard—as soon as you found out he had information that was hot?"

Durbin had nothing to say. He followed me into Barkley's office. It took an hour to interview the help, and I found out nothing. Nobody had seen anyone stop at Durbin's door. Nobody had seen anything. The switchboard operator, a local girl of good family, declared she hadn't listened in on any phone calls and never told anybody what she heard even when she did.

I believed her. When the last employee had left, I turned to Barkley, who was seated behind his desk.

"You said you're only one of the owners. You have a partner?"

"Yes. Lew Jacobs. We each own a half interest in the hotel and cottages."

"So there are cottages?"

"Yes. Twenty of them. Along the waterfront. Beautiful cottages, completely modern."

"Quite a layout."

Barkley beamed. "Yes, if I do say so. Lew and I came here only fifteen years ago and built a few cottages on a shoestring. Afterwards we put up the hotel. It was a gamble, but we won. There isn't a better piece of resort property in the state."

He was probably right.

"This partner—could you get him here?"

"If I can find him. Maybe he's in his suite. He usually comes in at about this time to dress. I don't see much of him with all these girls running around in flimsy little bathing suits."

"I take it you're the actual manager of the business."

Barkley shrugged his assent to this. He picked up his phone and asked for Jacobs' room. Presently he said: "Come right down, Lew. We've got a murder in the hotel. Maybe you've heard about it."

It was one of those super-phones which, unless held tightly to the ear, permits everybody in the room to overhear the conversation. I heard a crisp voice say: "I've been taking a nap, George. Don't spring any joke that crude on me. I'm not up to it."

Barkley said: "I'm not joking. Get down here and fast!"

Lew Jacobs walked in about two minutes afterwards, wearing a dressing robe. Barkley made the introductions. Jacobs listened a little dazedly to his terse story. He lighted a cigarette and puffed it nervously.

He was the nervous type. I guessed his age at forty-five, about five years younger than Barkley appeared to be. There was a greater difference than the years indicated. Barkley would be completely gray in another few years, while Jacobs' well-groomed hair showed only a few wisps of steel-gray. Barkley had gone to paunch, Jacobs was lean-hipped. He didn't have a thing to say.

Durbin could endure playing second fiddle no longer. Jacobs was the type of man he wanted to impress. He took his lower lip shrewdly between his right thumb and forefinger and said: "It strikes me that the big thing we have overlooked all along is the lead pipe that killed Jack Smith! I think that, when we check, we'll find it identical with the pipe used in the attempt to detonate that dynamite which was placed in the dam!"

I said: "Which will only tend to show what we already know—that the dynamiter killed Smith."

Durbin growled. "Hasn't it occurred to you, Corbett, that the pipe might contain fingerprints?"

"It won't. The one used with the dynamite was without them, and this one will be, too. Even if there were prints, they'd be no good without prints to match. Whose would we compare them with?"

"There's Sloan and Grant."

"You hold their hands—I'm going to be too busy." I got up from my chair at the corner of Barkley's desk. There was a photo facing the other way, but I got a look at it as I leaned over. It was a photo of the redhead at Tim's cottage.

"Pretty girl, Mr. Barkley. Your wife?"

"Of course not. That's Beasie, my daughter. She's in summer school now."

BEASIE BARKLEY unlocked a screen door and permitted me to enter her fortress. She was wearing a play suit that made her run a close second to Kay as a traffic-stopper. I thought she could have seemed happier to see me.

"Waiting for somebody else?" I asked.

She frowned. "Let's take up your problem first. I thought you'd given up this cottage for keeps."

"I have. Only I thought you might like to hear a little gossip. There's been a murder at your papa's hotel."

Beasie Barkley thought this one over.

"Who told you my name. Tim?"

"No. I saw your photo on papa's desk. He told me you were in summer school. You'll never make Phi Beta Kappa playing hookey like this. For shame!"

"The hell with Phi Beta Kappa! At least I've been taught to mind my own business!"

"I think maybe this murder at the hotel could turn out to be your business."

"I don't get it. Who was murdered?"

"A man named Jack Smith. He was a dynamite-blaster by trade."

Beasie's eyebrows lifted. "Why, that's the man whose dynamite was stolen!"

"Check. So he was murdered before he could tell who stole the stuff. That means the dynamiter is right in this neighborhood. It could be that he's going to try again."

Beasie grew thoughtful. "Well, he'd hardly have nerve enough to try anything so soon after the murder. I guess I can take a chance on staying here tonight."

"Why not move to the hotel? I think maybe papa might manage to put you up in an attic room or something."

Beasie blushed. "You can't be that stupid. Naturally, I've got a date here tonight."

"With whom?"

"You simply can't mind your own business, can you?"

"It's always my business who gets murdered. I've got a hunch that murder is the motive behind this bank-blast attempt. Tim says he has no enemies, but maybe you have. How about it?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Of course there are plenty of girls who would cut my throat or steal my hose, but they're hardly up to plant-

ing a load of dynamite under the bank road."

"How about your father? He have any enemies like that?"

"What do you mean, my father? He's the last person in the world who would come down into this hole! Nobody would have a chance to kill him down here!"

"Of course not. But I've a hunch you're his most priceless possession, even more valuable to him than his interest in the hotel and cottages. Check?"

"I guess that's right."

"So anyone who wanted to hurt him could hurt him through you. Now, tell me—where were you on the twenty-eighth of July, the day the dynamite was found?"

"At school of course."

My jaw must have dropped a foot. "You're sure?" She nodded emphatically. I shrugged. "Well, there goes another theory. I would have bet good money that you were here in this cottage at the time, that the dynamiter was scheming to have you killed in the flood."

"Better try another theory. But somewhere else, please. I think I remember telling you I'm expecting company. And, by the way, you don't look like a heel."

"Thanks. Your secret's safe. If papa ever knows he'll have found out for himself. Only heaven help you if he does!"

CHAPTER THREE

Date With Dynamite



LD TIM was visible inside his screen door in the deepening dusk. He looked up as I climbed the veranda steps. He made an inviting gesture with his pipe, and I walked inside.

"Got the Home-Rest in first class condition for you, mister. There's the key layin' on that table."

I ignored the key.

"Have you heard about the murder at the Barkley Hotel?"

Tim had been rocking his chair. He stopped.

"The hell you say! Who got murdered?"

I told him about it. Then I told him about my discovery of the identity of his red-headed guest."

"She come here often, Tim?"

He hesitated. I said: "I've got half an idea somebody might be trying to take a crack at George Barkley through his daughter. Any information you can give me would help."

"Well, I can't give you none. She rents that cottage irregular, startin' the beginnin' of this summer. At first I didn't want to rent it to her, knowin' who she was and figurin' George Barkley'd be after me with an axe soon's he found

out. But she pays well, and I figured the percentages and took a chance."

"All right, who meets her here?"

"Damned if I know. You see, both the girl and the fellow she sees come in the back way from the slough road."

"But I thought that was all swampland!"

"It is, but there's a path. I know, because I graveled it myself. I had an idea of making a road for cars but had to give it up. There's still path enough for a man or a girl though."

"I should think you'd have spotted the guy who comes here."

"Son, I mind my own business. I'm seventy-seven, and that's how I got that old."

"At least tell me this. Was the girl here on the twenty-eighth of last month?"

"Nope."

"Got a list of your other guests?"

"Nope. I don't like divorce lawyers snoopin' around."

"You don't recall knowing any of them?"

"Nope. You see, son, the cottages was just rented on the Friday before the Saturday that the dynamite was found. After that I didn't have much chance to get acquainted."

"Well, thanks for all you've told me."

It was dark when I got back to the hotel. Durbin's suite had been cleared of debris, and Kay had changed to a white bare-midriff dress.

"Kind of cozy, Mrs. Brown."

"Can the wise cracks."

"Well, I'll give Durbin credit for one good idea anyway. It so happens an idea of my own has just checked in."

"This is going to be good. What am I in for?"

"There are some cottages down the bank road. An old party named Tim runs them. He has only one guest—name is Beasie Barkley. Yes, the same. Now, I want you to have a cab take you and your luggage down there and check in at a cottage next door to the Evelyn. That's the one Beasie's in. She's expecting company. You can give the same idea. You girls should get along fine."

"Didn't I hear something about that being the place where the dynamite was found?"

"You could have."

"You dirty rat."

"Listen, Kay, that's no way to talk to a guy who's only trying to solve a murder. There's no danger. You can get all the information you need in an hour or so, and nobody's going to try anything that soon. Besides, I'm going to post a guard where the dynamite was hidden."

Kay looked thoughtful.

"Just what is it you want to know?"

"Anything you can pick up. Especially who Beasie's big heart-throb is."

"Well, you're putting in a large order for such a short time. But I'll take a stab at it. If the bank blows up, send the body C. O. D. to Keever."

"Honey, I'll even pay the express charges."

I went downstairs, wondering what had kept Durbin away and plenty glad something had. I spied Pittman standing on guard outside the office door.

"What gives?"

"Durbin's got Sloan and Grant in there. Giving them the third degree, I guess."

I said: "Does the head feel good enough to take on another guard job?"

Pittman straightened. "I'll say! The next guy that takes a crack at me will get his head busted open!"

"That's the old spirit! The job I want you for is to guard the bank road at the spot where they cached the dynamite two weeks ago. You can watch it from the boat landing at Tim's."

"But I thought the conservation men were guarding the road!"

"If they are, they're doing it in the local beer parlors. I think the situation's eased up, and they're just taking it easy. So the time's ripe for the dirty work to begin. You got a gun?"

"No. Durbin says a scientific investigator doesn't need one."

"Maybe he's right. Here, take mine. And remember—it shoots!"

I handed over the little .380 Beretta that I carried in a hip-holster. Pittman stuck it under his belt. He started away, then hesitated.

"But Durbin ordered me to stay here."

"I'll tell him I changed the order. Hurry it up now—it's dark outside already."

I OPENED the office door and went inside.

Durbin was in the act of browbeating a little man who looked as if he had lost everything worthwhile in the world. Even Durbin's questions didn't rouse him from his melancholy. I ticketed him as Grant, the man who had lost his family in the lake accident.

The other man was sweating. He would be Sloan, the party who had been given the heave-ho for having the hand out. Barkley sat behind his desk, wearily watching. I gave him the high-sign, watched Durbin a few moments and went out. Kay came down the stairs as I did so, and breezed past me.

I stepped out a side door and into a parking lot. Presently Barkley joined me. I got out a couple of cigarettes, and we lighted them.

"Got any enemies, Barkley?"

"I suppose I've got a few enemies—every businessman has."

"Any of them hate you enough to want to commit a murder?"

"Well, I certainly don't think anybody hates me that much. Of course Lew Jacobs doesn't like me, but that's just jealousy. He knows he's dependant upon me for running this setup, and he doesn't like that—although I've been keeping him in style for years. As a matter of fact, I suppose he would gain by my death."

Julius Long

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"The hell it did! Well, I'll say Jacobs has plenty of motive for murdering you! Take a tip from me, Mr. Barkley, and stay away from the bank road!"

I left him standing there. I got my car, drove out of the lot and headed toward Tim's cottages. I made it in a few minutes and parked at the usual place. I looked over the bank rail to see if Pittman was on the job. I couldn't see him. I went down to investigate. I took two steps on the boat landing, then got knocked cold.

You guessed it. It was Pittman who got me. But good. It was a half hour before he could bring me around, even though he had dumped pails of water all over me, mostly my clothes. He was apologizing all over the place. I could hardly hear him for the buzzing in my ears. But there was no bleeding out of them, which ruled against a fractured skull.

"What did you conk me with?" I asked with professional curiosity. He showed me my gun. I snatched it away from him.

"Please, don't tell on me!" he begged.

"You do ditto." I could picture Durbin splitting his sides laughing as he related this bit of opera bouffe to Keever. Pittman seemed happy over the deal. I got to my feet.

"Nobody came or left while I was out?"

"No. That is, nobody came down here. But somebody parked a car up there behind yours."

I clambered up the steps to the road. I couldn't recognize the car. I tottered across the road, barely avoiding a passing car, and went down the stairs beyond. There was no light in Tim's cottage. I went on to the Evelyn.

There was no light there either I tried the door. It was unlocked. I entered cautiously, the 380 out and ready. Nothing happened. I fumbled for the switch. I found it, and the lights went on. Barkley lay on the floor.

I knelt beside him. He was barely breathing. I looked for a wound, found no mark of any kind. The room showed no signs of a struggle. I left Barkley and went to the back door. Then I saw her at the foot of the steps.

She lay face down. At first I thought her neck was broken, but the crazy angle meant nothing. I discovered, as I straightened her head. She opened her eyes.

I said: "Take it easy—you're all right. But where's Kay?"

(Continued on page 90)

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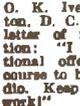
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Julius Long

(Continued from page 88)

"Kay?"

"The other girl, the blonde who took the cottage next door."

"Oh. Why, I don't know. I hardly talked to her."

"What happened?"

"All I know is someone called me to the back door. I went there and opened it. That's all I remember."

"Your father's inside. Don't you remember seeing him?"

"No." Beasie straightened. "He—he's all right?"

"Definitely not. I'd say he needs a doctor at once. If you can make it, you'd better run for the nearest phone."

She got up, braced herself for a moment, then went into the cottage. She paused a moment before her father's prostrate body, then raced on.

I went to the cottage on the right. The door was locked. I kicked it open. The cottage was empty.

The cottage on the other side of the Evelyn was deserted, too. I ran to Tim's cottage. The screen was not locked. I went inside and turned on the lights. Tim had said he had lived to be seventy-seven by minding his own business. I wondered what he had found out that wasn't his business that had merited the rising lump on his bald dome. I tossed a pail of water on him, looking around me.

Kay wasn't here. I tried every cottage, my failures monotonous. Then I went back to the Evelyn, picked Barkley up as gently as possible and carried him out on my back. Getting him up the steps to the road was tough, but I made it. I yelled for Pittman. He came running and helped me carry Barkley to my car.

When we had put him in the back, I said: "Get him into Lake Point as fast as you can. They should have a doctor there!"

Pittman said: "He just moved. Maybe he's coming around!" The dome light was on, for the car door was open, and I saw that Pittman was right. I shook Barkley gently.

"Who did it?"

"I—I don't know."

"Why did you come here after I warned you to stay away?"

"Beasie, my daughter! Someone called—said she was here in trouble. I—I came!"

"And after I'd told you to stay away!"

Barkley didn't hear the remark. He was out cold again. I motioned Pittman to hurry away. He did. I waited till he was fifty yards down the road, then went down to the boat platform. The oars were still in Tim's boat. I shoved it off, jumped inside and rowed to the opening in the wall.

Date With Dynamite

HAVING little experience with boats, I didn't handle the oars any too deftly. The water was a little rough, and I bumped my head on the sore spot before I got through, but I did get through. I got out my lighter and lit it. The stuff was on the ledge where it had been placed the first time. I manipulated the boat so that I could reach it, then I pulled the whole works into the boat. The little lead pipe was what I was after, and I yanked it away from the percussion cap.

My fingers blistered as I did so. The little lead pipe was getting plenty warm. I tossed it over the side and into the water. Then I ducked again and rowed out with my cargo of dynamite. A spotlight played on me as I rowed back to the landing.

"Douse that light, you idiot!" I yelled.

"Who's an idiot? What are you doing down there?"

It was Keever. I reached the landing and distinguished Durbin beside him. I stepped onto the landing and pulled the boat up.

"What the devil are you up to, going boat-riding at this time of the night?"

I saw Durbin's satisfied grin at Keever's displeasure. I reached down, grabbed up the bundle of dynamite.

"This!" I said, and Durbin went over backward into the lake. Even Keever started running, then he came back.

"Dammit all, Ben, is there any chance that stuff will go off?"

"Nope. I got the gimmick out of it. And just in time, too, I'd say."

I put down the dynamite and helped Pittman, who was taking his time pulling Durbin out of the drink. We understood each other perfectly. We let Durbin fall back twice, then I pulled for sure, because I had business to attend to.

"You scoundrel!" Durbin shrieked. "You did this to me deliberately!" He appealed to Keever. "You saw it!"

Keever nodded and laughed in his face. He turned back to me.

"What goes on, Ben?"

"Plenty. Come on, everybody, and let's look for Kay. She's back in that swamp somewhere."

Some more of Keever's stooges had shown up, and there were seven of us altogether. Still it took us fifteen minutes to find Kay, and when we did, she was a sight. She was mud from head to foot. We got her into the Evelyn and brought her around with the old water-bucket deal. I mean I poured it on.

"What happened?" I asked her, when she finally came around.

It was the old lead-pipe story again. She'd

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Julius Long

heard a scream in the Evelyn, had noticed that the lights were out and come on the run. The moment she had stuck her bean inside the door, the roof had come down.

"All right, boys," I said. "Back to the swamp again. I think we'll find one more customer."

I left Keever with Kay and joined them. We had covered quite a lot of ground the first trip out, so we weren't long finding our man. We brought him in. He was almost unrecognizably muddy, but not much worse than we were by this time.

Beasie Barkley had returned. She stared at our muddy find.

"Lew Jacobs! What was he doing here?"

Jacobs didn't answer because he was dead. The lead-pipe treatment had been in earnest in his case. We lowered him to the floor. Keever took a deep breath and eyed me impatiently.

"All right, Ben, let's go!"

"It's elementary, boss. Jacobs and Barkley were partners in the Barkley Hotel and cottage set-up, worth a couple of hundred grand. If one partner died, the survivor could buy out his half interest for five thousand and make ninety-five thousand profit. So one partner arranged to kill the other.

"Lew Jacobs was an easy mark for a murderer. He liked to play around. He used Tim's cottages because the back path provided secrecy. Tim never mentioned this because Tim didn't tell everything he knew.

"Jacobs was to have been killed on the night of the twenty-eighth of last month. But the dynamite was discovered. Jacobs might have seen the light and taken warning if he hadn't been so wrapped up in romance. At any rate, he wasn't going to be frightened away tonight when he was to carry on his big romance, the one with his partner's lovely daughter. Isn't that right, Beasie?"

Beasie Barkley nodded.

"We'd met here several times." She frowned. "I never knew he'd met somebody else here on the twenty-eighth."

"And you never had any idea that your father knew he used this cottage, did you?"

Beasie winced at the implication. "Are you implying that my father tried to kill Lew?"

"Figure it out for yourself. You see what your father stood to gain by Jacobs' death. He didn't know Jacobs was meeting you here tonight. It must have been quite a shock when he found you."

Beasie Barkley was ashen. "Why, are you asking me to believe my own father hit me and knocked me down those stairs?"

"No, Beasie. Because nobody did. You faked that part of it after you'd killed Jacobs and knocked out Kay here. You took poor old Tim in your stride after he got suspicious and called

Date With Dynamite

your father. That's why your father came here. He arrived in time to see you at your gory work. He couldn't take it. He had a stroke.

"That didn't surprise you. You knew he'd have a stroke sooner or later, that he had only a little while to live. Then Jacobs would be able to own all the hotel at a cost of five thousand dollars. That's why you had to get rid of Jacobs before your father died. You knew that he'd never come out of his stroke—that's why you planned to let him take the blame for the murders and the dynamiting attempt, as well as Smith's murder at the hotel. Somehow he got wise.

"Originally the blast was to cover everything. The flood would wash away all the evidence after you had departed. That's why you got out of here in such a hurry, ostensibly to find a doctor for your father. When you saw that the dynamite had been found, you came bravely back. But it won't work. We've got you cold."

"The hell you have!" said Beasie Barkley. So, like a fool, I stared down the barrel of her little automatic. "Take it easy, wise guys, I'm going out here! Sure, you've got me cold, but I've no regrets. Dad was about through anyway, and it was no crime taking care of Lew Jacobs. He was a killer himself. He was running the boat that upset the Grant family and drowned Nate's wife and kids! He was getting more scared every day that I'd squeal on him, and I think he'd have killed me if I hadn't got him first. I'm not going to fry for rubbing out a rat like that! Stand still everybody—the first move will get you a slug!"

There was a hell of a racket and the automatic was gone from Beasie's hand. Also the majority of her fingers. From where I stood it looked as if her whole hand would have to be amputated. From where Tim had stood with his Winchester '97, it had been a right nice shot. The bucket of water I had tossed on him had done us all some good.

Keever was loudest in his appreciation. Tim listened glumly.

"It's a good thing you politicians didn't pass that firearms registration law yet," Tim said. "'Cause when you do, I'll have to sell this old gun. Shucks, it ain't worth the price of a license. If the law'd been passed already, I couldn't have helped you out much."

Keever gazed thoughtfully at Curtis T. Durbin, who looked slightly green. Then he turned to the mud-flecked Kay.

"Make a note of this please. I must notify the newspapers in the morning that the firearms registration idea was a ghastly mistake. I can see that I've been playing with dynamite."

THE END



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Dale Clark

(Continued from page 47)

"Let me take my own theories apart," the house dick snapped. "Part of this I'll buy. Charlotte's really married to Hurlong. But, damn it, she didn't kill Aristides Baker! In fact, did I ever say she did?"



IGAR stubs shifted cornerwise in reflective mouths, heads shook slowly.

O'Hanna said: "Of course not! Only I couldn't get anywhere until she confessed finding Baker's body here. The murder must have been committed while the bride and groom were out to dinner. Grant that, and it's a question of opportunity, answered by naming whoever was away from the dinner table a few brief minutes."

Custain cheered up. "That clears both Charlotte and me. Tarrant can tell you we didn't leave the table at all."

"No, Buddleigh, no! Mr. Tarrant can't because—don't you remember?—he was late himself by five minutes or more!"

O'Hanna listened happily. "It opens up brand new possibilities," he pronounced. "Come to think of it, Tarrant's the guy who's insisted all along that this diamond mine must be genuine. Frankly, it sticks in my craw! I figure the odds are a million-to-one against it!"

He peered at the lawyer. "Yet, as Custain's trusted business advisor, you were encouraging him to put a quarter-million dollars into a mining corporation, taking one hundred and twenty-five shares for your professional and legal services. No matter if the mine proved a phony, the corporation would still have cold cash assets of two hundred and fifty thousand dollars—and in the payoff, your hundred and twenty-five shares would entitle you to a fifty-fifty split of the assets.

"Then along came Aristides Baker," O'Hanna accused, "threatening to blow the scheme sky-high by revealing this whole salted mine and second marriage deal. You dared not buy him off since forever after he'd be a living witness to the fact that you'd known in advance the whole deal was illegitimate. So you invited the newlyweds to dinner, then lured Aristides Baker to the chalet on the pretext of facing Charlotte with his evidence, whereupon you plunged your pocket knife into his heart.

"Your choice of the chalet was cold-blooded," O'Hanna concluded. "You knew Charlotte's guilty conscience would compel her to cover up your crime. Somehow or other she'd simply have to move the corpse out of the bridal chamber."

Tarrant was wry-mouthed. Querulously, he

I Ain't Got No Body

complained: "This is all hot air and Irish gab! You've offered no evidence connecting me with the crime!"

"You connected yourself by overplaying your hand in the hearing of witnesses." O'Hanna said, grinning. "Deliberately and on purpose, you've tried from the start to keep Charlotte from answering my questions. At the start you assured her I had no case without a *corpus delicti*. But a *corpus delicti* doesn't mean a dead body—it's a legal phrase meaning a crime has been committed. There you made a mistake no lawyer could honestly have made."

Color fanned into the attorney's cheeks. "I was trying to protect my client's wife."

"Protect her from what?" O'Hanna's tone turned caustic. "I'd made no mention of Baker. All I said was that there was a dead man in the tub. For all you knew, he might have been dead for hours or days. He might have died from natural causes, or by sheer accident. Had it been natural or accidental death, there'd have been no crime and no *corpus delicti*. In other words, you convicted yourself by knowing too much too soon!"

Tarrant hurred himself, snarling, at the house detective's throat.

O'Hanna wasn't having any. He side-stepped, left a leg in front of the onrushing attorney, tripped him into Sheriff Gleeson's arms.

"Now there's still the little matter of the knife Hugh Fanch dropped into Baker's pocket," the house dick went on.

The youth shrilled: "I didn't—you can't—"

O'Hanna said: "Oh, hell. It's this way. Tarrant couldn't restrain his curiosity—he had to find out what had happened to the corpse. He'd contrived to leave an unsigned paper as an excuse to come here, but when he spotted the open bathroom window he took the chance of crawling in. He was trapped there when I lit a match over the corpse.

"So he slugged me, using the same weapon he'd used to fell Baker—a pocket knife handle clenched in his fist as a blackjack. But in the scuffle he lost the knife on the floor."

The youth was shrill, this time with relief. "Yeah, that's right. I stepped on it while I was getting Baker's body out through the window. I figured it dropped out of his pocket, so I put it back there."

"You'll identify this as the knife?"

As O'Hanna lifted the bone-handled implement, identification came from Buddleigh Custain. "By God, it's Tarrant's all right! I've seen him use it dozens of times!"

"I guess that ties it up completely." The San Alpan swung to the shivaree audience. "O.K., you boys can fill up the glasses. We'll drink a toast to the *corpus delicti*!"

THE END



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Merle Constiner

(Continued from page 75)

gal came off without a hitch. However he was in a murder game, and knew it, so he made arrangements to hide an emergency corpse. You never know the ramifications of homicide—it expands on you. It's winter and an unexpected cold snap might come along and freeze the ground making it difficult to bury an unlooked-for corpse. So he decided to fill his cistern and use it if he got caught in a hole. He bought a hundred pounds of salt from Knox Brackney to pack his meter. He filled the cistern at night with a hose from his house."

Sheriff Stites nodded slowly. "So Knox Brackney—"

"Frye had also seen the chain choke collar at Miss Asbree's, and had glaucmed onto it. His plan was to choke his victim with the chain, and, if he wasn't interrupted, to toss the body in the cistern. If he was caught in the act, which he was, by the way, then he figured the chains on the tires would give him an out. Which they didn't."

"But who," Sheriff Stites asked, "who was he planning to kill?"

"Anybody who jeopardized his get-rich-quick scheme. He was all set to do business. But his elaborate preparations tangled him. Brackney, mildly curious about what anyone would want with so much salt, dropped by and questioned him. Frye was all on edge and gave him the works. Knox Brackney loomed large in his thoughts because it was at Brackney's, too, that he'd stolen the eggs. He thought that was subtle—swipe the eggs and buy the salt, that would fool people."

Sue Asbree asked: "But how did you suspect? What put you on the track—"

"When he was arrested for manslaughter, and changed the bond from his house to cash. The dog chain, the murder weapon, is in that cistern and he couldn't afford to let the house get out of his hands."

Sheriff Stites said argumentatively: "But Pen-Wiper Johnson went his bail."

"Johnson saw him coming to the old Scraggs house for his blackmail payments and tried to edge in. He played up to Frye, and naturally Frye was ready for his assistance when he needed help. All the time Johnson was sending him anonymous letters, trying to mellow him up. Of course Johnson didn't put up all that dough as bond. Frye put it up himself—"

Lacey Frye expostulated: "I'm a poor man. I have a small salary but—"

"You blew Knox Brackney's safe. He was dead and could never prove anything."

Sheriff Stites meditated. "The way I see it, Pen-Wiper Johnson is the man to talk to!"

McGavock said softly: "You'll find him with the dog chain in Frye's cistern."

Hand Me Down My Thirty-Eight

The professor said loudly: "That's entirely possible. I'm not responsible for whatever happens to be in my—"

"I'd like to hear you say that in front of a hillman jury. Cisterns, in the backwoods, have held almost as many bodies as graveyards. It's traditional. Johnson was in that cistern this afternoon when I visited you. I saw the glint of new nailheads on the platform. I mentioned it to you and when I was in your basement you scurried out, broke an ink bottle, and smeared the nailheads with soot. You killed him when things began to close in on you and planted go-away traces in his home. He'd never be heard of again and folks would think he'd shaved his head and lammed."

Professor Frye cleared his throat. "The crime you outline is the work of a genius!"

"Hogwash. It's exactly what it appears to be, the work of a half-educated schoolteacherish grade-zero brain. Half-wise—half-dumb. The mechanics of safe blowing, the information about the egg white, the physics of salt on a water meter. A little knowledge can be a damn dangerous thing!"

IN ROOM 201 of the old hotel, McGavock re-told his story. As soon as he had finished, and had handed over the envelope with the blackmail money, Mr. Asbree said: "It sounds trite, but I can never repay you."

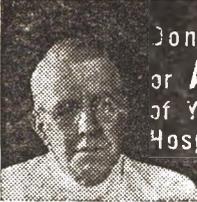
McGavock glared. He said harshly: "Forget it, Choctaw. Just be a good boy."

Mr. Asbree shook his head. "I prefer to meet my obligations and pay you people your fee."

McGavock said: "This is different. We're on a vacation and—"

Old Atherton Browne closed his book, laid it on the bedspread. "I'm the head of this organization, Mr. Asbree," he said. "And you're quite correct when you assume that we exist by the collection of monetary remuneration for services rendered. I'd like to talk this over with you. Luther, will you please leave the room?"

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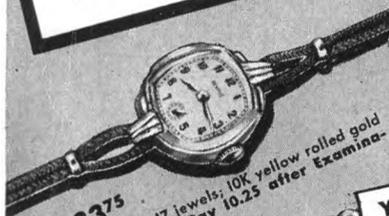
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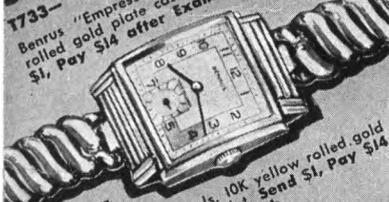
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