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IN BOLERO
TIME**

by **ROBERT MARTIN**



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BLACK MASK



JANUARY, 1950

VOL. 34

NO. 1

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Published bi-monthly by Fictioneers, Inc., a subsidiary of Popular Publications, Inc., at 1125 E. Valle Ave., Kokomo, Indiana. Editorial and Executive Offices, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Henry Steeger, President and Secretary. Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice-President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter at the Post Office at Kokomo, Indiana. Copyright 1949, by Fictioneers, Inc. This issue is published simultaneously in the Dominion of Canada. Copyright under International Copyright Convention and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction, in whole or in part, in any form. Single copy, 25c. Annual subscription for U.S.A., its possessions and Canada, \$1.50; other countries, 38c additional. All correspondence relating to this publication should be addressed to 1125 E. Valle Ave., Kokomo, Indiana, or 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts, enclose stamped, self-addressed envelope for their return, if found unavailable. The publishers will exercise care in the handling of unsolicited manuscripts, but assume no responsibility for their return. Printed in U.S.A.

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BEHIND THE



Hello, detective fans! What **BLACK MASK** writer do *you* like best? Lots of you have been writing in to tell us your favorites, but there must be many a reader who has never let us know what author he considers the best of them all. How about it? Don't you want to cast your ballot for your favorite yarn-spinner?

Incidentally, if Peter Kleinert will turn to the first short story in this issue, he'll find one by his candidate for top-honors—Robert C. Dennis. It's not a Willie Carmody story, but I think you'll find Private-Eye Rhodes does some pretty smart sleuthing too.

You see, fans? Your ideas do really count with us. So let us hear from you!

Dear Editor:

This is the first letter I've ever written to any magazine, but I feel that I simply must tell you how much I enjoy **BLACK MASK**. For my money, it's the best buy on the market—real reading entertainment!

I'm an ardent mystery fan, and sort of hard to please, but you can take my word for it when I say that I've never yet read a story in your magazine that I haven't thoroughly enjoyed.

My favorite writer is R.M.F. Jones. He really knows how to handle a story, not only in plot but as a whole. One of his stories I enjoyed exceptionally well was "Side Bet on Death." This was

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DIRGE IN

Dr. Clint Colby had to specialize in murder when somebody got impatient—and polished off his most glamorous patient.



BOLERO TIME

Dynamic Clint Colby Detective Novel

By **ROBERT MARTIN**



CHAPTER ONE

Poor Little Rich Girl

THE blonde girl was lying very quietly on a huge sand-colored divan in a big airy room. A wide window framed a sloping hillside, a sweep of fields, and a cluster of trees turning brown in the yellow sunlight of a late November afternoon. From a lacquered cherry cabinet at the far end of the room came the muted throbbing of *Ravel's Bolero*. The music stopped, and then began again—low, insistent, sensuous.

The girl on the divan didn't move. Her eyes were closed. She was wearing a pale green sweater, a soft gray flannel skirt, and white buckskin moccasins. On the right side of the green sweater, a little above the waist, there was a neat, dark circle, brown and dried-looking.

At the foot of the divan stood a stout woman wearing black-ribboned nose glasses and a string of three silver fox pelts over the shoulders of her tweed suit.

The woman twisted her hands nervously and spoke to a tall man standing beside the girl. "She was on the floor, Doctor, when I found her—there by the table. We had arranged to attend a church supper together, and when she

◆ ◆
"I don't care if I die for this, darling," she said. "I really don't."

didn't answer the bell, I came in. I picked her up and laid her on the divan, and then I called you. Doctor is she—?"

Dr. Clinton Colby placed his bag on the polished floor, tossed his hat into a chair, and knelt beside the girl. He placed his fingers on the side of her throat, just beneath her jaw. The girl's pulse was feeble, and her skin was hot and dry. *A hundred and three, at least*, Colby thought.

The bullet had entered her right side, just below the rib cavity. The wound was red and swollen, but there wasn't much external bleeding. Carefully Colby placed his hands beneath the girl and turned her slender body. The white skin of her back was unbroken, and Colby murmured to himself, "No exit wound—a probing job." Swiftly and expertly he examined the girl. At the roots of her yellow hair, just behind her left ear, he found a swollen ugly bruise.

He stood up and glanced quickly around the room. There was a telephone on a glass-and-chromium table before the fireplace, and he strode to it. He called the Dixie Memorial Hospital. A female voice answered, and he said, "Florence, this is Dr. Colby. I'm bringing in Mrs. Phillip Eaton. I'll need the operating room, then X-ray, and a bed. Please call Dr. Connors and ask him to assist with the anesthetic."

A woman's brisk voice said, "Yes, Doctor," and Colby hung up.

The blonde girl didn't move. Her cheeks were flushed with fever, and her lips were parted slightly. The music from the cherry cabinet floated through the room with the soft throbbing of muted drums. Colby said to the stout woman, "Where's Phil?"

The woman's mouth pursed in disapproval. "Away as usual. Hunting at Deer Lake, Glenda said. He left yesterday, and she didn't expect him back until tonight or tomorrow."

Colby nodded. He knew that Deer Lake was an hour's drive from the town of Dixie, and he also knew that there was no telephone in the pine and birch woods around the lake.

He thought of Phil Eaton, a big handsome man, growing fat with easy living, who had an eye for women, good clothes, scotch whiskey, and hand-made shot-guns with tooled stocks. Old Doc Eaton, Phil's father, had been one of the town's most respected Citizens. The dream of his life had been for young Phil to carry on his practice, and Phil had entered medical school. But he had preferred women and liquor to dissecting cadavers, and had been booted out of school early in his second year.

Old Doc Eaton had died shortly afterward, a broken man with a broken heart. He had cut off young Phil with a thousand dollars, and the balance of his estate had gone to the Dixie County Medical Society for research in cancer and heart disease.

Young Phil, Colby remembered, had promptly spent the thousand dollars courting and winning Glenda Harrow, only daughter of a retired Texas oil tycoon with more money than Colby had pills, and his fortune had gone to his daughter. And Phil Eaton resumed his drinking, woman-chasing career, with frequent jaunts to Idaho for grouse, or Florida for tarpon, or Canada for deer—all on the Harrow money.

This was the first time Colby had seen Glenda Eaton alone since before her marriage, but he had been with her fairly often before that. In fact, he had once decided that he was almost in love with her—until she began to respond to Phil Eaton's ardent wooing and broke dates with Colby on his infrequent evenings away from his office. Colby had decided that it was useless to try and compete with the full-time playboy, and Glenda had become a pleasant memory.

Now he stood silently looking down at Glenda Eaton's still form and wondered if he should call an ambulance, or take her to the hospital in his car. The low position of the bullet wound decided him, and he removed his topcoat and folded it over her.

The stout woman fluttered around him. "Can I help you, Doctor?"

"Just open the door for me," Colby said, and gently picked up the girl.

A cold November wind struck his face as he carried the girl to his sedan parked on the curving drive. The stout woman opened the car door for him, and he carefully placed the girl on the rear seat.

From the road came the roar of a motor. A big cream-colored station wagon shot around the drive and jerked to a stop behind Colby's sedan. A man got out of the station wagon, slammed the door behind him, and walked unsteadily up the drive.

He was a big man dressed in a heavy corduroy hunting coat, khaki trousers, and high laced boots. The boots were muddy, and burrs and Spanish needles clung to his trousers. His heavy-joweled face was flushed, and his blue eyes looked hot and bright. As he approached Colby, his thick black brows came together in a frown.

The stout woman stood stiffly, her arms folded, her mouth a thin line.

The big man grinned at her. "Afternoon, Mrs. Stanton."

She nodded shortly, not speaking.

PHIL EATON turned away from her, still grinning, and looked at Colby. He frowned again, and then he saw the girl on the rear seat of Colby's car. He blurted, "What the hell, Doc? What's the matter with Glenda?" He pushed past Colby, opened the car door, and leaned in over the form of the girl. "What's the matter, honey. You sick?" His voice was thick with liquor.

The girl lay quietly, her eyes closed. The big man turned to Colby with a shocked, bewildered expression.

Colby said quietly, "She's been shot, Phil, and there's a bad bump on her head where she hit it when she fell. I'm taking her to the hospital."

"Shot? . . . Who? . . . How?"

"I don't know," Colby said shortly. "I've got to get the bullet out of her, and take an X-ray of her head. She can't answer any questions until after that." He opened the front door of his car.

The big man grasped Colby's arm. "Doc," he said huskily, "do everything you can—don't spare the horses. Is—is she bad?"

"I don't know," Colby repeated, and he jerked his arm free. "We're wasting time."

"Take care of her, Doc," Eaton said earnestly. "I'll make it worth your while."

Colby thought grimly, *with Glenda's money*, and then he saw the fear and misery in Eaton's eyes. He smiled and touched his arm. "I think she'll be all right, Phil." He got into the car and started the motor. "Want to come along?"

Phil Eaton got in the rear seat, gently lifted his wife, and sat with her head in his lap. The stout Mrs. Stanton stood in the drive with her arms folded and grimly watched them drive away. . . .

Forty minutes later a nurse wheeled Glenda Eaton down a long corridor and stopped before an open door. Colby helped the nurse lift the unconscious girl to a bed in the most expensive private room in the Dixie Memorial Hospital. Colby had taken four X-rays of her head, and old Dr. Connors had administered the ether while Colby removed a .32 caliber bullet from the girl's body. The lumpy lead pellet, wrapped in surgical tape, was now in Colby's hand. The

X-rays had revealed a slight concussion, but no fracture.

Phil Eaton was waiting nervously in the hospital room. From the heightened brightness of his eyes Colby guessed that the big man had had access to a bottle during the time his wife had been in the X-ray and operating rooms. He stared silently at his wife while Colby made a final check of the girl's pulse.

Colby stood up straight and nodded reassuringly at Eaton. "She'll be all right, Phil," he said, and he jerked his head toward the door.

Eaton followed him out to the corridor, and Colby quietly closed the door. "The hospital is short of nurses, Phil," he said. "The one with Glenda now goes off duty at eight o'clock. I'll send Celia out to stay with her tonight."

Eaton sighed and drew a hand over his face. He needed a shave, and his eyes were sunken and red-rimmed. "Dammit, Doc, I'll stay with her."

Colby smiled and shook his head. "You'd better go home and get some sleep. I can spare Celia tonight."

Eaton looked down at the toes of his heavy boots. "All right, Doc. This thing has got me pretty upset. I—I guess I'm no damn good, but I think a lot of Glenda." He turned away and stared out of a window at the end of the corridor. "Did she tell you anything about what happened?"

"No," Colby said. "She was unconscious when I arrived. Maybe she can talk about it later. I'll notify the police."

Eaton turned suddenly, his fists clenched. "Doc, if I could get my hands on whoever did that to Glenda—"

"I know, Phil," Colby said quietly. "Probably she surprised a prowler. There's been a rash of burglaries lately." He turned away. "I'll see you later."

Eaton stood silently, his hands in his pockets, and watched Colby move down the corridor.

After Colby had changed into his street clothes, he stopped at the desk opposite the main entrance to the hospital and spoke to a pleasant-faced, gray-haired woman in a white uniform and cap.

"Florence," he said, "don't worry about a nurse for Mrs. Eaton. I'll send Celia Brooks out. She can stay until tomorrow."

The nurse smiled. "That's fine, Doctor. Right now we're awfully under-staffed. But how will you get along without Celia?"

"I couldn't for very long," Colby admitted. "I think Mrs. Eaton can go home tomorrow. She can rest there as well as here. I'll check her later this evening."

Dusk was merging into darkness as Colby crossed the parking area reserved for doctors at the rear of the hospital. As he opened his car door, he saw a tall man hurrying up the front walk toward the hospital entrance and he recognized Skip Malloy, the golf professional at the local country club. Malloy spotted Colby, waved an arm, and started across the grass to the drive. Colby waited.

Skip Malloy had a lean, wiry frame, wide shoulders, and thick powerful wrists. It was said that he could hit a golf ball farther and straighter than anyone in Ohio. His hair was thick and blond with tawny sun-streaks in it, and his blue eyes were bright in his tanned face.

Colby knew that Malloy had been in Texas where he had competed in the Western Open—and lost. The sport pages had said that Malloy, always a wicked threat with a driver, had folded in the semi-finals because of trouble with his short irons around the greens. Colby also knew that Malloy had been taking more than a passing interest in Celia Brooks, Colby's combination office nurse and secretary. Colby didn't blame Mal-

loy for that—Celia was an extremely attractive and intelligent girl—but at the same time he thought of the stray bits of gossip linking Malloy with Glenda Eaton. He himself had seen Glenda Eaton and Skip Malloy together in the bar at the country club. However, he liked Skip Malloy, in spite of the fact that the golfer still owed him ten dollars for two calls to his room when Malloy had been in bed with a severe cold.

As Malloy approached him, Colby noted the worn appearance of his topcoat. He wondered briefly and wryly if he, Dr. Clinton Colby, as a member of the country club's board of directors, should recommend a salary increase for the club professional. And then Malloy stood before him, and he saw the look of embarrassment and anxiety in his blue eyes.

Colby smiled and said, "Hello, Skip. Too bad about the Texas deal. They must have had trained putters down there."

MALLOY ran a hand through his thick hair. "I haven't any alibi, Doc—I was just a nine-hole dub around the greens." He paused, and his eyes bored steadily into Colby's. "I haven't forgotten about that ten I owe you—I just haven't had it. I figured on picking up some easy dough in that Texas fracas, but I guess I'm just small time, after all. And then the clutch on my car went to hell in Fort Worth, and I sold the wreck to get bus fare home. But I'll pay you."

"Sure, Skip," Colby said. "I'm not worried."

Malloy looked down at his shoes. "Thanks, Doc. I—I just got back in town this afternoon, and I heard about Glenda—Mrs. Eaton, I mean. It's all over town. A hell of a thing."

Colby thought of the stout Mrs. Stanton, and he smiled to himself. He never

ceased to marvel at the speed with which news spreads through a small town.

Malloy raised his eyes to Colby's. "How is she?" he asked. "Will she be all right?"

"Yes," Colby said. "She'll be all right." He paused, and then added, "Her husband and a nurse are with her now."

Malloy looked startled. "Is Phil in town? I heard he was hunting pheasant at Deer Lake."

"He was," Colby said quietly, "but he came home. Right after a neighbor found Glenda and called me out to the house."

Malloy looked up at the lighted hospital windows. "I won't bother her now," he said in a low voice. "Not with Phil there. But Glenda Eaton is a damned fine girl. She treated me as if I were somebody—not as if I were just a fifth-rate golfer who was paid to keep the caddies in line and teach duffers how to keep from topping a ball. In my book, she and Celia Brooks don't come any better." He turned to Colby. "By the way, how is Celia?"

"She's fine," Colby said, and he thought of the attention Malloy had been paying to his pretty nurse-secretary since the country club had closed for the season. Bachelors were scarce in Dixie, Ohio, and Malloy was young, handsome and unattached. Colby thought privately that a girl as attractive as Celia Brooks could have picked a man with more of a financial future than a small town golf professional, but it was none of his business, and as long as he had known Celia she had never become more than mildly interested in any one man.

Malloy grinned at Colby and said, "Look, Doc, I'm broke, and I need a job for the winter, until the club opens in May. You don't need an office boy, do you?"

Colby smiled. "I'd like to hire some-

one to make all my night calls for me.”

Malloy laughed. “If I can take Celia with me on those night calls, I’ll work for nothing.”

“It’s a deal,” Colby said. “All you need is a thermometer and a bottle of aspirin tablets.”

Malloy’s face sobered. “Doc, you’re one of the few persons in this town who’s been decent to me—you and Celia and Glenda Eaton. To most of that country club crowd I’m just the hired hand. I’d like to show them. There’s a tournament in Florida this week—Miami—and I think I know what’s been wrong with my irons. I—I’d like to enter. Could—could you loan me a hundred bucks? I’ll get it back to you.”

Colby hesitated for only an instant. Then he smiled, and said, “All right, Skip. I don’t have enough cash with me, but I’ll leave a check on the mantel in my office. You can pick it up tonight. When are you leaving?”

“Tonight—whenever I can get a bus south. Doc, you’re a swell guy.”

“Forget it,” Colby said. “Want a lift down town?”

Malloy walked around Colby’s car and got in. On the way to the business section of the town he asked Colby about the shooting of Glenda Eaton, and Colby told him all that he knew. Malloy got out at the court house square, and Colby drove around to the police station.

He found Chief of Police Chad Beckwith with his feet on the desk reading the evening edition of the *Dixie Democrat*. Beckwith was a big heavy man in his late fifties, with a broad tanned face and thick black eyebrows. He was wearing faded khaki trousers and a blue shirt with a tarnished silver shield pinned to the flap of a pocket. He gave Colby a yellow-toothed smile. “Evening, Clint.”

From his coat pocket Colby took the blunt lead pellet he had extracted from

the body of Glenda Eaton and tossed it on the chief’s desk. “I just dug that out of Mrs. Phil Eaton,” he said, and he gave Beckwith a brief description of what had happened in the last hour and a half.

Beckwith took his feet off the desk and fingered the small chunk of lead. He said slowly, “I heard about it, Clint, and I just sent one of the boys out to check. Is Phil’s wife going to be all right?”

Colby nodded. “No reason why she shouldn’t. A flesh wound beneath the ribs on the lower right side. No bones hit. Slight concussion, but no fracture where she hit her head when she fell.

Beckwith nodded gravely and looked up at Colby with narrowed eyes. “Any ideas, Clint?” he asked softly.

Colby shrugged. “Maybe some prowler—I don’t know. Maybe if you check with Phil you can find out if anything was taken. He was hunting at Deer Lake when it happened. A neighbor, Mrs. Stanton, found her and called me.”

Beckwith stared at his big red hands spread on the desk. “Don’t get me wrong, Clint—but why didn’t you report it sooner? You know the law on bullet wounds. The guy who shot her is probably in the next state by now.”

Colby’s lips tightened. “I’m a doctor, Chad,” he said evenly, “not a cop. I had to get that bullet out of her as soon as I could. It had been in her too long as it was.”

Beckwith looked up quickly. “How long?”

“Three hours, anyhow, from the condition of the wound.”

“And she was unconscious all that time?”

Colby nodded. “She had a bad bump on her head. It’s possible.”

Beckwith’s chin protruded stubbornly. “You could have had Phil call me before you took her to the hospital. I hear he pulled up when you were carrying her out.”

Colby thought again of Mrs. Stanton. "Phil was drunk," he snapped.

"Don't get sore, Clint," Beckwith said soothingly. "I'm just trying to get things straight. Glenda Eaton is a damned pretty woman, and Phil leaves her alone too much. What time did Maude Stanton call you?"

"Around five o'clock."

Beckwith squirmed in his chair and hunched forward a little. "And—uh—were you at your office until that time?"

"Yes. Why?"

Beckwith lifted his heavy shoulders. Then a sly look came into his eyes. "Just wondered. How come you didn't marry Glenda a couple of years back when you was sweet on her? Phil beat you out?"

"That's right, Chad," Colby said quietly. "Phil beat me out. Why don't you check that slug I gave you? Maybe it'll match that .32 I've got a permit to carry. Maybe I shot Glenda in a jealous rage. Who knows?" He turned for the door.

Beckwith stood up hastily. "Now, Clint, don't—"

But Colby was gone.

CHAPTER TWO

Advice to the Lovelorn

COLBY had a lonely dinner in the Buckeye Bar and Grille. It was nearing seven-thirty when he parked his car in the garage behind his

office and entered a rear door into his drug room. From the murmur of voices beyond the partition he guessed that his waiting room was packed with patients. He hung up his hat and coat, and washed his hands in a sink beside an electric sterilizer. He was buttoning a white jacket when Celia Brooks came into the small room.

She was a slender girl with deep blue eyes, a short nose, and a milky skin. A white starched cap was perched on her smoothly combed reddish brown hair, and her white uniform was neat and crisp.

"Hi," she said, smiling, and she nodded toward the waiting room. "They're hanging from the chandelier out there." She handed him a slip of paper. "Here are the calls since you left this afternoon."

Colby glanced briefly over the names. One stood out. "What did Beckwith want?" he asked.

"It was odd," Celia said. "He called, just a short time ago, and asked me what time you left the office this afternoon. I told him you were here until five o'clock, and then you had a call to go out to the Phil Eaton place."

Colby nodded. "That's right. Always tell the truth—especially to the law."

He moved to the archway leading to his office. "Add this to Glenda Eaton's history: 'Bullet wound in lower left side



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says **GEO. McQUEEN**

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beneath first rib. Lodged in outer area of rib cavity. No damage to bone structure or vital organs. Removed bullet under general anesthesia, Dr. Victor Connors assisting. Penicillin powder, dressing. Slight concussion left mastoid area. Four X-rays of skull. Temperature one hundred and three and five-tenths upon admission to hospital at five-twenty-five p. m.'"

Celia rapidly wrote a series of short-hand characters upon a pad. When she had finished, Colby said, "I'm afraid you've a job for tonight. The hospital is short of nurses this week. Can you go out and stay with Glenda Eaton until tomorrow? She shouldn't be alone for the next twelve hours, and Phil is in no shape to stay with her. I want you to especially check her temperature, and nothing but liquids until I see her again."

Celia Brooks eyes clouded, and for an instant she hesitated. Then she smiled brightly. "Okay, Doctor. I had a date with Skip Malloy after office hours. He just got back from Texas, and he's leaving for Florida on the one o'clock bus. But I'll call him from the hospital."

"I'm sorry," Colby said. "Tell Skip it's my fault." He remembered the check he had promised Malloy, and he sat down at his desk. From a drawer he took a check and began to write.

Celia moved to a closet, removed a coat and put it on over her uniform. As she moved to the door, she said, "Maybe I'd better warn you." She nodded at the waiting room door. "There's a strange brunette out there."

Colby looked up and smiled faintly. "Don't tell me there's someone in town I don't know. What's her name?"

"She wouldn't tell me," Celia said. "She arrived just before you came in."

"She'll have a long wait," Colby said. "You drive my car to the hospital. I'll take a taxi when I get through here and have a look at Glenda Eaton." He

paused, and then added, "I'm sorry about your date with Skip."

She smiled at him. "It isn't that serious. I can see Skip anytime." She went out through the drug room door and Colby heard the sound of his car starting.

He thumbed through the cards Celia had placed on his desk, recognizing names and the familiar aches and pains and assorted ailments. On the last card Celia had written, "The Mystery Brunette," and Colby smiled to himself. He picked up the envelope for Skip Malloy, crossed to his office door, and entered the waiting room. The people waiting raised their heads, smiled and nodded at him, and the room was filled with a murmuring, "Good evening, Doctor."

Colby smiled at the room in general, placed the envelope on the mantel, turned back to his door and held it open. It was then that he saw the brunette.

She was reading a magazine in a corner by the window, and she raised her eyes to Colby's for a brief instant. She was very pretty, with clear blue eyes, a full red mouth and a firm rounded chin. Her hair was a glossy black, and was wound around her head in two thick braids. She was wearing a tailored blue suit, and a loose gray tweed coat lay over her knees. On her left hand Colby saw a narrow gold wedding band and the modest sparkle of a small diamond.

He smiled at her, and she lowered her eyes. She was a stranger to him, and yet her face was faintly familiar. He tried to remember where he had seen her before. He couldn't, and he turned to fat Mrs. Johnson, the wife of a local contractor, who was unsuccessfully trying to reduce on a diet Colby had given her. Colby suspected that she was eating cream puffs in secret, and he resolved to have it out with her. "I believe you're first, Mrs. Johnson," he said, and he stood aside for her.

The fat woman smiled archly at him as she moved into the office. Panting heavily, she eased her bulk into a chair beside Colby's desk.

Colby sat down, picked up her case history card, and said severely, "Mrs. Johnson, it's obvious that we aren't making any progress. I'm to help you, you must follow my directions."

Her fat face changed from pink to red. "Oh, Doctor," she exclaimed, "I have a teeny-weeny confession to make. I simply cannot resist chocolate fudge cake with whipped cream. Can't you give me some pills, or something?"

And Colby's night's work began.

TWO hours and a half later he ushered out his last patient, except for the strange brunette. As he turned to her, he noticed that Skip Malloy's check was gone from the mantel. The brunette sat quietly, her legs crossed. An ashtray on a table beside her was filled with red-tipped cigarette stubs.

"I'm sorry you had such a long wait," Colby said.

She stood up, and Colby saw that she had an erect slender figure. "That's all right, Doctor. I—I'm really not ill. I just wanted to talk to you."

Colby was surprised, but he kept his face grave. "Please sit down, Mrs.—?"

She flushed. "How do you know I'm married?"

Colby nodded at the rings on her left hand.

She glanced down at her hand, and her lips trembled a little. "I don't know why I continue to wear them," she said, and there was a faint bitter edge to her voice. She sat down, and took a cigarette from a silver case.

Colby struck a match and held it for her, and then lit a cigarette for himself. He took a chair beside her and stretched out his legs.

The girl said in a low voice, "I'm Rosanne Malloy." She paused, and then added, "Skip Malloy's wife."

Colby looked at her in surprise.

She said in a brittle voice, "I don't suppose he has bothered to tell anyone in this town that he had a wife?"

"Nobody asked him, I guess," Colby said, and he thought of Malloy and Glenda Eaton, and of his present friendship with Celia Brooks. He frowned, and drew on his cigarette.

Rosanne Malloy said, "I'm a nurse, Doctor—also an X-ray technician. I've been working in a hospital in Cleveland."

Colby snapped his fingers. "Sure," he exclaimed. "I remember now. You assisted Dr. Lundstorm in a demonstration of X-ray therapy at the last medical convention in Cincinnati."

She nodded.

"I was there," Colby told her. "Lundstorm is doing a fine job. Do you work for him?"

"Not regularly, but I help occasionally." She tapped out her partially smoked cigarette. "My visit has nothing to do with the profession. I came to you because I need some information about my husband. Do you know him?"

"Yes. I saw him this afternoon. He just came back from Texas."

"I know," she said bitterly. "I try to keep track of him. He's tournament happy—and he never wins." She paused, and then went on. "I know you must be tired, Doctor, and I, don't wish to impose on you." As she spoke, she opened her purse and took out two photographs and handed them to Colby. "These were sticking in the corners of the mirror in Skip's room," she said. "It—it was quite a shock. Skip was never a chaser—golf was my only rival. But if he's in love with someone else now—well, it changes things. I want to know what I'm up against."

Colby was puzzled, but he kept his

face expressionless as he looked at the photographs. One had been clipped from a newspaper. It was of Glenda Eaton in the garden of her home, and Colby remembered seeing it in the *Dixie Democrat* in connection with a local garden club story. The other was a snapshot of Celia Brooks in a bathing suit on the diving board at the country club.

Rosanne Malloy said, "A soda clerk in a drug store identified both of them for me. He told me their names, and said the girl in the bathing suit works for you. I thought I'd come to you first."

"I see," Colby said gravely. He leaned forward and crushed out his cigarette. "You can stop worrying about Celia Brooks as soon as I tell her that Skip is married. Anyhow, from what she has told me, it's just been a casual friendship. And as for Mrs. Eaton—he gave her golf lessons last summer."

"But why should he have their pictures in his room?" she asked.

Colby lifted his wide shoulders and grinned at her. "Both are attractive girls. They made pleasing decorations for his room."

"I didn't see *my* picture there," she said bitterly. Tears came into her eyes, and she turned her head to stare out at the line of street lights on Main Street. "Can I talk about it a little, Doctor? I'll make it quick. And maybe you can help me."

Colby glanced at his wrist watch, saw that it was after ten o'clock, and he remembered that he wanted to check Glenda Eaton. But a doctor's duties and responsibilities are not confined to the physical ailing, and he said, "Sure, tell me about it."

She turned to face him. "Thank you. It—it took a lot for me to come here like this. But I love Skip, and I want to be with him. Maybe it's my fault that I'm not. Dr. Lundstorm, and others, took me away a lot. Skip was assistant golf

professional at one of the big clubs near Cleveland, and in winters he'd hit the tournament circuits. He always lost. I wanted him to quit golf, get a regular job, and settle down. But golf is all he knows, all he wants to do. He's good, but not good enough for the big time. We quarreled about it constantly.

"A year ago he was offered the job of professional at the club here, and he took it. My work kept me from joining him, and—oh, you know the rest. He stopped answering my letters. I finally wrote him that if he would come back to me he could play in tournaments all he liked, and that I would pay the bills. I was making enough money for both of us. I wanted him back, under any conditions. He never answered. He always resented the fact that I made more money than he did, and Skip's tastes run high—when he has the money. So I buried my pride and drove down here to see him.

"He wasn't in his room, but his landlady let me in. Then I found the pictures, learned who they were, and came to see you. I intended to wait for him in his room, but now I'm afraid to see him until I—until I know what's going on. . . . This Mrs. Eaton—what is she like?"

Colby sighed and got to his feet. "She's in the hospital," he said. "This afternoon somebody shot her."

Rosanne Malloy's eyes grew big. "Shot?" she faltered. "Who—?"

COLBY shrugged. "We don't know." He told her briefly about Glenda Eaton, and then he moved to his own office doorway and began to unbutton his white jacket. In the yellow lamplight his face looked drawn and tired.

"Look," he said gently, "Skip's leaving for Florida sometime tonight. I don't know where he is now, but he'll have to pack some clothes before he goes. Why

don't you go back to his room and wait for him?" He paused, and smiled at her. "I wish you luck."

She averted her eyes and fumbled in her purse. "Doctor, how much—?"

"Maybe you can take an X-ray for me sometime," Colby said, still smiling. "Anyhow, I'm afraid I haven't helped you much.

She attempted a smile, but Colby saw the pain in her eyes. She stood up, flung the coat over her arm, and moved to the door. "Thank you," she said in a voice so low that Colby barely heard her, and she hurried out.

He stepped to the window and watched her walk briskly up the street beneath the lights. It was then that he remembered the check on the mantel for Skip Malloy. The check was gone. Rosanne must have seen her husband when he came to get it.

Twenty minutes later Colby got out of a taxi at the Dixie Memorial Hospital. As he entered the building by a rear door he saw that Celia had parked his car beside the emergency ambulance entrance. He entered the hospital, climbed a dark stairway, and walked toward Glenda Eaton's room. The corridors were quiet, antiseptic-smelling, with a dim light at intervals between the doors to the rooms. His rubber heels made no noises on the tiled floor. The door to Glenda Eaton's room was closed, and he opened it quietly.

Celia Brooks, her back toward him, was bending over Glenda Eaton, and he had a glimpse of the blonde girl's hair spread out over the sheet. Colby closed the door, and the latch made a soft clicking sound. Celia turned swiftly to face him. Her eyes were big and dark in her white face.

Colby said softly, "Everything all right?"

"Clint," Celia whispered, "she's—she's dead."

Colby dropped his bag, strode swiftly to the bed and leaned over the still form. Glenda Eaton's dead eyes stared dully at the ceiling from between half-closed lashes. As Colby felt for a pulse he knew wouldn't be there, he snapped to Celia, "Respirator. Oxygen."

Celia ran from the room.

* * *

The hands of the big clock on the wall behind the head nurse's desk pointed to sixteen minutes before eleven o'clock in the evening. Down the corridor the door to Glenda Eaton's room was closed. Three people stood in the circle of light around the desk—Colby, Celia, and the head nurse, stout, gray-haired Florence Yates.

Colby said to her, "Florence, mark your records that she died at approximately ten o'clock." He turned to Celia. "We were far too late with the respirator. When did you discover that she was dead? Just before I came?"

Celia nodded. "She was all right when I arrived tonight." She paused, and then went on in a strained voice. "The regular nurse had gone off duty, and Phil was with her. She was still under the ether, but her pulse was strong. Phil was very nervous. He kept leaving and returning. I suspect he had a bottle outside somewhere. But he appeared to be fairly sober, and he kept asking me if Glenda would be all right.

"Then Glenda began to stir a little, and she called Phil's name. I went to her, and she whispered that her side pained her. I gave her a half grain of morphine, as you directed, and I took her temperature. Her fever was down to a hundred and one and two-tenths—it's on the chart. Then she quieted down and went to sleep. I persuaded Phil to go home then, and he left. That was a little before nine-thirty. Then

Skip Malloy came to Mrs. Eaton's room."

"To see you or Mrs. Eaton?" Colby broke in.

She flushed. "Clint, I don't believe those stories about Skip and Glenda."

"I just want to get it straight," Colby said gently. "As coroner of this county, I've got to make a report." He lit a cigarette and inhaled slowly. "I don't understand it. She had a strong heart, and there wasn't a mark on her." He sighed deeply. "I'll make some tests—tonight."

Celia's faced paled. "Autopsy?"

Colby said, "Maybe. Was she still sleeping when Skip arrived?"

Celia nodded. "Yes. He wanted to say good-by to me before he left for Florida."

"What time did he come?"

"Ten minutes before ten. I remember glancing at my wrist watch. I—I asked Skip to stay with Glenda while I went down to the kitchen to get some coffee and a sandwich. I hadn't had any dinner. I was gone ten minutes, maybe a little longer, and when I came back, Skip was gone and Miss Yates was with Glenda." She nodded at the gray-haired nurse.

The nurse removed her thick glasses. Her eyes were worried. She said to Colby, "Mr. Malloy came to me and said he had to leave, and he asked me to stay with Mrs. Eaton. She appeared to be resting quietly while I was with her."

Colby said, "The morphine would last for at least an hour. Did you take her pulse?"

Florence Yates shook her head. "Why, no, Doctor. Celia's chart showed that it had been normal."

"Did you leave her while Celia was gone?" Colby asked.

"Only for a short time—maybe five minutes. One of the nurses called me to the third floor."

"What time did you leave?"

"Around ten o'clock, I think."

"All right, Florence," Colby said heavily. "Don't worry about it." He sighed, and picked up his bag. "I'll have to tell Phil."

Celia Brooks touched his arm. "Clint—did I do anything wrong?"

Colby smiled at her and shook his head. "No, Celia. You stay here. I'll be back as soon as I can." He started for the door.

Florence Yates' voice stopped him. "Doctor, Mrs. Eaton's card isn't in the file!"

COLBY turned. The nurse had pulled out a drawer of a metal filing cabinet labeled *Admittances*, and was thumbing through a section of cards behind a tab marked *E*. As Colby moved back to the desk, his eye caught a glimpse of a white object on the floor of the corridor opposite Glenda Eaton's room. He walked slowly down the corridor. The object was a white file card. He picked it up and read: *Eaton, Mrs. Phillip. Room No. 214, Private*. This was followed by the date and the hour that he had brought Glenda Eaton to the hospital.

As he turned to go back to the desk, he saw that a door directly across from Glenda Eaton's room was standing ajar about two inches. He stared at the door absently, and then he moved over and opened the door wide.

It was a linen closet, with shelves on each side stacked high with sheets, towels and white hospital gowns. On the floor in a corner was a bottle. Colby picked it up. It was corked, but empty, and had once contained scotch. Colby smiled without humor. This was where Phil Eaton had gone to sneak his drinks. Colby shook his head sadly, replaced the bottle, and walked back down the corridor to the desk. He handed Florence Yates the file card.

"For goodness sakes," she exclaimed.

"How did it get down there?" She began to write on the card with a fountain pen.

Colby said, "I wouldn't know," nodded at Celia Brooks, and went out to his car.

He drove swiftly across town to Phil Eaton's house. As he swung into the drive, he saw a light in the big living room. He braked to a stop behind Eaton's station wagon, got out, and quietly closed the car door behind him. As he stepped to the tiled terrace, he could see plainly into the living room.

Phil Eaton was slumped in a deep chair. There was a tall glass in his hand, and his chin was resting on his chest. His eyes glowered up at a woman standing in the middle of the room.

The woman's hair was a bright copperish color, and it fell in shining folds over her shoulders. Her profile was toward Colby, and he decided that she had once been very pretty—still was, except for a faint hardness around her red mouth and the barest suggestion of fat on the soft curves of her body. She was wearing a man-style red plaid shirt, whipcord riding breeches, and tan low-heeled riding boots. She, too, held a glass in one hand. The other was pointed accusingly at Eaton, and Colby saw the red glister of a lacquered fingernail.

She was talking to Eaton, and her full rich voice carried clearly out to Colby. "Listen, Phillip, my sweet, you can't treat *me* that way. I waited in that damn cabin all afternoon for you. That was a dirty trick, running out on me. I walked two miles to a farmer's, and I paid him five bucks to bring me here in a broken-down cattle truck. You double-crossing, cheating—"

Eaton stopped her by holding up a weary hand. He reached into his shirt pocket, folded a bill, and tossed it on the floor at the woman's feet. "There's ten bucks," Colby heard him say. "Get out."

The woman kicked viciously at the

money. "Ten dollars! When you owe me thirty thousand! I've tried to play square with you, but now—"

Colby jabbed at the doorbell, and the woman's voice stopped abruptly. From within, he heard Eaton's irritated voice. "Come in, come in."

Colby opened the door, stepped inside, crossed a small reception hall and entered the long living room where he had found Glenda Eaton that afternoon. The soft strains of the *Bolero* still floated out into the room. Colby thought wryly that modern music recording devices were the nearest things to perpetual motion yet discovered. Just put on a record, or a series of records, and they will play forever, over and over, unless the machine is shut off.

Phil Eaton lifted his glass. "Hi, Doc," he said thickly, and he nodded at the woman. "Want you to meet a charming friend, Toni Morris. Toni, this is Clint Colby, the family doctor, and my wife's former boy friend."

Colby lips tightened, but he didn't say anything.

The woman stepped up to Colby. She smiled, and he saw that her teeth were white and even.

"Hmmm," she said softly, and her eyes searched his face. "I *like* doctors, especially when they're young and handsome. Did you really love Phillip's wife?" She stopped, and placed a hand over her lips. "What *am* I saying? I am *very* pleased to meet you, Doctor."

Eaton leaned forward in his chair and said to the woman. "How about you getting the hell out of here?"

The woman laughed. It was a rich melodious sound. She said to Colby, "Isn't he simply charming? Do you know what that skunk did to me? He telephoned me in Cleveland, very jolly and irresistible, and invited me to hunt pheasant with him at Deer Lake. Really, we had a rather pleasant time—until to-

day, when he ran out on me and left me marooned up there in the wilderness. I just came in by dog sled and found Phillip, very cozy, quietly getting drunker." She tinkled the ice in her glass, smiled brightly. "Won't you have a drink, Doctor? If one drinks, things do not seem quite so grim."

Colby shook his head, and looked at Eaton. The big man carefully placed his glass on the floor beside his chair, stood up, and moved slowly toward the woman. He was smiling pleasantly. The woman too, was smiling, but for a fleeting instant Colby thought he saw a glint of terror in her eyes.

Eaton grinned at Colby. "She's wonderful, Doc. Just a simple, wholesome American girl." He lifted his arm, and with the back of his hand he struck the woman sharply across the face.

She made no sound, but the impact of the blow sent her reeling across the room. She stumbled against a divan, and clung there, bent over, her back to Colby and Eaton.

Eaton laughed shortly. "I'm sorry I had to do that, Doc, in front of you. But that's the only language she understands." He hesitated, and ran a hand through his thick black hair. "I'm just a no-good bum, but I—I think a lot of Glenda. . . . How is she?"

"She's dead," Colby said coldly.

CHAPTER THREE

This Makes It Murder

FOR a long instant Eaton stared at him. Then a look of bewilderment, of shock, crept into his eyes, and he took a long shuddering breath. "Doc—" His voice broke. "Doc—you can't mean that!"

Colby nodded slowly. From beyond Eaton he saw the woman called Toni Morris turn slowly. Her copperish hair

fell over one side of her face, and a thin trickle of blood showed at a corner of her mouth. In her right hand was a small automatic. It was pointed at Phil Eaton.

Without removing her hot eyes from Eaton, she said to Colby in a brittle voice. "Stand clear, my handsome medico. I'm a girl scout, and I'm about to do my good deed for the day."

Eaton seemed not to have heard her. He was staring at Colby.

With a quick toss of her head the woman flung her hair back from her face. "Phillip," she said softly, "please turn around. I want to tell you why I'm going to kill you."

Eaton turned slowly, like a man walking in his sleep. He saw the gun in the woman's hand, and his big body stiffened. Sweat appeared on his temples.

The woman laughed. "You're a handsome brute—even when you're scared. I won't drag it out, darling. It's all my fault, really, for ever believing you." Her lips twisted bitterly. "After being married three times, I should know better. But then, my darling Phillip, you were so sincere, so unhappily married to Glenda—Glenda with all the money. You said I was something fresh and new in your life. Was it because of the money you owed me? But I believed you, darling. Isn't that comic?"

She paused, and went on in a ragged voice. "I won't have it, Phillip. You said that Glenda stood in our way—Glenda and her money. You said that you couldn't live without money—lots of it. I have money, Phillip, lots of it, but then you said that you couldn't divorce Glenda because of her trust in you. It wouldn't make any difference between us, you said. Our love was above such things as wives and money and the sordid work-a-day world. But when the chips are down, you go running back to Glenda. I can't stand any more, Phillip. You need killing, a man like you.

She raised the gun with a hand that trembled. "I don't care if I die for this, darling. I really don't."

Colby stiffened as he saw her finger tighten on the trigger. He took a slow step toward her.

The big man was trembling, and he said desperately. "Toni, don't! It's just you and I now. Listen, Toni—Glenda is dead. Don't you see? Please, Toni . . ."

She lowered the gun a trifle, and her long lashes narrowed over her eyes. "Phillip," she whispered, "what kind of cheap trick is this?"

"No trick, Toni," Eaton said eagerly. "Didn't you hear what Doc just said? Glenda is dead, Toni."

Colby felt a little sick. He saw the naked fear on Eaton's face, and the look of suspicious uncertainty in the woman's eyes. Both of them seemed to have forgotten him as they stood facing each other with death between them in the hand of Toni Morris. Colby made up his mind, and jumped for the woman.

She whirled like a tigress, but not quickly enough. Colby's fingers closed over her wrist. She struggled briefly and savagely, her head down, the bright hair falling over her face. And then the gun was in Colby's hand, and he stepped back. The woman faced him, panting.

Phil Eaton laughed suddenly, and he started for the woman. The fear was gone from his eyes now, and in its place there was a look of cruel coldness.

She backed away from him, and once more Colby saw the terror in her eyes. "Phillip—darling," she faltered. "I—I didn't intend to shoot you. Really, Phillip. . . ."

Eaton stepped close and raised his hand.

"Don't hit her again, Phil," Colby said sharply.

Eaton looked at the doctor with cold eyes. "She's a tramp, Doc," he said. "Don't interfere." He turned toward the

woman once more, and she shrank away from him. Eaton slowly stalked her.

Colby raised the gun in his hand and pointed it at Eaton. "Stop it, Phil," he said quietly.

The big man turned slowly. He saw the gun in Colby's hand, and the fear crept into his eyes again. For a split second he hesitated, and then his eyes shifted. He lifted his big shoulders, and he tried to smile. "All right, Doc. She isn't worth it."

Colby slipped the cartridge clip from the little weapon, and ejected the bullet from the firing chamber. As he dropped the clip and the extra cartridge into his pocket he saw that the gun was .32 caliber. He tossed the empty gun on the divan, and said to the woman:

"That's not a cap pistol. If you stage any more dramatics, you'd better get another prop." He turned and moved to the door leading into the reception hall.

The woman's voice stopped him. "Wait, Doctor. I want to go with you." She picked up a red woolen jacket and put it on. She didn't look at Eaton.

Colby hesitated. Then he said, "All right. Wait in my car. I'll be out in a minute."

She hurried past him, and he heard the front door open and close.

Eaton raised his eyes to Colby, like a small boy caught with his hand in the cookie jar. "Don't look that way, Doc," he said. "I'm drunk, and she don't mean a thing to me. She's just—well you know. I—I told her about Glenda just to get her mind off that damn gun of hers. I didn't think she would really shoot, but she gets pretty wild sometimes."

"You were scared blue," Colby said.

Eaton looked away from Colby's steady stare. "All right," he said in a low voice, "I was. Is Glenda really dead?"

"Yes," Colby said.

Eaton covered his face with his hands. "Doc," he said in a choked voice. "I'm

just no damn good. Glenda was worth a million like Toni Morris."

"That's right," Colby said evenly. "But now you'll get Glenda's money, and you're free to hit the high spots with all the Toni's you want to."

Eaton stood up slowly, and there was hate in his eyes. "Damn you!"

Colby said coldly, "Your affairs do not concern me, Phil. But I wanted you to know that Glenda did not die of that bullet wound. I intend to do an autopsy."

Eaton's eyes bugged out. "Autopsy? Why? I won't permit it."

"I'm afraid you haven't anything to say about it, Phil," Colby told him. "I'm coroner of this county."

Eaton turned away and stared out of the window. "Of course, Doc," he said in a tight voice. "If you think it's necessary. But I don't understand." He began to pace the room. "I—I'm all mixed up." He stopped his pacing, and turned to Colby. "Take care of things, will you, Doc. I can't think any more. If you want me, I'll be here."

Colby nodded, and went out. As he closed the door he heard the low throbbing of the *Bolero*.

THE woman called Toni Morris was waiting quietly in his car. She sat slumped in the seat, her face a pale blur in the light from the house. There was a cigarette between her lips, and she was staring out into the night. As Colby got in beside her, she turned her head and said in a low voice, "Will you drop me at the bus station? Maybe I can get back to Cleveland tonight."

Colby nodded, and drove down the winding drive to the street. Five blocks away, as he swung into the main street of the town, he saw a pair of headlights behind him. He watched them in his rear-view mirror. The light stayed a half block away. As he stopped by the curb close to the bus station, he lost the lights

in a scattering of the late evening traffic.

The woman made no move to get out, and Colby waited patiently, his hands on the wheel. She looked at him, and said, "Can you spare a few minutes, Doctor? I've got to talk to somebody." With trembling fingers she lit a fresh cigarette from the glowing stub of the one she had been smoking.

"Sure," Colby said wearily. "Go ahead." He remembered Rosanne Malloy, who had also unburdened herself upon him, and he thought wryly, *Dr. Colby, Physician and Surgeon, Advice to the Lovelorn*.

"Thank you," the woman said quietly. "I feel that I owe you an explanation about—about what happened tonight. I'm not such a witch, really. It's just that I love Phillip so very much, and he's treated me so shabbily. Tonight wasn't the first time he's struck me. Sometimes he scares me, but I—I love him. I met him at my club in Cleveland. I call it the Club Bolero. It's a nice place, Doctor, and I cater to the white tie and tails set. But if you should come there, I'll let you use your own dice."

She laughed shortly, and went on. "Dice were Phillip's weakness. He owes me over thirty thousand dollars. I suppose Phillip thought that he had paid me off in his personal brand of fake love. He was quite convincing at first—but then, I suppose a man could be for thirty grand. Then he began to avoid me.

"I stood it for a month. Three days ago I called him from Cleveland and told him that if he didn't pay me, I was going to tell his wife. That scared him, because he lives on her money, and he told me to meet him in the cabin on Deer Lake. I guess that's what I wanted most—just to be with him again. I went, but we just quarreled, and he drank constantly. This noon he left, and he didn't come back. Later, I came back to town and I found him at his house. You know

what happened then." She paused, and then went on in a shaky voice. "He's no good, but I love him. What'll I do?" Her voice broke, and she turned her head to stare at the lights of the bus station.

"Forget him," Colby said.

She laughed a little shrilly. "Thank you, Doctor. Thank you so very much. You're so *very* helpful." She fumbled blindly at the door handle, got out to the sidewalk, and walked swiftly toward the bus station.

Colby watched her until she entered the building. Then he sighed, leaned over and closed the door, and drove to the next corner and stopped at an all night diner. He had two cups of coffee and three doughnuts. Then he got back into his car and drove across town toward the Dixie Memorial Hospital.

As he left the lights of the business section behind him, he saw headlights behind him once more. He increased his speed, and the car behind him kept pace. As he slowed down to make the turn into the long drive leading up the hill to the hospital, the car pulled up beside him. There was a sharp report, and a flash of flame. A neat hole appeared in the windshield before Colby's face. He ducked his head then, and he gunned his car up the hill. He shot a quick glance behind him, and he saw the lights of the car speeding away toward the wooded country beyond.

Colby stopped before the hospital, and sat quietly for maybe a minute staring at the hole in the windshield with the spider webbing cracks around it. Then he got out, removed his bag from the rear seat, and entered the hospital.

Chief of Police Chad Beckwith was waiting for him in the main corridor. He was chewing on an unlighted cigar.

"Dammit, Clint, what're you trying to pull? I figured Glenda Eaton would be able to talk by this time, but when I get out here they tell me she's dead."

Colby nodded. "That's right, Chad." He made a move to pass Beckwith.

The chief grabbed his arm. "Now, wait a minute, Clint."

Colby stood quietly. "Yes?"

Beckwith looked embarrassed, and he shuffled his feet a little. "Clint, I hate to do this, but it's my duty to arrest you on, well—uh—on suspicion of murder."

"Why?" Colby said.

Beckwith said, "Clint, I gotta do it. Somebody telephoned me a little while back and told me they had seen your car at Phil Eaton's house early this afternoon, three hours before you said you went there. They also told me that Glenda Eaton had died."

"I see," Colby said quickly. "Who called you?"

Beckwith flushed, and shifted his eyes. "Now, Clint, don't take it too hard. She was just doing her duty. It was your

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office nurse, Celia Brooks, who called me.”

Colby leaned against the wall of the corridor and stared out of a window at the lighted lawn around the hospital. The trees were bare against the night sky, and down in the valley he could see the lights of the town. Somewhere down there, or maybe closer than he knew, was the person who had killed Glenda Eaton.

Beckwith said, “Clint, that bullet wound was more serious than you let on, huh?”

Colby swung on him. “No,” he said harshly, “Glenda Eaton didn’t die of a bullet wound. If you’ll forget this silly business of arresting me, I think I can tell you how she died.”

Beckwith stared at him a long moment, mouthing his cigar. “Clint,” he sighed, “I don’t like to think you’d do a thing like that—even if you was jealous of her because she married Phil. You’re still coroner of this here county, and I’ll string along with you.”

Colby grinned at him, and moved down the corridor to the desk where the head nurse, Florence Yates, sat. “Florence,” he said, “Where’s Celia?”

“She’s helping on the third floor. I locked Mrs. Eaton’s door.”

He nodded. “Ask Celia to come up to surgery. I’ll have to do an autopsy on Mrs. Eaton. Please have her body taken up, call Dr. Conners.”

She stared at him blankly, her eyes behind the thick lenses. “Autopsy?” Then she said briskly, “Yes, Doctor,” and she reached for the telephone. As she did so, the instrument jangled, and she answered it. “Yes,” she said, “He’s right here.” She held the telephone out to Colby. “It’s for you.”

Colby placed the receiver to his ear, said, “Yes?”

A man’s voice said, “Doc, this is Phil Eaton. Something just happened, and I thought I’d better tell you. Doc, somebody just took a shot at me.”

“Where?” Colby snapped.

“In my drive, by the house.” Eaton’s voice was ragged. “After you left, I went out to put my car in the garage. A car came up the drive, and I thought it was maybe you coming back. When it got about thirty feet away, I heard the shot, and I saw the flame. The bullet hit the car door beside me, and I ran around the car and ducked down. The car went out the other end of the drive, and headed west. Then I ran into the house. Doc, where did you take Toni?”

“To the bus station,” Colby said. “Look, Phil, you’d better stay in the house. I’ll be out as soon as I can.” He hung up, his lips tight, and ignoring Beckwith questioning stare he went up a stairway leading to the doctor’s dressing room on the second floor. Beckwith lumbered up after him.

Five minutes later Colby stood outside a room with the word *Surgery* painted on the white door. A white-coated attendant had just wheeled the sheet-covered body of Glenda Eaton into the room. Celia Brooks stood silently by, her eyes big and dark in her pale face. Chief of Police Chad Beckwith leaned against the wall, the cigar still in his mouth.

Old Doc Conners rounded a corner and waddled up to Colby, puffing. “Clint,” he said in a complaining voice, “I threw in a pair of aces down at the lodge to come out here to help you, and now Florence tells me it’s just a post mortem. You don’t need any help on that.”

Colby glanced at the beefy figure of Beckwith, and said to Doc Conners, “I wanted you to be here, Doctor, as a witness. It won’t take long. I’m very sure of that.”

The fat old doctor nodded, and entered the operating room. Colby moved over to Celia and said in a low voice, “Did you telephone Chief Beckwith tonight?”

She stared at him with puzzled eyes. Then she said, "No, Clint."

Colby grinned and patted her arm. "Okay." He nodded toward the operating room. "Want to help?"

"Of course," she said quietly.

Beckwith watched them silently as they went through the wide door and into a blaze of flat white light.

CHAPTER FOUR

More Corpses

COLBY sat in the office of Chief of Police Chad Beckwith. There was a dark stubble on his lean cheeks, and his eyes looked hot and sunken. His shirt collar was unbuttoned, and the ends of a blue-dotted bow tie hung down over his coat. The stub of a cigarette was almost burning his fingers.

Opposite him sat Beckwith, his big shoulders hunched forward, his hands clasped on the desk before him. The shredded remains of a cigar was in his mouth. Celia Brooks stood by a window staring out at the quiet street. Gray light of daybreak filled the office, and the lamp on Beckwith's desk cast a pale yellow glow.

A blue-shirted policeman came in with a pot of coffee and three cups. He placed them on the desk. "Thanks, Tom," Beckwith grunted, and the policeman went out.

Beckwith looked at Colby and said stubbornly, "Maybe I'm damned dumb, Clint, but I still don't get it. You tell me to have the boys pick up a black-haired gal named Rosanna Malloy, who claims to be the wife of Skip Malloy, and you tell me to send out word to also pick up Skip, who is supposed to be on a bus headed for Miami. On top of that, you say we gotta round up a red-headed babe named Toni Morris, whoever the hell she

is, and Phil Eaton. But Phil ain't home, and not a peep from the boys yet about any of the rest."

He paused, and looked down at his thick fingers. "I'm the law in this town, Clint, and you're still the legally appointed coroner. I'm willing to string along with you—up to a point. But it don't make sense. And now you tell me that Glenda Eaton didn't die of the bullet wound, or of the blow on her head, but of suffocation. My lord!"

"That's right, Chad," Colby said wearily. "Glenda was killed by asphyxiation—suffocated by a pillow being pressed over her face while she was semi-conscious from the effects of the ether and the morphine. She wasn't strangled, because there were no marks on her throat, and she didn't struggle much. My examination of Glenda Eaton showed clearly how she died, and Dr. Connors will back me up. Tonight, at close to ten o'clock, somebody had the opportunity to be alone with her long enough to place a pillow over her face until she stopped breathing. It would take only a few minutes."

Beckwith pulled a heavy hand down over his face. "All right, Clint. She wasn't shot to death. Somebody strangled her—"

"Suffocated," Colby broke in.

Beckwith banged a fist on the desk. "Dammit, she's dead, ain't she? But who shot her in the first place, and why? Who was alone with her ten o'clock tonight?"

"Maybe several people," Colby said patiently. "That's why I want you to pick up those persons I mentioned. I think the killer shot her early this afternoon, and left, thinking she was dead. When he—or she—found out that they hadn't done a complete job, they went to the hospital, waited for an opportunity, and then held a pillow over her face until she was dead."

Celia Brooks moved silently from the window and poured coffee into the three cups on Beckwith's desk. The chief lifted his cup and blew across it. His broad face was red and stubborn. "But why, Clint, why? What's the motive?"

Colby lifted his shoulders and smiled faintly. "Who knows what makes a person kill? There are many reasons—love, hate, jealousy, revenge, money. Sometimes there isn't any reason for a person being murdered."

He lit a fresh cigarette and sipped at his coffee. "Since five o'clock this afternoon I've learned a few small facts. Rosanne Malloy was jealous of Glenda Eaton because she thought her husband was having an affair with Glenda. Toni Morris is in love with Phil Eaton, and she may have thought that Glenda stood in the way of her happiness with Phil. Phil Eaton is a chaser, a lady-killer, and he owes Toni Morris a pile of money. She threatened to tell Glenda, and Phil couldn't have that—Glenda had all the money in the family. But with Glenda dead, Phil will get her money, and he can pay off Toni and forget her if he wants to. Skip Malloy—"

"Skip *skipped*," Beckwith broke in, and he laughed shortly. "I've heard talk about him and Glenda Eaton." He glared at Colby, his jaw thrust out. "Dammit, Clint, you're trying to cover something up. You was sweet on Glenda before she married Phil, and I still think you was at her house early this afternoon. And Skip Malloy was running around with Celia. That looks damn funny. I'm a cop, Clint, and—"

A young policeman appeared in the doorway. "We got the brunette, Chief. She was getting on the southbound bus."

Beckwith glanced briefly at Colby, and then grunted, "Bring her in."

The policeman stepped aside, and Rosanne Malloy came slowly through the doorway. She stood quietly, and

stared at Colby with puzzled eyes. The doctor got slowly to his feet. "Hello," he said. "We're sorry, but we want you to answer a few questions. Would you mind telling us where you were going?"

She hesitated an instant. And then her chin came up. "To Miami, Doctor."

Colby nodded. "I see. Did you know that Mrs. Phillip Eaton was dead?"

Her eyes widened. "No, I didn't know that."

"Did you visit Mrs. Eaton in her hospital room tonight?" Colby asked.

She glanced at Celia Brooks, and at Beckwith, and then her gaze returned to Colby. "Yes. I—I thought that if Skip was in love with her, I wanted to see her, to know what she was like. When I returned to his room tonight, his landlady told me that he packed some clothes and left. I decided to follow him, but there wasn't another bus until this morning. So I went to the hospital. There was no one on the reception desk. I looked in the file to find Mrs. Eaton's room number, and—"

"Did you replace the card?" Colby broke in.

"I—I probably didn't. I saw the number, and I hurried to her room."

"I found the card where you dropped it. What time did you go there?"

"I think it was a little before ten o'clock," she said. "But, Doctor—"

"Did you speak to Mrs. Eaton?" Colby asked.

She shook her head. "No. She was alone, apparently sleeping. I just looked at her, and then I left. She was very beautiful."

"Just one thing more," Colby said. "While you were waiting in my office tonight, you must have seen your husband come in and take an envelope off the mantel. Did you speak to him then?"

She flushed. "No. I didn't want to see him until after I had talked to you. I saw him come in, and I held a magazine

in front of my face until he went outside."

Colby turned away. He picked up his cup and walked to the window. The events of the last twelve hours filtered one by one through his tired brain.

The telephone on Beckwith's desk began to ring. The chief picked up the instrument and spoke briefly. He turned to Colby with his hand over the mouth-piece. "They got Skip Malloy in East Liverpool," he said.

Colby turned slowly and looked at Beckwith. The hand which held the cup trembled a little, and there was a bright glitter in his eyes. "Tell them to release him," he said in a brittle voice. He nodded at Rosanne Malloy. "You may go. We're sorry to have detained you."

The office was very quiet, and Beckwith stared at Colby with cold, angry eyes. Then he barked into the telephone, "Hold Malloy until I tell you different." He replaced the phone in its cradle and pointed a finger at Rosanne Malloy. "And she stays here—until I know what's going on." He glared at Colby. "I'm the law here, Clint, and I'm damned sick of this fooling around."

"Shut up," Colby said harshly, and moved to the door.

Beckwith stood up, his face red and dangerous. "Clint, you ain't leaving!"

Colby jerked his head toward the door. "Come out here," he snapped. "I want to tell you something."

Beckwith hesitated, his face sullen. Then he moved heavily across the office and followed Colby into the corridor. Colby closed the office door, and turned to Beckwith.

"Chad," he said, "I guess I'm not very bright tonight. Phil Eaton killed his wife."

BECKWITH'S mouth fell open. He stared at Colby dumbly, and then his lips closed in stubborn fine. "Now, looky here, Clint—"

Colby stopped him with an upraised hand. "Listen, Chad," he said. "I just remembered that Deer Lake is only an hour's drive from here. Phil Eaton didn't show up until after five o'clock—when I was carrying his wife out to my car. And yet Toni Morris told me that Phil left the lake at noon. He could have been at home at the time his wife was shot. He shot her, and came back to the house late in the afternoon planning on putting on the shocked-husband act—which he did. But when he found that he hadn't killed her, he accompanied me to the hospital, knowing that he had to finish the job before she regained consciousness and accused him of shooting her. So he hung around her room tonight, sneaking drinks from a bottle he had in a linen closet directly across from his wife's room. After Celia came, he pretended to leave, but instead he hid in the closet and watched the room through the partially opened door for a chance to go into his wife's room and finish the job.

"It came when Celia and the head nurse, Florence Yates, left his wife alone for a few minutes at ten o'clock. He ducked across the corridor, suffocated her with the pillow, and then left. I found his empty whiskey bottle in the closet. He was the only person who could have possibly known when Glenda Eaton was alone in her room."

"Celia was alone with her," Beckwith said evenly. "And so was that horse-faced nurse, Florence Yates. And so was Skip Malloy, according to you, and so was Malloy's wife. She's admitted that much."

"You got a gun?" Colby said harshly. "Come on. I'll prove that it was Phil Eaton."

Beckwith gave Colby a lopsided grin. Then he turned and called down the corridor. The policeman who had brought the coffee appeared, and Beckwith said.

"Watch my office, Tom. Nobody is to leave until I get back."

Colby turned and walked swiftly out to his car parked at the curb. Beckwith followed, and got in beside him. As Colby turned into the street leading to Phil Eaton's house, he glanced at his rear-view mirror and he saw the headlights of a car following them. "Somebody's tailing us," he said to Beckwith.

Beckwith turned and squinted out of the rear window. "It's our number two patrol car," he announced.

Colby turned into the Eaton drive. The patrol car pulled up behind, and two policemen got out.

Beckwith walked back to them. "Clint and me are going in, boys," he said. "You stand by." He walked to Colby's car and found the doctor staring at the left door of Phil Eaton's station wagon. A neat hole, with black burned-looking edges, was drilled in the metal.

Beckwith said softly, "Somebody took a shot at Phil."

Colby shook his head. "Phil did it himself to make me think that somebody was gunning for him, too, after he shot at me on the hospital road and missed."

The living room was blazing with light, but from where he and Beckwith stood on the terrace they couldn't see anyone inside. Colby pressed the bell, waited a second, and then tried the knob. The door opened, and he stepped inside, with Beckwith on his heels. He crossed to the big living room.

Every light in the room was turned on. From the lacquered cherry cabinet still floated the sensuous drum-beat throbbing of the *Bolero*.

Phil Eaton was slumped sideways in a corner of the divan. He was still wearing the hunting clothes he had worn the day before, but now the front of his heavy flannel shirt was wet and sodden.

Opposite him sat the woman called

Toni Morris. She was leaning against the arm of the chair, and her head was twisted sideways. Her right arm hung limply over the chair, and on the floor beneath her dangling fingers was the little black automatic. On her red plaid shirt, just beneath the pocket on the left side, there was an ugly black hole.

On the floor besides Toni Morris, lying face up, was a large glossy photograph of Phil Eaton. The back was covered with neat round handwriting in pencil.

Surprise, Dr. Colby! I had another cartridge clip in my coat pocket. I have just killed Phillip. He struck me once too often. I loved him, but he needed killing. Me, too.

After you left me at the bus station tonight, he showed up. He said he loved me, and he wanted me to help him. He was like a crazy man. He asked me to call the chief of police and tell him that I was someone named Celia Brooks, and that I knew you had visited Glenda Eaton early this afternoon. I did it—I don't know why. Now I realize that he was trying to frame you for his wife's murder. This will clear you.

After he tried to shoot you in your car, Phil drove around for a long time, cursing you. He babbled. He told me that he had killed his wife—for me, he said. Isn't that a laugh, Doctor? He said he had gone to see her early yesterday afternoon, after he left me at Deer Lake, and asked her for a divorce and a property settlement. She refused, and in a rage he shot her.

When he found out he hadn't killed her, he hid in the linen closet across the corridor from his wife's hospital room, and waited for his chance to finish her.

He told me all about it, and he laughed when he told me. He said he would get Glenda's money, that he would pay me off, and that I could go to hell from here on out. And he slapped me again. I knew then that I couldn't let him get away with it.

Antoinette Morris.

Five days later Colby received an air mail letter from Miami, Florida:

Dear Doc: Here's a money order for \$110.00 covering the money I owe you. Rosanne told me about seeing you. She has given up her work, and we are together—for good. I have a job as chief pro at the King Palm Country Club. Thanks for everything.

Skip Malloy.

P.S. I won the Southeast Open!

LIFTING THE MARCH

BLACK MASK



"Dog" Corson, second mate of the *Southern Cross*, counted the seconds to Frisco—and gorgeous Anita Belmont. There were only two hitches—another couple who stuck like teeches, and her husband, Blue.



When Dog and Anita went to Blue's swank gambling club to demand a divorce, Blue struck Anita. That was too much for Dog, already feeling his drinks. He belted Blue—and threatened to kill him.



Things got really fuzzy for Dog later, at the Belmont's palatial home. He remembered a shot . . . a scream . . . a gaunt figure sprawled on the floor. . . . There was no doubt—Dog had murdered Blue Belmont!

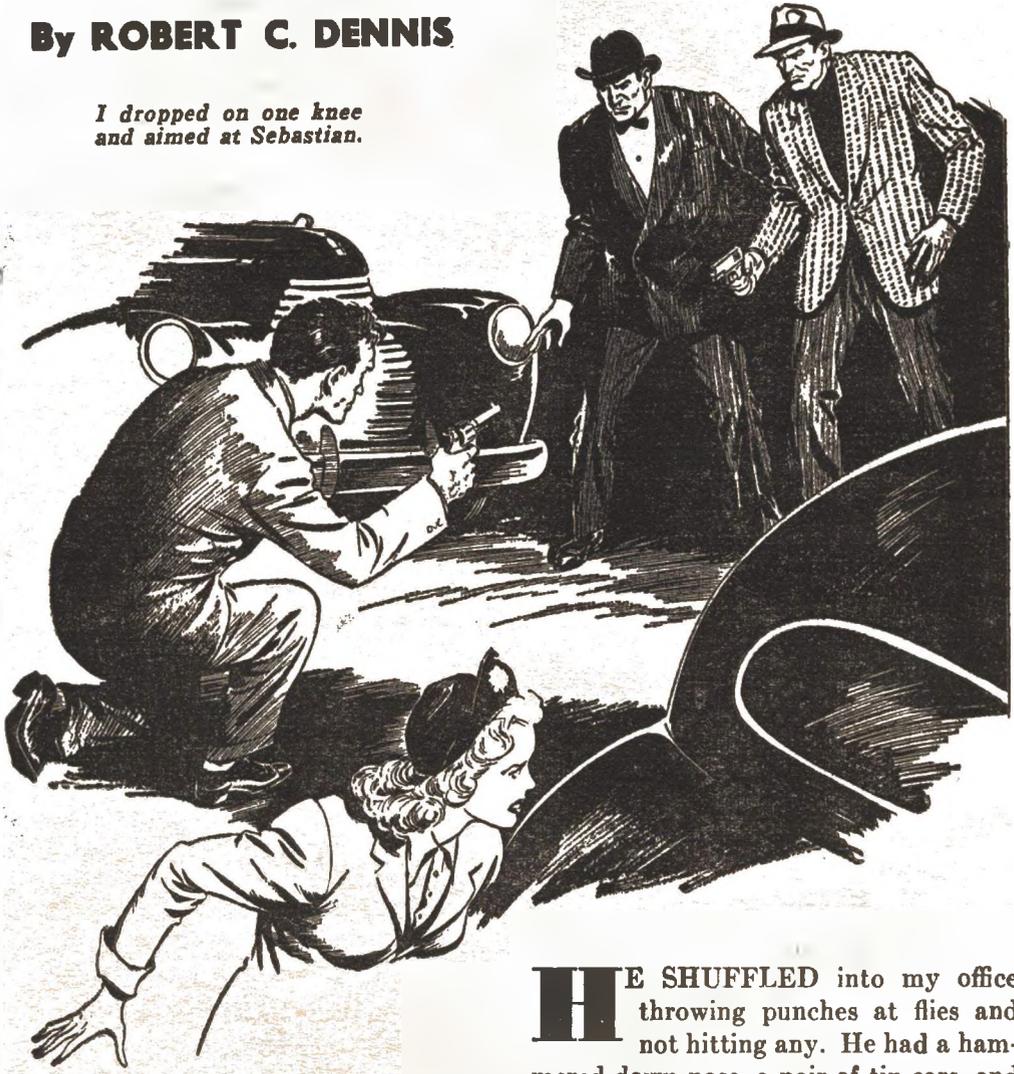


Hunted and desperate, Dog tried to put the bee on a friend for getaway money. . . . The complete story will be told in Fred Lane's novel, "Slayer at Sea," in the next issue—out January 20th.

STOP, YOU'RE KILLING ME!

By **ROBERT C. DENNIS**

I dropped on one knee and aimed at Sebastian.



The blonde bombshell was fighting out of her class—and so, my friends, was I.

HE SHUFFLED into my office throwing punches at flies and not hitting any. He had a hammered-down nose, a pair of tin ears, and thirty pounds of excess suet. You get the picture: a not very good club fighter, address No. 1 Queer Street.

"Hey!" he said, as if he was surprised to see me sitting behind my desk. "Your name Rhodes?"

"Yeah," I said. "Dusty—Rocky—I've heard all the switches. What can I do for you?"

"Huh?" I was too fast for him. "Oh . . . yeah. Hey! You want to go to work?"

"For you?"

"Naw," he said in disgust. He wheezed a lot getting air through that nose, and his voice was a harsh whisper from too many throat punches. "For the Champ. You know—Johnny Dellaroe."

"Dellaroe isn't champion yet," I said.

There was a little matter of fifteen rounds with Mickey Corcoran to take care of first. Although, if Dellaroe didn't catch one in the chops in the early going, he was a chinch to wear the old man out. Old man—Corcoran was thirty-three. So was I.

"Johnny will flatten him in two," the palooka said, with child-like faith. "You got any bills that say different?"

The bills I had were too weak to say 'Help.' So I asked. "What does Dellaroe want a private dick to do he can't do for himself?"

He sneered at my five-ten, hundred and seventy. "Anything Johnny can't do, can't be done! When he's got time. You want to go over to his trainin' camp? In Jersey?"

I dropped the report I'd been working on into a drawer. "Okay. Want to ride back with me?"

He was trying to figure where the door was now. "I got things to do. But if Johnny asks for me, tell him I ain't drunk." Well, not with strong drink. He took a chance on the doorknob and drew a winner. It was attached to the door. He gave me a triumphant look. "Hey! You want to lay that bet? You got a fin to lose?"

"Sure," I said. I could always put it on Dellaroe's expense account.

We rode down together in the serve-yourself elevator, a nice way to develop

claustrophobia. I stood on the street for a minute watching his footwork down Madison Avenue. It wasn't so hot. He side-swiped the mailbox on the corner. . . .

The training camp was a converted farm, meaning the cows had been evicted. What had moved in was much nicer—a blonde in a sun suit and dark glasses with wide gold bands. She was sitting under an apple tree reading. A cook-book, no less. The apple tree should have warned me.

She laid the book aside as soon as I vaulted the fence. "Well, you're agile enough," she observed. "But you're too pretty to be a sparring partner."

"And too smart. I saw one today."

"Oh, Punchy?"

"He certainly was!"

Her laugh had a tinkle like nickles coming out of a slot machine. "No, that's his name. Punchy Padgett."

"His mother never named him that."

She looked vaguely surprised. "Say, that's funny. I don't think I ever heard his real name!"

I had the same trouble myself. "Just for the record," I said, "is Dellaroe around any place?"

"He will be in a minute. He's getting into his ring clothes." She slid the sun glasses down on her lovely nose and peered over them at me. "What did you want?"

"You're smart enough," I said, "to be his manager, but' too pretty. I'll talk to Dellaroe."

Her eyes got dangerous. "Don't let my baby face fool you. I fight dirty in the clinches."

"I'll hold you off. *My* footwork is good."

She whipped the sun glasses all the way off. "Maybe you'd better use it then—straight out the gate."

I laughed at her. "And you've got just the boy for the job."

"I won't need Johnny." She had nothing between her teeth but anger. "Don't let my weight fool you. I fight out of my class all the time."

"You're out of it right now, baby!" For a moment I thought she would swing on me but instead her gaze drifted past me and a dazzling smile whipped across her face.

"We'll see how long you last with Johnny," she muttered.

I dropped my voice to her level. "And if Johnny doesn't win the championship tomorrow night, we'll see how long he lasts with you!"

That got her right where she didn't take them so good. She said, "Why you big—!" It was a nasty word.

I TURNED around and had a look at Dellaroe. He was a fine, handsome boy with only a few marks of his profession on his face. He looked in condition, no fat, eyes bright, alert. He didn't see me. When that blonde was around he couldn't see the Statue of Liberty.

"Where's Punchy, Maxine?" Johnny asked. "He's supposed to work a couple of rounds."

Maxine had her glasses back on and she could have been first contralto in your church choir. "I haven't seen him, Johnny."

"He's still in New York," I said.

Dellaroe decided I wasn't an apple tree. "And who the hell are you?"

"Rhodes," I said. "I'm a private detective."

"Oh," he said. "Yeah. Yeah, that's right. Glad you could come out."

"What did you want me for?"

He looked like a school kid who has had a surprise quiz thrown at him. "Well, I needed. . . ." He stopped. He didn't know what he needed.

"He wants somebody to keep the railbirds out," Maxine said smoothly.

Railbirds. Maybe that was spelled gamblers.

"Yeah," Johnny said in relief. His problems were solved. "That's it. I don't want a lot of bums hanging around. It gives the place a bad name. Don't let anybody in today." He gave Maxine a big smile. "Right, Maxine?"

"Right, Johnny." She had all the answers.

A little man in a dirty sweat-shirt came hustling up. He had about half of his hair left, which was gray and curly. He had a million worries and they were all noted down in the lines on his face. He said, "Come on, Johnny, come on! Let's get going."

"Okay, Sam." Johnny patted him on his bald spot. "Don't get so excited. Oh—this is Sam Chilk, my manager. What did you say your name was?"

"Rhodes," I said. I wasn't sensitive.

"Yeah. Rhodes is going to keep the bums out, Sam."

Sam's eyes crawled sideways against his will. "He got here too late," he mumbled.

Maxine laughed softly, "Oh, you're sweet, Sammy."

Sam Chilk was too smart to mix with her in front of Dellaroe. She had the champ-to-be groggier than Mickey Corcoran would ever manage.

"Come on, Johnny," Sam pleaded, "let's get to work. You've got some fighting to do tomorrow night. Remember?"

"Relax, Sam." He winked at me. "It's only a championship. Right, Maxine?"

"Right, Johnny," she sang back right on cue. "You've got to learn to relax, Sammy. You'll get ulcers."

Johnny laughed. "See you around, Mr.—" He couldn't remember my name.

I watched them walk away. "Does he know it's going to cost him ten dollars a day and expenses just to see me around?"

"He'll pay it," Maxine said, as if money didn't matter. "So you're a private detective?"

"I've got a license."

The sun glasses came off again, in a hurry. "Well, you don't have any manners!"

I laughed right in her big blue eyes. "Now coming from you that's bitter!"

"All right!" She cooled off about two degrees. "Maybe you're pretty tough at that. Not that I couldn't whittle you down if I had a little more time!"

"I'll give you a return match," I said. "Excuse me while I do sentry duty at the front gate." I walked away with my ears flapping, just in case she said she'd walk out with me.

"Wait," she called. "I'll walk out with you."

I let her catch up and we matched steps for a couple of minutes. My legs were longer, but after that it was her all the way.

She took a short deep breath to prepare herself. "Tell me—if a person has disappeared, how would you go about finding him?"

I gave her a few trade secrets. "Check railroad stations and the airports. If he owned a car, that would help. If he didn't, I'd cover the used-car dealers. Every case is different. But I'd get a line on him one way or another."

She rolled that one around in her

mind. Out on the highway a car was burning up some rubber. I could hear its high-pitched hum though it wasn't in sight. "How long would it take?"

I shrugged. "I'm just a one-man organization, so it would take quite a while for me to check all the angles alone. If I was in a hurry I'd hire a little help. That way, I'd probably turn him up in a couple of weeks."

"A couple of weeks?" She sounded stunned.

Maybe I'd laid it on too big. "All right," I said, "call it a month. You got a skip you want traced?"

THE fast-moving car swerved into the lane before she could answer my question. She took one glance at the big expensive buggy and retreated in disorder. Whoever was calling wasn't going to find her home. The driver leaned on his horn-button, but the cows on the next farm must have been making too much noise. She didn't hear a thing.

"Maxine! Wait a minute." He leaped out of the car, a neat little sharpy in a suit he must have designed himself. He had a pretty face, like a bowl of over-ripe fruit. "Come on, farmer, open the gate!"

"And let the cattle out?" I said. "Can't do that."

"What do you mean, you can't do it!

**BROKER
NO
JOKER**



EAST ST. LOUIS, Ill.—
"I mean it when I ask for Calvert," says Max Adelman, insurance broker of this city. "I switched to Calvert long ago, because I like its better taste. And with me it's the taste that counts."

Open up." He rattled the gate impotently.

"No visitors today," I said. "Dellaroe is training in secret. Sorry."

He swore delicately. "I didn't come out to see that meatball stumble around. I want to see Maxine." Then he laid it on the line. "Do I have to climb over this gate?"

"If you like," I said. "I promise you one thing, little man. You won't have to climb back."

He went suddenly white around the mouth. "Where do you get that little-man stuff!" he snarled. "I got something here that will chop *you* down to size."

It was a heater and a big one. It was really too much gun for his size.

"Well, well," I said. "That's a real cute pop-gun."

He was mad enough to sink his teeth into it. He tried his lower lip but that didn't taste good. "I'm coming over!" he warned.

"Okay," I said. "I'll toss both you *and* the gun back."

He was strictly a city boy. He climbed that gate like it was twenty feet high. Of course that big cannon got in his way. But he made it. He landed on my side, puffing and slightly mused. "Okay, hot-shot, let's see you—"

So I showed him. I bumped his gun-hand up and away, and spun him around. The gun went off, but all it hit was the top apple on the tree. I hauled the gun and his hand back behind his ears. He squirmed and kicked, so I yanked his hand on back till he could have scratched his ninth vertebra.

That was far enough. He bleated and let the gun slip out of his fingers. Then I lifted him. It wasn't much of a chore. He bounced on the top pipe of the fence and sprawled into the dust on the other side.

I said, "I'll throw your little toy over in a minute. I want a bullet for a souve-

nir." I broke it open and let the clip fall into my hand; and then Sam Chilk came barrelling across the orchard at a dead run.

"What happened! What happened! Who's doing the shooting?" He skidded to a stop beside me, heaving. "What in hell is going on here?"

"Just a railbird falling off the rail. He'll be all right." I tossed the heater over the fence. "Here's your gun, little man."

"Guns yet!" Sam screamed. "That's fine! That's great! You want to make Johnny nervous? You want him to be jittery when he goes in the ring with the champion? Can he train with guns going off around his head?"

"Around *whose* head?" The shot hadn't been close, but I wanted what credit was due me. "Next time somebody wants to take a shot at me, I'll have him use a silencer."

The little man with the big gun crawled over to his car.

"Look, mister," Sam said earnestly, "just forget the whole thing. That's all I ask—just forget it. We don't need you. Go back to New York. Send the bill to me. I'll pay you for your trouble. But go away, please."

Little Man was in his car now. He got it started, managed a U-turn, and went down the lane, weaving.

Immediately Maxine popped up behind Sam. "What's wrong," she asked innocently. "Who was in that car?"

"A friend of yours," I said.

"I mighta known!" Sam moaned. "You've done nothing but cause trouble ever since you came." He tied up the frayed ends of his nerves, took a breath and said, "Look, Miss Terry, why don't you leave the kid alone?"

"Johnny isn't complaining."

"Well, I am. You're getting out. Right now. Rhodes will give you a lift." He was bluffing and we all knew it.

But Maxine merely shrugged. "Give me ten minutes to change my clothes, Rhodes. Then you can throw me over the gate too."

SHE looked very pretty in a simple white dress that you might have bought for your wife. She was quiet on the ride back, doing a lot of thinking before she spoke her piece. I gave her plenty of time. We were coming in the Pulaski Skyway when she started laughing.

"What a pair of tough characters we are!" she said. "We let little Sam Chilk chase us both out. You didn't last any longer than I did."

"I thought it was pretty funny. But then I wasn't supposed to last, was I?"

She lost her girlish laughter quick. "Are you working your profession now?"

"Let's get out of the clinch, baby," I snapped. "Dellaroe didn't need a detective. You had to prompt him before he could tell me what I was supposed to do. Punchy Padgett could have handled the assignment."

"Don't get sore!" she said.

"I just want to keep the record straight," I said, getting sore. "I don't hire out as a strong-arm boy. If that's what you want, get yourself a dock walloper. I'm not the smartest detective in the world, but I'm proud of the job I do. If I wasn't, I'd get out of the business."

"I'm sorry. I guess I didn't manage it very well. I was careless."

"I don't like careless people," I said coldly. "They're a menace—to themselves and others. If you wanted to hire me, all you had to do was come in, or phone."

"I didn't want anyone knowing about it," she said meekly. "If Johnny brought you out, I thought nobody would think anything of it."

I glowered for a minute, but not long

enough to lose a job. "Who was the quick-tempered little man who pulled the gun on me?"

"Virgil—my piano player at Sebastian's Morning Glory Club. I sing sophisticated songs." She laughed, a funny, bitter little laugh. "Sophisticated—that means naughty but subtle! Only the snooty carriage trade understands them."

I said, "Your songs ever get a laugh from Johnny Dellaroe?"

"Johnny thinks I'm a nice girl. . . ."

"Okay," I said quickly. "It was something about finding somebody, wasn't it?"

"Yes. A girl. Her name was—Margaret Stratiotti." She laughed again, the same hurt, bitter laugh. "Stratiotti!"

"Was?" I said. "Do you think she's dead?"

"I don't know. But she will be if *they* find her." She looked up at me. "Rhodes, you looked very good taking that gun away from Virgil, but—"

"But Virgil isn't so tough."

Her voice was calm and very serious. "Virgil wears daisies behind his ears compared with—well, with the man you'll have to deal with if you take this job."

I did my best not to look frightened. Maybe I overdid it.

"I'll talk to you tonight," she said suddenly. "The fewer people who know about it, the safer it will be. Even you, Rhodes."

And that's all she'd say. If I wanted the job, I could meet her after she finished her ten o'clock act at the Morning Glory Club. I didn't argue because trying to make a woman talk when she doesn't want to, will make you old before your time.

"Meet me in the lobby of the Alistair Hotel. It's just across the street from the club," she said when I let her out at a cab stand.

I KEPT the date. Not in the hotel lobby, though. At ten p.m. I slipped into the bar of the Morning Glory Club and had some liquid sustenance. I wanted to hear Maxine warble a sophisticated song.

I must have been early because the floor show hadn't started. I finished my drink and ordered another.

"Barman!" The voice was familiar. "Don't serve this guy another drink."

"Well, hello, little man."

Virgil wasn't wasting any time on me. He was wearing a tux now. He said, "Drink up and get out, hot-shot."

"Do you really have that much influence around here? I thought you were just a piano player."

His over-ripe little mouth started getting white. "I'm warning you, don't ride me! You're not so tough you can't be softened up."

"Now don't tell me you're carrying your heater in that monkey suit!" I laughed to show there were no hard feelings. "Come on, little man, get off your horse. I'll buy you a nice big glass of milk."

"That does it!" he snarled. "Blow, or I'll—"

There was no living with the guy. "Okay, junior," I barked. "Back to your piano. Time you were doing your finger exercises."

It didn't take much to set him off. He slapped my fresh drink clear off the bar.

So we went into our act again. I spun him around, grabbed the back of his tux and hauled him up on top of the bar. His feet kicked out, trying to get leverage. He was literally sobbing with rage. The rest of the barflies sat around watching with a sophisticated and detached interest.

"Let me down!" Virgil sobbed. "Let me down and I'll—I'll—"

"If there is anything wrong," a fat voice said behind me, "you can make

complaints to the management. I'm the management."

I looked over my shoulder. The management was short and dark and fat. His black hair was carefully oiled and combed. He had dark brown eyes, and he looked benevolent.

"Will you take this little beetle and park him somewhere?" I said. "He annoys me."

"So I can see." He sounded as if he were enjoying a secret laugh. "Go along, Virgil. . . . But you'll have to let his feet down on the floor."

I let Virgil drop.

"But don't think this is the end, hot-shot," he choked. "We'll settle this later, you and me. I'll get you next time!"

"Run along, son," I said kindly, "or your boss will cut off your lollypops." He went away, carrying his humiliation like a big pack on his back.

"You shouldn't needle Virgil like that," the management said pleasantly. "He can't help being small."

"He can stop taking it out on other people," I said. "That's the trouble with little men. They're always trying to justify themselves. Would you be Sebastian?"

"Sure," he said. "You've never been here before."

"I just dropped in to hear Maxine sing a sophisticated song."

"You know Maxine?" Sebastian beamed. "Great little performer, Maxina, great. I'm sorry you won't get to hear her. She didn't come to work." He spread his fat palms helplessly. "I'm worried about her. She don't answer her phone either. Where did you meet her, Mr.—?"

"Rhodes. I ran into her out at Johnny Dellaroe's training camp."

Sebastian's face lighted up. His handsome dark eyes were excited. "You saw Johnny today? Tell me, how did the boy look? In great condition, huh?"

"Looked good." I said. "I think he's going to lose me some money."

He was suddenly watchful. Either I was a lunatic or I had a tip. "You bet on Mickey Corcoran? How come you go against Johnny?"

"I'm a sucker for odds."

He laughed just a little uncertainly. "You're going to lose your money, Mr. Rhodes. That Johnny, he'd been champ a year ago if he'd got Corcoran in the ring with him. The champ is scared." He lowered his voice confidentially. "Tell you something—maybe Johnny will be my boy after the fight. I think I'm going to buy his contract."

I started to say something polite when a brawl started near the entrance. This one I had nothing to do with. A woman let out a yip. "Look where you're going, you clumsy ox! You spilled my drink!"

"Now, what!" Sebastian started toward the center of confusion. I followed him.

THE clumsy ox was Punchy Padgett and he was blitzed. But blitzed! I could tell because he was walking practically straight. The liquor had corrected his tendency to pull toward the rail. His eyes focused, with difficulty, on me.

"Hey! You're a detective. Find Maxine. Gotta find. . ."

"She isn't here, Punchy," I said.

"I got—got to. . ." He choked deep in his damaged throat and his knees buckled. He came forward into my arms, but he was too heavy to hold. He hit one of the stationary bar stools and set the seat to spinning like a roulette wheel.

Sebastian chuckled behind me. "Like Mickey Corcoran tomorrow night." He started to count. "One . . . two . . . three . . . four. . ."

Punchy hadn't moved. I put a hand

under his coat, over his heart. I got a handful of blood. I looked up at Sebastian. "You can give him a long count, mister. He isn't going to get up."

Sebastian looked thoughtfully at the blood. "Dead, huh?" he asked. He might have been talking about a pheasant he'd just shot.

The bar stool had stopped spinning. "Yeah," I said, "Dead."

The patrons had scattered, leaving most of their sophistication behind. Sebastian rapped on the bar top with his knuckles and snapped his fingers. The man with the swizzle-stick handed him a telephone. While he was calling the police, I gave Punchy's body a quick frisk. He'd been carrying what everybody carries, with the exception of an envelope containing an airplane ticket. To Miami. I put it back in his pocket. It didn't answer a thing.

Sebastian was explaining the situation to a cop, who seemed to be a good friend. I didn't wait around. Nobody had paid for anything yet. Besides, murder is for cops. I joined the exodus of patrons through the front door.

The Alistair Hotel, just across the street, was a gloomy hutch full of pallid horse-players resting after a hard day over a hot tote board. I lit a match and peered around for Maxine. She wasn't there. Virgil, the demon piano player, was, though, and he had his gun with him. This time in my back.

"Go ahead, hot-shot," he hissed in my ear. "Be tough. All I ask is an excuse. I got orders to bring you back. But I'd just as lief not."

I looked over my shoulder at him. "You go disobeying orders," I said, "and you'll get sent to bed without supper."

"Ride me," he whispered. "Go ahead, ride me! You'll get it."

"Like Punchy Padgett?" I asked, and that stopped him cold.

He nudged me with his gun. It seemed

to be in his coat pocket but the way he was swinging it around, all the chalk players spotted the pitch. But none of them had any money down on me, so they just gave me glassy stares. Virgil and I, in tandem, went outside.

We walked back across the street and down an alley beside the Morning Glory club. A metal-faced door, set between two garbage cans, opened up when Virgil kicked it. A man, whose face was just a pasty blur in the gloom, said, "He's waiting for you—upstairs."

"Upstairs," Virgil said, as if I was deaf.

There was an office up there. Sebastian was standing at a window, peering out at the night through a slit in the Venetian blinds.

"Come in, Mr. Rhodes," he said, without looking around. "I was worried about you. I was afraid Virgil had done something foolish."

I wanted to establish the fact I wasn't scared. "How do you stand having him around? He makes me a little sick in the stomach."

"That does it," Virgil snarled. "Stupid big—"

He batted me across the back of the head so hard I felt my scalp lift. Sebastian's thick blue rug rushed up and wiped my nose. Now I was scared.

On the other side of a red fog curtain, Sebastian said reprovingly, "You mustn't be so impatient, Virgil. Mr. Rhodes—where is Maxine Terry?"

I pushed my hands under me, then my knees, and got into position to take a nine count. "Never heard of her."

"Come, Mr. Rhodes," Sebastian said, reasonably, "you mustn't be stubborn. You are a detective. Maxine hired you to hide her away, didn't she?"

"She hired me to find Margaret Stratiotti," I said.

That was a mistake. I got the impression Sebastian considered it a joke in poor taste.

He said with immense sorrow, "Virgil, you may kick Mr. Rhodes in the head. Once."

You didn't have to suggest a thing like that to Virgil twice. He place-kicked my noggin a good forty yards. I saw his foot coming, but there wasn't any place I could go.

WHEN I came to I was slumped in Sebastian's swivel-chair with my hands roped behind me. Virgil was leaning close and slobbering. "The big tough detective!" he mocked.

"Now, Mr. Rhodes," Sebastian said from somewhere out of sight. "Let's be reasonable. I've got to find Maxine before the fight."

Somebody with a voice like Punchy Padgett's said, "I don't know where she is."

He sighed. "Virgil. . . ."

Virgil hauled back a tiny fist. I kicked him squarely in the stomach. There wasn't much force behind it, but he took it big.

"He kicked me," he screamed. "He kicked me in the stomach! I'll kill him an inch at a time."

He came in swinging and still there was no place for me to go. Those little fists were as hard as golf balls. . . .

"You may stop now," Sebastian said presently. "You're underestimating Virgil, Mr. Rhodes. He's got great endurance, that boy. He'll work on you all night. If he'd been forty pounds heavier I'd have made a fighter out of him. Come now, Johnny Dellaroe is worried about Maxine."

I said, out of a torn mouth, "How can I tell you what I don't know?"

Virgil grabbed a handful of my hair with his left hand, held my head just so, and whaled me with everything he had. If I'd been forty pounds heavier he would have broken my neck.

I won't bore you with all the details. Virgil was a nasty little weasel. But his staying power wasn't so hot. Besides he got careless and I slowed him down with another kick in the belly. It gave me a small amount of satisfaction—and another round trip to the bottom of a well.

When I swam back to the surface Johnny Dellaroe was standing over me. I thought, *if they turn him loose on me, I'm dead.*

"What's going on here?" Dellaroe demanded. "Why is this guy tied up?"

"He's a detective, Johnny," Sebastian said, as if that explained it all. "He knows where Maxine is."

He put his face close to mine. "Do you? Do you know where she is?"

"I can find her." Even Punchy Padgett wouldn't have used that voice. "Untie me, Dellaroe. I'll get her for you."

He went around behind me and worked on the knots. I didn't feel the ropes fall away but my arms dropped. There wasn't any feeling in them. I didn't try to move. I didn't have it in me.

Dellaroe said, in a choked up voice. "Find her for me—before the fight. Anything you want—I'll take care of you."

I took a hold of the corner of the desk and pulled myself up. It was a feat to be proud of.

Sebastian was looking at me with a blank face, his brown eyes as benevolent as ever. Virgil was weary and disappointed. He had more tricks he'd wanted to try.

I said to Dellaroe, "You've got Mickey Corcoran to take care of."

I didn't know just why, but I had an idea he was not going to do it.

The rest of the night doesn't come back to me. I got downstairs with no effort; I fell. I knocked down one of the garbage cans outside the door. It was a happy thing no one was up that late. My face, as I stumbled out of that alley,

would have scared a butcher. I guess a cabby must have cruised by and picked me up. My next awareness was in a Turkish bath. That was good. There was an awful lot of pain to be sweated out of my system.

Somebody else could find Maxine Terry. I wasn't going to look even if they'd pay me off with Mickey Corcoran's share of the gate. There are some things you won't do even for money.

Somebody else *was* looking for her. The police. She was wanted for Punchy's murder! A bright detective had gone around to search his room and found three witnesses who swore she'd been there looking for him. They must have had more than that on her, but they were being cagy.

I drank another cup of coffee and turned to the sports page. According to the fight writers, Johnny Dellaroe had weighed-in looking like the breakup of a hard winter. He gave the impression that not only was he going to lose the fight but didn't give a damn. A woman will do that to some guys. I finished a fourth coffee and went up to my office.

I HAVE a couch behind a screen on which I take naps, between clients.

As soon as I walked in I knew how they could always tell I was there. I looked right through a crack and saw somebody lying on the couch.

It was Maxine Terry. She sat up quickly, tense with fright. "Where have you been?" she demanded.

I stared. "How did you get in?"

"Bribed the janitor," she said wearily. "I've been waiting for you since last night."

"Have you read the papers? You're hot, baby. They want you for murder. Padgett got the big punch yesterday."

"I know," she said.

"Is that all you've got to say?"

She showed a little of her temper for

a moment. "What do you want—a confession? I didn't kill him. At least not directly."

"Murder in the indirect degree," I said. "Whatever the hell that is!"

She got a cigarette out of her bag. "I used him as a decoy. I wanted to see if they were suspicious of me. He bought me a plane ticket."

"I know," I said. "One-way to Miami. Do you know who shot down your decoy?"

"Virgil, I suppose. You know how handy he is with that gun."

He'd put a crease on the back of my skull with it. "Whatever happened to Margaret Stratiotti?" I asked her.

"She disappeared a long time ago, Rhodes . . . where even you couldn't find her." Maxine looked at me for a moment and then looked away. "I'm Margaret Stratiotti. Of South Chicago. Maxine Terry is my professional name. I figured if a detective could find somebody who'd disappeared, he might be able to turn it around. Could you have gotten me lost where I could sleep nights?"

"Depends on how much you have on your conscience."

"I double-crossed Sebastian. He'll kill me for it, so I was going to get out."

"The fight?"

She nodded. "Sebastian's got his bankroll on Corcoran. And Sam Chilk is in hock on Johnny. If Johnny loses the fight Sebastian makes a fortune—and gets Johnny's contract. I've been Sebastian's girl—I know what would happen to Johnny in the end."

I said, "Sebastian figured to safeguard his bet by breaking Johnny's heart, just before the fight. That was your pitch. You were to throw him over—big."

She nodded, not looking at me.

"That's real cute," I said harshly. "You can be proud of that one."

"I told you I fought dirty in the

clinches." Then she laughed suddenly, that hard, bitter little laugh. "But I threw away the script, Rhodes. I fell for the guy. Oh, not the hearts and flowers stuff! I got over that at fourteen. Johnny's just a big dumb horse, with all his brains in his fists. He's stupid, in a kind of sweet way, and clean and decent—well, anyway, I couldn't do it."

I said, "You did fine! He's beaten right now. When he weighed in at noon he looked so bad all the sports writers wrote his obituary."

"That's why I'm here." She looked at me squarely. "You're going to take me to his dressing room."

I laughed, but it wasn't funny. "Oh, sure—with Sebastian and Virgil and the devil knows how many more torpedoes just waiting for you to show up. Do you think a bullet in your head will make Johnny want to go out and fight a great fight?"

"You said he was already beaten," she fired at me. "What can I lose? Besides my life?" She smiled one-sidedly. "I'm fighting out of my class, Rhodes. But I've been doing that all my life. If I hadn't I'd still be Margaret Stratiotti of South Chicago. But you don't have any stake in it. I won't blame you if you don't want to risk your life. But I've got to go. You can see that, can't you?"

"Sure," I said, quietly. "I know."

THERE are some things you won't do for money. You do them just so you can look at the guy in the mirror and not flinch. Maybe just because you have to know there's a difference between you and the Sebastians. Or maybe it's for the Sleep in Peace they chisel on your headstone.

We didn't have much trouble getting into Johnny's dressing room. Sebastian didn't think anybody would be quite that crazy. A cop tried to chase us out

but we didn't even see him. We weren't letting a mere cop stop us now, this close to the payoff.

Sam Chilk was pacing the room, working on his third ulcer. Johnny lay on a rubbing table looking like he didn't care if school kept or not. He had one arm over his eyes and he didn't move when we walked in.

Then Maxine said, softly, "How do you feel, Champ?"

He came off that table as if somebody had given him a hot-foot. He had Maxine's blonde head up against his big, bare chest and he was babbling, "Honey, where you been? I've been going nuts. Ask Sam! Maxine, honey, what happened to you?"

"Later, Johnny," she said. "How about you? You ready to go? You going to take that guy Mickey?"

"You bet your sweet life!" He unhooked one arm long enough to reach over and shake hands with me. He said, "Thanks. Thanks, pal."

He still couldn't remember my name.

Someone called from the door. "You're on, Dellaroe."

It was that close.

Maxine kissed him quickly. "Don't worry about a thing, Johnny. Just stay away from his right hand."

"He should live so long!" Johnny crowed happily. "Come on, Sammy! I want to get this over with. Right, Maxine?"

"Right, Johnny," she said. And this time it sounded right.

Then we were alone in the dressing room. Maxine looked at me, but I don't think she could see me. I think these were her first tears since she was fourteen. "How am I doing, Rhodes?" she asked.

"You're ahead on points," I said. "But let's get out of here."

We got as far as the parking lot. I never saw so many gorillas in my life. Sebastian stopped a car-length away and said, almost sadly, "You shouldn't have done it, Maxine. You shouldn't have come."

Then he nodded to Virgil.

And I shot Virgil dead in the chest. The bullet lifted him right off his feet. There wasn't much to him anyhow. I fired twice more, in the air, just so no one would think it was a backfire. Sebas-



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NEW

DETECTIVE
MAGAZINE

25c

tian's big swarthy face was almost as shocked as Virgil's.

He hadn't expected gun-play here. He wanted to save it for a dark road in a New Jersey swamp. But I was fed up with playing according to his rules. Who the hell was he!

Maxine had flung herself between the two cars. I dropped to one knee and aimed at Sebastian. I had no intention of shooting, but he didn't know that. He moved fast for a fat man.

One of his torps had been stampeded into shooting up some windshields but when he saw his boss move out, he didn't linger.

The others might have stayed to do the job but the parking detail was galloping up. After all, a big sporting event presents a traffic problem that calls for a lot of cops. It was just a question of sounding the alarm.

Shooting Virgil was an added dividend.

I don't know how many torps the cops picked up. There were plenty of them, and they were all running. Maxine and I just walked fast. We looked like late-comers for the fight. Anyway, nobody stopped us.

We found my car and speeded three blocks away from there.

After a few minutes Maxine said breathlessly, "Is this model equipped with a radio?"

I reached over and switched on the radio.

Maxine said, "You're tough, Rhodes. You're as tough as anybody."

"Coming from you," I told her, "that's a compliment."

The radio warmed up with the roar of a crowd watching a blood-letting. The fight was already started and the announcer screamed hysterically, "... and another left and right and he's down—flat on his back, in his own corner. The referee picks up the count from the time-

keeper. . . . Two . . . three. . . . It doesn't look like he's going to get up. . . . Five . . . six. . . ."

Maxine's voice was agonized. "*Who is it? Why doesn't he say who it is!*"

"And it's all over! Winner and new champion. . . ."

Maxine took her fingernails out of my arm. "He got him, Rhodes—he got him! When that big horse hits them, they stay down!"

I turned the radio off. I'd find out what round by reading the paper tomorrow. I wondered if I should pay that five bucks I'd bet against Johnny to Punchy's estate.

We drove about eight blocks in silence. "Do you want me to plan an itinerary for you?"

"I don't know," she said. "Maybe I won't run away. Johnny could keep Sebastian in line. He wouldn't dare get tough with Johnny."

"He won't get tough," I told her, as gently as I could. "He'll translate one of your sophisticated songs. Johnny will have your complete biography by morning."

"Yes. . . ."

She was silent for a long moment. "I guess you're right. There're some things he could tell that even Johnny wouldn't understand." She tried to laugh. "Back to South Chicago—or some place. How are you going to get Stratiotti lost, Rhodes?"

"I'll drive you," I said. "It's a nice night for a drive. . . ."

I built a crooked trail for Sebastian to follow. He'd have to be three-quarters bloodhound even to find her last address. But I don't think it will work.

Johnny Dellaroe just came into my office. He knows everything about her Sebastian could tell, but if he asks me where she is—well. . . .

You think I want what Mickey Corcoran got?

HOMICIDE— ACCORDING TO HOYLE

MacGregor had to out-poker a kill-happy convict—or cash in his chips.



"I wondered for seven years how I was going to make this visit last a long time. . . ."

By **HERB
SCHNEIDERMAN**

BLEARY-EYED from sleep, moving in a kind of dream, MacGregor answered the door. When he blinked out into the dark, he could make out only a tall, indistinct,

form hovering on the porch of his beach cottage.

"Yes?" he inquired in the faraway voice of one still partly submerged in slumber.

The form on the porch spoke. "Get back inside," it ordered.

MacGregor stepped back falteringly into the room and the visitor entered, closing the door with his foot as he faced MacGregor in the soft light of the lamp on the work table.

"I'm sorry," MacGregor said. "Isn't there some mistake? It's three o'clock in the morning and—"

"There's no mistake," the visitor snapped and tossed his hat and raincoat on the sofa against one wall. "I've come to play cards."

"To play cards?" MacGregor echoed and frowned. "Now see here, my good man—"

"What do you play?" the caller interrupted unsmilingly. From one pocket he withdrew a package of cards, which he tossed on the table for MacGregor to open. From another pocket he pulled out a gun. He put the weapon on top of the bookcase.

"We'll play poker," he said harshly.

MacGregor was still eyeing the gun.

"Anything you say," he replied. "But you'll have to teach me."

"Sit down," the stranger said. "I'll teach you. You'll never forget."

"I'll turn on a few more lights, if you don't mind," MacGregor suggested.

The stranger did not answer but followed with his hard eyes every move MacGregor made.

The game began.

MacGregor had never developed an enthusiasm for card-playing—it was not in his book, as he often said—but he tried to learn now. At the outset, clumsy with the pasteboards, he dropped a few on the worn rug beside his slippers and stooped to pick them up. The

caller rose quickly and put his hand on the gun.

"No tricks," he warned.

"No," MacGregor said. "No tricks."

"I'm not going to cheat you," the stranger said, as they resumed the game. He looked searchingly into MacGregor's eyes. "I never cheat—like some people I know."

"I didn't think you came here in all the rain just to cheat me," MacGregor said evenly.

The visitor made no comment other than a grunt.

Presently he said: "You can raise me here, if you want to. Give me a look at your cards."

MacGregor revealed his hand and the stranger frowned as he studied his opponent's cards.

"Don't you think we could play some other time?" MacGregor asked. "Perhaps tomorrow when we're feeling more fresh. You may sleep over if you like. I've an extra—"

The stranger was smiling sardonically, shaking his head from side to side.

"You're going to finish what you started," the man said. "And what you started is going to finish you."

"If that's what you want," MacGregor agreed, glancing again at the gun on the bookcase.

"This is the first time I've had my own way in a long, long time," the caller said.

"Hmm, is that right?" MacGregor remarked politely. "You must find much enjoyment in cards."

"Yeah," the stranger said. "Where I come from, cards was one of the only kinds of entertainment I could find." He stared with a hard expression at MacGregor, who returned his stare openly.

They played on, MacGregor learning poker as they went along.

"You live on the beach, I suppose,"

MacGregor said after a long silence.

The stranger laughed. "Are you kidding?" he asked. "I haven't seen a beach in seven years!"

"I'm sorry," MacGregor said. "I thought you might be a summer boarder here. Or attached to the summer school in the neighborhood."

"School?" the stranger asked. There was a snarl in his voice. "You're a fine one to talk of school!" He dropped his cards in front of him on the table. "My kid was in school. A good school, too. But what happened? I don't have to tell you—you of all people! He had to leave on account of the whole mess."

"I'm sorry to hear that," MacGregor said, sympathetically.

"You're *sorry!*" the visitor exclaimed. He laughed shortly. "That's a hot one! What could *you* be sorry about? You haven't even got a heart!"

MacGregory's eyes returned to the bulk of the gun on the bookcase.

"Did you say, sir, that three of a kind beats two pairs?" he asked, "or is it the other way around?"

They played a few more minutes, the stranger instructing and advising. "Now," he said, "we'll play for real. With money."

"I haven't got much," MacGregor informed him.

"Don't kid me," the stranger said. "You deal!"

MacGREGOR dealt the cards slowly and awkwardly as the visitor stared into his face.

They began to bet, with actual money at stake this time. MacGregor won a few hands, but the stranger finally wiped him out.

"I'm afraid I've nothing left to bet," MacGregor said.

"I don't know about that." The stranger looked about the room. He began to deal another hand between them and tossed his head in the direction of a framed photograph hanging near them on the wall. "Put that picture in the pot. That beautiful girl is worth something, I bet."

"No," said MacGregor.

The stranger sprang to his feet and brought the gun to bear on his host. "I said to throw that girl's picture in the pot!" He snapped a catch on the side of his gun.

MacGregor remained seated.

"I'm sorry," he said. "If you're going to shoot, I suppose you'll have to go ahead and shoot. But I can't let you have that picture." He closed his lips tightly against each other.

The visitor laughed strangely. "For a rat," he said, "you're a good bluffer!"

"Think what you like," MacGregor murmured.

"You're certainly a queer guy," the stranger said, returning the weapon to



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AMAGANSETT, N. Y.—Capt. Ted Lester has discovered a gem among whiskies. "It's Calvert Reserve," he says, "and the day I first tasted it, I switched to Calvert's smoother taste. It's a real find!"

the bookcase. "Who's the dame anyway? Don't tell me you've got a dame like that at your—"

"That was my daughter," MacGregor broke in.

"Your what! Your daughter?" The stranger looked surprised.

"She was killed by a truck," MacGregor went on. "On her way to vote for the first time." He looked down at his cards.

The stranger stared at him more intensely than ever. Then he asked: "When did it happen?"

"Couldn't we change the subject?" MacGregor said.

The man slammed the table with his palm. "Answer me, damn it!" he barked. "When did it happen?"

MacGregor shrugged wearily and, still holding the cards, wiped his forehead with the back of his hand.

"It happened in the rain," he replied softly. "In November. Nine years ago this coming November."

The visitor shook his head in disbelief. "Are you giving me a story?" he asked in a rasping voice. "It won't help you a damn bit!"

"I'm telling you the truth," MacGregor said listlessly. He was feeling very tired.

"All right, we'll play some more," the stranger ordered. "Remember if you got a royal flush, don't throw it away like you did before!"

"But what about the pot?" MacGregor asked.

"How about that clock on the bookcase?"

"Take it," MacGregor agreed.

"Now you're being smart," the stranger said. "None of these things are going to do you any good anyway—where you're going!"

The visitor was getting back to the point of his call. MacGregor perked up his ears.

"Where am I going?" he asked in a casual way.

"You're going straight to hell," the other answered and laughed.

MacGregor shrugged again and continued to play.

"You won't like hell one bit," the stranger said, almost whispering. He leaned over the table, coming very close to MacGregor's face. "I can tell you about hell because I spent seven years there. Seven years," he said. "While you were a big-shot."

"I was never a big-shot," MacGregor put in.

"Shut up, you rat!" the man snarled. "You ruined my kid. My kid's education and home-life. My wife—she didn't wait for me to come out."

Abruptly he stopped speaking, as if too weak to go on.

"Look here," said MacGregor, putting his hand on the man's wrist. "You're tired. Why don't you lie down for a while on—"

"Don't touch me!" the stranger cried out and pulled himself away sharply. He was trembling but evidently trying to regain his composure.

"Let's play," he said, finally. "Pick up your cards."

Before long, MacGregor had lost again, and now was minus the clock which had been in the family for generations.

"You're wasting your time playing with me," MacGregor told the stranger, and sighed. "I own very little. And I'm tired."

"You're tired!" the stranger said scornfully. His voice was beginning to rise again.

"Let's come to an understanding," MacGregor said. "I must ask you either to get finished with your shooting, or to let me go back to bed. Tomorrow is Sunday and I have—"

The stranger roared with laughter.

MacGregor waited patiently, pressing his lips together, until the visitor was through.

"You think I'm going to let you get off?" he asked MacGregor.

"I really don't know what your plans are," MacGregor replied. "You've got the gun. It's entirely your choice."

"We're going to play a little while longer," the visitor said. "You give me a kick."

MacGregor sighed and began to deal a new hand.

The caller stared at MacGregor as if he did not see him.

"I wondered for seven years," he said, emphasizing each word in a harsh voice, "how I was going to make this visit last a long time. And yesterday the idea came to me—just yesterday."

"The clock is gone," MacGregor said. "You won it. Now what shall I put up for a stake?"

The visitor spied an object on a side table. He pointed to it and rose to fetch it.

"Stop!" MacGregor shouted. He, as well as the visitor, was startled by the outcry.

The man grasped the object—it was a book, bound in finely-tooled leather—and loomed over MacGregor, who had pushed his chair back and risen.

"Sit down!" the visitor said, and pushed MacGregor into his chair. "What the hell is this thing anyway?" He flipped the pages curiously.

"That's a Bible," MacGregor said in a choked voice. "You know what it is, very well. Look at it."

"Oh, yeah." The stranger laughed. But the bitter note, the callous note was absent, at least for the moment, from his laughter.

"What the hell is a Bible to you?" the visitor asked, his hard eyes piercing MacGregor's, then darting nervously about the room and back again.

"I'd rather not say," MacGregor said simply.

At that instant, the stranger slapped the book violently on the table.

"You'd better say!" he shouted. "You'd better say before you die! Because I came here to kill you, rat, for sending me up seven years ago!"

"Sending you up—?" For the moment, MacGregor could only echo the words stupidly.

"Yes, you're the lousy judge, MacGregor, who ruined my wife and kid. And now you're going to pay!"

The visitor picked up his gun.

"My poor man!" MacGregor exclaimed. "I'm not Judge MacGregor. You're making a mistake."

The stranger laughed nervously. "You're a great kidder," he snapped. "Judge!"

"I'm telling you you've got the wrong MacGregor. But if you won't listen to reason, then go ahead and shoot me." He sat calmly at the table, looking directly into the visitor's eyes.

THE stranger hesitated. "What do you mean I got the wrong MacGregor?" he asked finally. He stood above MacGregor, staring down at the top of his head.

MacGregor looked up so he could meet the stranger's eyes. "You seem to be looking for a judge. Well, I have never been a judge. I wouldn't relish the job. You're probably looking for a Maxwell MacGregor. He retired a few years ago. Too old for the bench."

"Where is he now?" the stranger asked harshly.

"At this moment," MacGregor said, "I don't know if he's alive or dead. Besides, wouldn't it be folly at this stage of your life to make the mistake of killing a fellow man?"

"Aah, what are you talking about?"

the stranger said derisively. "You sound like a preacher!"

MacGregor smiled faintly. "I happen to be a clergyman."

The stranger snorted. "I had you figured way before this," he said. "That Bible was the tip-off. And the way you play poker—what a player! I'm not so blind."

"Why don't you stay and talk a bit?" MacGregor invited. "It's almost morning now."

"No, I got to be going," the visitor said and reached for his hat.

"Don't be silly," MacGregor said. "It's still raining and you'll get pneumonia. You can trust me. Come into the kitchen with me and I'll put up some coffee."

While the water was boiling, MacGregor told the visitor something of his own life: of the years in the seminary and later his missionary work in Burma; of his wife's death while a volunteer worker during a flu epidemic. And then, a few years after that, his daughter crossing an intersectoin on her way to the polls. . . .

The stranger was clasping and unclasping his hands, staring down at the table. Falteringly, he began to speak about himself, as MacGregor tossed fresh coffee grounds into the sputtering water on the stove.

"My name doesn't matter," he said. "You won't see me again."

"But I want to see you again," MacGregor interrupted with vehemence. "Come as often as you can. I enjoy talking to a man who's struggled with himself."

"No—not after tonight," the stranger said, shaking his head.

"Well now, you owe it to me as a favor," MacGregor protested. "After all, you gave me a very uncomfortable few hours over that table of cards. You must admit that." He smiled. "But no gun next time, please."

"No gun," the visitor agreed. "I don't like guns."

"Really?" said MacGregor.

"That's the truth," the stranger said, looking at his hands moving restlessly on the enamel table top. "I never had a gun in my life till yesterday. That's when I decided to get even with the judge for real."

"Was the judge wrong to send you up?" MacGregor inquired.

"What do you think?" the man answered.

"I don't know what to think, honestly," MacGregor said, as he took a small pitcher of milk from his ice-box. "What do *you* think?"

"He ruined my wife and my kid, that's all I know," the stranger muttered.

"And you were innocent?" MacGregor suggested.

The caller was silent for several moments. "No," the man said finally. "I wasn't innocent. I was guilty."

"And you think it was the judge's fault that you were guilty?" MacGregor said.

Again the stranger was silent. Meanwhile MacGregor sniffed the air, enjoying the odor of coffee simmering.

"I see what you're getting at," the stranger said softly, looking up for the first time since he had entered the kitchen.

"I'm not getting at anything," MacGregor contradicted him. "It's you who's getting at something. You made a mistake seven years ago and you paid for it—whether it was a fair penalty or not I can't say. And now you're free."

"Got out just a week ago," the stranger added.

"And you're feeling terribly bitter now about the time you spent in confinement," MacGregor said. "I'd probably feel the same way you do. But you don't give yourself a fair chance to think straight. Instead, you obtain a gun and

rush around trying to kill someone. Tell me something, will you?"

"What?"

"If the judge had been you and you had been on the bench in his place, would you have given him the same sentence?"

The visitor pursed his lips thoughtfully and looked down again at the table.

After a few moments, he said: "I probably would've given him the same sentence. Yes, I would have. You're right."

"Oh, no, I'm not right," MacGregor said. "You're right. You're thinking up all the answers and you're doing all the reasoning!"

The visitor smiled at him. "You're not so dumb, are you?" he said.



"Still going to look for the old judge?" MacGregor asked. He tossed a clean cloth over the table and laid out spoons.

"What do you think?" the visitor said, so low MacGregor could barely hear him. He handed his gun to MacGregor.

"I'm not going to kill anybody," he said. His voice cracked.

MacGregor put the gun aside and reached for cups and saucers.

"Say!" the visitor exclaimed. "What's this?" He was suddenly on the alert again. "You got three cups out. There are only two of us!"

"I'm taking care of an invalid," MacGregor said. "I'll wake him up now so he can join us in a hot drink."

"But you didn't tell me anything about another—"

"It wouldn't have done either of us any good at the time," MacGregor broke in. "And besides you didn't ask me about any invalid."

While the visitor stared after him, MacGregor went into his bedroom and shortly returned, wheeling a cot on which was propped up a wrinkled man. The invalid looked about him in a dazed manner, as an infant might, fingering shakily the silver stubble on his sagging cheeks.

"We have a visitor!" MacGregor shouted into the invalid's ear.

The invalid nodded as if he understood, but it was plain that he did not.

"Had a stroke a few years ago," MacGregor explained to the stranger. "He's in pretty bad shape, but still able to enjoy a cup of coffee once a day."

"Pretty bad shape is right," the visitor said. "I'm sorry."

"And now that you're in fairly good shape," MacGregor added, "I'd like to tell you that this sick old man is my brother, Maxwell. Judge Maxwell MacGregor."

The stranger lost control of his cup. It dropped onto the saucer at his place. His face paled to the color of MacGregor's linen table cloth. He seemed to be trying to say something, but all he could do was gape at the old man and move his lips soundlessly.

Then he looked once at MacGregor standing beside the man on the cot—looked once at him, as if about to speak—and dashed out of the house.

MacGregor started to follow him, calling: "Your hat! Your coat!"

But he saw the man was far down the path.

DEATH

CHAPTER ONE

Midas Jr.

Rex Sackler, that Shylock of shamuses, met his nickel-nursing match—in a client who screamed bloody murder because it would cost him cold cash to beat the hot seat!

I HAD heard of Charles Minniman before that sweltering summer day when he first entered the office of Rex Sackler. Even though I had never met him I took deep interest in his occasional publicity. For he was considered in many quarters to be the cheapest man in the world.



The killer made sure Regnor would take a drink from the cooler—spiked with strychnine.

FOR A DOLLAR

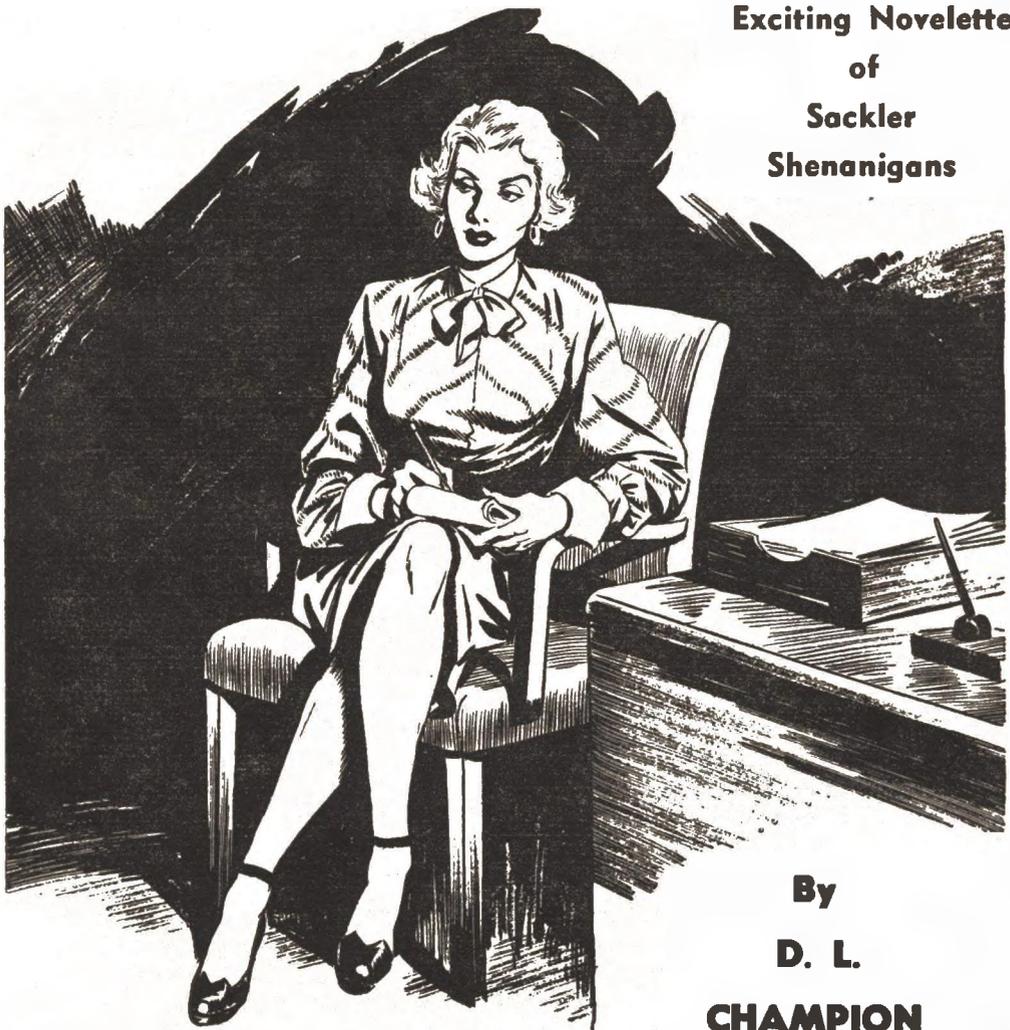
Since my candidate for that dubious title was Sackler, himself, I was quite naturally interested in their comparative records. Minniman, according to my research, was a promoter, with a pudgy finger in many pies, each of which was juicy, thick crusted and productive of much revenue.

Yet Minniman dwelt in an Eighth Avenue furnished room, arrayed his portly body in second-hand clothes and

had never left a tip beneath his plate within the memory of the most ancient waiter in town.

The best known tale of Minniman's frugality concerned the night he was held up. More afraid of losing his wallet than of a bullet, he had put up a battle. The stick-up artist had panicked, fired and fled. Minniman, with a slug in his shoulder and blood streaming out like water from a hydrant, had staggered to

**Exciting Novelette
of
Sackler
Shenanigans**



**By
D. L.**

CHAMPION

the nearest saloon to phone for an ambulance. There he discovered his smallest change was a dime. Even weakened as he was, Minniman was no man to put a dime in a phone slot when a nickel would do the job. He first went to the bartender for change and collapsed while awaiting it.

But this well authenticated anecdote by no means persuaded me to place him above Rex Sackler in the misers championship of the world. I had often thought that a contest between them to establish once and for all which was the most niggardly would be a spectacle well worth watching.

Then one day it actually happened. John Regnor was killed and Charles Minniman came into the office.

It was an August morning, one of those sizzling days that causes doubt that New York is in a temperate zone. I arrived at our Madison Avenue office first, finished the paper and put it on Sackler's desk. Sackler did not throw away money on newspapers. He read mine.

Some ten minutes later he came in. He muttered an unenthusiastic 'Good morning,' sat down and began to read. I nodded to him and became immediately aware of something odd in his appearance. It certainly wasn't his suit. That garment, which had been shabby for a good decade, was the same shapeless, unpressed mass as usual. His shoes, which had been soled and resoled until the uppers were almost worn through, showed no change.

Then the process of elimination gave it to me. It was his shirt. The fact that it was new was startling enough. But unless my eyes deceived me it was also nylon. And a nylon shirt, I knew, cost four times as much as Sackler customarily spent for such items.

I said tentatively, "Nice shirt."

He put down the paper, turned his

dark eyes on me. "Why, yes," he said. "I just bought it."

"Expensive, wasn't it?"

"Just under nine bucks."

"Were you drunk? Is the storekeeper blackmailing you? Or have you gone nuts?"

He gave me a nasty look. "Joey," he said, "I'm sick and tired of your hints that I hate to spend money. It's merely a nice-looking shirt which caught my eye. The price means nothing to me."

"In the same sense," I said, "that oil means nothing to Texas."

HE REGISTERED patient superiority and said, "Joey, you are such a money grubber yourself that you can not understand how I can toss away cash for something which takes my fancy. I do it all the time."

This was blatant falsehood. Sackler was as financially reckless as an Edinburgh banker, as free-handed with money as a squirrel with nuts. Though his income was one which left me green with envy, he existed like an Indian un-touchable. He lived in a furnished room. He ate in greasy cafeterias. He dressed in the second hand goods of Delancey Street.

He beat the cigarette tax by inexpertly rolling his own. He had no bank account. Every penny—and there were one hell of a lot of them—was stashed either in Government bonds or hidden in the steel of a safe deposit box.

His relationship to money was that of a mother to an only child. He suffered palpable agony when he disgorged my weekly salary. He devoted hours to inventing sure-thing gambling games to win it back.

Thus, nine dollars tossed away for a single shirt set me to work trying to figure an angle. Forty minutes later it came to me.

I said, "I've got it."

He folded the paper, dropped it in the waste basket and ran thin fingers through his ebony hair. He said, "Got what?"

"The angle on that shirt."

He sighed and essayed the expression of a martyr. "Joey," he began, but I cut him off.

"You don't have to iron those nylon shirts, do you?"

"Why, no."

"And they last forever?"

"For several years, I believe. I didn't ask."

"The hell you didn't. That's why you bought it. You paid nine bucks, all right. But for a shirt which will last ten years, which you'll wash yourself each night, since it requires no ironing. Therefore, you'll only need one and you'll never pay a laundry bill. I knew you were making money on it somewhere."

He had the grace to look slightly embarrassed. He said, "That has nothing to do with it. . . It merely—"

"I know. It took your fancy."

I shut up because at that point the door opened and Charles Minniman walked in.

He was a little man and fat. His face was cherubic and unwrinkled save at its bottom where several chins quivered. His hair was gray and sparse; his eyes blue and sharp as an eagle's. Sartorially, he resembled Sackler—that is, before Sackler bought the shirt.

He wore a brown suit which had no memory of a tailor's iron. The leather of his shoes was scuffed and his collar, I am willing to wager, was washable celluloid.

He told us his name, sat down and said with bitter indignation, "I have just come from Police Headquarters. I almost had to put up bail. Imagine, an innocent citizen having to pay for a bail bond! Outrageous!"

Sackler nodded agreeably. He pos-

sessed the oleaginous courtesy of a floor-walker when facing a prospective client.

"Moreover," went on Minniman, "I shall now have to spend some more money to clear my good name."

"What's wrong?" asked Sackler.

"John Regnor has been murdered."

Sackler shook his head in polite horror and clucked sympathetically like an old hen. I knew quite well that he had no more idea of who John Regnor was than I did. But all this came under the general heading of bedside manner to lull the client into a weakened condition when he heard the size of Sackler's fee. However, from what I knew of Charles Minniman, he was going to take some lulling.

"It's like this," said Minniman. "I've got a lot of interests. I have a number of partners. When someone comes to me with a good deal, I back him. He does the work. I put up the dough. Well, that's how it worked with Regnor. I was in the real estate business with him."

SACKLER rolled a cigarette, holding his tobacco bag carefully over the desk blotter. When he had finished a rather clumsy job, he swept the spilled grains back into the bag.

"Now," went on Minniman, "I make it a practice to carry life insurance on my partners. I had fifty thousand dollars on Regnor. Then he was murdered."

"How?" asked Sackler.

"Poison. In the water cooler."

Sackler nodded. "And the coppers grabbed you because of the insurance motive?"

"Right. But they couldn't prove anything, so they had to let me go."

I am not a man who is overly loyal to his employer. I said, "If they've let you go, what are you talking to Sackler for? You're free, aren't you?"

Sackler glared at me. Minniman said,

"But I must protect my good name."

I said, "You're going to have to pay for it."

Sackler's face was suddenly purple. "You keep out of this," he roared. "Never having had a good name yourself, you can't understand why it's worth money to protect one."

As a matter of fact, in Minniman's case I couldn't. I didn't believe he was willing to spend hard cash upon his reputation.

Sackler turned his apoplectic gaze from me and said to Minniman, "I take it you want me to find Regnor's killer?"

"Right. How much do you charge for something like this?"

They looked at each other like two bull moose about to lock horns. Finally Sackler, working on the there's-no-harm-in-trying theory, said blandly, "Ten thousand dollars."

Minniman uttered a cry of anguish. He said, "Do you think I'm a millionaire?" I said, "Yes," but he ignored me. He said, "Let's stop joking. I offer you a thousand provided you bring the murderer to justice."

I lit a cigarette and listened to them. They went at it hammer and tongs like a couple of Armenian rug dealers. They fought it dollar by dollar for an hour and a half. They were sweating and exhausted when the figure hit five grand. At that point, Minniman, realizing that he had last met his match, capitulated.

"All right," he said. "Five G's." He whipped a document from his pocket. "I had my lawyer draw this up before I came. We can fill in the amounts."

Sackler read the typed sheet. He said, "It says here that final payment is to be made upon the conviction of the killer. That, of course, implies that I get an advance. Let us say half."

"Suppose you fail?"

"Then I return the advance."

Minniman didn't appear to like this.

He stood up. He said, "We'll discuss this at lunch. I'll take you to the Colonial Restaurant."

The Colonial was on the upper East side, and its menu read like a quarterly statement of the Marshall Plan. Sackler, making certain there would be no mistake, said, "Thank you. I accept your invitation."

Rather to my surprise, Minniman didn't squawk.

"Joey," said Sackler, "while we're gone, go down to Headquarters. See Inspector Woolley. See what he's got in this Regnor killing. I'll get the other details from Mr. Minniman while we're at lunch."

I nodded. On his way to the door, Minniman took a package of king-sized cigarettes from his pocket. As I watched him a theory blossomed in my head. I said, "Hey, I know why you're willing to pay Sackler good cash to find this killer."

"I've already told you. My good name—"

"Good name, phooey," I said. "In your rackets you need partners. Partners willing for you to insure them. If these potential partners believe you killed Regnor for his insurance, they're going to be awfully leery about working with you."

Minniman said, "Well, of course, that's true. But I hadn't thought of it. It's really my good name." His blue eyes glittered as he caught sight of the package of cigarettes on my desk. He put his king-size cigarettes back in his pocket. "If you don't mind," he said, "I'll try one of yours. Just for a change."

What could I say?

He helped himself and the pair of them went out of the office. I watched the door close behind them and sighed. As long as Minniman was a client, I was afraid I was going to have a double cross to bear.

CHAPTER TWO

Time to Collect

I ATE a leasurely lunch, went downtown, saw Woolley and returned to the office. Sackler was already there. He sat leaning back in his swivel chair, looking extremely pleased with himself.

"Well," I said, "did you have a good free lunch?"

He nodded. "Funny thing happened. When the check came, Minniman didn't have enough cash to pay it."

"Judging from your good humor you didn't pay it, either. What happened?"

"Oh, I cashed a check for him. It so happened he needed quite a bit of cash for some deal. My safe deposit box is right near the Colonial, you know. I cashed a check for him for twenty-five hundred bucks."

That sounded a little screwy to me. Yet the check certainly must be good. Minniman wouldn't risk jail, where Sackler certainly would send him for a buck and a half, much less twenty-five hundred.

"What sort of a deal did you finally make with him?"

"Five G's, if and when we get the killer. He wouldn't budge from that. We simply have to get the guy, Joey. Otherwise, we get nothing."

I said bitterly, "Well"

"What did you get from Woolley?"

"Well, it seems that this Regnor was quite a potato chip eater and quite a beer drinker. He indulged himself in these vices all day in the office. But the killer swiped his beer and he got murdered."

"It this supposed to make sense?"

"Sure it makes sense. Regnor had a private water cooler in his own inner office. It also had a ice compartment where he kept cans of beer. So he chews

potato chips all mornnig. Builds himself one hell of a thirst, then reaches for the beer. There ain't no beer. So he drinks water. But there's poison in the water. So Woolley figures the killer swiped the beer to make sure Regnor would take a drink from the cooler—spiked with strychnine."

"That's all?"

"That's all. Except Woolley swears Minniman did it for the insurance. But beyond motive he can't prove anything. He can't even establish that Minniman was in the office this week at all."

Sackler grunted. "Woolley's a fool. Minniman's as innocent as you are."

I said, "Anyone's innocent who pays you five grand. What do we do now?"

"See people. I want to see Regnor's family. I want to talk to his secretary. Let's go to the office first."

There was a tired copper in the office, chewing gum and complaining of the heat. At a desk sat a shapely peroxide blonde with an efficient manner and the incredible name of Flower Manheimer. She conducted us into a well furnished private office.

"This," she announced sepulchrally, "was Mr. Regnor's office."

I looked around. I saw the water cooler in a corner of the room. The inverted bottle had been removed, probably by Woolley. On the desk was a fancy pen and pencil set, a desk pad and yellow crumbs of potato chips.

Sackler sat in the dead man's chair and Flower Manheimer looked at him as if he'd desecrated Arlington Cemetery. He thumbed through the desk pad.

He said, "You wrote all Mr. Regnor's appointments down here?"

Flower nodded.

"Even his social engagements? I see some dinner dates here."

"Yes," she said. "I think it efficient to write *everything* down. Not that Mr.

Regnor had many dinner engagements. He was a real home lover. Crazy about his wife and kids."

"You found the body?"

"Yes. It was about four o'clock. I went into the office to ask him something. At first I thought he was asleep in his chair. But he was—"

Her voice trailed away and her eyes filled with tears.

This, apparently, concluded the interview. Sackler got up, bummed a cigarette from the copper and strode out into the corridor. There was a pompous expression on his face and the wrinkle on his brow was calculated to convince me that he was thinking deeply. I decided to needle him.

"Well," I said, "that was an easy five grand."

He looked at me curiously.

"Haven't you got it yet?" I said. "That dame killed him. Little Flower Manheimer. She was nuts about him. Didn't you see her crying? So what does a dame who's nuts about a guy do? Tries to reform him. So she tried to stop him drinking that dirty old beer. But she couldn't do it. So she swiped the beer and poisoned the water cooler. That stopped him, all right. Do I get a cut of the fee?"

"Very funny," said Sackler. "Very funny, indeed. Now, go away. I wish to think. Meet me tonight at Regnor's home. It's in the phone book. Eight o'clock. In the meantime remove your presence in order that I may cogitate."

Since I'd nettled him into giving me half the afternoon off, I considered this a victory. I left him, went into the nearest saloon and proceeded to get rid of some of my utterly inadequate salary.

MRS. REGNOR and her two children lived on the upper east side in a basement apartment which gave out on to a garden in

the rear. Sackler and I hit the lobby simultaneously, rang the bell, established our identity and were admitted.

June Regnor was a tall brunette with a pale, oval face and liquid eyes. Her build was such that I wished I'd met her socially instead of professionally. I never have any luck.

The two kids—a boy and a girl, about six and eight respectively—were in pajamas and about to retire. They were good-looking children. In fact, I'd have called them cute if that word were not my favorite peeve. They bade us all a grave goodnight and disappeared in the back of the apartment. It was then that Mrs. Regnor introduced us to the lanky, thin guy who was sitting quietly in a chair by the window.

It turned out he was George Turner, the principal of the school which the kids attended and an intimate friend of the family.

Mrs. Regnor said, "Of course, I understand that Mr. Minniman is eager to find the murderer of my husband. But I'm even more anxious. If you can do it, Mr. Sackler, I'm quite willing to add something to whatever Mr. Minniman is paying you."

Sackler beamed like a May morning and accepted the offer with a fine phony reluctance. I groaned. I could walk through the mint without ever finding a dime. Sackler could sit in the middle of Death Valley and coyotes would rally round and drop diamonds in his lap.

I sat back and smoked a cigarette while Sackler asked the routine questions.

It appeared that Regnor had possessed no enemies. He had always been in the real estate business. The idea of another woman was unthinkable. He was a home boy in all respects. Rarely went out, devoted to his wife and kids. During all this testimony by Mrs. Regnor, Turner nodded his head corroboratively.

Sackler said, "I suppose the police notified you of your husband's death immediately? Say, about five yesterday afternoon?"

Mrs. Regnor nodded. Turner nodded also. Sackler turned to the principal in some slight irritation. "And when did you hear of the tragedy?"

"Last night," said Turner, straightening up in his chair. "Mrs. Regnor told me about it at the P. T. A. meeting."

"P. T. A.?"

"The Parent-Teacher's Association. Mrs. Regnor is very active. She's the treasurer."

Sackler returned his attention to the woman. "Do you mean to tell me that you attended a meeting last night? Right after your husband was killed?"

"Why not?" said June Regnor, with more defiance than defense. "I was too upset to stay here alone. And my treasurer's report was due. I'd promised to attend that meeting a week or so ago."

Turner nodded again. "That's right."

Sackler stood up. He thanked the woman politely, got in a short sales talk about his devotion to law and order, promised her he'd have some information in a short while and took his departure.

Outside, he said, "Let's have a beer, Joey."

"If you pay for it."

"We'll toss."

I shook my head. I'd had experience with two headed coins before.

Sackler sighed. "All right. We'll each pay for our own."

That I considered a victory. I accepted.

At the bar he seemed dejected. He wasn't putting on the heavy-thought act he'd pulled at Regnor's office.

I said, "What have we got? Anything?"

"Nothing." He sighed again. "There isn't anything I can put my finger on.

That fool Woolley should have something. He was the first guy on the scene. Didn't he find anything at all?"

I shook my head.

"Nothing?" he persisted. "Nothing on Regnor's body? Nothing in his wallet?"

"Nothing that meant anything. Usual stuff in his pockets. Cigarette, lighter, fountain pen, business cards with scribbling on them."

"And the wallet?"

"Some dough. About fifty bucks. Driver's licence. Oh, and a couple of theatre tickets to a show he'll never see."

"What show?"

"South Pacific."

Sackler put down his beer. His eyes glittered suddenly. He said tensely, "For what night?"

"The 16th. The day he was killed."

His face lit up like a pinball machine. He said, "My Lord," to me and "Two more," to the bartender.

I said, "Wait a minute. Who's paying for these drinks?"

"Shut up, Joey. I'm thinking. I'll pay."

A heavyweight's right would have staggered me less than that. If he was laying out ten cents for my beer, I knew quite well that he somehow saw his way clear to earning the five G's from Minniman.

I put my own mind to it. It was the mention of the theatre tickets which had set him off. I tried to apply that fact to the killer of John Regnor. I got nowhere. After I had drunk my beer and we were out on the street again, I had still got nowhere.

Sackler said, "I've got a job for you tonight. Go to that building where Regnor's office is. See the night watchman. You know that book they always have in office building elevators at night? The book that everyone who comes in after hours must sign?"

I told him I knew about the book.

"All right. I want the page for the 15th. Bribe the watchman to tear it out of the book and give it to you. If you can't swing it that way, borrow it from him and have it photostated."

I regarded him suspiciously. "Who's paying this bribe?"

"I am. Up to twenty bucks. But don't go crazy. Haggle with him. Oh, and tomorrow morning see Flower Manheimer. Get a key to the office from her. Take the office key and start checking—"

He broke off and stared into space. "No, don't do that."

"Do what?"

He paid no attention to me. "You just bring the book page and the key to our office about eleven in the morning. That'll give me time to get hold of Woolley and Minniman."

"What do you want to get hold of of Woolley and Minniman for?"

"I want to show Woolley what a damned fool he was for missing what was under his nose. As for Minniman, I merely want to fulfill my part of the contract, and collect."

"You mean you've got this whole thing broken?"

He nodded. "In theory. I'll dig up the evidence tomorrow."

He walked away, leaving me staring after him. He was about to add another five G's to his bank account. I stood there momentarily paralyzed with honest, indignant envy.

CHAPTER THREE

Check and Double-Check

NOT only were Woolley and Minniman present when I arrived at the office on the following day, but Mrs. Regnor and George Turner were also there. They were seated in a semi-circle around Sackler's desk. Sack-

ler was puffing a cigar which he'd doubtless bummed from Woolley. There was a general air of expectancy as I entered.

Sackler caught my eye. He said, "Did you get 'em?"

I nodded. I put the page from the watchman's book on the desk blotter and handed him the key to Regnor's office.

Woolley said, "What are we waiting for, Rex? Do you or do you not know who killed Regnor?"

"Of course I know."

"How?" snapped Woolley. "I know as much of the case as you do. Yet I have no idea who the killer is unless it's Minniman, here."

Minniman looked as if he was about to make an indignant speech. Sackler's upraised hand stopped him.

"A little bird told me—that's how I know," said Sackler. "Now, listen to me. We know that someone dropped poison in Regnor's water cooler. We know that someone aimed at killing Regnor, since the secretary used a second cooler in the outer office. That same someone took his beer out of the ice compartment, knowing those damned potato chips would make him so thirsty he'd drink the water."

"My Lord," said Woolley. "Did you drag us here to tell us that? It's obvious enough."

"Wait a minute," said Sackler. "I'm just summing up for you. Now, I'll tell you who and why." He frowned and broke off. He looked at Minniman. "If the inspector agrees that my case is iron clad," he said, "I assume you'll pay me at once, without waiting for the trial?"

"If the inspector says so, I'll pay," said Minniman.

"The whole five thousand?"

"The whole twenty-five hundred."

Sackler blinked. His face was suddenly pale. Anxiety flickered in his eyes. He said, "Twenty-five hundred? What are

you talking about? It's five G's. We've got a contract."

"Certainly we have a contract," said Minniman. "Five thousand dollars for your services. Twenty-five hundred down, which I've paid. And twenty-five hundred when your evidence convicts the killer. Though I'm willing to waive that and pay the balance now if your case is solid."

There was a moment's silence. For once I saw something before Sackler. I threw back my head and roared with laughter.

Sackler said in worried accents, "What do you mean you paid me half?"

"I gave you a check for twenty-five hundred, the day we lunched at the Colonial. You remember? I have the cancelled check to prove it."

"I cashed that check for you!" yelled Sackler. "I gave you twenty-five hundred in bills!"

Minniman shrugged. "Can your bank-book show a withdrawal of that amount on that day?"

"Damn you! I don't have a bank account. I got the cash out of a safe-deposit box."

"I hardly think," said Minniman, "that any court will accept that story. I have the cancelled check to prove my initial payment."

Sackler's face was gray. He turned in desperation to me. "Joey, you can testify—"

"I can testify to nothing. I wasn't there."

"Now, look here," said Woolley, "you've dragged me, Mrs. Regnor and Mr. Turner down here to tell us about a murder. We're not at all interested in any monetary difficulty you're having with Minniman. Get to the point. Who killed Regnor? And what was his motive?"

Sackler was a beaten man. There was no color in his face and his back bent

in his chair. There was pain in his eyes and his bearing was that of a man cruelly betrayed. He knew now why Minniman had paid for his lunch that day, why he had chosen a restaurant close to the vault where Sackler kept his Midas wealth.

"Who?" demanded Woolley again. "Why?"

"I don't know," said Sackler miserably. "There's a hole in my theory. I just saw it. I'll have to work it out again. I must think. Go away, everyone."

Turner rose, said, "I think he's crazy." He took Mrs. Regnor's arm and led her from the room. Woolley stood up and chewed his cigar savagely.

He said, "What the devil are you pulling, Rex? If you're obstructing justice, I'll have your licence."

I could see he was actually sore enough to mean it.

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BUT Sackler was beyond arguing. He buried his face in his hands and rested them on the desk blotter. Woolley swore a couple of heavy oaths and strode out of the room.

Minniman smiling, moved toward the door. He said, "I didn't mean to spring this on you until you'd cleaned everything up. But I got impatient. I wanted to gloat. However, it doesn't matter. I know what's going on in your head. But you won't be able to do it, Rex."

Sackler lifted his head. He said, "Judas. Benedict Arnold. Tokyo Rose."

Minniman grinned and slammed the door behind him. Sackler turned a face etched with horror in my direction.

"That man is a thief," he proclaimed. "Better people than he are in jail."

I failed to register sympathy. Sackler went on, "He deliberately framed me into cashing that check so he could claim he paid me. Well, the hell with him and clearing his name! He's paid me nothing and he gets nothing."

"I doubt it."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean the same thing as Minniman meant when he told you that you wouldn't be able to do it."

"Don't be so damned cryptic."

"Well, Minniman meant that if you have an ironclad theory as to the murder, you can still get twenty-five hundred bucks for it. And even if you're mad at him you'll never be able to pass up the money."

He grunted without denying it. Then he looked at me like a man who has suddenly been struck with an idea. He said, "Joey."

"Yeah?"

"Suppose you swore that you were present when I cashed that check? You could be a witness that it wasn't an advance payment, that I gave him cash for it."

There was a desperate wheedling note

in his voice which I recognized as the last cry of the drowning man who reaches for the straw. I shook my head with phony regret. I said, "Too bad I wasn't there."

"But you could say you were there, Joey?"

I assumed an attitude of righteous indignation. "What? Perjure myself? Jeopardize my immortal soul so that you can make a buck? My friend, you ask too much."

He glared at me and stood up. "You are all scoundrels. I am losing money." Here his voice rose and touched a note just this side of hysteria. "Someone will have to make it good." He strode across the room, through the door. He slammed it behind him, almost breaking the glass panel.

I grinned happily. The idea of someone mulcting Sackler was far funnier to me than any show on television.

Two days went by. I saw little of Sackler. He came in the office only to look at the mail and to read my morning paper. Then he disappeared on some melancholy business of his own. Minniman hadn't called either. I kept the vigil alone, catching up on my reading.

On the third day just before noon I had a visitor. He was a short guy and thin. He wore rimless glasses, and a toothbrush mustache adorned his upper lip. His suit was snappy, his tie snappier. He was in his late twenties and I decided that there was a shifty air about him.

He said, "Are you Sackler?"

"Thanking the Lord, no."

"When will he be in?"

"I haven't the slightest idea."

There was a pause after this conversational impasse. Then he said, "My name is Zirkin. Maybe I can deal with you instead."

I looked noncommittal and he went on. "Do you give rewards in this office?"

"In this office we give nothing."

Mr. Zirkin seemed disappointed. "Oh," he said. "Then I better go to the coppers. I *know* they don't give money for information. That's why I thought I'd try here."

My curiosity was aroused. "What kind of information do you have?"

"Something about the Regnor murder. What I've got will break the case."

I forced myself to appear less excited than I felt. I said, "What sort of money do you expect for this information?"

"A hundred bucks, maybe. I read in the paper that Sackler was collecting a fat fee. What I got is worth more than a hundred bucks."

A hundred bucks was out of my income bracket. It wasn't out of Sackler's but it was doubtful that he'd give any money away for anything. An idea hit me. Minniman might pay it, if it really broke the case. And then he wouldn't pay Sackler anything at all.

I said, "Why don't you try to sell what you've got to Charles Minniman? He may meet your price."

He shook his head emphatically. "No, not him. He wouldn't pay anything for the information I've got."

I MULLED that one over. If Mr. Zirkin was so sure that Minniman, who was interested in the solution of the Regnor killing, wouldn't pay for his knowledge, it argued that whatever Zirkin had implicated Minniman himself.

I had read the Sackler-Minniman contract and it stated, among other things, that Sackler was to convict the murderer and clear Minniman's good name. Obviously, if the killing was pinned on Minniman, his good name would not be cleared. Hence, Sackler could not collect.

Therefore, if I got information which proved Minniman the murderer, Minni-

man would go to jail, Sackler would not collect and little Joey Graham would emerge triumphant over the two cheapest characters in Christendom.

I said, "How about ten bucks? I'll pay it myself. Provided the information is any good."

The expression on Mr. Zirkin's face indicated that he held ten bucks in low esteem.

"Look," I said, "on your own admission Minniman will pay you nothing. The coppers certainly won't, either. As for Sackler, he suffers the agonies of purgatory when he lays out a nickle for a cup of breakfast coffee. Anything I pay you is velvet. Little as it may be, it's more than you can get anywhere else."

Zirkin thought this over. He said, "Fifty."

We spent twenty minutes horse trading. Finally, we arrived at an agreement. I was to pay Zirkin twenty bucks cash if his information was as important as he claimed.

"All right," he said. "Now, get this. I'm a pharmacist. I work in a drug store in the neighborhood where both Regnor and Minniman live. I know Minniman's doctor well. His name is Riker and he sends me all his prescriptions."

This was beginning to sound like twenty bucks worth.

"Well, the day before Regnor was poisoned, Minniman came into the store and got some strychnine on prescription—a prescription signed by Doc Riker."

"You can prove this?"

"Sure." He fumbled in his pocket. "Here's the prescription."

I glanced at it. It was the usual Latin jargon which meant nothing to me. But the printed name on top was that of Doctor J. Riker, as was the signature.

"Well," continued Zirkin, "Doc Riker comes into the store yesterday. I know about the murder and I'm curious. I ask

him why he gave Minniman a prescription for strychnine." He paused for effect. "The doc never gave it to him."

"You mean this prescription's a forgery?"

"It must be. The doc swears he never gave it to Minniman. It's a bad imitation of the doc's signature. Naturally, I didn't examine the signature when I filled the prescription."

If all this were true it was worth twenty bucks. It pinned murder dead on Minniman's shoulders. He had motive, opportunity, and he'd bought the poison. That meant Minniman was going to jail. And Sackler was going nowhere at all.

Zirkin said, "Well, ain't that worth twenty bucks?"

"After I check." I crossed the room, picked up the phone. I said, "What's the name and phone number of the store where you work?"

He gave it to me. I called. I ascertained that a pharmacist named Zirkin worked there. I looked up Riker's number in the book. I spoke to his nurse who said the doctor was out. I told her I was the police department, whereupon she divulged that Riker had been Minniman's physician for many years and that there was no record of any prescription being given Minniman on the date I mentioned. That seemed to tie it up.

I hung up and detached a twenty-dollar bill from my wallet. I handed it to Zirkin.

I said, "Okay. Here's your dough."

He snatched it. He said, "But you mustn't conceal this evidence. I don't want to get into trouble. I was only trying to make an easy buck."

"Don't worry," I told him. "The coppers will know about this within half an hour. So will a couple of other interested characters."

Zirkin adjusted his snappy tie and left. I sprang to the telephone again.

I called Minniman and Woolley. Then I sat down and waited, hoping that Sackler would return in time for the kill.

CHAPTER FOUR

You Can't Beat a Sackler

I WAS lucky. Some twenty minutes after the departure of Zirkin, the door opened and Sackler came in. He still wore an air of utter dejection, a dejection I fully intended to deepen. He sighed like a deflating inner tube and sat down at his desk.

"Joey," he said, "I'm licked. I suppose I must try to crack this case and collect my lousy twenty-five hundred. Minniman has swindled me and there's nothing I can do about it."

"Baby," I said happily, "you ain't going to collect nothing. For once."

He blinked. "Why not?"

"Because the case is cracked. Busted wide open."

"Who cracked it?"

"I did."

I thought he looked relieved. "Don't be silly, Joey. You never broke a case in your life. You—"

He broke off as Inspector Woolley and Charles Minniman came into the room.

"If you're wasting my time again," said Woolley, "you'll regret it, Rex. You got me here once before and all I heard was a chiselling argument between you and Minniman. What is it now?"

Sackler shrugged. "It has nothing to do with me. It's Joey's show."

Minniman helped himself to a cigarette from my desk and sat down. Woolley chewed his cigar.

"Go ahead, Joey. It better be good."

"It is," I told him. "You'll love it. Though I don't expect much enthusiasm from the rest of the audience."

I took the prescription from my pocket and tossed it on the desk.

Woolley picked it up. "What's this?"

Leaving Zirkin's name out of it, I told him. I pointed out that Minniman had motive and opportunity, and that he had forged a prescription for poison, the same poison which had killed his partner.

As I spoke Minniman's face became ashen. Sackler, however, didn't look as miserable as I'd expected. Woolley was frankly delighted.

"Ah," he said, "I knew it. I knew Minniman was guilty. Sackler was probably protecting him for a fee. Joey, I'll not forget this."

Minniman found his voice. "Wait," he said and he was close to shrieking. "This is all phony! It's a frame! Inspector, can't you see it's a frame?"

"Tell the jury," said Woolley grimly. "Maybe they'll believe you."

"You're crazy," yelled Minniman. "It's obvious enough. Sackler's mad because we had that fight about the fee. For reasons of revenge he's fixed this frame."

Sackler shook his head slowly. "Not me. This has nothing to do with me. I know nothing at all. This is Joey's case. He's broken it."

"That's right," said Woolley. "And Joey has no reason to frame you. Let's get going, Minniman."

"No," cried Minniman. He turned to Sackler with beseeching eyes. "Rex, you can't get them to do this to me. Get me out of it."

"He can't," I said proudly. "You're cold, Minniman."

"I don't know," said Sackler. "Maybe I could be of some help."

"Then do something," said Minniman.

"Naturally," said Sackler, "I can't afford to work for nothing."

Their eyes met and clashed. Minniman said in a low voice, "How much do you want?"

"Just what I was originally promised. If you gave me a check for five thousand dollars, I think I can clear you."

"You guarantee it?"

Sackler said with an assurance which worried me, "I guarantee it."

Minniman took a check book from his pocket and scribbled on it. He tore it out and handed it to Sackler.

"Now, listen," said Woolley, "I'm not going through this again. If you boys want to fight about dough, come down to Minniman's cell, Rex. I'm taking him now."

"You'd better not."

There was a grave note of warning in Sackler's tone. It made me slightly anxious. Apparently, it had that effect on Woolley, too. He said, "Why not?"

"Because," said Sackler, "he's not guilty. Now that I've been paid I can tell you what I wanted to tell you the other day."

"Nuts," I said. "You can't get behind that prescription."

"I can get very far behind it, indeed," said Sackler. "I make no criticism of Minniman. He is not in our profession. But to Woolley and Joey a pair of tickets to South Pacific are merely a pair of theatre tickets."

"What more are they to you?" demanded Woolley.

"Why," said Sackler, "they almost have the murderer's name written on them."

This I didn't like. I said, "Go on."

HIS black eyes were glittering now. His face wore the same uplifted expression as when he was about to deposit money. "Well," he said, "what did we establish about John Regnor? That he was a sound family man. That he rarely went out at night. And that whenever he *did* have a late appointment, little Flower Mannheim wrote it down on his desk pad.

But nothing was written down for the night of the 16th. Yet Minniman had two tickets for the biggest hit in town. Who did he intend to take with him? There's only one possible answer."

I said tentatively, "His wife?"

"Of course, his wife—you blind idiots. Who else?"

"So," said Woolley. "What of it?"

Sackler sighed. He shook his head patiently and spoke to us like a weary teacher with a class of retarded children.

"Obviously," he said, "Regnor had already informed his wife that they were going to the theatre. Nevertheless, she had another engagement, an engagement to attend a P.T.A. meeting which she says she'd made a week or so before. She *knew* Regnor wasn't going to be in any condition to take her out the night of the 16th. She *knew* that he'd be dead."

Minniman blinked. "You mean June Regnor killed her husband?"

"Did I say so?" asked Sackler wearily. "Of course, she didn't kill her husband."

"Then who did?" snapped Woolley.

"Why do you think she attended that meeting?" said Sackler. "Even though she knew she wouldn't be attending the theatre with her husband, doesn't it seem odd she'd go to P.T.A. on the night he was killed?"

"People constantly do inexplicable things," I said weakly.

"This isn't inexplicable," said Sackler. "She went there to meet the murderer, to find out how things went, to report her interview with the police."

"My Lord," said Minniman. "You mean Turner is the killer?"

"The killer," said Sackler, "and the third side of a triangle."

"You're crazy," said Woolley in one breath, and in the next, "Can you prove it?"

"I can prove it. First, I have a page from the night watchman's book from

Regnor's office building. It stood to reason that if Turner entered the office with the poison it would be when the office was empty. There is a signature in that book of a Ralph Smith, who ostensibly visited the offices of the Federal Oil Company three floors above those of Regnor.

"Through minor bribery, I obtained a specimen of Turner's writing. A handwriting expert has told me that his signature and that of Ralph Smith are the same. Turner simply walked down three floors, let himself into Regnor's office, dumped the poison, swiped the beer, walked back up three flights and left the building."

I felt a little ill now. I said, without much hope, "How did he get into Regnor's office?"

"He had a key, imbecile. At this point in my reasoning, it seemed clear enough that Mrs. Regnor had pinched her husband's office key and that they'd had a duplicate made for Turner."

"Well, did they?"

"I have worn out a pair of shoes—a pair which can not be replaced for less than twelve dollars at today's prices—checking every place in Turner's and June Regnor's neighborhood which makes keys. I finally found it. As a matter of fact they took the key in together."

"Good," said Woolley, as if he'd figured the whole thing himself. "We've got witnesses. The watchman and the key guy. I'll pick up Turner at once."

"It would be better," said Sackler, "if we visited the woman first. If we throw it at her hard, she'll probably crack and you'll have a State's witness."

Woolley nodded agreement and the telephone rang. I reached for it but Sackler got it first.

He said, "Yeah. Who? Oh." He listened for a minute. He shook his

(Please continue on page 128)

Trouble-dogged Jim Dennison was going to make the sweater girl eat her lethal lies—

COME HELL OR HOT WATER!

*She screamed: "There
—that salesman! He
stabbed Mac with the
paring knife!"*



By **TEDD THOMEY**

AS HE strode along West Seventh street on Tuesday afternoon, Jim Dennison's tanned young face was that of a guy in trouble. Deep,

urgent trouble. His storm-gray eyes were grim. His lean jaw was set in tough, rigid lines.

He didn't look like he'd been sleeping

well lately. And he hadn't. For two nights his mattress had felt like a bag of railroad spikes. It was impossible to get used to the ugly thing which had pushed into his life. His friends, even, were beginning to believe those newspaper stories that he'd robbed the delicatessen of nine hundred and ten dollars. Hell, now there were times when Jim Dennison himself thought he might have done it.

But he hadn't. Right along this Long Beach street, under these slender palm trees, he'd chased the lanky bandit. He could still hear the sound of the guy's hard leather heels, still see the tail of his raspberry-colored sport shirt flapping in the breeze.

And then the guy had vanished into the big apartment house. Two burly cops had come puffing up. *Click, click* went the handcuffs, and ten minutes later Jim Dennison was on the wrong side of many strong black bars.

They'd let him out on bail finally. His trial would come up in about a month—and he was cooked unless he could prove that another man had robbed the store. If he couldn't—well, the club at San Quentin was always open to new members.

So today Jim Dennison was grimly retracing the route he'd covered two nights before. He wore his best suit—the gray one with the fine blue thread—a white shirt and a maroon bow-tie. In one hand he carried a bright aluminum pressure cooker and a frying pan. A leather sample case, filled with paring knives, swung along in the other.

Actually, Jim's job was selling men's shirts and ties over a counter. But he'd taken a day off and at the moment, with the borrowed paraphernalia, he hoped he looked like an ordinary house-to-house salesman.

His plan was simple. He was convinced that somewhere in the big, red-

brick apartment building the bandit was still hiding. The cops had searched the place the night of the robbery. They hadn't found the bandit and Jim didn't think they'd tried hard enough. A guy going from door to door, selling kitchen knives, pots and pans might have a better chance.

It had taken him several hours to plan his little sales technique. First, he would leave paring knives at a dozen or so apartments and ask the people to try them out. Then in half an hour he would return, pick up the knives from those who didn't want to buy and sell to those who did. This two-visit system, he figured, would allow him to inspect each apartment twice.

This morning Jim had checked the two lower floors and discovered nothing suspicious. This afternoon he intended to check the third floor.

In quick order, he distributed eleven more of the small, red-handled knives. An old gentleman in a checkered bathrobe accepted the first one. At apartment 302, a knock-out of a brunette in a tight yellow sweater winked and smiled at him as she took the second. The door to 304 was opened by a small woman who kept it ajar barely enough for one dark eye to regard Jim suspiciously. After much argument, she gave in and took the damn thing. Knives were accepted in eight other apartments without incident.

Jim waited twenty' minutes. His stomach was nervous with anticipation. He was positive that the lady in 304 was trying to cover up something. As he talked again to the old man in the bathrobe, he wondered whether he should break in on her unexpectedly and see if the lanky guy was hiding in there. He sold a knife to the old man. Then he knocked on the next door.

"Well, hello again, honey," said the tidily stacked girl in the interesting yellow sweater. "C'mon in. . ."

As Jim stepped inside, the girl slipped past him. "Have to borrow a quarter from a friend," she explained. "Be back in a minute, honey."

Jim turned away from the partly open door and glanced around the small living room which was furnished in bright California reds and blues. He was still wondering about the suspicious lady next door—when he saw it.

On the rug near the davenport stretched the long, motionless body of a man. Jim stiffened with shock. The man was wearing a raspberry-colored sport shirt.

It was the guy! The guy who robbed the delicatessen!

And there was a knife in his chest—a small paring knife with a red, plastic handle.

NUMBLY, as if pressed inside a block of ice, Jim Dennison stared down at the sprawled figure. The man hadn't been dead very long. The dark, wet area was still spreading across his shirt. His other arm was flung partly across his gaunt, white face.

Jim was almost positive the knife was the one he'd left with the girl. He set his sample case on the floor and was staring at the knife, to make sure, when he heard the scream in the hall. Feminine screams, siren-pitched and hysterical.

"There—that salesman! He stabbed Mac with the paring knife!"

Jim whirled around. Peering through the partly open door were two excited girls. The brunette in the yellow sweater was doing all the yelling, and she was pointing a long, scarlet-tipped finger at him. Tears shimmered in her chocolate-brown eyes.

The other girl was a dyed blonde. Her face was whitewashed with fear.

In those first furious seconds, Jim didn't know what to do. He took a tentative step toward the door—and that was

the spark which set off the brunette's short fuse.

"N-no you don't!" she screamed. "Butcher! You're not leaving!" She flew at him, and her fingernails were ten small sharp swords. They dug deep tracks in Jim's cheek and throat. He caught her clawing hands and held her out at arms' length so she couldn't kick quite so accurately.

Then suddenly he felt fists on his shoulders and across his neck. The blonde was back there, pounding for all she was worth. Her punches didn't hurt, but when she started choking him in a highly professional manner, Jim quit.

He twisted from her grip and released the brunette's hands. Forgetting the sample case, he darted through the door, out into the hall and down the steps to the street level. A long moment later, he was running along the sidewalk, heading toward the busy intersection of Pine and Seventh where he was sure he could find a cop.

His emotions were as mixed as a green salad. Among other things, he sizzled with elation. Brother, those cops would believe him after he took them up there and showed him the guy! The bandit was still wearing that raspberry shirt. And the money would be around there some place. If not in the guy's billfold, maybe in the sugar bowl or hidden in the medicine cabinet.

Jim sprinted on for another thirty yards, brushing past startled pedestrians. And then abruptly he skidded to a stop. His jubilation collapsed like a house of sand. The tan on his face became a dirty gray and he suddenly felt weak.

If he took the cops back to that apartment, they'd think he'd killed the guy! And he couldn't prove otherwise!

The girl had been smart. Undoubtedly, she'd stabbed the guy. Why, Jim couldn't guess. But anyway she'd used the paring knife he'd left with her and

then very cleverly arranged her trap.

She'd probably recognized him from the pictures the papers ran after the robbery. Luring him inside, she knew that when he saw the body he'd go over and investigate. Then she came roaring back with a witness—the blonde. They'd tell the cops they'd caught him in the act of trying to pull out his knife. Running around yelling blue bloody murder, the brunette had made a damn convincing scene.

And all the breaks were on her side. Jim's fingerprints were probably still on the knife. Even the fact that he had run out to find a cop was a break for her. He'd looked exactly like a fleeing criminal.

Jim's nerves hummed and cracked like high-tension wires. To steady himself, he placed a hand against a signboard. For a full, bewildering minute, his mind was in complete mutiny. He leaned there helplessly, unable to decide what to do or where to go.

Seeing the cop snapped him out of it.

The cop was young, with a neat blond mustache. Running along the sidewalk, he was about one hundred yards away, and there was a business-like look on his face. He was glancing everywhere at once and Jim knew why.

For an instant, Jim was tempted to stand there and try to bluff it out. But then he felt the blood running wetly down his cheek. Damn that girl and her fingernails! If she'd painted his face red with a six-inch brush, she couldn't have made him more conspicuous!

Jim took off. He sprinted behind the signboard and across a littered vacant lot.

"Stop or I shoot!" hollered the cop, and Jim could hear his shoes slapping closer on the sidewalk.

It was no time for stopping. Jim sped across an alley. A six-foot board fence surrounded a back yard on the other

side. Two flat explosions cut the air back near the signboard, and Jim went over the fence as if it weren't there.

HIS heels crunched into grass. Ducking down, he ran under a couple of clotheslines and then across the yard. He knew there must be a gate in the brown fence, but he couldn't see it. The fence was attached to a four-family building which gave Jim a sudden idea. If he ducked into one of the flats, and if he were lucky for a change—maybe he could stay there a few minutes till the cop got lost.

Jim selected the lower left flat. As he yanked open the door, he heard the cop scrambling against the alley side of the fence. He was inside the gay green kitchen before he saw the little old lady.

She was seated at a checker-board sized table sipping a glass of milk. Her gray head tipped up, the glass tipped down and milk splashed her frilly apron.

"Sit still," puffed Jim as politely as possible. "I was just leaving." He crossed the kitchen quickly, entered a tiny hall, strode through a living room and out the front door. The old lady's first yelp caught up with him as he took the concrete steps four at a time.

She added a few more, on a higher scale, and Jim knew the cop would have no trouble learning which way he'd gone. Swiftly, his eyes swept up and down the avenue. Four or five buildings away, a red-and-white cab was parked, doors open. A paunchy gent had just paid off the driver.

Jim wanted to yell "Taxi!" but that would attract the cop. Instead, he ran hard as he could. The cab was going at least fifteen miles an hour by the time he caught up with it, opened the door on the run and flopped onto the cool leather seat.

The red-capped driver watched him in the mirror. He was a swarthy, bright-

eyed character, strictly the doesn't-miss-a-trick type.

"What hit you, fella?" the driver asked finally, as Jim dabbed a handkerchief at his scratches. "A pitchfork or a dame?"

"Neither," said Jim. "Shaved with a new blade this morning."

The driver grinned and tooled his cab around a red Pacific-Electric bus. From the tail of his eye, Jim kept watching the sidewalk behind. It wasn't until they were a good block and a half away that the cop came running out to stand uncertainly in the middle of the street.

Jim knew he should leave the cab as soon as possible. He got out a minute later at Fourth and Pine, gave the driver sixty cents and ducked into the Economy Drug.

As usual, the garish store was crowded, which was exactly what Jim wanted. He found an empty stool at the lunch counter in the rear and ordered a grilled cheese sandwich and a chocolate milkshake. He wasn't hungry, but he needed time to think.

Twenty minutes passed. Inside Jim a battle was raging. He couldn't make up his mind. Should he go to the cops, tell them exactly what had happened? Or should he leave town as quickly as possible, by rocket, if available—

Abruptly, Jim froze.

The guy on the next seat had just dropped a nickel into one of the green-plastic and chromium radios attached to the counter. He flipped the dial to a news broadcast.

". . . the girl's description of the murderer tallied exactly," an announcer was saying in cabbage-crisp tones. "The girl, Blanche Ford, told police that James Dennison had argued with McCormick over the stolen money. Blows were struck and then Dennison pulled out the red-handled knife and plunged it into McCormick's chest. . . ."

Each of the announcer's words was a kick deep into Jim's middle. He wanted to bolt from the store. He wanted to run furiously, put a hundred miles between himself and that brightly colored radio. But a strong magnetism kept him glued to the seat, listening.

". . . Blanche Ford said that McCormick had visited her the night of the robbery and again this afternoon. She said she suspected that McCormick and Dennison had been partners in the delicatessen holdup. Dennison, freed on bail, had come to her apartment demanding that McCormick give him his share of the nine hundred and ten dollars stolen from the proprietor. She said that after stabbing McCormick, Dennison took the money from the body and then fled. The girl told police she and a friend fought with Dennison before he left, inflicting deep scratches on his cheek and neck. Dennison is described as about twenty-seven, clean-cut, with curly black hair. He was wearing. . . ."

The announcer went on and on, but Jim had heard enough. The gashes on his face made him suddenly feel naked. He was sure all the other people at the counter were staring at him. Any moment one of them might point a finger at him and begin yelling, "Murderer!"

He put fifty cents beside his plate and slid off the stool. Fear quickened his footsteps. He had to fight to keep from running.

Out on the street again, he discovered that a cool February wind had come up, and it was excuse enough to turn up the lapels on his gray suit coat. Keeping his chin down so the lapels covered part of his scratches, he moved west on Fourth Street. Panic strode at his side, urging him to run.

He fought it and managed to keep down to a brisk walk. And he decided boldness might be wise. The cops might not find him right under their noses.

A nickel dropped into a street rack supplied him with a newspaper. In a few minutes he was sitting on a bench in Lincoln Park across the street from the white-faced City Hall. The newspaper shielded his face. But it didn't prevent him from watching the rear section of the City Hall, where black-shirted officers busily tramped in and out.

SEVERAL hours later, when the streets of downtown Long Beach were red-washed with neon, Jim Dennison left the park bench. He was stiff and cold. The wind from the ocean pierced his thin coat like spray. A big blob of uncertainty stuck in his chest, but his lean, tanned jaw was set stubbornly and his gray eyes were bold with the courage of desperation.

Jim Dennison had a plan. A risky plan, but he was going to give it a fling. He didn't have much of a weapon—one of the small paring knives was all—but it would have to do.

Keeping to dark side streets, he walked back toward the danger zone—the neighborhood of the delicatessen and the red-brick apartment house. He intended to play detective—long enough, at least, to prove that the girl, Blanche whatever her name was, had killed McCormick.

The clue was the way Blanche had winked at him the first time, when he left the little knife with her. Wanting him to come in, she'd been tossing wiles around like confetti. Obviously, although he hadn't suspected at the time, she'd already stabbed McCormick. The fact that Jim had come along was just a wonderful break for her. Was it logical that she had killed McCormick with another knife, pulled it out and inserted the little paring knife? If so, the chances were that his paring knife, having a thick, narrow blade, did not fit the wound exactly.

Jim smacked a fist into his palm. Dammit, it was plenty logical! And the cops had been called so fast, she couldn't have had time to get rid of the original knife. So it must be hidden somewhere in her apartment. If he could find the knife which fitted the wound exactly, it might prove his innocence.

As he strode along, shoulders hunching into the wintry wind, Jim's mind drifted back to Sunday night. It had all happened so fast. One minute, he was standing in the rear of the delicatessen, partly hidden by the high bread rack. He had heard the *clunk*—and when he stepped into the aisle to investigate, there was the proprietor lying out cold on the floor. And that McCormick guy, part of the broken wine bottle still clutched in his fist, was rifling the cash register.

Apparently, he'd thought the store was deserted. When he saw Jim, he took off like a scalded dog. Jim chased him to the apartment house, lost him and got handcuffed for his trouble. So far as the proprietor was concerned, Jim had been the only other person in the store. Rolling around on the floor, dazed from the blow, the proprietor hadn't seen McCormick—but he had seen Jim scoot past. Naturally, he assumed that Jim had beamed him with the bottle and robbed the till. That was just the first of a long line of lousy breaks.

Walking down the black alley behind the apartment house, Jim wondered grimly if the next few minutes would be as lousy. He swallowed dryly a couple of times and mopped some of the chilled sweat from between his thick eyebrows. *Scared?* he asked himself. *Sure, a little. But mostly I'm mad! I'll make that damn girl eat her lies if it's the last thing I do!*

Jim stood in the shadow of a high fence and studied the apartment building. He made sure there were no cops

stationed around anywhere. Then he counted the yellow rectangles of light which were the third floor until he singled out the windows belonging to Blanche's living room. There were two fire escapes. One led directly past her kitchen. The other passed within fifteen feet of her living room, and it was the one Jim decided to try.

He climbed the iron steps slowly, taking pains to prevent shoe scuffing. When he was just below the third-floor level, he raised his head and peered over into the girl's room.

He recognized the davenport near which he had found McCormick's body. The girl was lying on it now. All he could see was one slim calf and a satiny red house slipper which was propped against the sofa's arm-rest. He noticed that the ivory-colored kitchen door was closed—and it suggested his next move.

Back down the fire escape Jim went. Before he climbed the other fire escape, he made sure that the little paring knife could be yanked easily from his coat pocket. He moved directly to the kitchen window.

The screen was locked, but there was a small patch directly above the lower sill where at one time someone had cut the mesh in order to poke in a finger and unlatch the screen. Working quietly, it took Jim only a minute or so to unwire the patch and stick his index finger through the ragged little hole. Unlatched, the screen swung out easily.

Jim began to push the window up. Suddenly, he realized he was panting like an exhausted locomotive. He stopped then and forced his breathing back to nearly normal.

The window sighed as he eased it up. He slid over the sill and lowered himself to the kitchen linoleum. Then he closed the window. It wouldn't do for the girl to feel a draft and come out to investigate.

He moved through the sooty darkness to the wall by the door and his fingers found a light switch. Long, taut seconds passed while he pressed the button slowly. Finally, there was a small snap and light filled the room.

THE kitchen was small, but it was as good a place as any to begin his search. In one corner an old black gas range stood on spindly curved legs. An aluminum-painted water heater, with rivets like large warts, was fastened to the wall beside the stove. The sink-boards were finished in a creamy soapstone. There were a lot of drawers below the sink and much cupboard space above it. The refrigerator was old and full of rattles. It and the swing band on the radio in the next room built up a cushion of noise which Jim hoped would keep Blanche from hearing any sounds he made.

Five unsuccessful minutes later, he was standing on the stove examining the air vent in the ceiling. A sharp feeling of desperation was building up in him. If the knife weren't in the kitchen, he would have to search the other rooms—and how the blazes could he manage that?

He kept his precarious balance on the stove by bracing one hand against the aluminum water heater. Then he noticed that the heater was cold. And that was a hell of a note. What good was a cold heater? The clock-shaped gadget on its right flank was marked *thermostat*, so he knew it was automatic. The heater couldn't be cold unless someone had deliberately—

Quickly, Jim lowered himself to the floor. The bottom of the heater was open. Crouching on hands and knees, he peered up at the four gas jets directly beneath the tank's rounded bottom. They were out. So was the pilot light. Which was reasonable—because the han-

dle of a brass letter opener was wedged between it and the jets.

Brown stains were on the blade.

Jim didn't touch it. He got up from the floor. The skin on his shoulders itched. He felt uncomfortable all over. Because the worst was yet to come.

Finding the letter opener was only a two-inch hurdle. The big six-footer awaited. The police would demand more proof. Hell, they might even say he had sneaked into the kitchen and hidden the letter opener himself—and could he prove he hadn't?

Jim clenched his teeth. As he drew the sharp, bright knife from his coat pocket, he felt the muscles bulge along his throat and jaw. He stepped over to the door separating the kitchen from the other room. His fingers quivered slightly as he placed them on the ivory-colored panel and pushed. He put his eye against the tiny crack.

Blanche was still lying on the davenport. She glanced inquisitively at the door to the outside hall and then turned back to her confession magazine. The radio—beating its brains out only two feet away—didn't seem to bother her at all. She wore a shiny black lounging robe. One long white leg was folded against the back of the sofa.

Jim pushed the door aside swiftly. Like greased lightning, he crossed the room. His left hand was pressed across her soft red mouth before she realized he was beside her.

Her dark eyes swelled with fright. She kicked and twisted. She tried to bite his hand. Jim pushed her head deeper into the green pillow, rumpling her long black hair. She resisted wildly until he touched the tip of the knife against her smooth throat and then she became rigid.

"You killed him!" Jim said between tight lips. "I found it, hidden in the heater."

Suddenly, the girl didn't care any

more about the sharp metal so close to her throat. One hand shot out and struck the nearby end table, smashing a pottery lamp against the hardwood floor. A piece of wire flipped from the wreckage across the rug. A furious strength filled the girl. She twisted around on the davenport to a sitting position, smashing her hard-soled slipper down on the wire's end.

There was a crunching sound and Jim saw why. She had crushed a tiny plastic gadget containing a mass of wires. He grabbed her shoulder and flung her against the sofa back.

"I found the letter opener in the water heater!" Jim growled. "I know how you worked it and, dammit, I'll get a confession out of you if I have to cut you up into fish bait!"

The girl covered her bare shoulder with the shiny black robe. She laughed bitterly and Jim wondered if, somehow, she knew he was merely threatening.

"Put that thing away," she said, pushing aside Jim's knifehand. "I didn't kill him. Harry did—my husband—but you'll never be able to prove it. You won't—"

Abruptly, Joe heard a low, urgent voice. "Blanche, for Pete's sake, shut up! You forgotten the bug?"

Joe whirled around. The hall door was just being shut by a tall man in a brown tweed suit. There'd been so much noise in the room he hadn't heard it open. The man turned around—and Jim gasped.

It was him! The lanky guy who had robbed the delicatessen! The man who'd been killed!

JIM just stood there stiffly. He brushed a hand across his bewildered eyes, but the tall guy didn't disappear. Instead, he strode over to Blanche.

"Relax, Harry," she said. "Don't

worry about the dictagraph. I just smashed it!"

Harry's long narrow face was split by a wry grin. "Well, now I feel better, honey." Then he turned to Jim. "What's the matter, fella, think you're seeing a spook?"

Jim didn't reply.

"I guess it was that sport shirt that fooled you," said Harry. "After Mac got himself stabbed, we put the shirt on him and pushed in your knife. I skipped out before you came around the second time. He was practically the same size as me so it worked nice, didn't it?"

"Yeah," said Jim slowly. Things had become crystal-clear. This afternoon, he hadn't seen all of the dead man's face. The raspberry-colored shirt and the man's lankiness had convinced him it was the same guy he'd chased Sunday night. But McCormick was somebody else—and this Harry guy was Blanche's husband.

"Who was McCormick?" Jim asked. He didn't really expect an answer, but Harry was feeling generous.

"I hate to see a guy so jumbled up as you," said Harry. A corner of his thin mouth lifted sarcastically. "McCormick and me pulled a couple of little holdups lately. But I did a solo on that job Sunday night. And then today the wise guy comes around asking for a cut of the nine hundred. So we had a little argument and the letter opener wound up in his chest."

Blanche was frowning. "Listen, Harry, there's things to do. Our friend Jim here snooped around in the kitchen and found the letter opener."

"So what?" said Harry. "We'll get rid of it." He looked at Jim. "Might as well tell you, guy. You're cooked. The cops figured you might come back here to get even with Blanche—so they fixed up a

little trap. A dictagraph and so on."

Harry started for the kitchen. "I'll take care of the opener," he said.

Harry started to open the kitchen door. Abruptly, the hall door flew back and in walked half a dozen men.

"Everybody stay where you are," ordered the toughest-looking of the lot. He waved his gun like the nozzle of a hose and glanced at Jim. "I'm Lieutenant Candy. You're Jim Dennison?"

"The letter opener!" Jim tried to rein in his voice, but he couldn't. He kept shouting at the lieutenant. "Harry killed McCormick with it and hid it in the water heater. I managed to find it and I was—"

"Stick on the handcuffs!" commanded Lieutenant Candy. He stepped closer to Jim, who instinctively jammed his wrists behind his back.

A slow, friendly smile curled across the lieutenant's homely face. "You know," he said, "sometimes my boys get in a hurry. They searched this place, but they didn't find that opener." His heavy hand patted Jim's shoulder. "It's going to be nearly the best evidence we've got against these two."

"Huh!" blurted Harry. His thin face twisted with rage as one of the other officers cuffed his hands together. Then he caught himself and added smoothly: "That letter opener's no proof."

Lieutenant Candy walked over to the davenport. He stooped and pawed around under it.

"Cops have to have some secrets," he told Harry briskly. "We only let you know about the bug we put in the lamp. After the girl smashed it, we kept right on recording with this one."

He brought out a plastic button attached to a wire. Jim stepped over and studied the tiny device. Then he grinned.

"If that thing's a bug," he said, admiringly. "Just call me Nature Boy!"

How much punishment should a Galahad take—to save the luscious neck of his willful ex-wife?

CHAPTER ONE

Sweet and Fatal

HE COULD not cut his throat with the razor blade. It must have lain for years against the sweating stone wall; the edge was encrusted with rust. Sitting on the hard dirt floor in total darkness, Paul Baron sawed at his neck, but he could not even break the skin.

That small amount of exertion exhausted him. He rested against the wall before setting to work again. This time he tried to jab a corner of the razor blade into his wrist. After a while he felt a drop or two of blood, but he could not get down deep enough to open the vein.

There was nothing else with which he could kill himself. His pocket knife and nail file had been taken from him along with all his clothes but his pants. He thought of hanging himself with strips torn from his pants, but there was nothing in that absolutely bare room to which to tie the other end.

With a ragged sigh, Paul Baron slumped down on the floor. He lay on his stomach to avoid agonizing contact on his torn shoulders and back.

The air was fetid, gagging. There was



Gripping Crime-Adventure Novelette

By BRUNO FISCHER

*That was when Paul
moved in, bottle up-
raised.*



THE LADY GROOMS A CORPSE

no window. The room, with its walls of fieldstone and its dirt floor, was completely underground. He did not know where he was. They had taken him here at night, and during the ride he had been forced to lie on the floor of the car. Doubtless he was far out in the country, distant from other houses, for they did not care how loudly he screamed when Hunk whipped him with the flexible steel rod.

A terrible sound broke the silence. It was only a thin scraping, but that meant the bolt was being drawn. They were coming back to work on him again till he told them where he had hidden Dale Kavanagh.

Lifting his chin from the floor, he saw a thin edge of light appear. It grew and Martha stepped through the open door.

She was an immense woman, well over six feet in height. Not exactly fat—built more along the ponderous lines of a wrestler.

Paul Baron leaped to his feet and threw himself at her.

Martha didn't retreat. She met his charge solidly, with hands thrust out. He was as weak as a child, but in his frenzy he managed to get his fingers on her windpipe. Her arms wound about him, hugging him, squeezing the air out of him.

He could not choke her. His fingers lacked even the power to shut off her voice.

"Hunk!" she yelled hoarsely.

She could have handled him alone. Her hands digging into his chewed-up back sent waves of torment through him, and his constricted diaphragm sapped whatever strength was left in his legs. He was not aware that the man named Hunk had entered the room until he felt himself torn out of Martha's crushing embrace. An open hand slapped his face, smashing him against the stone wall. As Paul started to slump,

Hunk chuckled and raised his right fist.

"Don't knock him cold," Martha said quietly.

Paul fell as far as his knees and stayed there. He wanted to weep, but he was beyond even tears.

"How'd you like a two-inch steak and a schooner of beer?" Martha was saying. Hunk had gone out. She stood over Paul, an amiable smile on her lumpy face. "And after that we'll give you your clothes and drive you back to town and you'll be free as air. It's up to you. All you have to do is tell us where she is."

That was all. Just a few words and the torture would stop. And they would go to where Dale was waiting and kill her.

Then Hunk was back, a short, thick man with fists like rocks. He had brought that terrible steel rod.

"Time for another treatment," Hunk said cheerfully, slapping the steel whip gently against his own leg.

Paul pressed his naked back against the rough wall, every nerve quivering with anticipated agony. Till Friday afternoon, Dale had said, and they had brought him here Tuesday night. By Friday George Craig, the only person who could protect Dale, would return. But there was no way to count time here where day and night were the same. A hundred hours might have passed—or only twenty.

THE steel rod struck without warning, cutting across Paul's ribs. He rose with an animal cry, staggering crazily, and Hunk danced around him and laid the quivering rod across his back. Paul's stomach turned, and he felt himself sink lower than the floor—down, down into endless darkness.

He came back with the shock of cold water doused over him. He heard Hunk growl: "You starved him too much. That's why he's so weak."

He felt his shoulders raised by Martha's powerful arm, and a glass pressed to his lips. He drank greedily. Then there was food that she fed him like an infant and it filled a little of the sick emptiness in his stomach.

After that they went out, leaving him to regain enough strength to take a whipping without passing out.

They would be back again and again, relentless, merciless.

Don't worry, Dale. I'll take all they can hand out. I'll take it until they kill me.

It was what a man would do for his wife.

Except that Dale wasn't his wife any more. That had lasted only a handful of days. Not so very much longer than he had spent in this hell for her. . . .

Paul Baron had met Dale Kavanagh two years ago, when she had come for gas to the service station he and his brother Roy owned in the heart of town.

She was a beautiful girl in a sleek cream-colored convertible that contrasted vividly with her black eyes and hair. She was tall and slim, and she always had a wonderful smile for him.

He started to get breathless whenever he saw her convertible pull up to a gas pump.

His brother Roy caught on. He saw it in Paul's face.

"Forget her, Paul," Roy warned him. "She's too rich for your blood."

"In looks or money?"

"I don't know about money, though that car she's driving cost plenty. But she looks expensive."

She looked marvelous to Paul, and nothing else impressed him. He'd built up a nice business with his brother; he considered himself as good as any man. So the next time she came for gas, he asked her for a date.

Her long black lashes shaded her eyes

as she looked gravely at him. "I'd love to, Paul," she said.

He had three dates with her in six days, and the following week they were married. Without fuss, at the city hall with his brother and sister-in-law as witnesses. Then Paul and Dale drove off on their honeymoon.

They went in Dale's convertible because it was better than Paul's coupe. They drove to Miami Beach and stayed at a hotel that cost sixty dollars a day. They made the rounds of the race tracks and the night clubs and the gambling joints.

One night Paul said "Okay, sweetheart, we've had our honeymoon fling. From now on we're normal married people watching our pennies."

"Pennies?" She laughed, showing her perfect white teeth. "You're not a tightwad, darling."

"No, but I'm not rich."

"But you own a big service station!"

"It's not so big and I own only half. Besides Roy and I borrowed up to the hilt to buy it."

She hugged his arm. "Anything you say, darling."

He still had a week before returning to work. They moved to a smaller, quieter hotel at a third the rates. They spent their days on the beach and evenings strolling on the boardwalk. Paul found he enjoyed that more. They were closer to each other, away from the whirl of social activities. He loved her so intensely that sometimes it was like a physical pain.

They stayed at that cheaper hotel three days. On the fourth day she was gone.

Gone with only a few scrawled words left on the dresser: *I'm afraid we've both made a mistake. I'm sorry.*

She had packed her clothes while he had been in the lobby reading a paper, and she had driven off in her car.

He heard from her only once, from Reno where she had gone for a divorce. So then she was no longer his wife even in name. He did not know what had happened. He tried to wipe her from his mind, but he couldn't.

It was a year later that Paul saw her again.

A ROUTINE service call came in. A customer was stuck in his car a couple of miles outside of town. Paul drove out in the towing truck, and there was Hugo Nast's expensive sedan, and Nast, slight and sleek, standing beside it.

"Motor turns over, but nothing happens," Nast explained.

Paul opened the front door. He froze. Dale was seated in the car.

"Hello, Paul," she said.

He nodded and slipped behind the wheel and stepped on the starter. She sat next to him, inches away, her perfume like a drug. She wore a bright dress clinging to her splendid figure and a gay kerchief over her black hair. As he listened to the whirring of the starter, her nearness was fire in his chest. He got out of the car and raised the hood.

The feed line was clogged. As he cleared it, he heard Nast say: "So you know Paul?"

"We were married once." Her voice was disinterested.

Nast turned to Paul and smiled. There was amusement in that tight smile, contempt, as if he found ridiculous the idea of Dale Kavanagh having been married to a mechanic.

But what was Hugo Nast? A crook. A racketeer who, it was said, practically owned the city. That was what hurt Paul most—the fact that Dale was out driving with a man like that.

Paul slammed down the hood. "Try it now, Mr. Nast."

The motor turned over. Hugo Nast drove off with Dale.

Paul climbed into the towing car and drove off as if he wanted to wreck the car and himself with it. . . .

I hated her, Paul thought dully as he lay in agony in the airless dark room. Maybe I hate her still, but I'm letting them cut me to pieces for her. . . .

Abruptly every nerve in his body was quivering. Metal scraped; the door-bolt was being slipped open. Lifting his chin from the floor, he saw a thin edge of light appear. It grew and Martha and Hunk stepped through the door. Hunk had his steel whip.

"Wait!" Paul said hoarsely. "I'll tell you where she is."

Reluctantly Hunk lowered the rod. Martha said: "Now you're showing sense."

"What day is this?"

"Saturday," Martha replied quickly, almost eagerly.

She lied, of course. By Saturday it would be all over. He would know that the deadline had passed when they killed him.

"Come on, give," Hunk said, impatiently tapping the rod against his ankle.

Paul sat on the floor, huddled within himself. "My brother Roy has a summer place at Lake Kull. Dale Kavanagh is there."

"Where at Lake Kull?" Martha demanded.

"A few hundred feet up a dirt road called Birch Lane. There's a mailbox with the name Baron on it. The bungalow is a little way back in the woods toward the lake. Brown shingles and white trim."

Then they were gone. The darkness had closed in on him. He had delayed a whipping, but what were three lousy, crummy, insignificant hours where time had no end?

CHAPTER TWO

Don Quixote

MONTHS after he had met her in Hugo Nast's car Dale became big news in the city. She was involved in murder.

George Craig, the crusading district attorney who had been elected to office in November, set out to make good on his campaign pledge to get Hugo Nast. Hampered by a hostile police department, he couldn't touch Nast—but his investigators got the goods on Ronald Candler, head of the slot-machine syndicate that was part of Nast's gambling empire. Candler was ready to trade Nast's scalp for immunity.

What Ronald Candler got out of it instead were three .38 caliber slugs in his body at two o'clock in the morning in front of Hugo Nast's house.

So Craig was sure he had Nast at last until Dale Kavanagh stepped forward. At the moment of the murder, she said, Nast was in her apartment three miles away. He had called on her at midnight and had not left until three in the morning. Craig didn't have a chance to touch Nast with an alibi like that.

The newspapers had a field day with Dale's photos in various poses. She was very photogenic.

Paul Baron refused to read any of it in the papers or hear it on the radio. When the men at the service station discussed the case, he walked away.

His brother Roy and Roy's wife and a few friends who knew that she had once been his wife were sorry for him. They said little, but it showed in their eyes. That was almost as hard to take as Dale being involved in this dirty, nasty business with a racketeer. . . .

You did foolish things, Dale, but a man can forgive much. Suffer and forgive because he loves you. We can make

a fresh start—if only I live through this.

He must have dozed off on the dirt floor, for he was awakened by light against his eyeballs. He awoke abruptly, in a cold sweat.

A voice said: "That was a dirty trick you played on Hunk."

Paul twisted his head and saw a pair of highly polished black shoes and the sharp creases of immaculate gray trousers.

"Don't you think I know all about your brother's place at Lake Kull?" Hugo Nast went on. "One of the first places I looked. By now I know more about you than you do yourself."

But he didn't know where to find Dale Kavanagh. The thought gave Paul savage satisfaction, as if by having been so clever he had paid back a little what Nast had done to him. He pushed himself up to a sitting position and hugged his knees. The tall, gaunt man named Stretch stood in the doorway.

"You're wasting your time on me," Paul told him.

Hugo Nast laughed. His laughter was low and pleasant. He was a slim man who wore suits with elaborately padded shoulders. His carefully cultivated charm didn't ring phony until it was turned on a beaten half-naked man in a dark room.

"I like you, Paul," he said. "That's why I always took my business to your service station. I'd like to see you go out of here in one piece with five grand in your pocket."

Paul said nothing.

"You're a sucker, kid," Nast told him, his voice getting thin with anger. "She never gives, only takes. Look at the way she sold me out."

"I won't let you kill her," Paul said.

Nast sighed and turned his head to the door. "Hunk back yet?"

"Martha says any minute now," Stretch replied.

Nast thrust his hands into his pockets, stood brooding down at Paul. "Kid, up to now Hunk's gone easy with you. He'll really get unpleasant when he comes back."

Paul felt sobs welling in his throat, tears misting his eyes. But the fragment of pride still left in him would not let them see him weep. He stretched himself out on his side, turned his back to them, dug his teeth into his forearm.

"Okay, Paul, if that's what you want," Nast said, and his voice was suddenly weary.

There was a stirring of feet, a creaking of hinges, and the darkness was back and the silence.

I can stand it for you, Dale. When you needed a man you could trust, of whose love you were sure, you came to me out of all the men you had ever known. That means everything now.

AT ONE o'clock in the morning Dale had come to the little two-room furnished apartment in which he lived. The ringing of the doorbell roused him from sleep, and when he unlocked the door she plunged into his arms.

"Oh, darling!" she said.

This was the second time he had seen her since she had walked out on him, and her loveliness was dazzling and her splendid body still felt good in his arms. Her mouth was soft under his. It was like a homecoming.

"Paul, he wants to kill me!"

"Who does?"

"Hugo Nast. Because I saw him shoot Ronald Candler."

He pulled her head back and looked at the terror in the dark depths of her eyes.

Quietly he said: "You told the police you were with him at the time."

"I lied. I was in Hugo Nast's house.

Ronald Candler showed up after midnight and Hugo took him into another room. I was surprised; I knew that Candler was making a deal with District Attorney Craig to sell Hugo out. Perhaps Hugo sent for him to persuade him to change his mind, and Candler came because he was sure Hugo wouldn't dare do anything to him in his own house.

"I heard them argue loudly, and then Candler stalked out of the house. He must have hit Hugo; half a minute later I saw Hugo and there was blood on the corner of his mouth. He was white with anger. He ran after Candler and shot him dead on the sidewalk."

She had left Paul's embrace. She was moving agitatedly about the room as she spoke.

A filthy business, he thought angrily. And because she was in it over her head, she had come to him.

"Hugo Nast threatened to kill me unless I told the police he was in my apartment at the time," Dale went on. "He's a killer, Paul, and I—I didn't want to die. . . ."

She was sobbing softly, and suddenly his heart twisted. He felt tender and protective; again he held her close.

"But that was several months ago," he said.

"I couldn't stand having it on my conscious. Yesterday afternoon I went to see Craig to tell him everything. He wasn't in; he's attending some sort of conference in Cleveland and won't be back till Friday. I don't know why—but an hour later Hugo Nast knew I'd been there and guessed why. This evening he came to my apartment and said he'd kill me if I tried it again. He—he hit me."

Her voice cracked. She touched her cheek as if she could still feel the impact of Nast's hand.

"All you have to do is sit tight till

Friday and then tell Craig," Paul told her. "He'll protect you. And with his alibi gone and an eye-witness to the murder, Nast will be arrested at once and won't be able to touch you."

"You don't understand," she said. "When he slapped me, I lost my head. I phoned the police and told a detective that I could prove Hugo Nast had murdered Candler. He said he would be right over. That was four hours ago. He never showed up."

Paul pulled air into his lungs. "Looks bad. Nast practically owns the police department."

"That's why I'm so desperate. There must be honest policemen, but how can I tell which ones are? And Hugo Nast has his men even in the district attorney's office. I can't trust any of them but Craig. I can't turn to anybody but you." Her face dug into the curve of his shoulder. "Paul, I don't want to die! You've got to hide me till Craig gets back on Friday!"

"You can stay here."

"No. You don't know how thorough Hugo is. He has to kill me to save himself. He'll tear the city apart looking for me. He knows we were once married and he'll come here."

Paul snapped his fingers. "Floyd Donnelly's house! He and his wife left a month ago for a long visit to California. He's having the house redecorated, so he left the key at the service station. I still have the key. And Donnelly's house can't be connected with either of us."

Dale uttered a small sighing sound as some of the terror washed out of her. "Darling, I never want to go away from you again. I—I made a terrible mistake in Miami. Now I know that you're the only man who ever meant anything to me."

He wasn't quite sure he believed her, but holding her was so good. Reluctant-

ly he released her and went into his room to dress.

He was knotting his necktie when he heard her gasp in the other room.

He ran out. She stood at one of the two windows, and her slim body was sagging.

"Down there in the street," she whispered. "Hunk. Hugo's bodyguard!"

Three stories below, the street was very quiet. A short, broad figure did not quite merge with the brick wall across the street.

"He followed me here," Dale said. "We can't get out and soon Hugo will come and then—"

His arm tightened on her shoulder. "Easy, Dale. There's a back exit from this building to the back street."

She clung trembling to his arm as they took the fire stairs down to the basement.

At the door he paused.

"Wait here," he said.

He stepped out to the narrow alley that ran along the side of the building. He saw nobody until he reached the head of the alley. There stood a man where he could watch the basement exit. A very tall and thin man who looked as if a stiff breeze could double him up.

They were efficient, all right. But aside from Hugo Nast, none of them knew what Paul looked like. Paul stuck a cigarette between his lips and sauntered up to the tall man. "Got a match, bud?"

In the dim light the tall man looked him over. One of his hands went into his pocket—and Paul hit him in the side of the neck.

As the tall man sagged, Paul stepped behind him and hooked his arm about his neck and applied pressure until there was no more resistance. He dragged the unconscious man a few feet into the alley, then went back for Dale.

CHAPTER THREE

That Nasty Nast

THEY walked through deserted streets, keeping close to the shadows of buildings. The service station was on the way. Paul unlocked the office, got Donnelly's key out of the register, and again he and Dale moved hand in hand, silent and breathless and urgent.

Donnelly's house was only three blocks farther—a placid stucco house on a quiet street. Paul unlocked the door, but did not switch on the light. He felt Dale press herself against him.

"Darling, don't ever leave me again," she said.

He didn't point out that she was the one who had left him.

"What about food?" she said.

"One of us can slip out to the grocery store around the corner. That won't be much of a risk. Nast has no reason to look for us in this particular neighborhood."

"Is the phone working?"

The electricity probably was, he thought, because the workmen would need light. But Donnelly would have no reason to leave the phone connected. He struck a match and located the phone in the kitchen, and it was dead.

"That's a bad break," Dale said. "We could have called the district attorney's office, using a false name, to ask where we could reach Craig in Cleveland. Then we'd phone him there."

"I can slip out to a phone."

"And suppose one of them sees you?" she argued. "You will have to make a lot of phone calls and maybe have Craig call you back, and it will take a long time. Hugo Nast has so many men. They'll be all over the city and have a description of you, and if one of them follows you back here—" She

trembled in the circle of Paul's arms.

"Then we'll have to wait here till Friday."

"What if Craig doesn't get back Friday after all? You have to get in touch with him, darling. And once you leave here, you won't be able to come back because they'll be watching you all the time."

She was right, he thought. It was his job to work on the outside, trying to get in touch with Craig. She clung to him like a lost, frightened child, and he knew that she couldn't take much waiting in terror. He'd have to get Craig back to the city as quickly as possible.

He left just before dawn.

When he was outside the house he felt exposed, defenseless. He fought down the fear quivering in him. After all, Nast wasn't after him; he was after only Dale. All the same, it would be a good idea to get the revolver that was kept in the service station in case of a holdup.

Paul did not appreciate the desperate ruthlessness of a man like Hugo Nast. He underestimated him. When he reached the service station, there in the pale light of the dawning day was Stretch and the broad man named Hunk.

They had guns in their hands and they forced Paul into a sedan. They drove to Paul's apartment house. Hugo Nast stepped out of the doorway. He entered the car, and they parked there for a while, Paul in the back seat with Nast, Stretch and Hunk in the front seat.

"Where is Dale Kavanagh?"

Paul shrugged. "She came to see me for a while tonight. I guess she went home."

"And where were you in the last few hours?"

"I couldn't sleep. I took a walk."

Nast dug a wad of bills out of his topcoat pocket. "Two grand there. For you. Where's Dale?"

This was going the way Paul had expected. "I'm afraid I can't earn it," he said.

"I'll make it five grand."

"I don't know where she is."

Nast sighed. "Let's go."

PAUL was forced to lie on the floor of the car as they drove.

That was a good sign; if Nast intended to kill him, he wouldn't care if Paul saw where they were going. They drove for what seemed a couple of hours and stopped at an isolated farm house. There for the first time he saw the enormous woman named Martha.

In the house Hugo Nast removed his topcoat and said: "Let's have a rod." Stretch took a big automatic out from under his shoulder. Nast clicked off the safety. His perfectly groomed face had become like granite.

"We can bury you outside, Paul," he said, "and nobody will know what became of you. You have another choice. Tell me where Dale is and you live and get five grand in the bargain. You have five seconds."

Paul sweated. He knew that Nast wouldn't pull the trigger, but it wasn't easy to look into the gaping muzzle.

"I'll count five," Nast said. "One . . . two . . ."

He reached the count of five and nothing happened. Hate and desperation turned the pale ice of Nast's eyes into fire. And Paul smiled a little to himself. He had expected this too. He was too clever for them.

"A wise guy," Nast said. "You figure I can't get anything out of you dead. But alive I can. Take him downstairs, boys."

Hunk and Stretch took him down to the cellar and into an airless, windowless room. As soon as Paul stepped through the door, Hunk hit him. Paul staggered halfway across the room, and

then both of them swarmed over him. They battered him down to the floor. They dragged him up to his feet and slammed fists into his face and body.

After a while Hugo Nast came in. He looked down at Paul lying battered and bleeding and only half conscious.

"Where's Dale?"

Paul ground his knuckles into his mouth. He could take this. It was bad, but he could take all their fists dished out.

Again he underestimated them.

They stripped off his shirt. Twisting his head, he saw Hunk standing over him with something long and thin and quivering in his hand. Then it descended and his torso leaped and bucked with outrageous agony.

That was only the first time. . . .

Paul Baron roused to find light in the cellar room, but Hunk and his steel whip were not there. It was Martha. Stretch hovered in the doorway as an additional guard.

"Come with me," she said.

He stared up at her with eyes dull, jaw slack, not understanding.

"There's breakfast waiting for you upstairs," Martha said.

It was some kind of trick, he thought, but he stumbled up to his feet, stood swaying. She prodded him, and he moved unsteadily to the door and followed Stretch across the basement and up the wooden stairs. He wobbled. He would have fallen down the stairs if Martha's strong shoulder hadn't been behind him.

At a table in a large kitchen filled with sunlight, Hugo Nast and Hunk sat drinking coffee. The light hurt Paul's eyes.

"Sit down, Paul, and have coffee with us," Nast invited amiably.

Paul dropped into a chair, slumped against the table. Martha filled a cup, and the heady odor of hot coffee gripped

his stomach. He gulped it without sugar or milk, and when he set the cup down she refilled it.

"Feel better?" Nast asked.

It was completely bewildering. Maybe he was still down in the dark room dreaming this. But they looked real enough. There was no hostility in their faces or their attitudes; they might have been any group lingering over breakfast. And Nast appeared to be very pleased over something.

"Stretch will drive you," he told Paul.

"But you better eat before you go."

"G-go where?" Paul stammered.

"Anywhere you want." Nast reached for the coffee pot. "I'm grateful that you were stubborn. I saved myself that five grand I offered you."

"What do you mean?"

Nobody answered. Martha set a plate of ham and eggs before him, and he pounced on the food with a kind of madness.

As Nast lifted his coffee cup, his cuff pulled away from the watch on his wrist. It was twenty after ten. But what day? The answer was right there at the table. Hunk was reading a newspaper, and the date on it said Friday, October 15.

The day the district attorney was to return to town. In a very few hours, if not already, Dale would be under his protection, destroying Nast's alibi and pinning murder on him.

Nast didn't look at all worried.

"You didn't find Dale?" Paul blurted his thoughts.

NAST shrugged. "After all, you've been refusing to tell me anything, so why should I tell you? Just consider yourself lucky." He looked Paul over. "You'll scare little children if you go back to town looking like that. The bathroom is up the hall. There's hot water."

No guard followed Paul into the bath-

room. There was an open window, but they didn't care if he escaped. He filled the bathtub. The hot water felt soothing on his mangled back. He lay in a kind of torpor, trying to get his weary brain to think straight.

They must have found Dale and killed her.

Then why were they letting him go? They knew that he would head straight for the district attorney. Maybe he wouldn't be able to prove that Nast had killed Dale as well as Ronald Candler, but he could prove that he had been kidnapped and tortured. It would be so easy for them to kill him here and bury his body.

Yet they were letting him go.

He found shaving cream and a razor. In the mirror he looked like somebody he had never seen before. He shaved and combed his hair, and felt a little better.

Only Martha was in the kitchen when he returned. She gave him the rest of his clothes. When he was dressed, she said: "Stretch is waiting in the car."

Food and the bath had restored a little of his strength, but Paul found himself shambling unsteadily, like a man who had left his bed in the midst of a high fever. Stretch sat behind the wheel of a coupe. Paul got in beside him.

There was no conversation on the way. Stretch found his voice when they entered the city. "Where you wanna get off?"

"Anywhere," Paul said.

The coupe rolled on half a mile more before it pulled up at the curb. "Okay, beat it," Stretch said.

Paul's knees started to buckle when he stood. He leaned against a light pole and looked around. He knew every part of the city. Here he was only five blocks from his service station; less than that from Floyd Donnelly's house.

And in Donnelly's house might be a

clue to what had happened to Dale. Maybe she had left a message for him. Maybe her dead body. . . .

He moved from the pole. One block ahead and two to the right. The morning was bright and crisp. He shambled like a drunk, like a punchy fighter, and there was a tumult of fear and uncertainty in him. This was all wrong. Whatever had happened, it didn't make sense for Nast to let him go.

He crossed the street, and halfway up the block was Donnelly's little stucco house. His dragging steps became slower; the three-block walk had tired him greatly. At that, he was lucky Stretch had dropped him off so close. More than half a mile from here he had told Stretch he was willing to get off anywhere, but Stretch had continued driving.

Paul stopped dead. Suddenly he knew. He had been tricked.

That was why he had been let off in this part of town. The night he had hidden Dale, Stretch and Hunk had seen him come from this direction. They had deliberately made it convenient for him to go back to her.

He stood swaying, sweating. It should have occurred to him that he had been released to lead them to Dale's hideout. But he had been too groggy—too mentally as well as physically battered. Hugo Nast must have counted on that. And Nast was desperate because it was Friday and time was crowding him. About all that had been left to him was a frantic stunt like this. And it was paying off.

Paul glanced over his shoulder. A two-toned green sedan was parked at the corner, two or three feet from the curb, as if the driver had paused for only a moment. Sunlight glinted on the windshield making it impossible to see who was inside. Maybe Nast and Hunk. They had left the farmhouse some time before he had; they must have been

waiting where Stretch had dropped him off.

At the farther corner a man was lighting a cigarette. He seemed in no hurry to move on after he had the light. Paul had never before seen him, but Nast had a lot of men in his organization. Probably other unknown and unseen men were shadowing him also. He was boxed in.

Suddenly Paul smiled. All right, Nast was clever. He had caught on just in time. They knew only that he was walking up this street; they had no idea that he had been heading for the stucco house. He had only to walk past it and keep going to his service station, and Dale would remain safe in her hideout.

He resumed walking, and there was sudden vigor in his stride. He did not glance at Donnelly's house as he came up to it. The man at the corner turned his back, appeared to be studying a passing laundry truck. Paul started to laugh inwardly with a hysterical sense of triumph.

"Paul!"

Dale was coming out of the stucco house.

CHAPTER FOUR

Trapped!

PARALYSIS gripped him. He started to cry out a warning, but he realized that that was the worst thing he could do. He had to pretend he didn't know they were surrounded by killers. That would give him a little time—seconds, anyway.

She had stopped on the small square terrace outside the front door. "Paul, what happened to you?" she demanded. "You could have got word to me somehow."

The man at the corner was moving toward them, not hurrying, but his right

hand was in his pocket. The green sedan started to roll. They were closing in quietly, inconspicuously. But they would move quickly enough if Paul showed that he was aware of them. The car would shoot by and he and Dale would be sprayed with bullets.

He kept his terror locked within him. He compelled himself to saunter without hurry up the short paved walk.

"You said you'd get in touch with Craig by phone," Dale complained before he reached her. "Did you?"

He mounted the three steps to the terrace. He said: "Act as if nothing's wrong. Step back into the house."

"What happened?"

"Nast and his men followed me. I never got in touch with Craig. Hurry!"

He glimpsed panic in her face as she moved backward through the open door. He leaped after her. The green sedan had reached the front of the house. He shut the door, turned the lock.

"My Lord, Paul, we're trapped in here!" She clawed at his arm.

Trapped beyond hope. All they had gained by coming in here was a minute or two. The house was on one floor and hugged the ground; the killers would surround it and enter through windows.

"The back door!" he said. He grabbed her hand and together they ran across the living room and into the kitchen.

A man was in the kitchen. Paul stopped short, for a startled instant thinking that he was one of the killers. Bue he wore a white clerk's jacket and he held no gun. He was a tall, slim kid and he licked his lips nervously.

"Who's he?" Paul demanded.

Dale opened her mouth, but instead of uttering words she shrieked.

The upper half of the back door was glass, and through it Paul saw a man. The face was chubby, unfamiliar. He stared at them where they stood momentarily frozen, and he grinned. The

doorknob started to turn very slowly.

Paul sprang forward, turned the key in the lock. On the other side of the glass the chubby face grinned more broadly, and a fat hand appeared. A gun was in it.

He could have shot Paul through the window, but he didn't. Maybe because Dale was no longer in the kitchen and he had orders to make sure he could get both at once before rousing the neighborhood. Or he was posted there merely to block that exit.

Paul swung from the door and saw Dale and the kid in the white coat had ducked into the dinette. Paul followed them.

"They'll kill me!" Dale whimpered. "You fool, why did you bring them here?"

Paul gripped the back of a chair. The run through the house had used up almost his last bit of strength.

"What's going on?" the kid demanded in terror. "That guy had a gun. I'm getting out of here!"

Paul said: "You'll just get shot down. They'll shoot anybody who tries to get out."

Here in the dinette a bullet couldn't reach them from outside. The only window was high in the wall, long and narrow. The killers were taking their time, organizing their assault. They would not give their presence away until the last moment.

The front doorknob rattled. Then there was silence except for Dale's ragged, sobbing breathing.

"Who're you?" Paul asked the kid.

Dale answered for him. "He works for a grocer. I had no food and I was afraid to leave the house. Wednesday I saw him deliver an order next door and I called to him and he's been bringing me groceries every day. Paul, what are we going to do?"

He was staring at a bottle on the

dinette table. It was a fifth of whiskey, almost full, and two glasses were beside it. A bottle like that could be a weapon, but not against guns.

"Oh, Lord!" Dale cried.

SOMEWHERE in the house glass broke. Paul stepped to the side of the door leading into the living room. At the farther end of the living room Hugo Nast was reaching a hand through a hole in a window and groping for the lock.

Paul moved back out of Nast's range of vision.

"Listen," he said to the grocery clerk. "They only want the girl and me. They'll come in here shooting. Go out there and tell the man who's coming in who you are. Your white coat will convince him."

"S—suppose he shoots first?" the kid moaned.

"It's your one chance. Hurry!"

There was scraping sound, a slight rustling that could have been made by a man crawling through a window. The kid licked his lips. "Okay," he said and stepped into the living room.

Dale dug her fingers into her cheeks. She whispered harshly: "Hugo will kill him anyway."

"But not before he gets us. He knows the kid can't escape."

Paul closed a hand over the neck of the whiskey bottle and moved to the side of the doorway. Dale dug her back into the far corner of the room.

"Who the hell are you?" Nast said.

Paul looked around the door jamb. There in the living room stood Hugo Nast. He held a black automatic thrust out from his right hip. His pale eyes were annoyed. He had expected a simple job without fuss—to hunt Dale and Paul down in the house and shoot them and leave. A third victim complicated matters, but only a little.

"Please!" the kid wailed. "I only

brought the groceries. I don't know nothing!"

Nast moved on, coming close to where the kid stood trembling. He said: "All right, where is—"

That was when Paul propelled himself into the room with what strength remained in him. Nast's attention had been concentrated on the kid. He started to twist his body, bringing his gun around, and Paul smashed the bottle down on Nast's uncovered head.

The bottle shattered, spraying whiskey. Screaming, Nast reeled. Paul caught his right arm and tore the gun out of his hand. Nast didn't know it. He clawed at his face, covered with blood and whiskey, and suddenly he collapsed and lay still.

A shot sounded.

Through the open window Paul saw Hunk's square, ugly face. His bullet had gone wild; he was shifting the muzzle of his gun to try again.

Paul shot three times. In the war he had been pretty good with a handgun. Hunk fell away from the window, soundless, and Paul knew that he had hit him. *That's for the steel whip*, he said savagely to himself.

Suddenly Paul realized that he was alone in the room except for the bloody, motionless man on the floor. He returned to the protection of the dinette. The kid was cowering against the table. Dale sagged in a corner of the wall her hands in front of her face.

"We're all right now," Paul said. "They can't get at us except through the kitchen or the living room and I have a gun."

He stood listening to loud voices outside. The shooting had roused the neighborhood. His legs started to buckle. He knew he couldn't last much longer. He clung to a chair.

Time passed—seconds, minutes, he didn't know. Then he heard somebody

else coming through the living room window.

It was a uniformed cop. He straightened inside the room with his service revolver out. His eyes slid over the bloody man on the floor and fixed on Paul in the dinette doorway.

"Drop that gun!" the cop ordered.

Paul moved toward a table and put the gun on it. He heard himself say in a thin, infinitely tired voice: "We want to see District Attorney Craig."

"Mister," the cop said, "you're going to see plenty of him."

* * *

Paul Baron spent five days in a hospital. The first day only District Attorney Craig and a stenographer were permitted to see him. Craig told him that the whiskey bottle had killed Hugo Nast. Hunk would probably live.

"You're a very brave young man," Craig said.

On the evening of the sixth day the doctor examined him and said there was no reason for him to stay longer. Paul dressed and left. He took a taxi to Dale's apartment.

"Darling!" she cried when she opened the door. She threw her arms about him.

She stepped back, puzzled. "Is anything wrong, darling?"

"Everything," he said. "I've had plenty of time to think in the hospital. When you saw Nast shoot Candler, why didn't you tell Craig right away?"

"I told you—Nast threatened to kill me. I was afraid of him."

He shook his head. "Right after the murder Nast was being held for questioning. He couldn't have harmed you then. It was only because of your statement that he was released. Months later, when it was really dangerous, you decided to tell the truth."

"It was on my conscience."

"I don't think so," Paul said. "Nast

told me you'd sell me out the way you sold him out. What did you sell Nast out for, Dale?"

Her red mouth hardened. "Nast is dead. Let's forget him."

"It was money, Dale. That's the only thing that ever meant anything to you. When I told you my service station didn't bring in as much income as you'd thought, you left me flat. You like nice clothes, nice cars. You started going with Nast because he was rich. You couldn't get enough money out of him that way, but you could bleed him white when you could send him to the electric chair with a word. Wasn't that it, Dale? Just old fashioned blackmail?"

"Don't use that ugly word!"

"Blackmail," he said again. "An ugly word for an ugly thing. Arranging to let a man get away with murder as long as he paid off. But you got too greedy and Nast balked."

She moved toward him, her eyes soft and her mouth slightly parted—very desirable, very beautiful. "Darling, we all make mistakes," she said.

"Was the grocery clerk a mistake?"

She stopped. "I don't understand."

"You like more than money," he said. "Men too. All right, that good-looking clerk brought you groceries the first day you were in Donnelly's house. But why Friday when you expected to leave?"

She clasped her hands, imploringly. "Darling, don't spoil everything for us now! I need you."

"For how long?" He laughed without mirth. "So there you were having a swell time drinking with the kid in Donnelly's house while I was in hell for you. While my back was being cut to pieces by a steel rod because you were a black-mailer." Abruptly he turned to the door.

"Darling!" Dale cried desperately.

He went out to the hall and closed the door behind him.

ONE SUNK PUNK

Joe discovered there's nothing like a gun in the ribs—to make a feller grow up fast.

"You've got ten seconds, kid. . . ."



By

**PHILIP
KETCHUM**

AFTER supper, Joe walked down the street to the house where Carol McBride lived. He was seated on the front steps, talking to her, when Bill Slater came by. Bill Slater was tall, broad-shouldered, heavy. He was a cop. Several months before he had been promoted, and he now wore plain clothes and a detective's badge. But to Joe he was still a cop.

Slater stopped and grinned at them, but his grin was mostly for Carol. It was a crooked grin which deepened the

lines of his face and narrowed his eyes so the frosty blue color of them was almost hidden. He said, "Hi, kids. Where's Eddie?"

Joe stiffened. Scowling, he shook his head. Carol didn't say anything. She didn't act as though she had heard. Her arms were wrapped around her knees and she was staring straight ahead. She was seventeen, Joe's age, and she was almost as tall as Joe—tall and with a slim, straight back and a proud way of holding her head.

"Beat it, Joe," Slater ordered. "I want to talk to Carol."

Joe moistened his lips. A funny, breathless feeling came over him. He fixed his eyes on the toes of Slater's shoes and held them there.

He had hated Bill Slater almost as long as he could remember. He hated any man wearing a police badge. That was instinctive with him as it was with most of the other kids in this part of town. But for Slater, Joe's feelings had a deep and personal basis. It was Slater who had first marched him up before the juvenile court, four years before. He hadn't been guilty of the offense with which he had been charged. He had been put on a probation he resented. He would never forget it.

"Beat it, Joe," Slater said again.

Joe came to his feet. He was suddenly mad, mad all the way through. This was a free country. No cop was going to push him around and get away with it!

Joe shook his head. "I'm staying right here," he said grimly. "You don't own the street—yet."

"Go ahead, Joe," said Carol. "I'm not afraid of him."

But she was. Joe knew it. He again shook his head. "I'm staying right here."

Slater was scowling. After a moment he shrugged his shoulders. "All right, Joe," he agreed. "Stick around. Maybe

you know some of the answers. Where's Eddie?"

"My brother left town a week ago," said Carol quickly. "He said he was going to Dayton. He had a job there."

"Holding up service stations?" asked Slater dryly.

"Eddie had nothing to do with that holdup and you know it," cried Carol. "Why don't you leave us alone?"

Slater pushed his hat to the back of his head. "All right, Carol," he agreed. "Have it your own way. But give Eddie a message for me, will you? Tell him that a fellow who starts running from the cops never gets a chance to rest. He's got to keep running harder and harder and farther and farther. Pretty soon he gets short of breath and slows up and we catch him. We want to talk to your brother, Carol. If he's in the clear, why is he running?"

"I said he was out of town," Carol answered.

Joe stepped forward. "You heard her, copper. Why don't you move on down the street and leave us alone?"

Bill Slater pulled in a long, slow breath. He hesitated for a moment, then shrugged his shoulders and turned away.

Joe stared after him, still feeling the heat of his anger. He muttered something under his breath, something he wouldn't have said aloud in front of Carol. He glanced at her. Carol's face showed the strain of anxiety. She was plenty worried.

"Don't mind that big lug," Joe growled. "How he ever got to be a detective is more than I can figure."

Carol didn't say anything. She was still tense. Joe grinned at her, suddenly rather proud of the way he had faced Bill Slater. He sat down with her again and reached for one of her hands. It was icy cold.

"Forget him, Carol," Joe insisted.

The girl shook her head. "What he

said was true, wasn't it, Joe? Tell me!"

"What do you mean?" Joe asked, frowning.

"I mean what he said about running away."

Eddie was two years older than Carol. He ran with a pretty tough crowd. Joe had seen him several times, lately, in Dan Rogers' car. Rogers was a thin, dark-featured man who had been in trouble with the police a good many times. He was reputedly a gambler.

"Well?" Carol was insisting.

"You mean Eddie didn't go to Dayton?" Joe asked.

"I don't know where he is," said Carol. "Mom and Dad don't either. They're worried about him."

"But Eddie wouldn't get mixed up in a holdup."

"Not if he could help it."

"Don't worry about him, Carol."

The girl shivered though it wasn't cold. "I've got to go in, Joe," she said abruptly. "I promised Mom to do the ironing."

Joe scowled. He was working tonight, himself, but Frank Patton wouldn't expect him for at least another hour. Things had been perfect until Bill Slater came along.

"Night, Joe," Carol called. She turned up the steps, waved to him from the door, and then was gone.

JOE moved on down the street, still scowling. Until tonight, he hadn't guessed for a minute that Eddie might have been involved in the service station holdup a week before. He didn't want to think so now, but Carol's fears for her brother had reached him.

It would be just too bad for Eddie if he were involved. Andy Thomas, who had owned the service station which had been held up, had died of gun-shot wounds. The newspapers had raised quite a howl about the case. One news-

paper was even raising reward money by public subscription.

Joe wondered if it could have been Rogers' crowd which had engineered the holdup. He decided it might have been. If things went bad for a gambler and he needed ready cash, he might possibly branch out in some other line. Particularly a man like Dan Rogers.

There was a light in the printing shop where Joe worked but the door was locked. Joe let himself in with the key, locked the door again, then headed for the workroom. Frank Patton was there, hand-setting a dodger form. He looked up at Joe and waved.

"Back early, huh? Wasn't Carol home?"

"She had some ironing to do."

Frank Patton chuckled. He was a little, stoop-shouldered man with thin gray hair and a dry, wrinkled face. He knew nearly everyone along the street and everyone seemed to respect him. Joe couldn't understand it. Frank Patton didn't amount to much. He hardly made enough in the print shop to pay his rent and Joe's salary.

"I had a run-in with Bill Slater," Joe said as he took off his coat and reached for an apron. "The big lug thinks he owns the street."

"Bill Slater's all right," said Patton mildly. "He's a little on the hard side. Joe, but a cop who handles this beat has to be tough. You kids never make it easy for them."

"Why should we?"

"Why, simply because a cop stands for law and order. He stands between folks who want to live decently and the hoodlums who have no respect for anyone or anything. Not long ago we fought a war. Joe, against hoodlum nations who had no respect for the rights of other nations. Think it over, Joe."

"You think I'm a hoodlum?" Joe asked bluntly.

"Nope, but you were headed that way a few years ago. You could still drift that way. A man has to have respect for the law. Hate Bill Slater if you want to—but support what he stands for. Here, Joe, set this in the hand-press and run off five hundred copies."

Joe got to work. He was still frowning. Every once in a while he got into an argument like this with Frank Patton, and Frank Patton always got the best of it. He had a good notion to quit his job right now. There were plenty of other jobs a man could get.

Frank Patton looked back from the front office, called good night, and left. Joe went ahead levering the hand-press. He finished the five hundred dodgers, bundled them and cleaned up the press. He was just taking off his apron when there was a tap at the alley window.

Joe looked up. He caught his breath, a sudden chill racing down his spine. A face was pressed close to the alley window. Eddie McBride's face.

Joe hurried to the alley door and unlocked it, and Eddie stepped into the work-room.

"Hi, Joe. You all alone?"

His voice was high, strained, and as he spoke his eyes jerked nervously from side to side. He was pale. There were deep shadows under his eyes. He kept his hands in his pockets and he seemed to be shivering.

"Sure I'm alone," Joe answered. "Patton left here almost an hour ago. Where have you been, Eddie? Carol's worried about you. That cop Slater jumped her tonight."

"To hell with Slater," Eddie grated. "Someday I'm gonna take care of that cop."

Joe felt suddenly uneasy. He looked toward the door to the front office.

"Patton isn't coming back, is he?" asked Eddie.

Joe shook his head.

EDDIE took his hands from his pockets. He fumbled for a cigarette and lit it with fingers which weren't very steady. His eyes rested on Joe's face for a moment, then jerked away.

"You've got to help me, Joe," he said abruptly. "I've got to blow. I've got to get out of town."

Joe scowled. "Why, Eddie?"

"I reckon you'd better not know, kid." Eddie's voice was gruff. "If anyone asks you, you haven't seen me. You don't know anything about me, understand?"

Joe nodded, but he wasn't feeling very good about this. He was thinking of Carol and of what Bill Slater had said about a man who runs away.

Eddie McBride wasn't looking very sharp tonight. His clothing was wrinkled and his face was lined with worry. He had looked pretty cocky when Joe had last seen him in Dan Rogers' car.

"I need a little money, Joe," Eddie was saying.

Joe reached into his pocket. "I haven't got much. A dollar six-bits, Eddie. But tomorrow's payday. I can let you have ten tomorrow."

"Tomorrow's too late. How much is in the safe, Joe?"

Joe shook his head. "Why don't you get a loan from Dan Rogers? Why don't you—"

Eddie had stiffened. He took a step forward, an almost wild look showing in his eyes. "What do you know about me and Rogers?" he demanded. "Why did you ask that?"

"I—just asked," Joe said.

"I don't know Rogers," Eddie half shouted. "I never saw the man. Understand? Now get that safe open!"

Joe was suddenly frightened. He told himself it was ridiculous to be afraid of Eddie McBride, but that didn't help. Eddie had reached into his pocket and had tugged out a gun.

Joe backed up against the hand press. He could feel it behind him, solid, immovable. He wiped a hand across his face and was surprised to find that he was perspiring. He stared at the gun in Eddie's hand. He couldn't believe Eddie would use it. Why, he had known Eddie nearly all his life!

"Open that safe, kid," Eddie said again.

Joe turned toward the office. With a nervous laugh, Eddie lowered the gun. "That's the idea, kid," he was nodding. "I knew I could count on you."

Joe hadn't planned it at all, but he suddenly whirled around on Eddie, who had started to follow him. He grabbed at the gun which was still in Eddie's hand. He caught it and fought for it. He felt the jar of a blow in the face, and then another, but he managed to twist the gun from Eddie's hand and throw it half across the shop. He was screaming, "Eddie, listen to me! Listen to me!"

But Eddie McBride wasn't listening to anything. He was taller than Joe. He had longer arms. His fists rocked Joe backwards and Joe tripped over something and went down. He rolled to his knees and got up and plowed straight at Eddie, but Eddie seemed to keep sliding away from him, sliding away as he stabbed out with his fists again and again.

Joe went down once more, and once more got to his feet. He was winded and dizzy, and there was a ringing sound in his ears. Then suddenly there were sounds of many voices in the workroom, and someone grabbed Joe by the shoulders and pulled him back.

It was a cop. Bill Slater was there, too. The detective had collared Eddie McBride and had slapped steel bracelets on his wrists.

"Nice work, Joe," the detective was saying. "Maybe I'll have to change my mind about you. What did Eddie want?

Was he after the money in Frank Patton's safe?"

Joe stiffened. He shook his head. He wanted to step forward and smash the crooked smile on Slater's face. "It was just one of those private fights," he muttered.

Bill Slater chuckled. He marched Eddie toward the door, and when he got there he stopped and looked back. "I'll be around to see you later, Joe," he called. "We'll have a good, long talk."

There were two other policemen in the room, and Sam Meyers from the drugstore across the street and Ollie Patterson and Will Adams and several other men whom Joe knew. The two policemen started to question him about what had happened, but Sam Meyers told them to leave him alone. They could question him later.

Joe walked back to the sink. He got a drink and then splashed water on his face. He saw Eddie's gun on the floor, almost at his feet, and he looked around toward the others in the shop. Frank Patton had just come in and was talking to the policemen. The others were listening. No one was watching Joe. He stooped over, picked up the gun and slipped it into his pocket. Then he turned and joined the others.

"That's not true," he said bluntly when the policemen had finished. "Eddie came to see me about something personal. We had a fight. That's all there is to it."

"Slater says Eddie wanted money to get out of town," one of the policemen insisted. "He says he tried to make you open the safe."

"Yeah, an' Slater's trying to railroad Eddie McBride," Joe snapped. "To hell with him."

Frank Patton laid a hand on Joe's arm. He said, "Come on, Joe. I'll walk home with you."

THE newspapers, the next morning, carried the story of the arrest of Eddie McBride. He was being held, according to the police, in connection with the holdup and murder of Andy Thomas. Joe read every word of the article. His own name wasn't mentioned, to Joe's deep relief.

"What's the matter with your eye, Joe?" asked his mother. "Have you been fighting again?"

Joe shook his head. "I bumped against a machine at the print shop."

"Is that where you hurt your lip, too?" asked Joe's father.

They were at the breakfast table. Joe scowled. He thought he could detect a twinkle in his father's eye but his mother looked worried. "It was quite a bump," he said carelessly, "but it doesn't hurt much now."

"You're getting too old to be in fights," said Joe's mother.

"Sure, Mom," Joe agreed.

He pushed back his chair, got to his feet, and went outside. His father followed him.

"Anything serious, Joe?" asked his father.

"Nothing serious, Dad," Joe answered. "It couldn't be helped. The police arrested Eddie McBride last night."

"Carol's brother?"

"Yes."

"Why, Joe?"

"They think he was mixed up in the murder of Andy Thomas."

"Was he?"

"I—don't know."

"It's pretty serious if he was, Joe. The murder of Andy Thomas was cruel, cold-blooded and unnecessary. We don't have a place in this country for punks like that."

Joe bit his lips. He nodded, moved on out to the walk and started toward the print shop.

A block from the house he caught

sight of Bill Slater, waiting on the corner. He got all tense inside.

"Hi, Joe," said the detective. "I couldn't get around to see you last night as I promised. Suppose we have our talk now."

"What about?" Joe growled.

"About Eddie McBride. What did he want last night?"

Joe had figured an answer to that question. He wanted me to stay away from Carol. I said I wouldn't."

Bill Slater chuckled. "A clever answer, kid, but it won't do. You've been hanging around Carol for a long time. Eddie never complained before. Suppose I tell you what we've got on him?"

"All right," said Joe. "Tell me."

"We've got two people who saw him driving the holdup car the night Thomas was murdered. We've located the car. It had been stolen. Eddie's fingerprints were on the wheel."

"And I suppose there weren't any other fingerprints?"

"None we could identify. Eddie's companions, that night, were pretty careful. And Eddie's a stubborn fool. He won't name them. It looks as though he's going to have to face this thing alone. I thought he might have told you something."

"Well, he didn't."

Bill Slater scowled. "You know, Joe," he said slowly, "as I figure it, Eddie didn't know what was planned that night. He didn't know what he was getting roped into. If we could get the men who pulled the job and get the whole story, things would go a lot easier for Eddie. I can promise you that."

"What good is your promise, Slater?" Joe asked bluntly.

"Pretty good, I think."

"You'd just like to get the whole crowd. You don't give a damn about Eddie."

"I hate to see the others get off."

"You hate to see anyone get off!"

Slater shook his head. "You're not thinking straight, Joe. You are still blinded by a childish hatred of cops. Maybe you could help Eddie McBride, but you won't, because a cop asks you to. Get wise to yourself, kid."

Joe made no answer. He continued on down the street to Carol's house.

For a long time there was no answer when he rang the bell, but finally Carol opened the door and looked out. She said, "Hello, Joe," but there was no lift in her voice and her eyes were red as though she had been crying.

"I couldn't help what happened last night, Carol," Joe said. "I didn't know Slater was anywhere around."

"It wasn't your fault. He saw Eddie on the street and followed him," Carol answered. "Why did you and Eddie fight?"

"It was just one of those things," Joe said weakly. "An argument. We both got mad."

Carol's fists were clenched at her sides. "Eddie wasn't involved in that holdup," she declared. "I know he wasn't!"

Those were her words but they didn't sound very brave. It seemed to Joe that she was trying to convince herself of something she couldn't believe.

"Sure he wasn't," Joe agreed. "Things will work out, Carol. I'll see you tonight."

HE MOVED on down the street and put in a morning's work at the print shop, but he couldn't keep his mind on what he was doing. He knew things wouldn't come out all right. They couldn't.

It was while Frank Patton was out to lunch that the two men came in. Joe didn't recognize either of them. He thought, at first, that they had come in to order some work done, for they

started asking questions about the prices of letter-heads. Then quite suddenly the smaller of the two men straightened up and said, "All right, punk. Where's the gun?"

Joe's mouth dropped open. He backed away. The other man, a great big ape of a fellow, was watching him closely, too. His eyes were slate hard.

"You heard him," said the big man. "Where's the gun?"

"What gun?" Joe gasped.

"The gun Eddie McBride had when he came in here last night."

Joe moistened his lips. "I don't know."

"You'd better know, punk," said the little one. He looked very dapper and very nasty. "Eddie had a gun when he came here. He didn't have it when the cops got him. We learned through his mouthpiece that he dropped it in here and we're pretty sure the cops haven't found it. Where is it?"

Joe took another step backwards. "It—it's hidden."

"Get it."

"I can't," Joe answered quickly. "It's not here. I'll get it for you this afternoon."

The big man moved closer. "Listen, you punk kid," he grated. "If I thought you were lying to me, I'd take care of you right now. Maybe I will anyhow."

"Cut it out, Pete," said the other. "Give him a chance."

"A chance to call the cops?"

"He won't call the cops."

The first man shrugged. "All right, kid. Get the gun. Have it with you when you get off work tonight. We'll be waiting for you. Outside."

Joe tried to make some answer but he couldn't get any words past the thickness in his throat. The men turned abruptly toward the door and slammed it behind them. . . .

Frank Patton returned promptly at

one, but Joe didn't leave right away. He hung around for a while, thinking over the things that had been boiling through his mind since the two men had left.

"Mr. Patton," he said finally. "That gun that killed Andy Thomas was never found, was it?"

Patton shook his head. "I don't think so, Joe."

"If it were found, the police could tell it was the same gun, couldn't they?"

"Yes, I think they could. The barrel of a gun leaves a distinctive mark on the bullet it shoots."

"From the gun the police might be able to identify the owner?"

"Probably. But why this sudden interest in guns, Joe?"

Joe shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, I don't know. I just got to wondering. Maybe I'd better go to lunch."

Joe didn't always go home for lunch but he did today. In the quiet of his own room he examined the gun which Eddie McBride had dropped.

It was a .38 Smith and Wesson. Joe didn't think it was Eddie's gun. He could figure only one thing. The gun belonged to Dan Rogers and it had killed Andy Thomas. Nothing else would explain the visit of the two men to the print shop.

After lunch, Joe left his house by the back way and took a roundabout course to the print shop. He was afraid to go straight down the street, afraid he would meet those two men. On the way, he stopped in a Meyer's drugstore and telephoned police headquarters. He asked for Bill Slater but Bill Slater wasn't in and all he could do was leave a message.

Most of the afternoon, then, Joe worried about the message he had left and whether or not Slater would get it, and what he would do. He hoped Slater wouldn't misunderstand the message. He wasn't turning to the police for help. He wasn't even working with them. This

was something he was doing for Eddie McBride, and the police necessarily had to know about it.

At four thirty, Frank Patton had a telephone call and left the shop. "It's a job for us, maybe," he said to Joe. "I'll try to get back before closing time. If I don't make it, you can lock up."

Joe didn't want to be left alone, but there was no way to avoid it. He was afraid the men who wanted the gun would notice that Frank Patton was gone and come in after it. His message to Slater had said five o'clock. Five o'clock seemed terribly far away.

HE TURNED back into the work room the minute Patton left and hid the gun. And he wasn't an instant too soon. As he started toward the office door, it opened and the two men stepped in.

Joe caught his breath. He stood rigid, knowing that the fear which had gripped him showed in his eyes. His skin was cold and clammy, and the lump in his throat made it hard to breathe.

"Well, kid, you got it?" asked the dapper little hood.

"Got—got what?" Joe stammered.

"Cut that!" said the man gruffly. "We came here for the gun."

"You were to meet me outside," Joe said desperately. "I told you I didn't have it. I was going to take you to where it was hidden."

"Quit stalling. We want that gun, kid. Hand it over!"

Joe shook his head. "You'll have to wait. You'll have to—"

His voice choked. The little man who was doing all the talking had drawn a gun and was pointing it at him.

"You've got ten seconds, kid," the man grated. "Ten seconds to dig up the gun Eddie dropped."

"You'll never get it if you kill me," Joe said desperately.

"That's right," the man agreed. "But there are other ways we sometimes use to get what we want. Pete, go to work on him."

The second man walked forward. There was a grin on his face but it wasn't a pleasant grin. He moved up toward Joe and he seemed in no hurry at all.

The man's fist shot out, scraping the side of Joe's face. It stabbed at him again and then again. Joe hit back at the man but couldn't stop him. The man moved in closer. A knee came up, catching Joe in the stomach. As pain doubled him over, the man's fist ripped into his face once more.

Joe was on the floor, then, rolling from side to side, half blinded by the pain which racked his body.

He couldn't take more of this. He couldn't. He lay doubled up on his side, fighting to get his breath.

"Where is the gun, kid?" the little guy was asking. "This is the last chance you've got. Where is the gun?"

He couldn't take more of this, but he couldn't tell them where the gun was, either. He couldn't give up.

"Where is the gun, kid?" asked that voice again.

Joe shook his head.

"Work on him some more, Pete," said the voice.

The big, apeline man leaned forward. His hand laced across Joe's face and Joe screamed. He caught the man by the arm when the man struck at him again. He jerked and the man sprawled over on top of him, then rolled off and stood up. His foot drew back and stabbed at Joe's ribs. Joe fell away. He turned. He got to his knees. And suddenly he heard Bill Slater's voice shouting orders. There were three gun shots, close together, and one of the men staggered away.

Joe was sitting up, now, on the floor. He saw Bill Slater come forward. Several

other men were with him—detectives, men with drawn guns. Bill Slater was grinning, broadly.

"I got your message, Joe," Bill said. "What's all this about a gun?"

* * *

After supper the next night, Joe walked down the street to the house where Carol McBride lived. He was sitting on the steps, talking to her, when Bill Slater came by. The detective stopped and nodded. He said, "Hi, kids. Have you heard the latest news?"

Joe shook his head.

"The police have just arrested a fellow named Dan Rogers for the murder of Andy Thomas. They got the rest of his crowd, too, including a boy named Eddie McBride. This boy, Eddie, drove the getaway car. It seems he didn't know what was planned that night, and afterwards, he was scared. He was hiding out with Rogers. Three nights ago he stole Rogers' gun and tried to get away. A fellow named Joe got the gun for us. We identified it as Rogers'."

"What will happen to Eddie?" Joe asked.

"I just had a talk with the district attorney. The D.A.'s not a bad guy. He figures the army might straighten Eddie out. The army needs men. How does that sound?"

Carol looked up. "You really mean that?"

Slater was grinning. "Sure I mean it. . . . Don't stay out too late, kids."

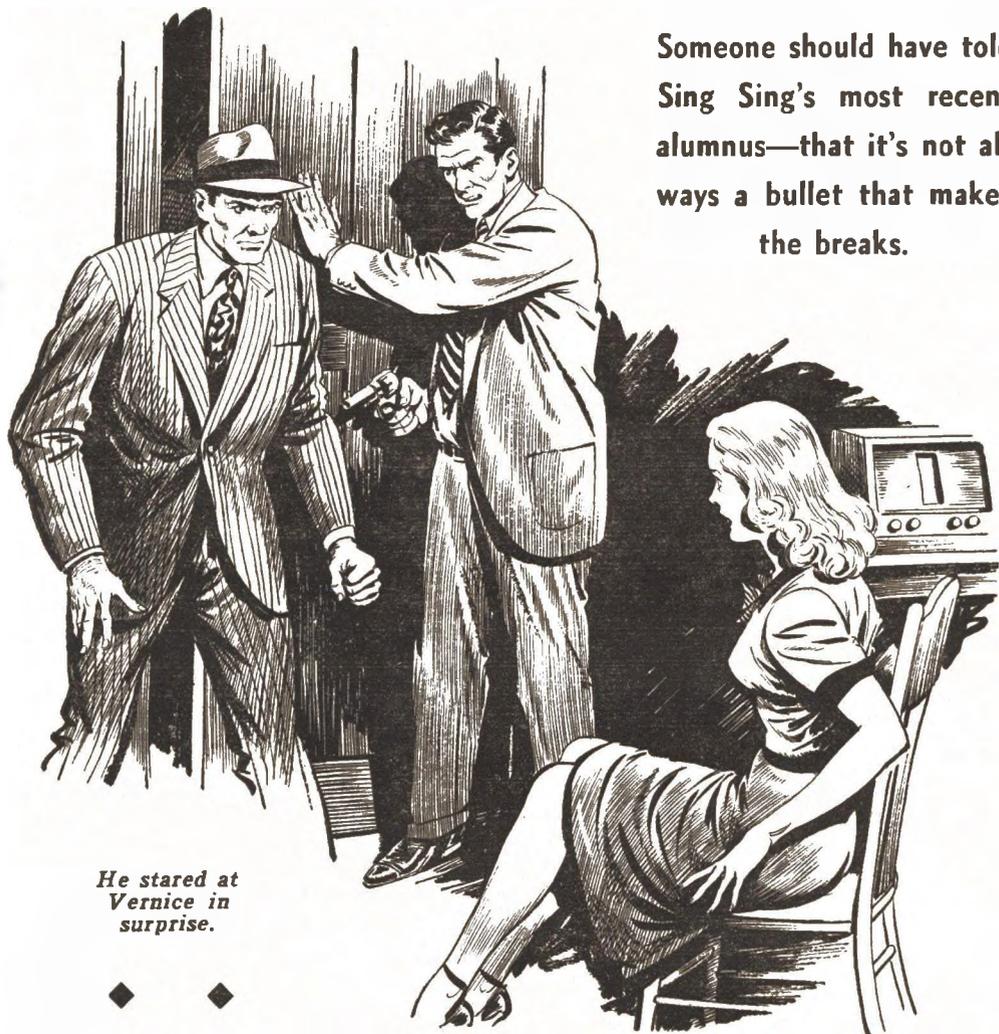
The detective moved on down the street. Joe looked at Carol. There were tears in her eyes.

"Slater isn't such a bad guy at that," he muttered. "You know, it's funny, Carol. I've hated that guy all my life but I don't hate him any more. What's the matter with me?"

Carol laughed softly. "Maybe you're growing up, Joe," she said.

THE MURDER'S ALL MINE

Someone should have told Sing Sing's most recent alumnus—that it's not always a bullet that makes the breaks.



He stared at Vernice in surprise.

◆ ◆

IT HAD been one of those wild, nightmarish days which always follows a prison crush-out. The screaming sirens, the wild chases. The convicts still free and the convicts back in their cells. And the other convicts who had been blasted into a deeper cell

than any even Sing Sing has to offer. Seven hours after the first alarm had been sounded, two men walked slowly down New York's Fifty-third Street. They walked abreast, their eyes sharply

By ROY LOPEZ

alert to every moving thing in sight. They wore cheap blue suits, badly creased. But Judd Conroy was not complaining that his suit had been balled up into a paper bag by Barney Giles' friends who had helped engineer the break—any more than he was complaining about the prison guard's bullet which had stopped the man this extra suit had been meant for.

Judd watched as Barney fished out a cigarette. He watched the big man light it, marveling at the slim, gentle hands attached to the huge body. Those hands had played the piano in some pretty fair bands at one time, Judd had heard. Then they had left the piano one night to fasten about the throat of Barney's wife.

"Watch how you smoke that," Judd said softly.

Barney caught himself. He was cupping the butt in his hand, keeping the glowing end hidden, and bending his head low when he took a draw. A prison yard trick.

"Check," Barney said, recovering. He didn't look at Judd as he said, "I still don't understand why you came out with us."

"I had my reasons," Judd said. He was a short man, a good ten inches shorter than his companion.

"Damned if I can figure what they were," Barney said. "Me, I'm a lifer. I've got nothing to lose. But you, serving a four-year term, and six months of that already gone. Maybe more knocked off for good behavior. You must be nuts to stick your neck out this way."

"I didn't engineer this deal," Judd said. "They know that."

Barney Giles snorted. "Think that will help you if they pick you up? Use your brains, kid. I know you got a bum rap. All of us up there know Slick Anson framed you. But it was still just a four-year stretch. Is that worth blowing your

top about, maybe lousing yourself up for good?"

Judd opened his mouth, then closed it again. With one movement the two men leaped back from the sidewalk, flattening themselves into a doorway. They watched beady-eyed as a prowler car, siren screaming, raced along Sixth Avenue, its noise gradually fading. Then they moved carefully into the daylight again.

Judd's voice was still soft, but now there was cold steel in it. "A four-year rap," he said. "Even a bum four-year rap. Sure, I could have stuck it out, if that's all there was to it. But there's more."

"A woman?"

"A woman and a man. They wanted me out of the way." Judd's fists were clenched in his pockets. "Vernice and Slick. And me twenty-five miles away with walls and guns keeping me there."

"So that's why you came out with us."

"That's why. Four years can seem like four hundred when they belong to somebody else—somebody who's taken over your girl."

They paused again short of the teeming avenue. "Let's break it up," Barney said. "I'm turning north."

"Take it easy," Judd said, and crossed Sixth without looking back.

He went south seven blocks and west a half. There wasn't a lot of difference in the way things looked. It could have been yesterday that he had been walking along this same street on the way to Slick Anson's flat.

He and Slick had been friends then. They had pulled a few jobs together, safe-cracking deals, like the one Judd had been sent up for. Only, Judd hadn't been in on that one at all. He hadn't even known about it, until the cops had barged into his room the next afternoon and found what they were looking for.

Judd's hand fondled the gun in his

pocket. The breaks had really come his way today. The extra suit Barney's pals had brought along. The gun. And the fact that he was still free to do a job on Slick Anson, a job that would feed at last the seething hatred inside of him which screamed for vengeance.

He reached the building where Slick used to live. Cops inside maybe? He'd have to risk it. He had risked plenty already. No reason for the cops to think of watching Slick's place anyway, as far as Judd's escape was concerned. They never had caught on to the frame.

He slipped inside, paused in the empty hallway. Nobody was there. Slowly he climbed the stairs, gun still in his pocket but his hand tight around it. Four-C, Slick's flat used to be.

As he climbed the last flight he heard a radio. Music. Seemed to come from Slick's room. Judd paused an instant, pulled out the gun and flipped the door-knob. The door was unlocked and gave to his shove. The music was louder now as he slammed the door behind him. But it wasn't loud enough to smother the terrified, strangled gasp from the girl in the room.

"Judd!" Vernice gasped. "Judd, what—?"

"Scream and you're through," he snapped. "Is Slick here?"

The girl shook her head, eyes riveted to the gun in Judd's hand.

He moved swiftly through the flat. Slick Anson was not there.

BUT Vernice was. Judd looked down at her, at the blonde hair he had fallen for a long time ago. It looked like old thread now. Vernice was a doll, a toy with the paint fading off.

"So you've got the key to Slick's place now," Judd said. "Maybe you'll use it on him some day the way you used mine on me."

The blonde leaped to her feet, hysterical. "Judd, it's not true! Don't hurt me Judd, please! It's not true—" The words ended in a choke of fright at the look in Judd Conroy's eyes.

"No," he mocked. "It's not true. Slick blows the safe at that restaurant and gets away with the receipts. Then the sack the money was in walks up to my place and goes to sleep in my bureau drawer, right where the cops can find it. All by itself, it does that."

"But maybe Slick put it there! I—"

Judd's hand closed tight around Vernice's arm. Fingers of steel dug into the soft flesh. Vernice bit her lip, but she didn't scream.

"Slick had no key, angel." The voice was still soft, almost gentle. "Only you had a key to my place. You and me. And I was gone for a couple of hours that morning."

Vernice was breathing heavily. "I want to help, Judd. Honest, I want to help."

"Sure you do. You wanted to help before. Only trouble was, you got a little confused. You helped Slick instead of me."

He yanked her out of the chair and held her like a sack of wheat. She would have melted to the floor if he had let her go.

"You were the one person in New York who knew I wasn't at that restaurant when people heard the safe go! You knew it because you were with me. But like I say, you got confused. You sort of lost your memory when the cops asked you. You said you hadn't seen me at all. Made it kind of tough on me, gorgeous. Kind of tough."

Vernice sucked in air, exhaled it. She tried to talk, but her mouth formed soundless words.

"Where's Slick?" Judd said.

More mouthing. Before she could answer him, Judd's attention snapped to

the radio as the music died abruptly and an announcer came on.

"We interrupt this broadcast to bring you another bulletin on today's prison break. Barney Giles, one of the escaped convicts, has just been shot and killed by police in a running gun battle on Sixth Avenue in New York City. Stay tuned to this station for further developments."

The music flowed back again. There was a bleak smile on Judd's face.

"Too bad that wasn't me. Then you and Slick wouldn't have to worry any more. Where is he?"

"I don't know."

Judd's left hand continued to support the limp form. His right drew back and lashed at Vernice's face. Vernice turned her head away, sobbing.

"Where is he?"

"I don't know, Judd! He went out an hour ago."

"Is he coming back?"

"Yes. I—think so. . . ."

"Stop thinking, angel. Just give me the right answer. You wouldn't want to die quite yet, would you?"

Horror played in her eyes. "He'll be back," she said. "He told me to wait here. Said he wouldn't be seeing me any more for a while. So I know he'll be back."

It rang true, and Judd was satisfied. "Got a job lined up out of town," he guessed. "Too bad he won't be able to make it."

"You're going to kill him."

"Give me one good reason why not?"

"Let me go, Judd, please!"

He threw her back into the chair and stood over her. "Give me one good reason," he challenged.

"The cops are after him anyway," Vernice said, and began to talk fast. "You want a reason, Judd. There it is. The cops are after him anyway."

"The cops are always after guys who

go around swiping things. Try again."

"This is different. It's a murder rap. The Monk Marino killing. They think Slick did it."

Judd was interested. "Did he?"

"Good Lord, Judd! You must have heard about it. Monk Marino was killed at the very time Slick was blowing that safe!"

"What safe?"

"The job they—they pinned on you. Don't you remember?"

JUDD thought back. He did remember now. Monk Marino had been found with his belly blown open. Neighbors had heard the shot, and Slick Anson's safe-cracking blast had been heard six minutes later—and five miles away. But Slick couldn't talk about that, not even after all these months when the finger was slowly swinging around in his direction.

"They know Slick was sore at Monk," Vernice rushed on. "And they wonder why Slick can't give them any alibi."

"But they haven't picked him up?"

"No."

Judd snorted. "They'll never get him. Not those dummies."

"Maybe they will, Judd. Then you'll be even with him, without getting yourself in more trouble. Don't you see?"

Judd Conroy's eyes were ice cold. "It won't work, angel. If you think I'll let that guy get away from me now, just on the wild chance that the cops might pick him up for some other job, you're bats. I'm here now. That's something I've thought about every minute I've been in that place. And I'm going to do what I came to do."

"What about me?" Fear had robbed her voice of substance. It was like a ghost talking.

"I'm not going to kill you, gorgeous. Stop worrying."

(Please continue on page 126)

SWANSONG FOR AN UGLY DUCKLING



CHAPTER ONE

Long Arm of the Past

THE glow was beginning. A faint shimmer of light which, as it reached out to her, became life-giving flame. The flame grew and flickered, inviting her to enter, waiting for her . . .

Sylvia's breathing quickened. All self-

**Dramatic Suspense
Novelette**

Lonely Sylvia discovered her only escape from the dungeon of reality —was through the trap-door called murder.

In the middle of the spreading patch of blood was the jeweled dagger.



By MARIAN O'HEARN

awareness left her and she stood erect, a tall, proud-headed girl with a delicately fine profile.

She studied every detail of the canvas with ritualistic intensity. Joan of Arc stood there in her shining armour, her uplifted face blazing with the tender flame. In her eyes were reflected visions of her great, tragic future—visions which had become reality. Just as they might for her, Sylvia. There could be a day when she, too, would mean the salvation of many, perhaps of a whole nation . . .

The flame was still reaching for her, seeking her. She felt herself leaving the floor, floating effortlessly up into the picture and becoming part of it. Her flesh tingled and her smile was radiant.

Then, abruptly, the exhaltation ended and she felt herself plunged down into harsh, paralyzing reality.

She was no longer alone. Someone was near, observing her, watching her . . . Her throat tightened. Her body lost its proud straightness, and her head ducked, convulsively, as if she sought to shrink into invisibility.

She kept her eyes fixed straight ahead but she was no longer seeing the canvas. In her taut fleshed misery, the Maid of Orleans had lost all reality. In rigid, almost unbreathing stillness, Sylvia waited for the staring stranger to turn away.

But, instead, he was coming toward her. Her body shrank even more, shoulders hunching, hands clenched on her bag. If she could only make herself move she would run for the nearest exit. She had to escape from the watching, amused eyes!

"So you like Joan of Arc," the man said. "That gives us a lot in common. I think it's one of the most stirring canvases in the museum."

His voice was smooth and evenly pitched. And there wasn't a trace of

mirth in it. He was speaking to her as if— Without turning her head she looked at him from the corners of her eyes.

He smiled. The smile was pleasant and warm. A smile he might have given any woman. Even an attractive woman like Madeline or Dollie.

"Yes." The word was a torn bit of sound. "I come here every week, every Wednesday, to see it."

"Every week! That is—devotion."

A tingling ran through her flesh and became excitement. A new, disturbing excitement. But no! It was *not* new or disturbing. It was the same sense of lift, the same exhilaration she experienced when looking at the painting of Joan.

"I'd like to come oftener," she said, "but the trip from Pinewood isn't always easy to arrange."

"Pinewood! Why, I live there, too." There was pleased surprise in his tone. "How's that for co-incidence, neighbor?"

Neighbor. The word held the sound of security and acceptance.

His eyes smiled at her just as his lips had. Admiringly. Yes, he was regarding her with admiration! She looked directly, fully, into his face.

He wasn't young. Obviously fortyish. But he was reassuringly tall in a world filled with terrifying little men who were forever peering up at her. His dark hair was faintly dusted with gray; his eyes were a deep steady brown, and his face just square enough for strength.

He was waiting for her to answer.

She said, uncertainly: "I live on Cedar Street at the corner of Beechwood."

"Cedar Street and Beechwood," he repeated, frowning a little. "That's the Reade Place. I know Mrs. Dollie Reade and her daughter, Madeline. I've seen them, off and on for years. I believe Madeline was married recently but—"

He broke off on a casually questioning tone.

"I'm Sylvia Reade."

Something flickered across his face and was lost in a broad, delighted grin. "Well, I'm glad to meet you at last! I can't understand why we didn't meet long ago."

His hand stretched toward her. It closed firmly over hers, and he said: "Why haven't I seen you when we've lived so near each other? I'm Douglas Black. My place isn't more than half a mile from yours."

DOUGLAS BLACK. He was Pinetree's wealthiest resident, and his place was an estate. When he was not in Florida or on the Cape, he was traveling to Europe or South America. Douglas Black!

Her glance darted to his eyes, searching them, and dropped to his mouth. Did it hold the faintest edge of secrecy, of hidden amusement? No! He meant the words he was saying.

"I don't get around very much," she told him. "Because of Dollie—my mother—you know."

"Not so fast. *What* should I know?"

She pulled her hand free with an almost convulsive jerk. "She's not well. In fact, she's what most people would call an invalid. I'm too busy caring for her and running the house to go out often, especially since Madeline married."

"I see. But you're out today, so let's make the most of it. How about lunch? There's a pretty good place not far from here."

"No, thank you. I—" Her glance fled from his and touched the painting of Joan. The glow was coming from the picture and turning into flame as it reached for her. She felt herself becoming bouyantly light and free of the earth.

Smiling, she looked at Douglas Black and saw that the flame was also behind his face, shimmering around him too. He had it, too. He could give her the same warmth, the same wonderful escape from the terrible, downward pull of the earth.

"Yes," she said, hurriedly. "Yes, I'd like to have lunch. Thank you."

As they left the gallery he took her arm and pressed it, briefly, against his side. "This is a day I'll always remember."

Sylvia halted, and her eyes cut into his face in a sudden, terrible need to know his thoughts.

But the brown glance held nothing except frank liking. The kind of look which men give an attractive woman. "Yes," he said. "I don't often discover such a stunning girl. You're beautiful, Sylvia Reade."

"Beautiful? I?" A laugh broke from her lips in a shrill titter. The sound was horrible in her ears and she raced on, breathlessly. "Madeline and mother would find that statement pretty funny."

"Why?"

She hesitated and pressed her lips together as another thin laugh gathered in her throat. "Never mind."

Black's hand tightened on her arm. "We'll go into it later. First, let's find some lunch."

Sylvia wasn't sure of the name or location of the restaurant. But she was immediately conscious of its rich quiet and smooth service. The table at which she and Douglas Black had been so solicitously seated seemed magically isolated from the rest of the room. It was a secure, untroubled place where they could not be disturbed.

Black ordered cocktails and insisted on the girl drinking hers at once. "I think you need it." His eyes stirred with the assuring smile, with the same

glow which radiated from the painted face of Joan.

The cocktail was strong but she got it down. As soon as she finished it, Black said:

"You can stand another. It'll help us get acquainted. While we're waiting, tell me why your sister and mother don't think you're beautiful."

Fiercely stinging blood shot up into her face. She shouldn't have come here. If she could make herself move, get up from the table . . .

"Sylvia, look at me. Family opinions are never very important. I want you to talk about it."

The second cocktail was placed before her. When she ignored it, Black put the glass into her hand. She drank so hastily that she choked.

Douglas Black chuckled. "Take it easy, child. Here, swallow some water."

She regained control of her breathing but anger struck. A sharp anger. A bitterness, as if she were discovering something she should have understood a long time ago—something she did not know and could not name.

She leaned a little forward, her eyes fixed on his. "Neither Madeline nor Dollie—Mother—think I'm beautiful because I'm—I'm not. It wouldn't matter so much, if I were like other girls. Or if I hadn't always been surrounded by exceptionally pretty women like my sister and mother. They're petite and charming. They're sure of themselves. They're fitted for life."

Sylvia was speaking rapidly, her words coming in a jumbled rush. "I'm a throwback, probably to some great, awkward goon of an ancestor. Even as a small child I couldn't be like others. In school I was always a foot taller than anyone in my class. When I tried to play games, everyone howled with laughter because I was so big and funny looking. My arms and legs moved like

a windmill and I could never remember the rules. They called me 'Stilts'. . ."

"Hold it," Douglas Black cut in. "Lots of girls are awkward in childhood and grow up to be lovely. A beautiful woman who's tall makes short, pretty women look ordinary. And you *are* beautiful, Sylvia. I want you to get that through your head right now."

She stared at him, her eyes very brilliant. "You sound as if you meant that."

"Certainly, I meant it. Once you forget the past and start living in the present you'll know I'm right."

"It isn't just the past. It's now, too. Whatever I do is wrong. I can't even warm mother's broth and take it upstairs without dropping the tray or spilling it."

"SYLVIA." Black's voice was low and crisply commanding. "Listen to me. There's nothing wrong with you. You're beautiful and charming. Forget your unhappy childhood."

"You don't understand." Her shoulders made a twisting movement as if to conceal her lowered face. "I can't be like others. I can't. I've known it ever since—since—"

"Since when?" he asked gently.

"A long time ago," she said in a whisper. "I was twelve . . ." She broke off and gazed fixedly at her empty glass.

"What happened when you were twelve?" Black prodded.

"I couldn't play with the girls." Words were crowding her throat and rushing against her lips. "They didn't want me. They regarded me as a freak. So I played with boys. They called me Stilts, too, but they let me in on their games and I was grateful. Then . . . then one early Spring day while the ground was still hard with frost, the boys decided to dig a cave. Shovels wouldn't work on the frozen ground so

they got some picks and an axe. They gave me the axe to help break the ground.

"While I was chopping away, a strange boy stopped to watch. When he saw me, long legs spraddled apart and skinny arms flailing up and down, he started to laugh. He laughed so hard he had to hold his sides, and he shouted: 'What's that? A scarecrow on stilts?'"

"I stopped digging and started for him. I hated him. 'You come here!' I screamed. 'I'll show you.'

"He scrambled out of the way and stood off, taunting me. I turned back, picked up the axe and began to chop at the ground again. Suddenly, the strange boy yelled: 'Here I am! Who's afraid of a scare-crow girl?'"

"Just as I made another down-stroke with the axe, he jumped toward me. I can't remember the next few minutes. Suddenly everyone was very quiet. The boy was lying on the ground and there was blood all over his head. His face was queer and collapsed looking.

"People arrived. Men and women crowded around me. The boy was taken away in an ambulance and I was led home. Mother kept me in my room for twenty-four hours and then two men came to see me. They asked questions over and over. Finally one left and the other went on questioning me. He was a doctor. A psychiatrist. He came often after that. I was taken out of school and kept away from other children.

"I never went back to school. My sister Madeline finished college and got a job. But because of my 'emotional and nervous condition' such things weren't for me."

Douglas Black leaned across the table and took her glance in his dark eyes. "What about the injured boy?"

"He recovered, finally, after months in a hospital. I wasn't told of his re-

covery until long afterward for fear the subject might 'disturb' me."

"I see." Black was noting the brilliance of her blue gaze, the tension of her mouth, the droop of her head. "You've never had a recurrence of such—anger? There was only that one incident?"

"Yes. I don't know." Her voice faded into thinness. "Once I caught Madeline reading my diary and tried to drive her out of my room. When she wouldn't go, I picked her up and threw her out into the hall. I was so much bigger that she was helpless. Her ankle twisted as she fell and she had to wear a cast on her leg for weeks. After that, Dr. Gruber—the same doctor—began visiting me again and talking . . . talking until I was too dizzy to hear anything he said."

" Sylvia look at me. I'm going to make you forget all the yesterdays. When I found you in the art gallery I had a feeling that I was intended to find you and be your friend. If you want me for a friend."

The brown, deep glance had somehow imprisoned her, but the shimmering glow was there in his face.

She said: "I do. Yes, I do want you for my friend."

"It's settled then. I'm going to see a lot of you. I'll drop in at your house tonight."

"No." Her hands jerked back. "Don't come there. Mother would—I read to her every night after dinner. She depends on me."

"All right. Meet me outside as soon as she's gone to bed. I'll be waiting near your house in my car."

"But it might be almost ten o'clock—" She broke off as he smiled at her. The exalting flame was spreading around her, lifting her into the world where happiness existed.

"I'll be there," she whispered.

CHAPTER TWO

Marked for Murder

THE door of the long, sleek car swung open. As Sylvia got in, Douglas Black said: "Good girl. I was afraid you might change your mind. Now, let me look at you."

He switched on the overhead light to see her, and her flesh tightened until the nerves crawled against the skin. Her dress, a new one, worn especially for him, was a Grecian-draped, dark golden-rod crepe. Her low-brimmed hat was also of golden-rod, and on her long, narrow feet, were heelless ballet slippers.

Bands of crimson spread across her cheeks. "Please," she said thickly. "The light. I don't like it."

"You should. It shows how lovely you are. Sylvia, you're even more stunning than when I first saw you."

He snapped off the light and started the motor. "We'll drive up to Crescent Hill above the country club. Lean back and relax, child."

The car soared with velvety power through the night, its tires hissing dryly over the cement roads. It stopped on Crescent Hill, a low plateau at the edge of the golf links.

Black said: "I come here often. It's a good place to pull yourself together."

The light from the instrument board flowed over his dark face and seemed to ignite the inner glow. She stirred toward him, toward the beginning flame.

"I have plenty of pulling together to do, too," he added, his tone suddenly heavy. "If I want to go on living."

Sylvia roused. "What do you mean, Mr. Black?"

"Why not call me Douglas?" He was smiling but the smile was thin and the lines about his mouth had sharpened. "We all have problems. This afternoon you told me yours. Now I'm babbling

about mine. I didn't intend to, but—"

"I want you to talk about it, whatever it is. Please."

"You sweet child," he said huskily. "I'm going to tell you something I've told only one or two of my closest friends. "I have a rather bad heart condition."

Her lips parted and her lashes whipped back from her eyes. "You're sick?"

"It wouldn't be serious—at least not quite so serious—if my life were different."

As he went on there was fatigue in his voice. "The doctor believes that if I could avoid violent emotional upsets, I'd be all right. I wouldn't get any worse and could probably live out the normal span of years. But I'm human enough to have a temper. A pretty bad one, at times. Connie—my wife—counts on that. She's devilishly clever at driving me into a fury. Knows all the tricks. I try to control myself and fight down my temper, but that's just as damaging. One of these days she manages to enrage me, my heart will stop and she'll have what she wants."

The glow was gone. It had left him. And the night was pushing against the car, tearing at the doors with cold, black hands.

"Your wife wants to make you ill?"

Black's low laugh was sardonic. "Nothing could please her more. I'm a rich man. If I died she'd have all the money she wants and be free of me at the same time."

"She'd like to kill you? She's *trying* to kill you?"

The short, low laugh came again. "Exactly. She knows outright murder isn't safe. But if she can goad me into destructive anger day after day, she'll soon become conveniently rid of a man she married only for his money."

"That's as bad as murder." Sylvia,

her eyes strangely brilliant, looked reluctantly at the cold darkness beyond the car windows. "You should leave her. You'll have to leave her."

"You make it sound easy. I guess it ought to. But if I left her, she'd drag through every court in the country, sue to tie up everything I own and plaster my name all over the tabloids. No. She'll never let me go. She doesn't want a divorce. She wants me to die."

"Die." Sylvia's lips shaped the word soundlessly, and she pressed toward him. "You can't die," she whispered. "She can't make you!" And her brilliant eyes peered through the dim light, seeking some trace of the glow which had been on his face a few minutes before.

He met her gaze and held it. "You're nice, Sylvia. The nicest thing that's ever happened to me. Now, let's forget Constance and talk of ourselves. Like to go someplace for a drink?"

"No. I've got to know more about her." She couldn't bring herself to speak his wife's name. "What is she like?"

"I don't know . . . It's been so long since I've thought of her as anything except a constant threat to my life. I suppose she's attractive. Like most women with plenty of money. She belongs to clubs and plays a lot of bridge. We've no children and she's never wanted any. Does that give you a fair picture of her?"

Sylvia was silent and he smiled at her. The smile lifted into his eyes and his face brightened with a faint, shimmering light. The flame was returning . . .

"You won't die," she murmured. "Douglas, I promise you that."

"SYLVIA!" Dollie Reade thrust herself up against the pillows. "Sylvia. Turn around and look at me." She motioned imperiously for the girl to come to her.

"Yes, Mother." The girl faced her

with dull eyes. Dollie wasn't really pretty, she decided. Not even attractive. She was merely a small, aging woman with loosening skin and sagging flesh. Strange, that she had always thought her so lovely . . .

"The pills you gave me a moment ago—that was the second dose! I didn't remember, when you insisted I take them, that you'd give me two of the pills half an hour ago!"

"It's all right," Sylvia said. "I gave you more because you complained of not sleeping last night."

"But what if I've had too many? Sleeping pills can be dangerous. Suppose—?"

"The doctor said these are harmless. Even a dozen wouldn't harm you."

The uneasiness remained in Mrs. Reade's eyes. "You're sure he said that?"

"Yes. Now go to sleep. I'll turn out the light."

"Leave your door open. Last night I called and called without getting an answer."

"I will. Good night." Sylvia closed her mother's door and hurried through the hall to her own room. She would wear the golden-rod crepe again. Douglas had liked it so much.

She pulled off her housefrock, dressed and went downstairs, her heeless slippers making no sound. Then she was running along the walk to the street. She was breathless when she reached the car.

Douglas Black chuckled approvingly. "You're more delightful every time I see you." He helped her in and the touch of his hands told her that the flame would be in his face. And it was. A deep, exalting light which lifted her up into its warmth.

"Where to?" Black asked.

"Anywhere. Crescent Hill might be best."

"Sylvia, I've been wondering," he said slowly. "After what I told you last night about Connie, maybe it would be a good idea for you to meet her. There are some people at the house now—half a dozen friends who happened to drop in."

"Take me to your home? To meet your wife? What would she think?"

"Nothing at all. What's unusual about inviting a neighbor in for a drink?"

"No! I don't want to meet her! Knowing what she's trying to do to you—"

"That's the reason I want you to meet Connie. You'll realize everything I said was true."

"I realize that now. So there's no need for me to go."

He bent, put a hand under her chin and lifted her head until her eyes were level with his. "I want you to do this for me, Sylvia. I don't know why, but it seems very important." The glow was behind his face, reaching through the flesh to find her. The same tender glow which had come from the picture of Joan.

"The people we'll meet at your house," she said confusedly, her voice a rush of thin, dry sound. "Are they young? I mean, are any of them young men? They always stare when they see me."

"Sylvia." Douglas Black took her hands and held them tightly between his own. "Nobody'll stare at you. Why should they? You're not only lovely; you're a personality. Please say you'll come."

She hesitated. "All right."

"Thank you, my dear. And you understand about Constance? If anything unpleasant occurs, you're not to be upset. She's a strange woman."

The girl's eyes were very brilliant as they fixed on his. "Don't leave me alone with her."

"I won't."

He started the car and she felt the muscles in her throat tightening, moisture spreading across her palms. When he spoke again his words sent shock driving through her.

"Here we are."

"So soon? Are we at your house already? I'm—not . . ."

The words faded as he helped her out. Her body was dry, brittle wood. She stumbled on the first of the wide, shallow steps and Black caught her arm, kept it reassuringly within his. But she almost tripped again as they reached the door.

They were inside, and she was conscious of the careful charm of the entrance hall, the cleverly arranged vista of adjoining rooms. Somewhere voices were talking against each other. There was a laugh and the tinkle of glass.

BLACK gave her wrap to a servant and urged her on. Then people were around her. Men. Gray-templed and easy mannered. Two women who were also casually pleasant. Two women. Which one was Connie Black?

"And Sylvia, this is my wife, Constance." Black turned her toward a third woman. "Connie, Sylvia Reade. She grew up here in Pinetree. Mrs. Dollie Reade's daughter."

"Of course." Constance Black was moving toward her, smiling. Smiling as if the thought of murder had never occurred to her, as if she did not, day by day, seek her husband's death. "I feel as if I already know you because of your mother and sister. Welcome, my dear."

She *was* pretty. Sylvia had been sure she would be. Slim, of medium height, with black hair and long gray eyes. Assurance in her voice and manner. Douglas said, *like most women who have*

plenty of money. Yes, that described her.

"What'll you have to drink?" she asked and put her hand on the girl's arm.

Sylvia started convulsively, and recoiled from her. "Nothing—nothing!" she said, her voice soaring.

Douglas Black chuckled indulgently. "Of course you will. I'll bring you a scotch and soda."

He turned away and she waited, helplessly, a great, awkward target for anything that might come.

"I'm glad Douglas brought you," Constance Black said in her poised voice. "Have you known him long?"

The gray eyes were studying her, glimpsing the hidden things, guessing at what she had no right to know.

Sylvia said: "Only a little while. We met at the art museum."

"Oh? In town?" Constance's glance sharpened and so did her tone. "How nice. I didn't know the Black Knight went in for art galleries."

"Black Knight?"

Constance laughed. "We call him that. He's always so knightly to young girls."

Fire blazed into Sylvia's face and a thousand white-hot needles stabbed at her skin. But Douglas Black was returning with the drink and Constance moved away.

Sylvia whispered: "I can't stay in the same room with her. Please . . ."

"How about a look at my study? I'll show you some trophies I've collected in different parts of the world."

"Thank you."

The study was as big as the living room. There were mounted animal heads on the walls, bronzes on stands, a row of gleaming glass cases. Sylvia's glance avoided the animal heads and moved over the glass cases. "Why, they're filled with jewels!"

"Not exactly. Some unset gems, but the rest—come and see for yourself."

He opened one of the cases and took out an emerald, three huge topazes and a ruby. "These are unusual. But here," he lifted the top of another case, "are things I bought merely because I liked them. Their origin is unknown. Some of these knives, though, must be very old. This is my favorite."

He picked up a golden-handled, gem-crusted dagger. The gold of the handle was very dark, set with blue diamonds encircling a black opal. The jewels blazed, and the blade, with its needle-sharp point, glinted with light.

Sylvia took the dagger and held it on her palm, watching the light from the blade flare and strike new fire from the gems. A shimmering fire. A glowing flame. The metal pressed down, warmly, into her palm. As the flame grew, it flickered, waiting for her to enter . . .

"Douglas!" Constance Black spoke sharply from the doorway. "I wondered where you and Sylvia'd gone. Have you forgotten our other guests? Or are they supposed to understand the Black Knight's busy at his—hobby?"

Douglas Black did not answer but he went very straight and still. His eyes darkened and his lips turned white. Anger was storming through him. Anger which might kill him—which Constance hoped would kill him.

Sylvia turned, moving with such terrible effort that her arms flung out woodenly. "You!" She choked on the cry and started again. "You—"

Constance began to laugh. The laughter was abrupt and uncontrollable. It shook the woman's slim body and misted her eyes with tears.

"I—I *am* sorry" she repeated, between gusts of mirth.

"Connie!" Douglas Black shouted. "Sylvia's our guest. Please go—I don't

want to lose control of myself now." His wife's face settled into still coolness and she turned silently away.

"Forgive me, Sylvia," Black said wairily. "I shouldn't have insisted on your coming here. We'll go soon." He groped his way to a chair, dropped into it and closed his eyes.

"It's your heart!" the girl cried. "She's done it again."

"Never mind." Each word was a heavy breath. "I'll be all right in a minute."

She went to him, knelt beside his chair. "Tell me what to do." She begged. "I want to help you."

He opened his eyes. "I'm coming out of it fine, sweet Sylvia. Let's go out, say good night to the others and get away from here. Wait, I'll put that away." And he reached for the dagger which was still clenched in her hand.

She relinquished it slowly. "It's so beautiful. So wonderful," she murmured. "Can I see it again, sometime?"

"Of course." His hand closed on her arm and pressed it briefly.

Brightness came through the flesh of his face. The shimmering glow which had come to her from the painting of Joan. And from the jeweled dagger.

CHAPTER THREE

Not to Be Trusted

SYLVIA left the study with new lightness and an almost exalted bouyancy. But in the entrance hall the door opened with a crash and a resonant male voice called: "Hi, everybody! Doug, what's the shortest route to the drinks?"

The girl's exaltation died and her flesh tightened into brittle stiffness. The man who had charged through the door was young. Under twenty-five. He was the personification of merciless, terrifying

youth. Big, magnetic and exuberant. Rich dark hair, reckless, waiting-to-laugh gray eyes and an arrogant chin.

He halted directly in front of her. "Well," he said. "Doug, my dear, dear brother-in-law, do something about this."

Black made an apologetic gesture. "Sylvia, this is Connie's brother Bill, making his customary unexpected call."

The overwhelming young man grinned. "I'm Bill Gardiner. And you're Sylvia—?"

"Reade," Douglas Black snapped. "If you don't hurry, the bar's liable to run out of liquor."

"Let it." Gardiner was concentrating on the girl. "Do you live in Pinetree, Miss Reade? And why didn't you let me know?"

Stinging blood burnt a path across Sylvia's face. She wanted to get closer to Black but her feet were wooden lumps wedged into the floor.

"Hey, what is this? You act like you've just seen Frankenstein. Take another look at me and if it's still that bad, I'll go away."

"Cut it out, Bill," Black broke in thinly. "Sylvia's—"

A servant paused beside them. "Mrs. Black would like to see you, sir. She says it's important."

Gardiner smiled. "Get going, Doug. That message has a wifely quality you'd better not ignore. We'll do fine without you."

Black looked questioningly at Sylvia, but her head was still drooping. "I won't be more than a minute."

Bill Gardiner chuckled as his brother-in-law hurried away. Sylvia waited, helpless, feeling the brittleness of her flesh, the hot dryness of her mouth and the crawling nerves under her skin.

Bill said: "Say, you *do* think I'm filling in for Frankenstein. Suppose I get some drinks. Maybe that'll help."

She forced out jumbled sounds. "Yes. Some drinks. Bring them here."

He was leaving, going toward the living room. She was alone and free. She could move now, could escape. She ran for the door, got it open and darted into the concealing darkness.

She was racing toward the hedge marking the end of the grounds when she heard footsteps pounding after her. She sped across the lawn, heading for the darker shadows of the shrubbery. The pursuing footsteps also turned off the drive and began to thud over the grass, gaining on her. Something jerked her to a halt.

"Now." Bill Gardiner's grip hurt her arm. "Let's get something settled. What's the matter with you?"

She made no effort to free herself but, instead, sank into terrified inertia.

His grip became even more painful. "Answer me. Why are you so scared? I'm a peaceful, ordinary guy who's never tortured children or beaten women. What gives here?"

Her lips were bits of ice scraping against each other. "Let me go—please let me go! I can't stand people watching me, laughing . . ."

"Well, for the love of Pete! Hysteria, if I've ever seen it! Come on, I'll have to do something about this." Bending, he lifted her into his arms, as if she were little and slight enough for any man to carry. "We're going back to the house for some first aid."

Holding her, he strode rapidly and lightly up the drive to the house where he put her down. "It'll be less embarrassing to walk now."

"Don't make me face those people again. I can't—"

"We can reach the study without being seen." He opened the door and hurried her across the hall into the room where Douglas Black had shown her the jeweled dagger.

"There. With the door closed, nobody'll barge in. Sit down and I'll bring some brandy. If you try to leave again I'll follow and drag you back."

He went out and she remained standing, her body taut, hands clenched on the clasp of her purse.

The glass of the cases glittered. Or was it the jewels behind the glass? The dagger was in the second case from the left. Warmth had played along its blade and become glowing flame. The flame which was freedom. . . .

She moved to the case and opened it. The gems in the handle were brilliant fire. She touched the dagger, lifted it. . . .

A muffled sound came from beyond the door. She stepped away from the case, sat down and held her bag, tightly, between her hands.

Bill Gardiner came in carrying a decanter and two glasses. "This'll put you on even keel," he said, filling the glasses. "Drink it right down."

"No, thank you."

"Drink it."

As she drank the brandy, he said: "Now, why were you running away? Had I said anything wrong?"

"There was no reason. I just wanted to leave. I'd like to leave now. I can't explain."

He scowled and his glance moved slowly over her face. "In that case I'll take you home. I wish you'd explain what's wrong—but obviously you won't. My car's outside."

She looked up at him silently, and his puzzled frown deepened. "Ready?" he asked.

She nodded but the door opened and Douglas Black entered. "Sylvia, are you—oh, Bill. You're here, too."

"Yeah, but not for long. I'm going to drive Miss Reade home."

"No need for you to leave the party. I'll look after her."

"The people at the party are your guests. Maybe you're the one who ought to stay."

Sylvia swayed closer to Black, shrinking from the other man. She murmured: "I knew you'd come back. I knew."

"Why not?" Douglas Black's voice dropped. Taking her arm, he turned out of the room and led her from the house.

AS SYLVIA opened the bedroom curtains, Mrs. Reade moaned softly and turned her head restlessly against the pillows. "Not so much light, dear. And don't bring the tray near me! The sight of food's upsetting. Just pour a cup of coffee. I don't believe I can get up at all today. My arthritis is worse."

She accepted the cup of coffee, tasted it and put it down. "Where's my medicine? The yellow capsules I'm to take when the pain is bad. You didn't leave them on the bedside table last night."

"I'll get them." Sylvia went to the bathroom and returned with a small yellow bottle. "Here." She gave Mrs. Reade a glass of water and put two capsules into her palm. "Hurry or your coffee'll be cold."

Her mother swallowed the pills, sighed and sat up. "Sylvia! Give me that bottle!"

She snatched at the bottle, tore it from the girl's fingers. The capsules in the bottle were green. "You gave me sleeping pills again! Sleeping pills from the bottle which should hold my medicine. You put them in the wrong bottle!"

"I know," the girl said evenly. "There was none of the medicine left so I thought these would help the pain."

'Call the doctor! Tell him how many sleeping pills I've had in the last twenty-four hours! Ask him to come at once!'

"That's not necessary, mother. You're all right. And I'll go to the drugstore and

have the prescription re-filled right away."

"I want Dr. Fredericks."

But Sylvia had left the room and the door was already closing behind her.

Outside the closed door, she paused indecisively, and finally turned toward the bathroom. Taking the empty medicine bottle from the cabinet she went to her own room, pulled on a hat and picked up her handbag. She would have the prescription re-filled and get more of the sedative.

She heard her mother's thin call cut through the silence: "Sylvia, come back. Sylvia!

She went on, moving down the garden walk without hurry, pausing again before turning out onto the sidewalk. Two blocks from the house a warning red light gleamed from the express highway and she stopped, to wait for the signal to cross.

Cars and trucks were noisy blurs, the passing people merely moving shadows. Douglas Black had said he would telephone her that evening. When she heard his voice the world around her would become real again. And she, too, would come back to life. Until then she must wait. . . .

There was a screeching of brakes. A car had skidded to a halt directly in front of her and a voice was calling: "Miss Reade! You've been reading my mind."

It was Bill Gardiner. Big and exuberant. The destructive vitality of his young, masculine vitality was suddenly pounding at her sense. "Get in and I'll drive you wherever you're going."

She shook her head and moved back from the curb. Her mouth was aching with dryness and her body was turning into wood.

He stepped out of the car and followed her. His hand closed on her arm and he grinned down at her. "I've been

trying to figure you out, lady. That's why I didn't go back to town last night. Decided to stick around for a day or two on the chance of seeing you again." His grin widened. "Let's go some place where we can talk."

She shook her head.

"At least I can give you a lift. Besides if I stay parked here another minute, there'll be brass buttons swarming all over the place."

He urged her toward the car. She was helpless against his grip, against the force in him. He helped her in and hurried around to the driver's seat "Where do you want to go?" he asked as the car started forward.

"Garrison's drugstore."

"That's just a block away. We'll stop by on the return trip. But first we're going to get out of this traffic so we can talk."

"No." She strained back against the seat, away from him.

"Yes! I've got to know the answer to you, and this may be my only chance."

He turned off the highway onto Locust Drive which curved over a hill and met another shady street. "Why were you so scared last night, Sylvia? If I acted like a curly-haired wolf—"

"It had nothing to do with you. I wasn't scared—I just don't like having people look at me and laugh. But I don't want to talk about it. Take me to the drugstore, please."

He turned his head and looked at her sharply. "If that's the way it's to be," he said, slowly. "Sorry. Guess I'm the one who was mixed up."

At the next intersection he swung the car around, bent forward and looked at his gas gauge. "Mind if we stop at the filling station first? It'll only take a couple of minutes."

"No." But her body pressed even more tightly against the seat, avoiding his nearness.

When Gardiner's car pulled in to the filling station, one of the attendants said: "How about your rear tires? Seem low."

"Fill the gas tank. I'll take a look at the tires."

Bill got out, and another car rolled into the adjoining drive A dark-haired woman at the wheel called: "I'm in a hurry, please. Ten gallons."

SYLVIA'S blue eyes became very bright. The woman was Constance Black. She was glancing about with her assured smile. Abruptly, her glance lifted and looked full into the girl's face.

"Miss Reade! How are you?"

Sylvia nodded. Her lips moved soundlessly.

"Keeping yourself busy?" Mrs. Black persisted. "Didn't you say you spend a lot of time in art galleries?"

Her lips struggled violently and brought out uneven sounds. "Not a lot of time. I usually go to the museum on Wednesday."

"Every Wednesday?" Constance's smile thinned. "How nice. And does the Black Knight go just as often?"

Bill Gardiner loomed between them. "Hi, Connie. Seem to run into you everywhere. So long." He slid behind the wheel and drove back onto the highway.

Constance Black's voice followed Sylvia. It ran after her, echoing in her ears. The Black Knight. The Black Knight. Words which meant something else, which actually said: *Douglas Black, the man I'm trying to kill. The husband I want to goad into dying.*

"Feeling better?" Bill Gardiner asked.

"No." Sylvia's eyes were blue, fierce fire. "I hate her. I hate her and you. You're like her."

"Wait a minute!" Gardiner swung the car onto a side street. A few feet from the corner he pulled up to the curb, shut

off the ignition and boldly faced her.

"Why do you hate Connie? What's she done to you?"

"To me?" The word lifted to cracking thinness and the blue fires of her eyes burned into his face. "Nothing, but she's a murderess—a would-be murderess. She's working, planning, hoping to kill him."

"Him?" Gardiner's lids pushed together as he watched her. "You mean Doug? What makes you think she's planning to kill him?"

"Because his heart—" She stopped as she became aware of his nearness, of the drive of his hard, youthful vitality. She mustn't tell him, mustn't betray Douglas' confidence. If Bill were to warn Constance—

"I didn't mean to say that. I—I don't know anything about your sister. Please take me to the drugstore right away. Mother's waiting."

"Yes, Sylvia. I'll take you there."

He started the car, drove swiftly to the drugstore and opened the door for her. "Good-by. Sorry I haven't time to wait."

* * *

Sylvia let herself into the house and turned to the stairs, her slippers moving silently over the thick carpet. She halted on the second step, sensing a change in the atmosphere.

Her head lifted and she saw the man standing on the landing, watching her "Dr Fredericks!"

"Yes. I've been waiting for you." The tall, gaunt physician came down the stairs. "Your mother called me."

"Mother phoned you? How could she get down to the first floor?"

"She told me she'd crawled most of the way."

"Why?"

His eyes were the strange silver gray

of a surgical instrument. Of a razor-sharp scalpel. "She felt very ill and frightened. I've sent for a nurse to take care of her. The nurse'll be in full charge and you'll be relieved—completely—of caring for her."

"I see." The words came out on a rush of hot breath. "Is that what she wants?"

"Yes, Sylvia." Dr. Fredericks' voice softened. "Do you get along well with your mother? I mean are you good friends?"

She hesitated, watching the strange, sharp gleam of his eyes. "Friends? I don't know. . . . I've been waiting on her so long, looking after her. . . . I hadn't thought about whether we're friends."

"I see. Well, you'll have a rest now. The nurse should be here within half an hour. You're free to—follow your own plans."

"Thank you, Dr. Fredericks."

She went past him, up the stairs and placed the bottle of medicine in the bathroom chest. Then, in her own room she realized what had happened. She *was* free. No longer tied to her mother or the house or Pinetree. She could go into town to the museum as often as she wished. She could go today. Leave right now and reach the art gallery, stand before Joan of Arc's picture before dark!

She turned back to the stairs and heard the telephone shrill on the floor below. Frowning, she paused to answer.

"Sylvia." Douglas Black's voice sent warmth reaching through the space between them. "How are you? I had to know."

"Wonderful. Oh, wonderful. Something's happened that will make everything different. I'm starting for town right now, going to the museum. I won't have to wait until Wednesday."

"Now?" His voice lowered as if with disappointment. "I wish you wouldn't. I've a surprise for you. One I can't tell you about until tomorrow. Until then,

I wish you'd stay in Pinetree. I want to know you're there, near me, even when I can't be with you."

"You don't understand. I can see the picture as often as I want."

"Later, sweet child. *After* my surprise."

She was silent, her eyes puzzled.

"Sylvia, are you listening? Do you agree?"

"Yes. Yes."

She hung up and returned to her room where she paced from window to window, unable to remain still. She could be on her way to the museum, could soon be standing before the Maid, looking at her, feeling the flame reaching out to claim her. . . .

At five o'clock she remembered that Mrs. Reade liked her dinner served promptly at six and went downstairs to the kitchen. But a middle-aged woman in a crisp white uniform barred her way. "I'll prepare the patient's food," she said. "I'm Mrs. Miller, your mother's nurse. Dr. Fredericks thought it might be better if I cooked all the meals, including yours, Miss Reade, so you'll be relieved of—kitchen chores."

"I see."

Mrs. Miller's eyes were chill and knowing. Sylvia backed away from her. Returning to the second floor, she paused at her mother's door. Her hand hesitated on the knob before she turned it and went in.

"Feeling better?" she asked. "The nurse is cooking dinner."

"I know. Dr. Fredericks instructed her to do so."

The bedroom door opened again and Mrs. Miller entered briskly.

"I forgot to tell you, Miss Reade. You're not to be in the sickroom except when I'm present. Your mother will rest better that way. Now, if you'll please leave you can come back after dinner."

The knowing gaze fixed on her and

Sylvia flushed. She would tell about this. About the nurse's peculiar attitude and the determination to keep her away from her mother. Maybe Mrs. Miller and Constance Black were alike. It was obvious Mrs. Miller disliked her—just as it was clear that Constance hated her husband.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Jeweled Dagger

THE late afternoon of the summer day touched Sylvia with chill, reminding her of the cold darkness of night which was ahead. She was an empty thing moving ceaselessly through an empty house, imprisoned in a silence which the distant echoes of the nurse's activities could not penetrate.

An hour away, Joan of Arc was waiting. The flame was waiting. It would reach out to her, find her, lift her free of the earth and warm her. Why was she here in deadly emptiness? She couldn't stay away any longer. She had to go to Joan and be brought back to life.

She heard a distant, shrilling bell. A minute later Mrs. Miller, the nurse, knocked at her door. "You're wanted on the telephone."

It was Douglas. At the sound of his voice the chill began to leave her.

"It's ready," he said, his tones deep with excitement. "The surprise I've arranged for you."

"When?" she asked. "When will you bring it?"

"I can't take it to you. You'll have to come here, to my house, to see it. There wasn't any other way to arrange it. Come right away. I'll be waiting for you."

"Your house. Oh, no, I'll never go there again. I can't stand the way *she* looks at me."

"Constance isn't here. I've made sure of it. She and Bill are at the country

club and they'll have dinner there. We'll be alone except for the servants."

"No, she might change her mind."

"I'm sorry. Sorry and disappointed. It's impossible to bring the surprise to you. When you see it—if you ever do—you'll understand why."

She was silent, her lips moving soundlessly, struggling to shape words.

"I went to a lot of trouble for this, Sylvia. Ordered the surprise and had it rushed through at any cost because I couldn't wait to give it to you. I promise you, child, that Constance will *not* be here. What more can I do?"

Sylvia closed her eyes so that nothing could distract from the warmth of his voice, so that it would completely envelope her. "I'll come," she said. "Yes. I'll come right now."

She sat very straight in the taxi, her fingers toying with the clasp of her handbag. Once, when it snapped open, she groped for something inside the bag only to halt and close it with a staccato click. The high, smooth hedge came into view and a moment later the cab was rolling up the drive.

As it stopped before the house, Douglas came out and ran down the steps to meet her. "Sweet child," he said, softly. "If you hadn't come this would've been the most disappointing day of my life."

They went slowly up the steps and he led the way to the study. "Stay where you are for a moment. Right in the doorway."

He entered the room and touched a switch. Light dropped over a cloth-draped object on the wall. Turning his head so that he could watch her, he pulled the cloth away.

Joan of Arc glowed to life on the wall. She saw the uplifted face sheened with light, the shining armour, Joan's ecstatic eyes.

She took a step forward and stopped again, uncertainly, her tall body sway-

ing a little. "You bought it just for me?"

"No, the picture in the museum isn't for sale. This is a copy made by a first-rate artist. Painted especially for you. He worked day and night to get it completed in a hurry."

"It is the same one. It has to be!" Her glances moved carefully, ritualistically, over the canvas. Light shimmered from the face of the Maid. The light grew and brightened. The flame was beginning. . . .

She went to meet the flame, stood directly under the picture and waited for it to find her. She was becoming free and light, floating upward into the canvas.

There was a disturbing sound behind her and she frowned uneasily. Someone was speaking. Talking to her. Douglas Black was saying, softly: "I've got to leave you for a bit. Not more than five minutes."

She shook her head impatiently, fearing the flame would disappear. She heard the door close, and straightened until she was erect and tall, her head lifted, her lips curved into radiance.

She was very near Joan now. And alone with her. The flame was playing over both of them and she was about to learn something, understand more than ever before.

The sound of the door again. Her smile stopped and she tried not to be aware of anything except the canvas. But Douglas had entered the room. If he would only be quiet. . . .

It wasn't Douglas! It was someone else walking steadily, quickly, toward her.

The exalting freedom disappeared. So did the flame. She turned, angrily to the person who had stopped beside her, who was regarding her strangely. . . .

"Go away," she said. "You've spoiled it. Go at once!"

"My dear Miss Reade, what are you

talking about? What's the matter with you?"

It was Constance Black who was beside her, standing in front of the picture! Constance, looking at her challengingly, smiling thinly.

"You — you came back!" Sylvia's tongue felt thick. Her suddenly chill hands gripped the clasp of her back and pushed at it with stiff fingers.

"I came back? This happens to be my home."

She halted as the handbag fell from the girl's convulsively twisting fingers. And she started when it struck the floor and its contents spilled out on the rug. One object—a jeweled, gleaming dagger—had rolled to a stop near her feet.

"Why, that's Doug's knife! One of the things he got in India!"

A hoarse sob broke Sylvia's throat. The be-gemmed dagger, lying near Constance's feet, was gleaming up at her, glowing as if flame would soon spring from it.

"You stole it!" Constance's voice took on new angry strength.

"No. Not really." But Sylvia couldn't go on with the explanation. A new fear had sprung up. There was a third person in the room, moving toward them, toward her. Whoever it was had heard Constance accuse her of stealing the dagger.

She wheeled awkwardly, and began to run. Out of the room and across the hall she ran, where she tore at the door with frantic hands. It began to open when a shrill, crazed scream came from behind her.

But Sylvia was outside now and running away from it, escaping from its final choking horror. The driveway seemed to stretch endlessly ahead of her. She could not even see the hedge which marked the end of the grounds.

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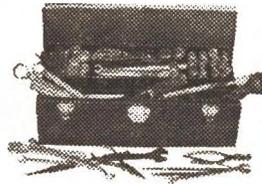
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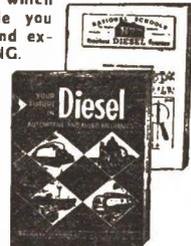


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There were echoes of footsteps beating about her. Her running feet were making so many sounds . . . No, not her own feet! Someone was running after her, trying to overtake her and drag her back into the house. She drove on in a nightmare of helpless effort but something caught her, pulled her back.

A man was pulling her back. "Don't try to get away. Makes no difference that you're a woman now."

She peered at him in bewilderment. It was the butler. He was holding her arm, twisting it behind her so that it hurt.

He pulled her along with him to the house, up the steps to the entrance hall and across it to the study. The place had taken on strange air, seething life. People were running and somewhere a voice was shouting, excitedly, over a telephone.

The butler pushed her into the study, prodded her forward toward the picture of the Maid. Douglas was there, on his knees. He looked up at them with a shocked, strained face and got uncertainly to his feet.

Then Sylvia saw Constance Black sprawled on the floor of the study. She was lying in an angular, unnatural position, and the front of her dress was covered with blood. In the middle of the spreading circle of blood was the jeweled dagger. The beautiful, glowing knife which had spilled from Sylvia's own bag onto the carpet. . . .

* * *

A semi-circle of men sat facing Sylvia in the living room of the Black home. Alvin Meadows, chief of police of Pine-tree, two detectives, and Douglas Black. Douglas, on the other side of the chief of police, looked limp. He kept his eyes away from her.

"Now, Miss Reade," Meadows re-

peated. "Explain again just why you came here and what happened between you and Mrs. Black."

"I've already told you," Sylvia said wearily. "And you didn't answer me about—Constance. Is she going to get well?"

"Never mind that just now." The police officer's tone was impatient. "The doctor and nurse are with Mrs. Black in the study. It might be dangerous to move her. Tell me again why you came here this afternoon."

Douglas Black exploded: "Can't you realize I've given you the whole story? This poor girl is—well, if I'd suspected she was dangerously homicidal I would never have brought her to my home. I felt sorry for her. She was so obviously lonely, miserable and neurotic. She took a dislike to Constance but—"

He cut off and started nervously from his chair as someone entered the living room and strode directly toward them. He sat down again as he saw that it was Bill Gardiner. "You," he said, heavily. "I suppose you know."

"Yes." Gardiner's voice was rough and harsh. "One of the servants called me at the club. I still don't believe Connie's been—"

"We realize your shock," the chief of police said. "Sit down please, so we can get on with our questioning."

"I'd rather stand." Bill Gardiner stepped back behind the semi-circle of seats.

"Continue, Mr. Black," Chief Meadows said.

"Well, it's simple—tragically simple. Sylvia has a life-long history of psychopathic difficulties and mental disturbance. As quite a young child she tried to kill a playmate with an axe. After that she was kept away from other youngsters. Later, she injured her sister. These are all easily verified facts. She was treated by local doctors. The

psychiatrist, I believe, was a Dr. Gruber. If I'd only realized that she might turn violent—"

"Chief Meadows," Bill Gardiner broke in. "Will you hold this for a couple of minutes? I hear a car stopping. It may be Dr. Fredericks. I want to see him."

Gardiner, who still seemed to loom ominously above the others, turned out of the room and disappeared. When he returned, he pulled up a chair.

"Sylvia." Gardiner leaned forward as he spoke to the girl. "You're glad Douglas is safe, aren't you?"

Fire ignited her eyes and turned them fiercely blue. "Yes. She wanted to kill him. She was actually murdering him—slowly—by driving him into rages. He has a bad heart and she knew it. She knew that if she could constantly provoke him into anger he would die"

"Doug told you that, didn't he? He said Constance wanted to kill him?"

"What *is* this?" Black swung to his feet and stood over his brother-in-law. "Have you lost your mind, too? If this poor girl told you some weird story—"

Bill Gardiner remained seated but his eyes knifed up into the other man's face. "Sit down. Sylvia's going to explain all about this business. Chief Meadows?"

"All right, go ahead."

Bill said: "After Doug told you Connie was trying to kill him, he brought you here, didn't he?"

"Yes. But I didn't want to stay. I was afraid of—her. I guess I hated her."

"But you came back today when he asked you to come. Why?"

"The picture," Sylvia said. "The painting of Joan. It has the flame. Douglas had it painted just for me."

"Then he called and invited you—urged you—to come to the house to see the picture this afternoon?"

Douglas Black once more shot out of his chair. "Chief Meadows, I can't take

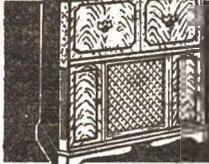
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any more of this! If you want me I'll be in my room."

"Not yet." Bill Gardiner was also on his feet, facing him, looming above him.

HE TOOK a folded slip of paper out of his hand and held it out to the police chief. "Connie and I were at the country club most of the afternoon. She wasn't with me when a telephone call came through for her. They paged her—and while they were paging her wrote the message out.

"When I was informed later that she'd been stabbed, I remembered that message and went to the switchboard to ask about it. The operator gave me a copy of it. The caller was Douglas Black and his message was a demand that his wife come home at once.

"Connie went home without saying good-bye to me. She was stabbed in her husband's study. He invited Sylvia here to see the picture, obviously explaining that his wife was out; then called Constance back home—so they would meet."

Douglas Black turned an angry shoulder on his brother-in-law and eyed the law officers. "Are you going to let him rant on?"

"Yeah." The police chief looked at Bill. "Even if Black got his wife here, what about the dagger the girl had stolen?"

"I didn't steal it," Sylvia said, her eyes darkening with the intense need of explanation. "I just wanted to borrow—"

"Never mind that, Sylvia," Bill said. "I'm going to bring someone else in on this. He's waiting right outside in the hall. Dr. Fredericks!"

The physician came in at once.

"Dr. Fredericks," Bill Gardiner said. "You've known my brother-in-law for years, haven't you?"

"Certainly. Both he and his wife are—were—old patients."

Swansong for an Ugly Duckling 125

"Is Douglas Black suffering from a heart condition?"

"No. He has no such condition and never has had."

Sylvia's eyes were brightening again.

Gardiner went to her side and put a hand on her arm. "Dr. Fredericks, you also know Miss Reade. In your opinion is she mentally unbalanced?"

The physician's sharp eyes rested on the girl and he shook his head. "No. There's no evidence of any serious mental instability. The background — circumstances of her life, perhaps have developed a persecution complex."

"Then you would call her sane?"

"Definitely."

Gardiner left the girl's side and nodded at the chief of police. "You've got my sister's killer right in your hands. My brother-in-law arranged the whole thing after learning of Sylvia's history. It was the perfect out—he thought. She took the knife, and it was perfect for his plans when it spilled out of her handbag. But if she hadn't had the dagger, he would have used one of the other knives."

Douglas Black stared at the police officer. He yelled, "Of all the crazy—!"

But the three policemen closed in around him and the noise cut off. Bill Gardiner bent over Sylvia.

"I'll take you home," he said.

Bill Gardiner helped Sylvia out of the car and walked with her to the house.

She put out her hand. "I can't say anything. I wish I could—"

"Don't try." He kept her hand in his. "But Sylvia, in a little while, when the shock of Connie's death isn't so bad—may I come back?"

He was young and big and vital. He was waiting for her answer. And Sylvia's smile was sure as she told him:

"Yes, please come back. I'll be waiting."

THE END



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(Continued from page 103)

Suspicion raced over her face. "I don't believe you. I know how much you hate me."

"Sure I hate you. I hate you too much to make it quick and easy. I'm going to hit you where it hurts a lot worse. I'm going to let you watch what happens to Slick!"

This time she screamed in spite of his threat. He clapped a hand over her lips to quiet her, then jammed his gun in her side. Prodding her with the gun, he made her sit on a straight chair, facing the door.

"That's better," he said. "Ringside seat and everything."

There was a pack of cigarettes on the table. He tapped one out for himself, lit it and looked at the girl.

"He means a lot to you," Judd said. "So much that you were willing to help him wrap me up. Wonder how much you'll love him a few minutes from now?"

He cut himself off short. Over the music of the radio he heard the thump of footsteps. Someone was coming up the stairs.

The door was still unlocked. Judd moved behind it, gun ready. Vernice writhed in her chair, made gurgling noises through the gag. Judd waited.

The steps paused. The door opened. Slick Anson stepped inside.

Judd saw him stare at Vernice in surprise. Before Slick could speak, Judd closed the door again, locked it, and turned to face the other man. "Hello, Slick," he said softly.

"Judd Conroy!" Slick cried hoarsely.

The gun spoke twice. Slick Anson stared horribly. The left side of his mouth twitched. A half a word escaped, a meaningless garble. Slick Anson turned slowly as he fell. It was like a strand of rope coiling to the ground.

Judd Conroy glared down at him for a long time, drinking in the sight.

"How's he look, baby?" he muttered thickly.

Vernice didn't answer. And Judd wouldn't have heard her anyway, for at that moment a new voice crackled over the radio.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen," the voice barked. "Before getting to the rest of the news, here is a startling development in connection with today's break from Sing Sing prison. One of the men who escaped, Judd Conroy, is an innocent man. He is serving time for a crime he did not commit. I have just learned that a full confession, complete with details heretofore unknown to the police, has just been received by the district attorney. It completely exonerates Judd Conroy. The police say that the guilty man is confessing to this minor crime to avoid a murder rap."

Judd stared stupidly at the radio. Vernice had stopped her struggling now.

"Attention Judd Conroy, wherever you are," the voice rattled on. "Give yourself up to the police at once. You are not in serious trouble, provided you give yourself up immediately. The police now know that you are innocent. They are on their way at this very moment to pick up the man who has confessed. Give yourself up, Judd Conroy. You are not in trouble. You are innocent. . . ."

The gun dropped from Judd's limp fingers. It fell on the lifeless form of Slick Anson and slid off into the stream of blood which was slowly emerging from beneath the crumpled body. Judd Conroy looked at Vernice, then turned away, unable to face the savage triumph he read in her eyes.

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head, said, "That's too bad. All right. Meet me in, say, half an hour."

AS WE bowled along through traf-
fic my head ached with the
effort of thinking. Obviously,
Sackler was very right and I was very
wrong.

Dimly, I heard Sackler still explain-
ing to Woolley, "In addition to the tri-
angle motive, Regnor left a hunk of
insurance and a lot of cash."

We were a good ten feet away from
the Regnor doorbell when we heard
Turner's upraised voice. "You told him!
It must have been you!"

He was roaring at the top of his voice
and he sounded as if he'd been drink-
ing. Woolley rang the doorbell and there
was instant silence. A moment later Mrs.
Regnor opened the door.

Turner stood against the living room
wall, his face pale and his eyes blazing.

Woolley said, "Okay, Turner, we want
you. And you, Mrs. Regnor, as an
accessory."

"Damn you!" screamed Turner. "I
knew you told them. You didn't want
to share the money with me!"

His hand jerked to his coat pocket
and when it appeared again, it held an
automatic. He levelled it at the woman
and fired as I sprang across the room.
I grabbed his arm and he slugged me
with his left. We struggled and both
slid down to the floor.

Then Woolley stood over us, his police
special in his hand.

"This really ties it up," said Woolley.
"They were fighting about the loot. You
must have scared them, Rex."

Sackler sighed heavily and strode from
the house. I went along after him.

There was a small figure standing at
the curb. It lifted a hand in greeting
to Sackler and said, "Hi."

Sackler returned the salutation glumly while I stared. It was Zirkin.

He said to Sackler, "It's five bucks like I told you on the phone."

"Yes," said Sackler sadly. "Some people wouldn't pay five cents to see their mother in heaven."

I stared at him, not understanding. He withdrew a worn wallet from his breast pocket and took out a dirty five dollar bill. He handed it to Zirkin.

"You framed me!"

"Framed you, Joey?"

"Yes. Zirkin was a phony. Minniman never bought any strychnine at all."

"Ah, now the brain is working."

"The whole thing was a frame," I said excitedly. "You got the name of Minniman's doctor and swiped a prescription blank somehow. You found out a guy named Zirkin worked in the drugstore Minniman patronized and hired this mug to impersonate him."

"I had to scare Minniman into paying me my rightful fee."

"But why drag me into it?"

"It would have looked too obvious if I'd done it myself."

I glared at him. I called him six harsh names, preceded by six harsher adjectives. I added. "What's more, I'm out twenty bucks."

"You're out?" he said indignantly. "You're so miserably frugal you cost me five dollars. I guaranteed that character twenty-five bucks for impersonating Zirkin. I said I'd make up the difference if you didn't give it to him—you skunk!"

He walked briskly down the street, muttering indignantly, leaving me speechless.

Someday I told myself desperately, somewhere, somehow, Rex Sackler is going to lose a buck.

But in my heart I didn't really believe it.

THE END

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(Continued from page 6)

printed a good while back, I know, but I never forget anything I like. Lets have lots more of his work from now on.

Marie R. Spencer
Hinton, W. Va.

Dear Editor:

Congratulations, BLACK MASK! In your November issue you brought back one of my very favorite detective writers—Robert C. Dennis. I haven't seen any of his work on your pages for some time, and I've really missed it. For my money, his yarns are tops in excitement.

While I'm on the subject of Mr. Dennis, I'd like to add that "The 7th Pallbearer" was one of the best yet. I honestly couldn't see how Willie Carmody was going to tie up the gangster's funeral with the movie party and the murder until almost the last page. A smart shamus, that Carmody. How about letting him strut his stuff again?

Peter Kleinert
Chicago, Ill.

Dear Editor:

Don't you think it's about time for another story by Richard Deming? His "No Pockets in a Shroud", published a while ago, was a fine job. Manville Moon is a likable vet turned private-eye and I'd like to see more about him.

I'm a newcomer to BLACK MASK so I don't know if Manny Moon is a regular character in your magazine, but I hope he will be from now on.

Howard Matlin
Raleigh, N. C.

Sorry there's no room for more, folks. We'll be saving this space for you next time, though, so keep those letters coming. Just address them to: BLACK MASK, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, New York.

THE EDITOR

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