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CALL THE LADY INDISCREET

by Paul Whelton

author of

"Death and the Devil"



SHEENA

QUEEN OF THE JUNGLE...



JOHN BARTRAM HIGH SCHOOL
SIXTY-SEVENTH STREET AND ELMWOOD AVENUE
PHILADELPHIA

W. MORGAN THOMAS
46 JUMBO COMICS
REAL ADVENTURES PUB. CO.
670 59TH AVE., N.Y.C., N.Y.

DEAR MR. THOMAS:

BY A VERY POPULAR VOTE, THE GRADUATING CLASS OF FEBRUARY, 1947 OF THE JOHN BARTRAM HIGH SCHOOL HAS SELECTED "SHEENA" AS THEIR CLASS MASCOT.

THEY HAVE FOLLOWED HER ADVENTURES WITH GREAT ENTHUSIASM AND ARE PROUD TO HAVE HER GRADUATE WITH THEM.

AS FACULTY SPONSOR OF THIS CLASS I AM WRITING TO ASK YOUR PERMISSION FOR US TO SO ADOPT "SHEENA" AND TO HAVE HER PICTURE PRINTED ON OUR TRADITIONAL SENIOR CLASS MASCOT BADGE WHICH IS A CELLULOID BUTTON OF THE SIZE AND SHAPE INDICATED BY THE ENCLOSED CARD AND WHICH IS TO BE WORN BY EVERY MEMBER OF THIS GROUP.

THE CLASS ALSO SEEKS YOUR ASSISTANCE IN OBTAINING A BUTTON SIZE DRAWING OF "SHEENA" WHICH WE COULD USE IN THE PRINTING OF THE BUTTON.

WE SINCERELY HOPE YOU WILL FIND IT POSSIBLE TO MAKE SUCH A DRAWING AND GRANT US THE PRIVILEGE OF USING IT SO THAT WE MAY CONTINUE TO ADVANCE OUR INTEREST IN "SHEENA"

VERY TRULY YOURS
John K. Martin

THAT'S WHAT I LIKE ABOUT THE JUNGLE, CHIM. PEACE, QUIET NOBODY KNOWS WE EVEN EXIST!

CHEE...CHEE!



*NOBODY EXCEPT THE HALF MILLION READERS, BOB, WHO SHARE SHEENA'S ADVENTURES IN EVERY ISSUE OF JUMBO COMICS!

DETECTIVE BOOK

Magazine

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MALCOLM REISS, Editor & Gen. Mgr.

Detective Book Magazine's \$2.00 Booklength Novel

CALL THE LADY INDISCREET

By PAUL WHELTON

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Just an out-of-state mob killing, thought the cops as they brought in the burned and battered body. But ace-reporter Garry Dean took one look and knew better. This was one more grisly strand in the bloody skein of vicious killing that was settling over the quiet little city. Murder after murder was woven into the bloody fabric—and Garry probed deeper—deeper—until the menace that crouched in the dead center of horror was aroused by the vibration of Garry's intruding steps. Then, in sudden hate and snarling panic, it struck back 3

Plus These Thrilling Stories and Features

- KILLER IN THE NIGHT** H. R. Hunt 106
He alone knew who the killer was—and he alone knew that tonight was the night to strike!
- MURDER MAKES A LOVELY FRAME** Ken Kessler 109
Crime reporter Johnnie Vinson laughed shakily to himself. The only way to find out who was for you, it seemed, was to kill a cop!
- STILL UNSOLVED! The Wall Street Explosion** Walter Galli 2
Beginning a new series on the greatest bafflers on record.

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The Wall Street Explosion

WALTER GALLI

1

ON SEPT. 16, 1920, JUST BEFORE NOON, A HORSE-DRAWN RED WAGON STOPPED AT WALL AND BROAD STREETS, IN THE HEART OF THE NEW YORK FINANCIAL DISTRICT. ON ITS RIGHT WAS THE HOUSE OF J. P. MORGAN AND CO. ON ITS LEFT THE SUB-TREASURY AND THE ASSAY OFFICE...

2

THE DRIVER GOT OUT AND INQUIRED OF SOME CONSTRUCTION WORKERS IF THEY KNEW WHERE HE WAS TO DELIVER SOME SUPPLIES. HE SAID HE HAD BEEN INSTRUCTED TO DRIVE TO BROAD AND WALL AND TO GET THERE BY NOON. AS HE ASKED QUESTIONS THE NEARBY TRINITY CHURCH CLOCK BEGAN ITS DEEP, LAZY ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE NOON HOUR.....

3

ALMOST IMMEDIATELY GOOD NATURED AND HUNGRY OFFICE WORKERS BEGAN POURING INTO THE STREETS FOR THE LUNCH PERIOD. THEN SUDDENLY, WITHOUT ANY WARNING, THERE WAS A TERRIFYING, PARALYZING CRASH! PEOPLE STILL CONSCIOUS SAW OTHERS THROWN 50 FEET INTO THE AIR, WATCHED AUTOS SMASHED TO BITS--ALL IN A SPLIT SECOND. FOLLOWING THE EXPLOSION 39 PERSONS LAY DEAD, MORE THAN 200 WERE MAIMED AND INJURED.....

4

IN THE MORGAN BUILDING, THE BODIES OF DEAD CLERKS LAY STREWN ABOUT. ALL DESKS AND BANK CAGES WERE SMASHED!

5

THE EXPLOSION HAD TAKEN PLACE IN THE WAGON... PARTS OF THE HORSE AND BITS OF A TIME BOMB WERE FOUND SCATTERED AS FAR AWAY AS 200 FEET. THERE WAS NOT A WHOLE WINDOW IN ANY BUILDING FOR FIVE BLOCKS IN ANY DIRECTION! STATISTICS COMPILED LATER SHOWED THERE WERE PROBABLY MORE PEOPLE IN THAT VICINITY THAT BLOODY NOON THAN IN ANY OTHER PLACE IN THE WORLD.

6

AS AMBULANCES CARRIED AWAY THE VICTIMS, POLICE ATTEMPTED TO DETERMINE WHAT HAD HAPPENED. THEY ARE STILL TRYING TO LEARN!

7

THE DRIVER HAD APPARENTLY ESCAPED UNINJURED. MANY SUSPECTS WERE QUICKLY TAKEN INTO CUSTODY, BUT ALL ARRESTS RESULTED IN DISMISSALS. THE NEARBY BUILDINGS STILL BEAR THE SCARS OF THE SHATTERING BLAST. STORED AWAY IN THE ARCHIVES OF THE POLICE DEPARTMENT ARE BITS OF HORSESHOES, PIECES OF BURNED RED BOARD AND SCRAPS OF HARNESS. BUT THOSE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE CATASTROPHE ARE AS FREE TODAY AS THEY WERE THAT TERRIBLE DAY WHEN BOTH THE TRINITY CLOCK AND THE TIME BOMB STRUCK NOON!

CALL
The Lady
INDISCREET



By **PAUL WHELTON**

A FICTION HOUSE SELECTION

CALL THE LADY

INDISCREET

By PAUL WHELTON

THE FIFTH VICE-PRESIDENT smirked and stood up behind the big desk. He was an undersized squirt with a thin, blond mustache, sloping shoulders and white-piped vest over a cute little pot-belly. The pot looked as if he'd breakfasted on a grapefruit without bothering to shuck its skin.

He said, with manufactured cheerfulness, "So you can tell your editor, Mr. Dean, that his tip seems to have no foundation."

But I wasn't concerned any more. Anyhow, not as much. My eyes, as I rose, were focussed on the far side of the wide main floor. The slim, semi-bald man across the way had slipped off his brown topcoat and was placing a brown hat with it on a chair. Under the coat he wore a black alpaca jacket. Watching through breaks in the seething tide of bank customers, I saw him stick a yellow pencil behind his right ear and a pince-nez on his nose. Nobody else seemed interested in him during this noon rush.

"Well, is there anything else, Mr. Dean?" the fifth vice-president asked pointedly. Even for a banker he sounded a trifle annoyed.

I loaned him a quick glance, carrying little more than two percent interest. Putting on my best hurt manner, I said, "Some day, Mr. Jordaine, when I have a great big bank and one of my hired hands louses up the accounts, I won't tell you."

He stuttered over words that stuck but I was fingering the latch of his gate and sliding through, Baldy, in the pince-nez and alpaca, had moved away from his topcoat and hat and was heading for the double-doored exit. With that get-up and the pencil behind his ear nobody would have taken him for other than a busy clerk. His frown of concentration helped. When he went through with the outgoing current I was a dozen or so clients behind. As I made the four worn granite

steps, he was already part way across the sidewalk,

At the foot of these steps I braked fast to a halt. Baldy had steamed up to a black limousine parked a couple of car lengths above the Belle City Trust Company. A well-set-up chauffeur with a hawk nose stood beside the rear door, holding it open for a woman who had beaten Baldy out of the bank only by scant yards. His shiny noggin poked into the aperture and the tail of his alpaca climbed its wearer's back a few inches. The narrow posteriors jiggled and he seemed to be talking to the passenger with considerable earnestness. Then a long, white envelope passed from her hand to his, he withdrew, and I turned, busying myself in brushing from my knees a fleck or two of dust that wasn't there.

Something in the way of shenanigans appeared to be making and I didn't intend to miss out on the play. When he hustled into the bank again, I was almost at heel. He veered left for the chair where he had placed his stuff, but I kept straight ahead for the customer's counter in the center, snatched a pen and pretended to be figuring on a deposit slip.

He picked up hat and coat, placed the large envelope on the same chair, removed pince-nez and pencil and dropped them into a pocket of his alpaca. A heavy-set man wearing a black Homburg, dark gray coat and a chin-dimple reached carelessly from the next chair, lifted the envelope, held it a moment while his eyes coursed the foyer, then rose, mixed with the outgoing flow and strolled for the open air.

Baldy, ignoring him, covered his glistening pate, slipped into the topcoat, and was donning a pair of horn-rimmed cheaters as I reached the door, tailing the envelope carrier. Already part way down the block, he was catty-cornering across Liberty Street. The limousine remained parked, its rear door still open, the chauffeur gazing toward the bank. I glanced at the license

plate, Y-4720, as I moved in Dimple-Chin's direction. To be certain of retaining it, I jotted the number down before leaving the curb.

On the other side of the street, my man continued east along Liberty but was taking it easier. The envelope had disappeared. His right arm was tight against his side, however, and I figured he had the envelope tucked away in his pocket. He passed Cornish Place—and then I spied Baldy and his horn-rims crossing Liberty, dodging through traffic. He reached our side, joined Dimple-Chin and they swung into a faster pace which had me hard put to keep up as I stepped a broken field around poky pedestrians.

WHEN they hit straight across Union Square, it was plain they were bound for Union Station—to blow town on a train I thought—and I began to search my skull for some method by which to get a peek at what was in that mysterious envelope. But the mental process was sluggish. By the time they whisked into the terminal I hadn't gotten beyond the rudimentary stage, to pick Dimple-Chin's pocket, which was no good at all.

Heavier crowds in the station gave me a chance to move closer without risking discovery and I was weaving in and out of this foot traffic, less than five yards in their wake, when Baldy suddenly obliqued toward the ticket windows and waiting room. Dimple-Chin kept stepping smartly and I stuck to him, past train gate after train gate, until he, too, changed course and cruised over to a long bank of pay-lockers.

Without hesitation, or even a glance around, he withdrew the envelope from beneath his coat, opened a compartment, tossed in the envelope, fumbled with coin and key, then faced around and began to retrace his steps. It all looked so silly, parking a small object like that in such a roomy hideaway.

From my vantage point I counted the boxes, right to left and bottom to top, charting the position of Dimple-Chin's locker. When I turned, George Poole, a railroad dick, was eyeing me curiously. For a moment I thought he had me pegged, but then he grinned and I walked over.

He said, "What's up, Garry, boy? You

came through here like you had a fire in your pants, Thought you were on somebody's trail."

My head waggled and I gave him a big fib. "Guess it's a stand-up but I was late anyhow. She probably got tired waiting."

"Sure. These dames! A guy spends half his lifetime waiting for them, then they get sore if he's late just once." Poole straightened the black bow tie that was his visible badge of office. "Anything hot in the news?"

"You dig me up a good yarn, brother, and I'll kiss you."

"Not while I got my stren'th you won't,"

Then I left him, cut over to a row of phone booths and called Dunegan on the *Press-Bulletin* city desk. While waiting, I tried to figure out what this shuffling business involving a white envelope and a woman in a black limousine might be all about, but I got nowhere.

Dunegan's gravel-voice came through the receiver. I said, "This is Garry, but I drew a large zero. The bank's all dummed up. Nobody'll talk, except denial, You'd better have Flatner go after the bank examiner at the State House."

I could hear him snort, "Never mind the damn thing," he rapped. "Some idiotic second cousin to the publisher's uncle's mother-in-law just got to the front office. There's a fix at the bank and a kill on the story. Come on in."

"Uh-huh! Not yet. I think I've picked up something else, Harry—maybe."

"Picked up what?" There was alarm in his voice. "Listen, now—you lay off anything with that bank."

"Well, it may not cook right. I can't tell you over the phone anyhow. Too many ears."

"What do you mean you can't tell me? Never mind the ears. Dammit, are you working for me or aren't you? When are you gonna learn that a city editor—"

There was no alternative. In a switch falsetto I cried impatiently, "Operator, operator! Answer this phone, operator," I clicked the hook two or three times, then dropped my voice, "Get off the line, please. You're on a busy line. Harry—" I hung up with that and chuckled.

Wriggling sidewise out of the booth, I almost stepped on Baldy. The expression he offered told me he was very unhappy.

II

THE PALE BLUE EYES behind Baldy's owlsh horn-rims regarded me unblinkingly. His thin lips pressed tight. The right hand was in his topcoat pocket.

I said, "Hello, Gillie, all booths taken? Step in here, then, and get your wrong number. Business is rushing."

But he wasn't interested in phoning—at least not his own phoning. He snarled, "Well, smart guy, what's the answer? Maybe I caught a wrong number right here."

"Why, Gilbert Maher, whatever is eating you?"

The right hand remained in his pocket. With the left he picked and pulled nervously at a little, nipple-like and hair-tufted mole or wen on his neck, beneath the chin. A black onyx ring was on the second finger,

"What's the idea, tailing me?" he demanded.

I grinned, though he hadn't moved and I was pressed against a corner of the booth. My eyes dropped once more to the pocket bulge. Then, with a quick jerk, I twisted into the open. Nothing happened except that he moved around and faced me again.

"What made you think I'm tailing you?"

His face worked and the contortion didn't make it any prettier. He said angrily, "I'm up in a bank and I see you. I come down here and I see you following. You gab with a station dick. Then you come over and call up—"

All of a sudden the guy began to annoy me. I snapped, "Listen, you two-bit con man, while it's none of your damn business, I went into that bank on the legit. I came down here and ran into Poole accidentally. Then I called my office to tell them there was nothing to the bank business. And now, you lousy tin-horn, if you try throwing a scare into me again, I'll do you up in a braid."

The hand came slowly out of his pocket and he relaxed. "Hell, Garry, I wasn't packing a rod anyway."

"I didn't think you were."

"No hard feelings, boy,"

"Ah, run away and rob another widow or orphan somewhere."

I abandoned him, threaded the concourse crowds to the square, crossed over and went back along Liberty Street to where I'd parked the Hudson. The big, black limousine was gone. I had an uneasy feeling that what I was meddling in probably was on the up-and-up and somewhere along the route I'd fall flat, and very embarrassingly, on my face. But reassurance came almost instantly. If this lateral passing of the white envelope were on the level, why was Gillie so concerned over my following him and his heavyweight boy friend? And why Gillie's clothes-shuffling dodge in the bank?

I slid behind the wheel of the Hudson, drove through to the Boulevard, turned left and made for Bulfinch Street and police headquarters. Dan Burke was alone in the Traffic Bureau. I said, kidding, "Mind if I lift some dope from your files, copper?"

He shook his gray head. "Okay with me, Garry. What's on your mind that we can use?"

"Just a personal matter. Why are you flatfeet always so damn commercial? Don't you pick up enough trade without having more dumped in your lap?"

He chuckled. "Well, sonny, the taxpayers seem a little fussy about getting their money's worth out of us poor john-laws—except when it hits them personal, of course."

I offered him a cigarette, but he picked up his battered pipe and displayed it wordlessly. I fired one for myself, opened the gate and went over the files. The drawer I wanted was down by the floor. It always is.

And when I found the listing for Y-4720, my breath caught and I regarded it thoughtfully. The limousine was a late-model, sixteen-cylinder Cadillac, registered to R. Eugene Langerman at 221 Kinkaid Avenue. And R. Eugene Langerman was doing all right with his rowdy and sprawling cut-rate department store, an old institution in Belle City.

FOR several moments, after shoving the drawer back and coming out of my crouch, I stood motionless beside the row of cabinets. The hunch that I had bumped smack into something smelly wouldn't down. No more slick or subtle knave than

Gilbert Maher ever had turned a quick but dishonest dollar and whoever had tagged him Slippery Gillie and Gillie-the-Slip must have been inspired. He was an artist in wriggling out of tight corners. Something in that envelope, I felt certain, must be valuable—or Gillie thought so—and he had gone through his hocus-pocus for the purpose of laying greedy hands on it.

But—I asked myself—what of it? If somebody in the Langerman family had been taken by a couple of sharpers, the matter probably had been reported to police by now and all the papers would have it.

Then, in another reversal, I felt happy again. Nobody, except myself and Gillie—and Dimple-Chin, of course—knew who had pulled the job. I sucked at the cigarette, dropped it to the floor, stepped on the fire and walked out past the desk on my way out.

"Find what you want?" Burke asked absently, the pipe bobbing between his lips.

"Funny thing," I said. "It was right there where it was supposed to be."

"Always a wise guy," he retorted amiably. "Don't forget, Garry, we got *your* number, too."

I went down one flight, followed the corridor back and entered the press room. Three of the police-beat men were there—red-haired Barney Babcock of the *Press-Bulletin*, rotund Jed Carr of the *Globe*, and Shorty Lawton, the *Examiner's* early man. A traffic cop named Seward, his uniform coat hanging from a locker hinge, was tilted back in a chair, feet cocked on the *Chronicle* reporter's vacant desk.

Carr grinned. "If it isn't the boy detective! Now something must be up when he favors *us* with a visit."

"He isn't on a bender," Babcock chimed in. "Look! His eyes are open."

I said, "Once in a while I like to come over and mix with the long-drawers set."

"Will you guys, for cripes sake, shut up for a minute." Lawton barked, interrupting his phoning. Then he growled into the mouthpiece, "These noisy bums must think they're home."

Babcock elevated his palms in a gesture of defeat. I sat down and reached for the press-room log. With pretended care-

lessness, I ran my eyes down the list of bulletins. The last one was timed at 1:47, I glanced at the electric clock on the wall. It read 1:56.

"Find it, Garry?" Carr asked impishly.

I pushed the log away. "Find what? Can't a guy drop in and rest his dogs if he happens to be around these slums?"

The lolling cop surprised me by winking out of a straight face for no reason at all. Lawton finished his phoning, disconnected and said, "Hello, Garry. Out on a hot prow!"

"Something that blew up. Just a waste of time, Did you ever want to slap a cute pot-belly and see if it'd flatten?"

The chubby Carr pushed back his chair and feigned alarm. "Let me outa here—please!"

"Since when the hell has yours been cute?" Lawton asked disdainfully. He turned to me. "Well, who is she?"

"Now, now!" Babcock chided. "Keep everything clean. Remember, the law's here, bending an eye and ear."

The cop swiveled his feet from desk to floor, yawned and flexed his shoulders. "Don't mind me. I gotta hit the pavement again."

I CAUGHT Babcock's eye and tipped my head toward the corridor. He rose and went out. I got up and followed. I said, "I am on to something, Barney, but don't know yet what the hell it is. Maybe it's nothing at that."

He smiled. "I figured you weren't here just for the social end."

"Is that log complete—radio calls and everything?"

"Sure. Put the last one down myself. Why?"

I shrugged. "Well, by all rights another item should be in by now—if I haven't gone nuts. It may break yet. If it doesn't something's even funnier than I thought."

"Swell! That makes it all clear." He shook his head wonderingly. "Marvelous what an open, frank talk will do to straighten out a tangle."

"Don't, for Pete's sake, let on that I've any interest in it, but this would be a complaint by a woman that she was horsed out of some valuables at a bank—in front of a bank. Probably she'll be a prominent

woman. But if there's no such report, don't mention the case at all."

"Okay, but why shouldn't she report it? Doesn't she want the stuff back, or what?"

"I'd sure like to know. And what I *don't* know is a hell of a lot more than I *do*," I told him patiently. "There should have been a yelp by now. That's what I can't figure."

"Does seem queer. What you do, get a tipoff?"

"Tip nothing. I saw it. But never mind details now. Just watch for a report. I'm going after this thing on my own. In half an hour or so I'll phone you and ask if it's in yet. If it isn't by then—well, it's a cinch there's nothing coming at all."

"I just say yes, or no, or not yet? Something like that?"

"Right!" I agreed; and he went back into the press room,

I walked out of headquarters, crossed Bulfinch to the Hudson, got in—and then sat there, smoking a cigarette and thinking. It wasn't too late yet to pull out. The Langerman family had plenty of jack and plenty of drag in Belle City, while I didn't have so much spare neck that I could afford to put it out and have a vital part lopped off. If the family had been cozened out of something but didn't care to have the fact publicized, who was I to horn in? Yet I was the lad who could tip them on who'd done it. After a while I got out of the sedan, tossed away my butt, walked around the corner to Kolrain's Bar and Grill and had a bourbon and soda. When I returned to the Hudson, I wheeled away without giving myself further argument.

Kinkaid Avenue climbed into hills off the Dyson Road. Number 221 was smaller than a public library but not much. A ten-foot wall of granite ran along the front and up the slope on both sides, vanishing into trees, but the yellow pile stuck high above that as if Atlas' great-great-great-grandson or something was holding it on his back. At the curb of Kinkaid, just beyond the drive, a coupe in two shades of green was parked.

Nobody stopped me at the open gate and I wheeled up between rows of shrubs under the naked trees. The drive curved and broadened into a concrete apron, where

a runty man in rubber boots and a dilapidated tan windbreaker was hosing a blue and chromium Chrysler roadster. Two doors of a four-car, yellow brick garage stood open, with one stall gaping empty. The garage had an upper story, and there were curtains in its two windows.

I parked the fender-dented, dull-surfaced Hudson, which looked like a rag-tag waif by comparison with the snooty roadster. Runty quit his hosing, dropped the nozzle, the water still running, and regarded me with a sour expression as I approached on foot. I gazed past him and read the license on a black car visible in the second open stall. It was Y-4720.

The runt had small, beady eyes, one of which squinted. His voice sounded like a pair of knock-knees in corduroy pants. He rasped, "Want something, Mister?"

"The chauffeur; just to ask a question or two."

"You'll have to yell like hell then."

"Yell? Is he deaf?"

Runty shook his head. "No, not deaf. In town."

MY EYES unconsciously went over his shoulder again to the limousine, then came back. "He was in town a couple of hours ago but now the car's back."

"His afternoon and evening off. Any law against taking them?" Runty picked up the hose and turned away indifferently.

I was talking then to his back. "Who was with him in the Caddie when he came home?"

The shoe-button eyes squinted briefly over their owner's shoulder. "Why ask me?" His voice had gone surly.

"Well, let me ask this, chum," I said softly. "Would it interest you to know that I came up here from police headquarters?"

He snapped around as if I'd stuck him with a pin. His small mouth had formed a circle and I waited for him to blurt out, "Oh!" like you wait for the guy upstairs to drop his second shoe. But Runty fooled me. The surliness had washed out and he said, "Pardon me, chief. I didn't tag you for a cop." He gulped, "I wasn't around when Jerry took the Caddie out and didn't see him come back. They could tell you at the house."

"Then I'll find out there," I told him with an assurance I did not feel.

I walked back down the drive to the front of this architect's nightmare. It was a long walk. Around the big yellow coliseum couldn't have been much more than four laps to the mile. Along its full width stretched a wide front veranda, roofless except for a section at the steps, which were in the exact mathematical center. A concrete flower urn perched at each end of the veranda but all they had to offer on this March day were brown, withered stalks.

My finger pressed the bell. Almost at the same moment the door swung open and a man came out. He nodded to me as he passed and I nodded back absently, then did a fast double-take. The man was Dimple-Chin. You could have knocked me over with a dry sponge.

III

THE VOICE WAS AS FUNERAL as its owner's appearance in the doorway. Except for the fawn waistcoat and brass buttons, he might have been a pro pallbearer in any morticians' league. Into one word he compressed a world of inquiry.

He intoned, "Yes?" in low register, and the word unglued my eyes from the broad figure of Dimple-Chin swinging down the drive.

The door was still held wide and the butler stood stiffly beside it. He was all of six feet, lean, with a pointed nose and thin, anemic lips. His skin, where it was stretched taut over high cheekbones, was veined and glistened like an inflated turkey-bladder. Shaggy black eyebrows contrasted strangely with his sparse, white locks.

I said, "Sorry to bother, but could I use the phone?"

"The telephone?" His hesitation was only momentary. "Certainly, sir. Right this way."

He moved aside. I walked into a wide hall and the door closed behind me. Though it was daytime, two yellow globes burned in wall brackets but at that the place was dismal as an abandoned carbarn. Through open doors to the left, at the foot of a staircase, I saw a concert grand piano, matched divans in front of a fireplace, and

a coffee table. Double doors directly opposite, at my right, were closed.

The lean one led me back along the hall half a dozen paces and halted beside a glass-enclosed booth tucked under the broad stairway. He said, pulling on a light, "In here, sir. You may shut the door if you wish."

"You're sure this is no trouble?"

"None at all, sir."

I nodded and stepped into the angular goldfish-bowl. All wrapped up in glass, I called police headquarters. From my seat I could see the lean one standing at alert across the hall. The switchboard operator's voice came through and I asked for the press room, then got Babcock.

"Nothing on it yet," he said.

"Within the last few minutes I decided there wouldn't be," I replied.

"Could I ask why? Or should I?"

"No."

"Thanks, you informative bum."

"Don't mention it."

I left the booth and the lean one came to attention. "Right this way, sir." He started for the front door.

"Not yet, I want to see somebody—what's your name?"

"Nevers, sir."

"Nevers. Okay. The party I want to see is the woman who was downtown a couple of hours ago in Mr. Langerman's limousine."

His dark eyebrows closed formation. "You are expected?"

I shook my head. "Uh-huh! Don't even know who she is—yet."

"Sorry, sir. I'm afraid that's somewhat—"

I gave him a flash of the police badge, carefully covering the word "Press." I said, "I'm sure she won't object after hearing what I have to tell her. If you know what I mean..."

The eyebrows unscrambled. "I fear I don't, sir. Whom shall I say is calling?"

"Mr. Dean. But I don't think you told me hers. In fact, I'm sure of it."

"I'll have to inquire, sir. Would you come this way?"

"With pleasure," I said, though not so certain whether any pleasure would come out of this affair at all. I was bemused over Dimple-Chin's presence in the house after that curious play at the bank.

We returned along the hall and he opened one of the double doors opposite the music room. "You may wait in here if you will."

THE vast chamber was almost an exact square. None of its contents could have come from the Langerman bargain store and certainly nobody ever had sat down and furnished it according to plan. Four huge chairs were in gray leather. Two others and a long, broad couch with three pillows were done in gray and rose striping of some heavy weave. A large library table in dead center was strewn with magazines and newspapers. The table looked as if, cleared, it could accommodate eight at a poker session—very comfortably except for the losers.

There were also three other, smaller tables, a dozen or more smoking stands and trays, an expensive cabinet radio, and lamps all over the place. On a fireplace mantel was a ship's clock, between two ship-models and directly beneath a blown-up photo of some racing yacht, heeled over, sails full and footing fast. On either side of the fireplace were immense open bookcases.

I was running my eyes along the books, many in class sets with wearying titles and probably never read, when the door opened, a good-looking dame came in and the door all but closed again. She was about twenty-five, with dark hair drawn back so that her ringed ears showed, and hanging in one of those chignon things at the nape of her neck. She had on a green, knitted sleeveless sweater with gold kid jeweled belt, over a long-sleeved blouse, and a skirt of darker green.

She also had on a dark frown. "You want something, Mr. Dean?" she asked.

I left the books without regret and shook my head. "No, I don't *want* anything," I told her, which wasn't strictly true. "I've *got* something." Then I grinned. "I haven't your name, though."

"I'm sorry. Miss Yeager. I'm Mrs. Corbell's secretary."

"Oh! You were downtown in the limousine this noon with the chauffeur?"

Head and chignon wagged. "No, that was Mrs. Corbell."

I leaned against the center table and gave her a patient smile. "Then it's Mrs.

Corbell I want to see—nice-looking though *you* are."

She ignored the salve, except that her expression chilled more. "Mrs. Corbell asked me to take care of this—whatever matter it is," she said curtly.

Again I shook my head. "I'm afraid it may turn out a little too confidential even for a secretary."

The dark eyes glinted and her lips pursed. "Mrs. Corbell has no secrets from me."

"No?"

"No."

"What a dull love life she must lead. Or is she merely married?"

Miss Yeager's words were cold as an iceman's shoulder. "My employer no longer lives with her husband, Mr. Dean, but that's beside the point. I didn't come downstairs to spar with you."

"Well, run right upstairs again, beautiful, and tell her to come out, but not sparring. This won't keep too long."

I thought I caught a slight stirring in the hall. This time the dark eyes wavered but her voice was still firm. "Are you going to tell me what you came for?" she demanded.

"We're back in that old routine," I chided. Then I drew a deep breath. "Anyhow, you'd better tell Mrs. Corbell to step inside. She can hear better than from behind that door." I smiled. "And you close it as you go out."

Her "Oh!" was an explosion of exasperation. Before she could say anything further, however, the door swung wide and a tall blonde with green-gray eyes, well fed but not hefty, walked calmly in on us. The suit of gold and blue checks, topped by a sort of boxy bolero with three trick buttons, never had been snatched from the Langerman racks, either. I gave the blonde thirty-five to seven summers—if none had been tough.

She wasn't even flustered. She said, "Thank you, Rhoda. Perhaps you *had* better leave us alone."

RHODA tossed me a dirty look as she switched by. I brushed it off till it was cleaner and tossed it back. The door clicked.

"Nice girl, Rhoda," I observed, "but a little hard to bend."

Mrs. Corbell said, "Apparently you don't take no for an answer either."

"A man makes a habit of taking no from women, and where does he get?"

She sank into one of the striped chairs and crossed a shapely leg over its mate. "Should I know the answer to that?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. Do you mind my smoking?"

"No. And may I have one, please, if it's a cigarette?"

"It is." I gave her a cigarette and light. She inhaled deeply, lolling back in the chair. I fired one for myself and leaned against the center table, facing her about five feet away. "Now about the limousine," I suggested.

Smoke curled from her lips and went drifting away. "So what about the limousine?"

"You were driven to the Belle City Trust Company this noon, weren't you?"

"Yes. Why?"

I reached over and flicked ash into a stand beside the table. "Well, this is my good deed for the day. Whatever you were flim-flammed out of at the bank—rather in the car while in front of the bank—I know where it is."

Her expression remained unchanged. "If I sort out those words correctly, I take it you think I was a victim of something or other?"

"That hits it right on the nose."

For the first time she smiled. "I'm sorry then that you've come all the way out here for nothing. You seem to be under some misapprehension."

That made two misapprehensions in a few hours—if they *were* wrong steers. I pushed myself away from the table, perched on a chair-arm, dragged on the cigarette and gave her the fishy eye.

"No, I don't think so. You were in the back seat after coming out of the bank. Your chauffeur was standing beside the open door of the car and a man with a black alpaca coat, eyeglasses, and a pencil stuck behind his ear—incidentally, he was pretty bald—this guy came dashing out of the bank and talked with you."

As she ground out her cigarette in smoking receptacle Number Seven of that cluttered room her head tilted and she frowned. "A man came out and talked with me? Oh, no!"

"And you passed him a long, white envelope and he returned to the bank," I persisted. "Then you and the chauffeur hung around, waiting for him to come back. He didn't come back."

She laughed but it carried no merriment to the naked ear. "Such an imagination. And whatever I *didn't* lose in this—well, dream transaction, you know where it is. That's very amusing."

I mashed out my own cigarette. "When you roll on the floor, I'll be sure it's killing you. Meanwhile, I don't suppose you know Gilbert Maher—by that or any other of his names?"

She shook her head. "Certainly not by that name. Should I?"

"They call him Gillie-the-Slip in some quarters, including official ones."

"How fascinating. Now if he were a woman, you'd naturally think the name came from her slip always showing, wouldn't you?"

I said, "That may take some study. Let me play with it awhile."

Suddenly she unscrambled her legs and rose. "Yes, do! But I'm afraid I must go now and—"

"Just another moment, if you please, Mrs. Corbell." I stood up, too. "As I came in, another man was just leaving. He nodded to me but I can't make him, though his face seemed familiar. He had a dimpled chin."

"How cute." She smiled sweetly—too sweetly.

"That wasn't exactly the reaction I was after."

"No, I don't suppose it was. But really, I don't know any men with dimpled chins, either. Perhaps he was a salesman—selling something."

"A common trait of salesmen, but not at front doors."

HER EYES fluttered, as if a veil had dropped over them momentarily. "Good afternoon, Mr. Dean. It is Mr. Dean, isn't it?"

"Yes, it still is—and he'll have to go back to police headquarters empty-handed; no report or anything."

She regarded me coolly. "No report or anything—to take back to the *press room*."

If she had hooked me under the ribs with one of her fists I couldn't have felt

any more rocky. Then light hit me and I nodded. "I see. The extension phone?"

"People *are* funny, aren't they, Mr. Dean? The butler will show you out."

She swished from the room, leaving me alone. My ego was flat as a postman's feet. Nevers appeared in the doorway and I began putting one shoe in front of the other. I still wore the topcoat but he handed me my hat.

"Women, to put it mildly, Nevers, are an enigma," I said.

"So I've heard it remarked, sir."

"Never try to surround one single-handed."

His face was expressionless. "I fear I'm a little beyond the age, sir."

"Even you misunderstand," I told him sadly. "By the way, what's the name of that gentleman who bowed to me as he went out? I can't seem to place him."

Nevers looked thoughtful. Then he shook his white head. "Sorry, sir, but I don't recall. He merely gave me a card which I took upstairs."

"To Mrs. Corbell?"

"To her secretary, sir."

"But he asked for Mrs. Corbell, I take it? She saw him, of course?"

"That I couldn't say." He opened the door significantly.

I was eased out like a curl of toothpaste from its tube. The door closed softly after me. I went down the steps and around to the driveway. Runty was gone and so was the snooty roadster. All four garage doors were closed. I climbed into the Hudson, pulled up across the broader part of the concrete apron, backed around and coasted down the drive between trees and hedges.

For two pins I would have quit this futile nosing around on something that seemed to be none of my business, but nobody was on hand with pins. Besides, Gillie's connection made the affair very rancid. He hadn't been mixed up with anything honest since he could reach out in the nursery and swipe the next kid's bottle, leaving an empty in its place. Already I had in prospect a lot of explaining to an irate Harry Dunegan and nothing with which to fill that order except a great big empty yarn about a phantom switch of something nebulous. Yet I felt certain, even if I couldn't print it, that a yarn was behind these baffling denials; that some-

body certainly was concealing something.

Turning from the Dyson Road into the Boulevard, I decided to risk one more longshot. If nobody would tell me what Slippery Gillie and Dimple-Chin had been enough interested in to pull a bold steal in broad daylight, I'd chance a peek myself. I rolled crosstown to Union Station, parked the Hudson in the square and walked across to the depot. Poking through milling commuters, I found George Poole's black bow tie. He was leaning against a candy stand opposite the through-line tracks and surveying the patrons dreamily.

My face was puckered to indicate worry. I said, "George, I've got a dime locker down the line and now I can't find the damn key..."

He straightened slowly, it seemed almost regretfully. "And of course you don't remember the number, either. That's fine."

"But I *do* remember the number, my friend. Garry Dean never forgets a face or figure."

The railroad dick grinned. "Let's keep sex outa this. What you got tucked away in the locker—a quart or two? Never mind. Don't answer."

"How do I get it open? Somebody must have a master key."

"Bright lad." He dug me in the ribs. "You go back there, Garry, and wait a little while. I'll send the lad along."

"Thanks. The number is GH-5729, six rows up from the bottom. It's the last locker-bank, around Track Twenty-four."

"Sure. He'll know."

I returned through the cross-currents of people. My feet were beginning to wear a trail in the tessellated floor. When I got back there a skinny guy with a light gray hat too large for his head was heaving a bag into a locker six rows up from the floor. He slammed the door, dropped a dime in the slot, withdrew the key and moved away. A little piece of my heart hurried off to catch up with him.

The lad with the master key seemed quite put out when I told him I'd changed my mind.

IV

ROSARIO'S WAS ALMOST deserted at four-thirty in the afternoon. I walked in from Queen Ann Street, after

locking the Hudson, and Gino set down the glass he was polishing. Two strangers, chinning over scoops of beer, were the only others in the place, but Gino beckoned mysteriously and moved down to the far end of the bar.

When I had followed and come to rest against the stick, he leaned over and asked hoarsely, "You in some jam again?"

I shook my head. "No, Gino. Why?"

"Three calls from the office. Last one from the boss himself."

"Dunegan?"

The barkeep straightened and nodded. "Mad as hell. Said he damn well knew we were covering you up."

"Forget it," I told him. "You know Harry. He'll be in buying you drinks for that when he cools off."

Gino grunted. "Art Bentley said to have you call him if you come in. He was on the first two times." Gino reached down, brought up a whiskey jigger and set it on the bar. "What you having, the same?"

"Sure. Bourbon and soda. Kind of lean."

He nodded. "Lean it is."

I went into the booth in the corner and rang my office. When I got Bentley, carefully avoiding the city desk, I asked, "What's up, son?"

"Holy mackerel, where the hell have you been?"

"Trying to round up something, but no dice. Harry's sore, huh?"

"Sore?" I could hear the rewrite man groan. "He's had us phoning all over town for you. A swell murder, right up your alley—and you nowhere to be found. He's mad enough to kick even our fat publisher in the teeth. Says you ran out on him and—"

"What's the murder?" I interrupted.

"A torcher. Some guy burned up in a car over at Bournedale."

My ears cocked. "Who is he?"

"No idea yet. We only had the flash a little while ago. His face is all hammered in, and his fingers—"

Bentley's voice choked off abruptly and I heard sharp background noises. A new sound exploded suddenly in my ear, the gravelly voice of Dunegan. It yelled, "Dean, you're fired. You hear that? You're fired."

When I got the ear back on its target,

I snapped, "Okay, I'm fired. Gimme Art again and don't be butting into private conversations—"

Dunegan roared even louder. "No, dammit, get out to that murder. You're not fired till tomorrow." The phone crackled. He'd hung up.

Rubbing my ear, I squirmed out of the booth, returned to the bar and picked up my highball. Gino's eyes were all inquiry as he drew a beer. He slopped it in front of a pudgy man, rang up the money and came over.

"How'd it go, Garry? You fix the thing all right?"

"Sure. I fixed it. I fixed it so good that nobody *else* can fix it." Then I grinned. "Where's Rosy? I've got to get some dough."

Gino shook his head. "Rosy and the missus went to the movies. How much you need?"

"Oh, fifteen or twenty. Can't go near the office."

"Write out an I.O.U. for the till."

He went back to the cash register as I drained the highball and scribbled a memorandum. When he returned he laid a ten and two fives on the bar and picked up the slip. Pocketing the money and thanking him, I started for the door, then turned and made again for the phone.

BOURNE DALE was a good twenty miles out of the city. State troopers working out of Hollister covered that area. I had friends at the barracks and might be just lucky enough to run into an identification which the higher-ups were saving for other friends on morning sheets. That might catch the last *Press-Bulletin* and salve Dunegan. When the coins stopped playing their tune, I asked for Mark Davis. He was out. So was Bud Pindyck. But a trooper named Ginger Cross was on deck.

I said, "Ginger, this is Garry Dean in Belle City and I need a break bad. Any identification yet on the burned guy?"

"Hello, Garry. No, not yet."

"You'd tell me?"

"Of course. Don't be a clown. The guy's a mess. They're trying for fingers but I don't know. Doesn't look any too good."

"What happened?"

"Why, a motorist driving past Quarry-

land saw this belch of black smoke all of a sudden, in from the road. When he got up there he hopped out, ran in through the trees and found this two-toned green coupe going like hell. This guy was in it. The motorist could see him in the seat but the fire was too hot to get near."

I said, "A two-toned green coupe?"

"That's what the report has. No plates on it. Probably a hot car."

I overlooked the unconscious pun. I was trying to place a two-toned green coupe in my memory. And suddenly it popped. The car parked in Kinkaid Avenue, and Dimple-Chin swinging down from the Langerman house in its direction.

But the well-known long arm of coincidence is apt as not to carry a stiff poke in the sneezer instead of a helping hand. I asked the trooper, "Any description at all on the victim? What did he look like generally?"

Cross made a gurgling sound. It was hard to tell whether he was registering amusement or distaste. He said, "The poor guy looked like a pot-roast—king size. I wasn't out there myself but that's what Steve Falconer phoned. The whole inside of the hack had been soused with gas, they think, to hot up the fire."

"See anything in the report on clothes, or weight or height? I understand his face was all bashed in."

"Wait'll I look over this damn thing."

The operator broke in. "Your five minutes are up. Please deposit fifteen cents if you wish to continue the conversation."

I played another tune in the box with reserve coins I'd placed on the shelf. Ginger's voice came through once more. "Hello, Garry?"

"Yeah. Still on deck."

"It says here part of the rim of a brown felt hat; pieces of brown cloth, probably remainders of a topcoat; lower trouser legs, brown." The cop's voice changed from his reading monotone and picked up life. "The upper clothes must have burned pretty bad, Garry."

"Probably," I said. "What else?"

He went again into his drone: "Neckband and part of shirt collar—light tan; piece of necktie, including knot, brown and blue-figured; black silk socks; tan, low shoes; key-ring on car seat with six keys; finger-ring with black onyx stone, found

on floor. May have fallen from burned left hand dangling over seat."

"Nothing to indicate approximate age or height or weight?" I felt like asking about a chin-dimple but then thought it best to keep my mouth shut. Maybe the cleft had become merely part of a mess at that.

"No more than when you asked before," he kidded. "That's all so far."

"And not a hell of a lot, either," I threw back. "Where's the car?"

"Still out there probably. I wouldn't swear to it."

"How about the body? Have they moved that yet?"

He hesitated. From the murmuring I caught, he had spoken to somebody at his end. Then he said, "Yup! On the way in to your morgue. There isn't any at Bourne-dale, of course."

THANKING the trooper, I replaced the receiver, scooped up the rest of my change and went back to the bar. Rosario's place was filling up with the early crowd. I ordered another bourbon and soda and stood trying to figure angles. I was having another hunch. Black onyx ring, brown hat, brown coat—brown all over. If the burned coupe was the same car I'd seen parked in front of the Langerman house, with Dimple-Chin apparently headed for the machine, all signs seemed to point toward Gillie Maher as victim and Dimple-Chin as exterminator.

But—I argued with myself—how did Gillie come to be in the coupe when he and Dimple-Chin, to all purposes, had parted at Union Station shortly after one o'clock? I was certain the parked coupe had held no waiting occupant. And if Dimple-Chin had driven the coupe to the Langerman house (as I suspected), had picked up Maher after leaving Kinkaid Avenue (something of which I had no knowledge at all), and had driven him to Quarryland and there killed and fried him, it could hardly have been Dimple-Chin who retrieved the white envelope at the depot between 4:00 and 4:15. And yet he had the locker key when I saw him there.

Testing the fresh drink Gino provided, I considered that Dimple-Chin could have transferred the key easily enough to another party, or that somebody else could have taken his place in the coupe. Also, it

was just as possible that the coupe I'd seen had nothing at all to do with the case and was merely a factor in coincidence. This last didn't register too strongly, however. The squat man with the black homburg had been on foot when going down the Langerman drive. And he hadn't seemed much like a lad who'd stay long on his dogs while transportation was available. Save for my battered Hudson, the coupe had been the only transportation in sight—except for the Langerman cars, which I speedily dismissed.

This mysterious party with the black hat, I felt certain, couldn't be any local boy making good, because I thought I knew practically every racket guy of note in town. I'd never heard before of anybody of Dimple-Chin's description in the shadowy ranks, let alone seen anybody. So he must be a visiting fireman and, if such an importation, why was he running with the notorious Gillie Maher—and what were both up to that they should hocus a member of R. Eugene Langerman's household? This naturally led to speculation over why the blond Mrs. Corbell had been at pains to deny her role as a dupe, and deny it very smoothly and almost convincingly at that.

Well, I didn't have any identification of the torch victim with which to butter Dunegan, and by now the *Press-Bulletin* was done for the day anyhow. I could arrive at nothing except a headache if I stayed at the bar, mulling longer over the thing. I finished the highball, picked up my feet and went out into Queen Ann Street. A cold rain had begun to fall. I turned up my collar against the wet and chill and walked along the row of cars to my own wreck. I'd go to the morgue. It certainly was a nice night for it.

Jo-Jo's white coats always draped him like the oversize hand-me-downs from a big brother. He was a small, meek man, somewhere in his forties, with pale blue eyes, a mangy, blond mustache, thin sandy hair and a perpetual air of puzzlement, as if he'd just sat down on a wet chair and was wondering if the wet really had been there before. He preceded me into his office, which opened from the morgue waiting-room, seated himself and picked up the enormous sandwich he had put aside to answer my ring.

"Yeah, you can tuck yourself away in the storeroom till everything's clear," he said, poisoning the sandwich. "They hafta ring anyway and then roll him downstairs. You'll have time. Take a seat."

I pulled a chair over beside his time-scarred desk as he poured steaming coffee from a thermos bottle into a cracked white cup. "Of course they may have him identified anyhow," I told the little morgue attendant, "but if they haven't and my hunch is right, and I'm shot with luck, I want it alone till the *Press-Bulletin's* out in the morning."

ABOVE the cup his eyes regarded me sadly through wisping steam. "You think you recognize the case, and that's your own business," he chided. "If you don't crack nothing to me one way or another, naturally I don't know nothing." The eyes half closed, he blew feebly into the cup, then they opened and he shook his head wonderingly. "You think I've forgot? After what you done for my kid, giving her blood and everything?"

I punched a cigarette out of my pack, fired it and flipped the match into his capacious tray. "Well, nobody knows I'm here. The other boys won't bother coming over. What's the sense? If there's an identification, headquarters will have it. And there won't be any post-mortem before tomorrow if I know Doc Rush."

Jo-Jo, chewing on a large bite, waved vaguely and mumbled, "Sure. They said in the morning over the phone."

I tilted my chair back against the wall and sat smoking. Except for the occasional faint blare of an automobile horn sounding from the street, and the stolid champing of Jo-Jo at his repast, silence hung like a pall over this limbo of the unburied dead. My cigarette burned down and I came back to even keel, reached over and rubbed out the fire. At that moment a bell above his desk shrilled and I froze in position, arm still extended across the desk.

He glanced up, as if surprised to discover the bell's presence. "Maybe that's them," he said regretfully. Setting down a wedge of apple pie, gnawed to half its depth, he wiped crumbs carefully from his mustache, then brushed others from hands and trousers. Rising without haste, he replaced the cork in his thermos bottle and

tapped it home with one palm. "You better duck in there now, Gerry," he suggested. "Just in case."

"Where's that?" I rose and shook myself.

The little attendant crossed his shabby office and opened a door. "There's a light here but you better not put it on. Might show through a crack. Maybe they won't bother coming in, though. I'll give 'em a receipt downstairs."

I patted his thin shoulder. "Okay, Jo-Jo. I won't forget this. And I'll be very, very quiet—like your boarders below."

His smile was fleeting but polite. "Well, I'll let you out as soon as I can. Probably won't be so comfortable in there."

I walked into my dark cell and closed the door. Through it I could hear his slow footsteps retreating. The bell whirred again, sharply. I groped around, found the string dangling from a light fixture and pulled it. The tiny room was flooded in brilliance and I glanced quickly around. On three sides were cupboards and nests of drawers, waist high. Above were shelves, laden with jugs, bottles, large and small tins, wooden cases, cardboard cartons, glass beakers.

There wasn't time to read labels, even if I cared. I yanked out one of the drawers, doused the light, groped for the drawer and lowered myself to its sharp edge gingerly.

I've never felt so completely alone. The inky blackness seemed to press in close. At first the place was blacker than 3:00 A.M. in a mine, but after my eyes had adjusted themselves I could detect a faint penciling of light along the top of the door—like an alarm clock's luminous hand far across a bedroom. There was an undefinable smell, pungent and disagreeable, which grew heavier and heavier. From somewhere, far off, came a muffled sound, as of a door slammed. Then silence again.

Minutes passed, while I grew more uncomfortable. My head commenced to throb and in my ears a surging noise developed, swelling and receding, like surf breaking on a beach. Then the drawer's hard edge began to cut into my tender rear. I shifted position and leaned far forward, elbows on knees, which took care of that, even if only temporarily. Within me welled regret that I hadn't been smart enough to remain

berthed at Rosario's for at least another hour.

I WAS fighting a losing battle with myself—torn between a desire to open the door for a brief whiff of pure morgue air, and the realization that I must sit tight and avoid discovery—when I heard those reluctant footsteps again. My ears cocked sharply, but Jo-Jo was certainly taking his own good time. Then suddenly the knob rattled and the door opened. I felt like kissing him as I weaved into the light, but I was too busy drawing deep breaths.

"Well, I got rid of them all right," he said in a mournful voice.

I still felt embalmed and groped for cigarettes. "What's he look like?"

"Who?" The washy-blue eyes regarded me with their perplexed expression.

"The dead guy, of course. Is he pretty untidy?"

Jo-Jo mulled that over for a moment, then nodded. "Untidy enough." He lowered himself absently into the swivel chair and picked up the remains of his pie. "Mind if I finish this first, Garry, while the coffee's hot?"

I was lighting a cigarette. "Go ahead," I said, and blew out the match. "Is he identified?"

"Nope!" His small mouth went back to work on the pastry.

I remembered then that my last meal had been some seven hours earlier, but still I didn't feel hungry. Not in Jo-Jo's place of business. He sat there now, face jaundiced in the yellow glow from his drop-light, pouring more coffee from the thermos. It was very still in the office. I picked up a magazine from the top of the old desk. The magazine was lying face down, spread open to mark a place. It had no cover, front or back. I rifled through a couple of dozen pages before replacing it. What did this colorless little man find to excite him in synthetic true romances? His chair creaked and he stood up, brushing himself again.

I killed my cigarette in his tray. "All ready?"

He crumpled the waxed paper in which his lunch had been wrapped, threw it into a paint-chipped waste basket and nodded. "Might as well go down. Then I'll put him away."

I followed his slight figure out of the office, across the waiting room, through a door at the side, which he unlocked, and down a flight of concrete stairs. It got colder as we descended and the air was heavy with a sharp and yet sickly-sweet mixture of odors—formaldehyde, carbolic acid, iodoform, rubber, death. At the foot of these stairs he clicked buttons, flooding a white-walled room with light. We crossed the large chamber, passing between rows of green metal cabinets, to a green-painted door at the far end. He opened the door and snapped another button. I followed him into the autopsy room.

"Maybe I'll just leave him here till morning at that," he muttered, half to me and half to himself. "No sense bothering to ice him just that long." He led the way to a rolling stretcher, on which was a sheet-covered mound.

I asked, "Where's your helper?"

"Late as usual. Or maybe he won't show at all. Drinking again. Caught him last night." He halted at the stretcher. "Now this ain't pretty, Garry."

"Peel him," I said. Already I was beginning to get the stench of burnt flesh and scorched cloth and blood.

He flipped back the sheet. An involuntary shudder went through me. They'd partially straightened out the poor guy but that was all they could do for him. Even his mother couldn't have told who he was by his face. It was a blackened, bubbled, shapeless mass. Bits of charred cloth stuck here and there to the otherwise naked torso and thighs, horribly fire-scarred. Shoes, socks and parts of his lower trouser-legs, chocolate brown, were recognizable. But these were all, except for the segment of shirt-band and the necktie knot, with charred ends, still in partial view beneath his chin.

When I glanced at Jo-Jo, I found he was watching me morosely. "Don't say nothing and I won't know nothing," he said in a voice of deep gloom.

"My Lord, how can this peer sucker be identified? He hasn't even any hair left."

"Worse than him have been," he commented dispassionately.

"How are the hands? Any chance for prints?"

He didn't answer. Instead he moved to a cabinet, took out a pair of red rubber

gloves and came back, drawing them on. The burned-car victim's fire-shriveled hands were together at the crotch, palms down. Jo-Jo turned the left one gingerly, shook his head and dropped it. There was no need to look at the other.

I STUDIED this distressing lump that once had been a living, breathing man. Something was turning over and over in my mind, but I couldn't pin it down. Then the attendant came innocently to my aid.

He said, "Funny position of the head. If he had a face and wasn't dead, I'd say he was trying for a look at himself to see how bad he was bunged up."

The head *was* in a peculiar position, slightly raised in a stiffened pose, as a person recumbent might strain to gaze along his body's length.

"Must have been the way he was sitting in the car," I said carelessly. "Probably golfed from behind and then his face was beaten in. He was sitting upright and his head naturally dropped, with his chin on the chest. And he burned that way when the gasoline was poured on him. That's the way I make it."

Jo-Jo was peeling off the gloves. "Well," he said, "probably you've seen all there is—"

I grabbed his arm. "Wait! Leave those things on. Can you get that chin up so I can get a peek around the knot in his tie better—where the chin holds it?"

He hesitated. Then his head bobbed. "Course I didn't touch him if anybody should ask. Shouldn't anyhow."

"So help me, I never saw you touch the remains. You'd be surprised what a lousy memory I've got sometimes."

The gloves were on again with a series of sucking sounds. He shuffled around the end of the roller-stretcher, hooked one hand under what had been the lower part of a face and lifted the gruesome mass carefully. I was in a half crouch, eyes glued to a spot just above the collar line. The condition there was just as I had hoped. The man's depressed chin had protected a small area from the searing flames as he sat slumped in the death coupe, behind the wheel. Untouched by fire was the hairy mole at which Gillie Maher had been picking fitfully while we quarreled in Union Station.

So I had my identification. I straightened and smiled. Jo-Jo eased the head back almost to its former position, withdrew his rubber-covered hands and regarded the slime on them with an abstracted air. Then his eyes raised and met mine inquiringly.

"Guess that about finishes the job," I said. "Thanks very much for the cooperation."

"That's all right." He began stripping off the gloves slowly.

"I'll let myself out, then?"

"Sure, Garry, you can let yourself out okay."

V

THE WEATHER HAD BUCKLED right down for a night of it and was doing no kidding. Wind moaned through chinks of my faithful hack and whipped rain in slant lines across the headlight beams. Twin windshield wipers waged a dogged battle on the streaming panes. Inside the Hudson, however, I was snug, if not cozy, but in nothing approaching a mood of complacency.

My lights swung right from the glistening macadam of Kinkaid into the Langerman driveway. I shifted back to second and scabbled up through a tunnel of dripping trees, between the sodden hedges, turned at the broad concrete apron above, rolled down to the veranda and killed the engine. The nor'easter was really pouring it on up here and as soon as I had hit the gravel and slammed the door I ran, with head bent, for the front door.

Nevers, I thought, took an inordinate time responding to the bell. On a theory that at night he scorned answering on the first or second alarm, I punched the button a third time and held it. When the door opened, I left my exposed position, barged inside without invitation and whipped off my dripping hat. Then my eyes blinked rapidly.

The girl ran anywhere from seventeen to twenty-two and had heard that all the dolls were on a binge of showing their ears. This one was showing her tonsils as well—and her teeth and a clean, pink tongue.

I said, "Well, better late than Nevers. Okay, you can close both of them now—the door and that pretty mouth. But you

shouldn't have gotten all rigged out just for me."

She wiped the startled look off her face, giggled and kicked the door shut with a golden slipper. "And who might you be?" she asked pertly.

I grinned. "The wrong guy. That's a cinch."

My eyes ran over her appreciatively. Here was something for the boys—very all right in the party dress, or whatever it was. Small breasts thrust out a shimmering sequin bodice of blue, cut decidedly low. The skirt, falling to the slippers, was some kind of combination in blacks, a couple of miles of it, under a black netting. Around her neck was a dog collar of gold woven material, with a broochlike decoration in front, and the cinnamon-colored hair was looped halfway along the course with a matching gold dingus. Black gloves went up to around her elbows. I started to go over it all again.

"Want me to turn around so you can get the rest?" she asked coyly.

I shook my head. "No, I'm doing all right with this view. But what's the matter? Didn't he show yet?"

"That any of your business?" she retorted, smiling. "Who *are* you and what do you want? And what do you mean by tearing into somebody's house without being asked?"

"You hurt me deeply."

"I asked some questions. Remember?"

"Questions. All I get is questions. And why don't I answer? Well, I will answer. This place is filled with lovely women but most of them are the wrong ones. I want to see Mrs. Corbell."

She surveyed me carefully. "Mrs. Corbell isn't in. So *now* I know who you are."

"No fooling," I said. "What's the connection?"

She giggled again. "Evidently you don't know her very well. If you did, you'd also know she's never in at night. So you must be the man who was out this afternoon. You're a reporter?"

"There are many more than a few who'd give you odds on that. Personally, though, I think so."

"And your name is Downes—Doane?"

"Dean is closer. But let's talk about Mrs. Corbell. Where can I find her?"

The small mouth pursed. She looked

thoughtful. "Well, you might find her almost anywhere downtown."

"For instance?"

"She likes to go places." Her glance fell to her gown. "And so do I." When the head raised again her eyes were sparkling. "Do you *really* want to find her?"

I SHRUGGED. "Just call it a whim. Say that something came over me. I always liked to wander around in the rain, calling on people who don't care for me."

"All right, then," she said firmly. "Take me along and I'll find her for you." She smiled. "And, being my sister and not having any yen for you, she'll probably half kill me."

I looked over her outfit significantly and opened my coat. "We'd make a fine pair. Genuine Chez Bergdorf and Kid Shopworn himself. Uh-huh!"

"Oh, so that's it. Then go find her yourself." She turned toward the stairs but she didn't move fast.

I fingered the thin bills Gino had siphoned from Rosario's register. "Come back here," I ordered. "No, go up and change into something that won't make a bum out of me."

She whirled so fast that I half expected the waxed floor to friction into flame. "Wait in here," she called. Her heels clicked and she snapped the library lights on. She was all vivacity. "Would you have a drink?" she asked gaily.

"I could use one."

"Go through those doors at the rear. It's on the buffet. Be right back." Then she was gone.

My mouth was still open. I closed it and threw up my hands. The room behind this clutter of chairs and tables and lamps was in darkness but I struck a match, browsed among old-fashioned decanters until I found one that read *Rye* in frosted letters and picked up a jigger that looked as if it might hold four ounces. There was nothing handy by way of a chaser, so I carried glass and decanter back to the lighted room, set them on one of the smaller tables and relaxed comfortably in a chair beside it. Then I saw the man in the doorway leading out to the hall.

Once he had been tall but now he was bowed over two canes on which he leaned heavily. His head was thrust up like a

turtle's and he was watching me from sunken eyes. He said, "Good evening, sir," in a voice whose depth surprised me, coming from such a slender source.

"Good evening," I replied, coming automatically out of the chair.

He began to lurch slowly into the room but as I moved forward to help, he halted and waved me away imperiously with one of his sticks. Then he resumed his slow, dragging steps until he reached one of the striped chairs, into which he lowered himself carefully.

"Please sit down again," he said gruffly, holding both sticks between his thin knees. I obeyed meekly. "You're that newspaper man—Dean?"

"That's right, sir."

His sharp eyes glittered in their wells and the old head bobbed, giving motion to sparse strands of white hair clinging to a blue-veined scalp.

"I'm Langerman."

"I thought probably you were. A pleasure to meet you."

He chased the palm of one skinny hand over the back of its mate, which held the canes. "Don't be polite. It's not what I came downstairs in that damn elevator for."

There seemed to be no answer to that so I said nothing. He took a deep, rasping breath and leaned back against the striped cushion.

"You visited my daughter Dorothea this afternoon. Would you mind telling me what transpired?"

"If Mrs. Corbell is Dorothea, then I did visit her," I said respectfully, "but I do rather mind repeating our conversation without her permission."

HIS SMILE, though twisted, was so slight it barely disturbed the mask that was his face. "If I said she'd lied to you, would it make any difference?"

"A lot of difference—if *you* told me."

"Thanks. Then what happened?" His tongue went over the thin lips and withdrew. "But perhaps I'd best be more pointed. Didn't she deny that an envelope had been stolen from her?"

I studied him speculatively. If he knew that, he probably knew the rest of the conversation. Perhaps the butler, undoubtedly an old retainer, had also bent an ear

at the door and had reported back. I said, "Yes, she denied it, but lots of people deny things that actually happened—that are known to have happened. They merely want to avoid publicity. Some call it notoriety but it's almost the same thing."

"Not quite. It often depends upon what side of the fence you're on."

"Naturally."

The old eyes still bored at me and he seemed to be weighing something. But he nodded finally and all he said was, "Yes, I think that's it. My daughter was displaying a not understandable reluctance to admit she'd been taken in; that she was vulnerable, in other words."

It sounded as if he were trying to convince himself more than sell the idea to me, but I let it slide. "The only out," I told him, "was that I happened to see the whole transaction. Just a matter of blundering into it. What I came out for this afternoon was principally to tell her—to tell whoever had been in the limousine—that I knew where the envelope was. But when she brushed me off—"

For him, the slight leaning forward was a major operation. "You know where it is?" he asked with an eagerness that made his head shake weakly.

"I *did* know," I corrected. "It isn't there any more. The party removed it."

"What party, sir? I've got to know what was in that envelope." He was trembling by then and I began to fear he'd come apart at the seams right in front of me.

"I don't know the man, Mr. Langerman. That is, I know what he looks like but not his name or anything about him." I indicated the decanter. "Hadn't you better have a drink, a sort of bracer?"

Suddenly he plopped back against the cushion. "Yes. I shouldn't. Against doctor's orders. But I *will*, damn it!"

Getting up, I returned to the rear room, lighting my way again with a match, and fetched another glass. I was tempted to tell him of Dimple-Chin's visit but decided to wait. "You'll want some water, too," I said, "but I don't know the layout here."

He shook his head. "You'll need no water with that, Mr. Dean."

I poured his drink, filled my own glass and sat down. He sipped and made no

face, so I sipped and found he didn't have to. The old man certainly knew his own liquor.

It seemed to perk him up. The quaver was gone from his voice when he said, "I understand enough about your business, sir, to know that you couldn't publish anything regarding this—well, theft, to name it by its term, without confirmation." He thought for a moment. "Such as a complaint to our police."

I looked at him over the outsize jigger. "That's perfectly true. And there's been no such complaint. Even if she admitted it to me, I couldn't print the story. If she denied it later, I'd be left holding the bag." I grinned. "You'd be surprised how many people are inclined to such changes of heart."

"I wouldn't be surprised at all, Dean. I've been around quite a while." He put back his head awkwardly and this time took a husky swallow while I watched the stringy neck. When he brought the glass down he gave me a thin smile. "Probably what I needed all the time."

"Doctors can be mistaken," I told him.

THEN his seamed face slipped back into its old contours. The eyes fixed me. "Now, Dean," he thrust eagerly, "if my daughter turned you down this afternoon and so, presumably, you had finished your Good Samaritan effort, why did you return this evening?"

That one was fogged in so fast that the bat was still on my shoulder. I stalled and studied my glass, then decided to empty it.

"Come now, sir," he pressed, "you had a reason for returning. Let's have it."

Silently I cursed the doll who had opened the door and then swayed me into letting her go along and find her sister. Except for that, I'd have been on my way long since. And except for that I wouldn't be sitting in an overstuffed room with an understuffed old guy, waiting for him to fall over dead when I *did* tell why I'd come back in the rain and wind.

There was nothing to do, I considered, but lie. I split the difference, though, and gave him only half a lie. I said, "Well, Mr. Langerman, I came up to see if she'd change her mind and tell the truth."

That laid a tremendous egg. I could see his eyes glitter. Also I noted that his glass

was empty, because he whacked it on the table beside him.

"Do you think I'm a bloody fool, Dean? Do you believe I'm too far gone to realize there's something serious behind this?"

I held up a protesting hand and opened my mouth to say something, but he was all wound up.

"Listen!" he snapped, coming away from the cushion. "I knew of your conversation with my daughter within minutes after you'd left here. I asked her about the envelope and at first she lied to me, too. I crowded her and she admitted losing the envelope. Said money was in it, some rather large bills, and a clerk—she thought then he was a clerk—came from the bank and told her it was required that the numbers of large bills be recorded, something the teller had overlooked. She said that when this man didn't return with the money, she went back and found no such employe had been sent after her. So she came home, resigned to take the loss rather than admit she'd been such a fool."

"Well, that sounds plausible. It was a slick trick. It's been worked before, and not only on women."

"Pfaugh!" He gestured angrily with one of the parchment-covered hands. "I know my daughter. She wouldn't let go of money so easy. Not here. She'd have to be hit with a sledgehammer first."

"You haven't forgotten you're talking to a newspaperman?" I cautioned.

"This is off the record," he snapped. "And besides, it's only between the two of us. I can deny as well as the best of them."

I grinned. "When you said off the record that was all you needed with me. I wouldn't depend on it with all the lads though."

He appeared not to notice the remark. "When she told me the chauffeur had been standing by and probably had heard all this taffy, I called him over and asked him. He corroborated her in every respect. Lying, too, of course. It stuck out all over him."

I shrugged. "Well, at any rate he was there. But I guess you're right about the important point—why was she so reluctant to admit it, even to me, if the loss was only money?"

Instead of answering he relaxed and closed his eyes. I thought he was doing

a fadeout. But the deep-sunkcn eyes unveiled again and he took one of the canes from where he had leaned them, between his right knee and the chair arm. He polished the curved handle thoughtfully with a skinny thumb.

"I may as well tell you this, Dean," he said. "I checked up on you a few hours ago—after talking with her—and was told you exercise discretion in the matter of what you turn in for publication."

"A little thing I picked up," I told him modestly.

THE corners of his mouth raised in a fleeting smile. "I'm not as dead as they fancy, Dean. And I still can use the phone, and do. I may have a foot in the grave but they're having one hell of a job getting the other in with it."

That seemed to call for no comment, so I reached for the decanter.

"Don't forget there's an empty over here, too," he said.

I got up with the long-necked jug and thought of an answer. "Anybody who makes a crack like your having one foot in the grave, tell him for me that he's a liar. But don't take too much of this stuff if you haven't been using it. The family won't thank me if you start trying a tap dance."

He was peering up then from the depths of his chair. "You're not curious why I bothered to check on you?"

"Lots of people have checked on me, Mr. Langerman. It seems I just naturally breed suspicion all over the place."

He picked up the filled glass but immediately replaced it on his table. I returned to my seat, wondering where that dilly had disappeared to, or if it always took her as long to peel off one costume and wiggle into another. When I looked up, he was staring fixedly at me again.

"Now, Dean," he said, "there's something wrong with this situation and you know it. I *sense* it. I want to know what you know. And because I've been assured you're discreet and this is off the record, I'll tell you my end first. Perhaps it'll loosen you up. What I mean is that something has happened to my household. It's been all around me but I've been left out of things. If I were only active again, if I could get around—could leave this

house without being on somebody's arm or under somebody's eye . . ."

I began to hunt for cigarettes and asked, "Could it have anything to do with the business—your store?"

The thin lips sucked in and out before he replied. "I don't know. The store's coining money, as it always has." His crooked smile seemed even more bitter. "At least that's *one* thing they do, show me the statements."

"Then you're not in charge any more? I don't mean active charge, of course."

"No, I'm not in charge. My daughter's taken over. But this thing has some connection with the house. Little signs come every once in a while, snatches of phone conversations, sudden silences when I appear, switched subjects. As I said, Dean, I'm no fool, nor am I entirely a corpse. I've strong suspicions and this matter of the stolen envelope may have a lot to do with them. But I don't *know* and so I need your information. When I have it, I may confide to you what I've picked up."

While I digested that, he reached for the glass, tilted his head as far as he could and tossed off the whole business. My eyes bugged out and I waited fearfully for his disintegration. When it didn't come, I decided he could stand almost anything.

"Well, I'll be honest with you, Mr. Langerman. I came out this evening to tell Mrs. Corbell that the man who thimble-rigged her for the envelope has been murdered at Bournedale. Slugged and burned up in a car. The police haven't identified him yet."

I watched the sick merchant narrowly but he took it like a major. "Murdered?" he repeated as I disposed of half my drink. His lower lip thrust out and he scowled. "What do you suppose that means? It might indicate money, of course. Greed."

"It might and then again it mightn't. But now, what are your suspicions?"

His skinny thumb went along the cane-crook again. Then he raised his head and I was astounded at the change. The eyes seemed to have sunk deeper. His face sagged in all its loose folds of flesh. And he looked at me almost with anguish. However, his voice was still firm.

"I've been thinking this over," he said

slowly, "and there's no point in baring my soul unless it brings me help. You understand that?"

"I understand." The cigarettes, I discovered, were still in my hand. I took one out but when I held up the pack he shook his head impatiently.

"I'll not beat around the bush, Dean. The man I talked with about yourself said you had a—well, a penchant for crime investigation."

He paused but I said nothing. Instead I emptied the jigger.

"Frankly, I'm trying to hire you to get to the bottom of this matter and clear it up without—that is, I'm afraid of scandal. I'll pay you well. I don't know, but I'm afraid, Dean. That's all I'd need now to push me over the brink."

I hated turning him down but I shook my head. "I'm working," I said. "My first duty, of course, is to the *Press-Bulletin*." It sounded sanctimonious, even to me.

Evidently it didn't do him. "If it could be arranged?" he suggested, and eagerly.

I shrugged and emptied my mouth of smoke. "Okay with me, sir, but *you'd* have to do the arranging. If I go sticking my own oar in, all I'll catch is a crab."

FROM where I sat I could hear his relieved sigh, though the wrinkled face remained impassive. "Consider it arranged, then," he said. "I still have connections and some power in this town." He looked at the stick as if wondering how it had come into his hand, then set it aside with the other and leaned slowly forward, lacing those talon-like fingers between the bony knees. "Now I'll tell you what I'm afraid of, and about Helen and—"

"Helen?" I interrupted. "Who's Helen?"

His brow furrowed and he tried to bob his head upward. "My other daughter. You're going out together but you didn't think to ask her name." The fingers unwound and he tapped their ends together. "Oh, I've got ears, as I told you . . ."

The words faded when heels clicked sharply in the hall. Helen appeared in the doorway, as if on cue. Her flash clothes were gone. She had a brown felt crushed down on her hair and a transparent raincoat over a dark suit.

Surprise was in her face. She said, "Dad, what are you doing down here? You should be upstairs." She shook her head and stepped into the room. "Come on, now; I'll walk you back to the elevator."

But when she reached down, he shook her hand off testily and gripped the chair arms. "Mr. Dean will take me to the elevator," he said, giving her his crooked smile.

I snubbed out my cigarette. Langerman came to his feet in a series of jerks and adjusted the canes.

"You seem to do all right as it is," I told him.

He didn't answer. His head turned in its bent position and he looked at the girl. "He'll be back in a moment. You wait here."

My glance caught her pouting like a ten-year-old whose bottom has just been paddled but who is too stubborn to weep.

I still kept my hands off the old man. We progressed slowly along the hall, past the glass phone booth, to a tiny elevator opposite an open door which I took to be that of the room in which I'd found the rye. As I held the elevator door open, Langerman halted, hooked his starboard cane over the left arm, fished in the pocket of his jacket and brought out a slip of paper, folded once. Still in his hunched-over position he thrust it at me.

"Here," he said. "You'll be having expenses. I was optimistic enough to anticipate my luck in getting you."

I opened the paper. It was a hundred-dollar check, drawn on the Belle City Trust Company, made out to cash and signed R. E. Langerman. I held it out to him. "No dice. This isn't a deal yet. No arrangements made—"

But he snarled impatience. "It's a binder, you damn fool. Don't worry. Everything will be arranged. And if I know my daughters, you'll need quite a bit of that tonight." He tried to look up at me but his bent head wouldn't make it. "Now I suppose you feel like a gigolo—eh?"

So I pocketed the check. "Not at all. What'll I do—contact you tomorrow?"

"Yes. Better come out in the morning and I'll tell the whole story. Can't do it by phone, naturally."

I half turned toward what I thought was a noise in the dining-room. He was

shuffling into the elevator, though, and I had to hold the door. Once he was clear, I let go and darted across the hall. But when I poked my head into the blackness, all was quiet.

Helen Langerman, seated demurely on the arm of a chair, was humming as I turned into the library. She wasn't too demure—not with a nearly filled jigger in her hand.

"Loving cup?" she laughed, raising it.

I wondered if she had been eavesdropping, but her expression was guileless. "Why not?" I said. "You first, though. I've had a big start."

She came upright in a slow, almost feline motion. The glass was at her lips but her eyes were on mine. As she brought the glass down, she moved in a curious glide, elevated it again and placed it at my mouth. It wasn't the way I liked to drink, with head forced back and unable to call the shot. I fought the pressure, but her left arm slid over my shoulder and I had to open up and swallow, or get doused—or choke.

I swallowed. She muttered something in a thick voice and, before I could move, the other arm was around my neck and her lips were pressing upward, wet and hot, against mine. The glass banged on the hardwood floor. I could feel her trembling and straining. Then, as quickly, she sagged and I barely caught her shoulders. The arms fell away. Her eyes were closed. She was limp as a wet bathing suit when I lowered her to a chair.

"We don't have to go out," she whispered. Her lids fluttered open.

I drew a deep breath and blew it out hard. "Get up," I said. "If Dynamite Dean has unlocked some new power, why not be philanthropic about the thing and spread it all over town?"

VI

WE HAD ROLLED DOWN the driveway and were dropping over the hill of Kinkaid before Helen spoke again. She sat slumped on the end of her spine, the transparent raincoat bunched up at the back, her brown hat pulled low. Rain drummed hollowly on the roof even above the hum of the Hudson's engine.

She said, "Better try the Iron Gate.

Dottie goes there a lot. You know where that is?"

"Sure. Oxford Street. But first we'll stop somewhere and eat. My stomach must think I'm on a liquor diet since eleven o'clock." I turned left into the Dyson Road and drove toward the pinkish glow in the night sky which marked Belle City.

"Garry, where do you live?" she asked then.

"The Juanita Arms, Monmouth Street."

She sighed. "That must be nice."

"Why? Do you know the place?" I glanced at her suspiciously but she was still slumped, staring through the rain-sluiced windshield.

"No. But they're *arms*, aren't they?"

I said, "Get your thoughts up. You're a big girl."

She didn't answer that. Instead she drew herself straight in the seat. "Give me a cigarette, you big lug."

We were downhill again, on a curve. "They're in my jacket pocket—your side. Fish through the topcoat. It has a slit pocket."

I felt her hand groping but she took some time. The wet road straightened and leveled off and I was about to help her find the smokes when her hand withdrew. "I have them," she said. "Open that respectable mouth of yours."

She jammed a cigarette between my teeth. I took it out, spit tobacco shreds and replaced it. She struck a match, held the light and I puffed, keeping my eyes on the gleaming highway.

"I'll put them back," I said, holding a hand out.

"No, I'll do it. I ought to know the way on the second trip."

The lights of a dogcart showed yellow up ahead. We were turning in for the parking space when she began to laugh.

"What now?" I asked, pulling on the brake and withdrawing the ignition key. "You've got more damn moods than a Beethoven symphony."

She was reduced to giggling. She pulled the door latch and slid out into the wet. "Nothing you'd catch right away. Maybe it'll come to you later."

There were only three customers in the diner when we slammed in and shook rain from our clothes. I looked at my watch. It was almost quarter after eight.

I asked, "What'll you have?"

She gave the peek-a-boo coat an extra shake. "Nothing. I've had dinner."

"Not even coffee?"

"No, thanks." She began to dig around in her handbag. Then she looked up. "Give me a nickel, please."

I dredged up a coin. She walked the length of the diner to a juke box, studied the listings, dropped the coin in and came back, to wiggle up on a stool beside mine.

"Club sandwich and coffee," I told the chubby counterman. "My mother here won't take anything."

"Having my stomach lifted," she said sweetly.

The counterman grinned. "Guess he takes after the old man. You sure didn't give him none of *your* looks, ma'am."

He turned away to his griddles—and the juke exploded in a jungle rhythm. I shuddered and spun on the stool. "Boogie-woogie? My Lord!"

"Don't you like it?" She squinted through smoke from her cigarette. "And please don't be profane."

"Like it? Of all the garbage in music, boogie-woogie and jump-tunes are the stinkiest." Inadvertently I blew a smoke ring and she stuck a finger through it.

"Oh, I didn't know you felt that way." She twirled the finger as my ring disintegrated. Her hand dropped. "All right, then. We'll do things about it. Give me a quarter, please."

I LOOKED at her and groaned but handed over a two-bit piece. She slid from the stool, went back to the juke, scanned the list and invested the whole slug.

"Wet or dry, Jack?" the counterman asked, turning from his fire.

"Looks like I'm all wet—if you think it'll make you any happier."

"No, no, Jack. You want mayonnaise or not on this club bellyacher?"

"Oh! Mayonnaise, to be sure. The sauce of egg yolks beaten up and seasoned. I've a mayonnaise mind."

"Ain't we all?" he remarked absently.

I was carefully setting down the thirty-cent juke expense on a wad of copy paper when she hopped up on the stool again. "What you writing?" she asked, poking her face over my arm.

"Thirty cents, expenses—sore ear and oil for same."

"Hm! Lots of room on the paper yet, isn't there?"

Chubby slid my sandwich along the marble counter on a chipped plate. I dropped my cigarette on the floor, stretched a leg and stepped on it. "Coffee—one sugar," I told him.

The boogie-woogie number ended in crashing discord. I drew a breath of relief and picked up one section of the sandwich. "If Dottie isn't at the Iron Gate, we'll try the Colony," Helen said dreamily. "I love the Colony band but don't suppose *you* would. Pretty brassy."

My mouth was full and I could only mumble. Then I almost choked. That same record began to play all over again. The counterman, at his huge refrigerator, looked questioningly at her over his shoulder. I turned and stabbed her with a baleful eye.

"You little double-crosser," I said after swallowing. "You did that purposely. And on my dough."

But she appeared stricken and brought both hands up in a gesture of helplessness. "I must have pressed the wrong button first."

"Some day I'll bust that record and stuff it down the silly service guy's throat," Chubby muttered.

I was ninety percent through with the sandwich and his anemic coffee when anchor-chain and dishpan crashes again ended the number. She slid off the stool and said hastily, "I'll go and see if the car's all right."

"It's all right," I assured her. "I locked the switch. Dig me out a cigarette, there's a dear."

But she pretended not to hear, slipped over to the sliding door at the diner's end, opened it and stepped into the vestibule. I had my head swiveled around, wondering what she was up to now, when the record began beating it out a third time. At the sole occupied table, beneath the windows, two men and a woman companion were moving their lips and giving me a bad eye.

"You sure know how to take it, Jack," the counterman said sympathetically, slapping my change down with a wet hand. "Me—I'm a man left without words."

"Next time I come in I'll bring you some," I promised, lighting a cigarette.

Helen was in the front seat, hands folded demurely in her lap, when I made the car. I ignored her, slid under the wheel, fumbled with the key and started the engine. Then I got a strong whiff of perfume which certainly hadn't been present before.

"What the devil have you got on?" I asked.

She hooked her arm in mine chummily. "*Intoxication*. Like it? It's only for special occasions, such as when you've been around onion smells or something in a lunch cart. But it's very successful in lots of other ways."

The stuff *was* a little inspiring. I unhooked the arm and placed her hand back with the other in her lap. "A time for everything," I advised. "I'll put you down for my next free moments. Just now we're on business."

SHE didn't say anything to that. I wheeled the sedan away and rolled toward town, keeping both eyes glued ahead because traffic was thickening. She didn't speak the rest of the way in, either, and when I parked in Oxford Street I had to shake her twice before she sat up.

Her hands went up to the hat. "Must have fallen asleep. Where's the light? I'm probably a wreck."

I reached and snapped on the overhead. "That poison gas you doused yourself with probably knocked you out," I kidded.

In the bad light she did a remake of her face, then stowed her materials again and closed the handbag. We hugged buildings as far as the Iron Gate and dodged under cover. Rain or not, there were plenty of evening gowns in the night spot. She looked at me and grimaced.

"Who knows her in here?" I asked.

She wrinkled her nose prettily. "Are you being funny? Nobody—except all who work in the joint."

"Wait in the foyer. I'll ask."

But Mrs. Corbell hadn't been at the Iron Gate that evening. We went into the rain again and drove two blocks to the Colony Club in Shaftesbury Street. There *was* plenty of brass up on the stand, as Helen had said, but her sister's ears weren't having any of it.

"Where's the next best bet, Stinky?" I asked my perfumed companion and made a distasteful face. "Phew!"

"It does register, doesn't it," she said complacently. "Well, let me see. Oh, yes—the Old Plantation."

I looked at her. "That sink? She doesn't go there?"

Helen adjusted the unadjustable hat again and gave a couple of experimental pats to her hair. "You *asked* me and I *told* you."

"Well, come on then. Ye gods! The Old Plantation." I grabbed her arm and we hustled out into the wet. "I wouldn't even expect to find Harry Dunegan there."

"Who's Harry Dunegan, pray?" She was running to keep up.

"A sheep-stealer from Donegal. He steals them so he can get wool to pull over people's eyes."

"I think you're making fun of me and I hope you don't find Dottie."

"When that's established your evening ends," I told her, opening the car door. "Get in and check over your guns and brass knucks."

But Mrs. Corbell *was* at the Old Plantation. Very much at the Old Plantation. When I asked a little waiter, glistening in his black-face make-up, for Johnny Jump-Up, he scuttled away. In a couple of minutes or so a husky lad with a flat nose and two tin ears came through an arch from the lounge-bar.

This one was white—fairly white. Out of character. His eyes were too small and red-rimmed, like a pig's. He said, "Oh, it's you, Garry. You want Mr. Poseny, eh?"

My eyebrows ran up like two window shades. "Mr. Poseny? What's he wearing now—lace?"

"No cracks, Garry. Lay off the cracks. Johnny never done nothin' to you—see!" He hooked two banana-bunches that were hands under his tux vest and yanked it down. "What you want with him?"

"Listen, Toledo," I said patiently, "I only want to ask Johnny a question. Maybe two questions, or it might run into three if I'm working good. . . ."

"What about? He's a busy guy." Toledo held up one of the banana bunches. "Now, don't get me wrong, pal. That's the first thing he's gonna ask me. What about?"

"About a lady, Toledo. I'm *sure* he can answer questions about ladies."

The gorilla looked at me for a moment, in doubt. Then he nodded heavily. "That's fair enough. Yeah—guess he can. This the lady?"

I shook my head. "No. Helen, this is Toledo Mike Moulin. Once he was sparring partner for a heavyweight champ."

"Hello, Helen," he gushed. "Pleased, I'm sure."

"Ooh, a fighter. Has he got muscle?" She moved in front of me and clutched his arm above the elbow. Toledo grinned sheepishly.

"He's got more muscle up higher," I said. "You have to jump the neckline."

"Always kiddin', Garry is, Helen." He was all gallantry. "Take a seat somewhere, you guys, while I tell Mr. Poseny—that is, Johnny. Why don't you go in the bar or some place?"

HE went clumping off into the crowded room, heading for Johnny Jump-Up's office. I said, "Well, why not? We've time for a quick one. You haven't spotted her in there, have you?"

"No. But it's so jammed, and those lights are so terrible. Why do they have them so dim and why do they use blue? Everybody looks dead—sitting up and dead."

"The better to overlook their bum addition on your dinner checks, my love."

I ordered a rye and soda for her, a bourbon and soda for myself.

"First time I've been in this place," she said. "What did you call him—Johnny Jump-Up?"

I gave her a cigarette and held lights for us. "Somebody pinned that on him right after he opened this dive. Every time anybody came in, he'd hop up and greet the customer personally. You know—the big build-up."

Our drinks came and the barman reduced my five-spot by forty percent. Stowing the three singles away, I ran into the smooth paper of Langerman's check. I thought that if siphoning like this continued, I'd best cash the thing.

"Why didn't you ask that Toledo about Dottie? He'd probably know her. She comes here a lot."

"Well, I sort of wanted to sound out Poseny on something else, too."

She tasted her drink and gazed toward the dining-room. Its small dance floor was packed and the blacked-up band was doing a smooth, rhythmic job on "One Thing Led to Another." I wondered how many customers knew that probably at the next table, or the one beyond, were prominent alumni of various jugs and sneezers, guys whose front and side views were treasured items of many official photographic collections.

Then I saw Poseny, with Toledo lumbering in his wake. Johnny took the two steps into the bar at one hop. He was a short, slender and dapper man of doubtful race and antecedents, with a cold eye and a smile that turned on and off like the sun riding behind broken clouds. It was all over his pan now and his hand was out four strides before he reached me.

"Garry Dean—this *is* a surprise; a pleasure, *believe* me." His little mustache bobbed. From a corner of my eye, I could see heads turn at the bar. He clapped me on one shoulder while he held my hand. "Toledo said you wanted to ask something about one of the girls. Fine! Great! So word of my show's got across town. Wonderful show. Best I ever put on."

I picked my drink off the bar. "Wait here a few minutes, Stinky, if you don't mind," I said to Helen. Poseny's eyes flickered to the girl and back to me as I stepped down from the high-altitude, low-backed bar chair. I took him by an elbow and walked him to a vacant table. "Toledo's a little mixed, I think, Johnny. The party I want to talk about stopped being a girl quite a while ago. Sort of outgrew it."

He felt his way down into a chair, eyes on my face. I sat in one opposite and put the glass where it wouldn't be too much of a strain to reach.

"What's on your mind then, Garry?"

"Oh, nothing too important," I replied carelessly. "I'm looking for Mrs. Corbell. I was told she'd probably be here. You know her, don't you?"

He turned the smile on again, but dimmed down its glare. "Sure, Garry. Know her well. She's in now—or was."

"I've a message for her but didn't want to go barging through all that crowd. You know how it is. Thought you might snake her out here." I grinned. "Nothing like

getting the head man when you want something."

THE EYES were hard, but his white teeth still showed under the mustache. "Garry, you're a card. Sure I'll get her. Nice woman, Mrs. Corbell; nice and refined." He pushed back his chair and stood up. "I'm kind of disappointed, though. Thought you might be plugging the show. You haven't caught it yet?"

My head waggled. "Not yet, Johnny. Maybe tonight. When is it, at ten?"

"Ten-fifteen. But you got to catch it. Let me order some drinks." He started away.

"No, Johnny! Wait a minute!" I fumbled in my pocket as he swung back. "No drinks—but you might cash a check if you will."

The smile faded. "How much?"

"Just a hundred." I handed it over and he pulled it up close to his eyes in the dim light.

Then he looked puzzled. "Langerman, Langerman. That isn't the store guy?"

I nodded. "Been doing a little writing on the side for him. Personal stuff. That paper won't bounce."

"No. Probably not." He was groping inside his tux and drew out a fountain pen. "Well, better put your monicker on the back just the same. House rule."

I took pen and check, endorsed the paper and handed the whole business back. He had a wallet out and counted even tens on the table.

"Thanks, Johnny. Some day when I get rich, I'll cash yours." Then I gave him the needle as I picked up the money. "By the way, Gillie Maher hasn't been in tonight, has he?"

If Poseny did know anything, he took that well. Not a hair of the mustache even quivered. He finished putting the wallet away and looked me straight in the eye. "Gillie? Hell, no. Haven't seen The Slip in here for more than two months. What do you want with him?"

"Nothing. He's in town again, though. Ran into him this afternoon down at Union Station." I laughed carelessly and reached for the glass. "Same old Gillie. Always looking to turn an honest dollar."

Poseny wheeled. "Well, I'll get Mrs. Corbell if she's still around."

I took my glass and returned to the bar. Helen said, "You certainly don't save on words when you ask anybody a simple question."

Climbing back on my perch, I chucked her under the chin. "Simple questions are for simple people, Stinky." Leaning over, I sniffed hard.

She ignored it, sipped her highball and placed it on the bar. "Dottie's here, I take it. Wait'll she sees me."

"Wait'll she *smells* you."

She giggled. "Well, it won't be long now. Here she comes up those steps."

"Stick around here," I said hastily, and planed down from the seat and walked over to intercept Big Sister.

"So it's you again," she snapped. "What do you want now?"

"Tsck, tsck, tsck! Is that nice, biting a helping hand? Let's go over where we can talk."

She remained where she was. "About what?"

"You'd be surprised. At least I hope you will." A big guy who had trailed her up the steps across the lounge moved a stride closer and bent a curious ear. I said across her shoulder, thinking he was some lush, "What do you want? Scram!"

The big guy started around her but she stepped in his way. "He's with me."

"Oh! Well, for the next few minutes he isn't. Not unless you want me to broadcast this—and I hardly think you do."

Her head half turned. "Wait here, Bob. I can handle it."

In silence, we went over to the same table. I was through being polite and flopped into a chair. She sat down. "Now what is it? How long are you going to keep bothering me?"

"That I can't say, but it's about the con man who got your envelope. Or do you still deny losing an envelope? He was a bald-headed guy. Remember?"

"Well?" There was disdain, well frosted, in the one word.

"Would it interest you to know he's dead—very unfortunately dead?"

Seconds ticked off but she never moved. It may have been imagination that, even in the poor light, I thought her pupils distended. Finally she placed both hands on the table and used them to raise herself slowly.

"Why are you plaguing me?" she demanded, and there was unmistakable fear in her voice. "What do you want? Who told you where to find me?"

"Now take it easy, Mrs. Corbell. All I want is the name of that man at your home this afternoon. Nevers let him out as I waited to go in."

I rose and we locked eyes. She said, "I don't know. I didn't see him. You seem a know-it-all about everything else. Why don't you know *that*?"

The words were hardly out when I saw her jaw drop in astonishment. I followed her gaze. Helen was on the way over, using that strange, catlike glide again. Mrs. Corbell looked around wildly and beckoned.

"Hello, Dottie," her sister gurgled. "You people all through now? Garry here asks more people more questions—and *longer* ones. . . . Why, Dottie, what's the matter?"

The big guy came bumping around a table. "Bob," Mrs. Corbell moaned, "see who's with him."

Amazed at the anguished tone, I turned toward her. I only half saw Bob's swinging motion and, before I could face back, somebody pulled the building down on top of me.

VII

THE WALLS OF THE ROOM went around and around but didn't seem to raise any breeze. The curtains weren't whipping. They were hanging straight up and down, stiff and formal, and yet they were going around and around with the room, I tried to count the curtains, rolling my head to pick them up as they circled and ride them through.

Somebody said, "He's coming out of it—I'm afraid." The voice sounded far away but happy. Then it said, "Sucker bait."

"Shut up!" another voice barked.

I tried to talk but my face seemed unhinged. The room was slowing down, though, and I could see the curtains were dark blue. I felt something slide under my neck and my head was elevated and a deeper voice said, "Here you are. Take a bite of this."

Whiskey filled my mouth. I swallowed

automatically. It kept coming and I kept swallowing until I gagged and coughed. When I stopped coughing, tears were running from my eyes, washing all the fog away. I struggled and sat up, swiped at the moisture and looked about. I was in Johnny Jump-Up's office and Poseny himself was standing a couple of feet away, still holding the glass.

He said, "How's it now, kid? Feel better?"

I shook my head cautiously. Everything seemed tight, with no rattling. Beyond Poseny I saw his partner, Lou Schleger, sitting on a desk, and a dark, fox-faced gun called Little Reno. The fox-face was Schleger's convoy and didn't like me much. Once I'd had to work his mug over a little, but when it straightened out the mug was still a fox-face. So now I placed the sneering voice which had said I was coming to.

"Care for another shot of this?" Johnny asked, the glass poised.

"No, thanks. How long was I out?" I looked at my watch. It read eleven after ten.

Poseny set the glass down and straightened, rubbing his palms together. "Why, you weren't out long at all, Garry. Five, six minutes maybe."

"That was a real nasty fall," Schleger said smoothly. "Guess you turned too fast and tripped yourself. When you hit the table——"

My angry eye cut him short. I asked Poseny, "Where'd they go? Where's the girl?"

He shrugged and thrust both hands into his tuxedo pockets. "They blew. She went with them."

"Oh!" I ran an experimental hand along my jaw. It was sensitive but not lumpy. The punch had landed right on the sweet spot. "Who's the big guy?"

Poseny shook his head and turned the smile on but his eyes were wary. "Search me, Gary. Never saw him before."

"Some guys it would be better if they never see him again—and happier," Little Reno chuckled, pushing himself away from the wall and dropping into a chair.

"I told you to shut up, punk!" Poseny snapped without looking around. But almost instantly the glower faded and his suave smile returned. He glanced at his

wrist. "Listen, Garry, that floor show's about due. Care to sit in? You feel okay?"

"Sure. I feel okay, Johnny, but I'll watch from the bar maybe." I got off the leather divan and flexed my legs. "See you out there."

"Fine, Garry. Order what you like—on the house." The lid of one eye dropped significantly.

I ran the fingers of both hands through my hair in a quick, dry toilet. For the first time I missed my hat and topcoat. Then I saw them on a chair. I picked them up, went out and closed the door. From behind it I heard Little Reno laugh.

All of a sudden I was hungry. My club sandwich in the boogie-woogie diner probably had drowned. The floor show was just starting, so I worked my way front to Pappy and asked him to stick me in at some casual table.

Under the blackface, Pappy was Jan Czarsjak, a Bohemian or something. He grunted and surveyed the crowded premises. Then he said, "Why not the bosses' table, Garry? You know the two guys there—Vince and Maxie."

"Yeah, I know them." I hesitated, then nodded. "Well, you're pretty full. That's all right, I guess."

"You don't need no guide. Go right ahead."

I held up a reproving finger. "Yo's fo'-gettin' yo Deep Saouth talk, Pappy."

The black-rimmed lips parted in a grin. "Oh, that!"

I THREADED through the tables. Heat and smoke hung in the place like a swamp fog. A synthetic mammy in bannanna, padded hips and dingy white apron over a garish, stock mother Hubbard, was out in the spotlight, clowning the bumps and telling the customers that her "Black Man Done Me Up Brown." Her dialect was strictly tenth road company *Uncle Tom's Cabin* but the paying joes were giving off surges of laughter at her racy lyrics.

Vince Emdehoff and Maxie Ginstell toyed with drinks at the table. The ashtray in front of them was mounded with cigarette butts. One still spiraled up a thin curl of acrid smoke, adding to the clean, fresh air. I took out a pencil, killed the fire with its blunt end and sat down.

"Hello, boys," I said. "Jump-Up sent me out to stuff myself. You don't mind my company—I'm sure."

Maxie merely shook a bullet head and kept his gaze fixed on the singer. Vince arranged his heavy face in a smile. "Make yourself to home, Garry. When'd you come out of the ether?"

I smiled. "That was Johnny's liquor, Vince. What's he hyping it with now?"

"Looks like the old Dean's slipping, kid. A blind guy in a dark alley could of seen that roundhouse coming."

"Any idea who the big guy was?"

This seemed to amuse him considerably. He chuckled deep in a thick throat. "Big guy? Who's been feeding you that crap?" He switched his eyes across the table. "How much a size would you say that egg was, Maxie?"

The bullet-head turned reluctantly away from the floor. "Huh? Who?"

Emdehoff shrugged and threw a scornful thumb at his companion. "Maxie's on the make. Gone for the canary." But the bullet-head wasn't listening any more.

I signaled a skinny, harassed-looking waiter who roamed into the area. He flat-wheeled to the table. I said, "Let's have the regular chicken plate and coffee; no salad, no trimmings." He started away. "And give the check to Mr. Poseny."

"Yes, sir."

The Plantation girl lines were always real brownskins and Johnny Jump-Up knew how to pick lookers. They had gone to work, eight of them, and the singer was swinging her bustles toward the dressing-room. Maxie Ginstell mumbled something, stumbled out of his chair and went prowling after her like a tomcat. He disappeared into the runway.

Vince shook his head sadly. "Maxie's sure got it bad. And where'll he wind up? Why, he'll wind up behind the eight-ball, like he always does."

I shifted around to watch the line. The eight cocoas were feeling the heat of this close, fetid room but were enthusiastically strutting their stuff regardless. White teeth shone in faces already glistening with sweat. The girls wore skimpy bras, brief and soiled yellow skirts, lace-trimmed panties meant to be white, and golden slippers on which many scuffings had lowered the gold standard.

Johnny Jump-Up's stock gag Number One was pulled right on schedule. As the leg-flashers switched fours-in-line from front to rear, the good-looker playing right end in the new forward line hooked a surreptitious arm behind her and yanked. The ends of her bra cut adrift, the sketchy covering fell away in front and her neat, tan breasts popped into view. She simulated dismay, grabbed for the bra, covered herself skimpily with it and ran off the floor with a fine show of virginal panic as patrons roared, whistled and stamped.

Then I watched for Poseny's killer-diller, and that came on schedule, too. One of the remaining seven would always start losing her frilly pants during the run-off and would hoist them again in frenetic grabs. She did—second last dancer to depart.

The harassed-looking waiter arrived with my meal while the Old Plantation still rocked with mirth and raucous noises of approbation. He arranged it on the table fretfully and went away.

"It always floors 'em," Vince commented in wonder, and regarded the applauding clients with a speculative eye. "Me—I don't get it."

"Theirs," I told him, "is a subway mind, while yours is probably elevated."

HE FIRED a cigarette and thought that over. Apparently he decided to do nothing about it. He asked, "How come the guy sloughs you, Garry? All I see first hand is when I make the bar in three jumps from here and you're already layin' there, muggin' the canvas."

"The carpet, my friend." I took a forkful of fried chicken. "And if you weren't on deck when the explosion came, how'd you know it was a roundhouse?"

"You wasn't exactly alone in the bar, pal. I got ears, ain't I?"

I looked at his sound-catchers. "Sure. You got ears all right, Vince, but you're like a lot of other chumps. You don't use them to catch the right things. You don't use them any more, say, than your eyes."

"What's the matter with the eyes?" Smoke spurted from his nostrils and he glared. "What's that—a crack?"

Placing my fork across the plate, I wondered whether to push this. Maybe I'd be tipping my hand too far. But Emdehoff

wasn't over-bright. I said, "No, Vince, it isn't any crack. It's a fact. Things go on around people all the time. They see them and hear them, but mostly they don't register."

He flipped ashes from his cigarette, adding to the messy pile in the tray. "Ah, you writin' punks with your lousy words that just go round and round and don't land nowhere. . . ."

From the floor came a clatter of feet as two blacked-up hoofers, male, worked a complicated and frenzied routine. I went back to raiding the chicken plate.

"For instance," I remarked carelessly, "I ran into Slippery Gillie this afternoon. He's been out of town and only came back a short time ago. Now I'll bet he's been in and out of here to see the boss half a dozen times since then and you never even noticed him."

When I looked up, Vince was squinting through the bluish haze. The fatty lips were parted in a knowing grin. "Yah! A wise guy! Well, if you knew anything you'd talk different. Gillie don't come in here no more. He and Lou and Johnny had a jam."

That put the fork down again. "What do you mean, a jam?"

He hesitated, took a long drag on the cigarette, then rubbed it dead in the tray. "Why don't you buzz Johnny or Lou? Why don't you ask Gillie if you're asking anybody? But he don't hang here no more."

It was all news to me and I was doing some fast thinking. The door to the dressing-room runway opened and Maxie Ginstell emerged slowly, buffing the bristles of his bullet head with the palm of one hand. He appeared baffled and disconsolate.

I said to Vince, "Well, you should know. But I wonder where Gillie's hanging out. He has to have some place."

Emdehoff grunted. I waited, pretending a keen interest in my food but almost holding my breath. He said, "Yeah! He's got a new pitch, all right. Over at Frenchy's, I hear."

I swallowed carefully. My appetite was gone. If it hadn't been, the return of Maxie would have chased it anyhow. He sank slowly into his chair and looked upon the departing hoofers with a jaundiced eye.

Vince winked, the grimace drawing up one whole side of his face.

"Get your pigeon, Maxie?" I asked.

The bullet head turned and his eyes were expressionless as a haddock's. He said, "Maybe you didn't get a count long enough. Maybe you wanna get that lopsided puss evened up."

"Shut your yap, Maxie," Emdehoff snapped. "Garry's only handing you a rib. He's a right guy."

My hand had gone unconsciously to the jaw. It was slightly lumpy, at that. I said, "Of course, Maxie. I was only kidding. Don't let a doll get you down. They grow on bushes."

Vince started to grin but then he looked over my head and his face fell into sober lines. A hand touched my shoulder and I turned. Helen stood there, smiling and nibbling her lower lip.

"Hello!" She fetched up a giggle. "Surprised?"

VIII

IT WAS A LONG WAY UP from that chair. When I made it, I peered through the miasma of the Old Plantation but nobody seemed to be coming through the rye and the Scotch and the gin-laden tables after her.

I said, "Where the devil did you drop from? Thought you'd gone home." My nose got a fat whiff of perfume and I made a face.

"You notice it!" she exclaimed happily. "I just put on more in the taxi."

"What taxi? Where've you been?"

"Oh, places," she said airily. They left me in a cab while they went into a place—so I told the driver to take me back. I thought you might still be here."

I groaned and whipped hat and coat off the spare chair. "Come on," I said, grabbing her arm. "You've got to get the hell out of here." I turned to Vince. "There's a back way, isn't there—the kitchen or something?"

He was puzzled at the tableau but he nodded. "Yeah! There's a back way, Garry. Out the alley."

"Get going." I hustled her toward the door through which waiters were passing. The brownskin line was working again but we cut across the floor regardless, behind

the M. C.'s mike. Customers turned startled heads as we wriggled between their tables.

We reached the swinging doors and barged through. The passage beyond ran for about ten feet, ending at the kitchen. Half a dozen men, stripped to undershirts but wearing soiled white aprons, were in a fever of activity. The heat was even worse than out on the floor.

I collared a short, squat guy with a Balkan mustache. "Where's the back door?" I threw at him.

It was too hurried. All he did was stare. Then he sniffed and looked at me peculiarly.

I said, "Look, General! This lady's husband just came in. We want to duck him. Mr. Poseny sent us through."

"Ha!" he exploded. A big grin split the fat face. He rubbed pudgy hands together excitedly. "Appuntamento! Romantico! Prodigioso!"

"Yes, yes—that's swell. But where's the back way out? We have to hurry."

"Si! You come."

He waddled across the room, swerving around counters, while pop-eyed mates watched us wonderingly. At the far right-hand corner he ducked into a short passage. There was a door at its end, standing open and hooked back. He jammed himself against one wall, waved his left hand and bowed. We couldn't squeeze past his bulging belly till he had sucked it in.

"Thanks, pal," I said sidling by. Helen was just ahead.

"Is a'right. For you ver' good luck." He beamed and tapped me on the arm. "You smell nice, I t'ink."

I was groping with her along the sloppy alley before his remark hit me straight. Then I shook her and she ended up banging against me. "So I smell nice, do I? Damn it, I ought to paddle your backside right here."

The heavy scent was almost overpowering as she clung hard. Even through my topcoat, suit, her raincoat and other clothes I could feel the contours of her lithe body as she pressed closer and closer. And she was giving off moans and little whimpering cries.

When I felt the hands at my neck, I reached and pulled them away. "Wait a minute," I admonished. "What's the mat-

ter with you anyhow? This isn't any time for mugging. What am I playing in, damn it—Mr. Dean's Profession?"

How she found her mark so accurately in the dark I don't know, but she hauled off and whacked me with her open hand across the face.

"You bum," she hissed. "I could kill you." Then she was running up the alley, silhouetted against the wan light at its end.

I shook myself. The hell with it. Let her find her own way home. She couldn't hunt me down again anyhow, because she didn't know where I was going. I straightened my hat, went up the alley and walked away from the Old Plantation to the Hudson.

BEFORE I noticed her, I was sliding under the wheel. She was scooped down in the seat, almost on the back of her neck, with her head at window level. Despite the beating rain I stopped my entrance while one leg still hung out of the sedan.

She sniggered and went through her routine again. "Hello! Surprised?" Nobody would have suspected she was the girl who had just pasted me.

My leg was getting wet. I hauled it in, slammed the door and said, "You ought to get yourself a new writer. Your stuff's beginning to sound rather stale." The perfume hit my nostrils in a wave.

She tittered again. "I like you, too. Where do we go now?" She sat up and her hands went to the battered hat.

"We're going home—to *your* home." I punched the key at the ignition lock, missed my target entirely, then went groping for it. "Yeah! You're going home pronto and, if it were possible, I'd see you tucked into bed—snug as a bug, which I'm beginning to think you are—and then I'd hog-tie you in."

"That would be nice." Her giggle erupted again. "Only it's too early for anybody to go home, I'm sure."

"Not for *you* it isn't." I kicked the engine alive and looked at my watch by the instrument dials. "It's eleven-ten. I mean at night, in case there's any misunderstanding."

Her hand fell suddenly on my right thigh and squeezed hard. I took it off

hastily and jackknifed out of the parking space. Heading for the Boulevard, I wondered what really was the matter with this dame and if I were a little dopey not to be playing ball with her. As she remained silent on the ride and kept to her own side, my feelings toward her began to soften. Maybe she was just a bit high-powered.

She was humming as we turned off Kinkaid and began to climb the Langerman driveway under the dripping trees, but the humming stopped abruptly when we saw a hunched figure toiling up the slope, full in our headlights.

"Who's that?" she cried, sitting upright.

The man, in the dark topcoat and dark soft hat, pulled low on his forehead, swung around and faced us, then stepped aside into shadow on my side. She drew upon her reservoir of giggles. "Oh! It's Jerry coming home."

"Who's Jerry?"

"Our chauffeur. This was his day off."

I'd forgotten his name and he looked different out of livery. I stopped, turned down my window and called, "Hop on, Jerry."

Emerging from the shadows, he peered through the window. "Thank you, sir. Oh, it's Miss Helen. Good evening."

"Hello, Jerry. This is Mr. Dean. Not the dean of *women*, by any means. Say hello to the nice Mr. Dean."

Why the hell—I thought—does she talk like that to the family chauffeur? Or was she putting on an act? Then another idea hit me. Could she be nuzzling with him, too, in dark corners?

He had stepped on the running board and was gripping the window frame. All I could see of him then in the headlights' diffused glow was his light and dark, diagonally-striped necktie against the background of his clothing. Though he was crouching, his face was merely a gray blur.

He said, "Hello, Mr. Dean. Glad to know you. A bad night."

"Yeah!" I acknowledged grimly. "Bad all around." We resumed the climb.

She snickered. "He means *me*, Jerry. Mr. Dean doesn't like me any more. I'll bet your girl likes *you*, Jerry."

3—Detective Book—Spring

Now what the devil kind of a way was that to talk, I asked myself, or was she *really* a mental case.

"No, I haven't any girl," the chauffeur returned politely. "I go out by myself mostly. Tonight I took in the fights. A chauffeur friend just gave me a lift home as far as the hill."

I was only half listening. My interest in fights was somewhat short of apathetic. We were on the concrete apron in front of the garage and I turned the Hudson in a wide swing and stopped. Jerry stepped down from the running-board and shook himself.

"Thanks very much," he said, head bent against the rain. "Goodnight. Goodnight, Miss Helen."

She called a goodnight and I let the sedan roll to the veranda end. "Scram, Stinky," I ordered. "I'll wait'll you get into the house."

For a moment I thought she might attempt another assault on the Dean honor, but finally she opened the door. "You're funny, Garry." Then she was out, the door slammed and she was running for the front steps.

WHEN I saw her vanish, I shoved the Hudson into gear and began to drop down the winding drive. But after a few feet I braked down, shifted into reverse and backed up the hill to the garage. There was a yellow light in a window above. The shade was drawn. I found a side door, fumbled around without locating any bell, then hammered with a fist. After a while I heard the sound of steps, the door opened a crack, and I saw the chauffeur's predatory nose and one sharp eye.

I said, "It's Dean again, Jerry. Could I come in and talk a minute?"

"Oh!" The door opened wider and I slid out of the rain. He had snapped on the downstairs lights. I saw three of the four cars. The flossy Chrysler was one. "What do you want?" he asked ungraciously.

One hand went over my wet hair uncertainly. How loyal a family retainer this guy was, I didn't know. Sometimes chauffeurs were pretty close. But I had to chance it.

I said, "Thought you might like to

make a buck or two on the side. How about it?"

His forehead corrugated and he eyed me warily. "That depends. How?"

"Merely by getting a little information." I went through the slit pocket of my top-coat and pulled out some bills. Extracting a ten, I shoved the rest back. He regarded the bill calmly. I said, "I'm interested in that envelope Mrs. Corbell passed to a man today in front of the Belle City Trust."

"Yes?" His expression didn't change.

Then I shoved the tenner at him and his hand closed on the note. "Any idea what was in it?"

"Nope!"

"Do you know the man who came from the bank and took it?"

"Said he was some clerk. No, I never saw him before."

"What did he say to her?"

Jerry hesitated, glanced at the ceiling, then back at me. "Why, I didn't hear everything—something about a mistake being made. Then she gave him the envelope and he went back into the bank."

"And what did Mrs. Corbell do?"

"Well, she sat in the car awhile. Then she began to look over toward the bank. Then she got out and went into the place. When she came out she told me to drive her home. Why, what's it all about, Mr. Dean?"

I shrugged. "That's what I'd like to know. Mr. Langerman questioned you, didn't he?"

Jerry's eyes hardened. "Yes, he called me over. All I could tell him was the same."

"Well, look!" I indicated the bill in his hand. "There's more where that came from if you keep your eyes and ears open and can find out some things. How about it?"

He smiled. "That's what talks, sir—folding dough. A chauffeur don't make much, you know, even in a spot like this."

"Right!" I dug again and came up with a five-spot. "So now let's have the *real* story of what happened at the bank. Her story is the same as yours, but hers is all wet. So yours must be."

He wasn't abashed. He said calmly, "Okay! She didn't go back into the bank. After she gave him the envelope she said to drive home. But that's the only change."

"Now we're on a sound basis," I told him. "Let's keep it that way. And let me know anything unusual you see or hear, from the help of other parties."

"You're a sharp one."

I scribbled Rosario's number on a paper and handed it to him. "If I'm not there, you can always leave word when you'll be at some certain number, so I can call you back."

He took the paper in the same hand which held the bills. "There's a phone right back here, a pay station for the help," he said, pointing to the rear of the garage.

"Fine!" Then I hesitated, but finally decided to give him a spur. "The reason it's important, Jerry, is that the guy who took that envelope wasn't a bank clerk at all. He was a sharper. And he was murdered this afternoon in Bournedale."

The chauffeur's eyes widened and he drew back a step. "Murdered? That quiet-looking gink?"

"Remember—call me on anything you think I ought to know," I said, turning to the door. "And don't forget that it's just between you and me."

"I won't forget, sir. Murdered? Lord Almighty!"

THERE WAS a bad taste in my mouth as I rolled down the drive, but from which dish of chicken—the Old Plantation's or the Langerman's persistent Helen—I wasn't sure. In a tavern at Fieldmont I washed away the taste with a bourbon, stepped into a phone booth and called the trooper barracks. Mark Davis, a corporal who once had been a Belle City cop, was on the desk.

I said, "Mark, this is Garry Dean at Belle City. What's doing on the torch murder, my friend?"

"Hello, Garry. Not much. We've sort of been looking for you out here."

"Been tied up in town. Now they want something for the first edition."

He laughed. "Well, hell, there isn't much, kid, as I said. That car—"

"Any identification yet?" I interrupted, crossing mental fingers.

"Haven't heard any. That's in town, though. Belle City's handling it."

I let out my breath in relief. The troopers certainly would be informed of any iden-

tification. "What were you saying about the car? Sorry to break in."

"Only that it was hot. The coupe was swiped two days ago at Saunders. We traced it through engine and maker's numbers. The fingerprint boys are going over it right now but it doesn't look too good."

"Well, thanks, Mark. Maybe I'll be seeing you."

I disconnected, waited and rang the Belle City police Bureau of Criminal Investigation. Sergeant Flick came on the phone. He sounded grumpy.

"Thought you'd be around after a while," he growled. "What the hell kept you?"

"Am I late?" I asked innocently. "Well, you know me, Pete—the late Mr. Dean."

"Listen, Garry, we're awful busy here. What do you want?"

"I'm doing this the lazy way. How about an identification in the torch murder at Quarryland?"

He grunted. "Whad'ya think we are, dammit—magicians? You didn't see those remains or you wouldn't ask. He's still unidentified. Probably some out-of-town mobster dumped in another territory."

"Well, if he's a mobster there should be a file on him."

"Jaysuss, Garry, he isn't like anything *human* any more. Can't you pound that into your thick skull? We couldn't even get prints off him. Maybe we'll find something through the teeth but I dunno."

"Then you've got nowhere," I needed.

He took the bait. "Listen here, you! We're working on it. Give us half a chance for once. You lousy newspaper guys and your damn editors..."

"All I can hear is something about lousy editors," I told him. "Good night, Sergeant Flick."

He was sputtering when I hung up. I felt pretty good about apparently having identification alone, so I went out to the bar, picked up another half a dozen nickels, then returned to the booth.

PAT Stanley was in charge on the *Press-Bulletin's* lobster trick. He informed me, in worried tone, that Dunegan had called twice from home, wanting to know what I'd dug up on the murder.

"He's got an idea it's an insurance case, Garry."

"That I wouldn't know, Pat, but I doubt it."

"Harry sore on you or something? I told him the last time that I expected to hear from you any minute but he acted peeved."

"Harry's always sore on somebody, my good man. If he isn't sore on somebody, he'll dream up a way to be sore *about* something."

"You're telling me. But what've you got? You know that guy. He'll be on the phone again in a little while and if I haven't something to tell him, he'll chew his way in all along the wire."

I chuckled. "Let him eat amperes. Of course I have something, my friend, but I'm not going in to write it myself. We've got it all alone, too, so post your guards in the bastions till the presses roll."

"Thank Heaven for that. What's it? Headquarters hasn't a damn new angle—only rehash—but B.C.I. seems to think this guy may amount to something."

"Much as I hate to hurt B.C.I.," I told him, "we've got to identify the victim on Page One. So the boys, I think, will be somewhat shocked."

"What do you mean? Come on, Garry; that guy'll be calling any minute."

"Okay, Pat. *I've* got him identified. You know Slippery Gillie Maher, the con-man they've never been able to pin a rap on that'd stick?"

"I know of him. I don't know him. Why?"

"Well, he's your victim and there's your lead for the first edition. That's all I've got but it's plenty for now. Then you can rehash the rest to pad the story. And there are all kinds of clips on Gillie."

"Swell! And we've got it alone? Who made the identification, or is that a secret?"

I chuckled again. "I made it and it sure *is* a secret. I won't even tell you how I worked it. Not yet. Another thing—no by-line. There'll be hell to pay when the *Press-Bulletin* hits the street—and a lot of questions asked. I don't want them tossing conundrums at me right away, because there's something big behind this that smells of the hocus and I've got the inside on that, too. Keep the story anonymous. You know—the P-B learned on good authority..."

"Attaboy, Garry. Wait'll I see if we've got anybody sober on rewrite. They just

came in." I waited and he returned. "I'll give you Egan. Hold it, now..."

When I finally stepped out of the booth, the bartender looked up from his newspaper. Out here in the suburbs the late business was poor, probably because of the wet night. A lone customer sat staring at his beer.

The bartender grinned. "More nickels? She must be difficult."

I shook my head. "Not this time, Mac. Had her on the ropes with only one."

He turned and glanced at the clock. The hands pointed to eight after midnight. He turned back and smiled. "Cripes, she must be a night watchman's daughter—either that or she's in a bad way."

"It's a wrong jane," I said, "that has no yearning."

When I turned at the door he was looking at the clock again.

IX

FRENCHY'S PLACE ELEGANTE, like its front man, carried a label somewhat out of keeping. Just a little. If Brooklyn's Gowanus could be called the Seine, Frenchy was a Parisian, but probably not otherwise. The club was an after-hours roost, a place to go in Belle City—provided you held a membership card—when there wasn't any other place to go except home. And it was tough to get a card. Very tough! Sometimes you actually had to *ask somebody* for one.

There was no floor show at Place Elegante. No prancing dolls to lose their bras and fripperies—at least not while prancing—no groaners, no accordionists, no comics, no apache, ballroom or tango dancers. Hy Kupnel, who was Frenchy through some vague metamorphosis of convenience, gave you good food, good booze and let you alone—unless a client wanted to go upstairs and try his luck one way or another. With or without a friend.

I left the Hudson at the end of a line of cars in Mohican Street and breast-stroked through the rain halfway along the block. The spot officially occupied two old brownstones, broken through and thrown together. There was another brownstone next door, with vacant, staring windows, which nobody ever seemed to occupy, though commercial establishments

had taken over the rest of this once snooty residential section.

It was odds-on that they wouldn't, but Frenchy and the boys *could* have told you about this empty house and connecting doors on the upper floor, concealed by draperies on the Place Elegante side. Sometimes these doors and the empty house were convenient in fading from the club during moments of stress.

The bell-button at the top of the front steps gave out with a grating buzz when I pressed. The door was opened almost immediately by a chunky lad in a dinner coat.

I said, "Hello, Gus. Welcome the arriving guest."

"Oh, it's you, Garry. Long time no lay eyes on you. Come in." He stepped aside. "Where'd you leave your rowboat?"

Behind me the door closed and we stood in a brightly-lighted vestibule, with another locked door to go. "You don't mind a little rain?" I kidded. "Is Frenchy in?"

He had turned his back, hands behind him, and was doing things with a row of buttons set into a panel. The buttons worked signal lights in a little inner office, according to the night's combination of colors. I couldn't see which buttons he pressed but I knew the system.

When he finished, he said, "Frenchy? Sure, he's in. How's tricks, Garry? What are you doing over here tonight?"

"Just roaming. Had a disappointing time with a dame. You know how it is." I poked him in the ribs and he pulled in his mid-section. The inside latch clicked.

He opened the door and stood aside again. "Sucker stuff," he chided. "Well, drown the old sorrow, boy. Ask the Clipper about Frenchy."

I went in and heard the door close. That left me in a large, dark-paneled hallway, with a carpeted staircase leading up at my right. Also to the right was a doorway opening into a dimly lighted room. There were tables in this room, with a blue-and-white-checked cloth and a small lamp on each.

All the tables were well filled. A low hum of conversation drifting into the hallway was like the far-away droning of bees. I wasn't concerned with the hum, however. A man had come out of the tiny office, set into a jog between vestibule and

wall. When I turned down my collar and gingerly took off the soggy hat, he recognized me but didn't smile.

He said tersely, "Sitting down, Garry, or just looking around?"

"Entirely social, Clipper. I'd like to see Frenchy."

Still his pan remained cold and expressionless. "I think Frenchy's busy. Wait'll I find out."

He retreated into his cubicle and I heard the rattle of a phone and then a murmuring. I peeled my damp topcoat and threw it over one arm. The rattle sounded again and in a moment he reappeared.

"Frenchy says okay. Go ahead up."

"Thanks." I moved along the hall, past the staircase, to a small self-service elevator. More low murmurings came from the rear of the joint. Everything decorous. No shrill laughter, no jive, no table-hopping drunks. I stepped into the gilded cage. After the lift stopped at the fourth, I walked along a thick-carpeted hall to a door on which I knocked. When somebody called, "Come in!" I opened the door and went in.

HERE was top-drawer setting with a bottom-drawer cast. The large, high-ceilinged room looked like a movie layout. Sound-deadening velvet drapes, lemon-yellow, covered the walls and blue ones hung at the two windows. There was a huge couch of light, unpainted but wax-finished, wood, done in blue leather, and half a dozen odd lounging chairs in the same motif. The thick-piled rug was dark blue, figured in a lighter shade of the same color. Three floor lamps were burning. Their inverted bowls threw white light against the ceiling, which threw it back softly. Atop a large cabinet radio, in the same unpainted finish as the rest of the furniture, stood a vase of roses.

A red-haired, long-thighed woman in a dove-gray dinner dress, and holding a glass, was half-sitting, half-lying on the long couch, head turned toward the door. Beside the couch was a champagne-cooler from which a bottle-neck protruded. Curled in a pillow-back chair was a small blonde in street clothes whose hair had patronized too many drugstores. Whatever was in the long glass on the curved-leg cocktail table before her wasn't champagne-colored.

Sprawled in another chair, beside Frenchy's half-moon desk, was Nick Zulturo, one of his house dealers. I wondered why Nick wasn't dealing until I saw the bandaged right hand.

Frenchy had come upright in his too-large swivel chair behind the desk as I entered. He said, "How are you, Garry?" in a tone he might use to buy a pound and a half of mackerel. He waved a careless hand, in which he held a partly-smoked cigar. "You know Mona and Nick."

I nodded. "Hello, Mona." Then I looked at the platinum-head.

"Evie, this is Garry Dean, one of those snoop reporters," Frenchy said with a heavy attempt at humor. His chunky nose wrinkled and one of his lobeless ears, set close to his head, came into view as he turned. "Garry, this is Evelyn Fair."

"Fair enough," I cracked. "Show business?"

Her lined eyebrows came up and the glistening red of her mouth divided into two parts, but the paint job didn't slip. "*Trouble in Paradise*," she trilled. "How'd you guess? Nicky, he's marvelous."

"Oh, just a wild stab in the dark," I said modestly. "Think nothing of it."

Frenchy leaned forward and rested both elbows on his desk. "That's one of Mr. Dean's few bad habits, Evie—stabbing wild in the dark." He looked at me. "Sit down, Garry. What'll you drink?"

"Bourbon, if it's handy." But I didn't sit down. I dropped coat and hat on a chair and crossed the rug toward his desk.

I had been aware of a vague, barely perceptible hum since coming into the room. Now it abruptly cut off and a short, shrill whistle sounded three times. Frenchy reached quickly to his left and killed a small table radio whose battered mahogany finish was incongruous in this room of sleek, light-hued furniture. He glanced at me but I kept a deadpan, even though I had recognized the police short-wave attention signal. Then he brought up whiskey bottle, siphon and a glass.

"Say when," he called, pouring bourbon. "When! And just in time, too."

Soda squirted into the glass and he handed it across the desk.

"Thanks, Frenchy." I was still standing.

"Now, Garry, anything special you wanted to see me about?" He pulled at the

cigar but the fire had gone out. Drawing over a desk lighter, he snapped it into flame.

"It's sort of under cover. I thought you were alone." My eyes rolled significantly toward the couch.

TWO deep exclamation points appeared between his sleepy eyes. "That means, I suppose, you'd like my friends to take a walk. What are you building up to—another wild stab in the dark?"

"Why, no, I don't figure it's too much of a blind one at that, Frenchy. I'm running down a guy and some information—if these nice people don't *mind* walking for a little."

Nicky already had risen. The bleach-blonde unfolded her gams and dropped them to the rug. They weren't unsightly shafts at all. Frenchy nodded toward the door and said, "Okay, Mona."

"Oh, for Pete's sake!" She swung the limbs off her couch, and the dove-gray gown hauled up to above her knees. She let it stay that way just a shade longer than necessary, then jackknifed to her feet and walked toward the exit. The three went out and the door closed.

"Mona seems a little huffy," I observed cautiously.

Frenchy fixed me with the heavy-lidded eyes. "Never mind Mona. Get down to cases." His affability was all gone. "You're not here for fun. I can see that."

Placing my highball on the desk, I reached over and rubbed a hand across the small mahogany radio. "How's your short-wave reception here? Does this thing pull in all right?"

Cigar smoke billowed around his face. He blew a hole in the cloud. "That isn't what you came up to ask me."

I grinned. "No, but you really ought to have this in light finish to match the rest here." I waved at the furniture. "Or did you just borrow out of curiosity about police calls tonight?"

"Look, Garry, I don't know what you're driving at but I'm a guy who can get awful impatient. If something's on your mind, spill it."

I retrieved my glass and sipped, then placed it back on the desk. "This afternoon I ran into Gillie Maher and a heavy-set lad with a black hat — what's his

name..." I snapped searching fingers, then shook my head.

"If you ever knew it," Frenchy observed crisply. The eyes were still fixed on my face. "What about the Slip—if he means anything?"

"Oh, he does; he does. Good old Gilbert means a lot. Yeah, Gillie's become quite important."

Frenchy drew on the cigar again but exhaled quickly. "Important how?"

As if not hearing the question, I assumed an expression of bafflement, shook my head and said resignedly, "Nope! I just *can't* remember the name of that guy in the black hat."

"Listen, Dean!" Frenchy snapped. "I could take that dizzy blonde of Nick's and throw her overhand along the Boulevard at high noon—and she'd knock off a hundred black hats."

"That I'd like to see, provided you toss her feet first and she raises a breeze. But this is one special guy with just one black hat and a cleft chin who runs around with Gillie."

The cigar dropped ash on the glass. Unmindful of his rug, he blew the ashes off into space. When his head raised, he fixed me once more with the smouldering eyes.

"To hell with the guy in the black hat."

I shrugged. "Okay! Whatever you say. But about The Slip." I fed him a big lie. "Gillie said he'd had some kind of jam with Johnny Jump-Up or Lou Schleger—he wasn't quite clear—and he doesn't go in the Plantation any more." I paused and picked up my glass. "He said his racket was moved over here."

"You don't—what you call it, mince words, do you, Dean?"

I swirled the liquor in my glass. "You mince 'em and what've you got—just a lot of chopped-up nothing."

He gave out with a twisted grin and chewed the cigar. "That's about what I think you're selling now, brother. I don't think you saw Gillie this afternoon, or tonight, or any other time when he'd tell you anything except maybe ain't it a nice day."

"Or vice versa—a *bad* day?"

"Perhaps. *You* call it."

"Okay! I'll call this much. I'll lay you a hundred bucks to five that you can't get Gillie, within a week, to tell me either

it's a good or bad day. You get him, set the time and I'll be here."

FRENCHY'S eyes became sly. He dropped them, took the frayed cigar from his mouth, turned it over between thumb and forefinger and appeared to be deeply interested in its inspection. Then he looked up.

"A C-note to half a G? What the hell kind of odds are those?"

I shrugged. "For you it's like finding money, if you can do it. And why shouldn't you be able to do it, Frenchy? He's a pal of yours. You're not afraid you won't be able to produce him, are you?"

"What kind of crack is that? You've got some angle, Dean."

I took out a cigarette, walked around the desk, snapped his lighter and borrowed a lick of the flame. Blowing out smoke, I asked, "Why do you think Gillie won't be around any more, Frenchy?"

The eyelids drooped even lower and he looked at me from slits. The little muscles at either side of his mouth twitched. He rose slowly, both hands on the desk. "I'll take that bet, wise guy. Five to one—within a week."

I swallowed hard and cold doubt galloped through my being. If I were being gimicked, I'd have to hop town with a fire of wrath blazing on my tail—and Dunegan fanning it among the most enthusiastic. Frenchy was grinning now—a demoniac one—leaning forward on both hands. His head, with those tight, lobeless ears, was thrust at me challengingly.

"Sold!" I said, astonished that my voice was even. I stuck a hand in my pocket.

He straightened and gestured contemptuously. "Keep your dough while you have it—if you have it. I'll sign a marker. You give me one." He yanked open a drawer, produced some paper, unclipped his fountain pen and scribbled while still standing. The slip he handed me read:

Marker. Frenchy bets Garry Dean \$500 to \$100 he'll have Gil Maher say either it's a nice day or it isn't a nice day to Dean before 1:00 A.M. March 29th.
Frenchy.

I nodded. He slid paper and pen across the desk and I wrote my version on a slip

which he folded and dropped into a vest pocket.

"Like you said—soft dough," he sneered. "Anything else?"

"No, I don't think there's anything else, my friend. Unless we come back to black hats—heavy-set guys with dimple-chins and black hats."

"Let's not come back to black hats." He lowered himself into his big chair and smiled sardonically.

I killed my cigarette in his tray. "Well, later maybe. And maybe we'll throw in two-tone coupes—hot two-tone coupes in green and green."

He didn't answer that. He was peeling cellophane from another cigar. I walked over to the chair where I'd left my coat and hat, put them on and went out, closing the door after me. Nobody was visible in the hallway as I proceeded toward the elevator, but muffled voices came through closed doors of the game rooms.

A red light showed at the gilded cage and I waited for it to discharge passengers. It rose all the way to the fourth floor, however, and I stood aside when the lift stopped. The door opened and two women stepped out, laughing. Neither gave me a flash but as I started to enter I wondered vaguely where I'd seen them both before—or either.

I was almost to the first floor when memory clicked on one. Dark hair, drawn back to a chignon. Earrings. Those teeth. She was the babe I'd fenced with at the Langerman house — Rhoda Yeager, secretary to Mrs. Corbell. Rhoda, I considered, kept nice hours, in nice places.

X

VINEGAR PUSS WAS KNITTING at her switchboard when I walked into the Juanita Arms with the morning papers. I gave myself one guess and decided she wasn't knitting little garments. Her indignant look neither affirmed nor denied when I put the question to her in making for the elevator. Vinegar Puss didn't like me very well. Riding up, I wondered how she'd set off a black lace nightie in a warm, cozy room with snow swirling against the panes. Possibly it was the idea of snow that made me shudder.

Before my door on the third floor I

fished absently for the key, with thoughts switching back to Rhoda Yeager and the woman with her at Frenchy's place. The woman's face was still distinct but I couldn't seem to tab her. It bothered me. Suddenly I realized that the key was bothering me, too. Usually I kept it loose in either jacket pocket, but it wasn't there. I searched all other pockets and it wasn't in any of them either.

That meant visiting the night operator, who didn't like me as much as she enjoyed knitting. I sighed, returned to the elevator and rode down.

"I seem to have mislaid my key, Gertrude," I said humbly. "Could I borrow a master? I'll give it to the porter in the morning."

She sniffed and laid her stuff aside. From a small drawer beside the board she removed a tagged key and placed it disdainfully where I could reach it.

I picked up the key, unconsciously waiting for her usual cutting comment. When the remark didn't come, it was like something left out of my life. So I went back softly to the elevator.

In my room I skimmed through the *Examiner*, *Post* and *Chronicle* stories on the torch murder. None had anything except open and shut facts of the case—the passing motorist, his discovery of the blazing car in the brush, the horribly burned corpse with its battered, unrecognizable face, search by police for fingerprints. These things and a lot of words! Cliff Romney, a *Press-Bulletin* alumnus who had departed that sheet in an historic exchange of recriminations with Dunegan, used the most words—in the *Examiner*—but they didn't reveal anything more when you'd ridden through them. I went for Romney like I'd go for a boil on my butt, though the guy could write. All the ayems agreed that this was a fiendish killing. As to whether it was a mob liquidation, a falling out among car thieves, or an insurance case, they were divided.

Stripping for bed, I chuckled over the shock due these editors and their lads on the murder coverage, not to mention B.C.I. at headquarters, when the *Press-Bulletin* broke Gillie Maher's identification at eighteen. But my brain had turned over and was on Rhoda Yeager and her elusive companion again when I corked off.

I had troubled dreams. An enfeebled Gillie, old, stooped and with two canes, had me in a corner and was crowding closer and closer. I wriggled and turned and tried to push him away, but he seemed soaked with perfume and was smothering me. I was astonished that he wasn't bald any more and that, instead of his sparse cranial fringe, he had a full crop. The hair even tickled my face. Putting out my hand, I stroked the hair to see if it was real. Then my eyes unpeeled slowly and I looked again—and came bolt upright.

Helen Langerman snuggled beside me in the three-quarter bed. Not entirely beside me, though. I had flung her arm off my chest but one leg was drawn up and still pinned me down across the knees. She was sound asleep, the cinnamon-colored hair exploded on my pillow, long lashes lying on her cheek, the full, sensuous lips slightly parted. She certainly didn't have adenoids, no matter what else troubled her. In repose she looked even younger than the way she had acted the night before. And she was naked as a winter birch.

OUTSIDE it was gray. My wrist watch, after a little maneuvering to catch the light, read twelve after seven. She didn't wake when I lifted the crooked knee carefully and slipped out of bed. I pulled the covers up over her again, wondering about Vinegar Puss downstairs and how in hell this wolf-bait had ever gotten by her. Because if Helen hadn't slipped past in some unguarded moment, the Juanita Arms would certainly have been up in them by now.

Also, I knew at last where my key had gone. When Helen fished me for cigarettes she must have felt the key and clipped me for it. I recalled her asking where I lived. I remembered a lot of things and added them up. The weight of their sum in my head slightly bowed my legs.

Tiptoeing around the room in the half-light, I dressed with clumsy, fumbling fingers. Once she moaned, tossed off the covers and rolled to her other side, while I held my breath. On a chair I could dimly make out her garments and in my nose was that same exciting scent. This was no place for a susceptible guy—not with that picture in front of him. Through my head ran Coleridge's lines on Christabel:

*Her gentle limbs did she undress,
And lay down in her loveliness.*

I didn't wait to shave, or even to wash, or scrub my teeth. When my coat and hat were on, I picked up the master key and then looked around for my own. It wasn't on the dresser, the highboy or the bedtable. I found her shoes beside the chair and shook them out. No key. There was nothing in the stockings. Her handbag wasn't in sight but the light was gaining and I spotted a bulge at the foot of the bed, on the vacant side where there shouldn't have been a bulge.

Inch by inch I eased the bag from beneath blankets and sheet. Moving cautiously to the window, I opened the bag softly and began to rummage through its mass of junk. Clouds of perfume rose to assault me but I was brave and stood my ground. Dredging to the bottom of that thing was an engineering job and my fingers were groping for an opening when I spotted the photographs. I pulled them out and damn near dropped the whole business.

There were three pictures, about three by five inches, clear-focussed, sharp as a razor in their black and whites—professional-looking contact prints. Evidently Helen Langerman was interested in cameras—so long as she faced them. She was in three nude poses, standing poised at a mantel, sitting straight in a chair, and a side view, lying down with one knee raised. They showed almost everything except her thoughts, and I could imagine what those were.

I slipped the prints into my pocket on general principles, went over to the morris chair and dumped the bag's contents. But, though I found my key and confiscated it also, there wasn't anything else in the junk that seemed significant save an empty isinglass-windowed envelope which had a phone number penciled on its back, Circle 4182. For no reason except that I wouldn't have another chance, I made a note of that number. Then I stuffed all her rubbish back in the bag, including a small purse with sixteen one-dollar bills and some silver, inserted it beneath the bedcovers and eased myself out of the room with great care.

Vinegar Puss was off at eight o'clock. It lacked half an hour of that time and I

couldn't afford to be seen lurking in my own corridors any more than I could afford to let her see me sneaking out. I went along the hall and climbed three flights to the top floor, doubled back and ascended the rear stairs to the roof. The door was bolted but I unlocked it and stepped out, closing it again.

The sky was leaden gray and a chill wind whipped across the building tops but the rain had stopped. Pools of water lay in the graveled low spots, their surfaces ruffled by the breeze. I walked across the roof, scaled a low parapet and tried the next penthouse door. It was locked. I went across to the adjoining roof and that door was locked as well.

The third one was caught closed with something but not locked. I could open it a couple of inches. After I had jerked several times, the door came free, trailing a length of wire. I stepped inside, rewound the wire around a projecting spike and descended the several flights. I didn't look back as I came to the main floor. I was a busy little business man, intent upon getting out to his business and maybe a little late to be sure.

IN a variety store at Monmouth and Blake, a sleepy-eyed youth sold me two packs of cigarettes. I went into the phone booth and rang my hotel. There was never any music in Vinegar Puss' voice and she didn't shatter her record now.

I said, "Gertrude, this is Garry Dean. I had to go out again a couple of hours after speaking to you. If anybody calls, will you give them Rosario's number?"

"When did you go out?" she demanded. "I didn't notice you and I've been here right along."

Unseen in the booth, I grinned. "Oh, I walked downstairs. That was when you were asleep, I guess."

"I wasn't asleep," she snapped.

"Remember? When you dropped your ball of yarn on the floor?"

She was burning. "Listen here, Mr. Dean, I'll have you understand—"

"Maybe it's my darn glasses," I hurried to interrupt. "Have to get them changed."

"You don't wear glasses," she said angrily.

"Oh, I never wear my glasses around girls. They wouldn't make passes..."

The line crackled and went dead as she cut me off. I left the booth and the store and the half-awake lad and walked back to where I'd left the Hudson in the gutter. There wasn't any tag on it and I got in, warmed the engine and drove to Rosario's.

It was still short of opening time but a few lights were burning in the bar and I rattled the front door. I saw Rosy's squat figure emerge from the gloom and then his fat face loomed behind the glass and divided in a beaming smile. He fumbled with the lock and catches and the door swung open.

"Garry! O-ho! The early bird is cop the worm, eh? You got hangover, I t'ink."

I walked in. He shut the door and locked it again. "Nope! I could feel better, Rosy, but the jimmies are missing."

"At'sa fine!" He rubbed his fat palms together enthusiastically. "No seeka the belly; no ache in the head. You like leetle drink in back though—no?" He peered anxiously at the clock.

I shook my head. "Not right away. Bye and bye. But could I wash? I've been out on a story."

His arms spread expansively. "Sure you wash. Hokay! Bimeby you have leetle drink." He pointed to the door leading to his living quarters. "Go on hopstairs. Con-cetta, she's give you nice cleans towel, you betcha."

"Thanks, Rosy."

I went over to the door and climbed the steep stairs. The bathroom was to my left along a short hall, but as I passed an open door I couldn't help seeing Carmela standing before a dresser mirror, arms raised to her hair, face turned toward the sound of my footfalls. She was bare-armed and bare-footed and her plump figure was sheathed in a short white slip.

She grimaced. "For the love o' mud, where'd *you* pop from? Where does a girl have to go now to dress in privacy?" Her arms came down but she had no false modesty and didn't try to cover up. Instead she walked to the doorway, smiling.

"I should have made the grade a little earlier," I said. "Perhaps I'd have caught you in bed."

"Fat lot of good that would have done you," she retorted without offense. One hand smoothed a hip. "If you like, though, I'll put you on the list. Let me see—you'll

be about sixty-seven when I get down that far."

"Oh, don't bother. I'm sick of climbing in and out of girls' beds."

"What are you roaming up here for, anyhow? You know, in the phone book it says Di Luccio for this address. Wops—but very nice people!"

"I've heard the name. Not very hospitable, though, are they?"

"Hospitable?" She feigned indignation. "My Lord, any morning you wake up in this place you're liable to step on some reporter or rewrite man or photographer, or some other of your bums—yes, and traveling salesmen who forgot to travel." She shook her head. "That old man of mine. New Year's morning, two years ago, there were seven of you tramps laid out around these rooms—in beds, chairs, even on the floor. You guys ought to wear numbers."

I patted her bare arm. "Well, that's a fine tirade, but Rosy said I could wash up."

SHE NODDED. "I thought it was something like that. You've a room across town and you haven't got the strength to make it. Wait'll I get a fresh towel."

She brought a towel and I performed the ablutions. Then I cheated, looked in the cabinet and found a razor and some brushless shave cream. When I went downstairs I felt considerably neater. A few early birds were in, seeking a hair of the dog, and I had Rosy mix me a bourbon and soda. Then I ordered breakfast of scrambled eggs and bacon, toast and coffee, and went into the phone booth.

Art Bentley's voice was cheery. The rewrite man said, "Well, I see you're on the ball again, sonny. Everything okay now with Harry?"

"Oh, sure." I told him. "And we oughta knock their hats off today. How's the story played?"

"Second lead with your by-line. Why? Got anything to freshen it?"

I barked, "By-line? What the hell! Just what I didn't want. And what do you mean, freshen it? The *Globe* and *Despatch* will be tearing their hair trying to cover themselves on that identification."

There was silence for a moment at Bentley's end. Then he asked, "What iden-

tification? Are we talking about the same thing by any chance?"

I began to wonder myself. "We're talking about the torch murder, aren't we? And the story's that the *Press-Bulletin* has identified the victim, isn't it?"

"Identified him? Not in today's paper, Garry. This is just run of the mine stuff. The lead says they've an idea they'll identify him through extensive bridgework. Meanwhile they're hunting for prints—and so on."

Icy ripples had been coursing my spine as he talked. I said grimly, "Flash the board and put me on Dunegan's line. I'll see you later."

"Yuh! Wait a minute."

I hung on, rocking from one foot to the other and almost smelling my own heat. There were clicks and a buzz, then Dunegan's grating voice.

"This is Garry," I snapped angrily. "What happened to my identification story? I called—"

"Oh, it's you!" The sound was like a file being drawn hard against a brick wall. "What the hell's the idea of trying to sell us a yarn you can't back up? And what's the idea of—"

"Wait a minute," I interrupted, "I sent a story, didn't I, that this guy was Gillie Maher?"

"The police say he isn't identified," Dunegan barked. "And what do you mean by having the advertising manager try to loan you out on—"

"And you'd take the cops' word against one of your own men?" I persisted.

"Now don't go twisting things, Garry. You listen to me."

"That sort of makes you and me through, Harry. Maybe the *Globe* will be glad to use a little exclusive like that, pally."

"Now, I'm only saying—"

I hung up, ran the back of my hand over a sweaty forehead, pulled my hat back in place and stepped out of the booth. My half-finished drink waited. I went over and swallowed it. Rosario moved along behind the bar and picked up the empty. He looked at me questioningly.

"Poosh 'em up again—no?"

"Push 'em up again—yes." I grinned. "And from now on, Rosy, my drinks are free for twenty-four hours—under your own house rule."

His forehead corrugated, the stubby nose wrinkled and he glanced at the phone booth, then back at me.

"Garry! Is happened one more time?"

I nodded. "Out! Jobless! Just a bum again. So I'm on the house till this same time tomorrow as an unhappy man who needs to drown his sorrow."

"Dunegan?" Rosario's head cocked to one side and he wore a comical expression of incredulity.

"Yeah! Just had it out with him over the phone."

He spat disgustedly. "That Dunegan. Nexta time he's cummin here, Rosy give him nice beega mickeys finn."

XI

THE SCRAMBLED EGGS were bright yellow and tasty. The bacon was crisp, but not hard, the coffee was hot and strong and the toast had been delivered in a nice shade of tan. There was nothing about the breakfast to make my attention stray, but I was midway in the meal when something behind my forehead unlocked and suddenly I remembered where I'd seen the woman who had stepped from Frenchy's gilded cage with Rhoda Yeager.

I recalled a police lineup three or four years earlier, under the glaring lights, and whatever cop had been putting the night's collection through their paces had told watching dicks in the dark show-up room that she was Queen of the Shoplifters.

I hadn't even been consciously thinking about her, or about Rhoda Yeager, or Frenchy's place for that matter, when memory popped. I had just recalled Dunegan's crack about my getting the advertising manager to loan me out. That must have been old Langerman's channel through which he planned to have me help clear up whatever was bothering him. A bad move, indeed. The *Press-Bulletin* city desk and the business office got along about as amicably as a bigamist's wives.

Well, whether or not Langerman's drag with the business office had been strong enough to put his arrangement through, I was free now to throw in with him anyhow. He had a yarn to tell me. But, no matter what his story was, I had a firm conviction that Gillie Maher's execution had some answer at the Langerman house.

The old man had asked that I come out this morning, so I finished my meal, drained off the coffee and wriggled out of my booth. Just then Rosario came bustling in from the bar side, his moon-face alight with excitement.

"Is Dunegan, Garry," he beamed, waving both hands. "You talk—yes? Maybe you fix."

"Dunegan? What do you mean?"

Rosario swung his head violently from side to side and grimaced, as if overwhelmed by such stupidity. Then he turned sharply and stabbed a finger toward the phone booth. "Dunegan is call up. He's wait now for you."

"Nuts! You tell Harry to go fan himself. No. Tell him you thought I was still eating but I finished and went out. You don't know where." I thought for a moment. "Tell him I said something about going over to the *Globe*." I clapped him on the broad back. "You *do* that, Rosy. Why should I kick twenty-four hours' free drinks out the window?"

An expression of resignation chased the grimace from his face. He turned and hustled back toward the bar. I glanced at my watch. By the time I got out to Kin-kaid Avenue, it would be well after nine o'clock, not at all too early to call on a retired gentleman. Come to think of it, I was retired as well. Maybe he had a chess-board.

The morning was still cloudy but a game fight was being waged by the sun to break through. The air was cool and I kept my window two-thirds down as I rolled along the Dyson Road. I couldn't detect even a faint trace of Helen's perfume with which the hack had reeked only a few hours before. But I wondered if she had cleared out of my room by now. I hoped so.

Jerry piled out of his de luxe garage as I emerged from the Hudson. He walked toward me shaking his head.

"Nothing yet." He thumbed toward the rear of the house. "Kept my ears open at breakfast, but just the usual chatter. None of the family's showed up; no calls or anything."

"Okay! Just watch it. I came out on appointment with Mr. Langerman."

"Well, I'll call up if I find out anything."

"Fine!" I walked down the drive.

NEVERS answered my ring on the first alarm, looking spick and span as a Park Avenue grenadier. Some of the ice had gone out of him. He even ducked his head enough for the motion to be measured with a micrometer.

"Good morning, Mr. Dean."

"There have been better, Nevers," I said, stepping over the sill. "Mr. Langerman and I have an arranged session to beat the gums a bit."

"Beat the gums, sir? He advised me by memorandum that you'd call this morning but he didn't include the time. He hasn't rung yet, but doubtless he'll be down when I tell him you're here. May I have your coat?"

I shucked the coat. "Shall I wait in the same room? Maybe I can manage to find a chair there somewhere."

"Oh, I'm certain you can, sir."

I started for the furniture-cluttered library but remembered something and turned back. "On second thought, might I use the phone again?"

"Certainly, sir."

I went back to the glassed-in booth while he ascended the staircase. There wasn't a sound in this huge house. I pulled out my wad of copy paper, found the phone number I had copied from Helen's hand-bag and called information.

"Would you give me the listing, please, for Circle 4182?" I asked.

"Just one moment." From overhead came muffled stirrings and a faint noise as if a door had slammed at a great distance. I drummed on the shelf in front of me and waited for information to return. The volume of sound above seemed to be increasing and I thought I heard a woman's voice raised. Then the operator came back. "Circle 4182," she intoned, "is the Acme Products Company, Three-Five-Two Harvard Street."

All alone in the booth, I made a face. "What type of business is that, operator?"

"Just a moment." There was a pause. I thought I heard feet running and lifted my head. Then she said, "Souvenirs, novelties, party favors."

"Okay! Thank you."

I made a notation under the scribbled number, stood up and was just opening the door when Mrs. Corbell all but skidded to a stop in front of it. When she saw

me emerge, her eyes almost popped. I looked at her and then glanced upward in wonder. All hell seemed to be loose on the upper floor. Shrieks and wails were bouncing off the walls.

"You!" she blazed, switching my attention back. "What are you doing here? Haven't you caused enough trouble?"

"I don't know," I said, my eyes lifting again toward the racket. "What's the matter? What's going on?"

"Father! He's dead. He's been murdered." One ring-covered hand went to her mouth and she swayed, bringing up against the door. I grabbed her waist, but instantly she straightened and shook me off.

"Let me alone," she cried. "I must phone the police."

"Wait a minute," I snapped. "Who said he'd been murdered?"

Her eyes widened. "Nevers. He just went up to call him."

"Don't touch that phone till I see," I ordered sharply. Then I ran for the staircase and bounded up two at a time. At the turn I could see her hurrying after me.

There wasn't any need to ask where to go. The shrieking had leveled off, but sobbing and generally confused sounds came from the right of the stairs as I hit the top. At the front end of this second-floor hall were five persons, all women except Nevers. One was peering into a front room. The others were wailing around the butler who stood a few feet from the door, adjuring them to quiet. I reached the room and the woman in the doorway straightened and drew back. It was Rhoda Yeager. I passed her and entered the chamber.

OLD MAN LANGERMAN was dead all right. Barely a glance was necessary to establish that. He wasn't visible from the door. He lay almost face down, below the foot of the bed, with the left side of his skull and face crushed and blood-encrusted. Blood had soaked into the rug beneath his head. More blood was spattered around—a lot of it. And beside him lay a heavy brass candlestick with a broad, beveled base, a candlestick smeared with the same dark brown. I glanced at the mantel above a brick fireplace. The matching candlestick stood there at one end.

Then my eyes surveyed the room. The bedcovers were thrown back and a dent was in the pillow, as if the merchant's head had rested there. That slight disorder was actually the only orderly feature in this chamber of violence. Seemingly, it had been thoroughly ransacked.

Dresser and chifferobe drawers were out, their contents scattered about the floor. A closet stood open, the hangers bare and garments in a heap outside. Even a chair and the bed-table had been overturned. The devastation looked too complete, though. It was phonier than a B-picture story. And all four windows were closed. Had Langerman usually slept with them closed or had he received a visitor and so had shut the window, or windows?

This was no time for me to be speculating, however. I left the room. Neither Mrs. Corbell nor her secretary was in sight. Only two women remained with Nevers, middle-aged women, red-rimmed of eye and with fear on their faces. I drew the butler aside.

"I'll notify the police, Nevers, but first have you any ideas?"

"Oh, no! No, sir. I can't imagine, Mr. Dean—"

"What time did Mr. Langerman retire?"

"I don't know, sir. I was off last evening. Usually he retired between nine and ten."

"He's been dead a hell of a long while," I said thoughtfully. Then I looked again into his gray face. "How come this wasn't found out earlier?" I glanced at my watch. "It's nearly 9:45 now."

"Mr. Langerman never wished to be disturbed in the morning, sir, until he rang. Then I would take him his breakfast—"

"Didn't he have a man of his own, a guy all stooped like that?"

"No, sir. I attended him. He wished it that way." Nevers blinked. "And it wasn't unusual for him not to ring before nine or ten."

"All right, then," I said. "Keep your eagle eye on this room till I phone. Don't let a single person in till the cops come. They'll raise blue hell if anything's disturbed."

"Yes, Mr. Dean. But you could phone from there—on the extension."

"Uh-huh! That's what I mean. Don't let anybody touch anything in there."

He nodded and I hustled for the stairs, went below and ducked again into the glassed booth. The next *Press-Bulletin* edition had a 10:15 copy close. Reaching for the receiver, I stayed my hand in mid-air. Why the devil was I calling the *Press-Bulletin*? Garry didn't work there any more! Well, nuts! I didn't work anywhere else, either. Of course—I argued with myself—if it were only a little, *unimportant* story...

When I got through to the city desk, Fred Hite answered. He was Dunegan's assistant across the desk. I said, "Fred, this is Garry. Give me Harry, will you. I've got a story that'll pin his ears back."

"I wish to hell somebody'd pin something on him," Hite growled. "He's yapping at everyone. Hold it. I'll switch you over."

Dunegan's voice rasped. "You, Garry—what's the matter with you?"

"Listen, I haven't time for arguing and neither have you. I've got a yarn that's a honey. R. Eugene Langerman's dead—the merchant."

"He's dead?" Dunegan snorted. "So what? We'll *all* be dead some day, thank Heaven."

"But maybe we won't all be murdered, Harry," I said softly.

"What's that? What you say about murder?"

"Langerman's been murdered," I shot back. "He was hammered to death in his bedroom with a candlestick."

Then he did get excited. "How do you know? Where'd you get it?"

"I'm out here, damn it. The butler just found him. We haven't even called police yet. You've just got time to make the 10:15 deadline, haven't you? Then you'll beat the town."

"Holy smoke! Wait'll I give you rewrite." I heard him bellow for Jimmy Farrell. Then his voice abraded my eardrum again. "I won't forget this, Garry. Great! Great!"

"Oh, that's all right, Harry. I'd do the same for a white man."

AFTER finishing with Farrell, I hung up and called police headquarters. I won Lieutenant Kalminski in B.C.I., a nice guy—calm, no blowoff. He thought I was kidding, and laughed when I told

him he had a new murder on his hands.

"Nobody's told *us* about it, Garry. What's this, a rib?"

"I'm telling you now, my good man, and it isn't a rib. Somebody's beat the hell out of old R. Eugene Langerman and he's dead."

"What?" The poor old eardrum took another licking from that same old word. I cringed and brought the receiver back. "When'd this happen?" he was saying, all the joviality gone. "How'd *you* find out, Dean?"

"Just walked into it, Frank, that's all. Came out here on an appointment with him—and there he was, dead."

"Well, what happened?"

"Hey, what do you guys want, a blueprint? All I saw was—"

"Skip it. I'm shooting somebody right out. I'll notify Captain Harding on this at home." Kalminski's voice was hard and efficient. "And you stay there till you're talked with. Understand?"

"Try and get me out of here. So long."

"And no phone—"

I hung up quickly and emphatically. I wanted him to understand I hadn't heard *that* order. The booth was stuffy and warm. As I left it, mopping my forehead, Mrs. Corbell and Rhoda Yeager advanced along the hall from the foot of the staircase. I figured they'd been waiting.

"Where's Helen?" her sister demanded coldly.

"Helen?" I stalled. "Isn't she here?"

We stared hard at each other. "You know well she isn't here. What have you done with her?"

"Look, Mrs. Corbell," I said patiently. "You took Helen away last night at the Old Plantation." Then I gave her a little smile. "I've an unfinished business matter to settle with a guy on that, come to think of it. Anyhow, Helen came back to the club. I ran her home here and dropped her about quarter of twelve." I pointed along the hall. "She passed through that doorway and the door closed. Then I drove away. Now, what else do you want to know?"

"Where Helen is," she snapped. "If you've done anything to her—"

"This can get very tiresome," I told her. "Your chauffeur was here when we came home. He rode up the driveway

on my running board. Why don't you ask him if that isn't so? He's around."

Her eyes veered uncertainly to the secretary. Then they came back to me but before she could say anything further, a rattling sounded at the front door and we all looked toward it. The door swung open—and in walked Helen.

SHE was beaming. She kicked the door closed, came gliding along the hall and again played her broken record: "Hello, everybody! Surprised?" I sniffed instinctively, but no perfume.

Mrs. Corbell's face was tight. "Where have you been?"

The sister's eyebrows climbed. She still wore the silly grin. "Out for a ride. I got up early."

Mrs. Corbell seized her hard by an arm. "Come upstairs. I want to talk with you."

They started away, but when Rhoda Yeager would have followed, I put out a restraining hand. "And I want to talk with you," I said, smiling.

She glanced down, shook off the hand, then speared me with a glare. "Please don't paw."

"I'm sorry. But let's not talk in hallways."

"Hallways suit me."

"You leave yourself wide open for a crack when you say that, but I still have a thin veneer of breeding. Not thick. Thin."

She folded her arms stubbornly. "Just what are you getting at? About the veneer—I haven't noticed any."

I shrugged. "All right! If you'd rather have it in a hallway, that's fine with me. It's about Frenchy's joint—Place Elegante."

She glanced upward and I didn't miss it. "Perhaps we *had* better go somewhere else."

Turning, she walked toward the library. I followed. When we were in, I closed the door. She sat down but refused my offer of a cigarette.

"Now, what about Frenchy's place?" she asked coldly.

I lighted the cigarette. "How'd you make out gambling there early this morning?"

She reached and did something with

the chignon hair-do, involving a slight neckwriggling. "I didn't gamble."

If she hadn't gambled, the only logical reason for her being on that fourth floor would be to see Frenchy. There were only his office and the game rooms on the fourth. But I didn't voice that. I said, "The woman you were with—the one you got out of the elevator with on Frenchy's floor—she looked familiar to me."

"Did she?"

"Now, where could I have seen her before?"

The secretary watched me with expressionless face. "I wouldn't know, I'm sure."

"Could I ask where you met her?"

"Yes, you could ask. Why not?"

"And you'd answer, of course?"

The fleeting smile was more like a shadow chasing across her face. "No—of course."

I blew out smoke. "Well, that seems to settle that."

"Yes, doesn't it?"

I dredged up a laugh. "Now, let's see if I can surprise you, my black-haired beauty. Funny, but I just remembered about that woman. All by myself, I remembered. She's known as Queen of the Shoplifters." I held up a hand and added hastily, "That's a police tag—not mine."

She thought it over for a moment. "Queen of the Shoplifters. How strange. She never mentioned any title to me." Rhoda cocked her head. "It's rather an attractive—well, tag as you say, isn't it? Don't you think it's rather attractive?"

I nodded and dropped ash into a tray. "Oh, yes—regal. But let's come right down to cases and find out what you were doing at Frenchy's. That's a direct question, by the way."

"Is it? Why, I was having supper there with some friends, after the show. This—this Queen of the Shoplifters, as you call her, came into the party with some of *her* friends. She wanted me to go up and meet your Frenchy. That was nice of her, wasn't it?"

I ground out the cigarette. "Yes, that was fine. And now, how'd you come to be in Mrs. Corbell's employ? Not to be blunt about it."

She smiled sweetly, too sweetly. "How'd I come? Oh, I came in a car. Another friend of mine."

"Very funny, Miss Yeager. I must remember to titter later on. But where did you work before coming here?"

"Before that? Let me think." Her nose wringled prettily. "Oh, yes. I was secretary in a place. I don't seem to remember where."

"I see. Well, now let's swing over to men. I'm sure a pretty doll like you must have a better memory about men. How about it?"

She clasped her hands and smiled. "I think men are interesting, don't you?"

THAT seemed to do better without an answer. I said, "The particular man I mean is one who called here yesterday and sent his card up to you. He had a dimpled chin."

Her head cocked again and the white forehead corrugated. "A dimpled chin? And he sent a card to me? Are you sure that your houses aren't mixed?"

"Very sure."

Then she shook her head slowly. "No man. No card. Now what *else* shall we talk about?"

Into the library filtered the far-off wail of a siren. I turned toward the front windows. When I swung back she had risen.

"Could that be the police?"

"About due," I said. "Now we're about to step into the role of Quiz Kids. We ask no questions but try to answer them. They probably won't ask you about Place Elegante though—not unless I tip them off." I studied her and shook my head. "A nice girl like you hanging around a tough joint like Frenchy's. I should think you'd be more interested in parked cars and a few kisses. Much more fun."

She nodded eagerly. "Oh I *am* interested. I am. But a girl can't be kissed all the time. Is that what you're interested in, too?"

"Well," I said modestly, "I could work up an interest but, shucks, mine's been only sort of a prep school education. I've a lot to learn yet."

She regarded me speculatively. "Of course I couldn't give you a full course of lessons here, but you know I rather like you." She nodded in emphasis. "You're nosey and a meddler, but I rather like you. So I might give you a test lesson."

I grinned and threw out my arms. "Say, that'll be swell. Maybe I'd pass." I still figured it was all kidding.

She pursed her lips, however, and moved over to me with a show of maneuvering into the arms. We closed, her hot mouth came against mine—and then she bit. The grinding pain of her teeth, caught in my lower lip, gagged me so that all I could do was moan. Tears stung my eyes, I felt the flesh give, like the skin of a grape breaks—and then she let go, shoved me away and ran to the door.

My hand had gone quickly up to my face. When it came away, the palm was smeared with blood.

She snapped, "Your lipstick's running, you jerk." Then she yanked open the door and fled.

The siren's wail came again, louder and closer. I reached around to my hip for a handkerchief.

XII

DETECTIVE-SERGEANT SWAIN leaned back in the wing chair, wrestled one ankle up on his opposite knee and placed five fingertips neatly against the other five across his vest. He was a chunky man, sometimes with an aggressive air but with heavy lids that had a disconcerting way of rolling down over his eyes, like a second-act curtain, just when the going was hottest and you expected him to explode.

"So you came out and picked up this Helen Langerman," he said, "and took her in to the Old Plantation, stayed there till a little after eleven and brought her home again?"

"It was 11:05 or so when we left the Plantation," I agreed. "In the car I looked at my watch. It was then 11:10."

He nodded. The ten fingers parted as if in benediction and came together again. "You certainly sock it in, Garry, when you take a doll out for a good time. No dancing, a stinking show like the Plantation's. a couple of drinks—and whiz! Back home, buckety-buckety. Two, three hours of screaming fun." His head barely bobbed toward the library door. "How long you been playing in this kind of league?"

I gave him the Number Five smile—smug, demure, coy and quizzical. "You'd

be surprised, Gabe. I have my little ways."

"And while the girl was up dressing, before you two went out, Langerman colared you and said he wanted some help on something and he'd tell you the whole story in the morning?"

"That's right."

"Well, why be so cozy? Why the hell couldn't he of told you then?"

"The girl came down. From the way he acted, he didn't want to let her in on it. That's how I took it."

"Dammit, Garry, he could of told her to run along and wait somewheres, couldn't he? You should of got it out of him right then."

My shoulders went up in a shrug. "I should dictate to a million bucks or so. He told me he'd spill today, so why not? What's another day?"

"Another day looks damn important just now."

"Doesn't it? But there's no use crying over spilt days, is there?"

Swain didn't appear to hear that. He brought down his hoisted leg and sat tapping the finger ends together reflectively. Finally he said, "You know what I think, Garry? I think somebody overheard him telling you he was gonna crack on something and got to him first. Somebody that was very much interested in him not cracking."

That was half an idea with me, too. I said, "It would depend on what he wanted to tell me, of course." I wondered whether to let the Sergeant in on Langerman's bare mention of Helen, but decided against it. That naturally would move him to dig harder at the girl on all her acts and movements. She might blab about being in my room most of the night, which would be very nice blabbing indeed. I said instead, "If Langerman had only given me some hint or other."

Swain was about to say more but a knock sounded on the closed library door and he called, "Come on in!"

It opened and a uniformed policeman stuck his head through. "Sarge," he said plaintively, "those reporters are raising hell outside."

"Okay!" Swain waved a hand and struggled up from the chair. He said to me, "Well, all right, Garry. That's enough

for now." Then he smiled dourly. "I don't suppose you been on the phone yet to your paper?"

I grinned. "Why, I have to call in every so often, Gabe, and let them know I'm alive and where I am. The same as you cops. It's routine."

"Sure. Routine. So now I get my ears jawed off by these other guys because you win a jump on them."

"Merely more routine, my friend. These other guys are just unlucky. My heart bleeds real bad for them."

That furrowed his brow and he studied me pensively. "By the way," he asked, "how'd you get the gouge under your lip that is bleeding?"

MY HAND went up instinctively. The bite was leaking again. I said, assuming an air of carelessness, "Oh, that! I shaved too close this morning."

He hitched up his belt before speaking again. "Maybe when you shave you should stay further away from yourself." The heavy lids fluttered and I hastened to get away from that line.

I asked, "How about seeing Doc Rush and finding the time Langerman's been dead? I'll need that. He ought to be up there by now."

Swain shook his head emphatically. "Nothing doing. You ain't seeing the Medical Examiner or nobody else exclusive. Now trot along outside and take your place with the rest of that newspaper mob. You got enough gravy already."

"But Gabe!" I gave him the helpless hands. "I can see Helen first, can't I? For only a minute? You wouldn't break up a beautiful friendship?"

He hesitated and hitched again at the belt. "Well, all right, but make it snappy. Tell Finkle I said it was okay. He's in charge up there." Swain grimaced. "Now I got to go out and face them wolves, who every mother's son had lost anyway five editions, to hear them tell it."

We parted in the hall and I climbed the stairs. The second-floor front was in a ferment of activity and there came a bright flash from the old man's chamber as I turned the angle. A police photographer was busy. I found Sergeant Finkle just outside the murder-room door and gave him Swain's message.

"Everybody's been told to stay in their room until called," Finkle said. "You know where her room is?"

"Mister Finkle!"

He grinned. "Well, I only asked, dammit!" A stubby finger pointed back along the hall. "Down there somewhere, Garry. Try 'em all." Then he leered. "But maybe you're bashful about knocking on dames' doors."

"You should have your mouth washed."

I left him and did start trying them all. The first door was ajar but nobody answered my knock. From what I could see through the narrow aperture it appeared to be a sitting-room anyhow. The next knock brought Rhoda Yeager into view. When she saw my face she stopped opening the door, holding it to barely the width of a magazine salesman's shoe.

"Yes?" she intoned.

I stared hard. "I'll return that now, if you want."

"Thanks. I don't happen to want." The door closed with a bang.

The next room produced Mrs. Corbell, the person I really was seeking. Across her features spread an expression of complete disgust.

"My Lord!" she exploded. "Can't I get rid of you even by going to bed?"

"This is hardly the time for such an experiment," I said. "What I came for was to tip you off that I mentioned nothing to the cops—to Sergeant Swain—about your being at the Old Plantation, or what happened. All I said was that I took Helen there and brought her home about 11:45. That happens to be the truth—on both ends. What you care to tell him is your own business."

"You wouldn't be covering up for yourself, of course," she cracked nastily.

I grinned. "Oh, I've been knocked silly before, and usually from behind, at that. But let's get back to business. I didn't tell the Sergeant, either, why I came out here in the first place. I mean about the envelope you handed a con man who managed then to get himself murdered. Would that have anything to do with your father's death, do you think, Mrs. Corbell?"

Gradually her face had been tightening, her lips coming down to a thin, hard line.

"Yeah! I know. It never happened. Well, I told you before—"

your father said you'd admitted the envelope and the man to *him*. You said there was money in the envelope, but he didn't believe that. So now if—"

THE DOOR missed my nose by the thickness of a cigarette paper. I got it on one knee, which dulled the slamming sound but didn't leave me laughing. Nobody at the far end of the corridor seemed disturbed by the sound, however. I rubbed the knee, flexed it gingerly and went limping toward the stairs like a spavined waiter. By the time I reached the main floor the pain had almost gone. Probably the door was soft wood.

An apple-cheeked cop I'd never seen before grabbed me as I was leaving the house. "Hey, where are you going?" he barked. "Nobody gets out of here without orders."

Sergeant Swain was on the veranda, surrounded by the boys. He heard the commotion, looked up and called, "Don't handle him, officer. Your fingers'll drop off. Let him out."

I smiled at the rookie. He looked puzzled but released my arm and stepped back. The gang left Swain and advanced on me, employing dirty words. Swain threw up his hands and walked back into the house.

"Hey, how'd this thing happen from start to finish?" Buck Nelligan of the *Despatch* demanded, when these recriminations began to die down.

I gave them all I thought they should know, including my taking Helen out the evening before and her father's request that I return in the morning.

"So you're in society now?" Obie O'Brien of the *Post* chuckled. "Taking out the little gold-plated babies!"

"Yeah—and whad'ya use for dough—or do they pick up the checks?" Rudy Gavona of the *Examiner* jibed.

I patted him on the shoulder in fatherly fashion. "You, too, work hard and faithfully for your employer and some day you'll be rich and a success like me. You'll be able to mix with the best people."

O'Brien's cameraman, Bert Hume, set his box on the veranda ledge and snorted, "Cripes, this Dean guy'll be wiping his nose on a handkerchief by next year."

I paid him off with a smirk. My office

had sent Eddie Laconte out with the photographers and I took Eddie aside.

"All that stuff I've just gone over was phoned a long time ago," I told him. "You don't have to bother with it. But you'll have to get the Medical Examiner's end, and anything else, if you're sticking here. I'm blowing."

He looked at me curiously. "Why?" Then he grinned. "Oh, the tangle with Harry? Hell, that's all water over the dam. You know Harry."

"A little bit." I gazed around. "Anything been doing outside while Swain had me impounded in there?"

"Oh, yes. I phoned in. They found a single footprint under the old guy's window. A deep one, like somebody hung from the window and dropped—one foot in the dirt, the other on grass."

My eyes ran up the front of the yellow brick pile. "What the hell! Allowing for this veranda, that would be a drop of—well, it wouldn't be too tough for a guy hanging by his hands at that. And the ground was soft. It was rainy."

"He come down in a bunch of bushes. They're broken. The print was under one of them in the soft ground. It isn't clear on account of it getting scuffed by the guy's foot probably while he was getting his balance. We all got a shot of the print, though."

"Then he couldn't have used a ladder," I suggested. "He'd have come down it again—unless somebody took the ladder away meanwhile, which doesn't make sense."

Eddie shook his head. "No ladder marks!" he said laconically. "They give it an All-American going-over. So they think the guy walked in somewheres, or got in a window maybe, then did a hand-drop when he found he'd killed the old man and a bit of haste was behooved."

"Some day," I told him, "let me remind you to try this English stuff. It's the latest thing. Even city editors like Dunegan will have to come to it." I looked down along the drive. "Where are you phoning from? They won't let you in the house."

HE PUNCHED a thumb over one shoulder. "Coin box back in the garage. I grabbed that off with a five-spot

to Jerry Flavin, the chauffeur." Eddie turned and pointed down over the lawn toward the granite wall. "The *Globe* and *Despatch* beat it across the street," He chuckled. "Know what?"

"Not till you tell me."

"The flunkey over there was very nasty high-nose. Couldn't use the phone. So they pooled eleven bucks and greased him. Hah! If they'd only asked for the old lady, they could have had it for no. Every time they go over to call in, she's draped around their necks, hanging on every word. She hasn't got such a boot out of scandal since Aaron Burr shot Alexander Hamilton."

I grinned. "A little before my time. That was one Dunegan must have covered. Well, keep the faith. I'm shoving off. If Harry asks for me, you don't know from nothin'."

"Except you're gone somewhere?"

"Except that I've gone—and not even somewhere. You just don't know."

"Check!"

I moved down the steps, followed the path to the driveway and walked to the Hudson. Instead of leaving immediately, however, I went to the side door of the garage and pounded. Jerry came down and opened up. He was sober-faced as he stepped outside.

"Good Lord, Mr. Dean, isn't this awful? And right after what you said last night. It seems almost prophetic—like putting the finger on something, doesn't it?"

I shrugged. "Now don't go superstitious on me, Jerry. You're more important than ever in my book. Don't suppose the gum-shoe cops have had time to question you yet?"

"Not yet. I been expecting them any minute. Thought when you knocked it was them." He motioned toward the house. "They'll have to put everybody through the jumps, won't they?"

"Naturally. Did you hear anything at all in the night?"

His head waggled. "Me? I sleep like a log." His thumb went over one shoulder. "They hadda put the house phone-bell right side of my bed to wake me when they want late service."

"So long as you can sleep, brother, you're okay."

He drywashed his hands. "But, boy, am I nervous! Traffic cops are bad enough with

us guys—but these Sherlock cops! What have I got to tell them?"

I laughed. "Tell them the truth, that's all. And remember—if you run across anything I ought to know, get right on that phone number."

"You bet! I mean I'll do that, sir."

I got into the Hudson and drove away, a little worried over what Mrs. Corbell might say to Swain, but a hell of a lot more worried as to what Helen could pour into his receptive ear. And I half regretted not letting him know about the check which Langerman had given me, though the check wasn't likely to turn up during the investigation. Even if it did, I soaced myself, it was easily explained as a retainer. Still, I felt sort of funny over having cashed a dead man's paper.

I had turned out of Kinkaid and was headed back for town when a black car with a winking blue light came clipping along the Dyson Road from the opposite direction and a siren screamed in the morning air. Then the car went whooshing past and was gone, dwindling in my rear-view mirror. It looked like Captain Harding's bus but I couldn't be sure.

At a filling station I pulled up to the pumps, told the wizened attendant to put in ten gallons and check oil and water, then went into his office and called my hotel.

"This is that sterling character on the third floor who lends tone to your fleabag establishment," I told Alice, the day girl. "Any calls for me—or maybe complaints?"

"Oh, hello, Garry! No. Everything's quiet and respectable—a normal condition when you're not in."

"Thanks! I also speak well of you to everybody. Listen, tell Ralph I've got one of his master keys. Forgot to leave it when I went out."

"He knows," she said dryly. "Gertrude, the laughing lass, didn't lose any time telling him. So he asked me about it."

"Well, I mislaid my own last night but I've found it again."

I could hear her giggle. "You pal around with the most irresponsible jills. Every latchkey that I'm loaned I have to give back pronto. No repeats."

"I have scarcely time," I said, "to run over your colorful career. I'm a very busy man. So long, Cleopatra!"

So that was that, I thought upon hanging up. Helen had slipped out of my room without being spotted, else there would be talk around the Juanita Arms and Alice would have given me a tipoff. She was a brainy number.

The attendant had his head under the hood. As I came alongside he withdrew it and rubbed both hands on the seat of his jumper. "Two bucks forty, Jack, including a quart of oil. Say, do you know you got a drip?"

"I had one last night—no fooling," I said, fumbling out the fee. Then I grinned. "Oh, you mean the car!"

His smooched face ran into wrinkles. "Naturally, the car. What you think I meant? You better get them connections tightened or she'll be heating up on you. A wonder she hasn't heated up already." He pocketed his cash and eased the hood down.

"You don't know the half of it, brother," I murmured, sliding behind the wheel.

XIII

THE TALL, SKINNY KEEPER of the Rogues Gallery scratched his naked, freckled scalp, looking very thoughtful. He swallowed once and his Adam's apple ran up the scrawny neck and dropped back again like a pop-fly hit with a nickel ball and Junior's two-bit bat. With feathers and talons, Lex Halleck could have passed for a vulture.

He said, "Queen of the Shoplifters? Hell, Garry, they've been an army of those, only I was trying to think of some particular one looking like you said." He became pensive again, but gave up and shook his head. "Nope! Some dame builds herself up a booster record and if she's any looker at all, why right away the dicks tag her a queen. It's like king of this, or king of that, only naturally a king isn't female."

"I get your point," I assured him. "Well, guess I'll have to look over the exhibits. No other way out." I gave him the swerve. I might as well, because I'd already given him one lie and had been swerving almost everybody else. "I think I'll recognize the name when I see it."

One long-fingered hand went up to scratch his jaw as he shuffled away. I

lighted a cigarette, went over to a display table where witnesses inspected photos and turned on the light. After a while he came back with a pile of them, which he placed in front of me.

"How come your sheet's hipped all of a sudden on a special article about shoplifters?" he asked. "Hasn't been no epidemic lately."

"The office is probably starving for features, Lex. Mine not to reason why; mine just to do or die."

"You said it. You and me both." He dusted both hands carefully and went back to his desk.

Under the bright light I began cruising the photos. I had gone through probably two dozen when I stopped and stared at the ugliest woman I'd ever laid an orb upon. She had a long, horsey face with protruding cheekbones; thick fleshy lips; eyes that were deep in their sockets; a thick, wrestler's neck, and stringy hair drawn severely back and not helping matters at all. A puss that men would leave home for—if *she* were in the home.

I must have uncorked some exclamation because Lex called over, "What's the matter? Find a friend or something?"

"Heaven forbid!" I called back. "Not this one, I hope." I turned the photo over and read the pasted slip:

Katharine Dribley, alias Katharine Doble, alias Karen Doble, alias Mary or Anna Riley, alias Kate the Kisser. File Card #72511.

Lex had left his desk. When I flipped the photo face up again, he chuckled over my shoulder. "What you might call a cover girl."

"Right! One that should be *kept* covered."

"I remember that phiz coming in here. Not that we ever had her. Only the pictures and a wanted notice. New York, Baltimore and Indianapolis, I think, were after her a few years back but haven't heard nothing since. Maybe they nabbed her. I dunno."

"She must have had that acromegaly disease," I said. "It distorts the ace, neck, feet and hands."

He grunted. "She's sure got something, but it ain't looks by a damn sight."

I placed Kate the Kisser in the finished pile and continued sifting. Eleven more photos down I stopped again. The woman who had been at Frenchy's place with Rhoda Yeager was gazing at me somberly from the glossy print. The slip on the reverse side of this one read:

Joyce L. Stevens, alias Stephenson, alias Fanchon Brunelle, alias Mrs. Walter Brunelle. File Card #12,-413.

"Don't seem like I remember her even yet," Lex said musingly. He sighed. "Well, they come and go."

I added her names to my wad of copy paper, took names from a few more photos as a blind and told him I had enough. "Thanks for the use of the arena."

The curator of this inartistic gallery leaned over to scoop up his exhibits. "That's okay, Garry."

I KEPT AWAY from B.C.I. and the press room, leaving headquarters by a side door. At the corner I bought a *Press-Bulletin* second edition and chuckled when I studied the front page. They were leading with the Langerman murder. The drop-head, under an eight-column streamer, reminded that this was the second murder in two days. Then the two stories read out, in parallel columns, and Dune-gan had decided after all to run the Gillie Maher identification. Only the Langerman piece carried my by-line, however. I breathed easier that the identification had been left anonymous.

This called for a mild celebration, so I walked around to Kolrain's. I ordered a bourbon and soda and was wondering what to do next, puzzling over Rhoda Yeager's curious company at Place Elegante and checking back through incidents of the morning, when Dutch, the bartender, set the highball in front of me and picked up my bill.

"Day off, Garry?"

"Uh-huh! I'm working all right. Don't you see me sweating?"

He grinned. "Any time." Ringing up the drink, he slapped down my change. "I hear they got another murder this morning—that Langerman of the Langerman store."

I unfolded the second edition and shoved it around so he could read. "We beat the town on it."

His head raised. "So *you* were there when they found him. And out with his daughter last night? Sa-a-ay!" He whistled.

"Just a little social tone to the story, Dutch," I said modestly.

He read on, then made a sharp clucking noise and his head came up again. "It says Langerman's chauffeur was at the fights last night. Hell, Garry, I took those in, too." He grinned broadly and tapped the paper. "Don't see nothing in your piece about me being there."

"You ought to work for guys that get themselves murdered. Then it might be important where you were."

"You said something. Anyway, it was one pip of a brawl. That Bercovi and Tiger Martin whaled the hell outa each other. What you guys got in about it?" He began flipping pages.

When I tasted the drink, my punctured lip stung. I used the far side of my mouth and watched Dutch devour the fight story, but my thoughts went drifting back to Gillie Maher and his pal in the bank, and to the sight of Dimple-Chin stepping briskly through the Langerman portals as if he owned the place, by gad.

Dutch finished his reading, switched the paper around in front of me and punched it with a gnarled forefinger. "Look, Garry! There's the kayo in the seventh—curtains and little birdies for the Tiger. Get a load of that. A lulu—eh? Just a little before, he come up on a nine-count and belted Bercovi halfway through the ropes."

My eyes fell idly on the sports page and its five-column cut. The flashlight photo had been snapped from some cameraman's hoisted hands at a few feet above ring-floor level. It showed Tiger Martin just landed on the canvas. His arms were extended and his face screwed up as if he'd swallowed a bad oyster. Above him, a tousle-haired Bercovi stood in a half pirouette.

"Looks like an uppercut," I commented. "Right in the whiskers."

"It come from his knees," Dutch agreed happily.

I heard him only vaguely. My gaze had wandered from affairs in the ring and were glued on what the lens had picked up

beyond the opposite apron. The arena fans were on their feet, staring intently or with mouths open and arms waving. The elevated hand of one customer was bound in white and even in the newspaper cut I recognized Nick Zulturo, the Place Elegante dealer who had been in Frenchy's office. And standing beside him was a man whose face seemed to be that of Jerry, the Langerman chauffeur, eyes popping, clothes askew, figured cravat flapping.

"Yeah, man!" Dutch exclaimed. "I see a lotta scraps in the old place but that took the cake. Lightweights put on the best shows, don't you think, Garry?"

I looked up and the words finally registered. "Lightweights? Oh, sure, sure!" Folding the paper, I shoved it toward him. "All yours, Dutch. Time for me to be pushing on, I guess."

BACK at the Hudson, I climbed in with the intention of visiting the Langerman scene again and trying to get Rhoda Yeager to one side, when I could spring Joyce Stevens on the secretary, or Joyce Stephenson, or Fanchon Brunelle, or Mrs. Walter Brunelle—and see if Rhoda reacted. But the Acme Novelty Company popped back into my head inexplicably and I thought I might as well take a gander at the place.

Harvard Street wasn't far from the *Press-Bulletin* office, a thoroughfare of dusty-windowed, half-tenanted blocks given over to printing establishments, feather and millinery-findings houses, greeting-card, lampshade, toy and doll, window-shade and cap-making firms. During prohibition there had been a couple of speakeasies in Harvard Street lofts. I knew the location very well.

Three men were unloading packing cases from a truck in front of 352 Harvard, trundling them across the walk into a freight elevator. I strolled past on the other side, sizing up the place. The Acme outfit was on the second floor, its windows as grimy as the rest. A small black sign, with gold letters, extended beyond the windows; another, smaller sign was at the street entrance.

I crossed over, walked back and turned into the building. The stairs led straight up, with no passenger elevator. There

were three doors up there but Acme had the whole floor. A dim bulb burned in the fusty hallway. I opened a door which said ENTRANCE and was surprised to find the display room so small. Somewhere at the rear a bell tinkled and a dapper little man with rimless glasses came through a door in the back partition.

He weaved through the counters and said, "How do. What can I do for you, sir?"

I waved a vague hand at the display. "About these things. I want to price some favors and gimcracks and stuff for a party."

His smile was meant to convey a faint pity for me; the smile and a light head-shake. "We wholesale. Everything's sold in quantity." His own hand swept toward the display. "These are only for show. Now you could go—"

"But this is a party for a lot of people—several hundred," I pressed, thinking fast.

"Oh, but you wouldn't want the same favor for all." The tolerant smile was still on his pan. "You're not a dealer, of course."

So I test-hopped him. "No. Miss Helen Langerman sent me here."

I really hadn't expected results, but the smile almost slid off. His mouth quivered and when he caught the smile again, it was more of a smirk. "Helen Langerman, Helen Langerman," he said musingly, as if trying to recollect. He couldn't make his eyes behave, though. They were switching from my belt-line to my face and back again like tiny ping-pong balls bobbing in a spouting fountain. I thought he might have seen the murder story and was a little upset that any member of the victim's family would take time out to show interest in a party, even somebody else's party. Still, that didn't explain his apparent discomfort either. She could have referred me to the place long before any murder.

Finally he said, "I don't place her, sir. There must be some mistake." He started to move off. "If you'll wait just a minute, please."

I waited in the aisle, looking over the paper hats, the paper snappers, ratchet noise-makers, gaily-painted tin horns, innocent-appearing dribble-glasses and rub-

ber cigars. I had my back toward the partition door when I heard it open again. I turned—and Dimple-Chin was approaching between the display tables.

XIV

HE WALKED AS IF he were wading through deep snow, inclined forward, with his shoulders, wide as a Notre Dame fullback's, ahead of the under-carriage. He was in shirtsleeves and wore plastic suspenders of amber shade to hold up wide-girthed pants.

He came into my aisle and stopped. "You say a party named Helen Langerman sent you here?"

I nodded. "Why, yes. She recommended this as a place to get some favors for a party." I noticed the dribble-glasses again and had a new flash. "An April Fool Party."

There was no sign that he recognized me as the Langerman visitor to whom he had nodded absently only the previous day. But he wasn't smiling. He said, "Nobody here seems to know any Helen Langerman."

The partition door opened again and a third party stuck his head through. He sang out, "Okay! The man says that's it."

His nod was barely perceptible and his eyes never left me. "I'm sure she gave the name as the Acme—" I started to say but never finished the sentence.

His left hand shot out, grabbed my topcoat lapels and jerked me toward him. "You're a lousy liar. You're that fresh newspaper guy." Suddenly he let go and punched me on the sore lip with a hand that felt like a small anvil.

I went spinning along the aisle, bounced off a counter and brought up with my back to the wall, beside the entrance door. One hand went instinctively to my mouth, and I shook my head to clear it.

I said angrily, "I wouldn't do that again if I were you."

He had been standing on the same spot in the aisle, a twisted grin on his pan, but he lurched and started after me. I came off the wall, swept the nearest box from the counter and threw its contents into his face. Then, while he swam through his own paper hats, I stepped in and hooked him twice, a left high on his head

and a right to the belly. Roaring with rage, he came back swinging. I rolled with his right, taking it on the shoulder, but stopped a mule's kick on my chest, staggered and recovered barely in time to dodge the knee he brought up for my groin.

There wasn't much room for footwork in the narrow aisle and this grizzly had too much weight for me to close in. But I thought I might chop him down and began feeding lefts. His grunts and curses filled the room until I popped him on the mouth. I felt a twinge all the way up my arm, but he began to unhinge. Then, as I cocked my right for a sleeper, I heard behind me a sound like the door opening, I half turned—and night fell.

WHEN I drifted back to consciousness, I thought I'd been thrown into a freight car but I seemed to be blind. Though my eyes were open, I could see nothing but blackness. Under me was irregular motion and my mouth held an odd, sweetish taste, like some medicine I'd been dosed with when a kid. I tried to remember the medicine's name but it eluded me. For some reason that made me angry and I struggled to sit up. I couldn't sit up, however, and I couldn't move my hands, which were crossed on my stomach. They felt like two lead weights. I began puzzling over that. Then it didn't seem to matter, because I was slipping back dreamily into blackness and pretty soon everything faded again.

Next I was being carried uncomfortably. Perhaps it was the bouncing motion that brought me around. I was still horizontal but somebody had me by the legs and somebody else under the arms on either side. I heard the snarling and popping of a suddenly accelerated engine, then clashing gears. A heavy vehicle seemed to be laboring on a grade. By this time I knew I wasn't blind. Stars, millions of them, studded the canopy above.

I felt numb and stiff, as if I'd been asleep for a week, and the sweet taste still cloyed. I began to wonder again about that.

"Then somebody gasped, "Gee, put this lunk down a coupla minutes. He weighs a ton. My arms are busting."

The jouncing stopped abruptly. I felt

myself being lowered unevenly. Next I dropped and whacked the ground. The drop may not have been more than a few inches but it was unexpected and felt like falling off a porch. I gasped and clenched my teeth to avoid crying out. Not that it would matter, in all probability, but I didn't want these bearers to know I was awake.

My hands were still bound at the wrists and crossed at my belt but the legs were free. I wiggled the toes experimentally and cautiously drew my legs apart under cover of the dark.

Somebody laughed softly and a voice said, "Chappie's in swell condition. Right in the pink. How's the arms now, Chappie?"

A light flickered at my right, in the direction of the voice, dulled and flickered again, but I dared not turn my head. Blackness closed in once more and I smelled burning tobacco.

Then a deeper voice complained, "Why can't we make this louse walk? He oughta be out of it now. Hell, it's six or seven hours."

The first voice said. "Yuh, but Steve gave him an awful belt of that stuff, enough to knock over a horse."

I heard a locomotive whistle not far off and felt a faint vibration. On the night air came dull rumblings of a train. From the sound it seemed to be a heavy freight. The whistle mourned again.

Though I was straining and working my wrists, their bindings wouldn't loosen. With hands and feet free I might have a chance for escape by taking off suddenly and getting lost out there in the blackness. However, I was on my back and by the time I could roll over with hands bound, rock up to my knees, gain my feet and get going, these three lads would be draped all over me like the mortgage on a development cottage. And probably I'd be knocked kicking again. The thing was beginning to be habit-forming.

Finally the voice which had jibed at Chappie came out of the dark. "Well, whad'ya say, you guys? They'll be wondering what the hell happened to us. They couldn't help hearing the truck stop and then go away."

"Okay, Eli!" came an answer. "Ain't far in now, anyway."

A small button of orange fire arced across my vision, giving off sparks. One of the group had flicked a cigarette away. Feet shuffled closer, then were scuffing around my head.

"Let's see if this tramp ain't snapping out of it," the captor called Eli suggested. A match flared. "Go over him, Jigger."

Instinctively with the light I had snapped my eyes shut. There was more shuffling and I felt a hand on my cheek. Fingers slipped around my right eyelid. I rolled both eyeballs as far back as I could strain them. Rigid, and holding my breath, I fought an urge to blink as he held the lid back.

The light went out, my eyelid was released. Jigger grunted, "Naw! He's colder'n a Nova Scotia halibut. Might as well pick the bum up again."

ONCE MORE I was lifted, not too gently, and went swaying horizontally through the country night. I'd have given much for a cigarette and a drink—even water. The footing seemed rough. My carriers stumbled and cursed. I could see trees massed on my left but nothing except sky to the right. Then the trees gave way to a more solid mass outlined against the stars and the front man, soon afterwards, kicked against something that sounded like wood.

"The steps," he growled. "Why the hell don't they give us some light?"

As if it were a signal, the darkness suddenly was pierced. Appearance of this shaft of light was accompanied by a creaking noise. A door evidently had been opened. I was tilted and feet clumped up the few steps. My legs rode high and blood rushed down to my head, making me slightly dizzy. I heard strained and puffy breathing. Then I was leveled off.

"Stick him in at your right," a deep voice growled. It sounded like Dimple-Chin but I didn't dare open my eyes and peek. "Is he still out?" the same voice asked.

"Yeah—he's—still—out," panted the carrier who had kidded Chappie. "On—that—stuff—he'll—be—out—a—week."

"Dump him there on the bed. If he doesn't come around, we'll bring him around."

My front carrier stumbled. I was bump-

ed against the door jamb, swung off and felt myself turning. A few more and I got another rap, but was hardly in a position to protest. After that I was juggled around and my breath left me, as in a suddenly dropping elevator. I fell—bounced and came to rest. I'd been dumped on the bed.

"Gee, I don't wanna do that again in a hurry," panted Chappie.

"Sleep, my pretty one," Jigger chuckled.

"I'd sure like to ask him like a gentleman to move over," Chappie said wistfully. "Could use a little shuteye myself right now."

"How about those loose feet?" asked the heavy voice that I thought was Dimple-Chin's. "Better tie them up."

Jigger demurred. "Hell, Steve, he ain't gonna walk out of here. He'll stay put for hours. He ain't as much as coughed."

"Well, all right," Steve said reluctantly, "but we don't want to lose him now."

"We won't lose him—don't worry." He chuckled. "Maybe we won't even have to bother with him no more. You know—the long bye-bye."

They went out and I was left alone in the room. It wasn't in darkness, however. Light came from the small front hall, I noted after a few minutes when I raised my head cautiously and peered around. This was a small, square chamber and the bed upon which I lay was no more than a cot. Across from my door was a narrow staircase, painted white except for banister and newel post. They were a mahogany hue.

I began to work again at the bindings holding my wrists. The wrists were sore and undoubtedly chafed. But my efforts made no impression on the fastenings, while the best I could do in straining my fingers back was to touch the lashings with barely the end of one little finger. They were rawhide thongs. Even my teeth made no impression on them. From somewhere in the house I heard rumblings, as if several people were talking in a far room.

CAREFULLY, I drew up one knee. It seemed all right but the cot gave out a labored squeak. I tried the other leg and that was all right, too. I had just eased this second leg back when a board

creaked in the hall and a shadow fell against the door jamb. I dropped back and stiffened only a split second before a silhouette appeared in the doorway. The man stood watching for about ten of my heartbeats. Then he struck a match. Through half-closed lids I saw smoke ascend. Then the flare suddenly snuffed out and the man turned and vanished.

I waited several minutes before daring to ease my legs off the cot. The damn thing complained, and while they were thin, feeble complaints, I paused, holding my breath, after each one. Finally my feet were on the floor, I was sitting up, and then I was standing. But my hands were still bound, I ached all over like a sore tooth, and my knees shook under me, whether with weakness or because of nerves I couldn't tell.

There were two windows in the room, one at the right of my cot, the other beside its head. I raised my hands to the joining of the sashes at this window, feeling for a catch. There was none. Awkwardly, because pressure upward was on the knuckles, I tried to raise the bottom sash. It was immovable and apparently nailed. Circling the cot quickly, I tried the other window with the same result. Whoever corked off in this room had a prejudice against night air. Just then I desired plenty of it.

I knew I had to work fast but dreaded stepping into the lighted hallway. Yet I couldn't remain where I was. Those boys had considerably more than a casual interest in me, but my interest in them, at the moment, was well in the lower brackets. Later, perhaps—not now!

Nobody was in the hall. I gave it half an eye, then an eye and a half, a head and both eyes. The front door was in plain view only a few steps to the left. It had a bolt and the bolt had been shoved home. This place was laid out much like a Cape Cod cottage and the stairs went right up to the second floor as soon as you were in. Across the hall was another doorway, leading into an unlighted room.

Drawing a deep breath, I sneaked out into the light, took swift steps across a hooked rug to the front door, drew the bolt and then, with both hands, maneuvered a grip on the knob and drew back softly. The door gave perhaps a quarter

inch before balking. I jerked at it impatiently. No more give. It was locked. The old-fashioned keyhole was there—but no key.

Grinding my teeth, I flitted into shelter of the other room and stood listening. Nobody came tearing out. Nobody appeared even to be alarmed. But apparently I wasn't any better off than I'd ever been. There was half-light in this room, too, diffused from the hall. The place seemed to be a sitting-room. I could make out a small, round table in the center, with a shadowy lamp on a white doily; a short, old-fashioned couch, several chairs and a stuffed magazine rack. The three windows here were like the others I had tried, hard and tight.

I cursed the bonds at my wrists. Had my hands been free, I would have chanced a crash-out through one of the windows, coat over my head, but with an unprotected head and face any such attempt would be silly. Even my hat had vanished.

SOMETHING had to be done, and fast. One of these lads was bound to come out for another peek into my cell. Dimple-Chin—if it *had* been his voice I heard at the door—was due to be concerned with me shortly. He had said so himself, very unpleasantly.

A window could be kicked out, but that involved several kicks, with valuable lost time. Meanwhile the alarm would have been raised and, in my awkward state, I'd probably be eased barely halfway through the gap before being nailed. Or, if I did get wholly through, there was no telling into what I might dive, nose first, out there in the darkness. One scheme might work, though. It was only a bare possibility, but hell—I thought—I wouldn't be much worse situated even if it did fail.

My eye picked out a ladderback chair. It looked not too heavy. I tiptoed across the room, came up to it from the rear, reached over and found I could lift it fine by grasping the lowest of three cross-pieces, just above the rush seat, and balancing its top against my stomach. Even working cross-handed, I had an excellent battering ram, comprising the chair's rungs and four legs.

I moved over toward the entrance with the chair. The window nearest the front

door showed plainly from the hall. It couldn't be missed by anybody coming along the hall from the rear. I knew a beautiful bellybump was due me but I backed off, grasped the ladderback hard and then ploughed for the glass.

The crash should have been heard as far away as Belle City — however far that might be.

XV

THE LADDERBACK JAMMED part-way through the shattered window, which wasn't in my sudden plan at all. This hole had to be navigable to be impressive. But even as I wrestled with the damn chair, it suddenly was free. I gave it a final shove and it went through and toppled into darkness. Meanwhile, the house was filling with shouts and cries. While only a couple of seconds, perhaps, had been lost in dislodging my battering ram, feet were pounding in the hall as I snake-wriggled behind the short couch and hugged the floor in a tight ball.

Somebody was yelling for somebody else to go out the back way. There were demands for lights, bellows about the smashed window, angry recriminations and bitter retorts—all in a jumble, identifiable only in fragments and by tones. No more lights came on and all I could see, peeking beneath the couch, was feet milling around at the entrance to the sitting-room. There was confusion at the front door and suddenly it jerked open. The feet all vanished over the sill, like weird things, into the night.

I wormed out from behind the couch, slipped hurriedly to the doorway, still hugging the dark, inhaled deeply and then whirled around the jamb and went knifing up those stairs like an eager salmon fighting upstream to spawn. With every step I dreaded to hear an exultant shout that would reveal my ruse and bring the wolf pack after me.

The only hunting cries, however, were those outside. I came into more darkness on the upper floor and wondered now what the hell to do. I had developed no plan except to hide away until I could free my hands, but where to hide and how to get them free were still acute problems.

Up there it was black as a traitor's soul.

I hardly dared turn on a light, even for an instant, to find some rough-edged metal object—if I could locate the lights. I had no jackknife in my pockets, though I could have been able to reach one by considerable maneuvering. There might be razor blades in the bathroom, but I didn't know yet where the bathroom was and I'd have to find a blade and then devise some means of wedging it while I sawed at my bonds. I wondered about these guys who were supposed to have gnawed through lashings. Evidently they hadn't worked with rawhide. All I had from my effort was a bad leathery taste to mix with that cloying sweetness which still lingered without identification.

With feet probing cautiously and hands raised to protect my sore face against snubbing a half-open door, a sharp corner or some other out-jutting object, I began shuffling through the dark. I came to a doorway, groped my way through and began inspecting the place by touch. Cries of the hunters came filtering into the room but soon, I feared, they might have a rush of brains and decide that maybe I hadn't gotten away so easily and would search the house.

I stumbled against a bed and almost fell on it. This one was made up, in contrast to the bare cot on which I had been dumped. I could feel covers which hung below the mattress. Inching around the bed in the dark, I decided it was about a three-quarter.

After bruising one thigh and knocking both shins, I found a closet but it was narrow and small. No sense trying to hide in there. The first person to open the door would spot me instantly. There were hooks, though, in the closet and in feeling them I came upon one with a ragged underside.

In a fever of haste and excitement I raised the wrists, pressed against this hook and began rubbing the thongs back and forth. The position, with both arms elevated, was strained and awkward and soon they began to ache. I stopped rubbing and tested the rawhide against a cheek. The bindings didn't feel frayed at all. With my fingertips I groped for the hook again and groaned in disappointment. Where the rough spot had been was now smooth. Evidently it had been merely paint, dribbled and hardened. Silently but fervently

I cursed the dribble and the hook and my luck.

THEN I began sniffing suspiciously. For some time I had been vaguely aware of a faint and elusive, but somewhat familiar scent. It was stronger in the closet, though the few garments hanging there were rough and masculine to my touch. The scent, I was certain now, was the same as Helen Langerman's perfume. Could these garments belong to a friend of Helen's upon whom some of her lavishly-used man-bait had rubbed off? Then I figured it was silly. Who could tell how many girls used that same stuff? Probably there were thousands. But I wondered if they all bathed in it, as Helen overdid.

I began trying the windows. None had a catch but none was nailed down, either. I could move the lower sashes. There were four windows, all opening into black space. No veranda, no porch, no roof of any sort from which an agile party might shinny to the ground in comparative safety. Anyhow, I wasn't equipped to perform porch-shinnying—not until I got my hands free so I could grip. Then I paused. There might be an idea, at that. Why not get out atop the front porch and trust that chance would provide some sharp nail or other means of severing my bonds. At least I'd be out in the nice, fresh air. I could use some.

The grinding of an automobile starter interrupted my launching of that plan. The engine caught, roared at high throttle and was cut down. Voices of the hunters had been growing louder until the engine drowned them. I peered through the window.

Lights suddenly stabbed the night and swung to the right. A car was leaving and from my window I saw that the house was set in fifty feet or so from a narrow road, into which the machine had been driven and along which it was bumping.

Then I heard the thump of boots. My hunters were returning to the house and were on the porch steps, or the porch itself. Feeling very silly, I crossed to the side of the bed farthest from the door, got down on my knees, then on my face and wriggled on my back because the hog-tied hands were hurting under pressure of my body.

The bed was low-slung, probably of a cheap type, and sharp points of the coil springs clipped me on the head as I struggled to reverse position. It took a few seconds then for light to dawn. Sharp edges! I reached up and investigated with the overworked fingertips. The bedspring was lousy with sharp points where the coils ended. Also it was full of dust, but not as much as before, for much of it sifted down into my eyes.

Desperately I began rubbing the thongs on one of the points but they kept slipping off or snubbing. So I tried calming down to a frenzy and doing the thing systematically. This worked out to a matter of hooking the thongs on a point and then jerking sharply toward me, in hope of shredding the tough leather. One disadvantage of the system was that each time thong and spring-end parted company, a little musical *ping* resulted. Not that it mattered right away. The volume of sound below was considerable. Under other circumstances I might have been amused at the heated squabble, but not at the moment.

I was certain of Dimple-Chin's voice then. He was bellowing almost as angrily as he had bellowed during our battle between the display counters. Except that words were riding the tide of his noise this time.

"You low-life nitwits," he thundered. "Why didn't one of you keep an eye on him? I said to tie him up good, you lousy, no-good—"

"But Steve, he was out like—"

That sounded like Chappie's plaintive voice. Steve cut him off sharply. "Shut up! Now you dopes have blown everything up. Now we'll have to get the hell out of here fast."

So Dimple-Chin's name was Steve. I snubbed the thongs doggedly as I registered that—caught them on an edge, jerked hard, fumbled back to the coil-end, caught them again and jerked. Testing on the cheek brought a wave of elation washing over me. The leather had a distinct rough and frayed feel.

THEN I ceased operations temporarily, and in some dismay. Not because I heard a woman's voice drift up the stairway out of the quarrel, but because of the words being used. She had a high-

pitched voice, but it wasn't hurried or excited.

The woman said, "Well, supposing he didn't leave the house at all? Did you ever think of that?"

"What are you—crazy?" It was Steve-of-the-Dimple again. "Hell, he went out that window like a rabbit and you know it. Don't tell me different."

"The chair was still under the window—right square under it," she declared calmly. "If I'd gone through there and felt the chair below, I'd have kicked it away so I wouldn't smash a leg or something."

"Or you'd have hopped over it," he snarled. "How the hell much time do you think he had to be fussing with furniture out there on the lawn?"

She remained calm. "That's just it. He didn't have much time at all. If he *did* get out, it had to be right after the chair went through. In that case he'd have stumbled over it or gotten tangled. And we were out there almost before that glass stopped falling."

"Say, that sounds okay." The voice was Jigger's. "Maybe it was one slick trick," he went on eagerly. "Maybe the bum only foxed us into thinking he'd beat it. Then he scrambled to some other part of the joint and he's waiting now to crush out."

"Exactly what I was trying to make you dopes understand," the woman said scornfully.

"Pah!" Disgust was in Steve's tone. Then, surprisingly, it altered. He said grimly, "Okay! Scatter and look the place over if you want, but make it damn snappy. As I said, we've got to blow this joint quick. That crumb's probably out along the road now, trying to flag down a car—if he hasn't already been picked up by somebody. He's too cute to let Eli grab him."

My heart couldn't sink, because already it was pretty close to the floor. I thought possibly it turned over, however. I was trapped like a rat. That bed offered no more permanent concealment than a lamp-post. I took a vote of confidence with myself and lost, one to nothing. My spirits were lower than a curb stock. In a surge of panic I stabbed frantically at the bed-springs again, unmindful of their *pinging*. My eyes stung from the persistent rain of dust, both arms ached from the overhead work and both legs were strained

from bracing heels on the floor and knees against the spring.

The voices had stilled but I could hear tramping footsteps below. Probably the searchers first were investigating the rooms down there. I tested the thongs on my cheek once more and they seemed pretty shop-worn, which boosted the morale a trifle. When I strained the sore wrists apart I could feel a distinct give. But, though I had more play at the point of binding, I wasn't loose yet. So I went back to clipping the leather on the spring ends, dreading to hear, at any moment, the sound of steps starting for the second floor.

Instead I heard a horn beep, the blowing of a motor before it's killed, and the grating noise made when a handbrake is drawn up tight. Down below, the sound of footsteps accelerated and I thought my ears caught the front door's squeak as it opened. Then there were voices again and among them that of the lad who had seemed to be in charge of my carrying detail. This, I thought, must be the Eli who had gone to pick me up.

He said, "No luck, boss. I cruised a couple of miles down the road and then back the other direction. No sign of anybody hoofing. Guess he made it clean."

"Yeah! Thanks to you dumbells. Boy, I should have known better than to take your word. Well, come on. Let's move out of here. And remember—nobody's been at this place tonight. It's his word against ours."

I BREATHED easier but kept on trying to cut through my bonds. Then I cringed from another shock. My lady of the high voice grabbed the floor again.

"Wait a minute," she said. "I thought we were going all through the house first. We've hardly done down here."

"Going through the place?" That was Eli's surprised voice. "Why? What's the play?"

"She doesn't believe Dean got away," Chappie piped. "Thinks he may be holed up somewheres."

"Holed up? Where could he, for cripes sake?"

"Anywhere we haven't looked yet," she said dryly.

"Listen, you!" Jake snapped. "If we're not to hell away from here in short order

we'll have the law piling in. Then what? The can. That's what. We've got to get down the lane and out to the highway before they come. The lane's a dead-end, remember. If they hit the entrance before we do, we're bottled."

"I'm going up," she said coldly. "You can be getting ready."

I WAS still clipping steadily, automatically. I didn't know for a second or two whether my heart had given one last despairing thump and life had gone slack at her words, or I'd fumbled the bedspring. Then I was all but dumbfounded to discover that my wrists were apart. I was free—unencumbered.

While I was sliding hastily from under the bed, I heard Steve say to somebody: "No. Fanch was coming out tomorrow night. Never mind that. Get this place straightened and we'll lock up."

"Lock up?" Chappie blurted. "With a whole window smashed?"

The upper-hall gloom suddenly dissolved. Somebody had snapped on a light.

"Course we'll lock up," Steve barked. "Get that chair inside. Throw most of the broken glass in—and the pieces of sash. Then when he gets back here with the law—if he goes whining to the law—where's his story of busting out when the window shows it was busted in?"

I was upright by then, with the bed between me and the door. A rectangle of light fell into my chamber from the hall. I started for a side window, resolved to risk a hanging drop, but then I heard the stairs creak. Somebody—the woman, no doubt—was coming up. There wouldn't be time now to raise one of those old-type windows which had no counter-weights, prop it up, crawl through, lower myself by the hands and let go. So I scuttled around the bed like a land crab—then stopped short instead of trying to make it across the shaft of yellow light and get behind my door.

Her broad back was toward me as she climbed heavily. The stairs ascended straight for two-thirds of the way, turned right at a small landing and continued up to the floor. My hideaway chamber was around a railing to the left of the flight.

I watched, holding my breath. If she turned the railing and came in here first,

I was sunk—unless I nabbed her before she could yell. And my score thus far on hitting women was zero. I didn't like the idea of rolling it up, even on a dame with the courage and build of this one.

I was ready to pull in my neck at her first sign of veering. But she didn't veer. She hit the top, crossed diagonally to her right, entered a room and pulled on the light by a dangling string. Then I had an idea. I reached for the bed, gathered a handful of the rough-finished spread and whipped it off. I heard her moving in the other room, and a door squeaked. Risking discovery, I strained my eyes again around the jamb. She was out of view. Two strides and I had crossed the shaft of light and taken shelter behind my own door.

There was constant movement on the floor below, but the sounds and occasional voices were muffled. I felt that if only I could be sure the way to the front door was clear, I could just about make it and be out before anybody was on my tail. Or if this stubborn dame hadn't insisted upon going through with her idea, satisfying herself that I wasn't tucked away somewhere, I could have been out on that front porch roof, with hands free, been sliding down a post, and off into the night.

Right then she was back in the hall by the sound of her steps. I had a narrow view between the hinge side of the door and its frame but I couldn't sight her in my limited scope. I heard another light pulled on. Evidently this room had less than a few hiding places because the light fixture jingled again almost immediately and then she was in the hall once more. My nerves tightened and I stood poised, holding the bedspread at the alert. But I relaxed as she went into still another room.

An anxious party came noisily into the lower hall and bellowed, "Hey, how about it up there? We're pretty near set." I wasn't sure of the voice. It was too loud and it echoed.

"Just a minute," my nemesis called down. "I'm almost through."

"Yah, you're wasting your time. Come on! Steve's getting nervous."

She didn't deign to answer that and the guy stamped off. Again I heard a lighting fixture chain jingle against its globe, and again I tensed myself. The footsteps moved into the hall but I couldn't see their owner.

Then suddenly a shadow fell across the oblong of light patterned on my refuge floor. The narrow embrasure through which I was watching the hall blacked out as she passed the chink between door and frame. The woman was entering. I gripped the bedspread with both hands, poised and sprang.

THE SPREAD went over her like a tent. All she had time for was one startled grunt. Then I had my left forearm, outside the rough covering, crossed beneath her chin and was shoving the head forward with my right hand, trying to cut off her wind. We were dancing lightly, but not according to rules. She tripped, went face down on the bed and I fell on top of her.

I hissed through the enveloping shroud, "One yelp out of you, lady, and I'll stick this knife in your back. Remember your girdle."

She moaned and I took a chance on drawing my lower arm away from her throat. I had no desire to throttle her. She relaxed momentarily and coughed.

Again through the cloth, I told her, "I'm going to tie you up and scam. Don't try to get smart and you won't be hurt. Your boy friends will come up to find you in a little while."

Not a word came back. She was a hefty dame but she didn't try to struggle, so I reached around, held the cloth against her mouth with one hand, flipped the back fold of the spread forward, uncovering her head, grabbed it quickly by both hands and pulled back, intending to knot the stuff and make a gag. But she had other ideas.

She gave one tremendous heave with her broad hams and I bounced like a tennis ball. The tangling bedspread slipped. She rolled over, clawing like a huge cat, but her heave had thrown me off sidewise. I hopped up, feeling very undignified. She herself was out of position, half on the bed, half on the floor, trying to recover her balance by bridging her back, but her heels keep sliding.

I wasn't concentrating on the heels, however, in that half light. I was staring at the long, horsey face with its thick, fleshy lips, the deep eye sockets, the large, protruding cheekbones. It was the ugliest

face I'd ever seen on a woman—or anyone else.

As I goggled, fascinated by this map which had given Kate the Kisser her tag, she suddenly uncorked a screech that seemed louder than a noonday whistle.

MY FEET HAD WINGS. Turning the sharp angle of the upper hall I must have left skid marks. The screams were still lifting divots on my scalp. There was a mad scrambling downstairs and between her screeches I could hear the boy friends yelling.

At the end of the small upper hall was a tiny room, barely large enough for a den. This window had no lock either. Feet were pounding on the stairs. I got the window up, crawled through and somehow was hanging on the porch edge. The screams had stopped, but from inside came more confused babbling than you'd hear at an indignation meeting of the Sisters of Susanna.

I slid down the post, skinning my sore wrists and nearly cracking both ankles when I brought up against the railing. In clambering to the ground, dry and brittle twigs of bushes ran up my pant-legs. It was dark outside as a flapper's secret and when I disentangled myself from the bushes and started running, I went smack into a small tree. It got me on one shoulder and I spun around as a band of light fell suddenly across the porch.

Three pencils of flame stabbed from the doorway and three spiteful cracks went echoing over the countryside. But the shots had been fired blindly. Then figures were on the porch, jumping the steps. By that time, however, I was far to one side of the house and bringing up against a rail fence. I went through the fence and stayed bent low, pushing my way through weeds and brush. The cries behind me became fainter.

After a time I veered right in the wild-grown field and came finally to a broken stone wall. After climbing the wall, wading through tangles of high grass and stumbling into a ditch, I found myself on a narrow road, barely a cart trail. My eyes had adjusted themselves and the night didn't seem so black. I figured this trail must be the back end of the lane, turned right again and proceeded with caution.

And I had stumbled along for only a few minutes when I saw lights through the brush and heard the hum of an engine. The lights vanished, but as I rounded a bend in the lane, twin ruby tail-lights were up ahead. The rough road was straight here and finally I watched the car swing left into the highway.

Nevertheless, I still exercised caution, especially in passing that dark house outlined at my right against the starry sky. There was no sound now except the scraping of my shoes as I snubbed a high spot in the lane or rolled on a loose stone. When I reached its end, I took to the brushy side and emerged on the highway only after making certain that no ambush had been set.

Then I walked along the paved road in the direction the car had taken. Where I was I had no idea, other than that I had left a lane near a hill which was close by a railroad. For the first time, I thought of my funds and shoved a hand into the cash pocket. The money seemed to be intact. Pulling it out, I struck a match for a hasty check. There were a number of tens, so nobody could have touched it.

Helen Langerman's nudes I had put in the glove compartment of the Hudson, still standing—I hoped—in Franklin Street. I struck another match and looked at my wrist watch. It said five after eleven.

From behind came the sound of an engine and singing of tires. I turned and walked backwards, throwing a thumb suggestively over my shoulder but prepared to dive into sheltering darkness if the car should stop and its occupants prove to be my recent pals executing a coup by doubling around. I needn't have bothered to be prepared. The car whined past. I walked some more until a truck lumbered along in the same direction. That went by also. Meanwhile, each time a machine approached against me, I took a prudent step into the underbrush or ducked behind a tree.

THE ninth driver responded to my signal. I had no need to embrace the night. This was an open jalopy whose brakes squealed and whose springs groaned. The engine tappets, while the motor idled, and the junkpile was scrawled all over sounded like a drunken tap dancer's feet

with chalk or white paint. I supposed they were hepcat or slick-chick slogans and invitations but couldn't make them out.

"Belle City?" I asked hopefully, while the heap shuddered and complained.

"Sure, bud! Hop in!"

That took a bit of doing. There were four kids in the back seat and three in the front, two girls and the tow-headed hatless driver.

He said cheerfully, "Get up, Betty. Sit in his lap."

The lass in front, on my side, popped up. I groped for the handle but found only a rope, which seemed to be holding the door in place.

"Climb over, grampaw," one of the two janes in back giggled.

I climbed over and wedged myself into the seat. Betty promptly plopped on my knees and snaked her left arm around the back of my neck. She wore an evening gown under her coat and smelled nice, but I wasn't sure of what. For that matter, I wasn't sure of anything.

I sniffed and said, "Intoxication?"

She answered. "No. Are you? Only you certainly don't act it." A peal of laughter came from the rear.

"How far to Belle City?" I asked, giving up.

"About thirty miles," the towhead said, without taking his eyes from the road over which our splendid chariot was rolling again.

"How far have you been hiking?" Betty asked. She wriggled. "Boy, this seat feels like you wore your legs right down to the knees. Sharp points!"

I patted her hip. "Oh, I've just been taking a walk from Belle City and back."

Her head swung until her nose almost touched mine. I could feel her warm breath. "Taking a walk? What are you trying to do, kid little Betty?"

She couldn't have been more than sixteen, even at night. I tried to put more distance between our faces and said, "Perish the thought. I love walking. But enough about me. Where have you people been? You're all dressed up."

"Junior prom at Culverton. Very droopy! Now we're putting on the feedbag in Belle City."

"A prom at Culverton? You mean high school?"

She giggled. "Yes, I mean high school." The back seat giggled. "We all go there, mister," she added.

"But Culverton's over fifty miles from Belle City. Why not eat back there?"

"Eat in the same town?" Her tone was a mixture of scorn and disbelief. "That's icky. Mirror yourself. Consider your echo."

"Pardon me," I said, "while I weep tears of shame."

Back seat and front seat were overcome by giggling and guffaws. Only Towhead refrained. He kept his eyes grimly on the road, though the girl snuggling her head on his shoulder had joined with the others. Meanwhile, the jalopy ate up miles, clattering, wailing and protesting. My abused legs began to ache and I shifted Betty a trifle. Both wrists were sore as hell. The one encircling my lapful kept rubbing against her rough coat with every jounce of this rattletrap. And every settlement we passed through meant squirmings, hand-wavings and shrill "Yoo-hooing" to anybody visible—movements which did the unfortunate wrist no good at all.

We hit the outskirts of Belle City and houses began to show closer. Towhead asked, without turning his head, "You going all the way in, Mister? We are."

I sighted the neons of a pub ahead. I said, "No, thanks. This is fine. Stop anywhere along where those next lights are."

He pulled in at the curb and the jalopy fluttered to an asthmatic halt. It stood trembling. Betty rose and pressed back against the windshield. I got up and promptly trod on her foot.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" I apologized.

She giggled again. "That's okay. I walk on it, too."

I WAS stiff from everything, including the cramped ride and her weight, but I climbed over the side without too much difficulty. Betty took the vacated seat by the simple process of turning around and falling backwards. Standing beside the shaking heap, I pulled out one of the tens and reached it across her and the towhead's chum.

"Let the eats be on me, pally," I told him. "That ride meant more than you'll ever know."

He shook his head and threw the car

into gear. "Nothing doing. We're all set. Thanks just the same."

I tossed the bill into his girl friend's lap as the wreck began to move off. Hell, it was dead man's dough anyhow. Half a dozen live wires might as well use some of it. I walked along toward the neons.

The clock above the rows of bottles said fourteen minutes before midnight. I asked for a bourbon and soda, but the bartender didn't move. He merely looked at me.

He said, "You all right, Jack?" Sharp eyes ran over from the hatless head to where I vanished from view at above the waist.

"Am I all right? Of course I'm all right. Why?"

He grinned. "Well, you talk all right, anyway. That's a fact." Then he shook his head. "But you sure don't look it. How's the other guy?"

"What do you mean?"

The mirror back of the bar was soaped. He reached over with a towel and rubbed a spot clean. I moved a foot to line myself and then I didn't blame him. My face was dirty, there was a mouse under the left eye, and the jaw looked lopsided.

I passed an exploring hand over the caricature. "Oh, that! Just a little work-out." I held up a coy finger. "But I won. Make no mistake."

"You said bourbon and soda?" he asked. Without waiting for an answer, he turned and ran a finger along the bottles.

Working on my drink, I began to realize what I'd probably escaped from, but the thing was all tangled up. I was all but certain that Steve was close to Gillie Maher's murder. And Steve had some mysterious contact with the Langerman house, a strong, frontdoor contact. Yet Mrs. Corbell and Rhoda Yeager wouldn't even admit knowing him.

Helen Langerman, who carried around nude photos of herself, also had this Steve's phone number in her handbag with the pictures, and I had run into a heap of grief merely through mentioning her name as a wild stab at Acme. That had enraged Steve—Dimple-Chin—enough to have me laid low, kidnaped and run out thirty miles or more beyond the city to a curious hideaway. And what was the ugly woman known as Kate the Kissers doing at that

hideout with Steve and his gang? What, for instance, was the tieup between a guy who dealt in flimsy favors and novelties, and a malformed dame with a prize shoplifting record?

Shoplifting! That carried me back to the woman who had been with Rhoda Yeager at Frenchy's place—and what was the connection there, if any? For that matter, what was the Langerman chauffeur doing in a probably expensive ringside seat at the Arena fights, with Frenchy's Number One dealer, Nick Zulturo? Provided Jerry had been with Nick and wasn't merely beside him through coincidence. Still, chauffeurs didn't ordinarily lay out top money for a squat in the ringside pews. Not at their wages!

I must have been mumbling, because the barman loomed in front of me. "You say something?" he asked, picking up my empty glass.

"Me?" Then I grinned. "Oh, just figuring out something. Must have been talking to myself." I indicated the glass. "Let's have another."

His head wagged in concern. "Son, you've had kind of a bad night, I'm thinking. Watch out for that boxing stuff before you get real punchy." He rinsed the glass and put in fresh ice.

After finishing the second drink I felt better. I went into the grimy lavatory, found no soap or paper towels and so washed in cold water as well as I could, mopping myself with a handkerchief. Then I came out, entered the phone booth and called my office. Pat Stanley was in charge again on the lobster.

HE SAID, "Where the hell have you been? We've been hunting the town wild."

"My good friend, didn't anybody tell you I was through?"

"I heard you and Harry had a jam but thought it was all squared up. Hell, your Langerman murder story ran all day. That came afterwards."

"Well, I had to give it to somebody. Who else could I give it to?"

"Listen, everything's supposed to be all right with you here—so long as you deliver. And you *have* a story, haven't you?" he ended hopefully.

I chuckled. "Pat, I'm sitting on top of

a pip but I can't print it. At least I don't want to quit yet. Maybe it'll work into something but not right away. No, you'll have to go along with what you've got."

"Oh, my Lord!" Then I could hear him groan and he pleaded, "Garry, you can't *do* this to me. Dunegan's on the phone every fifteen minutes, wanting to know what you've called in on the murder. I have to keep stalling him."

"Which murder? There are two—unless more have come in since I..." But I broke off and said, "Never mind."

"Never mind what, Garry? Since you what?"

"Well, okay, Pat. Don't spread it around, though. I was knocked kicking this afternoon and kidnaped. I just got away—well, about an hour or so ago. Oh, I know the guys—at least I know who one is. And the woman—"

"What guy? What woman? Is that why Captain Harding's been looking for you all night?"

For a moment I thought I was hearing wrong. I said, "Tom Harding? Did you say Harding wanted me?"

"I'll say he does! And he's steaming, too. Just had him on my ear a few minutes ago."

"Did he say what for—as if I didn't know?"

"He doesn't say anything except if you don't show at headquarters pretty quick and talk with him there'll be a pickup sent out." He paused. "But how about me, Garry? Haven't you got something?"

I grunted. "After the way Harry kicked my identification story around and left it out of the first edition? Incidentally, what's new on that end?"

"It's Gillie Maher, all right. They checked his Bertillon and found some marks the fire hadn't reached. They weren't enough but they dug up his dentist. He had a chart of Gillie's choppers. So everything's official now."

I was only half listening, however. Forming in my battered head was an idea to blow something wide open—perhaps myself, at that. But Stanley wanted a yarn.

I said, "Pat, I can give you one hell of a lead that's fifty percent fact and fifty percent speculation. If I do, though, I'll probably have to dig deep about 8:30 A.M., crawl in and pull the hole in after me."

"Only a lead?" There was disappointment in his tone.

"Only a lead," I repeated firmly. "And I guess my hearing's off somewhat. Didn't catch your words of concern over what might befall *me*."

"Sometimes these phones have tough connections," he said dryly. "Well, what's the lead before I put you on rewrite?"

"No, I'd rather you'd take it yourself, Pat. The thing is short. If you don't mind, I'll dictate it. That's because I know just what I want to say and what to leave out. And by-line it if you will—not only because it's written that way but I want to hit certain parties right where they live."

"Well, you know your own angles. Go ahead. Shoot!"

"Listen! If they won't run it this way, don't run it at all—at least not under *my* name."

"Sure! Sure!"

"Here we go, then." I began to dictate:

Investigation into the murder of Gilbert (Slippery Gillie) Maher, police-labeled confidence man, and the bludgeon-slaying of R. Eugene Langerman, retired Belle City merchant, took a bizarre turn today when a possible link was established between the brutal killings.

This *Press-Bulletin* reporter reveals that on the day of the Maher murder, shortly before his battered corpse was set aflame in a green coupe at "Quarryland," a car of that description was parked in Kinkaid Avenue, outside the Langerman home.

The coupe, in two shades of green, was driven away by a stocky, dimple-chinned man, wearing a black Homburg hat, who had emerged from the Langerman house. Two women of the household denied to this reporter, however, that he had called upon them or they knew him.

At noon of the Maher murder day, just prior to his visiting the Langerman house, the dimple-chinned man had been seen with Maher in a downtown bank and had walked with him from the bank to Union Station, where they ostensibly separated.

I said, "There's your lead, Pat. We'll leave it hanging—just to tantalize. It ought to raise particular hell in some quarters."

Stanley's low whistle came clearly over the phone line. "You're telling me. What's the lowdown? No—never mind now. You're certainly not going it blind."

"No, I'm not going it blind, my good man, and I think it'll smoke somebody out. Meanwhile I've got some other angles to work over. Now don't forget. Tell Harry

if he doesn't want to go on it just that way—well, he knows what he can do with it."

Stanley laughed. "I'll inform him in privy session."

"I get what you mean," I told him.

When I stepped out of the booth, my stomach was rumbling. I remembered that I hadn't eaten since morning. I felt lame and sore all over and my head now was getting light.

Down the street I found an all-night lunchroom and took care of the calories. A couple of stools removed was a man with a worn leather windbreaker, a cap with patent-leather visor and a badge.

I said, folding the bills from my change, "You wouldn't be a hackie, would you?"

He set his coffee mug down and looked at the bills. "Yuh! You wanna go some-where?"

"Police headquarters."

His eyes ran over my battered face. Then he leaned forward. "Maybe it ain't none of my business, Doc," he whispered hoarsely, "but are you giving yourself up?"

I shrugged. "You might call it that."

He wiped his mouth with a paper napkin, crumpled it on the counter and slid down from the stool.

XVI

CAPTAIN HARDING LEANED forward in his swivel chair, rested both forearms on the scarred mahogany desk and watched me walk across the dingy B.C.I. office from its entrance through the high iron grill. Sergeant Flick, who had let me in, kicked a chair over and I sat down wearily.

"It took one hell of a time to get you to come here," the captain of detectives said coldly.

"Time is relative, Tom," I told him. "I came right over. Just had the office on the phone and they told me you'd like my company." I fumbled for a cigarette. "I've been sort of busy."

He leaned back abruptly and the ancient chair groaned beneath his weight. Into vest pockets he hooked both thumbs.

"From the shape of that face it looks like you've been pushing it into somebody's business, into some place it wasn't wanted. Who gave you the bum eye?"

"Nobody gave it to me. I had to fight for it."

He nodded dourly. "And a cut lip and swollen jaw. Seems you didn't do so good at that."

I fired the cigarette, leaned over and tossed the match into his ash tray. Then I straightened, crossing one leg over the other. "Now don't tell me you brought me all the way over here to talk about my face."

"Maybe!" he snapped. "When you shove it into police business, we want to know why."

"Did I stick my face into police business?" I hoped I was registering convincing surprise.

"What about that Gillie Maher identification? Who steered you onto that?"

My leg came down abruptly. "Me?" Who told you I had anything to do with sorting Gillie out?"

"Never mind who told me—or if anybody did. I'm asking you a question."

"Okay! And I'll answer it. Nobody steered me on any identification."

He arched forward to the desk and picked up his pipe, while the chair complained anew. He held the pipe by its bowl and stabbed the stem toward my chest.

"Very well, Dean, then I'll tell you a few things. I think you were acting on information, but you say you weren't and I don't know. But you're holding out with something. You were talking to Gillie Maher yesterday—the very day of the murder—"

"The day before yesterday, if you're bound to be meticulous, Tom. This is morning."

"You were talking to Gillie the day of the murder," he said grimly. "That was down at Union Station. In fact you'd been following him through the station. So let's have the reason. It may mean something."

I blew three consecutive smoke rings, which was a record to date. Then I said, "Following him? You're a little mixed up, Tom—"

"Don't tell me I'm mixed up."

"When I talked with Gillie, he'd been tagging me. I came out of a phone booth—and there he was." I dropped ashes into the tray. "Come to think of it, he did beef some that I was following him. Probably a guilty conscience."

Harding was stuffing his pipe with coarse, dark tobacco from a blue paper package. His head raised slowly. "You know George Poole, of course—the railroad dick?"

I'd been wondering about Poole but I let the question pass with a nod. Harding waved carelessly at Sergeant Flick, then continued to pack the pipe with great care.

"Garry," the Sergeant said smoothly, "Poole saw you tailing Gillie and another guy through the station a little after noon. Poole had just come back from lunch. He doesn't know the other guy. Never saw him before. Then he lost sight of the three of you but a little later saw you still hanging around. So he pushed in and chinned with you but didn't find out anything. You had some stall about waiting for a girl or something. After that he kind of played peeper and saw Gillie show up again and you and him jabbering."

I GESTURED as nonchalantly as possible. "That's what I said. Gillie came up while I was phoning. He asked why I was tailing him. So I asked what gave him such an idea, told him to run away and sell his papers and left him there." I shook my head. "And George went galloping right to teacher, eh, to pour out his little story?"

"He did when he found it was Gillie'd been murdered," Harding spat. "It was just what he shoulda done — what you shoulda done as far as that goes." He struck a match against the desk. "But that isn't all Poole reported in his official capacity."

"No? Well, what else did he report? Let's wash this all out."

As he puffed, his eyes regarded me above the agitated flame until obscured by a poisonous cloud of smoke. Then he blew the flame into extinction and the cloud away, all in one puff, dropped the match on his floor and leaned back.

"Around four o'clock," he said evenly, "you were in the station again with a fine fairy story that you'd lost the key to a public locker there and asked Poole to have it opened. Why'd you change your mind when the guy came with another key?"

I grinned. "Let me have my little eccentricities, Tom."

His face darkened, the pipe waggled and a live coal jounced out, to land on his vest. He brushed it off savagely.

"I'll tell you why, Dean. You were pulling a fast one but something went wrong. The time registered on that locker when the last user put anything in it was eight minutes past four." He removed and brandished the briar. "And at eight minutes past four—around there—you were talking with George Poole, telling him you couldn't find the key. That—we used to learn in Sunday School—comes under the heading of a lie."

I reached over and snubbed the fire from my cigarette, thinking fast, though thinking evidently wasn't doing me any good in this session whatsoever. When I settled back in the chair, I said, "Tom, did it ever occur to you that a man might decide he wasn't sure of the right locker and so would tell the lad with the key not to mind?"

"It occurs to me that you're doing a lousy job of dodging in trying to cover up," he retorted icily.

"Well, listen!" I said just as icily. "I'm working for the *Press-Bulletin*, 8:30 to 5:00, or however much longer any job may take. I'm not working for you, or for Sergeant Flick here or the Belle City Police Department."

"If you ask me, that's pretty obvious," he observed.

"Nobody happened to ask you. But what I do in *Press-Bulletin* hours, so long as I don't break the law, is my paper's business and none of yours—while I continue working for my paper. So why don't you do your detecting and I'll do my reporting and writing and we'll get along just fine."

The pipe had gone up to his mouth but he brought it down again. "A pretty sentiment. A *very* pretty sentiment." Sarcasm dripped from his voice. Then suddenly his manner changed and he barked, "Well, why wasn't that idea holding good when you promised to work for Langerman? How about your time being your paper's then?"

"That," I told Harding loftily, "was to be arranged."

"And what kind of work were you to do? On what?"

"Just as I told Sergeant Swain— I don't know."

The captain forgot what he was holding, his pipe banged on the desk and ashes flew. He seemed not to notice the mess he'd made, however. "You don't know. Sure, you told Swain that. But you didn't tell him Langerman already had paid you a hundred dollars, did you?"

That hit me in the pit of the stomach. There was only one way in which he could have known about the check—through Johnny Jump-Up coming forward voluntarily and producing it with my endorsement when he learned of the murder. Come to think of it, why *had* Poseny wanted my endorsement?

I SAID, "Langerman paid me that as a retainer, a binder—his own word. He intended telling me the next morning what he wanted. That night he was killed. Now, do you want me to confess that I killed him?"

Harding disdained to recognize the smarty-pants crack. "You were in a hell of a hurry to cash his check, weren't you?"

"Oh, yes. I was in hurry all right. That was partly the reason for the check. I had an expensive baby with me. Langerman said I'd probably need to be heeled. He knew his own daughter, I guess."

The detective chief filled the pipe again, scratched another match and puffed reflectively, keeping his eyes on my face. The room was silent as downstairs in Jo-Jo's boarding house. Finally he took the briar from between his teeth and again stabbed toward me with the stem. A little wisp of smoke curled up from the mouth-piece.

"That's another thing. He knew his daughter but you didn't. Yet you deliberately gave Swain the impression you'd known her a long time. But you just hadn't. As a matter of fact you met her only that night. Pretty fast work, wasn't it?"

I grinned. "She was overcome when she saw me. Sometimes, Tom, I don't know my own strength that way."

"Don't let your tongue get flip with me," he warned. "I'm asking something. You weren't even known at the Langerman house for the first time *that* certain day, and *between* visits to the railroad depot?"

I was getting weary. For a fleeting moment I considered telling him the whole

damn business, from the time I'd spotted Gillie in the bank right up to my being kidnaped and taken to the farm or country house. But what the hell! That would involve Helen and her nudes. It would blow my inside on the story sky-high—and to what good end? And then, Mrs. Corbell undoubtedly would continue her stubborn denial that Gillie and Steve-with-the-Dimple had gulled her in some fashion through a white envelope. Surely Harding hadn't gotten anything from her on that or he'd be climbing all over me about it now.

I said, "First, how'd you get all this information concerning me? I mean about not knowing the Langermans."

Harding smiled without humor. "I think that's *our* business, Dean."

"Well, what made Johnny Poseny vomit that check up so quick?"

"Now, I think that's our business again."

Drawing a deep breath, I got slowly to my feet and buttoned the wrinkled topcoat. I looked around for my hat but remembered I'd lost it in the shuffle somewhere.

I said, "Thanks for nothing, Cap. You like to put the pump on but when it's turned around, that's something else again. I think I remember being an ace in the hole for you and your boys a few times before. I turned up the Alderson case and handed it over to you on a platter. The box score carries a few more assists, if I buckled right down to making a list, but they're all here on your B.C.I. record. Hereafter, oh Captain, my Captain, I walk alone—like a song or something." I moved out around the chair, with legs that felt like two brittle sticks.

Harding's swivel chair squealed as he sat up straight. "Where are you going?" he demanded.

I started through my pockets for another cigarette. "If I'm under arrest, just say so. I came here under my own power and I'm leaving the same way. But if you want to do anything about it, it's all right with me. Only make it official."

He struggled out of the chair. Ashes cascaded over his vest. "Now you got me wrong, Garry—"

"Your pipe's upside down, Captain," I told him. "For a superior officer, your tidiness is very *inferior*."

"Let him out, Sergeant," the detective chief said curtly.

Flick walked with me across the dark-stained, splintery floor. As he reached across to unlock the high grill gate, he said softly, through his teeth, "The secretary out there told him—that Rhoda something."

"Thanks, Pete," I said, sifting the words through my own teeth.

The gate clanged behind me and the ringing noise went echoing along the marble-walled corridor. I walked downstairs, avoiding the press room, and emerged into Bulfinch Street. Starting again to look for cigarettes, I found I was carrying them in my hand. I lighted one, standing on the curb, and waited awhile before being able to flag down a cab. Finally I got one.

"Take me to Franklin Street," I directed, opening the door.

He turned after I had dropped back on the seat. "Did you say Franklin Street, mister? Nothing open around there."

"Have to pick up my car," I told him.

That area was strictly day-commercial. The Hudson stood all alone at the curb. All the blank, staring windows in the block, including Acme's, seemed to be brooding over the orphan below. I paid the cabbie off, got into my own hack, snapped on the dash lights and unlocked the glove compartment. Helen Langerman's nudes were still there.

In the light of the dash I looked at them again and she smiled back from each one. I wondered what might be going on in that pretty head. Then I shook myself. Hell, I already knew. My own brain was getting pretty tired.

I locked the nudes in the compartment once more, fumbled for the switch and started the engine.

XVII

THE MACHINE GUN chattered viciously again. I tried to dig deeper into the earth but it seemed to spring back at me, rubbery, resilient. There was a shrill, annoying ringing in my ears. My rump reared too high and I expected every second to feel the hot, stinging lead rip through that tender portion. My face ached from grinding it into the dirt and

both hands, from constant digging, were sore clear back to the wrists.

When the sharp rat-a-tat stopped, I relaxed, but the gun started up again almost immediately and I dug the more frantically, turning and squirming for better purchase. My clothes were twisted tight from the squirmings and I began to strangle. The ringing sounded louder in my head. Raising up and struggling to loosen the clothes, my eyes opened and I marveled that the ground was all white.

But I crouched in bed. There was a hellish clatter in the hall and the phone on the bed-table shrilled and died, then shrilled again insistently. I struggled to get out of bed but found I was wound tightly in the covers. Smears of blood were on the rumpled pillowcase, and the pillow looked as if it had been used in a soccer game. My dreams had been all to the bad.

The mad clatter continued outside my door. When I freed myself and hit the floor, I was stiffer than a parole board's manner. Creaking to the door, I opened it and the Battle of the Marne washed through in sound effects.

A gray cloth curtain, wet and clammy, hung over the doorway. I wrestled it aside and stuck my head out. "Hey, what the hell's going on here?"

The clatter ceased abruptly. The two overalled men straightened and the one holding a power-drill leaned it against the wall and dragged a sleeve across his dusty forehead, dislodging a whitened cap.

"Hi!" he greeted genially. "How's about a drink of water, mister?" He spat with a grimace of distaste, wiped his mouth with the back of one hand and left a streak in the dust-mask.

"Water? I ought to *drown* you guys in it—waking people up in the middle of the night. Okay! Come in."

The noise-makers dusted their overalls sketchily and with little effect, then ducked around the curtain.

"What's that you said about the middle of the night?" the short man who had parked the drill asked. "You know what time it is?"

I glanced at my watch. It showed twenty after one and I looked back at them in surprise.

"We only started to work on patching

that tile floor after lunch," the taller one volunteered. "Figured nobody could be asleep then, didn't we, Joe?"

Joe bobbed his head energetically. "Sure did. Fact is, that's what we told the girl, too. 'Anybody who can sleep through this racket ain't asleep; he's just plain dead,' we said to the girl—"

"Wait a minute," I broke in. "*What* girl?"

"Why—a girl." He gestured vaguely. "She come up in the elevator looking to get in here but, like I said, who'd of thought anybody was in. So she went away again, but that was after she held the drill."

"Only for a minute or so," his companion added thoughtfully. "It walked too much on her. Them things take a knock."

I shook my head. "Listen boys, I just got up. I'm a little numb yet above the ears. This girl came up to see me and took to running your drill?"

"Oh, for hardly any time." The tall guy's chuckle was deep.

"What did she look like?" I squared a hand away at chin level. "Was she about so high, always smiling?" I gave them a narrow eye. "Rather a friendly sort?"

Joe and his companion exchanged glances. Then Joe shrugged his square shoulders. "Yuh! She was friendly all right—eh, Sid?"

"I know what you mean," I said without waiting for confirmation.

"But how about that drink, mister?" Sid asked. "I could spit anything up to a whole bunch of pussy willows."

"Sorry," I said. "Your bad news put me off the track." I waved toward the bathroom. "Help yourself. The cold's on the right." Then I paused. "Bad news or no bad news, maybe you could stand something stronger."

THE MEN were on their way past the bed but halted as if they'd stepped in soft, sticky tar. I went over to the dresser, dug a bottle from beneath my shirts and held it up against the light. The jug was two-thirds full. So the maid hadn't been at this one, unless she'd watered it.

Their eyes lighted. Sid exclaimed, "Oh, boy! But guess I'll wash some of this cotton outa my mouth first." He continued on to the bathroom.

"You'll find glasses there in the cabinet," I called. "Bring them out."

When they had gone back to work and resumed their clatter enthusiastically, I stood under a warm shower and then a cold. Some of my stiffness washed away, but the lip which Rhoda Yeager had bitten was bleeding afresh. I shaved, staunched it with styptic pencil, dressed in fresh clothing, skipped through the Battle of the Marne and went downstairs. Alice was on the switchboard. She stared as I approached from the elevator.

"Where in the name of all that's holy have you been? I rang till my key got hot. And some dilly insisted on going up, even when I said you didn't answer. Your office called, incidentally."

"Was that the ring?"

"That was one ring—the last one. You mean you were there all the time, you big bum?"

"I was there all the time, my pet. Your ringing was beautiful. Loaded with verve and feeling. Nothing like a nice ring."

The lashes came down over her eyes. "I didn't notice any ring on your *wife's* finger when she went up."

That didn't sound right at all. "My wife?"

The eyes opened wide and she smiled slyly. "That's what she told me. Been away for a long time, she said." Alice sniffed. "If she'd been away more than a year you must have married her in a bassinet."

I grinned. "No wife—no nuthin'! I've outlived my several wives—all six of them. When I marry again, it'll be you, darling." I chucked her under the chin but she drew back and attempted playfully to bite my hand.

"Anyway," she said airily, "you'll probably find her over at your gin mill. She wanted to know where to look for you, so I told her." The operator smiled sweetly and patted her hair. "I said that's the only place to look for a married man nowadays—in any old slophouse with some *other* married woman."

"I mustn't forget to buy you a case of poisoned bonbons ~~one~~ of these days." With that I started away.

"Oh, yes, Garry," she called mischievously. "Tell her she's got a run in her left stocking. Not that you wouldn't notice the leg first, of course."

"No, my pet. That's the *wooden* one."

I walked around back to the Hudson and drove crosstown to Rosario's. Helen Langerman was seated at the bar, a high-ball glass, half full, in front of her. There was a run in the left stocking, which I didn't mention. She put on her stock delighted smile as I made port beside her.

"My, it didn't take you long at all." She held up the glass. "This is only my second drink."

"And what are you doing in town? Your father—you ought to be at home. How'd the family happen to let you out?"

She played with the drink, then decided to sip it. Her large eyes danced above the glass. "Oh, they didn't let me out. It was my own idea." There was only a faint, teasing scent about her today. It was the same brand, though, and registered very pleasantly.

WHEN my eyes left the pretty face I saw Gino high-signing me from down the bar. I said, "Excuse me a moment, Stinky," and placed one hand on her arm. That was an error right from the danger file. Her breath drew in quickly with a hissing sound, the lavender eyes dilated, her full lips trembled and she swayed toward me on the high stool. One elbow struck the glass and it tipped over, making a small river on the bar.

I righted the glass. She straightened on her perch, the yearning expression wiped off as, with a damp cloth, and she smiled brightly.

"How careless of me."

"Yeah! Lot of people have been shut off at bars for less. I'll get you another drink."

"There's no hurry."

Then I circled around her and moved down to Gino. He wore an anxious look as he leaned across the stick and whispered, "Couple of bozos I never saw before were in last night asking for you. I come back late to help Rosy out. Said they had something to talk over, but I dunno. I couldn't peg them."

"Probably dicks. Captain Harding wanted to see me last night at headquarters. I talked with him after midnight."

Gino shook his head. He seemed to be studying my bunged face but didn't com-

ment on it. "No dicks," he said emphatically. "I can smell a plain clothes bobby a mile away. These bimbos smelled wrong."

"What time was it?"

"Oh, 12:15-12:20. Around there somewhere. They hung on till after 1:00. Then they wanted to know where you lived, but I played dumb and gave them a bum steer. Said I thought on the South Side somewhere."

I mulled that over. Steve and his lads, with the homely Kate, had poured themselves out of the house in the lane a little before 11:00. Plenty of time to make Belle City and go looking for me at Rosario's.

"Well, thanks, Gino. I'll keep an eye open." I placed a couple of my dwindling tens on the bar. "And thanks for the bankrolling."

"That's okay, Garry. Wait'll I get your I.O.U."

"Never mind the formalities. Tear it up."

Nevertheless, he started for the register, but checked and turned back, eyes wide and mouth open. "Say, by the way—what happened to your twenty-four hours' free drinks? Did you patch things up with Harry Dunegan?"

I grinned. "That, Gino, is in a state of flux. And you don't happen to have an early *Press-Bulletin*, do you?"

"One around here somewhere." He ducked and went poking under the bar. When he came up, he tossed some crumpled papers in front of me. "Should be the morning *Examiner* there, too. I noticed your story today. That's why I was wondering."

I passed a warning forefinger in front of my lips and motioned toward Helen. "Don't crack about the murders, Gino. She's one of Langerman's daughters."

His mouth rounded into a surprised circle. Then he grinned. "Say, I'll buy that."

"You'd be buying a pokeful of perplexity," I assured him and turned to the papers.

MY STORY, given to Pat Stanley, was in just as dictated and I wondered what blowoff had occurred at headquarters when the sheet hit there. I went through the rumpled *Examiner* until I

found the front of it. They were still on routine. Gillie Maher's fadeout by fire had been cut to half a column of speculation in that morning tab, while on the Langerman case Cliff Romney was expounding a limping theory that the retired merchant had surprised a burglar and had been beaten to death as his reward for vigilance. The idea was silly on the face of it. Hell, a two-year-old in rompers and with a sore hand could have knocked old man Langerman flat on his fanny. There wouldn't be any need to hammer him with a brass candlestick. Somebody had definitely wanted him out of the way.

I refolded the papers into some semblance of order and shoved them back at Gino. Then I returned to Helen.

"How about eating, Stinky? I haven't put away any breakfast yet."

"Oh, I had breakfast very late. Can't I watch?"

"There's no juke box here," I warned. "Come on, then. We get service on the other side."

She slid off the stool and we went through the archway and took a booth. Luncheon business was slowing down at this hour. Carmela, very trim in her black uniform with white collar and cuffs and a small white apron that always looked fresh, came switching up.

I said, "How do you do?"

"Good afternoon, sir," she said as if she'd never met me before. It was all very formal and she surprised me until I looked up again and caught her eye. She wrinkled her nose in a grimace at the top of my companion's head.

"How's the food in this dump?"

From an apron pocket she took her pad and from her hair a brown, sharp-pointed pencil. "The food's always lousy," she said calmly. "And I can't say much for the male trade, either."

Helen's head snapped around. She wore a startled expression. Then she saw me grinning and that curious, childish smile of contentment chased away the frown and closed her mouth.

"Okay, Carmie," I said. "Ask your Ma to whip me up something for breakfast, will you. My cousin isn't eating. She's only got enough dough to pay for one." I grinned. "But bring her a rye and soda, anyhow."

Carmela pulled her head back and surveyed me with interest. "You look as though something got whipped up since yesterday. Who hung the shiner on you? And that lip! Tsk, tsk!" Her shoulders went up.

"There's too damn *much* lip around here. Hit the kitchen trail."

She switched away, swinging her buttocks a little more vigorously than necessary. I turned back to Helen.

"Now let's have it. What are you down here for? And why'd you come to my room again?" Without waiting for an answer, I said, "That was a scurvy trick, picking the key out of my pocket."

I had expected an apology or at least a laughing brush-off for the key incident. Instead she half-puckered and said plaintively, "Garry, you took my pictures. They were in my bag but when I looked there for the key, the pictures were gone, too."

XVIII

I HOPED MY ASTONISHMENT didn't show; that the facial lumps would break it up. Nice, moral girls with dough didn't go around asking for their naked photos back. They denied them and said they were pictures of doubles or something. But was Helen moral or immoral or merely unmoral?

She was still pouting, as if she were a kid of nine or ten and I'd snatched her lollypop. She asked, "Where are they, Garry?"

"They're safely tucked away," I said. "Fine things for you to be carrying around! Where'd you have them taken? And incidentally, why?"

All of a sudden she went coy on me. "Oh, somewhere. You like them?"

Carmela brought the rye and soda, sniffed at me and went away again.

I nodded. "Yes, I like them first-rate, especially the goose pimples. You did have goose pimples, didn't you, with so little on?"

The glass was in her hand and she contemplated it dreamily. "Dottie was angry," she said out of a clear sky, half to herself. "She took the other ones away."

I shook myself. "Hold on! You mean you had more and your sister saw them? Say, who took those pictures, anyhow?"

Her smile was sly then and the dreaminess was gone. She had more change of pace than a big league pitcher. "Wouldn't you like to know?" she said impishly.

"Don't mind me. I just like to talk. One word in back of another and the first thing you know you've got a question—without an answer."

She pouted again. "I think you're making fun of me."

Sometimes I wondered if *she* wasn't making the fun. I thought she might be then. Her expression became animated. The glaze of a few minutes back had vanished from her eyes and the slackness from her lips. I couldn't figure this dame at all. She was two persons in one. Then I remembered Steve of the dimple and his reaction when I mentioned her name in the Acme Products Company. Naturally, I thought, also, of the Acme number I'd jotted down from her envelope on a long shot.

I said, "By the way, I was talking with Steve yesterday. We had quite a session."

She had been stamping impressions on the cloth with her glass, but she stopped and looked up.

"I didn't think you and Steve knew each other."

"Oh, yes. We know each other very well now. Very well, indeed."

Her expression altered once more and became sad. She shook her head. "Dottie's so mean. She won't live with him any more."

My pulse broke into a gallop and I swallowed hard. Carmela minced up then with my breakfast decorating one arm and created a diversion. She clattered the dishes down with studied carelessness so that everything was in the wrong place. I gave her a stern look but she smiled sweetly and turned back toward the kitchen. Behind her she left a jelly omelet, hashed brown potatoes, rolls and butter and coffee. I began shifting them around into proper array.

"What was it you said about Steve and your sister not living together any more?" I asked, trying to be casual.

She set the glass down. "I thought you knew him well."

I smiled pityingly. "Hardly well enough to ask whom he's living with at the moment. I mean there's a certain delicacy

about those things, according to the parties and the particular situation. You mean, of course, he *was* living with her at one time?"

"Of course! And why not? He's her husband. What's the matter with you?"

"I'm beginning to wonder," I said after rallying. "Steve Corbell. My, my! I recalled Mrs. Corbell's denial that she knew any man with a cleft chin.

Helen giggled. "What's so funny? If you know Stephen at all, you should know that. At least you ought to have his right name."

"Oh, I should. I should. No doubt about it. Poor, forgetful me." I pointed my fork at her. "And why are he and Dottie mad on each other?"

ONCE MORE she changed. It was like a curtain passing over her face. The sly look was back, and the slack lips, but no words came. And suddenly I thought I knew why Mrs. Corbell's husband was a castoff.

I said carelessly as I tried to eat, "That place of his—that Acme Products shop—do you go up there often?"

She shook her head. "Oh, no, he doesn't want me up there any more."

I nodded. "Probably the place out in the country then. Nice spot. I'd like to see it again. I've only been out there once." Again I nodded, as if all this were an adventure in nostalgia. "Kate's a nice person, too. No knockout, but agreeable."

"Kate? There isn't anybody out there named Kate."

"No? Funny how that came into my head. I met *some* woman at the house." I looked up and was very, very thoughtful. "Was it Kate, or Mary, or Ann—or Karen? No, I don't seem—"

"Ann?" she broke in. "You must mean Mrs. Doble." Helen gave a little shudder. "She's so awful homely."

"That's the one. I wondered what she was doing at the house."

"Ann? Oh, she lives there with Eli. They have to be around for the truckmen and lock up the barn again."

Coffee at Rosario's always came too hot. My experimental swallow almost scalded me. I hadn't meant to drop it down the hatch that quick, but this doll was killing me and I feared she might

undergo another change and clam up. She was a gold mine.

I said, "They have to see the truckmen and lock up the barn again." Then I nodded, as if aware of this all the while. "Of course! I went out there in a truck myself. I mean I myself went out in one of the trucks." I gave her a casual hand-flip. "Matter of English."

She giggled. "I know what you mean."

You do like hell—I thought—and you're getting a little potted. But she had fingered Steve, Kate the Kissler, who was Ann Doble, and Eli. She hadn't mentioned yet the two energetic lads called Jigger and Chappie. I wondered whether to press a little harder for quantity production from this featherbrain but decided on caution and quality. Then I recalled Steve's remark in the lower hall, while I struggled with my bonds upstairs, that some Fanch wasn't expected that evening but would be out the next night.

"I was hoping to meet Fanch out there but he wasn't around," I said, throwing the brand-new caution to the winds.

Her forehead wrinkled and she appeared to be having difficulty in focussing. "*He* wasn't around? Fanchon's a *woman*, silly."

I had to scramble back fast and take that one on the first bounce, so I stuttered a little. "I mean the—the man who was going to introduce me didn't come out. Neither of them did."

"Oh, her friend! The one with the sleepy eyes and funny ears?"

My knife slipped as I buttered a piece of roll. I recovered and pressed the blade hard, trying not to betray my excitement.

"That's the one! Frenchy!" I placed Fanchon now and should have remembered. She was the babe I'd seen stepping out of the elevator with Rhoda Yeager. So Frenchy had a hook-in there, too. I said, "What do they keep in that barn, anyhow?"

I expected that she'd blab something about alcohol, or a still, or something yet of interest to the racket boys, but she let me down. The glass came away slowly from her lips. It was empty but she had carefully drained its last amber drops from the ice. I considered ordering her another potion, but she was showing effects of the liquor and I feared she might go over

the nice edge if pushed by one more shot. "Goods for Steve's business," she said. Then she waggled a coy finger. "Garry, you know something? I like you."

I SMILED. "Thought I left that magnetism at home. But why does Steve store his stuff way out there? Why not at the shop?"

She nodded to herself, then suddenly looked up. "Who?"

"Steve. Why doesn't he truck his merchandise in town to the Acme place?"

"'Cause he's got too much bus'ness. Never mind Stevie. Why don't you treat me with the proper respect? Come over'n sit side of me."

"Sure! In a little while."

I didn't get it. With all that vacant loft space in the Franklin Street block, and probably at cheap rental, why should he use a barn in a God-forsaken country lane? And why such a tremendous backlog anyhow? Paper hats, whistles, dribble glasses, snapperjacks, trick cigars, confetti! All small-bulk stuff.

Then I recalled those cases I'd seen being wheeled across the sidewalk from truck to freight elevator. Was the Acme firm supplying the whole damn countryside? Or was something with a very ripe odor behind this? What common bond linked the alienated son-in-law of a wealthy merchant, a racket-guy owner of a night spot, a couple of apparently retired shoplifters, a con man, and three bims called Chappie, Eli and Jigger — whoever and whatever they might be? I didn't know but I meant to find out.

Finishing my coffee, I beckoned to Carmela and paid the score. As she went away she brought one hand up to her nose significantly in the nearly empty restaurant, closed the nostrils with forefinger and thumb—her little finger extended stiffly—and made a distasteful face. Helen's back was to the gesture.

I said, "Well, Droopy, what's about getting you home before all is lost? They'll have the gendarmes out scouting pretty soon—or that mug who pasted me night before last at the Old Plantation. By the way, who *was* that guy?"

She giggled and picked up her glass. Then, noticing it was empty, she set it down again. "That was so funny, Garry."

"Yeah! I was hysterical, only I don't remember laughing. Maybe I was too busy reaching for the floor."

She regarded me owlishly. "He's Dottie's most precious boy friend." Another silly giggle.

"Oh, just a boy friend. And he'd do anything for a friend." I rubbed my jaw and became bold. "Well, I suppose he has a name?"

"Cert'nly he's got a name, Garry. He's Bob." Her face suddenly showed perplexity. She blinked, swayed in the seat and managed another giggle. "Isn't it funny? Can't remember Bob's name. But it's Bob Something."

"Probably! You said that." I slid out of my seat, stood up and moved the table to give her room and a hand. "Come on, Toots—get yourself cranked up. You've a rendezvous with some shut-eye. I'll drive you home."

She elevated herself from the bench but in no sprightly manner. "Let's go some places," she said. "Night's young."

"Sure. Sure. It's by far the youngest night we've seen this afternoon. We'll go run a left-handed power-drill somewhere in a hallway outside nobody's room where he isn't asleep."

She leaned, and with her up close I got the teasing scent again. She patted my hand and crooned happily, "My nice Garry, the old fathead. Where we going, Garry?"

"We're going for a lovely ride to the foot of a hill called Kinkaid Avenue. Then you may go bounding up the hill like a gazelle—if you're able. If you're not, I'll make delivery in person and pour you into the house and Big Sister probably will sic all her pals on me for bringing you home crocked."

"Don't say that. Never told you anything of the kind."

I walked her out to the Hudson, shoe-horned her into the front seat, rolled down the window on that side, doubled around the car and took the wheel.

My problem child had changed again. She said querulously. "I want them, Garry. Where are my nice pictures?"

"That's rather a loose term," I said, almost patting her knee before I recalled what the result might be. My hand jerked back in reflex as if I'd touched a hot

stove. "Your pictures are all right, Droopy. They're safe. I've put them away, so forget them."

SHE leaned on my shoulder and sulked. Then she straightened, evidently deciding that she was hurt. "So you won't give them back." Her head bobbed vigorously. "All right, then. I'll get some more from Steve. Get lots more nice pictures from Stevie." But almost immediately she leaned again. "Garry, I feel so sleepy."

"Well, go to sleep for a while. I'll wake you when we get there."

My thoughts were trying to disentangle themselves as I snaked the Hudson away from the curb below Rosario's. So she'd get more photos from the outcast brother-in-law. And what the hell was *he* doing with nudes of his wife's kid sister? Unless he had stripped her and taken them himself. But the shots were as skillfully lighted and clear-cut as any pro could do them. Something was very sour, no matter who had made the studies. Steve apparently had a stock of them—perhaps including other and racier poses at that—and who except a complete heel would be messing around in such fashion with his own wife's kin?

The day was clear and the air crisp. We rolled out the Boulevard swung into the Dyson Road while she slept peacefully. Breezes, whipping through the open window, blew wisps of her hair against my cheek. The coat she wore was pulled over and the dress hiked well above her left knee. I didn't dare pull the dress down or adjust the coat. I didn't even dare dig out a cigarette for fear of disturbing her.

She was difficult to awaken, however. When I shook her at Kinkaid and the Dyson Road, she merely moaned. I straightened her in the seat but her head lolled and wobbled. So I put my right arm across her shoulders and steadied the head while I patted her cheeks lightly. That was a tactical error. One arm whipped around my neck and her face turned to mine, though she seemed yet asleep.

With some difficulty and delay, I came out of the clinch. After breaking the hold, I would have gone to work on her once more but found her eyes open.

She said, "Hello!" That was her adult voice. Then she blinked a couple of times

and sat up straight. "Oh, we're back home."

"You're back home," I corrected. "Or you will be if you can make that hill. How about it?"

"You're so repulsive, Garry. Of course I can make the hill."

She appeared perfectly sober and I stared. "You wouldn't have been kidding me by any chance. Hell, seven deacons on Sunday couldn't be any soberer than you."

She leaned and the off arm started going places again. "Was I plastered, Garry?"

"About medium." I gave her arm back. "It's broad daylight, my pet. We're on an open road and autos run by quite often. They're very popular now, you know. So on your way. I've got work to do."

"I'll wait'll you turn around." She settled back in the seat complacently.

"I'm not turning around. I'm going straight out to—well, some place on business." Reaching in front of her, I pulled the handle and the door swung open.

By then she had clutched me around the waist. The more I wriggled, the more she clung. Off balance of my stretch to the door, I had difficulty in applying pressure. When I did recover and broke her hold, her hand was in my topcoat pocket. I pulled the hand out.

"Garry!" she wailed, fussing around the neck of her dress and straightening her clothes.

"Come on, now. Be a good girl. You should be home, anyhow. I'm asking you as a gentleman to a lady—scram!"

To my amazement, she smiled sweetly, turned and slid down from the seat without further argument. The smile twisted into a kiddish leer as she faced around on the pavement, and her lower lip was caught between her teeth.

She said, "I'll be seeing you, Garry—soon."

"Fine!" I nodded with vigor and thankfulness. "Wait for me to call you up—maybe nine years from next Fourth of July."

She swung the door closed with one motion. The funny smirk was still working. It bothered me as I started to roll, leaving her standing on the curb at the foot of the hill. It was still bothering me a couple

of miles away—that and the hand in my pocket and the peculiar fussing she had done around the V of her dress.

After swerving to the shoulder of the road, it took only a few seconds to search for my room key. It was gone again.

XIX

THE HIGHWAY CURVED on the rise and dropped gradually over the other side, a three-lane strip of macadam, for more than a mile of straightaway. I could see the raised, black-and-white-striped protection gates of a railroad crossing in the valley as the road leveled off. So my calculations had been right.

Halfway along the down slope, I turned the Hudson and reversed my tracks, topped the hill a second time and went rolling along its curve to the bottom, with an eye for side roads or lanes. The macadam ran through a cut in the hill, with rain-eroded sides lifted fifteen to twenty feet. When I ran out of the cut I knew I had the place.

Once more I turned, drove back a couple of hundred yards and wheeled the Hudson off the highway into a gravelly recess which a steam-shovel probably had made while digging fill out of the embankment. This—I thought—should be an excellent spot for necking unless the state troopers were wise to it and mean enough to throw in a light while patrolling.

I raked around in the Hudson for some handy tool but as usual found little of what should be there. In the trunk were only the spare tire, the jack and a broken piece of spring-leaf about sixteen inches long. I picked that up, locked the trunk and hit for the sloping sides of this roadside gash. Maybe people in the occasional cars which sang past would think I was looking for wild flowers in March.

Woodland stretched away from the embankment top. It was second or third growth, thin and scattered beeches and maples, some of which still fluttered autumn's hangover's of crisp, brown leaves. The woods sloped gently as I worked along in the direction where I estimated the house should lie. There was underbrush here as well, but none so thick that it could not be skirted or crashed through, and an occasional carpet of gray moss, or

stand of winter-sered fern, drooping and disconsolate.

Fallen leaves packed deeper and it was soggy underfoot as I reached the bottom of the slope, keeping a careful watch for the house. I had no desire to be grabbed and tied up again. That was where I had come in. There was no telling where I might have gone out, if they could have had their way. Two men were dead already and neither had been killed merely for somebody's amusement.

In an earlier day this land must have been pasture, or been farmed over. I climbed one wall, still in fairly good repair, which ran far back through the woods, and came to another, but the second wall was low and crumbling. Once, to my left, there sounded a sudden wild scurrying, as if some small animal had made off in alarm, though I was able to see none.

Then I spied the house, and all hope that Kate the Kisser, or Eli, or any other of this curiously-associated crew, might have feared to return was dissipated. Smoke curled thin and lazily from the chimney. For a few moments I paused, watching the place, or what part of it I could see, but that smoke was the only sign of life. Afterwards I proceeded more cautiously, crouched over and with one eye on the building. Coming to a knoll, I detoured rather than go over the rise. And when I got around the knoll, I had my first glimpse of the barn, beyond the house and probably sixty feet from its nearest point. Over the countryside brooded a deep silence, broken only by my feet scuffling the leaves, and an occasional faint singing of tires far back along the highway.

Then I ran into barbed wire. It was strung through the woods from a point behind the house—heavy strands six inches or so apart and to a height of about seven feet. The wire was nailed to trees, with staples driven deep into green wood. Following the wire back as it snaked through the woodland, it became plain that this protection was strung around the barn, except for its front and that side nearest the house, overlooking a weed-grown field. I wondered whether the wire was rigged to an alarm system designed to bring the boys roaring out if any attempt were made to scale the barrier. I could discover noth-

ing that appeared suspicious, however.

The large front doors of the barn were fastened with a huge brassy padlock. I could see another padlock in place on a smaller door at their left. There was a closed loft window high above the main doors and one begrimed window on my side, half a dozen feet from the front. When I came opposite the window I was almost beyond sight of the dwelling. Barely one corner showed from my position.

At this point the wire was stretched along saplings which marked the woods' edge. Between wire and barn was a gap of twenty-five to thirty feet, all open but high with brown, brittle weeds. I moved farther along the wire and considered my situation. Just then I would have given one of Langerman's ten-spots for a pair of nippers. The broken spring-leaf served no purpose against the stubborn, deep-driven staples. As a pry, it merely skidded and left gashes in the slippery bark.

There was nothing to do but climb. I dropped the spring-leaf through to the other side, peeled and wadded my topcoat and shoved that through, then went gingerly aloft, grasping a sapling and feeling cautiously for toeholds between the heavy barbs. Descent on the other side was even more delicate but I made it without stabbing myself, donned my coat and picked up the flat length of steel.

To my straining ears, crackling of the dry weeds as I waded through them sounded loud as small Chinese firecrackers. I mushed around behind the barn but drew a blank there. High up was a window matching the loft window in front. Down below were four small, square ventilation ports which evidently opened out of stalls. The rest of the rear presented a solid area of time-grayed and weather-curved shingles. Twenty-five feet or less at its rear the barbed wire ran, leaving escape paths available only through the field on the far side or along a drive past the house.

I SCUFFED back to the side window. The barn stood on a granite foundation and the bottom of the lower sash was in reach. I couldn't make the upper part, however, and so could get no pressure to raise the sash. Nor could I see if there was a catch at joining of upper

and lower sashes. Poking with the spring-leaf, I jammed it under the window, got a purchase and bore down cautiously. The sash didn't budge. It was either locked or nailed. I maneuvered another purchase in the chink and gave it more muscle. This time the sash raised a fractional inch, but sank back into place when I eased pressure on my makeshift jimmy.

For more than a minute I stopped to listen but there was yet no sound of movement from the house. I feared most that a truck might arrive with a cargo for storage and there I was, caught between barn and wire, with an excellent chance of being spotted if anybody had curiosity enough to circle and check the building.

Again I drove the spring-leaf home. This time I employed both hands and plenty of weight. The steel moved but whether it was merely biting into the wood or straining whatever held the window closed, I couldn't tell. Sharp edges threatened to cut my hands, so I shifted the grip and bore down anew, holding my breath and fearful lest the glass buckle and crash.

But suddenly something gave. The sash was free. I reached up, got my fingers under it and shoved as high as I could reach. Then I upended the steel and used that to raise the window more. It went up hard, but it went up, nevertheless, and stuck there.

I felt as if I'd been pushing up the roof, and the grating noise had been too loud for comfort. My nerves weren't any too steady. I felt a trifle shaky. Just a bit; not enough to rattle my hat off if I still had a hat. Nobody came boiling around the corner of the barn, though, and I began to straighten out after a while. Then, inexplicably, I thought of Dunegan and the mood he must be in through not hearing from me all day.

Well, the hell with Harry for now. I studied the gap between sash and sill. Getting through there was bound to be a tight squeeze, even once I was up to level. The sill was at chin height. Then, supposing the window let go and dropped while I was halfway through. I'd be cozy as a mouse in a trap.

I made it after two futile attempts. Hauling up my left pant-leg, I ran the spring-leaf down into sock and shoe. I didn't want to be without that handspike

in the event I was cornered. Two kayos were somewhat over the quota. The next one was mine by all rights. I was tired catching them. I wanted to pitch from now on.

The third spring-and-scramble landed me balancing my chest on the sill, with elbows hooked. I jockeyed them apart, got my head down and into the aperture, then wiggled. The rest was comparatively easy until my head bumped something hard. It was a large, wooden case, but away from the window far enough so that I could raise myself on it, get my legs inboard and drop to the floor between window and case.

The barn was huge. More wooden cases, of assorted sizes, stood about the floor. Smaller ones were stacked in twos or threes. Across from where I stood was a second window. Toward the rear on that side was another small door, undoubtedly in sight from the house. I threaded my way among cases, crossed an open space just inside the big doors and peered through the opposite window. Nobody at the house seemed alarmed. Pale blue smoke was still wisping from the chimney.

Turning back from the window, I slapped the spring-leaf thoughtfully against my thigh and studied the layout. There wasn't much room for additional cases unless they were piled higher. Then I looked up and saw a large open trap in the rough, beamed ceiling toward the rear. Winding through a narrow aisle, I discovered at that end a boarded-in staircase which led up steeply. I climbed the stairs and found myself in a loft with more packing cases. There was a pulley-hoist rigged over the trap in the floor. Toward the loft front, on the side facing the house, was a wide door, probably one used for swinging hay and feed inboard when animals were kept in the building. This door was held closed with a large hook.

THEN I spotted the mantelpiece. It leaned against the back wall, an old couch pushed against it. The mantelpiece, possibly a discard from the house, looked familiar and I moved in closer. I remembered its carved design and could see Helen again, lounging casually against one corner and wearing a dreamy smile—the

only thing she did wear. I gazed around the place. So this may have been where her pictures were made, in the dusty loft of an old barn. On that couch she might have posed naked, a couch easily decorated with a throw to hide its shabbiness from the lens. Apparently for anything in pants—or out of them, should it come to that—Helen would fall like an overripe apple.

But if this were the studio, she must have fallen for her brother-in-law, or his photography—or both—before his business had stepped up. There were too many packing cases in the way now. I sighed and returned downstairs.

Upstairs or down, the cases had no markings, except for a number stenciled on each, preceded by a letter. Neither name or consignor nor consignee; no hint of an address! And they were battered and stained, as if they'd been shipped around considerably.

With the spring-leaf I tried to pry the corner of one apart but my makeshift tool had an end too blunt. I couldn't get enough bite for leverage. After a few minutes I gave up and went seeking a better tool. That produced nothing but a loss of time, and the afternoon was waning. The barn had no more tools than a journeyman plumber on his first journey.

I did find three long, rusty planking spikes. With these I went to work on a case, worrying away the wood with little gouges at the joining of two boards. I felt like a guy trying to dig his way out of Sing Sing with an old nutpick. Eventually, though, I chewed out a crevice large enough for the spring-leaf. I punched the steel shaft into this hole and pried. The boards were dovetailed, which made it more difficult, but finally one split and cracked, protruding enough for me to slide the spring-leaf through as a wedge. Then I grabbed with both hands and ripped a section away.

The noise appalled me. I dropped the piece of wood, scuttled to the window which gave a view of the house and peered through the dusty panes. I expected to see an excited exodus but all was serene as before. I stood there more than a minute before returning to the breached case. Exposed to view was a lining of newspapers, showing a small tear which

apparently had been made by my pry-bar. I tore some of the paper away and my hand came in contact with rough cloth.

Groping further, I touched more cloth, of different textures, but then the sore wrist rubbed against jagged wood and I desisted. Next I tried to pull some of the cloth free but it was packed in tightly and came hard. After awhile I worked an end loose, yanked and felt a smooth surface on the other side. I turned the cloth over and stared. What I held in my hand seemed to be the corner of a lined overcoat. Now what the hell were Steve Corbell and his Acme novelty firm doing with a caseful of overcoats?

Finding that I was still holding the material, I dropped it and looked around. All these boxes and no nail-puller! My right hand was sore from pressure of the spikes and I studied the situation for easier game. At my right, nearer the wall, two smaller cases were piled, one on the other. The top one appeared to have thin plywood sides.

I climbed stiffly on corners of boxes until my head, when I stood erect, went between beams under the ceiling. Steadying myself with a hand on the beam, I brought a heel down sharply on the top case and the wood caved into a mass of splinters. Stooping over, with feet carefully braced, I ripped jagged pieces away until a large hole gaped.

This container seemed packed with narrow pasteboard boxes. I yanked away more of the thin, splintered side, took one of the spikes again and worried some of the glazed pasteboard away. With the spike and straining fingers I coaxed out a pair of ladies' black kid gloves. These didn't come under the heading of favors or novelties — any more than the overcoats came under the heading of favors or novelties.

I thrust the gloves into my pocket, picked up the trusty spring-leaf and moved toward the open window.

XX

THE JUKE BOX IN THIS JOINT, with muted horns and the bass doing a sermon on jive, was pounding out, "Calling Dr. Cupid to Mend a Broken Heart."

6—Detective Book—Spring

I had trouble hearing Art Bentley and closed the phone-booth door.

"That's better," I told him. "There's more damn tomtoms beating in this town than Dicks and Harry's."

"What do you mean?"

"Never mind. What were you saying?"

"I said what the hell's the sad story? Harry's so bloody sore he won't speak to anybody in this salt mine. No word from you all day. Say, are you in or out, my mysterious friend?"

"Brother, I don't know. What I do know is that I'm in something else up to my pretty neck. I'd like to see you."

"What for? Hell, you've got a desk right in front of me. What's the matter with *using* it once in a while?"

I let that pass. "I'll see you at Rosario's, and plan not to go home. Will you look up—"

"Hold on, now, sonny. I've got a date with Wanda. It may have slipped your mind that I'm particularly a bride's husband."

"You've got to flag her, Art. This is big stuff—I think! When my blast goes off it'll rock the town—if things work out the way I figure."

"Wanda's blasts do a little rocking themselves. And you know how she'd sound off if I said I was flagging her date to meet you."

Wanda didn't care much for Bentley's running mates of the bachelor days. "My Lord, Art," I argued, "she isn't a little bride any more, watching for you behind the curtains. She'll be glad to junk you for an evening. Wives are *like* that after a while, ol' boy."

"Cripes, you single bums know all about it, don't you?" He chuckled. "Well, I'll ring up and try to stall her on something. But what's the gag? What do you want me to do for you? There's always a catch."

"Nothing much. Nothing much at all. Very simple, as a matter of fact. We ran a fight picture yesterday in sports—a kayo at the Arena. Bercovi floored Tiger Martin or something. Maybe it was vice versa. You remember the shot?"

"Yuh, I think so—vaguely. Why?"

"See if you can get the photo department to make me a clear print, blown-up as big as possible, and bring it over to Rosy's."

"Okay—if they haven't lost the negative. See you over there."

"Wait a minute. One more thing. Pull out the clips on Dorothea Langerman, too. She's Mrs. Stephen Corbell now, of course. Maybe her clips are under his name. If not, bring any on him, too, but I can't remember ever hearing of the guy."

"So far I'm hardly stumped. What else, I'm being your copy boy?"

"Nothing else. If I'm not there, wait for me. And give my regards to Wanda."

"You can go to hell. If she ever finds out I've lied about having to take a night assignment—"

I hung up, smiling, and discovered that a last lingering cockleburrr was sticking the tail of my coat to a pants leg. During my country trek I'd run into burdock somewhere and had picked up a mess of the pesky things. I removed this one and carefully transferred it at the bar to the sagging rear end of a souse who had clapped me hard on a shoulder while I waited for the phone.

Then I skimmed hurriedly through the papers. On the way toward town from the barn I had picked up the afternoon editions. They were all groping on the Langerman murder, while Gillie Maher's passing had been reduced to a couple of sticks. The butler, the chauffeur, Rhoda Yeager, the cook and the maids had been questioned again at the Langerman house but could throw nothing in the way of new light on the case. Specific mention of Helen was missing, except the *Globe* repeated that Mrs. Corbell and "a younger sister" had been downtown, and all others of the household, save one maid and the cook, had been absent at the time of the killing.

There was no mention of me, either, so Captain Harding had chosen to keep mum about our clash and his curiosity regarding my activities.

I went out to the Hudson and started rolling for Belle City again. Heavy clouds had piled in and were moving slowly across the sky. It seemed that the weather was making up for more rain. I fired a cigarette and wondered what time Helen would creep into my room this night, using the key I'd been sap enough to let her steal a second time.

Walking into Rosario's, I ran my eyes

along the bar but saw nobody who looked at all sinister. Bentley hadn't arrived. Gino moved down to my end and laid his palms flat on the mahogany, awaiting my order.

"Same thing," I said. "Anybody been in looking for me since?"

He shook his head. "Not while I been on, Garry. Everything quiet. I had a relief this afternoon, though. You find out who those guys were?"

"Nope! I've a fair idea, though."

"They didn't look right to me." He went back along the bar and picked out a bottle.

BENTLEY came pushing through the door, turning himself sidewise. He carried a large manila envelope under one arm. Gino spotted him, set out another glass and waited expectantly.

The rewrite man said, "Bourbon and soda—Markey's." He slapped the envelope down. "There, dammit! I had to bring the thing wet and not tinned."

"A high finish isn't necessary. How about clips?"

"In my pocket." He patted his coat. "You want them on the bar? And what the hell's the mystery, anyway?"

"Yeah, let's have them. The mystery's quite a story, my lad. Quite a story. In fact, it's such a story that I don't know the end myself. It's baffling. It's intriguing. . . ."

"It's probably baloney," Bentley said dryly. "Come on. Cut the guff."

I took the yellow envelope of clippings he handed over. It was marked "LANGERMAN, Dorothea; Merchant's Daughter," and was from the *Press-Bulletin* reference morgue. The reference clerks hadn't dignified Corbell by putting his wife's clips under her marriage name, with a cross-reference—if, indeed, there had been anything printed on the marriage. I couldn't recall any.

"Did you look through these things?"

"No," Bentley replied. "What the hell would I look for?"

I sipped my drink and set the glass down, drew the clips out and began riffling through them. There were quite a number. If Dorothea wasn't Social Register, or Sewing Circle, or Junior League, at least she was active in hardly-less-catered-to brackets. Come to think of it, she probably was out of Junior League range

anyhow. She appeared at least fifteen years older than the yearning Helen.

For a couple of minutes I waded through all-but-forgotten accounts of socials, drives, concerts and benefits until arriving at a clipping which I was seeking. Only a couple of paragraphs of bare fact, and dated six years back, it read:

DOT LANGERMAN BECOMES BRIDE

Friends of the couple received announcement yesterday that Miss Dorothea Langerman, elder daughter of R. Eugene Langerman, Belle City department store owner, and the late Florence Walker Langerman, had been quietly married to Stephen J. Corbell, merchandising manager of her father's business.

According to the announcements, the couple will reside at the Langerman estate, 221 Kinkaid Avenue, in the West Hills section. Mrs. Corbell is a graduate of Miss Hartwell's School, Fairview, Conn., and attended the Lockyear School of Business and Accounting. She has been associated with her father in the Langerman store.

I passed the clipping to Bentley. "That, brother, is what might be called the bridegroom's brushoff." I went cruising for more but found only one other announcement clip, as brief and along the same lines.

The rewrite man handed back the clipping. "He *was* sort of under wraps at that. The gentleman also was present. Shotgun, do you think?"

"Uh-huh! No kids that I know of." I bunched the clippings and slid them into the envelope. "Sounds more like a matter of marrying the boss' daughter." I returned the envelope to him. "And sometimes not a bad idea, either, if you ask me."

Bentley dropped the clippings into a side pocket and picked up his glass. "I'm not asking you, my friend, but I *am* asking what the hell you wanted me for tonight. So far I haven't got fat on your information. If I go by past experience, you're stuck on something."

I nodded. "Yes and no. I'm stuck and I'm not stuck. I'll tell you a little story."

He grinned. "Do, my friend. *That* I'll listen to. Wanda's wandering boy must have something to carry back and tell her."

Then I related everything that had happened to me since the bank visit, when I'd attempted to pump an admission from the pot-bellied fifth vice-president that his

Belle City Trust had a shortage, and my eye had fallen upon Gillie Maher across the lobby. As I concluded with my discovery of what was in the barn, Bentley jiggled the ice in his glass, placed it on the bar and shoved it away for a refill.

"So you got up like a gentleman, abandoning this peeling belle in your own sheets, and dressed yourself and faded," he said, smirking. "Now did I ever tell you about the farmer's daughter who became a traveling saleslady . . ."

"You *would* pick out that one spot," I accused. "Yes, I scrambled and I'd scam again. That doll is definitely psycho. She's forty-rod. She's dynamite. She hungers. She yearns. She craves and burns and pants. Well, let her run along and pant after somebody else."

He patted my shoulder. "Maybe she has. Yes, call the lady indiscreet. From what you say, she probably has corns on those bed-climbing knees, my leftist Casanova."

A VOICE came over my shoulders. "So now he's a Casanova. Well, well!"

We turned and groaned in unison. Cliff Romney of the *Examiner*, the *Press-Bulletin* alumnus and renegade, had approached unseen from the cafe side with Rudy Govana of his sheet.

Govana grinned. "Garry on the spot. If somebody's murdered, look under the bed for Dean. He'll be reporting it from ringside. What happened, Garry boy? You started the Langerman murder off and now we hear you're fired."

"Only by ambition," I said modestly. "Mr. Dunegan and I don't always see eye to eye but who does always see eye to eye with Harry?"

"Salt of the earth, that Dunegan," Romney observed dryly. "He'd hang his own mother, if *she'd* bring the rope."

Bentley had been blowing little impatient puffs of air through his lips. He simulated a grin, picked up the large manila envelope and said, "Getting pretty noisy around here, Garry. Let's move to the other side where there's less riff-raff."

Romney wasn't offended. "Ah, something cooking!" he exclaimed, nodding sagely. "You see Bentley and Dean with their heads together and what've you got?" He shrugged. "Well, of course you've got

double-barreled dandruff. And then you've got . . ."

But Bentley had started away for the cafe side and I followed, leaving Romney still mouthing.

"Why doesn't that lippy bum drink some place around his own shop?" the rewrite man grumbled, peeling off his topcoat and hanging it up with his hat.

I ADDED my coat and slid into the booth. "Into everyone's life some bane must fall, brother. Personally I thought his corny comedy improved a trifle—just a trifle—since his move to the *Examiner*. Their refining influence, no doubt."

"Nuts! Cliff couldn't be refined even by double-distillation. Take a pig out of his pen and put him in a parlor—and he's still a pig."

He had placed the manila envelope upright behind the sugar bowl, propping it against the wall. I retrieved it, bent the clamps back and drew out its damp contents. The photo, blown up to about sixteen by twenty inches, was between two pieces of white blotter.

"If that's Exhibit A, what's the significance?" Bentley asked. "To me it looks like a fight picture, but of course what it looks like to you . . ." He left it hanging.

I switched the photo around so he could view it right side up. Pointing to the figure with the bandaged hand, I said, "This guy is Nick Zulturo. He's a dealer over at Frenchy Hupnel's."

Bentley's head raised and his eyes met mine. "Place Elegante? Well, what of it?"

"And this laddie," I said, pointing to Jerry, "is the Langerman family chauffeur. Does *that* mean anything to you?"

The rewrite man looked up again, frowning. "Not especially. What should it mean—if anything?"

"There's the question. Maybe it's only coincidence. Jerry Flavin is *my* boy out at Langerman's. Yet I spot him at the fights right beside one of Frenchy's gang. Now, Mrs. Corbell's secretary—a very delicious dish, by the way—plays around Frenchy's joint. I saw her there myself with a one-time Queen of the Shoplifters. And Gillie Maher had shifted his base to Frenchy's, and Gillie's dead."

Bentley grinned. "Sure. So is old man

Langerman dead. He didn't play Frenchy's, did he, on a couple of canes? And Mrs. Corbell and that Bob guy who hung one on you were playing the Old Plantation. Where are your points? For that matter, you're liable to sit with anybody at the fights. Once I was in the working press row at some wrestling bouts and who climbed in beside me but old Jack Johnson—beret and all. I'd never even *seen* him before, close up. What did that make me, his pal?"

I sandwiched the big photo in between the blotters again and shoved the whole business back in the envelope. "Well, I dunno. The price of ringside seats and everything."

"Only three bucks thirty. Then he might have knuckled an Annie Oakley." Bentley smirked. "I hope I'm helping you."

"Yeah, you're helping a lot." I thought of the one thing I hadn't told him about the photo, but I wanted to see what his reactions were to the rest first. I said, "What do you make of the secretary and her peculiar friends?"

Just then Carmela appeared in the cafe, knotting a white apron over her black costume. She ranged mincingly up to the booth.

"Well—so you finished pouring her back in the bottle. My, my! The babes this Dean fellow runs around with, Art."

"You will kindly reach, grab yourself in the rear and run around to the bar," I said sternly. "And when you return with two bourbons and soda—probably in not too much of a hurry, either—you'll kindly button that fresh Italiano bazoo."

She made a wet, blurbling, very unladylike noise through pursed lips, wrinkled her snub nose and minced off.

"Now where were we?" I asked.

"The secretary." He nibbled his lower lip. "In the first place, what does this Corbell dame want with a secretary, anyhow? She's no dowager or something, with a lot of social commitments."

"She's no dowager—period! In fact, she's a nice dish, too, though a bit on the iceberg side. But the clipping said she's associated in the business. Her old man indicated the same thing to me—more than that. I took it she was in charge. And business people need secretaries."

"Okay! They have secretaries in the

office, haven't they? Maybe this Rhoda is more of a companion."

I SHOOK my head. "Too young and too good-looking. Mrs. Corbell's a looker, of course, but she's got close to fifteen years on Rhoda. No woman thirty-seven or eight wants to lay herself open to comparison with a chum whose youth is fresher and obvious." I cleared my throat. "This is Dean, the philosophic psychologist, speaking."

Bentley produced a pack of Camels, drew one out and dropped his pack on the table. "Is this Mrs. Corbell a yearner like her sister?"

"Far from it. She's about as cozy as a wet Newfoundland. At least with me she's been. Hard as nails. Evidently she can be softened up, though, when it comes to the kid sister. You know, there are quite a few years between them—but only one brain." I rubbed my jaw. "Mrs. Corbell's evidently been trying to keep the kid and her complex under wraps and away from temptation. That's probably why she nearly had a fit when she saw Helen at the Old Plantation with me, a virile male." I coughed diffidently.

"Well, if she knows about the kid's leanings and is so touchy about her running with men, why wasn't an eye put on Helen? You said Mrs. Corbell went out and left the kid there with only the old man and a couple of servants."

"Somebody apparently was calling for Helen but didn't show," I reminded. "She was all rigged out. Maybe I should have pumped her on that."

He nodded. "All right. Supposing that somebody did call after you two left. Maybe there's your murderer. Does Harding know about the date?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. Tom Harding isn't telling me, of all people, what's he found out. Anyhow, that wouldn't explain Gillie's murder."

Bentley puffed for a moment and let smoke curl from his lips. "Doc Rush said Langerman was killed less than four hours after dinner, according to stomach contents. That fixed the murder time at not later than 11:00. Where was Mrs. Corbell then?"

I took a cigarette from his pack and lighted it. "She and Helen, with this guy

Bob—whoever *he* is—had left the Old Plantation. Helen popped back again. That was just around 11:00. I know it was eleven ten when I started to drive her home right afterwards. She said she'd been left waiting in a cab by her sister and Bob while they went into some place. So she gave them the slip."

"The chauffeur was on his day off and at the fights. We know that. How about Steve Corbell and his dimple?"

"Heaven only knows where he was."

"A prospect, then. A very *good* prospect. Angry son-in-law who's been kicked out of his Langerman job as well as the Langerman daughter's bed." Bentley grinned. "I mean the *elder* daughter, of course, not the one who drags you in."

"Keep it clean," I warned sternly. "Wanda wouldn't like it."

Carmela arrived with the highballs. She made change for my bill, ignoring both of us, carefully spilled the coins into the fusty ashtray and hurried off before a rebuke could be thrown.

"Now the secretary," the rewrite man resumed, as I picked the coins out gingerly. "She's at Frenchy's place when you get there. What time?"

I MADE a quick calculation. "Oh, that must have been about half an hour after midnight; twenty of one. Around there. But I talked with Frenchy probably twenty minutes before spotting Rhoda. I must have seen her and the booster queen around one o'clock then."

He watched me remove the last coin and clean it on the tablecloth, then crushed his cigarette in the tray. "You don't know where she might have been before eleven, of course?"

"No. And try to find out from her. Try to find out *anything*—either from *her* or Mrs. Corbell."

Bentley ignored that. "Of course Frenchy wouldn't go out and pull a murder himself," he mused aloud. "He's been on the grill for a couple of killings, but those boys don't do their own dirty work. And you haven't any idea who the three lads were who had you in the truck?"

"Except for the names I heard them call each other, and that Eli lives with Kate the Kisser."

"The old butler? I suppose he's

scratched? You don't make much of him?"

"Nevers?" I laughed. "Hell, he couldn't knock a midget off a chamber pot with a fungo bat—if he could *lift* a fungo bat. Whoever belted Langerman with that candlestick worked up a sweat. Anyhow, Nevers had that night off. And there's another thing—"

"What?"

"Langerman probably was killed by somebody who didn't go there intending to kill him. If the thing had been premeditated, the murderer would have brought a weapon. He wouldn't depend on chance to give him one."

Bentley nodded again. "Maybe you've got something there. At the same time it splits the two murders apart again. Gillie certainly was marked. Looks like he was used and then rubbed out. Maybe you're all wet in thinking the two go together."

I washed my throat with the bourbon and soda. "If it hadn't been for that envelope, I wouldn't have hooked them up at all," I confessed. "But when you get Steve Corbell working with Gillie on the envelope, and Corbell connected somehow with dirty pictures of his wife's sister—and Corbell apparently intending to rub me out after I'd mentioned the girl's name—"

The rewrite man ran his forehead into wrinkles. "Just for mentioning her name?"

My head waggled. "No, I think it was a hell of a lot more than that. Probably he felt I was getting too close to something. When he grabbed me, he said, 'You're Dean, that nosy reporter,' or something like that. And it was Corbell, remember, who left the house and walked down toward the green coupe when I first called at Langerman's."

Bentley regarded his glass thoughtfully. Then he looked up. "Too bad you didn't get to that locker first and find out what was in the white envelope. That might have put you right in the gravy."

His remark clinched a decision to which I had been building up slowly. I killed my own cigarette and collected the picture envelope.

"Come on! We're going for a little ride."

His forehead puckered again. "A ride? Where?"

"I'm heading out to talk with Mrs. Cor-

bell like a Dutch uncle." Then I grinned. "Not that I ever heard a Dutch uncle talk but I'll give it the old college try."

He slid out of the booth and stood up. "Well, hell, I've got an eight-hour pass or so. Might as well go riding as sit in here petrifying the liver with this stuff." He picked up his glass and swallowed the last half-inch of liquor.

"Just one more petrify," I observed, slipping into my coat.

"By the way, what the hell's the idea—no hat?"

"That," I said, "is the collegiate part of it."

"Aren't you getting a little old for a sophomore?" he inquired cynically.

IT WAS RAINING AGAIN, a nasty, dreary drizzle, just enough to gum up the windshield but not sufficiently heavy to let my wipers get a good, clean bite on it. The windows were fogged and I thought the man who loomed up beside the Hudson was a cop until I opened the door. It wasn't a cop, though. It was Jerry.

He said, "Oh, good evening, Mr. Dean. Saw your lights turn in but didn't recognize the car in this muck. We're sort of keeping an eye on anybody who drives up."

"Thought you'd have a police guard on here yet," I told him.

He shook his head. "Mrs. Corbell wouldn't stand for it. That woman's got a lot of moxie."

I said, "Jerry, I want you to meet Art Bentley, one of my *Press-Bulletin* colleagues. Art, this is Jerry Flavin."

The rewrite rumbled something across my back and Jerry ducked his head. "Glad to know you."

I slipped out of the sedan. "Art's going to wait," I explained to the chauffeur. "Mrs. Corbell's in, I hope."

"Sure. She's in. They're releasing her father's body tomorrow but it won't come home. She's sticking close, though. I haven't had but one call all day." He cleared his throat. "Out here for anything special, Mr. Dean?"

"Just want to run over a few things with her. Anything new on your end?"

He thrust both hands deeper into his coat pockets. "Nope! I still think some burglar barged into the old man's room and

knocked him off when he was crazy enough to get up."

"Well, if you want to talk with Art and keep dry, take my seat. This rain is soaking right through my hair."

I left him and went down the drive to the walk, crossed to the steps and punched the bell. Nevers opened the door. He seemed to have aged and his skin was more like tautly-drawn parchment than ever.

"Good evening, Mr. Dean." At least his voice hadn't changed.

"Good evening, Nevers." I stepped inside and ran a hand through my wet hair. "Would you tell Mrs. Corbell I'd like to see her? Very important."

He nodded and indicated the same old room with the clutter of furniture. "If you'll wait in there, sir."

"No, thanks. That room's unlucky. I'll take it on the dogs right here."

"As you wish, sir." He began slowly to climb the stairs.

Nevers had made no move to take my coat. I slipped it off and hung it on the rack. My heels, hitting the parqueted floor, sounded like castanets in the silent house. It was like a place without life. Then came a faint echo, as if a door had closed somewhere in the distance. I hadn't heard Nevers knock or heard any voices, but when he came down again, soberly, I knew his message even before he spoke.

"Mrs. Corbell is at home to no one. Sorry, Mr. Dean."

Well, I'd expected that. As he started for the rack to get my coat, I said quietly, "Just a moment, Nevers."

He turned as I pulled copy paper and pencil from my pockets. Using the wall for a hard surface, I scribbled:

S. J. Corbell deals in other articles; for instance, clothing, gloves and girls' "art" photographs.

Dean.

I tore off the strip, folded the paper and handed it to the butler. "I think she'll change her mind," I told him. "Try her again, if you will."

His face was impassive. "Very well, sir."

As he climbed once more, I started to rock back and forth on my heels, but that

made a noise, too, and I desisted. The place was so still that even anybody changing her mind should have set up some sound, but I didn't hear any. When Nevers reappeared, however, Mrs. Corbell was directly ahead of him.

IF SHE felt grief, she didn't show it. Her face was hard and cold as a stone woman's. And she hadn't buried herself in black, which would have been all right at that—for a blonde. She wore a robe of soft wool in dawn blue with her monogram on its shawl collar. Slippers of blue, with heels and pompoms, showed beneath. Her mass of taffy-colored hair was down around the shoulders, loose except for the right side, where it was caught back part way with some sort of blue clasp.

Reaching the foot of the staircase, she advanced two more strides and waited, head half turned, until Nevers had circled the newel post and was well along the hall toward the rear. Then she snapped around.

"What have you been meddling in now?" The words were bitter, venomous. She tapped the paper. "What's the meaning of this?"

"I think you and I should have a talk, Mrs. Corbell, but this is hardly the place for it." I glanced around the hall.

She indicated the same old room. "Please go in, then."

I shook my head. "If you don't mind, I've a prejudice against that room. Everything seems to hit blind alleys there."

"Well, the music-room, then." She led the way.

If all you needed were a grand piano and a tricked-out console radio in garish cream and red, this was a music-room. It had another fireplace but none of the hodgepodge of tables and chairs and lamps peculiar to the library and lounge across the way.

She dropped down on one of the divans near the fireplace. I took a fan chair done in red. The back legs didn't look any too confident but they held.

Her face was still stony. She asked, "Why do you persist in annoying me, Mr. Dean?" But I caught her glance at the paper, still in her hand.

"Would you rather keep on being annoyed by somebody else?"

"What do you mean?"

"It's rather obvious, isn't it? Steve Corbell has been cast out of your life but it didn't take. He's bothering you. He was even in the bank when you turned over that envelope to a supposed clerk." She leaned forward as if to interrupt but I held up a hand. "He wanted that envelope and got it. And he was in this house a few hours later. Now please don't tell me again that these things aren't true, because I saw them with my own eyes."

"They should be of no interest to an outsider," she said coldly. "What goes on between my husband and myself is our own affair."

"Certainly! Up to a point. Up to any of many points. One of them is murder, and murder happens to be the public's concern."

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean." She tapped the paper. "I thought you had some information to give me about my—about Mr. Corbell."

I smiled. "Oh, what he deals in? I think you know about some of it, else I wouldn't have put it down. I mean Helen's photographs—the ones you really couldn't frame and place there on the piano."

The pupils of her green-gray eyes went down to pin-points. Her mouth barely opened and she said between her teeth, "Yes?"

"And because that's one thing you've undoubtedly been trying to keep under cover, I haven't passed it on to any official."

I saw that I had scored. She relaxed, if even so slightly. "Thank you."

Leaving the fan chair, I walked slowly up and down the rug. Then I stopped. "Cigarette?"

"Thanks." She took one and I made a light for us.

"Don't get me wrong, Mrs. Corbell, but I think you've made a grave mistake in trying to hide something that was bound to come out in the end—with a far worse face on it." I stopped walking. "Like now, I mean. It is coming out. It *had* to eventually."

I was wishing to hell I really knew what was coming out. Though I had half an idea and knew about Helen's proclivity for peeling herself, the Langermans could have bought back all those pictures and dropped the whole matter—provided she

didn't get careless again. Even that could be taken care of by walling her up in the funny house for a while or having her always under scrutiny.

MRS. CORBELL, on the divan, sat measuring me. I caught her eyes and held them. They had none of those funny lights such as glowed in the younger sister's when her moods changed swiftly and so strangely. Also, Big Sister's eyes had softened. They weren't icy any more.

"What did you mean, would have a worse face on it?" She tapped ashes from cigarette to tray.

I drew the fan chair closer and sat down. "Mrs. Corbell, your father died within a few hours after asking me if I'd help him in some manner. He said he was afraid of scandal. He must have known about Helen but he spoke of her only in passing. So it couldn't have been that entirely. It must have been something else."

She extinguished the cigarette carefully. Then she nodded. "The police said he'd been talking with you."

"Only because I told Sergeant Swain. But somebody else knew it, too. And I don't mean Helen, of course. Whoever overheard us killed your father, or tipped off somebody who killed him or had him killed." I leaned back. "This may hurt, Mrs. Corbell, but it's open and shut—at least the way I see it. He was killed to silence him."

I had expected to see her go white, or her lips quiver, or her eyes blink—or something. But she remained calm and cold as a statue.

"Who *could* have overheard except Helen?" she asked.

I shook my head. "Helen doesn't count. She didn't kill him. She was with me..." Then I halted. She *hadn't* been with me throughout the entire evening. I bent forward. "No. Part of the time she was with you and that Bob guy. Did she use a phone at all?"

"I don't know. She ducked us about 10:40. What she did after that is only your story and hers."

Again I relaxed. "10:40! Not time enough. Your father was dead quite a bit before 11:00. She couldn't have tipped anybody in time for that person to get here or send anybody. Anyhow, I don't

think Helen is interested in anybody except herself. I doubt even if she overheard enough to put her wise. So that shifts us to others."

"What others?"

"The others in the house."

She shook her head slowly. "Only the cook and a maid were here. Nevers was off. Miss Yeager—my secretary—said she left right after me. The chauffeur was off. One maid—Annie—was off."

I disposed of my cigarette and looked straight at her. "Your secretary. Mrs. Corbell, just why *do* you have a secretary?"

It was Bentley's implanted idea, but it shot home. The color drained from her cheeks and she picked at the woolly nap of her robe. Finally she said weakly, "I'm in business. I need a secretary."

The Bentley shaft went in again. "Of course. But you've got them at the office."

Suddenly she rose and began pacing, one hand pressing knuckles of the other. Almost immediately, however, she wheeled.

"Why can't you let me alone?"

Then I knew I had her. The hardness had washed entirely from her face.

Her lips worked and she clutched the lower one in her teeth. I got up and took her by both arms. We stood face to face and she didn't shake me off. An hour earlier she probably would have slugged me.

I said, "Listen, why not get it off your chest? Call Rhoda down so I can tackle her—so we both can. The longer you let it go on, the worse it'll grow. By cooperating, you may even block another killing." I patted her arm encouragingly but figured it best not to mention that the next victim might well be myself. "I wouldn't be advising you this way if I didn't think it was the right thing to do."

"Oh, God, if I could only be sure."

Then she sagged on my shoulder, weeping.

I could feel her breasts pressed hard against me, even through the thick robe. Putting both arms around her, I shifted my pats to the soft, woolly back. She had seemed tall but her head came just under my nose. The taffy hair tickled and I caught from it a faint scent. It wasn't Helen's brand but this perfume, I thought, could dizzy up a guy just as much, provided he put his mind right on his work.

XXI

WHEN I GOT BACK to the Hudson again, Jerry abandoned my seat and doffed his cap to Rhoda Yeager.

"Mr. Dean's giving me a lift to town, Jerry," she said. "Isn't it a nasty night?"

"Oh, but I could take you in," he protested. "There's nothing doing."

"Mrs. Corbell may want to go out. She hasn't decided. Probably I'll call you later to pick me up."

I said, "Better get out of the wet, Miss Yeager. That blur you notice across there is a face belonging to Mr. Art Bentley. Even when you see it close up, it's *still* a blur."

"How do you do, Mr. Bentley." She slid under the wheel and moved over beside him.

"You don't have to be polite," I told her. "He's tied up in marriage tighter than an oyster in his shell."

My head was being soaked again and I climbed in after her. Jerry closed the door and stepped back. I let the Hudson roll, caught the engine in gear and we dropped down through the dripping tunnel of trees and hedges. With this rain settling down to serious business, the wipers took hold nobly against something to work on beside a greasy film.

"We're doubling back to Rosario's," I said for Bentley's benefit. "Rhoda will hole in there for a while. We can call you Rhoda, can't we, without your biting somebody?"

"Oh, yes." She laughed. She appeared a different person. "You see, I've changed."

My tongue went over the lip, now starting to heal, which had felt her sharp teeth and succumbed to the pressure. When I reached over and touched her hand, however, she made no response.

"You wouldn't be stopping at Rosy's long enough to eat, would you?" Bentley asked dryly. "If I figured you to be in there indefinitely, I'd have brought along my pemmican and sleeping bag."

"We'll eat okay," I assured him.

Wind, driving from the northeast, whistled in the chinks and slapped rain hard against the Hudson. Both windshield wipers swept doggedly back and forth across the glass. I glanced at the girl between us but she had sagged down and

was gazing impassively ahead. By the dash-light she seemed lost in thought.

I said, "How about a cigarette, Rhoda?"

She straightened. "Thanks. I'd like one."

Bentley produced a pack. "Here. They're right on tap." He struck a light.

"Three on a match?" she cried. "That's unlucky."

"This isn't a match. It's a two-buck lighter, which makes it different."

She blew out the flame just the same. He laughed and snapped it into life again. I took it, puffed and handed it back. Art laughed.

"You don't really believe in that bad luck legend, do you?" the rewrite man asked her.

"For tonight I'm taking no chances," she replied soberly. "I'll need all the luck there is, I guess."

Not caring for this to go too far, I switched the conversation. She was still on edge until her part of the job was done and if she began thinking too much, she might decide to bow out.

I said, "You'll like this Rosario. He's a nice guy."

Bentley chuckled. "Garry means that Rosy's a softie when you want something on the arm."

"I get what you mean."

She laughed and I considered the danger point past. Until we pulled into Queen Ann Street, I kept them off the subject of herself. We hurried along the sidewalk, heads bowed against the rain, and went in through the café side. After Bentley and the girl were tucked away in a booth I cautiously surveyed the bar. The weather seemed to have made it a light night for trade, however. Nobody was present from whom I felt we'd have to duck. All the day-side newspapermen had gone their way and Romney apparently had taken his corn and his pal off to work. It was far too wet for sneaking out to any oasis except one close by the shop.

THE CLOCK over the bar showed eight minutes of ten. I returned to the booth and asked Rhoda if she'd care for a drink first.

Her head shook soberly. "Let's get the other over with."

Bentley looked at me questioningly, but

I wagged a cautious finger behind her back.

"Okay!" I told her. "That's the best way, I guess."

"I get pretty lonesome when by myself too long," he hinted as she started to leave.

"Can't imagine any surer way to be lonesome," I said. "If you catch up with that Carmela, order dinner and some drinks."

"Oh, I won't eat," Rhoda said quickly. "Just a cocktail, a sweet Manhattan."

We left him and went back along the booths. "The coast is clear to the phone," I said reassuringly. "You know how you'll act and what you're to say?"

She nodded. "Of course! I'm frightened and stammering. I'll just tell him I overheard something and there's hell to pay; that he'd better call everybody in at one o'clock and I'll tell them then what it is—and we'll decide what to do."

"You can't get there till then. You still have your nose pointed and your ears strained. You're trying to pick up more..."

"And I just slipped away for a moment to tip him. I don't dare talk over the phone. Got to get right back before I'm missed, because I'm supposed to be in the powder room."

I calculated quickly. 1:00 o'clock. It could be stalled until about 1:10 without arousing suspicion over her tardiness. No news of it would leak out till 1:30 or 1:45. By then the morning sheets would be locked up. And what the P.M.'s got could be only the bare story. We'd have a clear inside track for the *Press-Bulletin*. That I liked.

"That's the stuff," I said and patted her back hearteningly. Which just about fixed me up with my varsity letter in lady-patting.

Her face was drawn; the dark eyes loomed large. "And you won't forget your promise? You'll take care of me?"

"You're in the bag—so long as you don't slip on this." I handed her a couple of nickels. "Go ahead, now. Get in there and pitch."

I watched her cross to the phone booth, enter it and close the door. Then I went back to Bentley, who was chinning with Carmela. She turned, laughing.

"So now you've dug up another one!" Her head shook and she said to the re-

write man, "Poor guy! Never stops trying, does he?"

"I dig up nothing, babe. I reach to the top shelf for them." Then I squeezed one of her chubby cheeks. "What's more, this one's sleeping with *you* tonight."

She slapped my hand down with no anger. "Like fun she's sleeping with me. What do you think this is—a dumping ground?"

"There *have* been comments," I said, taking the bench opposite Bentley. "But wait'll you see her. She'll do something to that mirror of yours upstairs."

"Which I suppose isn't any reflection on me," Carmela retorted. Her tongue darted out like an adder's fang and she flounced away.

Bentley sighed. "Now that you've probably ruined our dinner, what the hell goes with this Rhoda? Am I merely the inanimate and inarticulate sea anchor of this expedition or may the brilliant brains of Bentley be employed for purposes to which they have proved suitable through the years?"

"You are a chaperon pure and simple for the time being. Please notice the adjectives." I grinned. "But no kidding, Art, I finally broke Mrs. Corbell down. Then she and I broke this Yeager gal." I went searching in my pockets for cigarettes.

"Well, that's fine! That's just dandy!" His tone was sarcastic. "And I'm supposed to guess the rest?"

HE TOOK a cigarette from my deck and tapped it on the table. When I made a light, he stuck the cylinder between his lips and leaned across to the flame.

"No guessing," I said, "but there isn't time to go over the story here. After we eat, I'll park Rhoda and then we've got a visit to make—at least I have—to collect five hundred fish, I hope. Sort of an investment." I leaned back and smiled. "You play the part of a watchdog in that little detail. Which makes you tonight a very versatile guy!"

"Chaperon! Watchdog! What the hell's the difference?"

"Plenty. One's an inside job—cozy like. The other's outside work, and maybe not so healthy. That I wouldn't know yet. Be patient."

"Well," he grumbled, biting off smoke

with his words, "why not spill now what all this double-shuffling's about?"

"Can't in front of her. She's jittery already. Give her the idea I'm spreading the thing around and she might pick up her bat and ball and take a powder. Here she is now."

Rhoda's high heels came clicking. Only a few steps behind was Carmela, carrying a tray with drinks. Her eyes were shuttling up and down the secretary's trim figure and Carmela wore that bemused expression which is characteristic when one girl measures an unsuspecting sister.

I looked unquestioningly at Rhoda. She raised her eyebrows slightly and slipped in beside me.

"Everything okay?" I grunted.

"Yes," she whispered back. "He'll contact the others. Seemed all excited."

Carmela was transferring the drinks from tray to table. She was prim and businesslike as a lady jailer.

I said, "Carmie, this is Rhoda Yeager. Rhoda—look you well upon Carmela Di Luccio, sweetheart of the Fourth Estate but bride of none. Hostess, shake hands with your guest."

Carmela's sudden smile would have melted a process server. She said, "My hand's wet, but how are you, Miss Yeager?"

Rhoda appeared troubled. She turned to me and protested, "What an awful way to break anything to a person. What will she *think*?"

"Oh, that's all right," Carmela laughed. She dangled the tray at her side. "After you get to know this bunch of addle-wits, you don't mind what they say. Mostly it goes in one ear and out the other."

"Triumph of mind over patter," Bentley observed dryly.

"Anyway, Garry told me about it a little while ago," Carmela said, ignoring him.

Then Rhoda smiled. "It's awfully good of you. You weren't going out?"

Carmela shook her head. "No. If I went out, the old man probably would have the joint given away—provided my mother didn't catch him first." She started off. "I'll be around."

I swallowed half of my highball and set the glass down. "This, then," I said, "seems a good time for me to get in a call. You

two hold the fort. And remember, Rhoda—he's married."

"Oh, he's safe," she retorted.

Bentley nodded and crumpled his cigarette. I left the booth and went back toward the phone but Rosario's buxom wife came bursting through the door from upstairs and intercepted me. She was wheezing and when she blew through her fat lips, the little mustache hairs jitterbugged.

"Meesta Garree!" she exclaimed. "Who you bring now to Concetta, eh?" She had strength enough left to flail me with a hand the size of a flounder. "She's ver' pretty one, I hear."

I CAME BACK to even keel again. "Aye, a beauty, Concetta. You've got to keep her here all night for me. Carmela told you?"

"Si!" The big, dark eyes rolled excitedly. Then suddenly she cocked her head and the big hands went to her hips. "An' you go home, you bet. No monkey shinings at Rosario's."

"I'm ashamed of you, Concetta, for the very thought." I chucked her under the chins and started to detour around the bulky figure. Then I stopped. "She's out in a booth with Art Bentley. Go over and say hello. She's a little strange. You know what I mean."

Concetta grinned and blew out the mustache hairs again. "Ho! She cannot be the strange one with two wolfs, only maybe she's not know you ver' well."

Carmela banged through the same door, saw us and stopped. "Come on, break it up," she ordered. "I'm lugging that chow out now and it's not going back for more fire when you kick that it's gone cold."

She hastened toward the kitchen while I continued to the phone. Captain Harding was on deck in B.C.I., but his greeting carried as much affection as an alimony check.

He growled, "Well, what do *you* want?"

"Fine thing," I said. "Here I'm trying to do my good deed for the day and you talk like I owed you money."

There was less hostility in his tone then. "What good deed? After that trick you pulled—yes, and more than one trick?"

"Come, come now, Tom! Let bygones be bygones. This makes up for everything. If you want a little fresh air tonight with

some of your boys, get your corns pared—"

"Cut out that damn third-class vaudeville, Garry. If you got anything to say, start talking."

"Okay, Tom! Here it is."

I started talking. When I'd finished, three nickels later, I went back to the dinner and ate it cold.

XXII

MY RUBBERS MADE little sucking sounds on the wet pavement of Mohican Street. Only dim lights were here, and black, eyeless windows keeping vigil over the line of cars parked along the right-hand side. I added the Hudson to the line, switched off the engine and handed my keys to Bentley. Then I maneuvered my wrist into the dial lights.

"It's about 11:05 now," I said. "What time have you?"

He fumbled in his clothes, snapped the lighter and looked at his own watch. "11:06, to be exact." The lighter went out.

"Fine! Then, if I'm not out of this joint in half an hour—alive and sitting in the car, I mean, and telling you everything's all right—saddle up Old Paint here and ride for the sheriff."

"Half an hour?" he repeated. "You're not being a damn fool, now?" Then he grunted. "As if I had to ask."

I chuckled. "Well, Frenchy may not like the idea of throwing up half a G—just like that. In fact, he may not like *me*. So, just in case—you be ready to get me bailed out before I pass out. I've been slugged so often I'm beginning to see fists in my dreams."

"That's where I'd rather see them," he commented wryly. "Okay, then; I'll be right on deck. And if I see any sudden mad outpouring, I'll ride regardless. Better-Begone-than-Belabored-Bentley — that's me!"

I got out of the car and slammed the door. Rain hit my bare head like a cold shower bath. Bending my neck, I sloshed along the dark block to Place Elegante, climbed the steps under the blue light and punched the bell. Gus opened it immediately but I saw no open arms. He seemed ill at ease.

"Sorry as hell, Garry," he blurted.

"You're on the scratch list." He shuffled his feet. "Orders! What can I do?"

"That's all right, Gus." I stepped into the roomy vestibule, out of the rain. "Hell, I've been locked out of real, swell places." I indicated the vestibule. "Much sweller than this, in fact."

He breathed relief audibly. "Well, it's great you take it in such a nice way, kid. Remember—it ain't me that gives the orders, so what can I do?"

I grinned. "Well, you can do this much. Tell the Clipper I want to see him, and I'm not leaving till I do. No harm trying to see Frenchy, is there?"

He hesitated. "Well, no. Wait a minute." He turned his back to the buttons, the door ticked, he opened it and slid through, closing it after him.

For a moment I wondered if the time limit I'd given Bentley wasn't too short. Seconds and minutes were ticking off. But then—I estimated—if I did get in, my business could be done in ten minutes at most and there'd be plenty of margin. If Frenchy would *do* business!

The door opened and the Clipper appeared. He wasn't exactly beaming, either. "Nothing doing," he said curtly. "Just called Frenchy and he says a big N.G."

I shrugged. "That's too bad. The boys around town oughta be surprised to hear Frenchy welshes on his bets. Maybe he didn't think of them being surprised."

"Welshes on *what* bets? Frenchy never run for cover yet."

"Oh, I think you're wrong there, Clipper. He seems to be running on this one." I turned as if to go, then faced back. "Perhaps you'd better call again and tell him that. Tell him I hate to spread the word all over Belle City."

"Act your weight, Garry. That's no way to talk about a right guy."

I picked his words up on a short hop. "A right guy's a right guy only when it's paying him percentage, Clipper. Looks to me like this might be percentage for Frenchy." I shrugged. "Of course, if it doesn't look that way to you—"

"Well, wait, damn it," he growled. "I'll buzz him again."

Gus eased his chunky frame into the vestibule then and settled into the sentry's chair.

"What you do, Garry, cross up the boss

on something? There ain't many newspaper guys get the blackball."

"The only deal is a little bet we made." I assumed a puzzled air. "Funny Frenchy should kick that one over."

"Yeah! A bet's a bet—win, lose or draw."

Again the door opened. The Clipper said ungraciously, "Okay! Go ahead up." He eyed me morosely. "But don't expect him to do no handshaking. He ain't exactly in the mood."

I glanced at my watch. Only four minutes of the half-hour had gone. It seemed longer.

"Haven't much time for handshaking, anyhow," I said. "And thanks for the service."

"Don't mention it," he growled, turning into his cubicle.

BUSINESS was light in Frenchy's place, but that wasn't surprising. The hour was early for this spot and the outside night was bad. I saw nobody in the large room at the right, though the soft yellow lamps glowed on tables. The gilded cage was waiting. I stepped in, pushed the top button and went slowly upward.

There was no red-haired woman, long-thighed or otherwise, stretched on the couch. There wasn't anybody in Frenchy's office except Frenchy. He still sat behind his half-moon desk, tilted back in the chair that was too large. It fitted him like a bargain basement suit. He looked like Daddy's little boy, playing grownup in Daddy's den. Except for the peculiar ears. Daddy might have been inclined to go checking over the grownup tradesmen, to see where the ears had come from.

I closed the door softly and trudged across the rug, so thick that one almost needed snowshoes to make it.

"Getting a little exclusive, aren't you, Frenchy, throwing a down thumb on the old pals?"

His smile was thin. He tapped fingers lightly against his vest. "Sometimes it's hard to tell who your pals really are. For instance, you're such a pal that you want to collect on what you knew was a sure thing."

I sat on the arm of a chair beside his desk. "Since when hasn't a bet been a bet, Frenchy? And I'd sure hate to have a big

shot like you get the reputation around town of running out."

He considered that for only a couple of seconds. Then the chair rocked forward and he opened a drawer at his right.

"No, that kind of reputation doesn't do a guy any good, Dean. But I'm not running out on you." He looked up quickly. "Fact is, I'm *glad* to pay you off. Rather a good investment."

I hardly needed a bloodhound to find the answer to that one, but I didn't give it a tumble. Sooner or later he'd come out with it cold himself.

Instead, I said, "A good investment? Why, paying off your paper is always a good investment, Frenchy, not just any one time."

"You want large or small stuff?" he asked, with his hand still in the drawer.

"Make it small." I grinned. "The small bills spend faster."

"All in the mind," he commented dryly. The hand came out and he began to count money down on the glass top. My eyes were at an angle from where I sat, but he counted twenty-five times, which seemed to make them double-saws. Then he shuffled the bills together and tossed the bundle across his desk contemptuously. "Check it over yourself if you'd rather. You don't seem to trust people much any more. Well, neither do I, so give me a receipt while you're at it—and don't forget to say what it's for."

"Sure I'll give you a receipt." I reached and picked up the bills. They *were* twenties and they counted to a pleasant five hundred dollars. "I'd give you the marker, too, but figured I'd better freeze to that till I collected. Anyhow, you've still got mine."

He tilted back again and hooked his thumbs into vest pockets. On the tilt, he slid down until his calves brought up against the edge.

"That's right, Dean. I've got your marker and you've got mine. So, like I said, I make a very nice investment." He smiled thinly. "You see, trimmer, those markers show I didn't know Gillie was dead that night and you did." The thumbs broke away and he waved carelessly. "Five C's for a real good alibi like that is cheap, almost dirt cheap"

"Yeah, isn't it? But trimmer's a bad word, Frenchy. Nasty! That isn't like you

at all. However, no hard feelings. Let's take your pen and a letterhead or something. On this copy paper of mine the ink blots."

HE SAID nothing but brought the chair back to level, unclipped his pen, drew a sheet from his top drawer and shoved both across the glass. I scribbled a receipt for the five hundred, noting that it was in payment of the bet on Gillie Maher. Then I pushed pen and paper toward him, rose and tucked the money away in my pocket, where it nestled with what was left of old man Langerman's check.

"Now screw," he invited coldly, reaching for pen and receipt.

"There's just one more thing," I said, fumbling toward my inside pocket, "and I'm not digging left-handed for a rod."

"You'd be a sucker if you dug even right-handed."

"Maybe this'll sting you a little more than a thirty-eight, my friend." I tossed the pair of ladies black kid gloves in front of him. "Try those on for size—around your neck."

He glanced at the gloves but didn't touch them, then looked back at me. "This, I imagine, is something smart."

"I think so." I said it carelessly. "Those were hijacked from a case lot in Kate the Kisser's barn—Steve Corbell's barn." I chuckled. "Let's call it your barn, too."

His eyes glinted. "You're quite a guy, Dean, but your ears aren't too good. Maybe you didn't hear me say to get the hell out of here."

I took a flash at my wrist and nodded toward the door.

"I'm going, Frenchy. Pronto. But any ideas you may have about a little ambush between here and the street—just knock them out of your head. I've got a peeper outside. In just nine minutes, if I'm not out there all whole and with this roll to flash, he's got his instructions. He knows just where I am and what I'm up here for and whom I'm seeing."

"Maybe I'd better call a waiter to lead you out by the hand," he suggested witheringly. "That seems about your style now."

I grinned. "Bum handicapping, Frenchy. I rate a captain of waiters at least. But never mind. I can make it alone. Just so

long as nobody tries to play funny. Not a few things around this town are beginning to get pretty tiresome."

"Yeah! Not a few *people*, too."

I waded across the rug and went out by the door. I took my time closing it, but nobody was lurking in the corridor. There was no booby trap around the turn of the hall, either, though I hugged the far side as a precaution against possible lurkers. Even the gilded cage took me down without incident. But when the Clipper himself let me out into the vestibule, I didn't let him have a view of my back.

"Happy landings," he said, but from the tone his heart wasn't in it.

"Thanks, Clipper. The boss was very cooperative."

I said goodnight to Gus and went out to the steps. Rain was still falling drearily but the wind wasn't driving here. I walked back along the gloom-ridden block and slid into the Hudson beside Bentley.

"Well, how'd it go? No mayhem, no bloodshed, no cries in the night?"

"Just a matter of smooth salesmanship," I told him modestly. "The big smile, the winning way. You can't miss."

He grunted, unimpressed. "Maybe you oughta try those on Dunegan some day." He peered down at my hands, which had begun to shuffle among Frenchy's contribution. "Man, what you do—clean him?"

"Uh-huh! Far from it. Here, my hen-pecked friend." I handed him a dozen of the twenties, to which I had added one of Langerman's remaining tens.

His hand opened automatically. Then he exclaimed, "Hey, what's this?"

"Grease for the palm of Wanda. A little lotion to soften her hand when she starts taking a sock at you. Buy her a present."

"A present?" His hands went closer to the dash-light and he rifled the bills swiftly. Then he whistled. "Two hundred and fifty fish! My Lord, Garry, I can't take *this* kind of dough."

"Take it, you damn fool. That was like finding it. I don't want to be contaminated alone."

"Well," he said reluctantly. Then he chuckled. "You know what Wanda's sure to say, don't you, if I ever flashed this on her? She'll say I was out all night in a crap game or playing poker somewhere instead of working. You know women."

I stuck the switch key into its recess and pressed the starter button. "Sometimes I wonder, but we'll find out about *one* of them pretty soon."

"Why? What's on the program now?"

"The jackpot," I said and threw the Hudson into gear.

XXIII

SMOKE HUNG HEAVY in the room. I tossed two red ones into the pile, blew a hole in the haze and asked, "What've you got?"

"Fill heem right in the belly." Concetta guffawed and laid her hand down, spreading the cards wide. She had a straight up to the queen and hauled in the pot.

Carmela slapped her mother's broad back. "Atta gal, Ma! You're hot as a cannon. Garry and his measly three of a kind. That's taking him."

"We'd better brush up a little," Bentley observed, lighting another cigarette and adding to the fog. "Your deal, Rhoda, old thing."

Rhoda collected the cards slowly and began to straighten them. "Isn't it time they showed up?" she asked in a worried tone. "I'm getting nervous. If it doesn't go through..."

Though I patted her arm comfortingly, I was a little nervous myself. My watch showed six minutes before one o'clock. "Plenty of time yet," I told her. "Won't take ten minutes to get there."

She smiled weakly, then began shuffling the cards, handling them like a gambler, swiftly, surely and with never a fumble. As she placed the deck down and I started to cut, my hand stopped in midair. Heavy footsteps sounded on the stairs.

"Those are size twelves if I ever heard size twelves," Bentley said.

I pushed back my chair. "Sounds like a whole platoon." Then came Rosario's voice and I stepped over to the door.

He was approaching along the short hall from the stairs. Behind him were Captain Harding and Sergeant Flick. They eyed me soberly, but Rosario was all animation. He squeezed back against the wall and waved them past with a flourish of his hand.

"I go now back to the customers," he said, and retreated toward the stairs.

"Ready?" Captain Harding grunted. "It's almost 1:00."

"All set!" I turned and beckoned to Art Bentley, who was reaching for his coat.

Harding sighted Concetta and the girls. "Good evening," he said, bobbing his head. He looked at the chips but made no comment. Instead, he appeared anxious.

"Garry!"

I wheeled, then went back to Rhoda at the table. "Everything's all right," I said. "You'll be okay here and I'll flash word as soon as it's over."

"Wish you would. If anything goes wrong, I'm cooked."

"Nothing's going wrong," I assured her. "Anyhow, you're under cover. Nobody knows you're here. Mrs. Di Luccio and Carmela are fine guardians." I squeezed her shoulder, picked up my coat and returned to the hall.

Harding, Flick and Bentley were moving toward the stairs. I slipped into the coat and trailed down. The cafe side was dark but Rosario was waiting just inside the door and let us out quietly.

"You're sure this thing'll work?" Harding growled when we were in the rain.

I was having doubts, too. There were all sorts of chances for a bobble. But I couldn't show myself up. "Course it'll work, Tom. Did you get the warrants?"

Flick said, "I got 'em personally from Judge Saunders at his house."

"Who'd you bring?" I asked Harding. "Durkin, Sughrue, Mike Masuret," he answered gruffly. "Blair and Le Souci have gone to the farm. Lieutenant Holliday and a picklock went ahead to the other house. They should be in by now. The exits have men on them. Let's go, but by God—if this thing's a false alarm—"

"It isn't any false alarm, dammit. And this way we'll probably get the gang all at one time."

He grunted again. "All right, then. You two follow us over. Once we're under cover, Condon and Delehanty make a play at the front door, so that doorman will give the alarm."

The Captain turned and walked along Queen Ann Street to his black car. Its blue police light and huge spotlight were dark. Bentley and I went the other way to the Hudson.

"Remind me to kick myself in the scut for getting into this thing," he said as I started the motor. "My teeth are doing a maxixe. Only two incisors are out of step."

"Before long it'll be a rhumba and they'll *all* be out of step," I chuckled. "For the sake of that two and a half yards of fresh folding dough, pull yourself together."

WE ROLLED over wet pavements, through traffic lights that had switched to yellow blinkers at this hour, and stopped around the corner from Mohican Street. I killed the engine and we got out. The five cops were leaving their car just ahead.

"Split up," Captain Harding ordered as we reached the group. "If seven men barge together it'll be a dead giveaway." He turned to me. "You two going inside?"

I nodded a head that was getting wet again. "Part of the deal, Tom. You get the case broken; we get in at the payoff."

"Hmmm! Well, take it one by one. Stay away from street lights. There's only two in that block. When you reach the door, rap once, then three times, then twice. Remember—one, three, two." He spat. "Get that wrong and you're apt to have your brains batted out—if any. Garry, take it first. Anybody damn fool enough not to wear a hat a night like this ain't got brains anyway."

"You always leave them laughing, Tom," I chided.

Moving off through rain and darkness, I swung into Mohican Street. Frenchy was doing a good late business after all, despite the weather. Cars were parked in a longer line. The machines and Place Elegante's dim blue light were the only signs that life went on here. Somewhere, a couple of detectives were concealed, however, awaiting their signal to tackle Gus, the doorman. They had no expectation or desire of getting inside unannounced. The play was for an alarm to be flashed upstairs. Past car after car I sauntered, crossed to avoid a street lamp's rays, cut back and went up the steps of the vacant brownstone. Its heavy door swung silently with my softly-rapped signal.

"Garry Dean," I said, "from Harding's

bunch." Beyond the door was nothing but blackness.

A hoarse whisper responded. "Okay, Garry! Get in quick!"

I groped cautiously over the sill and heard the door close.

"Who's this?" I asked.

"Lieutenant Holliday, with a man from maintenance. Don't strike any matches, you guys."

A faint shuffling sounded, then the signal came again. Holliday swung the door open. I saw Bentley's silhouette. He slipped inside. I reached out, grabbed him and he jumped.

"It's Garry," I whispered. "What's the matter with you?"

"Damn it, don't do that again. I almost hopped out of my skin. Imagine me without any skin."

In quick succession the others arrived at this untenanted house, Captain Harding bringing up as rear guard.

Once behind the door, he whispered, "What's the layout, Lieutenant?"

"Only one stairway down to here," came through the dark. "Rear stairs from this floor down to the kitchen. Back kitchen door leads into a small yard. The yard has a gate to an alley."

"Great! They'll make for this way, trying to reach the rear. Won't dare show themselves out front. We'll squeeze them right here in the hall. You're sure there's no out to the roof?"

"Positive!" Holliday said. "It's a pitched roof anyway, all cut up with gables."

"No fire escape?"

"No, sir."

"Lord! Any wonder people get burned up in these old fire-traps? Well, the hell with it. Have to move fast. Condon and Delehanty are giving us only five minutes to get set. Durkin—you and Masuret take it up the stairs, wherever they are, and tuck away on the next floor. When they go past, you'll be in back of them. We'll cut 'em off here in front. Throw your flashlights down on them, but not in our eyes. The rest of us stay here. Everybody look to your guns and lights."

SOMEBODY whispered, "Okay, skipper!" I heard a dull *clunk*, like a toe being stubbed, and figured that Durkin

and Masuret were starting their groping ascent.

"Dean! and you, Bentley!"

"Yeah!" I hissed. "Right here!"

"Get the hell out of this hall," Harding snapped. "Either of you gets winged, I'm apt to be busted. You're not supposed to be here. Go find yourselves a hole."

Lieutenant Holliday's whisper cut through. "At the right, from this door, Garry. Better put your hands out, boys, or you'll smash those pretty faces."

"Well, we'll go if it's orders," I said. But I leaned toward Bentley and breathed, "Like hell we will. Only as far as that doorway."

"Speak in the first person singular," he hissed back. "Don't use that damn plural. Me—I want a cozy room with bath, so I can lock myself in the bath."

Somebody's feet shuffled down along the hall, feeling their way. Harding whispered, "All set, men? Fade out of sight of those stairs. These guys may have lights, too. Surprise means everything. When they're on the stairs, between first and second floors, we jump 'em. I'll yell one word—*Now!* Then we jump as one man and light them up. But no gunfire, unless they let go first."

"Ought to be about time, hadn't it?" Holliday asked.

"Yes," Harding replied. "Everybody quiet now. No more talking."

Silence closed down like a smothering shroud. I could hear heavy breathing as somebody tiptoed in close. It seemed longer than five minutes since Harding had slipped into the brownstone. I felt for the radial artery in my wrist, with a thought to measure seconds by pulse-beat, but recalled that pulse varied with age, disease and muscular or mental emotion. Well, I certainly had a mess of mental emotion. The pulse was skipping as blithely as a twelve-year-old in springtime.

Then I caught the sounds. They were faint, well above us and hardly distinguishable—little more than preliminary stirrings.

Harding rasped, "Here they come! Watch it close, men! Don't anybody show too soon. Remember the signal—when I yell the word *Now!*"

Nobody spoke. The stirrings above were plainer but no voices were audible. Only

vague movements! Standing there in the dark, I drew a mental picture of what was happening—figures slipping one by one behind those lemon-yellow drapes in Frenchy's office, passing through that concealed doorway cut in the wall. Then shufflings, whispers, gathering together for descent and flight by these stairs.

But even as I ran over this picture, the muffled sounds had ceased. Dead silence had closed again on the chill, musty brownstone. Not even a creak came over the black stairway. Something tickled and ran down my cheek. I raised a hand and discovered I was sweating profusely.

Finally Harding's hoarse whisper cut the darkness. "What the hell! Ain't they coming down?"

My stomach gave a funny bounce, though possibly it only rolled back into position.

"They're figuring to wait out Delehanty and Condon," the Lieutenant ventured.

"Humph! Well, we got them cornered anyway—if they're *really* upstairs."

I didn't care for his tone. It lacked enthusiasm. One hand wiped over my face again. It came away damp and clammy.

Feet shuffled uneasily in the hall. "How about going up and getting 'em?" There was no mistaking Sergeant Flick's rumble. "Maybe we should of camped out in that room and picked them off one by one as they came through."

"Maybe we should have done lots of things," Harding retorted. "No, we won't go up, Pete—not yet. We'll try and suck them down here. They can't slide out anywhere with front and back watched." There was silence again for moments. Then he said decisively, "All right, Pete! You got a hog-caller's voice. Yell up and tell them they're treed and to come on down. Let's have some light, too. The hell with this poking around in the dark."

THREE electric torches flared in quick succession. I blinked at the sudden light. Captain Harding was standing at the foot of the stairs, gazing upward into nothing, one hand on the newel post. Flick was in the rear passage, about ten feet from his chief. The man I'd heard breathing turned out to be a party I didn't know, but supposed he was the guy who'd picked the lock of this place. Still stationed inside the front door was Lieutenant Holliday.

I had scarcely time to take in the tableau when Flick threw back his head, aimed his muzzle aloft and bellowed, "Hey, you upstairs! Come down here—hands over your heads. We're police. We've got the whole block surrounded."

His stentorian voice went rocketing through caverns of the four-story house. The echoes, dying in surges of sound, were succeeded by nothing but silence. After a few tense moments, Harding turned and frowned at Holliday, then switched his gaze to me.

"They seem reluctant," I suggested weakly.

"Yeah, damn reluctant!" he snapped. "If they're up there at all."

"Well, nuts!" Flick exploded. "Let's go up and smoke 'em out." He juggled the police revolver in his right hand, his torch gesturing in the left.

Harding peered aloft, as if endeavoring to pierce the gloom while he considered this impasse. Then his head bobbed toward Flick.

"Give 'em one more warning first. We don't want to do this the hard way if we can help it."

The Sergeant grinned, pointed his nose skyward and roared, "Come down, you guys, or we're going up."

Echoes again—and again silence. Flick was making an impatient gesture when I caught a thin sound of movement above, followed by a rasping noise.

Holliday spoke from his post. "Guess that woke them all right, Tom—unless Durkin and Masuret are stirring around."

Harding shook his head. "Don't think so. Noise would be sharper. The way it is, any—"

His words chopped off as if the sentence had hit a wall and disintegrated. His mouth hung open. The din suddenly unloosed upstairs would have startled a calmer man than the detective chief. And knifing through this clamor was the shrill scream of a woman—two screams, one crowding the other's echo.

Finally the Captain snapped into action. "Come on!" he bellowed, and went bounding up the stairs. "Masuret!" he called. "Durkin!"

Sergeant Flick was almost on his superior's heels when Sughrue and then Holliday reached the bottom step. That left

Bentley, the picklock and myself below without light. It wasn't any place to be without a light, so we all hit the stairs as well.

My breath was strictly juvenile, in short pants, by the time we made the fourth floor. I was in great condition. So was Bentley. We puffed along the hall toward light throwing out from a doorway. Captain Harding's torch and gun-waving cops were lining seven men and a woman against a wall of this room. The Captain wasn't visible with his crew but a broad rump showed at an open rear window. Lieutenant Holliday, half-crouched beside the rump, was endeavoring to peer down also but his vision was blocked.

I hurried to the Lieutenant and panted, "What—happened—Fred?"

He abandoned the effort that wasn't getting him anywhere and pushed a forefinger downward. "Some guy took a dive." Then he nodded toward the captives. "Or maybe one of this bunch helped him."

My eyes toured their faces. Some were glowering, some sullen, one was chalk-white and stark with terror. I saw Frenchy, and Nick Zulturo, his dealer with the bandaged hand; Corbell of the dimpled chin; Joyce Stephenson, who was alias Fanchon Brunelle and Joyce Stevens and Mrs. Walter Brunelle. I was mildly surprised to see Johnny Jump-Up, and beside him Little Reno, or Lou Schleger's gun. The two remaining lads puzzled me, though. I didn't know their faces.

Then my versatile stomach turned over again. One face I had confidently expected to find wasn't present. I wheeled and stared dumbly toward the window. Harding, still visible only in a section, was engaged there in shouted conversation with someone below. Then he backed out of the aperture.

"Dead as a doornail," he announced. Stabbing the prisoners with a glare, he barked, "Who was it? Come on, speak up!"

I shook myself and said, "Without even looking, Tom, I think I know. The Langerman chauffeur."

His eyebrows marched together. "Jerry Flavin? Why the hell was he—"

I pointed toward Fanchon. "That's what he called himself out there but his real name was Wally Brunelle. There's his wife and—"

"How the hell did a *chauffeur* rate here?" Harding demanded.

I smiled. "He was just playing at chauffeuring, my friend. Wally Brunelle was your two-time murderer—an executioner for Frenchy. So maybe *you* can guess who executed the executioner."

Detective Durkin sprang forward to grab the collapsing Queen but muffed her on a close decision. She slid through his hands to the floor.

XXIV

THE PLATTER WAS LARGE enough to hold a twenty-pound turkey but was piled with sandwiches instead. Carmela placed it on the round table, beneath the heavy hanging lamp, which was decorated with a fearsome combination of red and green glass.

"Good Lord," she said, "I'll be shoveling food into men's mouths even after I'm dead. The handsome waitress in St. Peter's Bar and Grill—that'll be me. Ask for Carmie, the one with the black wings." She flashed a smile that said she was only kidding, flounced out of her parents' dining room and nearly collided with a tall man at the door. She ogled him and disappeared.

"It's a'right! Go in! Go in!" The voice was Rosario's but he was hidden by the big frame.

The husky lad stepped inside, while Rosario continued along the hall. "I'm Bob Thornton, representing Mrs. Corbell," he said, smiling uncertainly.

I circled the table and stuck out my hand. "We just beat you here. Remember me—Dean, at the Old Plantation?"

He grinned but appeared uncomfortable. "Yes, I remember you. Suppose you want a shot at *my* chin. Here!" He thrust out his jaw.

"Uh-huh! Some other time."

"Well, I'll apologize instead. Sort of lost my head when I heard Mrs. Corbell cry out and spotted her sister with you."

"I know. She finally told me all about it." I turned. "You know Miss Yeager, of course. Over there in the big chair is Captain Harding, head of the Bureau of Criminal Investigation. Lieutenant Holliday's beside him on the right. That's Sergeant Flick standing at the sideboard with

the important business. And at the table, with all the food, is Art Bentley. He's on the *Press-Bulletin*."

Thornton nodded at each in turn and I waved him to a chair. Holliday rose, reached and took a sandwich. "Somebody's got to do these justice. They look good." He plumped down again.

I said, "Well—looks like the troubles are over, Bob. The picture matter's under cover, the stolen goods racket is busted and the gang's rounded up. You know about Jerry's death and the grabbing of eight at Frenchy's place. The ones I didn't recognize turned out to be guys who lugged me to the farm."

"Jigger and Chappie," Bentley added.

I nodded. "Another squad brought in the woman fence, Kate the Kisser, and Eli Soler, who was living out there. A barnful of stuff was seized and a lot more at Steve Corbell's novelty house."

Thornton shook his head soberly. "I'm glad it's over. Too bad Mrs. Corbell couldn't have been situated to smash the thing before." He gestured futilely with his hands. "But there was her sister, and Corbell had those pictures and was threatening..."

Sergeant Flick left the sideboard and started around with a trayful of drinks. I took mine, placed it on the table and dug for a cigarette.

From the depths of his chair, Captain Harding asked, "Mr. Thornton, how far back did this selling of hot goods in the Langerman store go and how much money does it run into?"

The merchandising manager looked thoughtful. "Must be untold thousands, Captain. How much perhaps will never be known. They even had their own auditors in there. You see, it was flourishing for some time before Mrs. Corbell ever found out. When she broke with Corbell and fired him, she thought that would end it, but then he produced those pictures. I suppose you know about them?"

Harding nodded. "Dean told me a little while ago. Showed me three." The heavy face screwed up. "By the way, Garry," he asked, "how'd you happen to get steered on them pictures?"

That was a little embarrassing and I mugged to gain time. "Why, I took a little peek at Helen Langerman's handbag when

she didn't happen to be looking. She had three shots in there. And that's where I found the phone number that led me to Corbell."

Harding considered my answer carefully. Then he said, "Well, that Corbell place is rigged like a legitimate shop. How come you smelled a stolen goods racket?"

I SMILED. "That, Tom, is what a guy gets for losing his head. Corbell blew his top after I mentioned Helen's name there. He and his boys put the slug on me—probably because he feared I was getting underneath everything. Then they poured some kind of dope down my gullet—"

Bentley choked and ended with a gurgling cough. "A very difficult feat with *your* gullet, I'm sure."

"You go soak your head," I ordered. To Harding I resumed: "Possibly Corbell didn't quite know what to do with me after his flare-up. If he'd been smart and just yessed me, I might have been sidetracked. But he had me taken out to that old farm and I got away. Running into ugly Kate, after seeing Mrs. Brunelle with Rhoda at Frenchy's place started me wondering why Corbell was hooked up with shoplifters. I also wondered why a hideaway. Later Helen let fall something about a barn. I drove out on the quiet, nosed around and found the barn jammed with cases of stuff." My hand sawed the air. "That's all there was to it, really. Maybe Corbell meant to keep me on ice till he could contact Frenchy and get advice. Perhaps he thought to pump me and find out how much I actually did know."

Lieutenant Holliday said to Thornton, "This Kate woman with the homely kisser—did you know about her?"

He shook his head. "No—nor Mrs. Corbell. All she knew was that her estranged husband was handling the thing. She thought he had somebody in the underworld behind him and finally fixed on Poseny at the Old Plantation—the one they call Johnny Jump-Up. We used to go around to different places, thinking in our own confused way that we might smoke out the real leader and she could *do* something—perhaps buy him off."

A heavy grunt came from Harding. "Worst thing you could do! He'd take

the money, laugh to himself and go on as before."

I sipped at my highball and replaced it on the table. "She thought she finally was fixing things up, Tom, but through her husband. Gillie Maher queered that. He was a con man right up to the final gun and even double-crossed the guy who was double-crossing her. I mean Steve Corbell."

Harding had started to load his briar pipe but he halted. "That's a little mixed, Garry. Clean it up."

I pulled back a chair, sat down and leaned my elbows on the table. "While I was talking to that squirt fifth vice-president, I spotted Gillie in the bank. Now, Gillie and banks didn't mix. So I watched him. I *didn't* notice that Gillie switched envelopes on the way back from Mrs. Corbell to the bank. He knew *something* vital to Corbell's welfare was in that envelope and had his own plan to use it in blackmailing Corbell."

The rewrite man had started to raise his glass. He put it down again. "But what's this *envelope* stuff? What was in it, anyhow?"

I blew a last cloud of smoke and killed my cigarette. "Art, when Mrs. Corbell caught up with her husband and fired him—but let's start at the beginning. This is pooled from what I ran down, what Mrs. Corbell and Miss Yeager finally decided to tell me and what little information Captain Harding, Lieutenant Holliday and Sergeant Flick—ex-bartender, but *still* a punk one—squeezed out of that gang so far tonight."

"A dirty slur like that I won't forget in a hurry," Flick said, grinning.

I picked it up again. "When Corbell married Dorothea Langerman he married a lot of dough, but it wasn't his dough. He found that out after awhile and didn't like it. He was quite a lad for life and was in the barrel at the store—"

"That early?" Flick interrupted.

I NODDED. "He'd been juggling stock in a small way at the store even before his marriage—trying to siphon off some illegal cash for himself and square debts around town. He was in rather deep to bookies, for one thing, and Frenchy and his tables for another, but thought the

marriage would give him a nice stake to level everything off. She didn't prove as easy, though, as he'd figured."

I set the glass down. "Now, the guys Corbell owed his shirt to were put out when they found his marriage wasn't squaring him. Incidentally, one guy was Johnny Jump-Up, who'd booked a lot of Corbell's bets. So, what with one thing and another, they had themselves an idea, a scheme not only to get theirs from Steve and insure him a steady, independent piece of change but a scheme that'd feather their own nests as well. The setting was perfect. Here was a store selling all kinds of pickup bargain stuff—"

Holliday rose and took another sandwich. "Yup, you sure get bargains at Langerman's all right."

"Now, by a coincidence—merely a coincidence, mind you," I smiled, "Frenchy and the Jump-Up knew where to put their hands on a lot more stuff, only these goods were hot. Kate with the ugly kisser and Fanchon Brunelle, former shoplifters, had given up boosting and were part of a ring of fences. Here was your hand-made setup. Corbell was a big shot in a big store. The ring had plenty of stolen goods to dispose of. Why not put two and two together and begin counting the dough? So they propositioned Corbell and sold him. Hot merchandise sold from counters and racks at Langerman's, with fake labels and markings.

"That was the start," I said, "and the take was dandy until Mrs. Corbell smelled something. You can imagine her shock on learning that her own husband was head, neck and heels in the mess.

"They hadn't been getting on too well anyhow. The employer-employee romance was threadbare. She gave him the old heave-ho after forcing a confession on threat of prosecution. She wanted the confession because it would let her out if authorities ever got wind of the irregularities. Then she thought everything was fine. She put Bob Thornton here—a guy with a *fair* right-hand punch—in Corbell's place as merchandising manager.

"Okay!" I said, taking a sip from a fresh highball. "With Corbell out of the way, Mrs. Corbell figured the funny business was over, but she failed to reckon in the gang. They weren't letting all that

soft dough slide so easily. They told Corbell his confession was just too bad but something might be done to offset it. Just give them a little time. There's never been anything so smelly that a racket mob couldn't think up something smellier. And when they found that Helen Langerman had a weakness and Corbell possessed pictures of her and could always take more, the gang had their weapon. Mrs. Corbell said she almost died when told about the photos. She tried unsuccessfully to buy them away."

"Wouldn't do her no good," Flick observed. "They'd hold back copies."

"Even though she failed to buy up the photos," I went on, "she balked at the gang's demand that peddling of hot goods be continued in the store. But when they played their hole card and threatened her with the rottenest part of their scheme, she was trapped—"

Harding leaned forward, pipe in hand. "What hole card?"

"Corbell had pictures of his wife, of course, studio and snapshot. If she wouldn't play ball, composite photos would be gimmicked, with her head and Helen's nude figure. These composites, with Mrs. Corbell apparently throwing herself around in her skin, would be sent anonymously to business and social friends."

"And so she had to consent?" Lieutenant Holliday asked.

I shrugged. "What else could she do till she hit upon a new solution? And they even were ahead of her there. Suspecting she might find something new up her sleeve, they informed her politely that she had two new employees—the chauffeur known as Jerry Flavin, and the secretary, Miss Yeager."

Rhoda's face was pale but her eyes steady when she looked up again. She seemed to be making a silent appeal that I keep my promise.

Harding said, "Well, of course they were put there to keep watch on Mrs. Corbell. It's obvious."

"They were eyes," I agreed, "but I'm sure Miss Yeager would have faded if she realized there was to be any violence."

I felt pretty good. I'd sunk home a first punch for her. Maybe now—I thought—she'd feel at least a little sorry for having bitten my lip.

I SAID, "There was the stage and there were the players, when I went to the trust company about a shortage the *Press-Bulletin* had been tipped on. That was just a break—lucky! If that squirt banker had admitted the shortage we probably would have been sitting with our heads together and I'd never have noticed Gillie Maher in the bank."

"Yeah, but what about this bank thing?" Bentley complained. "Always you come back to the bank, like a guy topheavy with gold, but you *still* don't straighten it out."

I blew a smoke ring and watched it break against the garish lamp. "Well, I'm coming to that. Corbell and his crew were operating smoothly again. He'd been set up in that wholesale novelty business for a front. Stuff from the fences was shipped either direct to his joint or to the farm and then to the shop. But he was worried over the confession his wife held and finally made a private deal to trade it back—his confession for the pictures, negatives and a promise to leave Helen alone. But he wouldn't come through with them to Mrs. Corbell till he had the incriminating paper."

"What was to prevent his renegeing once he got the paper?" Harding demanded.

"Nothing!" I said. "That's precisely what Mrs. Corbell asked herself. And she was smart enough to have a photostat made. Now, as to Gillie, Corbell knew him for a smoothie. Gillie'd had a run-in with Johnny Jump-Up and wasn't any too well set with Frenchy. So Gillie wouldn't be liable to squeal. Corbell didn't want to be seen with his wife. Gillie was obtained to pose as a bank clerk, get the envelope and slip it to Corbell."

"Didn't the chauffeur—this Jerry, or Wally Brunelle—know Gillie?" Lieutenant Holliday asked. "Gillie was in the gang, wasn't he?"

I shook my head again. "No to both. Brunelle was imported—came on after his wife. And Gillie was in and out of Belle City."

Captain Harding stirred impatiently. "Well, it's plain Gillie rooked this Corbell on the deal. When'd he find out?"

I said, "Not until he retrieved the envelope from that dime locker. That was another unexpected play. Gillie had seen me leave the bank on Corbell's trail, told

Corbell he was being followed and advised sticking the envelope away so it wouldn't be found on him. Then he could duck me and pick it up later at his leisure. But after Corbell had tucked the envelope away, he saw his opportunity and grabbed it again while Gillie and I were arguing across the station concourse, outside a phone booth. Corbell *must* have taken back the envelope then."

"Why?" The curt question came from Harding.

"Because he beat me to the Langerman house that afternoon. I went out to find the woman of the car and tell her that whatever she'd been tricked out of was in a locker at the depot. Corbell had already arrived. Miss Yeager can tell us about that."

All faces turned in Rhoda's direction. She placed her original highball, still only half-consumed, on the floor, then rubbed her hands slowly together, as if they were chilled.

"Well," she began hesitantly, "Mr. Corbell asked for me—sent up his card. I went down and he was furious. He said his wife was supposed to have given him some important paper but the envelope contained only a blank sheet. She overheard him and had him come upstairs. She was pretty upset, too, and denied giving him only blank paper. Finally he seemed to believe her and grabbed the phone. He called Frenchy's place—I recognized the number—and talked with somebody, I don't know who. I heard him cry, 'Oh, he's *there*, is he!' Then, after listening, he said, 'I don't care if you *kill* the rat.'"

Sergeant Flick observed, "He might as well of *told* a bunch like that to knock him off."

I said, "Rhoda, you overlooked the chauffeur."

The chignon swayed as she shook her head again. "No, I didn't hear about Jerry's part till late that night. Mrs. Brunelle told me at the club. She said they made Gillie produce the paper and then gave him a terrible beating. Frenchy came in and was angry when he heard what Gillie had done. Jerry was there and Frenchy talked with him and then they put Gillie in the green car and Jerry took him

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away." Rhoda shrugged. "Mrs. Brunelle seemed rather proud of her husband."

Harding interposed, "Then Corbell must have had to tell his gang, after all, about angling for the confession."

"Probably wasn't anything else he *could* do then," I agreed. "But I doubt if he'd admit making that *kind* of deal. You boys should get more information when you go to work on them."

Holliday leaned forward. "Tell me, Miss Yeager," he said paternally, "how did you ever come to be mixed up with such a gang? You look like a nice girl. You don't *talk* like a moll." He studied her reflectively. "And—you're pretty!"

She smiled. "I was bookkeeper at the Old Plantation—bookkeeper and secretary to Mr. Poseny and Mr. Schleger. And please don't think I was part of any *gang*, Lieutenant. They said I was to go as Mrs. Corbell's secretary; that I should report daily to the chauffeur on what she did and said. What it was all about, I didn't know at first. Mrs. Corbell didn't like it and didn't like me either at first. Then, after a while, we both began to like each other better." Rhoda took the fresh drink Flick handed her and bowed politely. "Probably, if things had gone a little longer, I'd have been on her side."

I smiled at her encouragingly. The babe was making out pretty good with these gendarmes on her own. But I had to clear up some points for them.

"Now, about the night when I talked with Langerman. I want this to clear your own lips here. Somebody was tucked away in the dark of the dining room, listening. . . ."

Her smile was embarrassed. "I was the one, as I told you last night. That was part of my job, to hear what went on."

"Then you reported it direct, Jerry being off?"

"Yes, I didn't know when I'd see him."

"And perhaps they got hold of him at the fights and he came home and knocked off the old man." Then I qualified the statement. "Still, I can't believe he intended to kill him at first. In that event the chauffeur would have brought a weapon. The fact that brass candlesticks happened to be on the mantel was accidental." I looked at Harding and Holliday. "And how did he get in? There

wasn't any first floor door or window found open or forced."

"That's right!" Harding grunted. "The only clue to entrance or egress was that one deep footprint in the muddy ground under the old man's window, as if somebody dropped from the window, one foot landing in dirt and one on the lawn. That print must have been planted deliberately."

"Certainly!" I said. "And you never heard of anybody bothering to close a window before dropping—especially a burglar who'd just murdered a man. It would be an acrobat's trick." I shook my head. "No. I lean strongly toward what Mrs. Corbell told me. She said her father had threatened to question the chauffeur again about that envelope."

"Ah!" Captain Harding sat upright. "And he was suspicious of him anyway."

I NODDED. "My idea is that Langerman called the chauffeur over, let him in, took him upstairs and there had it out. Of course Jerry denied everything. Langerman was an irascible type. He might have tongue-lashed Jerry, or even let slip that he *did* know what was wrong at the store. Anyhow, something happened that made Jerry snatch that candlestick and paste him." I paused and surveyed the gathering. "Remember, Jerry was a torpedo. An extra killing or two wouldn't bother a guy like that."

"*This* one seemed to mean something," Sergeant Flick commented. "It meant he became completely dead himself."

"Because Frenchy wanted to shut his mouth," Captain Harding grunted. "But he forgot he couldn't shut them all up, including Jerry's wife. Frenchy opened the window, said something about them scrambling that way, called this Jerry guy over to look—and when he looked, gave him a shove."

"Pardon a poor lad like me with a double-jointed brain," Bentley drawled. "but Langerman was dead before eleven o'clock, wasn't he?"

"That's positive!" Harding snapped. "Why?"

Bentley didn't look at him. "Well, the fights wound up just around eleven, and the chauffeur was there, right at ringside with Nick Zulturo. The chauffeur couldn't possibly have gotten home, been called over

by the old man, gone upstairs, argued awhile and then killed him before eleven forty-five at the earliest."

I smiled with an expression he'd take for pity. "Just when Helen and I picked Jerry up as he was climbing the driveway? He said he'd been given a lift home by a fellow chauffeur?"

Bentley nodded, a little crease appearing between his eyes. "That's what you told me."

"I also told you that all I could see plainly of Jerry on the running board was a tie with broad diagonal stripes flapping from his coat. So look at this." I picked up the manila envelope and drew out the enlarged photo snapped at ringside. It was much sharper than the newspaper reproduction. I indicated my two men standing just beyond the ring apron. "This guy's Nick Zulturo. The one beside him is Jerry. What kind of a necktie is he wearing?"

Harding exclaimed, "By God, *that's* no striped tie. It's got—well, like flowers or leaves."

I said, "There you are! He probably got blood-splattered beating the old man's brains out, changed clothes, disposed of the bloody ones, then went down and waited for somebody to come along so he'd have an alibi."

Lieutenant Holliday seemed puzzled. "But Garry," he objected, "that *time* element." He punched a forefinger at the enlargement. "The fights weren't over till around eleven. Unless this was taken early in the main bout . . ."

"Nope! That's the knockout. What Art doesn't know, but what I checked, was that the main bout was fought ahead of two prelims. The main bout went on at nine o'clock, a scheduled ten-rounder. It finished in less than one minute of the seventh. So your chauffeur-executioner had plenty of time to get back home."

Bentley groaned and pretended to beat his head with both hands.

I handed photo and envelope to Harding. "Have a slice of evidence, Tom. No charge. See if all this doesn't check when you begin shaking those prisoners apart."

Bentley cleared his throat. "My head," he intoned, "is bloody from that fight sequence, but still unbowed. I'll stick

it out once more. What became of the guy Helen was all dressed up for? Has *he* gone down the drain?"

Rhoda said, "I think I can answer that. Helen wasn't going out. She often dressed up. She liked to pretend. In lots of ways she's still only a little girl."

I felt like mentioning that she wasn't from one personal view I'd had, but kept my trap shut and tapped Thornton's arm. "Tell Mrs. Corbell we'll have to print the inside story—but nothing about Helen. It'll be just that the store management was in the grip of a ring. Let the public guess at the rest."

Smiling, he stuck out his hand. "Thanks!"

Bentley rose. "Don't tell me you're coming down and help *write* some of this," he said dryly. "Cripes, you hardly remember what the office looks like." He turned toward the door. "Okay, then, I'll call the desk and tell them we're heading in with a cleanup."

RHODA appeared beside me. "Thank you, Garry." Though she was smiling her eyes were weary. "You handed me wonderfully."

"Pays you back for biting," I whispered. "Coals of fire stuff!"

"I'm sorry about that. Really I am."

She smiled again and glanced toward Harding, Holliday and Flick, who had their heads together by the sideboard. "What do you think they'll do about me?"

I patted her arm. "You'll be all right. Maybe a witness or something. Stick with Mrs. Corbell for awhile and we'll see."

"Well, thanks again. I think I'll find Carmela and turn in."

But I thought of something. "Listen, before you do that, give Mrs. Corbell a ring. She may be worried about Helen."

"She's always worried about Helen."

I nodded. "Just tell her that if Helen, by any chance, hasn't been home tonight I know where she parked. Tell her," I lied, "it was for safety's sake. If I know the pretty daffodil, she'll go home by herself."

Rhoda eyed me curiously but finally said, "All right. I'll call. Good night again!"

All the way down Rosario's dim-lit stairs it seemed that I could catch again a faint trace of Helen's perfume.

KILLER IN THE NIGHT

By H. R. HUNT

He alone knew who the killer was—and he alone knew that tonight was the night to strike!



The shot burst the hollow night open.

NOBODY WOULD EXPECT to find a killer in a brightly lit hotel lounge. The thought amused me and I went in. There was the usual assortment of people. I found a comfortable chair, stretched my legs and lit a cigarette. I had a lot of time.

Ever since the murders began the police force had taken a lacing from the citizens. The captain of our precinct had given us orders to be alert on and off duty.

It was a pleasure to be out of uniform even for one night. Even so, I was restless as a cat. The hounding at headquarters, the movie slides and talks had gotten me down. Everyone had a theory. But no one knew anything.

The murderer was a thrill killer. He was clever and fast. Everyone of his victims had blond hair. So they waited to trip him

up on his fixation. They searched the town for the lock of hair he snipped off each lifeless head. I wanted to laugh out loud.

The dim streets at night and the dark, musty alleys were his home. Sometimes he followed a golden head into her apartment. Held there by fascination and the sweet terror in her eyes, he watched her die, softly, without a sound.

I knew what it was like. I knew his identity.

I crushed my cigarette. It was nearly twelve. In a few minutes the telephone exchange would disgorge its lovely, laughing human mass of life.

I walked to the magazine stand. Bought a package of cigarettes I didn't want and a magazine I wouldn't read.

"Hi, Mr. Davis—"

I turned, startled, and froze. It was

Sandy Smith, the pink-cheeked elevator boy at the hotel. I knew him well. He lived a few houses down the block from my home. The kid had always annoyed me. The model boy. He was held up to the other youngsters as a paragon of virtue. He nauseated me.

He had already changed from his uniform. His eyes were bright as they met mine. "Off duty tonight, Mr. Davis?"

"Yes," I admitted, rolling the magazine up tight.

"Say," he grinned fatuously, "got any news on the killer yet?"

"No." I stared at his shoes. "Guess he's too smart for us. But we'll get him one of these days."

"I bet you will," Sandy laughed. "Have any theory?"

"None," I answered, not looking up. I wanted to smash his face in. "If I had, I'd sure use it."

"You'd better take good care of that girl." His eyes stared straight into mine. The monkey, I thought. He knows. "Well," he turned, "got to get home. It's late. See you in the papers."

"Yeah." I walked out of the hotel, burning, and headed for the telephone exchange.

THE telephone girls were leaving the building in chattering twos and threes. I caught sight of a page boy blonde and my heart gave a leap. I followed her slowly. At the bus stop I walked up to her. "Beautiful night, isn't it?"

She gave me a lovely smile. "Not in uniform tonight?"

"No. My off night," I answered. "I was wondering—" the words beat in my ears "—if you'd care to take in a movie?"

Even in the dim street light I could see the quick color come into her cheeks. "Why, I—"

I looked into her eyes. They were so blue, I foundered in their depths. Ever since I could remember, it had been little Mary Stevens for me. I forced myself back to reality. There were too many people about, waiting.

"Yes, I'd like to very much," she said. Her face was gay. She felt the same, I knew.

I touched her arm. "When?"

"Next Thursday all right?"

"Fine," I said, exhilarated.

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My darling, I thought, I thought, You don't know it, but you and I have a date tonight.

In the bus we managed to get one of those double seats. Sitting like that gave me the sense of being alone with her.

"You look different without your uniform," she said, turning her head to look at me.

I glowed with the pleasure of anticipation at last realized. How long, no one knows, I had planned to have her notice me. No one could imagine how she tantalized and fascinated the awkward hulk of me with her dainty loveliness.

I was all tied up in a knot of restraint. Her lips said things to me a man can't endure. Her eyes haunted me.

"Aren't you afraid—" my mouth was dry "—to go home so late at night?"

She gave a shaky laugh. "Of course, now, with the murders . . ."

I tore my eyes away from her face. "You have a few blocks to walk down. Rather dark, isn't it?"

"Yes," she began, and then hesitated. I could feel her eyes searching my face.

"I'd be glad to take you home.

"Why . . . if you like . . ."

But something had clicked in her mind. I glanced up to find her studying me. I grinned nervously. But she did not smile.

"Do you think the police will ever catch up with him?" she asked.

"Don't we always?"

"I don't know—"

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Irresistibly, my eyes were drawn to her hair. It clung like a long shining cap to her small head. It was soft-looking, inviting . . . I wanted to touch it. I longed to feel its smoothness in my hands.

I forced my eyes away and met hers. They clung and held. Slowly into their depths there came something like suspicion, and fear widened them.

"Our stop," I said hoarsely and the moment broke.

"Really, I don't want to put you out of your way," she said. "After all it will take you a few blocks further . . ."

Then I knew. She was afraid of me. I clenched my hands. "I think I understand—" I could barely form the words—"how you feel. Good night."

I watched her walk down the street, a girl afraid of the black emptiness behind her.

I couldn't lose her now! I ran quickly into the next street and plunged through a dark yard, into another street, running lightly, for there were still lights in the peaceful houses.

At the cross street I slipped into another yard. I knew each foot of the way well. I was in my own territory. Ahead of me waited the sprawling vacant lots, full of weeds and sheltering grass.

I fell flat, my face in the soft, moldy dirt. I inched my way forward in the darkness.

Then I could hear Mary's steps on the pavement. They were impatient, and the terror in each cried out into the night.

I parted the tall grass and crawled forward. I drew up on my knees and waited.

They never cry out. They are paralyzed with fear. The eyes are especially beautiful in their terror. A quick hand on the mouth and then they die, softly, without sound.

I fired my Special. The shot burst the hollow night open. Then I ran to her and held up her head, her blonde hair soft against my face.

But she was only stunned. There was a long bruise on her cheek. I did not look at the figure sprawled in the grass. Without turning the face up, I knew it was Sandy Smith.

I watched you grow up, Sandy. I watched you die. We understood each other more than any other two people in the world.

MURDER MAKES A LOVELY FRAME

By KEN KESSLER

Crime reporter Johnnie Vinson laughed shakily to himself. The only way to find out who was for you, it seemed, was to kill a cop!



IT WASN'T THE WALK down the hall, or dropping the nickel in the slot, or dialing, that brought beads of sweat to Johnnie Vinson's brow. And certainly it wasn't Leta Morris' warm, lilting "hel-lo," for that was music to his tortured soul. It was none of these.

It was the ending of a phase of his life, or the beginning of another. There was a sharp line and a deep scar in between that Johnnie would never forget. Not for a long time.

When she recognized his voice she drew a quick, pained breath. "Oh, Johnnie, darling, where are you? I've asked everywhere. I've searched till I'm almost panicky—"

He drew strength from her anxiety. He wondered with that part of him which had become so alert whether Henslee ever missed. Henslee, the copper, the genius down at headquarters who had no unsolved cases after twenty years.

"It wasn't safe to call sooner," he said, muffling his voice. "It's still not safe, but I've got to see you. At once, Leta. Can you come here?"

"Of course, darling. Right away."

Johnnie pressed his face tight against the phone. He gave her the address. "Use back streets. Remember, I'm billed as a cop-killer. Captain Henslee himself is on the case."

There was an instant of silence when Johnnie could hear the beating of his heart. Then her voice came. "Don't leave the house, Johnnie. I'll get to you. Don't go out for anything." She hung up. The receiver clicked as if reluctant to break the connection.

Johnnie returned to his room at the end of the hall. This building was as remote as any he could find, a good spot for a murder-suspect. It was in the heart of the city, but no limousines plied the streets outside; no women in ermine or men in top

"... they'll find the gun in your hand!"

hats were ever seen under its shadowy lights. This was a section called Sand Flat, a little isolated world of unkempt hovels and dime beers and sleezy femininity in peeling doorways.

Johnnie entered the room, closing the door behind him. A lone table, ringed with the imprints of a thousand whiskey bottles, two plain chairs, and an iron bed with grilled head- and foot-boards, were the room's furnishings. The bed squeaked lustily as he sat on it.

He would wait now. He would count the seconds marching past and—wait. He felt like a character in one of his own true police-case write-ups. Johnnie Doe, or Harvey Smith. Of Oshkosh, or Pumpkin Center. Only, now it was Johnnie Vinson and not some remote character blurred on a police photograph. Johnnie made his living unearthing unusual murder cases and writing them up for the national magazines.

He passed a slim hand across his unshaved cheeks. His eyes were red, his blue suit wrinkled, and his shirt dirty. He hefted himself off the bed and went to the window, drawing back the curtain and peering across at the intersection. The big, alert figure of Captain Henslee was there. He was leaning against a lamp post, cleaning his fingernails.

Johnnie drew back. Leta would never come down the street. She was too schooled in the guiles of a world that lives by night. A dancer, a sprite in gay panties and bra to whet the fancies of overbored customers, a girl who'd made her own way since she was orphaned at twelve. Leta would use the back entrance.

WHEN he heard her unmistakable nervous tread in the hallway, he leaped to the door. And then she was in his arms, her hands clasped fiercely behind his neck. "Johnnie, you're in an awful jam, honey."

He drew away. "The cops are hot, hey?"

She nodded. "You've got to have help. You can't just sit here and rot. They'll pick you up in time."

He gazed at her slowly. She was wearing black that grew into every subtle curve and made startling contrasts against her white flesh. "That's why I called you," he explained. "I had to see you. It's rough,

waiting like this. But I can't go out. I've been living on sandwiches and beer that a kid brings me."

"They've got you charged, you know. Cop-killing!"

His voice was harsh. "But they've got nothing on me except a lot of circumstantial evidence. They've never found the murder gun. What do they claim for a motive?"

"Jealousy, Johnnie. They think you killed Fagan because you were jealous over me. Witnesses heard you tell him to stay away from my dressing room."

"He had no business hanging around back there every night. But I wouldn't have killed him for it."

"Johnnie," she said measuredly, "you're forgetting I saw you."

He slumped on the bed. "He was in the hallway. The Golden Moon was packed. You had just finished your dance. I was ahead of you on my way to your dressing room. As I opened the door I heard the shot. I guess you heard it, too. Being behind me you thought it was me."

She stood close to him. "Johnnie, remember, I saw you. I wasn't more than a couple of steps behind you. The gun went off and then, before I could do or say anything, you were racing out the rear exit."

His shoulders drooped wearily.

"They're saying now he wasn't just playing around. He was on duty. I don't know what he was looking for, but Fagan wasn't there to make passes at me. He was officially working."

"The way he hung around you—"

"That was part of his act. He was using me, or thought he was." She grasped his hand. "I've got a plan. You won't like it, but you've got to listen!"

"I'm listening."

"Curd Roper. I know how you hate him, but you're in no spot to quibble. Curd can get you out of here, out of town, where you'll be safe. He has men all over the city. Then you can hole up somewhere for a while."

Johnnie tensed. "Curd would want pay, big pay. I haven't got any money. No, we've got to think of something else."

"They—they'll hang you, Johnnie." Her nails dug into his hand. "Oh, I thought there were other ways, too! But there aren't. It has to be Curd."

"But the money?"

"I've got my savings." Her breath came with a rush. "You can pay me back later."

Johnnie shrugged. "Maybe it has to be."

She loosed her hand. "I'll go to Curd immediately. And, Johnnie—" she bit her lip—"you know how Curd is. If you've got a gun around, hide it."

"I don't have one," Johnnie assured her. "Neither a gun nor the gun."

She kissed him and went out.

Johnnie sat quietly on the bed. At length he got up, lit a cigarette and sat down again. He was thinking of the nights in the Golden Moon. Laughter and music, and holding Leta in his arms.

He had first met Leta casually a year ago, but it wasn't until recently that they had come to know each other. Fagan was hanging around then. Leta said not to mind him. She said that Johnnie was all she wanted. It happened that suddenly.

He recalled the night when several of the band members were in the hallway smoking and Fagan was leering at Leta. Johnnie told him to move it. "A copper's place is out front, Fagan. No crooks back here." Curd Roper, who owned the Golden Moon, came through then. Fagan smiled and moved out of the hall.

JOHNNIE smoked his cigarette and marked time by the progressive acceleration of his heart. Finally he heard steps again, this time heavier and slower.

The knob turned and Curd Roper stepped in.

"Hi, Johnnie," he smiled in his easy way. Curd gave the impression of being disjointed. His arms swung freely and his legs were as agile as an athlete's. His fine body was incongruous with the unrelenting grey eyes and the thin, hard mouth.

Johnnie got up. "Leta said she'd fix it. I guess I'm in a spot."

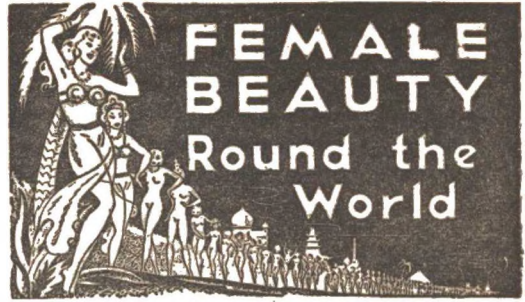
"Guess? You're putting it mildly. What made you kill him? A dame ain't worth it, Johnnie."

"I didn't do it, Curd. But innocence makes no difference. A frame can be—"

"Frame?"

"Fagan was shot by a gunman hiding in the hall. The copper was working on a case."

Curd leaned on a chair. "What was he working on, Johnnie?"



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"A dope ring. I'd heard it rumored that a big one was active. A few small-time arrests were made, but Fagan was after the leader. I figure the Golden Moon was headquarters and—"

"Are you insinuating—"
"—that he was after you, Curd. Little by little, hanging around as if he was making a play for Leta, he was adding things up." Johnnie stepped back. "Leta learned he was a cop and got wise. So did you."

Curd gouged his hand in his pocket. "So I come up here to help you and you spring this?"

A gun appeared out of Curd's pocket. He grinned, waving it up and down.

The beads of sweat reappeared on Johnnie's forehead. "I know, Curd. The murder gun. I know the whole set-up. I couldn't believe Leta was mixed up in it at first . . ."

Curd cut in, grinning. "You're smart, Johnnie. Since you called the plays, I'll tell one. Sure, I killed Fagan. Now I'll surprise you. I'm not going to kill you, Johnnie."

"You've got to, now!"
Curd jiggled the gun. "Suicide, Johnnie. You couldn't take it, so you shot yourself. Oh, I'll pull the trigger, but they'll find the gun in *your* hand. This one, Johnnie." He took a step forward. "Start your prayers, Johnnie. Here it is—"

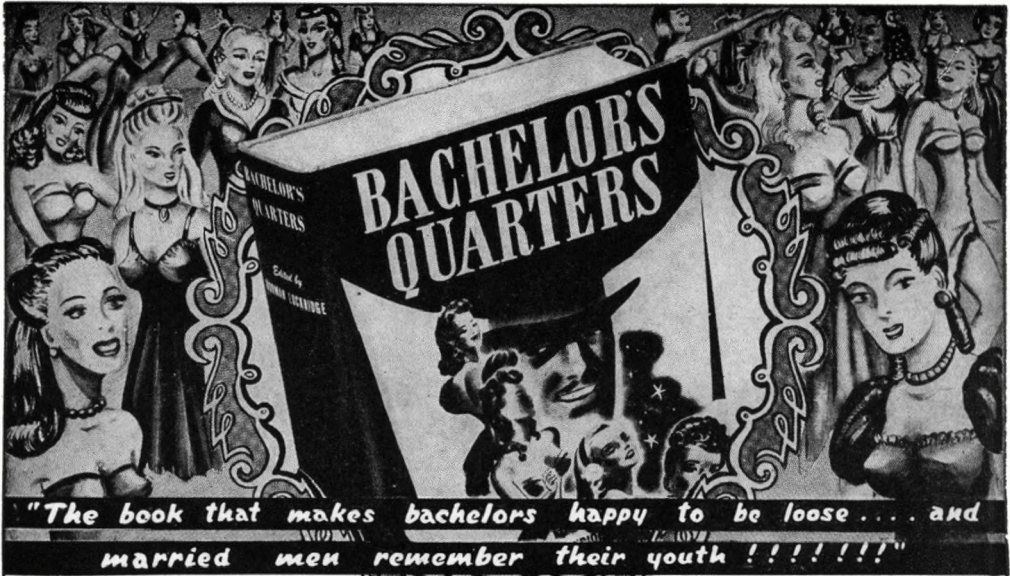
"That's all I need to hear, Curd." The voice was Henslee's, from the doorway. He stepped inside, his gun aimed at Curd's head. Curd whirled, licking his lips. He finally shrugged.

Johnnie was white. "I'll hand it to you, Henslee. When you said that you suspected Leta and Rope of working together, I—I couldn't buy it. But—"

Henslee had a moment when he looked very old. "A guy can't bat a thousand. No cop can. Watkins grilled her. He's convinced she's on the level. She was honest in thinking she saw you shoot Fagan. All along she was trying to help you."

Johnnie sprang for the door. "Then she's free!"

Henslee smiled weakly. "She would be if it wasn't for you." But Johnnie was gone down the stairs, leaving Henslee to talk to himself.



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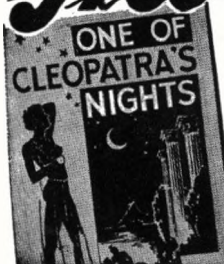
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