

DETECTIVE BOOK

SUMMER

20¢



A.N.C.

MAGAZINE

THE FLAMING LADY MURDER

A 3-alarm thriller
by STEWART STERLING



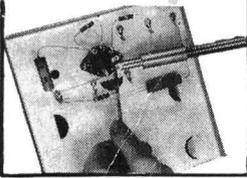
*Detective
Book's
\$2.00
mystery novel*

*Johnny Saturday, murder-wise private dick, loved
that curvy babe he was hustling to the chair . . .*

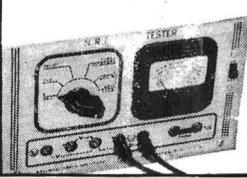
TIGER BY THE TAIL

by LAWRENCE GOLDMAN

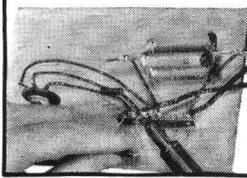
YOU PRACTICE Radio Soldering with Soldering Equipment and Radio Parts I send you. Get practical experience mounting and connecting parts.



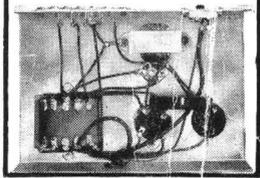
YOU BUILD this Tester with parts N. R. I. sends early in the course. Soon helps you fix neighbors' Radios and **EARN EXTRA MONEY** in spare time.



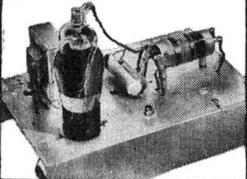
YOU TEST Radio circuits like this built with parts I send. Build special circuits; learn how to locate and repair circuit defects.



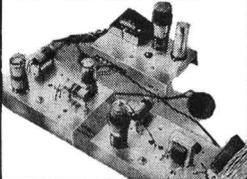
YOU BUILD Vacuum Tube Power Pack; make chassis which give you experience with packs of many kinds. Learn how to correct Power Pack troubles.



YOU BUILD this A. M. Signal Generator for more valuable experience. It provides amplitude-modulated signals for many tests and experiments.



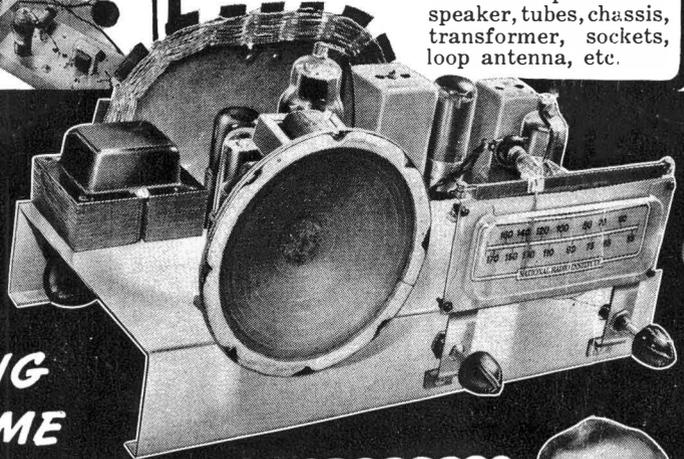
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DETECTIVE BOOK MAGAZINE'S
\$2.00 BOOKLENGTH NOVEL

TIGER BY THE TAIL

by LAWRENCE GOLDMAN

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He traced lovely Thorne Moore to a hide-away cottage, found her staring into the face of a blood-drenched corpse, heard her babble out a vicious motive for murder. But how could ace insurance dick Johnny Saturday turn in his damning report? How could he pin a murder rap on the gal he'd been planning to marry?



Plus Three Spine-Tingling Short Stories

- THE FLAMING LADY MURDER** Stewart Sterling 81
When they found a body among the charred ruins of the *Maison Elegante*, Chief Fire Marshall Ben Pedley began to realize that some fires are too hot to handle—even after they've been out a couple of days!
- FORTY FLIGHTS FROM HELL** Dan Gordon 91
Clouds were shrouds for the bodies of the damned in that glittery, swank penthouse where steeplejack Marty Morgan found the answer to his diamond-studded dreams.
- YOU'LL BE THE DEATH OF ME** . . . Edward Van Der Rhoer 98
Quickest way to catch a killer: Put a Hindu Swami and a ex-flatfoot on his trail—and don't tell the cops!

DETECTIVE BOOK *Magazine*

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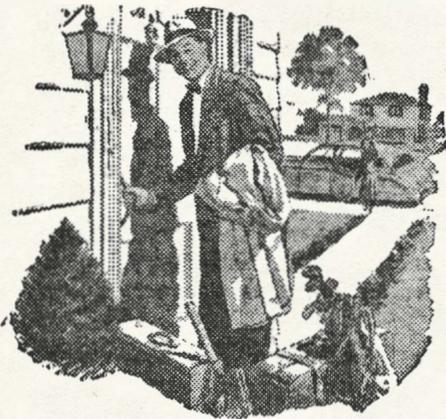
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THIS IS HARD



BUT THIS IS EASY



**AND THIS IS
MIGHTY WONDERFUL**

SURE, you believe in saving.

But it's hard to take cash out of your pocket, time out of your day, to do it regularly.

The sure way, the *easy* way to do your saving is to get started on an *automatic* savings plan with U. S. Savings Bonds. Like this . . .

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In just ten years after you start buying bonds, your money starts coming back to you —\$4 for every \$3 you put in.

And remember—any time you need your money for emergencies, you can get it back in minutes without losing interest.

Automatic saving is sure saving—U.S. Savings Bonds

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"I WAS ASHAMED OF MY FACE

until Viderm helped make my skin clearer in one short week"
(FROM A LETTER BY E. S. JORDAN, DETROIT, MICH.)

If your face is broken-out, if bad skin is making you miserable, here is how to stop worrying about pimples, blackheads and other externally-caused skin troubles.

JUST FOLLOW SKIN DOCTOR'S SIMPLE DIRECTIONS



IT DOESN'T PAY to put up with a broken-out face. Your very success in business, love and social life may depend upon your looks. *Handsome and a good appearance usually start with the condition of your skin.* Nobody likes to look at a face that is blemished by blackheads or pimples. **WOMEN ARE ATTRACTED TO MEN WHO HAVE SMOOTH, CLEAR, HEALTHY-LOOKING SKIN.** Business executives don't choose men whose complexions are against them. Don't take chances with your success in life when this inexpensive Viderm formula may help you.

Good-looking Skin Is Not for Women Only

You—yes, you—can have the same handsome complexion, free from externally caused skin troubles, simply by giving your face the special care that screen stars give theirs. There's almost nothing to it—it is just about as easy as washing your face. *The whole secret consists of washing your face in a way that thoroughly purges the pores of every last speck of dirt and grime—* something that ordinary cleansing seldom does. In fact, examination after examination shows that, usually, it is not a case of "bad skin" so much as a case of faulty cleansing. What you should use is a highly concentrated soap like Viderm Skin

Cleanser. This penetrates the pores and acts as an antiseptic. Specks of irritating dirt and grime are quickly washed out. They dissolve and disappear, leaving your skin

entirely free of the dirt particles that usually bring out pimples, blackheads and other externally-caused skin troubles.

Squeezing pimples or blackheads to get rid of them is a nasty, messy business—but that isn't the worst of it. Doing so may also be injurious and leave your face with unsightly, embarrassing blemishes. There is, now, a much easier, safer, cleaner way to help you rid your face of ugly, offensive, externally-caused skin troubles. *You merely follow a doctor's simple directions.*

Don't murder your skin! Here's all you have to do to get it smoother and clearer and to keep it that way. Use Viderm Skin Cleanser when you wash your face. Rub the rich lather of this highly-concentrated medicated soap on your face for just a few seconds and then rinse it off. Then apply a little Viderm Medicated Skin Cream and that's all there is to it. Viderm Medicated Skin Cream quickly disappears,

leaving your skin nice and smooth. This simple treatment, used after shaving, helps heal tiny nicks and cuts, relieves razor-burn and smarting, besides conditioning your skin.

Give Your Face This Treat for 7 Days

Stop worrying and being embarrassed over what may happen

to your skin. Just send for your Viderm Double Treatment this minute, and be confident of a smoother and clearer complexion. Follow the simple directions, written by a doctor, that you will get with your Viderm Double Treatment. Then look in your mirror and listen to your friends admire your smoother, clearer skin—the kind that women go for.

Just mail your name and address to The New York Skin Laboratory, 206 Division Street, Dept. 40, New York City 2, N. Y. By return mail you will receive both of the Viderm formulas, complete with full directions, and mailed in a plain wrapper. On delivery, pay two dollars plus postage. If you wish, you can save the postage fee by mailing the two dollars with your letter. Then, if you aren't thrilled with results, your money will be cheerfully refunded. Remember that both of the formulas you use have been fully tested and proven, and are reliable for you. *If they don't help you, your treatments cost you nothing.* After you have received your Viderm, if you have any questions to ask concerning abused skin, just send them in.



DON'T DO THIS!

Don't murder your skin by squeezing it. Skin is delicate. When you break it, you leave yourself open to miseries. It's far easier, far safer, to let the Double Viderm Treatment help you enjoy a handsome, clearer, blemish-free complexion.



TIGER BY THE TAIL

By LAWRENCE GOLDMAN

“TWENTY THOUSAND dollar policies don't exactly come with the morning milk,” Metzger said, glumly. “So if this one turns out to be on the up and up, the front office won't kick.” From the way he chewed his dead cigar I could see he didn't expect it to be on the up and up.

I sat on the edge of Metzger's desk, picked up his stapler. I squeezed the plunger and a staple shot out.

“That's not like you, boss,” I said. “Hiring a lemon.”

His short mustache sawed away at the cigar. “I told you what happened. He came well recommended, the louse. He caught us in a pinch, so I put him on. Two weeks later when I got around to checking his work I found he hadn't seen a damned contact. He'd just take the names we gave him and write his report straight off the cuff.”

“Good gag if you can get away with it,” I commented. I found I could make the staples shoot out like machine-gun bullets. I started to lay down a barrage on Metz' onyx clock.

“He didn't get away with it long,” Metz growled. “I kissed him off proper the moment I learned how he was taking us for a ride. Stop playing with that thing, Johnny. But what could I do? Our best investigator was over on Saipan . . .”

“Flattery he tries now.”

“. . . Without sense enough to keep his head down . . .”

“Ouch. I might have known that was coming.”

“Well, luckily the major part of the stuff was all right anyway. Little policies that didn't amount to much. But this Kearns deal now . . . Johnny, will you stop horsing around and listen to me?”

I had just got the range on the clock and his shouting threw me off. “I can hear you without listening,” I said. “I'm

way ahead of you. Give me the policy and I'll get on it tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow, hell. You'll get on it tonight.”

I put down the stapler. “Wait a minute. Where do you get this 'tonight' stuff? Just because an investigator goldbricks you with a lot of phony reports, do I have to work overtime?”

“Did you get overtime in the Marianas?”

“That was different. But you do remind me of Kelly sometimes.”

“Your top sergeant?”

“Yeah. The one the guys always talked about shooting in the back.”

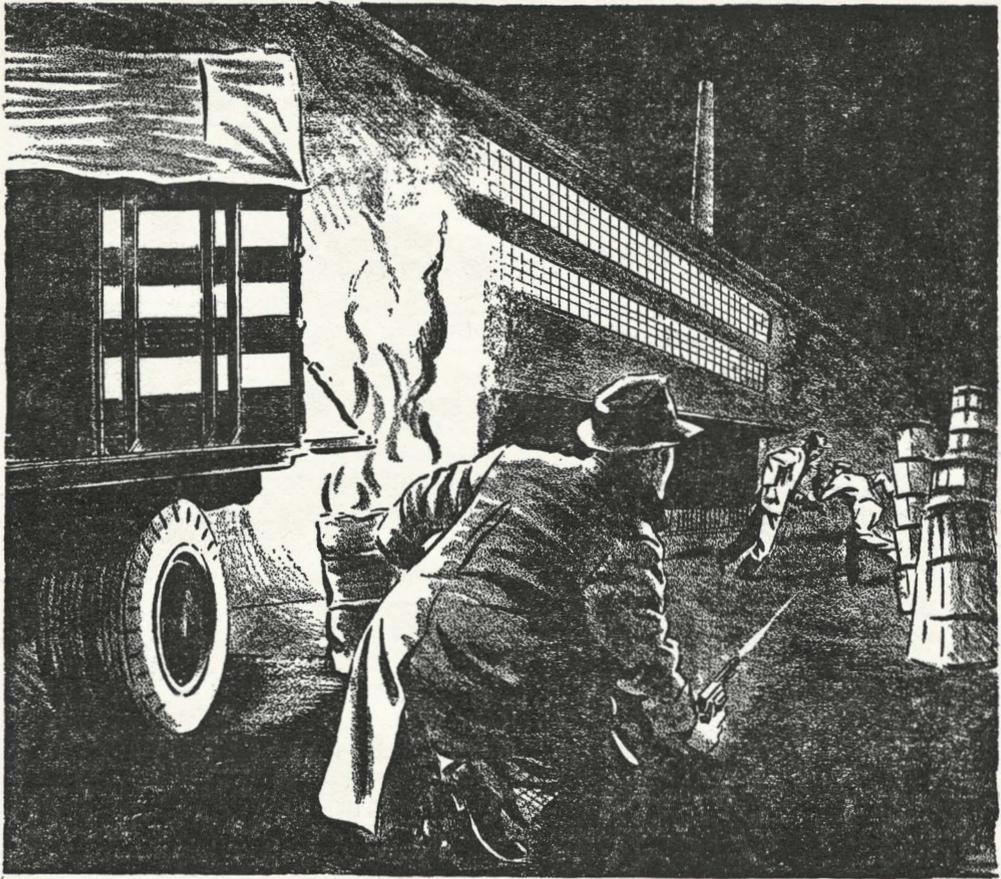
Metz managed a sickly smile. “Well, you wanted work. I told you to take plenty of time before you reported back, but here you are. What was the matter, Johnny?”

“Personal,” I said shortly.

Metz shrugged. “I can take a hint. Anyway, the guys you'll be looking for on this job don't go to work until two in the morning, and you can't find them after six A.M. Now here's what you do. Don't go to the insured. We don't want him to get worried about the company. Just check up on his references.” He handed me the photostatic copy of the policy. “Be easy about it. You can't use the credit line, because if White actually did see them they'll be suspicious of that. Maybe you'd better . . .”

That was like Metz, trying to play all the positions. I looked the policy over. Wilson Kearns was twenty-eight, six feet tall, hair brown, eyes brown. He'd passed the medical exam without comment from the doctor. Salesman at the Peterson Produce Company, Terminal Annex. The character references he gave all had addresses in the Terminal, too.

I read the name of the beneficiary. Metz looked at me sharply. “What's the matter?” he asked.



"There couldn't be two names like that."

Metz looked at the photostat. "Thorne Moore. You know her?"

Know her! The mere sound of her name twisted something inside of me. Fighting to keep my voice normal I said, "I used to—if it's the same one. Look, boss, do me a favor, will you, and put somebody else on this job. My desk is piled this high and . . ."

Metz grinned. "A ghost out of your crowded and erotic past?" Then seriously: "Hell, Johnny, you don't have to go near her. Better if you don't. Let's see, Thorne Moore, relationship to insured, none. Matter of fact, that was the snag that worried me on this deal." Metz tossed the policy back. "I'd take you off, Johnny, only we're strapped right now, with Zink in San Diego and Dahl with his leg broken . . . and we've got to clear this thing."

When he put it that way, of course, there wasn't anything to say. I stuffed the policy in my inside pocket. "They get

time and a half for this at the shipyards," I grumbled.

The policy crackled against the letter in my pocket. The letter I'd received at the base hospital on Leyte; the letter that held up my convalescence for more than a month. The letter I had read and reread until the writing was blurred and the paper almost in shreds . . . the letter I'd never had the courage to throw away.

Metz was right. I didn't have to go near her. Better—far better—if I didn't.

THE MARKET was waking up for the night's business. Produce farmers piled into the narrow causeways in trucks, all kinds of trucks, from shiny Diesels down to decrepit Model T's held together with string and spit. The trucks lumbered in and out of the misty patches thrown by the arc lights, coming out of nowhere, blaring horns when they were right on top of you, and bowling back into nowhere again. It was hell's own job to

keep from under their wheels. When they stopped they disgorged unbelievable quantities of carrots, lettuce, cabbage, and tomatoes.

And when I wasn't dodging the big trucks, it was the hand-trucks I had to worry about. Swampers wheeled them all over the sidewalks with reckless skill, not slowing down or turning aside for anybody. If you got in the way it was your tough luck. Their rubber-tired wheels gave no warning of their coming; my ankles shrank in constant fear of their vicious jaws that bit into the bottom of a stack of crates and lifted the stack, six or seven high, off the ground.

I stopped one of the swampers. "Where's Peterson's place, sonny?" I asked him.

He mumbled something I couldn't hear, gave his truck a shove and disappeared in the crowd. I tried another, and got the same treatment. I said the hell with them, and set out to find Peterson's by myself.

The Market was laid out like a walled city, the wall consisting of a three-story building running clear around the four sides, with exits for trucks tunneled through the ground floor at regular intervals. Inside the enclosure two long canopies stretched over a floor shoulder high for easy movement of goods from trucks. The parallel canopies were a good thousand feet long, which gives you some idea of the size of the setup.

The stalls under the canopies were occupied by the smallest operators, many of them farmers who rented the space during crop-time for disposal of their own produce. Between them and the more permanent dealers in the building there existed a distinct social cleavage. The stall men were in the Market but not of it: while they contributed a sizable percentage of the food to feed two million people daily, they went unnoticed by the established tenants.

These permanent dealers felt themselves to be the real, the only Market. Their display space consisted of a series of pull-down doors opening on sheds. Now, at the beginning of the Market's "day," most of these sheds were packed with stuff, stacks that extended out of the doors and

over the sidewalks, leaving only the narrowest space for movement.

Most of the dealers rented one or two doors, some three, and a few ran up to six or eight. When I found the sign PETERSON PRODUCE COMPANY, it stretched in foot-high letters across twenty doors.

Except for high-piled crates of tomatoes, lettuce, carrots, and squash, casting long shadows over the cement floor from the naked overhead bulbs, the place seemed empty. I went inside; and instantly my nose was assailed by a stale, pungent, aromatic odor.

Stairs inside seemed to lead to an office on the second floor, but first I peeked into a little glass-enclosed booth. It contained a telephone, a writing shelf scattered with order pads, and nothing else.

Feeling a little frustrated. I stepped on the platform of a huge Fairbanks-Morse scale that took up to three thousand pounds. The long pointer moved an inch or so to the right, hovered around a hundred and eighty.

From the scale I saw something I'd missed on the way in. Three men were on their knees outside the shed door, and I didn't think they were praying. I went over.

"Anybody fading me? Climb on board, boys the dice are hot!"

"It's four bits of my money. Snake-eyes, don't let me down!"

"How about you, Nicky?"

"Them flats ain't doin' me right, but I'm on. Come on, let's see you seven-out!"

The elbow-shaker wound up and let go. "Hah!"

There was silence for a moment while the trio waited for the bones to stop rolling. Then, sadly, "Jus' one little mile from home!"

Light for the game came from a fire built in a galvanized ashcan and fueled with broken-up vegetable crates. It had been a long time since I was in a good knockdown dragout crap game, and I felt the itch to get down there and do a little hog-calling myself.

I said, "Any of you fellows work here?"

They eyed me suspiciously and uncomfortably. I smiled. "It's all right, boys,

I'm not the law. Where can I find Mr. Peterson?"

Nicky thumbed the open door and turned back to his game. I went inside.

The office upstairs was locked. I knocked, waited came back down.

The ashcan fire smoldered and shot glowing orange fingers into the murky dark; but the crapshooters had vanished. Maybe they had got tired of the game or had been called to work. It could be as simple as that—but I didn't think so. There was something insulting about the way the fire spat up it's casual and random tentacles, as if deliberately pointing out the empty space between the columned crates.

"All right," I said to the fire, "I know I'm about as welcome around this joint as the Japanese beetle. You don't have to rub it in."

I spat into the fire as I went by. The fire hissed back, and tried to reach me with a tongue of flame.

II

THROUGH the window of the restaurant, past the letters that spelled TERMINAL CAFE in reverse, I could see the trucks lumbering in like elephants at work when the circus comes to town. It was warm in the Terminal Cafe, warm and bright.

A trucker in a plaid lumberjack vaulted on the stool next to mine. He looked me up and down, staring at my fresh tan gabardine suit and maroon tie with suspicious distaste.

"Coffee royal, Gus," he called to the departing counterman.

Gus set a steaming mug in front of him. The trucker pushed back a leather-billed cap and cupped his hands around the mug.

I said, "Double that, Gus."

The guy in the plaid lumberjack eyed me as though I'd infringed on his patent, then turned back to Gus.

"Where's Thorne?" he demanded. I felt the twist inside me at the name.

Gus stopped with my coffee royal in midair. "She went off at two."

I spoke without thinking. "Is that Thorne Moore?"

Then the lumberjack got up, took his check, and walked over to the cashier.

Gus put down my mug. "Here's your royal, mister."

I watched Gus' white-shirted back re-treating to the kitchen. It was a stone wall. I was on the outside. The Market was on the inside. To get on the inside was going to take some doing.

The door blew open and two men came in. The first one was small, with puffy slits of eyes peering anxiously from under a broken-peaked cap. He looked familiar . . . I recognized him. Nicky, the others had called him. He searched up and down the counter and poked his head into the booths. "There he is!" he shouted, pointing. He started toward a booth. "Come on, Carlo."

The man who followed him in was older than Nicky, with a cigar clenched between his teeth and a sweat-stained hat pushed to the back of his head. He had on a loose overcoat, unbuttoned, that flapped behind him as he walked. The two made for a booth and began talking to someone I couldn't see.

"Boss, I kin go along, can't I, huh?"

The man with the overcoat had caught up to Nicky by this time. "Pipe down, will ya?" he said, not ungently; then turned to the invisible occupant of the booth. "I gotta trace that reefer. Musta got hung up somewhere. Nicky wants to come along. That all right with you, huh?"

I didn't hear what the man in the booth said, but Nicky did. "Gee, that's swell, boss. Thanks."

Carlo turned to go, but stopped to listen a moment longer. "Yeah, boss. I'll take care of it." His face darkened. "Oh. Bill Kearns phoned. He ain't comin' in tonight. I don't know what that guy thinks he is. Says you should phone him up."

Nicky had turned away and was peeking into the kitchen. He came out and joined Carlo as they passed me. "Gee, Carlo, Thorne ain't here tonight neither. Maybe that Bill's beatin' your time again, huh?"

Carlo glowered at him. "Shut up," he said between his teeth.

"Aw, jeez, I'm sorry. I didn't mean nothin'."

Carlo rubbed Nicky's shoulders affec-

tionately. "That's all right, kid. Forget it."

I picked up my coffee royal and walked over to the booth, and spoke to the man sitting there.

"Excuse me. Are you Mr. Peterson?"

The man I faced had on one of those gray felt hats with the brim a little too wide and the ribbon a little too narrow. The kind of hat that had Texas written all over it. He had on a conservative gray suit that had set him back a good hundred and fifty bucks. His forehead was straight like an Indian's, with little hollows at the temples, and it was chiseled with small wrinkles of mild surprise that seemed to be a permanent fixture there. His nose was thin and high-bridged and his lips, while full and curved, showed no softness.

He didn't say anything, didn't ask me to sit down. I sat down anyway. I was caught by his eyes now. They were blue quartz chips, expressionless and cold.

One look at those eyes told me this was no time to spin the tale. My only chance with this guy was to lay it on the table. If I leveled with him, he'd level with me. If I crossed him . . .

I said, "My name's Saturday, Mr. Peterson, John Saturday. I'm with the Coastal Mutual Insurance Company. I'm not here to sell you any insurance," I hastened to add. "Fact is, we sold a small policy to a man who I believe works for you. Wilson Kearns. That's right, isn't it?"

The quartz eyes didn't waver, nor the corners of his lips. He pushed his breath out in something that wasn't a yes or a no, but just a sound.

I went on. "There was a little mixup somewhere. We usually ask after a man's rating, you know, when he applies for a policy. Someone may have been to see you, but if so, we've misplaced the record. I'd appreciate it if you'd answer a few questions about Mr. Kearns—strictest confidence, of course."

I had a funny feeling as I talked to this guy. He might have been sitting across a poker table from me, determined—and able—to make me pay for every spot I saw on his cards. And up to now I hadn't seen a spot. He hadn't even admitted his name was Peterson.

"We like to get some idea of an applicant's steadiness, his dependability. Does he contract debts, is he slow to pay, that sort of thing. Then there's the beneficiary. Are you acquainted with . . .?"

I stopped. He wasn't listening to me. He wasn't looking at me any longer. He was looking at a point over my head and beyond. I turned.

A man was smiling down at Peterson, not pleasantly. He must have been sitting in the booth next to ours, had just stood up, because I hadn't seen him before. He was the kind of man you don't overlook, either. He was big, just over six feet, and he must have weighed two-fifty. He had on one of those Hollywood plaid sport jackets you can spot a mile off. On one powerful hand a diamond the size of a lima bean sparkled.

When he spoke he didn't seem to give a damn who heard him. His voice carried to the farthest corner of the kitchen.

He said, "How's the carrots today, Peterson?"

His tone was deliberately insulting. I noticed that the whole restaurant had suddenly gone soundproof. The clatter of dishes and forks had stopped as if by magic. The waiters and the men at the counters sort of froze.

Peterson said quietly, "You know how they are, Galt."

The man called Galt kept that unpleasant fixed smile on his florid, tightly lined face. "Tough luck, Peterson. Maybe produce ain't your line, big boy." He laughed again and pushed toward the door.

As he went out, the restaurant seemed to breathe and come to life again. Sitting between them as I had been, I suppose I got it more strongly than otherwise. That feeling of forces, big, powerful forces meeting head on like bull elephants. The feeling wasn't diminished by the fact that Peterson hadn't moved, hadn't spoken above a quiet tone that carried only as far as it needed. If anything, the way Peterson acted made it more real, more pronounced.

I opened my mouth to get back on the subject of Kearns, but as far as Peterson was concerned I might have been back home in bed, where I belonged. He stood

up—he was over six feet himself, and solid. Without a word to me he picked up his scarf and topcoat and closed himself into a telephone booth at the side of the cashier's desk.

I shrugged. I wasn't going to win any Academy Award for this performance, that was certain. Gus came by and I ordered another coffee royal. I drank it and felt it kindle a small alcohol lamp in my stomach.

The lightning struck.

I grabbed Gus by the arm. "Holy smoke! That isn't *Percentage* Peterson is it?"

Gus didn't like it. "Look, mister, why don't you finish your drink and blow, like a nice feller?"

But the freeze wasn't working, not any more. I looked over at the telephone booth. It was empty.

I DIDN'T KNOW who this Galt was, but I guess there weren't half dozen people on the Coast who hadn't heard of *Percentage* Peterson. Three years back he'd been a legend—like Rothstein, or Weber and Fields. He killed a man over a card game. The jury had called it self-defense, and given him a clean bill. Right after that he simply dropped out of sight. If you mentioned *Percentage* Peterson today to the guy next to you in a bar, he'd likely say, "Peterson? Sure, I remember him. Died, didn't he?"

It was the trial that ruined him. Not in the way it would ruin an ordinary guy. It wasn't a case of reputation or good name or respectability, anything like that. It ruined him by exploding the legend, by exposing his trade secrets. Before the trial everybody knew all about him, but nobody had ever seen his picture. Everybody knew he carried a Luger under his left armpit—knew that even before he used it in the card game. They knew about his "li'l prop'sitions," and the amazing tricks he practiced incessantly and with which he picked up an odd hundred here and there. They were incredible, those tricks. He could throw a rock over a ten-story building. He could kick his bedroom slipper to the ceiling and catch it again on his foot. He found a hard place on

his head and he could hit against the wall with a force that would stun anyone else. There were others—with matches and coins and whatever else was handy. He had a habit of leading the conversation around, leading you to bet. He was always mildly surprised when he succeeded, and he usually succeeded. Wise guys who had been filled to the ears about *Percentage* and his "li'l prop'sitions" would egg him on, but they never got anywhere because *Percentage* was always inventing new ones. They said he delighted in taking the wise guys.

He was a human adding machine, always figuring odds; he never bet unless he could shade the odds a little in his favor, although he preferred them a lot in his favor rather than a little. He made his living off people who thought more slowly than he did—and that meant most people. The expression that was on everybody's lips a few years back was one he pulled the one time he had to go to court. "When you see two suckers, knock their heads together."

It went across the country like wildfire, the "twenty-three skiddoo" of its decade.

That was *Percentage* Peterson. He hadn't died after all. And now he was in produce. In fact this minute I could see him easing away from the curb in a long black Cadillac sedan, his square jaw muffled in a navy-blue scarf, his quartz-blue eyes looking straight ahead with emotionless intensity. Well, well.

Gus took the five I laid on the little rubber mat next to the cash register, rang it up, and replaced it with some bills and change. I picked up the bills. "Two spots. Haven't seen any of these in a long time."

"Superstitious?" Gus inquired without smiling.

"Give me a million of 'em and find out." I smoothed out the two deuces and walled them and slid the change into my pocket.

Gus leaned over the register. "Look, chum, you want to keep your health, you'll stay shut of Galt. Or Peterson either. Them boys are bad medicine. If I was you, I'd get the hell out of this Market an' stay out." He straightened up. "I don't know why I'm shootin' off my mouth to you," he said suddenly suspicious.

I smiled at him. "Thanks anyway."

I went out into the chill night air and started to look for a taxi. Two men sauntered out of the shadows and blocked my path. "Got a match, bud?" one of them asked.

I got a look at him as he lit up. He was the plaid lumberjack. His friend said casually, "You work around here, fella?"

"No." I told him.

"Oh. Leaving then?"

"What's it to you?"

He grinned at me. He was a tough-eyed banty in a turtleneck sweater. His grin reached about the middle button on my vest. "Just thought you might be. The owls don't run so good this time of night."

I felt the hot flush rise in my neck. I never could get used to being pushed around, even in the Marines. But I'd learned in the Marines there's a time to do something about it, and a time to take it. And I *was* leaving.

"I was going to call a taxi," I said.

"Oh, sure." The banty put two fingers in his mouth and whistled. A starter ground into action halfway down the block, then headlights flooded us and a cab pulled alongside.

"Service," I commented.

He opened the cab door for me. "Nothin' else but." I got inside and he shut the door. "Nice to have known you, fella." The way he said it left no doubt he meant it to be very final. The last thing I saw as we slid into the shadows was his grin.

III

THE CAB DREW UP ACROSS the street from Wilson Kearns' address on Scott Street. I told the hackie to wait and got out.

It was dark on Scott Street, dark as a residential street can get late at night, after the trolleys stop running regularly and nobody is out walking the dog any longer. Quiet, too; the strains of someone's radio shuffling through "Stardust" might have come from blocks away.

The door at three seventy-two was wide open. I pressed the bell but nothing happened—out of order. There was a light

somewhere far back in the house. I knocked again. There was no response, and no more shadows.

It's a strange thing to walk uninvited into someone's home at any time—and at night the strangeness is doubled. You half expect to be thrown out bodily, and knowing how thoroughly you deserve it, you feel you wouldn't have the will to resist.

To one side of the hall was a dark chasm that was the living room. The light came from a room at the far end of the hall—a room I was pretty sure was a bedroom. This was getting a little too much, even for me. I called, "Anybody home?" No one answered. I took my courage in my hands and went up to the lighted door.

It was the room itself that gave me the first shock. Kearns had listed himself on the policy as unmarried, so I hadn't counted on a pair of lace-trimmed silk pajamas trailing over the side of the rumpled bed to the floor. Or one beige stocking hanging over the back of a chair. Or a dressing table against the wall covered with cosmetic bottles and jars.

"Saturday," I told myself, "you're going to have to get someone to tell you the facts of life."

The next instant my fists and jaws clenched, and unreasoning anger surged over me. A brooch pinned to the throat of a yellow shantung dress was the cause of it; a brooch of ivory-inlaid mahogany. I knew every curve of its design. In the musty half-light of a native shop I'd found that brooch and bought it. I kept it for more than a week before I could bring myself to let go what was to become a part of the girl I was sending it to.

With rage-blinded eyes I started out of the room to get that brooch out of my sight. I wanted to get away from there.

I almost stumbled over the body before I saw it.

He was lying spread-eagled on the floor near the dressing table. The double-breasted coat of his chalk-striped gray suit was open and the top buttons of his vest were undone. His tie was pulled a little to one side and out of his collar and it gave the unwholesome suggestion of a hangman's noose. His deep brown eyes

were wide open. His chest wasn't moving up and down as it should have moved if he were even a little bit alive. A black hole in the base of his skull formed the source of a little lake of dark crimson on the rug.

All my hate and rage evaporated; all the emotions evoked by the brooch erased themselves from my mind.

I dropped to one knee and reached for his pulse. The pulse was still—I knew it would be; but my movement of his hand relaxed the tightly clenched fist. That was how I happened to see the green between his fingers. I pulled the little wad of green paper out of his unresisting hand. I had no compunction about disturbing evidence or any of that nonsense. I had a job to do. Wilson Kearns had somehow pushed a twenty-grand policy through Coastal Mutual. Now, less than three weeks later, Wilson Kearns was lying in his own bedroom with a hole in his head, and staring at me as if he still couldn't believe it.

I dropped the little green wad into my pocket and stood up. There was a phone on the night table next to the bed. I walked over there and picked up the phone and dialed the operator. While the little wheel clicked its way back to home base I heard a voice behind me, at the door.

"Put it down."

I put the phone in its cradle without first turning to look. It was that kind of a voice. When I did turn, I saw Percentage Peterson standing in the doorway of the bedroom. In his hand was that Luger I had heard so much about but never seen. And it pointed straight at me.

I said, "Well, I won't have to check his references now, at any rate."

Peterson motioned in the direction of the dead man. "Run through his pockets."

I said, "Now wait a minute. I'm just an innocent bystander. I'll do anything reasonable, but as for tampering . . ."

Peterson said, "Stop gabbing. Get me his wallet." His voice was still mild and unexcited, with a trace of Texas drawl in it, but there was something else in it, too. I couldn't put my finger on what that something was, but I found myself

gingerly reaching into the dead man's pockets. His brown eyes stared at me reproachfully. I got his wallet and handed it to Peterson.

"Back away," Peterson ordered. I backed.

Peterson flipped the wallet open and with the most dexterous manipulations of the fingers of his free hand quickly extracted a sheaf of identification cards and fanned them out like a poker hand. In another instant the cards were back in the wallet and he was handing it to me.

"All right," he said. "Put it back in his pocket."

I knelt down beside the dead man. Peterson said, "Just a minute. Wipe it off with your handkerchief."

I did that gladly. When I got off my knees I said, "What now, doc?"

"Get over in that corner and turn your face to the wall."

I hesitated. Visions of the St. Valentine's massacre raced through my mind. Peterson interpreted my slowness. "Go on," he said. "You won't get hurt that way."

NOT CONVINCED, but helpless I obeyed. I didn't even peek. I didn't need to. The sounds Peterson didn't try to hide told me what he was doing. He was searching the room, quickly, thoroughly. I could hear him at the bed, the night table, the dressing table. There was quiet then, but I wasn't invited to turn around and I didn't. My imagination pictured perfectly well Peterson going through the dead man's pockets carefully, not touching or disturbing that patch of purpling blood.

There was silence for a space. I closed my eyes. I could feel what was going on as sharply as if I had eyes in the back of my head. Peterson had finished his search and was calculating what to do next. And what he decided might be—anything. I refused to think about it.

Footsteps started in my direction. I braced myself while the sweat trickled down my back. Peterson had evidently changed his mind about my not getting hurt. The footsteps hesitated . . . halted.

"All right," Peterson said. "Come on."

It was a moment before I could get

my fear-numbered body to obey. When I turned around, though, and saw Peterson's face, I felt a little better. The pistol still hung from his right hand, but it was not aimed at my stomach. He wasn't going to kill me . . . not here, anyway.

I even got a little brave. "Where to?" I hazarded.

He didn't answer, and I tried again. "I left a cab waiting out front."

Peterson waved his eloquent Luger without speaking.

I turned then. "I left a cab waiting out front."

Peterson thought a moment. "Back way, then."

I said, "But the hackie'll remember me, anyway . . ."

I went. The back door was open. In three minutes we were on Scott Street again, a couple of blocks from the house. It was quiet as before—quieter, because the radio addict had turned off "Stardust."

Peterson walked fast, half a step behind me. I wanted to break and run into the darkness, but I didn't. His hands were in the pockets of his topcoat, and I knew my first step would be my last. Besides, my immediate concern was to get away from there, and if Peterson had done this job, which I figured he had, that would be his main concern too. Nor would a guy who's just killed one man hesitate to kill another.

We came to an allnight drugstore. A hack idled at the corner. We climbed into the cab and Peterson leaned over and gave a direction to the driver that I didn't hear. I opened my mouth to say something and instantly that Luger in Peterson's coat pocket jabbed my hip. He flashed his eyes at the driver. I got the point—and the rest of the drive I kept my mouth shut. But I didn't feel any easier. He was looking for something, and he hadn't found it. No emotion showed on that poker face of his, but I was sure he was disturbed about that.

I peered out of the cab's windows. The black buildings of the industrial district as they showed up by the misted street lamps weren't reassuring.

The cab took a corner and pulled up in front of a lighted door. Peterson nudged me with the hidden Luger. I got out. Peter-

son followed me, pushing a bill through the little window to the hackie. "Keep the change," he said. He didn't take his eyes off me an instant.

I glanced at the building before us. It was the Central Police District Headquarters.

AS WE went in the swinging door a dick started to push by us on his way out. He glanced at Peterson and stopped, surprised. "Mr. Peterson! What are you doing here?"

"Oh, hello, Morgan." Peterson turned to me. "This is Mr. Saturday, from Coastal Mutual. Morgan has the market beat," he added for my benefit. "We want to talk to Captain DeWitt."

"Oh, sure, certainly." Morgan bulged in his tightly buttoned blue suit. Little red veins cross-hatched his cheeks; the dull droop of his eyebrows and the corners of his mouth was given the lie by bright black eyes that missed nothing. "I'll take you in myself."

Captain DeWitt got up when he saw Peterson, came around the desk and shook hands. Peterson was evidently quality folks in this clink. He introduced me to the captain and I too got a bonecrusher grip. We sat down.

"I got a call from a salesman of mine this evening," Peterson began. "Wilson Kearns. He asked me to come over to three seventy-two Scott Street. He was in trouble. I went over and found him dead. Shot in the back of the head. Mr. Saturday got to the house the same time I did, although we didn't come together." Peterson pulled out his Luger and laid it on the captain's desk. "In all fairness to us both, I think you should check my gun and allow us both to take the nitrate test. I can testify that Mr. Saturday has had no opportunity to get rid of a weapon since we discovered the body."

The captain looked at him sharply under beetling white brows. "Certainly, Mr. Peterson," he said after an interval. He got on the phone.

When he hung up, Peterson said, "Also for the record I should like to be searched. How about you, Saturday?"

I said, "I think it's a good idea. I think

we ought to go a step farther. Maybe we'd better tell our stories separately, so there won't be any suggestion of collusion."

Peterson, "We could have agreed on a story on the way down if that's what we wanted to do. I don't believe that's necessary, do you, Captain?"

"I insist on it," I said shortly.

The captain scratched the thickly matted white hair on the back of his hand. He wanted to string along with Peterson, I could see that. But he also knew how it would sound in court if he refused me. And I tried to make like the guy who would see that it sounded as bad as possible. He said, finally, "Just as you like, Mr. Saturday." He got on the phone again and Morgan came in. "Take Mr. Saturday in to Sergeant Trout's office, will you, Morgan? Get a stenographer and take his deposition. He wants to be searched."

Peterson's frozen expression didn't waver, but I got the subtle impression that he didn't like the turn things had taken. Whether it was my standing up to him, or the captain's decision to back me up, or even the appearance of Morgan on the scene, I couldn't tell, but something very definitely had put a crimp in his plans.

Morgan's eyebrows raised, but he merely said, "O.K., Captain." The minute we were outside the door, though, he turned to me. "For Cripes sakes, what cooks here, anyway?"

I told him. He whistled.

"Will Kearns! Whaddaya think of that!"

"You knew him?"

"Oh, sure. He's been with Peterson some time now. Good salesman, and a nice guy, too. At least I always liked him."

He swung me into an office and I sat down with the sergeant and a police stenographer. I told the whole story, showed them the policy on Kearns, everything. That is, almost everything. I didn't mention knowing Thorne Moore.

When I finished Morgan said, "O.K., now. Turn out your pockets."

I began going through one pocket after another, laying on the desk my wallet, keys, change, handkerchief, cigarettes and

matches, and a few odd scraps of paper I had on me, memos of phone calls and addresses that should have been torn up months ago. Casually, Morgan reached over and smoothed out a wad of green paper.

"Play the ponies?" he inquired.

I STARED at a little green scratch sheet. I'd honestly forgotten all about it. There were penciled notations on it.

Unhurriedly, not telegraphing my interest to Morgan, I reached for it. "Not me. That's a sucker's pastime. This belongs to a guy—by the way, I promised I'd get it back to him. Could I cadge an envelope and a stamp from one of you boys?"

The sergeant obligingly reached into his drawer and produced both. I slipped the green sheet in the envelope, sealed it and stamped it. Using the sergeant's pen I addressed it. I was casual about that, too, but no one saw the address I put on it. I stuck the envelope in my breast pocket and began stowing away the other stuff.

"Now for the nitrate test," Morgan said. He shepherded me into the hall. There was a mail chute next to the elevator. I got the envelope out of my breast pocket and pushed it into the chute. It started to flutter down and then suddenly wedged crosswise in the chute. I gritted my teeth. Staring Morgan in the eye through the glass of the chute was the address I had been so careful to hide. Morgan grinned at me.

"Happens all the time," he commented. "Next letter will knock it down."

"Might not be another letter until morning," I said. "I'd like this to go out by the first pickup."

Morgan said. "Sure." He fished in his pocket and came up with an old latchkey. "Been carrying this around for a month now. Can't remember for hell what it opens. Probably nothing." He dropped the key in the chute. It clattered against the letter, knocking it loose. Key and letter disappeared from sight.

"Here's the elevator," Morgan said. "Lab's in the basement."

The nitrate test was negative, both on Peterson and myself. The captain left us at the front door.

"I wanted to clear that up," Peterson said. "I know the store you boys set on *modus operandi*. I carried a gun out there, and I've used a gun before. I didn't want you to be adding two and two and getting seven." He smoothed down the collar of his topcoat. The gesture crystallized a vague memory that had been nagging me since we left Scott Street. Peterson had left his scarf in the house on Scott Street, the conservative navy-blue scarf I'd seen him bundle around his throat down at the Terminal.

"Oh, no," the captain was disclaiming. "We have a little more brains than that, Peterson. I may have to call you later, of course. Thanks for coming in."

We shook hands. Except for no sandwiches and beer, it was just like an evening of poker in the suburbs.

Peterson hailed a cab. "You can let me off at the Bishop Arms," I told him.

He ignored me. "You told me Kearns took out a policy in your company. Is it in force?"

"Yes, worse luck."

"Who's the beneficiary?"

The name choked me a little. "Thorne Moore."

"Will your company pay up?"

"Of course—when they're satisfied the claim is legitimate. And not until then, You can take my word for it."

"I suppose you'll be put on the case," Peterson said.

"That's my job—investigator. And it looks like I got in on the ground floor this time."

Peterson drew in his already thin lips, stared straight ahead for a minute. He reached a decision, leaned over and spoke to the driver.

"Gateway Hotel."

"Just a minute," I protested. "It's after three o'clock. I've got to get some sleep."

Peterson snapped on the dome light and brought out a roll of bills. With the roll put carelessly on the seat between us, he peeled one off the top and handed it to me. It was a century. They were all century notes, the whole roll.

"What's this for?" I asked.

"Your company's going to put you to work to find the person who murdered

that boy. There's a job you can do for me at the same time."

I thought I saw his drift. "I work for Coastal Mutual," I reminded him. "Besides, I won't be the only one on this case. If you're figuring I can pull any funny business to sweeten the claim when it's not legitimate, you're sadly overrating me."

"That's not what I want," Peterson said. "I want you to try to find the killer."

I stared at him. "Me?"

"There'll be one of these every day for your expenses. And twenty of them when you find him."

I carefully folded the bill lengthwise, then crosswise. It was a temptation. A hundred bucks—all in one piece—was something I might go a long time before seeing another one of. Especially it was a temptation when I considered that my next orders from Metzger would be the very same—only this time on straight salary.

"There's only one condition."

I looked at him.

"When you find the person who did it, you don't turn him over to the police."

"Who then?"

"You turn him over to me."

The cab drew up at the Gateway Hotel, across the street from the Market. Peterson got out without another word. I sat there for a moment, the century bill still in my hand. Then I followed him.

Peterson's last statement, stunning as it was, was not the reason I followed him. The reason was that the cab had pulled to the curb behind a black Cadillac sedan. It was the sedan I had seen Peterson drive off in, on his way to Kearns' place.

IV

PETERSON CALLED NICKY away from a casino game in a corner of the lobby. "Nicky, run over to Mr. Saturday's place and throw a few of his clothes into a bag and bring them over here." He turned to me. "Better write him a note."

"What's the idea?" I demanded.

"You're staying here for a few days," Peterson said.

He didn't bother to get my opinion on

the matter. He stepped over to the room clerk. "Fix Mr. Saturday up with a room and charge it to me."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Peterson." The clerk swiveled the register around for me to sign.

Peterson said, "Soon as you get settled, come in and see me. We'll talk it over."

Without another word, he headed for the elevator.

Nicky was at my elbow. "What you want I should bring you?"

I wrote him a list and he beat it. The clerk had broken out a new sheet at midnight, and mine was the second name on the sheet. I signed under Mary Smith, City.

The hot needle shower seemed to wash away the whole nightmare. I stayed under it a good half hour, luxuriating in the steam. Nicky wasn't back yet with my stuff; I wrapped a towel around me and picked up the phone.

Metz answered fuzzily, but the moment he recognized my voice the sleep disappeared from him. "What the hell do you mean by ringing me up in the middle of the night?" he demanded.

"I just saw Kearns," I said.

"Is that a reason? Wait a minute. You saw *Kearns*?"

"Yes. He had a hole in his head."

"Johnny, what kind of an investigator are you, anyway? You know we have a rule about checking the insured unless . . . Did you say he had a *hole* in his head?"

"That's right."

"Dead?"

"As a herring."

Metz groaned. "What . . . how did he die? What happened?" A note of hope came into his voice. "Suicide?"

"The hole's in the back of his head."

Metz groaned again. The hope died out of his voice. "Accident. What rotten luck. After one payment."

I said, "Not accident, Metz. Murder."

"Who did it?"

"Don't know yet. Look, Metz, you'll get a letter with a racing form in it. Don't throw it away. It's mine."

Profanity crackled over the wire. "The company's pouring forty thousand bucks

down the drain and you're playing the ponies! What is this?"

I grinned into the mouthpiece. "Gotta go now. See you later."

I hung up on his protests. I kept the hook depressed for a moment and then lifted the receiver and waited for the desk connection.

"Give me Mary Smith in room nine-twelve," I asked the clerk.

I heard the phone ring in nine-twelve. It rang five times, then six, then seven. At the eighth ring I could hear the receiver being disengaged at the other end. There was a long pause.

I put a hand over my mouth, half muffling my voice. "Hello. Are you all right?"

"Oh!" The girl's voice at the other end registered pure relief. "It's you. I've been waiting for you so long! I'm so scared!"

My throat filled with feathers at the sound of that voice. "Don't say anything over the phone," I said, still muffling my words. "I'll be right up."

"Oh, I'm glad! Please hurry!"

I heard a knock at the door so I put back the receiver without saying any more. I opened the door. It was Nicky. My Gladstone was at his feet. My heart gave a jump when I saw he was handling a gun.

"Gee, Saturday, where'd you get this? She's a beaut!" Nicky's puffed eyes gleamed as he turned the gun over and over in his hands. "It was under your shirts in the dresser drawer." He weighed it admiringly, then crooked his finger in the trigger guard and drew an imaginary bead on the doorknob. "Lemme try it, will you?"

"Not here!" For a moment I was afraid he was going to shoot it off in the room.

Nicky laughed. "Aw, I wouldn't do that!" There was an excited overtone in his voice. "I mean later. But don't tell the boss about it, will ya? He don't let me have no guns."

"I don't wonder," I said. "Here, give me that thing before it goes off."

Nicky handed it over reluctantly. I didn't start breathing normally again until I had stowed it in the Gladstone.

Nicky grinned slyly and reached into his

hip pocket. "Course, he don't know about me packin' this one."

I started to get nervous all over again until I got a look at this new gun. Then I relaxed. It was one of those kid comando things they sell in the dime stores.

I had Nicky's number by this time. He was gun-crazy. Usually I guess, it's a hangover from kid days, when an air rifle is the most desirable thing on earth. Coupled with Nicky's general punchiness, though, it could be a dangerous aberration.

He looked longingly at the Gladstone. "I got some bills of lading to take over to the Sante Fe, and Carlo'll eat my can out if I don't get 'em over right away." He licked his lips. "Say, Johnny, you couldn't borrow me the loan of two bucks till tomorrow, could you? I got a hot nag, but really hot."

It was "Johnny" now. I could have reminded Nicky how upstage he had been an hour back.

"You ought to get onto yourself, Nicky," I said. "Don't you know all horse-players die in the poorhouse?"

"Not the smart ones. You can make plenty of dough out of the nags, if you know your onions. Plenty!"

I didn't think it would be cricket to point out that if he really was one of the smart ones, as he said, he wouldn't be down to mooching two-spots.

"What's the nag?" I asked him.

"It's Weehawken Daisy. She's in the fifth at Belmont. She's a cinch, Johnny—but really lead-pipe!"

"Does Peterson go for this?"

"The boss?" Nick guffawed. "Why, jeez, he . . ." Suddenly his puffy eyes narrowed with craft. "Aw, hell, you wouldn't say anyting to him. You're a white man." His eyes were glued to my wallet. "Gee, thanks!" There was as much surprise as gratitude in Nicky's voice. I got the impression that Nicky tried to promote a lot of two-spots between pay-days and that he didn't succeed too often.

He stared at the two-dollar bill I gave him. "Jeez, another one!"

"Not superstitious, are you, Nicky?"

He grinned at me. "Try me wit' a mil-

lion of 'em an' find out. It's only some of the boys won't touch 'em, but not me! They bring me luck. 'Course, you gotta take the curse off'n 'em first."

He carefully tore off a square corner, then folded the bill into neat accordion pleats.

"Where'd you get the tip, Nicky?" I asked quickly.

Disdain took charge of Nicky's mobile countenance as he thumbed the wadded bill into his shirt pocket. "Tip? What gives, tip? You can go crazy with tips. There's only one way to beat the nags. You gotta dope 'em. W'y, looka here, for instance . . ."

He tugged at a back pocket and came up with a creased and folded green paper. "Now you take this Weehawken Daisy. Here she is, see? Fift' at Belmont. The whole story's right here. Her whole record. What she done in previous performance, an' all like that. So you c'n figure out scientific how she's goin' to make out."

"Does it pay off, Nicky?"

"Pay off!" Nicky went sly on me. "Well, here's what one guy thinks of it." He flashed a fifty-dollar bill under my nose.

I was genuinely surprised. "Whose dough is that?"

Nicky shook his head. "I ain't sayin'." He crammed the fifty back into his pocket.

I shrugged. It seemed there were crocks around this Market even more cracked than Nicky's. "All right, Nicky," I said. "You can blow. Tell Peterson I'll be along as soon as I get dressed."

I SLIPPED into my coat and took the elevator to the ninth floor. At nine-twelve I knocked softly. The knob of the door turned slowly and the door opened on a wedge of blackness. I got my shoulder into the crack and pushed. The girl inside recoiled and stifled a scream.

"Who are you?" Then with fine presence of mind, if a little behindhand, "You're in the wrong room, mister. Now will you please step out?"

I reached behind me and fumbled for the light switch. She couldn't see me, but I shook my head. "Nope, I'm in the right

room, Miss Moore. Or may I still call you Thorne?"

I found the switch, flooded the room with light. The girl backed up until her hand felt the security of a chair. "Who are you?" she demanded again, before she recognized me.

I recognized her, all right. She hadn't changed. She was small, well packaged where it counted most; and the fitted mulberry coat wrapped around her was calculated to bring it out where it counted most. She had eyes the color of blue china plates and almost as big. She was scared now, panicky, but from instinct or long habit her emotions, even her real ones, came out on her face as appeals for protection. It was that kind of a face. Just to look at her made a man run inside like a toasted marshmallow. I knew. I'd done the marshmallow act myself plenty.

"Johnny!" she breathed. "How . . . ? What did . . . ? How did you get here?"

In an instant she had thrown herself against me, her arms around my shoulders clenching with tight, rigid fingers, her honed hair spilling over my chest. "Oh, Johnny! I'm so glad to see you. I'm in the most terrible trouble." She lifted her face, stared at me with wide trusting eyes and parted moist lips.

No, she hadn't changed. She was still the same Thorne, who took it as a matter of course to be the center of a whirling universe of men, a universe created solely for her comfort, convenience, and benefit. It angered me to remember that she wasn't far wrong either. My arms wanted to cuddle her; I kept them down with an effort.

"Look, Thorne," I started. "I haven't got much time. I came here . . ."

"You came to help me. Oh, I'm so glad, Johnny. I *do* need you so awfully. Mr. Peterson sent you . . ."

"You tell the story," I said shortly.

"You . . . what?"

"You know damn well how I hate it when you try to guess what I'm going to say."

The wide trusting eyes took on a sparkle that had gone out of them and the moist lips parted in a quick smile. "That always

did make you mad, didn't it, Johnny? But it doesn't matter now, because you're here. And I . . ." The smile vanished and fear took possession of Thorne's face. "You *did* come to help me, didn't you, Johnny? Mr. Peterson *did* send you?"

"No," I said. "Peterson didn't send me. He doesn't know I'm here."

She dropped her arms then, backed up and fell into the chair and sat there, sort of pigeon-toed.

"And I didn't come to help you. I'll tell you that right now. You're in a spot, and I'm in a spot. It's going to take everything I've got to pull myself out of this—if you think I'm going to jeopardize myself one jot to pull you along, you've got another think coming. If you killed that guy I'll nail you for it just as quick as I would Peterson, or anyone else. So if you've got anything to say, let's have it."

She stared at me, open-mouthed, pitiful as a wounded rabbit. She couldn't make up her mind how to take me. I could imagine what was going on behind those big blue eyes. She had to act, and act quickly. Every instant's delay was lessening the effectiveness of her action in my eyes, and she knew it.

She drew her mouth into what passed—for her—a line of decision, only the kind of mouth she had she couldn't draw any straighter than a holly-berry. She moved to the phone.

"I'll call Mr. Peterson," she announced. "We'll see what he makes of the way you're threatening me!"

I didn't say anything. With her hand on the phone she stopped, looking at me uncertainly. I hadn't moved from the spot leaning against the wall.

"Go ahead," I said. "Good idea. I'd like to ask Mr. Peterson some questions myself. Be interesting to hear how he explains giving you the key to his car and hiding you out in his hotel. I'd like to get his angle on a couple of other things. Go on," I urged when she made no move to lift the receiver. "He's in seven-four-teen."

She lifted her hand off the phone as if it burned her. She walked over and stood right under my nose. The top of her head came about to the spot where my tie was

knotted. I got a whiff of perfume she hadn't bought at Woolworth's, not by thirty dollars an ounce.

"I don't want to call Mr. Peterson," she said. Her holly-berry lips took on a pout to melt a heart of stone. "I'm dreadfully afraid of him. I know he'd blame me for this."

"For what?" It was a little difficult to talk at all, much less keep up the tough act, with that five feet two of distraction looking into my eyes.

"For letting you in here, and all."

"You couldn't help that," I said, "I walked in."

"Johnny," she whispered. "You never used to act like this. What's come over you? You used to like me, didn't you?"

"Sure I used to like you. I was in love with you, Heaven help me. Love is blind, they say, isn't it? Nobody could tell me anything about you. I'd've broken the neck of anybody who hinted that you were . . . what I know you are. I had to find out myself—the hard way."

Her head was down, so all I could see was the honey-colored top of it. Her shoulders under the coat shook a little. She didn't say anything.

I forced myself to go on. It was hard to talk, as if I had been running up the side of a mountain. I could feel the letter crackling in my inside pocket with the beat of my heart. "Maybe it's just male egotism. No man likes to be played for a sucker—least of all by a baby-face like you. No man likes to remember that he made a wrong guess. No man . . ."

"Johnny!"

"Don't bother to put it on for me. I'm not a director, you know. I couldn't get you in pictures if I wanted to. Or have you got over that bug? I see where it's got you—hash slinger at the Terminal Cafe." I wasn't proud of myself for that one.

"Johnny, must we always fight like this?" Her lower lip pushed itself out adorably moist and inviting. There was a hint of tears in the blue eyes.

I reached down and kissed her.

The kiss was everything I remembered, and more. I felt her arms slide around my neck, and the palms where they rested

against my neck were hot and soft.

She reached up finally, held my face away from hers with a gentle hand.

"We mustn't, Johnny," she said. "We mustn't do that any more."

AS I BREATHED her name, everything that had passed since I last buried my face in this fragrant hair faded into unreality. A sweet, welcome drowsiness bathed and softened my will. It would be so easy to wash out the bitter past like the memory of a bad dream, to start from here . . .

A picture of the room in Kearns' house flashed past my mind. I saw the yellow shantung dress draped over a chair, the brooch of ivory-inlaid mahogany. I bit off the melting words that rushed to my lips, fought back the smothering drowsiness. I pushed her away. "You've still got the old pull," I told her bitterly. "You'll be glad to know that. It means you haven't got anything to worry about on this rap. There isn't a jury in the country would convict those gams of yours, and you know it. You just give them the old one-two. He made a pass at you—tried to rape you. You saw him lunging at you and then everything went black."

"No, No! That's not true!" She pounded angrily against my chest. "He didn't do anything like that! He was my husband! How can you . . .?"

She sank into a chair, broke into a fit of uncontrollable weeping. I stared at her, stunned and helpless. My mind was awl. One part of me was still working for the company, trying to figure angles on the policy—angles that included tossing this bit of marshmallow fluff in the gas chamber at San Quentin for murder. At the same time another part of me was fighting the first part, driving me to clear this girl at all costs. And still another part was standing off and telling me I was a sucker.

I pushed my handkerchief into her hands, and she smothered her face in it.

"I'm sorry, Thorne. That was brutal. I wish I'd known."

It sounded banal, like any mouthed apology. And almost immediately the shock subsided and my suspicion returned.

"You weren't married two weeks ago."

She spoke muffled words through the handkerchief. "We were married last week. We flew to Reno on my day off."

Well, that explained why the policy had not listed her as Kearns' wife. And it made the company's case that much weaker. As his wife she now had an insurable interest in Kearns—the thing that Metz had been griping about in the afternoon. It's a lot tougher to fight a case against a strong insurable interest than against a poor one. If she hadn't bumped him off herself, that is . . .

"How long did you know him?"

"Two weeks. Two weeks before we were married."

I blurted out, "Did you love him?"

"When we first looked at each other . . . something happened, Johnny." She rushed to explain. "He was wonderful to me—always sending me orchids and candy, and beautiful things . . ." Her eyes strayed to the triangle of apple-green silk that peeped out of her parted coat. She drew the coat around it. "He simply swept me off my feet. He was going to buy a Packard for me—we looked at it together—and he did take out a big insurance policy to show me how serious he was. I—well, he was so good-looking on top of that. I simply couldn't refuse—when he suggested for us to take the plane to Reno—where you don't have to wait the three days, you know . . ."

"Yes, I know all that," I interrupted bitterly. "And Central Casting wasn't calling, and you had to take a job slinging hash at the Terminal—but did you love him?"

She flared up. "Of course I loved him. What do you think I am?"

"I used to think I knew. That was before I got this."

She looked at the gray, dog-eared letter I held out, and tears started afresh.

"Oh, Johnny! I . . . I hoped you'd . . . It meant so much to you, then?"

"It didn't mean a thing," I snapped.

"I get letters like this every day. Girls I've counted on marrying throw me over every morning before breakfast. It's just that I was in the hospital at the time and I guess it went to my head."

"Johnny, you'll believe me? It wasn't easy to write."

"Not even for a Packard?"

"Please."

"I see you hung onto the brooch."

"Johnny, can't you understand? You meant . . . you still mean a great deal to me. I could never forget you, and I'd never try. It was something that . . . just happened. I didn't think it could ever happen to me so . . . so utterly, but it did. I couldn't help it. I told Will about the pin. He said by all means I should keep it. He wasn't jealous. He said any man I . . . had been in love with . . . must be a fine person, and of course I'd want to remember him. Will was like that. Oh, Johnny, if you could have met him before . . . before this, you'd have realized . . ."

I cut in on her. "Let me tell you about that pin. I found it in a dirty little curio shop in Tacloban. The old native who ran the shop asked forty bucks for it. I forked over the forty without a word. Doc Marcus was with me. He nearly threw a fit. He called me all kinds of a damned fool. The guy would have taken twenty—fifteen. Sure, I knew it. But I wanted that brooch for a very special girl. I wouldn't have felt right haggling over it. I had a funny idea that when I came home and looked at that pin on your breast I wouldn't have to remember how I'd chiseled some poor Igorot to get it a few bucks cheaper."

Her back was toward me and I stared at her quivering shoulders.

"This letter came by the next mail."

A muffled "Please, Johnny!" came from her.

I said, "O.K. So you were married. If you were married."

She wheeled, fire in her eyes. "Yes, we were."

She saw my glance at her left hand. "He bought me a ring, a beautiful ring. But he asked me not to wear it for a while."

"How come?"

"I'm not exactly sure. It was some business deal he was working on. He said it was only for a few days."

"Did he ask you to go back to work after you returned from Reno?"

She nodded, her lip trembling. "We decided not to tell anybody for a while—he said as soon as he was finished with this business . . ."

"He didn't tell you what the business was?"

She shook her head.

"Didn't that strike you funny?"

"Whatever Will wanted was all right with me. I . . ."

HER VOICE CAUGHT. Once again she broke down and sobbed. As I looked down at her shimmering honey-gold hair and the little shoulders trembling under the coat, contrary emotions tore at me. I wanted to sink down beside her and comfort her like a hurt child—and I wanted to twist her heart for the way she had once twisted mine. I clenched my fists and stood tense, forced myself to look away from her.

"I'm wondering if my guess on you is right," I said.

"Guess? What guess?"

"Peterson's big time, isn't he? He's in the real dough. He can do a lot for a girl."

"Wh— I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Don't you? Then you're making all the right moves without the sense I give you credit for. Working blind, like a bee. Working by instinct, but an instinct that never misses—not where little Thorne is concerned."

My meaning penetrated slowly. The anger mounted in her eyes, but she put it down with a conscious struggle. "Johnny," she said, choking a little, "I don't know what's coming over you, Johnny. But you're wrong, dead wrong, about Mr. Peterson. He's Will's . . . father."

It was the second time she'd stopped me cold. "His father! But . . . the names are different . . ." I scrambled for thoughts that seemed to dodge and roll and bounce out of my reach like a handful of dropped quarters. "Did Kearns tell you about this?"

"No. It was Mr. Peterson."

I started for the door.

She was on me in a second. Her little fingers dug into my arms with unexpected

strength and her eyes, tear-melted now, turned up to mine. "You're not going to tell the police!"

"You can't stay here forever, you know. Did you kill him?"

"No! No!"

"You're not making your case any better, hiding out like this."

"But Mr. Peterson said . . ."

I looked down at the blue eyes, the berry-red mouth. With an effort I held myself back from scooping her up for another one of those kisses. I said, "Don't you worry. You have a gift for landing on your feet."

I fumbled for the doorknob and somehow got out. I almost stumbled over a man. "What the hell . . ." I said.

"I . . . excuse me. I was just passing by," he stammered in confusion. The voice rang familiar. I peered down the dimly lit corridor at the receding figure in its flapping topcoat. I shrugged and turned the other way and made for the elevator.

If Carlo wanted to play games, that was his own lookout. If it made him happier to think I didn't know a man two seconds away from a peek at a keyhole, why that was all right with me too.

By the time I knocked on the door of seven-fourteen I was working for the company again.

V

THE LUGER was pointing at me when I opened the door. Peterson put it down when he saw me. "Sorry, Johnny. I haven't done this for . . . for years. Since I got out of the racket. I thought I was through with habits like that for good, but this thing that happened tonight . . . What kept you? I called your room and you weren't there."

The door I opened was the door of a typical third-rate three-dollar-top hotel. The room I walked into was the penthouse of the Beverly Wilshire. It had been made, evidently, by combining two or three of the hotel's ordinary rooms. Once you closed the door you lost all sense of being in a hotel. You were in a home, a big home, graciously and tastefully furnished. Somebody had given a blank check to a

decorator who knew his business. And it wasn't that alone. The place was lived in, you could tell that. Everything, from the big natural-rock fireplace to the huge easy chairs and brocaded sofas with their soft, punched-in pillows, fairly shouted that.

A big gray police dog came bounding in from the far room. He stopped short as he eyed me, and an involuntary growl started somewhere deep in his throat.

"It's all right, Brutus. He's O.K." Peterson spoke in his normal mild drawl, as if addressing a man. Brutus subsided instantly on the hearth and draped his massive jaw over one forepaw. But I didn't fail to notice that his big sad, watchful brown eyes followed the least flicker of my finger.

I reached into my pocket and took out the century note. It was beginning to wear a bit from all the handling I'd given it since I got it. I unfolded it, lengthwise and crosswise, and laid it on the coffee table between us.

"What's that for?" Peterson asked.

"You gave me this to turn Peterson's murderer over to you. I shouldn't have taken it, because I wouldn't have done that in any case, I guess."

I stood up and started toward the door. Peterson was up and alongside me in an instant. "Where are you going?"

"I don't mind telling you. I'm going down to the station and turn in the little frill you've got staked out on the ninth floor."

I'll swear I didn't even see him move, but the next thing I knew I was on my hands and knees on the rug shaking my head to clear it and working my jaw in an effort to snap it back into place. When my eyes focused I could see Peterson's legs planted wide apart in front of me.

"Get up," Peterson said.

I got up, with difficulty. I manipulated my jaw; I came to the conclusion it wasn't sprung, but every tooth along that side had its own individual toothache.

"I'm sorry," Peterson said. "I shouldn't have hit you; but you shouldn't have said that. She didn't kill him."

"Listen," I said. "I don't know where that wallop came from, unless you've got the Invisible Man working for you. But I

know my limitations. You've got the wallop and you've got the gun. That means you're right. You're absolutely right. You're damned right. Whatever you want me to say just let me know."

"Don't talk like that. You know I'm not looking for a yes-man. I just know she didn't kill him. But I want to hear what makes you think she did."

I rubbed my jaw again. "You're sure about that? It seems to be a touchy subject with you."

"Go on, go on."

"All right, then. She was in that room not two minutes before I came in. She met you on her way out, or more likely, since I didn't see her, you were there before I was and the two of you hid while I passed. You gave her the key to your Cadillac. You told her to come here and get a room. Probably you scribbled a note to the desk clerk. You put her up the same way you did me. I didn't know why . . . then. Now she tells me Kearns was your son. I don't believe it. But let's say I'm wrong. That gives you a reason to protect her—to try to buy me off, for instance. And for my book she needs protection. Not that it'll do her any good."

Peterson showed nothing whether this was hitting him. His granite eyes pinned mine steadily and his lips remained thin and non-committal. "She didn't do it," he repeated doggedly.

"The company will make a case. Don't forget she's the beneficiary of that policy Kearns took out. You watch the case the company will make out of it with forty thousand dollars at stake."

Peterson said, "Sit down."

I sat down in the big easy chair. Peterson stood looking down at me. He didn't speak for a minute. If it had been anyone else, I would have said he didn't know quite where or how to begin. It was hard to believe that, though, when you knew who Percentage Peterson was.

Or rather, what Percentage Peterson had been. Because three years back he had dropped out of sight. He had shot a man, shot and killed him with the Luger that lay now on the table between us.

It was in a poker game, and there were four witnesses to agree that the other man

had pulled a gun first; the jury had called it self-defense and had turned Peterson free.

It was about that point in his life that Peterson chose to tell me now.

"It did something to me," he was saying. "It changed me. I swore I'd never touch a card again, and I haven't, from that day to this. I swore I'd never touch a gun, either; and tonight is the first time I've had one in my hand."

His hands were clasped behind his back and he looked at me intently, as though a great deal depended on making me believe him.

"I decided to get into some honest business," he went on in his even, unhurried voice. "I won't bore you with the details, but I went into produce. For two years I was in partnership with a man who knew all the ropes; and then he died."

I didn't know where this was getting us, but I waited.

"It was a half million dollar business when I took it over. In about one month," Peterson was saying, "unless something happens, I shall be bankrupt."

Peterson looked out the window at the long double canopy that stretched away into the darkness.

"Produce is big business. All the vegetables and fruit to feed two million people pass through this Market. We operate in two ways, chiefly. The smaller commission men get their stuff from the truck farmers in the county. That doesn't require much capital. The farmers leave the stuff on consignment and take the price the wholesaler can get for it, less commission. There may be a hundred or two hundred stalls in the Market that do nothing but consignment selling.

"The other method is to buy directly from the grower. That means stretching out, getting grapefruit in Arizona, lettuce in Utah, bringing it in by the carload . . . and paying cash on the line and taking your chances about the price when it comes in. To give you an idea: I bought up a tomato crop in Mexico, near Hermosillo. I can sell about a carload a day. In order to have a steady flow of produce, I have to have twenty-five cars on the road all through the tomato season. That's

a steady investment of twenty-five thousand dollars in tomatoes. And that's just one item. I handle thirty or forty."

I whistled softly. There was a way Peterson's tongue rolled over the words twenty-five thousand dollars, or any other mention of money in large quantity, that was something to hear. It gave you the feeling that he appreciated what he was saying, not like a miser, but as a man in the leather business will run his fingers over a fine piece of leather, appreciating it through his finger-tips.

"And on tomatoes alone," Peterson said slowly and significantly, "I'm losing a thousand dollars a day."

It took me a moment to get it, and when I did it jerked my head up. "A thousand dollars a day!"

Peterson nodded.

"Bum buy?"

Peterson shook his head. "If it was tomatoes only, that might be it. I've made poor buys. I'm new at this racket, and I counted on Byler—my partner—to teach me the ropes. No. Matter of fact, the crop is the finest that can be had. But just about every third car that comes in is a total loss."

"I don't get it," I said.

"Well, those tomatoes have to come across the desert to get here. If a careless brakeman leaves the top of the refrigerator compartment open for a few hours and the ice melts . . ."

"But how often can that happen?"

"I'm telling you, it's happened to one car out of three."

"But that's sabotage!"

"Exactly."

I stood up and began pacing. "But I still don't get it." A thousand questions raced through my mind. "Can't the railroad check that sort of thing? Aren't you insured? Does this happen to anybody else? Who's doing this, anyway?"

Peterson answered the last question first. "There's no question about who's doing it," he said. "Six months ago a man named Galt bought into an old-line firm—biggest outfit in the Market, next to mine. His partners have already sold out to him because they couldn't stand his methods. Now he's out to build him-

self up, and he doesn't care how he does it. I'm the biggest obstacle in his way, so he's after me the hardest. The little fellows he controls by terror. Accidents have a way of happening to any dealer who shades his prices below Galt's. Galt disclaims all responsibility, but he makes it very clear how he deplors what he calls 'under-cutting the market'."

I said, "Well, maybe it would be a good idea to have uniform prices."

Peterson shook his head. "The only way the little dealers can keep going is through what we call 'shoppers.' Buyers for the big chains of markets don't haggle over prices. They need quantities and they just about have to come either to Galt or to me. But the shoppers, the owners of tiny corner markets who do their own buying—that's a different story. They buy single-crate lots and they'll go all over the Market feeling the cabbages and comparing prices before they place their order. A few cents makes a big difference to them."

"All right. That's the little dealer, What's it with you?"

"With me it's—sabotage."

"Aren't your shipments insured in transit?"

"Yes, of course. For the F. O. B. value only. The main thing, though, is not the actual money lost. The main thing is the customers. They're used to a certain quality in my goods. They know what's happening, of course, and they sympathize, but they're helpless. They've got to have the stuff, and when I can't give it to them, they have to go to Galt."

I took out a package of cigarettes and held it to Peterson. He shook his head. I remembered then. He had promised his mother when he was a kid that he'd never smoke and he never had. It was one of those things that would have made a cream-puff out of anyone else, but which Peterson somehow made stick. I shook a cigarette half out of the pack and caught it with my lips.

I found a match and lit the cigarette. "Can't the railroad do anything about it? Seems to me they'd be as interested in this as you."

"Sure, they did something. They fired

the brakeman. They thought it was carelessness the first time. After that they got serious. They've had their investigators on it, but the spoilage keeps right on. The tomatoes were just an example. Other things happen. It's remarkable what a little croton oil will do, for instance, if it's spilled in the right places."

"Railroad dicks find anything?"

"Not a thing. There's a leak somewhere."

"How do you mean?"

"Galt gets information about my purchases and deliveries, and he gets it fast. Naturally the first thing when these accidents began happening, I clammed up tight."

"Galt has bought up someone in the railroad office."

Peterson shook his head. "The railroad investigators report a clean bill of health. The telegraph company has checked their system thoroughly and they can't locate any leak."

Something struck me. "This is all very interesting, but aren't we getting a little off the beam? You were going to tell me about this Frankie and Johnnie act I walked into."

"That's another story," Peterson said. And he told it to me, speaking in his low, unvaried tone, with only the little unexpected halts to give away the emotions behind his inscrutable eyes.

He had married once, many years back, a woman who was attracted by the life he led then. It seemed exciting to travel and stay in hotels and meet interesting people and live in the night time instead of the daytime, like other folks. But after a few years it wasn't so romantic. There was another side to the coin, and she found it out. The uncertainty of chicken one day and feathers the next, the humiliation of being known as a gambler's wife—and even the hotel life turned out to be mostly sitting up alone waiting for Peterson to return at three or four every morning.

When the boy was born they talked it over. She didn't want the child to grow up in that kind of atmosphere, and of course she was right. So she went back to her folks and listened to their I-told-you-so's, and he came West.

"She—she died, not long after. I watched the boy. I didn't let him know it, but I kept track of him. That was how I knew him when he came out here to see me."

I must have looked my surprise, and Peterson explained. "Her folks had hushed me, but he found out I was his father. He wanted a look at me before he committed himself. I don't blame him for that. He called himself Kearns. I gave him a job and waited. I wanted him to make the first move. You understand?"

I nodded. Peterson was a guy who could do a thing like that, carry it through.

"He was a smart lad. He saw what I was up against fast, and he went to work on it. Last night he called me. He had something, something important. I hurried over. I think—I hoped mainly that he was going to tell me about—being my son. Somebody else got there first. And then that girl told me she was his—wife."

Peterson stopped talking.

"What was his name?" I asked.

"Her folks raised him under their name, Cawelti. Old line Dutch. Hard as nails. Money from way back."

I filed the name in my memory. This was something that could be checked.

"All right," I said. "Let's get back to the girl. I appreciate your concern. Matter of fact, I . . . Well, skip that. What are you going to do with her? The cops will be after her any moment. Running away isn't the way out. You know that."

Peterson nodded slowly. "I know that. She's had a terrific shock. I wanted her to get some rest before they start in on her. I hoped I could get hold of . . . whoever did this before morning and save her that ordeal. That's why I asked you to help."

"All right," I said. "I'll help. I'll do what I can. But if you ask me, the first thing to do is get that girl to the police, before they get to her. Signing 'Mary Smith' on the register wasn't smart of her. It didn't fool me. It didn't fool Carlo. He found her. Do you think it's going to fool the cops?"

"Did you say Carlo?"

"Yes. He seems to be a little slug-nutty about the girl."

There was a knock on the door. Peterson's hand was on the Luger before he remembered, took his hand away, and said, "Come in."

Nicky and Carlo came in. Carlo started when he saw me, but pulled himself together quickly. "Boss, I located that reefer outside of Blythe. They got a new trick now. They just scratched out the destination on the side of the car. It's been kicking around . . ."

Peterson said, "Where have you been since I saw you last?"

". . . The whole damned car will be ruined by the time it gets here—standing in that desert for three days!" Carlo seemed to hear Peterson's question for the first time. "What did you say, boss?"

"Where have you been since I saw you last?"

"Why, first we went to the S.P. freight office, and then . . ."

Peterson turned on Nicky. "Were you together the whole time?"

Nicky and Carlo stared at each other. "Why, sure," Carlo said.

"Cert'nly," Nicky said.

Peterson waved a dismissing hand. "All right, boys. You better get on the job downstairs."

Carlo said, "But the reefer . . .!"

"Never mind that now. You two blow."

Nicky pushed forward. "That guy, He's downstairs snoopin' again. You want I should clip him?"

"No, no," Peterson said impatiently. "I don't want you to get into any trouble."

"Oh, no trouble, boss," Nicky grinned eagerly.

"Leave him alone." Peterson turned his back on them.

The two looked at each other and went out. Peterson said to me, "You see what I'm up against."

"Who's the guy—the one Nicky spoke of? One of Galt's?"

Peterson shrugged as if the subject annoyed him. "It seems so unimportant now." He walked over to me and put a hand on my shoulder. "Asking favors isn't in my line, Saturday. I guess that's why I tried first with money. But if you could string along with me, I think . . . I guess it's that I need somebody, having

Will pulled out from under me like this."

Emotion didn't come easy to a face trained for years in poker blankness.

I stood up. "Where are you going?" Peterson asked.

"I think," I said, "what I need is another coffee royal."

A man loafed outside the door of the Gateway, leaning against a post. He looked up at me curiously as I passed him. One shoulder was hunched up a little higher than the other and his short nose ended in a kind of bulldozer blade, as if someone had pinched it hard and it had remained that way. Maybe it was an idle stare and didn't mean a thing. Maybe I was all wet with my feeling that eyes, unfriendly eyes, had never lost sight of me from the moment I stepped into the Market. Maybe.

VI

IN THE CHILL AIR BEFORE dawn, activity in the walled town of the Market was at its height. I wandered through a labyrinth of boxes, crates, trucks and men, all moving crazily every which way. Salesmen yelled at swampers and piled up the produce on the sidewalk outside their stalls for the morning business. Trucks backed into the curb, their tailgates only the narrowest distance from the high-stacked crates. And the space to move, what there was of it, more often than not was blocked by men yelling and arguing, hats pushed back on their heads, cigars or cigarettes wagging with the vigor of their conversation.

In all the vast, unfriendly reaches of the Market, the only friendly beacon was the small alcohol lamp the coffee royal had lighted in the pit of my stomach. Everything else was enemy. Everybody I passed seemed busy as hell, trucking, swamping, hammering crates together with those little tackhammers they all carried, taking orders, and generally behaving like a troupe of Swiss bell ringers in the finale of the Second Hungarian Rhapsody. In spite of that I had the feeling that the moment I passed they all stopped whatever they were doing and stared after me. I suppose they didn't really, but that was

the way it seemed. Where before the Market had been something to see from the outside, like the zoo, now it was for all the world like a jungle in which a man could easily be trapped, strangled and torn to pieces if he were not careful.

"Gotta match, mister?"

I turned to a dried-up little guy sitting on an upturned crate. He didn't have any hair on the top of his head, only two white fringes on the sides that stuck out like a pair of earmuffs.

I leaned over with a match in my cupped hands and waited till he got his untidy brown-paper cigarette going. I shook out the match and tossed it in the gutter.

"Ain't seen you around," he said, when he had inspected the cigarette and assured himself that it would draw. "Who you buyin' for? Don't want to pick up some rutabagas cheap, do you now?" He jerked a thumb at a dozen or so crates in the doorway behind him.

I told him I didn't want any rutabagas. He didn't press the point. "All I got now. Used to have a pretty fair business before that rat took it all away." He spoke casually, without much rancor.

"Who was that?" I asked him.

He looked at me, and for a minute I thought I was going to get the same cracked ice I'd been getting from the others, but he merely said, "I thought you was in the Market."

A huge Negro in brown canvas chaps came out of the sheds behind the wizened Irishman. He put a hand on the Irishman's shoulder. "Hold it, pop. You talk too much for your own good sometimes."

The Irishman said querulously, "Damn it, I was only askin' the man . . ."

The Negro studied me carefully, his eyes serious and unsmiling. "What's your outfit, mister?" he asked. The question was neither menacing nor cordial.

It was odd that he phrased it just that way. Those were words out of the old West, the West before the coming of law and order. A man connected with an outfit, a man with ties, was a man to be trusted. A maverick without ties was something else again.

"None," I said shortly. "Just a tourist."

Behind my back as I strode away I could hear the little Irishman complaining, "Damn it, Howard, I was only askin' the man . . ."

I FOUND CARLO in front of Peterson's sheds lining up the goods for the morning's sales. He had a stub of pencil behind one ear and a pad of paper in his left hand. With his right he directed the efforts of a half-dozen grunting, sweating swampers.

"Sancho, you dumb ox, line it up over there. Over there, don't you see? You expect customers to run all over the place looking for carrots? What do you think they are—sight-seers?"

He saw me then. "Hell, you can't sell the stuff when the quality ain't there. Just look at them tomatoes. An' now another carload shot!"

I looked at the tomatoes through the slats of the crates. They looked like tomatoes to me, whatever subtle nuances of color and texture their bright-red skins spelled to those in the know.

"I been with Peterson since he bought in to this joint," Carlo was saying, "and he always treated me right. But hell, a man's got to make a living, and if things don't pick up, I'm going to have to go where I can get the stuff to sell."

"You mean to Galt," I said.

Carlo looked at me belligerently. "Sure to Galt," he said. "He's made me offers. He knows I'm the best damned salesman on the street. It ain't no secret. I've told Percentage about it, and he ain't holdin' me back. He knows the score."

"When did you see Galt last?" I asked him. "Where did he make these offers?"

"He talked to me just yesterday right there in the street." Carlo pointed into the mass of trucks and traffic. "An' at the Terminal . . . more'n once."

Carlo's belligerence turned to shamed petulance. "Hell, it ain't that easy. I told you Peterson's always treated me right. You can't kick a man when he's down."

"But if Galt puts Peterson out of business?"

"That's a different story. I hope it don't happen, understand? But if it does, then nobody can blame me for gettin' an-

other job where I can make a livin', can they?"

I said I didn't see how anybody could.

"Do you think he will?" I asked.

"Will what?"

"Put Peterson out of business?"

"Hell," Carlo said. "How can he miss? Peterson's green. Galt stops at nothing. When he really puts on the pressure . . ."

"I thought it was pretty bad already."

"Oh, it is. Of course I don't feel it so much at my end here, but . . ." Carlo trailed off uncomfortably, turned his back on me and started counting up the stacks of crates. I waited.

Suddenly he wheeled on me. "All right, ask me. Go ahead."

"Ask you what?"

"Don't just stand there. I know what you're waitin' for. An' I don't give a damn, see? I'm crazy about her. I can't help myself, I'm just crazy about her. So what do you want me to do about it, huh?"

I said mildly, "Nothing, Carlo. I know how you feel. I used to know her myself. I guess I was crazy about her once, too. I can see how it could happen."

"You can . . ." Carlo's jaw dropped. He had been prepared for attack, ridicule, scorn — anything but understanding. "Jeez," he murmured. "Jeez." His was the pathetic gratitude of a dog who expects to be kicked and isn't. He picked up courage. "You fell for her . . . too?" Words suddenly rushed from him. "I never told her. I know she'd only laugh at me. Imagine me, at my age, married and all. She wouldn't have nothin' to do with me, an' I don't blame her." He became suddenly confused, dived into the pocket of his topcoat, said, "Damn!" picked up a little metal-shanked hammer from a shelf nearby and busily tacked down a loose nail in a crate. I waited until he had put the hammer back on the shelf.

I said, "When you and Nicky left the Terminal Cafe last night, where did you separate?"

Carlo grateful for the change of subject, grinned. "That Nick. He kills me. You think the boss noticed?"

"He'd have to be blind not to."

"Then I guess I'll have to tell him. Nicky'll be sore, but I can't help that. He gets himself a hot number, an' nothin' will do but he has to beat it over to George's an' put a plaster on this nag's nose."

I interrupted. "Who gives Nicky fifty-case notes to bet?"

Carlo took a moment to shift gears. "Oh, one of the boys might have asked him to place it. The kid's honest enough . . ."

"He said this guy was backing his judgment."

Carlo threw back his head and laughed. "He was handing you a line. Nobody'd be sucker enough to do that." He mused, half to himself. "Nicky asked me not to tell the boss . . ." He snapped his fingers. "So that's what had the boss up on his ear. I didn't think a reefer of tomatoes would get him so upset. I'll have to square myself with him."

"It wasn't that," I said, "and it wasn't the reefer of tomatoes."

Carlo looked up at me. "What then?"

"Didn't you hear? There was a man killed."

I watched him closely as I said it. His reaction seemed genuine. "Jeez! Who was that?"

"Kearns."

"Kearns? But I was talkin' to him only . . . LOOK OUT!"

The truck was backing up, and its rear end was headed for me with the speed of a rhinoceros. The Diesel jockeys all traveled that way, but they usually gave the horn when they backed up, and they usually managed to stay on the street.

This brute was climbing the curb as I watched it. In another second I would be pinned between its ugly bolt-studded back and the stacks of crates that crowded the inner edge of the sidewalk. For a brace of winks I could only stand flat-footed and watch the thing come at me. It stood out in unnaturally sharp focus; I took in every detail in that fraction of a second before my defense reflexes could begin to work. I saw the grain of the wood in its stakes, and where the paint was peeling; I saw the way the massive tires squeezed as they went up over the curb; the mud on the tail-light, the dent in the license

plate, everything. I even saw *GALT PRODUCE COMPANY* lettered on the side.

There was only one way to go, and that was down. I flexed my knees and ducked. Even so, the iron frame clipped me alongside the head and hurried the drop.

A dark shadow passed over me and I heard the sickening crash as the truck battered into the crates, the noise of splintering slats. Tomatoes rained down on me, at first loose and bumpy, and then the avalanche itself—the crates. I threw my arms up, a useless gesture. The first crate, corner on, took me in the small of the back; the second got me on the head and ground my face into the wet sidewalk.

After that everything was quiet—except the screaming pain of my mashed kidney and the roar in my head. I wasn't too far gone to miss the noxious blast from the exhaust as the driver gunned the accelerator, or to hear the welcome clash of changing gears. When the shadow rolled away I got another shower of free tomatoes and a couple more crates.

People began tearing the crates away and someone yanked me to my feet, which didn't do the kidney any good. I hoped it hadn't been torn loose from its moorings. I ran my hand down my face and it came away streaked with blood and dirt, but a quick fingertip checkup convinced me it was just the scraping along the sidewalk.

The moment I found I was still in one piece I stopped shaking like a leaf and began to see through a blue haze. From that moment on I had only one goal: to massacre the driver of that truck. There wasn't the slightest doubt in my mind that the attack had been deliberate. I could see the white brute lumbering down the causeway and I started after it. I knew it wouldn't get far without being tied up in a jam, and as I watched, it stopped, and the driver leaned on the horn.

I got there before he could start up. I jumped on the running board, reached inside, and grabbed myself a handful of collar. The goon was so taken by surprise that he didn't have time to defend himself. He came out of the cab as easily as a carrot out of loose earth. He came out head first, and I had to hang on to him tight to keep him from diving right down

on the asphalt; that wasn't what I wanted at all. I jerked him upright and pinned him against the side of his own truck.

"And now, bad boy," I said between clenched teeth, "we're going to take a little of our own medicine."

I held him with one fist and gave him the open hand across the jaw. I gave it to him heel on, so it would really hurt. I had the satisfaction of seeing the angry welt follow my hand.

He didn't even try to put his arms up. I guess he was too startled. He just babbled something I couldn't make out and stood there. After the first slap his hands made clawing motions at my arm, but there was no force in them.

I gave him the heel of my hand again in the same place, and then a third time. His mouth never lost that surprised expression, and blood began to dribble out of it and over his chin. I kept it up, always with the edge and always in the same place. The spot became blue, then purple, then black, and I expected to see the teeth on the outside any moment.

I was angry, but not emotionally angry. I had a job to do, and the job was to hurt him just as much as I could without slamming him into unconsciousness where it wouldn't hurt any more. I calmly considered the pros and cons of changing hands and working on the other side. My own hand was beginning to hurt like blazes, but there was fascination about that blue-black welt on his jaw. I hated to give it up.

The goon decided the issue by going out after all. His eyes glazed and he sagged down slowly. I tried to hold him up but the dead weight was too much for me. I let him go and began to rub the edge of the hand I had been hitting him with. He ended up in a half sitting position with his face against the hubcap of the truck.

I was aware of a commotion behind me. I turned to see a circle of faces. They were standing just out of range and not saying anything, just looking. I stood there and stared back at them. I was breathing hard, and my kidney, which I had forgotten for a while, made itself known with a bayonet-stab that clamped my teeth together.

I couldn't make out whether the look on the faces was hostile or approving. I didn't much care. I reached down and grabbed my goon by the shirt front and jerked him out from under the truck. Then I got hold of one of his arms and hooked it around my neck and with a heave I had him over my shoulder, fireman's lift. I headed for the circle. The circle parted and let me through.

A blue haze seemed to have settled over my whole field of vision, and the only thing that stood out sharply was the string of doors across the causeway with *GALT PRODUCE* lettered across the top of each one. I headed straight for them, not looking to right or left, not turning aside for trucks or anything else; and somehow, miraculously, neither trucks nor anything else got in my way. I could hear, as from a great distance, a sound that I knew was the crowd following me.

THREE GUYS came out of the Galt place as I stepped up on the sidewalk. If I had been in my right mind I would have seen then that I was walking into something I was going to be carried out of, but I wasn't in my right mind. I could see them waiting for me, waiting with a peculiar relaxed alertness that boded no good. I could see one of them furtively slip something shiny over his fingers—brass knucks.

That tiny corner of my brain caught—still without attaching it to reality—a sudden change in the goons. It was in their attitude, their posture, rather than in their faces, that it first became noticeable. Then it climbed into their faces, and I could recognize it—even in my beserk state—for what it was.

It was fear. Cowardly, unnerved terror, the terror that grips a man when he confronts something completely out of his experience, that forms sweat in the small of his back and makes him lose hold on his sphincters.

It was so surprising that it brought me back to my senses for a moment in my effort to fathom the reason for it. I probably made a terrifying picture with the look of cold rage frozen on my face and the limp goon slung over my shoulder; but

even so, I couldn't believe it was the sight of me that caused them to disintegrate so suddenly.

Then I realized it was not me they were staring at. They were staring beyond me. The sound of susurrating footsteps of the crowd that followed me was succeeded by a new sound: a sort of low, throaty noise that struck a shiver into me and made me understand, a little, what the goons were up against. I turned around and looked myself, and then I understood a lot better.

They were behind me, all right. They had stopped when I stopped, about twenty feet of no-man's-land between us. There was a set look on every face, and a length of one by two or a rock or one of those ubiquitous tack-hammers had sprung from nowhere into every hand. They formed a wedge with a big Negro at the apex. His face was familiar, vaguely. He was holding a side-stake off a truck with a length of chain attached to it in his hand; he gripped it as easily as another man would grasp a broomstick.

I turned back to the goons, in time to see the brass knucks rattle on the cement as with one mind the three turned and disappeared into the interior of the place.

I shifted the dead weight of the man on my shoulder and stepped inside. It was darker in there, and the crowd made no attempt to follow me. I threaded between stacks of crates. A thoroughly scared little woman with stringy gray hair, rabbit teeth, and brown paper sleeve-protectors shrank inside her glassed-in cubbyhole.

"Where's Galt?" I asked her.

Her mouth moved without any sound coming forth and she waved a thin arm aimlessly. I could see she was afraid to tell me and afraid not to. It was up to me to make her more afraid not to. I said, "Come on, Minnie Mouse. Do you want to tell me or do you want this in your lap—right through the glass?"

I swung the goon a little, menacingly.

She recoiled quickly and her rabbit mouth nibbled air for a moment. When she saw she couldn't speak, she pointed, trembling. I followed her lead up a flight of stairs. There was a door at the head of the stairs, and I pushed it open without knocking.

Galt was sitting behind a desk with a big cigar in his mouth. The three goons were in front of the desk, babbling excitedly. They jumped aside when they heard me.

I dropped the unconscious man in front of Galt's desk. As he hit the floor the three goons leaped as though they thought he was going to explode. I ignored them, stepped over the body on the floor and put my knuckles on Galt's desk.

"Here's bad boy," I said to Galt. "He's been cutting up a little more than I care for. You ought to keep him on a leash."

Galt didn't answer. He didn't look at the guy on the floor or the other goons. He just kept his eyes on me, in a sort of appraising look, and puffed calmly at his cigar.

I said, "I don't like to be pushed around. I can take a gag just so long, and then it isn't funny any more."

The three goons had come to their senses a little by this time. They realized I was alone. Out of the corner of my eye I could see them pulling themselves together. One of them took a short tentative step forward.

I whirled on them. "And that goes for the rest of you jerks. And if you want any more convincing, I'm ready to take care of that here and now."

The foremost goon made another step, and the others, emboldened, followed him up. I decided to give number one just one more step and then I'd lash out.

But it didn't happen that way. Galt said, "All right, boys, clear out."

They cleared out, but not before they gave me a couple of looks I could have rubbed together and ground corn between.

Galt walked around the desk and looked down at the goon on the floor. That one began to stir and groan, and pretty soon he reached up and touched his jaw, and then he groaned again. Galt bent down, got him under the arms, and lifted him to his feet. He was a heavy man, but Galt lifted him as easily as a baby. The guy just hung there for a moment, unable to get his feet together under him. Galt gandy-danced him to the door, held him with one hand while he opened it, and pushed him unceremoniously out into the

hall like a bag of laundry. Then he shut the door and came back to me.

"All right, now," he said. "What's your angle on this?"

"My angle," I told him, "is to keep bad boy and his pals off my neck."

"What are you hanging around the Market for?"

"I don't think that's any of your business."

"Everything that goes on in the Market is my business."

We stood and looked at each other for a long moment without speaking. Then he said, "You're working for Peterson." His eyes were hard.

I said, "I never met Peterson till this morning. Yes, I know what's going on between you two, and frankly I don't give a damn which one of you wins out. But I warn you, if I have any more interference from your crimps I may take a hand in the game myself. And if I do, I'll run you right out of the Market!"

It sounded big, but it didn't scare Galt. He smiled broadly. "My, my! Quite a man, aren't you?"

I turned on my heel and put a hand on the doorknob. Before I could turn it, Galt dropped a beefy hand on my shoulder. "Hold on a minute," he said.

I glared at him.

Galt said, "I could use a man like you, Saturday. What do they pay you at Coastal Mutual?"

"You certainly don't waste any time," I told him.

He smiled again. He took it for a compliment. "I told you everything that goes on in the Market is my business. I make it my business."

I said, "I don't think I'd care to work for you."

Galt shook his head. "Don't be hasty, Saturday. There's dough in it for you. Big dough."

"I'm not being hasty," I told him. "This is a well-considered conclusion. And while I'm here I might tell you another conclusion I'm coming to."

"Yes? What's that?"

"I warned you I might take a hand in this myself."

Galt's smile might have been set in con-

crete. "Don't bite off anything that'll crack your bridgework," he said.

He held the door open for me and I walked out.

VII

THE CROWD WAS STILL standing there, still formed into that flying wedge with the big Negro at the point. I stopped and looked at them . . .

"It's all right," I told them. "You might as well go back to work now. And thanks."

They made no move to break up. The Negro said, "That big boy in there didn't do you no hurt, did he?"

I shook my head and he added, "If he did, we'll kill 'im."

"No, it's all right." I was about to walk on through, because in spite of what I had told Galt I still considered this was none of my marbles; but something was busting inside me and it had to come out.

I said, "Why do you put up with this guy and his crimps?"

That started a murmur. Somebody asked, "What all you want us to do, mister?"

I jumped on that quick. "I don't want you to do anything. Except use your heads. It's your Market, not mine."

The Negro gripped his stake tighter and grinned at me. I recognized him now. He had stopped the little Irishman from talking to me.

"We could put him out of business for good—right now," someone else said.

"No," I said quickly. "None of that." I didn't want to be the cause of this mob wrecking Galt's place and maybe lynching Galt—which was entirely possible, what with the temper they were in.

I wondered why the Negro still grinned at me, where the crowd couldn't see him.

"Well, what then?"

I said, "Use your heads. Get together. You know the angles around here. I don't. Talk it over."

I walked through the crowd. The Negro hurried along and fell in step with me. "Mister, can I talk with you for a minute?"

I said, "You weren't so anxious to talk to me before."

He grinned at me with complete friend-

liness. "That was before. I didn't know what side you were on then."

"I don't know what side I'm on now," I told him. "I didn't think I had to be on any side."

"They say you can tell what side a man's on by the enemies he makes." He pulled up his sleeve and showed me his left arm in a white plaster cast. "Piece of lead pipe," he commented. "Galt's boys don't always miss. You was lucky."

I stuck out my hand. "Saturday's the name. Come on and have a coffee royal."

He took my hand soberly. "John Howard, an' happy to know you, Mr. Saturday."

Over steaming mugs of coffee royal in a booth at the Terminal Howard said, "Mr. Saturday, you sure made a hell of an impression on the boys in the Market just now."

"I tried my damndest to make an impression on one of them."

"No, that's not what I mean. The men saw for the first time that there might be some hope of gettin' rid of Galt an' those gangsters of his. It was what you said when you came downstairs I'm meanin'."

I smiled: "I don't remember rightly what I did say. I was pretty well steamed up. I might have said anything."

"You told 'em to use their heads. You told 'em they didn't have to put up with that sort of stuff if they didn't want to. You pointed out to 'em that they really outnumbered the Galt gang fifty to one, if they could only get together."

I said, surprised, "Did I really say all that? I didn't know I gave a speech."

Howard flashed strong white teeth. "Well," he admitted, "maybe you didn't say it—not all of it. But you got it across all right. They're talkin' about it right now, out there." He leaned forward over his mug. "I don't know if you understand what's goin' on at the Market here . . ."

I said, "Galt is trying to run competition out, isn't that it?"

"That's puttin' it mild. It's the way he's doin' it. The whole Market is an armed camp. We're worried about it."

"Who's 'we'?"

"The union. I'm on the board. We've

called this meetin' tonight, an' we . . ."

"Hold on a minute. What meeting?"

HOWARD CAUGHT himself up. "Excuse me, Mr. Saturday. Habit of mine, runnin' off with myself. You see, durin' the war the Market worked together. Oh, it wasn't a hundred percent, but by and large, everybody teamed together. The big dealers an' the little dealers stopped fightin' each other, an' the men—that's us—stopped fightin' 'em both, an' we all pitched in for the big job. An' it worked, you understand. We got the stuff out because it was needed; an' while we were doin' it, we learned a few things. We found out that a lot of beefs we used to have against each other just sort of faded away, and those that didn't fade, well, we managed to iron 'em out one way or another. An' we liked it."

I nodded and Howard went on, "Now Galt is throwin' a monkey-wrench in the works. The war's over, but the food's still badly needed. If the little dealers, like the old guy I'm working for, would stick with us, we could lick Galt. They belong on our side, because they're right under the gun. We gotta make 'em see it. Not only that: there's plenty of guys in the union don't see any farther'n their noses, too. They can't understand us teamin' up with any dealers, big or little. We gotta try to knock some sense in their heads."

I said, "Sounds good. I hope you can do it."

Howard said, "I was hopin' I could persuade you to come out."

"Me?" I was genuinely surprised.

"Sure. You opened a lot of eyes in this Market, Mr. Saturday. A lot of guys saw for the first time that it's possible to stand up to Galt an' get away with it, an' make him eat crow, too. They wouldn't a' believed it without they saw it happen."

I shook my head definitely. "Nix, Howard. This is not my battle. You boys don't need an outsider to tell you what to do."

Howard's grin flashed. "Hell, Mr. Saturday, you ain't an outsider. Not now."

"You're not afraid of anything happenin'?"

"Happenin'?"

I said slowly, "Seems to me, if I were

Galt, I might be aiming to do something about this meeting myself. I might not want anybody to knock sense into their heads."

"I know," Howard said seriously. "That's a chance we got to take. We just got to hold this meeting. It's our only way to put heart into the boys, to convince 'em to hold the line. Not everybody likes to stick around where he never knows where his next sluggin' is comin' from."

I couldn't help glancing at that sleeve. Howard went on, "It's our only way to advertise to the whole city that we don't have to fight Galt with lead pipe. We can lick him with organization—if we stick together."

He stopped talking suddenly and lowered his eyes to his mug. In a moment he said, under his breath, "There's a guy walkin' out now. One of Galt's men. He was in the next booth."

I twisted my neck to see the man Howard described. He was at the cashier's counter, paying his check. He took a cigar out of his pocket, clipped and lit it. He turned and caught my eye, stared at me for a moment with insolent, meaningful disinterest, then picked up his change and went out the door.

"I don't like that," Howard said. "He was listenin' to us."

"Nuts to him," I replied.

Howard shook his head. "You watch out for him, Mr. Saturday. These guys are dangerous."

I grinned. "They'll have to go some to catch up with me. In just about half an hour I'm going to get between two clean sheets, and I'm going to sleep the clock around. I got a night's sleep to make up."

I drained my mug and stood up. "By the way," I asked, as casually as I could. "How does Peterson stand on this thing? Is he with you or against you?"

Howard said, "Funny you askin' that. That's just what I was kind of hopin' to find out from you."

I grunted. "There's not much around here you could call private, is there?"

Howard smiled slowly. "Wheels within wheels, Mr. Saturday. That's the way this Market is nowadays." He stood up with me. "About Peterson. You know,

Mr. Saturday, we've talked him over many's the time. An' nobody knows. Galt is gunnin' for Peterson, same as he is for all the little guys. Peterson's losin' heavy sugar—carload stuff—from funny business, an' it can only come from Galt. But we still don't know. We tried to talk to him, but he won't come along with us. He don't believe in organization, I guess, not a lone wolf like him. Maybe he's goin' after Galt in his own way, but if he is, he sure ain't makin' headway that I can see." Howard held the swinging door open for me. "An' for my money personally, he's still a big operator. An' I wouldn't trust a big operator any further'n I could throw him, I don't care who he is. In fact . . ." Howard stopped, smiled enigmatically. "Well, maybe I better keep my big mouth shut."

I HAD THE KEY out and was reaching for the keyhole when I saw the light under the door. I hadn't left it on, I was confident of that. I hesitated. The thick carpet in the hall muffled my footsteps. It was morning, and the elevator would be up soon. I didn't have long to wait. Timing my move with the clanking of the cage, I turned the knob and carefully opened the door.

He was on his knees, bent over my Gladstone. His back was to me and I moved up on him. At the last instant he heard me, wheeled around. I kicked him off balance and went after him. One arm shot up to ward me off. I caught wrist and shoulder, stiffened, twisted. He went over my head.

I should have been tipped off by the way he took the fall. He took it professionally, distributing the landing over as large a surface as possible, slapping one hand behind him on the floor to break it further. Neither of us heard the terrific thump he made.

He bunched on all fours, catlike, almost on the rebound. I leaped on him before he could get his feet under him. Silently we scuffled, and somehow he managed to regain his feet, but not until I secured a full Nelson on him.

I began to exert the pressure. His head bent forward, and under my clasped hands

I saw the cords of his neck tighten and redden. There's only one way to break a full Nelson . . .

He did it. He bent his knees suddenly, lifted his arms at the same time. I felt him sliding out of my grip and tried to hang on. His upraised hands gripped my head like a basketball; he bent forward at the hips and I went over his back as if shot from a cannon. My head caught the bare floor near the wall and I blacked out.

In a half daze I felt myself being lifted to the bed. I felt something being done to my legs, not too gently. A twinge from the shrapnel wound cut through the daze and woke me, but not soon enough. When I could see straight, I found myself on the bed, seated, my legs twined around the bedpost in a kind of overhand knot. My adversary was grinning at me.

"Oh," I said. "It's you."

He was the banty who had put me in the taxi. "Yeah," he said. "Too bad you didn't hold off for a while. I was almost through." He turned back to the valise, and a thought occurred to him. "Don't try to wiggle out of that, fella. You'll only fall off the bed and break a leg."

I knew he was right. I felt silly as hell, nailed to this bedpost. "What are you looking for?" I asked him.

"Can't tell you." He was almost apologetic. "Orders."

"Whose orders?"

He straightened up. "Now that you're here, I might as well look you over too. Now don't try any funny stuff and you won't get hurt."

He approached me from the back and started to go through my pockets. I could have lashed out and maybe clipped him, but it wouldn't have paid off. He had me like a fish in a barrel. I clamped my teeth and bit back my rage until he pulled out Thorne's letter.

"That's personal," I snapped.

He read it with insolent deliberation. "Yeah, I see. Tough luck, pal. Don't let it throw you. You know what they say about women and streetcars."

That tore it. I tossed discretion overside and tried to reach him with a fist. I

might have known he'd be too smart to stay within easy reach, only I wasn't thinking just then. All I got for my trouble was the pang of a twisted ankle.

He paid no attention to me. He was whistling softly. His probing hand had dredged up a fistful of campaign ribbons. "Lookit the fruit salad! Been around some, eh? . . . Purple Heart! Jeez, I hope I didn't hurt you none."

"That's not what I hope about you," I told him.

"Aw, come now, is that nice?" He showed no sign of losing his temper. "What d'ye know! My old friend Benjamin Franklin."

He snapped the century note meditatively. "I really ought to take this for my trouble . . . but seein' as how you and me is buddies . . ."

"What do you mean, buddies?"

"Oh, I was in the Marines . . . for a while."

I said viciously, "A Section Eight?"

He gave me the slow grin again. Nothing ruffled him. He had the quiet confidence of a much bigger man. It looked ludicrously out of place in a banty.

"That where you learned the judo?" I asked him.

"Learned it? Hell," he said softly. "I taught it."

He went out, closing the door behind him.

I SAT ALONE on the bed, like a tin Buddha contemplating my newel. I knew what I was up against, all right. When I was a kid we called it the "prisoner's tie" and used it to lash some unlucky mutt to a post or sapling. The twist is made while the victim is standing and when he sits on his own bent legs it's impossible for him to get up and untwist under his own power. At least that was the theory we had then. Now it seemed ridiculous that a grown man could be pinned down by a kid trick like this. The bedpost was too short to pull myself up hand over hand; I tried lying on my back and inching my backside up the post. I worked up to a Yogi position before the post clamped me like a tourniquet and shut off a femoral artery. After that I

sweat just as much to get back to horizontal again.

Brute force was out. The telephone was clear over on the other side of the room.

I heard keys clank in the hall outside. I put my pride in my pocket and yelled.

It was a very startled chambermaid who opened the door. She gave one look and backed out, muttering something about the manager.

"No, wait!" I called after her. "Come back here!"

She came in timidly. She tried to make some sense out of what she saw. I could have told her there was no sense in it. "Don't call the manager," I said. "Get on the phone and get Peterson in seven-fourteen."

She hesitated, then came inside again, leaving the door wide open for an out in case I should suddenly leap at her, bed and all. She skirted me carefully to reach the phone. She called seven-fourteen and talked to somebody, then hung up.

"He ain't there," she said.

That was just dandy. We looked at each other like a couple of strange dogs. The conviction was slowly forming in her transparent mind that I was practising some newly-invented perversion.

I said, "Well, I guess it's the manager after all."

Peterson burst in then. One look told him the story. "Your room too? They got mine while I was out."

I fought back a flush as Peterson lifted me over the post like a baby and helped me to unlock my numbed legs. I was stuffing my belongings back into my pockets when a thought struck me.

"Thorne," I said.

Peterson pursed his thin lips. Without a wasted word we hurried to nine-twelve. The door opened at Peterson's touch. I heard his sharp intake of breath and saw his body stiffen. I looked over his shoulder and got the picture.

Thorne was lying on the floor. She had fallen into the kind of pose that movie directors are forever hoping to slip by the Hays office. She still had on those apple-green panties, and a brassiere to match. The brassiere was heaving up and down, so I knew she wasn't dead. The long

lashes of her closed eyes glinted in the early morning sunlight that poured through the window and her hollyberry mouth had fallen open.

I knelt beside the girl and turned her head. My hand came in contact with a lump. I stood up, went into the bathroom and soaked a towel in cold water. A print dress hung from the shower rod. A dark area near the hem caught my eye and I touched it. It was damp, as if a stain had been washed out of the dress.

Peterson was lifting Thorne's head gently when I came back, pushing the hair out of her eyes. He took the towel from me without a word.

Thorne's breathing quickened; her eyes fluttered and opened. I took her ankles and Peterson her shoulders, and we got her on the couch with a pillow under her head.

Peterson said, "Get something to cover her, Johnny."

I found a blanket and draped it over her. Thorne opened her eyes.

"How do you feel?" I asked her. "Can you talk now?"

She stared at me as if she didn't see me at all, and soundlessly asked for water. I gave it to her and waited. She touched the lump, grimaced with pain.

"What happened?" Peterson asked her.

Her eyes widened and she pressed the fingers of both hands to her forehead. "I don't know. I opened the door—it was a man, a big man. He held a handkerchief over his face with one hand . . . That's all I remember."

I glanced around the room. It had been given the same treatment mine had—more so if possible.

I said to Peterson, "This means that the guy who killed Kearns didn't get what he wanted—scared off, most likely. And, he's still after it."

"What's that?" Thorne demanded.

I said, "I'm not sure, but I have a hunch. Peterson, you take care of her. I'll be back in an hour."

VIII

I SAT ON THE CORNER OF Metz's desk and tried to balance a

metal ashtray on the thin edge of Metz's paperknife. I didn't do so well because I was dog-tired and my hand trembled. I gave him the whole story. It took the better part of an hour to tell.

"That's the way it is," I finished. "If the company can't prove fraud—and I'm afraid we can't—we'll just have to fork over. Double indemnity, too."

I put that last in just to see Metz squirm. Metz considered every cent Coastal paid was drawn from his veins. But he foxed me. He knew I was baiting him, and with a great effort he held onto his dead-pan.

"Unless . . ." he said.

"Unless what?"

"Unless the beneficiary crocked the insured."

I shrugged, and the ashtray, which I had almost balanced, fell off the knife face down on the desk. Metz reached out and took the ashtray and put it in a drawer.

"I thought of that. But after seeing the way she was laid out just now . . ."

"Hell," Metz howled. "That doesn't prove a thing!"

I snatched a yellow pencil and tried to find its exact center of gravity with the paperknife as a fulcrum. I knew what Metz said was true. It didn't prove a thing. But somehow the part of me that worked strictly for the company wasn't so keen on the job any more. Maybe it was the sight of those long closed lashes, the sunlight pouring on her hair. I don't know. The plain truth was that right now I was a lot more interested in seeing Thorne Moore proved innocent than in saving Coastal Mutual forty thousand bucks. But that wasn't anything I could tell Metz. I changed the subject.

"That dope sheet will be here in the first mail. Maybe that will tell us something." I picked up the phone and got hold of Bob Coulter at the *News* office. Peterson hadn't told me what city his son grew up in, but Coulter would know. "Sure thing, Johnny," Coulter's cheerful voice came over the wire. "Percentage Peterson stood trial in Cleveland and was acquitted. After that he operated around Philly and New York. Cawelti? That's right, his wife was old Cawelti's daughter. Cawelti was

in wholesome furs in Buffalo. Don't mention it, old man. When am I going to get even with you at gin?"

I hung up, turned to Metz. "Get our Buffalo office, will you, Metz? See what they can find out about this for us." I gave him the dope about Peterson's marriage and separation. "Check on the son. And tell them to hurry."

Metz raised his eyebrows, but he jotted the names down and nodded without speaking. Then he turned his eyes back to me, bit on his cigar, and waited.

I said slowly, "You better call Reno, too, and see if a marriage license was taken out by Wilson Kearns and Thorne Moore last week." At that moment the whole weight of the long sleepless night and the excitement almost got me, but I fought it off.

Metz reached for the phone, changed his mind.

He said, "Johnny."

"Yes?"

"This girl. I can read you like a book, Johnny. She meant a lot to you."

I didn't answer.

"Johnny, you can talk to me. You didn't . . .?"

I shook my head. "I'm not saying what I might have done if . . . For a while I wasn't myself. Even when I went out to his house I wasn't sure how I'd act. But somebody got there first, Metz."

Metz let out a big breath. He'd been holding it.

The phone rang and he took it. "For you, Johnny. Man from the police. Outside."

MORGAN TURNED his hat in his hand apologetically. "Captain wants to see you, Saturday."

"What for?"

Morgan shrugged. "They don't tell me these things."

Metz's secretary came in and dropped a pile of letters on his desk. I tried to give Metz the high sign but he didn't see me. He said, "Here's the letter you were waiting for, Johnny," and handed it to me.

I said, "I'll want a lawyer."

Morgan shrugged. Metz picked up his

phone. "I'll send Korb down after you, Johnny."

Morgan's droopy eyes followed the secretary's legs as she went out the door. I slid the letter in my pocket. I said, "Let's go, Morgan."

The dick coughed self-consciously and followed me.

In the elevator going down I said, "What happened with the slug, Morgan?"

He raised his bushy eyebrows. "Slug?"

"The slug in Kearns' head. What did ballistics report on it?" I asked, impatient at his stupidity.

"Oh." The dick glanced sideways. I saw the other passengers in the elevator staring at us with startled expressions. "I—uh, well . . ."

I said, "Maybe there wasn't any slug."

Morgan turned to me, "Huh?"

I let it ride.

We crowded into Morgan's six-year-old, coughing Dodge coupe. Morgan seemed to feel his responsibility as host.

"Carbon," he apologized as the Dodge stuttered into second around a corner. "I've been after Andy for months to clean it out and reseal these damned valves, but do you think I can get him to do it? Never has time, he says. I notice he's got plenty of time to guzzle coffee at the corner drugstore six times a day, though."

The monologue dragged on, inanely. It was still going on when we got into town.

". . . Broke me, the dogs. Eighteen years on the pickpocket detail. Two years to go for retirement. Never played politics in my life. All I wanted was to get along with everybody and keep out of trouble and save my dough for a nice little chicken farm when I retired. And then they had to shake out the old chief and put in this guy. You know what that meant. He went through the department with a fine-tooth comb, and every cop who so much as used to salute the old man got the boot. They fired some of 'em, even, civil service or no civil service. They did their damndest to get something on me, but they couldn't fire me, but they broke me. Good-bye chicken farm."

I was glad when we got to the station.

Morgan pointed out a hard wooden bench to me and I sat on it.

Morgan turned his back to me and began to check over some records. Before long a buzzer sounded. Morgan called over his shoulder. "Captain will see you now."

PETERSON and Thorne were sitting in the captain's office. Comb and lipstick had done noble work, but they hadn't been able to wipe that frightened helpless look off little Thorne's face. Maybe they'd heightened it.

The captain waved me to a seat. To Morgan he said, "Bring him in."

Morgan stepped out. I turned to the captain. "What is it?"

"We've got the cab driver who took you out to Kearns'. I want him to make an identification."

"I've got a lawyer coming. I don't want to talk till he gets here."

"You won't need a lawyer. You've already admitted going there. This is just for the record."

"I'm still not talking."

The captain sniffed and didn't answer. Morgan came in, escorting the hackie. The hackie stared at the three of us. We all stared back.

"All right," the captain prodded. "Is this the man you took out to Scott Street?"

I could see the longer the hackie hesitated the more trouble he was having to make up his mind. Finally he said, "I don't know."

"You don't know! You told me you'd recognize him anywhere. What kind of a rotten runaround are you giving us, anyway?"

The hackie kneaded his cap. "I ain't givin' you the runaround, honest I ain't. I just want to be sure, that's all."

I said to the captain, "You know this isn't a kosher identification. You want it to hold water in court, you better have him pick me out in lineup . . ."

"I know all that, Saturday. I'm just trying to get on with this thing. It isn't going to be held against you."

"Besides," I continued, "I told you myself I went out there in a cab . . ."

"Fine. Is this the cabby?"

I looked at the hackie. I honestly couldn't tell him from Adam. "How should I remember? I don't make a point of re-

membering hackies. What's your name, pal?"

"Eddie Riggert."

I made a real effort to connect the name with the picture that must have been in the cab I rode. No dice. I shrugged.

The captain said to Riggert, "At least you're sure you took *somebody* out there?"

The heavy sarcasm was lost on the hackie. He answered eagerly, "Oh, sure. An' brought him back."

The captain turned away from him in disgust. "Mrs. Kearns," he said suddenly to Thorne, "suppose you tell us what you know."

The tears welled over; she produced from somewhere a wisp of lace and dabbed her eyes. The captain stood up, walked around his desk and bent over her, patting her shoulder. By George, I thought, she's even got him on the run. As for Riggert, he stood like a stone statue, his jaw slack, unable to tear his eyes off the weeping girl.

"... I came home after my shift at the Terminal—Wilson wanted me to keep my job for a couple of weeks, until he finished his business; then we were going to New York. The light was on, but I didn't think anything of that. Wilson always waited up for me... I ran into the bedroom and there was Wilson on the floor and... then Mr. Peterson came in. He had a gun in his hand. I was petrified. I... I was afraid he would turn on me next."

That I can believe, my pretty, I thought. That touch comes from the heart. I turned to Peterson. His gaze never wavered from the girl, but I felt his heel grind down on my instep. He just sat there, his steady ice-blue eyes watching her without blinking, without emotion, that perpetual faint surprise wrinkling his forehead.

The captain said, "Did you hear a shot?"

"I... I can't be sure. I think so."

"You're not too sure."

"When I saw Wilson there—it's hard to remember what happened before."

"You thought Peterson had killed your husband?"

Thorne pulled at her handkerchief. "I... I don't know what I thought. I..."

The captain nodded, complacently I

thought. "Go on. You were afraid Peterson would go after you."

Thorne plied the lace wisp again. "I was at first. But in a minute I could see he wasn't going to hurt me. He sort of shook himself together. I... I honestly think he didn't know what he was doing." She waited for agreement. I took a leaf out of Peterson's book and gave her the ice-cube eyes. She looked from Peterson to me and back to Peterson again, faltered a moment, and then, almost in self-defense, went back to her story.

"He told me I'd have to get out quickly, so that I wouldn't be involved in the... killing by the police. Just then we heard somebody coming." She turned to me. "It was you. We were in a dark hallway. He held my arms and kept a hand over my mouth. We watched you go past into the bedroom. Then he whispered to me to come to the Gateway and register and wait for him."

She seemed about to say something more but she halted herself, and once more she broke down prettily. I had been waiting for her to tell DeWitt that Peterson was her father-in-law, and I was sure that was the statement on the tip of her tongue. I was getting fed up with her innuendos. I jumped to my feet where Peterson's heel couldn't reach me. I paced the length of the little office, brushing by the ossified cabdriver and then back again and planted myself in front of Thorne. I tried to keep my voice steady.

"It's a pretty good story, Thorne," I told her. "You might even make it stick, if you polished it up a little, although," I added judiciously, "a smart prosecutor would probably break it down without much trouble. Too vague. You see," I told Thorne, "he'd hammer away at the details. He'd make you tell it over and over again, weeks apart, maybe; and you'd forget and get tangled and pretty soon you'd be tied up in such a pretzel you'd wish to hell and gone you'd never thought of trying it."

THE CHINA EYES blazed in a way I wouldn't have thought possible if I hadn't seen it happen before. She jumped up.

"You're just trying to scare me! Don't you try to make me say it isn't true, Johnny Saturday! You can't do that, because it's true, every word of it! It's true, it's true, it's true!"

She emphasized her remarks with the hammering of little fists against my chest. I caught her wrists and held them until she subsided.

"Of course the insurance wouldn't have anything to do with it?" I taunted her.

She blazed at me. "You hate me, don't you? You've always hated me, just because . . ."

"You tell *me* the story." I pushed her away from me.

"Oh . . .!" She was beside herself with fury.

The captain came between us. "All right, you two. Stop bickering." He peered at me beneath bushy white brows. "You know each other?"

"Yes," I said. "We know each other. Used to, that is."

The captain walked back to his desk and clipped off the end of a cigar. He pointed the cigar at Thorne. "Sit down," he ordered.

He lit the cigar, concentrating on it fiercely until he got it drawing.

"Unfortunately, as Mr. Saturday points out, there are several holes in your story."

Thorne subsided into a chair. "But I saw him, I tell you! I saw him standing over Wilson . . . with the gun . . ."

"In the first place," the captain horned in, "Mr. Peterson came here immediately after the killing. Tests showed that his gun had not been used recently—more than that, he had not fired any gun during the last twelve hours, at least."

Thorne's whole body went rigid. "You're just trying to trip me up, that's what! I'm not going to say another word to you!"

Riggert the cab driver stammered uneasily, "Well, Captain, if you don't need me . . ."

I said, "Wait a minute. We do need you." I turned to the captain. "I suppose you found the weapon?"

"That's it. We didn't."

"In that case," I said, "I can clear Peterson. He wasn't carrying anything

but the gun that I could see when he walked in on me, and he didn't get out of my sight until he got here and was searched. He didn't have a chance to throw a weapon very far." I looked at Peterson. "And he can say the same for me."

Peterson drawled quietly, "That's right, Captain. He had no chance to get rid of a gun." He still stared at Thorne, his quartz-blue eyes unblinking, the creases of surprise in his forehead unmoving. The stare had weight to it, and Thorne felt the weight. Cold hostility from men was something new in her experience.

Peterson continued, not raising his voice a decibel. "This girl is speaking the truth, up to a certain point. Will Kearns called me to come out to his house right away. He had some important information for me about my business. He said he would leave the front door open for me. I found it open and went in. He was not in the front room. I called to him and he didn't answer. The light was on in the rear, so I went back. He was lying on the floor—the way you found him. I bent over him—and Miss Moore . . . Mrs. Kearns came in. I didn't have my gun out. Before we had a chance to do more than look, we heard a noise—Mr. Saturday coming in. We hid in the hallway and watched Mr. Saturday go past. I drew my gun then—she saw it then. I didn't use force on her. I told her to go to the Gateway and wait for me. I gave her my overcoat and the keys to my car. The rest happened as you heard it."

"Why did you prevent Mr. Saturday from phoning the police, and why did you spirit away a material witness?" the captain demanded coldly.

"Because it was just possible, in view of the swiftness with which everything was happening, that whoever killed Kearns did not have time to get the information he was after. Because this . . . Mrs. Kearns might have that information—or the killer think she had it, which amounts to the same thing. If that were true, her life was in danger. What happened later proved I was right about that. All our rooms at the Gateway were searched. Mrs. Kearns herself was attacked."

"What was this information?" Captain DeWitt wanted to know.

"I don't know exactly. Kearns didn't say over the phone. There was a business matter that had been worrying me: I believe it had to do with that." Peterson didn't volunteer any more. I noted that he, too, had said nothing about his relationship to Kearns.

The bug-eyed hackie swiveled from one speaker to the next like a spectator at a tennis match. I said, "You, there. You said you took a man out to the Kearns' place."

He turned to me, stuttered, "Eh—yes, sir. Yeah, that's right."

"What time was that?"

"A little before three. Hank the Night Watchman had on 'Stardust,' an' right afterward he gave the time . . ."

"And you brought him back?"

"Yessir. He told me to wait a couple houses down. He wasn't gone more'n five minutes."

I turned to DeWitt. "I came out in one cab and went back with Peterson in another we picked up at a drugstore. Peterson went out in his Cad. There's only one answer to that."

"Someone else."

"Right." The captain pointed his cigar at Riggert. "Will you be able to identify your passenger?"

"Gee, I hope so!"

The captain made a disgusted face. "Morgan, have that cab gone over for evidence of a weapon. Also Peterson's car." His cold look took us all in. "I could detain you all as material witnesses, but I won't . . . That'll be all—for now. Hold yourselves available." He turned on his heel and walked out of the office.

Morgan said apologetically, "About that car of yours, Mr. Peterson . . ."

Peterson nodded, turned to me. "Coming, Johnny?"

I shook my head. "I've got a job, too. If you could drop me at my office . . ."

Little Thorne said, "What about me?"

I looked at her. "Well, what about you?" I tried to make it as unfeeling as I could.

"I'm afraid. Somebody tried to kill me. They might try again."

Peterson said, "Whoever attacked you probably knows by this time you don't have what he wants. However, you're welcome to come along with us . . ." He stopped, "On second thought, I think I'd prefer it if you didn't. Johnny, suppose you take the young lady wherever she wants to go."

On the wooden bench outside sat Korb, Coastal's legal eagle. He hugged his briefcase to him as if he were afraid some one would snatch it away, and his little mustache twitched at the strange odors that pile up around a jail-house. He leaped to his feet when he saw me.

"Where the hell have you been?" I demanded.

"Why, right here, Johnny. They said you hadn't come in yet."

"Who said?"

Korb's eyes darted around, settled on Morgan. Morgan grinned at me. "I musta made a mistake," he mumbled.

"Oh!" Korb's lily-white background in the fleecy pastures of contracts and fiduciaries hadn't prepared him for this kind of chicanery. "You'll hear from this . . ." he began.

I took Thorne's arm and pushed her through the door.

IX

IN THE CAB, THORNE DIDN'T talk, and neither did I. She sniffled into her handkerchief. I didn't turn my head; I could feel rather than see her sidelong glances at me to see how I was taking it. We rode a couple of miles this way.

Finally she said, "I can't help it, Johnny. I was so afraid—I didn't know what I was saying."

"I weep for you, the Walrus said."

"What did you say?"

"Nothing." Suddenly all the resentment I had been holding back welled within me and I had to get it out. "If you ever in your life—just once—did something without first calculating what little Thorne was getting out of it . . ." I stopped. "What's the use?"

"Johnny." She put a hand on my arm. "You still don't believe me. You don't

believe it was real . . . with Will and me?"

"Maybe with him. You do things to a man. With you . . . no."

"You think it was the money, the things he promised. If he'd been broke, out of a job . . . or a buck private . . . then I suppose you'd be convinced."

"If he'd been broke it wouldn't have happened."

No sound came from the handkerchief. Then I heard a little choke. I said gruffly, "You've had a pretty rugged time of it at that. Sorry."

I put my arm around her and pulled her over toward me. Her face went to my shoulder and I felt her body quiver against mine. I cupped a hand under the little heart-shaped chin and lifted her face.

She murmured, "No, Johnny." Her hands pushed at my chest and her lips struggled to avoid mine. I pulled her closer.

I felt a stinging slap on the cheek. More from surprise than anything else I relaxed my grip and she slid away.

"I asked you not to do that," she said, panting a little.

Her voice was cold and at the same time curiously tender.

"If you won't believe me when I tell you I loved my husband, maybe you can understand that."

I rubbed my cheek. "Well, if it's an act, it's a good one."

She said, "Let's talk about something else."

For a couple of blocks there was silence in the cab. Then I said, "All right. Your round. Suppose you tell me what really did happen last night."

"It happened . . ." She made a real effort and pulled herself together. "It happened just as Mr. Peterson said."

"Then you didn't hear a shot?"

"I'm not sure." Her voice was muffled. "When I came in he was . . . it was . . . all over."

"You left the Terminal at least a half hour before Peterson did. How did you get there?"

"Street car. They don't run often so late."

It sounded all right. It had taken her

an hour, perhaps, and Peterson could drive it in twenty minutes.

"Did you see Carlo?" I asked.

"Carlo? No. Although I wouldn't be surprised if he was hanging around. He usually is."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Oh, he's been mooning around after me for months. Never says anything, so I can't tell him off the way I'd like to. Just follows me. He's in the cafe about twenty times a night, drinking coffee and watching me like a sick calf. He makes me tired."

"Who is he, anyway?"

"I don't know, except he works for Mr. Peterson. I think his wife henpecks him. But he doesn't have to take it out on me!"

"And then Kearns came along and beat his time," I mused. "They ever quarrel about you—have a fight?"

"With him? Why, Will could have broken him in two with one hand. He wouldn't dare stand up to Will."

No, I thought. He wouldn't dare stand up to Will—face to face. But it didn't always work out that way. There were other ways of feeding a grudge. And someone had taken that hack out to Thorne's last night, hung around, and then gone back downtown.

"What about this business your husband talked about?" I asked. "What do you know about that? Anything you can tell?"

"No, only he seemed very happy and excited about it. When I called him earlier in the evening to tell him what time I'd be home, he told me I'd never have to ride a street car again."

I snapped on the dome light and reached into my pocket. "Did you ever see this . . .?"

Thorne waited a moment. Then she said, "What, Johnny?"

I scarcely heard her. I sat like a statue. My hand in my pocket closed on nothing—nothing at all. The letter with the dope-sheet was gone.

It didn't seem reasonable at first. I'd stuffed it there, before we left Metz's office. I'm not the kind of guy who forgets what pocket he puts something in, but I made a systematic search just the same.

"What are you looking for?" Thorne wanted to know.

I remembered Morgan then. Morgan had seen the scratch sheet when I was searched at the station. Morgan had watched me mail it to Metz—had seen the address when the damned thing stuck in the slot. Morgan had been right on deck when the mail came in and Metz handed it over to me. Some of that self-pitying drool Morgan had been spilling on the ride over to the station came back to me. That sad-apple had been on the pickpocket detail for eighteen years. He told me that himself, hadn't he?

And while he was filling me full of that noodle soup about chicken ranches, the ward-heeler had snitched that envelope out of my pocket.

Mad clear through as I was, I almost had to smile. Because now I knew something I wasn't sure of before. Up to now I'd only guessed the dope sheet might be important. Now I knew it.

"Did you lose something?" Thorne asked.

"Look," I said. "I'm going to drop you at the Gateway. I've got places to go."

"Was it a green paper—a racetrack form?" Thorne wanted to know.

I looked quickly at her. "What did you know about that?"

"Only that Will showed me one of those. It had writing on the margins. He seemed very elated over it, for some reason."

"O.K. That's all I wanted to know. Now I've got to get that dope sheet back." I leaned over to the driver, slipped him a bill. "Let me off at the Market, will you? Then take this lady to the Gateway Hotel."

"But I'm scared," Thorne wailed. "I don't want to go there any more!"

"Where do you want to go, then? Home?"

"N-no!"

"All right. The Gateway. You can lock yourself in your room. Make the desk clerk go up with you. Nobody's going to hurt you."

"But how do you know?"

"I know," I said, "because whoever was looking for what you might have had is damned good and certain you haven't got it now."

THE MARKET looked just like a circus tent after the last show. The place was empty of trucks—retailers were back at their stores in the four quarters of the city. Cleanup men worked apathetically at the scattered crates, sweeping up bruised and squashed oranges and rhubarb and all the other flotsam and jetsam that strewed the whole length of the thousand-foot double canopy and the gutters of the walks on either side. The Market had once again finished its daily job of supplying two million people with beets and carrots, grapefruit and bananas, nuts and rutabagas, lettuce and cabbage, done its job in a matter of four or five hours, and was resting for the next grueling round.

I found Nicky in front of Peterson's place supervising the activities of three or four swamper with brooms and shovels. The mountainous stacks of crated vegetables contrasted with the gaping spaces of the other stalls I had passed.

"Peterson come in yet?" I asked him.

He shook his head.

"Carlo?"

"He's down at the S.P. checkin' on that reefer we lost." Nicky grinned ingratiatingly. "Jeez, that was some gat you had up there in the room. Boy, would I like to have one like that!"

"It's a Colt .32," I told him. "Listen, Nicky, what time does Morgan come on duty here?"

"Hell. I don't know. Seems like I see him around all the time." He breathed ecstatically. "That's sure some rod. Don't forget you promised to let me blaze 'er sometime, eh?"

"Sure, sometime. I know a fellow who has a target range on his ranch. We could go out there sometime." A thought struck me. "Say, Nicky, let me see that dope sheet you showed me this morning, will you?"

Nicky's puffy eyes glistened. He was in heaven, talking about guns, thinking about guns. No mundane query of mine was going to pull him out of it in a hurry. "Look," he said suddenly. "Harry's place is just down the street. How about splashin' a little lead now, huh?"

"Not now," I started to beg off, then thought better of it. I hesitated. There

might just possibly be something to learn from this broken-down pug, punchy as he seemed. "You're sure it's all right with the boss?"

Nicky grinned craftily. "Hell, don't you worry about that. Me'n the boss understand one another, all right."

I shrugged. "Lead the way," I said.

Harry's place was a shooting gallery, complete with tin ducks, clay pipes and all the rest of it. Harry himself—I guess it was Harry—sat propped on a chair, his feet on the counter and his hat tipped over his nose.

Nicky reached out furtively and caressed the stock of the nearest rifle in the row on the counter. "What d'ye say, eh?"

"Drop that gun!"

Harry had come to life with a suddenness that nearly startled me out of my shoes.

Nicky began to whine, "Aw, now, Harry . . ." But I noticed he made no further move to touch the rifle.

Harry slowly tipped his chair forward and stood up. He was a tall man, and there was blood in his eye. "I told you if you laid a hand on a gun of mine again I'd wipe up the floor with you! If it's trouble you're looking for, here's the man to give it t'ye! Now scat! An' don't let me catch you suckin' around here again, d'ye understand me? By Joe, if ye so much as pass by here again, I'll . . ."

I said mildly, "What's the row, Harry? We were only going to do a little shooting."

"A little shootin', d'ye call it, now? Well, will ye take a look at this, for a minute!" He yanked back the sleeve of his sweater and held out for my inspection a forearm ploughed by an angry red welt eight inches long, from wrist to elbow. "It's a fine little shootin' when a man can't be trusted to aim at the ducks and the pipes, but has to go gunnin' for the proprietor himself! Now wouldn't you say?"

"Aw, Harry, you know that was an accident," Nicky whined.

"Sure, it was an accident. And it was an accident the time you shot at the wall and put a bullet through Feinbaum's delicatessen next door, I suppose you're goin' to tell me."

Nicky said sheepishly, "How was I to know your walls wasn't bulletproof?" He looked at me apologetically. "I was just tryin' to see if I could get me a duck on the bounce. You know, like in pool."

Harry looked at me, too, not apologetically. "You see what I mean? I tell you this guy ain't to be trusted. He's nuts!"

"I see what you mean, Harry," I said. "Well, Nicky, I think we'd better be moving along. You dialed a wrong number that time."

"No, wait a minute, please!" Nicky practically pushed me back with both hands. "You go on and shoot, and I'll watch you. Go on. He can't stop you from shooting. Please!"

He was so pathetically eager I didn't have the heart to refuse him. I dropped a quarter on the counter and put the Winchester to my shoulder.

"No, not the rifle," Nicky begged. "Le's see what you can do with the pistol. Come on, Harry, give him the pistol."

Harry produced a .22 automatic with a swank imitation-ivory grip and handed it to me.

"Eight shots," he said.

"All right, Nicky, what'll I go for?"

Nicky pointed. "See if you can ring the bell," he said excitedly.

He pointed out a metal target with a tiny hole in the center. You had to make the hole to ring the bell. I said, "All right, give me a couple of slugs to get used to this cannon."

All shooting-gallery iron is off-center one way or another. I've seen rifles that were bowed worse than the Holland Tunnel. The cheap ammunition is usually erratic, too. Three shots showed me this wart remover was bearing down pretty consistently toward five o'clock. I raised the sight up and to the left a little, and by the time I'd finished the clip I had the range.

"O.K., Nicky," I said. "I'm ready now." I handed the auto to Harry to put in another clip.

Then I rang the bell eight times in rapid succession.

"Gee," Nicky breathed. "You're all right, fella!" I knew he belonged to me from that point on.

WE SAT in the Terminal nursing a couple of steaming coffee royals. I got Nicky talking about his boxing days. He surprised me in one respect. Unlike most punchy ex-bruisers, he wasn't looking forward to a comeback, and he didn't think he was a potential champ.

"In plain English," he said. "I stunk."

"How'd you meet Peterson?" I asked him.

It was quite a story. Peterson watched him work out in a gym, and when the workout was over he came up to Nicky.

"'Boy,' he tells me, 'you're in the wrong racket.' I was pretty cocky in them days, an' I jus' up an' took a poke at him. Nex' thing I knew I was on the canvas way across the ring."

"Yeah, I know," I said ruefully. "I've tried out that wallop."

"When I came to he was leanin' over me wit' a towel. 'What did I tell ya?' he says. 'There's no percentage in this. You come along wit' me'. An' I been wit' him ever since."

When Nicky talked about Peterson an ecstatic expression took hold of his puffy ugly face. "You never seen a guy like him. He's a whiz, he is; a reg'lar bearcat. He can do anythin', an' boy, I mean any-thing!"

"Pretty quiet now that Peterson's sort of settled down, eh?"

Nicky groaned. "Dull as dishwater. Vegetables! Sellin' vegetables! Kin you feature it?"

"You can't say it's been dull recently," I suggested. "What with this Kearns getting drilled, and all."

Nicky sobered. "Yeah, I forgot. Jeez, you could 'a' knocked me over wit' a feather when I hear'n about it."

"What was he like?"

"Oh . . ." Nicky spread his hands apart. "I dunno. Just a guy. He was nice to me, though. Good salesman, too."

"Did he follow the bangtails, too?"

"Yeah, sure. He . . ." Nicky looked at me. "Funny thing your mentioning it. He was all the time askin' me for tips. Every day, seemed like, lately."

"You do your own handicapping, don't you, Nicky?" He nodded. "I always wondered how they did that."

Nicky peered at me quickly to see if I was giving him the business. My face showed nothing but wide-eyed interest. It wasn't entirely acting, either. Nicky reached into his hip pocket and hauled out the green sheet.

"You get yourself a scratch sheet like this." He handed it over to me. "Tells all about the nags. What they done in prev'ous performance, an' all that. So you can stand yours up against the other beagles, like, an' figure out scientific how she's goin' to make out."

I examined the scratch sheet curiously. It was the same issue as the one Morgan had snitched from me, but to my disappointment it bore no writing.

"This is the sheet most of the boys use?" I asked.

"Naw." Nicky's superior scorn could be scraped with a spatula. "It's the best one, but do you think I c'n get anybody to see that? The guy at the paper stand tole me once he don't sell a dozen a week . . ."

That still didn't rule out coincidence, but it was good enough for me.

"Had any winners lately, Nick?"

Nicky leaned across the table. "I was on Barbecue yestiday, fifth at Aqueduct. He was a cinch to pay off, only the crooks pocketed him. An' American Girl, Tuesday, she got robbed too. I been playin' in the damnest luck. Take last week, there was . . ."

But I wasn't listening any longer. I've done a bit of beagling myself, off and on. I was thinking.

So Nicky handicaps 'em. He's not just a blind stabber. He handicaps 'em—and still the horses he picks are strictly from glue.

I held up the green folder. "Mind if I keep this, Nicky?"

"Sure, keep it. I c'n get another."

"What's with this Will Kearns and Carlo?" I asked.

He grinned quickly. "Oh, that. Carlo always had a yen for this hash-slinger. Wait, I'll show you who I mean. He craned his neck over the side of the booth and scrutinized the three waitresses on duty behind the counter. "Looks like she ain't here right now. She's a looker, all

right. Wouldn't object to a little of that myself, only hell, I know how I stack up wit' dames. I don't kid myself. But Carlo, now, he does. He's smart in lots of ways, don't get me wrong. But jeez! he's old enough to be the gal's pappy, an' him married an' all. It just don't make sense, see? So Kearns blows in—you know, young an' good lookin', an' strictly a wolf—an' he starts beatin' a gong for this Thorne, an' she falls for him like a ton of bricks. Well, Carlo, he don't like that. An' you can't talk to the guy. Jeez! Open your puss an' he takes your head off!"

Nicky's voice dropped to a hoarse whisper. "Watch it. Zero comin' in at five o'clock."

Carlo slid into the booth beside me. He was flushed with excitement. "Hey! You guys hear what happened? Morgan. He got it. Right in the back of the head." He gulped air. "Just like Kearns."

"Where did it happen?"

"The tunnel out to San Pedro Street. Pretty dark in there."

Nick said quickly, "Wit' a gun?"

"It looked like it. Nobody heard a shot, though."

Nicky stood up. "I'm goin' over. I wanta see this."

Carlo said, "Oh, they took him away already."

Nicky stopped in his tracks. "Hell!" Disappointment was written all over his face. "Why didn't somebody tell me sooner?"

X

I HADN'T MUCH STUFF AT THE Gateway, so packing, even after Section Eight's workout on my Gladstone, was no job. I snapped the catch and reached for the handle when the door opened.

Peterson said, "Where are you going?"

"Home to get some sleep."

"Quitting?"

I nodded. "Coastal put someone else on this job."

"It's gone too far for that."

I looked at him, steadily. "Galt's pipeline in your outfit is Carlo. You know that. But you don't do anything about it. Why?"

"It was my son was killed," Peterson

said in a flat voice. I saw I was talking to a stone wall. I tried to jolt him another way.

"Morgan was killed too."

Peterson nodded. "I heard that."

I said, "The police are giving out he was shot, just as they did with Kearns. Only I'm betting he wasn't—any more than Kearns was shot."

Peterson looked up quickly. "What makes you say that?"

I said, "Criminals tend to repeat. They employ the methods, tricks, and weapons they are used to. They fall into habits, just like the rest of us. The FBI has a big *modus operandi* file, you know."

Peterson took a step toward me, lithe as a cat, and menacing as a tiger. "What makes you say that my son wasn't shot? What do you know about this you're not telling me?"

"Nothing—yet. Nothing you don't know yourself. When they called us down to the station, the second time, that was the tip-off. If there had been a slug and it hadn't fitted your Luger, they wouldn't have needed you down there. And if it *did* fit the Luger—they wouldn't have needed anyone else."

Peterson didn't answer.

"What's more," I went on. "You know all this as well as I do. I'll give it to you straight. I'm bowing out of this thing while I've got the chance. And one reason is that I can't savvy where you stand in this. I can't figure you out, Peterson, and I don't like it." Something struck me, and I added, "Hell, I don't even know if Kearns was your son. I've only got your word for it, you know."

Peterson's jaw tightened. He wasn't used to having his word doubted.

"I noticed you didn't mention it to DeWitt, down at the station," I drove on.

Peterson said, "Neither did you."

That stopped me. I hadn't, nor had Thorne. He hadn't asked me to keep it quiet, and I didn't believe he had asked Thorne either, yet we both had fallen into line, by a tacit understanding that he didn't want to pull that rabbit out of the hat just yet.

Peterson said, "I had my reasons."

I was sure he had, and that his reason

boded no good for his son's killer, if and when he caught up with him. If . . . always if . . . Kearns was really his son. On sudden impulse I walked over and picked up the phone. Miss Gillicé, Metz' secretary, answered.

"The boss got called downtown," she told me. "By the police."

My heart leaped a beat. I remembered the look the captain had flashed my way when he learned Thorne and I had known each other.

"What did he find out from Buffalo about Wilson Kearns' mother?"

"Oh, that." I could hear Phyllis fumbling with papers on her desk. "Funny thing. We had a policy on her, so the Buffalo office was able to supply quite a bit of information. Let's see. Five feet three, blue eyes, blond hair . . . You don't want that stuff."

"No," I said impatiently. "What about her son?"

"Well, the policy was taken out when she was single, under the name of Emily Cawelti. Beneficiary was later changed to Wilson Kearns, although she never changed her own name on the policy. Nothing here to indicate who she married or who the boy's father might have been. Anything else you want right off?"

"No, thanks."

I hung up.

"Are you satisfied?" Peterson asked.

I nodded. "I'm satisfied. My mistake."

"Will you stick?"

"I shook my head. "I don't think so."

Peterson continued to drill me with his ice-blue eyes, as if trying to stare me down. Finally, without a word, he turned and walked out.

I waited, standing stock-still in the center of the room, for a long time. I couldn't keep my eyes off the door that Peterson had walked out of. But nothing happened, and I shook myself back to earth. I picked up the Gladstone and opened the door. The corridor was empty. The door closed behind me with a confident, final click.

At the lobby desk I turned in my key. "I'm checking out. Will you send this over to the Bishop Arms for me?" I slung the Gladstone up on the counter.

The desk clerk looked concerned. "I hope the room and the service have been satisfactory," he said anxiously.

"The room was fine. The service was swell. I was only here temporarily. I live at the Bishop."

His face cleared. "Oh. All right, sir. I'll send it over. Come stay with us again when you can."

"Sure. Let me have the bill, will you?"

"Oh, but Mr. Peterson had it put on his bill. He'll take care of everything."

"That's right," I said. "I forgot."

The clerk leaned over the marble slab on tented fingers. "Do you feel all right, Mr. Saturday? You look pale."

"I feel all right," I said. "I'm just tired."

I was tired. My legs warned me that they were about to refuse flatly to carry my body any further, and my body delivered an ultimatum on the subject of staying upright over my legs. It was a tossup which would quit on me first.

But it wasn't lack of sleep that made me pale. It wasn't the throb of my right hand from the schlamming I'd given the goon who tried to pin me with his truck. It wasn't the batting around I'd been taking for the past twelve hours. It wasn't even the treatment I'd got from Section Eight, the judo shark.

If I'd wanted to go into the matter with the desk clerk I'd have had to tell him the truth. I was pale because I was scared.

XI

AS I STOOD ON THE STREET outside the Gateway and got a look—a last look, I hoped—at the Market hitching up its belt for another nightly onslaught, I was still scared. I couldn't believe I'd got this far.

"Saturday."

The three men came up behind me so unexpectedly that I jumped. The sight of union buttons in their hats reassured me but my nerves took their own good time about quieting down.

"Have you seen Howard?" one of them asked me.

"The big nigger," a second amplified,

"I know him," I said. "No, I haven't seen him. Why?"

"He was due at a confab we're having. He ain't usually late."

"It's that heel Galt," the second guy put in. "I'm still for going up there and kicking his teeth down his throat. If he done anything to Howard . . ."

"Oh, fine, fine," the first man said. "We're breakin' our necks to duck the rough stuff, an' you're gonna kick Galt's teeth down his throat. Wise guy. Galt would just love an opening like that."

The second guy muttered something into his stained Melton.

"He'll turn up, I guess," the first guy said to me. "It's just that I've never known him to be late to a meeting. You see him, tell him we was lookin' for him, will you?"

"I sure will," I said.

The three went on, their faces pretty hard and grim.

I hoped the first man hadn't noticed the way I stared at his nose. It was a short nose, spaded at the end as if it had been putty and someone had given it a good pinch. Wheels within wheels, Howard had said. His enigmatic grin as he said it suddenly made sense. So Galt wasn't the only one keeping tab on Peterson's comings and goings.

I shrugged and turned into the Market. It was no skin off my back. I was on my way out. From now on I didn't give a damn who kept tab on whom.

The Market was putting on another one of its variegated moods for me. It was hard to remember that this empty mausoleum would spring into crowded activity in a few hours, that it would be impossible to pack another truck in the now-deserted streets, to stack another crate on the overflowing sidewalks and stalls; that swampers would be tearing in all directions with their hand-trucks piled seven high with blood-red rhubarb and avocados packed in excelsior like emeralds; that swearing, sweating drivers would be manipulating their snubnoses and kidney-busters in and out of impossible places. It was a great sight to see.

I passed a phone booth and on an impulse ducked inside. I dropped a coin into

the slot and dialed Coastal Mutual's number.

"Legal department," I told the switchboard girl when she answered.

Korb's carefully modulated tones came over the wire.

"Korb," I said. "This is Saturday. Tell me, what do you know about anti-trust laws?"

"Why? What do you want to know?"

"Suppose two big concerns, big enough together to dominate their field, work in cahoots to fix prices or damage competition. Are they violating the anti-trust laws?"

"Certainly, if they engage in interstate commerce."

"Hm. Well, what's the procedure? What takes place?"

"I don't get this," Korb said petulantly. "If you'd give me some . . ."

"Just a notion I had. Look, what happens? Who complains?"

"Anybody can complain. Usually the injured party will complain."

"And then?"

"The anti-trust division of the Department of Justice will send out investigators to see if a violation exists."

"Go on."

"Well, if they find a violation, they will see what they can do to stop it."

"How?"

"The simplest way is to go to the violators and advise them to quit what they are doing."

I was startled. "You mean they go to the violators?"

"Sure. Why not?"

I rubbed the phone receiver against my nose. This wasn't going the way I'd figured it at all.

"Well, suppose they won't quit?" I persisted.

"The government can issue a cease and desist order."

I played it to the bitter end. "Isn't there any penalty?"

"Oh, sure," Korb said brightly. "The injured parties can collect damages. Treble damages."

"The hell with damages. The guys I'm thinking of don't care about that. Isn't there a jail rap?"

"We-ell," Korb pontificated. "I do believe the offense carries a one-year penalty, but I doubt if it's ever invoked. I don't remember any case where it was. You know, if you'd give me some idea of what you're driving at, Saturday, instead of these vague generalities, I could . . ."

"Oh, that's all right. It was just a notion I had. Thanks, Korb."

I hung up and left the phone booth and started walking again through the deserted Market. A shabby and pathetic scavenger poked in the garbage cans, now and again popping a salvageable carrot or tomato into a brown paper bag. His lone presence seemed to emphasize the emptiness.

ALLEYS WERE CUT for trucks at intervals through the lower floor of the building that lined the Market on all four sides. I turned down the first one I came to. It was dark, a tunnel, really, with the second floor of the building forming a roof; it was barely wide enough for one lane of traffic each way. It was in just such a pocket of darkness that someone had stepped silently behind Morgan and . . .

I heard a truck behind me. After my experience with trucks in that joint I was a little jittery. I turned and looked over my shoulder. This one was all right, though. It lumbered along well over on its own side of the freeway. The shadowy form of the jockey behind the windshield didn't strike me as sinister. I deployed over to the left and waited for the truck to go by. As I walked along I reached into my pocket for a cigarette and match.

That's the way he caught me, with both hands in my pockets. He scooped me up the way a limited scoops up a sack of mail. He must have been waiting just inside the tailgate of the truck. The sudden blow against the small of my back knocked the breath out of me.

When I regained it I was inside the truck, face down. There was a knee in my back at the precise spot where it hurt the most. The owner of the knee was trying to get my hands out of my pockets, and he wasn't being gentle about it. I couldn't imagine what he was doing that for and I tried to turn my head. Instantly my face

was smashed down on the dirty floorboards of the truck. Somebody said, "That'll learn you to keep your ugly mush where it belongs."

I didn't recognize the voice, but I learned my lesson fast. I didn't try that again. The knee massaged back and forth over my kidneys with the lurching of the truck, which was picking up speed.

My captor yanked at my hands, his every effort adding overtones to that magnified Dutch rub. If he'd let up for a second I'd have been more than happy to help him; but he didn't. He jerked them loose finally, tearing the lining of a pocket as he did so. He grunted with the effort, and I grunted from the effects of his knee in my back.

"There, damn it." He'd got my left hand out. My hand had balled into a fist around the package of cigarettes when the limited hit me, and he immediately began prying my fingers loose. I held the fist for a moment, more from reflex than anything else; but the instant I got it through my head what he was doing I opened it. The crushed package of cigarettes rolled out on the floor.

"There it is," the guy on top of me said. "Grab it, Pinky."

So there were two of them, besides the driver. I could only tell from the sounds what was going on; my field of vision was restricted to a square foot of splintery board.

The truck jerked to a stop and idled, at a boulevard stop, most likely. I considered the possibility of getting this guy off my kidneys with a single heave, giving it everything I had. I hesitated; it would be so easy to put me out for good with a length of pipe before I even got the two of them in focus. While I hesitated, the truck started lumbering forward again. There was a strong smell of oranges in the air.

A voice—Pinky, no doubt—said disgustingly, "It's nothin' but a pack of Camels."

"O.K., then," the other said. "We gotta search him."

Pinky demurred. "Now?"

"You're damned right, now. Go on, get started."

"But how you gonna hold him down? He'll . . ."

The man on top of me kned me viciously. "He ain't gonna peep. You leave that to me."

I felt the driver brake to another stop. I'd made up my mind by this time. These guys weren't going to be any the less dangerous for giving in to them. I took a deep breath, gathered my legs under me suddenly and heaved, straight up.

The guy on top of me was only half prepared for it. He went over sideways but recovered before I could get to my feet. He had hold of my left wrist, and he didn't let go. By the time I was on my hands and knees, he had recovered enough to make a catlike spring that landed him on top of me again. Riding me like a bucking bronc he slipped his arm under mine and around the back of my neck in a half-Nelson. He jerked his arm, and my forehead hit the boards with a crack that all but put me out. Instantly he got his other arm around under my crotch and flipped me over on my back as easily as you'd flip a turtle with a stick.

In another instant he had his foot in my armpit and was holding my left wrist out at arm's length. He had the wrist bent forward almost double with his thumb. The pain was excruciating, and I knew he could break my wrist with a tiny pressure.

"All right, Pinky," he said. "You can frisk him now. He'll be good."

"You're damned right I'll be good," I said, between clenched teeth. "Don't break that wrist. You can have anything you want. Just don't break that wrist."

I got my first look at him then. He had a mean, ugly face, and it wasn't improved by a black and blue swelling on his right jaw, like a horribly abscessed tooth.

"I'll break every lousy bone in your body, before I'm through with you," he said viciously. To emphasize the statement he put a fraction more pressure on my wrist. Unconsciousness swept over me in a white wave, then receded, leaving me in a sea of pain.

I recognized him; and I knew he meant every word he said.

The face that looked as if it had been run over by a tank—and had broken the treads of the tank—that was his own. But that onion-like swelling was something

added; and it wasn't an abscessed tooth. It was the result of blow after monotonously repeated blow from the chopper of my right hand.

PINKY went through my pockets while the big truck rolled along the streets of the industrial district . . . Pinky was something like a truck himself: he was big, lumbering, and not built for speed, but if he hit you with the power behind his huge shoulders you wouldn't be in any position to swear that it wasn't the big Diesel we were riding.

He tossed the stuff on the floorboards as fast as he pulled it out of my pockets; matches, wallet, keys, handkerchief, small change—all the junk a man carries in his pockets.

The truck was a stake, and canvas was up on all sides, shutting off the view of surrounding traffic. The top was open. Lying on my back I could make out the upper stories of the taller buildings, so I knew we were still downtown.

I cast up chances. Getting loose from this wrist-lock was out of the question; the guy with his foot in my armpit had been a wrestler, or I missed my guess. Yelling for help would merely bring me a broken wrist and possibly a few broken ribs to boot. The two of them could kill me in that truck before help came—if it ever did.

We pulled up at another red light. Something seemed to lean over the side of the canvas. I was wondering through the red haze of pain how people got way up there, and then I realized what it was. A double-decker bus had pulled up alongside of us. Both Pinky and his pal had their eyes glued to the swag they were dredging up from my pockets, and neither of them looked up.

Most of the passengers on our side were occupied with newspapers or with the scenery. I never believed in telepathy, but at a time like that you don't pass up any bets. I picked the most likely prospect, a hatless youth who wasn't reading and who looked as if he'd be easy to influence via the occult. He was staring up at the buildings as if he were counting the stories. I concentrated on him, tried to

reach him, willing and compelling him to look down.

He didn't look down; but another man in a rear seat suddenly folded up his newspaper and turned his head as if he'd heard me call him. He stared at the three of us curiously for a second. I caught his eye. I couldn't move, or speak, but I could form words with my lips, and I did. "Help. Help. Robbers."

He looked puzzled for a moment; and then he grinned at me. My heart fell. The damn fool thought we were clowning.

The light changed and the bus shot away from us. The guy in the rear seat had looked away even before it started; at the last minute I caught a glimpse of him out of the tail of my eye. He glanced back, and the stupid fool grinned again.

"Baby!" Pinky cried. "A hundred-case note!" He was emptying my wallet, dumping cards and papers on the floor as he examined and discarded them. He held up Peterson's century admiringly.

It was my chance—there might never be another—and I took it. I jerked my captive hand with everything I had. I hoped fervently I'd come out of this with nothing more than a bad sprain. My wrist shot sparks, but it was free. I concentrated on the boot that was lacerating my armpit. I clamped it to my bosom and held on for dear life and rolled. I rolled right into Pinky, who wasn't expecting visitors. He was on his knees and harder to upset, but the surprise of it caught him just enough off center so that he tipped over. It was something like the dismantling of a hundred-foot factory chimney that you see in the newsreels every so often. I knew he'd be up soon, but I had to take the chance that he was slower than his partner. He looked musclebound both above and below the ears.

The guy whose leg I was twisting into a peppermint stick didn't have the same delicacy I'd had about making his pain known. He yelled blue murder, which was all right with me. The sooner this whole pitch brought down the house the better I'd like it.

Onion-jaw soon came to the same conclusion. He shut up and took his medi-

cine in silence. I gave his foot one final vicious tug to make sure it would claim his full attention for a few seconds at least; released it and scrambled to my feet in time to meet Pinky coming up. A kick in the throat sat him down in a hurry. He clasped both hands to his neck and looked at me with pop-eyed surprise. His mouth opened as if he had something to say, but nothing came out of it. I could ignore him for a while.

I tried to take in the situation and keep an eye on the two at the same time. The tailgate of the truck was canvassed up to a height of six or seven feet and laced to the stakes at the side. If I tried to get out I'd have the two goons on my neck before I got the first knot undone. There didn't seem to be any crawling under it either. And just to make it tougher, the truck was really balling the jack by this time. Stop signs were few and far between.

There were a couple of crates in the corner of the truck, and I went for one of them. I had some idea of ripping out a stave to defend myself with and I actually yanked a slat out of one crate, but all I did was to release a flood of oranges that danced and rolled over the floor of the truck to the spot where the wind had caught a couple of my cards and the hundred dollar bill and was whirling them around in a grave, stately minuet. The thin slat made a puny weapon. It didn't even bolster me up psychologically. If anything, it made me realize more pointedly the hopelessness of my situation.

Onion-jaw got to his feet, and Pinky, first watching him with the bright, almost-human intensity of a dog, got the idea. He gave his throat one final massage, opened his mouth with that imitation of a man about to make a speech, closed his mouth, and slowly rolled over on his knee and stood up, grasping one of the side stakes to steady himself.

Onion-jaw and I were holding on to stakes, too. We had to keep our feet in that sea of oranges, the way that ten-wheeler was weaving. And they were between me and the tailgate.

For a minute the three of us just stood and glared at each other, getting our wind

back. Pinky's eyes were still a bit smoky. I started to edge over toward him. Onion-jaw yelled above the racket of the truck.

"Watch it, Pinky! He's going to make a dive for it!"

Onion-jaw reached into his hip pocket. "All right, you creep. You asked for it. Now I'm going to kill you!"

He pulled out something metallic and shiny. My heart thudded against my ribs. In the close confines of the truck he was shooting fish in a barrel. I watched it, fascinated, waiting. At first my brain, almost knocked loose from its moorings, kept telling me it was a gun, and that he was for some strange reason holding it the wrong way to. I couldn't figure out why he would do that.

I shook my head to clear it, and took another look. I saw then what my preconceived notion had kept me from seeing before.

It wasn't a gun he was holding. It was one of those little metal tackhammers that everybody in the Market seemed to carry. I almost laughed with relief—the thing in his huge hand looked so puny and useless, now that I knew it couldn't spit lead across the ten feet between us.

He started for me, holding the little hammer in one hand, feeling for a foothold and changing his grip from stake to stake as he advanced. Pinky, on the port side near the tailgate, watched us both stupidly. Nobody wasted energy on words.

Braced as we were against the truck's forward speed, and closed by the canvas from any reference to the outside world, with the exception of the amorphous sky above us, we gave the queer impression of gravity gone slightly askilter. To stand upright you had to lean toward the cab of the truck, and so we all leaned, the three of us. Onion-jaw, coming toward me, swinging with one hand from stake to stake, looked to me as if he should by all rights fall forward on his face; only he didn't fall on his face. He kept coming.

The truck took a curve that threw us rudely to the left. With my back against the cab I had no trouble taking it, but Pinky stumbled and went down on one knee. I looked quickly to see whether Onion-jaw would do the same. No such

luck. He swung on his stake like an orang-utan, but he hung on, and the moment the truck was riding a straight line again he shifted to the next stake.

I could have handled him if it hadn't been for Pinky. Pinky was fast coming out of his punchy state, and if I went for Onion-jaw he would be on top of me. There was only one answer to that one. With a silent prayer that the truck wouldn't lurch just for a minute, I made a lunge for Pinky.

He saw me coming and made a stupid attempt to put his hands up; but the slowness of the move was pathetic. I buried my fist to the wrist in his big stomach. It was a sweet punch—sweet and low. Pinky folded like a concertina, sighed once, and went down holding his stomach with both hands.

THEN I turned to face Onion-jaw. And not a moment too soon.

He guessed my purpose with my first lunge and left the security of the stakes to head me off. His hand clutching his ridiculous little tomahawk was upraised. He limped—I'd done a good job with his foot. I stepped forward and caught his wrist at the top of his swing and with my other hand I chopped him where I knew he'd appreciate it the most—right on that onion. He howled and his fingers loosened and the little hammer clattered to the floorboards. As he reached for his jaw I gave him the same thing I'd given Pinky. It wasn't so easy this time. He had a stomach like a galvanized wash board. He grunted but he didn't go down. He shook himself together and came at me, arms spread-eagled wrestler fashion.

If he grappled me I was a gone goose. I backed up and held on to a stake. He took a step forward. Between that limp and the angle he had to lean against the truck's speed he looked ludicrous. The stance was so damned improbable I felt an almost uncontrollable impulse to laugh loud. And then he stepped on an orange.

He tried to scramble to his feet, but I didn't give him a chance. I leaped into the air and came down on his chest with both heels. The sound of ribs cracking was the pleasantest music I'd heard for

years. His arms and legs flailed out completely independent of each other, like the spasmodic jerkings of a pithed frog. I watched him for a moment, hanging on a stake as I caught my breath. For the moment I was monarch of all I surveyed. The only drawback was, what with the canvas swathing on the truck, I couldn't survey much. I hadn't the slightest idea where we were. From the way we were hightailing along, with only an occasional car passing in the other direction, I gathered we had left the city behind. If that were the case, the sooner I got out of here the better.

I made my way to the tailgate of the truck and took a stab at the knotted rope threaded through metal eyelets in the tarp that beat with the wind. My fingers fumbled and slipped; it didn't take me long to see I wasn't going to make much headway here. That battle had taken more out of me than I suspected.

I looked back. Pinky was still out cold; Onion-jaw rolled helplessly on the floor of the truck, moaning to himself. I saw my wallet—I'd forgotten about it; but there was no use leaving it here for those goons. I picked it up, and found the century where it had fallen out of Pinky's hand. A few inches away was Onion-jaw's little metal hammer. The moment I picked it up I realized what a sucker I'd been to discount it when Onion-jaw was swinging it. The damn little thing was a lot heavier than it looked. Not only the head, but the entire shank was solid metal. You could kill a man with that. It wouldn't do to leave it with him; I stuffed it in my pocket.

Pinky's head had begun to roll about aimlessly. He'd be coming out of it in a minute. The prospect of facing him and his unpleasant pal again gave wings to my fingers and I attacked the knots at the tarp. I remembered the hammer had a claw at the base of the handle. I whipped it out and forced the chisel edge between the ropes. With the added leverage it gave me, the ropes began to give. I yanked, and the knot was free. Quickly I unlaced the eyelets; before I was half finished with that the wind snapped the tarp out of my hands with a report like a pistol shot. The truck was rolling fifty, at least; it would be

suicide to jump. But the mere opening of that back door, even though I couldn't use it, lifted from me a pressure of being closed in which I knew now had been more than a small part of my troubles.

I raised a section of stakes and threw it inside the truck. It clattered next to Pinky's ear, and instinctively he ducked from it. Oranges began rolling out the hiatus thus created and I could see them bounce on the pavement yards behind us. The driver saw the tarp whipping the breeze through his rear-vision mirror. The truck slowed down.

I crouched down on the rear edge, hang on to a stake to steady myself. The moment I felt I was safe I sprang out, backwards.

There was no question about which way to run. To my right rose a forbidding fence of solid boards a good nine or ten feet high. The other side of the road presented a huge open field. I knew instantly where we were; I'd been here a thousand times. The acres between Wilshire and Beverly for a mile or more from Fairfax to La Brea had been only one patch of many left hanging when the big real estate boom of the twenties burst in Los Angeles. A big football stadium eventually occupied part of the space; that was the board fence. The south side for years remained vacant; only in recent months a housing project had cleared the ground and had begun to erect huge sprawling blocks of apartments. Between the apartments and the stadium Third Street stretched, six lanes wide and straight as an arrow, a godsend for thousands of motorists converging on the city from Beverly Hills and West Hollywood. I'd used it myself many times, a beautiful freeway without side street or hindrance.

But I had no eight-cylinder motor purring under me now; and the big truck was squealing to a stop even while I stumbled forward to hold my balance.

I turned instantly to the south and started across the broken ground to the shelter of the nearest brick building.

A housing project in construction does things to terrain. Trucks and tractors and cement mixers dig ruts in the most unexpected places; and workmen leave stray

bricks and piles of cement and sand and occasional two-by-fours in strategic spots to trip a hasty fugitive. To make it tougher, the architects had decreed that no building should be closer than a hundred yards to the street. That might be fine for the eventual tenants of the apartments—I had no doubt it made for peace and quiet. But for my purposes at the moment it was poison. It meant I had to run the equivalent of an entire gridiron straight-arming cement and stray pipe as I traveled, before I could get something solid between me and the goons. All I needed was a pigskin ball under one arm to make me feel like an All-American quarterback in the last minute of play.

And they were after me, all right. There were three of them now—the driver had joined in the chase. My only consolation was that they were probably in no better shape than I was to make the broken-field run, two of them, anyway.

The buildings were skeletons, and deserted. There was little percentage in dodging around among those gaping casements, half-erected brick walls, and lonely staircases jutting out into nowhere like a Dali nightmare. Not with three determined men looking for me. What I needed was people, lots of people; and I knew where to find them.

As the desert wanderer thirsts for the sight of the cool oasis, I peered hopefully across the void of the acres to the low slate-colored sheds of the Farmer's Market. I called upon whatever second wind the good Lord would grant me to make it across still another gridiron.

As I expected, they caught sight of me before I'd gotten fairly started but I was in better condition. When I reached the security of the Farmer's Market they were a long way behind.

THE FARMER'S MARKET could blossom only in southern California. It was one of those cases where a guy has taken an idea that as an idea was merely terrific and built it into something colossal.

It was an adaptation of the Oriental bazaar, I suppose, or the town square markets of old Mexico. Here it was thoroughly Americanized, with neat white booths dis-

persing everything eatable in the most sanitary and appetizing way. It was a show-place of the city.

Weary and puffing, I wandered past open-air seafood bars, booths piled with nuts, bakeries where meringue swirled a foot high on pastries in refrigerated show-cases. I found a coffee stand and ordered black coffee.

The primly starched girl behind the counter eyed me distastefully. At the moment I was too occupied otherwise to care. While she drew the coffee I glanced apprehensively behind me; but I made out no sign of Pinky or his pals in the crowded little bazaar lanes.

I had an idea. "You don't serve coffee royal, do you?"

The girl said, "What's that?"

"I didn't think so. Is there a liquor store on the lot, sister?"

She pointed it out to me.

"Hold the coffee," I told her. "I'll be right back."

I bought a pint of rum and came back. The girl watched me curiously as I poured an inch of the coffee into a saucer and replaced it with rum. I stirred it with my spoon, looked up and caught her eye. "Ever try it?"

"No," she said. She tried to get the proper disdain into her voice, but there was something else she couldn't keep out of her tone. Curiosity.

I took a swallow, and stood still, feeling the warm stuff coast smoothly down and go immediately to work painting the lining of my stomach with pain-killer. The girl looked at me as if she expected me to explode. I grinned at her, took a mug from a tray on the counter and poured in a slug of rum. "Go on, try it," I urged her. "It's good."

She turned her back on me. I shrugged, slipped the rum in my hip pocket, and went back to my coffee royal. No caffeine dispenser's ill-will was going to spoil my enjoyment of that.

By the time I'd finished she still hadn't turned around. I thumped my nickel pointedly on the counter. "It's still there, sister," I reminded her, and turned away.

I saw them before they saw me. Onion-jaw peered from side to side like a hyena

on the prowl, and a few steps behind him Pinky came, dragging his feet a little. He was fingering his neck gingerly, and he looked as if his only desire was to be somewhere else, some place where he could just lie down and try to forget all about it.

I made the mistake of moving too fast. It was a natural thing to do, when I saw that pair bearing down on me, but it was a mistake. Onion-jaw caught sight of me. I saw him point and saw Pinky follow his finger, and the two of them started for me.

Dodging them was easy. The place was a maze of booths and lanes. I did a little zigzagging and stopped to catch my breath. I looked back, but the goons were nowhere. I found myself staring into a fishy, uncurious eye. A bantam rooster nestled on a pyramid of cardboard egg-boxes. He cocked that unblinking eye at me for a moment, then deliberately got to his feet. He lifted first one foot and then the other in careful, measured steps; and when he reached the end of the counter there was a flurry of wings, and he was on my shoulder. He nestled down with a loving cluck and rubbed his downy neck against my cheek.

The poultry and egg merchant looked at me and grinned broadly. "He likes you," he said. "Steve don't like many people. Come back, Steve, don't bother the gentleman. Come on, now!"

The little bird moved at the sound of his name, for all the world like a kid not wanting to hear the command to go to bed. I'd have enjoyed Steve's confidence more if I hadn't had other matters on my mind.

"Come on, Steve!" The egg-dealer's voice sharpened. "You make a big nuisance of yourself. Just a minute, mister, I'll get him off you."

I saw them then. They didn't see me, but they were headed straight for me, and if I moved Steve might make a fuss. All I needed was one yipe out of Steve. I wondered how I could wring Steve's neck for him the quietest way; but fortunately for Steve I had a better idea.

"Never mind," I told Steve's boss. "He might fly away. I'll come inside with him."

The egg-dealer tried to protest, but I paid no attention to him. I ducked quickly

under the counter. Steve let out a complaining cluck, but he kept his perch.

"Gee, mister, I didn't want you to go to so much trouble . . ."

"No trouble at all," I assured the egg-man. "Here, get him off me . . ."

"Sure, sure." Steve tried to cling to my shoulder, but the man was stronger. Steve snapped loose like a banjo-string. The egg-man gave him a spanking on the bottom and set him back on the cardboard boxes. "See what a nuisance you are, you bad boy! I'm sorry, mister . . ."

He looked down at me and stopped. "What . . .?"

I remained on my knees. "I think I lost something," I told him.

"Is that so? What is it? Here, I'll help you."

"A watch," I said. "Seems to have slipped out of my pocket."

THE TWO OF US searched on hands and knees among the pin-feathers. "I wouldn't care so much," I said, "only my mother gave it to me when I was graduated from high-school, and I told her I'd never lose it."

"I should say not!" the merchant agreed indignantly. "Was it a big watch or a little watch?"

"A little one. My mother's wrist watch. I kept it in my pocket. Here." I showed him where I kept it. "Now, it's gone."

We searched some more. I showed no inclination to give up, but I could sense the egg-dealer's enthusiasm evaporate and chill suspicion gradually taking its place.

"It don't seem to be here," he said, finally. He shot a covert look at my dust-rolled garments and another in the direction of the cash register.

I figured they had got well past by this time. "I remember now," I said. "I left it in my other pants this morning when I changed."

I got to my feet, slowly, as if my back hurt me, which it did.

The egg-man said, "That's good. I'm glad it's not lost." His manner told me plainly what he thought of this braggadocio of mine about having another pair of pants.

I'd made a survey by this time, and I

was prepared to go now. There didn't seem to be much point in wasting more words on Steve's boss—he quite evidently didn't appreciate me. Steve did, though; and I patted his tail-feathers when I got outside the booth. Steve half-rose, then settled back with a weary cluck.

"See you again sometime, Steve," I said.

Walking cautiously but swiftly, I made for the nearest exit. Well-dressed tourists and holiday shoppers sniffed when they saw me and gave me a wide berth. I didn't blame them. I was pretty much out of place in this joint. My wanderings brought me back to the coffee kiosk. The girl behind the counter spied me. She greeted me with a big smile.

I smiled back at her. "How was the coffee royal?" I asked her. She ran an appreciative hand over her lips. "If I could sell those here," she said. "I'd make a mint."

"Why can't you?"

"Rules. The man who owns this shebang is like that. The concessionaires have to sign a contract a yard long, and there's a dozen waiting in line to take your place if you don't want to play ball."

This was interesting, but it wasn't solving my problem. "Look, sister," I said. "There are some friends of mine loose around here and I'd just as soon not meet them. Is there a side door out of this joint somewhere?"

She said, "Are those your friends, right behind you?"

I wheeled. Pinky and Onion-jaw were converging on the coffee stand and from the set of their shoulders they meant business. Pinky had come out of his fog and he was a man to be reckoned with. They had me cold. I braced myself and waited for them to approach.

When they were ten paces away I waved at them genially. "Hi, boys. Been looking all over for you. Come on, have a cup of coffee."

With that I deliberately turned my back on them and held up three fingers to the girl. "Draw three."

It was a tight moment. There was always the chance, the big chance, that they wouldn't get it, and drop me anyway. I had to take that chance. There was no

other way to get it across to them. I had to make my back spell complete confidence, but I couldn't keep the lines of anxiety from drawing around my mouth and eyes.

Pinky pulled up at the counter like a transatlantic liner making port, and Onion-jaw's shoulder nudged mine on the other side. I could afford to breathe again. They'd caught on.

Onion-jaw talked into my ear out of the side of his mouth. "All right, we can't do nothin' here. But don't think you're gettin' away with it. We're stickin' to you like glue, see, and when we get you outside . . ."

"Oh, but you're mistaken," I assured him pleasantly. "I'm not going outside."

He regarded me suspiciously. "Whadda ya mean?" he demanded.

"I like it here. There's lots of good things to eat, and I have plenty of money to buy them. I have a hundred dollar bill, remember? And it's safer here. Lots of people around. I like people. In fact, I love people."

That stopped him for a moment. It was Pinky who said, "Don't let him throw you, Billy. He's got to get out sometime. We'll wait."

So Onion-jaw's handle was nothing but a sweet simple Billy. It didn't suit his character, somehow. He'd always be Onion-jaw to me. He said now, "Yeah, that's right. We're stickin', see? We can stick here as long as you can."

"Watch it, Billy," Pinky warned. The girl was setting out coffee. She looked thoroughly scared.

Onion-jaw shut up, pulled his cup to him churlishly, spooned in four helpings of sugar and stirred viciously. I took a swig of my black coffee. After coffee royal it was like swigging dishwater. I had the pint on my hip, but I was damned if I was going to give aid and comfort to the enemy to the extent of lacing their java for them. The hell with that. Besides, I had my own cows to milk right now. Onion-jaw meant every word he said. I'd found out by this time that he didn't indulge in exaggeration when he was describing unpleasant plans that he thought up for folks. I could depend on this mangy pair dragging my heels until I got rid of

them—or vice versa. And I was determined it wasn't going to be vice versa.

We downed our coffee in silence. The girl watched me anxiously. I grinned at her. It seemed necessary to reassure her as the shortest route to reassuring myself. I said, "Sister, is there a public phone around here?"

She nodded dumbly and pointed down the lane.

Billy said grimly, "You ain't goin' to phone nobody!"

I looked at him. His face was dark, discolored and unbeautiful. It was no pleasure to look at it and I didn't hide the way I felt about it.

"Who's going to stop me?" I asked him. And before he could answer I said to the girl, "He'll pay for the coffees. I have to make a phone call."

I stepped off down the lane, threading through the crowd. I didn't bother to look back. It wasn't necessary. I could see as plainly as if I'd turned the sudden frantic fumbling for small change that was going on at the coffee booth. Under other circumstances I might have found time to laugh at the idea of those gunsels not daring to gyp a defenseless girl out of fifteen cents.

Another pair would have split up, one paying and the other on my tail, but not Pinky and Onion-jaw. They ran beautifully true to form. You could depend on them. There wasn't much I liked about them, but I liked that.

Once around the first corner I might have been in the next state, as far as their chance of finding me was concerned. This time I didn't make the mistake of running, I merged with the crowd, walking slowly, letting it carry me out of one of the countless side exits to the place.

I came up to the truck on the driver's blind side, at the rear. I knelt down and unscrewed the valve on one of the big double rear wheels. The air came out with a satisfying whistle like a peanut stand.

I could hear the driver swear as he climbed out of the cab. As he looked for the slowly deflating tire, I moved noiselessly around the other side of the truck, stepped into the cab. He had obligingly left the motor idling, so it was a simple

matter of easing the gear into low, releasing the clutch, and leaving him flat-footed in the middle of Third Street.

I didn't exceed the speed limit, because I didn't want any cop to flag me down. There's another kind of driving that pays better dividends in city traffic, when you're in a hurry. You play it like a smart runner in a distance race: thinking ahead, steady pressure, saving the burst of speed for the spot where it will do the most good. It involves sizing up the other drivers around you, and not allowing yourself to get pocketed behind a clunk; planning to hit the intersections on the green light; making use of that hole next to the curb as often as you can. There are other tricks; and I used them all.

I was back at the Market in better time than we'd made the other way, but that didn't cheer me. I had no illusions about how long it was going to take those thugs to get on my tail, if they hadn't phoned ahead . . .

XII

I FOUND A PAY BOOTH AND called Metz.

"Gosh, Johnny." His voice trembled with excitement. "I must be psychic. I've been pulling for you to call until my eyeballs ache."

"I heard they yanked you downtown. What gave?"

"It's you. They want you, Johnny."

"What did you tell them?"

"I told 'em nothing. But that captain is no dummy. He reads between the lines. He thinks you're hot."

"Thanks, Metz. I'll go down later and have it out with him. Right now I've got things to do."

"Look, Johnny, you know your own mind and all that, but do you think that's wise? If they get the idea you're running out . . ."

"I'll have to take the chance. I need just a couple of hours."

"Well . . ." Metz didn't like it. "Call me if you need bail."

I laughed. "Sure thing. So long." I hung up, still laughing. A moment later I stopped short. "What am I laughing

at?" I demanded of the black-snouted instrument.

In the causeway the first thing my eyes lighted on was a uniformed cop picking his way toward me through the crate-littered sidewalk. He didn't see me; I shrank back into the booth and crouched down below the glass. There wasn't much chance he was on the lookout for me, but I felt better playing it safe. The heavy tread of his brogans approached; his shadow passed over my bowed back. I waited a respectful period and then came out.

Six o'clock in the afternoon here in the Market was like the middle of the night in any other business. Most of the overhead doors were down and the causeway was deserted. A single black opening loomed in the score or so that spread out under the sign of the Galt Produce Company. I started over there.

In the gutter in front of Galt's place I spied the dirty-white spade-shaped object that made my blood run cold. I bent down and picked it up. It was a fragment of plaster cast.

Maybe it meant nothing—although I couldn't see Howard peeling off his cast out there in the street. Not voluntarily. And that single door, gaping at me like an empty tooth socket in an evil, grinning mouth . . .

I headed through the door and up the stairs.

Voices came from Galt's office at the top, and among them I distinguished the shrill anguished piping of little Thorne.

She was there, all right, in a little jersey print creation that clung to her as though it were wet, with pumps of the same print. She had spent a lot of time on her hair and her face, too, since the last I'd seen of her.

Galt sat heavily on the corner of his desk, one huge ham hanging in mid-air. He looked weary and bored. He examined his cigar which had gone out; raked a match over the seat of his pants and lighted it again. He said, "Lady, will you go away?"

Thorne spluttered. "You promised me . . ." she began.

"I promised nothing. I told you to come over and I'd see what I could do.

You didn't tell me anything I didn't know before. If you think I pay off on that kind of marbles, you're mistaken. Now be a good little girl and get the hell out of here, will you? I've got work to do."

Thorne let out a screech and started for him. I heard a surprised grunt out of Galt. "Why you little . . .!"

He wiped blood off his cheek with a handkerchief. Then he started after Thorne. I put myself between them, and he stopped short. "Oh, it's you," he said.

"Johnny!" Thorne cried. "Oh, I'm so glad to see you, Johnny!"

She sensed almost immediately that something was wrong. I didn't put my arms protectingly around her. The marshmallow just wasn't running any more.

I said to Galt, "What was her proposition to you just now?"

Galt took a mirror out of his desk and examined four parallel red scratches on his right cheek, still dripping blood. "The little witch," he said. "She moved so damned fast . . ."

He put the mirror down and turned to me. "Well, Saturday, what cooks? You ready to listen to reason?"

"What was her proposition to you?" I asked him again.

"Oh, you know her? Cute little trick, ain't she? I might have known you two were in this together."

"We're in nothing together. I'm waiting."

"Waits table over at the Terminal. All the boys are on the wolf for her."

He pulled at the cigar until it caught, then blew out the match and dropped it into an ashtray on the desk.

I waited. Thorne pulled at my sleeve. "Johnny. Johnny. Let me explain . . ." I didn't turn my head.

"I might have gone for her myself, only my wife wouldn't like it." Galt laughed heartily, whether at the joke or at his wife I couldn't tell. Probably at the wife, because the joke wasn't worth it.

"You haven't told me what she came here for," I reminded him patiently.

The grin wiped off his face as though he had palmed it. "I'm trying to tell you in a nice way that it's none of your damned business," he snapped.

"Where's Howard?" I demanded.

Galt's face clouded in anger. He shifted his weight off the edge of his desk and walked over to me. "All right, Saturday. You've said your piece. Now get the hell out of here before I lose my temper. And take this little witch with you."

I stood my ground. "What did you do with Howard?"

Without waiting for an answer I went for a small door behind Galt's desk and opened it. I had time to see that the closet was empty before one of Galt's hamlike hands wheeled me around. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

I said, "I've got a score to settle with you, Galt."

Galt carefully put his cigar on the ash-tray on his desk. "All right. Let's have it out of your system right here and now."

Thorne tugged at my sleeve. I pulled it loose.

"No. Nothing like that. You wouldn't last five minutes with me, and you know it. But you're willing to take me on, and that means you've got a certain personal, physical courage. It means you'd rather take it this way than the way you know you're going to get it. Well, I'm not going to let you off with a moused-up eye or a bloody nose, so save it. I'm going to watch you get it in the only way that really hurts—you."

GALT'S ANSWER was to take a swing at me. He swung hard, and left himself wide open as a garage door. I planted my fist in his belt buckle. My fist seemed to go in and in, without resistance. It was like punching a wad of dough. Galt gasped mightily, staggered two steps backward and came up against the desk, holding his stomach with both hands. He stood there fighting for breath, his mouth opening and closing like a fish's.

"I'll finish my piece now," I said. "And then I'll go. There's a meeting tonight, Galt. This time tomorrow you're going to be on your way out of the Market. I'll enjoy it, but the credit won't be mine. It'll be due the whole Market. All the little guys who work in the Market, who try to make an honest living here, the little guys you've been stepping on. Well,

it's their turn now. They're going to step on you. They're after you, Galt. You were organized, they were not. That was your secret weapon, so to speak. They're taking that weapon away from you, and they're going to use it themselves. Against you. Think it over, Galt."

Galt screwed his face into an expression that combined scorn and pain. "That . . . meeting," he puffed. "Heard . . . about it. Let 'em rave . . . saps."

He pushed himself heavily upright and made an effort to stand and talk normally. His forehead began to exude little beads of sweat. I knew what that punch was doing to his solar plexus, and I could appreciate what was going into the effort. It confirmed my hunch about the man. He had physical courage, all right.

He said, getting out each word with a struggle, "I can't . . . understand you, Saturday. You look like a guy who's smart enough to climb on the right wagon."

I said, "Maybe your idea of right and mine don't jibe."

I reached the door and turned back. "There've been rumors of something ugly coming off at the meeting tonight. I'd advise against it, Galt. You're outclassed this time. I hope you've got sense enough to realize this is the straight dope." I opened the door. "And another thing. If anything's happened to Howard, what I said just now is off. I'll be back here and take you apart limb from limb." I jerked a thumb at Thorne. "Come on. Let's get out of here."

"My, my! Listen to him, though!"

I turned to see my friend Section Eight grinning up at me. He asked over my shoulder, "What you want I should do with him, boss?"

I stepped back and wound up for a right hook to his jaw. The punch started, but it never got there. He parried my right with a left wrist inside my elbow, then snaked down and speared my right wrist. He pivoted so that his shoulder fit under my pinioned arm. A springy knee action did the rest. I sailed gracefully over his head and finished my dry-land swan dive on the uncarpeted floor at Galt's feet.

Section Eight sat on top of me and twisted my arms into a sheepshank. Since

he'd already knocked all the wind out of me, this was an entirely unnecessary encore. He said, in that amused way of his: "Didn't they show you that one in boot camp, fella?"

Galt walked over and kicked me viciously in the ribs. Section Eight said, "Aw, now, boss, you shouldn't do that. This guy and me was in the Marines together." But he made no move to let me go.

Galt breathed heavily and glared hate at me. "That's not all I'm going to do to him," he said. "Later," he added, with meaning. He flicked a fat finger at Section Eight. "Frisk him," he ordered.

"But boss, I frisked him before. I told you . . ."

"Shut up. He could put something in his pocket since then, couldn't he? Search him again. And don't be afraid to bear down if he gets smart."

I had no intention of getting smart. I knew when I'd met my master. But it wasn't Galt and his threats that worried me. What occupied my mind at the moment was the figure I was cutting in front of Thorne. I'd caught a glimpse of her horrified face when I went down, and I could still feel the flush that seized the back of my neck then.

Section Eight leaped clear of me with a catlike spring and jerked me to my feet like a sack of meal. Before my reflexes could function he had a double hammerlock that almost immediately started pins and needles through both my arms.

He said to me: "Your feet are free and you can kick. I just wanted to let you know something before I begin. When you wind up for your first kick you'll hear a funny noise. That'll be your right arm breakin'. Savvy?"

I didn't answer. He shrugged. He held the grip with one hand, and with his free hand he began emptying my pockets.

I glanced over my shoulder at the door. Thorne had disappeared. I had time to be grateful for small favors. Neither Galt nor Section Eight noticed her absence.

Galt watched the stuff from my pockets as it was tossed on the floor. He reached down grunting, picked up my wallet and went through it. He threw it down in disgust, and then his eye caught the

wadded century note. He swooped down on it, unfolded it.

"Where'd you get this?" he demanded. I pretended I was still winded.

Galt doubled his fist and hit me on the jaw. I tried to roll with the blow, but it hurt.

"You can talk," he said. "Where'd you get it?"

"It's mine," I said through numb lips. "I carry money too."

He hit me again. Section Eight tightened his hold on my twisted arms.

"Peterson carries a lot of these," he prompted.

"What of it?"

Galt hesitated. I could see his problem. It was up to him to decide whether this was proof I was working for Peterson. The thing I couldn't fathom was why he had to bother asking. In his place I wouldn't have had to ask any questions. I'd have been satisfied; damned satisfied. Why wasn't he?

At any rate, my cue was to let him wonder. I'd have to weather this thing the best way I could; but he'd get no confirmation from me.

The doubled fist tightened for the next convincer, then relaxed. Galt heard the racket on the stairs; he dropped his arm and turned around. Simultaneously, Section Eight released me.

It was a cop who came in, the same cop I'd dodged a few minutes back. Behind him was a white-faced and frightened Thorne.

The cop took in the tableau—the three of us in strained, unnatural positions, the money, wallet and keys on the floor. He was too well versed in Market manners to ask embarrassing questions of so important a personage as Galt. Thorne pointed to me.

"There he is," she said—eagerly, I thought.

The cop started in my direction. "The captain wants to see you," he announced.

I glared at Thorne. "Haven't you done enough damage?" I said.

Her eyes appealed to me. "Johnny, I'll explain . . ."

"Explain hell. You don't have to tell me anything." I reached down, scooped

up my belongings and distributed them among my various pockets. My fingers felt as if they were working through thick gloves. "I'll tell you. Little Thorne is a one-way street. Once you see how the signs point, you know exactly where she's going. She sees forty thousand dollars dangling just out of reach and it's driving her nuts. You've been thinking about that forty thousand bucks and wondering why it doesn't drop in your lap. By this time you've talked yourself into believing it's coming to you—not from the insurance company necessarily, you understand, but just generally the world, or somebody, has got to get that forty grand for little Thorne or there ain't no justice."

Thorne was sobbing. "You're wrong, Johnny . . ."

The cop said, "Come on, you."

I paid no attention to either of them. "And you're too jittery to play one line and stand or fall by it." I found a kind of perverse relief hurting her. It made up, a little, for the thin veneer that prevented me from giving her the back of my hand. "You get nervous when things don't work out pronto and you look for a way to copper your bets."

"Johnny, stop!"

"That would be fine if you just hurt yourself leaping from crag to crag like this. But no, you have to drag along other people, innocent people, as you go along. You . . ."

It was lack of breath, not the sight of her suffering, that got me down. Something was being done to my wrist. I looked down at the shiny handcuffs.

"If you've got to make speeches," the cop said, "you can make 'em in the cooler where they won't bother folks." He turned to Galt. "Sorry about this, Mr. Galt."

"That's all right," Galt said.

The cop, very deferential, asked if he could use Galt's phone, and Galt said he was welcome to it. The cop called headquarters and told them to send a prowler out for us.

Galt grinned. He was enjoying this hugely. Section Eight grinned too, from the background, half apologetically.

The handcuffs did something to me. I didn't feel like fighting back any more.

Thorne spoke up. "Johnny, you'll want a lawyer."

I said, "Don't bother your pretty head over me. You're doing fine."

"But you've got to have a lawyer." She appealed to the cop. "He's entitled to a lawyer, isn't he?"

"Sure," the cop said. "All in good time."

"No, no!" Whether I got a lawyer or not suddenly seemed to be a life and death matter to Thorne. I noted curiously that while her eyes were shining she wasn't crying any more. "Johnny, who's your lawyer? I'll call him right away."

There was a bitter comment on my lips, but something about the way she looked and the way she talked stopped it. I said, "The company has an attorney . . ." A picture of Korb rose before me and I grimaced. "No. Better call Bill Castagnelli."

Thorne was at the telephone book on Galt's desk. From the corner of my eye I saw Galt start, then lapse back. Something was up. I didn't know what; I could only play along. Thinking to be helpful I said, "His number's Vandyke 4034."

Thorne was thumbing through the book. She stepped on my words. "No, that was before he moved his office. Here it is . . ."

My eyes narrowed. Bill hadn't moved his office, and if he had, Thorne had no way of knowing it. I saw the phone book fall open under Thorne's hands and a piece of green paper showed on the white page. Thorne grabbed a pencil, scribbled on the paper. "I've jotted down the new number for you." Her voice trembled with excitement. She came around the desk and shoved the green paper into my pocket. Galt started forward. The cop looked at him curiously and he subsided.

The cop turned back to Thorne. "Well, lady, ain't you going to call up?"

"No," Thorne said. "No use bothering Mr. Galt any more. We can phone from the station, can't we?"

"Sure, sure." The cop was trying to take this all in, and not making much headway with any of it. He tugged urgently at the handcuff. "Let's be movin', then."

We started down the stairs. Galt and Section Eight made no move to stop us.

Thorne's arm was near my free hand.

I reached under it and gave it a squeeze. I tried to make the squeeze say a lot of things. From the look Thorne flashed me I could see she understood all of them, perfectly.

IN THE DARK musty recesses at the bottom of the stairs I asked Thorne, "When did you find out they wanted me?"

"The captain got in touch with me," she said. "He asked if I knew where you were."

"Oh." The captain was taking a lot for granted, I thought. "Well, I'm out of the frying pan, all right. Question is, have I jumped into the fire?"

"I'll come along, Johnny. I'll tell the captain you're all right." To the cop she said, "I can come along, can't I?"

"Well, lady . . ." From the look on the cop's face it was easy to see he'd love it.

I squeezed Thorne's arm again.

My hold froze suddenly, a quick, jerked warning. There was no need. She had heard, too; and so had the cop. We held our breath and looked at the shadowy stacks of crates from whose direction the sound came. I struck a match and quickly flipped it away from me. While the phosphorus burned it made an eerie fluttering light; and before it went out I saw the legs in brown chaps slowly moving and a dark hand groping. I lit another match and held it. It guttered in my cupped hand, lighting up Howard's pain-creased face as he tried to pull himself to a sitting position. There was a clot of dark blood where one side of his scalp had been laid open, and another thin trickle of blood coming out of the corner of his mouth.

I ran to him, pulling the cop along. "The rats! They did get you!"

Howard worked his jaw for a moment before he spoke. "What time is it?"

"Going on seven o'clock."

He made an effort to get to his feet. I pushed him back. "Not so fast there. Let's see what the damage is first. How's that arm?"

Howard managed a white-toothed grin. "It's all right. The meetin' will be starting soon. I got to . . ."

The cop said, "Look . . ." Neither of us paid any attention to him.

"The meeting can wait," I said. "We've got to get you cleaned up first."

"Hell," Howard said, "this was just a once-over-lightly. If they'd wanted me real bad, I wouldn't be here."

"You tell the boys about this, and Galt won't be here."

Howard shook his head. "Remember what I told you? That's just what they want. I'm not tellin' the boys about this at all."

The cop suddenly realized he was supposed to be in charge. "Looka here," he demanded. "What the hell goes on here?"

Howard flashed him a winning smile. "Why, nothin', officer. I musta fell down, I guess."

The cop said suspiciously, "Maybe I better run you in too."

"On what charge?" I asked him.

The cop hesitated. There wasn't any charge, and there were two witnesses against his faking one. "All right," he said reluctantly. "Get movin' before I change my mind."

Howard didn't start right away. "Mr. Saturday. Anything you want me to do?"

I shook my head. The cop pulled and we headed for the door. Howard tagged along. I said, "This is nothing. The captain wants to talk to me, that's all. They can't hold me."

He glanced doubtfully at the handcuffs. "Maybe you'll change your mind an' come to the meetin'? Er . . . if you can?"

I didn't feel like answering the last question. I stuck to the first. "I don't think so, Howard. This is your show, not mine."

"Get movin' I said!" the cop interrupted. Howard hesitated, shrugged helplessly, started out the door and disappeared.

"All right," the cop said. "Let's not stand here all night." We started up. At the door two dark silhouettes moved in our direction.

"Stop that whinin'," the unmistakable voice of Onion-jaw said impatiently. "Cripes, you ain't hurt. Look what he done to me. I ain't bawlin' am I? The boss see you, he'll begin to wonder maybe you're soft, or somethin'."

"But it feels like a lot of guys is jumpin' around in my head with football cleats," Pinky complained. "An' that kick in the teeth he gave me ain't doin' me no good, neither."

"Aw, dry up." Onion-jaw felt his face gingerly. "Jeez. I think it's busted. Oh Boy!" He spat out the word with explosive venom. "If I ever lay my hands on that guy . . .!"

At that instant he saw me. He gave a throaty cry and started forward, and then his eyes lit on the cop. He stopped in his tracks, trying to take in this new wrinkle. His slow brain couldn't make the grade. We approached and passed him.

I said, "The boss is upstairs, waiting for your report. Too bad you guys don't get together. Is this what you were looking for?"

Onion-jaw stared at the green paper I waved in his face. His arms, hanging at his sides like a gorilla's, made no motion. He nodded stupidly.

The cop yanked at the handcuff. We left Pinky and Onion-jaw and went outside. The prowler was idling at the curb.

Thorne ran to keep up with us. She said, "Johnny, I almost forgot. I heard Galt talking up there, before you came in. He was talking about a machine gun, I think."

I tried to shush her, but I wasn't quick enough.

"Machine gun? Jeez! Who's got a machine gun?"

Nicky had popped out of nowhere. His dull eyes lighted with an unholy excitement as he peered up from the broken peak of his cap.

The door of the prowl car swung open. Nicky, jogging alongside, didn't seem to notice anything out of the way. He was off on his trolley. He kept asking wistfully, "Jeez, Johnny, who's got a chopper, huh?" until the door closed and we roared away.

CAPTAIN DEWITT fixed first Thorne, then me, with the piercing eyes under the white thatch.

"This young lady has given you a clean bill of health, Saturday. I don't have to take her word for it, but I'm going to—for the time being. I don't like to make

a pinch unless I'm really sold on it. I'm not a hundred percent sold on you—yet. I just want to warn you that your own actions are rapidly making up my mind. You can take that for what you think it's worth." He let that sink in, and then he went on. "Just remember two men have been killed in the last twenty-four hours, and we're sure as hell going to get whoever did it. In the circumstances, it's smart for anyone as much under the gun as you are to do two things. The first one is not to keep material information from the police. So if you've got anything to say you haven't told me, let's have it."

He waited, lips pressed tight together. Neither Thorne nor I spoke.

"All right," he snapped. "This is notice that I expect you to bring any information you get directly to me. Without fail. And that takes us to the second point. Don't go looking for anything. What I mean is, don't play cop. You're paying a police department to do that kind of work, and believe me, we're far better equipped to do it than you are. Is that understood?"

Thorne and I nodded in unison.

"All right. You can go. Hold yourselves available."

Outside once more, Thorne and I looked at each other.

"Now," I said. "What was that you said about machine guns?"

"Johnny, you heard what the captain said. We promised. Do you think . . .?"

"We didn't promise him anything. We just said we understood. I notice you didn't tell him about the chopper—or about this." I held up the green racing form.

"I waited for you . . . and when you didn't . . ."

"Good girl," I said. "Now, tell me the story."

"There isn't much . . . maybe I'm mistaken. Galt was talking on the phone as I came in. I just heard the word. He stopped as soon as he saw me. That paper—he had it in his hand. It looked exactly like the one Will showed me—the one you were looking for. Galt slipped it into the phone book. I didn't know what to do. I just talked and talked. I tried to get him mad. Finally I scratched him."

"What on earth for?"

Thorne worried her tiny mouth into a down-pointed half-moon. "I don't know. I just didn't want to leave there until I could get that paper. I hoped something would happen. Then you came in."

"Yeah. And I didn't do so good."

She was all solicitude. "Oh, Johnny, you were wonderful. Of course," doubtfully, "nobody could stand up to that awful little brute. I had to get help some-way. Outside I saw the officer. I told him you were upstairs."

"You did all right." Suddenly I was ashamed right down to my toes. "You did better than all right. You were magnificent. Thorne, I feel like two cents. I guess you know that. A little later, will you let me try to make up for . . ."

"Later? Where are you going now?"

"I've got to see Peterson right away." I didn't want to tell Thorne I discounted her story about machine guns. It sounded too fantastic. Just the same, the meeting was scheduled within an hour, and I didn't see Galt taking it lying down.

XIII

PETERSON STARED AT THE green scratch sheet, and I stared at Peterson.

"I'm not proud of myself," I said. "I should have figured it out a long time ago. There had to be another copy—if it was a code. Galt had to have a copy."

I didn't tell him how I got hold of it. I wasn't too proud of that, either. I pointed to the penciled list on the sheet. "I can't make out this list of horses, though. I can't even find them in the index. Oxheart, King of Denmark, Iceberg, Klondike—none of 'em."

Peterson looked at me gravely. "Those aren't horses, Johnny."

"Not horses?"

"Those are vegetables. Oxheart is a variety of carrot. King of Denmark is spinach, Klondike is cucumbers. Iceberg lettuce. White Icicle radish. Lucullus is swiss chard."

He paused. "And a shipment of every last one of them had been wrecked on me in the past month."

Peterson picked up a wire from his desk and shoved it over where I could reach it. I read: PETERSON 766 TERMINAL LA CALIF CAR MANIFESTED TO YOU BROKEN INTO LAST NIGHT CONTENTS DUMPED ALONG RIGHT OF WAY STOP WILL RECOVER ALL POSSIBLE STOP TWELVE CRATES CHILI PEPPERS REMAIN IN CAR ADVISE DISPOSITION. REEVES AGENT.

"Peppers don't spoil," Peterson said bitterly, "so they did it this way."

I could see as clearly as if I were watching it on a movie screen; the freight train bumping and clanking through the desert at night, paralleling the highway. A couple of men without faces who furtively boarded the train at its last stop making their way over the tops of the cars to Peterson's car. Getting down to the center-set door of the moving car is a trick, but can be done. There's a little lead and wire seal strung through the eyeholes of the latch. It's a tiny thing, ridiculously weak to protect a car full of valuable merchandise from theft. Only the quick jerk of a finger is need to pull it off—only a finger and a willingness to risk a long term in a Federal prison. The faceless men swing latch and shove the door open. They disappear inside the blackness of the open door. The white ghostly blob of a wooden box materializes like a faint starshell, completes its downward trajectory and smashes on the rocky roadbed . . .

Then another box, and another. Always one at a time, to make very certain that they smash and that no undamaged box will be picked up tomorrow . . .

For an hour. Maybe two hours. It's a job for two men to unload a freight car.

Their work done, it's an easy matter for men to swing off the train as she labors up a grade. A hundred-yard walk to the highway. A car that has been following without lights. The car starts up . . .

I shook myself back to reality. I studied the green sheet with its cryptic penciled markings. "The code would be simple. Very likely the name of the track, the number of the race, and the position of the horse correspond to the commodity, the railroad, the quantity of the shipment,

or whatever it's necessary for Galt to know. In that way a bet on a horse tells him everything he needs. The important thing is that the information is got across—although why anyone would pick a stunt like this instead of telephoning or passing a note is beyond me."

Peterson shook his head. "Nobody would dare to take a chance like that in the Market. This place is like a village. Everybody knows everybody else, everybody sees everything that goes on. There's no such thing as a private phone around here, and as for passing notes—that would be suicide."

I snapped my fingers. "Nicky. He talks big about doping the nags, but actually he knows from nothing about handicapping."

"Nicky wouldn't do that to me," Peterson began, but his voice lacked conviction. He hesitated. Uncertainty wasn't a trait I'd normally associate with Peterson, and I watched him curiously. He seemed to make up his mind sharply. He reached into his desk and came out with a scrap of paper and offered it to me.

It was a roughly triangular bit of brown butcher's paper of the kind used throughout the Market. Words were scrawled on it in black crayon. "G—Extra shipment. Call me at home tonight. K."

I stared at the scrap. "Where did you get this?" I demanded. Actually I didn't care. The scrawled words stunned me. I'd thought I had this thing figured out. I'd have barked on my answer. And then this . . .

"I don't believe it," I said, mostly to myself. "It's not real. It can't be real."

Peterson nodded his head in slow agreement. "Nicky dropped it," he said. "If it were real it would mean . . ."

"It would mean Kearns was passing information to Galt on your shipments. That part of it doesn't bother me . . ."

"It bothers me," Peterson cut in coldly. "He wouldn't do it. He was my son."

I let that pass. "But it's not real. It's too crude, for one thing."

"It's not in Will's handwriting," Peterson supplemented. "And I've had no special shipment for a long time."

It was a fake then. That brought up different questions, was a different problem, but for me it was still the same

problem. Fake or real, this triangular scrap of butcher's paper meant I'd been barking up the wrong tree. I did a mental about-face and brought what brains I had left to bear on this thing. I found myself talking aloud. "It's the kind of thing that wouldn't fool anyone but Nicky. But him it would fool good. Somebody's been using him. Somebody who's feeding him tips on the nags, seeing that he bets them where one of Galt's boys can hear . . . And that same somebody could show this to Nicky." I picked up the green sheet again, compared the writing. "Seeing that note," I said slowly, "Nicky might well kill Kearns out of loyalty to you."

"I've had it since morning," Peterson said. "I didn't want to act until I was sure who was doing this. It would have to be someone Nicky knew, of course. Someone he trusted, someone he would believe."

I wasn't listening. A word on the green sheet suddenly snapped into sense. I cried out; and Peterson followed my finger as I pointed to the pencilled scribble. "That's no vegetable," I told him. "That's the trade name of a chopper. A tommy-gun."

We stared at each other, one thought between us. My mind flew to the crowd of men gathering in the streets of the Market, unarmed, looking forward to nothing more exciting than a fist fight or two, maybe, to add a fillup to the meeting. "And I wouldn't believe her," I breathed.

Peterson was reaching in the drawer of his desk. "What did you say?"

"Nothing."

I watched Peterson curiously. He took the clip out of his Luger, examined it, shoved it back into the butt and released the safety.

"Come on, Johnny," he said grimly.

"IT COULD come from anywhere," Peterson said, as we headed for the far end of the causeway. "If it isn't here already. That's the dangerous angle. They could bring it in on a truck, and there are twenty entrances. And only two of us."

"I can fix that," I said. I broke away from him and made my way toward the crowd. The red flicker of a dozen ascan

fires lit the canopy and the forbidding sides of the building. You didn't realize how many people worked in the Market until you saw them all together, milling in the cul-de-sac that formed one end of the long causeway. There must have been a couple of hundred perched on the edge of the stall breastwork alone, looking like nothing else in the world than a long row of crows on a telegraph wire. Many more just stood jawing in little knots of argument here and there. My guess was a couple of thousand of them at the very least.

I skirted the edge of the crowd, walking casually, not fast. The meeting proper hadn't started yet. There was no one to pull the group together, and I got snatches of angry, expectant talk from all sides. It took me some little time to locate Howard. Somehow he'd managed to hide most of the marks of the shellacking he'd taken. I drew him aside and told him the story. "I don't suppose there's a chance of calling the meeting off, is there?"

His face was grave. "Not a chance in the world. And I don't dare to tell them about this, either. There'd be no stopping them then. They'd rip the place to pieces. Good God! Machine guns!"

"All right, then. You've got to guard all the entrances. Don't let a truck come in the place without searching it. And have enough men at each spot to take care of anything that might come up."

Howard said, "Just a minute." He went into a huddle with a couple of men who nodded, turned, and began to circulate through the crowd. Howard came back to me. "The union's had stuff like this to handle before," he said. He was smiling a little now. "There won't anybody get through those arches now, you take my word for it."

"That's swell. That leaves Galt's place. I'll take care of that."

Somebody ran over and singled Howard out. "Come on, fella, we got to get started. They're gettin' ants out there."

"Right off," Howard told him. He still held my arm. "You want help?"

I shook my head. "Peterson is there already." I hesitated, debated whether to ask Howard about Nicky. I decided

against it. The tommy-gun thing was more urgent. Even Peterson should see that, I told myself, and even as I did I wondered if I could count on Peterson seeing that.

There was another yell for Howard and he started toward the voice. He turned long enough to say over his shoulder, "You take care of yourself, now, Mr. Saturday. You need help, you holler!"

I nodded absently. I was already moving in the opposite direction. My fingers closed on the scrap of butcher's paper in my pocket. Funny how little it had taken to upset my whole apperception. A few words scrawled in black crayon. I threaded between the men, heeding them only as obstacles to be dodged, trees in a forest. My mind was elsewhere.

The pattern I'd made had gone meaningless. I tried to fashion a new pattern, hastily, on the run, to fit this new bit. That Kearns had been selling Peterson down the river I had no doubt whatsoever, in spite of Peterson's feelings in the matter. Somebody had cooled him in the act—but was it for that? Or for another reason altogether? Had Nicky been used for the job, as he had been employed so unsuspectingly to feed information to his boss' enemy? It would have to be, as Peterson himself mentioned, someone Nicky trusted, someone he would believe . . .

IT WAS ONLY accidentally I saw Carlo. His face was outlined in a satanic glow as he walked past one of the ashcan fires. He was looking to one side and the other, not paying attention to what was happening on the platform or in the mob. He was looking for someone, someone he didn't want to see.

I caught sight of Peterson then, on the far fringe of the crowd. Neither one of them saw the other. I got an eerie feeling, seeing them both that way. It was like watching a hunter stalking his quarry through a thick jungle, watching it from a vantage point where you could see everything, but too far away to help either the hunter or the hunted. Everything that went on around them passed them by completely. It was the hunter and the hunted, intent on each other and the chase, and

everything else was the irrelevant chatter of the monkeys in the trees.

Then Carlo did a strange thing. He stopped next to one of the roaring ashcans and waited. It was exactly as if he were a pronged buck sensing danger in the air. He actually seemed to be sniffing and listening, an animal on the alert. He was between me and the fire, so that all I got was his silhouette, but he was opening a beautiful profile to Peterson on the other side, if Peterson should happen to look that way.

And Peterson did look that way. He stopped in his tracks. I could see him decide against cutting through the mob, and start to circle, moving fast and not taking his eyes off Carlo.

Carlo, oblivious, started also. He headed toward the dark opening that led into Galt's sheds.

Howard's voice boomed from an improvised platform. ". . . An' we've all just about come to the conclusion nobody can handle this thing alone. Something has got to be done, no two ways about that. But nobody here wants to stick his neck out first and get it chopped off. Sure, that's what Galt counts on. That's why he's been able to run this roost with a handful of goons."

Somebody on the outskirts of the crowd yelled out, "You're stickin' your neck out, dinge!"

"Oh, no, I ain't." Howard came back at him with a quick grin. "Not me, brother." He spread out his muscular arms to include all the crowd. "It don't take much bravery to talk big when you got a gang like this behind you."

I lost Peterson. I strained my eyes trying to pick him up. "Get onto yourself, Saturday," I barked at myself. "This is no time for a miscue. Snap into it."

I knew what was wrong, of course. That triangular scrap of brown paper in my pocket had me groggy. I'd had the whole thing down cold when I walked into Peterson's office with the dope sheet. The harder you're braced for action from one direction, the easier it is to knock you off balance from a tangent. Judo taught me that.

Howard sounded far off. "We're all in this together. We make a living out of this Market. The dealers can't get along without the swampers, an' the swampers can't get along without the dealers. Sure, we've had our scraps. We'll have 'em again. But right now we're up against a common enemy. He's out after all our hides, big an' little alike. He's counting on us squabblin' with the little dealers, the bosses with the union, the union guys with the non-union guys. We keep on squabblin' an' believe me, bother, we're kaput!"

I climbed on a crate and tried to pierce the fitful half-light. It was Nicky I couldn't get out of my mind. Sure, it was entirely in the cards that someone—Carlo for instance—too chicken to kill Kearns himself, had tricked Nicky into killing Kearns out of loyalty to his boss. But that didn't account for other things. Like Morgan. Morgan had been killed the same way, probably by the same person who had killed Kearns. And yet I couldn't see Nicky backing up a first murder with a second. Not Nicky.

I saw Peterson again, momentarily. He was a lot closer to the Galt entrance than I was and he was walking fast. I hopped off the crate and broke into a run, heedless of the curious looks around me, and strained my eyes to keep from losing him in the crowd. In spite of the chill of the night, my forehead was covered with sweat.

XIV

IN THE SHED I WAS BLIND AS a bat. I could hear Carlo talking fast and excited before I could make him out as anything but a dark blur.

"Boss!" he was pleading. "You gotta listen to me. I know I ran out on you. You kin do anything you want to me about that. But you gotta believe me. Boss, be reasonable. Don't make me do anything I'd be sorry for."

That last didn't sound right, until my eyes took in the darkness and I saw Carlo holding Peterson off with a cannon almost as big as he was. He kept talking, low and fast and earnest. It was plain he depended more on his talking than on the

gun that wobbled in his hand to stop the slowly advancing Peterson.

Peterson paid no attention to the wavering gun. Cold murder glinted in his granite eyes. Carlo backed up a step. "Boss! You're makin' me . . . I don't want to shoot you, but if I have to . . ." He whispered frantically as he labored to close the biggest selling deal of his career.

Peterson kept moving forward and Carlo retreated another step. I could see the despair mount in his frightened eyes, the wavering resolution as he strove to hold the gun steady in his shaking hand. He made one more try—a last resort, clearly.

"Boss, listen, please!" He still whispered. He stopped backing up and took a step forward. He turned the gun in his hand and offered it, butt first, to Peterson.

"Here. Take it. That'll show you . . ."

Peterson paid no attention. The distance between the two men narrowed.

I said sharply. "Peterson! Snap out of it! This can wait. We've got something bigger on!"

On the heels of my words we all heard a distinct movement behind the crates.

Peterson stopped, looked at the proffered gun, then at Carlo. A change in the set of his back, not a relaxation of the tenseness, but a sort of shift in the tenseness, told me that Carlo had closed his big deal . . .

Peterson brushed the gun aside and his hand dipped inside his coat and came out with the Luger. He walked forward into the dark jungle of crates. Carlo, twisting quickly to follow him, rammed his shoulder into a stack of crates. They tumbled to the ground with a crash.

Instantly a shot spat out from the darkness, and I heard a slug thump into the wooden wall above my head. Peterson's Luger barked twice, and the hidden gun answered.

A streak of color darted into the shed as the guns blazed. "Johnny!" Thorne was screaming. "Watch out!"

She was the one who needed to watch out. She was directly in the line of fire. I shouted at her, saw her turn her head blindly without seeing me or anything else.

Swearing, I made a dive for her, caught her with a jolt that shook the breath out of her, and carried her out of danger. We had more luck than we deserved. I dropped her the moment she was safe and turned around.

Carlo seemed only to want to get as far away from Peterson as possible. He danced wide to the right and hid behind a stack of crates and stayed there, peeking out curiously and aiming at the inky blackness.

There was a movement in the dark. Carlo shot off the big cannon, three times in rapid succession. We heard an animal-like cry of pain and the thud of a falling body. The three of us, Carlo, Peterson and I, froze, waiting. No sound came out of the blackness. The void suddenly lost its menace, became just another dark cellar, the kind you are not supposed to be afraid of when you grow up.

PETERSON lit a match. A limp arm jutted incongruously from behind the crate barricade, with a pistol at the end of it.

The fingers around the butt of the gun relaxed helplessly.

Cupping the match against the breeze of his movement, Peterson moved around the crates. Then the match went out, and we were once more in darkness aromatic with citrus and musky with the memory of many vegetables stored here on their long trip from farm to table.

I found the time to wonder why the shots had not brought down upon us the crowd of men who listened to the haranguing of their leaders not a hundred feet away—and answered my own question. The noise the men themselves were making would be almost enough to account for it alone. But if that were not enough, there was the deadening quality of the stacks of irregularly placed crates, acting as sound baffles. And above all, perhaps, was the nature of the Market itself. Strange noises were part of its daily life, so much so, that the denizens of this particular jungle would have been more startled at the sudden silence than anything else.

Peterson fumbled out another match,

lit it. The three of us looked silently down on Nicky's lifeless body.

"Poor kid," I said after a moment. "He didn't get to see the choppers after all."

Carlo twisted the gun in his hand. "I'm sorry about this, boss. Honest I am."

Peterson continued to look down at Nicky, not offering to bend or come any closer, just looking. Even when we smelled the singed flesh he did not move, and finally the match sputtered. He dropped it, and it drew a red glowing arc to the floor, and the black swallowed up the red, and we were in darkness again.

Carlo's hoarse whisper cut the darkness. "I guess I shouldn't 'a' done it, boss, but jeez—I never thought he . . ." His voice trailed off.

"Never thought what?" I asked. It was plain Peterson was in no condition to get out of Carlo the information I needed from him.

"When he asked me to front for him. Jeez, I thought it was just he was scared the boss would bawl him out for playing the ponies."

"What do you mean, front for him?"

Carlo's disembodied voice was querulous. "—Nicky told me he was going to the bookie and asked me to alibi for him—to say we were together the whole time. He said the boss was down on him because he followed the nags an' . . . well, you know, boss."

I lit a match and bent over Nicky. A slug had caught him on the side of the jaw. Autopsy'd probably find it in the base of his skull. He was messy with blood, but it didn't seem to bother him. He looked peaceful and almost happy.

The match still burned when I straightened up and looked at Peterson. His mouth was grim. "Now for Galt," he said.

"No," I countered. "Not now. We've got a job first . . . remember?"

Thorne was at my back, clawing frantically. "I tried to tell you, Johnny, out there. They've got guns—machine guns. They're going to . . ." Then she saw Nicky.

The match reflected her horrified face. She stared at Nicky and then at me; and she opened her mouth and tried to talk but the words caught in her throat and didn't come out.

"Shh!" I could hear noises, different noises from those that filtered through from the outside. I had them placed in a moment. They came from the stairs—footsteps, coming down the stairs in the dark. I doused the light. The others had heard them too. We waited.

I clutched Thorne's arm, partly to crimp any unexpected move she might make. Her arm, her whole body, was trembling, and suddenly I was ashamed. I wanted to do something—to tell her—and I couldn't speak. I gave her arm a squeeze for luck and courage; the feel of her hot, frightened body against mine in the dark started that old business again.

Somebody stumbled and barked a shin and let out a stifled oath. "Shut up!" somebody else whispered.

"There's boxes all over the damned joint!"

A match was struck. "I thought I heard a shot."

"Put that out, you crazy loon. You're all needed up. Nobody else heard no shot."

The hurt one snarled back and the match went out. Not, however, before I caught a glimpse through the slats. The goons, about thirty strong, trooped down the stairs, each one gripping a hickory club or a length of rubber hose. On more than one fist I saw the gleam of brass knuckles and one ugly customer carried eighteen unmistakable inches of iron pipe.

The guy with the tommy-gun was the last one.

THE PLAN was so simple it was beautiful, in a way. The thirty goons would rush out there and take something of a beating. At a signal they would fade out of the landscape and the tommy-gun would spray death into the crowd. And who was to say then which side had started the massacre? The boys would know, but they couldn't prove anything. It was one of those things that can drag for years in the courts and end with all the wrong guys getting the twenty-year stretches.

They were between me and the only open door, and I had to get out first. I had to warn the boys outside. I had to do something, I had only a moment to act—and

I hadn't the slightest idea what there was I could do.

I worked strictly on the cuff. I whispered to Peterson and Carlo, "Stay put and don't breathe a sound, understand? This is orders."

They didn't answer me. I tried to put something in my voice I'd learned from Peterson, and I could only hope it registered. I didn't have time to make sure. But as I leaned over Peterson I felt cold steel and I took the Luger he offered me.

Cutting around the boxes on the floor was a ticklish job in the dark. It was a case of make haste slowly, because vital as time was, a stumble over here, would be a calamity. I managed it by bending over, like the gleaners in the picture, and using my hands ahead of me as feelers. This technique tipped me off to at least three crates that otherwise would have sent me over on my head.

When I got to the waiting pack it was easier, really. My only chance of discovery was that someone would strike another match, and I had to take that chance. In the dark I could circulate easily among the mugs, all of them breathing hard before their zero hour, and if I rubbed against one or brushed my arm against another, well they were all doing that and none of them thought twice about it.

I found the guy with the chopper eventually; and not a moment too soon. There was no mistaking that short murderous barrel jutting out in front of him. When I put out a hand to be sure he growled at me. "Watch it. You want this thing to go off?"

Somebody up front said, "Let's go, boys."

The goons started moving out the door. I stayed put, blocking the tommy-gunner with my body.

He said, "Get goin' there! What's the matter? You yella?"

I grunted and stepped out of his way. He took a step forward. "What the hell . . .?" he whispered. I got my hand in his coat collar. The tommy-gun occupied both his hands, and besides, he hadn't figured this out. He still hadn't figured it out when I let him have it with the butt of Peterson's Luger. He just moaned and

sank to the cement floor. The tommy-gun clattered alongside him.

I felt around till I found the chopper and picked it up. I tossed it on top of some crates and went to the open door where the flames of the ashcan fires flickered dimly.

All hell had broken loose outside. That was as it should be. I grinned to myself in the darkness. The boys outside had found something now to put an end to that endless chatter. Here was a situation where even a dimwit could tell that talking was no good and only action counted. In the murky light I could make out very few details. I did see a couple of swampers ganging up on one of the brass knuckle boys, and a moment later I got a glimpse of Howard, who had jumped off the platform at the first sign of trouble, taking another apart with his one good hand.

I caught another picture in the firelight; a huge mustachioed Hunyak face to face with a guy almost as big as he was. The Hunyak held the guy's head cupped in his left hand so he wouldn't drop, and with his right balled up into fist as big as a cantaloupe he smashed into the other guy's staring face. I heard the crack of that blow even above the racket of a score of similar battles going on all around it. The head sagged limply in the cupped hand. Blood spurted from a nose mashed completely to one side of the face and the mouth hung open and the jaw rolled from one side to the other.

The Hunyak looked at the ruined face for a moment, like Hamlet at the skull of Yorick. Then he dropped the limp goon to the pavement, wheeled, and plucked another goon off somebody's back, like a leech. When the battle closed in around him and blocked him from my view, he was holding this ugly head in position with his cupped left hand. His right was balling up into a fist.

It wasn't long before the goons began trickling back to the shed. They came in ones and twos, trailing a brace of embattled swampers, usually, who hung on like bulldogs and had to be literally dragged along. When they got to the door they were treated to a view down the barrel of Peterson's Luger. I didn't once have to

tell them to turn around and keep pitching. They all got the point immediately.

They must have had a pretty good grapevine at that, because in a little while they stopped coming. Or maybe it was that they just couldn't make it to the door after that trip through the meatgrinder.

THE LIGHT went on behind me and I wheeled around. Galt stopped on the bottom stair and stared at his empty-handed gunman stretched out on the cement, at me, at the gun in my hand. The rapid glow and fade of the tip of his cigar was his only sign of emotion.

I kept the Luger on him. "You couldn't understand what was holding it up, eh? You had to come down and see what happened to your chopper. Well, there he is."

He took the last step that brought him to floor level.

"Stay where you are," I told him. At my command he stopped short.

"I might have known it was you," he said.

I shook my head. "It wasn't me. I helped a little, and maybe there would have been a lot more blood spilled and maybe a few guys would have been killed otherwise. But it would have turned out like this just the same, Galt. You'll never get that through your skull, and I don't know why I keep trying, but it's true. You can push them just so far and no farther. Something breaks, and it's always Galt."

His lip curled.

"You're broken now, even if you don't know it. Wait till the shock wears off, Galt. Your stormtroopers are gone. They'll never come back. You're through in the Market. You only worked through them, and without them you're helpless."

"You're talking like a hophead, Saturday," he said. "You know you're just jacking up the price. All right. I'm in a spot. I'll pay. What's it going to cost me? Make it snappy, Saturday, we haven't got all night."

"No. We haven't got all night. We've just got till the boys polish off your gang and stop to think who's behind all this. That won't be long, will it, Galt?"

He flicked away the cigar. Some of his self-assurance went with it. "Quit stall-

ing. What do you want? I've got fifteen thousand cash in the safe upstairs."

"By rights," I mused, "I ought to hold you here and let the boys take care of you when they hear about that tommy-gun . . ."

"Saturday!" Galt's voice cracked. "You're wasting time. It's fifteen thousand dollars, Saturday. I'll get it now." He waited, looking for my response, and not getting it: "Or here's the combination of the safe. You can get it yourself. Any way you want, Saturday! Only for Christ's sake put down that gun and let me get out of here before . . . It's fifteen grand, Saturday."

Something happened then that made this just about the happiest day of my life. Galt's voice gave out on him and he began to blubber and shake with an uncontrollable ague. I hadn't hoped for this. I really thought his physical courage was unshakable. I just stood and kept him covered with the Luger and enjoyed it.

"Saturday! Good God, man! What do you want? I'll do anything . . ." For a moment it looked as though he was going to rush me and get it over quick, but he'd waited too long for that. His mind willed it but his body refused to respond. I could see the struggle going on in him, and I enjoyed that too. I'd have been disappointed if he'd made himself rush me. I didn't want it to be that easy for him.

"Please, Saturday! They're coming back!"

They weren't coming back—yet. I said, "I don't want your dough, Galt."

"Then for God's sake, man, what do you want?"

"I want you to confess."

"Confess? What the hell are you talking about?"

"The cops will be here soon." I saw his face light up with hope and I was quick to squelch that. "Oh, there'll just be a couple of 'em. Not a chance of them holding back the boys when they return. You'll give yourself up to the cops. That's your only alternative. You can take it or leave it."

"Give myself up? Are you crazy? What for?"

"I don't think I'm crazy. I think it's

your only out, Galt. You'll tell the cops you started this riot. That you planted a chopper here and at a signal from him your goons were to fade out and the chopper was to spray the boys with lead. It wasn't your fault the chopper wasn't able to give the signal. And when it was all over the goons were to swear that the boys attacked them and did the shooting. That was the way you planned it, didn't you, Galt?"

"Yes, but . . ." In his turmoil he didn't even have the wit to deny it. "But that means twenty years for manslaughter!"

"Ten is more likely, Galt! Nobody was killed, you know—unless that rat with the iron pipe got in some licks before they smothered him."

Galt was aghast. "Ten years," he repeated.

"That's right. If you ask me, it's letting you off damned easy. And by the way, Galt. There'll come a time, at the trial, maybe, when you'll want to repudiate your confession. I wouldn't, if I were you. Because the day you step on the street I'll see that the boys are waiting for you. That's a promise."

He turned that over in his mind, looking for a way out. There wasn't any.

"One more thing," I told him. "You're going to tell who you're working with on this deal."

Galt licked his lips. "There's nobody . . ." he began.

"So you sent code messages to yourself," I cut him off coldly.

He let out something between a sob and whimper. "All right, Saturday. It's a deal. Only let's get away from here quick." He started, listening. "What's that? They're coming back here!"

I heard the sound too, only it wasn't the boys. I turned quickly. Peterson stood at the edge of the lighted area with a gun in his right hand. His face was drawn and hard, and his granite eyes were fixed malevolently on Galt.

HE LIFTED his gun and trained it on Galt. "Not so fast, Johnny. I'm going to get something out of my system before the cops come. Jail's too good for lice."

I remembered the gun I had left in

Nicky's hand and swore at myself. "Peterson!" I called sharply. "Don't shoot!"

Galt saw him too, then, and he ran for the shelter of the stairs. Peterson waited until Galt had almost made it and then he fired. Galt tripped over his own leg and went down heavily.

Peterson watched him dully. I saw what he had in mind. He was preparing to shoot Galt up slowly, scientifically, to get as many shots as possible into him where it would hurt the most before Galt went out.

"Stop it, Peterson!" I yelled. "Don't do it!"

He paid no attention to me. He raised the gun for a second shot.

I caught him in the right wrist with a slug from the Luger. His gun dropped to the floor. Peterson looked at me coldly, without rancor.

His right arm hanging down at his side, he bent down and recovered the gun with his other hand. His left arm was in front of his body and I couldn't pot that without drilling him in the stomach. I held my breath.

Galt was dragging himself to the protection of darkness, his shattered leg hanging stiff and heavy behind him. He looked back at Peterson only once, a hurt, surprised, terrified look. He opened his mouth as if to speak. Peterson shot again, and the whole jaw disappeared. Galt fell heavily on his face. His body jerked once and was still.

Peterson trained the gun on the prostrate man and pulled the trigger.

The gun jammed.

I walked over and took it away from him. He made no resistance. He sat on a crate, took a handkerchief out of his pocket, and set to work with his good hand and his teeth to tie up his bleeding right hand.

Carlo had got his bearings and made distractedly for the door the moment two cops and an ambulance squad stuck their heads into the opening. The cops watched Carlo coming and when he got to them one of them casually tripped him. Carlo sprawled flat.

"Cripes," a white-coated attendant was saying. "Somebody better get on the

phone and call General. We can't handle this mess. There's more'n twenty contusions, concussions . . . the whole damn Market is littered . . ." The cop's flash was taking in the scene. "What cooks around here, anyway? A war?"

"That's it," I said. "It was a war. Hello, Captain."

This last was for DeWitt, the police captain, who stood in the doorway. His quick eyes under the white thatches of brow darted from one figure to another.

The ambulance man said to his partner, "See if you can find a phone, will you, Jess? This is bigger than we thought."

"There's one upstairs," I told Jess, and he started up three stairs at a time.

"Who's going to start explaining?" the captain demanded coldly.

Thorne shrank toward me and looked up. There was pain in her eyes. "Johnny . . ."

"Not right now, honeychile. There's work to do. Hold it a minute, will you, baby?"

I pointed to Galt, who crouched on the cement, his back to us, doubled up like a kid with a dried-apple belly ache. "This is the guy who's going to do the explaining, Captain. Only not right now." I beckoned to the whitecoat. "Take care of him, will you. He's got things to say. We can't afford to lose him."

We both bent over Galt, who lay very still on the cement. The ambulance man made a quick examination. "Why, he's . . ."

I gripped his arm until he drew his breath in pain. "Lots of bleeding from that jaw," I said firmly. My eyes were fixed on the attendant, who stared back at me, surprised and frightened at my intensity. I was intense, all right. I had to get it across to him. He just *couldn't* fumble this. "But he'll live," I whispered into the ear of the scared interne. "He'll live, but it's dangerous to move him. You can't move him. Catch?"

Why he should have played along with me at all, I'll never know. But he did. He rose from his knee and began pulling gauze out of his bag. "He's plenty weak," he announced. "I wouldn't move him. Somebody tell Jess to call for plasma—all

types. I don't dare move him until he's had an on-the-spot transfusion."

He began stuffing the gauze into what was left of Galt's face.

I rose too. "That's good," I said. "I want him to be good and healthy for the next ten years."

"What the blazes are you talkin' about?" asked the nearest cop, suspiciously. His police special wavered between Peterson and me.

"Get up there, Showalter," the captain said. "Catch that doc before he gets off the phone." He turned to me. "All right, Saturday. Are you going to start talking?"

"Just a minute, Captain. Do you mind? I don't want to forget. There's another one behind those boxes."

"Holy Mother of God! Another one!" The cop who wasn't trying to get a bead on everybody at once made a beeline for the maze of crates, fumbling for his flashlight. In a moment he came back.

"Well?" the captain asked.

"He's there all right, Captain. Dead, this one is." The cop turned to me. "Forgive me for doubting your word," he said heavily.

"Oh, that's all right," I told him.

"Quit that clowning," the captain said icily. He went behind the crates himself. When he came out his grimness had doubled. "Shot. Who did him in?"

"Him," I said, pointing to Carlo.

Carlo gulped, flashed me a look that was half hate and half terror. He scrambled to his feet.

The clowning cop said, "I suppose it was self-defense."

I thought of the way Carlo had danced over to the side when the fireworks started and the way he potted Nicky on the angle.

"You might call it that," I said.

CARLO'S BREATH came out in a rush of relief. "Self-defense? Hell, man, the guy was shooting up the joint—from ambush, too. He was gun-simple. Anybody'll tell you that. When he got his hands on a gun he went crazy. I can get you a hundred witnesses—ask Harry, over at the shooting gallery. He wouldn't let him near his place."

The cop chopped into Carlo's torrential self-justification. "That so?" he asked me. Apparently I was getting a reputation for veracity around here.

"That's right," I said.

"He even carried a wooden gun all the time—like a kid. He's just nuts about guns, that's all, and when he got hold of one you never would know what he was going to do. He was dangerous, I'm telling you . . ."

"It's all right, Carlo," I said. "Don't talk yourself out of a sale." His face held the blank amazement of a kid who's touched an innocent-looking wire and found it loaded. After all, his only crime had been a very dull, very commonplace middle-aged infatuation for a girl half his age, and look at the bloody mess it had led him into. I felt sorry for the poor little sucker, but I had other things on my mind.

I flipped the Luger around and offered it, butt first, to the nearest cop. Then I pulled the other cannon out of my pocket and handed it to him too.

"Say," the cop said, taking a gun in each hand, "What is this, anyway?"

"That's nothing," I told him. "You'll find a tommy-gun up there on top of the crates." I tossed my head in that direction. The cop looked to the captain for direction. The captain, his lips clamped down hard, nodded. The cop lost no time clambering up. He came down with the chopper tucked under one arm.

"Jeez," he said. "The guy ain't lyin'."

The first cop had both guns in one hand now and was covering me with his own police special. "You seem to be a kind of tough character, buddy," he said. "Put up them hands. Come on, now, reach."

"I'm not the tough character," I said. "Hell, I gave you all the artillery, didn't I?"

Something soft swayed against me. "Johnny," Thorne murmured.

I took her shoulders in my hands. "Good kid," I said. I bent down and kissed her. She drew in her breath sharply as my lips met hers. "Please, Johnny, I asked you . . ."

When we drew apart she stared at me, her eyes worried.

I didn't say anything. I couldn't.

"Have I made up . . . for hurting you, Johnny?"

"A thousand times, baby." And I meant it.

"I was so scared. I got . . . blood on my dress, where I kneeled. I tried to wash it out, but I was afraid the police would find it and . . ."

"You poor kid! Was that all?"

Thorne raised wide eyes to mine. "They have such dreadful scientific ways of finding out things, and I was sure they would say I . . ."

"Honeychile, that stain couldn't incriminate you. You couldn't have got it any other way, there at the hem of your dress. You had nothing to worry about."

Her drawn expression relaxed into a smile. "Thanks, Johnny," she murmured.

"You're real, honeychile, and don't let anyone tell you different."

Her eyes closed, but the smile still played on her lips. Then suddenly she was limp in my arms. And I saw the blood that was staining my shirt.

Jess was coming down the stairs. He rushed over. We stretched her gently on the rough floor. Her perfumed hair was an odd note in this scene of carnage.

"Through the side," Jess pronounced after a moment. "May have nicked a rib, but nothing vital was touched."

I breathed again. "Thank God for that. Look, pal, she goes out right away. This is something special."

Jess gave Thorne an appreciative up-and-down. He grinned at me. "Something special it is. She'll be in General in ten minutes, pal."

The other interne rose from Galt's prostrate body. "Type B," he said, just as if he hadn't heard this little byplay. "Nothing to do until the plasma comes." He'd covered Galt with a rough tarp he found nearby, until the big man looked like a heap of his own Irish potatoes. "Near thing, though. Any little shock . . ."

I tried to hold back the body English. The kid was playing a part and loving it. If he talked much more . . . The captain came to my rescue. He nodded at Peterson. "How's this other g.s.w.?"

The interne examined Peterson's limp wrist. "Not bad. He can travel."

XV

“YOU’LL GET THE DETAILS from Galt later,” I told the captain. “But I can sketch the outline for you. Galt’s main plan was simple enough: to discourage as many dealers as he could by terrorism and sabotage, and then, when they quit the Market, to take over their business. But it wasn’t working out fast enough to suit Galt. He cast around for something to speed matters up. This meeting was manna from Heaven for Galt. It was a chance to do some discouraging in a wholesale way—with machine guns.

“Someone was working with Galt, someone who found out when Peterson was expecting carload shipments and passed the information to Galt through an elaborate code, that involved giving punchdrunk Nicky racing tips.”

I took the green sheet out of my pocket and held it out to the captain. “With dope like this, Galt could practically call his shots on Peterson’s shipments.

“Kearns got hold of it and guessed instantly what it meant. He called Peterson and had him come out. He told his wife they’d be on easy street as soon as he cleared up this little piece of business. But the murderer got to him first. Later Morgan stumbled on the same sheet, and he too, being one of the Market boys, recognized its significance. It was something the right party would pay big dough to get back. Maybe that’s what Morgan was after. Maybe not. Maybe I’m doing him an injustice. Maybe he was an honest cop and was on his way to turn it over to Homicide detail. It doesn’t matter. Either way, he didn’t get there. Morgan got it in the back of the skull, just as Kearns did—with this.”

I turned to Carlo and pulled out of his pocket the little metal-shanked hammer he always carried.

“The little round head on this makes a hole just about the size of a large-caliber bullet.”

I walked over to the door of the shed and slashed viciously at the pine frame about the height of a man’s head. When I pulled the hammer out we all stared at the deep round hole in the wood.

I tossed the hammer to the captain. You can check it for blood and hair. I don’t know how evidence sticks to metal like this . . .”

“It sticks,” the captain said grimly. “If it’s there, we’ll find it.”

Carlo stared at him with undisguised horror in his eyes.

“Hey, wait a minute! I didn’t . . .! Are you tryin’ to say . . .?”

I shook my head and smiled wearily. “No, Carlo,” I said. “I’m not trying to say that.”

Carlo scarcely heard me. “That hammer. I lost it yesterday — I had to borrow Nicky’s . . .” He cast a frightened glance into the dark shadows where Nicky’s body lay, as a wild guess took form in his eyes. “Jeez! Nicky! He . . .”

The captain eyed Carlo as he would something he’d picked off a tomato plant. “Never mind that,” he said, harshly. “You’ll get a chance to make your statement . . . later.”

His tone implied no good. Cops don’t like guys who kill other cops.

“Just a minute, Captain,” I put in. “He’s right, you know. You lost the hammer yesterday, Carlo. And found it today?”

“Ye—yeah, that’s right.”

“What time was that, Carlo?”

“What are you getting at?” asked the captain, suspiciously.

I looked at the captain. Since I’d seen him first at Headquarters—a million years ago—he had gone off duty, slept, watered his lawn and played with his kids, and was back on the job—while Peterson and I hadn’t had our shoes off.

“He’s telling the truth, Captain. You didn’t find the hammer until after Morgan was killed with it, did you, Carlo? After the person who borrowed it was through with it.”

“Yeah,” the wondering Carlo murmured. “Yeah, that’s right? But who . . .?”

I motioned to Captain DeWitt. “There, Captain. Right behind you, trying to kill Galt before he talks.”

The thunder of the captain’s police special compressed the already acrid air around our ears. I stumbled forward to prevent his second shot. I was tired, dog-tired, and even as I forced myself to move, the

sleep would not clear from my eyes.

"Hold it, Captain. He can't do any harm. Galt has been dead for ten minutes already."

The captain's thatch-covered eyes flashed to mine, to the interne. The interne's mouth was hanging open. He jerked his head up and down in confirmation. Satisfied, the captain returned to his wary scrutiny of the scene taking place in the shadows near the newel post of the stairs leading to Galt's upstairs office.

Over Galt's huddled form Peterson crouched, knees flexed, one arm upraised, as though caught in a pose by a fast-action camera. As we watched his body sagged, first a tiny inch, then another. His whole torso trembled with the effort he put into trying to straighten up against the inexorable force dragging him downward. The fingers of his upraised hand opened, stiffly, and the yard-long iron strap he held clanged to the floor. With the metallic sound, the resistance suddenly snapped out of Peterson; he collapsed heavily beside Galt, one long arm reaching over his intended victim's rump.

HE WAS BREATHING hard when we reached him. He stared at me from eyes that were pain-ridden, but without malice. He whispered something, and I bent my head to hear. I could barely catch the words.

"Rotten gambler, Johnny. Held my . . . cards too . . . long."

"Galt was dead when we looked at him before," I told him. "I had to leave him for bait."

Something that was almost a smile twisted his sweat-rimmed mouth. "Thought so." He forced the words out. "Couldn't take . . . chance."

"It wouldn't have made much difference," I said, wearily. "The code was the tipoff. You couldn't hide that."

Peterson's short breaths, each won with a separate labor, changed rhythm. His brows twitched in question.

"Not what was on it," I told him. "The fact of the code itself—why there had to be a code at all. After all, who would have to use such a clumsy means of passing information to Galt? You told me no-

body would be seen with Galt, but I found out different. Carlo talked to Galt about a job. Even Howard went to see him. Only one person in the Market couldn't be seen with him—only one person couldn't even take a chance on phoning. That was his sworn enemy—you, Peterson. Anybody on the inside here at the Market, seeing that code, would tie it all up instantly. Kearns did, and tried to sweat you for it. He wasn't your son . . ."

Peterson shook his head with an effort. "You knew . . . that?"

"You told it straight enough. That's what made it tough to check. Just that one difference—the son you had didn't grow up and come west to have a look at his father. I don't know who your real son is or where he is, but he wasn't Kearns. You have blue eyes, Peterson, and so had your wife. Kearns had brown eyes."

Peterson closed his own blue eyes for a second, then opened them. "Don't get it, Johnny."

"Two blue-eyed parents don't have brown-eyed children. It just isn't in the cards. I learned about your wife through a fluke, Peterson. She had a policy in my company. When I called up—in your presence—to verify your story, the girl mentioned the eyes. It scared me stiff at first. Later I cooled off. Fathers have been fooled before. I had to find out. I brought the code to you to see how you'd take it. And then you pulled this on me."

I held out the triangular bit of brown paper. Peterson's thin pain-racked lips struggled into a smile that was genuine this time. "I had it ready for you. You see . . . I didn't underestimate you, Johnny. I knew you'd figure . . . figure things out sooner or later. Had to throw you off . . . the track."

"It certainly threw me." I admitted.

"I hated to use it. I hoped . . . I wouldn't need it. Because it meant . . ."

"You had to rub out Nicky."

"I didn't want to. I loved that kid, I guess. In a funny way he sort of made up for . . . But I went too far to stop. Needed time. Had to . . . throw somebody to the wolves. If I could make you think . . . even for a few hours . . . Nicky killed Kearns out of . . . loyalty to me . . . that

much time . . . If you have . . . time, you can always think of . . . some way out." He seemed to gain a surge of new strength. "You saw . . . machine gun . . . I didn't know about that. That gave me the . . . out I needed. I'd kill . . . Galt . . . pin everything on him." He stopped for breath, then managed to whisper hoarsely. "You . . . believe me, don't you, Johnny? I wasn't in with Galt on . . . this, Johnny." His eyes indicated the door that framed the brutal battle of the causeway."

"I never thought that," I told him. He wanted so badly for me to reassure him.

"Will Kearns should have known better than to think I'd stand for a shakedown. And Morgan . . ." He turned to the captain. "Morgan was an honest cop, Captain. He was on his way . . . to Homicide with the code, and I had to get him."

That was fine, I thought. I didn't have any call to point out how Morgan had seen the code in the station in the first place, how he had snitched it from my pocket later. Let him die a hero and have a big police benefit funeral.

"That's right," I said. "He was an honest cop." Peterson and I looked at each other and had our little joke privately. He had talked himself out, but there was one more thing on his mind. He struggled against the pain to get his good hand in his pocket. When it came out finally he reached it over to me, and I took it. I looked at the roll of hundred dollar bills in my hand.

"You . . . did your part, Johnny," he said, with a ghost of a smile. "You found who killed Kearns."

"Oh, wait," I blurted. "I can't take this." I pushed the roll back to him, but he shook his head.

"Bargain's a bargain," he whispered. He fought to get the words across. "Good . . . boy, Johnny. No . . . hard feelings."

His eyes closed and his head rolled. The goggle-eyed interne came at the snap of the captain's fingers, made a quick check-up. "He's got a pretty good chance, but we ought to get him under cover right away." He checked himself. "Really this time, I mean, Captain."

The captain didn't smile. "O.K. Stick with him. He's got a lot to tell us yet."

We heard the sirens then, the ambulances speeding up to us. One of the cops went outside to steer them to the right place.

I kicked over a crate and sat down on it.

XVI

A THICK PORTERHOUSE hemmed with French-fried onions, three cups of coffee laced with rum, a boiling hot shower, and about ten hours of uninterrupted sleep were the medicine I needed to take the edge off the last grueling twenty-four hours. Now my footsteps rang briskly down the hospital corridor and the echoes bounded off the aseptic white walls.

I turned a corner. Two burly figures in unaccustomed store clothes blocked my path. The one with the moused-up eye reached out and grasped my wrist.

"You're Saturday." He didn't ask, he announced it.

The union buttons in the lapels reassured me. I recognized the fellows who had been looking for Howard the night before.

The one with the bandaged hand said, "He's on this floor. We were just goin' in. Come on along, will you?"

I glanced at my wristwatch. "I . . . Sure. Lead the way."

Howard's mahogany-brown face smiled up from the snow-white sheets. "Gee! Ray, Otto . . . An' Mr. Saturday! My, I'm certainly proud to see you all. Sit down, won't you. You fellows know Captain DeWitt, here."

The boys ducked their heads and sort of melted into a corner.

I said to the captain, "Peterson . . .?"

DeWitt said, "They took one slug out of his sacroiliac. The other one lodged in his spine. He's paralyzed from the hips down. But he talked."

I said, "I hated to do it. I kind of liked the guy."

"I know. You couldn't help liking him. He did have something." The captain knitted his tangled brows. "It's a lousy business sometimes, Saturday. He told me the whole story. He wasn't really working with Galt, you know."

"He said that last night."

"It's true. When Galt bought into the Market, his first move was to proposition Peterson. Between them, the two could dominate the whole Market and wipe out most of the little fellows. If Peterson wanted to play along, fine. If not . . . Galt laid it right on the line. He'd wreck Peterson first. Peterson was on a spot. His partner had just died and he was floundering about in a new business. Given time, he had a chance to work hard, pick up the know-how, save his investment somehow. He might even sell out if he didn't think he could make a go of the business. With Galt as an enemy he was sunk. He offered to sell to Galt but Galt wasn't having any. Peterson knew then that Galt had no intention of cutting him in when the big profits started rolling. Once the little fellows were cleaned up, it would be Peterson's turn, and Galt would pick up Peterson's outfit for nothing. Peterson made a quick decision. He pretended to agree with Galt. His idea, he told me, was to hang on, play for time, hold out somehow until he was better equipped to take Galt on."

"He wanted the percentage in his favor," I said.

"That's exactly the way he put it. Galt stipulated that Peterson was to pose as a victim of Galt's dirty work, and Peterson agreed. He had no desire to be tied up in the eyes of the Market as a Galt man. Then Galt wanted Peterson to spy on the little merchants and the union, to bring Galt information on any attempts to fight the combine. Peterson balked at that, and Galt finally conceded the point. On his side he had a lot to gain by securing Peterson's even passive cooperation. He could fight on one front at a time, so to speak. To make the story look good, they cooked up the sabotage idea. A little of that, properly publicized, went a long way, and it had its effect on the other merchants, too.

"For a while Peterson managed to get information to Galt by phone or note, but when Galt's tactics became really thick the whole Market watched every move Galt made. Then Galt and Peterson resorted to the racetrack code. Peterson would give Nicky a fifty dollar bill to bet on a horse. Nicky always bet at the same place, and

it was no trick for Galt's men to hang around and listen in. Peterson told me you caught on to the way the thing was decoded. The name of the horse didn't matter, but the track, the number of the race and the horse's position told Galt everything he needed to know.

"Kearns stumbled on the code—Peterson's copy. He'd already puzzled over several curious things without being able to make them out. For instance, he suspected Peterson's carload losses were a lot smaller than Peterson gave out. Nicky had been unable to keep those fifty-dollar bills he got from Peterson under his hat. The right people heard him brag, but the wrong people heard him too. The code taped everything together. Kearns was elated. He tried to put the bite on Peterson. Peterson had to pay or shut Kearns up. He picked up Carlo's hammer when he went out to keep that date with Kearns. He knew we'd never think of him as a hammer man. And he took along his Luger . . ."

"I should have realized that was strange. He spoke of being through with gun-toting. And he was only going out to talk to one of his salesmen."

"The hammer idea was deliberate. Remember, he was the one who first put the *modus operandi* bug in our ear. He listened to Kearns' proposition, pretended to agree, and when Kearns' back was turned, he let him have it. Before he could retrieve the racing form, Mrs. Kearns came in. Peterson managed to get out the back door. He wrapped the hammer in his scarf, dropped it in the back of the car, and immediately came to the front and knocked."

"That's right. The back door was open."

"She had discovered the body. Then they heard you come in. It was easy for him to persuade her to hide. While you were occupied with Kearns' body, he slipped her the key to his car. As the quickest way to get her to do what he wanted, he told her that Kearns was his son. He told her to register at the Gateway and sit tight until he got to her. She put herself completely in his hands. She never questioned his statement. So without knowing it, she transported the weapon from

the scene, and left Peterson in the clear. The scarf around the hammer prevented traces in the car. Later he washed the hammer and burned the scarf."

I said, "That scarf worried me. I couldn't exactly figure out why."

"He couldn't find the scratch sheet when he searched Kearns. He wasn't sure whether you or Mrs. Kearns had it. He had to hold on to both of you until he found it. His first thought was to search you, but he realized immediately that if you did have the code and he took it from you, his tie-up with Galt would be exposed. If he could get it away from you some other way, you, being an outsider in the Market, probably wouldn't even guess it was important. So he brought you down to headquarters and let the police do the searching. It was a nervy move, but you spoiled it by insisting on a separate search. And then, of all the cops on the force, I had to assign Morgan to work on you."

"Wait a minute," I interrupted. "Morgan saw the code and recognized what it meant, same as Kearns had done. He snatched it from me and with it contacted Peterson on . . . shall we say, police business. Peterson killed him, and got the code. That was around noon yesterday. But *after* that, well along in the afternoon, Galt's crimps took me on that truck ride, and they were still looking for the same thing. How do you account for that?"

THE CAPTAIN SHRUGGED. "The very fact they used a code at all showed the trouble Peterson and Galt had in communicating with each other. Peterson tried for hours to get word to Galt he'd found the scratch sheet, but never was able to get to him."

I winced as an outraged ligament reminded me of that ride. "I'd have been happy to carry the message for them myself. And that brings up another little item that's been graveling me. How come two smart men had to resort to a code to keep in touch with one another? Surely they weren't under glass twenty-four hours a day?"

"That's where you're wrong, brother." It was Ray of the bulldozer nose. He jerk-

ed his head toward Howard. "He did it." Howard grinned whitely. "We had a three-shift tail on both them hombres. Galt we watched from the start, of course, but Howard here insisted we tag Peterson too." He chuckled. "Hell, once we had them staked out they couldn't no more get through us than a steer through a chainlink fence. Why, we got a record of them every time they . . ."

Howard's deep baritone came from the bed. "I told you I wouldn't trust a big operator any further'n I could throw him."

"Yeah," Ray chided him. "Only it begins to look like the one we should have covered was that punchy Nicky."

Howard's grin widened. "I ain't no mind reader, big boy."

The captain took up his story. "Peterson had you around his neck like a millstone; you were going to work on the case anyway for your company. There was no way of getting you off it short of killing you, and he didn't want to do that unless he had to."

"Gee, thanks."

"He told me he took a liking to you the first time he saw you. At any rate, his next best bet was to keep you under his thumb. He certainly didn't count on you finding Mrs. Kearns so soon, or on her telling you that Kearns was Peterson's son. When you braced him with that, of course he had to follow through."

"You mean he composed that touching saga off the cuff?"

"It wasn't too hard. Peterson did have a wife and son, and they left him, and she died. That much was perfectly true. Peterson just put Kearns in his son's shoes and told it from there."

In the pause that followed my hand encountered the roll of century notes in my pocket. I held out the roll to the captain.

"I can't keep this," I said. "What'll I do with it?"

"It's yours," DeWitt said. "He gave it to you."

"I don't care. Makes me feel like a ghoul. Look, Captain, will you take care of it? A lot of people got hurt. There's Nicky and Kearns and Morgan . . . and Howard here and the others in that brawl.

Sort of spread it where it will do the most good, will you?"

DeWitt took the money and put it in his pocket. "All right, Saturday. I'll take care of it." He turned to Howard. "I really came here to see you for a minute. You know the Market's been a hotbed of trouble for some time now . . ."

"Only since Galt moved in," Howard corrected.

DeWitt nodded. "We want to clean it up. We're going to need help. I talked to Mr. Berg, your president, down at the union office this morning. He told me the man to see was you."

Howard said, "Me? I'm just one of the boys."

DeWitt pulled a thin-lipped smile. "Not to listen to Berg, you're not. He had some fine things to say about you. I won't bother you now, but I'd appreciate it if later, when you're up and around, we could get together and map out some sort of a program."

Howard didn't answer for a moment. Then he said in his slow, rich baritone, "It'll take a lot of doin' . . ."

"But it can be done."

"Howard smiled up at him. "Sure thing, Captain. It can be done all right. An' I'll be proud to help out."

The captain stretched out his hand. Howard said, "You'll have to excuse me, Captain, if I don't shake hands. I got a little bunged up last night."

"I'm sorry . . ." The captain couldn't seem to think of anything else to say. "Well . . . goodbye, gentlemen."

The atmosphere loosened up instantly. The boys came over to Howard's bed. "Why you old son of a gun," Ray said. "Have you forgotten how to duck?"

Otto reached into his back pocket and pulled out a flat bottle. "We brought you a present," he said. "Where's a glass?"

Howard grinned. He was at home. "Little too early in the mornin' for me," he said happily. "But you guys go right ahead. Glass right over there. Uh . . . just sort of keep an eye out for the nurse, will you?"

The glass was offered to me and I waved it away. Ray took it and Otto drank a swig from the bottle. "Here's to the

scrap," Ray said. "I ain't had so much fun since fanny was a girl's name."

Howard's face sobered. "It wouldn't have been so much fun except for Mr. Saturday here."

The boys wanted to now how come, and Howard told them about the tommy-gun. They whistled fearfully, and then they drank one to me.

I looked at my watch. "I've got to be running," I said.

Howard smiled at me. "He's got a date down the hall. We won't keep you, Mr. Saturday."

I made my goodbyes and Ray followed me outside to see if the nurse was in sight. In the hall his joviality fell away.

"They ganged up on him," he commented bitterly. "Collar bone, an' that same arm . . . an' the other one. That son of a witch with the iron pipe. Well, Anton took care of him, all right."

"Anton?" The picture of the big Hunyak with the handlebar mustaches flashed before me. "You mean . . .?" I smashed my fist into my palm.

Ray grinned quickly. "That's him. Jeez, he musta got twenty of 'em all by himself. Well . . ." We shook hands.

THORNE was sitting up in bed when I came in. Her hair seemed to be caressed by a soft sea breeze with a Charles of the Ritz training. She had on a white angora bedjacket embroidered with rosebuds; it looked fluffy, but it somehow managed to fall with an affectionate drape over her breasts. She was still Thorne.

Her hollyberry lips parted in pleasure when she saw me. "Johnny. How nice of you to come!"

At first I thought a wall-bed was falling on me. My mistake was natural: the floral piece was just about the right size for a wall-bed. It contained every species of flower known to man, and probably a couple besides. "GOOD LUCK THORNE" was spelled out in the middle with lavender orchids rimmed with pink camellias, and it went on from there.

"The boys from the Market sent it," Thorne said. "Wasn't that sweet of them?"

"I wish I'd thought of that," I said. As always in hospitals, the cat got my tongue. I thought furiously and gave birth to a typical Saturday gem. "How are you feeling?"

"It still hurts, but the doctor says I'll be out of here in no time. He says nobody'll notice the scar."

"That's swell. And look, Thorne, I . . . it isn't easy to say this, but I've got it coming. I gave you a dirty deal, and I feel like . . . Well, anyway, as soon as you're up . . ."

I leaned closer to her.

She didn't move, but the tears started in her eyes.

I straightened up, suddenly empty inside.

"I'm sorry, Johnny," she whispered. "I wish it were different."

I bit my lip. I waited for her to say, "Maybe later," but she didn't say it. I sat back on the stiff little metal chair the hospital offered, and pushed my hands deep into my pockets, away from temptation, and we talked of a great many other things.



MURDER

**A killer's
footsteps
slithering
softly in
the gloom,
moonlight
glinting on
a weapon
—then the
merciless
stroke of
murder!**



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The Flaming Lady Murder

By STEWART STERLING

Chief Fire Marshal Ben Pedley sniffed plenty of tell-tale clues among the charred ruins of the *Maison Elegant*. But he soon learned that some fires are too hot to handle—even after they're out!

THE RED SEDAN TOOK THE corner on screeching rubber, rocketed into the dark canyon of the garment center with siren wailing and bloodshot eye blinking.

It was a one-way street; Chief Fire Marshal Ben Pedley came roaring into it the wrong way, but he kept the speedometer at seventy.

Bus drivers locked their brakes, closed their eyes and prayed. Truckmen cursed, backing huge trailers frantically. Taxies climbed the curb.

West of Broadway the block was jammed with gleaming red apparatus. Against the claret wine spilling from a dozen headlights, helmeted silhouettes converged on a towering loft building.

He slid the sedan in behind a combination pumper and hook-and-ladder, snatched smoke mask and hand torch, leaped to the sidewalk.

Forty stories above, a feather of smoke trailed from one of the topmost windows. Except where its underside was reddened by the glare reflected from the pavement, the smoke was light gray . . . and the Marshal swore in relief.

Any blaze in the high hazard district was bad. But those in this garment section were liable to be deadly as machine guns. Plastic, rayon, fabric fibres . . . they, all burned into poison fumes that could kill more people than flames ever did. But those gray plumes weren't the danger signal . . . not yet.

As he plunged past hosemen wrestling with the hand plate to the standpipe connection, a puff of oily black mushroomed out against the luminous sky; it was shot through with darting tongues of orange. He ran.

Rubber-coated men raced to the lobby with doughnut rolls of hose, brass nozzles,



Hilda Webster had been trapped by four solid walls of flame. There was no escape . . . When Pedley found her, she was lying on the floor, face down, unconscious. Would she ever wake again? Would she live to tell her terrible story of arson and murder?

Quinlan force bars, axes. A white helmeted man demanded of a frightened gaffer in a shabby uniform:

"Which car goes highest?"

The nightwatchman pointed.

"Run us up." The Battalion Chief jerked open the car door, motioned the watchman to the lever.

Pedley piled in: "Who pulled the box, Mac?"

"Don't know, Ben." Battalion Chief Mackinnon glanced at his wristwatch. "Still alarm. Phoned in. *Maison Elegant*. Dress manufacturer. Forty-first."

Pedley nodded grimly. "Stuff for fall wear. Be wool in it. Those damn fumes . . ." he thought of the coiling black, blossoming from that window.

"It's got a five-minute start. We had to bust the door in before this clunk woke up." MacKinnon glowered at the trembling watchman. "Stop at forty."

The elevator door clanged open. Ped-

ley lingered a moment after the firemen had raced for the stair well.

"How many people in the building, pop?"

"Should I know?" The watchman's eyes bugged. "I'm only keeping a record of them who come in after six peeyem. And" he added, "them who' check out. How many is in here, I couldn't tell. Not many. You want me to wait here "

"Cry sake, no. Go down for more men." Pedley sprinted for the stairs, went up three at a time. Beneath the beam of his flash, the corridor on the forty-first was hazy but not thick with smoke.

The hosemen were coupling up to the brass siamese connection. McKinnon was far down the hall, giving doors the feel.

"Here," he shouted, bracing his shoulder against a steel door, opening it cautiously an inch or so.

Pedley raced to help him.

Black smoke, wreathed with ugly cream-colored fumes, gushed out. McKinnon tried to slam the door shut.

There was a blast like a field mortar. The door ripped off its hinges, hurled the Battalion Chief across the hall, slammed him against the wall. A solid wedge of flame whooshed up against the corridor ceiling, banked down again as Pedley dragged the Chief clear.

Water roared over his head. The two-inch line, going into action.

"Hot enough in there. . . ." MacKinnon gasped, "—to buckle the girders."

Pedley lifted his smoke mask long enough to growl: "Buckle anybody who was in there, all right. I want the person who phoned in that alarm."

He plunged through the vortex belching from the dress company's door, flattened himself against the fireproof wall that had so far contained the flames. The next door beyond the one that had blown open, had gilt lettering:

MAISON ELEGANT

Modes for Misses & Junior Misses

J. V. Webster, Inc.

4162

He put his palm against the door. Hot, but not blistering.

He flattened his ear against it. No crackling or roaring within.

He tried the knob. The door was unlocked.

He brated himself, anticipating an explosion of fresh air touching off smouldering material.

WHEN HE CRACKED the door, bile-colored smoke vomited out at him. The ugly yellow-green color was plain, even before his flashlight hit it. The lights were on, inside.

He went in. The smoke was so dense he had to feel his way, past chairs, a bench, a railing. He fumbled along the rail to the gate, tripped the catch.

More desks. A water cooler. A solid metal door, so hot it scorched his fingers. That would be the door to the factory part of the establishment. He left it strictly alone.

A typewriter desk. Files. A window. He smashed it with the butt of his flashlight. Glass tinkled faintly. The smoke began to clear.

He turned, searching for the switchboard. Something caught him in the chest, solidly. A thick block of iron. The door of a safe.

Open.

Pedley moved around it, stepped on something that crunched beneath his shoe. He knelt, quickly.

On the floor, face down, unconscious—a girl of twenty or so. He got his arms underneath her, lifted her to his shoulder in the one-arm carry.

A metal box clattered to the floor as he lifted her. The cash-box, probably. She'd rescued it from the safe before the smoke got her . . . *WOW!*

He stumbled to his knees as flames seared the back of his neck. His smoke mask fell off, rolled away . . .

Flame? He twisted around. There *couldn't* be any flame in here. That steel door . . .

Whoosh! An incandescent jet puffed fiercely at him through that broken window! *From outside! From the burning room adjoining!*

A night breeze had come up suddenly, was sucking the flame out of the blazing

factory and whipping it in through the office window. *Whoosh!*

He crawled toward the door. Behind him, papers flared into momentary brightness. Varnished woodwork began to crackle.

He reached the corridor.

"*Water!*" he yelled. "Mac! Line here!" He coughed as the fumes strangled him.

But he made it to his feet, leaned against the wall with the girl's weight a suddenly severe burden.

Hosemen clumped past, gripping the long nozzle, snaking the swollen canvas to the door.

"Need any help, Marshal?" The nozzleman peered owlishly through the eyepiece of his mask.

"I can . . . handle it." Pedley didn't know whether he could or not. There was a queer lightness in his head. His legs didn't seem to respond as they ought to.

The girl was worse off than he was. She needed medical attention. He'd see she got it fast. But before she was whisked away by some zealous ambulance interne, he had a couple of questions to ask her.

The fire was more than five minutes old—more than ten probably. He stumbled slowly along the hall until he could see past the firemen who'd worked their lines into the door MacKinnon had opened.

The flames had been driven back. Cutting tables and sewing machine benches were still burning but the long rows of hanging dress-racks, the metal waste-containers and the piles of fabric on the goods shelves were hissing steam and smouldering char.

Some of the solid oak tables, with four-inch square legs and two-inch cutting tops, had been reduced to spindly cinders. *That* hadn't happened in five minutes!

"Dobby . . ." the girl moaned.

He got his back against the wall, shifted his weight so he held her in both arms. "What?"

"Dobby . . . where are you?" Her voice was fuzzy, but she had her eyes open, staring wildly up at Pedley from a smoke-smudged face smeary with lipstick and mascara.

"Who's Dobby?"

She groaned, winced, closed her eyes

as if shutting out the memory of something horrible:

"Shipping clerk . . . Dobby Doblin . . . tried to find him . . ." she shuddered. Her head rolled from side to side in an agony of frustration.

MacKinnon loomed up through the smoke. Slung on his back was a charred something that dripped and steamed. Tatters of burnt cloth hung from blackened legs. The arms flopped disjointedly, like the arms of a dead man.

But Pedley wasn't looking at the victim's arms or legs. He squinted at the thin, white, fallow face.

"Where'd you find him, Mac?" He set the girl down, held her up with one hand.

"Floor, beside the door that goes out to the shipping room. This was the factory part. Where the girls worked." The Chief pointed. "Poor guy got that far before the fumes hit him."

"Might have been something hit him," grunted Pedley, "but it wasn't fumes!"

THE GIRL SAT on the runningboard of Ladder 6, leaning against the short-ladder rack.

"I'm . . . all right," she coughed weakly.

The doctor in the soot-smudged raincoat held an uncorked bottle under her nose:

"You don't know whether you are or not. If you inhaled any of those nitrous fumes, they'll anaesthetize your throat; you'll think you're okay; in an hour you're a stretcher case. Breathe deep."

"What is it?" She tried to push his hand away in alarm, "Chloroform?"

"Carbonate of ammonia. Do what I tell you."

The departmental medico twisted his head as two rubber-clad figures clumped out of the lobby, laid the limp figure of Chief MacKinnon on the sidewalk. "Here, Ben . . ." he shoved the bottle at Pedley . . . "Make her suck in deep into her lungs." As he moved swiftly to MacKinnon, another pair of firemen lugged out the nozzleman who had offered to help the Marshal.

"Back draft blew off everybody's mask," one of the rescuers muttered. "They're keeling over like duckpins! More of 'em coming down directly!"

There was no change in Pedley's expression as he squatted on the curb with the bottle in his fist. But the line of dark scar tissue, which ran from his right cheekbone to the angle of his jaw, whitened under the hardening of the muscles.

"What's your name?"

"Hilda Webster." She inhaled fearfully, expecting to be hurt.

"Bookkeeper?"

"Office manager. James Webster's my uncle."

"He the boss? Where is he?"

"He's been in Florida for a month. Del Ray Beach."

"You phoned in the alarm?" He watched the growing row of unconscious men stretched out on the sidewalk.

"Yes. I smelled smoke. I ran out into the factory . . . I couldn't see anything, the smoke was so terrible . . . I called to Dobby, because I knew he was working out there . . ." her eyes brimmed with tears . . . "Maybe if I'd smelled the smoke sooner, they could have saved him."

"He was dead before the fire started."

Pedley put one hand around back of her neck as she tried to avoid the bottle under her nostrils.

"Before!" Hilda's face puckered in misery.

"Yair. Those fumes were loaded with cyanic acid gas. Roomful of burning wool's just the same as a lethal chamber. Whiff of that stuff and your skin gets all blotchy purple. Lips look like old liver. He didn't. So . . . he didn't breathe any of it."

"But how?" She shook her head terrified.

"Might have been natural cause. I'd guess not. Face wasn't contorted. Would have been if he'd had a heart spasm. Autopsy'll tell, anyhow." Pedley saw her eyelids begin to sag, felt her lean heavily against his arm. "Who else was working up there tonight beside you two?"

"I don't know," Hilda clenched her teeth as if in pain. "I don't think anybody was working. Except Dobby. And he knew it was strictly against the rules to smoke in the factory."

"Yair." He took the bottle away, mo-

tioned to a starched interne clambering out of a long, gray ambulance. "Fire wasn't started by any cigarette. Went too fast for that. No draft to make it go. Windows all closed. But the place was going like a bonfire."

"Burns?" the interne brought his stretcher.

"Smoke intoxication," the Marshal stood up. Tell your emergency staff I want her given the very best attention in the P. C. ward."

"P. C." The interne gawked at Hilda. "Will do."

Pedley patted her shoulder. "Do what they tell you. Don't try to get up until the doc says okay . . . or you'll be sorry. I'll be around to get statement, later."

HE STALKED PAST the steadily increasing line of rubber-clad men stretched out on the sidewalk, found a second elevator in charge of a Rescue Squad Lieutenant. The ancient night-watchman's car was up at the fire level.

The Lieutenant ran him up. "You make it a bug job, Marshal?"

"Smells fishy."

"Smells like naphtha," observed the Lieutenant.

"Yair?" Pedley's eyes asked for details.

"They got a lot of bolts of cloth stacked up on shelves, one end of the place. Some of 'em got hollow cores . . . makes 'em lighter to handle, I suppose. An' you know how naphtha vapor seeps into hollow places just like a fluid"

Pedley said he knew. "They were on the Inflammable's Permit list. For five gallons. To clean garments."

"Maybe the heat got to the can, expanded the stuff and blew it all over the joint." The Lieutenant looked skeptical. "Or maybe somebody attached that naphtha as a rider to an insurance policy."

"Then somebody better take out life insurance," Pedley was brusque, "because somebody's liable to burn for this."

A harassed Deputy Chief had the blaze under control when Pedley reached the forty-first.

The danger was still there, in those slowly coiling bile-colored fumes. But the flames were out. Only glowing embers re-

mained as targets for wetting down.

The windows were glassless. The night breeze lashed fresh air in to dissipate the smoke.

Pedley paid no attention to smouldering tables or dripping sewing machines; he went to the long pipe racks stretching across the end of the factory.

The smell of naphtha was strong, even above the reek of glowing cloth and steaming ashes. The floor beneath the dress racks was three inches deep in sooty water. Fragments of garments still hung steaming, from the racks.

Methodically, he plucked them off, slid them into marked envelopes.

SHIPPING ROOM NO ADMITTANCE

A yard from the door, the floor was deeply charcoaled, its surface checked by hundreds of cross-hatchings, like alligator skin . . . except for one space about two feet by five, where the wood had barely been burned. Just about the space that would have been covered by the body of a man, he decided.

He went into the office, searched the safe. Then he found a black book on the ledge of the switchboard. He studied it while the watchman took him down to the lobby.

"Who'd you take up to the forty-first after six tonight, pop?"

"My memory I should trust! Ha!" The old man snorted. "A ledger I keep for such matters. You want to see?"

"Yair."

On the Watchman's Record, only two names had been checked in to the forty-first floor. They'd come in together; a Sam Brunberg and a Carlina Foss. The check-in was at 8:10 P. M. They'd left together twenty minutes later.

"Who's this Brunberg?" asked Pedley.

"Who is he? Just the manager of *Maison Elegant*, that's all he is. Sales manager. A fine man, too." The watchman was wary.

"And the lady?"

"Miss Foss ain't no lady. She's one of the girls that works for him. A model, yeah."

"They usually come back to the shop after dinner?"

"Mister," the old man was emphatic, "It ain't my business to keep an eye on people. I do my job an' let them worry about *theirs*."

"Yair, yair. But——"

"Now you put it right to me, I don't know's I can ever remember them two comin' together before, at night."

"Might be important, pop."

The old man cleared his throat, hesitantly.

"Trouble, I wouldn't be wanting to get anybody into. But with all them firemen getting hurt . . . and that feller who got himself burned to death, maybe I ought to be telling you."

"What?"

"I'm hearing something Mister Brunberg says to this model friend of his. Coming down in the elevator, he says to her, 'We better get the hell out of here before the blow-up, baby.'"

THE DOCTOR GRABBED Pedley as he hurried out to the street.

"You got a gutful yourself, Ben!"

"Nothing to hurt."

"Hell you say. You sound like a zombie." The physician plugged in sethoscopic earpieces. "Let me listen to your pipes."

"I'm in a rush, doc!"

"You'll be rushing somewhere, feet first, if——"

"Lot of good guys be heading for hospital cots before I will," Pedley scowled at the firemen stretched on the sidewalk, at internes working on inhalators. "I have to find out who sent 'em there." He climbed in his car.

He felt queer. Light-headed. The high-pitched humming inside his skull bothered him. His throat felt numb. Maybe he should have let doc examine him after all.

But he knew what the prescription would be. *Take it easy. Flat on your back.*

Too many men that way, now. Might be more, if the incendiary who must have started this sky-high fire wasn't nailed promptly.

He could phone the Bureau, ask for deputies. But the address next to *Brunberg*—in the little black book he'd taken from the switchboard—was only nine blocks away. He could get to it as quickly as he could put the call through . . .

This Brunberg might not know anything about Dobby's death. Or about the spilled naptha which had spread what would have been a waste-basket fire into a blaze that could have gutted a dozen buildings except for the speed and skill of Mac and his men.

Brunberg might have a good explanation for his presence up on the forty-first floor, a few minutes before the fire broke out. But then why had the Webster girl pretended she didn't know of Brunberg's trip up there with this Carlina? Why that crack about the blow-up?

The apartment house of Forty-seventh was a converted walkup, with an automatic elevator, a brass plate with push buttons, a speaking tube hung on a hook.

Brunberg was 3A. He took the speaking tube off the hook, thumbed the button. No answer.

He jabbed the one marked *Superintendent*. It took half a dozen pushes before the electric latch buzzed, let him in. A door at the end of a short, dark hall opened. A fat woman in a yellow bathrobe clattered out in sleazy mules.

"Brunberg," he began, swallowed, started over. "Brunberg . . . 3A." His voice was merely a whisper! Those damn fumes had paralyzed his vocal cords!

"What you want, mister!" The woman backed hastily into her room, half closed the door, spoke sharply from behind it.

"Fire Department," Pedley whispered hoarsely. He held out his gold badge. "Keys to 3A . . . official business."

"I don't let nobody in my tenants' apartments when they ain't there, mister. You from the Fire Department, you get a warrant! Or call a policeman!"

Pedley jammed his foot in the door. "*Brunberg's* place of business went up, half an hour ago. Dozen men hurt. One dead. Want to find out where *Brunberg* is. You've a phone. Get on it. Call the station. Ask 'em to send a wagon here. For you."

The fat woman clapped a hand diagonally across her face so it covered her mouth and pulled the puffy flesh down under one eye. "Migaw! I didn't know! Dad! Here!" She thrust keys at him. "Tag's on it."

He used the rickety elevator. At 3A he punched the door button. The buzzer sounded, but there was no action inside.

He opened the door, stepped in, felt for the wall-switch. In the dim light streaming in from the hall behind him, he glimpsed a swift blur of movement. He pulled back, throwing up an arm to protect his head . . .

THE BUTT of a shotgun smashed him under the jaw, flush on his Adams apple. He staggered. The weapon swung back, clubbed him again.

He got his fingers on it, wrenched it away from the shadowy figure. He kicked. His shoe hit bone. He swung the shotgun, connected.

A chair crashed down on his head. It knocked him to his knees, but as he fell, he dived forward. His arms touched a shirt. He clawed at a belt, jerked. The man came to him, went down on top of him.

Pedley butted. He hooked a short left. He got up . . . and used his knee when he did. The man on the floor cried aloud in pain. Pedley clouted him once more with the stock of the shotgun. The man collapsed.

The Marshal stumbled to the door, found the light-switch, clicked it on.

A girl said, very tightly: "If you move one single muscle, I'll pull the trigger."

She was standing six feet away, flattened against the wall. She was not more than eighteen, slim, dark, with jet hair coiling down over the nape of an ivory neck, and dark eyes, squinting at the sudden light. A pretty face, too, in spite of the strain she was under.

The gun was a thirty-two hammerless, nickleplated. Pedley'd heard them called "toys," "poguns". He had more respect for them than that. He froze.

The man on the floor rolled over, groaned, got an elbow underneath him, propped himself up. His face was a mask of blood from a cut on his temple

One eye was purple. His upper lip was swelling fast.

"Serve him right if you do put a bullet in him, baby. Dirty son nearly killed me."

He rolled over, wobbled to his feet. Maybe forty but not fat. Stocky. Wide shoulders, under the blood-spattered sport shirt. His eyes were small and ugly.

"Drop that shotgun, you——"

Pedley did as requested.

The girl spoke through her teeth: "You better search him, Sam. He may have a gun on him."

"Turn around," Brunberg ordered. "Put your hands up on the wall."

Pedley said: "Why don't you call the cops?" Only he didn't say it aloud. He tried to. But not even a whisper issued from his vocal chords!

Sweat broke out on his forehead. This was worse than being kayoed. Hands patted his hips, his armpits, his coat.

"Crummy hasn't any pistol, Carlina!"

"Where'd you get the key to this apartment?" asked Carlina.

He took one hand away from the wall, slowly, pointed to his right pants pocket.

Brunberg snarled: "Why, you lousy ——!" But one hand searched the pocket, came up with the badge.

"What in——!" Brunberg read the gold lettering: "*Bureau of Fire Investigation . . . City of New York.*"

Pedley nodded vigorously.

"He's a dummy," cried Carlina. "The Fire Department wouldn't have an inspector who——"

Brunberg stepped close to the Marshal, sniffing.

"*There's smoke on his clothes!*"

Pedley turned around, slowly, half expecting the shock of a bullet.

The girl held the gun out stiffly, with both hands. It was pointed at his navel.

The Marshal reached in his coat pocket, being careful to keep the movement of his hand slow. He brought out one of the envelopes, opened it.

Brunberg goggled, bent over, smelled.

"*Dresses!*" He seized the envelope.

Pedley nodded, pointed at him.

"*Mine?*" screamed Brunberg. "*From the factory?*"

The Marshal nodded again. His hand

went back to his pocket, came out with a fountain pen.

On the envelope he wrote:

"*Throat hurt. Liquor?*"

Brunberg scuttered toward a cellarette. "How the hell would *we* know who you were! We thought you were a burglar."

He brought a bottle. Cognac. He held out a glass.

Pedley shook his head, took the bottle, put it to his lips, tilted it.

The brandy stung like acid on raw flesh. It nearly strangled him. But the alcohol did jolt the nerves, thought Pedley doubted if the doc would have recommended the treatment.

"Shipping clerk," he tried. It wasn't much like his voice, that scratchy huskiness, but it was audible. "Your shipping clerk. Burned to death."

"No!" Brunberg looked suddenly very worried. Carlina lowered the gun, let it dangle.

"Yes. Dozen firemen hurt." Pedley drank again. "Fire was set. You were there tonight. About the time it was set." His eyes went from one to the other questioningly.

Brunberg took out his handkerchief, mopped blood off his face. "That's right. We were. But we didn't start any bonfire in our building."

"What'd you mean by telling Miss Foss you'd better get out before the blow-up, then?"

Brunberg's mouth hung open foolishly, as if he couldn't remember having said it. "Oh! That! I meant before hell began to pop around the office."

"It popped, all right." Pedley picked up the shotgun, but didn't put down the bottle. He still felt shaky. He might need it again.

"Not that kind of hell," the manager protested. "I was referring to what Mister Webster would say when he found out Carlina and I were married this morning."

"Was he," Pedley glanced at the girl, "fond of . . . uh . . . your bride?"

"Not especially." Brunberg touched his black eye, tentatively. "But he's fond of his niece, Hilda. And up to this morning I was engaged to marry *her!*"

"MORE TO IT than jealousy." Pedley moved around the living-room, stopped in front of a Governor Winthrop secretary. "I've known guys to torch their sweetie's house, after being given the bounce. Not a factory, though. Never heard of a shipping clerk being murdered because somebody was sore at somebody else!"

Carlina breathed: "Murder?"

"Yair. Before the blaze got going." A pigskin attache case lay on the desk; Pedley fiddled with the clasp, got it open. "Killer clunked him, poured naphtha on him, touched a match."

"Why would anyone want to do a terrible thing like that!" Brunberg was horrified.

"Insurance, maybe." The Marshal shuffled a batch of printed blanks, clipped together in the attache case. "You kept your stock covered, didn't you?"

The manager held the handkerchief to his swollen lip. "Sure. Mister Webster's thoroughly protected. But he won't collect more'n eighty percent of what the merchandise is worth, even if it's a total loss."

"Total," Pedley agreed. He picked out one of the filled-in forms

There were a score of items listed. "What's this stuff worth, Brunberg?"

The manager looked sick. "Hard to say. Possibly twenty-twenty-five thousand . . . at wholesale. That was our winter line, those numbers. Pure wool gabardine, practically all of it. But who cares about the goods, with a man dead!"

"I do," Pedley was blunt. "You say most of these dresses were all wool?"

"Few might have been a 60-40 mixture," the manager hedged. "Most of it was guaranteed pure virgin wool."

"Maybe you can kid the consumer." Pedley slid the inventory sheet back in the attache case, closed it, picked it up. "You can't pull that with a chemist. Those ashes," he nodded toward the envelope Brunberg had laid on the arm of a chair, "will analyze ninety percent rayon. Maybe ninety-five percent. If you're going to try to collect twenty-five thousand on the strength of the goods being pure wool, you'd better think twice."

"I'm not collecting," Brunberg retorted.

"It don't mean a thing in my life. Mister Webster owns the company, except for a couple shares Hilda holds. He'll get the dough. Don't be making out I'm putting anything over . . ."

"Nobody's putting anything over," Pedley eyed him bleakly. "Somebody might be planning to. I'd say Doblin got in the way of that plan. Got barbecued, for doing it."

"Sam!" Carlina pleaded. "Tell him! Tell him! First thing you know, they'll be claiming it was you. There's no need to protect anyone, now——"

Pedley said: "No possibility of getting away with it, either."

The manager looked as if he was about to burst into tears. "All right. Okay. I'll give you the straight. Carlina and I went up to the factory tonight to check on some monkey business I just learned about, today, by accident."

Little man, that makes a busy day, the Marshal said to himself. Getting married. Discovering some fiddling in your firm's business. Being mixed up in murder and arson. Aloud, he said:

"Less merchandise on hand than there was supposed to be? Shortage that might be covered up by a fire?"

"In a way. I found out one of our customers was selling our Elmart model, retails for \$48.50, at around \$39.98. His competition found out about it, got mad, asked me how he could sell so low. Come to check into it, that particular customer never bought any of the Elmart numbers. But he had 'em. On sale. I saw 'em."

"Sam investigated," Carlina cried, "and found the fella bought a lot of cheap stuff, to sell for around \$22.50. But what was shipped out to him was fifteen dozen high price numbers."

"So I figure," Brunberg began to talk louder and faster, "I figure somebody in our organization is in cahoots with this retailer. And if with one, maybe with others. That's what we went up for, tonight. To see if the dresses on the racks check with the inventory."

Pedley moved toward the door.

"They don't tally," Carlina said. "The stuff on the racks is all cheap models. Not what's supposed to be there at all."

Pedley tucked the attache case under his arm. "Who'd you see there?"

"Dobby," said Brunberg. "He was getting an order ready to go out in the morning. I put it to him. He looks surprised, gives me a lot of double-talk, claims he doesn't know a thing about the switch. Says all he does is ship the goods we give him, an' check with the duplicate invoices."

"Who gives him his orders?" Pedley motioned them out to the elevator.

Carlina looked at her husband. He looked unhappy.

"I do," he admitted. "I'm supposed to, anyway. But I never okayed any shipments of Elmart to that creep!"

Making it look as if the dead shipping clerk was a crook and a conniver, thought Pedley. *Could be, of course. On the other hand:*

"Doblin still working when you left?"

"Yes." Carlina clung tightly to Brunberg's arm as they descended to the street level. "He was pretty bitter at Sam. Talked about quitting his job. Threatened to go to Mister Webster. But he was still wrapping dresses and packing them in boxes when . . . when . . ." she faltered.

"Hilda came in and found us together," Brunberg growled. "She threw a fit. Called Carlina six kinds of a witch. Told me I'd be looking for a new job soon's her uncle came back from Florida. We got out of there in a hurry."

"Didn't go into the matter of the inventory." Pedley made it a flat statement.

Carlina explained: "There was no use trying to talk to her. She was in such a rage because I got Sam."

"It's a fine way to start a honeymoon," Brunberg glowered. "Arrested for . . . what are you charging us with, huh?"

Pedley slid back of the wheel. "I'm taking you in protective custody, time being . . ."

THE POLICEWOMAN sitting in the chair beside the screen in the Protective Custody Ward rose hastily, saluted: "Poor kid's been sicker'n a pup. But she's better. Doc says she has to stay in bed."

"Yair." Pedley went behind the screen.

Hilda lay pallid on the narrow cot, her skin waxy, eyes staring at the ceiling. She rolled her head weakly to one side when she heard the Marshal.

"Had a tough night, didn't you?" He sat on the foot of the cot.

"Pretty bad." She smiled wanly. "The worst is thinking about Dobby."

And the others, he said silently. *The other good men, lying on other cots—fighting for air—lungs damaged for life, if they lived . . .*

He said: "Why didn't you tell me Brunberg and his wife had been up there to-night?"

Her lips quivered. She turned her face away. "I was so damn nasty to them, when I first learned they'd been married . . . I just didn't want to make things worse by getting them mixed up in all that awful mess."

"Yair. Did Doblin tell you why they came up to the factory?"

"No. I didn't see him, after they left."

Pedley raised his voice: "Bring Brunberg here."

A bluecoat came around the corner of the screen, hanging on to Brunberg's elbow.

"Sam!" Hilda struggled to sit up. "Why have they got you, Sam! I never told them—"

Brunberg said loudly: "There's nothing to tell!"

"No . . . no, of course not!" Hilda burst into sobbing. "I didn't mean to give anything away, Sam, . . . you have to believe that . . . I did hate you . . . for double-crossing me. But I don't want to hurt you . . . I wouldn't have said a thing —"

The manager insisted: "There's not a damn thing—"

"Yair," Pedley cut him short. "Sure. That inventory racket you were in, together."

Hilda crouched back against her pillow, aghast.

Brunberg shivered, eyes round with fear.

"Had to be at least two of you in it," the Marshal went on. "One on the outside to make the deal with the retailer."

One on the inside to fix the books. You could have cleaned up on the old man that way for a long time, shipping out expensive garments, billing the customer for cheap ones, collecting the difference and splitting it. Only Miss Foss broke up the lovely friendship."

Brunberg wagged his head vehemently. "I knew there was something screwy about the shipments, but I didn't have any part ____"

Hilda craned her neck forward like a hissing swan: "You scabby liar! I suspected what you were up to, fooling around with those invoices every night, after the office closed. But I kept quiet, hoping that after we were married, I could straighten it out. . . or keep my uncle from doing anything to you!"

Brunberg snarled: "*That's* going to be the line, *hah!* So I'll do some talking. I knew there was something screwy about counts, but since we were engaged—"

Pedley smiled grimly. "When thieves fall out."

Hilda went on as if she and Sam Brunberg were alone in the ward:

"You knew I was wise to you, *Sám*. When you tricked me by latching up with that empty-headed window-dummy, you were afraid I'd spill the beans. So you rushed right around to give your version to Dobby, hoping he'd tell my uncle. Instead, he accused you of switching the invoices, so you killed him!"

The manager squirmed away from the policeman, stuck his face close to hers, his eyes venomous: "No . . .! you don't You're not going to pin *that* on me. You murdered Dobby because you thought if he was dead, everybody'd blame him for the missing garments!",

Pedley showed his teeth, without smiling. "Two to one against you, Miss Webster. Brunberg has his wife to back up his story of what happened in the factory tonight. You haven't anyone."

"Of course, Carlina'd lie about it," she screamed.

"You could try to put it on him, in court. But you've two strikes against you. You lied about running out in the factory

after the fire started. You didn't. There wasn't any dark smoke in the office when I crashed in there. Just light gray . . . wood and rayon scraps, plastic buttons . . . but none of the fumes that would have been there if the garments had been burning and the office door had been opened."

"*I told you the truth!*" she was hysterical.

"No. What happened was, after you bopped Doblin, you touched a match to the naphtha, waited until you made sure it was going—ran to the office and slammed the door. Then you waited a few minutes before phoning in the alarm, because you didn't want the blaze put out before all those cheap dresses had been burned"

She tensed like a cat about to spring.

Pedley got off the cot. "You overdid it. By the time you'd phoned in the alarm and opened the safe, the nitrous fumes got to you. Knocked you out."

She sprang, fingers clawlike, toward Brunberg.

He recoiled, bumping into the policeman. The officer tried to get in between them.

She fought like a wildcat. Her hand flashed to the bluecoat's holster.

The gun came out. She poked it at Brunberg's chest, pulled the trigger. It didn't fire the first time, but before Pedley could knock the barrel up, she'd fired again.

Brunberg grunted. "No! Ah!" A small, red worm crawled out of his sport shirt just above the V of his vest, inched down beneath the vest.

Pedley got the gun. The policeman pinioned Hilda's arms.

She lay huddled there, sobbing:

"It *was* Sam's fault. He got me into it, in the first place."

Pedley looked down at her. "You didn't try to kill your fiance . . . until after we caught you. It was Doblin. Remember?"

"I knew Dobby would tell my uncle. He *said* he was going to. When I saw he was going to be dangerous . . . I . . ."

"You might have a thing there," Pedley said wearily. "Putting a dangerous person out of the way. Not a bad idea."

FORTY FLIGHTS FROM HELL

By DAN GORDON

Clouds were shrouds for the bodies of the damned in that glittery, swank penthouse where Steeplejack Marty Morgan found the answer to his diamond-studded dreams . . .

"This!" the voice said . . . Marty jerked his head sideways. He rolled from the soft cushions, bounced on the floor, and came up facing the man.



THE CORNICE WAS JUST above his head, and below him the small cars crawled in insignificant streams upon the busy street. When Marty Morgan gripped the rope and heaved, his hips slid up through the inverted V, and the small board that formed the seat of the boss's chair slid down the back of his legs. Marty shifted his grip on the line. The board moved skittishly once, then made a safe enough platform for his practiced steeple-jack's feet.

Standing now he could see above the cornice, could look right into the penthouse where the woman stood with the man, extending her hand, the hand that was holding the drink.

Marty grinned, feeling the wind against

his teeth. Always on these high jobs you felt the wind, heard its ghostly murmur as it sifted around the tops of the skyscrapers. It was a cold wind, and a drink would go good—a drink served by the dame who was with the guy in the penthouse. Marty stood there, savoring the thought.

The woman was facing him, obviously unaware of his presence out there on the wind-swept stone. Her eyes were on the man who was in the apartment with her, a chubby butterball of a man. She was close enough to the glassed-in side of the room. Marty could see her face.

He saw it. Feasted upon it. Because faces like that didn't happen very often. Not even to Marty Morgan who had spent

ten years of his life swaying precariously outside windows. Marty's mind went away somewhere, off into that fanciful region where minds go when Hayworth walks on the screen.

Marty swallowed. Thinking about it. Wondering how it would be.

He was thinking about it when the chubby man inside the apartment stumbled, lurched sideways, fell forward upon his knees.

The girl stepped back. Her face was empty of all expression as the stubby fingers clawed the carpet. When he ploughed forward flat and still, a dim smile dusted her lips.

Marty swung himself up, wriggled over the flat stone and dropped lightly down to the roof. He saw the eyes of the girl go wide. He could understand that. She wouldn't get many visitors coming over the garden wall. Not when the garden was on the fortieth floor.

She watched him cross the miniature lawn. As he reached the door, she snatched something from the desk, held it concealed against her palm and softly called: "Come in."

Marty said: "I was coming over the edge, Miss, and I see him take a dive. Bum heart?"

"Yes." Something went out of her face, and it looked as good close up as it had at first at a distance. "Yes," she repeated. "He has them often. He really shouldn't drink."

"You called the doctor?"

"Not yet," she said easily. "I'll do it now." She turned and walked away with that swaying walk. Marty heard the faint sound as she laid something on the desk blotter.

Without looking back at him, the woman went out of the room.

Kneeling, Marty picked up the chubby man's hand, slid his fingers under the shirt cuff, searching for the pulse. There was nothing, but it would take a doctor to tell . . . Marty scooped up the flabby body and carried it to a divan. He could hear the soft spin of a telephone dial and the indistinct murmur of the woman's voice trickling in from the other room. She didn't seem excited. But you couldn't

expect her to throw a lulu if the guy had passed out before . . .

Marty loosened the fat man's collar. The pudgy jaw gaped open as if he'd released a spring. The guy looked plenty dead. Marty felt the fleeting uneasiness, remembering, letting the pictures come back into his mind. The girl had not been smiling when she'd offered the drink. The smile had come right after that, when the fat boy went into his dive. She had seen him, Marty, and had picked something up. Something she'd laid on the desk.

Moving with his pacing, swaggering, steeple-jack's stride, Marty crossed the room.

He picked up the letter opener, the only thing on the blotter. It wasn't the conventional souvenir junk. It was finely made and sturdy. The edge was razor sharp.

The girl said: "Looking for something?" She put a twist on the words, a twist that went with the sway of her hips and insolent heat in her eyes.

MARTY chose a cigarette from the box on the coffee table. He kept his eyes on hers while he used the lighter. There was the thing he should do. Get the hell out of there. Tell the tale to the Building Superintendent. Let somebody else take it from there . . .

The girl hadn't moved. She said: "Well?"

Inside Marty, a small chuckle formed, gurgled quietly deep in his throat. To think he'd felt strange and ill at ease before this society broad . . . A dame. Like all other dames.

Marty said: "Yeah. I'm lookin' for something. What've you got?" He sat in a club chair and jetted a stream of brown-yellow smoke across the room at her.

"What do you want?" She was laying it on the line, telling him they were talking terms.

"The inside, Mousie. I want to play in here with the other kids. I been outside too damned long. It's cold out there. And dangerous."

She said: "Maybe it's dangerous in here."

"Yeah. Maybe. But it's easier to take sittin' here in this chair than slidin' down a rope." He let his eyes flick sideways at the quiet lump on the couch. "Your husband?" Marty asked.

"Maybe. Maybe not. We're not talking about him or me. I asked you what you want."

Marty said: "Why hurry? Let's wait till the doctor comes."

Stall it. Play along. You've got your mitts on something big. Take it easy. Play it along . . .

"There won't be any doctor." Her voice didn't show any thought at all. She was stating an obvious fact.

"That's what I thought," Marty told her, "when I saw that grin on your pan right after you gave him the drink. You ought to learn to control that, if you're makin' murder your business."

Something flickered behind the eyes and she said: "Your choice of words is very poor but—" She shrugged and said in a warmer voice: "Care for a drink?"

"No. Hell, no." She was going to get away with it. If he let her, she was going to. There would be nothing wrong with her plans. She was bright, and she'd taken her time . . . Marty wasted no thought on the fat man. He had lived too long on the seamy side to waste sorrow and sympathy on a man he didn't know.

The girl said: "Are you going to sit there all day?"

"I might. It's comfortable enough." Marty leaned back and let the warm faint fragrance of the room sift in through his nostrils. "Depends," he said, "on what you plan to do. On what you plan to pay."

The legality of the question didn't bother him at all. His mind was filled with one thought. A break like this came but once to a man. To be looking through a window at the one particular second when a high society broad was slipping her one and only a permanent mickey-finn. If the law caught up with him later, it wouldn't mean much of a stretch. He hadn't really done anything except fail to turn the girl in . . . "Which reminds me," Marty said aloud, "what are you willin' to pay?"

"This!" the voice said behind him.

Marty jerked his head sideways and the object missed his head. He rolled from the soft cushions, bounced on the floor, and came up facing the man.

A young man. Yale or Harvard, too many meals ago. Now he was leaning awkwardly half over the divan. His smooth pink face was sorry he'd missed the swing, wondering what to do next, jittery with fear.

Marty saw that. He also saw the man didn't have a gun. He said: "Try again, sucker."

The man dove for Marty, using a clumsy flying tackle which might have been effective ten years ago, before he softened up.

Marty moved and let him go by. When the hero's nose came to rest in the carpet, Marty took one leisurely, graceful step and kicked him behind the ear. The pink faced man lay very still, and Marty said to the waiting girl: "Where'd that tramp come from?"

"The closet, I guess."

"Got any more in there?"

"No."

"Who's this one?"

"He's Perry Bridges. My husband's attorney." Her hand made a weary gesture. "That's my husband there."

"Cozy," said Marty comfortably. "Everybody in the joint asleep, except for you and me. What's your name, beautiful?"

"Toni Summers. But, good lord, let's get on with this. Let's get down to what you want."

Marty grinned, knowing what she was thinking. That he was an ignorant monkey who could be bought for a grand or two. "Half will be enough," he said. "Half of whatever you get."

Her laugh wasn't pretty. "And what do you do for your share? Do you know what I did for mine? I lived with that jerk for three years—that slob lying there on the couch. And you come along and ask for half. What did you do? Walk in?"

"I walked in. And I find you with a body—on the fortieth floor. That's where I come in. How you going to get it down?"

"Simple," the girl said. She lighted a cigarette, drew on it nervously, blew the smoke from the side of her mouth. "Sui-

cide," she said. "He jumps from the roof out there."

"And who gets his dough?"

"I don't see——"

Marty's voice went crisp and hard: "Don't give me a stall. I saw you bump the guy. Marty Morgan's the name. Remember?"

"All right. I get the money. And Perry has power of attorney."

"Pinky here signs the notes and such?"

"That's right."

"Now we're makin' sense. That's what I wanted. The picture. Now listen, sis. Say you dump this guy off of the balcony. It's a long way down, all right. But a cop with half an eye can see where he started from. He'll fall in a straight line, see?"

"So?"

"And right after he falls, you and Pinky get the dough. That's bad. It'll look bad. The cops will get plenty snoopy."

Perry Bridges sat up and rubbed the side of his head. He had apparently been lying there, quietly listening, for now he said: "I saw a man fall from a skyscraper once. Believe me, there wasn't much left to snoop."

"Still," Marty said, "you'd really be in the clear if I fixed it so he jumps from another building—say the one across the street."

"It would be delightful," Perry Bridges said sarcastically, "Shall we take him down in the elevator, then across the street, then smuggle him up to the roof?"

"Nix. It's a matter of rigging. I'll get me a line-throwing gun, run a line between the two buildings. For half." Marty Morgan stood up, opened his jacket and took another notch in the belt that hugged his supple waist. "If you go out," he said, "lock the joint so junior don't go away. I'll take a couple of hundred in advance. I'll need some of it to buy my gear."

TONI SUMMERS was measuring the distance to the building across the street, weighing the plan, narrowing her eyes.

Perry Bridges said: "What about it, Toni?"

"Give it to him. It's that or shoot the

fool. Then we'd have two to dispose of."

Her voice was so soft and pleasant Marty had trouble realizing the dame was discussing his death. He took the bills from Bridges, and said: "See you right after dark, folks. Be ready to let me in."

He left them alone with the body, then, and took the freight elevator down. He was surprised to find an unaccustomed feeling of tautness, of tension, in the region of his stomach. Surprised because he had swung himself often over the yawning death of space without particular fear. Murder, it seemed was different. Murder took more guts . . .

The line-throwing gun was his prime concern. He found one in good condition at a nearby War Surplus store. He was careful to select one that would take a shotgun shell. Fishline was there by the bale. The heavier hemp rope he could draw from the maintenance company for which he worked—without any questions asked.

He stood upon the roof in the dusk, and across the street, in the opposite building, he could see the light in the penthouse. Enviously, he thought of the girl and Pinky both snug and warm inside. Then he thought of the body with them and decided they wouldn't be having a hell of a lot of fun.

Anyway, it wouldn't pay him to hurry now. Marty turned his head from side to side, testing the direction and intensity of the wind. He brought the gun to his shoulder, aimed it for the light, shifted the barrel to the right to allow for drift, and raised it to make sure the line would carry all the way across the void.

He fired, and the projectile sped through space, carrying with it the end of the fishline. The light line ran out well, without kinking, floating on the wind. Marty put down the gun and took in the slack until he was satisfied that the shot had been well placed. The light line was bridging the gap.

In the failing light, he located the coil of strong hemp rope. Bending both ends to the lighter line, he passed the light, the middle of the line, over a sturdy pipe. When he left the roof, there was nothing to show he had been there except those

two strands of rope leading off into space.

Evidence that could be removed by a pull on either end.

Toni Summers was pacing the thick-piled carpet when Marty returned to the apartment in the building across the street. She was a little tight, and plenty worried. She said: "Perry, here's the brain."

Marty grinned tightly and eyed the furniture. Perry Bridges was stretched out on one divan. The body was gone from the other. Marty said: "What'd you do with it?"

"If you mean my late husband, Perry put him in the bedroom." You could tell she was jittery by her tone. It wasn't what she said.

Perry said rather drunkenly: "Little man, what now?"

"Bring him out. I'll get things ready outside."

"Not me," Perry answered. "Get yourself another boy."

"You'd rather I called the cops?" Marty kept his eyes on the pair, put his hand on the phone.

Perry swung his legs to the floor. He said: "How I ever got into this . . ."

"You picked a bad one," Marty told the girl. "He's hell on the start, but he ain't got much for the stretch."

Toni looked at the pink man thoughtfully. "Sometimes I think you're right."

"I know I'm right. If the chump had anything on the ball, he'd at least have brought a gun."

"Shut up and do what you're going to do." Perry Bridges' voice was ragged. "So far all you've done is talk."

Smiling, Marty said: "Buck up, boy," and headed for the door.

He found the weighted metal end of the fishline wedged in behind the cornice. Glancing warily behind him, he decided he'd hear them come out on the roof. Even so, he hurried as he pulled the line in hand over hand. Perry Bridges didn't worry him much. The lawyer seemed like a man who has come along for the ride only to find the driver drunk and the car moving much too fast. Toni Summers would be far more likely to remove an unwanted ally by means of a well-timed shove.

Marty finished his work with the rope, moved well back from the edge. Pinky came out, staggering and grunting under the weight of Summer's body. Marty called: "Over here," and the lawyer made the distance and put the body down.

"Hurry," the woman's voice was sharp, and Marty twisted his head around. She had somehow come out and moved behind him on her silent, sandal-shod feet.

Marty swore quietly, and his breath made a silvery wisp of vapor blown on the cold night air. He'd have to be more careful when it came time to wrestle the body over the edge. Should have been more careful just now.

Working rapidly, he rolled the dead man into a loop of the hemp rope. Through an eye in the loop, he threaded a wooden toggle pin. Attached to the toggle pin was another lighter line. Then he grunted and stood up.

"Like so," he said. "We get him across the street by paying out on one line, heaving around on the other. Then we jerk the pin out, and down he goes. After that, we pull in our lines."

Toni Summers said: "I don't see—"

Perry Bridges said with grudging admiration: "I think he has something, Toni. I can see the thing might work."

"Pick him up," said Marty. "I'll help you carry him to the edge. You two balance him there while I tend the lines."

The dead man's coat ripped as Marty gripped the shoulders. Not that it would matter.

All the seams would burst when the guy splashed down below.

Silently, with only the sound of breathing, the three carried the body, lifted and strained until it lay limp and inert upon the flat top of the wall. Marty eyed his companions warily. If they had any intention of forcing him to join the dead man on the long trip down, it would be simple enough for them to bear him over the brink in one concerted rush. He was thankful when he'd satisfied himself the ropes were well arranged and he could move back out of danger.

He took a turn with one line, the one that would take the weight of the body. "Ease him over," said Marty. "I've got

him here. All you do is heave on the other line."

"What?" the lawyer said blankly.

"Pull. You two pull on that one. I'll slack off with this."

He felt the surging jerk against the line in his hand as the body went over the edge. Slowly, he paid out, letting the turns slide around the pipe, praying the line wouldn't chafe too much against the sharp stone edge. He saw the girl and Perry straining with the other rope, watched them take it in foot by foot. It was working slowly, but as the two continued to gain more rope, Marty knew it was working well. He was careful to keep the toggle line slack. It wouldn't do to have that pin come out. The cops would have more than a normal interest in a suicide who landed far out in the center of the street.

The rope in his hands went slack, at last, and he knew that the other end was taking all the weight. So the dead man should now be dangling against the dark sheer surface of the building across the street, dangling directly opposite, but several floors below.

Marty said: "Hang on," and moved to the edge of the penthouse garden, stared off into the darkness. He couldn't see well, but by testing the toggle line in his hand he could tell the body was swinging there. Behind him, and to one side, Perry Bridges and Toni Summers were leaning back on their rope, straining, holding the weight.

Marty jerked his light line. The pin came free. The girl and the lawyer went down in a heap when the strain went off of their line.

Taking advantage of this, Marty wriggled far out on the top of the wall and peered down at the street below. Already, a ring of pedestrians had formed on the other side of the street. Marty couldn't see the body, but he didn't need to. The tiny circle of humanity told the story plainly enough.

Toni and Perry were up now, and Marty came down from his perch in a hurry, seeking a safer place.

"Did it—" the lawyer began.

"Perfect," Marty broke in. "Now we

pull in all our lines before they start checking to see where he came from. And let me tell you, chillun, that was one fine rigging job." He drew in the lines, coiled them down. Perry attempted to help. The girl stood back near the penthouse window, and Marty saw her regarding him with narrowed, thoughtful eyes.

That look imprinted itself on his mind, stayed with him on the way home. He went to his furnished room. It looked poor and incredibly dingy after the penthouse plush. Marty thought about it while he shaved. He'd have to live here for a while. Too many guys had tipped their mitts by showing sudden prosperity after a lucky break.

ANOTHER THING he'd have to do. Get an account down on paper, and make arrangements so the paper would be found by the law if that lawyer and that ice-cold babe had any foolish notion about knocking him, Marty, off.

It was a thing that shouldn't be left undone, so he sat right down and did it. Wrote a complete account of the night's activity in his labored, sprawling hand. Then he addressed the letter to the police, and locked it in a drawer.

The landlady would find it if he didn't show. His next important job was to make sure the girl and Perry knew of the existence of the letter. No hurry, though. That pair had no idea where he lived. He could tell them about the letter when he went to collect his first payment—after work tomorrow.

For Marty had no intention of quitting his job right away. He planned to go on living exactly as if nothing had happened. Except he'd be salting that dough away . . .

He was working with a crew the following day, doing the preliminary rigging that would enable the gang to rig stages and heavier equipment for a routine job, that of sandblasting the smoke-grimed face of the towering Charlotte Arms.

He was all alone on the building's stark face. Far above him, on the roof, competent, cautious men were lowering him away, paying out on his line.

The single strand of tested rope

stretched upward, comforting Marty with its newness. He was seldom nervous. He'd passed that stage years ago. Still, it was nice to be working with good equipment. The street was a long way down.

He signalled to the men above, and they lowered away one foot. Marty removed the hammer from his belt and struck a projecting ringbolt, testing it, making sure it was safe for the other men on the job. The bolt was okay. Marty replaced the hammer, cleared the leather protecting thong that prevented him from dropping the tool on the heads of unwary passersby who moved like sluggish ants on the sidewalks down below.

He felt the slow movement of the bosn's chair, saw the ring-bolt move out of reach. The part of his mind he didn't need for his work kept flashing back to the night before. You could sure enough get away with murder if you played it smart enough. And he was playing it smart. Once he told that pair about the letter, they'd realize their only chance was to play along with him.

Marty grinned thinking about it, and looked up.

And saw the girl. Her head was in view for only a second. She must be standing on a stairway landing. The landing three floors above.

Marty gripped the single strand of line and held on, thinking fast. He had to tell her about the letter. If he didn't tell her how things were, no telling what she might do . . .

He saw the calm mask of her face in that instant, and he tried to yell to her. But her head drew back, and he thought she had gone. He let out his breath in a whistling gasp. Relief. She had scared him plenty.

When he saw her hands re-appear, Marty Morgan screamed. He screamed the first of a series of screams that would echo against the granite face of the building as he made the long plunge down.

For those hands held something that flashed bright in the sun. Those hands were cutting the rope.

7—Detective Book Magazine—Summer

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You'll Be The Death Of Me

By EDWARD VAN DER RHOER

I HATED THE GUY FROM THE beginning. Maybe I didn't know it right away, but it didn't take me long to find out. Nobody but a snake could act so unconcerned when a beautiful doll like Nancy Druse passed out of the picture.

Krishna Lal was more often called the Swami than anything else that was printable. He was supposed to be the only child of an English mother and a Hindu father but I couldn't tell that he had any but Indian blood. He was brown and long, so long that he got up from a chair like a cobra uncoiling. His hair was glossy black more the shade of purple in the light, his eyes an unblinking beady black that never changed expression.

It would be hard to say why I ever went

to work for him. I didn't like his looks and he couldn't make any mistake about me, an ex-cop who quit the force under a cloud, as the newspaper guys say. "You will do anything and everything I want you to do," he told me in a voice that sounded like Ronald Colman. I found myself combination valet, bodyguard, bartender and chauffeur.

It was a mystery to me why Nancy Druse married the Swami. For years her picture had appeared regularly in the Sunday society supplement as the beautiful daughter of a certain Senator from Montana. I caught a glimpse of her once or twice, she was beautiful all right, somewhat on the order of that nude getting into a bath painted by some Dutchman—Ru-



bens, I think—and now hanging in the Kraft Gallery, where the Swami is a so-called expert on Indian Art. There was a divorce (before my time) and he had been a bachelor ever since. Meanwhile Nancy married a rich manufacturer named Martin Druse who went for the Washington social merry-go-round and was hanking around, some people said, in hope that he could wangle an ambassadorship.

I guess I was mostly jealous of the Swami. He had a big reputation as a lady killer. I always figured that it was the same attraction that a snake has for birds. Still he had been married three times, which ought to prove something. Number three was Nancy Druse, whom he never mentioned, and the first news of her in a long time came in the newspaper that was delivered to the door one morning.

WEALTHY COUPLE IN SUICIDE, the headlines said. Old stuff, only I saw Nancy's picture staring back at me from a box on the front page. The report said that Martin Druse and his wife had quarreled violently. Druse jumped out of a front window of the apartment in which they lived at the Parkview Arms on 16th Street. Two minutes later Nancy Druse appeared in the window, screamed, and leaped to her death on the pavement within a few feet of her husband's body. Many horrified spectators witnessed the whole episode.

I left the newspaper unfolded and placed it right next to the grapefruit and black coffee that were waiting for the Swami. He saw it as soon as he came in and sat down to breakfast, I'll swear to that, but he didn't say a word or exhibit any interest. He just ate his grapefruit and appeared to enjoy every mouthful, the pig! Finally he dabbed his thin lips with a napkin and said, without touching the newspaper, "So Nancy came face to face with life at last!"

"You mean death," I said. I felt mean.

"Most people don't learn about life," said the Swami, "until they are about to leave it." I didn't say anything. After a while he said reflectively, "You take Nancy. Just a lovely, healthy animal, revel-



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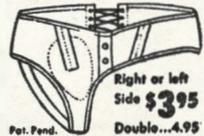
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ling in the feeling of silk against her skin. You understand what I mean."

I didn't, but I let it pass. "You know so much, smart guy!" I thought. "Wait until your turn comes."

I watched him as he leaned across the table to pinch off a rose from a bouquet in the vase. He fussed with his button-hole, putting the flower in place. "Tell me, Joseph," the Swami said suddenly. "You have friends on the police force, I believe?"

"The name's Joe," I said. I hated to be called Joseph. Nobody had ever called me anything but Joe. "I used to be a cop, if that's what you mean," I said nastily.

"Good. Then you'll be able to ask your friends some questions. Find out if there was a will and who will be the beneficiary now that both Nancy and her husband are dead."

He wants to play at being copper, I thought. "Why don't you mind your own business and let the police take care of theirs" I said. The Swami just looked pained. "I'll find out but you're wasting my time. You won't get any of the dough, that's sure."

"My dear fellow," the Swami said, kind of annoyed, "I pay generously for your time and I'll waste it if I please."

FOR TWO CENTS I would have spit in his eye. I didn't say anything. Maybe good jobs are hard to come by these days, especially when you've been kicked out with a black mark on your record. I went down and saw Lieutenant Murphy in Homicide. We used to pound the same beat when we were rookies. He knew the real story behind the shakeup on the force that sent me out and him up the ladder. Just the breaks, that was the difference between us.

"I don't know what your pal is getting at," Murphy said, "but here's the dope—Druse was worth about two million bucks and left all of it to his wife. Who gets it now, I don't know. Mrs. Druse didn't have a penny of her own and left no will."

I saw the Swami that evening. He came home at six, his usual time. He had an invitation to eat out, and so I laid out his dinner jacket for him.

"What did you find?" he asked immediately.

"Nothin' that you couldn't've read in the newspapers," I said. I repeated my conversation with Murphy.

The Swami looked smug. "Just as I thought. The police, in their usual fashion, have been content to call it suicide and close the case."

"What else?" I said acidly. "Would you call it murder?"

"Indeed I would," the Swami said seriously.

"You might as well tell me who the killer is, too," I said.

"Why Ronald Patterson, of course," the Swami said in a surprised tone. "You see, Ronald has always had all the moral equipment for murder. He's cold and emotionless, calculating, unscrupulous, the kind that is unlikely to be deterred by western standards of morality."

"You mean Wild Bill Hickok and stuff like that?" I said, trying to be funny. It sounded to me as if the Swami had given a pretty good description of himself.

"Don't expose your ignorance. The point is that Ronald is a logical suspect in a case of this kind."

"Would you mind very much telling me who in blazes Ronald is?"

"Ronald Patterson is Nancy's son by her first marriage. You didn't know that Nancy was married before she met me? Well, to look at her, you wouldn't think that she had ever had a child. She was only a child herself. To tell the truth, Nancy wasn't much of a mother. Maybe that's why Ronald didn't turn out to be much of a son."

"You don't like him very much, do you?"

The Swami smiled bitterly. "Ronald bears me no love. I understand he's turned out to be something of a master, one of the sort that haunts night clubs and race-tracks. He married a show-girl, it seems to me."

"You think, then, that Ronald Patterson killed his mother and stepfather because he's no good and the killer type?"

"That's a good reason as any," the Swami said, waiting for me to serve his evening Scotch-and-soda. He looked

thoughtfully into his glass, as if he were reading a crystal ball. "There is always a motive for murder. That's the key to unlock the riddle—find the motive. Even a madman has his motive, you know."

"What has that to do with Ronald?"

"I knew Nancy well—perhaps better than she knew herself. I can assure you that she would not have committed suicide. She lived too much on the surface of life to be disturbed by the dark currents underneath. Accept that as a premise, and you can safely say that she was murdered. The possibility of an accident, I think, is ruled out."

"Accidents happen," I said, intending to annoy him.:

"If we assume that this is a case of murder," the Swami continued unperturbed, "there is a motive. Murder for profit is the most obvious, since these murders were too well-planned, too premeditated, to be mere crimes of passion."

"To get back to your friend Ronald—"

"Ronald Patterson, as I have said, has both the disposition and the motive for murder. You yourself learned that Martin Druse left his entire estate to Nancy. Does that suggest any thing to you?"

"Ronald is her next of kin. So what?"

"He will inherit every cent of Martin Druse's estate."

"I don't believe it," I objected. "How can he be sure, anyway, that the money won't go to a relative of Druse himself?"

"Ah," cried the Swami, "now you have touched the nub of the whole affair. Here the diabolical cleverness of the murderer is revealed. Only a man well acquainted with the law, such a man as Ronald Patterson, who spent two or three years in law school, would realize that it was of vital importance that Nancy should outlive her husband, if only by two minutes. There can be no question that she was her husband's legal heir. Then, with Nancy out of the way, her heirs inherit. Ronald is the only heir."

I laughed. "Well, you're telling me that Ronald pushed Nancy out of the window after Martin Druse so that everyone would know who died first?"

The Swami nodded soberly. "Something like that."

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"Sounds good," I said, getting ready to drop my bombshell, "but how do you account for the fact that the front door of the apartment was locked and bolted on the inside? So was the kitchen door that leads to the fireproof stairway. And all the windows were locked on the inside except the one from which Nancy and Martin Druse jumped. Try to explain that, if you can," I added, enjoying my triumph as I saw his face seem to grow pale.

The Swami had nothing to say for a while. "Well, he mumbled finally, "it's impossible to forget that Ronald Patterson is the only one, so far as we know, who stands to profit from these deaths. Every rule of reason points to him as the murderer. I can't explain this mystery of the locked doors and windows now, "but rest assured there is a logical explanation. Maybe his wife was helping him somehow. Anyway, as Poe said once, it may be that the mystery is *too* self-evident."

"You can tell me when you've figured it out," was my parting shot at him, and I left to go to the pantry and sneak a shot of hundred-proof rye.

THE NEXT DAY I dropped in to see Murphy again and told him about the Swami's theory, but Murphy just laughed it off. "Look, Joe," he said, "tell your boss to keep his nose out of police work. He shouldn't listen to these radio private eyes. Anyway, the case is closed."

But the Swami had other ideas. "Joseph," he said, the next morning when I was driving him to the Gallery, "I suppose your police friends talked to all the employees at Nancy's apartment house?"

"That's what they get paid for."

He pursed his lips. "Don't be sarcastic, Joseph. They found out nothing that would shed new light on the case?"

"Nope."

"I suppose not," he mudmured reflectively. "Not likely that anyone else saw anything. . . . Joseph, I have a little job for you. This ought to be in your line as a policeman, since it calls for you to wear a uniform."

"Impersonating an officer, huh?"

"Not exactly. . . . I recall being in the Parkview Arms on one occasion, and they

have a number of hall porters who wear a very presentable sky-blue uniform with gold buttons." The Swami handed me something green that crackled in my palm.

"It shouldn't be too difficult to find a porter about your size and borrow his uniform for a while."

"This ought to be fun," I said with a sneer. "What then?"

"Ronald Patterson and his wife have a flat directly underneath his mother's place. Go to his apartment and ask to see him. Act mysterious. Say that you have a note for him."

"That's all?"

"That's all."

"Suppose Patterson's not at home?"

"He won't be," the Swami answered calmly. "His wife will be there. Act as if you're reluctant to give the note to anybody but him."

I braked the car in front of the huge stone centaurs on the steps of the Kraft Gallery. "Okay," I grumbled, "but it sounds to me like a harebrained scheme."

"Get in touch with me at the museum later," the Swami said as he got out of the car.

The Parkview Arms had the look of elegance about it, clipped lawns and neatly manicured shrubs leading up to the imposing front entrance along a curving concrete driveway. There was a very fancy lobby framed behind glass, where the rugs lay as deep as an Alaskan snow and the attendants gave you a dirty look if you sat on the modernistic white oak furniture. I didn't use the front entrance. The servants' entrance was around the corner on a side street, and I felt less conspicuous there.

It wasn't hard to sell my proposition to one of the hall porters for a fin. Fifteen minutes later I was ringing the bell of the Patterson apartment. The little peephole in the door opened up and an eye smeared heavily with mascara appeared. "Yes?" the voice said.

"I got a message for Ronald Patterson," I said.

"What is the message?"

"It's a note," I explained.

I heard the sound of the lock's tumblers and then the door opened. The woman

who stood half-concealed behind the door must have been Ronald Patterson's show-girl wife. She was wearing a revealing pale-blue negligee that matched the color of her eyes, and honeyed hair fell in wavy billows to her shoulders.

"Let's have the note," she said, holding out a slim, well-kept hand.

I shook my head. "No can do. This is for Mr. Patterson personally."

The plucked eyebrows rose even higher. "I'm Mrs. Patterson. You can trust me with your note."

I looked her over good and liked what I saw. She didn't have that half-starved, boyish look. Her figure was soft and full, the way Nature intended it to be and the old masters liked to paint their women. Her chorus training stood her in good stead, for she didn't seem to mind being looked at.

I thought of the Swami and hated his guts for treating me like an errand boy. "Let's stop all this nonsense," I said, pushing her aside and entering the apartment.

A tiny vestibule led down a couple of steps into a sumptuously furnished living-room. A thick Persian rug sank beneath my feet. I could see my reflection in half a dozen mirrors of all sizes and shapes. I needed a shave. There were soft divans all over the place, like a sultan's harem. A red mahogany end-table caught my eye. Right beside the statuette of a nude West Indian woman with a gold turban wrapped around her head was a tray bearing a half-full decanter of whiskey and a siphon bottle.

I picked up an empty highball glass, sloshed in four fingers of whiskey, and diluted it with a short squirt of soda-water. Then I settled back comfortably in a love-seat and eyed my hostess.

She had closed the door but was still standing at the top of the steps. She didn't take the trouble to pull her negligee tighter. In fact, I wondered what was keeping it on. She stood so motionless that I hardly noticed the pearl-handled automatic in her hand.

"Something new has been added," I said casually, taking a stiff drink.

"Who are you?" She demanded in a

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hard, breathless voice. "You don't work in the building."

I ignored the question and the gun. "Come on in and make yourself at home," I said, patting the vacant cushion beside me.

She hesitated. "What do you want?"

I held out the square white envelope in which the Swami had enclosed his note. "Read it an' weep."

She came across the room toward me, slipping the gun into a pocket of the negligee. Her feet made little squishing sounds on the rug. I noticed for the first time that her feet were bare, the toenails painted a delicate seashell shade of pink.

She sat down opposite me in a chair covered with bright flowered cretonne. While she read the note, I emptied my glass. The room was quiet except for the gurgle of the liquid draining down my throat.

"What's your name?" I asked, studying her feet, which were small and well-shaped.

"Irene," she said automatically. She looked up. "What is it you want?"

I grinned and shook my head.

"This note sounds like blackmail," Irene said, her face growing pale.

"I haven't read it."

Irene handed it to me, and for an instant our hands touched. I sensed that she was trembling but couldn't figure out why.

I read the note. It was typewritten on a sheet of plain paper. It said: "*I have some information in connection with the Druse case. You might like to purchase same. Expect to hear from me soon.*" There was no signature.

I REFILLED MY GLASS from the decanter. This time I paid no attention to the siphon bottle. I lifted the glass to my mouth and my eyes met Irene's. I set the glass down so suddenly that some of the whiskey spilled.

I got up slowly and took a step toward Irene, standing over her. She didn't move. I bent over and kissed her slightly parted lips. At first her lips were hard; then they yielded, and she kissed me back. We both breathed hard. When I let her go, neither of us could talk right away.

Finally I said, "Did he kill the Druse woman?"

I saw fear come into her eyes. "Who?"

"You know. Your husband. Ronald."

"Nancy wasn't murdered," Irene said quickly. "The police said it was suicide."

"My boss thinks otherwise."

"Who are you?"

"The name's Joe. You didn't answer my question. Did Ronald do it?"

Now I could see that Irene was really scared. Her voice quaked. "I don't know. I couldn't say. Maybe it's true. I don't know!"

"Okay," I said, and went over to toss off my drink. I felt a little dizzy. It might have been the whiskey. It could have been her. I gave her a hard look. "You like that guy?"

Irene's eyes glittered. "He was all right for a while."

"Look," I said. "I don't know about Ronald. I don't care what happens to him. But if you're in the clear, I'll look out for you."

"I wasn't in on any of it, Joe," she said, giving me a steady glance.

"Okay." I kissed her again, and she clung to me, her arms tight about my neck. I could feel the soft curves of her body against me. I pushed her away. "See you later."

"What will I tell Ronald?" Irene asked, clinging to me.

"Give him the note," I said. "So long, baby. I'll keep in touch."

I was pretty pleased with myself when I closed the door behind me. I hot-footed it to a drugstore telephone booth and dialed the Swami's number. "I did what you told me," I said when I heard his voice.

"I wonder why she didn't call," the Swami said musingly. He sounded disappointed.

"What are you talking about?" I growled. "And how come you knew Patterson wouldn't be home?"

"Very simple, my boy. I had a luncheon appointment with Ronald. He was with me when you called at his flat. You delivered the note?"

"Natch. But I still don't get it. What's your game?"

"I anticipated that the charming Mrs. Patterson would read the note—woman's curiosity, you know—and quickly telephone to Ronald."

"Well, she didn't," I said, a little peeved.

"How do you know?"

I'd made a slip, but I tried hard to cover up. "Uh—you said so yourself, didn't you?"

"Dear me, so I did."

"You can't figure her in on this deal," I told him.

"I wouldn't think of it," answered the Swami. "How do you like her?"

"Never mind that. Just leave her out of it, understand?"

The Swami was silent for a moment. "You seem to have developed a sudden interest in the beautiful lady, Joseph."

"Don't call me Joseph!" I yelled into the mouthpiece. "For your information, I thing she's innocent. 'I don't want to see her involved in this dirty mess.'"

"Of course," he said, his voice dripping oil. "By the way, could you contrive somehow to get Mrs. Patterson away from her flat tomorrow afternoon?"

"What for?"

"I'm getting some cooperation from the police. They're going to search the Patterson place in the afternoon, if nobody's home."

"I'll take care of her," I said slowly, "but how about Ronald?"

"I have an appointment with Ronald. In Franklin Park. I gave him to understand that I had something very secret to discuss with him—out of doors, where we couldn't be overheard. He was a little suspicious but promised to meet me."

"I'll take care of her," I repeated and hung up. Then I looked up Irene's number in the directory.

The phone rang for a long time. Finally I recognized Irene's pleasantly huskey voice at the other end. For some reason it sent a tingle up my spine.

"Irene? Look, this is Joe. I just called to tip you off. Don't leave your apartment tomorrow."

"Don't?" she said.

"That's right. I was supposed to get you away from there so the cops could search the joint."

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"I won't go out," Irene replied. "Will I see you soon?" There was a note in her voice that made me want to go straight to her and take her in my arms.

"Soon—I hope. Be careful."

"I'll be waiting," Irene said, and rang off.

IT LOOKED as if the Swami didn't want me around when he met Ronald. Instead of having me drop him from the car at Franklin Park, he ordered a cab to call for him at two o'clock sharp. I made up my mind that I'd find out what he was about, since he acted very mysteriously and didn't take me into his confidence, as he had before.

I parked the car on Fourteenth Street and walked across to the park. It is one of the Capitol City's less impressive parks, set down in a drab business section and otherwise undistinguished surroundings. The central motif is furnished by a fountain which could hardly be classified as a work of art, and the rats have undermined the ground around it in their persistent campaign against the unhappy squirrels that seek refuge in the park's few trees.

I caught sight of the Swami almost at once. His gangling, stoop-shouldered form surmounted by the white, closely-wrapped turban was unmistakable, even at a distance. He was just shaking hands with a young man who rose from one of the benches.

Without having met him, it was not difficult for me to dislike Ronald Patterson. He was a broad-shouldered blond young man with a stiff carriage and an air of considerable self-esteem. His rather effeminate features wore a constant smirk, as if he had learned from past experience, that the world was out of step and Ronald Patterson was the only one aware of the fact.

The two men strolled along one of the walks, conversing seriously. The Swami took Ronald's arm and bent his head toward his shorter companion as he spoke with a confidential manner.

It was impossible for me to guess at what they were discussing with such solemnity and apparent friendliness. Later, when I was on my back in the hospital,

the Swami came and told me about this conversation.

Ronald was suspicious from the start. After the two men had walked side by side a few paces, Ronald turned suddenly and confronted the Swami. "See here," he said, "you know I don't like you, and you don't like me either. I have always considered you a faker who took in my mother, and certainly I've had no reason to change that opinion. Now, what's your business? If you hadn't been so urgent about it, I wouldn't have come at all." He smiled slightly. I prefer to spend my time in more congenial company."

The Swami returned the smile in his sly way. "I want to congratulate you, Ronald, on the clever way in which you arranged the end of your mother and her husband. You almost succeeded in fooling me."

"What on earth are you saying?" Ronald asked, casting a shrewd glance at the Swami.

"The way you made the deaths look like suicide. It was most clever."

"But it *was* suicide! Didn't the police say so?"

"Come now, Ronald. We're all alone. I know that you arranged the whole show. Why deny it?"

Ronald halted again. He hesitated and looked furtively about him. "Certainly," he said. "Why should I deny it? It's your word against mine. Nobody can prove anything against me. Certainly I killed them. I needed money, and Mother couldn't give me any, even if she wanted to."

"I thought as much," said the Swami coolly. "But tell me—how did you go about it?"

"Very simple. I gave you credit for being more intelligent, really. There was no problem in gaining access to the apartment. Just a visit to my dear mother. Naturally, I made certain that no one had observed me in the hall. You know," Ronald added, with a wicked gleam in his eye, "yesterday a clumsy effort was made to blackmail me with the assertion that I was seen in the hall. I guarded very carefully against such a contingency."

"What happened when you went to see your mother?"

"Mother and her husband had just had

a terrible argument. Most of the neighbors heard it. That fitted in well with my plans. Mother was dressing herself in her bedroom and he was pretending to look at his rare collection of books in the library."

"They fell to the street from the bedroom window?"

"Yes," Ronald said with a show of irritation. "I talked to Mother for a while and finally, when her head was turned, I stunned her with a blow on the side of her face. My stepfather heard the sound of her body falling to the floor and, sensing something amiss, rushed into the room. I hit him as hard as I could with my fist. Then I dragged his body to the window and threw him out. I waited for Mother to start to regain her senses and pushed her out after him. She screamed on the window-sill, just as I wanted her to do."

"Masterly," commented the Swami. "Of course, Druse had to die first so that you would get his money."

Ronald nodded. "Mother didn't have a red cent."

"There's just one thing I don't understand," said the Swami dreamily. Ronald looked questioningly at him. "The locked and bolted doors. The locked windows. How could you get out of the flat? I admire that little touch," he added. "It made suicide the only logical answer."

Ronald laughed scornfully. "If you can't figure that out, you don't have much of a brain, for all of your books on art and philosophy."

The Swami gazed absently at a group of children pursuing a rubber ball across the grass. "Of course," he murmured, "Poe was right. The mystery was a little too plain. It appears impossible for anyone to leave the apartment, with the doors and windows locked on the inside. Yet we know that you did it, and we are puzzled."

Ronald regarded him watchfully. "Yes?"

"The answer is, of course, that it was impossible for you to leave. Ergo, you did not leave the flat. You were still there when the door was forced open. Probably you were hiding near that door, waiting your chance to depart unobserved. Since it was so obviously a case of double suicide, no one thought of searching the flat.

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Am I right?" he inquired, turning luminous eyes on Ronald.

The scornful look was replaced by one of reluctant admiration. "Exactly right," Ronald admitted. "I hid in a closet in the vestibule. There were many people, mostly curious, who followed the manager and a few others into the apartment. When the coast was clear, I slipped out of the closet and mingled with the crowd, pretending that I had been attracted by the commotion. That's all there was to it."

"Bravo, Ronald," the Swami cried. "You have committed a perfect crime."

"Of course," Ronald said brazenly. "And what is more, even though you know all the details, there is no way you can prove anything against me."

THE TWO MEN walked a few paces in silence. The people sitting on the benches in the park appeared to be enjoying a sunny interlude in their hurried lives. Only a few paid any attention to the Swami's oddly attenuated shape. The rest were preoccupied with daily newspapers or the actions of the gulls that strutted along the walls, scarcely yielding ground to two-legged pedestrians.

"You know, Ronald," the Swami said thoughtfully, "a confession of a crime from one's own lips, if not extracted under duress, carries much weight with a jury."

"Huh?" exclaimed Ronald, his eyes widening. Then he laughed harshly. "You mean what I just told you? Well, a lot of good that will do you—it's only your word against mine."

The Swami shook his head slowly and emphatically. "No, my friend, it is not my word against yours. There have been other witnesses."

Ronald's mouth opened and closed, but not a word issued from it. Finally he moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue and said, "What do you mean?"

"Do you see that man over there, in the checked jacket, sitting on the grass with a notebook on his knee?"

"He couldn't hear anything. He's too far away."

"And the bald-headed man, on that

bench, now looking in our direction? And the young girl in a red coat leaning against a tree over there?"

"They're too far away!" Ronald almost shouted.

"All three are deaf and dumb, Ronald. Do you comprehend what that means? You must know that such people are often expert at lip-reading. Every word that you have spoken is now a matter of record. They happen to be expert stenographers as well as lip-readers." The Swami smiled, curling his thin brown lips. "And it will stand up in court, too, my friend."

Ronald Patterson had the stupefied look of a man who has seen a brick house tumble about his ears. He glanced quickly in all directions while one hand slid into his coat pocket.

I had been watching the two men closely, keeping out of sight. When I saw Ronald tug frantically at his coat pocket, I knew what that meant and started in their direction. "I have a gun," Ronald announced loudly. "Don't try to stop me," he warned the Swami, his eyes full of hate.

I broke into a run. Ronald saw me coming and swung the gun around toward me. I felt the searing sting of a bullet without knowing just where I had been hit. It was a surprise to find myself on the ground and look up to see the Swami's arm reach out snake-like for Ronald's throat. With the other arm, he struck the gun from Ronald's hand. The last I remember is the sight of Ronald wriggling in the steely grip of the Swami's long fingers . . .

The Swami came often to see me in the hospital, bringing a basket of fresh fruit each time he came. "Hurry up and get well, old fellow," he said. "The flat is in a frightful state."

"You just want to save money on the hospital bill," I grumbled. "Why don't you let the police do their own work? You'll be the death of me yet."

"Just the same, I miss you, old fellow."

"That was a clever stunt, rigging up that plant of deaf-mutes in the park," I said grudgingly.

The Swami looked surprised. "Surely you're not as gullible as Ronald?"

"But you said——"

"Just a ruse, I assure you. It was in a mystery novel I read once, and it seemed just the thing for Ronald."

"Who were those people in the park?"

"My dear fellow," the Swami protested. "I haven't the faintest notion. By the way, is there anything you would like me to do for you?"

"Yes," I said. "You can give someone a message. Irene—Mrs. Patterson."

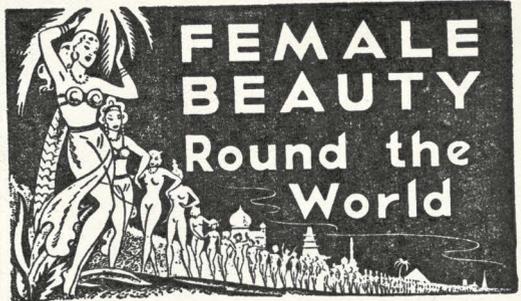
The Swami raised his eyebrows. "I doubt it. She's in prison, you know."

I raised myself on one elbow and gave him a look that should have made him drop dead. "Yes," he continued, "the police arrested her at her place about the time Ronald was taken into custody. The two of them have been busy ever since accusing one another. She knew all about Ronald's schemes. While he was pushing Mr. and Mrs. Druse out the window, she stayed home and prepared to cover up in case anyone called for her husband."

"I thought——"

"Yes," the Swami interrupted smugly. "You thought I wanted her out of the apartment so the police could search the place. Actually, I anticipated that you would tell her the opposite—and I wanted the attractive Mrs. Patterson to be available for immediate arrest before she received word of Ronald's arrest. No hard feelings, I trust."

I just glowered at him. I hated him more than ever.



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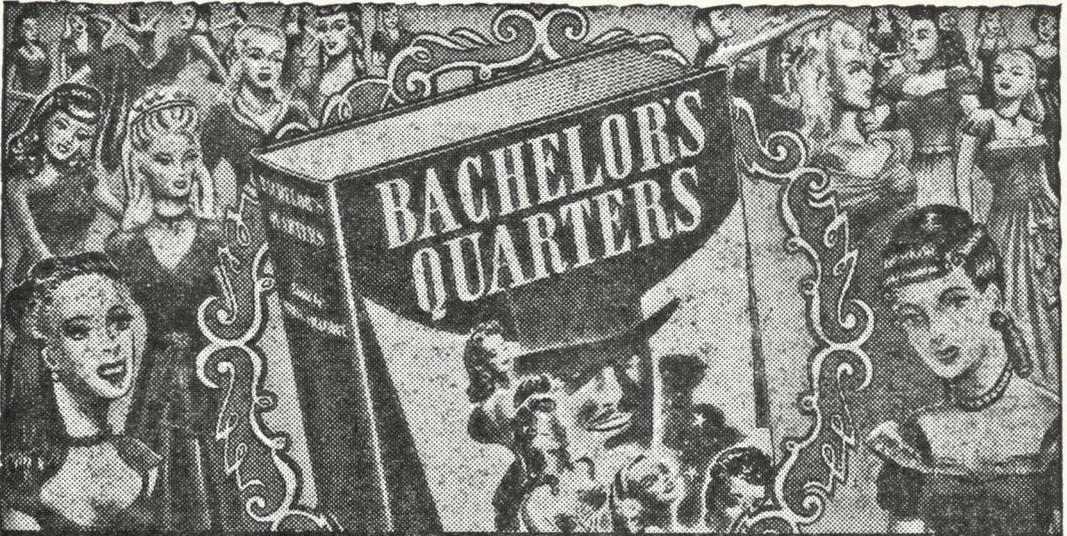
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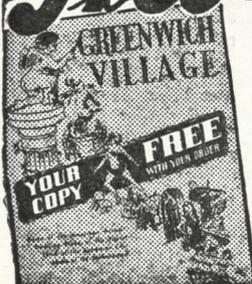
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