

# DETECTIVE BOOK

AND  
MAGAZINE

WINTER  
20¢



*Who would be guilty when  
the Dead Man signed?*

## CONFESSION OF A CORPSE

DETECTIVE BOOK'S  
FULL-LENGTH '2" NOVEL

by C. W. FOX and  
JONATHAN TREE

*Plus short stories*  
by RAY BRADBURY  
STEWART STERLING





**DETECTIVE BOOK MAGAZINE'S  
\$2.00 BOOKLENGTH NOVEL**

# CONFESSION *of a* CORPSE

**By C. W. FOX and JONATHAN TREE**

*In advance of publication in book form*



Only the pale hand of Death could write *finis* to the tragic case of young Bob McLane, the ex-Marine Corps hero, who returned to the States to face an enemy far deadlier, far more insidious than any army of Banzai-screaming Japs!



*Plus Three Thrilling Short Stories*

- TOUCH AND GO!** . . . . . Ray Bradbury 85  
Acton's ten, chubby, pink fingertips shaped perfect murder with one deft twist. "Oh, but you couldn't be *mean* enough to betray me now," he cried, as his victim's mocking laughter still echoed through that huge, vault-like room!
- NEVER COME MOURNING** . . . . . Stewart Sterling 91  
". . . because once the blaze is set, and women in negligees leap from high windows, and black smoke billows out over the city, there's *nothing* you can do . . ."
- THE BLOOD-RED ROSES** . . . . . John Marshall Tufts 102  
Their scent was the scent of lust and murder, those six pretty red roses that would brand tortured, innocent Jeff Monro with a killer's conscience and a killer's guilt!

## **DETECTIVE BOOK** *Magazine*

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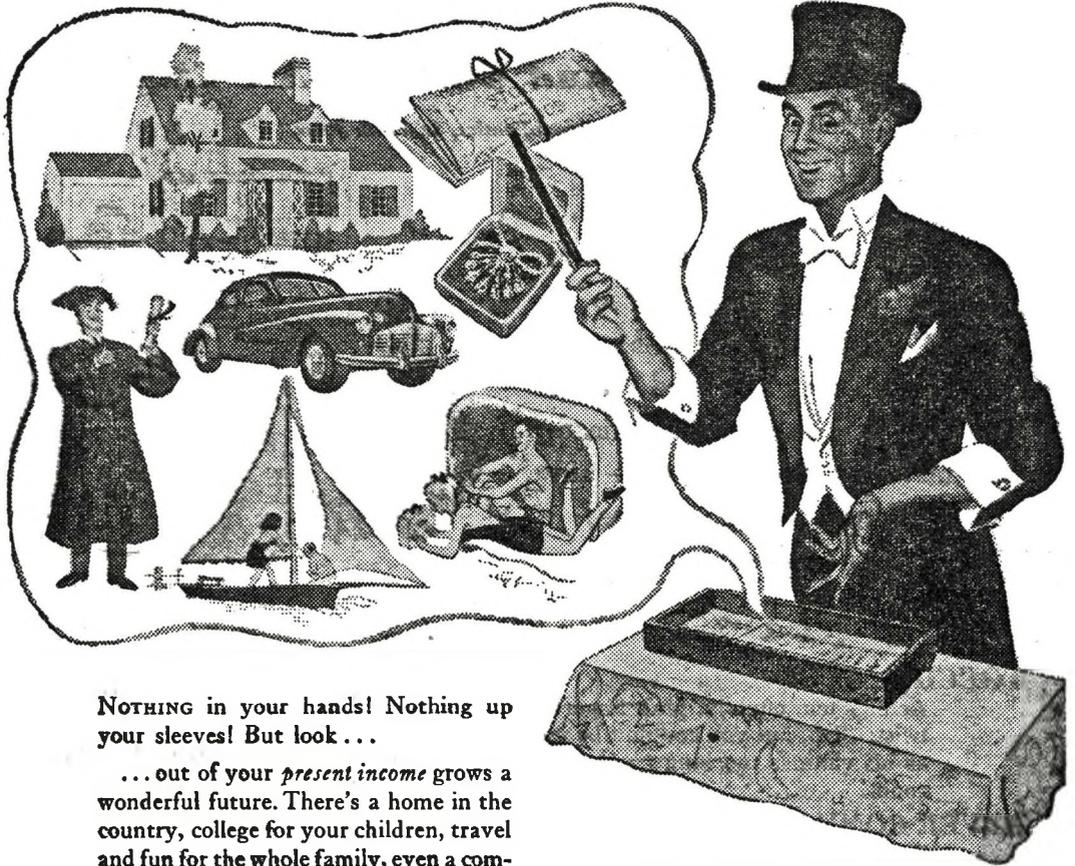


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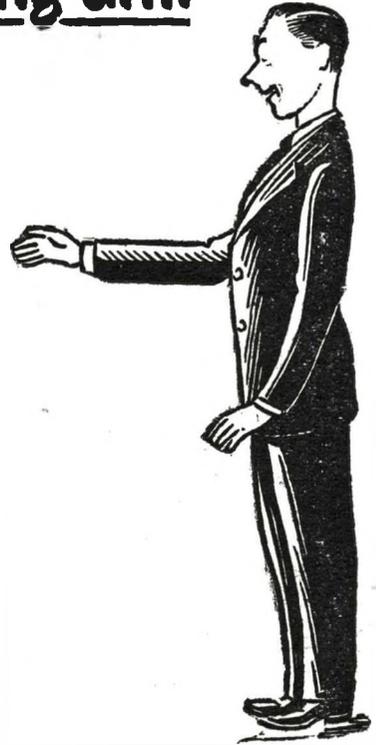


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# CONFESSIOIN OF A CORPSE

By CHARLES WILLIAM FOX and JONATHAN TREE

**I**F Captain Robert McLane, lately of the Marine Corps, had not stopped to buy a newspaper in the subway station at Grand Central, the lives of many people, and the deaths of some, might have been very different. Perhaps a trapped and lonely man might have lived longer, certainly Anne Martin would not have trembled sleeplessly in her apartment on Bleeker Street before she slept forever.

On the other hand, an evil cancer might have grown to such a size that little except a million lives could ever have cut it out. And after all, there were very few to mourn the handful of people who did die because he bought the paper.

For by pausing at the newsstand McLane was delayed several seconds in reaching the train platform. As a consequence he missed the train he could have taken if he had hurried down the station steps without a stop. Even so, he might have caught it by running. Several people who passed him on the steps did reach the train and, by holding the last door of the last car open for one another, managed to get aboard. He didn't feel like running. Although the doctors had not said he couldn't, his leg still ached a bit when the weather was damp, and he had decided to be a little cautious for a while.

At the time it didn't seem to make much difference which train he took. He was in no hurry. The only reason he was out at all was because ever since he came back he'd had trouble sleeping. That, he reflected, was to be expected. His life had changed quite a lot since the last time he had been in New York, back in 1941. Was it really that long ago? Yes, for since then there had been Pearl Harbor, the Southwest Pacific, Okinawa, the hospital in Guam and other hospitals in the States. Then he had gone back to China to lend

a hand before he took his discharge. Now there was New York, and looking for a job, and trying to get settled somewhere.

In his restlessness he had acted on a sudden urge. He would take a walk in Times Square now that the rain had stopped. He liked the lighted streets, the garish signs, the faces of the crowd that would be there, even at midnight. It might relax him. Certainly it was better than counting the tickings of the clock as he lay awake in the darkness of his bedroom.

But taking one train or another didn't seem to make much difference. He could not know, of course, what was going to happen on the train which he did take, nor how it would plunge him into a series of adventures of which he had no more idea, at the moment, than the man from whom he had just bought his newspaper. That sixth sense of impending danger, which had saved his life many times during battle, was dormant again. Loud noises no longer made him duck.

When the next train came in he waited until the east-bound passengers had pushed each other out, then entered and sat down. The car filled, the doors puffed shut, the air brakes hissed and the train started on its brief underground journey. McLane folded his paper in the lengthwise fashion of New York subway riders, a trick he had just recently learned and, half reading, half observing his fellow passengers, he settled back for a short ride.

Across the car from him another man took a folded tabloid from his overcoat pocket. It was, McLane observed, the morning edition of *Watch*, a new paper started while he had been away. Its front page, completely filled with a headline, startled him. "RED-BAITING SENATORS SEEK TO CRIPPLE STATE DEPT," it read. He remembered his own

paper and opened it fully. Apparently something big had happened, something disturbing. He must have missed it on the radio.

Page one of the early *Times* seemed to have no news at all concerning the State Department. He turned to page two, three. Nothing. He looked at the index. Could *Watch* have received a news item which *The New York Times* had not, especially one which sounded so important? It did not seem likely. Ah, here it was, on page 12 under the headline, "Means Sought to Bar Disloyal Employees."

He read the few paragraphs. It was a story to the effect that at a hearing before a Senate Committee on appropriations for the State Department, a senator had declared he had heard reports that persons suspected of disloyalty to the United States had found jobs in the department. An assistant secretary, appearing before the committee, had agreed that such charges had been made and, upon investigation, had seemed to have some basis in fact, but that difficulty had been experienced in dealing with the situation because of provisions of the Civil Service laws. The senator had said that means should be found to assure the integrity of personnel in so important a branch of the government.

There was nothing that McLane could see about anybody's trying to cripple anything. Still, he had heard that *Watch* was a new paper and had been started for the express purpose of telling the truth about the news, facts that other papers would not print because of editorial bias or outside pressure. He realized he didn't know much about those things. He was out of touch with things back home. Maybe he should start looking into some of these matters that he had not much time to think about since the 'canal. The rest of the world had moved a long way, and maybe he ought to know where it was going, now that he was going along with it.

His thoughts were interrupted by the lights outside the car windows as the train squealed into the Times Square station. Other passengers stood up and crowded about the center doors and, as the train slowed to a stop, he stood up too. It was then that it happened, so quickly that for

a moment he could not be sure he had actually seen it.

A MAN, standing directly in front of him in the crowd at the door, stumbled as though thrown off balance by the lurching car, and as he stumbled he clutched the right shoulder of another man who was facing him. It was perfectly normal, perfectly timed. It could have been accidental—except that, as the man who was being pushed glanced at his shoulder and then at the man who was pushing him, the latter's right hand darted inside the other's coat. A split-second later, when the hand was withdrawn, it held a thin black envelope.

It was done so swiftly, so deftly, that if McLane's eyes had not been focused on the spot by pure chance, he would never have seen it. Certainly no one else in the crowd was aware that a pocket had been picked right beside them, with the smooth skill of a master magician's pass.

McLane stepped forward just as the car came to a sharp stop. The door jerked open and the clot of passengers pushed through. The pickpocket—a short man in a brown coat and a battered gray hat—stepped ahead of his victim and hurried into the human stream on the platform. McLane pressed after him. As he passed the man who had been robbed he took him by the elbow. "You've had your pocket picked, Jack. That fellow going there. I saw him. Come on, I'll help you get him."

The victim turned a startled face, his hand flew to his inside coat pocket, he made a little sound and the deep furrow between his brows became an exclamation point to punctuate the fear that came into his eyes. By now the thief was several paces ahead, threading his way nimbly through the crowds, and McLane, with an added "Come on," hurried after him, at a limping half-run. Two sailors and their girls crossed his path and he bumped into them. One of the sailors muttered something about a "dumb gyrene" and the girls giggled.

He continued his pursuit, dodging, jostling, keeping the fleeing figure in sight as they went through a turnstile until, as they approached the exit stairs, he grabbed the man with his left hand, swung him

around and against the wall with his right, and shifted his grip to coat lapel and arm.

"Hey, what th' hell?"

"Sure, and what the hell's the idea of picking that guy's pocket on the train?"

"You're nuts! And let go my arm, hero. The war's been over for a year now—or ain't you heard? Leggo me."

"If you don't shut your mouth," McLane said between his tight, white lips, "and stand still I'm going to bust you wide open, Jack. I saw you take something out of this man's pocket."

The thief glanced back toward the turnstiles. "What man?"

McLane looked around, but the victim of the robbery was not to be seen. He peered farther back into the station. People everywhere but none of them acting as though he had just been robbed. Surprised, McLane looked at each passing face. There he—no, that wasn't the one. Where was he? Intent on finding the man who would back up his story—and keep him from looking like a fool—he relaxed his grip on the thief's arm, and with a quick jerk the pickpocket twisted. McLane redoubled his grasp on the coat lapel.

"The hell with you, let go!" With a sudden motion the thief threw his arms backward and spun out of the coat.

As the coatless man rushed up the stairs, two at a time, McLane stood where he was, uncertain and uncomfortable. It was clearly pointless to take up the chase without being able to produce the injured party. A knot of people who had been attracted by the scuffle were staring at him, and with a kind of stupid surprise he realized he still held an empty coat in his outstretched arm. He gave the gaping audience a grin which he hoped was debonair but which he felt was only imbecilic, considered saying something about the difficulty of finding civilian clothes, thought better of it, and started to walk toward the exit.

The crowd melted away.

This, he thought to himself as he stood at the subway exit, is what comes of trying to help strangers. He watched the people coming out. Where was the man to whom he had tried to play the Samaritan? How could a person be told he'd

just had his pocket picked and act as though he'd merely been wished a good evening? And, incidentally, what did the fellow look like? He wasn't short, nor was he tall—he needed a shave, McLane remembered, and he had a deep frown between his eyebrows. But there must be a million men in New York who need a shave at one o'clock in the morning. And who wouldn't frown, everything consid-

ered? McLane was frowning himself, he realized, as he waited for the robbed man to show up. He considered the coat which he held in his hand and wondered what to do with it. He might give it to a policeman, but that would probably mean having to answer a lot of questions. And when you stopped to think it over, the story sounded a little fishy, didn't it? But the coat was too good to be thrown away; good tweed, with not a worn spot on it.

"I certainly fouled up that deal," he said to himself. "Like Hogan's goat."

Walking in Times Square hardly seemed the thing he most wanted to do now, so he hailed a cab. "Tenth Street, between Sixth and Fifth," he told the driver.

**S**EATED in the cab, as it swung down Broadway, he lit a cigarette. "I wish I'd hit that rat," he thought. "I didn't like the way he talked. If I ever run into him again I'll try not to forget." The image of the swarthy face, the yellowed teeth, the dirty shirt collar remained with him, and with pent-up belligerence he smacked his fist against the palm of his hand.

"Anywhere along here, driver," he said as the taxi turned off Sixth.

"Goodnight."

"Goodnight, captain."

He pocketed his change and walked up to a brick house. The steps and the wall glistened with the street light reflected from the wetness of the earlier rain. Winter-wan flower boxes hung from the stone sills of the first-floor windows. In summer they would again be carefully tended miniature flower gardens, part of the charm and color of Greenwich Village, but right now they were narrow tubs of mud and reminded McLane of parts of the Southwest Pacific.

"Vella Lavella," he mused half aloud as he turned his key in the lock, "that was a hell of a place, wasn't it?" He walked up two flights, which didn't help his aching leg, and let himself into the apartment he was using while his aunt was away.

He switched on the light in the entrance hall, then in the living room. The apartment occupied a full floor of what had been a single house but had been remodeled. It was quiet, pleasantly decorated and tastefully furnished. The hall had broad green-and-white striped paper on the walls and contained two chairs flanking a narrow table. Lamps stood on each end of the table and between them was a mirror which was a collector's item but whose flaked and tarnished silvering gave back an image which had nonplussed McLane the first time he looked in it.

The living room was spacious and large for a New York apartment. Set in one of the side walls, which were painted gray-green, was an arched fireplace of shiny black marble with a davenport of grand scale at right angles to it. Two French windows looked out on Tenth Street and gave access to narrow balconies. There was a kitchen of modest dimensions, and one bedroom. It was the sort of place McLane might like to have for himself some day, though if it were his he would have more overstuffed chairs and fewer antiques—at least, that's what he supposed they were. They looked as though you had to sit on them lightly, especially if you weighed within ten pounds of two hundred. Still, it had been considerate of Aunt Caroline to go off to Sea Island for a month just when he came to New York to look for a job. Hadn't done much looking during the five days he had been in town, though, or seen many people, or even drunk all that whiskey he had promised himself. Well, he'd look tomorrow, if he could make up his mind to get started. That was the trouble, getting started.

Maybe he wasn't readjusted. Maybe he was a problem veteran. Maybe he needed a drink.

He tossed the tweed coat on the living-room sofa, carefully hung his uniform coat and cap in a closet, kicked off his shoes and stepped into a pair of slippers. Then

he loosened his shirt collar and tie, and reached for the bottle of bourbon on the living room mantel. Aunt Caroline would have a fit if she ever came in and saw that, he chuckled.

In the small kitchen he found a glass which he should have washed before, rinsed it out—whiskey would kill any germs—found some ice cubes in the refrigerator, remembered to refill the tray and poured himself a drink.

Studying the amount judiciously, he added a little more and went back to the living room.

There he sat down carefully on a Sheraton chair, which he promptly tilted back so he could place his feet on a footstool covered with needlepoint, and reached for the coat he had so recently acquired. Rather good material, it seemed, but there were no marks, not even cleaner's tags. Nothing in the inside pocket, nothing in the right pocket but there, in the left, a black leather folder. No doubt the one which had been stolen on the train. What else could it be?

There were seven separate papers in it—three photostats of letters, a newspaper clipping, two original letters and a carbon copy of a third. The two original letters were typed under the letterhead of the "League to Safeguard Democracy." He sipped his whiskey and began reading them. There were mentions of "WW" and "WWC." Also, plans were evidently being made concerning a publicity campaign in connection with "WWC," or so it seemed to McLane. It didn't look very important, anyhow, and he wondered why anyone would pick a pocket for such stuff. He put the papers back in the envelope, tossed it and the coat back on the sofa, and finished his bourbon. Not bad. He thought he would probably sleep well to-night.

As it actually turned out, though, somewhere in his dreams he was in a subway, only it was raining in the subway, and when the car door opened he found it was really a pill box door so he threw a grenade in it, and just before the grenade exploded he saw a Jap start to come out, only the Jap was wearing a business suit and his shirt collar was dirty. As the grenade went off, McLane awoke. His leg hurt.

## II

THE COFFEE made a little amber geyser under the glass dome of the percolator until Robert McLane looked at his watch and turned off the gas. He rummaged in the cabinet below the stove for a clean skillet but found none. He considered washing one of those in the sink, decided against it and found a pie tin or the pantry shelf which would do instead. Filling it recklessly with bacon and putting it over a flame, he watched it until it began to sizzle and sputter, then he turned it over on the other side.

He popped two slices of bread into the toaster and drained the fat from the bacon into the sink.

The rain of the night before had passed, and today was a bright Wednesday, just the day for doing things before he started tapering off for the weekend. Today, too, Hazel should come and clean up the place and wash the pile of dishes in the sink. It didn't seem possible he could have dirtied that many dishes in less than two days, yet Hazel had been there on Monday. He had had to get out of bed to answer the door bell, and was quite surprised to find a handsome colored girl at the door until she had explained that she came in on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays to clean for "Mis' Caroline."

Wednesday, he told himself again, was certainly the day to get out of the house and look for a job. Maybe he'd also walk over to Wanamaker's and see if he could buy a suit.

He dressed, stuck the bottle of bourbon in the cabinet behind his aunt's discreet decanters of sherry and port, picked up his cigarettes from the table, looked at his watch and noted the time, quarter after nine, and started to leave. But his eye was caught by the crumpled coat on the couch, and he remembered the subway ride of the evening before. Well, he'd better do something about that coat, or at least those papers. Maybe someone would be glad to have them back.

The telephone was on a little stand in the hall with a chair beside it. He sat down and reached for the envelope. What was the name of that outfit? And what should he say? Just that he had found the papers somewhere, he guessed, better

not say anything about the coat. He leafed through the letters and noted that on the upper left-hand corner of the "League to Safeguard Democracy" letterhead there was a telephone number. He dialed it.

The voice of a switchboard operator answered. "Hello," he said, "is this the League to Safeguard Democracy?"

"Whom did you wish to speak to, please?"

"I don't know. I found some letters last night that I think may belong to somebody in your outfit."

"Just a minute, please. I'll connect you to Mr. Morris." A click, a wait, a man's voice. The operator's voice came in, "Mr. Morris, will you talk to this gentleman who says he's found some letters? Go ahead sir, here's Mr. Morris."

"Hello, Mr. Morris. This is Captain McLane. I found some letters last night and I think they might belong to you. At least they have your name on the letterhead."

"Whose name, mine?"

"No, not yours. Your outfit's name. The League to Safeguard Democracy."

"Oh, well, then I think you want to talk to Mr. Anderson. Just a minute. Operator, connect this man to Mr. Anderson, please."

Once more the click and a buzz.

"Anderson speaking."

"Hello, Mr. Anderson. My name is Bob McLane. I found some letters last night which I think may belong to you, and I'd like to send them back to you if they are important."

"Yes, Mr. McLane, what kind of letters?"

"Well, it was an envelope, really, and in it were three letters on your League's stationery, some photostats and a newspaper clipping."

"Well, if you'll wait a minute I'll see if anybody around here has lost them," and then he heard a voice inquiring "some guy says he found some letters, any of you guys lose anything?"

"No, Mr. McLane, there doesn't seem to be anybody around here who lost any letters. What do these letters say?"

"Well, let's see. One of them, here, is to a Mr. Edward Dial, and it says 'Dear Ed. I think everything is about ready for the WW campaign. You will receive

the check for Minter tomorrow and' . . ."

"Wait a minute," Anderson's voice interrupted him, "who signed that letter?"

"It's just signed 'Paul.'"

"Will you hold on a minute? I'd like to ask some of the people in the next office about this. What did you say your name was? Oh, yes, McLane."

The phone was silent for a long time, and then a new voice came on. "Mr. McLane?"

"Yes, this is Captain McLane."

"This is Paul Houseman, Captain. Mr. Anderson tells me that you have found some letters and he thought maybe I might have been the person who signed one of them. Would you mind reading the letter to me?"

McLane read the letter again. "' . . . receive the check for Minter tomorrow and then he can proceed as we have planned. I don't think there can be any slip-up, public opinion being what it is since the cost of living has gone up, and this should be our best campaign on the W.W. crowd to date.' Then it says, 'Yours truly, Paul,' and that's all there is to it."

"And where did you find this letter, Captain?"

"It was lying on the sidewalk in front of the house; that is, the folder was, and I picked it up as I was coming in last night." That wasn't a bad story.

**T**HERE was a pause at the other end of the line. Then, "Well, I don't think it's my letter, Captain." There was something in the way it was said to make McLane think "The hell it isn't," and then the voice continued. "I tell you what, give me your name and address and your phone number and if I do find out who lost it I'll give you a call."

McLane gave his address and phone number, adding that he expected to be out for the rest of the day but that he would be home next morning until ten o'clock. He hung up and put the papers back in the envelope which he shoved into a pocket of the brown tweed coat. Then he went out.

On the street he turned left and walked along Tenth. The sun was warm and felt good on his leg. Spring couldn't be too far away. He thought of some of the other Springs he had known, such as the

one when he had been staging for the Okinawa campaign. That was a tough show. After the Marines had taken the northern half of the island, and chased the Japs through the pine trees and out of the hills behind Nago, they had to go south and help the Army. If he hadn't gone south he wouldn't have got hit, but maybe he'd have got it somewhere else anyway.

He remembered that he'd had a premonition, as soon as the division learned it was going to the southern half of the island. He wasn't afraid, now that he thought of it. Rather he had had a mild curiosity about how bad it would be, and whether he would get home or would stay behind in one of those whitepatterned cemeteries, like the one he had passed as they rode down to Machinato before going into the lines again.

All he had know was that something was going to happen to him soon. It was strange that he should remember the feeling so strongly now, as he walked along.

He crossed Fifth Avenue and went down to Eighth Street, where he turned toward Wanamaker's. Once in the store he decided his luck for the day was going to be good, because he was able not only to find a suit that fitted his six-foot frame but that he actually liked as well. The only alterations would be to the trousers, and after talking with the clerk he arranged to have the tailoring done immediately so he could pick the suit up later in the afternoon.

He would need a hat, and self-consciously he tried on several until he found one that didn't look too strange, though none of them felt quite natural. He was glad when he put his cap on again and was able to walk away from the other shoppers with the hat safely concealed in its box.

A trip to the shirt section was followed by a visit to the necktie counter, where he bought four with the help of a pretty girl clerk and then left the store quite satisfied with the morning's work. A suit, a hat, shirts, ties and he could wear his uniform shoes very nicely with the suit he had bought. Yes, he was well on his way to being a regular John Q. Civilian. Now he'd take this stuff back home and then go uptown for lunch. After that he'd call on

some people and see about a job of some kind.

He'd been an engineer of sorts when he came out of college, maybe he could be one again.

The apartment looked much better than when he had left it two hours before, and Hazel was just finishing the last of the dusting when he returned.

"Hello Hazel," he said. "You've certainly managed to get this place squared away in a hurry. I'm sorry I leave it in such a mess all the time but I'll try to do better from now on."

"That's all right, Mr. McLane. I guess you didn't get much chance to practice housekeeping out there in them foxholes. Your aunt Caroline tol' me you were out there a long time."

"I was, Hazel." He settled into a chair, lighted a cigarette and opened the morning paper he had bought on his way back to the apartment. Amid the headlines about strikes and railroad wrecks he found a short item about a Marine detachment being sent to Peleliu, and with a shudder he remembered the days and night he had spent during the assault on Bloody Nose Ridge. It all seemed, now, like something that had happened in a dream, or to somebody else, and he turned to Hazel as she dusted the marble mantel and said, "At least it seemed like a long time, then. But since it's over I sometimes wonder where all those years went to."

"Did you shoot many of those Japs, Mr. McLane?"

It was hard to conjure up a clear picture of the *banzai* charges any more, or of the piles of dead Japanese stretched out in front of each BAR squad, and he could only answer, "Oh, I shot at a lot of them. Maybe I hit some now and then." To change the subject he asked her, "Did you have any friends in the war, Hazel?"

"Yes, suh," she told him. "My brother. He was in the Army. In the E.T.O. He was a staff sergeant, but he's been back here for more than a year."

"That's fine. What did he do over there?"

"I think he spent most of his time in Paris. I don't know exactly what he did. Every time we ask him he just rolls his eyes and grins, sort of foolish like."

**L**UCKY DEVIL, he thought. He should have been out in the Pacific, hauling ammunition up to the front lines. Instinctively he glanced at the Purple Heart ribbon on his chest, a memento caused by a Jap shell that had landed squarely on an amphibious truck full of explosives, and driven by two colored Marines. The lucky hit had put him in the hospital for a long time, and he wondered what had ever happened to the badly injured driver whom he had dragged from the flaming wreck. Aloud he said, "Some guys had all the luck. I wish I could have gone to Paris." He looked at his watch. "It's after twelve o'clock, what time do you knock off and leave here?"

"Oh, I leave when I'm finished. I'm almost through now. I put all your dirty clo'es in the laundry bag and you can put them out for the laundry man when he comes tomorrow. And I cleaned off that foot stool and you better not let Mis' Caroline catch you putting your feet up on it!" She moved into the entrance hall and in a minute he heard the carpet sweeper. Then it stopped and she called to him. "Mr. McLane, is this coat yours? I never seen it before."

"What coat?" He was reading a report of plans for Army and Navy unification, searching for something about the fate of his beloved Marines, paying little attention to the girl.

"This brown one."

"No, it isn't mine." An idea came to him. "Do you know anybody who could use it, Hazel? You can have it if you want to."

"I sure do know somebody who can use it, Mr. McLane. I got a friend it will just fit, I think. Thank you—thanks a lot."

"It's yours if you want it." He heard the sweeper again and called above its noise. "Look in the pocket and take out that black folder and put it on the table beside the telephone, will you, please?" Then he went back to his perusal of the newspaper.

A quarter of an hour later Hazel, wearing a hat and coat, and with the pick-pocket's coat over her arm, stepped into the living room. "Goodby, Mr. McLane," she said. "Thanks again for this coat, and I'll be back on Friday."

"Goodbye, Hazel. Give my regards to your friend, that's a pretty good coat." He heard the door shut behind her as he continued his reading.

When he had finished he realized that he was hungry, and he also knew there was little to eat in the ice-box. He might as well go uptown for his lunch and see if he could make an appointment, later, to discuss the possibilities of a peace-time job with a friend of his father to whom he had a letter of introduction.

As he reached in the closet for his coat and hat he noticed that, except for the telephone, the hall table was bare. The black envelope with the letters was not there, nor was it in the table drawer, nor on the floor. He searched the closet floor but could not find it, and he realized that Hazel must not have heard his directions above the noise of the carpet sweeper. Well, he thought, he would see her again on Friday and ask her to return it, and if he had any inquiries about the letters he could postpone delivering them to their owner until Hazel brought them back to him. He hoped she'd keep them.

He walked down to the corner and caught a Sixth Avenue bus going uptown. Where should he eat? He felt silly, going along on a bus, looking for food, but with no idea where he was going. Then he remembered—there was a place he had heard war correspondents talking about, a place where they were always playing some game with matches. Bleek's, that was it.

He got off the bus at 40th Street and asked a policeman where Bleek's was and, when the policeman told him, he walked over and went in. He liked the looks of it. There was a long bar on the right, and a small dining room at the rear was full of smoke and conversation. He caught the headwaiter's eye.

"There will be a slight wait for a table, Captain," said the headwaiter, glancing with some respect at McLane's rows of ribbons, "but I'll have a place for you very soon. Wouldn't you like to wait at the bar?"

"A good idea, thanks." McLane's eyes had already noticed an interesting array of bottles. "Don't be in too much of a hurry to call me."

He seated himself on a stool, popped a

peanut into his mouth. "Give me some of your best bourbon, with soda."

"Make it two!" a large voice shouted, and McLane received a slap across the back which came dangerously near confusing the peanut mid-way in its trip. "Bob McLane! How the hell are you Bob, you old hero, you? Still dressed up like a chocolate soldier, I see. Are you still alive? How's your festered leg?"

"Pat! Pat Gorski, you old plagiarizing bolshevist son-of-a-gun. I didn't know you were in New York. Sit down. Have a drink. Have two drinks. Boy, am I glad to see somebody in this town I know, even if it is only you, you jerk. Bartender, give this man a drink—a big one."

THERE was no mistaking McLane's honest delight in his unexpected meeting with Patrick Gorski, son of a Russian father and an Irish mother, war correspondent and veteran of as many Marine campaigns as McLane himself. "Where the hell have you been?" McLane asked him. "I haven't seen you since you left the hospital in Guam. Still writing for that cheap rag of yours?"

"You insult me, Bob, you hurt me to the quick. Why, hell, if it hadn't been for the story I wrote about the great Captain Robert McLane you never would have got that Navy Cross of yours." It was pleasant banter between two friends who understood each other, who talked the same language, who had been to the same wars together.

"Yes, and if it hadn't been for you, you crazy hack, I'd never have got the Purple Heart, either. How's your arm fellow?"

"The hell you say. Why—you were living on borrowed time long before you ever met me, to my great misfortune. The arm's all right. How's your leg?"

"Your misfortune?" McLane hooted. "Why if it hadn't been for me you'd never have written that story—what was the corny title you used—'The Japs Made A Hit With Me.' Very funny. I'm the guy who brought you fame and fortune, that's who I am. The leg's got some kind of a silver gizmo in it, but I can get around all right. Have another drink. Have a pile of drinks."

The headwaiter tapped him on the shoulder. "I have a table for you, Captain.

Hello, Mr. Gorski. Are you two together?"

"Hello Fred," said the newspaper man, "by a strange twist in the long string of my personal misfortunes we are. We will eat together. Give us a table where the gilded tycoons who patronize this beanery can gaze upon my friend, Captain Robert McLane, the Peril of the Pacific and the Curse of China. Boy," he continued when they were seated, "I'll never forget when that shell hit. There you were, a hole in your leg I could drive a jeep through, dragging those poor devils out of that Duck, and there I was . . ."

"Shut up," laughed McLane, "and tell the man what you want to eat."

### III

"LOOK, PAT," McLane said, "I've got to go. I want to try to see a man this afternoon about a job and then I have to go down to Wanamaker's to get me a new suit that is supposed to be ready about four."

"All right. I ought to be looking in at my shop, anyhow. But when are we going to get together again? Not that I like to look at your ugly puss, but you probably need somebody to take care of you in the big city. After all, having made you what you are today I can't very well abandon my own child on some stranger's doorstep, even though I refuse to recognize you in public."

"You name the time," McLane suggested. "I'm a free man and can come and go as I please."

"Tell you what," Gorski replied. "I shouldn't do this, but it just so happens that I have an appointment to see the most beautiful girl in the world tonight. We were planning to sit around and drink a few slippers of champagne and play some hillbilly records—mood music—while I try to sell her the idea of coming over to my place to live until death do us part. Now she has a room-mate. . ."

"And you want me to keep the room-mate occupied so you won't have to send her to the movies—or whatever it is you do to get her out of the way."

Gorski grinned. "Quick, that's my boy McLane."

"What does this room-mate look like?"

"I was afraid you'd ask that." Pat's eyes twinkled. "She looks just about as ugly as that nurse you got me a date with when I first met you at Pearl."

"I was afraid you'd bring that up. But what the hell did you care, it was so dark on the beach you couldn't see her face?"

"Yeah, but I held a light up close to her for her cigarette and fainted dead away. When I came to she told me I had promised to marry her. If I hadn't shoved off for Saipan the next morning I'd have been trapped. Gosh, I'd probably be living in East Cucumber or somewhere, trying to feed a lot of kids all as homely as she was." He shuddered. "But do you want to come along tonight? It'll be grim, but who are you to be choosy?"

"You make it sound so damned attractive."

"It's a date. Where the hell do you live, anyhow?"

"Right now I'm living in my Aunt's apartment on Tenth Street."

"Couldn't be better. Write it down, with your telephone number. Tell you what I'll do. These materialized dreams live over on Stuyvesant Street, and that's only a few blacks from where you live. I'll pick you up at your apartment somewhere, around seven thirty."

"And I'll be there," McLane assented, "with my tongue hanging out all over my brand new suit. I haven't had a date since I left San Diego. Do these girls have names?"

"Names?" Gorski snorted. "The one I try to claim for my own is so beautiful she is known only as 'Oh', while the one you are going to get is so repulsive that nobody has ever wanted to ask. You'll see."

"It sounds like a wonderful evening. Now let's get the check and get out of here."

They parted on the street, and McLane walked across Fortieth Street to a tall building on Fifth Avenue where he took an elevator to an upper floor. He had a letter of introduction to a friend of his father, and this was a first pass at finding a job. He stepped out, his ear drums popping from his rapid ascent, and asked the receptionist at the desk for the office of Mr. Adams. A messenger stepped up to show him the way.

"Right this way, Captain. I don't think Mr. Adams is in this afternoon, though."

The messenger led McLane to a suite of offices, entered one of them, and spoke to a woman at a desk. "This gentleman would like to see Mr. Adams."

"I'm sorry" said the secretary, "but Mr. Adams has gone for the afternoon. What did you want to see him about? Can I help you?"

McLane realized he was embarrassed. His fingers seemed to have changed to thumbs and he had no place to put his hands. This was worse than a night patrol, and he wished someone had warned him about looking for jobs.

"I have a letter for him," he managed to get out, "from my father. They were friends. In Indiana. I wanted to talk to him about a job."

THE secretary smiled. "I'm sorry he isn't in, but he really did leave, just about half an hour ago. I'll be glad to tell him you called. He'll be in tomorrow. Why don't you call him in the morning and make an appointment? What was your name?"

"McLane. Robert McLane."

"You're a captain, aren't you," she asked, as she wrote his name on a piece of paper. "Are you on terminal leave?"

"Yes, I am," he told her, "but you don't need to write down that captain stuff because by this time tomorrow I'll be in civilian clothes again. Say, why don't I leave this letter here, then Mr. Adams can read it before I call him. It's from my father," he repeated. "It probably says that I don't know much but that I'm healthy and willing to learn."

"I'll see that Mr. Adams gets it as soon as he comes in in the morning, Captain. And I'll tell him you will call. About eleven?"

"I think I can manage to stagger to the phone by that time," he nodded. "Thanks a lot. Goodbye, and I'll see you tomorrow, I hope." He bowed out of the office, caught the elevator down, and took a Fifth Avenue bus marked "Wanamaker Terminal."

The suit was ready. He tried it for a final fit and admired himself in the three-way mirror. "Looks pretty good, doesn't it? Wrap it up, please. I don't suppose,"

he continued to the clerk, "that you have an unlimited supply of these things, do you? One hardly seems enough."

"Try coming around next Wednesday morning," said the clerk. "We may get some in then."

He walked back toward Tenth Street with the brown suit box under his arm. It had been a pretty good day so far, he mused. New suit, date tonight, see a man about a job tomorrow, and best of all he'd met his old friend Pat.

"Oh, there'll be no promotion this side of the ocean," he sang to himself, and winked at a pretty girl who passed him. "But cheer up, my lads, bless 'em all."

He stuck his key into the lock of the street door and opened it. Across the street was a parked car with a man sitting in the front seat. McLane noticed it idly as he closed the door behind him and started up the two flights of steps. He heard a horn, outside, give three quick toots.

The apartment door swung open freely as he pushed his key into the lock, and he wondered how he had managed to forget to close it properly when he had gone out. With a slight start he saw that he had forgotten to turn out the lights, too.

Then he saw what had happened. His aunt's living room was in wild disorder. The drawers of the desk had been pulled out and dumped on the floor, papers had been pulled from the pigeon-holes and scattered about. His clothes had been removed from the closet and were lying on the carpet, books had been swept from the shelves.

An object almost at his feet drew his glance from the confusion of the living room. It was a large wooden packing case on the floor of the hall. He examined it. It was long and sturdy and his name and the Tenth Street address were painted on the top. The paint was wet. He lifted the hinged lid, but the box was empty.

He stepped into the living room. Something or someone had gone through it thoroughly, and it hadn't been moths. It was hard to know where to start to clean up. He picked up a cushion and tossed it aimlessly on a chair. Then he heard the apartment door close softly. He whirled back toward the hall as there came a sound of footsteps beating down the stairs. He

hurried to the door and out on the landing. Someone was disappearing around the corner where the stairs met the floor below.

"Stop!" McLane shouted.

Knowing he would come off second best in any chase down the steps, he raced back to the living room and through the front windows saw a man dashing across the street. The window was fastened with vertical slide-bolts at top and bottom and he jerked at them wrathfully, and heaved up with all his strength.

"Come back here, damn you!" he shouted as he got the window open. He stepped out on the miniature balcony. If he only had a gun! Where was that gun he'd brought back? In desperation he turned back to the room, seized a book-end from the table and hurled it as the man opened the door of the car parked at the opposite curb. It smacked against the hood as the driver threw out the clutch and the black sedan took off down the street.

"Come back here, you, come back!"

It was no use shouting, of course, and he went inside and shut the window. He walked through the rest of the apartment. Everything had been opened. Rugs had been turned over, even the towels in the linen closet had been pulled out. At a sudden thought he hurried back to the living room, but Aunt Caroline's silver was still there, even though it was on the floor.

It was plain he had come in just as the thief was ready to leave, and while he had stood in the living room the prowler had slipped out and escaped to the waiting automobile. He went over to the telephone, dialed the operator. "Give me the police, please . . . This is Robert McLane, and I just came home here at my Aunt's apartment where I'm staying and somebody has been here trying to rob it . . . What? . . . Tenth Street, two flights up . . . No, but somebody ran out just after I came in. . . Yes, I saw him, but he got into a car across the street. I only saw the back of his head . . . no, I wasn't able to see any license. . . I'll be here. Say, tell them. . . ." The police phone had been hung up, just as he had meant to ask them to bring back the book-end he had thrown. Now he'd have to remember to go down and get it himself.

IN A CORNER of the bedroom he found his pistol. It was on the floor and he picked it up. Funny the thief hadn't taken it. He turned it over in his tanned, hard hands and then recalled there was a Sullivan Law, or something, in New York. Better not let the cops find him with a loaded gun or he'd have some explaining to do himself. He stuck it under his belt and buttoned his coat. In a few minutes he heard a car on the street and looked out. A green and white coupe had come to a stop below.

There were footsteps on the stairs and he opened the door to two men, one in a policeman's uniform and the other in plain clothes. "This where you had a robbery?" the one in the business suit asked. "I'm Ryan, Eighth Precinct." Ryan looked around. "You have had something here, haven't you?"

McLane explained what had happened. "You might look for a car with a dent in the hood," he said. "I hit it a pretty good clip with a book-end. And say," he added, "that big box there came while I was out, and it doesn't belong to me."

"It doesn't, huh?" asked the detective. "Well, that may be a valuable clue, like they say in the books." He turned to his uniformed companion. "Johnny, you just drop down and get that guy who let us in, and bring him up here. I will ask him questions about who was in here today and where this here box came from." He took out a black notebook and began writing in it. "Gotta make a lot of notes and stuff," he explained to McLane. "Impresses the brass hats, you know. But just between you and me, don't expect us to catch the guy who was here."

The policeman returned with the colored janitor. "How many people did you let into this place today?" Ryan asked.

"Nobody, sir. Nobody."

"Come on, think again. Who did you let in here? You better tell me or I'll take you down to the station house."

"Nobody, sir. Nobody but the people from the express who brought that box for Captain McLane, and they went out right after they left it and shut the door behind them."

"There's your answer, Captain," said the detective. "As simple as can be. Two guys bring a box up here and another guy

is in it. They set the box down and walk out. The third guy gets out of the box and goes to work. They weren't looking for anything of your aunt's or they would have put her name on the box. Therefore, *quid, quod quad*, as the lawyers say, they were looking for something of yours. Anything of yours missing?"

"I don't know," McLane confessed. "I've nothing but clothes around here, and they all seem to be present and accounted for. I'll take another look. But how do you know," he asked, "that there was someone in that box?"

"How else? And don't suggest that we call the express company and ask them if they delivered it," Ryan smiled, "because the mere fact that it was carted upstairs proves that they didn't. At least I haven't heard of them doing any extra work." He turned to the policeman. "Johnny, be sure to write down all these brilliant deductions of mine and study them, and someday you too can be a detective."

Johnny made a loud, rasping noise by sticking his tongue between his teeth and blowing.

"See?" Ryan faced McLane with an expression of hopelessness on his face. "Younger generation. No respect. The force is going to hell, that's what I say." He paused. "Why don't you take a look around, Captain, and see if anything is missing. You know, the crown jewels or a bundle of old love letters tied with a faded blue ribbon, or something like that. I'll call up and see if they want to send a lot of guys over here to dust powder around and look for finger prints and take pictures and stuff. Just because I don't think they'll find anything doesn't say they won't. Sometimes those guys even find something worth while."

"The telephone's over there on the table in the hall," McLane told him. "I'll make another quick check." He shuffled through the rubble in the bedroom, but everything he owned seemed to be there, in spite of its disarrangement. "No," he said, when he came back to the living room where the other two men were. "It's all here."

"Well," said Ryan, looking up from his notebook and rubbing his head with a pencil, "it beats me. The lieutenant said he wanted to send his experts over, just for practice. He wants them to take a squint

at that box, says it's a new twist in this precinct. He was so damned pleased you'd think he had thought of it himself. What are you going to do?"

"I think I'll take a shower and change my clothes. Then I've got to get something to eat. I'm going out. There's some whiskey in the cabinet. Help yourself."

"We never drink on duty," Ryan said. "Where did you say it was?"

"In the cabinet, behind the sherry. And there's glasses in the kitchen. Wait, I'll get you some." He went into the kitchen, pulled the pistol from under his coat and placed it in the oven, shutting the door. "Do you want water or soda?" he called as he broke out a tray full of ice cubes. "I think I'll have a small one myself."

#### IV

MC LANE had showered, changed into his new suit, and was sharing sandwiches and bourbon with the two policemen, when there was a knock on the door outside. "That's probably the guys I called for," Ryan said. "Let 'em in, will you Johnny?"

It was Gorski, however. He surveyed the chaos of the living room casually. "Misplace something?" he said. "Hello Ryan. What are you doing here? I haven't seen you since you testified in that football fix. Still tapping wires?"

"I should have worn a fake beard when I came over here, I can see that," Ryan groaned. "A detective's no good when everybody begins to recognize him. How you been?"

McLane mixed a drink and, at Pat's request, related the story of the mysterious intruder.

"Probably some irate father looking for his daughter," Gorski said. "Take my advice, Ryan, and drop the case."

He drained half his drink and put the glass down. "Please, McLane! Stop simpering in that mirror, put on your hat, and come with me. High adventure awaits us. There's no reason why we should hang around here, is there, Ryan?"

Ryan assured them there was no need to stay. He would wait for the fingerprint man to come and would report any progress to McLane the next day. Probably, he added as the two friends went out, he

would take the box with him for further inspection.

"What the hell cooks, Bob?" Gorski asked, jerking his thumb back toward the house. "Who is looking for what?"

"I don't know," McLane confessed. "Money, I guess. I flashed a big roll when I was paying for stuff over at the store this morning, and I gave the clerk my address when he was taking notes for the alterations. Everybody knows that guys on terminal leave are dough heavy. Some sneak thief probably watched me, or followed me and waited around until he saw me go out for lunch."

"Could be," Gorski admitted. "There's an awful lot of that stuff in town since the war. But look, don't mention it to these girls, huh? There is a lot of robbery going on now, and everybody is worried about it. No need to scare them any more than necessary. If they want to be scared they can read the papers."

McLane agreed readily. As they walked along he told Gorski about the incident of the night before, when he had so strangely come into possession of the coat which he later gave to the maid. "Houseman said they didn't belong to him, though I'm not so sure, myself," he concluded. "I think my story about finding them took him by surprise. I'll probably hear from him in a day or two, when he makes up his mind. Then I just hope I can find the damned things for him, or I'll look like a chump, in spades."

"You don't think he could have sent that pickpocket to rob the little man on purpose, do you? He might be stalling until he heard the other guy's story."

"I doubt it," said McLane. "I think he saw that envelope in the other guy's pocket and, being a pickpocket by profession, lifted it more from habit than anything else. I'll wait and see what happens."

They had reached Third Avenue and turned downtown, under the Elevated, until Pat led the way into Stuyvesant Street, once a center of fashionable buildings and homes in the days when Greenwich Village was indeed a village, and Central Park was farm-land. Even today a few of the old houses remain, serene behind their brownstone fronts despite the rumble of the nearby elevated trains, and proudly

resisting the encroachment of second-hand shops and East Side tenements.

It was one of these old buildings that Gorski entered and pushed a bell beside the door. There was no janitor to answer the ring, as there was at McLane's place on Tenth Street, but a buzz answered Gorski's ring and they opened the door and walked in.

"Hey, up there!" Gorski called.

"Hey, down there!" a girl's voice replied. "Come on up."

"Ready or not, you shall be caught," the reporter responded, leading the way, two steps at a time, up the stairs. A lovely, dark-haired girl in an emerald-green housecoat stood outside a door on the second floor, smiling at them as they reached the landing. "Stand where you are, madame. It will do you no good to swallow those documents." Gorski put his arms around the girl, lifted her into the air, and kissed her. "We can prove you are the master spy who stole the plans for the Hudson River Night Boat." He kissed her again. "However, I'm only a man, and you are a *femme fatale*. I have my price. Will you marry me, Miss Linda, so I can call off the raid? Otherwise I have only to blow this whistle and . . ."

"Come in Pat, you fool, and bring your bodyguard with you. I thought you called and said you were bringing a Marine."

THE APARTMENT which they entered was not so large as the one on Tenth Street, McLane noted, but except that there was no entrance hall it was much the same. The three of them, Pat, the smiling girl he had called "Miss Linda," and McLane were on one side of the living room. Across the room, which was about fifteen or twenty feet wide, was a fireplace where some logs burned cozily. A studio couch was at one end of the room, a sofa stood along the wall beside him, two windows looked out on the street. Doors led here and there, there were books on shelves, a table or two, a combination radio and phonograph, and several chairs. In one of them, drawn up at an angle to the fireplace, sat another girl.

"My dears," Pat began to explain, "I did. This very afternoon I met an old friend of mine, one Captain Robert McLane, resplendent in the uniform of the

United States Marines and reeking of whiskey. By this evening I found he had changed. He had forsaken that noble body of men and the very flag he has sworn to uphold and had disguised himself, as you see him now, in several folds of old bur-lap. However, and strictly at your own risk, this is Bob McLane.

"Bob, this epitome of femininity by my side is Linda Cahill. There, on yonder chair reclining, is Miss Joyce Nesmith." He bowed. "Would you girls like to have a drink—of your own whiskey, I hope? No, don't get up, I know where it is. Lindy, come with me and hold an ice cube on my head before I become uncontrollable."

The other girl, Joyce, laughed as the couple left the room. It was a warm and friendly laugh, McLane noted. "Sit down and relax," she smiled, so that her even, white teeth showed between her red lips. "You can at least get a chance to catch your breath and maybe even say a few words before they get back. What do I call you? Captain?"

"Gosh no, not that." He raised one hand as though to wave away the implication of formality. "Call me Bob or Mac or almost anything you want to, I don't care. But I'll have to get used to going around without that 'Captain' tag, I guess, and I might as well start now." He offered her a cigarette and then took one for himself, flipped his lighter into a small flame, held it out for her and then sat down.

Joyce Nesmith was a girl he must see more of, and more often, he decided as he exhaled a cloud of smoke. He couldn't tell just how tall she was, as she sat in the chair, but he could see that she would certainly be tall enough to dance with comfortably, even though he was six feet himself. Her eyes were a dark blue which matched the blue of the dress she was wearing, but her hair was almost a taffy color and she wore it in a long bob. He had been granted a brief estimate of her figure as she had leaned over to take a light for her cigarette, and could not see how any sane young man could complain on that score. As she started to speak again she smiled. The corners of her eyes smiled too.

"How long have you been out?" she asked.

"To tell you the truth," he admitted, "I'm still in. I got back from China about six weeks ago and my terminal leave won't be over for another month. But today is the first day I've been out of uniform. I just got this suit this afternoon. I feel self-conscious as all get-out in it, too."

"I see you're still wearing something, though. What is that blue-and-white thing in your lapel?"

"Oh, it's a miniature Navy Cross. Just something I picked up in my travels. Pat can tell you about it sometime."

PAT and Linda returned with four glasses and Pat took over the conversation again. He told of the meeting at Bleek's, and from there he told how he and McLane had first met and some of the adventures they had had together. He dismissed Joyce's request for the story of McLane's decoration by saying that it was won in a crap game with a Navy aviator. "Aviators have millions of Navy Crosses," he said. Always his stories reflected only the amusing things that happen in a war, the little incidents, the laughs, the friendly and foolish acts that show men as human beings. He was a skilled story teller who could write as well as he talked and his printed tales from the Pacific fronts had won him wide renown.

"But enough of this," he suddenly interrupted himself. "Somebody told me you had some new records here, and I came over to listen to them. Bob, you and Joyous here go out and fill the glasses, I want to be alone—alone with the Lovely Linda. Knock before you come back."

"Come on, Bob," said Joyce. "I can take a hint, and anyhow you might as well know where we keep the ice, just in case you ever come again. And mind you, Patrick Gorski, keep your lecherous hands off that gal. We try to run a nice place here."

They went out, laughing, and Pat went over to the record cabinet and started leafing through some albums. "Why don't you marry me?" he said to Linda, "so I could take you away from all these nasty slurs from your so-called friends. What do you want to hear?"

"Play those Burl Ives records," she answered, "and I'm sure you're a lot more fun the way you are than you would ever be as a husband." There was a wistful note to her voice. "But I do think you're a dear, sweet thing, and maybe I'll marry you someday, when all else palls and I am cured of the drug habit."

Joyce, as McLane had by this time discovered, was just as tall as he had hoped she would be, and even more beautiful in the kitchen than she had been by the firelight and lowered lamps in the living room, if that were possible. He wished it were summer, or that they could be together somewhere in the tropics, so that he could take her swimming.

Anybody could see that she would look well in a bathing suit.

He pointed with his thumb, over his shoulder and toward the living room. "Do they always talk that way?"

"All the time."

"How long have they known each other? I never heard Pat talk about any girls when I knew him before."

"I think they met last September at some party. Anyhow, it was in October when he started coming down here and so help me, he talked that way from the very first minute he came in. I think Linda's more than a little in love with him. Don't you tell him I said so, though." She opened the refrigerator door.

"Here," he said, reaching for the trays, "let me get that ice." He busied himself putting fresh cubes in the glasses. "Do you know, I'm having an awful good time here tonight. I haven't had such a swell evening for a long time. Hand me those glasses, I'll pour it in. What do you use, two jiggers?"

"A jigger and a half will do for me," she told him. "I'm glad you came over. There's some cold soda in there behind the milk."

"I'd just as soon have water, thanks." He looked at her, quizzically. "When am I going to see you again? Maybe we could go out somewhere. Maybe you could even manage to dance with me, though I haven't been dancing for ages."

"Maybe we could. Why don't you call me up, I'm in the phone book. Now we'd better go in. You don't need to knock."

Another hour passed and then, from

somewhere, they could hear a clock striking twelve. "My friends," said Pat, glancing at his watch, "the time has come when I must go. Furthermore, all pure-in-heart working girls should be in bed by this hour. Inasmuch as it is inconceivable that you would go to bed any way but alone, I might as well give up and leave. Come on, Bob, I can tell you that we are not wanted here any longer. Goodby, and thank you for a lovely evening." He kissed both girls on the forehead. McLane promised Joyce that he would call her the next evening, they said goodby again and left.

"Pat, I had a swell time," McLane told his friend when they were outside. "Those are two of the nicest girls I ever met, and you're a real pal to ask me to come along with you. Where are you going now? Want to come over to my place for a drink?"

"No thanks, Bob. I think I'll just walk over to Third and get a taxi and go uptown and go to bed. I'm glad you had a good time. I don't know two nicer kids in this town than those two girls and you're on your own from now on in. Your love life is strictly up to you, but those girls aren't Honolulu pick-ups, and if you ever do anything to hurt either of them I'll kill you." McLane knew the reporter wasn't speaking idly, either. He had once seen Gorski beat an Army colonel senseless with a carbine butt because the officer had made some slighting remark about a picture of Pat's mother. "There's a cab. Do you want a ride over to your part of town?"

"No thanks, I think I'll walk. It's a nice evening. Goodby. I'll see you in a day or two. Thanks for the date. Good-night."

HE watched Gorski get into the cab and start away up Third Avenue. Let's see, he thought, which way should he go? There was Wanamaker's, looming dull and bulky before him. All he had to do was walk over there and then home. He looked around. It was dark in the shadow of the Elevated, dark and lonely. He couldn't see a soul. For some reason there was a prickly sensation in his scalp, but he dismissed it as nonsense as he started to walk to the corner, and won-

dered what there could possibly be for him to get the jumps about.

A man stepped out from the shadow of a doorway. "Captain McLane?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm Captain McLane, but what . . . ?"

"That's all I want to know." The voice was soft but deadly, like a snake, and McLane knew he was in danger. Instinctively he stepped to one side, and at the same time he swung his hand, axe-like, so that the edge of his palm caught the stranger on the throat. He followed it with a smashing blow to the other's jaw, and the man fell.

But something grabbed his right arm, and he felt a heavy blow on his head that staggered him down to his knees. Twisting free, he found himself confronted by two other men, and as he threw a swift punch into the solar plexus of the one of his right he realized the one of his left was poised with a black-jack, looking for a chance to strike him again.

As he tried to back himself against the wall, one of his ankles was gripped and he was nearly tripped by the first of his assailants, the one he had knocked to the sidewalk. With his free foot he kicked out viciously and had the satisfaction of feeling his toe connect with something solid. A dull moan from his target rewarded him.

McLane had not been idle with his hands. As the man whom he had hit in the middle bent over, the marine captain straightened him up again with an uppercut that had two feet of travel and 190 pounds behind it when it landed. The stranger stiffened with the blow, and McLane stepped in, taking his enemy by the slack of the coat and raining punches against his body and face with his other fist. For a moment he forgot the man with the club.

A pinwheel of light exploded inside his eyes, his legs turned to rubber, and as the uptown local thundered over the tracks above him he cursed himself for his carelessness. Again something struck him on the head and he fell forward, releasing his grip on the other man's coat. His head was jolted again, but this time it didn't hurt, and the fireworks in his brain were only pretty lights, nothing more. He seemed to be floating down to the sidewalk.

Just as he lost consciousness he had an idea that hands were searching his pockets.

McLane never knew how long he lay there, but it was very quiet and still, and the sidewalk was cool against his cheek when he moved. He put his hand to his face. It was sticky and he could taste blood on his lips. Weakly, he felt his head. There were three or four bumps on it, little knobs that hurt when he touched them. He rolled over and drew himself to a sitting position, his back against the wall of a building. Changing his position made his head hurt like hell. Those guys had done a good job on him, he realized. If they had done any better he probably wouldn't be alive.

He wanted to lie down again and go to sleep, but he got to his feet, propping himself against the wall, and he looked for a cab to take him home so he could go to bed. The streets were vacant.

Once more he started for the corner, as he had some time—he didn't know how long—ago. After a few staggering steps he knew it was no use and that he would never be able to walk home alone. Maybe, he thought, he could make it back to where those girls lived. They would call a cab for him. They were nice girls who would get him a cab . . . a cab . . . a cab.

Somehow he found the house and rang the upper of the two bells, hoping it was the right one. The buzzer answered. He opened the door and staggered in.

"Who is it?" It was Joyce, calling down the stairs, but he couldn't answer. All at once he felt very dizzy, and those lights were whirling around inside his head again.

"Linda!" He heard it out of distance and darkness. "Linda! Come here quick. It's Bob. He's been hit by a car or something."

The girls were helping him up the steps, holding him on either side while his strength came back to him slowly. "I think I've got it now," he muttered through his puffed and bloody lips. "Just let me lie down a minute and I'll be all right."

They led him to the studio couch and he gently lowered himself on his back and shut his eyes. He took a long breath and slowly let it out, telling himself that if he could only rest for a little while, then he could go home. He tried not to get blood all over the couch.

An acrid odor began biting inside his head and he turned away, but it followed him. Somebody was holding ammonia under his nose. He opened his eyes. Two anxious faces were looking at him. "What happened to you, Bob?" Joyce Nesmith wasn't smiling now.

"You got some awful unfriendly characters in this town," he said.

## V.

THEY wiped his face with a cold towel and gradually his strength flowed back. He sat up.

"What happened to you?"

"I don't know. Some guy stepped out and asked me if I was Captain McLane and when I said I was he and two other guys jumped on me and the next thing I was out. But I'm all right now. Can I call a taxi from here?"

Both girls looked as though the cuts and bruises were hurting them as much as him, but they nevertheless went efficiently about the task of cleaning him up.

"Did they rob you?" Linda asked as she carefully removed a smudge from his chin.

He felt through his clothes. "I don't seem to have lost anything," he said, "though I think I remember somebody going through my pockets."

"I'm going to call a doctor," Joyce said, "and the police."

"Don't do that, please. I'm all right." McLane put his fingers to his mouth. "I just cut my lip a little when I fell. It'll be healed up in the morning. There's no use of you girls having police tramping all over the place, and I'm too tired to sit around and talk to them. Besides, I don't have any idea in the world what those three men looked like. It was probably just a bunch of bums. I wonder, though, how they knew my name."

"Bob, we ought to call the police."

"No, don't. They'd just ask a lot of questions and I wouldn't know the answers."

"Then let me get a doctor," Joyce insisted. "You can't go home like this."

"I've been enough of a bother," he protested. "I'll get a taxi and go home to bed. How do I call one?"

"You'll never get a taxi at this time of

night. My car's parked on the street. I'll take you home. No," she added, as he began to object. "You've argued me out of calling the police or a doctor, but you can't argue me out of driving you to your house. Can you make it down the stairs?"

Joyce opened the door of a small, grey sedan parked in front of the house. She slipped across the front seat to the wheel and as he followed she stepped on the starter.

"Where do you live?"

He told her and the car started down the street. "There's where it happened," he said as they passed the spot of the fight.

When they arrived at his apartment building he felt better, so much better that, as he got out, he said, "Come up and I'll give you a drink to show you how much I appreciate the lift. It's only a little thing, but it's my own."

"I don't want a drink," she answered, "but I will see that you get in all right."

"I must warn you," he told her as they were going up the stairs. "The place is a mess. I had burglars this afternoon and . . ."

"You had *what!*"

"Burglars. Thieves. You know, people who break in to steal, only I can't figure that this guy stole anything."

"Wait a minute." She held him by the arm. "Do you have to be so casual? Here we sat around all evening, and you never said anything about burglars. Burglars and then somebody hits you over the head, all in the same twelve hours. What kind of a guy are you, anyhow?"

"Why," he smiled, "I'm free, white, old enough to vote, have a thick skull, and like to kiss pretty girls." His arm slipped around her shoulders, but she ducked away from him.

"Up the steps, Captain," she ordered, but there was no malice in her blue eyes. "Or you're liable to get another bump on your head. And you go in first, and look around. The place may be full of pixies for all I know."

The apartment was empty and the same as he had found it earlier in the day—yesterday, he reminded himself. He turned on the lights and searched carefully but there were no hidden visitors this time. "You can come in now, the coast is clear and free of gangsters. I told you it was a

mess. I'll never be able to put all this stuff back where it belongs but when the cleaning girl comes tomorrow she will know where it goes. I bet she has a fit when she sees it."

He removed some books from the sofa so that Joyce could sit down. "Have a cigarette," he offered. "I see those cops drank all my whiskey. You wouldn't care for some of Aunt Caroline's very best sherry, would you?"

"Not at this time of the morning Bob, thank you. I'll just smoke this cigarette and then I'll go home and let you go to bed. How's your head, does it still hurt?" She looked at him with wide eyes.

One cigarette led to another. They discussed the attack and the attempted robbery. "Do you still think," Joyce asked him, "that somebody is trying to steal your money?"

"I don't see what else it could be," he replied, thoughtfully. "I did flash a couple of hundred dollar bills around when I was in the store this morning, which is a foolish thing to do. But," and he reached in his pocket and took out his wallet, "I still have every bit of it. Yes," he counted, "one . . . two . . . three . . . three-fifty, and a couple of singles. It's all there. I guess somebody must have come along right after those three men knocked me out and scared them away."

"It could be," she said. "And anybody seeing you lying on the street over there would never bother you. That's at the end of the Bowery, and it's always full of drunken bums at night. Understand," she laughed, "I'm not meaning to imply that you are a bum."

"I bet I looked like one when I fell in your door tonight." He reached for another cigarette. "When Ryan, the detective who was here this afternoon, calls me tomorrow I'll tell him everything that happened and ask him to give me a special police escort wherever I go. Unless, of course, I'm going somewhere with you. Then I don't want a crowd around."

"We had pretty big crowd over at the house tonight," she said. "At least that Gorski talks enough for a crowd. I don't know anything about you except that you won the war single-handed and that you have a strange fascination for members of the underworld. Where were you born?"

HE told her more about himself, his family, and his boyhood. She learned that he had graduated from engineering college and gone straight into the service in 1941, and from then until that afternoon he had not been out of uniform.

"Oh, oh," she interrupted him. "It's almost three o'clock. I've got to go home, Linda will think that I have been kidnapped, or something. And if you don't get to bed you will never get up in time to call Mr. Adams in the morning. I've got to say goodnight even though," and her blue eyes met his squarely, "I don't really want to."

"I'll see you downstairs, just in case gorillas are lurking in the vestibule," he said. "I didn't know it was getting so late. I must have bored you to death, talking so long about myself. Next time it's your turn. And when am I going to see you again. Tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow is the day I told you to call me, remember? I'll be home sometime after six, and if you feel like it let me know." She opened her bag, straightened her hair in the mirror. "And now I have to go."

He walked down the steps with her, and in the lower hallway he paused. "Gee, you've been good to me," he began. "I don't know what I can say or do . . ."

Her hand turned the knob and opened the door. "You're a pretty nice guy yourself." She held out her hand for his, then stood on her toes and kissed him lightly on the mouth. "Goodnight, Bob."

She was gone before he could recover from his astonishment and, realizing that that was the way she wanted it, he merely opened the door and waved to her as she drove away. Slowly he climbed the steps again, and when he was back in his apartment he remembered to slip the chair on the door into place. He went to the kitchen for a glass of water, after turning off the living room lights, and as he gulped it down he kicked the oven door open with his foot and reached for his pistol. There was a piece of paper under it, and on the paper was a pencilled note.

"Thanks for the drinks," he read. "I'm giving you three days to send this gun back to the Marines where it belongs or else turn it in at the station. Ryan."

Ryan was smarter than he had given him

credit for. McLane undressed, gingerly washed his face, and turned in with the pistol under the pillow.

It seemed as though only a few minutes had passed before he was awake again. Ring, ring, ring. McLane heard it from somewhere in a sleepy distance. Ring, ring. He shook his head. "Ouch." That hurt.

*Ring, RING.*

It was the door bell. "Oh, for Christ's sake, shut up," he muttered. "Go away." The ringing persisted. He looked at his watch, it was twenty minutes after eight. "I'm coming," he called. This was a hell of a time for anyone to come ringing at his door. He rolled over to the side of the bed and stood up. "*I'm coming!*"

He started for the door, but the pain in his head kicked his memory and he went back and put on a bathrobe, then he reached under the pillow for the revolver and slipped it into the bathrobe pocket. He'd be ready for any funny stuff this time.

"Yes," he said. "What do you want?" Through the six inches of open door, still held by the chain, he saw a large man wearing a blue serge suit, a topcoat and a grey slouch hat.

"Are you Captain Robert McLane?"

I've heard this one before, he thought. His right hand gripped the .38. "Yeah, I'm Captain McLane. What the hell do you want?"

"Sorry to wake you up so early in the morning, Captain." The stranger reached inside the topcoat pocket.

*Don't pull a gun on me,* McLane thought, and he drew his own revolver and aimed it at the other from behind the door. *You do and you're dead duck.*

"I'm Detective Lynch." The stranger's hand came out of his pocket and McLane could see it held a badge, similar to the one Ryan had shown the evening before. "May I come in and talk to you for a minute?"

McLane sighed with audible relief. That had been a close one. He hoped the detective would never be so near death again. His left hand shook as he released the chain and he returned the revolver to his pocket.

"Come in." He managed to steady his voice and wiped his damp forehead with

a sleeve. "Can you wait a minute until I get into some clothes? You got me out of bed."

"Sure, take your time, there's no great hurry." Detective Lynch stood in the hall as McLane walked back to the bedroom. "What have you been doing up here? Throwing a lease-breaking party?"

"What do you mean?" McLane called as he discarded the bathrobe and replaced the pistol under the pillow. "There were some people in here yesterday. "Isn't that what you came about?"

"No. What kind of people?"

"I don't know. There was only one in here, I guess, and he got away. Didn't Ryan tell you?"

"No. Who's Ryan?"

"He's the fellow from the Eighth Precinct who came over after I called about it. Say," McLane came into the living room, buttoning his shirt, "if you aren't here about that why are you here? What's the scoop?"

"Oh, I just thought maybe you could help me identify a guy we've got. He won't tell us his name but we picked him up this morning."

"Identify a guy? What guy? What's he look like?"

"Well he don't look so good. If I knew who he was I wouldn't have to ask you to come and see if you knew him."

McLane was puzzled. "How would I know him?" he asked. "Hell, Mr. Lynch, I don't know anybody in this town. What makes you think I'd know him anyhow?" He paused. "Say, are you in a hurry? I haven't had any breakfast. Do we have time for a cup of coffee? I'm not awake yet."

"Sure, we have lots of time." The detective followed him into the kitchen. "Tell me more about this robbery you had yesterday. Them Eighth Precinct guys never tell us anything."

McLANE related the story of the afternoon before as he measured out the coffee and put the percolator on the stove. "How about some orange juice and a couple of slices of toast?" He reached for a loaf of bread and a knife.

"How did you skin your knuckles, Captain?" The detective was watching the hand as McLane sliced the bread. "And

who clipped you on the lip? You been in a fight?"

"You can say that again, mister." McLane stopped slicing. "Three guys beat me up last night, but I managed to hit a couple of them before they got me. Here, feel my head." He bent down. "Easy, those bumps are sore. They knocked me colder than a crock. Didn't steal anything, though. Guess they got scared, anyhow they were gone when I woke up."

"When did all this happen?"

"Oh, I don't know. A little after twelve, maybe."

"Where?" Lynch was plainly interested.

"Just this side of Third Avenue." McLane told the whole story in greater detail. "What do you think?" he asked.

"I think you're lucky you didn't get killed. That coffee's just about done, isn't it? Let's have some and then we can get going. I want you to see this fellow we got."

They finished the breakfast and left the apartment together. A police car was parked outside with its driver.

"Run over to Third Avenue and Ninth Street," Lynch said, and then to McLane, "Maybe you can show me where all this happened."

The police car moved away. This was the second time in two days there had been a police car outside his place, McLane remembered. The neighbors would soon begin to wonder what was going on if it kept up. He was beginning to wonder himself. How about this Lynch, now? He certainly asked a lot of questions but, when you stopped to think about it, he didn't seem to be answering very many.

"Here's the place," he said. "Right about there. I think the three of them stepped out of that doorway."

The car stopped and Lynch got out. "I don't see any pools of blood or any dead men lying around. What's this?" He bent over and picked some small object from the street.

"What is this anyhow?"

McLane looked at the detective's outstretched palm. "That's a miniature of some kind of a medal, the kind they give you to wear in your coat lapel." He picked it up and looked at its face. "It's a Navy Cross, or rather it's a miniature

of the ribbon. I've got one. You wear them on civilian clothes."

"Is it yours?"

"I don't know. I had one when I started out last night. I never looked for it after I came back."

"It wasn't in that suit you were wearing," said the detective. "I looked. You didn't even have one of those ruptured duck buttons." He put the miniature in his pocket. "Let's get going. When you get home you can call me up and tell me if you lost it."

They returned to the car, Lynch spoke to the driver and it headed up Third Avenue. "I hope you can recognize this guy we got," repeated Lynch, lighting a cigarette and erupting great clouds of smoke from his nose. "Maybe he'll be one of the guys you hit." The automobile slowed down as they came to 18th Street. "Are you sure you weren't fighting anybody up here?"

"Here?" McLane demanded. "Hell, no, I've never been up here before in my life. What's this all about, anyhow? I thought we were going to headquarters. Isn't that downtown?"

"We aren't going downtown just yet, Captain." Lynch's eyes were hard and black as he studied McLane through the smoke. "This guy I want you to see isn't down there. He's in the morgue. He's dead."

"Dead?"

"Yeah. Dead. We found him right along here about four o'clock this morning." The car continued up Third Avenue. "He seems to have known you. I hope you can prove all those places you say you were last night. This guy might have fallen off the El and then, on the other hand, he might have been pushed."

The car turned east for a few blocks and then stopped. "Here we are," Lynch continued. "Let's get out and take a look. I hope you have a strong stomach, Captain. This joker fell on his head when he hit the street. He's an unholy mess."

VI

"I'VE NEVER seen this man before." "Are you sure? Take a good look. Wait. I'll have somebody wipe some of the blood off his face, maybe you'll recog-

nize him then." The detective turned to an attendant. "Hey Joe," he said, "give this stiff a facial, will you, we want to see what he looks like without his makeup."

But the gruesome cleansing process made little difference.

"I still don't know him," McLane confessed after a further look.

"How about the guys you were fighting with last night? Could this be one of them?"

"No. Say, why did you get me up here, anyhow? You didn't even know I had been in a fight until I told you."

"That's right, I didn't, did I?" Lynch rubbed his hands together, blew a warm breath through his right fist. "Let's get out of this cold place before we all catch pneumonia or something. Cover him up, Joe." They walked out, closing the heavy door behind them, and McLane thankfully accepted the cigarette which Lynch offered.

He took a deep, lung-filling drag, exhaled slowly, and then he said, "Tell me, Mr. Lynch, what is this all about? I never saw that poor devil until now, I don't know how he came to be here, I don't know anything about it. Why did you get me up here? How did you even know anything about me, if you hadn't heard about the robbery yesterday?"

"Look." The detective reached in his pocket and took out an envelope. From the envelope he took a small piece of paper and held it out to McLane. "Ever see this before?"

The slip of paper had been torn from a memorandum pad, and on it, in a feminine hand, was written "Captain Robert McLane," and the Tenth Street address.

"No, I've never seen this, either."

"Well, do you have any idea who might have written it? How long have you been in town? How many girls—a woman wrote that note—know where you live?" He made notes in a book as he talked. "I don't think you had anything to do with this job, Captain, but you can certainly see why I have to get you up here to take a look at that fellow."

"Sure, I understand. Let me see. The only girls I know are the ones I saw last night. I've been in New York about a week. Of course, there's the colored girl who comes in to clean the apartment. Her name's Hazel, but I don't know her last

name or where she lives. She'll be there tomorrow though, and I'll ask her."

"I don't think those girls you saw last night would know anything," Lynch said, "but maybe I'll call them up and talk to them, just in case. It could have been the colored girl. I'll call you tomorrow and get a check on her. You aren't going out of town, are you?"

"No, I'll be around for—" He thought of Joyce. "I'll be around for quite a while, I hope."

"Well, just don't go away without letting me know, and I'll tell you if anything turns up. There must be some connection between you and that stiff, but I don't know what it is and I don't think you do, either. I'll go back and look through his clothes again, but I bet I don't get anything except a cold in the head. Do you mind if I don't drive back with you? I'll have the driver take you home."

"That's all right, Mr. Lynch, and thanks for the ride. If anything happens or if I stumble onto anything I'll let you know. Sorry I couldn't help you any more this morning."

He rode home silently in the police car, his conversational gambits with the driver checked by non-committal grunts. Once he was in the apartment he kicked off his shoes, opened his collar, and fell on the bed. Whew, he was tired. . . *Wonder who that dead man was? . . . What time was it? . . . Quarter to ten—he'd just relax until it was time for him to call Adams.*

*Relax. . . take it easy. . . where had he seen that guy before . . .*

*And then he was in a crowd, running from one person to another, peering intently into faces . . . a sea of faces . . . thousands of eyes were staring at him . . . eyes . . . eyes . . . faces . . . eyes . . . whirling around . . . turning from him in fear . . . then they suddenly melted and ran together into one small face, a face with a deep furrow between frightened brows. "You, you, YOU!" he heard himself calling.*

McLane awoke, still calling out from the dream—"You, you . . . ! That was the man—the man in the dream—the corpse in the morgue—the man who had had his pocket picked in the subway. They were all the same person. He remembered now. He'd call Lynch right away and tell

him. What time was it? Four o'clock—he'd slept through his telephone appointment with Adams.

He dialed the number Lynch had given him. "Hello. Is Detective Lynch there? This is Captain McLane. He isn't? Well listen, tell him to call me, will you? Yeah, McLane. M-c-L-a-n-e. He knows my number. Be sure to tell him, will you? Goodby." He hung up, muttering to himself, disappointed because the detective had not been there to take the message.

Then McLane realized he was very hungry and that there wasn't much left to eat in the house. He knotted his tie, put on his coat and hat and gathered his new suit together—he might as well take it to the cleaner. The telephone rang.

"Hello."

"Hello Bob. How's your head?"

"Joyce! Gee, it's nice of you to call. I was thinking about you but I wasn't going to call you until after six, like you said. What do you know?"

"That's what I don't know. What happened last night? Did you call the police after I left? There was a detective Lynch up here to see me this afternoon, wanting to know when I saw you and what time you left and where I went and everything else. And then Linda called me and said he had been to see her too. What did you do after I came home—go out and kill somebody?"

"No, I went to bed like a good boy and slept until that same Lynch waked me up this morning. But somebody did get killed last night." Briefly he related his adventures of the day. "And what time shall I come over for you tonight?"

"Oho." He could feel the smile in her voice. "So you're coming over tonight, are you? I don't remember anything about that. Tell me more."

"Well, it seems like a good idea to me. And then there are some things about this story I haven't told you." He had not told her where he had seen the man in the morgue before, or about the incident of the coat. "I thought you'd like to hear about them."

"So, holding out on me, are you? I'll have to look into it, I suppose. What else did you have in mind beside confessing your part in the crime?"

"Food. It just so happens that I haven't

had anything to eat since breakfast and I'm hungry. Also, I'm tired of eating alone, it's not good for my ulcers. I might even buy you a drink."

"Now you want to ply me with liquor, do you? I don't think a girl is safe with you, but I'm curious enough and hungry enough to take a chance. Come over about seven, if you can wait that long, and don't forget you're an injured man and have to take things easy."

"Not any more," he laughed. "I feel fine, thanks to the expert care I received last night."

"Well, you just keep on feeling good and keeping out of street fights. I don't intend to take you home every night. Goodby now. I'll be seeing you."

"Goodby, Joyce. I'll be there. Goodby."

He went whistling down the stairs. Gee, he felt good. His head didn't hurt, his leg didn't bother him any more, the swelling on his lip was hardly noticeable. It was a pretty good old world after all.

**T**HERE was a dry-cleaning place around the corner and he left his new suit with them. His miniature Navy Cross lapel pin was missing, he noted, just as the detective had said. How did he find that out, he wondered. He must remember to tell Lynch that the one from the street probably belonged to him. Then he gave his name to the cleaner, remarked that the brown stains on the coat were blood, and asked for the fastest service because it was the only suit he had to his name.

A sandwich and a glass of milk at a drug store were not enough to satisfy his appetite, but he hoped it would hold him over until supper time. He wondered where there was a good place to eat and decided to ask Joyce, she knew more about the town than he did.

There was a liquor store in the block where he bought some more whiskey, a bottle of gin and a bottle of dry vermouth for martinis, and went back to the apartment.

He shaved, laid out a pressed uniform and transferred his ribbons to the clean coat. It was still only five-thirty and there wasn't much to do except sit and wait for time to pass and for Lynch to call. He poured himself a small drink.

Things had certainly been happening to him. Thoughtfully he traced the events of the last two days. First the pickpocket and the coat, then the person in his apartment, then the assault of the night before. After that his visit to the morgue and, later, the memory of who the dead man was. That brought him right back to the pocket-picking again, and he remembered the papers in the envelope, and the flash that told him the letter did belong to Paul Houseman. It was a strange business—he thought of the corpse in the morgue—a bloody business, and any fool could see that there must be some connection between some of the happenings. If only he had realized it before the papers got away.

But why did the dead man have his name and address? Where did he get it? McLane decided to tell the whole story to Joyce, she seemed to have a pretty clever head on her shoulders, maybe between them they could figure it out. He finished his drink and, for the twentieth time, looked at his watch. If he dressed slowly and walked slowly he could arrive at Stuyvesant Street about seven.

He dressed carefully, then he looked at the room. Still a mess, he reflected, and though Hazel would know where things belonged the least he could do would be to put some of them in place. Maybe he would have company later on and what would Joyce think of him if she came back and found he hadn't cleaned up a little. He scooped papers into drawers, straightened pictures, put books back on the shelves. The scattered towels went into the linen closet. He started to make the bed.

The revolver was still under the pillow. He looked at it carefully, weighing it in his hand and at the same time rubbing a bump on his head. With a sudden impulse he stuck the gun in his hip pocket and turned to look at himself in the mirror. No, the damn thing showed. Anybody could see he had a pistol there. Now where was—oh yes—in the foot locker. At least it had been. Good, it was still there. He took off his coat and carefully adjusted the shoulder holster well under his left armpit, where it couldn't be seen. That made it a little harder to get to, but couldn't be helped. He put the coat on again and looked at the glass. No, nobody

could see he had it now. Let them try to break his head again, somebody would be due for a nasty surprise. He hoped no policemen decided to question him too carefully about anything. It was against the law to carry concealed weapons, he knew.

His cross-town walk was without incident and Joyce met him at the top of the stairs. "Good evening, Captain." She saluted. "My, but you certainly do look handsome in that uniform. And, I might add, a lot better than you did the last time you came up those steps. Come on in."

"How are you?" He followed her through the door, spiralled his cap to the sofa, turned to her. "You're good lookin' too. Yes indeed, I've been all over the world, and you're the prettiest gal I ever did see." She was beautiful tonight; her dress had been selected to display more than a hint of her figure; her eyes sparkled. "The very prettiest."

"Are you going to start that so soon?" She laughed. "Not on an empty stomach, please. Where are we going to eat? I'm starved."

"Where do you want to eat? You name it, I'm a stranger in town and the evening is in your hands. The whole city's yours, the sky's the limit."

"And what did you have in mind?"

"I want to eat. I'm a hungry ol' marine and food is number one on my hit parade right now. After that, anything may happen and probably will. I may even propose marriage."

"I think we'll just settle for food. How do steaks sound to you?"

"Steaks? Do you mean real honest-to-goodness steaks, three inches thick, and not what most New York restaurants call steaks?"

"Thick steaks and charcoal broiled."

"Joyce, I can't believe it. The mere thought of a real broiled steak makes me drool. What are we waiting for?"

"Nothing, except for you to stop drooling long enough to help me with my coat. Hey, watch out." He had brushed the side of his cheek against her ear as he held the coat. "Pretty early in the evening to start that." She laughed again.

"It's the perfume. It does something to me."

"We'll get out of here before it does

anything more to you. You'll feel better after you get that steak. Have you ever been to the Old Homestead? It's an eating place."

"Never. How do we get there?"

"It's on the other side of town, we catch a cab. That's where we will get the steaks, only we'll probably have to stand in line for a while. There's a bar though, and we can have a drink."

"What are we waiting for?" He closed the door behind them and they went down the stairs.

**T**WO drinks, two steaks, and two hours later he paid the check. "And now what do we do? Let's go some place where we can dance, can we? I want to smell that perfume some more. That is, if you think you can dance with a man with a silver plate in his leg."

"I might as well start learning," Joyce replied. "Let's go to the Cafe Society Downtown, they have a floor large enough to move around on and we can catch the show, too. After that maybe we can go to some other places. You should get to know your way around the Village sooner or later. We better get a taxi, it's too far to walk."

"Oh Bob," she said when they were in the taxi, "I'm having a lot of fun tonight." She touched his hand. "I'm glad Pat brought you over."

"Me too." He laid a finger against her cheek, slowly brought it down under her chin until he could tilt her head gently toward him. Then he kissed her very lightly on the mouth, wondering whether she could hear the trip-hammer pounding of his heart.

She looked at him for a long while. "You've got lipstick on your face," she said. And then the taxi stopped in Sheridan Square, and a doorman was opening the door.

The headwaiter showed them to a table along the wall and McLane ordered two drinks. "This is a nice-looking place," he said to Joyce. "Gee, look at those funny pictures on the wall. Do you know," he went on, "this is the first New York night club I've ever been in?" The music started. "Come on, let's dance."

The lights were low, her cheek was close to his, and the perfume sent little shivers

down his spine. He held her a little closer.

"What are you thinking about?" She looked up at him.

"I was thinking you're sweet, and I'm having a swell time."

"I just wondered. Tell me," she smiled impishly, "do you always dance with your eyes closed? Maybe that's why you run into buildings at night. I'm beginning to doubt that story about strange men jumping out at you."

The music stopped and they walked back to their table. "And now tell me," she said, "all about what happened this morning."

He told her the whole story, beginning with his subway ride to Times Square, ending with the strange dream of the afternoon.

"But," he finished, "I still don't know what it's all about."

"You must have some idea," she said. "For instance, why are you carrying a pistol? I felt it under your arm when we were in the taxi," she added. "Something's got you worried, Bob, and when I remember how you looked last night I'm worried too."

"Don't worry, Joyce. Nothing's going to happen to me—I hope. But I wish I could find out some of the answers. How did that dead man get my address? Why did somebody tear the apartment to pieces and yet nothing is missing? Why did those people go through my clothes last night and yet not take my money? Why did that fellow Houseman say . . .?" He snapped his fingers. "Those papers have something to do with it, I feel, but it seems a lot of fuss to make over something I offered to return."

"Do you mean those League to Safeguard Democracy letters?"

"Yes. The ones in the overcoat. Everything started after I called up about them. Look, I go out, after I tell Houseman where I live, and somebody comes in. He doesn't take anything because he can't find what he was looking for—the papers. So they think I have them with me, and the first chance that comes up they search me. But why," he asked, "would anybody go to all that trouble?"

"Because," she suggested, "whoever owns those papers doesn't want to be

connected with them. That means there is something illegal about them."

"It must be something extra-special." He felt the bump on his head. "Something illegal enough to warrant murder, robbery, and beating the hell out of me. Did you ever hear anything about this League? You've been here longer than I have."

"No." She thought for a moment, then, "but it has a funny sound to it, doesn't it? New York is full of new leagues and committees and organizations since the war, and if you can believe what you read in the papers, most of them are fronts for communist or other radical groups. Fascists maybe."

"I've heard something about that . . ."

"Some of them," she continued, hurriedly, "are just a bunch of crackpots, like the Columbians, that gang down in Georgia. They all love to plan and plot and skulk in the dark . . ." She shivered a little.

"Joyce, I believe you're right." He slapped the palm of his hand down on the table. "We had trouble with things like that in China. Spies, and double-dealers, never coming right out and saying what they wanted, but slinking around, stealing papers, buying information when they could, causing trouble, stirring up the people. By God," he growled, "I'll go up and see those Democracy League jokers tomorrow."

"Don't do it, Bob. You'll just get in more trouble."

"Trouble? Nuts. I won't get in any trouble. I know that kind of people, say 'boo' to them and they back down, unless they have an army behind them. I think I can take care of myself."

"You looked like it last night. I'm sorry, Bob, but it's late and you've got me so worried and so scared that I don't want to stay here any more. Let's go home."

The taxi stopped in front of the house on Stuyvesant Street. "Should I tell him to wait?" Bob asked.

"You better come up and I'll make you a pot of coffee. I don't think Linda's home yet, and you've got me too excited to sit alone and wait for her. If I heard her key in the lock I'd jump a mile. She should be home soon."

## VII

HE left shortly after Linda returned. There was a taxi standing at the curb in front of the house and the driver hailed him. "Ride?"

"Yeah." He got in and closed the door. "Tenth Street, between Sixth and Fifth." The driver let out the clutch, shifted the gears, and started away while McLane lit a cigarette and settled back in the seat. What a swell girl, he thought, Smart, too, to tie everything together the way she had. That idea about a front organization and not wanting to be openly connected with the papers. That made sense, to him. He'd never have thought of it, probably, by himself. Well, tomorrow morning he would pay a little visit to the League to Safeguard Democracy. Tonight he'd think about Joyce Nesmith. He exhaled deeply as the cab turned up Third Avenue.

Wait a minute. Why was the driver going up Third? All he had to do was go west on Ninth Street until he came to Sixth Avenue, and then turn up to Tenth Street. Oh well, maybe he would go across on Eleventh, that was a west-bound one-way street. Probably not too familiar with this part of town. What did he look like, anyhow?

Strange, there was no picture of the driver in the little holder where the identification card should have been. McLane rapped on the window as the car passed Eleventh Street. The driver sped on, ignoring a red light. McLane rapped again and then tried to push the sliding glass panels between the driver's seat and the passenger space. They wouldn't move. He saw the driver glance back in the mirror and suddenly the cab turned sharply to the right and headed down 12th Street.

"Here we go again!" The Marine officer had been thrown back and into one corner by the sharp turn, and was lying on his shoulders. With one motion he braced himself against the seat, raised his legs and crashed his feet against the sliding glass panels. They gave way behind the driver's head and the taxi swerved to a stop.

"Oh, a wise guy, huh?" The driver turned, snarling as his right hand sought an inside pocket.

"Get your hand out of there! Turn off

that ignition! Damn it all, I'm getting tired of this stuff. Now get the hell out of this cab and stand over by the wall and be damnably careful, Jackson, or you're a dead duck." There was authority in McLane's angry voice, there was double authority in the wickedly cocked revolver he held in his hand. "That's right, up against the wall. And what's that you got in your pocket? Don't you move!" He reached inside the driver's coat.

"Oh, so you have a gun too, do you?" He transferred the small automatic to his own jacket. "Now, what the hell's this all about. Come on, talk."

"I don't know nothin'. You got nothin' on me."

"I said 'talk', you son of an ape, and I mean it." He hit the driver a vicious blow across the face with his own pistol. "Do I make myself clear, friend?"

The driver cursed and his face started to bleed along one side of his eye. "I don't know anything."

"Brother, we're going to have a little talk. A nice little talk. With the hands." McLane replaced his gun in the holster under his arm. "I don't want to get it all rusty and covered with blood. Now," he hit the driver again, with his fist, "suppose you tell me where we were going." He hit him again. "Where-were-we-going?"

The driver threw up his knee in a crippling blow. McLane swung away. "I was looking for that, wise guy!" The enraged Marine swung with all his effort. "I'll teach you a trick or two." The driver fell.

"Huh, I must have clipped him just a wee bit too hard. I'll never get him to talk now. I better get out of here before somebody comes along." With his foot he rolled the insensible driver into the gutter. "Tell whoever sent you that maybe three guys can take me, Jack, but not one."

He walked home cautiously, rubbing his knuckles, but the night was without further adventure.

**N**EXT morning he was more determined than ever to make the visit he had planned the evening before, and shortly after nine he was speaking to the girl who was both receptionist and switch-

board operator for the League to Safeguard Democracy, in their uptown offices. "Good morning," he said, "I'd like to see Mr. Houseman, please."

"Certainly, sir. And what's your name?" The girl had the connecting plug in her hand.

"Captain Robert McLane."

"Captain Rob—" The girl dropped the plug and stared at him. "I'm sorry, Mr. Houseman isn't in."

"Nuts, sister." Why should the girl jump like that when he told her his name? "You were just about ready to plug him in, so I know he's here. Now you call him and tell him I want to see him."

"Oh no, I can't do that. He left word that he wasn't to be disturbed."

"Why don't you tell the truth, you're too pretty to lie convincingly. If you won't tell him I'm here, I'll look around for him myself. Call him up and tell him I'm on my way, like a good little girl."

He turned to the nearest door, opened it and walked in. The room was full of people working at desks and there was a wooden rail separating them from him as he came in.

"Pardon me." He leaned over the rail toward one of the people. "Is Mr. Houseman's office over that way?" He pointed.

"No, it's at the end of that corridor, there on your left. But wait, who are . . . ?" The man was unable to finish the question, McLane had already walked away.

He opened a door at the end of the hall without bothering to knock. A medium-sized, pleasant-looking man was standing behind a large desk in the center of the room, replacing a telephone on its stand as McLane entered.

"Mr. Houseman?"

"Yes, are you Captain McLane?" He smiled and extended his hand in a friendly grip. "I'm sorry Miss Martin didn't show you in, but she had the mistaken impression I wasn't to be disturbed. I see that you got here anyhow. Sit down. What can I do for you, Captain?" He pushed a cigarette box across the desk. "Smoke?" The tone was entirely cordial.

"Mr. Houseman, you remember those letters I called you about the day before yesterday?"

"Yes."

"I wondered if you had found out who lost them."

"No, I haven't, Captain. I asked around the office but nobody here claims them. Why? You don't have them with you, do you?"

"Sorry, I don't." McLane had not missed an almost off-key note of eagerness in the question. "I happened to be in the building on some other business and thought I'd drop in and ask you about them again."

"That was very thoughtful of you, Captain. However, as I told you before, if the owner turns up I'll let you know. I still have your address and telephone number here on my desk." Paul Houseman started to rise, indicating the conversation was over.

"Just sit down a minute, Mr. Houseman. I'll tell you when I'm ready to leave, there's no hurry. Here we are, just you and I, all alone in this nice big soundproof office. I'm very happy, Mr. Houseman, and I think I'd like to talk to you a little more."

"Really, Captain McLane, I don't . . ."

"You don't do anything, Mr. Houseman. You don't know anything and you don't do anything, do you? No, don't ring the bell. There isn't going to be any trouble."

"Then I think you owe me an explanation, Captain. After all, this is rather strange."

"It's not half as strange as the things that are happening to me. Have you given my address to anyone?"

"Given your address? No. Why should I give anyone your address, Captain McLane? Why, I hardly remember it myself."

"Well, it's a damned strange business, Mr. Houseman. Damned strange. Because right after I told you where I lived my apartment was robbed, I was stopped on the street and got the living b'jeepers beat out of me, and there have been several other things. And so far as I can figure, you're the only person in this whole town who knew who I was or where I lived."

"But Captain McLane, why would I want to do anything like that? What possible reason could I have? This is a reputable organization, as anyone will

tell you. I assure you, you've made a terrible mistake." The tone was friendly and like a patient father speaking to a small boy.

"I thought maybe you were trying to get those letters?"

"The letters? My dear sir, why in the world would we go to all the trouble, do the things you have described, to get some letters that you offered to return to us with no trouble at all? Think it over, young man, it just doesn't make sense. And now, if you will excuse me? I'm really very busy."

McLane stood up. There was something he couldn't understand but something he could feel, and it was all wrong. "Maybe I did make a mistake," he said. Suddenly he had an idea. "Anyhow, I thought I should let you know that I'm going to move. I think I'll go down to Texas in a day or . . ." He was interrupted by the ringing of a telephone.

"Pardon me," said Houseman, reaching for the instrument. "Hello. Yes, this is Paul. What?" He shot a quick look at his visitor. "No, you won't find him there. I can't tell you. Yes, that's right. I should? You will? All right, I'll do what I can." He replaced the telephone.

As I was saying," continued McLane, "I think I'll go down to Texas in a day or so. I'll write and give you my address when I get there and if you find out who owns those letters you can let me know and I'll send them on. I'm sorry to have bothered you." He turned toward the door.

"Just a minute, Captain. It's a funny thing, but that telephone call I just had was from a man who thinks that perhaps those letters belong to him. He's on his way over. Why don't you wait?"

**M**CLANE turned his back. Houseman had stepped from behind the desk, was standing with one hand in his coat pocket. "Sit down, Captain, and wait."

"Mr. Houseman, I don't know who you are or what you are." The voice was level, low and cold as a malarial chill. "But I do know that you are an out-and-out liar. And I don't like liars." He took a half step forward and hit Houseman squarely on the chin. "And I don't like

you," he added, catching the falling body. "Here, sit right down in your own little chair."

As he went out he stopped at the receptionist's desk. "Mr. Houseman asked me to tell you that he wasn't to be disturbed for exactly one-half hour. We had a very chummy little visit and he wants to rest. Goodby."

"Wait. Come here." Why was this girl so frightened? Why did she keep looking around, there was no one else in the reception hall. "Take this, but don't read it until you are out of this building. Put it in your pocket. Don't let anybody see it. Don't tell anybody where you got it. Now go. Please go."

Never a dull moment, he reflected as he obeyed the terrified girl and closed the office door behind him. Notes from mysterious switchboard operators, knocking people out in their own offices. It might turn out to be a very interesting day. He rubbed his knuckles and smiled to himself. He had been a little worried when Houseman had placed a hand in his coat pocket as though holding a concealed pistol, people got shot that way. However, he had looked in the pocket and learned that it was either an insignificant gesture or a bluff. Whatever it was, Mr. Houseman was undoubtedly still asleep in his chair, and his jaw would be sore for several days.

And now this note. McLane walked into a Child's restaurant on Fifth Avenue and sat down at a table. "Coffee with sugar," he told the waitress. He took the folded paper from his pocket and read it.

"Call LI 5-2637 at 7 o'clock tonight," it said. "Important."

What was it all about? He looked at the writing again. Where had he seen it before? Then he knew, it was the same writing as the note found in the dead-man's pocket, the one Lynch had shown him. He'd have to call the detective about this right away. What was the number? It was written down at home, he'd go back and get it. He dropped a quarter on the table and started out. "I didn't have time to drink my coffee," he explained to the cashier, "tell the girl to drink it herself. 'I'm in a hurry.'" He caught a Fifth Avenue bus and in a few minutes he was home and dialing a number on the phone.

"Hello. Is Detective Lynch there? Do you know where I can find him? What, he's out on a case? I know he's on a case, that's what I want to see him about. Where is he? You can't? Well, tell him to call me as soon as you find him. McLane. McLane. It's very important. Yes, he has my number. Goodby."

There was nothing to do except wait. He sat down and then he realized the apartment was just the way he had left it in the morning. That was funny, where was Hazel? It was Friday, he was sure of that. You never could rely on the help you got in these days, he reflected, but just the same he had promised to find out where she lived. She had the coat with those papers in it, too, and they seemed to be more important every minute. He smiled and wondered how Paul Houseman's jaw was feeling. He'd be eating soup for a week after that one.

He fixed himself some lunch and poured a drink. Later, about two o'clock, the door bell rang as he was dozing in a chair. It was Lynch.

"Understand you wanted to see me?"

"Yes, come in. I know who that guy in the morgue was."

"Oh, you do. How did you find out? I thought you never saw him before."

"It came to me in a dream."

"It came to you in a *what*? You don't happen to have another drink, do you? Thanks. Now tell me all about this dream."

McLane told how he had dreamed of the sea of eyes and the single face that turned out to be both the corpse and the man in the subway. Then he followed with the story of the coat, how he had called the League to Safeguard Democracy, how he had later given the coat to Hazel. "And then last night," he continued, "Miss Nesmith and I figured that probably somebody is after me trying to get the papers back."

"That's a smart girl, that Miss Nesmith," said the detective. "I had a talk with her yesterday. Didn't learn a thing I didn't already know. Go on, what else happened?"

"Well then, I was coming home last night and the taxi driver kept going up town until he turned on 12th." He'd better not mention the fact that he had a

gun of his own." So I kicked him in the head and when he tried to pull out a pistol I smacked him around a little and left him lying on the street. Wait, I've got his pistol here, I might as well give it to you."

"Thanks." Lynch looked at the small automatic and put it in his pocket. "Maybe we can trace this. And then what happened? You were tired, I suppose, so you came home and went to bed."

"As a matter of fact, that's exactly what I did. Then this morning I went up to see these League people, for after all they did seem connected somehow or other with the rest of the things that have been happening." He told of his conversation with Houseman, his temporarily delayed exit and what happened, and of the note from the switchboard operator. "And look, isn't this the same handwriting as the note you had with my name on it?"

"Captain," said the detective, "you'll pardon me if I pour myself a drink. I'd like one a little larger than those you hand out, right now. I think I need it." He reached for the bottle. "There must be some special saint who watches over you marines. I don't exactly know what this is all about, but either you're a very lucky man or a very tough one. I've been on the force for sixteen years and frankly, McLane, I am surprised that you're alive. You've found out too much, but I can get to work now and run some of these things down. And I think I'll leave my gun before I go, you may need it if you persist in going out after dark. You wouldn't consider staying at home until this clears up, would you?"

McLane thought of Joyce. "I don't think so. Keep your gun, though. I happen to have one of my own, though maybe I shouldn't admit it."

"I wondered how you were taking rods away from all these people you meet. You keep it. I'll see about getting a permit."

The two men sat silently for a while.

### VIII

"**H**OW ABOUT the note?" McLane asked the detective. "Shall I give her a call?"

"Might as well," Lynch told him, "You

never know. Maybe she has something interesting to tell you. Maybe she'll get your head knocked off. You can't ever tell if you don't try. She'll probably want you to meet her some place, so be careful. And just in case you see strange men keeping an eye on you don't do anything rash, because I'm having some of the boys follow you around for a while. I wouldn't want you to get hurt, you know."

McLane snorted.

"Nuts. I can take care of myself. Ask Houseman."

"Yeah. I've noticed how well you do. Do you still have those lumps on your head, Captain?" Without waiting for any answer other than McLane's rueful smile he stood up and adjusted his hat. "I've gotta go now. Even a detective has to eat. Take it easy and let me know how you make out. Goodby."

Left by himself again McLane poured another drink and slowly swallowed it as he reflected. If there was a tie-in between the League and the things that had been happening to him, how did the pieces fit together? What was the purpose behind the League? Where did Houseman fit in? What could the switchboard girl have to tell him? He glanced at his watch—Joyce should be home by now and he'd better call her tell her he might be a little late tonight.

"Hello. Linda? This is Bob McLane, is Joyce there? Thanks. . . . Hello Joyce, how are you? Oh, I'm all right. You know me, Iron Man McLane, nothing ever happens to me. Say, I may be a little late tonight, I'll tell you why when I see you. What?"

For Joyce had said, "I didn't know we had a date tonight."

"But honey, I thought . . ."

"Did you say anything about it last night?"

"Well, no. But I said I'd call you and I thought I'd be seeing you. I kind of took it for granted."

"But you didn't ask me, Bob, and I don't see why you should take such things for granted. And anyhow, I have another engagement for this evening, one that I made quite some time ago. I'm really very sorry if you're disappointed, Bob, but after all . . ."

"That's all right. I understand." He

was aware of the petulant tone of his voice, but he didn't care.

"Don't feel like that, Bob. I said I was sorry and I meant it. Anyhow, I want to see you again and you know I do. It's just that I can't see you tonight."

"That's all right," he repeated. "Have a good time. I'll be seeing you. Goodby." he hung up.

The hell with it, he thought. He poured another drink. The hell with her, too. He'd show her that he could get along without her, get along very well, as a matter of fact. A lot she cared whether he got killed. He'd call up that switchboard operator and suggest meeting her, if she didn't mention it first. He realized he was behaving childishly. "I don't care," he muttered to his glass. Maybe he'd never call Joyce Nesmith again. He reached for the whiskey bottle.

Where was that girl's note? He'd be damned if he was going to sit around in the apartment all night. With angry little jerks he dialed the number on the slip of paper, and listened to the ringing of the phone at the other end. A girl's voice answered. "Hello."

"This is Captain McLane. Are you the girl who . . .?"

"Is there anybody there with you, Captain?"

"No, I'm all alone. But are you the girl who gave me this number to call?"

"Yes, I am. Captain McLane, can I see you? It's very important."

"Sure, but what's this all about?"

"I can't tell you now, over the phone, but it's important and I have to tell somebody. Oh, I don't know what to do. When can I see you?"

"Anytime. I'm not doing anything tonight. Why don't you come over here now?"

"Oh no, I can't come over there. Can you meet me somewhere?"

"Sure. Where and when?" *Look out, chum, this may be a trap.*

"I'll meet you on the corner of Tenth and Bleeker. You just walk straight over Tenth Street from your place. I'll be on the corner. How soon can you be here?"

"Twenty minutes to half an hour."

"All right, but please don't be any longer than that. Goodby."

He hung up. That girl certainly sounded worried, he reflected. What could be this important thing she had to tell, and why did she have to tell it to him? After all, she had only seen him once, as far as he knew. It was probably a trick of some kind, but if that guy Houseman was behind it, well, brother Houseman would be nursing more than a bruised chin. He adjusted the holster harness over his shoulder and examined the pistol, spinning the cylinder and squinting at the light through the shining barrel.

Yes sir, Mr. Houseman. He ejected the shells and snapped the hammer several times. Yes, Mr. Houseman. No, Mr. Houseman. Oh, you will, will you, Mr. Houseman. He snapped the hammer twice, then carefully replaced the bullets and slipped the pistol into the holster.

**B**UT how could Houseman have prompted the note? He wasn't in a position to prompt much of anything at the time, McLane remembered as he buttoned his coat, cocked his hat, and went down the stairs. Well, he'd soon find out.

"Captain McLane?" He turned to find the girl standing beside him. "I'm Anne Martin. I—I'm the girl you were just talking to. I'm awfully glad you came."

"So am I." He saw, in the dim light, that she was pretty, and dark, and that she was wearing a little red hat. "What's the story? What's this all about, anyhow?"

"I'll tell you, but not here. We can't stand and talk here. Would you mind coming up to my place?"

"Not at all." *Easy, Mac, easy. Watch your step* "Not at all. Where do you live?"

"Up the street about half a block. Come on, nobody will bother us there."

"Wait a minute. Are you sure this isn't some kind of a booby trap. Houseman didn't put you up to this, did he?"

"Houseman? Mr. Houseman?" There was unmistakable fear in her voice. "Oh, you didn't tell him, did you?"

"No why should I tell him? All I did was pop him one in the jaw this morning. I thought he might have dreamed up a little party this evening and offered you as bait."

"You hit him? I didn't know that. I don't understand exactly what you mean."

"Skip it. A guy can't take too many chances, you know, but I guess I can take one more. Where do you live? Let's go."

Anne Martin's apartment was a small one room, kitchenette and bath affair on the rear of the second floor of a dingy building on Bleeker Street. McLane had followed her up the stairs, his hand inside his coat until he had entered, but there wasn't much room for anyone to be hiding in such a little place. He dropped his cap on the studio couch, lit a cigarette and look around. It was funny, he reflected, how some New York girls could take little apartments in run-down neighborhoods and make them so attractive. Here, for example. There were gay curtains at the windows, prints of good pictures on the walls, a pleasant atmosphere and everything as slick and clean as a new pin. "Nice little place you have here," he commented.

"Captain McLane, do you have those papers?" The girl ignored his compliment. "Do you have them? Oh, if you do please give them to me. Please give them to me."

"Just a minute." So this was the play, was it? "What makes you think I have any papers? I don't know what you are talking about."

"Yes you do. I heard you talking about them when you called up on Wednesday morning. Give them to me, please do. It's so very important."

"Eavesdropping, eh? And why do you want those papers so badly? Who told you to try to get them from me, anyhow?"

"Nobody. Oh, don't be so suspicious, Captain McLane."

"And why not? Everybody I meet seems to want those papers, and most of them are willing to give me a hole in the head in exchange. Suppose, Miss Martin, you tell my why you want them. I'd like to get this story straight, once and for all. What are those papers all about, anyhow?"

"I don't know. But you had them, and if Finn doesn't get them back he will get into terrible trouble, he said."

"And who is Finn?"

"He's the man you saw get robbed on the subway. He's the man . . . what's the matter?"

My face gave me away on that one, he thought. "Listen, Miss Martin. I'll tell you what I know but first you tell me

what you know. As for Finn—well, I think that Finn is dead. In fact, if Finn was the man who had his pocket picked then I know very well he's dead."

"No. Oh no! Oh, they did do it to him. He said they would, but I didn't believe him. How do you know?"

"I saw him in the morgue yesterday morning. He had your note with my name and address in his pocket, so the police came looking for me to see if I knew him. I'm sorry. Was he a friend of yours?"

"Yes, he was my friend and I guess I was his, at least as much of a friend as he ever had. He told me once that he couldn't talk to many people, but we used to go out to dinner sometimes in the evenings because he said he could talk to me. He was a lonely man, I know. And now they've killed him." She turned her head away and sat in silence.

Finally McLane spoke again. "Who killed him, Miss Martin? Who killed your friend? I think you should tell me if you know."

"Those people," she said slowly, "those people he was always talking about. He said they would kill him if they ever found out what he was doing. He said he didn't care if he could get what he was looking for first. And they, just when he almost had everything, they killed him."

"Who killed him?"

"I'll tell you all I know, Captain. May I have a cigarette, please?" He held out his pack for her selection, then offered her a light and watched while she inhaled slowly. "Would you like a drink, Captain? You will find some whiskey in the cabinet, and there is ice and soda in the refrigerator. I'd like one too, please."

"FINN'S real name was Resick," she continued, after he had mixed the highballs. "John Resick. I suppose it was originally something longer than that, but he shortened it after he came to this country. He said he had been born in Finland and had come over here with his parents when he was a little boy. After they died he went back to Finland, married, and had two children. He was successful and prosperous and happy there, I always believed, until the war in 1939. Then he went into the army. He was wounded in one of the first battles and after he had been in the

hospital for a while they gave him leave so he could go home and be with his wife and children for Christmas. He found his house in flames, his wife and the two small children burned to death.

"I don't think Finn was ever quite the same after that. He came back to America. I don't know what all he did. He had gone to work for the League just a short time before I did, about a year ago. He was a messenger of some kind. I never paid much attention to him until one evening when I was going out for dinner I met him on the street and we ate together.

"We were both without many friends here in New York, and I used to see a lot of him after that. He was a good man, Captain, but a lonely man and sometimes a little strange. He belonged to a lot of different organizations — radical things, I guess they were—and he was always going to meetings. But he never talked about them to me, very much. He didn't seem to be a radical himself. Not like some of the people you hear talking around here. He seemed to think that America was in danger from somewhere, and he always said what a wonderful country this was, and that people should wake up before it was too late or we would lose everything.

"Then last Tuesday night, or rather early Wednesday morning, he knocked on my door. The downstairs door is never locked, you know. I've never seen him so excited before. He told me that somebody had robbed him of some papers he had taken from the League's files and that if he couldn't get them back he would be in great trouble. The papers had to do with the World Wide Chemicals Company and something the League had been doing or was going to do which would hurt them a lot. I didn't understand it very well.

"He said he had been to see a Mr. Hamilton, who was a vice president of the company, and on his way home a pick-pocket had taken the papers. He said that a marine officer, I suppose it was you, had chased after the pick-pocket but he had taken the train back to Grand Central because he had been afraid and felt he had to get away. Then he asked me to see if I could find out who had the papers or if they ever turned up in the office, and he would meet me the next day after I

finished work, and every day until I found out, if I ever could.

"So when you phoned I figured that somehow or other you must have found them, and I took your name and address and that evening Finn was waiting on the corner as I came home and I gave him the note. He said he would see you and let me know what happened. I haven't seen him since and now you tell me he was killed."

"I never said he was killed, Miss Martin. I said he was dead. You said he had been killed. May I fix you another drink?"

"Please," she nodded. "I know he was killed. He said they would kill him if they ever found out that he knew what he did."

"But what did he know?"

"He knew something about the League. That's what he said when he came here on Tuesday night."

"But what is there to know about the League? What kind of an outfit is the League, anyhow?"

"I don't know. Honestly I don't. I just answer the phone and act as a receptionist. But Finn knew."

"But what do they do up there in those offices. Don't you know that?"

"They put out a little newspaper called 'The Democratic Truth,' and write letters to a lot of people asking for money."

"What's the paper about?"

"Oh, nothing much that I could ever see. They write a lot about how big business is making slaves of the people, and how big newspapers only print what they are told to print. They say America is going to be taken over by Fascists unless we act like some other countries and give everybody a chance to be happy. Things like that."

"And you say Finn had stolen some letters about the World Wide Chemicals Company?"

"That's what he said. Then he had taken them to this Mr. Hamilton to show them to him."

"What were the letters about?"

"He didn't say."

"Well, they must have been pretty important to someone. I know that ever since I found them I've been having trouble. Everywhere I go people follow me and . . . what's the matter?"

Anne Martin had turned a sickly white.

The half-empty glass fell from her hand and crashed, unnoticed, on the floor. She clutched the arms of the chair for support.

"What's the matter? Don't you feel well?" He started to pick up the broken glass. "What's wrong?"

"Follow you? Oh no. Oh God, no. They didn't follow you here, did they? They'll know you must be talking to me. They'll know I've told you. Oh, they'll kill me too, they'll kill me too." Her head fell to her arm, she cried silently, whimpering with terror, for all the world like a puppy locked in a strange, dark cellar. "They'll kill me, too. They killed Finn and they'll kill me."

"Take it easy, kid, take it easy." He patted her on the shoulder. "Nobody's going to hurt you. Everything's going to be all right. Here, I'll get you another drink, you kind of dropped that last one."

"I don't want any more to drink. I've got to go. I have to get out of here. Where can I go?"

"You don't have to go anywhere. You're all right. Nothing's going to happen to you. If you're really afraid I'll call the police and they'll keep an eye on you after I leave."

"Leave?" she cried. "Leave? Don't go. Don't go now, please. Oh, I'm afraid, afraid, afraid."

## IX

A BLACK sedan drove slowly to a stop at the curb and presently a man walked away from the doorstep where he had been lounging idly. He placed his elbows on the sedan's open window sill and spoke to the two men in the front seat. "Hello Mac. Hello, Patsy. What do ya know?"

"Nothin' much. How ya doin'?"

"Okay, I guess. He came over and met a girl at the corner. They talked a while and then went into that place across the street. He hasn't come out, and nobody else has gone in. Who's supposed to relieve me?"

"Joe Black will come along and take over at twelve. You know him, don't you? Cheer up, you've only got about a half hour to go."

"Well, I hope I'm here when he comes, and not following this marine back to the

Pacific or some place. Maybe he's going to stay with this dame all night, huh?"

"How would I know? All I know is Lynch said put somebody on the case and keep him there. You know Lynch, he doesn't explain much. What's the girl look like?"

"She's a pretty good looker. About medium size. She was wearing red shoes and a red hat when she met him, and had a light-colored coat wrapped around her. Good-looking legs. I wouldn't mind trading places with that marine."

"What would you do, talk? I never heard that you were the romantic type." The police radio in the car began a message. "Hear that? Goodby, we gotta go. Some drunk beating his wife again. Take it easy."

"Goodby. If you see Blake tell him to get the lead out of his pants and come over and relieve me on time. My feet hurt."

The police car pulled away.

At the same time Bob McLane was saying, "Don't cry so, Miss Martin. Don't cry, Anne. Everything's going to be all right. Here, come over here on the couch." He lifted the girl from the chair and carried her across the small room to the studio bed. "I'll get you a cover of some kind." There was a folded blanket at the end of the couch and he placed it over her. "Don't cry. Come on now, snap out of it." His tone was gentle, soothing. "Nobody's going to hurt you and you'll just get sick if you don't stop crying. You don't need to be afraid."

"Don't go away, they'll kill me too. I know they will. They killed Finn and they'll kill me too. Where can I go? I don't want to die."

"Now listen to me. You're not going to die." What, he wondered, were you supposed to do in a case like this. The Care and Comforting of Hysterical Females had been omitted from his military training. The silent, body-shaking paroxysms continued. He touched her shoulder.

"Miss Martin! Anne!" Well here goes—he slapped her sharply across the face with the flat of his hand. The crying stopped. "I'm sorry," he said.

"Lend me your handkerchief." She dried her eyes. "I'm sorry. I'm all right now. I was just being silly, I suppose,

crying like that, but I'm afraid. Tell me, does it hurt much to die?"

"If you don't stop talking like that I'm going to have to slap you again. Nobody's going to die. Where's your phone? I'll call up the police and have them come over if you are really afraid. Then I'll go home and you can get some sleep. You'll feel better in the morning."

"I don't have a phone." She saw the question before he asked it. "That number I gave you was a booth in a restaurant where I ate tonight."

"Where is it? I'll go down and call from there."

"No, don't go. I don't want to be here alone, not tonight."

"Come on down with me, then. We'll make the call together, nobody will hurt you when you're with me."

"No. They might be waiting for us. Maybe they didn't see us together before and would see us now and then they'd know. Stay here just a little while longer. Maybe I won't be so scared after a while. Fix me a drink, will you, please? And excuse me, I must look awful." She stepped into the bathroom and closed the door.

Women certainly were a funny outfit, he thought as he poured the whiskey into the glasses. One minute scared to death and the next minute worried about how they looked. This Anne Martin looked pretty good, but somehow or other he had been placed in a situation where he had to be the perfect gentleman. He shrugged his shoulders in a what-the-hell manner and splashed a double dose of whiskey into his own glass.

"Thanks, I guess I needed this. I'm sorry I acted that way. I don't know why I did it—only that I'm worried." She had come back to the room with only a trace of redness remaining at the rims of her eyes. "Sit down. Would you like me to turn on the radio?"

"No. Why don't you just relax and take it easy. Stretch out after you finish that drink and maybe you can go to sleep. I won't go away if you don't want me to."

"You're being awfully good to me. What are you going to do?"

"Me? I'm going to sit here until tomorrow morning."

"No, I mean what are you going to do

about all this? About Finn. About the people who killed him?"

"Why, I'm going to tell this detective Lynch what you've told me. He'll probably come over here tomorrow morning to talk to you himself. Then I think I'll get in touch with the Mr. Hamilton you told me about and see what he knows. Tomorrow's Saturday, but maybe he'll be in his office. I'll call up anyhow. But don't you worry. When I tell Lynch about tonight I expect he'll move right in on the League outfit. Then," he smiled, "I wouldn't be surprised if you found yourself out of a job."

"I don't care. I'm never going back to that place again, no matter what happens."

"Don't blame you. That makes two of us looking for jobs. Tell you what, if I find one for you I'll let you know, and if you find one for me, you call me up and tell me about it. When we both have jobs we'll go out some evening and celebrate—how does that sound?"

"That would be nice. You're a nice person, Captain McLane, aren't you? You're one of the nicest men I've ever met."

"**T**HANKS. Now why don't you try to get some sleep? Stretch out and let me cover you up. There, are you comfortable? Would you rather undress and get into bed? No? Well, I'll just turn out all the lights except this little one over here. If you want anything I'll be sitting in the chair. Goodnight now. Sleep tight."

He went back to the chair and picked up his unfinished glass. What a night. What time was it, anyhow—one o'clock? It wouldn't be light for six or seven hours. He got up and opened a window. The girl stirred. "Just a little fresh air," he whispered. He sat down again, stretching his long frame, trying to be comfortable. He yawned. Might as well get some sleep, there wasn't much chance of people coming banging on the door at one o'clock in the morning, he hoped.

Some time later he awoke stiffly and painfully. His foot had gone to sleep, there was an ache in his left armpit where the pistol had pressed, his neck creaked when he raised his head. The room was

cold, too, and then he heard Anne moving on the couch and he tiptoed over to make sure she was covered. The bed look inviting. He softly removed his shoes, his coat and the holster harness and loosened his collar. Might as well be comfortable, and there was plenty of room for two on the couch. He placed the pistol under the pillow and very, very gently, so as not to disturb, eased himself down beside the sleeping girl. She moved slightly, muttered something.

"It's all right," he whispered, "it's only me. I'm cold. Go to sleep again."

She lay on her left side, her back toward him, and as he shifted the blanket to cover them both she caught his hand and held it. "Stay here. Don't go away." He could feel her heart beating beneath his fingers.

And then it was morning again and the bright sun streamed in through the windows, banishing all hint of the trouble of the night before. Coffee bubbled on the little stove.

"Just one cup, Anne, and then I really do have to go. Gee," he looked at himself in the mirror. "I look like a tramp. Do you have a comb I can borrow?" He ran a hand over the stubble of his beard. "I need a shave. And these clothes look like I had slept in them." He laughed. "Which isn't surprising, because I did sleep in them, didn't I? How did you sleep? How do you feel?"

"Oh, I feel fine. I guess I was awfully silly last night, wasn't I? Look at that sun, isn't it wonderful? I'm not afraid any more, nothing could happen on such a bright day. Will you call that detective you know when you get home? Tell him I'll wait right here until he comes. Shall I tell him you were here all night? What will he think of me, I never did anything like that before."

"I don't think he could find any fault, do you?" McLane drank the coffee and smiled at her. "I don't see why I have to be only a brother to all the good-looking girls I meet. Just you wait until we get those jobs and have that celebration. I'm warning you, when I take a girl out I turn into a wolf." He gave a long, low whistle.

"I'll take a chance. Must you go now? When will I see you again?"

"If I can get away from Hamilton in

time I'll be back early. Maybe we could have lunch together, but I won't promise."

"Well, I won't be going out until later in the afternoon, and then only because I have to do some shopping. If I'm not here stick a note under the door. And tell Lynch or whatever his name is that I'll be here when he comes. Goodby, and thanks, Captain McLane. Thank you so much for everything. I don't know how to say it but you know what I mean. And I'm sorry I was so much trouble last night."

"You weren't any trouble. Forget it. I'll see you this afternoon. Goodby."

He walked along in the morning sunlight, smiling to himself, and the watching detective across the street stepped away from the wall and followed after, muttering, "Look at that smile. Just like a cat eating cream. Oh mother, why didn't you tell me to join the marines instead of taking this job where I have to stand up all night?"

Back in the apartment on Tenth Street McLane brushed his teeth, washed his face, and then dialed Lynch. "Hello, Lynch? Say, I just got home. What? No, I went over to see that girl. I found out who that man was.

"Did I what? No, you low-minded copy, don't you know I'm an officer and a gentleman? Don't laugh. Listen, do you want to hear my story or don't you?"

"Well, I met her on the corner at Tenth and Bleeker and then we went up to her place, it's about half-way up the block. First of all she wanted to know did I have those papers. She heard me talking about them over the phone when I called that fellow Houseman. So I told her no, I didn't have them.

**T**HEN I let it slip that her friend was dead and listen to this—she went into hysterics and said that they would kill her too. She was scared to death and wouldn't let me go out to call you or anything, said they would come and kill her if I left her alone. Finally I got her to go to sleep and this morning she felt a lot better. I told her you'd be right over. I told her you'd see that nothing happened to her, either."

"Why does she think something's going to happen to her?"

"She thinks somebody got wise to Finn and killed him and if they figure she told me anything they'll kill her too. She was plenty scared for a while."

"Okay, I'll buzz over and talk to her. She don't need to worry. You'll have to prove to me that anything worse than having you there all night could happen to her. Where does she live?" McLane told him. "I'll go right over. What are you going to do?"

"I thought I'd call up and see if Hamilton is in this morning and if he is I could go up and see him. That all right with you?"

"Go ahead. Will you be around this afternoon?"

"I told Miss Martin I'd drop by and see her when I came back, just to let her know what happened and to make sure you hadn't been beating her with a rubber hose. I'll be home after that, so far as I know."

"Give me a call when you get back and I'll come over and we'll see what we have found out."

McLane turned from the phone. It was too early to call World Wide Chemicals, he was sure nobody would be there until nine, at least. He'd take a shower, shave, and whip up some breakfast.

On Bleeker Street Anne Martin had finished washing the few dishes from breakfast and the glasses from the evening before. Her clothes were wrinkled, she noticed as she looked in the mirror. If that detective was coming maybe she better change them. She stepped out of her dress and her slip and turned on the water in the bathtub.

There was a knock at the door. "Who is it?" she called. "Just a minute." Could the detective have arrived so soon?

"It's Captain McLane." The voice was muffled by the door. "I forgot something."

"Just a second." She reached for a robe, hurriedly pulled it around her. "Come in."

She opened the door.

"Don't make any noise, Miss Martin." A strange man stepped into the room and closed the door behind him. There was an automatic in his hand. "Don't make any noise. I don't want any trouble."

"Who are you? What do you want?" Terror choked her.

"What was McLane doing here last night?"

"Nothing. Nothing. He . . . we . . . we just had a date, that's all."

"Don't lie to me, Miss Martin. What did he want? What did you tell him?"

"Nothing, nothing at all."

"I'm sorry you won't tell me here, Miss Martin. We'll have to go somewhere else. I don't want any noise. Put on your clothes."

"I can't leave. I'm waiting for a detec . . ." The look in the stranger's eyes stopped her.

He took a step forward.

"I don't want any noise." The automatic lifted and became a sullen club as it crashed down on Anne Martin's head. She dropped to the floor, and the man reached for her pulse. "So, there's a detective coming, is there? He won't get many answers out of you, little girl."

He took her slip from where it lay across the back of a chair. Swiftly he knotted it into a silken rope, looped it around the unconscious girl's neck and braced his foot against her shoulder as he pulled it tight. Her slow breathing stopped and she lay still.

The stranger stepped into the bathroom and turned off the water. "No noise at all," he said to himself as he went down the stairs. "No noise at all."

X

McLANE rinsed his face, doused his shaved skin with lotion, and returned to the bedroom to dress. He was pulling on his trousers when it occurred to him to wonder if he was not being somewhat of a fool in planning to see Hamilton. Wouldn't the sensible course be to get the little package of letters and memoranda back from the cleaning woman, take them to the League, apologize for hitting Mr. Houseman, and call the whole thing off?

"Nuts," he said to himself as he took a shirt from a drawer. "If I go up there I'll hit that Houseman again, if he doesn't have a patrol out to get me first. I think those League guys are a bunch of crooks or commies or something, and I'm going to see what happens. And I do meet a lot of interesting people—even though not

all of them are the type I would select for my best friends."

He called World Wide Chemicals and learned that Mr. Hamilton usually came in on Saturdays at about ten o'clock. It gave McLane plenty of time. He caught a Fifth Avenue bus uptown and then walked over to the tall building on Park Avenue which housed the company. The directors' and officers' offices were on the twenty-sixth floor, and McLane stepped from the elevator into a carpeted foyer presided over by a gray-haired, immaculately groomed receptionist. He gave her his name and asked if Mr. Hamilton was in.

"I'll see," she said. "Do you mind telling me what it's about?"

"Not at all. It's about the League to Safeguard Democracy."

The receptionist lifted a phone and dialed a number. "This is the desk, Miss Andrews. There is a gentleman here to see Mr. Hamilton about the League to Safeguard Democracy." There was a pause, then, "Very well. Thank you."

She replaced the instrument and nodded. "That way. First door down. Mr. Hamilton's secretary is Miss Andrews."

As he walked the few steps along the hall, McLane decided that the situation called for a frank, cards-on-the-table approach. He entered a room in which a pleasant-looking woman of about thirty-five sat at a desk. "Miss Andrews?" he said. "I'm Robert McLane."

"Yes, Mr. McLane. Won't you go in? Right through there. Mr. Hamilton just came in and he can see you right away."

The spacious inner office was pleasantly but not luxuriously furnished. It contained a leather-covered divan, a few chairs and a bookcase. On the walls were two excellent marine prints and a large-scale world map. A fine walnut desk was placed slantwise in one corner, and the man seated behind it arose as McLane walked in.

"Understand you're from the Democracy League," he said, extending his hand. "Sit down."

As McLane shook the outstretched hand he gathered it was offered more from a punctilious sense of courtesy toward a visitor than from cordiality.

"I'm sorry your secretary got the wrong dope, Mr. Hamilton," he said as he sat down. "I don't represent the League in

any way. I came here to talk about them, not for them."

"I see. What can I do for you?"

"Frankly, I don't know. I have a rather complicated story to tell, and I don't know just where to begin. But I first came to New York about a week ago. Since then I've found myself involved in a lot of odd doings, completely by accident, and now I think maybe you can help me get to the bottom of them."

"What kind of doings?"

"A street fight in which I got a bit mussed up, for one thing. A pocket-picking. An attempted kidnapping. A murder."

For all the effect these statements had on Hamilton, McLane might have been reciting the headlines from yesterday's newspaper. The blue eyes and firm mouth showed neither interest or surprise, only polite attention.

"How do you think I can help? I don't quite understand why you are here Captain."

"I know. The whole thing is a little tough to explain to strangers. But the beating and the pocket-picking and all the rest are tied in with an envelope full of papers which I happened to get. And not only are those papers connected with your company, but I think they are the same papers a guy named Finn was showing you last Tuesday night."

"Why did you say you were from the League?"

"I didn't. I said my business concerned them, and I think it does. Their name was on some of the papers, too. Only they say the papers don't belong to them."

"You've been to see them?"

"Yes. I called them up the next morning, because it looked to me as if the papers belonged to them. They said they didn't know what I was talking about. Then I went up to see them yesterday, and got a run-around and a lot of double-talk and ended up by smacking the boss in the jaw."

"You did?" McLane saw a little smile flash for a moment on Hamilton's ruddy face. "Well, you won't get a run-around or double-talk from me," World Wide's vice president said. "I don't hesitate to say that it's very likely the papers you are talking about are familiar to me. But let me be blunt with you, Captain. You

are an honest-looking American, wearing a uniform I respect. Funny things have been happening to you, you say; well, some funny things have happened to me, too, and frankly, I would like to know a little more about you before we have any heart-to-heart talks."

McLANE grinned. This man reminded him of a tough and wonderful colonel who had been his c.o. during the first push into the Marshalls. He looked you in the eye and told you what was on his mind. And what was on his mind made sense.

"That's fair enough, Mr. Hamilton. What do you want to know about me? The name is Robert McLane . . ."

Hamilton wrote the name on a scratch pad, jotted down some of the other facts McLane started to give him, scribbled impatiently, and said, "This is a waste of time. I can't check this stuff today. Don't you know anybody in this town that I might know?"

"Well, I've only been here a little while. About the only friend I have is a fellow named Gorski. He's a reporter for the *Herald Tribune*."

"Gorski? Don't know him." Hamilton pressed a button on his desk and picked up the phone. "Miss Andrews, please get me Mr. John Simpson at the *Herald Tribune*. Hello. Hello, Mr. Simpson. This is Hamilton . . . Henry T. Hamilton at World Wide Chemicals. Fine, thank you. And you? Good. Say, Mr. Simpson, do you have a man on your staff by the name of Gorski? Well, he has been given as a reference here, and I'm in a hurry to verify it—that's why I'm phoning. I wonder if you'd tell me what sort of a fellow he is and how long he has been with you. I see. What, he's there now? Could I speak to him?"

"Hello. Mr. Gorski? My name is Henry Hamilton, I'm with World Wide Chemicals. There's a young man in my office who has given you as a reference, and if you can identify him by telephone and then answer some questions about him it would help both of us a lot. Here he is now."

He handed the telephone to McLane, who spoke briefly and explained enough of the situation so that Gorski understood

what was wanted. And then, as McLane knew he would, the reporter established his friend's identity and reliability promptly and fully.

When he put the phone down Henry Hamilton stood up and extended his hand again. "Captain, I'm glad to meet you. If half of what that reporter said about you is true I am honestly honored by having you in my office. I'm sorry if I embarrassed you by checking, but you must understand . . ."

"Forget it, Mr. Hamilton. It didn't bother me."

"It didn't bother me, either," the vice president said candidly. "Now let's get down to cases. I think the first thing to do is make sure we're talking about the same set of papers. Do you have them with you?"

"No. I've got them put away." He saw no reason to admit that they had been put away by a stupid accident.

"You must have looked them over," Hamilton said. "Can you tell me approximately what was in them?"

"Yes, I can. There were seven papers in the group. As I said before, they were the same papers that a man named Finn took to your house on the same night I saw them stolen from him."

The elder man fixed McLane with a sharp glance. "How do you know that?"

McLane told the whole story—the subway ride, the visit to the morgue, his long conversation with Anne Martin, Anne's assertion that Finn had been murdered.

"You've found out quite a lot, Captain," Hamilton observed. "It all fits together. I wondered why that man Finn never called me." He leaned back in his chair. "I thought it was just part of the game."

"Game?"

"Yes, Captain, part of the game." He gazed out of the window. Finally he turned back and said, "I see no reason not to tell you this. But please consider what I say as confidential, or at least off the record. If we're going gunning for this League, and it looks as though we were, there's no sense in making a lot of noise in the woods, is there?"

"That's agreeable to me."

"If you read the newspapers, McLane, you must know that World Wide Chemicals received a lot of bad publicity during

the war. And it's still going on." McLane nodded and the other man continued.

"We've been accused of creating bottle-necks. It has been said that we delivered inferior products to the armed forces, and that we made huge profits at the expense of the lives of fighting men. Believe me, Captain, there isn't a word of truth in it, so help me.

"We were able to prove the truth during the war, even though the aftereffect of the unfavorable publicity still lingers in the minds of some people. And now they are after us again— whoever they are. Here and there, throughout the country, we can see little signs of a storm building up. If it breaks everywhere at once we might as well go out of business." The vice president paused and looked McLane squarely in the eye. "And don't ever tell anyone I told you that," he said.

"I won't, he promised.

"They'll say we are conspiring to raise prices. They'll say our profits are all out of line, that we are sucking the public and paying starvation wages to our employees. All lies. But we can't do a thing."

"What do you mean, you can't do a thing? Can't you fight?"

**“WHO** can fight shadows, McLane? I can't. Let me show you how this storm is growing. Just yesterday a story broke in a Chicago paper, and what it said was that the Department of Justice was believed to be preparing a suit against us on charges of cornering the market of an East Indian drug which has recently been used in some anti-cancer research.

"Mind you, they didn't say it was so, they just said it was believed to be so. After that lead, the article went on to describe the horrors of cancer and how many people would die because they couldn't afford this one medicine.

"If it wasn't Saturday I could get a man in here with records to prove that every bit of that drug which has been brought to this country since the war was imported and refined by us, and given to hospitals free of charge."

McLane scratched his head. "What did you do?"

"I called the city editor on the phone. He said one of their reporters had re-

ceived the story in Washington from a source which he could not disclose, and the paper printed it in good faith."

"Won't he retract, or whatever it is they do?"

"Sure, but what good is that? The damage is done."

"Can't you sue the reporter for libel, or something?"

"He'd love it. It would make a martyr out of him. No, McLane, big companies like this one can't use their strength against individuals. But I know that story was planted, and I have a good idea who planted it, and if I knew why it was planted and where it started, then we could act. Those damned papers may hold the answer."

"I just read them in a hurry, Mr. Hamilton, but they didn't seem that important to me."

"Of course not, but then you didn't have the background. Let me tell you what was in them. I read them carefully, and when Finn left I wrote them down as well as I could from memory. One of them was a letter to Edward Dial, and it began, 'I think everything is about ready for the WW' — that's World Wide — 'campaign. You will receive the check for Minter tomorrow and when he fixes the proof the whole story will be ready to break and nothing can stop it.' Do you know what that means?"

"I thought it was an advertising campaign."

"That's what it sounds like, unless you know that Edward Dial is a Washington scandal-monger, writer of a gossip column, and makes most of his money by blackmail. Minter is a clerk in an important bureau. The proof that he is supposed to fix consists of placing forged records in the files, and when those records are found they will prove that World Wide paid a high commission to a certain government official, who died last year, in return for a big fulminate of mercury contract."

"Can't you stop it?" McLane almost shouted.

"It's stopped. We have some friends, fortunately. We've also attended to the other letter, which you may remember said something about a campaign in Detroit which would be felt in New York. Both of those letters were signed 'Paul', and I

presume they referred to Paul Houseman. But do you recall the carbon copy? It was addressed to Paul, and had no signature at all. All it said was, 'Paul: When the WW campaign gets going I want your ideas on some similar efforts for All-State Steel.' It wasn't signed, but it shows that Houseman has a boss who tells him what to do. And I believe, Captain McLane, that the man behind Houseman is the man who is behind all our trouble. Those papers might lead us to him."

"Did Finn tell you who it was?"

"No. He knew, he said, but that information was strictly for sale. But he did confirm what we were beginning to believe, that there was more to these attacks than just accident, and that the whole thing was an evil and exceptionally clever plot, originated by and directed from some single, secret source. Bue we couldn't find out where or what that source was."

"But were you sure," McLane asked, "that there was a single source?"

"Not certain. But we'd just about reached that conclusion when I had the visit from Finn. His tale, while it appeared to confirm our thinking, was almost too pat. I thought that perhaps our analysis of the situation had leaked out and he was trying to capitalize on it. He told me that World Wide was the target of a smear campaign conceived and stimulated by the League to Safeguard Democracy, which, as you must realize, is only a front for some clever operators. The League, he said, was busy planting suspicion against us and, under various blinds, supplying 'documentary proof' of our rottenness to any group they thought might use it. Still—and this sounds almost too fantastic to believe, but it's true—the campaign against us was just part of a larger scheme, just an opening gun of a project which aims at nothing less than a new social, political, and economic set-up for the whole country, with the League, or whoever takes over from them, in the saddle. I couldn't take it seriously myself, at first, until Finn pointed out how the same thing was happening in other parts of the world. God rest his soul, I thought he was a crackpot . . . he was a martyr."

"And what are you going to do about it?" McLane asked.

"We must obtain better proof that a

plot really exists. Then, if we have the proper evidence, we may be able to turn it over to the government for action. If that isn't feasible, mere exposure of the scheme may collapse it and everybody connected with it. *But the only things that can lead us to the top of the plot are in those seven sheets of paper.*"

"All right, let's get 'em back. I'd rather give them to you and work on your team than take them back to the League."

"We'd appreciate that, Captain. I don't know whether you believe my story or not, but I give you my word you will be doing not only us but the whole country a great service if you can get those papers back in my hands."

"I believe you, Mr. Hamilton. There's something phony about that whole League set-up. To me it stinks. But, if you'll pardon my saying so, I don't spot anything phony about your company. Now I'll see what I can do about finding the maid and the coat." Briefly he disclosed what had happened to the important envelope.

"Can I help?"

"I don't think so, thanks. I shouldn't have any trouble unless somebody tries to jump me again, and I intend to keep out of dark streets at night." McLane moved to his feet. "I'll be seeing you again, Mr. Hamilton, maybe disguised in dark glasses and a red beard. I always wanted to be a detective."

Henry T. Hamilton scribbled on a pad, tore off a sheet of paper. "Here's the night number for the office and the number for my phone at home," he said. "Good luck."

## XI

"RIGHT here," McLane told the driver, "this will be fine." The taxi slowed. A uniformed policeman stepped from the sidewalk.

"Move along buddy," he growled, "you can't stop here."

"Why not?"

"Because I said so. Move up the street a little way, there's been some trouble here."

The taxi moved along and stopped again. "I hope this will suit the flatfoot," the driver muttered over his shoulder. "Those cops always have some trouble or other.

Probably investigating two old guys playing dominoes, or something.'

McLane tossed him the fare and walked back toward Anne Martin's. As he turned from the street and went up the steps of the house a man who had been leaning against the door cleaning his fingernails stopped him.

"Pardon me, sir, but did you wish to see somebody?"

"What's it to you?"

"Don't get sore. I just asked if you wanted to see somebody in here, that's all."

"Of course I want to see somebody. Who the hell are you, anyhow?"

"Police." The man extended his hand to show the badge he held in the palm.

"Oh. For a moment you had me worried. I'm glad to see you here. Miss Martin should feel safe now. I'm Captain McLane, it's all right for me to go in, I think. Miss Martin's expecting me. You can ask her if you want to."

"So you're Captain McLane. Yes, Captain, we were expecting you. As a matter of fact we were just about ready to start looking for you. Come with me, we'll go up together."

"You don't need to bother, I know the way."

"I don't doubt it, Captain. However, I was told that if you showed up I was to bring you upstairs personally." The plain-clothesman rapped on the door of Anne's apartment. "Captain McLane is here."

The door opened. "Fine, tell him to come in." It was Lynch's voice. "Come in, Captain, we've been waiting for you."

"Hello Lynch, how you doing? How long have you been here? I didn't expect to find you." McLane stepped into the room. "Where's Anne?" Then he knew. Even before his eyes dropped to the sheet-covered figure on the floor, even before he interpreted the cold look on Lynch's face or realized why there was another policeman sitting silently and strange on a chair in the corner he could smell it—Death—in the room.

"What happened.?"

"That's what I want to know. Do you still have that gun of yours with you?" McLane nodded. "I think you better give it to me for a while. Just turn your back to me while you're doing it. Thanks. Now tell me what you know about this, Cap-

tain." Lynch's voice was flat and expressionless. "This, I mean."

He reached down and removed the sheet. "Pretty, isn't it."

There was nothing pretty about Anne Martin any more, Anne Martin with her eyes bulging in a fixed and hideous stare, a horrible long purple tongue crushed between her teeth and the rug. You could see that there had once been beauty in the crumpled white body contorted on the floor, but what had been lovely in life was now indecently nude and unprotected except for a robe which still clung to one shoulder. The face was black above the pink silken noose still knotted about her neck.

"Who did it?" Little beads of sweat stood on McLane's forehead as he turned away and Lynch replaced the sheet.

"That's what I want to know," Lynch said. "You can come out now." Another policeman emerged from the bathroom. "Go and call the ambulance, and then you can move the car up to the door," Lynch told him. "Sit down, Captain. Now tell me all that you know about this."

"What do you mean? I don't know anything about it. I left here this morning, went over to my place, called you and then went uptown. Say, why did you take my gun—you don't think I . . .?"

"I don't think anything, Mac. All I know is I came over here about half an hour after I talked to you, rapped on the door and nobody answered. So I tried the knob. The door was unlocked and I came in and found her there. I could see she was dead but I called the doc. He said she'd been strangled less than an hour so I just sat here to see if you'd come back like you said you were going to. And here we are."

"But—damn it, Lynch, you don't think I did it, do you?"

"Who else?"

"But—but. She was alive when I left here."

"So you say. All I know is you came here with the girl last night. The man who was following you says it is the same girl. You went out, alone, early this morning. I was the next person to come in here and I find the girl dead. Who did it? She certainly didn't do it herself."

"But why should I do it? And I told

you she was scared to death last night. That's why I said you should have somebody guarding the place. Did you check with those people at the office where she worked? The League to Safeguard Democracy?"

"THEY'RE closed on Saturday." Lynch lit a cigarette and slowly blew the smoke through his nose. "Listen, McLane. I'm not saying you did this and I'm not saying you didn't. All I have to say is that you tell a hell of a funny story. First you tell me that three guys beat you up, but you never reported it until I asked you about it. Then you say they didn't take anything from you.

"Next thing that happens is you don't have any idea who that stiff was, but four hours later it comes to you in a dream. In a dream." He crushed the cigarette into an ash tray. "Mister, I've been on the force for a long time. I've seen and heard a lot of funny stories, but I'll be go-to-helled if I ever heard anything like that before."

"It's absolutely true."

"Could be. After that you tell me about some papers, and a maid, whose name you don't know, is supposed to show up and tell you what happened to them. Only she doesn't ever show up." He was interrupted by the sound of a siren outside, followed by footsteps on the stairs. "Here comes the stretcher."

Two men entered the room, a rolled stretcher between them. They looked at Lynch. "Hello boys. Yeah, you can take her away, everybody else has been here," he told them.

They placed the stretcher on the floor, removed the sheet and callously rolled the body over. The sightless eyes stared at the ceiling, and for a moment McLane thought he would vomit. "Gee, look at that shape and stuff," one of the men said happily. "I bet she was somethin'. Who done it? This guy here? What's a matter wit' you, you a sex maniac or something?"

"Why, you cheap son-of-a-bitch!" McLane stepped forward, his fist cocked. The silent policeman across the room reached for his hip.

"Take it easy," Lynch grabbed the poised arm. "Don't mind him." He turned to the stretcher-bearer. "Why don't

you keep your nasty yap shut? Now cover her up and get the hell out of here."

"Okay, okay. Take it easy around the turn, chum. So long, see you in the morgue, I hope." The two men with their grisly burden tramped down the stairs, one of them whistling "Love is the Sweetest Thing," as they went.

"We might as well go too," said Lynch. "You'll have to ride over to headquarters with me. The inspector wants to ask you a few questions."

The ride was silent. Once McLane asked, "Am I under arrest?" and received only "No" for an answer. The headquarters building was old and poorly heated, there was a strange smell of stale cigar smoke and sour shoes about the place, the lighting was dim in the marble-faced corridors.

"Right this way," said Lynch. He opened a door and the two of them entered a room where a man sat behind a desk. "Inspector, this is Captain Robert McLane. He came down to the Martin girl's apartment about an hour ago. He had a gun on him, here it is." He placed the revolver on the Inspector's desk. "The girl was alive when he left, he says."

"Sit down, Captain." The Inspector pressed a button on his desk and somewhere a buzzer sounded. I'm going to ask you a few questions, as soon as the stenographer gets here. You don't have to answer them if you don't want to, but it would be better if you did."

"I'll answer anything at all, Inspector. I haven't done anything." The police stenographer entered, sat down and opened his notebook. "What do you want to know?"

"What is your full name?"

"Robert McLane. I have no middle name."

"Where were you born? . . . When did you come to New York? . . . Where were you before that? . . . Why did you go to Times Square? . . . Why didn't you tell the police? . . . What was his name? . . . Get Ryan down here and ask him about that, Lynch. . . . What time did you leave Miss Nesmith? . . . How many men were there? . . . Why didn't you report it?"

"Why didn't you report it? . . . Why did you hit Houseman? . . . Who saw

you there? . . . Why didn't you report it?"

The minutes ticked away into hours, the pile of cigarettes grew in the tray. "All right, Captain, I guess that's all for the time being."

"You mean I can go?"

"I don't see what we could hold you on, except suspicion. There has been a murder, maybe two murders, but I don't see how we can prove that you did either of them. I could arrest you, but you could get a lawyer down here and he would have you out in no time. I don't want to make you do that. We try to give all the breaks we can to service men. You're a stranger here in town, probably the only lawyer you could get would be some shyster who's already seen you come in and is hanging around outside.

"We could hold you on a charge of carrying a concealed weapon, but Detective Lynch admits he said you could keep it—which he shouldn't have done. There's no evidence that anyone was shot, though. Yes, you're free to leave."

"Thanks a lot, sir. I don't . . ."

"But don't go out of town. I might as well warn you that you will be watched, maybe as much for your own protection as anything else. We want you on tap until this case is closed. You are still under suspicion, remember that. If you are innocent you will do best to cooperate with us until we catch the guilty persons. I'd consider that as a friendly warning, if I were you. That's all."

"Thank you, Inspector. I'm just as interested in catching them as you are." He walked out to the street with Lynch. "Thank you, too. I know when somebody's giving me a break. Who do you think did it?"

"I don't know. Maybe you did. I will say, though, that you certainly tell the same story every time. I'll be sorry if I find out it was you."

**L**YNCH went back to the building and McLane caught a bus. Gosh, what a rat-race this had turned into. The things that shouldn't happen to a dog certainly happened to him. Unbelievable things, and he didn't blame the police for suspecting him. What a fool he had been to leave Anne Martin alone, but then he

hadn't known all the things that Hamilton had told him, nor would he have ever imagined that murder would be committed in broad daylight, within the short time between his leaving and Lynch's appearance.

His own apartment was comfortable and inviting as he took off his coat and necktie and tossed the empty shoulder holster in the closet. He flopped in the chair. Now what the hell should he do? The whole thing was too much for him to carry alone, too deep for him to wade through by himself. He walked over to the phone, dialed a number.

"Hello. Can you give me Mr. Gorski, please? . . . Pat? This is Bob, can I see you? I'm in a jam . . . No, this isn't funny, this is a real jam and I need somebody to talk to. Yeah, I'll be here. . . Thanks, fellow, I knew I could."

Good old Pat. McLane smiled, remembering—"What, you have to marry the girl so soon? Don't believe it, even a rabbit test won't show up in less than a week. Or did you have a fight with that guy Hamilton, and what the hell did he want all that dope . . . What?" And then the serious tone the reporter so seldom used. "I'll be down. Where are you, at home? I'll be down as soon as I can, you know you can count on me."

Good old Pat.

He was in the kitchen, pouring himself a stiff drink, when he heard footsteps coming up the stairs, two at a time. "Come in," he called in answer to the bell and reached for another glass. "Oh, boy, Pat, I'm glad to see you. I called you the other day, but you weren't in." He offered the glass.

"Thanks. Now what's your trouble? What's this jam you're in? It can't be too bad, I notice you're still alive. Your house on fire, or something?"

"No, it's a long story, and I need some advice. Come on in and sit down. First of all, have you seen either Joyce or Linda since the other night?"

"No, I've been in Boston."

"Well, then, I'll tell you what has happened since I left you." The story unrolled, punctuated now and then by Gorski's searching questions. "And so the Inspector told me I could come home, but not to go out of town, and I came up here and called you."

"I think the Inspector gave you a break. Who was it? Sullivan? Big guy with greyish hair? That's the man, he's all right, I know him. Look." Gorski paused. "Look, Bob, before I say anything more I want you to remember that I'm a newspaper reporter, first, last, and always. Did Sullivan say anything about talking to reporters?"

"No."

"Or about talking to anyone?"

"No."

"Well, as far as I know there wasn't anything reported about this Anne Martin being murdered when I left. I'm going to call Sullivan and then I'm going to call the paper. If we get any kind of a break on the story I can fix it up so nobody will think you had anything special to do with it, which will be better than if some of the tabloids get it first and play you up as strangling naked women in a Greenwich Village love nest. Where's that phone. Mix me another drink, will you?"

He had finished with the call to the Inspector when McLane returned from the kitchen. "He wasn't too happy about it," Gorski said, "but there wasn't much he could do. I'm not going to say you were in the apartment all night, and he asked me to wait a while until I tie it in with the League, at least until we can prove they were connected with the job. He says I can have first crack at anything that breaks, unless somebody else turns it up first. Now I'm calling the paper."

He lifted the phone again. "This is Gorski, darling, give me the desk. I just discovered a fiendish crime . . . Tom? This is Pat. You hear anything about a girl, name of Anne Martin, being strangled on Bleeker Street? . . . Good . . . Now listen to this, and then switch me over to someone in rewrite—Anne Martin was found strangled with her own slip, yeah, what they wear, at nine-thirty this morning. A Captain Robert McLane of the Marines is connected and there is a whole file on him in the stuff I sent back from Okinawa in 1945. Yeah, he's the guy who was with me when I got hit . . . That's right . . . Well, dig it out, it can be used for background . . . No, he didn't do it. I'm with him now, and I think I'll stay with him for a while . . . I'll ask him, now switch me over." He turned to Mc-

Lane. "How much do you want for the story of your life?"

"Rewrite? This is Gorski, and it's mine, all mine. 'Lovely Anne—two n's and an e—Martin, M-a-r-t-i-n, was discovered dead at nine-thirty this morning in her apartment at . . .'

"And that's that. Have you et yet? Well, let's get something to eat, we can think better on a full stomach. And then I think I'll move in here with you for a while. You need a chaperone. Somebody to take you by the hand as you walk around town on dark nights. Somebody to sing you lullabys when you crawl into bed with soon-to-be-strangled girls. I'll take the job, it may not pay much but I'll meet a lot of interesting people. You got any food in the house?"

"I got a bottle of gin and some stale bread."

"Poor fare for a starving man. What we need is food and female companionship, and if we proposition the latter properly they may provide us with the former. Give me that phone again. I ws supposed to call Linda when I came back from Boston anyhow, and she might as well cook for both of us. . .

"Linda my lovely! Did you miss me? Were you true to me while I was away? . . . Of course I was, except for seventeen blondes. Look, I'm coming over with Bob, we are hungry, broke, bruised, and need food . . . She is? Tell her to stay there, she can feed us too . . . What? Wait, I'll ask." He turned. "Linda says Joyce thinks maybe you're sore at her, is that true? No Lindy, he says he isn't sore at anything. As a matter of fact he's madly in love and even went out today and got his blood tested so he could ask her to marry him without fearing the fingers of the past were holding him back. . . Huh? . . . I'll buy some on the way over. Goodby."

XII

GORSKI turned to McLane. "Let's go. I said we'd pick up some stuff for sandwiches. There's a delicatessen on the way, if I remember correctly. Joyce had been crying her pretty little eyes out over you, but she's better now, I hear." Together they started down the stairs.

"Just a minute, Pat, I've got an idea. Why don't we send a telegram to my Aunt Caroline and ask her where Hazel lives? Then tomorrow, if we have an answer, we can find out what became of the coat I gave her and see if those papers are still in it. Once we have them we can combine with Hamilton and maybe round up the whole League gang. That would be an item for you."

"Bob the Boy Detective! Remind me to write a story with that title, will you. Anyhow, I don't see what we have to lose. There's a telegraph office right up here on Fifth Avenue. Leave us start stalking the dusky Hazel. We'll be Harlem Hawkshaws yet."

THEY sent a message to McLane's aunt, asking Hazel's full name and where she lived. Then they started back toward Stuyvesant Street. Along the way they made many stops and when they reached the girls' apartment both friends were loaded with packages. "We *two* Kings of Orient are," sang Pat as they entered, "bearing gifts we traverse afar, field and fountain, moor and mountain—catch!" He tossed a large parcel to Joyce. "Hyah Lindy, my honey. Gad, but you're beautiful. Kiss me. Did you really miss me while I was away? I noticed twenty-three curly-haired chorus boys running out the door as I came in, thanks for sending your other lovers away when I come to call. Hello, Joyce, what do you know?"

"What's in this package, a corpse?" Joyce asked.

"*Don't use that word.* There's a smoked turkey in there, that's what, and it cost me five hundred dollars, so be careful with it. Don't even think of eating it, it's too precious. And here is bread. And roquefort cheese. I had to show my press card and tell them I was writing a story about the return of the black market. I intimidated them, I did. And here's ice cream. And in this dainty container," he stepped outside and returned with a large galvanized bucket, "are two bottles of champagne—on ice." He turned to McLane. "What's the matter with you, chocolate soldier, the cat got your tongue? You act like someone had come into a room and caught you in a compromising situation. Would you two like to be alone?

Come on, Linda, this is a hallowed place, let's go to the kitchen."

"Hello Bob, still mad at me?" Joyce smiled.

"I never was mad at you. I guess I was just tired, or hungry, or lonely. I don't know. Anyhow, I'm sorry. And I was going to call you this evening, only Pat called first. Forgive me?"

"Sure, I forgive you, if there's anything to forgive. Sometimes I don't think you're a tough marine at all, but only a little boy." She placed her hand on his arm, then kissed him lightly. "There. Now wipe the lipstick off your mouth and let's fix something to eat, I'm starving. Ready or not," she called through the kitchen door, "we're coming."

Later the four friends were sitting together in the living room. "Pardon me if I stretch," Bob yawned, "but I ate too much. Oh brother, champagne and smoked turkey. That's the first time I ever had turkey that way, but it's the only way I'll have it from now on. I was really hungry. First meal I've had to eat since breakfast."

"What are you doing," Linda asked, "trying to reduce?"

"No," replied Pat. "As a matter of fact he was down at police headquarters and they were beating him with a rubber hose. No, don't stop me, Bob. It's going to be in all the papers tomorrow, after it appears in mine first, and these girls can read." He paused. "Our friend McLane is mixed up in a nice, juicy murder—naked women strangled in their slips, and all that cheap romance. It's sordid, to say the least."

"What!" Two voices exclaimed together.

"It's true. Captain Robert McLane, Marine hero, jilted by lovely Joyce Nesmith, seeks solace, strangles steno in love nest. Ask him."

"What's this all about, Bob? Is he kidding?"

"Well, he's kidding a little, and I wish he was kidding the whole way. There was a girl found murdered over on Bleeker Street this morning, and I was the last person seen leaving her house. Only I didn't kill her, as any fool can plainly see. No," he said, as Gorski tried to interrupt, "let me tell the story. After all, I've told it so many times I can do

it pretty well. Joyce, you remember that I was going up to see the League, after I left you the other night. Well I went up the next morning and . . .

“. . . so that's the story. I called Pat and he came down and after he had phoned it in to the paper we came over here.”

“And I'm going to take him home tonight and put him to bed and stay with him,” said Pat. “He shall not vanish from my sight. I'll dog his footsteps all the way to the electric chair.”

“Don't talk like that, Pat,” Joyce flashed at the reporter. “You always have to treat everything as though it were such a big joke. This isn't funny. Bob's in trouble. Murder isn't anything to be funny about.”

“Sorry Joyce, old girl. I didn't know you felt that way. I wouldn't joke about it if I thought Bob were really in trouble. I know he didn't do it just as well as the rest of us do. I'm not the least bit worried. However, if you want to be serious about it,” his eyes twinkled, “I just happen to remember that Linda told me she had to take some old gin bottles back so she could get the deposit. Come on, Lindy, you don't need a coat, it's very warm outside. And for one half hour, Miss Nesmith, you can be as serious as you like. Then we'll be back.”

“Sometimes,” began Joyce after Pat and Linda had closed the door behind them, “sometimes I get so furious at that Pat Gorski I could throw something at him. He's never serious for a minute. And then where did he get this new habit of always stepping out and leaving you and me alone. If I want to be alone I don't need Pat Gorski to run things for me. I can be alone by myself if I want to.”

“How else could you be alone, honey?”

“Don't make bad jokes and don't you 'honey' me, either. Maybe you'd be better off if you were alone a little more yourself, instead of spending all night with other girls, over on Bleeker Street!” She sniffed. “*Bleeker Street!*”

“I told you I couldn't help it.”

“You could have gone if you really wanted to. Was she pretty?”

“Yes, she was pretty.”

“I thought so. Did you kiss her?”

“No, I didn't kiss her. How could I?”

I told you she went to sleep and I sat up in a chair all night.” It wasn't exactly true, but it would do in the present emergency. “To tell the truth I don't even remember if she was pretty or not, she was crying so much. And I didn't kiss her. I haven't kissed anybody but you for a long time.”

“You'll keep out of trouble that way. Oh Bob,” her voice and her expression changed. “Why do you have to be mixed up in such a terrible thing? You don't want to hurt anybody. You're such a swell guy, and I had so much fun when we were out the other night. Now I'm afraid.”

“Afraid? You don't need to be afraid, Joyce, nothing's going to happen to you. You don't think I'd . . .?”

“Oh no, Bob. I'm not afraid for me. But all these things happening to you, that's what I'm afraid of. Why, you might go out of here tonight and I'd never see you again.”

“Do you want to see me again.”

“Certainly I want to see you again.”

“When, Sunday?”

“Maybe.”

“Monday?”

“Maybe.”

“And always?” He sang. “I won't hold you to that until after Monday. What'll we do tomorrow? All day tomorrow?”

“I don't know. Maybe it would be nice for the four of us to go somewhere. We could go in my car and if it's as warm and nice as it was today we could drive out of town someplace.”

“That's a good idea. Say, how long have they been gone?”

“About twenty minutes. Why?”

“That leaves ten minutes. Does that light shine in your eyes?”

“It won't if I shut them.” She smiled. “What did you have in mind?”

“This.” He placed his arm around her. “This.” He shut his eyes, too.

In exactly ten minutes he heard shouting, whistling, and unannouncedly loud stomping of feet on the landing outside. Pat and Linda had returned.

“Hello,” Gorski burst into the room. “Still in a pet, my pet? No, I can see that you aren't. Uncle Patrick knows best, doesn't he. What do you think, we walked all the way to the gin man's place and

then found we had forgotten to take the bottles after all. So we stepped into a tea shop-*py* that happened to be nearby and had a drink. Not tea. Not coffee. Not even milk. We had green *creme de menthe*, just for the hell of it. We were going to bring some home to you only we didn't." He stopped, then, "Linda, do you see what I see? Are you tuned as sensitively as I am? Do you know what has happened? They don't pay any attention to me. Love has come into this place while we have been out. Love. Romance. Marriage and little children. Millions of little children. I can't stand it." He sank into a chair. "Millions of tiny little children."

JOYCE laughed. "Not quite that bad. But how would you two like to go somewhere with us tomorrow? If it's as nice as it was today we can go in the car. I bet maybe the leaves will be coming out on the trees."

"I've sworn to go where Bob goes, so include me in," sad Pat. "And because I don't want to be the third who makes the crowd, I'll be very glad if Miss Linda will accompany me."

"Where will we go?" asked Linda.

"Oh, I don't know. Up around Bear Mountain, maybe, that's a nice drive along the river."

"I'm not supposed to go out of town," McLane remembered.

"That's right. Well, we could go up to one of the parks in the Bronx and loaf around. There's enough turkey left to make some sandwiches, we could take our lunch. The parks aren't crowded this early and there's lots of room. Then when we got tired we could come back here and . . ."

"And what?" asked Pat. "Shame on you, Linda Cahill."

"And get dressed and go out somewhere—and that will cost you more than a smoked turkey, Patrick my friend."

"It's one of the most excellent ideas yet to have come from the female mind," said Pat. "We will be here, suitably costumed, at noon. Noon is a good time to start on an expedition. And now you girls can kiss the boys goodby, we have to go home and prepare our alibis in advance."

It was Sunday afternoon, and they had

driven through the warm Spring day, up the East River Drive, across the Triborough Bridge into Astoria and Flushing and then had crossed the Whitestone Bridge into the Bronx. "We'll give you a quick tour of the Big City, stranger," they told McLane. "You'll know your way around when we've finished with you. And if you have to be taken for a ride, you might as well go with friends instead of the mysterious taxi drivers you seem to patronize."

Later they made their way into one of the city's parks and, turning from the main highway, followed one of the lesser-traveled roads until Joyce stopped the car beside a grove of trees. "I think a bridle path runs along somewhere near her," she volunteered. "I used to come up here and go riding. Let's take all this stuff and walk around until we find a nice place. Okay?" They filed along the bridle path until they came to a small hill, flanked on three sides by pines and oaks just beginning to hint of green leaves again. The fourth side sloped away to a view of Long Island Sound, its blueness punctuated here and there by the white sails of small boats.

"This looks like a good place. The ground's dry. What say we put those blankets down here and see what we have to eat. Pat, where's that jug of martinis?"

"I've got it, Bob. I've been guarding it with my life."

"Spring is here," yawned Linda. "I'll never want to go back to work tomorrow." She smiled.

"What you need, my chick, is food," Pat told her. "Food and drink. Permit me to offer you one of these delicious dry martinis. Excellent for Spring Fever, no matter whether you wish to cure it or encourage it. 'Here,' as the White Rabbit or whoever it was said to Alice, 'drink this.'"

When the picnic was finished and the scraps and paper gathered together in a basket they lay lazily on the blankets. "I don't want to go back to town," Joyce sighed. "All I want to do is lie here on this hill and relax in the sun."

"I know something about a hill," mused Pat. "How does it go? Oh yes—

"'Mine be the breezy hill that skirts the down,

Where a green grassy turf is all I crave,

With here and there a violet bestrewn,  
Fast by a brook or fountain's murmuring wave;

And many an evening sun shine sweetly on my grave!"

"I wonder if there are any violets blooming now?" asked Linda.

"I don't know, let's go look. You two coming, or are you going to stay here in sweet communion with your souls?"

"You can go if you want to," Joyce said, "I'd just get into poison ivy."

"I promised not to let Bob out of my sight," Gorski hesitated. "Maybe all four of us should go."

"Nothing's going to happen out here in the open, in broad daylight," McLane said. "Anyhow, I don't think I should go tramping around on rocks and things with my leg. You can get a nasty twist if you aren't careful. You two run along. If any strangers appear I'll whistle and shout."

"That's probably the flimsiest excuse I have ever heard a grown man give," Pat hooted at him. "However, it may be the best you could think of. We'll come back by way of the car and blow the horn for you if you aren't there." He and Linda disappeared down the trail.

"Joyce."

"Yes."

He rolled on his side, facing her. "Hello, my very darling."

"Why do you say 'hello'? I've been here all along, haven't I?"

"I just wanted to make sure you hadn't gone away." He propped himself on his elbows so he could look at her as she lay there."

"Where did you think I would go?" Her eyes smiled at him and she turned slightly in his direction. "You didn't think I had gone to hunt violets, did you?"

"I think it's got me, darling," he told her, slowly. "I've never had it like this before."

"What's got you," she teased. "Something you ate? Smoked turkey?"

"I'm trying to tell you I've fallen in love with you." He placed one arm across her, held her shoulder with his hand and drew her closer to him. "I love you, Joyce, I really do."

She looked at him for a long while, it seemed, and the half-teasing smile faded slowly away until it was replaced by a look of deep and trusting happiness.

"There are stars in your eyes," he murmured, his face close to hers.

"I'm glad," she whispered. "I hoped there would be."

The sun had moved a little further toward the western horizon when Joyce sat up again and brushed the hair from her face. "Now give me a cigarette and my compact, please," she said. "Pat and Linda will be wondering what ever happened to us."

### XIII

TOGETHER they walked back to the automobile, hand-in-hand, and sat on the rear seat. "I don't see any sign of them yet. They must have found millions of violets. Shall I give them a honk on the horn?"

"I don't think so, they'll come when they get ready. Maybe they aren't even looking for violets. Sometimes I think they are looking for the thing we've found. Oh Bob, I'm so very happy. I'm in love and I'm happy. I've never been in love before."

"Neither have I." He kissed her. "And now, all of a sudden, I'm so much in love with you I don't know what to do. When did you first think you were going to fall in love with me?"

"I don't know. Certainly not very long ago. Why, do you know I haven't even known you a week. It won't even be five days until this evening. But I fell hard when it came, even if it did come fast."

"So did I . . . Oh darling, I'm so much in love with you and I'm so happy and at the same time I'm all mixed up."

"What do you mean, you're all mixed up?"

"Well, I don't have a job, and then there's all this trouble with the police and everything."

"What difference does that make? You'll get a job and I know you haven't done anything wrong. It'll all clear up in a day or two."

"I know darling, but I can't ask you to marry me until . . ."

"Until you can support me, is that it?"

You're a funny man, Bob, the dearest, sweetest, most wonderful funny man I ever heard of. You can ask me any time you want to, you know that. A job and all those other things can wait."

"Would you?"

"Would I what?"

"Would you marry me?"

"Come here." She pulled him to her, raised her face to his. "There, does that answer your question? Of course I will, darling, unless you decide to jilt me for some girl on Bleeker Street. Let me go now, and sit up, here comes a man walking around the corner."

"Shall I tell him we're going to get married? I want to tell everybody."

"No, silly. Sit up and act dignified."

The stranger approached the car and stopped beside it. "Pardon me," he said, "but I wonder if I could borrow a wrench. I've got a flat tire up the road a little way, and I find I don't have all my tools."

"I think there are some tools in the trunk compartment," Joyce told him. "Wait until we take a look. The keys are here in my bag." She handed the keys to McLane, who got out and opened the rear compartment.

"Here they are. Is that what you want, a lug wrench? Are you sure this is all you need, do you have a jack and everything?"

"I think I do," the stranded motorist told McLane, "but to tell you the truth I don't know very much about changing tires. Would I be imposing too much if I asked you for a little help?"

You certainly would, McLane thought. Aloud he said, "No, I'll be glad to give you a hand. Where's your car?"

"Just around the bend, about a hundred yards up the road. I certainly would appreciate some help. I've never tried to change a tire by myself."

"All right, I'll go with you. It shouldn't take more than a few minutes. Do you want to come along, Joyce?"

"I think I better stay here, Bob. Linda and Pat should be back very soon, and somebody should stay here and watch the stuff in the car. If they come before you get back we'll drive up and meet you."

McLane and the stranger walked along the road.

"Sure has been a swell day, hasn't it?" commented the man.

"Best day I ever had in my life. Is that your car up there?" They had passed the bend in the road and were hidden from Joyce. "It doesn't look like you had a flat to me. What tire is it?"

"The far one." The stranger was following behind McLane. "I'll show you when we get there." The ingratiating voice suddenly changed. "I have a pistol on you, Captain McLane, just keep walking and don't do anything funny."

"What!"

"Keep going. Don't stop, don't turn around, and keep your hands where I can see them. I don't want to shoot you but I will if I have to." Three men emerged from the woods beside them. "All right, boys, get him in the car before somebody comes along. Be careful, the girl's still back there."

"Why don't we take her along too?" one of the strangers said. "She looked like pretty hot stuff, layin' up there on them blankets. What did you stop for, Mac, you was just goin' good?"

"You dirty bastard!" Unmindful of danger behind him he leaped toward the speaker. "I'll break your filthy mouth!" The blow never fell. Something crashed against the back of McLane's head and he fell in the gravel.

"I told you to look out for him. Now throw him in the car and let's get the hell out of here."

The four men picked up the unconscious body. "Big guy, ain't he? In he goes." They threw McLane on the floor and two men followed into the rear of the car. The other two seated themselves in front, one took the wheel, stepped on the starter and quickly the car picked up speed and disappeared along the winding highway.

On the other side of the bend in the road Gorski and Linda returned to find Joyce along. "Where's Bob? Gone to see a man about some dogwood, I presume. We didn't get any violets."

**N**O, some man who had a flat tire came along and Bob went back to help him. Jump in. I said we'd drive up and meet him when you got back, it's just around the corner. You drive, Pat." They drove on a hundred yards or so. "That's funny, I don't see any car. Look, there's the wrench the man borrowed,

ying by the road. I wonder where they are."

"Wait a minute, Joyce," Pat asked. "What did this man look like?"

"Why, I didn't particularly notice. Just a man."

"I'm going to get out and look around." He picked up the wrench. "Are you sure this was yours?"

"It must be, where else could it have come from? You don't think anything has happened to Bob, do you? Oh no—no."

"I think I was a fool ever to let him out of my sight, that's what I think. If we don't find him in a few minutes I'm going to call the police. Linda, blow that horn, maybe he'll hear it and come looking for us. Joyce, try and remember what this stranger looked like."

"Oh Pat, I can't. I wasn't paying any attention. I was so happ. . . ." She buried her face in her arms and sobbed to herself, "They've killed him too, they've killed him. I loved him so and now they've killed him."

"There there, Joyce, don't cry. He'll be all right. He can take care of himself. Start blowing that damned horn, Linda, and do something for Joyce." He looked hopefully into the woods. "Jesus, why did I ever let him get away? If anything happens to him I'll run those bastards down if it's the last thing I ever do, so help me God." He stepped back to the car, slid under the wheel.

"This is a case for the cops," he said to the two girls. "I'm going to get to a phone. Does anybody know where there is one. How do we get out of this place, anyhow?" The car roared away.

They found a building with a "Telephone" sign near the entrance to the park. Gorski inserted a nickel, dialed a number. "Give me Inspector Sullivan . . . well, dammit, get him for me . . . this is Pat Gorski calling and it's important . . . I don't care where the hell he is . . . all right, connect me to his home. I said it was important . . . Sullivan, this is Gorski. They've got McLane . . . I said they've got McLane . . . How the hell do I know who?"

"Right up here in Pelham Bay Park, about twenty minutes ago . . . where was I? I was picking violets . . . yes I said

violets, damn you! . . . Some guy came along and asked for help to fix a flat tire and McLane walked down the road with him and now he's gone . . . what tail? . . . How the hell would I know what became of the tail you had on him, I'm not running your stupid department . . . yeah, the girl saw him . . . all right, I'll be down as fast as I can get there . . . What? . . . A '39 Chevy, grey . . . Okay, tell them to pick me up as I come down the Parkway." He slammed the receiver on the hook.

"LET'S GO, girls, the Inspector wants to talk to us. Hold on." They had gone about a mile when two motorcycles raced up from behind them and swung alongside. Pat nodded, one of the police drivers beckoned with a wave of his hand, switched on his siren and flashing red lights and screamed ahead. The other motorcycle followed him, contributing to the ear-piercing noise.

"Off we go, into the wild blue yonder," muttered Pat, pushing the accelerator to the floor. "We'll get you if we can, chum, and if this heap holds together!" He braced himself as he twisted the wheel and turned onto Bruckner Boulevard, tires squealing. "Riding high, up in the sky!" They slowed down to take the bridge over the Harlem River, picked up speed after they crossed to Lexington Avenue and headed downtown, until they reached headquarters.

"Hello Inspector." Gorski shook the proffered hand. "Sorry to disturb your afternoon nap, but it looks like there was hell to tell the skipper tonight. McLane's gone."

"So you said. Tell me about it." He heard the story without interrupting, then he said, "You don't think he jumped of his own accord, do you?"

"That's not a very fair thing to say, stopped talking to concentrate on their he didn't. You know as well as I do that McLane had no reason to skip."

"I'm not so sure. What do you think, Lynch?" The Inspector turned to the detective.

"I don't know what to say, sir. I had Travers and Matthews following them all the way up to the park, but they lost the car inside. Then, instead of reporting

back they just kept cruising around. Hell, they could cruise around in that place for ten years and never find anything. If McLane shook them deliberately it looks bad."

"But Bob wasn't driving," Joyce told them. "I was, and I never thought of anybody following us or anything. Bob didn't even know where we were going. And anyhow, why do you just stand here and talk? Why don't you do something?" she pleaded.

"We're doing everything we can, Miss. I have men searching the park, other people have been watching all the exits since you telephoned—I don't know what else we can do. And you can't prove he was kidnapped, there were no signs of a struggle. According to your story Captain McLane simply walked down the road with a stranger and never came back. I don't think he's the kind to go somewhere he didn't want to without putting up some kind of a fight, do you?"

"No."

"Nor do I think any one man could kidnap him," Inspector Sullivan went on. "At least I wouldn't want to try it all by myself."

"Got any dope on the League to Safeguard Democracy, Inspector?" Gorski abruptly changed the subject.

"Lynch went up there late yesterday. Tell them what you found."

"I didn't find anything. The place was just as clean as a whistle. All the furniture was there, but there wasn't anything in any of the drawers or file cabinets. Even the wastebasket were empty. The building people said everything had been moved out on Friday night. Then we tried to trace that guy Houseman, but there wasn't anybody home at his address. We've got some men out now trying to run him down."

A telephone on the Inspector's desk rang sharply. "Sullivan speaking." He talked briefly, hung up and faced the others.

"There were no signs of any fights, they can't find McLane in the woods anywhere around there, and nobody has seen him. He hasn't been spotted in any cars going in or out. Personally, I think he's breezed and I'm putting out the alarm to pick him up on sight, anywhere in the country."

"Is that the way you want me to write the story?" Pat asked him.

"That's the way the story goes out of this office."

"Very well. If you girls will wait until I call the paper I'll drive you home."

**T**HE RIDE back to Stuyvesant Street was a slow and silent one. Linda said nothing. Now and then Joyce raised her handkerchief to her eyes. Pat parked the car, gathered the baskets and blankets together and followed the girls up the stairs.

"Now don't you worry, Joyce," he began, "Bob'll be all right. He's come through lots worse than . . ."

"Don't stand there and keep telling me 'everything will be all right, Joyce, everything will be all right'! Everything isn't all right, and you know it. Why don't you do something about it? You even agreed to the story that Bob had gone away because he wanted to. You even phoned it in to your paper, for all I know. And you claim to be his friend. I'm glad I don't have friends like you, that's all!"

"Take it easy, Joyce, take it easy," Pat begged her. "Don't you see that if he was kidnapped, and if the people who did it think the police believe Bob ran away, they won't be as careful as they would be if they thought the police were looking for them? Can't you see that?"

"And if they're careless," he added, "it will be easier for us to find them. I don't think they're going to hurt him, really I don't." *God, forgive me for whistling in the dark.* "If they wanted to they could have done it before. I think they just want to ask him some questions. You know they're trying to find out what became of those papers. He'll tell them what he did with them and then they'll let him go. He'll turn up soon, I'm sure of that." *This is a prayer, Lord, this isn't just something I'm telling this girl. Make it come true.*

"I'm sorry, Pat. I know you're right. Only I can't think clearly and I keep saying there must be something we could do. I hate to think of him lying somewhere, hurt, and I can't help him."

"He doesn't expect you to help him, Joyce." It was Linda, trying to comfort her room-mate and friend. "He knows

we'll do everything we can, but he wouldn't want you to worry like this."

"Yes he would. He loves me. I told him I would marry him, just before he . . ." She buried her face in the pillows on the couch.

"Joyce, you poor darling. I didn't know. We didn't know." Linda sat beside her friend. "Don't cry. We'll find him. Pat'll find him somehow."

*That makes two of us, Lord. We're nice people, please help us.* Pat lit a cigarette and smoked it silently, down to a short, hot stub.

"I'll be all right now." Joyce slowly sat up, wiping her eyes. "I'm sorry I made such a fool of myself. I'll be better as soon as I wash my face."

"Would you like anything? A cup of coffee?"

"Thank you, Linda, that would be nice. You're good to me, both of you." She closed the bathroom door behind her.

"Oh Pat, what do you really think?" Linda asked, and searched his face for a clue.

"I don't know, darling. I'm worried. I can't tell you how worried I am, but don't let Joyce know. If only I knew what was behind all this. It's something big, bigger than I understand. Bigger than even Hamilton realizes, I'm afraid. I'll have to work it out, somehow. I only hope we can get to the bottom of it in time."

"It is that bad?"

"I'm afraid it is. The only thing I hold to now is that, if there is anyone, anywhere in the world, who can take care of himself and get out of a mess it's Bob McLane. I'd rather have him with me in a jam than Superman. He knows I feel that way, and wherever he is he knows I'm working for him, too. I hope it's enough, until we can get to him. I wish I could tell him about Joyce, he'd like to know about her right now. Gosh, they're swell people."

"You're kind of swell people yourself, Pat. If only this terrible thing hadn't happened we'd all be so happy tonight. Why, we could even be planning a wedding. But I shouldn't be talking about that."

"Why not, Lindy? We can still plan a wedding, if you want to."

"How? What do you mean?" She looked at him and saw a strange new expression on his face, as though he had suddenly discovered an answer he had been seeking for a long time. "Pat Gorski, are you . . .?"

"Yes, I am, Linda. I'm asking you to marry me. I'm not much, but I love you. I've loved you for a long time. Maybe it took something like today to make me serious for one of the few times in my life. Will you marry me, darling? Speak up, the mood may not last."

Tears of happiness welled in her eyes as she stood on her toes and placed her arms around his neck. "You are a swell guy. Oh Pat, Pat, I love you so. I thought you were never going to ask me."

Neither of them heard Joyce return. "You don't mind if I get myself some coffee, do you?" she said.

XIV

**H**E HURT. His head hurt—Lord how it hurt. Rumble . . . bounce . . . bounce. Why didn't it keep still, whatever it was, didn't it know that his head hurt all the way down to his hips? He took a long breath, filling lungs which felt as though they had been stored in a dusty corner. There was some sort of blockade against his feet and he pushed out, trying to straighten his cramped knees. Whatever it was wouldn't move.

"He's showin' signs of life." A voice came out of the blackness and McLane blinked his eyes tentatively, opened them and slowly rolled them to the right.

"He's got his peepers open now," the voice exclaimed, almost in amazement. "How ya feelin', ya punk?" McLane realized the last was a direct question but as he tried to make some protest in reply nothing but a grunt came out. There was something over his mouth. He forced the tip of his tongue between his lips and felt something smooth and sticky. Adhesive tape. He shut his eyes, his head hurt too much to do anything about it.

"Hey, wake up, wise guy." Something kicked against his arm. He tried to move again and found his arms were securely tied to his side. "Wake up, I wanta talk wit' ya." The kick was repeated, harder now.

With an effort he opened his eyes again. Where was he, anyhow? It must be in the rear of a car, on the floor between the front and back seats. That was one door against which his feet were shoved. And there were two men sitting on the seat beside him. One man, at McLane's feet, was quietly looking out the window, his hands folded on his lap. It was the other who was talking. Where had he seen that ugly face before?

"Don't ya remember me, huh? Say somet'in', you jerk. You ain't bothered by a little hunk of adhesive tape, are ya?" The one-way conversation was punctuated with kicks. "What do ya know, he won't talk. Don't ya remember me? I was drivin' ya in a taxi th' other night, ya dirty bastid!"

McLane's throbbing head cleared slightly as he remembered, with the tonic of exaltation, the blow he had delivered to his present inquisitor a few nights before, and then he cringed as a vicious kick caught him beside the kidney.

"Put the slug on me, would ya, ya dirty son-of-a . . .!" The evil face turned red with rage, the man's words evolved into a torrent of cursing and the kicks redoubled in intensity. I'll kill ya, ya . . .!"

"Take it easy." The man at the window hardly turned his head. "We're supposed to bring him back in one piece."

"I'll take it easy." The voice slowed to a studied, sarcastic tone. "Am I too rough on ya, Captain? Kin I do anything to make ya happy. Would you like to have a cigarette, maybe? Here, little pal, try this."

With a quick motion he took the half-smoked cigarette from his mouth and shoved the burning end into his helpless prisoner's nose. McLane's feet pushed against the door as the hot coal of burning tobacco seared inside his head. A cry of pain emerged through the gag as a small moan, and involuntary tears came into his eyes. He twisted his body, trying to dislodge the fire that was slowly cauterizing his very brain and finally, after ages of agony, he shook it loose and lay still again, breathing heavily.

"Hahaha," the erstwhile taxi-driver laughed insanely. 'Hahaha. What's the matter, Captain, ain't it your favorite

brand? Is ya nose hot? I'll cool it for you." He leaned over and spat full in McLane's face.

"Hahaha, hohoho, lookit that, would ya. He's slobbered all over hisself, just like a little baby. Wait a minute, baby, daddy'll wipe your nose for ya." He pulled a soiled white handkerchief from a pocket and placed it over McLane's face, then seizing the ex-marine by the nose he banged the bound captive's head rapidly against the floor of the moving car.

"I said take it easy." McLane could hear the voice of the second occupant of the back seat through the pain which rang in his ears. "Stop it, you stupid hop-head, or I'll lay you out, too. I thought I told you to leave that junk behind."

"All right, all right. I was just havin' a little fun with th' punk." McLane felt the handkerchief being removed. He lay still, fighting the pain inside his nostril and struggling against nausea from the rotten smell on his face.

The car rolled on and the tires hummed a tune against the highway until finally the driver slowed and turned. After that the road was bumper.

"You can untie him now and take that tape off." This was a new voice, coming from the front seat. "Wipe his face, too, I want him to look as good as he can." Then the rope or whatever bound his feet was loosened. The tape was removed with a single rough jerk and McLane opened his eyes and touched his tongue to his dry lips. The man at his feet was watching him now, and the folded hands held a blunt automatic leveled threateningly.

"How do you feel, Captain?"

McLane made no answer as he tried to get his brain to stop its endless spinning. His former tormentor untied his arms.

"You can talk if you want to, nobody can hear you here. But don't try any of your smart ideas. I might say, Captain, that we seem to have the better of you this time."

**S**O OBVIOUS a remark did not seem to warrant the trouble of even thinking for an answer. McLane closed his eyes again. The car continued along the bumpy road and through a small woods, he judged, by the difference in light and by the wet, fresh smell of trees. He didn't

bother to look. Then, as the light brightened again, the car stopped.

"Well, end of the road. This is where we get out." It was the voice from the front seat, recognizable this time as that of the man who had asked for help to fix a tire, so long ago. "I hope you can walk, Captain, it would be very undignified if we had to carry you."

The four men emerged from the car and stood, waiting. With great effort McLane raised himself to his elbows, then to a sitting position and finally he pulled his body to where his legs hung out the door. Then he stood up, grasping the door for support.

"Think you can make it?"

He took a step forward and would have fallen if two of his captors had not held him by the arms. Half walking, half stumbling, supported from both sides, the strange group led him along a pathway toward a large house. He would have called it an English-style house, if he had bothered to note its heavy wooden framework and its stucco walls, an English-style house of truly great proportions, stretching across gardens and lawns which reached out to a fringe of trees and underbrush on all sides.

He wasn't bothered with details then, although some corner of his whirling brain told him that he should be. Somehow or other he struggled up some steps and through a door. Then he was in a hall, and then in a large room, and there was another man, a new man, looming straight and tall and waiting in the room. McLane couldn't see him very well.

"Here he is, sir." The man who had asked his aid, back in the park, spoke deferentially. "This is Captain McLane. I had to use a little force to keep him quiet. We picked him up in Pelham Bay Park. Nobody saw us and nobody bothered us on the way up."

"Thank you. Are you Captain McLane?"

"Yes. Who the hell are you?" The words came out of a great distance, and sounded strange.

"I'm Anthony Foster, Captain. You've been causing me some inconvenience lately, Captain. I don't like it." Foster's voice was cultured, well modulated. He might have been a high-school principal admon-

ishing a student for some classroom misbehavior, except for the hard purposefulness of his words.

"You don't like it?" Fresh anger brought new strength into McLane's body. Some gland, somewhere, managed to pump an extra spurt of adrenalin into his veins. His brain cleared and he straightened his spine. "You don't like it! Well, I'll be go-to-helled in a bucket!"

"That attitude won't get you anywhere, Captain. *Nowhere at all.* I've been told that you have a tendency toward violence and coarse language but you might as well know that it won't do you any good here. You can't escape until I make up my mind to let you go, and I have many people here to protect me. And now tell me, please, what have you done with those papers?"

"What papers?" *Stall, McLane, stall and think. Think your way out of this one. Play dumb. Sway a little. Make them think you're still hurt.* He rocked on his heels.

"Come, Captain, you know what papers I mean. The ones you so fortunately retrieved from the late Mr. Resick."

"Resick? Who's Resick?" He mumbled the words, reached out as though to clasp some unseen support, and crumpled to the floor.

"I'm sorry, sir," he heard a voice saying. "That must have been a pretty hard bump I gave him, but I thought he was able to stand by himself."

"Give him a chance to rest for a few hours," Foster said. "Take him upstairs, give him some soap and towels, and send up some food a little later on. And then come in and see me. You may have to go to Detroit."

McLane felt four men pick him up and carry him away. "I think he's gained some weight since the last time," one of them complained. They went up some steps, through several doors, and at last he was dropped unceremoniously on something soft. He opened his eyes.

"Where am I?" he muttered.

"In the guest room—for extra special guests. Here's some towels and some soap. We'll send up some chow later. Goodby." The four men walked out and the door closed. He could hear the lock click shut.

Then he listened to their footsteps fad-

ing down the hall, and somewhere a door slammed and he heard them no longer. He got to his feet. The room was about ten feet square. There was a small window on one side and he crossed to examine it. It contained a single pane of glass, set solidly in the walls, and the glass was two inches thick, he judged. At least it was as solid as stone when he tested it with the side of his fist. *That* was never designed as an avenue of escape, he thought, as he looked out across the lawn toward the woods. In a corner of the room there was a wash basin and a toilet, on the floor was a thick mattress and a few blankets. The door was heavy and solid, the only opening in it was a small peep hole which opened from the outside and was also set with heavy glass. A single solid metal chair completed the furnishings. He tried to lift the chair and found it was bolted to the floor.

His pockets, when he searched them, were empty.

MC LANE shrugged his shoulders, picked up the soap and towel, turned on the water in the basin, and washed his face. Then he put his head under the faucet and let cold water stream over the bump behind his ear. It felt good and he let it run until he heard a noise at the door. His torturer during the recent ride entered with a tray.

"Aha, feelin' better, I see. Maybe I should of slapped ya around a little more." He set the tray on the floor. "How's th' nose?"

"Maybe you would like to try a little slapping around now that my hands aren't tied, mister." McLane took a step forward.

"Git back." An automatic flashed into the man's hand. "Sit down on the bed and eat your chow. I'll sit in the chair. And don't try anything' cut. I'd like to bang ya right through th' gut, but I kin wait, buddy, I kin wait. Ol' Hackie always gets his, sooner or later."

McLane reached for the tray, pulled it toward him, tested the first of several sandwiches on the plate. It was roast beef, delicious, and he chewed it hungrily. There was hot coffee, too, to take the edge from his thirst, and more sandwiches.

"Is that your name? Hackie? Hackie what?"

"None of your business. Ya don't need to eat so fast, you got a half an hour. If I don't come out by then the guy who sits outside the next door comes in to make sure you're still alive. And don't think ya can get past me and out the door, 'cause if I don't get ya, ya still ain't any further than the hall, and he'll get ya at the next door. You're a dead duck," he finished happily.

That was something to know, thought McLane. Every bit of information about the situation could be valuable and evidently Hackie could be provoked into interesting disclosures. He began again. "Where are we, Connecticut?"

"None of your business."

"I just wondered why you didn't drive the car up here. Probably you don't have a license. I always heard they were particular in Connecticut and you had to be a good driver to get one."

"Th' hell you say. I got a license to drive here too, only I won't show it to you." The primeval figure slumped in the metal chair in the center of the room grinned smugly. "Ya think y're a wise guy, doncha? You can't find out my name that easy, wise guy."

"I don't give a damn what your name is, fathead. Here, I've finished. Why don't you blow? I'm going to get some sleep."

"Hohoho, sleep he says. Go ahead, chum, you'll need it. Hahaha, what a joke." Hackie picked up the tray and backed from the room.

It must have been about ten minutes later that the door opened again and Paul Houseman, one-time manager of the League to Safeguard Democracy's office, entered the room. McLane was pleased to notice the purplish color still showing on the side of his latest visitor's face. But brother, brother, he reflected, the buzzards certainly were gathering around for a feast of revenge.

"Hello Houseman, how's your swollen chin?"

"I wouldn't joke if I were you, McLane. Will you come with me?"

"Sure. Where are we going?"

"Mr. Foster wants to see you."

"That's very nice. Do I want to see him?"

"I think you do, McLane. I think you would be very wise to see him. Mr. Foster

does not like people who cause him trouble, and you have caused him a lot of trouble already."

"My heart bleeds," said McLane. He followed Houseman from the room, down a short hall to another door. Houseman knocked on the door, an eye appeared at a peep-hole, and the door was unlocked and opened from the outside. During the peeping and unlocking process the prisoner looked around the hall, and through its mullioned windows he was able to gain a slight idea of his cell. Evidently he was in a separate wing of the mansion, and on the second floor. Then he and Houseman continued on their way, followed by a third person who had joined them from somewhere, and who walked heavily behind them as they passed through more halls and down a majestic stairway to the first floor. They turned into the room where McLane had first met Anthony Foster. Foster was waiting behind a desk.

Anthony Foster, in appearance, might have been your fellow commuter on the 5:18. He wore a single-breasted jacket of what seemed to be a soft tweed, a conservative tie, McLane judged he fancied himself very much the country squire. His hair was dark, flecked with gray, and he had a straight, well-trimmed mustache. His jaw was square, crow's feet were etched in the corners of his eyes, but it was not until you had watched him for a while that you realized none of the lines in his face had been caused by smiles. Anthony Foster never laughed.

Some people never had noticed the change that came to his eyes from time to time, or if they did they wisely kept it to themselves.

"Sit down, Captain," Foster said, as he indicated a chair.

A telephone rang. Foster and Houseman looked at each other, and Foster nodded. Houseman lifted one of two hand sets on the polished mahogany desk.

"Hello," he said. "Good morning. Just a minute." He turned to his superior. "It's Fessendon. He wants to talk to you."

"Yes?" Foster took the telephone, listened.

McLane relaxed in the chair and studied his surroundings. If Foster, at first glance, fell a little short of being distinguished in

his looks, there was nothing undistinguished about the background in which he had placed himself. Sitting behind an oversized, richly inlaid burnished mahogany desk, he seemed to obtain stature from the cold impressiveness of the furniture.

ONE END of the room was solid with shelves of books. The other displayed a heavily framed and indirectly lighted picture of a group of people. Behind a low table, in the picture sat a heavy-lidded, cold-mouthed man in a toga. He was flanked by two Roman soldiers. On the other side of the table stood a tall man, bearded, poorly dressed, an air of infinite sorrow and sadness on his face. With an involuntary start McLane realized that he was looking at the sentencing of Christ, and that the central figure behind the table was Pontius Pilate, preserved in all the evil of the moment by some master painter. McLane turned away.

Covering most of the wall behind Foster was a map of the Western hemisphere. Some cities, such as New York, Detroit, Seattle, and Pittsburgh, were marked with large stars. Others displayed circles, squares, and a varied assortment of shapes. It reminded McLane of any of a number of operational charts he had seen and studied during the war.

"Listen, Fessendon." Foster's flat voice cut into the telephone and McLane's attention jumped back to his captor. "I've told Quiston what to do and I've told you to do what he tells you. I know what's going on. You don't. You do as you're told or get out now. But if you decide to get out, just remember that I have a complete file on the Preston contract negotiations here. Take your choice. Goodby." He replaced the telephone.

"And now, Captain, we have your case to consider. Paul," and he turned to Houseman, "sit over there and take any calls that come in. Gromio, stand by the door." Gromio, evidently, was the guard who had followed McLane and Houseman through the halls. "Captain," he continued, "I must ask you again, where are those papers?"

"What papers?"

"It won't do you any good to stall. You know perfectly well what papers I mean. You had them, you certainly know

where they are now. I want them, or I want to know where they are. I think you will be much more comfortable if you tell me." His mouth looked as though it had been stabbed in an embalmed face. His eyes narrowed to black worm holes. "You will be very uncomfortable if you don't. Do I make myself clear?"

"Very clear. Very clear indeed, to me. After all, I've seen Finn and I've seen Anne Martin, and I've been worked over by that gorilla of yours who calls himself Hackie. But I don't have the papers with me. You know that."

"Where are they?" Foster's voice was like a whip.

"Why do you want them?"

"Because they belong to me. They are important to me."

"I thought they belonged to Mr. Houseman."

"They belong to me. Where are they?"

"I don't know."

"Gromio." The lash-like tone faded from Foster's speech, the voice now sounded as though he were speaking to a pet cat. "Gromio. Come here." The guard approached and for the first time McLane had a clear view of him. He was a huge man, ugly of face, with a cast in one eye and large hands, hairy and knotted, that hung almost to his knees. "Captain McLane," Foster said, "Gromio here is an expert conversationalist. However, other people do most of the talking when he wants them to. I think you would rather talk to me than talk to him."

The fawning voice went on. "People who talk with Gromio, Captain, usually find themselves at a disadvantage. It is very difficult to talk coherently when your fingers are being broken one"—he made a cracking sound with his tongue—"by one, or when your eyeballs are hanging out of the sockets and are lying on your cheeks. Do you see what I mean?"

"I understand very clearly, Mr. Foster," McLane replied, with a calmness that was more than a little assumed. "May I also say that I am surprised. At first you impressed me as being cultured. Now you impress me merely as being crude."

"I am a man of culture, Captain," and McLane's ear detected a slightly higher pitch in Foster's tone. "I have studied here and abroad, I have background, breed-

ing, money, and friends in the best circles. The only thing I don't have is a great deal of time." He leaned forward, one hand gripping the edge of the desk, the other extended with the palm cupped and the fingers clenching upward. The carefully modulated voice was almost an octave higher now, the dark eyes bored into McLane. "I don't have any time to waste on little people like you."

The telephone rang again and Houseman answered it. Slowly Anthony Foster settled back in his chair, slowly the strange mood passed as he watched his assistant.

"The blast furnaces went out, sir," Houseman said as he put the phone down. "The linings are ruined. Steel has stopped. The men will be off starting tomorrow."

"Good." Foster nodded. "And now, McLane, where are those papers?"

"I don't know."

"Gromio!"

"But I'll tell you what I do know about them," McLane added quickly, as the "conversationalist" approached.

## XV

**A**FTER ALL, he didn't know where the papers were. If he could convince this cold-faced, unsmiling madman of that he would save himself a lot of pain from the sadist Gromio. What if he did say he had given them to Hazel. Let Foster find Hazel, let Foster start a search. Did Foster know everything? Did he know, for example, that the police and Hamilton and Gorski, all three, were hunting for Hazel too? Maybe he didn't. Why not tell and set these people on a trail which would cross the trails of his friends? He shuddered as he thought of the alternative and blinked his eyes shut for an instant as he imagined them being gouged out.

"As far as I know," McLane said, and he knew his life depended on the way his words sounded, "those papers are in the coat, and I gave the coat to the colored maid."

"What coat?"

"The coat I took from the man who picked Finn's pocket."

Foster winked slowly, bent forward. "I know nothing of such a man," he said.

"I thought he was one of yours," McLane replied, relieved at Foster's interest.

"That was how I got the papers in the first place."

"I thought you told Mr. Houseman you found them?"

"I saw no reason to tell him the truth, especially when I knew he was lying to me. But do you mean to say you don't really know how I got them?"

"No."

This was good, he thought, evidently these people didn't know everything. "Well," he began, and thanked the circumstances that had made him learn the story so well he could tell it automatically and spend his time thinking up variations while the words rolled out. "I was riding across from Grand Central to Times Square on the shuttle . . . and so, after I saw the name 'League to Safeguard Democracy' on the letters I called up the next morning and talked to Houseman, here. He said they didn't belong to him. I put them back in the envelope, put the envelope in the coat pocket and forgot all about them. I had other things to do. Later that morning I gave the coat to the maid and as far as I know she took it with her and has it now."

"What is the maid's name?"

"I know her only as 'Hazel.'"

"What is her last name?"

"I don't know."

"Will you tell Gromio?"

"I'd tell you if I knew. Hell, if I knew I'd have gone and gotten those papers myself days ago."

"Does anybody else know where they are?"

"I don't know."

There was a moment of silence, and Foster drummed his fingers on the table before he spoke again. "I'm inclined to believe most of your story, Captain. I can tell when people are lying to me. Also, I know the papers were not found in your apartment when I had it searched, and they were not on you that night. I shall check your story about the maid. Paul, you have heard what the Captain has told us. It accounts for the reason we have been unable to find those letters this far. Find the maid—Hazel—and get them."

"Yes sir." Houseman left the room.

"And now, Captain," Foster continued politely, "there are a few other things I would like to ask you. Make yourself

comfortable, please. If you have told the truth you have nothing to fear. Would you like a cigarette? How about some brandy, may I offer you a drink?"

"Thank you. I could use one."

The strange host was graciousness itself as he offered a cigarette from a heavily ornamented box, extended a lighter to his guest and then walked to a rosewood cellolette across the room. "I think you will like this," he said selecting a bottle. "There isn't much left any more. It came from Napoleon's personal vaults. Napoleon was a fool in many ways, but he did have good brandy. Soda or straight?"

"Straight."

"Very good, it's the only way to enjoy good brandy. And now will you join me?" Foster's eyes flashed, his voice spoke to imagined millions. "Here's to a greater America." He sipped the brandy and returned to the chair behind the desk. "And now there are some other things I must ask you, Captain. For example, why did the police come to our office yesterday?"

"Because I told them Anne Martin worked there."

"I see. And why did the police take you to the morgue?"

"They wanted to know if I could identify Finn, or Resick, or whatever his name was."

"Could you?"

"Not then." Were these traps, McLane wondered, or could it be that Foster didn't have any more information than he seemed to have? "Not then," he repeated. "I remembered later that he was the man in the subway."

"Why did the police think you could identify him?"

"Because he had a slip of paper with my name and address in his pocket."

"That was a mistake," and Foster's tone implied that things would not go too well with the person who made the error. "It should have been removed. Do you know where he got it?"

"Yes, Anne Martin gave it to him."

"She did? Why?"

"She was his wife." There, let Foster think that one over for a while. "She told me he had managed things so she got a job in the League's office, and they were working and spying on you together. I think there were other people in the office

who were working with them, too." McLane paused, partly to give himself time to think of some additional red herring, partly to see how Foster would take this latest misinformation. "She asked me to meet her after I had my little argument with Houseman. She thought I had the papers and she wanted me to give them to her so she could give them back to Finn. I told her Finn was dead."

"You say she was married to Resick?"

"That's what she told me." Now he would see if Foster really could tell a lie from the truth.

"**T**HE FOOLS! The blind, stupid fools!" Foster's knuckles shone white as he clenched his fists. "You've fought battles, Captain, and you know how you felt when some underling made a mistake which spoiled your plans. That's the way I feel when things like this happen to me. Why didn't they check on that girl? Why did they let a thing like that go on under their very noses? How can I succeed with fools . . . with fools?"

"I don't know. What are you . . .?"

"Maybe that's the trouble," Foster broke in. "Maybe not enough people know what I'm doing. But I'll tell you." Once again, as Foster pulled the stops and his voice rolled out like an organ, McLane had the impression that the man was speaking, not to him, but to a million men.

"Foster rose to his feet. "America stands at a crossroads today," he began, and in spite of the cliché McLane had an urge to stand at attention, so powerful was the spell of the man's voice. "One way leads to a world of regimentation, such as we have in Eastern Europe now. That way has the weaknesses of a chain with several faulty links. One of those links is emotionalism, which leads to errors in judgment. Another is mass ignorance. Another is a limited perspective on the part of its leaders. Without those flaws that system would be the strongest ever known, but those flaws are in the foundation, and they cannot be repaired without tearing down the whole structure.

"The other way is the so-called democratic way we think we have here. A fool's paradise, slow, undecided, geared to little minds. America today is inefficient, dilatory, cowardly."

Humor him, McLane thought. The man's crazy, but keep him talking and you won't have to. "Cowardly? Inefficient?" he asked. "I wouldn't say so. we were efficient enough and brave enough to win a war."

"You don't really think we won it, do you?" Foster sneered. "Read the papers, Captain, the war's still going on and we're losing. But we can win it, and we can win the world, if we can pull ourselves together and get a man to lead us who has the power to make decisions, and who has the people behind him to enforce them."

"And what do you propose to do, Mr. Foster? Elect a President who will do as you tell him? Is that your idea?"

"You can never elect a leader, McLane, unless you elect him unanimously. But a strong man can work himself into leadership if he knows how." He paused, and then he almost whispered to McLane. "*I know how.*"

And the implication, clear and deadly, was that not only did this strange man know, but that he was already acting, and the leader he had in mind was himself. McLane said nothing. Foster continued.

"Destroy confidence. Destroy ideals. Destroy all the things men need to live by. Take away their jobs, their homes, their standards of living. Force their daughters into the streets for a square meal or a cake of soap. Let them see their children with spindly legs and bloated bellies—then they'll turn from the leaders they have and acclaim and worship one who can give it back to them!"

McLane reached for a cigarette, lit it, blew a cloud of smoke between himself and the listener.

"I'm doing it now, Captain! You heard what I said to Fessendon. Tomorrow he'll call for an investigation of Michigan Motors, and he'll claim they overcharged the government almost a billion dollars on contracts during the war. Tomorrow night Michigan Motors' Comptroller will commit suicide. Within a week two banks in Detroit will close, more than two hundred thousand workers will be on strike—and hungry—and every citizen of the United States will have lost confidence in a major industry and its leaders."

A sudden pain, as the unwatched cig-

arette burned his fingers, snapped McLane out of an almost hypnotic state, but still he sat, silent.

"I did the same thing to World Wide Chemicals, once, and I'm going to do it again. The only thing that can stop me is those papers, Captain. They'd drag me into it, and I don't want anybody to know what I am doing, just now. You've slowed my schedule, McLane, in one very important part. World Wide is so big that if it goes down a great portion of the public's faith in the integrity of all business will crash with it. But I can't start until I have those papers back in my hands, McLane. Until then," smugly satisfied, "all I can do is close steel mills, start strikes, and discredit leadership there and there and there." He pointed to the map on the wall.

"You can't do all that, Mr. Foster." McLane ground the cigarette butt firmly into a tray. "I don't believe any one man can ever tear down all we have built, or take over this country."

"I've practically done it, Captain. In another five years I will be the only man who will have the answer to all the confusion I have caused. Men like Houseman and Quiston, whose minds I can trust, and freaks like Gromio and Hackie, too, will have done my groundwork. *Watch*, my newspaper, will have made its readers distrustful of their own thinking. No one will know where to turn for rescue, and so they will be forced to turn to me. In another five years." He sank wearily into his chair. "I almost wish you could be here, Captain, just to see it. But now I am tired and I have some reports to read. I will see you in the morning, after I hear from Mr. Houseman. I hope you rest well tonight. Go with Gromio, please, he will show you the way."

**T**HE INTERVIEW was over and McLane followed the sinister guard back to the room at the end of the house. The door was closed and locked and he was alone. While he had been away somebody had left a pack of cigarettes and some matches by the mattress, he lit one and considered setting the place on fire. He had seen that done in a movie once. But what good would it do here? He couldn't get out the window, he couldn't get out

at all. Probably he would only suffocate. He stretched out on the makeshift bed.

Think, McLane, think. You can't lick them all. You can't bull your way out of this one. Remember how Foster said he was sorry you wouldn't be here five years from now? Do you know what he meant? Sure you do. You'll be lucky to be here five days from now. Just let them find those papers and your number is up. Even if they don't find them, that would-be-dictator won't let you go. You know too much, McLane. You know everything except what to do next and how to get out of here. You better think fast, McLane, you better think fast.

His tired body betrayed him and he went to sleep.

"Git up, punk. Here's ya breakfast." Hackie was kicking him awake. "Git up."

He rolled over and sat up, smelling coffee and bacon. "You better never kick me when I'm awake, you yellow bum. Don't ever get close to me, Hackie, or I'll kill you. I'm warning you." He crossed to the wash bowl, washed his hands and face and sat down on the edge of the mattress. "I don't see why I didn't kill you when I had a chance." He turned to the bacon and eggs on the tray and began eating.

"Hohoho, listen to th' punk. Wait'll he finds out. Wait'll the Chief says, 'All right, Hackie.' Then, *bing wit'* th' cannon and *whump* into th' barrel of cement and down to th' dock and into th' boat and out to th' Sound and *splash*—and there goes little punkie. Maybe I'll let ya have it in th' gut and dump ya in th' barrel while ya still know what I'm doin'. How'd ya like that, huh?"

McLane snorted.

"Hohoho. Talk big, punkie, talk big. I've dumped 'em before and I'll dump 'em again, but I bet I never laugh as much as I do when I dump you. *Bing, whump, splash*, and there goes Big-Talk. Hahaha. I kin hardly wait."

"How about waiting long enough for me to shave, you stupid baboon. You don't have a razor on you, do you?"

"Maybe ya can shave later. It won't make no difference to ya when y're in the cement, though. Shove the tray over here if y're finished eatin', and stand back while I pick it up. Goodby now, little chum."

A little later another guard came back with an electric razor. McLane plugged it into a floor socket and attacked the stubble of his beard. So they were careful to give him an electric razor, were they? Did they think he could use a safety-razor blade to cut his way out? He grinned. He'd like to cut his way through a few yards of that Hackie.

The door opened again. This time it was Houseman. "When you've finished shaving, McLane, Mr. Foster would like to see you again."

"Captain McLane to you, Houseman." He disconnected the razor, threw it on the mattress. "Let's go," he said. Gromio lumbered threateningly behind as they passed through the halls.

"Good morning, Captain McLane," Foster greeted them, "I trust you slept well. Was your breakfast to your liking? Sit down. You may be interested in the morning papers, they seem to mention you."

McLane took the early Monday edition of the *Herald-Tribune* as he sat in the chair. There it was, right on the front page—MARINE CAPTAIN SOUGHT IN MARTIN MURDER—He noted the "By Patrick Gorski" before he started to read.

"Former Marine Captain Robert McLane, under suspicion for the murder of Anne Martin since Saturday, has vanished. Police believe he deliberately disappeared yesterday when he walked away from friends while on a picnic in Pelham Bay Park, at about three o'clock in the afternoon. Captain McLane had been ordered not to leave New York City, according to a statement by Inspector Timothy Sullivan of the New York police, who added that Captain McLane had apparently eluded the two detectives who had been assigned to follow him. Inspector Sullivan also announced he was requesting police in all neighboring states to pick McLane up on sight . . ." and so on.

"It looks as though we did a good job this time, doesn't it, Captain?" Foster was plainly pleased. "I was a little afraid someone might suspect you had left against your own free will, but now everybody thinks you came freely. You see, I do have some men I can trust, after all.

"You may be glad to know, too, that

Mr. Houseman substantiated your story about the coat and the colored maid. The janitor in your building spoke to her as she left, and she told him about it. The janitor also knew her last name, although he didn't know where she lived. But we'll find that out soon. We have friends in Harlem who can locate almost anybody in the city."

Why didn't I think of asking that damned janitor, McLane berated himself. Aloud he said, "And how soon are you going to let me go? As soon as you have found the papers, I hope."

"Please, Captain. I really don't see how we can let you go at all. You know, don't you, that you have committed some very serious offences against my organization? We have certain charges to bring against you in our courts."

"Courts?" McLane asked. "What courts?"

"I didn't tell you, did I?" Foster's voice was almost playful. "Yes, our judicial section already functions, as you shall see. Our justice is democratic, fast, and fair. Would you like to follow me to the court room? I think the judge and the jury are waiting for us. This way, please. Come, Gromio."

## XVI

"OUR PALACE of justice!" Anthony Foster opened a double door and they entered an auditorium with about twenty rows of comfortable seats sloping down to an open space which was occupied by a raised dais behind which sat a stern and cold-looking man. To the right, as they proceeded down a center aisle toward the dais, McLane saw a separate row of seats—yes, he counted, there were twelve of them, twelve seats with twelve occupants. He recognized one of them, Houseman. To the left there were tables and chairs. The people in the room stood up as he and Foster entered the open space, a spotlight flashed on a huge gold, black and green flag that was displayed on the wall, and a few notes of music sounded from somewhere.

What a lash-up, McLane reflected. It looks like a court. Twelve in the jury and a judge behind the bench. He imagined the treatment he would receive from a

jury of which Paul Houseman was a member.

"Be seated, gentlemen," ordered Foster. "I have convened this court to try Captain Robert McLane on various charges and for various acts inimical to our organization. I have assured him of a fair and speedy trial, in accordance with our true democratic principles which are opposed to the delays and inequities of other courts, which claim to be fair and democratic but which so often permit offenders to go unpunished."

Slowly Foster became the orator again. The eyes flashed, the voice sounded like a symphony, combining bassoon-like undertones with the high-pitched notes of clarinets. "I have not told him, but he can hear me now, that we are informal here, informal but just. We are just, but we are not delayed by the twisted interpretations of old-fashioned law. We do not argue over Latin phrases which were outmoded years ago. We do not argue at all. And there is no appeal from our verdict, for this is the highest court, and who can appeal from that which is always right? And who can deny that we are right in what we do?"

"Judge, and gentlemen of the jury, this is Captain Robert McLane. Captain McLane, this is Judge Ivan Snilov, whom you have never met, but who followed your trail to the late Miss Martin's apartment and entered after you left. Unfortunately he was unable to bring her here, which is one of the reasons the police, I believe, are looking for you now.

"And here we have Mr. Paul Houseman, foreman of our jury. I believe you two have already met. We have Mr. Morris, and Mr. Anderson, together with Mr. Kongrut, whom you have also met but whom you probably do not recognize, as the night was very dark. It was early on Thursday morning, you had just left a house on Stuyvesant Street, remember?"

McLane could feel the damp sweat in his armpits and he shifted in the chair as Foster continued.

"And then we have Furlin, and Kleipper, and Antione. They are the gentlemen who found the late Finn on the Third Avenue El on Thursday night. I am sorry Finn could not be here but unfortunately

he fell from the Elevated platform. I do not think you would be interested in the others, but I assure you they are all good men and true. And now, will you take the stand, please?"

McLane walked slowly to a chair beside the judge's bench. What a crew. What a farce. They were going to murder him, he knew, but why did they have to go through all this rigmarole? Why didn't they shoot him and get it over? He sat down. The hell with them, he'd ride this thing through and if it came, well, the sands ran out for everybody sooner or later. He wished he could see Joyce just once again, though.

"Do I get sworn in, or anything?" he asked.

"Not in this court. Here your word is good. Our system is built on trust and not on such artificialities as a Biblical oath."

"Do I get a lawyer?"

"Lawyers are liars and tricksters," Foster told him. "We have no place for them. If you cannot defend yourself, how can you expect anyone else to defend you?"

What an insane procedure, McLane thought.

"And now, judge and gentlemen of the jury, I will declare the charges against the defendant," Foster continued, "and let him speak for himself. Listen to the charges and the answers, so that you may judge and decide fairly.

"Robert McLane, I charge you with deliberately obstructing the progress of our movement. What do you say, guilty or not guilty?"

"Not guilty. Why, dammit . . ."

Bang! Above his head the judge called Snilov rapped sharply with his gavel. "I must warn you against intemperate language, Mr. McLane. If there is any repetition I will hold you in contempt of this court!"

"Not guilty," McLane repeated. "I don't even know the purpose of your organization."

"Your argument is not pertinent, Captain," Foster told him gravely. "The fact that you might not know how to cook would not prove you had never broken an egg."

"That's the stupidest thing I ever heard . . ."

The gavel rapped again. "Out of order," said the judge.

"Number two," said Foster. "I charge you with plotting with certain others, since deceased, to obstruct the progress of our movement. Guilty or . . ."

"Not guilty."

"With carrying information to the police . . ."

"Not guilty."

"With assault . . ."

"Not guilty."

On and on it went, a mockery of justice, a witch's trial, a black mass, a travesty in which McLane was trapped and where he could do nothing but sit and listlessly answer "not guilty" without even listening to the accusations. And now he heard Foster change from the sing-song of the charges.

". . . I rest my case," Foster said to the jury.

JUDGE SNILOV turned to the twelve men at his side. "Gentlemen of the jury, you have heard the charges against the defendant and you have heard his pleas. You will retire and decide."

Paul Houseman stood and faced the judge. "Your honor," he droned, "there is no need for deliberation in a case like this. We find the defendant guilty as charged."

"Thank you." The judge rapped softly on his desk. "You have arrived at the only possible verdict. Captain McLane, arise. Have you anything to say before I pronounce the sentence?"

"Only this." McLane stood straight and tall and faced the jury. "Only this one thing. I thank God that I have lived long enough to learn that real justice can be found in this country, even if I had to learn it by sitting through this joke this morning. May I also take this opportunity to express my hope that *you all rot in hell!*" He spat on the floor.

Not an expression changed as he stood there and then came the rap on the desk behind him and Judge Ivan Smilov, the strangler, slowly purred. "I sentence you to be executed by shooting at midnight tonight, and your body to be disposed of in the usual manner."

Anthony Foster stepped up, shrugging his shoulders. "I'm sorry you didn't have

more to say in your own behalf," he said. "I am afraid your attitude influenced the jury unfavorably. There was little else they could do. Now go with Gromio. He will show you back to your room. We will do all we can to make you comfortable during the next twelve hours."

So this is it, he thought as he lay on the mattress, back in his room. He had eaten his lunch, endured Hackie's jibes, and found little else to do except relax and try to think of a way out.

When Hackie came in with the evening meal he would rush him. There might be a chance. Then he would have half an hour before the guard at the outside door came to investigate, half an hour to try to escape from the house and the grounds, providing he made no noise to attract attention during that time. He might be able to get out through those windows in the hall, the small leaded section of glass should be easy to force.

But Hackie was trigger happy. He would be full of dope, too, for he was plainly an addict and would be keying himself for the midnight execution. If he rushed, Hackie would undoubtedly shoot. Well, it might be better to go out like that than to go without any fight at all. Could he set a trap of some kind? How about stretching something across the floor in front of the door? Hackie might trip over it when he came in. What could he use?

McLane rolled to change his position on the mattress and felt something hard beneath his side. The electric razor. The electric cord! That would do it. He would take half the double cord, strip the insulation, and use the fine wire to rig a trip line. Quickly he ripped the razor loose, tossed it to one side and jumped up, the cord in his hand.

Where to stretch it? Was there anything to which he could attach the ends? Hell and damnation, the walls and the molding around the floor were smooth, the the only possible points of attachment were the chair and the pipes to the wash-stand, and the chair was on one side of the room while the wash-stand was on the other. Both were away from the door. He fingered the frayed ends of the double cord as he studied the problem—if he had the other end of the cord plugged in the

socket he might be able to shock Hackie. If he put the two ends on the chair where Hackie always sat . . .

Quickly he went to work. There, wrap one end around the leg of the chair. Jam it between the leg and the wooden floor, under the leg where it is bolted down. Tightly now, you have to have a good contact.

Take the other half of the cord and strip the insulation away for a foot or so. Strip it off with your teeth, what does it matter. Now separate the fine copper wires of the cord and fan them out a little. That's good. Move the mattress now, one corner right up against the leg of the chair so he can't see the cords, the other corner over by the floor socket. Give yourself some slack so you can jam it in when he sits down.

Get some water. Easy with it, just a puddle in front of the chair, so he'll have to put his feet in it when he sits down. Be sure the puddle is big enough to run under the mattress where you have that fan of copper wires. Block the mattress up with soap so the bare wires won't touch it. Put the head of the razor under there too, to force the little wires down in the puddle.

**S**PLASH some water around the room. Make it look like the toilet ran over. Only keep that puddle in front of the chair.

Don't plug it in now. Wait until he sits down, you might just blow a fuse somewhere if you plug it in now. Wait until those thin shoes of his get wet, then let him have it. Relax, McLane, relax. If it doesn't work you can always rush him . . .

There, he had done everything he could. Now there was nothing to do but wait, and that wouldn't be too long. Already he could see the shadows lengthening across the yard as he looked out the window. Soon Hackie would come with dinner. He smoked a cigarette, smoked another.

A baleful and bloodshot eye appeared at the peep-hole and then the door opened. "Hello punk. Just keep layin' there on the mattress until I set this tray down. I've had to let a lot of guys have it because they thought they could jump ol' Hackie.

If ya want it now, make a move. If ya wanna wait 'til later, stay where ya are." He set the tray on the floor, backed over and sat down on the chair, keeping his automatic trained on McLane.

"Don't you ever shut up?" McLane asked him.

"Hohoho, I'll be talkin' for a long time after you're in that cement. I'll be talkin' when the little fish are scratchin' their little backs against that barrel. Go ahead and eat, little punkie, it's the last food you'll ever get." He planted his feet squarely in the puddle. "What did ya have in here, a flood?"

"The can ran over," McLane told him. *Wait a second, let it soak in a little while. All you have to do is push against that plug, it's half-way in the socket now.* "The can ran over, I damned near drowned."

"Hohoho. Haha . . ." Hackie was still laughing when McLane pushed the plug and rolled out of line from the pistol. The one-time taxi driver stiffened, the automatic fell from his hand, his eyes twisted in his head and his face turned the color of wet ashes.

McLane watched him for a second, standing over the chair. Suddenly Hackie's legs shot out, the trembling stopped, the contact with the puddle was broken. At the same time McLane struck him behind the ear with his fist. Hackie relaxed in the chair and McLane hurriedly yanked the floor plug from its socket. Then he pulled the grayed end of the wire from beneath the mattress, wrapped it around his victim's ankle, pushed the plug back into the socket and started for the door. Quietly he turned the knob and tip-toed into the hall. As he looked back he noted with satisfaction that Hackie was stiff again.

It had not taken more than two or three minutes, there was still almost half an hour to go. He tried the windows, they were set firmly in the frame, and the mullions were not lead, but steel. The window frames were of wood, however, and the panels of glass gave a little when he tested them with his shoulder. Push. Push. Don't make any noise. Push a little more.

He saw a face appear at the peep-hole in the second door and knew the outside guard had discovered him. There was

nothing to do but hurl himself bodily against the window. It gave, and he crashed through and fell in a pile of shrubbery below. He rolled and sprang to his feet and raced for a corner of the house as he heard the sound of a shot and felt the sting of the flying stucco that the bullet clipped loose beside his face. Then he was running through the long shadows that crossed the lawn toward the woods beyond. Run, McLane, run, they'll be after you in a minute. Why did that guard have to see you? Why did you make so damned much noise?

For a while he stumbled through the trees, then stopped and listened. Quietly now, don't make a sound. Look out for that fence, don't touch it, don't you see those posts? The wires are on insulators, it's electrified. Climb a tree and drop over. Now, get going, there must be a road around here somewhere. Keep low going across the field, it's not so dark they can't see you.

A ditch ran beside the road. He tumbled into it and rested his burning lungs. Where was he, what direction should he head? Did the road lead back to his recent prison or did it lead to safety? He looked at the fast appearing stars, the North Star was not out yet, but he could distinguish the Big Dipper and determine directions from that. Foster's house was on the Sound, he knew—Hackie had mentioned rolling barrels down to the dock—so if he headed north he would be getting away, no matter where he was.

The road pointed northeast and he started walking.

Street lights were burning in the town when he arrived, but he avoided them and kept to the shadows. Then he brushed the dirt of his flight from his trousers and jacket, ran his fingers through his hair and straightened it the best he could, and headed toward the center of the small city. A youngster gave him directions to the police station.

A motorcycle was parked on the street outside the brick building and the sign over the door, "Police Department," seemed to offer haven. McLane walked in and approached the officer at the desk. As he opened his mouth to speak the telephone rang. The sergeant nodded to him to wait and picked up the phone.

"YES SIR," the policeman said. As he listened carefully to the voice from the other end of the line, he made several notes on a piece of paper. "Yes sir, I think I've got it all down. About six feet tall, weight about 190 pounds, wearing brown khaki trousers and shirt and a fatigue jacket. No insignia. No hat. And you say he tried to steal a car from your garage? And assaulted one of your chauffeurs? I'll get the word out to the State Police immediately, Mr. Foster. Yes sir, Mr. Foster, I'll do it right away." He hung up.

"Somebody tried to steal a car out of Anthony Foster's garage, and when the garage man walked in on him this guy beat him over the head with a wrench. Foster's a big shot who owns a house by the shore," he explained to McLane. "The State Police ought to be able to pick the guy up. What did you want?"

"Nothing much." With the mention of the name "Foster" McLane realized the description and the story of the attempted car stealing applied to him. The police station no longer offered sanctuary. There was little doubt in his mind that Foster could easily get him away from the police and back to the prison from which he had so recently escaped. "Nothing much. I was just driving up from New York and I saw what looked like a fire in a field about a mile out of town. Probably a brush fire. I thought I ought to report it."

"Why yeah, that's right. Where was it?"

"Just about a mile before you come into town, off on the left. I couldn't see if anybody was watching it or not."

"I'll get somebody out to take a look," the sergeant said as he scribbled again on his pad. "Seems funny to have a brush fire at this time of the year, though. Thanks a lot. What's your name?"

"Malone. Joseph Malone. I think I'll go now, I'm trying to get to Boston sometime before morning."

"All right. You'll do better if you cut over and get on the Parkway, though." McLane started for the door and the sergeant turned back to his notes. "Let's

see, six feet tall, brown khaki . . . Hey you, Malone, come back here a minute!"

But McLane was out the door and sprinting down the sidewalk. He turned a corner, ducked down an alley and as he reached the protection of shadows and back yards he heard the shrill noise of a police whistle. There was a fence beside him, he vaulted over it and landed in the soft earth of somebody's freshly spaded garden. Then, keeping close to the house, he slipped to the front yard. The house had a large porch, he crawled under the steps and lay still and quiet in the damp litter.

Outside he could hear a search going on. One time heavy footsteps tramped up the steps over his head, he heard a heavy hand knock at the door and a mumbled conversation on the porch. Then the door slammed shut, the steps tramped away again, and all was still. Somewhere in the distance a clock struck ten. Eleven. Hours later, it seemed to McLane, the clock struck midnight. Midnight, and he was still alive.

And then he heard another noise, a low and very distant moan. After a while he realized it was the whistle of a locomotive. He could barely make out the dull rumble of a train, somewhere, not too far away. He began to plan again.

The roads would be watched, he knew. Maybe, because of the story Foster had told, they would be expecting him to try to escape in a stolen automobile. The sergeant, having mentioned the Parkway, might be looking for him there. But would they look for him on a train? There was a chance they wouldn't, a chance he would have to take. He waited until the clock struck one, and two, and three. The town was asleep, he hoped. Slowly he crawled from his hiding place, skirted the protection of some bushes, crossed the street to the shadows of houses on the other side and began to work his way in the direction from which the noises of trains had come.

Gradually residences became fewer. Then he heard another train and as he looked down the street he saw it streaking through the night, about a quarter of a mile away. Keeping low and hidden as best he could by fences and trees he reached the tracks and lay in the ditch beside them. Now all he had to do was wait for something slow enough to jump

on. He studied the stars again—a west-bound train would take him back to New York and he could get in touch with Gorski. If only one would come soon. The ditch wouldn't offer much shelter in broad daylight. He inched over to the nearest rail and rested his teeth against it. Something was coming, he could hear it in the distance, feel the faint vibrations through his upper jaw.

WHICH way was it going? Would it stop, or at least slow down? He could hear it plainly now, and soon he saw the headlight on the locomotive. It was coming from the east and—luck was with him—there was a red light burning on the signal tower beside the station to the west. It was going to stop. He hurried along the ditch toward the station, throwing himself in the shadows just before the headlight spotted him. The long freight slowed and he trotted alongside. How the hell did you ride a freight train, anyhow? Where were the "rods" he had heard about? The string of cars jerked to a stop and he rolled under the nearest one. Find something to hold on to, McLane, there must be some way to ride under these things. You better figure it out fast. He reached up and seized something in the darkness, a piece of rusty pipe or metal rod of some kind. It felt firm and he pulled himself up and rested on it. Then he explored the surroundings with his hands and felt a ledge running the length of the car, it was narrow but he could squeeze part of his body into its protection. The train started, almost jolting him from his perch, picked up speed and rolled along, carrying him further and further from Anthony Foster with each clackety-clack of the wheels.

Gradually the darkness turned to grey beneath the freight car. He shifted gently in his cramped position, easing strained muscles, careful not to fall. The heavy stone between the ties changed to oil-soaked cinders, macadamized crossings became more and more frequent, and soon the train stopped. Slowly, stiffly, McLane lowered his body and rolled out into broad daylight where he was surrounded by a forest of freight cars. Some kind of yard, he knew, but where? He started to walk between the rows of cars, came to the

end of the train which had brought him thus far and continued toward the street he saw in the distance.

"Where you going, bum?" A harsh voice came from behind him, and he turned to face an armed railroad guard.

"I'm trying to get to New York."

"Yeah, what are you doing in here? Don't you know this is railroad property? Where did you come from, anyhow, off that freight?"

"Yes sir," McLane answered. Give them that old "sir" stuff. You do look like a bum, you know.

"Don't you know that's against the law?" the guard growled. "I'm getting sick and tired of you bums riding in here. Where did you come from?"

Guess it, McLane, guess it. "New Haven, sir. Don't run me in, please. I had to get to New York. I know where I can get a job here. This is New York, isn't it?"

"It's the Bronx. New York is on the other side of the Harlem River. And I've heard that job stuff before. You better come with me."

"Don't run me in, officer," McLane begged. "I tell you I have to get this job. I'm broke. This is the first chance I've had to get a job since I got out of the Army. Give me a break."

"Army, huh? I guess those were army clothes once." The guard's expression relaxed a little. "Well, maybe I'll let you off this time, I always try to give a vet a break. Come over to the gate with me and then get going." Together they walked across the yard and the guard opened a gate in a high wire fence.

"Thank you, sir," McLane told him. "I appreciate this. I guess I can find my way downtown from here. Thanks a lot." He started to walk away.

"Hey, come back here a minute." McLane turned, wondering if the guard had recognized him. "You got any money?"

"No, sir."

"Well, here's a buck. Get yourself a shave and get some of that dirt off you before you go for that job. You look like hell. Now get out of here before I change my mind." He extended a dollar to McLane.

"Thanks a lot, mate." He took the dollar, turned and walked rapidly up the

street away from the yard, then down another street until he came to a small restaurant.

"Cup of coffee and some doughnuts," he told the counterman.

"You got any money?"

"Sure, I got money. Want to see it?" He flipped the dollar on the counter.

"All right. Coffee-and coming up." The waiter filled a cup. "No offense. But anyone can see you just crawled out from under a freight. Most of the bums that come in here don't have a dime to their names—not that you're a bum, of course. Sugar and cream?"

"Both." The coffee tasted good and the doughnuts took the edge from his hunger. "Give me a couple nickels for the phone, will you?"

"Here you are. There's a booth in the back."

McLane checked the number in a battered and greasy directory, shut himself in the booth and dialed the number. "Hello, let me talk to Mr. Gorski, please . . . Pat? . . . Yeah . . . . Yes, I'm all right . . . I'm somewhere in the Bronx . . . Yes, I've got subway fare . . . Where is it? . . . I'll be down as soon as I can. What? . . . Don't worry, even my own mother wouldn't recognize me now."

He came back to the counter and finished the coffee. "Well," he told the waiter, "the job's waiting for me. Where's a subway station, I want to get downtown?"

"Walk up to 138th Street and then turn right until you come to Cypress Avenue. There's a subway station on the corner. It's only about six blocks from here, you can't miss it."

The sun was warm and bright as he walked toward the subway station. "Get off the local at 68th Street," Pat had told him. "Walk east, pass the house and go about a block. Then turn around and come back. If anybody follows you, get in the subway and clear out. If nobody follows you, walk in the door. I'll be waiting for you inside."

**N**OBODY seemed to be following. A police car drove down the street on a routine patrol and the drivers paid no attention to the shabby figure walking along the pavement. He waited until they

were out of sight, then turned and went back to the address Pat had given him. The door was standing half open, Gorski was inside.

"Cripes, Bob, I'm glad to see you. Where the hell have you been? What happened? Come in here before somebody comes along." Gorski grabbed his friend by the arm, pulled him in and closed the door. "You look like hell. Have you had anything to eat? The questions came so fast there was no time to answer. "Come in. I've got a friend of yours here to see you, too."

It was Joyce. Lovely, wonderful Joyce, coming to meet him with her arms outstretched, her eyes blue and misty as he took her in his arms and kissed her. "Oh Bob, Bob, my darling," she cried, "I thought you would never come back."

"Of course I'd come back. Didn't I have something to come back to? It takes more than Brother Foster and his gang of gorillas to keep me when I know you're back here."

"Foster?" Pat spoke up. "Who's Foster?"

"Anthony Foster. He's the guy behind all this. Wait until I tell you. You'd never dream half the things I found out." He paused for a breath. "Why, the Anthony Foster . . ."

"You don't mean Anthony Foster, the publisher of *Watch*, do you?"

"Yeah, that's the guy. Well, when I walked away . . ."

"Whew." Pat whistled. "Anthony Foster. Brother, this is bigger than I imagined. Go on, what happened?"

"I'm trying to tell you," McLane continued. Rapidly he outlined the adventures which had happened to him.

"And so I pulled into some freight yard up in the Bronx this morning and told the guard who picked me up that I was on my way to get a job," McLane continued. "He gave me a buck because he felt sorry for me and here I am. Boy, am I tired. And not only are the cops looking for me here in New York, they're looking for me up there, too."

"I'll fix that," Gorski growled. "Wait until I call Sullivan and tell him. We'll be on those guys like a ton of bricks. They took you across the state line, too, we can get the FBI in on it."

"Wait a minute, Pat," McLane told him. "What can you prove? It's only my word against Foster's. The first thing you know he would have them holding me on some charge, or else he would locate me and have one of his gang shoot me. You don't realize how powerful he is. You should have listened to him telling how he was going to rule the world, like I did."

"Maybe you're right," Pat admitted.

"Of course I'm right, I've been there," McLane said. "And he's got some of his people looking for those papers now, remember that. They're even more important than Hamilton thought they were. If we can get them, together with all that Hamilton can tell about them, and the other things he knows, we can show that it is Foster and why he has been doing all this. We've got to get those papers, but if the police know I'm back in town before we find them the word may leak out and first thing you know Foster's gang will be after me. I'm not too anxious to meet them right now."

"Okay, let's go." Gorski was anxious.

"Wait a minute," Bob cautioned. "It's no use to dash off in all directions. Here's a plan I thought of this morning while I was riding down. Why don't you go down to my place and see if there is any word from Aunt Caroline. Then go around to the cleaner's and pick up my suit, it ought to be cleaned by now. They said I could get it by the first of the week." Mentally he checked off the days. "Today's Tuesday, isn't it? Then come back here and we'll go find Hazel. While you're gone I'll take a shower and a shave and fix myself up a little. I can wear some of your clothes. How about it?"

"It's an idea," Pat replied. "I'll dash down town and get what I can. And look, there are some sulfa pills in the cabinet in the bathroom. Take two of them, just in case that nose of yours should feel like acting up. I'll be back as soon as I can." He slapped a hat on his head and said a hurried "Goodby" as he shut the door behind him.

"Oh Bob!" Joyce was in his arms again before the door had fully closed, kissing him, laughing, crying tears of relief. "I thought you would never come back. I thought they would kill you. Did

they hurt you very much, my darling?"

"Not much," he assured her, "except for that cigarette trick. But you shouldn't worry about me. Nothing's going to happen to me—I keep telling myself. Give me a kiss and then let me go and get some of this dirt off, you won't love me much if I stay this way. I must stink like a goat." He kissed her. "Now do me a favor and go look through Pat's things and see if you can find me some clean shorts, huh? I won't go far away." He disappeared into the bathroom and stripped, then stood beneath the shower and let the hot water pour down over him as he soaped himself.

There was a razor and shaving gear in the medicine cabinet, together with the sulfa pills in a neat little box with "U.S. NAVY" printed on it. Some that Pat had brought back from a Pacific hospital, he supposed, as he attacked his beard. He found a bottle of after-shaving lotion and relished its gentle sting against his face.

### XVIII

MCLANE was dressed, when Gorski returned about forty-five minutes later, in borrowed socks, underwear, a shirt and an old bathrobe which belonged to his friend. He sat up and slipped his feet into his shoes as he heard the knock on the door. "Who is it?" he called.

"It's me—Pat." McLane opened the door for the reporter. "Here's your suit. How are you feeling now, ready for anything?"

"Ready, willing and able. Did Aunt Caroline send the dope?"

"She did. I got down to your place and there were a couple of cops hanging around. I told them who I was and said I was there to get a description of the apartment for a story I was writing about you, so they let me in. I asked if there had been any messages for you and they didn't know of any, and of course there weren't any telegrams lying around. But I got the janitor aside and asked him and he said a Western Union boy had been there. Just our luck he had come when the two cops were upstairs and didn't see him. The messenger had gone away when the janitor told him you weren't home. I gave the guy a fin," he continued, "and

then I walked slowly around the corner and jumped for a phone booth.

"Sure enough," Pat went on, "there was a telegram for you. I said I was Robert McLane, so they read it to me. Wait, I've got it all written down somewhere." He pulled a scrap of paper from a pocket. "Here it is. **'HAZEL SANSONE EIGHTEEN TEN FIFTH AVENUE IS IT TRUE LOVE.'** I must say your dear aunt goes the limit in ten words allowed. What are you keeping from Joyce, anyhow?"

McLane disregarded the question. "Eighteen ten Fifth Avenue," he asked, "where's that?"

"Oh, it's up in Harlem somewhere, we'll find it. Are you ready to go?"

"Any time. I wish that damn Lynch hadn't taken my good gun, though."

"You won't need a gun this time," Gorski told him. "You'd just get in more trouble. I'm taking charge of this expedition and there won't be any guns or any fighting. We'll see Hazel, get the coat, get the papers, and then go down to talk to Sullivan. It shouldn't take more than an hour."

"Can I come along?" Joyce asked. She had been sitting quietly, listening to the conversation between the two men. McLane glanced at Pat.

"I don't think you need to, Joyce," Pat answered. "I don't know what kind of a neighborhood we'll be getting into, and some of those Harlem places aren't the best places in the world for a girl, even if she does have two men with her. Why don't you take a rest? You haven't been to sleep for two days. You can stay here if you want to."

"Thanks," she said, "but I think I'll go home and lie down for a while. Are you sure you won't be in any danger?"

"Of course we're sure. What could happen to two people in broad daylight in a crowded city street? And as soon as we get away from Inspector Sullivan," Pat told her, "we'll call you and then we'll all go out to dinner this evening and celebrate. Tell Linda. But you better get a little sleep before then."

"All right. I am tired." She smiled at Bob. "You kind of keep a girl awake and worrying when you stay away all night, you know."

The three walked to the subway station

and said goodby to Joyce as she started downtown. Then McLane and Gorski hailed a taxi and began their trip to Harlem. "I hope this all works out as simply as you describe it, Pat," Bob said. "But what happens if Hazel doesn't have the coat?"

"Then we find out what she did with it and keep looking until we find it."

"And suppose those letters aren't in it anymore?"

"Then we find out where they are. Unless they have been burned," Pat said, "we ought to be able to locate them somehow or other. If we can't find them we just think up something else. Maybe Hamilton could help us. Maybe we will have to tell your story to Sullivan, no matter how impossible it sounds, and see what he wants to do with you."

"Yeah, and what if he decides to throw me in the brig?"

"I'll get you out," Gorski declared. "It may take me years and years, but I'll get you out somehow or other. They'll let Joyce come to see you every week, too. Through a screen, that is."

"That's what I was afraid of." McLane lit a cigarette and settled back in the seat. They rode in silence.

"Here we are." The taxi had stopped in front of a small, over-ornamented, dingy apartment house. The two friends got out, Gorski paid the driver, and they walked into the lobby. "I guess this is the bell, it says 'Hazel Sansone,' anyhow." He pushed it.

After a long time, it seemed, a muffled voice came from somewhere upstairs. "Yes, who is it?"

"Hazel? This is Captain McLane. Could we see you a minute?"

"Who?" The voice sounded more like an owl than a human.

"Captain McLane. You remember me," he called at the stairs and the invisible voice somewhere beyond in the gloom. "I'd like to talk to you if I could."

"Yes, Capt'n," the echoing tone came back. "I'm up here on the third floor."

**Q**UICKLY they ran up the dusty, poorly-lighted steps. Doors cracked and suspicious eyes followed their progress. Hazel was standing outside a half-opened door on the third floor, a faded robe

wrapped around her. "Hello, Captain McLane," she said. "I hope you'll pardon me the way I look, but I wasn't expectin' no company. I been sick."

"I'm sorry to hear that," he sympathized, "I wondered where you were. Hazel," he continued, "do you remember that coat I gave you the other day? Do you still have it?"

"No sir, Captain. I don't have that coat. I gave it to a friend of mine."

"You did?" he asked. "Where is he? You didn't notice if there were any papers or a bill fold in the pocket, did you?"

"No sir, I didn't see any papers."

"Who did you give the coat to?"

"You told me I could have that coat, Captain," she protested. "You said I could give it to my friend."

"I know I did, Hazel," he reassured her. "It's all right. Only I've just remembered there were some papers in the pocket. Now tell me, who did you give it to?"

"I gave it to my friend Mr. Thomas Moore."

"Where is he now, do you know?"

"No," she said. "I ain't seen him since Friday night."

"Listen, Hazel." Gorski decided to see what he could learn from the reluctant girl. "We don't want the coat. We don't want to take the coat away from Mr. Moore, we just want to see if the papers are still there. Now tell me, where can we find Mr. Moore? Or rather," and he handed her a folded bill, "where is the best place to look for Mr. Moore?"

"Well I don't know." She placed the bill in a pocket of the robe she was wearing. "He usually lives at the Elite Hotel when he ain't—" she checked herself—"when he ain't livin' somewhere else. That's just around the corner. But I don't know whether he is there or not, now."

"The Elite Hotel, huh? Whom do we ask for," Pat wanted to know, "Mr. Thomas Moore?"

"You ask for Big Tom Moore. If he ain't there they may be able to tell you where he is. But don't you tell anybody I told you where he was," she added.

"We won't, Hazel," McLane told her, "but why not? He hasn't done anything,

has he? And even if he had, we're not policemen."

"No sir, he ain't done nothing, except maybe drink too much whiskey now and then. But," and she lowered her voice and looked around, "that man who asked me about Tom yesterday said I shouldn't tell anybody where Tom was, or . . ." and she drew her fingers across her throat significantly.

"Who told you that?" The question came from Bob and Pat at the same time. "Who was here yesterday? What did he want?"

"It was an ugly looking man," she said, keeping her voice so low they had to strain to hear what she was saying. "An ugly looking white man, and he asked me what I did with that coat. I asked him who he was and he gave me ten dollars. I told him I gave the coat to Tom and that Tom lived at the Elite Hotel. Then he said I shouldn't tell anybody he had been here, or tell anybody else what I did with the coat. But I figured the coat really belonged to you in the first place, Captain, and so it was all right for me to tell you, wasn't it?"

"It certainly was, Hazel, and thanks a lot." He turned. "Pat, we better get looking for Tom Moore, come on." As they started for the stairs he called back. "When are you coming back to work, Hazel?"

"I don't know, Captain," she wailed. "I'm still feeling pretty poor. I got this misery in my back. Maybe next week."

He paid little attention to her, and was half-way to the first floor when Pat asked, "Who the hell got there first, some of your friends from the League?"

"I imagine that's who it was. I know they started hunting yesterday, but maybe they haven't found Moore yet. Let's see, she said it was just around the corner. Do you see any Elite Hotel anywhere around here? Hey son," he called to a boy on the corner, "where's the Elite Hotel?"

"What do you want to know for?" The boy glared at them.

"Wait a minute." Pat stepped in. "You got us all wrong. We aren't cops. Here's a dollar. Now will you please tell us where the Elite Hotel is?"

"Half a block down that way." The

boy pointed, snatched the bill, and walked away.

"Nice bunch of people you have in this part of town, Pat," commented McLane. "Do you think we'll have to pay the doorman of the Elite Hotel to get in?"

"Not if this it it," Pat said. They stopped in front of a ramshackle brick building. The words "Elite Hotel" were barely discernible beneath the grime that covered the sign above the dirty glass window. "This is a Harlem flop-house if I ever saw one. Come on, let's go in, but look out. We'll be lucky to get out of this rat-trap alive if we aren't careful. Let me do the talking." He pushed against the once-painted door and they entered a two-by-four lobby.

A GROUP of down-at-the-heels colored men sat on battered chairs. Some of them were smoking hand-made cigarettes, the air was blue with smoke and fetid with the smell of unwashed bodies. In one corner a man lay snoring, and as McLane glanced at him he saw a large cockroach run from under the sleeping body, stop, and then run back. He sensed that bleary and blood-shot eyes were looking at them, but nobody moved or made any noise. Pat stepped toward the broken-down desk at one end.

"Pardon me, sir." Bob watched Pat extend a card to the man behind the desk and drop some money before the clerk. "My name is Gorski. I'm from the *Herald-Tribune*. Here is my card. My friend and I are looking for a man named Thomas Moore—Big Tom Moore. We got word that the Army is looking for Mr. Moore to give him a medal. Does he live here? I'd like to talk to him and I'll pay him for any story he may give me about how he won the medal."

"Tom Moore ain't here," the clerk snapped.

"I wonder if you could tell me where he is?"

"I don't know and I don't care." The clerk squinted through the smoke. "That's what I tell you and that's what I told the other guy who was here yesterday, only he didn't want to give Tom Moore no medal. That's a new one. Tom Moore wasn't in the war, anyhow. That's all I know. Now get out."

"Do you know any other people by that name?" Gorski tried again. "The word we got at the paper was that a Tom Moore was supposed to get some kind of a decoration." He dropped another bill on the desk.

"Listen, mister-whatever-your-name-is, I know of only one Tom Moore. Last time I saw him was on Saturday, and he was drunk. So far as I know he's still drunk. If you want to find him don't look here, look in gin mills. That's the only place you'll find Tom Moore for the rest of the week. Now get out. We don't want you in here."

There was no mistaking the clerk's tone for a friendly one.

"Come on, Bob," said Pat, "we might as well go some place else." They walked out into the fresh afternoon air. "Quite a hotel, what? The kind of an inn you'd pick for a honeymoon, I don't think. I'm glad we didn't have to go in there at night. What do we do now?"

McLane shrugged his shoulders. "Look in gin mills, I guess, like that fellow said. How many are there up here?"

"There must be a million of them, each one tougher than the other. It would take a man a lifetime to find all of them, let alone live to do it."

"Well, we can start, anyhow," McLane decided. "After all, the guy lives around here, and maybe he operates close to his base. We might run into somebody who has seen him. Let's go in this one." He pushed the door of "Ed's Bar and Grill" and walked into a dimly lighted room. There was a bar along one side with ten or a dozen men leaning against it. A juke box played loudly, but as the two white men walked in it suddenly stopped. At the same time all conversation ceased, the customers who had glanced at the intruders rolled their eyes back and silently studied their drinks. A cat walked from behind the bar toward the rear of the room and for years afterwards McLane would swear he could hear its footsteps as it went.

"Pardon me," Gorski addressed the huge bartender, "but I . . ."

"Get out o' here, white man," the bartender interrupted him. "I don't want nobody in here but my friends. I don't think you're no friend of mine."

"All we want is a little information. We're looking for . . ."

"I don't care who you're lookin' for. He ain't here. And we don't have no information, neither to sell or give away. Now get out." The bartender called to the back of the room. "Turn that juke box on, somebody." The loud harsh notes of the music filled the small room again.

"Just a second, damnit!" McLane banged his fist on the bar. "I don't like your attitude, buddy, and I don't give a hoot in hell who knows it. Shut up, Pat, I'll talk to this guy. I don't think he's so tough. I'm tired of getting pushed around. Listen you, I'm looking for Big Tom Moore. Have you seen him?"

A tight little knot of colored men had surrounded him as he talked. Suddenly one of them spoke up. "Don't you talk like that in here, mister. That big talk don't go here." The voice was soft and deadly. "I think you talk like you'd been in the army, mister. Like you was a sergeant, maybe. I was in the army too, mister, for four years. Just in case I might have known you I'm telling you, you better do like Ed says and get out. Now."

"Come on Bob, we'd better go." Little beads of sweat were standing on Gorski's forehead as he took his friend by the arm. The circle around them parted and opened a passage to the door. Someone spat loudly, disgustingly.

"That was a little too close for comfort, my friend," said Pat as he wiped the moisture from his face when they were safely on the street again. "You may not have understood, But I quite definitely had the impression we weren't welcome there. In fact, I would like to have a dollar for every switch-knife that was just about ready to cut our throats."

"That bartender made me mad," McLane growled. "What do we do now, try another? They won't do much worse than throw us out, will they?"

"I don't know," Pat confessed. "Here's one, let's go in on a wing and a prayer, as they say. What the hell, it's only our lives we're risking." The second saloon was much the same as the first, except that the juke box was not playing. But the same ten or twelve men—or their exact counterparts—stood at the bar and

stopped talking to concentrate on their drinks or the bottles behind the bar as Gorski stepped up.

"Pardon me." It was beginning to sound like an old refrain. "Pardon me, but I'm looking for a man known as Big Tom Moore. Do you have any idea where he is?"

"Never heard of him, white man. Never heard of anybody who ever did hear of him, neither. Anything else you want to know?" The bartender rested two huge black paws on the bar and pushed his face close to Gorski, "'cause if there is, I don't know that, neither."

"Any of you men at the bar ever hear of Big Tom Moore?" McLane demanded of the customers. Not an eye turned in his direction, not a sound was made. Somewhere at the end of the bar one man lifted a beer glass and drank silently. "I said, did any of you ever hear of Big Tom Moore, dammit!

"Wait a minute." A strong voice came from the door behind him and he glanced at the mirror over the shelves at the rear of the bar and saw two colored policemen come in. "What's going in here," one of them asked. "What do you two men want up in this part of town?"

**B**OB AND GORSKI swung around. Here was the end of their search. The police had orders to pick McLane up on sight and there was little chance these two would not ask him who he was and learn his identity. Gorski spoke. "Nothing, officers. We're trying to locate a Big Tom Moore. I'm from the *Herald-Tribune*, and I think he may be able to give me a story."

"Newspaper reporter, eh?" The policeman had been glancing strangely at McLane ever since he had entered. "Aren't you Captain McLane, sir?" The tone was respectful.

"Yes, I'm Robert McLane, but . . ."

"I knew it, I knew it!" The policeman's face opened in a wide smile as he grabbed McLane's hand and shook it violently. "How are you sir? Never expected to see you up here. Captain, I'm glad to see you. How's your leg?"

"I remember you," said Gorski. "Bob, you remember this man, he was in that Duck that got hit. Weren't you?"

"I sure was," the policeman replied. "And I'd be there yet if it hadn't been for the Captain here, and that's a fact."

## XIX

**"I** REMEMBER you now," said McLane. "Sure. You were in a Duck full of some ammo with a couple of other guys. Just as you came up over the hill north of Naha the Japs dropped a shell right into your pratt, didn't they? But I swear I never did learn your name."

"Rogers. I was Sergeant Rogers then. I guess we didn't have much time for names. The way I recall there was a big bang and I saw a lot of stars and the next thing I knew I was lying along side the road in a ditch. Later on somebody told me you pulled me out. They said you got hit too."

"I got a little nick in the leg," McLane admitted. "This is Pat Gorski, Sergeant Rogers. He was out there at the same time, writing a story."

"I'm glad to meet you, Mr. Gorski. This is Patrolman Edwards. I'm Patrolman Rogers now, not Sergeant. Ed, this is the officer I was telling you about, the Marine captain who saved my life." The four men stepped to the street. "What are you doing up here, anyhow?"

"We're looking for a man," McLane told him. "But aren't you looking for me?"

"I did hear something about an alarm being out for you," Rogers admitted. "To tell the truth, that's why I was talking about you to Ed. And then I read about you in the papers. But like I told Ed here, I don't think you ever killed any dame. I said to Ed, 'That Captain McLane never killed anybody but a couple million Japs.' Didn't I, Ed?"

Patrolman Edwards nodded in affirmation. Rogers continued, "I guess we have to turn you in, even though I know you didn't do anything. But what are you doing up here, anyhow? The last I heard you skipped town. Don't tell me you were hiding out around here?"

"No, I didn't skip," McLane assured him. "I got kidnapped and then I escaped and came back. Only I don't think I could prove I was kidnapped. But if I can find a fellow known as Big Tom Moore and get some . . ."

"You looking for Big Tom Moore?" Rogers asked. "Why didn't you say so? Hell, we know him. Everybody in this part of town knows Tom Moore. He's been on a bat since he turned up a winner on the numbers Saturday morning. We've been keeping an eye on him, but he's a friendly sort of a guy and don't cause any trouble."

"You don't know where he is now, do you?"

"Sure. We just saw him walk into a place about two blocks from here, singing and whistling and happy as a little bird. If you're looking for him I guess we can go over there before we head around to the station house. I've got to turn you in, you know, but it won't take long to find Tom Moore." They started down the street in the direction Rogers indicated. "What do you want with him anyhow, Captain?"

McLane gave a rapid resume of his adventures.

"Everything certainly happens to you, Captain." Rogers shook his head in amazement. "Doesn't it, Ed?" They stopped outside a building. "This is the place where we saw Moore go in. If he isn't here he won't be far away."

The Rialto Bar and Grill was another one of a pattern. On the left as they entered was the bar. To the right, running the short length of the dark room, were half a dozen tables. Twenty or twenty-five customers occupied the Rialto, some at the bar, some seated. The inevitable juke box played a tune. Long, dust-filtered rays of pathetic light from the setting sun struggled through the window in front and wrestled futilely with the red and green glare of a beer advertisement of twisted neon tubing.

"Anybody seen Big Tom Moore?" boomed Rogers. "I got some friends of his looking for him."

"Hello flatfoot," laughed one of the white-aproned men behind the bar. "You lookin' for Tom? What's he done this time? You'll find him back there at a table, if he ain't floated away by now."

"Thanks, George." The patrolman strained his eyes toward the shadowy corners.

"Hey you, Tom Moore!"

"Who dat yelling, fo' Big Tom Moore?"

Dat you, Rogahs? Go 'way, Rogahs, ah ain' done nothin', 'cept drink one gawd-awful mess of gin since ah started. Wha' day is 'is anyhow?" A tall, thin, colored man stood swaying at a rear table.

"Sit down, Moore, sit down," Rogers told him. "You ain't done anything that I know of. Is that the coat, Captain?"

"That's it. That's the coat."

"Wazza matter dis coat?" The drunken Moore wrapped the garment closer around him. "Ah didn' steal his coat, mah gal give it to me to keep me from freezin'. Freezin'. Ah was col" to death and she gave it to me. Col', col'." He shivered, put his head on the table and began to sob pitifully. "Ah'm so col', so col'."

"Go ahead and look in the pockets, Captain," said Rogers. "I hope those papers are there. Shut up, Moore, nobody wants your damned coat."

McLane thrust his hand into the right pocket of the coat, felt around. There was nothing. He stepped behind Moore and reached in the left side, found nothing except a hole. Frantically he felt along the hem and in the folds of the lining. There it was. Something was in the lining. He ran his hand through the bottom of the pocket and withdrew the crumpled leather folder.

"It's it!" he shouted. Quickly he drew his finger along the edge and removed the papers. "They're here, they're all here. Let's go, Pat. Let's get down and show these to Sullivan, he'll have to listen to our story now."

Someone grabbed the papers from his hands. He whirled to see a broad-shouldered man turn and start for the door of the saloon. "Hey! Come back here!"

**W**HILE McLane had been searching through Moore's pockets his three friends, Gorski and the two policemen, had been watching him, their backs toward the door. No one had noticed the silent entrance of three newcomers, two white and one huge colored man, until one of the white men had suddenly stepped up, seized the papers from Bob's hand and started toward the exit.

"Come here with that!" McLane made a flying leap at the man who had snatched the prize from his grasp, tripped over a

chair and barely managed to clutch his target by one ankle as he fell to the floor. Desperately he strengthened his hold, pulled the other man down with him, but something jumped heavily on his arm and broke his grip. He saw the flash of a beer bottle descending, rolled to catch a glancing blow on his shoulder as the bottle crashed against the floor, and then rolled again to cover the outstretched hand which still held the envelope. He felt another body fall heavily on the shoulders of the man he had tripped, looked quickly and saw it was Gorski.

The precious papers were in his hand. Somebody stepped beside him, iron fingers closed over his neck from behind and he was lifted from the floor and thrown to one side as though he were a sack of dried leaves. The papers scattered. He fell, dazed, against the bar.

Gorski still struggled with the stranger. As McLane watched the same man who had so easily lifted the former marine's 190 pounds reached down and seized the reporter by the arm and flicked him away. And then McLane recognized him—Gromio. The other white man, the one on the floor, was Snilov, the strangler, the judge at the trial. Foster's henchmen were here. But where was Rogers, where was Edwards? What were the policemen doing?

He struggled to his feet. Edwards stood at the door, pistol in hand, blocking the exit. Rogers was reaching for Gromio but as he reached the huge colored man behind him raised a chair and crashed it down over the patrolman's head.

Edwards fired a shot at the man with the remnants of the chair still in his hand. The black giant screamed and swung the legs of the chair at the overhead light, breaking the single bulb and plunging the room into darkness. In the fitful shadows from the window McLane saw Gorski rise to his feet. Somewhere from the floor a flame flashed, he heard the wicked "Splat!" of an automatic and Gorski staggered back, slumped to a chair and slowly dropped his head on the table. The black man roared again and swung the legs of the chair in a vicious, head-high arc, striking one of the customers who bellowed and threw a glass at his assailant. McLane dove under the circling club, felt Gromio

kick him as he went by, landed on the sitting Snilov and reached for the automatic.

Together they wrestled among the welter of furniture and the legs of fighting men. A police whistle shrilled in the gloom. Once more giant fingers closed around McLane's neck and he was lifted and thrown across the room against a flimsy table. The table overturned, his weight knocked a leg askew and he pulled it loose, rising to his feet and advancing again. "Splat!" Snilov's gun barked, he felt the bullet sing by his ear. Splat! Splat!" McLane charged in, avoiding blows, fending off swinging bottles with the table leg. "Drop that gun, you murdering swine!" he roared. "Stand up and fight like a man!" He began to swing wildly.

A little lane in the line of fire cleared. Somebody turned on a light at the end of the room. Slowly, deliberately, Snilov raised the small automatic in his hand. *He won't miss you this time, McLane. Don't stop, McLane. Bore in, McLane. Two more feet and you have him, if he doesn't stop you cold. The hell with him, McLane, you can't die more than once.*

He was only dimly aware of the louder roar of a police .38 from somewhere else in the room. All he knew was that as he raised the leg of the chair Snilov's wicked little eyes slowly glazed, the gun dropped from his hand and the strangler wilted to the floor, clawing at the bar as he fell.

"Look out, Captain!" McLane shifted to one side with the warning, dodged a blow from the berserk colored giant, fended off another with the table leg, saw an opening and thrust a powerful jab with the table leg against his adversary's mouth. He felt teeth crumple away, saw blood trickle from thick, crushed lips. The black stopped, a gorilla-like cry welled from deep within his massive chest, hate shone from his red-rimmed eyes. Slowly he started forward, dropped his club, flexed his fingers below his knotted forearms. McLane caught the crazed negro a blow along the temple, laying open a four-inch wound. He swung once more, but still the other bored in, as relentless as doom itself. The negro's face was a bloody pulp, the dark wool of his head was a matted, horrible sponge, one ear hung loose. Now McLane was backed against the wall. He opened

his mouth and roared with the sheer joy of the animal craziness, madness and anger which gripped him, brought the table leg down with all the force of his sudden blind hate for his aboriginal foe.

The negro dropped.

"Nice work, Captain." Suddenly his friend Rogers was at his side. "Stand back, you people," Rogers commanded. Now there was only Gromio standing bewildered, alone, holding a bottle in his hand. "Drop that bottle," Rogers ordered. "Drop it, I said!"

Gromio slowly lifted the bottle. "Drop it, or I'll shoot." As McLane watched the bottle rose higher. "Drop it!" The bottle came hurtling through the air as Rogers fired, and McLane saw a small black mark appear on Gromio's forehead while the bottle broke harmlessly against the wall. The last of the three men who had sought the papers for Anthony Foster pitched forward on his face.

"Nice work, I must say." Gorski's welcome voice greeted them from a corner. "Do you think a man could get a drink in this place, if he needed one real badly?"

"Pat! Are you hurt? Are you all right? I thought you were dead!"

"I'm alive, but no thanks to your friend over there. I'll have to part my hair differently, too, he creased me right alongside my head. Another half inch and I'd be as dead as I hope he is." He removed a blood-stained handkerchief from his head. "How does it look? Cute?" He stood up and walked over to the bar. "What do I have to do to get a drink here, sing Mammy or something?"

"Go ahead, George, break out that good bottle," Rogers nodded to the bartender. "Then get some more light in here. The rest of you people stand back and don't try to get out." He returned his pistol to its holster. "That was a nice shot, Edwards. Did you call for some help? Not that we need it now, but we better get an ambulance down here. And keep those people outside." Through the window they could see a crowd in the street. "What happened to your papers, Captain? You got 'em?"

"I think they're all here." McLane was assembling the letters from the floor. "They look like a lot of people had been walking over them, but you can still read

them." He gathered his collection together and put it in an inside pocket. "Hey, how about a drink for me?" he asked the bartender. "I'm sorry if we messed up your place."

"This is nothing.' You should see it sometimes on Saturday night," the bartender told him. "You want I should give everybody a drink, suh? Lots o' nervous guys, waiting around here, seems to me."

"Go ahead," McLane laughed. "My wounded friend will pay for it. How's your head, Pat?"

"It's still bleeding, but not much."

A groan from the floor attracted their attention. They turned to where Snilov lay beside the brass rail.

"I thought that guy was dead," said Rogers. "Maybe he isn't, after all." He knelt over the prostrate figure, felt for a pulse. "Hell no, he's still alive. Ed, where's the ambulance? This guy's still breathin'."

"It ought to be here any minute."

"That's the guy who killed Anne Martin," McLane informed the patrolmen. "I can tell the story about him. If he lives we may be able to send him to the chair. But how about this other guy, did I kill him?"

**R**OGERS BENT over the bloodied colored man. "No, he's still alive too, but I bet he'd rather be dead. You kind of messed his face up a little." He turned to the others in the room. "Anybody here know who this is?"

"No suh. No suh. Nevah seen him befo'."

The whine of police sirens interrupted further questioning. Several men burst into the barroom. "What's happened here?" barked one. "Hello Rogers. Hello Edwards. What you guys been up to now?" He glanced at the three figures on the floor. "Judas H. Priest," he whistled, "what the hell *have* you been doing? What did you do to this guy, run his head through a meat chopper?"

"Well, Lieutenant," Rogers said, "we had kind of a little fight, you might say. But two of these guys are still alive and that one," pointing, "he's the guy who killed that Martin girl last Saturday."

"All right. All right," the lieutenant snapped. "Some of you cops get these

two to the hospital. How about this other one? Is he dead? Who shot him? Who are these two people?"

"He's dead. I shot him. And these two gentlemen are Captain McLane and Mr. Gorski."

"McLane? McLane. Hey, aren't you the guy that we've got an alarm out for? What did you do, Rogers, follow them in here? Did they do all this damage? What are they doing standing there at the bar drinking? Why the hell don't you run 'em in? What goes on here? Tell me, please. Gawd, my aching head . . . won't somebody tell me what happened?"

"Well, you see, Lieutenant," Rogers began, "I met Captain McLane and this other gentleman and brought them down here."

"You brought them down here?" The Lieutenant was a study in amazement. "Why? Didn't you know who they were? Why, for the love of all that's holy, did you bring them here instead of to the station house?"

"Because Captain McLane is the officer who saved my life out on Okinawa. We were both in the Marines, both in the Sixth Division. So when I said I had to take him in he asked me did I know where Tom Moore was, 'cause he was looking for Tom Moore. I told him Big Tom Moore was in here, and we just stepped in . . ."

"*Big Tom Moore,*" the Lieutenant shouted. "Who the hell is *Big Tom Moore*?"

"Ah'm Big Tom Moore." A dull voice boomed from the rear of the room. "Ah'm Big Tom Moore, ah is. Ah been asleep, ah guess. What's happened in here anyhow while ah been asleep? Did somebody buy a round o' drinks, Gawd?"

## XX

"GRADUALLY the activity of the 25th Precinct station settled back to a normal level. McLane had told and retold the story of his adventures from Sunday afternoon until they had ended in the tavern less than an hour before—first to the precinct force, then to Inspector Sullivan, and after that to Henry Hamilton, who had been summoned by Gorski. Now he was reviewing it again

under Sullivan's detailed questioning.

"Did you say this man Snilov actually told you he had killed Miss Martin?"

"No, sir, but he was pointed out by Foster as the man who had."

"I see. These other people you have mentioned, did you ever actually hear them admit they killed Finn, or Resick?"

"No, sir. Foster only said they did."

"And you still have no actual proof, other than your own words, that your story is true? Don't you agree, McLane, that it sounds a little incredible?"

"It does," McLane admitted. "But can't you find the railroad guard who caught me this morning when I rolled out from under that train? And that cop in Connecticut should be able to recognize me again. I'm perfectly willing to go back and face Foster and accuse him of kidnapping me and keeping me in that big place of his. And how about Snilov, is he dead yet? He might be willing to talk."

Sullivan turned to a policeman. "How about those two guys at the hospital, are they awake yet?"

"I don't know, Inspector. The last word I heard was about ten minutes ago. They were both alive but still unconscious."

"Give the hospital a call. I want to know just as soon as they can talk."

"Yes sir." The policeman picked up a phone spoke briefly. Suddenly he turned, excitement written on his face. "Inspector!" he cried, "the guy that was shot in the stomach, the white man, he's talking! He's askin' for a priest! The doc says the guy has only about half an hour to live, too and if you . . ."

"Let's go, Sullivan interrupted him. "Come with me, McLane. If this guy has anything to say I'll let you talk to him. Hamilton, I guess you can come too. Yes, Gorski, come along." He hurried down the steps to his waiting car. "Hospital—as fast as you can," he barked at the driver.

The black sedan jumped away from the curb almost before Gorski was able to slam the door behind his long legs. Two other green and white police cars followed behind them as, sirens shrilling, they raced through the dark and crowded Harlem streets.

"Right this way, gentlemen," a white-gowned orderly directed them. They hur-

ried down a long corridor, entered a room guarded by two policemen. Inside, around a bed, stood a doctor, a nurse and a black-robed priest.

"Hello doc. Good evening, Father. Are we in time?" Sullivan questioned the two men by the bed as he stepped up. "Well, Snilov," he leaned over the pale figure in the bed, "it looks like the end of the road for you. Anything you want to tell me?"

The pained eyes of the dying man rested briefly on the Inspector, then turned to the others, one by one, until they finally stopped at McLane. Slowly and deliberately Snilov moistened his lips with his tongue. Tortured words limped from the tightened mouth. "Hello Captain . . . you're beating the rap, aren't you?" He paused for a breath. "You're the only one that ever did . . . Judge Ivan Snilov . . . you're the only one." The dull eyes closed. "Maybe it was time . . ."

"Snilov. Snilov," McLane begged. "Don't stop now. What happened to Anne Martin?"

The grey lids dragged themselves away from the pools of torment which they had covered a minute before. "Martin . . . Anne Martin . . .?"

"Yes, the girl on Bleeker Street, you remember."

"Yes . . . yes . . . Anne Martin . . . I killed her . . ." The voice took on a new and terrifying volume. "I killed Anne Martin . . . I killed them all . . . Foster said to kill them all!" Snilov's voice slowly faded. "Killed them all . . . Foster was wrong . . . he wanted it all . . . wanted it all—I thought he was right . . . Father—Father, where are you?"

The priest stepped to the dying man, held a crucifix against the blood-flecked lips. "Forgive me, Father, I didn't know. I thought they were right in what they planned." There was only a whisper now. "Mary, Mary . . ."

The doctor placed his stethoscope against the strangler's chest, straightened up and pulled the sheet over the strangely peaceful face. The priest's lips moved softly as he made the sign of the cross.

"I think I want to talk to Mr. Anthony Foster," said Sullivan as the party reached the hall. "It seems to me he should be

able to tell us some very interesting things. And McLane, I guess you're cleared on that Martin case. A death-bed confession is as good as anything we can get for the time being. But hang around, I'll want you when we get Foster's story."

"Hang around? You didn't think I was going any place, did you? Aren't you going after Foster now? He'll get away if you wait, won't he?"

"I don't think so. I don't know how he could have found out anything yet. Wait a minute, though, and I'll find out how things stand." Sullivan turned to the orderly who was with them. "Where's your telephone, son?"

"Right over here." He pointed to a desk. The Inspector picked up the phone, dialed a number.

"Hello. This is Sullivan . . . what? . . . he did? . . . All right, call Captain Mead in Stamford and tell him I'm heading up the Merritt Parkway. Ask him to have us picked up at the line and in the meantime to keep those people in the house if he can. Tell him I've got enough to make any case he wants and we'll settle the details later." He slammed the phone back in its stand and started at a run for the door. "Foster just got a call from New York," he shouted over his shoulder. "The operator reported somebody told him Snilov was dying and hung up. Come on, if you're going with me."

They were back in the Inspector's car once more, racing crazily through the Harlem streets. Out of the corner of his eye McLane could see the speedometer needle hovering between 60 and 65. From somewhere two motorcycles had materialized ahead of them, clearing a way through traffic for the black sedan and the several cars that followed. Through the din of sirens and the whistles of policemen at intersections he could understand that Gorski was complaining because he had not had time to telephone to his paper.

"What will they think when everybody has the story about the fight in the saloon?" the reporter wailed. "And me, I get shot and kicked around and I don't even call up and tell them about it."

"Do you want me to stop and let you out?" the Inspector laughed.

"No, no, not that. Maybe they'll forgive me when I tell them how Anthony

Foster, millionaire publisher of *Watch* and other things too numerous to mention, was arrested on a charge of kidnapping and murder. I can see the headlines now—hey, look out! I've got one hole in my head already." He grabbed at the back of the front seat as the car took a corner on two wheels, skidded ominously and then straightened out on its mad journey again. "This is a hell of a place for a conversation."

**T**HE POLICE CARAVAN picked up more speed as they turned onto the Henry Hudson Parkway. Slowly the speedometer climbed—70—75—80. Henry Hamilton nervously smoked one cigarette after another and thought of the wonderful story he would have to tell the board of directors at the next meeting. Maybe he would even call a special meeting and get out a letter to the stockholders explaining why *World Wide* was in the headlines again. He smiled to himself.

"Inspector Sullivan. Inspector Sullivan. This is Captain Mead, Connecticut State Police. Come in please, Inspector, if you hear me." The radio in the car rasped its message to the silent and thoughtful group. Sullivan picked up the microphone.

"Hello Mead, this is Sullivan. What do you know? Go ahead."

"Hello Sullivan. Four motorcycles will pick up you up at the line. I'll meet you where Route One-Oh-Four hits the Parkway. I've got ten men heading for Foster's place and other men watching the roads. What's this all about, anyhow?"

"Hello Mead. "We've passed Rye. Don't let Foster get away. I think we can hang a kidnapping charge on him. See if you can get a Federal man there to pick him up on that one, will you, so he can't get out of it so easily. I'll tell you all about it when I see you, but it's the biggest thing you've heard for a long time."

"All right, I'll get Higgins, here in Stamford."

They crossed into Connecticut where they were joined by a new escort. The miles flashed by, in less than ten minutes they were slowed by blinking red lights at an intersection and a car pulled from the side of the road and paralleled them. A man in the new car waved, motioned. Sullivan nodded back and the car pulled

ahead to lead the procession. The speedometer climbed back to 90 and hung there.

"That's Mead," Sullivan commented. "He's a damned good man."

The lights of Norwalk came up on their right. Suddenly the radio crackled again. "Sullivan, Sullivan. I've just heard that Foster and a dozen or so of his gang have broken through the line around the house. They've shot two of my men. Wait a minute, here comes some more." They could hear a faint mumble in the receiver.

"He's got a couple of sets in that car," Sullivan told them.

"Here's the story, Sullivan. Foster and ten or twelve other people slipped out the back way as we closed in at the front. They shot the two men who were coming in the back. Another of my men got hung up on that goldamned electric fence around the place. We haven't located Foster yet. Wait—here it comes now." Sullivan, McLane, Gorski and Hamilton sat with their ears glued to the receiver. Only the driver appeared unconcerned.

"Here's the rest of it, Sullivan. Two strange cars picked up Foster and his party along the road. They were waiting in a lane. A two-man patrol tried to stop them when they hit the Parkway and both guys in the patrol got shot. They're armed with a couple of machine guns. One of the patrol managed to get to the radio in his car and tells me Foster's two cars headed up the road toward Weston. Wait a minute, I'm getting some more."

There was a long pause, then. "The people at Foster's place say they think he's making for a private airport south-east of Weston. Foster keeps a plane there. I know where it is, we turn about two miles from here. Hold on and follow me!"

The double tail lights on Mead's car blinked, the procession slowed slightly, skidded to the left and screamed along the new road. Another turn to the right and they were away from the highway and bouncing down a secondary road, rutted by the winter weather. The leading car turned again, jolted along a lane and came to a stop in front of a weather-beaten building where two other cars were parked. The escorting motorcycle riders dropped their machines, policemen and troopers piled out of automobiles.

"Hello Captain." Sullivan gripped a tall uniformed man by the hand. "You certainly got us here in a hurry. What else do you know, anything? Where the hell are the guys who came in these two cars?" A figure came running from the building. "Hey you!" The figure stopped. "Who are you? Where are the people who drove up before we got here? Is Anthony Foster here?"

"He's in the plane," the newcomer answered. "What's the trouble?"

"What plane?" The roar of motors sounded through the darkness. "Listen! There they go! Stop that plane," Sullivan shouted, "for the love of Pat! Stop it, shoot it, shoot it!"

They could see the plane now. Somebody trained a spotlight from one of the police cars on the small two-motored transport which stood at one end of the runway. As they watched the twin halos of light reflected from the propellers grew brighter and the plane started forward. A policeman emptied six quick shots from his revolver, another fired a series of short bursts from a sub-machine gun. The plane rolled on, ignoring the increasing fusillade of bullets. Faster, Faster. It neared the end of the runway, further and further from the little knot of watching men who seemed powerless to stop it as it raced away in the slim finger of light. Firing stopped as the range increased.

**S**LOWLY the transport pulled itself in to the air. The spectators gasped as it came back to the runway and bounced into the air again as the pilot struggled to free himself from the ground.

It bounced again. Then, with a deadly deliberateness it seemed to drop one wing to the earth. The tail went up, the nose folded away against the runway. For an instant they heard a terrified scream, then flames flashed out and a tall pillar of fire and black smoke billowed skyward. McLane seized the window frame of a car as it moved by him, swung to the running board as the driver sped down the runway to the blaze. Other cars followed and came to a tire-burning stop on the fringe of the holocaust, adding the small of burning rubber to the odors of frying flesh and fabric.

"There goes Anthony Foster, the League

to Safeguard Democracy, and all his hellish ideas." McLane spoke to no one in particular. His only feeling was one of great relief.

"If he was in there," Gorski added, at his side. "Nobody will ever get out of that one. Come on, let's see what they've found." Together they walked to where Sullivan, Mead, and others were gathered in a circle around the stranger who had come from the airport building.

". . . I told Mr. Foster the plane was loaded too heavily," stranger was saying. "I said we hadn't had time to warm it up, and that he would never get it off the ground. But he said we was in a hurry and had to take a chance."

"How many people were in the plane?"

"There were ten. Eleven counting the pilot."

"Are you sure Anthony Foster was in it?"

"Yes sir, I know Mr. Foster well. He's been using this airport ever since the war, when he got that plane. But I told him he couldn't get all those people in there, with that load of gas. I told him . . ."

"All right, that's enough," Sullivan cut him off. "Captain Mead, will you have some of your men stand by, please, and see what they can find as soon as the fire's over? I don't think they will find much. The rest of us better be getting over to the house and see what you have there."

"Okay, Inspector," Mead assented. "There doesn't seem to be much we can do here. I still wish I'd been able to lay my hands on that damned cop killer. He'd have walked into that fire by choice after I'd had about five minutes with him." He very carefully cursed under his breath. "Well, let's go." The others turned and started to walk to the cars. "McLane," Mead called, "give me a few more details on that house of Foster's will you? I don't want to run into any trouble back there."

"Sure thing Captain. In the first place you drive in through a woods, and than . . ." Somewhere, in a corner of the dark hangar, he heard a noise. His scalp prickled, the danger signal came to him again.

"And then what?" Evidently Mead had heard nothing.

"And then you take a turn like this."

He took the trooper by the arm and steered him clear of the open. "Somebody's in that hangar!"

They wheeled and faced the direction they had come, in time to see a shadow detach itself from the wall and glide rapidly through the flickering half-light toward the darkness at the edges of the field. Slowly, it seemed to McLane, Mead's blue-black revolver came up. He nodded affirmatively to the question he knew was in the other's mind, and then he heard the sharp noise and saw the bright flash beside him. The running figure twisted to the ground.

"That was Anthony Foster," he said slowly, almost unbelievably.

"I'll bet you a dollar I hit him right in the shoulder, too. He'll live to see the chair." Mead's voice faded off in the voices of the returning crowd. "I get my wish," he added to himself.

McLane leaned back against the seat in the car, relaxed. There was something about the way he felt that was familiar, and he tried to remember what it was. Then he knew. It was the same feeling he had had when, lying in the hospital in Guan some months after he had been evacuated from Okinawa, he had learned that the war was over. There would be no more campaigns, no more horrible tomorrows, no more screaming of the wounded in the night. He had nothing to worry about, nothing at all.

And then he thought of something else. "Say, Inspector," he asked, "they won't do anything to me for that trick I played on Hackie, the fellow who brought me my lunch, will they?"

"Hum." Sullivan paused before he answered. "I'd say that was a matter for the sovereign State of Connecticut to de-

side. It's out of my territory. But if I mention it to Captain Mead, they might give you a medal. Do you want a medal?"

"Hell no, I've got a medal. I've got everything I need, except a job."

"Come around and see me in about a week," Hamilton told him. "I think you'll find that I have a job for you. It's the least we could offer, seems to me."

"Thank you, sir, I will." McLane settled back again. Now the war was over, and he could think of Joyce, waiting at home for him, waiting for him to come back.

He smiled softly.

The car turned, and from the windows they could see, through the night, the distant dull red glow where all that remained of Anthony Foster's perverted plan for a controlled world was being consumed by free, uncontrollable, relentless flame.

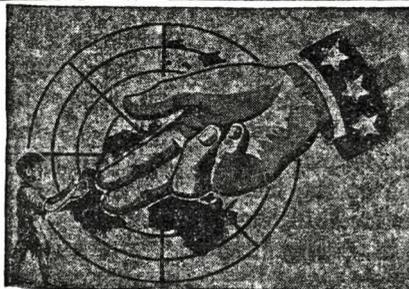
"I wonder what he might really have done," mused Gorski. "He had brains and ability and wealth and everything we need in our great men. He could have been a great man, I guess, if he hadn't gone off the track somewhere. I wonder what it is that warps genius and turns people like that away from a better destiny?"

"Can't they see that freedom can't be fenced in by the ideas of any one man? Don't they know that millions of people have gladly died in these past few years just to prevent the fulfillment of ideas like theirs? Don't they know that men will always die for freedom and the right to think for themselves and to act for themselves?"

"But hell, I'm starting to talk over my head. I'll be damned if I know the answer. Stop smiling, Bob, and give me a cigarette, will you?"

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*Acton's every impulse exploded him in a hysteria toward the door. Get out. Get away, run, board a train, get a taxi. . . . But get the blazes out!*

## TOUCH AND GO!

By RAY BRADBURY

**W**ILLIAM ACTON rose to his feet. The clock on the mantel ticked midnight.

He looked at his fingers and he looked at the large room around him and he looked at the man lying on the floor who was dead and would say no more sayings nor brutalize more brutalities. William Acton, whose fingers had stroked typewriter keys and made love and fried ham and eggs for early breakfasts, had now accomplished a murder with those same ten, whorled fingers.

He had never thought of himself as a sculptor and yet, in this moment, looking down between his hands at the body upon the polished hard wood floor he realized that by some sculptural clenching and re-

modeling and twisting of human clay he had taken hold of this man named Arthur Huxley and changed his physiognomy, the very frame of his body.

With a twist of his fingers he had wiped away the exacting glitter of Huxley's grey eyes; replaced it with an airless dullness of eye cold in socket. The lips, always pink and sensuous, were gaped to show the equine teeth, the yellow incisors, the nicotine canines, the gold inlaid molars. The nose, pink also, was now mottled, pale, discolored, as were the ears. Huxley's hands, upon the floor, were open, pleading for the first time in their lives instead of demanding.

Yes, it was an artistic conception. On the whole, the change had done Huxley a

share of good. Death made him a handsomer man to deal with. You could talk to him now and he'd have to listen.

William Acton looked at his own fingers.

It was done. He could not change it back. Had anybody heard? He listened. The normal late sounds of street traffic outside continued. There was no banging of the house door, no shoulders wrecking the portal into kindling, no voices demanding entrance. The murder, the sculpturing of clay from warmth into cold was done, and nobody knew.

Now what? The clock ticked midnight. His every impulse exploded him in a hysteria toward the door. Get out, get away, run, never come back, board a train, get a taxi, get, go, run, walk, saunter, but get the blazes *out* of here!

His hands hovered before his eyes, floating, turning.

He turned them in slow deliberation; they felt airy and featherlight. Why was he staring at them this way, he inquired of himself. Was there something in them of immense interest that he should pause now, after a successful throttling, and examine them micrometer by micrometer?

They were ordinary hands. Not thick, not thin, not long, not short, not hairy, not naked, not manicured and yet not dirty, not soft and yet not calloused, not wrinkled and yet not smooth; not murdering hands at all—and yet not innocent. He seemed to find them miracles to look upon.

It was not the hands as hands he was interested in, nor the fingers as fingers. In the numb timelessness after an accomplished violence he found interest only in the *tips* of his fingers.

The clock ticked upon the mantel.

He knelt by Huxley's body, took a handkerchief from Huxley's pocket and began methodically to swab Huxley's throat with it. He brushed and massaged the throat and wiped the face and the back of the neck with a fierce energy. Then he stood up.

He looked at the throat. He looked at the polished floor. He bent slowly and gave the floor a few dabs with the handkerchief, then he scowled and swabbed the floor; first, near the head of the corpse, secondly, near the arms. Then he polished the floor all around the body. He polished the floor one yard from the body on all

sides. Then he polished the floor *two* yards from the body on all sides. Then he polished the floor *three* yards from the body in all directions. Then he—

He stopped.

THERE was a moment when he saw the entire house, the halls, the doors, the furniture; and as clearly as if it were being repeated word for word he heard Huxley talking and himself talking just the way they had talked only an hour ago.

Finger on the doorbell. Door opening.

"Oh." Huxley shocked. "It's *you*, Acton."

"I want to see you, Huxley. It's important."

"I don't see—Well, all right. Come in."

He had gone in.

"Go on into the library," said Huxley. He had *touched* the library door.

"Drink?"

"I need one."

"There's a bottle there of burgundy, Acton. Mind getting it, I'm terribly tired."

Surely. Get it. *Handle it. Touch it.* He did.

"Some interesting first editions there, Acton. Look at that binding. *Look* at it."

He had *touched* the books and the library table and *touched* the burgundy bottle and burgundy glasses.

Now, squatting on the floor beside Huxley's cold body with the polishing handkerchief in his fingers, motionless, he stared at the house, the walls, the furniture about him, his eyes widening, his mouth dropping, stunned by what he realized and what he saw. He shut his eyes, dropped his head, crushed the handkerchief between his hands, wadding it, biting his lips with his teeth, pulling in on himself.

The fingerprints were everywhere, everywhere!

"Mind getting the burgundy, Acton, eh? The burgundy bottle, eh? With your fingers, eh? I'm terribly tired. You understand?"

A pair of gloves.

Before he did one more thing, before he polished another area, he must have a pair of gloves, else he might unintentionally, after polishing a surface, re-distribute his identity.

He put his hands in his pockets. He walked through the house to the hall um-

rella stand, the hatrack. Huxley's overcoat. He pulled out the overcoat pockets.

No gloves.

His hands in his pockets again he walked upstairs, walking with a controlled swiftness, allowing himself nothing frantic, nothing wild. He had made the initial mistake of not wearing gloves (but, after all, he hadn't *planned* a murder, and his subconscious, which *may* have known of the crime before its commitment, had not even hinted he might need gloves before the night was finished), so now he had to pay for his sin of omission. Somewhere in the house there must be at least *one* pair of gloves. He could take his time; there was little chance of anyone visiting Huxley at this hour. He would have until six in the morning when Huxley's friends were to pick him up for a scheduled hunting trip.

He went about upstairs opening drawers, using the handkerchief as blotter. He untidied seventy or eighty drawers in six upstairs rooms, left them with tongues, so to speak, hanging out, went on to new ones. He felt naked, unable to do anything until he found gloves. He might go through the house with the handkerchief, buffing every possible surface where fingerprints might lie, accidentally bump a wall here or there thus sealing his own fate with one microscopic, whorling symbol. It would be putting a stamp of approval on the murder, that's what it would be. Like those old waxen seals in the old days when they rattled a papyrus, flourished ink on it, dusted it with sand to dry the ink, and set their signet ring into hot impressionable crimson tallow at the bottom. So it would be if he left one, mind you, *one* fingerprint upon the scene. His approval of the murder did not extend as far as affixing said seal.

More drawers. Be quiet, be curious, be careful, he told himself.

At the bottom of the eighty-fifth drawer he found gloves.

"Oh my Lord, My Lord." He slumped against the bureau, sighing. He tried the gloves on, held them up, proudly flexed them, buttoned them. There were soft, grey, thick, impregnable. He could do all sorts of tricks with his hands now and leave no trace. He thumbed his nose in the bedroom mirror, sucking his teeth.

NO!" cried Huxley.

What a wicked plan it had been!

Huxley had fallen to the floor, *purposely!* Oh what a wickedly clever man was Huxley! Down onto the hardwood floor had dropped Mr. Huxley, with William Acton after him. They had rolled and tussled and clawed at the floor, printing and printing it with their frantic fingertips! Huxley had slipped away a few feet, Acton crawling after to lay hands on his neck and squeeze until the life came out of him like paste from a tube!

Gloved, William Acton returned to the room and knelt down upon the floor and laboriously began the task of swabbing every wildly infested inch of it. Inch by inch, inch by inch he polished and polished until he could most see his intent, sweating face in it. Then he came to a table and polished the leg of it, on up its stolid body and along the knobs and on the top, and he came to a bowl of wax fruit and polished the filigree silver and he plucked out the wax fruit and polished them clean, leaving the fruit at the bottom unpolished.

"I'm *sure* I didn't touch *them*," he said.

After rubbing the table he came to a picture frame over it.

"I'm certain I didn't touch that," he said, and stood looking at it.

He looked at all the doors in the room. Which doors had he used tonight? He couldn't remember. Polish all of them, then. He started on the doorknobs, shined them all up and then he curried the doors from head to foot, taking no chances. Then he went to all the furniture in the room and wiped the chair arms and rubbed the material fabric itself.

"That chair you're sitting in, Acton, is an old Louis XIV piece. Feel that material," said Huxley.

"I didn't come here to talk furniture, Huxley! I came about Lily."

"Lily, eh? Oh, come off it, you're not that serious about her. She doesn't love you, you know. She's told me she'll go with me to Mexico City next month."

"You and your money and your damned furniture!"

"It's nice furniture, Acton; be a good guest and feel of it."

Fingerprints can be found on fabric.

"Huxley!" William Acton stared at the body. "Did you *know* I was going to kill

you! Did your subconscious know, just as my subconscious knew? And did your subconscious have you make me go about the house handling, touching, *fondling* books, dishes, doors, chairs? Were you *that* clever and *that* mean?

He washed the chairs drily with the clenched kerchief. Then he remembered the body—he hadn't dry-washed *it*. He went to it and turned it now this way, now that, and burnished every surface of it. He even shined the shoes, charging nothing.

While shining the shoes his face took on a little tremor of worry and after a moment he got up and walked over to that table.

He took out and polished the wax fruit at the *bottom* of the bowl.

"Better," he whispered, and went back to the body.

But as he crouched over the body his eyelids twicked and his jaw moved from side to side and he debated, then he got up and turned and walked once more to the table.

He polished the picture frame.

**W**HILE polishing the picture frame he discovered—

The wall.

"That," he said, "is silly."

"Oh!" cried Huxley, fending him off. He gave Acton a shove as they struggled. Acton fell against one wall, got up, *touching* the wall, and ran toward Huxley again. He strangled Huxley. Huxley died.

Acton turned steadfastly from the wall, with equilibrium and decision. The harsh words and the action faded in his mind, he put them down and away. He glanced at the four walls.

"Ridiculous," he said.

From the corners of his eyes he saw something on one wall.

"I refuse to pay attention," he said to distract himself. "The next room, now. I'll be methodical. Let's see, altogether we were in the hall, the library, *this* room, and the dining room and the kitchen."

There was a spot on the wall behind him.

Well, *wasn't* there?

He turned, angrily. "All right, all right, just to be *sure*," and he went over and couldn't find any spot. Oh, a *little* one, yes, right—*there*. He dabbed it. It wasn't

a fingerprint anyhow. He finished with it and his gloved hand leaned against the wall and he looked at the wall and the way it went over to his right and over to his left and how it went down to his feet and up over his head and he said softly, "No." He looked up and down and over and across and he said, quietly, "That would be too much." How many square feet? "I don't give a good a hot-damn," he said. But unknown to his eyes his gloved fingers moved in a little rubbing rhythm on the wall.

He peered at his hand and the wallpaper. He looked over his shoulder at the other room. "I must go in there and polish the essentials," he told himself, but his hand remained, as if to hold the wall, or himself, up. His face hardened.

Without a word he began to scrub the wall, up and down, back and forth, up and down, as high as he could stretch and low as he could bend.

Once he stopped and put his hands on his hips.

"Ridiculous, oh my Lord, Ridiculous."

But, you must be certain, his thought said to him.

"Yes, one must be certain," he replied.

"One *must* be certain."

And again he rubbed and polished.

He got one wall finished, and then. . .

He came to another wall.

"What time *is* it?" he wondered, drily.

He looked at the mantel clock. An hour gone. It was five after one.

He looked at this new fresh wall. "Silly," he said. "It's flawless. I won't touch it." He turned away.

From the corners of his eyes he saw the little webs. When his back was turned the little spiders came out of the wood-work and delicately spun their fragile little half-invisible webs. Not upon the wall at his left, that was already washed fresh, but upon the three walls as yet untouched. Each time he stared directly at them the spiders popped back into the wood-work only to spindle out as he retreated. "Those walls are all right," he insisted, in a half-shout. "I won't touch them!"

He went to a writing desk at which Huxley had been seated earlier. He opened a drawer and took out what he was looking for. A little magnifying glass Huxley sometimes used for reading. He took the

magnifier and approached the wall uneasily.

Fingerprints.

"But those aren't *mine!*" He laughed, unsteadily. "I *didn't* put them there! I'm *sure* I didn't! A servant, a butler, or a maid perhaps."

The wall was full of them.

"Look at this one here," he said. "Long and tapered, a woman's, I'd bet money on it."

"Would you?"

"I would!"

"Are you certain?"

"Yes!"

"Positive?"

"Well—yes."

"Absolutely?"

"Yes, damn it, yes!"

"Wipe it out, anyway, why don't you?"

"There, by gad!"

"Out damned spot, eh, Acton?"

"And this one, over here," scoffed Acton. "That's the print of a fat man."

"Are you sure?"

"Don't start that again!" he snapped, and rubbed it out. He pulled off a glove and held his hand up, trembling, in the glary light.

"Look at it, you idiot! See how the whorls go? See!"

"That proves nothing!"

"Oh, all right!" In rage he began to sweep the wall up and down and back and forth with his gloved hands, sweating, grunting and swearing, bending and rising and getting redder of face.

He took off his coat, put it on a chair.

"Two o'clock," he said, finishing the wall and looking at the clock.

He walked over to the bowl and took out the waxed fruit and polished the ones at the bottom and put them back and polished the picture frame.

He looked up at the chandelier.

His fingers twitched at his sides. His mouth slipped open and the tongue moved along his lips and he looked at the chandelier and looked away and looked back at the chandelier and looked at Huxley's body and then at the crystal chandelier with its long pearls of rainbow glass.

He got a chair and brought it over under the chandelier and put one foot up on it and took it down and threw the chair, violently, laughing, into a corner. Then

he ran out of the room, leaving one wall as yet unwashed.

In the dining room he came to a table.

"I want to show you my Georgian cutlery, Acton," Huxley had said.

"I haven't time," Acton said.

"Nonsense, look at this silver, this exquisite craftsmanship, look at it."

Acton paused over the table where the boxes of cutlery were laid out, hearing once more Huxley's voice, remembering all the touchings and gesturings.

Now Acton wiped the forks and spoons and took down all the plates and special ceramic dishes from the wall shelf. . .

"Here's a lovely bit of ceramics by Gertrude and Otto Natzler, Acton, are you familiar with their work?"

"It *is* lovely."

"Pick it up. Turn it over. See the fine thinness of the bowl, hand-thrown on a turntable, thin as egg-shell, incredible. And the amazing volcanic glaze? Handle it, go ahead, I don't mind."

HANDLE IT. GO AHEAD. PICK IT UP!

Acton sobbed unevenly. He hurled the pottery against the wall. It shattered and spread, flaking wildly, upon the floor.

An instant later he was on his knees. Every piece, every shard of it, must be regained. Fool, fool, fool, he cried to himself, shaking his head and shutting and opening his eyes and bending under the table. Find every piece, you idiot, not one fragment of it must be left behind. Fool fool. He gathered them. Are they all here? He looked at them on the table before him. He looked under the table again and under the chairs and the service bureaus and found one more piece by match-light and started to polish each little fragment as if it were a precious stone. He laid them all out neatly upon the shining polished table.

"A lovely bit of ceramics, Acton; go ahead—*handle* it."

HE TOOK out the linen and wiped it and wiped the chairs and tables and doorknobs and window panes and ledges and drapes and wiped the floor and found the kitchen, panting, breathing violently, and took off his vest and adjusted his gloves and wiped the glittering chromium . . . "I want to show you my house,

Acton," said Huxley. "Come along". . . . And he wiped all the utensils and the silver faucets and the mixing bowls, for now he had forgotten what he had touched and what he had not. Huxley and he had lingered here, in the kitchen, Huxley prideful of its array to cover his nervousness at the presence of a potential killer, perhaps wanting to be near the knives if they were needed, they had idled, touched this, that, something else, there was no remembering what or how much or how many, and he finished the kitchen and came through the hall into the room where Huxley lay.

He cried out.

He had forgotten to wash the fourth wall of the room. And while he was gone the little spiders had come out of the fourth unwashed wall and swarmed over the already clean walls, dirtying them again! On the ceilings, from the chandelier, in the corners, on the floor a million little whorled webs hung billowing at his scream! Tiny, tiny little webs, no bigger than, ironically, your—finger!

As he watched the webs were woven over the picture frame, the fruit bowl, the the body, the floor. Prints wielded the paper knife, pulled out drawers, touched the table-top, touched, touched, touched everything everywhere.

He polished the floor wildly, wildly. He rolled the body over and cried on it while he washed it and got up and walked over and polished the fruit at the bottom of the bowl. Then he put a chair under the chandelier and got up and polished each little hanging fire of it, shaking it like a crystal tambourine until it tilted bellwise in the air. Then he leaped off the chair and gripped the doorknobs and got up on other chairs and swabbed the walls higher and higher and ran to the kitchen and got a broom and wiped the webs down from the ceilings and polished the bottom

fruit of the bowl and washed the body and doorknobs and silverware and found the hall banister and followed the banister upstairs.

Three o'clock! Everywhere, with a fierce, mechanical intensity, clocks ticked! There were twelve rooms downstairs and eight above. He figured the yards and yards of space and time needed. One hundred chairs, six sofas, twenty-seven tables, six radios. And under and on top and behind. He yanked furniture out away from walls and, sobbing, wiped them clean of years-old dust, and staggered and followed the banister up up the stairs, handling, erasing, rubbing, polishing, because if he left one little print it would reproduce and make a million more! and the job would have to be done all over again and now it was four o'clock! and his arms ached and his eyes were swollen and staring and he moved sluggishly about, on strange legs, his head down, his arms moving, swabbing and rubbing, bedroom by bedroom, closet by closet. . . .

They found him at six-thirty that morning.

In the attic.

The entire house was polished to a brilliance. Vases shone like glass stars. Chairs were burnished. Bronzes, brasses and coppers were all aglint. Floors sparkled. Banisters gleamed.

Everything glittered. Everything shone, everything was bright!

They found him in the attic, polishing the old trunks and the old frames and the old chairs and the old carriages and boxes and toys and music boxes and vases and cutlery and rocking horses and dusty Civil War coins. He was half through the attic when the police officer walked up behind him with a gun.

On the way out of the house, Acton polished the front doorknob with his handkerchief, and slammed it in triumph!

# NEVER COME MOURNING

By STEWART STERLING



**“Every arsonist has a twisted mind,” said Chief Fire Marshal Pedley. But the tangled web of greed and lust that fashioned a monstrous funeral pyre in the Hotel Grolier was more than he could fathom . . .**

**I**T seemed futile to hunt through that steaming jungle of twisted metal and charred wood. A screen of blackish water dripped from the warped girders above. A veil of smoke hung sluggishly over the smouldering wreckage. Searchlights, shooting up from the street, cast grotesque shadows through the gutted hotel.

As he followed the fat python of canvas which coiled up the staircase around the steel bones of the elevator shaft, he appeared to be methodically following

another, more obscure, trail through the clutter. His eyes, reddened from too much exposure to acrid fumes, held the bleak bitterness of a boy helpless to prevent the agonies of a pet dog.

He moved, cautiously, focusing the cone of light here on a lump of fused glass, there on the drooping angle of a buckled pipe. The melted metal of electric fixtures held peculiar interest for him.

On the landing between the third and fourth floors, he flattened against wet brick to permit gangway for a helmeted

pair clumping streetward with a limp burden. It didn't seem to disturb them when the head of the sagging figure they were lugging banged against a beam.

The man with the flashlight asked: "Many more up there?"

"Plenty on nine and ten, Marshal." One of the laddermen recognized him. "Ain't any hurry about getting 'em out, now, though."

His partner cursed in corroboration; they clumped on down. Chief Fire Marshal Pedley went up.

He left the stairs, moved slowly down the corridor of the fourth floor. The boards became suddenly springy beneath his feet. He went down on hands and knees, distributing his weight.

It was slow work, crisscrossing the corridors from door to door, creeping over jagged shards of glass, slivers of metal. The drenched woodwork was still blistering. The planking grew spongier underneath him. He kept on, hacking lightly at the inside and outside of each door with his emergency axe. All the chips showed a greater depth of char on the corridor side than on the room side, until he reached room 441.

The blackened fragments from that door showed the roomside burned much more deeply than the exterior. He started in the room. There was a sound like a ripping canvas; the floor sagged, tilted away from him.

He spreadeagled,—as he would have on ice too thin to support him,—inched on.

His fingers touched fibrous jelly interlaced with coiled wire; what was left of the mattress. Two-thirds of the way across the bed, the drenched pulpiness became greasy residue, where the mattress-filling had burned away. This was where the blaze had started . . .

With infinite caution, he worked his way around the room. The front legs of the bureau had burned first, tipping the glass top and what had been on it, forward onto the floor. Woman's things. Hairpins. A long nail file. The fused back of what had been a silver hair-brush. A compact.

The beam of his flashlight glinted on a thin, round neck of glass. The remnants of a liquor bottle. Beside it, flat pieces. An ash-tray that had cracked in two,

folded over on itself as if made of cardboard. Between the two segments was the sopping stub of a cigarette—unburnt—the paper-stained tobacco yellow. He fished it out of its place of protection with a pair of tweezers as if he were extracting the fangs of a cobra.

Below in the street, gongs clanged as pumpers and combinations rolled back to their stations. Pedley remained for long minutes in room 441, wriggling across the insecure floor, putting shoe-eyelets into envelopes, scooping up ashes with a spatula, scowling . . .

By the time he had descended to the lobby, only the big quad and the hook-and-ladders remained in the street; their long fingers pointed accusingly up at glassless windows. Hosemen were uncoupling. Police were forcing the fire lines back toward the avenue. The bloodshot eyes of ambulances glared at shiney black rubber and crisp white jackets moving among the rows of tarpaulin-covers stretched along the curbs . . .

Inside the lobby, firemen, policemen and a few individuals in civilian clothes milled about wearily. One of the latter, a blocky man with a raw hamburg complexion, signaled to the Marshal across the wreckage of the room clerk's desk:

"Those babies're rasing hell, Ben. They want out of here, bad. That manager's ready to blow his fuse. Says he's going straight to the Commish . . ."

"Tell him to go to hell. This fire was set. He's partly responsible. Before we get through with him, he'll wish he was lying out there on the sidewalk with the others." Pedley's voice was a gritty file on rough metal. "I'll take 'em in the manager's office. One at a time. That floor patrol, first."

**T**HE Deputy Marshal pushed a heavy-set, white-haired man into the manager's office. The man's puffy face was shiny with sweat; his eyes dull with shock. The absence of his left eyebrow and part of his hair on the left side gave him a lopsided appearance. The port sleeve of his light blue uniform had been slashed off at the elbow; his wrist and hand were encased in a bandage.

"Doc says this gent has to hustle to Polyclinic for treatment," the deputy ex-

plained. "He hung out one them seventh floor windows twenty minutes before they got the big ladder up to him. That's a second-degree burn on his duke. He got a bellyful of fumes, too."

"Don't fret about him, Ed." Pedley wasn't impressed. "Plenty of others aren't getting to the hospital, either."

"Yeah. Name's Lester Harris. Here four years. Okay record." The deputy went out, closed the door behind him.

"You phoned the alarm, Harris?"

The patrolman nodded glumly. "I'm up on the ninth, see? I smell this smoke. So I beat it for the hand extinguisher down the end of the hall. When I get down there I see smoke's comin' from the stair door. Comin' up from eight. So I run down there an'—"

"What time was this?" Pedley cut in.

"Only a couple minutes before I phone in. Don't know exactly. I just punch my clock on nine when I get that whiff of smoke. When I get down to eight I still can't tell where it's coming from. I figure it ain't safe to delay any longer. So I push in 802, — that's a vacant they're repapering, — and grab the phone."

"Been making your regular tour up to that time?"

"Yes sir."

"Where'd you start?"

"From the mezz."

"When?"

"Midnight. Maybe a little after. Clock'll show."

"The alarm hit the Telegraph Bureau at 1:07. How long's it take you to cover a floor?"

"Suppose to be around five minutes. They allow an hour for me to cover ten floors."

"Why'd it take you sixty-seven minutes to inspect eight, then?"

"Crysaque!" Harris coughed. "I don't generally gallop up them stairs. An' I took out for a personal. On six, that was."

"Didn't notice anything out of the way on any of the lower floors when you came through?"

The floor patrol's glance flickered for a split second.

"No sir."

"Know the party in 441?"

Harris repeated the number with a rising inflection.

Pedley consulted a card. "Register says it was occupied by a Mrs. Doris Munson, Danbury, Connecticut."

"She's a permanent." Harris fumbled at his bandage, showed his teeth in a grimace. "Works here. On the switchboard. Day side."

"Know anything about her?"

"A blonde. A nifty. Thirty or so." He rubbed his bald eyebrow. "Why? What's she got to do with it?"

"Fire started in her room."

The floor patrol's eyes grew round. "Holy cats!"

"Smoking in bed, looked like." Pedley's face told nothing. "Was she much of a boozer?"

"Not that I hear of. But—" Harris didn't finish whatever it was he had been going to say.

"But what?"

"Nothing."

THE Marshal took two quick steps, wound his fingers in the cloth of Harris's uniform coat at the second button, jerked the shorter man up on tip-toe. "This blaze put twenty people in the morgue! Twice that many in the hospital!" He put his face close to the other's, growling: "If you know one damn thing about how it started, spit it out! Fast! Or you'll have a long time to wish you had!"

"I don't know," Harris looked as if he was about to sneeze, "if I *do* know anything . . ."

"Let me decide." Pedley released him.

"This Mrs. Munson. She's kind of . . . uh . . . friendly . . . with Check Wayner . . ."

"Whc's Wayner?"

"Bell captain. Night side."

"Keep pouring."

"He goes up to her room once in a while. He ain't suppose to; it's strictly against house rules. I don't know if anybody else knows it. But I seen him coming out of 441 a couple times when he didn't know I was around. He was in there tonight."

"You see him go in?"

"No, sir. I hear him. When I'm comin' along the corridor on four. They're havin' some kind of argument."

Pedley eyed him stonily. "So you listened at the door."

"I'm suppose to see nobody roams around in rooms where they don't belong," the patrolman protested. "Mrs. Munson was a single."

"What were they battling about?"

"You couldn't prove it by me. I only horn in on it a minute. I figure it's one of them things and none of my business. Except I wonder how Check gets away with bein' off his desk so long."

"What were they talking about?!" Pedley stepped in close again.

Harris retreated a step. "Near's I can make out from the little I hear," he muttered defensively, "Check is bawlin' her out for fiddling around with some other joe. An' she's tellin' him to peddle his papers, she'll do like she pleases."

"That all?"

"Well, Check gets pretty sore, from the way he sounds. I figure he's about due to come bustin' out of the room. So I mosey along. Last thing I hear him say is,—"*I'd rather see you dead than living this way; Doris!*"

**P**EDLEY waved brusquely at the short, dapper youth in the snappy bellman's uniform.

"Sit down, Wayner."

Check Wayner didn't make any move toward the straight-backed chair beside the manager's desk. "You got no right to hold me."

"Get the idea out of your mind, fella. I've the right to hold you, arrest you, try you and convict you,—right here and now. At the scene of a fire I'm cop, prosecutor, judge and jury, all in one. You better take my word for it but it won't make a damn bit of difference whether you do or not. What you know about this blaze?"

"Nothing."

"Still alarm came in at one-seven ayem. Fire had a ten, maybe a fifteen minute start by then. Where were you, around ten minutes to one?"

"Taking a bucket of ice up to somebody, chances are."

"Your call sheet doesn't show any entries after 12:25."

"Then I was in the lobby."

"Weren't up on the fourth?"

"No." Wayner's eyes became wary.

"Not in 441, maybe?"

"No."

"When was the last time you were up in that room?"

"Don't the call sheet tell you that, too?" the bell captain inquired sullenly.

"You were up in Mrs. Munson's room about quarter past twelve. How long'd you stay?"

"I don't remember . . ."

Pedley looked unhappy. He got up from the chair behind the desk, shucked his coat. "I'll lay it on the line, kid. This hotel was torched. The fire started in Mrs. Munson's room. It was set so it would look as if she'd been smoking in bed and fell asleep . . ." He rolled up his sleeves; Wayner watched him.

"A lot of people got killed," the Marshal went on. "A lot more got hurt, some of 'em so bad they'll die. Most of 'em were guests in this hotel but some of them were firemen. Friends of mine." He stared down at his big hands, flexing the fingers slowly. "I'm going to find out who touched off this blaze. I don't know whether it was you, or not. But you know something. I'm going to get it out of you, one way or another. Up to you, how I do it . . ."

Wayner spoke through set teeth. "You think I'd start a fire that put my sister in the hospital?"

"Mrs. Munson your sister?"

"Yes. I got her the job on the switch-board here."

"What were you quarreling about, to-night?"

"We weren't."

"Les Harris says he heard you when he came past 441 on his twelve o'clock tour."

The bell captain snarled: "He's a liar."

"He says he heard you tell Mrs. Munson you'd rather see her dead than living the way she was. What was that all about?"

"Why don't you ask her?"

Pedley turned, tapped the telephone. "The doctors just told me she wouldn't be answering any questions, Wayner."

"She's dead?" He breathed it, as if it hurt him to speak.

"Not yet. She's going to die."

The youth whirled for the door. Pedley caught him:

"If you want to see her before she goes, you better loosen up, kid. I can't

let you go until you do."

Wayner's lips trembled, he stared blankly at the carpet, his head rocking from side to side in misery. "All right. She was fooling around with the manager here and—"

"Broodman?"

"Arnie Broodman, yuh. Doris,—" tears began to stream down his face,—"she was in love with the crumb. He tells her he's going to marry her,—all the time he's got a wife an' a couple of kids out on Long Island. He keeps sayin' he's going to get a divorce so he can marry Doris but I know better. He don't intend to do nothing of the kind. I been trying to get her to break it up, quit her job, move out of the hotel. She tells me to keep out of it, she's old enough to know her own mind. Maybe she is, but she don't know Arnie's . . . and now—" he closed his eyes and lifted his face toward the ceiling.

"Was your sister drinking heavily tonight?" Pedley didn't ease the pressure.

"Some. Arnie'd been up to see her around eleven an' he brought her up a fifth of brandy. To celebrate the good news, he says. He was feeding her a lot of yatatada about the hotel closing down for six months,—repairs or something,—an' him going down to Miami to run another place so that's when he'll split up from Mrs. Broodman an' marry Doris. I tell her she's feeble-minded if she falls for an old line like that but she laughs me off. Finally I ask her how long she's going to stand for the runaround an' she says if Arnie doesn't file suit or whatever as soon as the hotel closes here an' he goes to Florida, then she'll know he isn't on the level and she'll raise plenty of hell with him." He opened his eyes, staring fiercely at Pedley. "Y'know what I think? I think she told Arnie that, too,—an' he hadn't any idea of bustin' up his home, so he was afraid of what Doris might do and he beat her to it, tonight. *That's what I think!*"

"You didn't see him go up to the fourth again,—after you left?"

"I didn't see the crumb at all!"

"Not after the alarm went in?"

"No. Soon's I heard those sirens I grab one the service elevators and run it up to take people off the eighth,—that's where Harris says the fire is . . ."

"You don't know where Broodman was, from the time you left your sister's room until the apparatus began to come in?"

"No." Wayner's mouth hardened. "But I know where he'll be when I get my mitts on him! I'm going to—"

"—go out in the lobby and sit down and keep your mouth shut. Understand me?"

"You said you'd let me go to see my sister."

"I'll tell you when you can go." Pedley rolled down his sleeves, put on his coat, opened the door.

"Ed . . .?"

"Yeah, Ben?"

"Keep an eye on this kid. Send Broodman in."

**A**RNOLD BROODMAN was a tall, gaunt, sandy-haired individual with deep frown-creases slashing the bridge of his nose; he had a golf-course tan and a slightly disheveled look about him, as if he had dressed hurriedly.

Pedley didn't ask him to sit down. "A week ago," the Marshal read from a tissue carbon, "the Bureau of Fire Prevention wrote you as follows:

ARNOLD J. BROODMAN

RESIDENT MANAGER, HOTEL GROLIER,—

*You were directed by the Fire Commissioner on . . . March 7, 1947 . . . to:*

1. *Equip with steel doors all exits from all floors*
2. *Install acceptable fire breaks on floors 2 to 10, inclusive*
3. *Satisfactorily enclose two elevator shafts*
4. *Erect an additional fire escape on the Forty-fifth Street side of the building*
5. *Provide for an automatic smoke alarm system*

*within . . . 60 days . . . at the premises occupied by . . . the Grolier Operating Corporation (leased) by you, said premises being considered dangerous to life and property and in its present condition a violation of law.*

*Having failed to cause the ordered re-equipping to be done within the . . . 60 day . . . period, I am required by law to notify you that the said premises are hereby ordered to be . . . vacated.*

"That notice was signed by John M.

Bresnahan, Deputy Fire Commissioner, City of New York."

Broodman laced and unlaced his fingers wretchedly but said nothing.

"Three days after you received that notice, your lawyers obtained a two-week stay of ejection from Judge Potter. In your application for this deferral, you promised to cease operating this building as a hotel within ten days; you pleaded inability to get labor and materials with which to make the required alterations to date."

The manager sweat it out in silence.

"A couple of days ago you attempted to obtain an additional policy of fire insurance to the tune of forty thousand dollars,—"

"To cover the improvements on the property," the hotel man interrupted.

"The companies turned you down. After checking with us. Anyhow, failing to get your additional coverage, today you began to give your employees their week's notice. And tonight you have a fire."

"Nobody can feel worse about this than I do." Broodman combed his hair nervously with his fingers.

"A hell of a lot of people feel a hell of a lot worse!"

"The corporation won't attempt to deny its responsibility."

"You won't, either."

"You're not suggesting—?"

"I'm making a flat statement, Broodman. This blaze was incendiary. You . . . and your other stockholders . . . are the only persons who could profit from it."

The manager's tan became a muddy gray. "As far as profit is concerned, every cent I have was in this hotel. The insurance won't cover sixty percent of the loss. I'm wiped out . . . even if the corporation wasn't liable for damage suits. Don't talk to me about profiting from a ghastly business like arson. I'll sue you for defamation of . . ."

"After I get through with you, you won't have any character that could be defamed, mister. The fire started in Mrs. Munson's room. You were up in her room tonight. She was liquored up. You supplied the liquor. You were in a jam with her. Now she's going to die; you think you're out of that jam. Well, you're in another and it's a lot worse. They

electrocute people for first degree arson in this state, in case you didn't know."

Broodman scowled. "You sure the fire started in Doris' room?"

"I can make it stand up in court."

The manager sat down suddenly in the straight-backed chair, buried his face in his hands. After a minute he groaned:

"I guess you're right, saying I'm responsible. But not for arson. Only because of Doris."

"Trying to say the girl deliberately burned herself."

"That's what she *would* do, Marshal,—what she must have done. She threatened as much, though she didn't say anything about . . . setting a fire."

"When was this?"

"Tonight. Half-past eleven or so. We'd been threshing the thing out,—apparently you know about it . . .?"

"Only what I got out of Harris and Wayner."

"Well . . . I told her I had to shut the place up . . . was going south to run a hotel there. It would take a while for me to get a divorce and so on. She wanted to know how she was going to live in the meantime. Couldn't she go with me and so on. Finally I got sore. Told her if she wasn't satisfied to play it my way, we'd call the whole thing off."

"And then . . .?"

"She bawled and got hysterical, the whole damn rigamarole women put on. But I'd had enough of it by then,—I suppose worrying about the shutdown made me kind of jumpy,—and I told her we were all washed up. Finally she said she'd kill herself; she'd make me sorry for treating her that way if it was the last thing she ever did." Broodman chewed at his lower lip. "That's the kind of break I get,—for her to be so badly burned she can't tell you the truth of it. You could ask her . . ."

"I will," Pedley said. "She might come to and talk a little before she signs off."

Broodman shivered.

**T**HERE were more reporters than firemen in the lobby when the Marshal left the office; more photographers than internes, in the street. The crowd had thinned; the fire lines were permitting traffic on the opposite sidewalk. Ped-

ey spoke to a haggard man in a white helmet:

"How about Maxie?"

"Died on the way over, Ben." The Battalion Chief spat. "Rest his soul. He was a good man."

"He was." Pedley nodded, walked to the red sedan. Maxie Rhine had been in the old Engine Eleven Company with him when they were probationers. They had rolled to many a bad blaze together; once Maxie had waded through the acid-loaded water of a drug warehouse cellar to drag Pedley out from under the I-beam that had pinned him. Now Maxie had taken a gust of flame from a back draft up on the tenth floor of this firetrap and they'd be sounding the four 5's for him in the morning. And there were three other wearers of the Maltese Cross who'd never answer the gong again, though Pedley hadn't known them as well as he had Maxie. There'd be those who'd miss every one of them . . .

At the hospital the doctor confirmed what Pedley had learned on the phone. Doris Munson had been seriously burned about the breast and throat; was suffering from shock and smoke inhalation; barring pneumonia setting in, she'd recover. The matron said it was all right for the Marshal to talk to her, long's he didn't excite her. He said he'd try not to.

The girl on the cot in Ward C couldn't have been identified as a blonde; there wasn't enough of her hair left. She looked up at Pedley out of bandages swathing her like a mummy:

"First thing I remember," she mumbled. "was someone at the window yelling 'Water!'"

"Had you been smoking in bed?"

A negative shake of the head.

"Were you feeling pretty good, — you know, — hit the cork quite a bit, — before you turned in?"

Another negative. "I only had three little drinks," she added with an effort. "I was feeling terrible. I'd just found out something that would have sobered me, if I'd drunk a gallon."

He told her what Broodman had said. "Is that true?"

Doris nodded, her eyes widening with

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horror. "Oh! Arnie thinks I . . . started the fire!"

"You could have."

She struggled to sit up. He put a hand on her forehead, forced her back on the pillow.

"*Maybe I did!*" she whispered. "If I did, I hope I don't live. I couldn't bear to know I'd . . . caused all *that!*"

"Take a sleeping pill to get you to sleep?" He knew there must have been something to make her doubt her own actions.

"I took . . . six."

"Yeah." Not enough to kill her. Enough to scare Broodman if he'd learned about it. "You wash your face before you went to bed?"

"What?"

"Wash your face? Or use cleansing cream?"

"No." she was puzzled. "Why . . . ?"

The nurse came in. "Phone for you, Marshal."

He took it out in the corridor.

"Ed, Skipper. I been keeping an eye on Wayner, like you suggested."

"So . . ."

"He didn't head for the hospital at all."

"Know he didn't. Where is he?"

"Seven fifty West Twenty - eighth. Rooming house. No savvy if he lives here or not. Name isn't on the mail box. That don't necessarily mean anything at a flea-bag like this."

"Where you calling from?"

"Candy store. Across the street."

"Stay there till I get down."

He didn't bother to go back to the ward. The red sedan made it in four minutes, with the blinkers but without the siren.

Shaner stopped devouring a chocolate bar long enough to say: "Must be in one of the back rooms, Ben. None of the fronts have lighted up since he went in."

"He could be rooming with somebody," Pedley said.

"Or he could be calling on somebody. Better let me go in with you."

"You go back, sit on Broodman's neck. I want him handy when the grand jury meets, in the morning." Pedley went across the street, into a hall that smelled of cabbage and pork and carbolic. In the front of a black tin mail-box was a card-board with a dozen names printed on it;

a couple of them had been crossed out. *Harry Lester, C-6*, hadn't been crossed out; the Marshal thought it was close enough to Les Harris to be worth casing.

He went up a staircase where the paint flaked off the walls like skin off sun-burned shoulders; he made no particular effort to be silent about it.

On the third floor, lights showed under two of the doors, — none under 6. He walked on up to the top floor, opened the door of the common bathroom, closed it. Then he took off his shoes, went down one flight in his stocking feet.

He listened at 6-C long enough to make sure somebody was opening a window inside, quietly, in the dark. Pedley set his shoes down carefully, took out his flashlight. He tried the knob, turned it noiselessly. The door wasn't locked.

He pushed it open suddenly,—swung his flashlight in an arc covering as large a segment of the room as possible.

A washstand. A bed, rumped up. The toe of a shoe just behind and beyond the open edge of the door. Pedley reached around the jamb for the switch. The movement took his head and shoulders into the doorway for an instant.

Long enough for a gun butt to smash down across the crease of his hat . . .

**T**HE room was still dark, but dull red red flashes pulsated before the Marshal's eyes. It was some seconds before he realized they came from a neon sign high on a building on the next block. The ruddy reflection from a polished shoe-tip was the thing that made him recognize it.

He reached out, touched the shoe. There was a foot in it; the foot didn't move when he felt it. Pedley pulled himself up by the bedpost, found the light switch, snapped it.

The foot in the shoe belonged to Les Harris, who lay on his back with a small scarlet worm wriggling down from a dark spot in his right temple. There was a purplish lump an inch above his right eye. The body was still warm. An automatic lay on the grass matting of the floor about eight inches away from the dead man's head.

The Marshal looked at his watch. 4:52 He hadn't been out more than ten minutes or so.

He felt in the pockets of the floor patrol's uniform. Nothing but a fistful of silver coins and a couple of keys. No bills, of any denomination. But on the chair beside the bed was a strange collection.

Six wristwatches; two men's, the others the tiny diamond doodads women go for. Four rings; one wedding, two solitaires, a pinky set with what looked like real rubies. A black opal brooch. A gold comb. A platinum cigarette case with the initials K. T. M.

Pedley stripped a pillow-slip off the bed, tilted the chair so the jewelry slid gently into the white sack. He lifted the gun by sticking a pencil in the muzzle, deposited it on the loose end of the pillow-slip, wrapped the surplus fabric around the weapon.

He retrieved his shoes, put them on. When he left 6-C, he took the key from the inside of the door, locked the room.

**E**VERY arsonist has a twisted mind." The Marshal stared coldly across the manager's desk at Broodman. "I don't mean pyros, either; they're psycho cases, anyhow. But every firebug is so snarled up in his mental processes that he figures a fire has to be set by some tricky method . . . and it always backfires on him." He opened a flat metal case, like a child's paint box. "This one used a cigarette, hoping it would look as if Mrs. Munson had fallen asleep smoking and set the bed on fire. But he forgot the lipstick."

Broodman leaned forward to peer at the brown-stained stub. "I don't see—"

"There isn't any. Would have been if Mrs. Munson had been smoking it,—no matter how water-soaked it had gotten. She used lipstick, of course; she hadn't wiped it off."

The hotel man sighed. "She didn't start it, then."

"No. She was hurt enough to do it, maybe. But her mind didn't run to endangering other people's lives,—only her own. She took an overdose of luminol. Not enough to kill her. But enough to keep her from waking up until the blaze had a better start than the firebug ever intended it should have."

"Who—?"

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"He opened the door with a master key, after Mrs. Munson had gone to sleep,—say twenty minutes to one. After he made sure she wasn't awake,—he probably assumed she was drunk,—he tiptoed in, took the lighted cigarette out of his mouth, laid it on the edge of the ash-tray that was on her bed-table, put the ash-tray and cigarette on the bed so the burning stub would fall off and ignite the mattress. He thought Mrs. Munson would wake up after the mattress started to smoulder and filled the room with smoke. She didn't; the sleeping pills prevented her from waking up until the flames from the burning blankets began to sear her."

"What was the idea . . . if he didn't mean to burn down the building?"

"To cause a panic. Get people running around the corridors in their nightgowns and pajamas, half scared to death. With the corridors filled with smoke, the apparatus rolling in with bells clanging and everybody screaming "Fire!!",—it was easy for the bug to go through the guests' rooms on the pretext of routing them out and starting them for the elevators and the stairs."

"Why!"

Pedley slid the contents of the pillow-case out on the desktop. "So he could loot their rooms; their clothing. Most people don't lock up their money or jewels when they go to bed. They leave their money in their purses and wallets,—their rings and watches on the bureau. With a hotel employe yelling at them to get out of their rooms in a hurry,—with those sirens and the smoke stampeding them,—not many would take time to go for their valuables before they rushed out into the hall."

"Wayner!"

"There's another screwy thing about firebugs," the Marshal shook his head. "They always have an alibi. In twenty years I haven't run across one who hasn't claimed he was somewhere else when the fire was set,—who didn't try to prove he couldn't possibly have been around when the fuse was lit. Now your bell-captain didn't have any alibi at all,—any more than you did."

"That damned Harris!"

"Sure. He kept impressing me that his patrol clock would show by the times

he punched it, on each floor, that he couldn't have been down on the fourth at the time the place was torched."

"But why—?"

"Your fault, partly. You gave him his notice today. He didn't know where to get another job, probably. By the room he was living in, I'd say he didn't have much money saved up. He saw a way to get even with you for firing him and to get his hands on a lot of valuables, at the same time. Only the thing got out of hand; he didn't know it until it was so late he got cut off, up on the eighth—and nearly lost his own life before the boys brought him down."

"They should have left him up there," Broodman said grimly. "Did you get him?"

"Somebody did." Pedley stirred the heap of jewelry with his finger. "He's dead. It was supposed to look like suicide. He was shot with his own gun. But he'd been slugged before he was lit up."

"Ah . . . !" Broodman waited.

"One of my deputies trailed Wayner over to Harris's rooming house, called me and I went down there. When I went in the room, somebody was hiding there. I didn't see him; he crowned me with a gun-butt and got away while I was out cold. My deputy trailed your bell-captain back here to the hotel, collared him and found a big roll of bills on him. Nearly a thousand bucks. Wayner'd slugged Harris, taken the money which couldn't be traced and left the jewelry because it would be risky to pawn it."

"Check Wayner shot Harris?"

"No. You did that."

The manager didn't deny it. He appeared to be to dazed by the accusation to attempt an answer.

Pedley felt of the bump on the top of his skull. "Wayner wasn't the person who crowned me. He isn't tall enough to swing a gun down on the crease of my hat. Harris wasn't, either. But you are. And you sneaked out of the lobby right after I left for the hospital."

"For coffee," Broodman admitted. "I had to have some coffee. I was dead on my feet."

"Harris was, anyway. You doped it out just the way Wayner had. Only your bell-captain wanted the money he guessed Harris had stolen; you wanted to get even

with Harris for ruining you. If you hadn't been afraid the whole business about your entanglement with Mrs. Munson would come out, if Harris had been forced to defend himself in court,—you might have had him arrested and tried for arson. But you didn't want your own dirty linen hung up for everyone to see,—so you took his punishment into your own hands . . .

"You followed Wayner to the boarding-house, waited in the hall until the bell-captain had slugged Harris and taken over the dough. When he came out, you went in. You were still in there when I arrived. Wayner was down in the hall somewhere,

—anyhow, he left the rooming house before you did. My man trailed him,—didn't see you!" The Marshal walked around the desk.

"I'm not booking you for murder," the Marshal said harshly. "I'm taking you in for criminal negligence in connection with the deaths in this fire. You'll have the better part of the next ten years to wish you'd spent the dough to make those changes the Commissioner ordered. At that," he gripped the manager's arm roughly, "it won't be as long as a lot of other people will have, to regret what happened tonight. Come on . . ."



# THE BLOOD-RED ROSES

By JOHN MARSHALL TUFTS

Their scent was the scent of lust and greed, those six pretty red roses that would condemn tortured Jeff Monro to death in the electric chair—for a murder he didn't commit!

JEFF MUNRO flicked the maroon sedan neatly through the homeward-bound traffic. Sitting beside him, Bill Norman hiccupped unobtrusively. Jeff was blond, with a year-round tan that made his eyebrows seem white. Bill was darker, pale, and his eyes were underlined with gray.

Bill said, "I'm afraid I've shot your whole afternoon."

Jeff kept his eyes on the road. "My office can spare me. Anyway, a case that concerns you and Irene is more important. Are you sure it couldn't still be patched up?"

"Damn." A hiccup had escaped Bill. "Nothing left to patch. I knew a long while ago something had to be done. Trouble was I couldn't bring myself to do it. I kept fighting myself. Then this morning, all of a sudden it didn't seem

important any more. Isn't that funny?"

"Not very."

"I mean, isn't it strange?"

"Maybe." Jeff swung closer to the curb to dodge a hurtling bus. "Have you told Irene?"

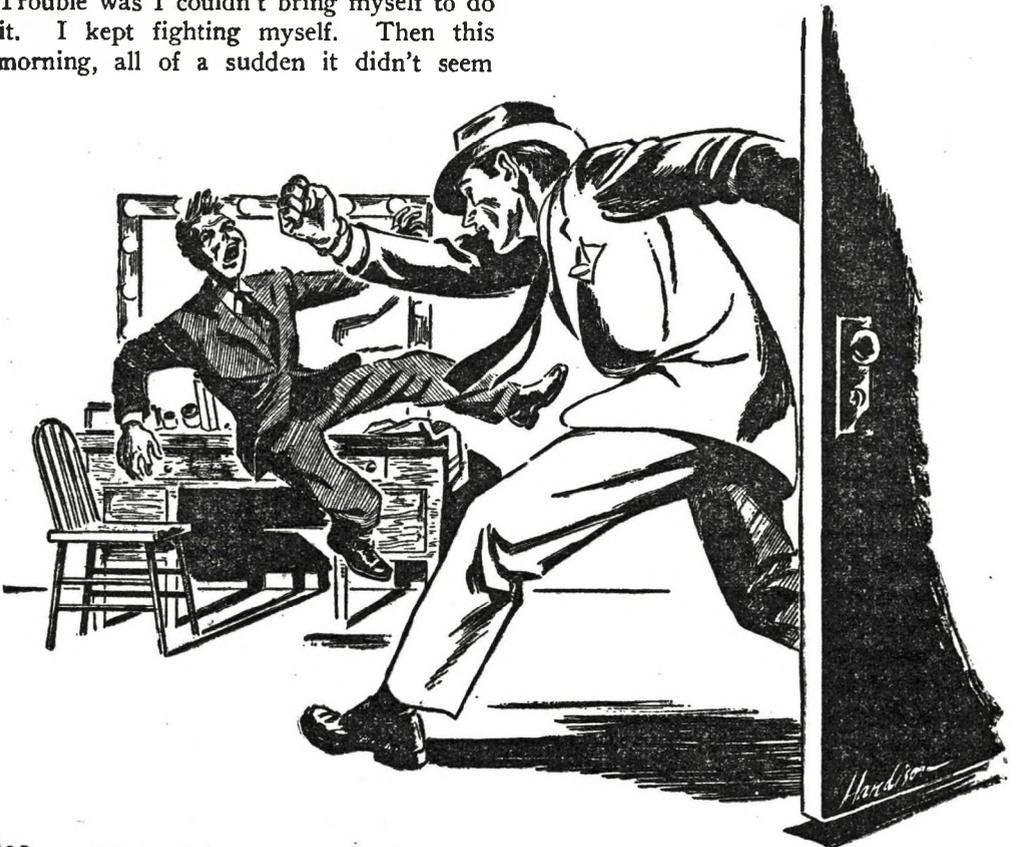
"No."

"She'll have to take the initiative, you know."

There was a silence.

"Stop in and see her, why don't you?"

"It would be better if you two arrange it between yourselves." Jeff braked smoothly to a stop in front of a small, blue-shuttered, white brick house. "Ask Irene to drop in at my office tomorrow. That is, if she agrees to it."



The front door was locked. Bill reached into his hip pocket for his keyring. Not there. He groped in his other pockets. Not there either. Must have left it in the office.

He called, "Irene." She must be home: the radio was going loudly. Probably she was listening to one of those soap operas.

"Oh, Irene." Still no answer. Maybe the back door was unlocked. Bill went around the flower-lined path. There was that Mrs. Penney, next door, peeping out of her window again. Bill pushed the back door open.

"Irene?" The soap opera must be extra sudsy. Bill crossed the kitchen. The living room appeared to be empty. One of Irene's shoes lay beside the couch. Bill obeyed an old habit, and stooped to pick it up.

"Irene!"

She would never answer. She lay behind the couch, her lithe body twisted awkwardly. From the bodice of her flowered gown jutted the brown hilt of Bill's sheath knife.

He knelt beside her. Her face had mirrored so many jealousies, so much bitterness . . . Yet now she looked like a frightened child. He straightened her dress absent-mindedly.

Wait a minute. This wasn't what you were supposed to do. You were supposed to leave everything the way you found it. Not touch a thing. And call the police.

Bill picked the phone from its cradle. "Get me Police Headquarters."

They didn't take long. Three minutes—five minutes later, a small solid man knocked at the door. He pulled a badge from his pocket. "Name's Arnold. You Mr. Norman?"

"Yes."

"You the one that phoned?"

"Yes."

"Where's your wife?"

"Right in here." Bill showed him.

A number of other men had followed Arnold in. They seemed to fill the house with their activity. They didn't make much noise, though, and they never got in each other's way. A flash bulb flared.

Arnold said, "Mind telling me how it happened?"

"I don't know." Bill moved to one side to make room for a man with a tape meas-

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ure. "I had just got home. I phoned you right away."

"Everything was just like this when you came in?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Arnold." A tall, lean man approached, carrying a scrap of paper. Funny, the way he carried it. He had a handkerchief spread over his palms, and the paper was in the middle of the handkerchief.

Arnold looked briefly at the paper. "Where'd you find it?"

The lean man said, "Under the body."

Another detective drew Arnold aside and talked to him. Arnold nodded, then turned to Bill. "That your knife?"

"What? Oh—yes, that's mine."

Someone had brought Mrs. Penney in. Or maybe she had come in by herself. She wasn't talking fast, the way she usually did. She was just staring. Bill said hello.

Arnold said, "You're Mrs. Penney. Tell me what you saw."

"Oh, this is terrible." Mrs. Penney's voice quavered. "Doesn't she look awful?"

Arnold gestured at the lean detective, and a sheet was thrown over the body. "What was it you saw, Mrs. Penney?"

"Well, I didn't really see anything. I was going upstairs to put away the clean clothes—"

"Tell me what you heard, then."

"It wasn't very much. Really. I was listening to the program 'Saturday's Child' on Mr. Norman's radio—"

"You were in this house?"

"No, in my own house. Mrs. Norman plays her radio so loud—"

"What did you hear besides the radio?"

"Well, while I was putting the clothes away, Mr. and Mrs. Norman started arguing."

"What time was that?"

"Now, I'm not just sure. Let me see . . . It must have been three hours ago."

**B**ILL corrected her. "I wasn't home then. What you heard must have been part of the radio program."

"No, indeedy. You two were making so much noise I couldn't hear the end of 'Saturday's Child'."

Arnold asked, "You're sure it was Mr. Norman's voice?"

"Oh, absolutely. I've listened to—I mean—I've heard them arguing before."

"What did Mr. Norman say?"

"He called Mrs. Norman some terrible names, and he said—I could hear it just as plain—he said, 'Nobody is going to buy you away from me.'" Mrs. Penney looked at Bill commiseratingly. "You poor man. She must have been a great trial to you."

Someone whisked Mrs. Penney away. It dawned on Bill how efficiently the police were working. Nobody had ever whisked Mrs. Penney away before. It was a good idea.

"We'll have to book you," said Arnold.

"What?"

"You'll have to come to Headquarters with us."

"You aren't taking Mrs. Penney seriously, are you? Nobody does."

Arnold eyed Bill strangely.

"I can see it would look bad," Bill said, "but of course I didn't do it."

There was a detective on either side of him now.

Bill shrugged. "I'll come along with you, but you're making a mistake."

They didn't handcuff him. They were almost polite during the ride to the police station. The cell they put him in was clean and decently lighted.

Not more than ten minutes after the key had first clicked decisively in the lock, the guard reopened the cell door and let in Jeff. Jeff set down his briefcase and gripped Bill's hand.

"Sorry about Irene."

"Thanks."

"I got here as fast as I could. Have they asked you any questions?"

"A few. They think I killed her."

"What did you tell them?"

"I said I wanted to talk with you first."

"Good boy." Jeff sat down on the cot and tugged at his trouser creases. "Give me the whole story now, carefully. Don't leave out a thing."

Bill told him.

"—I suppose," he concluded, "I should feel bad about Irene, or angry about being locked up. I don't, though."

Jeff said, "My job will be a lot easier if you can take it that way. I can build up an airtight defense. No jury will believe you did it. A man who had just killed his wife wouldn't spend the rest of

the afternoon arranging a divorce. I'll testify, myself, as to the arrangements you made with me. I'll produce the divorce papers you signed. Then I'll round up some people who saw us together in the Woodward Bar——"

"All that won't be necessary."

"Why not?"

"Don't you understand? You're my alibi. You were with me in the Woodward when Irene was killed."

Jeff ran a hand through his neatly tailored hair. "I thought you said they established the time of her death at about three hours before you found her."

"That's right."

Jeff's brows met in a tawny line. "Let's get this time business straight. I brought you home at five. Irene was killed, then, about two. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"Should it?"

"It means I can't give you an alibi. You went back to your office at quarter of two and you were gone for half an hour." Jeff paused. The shadow of trouble had come into his eyes. "Bill! Don't you remember?"

"I—I didn't realize that was at two."

The policeman was at the cell door again. "They want Mr. Norman upstairs."

"All right." Jeff lit a cigarette with a hand that shook slightly. "You'd better go on up, Bill. Tell them the exact truth and you'll have nothing to worry about." He forced a grin.

THE policeman took Bill to an office on the main floor. Detective Arnold was behind the desk. Through the open window Bill could see the cool, twilight city street. So near; so far.

Arnold swivelled around. "Hello. Had your supper?"

"No."

"I won't keep you long. They'll have a hot meal ready for you when you go back. Sit down? Have a cigar."

Bill took the cigar. "This isn't the way I'd imagined it."

"What isn't?"

"I thought when the police questioned you they put a bright light in your eyes. Then they pushed you around and batted you with rubber clubs."

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Arnold laughed. "That would be unscientific."

"I'm glad of that."

Arnold chuckled again. "Nowadays evidence consists of facts, objects, figures. Surprising, sometimes, what scientific data can do. Did you know this department once trapped a murderer just by the fillings in his teeth?"

Bill said no, he didn't.

"Well, that's a long story, and I won't go into it now. But criminal investigation is becoming more and more a laboratory problem. Don't really need any oral information at all, nowadays. All the person involved has to do is nod his head."

"The person involved?"

"Yes. Take your case, for example. Mind if I review it?"

Bill said nothing.

Arnold leaned back in his chair, pressing his fingertips together, smiling. "Mrs. Norman spent more money than you could afford. When you stopped handing out the money she ran up charge accounts. When you cut off the charge accounts she borrowed money . . . elsewhere. A year ago she asked you for a divorce. You refused her. Right so far?"

Bill tried to make his face expressionless. A muscle beneath his right eye kept twitching.

"This morning," Arnold went on, "you left your office at 11:45. You did not return to it. You had lunch in the bar of the Woodward Hotel. After lunch you remained in the Woodward, drinking, until 1:45. Then you went home. You got into an argument with your wife about some other man. The argument turned into a fight. She tripped you. As you fell your keyring dropped out of your pocket. She tried to kick you. You grabbed her foot, throwing her. Her shoe came off in your hand. In your rage you took your Navy knife from the top of the bookcase . . . You stabbed her." Arnold paused dramatically.

"When you realized what you had done, you knew you would have to destroy the evidence. You searched your wife's room for a letter from the other man, but you didn't find it there. You examined your wife's clothing. It was there. You looked everywhere for it except under the body . . . Finally you gave up the search and

went back to the Woodward. That was at 2:15. You drank some more to steady your nerves. At 5:00 you went home a second time, 'found' the body, and called the police."

Arnold blew a smoke ring and destroyed it with his cigar. "That's the story. Anything you want to add to it?"

Bill set his palms flat on the desk to hide their shaking. "I have three questions."

"Go right ahead."

"What makes you think I searched Irene's room?"

"It was a shambles."

"What was in the letter you found under Irene's body?"

Arnold wagged his head sadly. "Not what you were expecting. I'll quote it: 'Can't meet you this afternoon. Busy tonight, too. Some other time?' Wasn't a very romantic note, was it? It was written in ink, on plain stationery, unsigned."

Bill gripped the desk harder. "Where did you find my keyring?"

"In the corner of your living room . . . If there's anything else you want to know, don't be afraid to ask."

Bill knotted his hands together.

Arnold said, "You can see we have all the details. Are you ready to sign?"

"Sign what?"

"The confession. I have it right here." Arnold ducked his head, opening a low drawer at his left.

Bill picked up his cigar from the ashtray. He caught up the ashtray, too, and swung it down against the side of Arnold's head.

Arnold slumped against the desk drawer, slid gently to the floor.

Bill clambered out the open window. It seemed to him he made a great deal of noise. The street was deserted. He walked to the corner. It was only after he had turned into the alley that he let himself run . . . and run.

The street he came out on was the street with all the movie theatres. Bill halted, then eased into the slowly passing crowd. One woman looked up at him. Bill coughed to hide his harsh breathing. She turned back to her escort and walked on.

In front of a theatre, Bill edged to the curb. The second taxi he hailed pulled

up. Bill gave the address that had been his own.

It was dark when he got there. Both doors were locked. Bill pried open the kitchen window and hoisted himself in. He got the flashlight from the cupboard shelf and wrapped a handkerchief over the lens. Keeping the dim beam pointed downward, he climbed the stairs to Irene's bedroom.

The police and somebody else had searched. Heaps of unworn clothing from the closet and bureau were strewn over the floor. Nice clothes, expensive.

**B**ILL sat down on the edge of the bed. Maybe this wasn't the best place to begin. Maybe he should have looked somewhere else.

His elbow bumped the French phone on the little table. He straightened it idly. There was a pad beside the phone. Nothing written on the pad. Bill tore off the top sheet and carried it to the closet. He bared the flashlight and passed the paper in front of it. Faint indentations were visible. Numbers. Bill strained to make them out: 4—7—2—5. Probably some store. Not much good without the telephone exchange. He slipped the paper into his pocket.

Even the vanity table had been rifled. How many hours Irene had sat there, brushing and brushing her hair.

Down one side of the mirror ran a row of roses. Good imitations. Everything but the smell. Some sort of plastic. Bill pulled one from the frame of the mirror. On its stem there were small gold letters: ROSE ROOM.

Rose Room . . . He had taken her there once. It was the last time they went dancing. The rose was a favor the cigarette girl gave away. Sort of a come-on . . . But there were six roses alongside the mirror.

Bill picked up the phone.

"Number ple-uzz."

"Allerton 4725."

"Thank you."

Then a smooth, silky voice: "Hello?"

"Is this the Rose Room?"

"No, this is Mrs. Hammond."

"Sorry, I must have the wrong number." —

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"Quite all right."

Bill tried the next exchange. "Barnaby 4725."

A man answered. "Harascheimer's Warehouse."

"Sorry. Wrong number."

And the next, and the next, on down the list.

"Morningside 4725."

"Mullins speaking."

"Is this the Rose Room?"

"Hell, no." Click.

Bill started to light his pipe, remembered in time, and crammed it back into his pocket.

"Nixon 4725."

This time the "Hello" was brisk and breezy.

"Is this the Rose Room?"

"No. This is Dave Ring, manager for Tony Williams."

"Sorry."

"If you want the Rose Room, phone Garrison 3200."

"Thank you."

Bill set down the receiver, slowly, and stood up. It tied in with the night club, all right. But how? He groped his way down the darkened stairs. Who was Dave Ring? Who was Tony Williams?

He was still trying to place the names, twenty minutes later, when he was sitting at a sandwich-size table and gulping a miniature highball. The way the rye took hold reminded him he'd had no supper. One drink would do for three.

"Cigarettes . . . Cigarettes." A bare arm reached over his shoulder and dropped a red rose in the center of the table. Bill swung around. She was pretty, what you could see of her. And her costume wouldn't make a handkerchief.

"I'll take some cigarettes."

"What brand?"

"Oh, any brand, just to keep the conversation going."

She handed him a pack.

"Do you give roses to everybody?"

"One to a party."

"Is there any way I could get some more?"

"One to a party."

"OK, OK." Bill handed her a dollar and grinned foolishly. "Keep the change." He waited for the phoney smile and thank-you-sir.

"Cigarettes are one fifty."

"Oh." Bill gave her another dollar. He remembered, now. That was one reason he hadn't liked the place. That and the singer. Irene had mooned over the singer; and the check had been twenty-two seventy-five.

A hush fell over the crowded room. The emcee was saying, "—The star of our show, the sensation of the year: TONY . . . WILLIAMS."

A spotlight fell on a pale, willowy young man, smiling boyishly. How did he make his teeth glitter so? He aimed the smile at all corners of the room. Then he drooped over a microphone and began whispering into it. Behind him a muted orchestra picked up the accompaniment. His husky whisper came out of the concealed amplifiers with an unpleasant intimacy. "—Only the moon . . . knows my dreams . . . knows of my love . . . and it seems—"

There was nothing to do but listen to it. As soon as the willowy young man finished what he was doing, Bill pushed back his chair. He headed for the entertainers' door. A waiter stopped him.

"I'm an agent," Bill said. "Hollywood. I want to talk with Dave Ring."

The waiter let him by. "Third door on the left."

Bill moved down the dim hallway, pushed open the third door.

Williams was stretched out on a couch. His jacket with the broad shoulders hung in a corner. Astride a chair was a small, wiry man with shiny brown eyes. The small man said, "Who the hell let you in?"

"Are you Dave Ring?"

"Yeah."

"I don't want to talk with you. I want to talk to your boy."

Ring strutted forward like a gamecock. "I do all Tony's talking."

Bill hit him in the face, and he went end over end into the dressing table. A bottle crashed to the floor.

**W**ILLIAMS sat up, paler than he had been in the floor show. Ring crawled out from under the table.

Bill leaned back against the door. He shoved his hand into his coat pocket. Maybe the pipestem would look like a

gun. He said, "Ever heard of Irene Norman?"

Williams shook his head.

"Ever write a note that went like this: 'Can't meet you this afternoon. Busy tonight too. Some other time?'"

"Yeah, I wrote that."

"Who to?"

"A dame that called herself Iris. Iris Niles."

"When?"

"This morning"

Ring had picked himself up. He was watching Bill warily. "What do you want?"

"Iris Niles is dead. Murdered."

Ring's eyes bugged. Williams swallowed his Adam's apple.

Bill said, "Why did you kill her?"

The singer's voice shot up into a high octave. "Me? Kill her? Listen——"

Ring talked fast. "As far as the kid was concerned, she was just another fan. She was hanging around, see, like a lot of others."

Bill hit him again. Not hard. Back-handed, the way they do in the movies. "I told you I want to talk to your boy."

Williams stammered. "I seen her a few times, sure. Like Dave said, she was hanging around. But I was trying to give her the brush. I got no time for fancy floozies——"

Bill hit him. It was getting to be a habit. "Why did you kill her?"

"I didn't kill her. I didn't go near her. Last time I seen her was in here a week ago. Then she wrote me day before yesterday."

"Where were you today?"

"Today? All morning I was in the hotel. Dave was there with me."

"How did you get that note to her?"

"The note? I sent a bellhop over with it."

"Then you knew where she lived."

"Sure, sure. She give me her address."

"Where were you this afternoon?"

"I sang in the stage show at the Lyceum."

"What time?"

"I come on twice: two and four-thirty."

"Where were you just before two o'clock?"

"Where was I? Backstage."

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Bill crossed over to Williams. He raised a hand.

"Ask anybody," Williams said, fast. "I got a trick voice, see? A flutter, like. I took it from Bing. Only I can't do it if the temperature ain't right. I gotta be in the joint an hour before I can sing. Ask anybody."

Bill went out, down the street to the Woodward Hotel, into the bar. Not many people around. He climbed onto a bar stool.

"What'll it be, Mr. Norman?"

Bill glanced up. "Rye and water, Fred." He noticed his reflection in the mirror behind the bar. No wonder those pixies had been scared of him. The way he looked, he could have scared Boris Karloff.

"You know," Fred planted his neat hamlike hands on the bar, "when you was in here this afternoon I was half a mind to say why'n't you take a couple days off. But seeing as you was in and out a couple times with that lawyer I figured maybe you was hot on a business deal."

Bill looked at himself in the glass. Boris Karloff? He could have scared Bela Lugosi and Peter Lorre, too. But not Fred. Good old Fred. Fred wasn't scared of him.

Fred's hand rattled the bottle against the jigger. Bill focussed on him. Fred's eyes were as big as blue moons.

"What's the matter, Fred?"

**G**RADUALLY it dawned on Bill that it was the radio. They were talking about him on the radio . . .

"—For questioning in connection with the murder of his wife. At 6:15 this evening he struck down a police officer and made his escape from the station on Thirtieth Street—"

There was only one place left to go, and Bill went there. Jeff would know what to do. He was a smart lawyer. Smart enough not to let his client be held on circumstantial evidence . . .

It turned out that Jeff didn't look at it that way, though. He said, "The best thing for you to do is to give yourself up."

"I can't do it that way."

"You're being damned unreasonable."

"Unreasonable! They tried to tell me

science proves I killed her. They wanted me to sign a confession."

"I know. But don't you see what you've done? You've spoiled the entire picture I was going to give the jury. If you'd simply denied Arnold's charges I could have built you up as a quiet, rational, sensible guy. All your behavior would have verified that picture . . . But not now. The newspapers will take this jail-break story and turn you into a Jack the Ripper."

Bill finished his drink. "You're overlooking one small point in my defense: I didn't do it."

Jeff let his chair down with a bang. "Dammit, Bill, it isn't enough for you and me to know that. I've got to have something I can sell to a jury." He drummed his fingers on the table top. "I'd give my arm for an alibi . . . Are you positive you didn't see anybody when you went back to your office?"

"Positive."

"Wasn't there even an elevator operator?"

"I didn't wait for the elevator. I walked up."

"Where was your secretary?"

"Ask her union. I don't get snotty nowadays if a secretary takes an hour to powder her nose."

Jeff shook his head. "Bad. Bad."

Bill thrust out his glass. "Give me a refill, will you?"

Jeff started for the kitchen. "You're slugging down my five-year-old stuff as though it were dollar corn."

"At least they'll be able to say I drank a hearty dinner."

Jeff paused in the doorway. "Bill, I'm going to have to put a proposition to you. I don't want you to get sore. I want you to consider it carefully."

"What's the deal?"

"You've been under a great strain lately. Business troubles and marriage troubles mix like gin with whiskey. Would it be possible that this afternoon you had a mental lapse? Is it possible you went home at two o'clock without knowing it?"

Bill gaped.

"Such things," Jeff went on, "have happened. I'll put it bluntly. The story you've told me would never get over to a jury at all. Are they going to believe that at

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Bill walked toward the kitchen. "Jeff, how did you know I didn't have my keys?"

He stuck his head through the doorway. Jeff was putting down the phone, too casually.

Bill rubbed his hand across his forehead. "Why are you crossing me up, Jeff?"

**J**EFF was white-lipped. "Bill, you've got to go back to jail. It would ruin our case completely if you hid out here."

Bill steadied himself, bracing his hands against the sides of the doorway. "How did you know I didn't have my keys?"

"The detective told me."

There was something Fred the barkeep had said, something like: "You was in and out a *coupla times* with that lawyer." Bill laughed.

"What's the matter?"

"I just now got the point. You weren't in the Woodward at two o'clock, either."

"You're not making sense."

"No? Listen. I stopped being jealous about Irene a long while back. I didn't know who her latest boy friend was, or even her next-to-the-latest. She dropped you for Tony Williams, didn't she? You were jealous, not me. I told you this noon she'd been running around again, and you knew she hadn't been with you. You couldn't understand it. You figured Williams must be flashing more money. You told Irene, 'No one is going to buy you away from me.'"

Jeff must have had the .45 in his pocket all the time. Bill wasn't looking down the muzzle. It was pointed at his belly.

The man outside rapped again. "This is the police."

Jeff's knuckles whitened on the butt of the automatic. "I really hoped I could get us both off, Bill. But now it's fouled up like fire drill . . . Isn't it?"

Jeff's footsteps came steadily closer. He stuck the gun through the doorway ahead of him. Bill came down on it with both hands and swung Jeff across the living room. Jeff stumbled, fell. The .45 was in Bill's hands now.

"Don't do it."

Bill turned toward the voice. It was Arnold. Arnold's hands were empty. No gun. Bill looked down again at Jeff and raised the butt of the .45.

"Don't do it," Arnold repeated. "The law wants him for killing Mrs. Norman. The bartender at the Woodward phoned in and spoiled his alibi."

Bill drew the gunbutt back, poised it . . .

"We found some old letters from him to Mrs. Norman in his car. They're what he searched her room for."

Bill stopped his downward swing in midair. He kept the automatic balanced above Jeff's head. "That's not enough."

"And he forgot the rub off all the keys in the keyring. His fingerprints were on top of yours."

Bill lowered the .45 slowly. The tension inside him released. "All right. Take him."

Arnold slipped handcuffs on Jeff's wrists.

Bill asked, "How did you get in here?"

"Turned the key in the lock with a pair of tweezers. It's faster and quieter than breaking in."

"How did you catch on to Jeff? The bartender's phone call wouldn't mean a thing unless you already suspected."

Arnold coughed, frowning. "Even scientific data needs checking." He hesitated. "That chair you sat in, in my office, remember? It's an experimental type lie detector. Someone left it going and it showed two reactions: one guilty, one innocent. There was only one person besides you who had sat in that chair: your lawyer."