

# DETECTIVE

BRITISH  
9.<sup>th</sup>  
EDITION

STORY MAGAZINE

JANUARY

A NEW  
MURDER  
MYSTERY BY  
JOHN D.  
MacDONALD  
**FINDERS  
KILLERS!**





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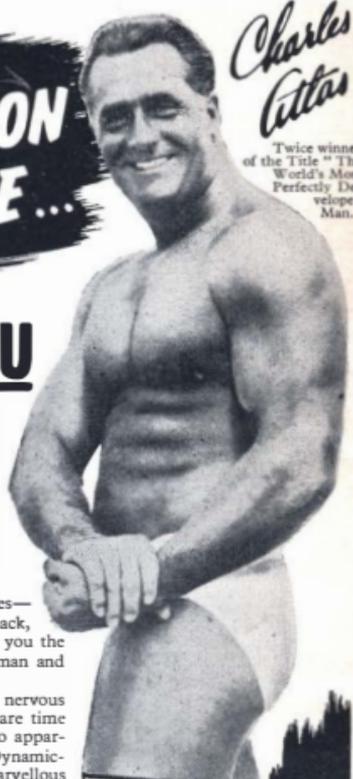
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# DETECTIVE STORY

MAGAZINE

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## Contents

### *Crime Novelettes*

- FINDERS KILLERS!** . . . . . John D. MacDonald 2
- THE SWAMP SEARCHERS.** . . . . Talmage Powell 20
- DEATH IS HER BRIDEGROOM . . . .** Fletcher Flora 38

### *Short Story*

- A CORPSE IN EVERY ROOM.** . . . . Dan Sontup 55

### *Feature*

- KEEPING UP WITH THE CRIME CROWD**  
Clark Hansen 64

YOUR NEXT ISSUE WILL BE ON SALE  
--- WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 20th ---

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# Finders Killers!

By  
**JOHN D.  
MacDONALD**

*When Torran made a bum out of me by blowing town with a quarter million hot bucks, after I had him nicely sewed up, it was up to me to find him—before he found me!*

## CHAPTER I.

WE waited for him to run, because that was the final proof of guilt that we needed. We had him bottled up in a Chicago apartment. Our boys drove the cabs, delivered the milk, cleaned the street in front and in general covered him like a big tent. I don't know exactly how we gave it away. But we did. We threw it to him.

You can say we were careless. That's in the same league with Monday morning quarterbacking. Our excuse was that we didn't know he was tipped. He walked into the apartment house and never came out again. Three hours later when we took the wire and tape off the fat woman across the hall from where he had lived, we learned how he'd used that cold, dark, drizzly evening to good advantage.

She was a tall woman, and fat. We knew he wore size 10B shoes. Hers were 9A. He tapped at her door. He hit her so hard that she still remembers hearing the tapping, but she can't remember open-



I heard her yell of pain as though it came from a long distance. . . .



ing the door. Figuring the rest was easy. He merely undressed and wrapped his own clothes around his middle, tying them in place. Then he got into her clothes. He took her raincape and a big floppy hat. Maybe he'd taken the precaution of shaving himself closely. Maybe not. It was a dark night.

He walked out. Aragon, holding the night glasses on the apartment door, didn't spot him. The boys in the cellar played back the recording of him going to bed. It was a sensitive pickup. I heard the shoes drop, the springs creak, the sleepy yawn.

And that was the way Torran walked out on us—walked out with two hundred and forty thousand dollars in brand new treasury notes in five-hundred dollar denominations—all in serial sequence, most of it still in the mint wrappers. In addition he had an estimated twenty-five thousand in smaller bills, all used stuff. He had a lot of the bonds, too. Negotiable stuff. Very hot. Even if they'd just dumped out the bank guards without the holes in the backs of their heads, the bonds would have been hot.

They had carried the guards across the Connecticut line before dumping them out. Torran and Holser. We knew that much. We didn't have to worry about Holser. Some kids on a picnic found Holser a hundred feet from the highway. The thigh had gone bad under the dirty bandage. There was a hole in the back of his head. The slug matched the ones taken from the two guards.

There is not the slightest point in going over the history of how we located Torran. It was dull work. It took seven months. Then we had him bottled. We still couldn't be certain that there wasn't a third party involved. So we watched him. I was the one who advised against moving in and grabbing him. "Wait a little," I said. "He'll either run some more, or he'll have company." Either way, I thought, we couldn't lose.

I'd been with it for seven months. By painstaking spade work I'd uncovered the initial lead that eventually led to him. I was a hero. So Torran slipped away. So I was a bum.

It took three days to prove we hadn't

the faintest idea whether he'd left town, and if so, how, and in what direction.

Broughton called me in.

His eyebrows look like white caterpillars. He looks like a deacon in the neighborhood church. He's the Broughton who went into that New Orleans hotel room in '37. He expected one man to be there. There was a slip. There were four of them. When it was over, Broughton was still standing up. The lead he was carrying didn't pull him down until he got back out into the hall. *That* Broughton!

"Sit down, Gandy," he said.

I sat. No excuses. They never go.

"Washington is disturbed, Gandy," he said.

"As well they might be, Mr. Broughton."

"I've watched you carefully, Gandy. You've got a lot of presence. You speak well and you think clearly. But you're too ambitious. You expect too much, too fast."

"And?"

"And I could butter you up to keep you aboard. During your four years with us, you've done well. But now you're marked. You saw what the papers did to us. That was unfortunate. Now you're not Agent Gandy any more in Washington. You're Russ Gandy, the one who lost Torran."

"So I lost him. So I'll find him again."

"That's what I'm trying to tell you. You're being reassigned to duty with the School."

"Why are you telling me this?"

He looked at me and the blue eyes went hard and then softened. "I was pretty ambitious for a while, Gandy. Until the afternoon I had Barrows trapped and he walked away from it."

"I see," I said. I stood up. I was too mad to stay sitting. "Suppose I go find him anyway?"

"Not as an employee of the Bureau. A private citizen has no standing."

"Do I have your permission to dictate a resignation to your secretary?"

He shrugged. "Go ahead. Make it effective as of now."

With my hand on the doorknob I turned and said, "Thanks."

He looked as though he had already forgotten me. "Oh . . . that's all right, Gandy. Just remember that this talk was off the record."

"Of course."

After I dictated the resignation and signed it, I went and cleaned out my desk. In four years I'd cleaned out a lot of desks. This was different. There was no new desk waiting.

My file on Torran belonged to the Bureau. I flipped through it. I knew it by heart. I took out two pictures—not the best two—but good enough, folded them and stuffed them in my pocket. They'd been taken with a telephoto lens from the window across the way where Aragon was holed up.

I left the office without kissing anyone goodbye. The check would be sent to my bank marked for deposit. Four hundred and twenty something. The last check.

I went back to the crummy room I'd rented and in which I'd spent only sleeping time. On four years of salary and expenses, when all you think about night and day is a job of work, you save dough. I looked at the bankbook. Twenty-nine hundred in the savings account. Four thousand in the checking account.

I'd left the little badge and the Bureau weapon and the identification card with Broughton. I sat on the bed and cried without making a sound. Like a kid. He'd been too right. I was ambitious. And they'd taken away my toys.

What the hell was Torran to me now? I took out the pictures. I looked at them. One was an enlargement of the face. Aragon had caught him just as he came out into the sunlight. Torran. A bad boy. No punk. Thirty-four, approximately. Eight of those thirty-four years had been spent in prison. Auburn, Atlanta, Ossining. Armed robbery. Extortion. Now it was a big one. Bank robbery, kidnapping and murder.

The joke was that he looked like a nice guy. Big mouth, slightly crooked nose. Laugh wrinkles around the eyes. The old prison pictures were no good because he'd been out for five years. In the picture he looked like he was on the verge of smiling. Or laughing—at me. How do you figure a guy like that? You

can't blame society. Good family, good education. So he was just a wrongo. One of those guys who work twice as hard as anyone else while they try to make it the "easy" way.

Now he had made a big strike. But keeping it was a horse of a new shade.

I looked at the pictures and called him everything in the book. I went out and had a steak; then bought a bottle, brought it home and killed it. It came close to killing me. When I woke up after fifteen hours of sleep it was nine in the morning.

Torran's pictures were on the floor. I picked them up and cursed him some more. It was easier to hate him than to hate myself. Before the war I was an accountant. One year at a desk telling myself I'd get used to it sooner or later. Then five years of war to prove to me that I couldn't settle down. I took the exams and made the Bureau.

After four years it had begun to look to me as though pretty soon I'd be telling J. Edgar to move over and make room for new blood. I liked the chase and I liked to catch them. But you try to be too smart—you try to move too fast. Boom.

I wanted to catch Torran. I wanted to catch him so very bad I could taste it.

But what can one man do? Now the Bureau would be going after him twice as hard. Good sense would have said to drop it. I went in and looked at myself in the mirror. I didn't look so sensible. In fact, I thought I looked a little bit like some of the boys I'd caught during the last four years. Long hard face with heavy bones. Lids that cover maybe too much of the eyes at the outer corners. Big stubborn cleft chin. Hair that's mine, but looks as though it were made from the end of the tail of a handy horse. Beard stubble. I shaved it off. My hand shook. I stopped now and then to drink more water. I got so full of water I wondered when I'd start to make sloshing noises.

After three cups of coffee at the corner café, I could think again. What Broughton had said about private citizens stuck in my head.

My local contacts weren't too bad. By late afternoon it was fixed. In three days I'd have my license as a private investiga-

tor in the State of Illinois. License and a permit to carry a gun. So I got in the car and went to Boston. Once you start to do something, you can keep on even though you know it isn't smart.

I left Chicago on Monday at six P.M. I went through Toledo, Cleveland, Buffalo, Syracuse and Albany. I was in Boston at eight o'clock on Tuesday. I went to bed, got up at eight in the morning and located the house in Newton Center where May Marie Sipsol lived with her aunt. It was her bearer bonds that Torran had taken along with the cash. It was just her bad luck that her daddy died exactly when he did.

She was a blonde with a skin like milk in a blue glass—a trembly uncertain mouth, and eyes so close together they threatened to overlap. She wanted none of me. She was a timid eighteen. She spoke of the authorities and what they were doing and she said she couldn't pay me. I said I didn't want pay. I said I wanted a percentage on recovery. I said ten would be enough. The bonds totaled a ten thousand face. Eleven thousand for Russ.

We were alone in a room with Italian antique furniture. It smelled like dust. When I realized that she meant what she said, I took her by the shoulders and shook her until her eyes didn't focus. Her aunt came in and bellowed at me. I pushed the aunt out of the room and locked the door. May Marie whimpered. I shook her again and she wanted to kiss me. Her breath was bad.

Pretty soon she decided that this was a "great love" and that I was a very dramatic type and it was all pretty much like out of a Raymond Chandler movie. By the time the cops the aunt had called started beating on the door, I had our little contract all signed and tucked into the back of my wallet—the wallet with the little holes where the gold badge had been pinned.

She gave the cops and her aunt undiluted hell. She raged like an anemic tigress. I held my breath and kissed her again and left with my contract.

I was back to Chicago on Thursday afternoon. I picked up my documents, bought a .357 Magnum, phoned the

office and found out from my old friend there that—in cautious doubletalk—Torran was still at large.

On Friday morning I got up and went to work. I went on the basis that he had left town. Assuming that, I knew he was too smart to use any common carrier. He had no car. So he had stolen a car. Most cars not stolen for repaint and resale are recovered. He wouldn't drive it too far. Not Torran. He'd want to get well out of town. An hour out, or maybe two. I went to headquarters and my pretty new documents gave me the in I needed. Torran had left the apartment house at eight o'clock on a Thursday evening. I copied down a list of the cars stolen after eight and before ten. I was informed that my ex-co-workers had been in. That was all right with me.

One, and the one I liked the best, I almost missed, because it wasn't reported until nearly midnight. The people had gone to a movie eight blocks from where we had Torran bottled up. Their car, a black Pontiac sedan, 1947 model, had been left in the parking lot near the theater. They'd gone into the theater at twenty after eight. That made sense. Torran was smart enough to pick a car that had just been parked, and he'd have had time to get there and watch the lot entrance. He wouldn't want a flashy car.

There was a blue check after the entry. I looked it up in the recovery register. Recovered in Beloit, Wisconsin, on Friday—reported to the Chicago police at one in the afternoon. They had informed the owner and he had said he'd go up and get it Saturday.

None of the others looked as promising.

Friday noon I was in Beloit. When I made inquiries about the car, the local cops gave me a bored look and said that it had already been checked by the Bureau.

After I smiled enough, they let me know the facts. It was on the main drag in a meter zone. It had been tagged for all night parking, then tagged again for overtime in a meter Friday morning. Then they checked against stolen car numbers and towed it in and told Chicago. The answer to my big question was dis-

appointing. Were there any cars stolen for here Thursday night—any time between ten and two? Sorry, no. No missing persons—with car and all? Nope,

A sour lead, and I couldn't tell if I was right. I went back to Chicago and checked out of my room. I waited until night before leaving. Then I left from the parking lot street at eight-thirty. I was Torran, wearing woman's clothes. My feet hurt. I was in a stolen car. I wanted to shed the clothes.

I took Route 20 out through Elgin. I stayed well within the speed limits, as no doubt Torran had done. I pretended it was raining. I looked for a chance to change my clothes. I'd need some sort of shelter from the rain, or else have to do it in the car. The longer I kept my own clothes wrapped around me, the more wrinkled and conspicuous they'd get. The ideal spot would be one where I could change and also ditch the woman's clothes.

That's a tough assignment on a rainy night in a heavily populated section. I didn't have much hope of it working out. He could have pulled off in any number of places after leaving Starks. At Rockford I turned right on Route 51. I crossed from South Beloit over into Beloit and parked as near as I could to where the car had been found. It was twenty-five after ten. Allow Torran ten minutes to change and he would have gotten in just before quarter to eleven at the latest.

I lit a cigarette and sat in the car for a few minutes trying to think. I went for a walk. Three blocks away was a bus station. Every night a southbound bus left for Rockford, La Salle, Bloomington, Decatur and Vandalia at eleven-fifteen. I liked that one. The hunted animal doubles back on its tracks.

I found the driver having coffee. I asked him if he'd taken the bus on that run the previous Thursday a week. He took a tattered mimeographed schedule out of his inside pocket, studied it and said that he had. I asked him if he remembered any specific people on that trip and he gave me a look of complete disgust. "I drive one hell of a lot of buses," he said. I showed him the picture of Torran. It rang no bell.

He warmed up a bit for a five-dollar tip. I sat beside him with my coffee. "Now think back. Did *anything* happen that was unusual that night? It was raining. Remember? Anything at all that might have puzzled you?"

He started to shake his head slowly and then stopped shaking it. He looked into space for a moment. "Now wait a minute. I don't know if this is anything or not. I make my Bloomington stop. Below there, some place just outside Heyworth, a car goes by me doing maybe ninety. Up ahead it slows down to a creep and I got to pass it. Zoom, it goes by me again. Looks like a girl driving. She slows up again and I got to pass her. Then she scoots by again and I don't ever catch up to her again. The third time she goes by she leans on the horn like she was saying hello to somebody. You know—shave and a haircut, two bits."

"Could she have been looking for somebody on the bus?"

"That's what I was thinking."

"Anybody get off at Decatur?"

"Three or four, I think."

"Nothing funny about them, about any one of them?"

"Now, you know, I just remembered. One of them had a ticket to Vandalia, but she got off at Decatur."

"She?"

"Yeah. Big heavy woman with no baggage."

"And a big hat?"

"Damn if that isn't right! One hell of a big hat!"

I added another five to what he already had. I thanked him and went to the ticket office and got a timetable of that late run. It's roughly a hundred and forty miles from Beloit due south to Bloomington. Even with two stops the bus made it in under three hours, getting to Bloomington at ten after two in the morning.

I was in Bloomington at ten minutes of two. A bored man with gray pouches under his eyes lounged behind the ticket grille.

"Were you on a week ago Thursday at this time?"

He yawned. "I'm on every night, friend. In the daytime I try to sleep. The

neighborhood is full of kids. I'm learning to hate children."

"Would you remember if someone, it might have been a girl, just missed the southbound bus from Beloit to Vandalia?"

"If you'd come around a year from now, friend, I'd still remember the lady. You don't see much of that material in bus stations. She came plunging in here five minutes after number seventy had pulled out."

"Nice?"

"About five eight. She stood right where you're standing. Hair like harvest wheat—with rain beads caught in it. Moon-pool eyes, pal, and a funny, tough, scratchy little voice, like a tired phonograph needle. She asked me if the bus had left and I said yes and away she went. It was like she pulled me along on a string. I went right to the door. She got into a big gray sedan and went away from here so fast that the tires yelped."

"What make?"

"Oh, the car? Who knows? Big and new. Cad, Buick, Packard. Take any car. Say, that's pretty good! Take any car."

"A dark-eyed blonde. Hair cut short?"

"Nope. Nice and long. The kind to run barefoot through."

"Age?"

"Twenty-two, three, four."

"Clothes?"

"Brother, I was too busy taking them off to take a look at them. Something green, I think. But it could have been blue."

At Decatur I found that I was too close to falling asleep at the wheel, so I checked in at a hotel. In the morning I bought a road atlas and took it into the sandwich shop with me to read while having breakfast. I looked at the map with the idea of trying to outguess them—rather to guess the way they would.

Obviously Torran had phoned from some place along his escape route and told the girl his plan. I had them spotted at Decatur in the rain in her car with Torran still in his disguise and with dawn not too many hours away. Either they were going to make a long run for it together, or she was going to take him to some hideout. If he had called from Beloit—which seemed the most probable,

then I could draw a circle two hundred miles in radius around Bloomington and safely assume that she had roared over to Bloomington from some place within that circle.

It didn't look as though she could have made it from St. Louis. If she had to get ready for a trip, Springfield might be a logical starting point. Yet, if it were Springfield, why not let Torran ride all the way to Decatur? If it were Peoria, she should have been in Bloomington in plenty of time. Galesburg seemed just about right. If she'd been in Chicago, then why hadn't he gone to see her before he began to suspect that he was being covered?

At any rate, Torran was going to be too smart to make any two-hundred mile run in a big car at that time of night. There are too many town cops who like to wake themselves up in the small hours by hauling down big cars on the road. Torran had gotten into Decatur by bus at just about three in the morning. He hadn't seen the blonde in a long time. He needed to change back to his own clothes. Everything pointed to their holing up close to Decatur. A tourist court was indicated. I was in for some routine legwork.

## CHAPTER II.

I HIT twelve places before lunch. Each place I hit drained some of the confidence out of me. The second place after lunch was called the Sunset Rest Courts and it was three miles out of town on Route 36 heading east.

The woman was very brisk and friendly. "Yes, we had a girl and her mother register a week ago Thursday—I should say Friday morning at three-fifteen. The girl woke me up. We had a light burning that night because we had a vacancy. She said she had planned on driving all night but her mother was taken sick. Nothing serious."

"A blonde girl?"

"Yes. Quite pretty. I showed her the vacant room and she seemed satisfied. Here's the register card."

I looked at it. Mrs. Walter B. Richardson and Anne Richardson, of Moline. Make of car—Buick. License—Illinois

6c424. All in angular backhand script—finishing school script. I wrote down the license number, fairly certain that they had taken advantage of the dark night to put down the wrong number.

“Are you from the police? Is something wrong? We’ve never had any trouble here. We try to run a—”

“You’re in no trouble. I’m just looking for someone. This won’t even get on the records. Do you know which way they went?”

“Well, Mrs. Richardson must have recovered in a terrific hurry. They left here a little after seven. They went out of here so fast that I actually dressed and went over to see if they’d taken anything from the room. I can see the road from my bed. They went up the highway, heading east, and then turned up there at the fork and went south on Route One Twenty-one.”

“Did they have any reason to believe that you might have seen which way they went?”

“No. I’m a very light sleeper. I was about to get up anyway. As I say, I just happened to see them turn south.”

“Could I take a look at the room?”

“If you want to. There’ve been quite a few people in it during the week.”

“Then maybe there’s no point in it. Who cleaned it after they left?”

“I did.”

“Did you find anything of interest that was left behind?”

“N-n-no, not really.”

“What did you find that puzzled you?”

“A razor blade in the bathroom wastebasket. Lots of women use razor blades, of course. But this one had stiff black stubble on it, and caked shaving cream of some sort. I just thought it seemed odd. No one was in there but the two women between the times I cleaned the bathroom.”

I left and drove slowly down 121. It was definitely a secondary road. The shoulder was narrow and the brush high in the shallow ditch. In the patches where the brush was thickest I went about eight miles an hour.

After about two miles I saw something in the brush. I got out and took a look. An old white rag caught on the base of

some weeds. The second time I saw something, it was jackpot. A brown wool dress, ripped down the back and under the arms. Big shoes with the leather stiff from dampness, the stitches pulled by strain. Heavy stockings, a rain cape and a big floppy hat. The works had been rolled into a tight bundle and fastened with a woman’s belt. After I was certain of what I had found, I bundled it back up and got ready to toss it farther into the brush. A truck went by, a farm truck, and the driver looked curiously at me. I locked the bundle in the back end of my car with my luggage.

I sat behind the wheel and studied the maps. Either the gray Buick was hot or it wasn’t, then the smartest thing for the two of them to do would be to make a lot of road time. I was willing to accept south as the direction. His first run had been north. South looked good.

But the south is pretty roomy. Again I had to try to think like Torran. Unless the girl had brought clothes for him, which wasn’t likely, he’d be anxious to pick up a wardrobe. The best wardrobes come from the big cities. The big cities, more often than not, are inclined to have the most alert boys in the cop line. His picture would be widely plastered around. I sat and thought and scratched my head. I just didn’t have enough. With Torran alone I could chance guessing his next move. You study a man’s life long enough and you can detect the pattern of his thoughts. But Miss X added a new factor. I could guess his decisions but I could not guess either hers or their combined decisions.

So I went to Beloit for the second time. I arrived late Saturday night. Sunday morning I went to the phone company offices, presented my credentials, asked for information about any long distance calls which had been made from the bus station ten days ago. After some stalling, the chief operator on duty dug into the records and came up with three long distance calls made from the bus station between ten-thirty and eleven-fifteen. The one to Cleveland I didn’t consider. Nor the one to Evansville, Indiana. The one I liked was made at five after eleven to a place called Britcher City, a town of

fifteen thousand midway between Urbana and Danville on US 150 east and a bit south of Bloomington. The call was to anyone at Britcher City 3888.

I hadn't checked out of my hotel room. I found a place that would grease my car, change the oil. I took an hour nap and had a quick sandwich before leaving Beloit at noon. It was a hundred and ninety mile trip to Britcher City. I drove by the city limit sign at five minutes of four. I found a square red brick hotel called the Westan Arms and got a room. I used a pay phone in the lobby to call 3888.

I heard it ring three times at the other end and then a voice said, "Good afternoon. Westan Arms Hotel." I nearly dropped the receiver. "Sorry," I said, "wrong number." I hung up. Sometimes it happens that way.

I went to the desk. The gray-haired woman desk clerk said, "Yes, Mr. Gandy?"

The boyish grin was the right one to use. "I've got a problem, ma'am."

"I hope we can help you."

"I believe a young lady left here recently. I don't know what name she was registered under. She may have checked out ten days ago. Blonde tall girl with dark eyes."

"Oh, her!" the woman said with surprising coldness. "Friend of yours?"

"It's very important to me to locate her."

"Well, we don't know much about her, to tell the truth, even though she did live here for two months. Her name is Marta Sharry. Is that the one?"

"I don't know. I'd have to see her handwriting to make certain. Would that be too much trouble?"

She shrugged and turned around to a file behind the counter. She hunted for three or four minutes, then pulled out a card. The angular backhand was familiar.

"That's her writing. Did she leave a forwarding address?"

"No, she didn't. I thought there was something funny about her. No mail and no phone calls, until that last one—all the time she was here. We wondered if she was hiding from somebody."

"Did she act as though she were hiding?"

"No. She used to take liquor to her room and drink it alone. She used to sleep every day until one or two in the afternoon. Along about five o'clock *he* would come for her and she'd go out with him."

It was time for the boyish grin again. "Who is he?"

She smiled a bit wryly. "Every city has it's Joe Talley, I suppose. He runs something that is supposed to be a private club. I don't know why the police don't close it. Heaven knows all that goes on there. He'd bring her back here at three and four in the morning. We don't like that sort of guest, but she was quiet and she always paid her bills. I'll bet you Joe Talley knows where she went."

"Did she have a gray Buick?"

The elderly woman sniffed. "Not when she came here, she didn't. Very remarkable. Joe Talley blossoms out in a new car and suddenly she has his old one, with different plates."

"Where did she garage it?"

"Down at the corner. Landerson's Service."

I pushed the register card back to her. Miss Marta Sharry, New York City. Not much information there. "Where is Talley's place?"

"On Christian Street. Go down Main and turn left on Christian three blocks from here. It's eight blocks out on the left and it looks boarded up, but it isn't. There's an iron deer in the yard. You'll see the sign on the gate. The Talley Ho." She lowered her voice and looked around. "They *gamble* there," she said.

I thanked her with as much enthusiasm as I could manage. I went to the place where she'd kept the car. It was open. A pimply boy was on duty. Just remembering the blonde seemed to up his blood pressure. He had big wet eyes and they glowed.

I made like I was a friend of hers. The license was 6c424. That surprised me a bit.

Again I was shot with luck. He smirked and said, "I guess that fancy name, that Marta Sharry, was kind of a stage name, huh?"

"Oh, she told you her right name?"

He had the decency to blush. "No. She had the registration in one of them little plastic things on the key chain. I took it out once because I wanted to see how old she was. The name on it was something like Anne Richards."

"Anne Richardson?"

"Yeah. That's it."

"Good thing Joe Talley didn't catch you spying on her, eh?"

He licked his lips. His eyes shifted away from me. "I wasn't doing nothing," he said sullenly.

"Did she come and get the car when she left town?"

"She phoned, and I drove it over to her. I helped load her bags in the back. She give me five bucks."

"She seem nervous?"

"No. Kind of excited. Joe Talley came along. He sat beside her in the front seat and I walked back here. I saw her come by ten minutes later and he wasn't with her then."

"What time was that?"

"Sometime before midnight."

From there I went to the Talley Ho. There didn't seem to be anyone around. It was a big three-story Victorian frame house, with a cupola, a bunch of scroll saw work and an iron deer standing next to a chipped bird bath in the shaggy lawn under the shade of big elms.

I went back to the hotel and slept until ten. When I went back to the Talley Ho I found the narrow side street lined with parked cars. There was a guard at the gate.

"This is a private club, mister."

"So I've heard. I'm a stranger in town. I thought maybe I could join."

"Maybe you can and maybe you can't. Write us a letter and we'll let you know."

"Couldn't I talk to the manager?"

"No. Sorry. I got my orders. Nobody gets in unless they got a card."

"That's a hell of a note. Miss Sharry wrote me and told me that Joe Talley would treat me right if I ever came through here."

He turned the flashlight on my face again. "You know her?"

"No. I just made up the name."

"No need to get fresh, stranger."

"Hell, I like standing out here. Don't you?"

"Wait a minute," he said. "Anybody comes along I'll be right back, tell 'em. What's your name?"

"Gandy. Russ Gandy."

He was gone five minutes. He came back with a taller man. At their request I came inside the gate. I stood while they put the flash on me again.

"What's your business, Gandy?"

"I'll talk to Talley, if you'll get him out here."

"He's out of town. I'm in charge."

"What's your name?"

"Brankis."

"Come over here a minute, Brankis. This is personal."

We went over by the deer. I tapped a cigarette on its cast iron muzzle and lit it. "It's like this, Brankis. I ran into you-know-who in Chicago. He told me he had Anne Richardson staked out here. At the Westan Arms. I phoned her couple weeks ago. She told me that a guy named Joe Talley is all right, and—"

"Anne Richardson? Who the hell is she?"

"Don't be cute, Brankis. She's Torran's girl." I purposely made it a little loud.

"Dammit, lower your voice!"

I laughed at him. "Then the name means something to you?"

"How do you figure with Torran?" he said in a half whisper. "Nobody's ever been hotter than he is. So why should he pop to you?"

"Maybe you can call me an associate, Brankis."

"What kind of a word is that? Associate, yet. Joe isn't going to like any link-up between him and Torran through that girl. She's all mouth."

"Like any lush. Now can I come in and play? I just want to kill some time."

"No, friend. Anybody coming in gets Joe's okay and I told you Joe is out of town."

"That's too bad. I got some merchandise for him."

"Merchandise? What kind of merchandise?"

"Brankis, you must be a real small wheel in this outfit. Annie knows more than you do. She told me Joe Talley is

always in the market for this kind of merchandise."

It was too dark to see his face. I waited, hoping it would work. When he spoke he piled the words on too fast to cover up the period of silence. "Oh, that stuff."

"Yes, I got it down at the hotel. Want to come look it over and set a price?"

"Sure. I'll come take a look." He couldn't admit Joe had been leaving him out in the cold, and he had to see the merchandise to know just how far out he'd been left.

We went to the gate and he said, "George, I'll be back in a while. You have any problems, ask Mac what to do."

We went out and got in my car. I stopped for the first cross street and glanced at him, seeing his face for the first time, liking the youngness, the weakness, the loose viciousness of his mouth. I started up, took out my cigarettes and, as I offered him one, I managed to drop the whole pack at his feet. He bent over instinctively to pick them up. As he got into the right position I hit the brakes hard. His head dented the glove compartment door and he sighed once and flowed down onto the floor, like some thick, slow-running liquid.

I parked in shadows and looked him over. All he carried was a sap in black woven leather with a coil spring handle. I bent over him, folded his hat double to cushion the blow and hit him hard behind the ear, flush on the mastoid bone. I took his pulse. It was slow and steady.

I headed toward Danville, found a dirt road that turned left. The sign said the towns of Pilot and Collision were up that road. How does a town get to be called Collision?

The sky had cleared and the moon made a good light. The road was a little soft in spots. Farmhouse lights were off. The road made a right angle turn to the left and another to the right. When I saw a break in a fence, I got out and checked the ditch. It was shallow and dry. The pasture seemed firm enough. I put the car in low and drove across toward a dark clump of trees. I parked and hauled him out and used my tow rope to tie him to a tree. I wrapped him up so that all he could do would be roll his eyes

and wag his tongue. He was limp, sagging in the rope. I sat and smoked and waited for him to come around.

After a long time he sighed. Then he groaned. I knew he could see my cigarette end, glowing in the darkness.

"Whassa marra?" he asked. "Whassa idea?"

I didn't answer him. He was silent for a long time. He said, "What do you want?" Panic crouched behind the level tone.

I watched him and let him sweat. To him, I was just a dark shadow sitting on the front fender of the car.

"What are you going to do to me?" he asked. His voice shook.

A farm dog howled at the moon far away. A sleepy rooster crowed in a half-hearted way. Down the line a diesel hooted at a crossing.

"It was all Joe's idea," he said. "I'm not in on it. He met her in the hotel. She got tight out at the place. She hinted about Torran. Just little hints. So Joe pried it all out of her. She told him how she was waiting for word from Torran when he got ready to make his run for it. She didn't know where or when Torran was going to run. She had five thousand he'd given her in Chicago right after the job, when they split up. She was to buy a car and get it registered under her own name." He stopped talking and waited for me to say something.

He started again, his voice pitched higher than before. "Joe started thinking about all that cash. All that money, and he worked the girl up to where she was thinking of crossing Torran, because Torran had been pretty rough with her. The more he thought about getting his hands on that dough, the better he liked the idea. He talked it over with me. The idea was to get Torran to run with the girl to right where Joe wanted him to run. It had to be done delicate because if Torran felt maybe the girl was steering him some special place, he'd smell a cross."

Again he waited and again I said nothing.

"What are you going to do to me? I'm telling you everything I know." It was half wail and half whine. "Joe fixed her up with the car and figured that because

of the dough in serial sequence and the bearer bonds, Torran would want to get out of the country to where maybe he could buy a banana citizenship and get a better percentage than trying to fence the stuff here where it's too hot to touch. And if Joe got the dough here he'd be in the same trouble. Mexico has an easy border to cross, even with them looking for you. So Joe figured help him get into Mexico through the girl, and take it away from him down there.

"Joe goes to Mexico a lot because if you spend too much here, the tax boys get curious. He's got a house down there he rents by the year. In Cuernavaca. As soon as the girl got word from Torran she told Joe and he flew down to set it up. If Torran goes to Canada or flies out of the country some other place, Joe is licked. The girl was supposed to get away from Torran for a couple minutes and wire me so I could phone Joe. The wire hasn't come yet."

I flipped a cigarette away, stood up, walked over to him. I said casually, "If I kill you, Brankis, you can't phone Joe and tell him about this, can you?"

"Now wait a minute!" he said in a voice like a woman's.

"Or maybe I'll tip Joe Talley that you opened up like a book."

"A deal, mister," he said breathlessly. "I keep my mouth shut and so do you. Honest."

"And I get word on that wire the minute you get it."

"Yeah. Sure!"

I untied him and slapped him around and took him back and left him. I went right to Western Union. A bored night man looked at my credentials without interest, sneered at a twenty-dollar bribe and told me the only ones to see telegrams were the persons to whom said telegrams were addressed. There was no time to arrange a tap on the Tally Ho phone. I added two more twenties. He ignored me. I added two more. One hundred dollars.

He yawned and picked up the money. "It was marked deliver," he said, "and I sent it out twenty minutes before you came in. It was from National City, California, and it read: *Plan to take*

*cruise to Acapulco starting tomorrow. It was signed Betty."*

He pocketed my money and shuffled back and sat down and picked up a magazine.

### CHAPTER III.

THIRTY-ONE hours later I was sitting by a window on the port side of the Mexico City-Acapulco plane as it lifted off the runway at seven in the morning. There was a wad of traveler's checks in my pocket and a bad taste in my mouth. I had wasted too much time getting the *turista* permit, making travel connections.

We climbed through the sunlit air of the great plateau, lifted over the brow of the mountains near Tres Cumbres and started the long, downhill slant to Acapulco on the Pacific. It was hard to figure just how quickly Torran and the girl would get there. My phone calls to California had established that there was no scheduled cruise to Acapulco at the date the wire had indicated.

Probably Torran had made arrangements to have a boat pick him off the lower California coast and smuggle him down to Acapulco. The odds were against his tarrying in Mexico long. Extradition was too simple. The same method of travel would take him down the Central American coastline to some country where an official would listen joyfully to the loud sound of American dollars.

One thing I could be certain of. Joe Talley would be there. And I would know Joe Talley. I'd memorized a recent picture of him—a beefy blond with a rosebud mouth and slate eyes. I knew Torran's face as well as I knew my own.

Traffic wasn't heavy as it was the off season for Acapulco, the summer-rate season. The air was bumpy. A large family across the way was airsick, every one of them. We flew to Cuernavaca, over the gay roofs of Taxco. Brown slowly disappeared from the landscape below us and it began to turn to a deep jungle green.

At nine o'clock we lifted for the last low range of hills and came down to the coast. The Pacific was intensely blue, the surf line blazing white. The hotels were

perched on the cliffs that encircled the harbor. The wide boulevard ran along the water's edge.

There are hunches. All kinds. This was one of those. I looked at the city as we came in for the landing. I looked at it and I didn't feel anything and then all of a sudden I felt confident and good. I felt that whatever was going to happen, it would happen right down there.

We made a bumpy landing and as soon as we were down I knew why Acapulco was not at the peak of its season. The heat was like when a barber wraps your face in a steaming towel. It was heat that bored a hole in you and let all the strength run out. It was heat that kept your eyes stinging from the sweat running into the corners.

I stood in the shadow of the wings as they untied the baggage and handed it down. I took my bag and walked across the runway, and it was so hot the soles of my feet began to burn. I took the sedan which had HOTEL DE LAS AMERICAS on the front of it, remembering that it had been recommended to me in Mexico City. No one else was going to that hotel. The airsick family piled into a shabbier sedan labeled HOTEL PAPAGAYO.

The hotel was something right out of the imagination of an assistant to a Hollywood producer. High on the cliff, with cabañas, shops, pools, outdoor cocktail lounges, outdoor dining room and dance floor. I registered, took a cabaña, took a shower and put on the Acapulco clothes I'd bought in Mexico City. Protective coloration. I wanted to look like an American tourist. The shirt had a pattern of tropical parrots. The shorts were lime yellow. The sandals had straps that hurt me across the instep. I topped it off with a white mesh cap with a ball-player's bill, oval slanting sun glasses.

I told my troubles to the desk clerk. "I'm trying to find a friend here in town. I don't know what hotel he's at. How would I go about it?"

"An American, sir?"

"Yes."

He gave me a list of the six most likely hotels. The flaw was that Joe Talley might not be using his own name. But there was no real reason for him not to

do so. His name would mean nothing to Torran. Torran was big time. Talley was a small town crook. And just before lunch I found him. He was at the Papagayo. It was one of those breaks you get. I was just getting out of the taxi in front of the place when I saw him coming across the road from the beach. He had a dark pretty girl with him. Both of them seemed a little unsteady on their feet. They passed right in front of the cab and went into the hotel grounds. Joe was speaking Spanish to the girl. She was giggling. I don't know how good the Spanish was. It sounded good and she seemed to be enjoying it. The black hair on the girl wasn't a dye job. Of that I was certain.

There were enough people around so that I could follow them into the grounds. I shoved the money at the cab driver. I got such a wide grin I knew it was too much. I went in. The cabañas were on either side of long walks behind the hotel. Tropical foliage was lush around them. I kept them in sight. They turned into the last but one on the central walk and I saw Talley unlock the door.

I strolled around. I went by to the end of the walk, came back, and when I was sure I wasn't observed, I ducked into the thick brush beside their cabaña. The windows were open. Through the screen I heard the buzz of a fan, the clink of bottleneck on glass, the girl's thin giggle. They kept talking Spanish to each other. They stopped talking after a while. I didn't risk raising my eyes above the sill until I heard the roar of a shower. Then I looked in.

It was Talley who was taking the shower. I could see the girl. She had changed into a white dress. She went over to the bureau and started making up her face. I walked away from there. I had vaguely planned to have Talley lead me to Torran and Anne. If Joe Talley could take Torran, it was all to the good. If he couldn't, he'd knock Torran off balance long enough for me to take him. But Talley was playing. He was like a guy with nothing on his mind. It bothered me. He ought to be pretty well tightened up. Just the thought of coming up against Torran ought to keep him nibbling on

his hands. Something had gone wrong in my guessing.

An hour later the girl came out of the cabaña alone. She had a big bright red purse slung over her shoulder. I tossed a mental coin and decided to stay with Joe Talley. So I intercepted her where I could keep Talley's cabaña in sight.

She gave me a long cold look, then wrinkled her nose in a very charming little smile. "A leddle."

"Can I buy you a drink?"

"Dreenk? No, *gracias*. Other time, maybee."

A nice old lady schoolteacher walked by, glanced at the girl and gave me a sour look. I tried to make a date with the girl, but she walked on.

I shrugged and found a bench where I could see Talley's cabaña. The long hours went by. I was hungry and thirsty and out of cigarettes. I cursed Talley, Torran, Anne Richardson, Mexico and the three hundred and seventy thousand dollars.

When Anne Richardson came by me, it caught me by surprise. I was waiting for Talley to come out. It shook me to see her and know that it could be the one. I went over the ticket agent's description. Hair like harvest wheat, he had said. Moon-pool eyes, whatever those are. The funny, tough, scratchy little voice would be the payoff.

I had to make a quick revision of all my guesses. It was like coming in on the third act, not knowing your lines or what has happened so far. I moved in behind her as she headed down the walk. She wore an aqua cotton two-piece dress with a bare midriff. She walked on high cork soles, and she was tall enough not to need them, and her walk was something to remember and speculate about and bring back to mind on long cold winter nights. A man like Torran should pick inconspicuous women. She was as noticeable as a feather bed in a phone booth.

She went to Joe Talley's cabaña, tried the door and went in. My play was to walk slowly by and see if I could duck into the shrubs again. This time they'd be speaking English, at least. But before I could get by, the door banged open and she came out again, blanched to the

# PSORIASIS

Whatever the extent, and it may be anything from two or three small spots on elbows and knees to large patches on the scalp, body and limbs. Psoriasis is always most distressing and embarrassing to the sufferer.

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color of roquefort, sucking at the air through parted lips. I took a quick step back, caught her wrist and spun her around.

"Let go, let go!" she panted, fighting me. The voice was small, scratchy.

"Get back in there, Anne!" I said, pushing her toward the door. Her ankle turned because of the high cork soles and I caught her before she fell. My using her name took a lot of the scrap out of her. Her eyes were wide and hot as she looked at me. Moon-pool eyes, to that ticket agent, are the ones so dark that you can't see where the irises leave off and the pupils begin.

"Who are you?"

I shoved her again, reached around her to the door and pushed it open, pulled her in. She turned her back to me and I spun her around and caught her hand just as she yanked the small automatic out of her white purse. I tore the gun out of her hand and it hurt her fingers and she yelled with pain. But I heard it as though it came from a long distance.

I was too busy looking at Joe Talley. He was pretty messy. Through the open bathroom door I could see the top half of him. The shower was still on and turned too hot so that steam drifted around him. He lay on his back with his legs still in the shower and the big knife was stuck through his throat at an angle so that the tip of it came out under his ear.

The girl made a dive for the door and I caught her in time, whirled her back, picked her up bodily and threw her onto

the bed. "Be good," I said. She lay there and stared at me. I opened her purse, took out cigarettes, lit one. I looked around the room. The search had been pretty complete. The bottle was on the bureau. Two glasses had been used. The third was still clean, still upside down on the tray. I poured some of the defunct's bourbon, a liberal dose, took it over and pushed Anne's legs out of the way so I could sit on the bed.

"I could use some of that," she said in a wheedling tone.

"Tell me some things and maybe you'll get some."

"Tell you what things? I don't know anything to tell you."

"Why did you kill him, honey?" I knew she hadn't. I knew she didn't have time to do it. But she didn't know I knew.

Her eyes darkened curiously. "I'm asking you that, mister."

"I'm turning you into the local cops. I think they have cells with dirt floors. I think the jailers will give me a vote of thanks for putting something like you in there. The bugs are bad, but they'll keep you entertained."

"You can't bluff me, mister. Who are you?"

"How did you get here so fast from National City? You and Torran?"

"Who's Torran? Somebody I ought to know?"

"From way back," I said.

"Why did you kill Joe Talley, mister?"

I took another pull at the drink. Her eyes kept flicking to the glass and now and then she'd lick her underlip.

"We're going around in circles, Anne. I didn't kill him. And I know you didn't. But I do know who did. Interested?"

She sat up, pulled her knees up, hugged them. "Who?"

"I'll give you a little. You give me a little first."

She shut her eyes for a long three seconds. "We got here fast because there was a light plane staked out for us at Ensenada."

"A girl killed him. A Mexican girl wearing a white dress and carrying a big red purse. She was pretty. He brought her back here from the beach around noon. They both looked a little high."

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Still hugging her knees, she said five or six words that she shouldn't have known. Her lips writhed like bloody worms as she said them.

I asked, "Where's Torran?"

Suddenly a thought seemed to strike her. Her eyes went wide. She scrambled off the bed, took one hesitant step toward the door and then stood there. "Look, I just realized that maybe. . ."

"Go ahead and talk. Get it off your chest," I told her. "I know that you and Joe Talley planned to hijack Torran's take and you crossed Torran by sending the wire to Brankis. I know which bus Torran took dressed as a fat lady, and I know the place he tossed the getup out of the gray Buick, and I know how you honked at the bus."

It was meant to shake her. It did. Her face went white again. She sat down beside me on the bed.

"Who are you?"

"I'm just a guy interested in three hundred and seventy thousand dollars, sweet."

She ran her fingertips along the back of my hand. "If I could trust you, mister."

"How do you mean?"

"Wouldn't I be a damn fool if I steered you to that money and then you took it all?"

I nodded gravely. "You'd grab it all for yourself if you could, wouldn't you?"

She looked at me. "I need help. Joe was going to help. I'm afraid he talked to the wrong people. I'm afraid he was killed by somebody who wants the money."

"Where's Torran?"

"How can I trust you?"

"You can't. But I think you're on a spot where you're going to have to trust somebody."

She turned into my arms and caught her hand strongly at the back of my neck and kissed me. She could be considered an expert. The kiss was as smarting hot as the sauce that came with the one meal I had in Mexico City.

"It's nice," I said casually, "but it isn't worth three hundred and seventy thousand." I blocked the slap she threw at me and watched her as she went over to the bureau.

She picked up the bottle and tilted it

high. Her throat worked convulsively for five long swallows. She lowered the bottle, said, "Haaaaah", tilted it high again and took three more swallows. She wiped her wet mouth on the back of her hand, leaving a smear of deep red.

"I've got to tell you," she said, "because I've got to have help. Torran is sick. He got sick in National City, and he's been running a hell of a high fever. He's out of his head sometimes. That made it simple for me to contact Joe as soon as we landed. Joe made arrangements for a house up the beach, a small place walled in and private. Torran's there. The bad thing was not knowing how to get the money away from him. It's all crammed into a huge money belt. Even sick like that, I couldn't risk it. And I'm not killing anybody, even for that amount of money.

"Joe has contacts. He got some sedative and handed it to me early this morning. I couldn't get it down Torran until noon.

"When he was out, I got the belt off him. I know it isn't safe to stay here. I can't get it out of Mexico without Joe's help. So I hid it in the house and came to get Joe and tell him. Now I'm afraid to go back there, because if Joe talked to the wrong people and there's another group after that money, they'll be at the house now. If you come back with me and help me get the money, and help me get it to El Salvador, I'll give you seventy thousand."

"Half, sweet."

"One hundred thousand. No more. Final offer." The liquor had gotten into her blood stream. Her lips looked swollen and she weaved slightly.

"Half, and be good, or I'll take it all."

She leered at me. "Maybe we could stick together, huh? Your money is my money?" She laughed. It looked funny to see her standing there laughing, because behind her I could see Joe Talley's hand, palm upward, the steam curling around it.

She turned toward the bottle. I got there first. She cursed me. She clawed at my face and I slapped her so hard her eyes went off focus. Then she turned sweet. "You gotta help me, honey," she said. "Gee, I don't know your name."

"Russ, sweet. Be good. Stand by the door. There's prints to get rid of. That heat is going to make time of death tough for them to determine."

I cleaned up and we left. A man was standing up the walk talking to a woman who stood in front of the neighboring cabaña. I turned back toward the door, waved, and said, "See you later, boy."

Her face and eyes were empty as we got into the cab. She gave the address "Ocho Calle Revocadera."

"You know the language?"

"Twenty words, Russ."

I held my hands low and took a look at the automatic. It was a toy. Twenty-five caliber. Curly designs etched into the steel. The clip was full. The cab took fifteen minutes to put us by the gate in the wall around the house. She sat in the cab and started to tremble. "I'm scared," she said in a low tone.

I held the door and she got out. I paid the driver and the cab went away from there. I looked at the gate. There was a chain for a padlock but no padlock. I slipped the catch and pushed it open. The lawn was deep green, unkempt. Flowers straggled in wild confusion along the side of the pink stone house.

"What room is he in?"

She was shivering again. "In . . . in the back."

"Did you lock the place up?"

"Yes."

I took a look at the side door. The wood was splintered and pieces of the brass lock lay on the stone step. I pushed her to one side, kicked the door open and went fast whirling on balance, the way I had been taught. The hallway was empty, dim. I listened. The house was silent.

"Come in," I whispered. She came in obediently. She was chewing on her lip. The liquor was sweating its way out of her.

"Where did you hide it?" I whispered, my lips close to her ear.

"You'll take me with you, Russ?"

"Of course."

"Promise."

"I promise."

"Come on, then." She walked with extreme caution. I followed her. It was hard

to walk silently on the gayly patterned tile floor. She peered into the next room and then walked in. Suspended from the ceiling was a huge fixture, like a fruit bowl. She pointed up at it. I picked up the antique Spanish chair from its position near the door and put it silently under the fixture. She put her hand on my shoulder and stepped up onto the chair, reached her hands up and around the edge of the fixture.

The flick of movement was off to the side. I turned, firing as I turned, my snapping shot drowned by the resounding smash of a heavier weapon. He stood gaunt in the doorway, wearing only pajama pants, his eyes glittering and feverish, black stubble on his face, his lips cracked and caked with white.

As the muzzle swung toward me, I saw the tiny holes appearing in his naked chest, all left of center. His left. The little automatic shot well. He tried to hold onto the doorway and steady the weapon. He trembled with effort but he could not stay the slow sagging of the muzzle. When he fired it, it was aimed at the tile. It smashed tile, whirred by my head and chunked into the wall behind me. His knees made a clocking sound on the tile and he folded awkwardly onto his face, getting one hand up but not far enough.

I turned toward Anne Richardson. Both her hands were clamped on the rim of the light fixture and her feet were still on the chair. But her knees sagged so that all her weight was on her hands, and on the fixture. It pulled free of the ceiling and she came down with it, hitting cruelly against the heavy arm of the chair, tumbling off onto the floor while the glass splashed into all corners of the room.

I knelt by her and turned her over gently and saw where the bullet had entered, just below the bare midriff, dead center, ranging upward. She gave an odd little smile and said, "Tell . . . tell them I . . ." Then she chopped her heels at the floor so hard she broke the straps of both cork-soled shoes and they came off. She arched up a few inches and dropped back and died. I wondered what I was supposed to tell them.

I went to the front door and listened. There was no traffic in the road. The

nearest beach house was four hundred yards away, and the sound of the surf was loud.

Torran was dead. That look of affability was gone in death. He looked weak, vicious, cruel. He looked like a punk, a dirty small time killer. I searched the house. The kitchen was small. The girl in the white dress lay with her head under the sink, face down, the big red purse under her stomach, her white dress high on the bare strong brown thighs. The slug had made an evil mess of the back of her head. Her companion, a dark man I had never seen before, was one eighth alive. At least he was breathing. His pulse had a flutter like the wings of a captive moth. He had two in the belly.

When Torran had regained the belt, he had put it where a sick person could be expected to put it. Under his pillow. I opened it. Each compartment was hard as stone with money. It was crammed in so tightly the belt would have to be cut to get it out without tearing it.

I looked at it. All the money in the world. Fresh money, still in the mint wrappers. All the money in the world for all the things in the world. I sat on the bed that smelled of fever and sickness in the room with the drawn blinds and ran my fingertips back and forth across the visible edges of the stacks of bills. I thought of crazy but possible things.

It was done very, very neatly. It was done the way experts do it. A gardener was working in front of my cabaña at the Hotel de las Americas. Another man was coming down the path with a covered tray. I unlocked the door and went in. When I was three steps inside the room the gardener shoved the muzzle of the weapon through the screen of the side window. The waiter tossed napkin and tray aside, kept the light machine gun the napkin had covered. He held it centered on the small of my back. At the same instant the third man stepped out of my bathroom and covered me with a professional-looking revolver.

I raised my arms and stood there. With

no accent at all the man in front of me said, "Sit down and hold onto your ankles."

I did as directed. They took the gun first. Then they took the money belt off me. They put the gun and money belt on the bed. They seemed to be waiting for someone. I felt better. I had a lovely idea. "Police?" I asked. My voice sounded like something crawling up the side of a wall.

"But of course," the English-speaking one said.

We all waited. Broughton came in. The white caterpillar eyebrows showed no surprise, no elation. He looked like the deacon standing at the end of the pew waiting for the collection plate to be handed back.

"You saved us some trouble, Gandy," he said.

"Glad I could help."

"We didn't find Brankis until yesterday. We've gotten excellent co-operation from the Mexican authorities."

"Put that in your report, Broughton."

He nodded. "I will. You nearly made it, Gandy. One day later . . ."

"My hard luck, I suppose," I said. "Can I get up on my feet?"

He nodded. I got up. He showed expression for the first time. I was something low, dirty and evil. Something you'd find under a wet rock. Something he wanted to step on.

"We're taking you back," he said.

"Kind of you, sir."

I grinned at him. I gave him a big broad grin and he turned away from it. I was laughing inside. I was laughing so hard I hurt. Let him have his fun. Sooner or later he was going to find out about the wire I sent before returning to my cabaña—that wire to Washington Bureau Headquarters, giving the case code name, reporting recovery, requesting instructions.

You see, it looked like all the money in the world, but sometimes even that isn't enough.

# THE SWAMP SEARCHERS

TALMAGE POWELL

*The only clues Barney could follow on this desperate manhunt, were the smell of murder, and the silent message in a dying man's eyes.*

AFTER a week, Charlie still had found no trace of Bobo Hensley and the twenty thousand dollars. The strain was putting a twitch in Charlie's narrow eyes. Being buried alive up here in the Smoky Mountains was doing unpleasant things to Leah, too. She was just about nuts from having the crickets, frogs, and whip-poorwills talk to her at night.

Leah was something to make the local yodelers come out of the hills just for a look. She was tall, had black hair and green eyes, and she knew how to dress her engineering job and walk it around. Charlie was her second husband. Sometimes, when she was sore, Leah compared Charlie unfavorably with her first husband, who had committed suicide.

Being away from city lights was making her short with Charlie. She railed at him and cried in anger, and last night Charlie had slapped her.

With Barney, it was different. He fished every day. The twenty grand wasn't his. Not Barney Loy's That was Charlie's worry. It was a sort of accident that Barney was here with Charlie and Leah.

Barney sat on the screen porch of the small cottage. The cottage was on a hill overlooking the little village, and the village was on a hill overlooking a neck of Lake Sanloosa. On hills in the distance could be seen the wooded sweep of cool wilderness, with here and there a checker-board patch that meant a hillbilly farm with corn and tobacco struggling to stay upright in its growth on the hillside.

Barney was cool, contented, as he snelled bass hooks. Behind the cottage a mountain stream gurgled. In one of the two small bedrooms Leah was prowling sullenly. Charlie was off somewhere trying to ingratiate himself with these stolid, wary hill people. Trying to get a lead on Bobo Hensley without anybody knowing that was what he was trying to do. A

smart guy, Charlie. Yeah. Only something about these people saw through the smartness.

Leah came out on the porch. She was wearing a print dress. It clung to her like tattoos on her skin. She passed her hand through her mane of black hair, sighed, lighted a cigarette, and sat down in a cane-bottomed chair to watch Barney prepare his fishhooks.

"You're really serious about this fishing, aren't you, Barney?"

"Sure." He was a male, and therefore inevitably aware of Leah's nearby warmth. But he was plenty sore at her, and Charlie, too. A pair of tramps. And he was sore at himself for not recognizing that fact sooner. Maybe he'd recognized it and just closed his eyes. You had to have a good manager to get ahead in the fight racket, and Charlie was even a little better than good. Or so Barney had believed until recently.

"How can you do it, Barney?" Leah asked between drags on her fag. "Stay out on that lake like you do?"

"Oh, I dunno. I just like it." He didn't try to explain. Leah wasn't the kind to understand. Ever since he'd been a kid he'd wanted to find himself a place like this. A street corner slugger in an East Side slum, he'd wondered what the world was like out where the trees were green and plentiful and the sun shone on something besides concrete and massed bodies.

There had been the training camp in Jersey. But that still wasn't the dream coming true. Too many reporters and city yeggs flocked in to watch him spar and punch the big bag. To look at his two hundred and four pound mass of muscles like he was a prize boar in a hog show.

Leah put her cigarette out and came over to stand beside Barney's chair. She touched his shoulder and her fingers were like small flames. "Barney . . . it looks

like we're going to be stuck here a long time. These people aren't Charlie's type. You got a way with them that he hasn't. Like you got a way with old ladies and kids—and certain young women."

He lifted a broad placid face that wasn't too badly marked by seventy-three fights. Her lazy eyes and moist lips made the proposition even plainer than her words had. You find that twenty grand and Bobo Hensley so we can get out of this place, and you won't be sorry, Barney."

"The price, Leah, is a little high."

She stepped back. She looked as if she wanted to slap him. "What do you intend to do?" she said sullenly. "Just rot away here?"

"Hell, no. I plan to go fishing."

He gathered up his tackle and walked off toward the lake, leaving her standing there with her hands opening and closing and her face stamped with rage.

I'm through with Charlie and Leah, Barney thought. Charlie wouldn't be able to talk him out of it, either. Charlie had that quick way of moving and speaking that made Barney always feel like a clunk, even if Barney knew he wasn't a real lunk-head. But Charlie could bark his lungs hoarse this time without it doing him any good.

Let Charlie find himself a new boy, a fresh sucker to whom he could give a big build-up and then bet against to clean up.

The Kid Delaney fight still rankled. I might have taken that guy if Charlie hadn't talked me into training with the wrong tactics, even when I felt I was right. Charlie must have kept Delaney tipped off during every moment of training, too. When he'd waltzed into the ring that night, Barney hadn't a prayer, like an army whose general has passed every communication to the enemy before an attack.

So Charlie had made his twenty grand. So what to do about a guy like that? You got anything to go to the commission with? And you go to the boxing commission and Charlie outtalks you. Maybe he gets it in the neck, but you will never fight again, either. Charlie knows that, is banking on it. And banking on that certain little thread of feeling inside of you

that makes it tough for you ever to turn against a guy you've once called a friend. Now you cap Charlie's assurance you'll keep your mouth shut with Leah's proposition.

What do they take me for, anyway?

The dock was a floating island of planks lashed to oil drums. In the center of the dock stood a shed where soft drinks and candy were sold. Boats, flat bottoms and classy v-bottoms, were moored around the dock. The dock was hooked to the land by a thirty-foot-long gangplank which floated on more drums and was moored to the bank by ropes.

A wiry old ex-seaman ran the dock. He passed the time of day as Barney bought bait and paid rent on a boat and kicker.

Barney spun the kicker to life and started out over the lake.

He guided the boat in and out of the straits, in and out of the coves, until he was about four miles down the lake. He waited with a minnow and sat back to await the passing of a hungry bass. He'd had good luck here yesterday. Caught two and missed one strike.

With the cool evening air like a caress, he sighed back in the boat and thought of how hot and humid it was in New York at this moment. He wanted only to relax, but his thoughts kept running back to Leah. And Charlie. And Bobo Hensley.

Barney felt himself sweating the sweat of rage all over again. He'd found out about that bet and Charlie had said, "Oh, for cripes sakes, you'd have got your cut!"

As if that squared everything!

That lousy heel. That punk with the fishbelly-white face of a corpse, that consumptive cough, and the skinny body that threatened to rattle its bones together when Charlie put it in motion.

Barney had always felt a little sorry for Charlie because of Charlie's unhealthy appearance. The sympathy of a man with health and strength roaring through every fiber.

But not now. No more of this soft, sentimental sympathy. Good enough for Charlie because he'd been scared to collect his illegal bet on the Delaney go. Charlie had been sure the plainclothes boys had sniffed a stink and were watch-

ing him. Charlie had figured the gambler holding the dough would shag out of town with those cops nosing around. This had distressed Charlie greatly. So Charlie had sent Bobo Hensley to get the dough before it got away for good. Bobo had picked up the money as it had been arranged by phone—only he had kept right on traveling.

Charlie'd been fit for a strait jacket then. He'd wept, real tears. He would cut Bobo up and feed him to stray dogs. But he had to find him first.

They'd gone to Bobo's apartment, Barney himself so mad he could bust, now that Charlie had spilled his brains in hopes that Barney might have some idea of where Bobo had gone and be of some help.

In the apartment, they'd found that timetable, slid down behind the dresser where it had fallen accidentally. Bobo had made little checks beside the schedule to Bryson City, North Carolina.

Charlie's lips and eyes had looked as if oil had been poured over them. "The dumb hillbilly punk, he's gone home with the dough. He was always talking about those mountains above Bryson City, the lake where he used to fish, those hills where he hunted."

All that before Bobo, big, strong, easy-going Bobo, had got his brains scrambled after having fought his way nearly to the top in the big city. The Mauling Mountaineer they'd called Bobo, but he'd been good only to stay in another man's corner when Barney had met him.

"What will he do with twenty grand in that wilderness?" Leah had wondered.

"Maybe he'll buy some pigs," Barney had said, "to enjoy a higher grade of company."

The bass failed to show interest in the minnow. Barney weighed anchor and cruised on down the lake. He finally got Charlie, Leah, and Bobo off his mind when he had a strike in the rock-bound inlet he'd learned to call Little Sanloosa Cove.

He worked at the fishing another hour without luck. He noticed that night was creeping like dark oil poured over the jagged eastern peaks.

It was time to get back. After dark-

ness, in this maze of coves, he wouldn't give a plugged nickel for his chances of finding the boat dock. The kicker popped to life and Barney swung the boat out in the channel. It was later than he'd thought. Those shadows were reaching long toward the eastern shore. He opened the throttle wide and the roar of the kicker banged against the hills, throaty with anger. The boat began to crawl out of the water and plane, the prop churning water like a giant eggbeater. A little spray struck Barney's face. This was living. Cripes, a little more practice, and he would be a first-class sailor.

He didn't see the log. It was so sodden with water it must have been prowling just inches under the surface. The boat struck the log with a dull crunch. Up and over the boat started, like a fighter plane peeling off. It was as if Barney had been sitting on a giant spring, and the spring snapped suddenly. Up and out Barney went. End over end, arms and legs flying. The water was hard as a brick wall when he struck. The water gave him a stinging slap on the face that threatened to tear his head off his shoulders.

Bubbling, throwing spray, roiling about him, the water claimed Barney. He rolled down and down until his lungs ached, and then he burst back to the surface, blowing water out of his nose.

When the ringing left his ears, he heard the roar of the kicker fading in the distance. After throwing him like an angry bronco, the boat had righted itself, and Barney watched it charge down the channel, pitching and skipping crazily. It vanished from sight around a far off point of land. The sound of the kicker became a whisper in the majestic silence of the mountains and then faded out altogether. The boat had probably beached itself.

Barney began dog-paddling toward shore. He swam with all the grace of a mastodon. He'd never learned any of the fine points of swimming, but as a kid he'd been able to dog-paddle around East River docks for hours on end.

He pulled himself erect when the water was waist deep and waded to the slippery, chocolate mud shore. Under a tree just above the shoreline, he sat down to

snort the remainder of the lake out of his nose and catch his breath.

He was pondering a night spent under the trees. He didn't relish the thought. He was sopping; the nights up in these mountains sometimes got more than delightfully cool, under such circumstances.

Perhaps he could find a house nearby. He stood, turned toward the hillside, and saw the girl.

She startled him. He stood looking at her for a moment without speaking. She was small and slender and her hair was a mass of gold tumbling to her shoulders. She looked like a very charming mountain sprite in the half light of dusk.

Her voice was warm, husky, serious: "Are you hurt?"

Barney jarred to life. "No. At least I don't think so."

She walked toward him, graceful as a wood nymph. Barney, you're staring, Barney thought. She saw his stare and the drop of his jaw and smiled.

"I'm Josie Calhoun," she said. "I live in the cabin overlooking the point. When I heard the roar of the motor and the crunch I knew somebody had hit a log. Thought I'd better come down and see. You can dry out at the house if you want."

"That's very nice of you," Barney said in his best manner. "My name is—"

"Barney Loy," she finished for him. She had turned and started along a path which would have missed Barney's eyes if he had been here without a guide. He caught up with her.

Walking beside her, he was conscious of his bigness and the homely cast of his face. She was like . . . like cotton candy at Coney when he was a kid. He said, "How'd you know my name?"

"Oh, most folks around here know you. That Charlie Collins fellow with you, he hasn't found Bobo Hensley yet, has he?"

"Folks around here seem to know everything," he said, mimicking her liquid mountain drawl. "You must have mighty fine Western Union service in these parts."

Her laugh tinkled. "I didn't mean to make you sore. Strangers always attract attention and folks usually fathom what brings them here. Then word just somehow seeps around, like it's borne on the

wings of birds or filters through the very air itself."

Her words caused Barney to feel alien in the mountain quiet. The dusk took on a tinge of evil. The harrumping of frogs on the lake was strangely lonely, disturbing. He thought, hundreds of eyes watching, like chips of blue flint. Word filtering from tight mouths, making its way over the mountainsides, into the hidden coves. Charlie Collins had better watch himself; the tricks that go in New York might not look so smooth here.

## CHAPTER II.

He said nothing else to the girl as they crossed a clearing toward the house. Josie walked across a footlog that spanned a creek, waited for him to regain her side, gave him a smile that was more or less impersonal, crossed the packed earth of the yard, and opened the door of the house.

It was a structure of logs, rambling across the hillside. There were electric lights and a living room set in the front room. The place was clean, comfortable, and might have been the summer retreat of city folks.

"You can start a fire in the fireplace to dry out if you like," Josie said. "I was just getting supper."

She left him alone in the living room. There was wood laid in the fireplace and Barney found matches on the mantel. He touched fire to shavings, which caught and licked flame about the corncobs, which in turn threw flame against the heavier wood. The fire was beginning to crackle when Josie entered the living room again. She was carrying jeans, blue shirt, and a pair of brogans.

"These are pa's, Mr. Loy. I don't think he'd mind you wearing them until you dry yours. Supper on the table in ten minutes."

She tossed the clothes on the overstuffed chair. Barney picked them up. "I've been thinking what you said about Bobo Hensley and Charlie. You got more than passing interest in it?"

"Bobo is my cousin. Lots of cousins in these parts, Mr. Loy."

"The name is Barney," he said almost angrily. "And for the record, I'm no cousin of Charlie's. I'm just along for the ride and because I wasn't able to make up my mind about that character at first. I was so sore at him I didn't want him out of my sight, see? But I don't want to be mixed up in no feud. You can just put the word out in your telegraph system that I like the fishing."

She smiled. "I'll do that for you. I've seen you on the lake, Barney. And around the village. I've wondered how come you keep company with that walking corpse fellow."

She went out, and Barney pulled the blind and began climbing into her old man's clothes. They had a clean, nice smell of strong soap. So she had seen him around the village. How in blazes could he have seen her and not have it register?

She served him corn pone, hominy, thick slabs of fried ham, and collard greens. Halfway through the meal, thunder began to roll over the mountains and rain began to beat a lulling rhythm on the shingle roof. Barney ate until he was filled with a pleasant glow. He helped Josie stack the dishes in the kitchen sink. Rain was hammering against the windows now, and when she went back into the living room she stood with her back to the fire, and it made her very beautiful.

They were shut away here in a world all their own, and Barney took her in his arms and kissed her. Her lips were warm and sweet and her body flowed against his for a moment. She stepped back and Barney found himself gasping to breathe.

She slapped his face hard, though her features held no anger.

"You think I'm fresh, huh?" Barney said, holding his cheek. "You didn't like that?"

"Maybe I did, but I'm just a helpless mountain girl and you shouldn't try to take advantage of me."

Barney wasn't sure she was so helpless; he grinned, "Okay, so I was fresh—but I won't apologize. You don't apologize for something you enjoy very much."

She was smiling again. She studied the rain pouring down the dark window. "You'll get drenched. And you'd never

find your way to the village or back to the boat dock in pitch darkness, I suppose you'll have to stay here, at least till the rain stops. But you sit over there—and I'll sit here."

Barney took the chair she indicated, and she curled in the chair across the fireplace from him. Like a kitten. She asked a question or two and Barney found himself talking about himself. It was a new experience. He'd never been very talkative before, especially with dames. But he told her about little adventures he'd had as a kid, what life in the big town was like, and he found her a good listener.

The fire burned low, but the rain didn't stop. Barney quit talking finally. She was sleepy-eyed. She yawned, said, "Looks like I'll have to offer you the settee for the night."

She rose, lifted down the rifle that hung on wooden pegs over the fireplace.

Barney gave the gun an askance look. He didn't like guns. He said, "What's that for?"

"Pa's logging on Big Hickory." Josie smiled. "This little fellow will have to stand in his place. Good night, Barney."

She entered the bedroom, reappeared long enough to toss him a quilt with a crazy pattern and a pillow; then the door closed behind her and Barney heard it lock.

He rolled in the quilt, lay looking at the dying embers of the fire. He felt strangely young and happy. He went to sleep with a smile on his face.

Later he snapped awake, a feeling of alarm jolting through him. He didn't know how long he had slept, or who was in the room with him. Maybe Pa had finished logging on Big Hickory. Mountaineer fathers and shotguns became an unpleasant correlation in Barney's mind.

He stumbled off the sofa, watching the shadow over near the window, and bumped into the second man. Startled at the new presence, Barney threw a right, felt it connect, acting on the assumption that anyone who entered in this manner could be up to no good. There was a grunt; then a chunk of steel slapped the side of Barney's head. He sat down on the floor

so hard the house timbers groaned with the strain.

A switch clicked. A light flared up. Josie said, "Leave him alone, cousin!"

Barney took his hand away from the side of his bursting head. Sitting with his legs splayed, he saw Josie in the bedroom doorway, her face tight, the rifle in her hands. Shuffling away from the open window was Bobo Hensley. And just to Barney's right, standing over him, was a big hillbilly with a black beard, black eyes, and an equally dark look on his face.

Bobo had never been pretty and a hundred-odd fights had made such a mass of cartilage of his face that he was something out of a nightmare. He was bald and had the lumpiest ears in the fight racket. He looked at Josie and said in a voice filled with gravel, "Be careful with that thing!"

"You be careful. Mr. Loy is a guest in this house. You ought to show a little mountain courtesy. The idea, breaking in this way."

"Shucks," Bobo said, "we didn't mean evil. I just got to talk to Barney, is all."

Bobo's plaintive words and doleful expression caused Josie to lower the rifle. She came forward to help Barney back on the settee. She touched his hurt with gentle fingers.

Bobo came forward, offered his hand humbly. "Barney, it's good to see you. This is Skip Merrill. Skip, you apologize to the man for hitting him."

The big mountaineer slid his pistol in his overalls pocket, hooked his thumbs in his galluses, worried a cud of chewing tobacco in his stubbled paws, and looked Barney over. He didn't seem to think Barney was so tough. "Reckon I can, at that. Apologies, Barney. Didn't calculate to bop you. Just intended to make you quiet-like."

Barney decided to let it pass. He didn't like the faint sneer of contempt in Skip Merrill's eyes. Merrill was fully as large as Barney and seemed to be thinking what a pleasure it would be to take this citified prize fighter apart just to show the boys up and down the cricks that he could do it.

I don't think I'm gonna like Bobo's pal, Barney thought.

Josie crooned over him and said she would get turpentine to take the soreness out of his lump.

Bobo watched Josie pat the pungent medicine on Barney's head. Bobo blinked his eyes now and then. He shifted his gaze to Barney's face. "I saw you on Sanloosa when you hit the log. Saw you meet Cousin Josie. We kind of ambled up this way, and been waiting in Pa Calhoun's barn until we decided you wasn't coming out tonight."

Bobo licked his lips. His eyes were worried. Barney found himself feeling sorry for Bobo, remembering little favors Bobo had done him, the way Bobo, in Barney's corner, always seemed to suffer every punch that landed on Barney's face or body.

"Look," Bobo said, "Charlie Collins being down here has kind of got me pinned down."

"You took his twenty grand?"

Bobo nodded. "I'm gonna level with you, Barney. I had to have that money. I need it like a bass fish needs his scales. I need to use it in a hurry, for something extra special. So I got to get Charlie out of my hair."

Here it comes, Barney thought, the pitch.

"Tell you what," Bobo said in his halting tone, "I don't want to see anybody getting hurt, even that skunk Charlie. What I've got to do won't take all the money. I'll make a deal, split with Charlie."

It seemed to Barney to be rather cock-eyed reasoning. He said, "You will make a deal with Charlie—for Charlie's money?"

Bobo said seriously, "I figure Charlie owes me that money. You don't know Charlie like I do. He sold me short all down the line. He sold me for the quickest buck. I might be fighting even yet if Charlie had handled me different."

Barney studied Bobo's ugly, sad face. Barney was willing to concede a certain point. Charlie would have a tough time collecting the dough from Bobo through legal channels. Possession here seemed to be ten points of ownership.

It was anybody's dough, under the present setup. Hell, Barney thought, I've got as much right to it as anybody. I'm the guy who took the beating for the dough.

The thought angered him. But he kept his mind on Bobo and Charlie. "What's your deal?"

"I'll give Charlie back half the dough," Bobo said, "if he'll promise to get out of these hills and not make any trouble. Otherwise he'll get all the trouble he's asking for, and I'll keep all the money."

Bobo stood up, moved toward the door, Skip Merrill a sardonic shadow beside him.

Barney said, "Leah wants to get out of here."

"That Leah," Bobo said.

Skip Merrill grinned; he had broken, yellow teeth. "Some babe. What kind of playmate is she, Loy?"

Barney looked at him levelly. "She's warmer than a kewpie doll," he admitted. "But Charlie ain't. He's got ice in his veins. He may not want to leave so bad. I don't think he'll take your deal, Bobo."

"Maybe I got a way of forcing the deal," Bobo said darkly.

Barney studied Bobo's face again. Bluff or bravado wouldn't work in this setup. He saw neither in Bobo's face.

"You just do me this one favor, Barney," Bobo said. "We've always been friends, but I won't sponge on friendship any further. Just outline the deal to Charlie, see if you can help swing it, and meet me tomorrow night just after moonrise at the cabin on the point overlooking Little Sanloosa. You can't miss the place. Meantime, Skip and me will locate the boat you lost and fetch it back to the dock."

"I don't want to be dragged into this," Barney told him. "But I'll run this one errand."

"I told Skip you would. Maybe a little pressure will fix things so that we can iron out the details tomorrow night.

Bobo and Skip went out. Josie stood by the fireplace, very pensive. "That Leah, Barney—is she really such a . . . warm playmate?"

Barney looked at Josie's trim back and grinned. "She's got a bucket of hot

coals where most dames carry their hearts."

Josie whirled on him, and Barney's face went stiff. His kidding had misfired. Josie had tears brimming in her eyes.

Barney reached out, his face contrite, his mouth open to try to say something soothing.

"Don't you touch me, you big hunk of overgrown muscle! Cousin Bobo has done nothing but give you a build-up every time your name was mentioned. But now I believe Bobo really is punch drunk."

She picked up that rifle again, marched into the bedroom, and slammed the door. Barney let his hand drop and closed his mouth. He felt terrible. He hadn't known Josie long, but he wanted to know her a lot better. A crazy kind of dream was beginning to stir in the nethermost parts of his mind.

He sat on the settee. But he wasn't sleepy any longer. The rain had stopped. Moonlight was filtering through the window. He might as well go back to the cottage in the village.

"Cripes," he muttered, "but I feel lousy."

Leah cooked breakfast the next morning, scrambled eggs and scorched bacon. She shoved the food before Barney and Charlie, sat down at the end of the table, and poured herself a drink from the bottle of bourbon she had set out.

Charlie, who had the physique of a scarecrow, hunched his shoulders and picked up a fork. "Lay off that stuff, baby. It's not a healthy breakfast."

Leah looked out over the silent mountains and shivered. "Why don't you take a running jump in the lake? You can't find Bobo Hensley, and you're not man enough to take the twenty grand from him if you did."

Charlie's thin hands began to shake. "You let me find Bobo and I'll get the dough," he said. "I've dealt with tougher characters before."

"Big talk—and meantime we rot. I don't see what I ever tied onto you for."

"A meal ticket, baby. Just like your first husband."

"We'll leave my first husband out of this," Leah said, splashing a second drink

into her glass. "He was more of a man than you'll ever be."

"Maybe I ought to punch you one," Charlie threatened, "and show you just how much of a man I am."

This, Barney thought, can go on indefinitely.

"I saw Bobo last night," he said.

Charlie dropped his fork and Leah spilled her whiskey.

"You—you get the dough?" Charlie asked. He tried to laugh. The sound was forced, patronizing, and it sickened Barney. "You wouldn't hold out on me, Barney?"

Barney whittled Charlie down with his gaze. What a prize sap I was ever to hook up with this character, Barney thought. But Charlie could be plenty smooth when he wanted to be. Smarter boys than Barney had been taken in by him. Barney guessed there were two Charlies, really, the one who put on the suave front and this other one who had begun to be revealed when the money disappeared.

"You really think Bobo would hand over that money to me?" Barney asked.

Charlie's thin face grew glum. "No, I guess not. Bobo have anything to say to me?"

"He wants to make a deal."

Leah stiffened on the edge of her chair, lynx-eyed. Charlie laid down his fork with an elaborate motion. "A deal?"

"Bobo says he will split the money."

Charlie cracked his colorless lips in a mirthless laugh. "Some boy, Bobo. What does he take me for?"

"I told him you wouldn't do it."

"Did I say I wouldn't?"

Barney studied Charlie's face. Charlie had something up his sleeve. Barney felt a tremor of fear for Bobo pass through him.

Charlie flung his arms wide in a charitable gesture. "I don't mind living and letting live, Barney. Where do I meet Bobo?"

"I meet him first," Barney said. "Tonight."

"Arrange things for me, pal, and we'll all be one happy family again."

"Yeah," Barney said. He watched Charlie turn to Leah. That calculating

expression in Leah's eyes didn't change. She knew Charlie was up to something but she couldn't figure what.

"See, baby," Charlie told her, "we'll be getting out of here before long now, and I'll give you a grand to buy a new winter coat."

Still chortling, Charlie left the cottage to buy some cigarettes in the village. Leah watched him walk down the path out of sight; then she tossed off her drink. She got up to move around closer to Barney; she was a very delectable image in shorts and halter.

"Thanks, Barney, for trying to fix things."

She poured herself another drink, offered the bottle to Barney, and sat looking at him. Her lips were ripe, red, and glistening wet. She was bored stiff and Barney knew he could kiss her if he wanted to.

"I didn't try to fix anything," he said. "I ran into Bobo by accident, through a little cousin of his who lives four or five miles this side of the boat dock."

She laughed. "Female cousin, Barney?"

He nodded, said seriously, "It ain't over yet, Leah. Not by a long shot. Charlie won't go around handing out ten thousand dollars."

"I know. I had the same feeling—that he's planning something. I think he intends to meet Bobo, throw down on him with a gun, and take all of the money."

"Well, he'd better be careful. This is Bobo's country, his league. He's running with a tough sidekick named Skip Merrill. Something powerful is driving Bobo to keep that dough. I had the feeling he intends to keep it, even if he has to kill for it."

Her green eyes darkened. "He sounds determined."

"He's got just one thought in those scrambled brains—to keep at least half the dough. When Bobo grabs an idea like that, nothing will cause him to let go."

She leaned toward Barney. "Then," she said, a huskiness slipping into her tone, "it's still partly up to you, Barney. You got to fix it so we can get out of here. You can do it, acting as middle man."

"I don't like the sound of that phrase,

middle man. I don't want any part of this setup."

Her smile came, slow and liquid. She moved her lips close. "Even for me?"

"I think," Barney said, "I'd better go fishing."

### CHAPTER III.

THAT night a pale moon poured cream over the hills, threw shadows into the valleys and coves, and turned to silver reflections in the dark water of the lake. During the day Barney had recessed from his fishing long enough to cruise slowly from the boat dock to Little Sanloosa and back again. He wanted to make the trip by water and needed the certainty that he could navigate in the darkness. He had also spotted the tumbledown, deserted shack above Little Sanloosa. He hadn't seen the house at first, but after he'd cruised into the cove he'd picked it out of the trees, an ivy covered mass of logs blending with the hillside.

Now, with the moonlight at his back, he cut the kicker and stood in the boat as it drifted toward the bank. It bumped gently. Barney went over the prow with the line in his hand. His feet slipped on the dark, slick mud. He snubbed the line about a stump just above the water line. Then he started up the hillside.

Frogs and crickets sang lullabies; but Barney's nerves refused to be soothed. He struck the brush line and waded through brambles, muttering darkly. He was sweating by the time he came out of the brush into the clearing where the tumble-down cabin stood.

He paused a moment at the edge of the clearing. From his hip pocket he slipped the jack handle he'd picked up in an idle moment today. He wasn't really anticipating trouble; but with twenty thousand dollars floating around he didn't feel it wise to take too many chances.

The cabin was dark and seemed to be deserted. The front door was standing crookedly, hanging by one rusty hinge. There was a strong earthy smell inside the cabin.

Moonlight filtered feebly through the cracked window, touching a paleness over an old stone fireplace, a broken-down

table and bench. Barney's body was blocking a part of the moonlight; and when he shifted, he saw Bobo.

He caught his breath and the jack handle fell from his fingers. Bobo was sitting on the floor of the cabin, his shoulders sagging against the wall. A crimson well had been opened through a jagged wound in his hairy neck.

Barney fought about four impulses at once. To run. To yell for help. To shut his eyes, and tell himself this wasn't true. To see if anything could be done for Bobo.

Given a second to steady himself, Barney knew there was really no decision to be made. He dropped on his knees at Bobo's side. Bobo was his friend, and it lumped Barney's throat and made him very mad to see him hurt like this. He was a big, dumb clunk, but he'd never done anything to deserve this.

Barney jerked out his handkerchief to make an effort at stemming the flow of blood. It was already becoming a coagulated mess on Bobo's neck. It didn't seem that he could help any. He already looked dead.

Then there was a twitch of Bobo's lids, and his eyes opened. They were glazed, the pupils wide and dark with shock and fear.

"It's me, Bobo," Barney said gently. He saw some of the wild terror leave Bobo's eyes.

"The money, Barney. . . . Get Josie to take you to Cold Slough."

The words were stretched out and took great effort. Bobo closed his eyes again and Barney decided to get him in a more comfortable position and run like crazy for help, a telephone, a doctor.

Before Barney could move him, Bobo coughed bloody froth. He opened his eyes once more; they were filled with some kind of message. And Barney knew that he couldn't help him now. Neither could he fathom the message in his eyes.

"Murder, Barney," Bobo gurgled. "Strictly murder. . . ." He kept right on talking, but it was silent talk, just a movement of his lips. Maybe he thought he was shouting it. The message seemed to leave his eyes. But he wasn't making a sound, and Barney couldn't read lips.

HER HIGHNESS

# JOAN THE WAD

317, JOAN'S COTTAGE,  
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CORNWALL

ALWAYS UPON YOU DAME FORTUNE WILL NOO, IF YOU ALWAYS CARRY YOUR WEE JOAN THE WAD

"Two weeks ago I bought a 'Joan the Wad' and to-day I have won £222 10s. Please send two more."

*E.C., Tredegar, S. Wales.—Extract from "Everybody's Fortune Book, 1932."*

## JOAN THE WAD

SEND  
NOW



HURRY

GUARANTEED DIPPED IN WATER  
FROM THE LUCKY SAINTS' WELL

is the LUCKY CORNISH  
PISKEY who Sees All, Hears  
All, Does All. JOAN THE WAD  
is Queen of the Lucky Cornish  
Piskeys. Thousands of persons  
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Joan the Wad has brought them  
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**HISTORY FREE FOR A SHILLING**  
If you will send me your name  
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reply, I will send you a history  
of the Cornish Piskey folk, and  
the marvellous miracles they  
accomplish. JOAN THE WAD  
is the Queen of the Lucky Cornish  
Piskeys and with whom  
good luck and good health  
always attend.

### AS HEALER

One lady writes: "My sister suffered very badly for years, but since I gave her a 'Joan the Wad' to keep near her she is much easier. Do you think this is due to Joan or the Water from the Lucky Well?"

### AS LUCK BRINGER

Another writes: "Since the War my wife and I have been dogged by persistent ill-luck, and we seemed to be sinking lower and lower. One day someone sent us a 'Joan the Wad.' We have never found out who it was, but, coincidence if you like, within a week I got a much better job, and my wife had some money left her. Since then we have never looked back, and, needless to say, swear by 'Queen Joan'."

### AS MATCHMAKER

A young girl wrote to inform me that she had had scores of boy friends, but it was not until she had visited Cornwall and taken Joan back with her that she met the boy of her dreams, and as they got better acquainted she discovered he also has "Joan the Wad."

### AS PRIZEWINNER

A young man wrote us only last week: "For two years I entered competitions without luck, but since getting 'Joan the Wad' I have frequently been successful although I have not won a big prize, but I know that —, who won £2,000 in a competition, has one because I gave it to him. When he won his £2,000 he gave me £100 for myself, so you see I have cause to bless 'Queen Joan'."

### AS SPECULATOR

A man writes: "I had some shares that for several years I couldn't give away. They were 1/- shares, and all of a sudden they went up in the market to 7/9. I happened to be staring at 'Joan the Wad.' Pure imagination, you may say, but I thought I saw her wink approvingly. I sold out, reinvested the money at greater profit and have prospered ever since."

**JOAN THE WAD'S** achievements are unique. Never before was such a record placed before the public. Ask yourself if you have ever heard before of anything so stupendous. You have not. Results are what count, and these few Extracts from actual letters are typical of the many hundreds that are received, and from which we shall publish selections from time to time. We unreservedly **GUARANTEE** that these letters were absolutely spontaneous, and the originals are open to inspection at **JOAN'S COTTAGE**. Send at once for full information about this **PROVED Luck Bringer**. You, too, may benefit in Health, Wealth and Happiness to an amazing extent.

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Then Bobo burped, like a baby, almost, and fresh blood spilled over his lips.

Bobo died. Barney saw the light go out of his eyes; then Barney sat back on his haunches and discovered a hot feeling in his eyes that might mean tears. He thought about the time he'd known Bobo and what a friendly lug he had always been. Then frustration began roiling in Barney as he realized that Bobo had not only labeled his death as murder but had gone ahead to tell the who, how, and why of it. Only it had been the silent talk of the dead, the talk of a man in whom the fighting instinct had tried to operate until the last.

Barney eased Bobo to a sitting position and folded the large, heavy hands across the great barrel structure of chest. Then Barney rose, slid the small flashlight out of his hip pocket and played it over the room.

Near Bobo he found the gun, a second-hand thirty-eight revolver. He decided he'd never seen the gun before. It could belong to anybody.

He stepped to the door of the cabin, switching off the flashlight. He smelled the odor of earthy perspiration before he heard the quick shuffle of a foot. He started his body about in a spin. Half-way around, the blow caught him on the side of the head. A great light bloomed in his brain; and he saw the large shadow moving out from its hiding spot outside the door jamb. Then the light went out, leaving nothing but a black void.

At last into the void began to filter sensation, which was anything but unpleasant. Barney had the grandfather of headaches. A hand was on his shoulder, shaking him.

He said, "Lemme alone!"

A light played like fire against his closed lids. The hand shook him again. He remembered Bobo, and he opened his eyes.

A Coleman lantern was hissing softly, throwing a glaring white light over the moss-grown interior of the cabin. Barney rolled his head. Charlie and Leah were here; and there stood Josie, looking down at him and biting her lip.

Barney had never seen the man who

held the lantern. He was a huge individual with shoulders that sloped off into an elephantine stomach. He wore no coat, and his shirt sleeves were rolled halfway up his thick, hairy forearms. Barney saw the gleaming star pinned just over the shirt pocket. With a sinking sensation that almost overpowered his headache, he lifted his gaze to the man's face. It was a heavy, cruel face with thick lips, sagging jowls, fleshy nose, cold gray eyes; the creased forehead slid off to become a bald pate.

Josie knelt at Barney's side. She touched his sore head and managed a wan grin. "Looks like I need the turpentine bottle again. Barney, this is Sheriff Tyne Conover. Tell him what happened. He thinks you killed Bobo."

"I was slugged," Barney managed.

"Yeah?" Tyne Conover said. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Right sure you didn't get in a hurry to get out of the place, trip over that old stick of firewood there and slam your head against the door jamb?"

"I was slugged," Barney repeated. "Period. By a creature on two legs I wouldn't hardly call human."

"And how about the money?" Conover demanded.

"What money?"

"Don't play dumb." Conover glanced at Charlie; then he wrapped Leah in a very appreciative gaze. "These folks say you was to meet Bobo here in regard to a little matter of some money he stole. When you became pretty long overdue, they set out to find a cousin of Bobo's you'd mentioned. Josie, naturally, she being the only female cousin of Bobo's living four or five miles from the boat dock where you said. They figured Josie might know where you and Bobo were to meet. She knew, all right. She heard Bobo tell you the spot, but she wouldn't bring 'em here alone. She fetched me, and look what we found."

Just look, Barney thought. I don't want to. I never wanted in this setup in the first place.

"Barney," Josie said, a sob in her voice, "I never reckoned on finding what we did. Or I'd never have brought Tyne into it.

At least I'd have given you a chance to run."

Barney felt cold sweat breaking on him. There stood Leah and Charlie both damning him with their eyes. And there was Tyne Conover looking ready to lick his chops. And here was Josie not believing he'd killed Bobo, but knowing that her belief wasn't worth a plugged nickel.

"No need of wasting any more time," Conover said. "I'll let you cool your heels in my jail. It'll go easier with you if you tell me where the money is."

"I didn't kill Bobo and I wasn't looking for the money!"

"That's your tale?"

Barney nodded. "And I'll keep right on telling it."

Conover helped him to his feet, snapped handcuffs on his wrists. Barney looked at the cuffs and a coldness seeped into the bottom of his stomach. Josie was looking at the handcuffs too. She pressed herself against Barney. She was very slim, warm—and trembling. Conover said, "Stand aside girl."

"If I had pa's rifle, you'd never take him, Sheriff."

"I don't like that kind of talk! You get yourself along home!"

Charlie fidgeted from one foot to the other. Barney looked at him, said hoarsely, "Get me a lawyer, Charlie!"

"Sure," Charlie said. "A lawyer for the guy who steals my dough?"

Barney looked at him and Charlie backed up a step, even if Barney was wearing handcuffs. "Okay," Charlie said, "I'll get a lawyer. I'll help you out of this jam if I can. But I won't forget it, Barney!"

The next day Leah came to jail to visit Barney. Tyne Conover came to the cell to announce her presence. The jail was in the rear of a rambling frame building; there were two other cells, though Barney was the only occupant at the moment.

Conover's eyes warmed as he watched Leah walk into the cell. Conover licked his lips and his gaze didn't miss a movement of Leah's body. She was wearing a sun-backed yellow dress today, and it added humidity to an already hot day.

Conover stood in the cell doorway a moment, just looking at her. She turned, gave him a smile, and he hitched his pants and his chest swelled a trifle. "You need anything, just call out," he requested.

"I'll do that," Leah said.

Conover closed the iron-barred door. Leah looked about the barren cell, at its single lumpy bunk and scabby walls. She crinkled her nose, lighted a cigarette. "How goes it, Barney?"

"Lousy." Barney stood looking at the sinking sun through the single window; he turned back to Leah. "This Conover yegg ain't going to strain himself working. He found a body. He found a fall guy on the scene with—he thinks—a twenty-thousand dollar motive. He found a gun and sent it over to the county seat, and it has my fingerprints on it, naturally, since I picked it up when I watched Bobo die. It's neat, cut and dried, and Conover is patting himself on the back."

Leah sat on the edge of the bunk, crossed her legs, and rested her elbow on her knee. "What can be done for you, Barney?"

"I dunno. But I know one thing. I'm going to keep screaming. I'm going to yell my head off. I know my rights. I'll make Conover keep looking, one way or another. There were other visitors at that cabin last night, Leah. Just wait until I get a lawyer. Where in blazes is the lawyer anyhow?"

She shrugged. "Charlie went into the county seat this morning. Conover got there ahead of him. Nobody much seems to want the case."

"They can't do it to me!" Barney was aware of panic slipping into his voice. Down here in these hills, the native populace determined what could or could not be done. He felt as if a web were tightening about his chest.

Leah glanced at the corridor outside the cell door. She turned her gaze back to Barney. "Too bad you're not out of here."

"Yeah. What do I do? Dissolve the bars with spit?"

"There might be a way."

"You tell me."

She smiled. "And make myself a party to a jail break? You're not too dumb to

grab your opportunities, Barney, without having everything put to you in spades."

She moved to the cell door, called, "Sheriff Conover. . ."

He appeared in the corridor, walked back to the cell, opened the door. He had a pistol in his hand to cover Barney. Leah gave Barney just one flick of her eyes, and he felt the hackles rise on his neck as she looked at Conover. Barney guessed what she'd meant when she spoke of opportunities.

She gave Conover a strong dose of come-on with those green eyes and he began to grin. She moved to the cell doorway, worried the button on his open shirt collar between her fingers, and slugged him with her smile.

"Barney is very good friend, Sheriff. You wouldn't mind if I brought him something to eat?"

"Course not."

"And maybe you and I—just the two of us—could talk over Barney's case?"

"Yeah, and there might be even more interesting conversation," Conover suggested with a leer.

"How you do talk!" Leah laughed. It was a warm sound, and Conover responded to it and her warm nearness. He couldn't help looking at her, and his gun shifted a little, and Barney moved. Conover just had time to start swinging the gun up and get a shout formed in his throat when Barney buried a left in the soft midsection. Conover doubled over, dropping the gun and grabbing his paunch. Barney straightened him with a right to the jaw that laid him on the floor in a state of utter unconsciousness.

"Cripes," Leah breathed. "You didn't need to try to break his neck!"

"I haven't hurt him. He'll come around in a few minutes. You'd better stick here and let him think you brought him to."

Leah stared at Conover as if she believed it impossible for a man to be so immobilized by two punches. Barney shook her shoulder until the dazed, blank expression faded from her face. He bent, took Conover's gun.

"Give me ten minutes," Barney said. "When he comes around, tell him what a tough time you had bringing him out of it. Just stroke his cheek a time or two

and he'll forget to consider you might have had anything to do with it."

He left her standing there looking at Conover with a certain distaste on her face.

The rear door of the jail building opened on an alley. It was deserted. Barney slipped outside. The alley joined a dirt road that wandered up the mountain-side, the village lying below. He ducked back in the alley when he heard the rattle of a pickup truck. The truck passed, leaving a heavy dust pall. Barney moved in the midst of the dust, crossed the road, and gained the brush above the road.

Under a tree, he paused long enough to let a breath out of his lungs and take his bearings. Below him the jail, a few stores, houses, and a movie theater where pictures were shown twice a week. Above him the silence of the mountains, still a trifle frightening to Barney. Off yonder in the distance, the sparkling jewel of the lake. But this Cold Slough that Bobo had mentioned—Barney hadn't any idea where it was.

He moved like he was doing road work, with a tireless, mile-eating gait, along a path that led toward the upper reaches of the mountain. Right now he wanted only to put distance between himself and Conover.

He tried to keep his thoughts away from Conover. The sheriff might even shoot him on sight, now. The thought of bloodhounds occurred to him. He'd never seen a bloodhound, but he'd read plenty of stories about them. It gave a guy the creeps to think of being chased by those big, hungry creatures. They didn't give up, but kept coming, on and on, their baying like a trumpet note of doom. Then they ran a man until he was crazy with fear and exhaustion. And finally they closed in on him.

Escaped cons always chose streams to shake bloodhounds, and just on the chance that Conover would use dogs, Barney found a creek and waded it until he was limp with exhaustion.

#### CHAPTER IV.

HE traveled with the sun at his left until it dipped behind the mountains and died

its daily death. Darkness came, bringing a cool breath over the land. Barney rested under a tree, keeping in mind his direction, the location, and the distance he'd traveled. If he made a mistake in his calculations, or judged wrong, he'd get lost within thirty minutes, traveling in darkness. That would mean his last chance was gone for keeps.

Josie seemed to be alone in the house. He watched the place for ten or fifteen minutes after his furtive arrival. He saw no signs of any other human being—only Josie's shadow passing the lighted window now and then.

He guessed Pa Calhoun was still busy at his logging.

Barney was still in no mood to take chances. He hung back close to the brush line and tossed a handful of pebbles against the side of the house. Josie was passing the window. He saw her stop. He threw more pebbles. She hesitated, disappeared from his line of vision. A few seconds later the front door opened, and she came out with Pa Calhoun's rifle in her hands.

Barney tossed more pebbles. They rattled on the planking of the porch. Josie whirled around. "Barney?"

"Yeah. You alone?"

"So much alone I've been about to bust with it," she said, coming from the porch to meet him in the yard. She stood with her head tilted, looking up at him. Suddenly she started crying. Barney couldn't have that, and he folded his big arms about her. She seemed to like it, and wept against his chest.

"Tyne Conover was here," she said. "Oh, he was mean-mad, Barney! He had a lump like a banty egg on his jaw and he swore he was going to take no more chances with you."

"How long ago?"

"Just before nightfall. Said he was going back to the village and get a bunch of men together and deputize them. Barney, it'll be awful. There'll be white liquor sneaked along despite everything Conover can do. These men are all born hunters. They live it, breathe it, all of them swear by hunting. They'll figure this a mighty thrilling hunt—only you'll be the game! Barney, you can't face it.

I don't care if you've got Cousin Bobo's money. Let's just get out of here. . . ." She stopped speaking, looking stunned at what she had said. "I didn't mean to put in that way. You—you didn't ask me to go, did you?"

Barney was scared; but he was mad too. He might make an escape from these mountains. But always Bobo's murder would be hanging over him. What kind of life would he have then? "I'm not going," he said abruptly. "If I were, you would go with me. Instead, you're going to take me some place else. You know a place called Cold Slough?"

"Sure. It's a cove about six miles from here. Bobo's uncle, Josh Hensley lives there. Uncle Josh raised Bobo, after his parents died. He's a kindly, fine old man, Barney. He's the reason Bobo grabbed the money."

"Why would Bobo get it for Uncle Josh?"

She seemed on the point of explaining; then she said, "You'll see when we get there. Come on. We'll use Pa's pickup and drive by the dirt road."

Barney sensed sickness and despair the moment he entered the cabin nestled in Cold Slough Cove. The cabin was built low into the hillside against the blasts of winter and heat of summer. It was old and filled with the lingering odors of smoked ham, moist earth, and salt pork. A sparrow-like old woman was in the outer room, greeting Josie and acknowledging the introduction to Barney. Josie introduced Barney as Mr. Simpkins, and Barney knew it was because there was no telling how this old lady would react to the presence of the man accused of Bobo's murder.

The old lady was Uncle Josh's wife; she had reared Bobo.

Barney followed Josie into the next room. He was prepared for sickness, but the sight of the old man stunned him.

Paralyzed. No control at all. And in great pain.

Blast Bobo, anyhow, for sending me here, Barney thought. This was Bobo's first thought, this old man, as he lay dying. He was counting on me wanting to do something about it.

Uncle Josh said, "You're a friend of Bobo's?"

"Yes," Barney said softly.

"A fine boy, Bobo. Soon as he heard about my accident, he came right down.

"The trouble's down there—in my back. Had a mean bull. He broke his chain. Nigh gored Ma. It was pretty frightful when that bull hit me.

"They want to send me off to a surgeon that fixes these kind of cases. That takes a whop of money. Course Bobo was going to take care of all that. Now Bobo is. . . ." The old man stopped speaking. He touched a pale tongue to dry, cracked old lips. "Sheriff Conover was up here today. Says Bobo was murdered. Says Bobo stole the money from a fight manager."

"Bobo never took anything that didn't really belong to him," Barney said.

He's sure gonna feel lousy when he learns the truth for once and all, Barney thought. He felt dismal.

Barney and Josie finished their visit with the old man and went into the kitchen where the old lady invited them to a long table with benches on either side. Barney drank strong black coffee which had been ground in the coffee mill in the far corner of the kitchen. He ate biscuits, side meat, and a platter of eggs, touched up with golden butter and strawberry preserves.

After he and Josie visited with the old lady, they went out to Pa Calhoun's pick-up.

Barney asked, "Skip Merrill live anywhere around here?"

"On down this road. The second cove. It's about three miles."

"You go on home," Barney suggested. "I got an idea where Bobo's money might be found."

Josie's face was grave in the moonlight. "Skip Merrill means trouble, Barney."

"Who did Bobo stay with?"

"He lived alone, since his wife died two years ago. Barney. . . ."

"I'll be careful. I'll see you at your house by dawn. You've still got Pa Calhoun's gun"—he grinned—"so I won't worry about you."

He strode down the dirt road, his

thoughts ticking along on the task ahead. The night promised to be a long one.

The second cove, Josie had said. About three miles. In years of road work, Barney had come into the ability to judge road distance with accuracy. That must be the house, the one just ahead. It was set thirty yards back from the road and looked like a weathered box with a gabled lid. Lamplight made yellow squares of the front windows, which were small and set high.

Barney walked up a path that yearned for the removal of weeds. He slipped Tyne Conover's revolver out of the waistband of his trousers, rapped on the door. After a moment, footsteps sounded inside.

The door cracked a trifle, and Barney set his weight against it, slamming it open.

Merrill staggered to a stop in the center of the room. He looked at the gun and fright came into his eyes. He had taken off his shirt and his shoulders hunched under his dirty gray union suit top. He mustered enough brag to bring a sneer to life on his lips. "Pretty high and mighty with that gun, ain't you?"

Barney ignored him. He moved closer to Skip, and sniffed. Skip glowered.

Barney said, "It's the same sour stink I smelled when I was slugged in the doorway of that cabin on Little Sanloosa. You're the boy who hit me, Skip, and I'm of the opinion that you've got Bobo's money."

"You aimin' to shoot the truth out of me?"

Barney eyed Skip's shoulders, patting the barrel of the gun in his other palm. With a sudden motion he slid the gun into the corner behind him.

Skip roared with the ferocity of an angry bull, and charged. Barney side-stepped and knocked out two of Skip's snag teeth. Skip staggered back. Barney punched him in the stomach. Skip lost all his wind. Barney hit him on the nose, and it began bleeding. Skip threw one punch. It was feeble. Barney took it on his shoulder, measured Skip's jaw. Skip, he remembered, had slugged him twice. Once with a gun in Josie's, a second time on Little Sanloosa.

He hit Skip on the jaw. Skip staggered

against the wall, and pots and pans crashed in the next room. Skip reeled away from the wall throwing wild hay-makers.

Oh, cripes, this isn't even fun, Barney decided.

He knocked out two more teeth, connected with the black-beard jaw again, and Skip fell to the floor. He lay groaning, and when he felt the touch of Barney's hands as he tried to pull him to his feet, the groans became whimpers.

Barney allowed Skip to mouth broken, incoherent pleas for a moment; then he suggested flatly, "Shut up!"

Skip quieted.

"Where's the dough?"

"I dunno."

Barney worked his right hand into a fist, drew it back, and Skip amended, "In the loft."

"Where?"

"Upstairs. Up that ladder. In a trunk."

Then, as if he were hearing it in a dream, Barney heard Charlie Collins' nasal voice say, "That's nice to know."

Barney stiffened; Skip raised his head; they both looked at the doorway. Charlie and Leah walked in. Charlie was smiling with his thin lips. His white flesh looked ghostly in the flickering lamplight. "Nice of you to make enough noise to cover the sound of our arrival and warn us a little party was going on," Charlie said. "I believed your tale of getting slugged, Barney, and also your story about Bobo having a tough sidekick named Skip Merrill. It wasn't too hard to find where pal Skip lived, and I waited for night to keep anyone from seeing me drive up here. Now it seems you've saved me a little trouble."

Barney looked at Tyne Conover's gun where it lay, far away in the corner. Strictly a sap, that's me, he thought. He looked in Charlie's eyes and began to feel the cold touch of fear.

Charlie said, "Leah, scoot up that ladder and start tearing apart any trunks you find. We'll have the dough and be out of here by morning."

"Just like that, huh?" Barney said. "And I take the rap for Bobo's killing?"

"I'm sorry about that, Barney, but, for all I know, you did kill him."

Barney watched Leah walk to the ladder that led up to the loft. He thought, Leah killed Bobo.

It fitted like a glove. Bobo had repeated his assertion at Josie's that he could bring pressure on Charlie. He would force Charlie to lay off. But he didn't have anything on Charlie, Barney was reasonably certain—or he would have used it before. Who else, then, was there to put the pressure on? Leah, of course. And she, Bobo had figured, could call Charlie off.

A clunk, that's me, Barney thought. Bobo had practically told him what kind of goods he had on Leah. Murder, he had said as he died, strictly murder. He hadn't been talking about his own death; anybody could see that it was murder in his case. Another death, then. And what death? Leah's first husband, of course. Not suicide after all, but murder. It had to be that way. No other picture fitted the frame.

Barney could picture it in his mind. Bobo getting to Leah, telling her she'd better call Charlie off if she knew what was good for her, telling her that he was meeting Barney that night in the Little Sanloosa cabin, and Charlie had better be brought around so that Barney arrived with the right news. Leah getting that unregistered gun she or Charlie had picked up sometime in the past, going to the cabin, hearing the kicker as Barney came in over the lake.

She would have had plenty of time. The sound of the kicker in Barney's ears would have kept him from hearing the shot. Then she'd made a quick exit, leaving Bobo for dead.

And waltzing in the shadows, lured on by the hopes that he could somehow get that dough for himself, had been Skip Merrill. Unknown to Leah. The joker in the deck.

Leah started up the ladder. Barney watched the swing of her legs and hips. He said, "Charlie, she'll probably end up crossing you the way she's crossing me right now."

Leah stopped going up the ladder, and Charlie's mouth tightened. "What do you mean by that?" he said.

"We had a little deal of our own, Leah

and I—after Bobo told me about her killing her first husband.”

Leah gripped the braces of the ladder to keep from falling. Charlie shifted the gun toward her. “No, don’t believe him! It isn’t true! Bobo knew—he heard you in the Jersey training camp the night you came in drunk and threw it in my face, Charlie. It was your fault. Since that time, Bobo has known. But he didn’t tell Barney. And I didn’t make any deals! Honest. You got to believe me!”

“Then how does Barney know?”

“He’s guessing—only now does he know for sure. You were too quick to doubt me and throw that gun on me.”

“I don’t trust you,” Charlie said. “You had me alibi you that night—and later, when I guessed that it hadn’t been really suicide. I knew you’d play me for a sucker.”

“It was a drunken brawl, Charlie. I didn’t mean to kill him. I’ve told you a hundred times.”

Barney looked at them, each wary of the other, bound together by a bond so dark and evil it caused him to shudder. A pair of tramps. . . . Cripes, what a complement!

Barney was edging toward that corner where the sheriff’s gun lay. Then Charlie seemed to jar to life again, and he centered his gun on Barney.

“Okay, Leah,” Charlie said, sounding suddenly almost tired. “What do we do with them now?”

“Make it look like they killed each other in a fight,” Leah suggested.

“No,” Charlie said.

“You haven’t much choice,” she pointed out. “You’re accessory after the fact in one murder. I’ll swear you killed Bobo yourself if you try to turn me in. You’ve got to pull the trigger, Charlie!”

Charlie was sweating. It stood out on his forehead in heavy drops. Then he was pulling the trigger. But the crash of the gun came from outside, and Charlie’s revolver flew from his hand.

Josie stood spread-legged in the doorway with Pa Calhoun’s rifle in her hands.

“Barney, my boy, Skip Merrill I reckoned you could handle. But when Charlie Collins’ car passed me, heading this way, I thought I ought to turn that

pickup truck around. I parked down the road far enough to slip to the house here quietly. I almost took too long, didn’t I?”

“Cripes, yes,” Barney said.

Leah took a step toward Barney, her green eyes frantic. “Barney, I gave you a break. I helped you get out of the cell.”

“Yeah, in hopes that Conover would shoot as I made the break or hunt me down with a gun in the hills—which would have closed the case in a nice package. You wanted that, knowing I was going to keep on screaming until I got the right kind of lawyer. You wanted the case closed in a hurry, because you were guilty. You looked awfully disappointed when I slugged Conover so fast and put him out of action until I could get away.”

Her shoulders slumped, then straightened. “Okay, Barney. Maybe I’ll have more luck with a judge and jury.”

“Maybe. But I doubt it, if Skip saw you coming out of that cabin on Little Sanloosa.” He looked at Skip. “State’s evidence?”

“You’re dern tootin’!”

The next day just before noon, Barney beached his rented boat below Josie’s house. He found her in the living room. She asked, “How is it going?”

“Conover is clearing up details fast. Found one of her footprints to back up Skip’s statement. Charlie’s scared stiff. He and Leah both will be trying to outtalk each other before nightfall. The twenty thousand that started all this has been impounded.”

“And you, Barney?”

“Well—” He was thoughtful. “Bobo was my buddy. I’ve got a few grand salted away. Enough to help Uncle Josh some and still have a buck left over to pay down on a fishing camp around here some place.”

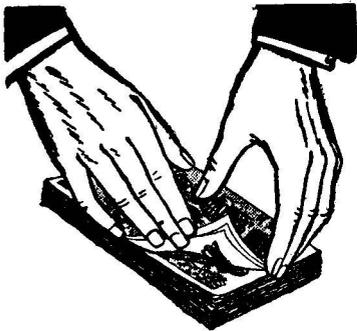
Josie squealed.

Barney grinned. “Been thinking I’d get out of the fight racket.”

“Cripes, looks like I’m hooked, don’t it?” He seemed very happy as he reached for her.

“Man,” Josie said, “never been a bass fish in the whole of Sanloosa hooked more firmly!”

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# DEATH IS HER BRIDEGROOM

FLETCHER FLORA

*A girl like Brenda and fifty grand. . . . Who could blame Cleo Constance for trying to make a killing? Certainly not Jeff Pitt, who knew Brenda. . . . But who did not know just what kind of a killing Cleo would make.*

**P**ARKED in the curved drive under the shadow of the huge portico, Jefferson Pitt's modest jalopy assumed an appearance of weary decadence, as if it were about to collapse in a sad heap of defeated parts. And Jeff felt that he himself was in something the same shape. As he went up wide steps, his serviceable worsted seemed suddenly to become shrunken and shabby.

However, being the type of guy who could laugh at himself, he laughed silently and with wry humor. By the time the door chimes were answered by an ancient servant, he regained assurance, and was even feeling a little superior. After all, his services were in demand—he was needed and had been asked to come.

"My name's Pitt," he said. "Mr. Roman expects me."

The servant nodded and stepped back.

Jeff moved past him into the hall that could have done service as a railroad terminal. Standing there with his hat in his hand, he felt the subtle depression which descends upon one in a place which has too much of everything.

From his position, he could detect in the half-light the dark faces of old paintings. Any one of them would have been worth a small fortune, and there were a dozen. Down the hall near the foot of the stairs that had more breadth than most rooms, there was, somewhat incongruously, a bright yellow splash of Van Gogh.

The servant moved around Jeff with cautious decrepitude. Jeff followed him down the hall, past the Van Gogh, and up the broad flight of stairs. On the second floor, the old man knocked discreetly upon the heavy walnut paneling of an immense door, and pushed the door inward without waiting for a response.

"Mr. Pitt has arrived, sir," he said in a cracked, squeaky voice.

Obedying the servant's gesture of invitation, Jeff entered the room, and immediately his whole attention was taken up with the initial shock of seeing the man who sat in a massive, high-backed chair awaiting him.

When Jeff had last seen Reed Roman, three years before, the fabulous millionaire had been a powerful, dominating block of man. Old, even then, but with the drive and aggression of youth still in him.

Jeff had read about his illness, the stroke, in the papers, but he hadn't realized the extent of its ravishment. The old man sat twisted in his chair, his body betraying, even in repose, its partial impairment.

Only the eyes retained some of their former force, burning under craggy brows. His voice sounded, now, with an angry tremor, driven upward from its afflicted mechanism by a fierce exertion of will.

"Come in, Pitt. Come in and sit down."

Jeff found a chair and sat with his hat on his knees, wondering if he should comment on the old man's condition, deciding he'd better not. In the burning eyes there was suddenly a glint of cold humor.

"That's right, boy. Be discreet. Sit there and act as if nothing had changed. They all do it. They all think the old man's dying, and their fingers are itching like the devil for his money all the time the damned pious expressions are on their faces."

He broke into a gusty wheeze of laughter, maliciousness gathering to bright, sharp points under bony overhang.

"I've got news for them. I've got news for the whole damned crew. The old man will be here like a lump in this chair for

a long time yet. I'll be right here watching them stew in their juice while they wait for me to die. Maybe I'll even outlive a few of them."

The aspirate laughter exploded again.

"You know why I called you here?"

"Not exactly, of course. I assume you have a job for me."

"Brenda's gone. Kidnapped," the old man said abruptly.

Jeff's rather amiable face hardened, taking on a rugged angularity that was not usually apparent.

"Snatched? It's the first I've heard of it."

"Naturally. I've kept it quiet. Get a lot of noisy police mixed up in it, anything might happen."

"Sure. Anything. They might even get Brenda back for you."

The old man's stricken body jerked angrily. "The note said she'd be killed if the police were notified."

"You've had a note, then?"

"Of course. Fifty thousand ransom. It's here, if you want to see it."

Slowly, with laborious effort that set his moving hand to trembling, he reached into the pocket of his robe and extended a folded piece of paper.

Taking the paper, Jeff turned it in his fingers, discovering that it was the cheap stuff for typewriters that can be bought in packets in any dime store. The kind that could never be traced. This piece had added stiffness, the result of paper pasted to the side folded in. Opening it, he found the expected—the crude newsprint pasted to form the message. Reading, he felt a certain incredulity, an inner urge to jeer at himself for taking seriously the hocus-pocus of a bad movie.

After he had finished reading it, he said, "It's a queer setup. It has a phony ring."

"All these things have a phony ring. Something that just doesn't happen—until it does. You're a detective. You ought to know that."

Jeff shrugged. "You're right, of course. There's always an air of incredible melodrama about real evil. That doesn't make it any less real. What do you intend to do?"

"I'll pay the ransom, naturally. Not

that she's worth it. Brenda, I mean. She's beautiful. She's more beautiful than you'd imagine a woman could be, and she's rotten as a stump full of termites. But that's not a good analogy. It makes her sound soft, and she's not soft at all. She's hard as a diamond and filled with the same kind of fire. Cold as ice sometimes, sometimes hot as an inferno. And for me, no love. No love at all for the old man."

The petulance in his voice was suddenly in danger of degenerating into self-pity, and becoming aware of it, he shook himself out of the mood impatiently.

"But maybe I've got it coming," he said. "If so, all right. I've been hard myself. No pity or love in me when maybe there should have been. You don't build up a fortune of millions with love and pity. Anyhow, it's too late now for regrets. It was too late long ago. I'll pay the ransom because she's my son's daughter. It's pride. It's the thick, sticky hold of blood. At any rate, it's the last she'll have from me, and maybe it's cheap enough. Not another penny will she have."

"You mean she's out of the will?"

"That's right. Out cold. She looks like an angel, but she's got the instincts of a hellion, and she'll have nothing of mine to dissipate on the frequenters of garbage heaps." The explosive laughter burst past his bloodless lips again, but there was grudging admiration in the harsh lines of his face. "Not that she gives a damn. She's got more guts than all the others put together. That much you can say of her. She told me I could take every cent I had to hell with me."

"The note instructs you to get a man named Constance to act as contact. Cleo Constance. You been in touch with him?"

"Yes. He was here earlier today."

"Will he act?"

"Yes."

"Why him, I wonder. Why a particular man named Cleo Constance?"

"Probably it was Brenda's suggestion. Constance is a private detective, like you. Brenda used him once. A matter of some stolen jewelry. He seemed efficient. Got the stuff back in a hurry."

"When was that?"

"I don't know exactly. Not long ago.

At the time, I was flat on my back with hell's emissaries sitting on my chest."

"There's another thing. Constance must be known to the kidnapper. By sight, I mean. There's no instruction, in the note, about identification. No special article of clothing to wear. No gesture or sign to make at a certain place or time. Nothing to point him out."

"I thought of that. It isn't unlikely that a private detective would be known. I should think you'd know him yourself, being in the same business."

"It's a big city. Private detectives aren't like millionaires. They get lost in the crowd."

"All right. What's more important, does he know you?"

"I don't know. I don't think so."

"There's a chance he might, but we'll have to take it." The old man paused, his chin sinking onto his chest, lids lowering over his smoldering eyes. He remained that way so long that Jeff wondered if he had sunk suddenly into a coma, but after a while, eyes still shut, he began to speak again. "Fifty thousand is a lot of money. To a lot of people, it's a fortune. It might be quite a temptation to a private detective."

"I can testify to that," Jeff said, and he sat quietly, waiting for the old man to continue, thinking that they had come to the point at last.

"You read the note," Roman said. "Constance is to get on the seven-thirty bus for Darrowville tomorrow night. He's to have the fifty thousand with him in unmarked bills. It's a local bus. One of these little lines that hang on for peanuts. It's about seventy-five miles to Darrowville, and the bus makes a couple of stops between here and there. Somewhere along the way, the contact will be made. I want you to be sure the money is handed over."

"You mean be sure that Constance doesn't take a powder with it?"

The old man lifter his shoulders very slightly. "As I said, fifty thousand's a lot of money."

"What does Constance look like?"

"He's tall. Broad shoulders and a thin, handsome face. There's a feeling of coldness about him. Dresses like a banker. Homburg. Blues and grays. Good stuff,

cut by a tailor who knows how. You'd never pick him for a detective."

Jeff grinned. "Thanks," he said. "You haven't told how it happened. The kidnapping."

The old man was slumped in his chair. Weariness covered him like a powdering of gray dust. He lifted his lids briefly and let them fall again of their own weight.

"Who knows? She left here two nights ago, going God knows where. She never told anyone where she was going, what she was doing. Never a damn word. She left here in a taxi, I'm told. The note is the only word I've had of her since she left."

"Did she usually go out in a taxi? Why didn't she drive?"

"Sometimes she drove. Sometimes she used a taxi. I guess it depended on where she was going. It doesn't matter. All I want you to do is to see that the ransom is paid."

"That may be a large order. The kidnapper's no fool. You think he'll approach your contact openly?"

The eyes flicked open again. Open and shut. "That's your business, Pitt. You've done other jobs for me. You did them well, or you wouldn't be here now. Do this one."

The effrontery of wealth, Jeff thought. The damned bland presumption of millions. He stood up, waiting for the lids to lift again, waiting for an overt sign that he was free to walk away. When the sign failed to come, he left without it, letting himself out into the unperverted air. Breathing deeply, he stood for a moment in the drive beside his jalopy to think of a beautiful girl whose life depended on the delivery of fifty grand, and of a man in a homburg who was the delivery boy.

While Jeff stood beside his jalopy and thought about Brenda Roman and Cleo Constance, Cleo Constance drove across the city limit and thought about Brenda Roman and fifty grand. It was logical that he thought of Brenda and the fifty grand in association, since they came together. Either would have been a piece of loot a man would sweat for. Together they were almost incredible. Once-in-a-lifetime stuff.

He sat behind the wheel of his Olds with an odd, military stiffness that never left him. His gray homburg sat with conservative tilt the proper distance above his level brows. The eyes beneath the brows were pale blue, cold, and seemed to be covered by a thin film of ice. The nose and mouth were thin, rather patrician, conforming to the narrow oval face. As Reed Roman had said, handsome. A banker, he'd said. Actually, the face would have been more appropriate under a klieg light.

On the highway, out of traffic, he held the needle of the speedometer at fifty. Restraint was difficult to maintain. He felt a wracking inner compulsion to let himself go, to send the Olds booming down the highway as a symbol of the wild soaring of his imagination.

I knew it would come, he thought. The big break. The time that requires only guts and action to make it the beginning of the big life. Caesar crossing the Rubicon. Napoleon firing his cannon down a Paris street. It's been worth waiting for, and I always knew it would come in time. I knew it even as a kid back home—that long ago—and even then it was a kind of compensation for an old man who was a pickled bum and an old woman who was a whining slattern. I've never lost sight of the big break. Not in reform school. Not during all the dreary, slimy leg-work for petty fees that goes with being a private eye. And now it's here, and it's only the beginning. With fifty grand to ride on and a sleek charmer like Brenda Roman to go along for the ride, the lid's off for Cleo Constance. The sky's the limit for Cleo.

Funny, how things begin. Just another caper, you think; a few grand in stolen jewels, and a servant begging for mercy. Just a few days to crack it. Then the note from Brenda asking me to call for my fee. I knew then that something was funny, because it would have been the normal thing just to mail it to the office. I knew the caper was taking a turn. Not that I objected. I was burning to see her again. Ever since the first interview, when she sat there in that suit with a skirt so tight that it showed all the long lines of her legs. Ever since I looked into that

strange, beautiful face that makes you think of a fallen angel who has no regrets.

I'll never forget the day I called for the fee. She had me come up to her room in that gloomy stack of old Roman's, and the room was like another place entirely, with soft light coming out of nowhere and all the thick rugs and sleek furniture and the big bed in black silk. And there she was, in black silk like the bed, with her hair like a cloud of white fire.

"You're a handsome guy, Constance," she said. "You're the handsomest, most aggravating species of male I've ever seen. What makes you nothing but a lousy private cop?"

And there it was, asking for nothing but guts and action to make something of it, and that was not the end at all, but only the beginning, and now it won't ever end until we're old, or burned out, or dead, and by that time we'll have had all, the full, strong flavor of life, and it won't matter.

Fifteen miles out the highway, he turned off in a northerly direction, following the course of a narrow gravel road. The tilt of the earth was generally upward, rising to the foothills of a sprawling range worn low by the action of geologic ages. Rock outcroppings and scrub oak were everywhere. The oaks, stripped of leaves, presented a gnarled and twisted hardiness, grim yet somehow exhilarating, that reinforced his soaring mood.

There was hunting here. Hunting and good fishing, with speckled and rainbow trout fighting the currents of clear streams. He had a cabin in the low hills, a two-room thing of logs, where he came now and again. It was a good place to come, he'd found, when the city closed in and the big dream seemed buried forever in steel and asphalt. It was a good place to come, too, when one had a girl to hide for the little while it would take to make the dream come alive at last.

Turning again, steering the Olds along hard ruts that ascended precipitately, he felt the automatic transmission shift down for its increased labor and saw ahead of him among the scrub oaks the brown bulk of the cabin against its side of hill. He pulled around the cabin and into a rough shed. Retracing his way

afoot around the cabin, he crossed the small front porch and pushed open the door.

The attack was swift, without warning, as if a mountain cat had crouched waiting within the room. But it was an attack without fangs or talons, precipitated by a hunger that wanted to devour but not to destroy. Her arms were locked around his neck, and her body was straining against his. He was drowning, he felt, in the astringent scent of her pale hair. Her lips moved against his.

"Two days, Connie. Only two days, and it seems like two years."

He tangled his long fingers in the pale silk of her hair and drew her head back until her throat arched back at the tension. His mouth was hard against hers, until suddenly he released her and spun away, walking into the room with the precise military bearing that survived, rather ludicrously, even the swift, flaming attack. When he turned abruptly to face her, his pale eyes were still aflame, contradicting the effect of his conditioned reserve. It was this more than anything, he knew, that explained his strange and overwhelming fascination for her. This deep flame that broke through his chill restraint with the intensity and swiftness of heat lightning. She had the capacity to make it flare, and the knowledge, he realized, filled her with a shattering sense of excitement.

"It's on the way, baby. Our way. The way you've got it planned."

"You've seen grandfather?"

"I've seen him, and I'm in."

"He's a crafty old hellion, Connie. You don't make millions by being stupid. You think he suspects anything?"

"Nothing. I'll swear he suspects nothing."

"He's following the instructions? Even about the police?"

"Yes. He hates your guts, baby, but he admires you, just the same. With him, that's probably better than love. He wouldn't leave you a dime if he scorched in hell for it, but he'll pay a fat ransom to keep anyone else from trying to hurt you."

"I know. I told you it'd be like that. I've known the old devil for a long time,

Connie. Is it going through tomorrow night?"

"On schedule. I'll pick up the fifty grand at the old man's place at six-thirty. From there, I'll go to the bus terminal and catch the seven-thirty Darrowville bus. It'll be a dry run to make the ride, of course, but I'd better make it for looks, just in case someone's looking. When I get to Darrowville, I turn around and come back on the first bus. That'll be next morning. I'll still have the fifty grand. As far as anyone will ever know, the contact was made. Either somewhere along the way or in Darrowville itself."

"When do I show up?"

"The next night. It'll be a little rough. You'll leave here after dark and walk to the highway. It's a long way and tough going. You show up on the highway. Get yourself picked up. You're in bad shape. You've been taken to a spot near the highway and released. You don't know just where, because you were blindfolded. Say there were two men involved. Use your imagination when you describe them. Think you can do it? I'd pick you up here and drive you down near the highway, but it'd be too risky."

She moved toward him and stopped, laughing.

"I can do it, all right," she said. "Oh, I can do it."

She stood there looking at him with her hands on her hips and her breasts rising against her blouse. The blood was burning in her cheeks.

## CHAPTER II.

WHEN the bus was thirty-five miles from Darrowville and still ten miles out of Hogan, it began to rain. Water fell from an inky sky in a deluge that threatened to wash all traffic, including the clanking bus, off the highway. Sitting in his seat at the rear, Jeff Pitt looked out the window on his right and saw no farther than the streaming glass.

In his seat of authority, the driver hunched forward over the steering wheel, peering intently through the half-circle of windshield that was swept by the flapping wiper. Rain flooded in behind the rubber-edged blade, obscuring vision. The bus

crept cautiously, the light of its headlamps beaten back. After about twenty minutes, there was a sharp downward tilt. For a moment, at the bottom, the ugly sound of rushing water swept under and around the bus, then the tilt was upward, the sound receding. *Flash flood*, Jeff thought.

Two rows forward and on the opposite side, Cleo Constance sat stiffly. He seemed a remote, self-isolated figure, forbidding approach. The gray homburg rode his head with unimpeachable correctness. His shoulders were rigid, square, under boxed blue tailoring. Most of the time his pale eyes were directed carefully ahead in a blind stare, but now and then his head turned briefly, showing a hard, flat cheek, a thin aquiline nose.

Pride, Jeff thought. Pride and arrogance to the degree of cruelty, sharpened by ambition and frustration. Well, one thing's certain. He's made no contact. Not yet. It'll be at Hogan or Darrowville. Unless, of course, it's made on the bus. And that isn't likely. The kidnapper would have to expose himself openly that way. It isn't at all likely. It'll be arranged in a way to protect the kidnapper. I wonder if he's waiting at Hogan? Or at Darrowville? Or is he on the bus? Besides Constance and me, four passengers. Could it be one of the four? Two men and two women. Could it be a woman? And why not? Not alone, of course. There's a man in it somewhere. One or more. But a woman could make the contact. It's been done before.

Across the aisle from Constance sat the fat little man who announced to Constance in a wheezy voice that he was Dr. Elliot Newman. Constance had responded with a cold nod and nothing more. A doctor. That explained the small brown bag he carried.

At the moment, Jeff could see only the back of Dr. Newman's head. A brown felt hat was placed precisely level on the head. Between the hat and a thin ragged edge of gray hair was a strip of naked scalp. The little doctor had made no more gestures of friendliness after Constance's obvious rebuff. Maybe he was sulking.

Up front, a couple of rows behind the driver, the young couple sat in heavy silence. If they had exchanged more than

a dozen words during the ride, Jeff hadn't noticed. The girl sat on the inside, next the window. Jeff could see only the top of her head over the high back of the seat. Her hair was mouse colored, stringy. It badly needed the benefits of one of the new shampoos. The new shampoos could work miracles, even with mouse-colored hair. Lady, you can be glamorous. Which side received the magic action? But probably it would be just as well to leave the hair as it was. Why take the mouse out of the hair when obviously nothing could be done for the mouse-like face, the gray little mouse-like soul?

The girl seemed to be sleeping. Jeff knew that she wasn't. At the last stop he'd got off the bus for a stretch. Boarding it again, he'd noticed that the girl hadn't moved. Her head was lying back against the seat, and he'd seen with a shock and a quick surge of compassion the open misery of her staring eyes. He'd seen also the indicative swell under her thin coat.

Married? he thought. I doubt it. Just trapped. Just trapped in one of life's nasty little predicaments. How about the kid beside her? Papa? Probably, but fighting it. Trying to get out. He has the look. The sulky, trapped, resentful look. He hates her guts for looking like a mouse and acting like a woman. He's a nasty little hunk. Slack mouth; could be vicious. The kind to use a shiv in a dark alley. But a kidnapper? It's a hundred to one against, but you never can tell.

It's dangerous to fall back on the old myth that you can tell a criminal, or his quality, just by the look of him. The same goes for the girl, if it happened to be the pair of them. What a beautifully classic case that would make for the records. The whole thing engineered by a pregnant mouse.

There was nothing mousy about the fourth passenger. The other woman. On the contrary, a bit brassy. Natural good looks underscored a little too heavily by cosmetics. Too lean, too tense and overdrawn, perhaps, for some tastes. But there was vitality in her bones and breath. In every glance and movement. Not contrived, either. Natural as sleeping. "Yon Cassius has a lean and hungry look. Such

men are dangerous." Shakespeare, yet. How about a lean and hungry woman? Also dangerous? Kidnapper's contact, maybe?

She sat hugging herself, directly across the aisle from Jeff. A peculiar mannerism, that. Her arms crossed in front of her body, one elbow fitted inside the other, her hands clutching her shoulders. Periodically, her body would shake visibly, and the forearms would press in against her breast, fingers digging into the shoulders like claws. Once he heard her teeth grinding. As if she were cold. But it wasn't cold in the bus. Too hot, rather. Steamy hot. A chill, maybe. Fever and chills. Like Jeff had once had on an island he wanted to forget. She was a looker, all right, but not exactly in the chips. Fur coat ratty. Heels, if you bothered to notice, a bit run over. He wondered if she needed help. He wondered if he should offer.

With a start of surprise, he noticed that they had stopped. The bus had been crawling so slowly that the change was barely apparent. Leaning over to peer more closely out the streaming glass, he saw a watery yellow blur of light and knew that they had crept into Hogan.

Up front, the driver slipped out from under the wheel and turned.

"This is Hogan, folks. We'll be here about five minutes."

The doors folded back with a soft, pneumatic hiss, and he dove out, vanishing into the gray downpour. No one else made a motion to leave the bus. The mouse sat beside her companion, her head back, the dull misery in her eyes. The little doctor turned once to look over his shoulder and then settled a little lower, with obvious resignation, in his seat. The naked strip of scalp between hair and hat had a kind of subtle obscenity about it. Across the aisle, the lean and hungry and pretty woman hugged herself and shivered and ground her teeth.

Cleo Constance sat militarily erect with fifty thousand dollars in his pocket. Cold and remote. Spiritually exiled. Don't touch me, peasants.

It was nearer ten than five minutes when the driver returned. He climbed in soaked, water running out of his shoes

and clothes onto the rubber mat on the floor.

"Sorry, folks," he announced. "We can't go on tonight. The highway's flooded between here and Darrowville. It's a flash flood and will recede in a hurry when the rain stops. By morning, traffic should be going through."

His voice had a relieved sound, and he was openly happy to escape the responsibility of more blind driving. In the bus, following his words, there was a hiatus of suspended sound and motion, and then the pretty woman jerked violently, as if she'd had a sharp, excruciating pain. An abbreviated cry of anguish burst from her lips.

"I must get to Darrowville. I must get to Darrowville tonight."

The driver lifted his shoulders in an expansive shrug. One man's meat is another man's poison. Himself, he was damned happy.

"Sorry, lady. Nothing's moving on the highway."

She huddled in her seat, hugging herself. Across the aisle, Jeff could hear her whimpering like a hurt pup.

Dr. Newman straightened. His voice was querulous.

"Are we expected to stay in this bus all night?"

"Not at all." The driver gestured at the yellow blur outside. "This is the hotel. Only one in Hogan. It's nothing fancy, folks, but there's accommodation for everyone. If you'll all unload, please. I'll have to move the bus away from here."

Another hiatus. Sullen reluctance to face the occasion. Then the little doctor got up briskly, retrieving his bag and moving up to the door. The rain swallowed him. The young guy up front followed, leaving the mouse on her own. She went down the steps into the rain slowly, clinging to the handrail with one hand, clutching her thin coat over the beginning swell of her belly with the other. Cleo Constance moved in behind her with measured precision and filled the exit briefly with his broad blue shoulders. The pretty woman whimpered in her seat, and Jeff stood beside her.

"May I help you off?"

She looked up with furtive, anguished

eyes, and he saw that her teeth had brought blood to her lips. Staring down into the eyes, he understood finally that it was neither cold nor fever that fed her anguish, and he felt a vast compassion and a sickness that filtered through his guts.

She struggled for control. "No, thanks, I'm all right. I'm perfectly all right."

Wrenching herself up and forward, she fled down the aisle as if she feared his pursuit. But it was more than him that she fled. Far more than a man.

Run, run, he thought. Run from the monkey. But it's always there. Always on your shoulder.

And he was thankful, stepping from the bus, for the clean, cold wash of rain.

The lobby had a worn carpet on the floor and a sickly rubber plant growing in a wooden tub in a corner. The carpet still displayed, between large patches where the fiber backing was exposed, a pattern of roses that had once been florid and were now faded and dirty. A solitary and lethargic elevator served the three floors up.

Jeff arranged for a room with an adolescent clerk who was plainly stimulated by the unexpected influx of guests. He spun the register and extended a pen with a flourish. Jeff signed and received his key. Turning away, he saw across the room an entrance to a small and dimly lighted taproom. The light was not the calculated soft stuff that goes for romance in better places. It was only the result of low wattage. A short bar and a few tables and chairs were visible in the dusk. At the bar, separated by three vacant stools, were Dr. Newman and Cleo Constance. The other three passengers from the bus had vanished, presumably up the shaft in the reluctant elevator.

Jeff threaded his way through the litter of tables and chairs and chose the center one of the three vacant stools. Right in the middle, he thought. If these are the two, right in the middle. He ordered a bourbon with water, and was grateful for the warm diffusion through his insides. He relaxed a little.

"Tough luck," he said.

Dr. Newman nodded curtly. "Damned nuisance."

Cleo Constance said nothing. He lifted his glass and drained it, setting it empty on the bar and standing with that damned clipped motion of his. He left without speaking.

Jeff finished his bourbon. "Think I'll turn in," he said.

Dr. Newman shrugged, irritation manifest in his plump twitch. "Might as well. Be along myself shortly."

Since he was only one up, Jeff walked. Coming off the stairs into the hall, he saw Constance unlock a door and disappear. Checking the tab on his key against door numbers, he discovered that he was beyond Constance about half the length of the hall. The door across from his was slightly ajar. He could hear, within the room, the desperate cadence of pacing footsteps, broken at brief intervals for the time it took to reverse direction. Back and forth, back and forth, across the trap of a room. Listening more closely, he detected with the sound of pacing the soft accompaniment of tortured animal whimpering.

Abruptly, on impulse, he crossed the hall and, without knocking, entered the room and closed the door behind him.

She had taken off the ratty fur coat and the jacket of her wool gabardine suit. She held herself, even walking, in that cross-armed embrace, and the pointed red nails of her fingers had ripped the thin stuff of her blouse where it stretched tight over her shoulders. When he entered, she stopped, twisting around from the hips to face him, her eyes bright and terrible, her lower lip fastened between her teeth.

"Go away," she said. "Go away from me."

He shook his head, wishing he could free himself of the compulsion to pity. Wishing he could always use the other side of the road and never give a damn. Knowing he never could.

"You need help," he said. "Maybe I can supply it."

She started her pacing again. "I just need to be let alone. Get away from me, I said. Get the hell away."

He stood watching her. Her black hair looked soft and clean, shining under the light. Right now it was in a tangle from the frantic combing of her fingers. She

rubbed her hands up and down her forearms, shivering. Her teeth began to chatter.

As she swung around from a wall, he said, "How long since you had one, baby?"

She was motionless, her eyes devouring him. "Who the hell are you?"

He smiled and didn't answer. She leaned against the wall, her head thrown back, the embrace of her arms locking tighter. Tears seeped from under her lids and ran down her cheeks. After a few seconds, she began to sob. The sobs were deep upheavals, tearing at her chest. He stood waiting until they ceased.

"There's a doctor downstairs," he said.

"Doctors," she said. "Damned doctors."

"It's a doctor's business to relieve suffering. Did anyone ever suffer more than you are right now?"

She didn't reply. The sobbing was ended, but the silent tears still ran down her cheeks.

"I'll be back," he said, and turned and went out.

Downstairs, Dr. Newman was just coming out of the taproom with his bag in his hand. Jeff waited for him to come even, turning back up the stairs at his side.

"You got morphine in your bag, Doctor?"

The little medico shot an oblique glance at him from under a cocked brow. "The pretty woman in the fur coat?"

"Yes. She's tearing herself to pieces."

"I suspected it."

They went on up the stairs and stopped at the head. Dr. Newman looked down at the floor, pursing his lips. He looked, Jeff thought, remarkably like a toad.

"I'm not supposed to do it, you know." He stood without moving a moment longer, and then said abruptly, "To hell with it. Which room?"

They went down and in without bothering to knock. The little doctor dropped his bag on a chair and snapped it open, barely glancing at the woman who stood pressed against the wall.

"Roll up the sleeve of your blouse," he said.

Jeff turned back into the hall, waiting

there until Newman came out a few minutes later.

"Thanks, Doctor," he said. "For her, I mean."

The ugly medico looked up with a twisted smile. His right hand crept over in a gesture of which he seemed unaware, to rub gently his left forearm. His eyes, turned inward, were characterized by an odd vacuity.

"You ever read Whitman?" he said. "If you don't, you should. He wrote something once: *I am the man. I suffered. I was there.* Greatest line of poetry ever written. Good night, son."

### CHAPTER III.

HE went down the hall with choppy strides, his bag swinging, and Jeff crossed to his own door. Inside, he left the door cracked and the light off. Removing his outer clothing, he shoved the room's one overstuffed chair into position before the crack and sat down. Damned foolishness, he told himself. No kidnapper would openly approach a contact in a hotel room. A kidnapper would always work under cover. But no matter. Jefferson Pitt had been hired to do a job. The job was to keep an eye on Cleo Constance. He sat in the chair patiently, looking down the hall at the door through which Constance had vanished.

He was aware, after a while, of the murmur of voices. Twisting, looking up at an angle over the back of his chair, he saw a rectangle of weak light high in the wall behind him. Then he saw that it was not really in the wall at all. The light came through an old-fashioned transom above a tall, narrow door. The door obviously led to the next room and had apparently been locked and nailed shut to make two singles out of a double.

Getting up, he fumbled in darkness for a straight chair and carried it over to the door. Standing on the chair, he could look through the transom into the next room. Up there, with his ear near the crack along the bottom of the rectangle, he could even distinguish words.

The mouse stood looking out the window into the rainy night. She had taken off her dress and had on a sleazy pink

slip. On the bed behind her, her companion on the bus lay in pants and undershirt, looking at the ceiling. His hands were under his head. A cigarette hung from his slack lips.

Pretty soon the mouse turned away from the window to look at the sprawled figure on the bed, and Jeff saw that her eyes were red and swollen. Her voice was pleading.

"It won't be so bad, Dickie. Honest, it won't. We can get a justice of the peace to do it in Darrowville tomorrow."

He didn't answer.

"We can get an apartment, Dickie, and maybe after a while we can buy a little house of our own. And some furniture. I'll work, Dickie. After the baby comes, I'll get a job right away."

The cigarette bobbed. "Yuk, yuk, yuk. For God's sake, shut up."

"It could be fun, Dickie. It could be fun, if only you'd let it."

"Fun. Oh, for God's sake."

"You didn't talk like that when you were talking me into it."

"I was drunk."

"Don't hate me, Dickie. It wasn't my fault. Please don't hate me."

"Hate you? Hell, yes, I hate you. I hate your ugly face, and your skinny body, and most of all I hate your damned whiney voice. How the hell I was ever nuts enough to get in a fix like this with a dame like you, I'll never know. Times sure must've been hard." He sat up, swinging his legs off the bed. "I'll get hitched, all right, because I see I've got to. And like you said, right after the kid comes you can get a job. At least you better, because I'm taking off. That's as long as I stick around, see? Just till the kid comes. Maybe, if I'm lucky, you'll both die."

She didn't flinch. There were no more tears. She just stood there against the window with the black rain outside, and Jeff got down off the chair in a hurry. His pulses hammered. He stood spraddlegged in the darkness with sickness rising to make him dizzy. A drop of cold sweat fell away from his armpit and ran down his ribs.

It would be so easy to kill, he thought. Sometimes it would be so easy.

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He sat in the chair again and stared blankly. The rectangle of light behind him winked out. Outside the cracked door, the shabby hall stretched silent and empty. His mind functioned now with a kind of cold clarity, receptive to intuition. An ugly little medico who quoted Whitman, remembered hell, and practised compassion. A pretty junkie now at peace. A mouse whose gray little life had reached the incredibly bleak point of being dependent on a pimply punk kid for pity. Kidnapper? Contact for a kidnapper? No. They were all on other business. The errands, the flights, the ceaseless, senseless motion between dark and dark.

And so, stepping on flotsam, he came back to the central figure. Cleo Constance, private detective. A handsome, cold fish. A man isolated, thinking his own thoughts, going his own way. Going his own way with fifty grand in his pocket.

He's a bad one, Jeff. Under the cold correctness, the clipped aloofness, there's an unplumbed potential for evil. A queer, cold fish; one of earth's eternal exiles.

And there's been no contact. You can't prove it, of course. Somewhere along the way, in some unobserved fashion, the pass could have been made. But it wasn't made, and it won't be, because the ransom is already paid. It was paid in the house of Reed Roman hours ago. It was paid to a queer, ascetic-looking kidnapper with ice water in his veins, and right now he's got it in a shabby room right down the hall.

Take it from the beginning. From the moment you knew immediately that it was all wrong, there in the house of the old man yesterday afternoon. Contact specified in the ransom note. Has it ever happened before? Kidnapper specifying himself as contact. Dammit, the guy must be nerveless. He must be put together differently from the rest of us. And it builds. The jewel case. The chance to initiate an acquaintance. Maybe more. A cold, handsome devil like that might make a hellish appeal to a wild dame like the Roman. The birth of an idea. The birth and slow growth and icy, calculated consummation.

So what do you do? Somehow you make him break. Somehow you crack that

stony, satanic arrogance. Now. Right now. Because morning will be too late. Let's see. It's nearly two. Human resistance is at its lowest ebb at two in the morning. The time for ghosts and fear of hell.

In the darkness, he stood up and dressed. His shoulder holster, nesting its .38, went under his coat. Moving swiftly, without noise, he went down to Constance's door and knocked softly. Waiting a few seconds, he knocked again. The door swung inward away from his knuckles.

Constance was still fully dressed. He hadn't even removed the perfectly tailored coat of his dark suit. He stood there without speaking, his pale eyes still and wary, the planes of his thin face stone-like in the dim light.

Jeff made a half-gesture toward the room. "I'd like to come in."

Constance moved back, and Jeff moved in. The door clicked shut. Constance came back past him and turned.

"Yes?"

Jeff grinned. "I want in, Constance."

"You *are* in, my friend."

Jeff kept the grin. It was work, but he kept it. "I don't mean in the room, Constance. I mean in the act." He waited, tension drawing to a throbbing point of pain in his chest. "About halfway in fifty grand, let's say."

There was no change in the face. The voice became a little softer, slightly more clipped. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"No?" Jeff shifted weight, lifted his shoulders. "Don't be a fool, man. You think old Reed Roman's lost his marbles? If you do, you're making a mistake. He saw the possibilities in this thing from the start. Naming yourself as contact, for instance. A little obvious, really, to a sharp old bird like Roman. He had me on your tail before you'd been gone an hour. Fifty grand might seem like a lot of money to a private detective, he said. He seemed to think it might be a temptation. His only mistake was, he forgot I'm a private detective too. Fifty grand looks just as big to me as to the next one. Even twenty-five looks big. That's all I'm ask-

ing. Just an even split. In return, I put you solid. I verify the contact."

Constance's lips moved stiffly. "You're mad."

"No." Jeff shook his head. "Why don't you give up, man? You'll split or burn, and it's as simple as that."

He couldn't tell if it was working. Constance just stood there, hardly touched. His lips twitched spastically, betraying inner tension, that was all.

"Conceding what you say is true, what makes you think I'd carry fifty grand around like car fare?"

"In case of emergency, maybe. In case, for some reason, you couldn't anticipate, you had to produce it. Like now, I mean."

"You guessed wrong, friend. I didn't anticipate having to produce it."

"You picked it up at the old man's at six-thirty. You had to make it to the bus station in an hour. That didn't leave you much time."

"Time enough. It's waiting for me in a tight spot."

So it was true. Constance was the man, carrying the whole deal through in lonely arrogance. The sharp pain of tension behind the hard bone of Jeff's chest was almost unbearable. In his head there was a thin, wild singing.

"It can wait for me just as well. Half of it, I mean. I'm in no hurry."

The lonely, proud, ambitious man. Maybe it was because the years had been too long, the cold veneer of his reserve wearing too thin for the persistent erosion of frustration. Maybe, after all the waiting and the final exhilaration of the big dream consummating, the sudden threat of disaster was the final impetus to hysteria. However it was, it was certain, now, in the end when he most needed to do what was exactly right, that he did the worst possible thing. Jeff had no warning. There was no gradual disintegration of the cold veneer. There was only a swift white flame of madness in pale eyes and a gun leaping as if by magnetic attraction from under the dark blue coat.

Jeff spun away with the sound of thunder in his ears, and something hammered at his right shoulder, slamming him against the wall. He thrust himself sideways in a reflex motion as he fell,

rolling into cover behind a heavy chair. A slug thumped into upholstery, beating out a thin cloud of dust.

Using his left hand, Jeff reached his .38 and got it out. He was not ambidextrous, and the shot he returned around the edge of the chair was wild. He heard the shattering of glass and thought for a moment his lead had gone through a window. Then he heard the sound of feet on the iron fire-escape, and he knew that it was Constance that had gone through.

Jeff pulled himself up behind the chair, his shoulder a mass of fire, and lurched across the room. Glass fragments grated under his feet. He was remotely aware that the rain had diminished, falling now in a soft cloud that seemed, against the street lights below, hardly more than a mist. The fire-escape went down against the brick wall to the ground, reversing the direction of its angle with each floor. Below, leaping three steps at a time, Cleo Constance had almost completed the descent.

Jeff wasted no shot. Stretching flat across the platform outside the window, he braced his inadequate left hand against iron, taking aim on the spot where Constance must leave the fire-escape. When the big figure came across the sight, he fired once, the gun leaping in his hand. The sound bounced off old brick and came crashing back around him.

Far below, Cleo Constance stopped and stood rigidly, a grotesque parody of a man being shot, like a kid playing cops and robbers. Then he pitched sprawling on the wet pavement, his arm flung wide for something that wasn't there.

He had to get up, had to get up, had to get up. It seemed to him that he lay on the wet pavement in the gray soft rain for long, precious minutes, repeating the injunction. Actually, he had hardly fallen before he was clawing at asphalt, scrambling to his knees, to his feet, lurching ahead. Another shot ricocheted with an angry whine off the pavement ahead of him, and he kept moving.

At the corner, around the edge of the building, he hesitated, looking around wildly. Across the street, idling in front of an all-night short-order joint, a Buick

Roadmaster waited with the yellow glare of its eyes projecting through the wet darkness. A break. A great, good break.

Holding his left elbow tucked into his guts and his smashed left shoulder pulled forward, he lurched across to the Buick and got in. With a desperate, instinctive concern for small matters that had assumed overwhelming importance, he noticed that the needle of the gas gauge showed almost a full tank on the face of its lighted dial. The big motor roared under his heavy foot, the car leaping ahead.

The sodden night went past him. That was the way it seemed. He sitting idle in the big immobile car while the night went past. The needle of the speedometer wavered at eighty, but surely the speedometer lied. He was sitting still while everything went past him. Everything, everything, all the wide world.

The wound hurt. It was alive and insatiable, tearing at him with hooked talons. It seemed lower than he'd thought at first. Farther in, too. Not really in the shoulder at all, but in the chest. His shirt was warm and sticky against his body. Blood, his bright, bright blood, seeping away in a cursed car that wouldn't move while the whole wide world rushed by.

The Buick hit the edge of the highway and leaped into the air, coming down with a tremendous jolt and a long sickening skid on the muddy shoulder. The impact drove him forward, the lower arc of the wheel ramming into his guts to send a great sheet of fire searing upward across his vision. He jerked his head up, fighting for breath and sight, heaving at the wheel. The car came back onto the highway rocking, two wheels elevated in a terrible moment of suspension. Then the wheels dropped, and the big Buick hurled itself forward.

Close. Too close. For some reason, he had trouble seeing. Everything seemed blurred, wavering in a kind of fog. The rain! The rain, of course. He felt a vast, consuming relief that made him want to shriek with laughter. For a moment, he'd thought it might be the effect of the wound.

Rocking up over the brow of a hill, the Buick boomed down. Ahead, abruptly,

the highway disappeared, and the light of headlamps lay yellow across swirling water. It was too late to slow down, and he ploughed in, water fanning up and out from the shuddering car in a giant V. The sudden retardation of speed again hurled him brutally against the wheel. Again the sheet of fire, the lurid pain. But even in the midst of it, at its most terrible intensity, he thought with despair of the motor. He heard it cough and sputter on the edge of death, and finally, with that vast, hysterical relief, heard it catch fire and resume its steady roar.

That guy in the bus. That tall, lanky guy in the rear seat. There'd been a feeling about him from the beginning. One of those things. One of those odd little threats of danger that seem to come like faint electrical impulses from certain people. He'd felt the guy's eyes on him during the ride. Like two hot projections burning into his skin just where the hair feathered on his neck. As if the sun had been focused there through the magnifying glasses.

For Jefferson Pitt, whose name he didn't even know, he possessed a virulent hatred that worked on him with a physical ravishment that was almost equal to that of his wound. Damn the guy! Oh, damn him, damn him, damn him! The curse repeated itself over and over in his mind with the effect of an evil incantation. Pray for his damnation. Pray, pray to the devil.

After a long time, he saw ahead of him the sign of the by-pass, a detour established for traffic that wanted to circle the city. It rejoined the highway beyond the limit on the other side. At the junction, with the instinctive caution of a wounded and hunted animal, he wheeled the Buick onto the by-pass. Probably there was no immediate danger in the city. Probably the heavy rain had interrupted telephone service out of Hogan. But you couldn't be sure. Maybe not. Maybe the news had gone ahead of him.

He was driving now with one hand. His left lay useless in his lap. His torso was gutted and drained and he seemed to be sitting in a puddle of something warm and wet. It was, moreover, increasingly difficult to think. He was unable,

somehow, to give proper consideration to the details of escape, which were things he should certainly be considering. Funny, the curious coloring the night had acquired. It was more red, now, than black, as if the world were ending in the fulfillment of fiery prophecy.

Brenda. Brenda would know what to do. Brenda was a kind of beautiful panacea, and he had only to reach her to make everything right again. He saw her quite clearly in a pink froth, and he fought for the vision, shutting everything else out. He did recall briefly, however, the fifty grand that was, contrary to what he'd said, still in his pocket. He thought of the money only because it had become in his mind her constant associate. He would take the money to her, and she would get them safely away, because she was beautiful and clever and all things were possible to her.

They'd go south, maybe. To the hot countries. Mexico, Brazil, Argentina. He'd never cared for the tropics. Colder climates for him. Climates of energy and drive and ruthlessness. But with Brenda it would be all right. With Brenda, all things would be all right. That fool back there. That lanky fool. Thinking he had kidnapped Brenda. Thinking he could do it. Hot and cold, tender and cruel, complex, contradictory, beautiful, beautiful Brenda.

He never knew when he regained the highway. Nor when he turned off into the hills on the narrow gravel road. At the end, he was only dimly, redly conscious of turning up the sharp climb to the cabin, of the Buick's skidding out of control and slamming into a stand of scrub oaks.

Opening the door, he pitched out. He lay on the wet mat of dead grass and leaves for several minutes, sobbing with pain. Finally he crawled erect and continued afoot, elbow in guts, shoulder crumpled forward. Slipping and sprawling, always regaining his feet by a fierce exertion of will. Up the slope and across the cleared area in front of the cabin. Up the steps onto the porch. Three steps. Three, arduous, body-wracking, heart-breaking miles. Clawing at the plank door,

beating at it desperately with the meaty side of a clenched fist.

A light came on inside, and the door opened. He plunged headlong into the room, and Brenda stood looking down at him with her breath caught in a hard, hurting knot in her throat.

"Connie," she said. "Connie."

#### CHAPTER IV.

HE was heavy. She had not dreamed that he was so heavy. Tugging, straining, staining herself with his blood, she got him onto a leather sofa and stripped him naked to the waist. She saw with a black wave of despair that the wound was bad, that he was barely alive. His chest heaved. Pink bubbles formed and broke on his lips.

Working like an automaton, not stopping to wonder what had gone so wrong, she did what she could with hot water and towels and an inferior antiseptic she found in the bedroom. It wasn't much.

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His heaving chest quieted, his breath becoming dangerously shallow. The pink bubbles formed more slowly, growing gradually in dimension to the bursting point, inflated gently by his diminished breath.

It was only after she had done all she could for him that she thought of the money. She took it from the inside pocket of his sodden coat and stood holding the thick packet in her hands. It was smeared with blood. Connie's blood. She stood here for a long time, looking down at the fifty grand, the stained stuff of the big plan, balancing in the mental columns of her own perverted accounts the green against the red. With a sudden, violent backhand motion of her arm, she threw the packet away from her. It struck the opposite wall and flew apart, the green leaves fluttering to the floor. Her voice came up on a dry, rasping sob.

"Connie," she said again. "Connie."

Kneeling beside the leather couch, she laid her face against his naked body below the wound, and it was several minutes before she realized that he was dead. Then, in spite of a grief that was real, she began to think, with the predatory coldness that had always been independent of her emotions, of her own survival. She understood that money would be essential, and she got up and began gathering the scattered notes. She was engaged in this when the door swung open, and a tall man stood in the opening. In a kind of strange immunity to shock that was the effect of too much already, she was not frightened, nor even startled, and she saw that this man, too, had been shot. His right arm hung stiffly at his side. In his left hand was a gun. His eyes moved from her to Connie's body on the sofa and back again.

"He's dead?"

"Yes." And then, quickly, "I didn't kill him."

"I know you didn't. I did."

At his words, hate flared within her, a hot blue flame, like the flame of an acetylene torch. So this was the man. This was the man who had done it. The intensity of her emotion made her feel scorched and withered inside, but with craft born of danger she gave no sign. This was a

man. Whatever else he might be, he was still a man. And men were to use. They were to be used for chosen ends in whatever methods were necessary at the moment.

"I don't understand."

"I shot him at Hogan, and how he ever lived this long to drive a car this far is God's own miracle." The lips moved again, giving the angular face no warmth. "I thought he was a kidnapper. I see now that he wasn't. I see now that he was only the partner in a conspiracy. In a way, I can't blame him. A woman like you. The old man told me you were beautiful, but the word isn't good enough."

Casually, she drifted a little left, her body lithe in its sheer gown, between him and the kerosene lamp.

"Who are you?" she asked him very quietly.

He moved, coming farther into the room.

"My name's Pitt. Jefferson Pitt. I'm a private detective, like him." His eyes slanted off again to the body on the sofa. "The old man hired me to keep an eye on the fifty grand. Your grandfather, I mean. Tonight, in Hogan, the thing broke wide open. Constance shot me. I shot Constance. He stole a car and got away. I bullied a cab stand down the street into letting me take a cab to follow him. But he was away. He must have driven like a maniac. I drove all the way to the city without catching sight of him.

"Then I gambled. If he'd taken another way, or if he'd gone on into the city, I'd lost him. But I figured he might have taken the by-pass around the city. If he had, I might be able to cut straight across and pick him up at the junction on the other side. It was a good gamble. I'd only been at the junction a few minutes when he came roaring off the by-pass. I couldn't catch him, but I managed to keep his taillight in sight most of the time. I was lucky to see it when he turned off into these hills. Finally I found the stolen car smashed up in a stand of oaks down below. I saw the light up here, and here I am."

She was caught, and she knew it. Connie was dead, and she was caught, and to make an issue of it now would only

be to concede her most potent weapons. Not to antagonize him, that was the idea. He'd come this far in his own way, and the thing from this point was to make him continue in her way. The way she had planned for Connie. It was quite a trick, but it could be done. By a beautiful woman in a sheer gown in an isolated cabin in the hills, it could be done. And there was another factor on her side. A factor that could be decisive. Fifty grand in crisp green, slightly bloodstained.

"You're hurt," she said.

"Not much."

"I can't do much. Hot water and antiseptic. I'll rip up a slip for the bandage."

He looked at her, admiration stirring in his eyes, softening for a second the haggard harshness of his face. He moved across the room, past the body of Cleo Constance that was now, in death, only a little colder, a little more remote, than it had been alive. Laying his gun on a table with an awkward southpaw motion, he removed his coat carefully. She went over and unbuttoned his shirt, her pale, astringent hair a soft and heady cloud just below his bold nose. When she was finished, she went off into the tiny kitchen to heat more water on the kerosene stove. In a chair, fighting dull pain and fatigue, he saw that she had laid the money on the table beside the gun. They lay there in the yellow light of the kerosene lamp with ugly, primitive life of their own, symbols of the present issue.

She returned with the water and worked at his wound. Her fingers were swift, gentle, sure. The smell of her was good and clean and pungent, sharp in his nostrils. He let his head fall back against the chair, his eyes closed. His face, she saw, was a different face in repose, marked by the signs of a strange, half-reluctant gentleness. He displayed no concern about the gun. Because he was too tired to care? Or because he understood that it was not her purpose to use it? Her early, hot hate was gone. This man had killed Connie, but now, after a lapse of minutes, she didn't care. Things go and things come. You say goodbye and you say hello.

She finished dressing the wound and put her mouth down upon his.

"Jeff," she whispered, a second later. "Jefferson Pitt."

His eyes opened, staring up into hers. Then, because she possessed always a hard capacity for realism, she began to understand that this was one engagement she couldn't win. Not that the eyes rejected her coldly.

They rejected her gently, with reluctance and sorrow.

"A woman like you," he said, as he had before. "What more could a man ask?"

She said hotly and quickly, "And fifty grand, Jeff. A woman like me, and fifty grand."

He put his unhurt arm around her and stood up, holding her tight against him with her feet off the floor. Holding her like that, he kissed her. Then he released her and moved away, not looking at her as he spoke, answering his own question.

"What more? Nothing, you'd think. Nothing that any rational man would dream of. But some men aren't rational. Men like me. They adhere all their lives to a kind of personal law that leaves them always behind in a shambles of lost chances. It buys them nothing on earth and nothing after. Even after they no longer believe in the old myths of reward and justice, they still hang onto the old law, because it's something they have to have to go on living."

He turned to look back at her, and said, "You'd better get dressed."

She went into the next room and dressed swiftly, thinking swiftly. Conceding defeat in respect to him, she still thought of the money. He had been, at most, as Connie had really been before him, only incidental. Dressed, wearing a fur coat, she took a gun out of her purse and went back into the other room with the gun in her hand.

He was standing with his back to her. The money and his gun were still lying together on the table, and she thought that he must be a bigger fool than any other man alive. Walking over to the table, she swept the notes into her purse as he turned to watch her.

"You don't need the gun," he said.

"It comes in handy for persuasion when other methods fail."

"You don't need it. You can walk out of here anytime you want to. Take the car I came in. The taxi. You can leave it wherever you catch the train or plane or bus."

She looked at him as if he were mad. "You're crazy. You're a crazy guy."

"Why? The old man would never let you stand trial. Why bother to take you back?"

"What about the fifty grand? He'll give you hell for letting it get away."

"Let him."

"But why? Why let me take it?"

He shrugged, and he was again haggard and tired. "Maybe because, like you say, I'm crazy. Maybe because I think he owes it to you. There's never been anything in the world he didn't think he could buy for cash. Whatever relief he needs from the guilt he shares in making a woman like you out of the woman you could have been, he can buy with the fifty grand. But it doesn't matter. Just take the money and leave."

At the door, she turned. "What about you?"

"I'll walk to the highway and catch a ride."

"With that shoulder?"

"I'll manage."

"You could ride in with me." And then with an aching urgency that she couldn't understand, "Please come."

He returned her look, sensing the urgency. "Thanks," he said. "Thanks for the offer."

"I'll let you know," she said, and started toward the waiting taxi.

He sent for the body and went to the doctor, slept and went back to the old man. He stood there in the big room, and told the story. The invalid watched him with venomous eyes.

"So they were both in it. The pair of them together. And he's dead, you say?"

"Yes. I killed him."

"Good. Where's Brenda?"

"I don't know. I hope I never know."

"You let her get away?"

"More than that. I helped her."

"With my money?"

"Yes."

"What was your cut?"

Anger stirred faintly, quickly subsiding. "Nothing."

"You expect me to believe that?"

"I don't give a damn whether you do."

"I could have you jailed."

"Go ahead and do it."

The old man sat there twisted and still, and slowly the venom drained from his eyes. "All right, boy. What's fifty thousand? Just tell me why you did it."

He wished he knew. He wished he could state it clearly, even to himself. "I'm not sure. Last night I met some people I've been meeting all my life. One of them I killed, and I'm sorry now I did it. You get sick of it. You get sick of pushing people around because they're lost in the crazy maze that someone says we've got to find our way through like white rats in a laboratory. Things just happen to people, that's all, and one of the things that happened to Brenda is you. Whatever she is, you're part of it. You can buy your peace with the fifty grand."

The old eyes were closed in the semblance of slumber. The voice came up muffled from his chest. "All right. Get out. Send me your bill."

"There's no bill," Jeff said.

He went out of the room and down the stairs past the Van Gogh and outside to his jalopy in the drive. He sat quietly under the wheel, thinking of a slim woman with pale hair somewhere in the hot countries.

She'd "let him know," she'd said. . . . Well, maybe, just possibly, she might. And if and when she did, he might—again just possibly—be able to raise the fare.

Savagely, Jeff cursed. "Good God, will I ever grow up?" he said aloud. There was an embarrassed grin on his homely face as he drove away.

*Trouble, a hotel dick finds, usually comes in bunches.  
But it's really bad, when the trouble happens to be—*

# A CORPSE IN EVERY ROOM

DAN SONTUP

I WATCHED the fat guy heave his bulk off the bar stool and start lurching his way toward the platform at the rear of the lounge where Anne was standing in the spotlight and singing.

He made his way unsteadily through the crowded tables, and when his knees bumped the edge of the platform, he placed one hand on the platform to steady himself and pawed at the hem of Anne's gown with the other.

"Hey, baby!" he said, and his voice was high and shrill and carried over the sound of the three-piece band and Anne's singing. People in the lounge who had been busy looking elsewhere swung around to stare at him.

"That's it, baby," he said. "Sing it pretty. Sing a little song for me."

Anne didn't miss a beat or a word of the song, but she stepped back out of his reach and her eyes searched for me in the crowd.

I was way ahead of her. As soon as the fat guy had started for her, I had left my post near the door and started after him.

I clamped a hand on his shoulder and spun him around—gently. I had to be gentle because the lush had been spending his money at the bar, and a customer is a customer. Also, he probably had a room right in the hotel, and that meant I had to be extra careful with him.

"You'll have to go back to your seat, sir," I said as softly as I could.

He looked up at me from tiny little eyes buried in puffs of fat. "Who are you?" he mumbled.

"I'm the security officer here," I told him, hoping the formal title would impress him. I wasn't in the mood for trouble.

He giggled and swayed a little under my grip. "What's that?" he said. "A house detective or a bouncer?"

"Both," I said. "Will you go back to your seat now, please?"

He took a moment to look me up and down and measure the width of my shoulders. I could see his eyes taking a sort of drunken inventory of my weight, and then he glanced at my hand which still held him by the shoulder.

He giggled again. "Why sure, officer. Don't want to make any trouble."

I let go of him then and followed him back until he had puffed his way up on the bar stool. I glanced at Joe, the bartender, and Joe gave me an almost imperceptible nod. The lush would wait a long while for a drink now.

I walked back to my place near the door, and when I turned around Anne had just finished her song. She winked at me across the lounge, and I grinned back at her.

Betty the hatcheck girl came and stood alongside me and folded her arms across her flat chest.

"Having trouble, Mike?" she asked.

"No. He's harmless."

Betty took a long look at the broad beam of the fat guy overlapping the sides of the bar stool. "Nobody makes passes at me," she sighed. "But him you can have."

I grinned down at her. "Cheer up, shorty. You're still young."

She laughed and dug an elbow into my ribs and then went back to her booth just outside the door.

I forgot about the fat guy and started looking over the rest of the crowd. The place was full, and with Anne and the band taking a break, the noise of conversation had now become a steady hum.

There was a sudden tug at my sleeve, and I turned to face Joe, who looked very much out of place away from the bar in his white apron and jacket.

"Better hurry, Mike," he said. "That

fat guy just followed Anne out the back way."

I walked quickly across the lounge, but not fast enough to make anyone notice me, and then I pushed through the narrow door at the back of the lounge. Once the door swung shut behind me, I quickened my pace until I came to Anne's dressing room at the end of the corridor.

I pushed the door open without knocking, and there was the fat guy trying to spread his pudgy arms around Anne's slim shoulders. She had both palms against his chest and was pushing back against his great bulk.

I wasn't gentle this time.

I grabbed him with both hands, yanked him away from her, and sent him spinning across the small room. He slammed into the wall with a jar that must have shaken half the building. He stood there leaning against the wall with a very surprised look on his face.

I turned to Anne. "You okay?" I asked.

Her blue eyes were wide, and I thought I could see a faint flicker of fear in them. She crossed her arms over her chest and hugged her shoulders. "I'm all right," she said in a small voice.

I walked over to the fat guy and grabbed a handful of his shirt in my fist and drew my other hand back.

"Hold it, Mike!" came a voice in back of me, and I swung around to see Tom Mansfield standing in the doorway.

Mansfield looked at me, then at the lush, and then back to me. "This gentleman is a guest of the hotel, Mike," he said in his best hotel manager's voice. "Please remember that."

I let go of the man's shirt, and he sagged back against the wall.

"What do you want me to do with him, Mister Mansfield?" I said.

Mansfield straightened his tie and ran a hand over his plastered-down hair. "If the gentleman is violating the rules of the hotel and shouldn't be served any more liquor, then just see him back to his room, please." He turned and walked away without another glance at any of us in the room.

I turned back to the fat man. "Are you all paid up at the bar?"

He straightened up and glared at me for a moment. Then he started to smile and finally the little giggle came back again. "I'm *all* paid up," he said, and he glanced at Anne. "Sorry, baby. Guess I stepped out of line a little. But I'll make it up to you. Gonna make a killing tonight, and when it pays off—well, I'll just spend all that dough on you. Okay?"

I looked at Anne, but she just stared at the floor, and her face was unnaturally red.

"See you later," the fat guy chuckled to Anne, and he started to weave his way to the door.

I stepped to his side and steadied him as he bumped into the edge of the door and, after casting a quick look at Anne over my shoulder, I started to guide the fat drunk down the corridor.

We passed through the lounge with me holding tight to his elbow, and as we went by Mansfield standing by one of the tables he bowed slightly and said, "Good night, sir."

"Night, bub," the fat man replied, and Mansfield flashed him a real pretty smile, and then gave me a reproachful look as if clucking his tongue at the very thought of slapping a guest around.

I ignored Mansfield and steered a course for the entrance. As we came opposite Betty's booth, the fat man dug his heels into the carpet and skidded to a stop. "Whoa," he said. "Can't forget my little old hat."

He dug around in his pockets and came up with a crumpled hat check. He tossed it on the counter and dug down into another pocket and produced a thick roll of bills folded in half and held together with a rubber band. He snapped off the rubber band and clumsily peeled a dollar bill off the top of the roll. He placed it on the counter and took his hat from Betty.

"That's for you, honey," he said to her. "Ain't I nice to you?"

Betty chomped on her wad of gum and eyed him up and down. "You're drunk, mister," she said as she picked up the dollar bill and stuffed it in the box on the shelf beside her.

"But my money's still good," the fat guy chortled, and he stumbled forward as I tugged him by the elbow and headed him to the elevators.

We finally made it, and after the operator had closed the elevator doors, I turned to the fat man and asked him for his room key.

He grinned stupidly at me and fumbled around in his pockets until he came up with the key.

I glanced at the tag. "Fifteen, Arnie," I said to the operator, and he nodded his head and started upwards.

By the time we reached the fifteenth floor, the fat guy was humming to himself, and I knew it wouldn't be long now. I hoped he wouldn't pass out before we got to his room. I wasn't in any mood to heft his big bulk on my shoulders.

Arnie opened the elevator doors. "Need any help, Mike?" he asked.

"No, I guess not," I said. And I took the fat guy's hat out of his hand, slapped it on top of his head, and shoved him out of the elevator in front of me.

We made it to his room by slow degrees, and I opened the door, pushed him inside, flicked on the lights, and then turned around to close the door.

"Well, how do ya like that?" the fat guy said in an indignant voice.

I turned away from the door and saw him sitting on the bed with his hat perched on his knee and some bills in his hand. He was looking down at the money as though he just didn't believe it.

"Look at that," he said, and he handed me the bills. I looked them over. There were four brand new, crisp ten dollar bills, all of them folded just once lengthwise. It looked as if each of them had been creased exactly halfway down the length of the bill and then folded very neatly and carefully one inside the other. I handed them back to the fat guy, and he looked at them again with that unbelieving expression on his puffy face.

"My money isn't good enough for them," he said hotly. "They let me lose fifty bucks at a time, but now they won't take my money—and I had a sure thing this time." He stood up and kicked his hat into a corner. "Well, nobody turns down Ed Porter's money without a damn

good reason. Who do they think they're dealing with—some punk from the sticks?"

He swayed over to the dresser, placed the bills on top of it, unfolded them carefully, and started to smooth out the single crease in each one with the heels of his hands. He was muttering to himself all the while, and I was waiting for him to pass out right there. From the way he was wobbling back and forth on his heels in front of the dresser, I knew it wouldn't be long now.

Suddenly he let out a hoarse yell. "There's only four of them!" he shouted at me. "Only four of them. They think my money ain't good enough for them, but they still try and steal ten dollars from me. Nobody does that to Ed Porter, you hear. Nobody!"

He crumpled the bills in his hand and shoved them into his pocket and wobbled his way toward the door. I stepped in front of him, and he stopped short and looked at me while a crafty smile worked at the corners of his mouth.

"Maybe it wasn't them," he said. "Maybe you're in on it, too. I've heard about guys like you trying to roll someone in a hotel. Where's that ten dollars? Think jus' because you're big, I'm afraid of you? I'll beat that ten bucks out of you."

He drew back his right hand and almost toppled over backward when he did it—and then he started to swing the right at me in a wide, sideways movement.

He was asking for it.

I blocked the right with my left forearm, and dug a short, chopping right to his chin. Even before his knees had started to buckle, I had grabbed him under the arms. I dragged him over to the bed, dumped him on it, and then stood there looking down at him for a moment. He was breathing deep and regular, sound asleep now.

I turned away from the bed and had taken only one step toward the door when the toe of my shoe touched something that rustled on the door. I bent down and picked it up. It was a small piece of white paper, also folded lengthwise, and when I unfolded it, things began to get a bit clearer for me.

It was a betting slip for fifty dollars on a horse running the next afternoon.

I stared at the slip for a while and thought of Anne and the fat guy, and then I flicked the light switch and walked out and closed the door behind me.

Downstairs, I crossed the lobby to the room clerk's window and asked him, "Who's this guy Porter in fifteen-twelve?"

The clerk flipped through a few cards on the rack in back of him. "He's been here about a week now," he told me. "Came into town for some kind of buyer's meeting."

"Thanks," I said, and I walked back to the entrance to the lounge.

"Everything okay?" Betty asked me, still chomping away on her gum.

"Yeah. Fat Boy is sleeping it off—with a little help from me."

"Good!" she said over her shoulder as she went to take a bunch of coats from a group just coming in.

Anne and the band were still on their break, and I crossed the lounge and went through the door in back to her dressing room.

This time I knocked, but there wasn't any answer.

I pushed the door open and almost stumbled over Anne. She was lying on the floor just inside the door, staring up at the ceiling with sightless eyes, and there was an ugly red blotch all over the front of her gown.

I dropped to my knees beside her and felt for her pulse. Her wrist was still warm, but there wasn't a single flicker of life in it.

I got back to my feet and stood looking down at her, my breath coming hard and forced, as though I had just been running. Finally, I turned and walked out of the room and closed the door quietly behind me.

I hurried back into the lounge and looked around for Mansfield. He was standing talking to Betty, and I went over to him as quickly as I could without making any of the customers take particular notice of me.

"Better come with me," I told him. "Something's happened to Anne." I turned to Betty. "Call the house doctor

and tell him to get down to Anne's dressing room quick."

From then on, everything happened fast. Mansfield took one look at Anne, and his face turned green under his sun-lamp tan. Then people—all of them employees of the hotel—seemed to be trying to crowd into the room at once. I shoved them all back and closed the door, and Mansfield and I were alone in the room with Anne. He looked scared stiff and I knew he wanted to leave, but I stood with my back against the door and we both just stood there and stared at each other until the doctor came.

His examination was a brief one, and when he finally straightened up and took the stethoscope out of his ears, what he said was equally as brief. "She's dead. Stabbed, as far as I can tell. Better call the police."

Mansfield said, "I'll do it," and he rushed to the door as though he couldn't wait to get out of there.

The doc looked up at me. "Not much more you can do here, Mike. Why don't you wait outside?"

I nodded my head, opened the door, and pushed my way through the crowd of employees in the corridor.

"Go back to work, everyone—please. Don't crowd around here," I told them.

They obeyed me grudgingly, just as if they all wanted to stay in a narrow, stuffy corridor because there was a dead girl on the other side of a closed door.

Betty tugged on my arm, and her teeth were clamping down on her wad of gum so fast she could hardly talk. "Is she dead, Mike? Is she dead?"

I nodded, and she stared at the door for a moment and then turned and started to walk away. I followed in back of her, trying to collect my thoughts, when I suddenly remembered a very fat guy sleeping it off in a bed on the fifteenth floor. He could have the answers to a lot of things.

"Porter!" I said out loud, and snapped my fingers. I brushed past Betty, shouldered a couple of waiters aside, and almost knocked Joe off his feet as I hurried down the corridor and then through the lounge and over to the elevators.

"Fifteen," I snapped at Arnie. "And make it fast."

The elevator shot upward, and I kept thinking of Porter and what he had said and what all of it meant.

When I got to his room, I used my pass-key to open the door, flicked on the lights.

He had rolled over on his side facing the wall, and I turned him over on his back and started to shake him.

"C'mon, snap out of it," I growled at him, but there was no answer. I leaned over and slapped his face twice, as hard as I could.

He groaned and breathed out a lungful of whiskey-soaked breath into my face. I grabbed him by the lapels of his jacket and started to pull him up into a sitting position.

There was a slight sound of movement in back of me, and I started to let go of the fat guy.

Before he had even dropped back on the bed, something cracked into the back of my head, and I fell forward across the bed on top of the fat guy.

I wasn't out yet, but the blackness was closing in fast. I placed both my palms flat on the bed and tried to push myself up, and all I could think of was that whatever had hit me had felt cold and hard.

I was halfway up when it hit me again, and then I couldn't do any more thinking.

When I finally opened my eyes again, I wasn't on the bed. I was lying on my side on the floor with a blanket over me, and when I tried to move there was a flash of pain in the back of my head that almost blinded me for a moment.

I screwed my eyes shut and groaned out loud and then tried to open my eyes again, this time without moving my head. I saw three pairs of legs in front of me, and I rolled my eyeballs upward until I made out the faces that belonged to the legs. One of them was the house doctor, the other a uniformed policeman, and the third was a man in a brown business suit and with the heaviest and blackest eyebrows I had ever seen.

"Easy does it, Mike," the doc said, and he kneeled down beside me. "You've been hit pretty hard." He placed an arm

around my shoulders. "Think you can sit up now?"

I tried it and found that if I didn't move too fast I could make it without feeling as if the back of my head was being ripped loose from the rest of me. I was breathing heavily when I finally got into a sitting position.

I swiveled my head around slowly, looked at the cop and the other man, and then I looked at the bed.

From where I was sitting on the floor, the fat guy on his back on the bed seemed to fill the whole room like an enormously inflated balloon—and sticking up out of the center of the balloon was the handle of a knife!

They let me take it all in for a long moment, and then the one with the eyebrows finally spoke. "Will he be able to make it downstairs, Doc?"

"I guess so," the doc said. Then he asked me, "You feeling any better now?"

I started to nod my head, but thought better of it and just said, "Yeah."

"Okay," the man with the eyebrows said, and he turned to the cop. "Grady, stay here and come down with them. I'll leave Anderson on guard outside." He looked down at me once and then walked out.

It took a little while, but the doc finally got me downstairs, and the cop tagged right along with us until we came to the little anteroom that opened off Mansfield's office. It looked like every employee of the hotel was sitting or standing there, and Betty jumped up off her chair and let me sit down in it.

"What's the matter, Mike," she asked in a breathless voice, but I didn't answer her.

A few of the others clustered around me, and when the doc started working on the back of my head, I could see Joe's face turn as white as the bartender's apron which he was still wearing. Finally, they all went back to their places and left me alone with the doc.

Police officials don't take a hotel detective into their confidence, so I was as much in the dark as to what was going on as the rest of them. They were called into Mansfield's office one at a time, and the room gradually began to thin out. I didn't

mind waiting because it gave the doc more time to work on my head, and I was feeling a lot better by the time I was called into the office.

The man with the eyebrows was sitting behind Mansfield's desk, and he looked as much at home there as Mansfield had in that chair. He motioned me to a chair in front of the desk and said, "I'm Lieutenant Dickson, Homicide. Let's hear what you've got to say about all this."

I looked around me. There was a uniformed cop standing by the closed door, with his arms folded across his chest, and there was a man in civilian clothes sitting at the side of the desk with a stenographer's pad in front of him and his pencil poised above it. Hanging on the rack in back of the lieutenant were a couple of coats and hats that dripped water on the floor. The coats bothered me somehow, but they didn't tell me anything more than that it was a cold and rainy night outside—something I had known all along.

I finished looking around the room, and then I took a deep breath and started talking. Nobody interrupted me, and the man with the pad and pencil bent his head over the desk and made rapid little marks on the pad.

I covered everything right from the time the fat guy had pawed at Anne's dress to the time I woke up on the floor in the room where the fat guy had had a knife stuck in his flabby chest.

When I had finished, I fished the slip of paper I had found on the floor in Porter's room out of my pocket and handed it to the lieutenant. He looked it over, then reached for a small leather notebook on the desk beside him. He opened it and held it out toward me and said, "Does this look like Anne's handwriting?"

I leaned forward and looked at the open notebook, which Lieutenant Dickson still held in his hand. There were a lot of names and dates and figures written there, but none of them meant anything to me.

"Yes," I said, "that looks like her handwriting."

The lieutenant nodded and tapped the edge of the notebook on the desk. "This

book," he said, "is a list of bets made on the ponies. The names of the bettors are in some sort of code. Did you know the girl was running a book here?"

"No, of course not. I thought you boys had cleaned up all the bookie joints in town."

"So did I," said the lieutenant dryly. "But it looks like we missed one."

"She could have been working it independently," I said. It hurt to say something like that about Anne, but the facts pointed to it.

"She was handling it alone, then?" Dickson asked.

"No," I said. "There was another person in on it—maybe more, but I doubt it."

"How do you figure that?"

"Porter kept referring to 'them' and he said that 'they' gave him back his money."

"Okay," the lieutenant said. "There was someone else in on it." He leaned forward over the desk, and the heavy eyebrows knitted together in a frown. "You're the house detective here. You mean to tell me you never knew what was going on?"

"No. I didn't."

"Can something go unnoticed like that for long in a hotel?"

"Sure. If no telephone calls are made; if they have some way of collecting the money and betting slips and returning the winnings so no one will catch on to it; and if they make sure that it's easy for the bettors to pass the money to them anytime during the evening."

"And Anne was the boss of the operation?" Lieutenant Dickson said.

"Looks that way. Her partner took in the money and handed out the winnings, and Anne kept all the records."

The lieutenant shook his head. "From what I've found out about her, she seemed to be a pretty good kid. Why would she want to get herself involved in a racket like this?"

"For money," I told him. "Maybe she needed more than she was making by singing."

"Then why was she killed?" Dickson suddenly snapped at me.

"Don't you know?" I said.

"Don't get wise with me, buddy. I want to find out what you know."

"I can make a darned good guess."

"Okay, let's have it."

"Anne knew that I had caught on to what she was doing. The fat guy dropped some pretty broad hints in the dressing room. He thought I was in on it, too."

"So?"

"So Anne knew that as soon as I got back from putting the fat guy to bed, I'd come and talk to her about it. She probably talked the whole thing over with her partner while I was upstairs. Maybe Anne decided to tell me everything. Maybe she got panicky. Maybe they had a quarrel. Whatever it was, Anne was killed to keep her quiet."

"Then why was Porter killed?"

"For the same reason, of course. He knew who the partner was, the person he handed over the cash to."

"Okay," Lieutenant Dickson said. "You've talked enough for now." He beckoned to the uniformed policeman and whispered something in his ear, and the cop went out and closed the door behind him.

The lieutenant and I sat and stared at each other until the door opened and the cop ushered in Betty and Joe and Mansfield. The lieutenant waved them all to chairs and then looked us all over one by one.

"You four," he finally said, "are the only ones who could have killed the girl and Porter. But you"—and he pointed to me—"are the only one who had the best chance to kill them both."

I sat up straighter in my chair. "What are you talking about?" I said, and I had some trouble keeping myself from yelling at him.

"Just this," he said. "All three of the others admit to going into Anne's dressing room after you left with Porter. All of them say they went in to see if Anne was all right. All three of them say that Anne was alive when they left her. All three of them say that no one else was in the corridor when they went in and left and that Anne was alone in the dressing room. We've got no way of checking on who went in last—but we do know that the girl wasn't reported dead until you went into the dressing room all by yourself."

I could see what he was leading up to, and my mind raced ahead trying to find the answers.

"Also," the lieutenant went on, "Porter wasn't found dead until we discovered both of you in the same room—and he was alive and very drunk the last time he was seen with you."

"And I suppose I stabbed him and then clouted myself on the back of my head just to make it look good?" I said.

Lieutenant Dickson nodded. "Exactly. It *could* be done that way, and it makes a pretty good alibi for you." He paused for a moment and scratched at one of his eyebrows with the tips of two fingers. I knew he was leading up to his punch line. "Besides," he said "we've checked with the elevator operator and no one went up to the fifteenth floor after you did." He

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leaned back in his chair and looked at me steadily and without blinking.

I was ready for him, though, and I brought my own punch line. "There's a freight elevator out in back. Anyone could have used it to come up to the fifteenth floor and follow me into the room and knock me out and then stab Porter. There was plenty of confusion downstairs, and the killer could sneak away for a while when I got to his room—and he was still alive when I was sapped."

The lieutenant leaned forward in his chair and some of the confidence began to go from his face.

"And," I said, "what about fingerprints on the knife handle and on the doorknob?"

The lieutenant smiled. "None. Everything was wiped clean. You're still the number one boy for my money."

I couldn't think of any more answers, and I avoided the lieutenant's gaze and looked at the coat rack in back of him. The coats were still dripping on the floor—and then it all began to fit into place. And I knew all the answers now.

"So you think I killed the two of them?" I said.

Lieutenant Dickson nodded.

"And conked myself on the back of the head?"

Dickson nodded again.

"I think the doc will bear me out in this," I said. "I had a pretty nasty blow on the head, right?"

Dickson grunted.

"Then if I knocked myself out, where's the thing I used to do it with? You didn't find anything in the room that I could have used to knock myself out, did you? You didn't find anything heavy enough to do the job, something with my blood and maybe bits of my hair on it—and something with my fingerprints on it, because I couldn't wipe off my fingerprints after I had knocked myself out."

The lieutenant didn't say anything for a long while. Then he sighed. "Okay. That lets you off the hook. I thought I could get you going until I found a motive—maybe a lovers' quarrel with the girl over the fat guy—something like that. So your idea of the motive is the only pos-

sibility left." He turned and looked at the other three, who hadn't been part of the conversation. "And that means one of you is the killer." His voice had become hard now, and he looked from one of them to the other.

"That's right, lieutenant," I said. "And I know which one it was."

Six pairs of eyes turned on me in one motion. Lieutenant Dickson looked puzzled; the stenographer seemed to have forgotten his pad and pencil; the cop unfolded his arms; Betty stared at me wide-eyed; Joe's face was white again; and Mansfield looked as if he was ill.

"You better know what you're talking about," the lieutenant said softly.

"I do," I told him.

"Okay. Let's have it."

I stretched my legs out in front of me. This was my show now, and I was going to enjoy every minute of it. I was going to get a real big kick out of putting the finger on Anne's killer.

"The killer, of course," I began, "is the one who was Anne's partner in this little scheme. So, if we find out who took the money and then gave it back to Porter, we'll have the one who killed both of them."

"Go on," the lieutenant said.

"It's pretty hard to pass money without someone seeing it, but Anne and her partner had worked out a good system. The bettor would hand over the money and the information about which horse was being bet on, and the partner would take the money and also pay off if the bet was a winning one. Bets were made at night for the next day's races, and winnings were probably paid off the next night. I don't think any talking was involved in this, because someone can always overhear a conversation. It all had to be done without any talking, without making phone calls, and without letting anyone see the money changing hands."

"Then how was it done?" the lieutenant asked impatiently.

"By a very simple method, lieutenant. Maybe the original contact with the bettor and the instructions for how the system operated all happened outside the hotel. But we're not concerned with that. All we're concerned with is how things

operated here in the hotel so that no one would catch on. The whole thing, then, hinges on how the money was passed back and forth."

I paused for a moment to let all of it sink in. All of them still hadn't taken their eyes off me, and they still hadn't said anything.

"First," I said, "Porter claimed that someone held back ten dollars of his money. That means the money could be on the killer right now. Those four ten dollar bills I saw were brand new. Probably all of them had consecutive serial numbers. Even if they didn't, the bill could be identified because it was brand new and because it had that nice little crease all the way down the middle. That crease is important, too, by the way."

The lieutenant interrupted me. "Any of you three want to hand over that ten dollar bill before I have you searched?"

All of them just looked at him dumbly.

"I don't think you'll be likely to find it on any of them," I said. "The killer wouldn't be foolish enough to hold back on a mere ten dollars, or to hang on to it for any length of time even if it was taken from Porter."

"Then where the hell is it?"

"Right where Porter left it when he took out the other bills. A drunken man fumbles around with his hands a lot, so he could easily have taken out only four bills and missed the fifth one. In fact, the betting slip dropped to the floor, and he didn't even notice it."

"Was it in his pocket, then?"

"No. He went through his pockets a couple of times before we even got to his room—and it was only in his room that he decided he'd been swindled. He left the lounge not knowing that he had gotten his money back. It isn't likely that anyone could have slipped it into his pocket without him knowing it or without someone else seeing it being done.

"Anne couldn't have given it back to him herself because, from what he said, he thought he was still *all* paid up; and if Anne wanted to return the money, she

could just as easily have given it back to him in the dressing room as go through a lot of hocus pocus about the money. Besides, she's not the one who handled the money. There's no way a bettor could slip her the money right in the lounge, and a bunch of different people traveling back and forth from her dressing room night after night would be too darn suspicious."

"Okay," the lieutenant said. "Get to the point. Where was the money?"

"In the last thing Porter took with him before he left the lounge—in his hat."

"Are you nuts?" the lieutenant shouted at me.

"No. Look behind you," I said, and I pointed to the dripping coats. "Why does a man wear a hat in a hotel when he's not even planning on going outside? It's a cold and rainy night. If Porter figured on going outside, then he would have brought a coat along, too. Why did he wear a hat when he was just going to leave his room, come downstairs in the elevator, go into the lounge, and then go back to his room, as all his actions indicated?"

I didn't look at Betty, but I could hear her gasp, and I knew all the rest of them were looking at her.

"He wore his hat," I said, "because the money was folded lengthwise inside the inner hat band, where Betty could take it out and pass it along to Anne later on. I guess Porter's money was returned because Anne had taken all the bets she could handle on that particular horse. Porter kept all his money folded in half and held together with a rubber band. Only the ten dollar bills were folded lengthwise, and that was the only fold in them."

The lieutenant motioned to the cop, and the cop opened the door and walked out.

I glanced at Betty, and I knew from the look on her face that the cop would return with a hat and a brand new ten dollar bill.

# KEEPING UP WITH THE CRIME CROWD

By **CLARK HANSEN**

*Crime moves faster in a mechanical age—and so the long arm of the law must move more swiftly too. . . . Now, even the prowl cars talk!*

**T**HOUGH the police of Los Angeles receive a call for assistance about every thirty seconds—which adds up to anywhere from two thousand to three thousand “I want a cop” message every twenty-four hours, they’re exceptionally well equipped to handle them all.

This is because the city has the largest and most complete system of communication in the United States as far as law enforcement agencies are concerned. It easily permits officers, in most cases, to actually arrive on the scene while the citizen is still busy telephoning headquarters. The procedure sounds simple: The central emergency board takes the call, records the information, passes it, via a mechanical belt, to a dispatcher who immediately relays it to the proper person in the microphone room. There are ten women here, with each one handling a different section of the city. She operates a switchboard-like panel which connects with every prowl car in her locale. It also lets her know where each one is at any given moment, and what it is doing. Consequently, she can transfer each message to the right officer in a flash. What’s more, since each car is equipped with a two-way radio, the man can reply, ask for additional information, repeats, and the like.

Right now there are nine hundred and fifty vehicles with such set-ups and their efficiency is easily exemplified by the fact

that on one New Year’s day alone eight thousand nine hundred and eighty-six different messages were received, relayed, and dispatched in this manner.

Another way in which the system facilitates law and order is the “rolling make” device. This means that any policeman can communicate with headquarters at any time and get immediate information regarding criminal matters. For example, if the name on a man’s driver’s license doesn’t jibe with that of the registered owner of the car that he’s in, a few simple words spoken into the mike can let the gendarme know whether the auto was borrowed or stolen. Or if a vagrant is picked up off the streets, the law’s arm can find out in minutes as to whether the fellow should be placed under arrest.

All of this sounds marvelous enough to satisfy everybody. Which is exactly the case with the exception of two groups of people: The members of the city’s ever-present underworld, because they get caught—and always far too fast. And—surprisingly enough—the bluecoats, themselves. They want to have and will get, when present plans are perfected, a facsimile mechanism in their cars, instead of the present-time auditory system. This will enable them to pull printed slips from their radios, instead of making possible errors while in the process of listening to messages and writing them down.

Nearly everybody has a secret ambition...

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