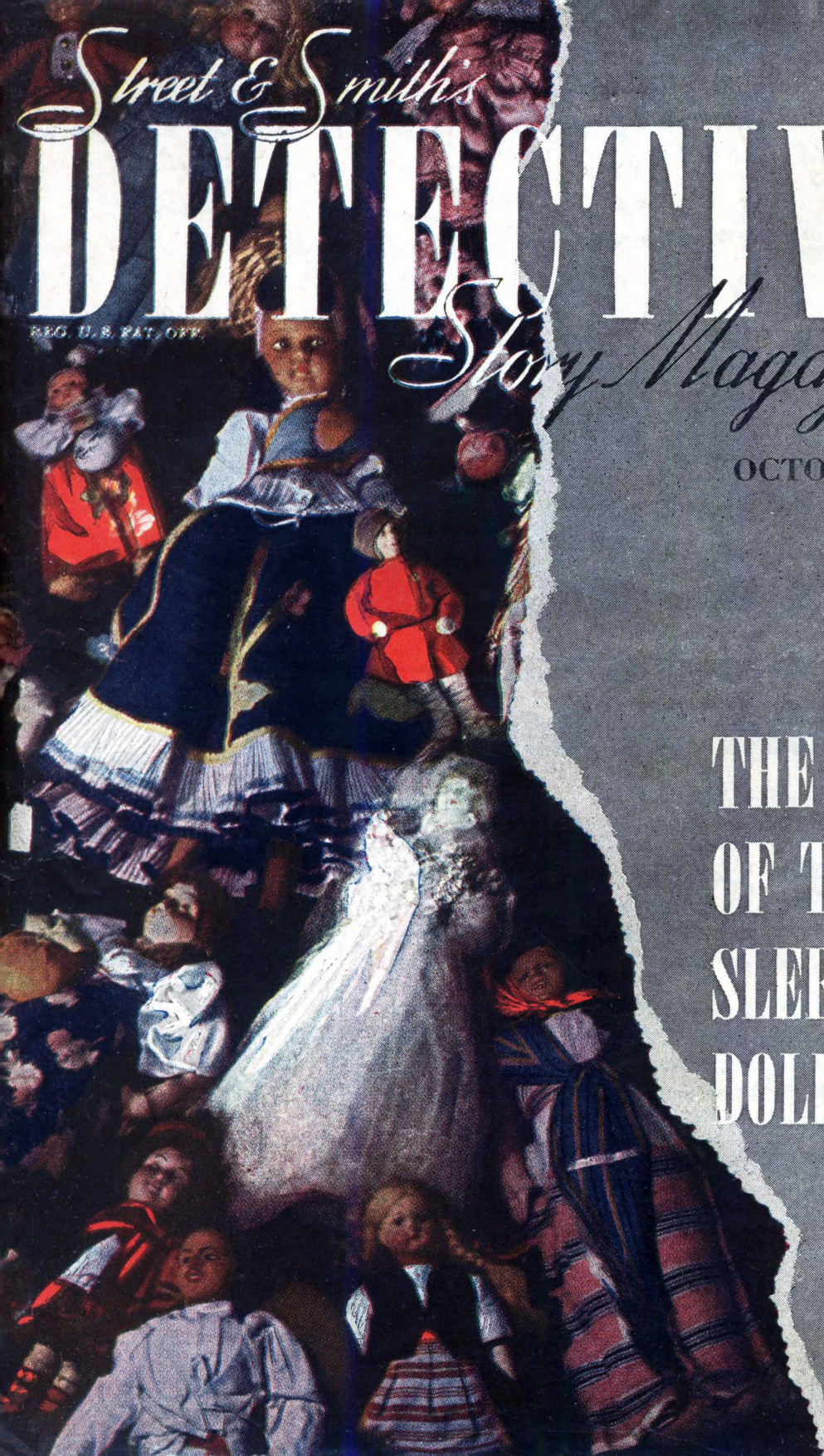

Street & Smith's

DETECTIVE Story Magazine

REG. U. S. PAT. OFF.

OCT. '44

OCTOBER 1944

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THE CASE OF THE SLEEPING DOLL

Me and Buck were having an argument about them flakes and scales on my jumper. "Listen," says he, "I'm laying my month's pay that if you'll take my advice, you'll get help—pronto!"

I took the bet.

"For all the tea in China," Buck says, "you've got infectious dandruff—germs—lots of 'em! And to fight bugs like 'bottle bacillus' you need antiseptic action—and massage!"

Soon's we got our Listerine Antiseptic, I went to work and kept going! Buck was right. Holy Smoke! Could I see an improvement!

Listerine Antiseptic and massage really got after those flakes and scales, eased up that itching. The old scalp and hair felt like a million—looked swell! Glad I lost that bet! Buck took the dough and we made liberty together. Good guy, Buck!

WHEN INFECTION IS PRESENT

Get After the Germs

That's what Listerine Antiseptic does—kills millions on scalp and hair.

Maybe that is why, in a series of tests where dandruff sufferers used Listerine Antiseptic twice a day, 76% showed either marked improvement in, or complete disappearance of, the symptoms of dandruff in 30 days.

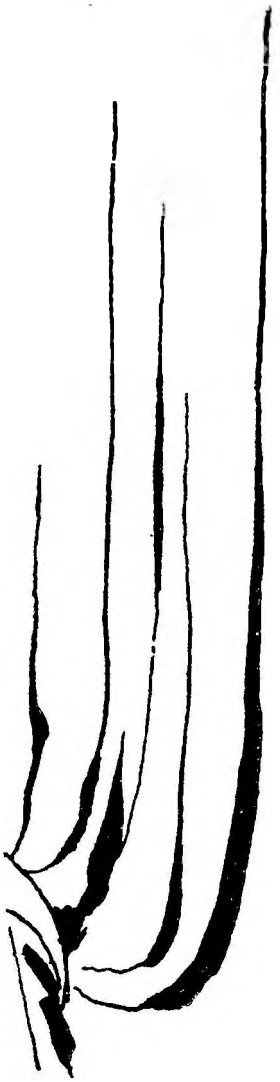
Just douse Listerine Antiseptic on and follow with vigorous, finger-tip massage. See how those distressing flakes and scales begin to disappear. Note how itching is relieved. Observe how wonderfully fresh your hair and scalp feel, smell and look.

This is the treatment that doesn't fool . . . that has helped thousands. Listerine Antiseptic is the same antiseptic that has been famous for more than 60 years in the field of oral hygiene.

LAMBERT PHARMACAL COMPANY, *St. Louis, Mo.*

The Tested Treatment

LISTERINE ANTISEPTIC for Infectious Dandruff



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OCTOBER, 1944 VOL. CLXVIII, NO. 6

SHORT NOVEL

NOVELETTES AND SHORT STORIES

NEXT MONTH

THE THIRD LADDER, *by Philip Ketchum*

Editor
DAISY BACON

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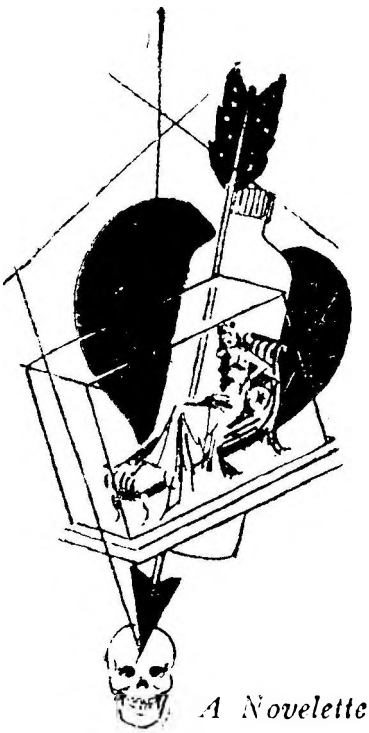


● *It blinked its eyes, it walked: in fact, it even tried to talk.*

THE CASE OF THE SLEEPING DOLL

A Novelette

BY BRUNO FISCHER

I.

Doug Allen said: "You're a cop, Bill. Can't you compel them to have an autopsy performed?"

The drapes had been drawn over the library windows, so that we stood facing each other in stifling gloom. Though there were many mourners in other parts of the house, I could hear no voices. The presence of death creates a peculiar hush of its own.

"Why an autopsy?" I asked.

"To find out why Sally died."

I studied him. Doug and I had been brought up in the town within a mile of each other, yet we never had been close friends. He had been the local bright boy, the ambitious lad; I had been a hell-raiser. He had gone on to establish himself as an up-and-coming business man and prominent citizen; I was merely a plain-clothes sergeant in the State police force.

But there was a bond between us. We both had loved Sally Caruth, and now Sally was dead.

I said: "To begin with, I'm not a cop in this house. I'm here on a leave of absence. Besides, we know the cause of Sally's death. Dr. Deylen insists it was her heart."

"There are ways to weaken a person's heart."

"You mean drugs?" I was forc-

ing it out of him.

"All right, drugs," Doug said savagely. "Poison. I want an autopsy to find out if Sally was murdered. There was no reason for her to die."

"Sally was always frail," I pointed out.

"No, she wasn't. She was built along delicate lines, but she was never sick. Two days ago I called on her here and she was in perfect health. Yesterday I got a phone call from her uncle. He was worried about her. I drove over and she was already sinking, and Dr. Deylen looked pretty hopeless. This morning she was dead."

"It happens like that," I said. "Especially, when it's the heart."

Doug's mouth twisted. "And it happens that her uncle, Louis Caruth, died suddenly and mysteriously eight months ago. As a cop, Bill, how many things have to happen before they form a pattern?"

I was wondering about that. Eight months ago Louis Caruth's body had been found at the bottom of a steep chasm not far from his home. His neck was broken. He had fallen, jumped, or been pushed —take your choice. It had been impossible for us to prove how he had died. And nobody much cared, except perhaps his niece Sally; and she, I think, mourned him only out of a sense of duty.

Louis Caruth had been kinder to Sally than to anybody else, but that wasn't saying much. It's true that he had raised her from childhood, but there are more personal ways of being kind. He never made any of her boy friends, like Doug and myself, welcome in the house. Though he could certainly afford it, he never sent her to a decent school, and she had fewer clothes than any of the other girls. In short, Louis Caruth was a mean, bitter old man, the richest man in the community and the most disliked.

Even his one known charity returned interest to him, when he took his destitute brother Eric and Eric's wife Alice in to live with him and Sally. It turned out that Louis got himself a housekeeper in Alice and a handyman in Eric without the necessity of paying wages.

Nobody much regretted Louis Caruth's death, but Sally's death, of course, was different. Doug and I weren't the only ones who had loved her, not by a long shot.

Doug was speaking again, angrily, urgently. "And why the haste to get Sally's body out of the house? She's been dead only a few hours. And why cremate her?"

"Alice always has believed in cremation."

"Very convenient now," Doug sneered. "Cremation will destroy every scrap of evidence."

It was out now, the bald accusation.

"Do you suspect Alice or Eric of having murdered Sally?" I asked.

"I'll go further than that. I'll say that this isn't the first time that they murdered somebody."

I said nothing. Both of us had been deeply hurt by Sally's death, and Doug's nerves were haywire.

That might be responsible for his words—or it might not.

Doug Allen grabbed my arm. His handsome face, pale and intense, was close to mine. Perspiration lay on his upper lip.

"It stands to reason, Bill. Eric and Alice were virtually slaves of Louis Caruth while he remained alive. They depended on him for every crust of bread."

"But his will didn't leave them a cent," I reminded him.

"It didn't, but they couldn't have known that. They expected a share of the estate to go to Sally, but not every last penny of it. The result was that they simply changed masters."

"Sally was good to them," I said.

"Of course, but it was still charity. Don't you see it? Sally left no will. Eric, as her blood uncle, is the nearest of kin. With her dead, it all goes to them."

"You need evidence," I told him.

"An autopsy will find it."

"It's not that simple. Only Eric, her nearest kin, can grant permission for an autopsy to be performed. And no judge will issue a court order unless there's more than a vague suspicion of foul play."

"I know it," he said. "That's why I haven't tried to go to a judge. But you're on the inside of the cops, Bill. There might be some technicality I don't know about to get an autopsy performed."

"There isn't," I told him. "The best I can do is talk to Eric."

Doug laughed harshly. "Sure, he'll want proof of murder discovered—like hell! Do you know what Eric told me an hour ago? He said the doll was responsible for Sally's death."

"Eric said that? He's the least superstitious man I ever knew."

"Sure he is. Maybe he's trying to cook up an alibi. Maybe he'll try to pretend he's gone crazy. I'm going to have another talk with Dr. Deylen."

For a long minute after Doug left, I stood there in the gloomy library. Then I opened the door to a small room off the library which once had been a storeroom. Within recent years it had become known as the doll room.

Louis Caruth's dolls had been his only known extravagance, though I always believed that his collection had been more of an investment than a hobby. They could always be turned into ready money, like real estate. The doll of Sally, I understood, was worth a couple of thousand dollars.

Thirty or forty of the dolls, dressed in expensive satins and laces, sat or stood on special shelves built for them. They looked, for all the world, like miniature humans—Victorian grand ladies, American Indians in full regalia, two soldiers of the American Revolution, picturesque natives of the Middle East in their charming dress, and so on. Four or five of them were as big as dwarfs, yet for all their realism, they were merely dolls.

Except the doll of Sally. It gave you a shock the first time you looked at it, for it might have been

Sally herself. The doll was a bit over five feet tall, exactly Sally's size.

Sally always had hated it. Once she had told me that she sometimes had a curious notion that the doll was jealous of her living counterpart, that the doll was striving to possess her soul.

I had laughed at her, of course, and Sally had laughed, too; but she had never been happy about the doll. She had posed for it only because her uncle had wanted her to. Louis Caruth had brought a famous dollmaker all the way from Los Angeles, saying that Sally, so delicately lovely, would be an ideal model because she was so much like a doll herself.

I stood in the doorway of the dim room, looking at the doll that was so lifelike that it was like looking at the live Sally. It was reclined in sleep on a real chaise longue in a specially built locked glass case that was as wide as a small room. And it was dressed in a rose taffeta evening dress which had been Sally's. Every detail was precise, to the manicured fingernails and the red lips, the flesh tint of the bare shoulders and the graceful turn of the calves.

And suddenly the lids of the doll's closed eyes moved.

A tremor went through me. I stepped closer, peering down into that inanimate face, remembering how Sally had said that the doll wanted her soul.

Then I found myself chuckling without mirth. It was a trick of the light or of my imagination. The doll was just a doll, and Sally lay dead in the next room.

The rather simple coffin rested on two chairs in the middle of the living room. In the doorway I paused, wondering if I, who had seen so many people who had died in agony, would have the courage to look at the dead, serene face of the girl I had loved.

It was even dimmer in here than in the other rooms, and I did not see Alice Caruth until she touched my arm. She was a quiet woman of about fifty, a strong woman, unbeaten even by poverty, with a great capacity for bitterness. She could resent people enough to murder them, I thought. First, perhaps, Louis Caruth, her brother-in-law, and then Sally.

"I'm glad you came, Bill," Alice said. "You haven't seen Sally yet, have you?"

Alice led me to the coffin. It was, oddly, not at all like looking at death. Sally looked as beautiful as I ever had seen her.

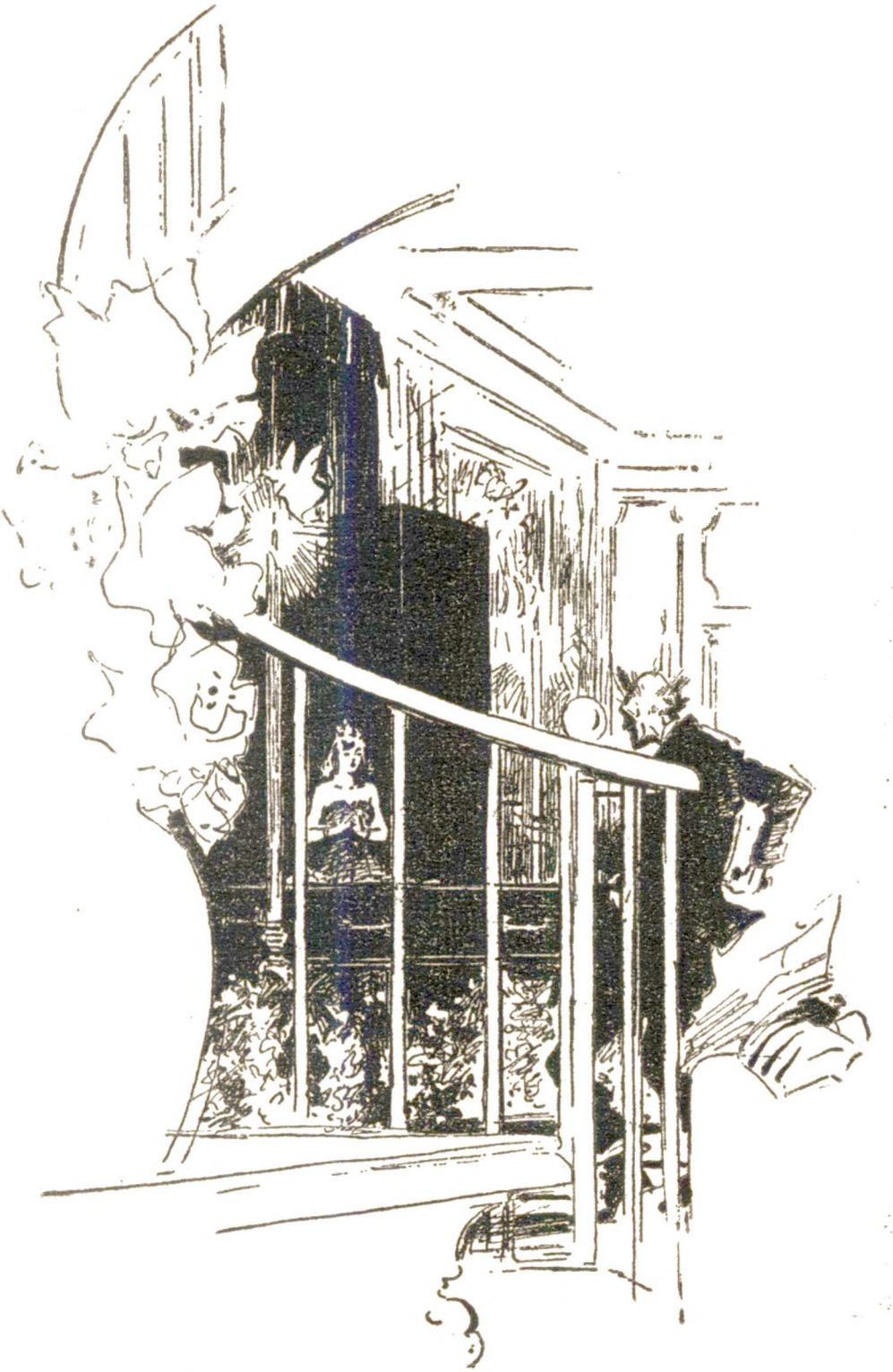
"That's because it happened so quickly," Alice told me. "She wasn't sick long. She didn't suffer greatly. She looks as if . . . as if she would get up."

"Yes," I said and turned away. "Why do you object to an autopsy?"

"I see that you have been listening to rumors."

So others beside Doug Allen had the same idea! Naturally. The two deaths had played directly into her and her husband's hands.

"An autopsy would prove the



rumors baseless," I pointed out.

"It would also violate that beautiful young body."

"Her body will be ashes soon enough."

"That's different. Cremation is clean and decent. No, Bill, as long as Eric and I have anything to say, we will not allow them to touch this poor body."

I looked again into the coffin and my heart agreed with Alice, though my policeman's intelligence told me that it made no difference to the dead what happened to them after death.

Eric Caruth came in. Like his brother Louis, he was small-boned and prim, but their physical resemblance was all they had had in common. Louis had possessed a driving nervous energy which had brought him a lot of money. Eric was easy-going, listless. I doubt if failure and poverty had made Eric as bitter as his wife. He seemed to be merely very tired.

Gravely, he greeted me and then said to his wife: "We are ready to leave for the crematory."

Alice nodded with a defiant look at me, as if daring me to stop them. She started out of the room.

"Alice!" Eric called after her. "Why don't we take the doll, too?"

"Doll?" Alice turned to her husband with a curiously sharp expression. "Which doll?"

She knew as well as I did. In that household of many dolls, only one was meant when talking about *the* doll.

"The doll of Sally." Eric ran a hand over his face. "Sally always feared and hated that doll. So did I. Let's get rid of it."

"Later we can try to sell it."

"No!" Eric's voice went shrill. "There's no time. And it must be destroyed. In a little while Sally's body will be consumed by fire and Sally's soul will have no place to go—and the doll is reaching for it."

"Eric! This is no time for such nonsense."

What I felt mostly at that moment was a sense of outrage that here, practically over Sally's coffin, they should make a scene. As for Eric, he had been a very well-balanced man, but now terror was stark in his face. Then he squared his shoulders and for a moment I thought he was going to put his foot down. After all, now that both his brother and niece were dead, he was master here. But he could no more buck his wife than he had been able to buck life. His voice came out in a whine.

"But I saw the doll, Alice. It was a little while after the undertakers had laid Sally out in her coffin. Nobody was in here except the doll standing beside the coffin and looking down at Sally. The doll saw me and scampered back to the library and into the doll room."

I saw it then. Poor Eric had lost his mind. Maybe not altogether, but enough to make him scared to death of a doll and give him hallucinations.

"Eric, you fool!" Alice exclaimed and swept out of the room.

I was also on the way out when the undertakers came in and started to put the lid on the coffin.

The mourners were gathered on the lawn, standing about in little groups, talking in hushed whispers. Everybody had been fond of Sally and most of the town had turned out for the funeral. Nodding to those I knew, I weaved my way toward where Dr. Deylen and Doug Allen stood talking.

Dr. Deylen was a small, fussy old man who, in my opinion, had more common-sense medical skill than any high-priced city specialist. He seemed to be as cut-up over Sally's death as either Doug or myself.

"I tried my best," he was telling Doug, as if trying to clear himself of failure. "I didn't leave her for twenty-four hours. You saw that yourself, Doug."

"I'm not blaming you," Doug said. "But you're the county coroner. You can order an autopsy."

Dr. Deylen flushed angrily. "In other words, you're implying that I don't know my duty."

Doug started to protest, but Dr. Deylen went right on proclaiming that if there were any reason for an autopsy he would certainly order it performed, and anybody who suspected his motives—

I cut in. "Then Sally's death was natural beyond question?"

"Beyond question," Dr. Deylen echoed vehemently.

That settled the matter as far as I was concerned.

Suddenly even the whispering among the mourners stopped. Every head turned toward the front door. The coffin was being brought out.

And then somebody sobbed. Not a woman, as you would expect. Everybody looked at Eric Caruth. His chin was on his chest as he shambled after the coffin, and there were words in his sobs.

"The doll—the doll—"

I could not sleep. After a while I got out of bed, lighted a cigarette and stood at the window. Again I was in the Caruth house, in the guest bedroom upstairs. I was staying overnight because we had returned from the crematory too late for me to start the long trip back home.

The Caruth house was built on a hilltop, seven miles from town, and from the back window I looked out over the plateau which ran to the chasm. In the moonlight I could just about make out the white line of guard-rail at the edge of the cliff. Sally had had it put up after her Uncle Louis had gone over the side and broken his neck. A rail like that would avoid accidents on a dark night, I was thinking, but it would not save anybody from being pushed over.

Abruptly, I straightened up. Under the moonlight a shadow moved along the patch of trees. For a moment I could not tell whether it was a man or a woman; then for a moment it stepped into the clear, and I saw a flowing robe and two long braids of hair.

Alice Caruth. It had to be, because only Alice, Eric and I were in the house. It was close to midnight. What was Alice doing out there so late?

She stepped in among the trees

and I could no longer see her.

I remained at the window, watching, waiting. Louis Caruth had gone to his death near there. But that had been eight months ago. Alice's midnight prowling could have no connection with what had happened then.

All at once I saw her again. But she was in the wrong place. She was a lot nearer the house, and not returning from the copse of trees near the cliff, but going toward it. She couldn't have come back to the house without being seen by me; anyway, there hadn't been time. And there was no other woman in the house.

No other woman?

My knees went weak as I leaned against the sill and poked my head out the window. That form was not like Alice's. It was smaller, I saw now, and dressed differently. The shoulders, burnished in the moonlight, were bare; the hair was piled high in a modish hair-do. The bodice of the dress was tight at the waist and then flared. She wore no loose night robe. She wore an evening gown.

I knew that gown. It had been Sally's and later had been put on the doll downstairs in the doll room. And I knew that small, trim figure and that graceful walk. Sally had been built like that and walked like that.

But Sally was a handful of ashes!

The second figure reached the trees, and, like the first, vanished from sight. I stood peering into the moonlight night, thinking of Eric's weird warning.

"Nuts!" I said aloud. "It's another girl built like Sally and with a dress something like the doll's."

But what girl? Nobody lived within five miles of this isolated house. And what would a strange girl in an evening gown be doing at this hour following Alice Caruth toward the chasm?

"All right, so it wasn't a girl," I told myself aloud. "Your nerves are wrecked by grief and the moonlight is tricky. One thing you may be sure of—it wasn't the doll that got up from her chaise longue and decided to go for a stroll."

I started to laugh at myself, a nervous, cracked, not quite sane sound. I stopped abruptly, however, when I heard the scream.

If it were a scream. It was distant and brief. It could have been somebody calling to somebody else. Alice calling to—whom?

For a long minute I stood at the window listening, waiting for the scream or whatever it had been to be repeated. The night maintained its silence. Finally, I put on my trousers and shoes and went downstairs. I knew where there was a flashlight in a kitchen drawer. I got it and went out through the back door.

I saw nothing, heard nothing, as I went toward the cliff, until I had almost reached it. Then there was a whisper of sound, as of an animal scurrying, and I turned. I caught no more than a glimpse of a trim figure in an evening gown before it vanished around the corner of the house.

Not Alice, certainly. Not Sally

because she was dead. Not the doll of Sally because it was a doll.

I started back toward the house, then checked myself. Where was Alice? She couldn't have returned to the house without being seen by me.

"Alice?" I called.

My voice rolled across the chasm. There was no answer, no sound anywhere.

I climbed over the guard-rail and walked along the edge of the cliff and shone my flashlight down. It was a sheer drop of two hundred feet and far below was nothing but ugly boulders.

Almost at once my light found her. She lay in almost the exact spot where Louis Caruth had been found eight months ago.

There was a roundabout way to the bottom. When I got down there, I did not have to stay long. There was nothing I or anybody else could do for Alice Caruth. She lay in a crumpled heap with a good part of her skull smashed in. It could have happened when she struck a boulder or she could have been hit first and then thrown over.

I raced back to the house, although there was no hurry now. I went straight to the doll room and flung open the door and played the light on the chaise longue in the big glass case. The doll of Sally lay, as always, in eternal repose.

Of course. What else could I have expected?

I went upstairs and softly opened the door to the Caruths' bedroom. Eric, clad in pajamas, turned from the window. There was no light in the room but what the moon sent in, which was probably what made Eric look so much like a walking corpse.

"Did you see her, Bill?" he asked quietly.

My voice was hoarse. "You mean, Alice?"

He seemed not to hear me. He looked me over for a long time. Then he said: "Bill, why was the doll following Alice?"

II.

Dr. Deylen, as county coroner, stated officially that it may or may not have been murder. That was as definite as he cared to be at the moment.

We were back in the house, gathered in the library, which was now more cheerful than in the afternoon because of the electric lights. Outside deputies were browsing around. In the library with me were Dr. Deylen, Sheriff Barton, Doug Allen, Eric Caruth. There was a grim silence after Dr. Deylen had made his statement.

"Accident, hell!" Sheriff Barton growled. "There's been too many accidents and sudden deaths around here. And there were just you two in the house tonight."

I was waiting for him to get to that. If the tables were turned and this were my case, my mind would run the same way.

Eric Caruth lifted his head, and everybody in the room looked at him. There was hardly anything left to him. His eyes were dull in the hollowness of their sockets.

"The doll," he said. "The doll killed poor Alice."

Sheriff Barton was the only one in the room who didn't know what he was talking about. "Doll? Do you mean somebody named Doll?"

"The doll." Eric repeated impatiently. "I warned them all, especially Alice. But they laughed at me. Now poor Alice is dead. Because the doll hated us. As soon as she was animated by Sally's soul—"

Dr. Deylen moved swiftly across the room and put a hand on Eric's shoulder. "Eric, why wasn't Alice in bed?"

"I don't know. We went to sleep together. Then I awoke and she wasn't there. I went to the window and the doll was following Alice. A little while later the doll came back, but Alice didn't."

Doug's breath drew in sharply and he and Dr. Deylen looked at each other.

Sheriff Barton appealed to me. "He doesn't make sense. What the hell is he talking about?"

"I don't know," I told him, "but I also saw somebody following Alice."

"Who?"

I shook my head. "I can give you a vague description, but that's all. There was little light." I told him what that second woman had looked like.

I felt two pairs of eyes, Dr. Deylen's and Doug's, staring at me incredulously. And when I finished, Eric nodded and said: "Of course, the doll."

"There it is again—a doll!" Barton cried in annoyance. "Can't I get an intelligent answer?"

Dr. Deylen moved along the wall and threw open the door of the doll room. He switched on the light and stepped aside for Barton to look in.

For a long time the sheriff studied the sleeping doll. Under his breath, in a kind of daze, he repeated to himself the description I had given him of the second woman. Then he turned off the light, slammed the door shut and strode to the center of the library.

"For crying out loud! Am I nuts or are you guys?" He swung toward me. "Sergeant, don't tell me you saw that doll prancing about?"

"No," I said quietly, "but I saw somebody and I described her to you."

"The doll murdered Alice," Eric persisted stubbornly.

Doug roused himself as if from a stupor and set his teeth. "I can tell you what happened, sheriff."

"Let's have it," Barton snapped.

"As a matter of fact, Bill and Dr. Deylen know, too. Either Eric or Alice or both murdered Louis Caruth and then eight months later they poisoned Sally. Today they had what they wanted—the Caruth estate. But they're not murderers: they had consciences. Alice, out of remorse, jumped, or maybe Eric killed her. That's for you to clear up, sheriff, but broadly that's the story."

Eric didn't flare up. He didn't even protest. He simply lifted those sunken eyes of his and mut-

tered, "The doll did it. Bill saw the doll do it."

"That's right," Barton told Doug. "The sergeant here saw a second woman. How do you account for that?"

Doug shrugged. "Easy. You see how small Eric Caruth is. He could have put on a woman's clothing to fool Bill."

I snorted. "Impossible. Eric hadn't the time. And he couldn't have the walk of a woman and the skin of a woman and—well, it *was* a woman."

Barton glanced toward the door of the doll room and then back at me. "Are you sure you really saw somebody?" he asked softly.

Was I sure? It was the doll or it was nobody—and it couldn't be the doll. Had I been hypnotized into seeing what hadn't been there? Was I going as wacky as Eric?

"I don't know," I replied feebly.

Grimly, Barton said: "It seems to me that Caruth did the job on his wife. He's trying to put over an insanity plea now. And for some reason or other, you're backing him up, sergeant."

"Is this an accusation?" I demanded.

The sheriff and I looked at each other. Up to now I hadn't tried to horn in; at present this case was exclusively the sheriff's, and, anyway, I was off duty. But if he forced me to throw my weight in, I'd do so.

Barton backed down in a hurry. "Sure not. I haven't even any evidence it's murder. All I say is I don't like it."

"That goes double for me," I told him.

Sheriff Barton and his retinue of deputies wandered back to the chasm to hunt for stray clues or a possible murder weapon. I tagged along. Pointedly, the sheriff ignored me; he didn't want my cooperation. It was not the usual jurisdictional jealousy between county and state; he just didn't trust me, didn't believe my story which apparently corroborated Eric Caruth's ravings. I didn't blame him, either.

After a few minutes, I left the county cops sniffing and snooping there and returned to the house. Dr. Deylen was coming out through the back door.

"I just put Eric to bed," he told me. "Gave him a stiff drug to put him to sleep. The poor man has had too many bad shocks."

"He's not the only one," I said.

"Of course, you cared a lot for Sally and you—" Dr. Deylen lighted his cigar and held the match to my face. "Bill, you saw Sally in her coffin; you saw her cremated. Some people can get into a state where they believe the dead walk, but Sally was cremated. Remember that."

"Whom did I see in the moonlight?" I asked savagely.

"We all see visions sometimes." Dr. Deylen said, and walked off.

Doug Allen was still in the library. Nervously, he was pacing back and forth when I entered.

"Bill, what the hell's your game?" he demanded.

We were all getting like that, nerves raw and stretched to the breaking point.

"Game?" I echoed.

"Why are you playing along with Eric? Did you find that Sally preferred me to you? Did you send Eric the poison to feed Sally?"

I took a quick step toward him, but at the last moment I prevented myself from hitting him. He flinched away from me.

"I'm sorry I said that," Doug muttered. "You don't know how hard Sally's death hit me. And then you backing up Eric's cock-and-bull story—"

I said: "I didn't tell the sheriff the whole story because it would sound even more crazy. It was the doll following Alice."

There was a dead silence during which I could hear Doug's panting breath. Then he whispered: "Bill, you're sane. That means you have something up your sleeve."

"I'm telling you what I saw. You explain it."

"Damn it!" he exploded. "The doll's in there and it's a doll. It's easy to make sure."

He swung toward the doll room. Abruptly, he froze.

Directly overhead somebody moaned.

"That comes from Eric's room!" I said. "Come on."

I went as far as the hall door and then turned. Doug was hesitating, not able to tear himself from the doll room door.

"We can settle that later," I said. "Come on."

He nodded in a slow, abstracted manner and went with me. The moans faded as we ascended the stairs, and they had died away entirely by the time we were in the bedroom.

I switched on the light. Eric Caruth lay in bed flat on his back. His right hand gripped the handle of a knife which was buried to the hilt in his chest. His lips were motionless now. I groped for his pulse. There was none.

"Suicide!" Doug gasped. "He went mad from too much murdering. After he killed Alice tonight, he couldn't take any more."

"Dr. Deylen told me he had given him a sleeping drug," I thought. "A sleeping man doesn't kill himself."

I went to the bedroom door and looked out into the hall. "Listen, Doug, were you in the library every second after the sheriff and I left?"

"Well, I went into the kitchen for a drink of water."

"That's when the doll slipped out of the doll room," I said. "But she hasn't had a chance to return."

Doug stared at me. He wet his lips. "My God, Bill, what's come over you?"

"We might still be able to block her off," I said, and I went down the hall and down the stairs.

Doug went with me, though he hung back a little, never taking his eyes off me. He was afraid of me as everybody is afraid of madness, yet curiosity was as strong as his fear. When I reached the doll room door, I waited for him to come up to me. Then I flung open the door and switched on the light

and closed the door behind us.

The doll's chaise longue was empty; the locked case was now wide open. From the shelves the almost human eyes of the smaller dolls looked at us with what I swear was mockery.

Doug started to laugh, though it sounded more like a sob. Then he got control of himself. "Damn you, Bill! What's the gag?"

"I don't know," I said. "You see as much as I do."

"It doesn't mean a thing. Anybody could have carried that doll out."

"Who?" I asked. "It was in here when the sheriff looked at it. Since then you were in the library practically all the time. Do you hear somebody coming?"

There was the soft movement of feet in the library. I turned out the light. Doug started to protest, but I poked him in the side. "We'll wait here in the darkness and trap her," I whispered.

"I never heard of anything so silly," Doug mumbled. "I'm not going to let you make a fool of me. I'm—"

There was no doubt now but that somebody was in the library. Doug's voice stopped completely as the doorknob turned. We heard the door hinges creak.

The single window of the doll room was heavily curtained, so that there was absolutely no light. Doug had moved away from me, though I still could hear him breathe. I knew the door was completely open when the sound of the police in the chasm came thinly to us. Then the door was closed again, and I knew that there were more than two of us in the doll room now.

Almost in my ear there was a rustling. The taffeta skirt of a flaring evening gown would rustle like that. My hand reached to the wall behind me and touched the light switch, but I did not click it on.

Something moved past me, so close that I could sense the physical solidity of it without feeling it. And in the darkness Doug again uttered that laughing sob.

I sensed whoever had entered stop suddenly to place the sound. The breathless silence tortured my nerves. Then there was the sense of motion again, and this time it was followed by the creaking of the chaise longue.

Doug could no longer keep his voice still. He said harshly: "Bill, the light!"

I did not stir. The chaise longue creaked again. There was a little sigh, such as one would make when relaxing.

A match flared. Doug was holding it, and his hand was shaking. The shimmering splotch of light hovered over the chaise longue. The doll was back.

"Who brought her in?" Doug demanded wildly. "Bill, you did?"

"How could I?" I said. "I was here when we heard her coming."

Then Doug screamed and the match dropped from his fingers and went out.

"Bill, her eyes were open! She looked at me! The doll's supposed to be sleeping."

"So Eric was right!" I said.

"It's a lie! Somebody opened the doll's eyes. The lids can be raised. For God's sake, put on the light!"

I fumbled for the switch. "I can't find it," I said.

Doug had to strike another match because he could not endure the darkness. The doll's eyes were still open, looking up at him, and her mouth was open, too, and moving without sound as if in a frantic attempt to achieve articulation.

With a choked cry, Doug threw the match from him and plunged toward the door where I stood.

I caught him and held him. He did not struggle. He had no strength for that.

"Let me out!" he pleaded.

"Now do you believe that it was the doll?" I asked.

"Let me out!"

"Be a man, Doug," I said. "You're not afraid of a doll. You watch her while I run for the sheriff."

"I'll go for him."

"That's my job." I shoved him back into the room. "Do you want me to lock you in here?"

He clawed at me like an hysterical woman, but I was too big for him to give me much trouble.

"Why should you be afraid of the doll?" I said. "After all, it's Sally's soul that brought her life, and Sally loved you."

"Bill, for God's sake!"

"Or does the doll hate you?" I went on. "Because the doll is Sally now and Sally has reason to hate you."

He was suddenly quiet, panting against my chest.

I asked: "Did Sally marry you? It'll be easy enough for me to find out."

"Bill, we can talk outside."

"Answer me!"

Again the chaise longue creaked. Doug's fingers buried themselves into my arms.

"We were married last month. Sally insisted we keep it secret, and I was too grieved at her death to talk about it."

In the room the doll muttered. There were no words, just a ragged experimental sound in the first stages of learning to use her voice.

"The doll knows you lie," I said. "She knows that you murdered Louis Caruth eight months ago. That gave Sally his money and then you induced Sally to marry you. But you didn't love Sally; you didn't want her; you just wanted her money. Isn't that so?"

The taffeta gown rustled. Doug moaned and clung tighter to me.

"She's coming for you, Doug," I said, "because you murdered her. You poisoned Sally. But that wasn't the end of murder. If you had announced that she had been your wife and you were entitled to her fortune, suspicion would at once fall on you. You had to make Alice and Eric the scapegoats. You didn't care whether or not there was an autopsy because if it were learned that Sally had been murdered there were others to take the rap. Eric played nicely into your hands with his raving about the doll. Alice you were afraid of. She was too

hard-headed. You killed Alice, and then a few minutes ago you killed Eric, rigging up his death to make it look like suicide. Eric would be blamed for all the deaths."

"Bill, the doll is right here! Standing!"

In the darkness we could both feel her beside us.

I said: "Eric's talk was not so wild after all. You see, I'm not afraid of the doll because Sally had no reason to hate me. But you murdered Sally, so you're afraid. I'm locking you in here, Doug. You can't kill the doll the way you did Sally."

The doll's bare shoulder brushed my arm as she reached in the darkness to touch Doug.

He screamed and threw himself against me. "Keep her away from me, Bill!"

My voice continued to tear and rip at his nerves. "You murdered Sally and the others, didn't you?"

"Yes, yes! Only keep her away from me! Take me out of here!" The light clicked on. Doug found himself looking directly into the face of the doll standing with a hand on his shoulder. Without a sound, he fainted dead away.

Dr. Deylen took his hand from the light switch and stepped into the room.

I twisted my head away from him. I said dryly: "Hello, Sally. How are you?"

It was almost daylight. They were all gone, the living and the dead, leaving only Sally Caruth and me. We sat outside in the pale light of dawn, and I could not have enough of looking at her loveliness.

"Doug Allen couldn't take it," I said. "He had to believe one of two things—either it was a doll standing there beside him or it was you returned from the dead."

"You believed neither."

"I wasn't a murderer," I pointed out. "I had nothing on my conscience. I like things to make sense, and it wasn't sensible that it was the doll walking about. At the same time I was sure that it had to be either you or the doll. The only answer was that it didn't have to be you I had seen in the coffin and who had been cremated. It could have been the doll making a perfect corpse."

"Did you think then that I had killed Alice?"

"No," I said. "It didn't fit. You had nothing to gain by their deaths. I held off for a little while, not quite certain what you were up to. Not till Eric was stabbed did I see it all. Eric couldn't have committed suicide because he was in a drugged sleep. So only Dr. Deylen or Doug Allen could have murdered him. Dr. Deylen was eliminated for two reasons. He wouldn't have told me he had given Eric a drug if he had wanted to fix an apparent suicide. And the burial of the doll in your place couldn't have been brought off without his help. Which left Doug. The motive then was obvious."

I looked off into the distance. She knew what I was thinking and pressed her folded hands to her mouth.

"I'm sorry, Bill," she said. "You were far away and Doug was here and he swept me off my feet. We were married a month ago. There wasn't enough time to realize what a terrible mistake I had made. Then three days ago I took a tonic Dr. Deylen had prescribed for me and I became quite sick. Dr. Deylen analyzed it and found it contained deadly poison. At first I believed that it was either Uncle Eric or Aunt Alice who had tried to murder me.

"But the more I discussed it with Dr. Deylen, the less sure I was. Doug had been here the day I had taken the tonic. And the reason Doug had given me for keeping our marriage secret wasn't very convincing. He told me he had to work slowly on his mother to obtain her permission, although his mother liked me, and certainly Doug was no child. Then Dr. Deylen told me something else, that there was a woman Doug had been seeing a great deal of, even within recent weeks."

Sally clutched my arm. "I had to be sure, Bill, who wanted me dead. It meant everything, even more than protecting myself from another attempt. Even if nobody tried to kill me again, I would go through life never being sure that it hadn't been Doug that first time. So I persuaded Dr. Deylen to say I had died and to arrange with the undertakers to put my doll in the coffin. I thought that if, after the funeral, I came upon the murderer suddenly, he would be frightened into confessing."

"So that's why you followed Alice toward the chasm?"

"Yes, but I never caught up to her. I heard her talking to somebody and thought it was you, so I returned to the doll room."

"That was Doug," I said. "He persuaded Alice to meet him out there, probably telling her that he had information about how you had died." I took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Sally. He's your husband."

Her hand slipped into mine. "He can't hurt me any more," she said.

There was no more talk for a while. None was necessary, however. We sat close together watching the glory of the rising sun.

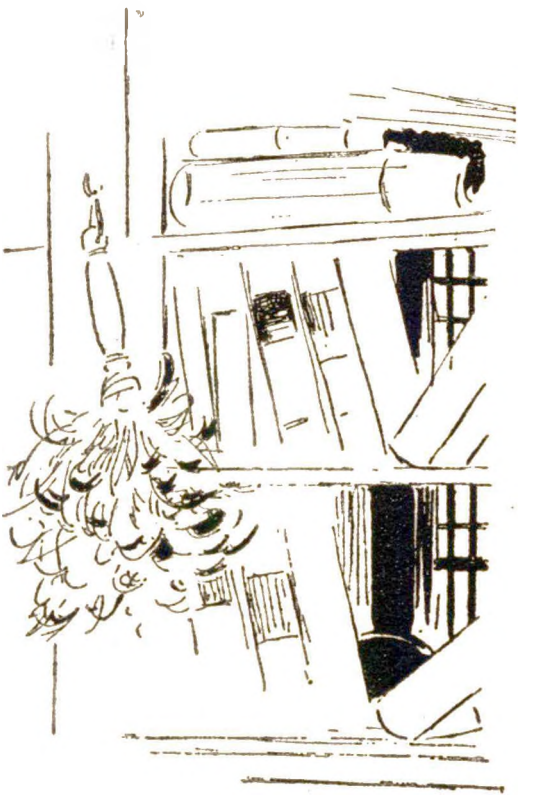
THE END.

BODY, BODY

A Complete Novel

I.

I was ending up a case and I didn't like it. Larry Lapeno was a tall slender greaseball with thin sneering lips that some women called smiling ones. His eyes were shrewd and foggy. His black hair the kind that first caused white towels to be placed over the back of Pullman chairs. I didn't like Larry Lapeno and I liked him even less now as I sat beside his desk and counted out five hundred dollars in blackmail money.



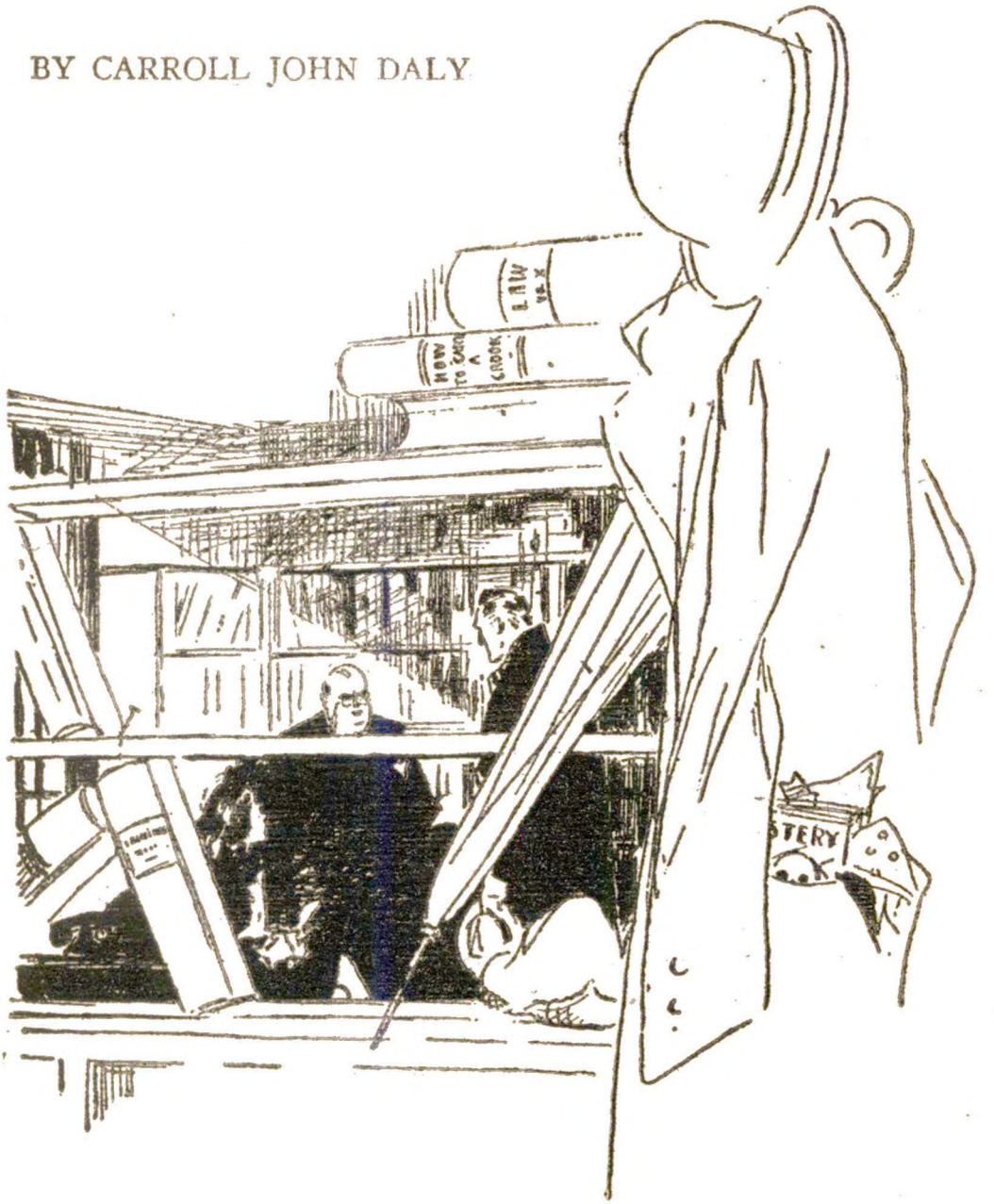
"Really, Williams"—he ran a hand through the shiny blackness above his oily forehead—"the damned letter isn't worth five dollars to the girl. I suggested she use you, and I set the price at five grand so you could pull me down and pose as a clever man to the—Miss Cole is the name, isn't it?"

"There's the money." I bit the words off sharp. "If I don't get the letter, I'll blow a hole in your forehead."

"You know, I think I cut my price because I like you, Williams. You're so forthright. At first, it

—WHO'S GOT THE BODY?

BY CARROLL JOHN DALY



was simply business. Now I like to send clients to you. You are not a time waster." He was slowly counting the money while he talked. "And don't think I underestimate you. Many people have threatened me and I have laughed. But I haven't laughed at you. There are times when I believe you shoot men for the simple pleasure of it."

"Get through with the deal or it will be more than a simple pleasure."

"Two hundred and twenty dollars," he murmured, then in his usual voice which was soft and oily like his hair and skin: "I could notify the police to pick you up if anything happened to me."

It almost turned my stomach to sit there and look at him and realize the suffering the man had caused—broken homes, broken health, children tossed about from one divorced parent to another, suicides. How he did it with those brains or lack of brains of his I don't know. The cops had watched him for years now, but no one ever saw him buy a letter, let alone steal one.

"Five hundred dollars," he said finally, as he slipped a rubber band around the stack of small bills and tucked them into an envelope. Then he lifted a slot in the wall behind him, shot the envelope into it. "How naïve I was the first time I did business with you, Race Williams. I gave you the letters, you gave me the money, and then you stuck a gun in my stomach and took both. Now you see the money drops into a safe a few stories below and makes of you an honest man. There, don't be impatient." He leaned forward and looked at me eagerly. His eyes grew bright through the mist. His words lost their softness or at least took on a sharp edge when he spoke.

"Williams," he said, "we all reach our peak in business at one time or another. Yes, even in blackmail. I am about to reach mine and retire. I will complete one final deal. It will involve a half million dollars. Perhaps more, certainly not less. Your fee will . . . can be enormous." And after a long pause and leaning far over the desk: "If you work for me, for me instead of your client, I will add out of my own pocket exactly fifty—"

That was as far as he got. Maybe I didn't mean to do it. Certainly, I didn't think about it before I did. And I couldn't know if he was offering me fifty dollars or fifty thousand or fifty million for that matter and I never would know. My right hand simply snapped up from my side and smacked across his left cheek. It was an open slap, but I must have had my heart in it for he fell along the flat desk, catching his feet in the chair and crashing to the floor. When he got to his feet, I could plainly see the marks of my fingers. His face was livid.

"Williams," he said, slowly and with viciousness, "Race Williams, you are the first person ever to . . . to knock me off my feet."

"You've had breaks then," I told him. "Give me that letter—now."

A shaking hand went below the

desk, trembling fingers came up and handed the envelope to me. I took my reading glass out and compared the handwriting I had with the letter inside. It was what I wanted all right, so I pocketed it and turned toward the door. He spoke then, and the same quiet viciousness was in his voice.

"I'll never forget," he said. "Never. I have seen people grovel at my feet. I've known a woman to jump from a hotel window. You will come crawling and—"

I turned, crossed the room and put both my hands around his throat.

"Out with it, greaseball." I forced him to his knees. "I've done business with you because it saved other people from being blackmailed first by you and then by some private detective. Now it's me, eh? Well, you've got nothing to lay over my head but death. All the sins on the calendar wouldn't make me cough up a nickel to you, let alone grovel at your feet. As for personal, bodily harm from a rot like you—that's a laugh. But you might hire someone—" I stopped then and let go of his throat. His lips were blue, his tongue was sticking out. Hell, I had nearly strangled him, though why that should bother me I don't know.

But it bothered him all right. He was kneeling there blubbering out words. I had misunderstood him. He intended me no harm. He didn't know why he spoke as he did. It was right for me to strike him. He had nothing but the kindest intentions regarding me. Certainly, he thought I intended to kill him and maybe at that he was right.

I went whistling down the stairs and out the front door. It had to come sometime, of course. I knew that now. I always knew that. Some day I was just going to up and shoot Larry Lapeno deader than all hell. Not a nice thought. But maybe I'm a lad who doesn't have nice thoughts.

I went to meet the girl. Her name was Avery Coles and she was a cute trick in a sophisticated way. She said she was twenty-three and that could be. She had been around and had lots of personality, but I don't think you could lay a finger on that thing called charm. If you wanted looks and clothes, carriage and plain class, she could furnish all that. It was simply that the soft grayness of her fine direct eyes could go hard and cold and suspicious at times. Her teeth gave you the impression of being sharp. But not pointed. Yet fitted into her face and looked good there. Her hair was black and stiff and as severe as an Egyptian goddess'. Pretty? Sure. Beautiful? Well, I think her face was too finely chiseled for that unless you were a sculptor. Striking is the word. You liked to be seen with her, but never felt fully at ease. Her long fingers with their vivid nails were something to see when she held the long white ivory cigarette holder in them. She gave the appearance of one who wouldn't unbend to a Greek god.

Why so much of this Ivory Lady

who wouldn't unbend? Well, she was unbending to me and I—Damn it, I didn't know if I liked it.

I met her in one of those small restaurants off Park Avenue where five dollars leaves you both hungry. It was called the Golden Shepherd and the tiny shaded lights on the tables were needed even at midday. She was holding the cigarette and looking toward me when I came in. If she were worried, she didn't show it. But I thought her face lit up a bit. I slid into the chair opposite her.

"There is your letter, Miss Coles." I put it down before her. "I took two thousand dollars with me, bought it for five hundred. You have fifteen hundred dollars coming to you less my commission of ten percent of five hundred, that leaves fourteen hundred and fifty. You won't want it here?"

Her laugh was like light opera in a penny arcade. Good but low.

"How businesslike." She picked up the letter and glanced over it. Then, stretching forth the hand that was free of the cigarette she laid it on my right wrist. "Why the Miss Coles?" she asked.

"Still business." I smiled and when she handed the letter back to me, nodded at my question if it was the right one, I struck a match to it, holding it over the ash tray.

"Oh," she exclaimed, half stretched a hand toward it, but as the flames licked up thought better of it. "I wanted you to read it. I like so few people and those I like I want to like me, not because of the good things they know about me but despite the bad things they know. Don't you feel that way?"

"No." I could be emphatic on that as I let the letter burn out in the tray, jamming it to bits with a knife. "They might not like my sins."

"Of ommission or commission?"

"Commission." I took a laugh. "I nearly killed this Larry Lapeno today."

"So that is his name." Her shoulders moved, which you could take for a shudder or not as you pleased. "But let us forget that unpleasant bit of business."

Avery Coles took the fourteen hundred and fifty bucks, assuring me easily that she often carried that much money around with her. Then she invited me to a party that evening.

"In your honor," she told me over the cream of tomato. "And you will be my only guest," she finished over the dessert. What she might have told me over the demi-tasse, I don't know. We didn't have a demi-tasse and besides I already had told her I couldn't come. Which was true enough. I had another case, a client I was to serve that night. A client who sent me two one-hundred-dollar bills.

"You know, Race," she said, when I had paid the check for what would have been a free lunch in the good old days, "I think you are afraid of me. You needn't be. You can dismiss from your mind all questions of should you see less of me. If I decided to see more of

you, it wouldn't make any difference what you thought. I am turning into a woman who gets what she goes after."

"I'm flattered," I told her.

"And a bit relieved, although you probably would call it amused. But I won't play with your emotions." And putting those strange gray eyes on me: "At least, I don't think I will." And suddenly: "I would go a long way for you, Race. Much farther than you think."

And that was that. I put her into a taxi and went back to my office. Another pleasant surprise there. A Mr. Harrington Grover Wainwright requested me by mail to call at his house on a matter of "vital importance" on Wednesday evening. Since it was now Tuesday night, business certainly was picking up.

Fifty dollars less the luncheon larceny that afternoon. Two hunderd dollars in advance for me to be at an uptown entrance to Central Park from twelve until two on Wednesday morning, plus whatever would develop from that. And now on the same Wednesday an invitation to visit Mr. Harrington Grover Wainwright on a matter of vital importance. Vital to him or to me? Well, vital to me meant money for me. And vital to him meant money for me, too. So I couldn't lose, any way you looked at it.

The twelve to two arrangement I didn't like any too well. But the note was anonymous and the two hundred was good and if the letter was sincere someone would count on my being there. If it wasn't sincere, it was a trap to kill me by any one of a hundred criminals I had displeased one time or another. If any murderer was willing to bet two hundred to nothing that he could shoot me to death at Central Park West between midnight and two in the morning, why I'd take that bet any time. The note said there would be more money coming if my services were required. If they weren't, I was two hundred to the good. I'd be there all right.

As for Avery Coles. She did bother me a bit. If it had not been for her eyes, I would simply have put it down to a young girl over dramatizing the service I had done her. As a matter of fact, I should have got that letter back for nothing. I had got more than one letter back from Lapeno that way and more than once just missed the chance to expose him. Sometimes I thought there was someone behind him and that he was only the front for the business. He was that dumb. Yes, Avery Coles did bother me.

I had saved a young girl of seventeen from kidnapers once and the way she went on about me you'd think I was Frank Sinatra. Her family had to send her across the country to school and I got love letters from her that would knock you silly until she suddenly up and married the undergardener at the exclusive school for girls. At that, I think the family still blamed me for it, though when I put it up straight to her old man he seemed

to prefer the undergardener.

But I couldn't see Avery Coles in that light.

An hour later I had the lowdown on Harrington Grover Wainwright. He was big stuff with lots of dough, middle-aged, and gave plenty to charity. In fact, he was nationally known as the chairman of many charity institutions. A bachelor, too. What that lad would need with a private investigator in a matter of vital importance I didn't know. Probably wanted me to shoot up a joint to break a lease. Still, guys like that lose a two-dollar portrait of their grandfather and spend ten grand to get it back.

I went out and ate a big dinner that was five times as large and one half the price of the Golden Shepherd. At seven o'clock I was home in bed with the alarm clock set for eleven and a penetrating coldness creeping into the air. A gentle touch of rain against the window panes that was beginning to lose that soft patter and pound like sleet.

It did pound like sleet while I leaned against the stone wall right at the edge of the park from five minutes of twelve until after two. Oh, there was atmosphere to the waiting, all right, but the swaying shadow of rain-swept trees in the darkness never sent chills up and down my spine. It was dark, gloomy and cold. My right hand deep in my jacket pocket caressed the butt of a gun, my mind caressed the thought of the two hundred bucks.

Nothing happened. No, I wasn't mad. A hundred dollars an hour is not a bad price for doing nothing. If I thought of anything in particular it was that the job I was waiting for might interfere with the one that was coming up later that same day.

I went home and went to bed. I won't say it was the easiest money I ever earned for I had picked up twenty-five hundred dollars once and a trip to Havana for a case that never broke at all.

No word from that anonymous client the next day and, of course, no demand for the return of the two centuries. No cold in the head either, just waking to a nice winter day.

The day of great wealth may be passing, but it didn't seem to be at the house of Harrington Grover Wainwright. Wainwright let me in himself. I won't go so far as to say there was anything secretive about his manner, but certainly he spoke in a low voice. Still, most people needing a private investigator for the first time act that way. In fact, even a hard-boiled lad like I am likes it better. But it's easier with those baggy-eyed sporty money gents who say, "Come in, boy, have a drink, have a cigar. I'm in trouble with a woman again and want to get out of it as cheaply as possible."

Wainwright was in trouble, all right. He didn't especially show it in his looks, but it was in his manner, the hesitancy of his speech and his approach to the matter in hand. Besides which, people don't send

for me unless they are in trouble.

He was a white-haired, sanctimonious-looking gent. The sort I don't fancy, but, then, everyone to his own taste and I've known dozens of them that were far better men than I ever hope to be. But these God's gifts to humanity who never let their right hand know what their left is doing, generally let everyone else in the community find it out anyway. He muttered something about it being beastly weather outside and that he had dismissed the servants for the evening in the same breath and led me to the library. He carefully closed the door, spun the key in the lock and sat down behind the flat desk in the center of the room.

I could see him better now in the light and he looked more like a blessing to the community than ever. Immaculately dressed, so closely shaved—and it now after eight in the evening—that the blue veins stood out through the powder on his face. But at that it was a good face as the books tell us. Free from wrinkles and that look in his eyes of the man who is always feeding stray cats. But successful confidence men look the same, so what?

Yes, the day of great wealth was lingering around. The library was big. Too big. It looked as if it should have signs on the wall reading "Quiet Please." But there were little ladders on wheels running along the shelves of books. A half dozen or more small desks and tables and filing cabinets tucked here and there. There were easy chairs, too, a huge fireplace and a great thick animal rug of some kind.

And there sitting across from me was Harrington Grover Wainwright, all of him. And all of him was plenty. Tall, heavy, round of face with red cheeks and merry sort of eyes that looked as if they were doubtful about being merry at the present moment.

"Sit down, sit down there." He nodded at me, although I was already seated. "You're the man from the agency, I take it, the private detective."

Now that was a bad start and maybe I frowned. I don't like being called a private detective, the name smells slightly. I leaned forward and told him how it was with me—and with him, too.

"Mr. Wainwright," I said, "I have a license to operate as a private detective. I have an office, yes, and I have a smart boy to take care of things there for me. But I am not a detective. I am a private investigator, a personal agent. No one sends me, no one ever sends me anywhere. You wrote to me, asked me to call. Remember?"

"Of course. To be sure, Mr. Williams. Certainly." He shoved a box of cigarettes across to me, took one himself, lighted it.

I remember thinking how tiny it looked sticking out of that great face. Like a child's whistle on top of a locomotive. "Personal agent, private investigator to be sure, personal and private, like a layman and his lawyer or his doctor. That's the way I want it. A man and his lawyer. A man and his doctor. Al-

most a man and his spiritual adviser. I am slightly confused and bewildered, Mr. Williams. My life has been so—shall I say even. Serene perhaps, charities you know, other people's troubles, and now when trouble besets me—well, I am at a loss. I who—"

"Suppose, Mr. Wainwright," I broke in, "suppose you tell me just what is on your mind."

"Don't get the idea that I condemn my fellow man," he was going right on anyway. "We who are seldom tempted seldom sin, you know. We who have money so often fail to understand the viewpoint of those who lack it. We who have warmth and shelter and food—But there, I'm getting away from things. So often I must admonish my colleagues in our charitable work that they must put themselves in the other man's place, sit across the table from themselves, so to speak."

I wished he'd sit across the table from himself now and see how he liked the blast.

"Well," I said, "you were tempted and sinned and now you want to get straightened out. That's my business."

He seemed shocked and surprised and then he wasn't. He sat back and laughed. It was not an unpleasant laugh, but there was something wrong with it. It didn't sound real.

"Perhaps you are right," he said. "I have been tempted and I have sinned, you say. Well, yes, I was sorely tempted, but it is sometimes difficult to distinguish justice and righteousness from sin. Or are you of the school of adages—'two wrongs do not make a right'? Or in this case perhaps I should say one wrong."

I gave it to him straight then. "To be perfectly frank, Mr. Wainwright, I don't know what you are talking about."

He moved his thin lips and the cigarette seemed to cross quickly from one side to the other, then back to the middle again. It isn't often today, at least in the best circles, that you meet a cigarette smoker who keeps the butt in his mouth while he smokes and talks, too, for that matter. For he said, and his enunciation was perfect despite the fact that the cigarette remained in place:

"I suppose, Mr. Williams, I am trying to say that the confidence of a man and his personal agent are sacred. Yet the law doesn't recognize it as such."

"But I do. The law can't take letters out of a man's mouth and put them together to spell words. At least out of my mouth they can't."

"Ah, yes, very well put." He gave a little nervous laugh this time. "Now how much should a man tell you and show you?"

"He should tell me as much as I need to know and I will be the judge of that. He doesn't have to show me anything."

The nervous laugh came again.

"Peculiarly, Mr. Williams, I was thinking of reversing the proceedings. Show you everything and tell you very little."

"That," I said, "would hardly work in your case."

"Really." His eyes opened wide and his face creased and uncreased much as if dough were being kneaded by invisible hands. "You know what my trouble is?"

"Hardly." I wanted to get down to facts. "But my guess is that your trouble is blackmail." And before he could break in again, I explained, "You are a man of wealth and position and as you say, temptation has passed you by. Many esteemed, many really great men, have committed in youth slight indiscretions that have pursued them in later life. Even a kindness in a charitable way that can be misconstrued by a hastily written letter. A thing so trivial in itself that it is forgotten, then out of a clear sky it pops up on you, looks pretty bad presented as a blackmailer presents it. You pay and you pay and you—well, you finally come to me."

"Yes, of course. You have been highly recommended to me as a man who never has let a client down. A man who never broke a confidence. So you pass your word to me to never disclose anything I show you tonight, for I shall tell you very little."

"That," I said, "is understood."

"And you will accept my little commission without question and at your fee."

"I will accept it or refuse it," I told him, "and keep my mouth shut."

"No matter what it is?"

"No matter if you had walked into a saloon and shot up the entire establishment."

He laughed at that one, the nervous little laugh.

"I see you know that I have strongly advocated the abolishment of strong drink, but not that drastic." He came to his feet. "However, come with me." And as I followed him across the room to a curtain in the corner that he tossed back disclosing a small door: "This room is too big for work that demands my entire concentration. So I have a small den, here." He put a key in the lock, spun it and pushed open the door. The best and easiest description of that room for either one of us is that it was a pocket edition of the outer room, a little more class to the desk perhaps, a little more color to the curtains at the windows, iron shutters before them, too. A little more homey, too, for there was a huge coat tossed carelessly between two chairs.

Wainwright snapped on an overhead light and closed the iron shutters of the windows. Then he walked over to the two chairs and turned on a lamp behind one of them. He reached down and gripped the coat.

"Perhaps," he said, "this will be self-explanatory."

I knew he was prepared to startle me so I prepared myself not to be startled when he jerked up the coat to disclose the homey bit of atmosphere beneath it. But I was wrong. I was startled. The homey touch was a dead body, a glassy-eyed, black-haired corpse

that sat grotesquely against the wall.

II.

I was wrong about another thing, too. I was wrong about my hunch, that almost certainty of feeling that some day I was going to shoot Larry Lapeno to death. That's right. I wouldn't shoot him to death now. There he sat before me, the sneering greaseball.

Wainwright was watching me closely. This little bit of drama was not quite up his alley. Then it struck me funny and I laughed. The dead skunk and live reformer.

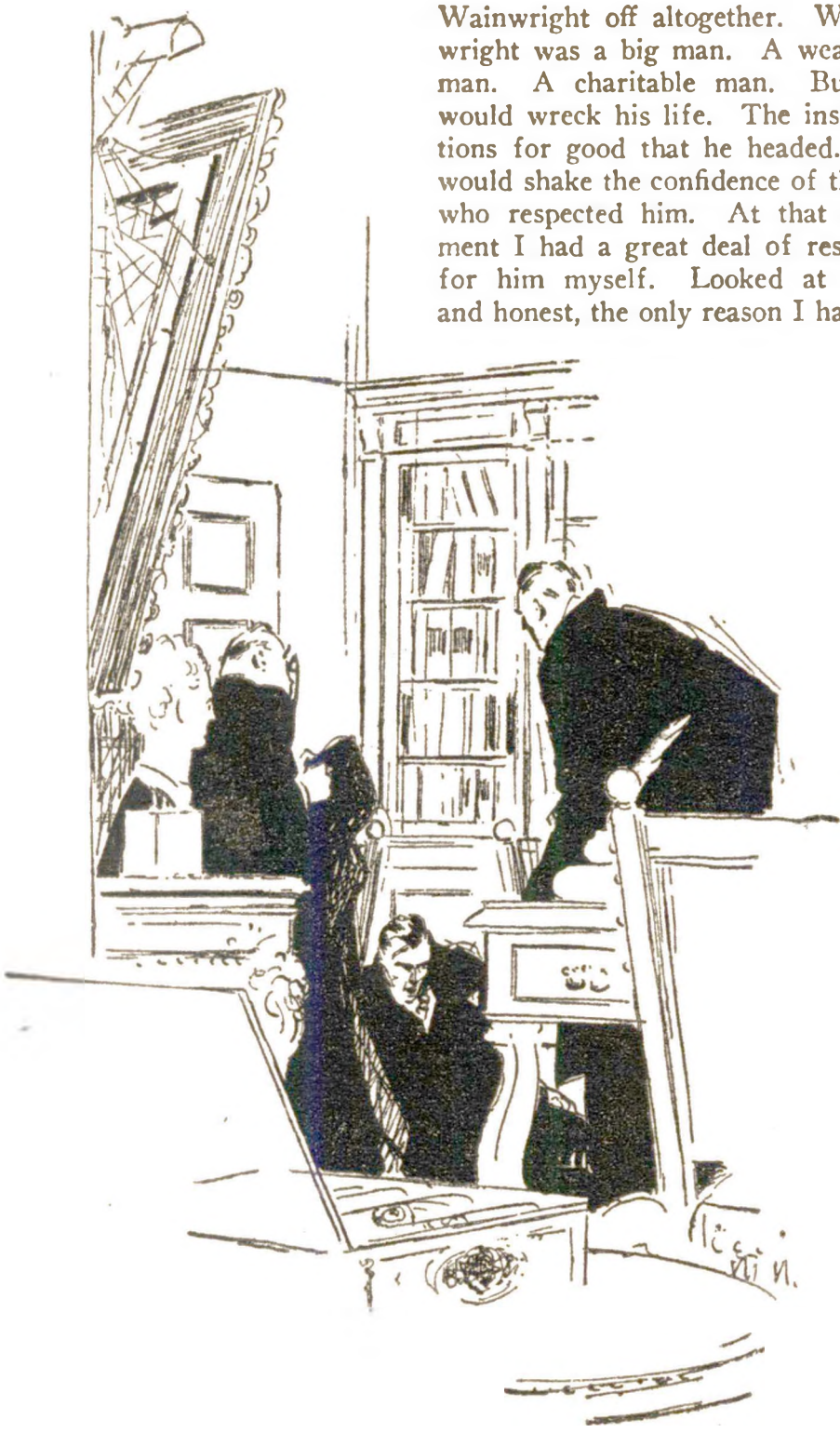
"Larry Lapeno?" I muttered. "He threatened you, pulled a gun on you and, just like that, you did him in."

"No . . . no," Wainwright said very slowly. "I am not going to lie to you. He talked about—he talked well. It was real, it was horrible. He told me of the people he had ruined. He described homes he had broken. He went into detail on a suicide, a young mother I believe. I was a frightened, shocked man when he started in to talk. After that I am not quite sure. The drawer of my desk was open, there was a gun lying in it. He was telling me I think of how the woman looked when she hit the sidewalk. I was not a desperate, half-crazed man, Mr. Williams. I seemed to be the avenging hand of outraged justice. There was something horrible in the room with me. Something horrible in the world with other people. It was my duty to destroy it. I lifted the gun out of the drawer. He was turning. I think he saw, but I am not sure. The bullet went through the side of his head. He turned a little more and sat down—like that—like he is now."

Mr. Harrington Grover Wainwright sat down, too, and put his head on his arms. I was looking straight at his back, but it didn't shake. His body was very still, no sobs came.

I tossed the coat back over the dead Lapeno. Murder? Yes, if it is murder to kill a rat. I was not thinking of ethics then, at least spiritually or morally. I was thinking of it legally. Homicide was the word for it, no two ways about that. I went around the desk and sat down and lighted a cigarette. Wainwright didn't move. I didn't disturb him. I blew smoke toward the ceiling. He wanted advice, of course. Justifiable homicide. Certainly. But that was my opinion only. I knew that Larry Lapeno was a blackmailer. I knew he had wrecked homes and lives and caused people's death. The police knew it, too; that is, the big cops knew it. Everyone he had blackmailed—and there must have been plenty—knew it. Yet no one could prove it. There was no evidence that would convict him before, why should there be any now that he was dead?

There wouldn't be much trouble to get the district attorney to accept a plea of second degree, maybe manslaughter. At that, Joe Gorton, the criminal lawyer, might get



Wainwright off altogether. Wainwright was a big man. A wealthy man. A charitable man. But it would wreck his life. The institutions for good that he headed. It would shake the confidence of those who respected him. At that moment I had a great deal of respect for him myself. Looked at fair and honest, the only reason I hadn't

killed Lapeno was because I didn't have the courage. It took a long-nosed, black-ribboned, glasses-wearing, sanctimonious old coot to blast him right through the gates of hell.

Wainwright sat up. He sat up very slowly, but kept his arms bracing himself on the desk.

"We who are seldom tempted seldom fall, Mr. Williams," he said slowly. "It wasn't money. It wasn't passion. I hope it wasn't fear and I am sure it wasn't hate. I have tried to tell myself it was a public duty, but I am afraid I am trying to make a martyr out of a criminal."

"Well," I said briskly, "Larry Lapeno was blackmailing you. You refused to pay. He came to the house, forced his way in. He threatened you, pulled a gun. You told him to get out. He struck and cursed you and struck you again. You remember little—the desk—the gun there and then the shot and you were holding the smoking gun and he was dead." And suddenly: "Where's the phone? You need Joe Gorton. He'll make the story stick."

He was shaking his head at me.

"That isn't the way it happened, Mr. Williams. I . . . I . . . this Lapeno telephoned me and came over and made demands and I shot him." And when I would have cut in with that was what he thought happened, he held up his hand and said, "I won't pretend not to know what you mean. I won't say I am above going on the stand and lying. But I am not going on the stand. I . . . my work couldn't afford it. I am chairman of a great many charitable boards. I give freely, I hope, but I also influence others to give. So much work in my charitable field depends upon the man himself, his character. Maybe I am overestimating my own importance and really trying to protect myself from the shame and publicity of a trial, but I hope not."

"Well"—I stiffened slightly and looked at him—"why did you send for me? Do you . . . you want me to take the blame for killing him? You want me to say I did it?"

"No." He shook his head. "I don't want that. If anyone else is accused of the crime and there is a danger of a miscarriage of justice I will talk, of course. He must have had many enemies."

"Plenty," I admitted. "There must be hundreds of respected people who had the motive. But the trouble, Mr. Wainwright, is that he was killed in your house and his body is here to prove it."

"That's it." Wainwright nodded his head slowly. "I don't want the body here, as you say, to prove it. I want it found somewhere else."

"But—" And I stopped. As a rule I don't need a brick wall to fall on me, but I was slow on the trigger this time. I didn't come right out with it. I asked him again, "Just why did you send for me?"

"To dispose of the body," he answered, and I thought his voice shook a bit this time. "To take the body off my hands. To charge me one fee and then for us both to for-

get the . . . the incident."

" 'Incident' is good." I sat back and tried to make smoke rings, but I never was much at that. I was thinking. In my long and highly colored career I had done most everything. But when I shot guys I let them lie. I didn't play "Body, body, whose got the body?"

Mr. Wainwright was talking. "Let me say that I don't want you to do anything against your own better judgment. I have your word that you will not break my confidence. And I have a hope that if your ethics forbid this, you might suggest someone else."

"I couldn't," I told him flat. "You'd have killed one blackmailer only to perhaps take on another for life." Suddenly remembering what Lapeno had told me about his great peak being reached: "Tell me, Mr. Wainwright, did this blackmail involve any great sum of money?"

"It would depend on what you would call a great sum."

"A hundred thousand dollars, a half million even?"

He didn't laugh, but I think he would have if he had been in a laughing mood. He said simply:

"No such sum, of course. That would be ridiculous. I am a well-to-do man, my charities are far lower than the newspapers lead people to believe. You see, I often give as the head of some foundation or through people who wish to remain anonymous. The sum mentioned was ten thousand dollars. The blackmailer immediately cut it to five thousand and I think less would have covered it."

"And you paid?"

"I paid nothing. Things came to a head before that—I mean, I shot him."

"You got the letter?"

"I got, as you call it, the letter. It has been destroyed."

"And just what did you intend to do, if the body was not removed?"

"I don't know. I don't—" He squinted his eyes up then. "Well, I have many filing cabinets. I ship them around at times. I thought of sending one to my summer home in Maine, but it is a little early for that."

"You have been reading too many detective stories," I told him, with a grin. "You'd have the body on your hands again in Maine. What did you expect to pay me?"

"Five thousand dollars and my assurance that I would admit the shooting if you were . . . er . . . inconvenienced dangerously."

"That," I said, "is a delicate way of putting it. You mean if there was a possibility of me burning for the crime. Well, Mr. Wainwright, when I work for a client I work all the way for him. I'll take your body for ten thousand dollars and take all the risks that go with it."

"No . . . no, I couldn't."

"Too much?"

"Not the money, but the other. I couldn't have a man suffer for my wrong. I wouldn't—"

I got up, leaned over and gripped his hand.

"We'll do it my way. Don't worry. They never burned me for guys I pushed over and they'll never

get me for a lad I didn't kill. Ten thousand in cash."

And cash was right. He had it there in his safe and counted it out to me. He told me he had got it out of the bank to pay Lapeno and said, too, when I asked him if his taking so much money out would not excite comment, that he often drew larger sums of cash, "anonymous gifts" he explained.

I stuffed the money into my pocket. It took a lot of stuffing since they were none too large bills —Larry Lapeno's suggestion, I presumed. Then I asked Wainwright to give me a few minutes alone in the smaller library while I thought things out. He went into the other room and I closed the door, lifted up the coat and sat down facing Larry Lapeno. Gruesome, I don't think so. I said, half aloud and half to myself, "I didn't have the pleasure of killing you, Larry, but it looks like I'll bury you—and for ten thousand cash at that."

I pushed back one of the steel shutters, found it well oiled or at least that it moved silently, lifted the window and looked out into a narrow alley. I even stuck my head out and saw the street beyond, the big iron gate that gave onto the sidewalk. I looked the other way. A shorter alley, then a back fence, and another alley to the street behind.

I sat down and thought some more. Maybe I don't think well. Maybe I'm a great artist at heart, for the simplest things always appeal to me and win out at the end. Of course, I wandered and had visions of a wagon backing up with Murphy Office Supplies on it and all that stuff. But what if it were ever discovered that Lapeno visited Wainwright the last time he was seen alive.

I went out then and tossed it smack in the face of Wainwright who was slowly pacing the room. I said:

"Things are settled. Go to bed at ten tonight, leave the window in the small study unlatched and raised a quarter inch, also draw back the inside iron shutter or curtain or whatever you call it." And with a grin for he seemed worried: "Your body will be gone in the morning. If the police find it out, have me arrested for burglary."

"I appreciate your kindly humor," he said, very seriously. "What are the chances of my being involved?"

Involved was a nice word you've got to admit, but for ten thousand dollars he was entitled to use it.

"Well," I told the truth, "your chances of never hearing about the matter again are good. The cops will hardly trace him here. Blackmailers do not confide their business transactions to others. Anyway, deny he was here. And don't think of your sacred honor in that, think of mine. I'll leave your friend in a place where any of a hundred might have left him. Professional crimes are duck soup for the cops, amateur ones plenty tough. They've got to have a motive and if they find people Lapeno has blackmailed they'll have plenty

with motives. Cops can't go around arresting them in dozen lots. Every victim might have killed Lapeno, but only one did. It will be like trying to find who stole a dress in a bargain basement on Dollar Day. Good luck."

He wanted to say more, but I didn't wait. I gave him a reassuring handshake and walked out the front door and down the steps.

It was going to be a nice clean job. Ten thousand for disposing of a guy I would have killed and buried for nothing. Sure, I felt good. Ten thousand is a lot of money outside the movies or even inside, for that matter.

Jerry was at my apartment when I got there. I went whistling in. Jerry, my boy—who was no longer a boy except that he was as fresh as ever—I had picked up some years before when he was headed straight for Sing Sing. He might be yet for that matter. But I could trust him with anything.

"What's the joke?" he asked, when I started to laugh.

"Larry Lapeno," I told him. "He won't be making me irritable any more."

"No?" Jerry opened big eyes and his large mouth widened. "You bumped him, boss? I knew you would—" He rubbed his hands together. "He's been in your hair for months and you've been in my hair. Why you didn't —" He looked hard at me. "Don't tell me he isn't dead?"

"He is." I nodded. "No kidding, Jerry. I'm going to let you help bury him tonight."

Ten o'clock that night was the big moment. It's a dead hour on that residential street of Wainwright's. Later you get the homecoming theater crowd and later still the night club or party crowd, and later—well, I wanted to run a bit with traffic, not drive through the night alone.

We came from the street behind Wainwright's house, parked the car and I hopped out and made smack for the alley and down it to the fence. If anyone saw me or anyone in that house came out, Jerry was to toot the horn, drive around the block and pick me up on the other side.

There was no toot from Jerry as I hopped the six-foot fence, dropped on rubber soles to the walk behind and hot-footed it for the study window. One quick look up and down and I jumped, got hold of the broad window sill, armed myself up on it and had a finger under the window. I dropped inside, clicked my flash once, then picked up the coat and, placing it neatly over a chair, reached down and lifted Lapeno up in my arms. He wasn't too heavy, just awkward. I slid him feet first out the window, let my hands slip from under his shoulders to along his arms, almost to the wrists before his feet reached the stone below, then I let him go. It was a good job, a silent job. Quickly, I closed the window and let myself down beside him.

No moon and the alley was pretty dark. I tossed the body over my

shoulder and reached the fence halfway down the alley. Rigor mortis had set in and Larry was a little on the stiff side which made it fairly easy getting him up but hard dropping him over the fence. He balanced nicely then and I was over the fence and had him on my back again.

A man, a single man passed on the sidewalk. I gave him a full minute, let my flash go once and waited. I heard the motor purr across the street and shortly after that Jerry swung the car around and drove up before the alley.

We work fast, Jerry and I. We are alive to prove that. He was out of the car, had swung the rear door open and was across the sidewalk and into the alley. We didn't talk. We just pulled Larry up between us, swung an arm of the dead man over each of our shoulders and hustled him out to the car like any stiff, no pun intended.

A quick glance to see if we were observed. A hoarse laugh from me when I saw that the approaching man was watching us and then I was sitting in the back seat with the corpse.

The man didn't glance back at us when Jerry jumped behind the wheel and drove away. It was just another drunk to him.

After that we crisscrossed a few streets for safety and turned onto Broadway. By this time Lapeno was on the floor and I was on the front seat beside Jerry.

"How much speed?" Jerry asked.

"Fast enough to get the thing over with, but not fast enough to get us a ticket. We have a body to deliver."

"Within the city limits, eh?"

"Sure," I told him. "Westchester is a nice county, besides, our own police are entitled to this corpse."

Straight up Broadway, down the hill at 181st Street, under the elevator pillars, over the bridge at Kingsbridge and so straight ahead to 242nd Street. There a swing right along Van Courtland Park, under the tunnel to the left skirting to the right of the lake. Then, as we reached the hill up to Central Avenue, we swung left and along the golf course, counted two parked cars.

"Easy does it, Jerry," I told him, as I climbed over the seat to the back and folded Larry Lapeno up like a ball. Hard against the rear door he was. Jerry slowed down and waited. Then he said, "It's clear to the curve, boss. I can swing to the bank. You say when."

"Bushes," I said.

Ten seconds later Jerry's whisper.

"Bushes it is."

The car swung sharply, the wheels going down in the slight incline. I threw open the door, raised my foot and sent Larry flying out. I jerked the door closed, climbed back into the front seat and we were hitting it up.

This time we turned right and up the hill to Central Avenue. So to Jerome and more elevator pillars and away toward the city. Just a single stop on a dark side street

while Jerry took off the phony license plates and put our own back on. Sure, that's right. It's foolish to take chances. I knew of a case once where an old lady said, "I wasn't doing nothin' in particular. I just seen the license number and remembered it."

So home, but not to bed. We were hardly in the apartment when the bell rang and up came Sergeant O'Rourke. Now Sergeant O'Rourke and I are good friends. I'd helped him more than once because he was regular and I liked him. And he has helped me many times. I guess because he liked me, maybe envied the red tape I so often cut with a revolver.

It was nothing for Sergeant O'Rourke to walk in on me at all hours of the day or night. Sometimes with a problem, sometimes to give me a tip. Sometimes just to trip me.

"Lucky to catch you in," he said indifferently, as he sat down and put his hat on the floor beside him. "Just spending a quiet evening at home, I take it?"

I grinned at that. Of course, he had been watching from across the street. Guys, especially cops, don't pop in on you right after you arrive unless they were waiting or unless it's a very lucky break. Then they don't mention it.

"Now, now, O'Rourke." I wagged a finger at him. "You probably spent the best part of an hour across the street. Wouldn't trip up a friend, would you? I got home this minute. Bring the sergeant a drink, Jerry."

"I wanted to see if you had any reason to lie, Race," O'Rourke said, with a smile as Jerry came in and planted a bottle and a glass beside him. "I guess it's just the cop in me."

He poured himself a stiff drink, lifted it to his nose and put the glass down again. Then he pushed the bottle away.

"Private stock, Jerry!" I bellowed at that damned boy of mine. His hatred of cops was still so strong that he couldn't even take O'Rourke, and no matter how often I told him he always brought out the cheap liquor. "That bottle," I added, "is reserved for Inspector Nelson."

O'Rourke's smile became a chuckle when Jerry arrived with the good stuff. He took a quick smell, downed it straight, shook his head once, took out a huge handkerchief, wiped off his mouth, filled up the glass again but let it stand and said:

"Got a report. Larry Lapeno is missing."

"Dead?" I showed surprise and satisfaction.

"Just missing." O'Rourke raised the full glass and juggled it slightly, but didn't drink any of it. "But when a guy like that is missing alive he turns up dead. His old aunt called. She said he left word with her if she didn't hear from him to call the police."

"Wasn't he ever missing before?"

"No," said O'Rourke. "Guys like that are missing once, just once."

"I wouldn't think a guy like that would walk the streets of New York without a bodyguard."

"He generally has two men with him. They slept in his house, downstairs. This time he got a call and went out alone, Tuesday night, just before midnight."

"How would I be interested?"

"I don't know." O'Rourke came to his feet, knocked off the glass of whiskey, shook his head again, but didn't refill the glass. He picked up his hat and stuck it on his head and walked toward the door. "If you didn't know, I thought maybe you'd like to know. You've threatened to kill him."

"I've threatened to kill half the crooks in New York, for that matter." I shrugged my shoulders. "You think I did it?"

"No." O'Rourke shook his head. "Guys you get aren't missing over ten minutes, then they're found dead. My guess is that someone is holding him, torturing him, maybe he has some letters he can't get his hands on and wishes he could. Blackmail is such an easy racket, until you blackmail the wrong man. I knew a doctor once who went wacky and cut out a blackmailer's heart and—"

"Better look up the doctor then, if Larry's got a heart." And as O'Rourke swung open the door: "Thanks, old sock, but I'm in the clear. Not that I wouldn't have killed him if I'd thought of it, but—"

The door had opened and closed. O'Rourke was gone. I never was a lad to talk to myself.

I slept like a baby, that is, if you believe that a baby never wakes and hollers during the night. When I got up about ten o'clock, Jerry had left for the office. I glanced over the headlines as I dressed. It was not surprising that Larry Lapeno had not been found, at least when the paper went to press. It was surprising that no passing car had sighted the body if no passing car had. New York people are not too dumb. Certainly, I'd never report a strange body myself. Are the cops thankful? I should say not. They want to know what you were doing at that particular spot at that time of day or night. Where you had been, probably everything you did since you first fell out of your baby carriage. A dozen different dicks ask you a dozen different times how the body was lying and they accuse you of lying more than the body. You're lucky if you aren't arrested for making false statements and impeding the course of justice. A lot of people know that. So if anyone did see the body it was a lad who knew enough to let sleeping dogs lie, with apologies to all canines.

I had a good breakfast at Jake's and went down to my office. Jerry screwed up his face and clutched his nose when I came in. So I knew that not only was I having a visit from the cops, but a particularly nasty cop at that. So I was not surprised to walk into my private office and find Iron Man Nelson. Inspector Nelson of the homicide squad, standing looking out the window. There were two other

plain-clothes men with him, a thick-headed, bull-neck lad called Stein and a round, red-faced giant whom I knew only by sight.

Nelson swung from the window, pushed out his stomach under the impression it was his chest, tried to make his iron chin come out the same way but without much success. He was the terror of the evil doer. He didn't speak, just glared at me. I walked over to my desk and said in passing:

"Why don't you rent that face out to the comic papers? They could use it to frighten women and children."

I sat down at the desk and he walked over and leaned on it and glared some more. The two dicks turned and stared at me rather blankly, not knowing how things were going to break. Then Nelson spoke.

"We picked up Larry Lapeno this morning. He was dead. Murdered. Know how he died?"

"Sure," I said. "He was shot through the head."

Nelson stiffened. "What part of the head?" he asked.

"Straight between the eyes," I told him.

"So you are not going to admit killing him?"

"Claim killing him, you mean."

"What made you think he was shot straight between the eyes?"

"Because every time a lad gets shot straight between the eyes you come running to me. Haven't you found any other good shots in the city?"

"It's like that, eh?" Nelson took a cigar from his pocket, bit off the end of it, rocked a bit on his heels, and actually lighted it. That lighting it was a bad sign. Nelson never smoked except when he was sure of his ground, had a real break in a case.

"Race"—Nelson jarred up and down confidently now—"I want to give you a break. Larry Lapeno was an unsavory character. A jury would listen to reason. The d. a. would listen to reason. You threatened to kill him, you know."

"So I shot him and get twenty years because he had it coming to him. Is that it? And I threatened to kill him. Well, I bet I can produce fifty people who threatened to kill him, but they all couldn't have or could they? How many slugs did you find in his body?" And when he remained cocky: "Come on, Nelson, take yourself and your gallery out of here."

"And you, too?"

"Got a warrant?" I wasn't alarmed, but I wasn't pleased either. I didn't like Nelson and he didn't like me, but he wasn't the dumb cop I liked to paint him and I knew it. And I wasn't the dumb dick he liked to paint me and he knew it.

He looked at his two men, nodded confidently. They nodded back. Then he said to me:

"Do you think I need a warrant?"

It was my turn to lean forward now and do the chin-and-glaring-eye act. Also I let my coat fall open and my right hand creep up above the desk and not too far

from my left armpit. I've got a reputation to uphold and part of that reputation is that I won't be shoved around by the cops. I know my rights. And what's more I know the lawyer to get who'll see that I get those rights.

"Yes," I said slowly, "I think you need a warrant. In fact, I know you need a warrant." And I tossed it all in now. "Unless you want to formally charge me with murder."

"Suppose," he said, "I just intend to take you out of here by force? Then what?"

"Then," I said, "you'll take me out in a cloud of smoke."

"Like that, eh?" He wasn't as sure of himself.

"Just like that," I told him.

He thought that over a long time. No, he wasn't afraid. Not Nelson.

"Well, suppose you put your coat on and we'll walk down and see the commissioner."

"No," I said, "I don't have to do that either. A citizen doesn't have to call on the commissioner any more than the commissioner has to call on a citizen."

The two big dicks were shuffling uneasily. Nelson wasn't doing so good with his hard-boiled stuff. He tried being a little persuasive in a nasty way.

"O. K., Race," he told me. "It wasn't my idea, but the commissioner wants to give you a break. We've got some stuff on you, boy, or I wouldn't be here. I'll give you a few facts and then if you won't come down to see the commissioner I'll—" He paused and turned. O'Rourke had walked in the door. "What are you doing here, sergeant?" Nelson demanded.

"Commissioner asked me to come up and suggest that Race visit him at once. Go on talking, inspector. I won't disturb you."

Nelson didn't like that, but there wasn't anything he could do about it. O'Rourke was only a sergeant, to be sure, but he could easily have been an inspector. Yet he didn't want it. He felt that by being a sergeant he was closer to the man on the beat, the backbone of the force, the closest connection between the citizen and the authorities and so in every-day contact with the pulse of the people—and the criminal, of course. I don't know how O'Rourke rated on the pay end of it, but I did know that he had the confidence of the commissioner and the ear of the commissioner. Nelson didn't like it. Most of the big-shot cops didn't like it. But that's how it was just the same. Nelson went on talking.

"I'll give you a few facts and then if you won't come down, I'll get that warrant you're so anxious to see. Listen. No. 1: Larry Lapeno left his house just before midnight on Tuesday last. We'd like to know where you were at that time. No. 2: It's not simply gossip, but an established fact that you threatened Larry Lapeno. No. 3: You visited Larry Lapeno and threatened his life Tuesday afternoon at three o'clock. What business you visited him on we don't know in a legal sense. But we know his business and we can as-

sume, though not prove, that you aided and abetted in a crime of blackmail by purchasing letters for some client. No. 4: On Wednesday morning, in a letter postmarked Tuesday evening 7 p. m., I personally received a letter unsigned, but written by hand, that if the writer should be found dead, you, Race Williams, would be responsible and the letter requested me to trace your every movement at the time of the murder."

"If it was unsigned how do you know Lapeno wrote it?" I asked.

"Because," said Nelson, smacking his lips, "when I went to his house today and told his aunt of the finding of his body by Motorcycle Patrolman John Drake she gave me a letter Lapeno had requested her to give me if he died an unnatural death. Well, he did."

"And why do you think Lapeno honored you with all this correspondence? Not a personal friend, I presume."

"No." Nelson didn't flush. He wasn't built that way. "I don't know why."

"I do," I told him, and meant it. "He knew you hated me and would do everything to lay the killing on me."

"He knew perhaps," Nelson corrected, "that I hated your methods of abetting criminals, no doubt." And turning to O'Rourke: "It might interest you to know that your . . . this man Williams actually threatened us with violence a few minutes before you came into the office."

"I threatened nothing. I—" I started and stopped.

O'Rourke said: "Tush, tush, no blood was spilled. Go on, inspector, I am sure Williams will see the reasonableness of your presence here and your request that he visit and talk with the commissioner."

"All right," Nelson snapped. "Just where were you from 11:30 p. m. on Tuesday until 2:35 a. m. on Wednesday."

"I don't know." I shrugged my shoulders. "Offhand, I might say I was home in bed, but really I can't remember." But I didn't feel the ease I tried to show. Those hours and even minutes were familiar ones to me.

"Well," Nelson went on, "I want to be quite frank with you. I happen to know that you left your apartment at 11:30 p. m. and returned to it at 2:35 a. m. the following morning."

"Oh, yes," I nodded. "It was some business of a confidential nature with a client." But I had a new respect for Iron Man Nelson. Here it was scarcely noon and Nelson sure had been around. But I said, with great indifference, "What difference does it make since Lapeno was killed at five this morning?"

"How did you know when he was killed?"

"You just said so."

"I said he was found dead at five o'clock."

"Oh, well, what has that got to do with my little business of Tuesday night and Wednesday morning?"

"Because"—Nelson poured it on

heavy now—"Larry Lapeno was killed between twelve midnight and two o'clock Wednesday morning."

"Medical examiner's findings?"

"His opinion," Nelson replied.

"Doc Walgrine?"

"Yes."

I tossed back my head and laughed. I knew old Doc Walgrine.

"Boloney, Nelson," I told him. "Walgrine wouldn't make a guess even before an autopsy and don't tell me he performed one already."

"What he means," O'Rourke put in, "is that Dr. Walgrine said it was quite possible, even very likely, that he was killed about that time."

"You mean it could happen?" I asked O'Rourke.

"Well," said Nelson, "will I get that bit of paper or will you come and have a talk with the commissioner?"

I reached for the phone.

"You better get the paper," I told him. And when he said nothing, I gripped the receiver. "Get the paper. I'm calling my lawyer, Joe Gorton. He'll have me sprung in no time. You'll have to charge me with murder, Nelson, and you'll have to make it stick."

Nelson set his jaw tight and I lifted the receiver.

O'Rourke said: "Just a minute, Race. Conceding all that you say is true, that Gorton can spring you, that you have your laugh on the inspector, Joe Gorton will charge you a thousand dollars at least, maybe twenty-five hundred."

I let the phone rest a minute. O'Rourke had appealed to my baser nature. Joe Gorton would lay it on all right. I knew that.

"It's a lot of money for an innocent man to spend just for a laugh," Nelson said sarcastically, but I could see that he was thinking, "Maybe I'll get Williams his little bit of paper, anyway. Yes, by God—"

"But the commissioner suggested Race come and see him," O'Rourke put in, and then to me: "You could call your lawyer from there, Race, just as well as here." And when I looked at O'Rourke: "You could talk to the commissioner on the phone first, if you won't take Nelson's word for it."

"I didn't give him any word," snapped Nelson. "He don't want to come. He has his rights. He don't have to. I would be breaking the law. A guy must have a funny sense of humor who spends all that dough for a laugh."

"Oh—" I started to shrug my shoulders again, then thought better of it. A lad can overdo indifference. But I said, "I might get some good advice from Joe. He might see my client, the one I visited during those so important hours. I might find it ethical to disclose where I was and so have an alibi, surprise the inspector."

Which crack set Nelson thinking. Suppose I did have an alibi, suppose Joe Gorton sprung it just after the papers carried the arrest? Nelson wouldn't like that. Yes, I guess those were the thoughts I read in his face, for he said gruffly:

"Well, make up your mind. Call

the commissioner if you like, O'Rourke."

Which if it appeared weakness was good common sense on Nelson's part. If the commissioner decided I should be held, Nelson would get the credit. If things went wrong and I blasted out with an iron-clad alibi, Nelson wouldn't get the blame.

III.

The commissioner doesn't like my methods when they interfere with police matters. Maybe he doesn't like me. But unlike Nelson, he's too big a man to dislike me. Also he respects a man who won't take guff from anyone. Still, at that, I was a little bothered. Nelson might have enough evidence to throw a warrant at me.

Riding downtown after O'Rourke had called the commissioner, I could picture Joe Gorton sitting there pounding the ends of his fingers together and saying:

"It's evidence, yes—circumstantial evidence, of course—perhaps enough to get an indictment, but unless they can produce something more tangible, a witness to the shooting, why, no jury will convict you."

And my saying: "But I didn't shoot him, Joe. I was standing in the rain. I got an unsigned letter to prove it."

"Of course, dear boy," Joe would say, "of course you didn't shoot him. It'll cost a bit to prove it, though, say five thousand dollars now."

When I walked into the commissioner's office I was still thinking and trying to decide if I'd tread the light and graceful or stampede all over his office. Different attitudes at different times and with different men. And certainly Commissioner Blake was a far different man than Inspector Nelson. Nothing rough about him, not even around the edges. He was so smooth at times that you could easily slip on his words—and often did and found yourself out cold on your back.

He was in one of those affable moods now when I came into his office. He didn't get up, but he did stretch out a hand and let me shake it.

"Sit down, Race. Sit down. Let us see if we can't straighten out this thing for the best interests of us all."

"Which means I'm the goat, eh?"

His laugh was short. "Always suspicious, Race. Sit down too, inspector, and you, O'Rourke. Nothing formal. I know, Race, that O'Rourke is a great admirer of yours at times—not your methods I can assure you, but your results. Take this Larry Lapeno. I quite agree with you that he was a slimy customer at best and the community is better served if he is dead. But we do have laws, you know. And I suppose Nelson has laid his cards on the table—most of them, anyway."

"All the big ones." I smiled.

"To be sure. To be sure." The commissioner caressed a chin and I mean a chin, for he had more than one. "I suppose Larry wanted more money than your client could raise, one word led to another, your temper and— Why, it might even be self-defense."

"You think a man should plead self-defense for the killing of that snake?"

The commissioner spread his arms far apart.

"We have to have laws and judges

to enforce them, lawyers to interpret them and a jury to decide the facts. No individual can have the right to decide the fate for another individual. Do you want to tell the story of that fatal night, the death of Larry Lapeno?"

"I don't know it." I didn't shrug my shoulders with the commissioner. "But I do know that a hundred, perhaps a thousand people had good reason for killing him."

"Those people—for I presume you are referring to the victims of his blackmail—are amateurs. This was a professional job. Lapeno was killed by a man who was not afraid of killing, was not alarmed afterward."

"What makes you think it was professional?"

"What amateur, what person unused to death by violence and the methods of crime and criminal would cart a body around for close to twenty-four hours? Maybe less, maybe more. As we see it now, Race, he was killed sometime between midnight on Tuesday and two-thirty Wednesday morning. He wasn't concealed from view, so the body couldn't have been there in the bushes long. Now will you tell me where you were between the hours of twelve midnight and two a.m.—in confidence?" he added, and the smile was not on his face.

I thought it over. It was not a good story. I was simply standing in the rain. So I shook my head and stuck to my original story. I said simply, "I never break the confidence of a client."

"All right," said the commissioner, rising. "I'll leave you here for ten minutes to decide if you'll give me that information. If you won't, you had better get in touch with your attorney"—he pointed to his telephone.

Then he turned and walked out of the room.

Nelson seemed pleased. O'Rourke seemed worried. And me—I was figuring just how much Joe Gorton would shake out of me. Why didn't I have an alibi for that night? Why didn't a guy in my position make a business of having alibis, but how could I? I was trotting around all hours of the day and night. Of course, I remember talking to the cop on the corner when I left the apartment and when I went back. Besides there was the doorman and— All right, I'd spend the money. I'd tell Joe it was a little trouble that didn't amount to anything in case the commissioner was bluffing. I was picking up the phone when the commissioner came back.

"Come with me, Race," he said, and I followed him across the hall into a small library. There was a young girl sitting by a desk. She was quietly but neatly dressed and almost shy of manner. I wouldn't have known her at first if it hadn't been for her eyes. It was Avery Coles, no mistake about that. She stretched out a hand and I took it.

"Your client, Race, and your alibi." The commissioner didn't seem displeased. "You see the young lady is more than glad to account for your missing hours.

You're an odd chap, Race. After all, the truth would not have hurt your client's interests. At least, that is her belief."

I said: "It is very nice of you, Miss—"

"Avery," she cut in quickly, "just Avery, Race, please."

It sort of made me look at the commissioner, but he was smiling blandly, so I said, "It was quite unnecessary, Avery."

"But why shouldn't I tell? How absurd for you to think for a single minute that I would mind your saying you were with me. When your boy at the office—Jerry it was—called me on the phone and told me, why I came down at once."

"There is yet," said the commissioner, "the question of time, Avery. You could be mistaken."

"No, I couldn't." She clutched her hands together over her heart like a school girl. "I couldn't—I—But the diary won't be mistaken, will it? And you won't show it to anyone?"

The commissioner said: "I suppose not. I mean, I suppose it won't be mistaken. And I won't show it to anyone. I'll leave you two alone until it comes. I have to talk to Nelson."

She started to talk as soon as we were alone in the room, but I shushed her up. A dictograph or even an intercommunication system could pick up our conversation. So I took her over to the window and, tossing it open, let the cold air come in. Then we leaned out and talked in whispers.

"What's this about my being with you? And Jerry calling you? He—Why, he didn't know."

"He knows now." She placed a slender hand on my big one. "I came into your office and heard them talking. When you and the officers left, I told Jerry that I was coming here and for him to say he knew and telephoned me. It's murder or something, isn't it? And if you were with me, you couldn't have done it, could you? And when the commissioner—he's really an old dear, he knew my father—when he questioned me as to how I knew the exact time I threw in the diary."

"But when he sends for it and you say it got lost?"

"But my maid will give it to him."

"You . . . you— But he'll have an expert examine it, be able to tell when it was written or approximately." And then it striking me: "How could you have written you were with me in it, if you came right from my office and the diary's at your apartment?"

"Race"—she turned and put both hands on my shoulders and I was glad we were far above the street—"I did write it that night. Don't look at me so blankly. I wanted you there, you know, and you wouldn't . . . couldn't come. So I pretended you did come. Other girls do the same thing I guess, and I wrote it in the diary just as if you and I were alone and—You're not mad?"

"Mad." I thought of the money she'd saved me. "Of course, I'm not. But you don't mean to say

you wrote it as if I really were there?"

"Yes. I used to do it at school, too, silly things about the holidays that other girls would find and read and become jealous. You see, I guess I haven't really grown up."

Looking at her then and listening to her, I guess she hadn't, too. All but her eyes. Oh, not at first glance. But if you looked at them long and hard it was there, tragedy and sorrow and a certain worldly knowledge far beyond a simple sophistication. And I wondered—Was there a touch of evil? But, no, there couldn't be. But the thought was there for I said, "You'll want something in return for this?"

She seemed shocked. At least, she drew herself up suddenly, then she said: "Perhaps—" She paused and the music was in her laugh. "Yes, I will. I think it's only right that we should have a date together, just like it was in the diary. I'll send for you and you'll come. Promise."

"I promise," I told her. "I'll be there."

"Your word. You'll play the part of the diary."

"My word." I grinned at her.

The commissioner came in shortly after that. He held the diary in his hand and he gave it to her very seriously.

"I wish to talk to you a minute, Avery," he said. "Remember I haven't seen you since you were a very little girl. That is all. Race." He didn't stretch out his hand to me, just looked at me. "I can understand, if not appreciate and admire, your reluctance to disclose the name of your . . . your client, I believe was the expression. Good day." And when I reached the door: "The matter seems cleaned up, but as you pointed out so clearly yourself the final examination of the body will hardly point out the time of death with such accuracy."

I went. I had thanked the girl. It would only embarrass her if I waited outside. But I was surprised at Commissioner Blake. Nelson, now, I could understand, but I really thought the commissioner would be glad an innocent man was above suspicion, even me. I shrugged my shoulders as I sought the elevators. After all, things would not be too pleasant for him. He could probably trace down a hundred people who had reason enough to kill Larry Lapeno and he'd know, too, that there were several hundred more he never even had heard of. He'd have a tough job solving that crime—and I wasn't going to help him.

Back at the office Jerry told me.

"A dame, boss," he said, his eyes glowing, "something like a hophead's dream, a slim bit of passion from the Arabian Nights. She must have come in on a draft. I was listening to the cops and never saw her until she was standing there beside me, listening, too. She put her fingers to lips that were like . . . like to burn you up and hid behind the screen where we hang our coats. Then you went and she came out. She told me—"

I cut him dead there and got the information. The same as she gave

me. I didn't dismiss her with a shrug. She had saved me from an embarrassing position to say nothing of a piece of change. I suppose girls do write things in their diaries when they think they are in love and I suppose, somehow, I'd pay for it later. Well, that was all right. I'm a lad who pays his debts. And for once, me, a lad who never believes in coincidence had to believe in it now, for she sure had knocked off that bit of fiction in her diary at the right time. A gift from the girl and a gift from fate and I let it go at that.

O'Rourke walked through the outer room into my private office and closed the door behind him.

"Well?" I took a good look at his somber gray eyes. "That has been cleared up. How's old Iron Man?"

"But is it cleared up?"

"What do you mean?" I stiffened a bit now. O'Rourke was my friend, but O'Rourke was an honest man, and I don't know who I'd less rather have on my tail if he really meant business. "Didn't the commissioner tell you—I mean about the girl?"

"Oh, sure. That." He nodded. "I wasn't thinking of that. I was thinking of your idea, that there was someone else behind Larry Lapeno. I never agreed with you that Larry was dumb, but we've searched his house with a fine tooth comb, investigating, you know. A few letters that could be used for blackmail, but nothing like the business we expected."

"What did you do with the letters?"

"Oh, the commissioner is a stickler on that. They are being sent back to their original owners, telling them that if they had come to the police in the first place they would have been protected and their names never discovered."

"Did you make copies of the letters?"

"Why, what for?"

"So you did." I nodded. "That's why blackmail prospers."

"Just for the record." O'Rourke bristled slightly, but he reddened, too. "Of course, those that concerned past unsolved crimes will have to be investigated, the others—" He just spread his arms far apart.

"The others," I told him, for I held strong views on blackmail, "no doubt, will pop up twenty years from now to haunt some relative. Oh, I know, just routine questioning because someone's father or mother went with a woman who—Damn it, O'Rourke, you fellows encourage the filthiest traffic in the world!"

"Do you suggest that we condone crime?" He put on his official dignity.

"Hell!" I went after him. "You know my views on that. You ride a few criminals and tens of thousands all over the country are paying out blackmail every day. Indiscretions of youth, sudden moments of passion, a family row, a few drinks too many, a woman of easy virtue and some upright citizen pays all his life. For what? Be-

cause you guys don't condone crime. You know my views. There's a homicide bureau, the pickpocket squad, the narcotic, chemical, ballistics, but what have you got in the way of a blackmail bureau? A couple of roughnecks who go through a victim's past life until what the blackmailer knows is insignificant in comparison. Then—"

"You've been doing pretty good for yourself as an in-between," O'Rourke cut in.

"That's what riles me," I told him. "Someone has to protect those unfortunate people. And you can't prove that either. You know I meet a blackmailer. You know I pay him money, but you can't prove even that. What do you do? Hire a few frowsy dames to park in a hotel room with a frowsy detective and hope a still frowsier blackmailer will try to cash in on it."

O'Rourke had the grace at least to flush.

"That was Nelson's idea," he said.

"Yeah, I know. They had someone call up Lapeno and tip him off to some easy dough, even told him I could be the go-between. Lapeno laughed himself sick and that's all the good it did. He demands police protection and gets it, and his victims—blah."

"That's right," O'Rourke finally agreed with me with a sigh, which always made me madder than when he argued. "So how about helping out a bit. Who do you think was behind Lapeno?"

"It was only a hunch," I told him. "And if I knew what? No proof without betraying the confidence of a client. Or," I added, "I might shoot him to death between twelve midnight and two thirty some nice winter morning."

"Atta boy!" said a voice from the doorway, and I looked up to see Marty Gibbs of the *Star* parked in the doorway. "So they tried to frame you for the death of Lapeno, Race, and— Oh, hello, sergeant."

O'Rourke said, coming to his feet, "You publish a story like that, Marty, and—"

"Like what?" Marty was all innocence. He winked at me.

"That the police tried to frame Williams."

"Police?" Marty Gibbs seemed shocked. "I was thinking of the blackmail gang. They fear Race. They know he suspects. They put him on the spot. The cops fall for it and then—Girl of Love Nest Saves Famous Detective—" And when I turned on the scowl: "I mean Noted Personal Agent."

O'Rourke stamped out of the office and Marty came over and sat down on my desk, swinging his legs back and forth.

"The love nest story will be a new one for you, Race," he said.

"It won't be, because you won't publish it." And when he just grinned: "Because it isn't true."

"No." Marty looked shocked again. He could look shocked very easily. "The crime was committed between twelve and two thirty or so a noted inspector police claims. A girl walks in and alibis you." And when I would have spoken: "I know. With you, it's simply busi-

ness. But when a sensational murder takes place— Boy, it's a love nest. A sparkling, bewitching piece the girl, too?"

"Know who she is?" I didn't raise my voice.

"No, but I have ways of finding her."

Which I doubted, but didn't like, anyway. "Look at that," he said, placing a late edition of the *Star* before me. The first picture I wasn't sure of. It was a couple of feet sticking up in the air and a body crumpled in leafless bushes. But the picture beside it was Larry Lapeno—cane, gloves, smiling face, white, even teeth, greasy hair and the captions below the pictures. BEFORE AND AFTER. HE PUT THE FINGER ON THOUSANDS—WHO PUT THE FINGER ON HIM?

"His heirs," I said, "can sue you on that."

"You can call spirits from the very deep," grinned Marty, "but do they come? Besides, he had two suits pending against the paper already. I'm holding your love nest story for the morning edition. It's an exclusive."

"And why," I asked, "are you holding it?"

"I thought maybe you wouldn't like it."

"I don't," I told him flat.

"You haven't knocked me around."

"That," I said, "can come later."

He still grinned, but he moved off the desk.

"You know, Race," he spoke confidentially, "you know what would make a good story? A better story than the love nest one? That you know who was behind Larry Lapeno, that you threaten vengeance because this lad tried to frame you." And growing enthusiastic: "Better still, you swear to get him because of the lives he has ruined, the suffering he has caused. That's it. Race Williams in a new light. The great humanitarian. People will eat it up. Nelson will turn a pasty yellow."

"And what good will it do?"

"Hell," said Marty, "you don't think as much of yourself as I do, as any crook does. This master blackmailer suspects that you know him, fear enters his heart, fear of death by violence. He's a coward and a rat and we picture him crouching over the letters that bring suicide and poverty, and then like a cornered rat he decides to strike, strike you before you strike him."

"But I don't have any idea who he is."

"That's it. He comes after you, you meet and *bang, bang*, you kill him. Hot stuff?"

"Marty," I told him, "you're nuts. I haven't any reason to suspect that there was a master hand behind Lapeno. It was simply a hunch and not a very strong hunch at that."

"But in one little slip this master blackmailer gave you the clue. With that single clue—"

"What clue, what slip? Damn it, I don't even think there was anyone behind Lapeno."

"What difference does that make?" Marty exploded. "The story will be dead in a couple of

days, anyway. The clue and the slip will be enough for the reader. We don't have to explain it. It sells papers. It's a good story. I want a good story. If the blackmailer shows up and you kill him or he kills you, it's another good story. If there isn't any other blackmailer, this is still a good story. Is it my fault if you were wrong?" When I smiled at him, lighted a cigarette and leaned back in my chair, he said, "Of course, if you give me that story I won't print the love nest one."

"So that's how it is?" I wasn't leaning back in the chair now. "You haven't forgotten the knocking around?"

He moved toward the door before he spoke.

"That, as you say, Race, is to come later." His eyes narrowed and he watched me closely. "They're both good stories, take your choice."

"Marty," I said, slowly, "you are somewhat of a rat. And not a very healthy rat, at that. If you publish that love nest story you won't be nearly so healthy." Reading in his face the swell story he thought he would have if he were picked up and sent to the hospital or the morgue and thinking myself of the influence of the press and the circulation of the *Star*, I added, "If you can interpret anything from my conversation that would lead you to believe that I claimed to know who this master blackmailer is, why go ahead, but I won't confirm it."

"Nor deny it?" His eyes opened wide, sparkled, his tongue licked at thin, broken lips.

"Nor deny it," I told him.

And he was gone. The story would be good for the paper, of course. The by-line would be good for Marty Gibbs and the publicity would not be bad for me.

The next morning Jerry brought me in the *Star*. His face was alive with enthusiasm. There was my pan across the front page. The heading was not bad. INNOCENT DETECTIVE QUESTIONED IN LAPENO MURDER SWEARS VENGEANCE. PERSONAL INVESTIGATOR AWAITS SECRET INFORMATION WHICH WILL DISCLOSE HIDEOUS HAND BEHIND MURDERED BLACKMAILER.

If you liked the sensational, Marty Gibbs was a great feature writer. The slip and the clue were cleverly hinted at in his "exclusive interview." He didn't say it exactly, in fact, he didn't say it at all, but you were left strongly with the impression that I would know "like a bolt from the blue from an undisclosed source." Then the question: How would I act? Would I disclose my information to the police who had suspected me of the crime and blundered continually in the disgraceful way they handled the blackmail situation in "our great city" or would I, Race Williams, man of action, drag the sniveling rat from his hole? Or would the rat, desperate, creep out into the night and attempt my destruction in the darkness "of our great city?"

Jerry loved it. And I—well, he had remembered personal investigator and—sure, I took a laugh. But I suppose at that I did like it.

IV.

I guess it was about an hour after I had admired my picture in the *Star* that Jerry stuck his head in the door and said a party with a snazzy male voice who wouldn't give his name wanted to speak to me. Would I take the call and would he listen in from the outer office?

I told him I'd take the call, but he wasn't to listen in.

I recognized the voice. It was my sanctimonious friend. That's right, Harrington Grover Wainwright.

A nervousness had crept into his voice and also a hesitancy. He wanted to know if what the paper said were true about my knowing the name of the man behind Larry Lapeno. And when I told him that it wasn't, he wanted to know in a most tremulous voice when I would know.

I said that I didn't know when I'd know and maybe led him to believe that I would know very shortly.

"Is it true, Mr. Williams, that you'll . . . you'll dispose of him?"

I grinned to myself and replied: "That is a reasonable assumption, if you don't dispose of him first."

That seemed to shock him so I asked him what was on his mind.

"I have been a foolish man, Mr. Williams," he told me. "My little personal business with the party now deceased is not a closed matter. Someone else has taken it up. I received a telephone call—I'm afraid he suspects—well, the truth."

"Good Lord!" I said. "But how?"

"He . . . he said he sent Larry Lapeno to me and has not seen him since. . . . No, he didn't accuse me, but he is coming to see me tonight alone. I thought you might—"

"Dispose of another one?" I almost shouted into the phone. It struck me suddenly that I was going to have a steady job getting rid of a philanthropist's corpses.

"No . . . no—" He fairly gasped the words. "I wouldn't. I couldn't. I haven't slept. I—God help me, Mr. Williams, I am shocked beyond words. I think . . . I feel almost certain that I recognized the man's voice on the phone."

"Who was he?" It was my turn to gasp.

"I can't— It is too horrible to think of. Even contemplate. Yet I must believe. He's coming at ten tonight. I was thinking, if you could be here . . . no servants . . . come unannounced and unseen. I—"

His voice was broken now. There was the weirdest rattle, like a dying Frankenstein monster, over the phone, right out of the movies. So I put on the brakes and said calmly. "There is nothing that can't be fixed up. I'll come—" And after a pause: "As I came last time, I mean when you didn't receive me."

"The study window you mean and—"

"Exactly, now forget it. Say nine o'clock."

"You think . . . you won't— It is horrible to think of and—"

"Sit tight," I advised him. "Read yourself a good book. We'll handle it one way or another."

"Thank God for your calm, assuring voice," he said, almost as if reciting a prayer. "I am a worried, broken man. You may name your own fee."

Which last line was not a bad one to hang up on. So what? So I sat down to think. Marty Gibbs had cast my bread upon the waters and it was floating home cream puffs.

My first thought was one of satisfaction that I had guessed there was another blackmailer. My second thought was one of satisfaction that this blackmailer didn't know I had carted the body away from Mr. Wainwright's house. How did I arrive at that conclusion? Certainly, he wouldn't go to a house where I might also cart him away, just as dead.

Then the question: Did this blackmailer believe I knew or would shortly know who he was? There were two schools of thought on that. The first that he didn't or he wouldn't go nonchalantly on plying his trade. The second that he did and he wanted to clean up all he could and make a getaway before I put the finger on him. And Harrington Grover Wainwright would be big business to start with.

That this blackmailer suspected Mr. Wainwright of killing his partner, I doubted. He would be a foolish man, indeed, if he chanced walking into his death also. That he was a common gunman or a well-known crook seemed out of the question also. Otherwise, would Wainwright have recognized his voice on the phone? It must have been a business acquaintance or a social one that so shocked him. Or again it didn't need to be someone he knew at all. Nice people don't kill without unpleasant reactions and Wainwright was certainly nice people—which I am not and will admit right now.

But why would a master criminal, a blackmailer who had hidden himself away for years, suddenly walk right out and do his own business? There was an answer to that—the first school of thought. Panic at my knowing him shortly and a final stab at heavy cash before his getaway.

I quit thinking. I am not the deducting, deducing book type of detective. I'm a hard working, plugging sort of guy who can recognize a break when he sees it and act at that same minute, at that same second or even split second if guns are brought into it.

I called Jerry and prepared him for the worst or the best, according to how you look at it. I told him simply to be where I could get him on the phone, that we might have to repeat the body act.

"Again, boss?" He opened those expressive eyes very wide. "Not that I mind, understand. But it always seemed more convenient to let 'em lie where you—" And when I did the staring act: "You know, let 'em just lay. I . . . I think you're over dramatizing it."

Whatever I did was right with Jerry, but juggling the corpse

around afterward struck him as an anticlimax.

That afternoon O'Rourke called on me. I thought it was about the boloney in the paper and he was a long time coming around to it. But it seemed he took the article for just what it was, boloney, and finally approached his real reason for his visit.

"Race," he said, looking off into space, "you never was a ladies' man, sort of felt it would interfere with your business. Now, you're not in love, are you, not thinking of getting married?"

I leaned back and took a long laugh. O'Rourke looked so serious.

"What put that into your head?" I asked.

"The commissioner," he said. "You see, he feels a sort of obligation toward that girl. Was a great friend of her father. I didn't know he could be personal in matters, but I guess he can. Since you are not serious and she quite evidently is and believes you are— Well, forget her." And in a sudden burst of his old-time friendship: "Oh, I suppose you were just kidding around, but she's young, unsophisticated and—"

"Just," I cut in then, "who are you talking about?"

"The Spellman girl, of course. I—"

He stopped there. I stopped, too. The voice in the outer office was loud and demanding. The knob turned, the door was flung open and Inspector Nelson stormed into the room.

"I want to talk to you, Williams," he said. "I want to talk to you now. I want you to know exactly where I stand before you start making a mess of things. I know enough to make trouble for you, real trouble, but if you are willing to play ball, why I am— A-ah! Sergeant—"

O'Rourke walked toward the door. "I was just leaving, inspector," he said.

"Me, too." I reached for my hat on the costumer across from the desk.

"No," said Nelson. "I speak to you now or—" He put one of those big hands of his on my shoulder.

"Nelson"—I looked at him coldly —"you're very fortunate I got a new rug, paid for, too." And when he looked at me dumbly: "If I didn't think you'd mess up the rug I'd shoot that hand off my shoulder at the wrist." With that I knocked his hand from my shoulder and pounded out after O'Rourke.

The elevator door closed almost in my face and I missed O'Rourke. Another elevator door two flights down closed in Nelson's face and he missed me. I didn't catch O'Rourke on the ground floor. Nor did Nelson catch me on the ground floor. I took a walk in the park, had dinner and loitered over my coffee.

What Nelson had to say to me didn't matter. What O'Rourke had said to me probably didn't matter either. But I was of a curious turn of mind and I couldn't locate the Spellman girl. At least by name,

I couldn't. A couple of women had been in love with me, yes. Some young girls, too. That happens to lads who throw their weight around, though not as much as to a lad who croons. I was trying to think of the name of the girl who eloped with the school gardener. I couldn't remember it. But I didn't think it was Spellman. Yet, the

name was familiar. Still all names are. I was wondering if she had turned up in the city again minus her gardener but with the same childlike romance in her heart.

I tried to think what the girl's name was who had run away from home with a bum last summer. Her father was a big shot and knew Commissioner Blake. But then all big shots knew the commissioner. The kid was seventeen. And the bum was a second-rate swindler with a first-class line, at least for kids. They were going to be married and I had dragged her out and her hero sort of lay on the floor after my first wallop and she changed her affections to me. She had written me letters and tried to see me. Let me see. Her first name was Gladys. Her last name. Her father's name. Was it Spellman? I didn't know. I'd find out the next time I saw O'Rourke.

I was glad now I hadn't caught up with him. I was glad, too, that Nelson hadn't caught up with me. This was one night when I certainly didn't want a bunch of cops in my hair.

So nine o'clock found me once again back at the window of Wainwright's study. I had come by the same way, too, through the alley behind and over the fence. This time no Jerry waited with a car. There would be nothing outside Wainwright's house to identify me with the inside of it until I sent for Jerry. Nothing, unless a pistol shot in the night. I wondered a bit about that.

Nothing happened as I reached the window, chinned myself for a moment, then swung up onto the broad sill. A flip of my finger beneath the slightly raised window, an easy push and I was in the room.

I closed the window and felt my way across the room to the strip of light that came from under the door to the big library.

In absolute quiet I pulled the door open and peered out into the lighted but silent library. Almost at once I saw Wainwright. He was sitting at the desk looking straight at the huge fireplace in which big logs were burning brightly. His face was lined, more deeply lined than when I had seen him there a few nights before. There seemed to be shadows under his eyes, and if his steady glare at the fire was what people call day-dreaming he was having a daymare. He raised his eyes once and looked toward the ceiling and half shook his head. For a moment his eyes cleared and he clasped his hands in front of him. Then his lips moved. He looked like a man in prayer.

I remember thinking while I watched him that if a man's life is written on his face then here had been a good life. Giving unstintedly to the poor.

He turned his head and saw me. If he was surprised it was a very mild surprise. When he smiled at me I wondered what there could be in his life that would make him fear blackmail. Something stupid, no doubt. Something you or I—well, that I, anyway, would laugh off if a blackmailer threatened me with it.

"Ah, Mr. Williams," he said, motioning me to a seat across the desk from him. "Rather, Race Williams." And when I sat down opposite him: "I must look on you now as a good and trusted friend."

"You paid for what you got," I told him. "You paid well. Now your—" I started to say "conscience" but didn't. I said, instead, "Now, it is difficult to kill a man no matter how justifiable the act and it worried you."

"No." His head was slightly down and he raised it and let mild blue eyes meet mine directly. "I didn't tell you the truth the other night. I didn't kill the man." He raised his voice slightly. "The child, the grown child of a very dear friend of mine killed him."

"A young man?" I didn't know whether to believe him or not.

"A young woman," he told me. "A charming young woman. You see, Mr. Williams . . . Race, I was a very foolish man. I dabbled with something I did not understand. I had the girl bring the blackmailer here, to reason with him, to plead with him and pay him, of course. He had what she wanted or at least she thought he did. I was an old man and she was a young girl and he was strong and powerful and had nothing to fear. So she killed him. You understand?"

"No, I don't. You told me quite a different story, the description of what was in your mind and your heart and in your soul when you pulled the gun from your drawer and shot him."

"I did. Yes, I suppose I did. At school I was known for my histrionics and—"

I wasn't listening to him. I guess he knew it for his eyes turned and followed mine. I wasn't sure at first. The thing that I was looking at was in the shadows and the thing I saw might not have been a shoe, a shoe with a foot in it, perhaps a dead foot. I could have sworn it was not there a few minutes ago, a few seconds for that matter. But it was there, and then it was gone, as if a shadow crossed it or a door closed softly. I turned back to face Wainwright and to crack wise about another body, but thoughts were racing madly through my head. I think I knew and yet I didn't know, but certainly I knew part of it before I saw the gun he held so tightly in his right hand. He was leaning across the desk, pointing the gun directly at me, and believe it or not, I could feel rather than see his finger pressing on the trigger.

There was no kindliness in the man's eyes now. No sudden change from good to evil either. Just a cold, calculating sort of viciousness, and perhaps a bit of satisfaction.

Then a voice spoke behind me. "Don't shoot yet, Mr. Wainwright. Until we know who he is going to get his information from. Put them up, Race Williams, both of them, high."

I put them up high. And so would you. There is not much chance to draw, aim and fire when one gun is a few feet from your stomach and the other hard against your back.

The girl was the girl of my alibi, the girl who had written in her diary about me. I knew then why she had written in the diary and given the date and the time. It was no coincidence. And if it wasn't a coincidence, what was it? It was knowledge. She knew, then, in advance, the exact time that Larry Lapeno was going to die. But she knew more than that. She knew that I would not have an alibi for that time. She knew that I would be standing in the dark and the sleet and the rain. She could only know that in one way or maybe two ways. Either she herself had mailed me the two hundred dollars that sent me to the entrance of the park or someone she knew had sent them. Sure. I suddenly became a deducting, deducing detective of fiction, but it took two guns to do it.

"I don't believe his silly story," Wainwright said, impatiently, as his gun steadied and I thought he was going to shoot. But he didn't. "He couldn't have information coming or— Search him, my dear. You should relieve him of at least two guns. He carries them under his armpits I believe." She got both of them out all right and laid them on the far end of the desk from me. "Nothing in his hip pockets?" Wainwright watched her closely as she searched me. "Good." And when I felt a sudden satisfaction that some hunch had told me to carry my tiny automatic sleeve gun that night, Wainwright of the honest face spiked that satisfaction.

"Both his arms, my dear little Avery," he said. "Our intrepid Mr. Williams is noted for his concealment, yes and use, too, of a sleeve gun. It doesn't show." And as she ran a hand along my arms: "Deeper, my dear. Back near the shoulders."

He waited and I waited, too, as the girl settled her hand directly on the tiny automatic, hesitated a moment and took it off again.

"Not a thing," she said, and I thought I detected a nervousness in her voice, a nervousness that must have been in her hands, too, since she did not recognize the feel of the gun.

"So you are the blackmailer?" I said at last.

"Ah, a Sherlock Holmes." Wainwright smiled at me. "The wisdom of a second Solomon. Yes, my dear Mr. Williams—Mr. for we can hardly be called trusted friends now. A rather unique setup, isn't it? But, then, charity is part of my business. It gives me a good name and costs me nothing. Indeed, I cash in on it. It is so easy to take a little kitty from each pot. And since so many people insist upon anonymity—oh, not from altruistic purposes, but through a fear that others will pounce on them for donations—I often take the credit for the donations. The technique of my avocation is not much different from that of my vocation, blackmail. In blackmail we threaten exposure or prison if possible. In charity, the fear of being known as a mean man, spoken about in hushed shame by those we wish for social or business reasons to respect us. I have aided the poor by the weak-

ness rather than the strength of the rich, and made myself rich on that same weakness. Always man fears exposure. But let us talk about you, Mr. Williams. What was this story in the paper that you were to receive information of the identity of the blackmailer behind the dear, departed Lapeno?"

"What good would it do to tell you?" I asked. "You intend to kill me, anyway."

"It would be useless to pretend differently," he said easily. "Still, there are many ways to die. Larry Lapeno died easily with a bullet through the side of his head. A bullet in the stomach now—I am told can be quite lingering and very painful. I had a client once who—But you would not be interested."

"I would be interested in knowing just why you picked me out for the body . . . the disposal of the body. And why you killed Lapeno."

"Not me, the little lady behind you," he corrected mildly. "Lapeno had fallen prey to the greatest of all human frailties. And that, Mr. Williams, is not women nor liquor nor even drugs. It is the one incurable vice that doctors can do nothing about. It is gambling. Despite the huge, untaxable income I permitted him, he was in need of money. Again he had become lazy, look how often he directed clients to you." And leaning forward and the gun coming even closer to my stomach: "He hinted at something once, Mr. Williams, once when I refused him money, money which I gave him after the hint. And immediately I began to plan for his death."

"But where would I fit into the picture?" I was still sparring for time. Trying to figure out where the girl stood behind me, how close was her body to the gun that was pressed against my back. If I could pitch over backward in that chair I'd come up with the tiny sleeve gun in my hand. Yes, I knew if I came up it would be in my hand all right, but would I come up again? A .25 automatic against a .45 revolver, one hidden in the sleeve, one facing my stomach. And a girl behind me with another gun.

Two shots would be all I could have and they must be perfect ones. A .25 is not a deadly weapon unless your aim is good. Was I thinking of actually killing a girl? Of course, I was. I didn't paint any romantic picture of disarming the girl and killing the man all in one single sweep. One plan only, at least one hope only. To get out of there alive if possible. Who else died didn't bother me then.

"Where do you fit into the picture?" Wainwright was saying. "Can't you guess what Lapeno's hint to me was?"

"By God, yes!" I said, without thinking. "His half-million-dollar blackmail scheme."

"Ah—" His eyes widened. "So I was right and it had reached that stage. You see, I never actually feared Lapeno. He was a coward at heart and he was deadly afraid of me."

"Which he had reason to be," I put in.

"Which he had reason to be," he repeated. "But I feared you, Mr. Williams. A half million dollars is a lot of money."

"Which I turned down."

"Really? Well, it didn't matter. A man might be so noble, of course. Still you could have pretended to accept the proposition and got him to talk. No, Mr. Williams, I feared you so I killed Lapeno. It tickled my fancy to have you dispose of the body for me. It amused me to send you a couple of hundred dollars to stand alone in the rain and be without an alibi. I am a wealthy man. I am ready to retire. It would be convenient to keep you busy while I wound up my affairs." And with a shrug and a raise of the gun which I felt might pop off any second he said, "Now, who could possibly have been able to disclose to you my identity?"

And it struck me all at once. I might start things moving. I might not be alive to see the end of that movement, but I had an idea one of them would be dead, too. I said: "Well, the young lady behind me knew."

"Nonsense. I have evidence right here in this house, evidence that made her work with me, evidence that caused her to toss away all her upbringing and work with"—a pause—"a blackmailer."

"Well—" I guess I cleared my throat for my position was not a pleasant one. "Who do you think alibied me?" And when he looked at me blankly: "Did she know or didn't she know about the two hundred bucks you sent me?" And as his face paled a little: "And why do you think she did it. Because she—"

The girl broke in. "He lies! I—" And swinging suddenly to one side of me: "His leg, boss! There might be a gun strapped to his leg."

"No," Wainwright snapped. "I'd kill him before he could ever bend forward."

"He'd go down and up," the girl said, and then cried out, "I can see the outline of a gun strapped to his leg!"

Wainwright cursed. Even then the words seemed strange coming from his lips. The girl swung in front of me just before she ducked down at my legs. For a split second I was out of range of the man's gun. The girl's gun I could see dangling in her hand as she started to bend. In that split second I did it. I threw my weight back and kicked up with my foot. Maybe the toe of my shoe striking the girl's gun delayed my backward plunge slightly. Maybe if it hadn't been a glancing kick I would have been killed.

Wainwright fired. I could see the yellow-blue flame. Then the sudden pain in my head as if I had been hit. But I hadn't, for I heard a picture crash to the floor behind me. My head must have hit the edge of one of the filing cabinets. Maybe it helped save my life. Maybe it didn't. Certainly I was spinning in the chair when I crashed and certainly my head was spinning when I came up. But I came up with the gun in my hand and death

in my heart. He fired again and I think skinned the lower part of my leg. That is, I thought that then, later I knew he didn't.

He fired once more after that, but I wasn't afraid then. There was fear in his eyes, beads of perspiration on his forehead, terror perhaps in the gaping hole in his face, for his mouth hung open.

We fired together, but I knew he was going to miss. And I think he knew I wasn't. And if that was the truth we were both right. I shot for the wide open spaces and since no mark appeared on his lily-white face I guess I hit the bull's eye or the bull's mouth if you want to be literal. Smack in the gaping hole it went and he slid back into the chair. Sat down for all the world like a man at ease. Then he began to disappear slowly. He was gone, quietly and softly but for a slight scraping of the chair along the waxed surface as he hit the floor.

The girl, of all things, was smiling as I crossed to the desk and peered down at the blackmailer.

He was dead all right.

V.

I turned to keep an eye on the girl and got my first good look at her. Was she too heavily made-up? Well, I shouldn't say that, exactly; I might say she was made up to be the girl I knew and not the demure little miss of the commissioner's office. Had she fainted? Was she staring wildly at me with frightened, unseeing eyes? She was not. She had one of the filing cabinets open and was going rapidly through it. She finally got what she wanted and turned toward the fireplace.

I crossed the room, had her by the arm and swung her around. Both her hands were behind her back, but she wasn't near enough to the open fire to chuck in what she held.

"Give me those letters or whatever you are concealing," I ordered.

"No," she said. "I sold my mind to that devil on earth and my soul to the devil in hell for these. I'm going to burn them now, as you advised in the restaurant." She looked at my gun. "You could kill me, but I'd burn them."

"That," I said grimly, "it not a bad suggestion. But hardly necessary." I held her tightly to me and put my hand around her, trying to get what she held.

"I gave you life tonight, Race Williams," she said coldly. "In return, won't you give me these two bits of paper to destroy? They are not mine, they are—" She hesitated a long time. "One is not mine."

"Gave me life?" I laughed.

"Yes. I held tightly for a full second to the gun in your sleeve." She put her eyes straight on mine and I'll admit my grip on her loosened. "Then I risked my own life by stepping in front of you when you so stupidly tried to compromise me by disclosing the alibi."

"That I don't believe," I told her, and then added honestly, "Though it looks as though I'll have to swallow the gun story." And

suddenly: "Why did you do it?"

She looked at me. "Because—maybe I wanted you alive. Certainly, I wanted him dead."

It jarred me a bit if anything can jar me.

"You had a gun of your own," I said. "Why didn't you use that on him?"

"A lady never kills a gentleman, at least in cold blood." And damned if even then it wasn't a nice smile she gave me. "Besides, he took the gun from my bag tonight and replaced the live shells with blanks. I discovered that."

"Why tonight?"

"Because of the two bits of paper I hold behind my back. He promised to show one of them to me tonight. He never had it here before. I guess he was afraid I would kill him to get it."

"And was his fear correct?"

"I don't know," she replied, slowly and rather thoughtfully. "I might say that I have gone through hell to keep what one of those sheets contains from being made public; that is, another girl who has taken my place has gone through hell. That girl is myself, of course. But such a different person. I suppose I'm sort of a Dr. Jekyl and Miss Hyde." Her laugh was not good now. "But sometimes I'm afraid I'll never slip back to being the girl I was. A convent-bred, demure little thing, like in the commissioner's office. At first the person I am now didn't seem too real to me, it was as though I were acting a part. Now, the person that I was doesn't seem real to me."

"You are not very clear."

"No, I'm not," she said. "You see, Mr. Wainwright was my father's friend. He bled my father white, bankrupted him by blackmail through Larry Lapeno, even loaned father the money to pay him, took mortgages on father's property. I never knew what it was until my father just folded up and died. He was delirious then and he told me, just me. My mother's an invalid, you know."

"No." I watched her closely to see if she were lying. "I didn't know."

"May I destroy these papers?"

"What's in them?"

"I saved your— Well, if I tell you what is in one of them will you let me destroy it now?"

"Maybe. If I like the story."

She looked at me a long moment, said abruptly: "My mother shot a man to death before I was born. Another woman knew it, saw it, but she protected my mother. But to protect this woman, my mother had signed a statement that she herself had killed him. Somehow, this statement came into the hands of Mr. Wainwright and he blackmailed my father through Larry Lapeno. My mother never knew. She doesn't know now. It would kill her, of course. Do you want to read it?"

"No," I said gruffly. "If you didn't save my life, at least you gave me a chance to save it myself. Toss the papers into the fire." And when she did: "If you knew just where that document was, and worked for this man, why didn't

you get it before?"

"It was never here before. You see, he had twisted my mind and warped my soul, but he wanted my body. He was a shrewd man. He read the truth there. Somehow, I wasn't big enough for that. He promised to show me my mother's statement tonight. He did. I saw where he put it. He was retiring from business. We were to be married. The day we were married he would give me the statement to destroy."

"Did you believe that?"

"No, but I believed and hoped that if I once knew where it was for so short a time I could get it—and I did. He read the newspaper about your finding the man behind the blackmailer. He didn't believe it, but he wondered. He was a careful man. He decided to kill you tonight. He wanted to involve me in your death, as he wanted to involve me in the death of Larry Lapeno."

"He said you killed Lapeno."

"Yes, but I didn't."

"What was the other document you burned?"

She didn't hesitate. She said simply, "A signed statement that I killed Lapeno."

"And you didn't?"

"Why, no." The smile was there and this time it was not too bad. "You remember, I have an alibi. You and I were together when Lapeno died." And when I just stared at her: "Yes, I worked with Mr. Wainwright. I went down to the very depths to protect my mother. At first, he pretended to be an old friend giving me a position as secretary. Then he found out what I was after. And he made me work with him. Maybe I fooled him. Maybe I didn't. But he was changing my personality to suit himself. Anyway, that is what he thought and I certainly did change. You see, he was the only man in the world who could pull Larry Lapeno out into the night unescorted. The night he killed him he simply sent for him. You wonder about my being blackmailed by Lapeno. Well, I sent Lapeno the very letter you paid to get for me. He had met me as Mr. Wainwright's secretary. But he didn't know I was the girl he was blackmailing. Because, as you know, he never saw her."

"What," I said, "could possibly be the purpose of that?"

"Because I wanted to meet you. I wanted to get to know you. I wanted—"

"You wanted me to kill Wainwright and get your mother's document, so you tried to make me fall for you?"

"That's right," she nodded. "At least I wanted that document."

"You didn't fool me," I said, with some pride, for she was a damned fascinating girl.

"No," she said. "I fooled myself. I played a game." She put both her hands on my shoulders. "Look at me, Race. I liked you. I told myself that I only liked you and would use you. But tonight—" She was getting pretty close and her breath was warm against my face. "I guess I have loved you

for some time, but tonight I knew it."

I took both her hands from my shoulders. I smiled at her. At least, I twisted up my lips as I looked into those hard, calculating eyes. But they weren't hard and calculating now. They were soft and appealing, maybe like the girl's she had been. Then I shook my head and laughed. She was a damned smart girl.

"You want me to let you go," I said, "to walk out into the night free, absolutely free from all that you have been, for your mother."

"That's right," she said. "I won't offer you money, though I will shortly have a great deal to offer you. But I know that wouldn't do any good."

"No," I said, and my voice was hard and cold, "that wouldn't do any good."

"You won't let me go?"

"Lady," I said, "no. This dead guy had a big game. This dead guy—"

She cut in. "The filing cabinets are all the proof you need that he was the blackmailer. They are full of letters." And when I gave her the cold and stony stare: "I suppose I could prove to you that—well, I have proved to myself that I love you, love you better than anything on earth. Anything—" And the hands were working again. I gripped them tightly and said brutally:

"Better than your dying mother, I suppose?"

"Yes, yes." She barely whispered the word. "It is terrible, isn't it? But it must be true. You see, if I had . . . had died without getting that signed statement of mother's—well, I threw myself between you and his gun. Why—" She was fighting to get her hands free now. "So that you might live even if I died."

She broke loose then and walked across the room toward the door. When I called to her to stop she threw the words back over her shoulder.

"Think it over, Race," she said, "or shoot me in the back if you wish. Anyway, you'll know where to find me or tell the police where to find me if you want it that way."

The library door to the hall opened and closed and I was alone. Alone with a corpse.

With a corpse? And it suddenly struck me. There was another corpse or had I really seen that foot? And didn't the girl know about that or— I went to one of the filing cabinets and jerked it open, shuffled through the files. Letters, letters, letters! All pertaining to charitable work. And then I found it. The drawer did not come out far enough. I didn't jerk the thing off its hinges. I found the little spring and snapped it back and there were some real letters. Love letters, threatening letters, a copy of a page from a hotel register, a snapshot of a man and a girl on a beach. Another one of a room which was not too nice.

I banged shut the drawer, took my handkerchief and wiped off any prints. What should I do? Walk out and let the police find the whole

business? Or should I call up O'Rourke and let him get the commissioner? There was the dead man with the gun in his hand. There was the picture on the floor and the bullet holes in the floor and the one in the wall. There were the letters to prove the great philanthropist was a common crook, the most vicious of all crooks, a blackmailer. There was—

I crossed over to where I thought I had seen the foot. It was in semi-darkness. I pulled out my flash and found a closet door. I gripped the knob and jerked open the door. I didn't need my flash. It was one of those closets where a light snaps on when you open the door.

Yes, I saw the foot all right, two feet bound tightly together. Hands, too, bound behind the man's back and a coat tossed over his head. Was this torture? Was the man bound before he was killed? I leaned down and jerked back the coat to look at the dead man's face.

Surprised again? Yes, I was surprised. Then it hit me and I threw back my head and laughed. I couldn't help it. No, the man propped up against the wall in that closet wasn't dead. He wasn't even unconscious. Eyes that were wide and staring and uncertain had suddenly taken on a hopeful look. Now that I laughed they took on a threatening look, an angry look that was fast turning to a doubtful, maybe an embarrassed look. Certainly, the man was red in the face. And suddenly I realized that perhaps it was not entirely from embarrassment or even anger. For the gag was tight across his lips, a handkerchief evidently first being shoved between his teeth.

I leaned down and tore loose the knot that held the gag in place and jerked the handkerchief free from his mouth. He tried to talk, tried to talk and suck in air at the same time. He was not very successful. He choked, gasped, coughed and began to come back to life.

You know who he was? Or maybe you don't. Well, he was Inspector Nelson. Old Iron Man Nelson himself. In person.

After a while he began to talk. All of it was abusive. Most of it profane. Some of it obscene. And the end of it was what would happen to me the minute he was untied.

"What makes you think I'm going to untie you?" I asked him.

He blew up then. Went off again and finally settled down.

"You came in a different window," he told me. "You hit me on the head. Rolled me in here, bound and gagged me. And Mr. Wainwright, despite his prestige and standing and wealth, isn't entirely free of blame. He hired you, I know."

"So!" The truth dawned on me. "And I was giving you credit for tracing down the blackmailer. And what did you do? Break the law. Tap my telephone wire and come here to meet the blackmailer and steal my show."

"I came to your office to give you your chance to disclose what you were hiding from the police." And when I just stared at him: "Cut me

loose," he ordered. "There will be others, the police will be here any minute."

"No, they won't." I shook my head. "An inspector of police doesn't take men into his confidence when he breaks the law and taps a telephone wire. Besides, when the other cops come, won't you be a pretty picture?"

At that, I didn't know what to do with him. A less kindly man would have shot him through the head and called it a day. I talked to him a bit, sort of felt him out. Sure, I got his story. Oh, he didn't actually admit that he tapped the wire, but he said he came there, was talking to Wainwright when someone hit him on the head. But the truth was that he thought he had bluffed Wainwright into hiding him in the closet until I came, evidently to horn in on the deal. But one thing was sure; he was certain I had cracked him down. He didn't know Wainwright had done it. He didn't know there had been a girl in the house, and he didn't have any idea that Wainwright was the real blackmailer. I guessed I'd never be able to prove he'd tapped the wire. But I scared hell out of him, anyway, before I went to telephone O'Rourke.

"One more foul peep out of that big mouth of yours, Nelson," I said, "and I'll telephone Marty Gibbs of the *Star* to come and take pictures. The readers of the *Star* might enjoy a little light comedy with their tragedy. A dead blackmailer outside and Iron Man Nelson trussed up in the closet. Anything for a laugh these days. But it won't inspire public confidence."

I went to the phone and called O'Rourke. I told him nothing, except that it was important—and how!

Ten minutes later I let O'Rourke in the front door. I showed him the corpse and the evidence in the way of blackmail letters, pointed out the shots in the floor and the one in the wall where the picture had crashed. I didn't mention the girl at all. And sort of slid in Nelson. I entirely forgot to tell him about the body of Lapeno I had carried out a few nights before. I told him that the *Star* story was to throw fear into the blackmailer so he would try to trap me, that Wainwright called me up. That he said he was being blackmailed and that he thought he knew who the blackmailer was and so I came to see him. I repeated the telephone conversation, for I felt Nelson had heard it, anyway. I said Wainwright had taken my guns from me, was about to kill me when I tossed over backward and produced my sleeve gun and did him in.

O'Rourke was a thoughtful and very wise man, a good politician, too. He walked up and down a minute before he spoke.

"It'll rock the city," he said. "It will wreck institutions that have been doing a great deal of good. Big names will refuse to be associated on stationery that bore and still bears the name of Harrington Grover Wainwright. Thousands—well, tens of thousands of people will refuse to donate to worthy causes that this man has wrecked.

I'll call the commissioner, Race." And as he reached for the phone: "No one need know what happened —maybe."

Only Nelson. I got ready to deliver the punch.

He dropped the phone back in its cradle.

"He's an honest man," he said, after a bit, "but he thinks of only one person, Nelson. He'll talk his head off if—"

"He's in an embarrassing position," I cut in, and I went into detail about Nelson and his tapping my wire and his being bound up in that closet.

O'Rourke smiled and lifted the telephone.

"Strange, Race"—he winked at me—"that you forgot to mention Nelson until after the commissioner arrived. Or I would have untied him, of course. If you had, I would have done my duty."

Commissioner Blake came and looked at me, looked at the body, looked at the letters in the cabinet, listened to me, stuck his face close to O'Rourke's and then said to me, "What did you say, what about Nelson?"

That was all right with me and I led the commissioner and O'Rourke to Nelson.

"Nelson frightened me, commissioner," I said, with a broad grin and in a loud voice. "Threatened me bodily harm. I was afraid to untie him until you came. There seems something wrong with him."

The commissioner did his stuff well. His dignity and displeasure were grand to behold. That is to me, not to Nelson.

"And you," the commissioner was saying when O'Rourke and I went back into the library by the fire, "you, Inspector Nelson, whom I trusted above all men, permit yourself to be bundled up like . . . like something you would never condone in a rookie. And outside in that room an ordinary citizen, Williams, fights for his life to rid the city of—"

That was all I heard. O'Rourke was soft-soaping me.

"You have done a great service to the community, Race. You may be asked to do a greater one."

"It's to be a hush-hush affair, eh?"

"The commissioner would have nothing to gain by hushing it up, except to benefit the community. It would drive him out of his job if the truth ever came out. He . . . he'll want to talk to the district attorney or the mayor—or both perhaps."

"They are elected to office," I said. "The truth would be hair on their chests."

"It never helps a public official to expose a righteous and respected citizen, especially when it makes other righteous, respected and influential citizens look ridiculous, if not feel slightly tainted."

That was the way they worked it. I didn't see the mayor or the district attorney who had to run for office. I didn't even know if the commissioner talked to them. But I did know he used another phone in the house, and I did know that the commissioner gooed all over me.

And I did know that for once I got my way in a blackmail case. My silence was the price of returning every letter to the original owner without making a copy.

"What are you guys doing for the good of the community that I don't do?" I asked. "Look at the newspaper notoriety, look at the business I lose. The story is not simply national, it's international. Why—"

Nelson whispered something to the commissioner then and he threw it at me.

"What about the body here before, what about 'You're expecting another body'?"

And that, of course, was part of my telephone conversation. Did it throw me? It did not. I said easily:

"What's a body to you gentlemen? Does one more or less make a difference?"

It didn't. I had my way about the letters going back. And that is the real story behind the death of "The greatly beloved and esteemed philanthropist, Harrington Grover Wainwright" as the papers called him. "Murdered by an unknown friend while he was thinking only of the welfare of his fellow man."

But it wasn't that bit of flowery writing that tossed me for a loop in the papers next day. It was the picture alongside the "kindly" old coot Wainwright. The picture of a young and beautiful girl. The daughter of the "beloved philanthropist's best friend now departed." The caption read:

INHERITS GREAT FORTUNE OF BRUTALLY MURDERED BENEFACTOR

And the name was the name of Miss Avery Spellman but the face was the face of Avery Coles.

I knew then what O'Rourke meant when he spoke of the commissioner's concern over Miss Spellman. And later I knew why the commissioner had treated me so coldly that day in his office when he left me with Avery.

How did I know later? It was the day after the funeral of Harrington Grover Wainwright, which I didn't attend, that I got the note from Avery. It read simply:

Come and see me tonight and keep your promise. Remember—we were to live the few hours that I imagined in my diary.

And with it was the page from the diary itself. The alibi page. It was rather a startling bit of writing.

"Most of those few short hours," some of it read. "Race Williams held me in his arms and told me he loved me. Now I know—I know—"

So the commissioner had reason to believe that I played fast and loose with sweet young womanhood.

Did I keep my promise? Sure I did. What had I to lose? Besides, I was armed when I walked into her apartment.

THE END.

● *It was the end of the nightmare—those hands, with the tiny pads of furry blond hair on the back of each knuckle, reaching for her throat—*

NIGHT OF FEAR

BY EDWARD RONNS

Her deep sleep was suddenly ended. Marion Porter sat up, sliding the covers off the couch.

"Joe," she called. "Joe, wake up."

The room was dark and chilly. The fire in the old Vermont hearth cast a pulsing red glow, like an animal breathing, over the slip-covered furniture, the oval chromos, the dimly flowered carpet. She could hear the *tap-tap* of cedar branches against the window panes, but this was not what had frightened her.

"Joe?" she called again.

He wasn't there. The battered, precious alarm clock ticked rustily, its luminous hands forked at two o'clock. There was nothing unusual about the gaunt old house, except that Joe wasn't there. Marion slid her long legs to the floor, fumbled into her shoes, and groped for her topcoat, shrugging the warm tweed over her pajamas. There was a three-cell flashlight on the old walnut dresser. Its bright beam made a friendly splash of light on the antique papered wall.

Marion was a tall girl, with midnight hair cut in a smooth bang over wide blue eyes. She still wasn't sure she liked this house. It was ten miles from the war plant where she and Joe worked, and only this one huge old room was habitable: still, it was a roof and shelter, and better than living in Trailer Town or in some overcrowded rooming house. As comparative newlyweds, they had a little privacy, at any rate. Just a little too much privacy now, she thought.

She opened the hall door and called again, "Joe," and felt her heart quicken as her voice echoed emptily through the barren rooms. For a moment she thought she was being silly: Joe was through at the plant at midnight, but he might have worked on with Eric Ledersen. There was really no reason why she should be alarmed at his absence.

Then she remembered the sound that had awakened her, and resisted the impulse to return to her warm bed.

She closed the living room door to keep in the heat and walked softly down the musty hall. The abandoned kitchen had been stripped long ago of its old-fashioned stove. One of the windows was pasted over with brown paper. The rear door had been locked so long that the bolt was rusted solid. It was deathly cold, and very quiet now.

A strong damp draught came up the wooden cellar stairs when she unlatched the door. It took courage to go down into that pit, even though the flashlight's brilliant beam lighted every corner. She mentally thanked Joe for having secured the fresh batteries and then, with almost a physical effort to get up courage, she descended the stairs.

She had thought it might be squirrels, or at the worst some vagrant. She had to find out, knowing the weary house locks would do her no good if it were a human intruder. She was strong, despite her slim figure, and felt she could take care of herself. Joe had shown her a good many tricks by which she could floor a man twice her weight.

She wouldn't have been afraid of a living person. But she wasn't prepared for a dead one.

The woman lay on the cellar floor as if she had slid through the narrow window overhead. She sprawled awkwardly, her legs scissored, her tangerine coat open its entire length. There was a lot of blood—from her throat—on her white silk blouse.

The cone of light from the torch in Marion's hand jittered violently. The woman lay almost at her feet, her taffy-colored hair a lustrous sheen on the damp, stained concrete floor. Her wide, staring eyes, fortunately, seemed to be looking aside.

Marion knew the dead girl.

She was Lois Seeley, Joe's assistant at the plant.

Why she didn't scream or faint, she never knew. She made a low, whimpering sound that escaped be-

tween tightly pressed lips. Her whole body was frozen with the horror of what she saw. She couldn't move; she felt as if she couldn't breath. And then her mind was saved by a second sound, a sound from above her, on the kitchen floor.

Someone was walking with uncertain, staggering steps toward the cellar door.

It was almost too much, this new terror that overtook her.

Deliberately, she swung the flash up the cellar stairs, flooding the doorway above. A man wavered there. His red hair was tousled and his eyes squinted in the glare of the torch. His tie was loose and his topcoat shredded along one arm. He looked as if he had rolled down a thorny embankment and landed in a bog.

"Joe!" she breathed. "What happened to you?"

Her words were far away, as if in a nightmare. Joe's usually neat, tall figure was changed. He groped uncertainly against the light as she hurried up the steps toward him. She knew by the dull horror in his eyes that he had seen the girl's body, seen it, and didn't believe it. His mouth worked, his tongue wet his lips, before he asked hoarsely: "How did *that* get here?"

"I . . . I don't know."

"Is she dead?"

Marion nodded quickly. "I just found her. I think . . . I think I'm going to be sick."

His fingers held her arm with sudden strength. "Don't."

"I—"

"Don't," he repeated.

She conquered the shuddering in her stomach and followed him as he turned abruptly and went down the hall to their room. The fire was very low in the marble hearth. The room seemed colder. She watched him as he sank down on the rumpled couch and ran long fingers through his curly red hair. His hands trembled violently. He reeked of liquor.

Marion's eyes were wide and frightened. He seemed a stranger.

"What happened to you, Joe?"

"I don't know, kid."

"Who killed her?"

"I don't know."

"How did she get here? Who dropped her through the cellar window?"

His face was gray and haggard. "Mickey, believe me, I can't remember a thing."

"We've got to keep calm," she told herself.

"Let me take off your coat," she said.

She took off his tattered topcoat, then his jacket. His shirtsleeves were rolled up. On his right forearm were a number of scratches and pinpricks. They both saw the little red weals at the same time. Instinctively, their glances met. Marion's eyes grew wide and dark.

Joe looked haunted. "Mickey, honey—"

"It's all right, Joe," she whispered quickly.

His mouth seemed stiff. "I remember going to Eric Ledersen's apartment, after work. We had a drink or two, and went there for

sandwiches. I remember that candy-striped furniture of his, anyway. I guess I'd been working too hard, because I passed out like a light."

"Was Lois there then?"

Joe's face was miserable. "I don't remember. I know I got awfully sick. The whole apartment was rocking like a ship at sea, and I passed out cold. I remember waking up once or twice, and Lois was there then. But I don't even recall how I got here. I woke up beside the car, outside. I was on the ground."

"Why should anyone kill Lois?" Marion asked.

"I can't imagine. She was a good kid. A little too easy, maybe, but good. And smart." He touched Marion's smooth, black hair. "You know I didn't do it, don't you?"

She said: "Of course. But we've got to do something quick."

The screaming need to do something—anything—was gone the next moment. Carlights flickered on the tall windows, brakes squealed, and then came the dying throb of a motor.

Marion looked quickly at Joe.

"Whoever it is, we'll have to get rid of them. We've got to have time to think."

Joe was instantly on his feet. "It's the cops," he said hoarsely. "Lois' body wasn't dropped here by accident. The cops were tipped off where to find it. We'll have to run for it."

"But—"

"You do as I say!" he rasped. His breathing was harsh and irregular, and to Marion he seemed totally unfamiliar. The next moment someone knocked ponderously on the front door. She went to answer it.

It was Al Shack, chief of the plant protective force. He was a big, raw-boned man in a heavy overcoat and a wide hat pulled down over his horsey face. She had liked him once, amused by his Vermont twang. Now he was—quite suddenly—an enemy. His small eyes were not friendly. A dapper young man was with him, looking like a recent college graduate. They both regarded her soberly as she stood in the doorway, her tweed coat over her heavy pajamas. She was glad for once that her black hair was so smooth and straight, and never looked disheveled.

Al Shack said: "'Evening, Mrs. Porter. Is Joe in?"

"It's more like good morning, isn't it? Three o'clock," she smiled. She wondered where her icy sense of control came from, and was grateful for it. "Of course, Joe is in. Anything wrong?"

"Could be," Shack said. His eyes edged past her, down the hall. The young man smiled. "Quite a mansion you have here."

"It's better than the rooming houses in town," Marion said. "If you'll wait just a moment, I'll get Joe up."

She left them in the hallway and carefully closed the big double door to their living room, snapping the catch. Joe was standing by the window, his eyes quick in the dim firelight. She crossed the room as

he dropped to the ground outside, and then followed him. Instantly, she felt the night cold through her coat, and was frightened.

"Joe, do we have to run away? It will look as if you're guilty—"

"It looks that way now," he snapped. "We've got to find Eric before I talk to Al Shack. It's important. Come on."

It seemed an endless distance to the car. It was parked on the back drive that circled the big, unpainted house. There was no alarm, not until they tumbled breathlessly into the coupe and Joe started the engine. Then from inside the house came a sudden shout and the sound of a door splintering. Joe stepped hard on the gas and the coupe reeled past the police car. The dapper young man on the front porch calmly drew a bead on them and fired. The bullet snapped through the metal car roof and whipcracked through the open window.

Then they were on the highway, careening into town. Al Shack's car never got in sight of them. In a few moments they were twisting through the maze of crooked streets in the war-boom town, safe from pursuit.

Marion felt herself shivering from head to foot. Her mind was numb and dulled with confusion. She wanted to cry.

Eric Ledersen was a cherubic, stocky man of unlimited vitality. Leder Aircraft Parts Co. was Eric. He had got the war contracts, built the plant, and turned the sleepy Vermont city into a boom town flooded with defense workers. His apartment in the hilly West End was on a dark, tree-lined street. Joe parked the car a short distance away, said:

"Eric will be home by now. We'll see him and get the whole story straightened out, then we'll go to the cops and get it off our chests."

His hope was contagious. Marion followed him into the tiny foyer, grateful that the pajamas under her topcoat would be mistaken for war-worker's slacks. In the tiny elevator she let her fingers creep into the strong clasp of Joe's hand.

Ledersen's apartment was at the end of the hall; Joe had a key, since the two men worked so many late hours here, designing means of speeding up production. Marion watched as he puzzled over his key ring and then shrugged his shoulders.

"Lost my office key," he muttered.

"Please hurry," she said.

Then they were inside, with Joe back-handing the light switch. They didn't go beyond the doorway, however. They just stood there, staring.

Marion refused to believe it.

There was no carpet, no familiar candy-striped furniture. The place was empty and bare. There wasn't a trace of furniture!

Joe crossed to the bedroom with a swift stride. It was the same story here. The apartment was stripped, looked like a vacancy.

Marion said feebly: "Maybe we're in the wrong place—"

But she knew these were—or had been—Eric Ledersen's rooms.

Joe shook his head with confusion. "But I was here tonight! I couldn't be mistaken about that! We were both here."

It was too bewildering to reason out. There was a lump in Marion's stomach. She stared at Joe's face and knew, with a sudden gladness, that he was honestly at a loss. She took a deep breath.

"Maybe he moved out in a hurry. Let's see the janitor."

They found the janitor on the stairway, an unkempt old man with squinty eyes. He hugged a mouse-colored bathrobe to his skinny body.

"Oh, it's you two," he whined. "I was wondering how anybody got in. You want to rent Mr. Ledersen's place?"

"Where is he?" Joe asked harshly.

"Mr. Ledersen? He's gone. Moved out."

"When?" Marion asked.

The answer was incredible.

"Yesterday—yesterday, at noon. He ain't been back since."

Joe said frantically: "But that's impossible! I was here tonight! I was here in the apartment and it was still furnished!"

The janitor sniffed. "No, you wasn't, young feller. That flat's been empty since noon. I think you been drinkin'."

Joe looked helplessly at Marion. "Mickey, I swear—"

"I believe you, Joe." She wanted to get away from here, quickly. She wanted to breathe cold air and get a chance to think. If anyone but Joe had presented her with his story, and then had it torn to bits; if she didn't know Joe as well as she did, every little bit of him; if she didn't have such blind faith in the big, red-headed lug—

She turned suddenly to the janitor. "Where did Mr. Ledersen go? Did he leave you a forwarding address?"

The janitor shook his head. "His lease was up and he just moved out."

She looked wearily at Joe. "Let's get out of here," she said.

But they were not to leave so easily. Joe paused in the tiny foyer and carefully opened the swinging street door. It made a scuffing sound as the weather-stripping scraped the marble floor. A blast of chill wind swept into the lobby.

For a moment Joe's tall figure didn't move, then he drew quickly back, pressing Marion away from the door. His face was white. His eyes darted quickly down the hallway behind them.

"What is it?" Marion breathed.

"The cops. They must have seen our car in the street."

They backed away, then turned and walked quickly to the rear entrance. The janitor wasn't in sight. Once again they were out in the chill night. They heard the front door snap back and forth as the cops barged inside.

There was a wide courtyard before them, planted with bare eucalyptus trees. They raced breathlessly along the flagstone walk and ducked through a low wooden gate-

to

way. The back street was dark with shadow. But even as they crossed it, they saw the two cops round the corner at the far end.

The cops didn't wait to challenge them. A .38 cracked, and the bullet snapped high over Joe's head. He sucked in an angry breath and pulled Marion hurriedly toward the other end of the street.

It was here that they were separated. Instinctively, Marion darted to the right, away from the apartment house. Joe whirled to the left corner. Between them another bullet cracked, and there came the angry hail of both cops. Their feet thudded hard in pursuit.

Marion immediately sensed what had happened. She whirled, eyes anxiously searching for him. She didn't dare cross the corner over the cop's gunfire.

"Joe!"

He was backing down the dark street, facing her, his tall figure erect, his red hair unruly.

"Run! Run!"

The cops were close. A third bullet plowed between them, and Joe turned and ran. She watched his tall figure merge with the darkness of an alley, then she, too, fled.

It had been all right as long as she had been with him. As long as they were together. Now she walked alone, her throat aching from the cold air she had gulped when escaping from the police. They hadn't chased her long. In the darkness of early morning it had taken only a few minutes to give them the slip. But she had lost Joe. She felt alone and helpless, a fugitive walking the street at four in the morning. She had a little money, crumpled in her topcoat pocket. Four dollars. That helped.

She quickened her step, walking swiftly through the deserted streets. At an owl cab stand she gave the horn a brief toot, brought the driver from a diner across the way.

"Leder Aircraft," she told him.

It took fifteen minutes to get there. Her identification button, with her picture on it, was pinned to the lapel of her coat, and she had no difficulty getting through the floodlighted gates. Some of the offices in the administration buildings were being used, and her entrance there caused no attention.

Joe's office was in a darkened wing used by the draftsmen. Marion pushed open the glass doors and waited a moment, studying the rows of tilted drawing boards. Dim light filtered through the wide, especially designed windows and shimmered on the executive doors beyond.

She took a deep breath. She wasn't sure what she expected to find here, but one item in the night's kaleidoscope of events seemed to make sense. Joe had lost his office key. He had missed it at Eric's apartment, but it might have been stolen from him during the blank period of his night. She went quickly down the shadowy aisles to Joe's office.

There was no sound from within. She turned the knob and heard the faint click of the latch. The door was open.

The light from the tall windows made a checkerboard shadow-pattern on the linoleum floor. Marion conquered a sudden shiver. Her questing eyes instantly settled on the broken filing cabinets. The tiny barrel locks hung forlornly on their hasps over the open drawers. A snowstorm of paper littered the floor.

The place had been rifled.

Whoever had searched before her was in a desperate hurry. The desks were upset, the tiny safe in the corner was open. Beyond the inner door she could see Lois Seeley's office, and a flutter of paper on that floor, too.

Marion breathed quickly now. She listened, but there was just the muted tumult of the factory. She took a few tentative steps across the room and stepped over the

threshold into the dead girl's office—

The man came out of the darkness with a murderous lunge.

The attack was too sudden for her to parry. A blow whistled by her head, and then his body smashed her back against the wall. The breath was kocked from her lungs. She twisted desperately and felt a second blow graze her shoulder and thud into the wall. There came a bitter, explosive curse from her assailant. Wriggling, she twisted away from the man's dark weight and jabbed her elbow hard into his face. Something crunched, and he went spinning abruptly away from her.

The killer was a dark, bulky shadow, dodging for the doorway. Marion grabbed, caught his sleeve, and felt cloth rip. The man cursed and whirled back to her. She glimpsed his blurred face, the sudden flicker of white eyes, and then something struck her hard, on the back of her head.

Abruptly, there was nothing.

After a long while, she came back to consciousness, like a swimmer clawing for the surface. She was still in the shadowed office. It was still dark outside. And she was alone. Whoever it was, had fled in safety, without raising an alarm.

Her head whirled as she leaned wearily against the wall. Memory of all the nightmarish events flooded her mind with fear. It was then that she noticed the tiny cardboard octagon clutched in her hand. There was a shred of cloth with it. Apparently, she had ripped the man's jacket pocket and taken the tag with her clawing fingers.

The numerals 1315 were stamped on the brown cardboard octagon.

She stood there a long time, staring at it.

It was nearly dawn when she left the cab at the entrance to Trailer Town. She gave the driver the last of her change and walked quickly through the wooden gateway to the parking lots.

The place looked dismal enough in the dim morning light. There were still dark shadows on the ground, but the sky over the rim of barren trees was light enough to glint on the seemingly endless rows of trailers. There were trailers here of every size and shape, from ramshackle huts on wheels to super de luxe chromium models with all the comforts of home. Crowded by war workers attracted to Leder Aircraft, Trailer Town was an ugly, sprawling mushroom growth condemned by everyone, but tolerated because of the lack of housing facilities to handle the influx of workers.

Marion walked down the main street between the parked trailers feeling like a ghost in a nightmare world. A baby cried nearby; a rooster crowed. Far off at the other end of the clearing a car motor coughed and sputtered in the chill dawn. She felt alone and desolate, and only the cardboard tab in her clenched hand made any sense.

She was haunted by a fear for Joe. If this hunch didn't work out, she would have to go to Al Shack.

She couldn't do any more. She couldn't think or fight any more.

Street 13 was marked by a painted barrel stave nailed to a light pole. Lot 15 was under the spreading limbs of a tattered elm. She read the number on the cardboard tab again, to be sure it was 1315, and then studied the trailer occupying that lot.

It was an expensive model, fully equipped. She saw that it had been hooked up to the camp's electrical system, but the Venetian blinds were drawn and she couldn't tell whether there was anyone inside.

There were three tiny steps to the door at the back of the trailer. The door itself wasn't locked. She pulled gently, peered within.

At first there was nothing to see. Nothing to hear. It was completely dark, silent. For a moment panic seized her, and she wondered if she should get help first. Then she stepped softly inside, felt for the light switch, and snapped it on. The golden flood of light shone on neat, trim equipment, a small gateleg table, the empty bunk—

And the candy-striped furniture. Eric Ledersen's furniture.

She stood there, not thinking, just staring at the softly lighted room. The carpet was the same as the one that had been in Ledersen's rooms; so was that easy chair, and that couch. Her eyes drifted over the tangled blankets on the built-in bunk, and a warning bell jangled in her mind.

She had to get to a telephone. She had to get Al Shack. And she had to get out of here, before—

Eric Ledersen spoke from the trailer doorway behind her.

"An honor, Mrs. Porter! Please sit down."

She whirled, feeling as if all the breath had been squeezed suddenly from her chest. She knew her mouth was open, but she couldn't say anything.

He was short and chunky, and the smile on his full red lips was set, almost a grimace. She wondered how she ever had thought of him as cherubic. He wore a porkpie hat, and a tan gabardine coat. He looked fresh, except for his eyes. They were puffy and bloodshot, and the lids drooped queerly.

"Sit down, Mrs. Porter," he repeated. "Can I help you?"

Marion found her voice. It was surprisingly firm.

"I was looking for Joe," she said.

"Indeed?"

"I thought he would be here."

The smile never left his fat lips.

"And if I tell you I haven't seen Joe tonight?"

She didn't answer. Eric Ledersen pulled the door shut behind him, and a sense of suffocation instantly caught her by the throat.

"How did you find me here?" the man asked.

"This," she said flatly, and exposed the tag still clutched in her hand. Ledersen's smile flickered briefly. Marion suddenly blurted: "It was you in the office, searching the place. Wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"It was you who deliberately got

Joe drunk tonight and took him to this trailer, after he lost his senses, and let him think that he was in your apartment?"

"Yes."

"And you brought him to every now and then by sticking pins in his arms. I saw those scratches. No woman made marks like that on him."

Eric Ledersen's eyelids drooped even more unnaturally.

"Whatever made you think of a trailer in the first place?"

Marion took a deep, shuddering breath. "Joe said he recalled your whole apartment rocking. He must have been in here at the time, when you drove him back to our house and dropped Lois Seeley's body in our cellar." She paused. "You killed Lois Seeley. You framed Joe for it!"

Ledersen licked his lips with a quick, darting motion of his tongue. His eyes never left Marion's white, oval face.

"And what will all that fine deduction get you?"

Marion shuddered at the sight of his face.

"I'm going to call the cops."

Ledersen said, very softly: "You think so?"

"I can scream. They'll hear me. You can't stop me."

"You couldn't scream with your throat cut. You saw Seeley's throat? Do you think her screams were heard? I'm afraid no one could hear you outside this trailer. It's soundproof for comfortable riding, the salesman said. Lois found it so, and so will you." His voice abruptly sharpened. "There is no point to struggling. Please don't make this unnecessarily unpleasant."

She began to laugh. It was a shuddering giggle, deep in her throat, but her shoulders rocked and the sound grew louder. Eric Ledersen's eyes snapped wide open. He said loudly:

"Stop that!"

She was gasping with silent laughter. She couldn't think. She could only laugh, laughter that was rocking and tearing her apart inside. The sound of the laughter was inside her, but she couldn't get it out. It wouldn't go past her vocal chords.

She kept moving back as the chunky man advanced. His eyes were perturbed as he watched her.

"Stop that giggling," he said again. "You know too much. So did Seeley. She was a very clever operative. Very. But she'll never tell the FBI what she discovered. And they'll never pin anything on me; the books are destroyed. What I've profited from the plant belongs to me, you hear? To me! The government thinks I falsified on contracts and I did. But they'll never prove it. And you won't be able to talk. Neither you nor Lois Seeley. Joe will be blamed. The cops are after him already. There's only you to settle."

He came toward her.

She couldn't scream. She couldn't move. She felt paralyzed by his slow, purposeful approach. It was the end of a nightmare, and one corner of her mind was glad. The

night was over. Those hands, reaching for her throat, would end it. She could see the little pads of furry blond hair on the back of each knuckle. Sunlight glistened on each individual hair. There was polish on his fingernails. The hands were very near her throat now, and her laughter was gone, almost everything was gone.

Then terror suddenly burst a dam within her, suddenly shot her through with a wild, desperate chill. And she screamed, at last.

She screamed until she thought her ears would burst, there was so much noise. There was a splintering of wood and the shouting of men and the stamping of feet. And through it all one sharp crack and a tickling pungency in her nostrils, like gunpowder. And still she screamed—

Someone was slapping her. It was a hard hand, hard and cold and wet, and it rocked her head back and forth.

It was Joe's hand.

She could see his red hair and his anxious face as he bent over her.

"Come on, baby. It's all right. Everything is all right. Eric is taken care of: he won't bother you any more. It's all over, Mickey."

Beyond Joe's tall figure she could see Al Shack and the very dapper young man who had been at the house earlier. She found her voice.

"How did you get here?" she whispered.

He grinned wryly. "I'm not much good at playing fox and hounds. The cops caught me half an hour ago. They picked up your trail right after we split up and followed you, thinking you'd lead them to me. But they got me before that happened, and Al brought me along when they tagged you. They wanted to see what you were up to." Joe nodded at the dapper young man. "Mr. Funston is from the FBI. He says you're a great little detective, hon. He says Eric—"

Marion sat up. "I know all about Eric. What happened to him?"

Joe said simply: "I shot him. We got the trailer door open a little and listened from outside. He was getting too close to you to suit me."

Marion felt the stirrings of righteous indignation.

"You mean you deliberately let him scare me half to death before you broke in?"

He helped her outside. It was clear daylight now, and a little crowd had gathered around the trailer.

"Working for a defense plant doesn't seem very glamorous, Mickey. But when Eric let greed turn him into a saboteur, I had to do something about it. I knew Lois was an FBI operative, but I couldn't tell you about that. All I could do was grab Al Shack's gun and rescue you." He grinned again. "I hope you think I'm a hero now."

She shivered and said briefly: "I think you're a heel." But she clung very close to him.

THE END.

THE CAT CRIED

BY CATEAU DE LEEUW

● *It was a nondescript black cat belonging to a nondescript little boy, but it was destined to play an important part in the lives of six people.*

All the way over to Niles Witter's workshop, that sunny October afternoon, I was saddled with a vague feeling of unease. It wasn't a matter of clairvoyance, there was no real foreboding. I'm not that kind of person. But I couldn't help feeling that the whole excursion was a mistake.

To begin with, I didn't like Niles Witter. Or, rather, I didn't quite trust him. His letter to Lansing, for instance:

I wish you'd come over on Saturday and see the new propeller blade I've developed. I think it's something revolutionary. You might be interested in it, and I'd be glad to have you bring along someone to check on it from an engineering standpoint. I've already applied for the patent, and I believe this will turn out to be my most successful experiment. Cordially yours—

Now, just on the face of it, that was a perfectly innocent letter; but not if you had known Niles Witter and Lansing Metcalfe as well and as long as I had. We'd gone to school together—I was a little older than the other two, but we had palled around together in our teens—and there had been no appreciable change in our characters since. An intensification with age, of

course, and, now that we were all on the wrong side of forty, a subtle hardening into the mold.

Niles always had been a little bit wacky, full of cock-eyed ideas that, surprisingly, turned out well frequently; silent, reserved, bearing a grudge against the world. Lanse had been just the opposite—jolly, free with his money, a good fellow—almost a playboy, but steadied by an unexpected streak of shrewd good sense. And I—well, you can see what I am; slow and cautious, the born lawyer, I guess. Longing always for the ability to let go, but never being able to. An onlooker at life.

There were five of us in the car that day. Besides Lanse and myself, there was Elias Culp, the banker, old with years and responsibility for other people's money; Springer, an aviation engineer from Hartford; and Tempy Blair. I wished with all my heart that Lanse had not brought her. Didn't he know, I wondered crossly, that she had been Niles' girl until a couple of years ago? Or didn't he care?

Tempy herself seemed to feel no sense of embarrassment, and before we reached the long brick building where Niles made his experiments I began to doubt the gossip I had heard. People said that Niles had been crazy about her, not that he had ever said anything because he needed every cent he made for his work, there wasn't enough left over for the support of a wife and a possible family. Of course, the gossip always continued, if he'd had the sense to hang onto that dust consumer, he'd have been a rich man by this time, and Tempy would have been Mrs. Witter.

But he hadn't. That was one of the reasons for my unease. Two years ago he had sold the patent for his dust consumer to Lanse, and Lanse, with the money to promote it, had made a pile out of its manufacture and sale. A pile that would grow steadily larger when the war was over and he could turn his factory back to the production of an item that housewives clamored for. It was by far the most successful invention that Niles ever had made, and—oddly enough—the only one he had been willing to sell. He had said nothing while Lanse's bank account had swelled on the profits from the dust consumer, while Lanse himself gradually had annexed the time and attention of Tempy Blair. But surely, I thought now, he must be resentful!

When we got to the workshop, I was relieved. We wouldn't stay long, I was certain, and then that would be behind us. Lanse got out and helped Tempy from the car. Culp and Springer stood a moment, staring up at the brick building and murmuring together. "Queer-looking place," the banker said, turning to me. "What was it before Witter took it over? Or did he build it?"

"I think it used to be the repair-shop for a bus line," I answered. "This was their terminal, something like the car barns we used to have for trolleys. It was pretty well equipped, and Niles picked it up for a song when the line's franchise ran out and they didn't renew it.

Of course, he ripped out a lot of stuff, but I imagine it has come in handy to have a place like this if he's experimenting with airplane propellers."

They nodded, and followed the others in. For some reason, I was loath to go, myself. I lingered outside the gate, staring at the big double doors, in which a smaller door had been cut, unwilling to leave the bright October sunshine and the clear, sharp air.

A touch on my sleeve made me start. I looked down at the dirty boy beside me. "What do you want, sonny?"

I saw he had been crying. There were tear streaks in the grime on his thin face, and his eyes pleaded with me. "Are you . . . you going in there?" he asked. He jerked his head toward the interior of the building.

"Yes. What's the matter?"

"I . . . I'm scared of him, mister, or I'd sneak in behind you."

I studied the worried face. "Why do you want to go in?"

"It's my cat, Blackie. Bill stole her from me the other day, and sold her to him!" His head jerked again, and the words began to come in a rush. "Blackie's my cat, and Bill hadn't any right to sell her. I heard her crying last night. I listened, and every time I called her, she'd answer me, so I know she's in there."

"Somebody sold your cat to Mr. Witter?" I asked. His head nodded violently. "But then, why don't you tell Mr. Witter? I'm sure he'd—"

"No!" He looked terrified. "He . . . I'm afraid of him. But I thought if you knew him, if you'd ask him— I'll give him his money back; I'll earn it. Or I'll get him another cat. But this is Blackie—"

The distress was real, and I promised quickly. "I'll speak to him. I don't think there'll be any trouble, sonny." I went into the building before he could thank me, but I had to stop a moment, just inside the door, to adjust my vision. Coming from the bright sunlight, and facing the huge square of brilliance at the far end where the large doors in the opposite wall were wide open, I could not make out objects near at hand.

I thought briefly, that the lad should have stopped Lanse instead of me. I liked cats well enough, but Lanse was crazy about them. He would have charged in and rescued Blackie at a moment's notice, I knew. There were always two or three cats in the Metcalfe ménage, and one of Lanse's hobbies was the finding of homes for friendless kittens.

"Hello, Orville," a voice said beside me, and I felt my hand gripped briefly. "We thought you had been lost in the shuffle. Where were you?" Niles' slow voice greeted me.

"I was detained," I started to answer. "A boy out there wanted me to—"

"We'll have to have this door open, too," Niles was saying, as if I had not spoken at all. I realized he was talking to Springer. "Have to have a through draft, of course."

I remembered the huge signs plastered over the outside of the building. DO NOT ENTER: DANGER—KEEP AWAY FROM THIS DOOR. I recalled that we had had to stop and open a heavy wire gate before we got into the yard. Apparently, Niles really thought he had something, this time.

The others were grouped around me, and I was suddenly aware of a feeling of tension. Tempy stood helplessly beside Lanse, who wore a slightly embarrassed air. Elias Culp was studying an overhead crane, with his scrawny neck tilted back and his old eyes squinted toward the ceiling. I wondered what had been said before I came in.

With the opening of the doors behind me, the workshop was considerably lighter. I saw now that there was a low dais, or platform, in the center of the floor, and on it was mounted an airplane engine with the new propeller attached. It didn't look too different from other propellers to me, but then I had not seen it up close, and besides, I'm only a lawyer. Niles was herding us together near the entrance while he talked. The engine was idling, and the powerful hum made my ears feel full after a while. The propeller, Niles explained, was disengaged at the moment, but as soon as he had finished his explanation, he would connect it and give us a demonstration.

His voice went on and on. Technical terms were strewn all through his discourse, and it was natural that my attention should wander. Springer, of course, was listening with complete attention, and so, to my surprise, was Elias Culp, although I was perfectly sure that he was as uninformed on such matters as I was. Tempy was half turned away, as if unwilling to face her former sweetheart, and shifted her weight from one slender foot to the other with obvious impatience.

And Lanse, the man for whom the whole thing had been arranged, kept straying from the group to examine the machine tools at the side, to poke into the piles of scrap, or stare at the sheets of shining metal propped against the wall. Always, just as he seemed about to get out of earshot, Niles would call him back. "I want you to hear this, Lanse. This is the crux of the whole thing." Or "Wait a minute, Lanse, don't leave us! I'll give you the theory behind this propeller in words of one syllable, if you'll hold your horses!" Lanse always came back with a grin, but it was apparent he was out of his depth, and several times he protested.

"Gosh, Niles, you know it just goes in one ear and out the other! What do you think I brought along all these experts for?"

The time he said that, I had seen Niles' eyes go involuntarily toward Tempy as if to ask just what sort of expert she was. Lanse had seen the glance, and had flushed darkly. He was regretting having brought her now, I knew.

But Niles had his way, and we stayed together in a close group listening, willingly or unwillingly, to his long dissertation. I grew

very nervous, for some reason. The slow, unhurried voice, the heavy hum of the engine, the eye-piercing light on the concrete yard outside all contrived to give me a headache. I wanted nothing so much as to be away from this place, and the question in my mind grew more and more insistent.

Why had Niles invited us here? Why did he want Lanse to invest in this invention of his? I cast my mind back over the years in which Niles had struggled against constant poverty, the years which had seen one failure after another, with only an occasional meagre success. In all those years Lanse never had helped him financially that I knew of. And that wasn't odd, either, because Niles never had wanted to sell any of his inventions. He held onto them as if they represented untold wealth. And yet everybody knew what fiascos most of them were, always just missing success, always putting him a little deeper into debt.

It had surprised all of us when he suddenly had offered his dust consumer for sale. He said he needed the money to complete his experiments with this very airplane propeller, and he had accepted

Lanse's offer of a small outright sum of money at once. I was convinced that he never had dreamed it held the seeds of fortune in its casual network of wires; that he had not intended to raise Lanse to the status of a wealthy man; that he had not suspected Tempy would find Lanse, gaiety and money more enticing than himself, hard work and poverty.

The voice had stopped, and I looked up in surprise. "I'll give you a demonstration now, if you like," Niles ended. "But I must warn you"—his voice was raised, to follow Lanse who had wandered off, as usual—"I must warn you not to go further forward in the shop than the halfway mark of the platform. Beyond that point it is dangerous when I am running the engine at full speed, and the propeller is connected."

Lanse turned and nodded, to show that he had heard. Tempy went to the side of the shop and found a seat on a bench that looked slightly less dirty than the floor. Springer was standing by with a massively intelligent and thoughtful air. Elias Culp, to my surprise, accompanied Niles to the platform. "D'you mind if I watch? I've always wanted to fly, and I guess this is as near as I'll ever come to it," he said. Niles looked momentarily annoyed, then agreed with astonishing grace. I followed at a leisurely pace.

I saw that Tempy had risen and was coming with me. From that moment on, everything seemed to happen with a nightmare quality in which slow motion and speed were strangely mingled.

Lanse was ahead of us. His strolling figure suddenly lost its casualness and straightened purposefully. His head thrust forward, and his steps quickened. At the same moment, Tempy and I came abreast of the platform.

"What is that noise?" she asked, and I cocked my head to listen. "Is that in the motor?" I thought I heard a high, whining sound, but before I could be sure of it, the engine's hum deepened to a roar that was deafening. The thought came to me at the same moment that Tempy's shriek soared above the noise. Lanse was well past the center of the platform, and going forward at a run.

I started after him—I can say that to my credit—but Tempy held onto my arm, a dead weight. I saw Lanse's figure caught up into the air as if a giant hand had lifted him. His arms and legs shot out ridiculously as he was hurled through the building, out through the large open doors, out into the pitiless glare of the sunshine.

There was shouting and confusion. Someone shut off the motor —I learned later that it was Elias Culp—and we all ran toward the crumpled heap on the concrete that had been Lansing Metcalfe. I wouldn't let Tempy come near, though she tried to. I can still see her white face and the queer, drawn look which aged her ten years in as many seconds.

"He's dead!" Springer called out. As if we didn't know that!

No human being could have survived that gargantuan death cast. "It was the air stream—he shouldn't have gone forward!"

I looked around the yard. This was where they had washed the busses. There wasn't an inch of soft earth or green grass. Nothing but concrete to receive a figure hurtling forward in the remorseless clasp of air. Springer looked up, and we all stood stunned. The silence beat upon my ears as the hum and roar of the motor never had done. And, loud in the sudden silence, came the crying of a cat.

That feeling of inertia only lasted a moment, I suppose. Then Niles was running inside, shouting something about telephoning for an ambulance. Tempy, looking faint, followed him. "Small good it will do to get an ambulance," Culp grumbled. "I'm going to phone for the police!"

We stood about the workshop, a silent, shocked group of people. There seemed to be nothing to say; we even avoided one another's eyes. The clanging bell of the ambulance foretold its arrival only a minute before the siren announced a police car. We moved out into the courtyard again, watching the white-coated figures bend over what was left of Lansing Metcalfe. Then the body was carried away and we went inside again.

The police captain looked serious. "A terrible accident," he said solemnly. "And Mr. Metcalfe was one of our finest citizens."

I had seen Tempy's start when he spoke. Now she stood up and came toward him. "It was no accident," she said distinctly. "It was murder." Her accusing eyes sought and found Niles Witter in our group. Her finger pointed at him. "He did it."

"You're upset, Tempy." I hurried forward. "It's understandable—You've had a terrible shock—and he was your fiancé. But to accuse a man—"

"I do accuse him," she interrupted swiftly. "He knew how much Lanse loved cats, everybody who knew Lanse knew that, and he had placed a cat right here, inside the door where Lanse would be sure to hear it crying."

Springer's face was a study in distaste. "But Mr. Witter warned us all, Miss Blair, not to go forward of the center of the platform when the engine was running full speed. You heard him yourself. And Mr. Metcalfe heard him, I know."

She shook her head from side to side, as if in pain. "Of course. But that was part of the plan. To make it look like an accident. Niles knew that Lanse would never remember his warning if he heard a cat in distress." She whirled toward the corner of the building, inside the door through which Lanse had gone to his death. "Look! Do you see that basket? When Niles came in here to telephone for the ambulance, I followed him. I saw him stop for a split second on his way through the shop. This basket was upside down, but it didn't rest solidly on the floor. I saw him thrust his toe under it and

lift it for a moment, and a little black streak shot out from under it, and disappeared. It was a cat!"

She brought the words out triumphantly. I stared around at the circle of men. Niles' face had set into ugly lines, and I could see that he was restraining his temper with difficulty. Culp's features were strangely stern. The police captain looked as if he were humoring an hysterical woman.

"How about it, Witter?" he asked.

Niles glowered, but his slow voice had not changed when he spoke. "Yes, there was a cat there. It's a young cat I keep here in the place. I've had it since it was a kitten. It still acts like one sometimes, gets frisky and knocks things over, shadow-boxing with itself. It seems to have knocked that basket over on itself this afternoon. Miss Blair is correct when she says it streaked out from under there. She's right, too, when she says she saw me lift the basket with my toe so it could get out. I heard it crying, that's why. And I guess Lansing Metcalfe had heard it crying, too. That's the reason he went forward against orders—to release it, I guess. I'm sorry it was there. If I'd known—"

I suddenly remembered the boy outside the gate. Tempy had said the cat was a little black streak. "You say you've had this cat for some time?" I asked.

I saw Niles' features twist with impatience. "Yes. A couple of months, I should say."

"Not a couple of days?" I persisted. "A boy stopped me outside your place and said his cat Blackie had been stolen by someone named Bill, and had been sold to you a couple of days ago."

"The cat was lost a couple of days ago, and I paid some kid a reward for bringing it back," he snarled.

Dead end, I thought. I was as sure as Tempy, now, that Niles had murdered my friend, but how to prove it? It had been made to look like an accident, and nothing we could do or say would change that aspect of it for the police. But Tempy was not to be discouraged. She went over to the basket, lifted it up and stared at it.

"This is heavy," she said suddenly, into the grave silence. "Come here and lift it, captain." The police officer obliged her, looking surprised as he lifted it. "It's got a thick metal rim around the top, do you see?" Tempy's voice showed sudden excitement. "To make it heavier."

"Well, what of it, miss?" the captain asked.

"Don't you understand? If the cat had been playing around, as Niles says, and the basket had fallen onto its neck, it would have been killed. It's a small cat."

"Yes," the officer agreed. "It would have killed the cat, all right. But only if it fell on its neck. And if it fell on some other part, it would have been injured, and you say it wasn't injured. But if it fell over, and the cat was imprisoned inside, then the animal wouldn't have been hurt at all. Only scared."

She shot him an impatient look. "But don't you remember? Or didn't I tell you? I could see the cat's head sticking out before Niles released it!"

Niles stepped forward quickly. "That's not true! The cat was under the basket—altogether under it!"

But now the officer had the bland, closed look that comes of inner conviction. "But you said yourself, Mr. Witter, that you lifted the basket with your toe so it could get out." He stooped and placed the basket upside down on the floor. "With the cat's neck to raise one side of it, there would be a purchase for your foot. But this way—Let me see you lift it with your toe now, sir."

Niles drew back and his eyes glittered. "What are you trying to say?" he stammered.

Elias Culp stepped forward. "I'll say it," he volunteered. "We're trying to tell you that we know now you placed that cat under the basket as a deliberate lure to get Lansing Metcalfe forward of the danger point. You had the engine idling when we came, and you kept us all at the other end of the shop, as far away from the cat as possible, so that distance and the noise of the engine would drown its cries. You waited until Lansing heard the cries and started to its rescue. Then you speeded up the motor and killed him!"

Two white lines circled Niles' nostrils, and his lips were dangerously thin. "You'd like to make it look like murder, wouldn't you?" he whispered. "But you can't! I had my back to Lanse when he went toward the cat—even as you did! You're the man who'll have to swear to my innocence. Because you were right beside me on the platform, and you know what I'm saying is true."

I saw Elias make a subtle signal to the police captain, saw that officer brace himself for trouble. "It's true enough," the old banker acknowledged. "But it's not all the truth. I stood beside you, and so I, too, was able to see Lanse's reflection in that sheet of bright metal against the wall, that sheet of metal which is placed to act as a mirror. I, too, saw when he had passed the danger point. And that's when you threw in the clutch and put the motor into full speed!"

Niles made a dash for freedom, but it was abortive. Not until he had been taken away did Tempy break down. I had my headache in real earnest by the time we closed the great doors behind us and started toward the car, Lanse's car. There was only one bright note in the whole affair, and that was the appearance of a dirty little boy just outside the gate. He clutched a small black cat to his thin chest, and his smile was beatific.

"Thank you, mister," he called out, as I helped a weeping Tempy into the front seat. "Thanks for getting my cat back!"

THE END.

● *Take a bullet-proof vest, an open boat in December, a north wind and the total sum was just*

SIMPLE ARITHMETIC

BY SIDNEY WALDO

He was a queer one, this stranger from the city. For one thing, the way he just suddenly appeared. As if the December gale had blown him right into the toolhouse where Sam Holder was at work. He looked important. "Kind of uppish," Sam thought. Yet he acted friendly. At first.

"I've a message for your brother," he said. "For Carl. Where have you hidden him out?"

And Sam answered, without stopping to think: "That would be telling."

So then the man knew that he did have Carl hidden out.

He said his name was Hale. He

was tall and heavy and his eyes were as hard as gray slate.

And now Sam wished that Carl had told him about his trouble, more in detail. He wasn't hiding from the police. It was tied in with the war. Carl had mentioned the words "counter espionage," but had instantly clamped his lips shut, as if he had said too much. "Just call it that somebody is gunning for me," he had finished. "And not in fun."

Then Hale was talking in a different way. Sam had the oddest feeling that he could see right through his friendliness. As if the mask of it had grown thin.

"You live with your married daughter. Her husband owns the village store. They have three children, two boys and a girl. Substantial people. If you were to be stubborn, unpleasant things could happen to them."

Outside, the wind pushed against the toolhouse like a great hand. The instant Sam stopped working, the cold had begun to seep in through his clothes. Now it seemed to get inside him, around his heart. Emma and Oliver and the kids getting mixed up in this? Oh, no.

Hale shook himself and turned up the collar of his coat. And, for the first time, Sam noticed the bulge under his left arm. A gun. The message for Carl would be a bullet from that gun.

Hale's voice stabbed into these thoughts. "What I want with Carl you don't have to ask or know. Your concern will be for the safety of your daughter, the people closest to you. I have men who obey my orders without question." Then he seemed to make a sudden decision: "But you are second-generation German. Softened. Better you know the straight facts. Better you make up your own mind to obey me."

Sam waited for him to go on.

"Your brother tricked us with his German ancestry. Now he must pay. Your part is to take me to him. And you will. It is simple arithmetic. Either your brother suffers; or else your daughter, her husband and their children. Your very softness will decide you."

Yes, Hale was right about that. The Gestapo. Five for one. Sam was certainly too soft to bring an unpleasant death to Emma and Oliver and the kids.

Yet neither could he betray his own brother. Hale really ought to see this, too.

Then Sam spoke, playing for time, in the searching hope that some idea might come to him. "Say I do lead you to Carl. He's got a gun. He's quick with it. The way he's located, he'd see us coming."

But Hale only smiled at this. "We, too, can practice deception. Your brother knows me as one of your own FBI. We think of these things. Including, in case of a slip-up, the vest I have on. A barrier against the cold. Also against bullets."

So Hale had thought of these things. Again Sam had to admit it. Even if he could get his hands on the old rifle, that was around somewhere, even if he could locate

the box of cartridges, it would do him no good. That was likely why Hale had mentioned the vest. To keep him from making such a try. To keep him helpless.

And once more the man's impatient voice broke into Sam's thoughts. "Well, which way is it going to be? I'm through waiting."

Even while the words were being spoken, Sam felt his heart give a sort of bump. He turned quickly away, to keep Hale from reading his face. Lifting his fleece-lined coat from its nail, he put it on. Still not meeting Hale's eyes, he said:

"You don't give me any choice, mister. Let's start."

It was a cold eight-mile drive in Hale's car. Then a mile or more, on foot, through woods. Then a lake with a boat.

The north wind came across the lake at them now, full blast. The dark clouds held the threat of snow. Ice was forming along the shore.

Sam unlocked the padlocked chain and stepped into the boat. He took the oars. Hale turned up his coat collar again and hunched himself on the stern seat. It would be a long row across the lake, into that north wind. Better than two miles.

And now, as Sam rowed, his mind drifted a little, taking him back to summer days when he had fished, with Carl, from this very boat. On the opposite sandy shore, he had taught Carl to swim. Carl had learned fast. Soon he could beat his teacher. Though never by much. How long ago it seemed!

Then Sam was wholly back in the present. Pulling in the oars, he stood up, unbuttoned his fleece-lined coat and slipped it off. He saw Hale arouse himself, saw his hand start for his gun.

But Sam already had sat down and picked up the oars. "That coat's fine for sittin' in," he remarked. "It's kind of hamperin' for rowin'."

The boat gained headway again. A flurry of snow suddenly enveloped them, then went scurrying off across the lake. Slowly, yet perceptibly, they were nearing the opposite shore. From time to time, Sam glanced over his shoulder at it. "I'd say it was six hundred yards," he finally estimated.

Again he pulled in the oars. "Got to get my breath," he explained.

He caught Hale's eye and nodded toward shore.

"Carl's dead ahead, as we're pointed. He's got a tent set up. About a hundred yards in. By that big pine. Likely, he's watchin' us."

For the second time, Sam stood up. Deliberately, he took off the sweater he had worn under his coat. This time, Hale didn't reach for his gun. That wouldn't have looked right to the watching Carl.

Free of his sweater, Sam moved with smooth, mentally-rehearsed speed. Snatching up the oars, he tossed them backward over his head. Hale's mouth came open. But Sam gave him no time to speak. In a sudden thrust, he put his full weight on the gunwale of the boat.

Over it went. Out spilled this man from the city, in his heavy coat. And Sam felt the bite of the freezing water through his own clothes.

But this, too, had been rehearsed. Instantly, he was swimming, keeping his thought and his will on the nearing shore line.

Now the trees, along the shore, sheltered him from the north wind. He could make it. Soon he'd be standing in front of Carl's camp fire. He hadn't grown old. He hadn't really softened.

So now he could think about Mr. Hale again. It was strange, too; you didn't think of him as a man, struggling in icy water. Dealing with men like Hale, you couldn't afford to be soft. You just thought of him as something to be stopped.

Sam felt sure he had stopped him. It stood to reason. "If he hangs onto the boat, he'll freeze. If he lets go, he'll drown. He's bound to. With a gun and a bullet-proof vest, and all, dragging him down. Even if he could make it, Carl's there with his own gun."

Sam's feet touched hard sand. As he waded ashore, he looked back at the overturned boat. He saw no life or movement. Yet his final thoughts were like spoken words, sent out there.

"You steered me onto it yourself, mister. What you said about simple arithmetic. Take a bullet-proof vest. Add it to an open boat. Add these two to a north wind. Seems like they added up."

THE END.

THE ARMY KID

A Novelette

BY GRANT LANE

I.

Perhaps it was sight of army uniforms that first got Danny Garrett interested in preparedness; that, and the stuff in the newspapers about defense and fifth columnists and war. But it was the uniform that really did it, because any young lad likes the smart, snappy cut of a uniform, and Danny was no different from many boys his own age, which was about fourteen.

Take that fellow just down the street. Henry Lancaster was his name, and he already had been classified for the draft. Henry Lancaster used to tell Danny about how anxious he was to get into the army; about what a swell thing it was to serve your country in times like these.

Danny would listen by the hour, and a pulse beat of excitement took hold of him. Whenever he heard a radio playing a stirring march

● *Danny didn't make the army, but his day at the induction center was not time wasted.*

tune he would pause to listen. He got into the habit of hanging around the induction center. Whenever a new batch of draftees marched out of the building on their way to camp, Danny's heart would pound with excitement.

He and Henry Lancaster, the kid learned, had a great deal in common. Like himself, Henry had been a shoe-shine boy on the sidewalks of New York. An orphan, Henry had struggled hard in order to earn a living. Henry was older, of course—nineteen, he'd said—and now he owned a shine stand and news shop downtown. He was a red head, with freckles and bright blue eyes, which made him almost a double for Danny Garrett.

Just yesterday he'd been telling Danny that he expected to be called up any day now. And so it was that the kid's pulse leaped with interest when he stopped by Henry Lancaster's house the following morning. He saw the letter from the draft board stuck into the vestibule mailbox!

Henry lived in a tiny kitchenette flat on the third floor, but there was no answer to Danny's ring. Apparently Henry wasn't home. Well, Danny figured, he'd stop around tonight and catch Henry then.

Yet he didn't find him home that evening or the following morning either. The kid even made it a point to go around there good and early, too.

The letter from the draft board was still in the mailbox. This worried Danny. It upset him more when the letter was still there the following day. And Henry wasn't!

Danny hung around until the mailman made his afternoon delivery. It was the same gray-haired, pleasant letter-carrier who stopped at his own house, and so Danny knew him. He said, "Look, Mr. Kelly, about this letter?" He indicated the letter that was still in Henry Lancaster's mailbox. "Isn't that pretty important? It's from the draft board."

"You bet it is!" said the mailman. "They called up a new group of draftees this week. I guess Lancaster's one of them."

"When do they have to report?" Danny wanted to know.

Kelly scratched his chin. "Let me see—" Then he looked sharply at the kid. "Why, it's tomorrow morning, the 15th. I remember another fellow right in this district was telling me." He frowned. "It's funny Lancaster hasn't paid any attention to this letter!"

Danny thought it was funny, too, and so after the mailman had gone on his way he sought out the janitor of the building.

"What's happened to Henry Lancaster?" Danny asked. "I've been looking for him, and he isn't around."

"Haven't you heard?"

"Heard what?" prodded the kid.

"Why, Henry was taken with appendicitis a few days ago. So they rushed him off to the hospital."

"Which one?"

The janitor blinked. "Say, come to think of it, I don't know! They had to hurry him off in a taxi, and I forgot to find out if—"

"I see," said Danny thoughtfully, and departed.

Going out through the vestibule again, his gaze touched the letter from the draft board, that urgent message which was still in Henry's mailbox.

On a sudden impulse, Danny took the letter and shoved it into his pocket. He hurried out.

Thoughts were tumbling through his mind. He remembered how proud Henry had been that he was going into the army. He recalled Henry's patriotism, his pride—

Abruptly, ambition gripped the kid. Why not?—he told himself. It would be a fine thing to do for a friend. Didn't they even look alike? Weren't they almost the same build? Of course, Danny Garrett was much younger, but he was large for his age. Hard work and a hard life had given him the appearance of a lad older than himself.

He thought of Henry Lancaster, lying in some hospital, worried sick about not being able to appear before the board tomorrow. And so, if Danny could appear for him—

At ten o'clock the following morning Danny was down at the induction center.

There were at least fifty young men who had been called. Danny was nervous. Would they discover that he was not Henry Lancaster? What would they say?

He had opened the letter yesterday when he had reached home and had seen that it was the draft notice. Of course, Henry Lancaster had received his questionnaire some time ago, and on that would be Henry's answers as to his occupation, age, and so on.

But Danny thought he knew all those answers. He had known Henry long enough, had asked enough curious questions, to almost feel that Henry was his own brother.

And so he stood in line, waiting, and then after a while they told him to take off his clothes and to get ready for his physical.

There were three doctors. They started firing questions at the kid.

"Age?"

"Have you ever been rejected by an insurance company?"

"Have you ever undergone an operation?"

"Was there ever any insanity or tuberculosis in your family?"

On and on it went. Questions. Then the physical itself. They examined his teeth as though he were a horse. They pounded his knees with a little mallet. They made him hold his breath, and jump up and down, and then breathe hard.

The doctor was looking at his teeth again. "How old did you say you were, young fellow?"

"Nineteen," said Danny. It was a white lie. Wasn't he doing this for his friend Henry Lancaster? Henry, who was lying helplessly in a hospital, who should have appeared here today!

"Hum-m-m," the doctor was murmuring thoughtfully. He studied Danny closely, then whispered something to one of his associates.

Next the other doctor was looking at Danny Garrett. The kid felt his face turning red. He felt like a goldfish being critically examined in an aquarium. The doctors had a large, filled-in questionnaire—it must have been Henry Lancaster's original that he had returned to the draft board—and now the doctors were studying something that was on the form.

"So you're Henry Lancaster?" said one.

Danny jerked his head.

"And you're nineteen?"

Danny nodded again.

"Then," said one doctor, "how do you explain that you haven't Henry Lancaster's mole on your chest? It is one of the outstanding physical identification marks listed on his questionnaire!"

Danny's face was now crimson. "I . . . I—"

"Call Sergeant Evans," ordered one of the doctors.

Then they had learned the whole truth, and Danny had admitted the part he'd played. He told them about Henry Lancaster, his good friend, and of how he was merely trying to help him.

Sergeant Evans was a burly, muscle-shouldered man about forty. He tried to look grim, but there was a twinkle in his level gray eyes as he said, "Kid, you're too young to join the army. You'd better go home and grow up a little more. Anyway, we won't arrest you for trying to get in!"

Suddenly all the other fellows there in the room were laughing. They were laughing, and Danny stood there, still in his skin, and he felt like a darned fool!

He hurried across the room to where he'd left his clothes and started scrambling into them.

It was then that he recognized Pinky DeWitt, the crook, who had shot that bank guard about a year ago!

Danny stared, standing there with one leg in his trousers and one out.

Pinky DeWitt was just being questioned by the doctors. The kid even remembered the crook's quick, somewhat shrill voice, and that nervous little way he had of shrugging his left shoulder as he talked. He remembered that morning when Pinky was being questioned at the precinct house after the shooting, and the man's voice had been exactly the same.

Later, while they were preparing to transfer Pinky DeWitt to headquarters, the gunman had pulled his sensational escape. Danny remembered it all as though it had been only yesterday. There had been a running gun battle, with Pinky disappearing into sidewalk crowds after shooting a cop. That had made two shootings, the bank guard and the cop, and later it had been the elderly bank guard who had died.

Pinky never had been found.

But here he was now, talking to the doctors, and Danny distinctly heard him say, "Yes, George Bailey. George W. Bailey, like it says there on my questionnaire."

Bailey! That must be Pinky's real name, it occurred to the kid! The other must be his alias, the

name by which he was known to the police.

Pinky DeWitt had never been fingerprinted. He merely had been questioned there at the precinct house. The more detailed classification would have taken place at headquarters. And Pinky had escaped!

Danny finished getting into his clothes quickly. He was trembling with excitement and suddenly glad now that the sergeant had not been too curious about his own identity. He merely had ordered the kid to get dressed and get out of there!

Danny went out, proceeded to the nearest cigar store phone booth, and called his detective friend, Mike Ryan.

Later, while he nervously waited near the induction center for the arrival of Mike Ryan and Slug O'Donnel, he was thankful that the crook, Pinky DeWitt, had not learned he was Danny Garrett.

Because Danny had somewhat of a reputation. For several years now he had been associated, in a way, with the New York police department. Once, as a shoe-shine kid, he had aided in capturing a criminal. That was how he'd met his two detective friends, Mike Ryan and O'Donnel.

From that day on Danny had been associated with the two detectives. There had been other cases, with the boy showing an uncanny ability of spotting clues and solving crimes.

Ryan and Slug drove up in the police car ten minutes after Danny's call to Center Street headquarters.

Slug O'Donnel unlimbered his lanky form from the car and swung out to the curb. He was a beanpole of a man with a perpetual critical expression on his lean features.

"What goes on, kid?" Slug demanded.

"I've located Pinky DeWitt," the kid explained. He nodded toward the building. "He's in there getting into the army."

"The hell he is!" said Slug. And then he said, staring at Danny, "What were you doing in there?"

"I tried to join," Danny told him matter-of-factly. "They turned me down, though."

Big, square-jawed Mike Ryan had followed Slug from the police car. He looked like a typical headquarters dick, which he was.

He said, "You tried to join the—" and then almost choked on the cigar. "What's the idea, kid?"

Danny said, "We won't go into that." His blue eyes flickered. "But about this Pinky DeWitt. You remember, he's the one involved in those shootings."

Ryan said, "Of course we remember. Let's take a look."

They went inside.

And Pinky DeWitt, the kid saw, had his clothes on now and was just being handed a card as they came into the room. "You will report at Camp Dix immediately," an officer was saying.

"Just a minute!" interrupted Danny.

Pinky DeWitt turned, as did the army man. Pinky's pale, grayish eyes flicked over Danny Garrett

and his two detective friends. He was a thin, wiry-looking man of medium height. It occurred to the kid that Pinky looked different with his clothes on. There was something, something that Danny should have remembered, but he could not seem to recall what it was.

"That's Pinky DeWitt, who is wanted for murder," said Danny.

Mike Ryan said, "Kid, I think you've made a mistake."

Naturally, they questioned George W. Bailey, who, Danny insisted, was no other than Pinky DeWitt.

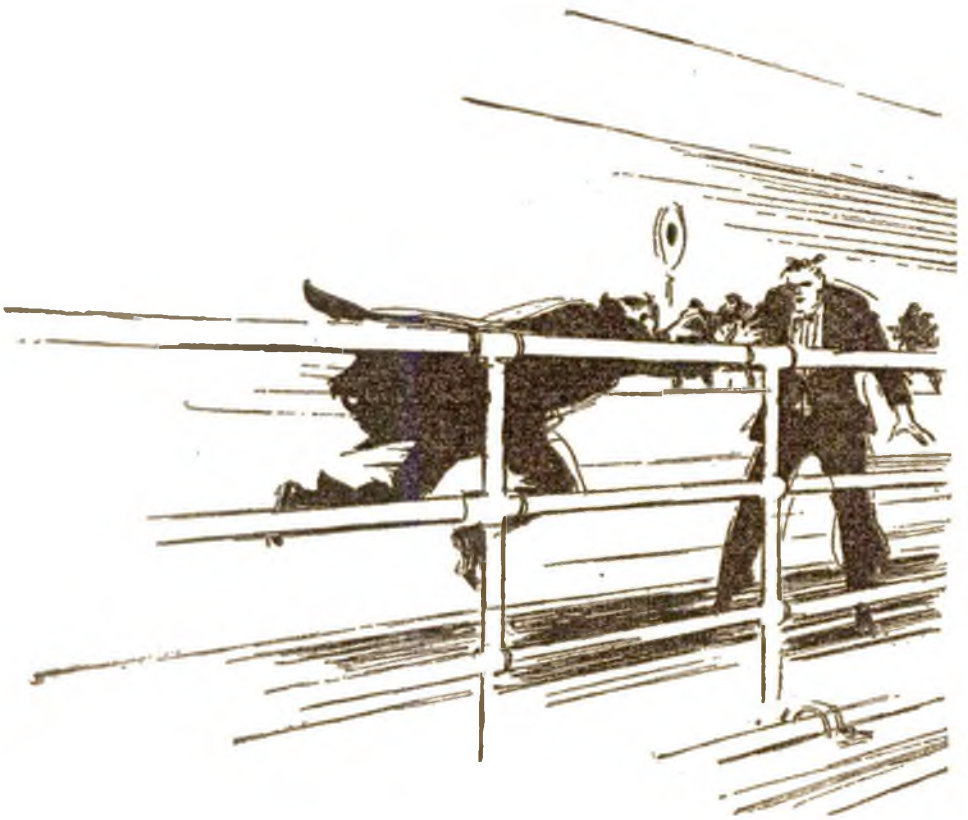
Ryan turned to the kid and said, "Pinky DeWitt had black hair. This man's is almost blond."

"He must have had it dyed," said Danny.

Skinny Slug put in, "And here's his questionnaire, and you can see what he is. He's a salesman living on East End Avenue. It's all here, even to the day he was born. We can easily check on that, kid."

Danny sighed. "But his voice is that of Pinky DeWitt's. I was there in the station house the morning he was picked up. I don't forget a thing like that, especially his voice."

Ryan said, "We keep a file on a known criminal's habits, his associations, and so on, kid. And there's



nothing here in this man's record that shows he ever lived the kind of life Pinky DeWitt did."

"Did you ever hear of Doctor Jekyll-Mr. Hyde?" demanded Danny.

Mike Ryan chewed thoughtfully on his cigar. "All right," he said finally, "we'll make a check."

They got permission to take George W. Bailey with them, and they visited the man's home on East End Avenue. They talked to neighbors, the local grocer, to people in the building where the man lived.

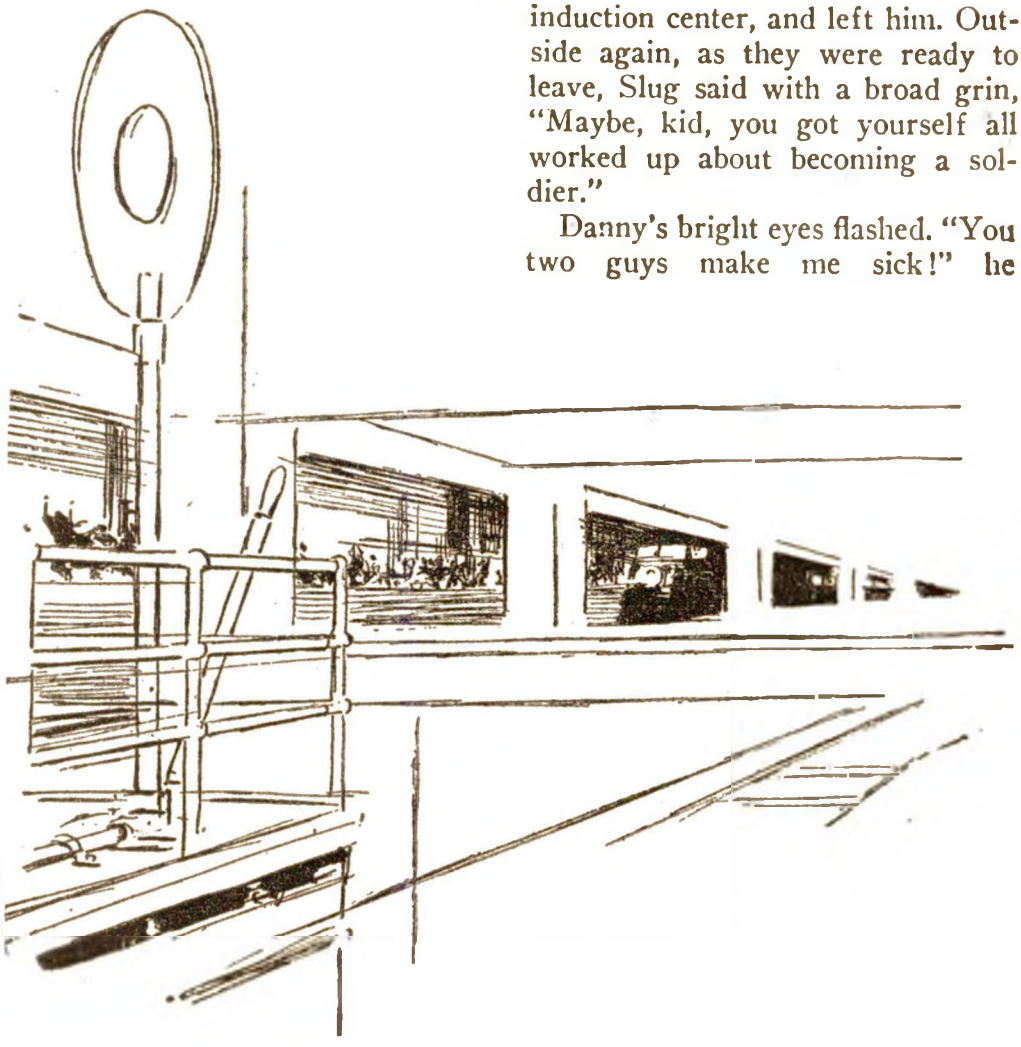
And they learned that George W. Bailey was a quiet-living man who paid his rent and his bills, and who worked every day and who never caused any trouble whatsoever.

Slug said, "You see, Danny? You were wrong."

"Of course," agreed big Mike Ryan.

They took the man back to the induction center, and left him. Outside again, as they were ready to leave, Slug said with a broad grin, "Maybe, kid, you got yourself all worked up about becoming a soldier."

Danny's bright eyes flashed. "You two guys make me sick!" he



snapped. And he walked off.

But the kid kept thinking about Pinky DeWitt, and the sound of the man's shrill, sharp voice: and so later he returned to the induction center and hung around outside.

Shortly a detachment of the new selectees left for Pennsylvania Station, where they would entrain for Camp Dix. Pinky DeWitt was with the group of men who marched to the station.

On a sudden impulse, Danny Garrett followed, joining the sidewalk passers-by who were watching the new recruits.

It was the rush hour at the station. Hundreds of people moved in and out. Commuters ran for trains, and every stairway leading down to the long train platforms was crowded.

Danny himself was practically lost in the crowds. People in civilian clothes mingled with the draftees with their suitcases and duffel bags. But the kid kept Pinky DeWitt in sight, and even managed to follow him to the car of the long express train on which the new draftees would ride.

Danny took a seat far back in the long coach, sitting beside a commuter who was reading a newspaper. He watched Pinky covertly.

Windows were open in the long train, and thus it was that the kid heard the faint *putt* of a sound only a few moments before departure time of the train.

He stared around. And then, abruptly, his blood ran cold.

One of the new draftees in a seat ahead—Danny remembered seeing the young fellow being examined by the doctors—had slumped forward in his seat. A draftee in the seat across the aisle had leaned over to see if the other man were ill. Suddenly, the second man was on his feet, crying out in horror.

"He's dead! He's . . . he's been shot!"

Danny started to move hurriedly forward along the aisle, then stopped with a jerk. He realized that Pinky DeWitt had been sharing the same seat with the man who had just been shot. And now Pinky was moving down the aisle and heading swiftly for the platform outside!

Danny hurried back to the other end of the car, reached the crowded platform just as Pinky DeWitt emerged from the other end of the car. He saw Pinky stare around. There was no doubt about the expression on the man's face; he was terrified about something!

Pinky ducked through the crowds and headed for a staircase. Danny followed. Behind him now, there was excitement in the car. He heard some of the new draftees yelling.

"Get the police! A man's been shot! He's dead!"

Pinky DeWitt reached the top of the crowded stairs and cut across the huge main concourse of the station. Danny was close behind him, taking advantage of the crowds in order not to be spotted.

There was a stairway across the room that led down to a lower level where the Long Island trains departed. Crowds were moving in

through subway stiles. The kid saw Pinky DeWitt duck toward a men's washroom. He followed swiftly.

But five steps from the doorway to the washroom Pinky swung around, as though warned by something. Fear, stark and terrible, leaped into his eyes as he looked across the room. Pinky was not looking at Danny, but rather at someone farther away in the moving crowds.

Danny followed that wild-eyed gaze. He saw the man moving toward the washroom. It was a quick-moving, thin fellow with dark features and a cap, yanked low over the eyes. He stood out, because no one else, no other man nearby was wearing a cap.

And it was this man that Pinky DeWitt was watching in terror!

The kid turned back, saw Pinky diving through the crowds again and heading toward an escalator stairway that led up to the street. The dark man in the cap started that way also, cutting diagonally across the room in order to intercept Pinky's path.

He did not make it.

Pinky DeWitt reached the escalator first. He was being carried swiftly upward on the movable stairs. A dozen people had crowded onto the steps directly behind him before the man in the cap managed to get onto the steps. He started elbowing his way past people on the narrow incline and an argument started. A burly fellow growled, "What the hell's the idea?" and shoved him back.

Danny himself was on the movable stairs now, another dozen steps behind the fellow in the cap. He watched the entire proceedings, his heart pounding.

He saw DeWitt reach the top of the stairway, and then disappear in the crowds moving out to the street. A moment later the dark man in the cap disappeared.

By the time the kid was clear of the stairway DeWitt was gone. But the second man was just slamming the door of a cab. There were other cabs in line; there was a stand here at the station exit.

Danny jumped toward another cab, swung open the rear door and said tensely to the driver, "Follow that hack just pulling out ahead. Just trail it, mister."

The driver nodded, slammed the door and eased out from the curb.

"I don't want them to know we're following them," said Danny warningly.

"O.K.," said the driver.

The first cab had swung around on Thirty-Fourth Street. It headed directly across town toward the west side. Danny's driver followed expertly, always holding some distance behind, and yet keeping the other hack in sight.

Then the first cab swung up Tenth Avenue and, a block farther on, stopped before a three-story rooming house. Danny said quickly, "Let me out here."

He paid the driver thirty cents and moved up the street, his bright gaze intent on what had happened a half block ahead. The man in the cap had entered the building. And that must mean that Pinky

DeWitt had gone into the rooming house also, because just turning a corner ahead was a cab that had preceded all of them! DeWitt must have been in that cab.

There was a grimy vestibule and a line of doorbells, half of which did not contain any names. For a moment the kid was puzzled. How was he going to tell into which flat Pinky and the other man had gone?

Then he saw that the inside door was not closed tightly. It was held partially open by a frayed, wrinkled strip of carpet.

Danny pushed into the hallway carefully. He listened. Above him somewhere there was a whispering sound of movement. Someone was climbing the stairs!

Danny hurried up the first flight, moved along the second-floor landing and proceeded toward the third floor. He paused halfway up the flight and listened, but he could hear nothing. Heavy, strained silence gripped the musty-smelling tenement building.

He moved ahead again. An instant later he heard something heavy falling. A door opened and closed. Then silence again.

His pulse throbbing, Danny leaped up the stairs. Thoughts raced through his agile brain. Why had the draftee been shot? And why, because of the shooting, had Pinky DeWitt been terrified?

Was the dark man in the cap the one who had done the shooting? It must be, thought the kid, because Pinky DeWitt had seen the fellow and Pinky had been scared to death!

Danny had reached the next floor. He started to turn back along the hallway—and someone crashed into him.

II.

One hand clutching the newel post, Danny held his balance and at the same time grappled with his assailant in the dim corridor. There was an exclamation, a snarled curse.

"You!" the man snapped, and sent a smashing fist at the kid's face.

It was Pinky DeWitt!

The kid was almost sent toppling down the flight of stairs behind him. Pinky was surprised when he was not.

But Danny was hard and young and wiry. He clung to the man, pushed away from the post, feinted, then drove a steaming one-two into the slender man's midriff.

With an explosive grunt, Pinky DeWitt momentarily relaxed his grip on the kid. And Danny let go with another fast right.

It caught DeWitt alongside the jaw and snapped his head around. The crook snarled something and slammed head-first at Danny Garrett. At the same time he tried to get the kid in line with the flight of stairs again.

Danny sidestepped, clutched DeWitt by the coat, tried to yank the coat down over the shoulders and thus pinion the man's arms. It was a trick that Mike Ryan had once taught him.

But this time it did not work.

DeWitt wriggled clear, whirled, hit the kid and knocked him to his hands and knees. A foot crashed out and caught Danny in the side. Pain lanced through his wiry frame; pain and nausea, that made his brain spin.

Then he had hold of DeWitt and they were rolling on the floor, striking the wall, straining wildly. Danny was flung against the hard wall, breath blasting from his body. The man was taller, stronger than he was. The kid didn't see how he was going to be able to hold out.

That was just before they both tripped over the top step and went plunging down the stairs. It was a wild fall, with Danny holding madly to his assailant's hard, slim form. They bounced down the steps, first one on top, then the other.

Below them, someone yelled. Someone was pounding up the stairs from the first floor. Danny had a single wild glimpse of a man in overalls. Then he and DeWitt crashed into the fellow at the second-floor landing.

All three went down in a tangled heap. Danny's head had hit the floor and he thought for a moment that he was going to pass out.

But he managed to hang on. He clung to a struggling body and dragged himself to his feet.

"Hey!" yelled the big man in overalls, and pushed the kid back.

Danny stared.

Pinky DeWitt was gone. He and the overall-clad man were the ones who had been struggling. The fellow was still hanging onto him.

Danny cried, "Hurry! We've got to catch that man! He's—"

The big man frowned. "Say, kid," he demanded, "what's your game? That's Mr. Johnson. Used to be one of my tenants—"

Danny paused, staring at the man. "Who are you?"

"I'm the janitor here, and I ain't putting up with no monkey business—"

"You said his name was Johnson?" prodded Danny.

"Yeah, and—"

"Come on!" cried the kid, and led the way down the stairs.

The janitor lumbered after him and they reached the sidewalk. Danny knew that they were too late. He had wasted precious seconds talking to the man.

Pinky DeWitt had disappeared.

Danny made brief explanations as they went back into the building. He told about his suspicions, of how he knew Pinky DeWitt was a man involved in murder.

"He worked under various names," the kid explained. "And I'll bet he didn't live here all the time, did he?"

The burly janitor looked at the kid. "No, he didn't. Used to be out of town a lot. But he always kept the room."

"When did he move out?"

"Just a couple days ago."

Danny was hurriedly leading the way upstairs again. He said, "We've got to get to his room in a hurry. There was another man who trailed him here—where is his room?"

They were on the third floor

again. The big janitor said, "Right here," and pushed into a room at the front of the hall.

The dark man who had been wearing a cap was in the room, all right. He was almost dead, lying on the floor. Blood smeared his shirt front and throat.

He had been stabbed in the neck.

Danny cried, "We've got to get help. Maybe he's got a chance."

The janitor stood stolidly looking down at the unconscious figure. "I doubt it." He swore. "This is twice somebody got cut up in my place. These roomers!"

The kid remembered he'd seen a pay phone on the first-floor wall. He raced back down the stairs, called Center Street headquarters, and reported the stabbing. He asked that an ambulance be sent out from the nearest hospital. Then he asked to speak to Mike Ryan.

When Ryan's gruff voice answered, Danny told him about the shooting at the Pennsylvania Station: of trailing Pinky DeWitt and the other man here. "I told you there was something wrong," Danny finished. "That was Pinky DeWitt all right, and now he's killed a man—"

"Listen," Mike Ryan interrupted, "you wait right there, kid."

But Danny said, "I've got to get back to the Penn Station," and hung up.

He did not return upstairs. He hurried out and located a cab. He only had about sixty cents change left in his pockets, but he was in a hurry now. He had a hunch.

Police had the stairway blocked off where the shooting had occurred on the long train platform. But Danny happened to know one of the cops who was on duty at the head of the stairs. He was allowed through.

There were more police down on the platform, and a medical examiner and photographers.

Danny saw that the train containing the new draftees had pulled out since he had left the station.

The kid pushed his way into the crowd. Some of the police recognized him. "What have they found out?" he asked.

The medical examiner had just completed an examination. Lying there on the cement platform was the young man who, less than an hour ago, had been on his way to camp. He had light curly hair, and looking at him now Danny felt the pulse beat of tragedy pounding through his heart. The bullet had made a hole in the side of the young man's head.

"We haven't found out a thing," a detective told Danny. "He was just shot, is all. A couple people say he was shot by someone outside the train window. But the killer escaped in the crowds. Why he wanted to kill this kid, we don't know."

Danny asked, "Has it occurred to you that it might have been a mistake?"

"Mistake?" The detective frowned.

"Yes. I—" Then Danny remembered the reason why he had hurried back here. He said, "I'll be

back in a moment," and ducked back through the crowd.

He located a train announcer. "Would there be any more trains leaving for Camp Dix?" the kid wanted to know.

The trainman nodded. "Sure. Those express trains go out about every hour. There's draftees leaving on them all the time."

"When is the next one leaving?" Danny said.

The man consulted his watch. "In about five minutes." He motioned. "The next track over, number 16."

Danny hurried off. He located the platform, stepped into the last car of the train. He started working his way forward through the long line of cars, his blue eyes alert.

Perhaps he was wrong, but something told him that Pinky DeWitt had returned here to the station. Pinky had not shot that young draftee, therefore, he would have nothing to worry about. And no one, except Danny, knew that Pinky DeWitt had stabbed the man at the rooming house.

For some reason, that man had scared off Pinky DeWitt from going to Camp Dix. DeWitt had been terrified, and had tried to pull a sneak. But now, with his pursuer out of the way, maybe Pinky would again start out for camp. At least, the kid thought, it was a possibility.

And then he knew that it was a fact. Pinky DeWitt was right here in the car he had just entered, seated up near the front. He was looking around nervously, apparently impatient for the train to get started.

He was looking around—and he saw Danny Garrett.

As though propelled out of the seat by a spring, Pinky DeWitt hit the aisle, raced forward through the car.

"Hey!" Danny yelled, and took out after him.

The man reached the long train platform ahead of the kid. For a bare instant he hesitated, staring wildly back toward the stairway that led to the waiting room. But he must have been thinking of all the police that were back there, and so he changed his course.

He spun the other way.

People stared, watching the kid chase the man the length of the platform. And then there were no people at all, because Danny and his quarry had reached the front of the train platform and in front of them was a drop-off to the tracks that led, underground, toward the tubes under the Hudson River.

Pinky DeWitt paused an instant, stared around wildly, then leaped down to the tracks. He raced off into gloom that was broken intermittently by red and green signal lights.

The kid followed.

The chase proceeded perhaps three hundred yards, then DeWitt jerked up abruptly, spun, dived at the kid. Danny, however, was ready for him.

He whirled back, mindful of a deadly third rail, then remembered that the railroad used an overhead electric system. Just the same he

had to be careful lest he trip over one of the rails in the gloom.

Danny stayed in the center of the tracks, and braced himself, meeting the impact of the man's plunge. He was almost carried off balance.

Desperation gave him added strength. He whipped a steaming right fist to Pinky DeWitt's jaw. He sent the man reeling away from him.

The man leaped in again, his features dimly twisted in a hideous snarl. "Damn you!" he muttered shrilly.

Danny hit him again.

Suddenly, with an awful start, he heard the sound that was somewhere behind him, the electrical hum of a dynamo!

He shot a swift glance over his shoulder.

A train, pulled by the modern electric engine, was bearing swiftly down upon them. There was the sudden glare of a headlight, as the engineer switched it on. There followed the abrupt, shrill blast of the air whistle as the engineer must have spotted them.

Danny looked to one side wildly, saw the six-foot setback in the wall beside the tracks. Those openings were placed so that a track-walker might step aside when a train came through the tunnel. Otherwise, there was not enough clearance for the train to pass a person's body!

And so Danny leaped back, dived into the security of the opening in the smooth wall. He looked toward Pinky DeWitt.

The crook, excited, had jumped toward the other side of the tracks. Danny's throat tightened. He started to yell, "Look out—"

But DeWitt already had seen. There was no setback on that side of the tracks. Nothing but sheer, bare wall! Frantic, the crook started back toward Danny's side of the tracks. But too late.

The train was upon him!

It seemed to Danny that he was huddled there for ages, the rising steel bulk of the cars almost brushing against his face. He huddled there in the setback, and he was trembling. He was remembering a man's terrible cry of horror—

And then the train had been moved out of the way, and there were police, and there was also Mike Ryan, accompanied by skinny Slug O'Donnel.

Big Mike Ryan was saying, "Why didn't you wait for us there at the rooming house, kid?"

"Because I had a hunch about Pinky DeWitt. I figured he was coming back here to catch the train, now that he was no longer trailed—"

Slug said, "It was Pinky DeWitt, all right." He looked just a little bit sheepish. "That guy back there at the rooming house didn't pull through. But before he died, he told us."

Danny looked up at Slug and Mike Ryan.

"He told us," explained Ryan, "how he'd been 'associated' with Pinky on a gas station holdup just a few days ago. Only, this rat, this DeWitt, pulled a fast one and disappeared with the money. So Pinky

figured that a hitch in the army wouldn't be a bad idea. Things were kind of hot, and he wanted to disappear for a while."

"Naturally," agreed Danny. "He led this double life, and most people thought he really was George W. Bailey. And so when he was called up in the draft under that name, he took advantage of it. But his former partner, that fellow who followed him to the rooming house, caught up with him before Pinky could get out of town. Pinky killed him, so he wouldn't squawk."

Slug said, puzzled. "But about this shooting here at the station—"

Danny said, "DeWitt was the one who was supposed to be shot. He was sitting in the same seat with that young draftee. Only, DeWitt's partner shot the draftee by mistake. That's why Pinky DeWitt was terrified. That's why he tried to run away."

Slug remarked, "Well, he won't run anymore. He got caught under that train."

Danny shivered. "They probably won't even be able to identify him," said Mike Ryan.

"Maybe they can!" the kid spoke up.

His two detective friends looked at him.

"You see," Danny explained, "that day Pinky DeWitt was dragged into the station house, he had been pretty well mussed up by the arresting officer. His shirt was torn, and I remember that tattoo mark he had on his chest. Today, during the examination, I was certain I recognized his voice. But when I saw the tattoo mark I knew for sure that I was right."

Mike Ryan's eyes flickered. "You mean, during the examination—"

Danny nodded. "Yeah. It's sure kind of embarrassing, standing there before all the fellows without your clothes on, but if it hadn't been for that I wouldn't have seen the mark on DeWitt's chest. That's why I was so sure."

Slug O'Donnel gave big Mike Ryan a baleful glance. "The kid," he said, "might not have got into the army, but just the same he did all right."

Mike Ryan said, "Do you have to keep reminding me!"

THE END.

● *When is a man a coward? A question that even the best of 'em on the Island couldn't answer.*

BRING BACK THE DEAD

BY ROLAND PHILLIPS

Matt Bevins let himself in at the rear door and stepped to the closet where he kept his mop and brooms. It was just a little after four o'clock, and he was starting early to clean up the premises, this being his night to take Lela to a picture show on the mainland. He wanted to be through work before dark. The bank had been closed for an hour now, and no one would be around except maybe Sam Kirkwood who sometimes worked late on his books.

As Matt got out his broom and dust cloths and started along the hall, he heard a muffled sound like the slamming of a door in the front office, and then another sound as if a heavy book had been dropped. He stopped and listened, but everything was quiet again and he went on closing the windows that opened onto the alley.

From the middle window, he could look out past the clump of ragged palms to the Gulf that lay like a burnished silver plate under the hot sun. For a moment, he watched the sleek gray patrol boat that stood out from shore, the men in white on its deck, and the covered guns forward and aft.

Day and night, they were out there, good weather or bad; planes, too, roaring overhead, and once in a while, farther out, a dirigible, creeping along as silent as a shadow. It was right and proper that these things should be, Matt kept reminding himself, and tried not to be bitter; but they had stopped the fishing, and a man in that business was hard pressed these days to make a fair living.

He closed and locked the last window and moved on; pushed open the door into the banking room;


CASHIER

halted with an exclamation. Sam Kirkwood was doubled up on the floor, face down. Matt dropped beside him and called his name. When the man didn't move or respond, he shook him.

"Hey, Sam! What ails you? You sick or—" Matt broke off, staring at the floor. Blood! It was running along a board.

His heart pounding, Matt turned the man over. The front of his shirt was red and soggy wet. He swayed to his feet, his knees weak, stricken by what he knew had happened. He turned to run out the front door into the street when someone appeared from behind a partition, a slim young man with a sallow face, a cap pulled down almost over his eyes.

Matt stood rigid. The man snarled something as he plunged forward. There was a gun in his fingers now and leveled. Matt recoiled and flung up his hands. He heard the click of a falling hammer, but there was no report. The man swore and raised the gun high, brought it down across Matt's head, and at the same time drove a fist deep into his stomach. Matt doubled up, gasping for breath, fighting to stay on his feet, trying to cry out in the darkness that suddenly enveloped him.

Matt's eyes opened upon the blurred figures that moved about him. He stirred and groaned; presently he recognized the brown face bending over him. It was Roy Sprague, the town marshal.

"You awake, Matt?"

He tried to speak, but his words were a mumble. His head was thumping, and when he moved, everything whirled crazily. Somebody splashed water into his face and he spluttered and coughed. Then Sprague's arm slipped under him, raised him a little from the floor so that he was propped up against the wall. Things were clearing a bit now and he saw that the room was crowded with people and that more of them were outside, staring through the big window. It was like being in a cage. Everybody was looking at him, and for a moment he was puzzled.

Sprague, squatting beside him, spoke hurriedly. "We found you here, you and Sam, a few minutes ago. We were afraid first—"

"You . . . you get the guy?" Matt faltered.

"Not yet," the marshal said. "We've been waiting for you to come around, tell us about him."

"Sam—"

Sprague shook his head gravely. "He's bad, unconscious. Like to die with a bullet in him."

Matt winced and his mind reached back. "I guess what I heard was . . . was the shot and Sam fallin'," he wavered. "I didn't pay no attention. Then I come in here, seen him layin' on the floor. Next thing this . . . this man come at me."

"That's what we want to hear about," Sprague said. "He jumped you? And you saw him plain?"

"Good and plain," Matt answered. "He was—" He stopped and closed his eyes, remembering all

too clearly what had happened, but suddenly ashamed to speak the truth. He hadn't done anything but stand there like a scared rabbit, let the man beat him down without lifting a hand. The man was puny, slat-thin, and not as big as himself. The gun had jammed, too. He should have tackled him then, knocked him out.

"Go on," the marshal urged impatiently. "Speak up, Matt. What'd he look like? We want to know that so we can start after him."

"I . . . I tried to stop him. We fought all over the place." Matt hesitated, picking his words carefully. "I had him down once, beatin' him good. But he was too big for me. And he had a gun. A wonder he didn't plug me. It was the gun he hit me with. Hit me hard. That's how he got away. I'm sorry."

The lying words had come easy and the men gathered around him nodded as if they understood. In the doorway now he saw Lela, her face white. She looked as if she had been crying. Crying over him, Matt thought, because he had been hurt.

"No need for you being sorry," Sprague spoke up kindly. "You were plenty game, Matt, tackling a scoundrel like that empty-handed. A big man, you say? What else? Can't you describe him some?"

Matt hesitated again, raking his mind desperately, endeavoring to conjure up a formidable assailant. It was too late to back down now. The room fell silent and everyone in it waited for him to speak.

"A big fellow with black hair and a red face like he'd been sunburnt," Matt stated. "A lot bigger than you, Sprague. I think he had on a gray suit. That's all I can remember just now."

"That's plenty," the marshal said, beaming, patting his shoulder. "You've sure helped us out. We'll have this gunman locked up in no time."

"Seems like I seen a fellow like that around the postoffice about noon," one of the bystanders declared.

The crowd began to buzz excitedly and some of the men pushed out of the room to spread the news to those in the street.

Matt got to his feet, swaying a little, and clung to Sprague's arm. "The crook ran out the back door," he said. "Probably miles away now, the start he's had."

The marshal chuckled. "Not much. The draw's been open for the last hour," he explained. "Jammed fast, somehow, and all traffic's tied up. Maybe midnight before it's operating again. A rare bit of luck for us, Matt. Your man can't get across to the mainland, not unless he aims to swim or take a boat. The coast guard's already been warned and on the lookout, and I'm making sure the bridge is watched. He's trapped right here."

The tiny fishing village of Coquina occupied the southern half of Tarpon Key that lay two miles off the Florida coast. Except by boat, the only approach to the island was over the long county causeway,

part fill and part span, with a draw at the ship channel in the bay. For a year now the island had been a coast guard base with its new docks and piers, barracks and radio station. Armed blue-jackets patrolled the wide sandy beaches, banned to civilians after dark, and guarded the causeway, demanding credentials of everyone bound for the mainland.

It was these war-time exigencies that had blighted the community's principal industry, for the fishing boats were not permitted to be out between sunset and sunrise. In fact, no boat could navigate coastal water, day or night, unless registered, and every man aboard wore his numbered button and photograph. And so it was that these restrictions, together with the damaged draw that blocked all vehicular traffic, played right into the hands of the law.

"We got him bottled up proper," Sprague declared jubilantly. "We'll mighty soon rout him out. I already phoned the sheriff. He'll be along presently to help."

"How much did the man steal?" Matt asked.

"Two-three thousand maybe. Had it been tomorrow it would have been twice that, being money for the dredging outfit's pay roll. The crook was probably counting on that, but got mixed up on his dates."

The marshal hurried off, shouting to the men he had sworn in as deputies and who were to begin their search of the island. The crowd thinned, and Matt went outside into the sun which was low over the Gulf now. He was still a little dizzy and uncertain on his feet. His head didn't ache very much, but there was a lump on it the size of an egg, and his stomach felt sore where the man had punched him.

When someone touched his arm he looked around to see Lela. Her eyes were misty bright and she was smiling, but her voice shook a little.

"You feel better, Matt?" she asked, and clung tightly to his arm. "You . . . you don't know how dreadful it was, seeing you there on the floor. I . . . I thought you'd been . . . been killed."

"I feel O.K. now," he assured her. He always felt that way when Lela was beside him. She was a little thing, came scarcely up to his shoulder, and the prettiest girl on the island. She was an orphan, living with her aunt and uncle, the Spragues, who were the best friends he had. They had been seeing a lot of each other for more than a year, would have been married by now, except that things had gone against him. He couldn't get into a uniform because of a knee he had hurt long before, then the fishing boats had been tied up, and money wasn't easy to come by.

"They took Sam Kirkwood across to the hospital at the county seat," Lela told him. "In Nelson's speedboat. He's to bring back the sheriff."

"They think . . . think Sam will die?" he asked.

The girl nodded and Matt clenched his fists. "I shouldn't have let that man get away from me."

"He won't get away," she told him. "Uncle Roy and his men are bound to catch him."

But they wouldn't, Matt knew. They couldn't catch a man who didn't exist. The enormity of what he had done began to frighten him. He hadn't stopped to think about it just this way before. It never occurred to him at the time, trying to protect himself, what the consequences might be. Now the whole thing filled him with rising panic.

"You should go home and rest, not be running around," Lela was saying. "You've done enough. If it hadn't been for you— Why, you're trembling, Matt," she broke out. "You go right home and stay there. Do you hear?"

"I'll go home," he said, and turned abruptly and walked away.

He'd go home, but not to stay. He knew what must be done and his mind was clearly made up now. That sallow-faced man who had shot down Sam Kirkwood and stolen the bank's money was not to escape.

He had plenty time yet before the draw would be working again and traffic restored, before he need station himself at the bridge-house and wait for the right man to show himself. His revolver was home and hadn't been used for a year or more, but he could put it in order soon enough. He didn't like guns, never carried one on his boat, although most of the other men he fished with did, using them on sharks or sting-rays that were always getting tangled up in the nets. Some of the men poked fun at him because he took no part in the shooting.

Luke Curry was one of them who jeered loudest, a squat, pock-marked man who owned several of the larger boats and took it upon himself to dictate the rights to the better fishing grounds. And as Matt made his way along the waterfront in the gathering dusk, it was Curry who suddenly confronted him, squared off in his path.

"Just wanted to put a question to you, Matt," he began with a grimace. "You right sure the fellow you run up against in the bank wasn't maybe seven foot tall and wearin' horns?"

"What you drivin' at?"

Curry laughed. "Why, you should have hatched up a meaner-lookin' cuss while you was about it," he charged. "Made yourself out more of a hero."

"You think I lied?" Matt retorted, wondering why Curry suspected.

"Well, it just hit me funny, hearin' you tell how you lit into this big fellow who come at you with a gun. Fought him all the place, you claim. Had him down and beatin' him good!"

Curry reared back and laughed harder than ever. "Why, you ain't got the spunk of a jellyfish, Matt, and you're gun-shy to boot. Most everybody knows that. Like as not this robber just waved a gun in your face and then bopped you over the head with it. And you froze stiff. We'll be findin' out before long," he added, "and you'll be showed up proper."

With that, Curry turned and

moved off in the shadows. Matt watched him go and made no reply. There was nothing he could say when the man spoke the truth, except to keep on with his lies, and he wasn't doing that.

He stood silent and alone on the bulkhead then, his eyes straying presently toward the speedboat cutting across the bay, making a tremendous racket and leaving a broad, frothy wake astern. When it swept in at a nearby dock and the lines were made fast, he saw two men climb out and hurry off toward Sprague's ship chandlery. Matt recognized the taller of the pair as Joel Wilkens, the sheriff. He watched as the men disappeared, and for a moment was tempted to run after them, confess what he had done. But he shrank from that, and, with clenched hands, turned away. Whatever the consequences he was not going to meet them empty-handed.

It was almost dark when Matt plodded along the short, sandy road that wound among the palmettoes to his house. The place wasn't much to look at, just two rooms and a lean-to kitchen, but it was his own and comfortable. There were several cabbage palms in the yard and a hedge of feathery bamboo. A coral vine overran a trellis and almost covered one side of the front porch. The stout pier and shed where his boat was tied up were just a step from the house, and beyond were the racks where he once spread his nets to dry.

Matt crossed the porch, entered the house which was never locked, and at once drew the blackout curtains over the windows. He had to be particular about that, especially the windows that faced the water. If so much as a sliver of light showed, the patrol would be down on him in a hurry. The whole island was as dark as the bottom of a well at night.

With the last curtain drawn snug, Matt lighted a lamp and sat it on the table. Turning, he confronted the man in a cap who stood against the curtained bedroom doorway, a gun swinging loosely in his hand. Matt recognized him instantly and stiffened with suspended breath.

"Glad to see you, Bevins," the man said and grinned. "I was beginning to think I might have conked you too hard a while ago and you wouldn't show up here tonight."

He crossed the room to throw the bolt on the door. Then he returned to where Matt stood, cold and incredulous, patted his clothes and stepped back.

"Didn't pick up a rod anywhere, eh? That's sensible. Been chinning with the coppers, I suppose, giving out with a full-size picture of me. Sent them chasing their tails all over the island."

Matt scarcely heard what was said. Now that the first shock had passed he wasn't so frightened, realized he couldn't afford to be. Here was the man he wanted, dropped right in his lap. Here was his second chance. He must keep his wits about him, think fast.

"What's the matter?" the man charged. "Can't you talk?"

"How . . . how'd you know where to find me?" Matt demanded.

"Your house, isn't it?"

"How'd you know that?"

"I usually make it my business to check up on things ahead of time. Always like to know my ground and something about the folks I might run up against. I've been in and around town for a couple days. You're playing janitor at the bank so I had to clock some of your movements."

Matt hoped the man would pocket his gun. He realized he wouldn't be able to get at his own revolver now, didn't even remember if it were loaded. The best thing to do, he reasoned, was to keep cool, keep talking, and perhaps the intruder would get careless and he might find a chance to jump him.

"All your checkin' didn't do much good, did it?" he burst out. "Things didn't come off like you expected, did they?"

"Not all of them," the other admitted. "But it happens that way occasionally."

"I fooled you by showin' up at the bank an hour ahead of time," Matt went on. "You likely figured Sam Kirkwood would be there alone. You didn't get your hands on the pay roll money either, because it's comin' in a day late this time. And you didn't count on the draw bustin' down. It got jammed just like your gun did when you tried to shoot me."

The man shrugged. "That's true enough, but things might have been worse. I got a break when my gun jammed, although I didn't know it at the time. And it looks like you did, too."

"You're not gettin' off the island," Matt said, making no sense out of the remark. "Not alive, you're not."

"It ought to be easy now."

"You're trapped. The bridge might not be open again till mornin'."

"I found that out. That's why I came here and waited for you to show up," the man explained. "That's what I meant when I said I got a break. If I'd put a bullet in you instead of merely giving you a headache, you wouldn't have come home and I'd have been out of luck."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Why, you wouldn't have been able to help me get away."

"I'm not helping you."

"You're taking me across the bay in your boat."

Matt laughed now that the other's plans were revealed. "Maybe you don't know about the coast guard."

"I know that you and your boat must be registered, that you can navigate between here and the mainland without much trouble, especially tonight with the bridge out of commission. There'll be plenty of traffic by water."

Matt knew that was true enough. It wasn't like going outside, and regulations were not so strict, probably be less so in the present emergency. Besides, he knew many of the local boys, now in uniform, who manned the patrols. They would let him pass with no more than a word or two, once he had been

stopped and identified. But he wasn't telling the man that.

"Do you no good," he protested. "I'm almost out of gas. We couldn't get more'n a mile from here."

"Skip the alibis, Bevins. You'll take me across. I won't be showing myself and if we're stopped, it isn't likely they'll search your boat. No one would suspect you of trying to smuggle out a fugitive."

"Mightn't be so easy as you think for," Matt came back. But he knew it would be because of the story he had told. Even if his passenger were seen he wouldn't be recognized as the man the law wanted. Not from the description that had gone out.

"Let's get started," the man said, and motioned toward the door.

Matt shrugged and crossed in front of his companion, wheeled and sprang. The attack took the man by surprise and he swerved, but not quickly enough, and went down heavily with Matt straddling him.

They rolled and grappled on the floor, Matt lashing out with his fists, the man under him squirming, grimly silent, parrying most of the blows, dealing some of his own. Those that landed hurt. Matt caught a glimpse of the gun under a chair and suddenly lunged for it. The man reached out, gripped him arm, jerked him back, and half rearing, flung him aside. Matt slammed against the far wall with a violence that dazed him. By the time he had caught his breath and wobbled uncertainly to his knees, the man had retrieved the gun and was standing over him.

"Behave yourself, kid!" he warned. "You might get hurt next time."

Matt got slowly upon his feet, dismayed at having been so readily worsted. The man could fight, could take care of himself in an emergency. It wasn't going to be easy to outwit him. Stooping to pick up his cap from the floor, the man jerked himself erect as a sound came, the labored cough of a motor pulling through deep sand. It drew nearer, and Matt knew a car was traveling along his road, approaching the house. If it should be Sprague or Sheriff Wilkens—

The car came into the yard and stopped just beyond the window. The motor was cut off, and presently someone tramped across the porch and rattled the doorknob.

"Keep quiet!" the man whispered. "Don't answer. We want no company."

A fist hammered upon the door then and a voice was raised.

"You, Matt! Let me in."

"It's Luke Curry!" Matt exclaimed, and wondered what had brought him here.

"The police?"

"No. Just one of the fishermen."

Curry shouted again and began kicking the door. "Open up, will you? I know you're inside, Matt. I can see the light under the door. If you don't open up," he threatened, "I'll bust through a window."

Matt glanced questioning at his companion. The man scowled. "All right, let him in. But get rid

of him in a hurry. And don't try anything! I'll be watching. This gun's working now, and I'll sure as hell use it."

He backed away, slipping between the curtains that shut off the bedroom from the living quarters. The pounding at the door continued. Matt stepped to it, shot back the bolt. Curry pushed his way inside, kicking the door shut behind him, and stood a moment glaring about the room.

"What's the idea, lockin' yourself in this way?" he burst out. "You still scary?"

"What you wantin' of me?" Matt demanded.

"Sprague wants to see you. He sent me. You're in for a mess of trouble, cookin' up that yarn you did." Curry leered. "You been showed up. Knowed you'd be. I told the marshal and Sheriff Wilkens as much, but they wasn't believin' me till a while ago when Sam Kirkwood talked."

"Sam—he's all right then?" Matt cried.

"Wasn't so bad hurt after all, and—"

"I'm glad of that," Matt said fervently.

"He come to at the hospital and told the police what happened in the bank. Told the truth about it. You didn't figure on his doin' that, did you?"

"What did he say?"

"He says it was a little guy wearin' a cap who did the robbin' and shot him down."

Matt nodded. "He ought to know."

"But it don't jibe with what you told about a big, red-faced fellow wearin' a gray suit," persisted Curry.

"Was that why Sprague wanted to see me?"

"He knows you've lied to him now. Set him off lookin' for somebody you made up. You better come along with me before—"

"I don't need you to bring me in," Matt broke in. "Get out!"

"Afraid are you?" Curry came toward him. "What you aim to do? Run off, maybe? You been actin' funny, havin' your door locked and—" He stopped short to peer at something on the floor.

Matt glanced down at the same time. What he saw in the shadow cast by the table was a flat package of currency that he knew must have worked out of the fugitive's pocket during the brief struggle a few moments before.

Before Matt could move, Curry pounced upon it, came up with the package in his fingers, stared at his find. "Money!" he exclaimed. "Bank's money! How come it to be here in your place? You—"

Behind him the curtains parted. The man who edged between them took two quick, silent steps. The clubbed gun in his hand lifted, descended upon the back of Curry's head. He grunted and half turned as if striving to get a glimpse of his assailant. Then his knees buckled under him and he pitched to the floor.

The man leaned over, coolly picked up the banknotes that had fallen from Curry's fingers, and

thrust them into his pocket. "A good thing your friend spotted this roll. I might have found myself short. Little enough as it is."

"He's no friend of mine," Matt retorted, his eyes upon Curry who lay quiet where he had dropped, a little blood trickling from the wound on his head.

"I didn't figure he was from the talk I heard."

The man stepped back to regard Matt quizzically. "What's this I hear about you slipping the police a phony description of me? I'm damned if I get it."

"You don't have to," Matt returned shortly.

"No, I suppose not. It just had me puzzled, that's all." He shook his head. "The idea of you fronting for me, sending the coppers off to round up a spook. Too bad you didn't get away with it. Too bad for both of us."

Matt remained silent, his eyes still upon Curry, his mind suddenly alert.

"If that cashier hadn't blabbed I might have escaped without all this trouble and you wouldn't have been in a jam. You're going to find yourself in a worse one when this bird wakes up and tells what he saw and what happened to him," the man went on. "You'll have a tough time trying to account for things. The quicker we pull out of here the better. You see that, don't you?"

"I see that," Matt repeated, his mind made up.

The man chuckled. "I've a hunch you have enough gas, after all, haven't you? Enough to get us away?"

"Let's get started," Matt urged, almost impatiently, and moved toward the door.

Outside the night was clear. There was no moon yet, but the stars were bright. The two men passed Curry's car in the yard and went on toward the pier, walked out on it single file. Matt, leading the way, dropped into the moored boat and turned over the engine. It came to life almost at once.

The man watched as Matt cast off the lines and took the wheel. When the boat was moving out into the shadowy cove with only its running lights showing, the passenger, leaning against the door of the cabin, spoke.

"I'll duck inside if a patrol happens along," he said. "I can shoot just as well from there if I have to. Remember that, won't you?"

Matt nodded without turning his head.

"If it comes to a showdown, I'll sink a couple slugs into you before anyone gets to me."

"Like you did Sam Kirkwood," Matt said.

"Only you won't be so lucky," the other responded.

The boat purred on through the star-filled night. The dark water was alive with phosphorescence. It swirled and eddied along the sides of the boat and trailed aft in gleaming whorls of liquid silver. Ahead of them a light glowed for an instant, winked out, the first of the tall channel markers. Other lights blinked here and there, or remained

fixed. Matt knew them all, read them as easily as he did the street signs in the village. They gave him confidence and courage.

"What're you saying if we're stopped?" the passenger inquired presently, and came to stand beside the wheel.

"We won't be," Matt assured him, but didn't explain.

"It'll be safer if we're not," the man said. "Safer for both of us. Don't forget the spot you're in." He peered off into the enveloping haze. "How long will it take to cross the bay?"

"I've made it in twenty minutes, the tide bein' right." Matt wanted to keep the man talking and unsuspecting, keep him within arm's length.

"Good enough. We ought to be well across before that pock-marked lug comes to his senses and spills the news to the coppers. You can drop me off on the mainland and keep right on going. You ought to know a proper hideout. You'd be crazy to return to the island now."

"I been thinkin' on that," Matt said soberly. "Got my plans set." His eyes remained straight ahead, the wheel steady under his fingers. He must be careful now, rounding the point, the shoals were tricky.

Far in the distance a thin finger of light suddenly swept across the sky, dipped and crept along the shore. "A patrol," Matt announced. "Long ways off though."

"Close enough," the other ventured uneasily.

Matt grinned as he leaned forward and cut off the engine. He gave the wheel a sharp twist and instinctively braced himself for what was to come. The boat grounded, the bow lifted, tilted drunkenly as it plowed into the mangroves. The man beside him cried out, groped for the wheel, missed, and was flung headlong to the deck.

Instantly, Matt was upon him, pinning him down. Apparently, the fall had not stunned the man, for he began cursing, struggling. Matt attempted to pinion his arms and got one of them. As he reached for the other a shot thundered in his ear. Flame scorched the back of his neck, but he knew the slug had gone wild. He drove a knee into the man's writhing stomach and at the same time clawed desperately for the gun. He got his fingers around the barrel, tore it away.

The boat lurched as the stern swung around and settled deeper into the water. Matt found himself slipping along the sharply tilted deck and let himself go, dragging the man with him. They bumped against the low gunwale, rocked there a moment and spilled overboard. Matt released his hold as they struck the water, thrust the man from him and swam off.

The tide was running far stronger than he expected and it swept him away from the grounded boat. Turning back against the current he heard the man splashing and yelling. It told him that the fugitive could not swim, or was too panicky to try, and he laughed. In

the dim light he saw the man bobbing toward him, his arms flailing the water. He waited for him to come closer, reached out and seized his coat collar.

"Take it easy," he shouted. "I ain't lettin' you drown."

But the terror-stricken man suddenly clung to him, hung on, choking and spluttering, dragging him under. Matt swore as he endeavored to wrench himself free. The tide carried them along, rolled them over and over crazily. Desperate now, he got both hands about the man's throat, squeezed with all his strength.

He told himself he had been a fool, trying to rescue this crook. The man wasn't worth saving and no one would thank him for doing so. His lungs were bursting and he could not rid himself of the weight that dragged him down. But he must not give up, he thought, must not let himself be drowned. By this time Luke Curry would be awake and hurrying out to tell his story. There would be no one to account for what had happened, or to explain. Matt knew, and the thought of that spurred him to greater effort. He kicked out and came to the surface again. And for a moment, fighting for breath, he did not recognize the shadowy object that loomed above him.

In the small office that opened from Sprague's ship chandlery, the marshal and Sheriff Wilkens listened gravely to Luke Curry's account of what had befallen him.

"Time I come to my senses Matt and this other fellow had skipped out," he finished breathlessly. "They've took off in Matt's boat, and—"

"It wasn't Matt who hit you?" the sheriff broke in.

"Of course not. It was the man he had hid. I never seen him. He slipped up behind and clouted me just after I'd picked up the money."

"How much money was there?" Sprague asked.

"A thick bundle of it," Curry asserted. "Tied up with a strip of paper like they use in the bank. I knew it was some of the stolen money soon's I clapped eyes on it. I figured something was wrong when Matt had his door locked," he ran on. "He wasn't for lettin' me in till I threatened to bust out a window."

"What did he say when you told him about Sam?"

"Made out he was right glad. But I could see he was scared. And he wouldn't come along with me neither. I tell you—"

"You think the man you didn't see was the one Sam told us about?"

"Why else would he be hidin'?"

"Well, if they've put off, as you say," Wilkens stated calmly, "the patrol will pick them up. They're stopping every boat leaving the island now. Nobody's getting away from here tonight. I've seen to that."

Curry shrugged. "Don't be so sure. Matt's a slick one, knowin' these waters, knowin' what he's in for if caught. You'll be lucky to see hide or hair of him again. He kept this crook at his place waitin'

for the draw to be fixed. When I busted in and told him what Sam had said he saw where he'd have to risk gettin' the man off by boat and himself as well."

Sprague shook his head. "I'm not ready to believe that." He looked through the open doorway into the store and saw Lela standing back in the shadows, realized that she must have heard all that Curry told. "Matt will show up again," he went on assuredly, raising his voice. "You wait and see. There is something to explain what has happened."

"Explains itself, don't it?" Curry came back derisively. "I figured first Matt told that yarn about tacklin' the fellow with a gun because he wanted to make himself out a hero. Now it's plain he lied deliberate to put us followin' a blind trail and let his thievin' partner get away safe. And before that he pretended to be knocked out when you found him in the bank."

"How do you know Matt lied?" Sprague demanded.

"Ain't picked up no big, red-face fellow in a gray suit, have you?"

"Not yet. But that doesn't prove anything. There might have been—"

"Even if you did find him that don't account for Matt's skippin' out like he's done or the bundle of money I picked off the floor, and him refusin' to come along with me."

"I didn't ask you to bring him in," Sprague returned. "You said you were going past his place and I told you to stop off and tell him about Sam. If I'd wanted Matt I'd have gone for him myself."

"Well, it's a good thing I walked in on him," Curry said.

The phone rang and the sheriff reached for it. He listened a moment and hung up.

"The bridge is open again," he announced. "My men are checking the occupants of all cars crossing to the mainland."

"You're wastin' time doin' that." Curry scoffed. "The pair you want is travelin' by water."

"You run along and get your head patched up, Luke," Wilkens advised mildly. "Me and the marshal will try to take care of things. Much obliged for what you told us."

Curry slammed the door behind him. Sprague got out of his chair and walked into the store, but saw no one. He called the girl's name, and when there was no response he decided she had slipped back to the apartment upstairs.

"Your niece out there a while ago, wasn't it?" the sheriff queried when Sprague returned. "Thought so. She and Matt been keeping company for some time?"

Sprague nodded. "A year now," he said. "I wouldn't like to think—"

"Be too bad," Wilkens agreed. "Always liked Matt."

The men fell silent then, waiting. Sprague kept glancing at his watch. The phone rang again, but it was only the editor of the county paper asking for the latest news. The sheriff said there was nothing to report so far.

"Might be before long," he added. "Keep your shirt on and stick

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around. . . . Yep, I got a hunch. Maybe the right one. I'll let you know the first thing." He put down the receiver and chuckled. "Most excitement we've had here since Ike Crater mistook a porpoise for a torpedo and—"

A noise outside on the stoop brought Sprague to his feet. He moved swiftly across the room, but the door opened before he reached it and Matt came in. His clothes were dripping and he walked unsteadily toward a chair, sank into it.

"I'd have been here sooner only I had a little trouble," he began, and looked expectantly around the room. "Luke showed up yet?"

"Been here and gone," Sprague said. "Told quite a story. We've been waiting—"

"I've got one to tell myself," Matt broke in. And while the man listened he revealed what had happened at his place just before and after Curry's appearance on the scene. "I couldn't warn him or come down here at the time," he finished. "Not with that crook holdin' a gun on the two of us."

Wilkens swore softly. "So that was the way of it, eh? A wonder we didn't suspect as much. This man forced you to take him off by boat, did he?"

"I didn't need no forcin'," Matt declared. "Usin' the boat gave me the chance I wanted, though I hadn't seen it that way till after Luke got clouted. When I run the boat aground as I'd planned on doin', the crook was knocked flat. I piled on to him and we rolled overboard. He couldn't swim so well, and when I tried to save him he grabbed me, pulled me under. I thought I was a goner for a while, what with the tide runnin' so strong and him fightin' me. If I hadn't come up the last time right smack against that first channel marker, and hung on to it to get back my wind—"

"But the man!" Sprague cried. "What became of him?"

"I towed him ashore after I'd rested up some. Brought him along as far's your stoop. He didn't give me no trouble then. I guess he's done for."

With an exclamation, the sheriff bounded to the door, flung it open. Sprague crowded close behind him. In the dim light they stared down at the quiet, sodden form that lay on the rough planking. Then between them they carried the man into the room, lowered him to a bench.

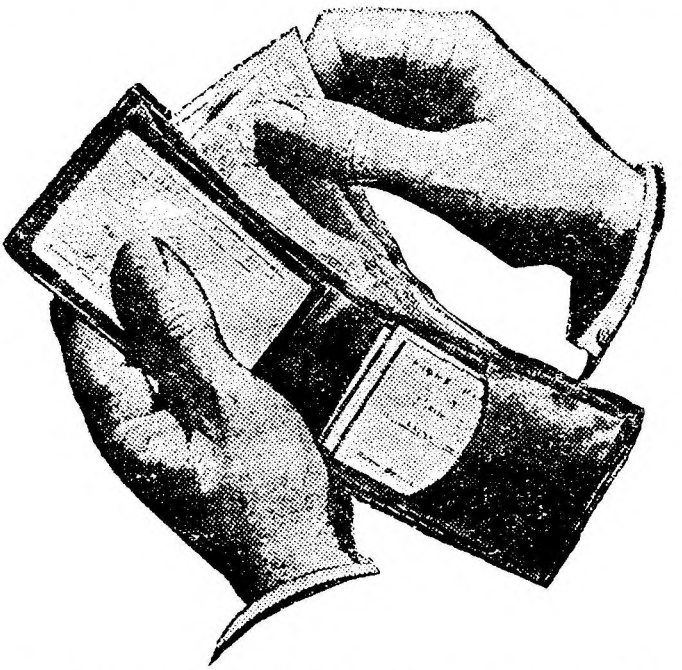
"Dead, all right," Wilkens announced a moment later, completing his examination, and cocked an eye at Matt. "These marks on his throat—"

"I had to get rough," Matt explained.

The sheriff nodded and began to explore the dead man's pockets. He dug out several flat packages of damp currency, scanned them. "Looks like most of the bank's money is here," he declared jubilantly.

"That's why I took pains to bring him in, dead or not," Matt said. "I wanted you to know I'd got the right man, and to own up to what—"

How to prevent inflation in one easy lesson



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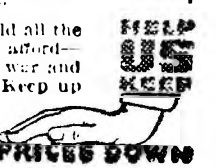

A United States War message prepared by the War Advertising Council; approved by the Office of War Information; and contributed by this magazine in cooperation with the Magazine Publishers of America.

"No doubt of it," Sprague put in, smiling. "Not with that evidence parked on him. And he fits the description Sam Kirkwood gave us."

"Don't fit the fellow I described," Matt burst out.

"Why should it?" charged Sprague. "That other man—"

"Wasn't no other man at all," Matt confessed. "You know I'd lied to you. You must have knowed that ever since Sam told what he did. It was this little fellow here who tackled me in the bank. I . . . I was too scared to stop him."

Sprague remained unperturbed. "You weren't too scared the second time."

"His gun jammed and I should have caught him easy," Matt hurried on. "But I didn't. I just stood there like a dummy, let him beat me down and get away. I was too shamed to tell that before all the folks, so I made up—"

"But he didn't get away," Wilkens interrupted, and came beside him. "You got the man we want and the money he stole. That's all that matters."

"Yes, but I told—" Matt faltered.

"Who cares what you told?" protested Sprague. "What difference does it make now? How's anyone going to disprove a word of it? We couldn't have if you hadn't brought in this man and confessed. Probably makes you feel better, owning up to us, and I admire you for it, Matt. But you're not repeating it. Understand? You're sticking to your story."

Matt looked uncertainly from one to the other of the men. The marshal grinned as he caught Wilkens' eye.

"Dogged if that hunch of yours hasn't panned out correct, sheriff. You figured all along there might be two men in on this robbery, and now we're sure of it."

Wilkens nodded and chuckled. "I was always pretty good on hunches."

"That big fellow who mixed with Matt seems to have given us the slip so far," the marshal declared. "Wouldn't surprise me none if he hasn't got across the bridge by now right under the nose of your deputy."

"Likely be hard to pick up, too," the sheriff admitted. He hesitated and looked guardedly over his shoulder as footsteps sounded on the stairs. "I'll have to phone that newspaper fellow right off, tell him the facts," he added, and lowered his voice as Lela appeared in the doorway. "You wouldn't want to make me out a liar, would you, Matt?"

THE END.

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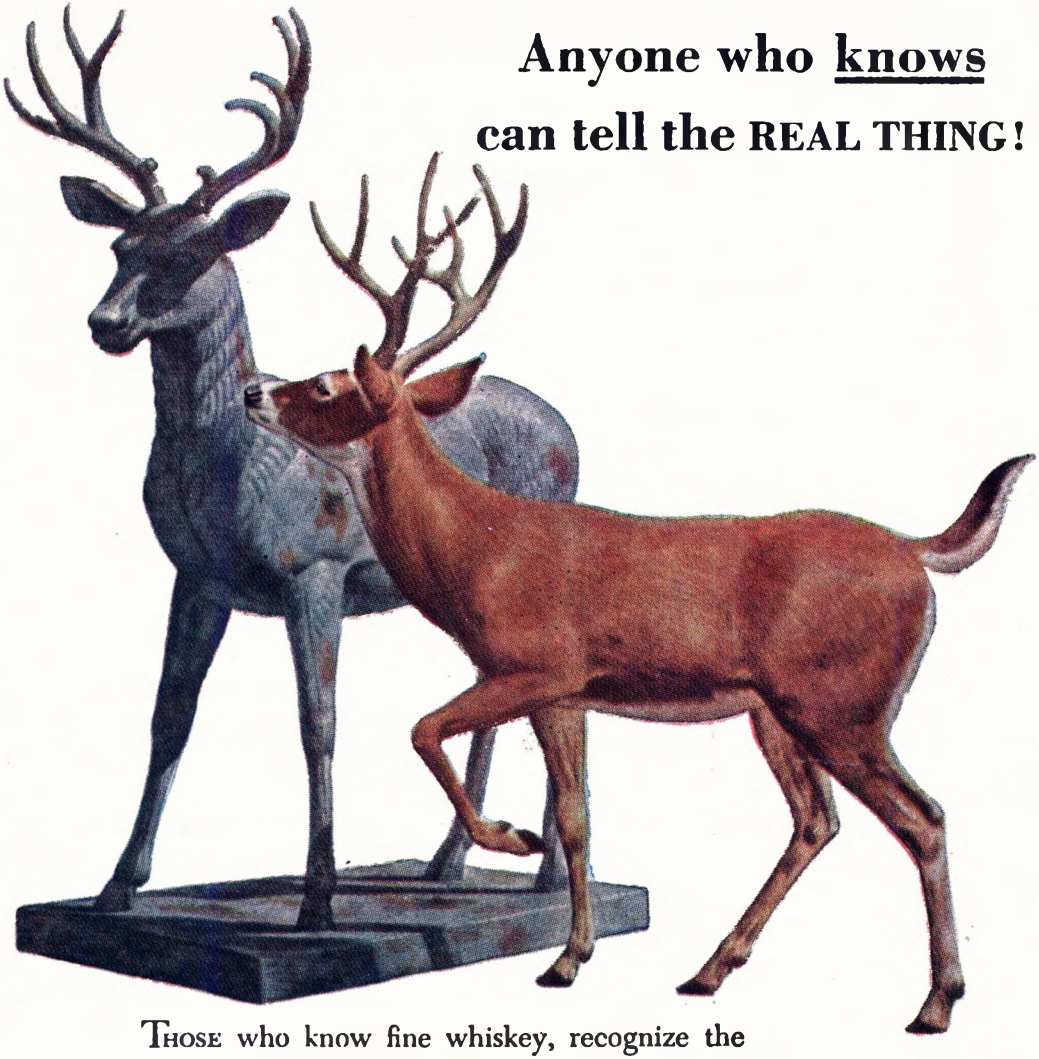

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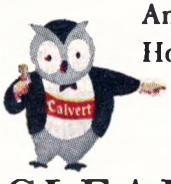

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