

STREET & SMITH'S

DETECTIVE

STORY MAGAZINE

WINTER 1949

25 CENTS

The
WAITING
Bride

and **THE CORPSE**

by T. T. Flynn

ALL STORIES COMPLETE



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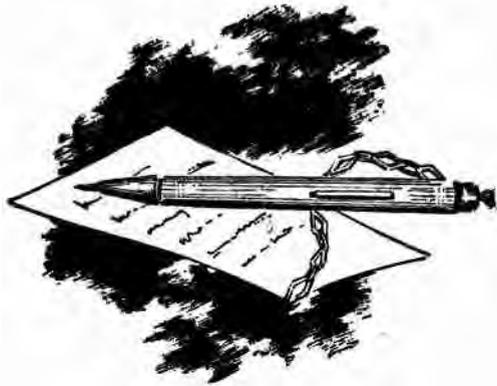
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last of the

A NOVELETTE



Kingmakers

BY PAUL E. TRIEM

He was a hard-boiled politician; to his way of thinking, there just wasn't anything money couldn't buy.

WHEN a copy boy told me that J. J. Bennington wanted to see me, up in the Tower Room, I thought at first that I was going to get my ticket.

Then I knew it couldn't be that. The Old Man never hired or fired. He didn't know the names of any of the men who worked for him. The *Chronicle* was just one of a string of papers he owned, scattered from coast to coast. He was one of those legendary figures, common enough back in the era of undisguised plunder politics but almost extinct now. In fact, you could say that James J. Bennington was the last of the kingmakers.

I told the city editor where I was

going. He asked if there were any last words for my survivors and said the city room would send a floral offering. I went down into the street, around the corner, and in at the private entrance. Up on the sixth floor Mr. Bennington was waiting for me.

This was the first time I had seen him close up. He was a good six-feet-two or-three, and built heavy where the strain came, around the middle. His face was expressionless. Heavy, sagging lids partly hid eyes the color of wet sand. He looked at me as if I were something out of a museum.

"You are the political reporter, McGrady?" he said rumbly.

I said that I was.

"Haze McGrady," he rumbled on. "Irishmen make good newspaper men. And poor lovers."

If he'd been anyone but the Big Boss, I'd have explained to him that the Irishman he was talking to didn't hire out as a lover. But I was too old for that kind of foolishness. I had been hot enough and quick enough with my repartees twenty years ago, but now I knew how to bite down on my tongue. Sticking to the outside of a polished steel cannon ball is hard enough, without trying to do a dance of the seven veils.

After a moment he turned and went ponderously away along the hall. He opened a door leading to a circular stairway and started up. I followed him. So that is how I landed in the famous Tower Room, at two, of a June afternoon, just about eight hours before the murder of a girl named Cynthia.

The octagonal room was approximately twenty feet across and was paneled in dark wood. Against some of the panels hung portraits of politicians. There was Grover Cleveland, fat and smug and durable looking. Next to him was a framed photo of little, frosty, bewhiskered Benjamin Harrison. There was an old-fashioned desk, with the top up and the writing bed running over with letters and other papers. Directly across from the desk stood a three-paneled screen with storks on it.

Bennington eased himself into his chair and told me to sit down. "I'm sending you on a political mission," he rumbled. "You'll take a packet containing five thousand dollars in bills down to the Oceanside Hotel, and locate a girl who lives near there. You'll give her the money and tell her to get out of this part of the country."

Just like that. I wondered if this little proposition had anything to do with J. J.'s saying that Irishmen made poor lovers.

"Who is the dame?" I asked.

He kept his sand colored eyes, under

their heavy lids, fixed on me. I could see that he was still sizing me up, that he never quit studying any man he dealt with. He kept a kind of perpetual inventory on the other fellow's character.

"Her name is Cynthia," he replied. "As far as I know, that is the only name she has." He paused, sat with his lower lip sagging, his colossal head tipped forward, watching me. Then he added, "This girl is the special friend of Robert Galvin."

That didn't help much. Bob Galvin was a big, handsome blond man-about-town, a dabbler in politics. The Big Boys, who managed things, had never been interested in him so far as I knew.

"Galvin will be the next United States senator from this state," Bennington went on. "Pendexter has proved unreliable."

I felt like some guy who has sneaked into an exhibit of art, and all of a sudden the expensive statuary begins tumbling down around him. Senator Clyde Pendexter was supposed to have his job in his pocket. I could have got all the bets I wanted, anywhere in town, that he would succeed himself. But now this old kingmaker was telling me Pendexter was washed up.

"This . . . ah, this girl," J. J. said, "must be gotten quietly out of the way. Galvin is a fool. He wants to divorce his wife and marry her. So you will drive down to Oceanside and send her about her business."

He fumbled in his vest pocket, drew out a cigar wrapped in silver foil. He unwrapped it, bit off the end, lighted it.

"Galvin's money comes from his wife," he continued. "Sally Galvin is not the woman to sit quietly by and let her husband make a fool of her. As soon as she finds out what he is up to, she will raise the hot place and put a block under it. I do not choose to take risks like that."

He nodded and then turned his head—slowly, like a four-hundred pound sea-turtle—and stared at the screen.

"All right, Niles," he said. "Give this man any additional information you think he should have."

A man came out from behind the screen across the room. A little man, mousy and dapper. I recognized him as Bertram Niles, a guy who had run for a lot of offices and always been snowed under. Now he had given up the direct attack, and was hanging on to Bob Galvin's coat tails.

He stood with his hands clasped in front of him, tipped back a little, a small, ineffective-looking man in a tweed suit, a purple edge handkerchief and the light platinum chain of what I took to be a pair of pince-nez showing from his breast pocket, his hand-painted tie a little askew. He looked uneasy.

"I sincerely hope this person is discreet, Mr. Bennington," Bertie Niles said. "If it should get back to Bob that I was here—"

"Give that man the data he needs and let him go about his business," J. J. Bennington interrupted.

So I learned that the girl was a blonde, in her early twenties, but looking not more than eighteen. She had been a chirp—Mr. Niles said, precisely, a "female vocalist"—with a name band, then had been picked up and taken over by Galvin.

"I believe in the beginning she did not know that he was married," Niles said. "But, of course, it would have made no difference if she had, she is the parasitic type."

You could see that Bertram Niles didn't like women. And he particularly didn't like this young dame because she was dangerous to his ambitions for Bob Galvin.

J. J. sat with his big flippers spread out on the arms of his chair. He didn't seem to listen but he wasn't missing anything. When Bertie Niles had finished telling me that the girl, Cynthia, lived in a shingled cottage Galvin had bought for her, down the beach from the resort hotel, the Old Man nodded toward the door.

"You can go, Niles," he rumbled.

He sent this jackal off as if he were dismissing an office boy. Then he opened a pedestal drawer of his desk and took out a packet of bills. He handed them to me. I riffled them over, five grand in folding money.

J. J. took out a wallet and produced some more bills. These he also handed to me. "The packet is for the girl. You don't need to get a receipt. Just tell her it would be foolish to try any tricks." He looked at me ponderingly. I could see that was meant for me, also. No tricks. "The two hundred is for your expenses while you are down there. Your room and meals at the Oceanside will cost you twenty-five dollars a day. You need not make out an expense account for this trip."

That was just a polite way of oiling my tongue so it wouldn't squeak. If I could do this trick at all, I could do it in one day. So I ought to clear at least a century and a half, but what I wanted to do was to throw the money on the floor and tell J. J. Bennington to get someone else to wash his dirty coveralls. That was what I wanted to do.

Oceanside was built like a feudal village, little houses scattered around a baronial castle. Only in this case the castle was a twelve-story modern resort hotel, with landscaped grounds and tennis courts and a golf course. A bellhop came out to take charge of my sedan, another grabbed my shabby old gladstone. The room clerk looked me over while I registered. I could see he had a notion to tell me he was full-up.

But he shrugged and gave me a nice room with a bath and balcony. I freshened up, then went back to the lobby. It was a little after four, and somewhere near at hand a dance band was playing. I could hear the glide and shuffle of dancers.

And just then someone came hurrying in through the lobby. I saw her going past—swift, light, eager—and

as I stared after her I felt a tingle like an electric shock. Maybe you don't believe in hunches, but I've had a thousand of them, most of them lucky, and so has every other man who ever worked long on a big city daily. This girl looked to be maybe eighteen. She had bright-gold hair and eyes the same shade of blue as flax flowers. She went on into the room where the orchestra was playing and after a moment I followed.

This was one of the dining rooms. There were tables around the sides of the long, rather narrow dance floor, which was as shiny as glass. Half a dozen couples swayed about, a bunch of expensive-looking old ladies in black silk were drinking tea and eating petits-fours and watching. The band was on a low platform at the other side of the room. I noticed the band leader, a tall, slim, dark young fellow with the smoldering eyes of a Latin when he is looking at a pretty woman.

This lad was looking at the girl. The girl, I mean. The one I had trailed in here. As I stood in the dusky glow near the entrance—the room was lighted only by silk-shaded table lamps—a chunky man with a round red face sauntered in beside me.

"Thinking of dancing, chum?" he asked. "Because you can't—not in that outfit!"

One Irishman knows another. Also a former police reporter knows a plain-clothes dick, private or official.

"What's eating you, O'Brien?" I asked.

"The name is Halloran," he said. "And I'm the—"

"You're the house dick. So I'm not a hotel thief. I'm registered here." I knew I mustn't haul my paper into this so I added, "And I'm a talent scout for a movie company."

The girl was dancing with a middle-aged man. She was so light and graceful that she made him look like a dancing turnip. Halloran, the hotel detective, kept on watching me. I saw that I had to loosen.

He uncrumpled the bill I gave him enough to make out the "10" in the corner.

"O.K., chum, I see you're a regular guy," he said. "Now what is on your mind?"

"I told you. I'm a talent scout. Who is that girl?"

Halloran gave me a quick up-and-down, took in my ready-mades, let his mouth quirk at one side. But he said, "Uh-uh, chum! Mustn't touch! She's hot. Make no passes at *her!*"

"Who is the band leader?"

Detective Halloran looked so surprised that I could see he wasn't just trying to scare me out to protect the guy on the platform.

"Him? That's Jimmy Pilgrim. Got an engagement here for the season."

"I suppose it's all right for him to make passes at this girl? Watch him now!"

Pilgrim was so absorbed watching the little blond wren dance that he nearly lost count of his dance beat. Halloran glanced that way and shrugged.

"You got any receipt for making a trumpeter *not* look at dames?" he asked. "That's his red wagon. I'm just telling you in confidence, not *that* lady! She lives down on the beach in a house of her own, and her gentleman friend packs enough weight in this part of the world to sit down on you and me together and smash us flat."

My hunch had been right. This must be Cynthia. I asked Halloran if she came often to the hotel.

"Practically every afternoon, for the tea dance," he said. "But at exactly five minutes to six she skips out, like Cinderella. Off like a bee for its beehive, back to her cottage, so as to be there if Mr. X shows up!"

Once, as she glided past, she looked at me. Just that once. And I knew that a guy named Haze McGrady, forty-two years old, with pouches under his eyes and not able to drink as much whisky as he used to, had fallen hard for a young thrush who was

as dangerous as an electric chair. Oh, sure, she wasn't as good as she should be. She knew better than to live the way she was living. But this is a tough world and I'm more likely to be surprised at people being as good as they are than at their doing things they oughtn't to do.

Halloran ambled off and I waited. At five minutes to six, Cynthia pushed out of her partner's arms. She was dancing now with Jimmy Pilgrim who had defied conventions and maybe hotel rules by coming down off the platform to dance with her. Maybe it was with his band that she had sung with, before Bob Galvin grabbed her.

She pushed away and came past me, light and radiant, heading through the lobby and then running down the steps. She was like a young kid running home to be in time for dinner.

I went out on the wide porch. There she went, down the beach. Pilgrim came out but he didn't see me. He was staring with his smoldering eyes after Cynthia.

So I cut down the steps and off across the grounds. I followed a quiet street that paralleled the beach. Evening had come, kids were playing in yards, I heard women in kitchens, singing as they got dinner ready, and a thick, powdery fog had begun to blow in from the sea.

I turned into a street that must lead to the shingled cottage. It was a dead-end street and sure enough the cottage was right in front of the dead end. Just as I hove into sight I saw the girl, running across the sandy backyard and then out of sight at the rear. A minute or two later lights came on. Bertram Niles had said she had a servant but only during the daytime.

I didn't want to contact her just yet. I wanted to kind of let all I had seen and heard settle. I wanted to work out my line. This was going to be plenty rugged, even for a guy who had many a time stuck his foot into a doorway and asked questions that were strictly none of his business. So

I turned back and just then a car came along through the fog.

By the light reflected from the instrument panel I saw the face of the person behind the wheel. A woman, proud, imperious, not so young any more, but with a look of breeding and race that passing years can't change, bobbed hair shot with gray, cameo-sharp face turned straight ahead. She didn't see me.

Back at the hotel I ran into Jimmy Pilgrim. He stopped in front of me, stuck his thumbs into his side coat pockets, stared with smoldering black eyes.

"I saw you watching a young lady, this afternoon," he said.

Ordinarily, I'd have told him who I was and that my intentions were strictly harmless. But, somehow, this evening I didn't feel like explaining to this horn blower that I knew I was out of it. I just watched him and waited.

"Listen, my friend," he said softly, "keep your eyes to yourself after this! If I catch you staring at Cynthia again—"

I laughed. "Thanks, mister," I said. "I wasn't sure that this was Cynthia. I might have been playing on a dead card!"

I pushed him out of the way and walked on, expecting any moment to feel his hand on my shoulder. But when I got to the dining room door and turned to look back, he was gone. I guess he was another guy who didn't want to risk losing his job.

While I ate, I thought of every gambit I had ever heard of, the appeal to decency, to vanity, to cupidity. That five grand in my side coat pocket was a lot of moola. But I knew none of these angles would work.

Then I figured I'd try the truth. I'd tell her that she couldn't win the game she was trying to play, that Galvin was a stuffed-shirt who would throw her over when he was tired of her, and that there were Big People back of him

who would smash her if she continued to get in their way.

And I'd tell her I was her friend.

I took the way down the beach. I looked around to see if Jimmy Pilgrim was maybe tagging along, but apparently he wasn't. So I slogged on over the hard sand, and the fog blew in from the water, and I could hear the eerie screams of gulls, disturbed by beach waves and tumbling driftwood. It was a forlorn kind of night.

By the time I could see Cynthia's cottage through the fog, I was almost upon it. Two windows at the side, up near the front, were lighted. All of a sudden I heard a door slam hard, then someone was running. I just stood there, listening. A car engine began to roar. There was a crescendo shriek as it came into gear and took off, fast, up that dead-end street.

Without any definite reason, my heart began to pump so that I could feel the blood throbbing in my neck, could hear it inside my ears. I stared at those lighted windows as if they could tell me something, then began to run. As I came even with the nearest window, I stopped to look into the house.

I was looking into a long, deep living room. There were two other windows over at the left, they must open toward the street. There was a door, straight across from where I stood. A big fireplace, laid with driftwood, but not lighted, showed on the right. And just about the middle of the room, beside a center table with books and magazines on it and under a frosted ceiling light which was turned on, sitting stretched out in a chaise-lounge was Cynthia.

She wore a pongee coolie blouse and blue flannel slacks and gold-colored beach sandals. One of her arms lay straight down along her thigh, the other was crumpled behind her, as if she had fallen back there and not moved. There was a big red stain on the front of her blouse and her head

was tipped forward as far as it would go.

I got in through the window. I crossed over to the chaise-lounge, stooped and looked into Cynthia's face. Her eyes were partly open; they had the blank look of windows in a house that is no longer lived in.

I touched her neck—it was so warm that I tried to tell myself she must be alive, but she wasn't. There was no pulse. She had stopped breathing. I could see a spot on the coolie blouse where a bullet had drilled through; there was an area of powder burn around it.

There had been a fight before she was killed. Two chairs were knocked over, rugs had been kicked across the polished floor. I went across to the door I had seen while I was standing outside and opened it. The light in this entrance hall was not on, but I could see a wall telephone. I lifted the receiver and asked the girl who answered to give me the sheriff's office. When a man's voice came to me, I told him where I was and that there had been a murder. Then I remembered that slamming door and the roaring engine and I told him the killer had probably taken off from this beach cottage by auto. I hung up and went back to look at Cynthia.

No, she hadn't moved. Of course, I had known she wouldn't, but seeing her sit stretched out there, with her head down and one arm crumpled behind her, made me grind my teeth. All I wanted was to get my mitts on the party that had done this. I remembered the woman who had driven here. The woman with the cameo-clear face, but that had been more than an hour ago. She had probably gone before the killing—or had she?

While I was trying to figure this out, I saw that Cynthia was holding something clutched in the hand that rested on her leg.

I got her fingers open, but she fought me all the way. She had died holding tight to whatever it was—and now her dead hand was like stone.

The thing she had been hanging on to was a pencil, a mechanical pencil with a bright blue enameled barrel, the writing tip and the blunt end plated with chromium. That's all I saw just then. I dropped the pencil into my pocket.

A small desk with a slanting cover stood over at the side. I listened for an approaching car, heard nothing but the booming whistle of a steamer, far out at sea, then went across and opened the desk.

There was a sheet of note paper with some words in ink on it. Beside the paper lay a ball-point pen. There was a sheaf of bills. The note said, "I told you not to leave this money. I won't take it. I'll go away—"

There was your sixty-four dollar question: who was "you?" The woman in the car? Or the party who had run out of the house as I approached? Or were they the same person?

I heard a car now. I went back into the hall and opened the front door. Through the fog I could just make out two men sliding down out of a sedan.

They were both tall, they were sunburned and looked countrified, and I soon discovered they knew no more about covering a murder kick than a pig knows about a holiday. I told them about coming here, on private business with Miss Cynthia, and about hearing someone make a getaway.

I went in with them and they stood, their faces not quite so ruddy, looking down at the body on the chaise-longue.

I told them about the note and the money in the desk and the sheriff, a worried looking man who said he was running for re-election and was half out of his mind, didn't think to ask me what I was poking around for. I didn't say anything about the pencil. At that time I thought it was something that Cynthia had owned, and I meant to keep it.

"Call the coroner," I told Sheriff Lynch, "and if he doesn't know anything about handling a kick like this, phone the city and try to borrow a

detective from the homicide bureau. I'm going back to the hotel.

My idea was that this was the time for me to bow myself out of this business, permanently. That was McGrady, the canny and cynical newspaperman, thinking and planning. Just get your bag and get out, McGrady.

But on the way back to the hotel I knew I wouldn't do that. This murder had been done right under my nose. And it was Cynthia who had been killed. That made it my business. Just how I didn't bother to think out; I knew without thinking. And all I wanted was to get the guy who had shot her in front of me.

The first thing to check up on was the band leader, Pilgrim. If he had a car—Halloran, the house detective would know that. So I went up the stairs and into the lobby, and someone was calling my name.

"Call for Mr. McGrady! Mr. McGrady!"

"The end booth, sir," the freckled bellhop said when I told him I was McGrady.

I went in and closed the door. The usual smell of stale cigars. The receiver was off the hook.

"Is this Mr. McGrady?" an unsteady voice asked.

"McGrady speaking," I said.

"Yes, yes . . . this is—" He broke off and seemed to be afraid to give me his name. In the background I could hear a piano playing.

Then he said, "This is Mr. Niles. I am speaking from Mr. Galvin's study. I thought you ought to know that he has gone down there, probably to see the girl—"

My voice must have sounded like a bulldog barking. "How long ago did he start?"

Another silence. That piano was playing "Central Avenue Breakdown," or trying to. Not doing a very good job, kind of as if the party at the piano was clowning. I thought, "Cynthia is murdered and those aristocrats are throwing a party!" But Bob Galvin wasn't attending.

"How long ago, Niles?" I snarled.

"I . . . I really can't be sure. I just discovered that he was gone and where he had gone! Two hours ago, probably!" That was long enough for Galvin to drive down here. Then all of a sudden Niles said, "Someone's coming, I must hang up!"

The phone clicked. I jerked the receiver onto the hook and wiped my face.

Drops of perspiration were sliding down it.

As soon as I hit town I stopped at a drugstore and looked up the address of the Robert Galvin house. Then I realized that the chances of the butler or whoever came to the door letting me in at this time of night were slim. Niles probably had left, so I called the house and pretty quick I heard a woman's voice, sharp, alert, authoritative.

"I'd like to speak to Mr. Robert Galvin," I said.

"Who are you and what do you want with Mr. Galvin?" the sharp voice asked.

That was a giveaway. No servant would have answered that way. I showed my Irish blood, by taking a big chance.

"You will do just as well, Mrs. Galvin," I said. I waited a moment but she didn't say anything.

And things were beginning to click in my brain. This clear-cut, authoritative voice went perfectly with the cameo-clear face of the woman I had seen in the car, driving toward the shingled beach cottage.

So I said, "There has been a murder down at Oceanside."

This time she spoke up at once, coolly, warily. "Why do you think that a murder at Oceanside would interest me or my husband?"

She was a cool customer and I knew what I ought to do was just to hang up and go to my hotel room and go to bed. I was fighting out of my class.

"Because you were there when it happened," I told her.

This time there was quite a long silence. I wished I could see her face. Then she said, "What is your name?"

"McGrady. Where can I see you?"

"Are you with the police?"

I could have said, "yes," and later she could have had me thrown into the brig for impersonating an officer. I said, "I'm an interested party. Where can I see you?"

"Come to my house, naturally. I'll hear what you have to say."

The house was a big one, expensive-looking, set back behind a wide lawn with a fountain. I went up the walk and stopped at a pair of grille-work doors. I was groping around for a bell when the inner door opened and a woman stood looking at me.

She wore a flame colored negligée and her dark hair was shot with gray. Her features were sharply cut, decisive, her dark-brown eyes were alert and confident. This was the dame I had seen in the car, all right.

"You are Mr. McGrady?" she asked. There was a kind of courtesy in her voice that some rich people use toward servants. When I said I was McGrady, she let me in.

The reception hall was like the ones you see photos of in magazines, curved stairway, spider-work iron banister. She went ahead of me and turned into a room on the left.

As I followed down the hall I looked for Bertram Niles or for the piano I had heard playing when he called me. I didn't see either. Probably Niles had beat it.

The room was fitted up as an office, modern desk, two-drawer file in matching finish beside it, some low bookcases with reference volumes in them over against the wall. A few chairs. A trough-shaped fluorescent desk lamp, suspended from a crane, was turned on.

She closed the door after I was inside and walked around behind the desk and sat down.

"Over there," she said, nodding to a chair. Then: "Now, what do you want?"

I had to go easy. If I hadn't been a fool I wouldn't have gone at all, I'd just have said, "Lady, I've made a mistake. Overlook it and I'll beat it and you'll never see me or hear from me again!"

But I thought of Cynthia, lying with one arm crumpled behind her, and I knew that what happened to me wasn't important. This dame might or might not have done the killing. But she was involved.

I said, "Cynthia is dead. She was murdered. About the time you were in her house."

I hadn't seen her enter the house, but if she hadn't she would let me know fast enough. She just sat with her elbows on the arms of her chair, her finger tips lightly fitted together, watching me.

"Do you deny that you were there?" I asked.

She stirred, sat a little straighter, slightly shook her head. "No. I was there, but I left the girl quite all right. Are you sure she is dead?"

She seemed to think I might be bluffing. I said, "She was murdered. By someone who ran out of the house just as I was coming toward it. This party jumped into a car and raced the engine and tore off at sixty an hour. It could have been you."

Again she shook her head. "No, I didn't hurt her. She was all right when I left."

"But you admit that you went down to try to make her give up your husband—"

Her sudden questioning stare stopped me. "You are quite wrong. When I found out about this affair, I gave my husband his choice, stop, right then and there or lose his comfortable position as a rich woman's husband. Of course, he decided to give up the girl. Then I felt sorry for her. He is shallow and heartless, but how would she know that? So I went down to offer to do something for her. She was heart-broken. I think he had fooled her terribly. I

stayed just a few minutes. She was alive and well when I left."

This all matched up with the money in the desk and the note Cynthia had started to write. I got the feeling that Mrs. Robert Galvin was watching me so steadily because she had something to hide.

"All right," I said, "that puts you in the clear. But Galvin was down there. I suppose you know that?"

She started to stand up. Then she made herself sit back and relax. "Oh, no, he wasn't," she said. "Because he has been at home all evening!"

She was a poor liar. She had never had to lie. Her voice had lost its cool confidence; there was something shaky and defiant in it.

I just sat watching her, a trick I had seen a police detective pull on a guy he was trying to crack. She stirred, her lips parted, and just then the door opened and Bob Galvin came in.

He had on a tux and what goes with it, and he was very drunk. He goggled at me through bloodshot eyes, then looked at his wife. I had never realized how handsome he was. Even with his congested eyes and twitching lips, he looked distinguished.

"Who is this person, Sally?" he asked.

"Bob, I told you to go to bed! Please go now," she said.

"Don' wanta go," he, muttered. "Heard this fellow talking about Cynthia. Got a right to know what's going on!"

She watched him a moment, frowning, then she turned to me. "You will have to leave," she said. "Come back tomorrow morning."

But Galvin blocked this. He came lurching at me, grabbed my sleeve, swung back his fist. "What's this about Cynthia?" he asked. "You talk or I'll bash in your face!"

I let him hang onto my coat. What I wanted to know was whether or not he was really as drunk as he seemed. His solicitude about Cynthia was

pretty convincing. But he was a man who had lived by playing various heroic parts, usually for an audience of women, and this might just be another clever rôle.

"If you try to swing at me I'll throw you down so hard your head will bust open," I said. "And you're not so drunk, Galvin. You drove up from Oceanside a lot faster than a drunken man could make it!"

Mrs. Galvin stood behind her desk, watching, no longer trying to interfere. And Galvin did seem a little less drunk. He let go my sleeve.

"What were you saying about Cynthia?" he demanded.

"I said she was dead, that she had been murdered. You were down there and you ought to know!"

His face changed as if the expression on it were cast by a cloud, which was drifting fast. I saw what looked like startled incredulity, then grief and then rage.

"You're an infernal liar!" he cried. He whirled on his wife. "Is this true? Has someone killed her? Do you know anything about it?"

She had more will power and more intelligence in one finger than he had in his whole graceful body. "Bob," she said softly, "the best thing you can do is to keep your silly mouth shut and go to bed. You're drunk. You've been prowling around the house all evening, drinking and pitying yourself."

He stared at her. "I wasn't here all evening," he said. "I came home about half an hour ago. What are you lying for?"

Momentarily, they were fighting each other, and I listened with my fists clenched and my neck stiff. Mrs. Galvin glanced sharply toward the hall door, which her husband had left partly open. Then she looked again at him.

I was pretty sure by now that one of them was lying and doing a very slick job. Maybe I was wrong about Sally Galvin not being able to lie skill-

fully. Maybe she was skating circles around me. She could have killed Cynthia or this stuffed shirt, her husband, could have done it and just be putting on an act.

"Galvin was down there because a witness I can produce in court said so and because," I added, watching Galvin, "he was seen on the Oceanside road, driving like mad, this way!"

He looked uncertainly at me. "Then maybe I did go down to see Cynthia," he said unexpectedly. "I got drunk, blind, stupid drunk. I thought I was at the club—"

"You were!" his wife said desperately. "I called the club. You were there till just before you came home!"

But I knew she had not called any club. Her lips were pressed tight together, her hands were clenched, as tight as mine. She was going all out to shelter this handsome playboy she had bought.

I remembered something. The pencil, Cynthia's pencil. It was the kind of thing Galvin might have given her. Maybe if I flashed it on him now I'd jolt something out of him.

I drew it out and held it up. "Recognize this, Galvin?" I asked. "Cynthia was holding it when she was killed! Maybe the poor kid tried to use it to defend herself with. Anyhow, she had it in her hand when I found her lying there, dead. This is something you gave her, isn't it?"

Bob Galvin gaped at the pencil. But it was his wife who really broke things up. She saw the pencil and came around the end of her desk.

Then she stopped and looked at him. There was hurt pride and a frightening kind of anger in her white face. "Did you give that miserable girl the pencil I gave you?" she asked in an unsteady voice. "Because, if you did—"

I think she meant just then that if he had done what she thought he had, she'd quit lying for him, quit helping him in any way, just throw him to the lions. But Galvin began to talk.

"Wait a moment," he said. "I didn't give that pencil to Cynthia. I never did. But I couldn't use it, so I gave it—"

I looked again at the pencil. And right then I saw something that jolted me, too. There had been a fine white metal chain attached to the blunt end of this pencil. It had broken off, but two tiny links remained.

This thing was beginning to come clear and it was terrific. Through a red haze I seemed to see Cynthia, fighting for her life. She grabbed the chain and it slid through her fingers till she was holding the pencil. The chain broke. Anything for a weapon, but just about then the gun must have cut loose and she dropped.

I had seen a fine chain like that when I was up in the Tower Room. I had seen it running from Bertram Niles' lapel buttonhole to his breast pocket. I had thought he was carrying a pince-nez. But the chain had held a pencil, this pencil.

Niles had phoned me, he said from *this* house, so soon after the murder that if that alibi stuck, he was out of it. But in the background as he talked to me I had heard a piano playing "Central Avenue Breakdown."

I whirled toward Mrs. Galvin. "Where is your piano?" I asked.

Her eyes had a stricken look. "Piano?" she said thickly. "I don't own such a thing. I am not musical."

She looked toward the hall door. Something had fallen over out there.

I turned and sprinted. As I spun into the hall, a man was streaking for the front door. A rug flew out from under his feet and he slammed down hard.

He was up like a rabbit. But he must have realized that he'd never make the door. He whirled, his hand went under his coat, came out holding a gun. I ran in and ducked and heard the gun go off. Somewhere back down the hall a man screamed and something hit the floor so hard that the front door rattled.

I had him by the arms but he was mad with terror and hate and he nearly got his gun hand wrenched loose. The gun went off again and this time the plaster rattled down. Bertram Niles was panting and cursing, his voice screeched like a file on glass.

I tripped him and fell on top of him, but this little man who looked so puny was giving me the surprise of my life. His muscles were not big, but they were tough as rawhide. He kept inching the muzzle of the gun around toward my head.

Then I flipped my knee over his gun arm and pinned it to the floor. He tried to reach over with the other hand to grab the gun, but I shifted a hand to his throat and squeezed down on the windpipe. He let go the revolver and I kicked it away.

This was the man who had killed Cynthia! As I bent down and stared into the convulsed face so close to mine, I hated him more than I had ever hated anyone in my life. As I got astraddle of him and got both hands on his throat, his eyes began to bulge. His tongue came out. His face was turning dark-blue.

I heard Mrs. Galvin sobbing. "Bob . . . Bob darling . . . you mustn't die!"

So that stray bullet, meant for me, had hit Galvin. I threw my weight into my job. When the servants came and dragged me off, Niles was unconscious.

He swore at his preliminary hearing that he had gone down just to reason with the girl. He said there was no sense sending a clown like me, that a shrewd man of the world, meaning himself was the only hope. His story was that she had come at him like a wild cat and he had shot her in self-defense.

All lies, of course. He had gone down there to kill Cynthia. He was one of those dried-up egomaniacs who get so hypnotized by one idea that everything else seems unimportant.

He thought she would be found dead, that the thing would be hushed up, that from then on Bob Galvin's climb to fame and prestige would be swift and uninterrupted. And he, Bertram Niles, would be the real power behind the throne, the kudos would really be for him.

Cynthia hadn't taken it sitting down. She had tried to grab him. She had got hold of the pencil. Niles hadn't discovered that it was missing till he was heading back for town in his car. Then he must have nearly had a stroke.

He didn't dare go back; he might be caught with the smell of powder smoke still on his hand. So he had thought of the alibi business, call me, establish himself as being far from the scene of the crime. It might have worked if I hadn't noticed that chain on his coat, up in Bennington's office, and if a piano hadn't been playing in the tavern where he stopped to phone.

The piano had meant nothing to him. He was half-frantic with fear and his only idea was to establish an alibi that would probably stand up. He didn't expect it to be questioned. So he phoned me, hung up, drove like mad into town, and then he was too upset to go to his apartment and try to sleep. He sneaked around, watching the Galvin house till he saw me arrive.

Niles got into the hall, he had a key, he was at home there. He crept close enough to hear what was being said. When he heard me ask about a piano, he was so flabbergasted that he backed up and upset a jardiniere of sword ferns.

But he had money enough to hire the best jury pleader in the country so he got off with a stretch for manslaughter. That didn't really matter. Cynthia was dead.

The *Chronicle* ran a front page story about her. Bob Galvin's name was

kept out of it, of course. Her picture was printed in papers from coast to coast, but no relatives came forward to claim the body.

I took charge of the funeral arrangements, but Mrs. Galvin made me let her pay the expenses. And on the day of the funeral I drove with her in one of the Galvin cars to the cemetery. Sitting beside me, she looked pale and almost gentle.

As we drove back through the radiant afternoon, we were silent till the limousine stopped in front of the *Chronicle* Building. Then Mrs. Galvin looked at me and smiled.

"It isn't the ones who die who are to be pitied, is it, Mr. McGrady?" she said. "Good-by, I'll have to get back and sit with Bob. Now that he's recovering, he's more like a small boy than ever."

When I gave J. J. Bennington back his money—all of it, except what I had actually spent on the trip to Oceanside—he looked at me with pondering pity.

"I hear you've been quite a Sir Galahad, McGrady," he said. "But I'm sorry I sent you down there. It turned out to be unnecessary."

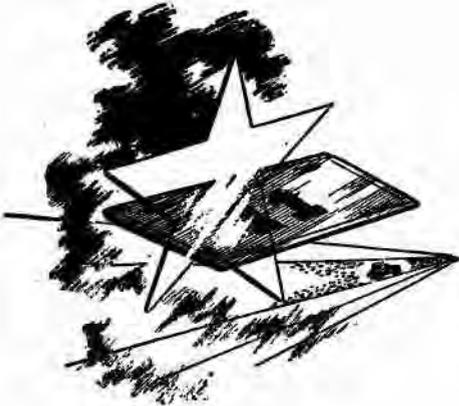
I didn't know whether the old king-maker meant unnecessary because Cynthia was knocked off the board without our bothering about it, or because now with rumors of what had happened unavoidably creeping out, Galvin would hardly be a safe man to put up for the senatorship. And I didn't care.

I was thinking about her obit. The kind of obituary I would write for Cynthia if I had been told to write one. Make it simple.

"She was born, she grew up and became charming and lovable, and she died."

I guess that was all you could say.

THE END.



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Five-pointed

Clue

BY PAT LEONARD

The Third Ward thrived on and was made up of trouble; and it did not take kindly to the new mayor's "clean-up" drive—

I WAS prowling in the Third Ward. The "Bloody Third" before Mayor Anderson's clean-up. I was expecting trouble. The political pot was boiling and something had to spill. I figured it would be blood.

Anderson, an Omaha Beach graduate, came home from one war to start another. He ran for mayor and took the Valenti greased machine for a ride. A ride, so rough, it jarred the whole bunch of grafters out of City Hall.

Jimmy Valenti, kingpin of the rackets since bum-label days, couldn't believe his empire had toppled. He thought, at first, he could operate in spite of the mayor. It took him a couple of weeks to wise up, the hard way. While he was learning, the sash-and-door business boomed. We used axes for search warrants and the joints we hit, we wrecked.

Valenti took it standing up. He and his parasites closed "the line" and

went into used cars, small loans and every other business where a guy with sticky fingers can turn a dishonest dollar. It was just a feint. Their real business was to beat Anderson for reelection. With fourteen days to go, their candidate was as completely licked as a lollipop in a kindergarten. Unless . . . unless, what? All I knew was that the play would be rough.

It was about midnight. I had the radio turned down to the threshold of silence. A long burst of garble came over. It sounded like more than a time-check. I gave the volume knob a twist.

The message boomed like a phonograph with the needle stuck in a groove: "D-2, Signal 70—D-2, Signal 70—D-2, Signal 70—D-2," that's me, Mike Kelley, chief of the homicide squad, and "Signal 70," that's the dynamite call. Trouble, bad trouble.

I jerked the phone off the dash and pressed the button. I let it warm up a couple of seconds, cleared my throat, and snapped, "D-2 to radio, over!"

It bounced back. "Radio to D-2. Report to the chief, urgent!"

I answered, "Roger! Wilco. Over and out."

I switched on the red spot and the siren. I crashed the first traffic light with the needle steady on sixty. At Sycamore and Pine, I whined into a too close left turn. I missed a Cream-Line Dairy truck by inches. The palms of my hands, gripping the steering wheel, made with the sweat and, involuntarily my tingling foot eased the needle back to fifty. But the howler was shooing them over to the curb and the streetcars were frozen on their tracks, so I bore down again. A mile and a minute later, I wheeled into the police garage in the basement of City Hall.

I scorched to a stop in my white paint-outlined space. That nearly filled "Brass Row." The safety director's car was in and, "D-1," the chief's automobile, was sloppily parked. One space was vacant, the mayor's, and it stood out like a pulled front tooth.

I ran the steps to the main floor, two at a time, and barged into the chief's office. I had figured the deal was a hundred degrees hotter than luke-warm but I walked into a two-way wake. The chief, old pot-bellied Gus Trotenheim, was *trying* to stare at his feet; one of two things he can't do. The other is to have an original thought. Elliott Best, the safety director and the mayor's protégé, stood doing a blank stare into space. He reminded me of an anemic corpse before the embalmer's touch-up.

I tried to bring the party to life. I cracked, "You guys look like someone shot the eagle that drops the pay checks."

Elliott gave me a seasick look. He said, "That's the general idea, Mike."

I sobered and asked, "What's the score?"

Elliott nodded to Gus. The chief

cleared his chronic sinus drip with a reversed snort and a quick swallow. He said, "Mike, about ten o'clock there was a fatal hit-skip at the corner of Main and Eastland."

I interrupted with a sigh of relief. "So, you've got accident investigation squads. We go home to bed, right?"

The chief flashed me a hard-eyed warning to button up. He explained, "The accident investigation boys came up with the license number from three witnesses. It was the mayor's car."

Socko! With that, I joined the mourners. I thought, "A myopic Mongolian idiot couldn't transpose or mistake the figure 11, the mayor's tag number."

I understated, "That's bad. What's Anderson got to say?"

Elliott and Gus did sheep eyes. I got it; they hadn't bearded the boss. "Well," I thought, "to hell with it. The radio log puts me in the clear, I did no stalling."

Elliott saw I was burning; so, he started putting on the salve. He said, "I was in the army with George for four years. I know he wouldn't run from trouble. There's something phony."

"Maybe," I snorted, "but, if there is, you two guys and your motionless *blah-blah* are hanging him to the nearest voting booth. Have you done anything?"

Gus winced. "I got a call about ten thirty. I was down here and had the story by eleven. I figured it was too hot for me to handle without the director. I finally got hold of Elliott at home. When he got down, he said to call you."

I jeered, "My pal!"

The chief said, "Take it easy, Mike. I think Elliott got it figured. If he has, it's your baby. First degree instead of manslaughter."

I snapped, "Sing it!"

Elliott ran his tongue over dry lips. He was trying to pry out the words. The guy's no dope but he spreads his prayer rug in Anderson's direction. He really was hurting. I'm a ruptured

duck myself—they called it military leave, soft words—and, to boot, I like the mayor. So, I'm *simpatico*.

Elliott finally got his pipes tuned. He said, "This is a frame that Valenti has engineered. George wouldn't be fool enough not to stop. It was a set of phony plates."

I said, "That, I'd like to buy. But, under pressure, any guy's liable to break the wrong way. Anderson may have side-swiped the pedestrian while he had a few snorts aboard. Then, he'd have everything to gain and nothing to lose by taking a powder."

Color crept into Elliott's face. It rose from the neck up, like the red in a match-prodded dime store thermometer. He clenched his fists and I figured he was going to swing.

Gus jumped up and stepped between us. "Break it up!"

Elliott cooled. "I'm sorry, Mike. I'm jumpy as hell. I know you have to look at both sides. I've ordered Gus to put you in full charge of the investigation. The voters and the papers know that you're not a politician. If you can crack this fast, it will save the election."

He's the kind of people I like to have for friends. He couldn't figure for a split second the mayor was wrong. I looked at Gus and he gave me the nod. That was all I needed.

I went to the door and yelled to the desk sergeant. "Sarge, tell the news-hounds to get in here. Quick!"

I whirled around to face Elliott and Gus. I had to get all the up-to-now in a hurry. I figured that calling in the press would speed up the process. They hadn't seemed eager to get things going; so, I knew they thought the deal was tough.

Pulling out my notebook, I asked, "Who's the victim?"

Gus, looking at the scratch pad on his desk, answered, "Identified by papers on him as George Sheppard, 1632 Iverson Street, a mill hand at the Ajax Steel Co."

"That," I thought, "is that. An innocent victim."

I let the hot hook fly. "Where's the mayor?"

Gus took the bit again. "We think he's at home. Accident investigation cars Nos. 1 and 2 took the run. When they got the rumble on the mayor's plates, No. 1 continued at the scene and No. 2 staked-out on the mayor's home. They're still there and, by radio, they reported the mayor's car in the driveway upon arrival. I instructed them to cover it until further orders."

Johnny Garber, the *News-Telly* man, walked in. His paper, our only morning sheet, had indorsed Anderson last election. Front page, high and often, they've kept boosting him.

Johnny eye-gunned the lay and went hot-scoopie. "What gives?"

I asked, "Where's the rest of them?"

Impatient, he snapped, "Give! Give! I'm first out. There's a little game down the street and I'm covering for all of them."

I said, "O.K., Johnny. Call your office and tell them to murder the front page layout and get ready to kill the sacred cow."

Johnny is the fastest thinking guy on the police beat, but that stopped him cold. He gave me a fishy-eyed look, took a long drag on his cigarette, and asked, "Anderson in trouble?"

I replied, "Yeah. For the first edition, at least, he's a bum. His plates were grabbed on that fatal hit-skip."

Johnny's cigarette smoke was still in the room, but he was gone.

"Elliott, call the mayor and tell him to meet the police car in front of his house. Tell him it's trouble, serious trouble, but give him no details."

He picked up the phone and raced the dial over a familiar course. He followed the order like the soldier he'd been.

I said, "Gus, tell AC-2 to pick up the mayor and bring him to your office. They're not to discuss the case and he's not to drive his own car or go near it. Have a scout car move in and continue the stake-out."

The chief squawk-boxed for "Radio"

and I took off for my office. I wanted to get Schmidt and Schultz, my night crew, rolling.

I came back to the chief's office. In my brief absence, the clerk from accident investigation had delivered copies of the statements taken from the witnesses. I read them carefully. They added up with just enough minor differences to make them sound like the truth rather than a rehearsed program. A dark Ford sedan, a 1941 model, driven by a man they couldn't describe, hit the victim, full on, as he was crossing the regular cross-walk. The car slowed down and then sped away. All three of them were certain on one point, the car bore license number 11.

You guessed it. The mayor, along with a few million other guys, has an automobile that fitted the description to a V-8.

Gus and Elliott sat silent as I read the statements. They had already looked them over and, when I finished reading them, we all sat still. It didn't take a lawyer to sense that they were triple-gilt-edged passports to jail.

I heard someone bark, "In there!"

I looked up to see Patrolman Harkness herding the mayor into the room. It made me a little sick at my stomach.

Harkness and Jentzen crew AC-2. Harkness is an ambitious guy bucking for promotion. I've heard him in court a couple of times and he's a deadly witness. He knows evidence and I figured he knew that he had a winner. That's why he was being so tough. Jentzen drives the car. He's a dummy.

The mayor looked a little sleepy-eyed. He wore a puzzled frown, but it didn't reflect a high worry content. He's a better than good copy of the original tall, dark and handsome that the tea-leaf readers describe. He'd get more votes kissing the mothers than the babies, but he does neither. He dishes it straight from the shoulder and follows through with consistent, if a bit rough, action.

He spoke to Elliott, nodded to Gus, and riveted his gaze on me. I suppose

he guessed that nothing short of murder would assemble such a crew. I thought, "Old Man Kelley's son, Michael, is elected to shovel the dirt." I stalled a minute, but, from long experience, I know that a quick jab to the guts is often kinder than a lot of fancy foot work.

I jabbed, "Mayor, at about ten o'clock, your plates were grabbed on a fatal hit-skip."

He looked me over like he thought I'd blown a fuse. I decided to bang him again for full-shock effect.

I said, "On the evidence at hand, I have to hold you for investigation. Anything you now say may be used against you in court. You are under no compulsion to make any statement."

I expected him to explode, break down, cry or confess. He fooled me. He asked, his voice as hard as the chilled steel in his eyes, "Have they done a good job, Mike?"

That kind of stuff is why some men are leaders. If he were framed, he was still trusting me. A good detective can only call them as he sees them but, after that question, I was going to be watching the foul line with both eyes and my heart.

I answered, "Up to now, it's perfect. Want to tell your version?"

We were all still standing. He eased himself into the chief's chair, took out a pack of cigarettes and offered them around. Elliott took one. The rest of us waved them away. The mayor lit a match and held it for Elliott to get a light. His hand was as steady as a guy shooting a three hundred on the outdoor pistol range.

He lit his and took a deep drag. He blasted the smoke out through his nose and said, "O.K., Mike. My story is short. I went home to dinner about six. I parked the car in the drive and locked it. After dinner, I read until about ten and went to bed. This was my only free night during the campaign and I wanted to catch up on my sleep. I awoke about twelve when my wife came in. The car wasn't out all evening."

I thought, "Wow! There goes his alibi witness."

I asked, "Where was your wife?"

He replied, "She went out about eight o'clock; it was her bridge club night."

Harkness was fidgeting like a first-grader on the last day of school. It was plainer than positive that he wanted to break into the act.

I asked, "You got something to add, Harkness?"

He said, "That's right. Mrs. Anderson came in about twelve in a Buick, 664-632. Man driving, woman in front seat with him and Mrs. Anderson in the rear."

I figured the guy had his oar in so I'd better let him row for awhile. Besides, I was plenty short of first-hand.

I said, "Tell us what you know, Harkness."

He started his piece and did it with gestures. "At about ten every night, if we're not on a run, Jentzen and I pull into the little fryer at Main and Montgomery for coffee. We take turns and, if we get a blast, the guy in the car blows the horn. I'm in the car when the call comes over. I hit the horn and Jentzen ran out. I'd say we were on the scene in less than a minute. The body was lying in the street and the crowd was gathering. I bailed out and ran to the body. I tested for signs of life. There were none. In the meantime, Jentzen had talked to a couple of witnesses. He came over and told me it was the mayor's car. We all know his plates, of course."

He paused and looked around with a "How am I doin'?" smirk on his hatchet-faced puss. He was feeling no pain for the mayor. With his type that's natural. Over-ambitious cops will sell their soul to get a blotter-scratch. It takes a lot of policing for a right guy to wise up to the "There, but for the grace of God am I" angle. The heels never do.

I said, "Go on!"

He continued, "Accident car No. 1 pulled up and I suggested that they

take over and that we run out to the mayor's place."

He knew he was getting to the meat; so, he stalled to make us drool. He asked, "Mind if I smoke?"

The mayor handed him the pack and lit and held the match, still steady.

Harkness took a couple of quick puffs. He flicked the ash with his little finger. I groaned silently. I thought, "A fool or an actor."

He went on, "We made a pass past the house; I saw a car in the drive but I couldn't make the plates. I told Jentzen that I'd make a foot-prowl. I got out of the car and, keeping out of the light, walked across the vacant lot next to the mayor's place. I saw the plates, 11, and I eased up the hood and felt the radiator. It was warm, almost hot!"

Anderson measured him with his eyes. The mayor's muscles tensed and I thought, "Here goes something."

Anderson roared, "That's a damn lie! The car hadn't moved for hours."

Harkness never batted an eyelash. He glared at the mayor, but held his tongue. He knew that, with the hot radiator story, he had Anderson in the driver's seat. That, you could sense, was exactly what he wanted.

The mayor reached for his trousers pocket and I slipped my hand beneath my coat and grabbed a handful of shoulder-holstered .38 Special. He came up with a small leather key case. I breathed again and relaxed my grip on the rod. He tossed it to me and said, "Mike, that's the only set of keys. The car is locked; ignition and doors, both. It has been all evening."

I nodded and stuck the keys in my coat pocket. I snapped, "Jentzen, how long were you in the fryer before you heard the horn?"

He blinked. Shook his head and said, "I don't know, maybe ten minutes."

That question was a waste of time.

I said, looking at Harkness, "That's all for you two for now. I'll take charge of the prisoner, but keep on the air. I may be needing you."

It was a routine sounding but studied speech. I wanted Harkness to think think he'd done O.K. I had a hunch he hadn't.

They saluted and took off.

I said to Elliott, "Will you take the mayor to the police surgeon for a blood-alcohol test and then take him to my office?"

The director came back to this world. On that "Prisoner" crack of mine, he'd lost contact with reality. I felt sorry for the guy, that's why I gave him something to do.

He nodded until he looked like one of those funny drinking birds.

I said, "O.K. Wait there for me. I'm hitting the street. There's a deck of cards in the desk drawer. You'll be needing it."

Johnny Garber grabbed me on the way to the garage. I whispered, "Don't go out on a limb, but, as a tip, ease it for a frame-up. Nothing yet."

He said, "Thanks!"

I rolled clear of the garage and hit the air for a location check on "D-3," Schmidt and Schultz. Radio reported them "Out of service at the morgue." That would have sounded bad to a chance listener but, to me, it was hot music. The morgue, only a block away, meant they'd scored. I'd sent them out to the mayor's place to look the car over. Their quick return meant they'd found something. They hadn't had time to give the car a real shake.

I pulled up in front of the decrepit, dirty, stone, two-story monstrosity which bears the morbidly worded sign, "City Morgue." I bounced into the office. Schmidt and Schultz were bent over an old wooden table and, by the light of a green-shaded drop-cord lamp, they were examining something closely.

Schultz boomed, "It's it!"

Schmidt, usually slow to agree, said, "That cooks the mayor's goose."

I snapped, "Who's cooking who with what?"

Startled, they looked up. I looked down, looked, then stared. A man's

suit coat and a small piece of same were spread on the table. A guy didn't have to have much of an eye for form to see that the roughly torn piece fitted the jagged hole in the coat to a thread.

I asked, "Where did you get it?"

Schultz answered, "Front bumper of the mayor's car."

I whistled through my wide-spread front teeth. I gasped, "Whew! That does it."

My brains were moving my tongue, but my heart was beating fast, too fast. I wasn't sure I believed my own words. I've been fooled by guys before—plenty of times—but, if Anderson were lying, I'd met the master.

I asked, "Any other signs?"

Schmidt looked a little disgusted. "We thought that cloth, if it matched, wound the deal up. We beat it right down here as soon as we found it. We sprayed the car with flashlights but lightly. I'll swear, though, that there wasn't a mark on the front bumper, fenders or the grille. The piece of cloth was wedged between the horizontal bar and left upright."

Schultz said, "I'll go along with all of that and the lack of markings doesn't mean a thing. Remember the Marsden case, Mike? There wasn't a scratch on that car."

I countered, "You're forgetting something, Schultz-boy. There were markings on that car, but you didn't find them. Remember?"

He colored up as the light dawned. "Sure, I recall, you found that the grease on the drip-pan beneath the car was marked by something scraping it."

I smiled. "Something?"

"O.K., boss, the body."

I said, "That's right. Did either of you look at the license plates?"

Both of them gave a look like I was out of my head. They chorused, "Sure!"

I asked, "And?"

Schultz replied, "Bolts, nuts and lock-washers, all rusted. Those plates haven't been off since they were put on."

I thought a long minute. A guy in my position can't say black is white just because he wants it so. After all, the taxpayers pay me to catch the guys who are killing them; not to figure smart "outs." But, on the cops-and-robbers circuit, you crack more cases by playing hunches than the book. My hunch that Anderson had been framed was tottering, but I kept groping around for something to hold it up.

"Have they done a good job, Mike?" kept buzzing in my ears.

Another hunch was taking root, but I needed a little moral support to make it blossom into action.

I said, "Listen! I'm feeling something on this deal and I don't like it. It's just like peach fuzz in my mouth, I can't swallow it. Suppose some joker counterfeited the mayor's plates, how would he do it?"

Schultz said, "Hell! All the plates are made in the stir. I suppose every ex-con would know how to do it."

I balked, "Too tough. Not without the dies and stuff. Come again."

I had the answer, but, to check my thinking for warp, I wanted one of them to come up with it.

Schmidt tried, "There are lots of ways, but cut up plates and piece them together; make photographic copies and paint them, or—"

He was getting close. I butted in, "Why not steal a set of plates that's got the figures you want, flatten out the extras and repaint?"

Schmidt—he's a tinkerer with a basement workshop—agreed, "Sure, it would be easy."

The mayor's plates were specials; the regular series for this city is six-hundred thousand. I figured the guy would steal a set with the double-ace in the middle, it would make the phonies look better.

I said, "Boys, I got a hunch. I'm going to make a bet with myself. If I'm wrong, I'm going to throw Anderson in the pokey. On the evidence, I should. But, if I'm right we've got plenty of work to do."

Schmidt asked, "Who's deciding your mind-bet?"

I picked up the phone and dialed headquarters. I answered Schmidt by speaking to the operator. I said, "Auto squad."

"Harrison, auto squad."

"Mike Kelley."

"Yeah, Mike. What can I do for you?"

"Run your recent stolens. Tell me if there was a set, six digits, with an 11 in the center."

"Jeez, Mike, hold it a minute."

Those auto squad guys sleep with license numbers batting around in their brains. The "Jeez" told me I was right, he was just verifying.

"Mike?"

"Yeah."

"Right. 671132, plates only. Reported stolen on the 20th from a car parked in the three thousand block on Elm Street. Registered owner, Miss Matilda Jones, 3006 Elm. Hold it, for a directory check—public school teacher."

"Good goin', Harrison. Thanks."

I slammed the phone into the cradle. I was feeling good again. I said, "Get the mayor's car into the garage and give it a good goin' over on the hydraulic lift. Keep on the air or in contact with Radio. If you find anything else, give me a blast."

Schultz said, "Anything else? We've wrapped it up for you already. What do you want us to find?"

That crack I didn't like. I snapped, "What do you mean? I don't like the way you said *want*. Any more of that stuff and I'll punch your insubordinate mouth. You damn well know that when the collar's made, it'll fit. I've got my first fix to make for dough, marbles or friends. If you question that, one of us is not going to be on the homicide squad much longer."

I was burning up. I felt like socking him for luck, but, instead, I pushed my hat back on my head and waited. I thought, "It had better be good."

He was quivering all over, but it wasn't fear. He was mad.

Schmidt saved it. He said, calmly, "Take it easy, you two. Mike, you should know that when a Dutchman tries to wisecrack, it ain't funny. Schultz and I both know you want it right and we don't hate you for hoping the facts are wrong. We like the mayor, too."

I got the picture. I laughed and Schultz loosened up. I said, "I understand. You guys want to believe what you see. No imagination. Well, maybe you're right, I had a hunch go wrong before. I thought I could make homicide men out of a couple of kraut burglar dodgers."

We all laughed. We'd been in too many hot places together for that line to stick to anybody's touchy spot.

Schultz said, "Let's go!" Then he added, with a grin, "Mike, I still say you can't get around that little piece of cloth."

Crossing my fingers, I said, "Oh, I can't, can't I?"

It was as plain as the nose on anyone's face that if it hadn't been the mayor's car, the director had called the turn. But who would be driving the death car? I dug into experience for the answer. I got it—Valenti.

To a guy who doesn't know the hoodlums, it wouldn't make sense. But, remember, I broke the Nickavoli case. He was another one of the suave type of political-fixing racketeers. He got to thinking he was legitimate, filed income tax returns and everything. But when I ran the Casey killing to his front door, what happened? When I went to take him, he reached for a rod. Valenti was desperate, too. He'd have to drive the car. If he didn't he'd never get through paying the guy who did. Besides, Valenti wasn't too far off the mayor's description; tall and dark, but greasy.

Someone once said about this sleuthing game: "It's not what you know, but who you know." I know a lot of people and a lot of things. Everybody in town knows that Valenti has a big rambling ranch-type house on the

West Side. I know he doesn't sleep there—and why. She's got an apartment in the Bedford Arms and I know the house dick.

So, I heavy-footed for the Bedford Arms. The traffic had thinned to a trickle and minutes meant more than miles. I swept into the wide horseshoe drive so fast that I caught the uniformed doorman smoking a cigarette.

I parked and hailed him. "Good morning, pop. Is Pete around?"

"Good morning, Mike. From the way you came in, I thought you were one of the drunken playboys. Pete's where he always is when that blonde is on the switchboard."

I grinned as he held the heavy glass door for me. I knocked on the door of the boardroom, waited a discreet half minute, and walked in.

Except for the lipstick on Pete's kisser, it could have been a conference. He asked, "What's the good word, Mike? Who we harboring?"

I gave him the office and he followed me out. I asked, "Is Valenti in?"

"Since about eleven, Mike."

"Nightman in the garage, O.K.?"

"No, but he's asleep. What's on your mind?"

"Quiet frisk of Valenti's car."

"O.K. He's driving the Cadillac tonight."

We walked down the steps to the basement garage. Pete and I have an understanding. I'm not investigating him for anything but murder. *That*, he's never done.

The car was unlocked, even the glove compartment. Once over light and I struck nuggets. Little treasures in a tiny cardboard box marked, "One Doz. Bolts and Wing Nuts." And there were *eight*. Two and two makes four and that's exactly the number you need to change a set of plates—fast!

I said, "Not much here, Pete."

He said, "No?" You can use the direct line in the manager's office. Even *I* can't listen to that."

I wish that guy was half honest. I could sure use him on the squad.

I used the phone. I had Pete stand

outside the glass-windowed door where I could watch him.

I fed it to Radio, fast: "Signal 70 to all scout cars for a land-line call in. Tell them to make every Used Car lot in town for a dark '41 Ford Sedan, licenses attached with new wing nuts and front end probably damaged. Have Harrison, auto squad, co-ordinate the deal. Send AC-2 to an automobile accident at the Soldier's Home."

Plenty on the ball, he asked but one question, "Where at the Soldier's Home?"

I replied, "The party calling hung up without saying."

O'Rourke, the dispatcher, laughed. He figured I wanted Harkness out of the way.

I beckoned for Pete to come into the office. I asked, "How do you want me to take him out?"

He answered, "You can't do that to me, Mike. He's paying me fifty frog-skins a week. Besides, a snatch here will cost me my job."

"What's the fifty for?"

He weighed that one, carefully. He knew that if he didn't level, I'd go up and grab. But I was going slow because I had an angle, too. There will be other mugs at the Bedford Arms; besides, you never put an informant on the spot. Not if you're a successful detective.

He finally answered, "For watching for Mrs. Valenti."

I said, "I'm going to cover the garage exit. In five minutes, you call Valenti and tell him the wife's waiting for an elevator to go up."

"What can I say besides, 'Yes'?"

I replied, "You can say, 'Yes, sir!'"

He grinned and gave me a forefinger and thumb circled O.K. He's a louse, of course, but I'll never scratch him until I have to.

Valenti scorched out of the basement garage and turned left toward town. I'd guessed it and was set to follow. Ordinarily, you could arrest him by telephone. But, if he was *it* on this bloody deal, his nerves would be doing

tricks. We still burn for first degree in this state.

He shoved it up to fifty. I raised him ten to catch up. I figured on pulling him over at the next red light. He crashed it.

I cut in the siren. He tramped on it, harder. I went all the way to the floor. We came to the boulevard lighting. He could see me, plainly. I motioned for him to pull over. He pulled on me, instead. Crash! He let one go. He missed. The rear door window bloomed a misty blossom of cracks.

That, I hadn't expected. My knee jerked and D-2 dropped back. I grabbed the transmitter. I barked, "D-2 chasing Cadillac, 642-165, west on Main near Fern. Occupant firing!"

It echoed, "To all cars, Signal 70—" I jerked my revolver from beneath my left arm. I laid it on the seat beside me. Fighting the wheel with my left hand, I rolled the right window down and then picked up my gun. I stepped on it, hard. The gap between the two racing cars lazied together. Abreast, I fired—double action, a foolish shot—and missed. Missed his body but shattered his nerve. He slapped on the brakes and I screamed past.

I socked both feet to the floor, then pumped the brake in a desperate effort to maintain control. I skidded to a stop against the high curb and, gun in hand, I bailed out.

Valenti, berserk, was running. Running toward me, firing as he came. Bursts of orange flame leaped at me from his outstretched hand. I stopped in a sole-burning slide. I leveled on him. I kept my nerve by thinking, "squeeze." My gun roared and jumped. Valenti sprawled forward.

I ran to him and dropped to one knee alongside the writhing body. I rolled him over and looked—at death.

I was furious. I didn't want to kill the rat. I needed him alive and talking. I thought, "Dammit, I'll make him talk."

The whole pattern had fallen into

place. I had the answer. A guy that knows evidence, knows that a dying declaration goes in any court. My mind heard Valenti saying what, alive, he could have said.

A cop in trouble brings them all. Sirens were screaming down on me from every direction—scouts, motorcycle-men and cruisers. I prayed, prayed hard and fast, that one car would respond. I knew it would. Harkness would be too curious to stay away. I reloaded.

Scout 25 was first in. I told them to get Schmidt and Schultz on the radio and to preserve the scene until they arrived. I was watching the rest pull in.

Then, I saw it coming, AC-2. Harkness, my man.

I ran across the street, and waved Jentzen to a stop. Harkness bailed out. The restraining strap on his holster was unsnapped. He was set for a fast draw. That was enough for me. I drew with my right and slapped him across the face with the barrel as I whipped the gun out. With my left, I disarmed him and threw his revolver into the street. I jerked open the rear door and shoved him into the car ahead of me.

I yelled to Jentzen, "Drive to headquarters, fast!"

He doesn't think. He just drives. He pulled away with a dozen awe-struck cops as witnesses.

Harkness, mouth bleeding, was rubbing his jaw. He was fogged in.

I snapped, "You're through, Harkness. Valenti talked before he died. He told me everything except what you were to get out of it. That, I can guess. My job."

He blubbered, "No! no! Mike, I wouldn't do that to you. He promised to make me chief."

I thought, "My God! What a dope."

I followed through fast. I barked, so Jentzen wouldn't miss it, "Spill it, Harkness! You don't have to and I can't use it in court. But the truth is the only thing that can help."

A law professor might quibble at my warning as to his rights, but no judge would. A cop is presumed to know.

Fighting the bloody foam, he spilled, "Valenti propositioned me. I went for it. He switched plates in the alley back of the First Trust. From there, he could see me in position at the fryer. He ran the guy down, circled back to the alley and re-switched the plates."

He stopped. I handed him my handkerchief. He wiped his mouth and continued, "I ripped the piece out of the guy's coat when I was testing for signs of life. I planted it on the bumper of the mayor's car. That's the whole story, Mike."

He finished, panting like the dog he was. To tighten up, I asked, "Was Jentzen in on this?"

I knew the answer, but I wanted to clear the thick Swede.

Harkness sobbed, "No! No!"

I said, loud enough for Jentzen to hear but sweet, "Too bad, Harkness, but I know you feel better now."

I elbowed him in the guts, hard! He collapsed.

A cop who betrays his trust is worse than any other criminal. The rats buy their own clothes, at least. I was trembling like a leaf. It was rage; not a delayed reaction from fear.

The mayor looking at Johnny Garber's scarehead to freedom, said, "Mike, I'm grateful."

Tears were rolling down his cheeks. Tears of thanks, I guess.

He cleared his throat and asked, "Why were you so sure it was a frame, Mike?"

I hadn't figured that out myself. I thought a minute and replied, "Your honor, I was seeing stars, I guess. In the army, I saw guys get decorated for everything. But I never saw a Silver Star, like you got, dished out for running away. I had one in my hands once. The guy who won it couldn't see it. So, I read what it said on the back to him. As I remember, 'For Gallantry in Action!'"

THE END.



the Waiting Bride and the corpse

BY T. T. FLYNN

A bride-to-be left waiting at the altar; a
bride-to-be dead among the tulips

I.

THIS was my home town, Phillipsburg, the Saturday night before Tri-County Fair Week, and Bill Dismore was expecting me to drive in the trotting races. This was the walnut-paneled library of my Uncle George Braden's fine old brick home. At sunrise I had been hundreds of miles away, at the Kane County Fair Grounds, in Illinois, driving the piston strides of Abdulla Pete in an early-morning workout.

Now, across the hall, in brightly lighted shock which filled the big living room, murder made me a little sick. It made me sicker as the facts lined up.

Then I thought of Sambra Meriwether.

A sheriff's deputy in the library doorway watched as I lighted a cigarette and tried to keep the match

steady. The more I thought, the worse it looked. For me, Pat Braden.

The facts had logical, ghastly order. Even to Merriam Leaman, still a nurse, getting me long-distance at the Kane County Fair Grounds, with word Uncle George had been injured in an automobile wreck and wanted me.

I hadn't seen Uncle George or Phillipsburg in four years, but I said, "I can get a train in about an hour."

Then a thought struck hard. I asked Merriam, "How did you know I was here in Illinois? In this particular town? And out here at the fair grounds?"

"Candace Meriwether suggested I call the hotels there."

I blurted, "How the devil did Candy know I was here?"

"It's none of my business, I'm sure," Merriam had answered frigidly.

I almost said, "It's the first thing you haven't made your business, sweet."

Minutes later, in front of the big empty grandstand, I told Bill Dismore he'd have to rustle another driver today, and if we lost the Oakmore Trot, I was sorry.

Bill was my partner. His wife was pretty, his horses tops, his Bourbon nectar. Which made Bill an ordinary hardboot in the Kentucky Bluegrass. In addition, Bill's broad grin masked incurable optimism. Which made him a horseman.

A navy hospital had thrown us out on the same day, two years back. I'd gone to the Bluegrass with Bill to see his three horses, eat some of his pretty wife's fried country ham and heavenly biscuits, and think things over. In that order.

The afternoon I loosened Abdulla Pete with a fast trot over the small training track, Bill had said, "You've got the hands to shake a horse out. Why don't we throw in together and do the circuit this year?"

Bill's hopeful grin had glossed over the bad back which had ended his driving.

"Why not?" I'd said.

We were still partners and now Bill had a quick idea. "Why don't I bring the horses over to the Tri-County Fair?"

"I was thinking the same thing."

"It's new territory for Abdulla Pete."

Bill's eyes were bright with fast figuring. He grinned at me. I grinned at him.

And when the girl walked into the club car east of Indianapolis, I still would have laughed at murder.

She came in like a breath of summer, with a smooth clear tan, with a white blouse collar showing a perfect throat and neck, with a smile and an air of walking on her toes.

I said, "Sambra!"

"Pat Braden!"

By then I was on my feet. We looked at each other warily. Sambra sat down. She was Sambra Meriwether, the kid

sister, grown up in the past four years.

"I'm stunned," I said. "You're stunning."

"I've had a few passes," Sambra admitted modestly. She was eyeing me, smiling faintly. "Coming home, finally?"

"Uncle George had an automobile accident."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Serious?"

"I don't know. Merriam Leaman located me by telephone, over in Illinois." I hesitated. "Merriam said Candy told her where to telephone. How did Candy know?"

Sambra shook her head. "I've been working in Indianapolis."

We sat silent. "I suppose I'm still a skunk in Phillipsburg," I said finally.

Sambra nodded. "When a bride waits two hours at the church, and has hysterics before half the town, it's history in a place like Phillipsburg. Babies are dated from the year Pat Braden deserted Candy Meriwether at the altar."

"Uncle George wrote me. Unforgivable insult on my part to everyone. Disgrace to the Braden name. Good-by and no blessing."

Sambra said, "I suffered. My slippers were too small. And you did hold promise of being a tolerable brother-in-law, until the final ghastly hour."

"I suppose Candy's married and happy now."

"No. Going to see her while you're home?"

"I doubt it," I said dryly. I looked at Sambra again. "Age has added something. Hm-m-m, but, yes!"

Sambra put her head back, relaxing, smiling faintly. She was not really Candy's sister. Her father had married a widow with a daughter named Candace, who took the Meriwether name.

Candace was a cream-blonde, with the promise of repressed fire. Sambra's silky hair had copper tones now. She had grown slim, poised. I had brushed her many a careless kiss in passing, big brother-to-be and gawky little

sister. But now— Sambra's faint smile grew. "What have you been doing, Pat?"

We were still talking in the club car when the porter called, "Phillipsburg!"

I helped Sambra off the Pullman step. She said, "The same old town." Then her smile went quickly. "'By," she said hurriedly.

When I looked after her, Mrs. Meriwether was there, flanked by Candace and Lila Snodgrass, Betty Carmont and Dot Wilkins. The girls all had been asked to be Candy's bridesmaids. They pointedly ignored me.

Not that it mattered. I was watching Candace. She had the same cream-and-gold cover-girl look; she eyed me in a shocked way and turned, dabbing a handkerchief at her eyes.

Mrs. Meriwether, a massive cream-and-grayish lady now, glared toward me and spoke sharply to Sambra as they walked away.

"Damn her!" I said under my breath. "I'd like to wring her neck!"

Behind me a voice asked in amusement, "Which neck, Pat?"

He was Barry Whitmore, lawyer, bank director and, with his wife, prominent in the country club set. Which meant they knew everyone who would relish my remark.

I shook Barry's hand. "Do you know how Uncle George is?"

"Not too good, I hear." Barry had lean, rather handsome fitness. Men and women liked him. "Staying long?" Barry inquired, not repeating the question I was ignoring.

"I'll stay for the fair, if stall space is left at the fair grounds."

Barry said, "Good," and seemed to mean it. "How many stalls? I can help there."

"Six."

"Count on them." Barry slapped me on the shoulder. "Drop by the house tomorrow and bring us up-to-date." It was Phillipsburg's way of saying the past did not matter.

"Thanks, if I'm not busy with Uncle George," I replied, picking up my bag.

The usual Saturday crowd filled Courthouse Square. Flags and banners and gaudy posters cried Fair Week just ahead.

Fair Week! It had been the high point of each boyhood year. Crowded exhibit buildings and hot dusty tents, popcorn, cotton candy, hoarse-voiced barkers and seductive, dazzling Arabian dancing girls. And always the fine sleek trotters and pacers in exciting heats on the smooth racetrack. Memories still had a surging tingle.

At the hospital, Dr. John Stevens, gray-haired, kindly, shrewd in medicine and human nature, told me, "George has a fractured rib, lacerations and some shock. He's seventy-four, you know."

"Can I see him now?"

"I'm keeping him asleep. Drop around about midnight and talk for a few minutes. Do him good then." Dr. John opened a desk drawer, poking among pill boxes and old letters. "It might do you good, Pat, to know his biggest worry after the accident was that he might die without seeing you again."

"It pleases me."

Dr. John handed me a house key.

"George wants you to stay in your old room at his house. For good, I'd say." He stood up, offering his hand, smiling. "Your roots are here, Pat."

In the taxi, going home, I thought wryly, "At least Uncle George's roots are all over the place."

He owned the Braden Flour Mill, the Braden Lumber Yard and dominated the First National Bank. He had an interest in a cannery and owned outlying farms and real estate. Flowers and trotting horses were his only other interests.

Mrs. Gilland was still housekeeper and cook at the red brick house which stood in solid plain dignity well back in ample grounds. She wiped her eyes as I hugged her. "I cleaned a chicken as soon as Merriam Leaman telephoned you were coming."

"So Merriam spread the word?" I looked around the cool quiet of the large living room. Nothing had changed.

Mrs. Gilland's crisp golden fried chicken, fluffy biscuits and lemon chiffon pie had not changed. When she had gone home, I sat on the front steps, smoking, thinking.

I seemed to be in Uncle George's good graces again. Probably once more in his will. But did I want it? Did I want to settle in Phillipsburg again and carry on what Uncle George had put together in fifty plodding years?

Bill Dismore and I had sipped wine of excitement at the fairs, the race meets, and in the Bluegrass horse country. It was in our blood now. We liked it.

I heard light footsteps and stood up and saw a slender figure which had come around the house in the starlight. "Sambra?" I called, going to meet her.

It was Candace, wearing a pastel-blue head scarf. "Pat! I had to see you!"

"Why?"

Candy's smooth, always pleasant voice was unsteady. "Seeing you at the station— Oh, Pat, I've seen you every day and night—"

Anger, somehow, wouldn't come again. "What are you up to, Candy?" I asked curiously.

"Don't you believe me?"

"Not on forty stacked Bibles. You cut my throat once, but good, baby."

"You don't understand!"

"The hell I don't! You promised to call everything off. I left town. And you went to church and faked being left at the altar."

Candy seemed near tears. "Pat, I couldn't believe you wouldn't appear."

"You knew I wouldn't. I had the goods on you. I was in line for the Braden money and you were marrying it. And I might have taken that," I said. "But not the affair behind my back, which you intended to keep up

after we were married. Not that. You knew it."

The dim triangle of Candy's face, her golden blondness, were lovely in the starlight. "You misunderstood, Pat. I haven't married."

"Why didn't you marry him, whoever he was?" I asked. "Unless you've been waiting for another try at Uncle George's money. Was keeping the broken heart on exhibition all this time worth the try?"

Candy slapped me furiously and whirled, running.

I watched her out of sight, around the house corner, taking the short cut through the back way to the Meriwether home. We both had used it years ago.

I rubbed the cheek and lighted a cigarette. If Candy had been crying as she left, it was anger, not heart. She didn't have a heart.

Then I turned, watching headlights coming up the driveway, and I was glad visitors had missed the scene. Phillipsburg had heard too much of Candace Meriwether and Pat Braden. The car, a coupé, windows down, stopped beside me.

"How is Uncle George?" Sambra asked from behind the wheel. "And does anyone feel like a drive?"

She moved over as I opened the door on her side. I slid under the wheel, warning, "This won't be approved of."

"Probably not," Sambra agreed.

I drove to Moon Lake, a few miles out of town. There was night boating on the lake, bingo and games and a dance pavilion. We sat in the car eating barbecue, saying little.

"Dance?"

"Be fun," Sambra murmured.

That was the moment a man peered in my window, asking, "Are you Pat Braden?"

"Right."

He told me he was a deputy sheriff. "You're wanted in Phillipsburg, Mr. Braden."

"Is George Braden worse?"

"We were only told to get you," he answered. "Follow our car."

He had a partner. They drove fast, using a siren. "How did they guess I'd be in your car?" I asked Sambra.

"Someone must have seen us," Sambra decided.

The deputies turned into Uncle George's driveway. The house windows were brightly lighted. Cars were parked out front. People stood about. "If he's home now, he's dead," I said soberly to Sambra. "Mind coming in with me?"

Sambra touched my hand. "Of course not."

We followed a deputy inside, from the front hall into the brightly lighted living room. He spoke to Walter Carnes, chief of police. "Here's Pat Braden."

Dr. John Stevens was kneeling beside a still figure on the floor. Carnes saw Sambra and started to protest and I moved quickly to cut off Sambra's view. We were both too late.

The large crystal chandelier drenched light over Candace. And in death, on the hastily spread blanket on the floor, Candace was still blond, fragile, lovely. But quite dead.

II.

Sambra drew one hard breath and walked by Walter Carnes' protesting hand and knelt beside the body.

I stood wordless. It had seemed obvious we would find Uncle George.

Carnes stared at me. After a moment he said, "She was back in the flowers. Adams, the gardener, stumbled over her. Someone choked her to death."

I looked down at my hands. I'd said, "I'd like to wring her neck!"

It couldn't possibly be worse. But it did get worse. Mrs. Meriwether had been in the dining room with solicitous women friends. She opened the French doors. Her sobbing grief preceded her. She saw Sambra kneeling, and she saw me and her scream at Sambra put ice on my spine.

"You were out with him after he killed your sister! After all he's done to us!"

"Mother!" Sambra protested, standing up.

Mrs. Meriwether began to laugh. It was hysteria, which set my teeth on edge. "They'll hang him! Hang him!"

"Get her out of here!" Dr. John snapped to the flustered women behind her.

Sambra was the one who took her stepmother's arm and got her back into the dining room. Dr. John followed, opening a small leather hypodermic case. The curtained glass doors closed behind them.

I started to reach for a handkerchief. Chief Carnes' eyes followed my hand. I put the hand in my coat pocket where there was no handkerchief. Purely reflex.

"Adams found her?" I said, because it was the only remark I could think of at the moment. I was thinking of Barry Whitmore and what he'd heard me say, and my mouth felt dry.

"We'll talk about it later," Carnes said. "You wait over in the library."

I looked at Carnes. He looked at me. "Am I supposed to be under arrest?" I inquired carefully.

Walt Carnes had never seemed a threatening man. He sang in church each Sunday, a stolid, earnest man. A friend. A neighbor. A part of Phillipsburg.

"I'll want to talk to you," he said now. The way he said it, slowly, thoughtfully, while he watched me, made him a stranger. Or me the stranger.

I waited in the walnut-paneled library across the hall. The young deputy lounged in the doorway. I smoked a cigarette, feeling sick. After all, I had once loved Candace, or thought I had.

The facts kept building up. One suspect. One logical suspect for all this. Only one and Whitmore could top all the facts with a final clincher. He had heard me say it as I watched

Candace walk away from the train.

Then I began to feel sorry for Sambra.

Walt Carnes summoned the deputy, and when the deputy came back he said, "I'll drive you to headquarters. Carnes will be alone."

Walt Carnes' office was on the ground floor of the small stone-fronted municipal building, off the square. A stocky young man in police uniform came smiling from Carnes' desk with a ready hand. I'd played high school football with him. Tige Rothwell.

The deputy left. Tige said, "Sit down, Pat. Cigarette?"

The wooden chair beside Carnes' desk was not comfortable. Tige reached into a paper sack on the desk and suddenly I knew what he was going to do, and he did. He cracked a peanut shell between thumb and forefinger, and then grinned and offered the sack, and when I refused he reached in for another nut.

"Still eating them," I said.

Tige chuckled and leaned back in the revolving chair. "I hear that Adams stopped on his way to the hospital to cut some flowers. He found Candace and carried her into the house, not suspecting she was dead."

"I wasn't there."

"Been in Indianapolis, haven't you? Someone said you came in on the train with Sambra Meriwether."

"Did Carnes suggest you pump me?"

Tige laughed. "I'm only a dumb young cop. Just talking."

Then Mort Kennedy walked in, tall and thin, with the same awkward, disjointed way of moving, the same puckered smiling look through thick glasses.

I could remember when Mort's father drowned under the river ice, and Mort grinding at school, managing the year book, working after school and Saturdays in seedy clothes. Always cheerful.

Tige said, "Come around next spring, Mort. We're busy."

Mort came over and shook my hand.

"So they put you in here with the bloodhound?"

"Tige says he's a dumb young cop."

"Plus the FBI training course," Mort said, perching on the desk. "Tige's the bright boy of our local law."

Tige grinned. "Mort's half-owner of the *Clarion* now. He'll print you."

"Put you on the wire circuit, too," said Mort. "They're asking. Tige, you holding Pat?"

"Uh-uh," Tige disclaimed. "Pat's waiting to see Carnes."

"He can wait over at the *Clarion*."

Tige grinned at me. "See? He's after you." And to Mort, "Walt talks to Pat first."

Mort stood up, all joints and thin height. His puckered smiling look went from Tige to me. "It's possible Tige is even dumber than he claims to be," Mort told me, turning to go. His left eye winked broadly. "I'll see you."

When Mort was gone, Tige said, "The boss' son-in-law. He married Eileen Wells."

"That cute little redhead?"

"Still cute. Two kids. Girls."

We might have been back in school, talking after squad practice. The telephone rang. Tige reached out a lazy hand.

"Who? . . . Sure. But not for long. I'm expecting a call over this phone." Tige held out the receiver. "For you."

Barry Whitmore's voice in the receiver was concerned. "Pat, I'm out at the country club. Just heard the news. Are you in trouble?"

"Am I?"

I wondered if Barry had gossiped to anyone. He sounded friendly. But the man was human. He'd heard me say it. "I'd like to wring her neck!" The thing was haunting me.

Barry seemed to be thinking it over. "Have you made a statement, Pat? Signed anything?"

"No. I'm waiting here for Walter Carnes, at his request."

That seemed to reassure Barry. But

he'd done some fast thinking before he committed himself.

"Pat, don't talk until I get there. I'm starting now." Barry paused again. "I do your grandfather's legal work. You'll probably need me. Suit you?"

"Hundred percent."

I hung up. Barry wouldn't be gossiping now. But he'd made sure the situation wasn't already hopeless. I wouldn't forget that. It was part of the pattern taking shape.

Phillipsburg was no longer my town. I was the man who had run out on Candy Meriwether, the man who had stepped off a train years later with Sambra. The one man, in the one spot, at the one hour tonight, with motive and opportunity.

"They'll hang him! Hang him!"

The thought would be in every passing glance. At least, I'd think it there. Nothing, now, was certain in my town. Not for me.

It was like being thrust out of one's whole life, into uncertainty, doubt of everyone. Into tight and growing loneliness. One had to grow up in a town like Phillipsburg to understand.

"I'll take a peanut," I told Tige.

That was the last time I liked peanuts.

They made me think of Candy Meriwether's pastel silk headscarf and that bright bare office, of Walter Carnes' calm questions and thoughtful stare, of Tige Rothwell moving aimlessly about the room, cracking peanut shells out of his coat pocket. And of Barry Whitmore, lean and pleasantly firm when he asked a question or reminded me of my rights.

Walter Carnes might have been discussing choir songs for tomorrow as he read from notes on the backs of old envelopes.

"Let's see now. Mrs. Gilland cleaned up her kitchen and wound the kitchen clock and went home. It was eight forty by the clock. She's positive."

I wondered how many men had sat here beside the desk answering questions. Men trying to be calm, while

tight and wary inside, not trusting anyone.

"Hm-m-m, Sambra Meriwether says she left home about eight thirty. Looked at her watch, she says. Her stepmother had gone to a meeting about the church booth at the fair next week."

Carnes looked at me and went on, "Sambra drove to the square and bought some gasoline. Some girl friends came by and she went with them to the drugstore and had a soda. Sambra says the courthouse clock rang nine when she started to the Braden place. She got there about nine five. That right, Pat?"

"Probably. I didn't look."

Carnes said thoughtfully, "You were standing out front."

"I'd been sitting on the front steps, smoking. What would you have done when car lights came up the driveway?"

Tige Rothwell cracked a peanut shell. "Spend much time in India, Pat?"

"Huh?" I looked up, puzzled, as Tige tossed the peanuts expertly into his mouth. "Some," I said. "In and out. Say, I didn't write where I'd been. How did you know?"

"Merriam Leaman met a Wac in Calcutta. Phillipsburg was mentioned. And then you."

That pert little brunette Wac. How much, I wondered, had been mentioned between the girls? Merriam Leaman had certainly broadcast it all, and probably added a little.

"Merriam in Calcutta?"

"Red Cross," Tige said.

He reached for another peanut. I tightened against the crunch. Jittery. Then the strangeness of Tige's question at this time hit me. Barry Whitmore had seemed to think so, too. He had given Tige a quick, puzzled look.

Carnes talked on. I tensed inside. Now it was coming.

"That leaves Candace home alone at eight thirty," Carnes said thoughtfully. "She wanted to hear a radio

program, instead of driving with Sambra."

He put the envelopes inside his coat and let out a soft thoughtful breath. "Two minutes later Candace was outside the Meriwether house. A neighbor walking home saw Sambra drive out. When she passed the house, Candace was standing on the front lawn. She was found dead behind the Braden house about nine twenty."

"Fifty minutes," Tige said. He cracked a peanut shell. I almost winced. "We don't know what Candy did in those fifty minutes," Tige said, watching me. "Only what happened to her."

They all looked at me.

"You don't have to say anything," Barry Whitmore reminded easily. "Not a word, Pat."

"Why not? I'm not guilty!" I met their eyes in turn. "Has anyone stopped to think that Adams finding her so quickly might have upset the killer's timetable?"

"Yeah," Tige said. "You bet we thought of that." His faint grin might have meant anything.

"Well?" I said.

Tige shrugged and ate another peanut.

I lighted a cigarette. My hands were steady. If they wished, I'd talk like this all night. But not a word of that brief meeting with Candace. Not even to Barry Whitmore.

Foolish, probably. Proof I was holding out was about all they needed. But this was for keeps; it was my neck in danger.

I wasn't happy about any of it. Candy's life might have been choking out behind the house while I laughed with Sambra and drove away. It was a sick thought, and there was a sicker thought.

The killer must have been close while Candy faced me in the starlight. He knew. Any man I saw now might be the one. The quicker I died, one way or another, the safer he would be.

Nice! It ran gooseflesh up my back.

Somewhere, anywhere, day or night, a killer had me in mind. He'd never be safe while I lived. I was the only living person with positive knowledge that he existed.

Tige reached in his coat pocket. I braced against the sound of a peanut shell crunching sharply between strong fingers. Tige's faint grin lingered as he watched me. His hand stayed in the coat pocket. Nothing happened.

I suddenly wondered resentfully if Tige were using peanut shells to rasp my nerves. But then he'd always eaten the things. Walter Carnes broke the silence with a blunt question.

"Pat, why didn't you come to your wedding four years ago?"

The silence clotted back around us. All three of them stared at me. Barry Whitmore, too. It was the sixty-four dollar question for Phillipsburg.

"I don't have to answer that," I said, and looked at Barry. "How about it?"

"Certainly not." Barry rubbed his chin, studying me. "If you could explain it reasonably, Pat, it might be best."

"Not a chance! That was four years ago. It died then, as far as I'm concerned."

Tige said mildly, "Candy died tonight."

"Four years ago hasn't anything to do with tonight!"

"Why not?"

Tige came over and leaned against the desk, stocky, somehow unreal and strange in the blue police uniform. He was serious as he watched me.

"That was a tragedy in Candy's life, Pat. I suppose you know she never got over it."

I locked eyes with Tige. "Why suppose I know anything? Or have an opinion? I went my way years ago. I haven't been in touch with Phillipsburg since."

"She saw you get off the train with her sister. She was found behind your house just after you drove away with her sister. The two most important things that ever happened to Candy were around you."

I leaned over and ground the cigarette in the glass ash tray on the desk. "Don't you think I know it?" I stood up. "Let's take off the gloves! I didn't want to come here. I was summoned by my uncle! And, damn it, if I'd wanted to wring her neck—"

With a kind of horror I realized what I'd said. I looked at Barry Whitmore. I couldn't help it. He was at my left, eyes on Tige Rothwell. His lean profile seemed blank until I caught bunching jaw muscles slowly relaxing.

It had hit Barry hard, too. Those same words, spoken at the train steps, had been vivid in his thoughts all along.

"Yes?" Tige prompted.

My face felt damp, mouth suddenly dry. "I wouldn't have done it where it happened, and left her there to be found!" I said, and it took an effort.

Tige said, "Sambra drove up unexpectedly. You suggested that old Adams' visit for flowers could have upset the timetable. The rest of the night would have been left to move the body."

"Why should I kill her?"

"Why shouldn't you, if you disliked her so much you let her down at the church?"

I wanted to watch Barry Whitmore and try to guess what was in his mind. I wanted to wipe my damp face. I sat down.

"That happened four years ago! It ended everything between us!"

Walter Carnes had sat listening thoughtfully. He cleared his throat. "Everything, Pat?"

"I said so!"

"How did Candace know where to get you by telephone over in Illinois this morning?"

"Ask Merriam Leaman! She talked to Candace! I don't know the answer!"

Carnes looked at Tige. Tige shrugged slightly.

"I guess that's all tonight," Carnes decided. "You'll be in town for awhile, I suppose, Pat?"

"You know damn well I'll be here until I'm cleared on this!"

"Good," Carnes said, as if he didn't have a warrant which would make certain I stayed in town.

And as I started to the door I had a strong hunch that if I were not George Braden's nephew, with Barry Whitmore my lawyer, I'd be walking toward one of the cells in the back of this same building.

Tige Rothwell lifted his voice as I reached the door. "Say, Pat, what do you know about tugs in India?" Tige was leaning against the desk, intent, expectant.

"Nothing," I said. "What has India to do with this?"

"I wouldn't know," Tige said. It was very strange. A peanut shell cracked sharply as I closed the door.

III.

Sunday morning: Phillipsburg. The extension telephone ringing in Uncle George's empty bedroom pulled me across the hall, half asleep. Merriam Leaman's frigid voice said, "Your Uncle George wishes you to be at the hospital at ten o'clock."

"I'll be there," I said. I was awake now. "And I'll want a few words with you!" I added.

Merriam replied icily, "I hardly think that's necessary," and hung up.

I was hungry. But when I thought of Gil's lunch room, Tony's Café, the Mayflower Restaurant, I wasn't hungry. I'd know everyone. They'd speak or they wouldn't speak. But they'd watch furtively; they'd stare behind my back. They'd be thinking, hang—hang—hang.

Mrs. Gilland never came on Sunday. In maroon robe and slip-slap slippers I prowled the kitchen. Bread and biscuits in the breadbox. Eggs, bacon, baked country ham, oranges in the refrigerator.

I rattled the frying pan, lighted the gas, peeled off bacon strips. I whistled. A beautiful morning. Sunday morning in Phillipsburg. Through Mrs. Gilland's crystal-clear kitchen

windows I could see the sun-flooded gravel paths and bright-hued flower beds that were old Adams' pride. I could see—

Unconsciously, I'd been whistling, "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean."

She wasn't my bonnie any more, but she had been. And she was lying in Reynold's mortuary. Last night she had been out there among the gorgeous flowers. I turned the gas flame out, no longer hungry in this kitchen.

The alarm clock at the end of the sink board ticked clearly as I went to the back door, unlocked it, and reached higher to slide back the old-fashioned bolt. The bolt was already back.

Last night I'd had to push hard against the door to get the bolt over. The key had been in the lock and I'd left it there. The key was still there. But sometime after midnight the bolt had been moved while I slept.

The alarm clock ticked busily. The other sound in the dead silence was the slow, hard thumping of my heart as I stared at the door.

There should be a flashlight in the right-hand drawer under the kitchen sink. There was. A brass-cornered chest under the storeroom window off the kitchen should hold tools. It did.

Flashlight in one hand, large wooden-handled Stillson wrench in the other, I started a search in the big cool cellar. I checked every hiding spot, every window opening from cellar to spacious, cluttered attic where mud-dauber wasps buzzed lazily in the rafter peaks. Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

Last night I'd locked my bedroom door on the inside and wedged a chair under the doorknob. I'd locked my windows which overlooked the front porch roof. I'd locked out the world and gone to sleep.

Now I had a thought. I took the bedroom door key to sunshine at a window, and there it was, on the key.

A dark patina of age was on the key metal. Some sort of slender-nosed instrument had gripped the round key tip from outside the door and turned

the key in the lock. The fresh scratches were there where metal had bitten into softer key metal.

The stout chair which I had wedged into the floor carpet and under the knob had kept the door from being opened. The front door downstairs had a chain, still in place. It was obvious I'd locked two of us in the house last night. The other man had left by the back door, locking it from the outside in the same manner. But he couldn't move the bolt back.

I had another thought. Uncle George kept a compact, hammerless, .32 calibre revolver in the bottom drawer of his rare old walnut dresser. At the back. In the small black cardboard case, with hinged top, in which the gun had come. He always had kept it in that spot. He always would.

The drawer contents were neat, as always. The small black carton was there, at the back. But it was empty.

Uncle George never carried the gun.

I put the black carton carefully back. If I had been dead in bed this morning, shot in the head, the hammerless revolver in my hand, it would have been clean-cut suicide to everyone in Phillipsburg.

Suicide, after murdering Candace.

The gun was missing. It could still be suicide, any day, any night, any hour; and the case of Candace would be closed, solved, and understood by all.

I bathed and dressed, wondering when and where the missing gun might kill. It was a beautiful morning in Phillipsburg, but not for me.

A taxi took me to the hospital. The driver's furtive interest was obvious. He made a point of not mentioning last night. A young nurse on the second floor directed me to George Braden's room in the east wing. She almost stammered when she realized who I was.

Then Uncle George—

Since last night I hadn't let myself dwell on that tall, spare, utterly righteous old gentleman with keen hooded

eyes and a mouth which could close like a trap when displeased. Four years ago he'd passed judgment on what I'd done. What he might think about last night couldn't make it any worse. He was alive after his accident; he wanted to see me, and I walked into his hospital room prepared for anything.

Anything, that is, but Uncle George stiffly upright in a rocking chair, fully dressed in Sunday black, his blue-veined hands crossed on the gold knob of his ebony cane.

"The devil!" I said, stopping inside the door and staring. "I expected to find you in bed."

He said, "You didn't," and studied me and nodded. "You look older," he commented briefly.

"I am older."

He said, and he sounded grim, "Older inside, I hope. Help me up."

He knew about Candy. That much I could tell as I helped him up. He winced from some twinge of pain. His lean, furrowed face, clean-shaven, was unmarked by the accident, but he must have had many bandages under his clothes.

"Does Dr. Stevens know you're doing this?" I demanded as he turned to the door, holding my arm.

"He does," Uncle George said shortly. I wondered what clash of wills had taken place between those two old friends to let this happen. But when Uncle George said, "We will attend church as usual," I stopped right there.

"Not this morning!" I refused flatly. "I'm sorry. It's impossible."

His hooded eyes, which had not aged save for the white bristling brows, looked at me with a blaze I'd seldom seen. His voice was quiet, rather terribly quiet, because so much hung between us in that look.

"The Bradens do not kill women," Uncle George said evenly. "We will attend service as usual."

After that I would have sat in hell with him.

Church was almost that bad. We

came in a trifle late. A startled rustle of movement spread through the pews as the tall old figure walked slowly down the aisle, hand on my arm. Uncle George seated himself in his pew, put both hands on top of his cane, and gave benign attention to the pulpit.

I tried not to think. This was the church where Candace had waited for me four years ago. Here, tomorrow, she would wait briefly near the exact spot where she would have been married.

The same soft light through beautiful leaded glass windows would fall on her. The same minister would speak. Most of the wedding guests would be here. They would know she had waited four long, heartbroken years, hoping. She hadn't let them forget it, even to the handkerchief at her eyes when she saw me step off the train with Sambra.

Candace had waited. Once more she would come to church and once more she would not be married. Once more Pat Braden would not be here to meet her.

I sat through the long service in my own private little hell. The one break I got was the empty Meriwether pew. I don't think I could have taken Sambra's pale, drawn young face accusing me. Or another outburst of hysteria from Mrs. Meriwether. Not here in front of this crowded congregation, rustling, uneasy, and furtively, avidly watching our pew.

There was a certain morbid diversion in watching Walter Carnes. The choir sat directly behind and a little above the pulpit. I could look up into Carnes' stolid, earnest face. His thinning hair was combed neatly. His face was scrubbed. His black suit painfully pressed. He stood stiffly, stolidly, at the right end of the front row, with a way of lifting up his eyes and voice as he sang.

He also had a way of dropping an unblinking, thoughtful stare straight at me. Everyone could see what he was doing.

I silently damned Walter Carnes to

a lower pit than I was sitting in. He'd better have locked me up last night. He had me spitted helplessly on his stare, like a squirming beetle on a laboratory pin.

Only I didn't squirm. I sat quietly. When the ordeal was over, I walked the slow and ghastly gauntlet up the aisle beside Uncle George. There were greetings, hurried, embarrassed, uncomfortable. A few limp hands to shake. This was Sunday church, and custom was strong and I obviously wasn't under arrest.

But I was indicted, tried, convicted by that well-dressed, proper congregation. Worse than that, my hand was shaken while they remembered Mrs. Meriwether's scream: "They'll hang him! Hang him!"

And all that time I was wondering tensely if the guilty man were here. Was he wondering if I'd noticed the missing gun and the back door bolt? Was he planning his next move? He knew. He knew I knew about Candace. He might have shaken my hand on the way out of church.

Uncle George barely made it back to the hospital room. His face was gray with exhaustion. But he'd shown the town what George Braden thought. He said one more thing before nurses engulfed him and Dr. John Stevens got upstairs from his office. Uncle George had to order nurses out of the room to say it.

"Come back later today, Pat. I want to talk to you." He had almost collapsed in the rocking chair, but he reached out a veined hand and gripped my arm. "Be careful!"

"Of course."

"Very careful!" he insisted. His thin fingers pressed in emphasis. "I'm too old to be driving; I know it now, Pat. But you would have had the same accident. A truck crowded my automobile off the road. It was deliberate!"

He released my arm, breathing painfully inside the taped chest. His gray pallor looked worse, but I was rooted there by what he implied.

"Are you certain? No possible mistake?"

His faint smile said I was a doubting youngster; I hadn't lived seventy-four years; I didn't know George Braden after all. But I did know him and I hurriedly asked, "What kind of truck? Did you see the driver?"

Wearily, he said, "Just a big dark truck cutting over unexpectedly. I was overturning down the steep bank before I could think. It was night, you know."

"But . . . but couldn't it have been an accident?"

"Carnes and Dr. John think I'm an old mule-head, excusing bad driving," he muttered, and paused. "Candace wasn't an accident," his low voice said.

"But why? Why you? Why Candace?"

He looked old, tired as he sagged back in the chair. "Why?" He shook his head.

Dr. John Stevens came in, looked once at the sagging figure in the chair, and snapped, "Get out, Pat! Send those blasted nurses in quickly!"

Sunday afternoon in Phillipsburg, my town. Day of rest and peace. Sunday dinners, Sunday driving, visiting, fishing, lazing through the hot, pleasant afternoon hours.

Candace came home again this Sunday afternoon. Through tall elms and maples on the Braden grounds I saw the long black hearse slowly pass.

The town was visiting this afternoon. I saw them go by on foot, in cars, glancing toward the Braden house, passing on to the Meriwether home with their murmuring sympathy, their thoughts, suspicions, low-voiced gossip and speculation. And in the hospital, George Braden's tired heart was barely holding even.

Dr. John Stevens had been almost angrily blunt when I saw him briefly in his office.

"I blame myself! But it's done now! You'll have to stay away from him, Pat, even if he sends for you! I'm doing

everything possible, but he must have peace and quiet!"

It wasn't the automobile accident now; it was Candy's death; it was I who threatened Uncle George's life. Sunday afternoon, and I was alone again in Phillipsburg, horribly alone, trying to think, sorting through the facts, hunting answers that wouldn't come.

I was pacing the front veranda when a long gray convertible swung fast into the driveway. I went off the front steps running, then stopped and lighted a cigarette. I was smiling wryly when Bill Dismore, my partner, leaped out of our car.

Bill's, "Well, killer, you might have waited for me!" was enough.

"So you've had an earful," I said.

"Both ears full," Bill assured me. "The car radio started chewing it over, and I started hitting eighty on the stretches. Got a drink?"

"Dry house, sorry."

Bill turned back to the car and brought out bonded Bourbon. "You look like a haunt, Pat. Get outside some of this and start talking while we're waiting for the horse vans."

A long time later, in the living room, I stopped talking.

Bill nursed a half-empty glass and stared at the rug. I would always see Candace lying there when I walked into this room.

"You don't even know who was in the house last night. Who might have hidden in here until you were asleep," Bill said.

"Chief Carnes and Tige Rothwell had me on ice."

"After this," Bill said, "keep your mouth shut when you step off trains. What does your lawyer think about you wringing necks with words?"

"Plenty, probably. To be crass: If Uncle George dies, I may be the Braden estate. Barry's pitching for future bread and butter. If it weren't for that—" I pulled a finger across my throat.

"Chances are he'll keep you out of

jail for the present," Bill decided. He whistled a tuneless bar, and shook his head. "I doubt if he'll keep you out of a coffin. We'll have to do that."

Bill grinned and sang under his breath:

"Hang him high, bury him low. Where do you think our Pat will go?"

I grinned, too, wanly.

Bill said, "She waited four years, and didn't marry the other guy. And you don't know who he is!"

"There was only the typed note Candace dropped in my car that night. It was torrid literature, reminding Candy our wedding wouldn't make any difference, as she had promised the writer."

"I'd have bowed out, too, but fast," Bill stated.

"Candy said she wrote it to make me jealous. But it was perfect typing. Candy couldn't type. Didn't even have a typewriter at home. Her hands were trembling when she snatched the note back next day. You don't tremble from jokes. I told her I was leaving town fast, and to call the wedding off."

"And you left the evidence with her," Bill said. He shook his head, almost admiringly. "She waited at the church and she had you. That girl could think fast, Pat. Nothing you could ever say would count after that. She nailed it tight by waiting for you to return."

"No girl could hate a guy that much!"

"Someone," said Bill, "was a little less than loving in all this." He put his glass on the small table beside his chair, and stood up. "Let's go out back where it happened."

Bill stopped in the kitchen and tested the door bolt. I looked past him through the door glass and exclaimed, "There's old Adams out in his flowers!"

I hadn't been out in the flowers or near the great white barn topped by lightning rods and a belligerent iron weather cock. Many others had been last night.

Old Adams was standing dourly among his trampled flowerbeds, a big, stooped old man, crotchety, easily angered. His gnarled hands had the "green touch;" he lived for his flowers and he was angry now.

"Trampling like cattle last night!" said Adams resentfully, with only a nod when I introduced Bill. He waved at the wreckage. "Aye! Cattle!"

"Where was Candace when you found her?"

"Here in the tulips!" Adams growled. "My imported bulbs! Walked on, and a bareheaded young lady lying on them!"

"Bareheaded?"

"Why not bareheaded?" Adams challenged testily. He went on irritably, "This morning young Rothwell came asking the same question! Would I be hiding her hat?"

"You didn't see anyone else last night?"

Adams lifted big gnarled hands in testy denial. I gave Bill a look. "Like to see the barn?" When we were out of earshot, I said glumly, "Candace wore a headscarf last night! It wasn't in sight when I saw her in the house. Tige has a hunch about something!"

"Is that guy smart or dumb?" Bill asked. "What was he driving at with his tugs in India?"

A thought hit me. I stopped. "Bill, I know who to ask! Let's get to the telephone and see if he's around!"

I made the call and explained as I hurried Bill out to the car and I drove.

"Cassius Thornweld, out on the Colesville Road, was a missionary teacher or something in India, until his health blew up. He came home not long before Candace and I split. I remember a talk on India he gave at the church. He's expecting us."

"Why not ask him over the telephone?"

"Party line out through the country."

"And me a country boy asking!" said Bill.

Thornweld was waiting for us on

the front steps of a small cottage up a shady farm lane. All the fevers of India seemed to have burned him out, leaving a thin-skinned husk of a little man with a wisp of white goatee, and a placid, rather sweet voice, touched with precise British accent.

He showed us to a creaking porch swing hung by chains, and he sat in a cane porch chair and beamed.

I began, "If I should say, sir, speaking of India—what do you know about tugs in India?"—what would it bring to mind? What would you be apt to say?"

Bill and I held breath, for Thornweld put fingertips precisely together and said, "I would be apt to say, God be thanked such murderous heathen were suppressed long ago."

I looked at Bill. Bill looked at me. "Jackpot!" Bill said, under his breath, and to Thornweld, "Murderous heathen?"

"Followers of the goddess Kali," Thornweld told us cheerfully. "For centuries they murdered unsuspecting travelers in India."

"Are you speaking of the Thugs of India?" I asked.

"The spelling is T-h-u-g," he informed me, smiling. "The pronunciation is 'tug,' slightly aspirated. They killed with the religious cloth, or handkerchief, around the neck. The method was shown me by an old man whose father, before hanging, confessed to over eight hundred victims. Death was always silent and quick."

"Cloth!" Bill blurted from the corner of his mouth. "Headscarf!"

He whipped out a handkerchief. "Mind showing us, on . . . er . . . Braden's neck?"

"A coin was tied in one end of the cloth, but we can dispense with that," Thornweld said, beaming as we all stood. "You notice I hold the handkerchief ends across the palms, my fingers up as they close. Always the palms up. Now I place myself behind you, sir, in the guise of innocent friendship."

Bill said rather flippantly, "One got eight hundred. How many did eight hundred get?"

The placid, rather precise voice behind me said:

"Now I bring the handkerchief down around your neck in front. A quick pull. My fists, palms up, turn in against the rear sides of your neck with a hard jerk to one side. Death was instantaneous and always certain."

I was clawing the handkerchief away. That husk of a little man, burned out by old fevers, had gagged me, almost broken my neck as his knuckles gouged in.

"G-good enough!" I said, coughing.

From the neck on down I had a queazy aftermath of an instant of helplessness terror.

We thanked the old gentleman, shook his hand, and we drove away, knowing about thuggi, the gentle art of quick and silent murder.

"Rothwell is no monkey despite his peanuts," Bill decided.

"Bill, that handkerchief was awful! Poor Candace!"

"Suppose," said Bill, "your visitor had got into your bedroom last night with your uncle's gun and that trick?"

I said, "Damn him! Now I'm afraid to sleep any more! And he might be anyone I know!"

"Did the little gent back there know her?"

"He couldn't be the man!"

"He knows how," said Bill. He thought while I passed a slow-moving old sedan. "The killer will probably have a try at you again, Pat."

I'd been through a lot since yesterday and probably sounded bitter. "The law won't let me leave town! I don't dare carry a gun, the way I'm suspected. I hang or I stay out in the open as murder bait and get shot or strangled!"

"He'll have to show himself if he tries to kill you."

"I might even recognize him before I'm dead!" I said bitterly.

The two huge horse vans arrived

from Illinois at dusk. The stall rows at the fair grounds were a scene of activity this last night before opening day. Late arrivals were unloading, men were busy with horses, harness, carts, sulkies.

There was much visiting around, talk of coming races and past races. This was not Phillipsburg. The long shadowy stall sheds smelling of straw and feed, of leather, liniment and horses were only another stop on the fair circuit.

We were the Dismore-Braden Stable, out of the Bluegrass, owners of Abdulla Pete, Marcellina Queen, Jack O'Leary Third and other horses.

We were part of this surging, tingling world of fine horses and feather-light racing sulkies, of wild dangerous melees of hammering hoofs and close-locked sulkies racing toward the judges, while crowded grandstands cheered.

Pools of black shadow spread after darkness fell. Phillipsburg people were busy with exhibits in tents and buildings. Strangers everywhere, and the fair grounds tonight a perfect spot for silent death.

Jumbo Sam and Old Deacon, our colored grooms, had come with the horse vans, as they always did. I was giving Old Deacon orders about Abdulla Pete when a voice at my shoulder asked, "Going to race tomorrow, Pat?"

Tige Rothwell was smiling when I whirled. He had come close and I hadn't heard him. Anyone else could have done the same.

I said shortly, "Not tomorrow," and I called Bill Dismore over and introduced him.

Tige was out of uniform. We spoke of racing and the fair. Tige offered peanuts out of his pocket and cracked a shell and smiled lazily at me.

"Mort Kennedy was over at the dairy exhibit. He wondered if you were around."

Tige looked at his wrist watch and shook Bill's hand again before he left. Not a word about all that was burning us inside.

"Any more discoveries?" I had to inquire.

"We're checking around; got a few ideas," Tige said vaguely.

"I'll give you another idea." I told Tige about my bedroom door, the bolt downstairs, and the missing gun.

"Kind of late to be reporting it," Tige reproved. He cracked a peanut and held it in his strong fingers while he looked at me. "I wouldn't have thought about that chair under the doorknob, Pat." He walked away, reaching in his pocket for another peanut.

"That guy," said Bill soberly, "is going to hang you or thinks he is. He's sure you're lying."

IV.

The Tri-County Fair opened the next morning. Bill had stayed at the house. We had slept in the same room, chair under the doorknob again, windows locked.

"I feel silly locking up like this," Bill had admitted wryly. "But if one guy could get eight hundred in India with his hankie, who are we to help out the local talent? Are you sure that chair is wedged tight?"

We drove to the fair grounds, checked horses and equipment, and then back to town. Uncle George was about the same.

Barry Whitmore, when I telephoned his office, had nothing new to report. "Don't worry, Pat," he advised with easy reassurance.

Barry was only a lawyer. He didn't know all I knew.

A little later I heard the church bell tolling, and saw the long, slow funeral procession pass the next corner while I waited in our car.

Bill joined me presently with what he'd learned by circulating as a stranger. They were burying Candace in her wedding gown. The bride who had waited for Pat Braden.

It was the touch that capped everything. A last silent accusation.

"I'd expected you to race as usual," Bill said slowly as we sat in the parked car. He looked grim. "Now, I don't know. You're not exactly popular. Driving in the trots and paces might seem a little callous to the townspeople, considering everything."

"Bill," I asked, and I must have sounded desperate, the way Bill looked at me, "what can I do? I can't speak of the past. I can't go around asking whom Candace has been friendly with. I'm stymied. Even the one person who might possibly have helped a little is out."

"Who?" Bill demanded alertly.

"Sambra. For some reason she was friendly. But I suppose she hates my guts now, too!"

"Kind of went for her, didn't you?" Bill inquired shrewdly. "How do you think she can help now?"

"A curious kid sister can soak up a lot through the years. If she believed in me, if she tried hard to remember—"

"You might have something there!" Bill decided with new enthusiasm. "It would be too raw trying to see her today, or even tomorrow. In a couple of days I'll sound her out."

"I'll do it," I said flatly.

Bill lifted eyebrows. "O.K. I'll look over the spot where your uncle went off the highway and get the exact time it happened. Someone along the road might remember the truck passing."

"Waste of time."

Bill argued, "The law doesn't seem to believe there was a truck. I do. Makes a difference. Now, how about the nurse who was in India? How many people here got to India during the war and might have learned about Ganges garroting?"

"Mort Kennedy would know. I'll see Mort tonight at his house."

But it was Mort Kennedy who contacted me.

The house telephone was ringing when we returned from the fair

grounds after dark. Mort Kennedy's voice sounded a little strained and guarded.

"Pat! Can you come over to the house?"

"I was thinking about it myself. Be over in half an hour or so."

"Come now. It's—well, it's important."

"Coming!" I said, and must have used the same strained tone, for Bill Dismore whipped out as I hung up, "What's happened?"

"Mort Kennedy wants to see me in a hurry! Something's up! Damn it! I forgot to ask where he lives!"

"Look in the telephone directory." And while I did that, Bill said, "Suppose I wait in the car while you go in? He might have the break we need."

"You're coming in with me!"

Mort had left the porch light off. Window shades were drawn. Mort opened the door, and stood, all joints and thin height, with a puckered look of reserve through the thick-lensed glasses when he saw Bill.

He closed the door almost hurriedly and turned the night lock against visitors.

I introduced Bill, and explained, "Bill's my partner."

"Heard you were in town," said Mort. "Eileen's busy with the kids just now. Go on back to the breakfast nook off the kitchen. Bill, have that chair on your left."

"Bill's in on everything," I insisted bluntly.

"Sure," Mort assented. "But don't rush me." He was smiling a little.

Mort closed the living room door behind me as I walked back to the kitchen.

Then I understood. Sambra was standing by the red leather cushions of the breakfast nook. Sambra in black, and all the air of walking on her toes gone now.

The tired pallor on her young face caught at me.

I said, "Sambra! I didn't expect—"

That was all I could say. I was

walking toward her, the hard hammer of my heart rising.

Something grave, weighing, mature in Sambra's look stopped me an arm's reach away. We looked at each other.

I made a helpless gesture.

"Sambra, I don't know what you believe. But . . . but when we came back from the lake, I had no idea—if you could tell me you believe that—"

Sambra's smooth throat moved as she swallowed. She rubbed closed fingers across her forehead, as if trying to clear an ache, or a fog.

"I don't know what to believe," she said in a low voice. She drew a hard breath. "Eileen is my closest friend. It seemed best to meet you here."

"Where the gossips wouldn't report it?"

Sambra nodded. She reached back to a paper sack on the yellow plastic table top.

"I wanted to show you this, Pat. It was hidden behind the seat cushion of our car."

She reached in the sack and brought out a crumpled pastel-blue head scarf and silently put it in my hand.

I said, "This looks like Candy's scarf! How did—"

Too late I stopped.

A quick sick helplessness hit me. In the ghastly silence that dropped between us, I looked from the scarf to Sambra's face.

She stood there, young and slender, more pale if possible, and grief and hurt froze all her youth away while I looked.

Two slow clear tears grew in the corners of her eyes.

"Then you did lie?" Sambra almost whispered. Her chin was beginning to quiver.

"It's my scarf, Pat! I changed my mind and tossed it to Candace before I walked out Saturday night. It was gone when I got back. She wore it, but you couldn't have known, unless you were with her! It . . . it must have been in your pocket when we started to the lake!"

Sambra swallowed hard. "They said you were lying and I didn't believe them!"

I had had too much. I put the soft silk scarf back in the paper sack and closed Sambra's small cold hand on the top.

"In the front room," I said, "is Bill Dismore, my partner. Will you show this to Bill and Mort before you leave?"

Sambra tried to answer, and only bit her lip hard and bent her head. We were silent to the living room doorway.

Bill's face went rigid; Mort Kennedy blinked behind the thick lenses when I stepped in the doorway and spoke over Sambra's head.

"Bill, I give up! Will you tell Sambra and Mort everything we know? Everything!"

I closed the door and walked slowly back to the breakfast nook. There, on the gay red cushion, I put my arms on the table and my head on my arms, and I quit.

Walter Carnes and Tige Rothwell had their case all packaged neatly with the scarf. But it wasn't that.

It was the look in Sambra's eyes, and knowing Sambra had been cured of all belief in Pat Braden. I wondered if Candace would have liked this ending, and it didn't matter.

Mort Kennedy and Bill came into the kitchen some twenty minutes later by my wrist watch. Longer, by my thoughts. A lifetime longer.

They slid into the nook, Bill first, and sat facing me. Mort put the brown paper sack on the yellow table, Bill tossed a cigarette across, and held out his lighter flame.

They looked sober, thoughtful.

"It was a good try, anyway," I said, and I found a faint smile. "With evidence like that, I'd hang my brother, if I had one."

"I see now why you went for her," Bill said. He reached in the sack and pulled out the scarf.

"What are we waiting for?" I asked.

"Do I sit here until someone comes for me?"

"What?" Bill said. He was poking the scarf with a finger. He looked up. "We're thinking about who tried to hang you with this pretty silk noose, by planting it behind that auto seat."

I stared at them; smoke began to tremble up from my cigarette.

"Why you dope!" Bill said. "You thought—" He shoved the scarf toward me. "That girl," Bill said, "would have gone on her knees to hear you were innocent! All I had to do was tell her about the back door bolt. Then we all took our hair down."

I was edging off the cushions. "Where's Sambra?"

"Sit down!" Bill commanded. "She's gone. This is worse than we thought. Your righteous Uncle George has played merry hell with his righteousness."

Now I was confused. "Uncle George?"

"Exactly!" said Bill. "Sambra guessed before the wedding that her sister was meeting someone else and guessed why you left town. But she didn't suspect that Candace faked being left at the church. And she never knew who the other guy was."

"But where does Uncle George—"

"This will kill you," said Bill. "You disgraced the family honor. So Uncle George righted the wrong in his own honorable way. If Candace Meriwether was still unmarried when he died, she got half the Braden estate, just as if you had married her. Uncle George put it in his will."

I said weakly, "That would be like Uncle George!" Then I saw the humor in it. "Candace couldn't marry! She had to keep loving me publicly!"

"Very funny," said Bill morosely. "Listen, dope. You got the other half of the estate! But if Candace died before Uncle George, you got it all! There's your perfect motive for killing her! Now laugh!"

I groaned.

"Why," I wondered, "wasn't I locked up at once?"

"The will isn't public knowledge," Bill informed me. "Uncle George told Candace, so she'd feel better. He swore her to secrecy. Candace let it out to Sambra. Hard to tell who else knows. Maybe the law is gathering a little more evidence to add to it."

I was thinking of that, too; and I was thinking of the truck which had put Uncle George down a steep highway bank.

"I can't believe Candace got tired of waiting. She wouldn't have tried to have him killed. Not Candace!"

"Let's be gallant," said Bill. "Not Candace. But what about the guy whose note broke up your wedding? He had Candace, married or not, didn't he? When Uncle George died, he had her, plus half the Braden estate. Maybe he got tired of waiting." Bill's look narrowed. "Mort says your lawyer's wife died suddenly, three years ago. Unexpected heart trouble—"

"Barry didn't mention that!"

Mort Kennedy said, "Barry has been living with his married brother. Candace has made a foursome with them now and then." Mort looked at us. "Barry could be thinking of marrying Candace and George Braden's money." Mort cleared his throat and produced a small newspaper clipping from his billfold.

"Saturday's *Clarion* carried this. 'A man identified as a Henry Harris, who had served two short prison terms, was found beside the highway on the other side of Bell City, killed by a pistol shot through the head.'"

"Bell City," I said, "is a hundred and fifteen miles from here. And I never heard of Henry Harris."

"You're hearing now," Mort said evenly. "Walter Carnes told me your uncle said a truck ran him off the highway. Carnes agreed a truck might have rattled him. I happened to remember that a Henry Harris, of Bell City, had been caught trucking stolen cattle during the meat shortage. The cattle were stolen from our county, which, I suppose, is why I remembered."

"I'm listening," I said, "but cattle—"

"I telephoned the Bell City Star on a hunch," Mort told me calmly. "They said Harris owned a truck. He'd been hauling something Friday night; his wife didn't know what or where. He parked the truck in Bell City before midnight and was found dead outside of town the next morning. It was a dark-red truck."

Excitement ran through me. I could see it in Bill, too. "Where is Uncle George's wrecked automobile?" I hurriedly asked.

"Hunter's Garage," Mort replied. "It's a black sedan. On the smashed left front fender, under dried mud, was a small streak of color where the fender had hit something painted red. The mechanic who was sanding the fender remembered it." Mort shrugged. "It's sanded off now, but it was there."

We looked at each other, and cold and carefully planned murder crawled into the breakfast nook with us. One could almost feel it, sense it, taste the clammy threat.

Bill Dismore broke the silence.

"Someone hired a trucker to kill George Braden! The trucker reported the job was done and was paid off with a bullet, so it would end right there!"

"It doesn't check," I said slowly. "Candace was killed. Her death gave me all the estate. No one has been trying to marry me and profit by it."

"Candace tried," said Bill with a thin smile. He was passing cigarettes; he paused and squinted at me. "You're not a bad specimen. Two arms, two legs, a passable mug. Suppose Candace got tired of the other guy? You were still a good buy, if you could be convinced. It would be the perfect final curtain on her act." Bill's grin was cynical. "And you did have the other half of the estate."

I said, "Good God! Nice prospect, if true, and I'd accepted. But I don't believe it!"

"She tried," Bill reminded. "Suppose she wasn't aware the other man

was listening. Maybe he followed her; maybe he heard what was said to you, and quarreled with her and killed her."

"Maybe!" I said. "Maybe the moon is cheese after all. What does it matter? The truck driver is dead. Candace is dead. The red paint is sanded off. And someone tried to get at me Saturday night—and I can't prove it!" I picked up the blue silk scarf. "This was planted behind the car seat, to pin Candace's death on me. George Braden's will provides my motive. If you ask me, I'm sunk." Then I said blankly. "And Barry Whitmore is defending me!"

Bill's nod was grim again.

"We're waiting for a telephone call from Sambra, Pat. If she doesn't have luck, we'd better get another lawyer, because you may have breakfast in jail!"

I said, startled, "I thought Sambra went home!"

"Sambra is pitching for you," Bill told me. "She was pitching when the scarf was found in her car. She gave that nurse, Merriam Leaman, a lift, and was asking how Candace could have told Miss Leaman you were over in Illinois. The nurse dropped her lipstick, felt back of the cushion for it, and found the end of the scarf."

I lifted the scarf off the table. Sambra's scarf. It had been lovely on Candace. It must have been more so on Sambra. It belonged to both girls now. It was beauty, it was death—and it might hang me.

A long hair was caught on the strong soft silk. I picked the hair off with morbid fascination, and said, "If Sambra let Merriam know anything, it's all over town by now."

"Merriam," said Mort quietly, "is the one who saw Candace standing in front of the Meriwether house Saturday night. Walter Carnes ordered Merriam to keep quiet about it. He told me. Sambra didn't know that, until I told her a few minutes ago. Sambra says Merriam had a queer, intent look when she asked whose scarf it was.

Merriam examined it closely, and began to cry. She said talking about Candace had upset her. And she seemed to accept Sambra's statement that the scarf was hers."

I dropped the long hair and pulled the scarf slowly through my fingers. It was a soft and lovely length of silk; it mocked death and hanging.

"Merriam certainly wasn't crying about me," I said. "And if she recognized the scarf, she'll talk. She always does."

"We were afraid of that," Mort Kennedy agreed. "So Sambra's going to see Merriam again. She's going to mention that Candace spoke of wearing the scarf Saturday night, and then left it at home. Sambra is going to say she wore the scarf herself, yesterday or today."

"Lying," I said, "for me!"

"Of course you're not worth it," said Bill lightly. "But it was fast thinking on Sambra's part."

I found another long hair on the scarf, and I stared at the soft silk, and then looked closely, and my heart began to hit fast, and faster.

"Merriam Leaman was in India, too!" I said. My voice sounded thick, even to me. Bill looked sharply. Mort cocked his head inquiringly.

"She's a nurse," I said. "She's hardened to death. She wasn't crying about Candace. She looked at this scarf closely, and she knew who the killer was. That's why she was crying. And she'll talk. She can't help it. She'll talk quick."

I was out of the nook as I said it. "We've got to find both those girls!" I said wildly.

"Why?" Bill demanded, following Mort out beside me. "It sounds good for you, if true!"

"Merriam," I said, "will go straight to the killer with it. Why do you think she was crying? And she's as good as dead when she does. And if there's any suspicion that Sambra knows, Sambra will get it, too. Mort, lock this scarf away somewhere. Wait

here for Sambra. Bill, are you coming with me?"

Mort shoved the scarf under the red leather cushion.

"Safe until the kids get up tomorrow. Eileen can answer the telephone or let Sambra in and lock the door. Let's go," Mort said, and he added, "Even if you are wacky!"

They both thought that. Mort's attractive little wife, who had been Eileen Wells, thought so, too, as disjointed instructions flew about her head while we were getting out the front door.

Wacky! They all thought it; but Bill drove the gray convertible fast, Mort directing from the rear seat, and they both fired questions at me.

"I can be wrong," I had to admit. "Maybe I've said too much. Just get me to Merriam Leaman! Step on it, Bill!"

"Turn right!" Mort yelled, almost too late.

Bill wrenched the steering wheel and took us into Adams Street on screaming rubber and two wheels; we barely missed oncoming headlights and rocked straight again. A startled shout from the other car faded back as Bill wound the motor whining with a heavy foot.

Mort Kennedy unscrambled himself from a corner of the back seat.

"Hey! We're in town!" Mort warned, getting his glasses back on straight. "And the *Clarion* has been preaching drive safely!"

Bill slowed a breath; he was used to splitting inches in harness racing tangles.

"Safety first for Sambra!" Bill suggested calmly over a shoulder. "Call your plays sooner, pal."

Monday night in Phillipsburg. Opening Night of the Tri-County Fair. The streets were peaceful, quiet. It did not seem a night for murder, a time for death. Our rush through the star-hung evening was the only discordant note.

"Fourth house on the right, beyond the next corner," I directed.

It was the old McKittrick residence, red brick monstrosity of turrets, gables, balconies and cast-iron gingerbread, set back among huge shade trees. Sambra's coupé was not at the curb.

Mort Kennedy hurried to the house. I paced back and forth. Bill's calm advice came out of the car:

"Break out of the gallop! If we lose this heat, we'll take the next one!"

Mort returned quickly.

"Merriam used the telephone, ran upstairs and washed her face, came down and said she was going to the fair grounds. Sambra was here and said she'd drive to the fair grounds and find Merriam."

"Who did Merriam telephone?"

"The landlady doesn't know. She said Merriam seemed upset." Mort sounded worried now.

"Get to the fair grounds," I told Bill, and if my voice shook a bit, I felt that way inside.

Bill drove off with a rush. "We'll find them," he said confidently.

But Bill knew, and I knew, that any fair grounds on opening night, crowded and noisy, exciting, with nooks and pools of blackness, was a perfect spot for murder.

V.

The big light-spangled ferris wheel circled high against the night sky as we parked inside the main entrance and hurried on foot.

Blatant rhythms of merry-go-round music reached us. The sights, the sounds and smells of the fair engulfed us. We were three more visitors pushing through the dawdling, dusty, happy crowd.

"We'd better split up," I decided. "Meet in front of the Hawaiian Dancers, on the Midway, if there's luck."

All this had been part of my daily life; the deafening motor exhausts from the Midway Motordrome, the

brass-voiced sideshow barkers, the pink and white masses of cotton candy, hot dogs, and hamburgers.

It was all around me now. Frazzled mothers corralling offspring, rumble of Midway rides, happy shrieks, and in the background the occasional squeal of hogs, the blat of sheep and lowing of cattle.

Only tonight it was different; it was unfriendly, it baffled and frustrated. Faces were everywhere, by hundreds and thousands, milling about in bright light and in dark shadows. Music blared, barkers shouted, rides rumbled, Diesel electric generators droned loudly off in the night where a scream, a body, a furtive flight would go unnoticed. Who thought of murder here tonight or cared?

Some faces were familiar. I began to stop people I knew and ask about Merriam Leaman. But not about Sambra; Mort Kennedy would have to ask about Sambra, after all that had happened.

I stopped roly-poly, pink-faced Ed Jackson, assistant cashier of the First National, and his plump wife. Ed carried an oversized white fur teddy bear and an unwieldy table lamp they had won at wheel games. Emma Jackson barely nodded; it was obvious why.

But Ed chortled, "Merriam Leaman? Saw her not ten minutes ago, didn't we, Emma? Let's see, which building?"

"She was standing at the east side of the Poultry Building," Emma Jackson said stiffly.

Ed chuckled. "I remember. Say, Pat, don't miss the tumbler pigeons if you go in there."

"She had been crying," Emma Jackson stated.

"Now, Emma, you just guessed that," Ed protested. "Glad to have seen you, Pat."

Emma insisted as I left them, "She had been crying! A woman can—"

Ten minutes. Merriam must have been waiting for someone. I hurried, just short of running. The Poultry Building was a long, single-story unit,

not too popular this time of evening. Merriam was not at the east side. Roosters were crowing inside and caged guineas near an open window were noisy.

Tall trees back of the Poultry Building shaded picnic tables and rest benches. People were not eating now. I walked into the shadows and called. Merriam did not answer.

Then I came suddenly on the tree-shadowed bench where she sat, head bowed in thought, and she ignored me. "Merriam?"

Before I touched her shoulder, and peered close at the angular smartness of her profile, and noted the awkward askew of her hat, I knew.

The touch unbalanced her. I caught quickly at dreadful heavy limpness. When I straightened up, Merriam lay there on the green-slatted seat as if dozing.

She was warm and at peace. She had used perfume and the fragrance hung about her. A crowing rooster in the Poultry Building reminded me of the cast-iron weather cock above the flowers where Candace had been found.

I ran to the end of the Poultry Building, and then walked. It would have to be reported; but Sambra first, while there might be time.

In front of the Poultry Building I met Ed Jackson and Emma, and Ed had the grace to be embarrassed.

"Wanted to see those tumblers again, Pat. Er . . . uh . . . been inside yet?"

Avid curiosity sharpened Emma Jackson's look.

"Merriam is back there on a bench, strangled to death!" I told them in bitter haste. "Have you seen Sambra Meriwether?"

Ed stared dumbly, his mouth open. The gaudy lamp shade wobbled as Emma caught his arm. She had a greenish look of fright.

"Don't tell him, Ed! You see I was right! Now he wants Sambra! Get the police!"

I said desperately, "Ed, for God's sake, use your head! Would I have

asked about Merriam if I'd wanted to kill her? Sambra's in the same danger! You've seen her, haven't you? Where, Ed?"

Emma shook his arm.

"Don't tell him, Ed! I don't care if the Bradens can have you fired from the bank! He killed both girls! He'll kill Sambra!"

Ed stood there, a pink-faced, roly-poly man, the big white teddy bear slumping against one cheek, the lamp shade jiggling the other cheek. He was considered a hen-pecked husband. His job, his future, his wife's growing hysteria were scrambling his wits.

I said, "Ed, get the police, of course! But I've got to find Sambra!"

Emma said dramatically, "Ed Jackson, I'll scream if you're not man enough—"

Ed's mouth closed. "Here, Emma!"

Emma gulped and clutched the large teddy bear and the lamp which Ed had shoved into her arms.

"Get in that building with other people and keep quiet, Emma!" Ed ordered almost ferociously. "I'll handle this without your cackling! Do you hear me, Emma Jackson?"

Emma went, as if sleep-walking. And her Ed, in ten seconds, had made himself a future with the First National, if I ever had the Braden stock.

"Been wanting to do that for some time," Ed said a trifle breathlessly. "Now, Pat, I don't know what this is all about. But Emma did see Sambra Meriwether when we passed this end of the Midway. Sambra was with Barry Whitmore."

I caught Ed's arm myself, hard. "Are you certain it was Barry Whitmore?"

"Couldn't see much with that lamp and teddy bear up around my face, and people jostling me," Ed confessed. "But Emma seemed sure." Ed looked embarrassed again. "Emma kind of punched me and said, 'There's Sambra Meriwether going into the Midway with Barry Whitmore, right after Candace's funeral!'"

"Thanks, Ed!" I said, and I ran.

You could trust Emma to make certain who the man was. She must have been torn cruelly between following me to Merriam Leaman, or trailing Sambra around the Midway.

Somehow, I hadn't thought of the Midway as a spot for death.

But it could be, easily. Barry could step away from Sambra, saying he would search for Merriam Leaman. Sambra might even ask him to. She had no reason to expect murder in the fair grounds tonight.

I thought of her tired young pallor in Mort's kitchen. I thought of Candace under the bright crystal chandelier, and Merriam Leaman's white quiet face on the green bench.

Fear cut in behind my knees, hollowed my middle, dried my mouth as I began to bump people and push fast into the Midway crowd.

Calling Sambra's name was useless.

This was the high point of the Midway evening. Skylo, the Skyman, would shortly give his free death-defying act atop the spidery steel tower which soared high above everything on the fair grounds.

The crowd was dense and growing. A line waited for seats on the spinning ferris wheel. At the banner-hung tent of Science and Wonders, a hoarse-voiced barker clanged a steel bar against a steel triangle:

"Only a qua'tah—five nickels—the fourth paaa't of a dollar—"

Gaudy gold-and-red horses pumped rhythmically around and around the loud merry-go-round music. The Hawaiian girls shook grass skirts before admiring eyes:

". . . these beeeootiful nymphs in daaaances of trrrropical passion! The purest aaart known to man!"

It beat around me, noise and happy confusion:

"Take a chance—Take a chance on the Lucky Wheel—"

"Gypsy fortune—Lucky fortune—"

"He's ossified aaand he's real—"

Repeating rifles poured fusillades of shots at shooting gallery targets.

"Popcorn-popeorn—"

"Hava bite—hava 'burger—"

Girls shrieked on the caterpillar ride.

And at the high round bowl of the Motordrome, the loudest pitch of all broke out ahead of me.

On this platform, Demono, the Motor Man, in crash helmet and goggles, started the engine of his oil-streaked motorcycle. The roaring cannon-bark of its exhaust smothered every nearby sound on the Midway, and drew the perspiring, gaping crowd.

That was when I saw Barry Whitmore ahead of me, going on his toes, craning to see better as he pushed across the crowd current toward the end of Demono's platform. Barry's right hand was thrust inside his coat, under his left arm.

I caught that glimpse of Barry, and the set, intent purpose on his face. The meaning of it hit me like a blow.

Barry must have a gun holstered under his left arm. The racing motorcycle exhaust, sounding like cannon shots in staccato bombardment, would drown out a revolver shot.

I'd been thinking of two strangled girls, of quiet, furtive death.

Now I remembered the Bell City truck driver, shot through the head. I thought of Uncle George's missing gun, which could incriminate me if it shot Sambra.

I fought to get through the pushing crowd which enveloped Barry's lean, stalking figure.

I was nearer the outer edge of the crowd. I moved faster than Barry. It would have to happen now, any second, while the crashing motorcycle exhaust tore the night with deafening reports.

Then I saw Sambra near the end of Demono's platform. She looked slim and young, pale in her black mourning. She seemed a little lost, uncertain, forlorn, as she stood there.

In the same moment I saw Tige Rothwell, and a great wave of thankfulness hit me and I fought toward him, ignoring protests.

Tige was off duty, neat in a blue suit and gray snap brim summer hat. He was eating peanuts as the crowd moved him toward Sambra. Always peanuts.

But he was Tige Rothwell, here, where Demono's motorcycle exhaust crashed above all other sounds. He was nearer to Sambra than Barry was. I caught a blurred glimpse of Tige tossing peanuts into his mouth, thrusting his hand back into a bulging brown paper sack holding more peanuts.

"Tige!" I shouted.

It was smothered by the backfiring motor exhaust which spewed out flying red sparks. I let Barry Whitmore go out of mind as I tried to reach Tige.

He was close to Sambra when I shouted again, almost at his elbow. Tige heard me. He stopped short, turned fast.

I put all I had, all I felt into a savage blow.

My fist knocked Tige reeling. It made his hands tear the bulging paper sack. Peanuts flew out.

I hadn't expected a hammerless revolver to be in Tige's right hand as the sack ripped apart. He'd had the gun hidden among the peanuts. He could have poked it through the bottom of the sack, shot Sambra, and moved away, still eating peanuts, still safe.

That hammerless gun of Uncle George's would have been found later, matched with bullets taken from Sambra, and Pat Braden could have explained. Tige thought of everything.

Tige thought of murder now. He could claim self-defense. I saw it on his face as I lunged in against his stocky, unbalanced figure. My hand slapped to the side of the gun and shoved up as it fired. Powder burned my face.

Tige fought back furiously, still off balance. The gun went off again, its muzzle too high once more. A vortex of fear spread around us in the crowd.

Demono cut his motor suddenly. In

the quick silence, a woman behind me screamed.

We reeled against strangers. I fought to hold the gun. Tige tried to throw me back.

"Not like the truck driver, Tige!" I wrenched out. "Or Candace or Merriam!"

He was hatless, hair down about his eyes; his face was inches away. I saw it clearly; I saw a man quit, a man die as guilt struck a balance in his quick mind. I knew about the truck driver—Merriam—Candace. I knew everything.

Tige added it all up instantly.

Barry Whitmore reached us and did not hesitate. The gun Barry pulled, chopped against Tige's head. Tige let go of the hammerless revolver. I jumped back with it.

Tige was staggering and reaching under his coat. He was half-turned away from me when he pulled his service gun from an armpit holster. I saw it. I had him covered, but Tige never looked at me again. He was standing that way when he shot himself, and dropped.

No one could have stopped him; Tige probably knew best. He thought of everything.

We waited in the fair ground's office, Barry Whitmore, myself, Sambra, Bill Dismore, Mort Kennedy. A few morbid people lingered outside. Not many. The noisy, crowded Midway was still doing business.

The room was warm, but beside me on a bench against a wall, Sambra's hand was still cold as I held it. She was quiet, I was quiet, as Barry Whitmore leaned back against a desk and filled in our knowledge:

"I drew George Braden's new will, and became, in a way, Candace's attorney also. He asked me to keep track of you, Pat. He wouldn't write, but he wanted to know about you. After you got into harness racing, that part was easy. And when Candace was killed—"

"You heard what I said when I stepped off the train," I reminded. "I should think—"

Barry gave me the ghost of a smile. "I'm not a fool, Pat. When a young fellow like you leaves his past and a girl like Candace, there is a reason. About a year ago, Candace began to pump me about blackmail. She was leading a blameless life. It could only mean some other man than you, Pat, before you went away."

I said blankly, "Blackmail? That would mean Tige threatened to tell enough to make Uncle George change the will again!" Then I guessed, "Tige must have doubted that Candace would ever marry him. He was using pressure."

Barry nodded. "I noticed Candace driving now and then with Rothwell. One day I asked her if she liked him. She denied it so emphatically I was certain he was the man. When George Braden was almost killed, and you returned, and Candace was found Saturday night, Rothwell was on my mind. Pat, if you'd been more frank with me from hour to hour—"

"I didn't know whom to trust, Barry. I suppose we'll never know whether Tige came to kill me Saturday night, and overheard Candace; or whether he met her for a minute that evening, and followed her, and guessed he was out of the picture for good, after hearing us talk."

Barry suggested, "There is also the chance he lost his temper and told Candace about the truck driver, and Candace said she'd report it, and he had to kill her."

"That," I said after a moment, "is what happened. Candace tried to break away from a mistake that stopped her marriage and her life. Tige wouldn't let her. Finally, he admitted murder, and killed her when she insisted on reporting it. Does anyone doubt the facts?"

No one did. We gave that to Candace and to Phillipsburg's long memory, just among ourselves. Sambra's

grateful hand held mine more tightly.

"After Saturday night, I began to wear my gun," Barry said. "And tonight, when I saw Sambra here at the fair, alone, I knew something was wrong. She wouldn't have been out tonight otherwise."

"Pitching for me," I said, squeezing Sambra's hand.

"I thought of that, too," Barry said, lifting an eyebrow at Sambra. "But when Sambra told me Rothwell had seen Merriam Leaman a few minutes before, by the Motordrome, on the Midway, I smelled trouble. You see, I'd seen Miss Leaman myself at almost the same minute, over toward the Poultry Building. Rothwell had lied, for some reason. We know now it must have been a quick alibi, putting himself on the Midway at the time Miss Leaman was killed. He was going to the Midway, not away from it, when he met Sambra.

"I went along with Sambra, to see what was up. We separated to search for Miss Leaman, and agreed to meet at the Motordrome. And then," said Barry reflectively, "when I spotted Rothwell moving toward the spot where he'd directed Sambra, I tried to get to him, not taking any chances. We know now, of course, Miss Leaman had told him enough to make Sambra seem dangerous to him. He was caught in murder; he couldn't stop. He had the gun he'd stolen from George Braden's house; there on the Midway seemed to be a good place to use it on Sambra."

Sambra held my hand hard. I was looking at her, safe beside me, when Mort Kennedy came over to me.

"I have to write a story tonight, and you sit holding Sambra's hand," Mort said accusingly. "Give!"

"From the *Clarion*," I said, "nothing is withheld. Peanuts, Mort."

"I can't use wisecracks!"

"You needed a bright light and a

close look to see them," I said. "A few tiny dark flakes on the scarf silk. They clicked suddenly. Bits of peanut skins, Mort, like you'd find in a coat pocket, where a man dropped broken peanut hulls so often he never thought of it any more."

In the silence that followed, Mort Kennedy said weakly, "Peanuts!"

"Boom, there it was," I said. "It meant Tige had Candace's scarf Saturday night. He was trying to frame me. He had to be the one who tried to kill George Braden and murdered the truck driver. Merriam Leaman knew that scarf, but wouldn't admit it to Sambra. She looked closely at it and she began to cry. I had to assume she'd seen the bits of peanut skin, too, and guessed where they came from. Maybe she'd talked to Tige about thuggi, maybe he'd learned it in his crime studies. But if Merriam was crying, it probably meant she loved the guy. She'd go to him, tell him, probably accuse him of having an affair with Candace, and killing her, and talk her own self into a fast grave."

"And she did," Mort muttered. He took off his glasses and peered at me, half-blind, as he polished the thick lenses.

"Going to live in Phillipsburg again, Pat?"

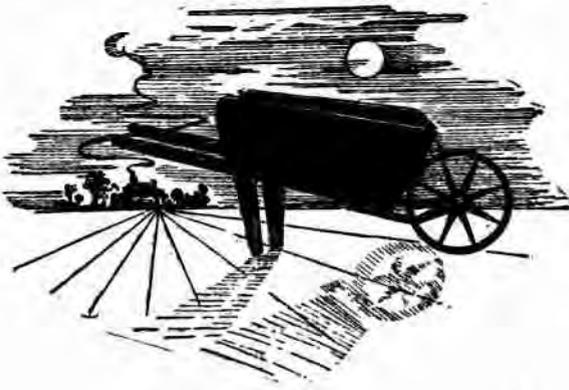
I held Sambra's hand tightly, not looking at her, and glad Mort could not see my face too well.

"I'm only sure of one thing," I said. "I hope to be married as soon as Uncle George is up and about."

"Good," Mort said approvingly. "Big church wedding here in Phillipsburg, with pictures for the *Clarion*?"

I didn't know what to say. Sambra said it for me, thoughtfully, a trifle too firmly, it occurred to me later, for a bride's complete faith in the groom.

"Something in a nice quiet elopement, please, Mort, that will go off on schedule."



She came back

at Midnight

BY IRIS BARRY

The house was empty, deserted, yet its mistress' presence filled it, floated as eerily through each room as the fog outside drifted through the orchard—

I DIDN'T want to spend the night alone in the old Sheveland house. High up there among acres of orchard with the nearest farm half a mile down the hill. But dusk was closing in.

I paused at the parlor window to watch the mist clouding through the dusty trees. Though it was July the weather was freakish and there was a chill in the air.

I was uneasily conscious of the big shadowy rooms behind me. A musty odor still hovered about, though I'd had the windows open all day. I'd vacuumed and polished and brought in pink phlox from the garden to freshen the air. It's queer how dead

and eerie a house becomes when no one is in it for a few weeks.

The mist hid the headlamps of cars down on the distant highway, and I felt lost to the world. Dad had driven me over and unless I wanted to walk seven miles back I was stuck there. But surely Mr. and Mrs. Sheveland would arrive any moment.

The mournful silence was getting on my nerves. I might as well make a cup of tea, I decided, and eat something. I left the window and went out through the cavernous dining room.

Suddenly, my breath choked in my throat. Something was moving by the

door to the side porch. A vague shadow, like a woman. Amalie Sheveland in one of the dramatic dark housegowns she wore so frequently! Her restless presence all at once filled the room. Impatiently, I snapped on the soft apricot lights over the great mahogany dining table. Amalie was with her husband. It was only one of the wine-colored draperies blowing. I'd forgotten the open window. I crossed and closed it.

But I was still trembling when I reached the kitchen. Its blue walls and oak cupboards did little to cheer me. I set the kettle on to boil and was measuring the tea when wheels grated on the driveway. I gave a little gasp of relief. The Shevelands. Thank goodness!

I opened the back door—and confronted Hal McCray.

"Hal!" My voice sounded breathless, the way I always felt when I met Hal unexpectedly. "I thought it was the Shevelands."

Hal was a kind of business manager for Grant Sheveland, but he lived on a farm of his own. Mr. Sheveland wouldn't have any employee living on the property.

"The Shevelands aren't here?" Hal's black brows went up in surprise. "I saw the lights—"

"They were due last night," I broke in.

His gray gaze went over his shoulder into the mist and back up over the dark bulk of the house. "You shouldn't be alone here, Tess."

I led him into the kitchen. "I didn't expect to be. I had a telegram from Mrs. Sheveland saying they would be here last night, and for me to come this morning and clean the house. Of course, I had my key."

"Well, it's high time Sheveland was getting back. Taking three weeks now with fruit picking getting so close."

But it probably wasn't the fruit picking, I thought, that had brought him so soon when he thought the Shevelands were back.

I turned from the stove and looked

at him lounging against the refrigerator, rangy and brown in slacks and plaid jacket, with that kind of easy good-humoredness about him that made you forget he wasn't really handsome at all.

Amalie Sheveland had felt Hal's charm, too. Was it Amalie that had brought him so quickly?—I wondered bitterly. Amalie with her slow provocative smile, her heavy satin eyelids, and that perfume about her of tropical flowers, orchids maybe, though I don't know whether orchids have fragrance or not.

Oh, I'd seen her more than once, under the falling wistaria vines of the side porch, ravishing in a low cut dinner gown, holding him in conversation, her sullenness forgotten, stars of laughter in her green eyes.

I said, "I haven't had my supper. Would you—"

"No, thanks." His brows were drawn together. "I don't like your being alone like this, a kid—"

"I'm twenty, Hal."

"Well, bless her little heart, she's a woman." He bent toward me suddenly and placed his mouth firmly and directly upon mine. His lips were warm and there was a kind of reckless force behind his kiss that sent the blood hot into my cheeks.

"I'm too old," I informed him, "to be kissed like *that*." And I got to work poaching an egg, and for a nice safe conversation I told him what I'd done that day.

"But do you know," I demanded resentfully, "that the dinner dishes were still on the table in the dining room? With the food molded in them? You'd think she could, at least, have cleared them up before leaving. She's always complaining because Mr. Sheveland won't employ a girl full time, and she always leaves more work than I can possibly do my two days a week. But not even to clear the table before going away—"

Hal said, "Beautiful creatures like Amalie can't see a dish pan. Grant Sheveland can afford ten servants and

more. He's close. All the Shevelands were tight-fisted."

"Well, she's horribly extravagant," I said, "though she was a shoppirl when he met her in San Francisco. She nags about money continually."

"Well, what's money for? Look at this ranch. Sheveland could use half a dozen men steady. But he brings them in only when it's absolutely necessary. It's not good business, and I've tried to tell him so."

Suddenly, he lifted his head, staring at the ceiling. "Anybody upstairs? No, of course not. But I swear I heard something."

"The window is open in Amalie's . . . Mrs. Sheveland's room. Perhaps her door's swinging."

"Lonely old morgue of a place." He spoke with a queer violence. He opened the back door. "Keep a light burning somewhere all night." He turned and looked at me, shaking his head. "Damn it, a lawyer's daughter shouldn't be doing housework."

I sighed. "Well, it's only summers and this is my last. I've a good book-keeping job waiting for me in town this winter. It's only because dad was ill that I've stayed, but he's so much better—"

"I won't be seeing you then," he pointed out.

"But there's glamorous Amalie," I replied with considerable irony.

He grinned, shrugged, and swung off the porch. "Their car broke down, I'll bet a fiver. Needed overhauling. So long, Hedy."

That was to make me feel beautiful.

After he'd gone, I could hear the mist closing in with the darkness; a kind of whispering sea-sound, though I knew it was only the wind in the vines about the house.

After I had eaten and washed the dishes, I went around and made sure the windows were locked. I didn't turn on the lights, but groped my way through the dimness. I had the shivery feeling that eyes would be staring through the mist into the lighted rooms.

I wondered if Amalie had felt that way about the house when Grant Sheveland brought her from the city three years before, a bride twenty years younger than her husband. I knew that the silence of the handsome, out-of-date rooms had made her jittery. Grant wouldn't hear of her giving parties and redecorating the house. It made her furious. From the tips of her toeless slippers to the crown of her copper head, she'd set herself against the staid customs of the place, customs which Grant cherished with a kind of passionate reverence.

Well, maybe they'd come back from their impulsive trip to Mexico at peace with each other.

I switched on the lights and reluctantly climbed the carpeted stairs to the small room at the corridor's end where I slept week ends.

I was tired. Gratefully, I stretched out my long limbs between the cool sheets. I'd left the hall light burning and its shaded glow penetrated to my room. But I couldn't get to sleep. I was too conscious of my utter aloneness in that huge house, with only the timid voice of my tiny clock ticking against the stillness.

I thought about Hal, which was practically a constant habit, and reflected painfully on that withdrawn look in his eyes whenever we spoke of Amalie.

A curtain stirred. I knew it was a curtain, and not the trailing gauze of the negligées Amalie affected, but it made the same restless whispering. Her personality was so dominant in that house.

Suddenly, I sat bolt upright, my heart hammering. Something was terribly wrong. Layers of blackness pressed against my eyes. Then I remembered: I was in the Sheveland house and must have fallen asleep. The window was a pale-silver square in the total blackness. I leaned over and stared out. There was only mist veiled over darkness. But, no, a star, a pin-point of light wandering close to earth. Now it had vanished. Then

I saw it again. It came and went, far out in the orchards to the north. Then there was only mist, though I waited.

With a great shock it came to me that the hall light was out. I slid out of bed in a kind of suffocating panic and groped for my slippers. Then I froze. A door somewhere downstairs groaned on its hinges.

In a moment common sense returned. The Shevelands, of course! I found my robe and wrapped it about me. I had to make certain it was the Shevelands before I went back to bed. The hall light; that was queer. With Amalie in the house, every light sprang into radiance; she had a horror of dusky corners.

I fumbled my way out and down the black corridor to the balustrade. Footsteps were coming along the lower hall, footsteps obviously trying to make no sound. A thin lance of light preceded them. I felt my hair lifting from my scalp.

The stairs suddenly vibrated to a heavy body. A beam of light glided up, up, to where my bare feet were frozen to the carpet. I clapped my hand to my mouth to stifle the scream rising in my throat, for a dark bulk was mounting stealthily toward me.

My fingers fumbling desperately at last found the light switch and the beaded lamps bloomed into amber flower. I collapsed limply against the wall.

"Mr. Sheveland!"

"Why, Tess. My dear, I've frightened you." Grant Sheveland's big face, handsome despite its heaviness, was full of consternation beneath his sun-burned hair.

I guess I gave him a pretty wilted look for he said earnestly, "I was trying to be still so as not to wake you. The car broke down or I'd have been here last night."

I pulled myself together. "It's all right, Mr. Sheveland. Do you and Mrs. Sheveland want anything before I go back to bed?"

His prominent blue eyes clouded. "Amalie . . . Mrs. Sheveland is not

with me." His tone grew bitter. "She'll be along later, tomorrow, I hope. Now you slip back and get your sleep."

I obeyed him with relief. "Good night," I murmured.

For quite a long time while I was drifting off to sleep, I heard him moving softly about, now in Amalie's room and then in his.

It was after ten before he came down to breakfast. I served him waffles and tangerine juice at the tiny gate-leg table in the bay of the dining-room. He was unusually talkative for him.

"Of course you received Mrs. Sheveland's telegram?"

I said, "Yes," though it seemed obvious since I was there. "There's only the back stairs left to clean. I'll get to them this morning."

He nodded absently and stared out the window. "Beastly weather for July. Muggy, no sun. Ruin the fruit if this keeps up. I've got to send for McCray."

"About the groceries," I reminded him. "I'd like to have something baked before Mrs. Sheveland gets home. What time do you expect her?"

He pushed back his plate and reached for the ash tray. His ruddy face turned grim. "I'm not sure." He spoke slowly. "Mrs. Sheveland is, as you know, well, shall we say unpredictable?" He cleared his throat. "I may as well tell you. We had a slight argument. Amalie was determined to stay on, but I felt with fruit harvest so close— I came back alone. When she gets through pouting, she'll show up."

I nodded soberly. I knew Amalie. "Well, I'll have everything ready."

His heavy tone lightened. "Fine. I'll take a turn about the orchards, then run into town for the groceries."

"I have a list," I told him.

It was an oppressive day; cloudy, but windless and warm. I felt limp and depressed as I emptied a pan of water on the geraniums withering by the back door.

Hal came swinging through the orchard. He strode in the gate and up the path between the soft plumes of the butterfly bush. "When did they get back? I just saw the big car shooting off toward New Orland."

I pushed the moist hair from my face. "She didn't come. Only Mr. Sheveland."

He didn't seem surprised. He shrugged. "Maybe she's left him."

I shook my head. "They quarreled, I guess, but he expects her anytime."

"Are you going to stay on until she comes?"

I didn't like the thought of that. "What else can I do, since she may get here any minute?"

He said in an odd tone, "What if Amalie doesn't show up?"

"Well, I'll wait a day or two. I'm not alone now. Mr. Sheveland—" But I wouldn't confide in him what a nervous idiot I was. Not while he had that dark secret look when we spoke of Amalie, beautiful Amalie. I felt sadly conscious of my gypsy darkness and grave ways, and from the soles of his Scotch brogues to the careless crown of his head he was completely irresistible.

I remembered something. Hesitantly, I mentioned that wandering light out in the orchard the night before.

His face sobered. "I was around out there toward midnight, to see that no one was hanging about. What with you all alone up here—"

A lovely warmth enveloped me. "Thanks, Hal." I went back to work, humming.

After cleaning the back stairs, I stopped again at Amalie's room. I couldn't get over the shock I'd felt when I'd stepped over the threshold the morning before armed with dust cloths and vacuum cleaner.

It was an incongruous room, furnished with the stately old Sheveland mahogany overlaid with luxurious knickknacks of Amalie's. There was a spread of pearl net extravagantly ruffled on the four-poster bed; drapes of

chartreuse satin at the windows. A thick gold carpet deadened the step. The stale fragrance of tropical flowers hovered in the air.

Dust had been everywhere, yet the room had been so neat I'd just stood and stared unbelievably. Tidiness was no great concern of Amalie's.

There had been no film of powder on the dressing table, no careless litter of jewelry, lipsticks, soiled powder puffs. No petal-tinted froth of underthings had casually decorated chair, floor, and bench as they usually did, awaiting my hand to collect them. Amalie's endless slippers were neatly arrayed on their rack in the closet.

Amalie had exerted herself astonishingly in her room, considering how indifferent she'd been to the dinner dishes, before she packed her bag and dashed off with her husband to Mexico.

But as I vacuumed and dusted, I had puzzled over it. Amalie was so vividly present in the room. I saw her lounging on the bed, her hair spilling like autumn sunlight over a satin bank of pillows, staring at me resentfully through the smoke from her cigarette.

"Grant's an idiot. I'm used to people about. I'm going to throw this old place wide open to parties. Let him row. Good heavens, you can still hear the steps of all his sacred ancestors on these musty old carpets. Has he always been like this, Tess?"

"The Shevelands always lived to themselves," I told her cautiously. "Mr. Sheveland is used to quiet living. It's hard for a person to change."

"You're telling me! Well, one of us is going to. And I can't see Amalie Moreau putting on the family shawl."

Perhaps, I reflected, closing Amalie's door, her husband's taking her on a trip proved they'd come to an understanding. Too bad it hadn't turned out better. I started down the stairs. Any minute she might drive up in some expensively hired car and the house would all at once spring to life.

I slid my hand along the worn satin of the banister and stooped to flick away some dust. Something gleaming

close to the stair just below caught my eye. Absently, I untangled several heavy strands of burning color.

An icy wind seemed suddenly to sweep through that long sombre hall and over me. The strands between my fingers writhed and came alive.

Impatiently, I caught myself. The atmosphere of the place was making my nerves jumpy. Amalie's bright hair was probably all over the house. Yet I bent and my exploring fingers found a sharp corner on one of the newel posts. That was what had snagged it. She must have been bending over. It would hurt, tearing loose such a quantity of hair.

Mr. Sheveland was in the kitchen, putting the groceries on the table when I entered. "How about fixing me a bite of lunch here in the kitchen, Tess? I rattle around in that big dining room."

By mid-afternoon I'd finished my baking. Everything was ready and waiting for Amalie. I even set a bowl of white cosmoses on her bedside table.

But the heavy gray afternoon wore away. Amalie failed to appear. I prepared dinner for Mr. Sheveland and put it once more on the small table in the bay. I hoped fervently as I went out to look for him that Amalie would return before night set in.

I found my employer in the garden-house, polishing a tool at his work bench.

"Dinner is ready, Mr. Sheveland."

He wheeled about as though I had struck him. "Dinner? Oh, yes, of course." He seemed angry at my intrusion. I felt suddenly sorry for him, waiting like that for his wife, not knowing when her mood would bring her home.

I turned to go and trod on something by the wheelbarrow. Mechanically, I bent and picked up a couple of bobby-pins from the dusty floor. Picking up hairpins which work havoc on a vacuum cleaner, was practically automatic with me.

"What have you there?" The

harshness of the voice swung me around in astonishment.

"Just some bobby-pins." I held them out indifferently. "They must be—why, they are Mrs. Sheveland's, copper ones."

I lifted startled eyes to his, two hard blue stones set in gray granite. But a great purplish vein in his forehead throbbled perceptibly as he took the pins.

Suddenly, he sighed, and his big shoulders drooped. "I wish Amalie would come. This waiting— Sometimes I wonder if she's left me."

I walked slowly out through the orchard with its limp dusty leaves back to the house, reluctant to have night arrive.

While I served dinner, I speculated idly upon the bobby-pins, asking myself what Amalie had been doing out in the gardenhouse which she never visited because she hated soiling her slippers.

Slippers!

The lemon pie I was serving nearly skidded into my employer's lap, I started so violently. "Excuse me, Mr. Sheveland."

"Certainly, but what is it?" His eyes searched my face.

Wide-eyed, I stared at him. But I was seeing that rack of shoes in Amalie Sheveland's closet. I drew a slow shuddering breath.

"Is something wrong?"

"No, nothing."

"But there is. You're whiter than wax." His chair scraped back on the polished floor.

A laboring motor on the drive interrupted him. He swung hastily about.

I took a great gulp of air. Amalie! At last!

Grant Sheveland strode to the door with a kind of terrible urgency. His nerves were ragged, I told myself, waiting for her, worrying. He hurried out and my eyes flew to the car. Hal was leaning from his black coupé.

All my panic returned.

The moment they were in conversation I raced upstairs to Amalie's

room. I tore open the closet door. The tidy rack of shoes confronted me. I had not been mistaken. Not a pair was missing!

Had Amalie gone off without her shoes? Frantically, my fingers explored her clothing. I knew every garment she possessed. Hadn't I pressed them all, replaced missing buttons endlessly? One thing alone was not on its satin hanger. Her lilac negligée.

Furiously, my brain began adding things up. The heavy strands of hair, too low down on the stairs even for a person bending over. But if that person were being carried, or dragged—

The bobby-pins by the wheelbarrow. Amalie's favorite robe missing. It was unthinkable that Amalie had gone away in a chiffon negligée, slipperless.

She had gone upstairs to change her clothes after dinner perhaps, leaving the dishes for morning. My teeth were suddenly chattering. I knelt and counted the shoes again.

I wanted Hal. I had to reach him before he left. I couldn't voice even to myself the monstrous fear looming over me.

"What are you doing in my wife's closet?"

Heart in my throat, I stood up, and confronted Grant Sheveland. I opened my mouth, but no words came.

"The shoes," he said, a black shadow seemed to drop over his features. "Her shoes. They are all there?"

Dumbly, I nodded.

"You're an observant girl." He stood a moment, his great arms hanging loosely at his sides, regarding me reflectively. "I'm going to confide in you, Tess," he said finally. "I find I shall have to, though I had hoped to work it out alone."

I didn't want to be confided in. I wanted passionately to be out of that room. But his big form blocked the way.

"Amalie and I quarreled," he said deliberately, "at dinner the night we were to start for Mexico, quarreled over money, her insane extravagance,

and her violent determination to throw the house wide open to her no-good friends. I was furious and, well, I went off without her. I wrote from Sunset City and begged her to join me. I was ashamed of myself. She wired that she would, but—"

His mouth grew grim. "She didn't arrive. I waited and wrote again. I telegraphed. Finally, I sent you that wire and signed Amalie's name."

"But why?" I exclaimed.

His jaw set savagely. "I didn't want anyone to suspect how things were with us. I intended to get here ahead of you and perhaps catch them."

"Them!"

He regarded me bleakly. "Surely you must have observed that McCray is in love with Amalie."

I sank limply down on the vanity bench. "Not Hal?" I protested weakly. But it was like looking through folds of black gauze. "What would Hal, even if he were in love with her, have to do with her disappearance?"

"Amalie," he said harshly, "as bitterly as I hate to admit it, married me for the Sheveland money and property."

"But I still don't see—"

He silenced me with a lifted hand. "Even if she was infatuated with McCray, she'd only play with him. I possess the things she wanted."

I felt sick. "But that wouldn't account—"

"I believe," he interrupted flatly, "that in his frustrated passion, the two of them alone here together, McCray did violence to Amalie."

"No!" I cried. "Oh, no!"

He gazed at me earnestly. "I've never trusted McCray, and I'm convinced after seeing these shoes and other evidence, that Amalie never left this house."

I felt cold to the bone. Only too vividly I recalled Amalie's half-veiled interest in Hal, and his own peculiar manner when she was mentioned. I had known him only these two summers that dad's ill health had com-

pelled him to live in the country. Had he been, could he have been so driven by jealous passion, alone with her intoxicating loveliness in this isolated house—

I passed my hand over my eyes. "I'd like very much to go home," I murmured.

"I'm going now to New Orland," he replied, "to check with the station-master. I've got to get to the bottom of this quickly. When I return, I'll drive you home, if you wish."

His voice sank, "I don't believe Amalie will . . . can ever come back." He turned and strode determinedly from the room.

I was still huddled on the bench in that perfumed chamber when I heard his car roar out and down the driveway.

Gradually, my reeling brain slowed down, but I wasn't quite sane. I thought wildly, "I'll find her. I have to find her, for Hal's sake. If she's been murdered, her body must be here somewhere."

I got up and went downstairs. The perplexing memory of the bobby-pins drew me outdoors and along the path to the gardenhouse. Could Amalie and Hal have held a rendezvous out there?

I paused beside the wheelbarrow where I had found the pins, and stared down thoughtfully. It came to me suddenly that the wheelbarrow was much too clean. It had been scrubbed, and recently, for it was dustless.

Sudden nausea struck me. A brownish-crimson stain showed unmistakably on one of the boards. Was my imagination running wild, or could that be the reason the barrow had been cleaned? Nothing seemed too fantastic after what I had heard from Grant Sheveland's lips.

I went outside and studied the gray clodded earth about the gardenhouse, and, to my sick horror, I found what I had been vaguely seeking, the imprint of a heavily burdened wheel, which the long dry spell had kept intact. There was the faintest shadow of footprints.

To the dry breathing of the orchard

leaves, I began to follow that half-defined trail. Again and again it disappeared, but I remembered the light like a lost star out there to the north the night before, and I kept on in that direction. And Hal had admitted to being out there!

All at once the track vanished completely beneath my straining eyes. Vainly, I searched the ground in the breathless dusk which pressed gray about me, but there was no disturbance.

Drearily, I turned back. I couldn't very well examine fifty acres of orchard. Everything seemed distorted and unreal.

A heap of discarded fruit crates loomed at my right. To my fevered mind they made a sinister mound. I went over to them and began to drag the crates aside. A frantic haste drove me. I wanted to be back and out of that house before Grant Sheveland returned from New Orland.

The stale odor of dust and molded fruit rose to my nostrils as I cleared a space among them. Orchard loam, dark and recently turned, met my eyes and footprints clearly defined.

My knees sagged beneath me, but I steeled myself. Grimly, I took up a crate slat and began to probe. The slat drove in without great effort through crumbly soil.

Then I reeled dizzily backward. I'd been insane to venture so far. The splinters of my rude spade were caught in a tangle of lilac gauze.

A split instant later I saw the shovel. It flashed above my head, dull silver in the vague light, swung by invisible arms.

I jerked backward and the taut muscles in my throat were released. A single discordant scream was torn from my throat. The heavy weapon rose and fell, rose furiously, missed, dashed to earth and rose again, in a dreadful silence broken only by the convulsive gasping of someone's breath.

I plunged to my knees, the dusk shattering into red stars, as with crashing force I was driven down. My outflung hands came violently down upon

a foot, a foot in a brown brogue. Even in that frightful moment I saw it was not the immaculate saddle oxford of Grant Sheveland.

Through a dark fog closing in upon me, I glimpsed a light swinging jerkily toward us. But nothing mattered. There were pounding footsteps, low savage profanity, then dull, shattering sounds—

The acrid odor of kerosene stung my nostrils.

I staggered to my feet, fighting off the enveloping fog, and dizzily beheld two dark struggling figures. One was Grant Sheveland and his hair seemed to be on fire. My leaden feet stumbled away from that horrifying place.

There were footsteps behind me, running. My blood congealed with terror. Then arms swept me forcibly back.

"It's all right. Take it easy."

I wrenched away. Horror sent me reeling backward. "Stay away from me. You killed her, Amalie. You mean to kill me, too. Keep back—"

"Tess, you poor kid, you've gone off your head."

Slowly, his face swam into focus, thin, dark, unspeakably grim, blood on one cheek.

"I saw you . . . I saw your feet—"

He strode close, reached out for me determinedly, and everything simply melted into nothingness.

I opened my eyes to see Dr. Bernard's calm, bespectacled face. My shoulder and the back of my head were bandaged and everything smelled of antiseptics. I lay on the couch in Grant Sheveland's study.

Someone was gripping my fingers hard, and I turned my head painfully on the pillow and met Hal's eyes, bleak and unsmiling. He looked as white as I felt.

"You're all right. Thank God, you're all right, Tess. Sheriff Lester's here. He wants to show you something, then get a few things straightened out."

The sheriff, square-jawed and businesslike, was holding a pair of shoes,

brown brogues. "We just took them off Grant Sheveland's feet. They are McCray's shoes."

"I know," I whispered.

"Apparently, Sheveland anticipated the murder would be discovered, and he was leaving footprints which he hoped would incriminate McCray."

I struggled up. "Where is he? His hair—it was on fire!"

"That's because McCray knocked him out with the only weapon he happened to have, a lighted lantern. Sheveland's on his way to jail. You knew too much, my girl. He nearly killed you."

"And you thought it was me," said Hal bitterly.

Out in the orchard, the sheriff told me, his men were lifting from the grave I had discovered, a crumpled figure with blood-soaked hair. She had been strangled, then struck, probably with a shovel, to make sure she was dead. It had been Amalie's blood I had noticed in the wheelbarrow.

"Her room was too tidy," I told them, shakily. "He must have cleaned it that night after he . . . to hide signs of the terrible quarrel."

Sheriff Lester nodded grimly. "Then he made up the story about a Mexican trip, and cleared out as soon as he'd buried her."

I told him about the slippers, and how in his overwrought condition he'd probably picked up the ones she'd kicked off in that dreadful struggle, and put them with the others. I told him also about the pitiful strands of hair and the bobby-pins and everything else I could think of.

"He, undoubtedly, intended to get back here before you entered the house," he said, "but his car breaking down forestalled that. He was likely going to claim she'd left him after sufficient time had elapsed, but he shouldn't have employed so intelligent a girl. Yet she was kind of dumb at that to believe that her sweet-heart—"

My eyes flew to Hal. "But you said

you were out in the orchard last night near—"

His dark face broke into a smile. "I was out there, and so was Sheveland. I saw him searching around. I couldn't leave you unprotected on this lonely place. I fixed myself a bunk up in the loft of the gardenhouse. When I saw Sheveland drive in alone, I determined more than ever to stick around. God knows I never thought of murder. I was simply afraid he might molest you."

"How did you happen to be so close when" — trembling seized me — "I needed you so terribly?"

The sheriff's eyes were on him also.

"Sheveland sent me off to Deaconville for more harvest hands. It sounded screwy. I had my own crew rounded up and he knew it. I hid the car down the hill and came back," he replied.

"Which is exactly what Sheveland did," said the sheriff, nodding at me. "After he told you he was driving into New Orland. He planned to steal up on you when you thought you were alone."

"Tess wasn't in the house when I got back," said Hal. "There were no lights and I was worried. I went out to the gardenhouse and lit a lantern debating what to do, when I heard her scream." His voice shook. "I'll hear that scream the rest of my days. I

took off in the direction it came from and—"

The doctor stood up. "You'd better get this girl home, young man. She's had about all she can take."

"That's right," agreed the sheriff quickly.

Over the big house all at once settled the silence of midnight like invisible gray webs smothering our voices. There was a kind of heavy waiting.

Hal lifted me tenderly to my feet and drew me toward the door, and I was trembling with eagerness to be gone. For I knew why they were waiting, the doctor and the sheriff, and I wanted to be far away when at last, at last, Amalie Sheveland returned to her home!

There was a question still in my heart. When Hal and I were in his car headed for home, I asked it hesitantly:

"Was it my imagination, Hal, that you acted—well, queer, whenever we talked of poor Amalie?"

His free arm drew me closer against him. "No, I guess it wasn't your imagination, sweetheart. Amalie always kind of waylaid me, and one day she fell on my neck and wanted a lot of sympathy, which," he added grimly, "considering what happened to her, she sure needed."

His lips brushed the top of my head. "But I had my eye on the maid."

THE END.



Leaves from a Borgia pen



BY AGATHA GANDY

It was a perfect murder; so perfect, in fact, that the killer could not resist drawing attention to his own brilliant originality.

I.

I WAS working on the piano score of Richard Strauss' "Der Rosenkavalier," an altogether impossible matter. Mr. Strauss had intended for the piano to impersonate some hundred odd instruments. Out of the dancing mass of onrushing notes, I was managing possibly a lame fifty. Dean Koroly's face was the color of an unpleasant breakfast prune. An explosion was imminent.

The studio door burst open. It was the dean's assistant to say that I was wanted in Miss Chalon's office immediately.

Crossing the campus to the Administration Building, I wondered what Susanne Chalon, the Dean of Women, wanted. I couldn't think of anything I'd done recently to merit a call-down from her. As a graduate student here at Brandywyne College for Girls, I didn't have to be too careful about campus and dorm rules. And since I'd been engaged to Miles Paxton, the district attorney, I hadn't broken any date regulations. Miles was careful to get me in on time; more careful not to take me any place which was on the college blacklist.

Anyway, Susanne Chalon was a wonderful person, and whatever she had

to say wouldn't be very bad. Miss Chalon was surprisingly young, and one of the most beautiful women I've ever known. She had that rare, fragile beauty which goes so well with blond hair. And she had kindness, generosity, and gentle breeding to go with her beauty. She also possessed a fine sense of humor. She was always quick to see the student's side, if the student involved had one at all. Yet, when the occasion demanded, Miss Chalon's fragility could suddenly become laced with inflexible steel. Otherwise, she could not have held her position; been so phenomenally successful in handling the girls.

And, of all the college executives and faculty, Miss Chalon was the only one who was really liked by the entire student body, with the possible exception of a few girls who were rank outlaws and had no respect or regard for anyone.

But I'd often wondered how Miss Chalon had always managed to be so kind and pleasant when her personal life, until recently, had been such a horrid affair. Nick Downing, her husband, had been an absolutely foul person. Two years ago, he had been ousted from the chemistry department due to carelessness in experiments, and for his singular inability to get along with either the students or faculty. After his ejection, Nick Downing either couldn't, or hadn't tried to get another position. He had set up a lab over his garage, smelled up the neighborhood with his vile experiments, and continued to be as unpleasant as possible to anyone who was unfortunate enough to come in contact with him.

Nick Downing's one decent accomplishment was to up and die some months ago with pneumonia.

Nobody had felt anything but vast relief for Miss Chalon; and a number of us had immediately begun to look forward to the time when Lucian Faraday, the college business manager, would do something about Susanne Chalon. Lucian Faraday had been in love with her for years. And a month

ago, they had started table-for-twoing it. Then two weeks later, it had stopped as suddenly as it had begun. Nobody understood it. Lucian Faraday was as handsome as Susanne Chalon was lovely. Together, they were a rhapsody. And why it had come to an abrupt, untimely end, no one knew. Not even the crack gossip peddlers, who could worm information out of a totem pole, were able to dig out a reason. All we knew was that Lucian Faraday was wearing a tight, pinched expression these days; that Miss Chalon was unusually pale; had an odd, worried look in her eyes.

I climbed the shallow steps to the towering, colonaded entrance of the Administration Building, traversed several miles of tile corridors, past the business office, the bookstore, and finally to the wing where Miss Chalon's office was.

Her pert little secretary's tiny, flying hands didn't so much as falter on her typewriter as she glanced up to say, "Hiya, Jan. Go on in. They're waiting for you."

Wondering a bit about the "they," I went in, and stopped to stare at Miles Paxton, who was sitting across from Miss Chalon. Miles rose, slim and brown and immaculate, to place a chair for me. He touched my hand, smiled; but his thin, lean face and his brown eyes that were usually so merry were unmistakably worried.

"How are you, Jan?" Miss Chalon's smile was warm, gracious. "It was good of you to come."

In a long-sleeved black dress of superb simplicity, she was unbelievably beautiful, sitting there, slender and erect, behind her gleaming desk with the sun from the window spinning a miracle of gold in her hair. But her exquisite face with its gently hollowed cheeks was very pale, and I was shocked at what I saw in her amazing blue eyes. It was as though her sense of good taste had been violently offended, and had left her stunned.

And I suddenly knew that whatever

I'd been called here for had nothing to do with me. It was something that concerned Miss Chalon, personally. And it was something ugly. A queasy, unexpected coldness seized me.

"Jan," Miles said, with an anxious glance at Miss Chalon, "we have a very nasty business here." With a lean, brown forefinger, he tapped an uneven stack of typewritten sheets on the desk. "Anonymous letters."

"Oh!" I said.

"We want you to read them," Miles went on. "See if you can place any one who might be capable of writing such things." Miles picked up the two top sheets. "These two were written to me; the rest to Miss Chalon."

My coldness became a knot of revolting ice. I do not like anonymous letters. Or people who write them.

The first one to Miles was on a half sheet of paper, apparently scissored from a full sheet. It read:

Mr. District Attorney:

Is your office so blind to crime that it lets murder go uninvestigated? Why was Susanne Chalon permitted to go unpunished for the murder of her husband, Nick Downing?
(signed) A Taxpayer

The second was on a full letter sheet, but the typing was uneven, looked different. The text was similar to the first, but included that Miss Chalon had killed her husband because she hoped to marry Lucian Faraday. It was cornily signed, "A Citizen Who Wants Justice."

My hands were shaking so badly that I had to put them down.

"Horrid little things, aren't they?" Miss Chalon remarked lightly, but there was a cold gleam in her dark-blue eyes. "Go ahead," she added, "read those to me. They are horrid!"

And they were. Not only horrid, but oozing with filth, hate, and nasty threats. Included were such things as: "Do you think Lucian Faraday would even look at you if he knew you had killed your husband? He'll find out. So will everybody else." "How long do you think you can go on fooling

people; keep them believing you're so fine and virtuous? People are beginning to find out about your nasty affairs with a long line of men while your husband was ill." And, "You'd better resign and leave town before you're arrested for murder!"

I stopped reading on the fifth one. I glanced at the others; they were much the same, except they were all written on an assortment of paper. Different texture, size and so forth. None of them were signed.

"When . . . when did they start coming?" I asked.

"The first one to me," Miss Chalon explained, "came more than two weeks ago. I burned it, thinking it the work of someone suffering with a temporary attack of spite. Then they started coming almost daily, and I realized there was something far more vicious than spite behind them. By tedious elimination, I eventually learned yesterday that they were being written on the typing department machines. But the typing room is open from four p. m. until ten p. m. each day to all students who wish to use the machines. So anyone might have typed them. And beyond tracing the machines, I was unable to do anything. Finally, this afternoon, I called Mr. Paxton. As it happened, he had received those two to him this morning and was making a check on my husband's death."

I looked at Miles in alarm. "Was there something wrong about Mr. Downing's death?"

Miles shook his head. "We don't know yet. The attending physician says not. But Miss Chalon has given permission to exhume. She feels, and I agree, that the best way to asphyxiate rumors and doubts is to have an autopsy performed. Then—" He paused, frowning. "Well, both of us are afraid it was murder. Those letters are too persistent, too deadly. One, or both authors must have some actual knowledge that Mr. Downing did not die of natural causes. One of them, I believe, is the murderer; and, for some reason

we don't know, wants very badly to have Miss Chalon accused of her husband's murder."

"But," I said, "I thought Mr. Downing died of pneumonia."

"Apparently, he did. But Mr. Downing had a very shaky heart condition. The physician assumed that the pneumonia instigated the fatal attack. Which, of course, is entirely possible. And if it weren't for the deadly persistence of those letters, I wouldn't question it for a moment. But there are too many things besides pneumonia that can provoke a fatal heart attack."

"And you have no idea," I said to Miss Chalon, "who's responsible for the letters?"

"None," she admitted. "I've discarded the possibility that it may be any of the faculty. I have carefully considered the surprising few who can type. I don't believe any of them is capable of those letters. Certainly no two of them working in collusion. The logical theory, and the first one which occurred to Mr. Paxton, is that they are the work of some students who have recently been severely disciplined. But we've had no cases lately that haven't been handled by the Student Executive Board. It could be, of course, some old grudge just coming to the surface, but—" She paused reflectively; then, "There is one incident which I neglected to mention. Recently, we discovered that Ollie Osgood, the student assistant in the bookstore, had taken quite a sum of money over a period of time in small amounts."

"What," Miles asked quickly, "was done about her?"

"It was her first offense," Miss Chalon explained. "Instead of dismissing her, we are letting her replace the money in small payments. So it doesn't seem possible that she would retaliate with those vicious letters."

"No, it doesn't," Miles agreed. "Still, it's difficult to tell about a thief. There's bound to be a sneaky streak in one.

Unless— Well, did Miss Osgood actually need the money?"

"No, she didn't," Miss Chalon replied. "Her parents are able to pay her tuition and board. Then she gets a reasonably good salary in the bookstore for her spending money."

"I see," Miles said slowly, and by his tone, I knew Ollie Osgood was in for a stiff investigation. He turned to me. "How about it, Jan? Can you think of anyone with an old or new grudge?"

"No, I can't," I told him. "But for some reason, I don't believe discipline is the motive behind the letters." I looked at Miss Chalon. "Because, just as in the case of Ollie Osgood, Miss Chalon, you've always been more than fair to everyone. Everybody likes you, thinks you're wonderful."

Her amazing blue eyes twinkled gently. "It's good of you to say so, Jan. But"—she nodded at the stack of letters—"how do you account for those?"

I shook my head. "I don't quite know," I admitted, "except I don't think student discipline is behind them. I think it's something—well, something very personal; possibly someone you've injured without realizing it. Or, at least, someone who feels injured."

Miss Chalon frowned vaguely. "I've considered that, Jan. But I can't honestly recall any toes I've trod on lately, either intentionally, or unintentionally."

I didn't say so, but it occurred to me that Lucian Faraday being in love with her might crush several toes. I could, without even trying, recall a dozen students and women on the faculty who had, from time to time, had violent attacks of Faraday fever. I'd had a mild attack of it myself during my senior year. Lucian Faraday had always been nice to everyone, but he'd never been even remotely moved by any of the attacks. He was sincerely and naively unaware of them. And he'd never actually seen anyone until he saw Susanne Chalon. After that, he couldn't see anyone else.

It was inevitable, his falling in love with her, and while a sighing wave of tender regret had gone whispering across the campus and back again, I hadn't thought there was any bitter resentment over it. I should have considered, however, that human nature will always provide one or two poor losers in such cases. Still, if jealousy were the motive behind the letters, why wait so long to start something? Then, I realized that although Lucian Faraday had been in love with Susanne Chalton for years, he hadn't gone with her. That had, to some, probably left him open territory. And the letters hadn't started until after Lucian Faraday had begun to go with Miss Chalton.

I switched to another angle. "Can't the typing," I asked Miles, "like handwriting, be traced?"

"Oh, yes," he said. "But, just as with handwriting, a sample is necessary for comparison."

"I see. But why do you and Miss Chalton keep saying two people wrote the letters? I can believe there's one with such a warped, contorted brain, but I can't believe there are two capable of distilling such poison."

Miles grinned wryly. "I hate to think of one, much less two. But two it is, I'm afraid." He reached for the letters, selected one. "See here. On this one, the letters were struck with uneven pressure. The spacing is irregular. No professional typist did that. And about half the letters were written that way or with the hunt-and-peck system. But the rest of them"—he picked out another letter—"were typed by a professional. See this. The letters were struck with even, regular pressure. The spacing is proper. Someone using the touch system."

I shook my head. "That may be true, but I still can't believe there are two people in it. The typing may be different, but the wording, the studied viciousness behind them are too much alike. I don't know anything about typing, and while I'm sure an amateur couldn't imitate a professional, I can't

see why a professional couldn't imitate an amateur. I could use two fingers on the piano and sound as painfully amateurish as I wanted to. So why couldn't a professional typist do it?"

Miles gazed at me thoughtfully. "You're right," he admitted. "One could. And both Miss Chalton and I noted the similarity in wording. Then, too, I wondered about the pair of letters to me this morning. I was meant to think at least two people were involved, but I thought it odd that both were mailed at the college sub-station, and at the same time."

"Well, it's certainly a relief," Miss Chalton said, "to know there's only one."

"Yes, it is," Miles agreed, with feeling. He frowned at the letters, then asked, "On the day your husband died, Miss Chalton, who was in the house?"

"My husband's niece, Agnes Downing, who lives with us," Miss Chalton replied. "The cook, Mrs. O'Toole, and Mrs. Ransford, the nurse. The doctor was in about mid-morning." Miss Chalton considered. "It was on a Sunday, so several people called, although no one stayed except Ollie Osgood, who happens to be Agnes' closest friend. Ollie came for lunch and stayed on for sometime. Then, Lucian Faraday, a friend who lives next door, came in the morning, and again in the afternoon."

"So we have Miss Osgood appearing twice," Miles observed with interest. "And the nurse, Mrs. Ransford? The doctor mentioned that she had known you and your husband before coming on the case."

"Mrs. Ransford knew Nick," Miss Chalton corrected. "She had gone with him years ago before I ever met him."

"Did you," Miles asked, "notice any resentment, anything like that while she was on your husband's case?"

"Oh, no!" Miss Chalton was emphatic. "Mrs. Ransford was very good, extremely considerate. She has been happily married for a number of years. I'm sure Nick was just another patient to her."

"Was the cook, Mrs. O'Toole," Miles asked, "alone in Mr. Downing's room any time during that day?"

Miss Chalon thought it over. "No, I'm sure she wasn't. The nurse fixed Nick's trays, so there was no occasion for Mrs. O'Toole to go in his room."

"Didn't Mrs. O'Toole, however," Miles inquired, "prepare the food for the trays?"

A startled look of concern appeared in Miss Chalon's eyes. "Why, yes, she did. And, of course, you are thinking of poison. Well, Nick and Mrs. O'Toole certainly weren't fond of each other, but poison and Mrs. O'Toole do not match." Miss Chalon's eyes twinkled. "Mrs. O'Toole's weapon would be an iron skillet and she couldn't have written those letters. The blessed angel has difficulty with the grocery list."

Miles smiled, then said, "How about Ollie Osgood, and the niece, Agnes Downing? Were either of them alone in Mr. Downing's room at any time?"

"Yes, they were." Miss Chalon frowned faintly. "The nurse was off from one until five. During lunch, Ollie and Agnes became involved in an argument about a chemistry formula. Both are chemistry majors. They wanted to ask Nick to settle the argument. The nurse said since Nick was so much better, she thought a bit of active conversation might be good for him. So the girls went in. Evidently, it shortly became a three-way argument. Both Ollie and Agnes were in and out, getting books from the library for the best part of an hour. Finally, I had to ask them to come out because Nick was raising his voice, becoming entirely too excited."

"Ordinarily, how did Agnes and your husband get along?" Miles asked.

"Not too well," Miss Chalon admitted slowly. "Nick was difficult to get along with; at least, with those who didn't understand him. And very few people bothered to do that."

"Is Agnes Downing just staying with you while she attends school?"

Miles asked. "Or is she dependent on you?"

Miss Chalon hesitated before saying, "Her father died two years ago, and she came to us. She had nowhere else to go. We sent her to school. She has a job now, however, and is paying some of her expenses."

"You mentioned," Miles observed, "before Jan came in, that Mr. Downing had a lab over your garage. Was he working on anything particular? Anything that might have been valuable?"

"He was doing some research on various types of volatile insecticides. Perfecting his idea on any one of them would have meant some money, but not a great deal."

Miles nodded thoughtfully. "What time did Mr. Downing die?"

"Sometime between four forty and five. I had been sitting with him. He decided he didn't want to wait for the nurse to bring his tray, so I went back to the kitchen to fix it. I stopped on the way to answer the phone and was gone longer than I would have been ordinarily. In the meantime, the nurse returned and found him dead."

"When you went back to his room," Miles asked, "did you see anything unusual? Smell anything odd? Something like that?"

"One thing," Miss Chalon said, "the covers on the bed were badly disarranged, as though he had thrashed around considerably. And he was hanging over, half off the bed in a twisted, contorted position, as though he had suffered terribly. Both the nurse and doctor, however, said that was often the case with heart attacks."

"Another thing. It occurred to me later that there had been an odd odor in the room. Nick, however, was allergic to open windows, particularly when he was ill. The room, consequently, was stuffy; filled with the usual odors of a close, sick room. So I discarded that. But now, since these letters have started, there was some-

thing which may have a definite bearing, that is, if Nick didn't die naturally.

"After they had taken Nick away, Mrs. O'Toole and I went in to straighten up the room. Over near the baseboard under the windows, and across the room from the bed was a small, empty bottle. It had held nose drops; the kind you inhale from the bottle. Nick had had severe congestion in his head and nose. And the odd thing about the bottle was that it was new; had been filled from the drugstore that morning.

"Mrs. O'Toole and I searched to find where the liquid had spilled. We didn't find any spots, anything. We spoke of it at the time, but we were more or less upset, and finally decided that the rug had absorbed the contents and dried out. But, during the past few days, I've given that bottle more than a little thought. It had a very small hole in the top, like a perfume bottle. Nick often threw things around, but to empty completely a bottle of that type, you would have to hold it upside down, let the liquid drip out. Nick would have never had the patience to do that."

"You're entirely right," Miles said with keen interest. "About the type of bottle, I mean. And you said it was new. Did you call the drugstore for the prescription, or was it picked up?"

Miss Chalton turned very pale. "Mr. Faraday picked it up that morning, along with some other things we needed."

"Mr. Faraday," Miles repeated slowly. "He's the friend who lives next door? And the one who's mentioned in the letters?"

Miss Chalton nodded.

Miles took a deep breath. "I'm sorry to ask this, Miss Chalton, but was there any basis for some of the remarks in the letters about you and Mr. Faraday?"

Miss Chalton glanced out the window and moved her hands off of the desk,

down into her lap. They were shaking.

"No!" I said furiously. "There was no foundation whatsoever for any of the remarks! Miss Chalton didn't even have a date with him until long after Mr. Downing had died. It was all very proper and decent and nice, and anybody who says different is a dirty you-know-what!"

Miles whirled on me in alarm. "Well, Jan! For the love of Pete, I didn't say it wasn't proper. I just asked a question. I'm just trying to get things straight."

Miss Chalton laughed softly. "Good heavens," she said. "I thought that nobody in the world knew anything about it. But I neglected to consider my precocious girls. How did you know about it, Jan?"

"How did I know? Miss Chalton! For years now, every time he saw you, he looked like he'd been drowned in stardust, or something."

Two bright patches of color flamed swiftly in her pale cheeks, and at that moment she looked all of sixteen. A very beautiful sixteen, and just as confused. I was suddenly very confused myself. I realized I'd walked where nobody but Susanne Chalton and Lucian Faraday had any right to walk.

Miss Chalton recovered quickly and looked at Miles. "I see what you are trying to find out, Mr. Paxton. You need the entire background. Well, here it is. Lucian was fond of me for several years. I didn't know it, however, until just before Nick died. Lucian was in and out of our house frequently. He was Nick's one and only real friend. They argued, quarreled constantly, but it was a friendly kind of quarreling. Lucian refused to let Nick have his way, and Nick respected Lucian for it. Lucian refused to let Nick win at chess and other games as most of the rest of us did to keep peace.

"Anyway, Lucian was there almost every day. When he didn't come, I began to realize I missed him, looked forward to his being there, although it

didn't occur to me what it was. I was, and am deeply interested in my work. I had put aside any thought of love, that kind of love. Then one afternoon, about a month before Nick died, I was in the garden, and I glanced up and surprised Lucian looking at me. There was no mistake about the look in his eyes, and I realized at the same time that I felt the same way. We never spoke of it, however. That is, until recently. Then— Well, then those horrid letters began—" She stopped, turned to gaze out the window again. And for the first time in the many years I'd known her, there was something bitter and defeated in her attitude. It made my throat ache.

"Were the letters," I asked before I thought, "why you stopped going with Mr. Faraday so suddenly?"

Miss Chalton turned in surprise, then sighed in smiling resignation. "You girls do check us closely, don't you?"

"Oh, no. I mean— Well, not everybody. But we were just particularly interested in you and Mr. Faraday. You were so . . . so—" I fumbled, out of words.

Miles reached over, got my hand. To Miss Chalton he said, "Did you stop going with him because of the letters?"

Miss Chalton nodded. "I thought if there were going to be a nasty scandal, and those letters seemed so persistent, I didn't want Lucian involved."

"Women!" Miles murmured in elaborate disgust and dropped my hand. "Miss Chalton, I dislike to give personal advice, but don't you know men want to share their women's troubles? It polishes, expands our ego. I've never met Lucian Faraday, but if he's anything like what I've gathered from you and Jan, then you've done him a grave injustice by not telling him about these letters, asking his help."

Miss Chalton gazed at Miles for a moment. "I know Lucian would have been glad to help me. But," she added, and there was cool steel in her voice, "he has his position to consider, and I still do not want him involved."

Miles shook his head gently. "Miss Chalton, you lived with Nick Downing for a long time. You obviously spent most of that time taking care of him, shielding him from his temper, from other people, doing things for him. But, Miss Chalton, that isn't the right, normal way. It's the other way. And in any case, Lucian Faraday will have to come into this. There's no way to keep him out. And I'm sure he doesn't want to be kept out." Miles rose. "You're an intelligent woman, but your life with Nick Downing wasn't normal. You think about it. You'll realize I'm right."

"Possibly so," she conceded, after some thought. "Are you going to talk to Lucian now?"

Miles nodded.

"You . . . you won't," she asked in confusion, "tell him why I refused to see him anymore?"

Miles smiled gently. "We'll have to tell him about the letters, when they started coming. His elementary arithmetic will do the rest."

Miss Chalton was very rigid for a moment, then suddenly, all the steel, everything went right out of her. "All right," she said smiling. Her amazing blue eyes were moist. For the first time in a long, long time, I think she knew what it was to have a personal problem shifted, shared. I think she liked the way it felt. We left her smiling.

II.

Agnes Downing, Nick Downing's niece was Lucian Faraday's secretary, and was the studious, career type. At least I'm sure she groomed her thin, brown hair in a tight upsweep, and wore severely tailored suits to achieve that effect. With the almond-shaped, horn-rimmed glasses over her vaguely slanted eyes, she managed the studious effect nicely. The smart, career angle, however, was a determined failure. She would have looked smarter with her hair down. It would have softened

the too sharp lines of her narrow, oblong face. More feminine clothes would have assisted, too. A higher, softer collar would have partially disguised the thin longness of her neck. Her voice, her manner were cool, stiff as she stopped typing and looked up.

"How do you do, Miss Ravel?" She acknowledged Miles with a brief smile. "What do you want, please?"

I told her we wanted to see Mr. Faraday.

Wearily, she took a pen from a holder, pulled a scratch pad toward her.

"What," she asked, "do you wish to see him about? Mr. Faraday is very busy this afternoon, and unless it's very important—" She let it trail off significantly.

I indicated Miles. "Miss Downing, may I present Miles Paxton. Mr. Paxton is the district attorney." I turned to Miles. "And Miss Downing is Nick Downing's niece."

"The district attorney!" Agnes gasped. Her hand jerked, and a big blob of ink plopped to the scratch pad, wavered, and crawled down over the side and onto the desk. She should, I thought, get herself one of those leakproof pens. Agnes pulled herself together. "I'm sorry," she insisted stiffly, "but I'll still have to know what you want to see Mr. Faraday about. He's very busy, you know."

"We want," Miles told her coolly, "to see him about your uncle's murder."

The slanted eyes behind the almond-shaped glasses blinked in shocked rapidity. "But I don't understand," she said shrilly. "Uncle Nick died of pneumonia."

"We have been told," Miles said, eyeing her carefully, "that he was poisoned."

"Who told you that?" Agnes demanded sharply.

"We can't," Miles replied, "reveal the source just yet."

Agnes looked stunned. "Well, it's

perfectly ridiculous! Whoever told you that has probably been reading too many detective stories, or something like that. Why, it's absurd!"

"You mean," Miles inquired in surprise, "that you don't approve of detective stories? That you don't read them?"

"No, I don't!" Agnes snapped piously. "I think it's a waste of time. I think one should devote his time to something more instructive."

Miles smiled. "Will you tell Mr. Faraday that we are here?"

Agnes frowned sharply, as though she meant to prolong the conversation, then she jerked up suddenly, went in and announced us.

I am madly deranged about Miles Paxton, but my pulse is still unfaithful when I see Lucian Faraday. He was tall, lean in tropical worsteds that were casual, but perfectly tailored. His jet-black hair was vaguely silvered at the temples. His thick brows were elbowy smooth over direct, deep-set, blue-black eyes. His nose was straight; the lines of his face were long, deeply tanned and cleanly cut.

I think Lucian Faraday's infectious charm lay mostly in that look of special interest he gave whatever person he happened to be speaking to. Or he made you feel his interest, his smile was particularly for you.

He came around his desk swiftly to shake hands with Miles. "I have been looking forward to meeting you, Mr. Paxton," he said warmly. "Although," he added with concern, "I hope it's nothing serious that brings you out." He indicated chairs; opened a thin, platinum case and offered us cigarettes.

"I'm afraid," Miles told him, "that it is serious. There appears to be some question about Nick Downing's death. As a matter-of-fact, the more I dig into it, the more I'm inclined to believe it was murder."

Lucian Faraday showed no surprise. He nodded slowly, thoughtfully, as though he had more or less been ex-

pecting it. "If I may ask," he said, "what brought it to your attention?"

"Anonymous letters," Miles replied briefly.

Lucian Faraday's blue-black eyes snapped, turned all black. "Were they," he asked carefully, "to you?"

"Two of them were," Miles admitted. "The bulk was to Miss Chalon."

The cigarette in Lucian Faraday's long, brown fingers snapped. He glanced down, absently picked up the pieces, put them into a tray. I've never seen a face so rigid, so cold with pure fury. "When," he inquired even more carefully, "did she begin receiving them?"

"About two weeks ago," Miles told him.

Mr. Faraday sat terribly still for a moment, staring at Miles, then he was up, moving swiftly, intently toward the door. Miles was up just as quickly.

"Wait!" Miles suggested gently. He caught Mr. Faraday's arm. "Wait. Remember she lived with Nick Downing for many years; she was accustomed to shielding him from everything. I told her about it, but give her time to think it over, and yourself time to cool off."

For a moment, I thought Lucian Faraday was going to shove Miles aside. Then he relaxed, shook his dark head dazedly. "I'm sorry," he said. "I . . . she— Well, she should have known better." He went back and sat down. He was badly shaken. His forehead was finely beaded with perspiration. "You don't know," he asked finally, "who wrote the letters?"

Miles said he didn't. "I think, though," he added, "that when we learn the identity of the writer, we'll know who murdered Nick Downing. Provided, of course, that he was murdered. The writer of these letters, for some reason, wants very badly for Miss Chalon to be accused of the murder."

"Yes," Mr. Faraday agreed, "that's exactly what I gathered."

Miles stared, puzzled.

"Oh, I forgot to mention," Mr. Faraday said with distaste, "that I received three of the things myself. The first two, I burned; the last one, I kept. The tone was a bit too vicious. I was afraid something like this might arise, that the letter might be useful." He rose, went to the safe, drew out a small steel box, opened it with a key, sorted briefly through some papers, and returned to hand Miles a folded sheet. "If it isn't absolutely necessary," he said, "I'd be glad if that is never made public."

"You may be sure it won't," Miles told him. "None of the letters will receive any publicity. Their only importance will be to use them to trace the murderer."

The letter to Mr. Faraday was written with the touch system; the wording was similar to the others. It accused Miss Chalon of murdering her husband; of various indiscretions with men; and reminded Mr. Faraday of his position; reminded him further that he could not afford to be involved in murder, and so on.

Miles put the letter down, looked at Mr. Faraday. "Do you have any ideas about Nick Downing's death?"

Lucian Faraday pondered, frowning. "No, I don't. I'd never given it any thought until those letters came. Since then, I've not thought of much else. Still, if he were murdered, I can't see how it was done."

"How about motives?" Miles inquired.

Mr. Faraday's frown deepened. "There were several people who hated Nick bitterly, deeply. Whether their hate was ingrown sufficiently to kill, I couldn't say. Nick wasn't a particularly nice individual to know if you didn't understand him. He gravely and unjustly hurt a number of people while he was on the faculty here at Brandywyne. He injured others from time to time. He was a mental sadist. Nick liked nothing better than to see people squirm. And yet, he was rather

pitiful, in some ways. Intelligent enough, but lonely. Lonely because he was entirely anti-social, couldn't get on with anyone. He had a persecution complex, felt everyone was against him and tried to cover it up with his verbal sadism.

"I tried to cultivate Nick, understand him at first for the sole purpose of—" Mr. Faraday paused, flushed uncomfortably. "Well, of having an excuse to be around Miss Chalon. Eventually, though, I came to respect Nick's intelligence, but I was never able to respect him as a man. He depended too much on Miss Chalon. Financially, emotionally, every possible way. He was absolutely helpless without her."

"And she realized it," Miles suggested, "and was too kind and generous to divorce him, or desert him? That it?"

"Exactly!"

"A situation," Miles pointed out, "which gave you a very strong motive, Mr. Faraday, regardless of the letters."

"I realize that's true," Mr. Faraday admitted. "At least, I'm certain it would appear so to an outsider. But no such motive existed with me. You youngsters"—he gave Miles and me a cold glance—"may think this unbelievable and old-fashioned, but it just happened that I loved Miss Chalon enough that I was content to be near her, see her, do things for her occasionally. That was sufficient. I considered it an honor. "Of course," he added frigidly, "I would be an outright liar if I tried to lead you to believe my physical need for her wasn't, and isn't urgent. It was, and is. But, at the same time, I was content to see her, be near her."

"With a person like Miss Chalon," Miles said, "I can understand that very well. So for now, we'll assume that you didn't kill Nick Downing. There were, however, four other people who had an opportunity to do so. Mrs. Ransford, the nurse; Mrs. O'Toole, the cook; Ollie Osgood, and the niece,

Agnes Downing. Of the four, which would be your choice?"

The chip vanished from Lucian Faraday's shoulder as he considered the question. "Well, Mrs. O'Toole certainly came in for her share of Nick's needling. For Miss Chalon's sake, Mrs. O'Toole tried to keep shy of Nick, but he hunted her out, imposed horrible descriptions of her cooking on her. And while I can easily visualize Mrs. O'Toole heaving a vase, wielding some sturdy blunt weapon, I can't see her using poison. And poison was probably what it was if Nick were murdered. There's nothing subtle, or underground about Mrs. O'Toole. What you want is someone with a quirk, a twist."

"Yes," Miles agreed, "because the letters indicate a distinct warp."

Mr. Faraday nodded reflectively. "Mrs. Ransford, the nurse, appeared to be very congenial, but it struck me that she would harbor a grudge, bide her time. And from a remark she made during Nick's illness, I gathered Nick had done her a very grave injustice at one time.

"Then there's Ollie Osgood, the girl in the bookstore. Miss Osgood is a complete misfit for this type of school. She has no natural charm, no personality, no particular talent, and, instead of using her money and efforts to buy suitable clothes and cultivate some charm, she tries to buy friends and affection with expensive gifts. Then she feels hurt and resentful when people fail to reciprocate with what she considers proper appreciation." Mr. Faraday glanced with distaste at a slim vase of roses on one corner of his spacious desk.

"As for Agnes Downing," Mr. Faraday went on with a thoughtful frown, "I'm sure she has a quirk of some sort. One thing, Agnes bitterly resents every penny Miss Chalon has spent on her. You'd think Agnes would be grateful to Miss Chalon for giving her a home, paying her tuition here, treating her as a member of the family.

But Agnes isn't. Miss Chalton will make some casual remark about not being able to afford this or that, and Agnes immediately pounces on it with a pious, 'Oh, but you could afford it if it weren't for me, couldn't you? I know I'm a terrible burden, but I'll get out on my own as soon as I can.' And any critical remark made about people in general, Agnes takes as meant for herself, considers it a personal insult. Worse, she is jealous, envious. She resents everybody who has more than she does.

"I made a place for her as my afternoon secretary simply to take some of the load off Miss Chalton. Agnes, however, is entirely unsuitable for a secretary. She seems to begrudge callers taking my time, and people practically have to present birth certificates before she'll let them in to see me. She is a distinct debit to the office.

"And," Mr. Faraday concluded, "I'd say that the writer of those letters is either Agnes, Ollie Osgood, or the nurse, Mrs. Ransford."

Miles nodded, then asked, "Did Agnes Downing benefit financially in any way by her uncle's death?"

"No," Mr. Faraday replied, after some thought. "I'm sure she didn't. There was and is, however, that insecticide research Nick was working on. Agnes is trying to complete it. I shouldn't think, though, that it would amount to anything like a murder motive when and if it's perfected."

"Who," I asked, as we rose to go, "brought you the lovely roses, Mr. Faraday?"

He stared, then grinned wryly. "I'm not certain who brought those particular ones, but I believe Miss Osgood and Agnes take turns at . . . er, freshening up my office, making it more homey, as Miss Osgood puts it." Mr. Faraday looked decidedly uncomfortable about the matter.

Miles and I had just stepped into the bookstore when Mr. Faraday went swinging past the door, headed toward Miss Chalton's office. A fast

freight couldn't have stopped him this time. Miles smiled, and we went back to the stationery section, where Ollie Osgood, perched precariously on a tall stool with her high heels hooked around the legs, was hunched over the high counter banging furiously on a typewriter.

As we approached, her thick fingers stumbled to a halt. "Oh, hello," she said uncertainly, her round green eyes sliding from me to Miles and back again.

I introduced Miles, and there was sudden fear in Ollie's flushed, fat face. The natural fear that some people have for the law, particularly those who horde little grub worms of petty crime. Ollie was a large girl with an untidy mane of coarse red hair and copious, uneven bangs. She wore an alarmingly blouse of huge purple chrysanthemums on a background of shocking pink. Her red skirt appeared to be in imminent danger of popping out at the seams. She had a large cud of gum lodged in her left cheek.

Miles said, "We understand, Miss Osgood, that you were at Miss Chalton's home the Sunday her husband died. Is that correct?"

Ollie looked blank for a moment, then nodded vigorously. "Why, yes, I was. Why?"

"Well"—Miles grew confidential—"we believe Mr. Downing was murdered. You—"

"Murdered?" Ollie gasped, shocked, but obviously delighted.

"That's right," Miles told her. "And you appear to be a very observant young lady, so perhaps you can tell us something about the situation at the time of his death. Who, for example, had a motive for his death?"

"Motive," Ollie repeated excitedly, rolling her eyes around importantly. "Well," she confided spitefully, "I hate to say this, but Miss Chalton is the only person who could've had a motive." Ollie shifted her cud and gushed on damply, "You see, Miss Chalton was nuts about Mr. Faraday,

who was a good friend of Nick Downing's. But Mr. Faraday couldn't see Miss Chalton for dirt. She was always inviting him to the house, made a perfect fool of herself about him. Chased him like mad, she did. Only she knew a fine man like Mr. Faraday would never marry her if she divorced her husband, and left him alone when he was so ill. Mr. Faraday wouldn't have liked that for a minute, and Miss Chalton knew it. So the only way she had a chance with Mr. Faraday was for her husband to die."

Miles looked puzzled. "But I understood," he said, "that Mr. Faraday started going with Miss Chalton some time ago."

"Oh, he did." Ollie's thick lip curled. "That is, he had a date or two with her. I guess he thought he ought to take her around a little since her husband was such a good friend of his. I imagine Mr. Faraday felt sort of sorry for her. But, believe me, he sure dropped her fast enough!"

"Oh, did he?" Miles inquired innocently. "And why was that?"

Ollie gave us a knowing smile. "For the same reason," she replied archly, "that men like Mr. Faraday usually drop women like Miss Chalton."

Miles nodded in understanding.

Grudgingly, Ollie admitted, however, that she had no idea how Nick Downing might have been murdered. "But," she added shrewdly, "I thought there was something funny about his death all the time."

"How do you mean 'funny?'" Miles asked.

Ollie readjusted her expansive hips on the inadequate stool. "Well, Mr. Downing was ever so much better that day, and"—she smiled cannily—"it was just too, too convenient for Miss Chalton for him to die right then, if you get what I mean."

Miles said he got exactly what she meant. He asked her a few more questions, thanked her, and we left.

"I could," I said when we were out

in the corridor, "use a nice clean bath right now. With lots of soap."

"So could I!" Miles said with feeling.

We drove downtown to the courthouse; took the elevator down to the basement; went through a long, dank, icy room and finally into Dr. Baynes' office. Dr. Baynes, the medical examiner, was a rotund little man with a slightly rakish sparkle in his round blue eyes.

"We got the body," he greeted us coldly, "but I don't know what in hell to start looking for, so I thought I'd better talk to you before I started the autopsy. It's bad enough," he added indignantly, "to work on a new stiff, but when it comes to these old ones, I—"

"Never mind," Miles stopped him. "You took this job of your own free will and accord. Nobody forced you into it. And if this will help any, here's what we found out." Miles went on to tell him about Nick Downing's insecticide research, and about Miss Chalton and the cook discovering the empty nose drop bottle.

"I like that empty bottle," Dr. Baynes remarked with interest. "Let's see, what could be corralled in a bottle that would knock a guy out and leave no trace? Or shock him enough to stop his ticker? Fumes from most of those insecticides will kill, provided enough is inhaled. I'll have to look up what Downing was working on, but I don't think a fatal dose could be put in a nose drop bottle. Besides, most of those gases are lighter than air. I expect we'd better look for something heavier than air, something that would rise immediately when the top was removed from the bottle."

Dr. Baynes pulled a stubby little black cigar out of his vest pocket, examined it closely, unwrapped it carefully and stuck it in his mouth.

"Well," he said at last, "I think I know what it was. Hydrogen chloride, which is heavier than air. Left open in a bottle, it passes out, disappears

into air, and leaves practically no trace. A normal person could take a deep draft of it, and possibly survive. At least, live for hours, maybe days. But Downing had a heart condition. He took a terrific whiff of it, thinking it was nose drops. He realized at once that somebody had meant to kill him, and the shock was too much for his shaky heart. Yes, I think hydrogen chloride is what we want to look for."

Dr. Baynes gave Miles a sudden, sharp look. "If this was murder, the killer had himself a perfect murder. So how'd you get onto it?"

"Anonymous letters," Miles told him. "And that's just it. The murderer was too perfect. He killed, hoping Nick Downing's wife, Susanne Chalon, would be accused. But the killer was so good that nobody suspected murder then. Now, however, it has again become urgent to the murderer for Miss Chalon to be accused. So it was one of those indirect motive murders."

Dr. Baynes nodded. "Yes, you're right about the indirect motive. Had the motive been direct, the murderer would have kept still, let well enough alone."

The next morning was Saturday, and Miles called me at nine. Nick Downing had been murdered, and it had been hydrogen chloride. "I think," Miles went on, "that we can completely discard Mrs. Ransford, the nurse. She doesn't type, and no one immediately connected with her even owns a machine. Besides, she would have certainly been noticed had she used the machines in the college typing department. So that leaves Ollie Osgood and Agnes Downing. We have samples of their typing, but our typing expert is out of town. I want to get this cleaned up today if possible, so we'll try another method. Jan, I want you to get word to both Ollie Osgood and Agnes Downing that we are arresting Lucian Faraday this afternoon for the murder of Nick Downing."

"Miles!" I whispered. "You aren't!"

"Use your head, darling," Miles said gently. "Of course, we aren't. But I want to be sure those two girls think we are."

The offices in the Administration Building stayed alive till noon Saturdays, so I went over to the bookstore for some stationery I didn't need.

Ollie Osgood was all questions, wanting to know what had been discovered. Finally, while deciding between some club size paper and note sheets, I confided with regret that Lucian Faraday was to be arrested that afternoon.

Ollie gasped, paled, and stammered that she didn't see how that could be. I agreed that it was an outrage, but explained that the police had definite proof of his guilt.

Nervously, absently, Ollie took my money for the stationery, and I knew it would be only a matter of minutes until she called, or went around to tell Agnes Downing about Mr. Faraday's arrest.

"Well," I said lamely, as I started to leave, "I think it's all a big mistake, but there's nothing I can do about it, so I guess I'll amble over to the conservatory and get in some practice before lunch."

In my practice room, I looked at the "Der Rosenkavalier" score and decided against it. It was still impossible. I tried some Chopin. At a quarter past eleven, I lost interest in Chopin and began to get uneasy. I was well into Brahms' Concerto No. 1 when Agnes Downing knocked and came in. Her narrow, oblong face was exceedingly pale this morning, and her slanted eyes behind the almond-shaped glasses held an uncertain, frightened look.

"Miss Ravel," she began uneasily, "I hate to do this. Miss Chalon, Aunt Susanne has been so terribly nice to me, paid my tuition here, done everything, but— Well, if Uncle Nick were murdered, I think—"

"You think," I encouraged, "that you ought to tell everything you know. That it?"

Agnes nodded with asperity, but her eyes were sick with worry. "You see," she began, "the day before Uncle Nick died, I saw Aunt Susanne in the library taking notes from a chemistry book. She had her back to the door and didn't hear me come in. I just glanced over her shoulder and noticed hydrogen at the top of the page where she had the book open. She was writing on a scratch pad, and when she noticed me, she slammed the book closed and looked sort of funny. Of course, that may not mean anything at all, but I just thought Mr. Paxton ought to know about it."

I told her I was sure Mr. Paxton would be glad to know about it and went to the door with her. I waited until she was out of the conservatory, then went down to the office and called Miles. He listened to what Agnes had told me, then said, "Call Miss Chalton, Jan; ask her to phone Mrs. O'Toole and tell her to let us in to search the house. I'll be by for you as soon as I can get there."

I phoned Miss Chalton, and she agreed to call Mrs. O'Toole.

Mrs. O'Toole was a sturdy, vigorous little woman with neat black hair and snapping black eyes. "Come in," she said, obviously against her better judgment. "Nick Downing's death," she informed us, "was an act of God, whether he died naturally or otherwise, and I can't see why anyone would want to nose into it. His soul will still be right down there where it belongs. Burned to a crisp!"

Miles assured her soothingly that he agreed personally, but there were laws which obliged him to delve into such matters.

"Humph!" Mrs. O'Toole sniffed coldly and showed us into the library.

Eventually, we found the book with the formula for hydrogen chloride written out on a scratch pad sheet between the pages. The writing was hurriedly sprawled; it could be Miss Chalton's. It looked like hers. The sheet could have come from a pad in

any of the business offices, since they were all supplied with a standard size from the bookstore.

"The writing," Miles observed, "looks too fresh. Like it was written very recently. We can, however, get an expert to decide on that."

Unconsciously, I had been running the edge of the small sheet up and down between my fingers. I noticed a vague trace of ink on my forefinger.

"Miles!" I cried. "Do you remember yesterday when we talked to Agnes Downing? When her hand jerked, and ink plopped down on her scratch pad?"

Miles nodded slowly, and I didn't like the look in his eyes. We found Mrs. O'Toole in the kitchen. Miles asked her if Agnes had come in yet.

"Yes," Mrs. O'Toole admitted coldly, "but she's gone up to that stink pen over the garage."

We climbed the steep, narrow steps to the garage lab. Agnes Downing, in a long green smock, was bent over a glass-enclosed sink, probably working on an insecticide experiment, because in a square, metal hood over the sink a suction fan was whirring, drawing the deadly gases generated from the experiment up and away from Agnes. And within easy reach at her elbow was a gas mask. Agnes had not heard us enter.

Miles tapped sharply on the glass. Agnes whirled, stared, then came out, carefully closing the narrow glass door.

"Yes?" she inquired vaguely. "What is it?"

Miles was having difficulty with his control. His face was white and pinched. Without preamble, he said, "Miss Downing, you were, and are in love with Lucian Faraday, but as long as Miss Chalton was around, you knew you didn't stand a prayer with him. To kill Miss Chalton, however, was unwise. You were shrewd enough to realize that Mr. Faraday would grieve over her death, probably never look at another woman. But if you could dis-

figure Miss Chalon's character, distort her reputation by having her accused of murdering her invalid husband, and completely disillusion Mr. Faraday on the subject of Miss Chalon, you thought you might stand a chance with him.

"Further, you harbored no love for your uncle. He needled you, subjected you to constant insults, so you killed him, believing Miss Chalon would be accused. But you were too good with your murder. Murder wasn't even suspected, so from fear or something, you let it ride for then. But when Lucian Faraday started dating Miss Chalon, you couldn't stand it. You had to bring your too perfect murder to the front. You wrote Mr. Faraday anonymous letters, accusing Miss Chalon of murder. He didn't stop going with her, though, so you began to write her letters. Miss Chalon stopped dating him, but you still weren't satisfied. You knew Mr. Faraday still loved her; you *had* to have her charged with murder, so you wrote to me."

"Why, Mr. Paxton!" Agnes gasped piously, but the slanted eyes behind the almond-shaped glasses flickered dangerously and turned to muddy, glazed ice. "Whatever are you talking about? It's perfectly obvious that Aunt Susanne killed Uncle Nick. Didn't you find the formula she had written out in the library?"

"Yes," Miles admitted with distaste. "But how did you know it was there? Surely you don't think that, if Miss Chalon had written it, she would have been stupid enough to leave it there all these months, do you?" Miles pulled the small sheet out of his pocket. "And look here, Miss Downing. See the ink stain on the edge there? We were standing at your desk yesterday afternoon when your guilty conscience made your hand jerk; and ink spewed out on your scratch pad. Certainly Miss Chalon's pad had no ink stain on it. And this morning, when you heard we were arresting Mr.

Faraday, you couldn't have that. You rushed home, tried to forge Miss Chalon's writing on this formula, then rushed over to tell Miss Ravel your stupid, filthy little cooked-up story."

Agnes Downing's slanted eyes quivered across the sheet of paper, her thin mouth became an ugly, straight line. Suddenly from her smock pocket, she drew a small automatic.

"Move back!" she ordered shrilly, and with her left hand, she reached back to open the glass door. "Neither of you will get out of here alive," she told us. "See that panel of switches over by the door? When I get there, I'll flip the right one. The fan will come in, on the down sweep. It works either way, you know. I'll lock the door, and within a few minutes both of you will get enough gas to die miserable, horrible deaths." She laughed shilly. "No need to scream," she warned. "The walls are sound-proof." She began to edge toward the outside door.

Miles looked over her shoulder, smiled with vast relief. "Hello, Mr. Faraday," he said. "Take the girl's gun, will you?"

And Agnes Downing, who did not read detective stories, fell for the old, old gag and spun around.

Miles stepped in, knocked the gun out of her hand. "Get out of here, Jan!" he said, and maneuvered the twisting, fighting Agnes out on the landing. He pulled the door shut, pinned her hands behind her and said quietly, "I'm not going to ask the death penalty for you, Miss Downing. Just life imprisonment. I want you to have plenty of time to think about those letters you wrote!"

And Agnes Downing did get life imprisonment.

And later on, Susanne Chalon and Lucian Faraday began table-for-twoing it again, and they had the look of a couple of very wonderful people who had stumbled into a cloud of stardust.



Murder is when you find it

BY WILLIAM GROPPENBACHER

A chess game with four queens! He'd never heard of one, but he supposed you'd play it the same as any other game—and he did!

BARNABY JONES dropped the phone back into its cradle, stared thoughtfully down at our interrupted chess game, and tried not to look like a detective. I could tell he was memorizing the position of the chess men, which meant he had to go off on another one of those rush calls and wanted something to think about in his spare time while he was doping out another case of homicide.

Still gazing at the red and black squares, Barnaby remarked laconically, "This bird they just called about would have shuffled off quietly like any other drunken bum, except he isn't a bum. He is Dobbs Faraday, and he finally took that one drink too many. If he had just been a bum, they would have let the medical students cut him up into little pieces, then they would have put the pieces into a pine box about the size of a foot locker and carted them off to Potter's Field. But

he is twenty million bucks, deceased, so they will have half the force and all the photographers in town to see him off. You want to come?"

I was already reaching for my hat with one hand while I handed Barnaby his beat-up old Panama with the other. On the way uptown in a cab I asked, "What was it with Faraday, acute alcoholism?"

"That's what the M.E. says." Barnaby leaned forward and said something to the driver, then he sat back and announced, "In just three more moves, I could have had you checkmated." He likes to have people believe that sudden death affects him no more than a crowd affects a subway guard.

When the cab turned off Park and over toward Lexington I asked, "How come? I thought Faraday lived on Park."

"He does . . . did. I guess this was

a shack-up job. Anyhow, this is where they found him." The cab slid into the curb in front of a small but smart apartment building and Barnaby led the way inside. It was one of those intimate places with no switchboard or desk and an elevator you run yourself. We rode up to the sixth floor and walked down the hall to where a uniformed cop was standing in front of an open door.

Inside, the living room of the apartment was sleek and glittery, with a lot of chrome and ebony furniture with zebra-striped upholstery, and a bunch of weird, angular-looking prints on the walls. On a huge couch, by a modern travesty of a fireplace, sprawled the remains of Dobbs Faraday. His dress collar was ripped open, he was bluish and bloated, and did not greatly resemble the carefully sun-tanned playboy who was such a pillar of café society. An almost empty bottle of Johnny Walker and an overturned glass were on the table beside him.

In one corner a police photographer and a printman were stowing their gear into cases, across the room a couple of white-coated ambulance men had leaned themselves and their stretcher against the wall, in the center of the room a uniformed sergeant was frowning over a notebook, and in a deep but gaudy easy-chair a police doctor was sitting on his spine reading a book. He looked up as we came in and said, "It's about time."

"Uh-huh," said Barnaby. "What's the pitch?"

The doctor attempted a little heavy sarcasm. "When the blood stream of an individual absorbs as much as one percent of ethyl alcohol, the individual stops living," said he. "Mr. Faraday took that final drink that pushed him over the limit."

Barnaby walked over and looked down at the remains. "How'd he happen to do that?"

"They don't, usually," the medical man admitted. "Drunks almost always pass out before they can get down enough of the stuff to kill them. If

they didn't, there'd be about two million dead citizens in the country next Sunday morning."

"How come this one didn't pass out first?"

"Heart condition, maybe. Or he could have slugged down a pint or so in a hurry." He picked up his black bag and creaked to his feet. "I'll have to do a PM, I suppose, but I'll tell you right now we won't find anything but too much of that stuff. Will it break up the party if we leave now?"

All this while, Barnaby had been looking thoughtfully at the dead man, first from one angle, then from another. Now he leaned over and lifted a silky blond hair from one black coat sleeve. He moistened the tip of his finger and rubbed it on a fleck of what might have been blood on the white shirt front; the red speck came off. He bent over and sniffed at the glass by the bottle and muttered something about soda and ice. Then he said, "Go ahead." He wiped his hand with the handkerchief from his breast pocket and watched while the ambulance guys moved over with the stretcher and loaded the late Dobbs Faraday onto it with all the ceremony of a garbage collector emptying an ash can. They started out the front door, and I heard a faint, sobbing gasp from behind me.

The blonde was standing in another doorway, and she matched the room, at least partly. Sleek and glittering, but not by any means angular. Barnaby looked at her, grunted, and said, "Good morning. I'm Lieutenant Jones. This is my friend, Tom Collins."

The big blue eyes swept from Barnaby to me, and she looked like she was going to make one of the usual bad gags about my name. I guess she decided that wouldn't be quite appropriate, so she put on a bereaved expression and said simply, "I am Kitten Corot." Which was saying a good deal in a very few words. Kitten Corot was an ex-show girl who had lately gone in only for private showings, and her big audience of the moment had been Dobbs Faraday. From what I had

heard, I could judge that some of the mistiness in her eyes was caused by the fact that the boys in white were lugging a very lush meal ticket out of her life.

"You live here?" Barnaby asked. She nodded, and he added, "What happened?"

She sat down in one of the deep chairs, and her new-look evening gown did nothing to hide that old look that has been so popular ever since the affair of the snake and the apple. "Dobbs got awfully drunk very early," she said, "so I made him bring me home. I wanted him to leave, but he wouldn't. He just sat here, drinking more, and finally I sneaked out when he wasn't looking. I was gone a little over an hour. When I came back he had passed out, or that's what I thought. I started to make him a little more comfortable. As soon as I touched him, I knew he was dead. I called the police." She let a slight tremor come into her voice, and skillfully balanced a tear just inside a well-mascaraed eyelash. "There's no need for you to do anything more, is there?"

"When a big wheel like Faraday stops turning, we have to find out why. Maybe you don't know it, but one death out of five has to be investigated. Too many people might ask embarrassing questions, so we want to know the answers."

"But he just drank himself to death; that's all there is to it."

"From what I hear, that's a tough thing to do."

What she would have said to that I don't know, because we were interrupted by a mild commotion from the hall, and a red-haired bombshell burst into the room. She looked at the three of us, a separate blaze from her green eyes for each of us, and demanded, "Where is my brother?"

Kitten Corot looked at the redhead. "Haven't you heard, Helene?"

"I heard he had killed himself drinking, but I don't believe it. Dobbs was as healthy as a stud horse." This, I

take it, was no news to Kitten, but she didn't say anything.

Barnaby inquired, "You are Mr. Faraday's sister?" She snapped him a nod, and he went on, "They told you right about your brother's death. Who told you?"

"That blue-suited watchdog at the door." She took a gold cigarette case from a mesh evening bag, tapped a cigarette on a blood-red nail, and shot Barnaby an insolent look. "Who are you?"

"Police."

She tilted an interested pair of eyebrows, slid into a chair opposite Kitten Corot, and gave her a look that was malicious and, somehow, smug. "So there is more to this than just an accident?"

Kitten flared, "What do you mean?"

"Simply that I don't believe my brother died accidentally."

Kitten tensed and started to say something, but Barnaby cut in smoothly, "Who might have wanted your brother to die, Miss Faraday?"

"Quite a few people, I should imagine." She touched the flame from a gold lighter to her cigarette, and her green eyes looked through a haze of smoke at Kitten. The look turned her into a piece of not very valuable merchandise. "That one, for instance. It was pretty well known that Dobbs was ready to toss her back into circulation."

Kitten started out of her chair, but Barnaby's hand on her shoulder eased her back. "Let's don't pull hair, girls," he said. "Miss Faraday, even if what you say is true, would you regard it as a motive for murder?"

The insolent drawl matched the mockery in her eyes. "You know about the dog-in-the-manger, don't you?"

This time Barnaby had to use both hands to keep Kitten in her chair, and I think if she hadn't had a certain atavistic respect for the law she would have given him a good fast bite on the wrist. But before it got to the kicking and gouging stage we had another visitor. Another dame. This one was

very petite and very chic, and she stood in the doorway with an exaggerated look of tragedy on her pretty hand-painted features. She let out a horrified little gasp and said to Kitten, "Oh, madame, something terrible must have happened!"

She came running across to Kitten, shrugging out of a light coat on the way. She was wearing a skin-tight black maid's uniform that began at the knees and ended below the neckline. Kitten pulled herself into a semblance of dignity. "It's nothing, Marie. You may go now."

Barnaby rumbled, "Wait a minute. Who are you, anyway? And what are you playing in?"

"Playing, m'sieu?"

"You look like something out of a musical comedy. Or do you go around in that outfit all the time?"

"But I am madame's maid."

"How elegant," drawled Helene.

"Oh. Mam'selle Faraday. I did not notice."

"Hello, Marie. You can start wearing your Flatbush accent again. We're among friends." She flicked Barnaby a speculative look and added, "I hope."

"It seems to me," began Barnaby, "that there is a lot of double-talk going—" He stopped abruptly, stared at the door, and his voice trailed off, "Good Lord, it must be raining dames outside."

This one was different. Still young and a little starry-eyed, and what lacquer there was hadn't set very hard yet. She hesitated on the threshold until Barnaby said, "Come on and get into the act."

She took a couple of steps into the room and said, "I was looking for Mr. Faraday."

"Why?"

Helene Faraday said, "This is Carolyn Marsh, Dobbs' . . . secretary." The slight pause she put in there made the statement sound like a dirty implication.

Barnaby asked, "What did you want to see him about?"

"I don't know. Someone called the

apartment and said he wanted me to meet him here."

"What apartment?"

"Mr. Faraday's." Apparently, she thought of how that might sound, because she added quickly, "I live there with Mr. Faraday and Miss Helene."

"It wasn't Faraday who called?"

"Oh, no. I think it was a woman's voice, but it was muffled, and I couldn't be sure."

Helene said, in that cool way she had of reducing people to the status of furniture, "You won't find him here any longer, Carolyn."

The girl pulled her coat tighter in a little going-away gesture and started to turn, but Barnaby stopped her. "Don't go away. Maybe you can give us a little information." Then he inquired, of no one in particular, "Doesn't it strike you as odd that all these females converge here so soon after the big event?"

Helene drawled, "You might ask some of them why."

"Good enough. We'll start with you."

"I've been trying to find Dobbs all evening, but he had too much of a start. He hasn't been pub-crawling, he's been pub-leaping. I've been about an hour and a half behind him all the way. Finally, I thought of looking here in his little gold-plated nest."

Carolyn said, almost diffidently, "Will someone please tell me what this is all about?"

"Mr. Faraday had an accident," Barnaby told her. "A fatal accident."

She gasped, her hand went to her throat, and she sat down abruptly in the chair nearest her. It struck me that she was the only one of the lot who had shown either surprise or grief. Helene still had her claws out, in a lazy way. She remarked, "Carolyn used to be an actress, of a sort, before she found it more . . . interesting to be a secretary." Carolyn shot her a look of undistilled hatred that lasted about as long as it takes the shutter of a fast camera to open and close.

Kitten made her contribution to the

cat race. "She still has a silly dream that Dobbs was going to back a play to star her in. We used to laugh about it." Carolyn duly favored her with a shutter flash of loathing.

All of a sudden, everybody started talking at once, not saying anything in particular but just making noise, like women do after an unexpected lull at a bridge party. Barnaby is a man who can take his women or leave them alone, and when they come in quantity lots he naturally prefers to leave them alone. He waved the bunch into silence and said, "Let's get this thing straight. This is just a routine investigation, like we make after every case of what you might call violent death. I might want to ask some of you some questions later. Right now I'm going to look around the place."

He motioned me to follow, and started for a door on the right. Kitten and Marie both bounced to their feet to come along, but Barnaby waved them back. "This will be an unescorted tour," he told them. We went into a bedroom, and behind us the conversation started up again, a jagged hum of keyed-up voices held on leashes.

Barnaby prowled up and down the bedroom, a streamlined seraglio of a place, and kept one ear cocked toward the living room. Finally, I remarked, "It seems to me you're making quite a production out of a routine matter."

"Think so?" He went on prowling, apparently not uncovering anything worth looking at twice, and finally he said, "This is quite a situation. Imagine playing a chess game with four queens. A queen, the most valuable piece on the board, because she can move any distance, any time, any direction. And here you've got four of 'em. There's an hour and a half there when any one of the four could have come into this place, made any move she wanted to, and gone on out. If she watched the other plays on the board, she had complete control."

"That's all right, but what makes you think you've got a game of any kind?"

The last thing in this world Barnaby would admit to anyone is that he has any faith in that vague something called intuition. All the same, a lot of his fancy deductions have a striking resemblance to a plain ordinary hunch.

He said, "A lot of things about this deal don't just add up right. How'd Faraday happen to get so drunk that he passed out this early? He was a lush, sure, but he was also the boy who closed up the bars and came home with the milkman. How'd all those dames happen to get here at the same time? They didn't come to see each other, because there's more jealousy flying around in there than there is at a United Nations conference."

He led the way into the bathroom, a swimming pool of a place that had everything but gold plating on the faucets. On the threshold, he paused and sniffed the breeze like an old hound picking up a hot scent. He remarked, "The place smells like a gin mill." His eyes swept around the room and lighted on a hot water bottle, with one of those long rubber tubes dangling from it, that was hanging behind the door. He went over to it, sniffed and asked, "You ever hear of anybody irritating his sinus with Scotch whisky?"

I went over and took a whiff, and the aroma was indubitably that of sound old Scotch. "Maybe it's a new way of aging it," I suggested.

"I always thought rum tasted like it was distilled from old rubber boots," said Barnaby, "but I never heard of anyone in his right mind doing anything like this to Scotch. You better call headquarters and have 'em send that printman back here."

"Suppose you do find out who's been pouring the old family whisky into hot water bottles. What do you do then, bug him?"

"Maybe whoever did this wasn't as crazy as it might appear."

I telephoned for the printman, and by the time I got back Barnaby had locked the bathroom door and was on the prowl in the maid's room, which was behind the kitchen on the other

side of the apartment. I was surprised to find him pawing through the dresser drawers, and I watched while he unearthed quite a collection of lacy panties, bras and whatnots, most of which would have been right in order on a burlesque stage.

Barnaby just said, "Hm-m-m." Then he went on out to have a more or less perfunctory look at the dining room and kitchen. We found three empty Johnny Walker bottles in the kitchen, and Barnaby picked them up carefully with his handkerchief and locked them in a cupboard.

Back in the living room, he told his four queens, "Just for the record, I want to ask you some questions. I'll take you one at a time. Who wants to go first?"

Helene remarked, "I suppose I should call my lawyer."

"It's your privilege."

"But I want to be alone—with you." She got up with an interesting display of mock seductiveness, and walked across the room. Barnaby snorted and led her into the dining room.

Which left me alone with the other three, and it was not the most completely at-ease situation in which I ever found myself. Even though these gals seemed as unmoved as so many granite tombstones by the tragedy that had brushed them, it hardly seemed the time for small talk. But they asked me a few polite questions, and I explained that I was not a detective or a newspaperman or anything glamorous. I was just a guy who was lucky enough to have a little money of his own, and I didn't believe in getting a job and possibly taking the bread out of some deserving family's mouth, so what I do is practically nothing. As far as Barnaby and the department were concerned, I just came along for the ride.

One by one, Barnaby called them in for a private quiz session, and I continued to sit there. Underneath the desultory remarks that passed for conversation I could sense that every one of these women had a knife out for each of the others, but I couldn't see

that it added up to anything. As a matter-of-fact, I couldn't see any scores being added, and all the while I kept wondering why Barnaby was bothering with a rummy who just drank himself out of the world. Even though the rummy had been born with a silver flask in his hand, he didn't seem that important.

The fingerprint man came, looking unhappy, and dusted the hot water bottle and the Johnny Walker jugs. Barnaby had both of us act as witnesses while he drained maybe a quarter of an ounce of whisky out of the kink in the rubber tube, and sealed it up in a small bottle. Then the printman took the four women's prints, amidst a slight flurry of protest. Barnaby quieted them down by holding their hands during the operation, all but Helene's, who didn't want to hold hands. Barnaby has those big strong masculine hands that seem to soothe nervous women, skittish horses and the like.

The phone rang and Barnaby grunted, "Uh-huh," into it several times without changing his poker face. He told everybody they were free to do what they wanted, and we left.

In the elevator I asked, "Was that the post mortem report on the phone?"

"Yep. It was just like the croaker said. Alcoholism and nothing else."

"Then why are you hanging around with your tongue out like a bloodhound's?"

"There are a couple of angles I don't like," he said. And that was all he would say. He dropped me off at my apartment and told me he would get in touch with me in the morning.

I was brewing some coffee when he came in about ten o'clock the next morning, looking like he hadn't slept very much. He flicked an absent glance at the chess board, but since he didn't look twice I knew he must be kicking around a pretty hot idea. After a couple of gulps of coffee, he sighed and remarked, "What I like is a nice clean ax murder. You know where you stand with one of them."

"Still baying up that mythical murderer's trail?"

"Not only do I have to catch a murderer, I first have to prove that there was a murderer."

"You haven't proved it to me."

"I can tell you how it was done."

"How, for instance?"

"Why, with that hot water bottle."

"That's the first time I ever heard of a hot water bottle being lethal."

"You learn a lot in this business, don't you? Like that doctor told us, if a souse can get as much as one percent of alcohol in his bloodstream he's a dead drunk. Literally. Only drunks almost always pass out before they can hit that one percent."

"That's what I thought the man said."

"But suppose he does pass out, and then some kind friend comes along and gently pours about another quart into him. What happens? He soaks it right into his blood and just doesn't wake up any more. The best way to ease the stuff into him would be through a long tube, like on the end of that hot water bottle. And if you had your quart in that rubber bottle you could slide it in easy, so he wouldn't regurgitate the whole works."

"Do you know what you're talking about?"

"It's medically sound, if that's what you mean."

"It does make a pretty little murder device."

"Pretty, hell, it's perfect. No clues, no evidence at all. The guy just conks out from too much liquor. You can't even prove it's murder."

"Just what I was about to say."

"There are some angles—" he began, and stopped when he saw me grinning. "Never mind any cracks about hunches." His eyes wandered to the chess board and back again. "I never heard of a chess game with four queens in it, but I suppose you'd play it the same as any other game. You could, for instance, set a trap and let the queen walk into it."

He got up and started pacing the

floor. "I found out a few more things," he went on. "Faraday was in a black mood yesterday, so he started drinking early, around noon, I guess, and naturally that made him worse. He was pretty swacked by late afternoon. He and Helene had a hell of an argument. It seems their old man was a great believer in primogeniture, so he left all his money to the son, with daughter getting nothing but the income from a trust fund. She's been after Brother Dobbs for a chunk of the big pile, but he just laughed at her, and I guess he made it pretty final this time. But she inherits when he dies.

"Next comes that secretary, Carolyn Marsh, who is maybe not so innocent as she looks. Apparently, Faraday's humor wasn't improved by the argument with his sister, so when he stumbles over the secretary he takes her on for a few fast rounds. That was the McCoy about her wanting him to back a show for her; in fact, he had already turned some bonds over to a producer to get up the nut. But the way he felt yesterday he told her he wasn't backing it any more, he was backing out. I think he made a mistake. The kid can act."

"Would that be the only reason it was a mistake to tell her?"

"The producer still has the bonds. But these are just statements, not accusations. Anyhow, he seems to be in the mood for kicking dames around, so when he gets over to Kitten's he tells her that her lease on him is up and she'd better start looking for a new nest. You can imagine she didn't cuddle up to this one so nicely; in fact, she seems to have done everything but throw the piano at him. I bet that one is a wild cat when she gets started. There was some talk about how he wanted some jewelry back, but la Corot wouldn't give. At any rate, she kicked up enough of a row that Marie got in on it, too.

"And here's where it gets interesting. The more I hear about that guy Faraday, the more I think he got what

was coming to him. He had a streak of sadism a mile wide; just liked to see the girls suffer. Of course, he picked up all the checks at Kitten's place, so naturally he was boss. He kept Marie around just to keep Kitten's jealousy whetted up to a nice razor edge. Remember all that brief and fancy lingerie? I bet some interesting little costume parties went on there, but, what the hell, I'm neither a gossip columnist nor a psychiatrist, I'm just a cop.

"The point is, he seemed to be telling all the girls the same thing. When Marie heard the row between Kitten and Faraday, she came in and let it be known she was going to take over where Kitten got off. Faraday just laughed at her. He was a theatrical kind of bird, and Marie was just part of the scenery, but he let her think she might be a good deal more. She's no more French than you are, but I bet she's got a hot temper. What's more, I'd like to know how much she was getting paid for that French maid act. Or if she wasn't getting paid, what Faraday had on her. Anyhow, Faraday was in the right mood to give 'em all the old heave-ho."

"So what you've got," I tallied, "is one well-preserved corpus delecti, and four well-scorned women. What you haven't got is any connection between them. You haven't even got any proof that your corpse didn't get that way from natural causes."

"Proof be damned! Do you expect a killer to sign his work, like a painter?" He prowled over and glared down at the chess board for a minute, then went on, "Those fingerprints made interesting reading. One of the Scotch bottles had been wiped clean. The hot water bottle had plenty of prints on it. It had prints from all four of those dames."

"All four of them?"

"Sure. What d'ya think of that? Do casual visitors to people's apartments go around pawing the hot water bottles?"

"Not usually. I can see how Kit-

ten's and the maid's would be there, naturally. But how did Helene and Carolyn get in there? They didn't leave the living room while we were there."

"Which simply proves that they were both there earlier. A little fact they neglected to mention." The phone jangled and Barnaby reached for it. "I told 'em to transfer my calls here," he said. He had a brief and cryptic conversation and when he hung up he said, "Let's go talk to Carolyn Marsh."

He had a car downstairs and we headed uptown. "I mentioned about setting a trap for those four queens, so last night I tried one little piece of bait. I copied a couple of paragraphs out of some medical textbooks and sent 'em to each of those four dames. One of those paragraphs told about how much alcohol it takes to kill a man. The other was from a manual they give out to ambulance drivers and it explains how to use a stomach tube. Sometimes those drivers have to get an antidote down a poison case before the doc gets there, and this shows how it can be done by practically anybody."

"So where does that get you? Suppose that wild theory of yours is right and one of them did knock Faraday off with that rum-dum hot water bottle stunt. All you accomplish is to let her know you know how she did it."

"Uh-huh. That's the tricky part of this trick. I didn't write the notes myself. I got one of our handwriting experts and put him in reverse. He wrote 'em in a couple of other people's handwriting."

"I don't get it."

"Maybe nobody will. On the other hand, maybe it might start something." I could tell that was all he was going to say on that subject. He switched to another one. "That telephone call was from Carolyn Marsh and she said she had something to tell me. She wanted to get away from Faraday's place, so we're going to meet her in a bar over near Kitten's." We parked in front of the tavern and went inside.

Carolyn wasn't there yet, so we sat in a booth and he ordered two Scotches. "Maybe that smoky smell will jog her memory along," he said.

After twenty minutes Carolyn had not shown up to have her memory jogged and Barnaby's frown was getting deeper by the minute. He got a quarter's worth of nickels from the bartender and went into the phone booth. When he came out he said, "I don't much like this. She left there forty-five minutes ago. Helene is gone, too. And nobody answers at Kitten's place. I haven't sent out a pick-up call yet, but I'm having a couple of the boys go over there to check up on Carolyn." He looked down at the Scotch, and absently drank it off, like you'd throw away something you didn't expect to need any more.

"What do you think of Carolyn Marsh wanting to meet you this close to Kitten Corot's?" I asked. "Any connection?"

"Could be." He sat twirling the empty glass between his fingers and looking out through the open door. Suddenly, his eyebrows tilted and he remarked, "There's one nice thing about this case. All you have to do is sit down and in walks a dame." I followed his look and there was Helene Faraday.

She saw us at the same time and walked over to our booth. She didn't look so bright this morning. The circles under her green eyes took some of the snap out of them, and her shoulders wore a tired look. She slid into the booth next to me and said, "I think a double bourbon will help." She tossed it down straight and it seemed to help. "That's what I needed," she said, and her voice accelerated so it was quick and nervous. "I took the car out this morning; I thought it would do me good to drive around a while. It didn't. I took it back home."

Barnaby asked, "How's the beautiful secretary this morning?"

"I don't know. She's supposed to be helping the lawyers arrange the funeral." From her tone of voice, she

might as well have said Carolyn was out buying her brother a new shirt. She sighed. "I have to go and see that damned Kitten. I've spent half my life picking up after Dobbs, but I didn't think I'd be doing it for the last time this soon."

"Picking up after him?"

"He had a bad habit of giving his women presents that should never have gone out of the family. Always to the most impossible tramps, too."

"So?"

"She has a necklace that belonged to my mother, and I want it. She doesn't know I know she has it."

"Which is the same as saying that since Dobbs isn't around any longer she figured she could keep the necklace and get by with it. Is that what you mean?"

"It isn't what I meant, but you could put it that way." She looked a little brighter at this thought.

"Let's go talk to her." We had to wait while Helene had another shot, and while we were waiting Barnaby ducked into the booth and made another phone call. Then we went over to Kitten's apartment, where we got no answer to the bell. Barnaby went down and got the super to let us in.

We no sooner walked into the living room than Marie popped up in the dining room door. She wasn't wearing her maid's uniform, but what she was wearing didn't do any more of a cover-up job. This time it was a filmy negligee kind of a thing and nothing else that I could see. I looked, too. She was a very scenic female, and no one knew it better than Marie. She said, "Oh. I must not have heard the bell."

"Funny," said Barnaby. "There's a buzzer in your room. Go punch that bell again, Tommy, and I'll see if it works." We went through that routine and when he came back he said, "It works, all right." He turned on Marie. "I also notice that you're packing. Thinking of going someplace?"

She shrugged and cracked, "*Pour-quoi pas?* I have no reason to stay,

now." Which might have meant any of a number of things.

Barnaby grunted and stalked over to Kitten's bedroom. "I see madame was planning to take a powder, too. Where is she now?"

Marie shrugged again and said, "But how could I know? She said something about a bank, I think."

Helene muttered, "Oh-oh. Off to the little tin box. So soon, too."

"Don't worry," Barnaby told her. "She won't be going anywhere." He looked at Marie and said, "You can finish packing if you want, but you're not going anywhere for a while, either." She made a *moue*, as they say in the French novels, and turned around with a swirl that flattened out the negligee in the places where it would do the most good. She went to pack, and, I was sorry to reflect, dress.

The two double bourbons, or something, had done Helene a lot of good. She was beginning to shine again. She lit a cigarette, blew some smoke at Barnaby, and said, "Don't you think you should tell me, as one of the family, just what you're up to, lieutenant? After all, I am the nearest living relative."

Barnaby eyed her coolly and said, "So you are. One could hardly call you a bereaved relative, however."

"Dobbs and I were brought up to be very fatalistic. Here today and gone tomorrow, you know."

"Also, you can't take it with you."

Her eyebrows tilted slightly. "How very true. Fortunate, isn't it?" She leaned forward confidentially and said, "Seriously, though, do you suspect what they call foul play?"

"Seriously," Barnaby said, "I do." Their eyes locked and held for a moment, until Helene gave a shrug that said anything the police might do was no concern of hers.

The door clicked and swung open, and in swept Kitten Corot. She looked like a woman who was going places. Places that did not include a funeral. She stopped just inside the door, looked us over, and visibly restrained

herself from making noises. She also made a brave attempt to look like she hadn't been going anywhere at all. Barnaby grinned happily and said, "Now if Carolyn would just show up, we'd have four queens."

"Four queens?" inquired Helene. "What is this, a poker game?"

"Nope. This is another game I occasionally play." He motioned a lazy hand at Kitten and said, "Come on in. We're perfectly willing to let bygones be bygones." That startled her into taking a couple of steps forward. She stopped there and a cautious look came into her eyes. She looked around the room as though she expected to see a booby trap hidden somewhere.

Barnaby went on in a casual, conversational tone, "Kitten had a brush with the cops a couple of years ago over a little matter of a hotel room, a rich sucker from Kansas City and an outraged husband, or that's what he said he was. They didn't pin anything on her, though. But there's one thing about the cops. You'd think in a big town like this they'd lose track of a little thing like that, wouldn't you? But we have the damndest filing system. It never forgets."

Kitten's body tensed and her voice tightened. "You don't get anything out of me until I've seen a lawyer."

"That's an excellent idea, darling," drawled Helene. "You might need a lawyer for more than one thing."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"There's a little matter of a necklace, for one thing. For another, Lieutenant Jones doesn't seem to be quite satisfied with the way Dobbs died. Are you, lieutenant?"

"I haven't said so."

"But it could have been something besides one drink too many, couldn't it? Poison, for instance?"

"Alcohol itself is a poison," replied Barnaby blandly, "if it is administered properly."

"Oh!" The exclamation came from the dining room door, and there was Marie, round-eyed and startled.

Barnaby said, "Come on in, Mary."

Those police files I was talking about. There's one about a girl named Mary O'Fallon, who all of a sudden gets all mixed up with a French kind of a girl named Marie."

That remark rubbed away her French maid pose like a cold-creamed towel rubs away grease paint. "That was no business of the cops, and it's not their business now."

"I didn't say it was. I was just thinking that there seem to be some interesting types mixed up in this affair."

Helene was sitting forward on her chair, and her lazy, sophisticated air had turned tense. "What were you saying about alcohol being a poison?"

"I think you know what I mean."

She jerked back a little. "I?" Her eyes narrowed and flicked sharply at Marie and Kitten. "Apparently, it meant something to these two."

"It also," said Barnaby, "would mean something to Carolyn Marsh." The phone rang, and he motioned Kitten and Marie back to their seats. He kept right on talking while he crossed the room to answer it. "Carolyn not only knew how it was done," he said, picking up the phone and looking at each of the three women, "she knew who did it." He let that sink in while he addressed himself to the phone.

Barnaby's telephone conversations are usually one-way affairs, with his contributions consisting of grunts, yes, no, and other such informative noises. This one was more eloquent. He said, "Hello, Reilly. . . . She did, eh? . . . In the car? . . . How about the apartment? . . . Take another look in the car. . . . Get her on the phone to me here as soon as you can. . . . Sure, bring her on over. . . . Yeah, I'll make the pinch right now."

Helene Faraday acted on that last line as if it had been a cue. She started up, a hard, cold glint in her ice-green eyes. Then she sank slowly back into her chair, her mouth twisted into a sardonic smile. She drummed a cigarette on a blood-red nail, flicked

on the gold lighter, and blew a cloud of smoke at Barnaby. "Well?"

"Well, the boys found Carolyn March," he said. "What did you do. Mickey Finn her?"

"I have nothing to say."

"Then I'll say it for you." He looked at me and went on in a casual way, "Remember I asked whether you expected the killer to go around signing his crime, like a painter?"

"I still don't see any signatures," I told him.

"That isn't the point. The point is, this was such an artistic murder that whoever committed it was bound to feel awfully proud of herself. It would get so she would almost bust if she thought no one appreciated her work of art."

"What's that got to do with four women?"

"Why, just this. Whoever killed Faraday was like the painter who keeps on hanging around his own exhibit, or the author who goes into a bookstore where he isn't known so he can hear what people say about his book. She came back here last night just to get the audience reaction to her work of art. Naturally, she couldn't get the credit for it, but from an artistic point of view she could do the next best thing. She could listen to the applause."

"All right, so you figured it was one of the four dames. How did you figure which one?"

"There were a number of little items. I wrote Kitten out of the scenario right away. She had been in that jam with the cops, and she would never have called them first if she thought there was anything phony about the way Faraday died. As it was, she called us just because it was the first thing that popped into her head. Then, of course, that Scotch bottle with the fingerprints rubbed off let her out completely. She would never have bothered with that when her prints were all over the other three, not to mention the hot water bottle. For that matter, the same goes for Marie."

"Two down and two to go," I remarked.

"Right. Carolyn and Helene. Whichever one it was got interrupted before she could finish the mopping-up job. She was in the kitchen, swabbing her prints off that Scotch bottle, and she had to skin out the back way and let the prints stay on the hot water bottle where they were. I figured right along it was Helene."

Helene raised an eyebrow. "Why?" She was absolutely controlled, just as objective as if she had been talking about somebody else. From the spoiled-brat way she had been throwing her weight around, I would have expected her to do some top blowing, but evidently she meant what she said about being fatalistic.

Barnaby said, "A number of reasons. I found a little red fleck on your brother's shirt front, and it wasn't blood even though it was just that color. It was also just the color of your fingernails. In fact, it was a piece of your nail polish that you chipped off on his shirt stud. Maybe that's why you didn't want me to see your hands when we were taking those prints. Another thing. This production wasn't just dreamed up on the spur of the moment. You knew what you were going to do long before you did it. It took a lot of time and thought to think out a killing like this. And before last night, none of the other three had any reason to want to kill Faraday, they had every reason to want him to stay alive.

"It was a very artistic piece of work, but you had to keep coming back to retouch it, and that spoiled the picture. Every time you thought I might be trying to hang it on Kitten or Marie or Carolyn, you spilled a little more. You didn't know it, but you were too jealous to see them get the credit for your work of art.

"It was Carolyn who interrupted you last night, of course, and you couldn't be positive she hadn't seen you. So

this morning you get a letter in her handwriting that describes how it was done. Then you overheard her calling me. That meant just one thing. You had to get her out of the way. When she left the apartment you followed her in your car. I wouldn't have known that if you hadn't told us yourself that you had the car out. You took her in someplace and slipped her the Finn. You didn't have time just then to get rid of her for good, because you wanted to find me and see what I was up to. So you just loaded Carolyn into the back seat and put the car back in the garage. She'd be safe there for a few hours.

The look that passed between Helene and Barnaby clashed in mid-air and rang like a couple of swords. Then her crooked smile twisted down even more and she shrugged. "You win," she said almost softly. "I told you I'm fatalistic. Here today and gone tomorrow." As an afterthought, in the same tone you'd inquire about the weather, she said, "How is Carolyn?"

"I really don't know," Barnaby told her. "That was all just a theory on my part." He shot me a supercilious look. "Or what some people might call a hunch. I told you I was playing a game. So I made a couple of trick moves, and you moved right in where I could checkmate you. That man I had telephone me didn't tell me anything because he didn't know anything. He didn't even know what I was talking about."

She allowed herself one brief, wild peal of hysterical laughter. "Oh, God, to think I let myself be trapped like that!"

"That's right," said Barnaby. He picked up his battered Panama. "Well, as you are fond of saying, here today and gone tomorrow. Let's start going." He flashed me a superior look and said, "You can come, too, and then we will go back to your place and I will checkmate you."

He did, too.

THE END.



She

kissed him dead

BY SAMM S. BAKER

I was an advertising man, not a homicide cop, but I discovered that murder can be as fascinating as advertising any day in the week, especially when one has a beautiful, cold, blond wife.....

THE taxi stopped in front of my shabby office building. I kissed my unenthusiastic blond wife and stepped out.

She said coldly, "Save the romance. I'll be back for you in a half hour. Be waiting for me on the sidewalk. A half hour, on the dot."

"On the dot," I replied, reaching toward her again. She reached forward also—to slam the cab door. It almost sliced off my nose.

She called out, "A half hour will be just enough time to finish your work, if you don't mess around with that new red-headed copy writer!"

I opened my mouth to protest, and got it full of the taxi's exhaust. She wouldn't have believed me, anyhow.

I was all wet. Especially because it was raining hard.

I started toward the building, but the drab entrance didn't look inviting. Not as inviting as the revolving door of the tavern a few feet down the street.

I found myself putting down an empty jigger of Old Grand-Dad, so I took another as a chaser. I glanced at the fast-moving clock, and sighed, "Better make it three."

The office building doors still didn't look inviting, but I went in anyhow. I pushed the rusted elevator button and waited—and waited—and waited. The service was always terrible, but at nine o'clock at night it was worse. The lobby was cold and dark and deserted.

I shivered. The building smelled of arsenic and old lice.

I looked at the dirty pad that hung on a string near the elevator door and saw that my three copy writers, Johnny, Ted and Alicia had checked in together an hour before. I noticed the label on the book, "After seven p.m. everyone must sign book and write hour of arrival and departure."

A shadow big as Frankenstein's fell over the pad. A shadow with b. o. It belonged to Joe, the night elevator man. Six and a half feet of bone and muscle and b. o. I didn't know his last name. And cared less. We had four elevator men, including those on day duty, and everybody called them "Joe."

Joe opened his ugly mouth and showed his teeth. They were white and even. "What are you doing here?" Joe asked. I almost answered, "I work here," but I didn't want to get into an argument. Especially one that he might win. Instead I replied, "I decided to come down and murder all my copy writers."

Joe didn't think that was funny. Well, neither did I. We walked into the elevator. The heavy iron door slammed shut. The elevator started up, protesting like an angry client.

Joe from the rear view was no prettier than from the front. His gray sweatshirt and overalls failed to hide his huge muscles. His clothes were dusty and dirty right down to his dry, cracked shoes. Light cotton work gloves held the elevator controls.

To drown out the irritating sound of the clanking elevator chains, I said, "I wore my thumb down to the elbow ringing for the elevator. Were you entertaining a blonde in the basement?"

I thought the character would feel complimented, but he turned around, frowning, and growled, "I was down at the corner getting a cuppa coffee. I take a half hour off from eight thirty to nine. Anything wrong with that?"

I changed the subject. "Did you take any of my gang up to work last night?"

He stared at me. "No names was marked down on last night's sheet," he said.

The way he said it stopped me. I guessed, "I thought Johnny Walker and the red-headed girl worked last night. Did they?"

He grinned a grin I'd like to wipe off with a crowbar. If I could lift a crowbar. "What's it worth to you to know?" he asked.

"You answered it," I remarked. So Johnny and Alicia were having fun and games in the office after dark. I thought of that luscious redhead. I thought of her soft, snug sweaters. I changed my thoughts reluctantly. I thought instead of what Johnny's wife would think about his after-hours' collaboration with the redhead.

The elevator stopped with a jerk that made me bounce like the redhead's sweater. The door dragged open and Joe's angry eyes pushed me out. He banged the door shut behind me.

There was a light in Johnny's room to my right, and another down the hall at the left in the office shared by Ted and Alicia. I heard a loud voice coming from that office and recognized it as the radio. I shivered, either from the cold dampness or from the idea of listening to a commercial. I decided to go over the new advertising campaign we were working on with Johnny first.

I walked toward his office. No typewriter clacking. He must be thinking, sleeping, or maybe even knotted up with the redhead. I pushed his door open and stopped.

Johnny was not thinking. He was not sleeping. No redhead in sight. Just a lot of red, wet red, on Johnny's head. He was spread out on the floor in front of his desk. The top of his head was crushed in like the side of a pinchbottle. No more advertising campaigns for Johnny.

I didn't like looking at Johnny, but neither could I take my eyes away. I was fascinated by a red mark on the upper part of his cheek. I bent down

and looked at it closely. It was a smudge of vivid lipstick. I thought of the redhead's full, soft lips.

"I'll be damned," I told myself, "she kissed him dead!"

I wasn't feeling so good all of a sudden. I seemed to hear the blood dripping off Johnny's head to the floor, until I realized it was the rain dripping off the window to the sill. But I didn't have to be a doctor to realize that Johnny had been killed within the past half hour; the wet blood gave that away.

I had to see a man about a bottle right away. I found Old Grand-Dad tucked under the middle cushion of my office couch, where I hid it from the cleaning woman. If she ever used her duster on that couch, she'd find the bottle. So it was completely safe. I wiped my lips and Old Grand-Dad walked me back into Johnny's office.

Johnny stared up at me from the floor. He hadn't been a bad guy. Good-looking. Too good with the ladies. Not bad with advertising copy. I didn't like the idea of somebody murdering him. I took another drink. "Who did it, Johnny?" I asked soundlessly. He didn't answer, not even soundlessly. His arm was outstretched, his hand seemed to be pointing. It was pointing at the wastebasket two feet away.

What could I lose? I walked over to the basket. In it there was a small bronze bust of Shakespeare, about ten inches high. Johnny had used it on his desk as decoration, or inspiration. The top of Shakespeare's hard head was bleeding—with Johnny's blood.

I walked over to Johnny's desk, found a towel in the bottom drawer. I carefully lifted Shakespeare out of the wastebasket in the towel, handling it so I wouldn't smudge any fingerprints that might be on it. With that cleaning woman, it was probably covered with prints years old. The goo on Shakespeare's head made a red stain on the towel. No question that it had been used to send Johnny on the long

journey somewhere. I sighed and laid the bust and towel on Johnny's desk.

The next step obviously was to phone the police. The phone looked very heavy so I picked up the bottle of Old Grand-Dad instead. When I put it down, I felt strong enough to walk away from the phone. I'd call the police later. I didn't know their number, anyhow.

I walked down the hall to the office shared by Ted and Alicia. On a hunch, I pushed the door open suddenly. Shared is the way that office was, emphatically.

"I'll have the other chair removed from the office," I mentioned, "since you both prefer using the same one."

Ted's hands reluctantly stopped what they were doing and fumbled for a cigarette. His eyes studied his lighter with a concentration I wished he'd give to his work.

The redhead slowly uncoiled herself from her roommate's lap and stood up. She smoothed her dress down from shoulders to hips, but that still didn't remove the insistent bumps. For which I was not displeased.

I pulled my eyes back into their sockets and asked, "Has either of you been working with Johnny yet tonight?"

Ted shook his head negatively. Alice snapped, "Not a chance!" How could such soft lips talk so hard?

I detached my eyes from her lips. "Neither of you seen him, at all?"

Ted replied, "No. Why?" He fingered a strip of wide adhesive tape on his chin. His mouth was smudged with lipstick. I looked from the smudge to the redhead's lips. They matched. I thought they matched the vivid cupid's bow on the dead man's cheek also.

"I was too busy to go see Johnny," Alicia drawled.

"Cut yourself shaving?" I asked Ted.

"Yeah," he replied angrily, "testing that new shaving cream you gave me."

"Let's all go and see Johnny," I suggested. I stopped at the door;

nothing had moved, not even the redhead's hips.

"I want to have a conference," I barked. "Or did you forget this is an advertising agency? Let's go."

They looked at each other, then followed me down the hall. I stepped into Johnny's office quickly and faced the door instead of the body on the floor. I scanned their faces as they walked in, then stopped short.

Ted frowned and swore. He dropped his cigarette and when he straightened after picking it up, his face was turned away from me.

Alicia let out a small scream and put the back of her hand in her mouth like in the very finest Grade B movies.

"What killed him? I mean—who?" she gasped.

"What makes you so sure he's dead?" I wanted to know.

Ted grabbed me by the lapel and yanked me off balance. I tripped and was held up only by his hand on my jacket. It was undignified. I chopped his forearm and he let go of my lapel in a hurry. He balled his fingers into a fist, pulled back his arm, then relaxed.

"What the hell's the idea of marching us in on something like this?" he snarled. "Why not tell us about it first?"

The redhead dropped her hand from her mouth and heaved her bosom a few times. "You might at least have warned us," she said sulkily.

"I figured you'd been here before," I said bluntly. "Both or one of you."

They didn't answer.

"That lipstick on his cheek, Alicia," I pointed. "Seems to me it matches yours."

She was angry now. "Any fool can see that's not my lipstick," she snapped. "It's on the purplish side, and I look ghastly in purple."

"Besides," I said, "you don't waste time kissing a man on the cheek."

She half-smiled; she liked that. Her hips started to pick up a rumba beat again.

I turned on Ted suddenly. "Cut yourself shaving, did you say?"

There was a startled flash in his eyes, then he blanked the worry out of them. "That's what I said," he answered slowly. "Any objections?"

"Plenty," I retorted. "When you cut yourself shaving, you make a nick or a scratch. You don't need adhesive tape to cover a nick, or hardly ever. You never need a wide piece like you're wearing."

"What's it to you?" Ted asked angrily. "Alicia and I came up in the elevator with Johnny. We left him there and went to our office together. That's where we've been ever since. Is that what you want to know?"

"That's what I want to know," I remarked, "but more than that, I have to believe it. So do the police."

Alicia looked at Ted, then at me. Her eyes would melt the candles right off a birthday cake. "It's true," she said softly, "Ted and I have been together every minute." She started smoothing her dress again for my benefit, but I wasn't having any. Not right now.

"That gives you both an alibi," I said, "or neither one. The way I figure it, one of you killed Johnny." I let that sink in. "One of you is lying to help a murderer."

They looked at each other and I could feel the chill developing. I turned the refrigerator current higher.

"Joe on the elevator said he didn't take anybody else up or down. I know the stairway door is locked because I fixed it when I closed up the offices earlier this evening." I lit a cigarette while rigor mortis settled further on them, all three of them.

"The cleaning woman doesn't come around here yet for an hour," I continued. "That leaves three of you entering this joint. And one of you is dead. You take it from there."

My brain was parched and so was my throat. I sat down and helped myself to the last of Old Grand-Dad who had been resting peacefully in my jacket pocket. The empty bottle

clanged noisily in the metal wastebasket. The silence had thickened considerably meanwhile, and lay there like a fog on Long Island Sound.

The redhead gave up first. "Maybe he killed himself," she suggested.

"How?" I asked.

She shook her shoulders and the adjacent areas effectively. "You're the *Green Hornet* around here tonight," she said, "you tell us how he was killed."

"Maybe Ted can tell us," I ventured. That character threw me a look that would have burned off the wires on the chair at Sing Sing.

"Shakespeare on the brain," I finally explained. "Johnny picked up his bronze bust of Shakespeare, hit himself over the head with it, then he laid down and died." I paused. "Oh, yes, he decided that the bust looked messy on the floor so he picked it up, tossed it into the wastebasket, then laid down and died again." I was getting sore at my own fat-headed wit. "Any more questions?"

Alicia commented matter-of-factly, "Shakespeare's not in the wastebasket."

"Shakespeare's head hurt, too," I explained, "so I wrapped it in a nice white towel which will preserve the fingerprints on it for the cops." I pushed out my cigarette on the desk top; it would have to be refinished anyhow some day. "Whose fingerprints?" I wanted to know. "Yours, Alicia, or Ted's?"

Ted was reaching for my lapel again. I kicked him under the kneecap. He jerked down to grab his leg and I ripped the adhesive tape from his chin. It showed a dark diamond-shaped bruise that had never been left by any razor.

Alicia let out a king-size scream this time and sat down quickly in a chair. Even with her fashionable long dress, she managed to uncover one knee.

Ted stood up, confused and angry. He touched his bruised chin and faced first Alicia, then me, challengingly.

"No razor ever put that bruise on your chin," I shot out sharply, "unless

it was hidden in somebody's fist. If you'll examine Johnny's right hand, you'll see a bruise on his middle knuckle." Ted looked at the dead hand involuntarily, then stared back at me. "I imagine," I finished, "that the police will be able to match up his knuckle with your chin."

"O.K.," Ted grunted. "So I did see Johnny before. So what?"

"You tell me what," I replied.

"So this," he said. "I had to go to the . . . down the hall."

"What time?" I interrupted.

He answered fast. "It was eight fifteen. I'd waited until the news program ended." He continued, "On my way back, Johnny called me in here. He made some cracks about Alicia—"

The redhead sat up and tried to keep the shocked pink out of her face.

"What did Johnny say exactly?" I asked. "It's important."

"He said"—Ted's eyes shifted toward the redhead, then back to me—"that he was giving her the air, so he supposed she'd be parking in my lap from now on." He frowned. "I'm sorry, Alicia, but that's what he said."

"Then you got sore and hit him," I prompted.

"Not exactly," Ted stumbled.

"You hit at him and missed, then he hit you, right?"

"Yeah," Ted mumbled. For a guy who wrote glib radio dialogue, he was certainly out of words tonight.

"Then," I went on, "you got up from the floor, picked up Shakespeare and hit Johnny on the head—"

"Yeah," said Ted. He changed his mind, "No, of course not." He flushed. "He was a foot bigger than me. Besides, after he hit me, I felt sick. I had to go back to the men's room, in a hurry. I stayed there quite a while. When I came out, Johnny's door was closed. So I went back to my office without looking in."

"Had you left his door open?"

"Sure, I rushed out of there too fast to bother with it."

His story sounded phony to me. I figured I had Johnny's killer cornered.

But I didn't know what to do about it. I didn't quite know how to get him to sign a confession on the dotted line. I always have the same trouble getting clients' names on contracts.

I turned to the redhead instead. The top half of her dress was doing nip-ups.

"That finishes your alibi, honey," I pointed out. "If Ted was in the . . . out there recovering from the battle he says he had with Johnny, you had plenty of time to go in and conk him yourself."

Her temper flared up and she referred to my parentage vividly. She added, "I was in my office every minute while this . . . this murderer was gone!" The last meant Ted, who didn't like it.

"How about when you went down the hall yourself later?" he asked viciously. "You were gone longer than I expected."

She turned white and her bosom was still. She wasn't acting now.

"Alicia," I said quietly, "when you saw Johnny then, was the lipstick on his cheek or not?"

"It wasn't," she replied just as quietly. Her eyes opened in panic. "I didn't mean that," she gasped quickly. "You trapped me. I didn't know what I was saying." She started to cry.

I let her sob for a while. Ted took one long look at her, then stared at the floor.

"When you're ready to talk, baby," I said, "I'll listen. But you better talk fast, 'cause I'm way overdue on calling the police as it is."

The redhead was recovered now. Her eyes stayed on mine.

"Here's how it was," she said, "just like this. I was on my way to wash up. I thought I'd look in on Johnny first for a second. His door was closed. I walked in and he was on the floor, dead." She stopped and breathed deep, exercising her attractive muscles for my benefit. "There was no lipstick on his cheek, and I didn't put any of

mine there." She explained, "I don't kiss dead men."

"Not even old friends?" I asked.

"Not even," she replied. "I walked right out and came back to Ted."

"And back on his lap?" I followed up.

"Yes," she said defiantly. "I thought I better act—well, natural." She didn't blush this time, but asked angrily, "What else could I do? I figured somebody killed Johnny between the time Ted came back to the office and the time I went down the hall. If I said anything to Ted, it would put me on the spot as the murderer. So I kept my mouth shut and acted as though nothing was wrong."

I was mixed up fine now. Where was that fine analytical brain I kept telling my clients about? I looked down at dead Johnny. "Four's a crowd," I muttered impatiently. "Let's go back to your office."

We trudged back down the hall. When we entered the office, I was frowning. "If somebody was back there massaging Johnny's head with Shakespeare," I asked, "how come neither of you alert geniuses heard a sound?"

"We had the radio on," Ted contributed eagerly.

"That's right," Alicia seconded the motion. "And besides"—if women can leer, and I wouldn't be a bit surprised, the redhead did just that—"and besides," she repeated, "we were wrapped up in each other—"

"This doll has no more morals than a window dummy," I advised myself. "Is that bad?"—myself inquired. Right now her humid eyes were starting to go to work on me. Her hips began their slow swaying.

"You wouldn't need a gun," I murmured, "you'd just kiss a man dead." Which brought me back to the lipstick and Johnny. "Or," I asked, "was it quicker using that bust of Shakespeare?"

But Alicia decided she had the situation well in hand. With her free wheeling working at top speed, she

moved up to me. My back was against a desk, so there was no place for me to go. If I wanted to go any place. She smeared herself against me and grasped my wilted lapels gently.

"Careful," I managed to gulp. "You'll singe my new tweed." "And who cares?"—myself wanted to know.

"Now listen, honey"—her voice was hot butter and I was her bag of popcorn—"you don't really think I could kill Johnny, do you?" If she moved any closer, she'd come through on the other side. She poured more butter over me, "Do you, honey?"

Suddenly there was a cold draft in the room. A chilly voice said very clear and cutting, "We're waiting for your answer, honey!"

The redhead oozed off me slowly and backed away, her eyes amused and satisfied. I looked at Ted. He was smirking comfortably. I looked toward the doorway. It framed my beautiful, angry wife.

I walked over to her, smiling like an over-ripe codfish. I opened my mouth to explain, but her cold eyes shut it tight.

"We're still waiting for your answer, honey," she repeated, "and what's this about that over-stuffed redhead killing Johnny?"

I grabbed the lead in a hurry. "That's why I wasn't able to get downstairs to meet you," I explained. "When I got up here, I found Johnny dead—"

"Overwork?" she asked bleakly.

"No gag," I insisted. "His head was caved in, and a bloody bronze bust of your favorite author was in the wastebasket."

She didn't change expression. She asked, "Why haven't the cops arrested the redhead yet?"

The redhead called my wife several names that are never found in smart advertisements. The blonde ignored her, kept her hard blue eyes questioning on me.

"I wanted to look the situation over before calling the cops. After all, Johnny worked for me," I faltered.

"And I'd feel better if I could catch his murderer myself—"

Her impatient look dismissed me from class. Her sleek gunmetal nylons carried her over to the desk and she reached for the telephone.

"Wait, Helen," I spoke sharply. "Let me explain the situation first. It's simple." She placed her hand on the phone, but didn't pick it up. "According to Joe, the gorilla on the elevator, only three people came up here tonight before me—Johnny, Alicia and Ted. Now"—I turned to that defiant pair—"if one or both of you will confess, we can save the agency a lot of trouble before calling the cops."

My surprising wife left the phone, walked to the doorway and said to me, "Take a walk down the hall with me." To the others, she snapped, "Keep an eye on each other, if you can stand it."

Ted frowned, then shrugged his shoulders and sat down. Alicia opened her red lips, decided not to spit. She swiveled her hips over the edge of her desk and reached way over for a cigarette, exposing a generous stretch of thigh.

My watchful blonde pulled me away from the door roughly. We walked down the hall. I followed her silently as we passed Johnny's office and stopped at a door to the right. She pointed to the door and said, "Go in there."

The door was marked, "Ladies."

"Why should I go in there?" I asked reasonably.

She said, "You claimed that no one came up here tonight except your cozy little group. But there's someone in that room. I was in there before, stopped there before I found the redhead making love to your lapels. I'm sure I heard somebody else." She paused, "Now go in like a big, strong man and see who it is."

"I can't go in," I protested. "All my years of training won't let me."

"Somebody's hiding in there," she retorted, pushing her red nails into my chest and forcing me against the door.

"It's probably the murderer. Go get 'em."

"If I go into a Ladies' Room," I stalled, "what will people say? My clients would take all their accounts away."

"You're afraid," my loving wife taunted. "Afraid to push open a little door and face a bloodthirsty murderer."

"I'm not afraid," I assured her. "I'm terrified! Besides, walking in there might leave me with a complex for life. What little life I have left," I added doubtfully.

"Listen, you muskrat," insisted my affectionate blonde. "Either you face whoever it is in there or me!"

Why, I asked myself hopelessly, did I have to get into this? All part of the peaceful, prosaic advertising business. "Join advertising and see the whirl," I muttered. Why couldn't I have taken up some less dangerous way of making a living. Like being a deep-sea diver and plunging 10,000 leagues under the sea.

"I'm right behind you," my persistent wife hissed.

"How about me being right behind you?" I almost answered. But it didn't seem exactly the manly thing to say.

"If you don't hurry," said my determined blonde, pressing me unpleasantly against the door, "whoever is in there will die of a horrible old age."

I don't know whether I pushed or was shoved, but suddenly I found myself floundering into the room where man feared to tread.

Something or somebody was trying to hide in the corner at the end of a row of sinks. It wasn't a saber-toothed tiger. It wasn't a three-tusked elephant. It was just a little, trembly brunette quivering against the wall. She didn't even have a sawed-off shotgun in her hands.

"Pardon me," I yipped brightly.

My blonde pressed the sharp heel of her shoe against my instep. I was practically spiked to the floor.

I said to the brunette, "This is Mrs. Clark, my wife."

The small well-shaped bundle didn't say anything. She stared at both of us.

I cleared my throat, "You look familiar to me."

"Who doesn't?" cracked my jealous wife.

I looked the brunette over carefully. I had seen her before, I was sure. Then I remembered. I looked her over more carefully. It was a pleasure. Her dress was last year's number, but her figure would never go out of style. She was not nearly so fragile as she had first appeared. I decided she was strong enough to lift Mr. Shakespeare's bronze bust.

"You're Johnny Walker's wife, aren't you?" I asked quietly.

She nodded affirmatively, but didn't say anything. For once my imperturbable wife was surprised.

"Let's all go where we can talk," I suggested. "I'm not quite comfortable in here."

We walked out of the door marked "Ladies" and down the hall with the brunette between my wife and me. I wondered whether the corridor to the electric chair was as narrow as this.

I stopped abruptly outside Johnny's office. The brunette bumped against me and held on to keep from falling. I caught my wife's glowering eyes and let go of Mrs. Walker.

"Let's go in here," I said, taking a step inside the door.

"No! No!" the brunette screamed. She covered her face with her hands. Hysterical sobs caught in her throat. We half-carried her down to the office at the end of the hall and let her fall into a chair. Ted and Alicia stared at her. Ted was frowning. The redhead almost appeared embarrassed.

"You both know her, don't you?" I asked.

They both nodded.

"Johnny's wife," the redhead said. "Where did you find her?"

"In the Ladies' Room." I added hastily, "My wife was with me."

"How long had she been there?" I looked at the redhead respectfully.

Maybe I ought to let her write one of our mystery programs.

I echoed to the brunette, "How long have you been up on this floor, Mrs. Walker?"

Mrs. Walker was not playing on this quiz show. She kept sobbing. Maybe she meant it.

"Listen," I said bluntly, "I don't want to seem brutal, but you know Johnny's dead, murdered, don't you?"

Those racking sobs were the only answer. But her behavior outside Johnny's door—refusing to go in, getting hysterical—was the answer.

I turned to the others. "Let's figure this thing out just like we'd plan an advertising campaign."

"You'll have to do better than that," remarked my nasty wife. I was glad there were no clients around.

I continued, "All we have to do is put down motive, opportunity, the personalities involved and . . . and all that stuff," I finished lamely. There must be better ways to catch a murderer, I thought.

My rugged wife looked at me patronizingly. She quoted, "'Come what, come may, time and the hour runs through the roughest day.' That's a clue from your friend Shakespeare."

"He's no friend of mine," I muttered. But I got the idea. I couldn't help admiring my blonde. How could one woman be so beautiful and so intelligent and so granitelike?

"Obviously," I appropriated her hint, "it's all a question of time. You both"—I indicated Alicia and Ted—"agree that you were together until eight fifteen when the news program ended. Ted says he stopped on the way to the washroom and saw Johnny alive after that. How long do you claim you were with Johnny, Ted?"

"It's the truth, dammit," Ted bristled. "I was with Johnny five minutes at the most. Add five minutes for me to wash up and put on the adhesive tape in the washroom. Then I came back to Alicia."

The redhead nodded, "He wasn't

away much more than ten minutes, I'm sure."

"Ten minutes is long enough to kill at least ten men," I assured them. "What time did you make your pilgrimage down the hall, Alicia?"

"At exactly eight forty-five," she answered promptly. "We heard our Bubble-Neat commercial on the Answer Me Anything program, then I excused myself."

"That's right," Ted agreed.

"Radio is wonderful," said my sarcastic wife. "It places the murder between eight twenty-five, if Ted is telling the truth, and eight forty-five, if Alicia is telling the truth."

"That is," I chimed in, "if they didn't collaborate in the murder and are lying as a team."

This time, they collaborated enthusiastically in calling me unclean names. No respect for their boss. That was all right, I had no respect for either of them, although the redhead—

My blonde interrupted, addressing me, "If Johnny checked in at eight p.m. as you told me before, obviously he was killed some time between then and nine o'clock when you came in. Unless," she continued coolly, looking straight at me, "unless you killed him after that."

I started to reply angrily, then remarked, "A wife can't testify against her husband so wipe off that smirk." I went on, "if Mrs. Walker won't tell us when she came up"—she still had a handkerchief hiding her face—"I can find out from Joe on the elevator. That's the only way up."

I swung out to the elevator and leaned on the button. Almost immediately it started clanking up to my floor. I was too confused to be surprised by anything any more.

The door opened and Joe's ugly pan looked out at me.

"C'mere," I said, "have a smoke."

He stepped out of the elevator so we were face to face, his towering over me. I handed him my pack. He forgot to give it back after he lit up. He turned to the elevator. I grabbed his

arm; his muscles were harder than bone, my shocked fingers told me.

He turned around again, "What the hell do you want?"

"When did you bring Mrs. Walker up on the elevator?" I asked abruptly.

"Who?" he concentrated.

"Mrs. Walker. Johnny Walker's wife. The little brunette." I shaped her with my hands.

"Oh, her," he grunted intelligently. "I didn't bring her up tonight."

"You're lying!" I wanted to get a rise out of him.

I got it. He stepped forward, crushed my foot under his heavy, dusty, work shoes. The pain almost blanked me out. He pushed his face forward. I tried to turn away. His foot pinned me to the spot.

"I ain't lying!" he yelled. "I never took that dame up tonight!" I looked down at my foot. He sneered. "Oh, excuse me." He removed his heavy boot. I'd have socked him, but why should I break my hand?

I said weakly, "I found Mrs. Walker hiding up here, and the only way up is in your elevator, with the other elevator closed down. The fire door's locked, I checked it. How else could she get up?"

"Not with me." He leered. "Did she catch her husband with that hot redhead?"

"Has Mrs. Walker been here recently?" I asked. He didn't answer. I saw the cash register in his eyes. I handed him a five from my wallet.

"She was here last night," Joe finally said. "She wanted to know whether her husband worked here nights with that redhead often. I wouldn't tell her nothin'. She damn near spit at me." He smirked. "That babe has a temper, lots of fire, if you know what I mean. Not a bad little number." He winked, "I'd of talked if she asked me real nice—"

He took my pack out of his pocket and lit another cigarette. He didn't offer me one.

"So she was jealous of Johnny and

the redhead," I murmured, mostly to myself.

"Yeah," Joe agreed. "Quite a boy, that Johnny. That juicy little brunette at home. That snaky redhead in the office—" He chuckled, shaking his head. He stepped into the elevator, slammed the door and started down.

I was tired. I was thirsty. I wanted to take a bath—in Old Grand-Dad preferably. I stopped in Johnny's office. I stepped over his body, being careful not to get blood on my shoe. I kept thinking of my acute wife's obnoxious remark about the possibility of me being the murderer, wondered whether the police might think of that, too. I picked up Old Grand-Dad from the wastebasket but he was dead also, dead to the last drop. I gathered up the towel-wrapped bust of Shakespeare, stepped over quiet Johnny again and went back down the hall.

There was a lot of smoke and a lot of silence in the office. Even Mrs. Walker was quiet. Her eyes were red, but she was one of those dolls who didn't look bad even with red eyes. There aren't many. She was smoking, too.

I said to her, "Let's face it, Mrs. Walker. You're in trouble. Your husband is dead, murdered. You were here last night asking about him and Alicia." The brunette studied her cigarette. The redhead simply sat there with her motor idling. My blonde squinted at me. Ted was frowning as he concentrated on my words.

"You were jealous," I went on, "probably jealous enough to kill your husband and the redhead. Right?"

That must have been a particularly interesting cigarette the way she was studying it. I almost asked her what brand she smoked. Instead, I said, "I'm ready to call the police and tell them about you hiding up here. I'll have to tell them you showed by your reactions that you knew your husband was murdered, when I tried to walk you into his office." I ran out of breath.

She didn't answer.

I nodded to my wife. "Better call the police, Helen. It's obvious she killed her husband. She won't even tell us how or when she got up here."

The brunette took the cigarette away from her lips and startled all of us. "I'll be glad to tell you," she said quietly. "You haven't given me a chance."

"O.K.," I agreed, "now that you're under control." I didn't mention that she'd had time to think up a good story, "Let's hear your version."

She flushed. Very pretty. She took the time to cross her legs. When I looked up at her eyes, she was looking back at me.

"I must admit that I came up to surprise Johnny and that redheaded—" She didn't finish her description but looked calmly at the redhead, then back at me. We all knew what she didn't say.

The redhead burst out angrily. "Look at her lipstick, same color as on Johnny's cheek. Trust those sweet little girls, kiss 'em and kill 'em or vice versa!"

Tears bobbed into the brunette's gray eyes. "Sure, I kissed him," she admitted. "I loved him." She cried a little. Kill 'em and cry over 'em, a teaching routine, I thought.

The brunette recovered, "When I came up the elevator, I walked toward Johnny's office. I heard loud voices in there and became frightened. I ran back and hid in the Ladies' Room. I stayed there about ten or fifteen minutes getting the panic out of me, but mostly feeling cheap and angry with myself for spying on Johnny—"

Time out for a fresh wave of tears. I was too bewildered to ask any more questions at the moment. So were all the others, though my wife's chilly pan showed no emotion.

Mrs. Walker stopped the flow of tears and started with the words again. "I decided to see Johnny for a minute and apologize for acting like a jealous wife. I rapped on his door. When he didn't answer, I went in. I found him

—on the floor." She was quiet. Everybody was quiet. She went on fast, so low I strained forward to hear.

"I knew I couldn't help Johnny anymore." She talked quickly to keep from breaking down, "So I just kissed him as he lay there and left. I walked out of his office, then I heard the elevator coming up. I didn't know what to do, so I ran into the Ladies' Room again." The sobs were coming back, "I stayed there until you found me—"

"Hold it," I said in a hurry. "The elevator man swears he didn't bring you up."

She looked puzzled. "There wasn't a man in the elevator," she explained. "A woman took me up."

I slapped my forehead. I should have hit my thick skull with a bronze bust of Shakespeare. "A woman, of course," I yelped, "the cleaning woman!"

"Yes," the brunette affirmed, "she said as long as the other elevator wasn't there, the operator must be out for coffee or beer again. So she said she'd drop me at the eighth as long as she was going up to clean the floors above."

"What time was that?" I asked

"I can't say exactly," she worried, "somewhere between half past eight and nine."

I suddenly had a bright idea. A wonderful idea. I felt ten years younger. "When you got off at the eighth floor, was the other elevator there?" She didn't seem to understand. I made it clearer, "There are only two elevators. You came up in one. Was the other elevator door open at the eighth?"

"No," she replied instantly, "the other elevator was closed, just like my elevator door after the woman let me out."

"Are you sure?" I insisted, "maybe you just didn't notice."

"No," she repeated emphatically, "both elevators were closed as I started toward Johnny's office. I looked back to make sure the woman didn't come back to watch me. Both elevators were closed."

I sagged again. Gone was my bright, my wonderful idea. I felt twenty years older. My brain was as dry as my throat.

My sympathetic wife broke the silence. "Is the poor man's Dashiell Hammett all finished?" she asked.

I nodded. I was flatter than a deflated flounder.

"Then," my frosty blonde finished, "how about putting your G-man button back in the cereal box and taking me home?"

I shrugged and walked over to the door, then turned back.

"Imagine a murder with too many murderers," I moaned. "Ted had a fight with Johnny and was alone in the office with him, motive and opportunity for the murder—"

"It's clear enough," said Alicia hotly. "The two men fought over me and one's dead. That leaves Mr. X, your murderer. What are you waiting for?"

Ted scowled angrily, picked up a heavy paperweight, then put it down slowly.

"Because," I replied to the pulsating redhead, "you were also alone with Johnny around murder time. It's clear from what he told Ted that he was giving you the air. You say you found Johnny dead. That's what you say. But you also had plenty of motive—"

The redhead's lush body squirmed inside her clothes. I expected smoke to rise from her gaping neckline any moment. I watched for it. An interesting view.

"How about getting your mind out of that red-headed gutter, and going home?" That was from my understanding wife. Naturally.

"I'm not finished summing up to the jury," I replied with great dignity. "Finally, we have Johnny's wife. She admits she followed him here, jealous and angry. We find her lipstick on his cheek. We find her hidden in the Ladies' Room. She says she was hiding because she was frightened. That's what the lady says."

I sighed. I picked up the towel-wrapped bust of Shakespeare.

"William and I," I informed them, "are going down to the bar next door for a drink. If you'll phone the police first, Helen, you may join us."

"How about us?" asked the smoldering redhead.

"You three," I suggested, "will wait here for the police. Since probably only one of you is the murderer the other two can protect each other."

My obliging wife was dialing the police, so I left and rang for the elevator. When it finally arrived, I saw those smooth gunmetal nylons bringing my irritable blonde. We stepped into the elevator together.

Joe presented us with his muscled back as we started down.

"Still raining out?" I asked.

"I don't know. I ain't been out." He didn't turn around.

I asked sarcastically, "You mean you've managed to stay alive without going out for coffee since nine o'clock?"

He turned toward me slowly. He didn't look pleasant. He looked me over without answering, then showed me his back again.

I looked him over. At least two hundred pounds of muscle from head to shoes. I looked at his shoes again. The same dry, dusty shoes he was wearing when I came in. When I came in out of the heavy rain.

"Can't you make this carousel go any faster?" I asked sharply. "I have to turn this bundle over to the police downstairs."

He looked around at me again, at the bundle in my arms.

"What you got there?" he asked.

I gently pulled the towel down, showing Shakespeare's bloody bronze head.

"Somebody," I said importantly, "bumped this guy's head against Johnny Walker's skull. Johnny is dead, but Shakespeare is going to tell the cops who killed him."

Joe's ugly face was blank. "How?" he wanted to know.

"Fingerprints!" I said emphatically. "The murderer needed a good grip on this baby to handle him right. The fingerprints are practically pressed right into the bronze."

"Haw!" the gorilla laughed abruptly. "Nobody leaves fingerprints any more, they either wipe 'em off or wear gloves."

My merry blonde was eyeing us with a thoroughly bored expression.

I expanded, "This bust wasn't wiped. You can see marks all over its surface. As for gloves," I hesitated, "some gloves leave impressions that the laboratory can translate into fingerprints these days. I mean light, porous gloves." I plunged, "Like those cotton work gloves you're wearing."

The elevator stopped with a jerk that nearly cracked my ankle bones. Joe turned around and faced us both, full face.

"Wise guy," he grunted nastily, "give me that statue."

I pulled the towel over Shakespeare. "Not a chance," I answered. "Willie is going to put a murderer into the electric chair!"

Joe was breathing hard. He looked undecided.

I was in deep. What could I lose? Except my life. "How come," I asked sharply, "that your shoes are so dry, when you told me at nine o'clock that you'd been off for a half hour and gone down to the corner for a cup of coffee? It's been raining all evening."

He didn't answer. Any minute I expected him to beat his hairy arms against his bare chest. Or against my chest.

It was too late to stop now. "I figure you were up in Johnny's office trying to shake him down. You were offering not to blab to his wife about his cozy evenings here with the redhead—"

I could almost hear the cogs clicking frantically in Joe's head. I had him off-balance. I made another stab.

"When Mrs. Walker came in tonight, just about the time her husband was being murdered, she noticed by the elevator indicator that you were

stopped on the eighth floor. She waited a long time and the elevator didn't move."

Joe was grinning slyly. "The elevator indicator don't work," he said.

I kept right on trying. "The cleaning woman took her up. When she got off, she noticed your elevator waiting empty at the eighth floor."

He looked puzzled. His eyes shifted toward the elevator controls. I reached over and picked up a small strip of wood that was hanging on a string from the control lever.

"Yes, I know," I said with far more assurance than I felt. "You slipped this strip of wood between the elevator door and the wall, so the door wouldn't close and lock, while you were on the eighth floor. But it left enough space for the elevator light to shine through, so Mrs. Walker could see that the elevator was there."

I could smell his animal odor as he focused his bewildered eyes. His fists clenched and unclenched slowly. I stepped back before I continued my bluffing.

"Then Mrs. Walker went down to Johnny's office. She heard you quarreling with him, so she hid in the Ladies' Room. A few minutes later she heard the elevator door open and close. Then she found Johnny dead in his office."

"She's lying, she made it all up," he spat out. "She killed him herself."

"O.K.," I said blandly. "C'mon up and tell her so."

He didn't move. His body blocked off the elevator controls so I couldn't get to them.

My hard-boiled blonde lit a cigarette. Her hand was as steady as a grand piano.

Somebody had to say something. Shakespeare felt as heavy as a Superfort in my arms. I fired my last broadside.

"Give it up, Joe," I spoke loudly and angrily. "You said you were out in the rain while Johnny was being murdered, yet your shoes are bone dry. That's the only pair of shoes I've seen

you wear in months. I know it's the only pair you wear on the job. So, you never did go out tonight!"

The anger in my voice was getting him sore. He was breathing harder.

I raised my voice even louder, "Your elevator was on the eighth floor, you were heard quarreling with Johnny, and your fingerprints are on this statue that killed him." I pretended to lose my temper, "What the hell are you waiting for? Take us down and take your medicine from the cops, you yellow-bellied murderer!"

The sweat was heavy on his reddened face. He finally spoke, with an effort. His hands clenched and stayed clenched, his arms swinging slightly. "You ain't never going down," he growled. "You know too much, you talk too much. You ain't gonna get a chance to talk to no cops."

I could taste my own sweat. "Why'd you kill Johnny?" I nagged. "Or," I mimicked him, "ain't you talkin'?"

"It don't make no difference," he glowered, "you won't be tellin' nobody. Sure, I went up and told Walker that his wife was askin' questions about him and the redhead. I wanted to know what it was worth to keep my mouth shut about him bein' up here alone with that babe so much." He moved toward me a step. I moved back a step.

He spoke again, "Walker got sore. Said he wouldn't pay a cent. Said he'd get me fired. The cheapskate! He got loud and took a swing at me. So I picked up the statue and hit him. I didn't figure whether it would kill him or not. Looks like it did."

"Definitely!" I punctuated. "Tough luck for you."

"It's your tough luck you figured it out. Now you ain't gonna live to tell nobody."

I looked bleakly at my sweet wife. Her disinterested glance did not comfort me.

The ape-man was edging up on me slowly.

"The cops will get you," I spouted bravely.

"Not after I get rid of you in the basement," he muttered. He was forcing me back gradually. I stopped. I was wedged into the iron corner of the elevator. His big hairy hands came up, his fingers arched as if he were going to grab a basketball.

I shoved the heavy bronze bust I was holding into the hands of my adjacent wife. Then those sweating fingers were pressing into my throat. I sank down to my knees. I hoped I knew what I was doing.

He was bent over me. I was gasping hard. I dug my nails into the backs of his rocklike hands. His putrid breath was helping to asphyxiate me. The fog was closing down over me. I could almost see the old man with the scythe through the mist.

Suddenly, his fingers loosened. Two hundred pounds of Joe fell on me. I crawled out from under. I got up massaging my neck. Joe lay quietly like a dirty bundle for Britain. I looked happily at the swelling lump on his head, then at Shakespeare lying beside him on the floor.

I turned to my handy wife. I'd figured Joe wouldn't worry about a woman bothering him. But he didn't know this woman.

"Thanks," I smiled gratefully. "I knew when I handed Shakespeare to you that you'd use him well."

She barely lifted one eyebrow disdainfully. "Not my fault," she said coldly. "Shakespeare was too heavy for me to hold, so I let him drop. Just happened your playmate's head was between him and the floor."

I moved up close to my cynical blonde. Her eyes glistened like hot ice. I grabbed her fondly. She resisted, then moved in close and plastered me against her with a hammerlock. Her hard-looking lips were soft, so soft. I felt as though I were falling. I was. I was sitting on unconscious Joe, with nothing in my arms.

"What's the idea of shoving me?" I asked unhappily.

"I prefer privacy," she murmured. "Shakespeare was watching."

I looked down at Shakespeare. I swear that he winked. I winked back.

I got up and swung the elevator lever. The buzzer was throbbing angrily; I wondered how long it had been going. I bumped the elevator down to the street floor, picked up the bronze bust and pulled open the heavy door.

Two cops watched us step out, their eyes popping. I handed Shakespeare to one of them and explained, "Here's the murder weapon. The murderer is on the floor of the elevator. The victim is on the eighth floor. So are three suspects. Please tell them to come down to the bar next door for a bunch of drinks on me."

I walked out casually. It was still raining. Radio police cars were

screaming toward our building. I stepped into the bar next door.

My tasty blonde was already relaxing on a bar stool. I settled next to her.

"Since when do cotton gloves leave fingerprints?" she asked.

"I don't know," I answered blithely. "Maybe they do. Maybe they don't. Someday I'll ask somebody. Those dry shoes—that's what bothered me as soon as I entered the elevator tonight for the first time."

I gave my attention to the smiling bartender.

"We need service in a hurry, Joe. Sustained service. Start with two double-shots of Old Grand-Dad."

There was a commotion at the door as one of the cops burst in.

I sighed, "Better make it three."

THE END.

Statement of the Ownership, Management, etc., required by the Acts of Congress of August 24, 1912, and March 3, 1933, of Street & Smith's Detective Story Magazine, published quarterly, at Elizabeth, N. J., for October 1, 1948.

State of New York, County of New York (ss.)

Before me, a Notary Public, in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared H. W. Ralston, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is Vice President of Street & Smith Publications, Inc., publishers of Street & Smith's Detective Story Magazine, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 637, Postal Laws and Regulations, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publishers, Street & Smith Publications, Inc., 123 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; editor, Daisy Bacon, 123 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; managing editors, none; business managers, none.

2. That the owners are: Street & Smith Publications, Inc., 123 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y., a corporation owned through stock holdings by Gerald H. Smith, 122 East 42nd Street,

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3. That the known bondholders, mortgages, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages or other securities are: None.

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H. W. RALSTON, Vice President,
Of Street & Smith Publications, Inc., Publishers.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 30th day of September, 1948. Edward F. Kaszira, Notary Public No. 497, New York County. (My commission expires March 30, 1949.)

the Stand-in is out

BY ROBERT
ERNEST
GILBERT



"Hello," my visitor grinned. "I'm going to kill you."
A swell way for a private dick's day to start off!

"HELLO," he grinned. "I've come to kill you."

I blotted a check for the office rent, two months overdue. "Some other time," I suggested. "I'm not in the market for bullets today."

The boy's grin broadened into a smile high-lighted by big yellow teeth.

He was small and not over sixteen. His Colt .45 automatic pointed precisely at my pounding heart. "First, I gotta make sure you're the right one," he went on.

I agreed. "That seems like the logical way to do it, but I'm not the man you're looking for, no matter who he is."

"Oh, yeah, you are, too. It says 'Brutus Kilgore' on the door. That's the right name." The boy's wiggling ears were like sugarbowl handles. He continued, "Pap give me a good description. He tole me you had yaller hair. Your hair don't look so very yaller."

"Sorry. I used all the peroxide last week." I hooked the toe of my saddle oxford under the handle of the bottom desk drawer.

"Pap said you was squint-eyed. That checks." Too wary to let me reach his gun, he leaned against the closet door ten feet from my desk.

"I know," I nodded. "I'm too vain to wear glasses." The drawer slid silently with my slowly moving foot.

"Pap said you was medium-sized and a smart Alec. You're Brutus Kilgore all right." The boy extended his arm and carefully sighted, at last convincing me that I was about to become extinct.

"Now wait," I objected. "Suppose I am Brutus Kilgore. Why do you want to kill me?"

"You killed pap."

"Hm-m-m. I don't recall knocking anyone off lately." The desk drawer squeaked, but the boy seemed not to

hear. In the crack the walnut grips of my revolver appeared.

"It was when you was a deputy sheriff," my visitor informed me. "You sent my pap, John B. Polk, up for moonshinin'. He croaked with double pneumonia in the pen. You same as killed him. He tole me to git you."

"Oh, him." I remembered John B. Polk. I sat on his still for two days before he gave me a chance to arrest him.

"What are you doin' with that drawer?" John B.'s boy stood on his toes, trying to see over the desk.

Billy the Kid could not have equaled the speed with which I pulled my gun, and I was using a drawer instead of a holster. I pressed the trigger once while sliding under the desk. Oddly enough, I hit him. Polk yelped like a kicked dog. His shot echoed mine. The heavy bullet rocked the desk.

I peered from my impromptu fort. He was trying to raise his arm for another shot. Taking time to aim, I fired at his gun hand. Naturally, I missed and ventilated the door.

Polk ran into the hall. I crawled from under the desk and followed three splotches of blood down the stairs. When I reached the street, Polk had escaped.

A woman shrieked and juggled her shopping bag. Saluting with the young cannon in my hand, I apologized, "Excuse me. I thought I was at the shooting gallery." I returned to the second floor.

Mr. M. V. Bullard, the building superintendent, was angrily fingering the hole in my door. When he saw me, he stretched his thin body to such a height that I did not bother to look above his purple bowtie. Waving scarecrow arms encased in a white Palm Beach suit, Bullard exclaimed, "Mr. Kilgore! I don't know what was wrong with my head when I rented an office to a private detective, but this must stop! You insist on chasing up and down the stairs disturbing people. This time I distinctly heard

shooting. Dr. Levine was so startled he drilled a patient's gums!"

I entered my office and took the check from my desk. Bullard trailed me, still gibbering. "Also, Mr. Kilgore, there's the small matter of the rent. You haven't—"

"Here, Scrooge," I interposed. "This check's for June. I know I owe for July, and for August in advance, but you'll get it. I'm working on a big case. Just now I've got to disturb your other tenants with some champions of law and order. A kid tried to empty a .45 into me."

Bullard's expression, as he deposited the check in his expansive wallet and left my office, indicated that it was a pity the kid had missed. If Abraham Lincoln had been clean shaven and bald, he would have physically resembled Bullard.

I called the police and told them my woes. Fifteen minutes later, a young policeman from a patrol car came upstairs and scribbled an abridged version of my story in his notebook. Trying to be helpful and co-operative, I dug the bullet out of my desk and told the officer to show it to the ballistics expert. He took the battered slug and marched out, leaving me with the uneasy feeling that he did not know the meaning of ballistics. By then it was time for lunch.

I stepped into the entryway of Vandergrift's Hardware and checked my fast watch with the small clock over the door, before crossing the street to the Corner Restaurant. Inside, George D. McIntosh, head of the McIntosh Construction Co., called to me from a long table already occupied by four people. "Come and eat with us, Mr. Kilgore. Lots of room."

His friendliness surprised me, for I knew him only slightly. Plump, gray-haired, and wearing the ugliest spectacles in town, McIntosh waved a fat hand at his companions. "Do you know these people, Mr. Kilgore?"

"Mr. West tried to sell me a suit once." I nodded at the manager of

the Men's Shop, Roger West, a near midget correctly attired in a tight, tan rayon suit.

The other two people were strangers. First and most vivid, the girl, who was inclined to stoutness, wore a white sharkskin dress that contrasted with her dark tan. Her black hair was neatly rolled around her head on a rat. A bag, the size of a compact, lay beside her plate. McIntosh introduced us. "Miss Flemming, Mr. Kilgore."

"Hello."

"How do you do?"

At the end of the table sat a man perhaps four years younger than I. A horrible sports shirt, covered with red palm trees and yellow flying fish, exposed his extraordinary biceps. His lower lip extended beyond his flat nose. "Mr. Kilgore, Mr. Tice, my construction boss."

Tice inclined his head toward his split pea soup without looking at me. Always happy to increase my prestige by being seen with prominent people, I slipped into a chair and ordered a frugal lunch. Despite my boast to Bullard of a big case, I had four dollars in my pocket. The rent check had left my bank account with a balance of ten dollars and eight cents.

As the meal progressed, I discovered a peculiar tension among the people at the table. Tice spoke to no one. Miss Flemming and West talked only to each other in low tones indicating romance. McIntosh confined his attention to the bony pork chops on his plate. I suspected that I had been called in to relieve the tension. Having nothing better to discuss, I told them of my contact with the Polk boy and his automatic. Miss Flemming made a longer comment than any of the others. She said, "My, how thrilling."

When our friendly little group disbanded, Tice took a brief case from the floor and followed Miss Flemming and West down Mason Street in the direction of Lee Avenue. Mr. Bullard snubbed me on his way out, showing his appreciation for the rent check. On the sidewalk, in the sweltering

August heat, McIntosh took my arm and said, "Mr. Kilgore, I'd like to go to your office with you. May want to hire you. Busy?"

"Not at the moment. Come along." We crossed Mason Street, at the intersection, then Tecumser Street and turned left.

"My company has cheated people out of five thousand dollars," McIntosh confided. "I thought maybe you could help me."

I was about to tell him he needed a lawyer, not a detective. We had reached the door to the stairs. A bullet sang past my ear. I heard the shot and dropped flat on the walk.

"They both fell down," someone chuckled.

"What's the matter with them?"

I raised my head and observed assorted shoes and legs belonging to the little crowd that had formed immediately. I touched McIntosh on the shoulder. "Let's get upstairs."

McIntosh did not move. He would never move again under his own power. He had a bullet hole in his temple. His ugly glasses were scattered over the concrete.

A half hour later in my office, Chief of Police Lunsford declared, "The best guess is that the Polk kid took another shot at you and hit McIntosh." He had a voice like a bullfrog and took no steps to modulate the tone. "The county sheriff is on his way to John D. Polk's old home now, to see if he can dig up anything. We'll check the bullet from McIntosh's body with the one shot at you this morning. Then we'll have the Polk kid."

"Suppose the bullets don't match?"

Chief Lunsford removed his cap and mopped the perspiration from his bald forehead with a handkerchief. "I'm sure they will. They've got to. We just don't have mysterious murders in this town. It's too small. Most of the killings are out in the sticks. Some farmer breaks a ax over his wife's head with all the county for witnesses."

"I seem to recall a couple of murders in town that were shady."

The chief frowned. "That's different. Those were things you were mixed up in. You keep out of this, and we'll have the Polk kid by this time tomorrow. You might even take a vacation to be safe."

"Can't afford it. Besides, I like it here. There's never a dull moment."

"I can't spare one of the boys to guard you, so watch yourself." Lunsford departed.

Unloading my Smith and Wesson .32, I scrubbed the bore with a rag soaked in powder solvent. Lunsford had discarded my story of the strained dinner in the Corner Restaurant as silly, but it seemed to me that it was worthy of investigation. If someone had wanted to murder George McIntosh, he had been presented with a splendid opportunity by way of me and my big mouth. He could have acted as a stand-in for Polk and have shot McIntosh while seeming to be shooting at me.

I reloaded the revolver and thrust it into the waistband of my trousers. Excluding the police, I had told my story to the four people in the restaurant. Three people, Tice, Roger West, and Miss Flemming, could have used my misfortunes as a plan for murder.

The bookkeeper, secretary, junior draftsman, et cetera, of the McIntosh Construction Co. was Eliza Creek, an old maid, or, to be kinder and more modern, a career girl. I knew Eliza well. A legend says she washed my dainty underthings during my first two weeks of babyhood.

When I entered the construction company office, Eliza was wiping her red eyes with a soaked handkerchief, hunched over one of the extras that the *Inquirer* had lost no time in putting on the streets. The murder of George D. McIntosh was the biggest news since V-J Day.

"Why don't you go home and rest?" I asked.

Eliza raised her head, put on her

glasses, and said, "Oh, it's you, Brutus. Isn't it terrible? Mr. Tice told me to close up, but there were some prints that had to be ready in the morning, and I suppose business has to go on." She realized that the black line print machine was still in operation and rose to switch it off. "I suppose you feel bad, too, it being your fault and all. You really should have told Mr. McIntosh someone was going to shoot at you."

I did not argue with her. "The police are working on another idea," I said. "Chief Lunsford asked me to help. I'm talking with the people who had lunch with McIntosh today, and any close friends. Lunsford thinks there's a possibility that Polk didn't do the shooting."

Eliza brushed off a drafting table and covered it with black oilcloth. "But that couldn't be. No one would deliberately shoot Mr. McIntosh. It says in the paper that a warrant has been issued to arrest that awful Polk boy."

"Routine police strategy," I assured her. "McIntosh was worried. He wanted to hire me. He said this company had cheated people to the tune of five thousand bucks. What did that mean?"

"Oh," breathed Eliza. Her face, like a dried apple with graying hair, paled. "I know, but I don't think I should tell you. That awful Polk boy couldn't have had anything to do with that. It was Mr. Tice."

"What was Mr. Tice?"

"I mustn't tell."

"You know you can tell me anything, Eliza. If I think the police shouldn't hear it, I won't tell them. I may get into trouble, but I'll risk that for you." I smiled sadly.

Eliza made a queer motion with her right hand. I think she was adjusting her teeth. "Well, if you'll keep it a secret. Clarence Tice buys all our material. Mr. McIntosh caught Mr. Tice working on some bills. He tried to hide them, but Mr. McIntosh got

one, and that's how we learned what Mr. Tice has been doing."

Eliza stuffed some black line prints into a folder and covered the typewriter. "What has Clarence Tice been doing?" I prompted.

"Well, it was mostly on little things. He'd buy a fifteen dollar door and list it at twenty dollars. The customer paid for it, and Mr. Tice put the difference in his pocket. You see?"

I nodded.

"Then Mr. Tice did the most awful thing," Eliza continued. "He burned those bills in the wastebasket and actually struck Mr. McIntosh when he tried to stop him! Then he said he'd made five thousand dollars, but Mr. McIntosh couldn't prove it. They had an awful fuss, and Mr. McIntosh said he'd find some way to settle it. But I don't see how he could have exposed Mr. Tice. It would ruin our business."

"When did this happen?"

"This morning. See, there are the burned papers in the wastebasket."

An occasional word or figure could be distinguished on the charred paper. "Can you lock this up, Eliza?" I asked. "Tice may think he's destroyed this stuff, but he hasn't. An expert can put them back together. Then we'll have them if we need them. I'll have to check some other things first."

"Surely you don't think—" Eliza faltered.

"Not very often," I agreed, "but Clarence Tice seems to be a moderately sinister character."

"Well, he is blood-thirsty at times," Eliza admitted. "He talks about those soldiers he shot in the war like he enjoyed it. Over there's a picture of him in uniform."

I examined the framed photograph hanging on the wall above a filing cabinet. Tice, in sun tans and a G.I. haircut, had his chest decorated with several ribbons and an expert badge for pistol and machine gun.

"Eliza, do you know a chubby black-headed girl named Flemming?"

"No, I don't."

"I'll have to see Roger West, then. Thanks for the help, Eliza. Be careful."

I would not have entered the Men's Shop on Commercial Avenue to buy something, except under torture. The store featured twenty-dollar sports shirts. No one in town was wealthy enough to pay cash for their suits. Roger West, with his coat removed and a yellow tape measure draped around his neck, greeted me gravely. "Hello, Mr. Kilgore. Too bad about McIntosh, wasn't it? May I show you something?" He studied my baggy tropical worsted with incredulity. "Could I show you a suit?"

"Not today. Do you have a private office? This is about the McIntosh business."

West ushered me into a room that was fitting for a man of his small size. I repeated the unlikely story that Chief Lunsford had sent me to investigate, and West accepted it. "What was wrong at lunch today?" I asked.

"Wrong?"

"Uh-huh. You people didn't get along. I did most of the talking. When somebody listens to me during dinner speeches, there has to be something wrong."

West twirled his tape measure and laughed nervously. "I think the luncheon was more surprising than wrong. I was seated with Miss Flemming." West colored delicately. I reflected that he would make an excellent hen-pecked husband. "Mr. McIntosh and the fellow with him—Trice, or something—came in, and they were both mad and arguing. McIntosh came over and shook hands with me, and I was surprised. I hadn't seen him in six months, and I never was well acquainted with him. I had the feeling that he sat with us so he wouldn't have to be alone with Tisk, or whoever he was."

I shook my head wisely. "Tice walked down Mason Street with you and your girl friend after lunch. What happened?"

"Nothing. He didn't say a word, and neither did we. He turned right on Lee Avenue, and we turned left."

"Thanks, Mr. West."

"But, Mr. Kilgore," said West, as if he did not want to appear doubtful of a detective, "I thought that boy did it. Iris and I can't be under suspicion."

"You aren't." I whispered confidentially in his ear. "I'll bet Lunsford gave me this job to keep me out of trouble until they catch the Polk boy."

Readjusting my voice, I inquired, "Where could I find Iris Flemming?"

Again West blushed. "She's cashier at Welles' drugstore."

"Thanks."

Frowning in despair at a frail man examining hand painted swimming trunks, I went from the air conditioning into the August heat. I turned the corner and entered Welles' drugstore.

On a small stool behind a counter of cigars and candy, sat Iris Flemming, stuffed into the white sharkskin dress. She lifted her plump dimpled elbow from the cash register and smiled. I gave her a tooth for a tooth. "Miss Flemming, I wondered if—"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Kilgore!" she squealed. "I'm all dated up until next Tuesday."

"Uh-yes. I wanted to ask you about Mr. McIntosh."

"Who?" She was disappointed.

"McIntosh. George D. McIntosh, the man you had lunch with."

"I had lunch with Roger." Miss Flemming took a check from an old lady, who had, it said there, eaten two chocolate sundaes.

"I know you did. I'm talking about the other man." I fear I showed signs of impatience.

"You mean that ugly boy in the loud shirt?"

"No. The fat man with glasses. He's dead."

"Did he have a car wreck? Who was he?"

"I surrender, dear," I sighed. "What I actually wanted to discuss with you was one of these delicious lollipops." I dropped a penny into the tray, se-

lected a sickly green lollipop, and walked unsteadily to the street.

For purposes of revenge, I used the pay telephone in the Federal drugstore to call Chief Lunsford. "We'll have him soon," Lunsford bellowed. I probably could have heard him without the telephone. "The sheriff located his mother in a shack on Hayne Mountain. She says the kid's name is Willie, and he came home this afternoon with a hole in his arm. She dressed it, but she says she don't know where he is now. You better take care of yourself, Kilgore."

"What about the bullets?"

"They haven't been checked. Francisco's off today, and we haven't located him yet. They look alike under a magnifying glass."

"Don't take any wooden night sticks, chief." I put the receiver on the hook and leafed through the directory, which said Clarence Tice resided on Sunhill Drive. Greedily licking my lollipop, I walked back to Commercial Avenue and drove away in my coupé.

The city limits ran through the middle of Sunhill Drive. Tice's house, a small shingled building, was a pleasant relief from the uniform, brick housing project dwellings. I lifted the knocker. For some strange reason, chimes rang.

Tice stuck his flat nose through a crack between the door and the jamb. He opened the door. I liked the inside of the house even better than the outside. It was one big room with a kitchen unit behind folding doors and a bed built into the wall.

"Bachelor cottage," I presumed. "Did you design it?"

"Yeah. What's eating you?"

"Acid poisoning. Too many tomatoes." Tice had decorated his home with war souvenirs. A German machine pistol hung over the mantle and an Italian carbine over the door. I reclined on the built-in bed. "I've had a hard day at the office," I complained. "Chief Lunsford sent me out to question the people who had lunch

with McIntosh. That finally brought me to you."

"You're a liar," accused Tice, telling the exact truth. "Lunsford talked to me before I came home. He said some guy, the one you told us about, tried to shoot you and hit Mac instead. He didn't send you out here."

Slipping off my saddle oxfords, I swung my feet onto the bed and purred with contentment. "I wish you'd go away and let me sleep, but I have to talk to you. What you said is all too true. Maybe I am sticking my nose in the wrong places, but when the first client I've had in a month gets bumped off, I go stark raving mad. Besides, he was Eliza Creek's pride and joy. Lunsford will probably be back when I tell him about your crimes at the McIntosh Construction Co. Embezzlement, I guess you'd call it."

"That damned old maid told you a pack of lies. If you think you can measure me up for a murder—"

"Temper, temper," I cautioned. "I didn't mention murder, but now that you've suggested it, you have the only motive I can find." Reluctantly, I wiggled my feet into my shoes and went over to a desk surrounded by half empty bookcases. "I also wonder what you did with the money. Paid for this house maybe?"

"You can't prove a thing. You're talking to hear your brains rattle," Tice observed. "Keep out of that desk."

Ignoring him and his big biceps, I leisurely opened all the drawers and flipped through their contents. I found a brown envelope from the bank and shook a stack of canceled checks from it. Tice moved toward me. "Why can't I prove anything?" I asked. Tice took the checks from my hands. He failed to see the one I crumpled in my fist.

"You can't prove a thing because I was with somebody all the way from the restaurant to the office." Tice threw the checks into the beautiful limestone fireplace and ignited them with an olive drab cigarette lighter.

With the same flame, he lighted a cigarette and blew smoke in my face. "I walked to Lee Avenue with West and that Flemming broad," Tice explained. "Then I met Al Gatti and Fred Barton after I crossed the street. Al was with me all the way to the office. I left the restaurant at twelve-forty. I noticed the clock on Vandergift's hardware store. It was ten to one when I got to the office. That doesn't leave me much time to run around shooting people. That's my story. Now you can beat it."

"Very well spoken, young man," I congratulated him. "I kept one of your checks. Twenty-five hundred bucks. What gets me is it's made out to M. V. Bullard, my dear landlord! That man loves me like a brother, only I don't think he ever had any brothers."

Tice snatched the canceled check and shoved me, unresisting, through the door. I turned the coupé in his driveway and headed for the business district.

Driving slowly through the five o'clock traffic, I sorted my information. Roger West or Iris Flemming could not have done it, I decided. Neither of them seemed overly intelligent, nor did they know George McIntosh well enough to kill him. If one of the three people to whom I had told the story of the attempt on my life by Willie Polk had used that attempt as a blind for killing McIntosh, it had to be Clarence Tice; but Tice had an alibi.

The A-Model ahead stopped for a light. The enormity of the thought that occurred to me kept me from noticing. My front bumper crashed against the rear of the car, sending it forward two yards. A big man in coveralls climbed out. He looked at his dented bumper. Then he walked to my open window and opened his mouth, perhaps to revile me with foul language.

"You know what?" I exclaimed. "I told that story to five people!" Luckily the man stepped back. I twisted the coupé around his car, under the

changing lights. A policeman blew his whistle, but I, happy with my knowledge that Mr. Bullard might be a murderer, mistook it for music.

Making no effort to conceal the revolver under my belt, I swaggered down the three steps to Bullard's office. Bullard's purple bowtie wobbled drunkenly on his Abe Lincoln Adam's apple.

"Mr. Bullard," I began, "what do you think of blackmail? If you knew of a person involved in embezzlement, would you ask him to give you part of his earnings to avoid exposure? Would you also murder another man who knew of the embezzlement, and perhaps the blackmail, to keep him from telling? Would you use the knowledge of an attempt on a private investigator's life to hide your own crime, which you conceived on seeing the investigator and the doomed man together in a restaurant?"

Bullard turned silently to his desk and wrote rapidly with a gold pen. He handed the paper to me and said, "This is not a confession, as you hoped. It's a thirty-day notice to vacate that office upstairs!" Bullard stood up and waved his long arms. "I've had enough, Mr. Kilgore! I've let you get away with ruining the reputation of this building, but this is enough! I can't make out what you're blabbing about, but I think you're accusing me of having something to do with that man who was shot this afternoon. You don't need to wait thirty days, and it'll be dandy with me. If you don't pay that two months' rent, I'll sue you for it! Now get out of here!"

"I'm thrown out of all the nicest places," I said. "How do you explain that check for twenty-five hundred bucks that Clarence Tice gave you?"

"I sold him my car!" snarled Bullard. "When that man was killed, I was in this very chair. I have a witness. I don't have time to carry a gun and shoot people! The deadliest weapon I ever used was a pea shooter.

I was born too soon for rubber guns. Get away before I choke!"

"Thanks, Mr. Bullard." I climbed up to the street, muttering, "Time to carry a gun." I decided that I had reached the summit of my brilliant career and was slipping fast.

I walked down Tecumseh Street and turned into Mason. I paused and stared at the clock over the door of Vandergift's hardware. I climbed the stairs to the second floor of the building. A window at the end of the gloomy hall presented an unobstructed view of the doorway where McIntosh died. I snapped on my pencil flashlight. The beam glinted on a tarnished metal cylinder, an empty .45 shell. With the shell in my pocket, I ran down the stairs to my car.

Clarence Tice's door was locked. I discovered him on his knees, struggling with the straps of a bulging suitcase. "Fixing to leave," I deduced. "How long did you think you could get away with murder?"

He moved too fast for me. His fist, coming up from the floor, caught me under the chin. I rolled my head away, or I would have been knocked out. I fell full length on the floor. The vibration of the house toppled a souvenir 20mm. shell from the mantle.

Tice bent over me. "Get up," he said, "and I'll do it again."

I was forced to use a trick known as the somersault throw. Grasping Tice by the collar of his bright shirt, I placed my right foot against his stomach, pulled with my arms, and lifted with my leg. Tice flew over my head and crashed flat on his back on the floor behind me. According to the book, I should have turned a flip onto his stomach and throttled him, but I felt too bad.

Rubbing my bruised chin, I sat on the bed and pointed my revolver at the groaning Tice. "Stay right there. I want to chew some fat with you. That big alibi you cooked up nearly threw me for a few minutes, but you could have easily turned up Mason Street, after crossing at the corner, and

shot McIntosh. Then you came back and met the boys who walked to your office with you. I know you were on that side of the street. You said you looked at the clock on Vandergift's hardware store. You can't see that clock from the side of the street the restaurant is on. It's too small and back under the porch.

"Another small item is that you were the only person at that dinner table who could have been carrying a gun, besides me. Iris Flemming didn't have enough room in that dress for herself, much less a gun. No room in her bag, either. Roger West's suit fitted him like a rubber glove. You had a brief case, probably full of guns and brass knucks. You're a good shot. You made expert in the army."

Tice opened one eye. "I'll admit this to you, snoop, but if you ever see me in court, I'll swear I never told you. I didn't have a gun in the brief case, but I did go past the hardware store. I wanted to eavesdrop on what Mac said to you. I didn't kill him. I heard the shot when I was in front of the store. A kid with big ears and a stiff right arm nearly ran over me coming down the stairs. It must have been Polk.

"There's something else you don't know, Kilgore. I called your loud-mouthed chief of police to let him know you'd been snooping. He tells me he's been looking all over for you. They put those two slugs under a comparison microscope, and guess what they found?"

"I know. The bullets were covered with germs."

Tice crawled into a chair and laughed. "No. They were both fired from the same gun. Willie Polk's gun."

I whirled my revolver around my index finger and then scratched my head with the barrel. "If that's true, I'll go to Brazil and become an Amazon. Better yet, I'll go to Switzerland and become a St. Bernard."

"A popcorn stand would be more your speed," sneered Tice. "You're

the best detective I ever heard of. You've got a guy with a motive. He's already tried to shoot you once, but you're too dumb to figure that he tried again."

I put my revolver on the desk and picked up the telephone. "Number please?" begged the operator.

Willie Polk climbed in through the window, when it would have been more polite to use the door. "Put down that gimmick," he commanded. His smiling young face had been superceded by a haggard feverish mask. A white sling held his right arm against his chest. The knees of his trousers were green with grass stain. "I hit the wrong feller at dinner time," said Polk, "but this time I'm gonna kill you."

"When does the next bus leave for Switzerland?" I asked the operator and hung up.

The .45 automatic in Polk's left hand belched a noisy whisp of smoke. My revolver jumped from the table with the walnut grips splintered. A piece of the trigger guard grazed my ear.

"I paid fifty dollars for that gun, second-hand," I objected. "Now look at it."

Willie Polk crowned Tice with the barrel of the automatic. Tice crumpled wearily and slid from his chair. "Git out to your rattle trap," ordered Polk. "I'm gonna take you out in the woods and tie you to a tree. I won't miss this time."

He refused to come close to me until we were in the coupé. "You drive," he directed. "Go down to the circle and turn out the highway."

I started the car. "You don't want to do this, kid," I reasoned. "They'll finally catch you, and you're too young to fry in the chair. Your mother wouldn't like it at all."

"Shut up and keep drivin'." We rounded the traffic circle. The sun was setting in a clear sky.

"Why don't we go down to the station and talk to them? I think we could get you off with involuntary

manslaughter. There's too many kids like you running hog wild. Did you know that a large percent of the crimes in this country are committed by teen-age boys?"

"Shut up. Quit the preaching."

"You ought to see a doctor about that arm."

"Shut up."

"This is your last chance, Willie. If you don't give me that gun, I'll wreck the car and kill us both." I eased my foot off the accelerator.

"You ain't got the guts to."

I unlocked the door with my elbow, aimed the coupé down a bank at a telephone pole, and jumped out. I struck the soft dirt on my left side. An explosion blasted me with noise and light. I felt myself rolling and had the sensation that a broken telephone pole, dangling from the wires, was swinging over my head like a pendulum.

Opening my eyes, I saw an angel. She had hair of spun gold and was dressed in white. "Heaven," I whispered. "I never thought I'd make it."

"Don't stay too long or excite him," murmured the angel. The ethereal creature was replaced by a more earthly vision of the dried-apple face of Eliza Creek. I realized that the

angel was a nurse and that I was in a hospital.

"What's wrong with me?" I gasped.

"You have three broken ribs, a broken arm, and a fractured skull," said Eliza. "Aside from that, you're all right."

"I feel fine. What happened to Willie Polk?"

"That awful boy burned up in your car."

"Tice?"

"He left town, but he deeded his house to the company to make up for the money he took. We didn't prosecute him. Mrs. McIntosh is letting me run the business now. Here's something for you." Eliza handed me a check for two hundred dollars. "I thought you should have it, Brutus, even if it was your fault that awful boy shot Mr. McIntosh. You made up for it by catching him."

"I can't accept this," I protested trying to find a place to hide the check. "You shouldn't have done it."

"You better go now," the angel whispered. "He must not be excited."

"I'm all right, angel."

I was all right until I started remembering that I had no automobile insurance and owed two months' rent, and until I saw the hospital bill. Then I had a relapse.

THE END.





a Matter of procedure

BY HAROLD F. SORENSEN

A homicide detective, on vacation, proves that neither time nor place have anything to do with his powers of detecting —

TRAVEL so disagreed with Mowitzky that when he grumbled a wish to stay on at the Rose and Crown Inn in Upswich, his wife sensibly threw away the guide books and dedicated herself to her knitting.

He became acquainted with the constable the first day, and he knew the whole small force the next, including Martle, who was in charge. They were standoffish, though, until Mowitzky divulged that he was a homicide detective, when at home, in a city of half a million population. That set everything right.

Martle had a large bald head, a gray mustache, and a small office crowded with records. He had plenty to do, but

he put in a long day, and there were dead spots in it. Mowitzky taught him gin rummy and, thereafter, Martle would treat to beer one night with what he had won from Mowitzky, and the next night Mowitzky would treat with what he had not lost to Martle. This was the best arrangement because, as Mowitzky noted upon arrival, no one in Upswich had the money to be treating. Just as Martle was getting the knack of the game, a local crime demanded his attention.

Douglas Saybrooke wanted to marry Rose Cantwell. A widower who'd had two wives and buried them, William Boucher told Rose's father that Saybrooke was no catch at all for the girl,

and indicated that he would marry her himself. Telling Cantwell to impress his girl with the advantages of this offer, Boucher said he would return on Thursday night for his answer. Thursday night, while crossing the fields to Cantwell's, Boucher was shot dead. Saybrooke was in jail and there he was likely to stay.

With matters matured to this degree, Martle was in a position to resume gin rummy. Only he couldn't keep his mind on the game. Martle was accustomed, once he had bagged a man and made a case against him, to having the criminal confess or at least shut up until he came to trial. Saybrooke did neither; he continued to declare himself innocent. As if he wanted Mowitsky to understand how unreasonable the prisoner was, Martle recited the facts.

Saybrooke had been of more than half a mind to kill Boucher Thursday night, as was indicated by the fact that he carried his shotgun. He had realized how wrong murder would be, though, and, feeling a revulsion for the gun, he stood it against a tree and went walking in the moonlight, seeking peace of mind and spirit. He did not know how long he walked, but when he returned for his gun it was not against the tree. Suddenly, he heard the gun fired nearby and rushed in that direction. Racing along the path, he tripped and fell. While he was struggling to get up, his hand encountered his gun. Next, he discovered it was the body of Boucher he had fallen over. Then Saybrooke ran home. After a few minutes he went out again, without the gun, to think over what he ought to do.

How likely sounding a story was that! Martle asked Mowitsky. To make matters tighter, they had old Dombey. He heard the shot and saw Saybrooke, easily identified by his hobble, running in the moonlight and lugging his shotgun. A minute later Dombey came upon the corpse.

Dombey went home, because that was where he had been going, and only

later and grudgingly bothered to report the murder to the police. He received a proper dressing-down, Martle assured Mowitsky, for the delay. Martle himself went to Saybrooke's farm. The gun was in the house, both barrels discharged. Matthew Gaundel, who was living with Saybrooke, was routed out of bed, but he knew nothing. Martle was about to order an alarm broadcast for Saybrooke, when the suspect returned home.

Boucher was dead, having received the full discharge of a shell from Saybrooke's gun in the side of the chest. Saybrooke was in jail, and with a case like that against him, what sort of sense did it make for him to talk about his innocence till everybody was sick of listening?

"What's Saybrooke like?" Mowitsky asked.

"He's about thirty," Martle replied, "and lately out of the army with a bad leg from wounds received. His mother was killed by a bomb during the war. His father had been in poor health for a long time, and died recently."

That left Saybrooke alone on his bit of a farm and loneliness drove him to redouble his efforts to gain Cantwell's consent to his marriage to Rose. Matters were so, when Boucher bid for Rose. Though Boucher was a man without friends, he had no enemies. There was no reason to kill him, except perhaps over Rose, and no one to kill him because of her, except Saybrooke.

Now, instead of selling the farm and getting himself a lawyer with the money, as he well might do if he were as innocent as he said he was, Saybrooke insisted that he'd be out to work the farm and to marry Rose if there were any justice left in the country.

Mowitsky agreed with Martle that if Saybrooke were innocent, then someone has been up to some unlikely and unusually skillful skulduggery.

"I'd like to ask Saybrooke a few

questions," Mowitsky murmured, slipping into a professional mood.

Worry lifted from Martle's face. He smiled, and his smile spread as ripples do on water. When he could smile no broader, he broke into a laugh.

"Aye, I'll stand bail you would," he guffawed. "But it wouldn't do, you know. They wouldn't go for that sort of thing here at all, just wouldn't stand for it. Why, a bit of that rough stuff, and it would make a bigger stink than the murder. We'd have all sorts of agitation, do you see? People'd say it didn't matter what Saybrooke did, he hadn't ought to be turned over for that sort of treatment, and it wasn't according to law, not our law."

Mowitsky's face was warm, then hot, and at the end of Martle's speech it was burning as if on fire.

"No offense," Martle said, sincerely, embarrassed. "It's not like you invented the system, or like a fellow don't have to do what he's told. Orders is orders. But we just couldn't have it, this side of the water. And I ain't saying, neither, that I haven't handled a few that I wouldn't have given something to've been free to handle American style myself."

Mowitsky did not refer to the matter again.

The next morning, which was crisp, with a smokiness in the cold, fluid air, he put on a burgundy flannel shirt and a sports jacket his wife had bought him in the hope that he would resemble a "man of distinction." He wore them, in spite of that, for their warmth.

At the church corner, he left the high street, walked through the cemetery, and set off across the fields.

His cigar had long ago gone out, and he was chewing the end of it when he saw the small house which he thought was the one he wanted. Beyond it, two figures worked in the field, and Mowitsky approached the man.

"Dombey?" Mowitsky inquired.

The man nodded. He was squatting and digging potatoes, as was the woman. Dombey wore an ancient pair

of corduroy trousers and a threadbare jacket. An old wool muffler was wrapped about his throat and secured with a safety pin. A cap, older than his cracked and broken shoes, was on his gray head. Mowitsky had a suspicion that there was no shirt under the jacket. Raw-red, Dombey's thin wrists stuck out of the short sleeves, and his gnarled hands were clawlike.

Mowitsky took only a glance at the woman and saw that she was as badly dressed and as work-worn. Neither of them had the time to stop their work to talk to anyone who was minding someone else's business. Pulling in his rather large stomach, Mowitsky squatted and dug for potatoes.

"I'd like to hear about how you found Boucher's body," Mowitsky dug a small, hard potato out of the cold, hard ground.

Dombey glanced at his wife, but she gave no sign, just lowered her gaze and moved along the row, digging.

"Was coming home after a pint at the pub," Dombey muttered. "The gun went off like in my ear. Stopped a bit and waited, then. The moon came out and saw Saybrooke hopping away and lugging his gun. Weren't a minute later saw something on the ground and it were Boucher."

Dombey spoke in such a thick voice and with such an accent that Mowitsky practically had to translate.

"How far was it," Mowitsky asked slowly, "from where you heard the shot, to the place where you found the body?"

The creased skin at the back of Dombey's weather-beaten neck folded as he lifted his head and looked about. A horny finger briefly indicated an old plow. Mowitsky estimated the distance to the plow as less than a hundred feet.

"At that distance, didn't you see the flash of the gun?"

"Don't have it to mind that I did." Although his hands continued to work, Dombey had the air of a man who was thinking. He shook his head.

"You were coming along the path,"

Mowitzky restated the story. "A cloud was over the moon when you heard the roar of the shotgun. It was loud, but you didn't see any flash. You stood still. The moon came out, and you saw Saybrooke, running with his gun. You started walking again, and when you'd gone about as far as from here to that plow you found Boucher's body." Mowitzky caught his breath. "Then you went home."

"Couldn't see as police could do anything the night as Boucher couldn't wait to have done the morning."

Mowitzky nodded, and dug potatoes for a minute.

"Then why did you change your mind?" He uncovered a potato. "Why did you go to the police, instead of waiting for morning?"

Annoyance flashed across the old man's rough face. His mouth tight shut, he reached back past Mowitzky's hands and unearthed a potato Mowitzky had missed.

"I made him to go," the woman said shortly.

Mowitzky stood up. His back ached, his knees were stiff, and his hands were cold.

"Thank you." He would have liked to give them some money, but he did not know what the consequence of such an action would be. He made up his mind that when he and his wife departed they would leave a bundle of clothing. "Saybrooke's house is that way, isn't it?"

"Just there." Dombey pointed.

Mowitzky saw no house. However, he politely said good-by to the couple and left them. He walked up the long gentle slope of a hill; from the crest he gazed beyond, and in a fold of the countryside he saw a house.

While he was still some distance from the house, a man came out of it and disappeared around the corner. A minute later Mowitzky heard hammering. When he turned the corner of the house he saw the man hammering at what looked like a henhouse, although there were no chickens about.

The man dropped a rusty nail which

he was about to drive, stooped for it, and saw Mowitzky. He straightened, and from the look of him he was not startled by having Mowitzky suddenly appear.

"You're the American. I'm Matt Gaundel."

He was a tall, darkly handsome young man with flashing white teeth and a heavy red mouth. His manner was mocking rather than pleasant, but he extended his hand and Mowitzky shook it. Gaundel was a faintly aggressive and definitely independent sort of man whom Mowitzky would have thought the kind to prefer the city, but Gaundel's ambitions were not pointed that way.

"Fixing the place up for Saybrooke?"

"Patching it up because I'll have all of it to do." Gaundel had the accent of the district, but it was only an echo in his voice. "Saybrooke'll be wanting to sell it to me, for money to get himself a lawyer."

The house and the few small buildings behind it were worse examples of claptrap than most of the tenant farmer dwellings Mowitzky had seen in his own country. The land looked wan and eroded and no more fruitful than the bleakly blue sky. Everything was in the last stages of disrepair, and the only reason that the buildings didn't cry for paint was the same reason that the children hereabouts didn't cry for candy; they'd apparently never heard of it.

Perhaps Gaundel read part of his thoughts.

"Oughtn't to be bothered with such rubbish," he snorted. "But seeing as it was in the family, I suppose I ought to take it back."

"Oh?"

"It was my dad's, and he never should have sold it to old Saybrooke," Gaundel muttered. "I wouldn't bother with it, but it's bound to be sold and I'd rather take it on than see it go to somebody else."

"And get married?"

Gaundel shrugged indifferently.

Mowitzky wondered if the girls were as indifferent about him. He must have been the closest approach to a romantic figure that the women hereabouts saw in a lifetime, in real life.

"Do you think Saybrooke killed Boucher?"

"What's it matter if I don't?"

"Well, you had a chance to see how Saybrooke acted before he went out last night," Mowitzky said. "You must have noticed that he took his gun."

"I don't remember as he spoke or looked other than ordinarywise." Gaundel hefted the hammer, and rolled a rusty nail under his thumb. "I didn't take notice when he went out."

"I was talking to Dombey." Mowitzky changed the conversation. "After he found the body he went home, and I guess he would have gone to bed if his wife hadn't nagged him into reporting the murder."

"The drunken old sot!" Gaundel sneered. "He was so drunk he couldn't think of anything but to go home, and a wonder he could find his way there." He looked Mowitzky up and down. "Smelling into this, after the manner of your kind, ain't you?"

"I'm glad you don't mind." Mowitzky grinned. "Just force of habit, I guess. By the way, where were you when Boucher was murdered?"

Gaundel indicated the house with a fling of his hand.

"Dead asleep. Been living with Saybrooke till I make up my mind how I'd get myself settled. Now it looks like I'll be stuck to take the old place back."

"Which makes me wonder," Mowitzky said, "where you got the money to buy him out?"

"Thought you'd get around to that," Gaundel winked. "A smart lad could keep out of the war if he knew how. Took some doing, but there was money to be made if he did it." Gaundel laughed. "Strictly on the honest. Don't you go worrying your head over that."

"I won't," Mowitzky promised.

"Look me up when you're by the inn, and I'll buy you a beer."

"Don't drink, don't smoke," Gaundel snapped. "Neither of them worth a damn. A man'd be better off without them even if he got paid for doing them, instead of him parting with his coin."

Mowitzky started away, nodding. He turned back suddenly.

"You may not get stuck with this place after all," he confided. "Saybrooke says he'll get out to work it and to marry Rose, bad as things look."

Gaundel's face darkened. His loose red mouth bunched up and he appeared to be about to speak, but he only shrugged and turned his back.

Mowitzky walked off, the pound of Gaundel's hammer eventually becoming faint in his ears.

A glance at his watch told Mowitzky that he was late for lunch. He swung his legs out briskly. He was hungry and the raw weather chilled him through.

A woman came down the side of a hill; it looked as if she would pass in front of him but at a distance. Because of the wind he lowered his head, and he was busy with his thoughts. It was a surprise when he looked up, and saw her standing waiting for him.

She was only a girl, bundled in a hodgepodge of clothes. Like all the people hereabouts, she looked as if she'd been outfitted at a rummage sale. She had a white cloth with roses in it over her copper hair and knotted under her chin. Mowitzky caught his breath. In a thin-skinned, hollow-cheeked, big-eyed way, she was beautiful. Her hands were thin but work was destroying their fineness, and Mowitzky felt that there would always be toil for her fingers.

"You're Rose Cantwell?"

"I know your name, too." She made no attempt to pronounce it. She had the atrocious accent of the district, but her voice was sweet. "You won't let them hang my Doug?"

"Saybrooke?" Mowitzky shuffled

his feet. "I can't do anything unless I know all the facts. Even then—"

"Sense enough to know that I have." She motioned, and they walked together.

In a few minutes they came to some huge slabs of stone which made a comfortable, though chilled, seat. Mowitsky sat beside her, and lit his cigar.

"Doug came to meet me," Rose disclosed. "He had his gun and he said he'd kill Boucher before he'd let me marry him. I talked fair mad, and I got the gun from him. But I was worried sick just the same. I stood the gun against a tree, and drew him away, making him walk with me." She paused as a plane flew overhead, drowning her voice. "We was talking how to plan out things for us when I thought I heard a bang, like a shot—"

"What do you mean, you thought?" Mowitsky demanded. "Did you hear it, or didn't you?"

"It was them, going by"— she pointed up at the now distant plane. "Four of them. But I hear better than most, and I thought I heard a gun, such like as Doug's."

"Did Saybrooke hear it?"

She shook her head.

"Did you mention it to him?"

"Wild as he was, and just beginning to promise he'd go to home?" She clasped her hands. "I told him I wouldn't marry Boucher, no matter what. He said as long as I promised him that, he'd go."

Mowitsky nodded.

"Doug couldn't find his gun." Rose wrung her hands, and anguish strained her features. "He said he would look till he found it. I was fair set to be crazy for fear Boucher would come along the path. But at last I got Doug started to home. I hurried to home myself to tell my dad it was no use him telling Will Boucher I might marry him. But I had just a glimpse of our kitchen light, and I heard the gun, plain as thunder."

"What did you do?"

"I ran back." Rose's eyes were big

and haunted. "It was all still, and no one by. For all the moon, the ground was dark. I was shivering afraid, and old Dombey come walking up to me. I asked him, but it made no sense what he mumbled."

"Is Dombey a heavy drinker?"

"He has not the money for such a career." The wind blew cold and Rose drew her thin, black coat about her. "Mrs. Dombey will not like me telling you this. But she told me that Thursday night when Dombey came out of the pub after drinking his pint, he met a friend who was driving a van to the city. He had a bottle and he treated Dombey royal."

Mowitsky held her words in his mind, letting the accent drain off.

"He was too drunk for you to know what he was saying," Mowitsky stated. "And when he went home and his wife understood what he'd seen, she sobered him and sent him to the police."

"Aye."

The witness who saw Saybrooke running from the scene of the crime was drunk. It appeared to Mowitsky that it made no difference since Saybrooke admitted being there.

"Saybrooke went home and put his gun in the house, but he went out again. I guess he came to you."

"I was sleeping lightly," Rose said, "and the tapping woke me wide. It was Doug at my window. He said Boucher was killed, and he'd be blamed. He was running away and bid me forget him." She blinked back tears. "It was me that made him go to home. In the morning we was to talk if or not he would go to the police."

"The police were at the house waiting for him," Mowitsky sighed. "Didn't you realize that Dombey must have seen Saybrooke running away from the body?"

"I clean forgot him." Rose wiped away tears. "And him staggering drunk, I would have thought he couldn't see or remember."

"Dombey's legs were drunker than the rest of him." Mowitsky stood up.

"You'll not let them hang my

"Dug?" She gazed hard into his face. "I hope not."

She nodded, thanked him, and walked away. He gazed after her lone figure crossing the fields, then he turned and walked to the inn. He was too late for lunch, but he had a sandwich and beer, and then he went to see Martle.

Martle looked as if he'd been holding his breath till Mowitsky got there.

Mowitsky sat down heavily, and told him everything.

Martle leaned back in his chair, one arm on the desk, the fingers drumming noisily.

"She's a loyal lass, is Rose," Martle conceded, "and up to saving Saybrooke. It's a good story that they were together when she heard the first shot. But he should have told it so, too."

"Still," Mowitsky frowned, "both barrels of the gun were fired, yet Boucher was killed by the load from one. How do you account for the other shell?"

"Saybrooke might have missed him with it," Martle argued. "Or maybe he fired it to halt Boucher. It's a good idea Rose has, to put the two shots so far apart."

"Do you think that's the main point?"

"D'you see another?" Martle leaned out of the chair toward him.

"Yes. But if it's as important as I think it is, you'll see it, too. If you don't maybe it isn't important. I'd say it depends on how much of a drinker Dombey is."

Mowitsky nodded and walked out.

The wind blew sharper and stronger this afternoon, and he hunched his big shoulders about his ears as he trudged along the path across the open fields. He had no difficulty finding the place where Boucher had been slain; the police had marked the area where the body was found. Boucher had been walking this path which would have taken him past Dombey's, and, eventually, to Cantwell's. Someone had shot him in the left side, part of the bicep being destroyed.

Mowitsky searched in an ever widening circle, studying the ground carefully. It took him a cold hour, and then he found it largely by luck; his foot caught in it. He knelt, parted the grass and weeds, and looked into a hole, probably made long ago by a rabbit. He took a knife from his pocket, reached into the hole, and scraped the earth. When he had loosened the soil, he took out a few handfuls. He winnowed these and retained only the pellets which he found among the earth and small stones. He returned to the inn.

He was thoughtfully smoking a cigar when a constable came to take him to Martle.

Matt Gaundel was sitting beside the desk in the small office. He appeared to have been ragging Martle, and he winked cheerfully at Mowitsky.

"Please sit down," Martle directed Mowitsky gruffly, and rustled several sheets of paper. "Information received from you has been put in writing. For the present, you will be asked if one statement is in accordance with your recollection." Martle cleared his throat, and read, "That drunken old sot! He was so drunk he couldn't think of anything but to go home, and it's a wonder he could find his way there." Did Gaundel speak those words to you, and was he referring to old Dombey?"

"What about it?" Gaundel demanded.

"He did and he was," Mowitsky deposed.

"Did you make that statement to Mr. Mowitsky, and had you reference to old Dombey?" Martle asked.

"Sure, I was," Gaundel snorted. "What's he having me up for, slander?" Gaundel roared laughing.

"You're up for murder, my lad," Martle announced. "How was you knowing Dombey was drunk?"

Gaundel's face lost some of its color, but none of its insolence.

"I took it for granted that he was drunk," Gaundel sneered. "What are pub crawlers, but drunks?"

"Dombey drank his regular pint at the pub, and the pint ain't been brewed as could turn old Dombey's head. He ain't been drunk or seen drunk within memory or gossip. He was drunk Thursday night because he met with a van driver who shared a bottle. Aye, Dombey was drunk. Rose knew it because she met him. His wife knew it the minute he come home to her. And how did you know it?" Martle banged his desk. "You that was supposed to be dead asleep in Saybrooke's house the while?"

"Go to hell!" Gaundel glowered.

Martle had obviously been baited to the end of his patience.

"You need a proper bit of questioning, you do." Martle glanced at Mowitsky, and back at Gaundel. "And I've a mind to see you get it."

Gaundel glanced at Mowitsky, his bravado somewhat diminished.

Mowitsky ignored the invitation to ask for a private interview with Gaundel.

"You weren't asleep," Mowitsky declared. "You followed Saybrooke after he was out of the house. The moonlight was pretty good, and you saw him meet Rose. She got the gun away from him, and stood it against a tree, then walked him away. You took the gun and went back along the path till you met Boucher. You walked with him, the gun cradled in your arms. When the planes passed over, you shot him."

"It's easy to make up such stuff." Gaundel's red tongue laved over his red-lipped loose mouth.

"You waited," Mowitsky continued. "When you saw Saybrooke coming along the path you waited till a cloud was over the moon. Then you fired the other barrel of the gun, and in the darkness threw it beside Boucher. Saybrooke came running, and fell over the corpse. He found his gun beside it, and he jumped up and ran home. The cloud passed from the moon, and Dombey saw him. You didn't run be-

cause Saybrooke might have seen you. You stayed flat on the ground, and that was how you saw Dombey and knew he was drunk. It was all good enough, but you made a mistake."

"Mistake, mistake!" Spittle flew from Gaundel's lips. "To hear you coppers, there's always a mistake."

"Dombey heard the shot, but he didn't see the flash of the gun. As close as he was, he would have seen it if Boucher had been shot then. But you didn't want Saybrooke to see the flash because he would have run toward it, and with the moonlight he might have come close enough, in spite of his bad leg, to recognize you. So you fired down an old rabbit hole." Mowitsky brought his hand from his pocket, and dropped pellets on the desk. "There's some of the shot from the hole."

"Why should I shoot Boucher?" Gaundel stood up, fists clenched. "I only knew him to speak to."

"You want Saybrooke's farm," Mowitsky replied. "You thought that with Saybrooke in prison it would be a simple matter to buy it for almost nothing."

Gaundel rushed to get past him to the door. Mowitsky thrust out a massive arm. Gaundel ran into the hard fist at the end of it, and went back into the chair, gasping and moaning.

When Saybrooke had been released, and Gaundel properly charged, Martle was ready for a relaxing bit of gin rummy.

"It was clever." Martle shuffled the deck. "I don't mean just clever—it was downright good police work. I had no idea you fellows went at things such a way." Martle's face reddened somewhat. "You know, I thought it was all done slam-bang over there."

"Well, if I've offset the effects of a few of those movies you used to see, that's worth something." Mowitsky cut the cards. "How's to deal me a good hand, just for once?"

smart Fisherman

BY FRANK BENNETT



When a man's charged with murder, no story is too fantastic to tell.

THE day Jeff West was murdered, Doc Dirrim went fishing for the bluegills, leaving his wife, Edna, to look after the drugstore.

Doc was a bluegill fan, all five-feet-four of him. In the spring, he went fishing almost every afternoon. He said that it took a smart fisherman to catch bluegills the way he caught them with a light line and a light flyrod.

Until Doc Dirrim and Jeff West, who ran the bank, had had trouble over shares in some wildcat oil wells and Jeff had got most of Doc's money, there were four of them who used to sit around doc's drugstore, drinking cokes and talking fishing. Doc, the sheriff, the game warden and Jeff West. The natives of Clayton laughingly referred to them as the fishing quartet.

Actually, doc and Sheriff Tom Spangler did most of the talking. Doc said that Spangler was nuts to go to Minnesota to fish for pike when there was plenty of fishing within a radius of five miles of Clayton.

"I'll have more fun in an hour catch-

ing bluegills than you can have in a month, fishing for pike," he'd say.

The sheriff's square red face would get a little redder, and he'd allow that bluegill fishing was for women and kids, not for real, he-men fishermen.

As for Ed Little, the game warden, who was a channel-cat-stink-bait fisherman, doc held him in contempt. Besides, Ed mixed fishing with taking pot-shots at bullfrogs along the creek bank with his .22 rifle.

Jeff West, who had been the fourth member of the quartet, had done some deep-sea fishing. But Jeff really didn't have time to fish. For one thing, he was too busy making money. Too, he had a stronger interest in pretty women than in fishing. Of course, since the trouble between him and doc, he hadn't set foot inside the drugstore.

On the day Jeff was murdered, doc headed his shiny six-year-old sedan out of town just as the courthouse clock struck five. He drove a mile north past Ed Little's place. Sally, Ed's young wife, waved from the front porch, and doc waved back. Then he

turned into what was known as the South Road and followed its lonely winding curves to where the wooden bridge spanned Elm Creek.

In years past, there'd been an old mill a half mile below the bridge. Now the mill was gone, but the dam remained. When the water was right, bluegills swarmed at the foot of the dam. Today, doc hoped, the water would be right.

He parked his car at the west end of the bridge, climbed out a little stiffly and gathered up his can of worms and the light fly rod. He didn't go in for fancy fishing togs. Just a scuffed pair of thick-soled shoes, faded slacks and a blue-and-white Sunday shirt with a frayed collar. Edna had cut off the sleeves at the elbows. Doc didn't have any spare cash to spend on unnecessary equipment, not after Jeff West had taken him to the cleaners in the oil business. Doc was lucky that he'd been able to hang onto his drugstore.

Whistling softly, he headed north along the dry, hard path that wound through the thick growth of timber. He could have taken another road which led directly to the dam, but that road was weed-choked and rocky. Doc preferred the half-mile walk to the chance of ruining one of his thin tires on a sharp rock. When he came to the dam, he stopped whistling. The water ran over the west end of the dam in a shallow, steady stream, making a slow-moving whirlpool at the foot of the dam. A smile came to doc's round, pink face. The center of that whirlpool should be crowded with hungry bluegills.

As a rule Doc Dirrim never hurried. Standing on the high rocky bank above the dam, he filled his briar pipe carefully and lit it. Then he put his rod together, threaded the light line through the guides, attached a four-inch nylon leader and a hook and a small cork bobber. He glanced at his wrist watch. Five thirty. A good two and a half hours before dark. Bait can in one hand, rod in the other, he

started down the steep bank. Then it happened. A loose rock went out from under his right foot.

The next thing doc knew, he was sitting with his fat legs in the two inches of water which glided over the end of the dam. He still had his pipe between his teeth and the fly rod in his right hand. But his left wrist had struck a rock, and he'd spilled the worms just above the dam.

Panting a little, he pushed himself back on the bank. He noticed then that he'd smashed his watch crystal.

He took off the watch, wrapped it carefully in a handkerchief and put it back into his pocket. Then, just as he started to pick up a crawling worm, he saw the hand sticking up out of the weeds at the edge of the water.

It was a left hand, white and soft looking, with a square-cut ruby set in a plain gold ring worn on the third finger. Instantly, doc knew to whom the hand belonged. The square-cut ruby ring told him that. The hand belonged to Jeff West.

At first, he was too stunned to think. He just sat there, staring foolishly at the hand and sucking on his pipe. At last, he reached out and parted the clump of weeds so that he could see into the water. He saw the head and shoulders of a man a few inches under the clear water. The man's face was turned away from the dam. It was Jeff West's face, and his thick black hair moved a little with the current.

Below the hair line near the left temple was a long, ugly bruise. Jeff had been hit with a dull instrument. Hard. He was dead. There could be no question about that.

Doc steeled himself and touched the hand. He lifted one of the fingers. It moved without stiffness. Jeff West, doc knew, had not been dead very long. And the bruise on the man's head told doc that Jeff had probably been knocked unconscious and then thrown into the water to drown. That made it murder.

Everything suddenly seemed to become too quiet. The south breeze died

down, and the leaves on the trees hung motionless. The birds nearby stopped singing as if something had frightened them into silence. Even the water sliding over the dam seemed to fall without sound. And, suddenly, doc felt a touch of fear, for it came to him that the murderer might still be lurking among the trees.

He shoved to his feet and looked wildly about, but saw nothing to add to his fear. He glanced back at the hand. The ruby glittered in the sun, a deep blood-red. Then doc asked himself who would hate Jeff West enough to murder him, and the answer left him trembling, for the answer was Doc Dirrim himself!

That was when he decided to put distance between himself and the dead man. With shaking hands, he scooped up the crawling worms and returned them to the can. Catching up his rod, he scrambled up the bank to the path and headed back toward his car. His mind kept going back to the trouble between him and Jeff. That scared him. Kept him from thinking straight. He didn't want to be tied in with Jeff's murder. He didn't want to have a thing to do with any of it. He would let someone else find the body and report it. He, Doc Dirrim, would keep his nose clean. He would get into his car and go fishing in another stream. Should any questions be asked, he would claim that he hadn't been near Elm Creek.

Then it occurred to him that perhaps someone had seen his car parked near the bridge, and he felt the fine, cold sweat work out on his face. If someone had seen the car, it would look bad if he should leave the creek so quickly. Rather than risk moving his car, he decided to cross the road and go upstream to the railroad bridge. He had fished there often, and he would say that he'd been there all the time.

He left the path where the creek made a bend and took a short cut along a rocky ravine. When he came out on the road, he was a quarter mile from the bridge and his car.

The road was empty. He started to cross it. That was when he saw a car parked behind his own car. That gave him a jolt. He scooted across the narrow dirt road and buried himself in the tall weeds and brush that grew on the far side. From this hiding place, he tried to see the car behind his own. He couldn't see enough of it to tell to whom it belonged, but he decided it didn't matter, anyway. The important thing to do now was to get to the railroad bridge and start fishing in the deep water beneath it.

Before he stepped out of the timber near the railroad bridge, he looked cautiously up and down the creek. No one was in sight. He hurried to the water's edge, baited the hook with fingers that were all thumbs and began to fish.

A bluegill struck, but in his nervousness, doc missed it. The next strike, he made good. Catching that fish calmed him, and he began to wonder if coming here instead of driving to town to tell Sheriff Tom Spangler about Jeff West hadn't been a fool thing to do. He and Spangler were old friends from way back. Spangler was nobody's fool. He wasn't the kind to jump to conclusions. He'd probably uncover evidence which would point to the murderer.

Wondering how long he'd been at the creek, doc glanced at his wrist. There wasn't any, watch on it. He remembered the smashed crystal and swore softly.

At that moment, another bluegill struck, and while doc was playing it, Ed Little, the game warden, came tramping up from the north. Doc lost the fish.

Ed dropped the butt of his .22 to the ground, threw back his lean-jawed head and laughed.

"What's the matter, doc?" he asked. "Losin' your touch?"

There was something wrong with Ed's laugh. It didn't ring true.

Doc tried putting a grin on his face, but it didn't fit, not the way he felt inside.

"That was a big one, too," he said mournfully.

"The big ones always get away, you know," Ed grinned.

The man squatted down with his broad back against an elm, plucked a blade of grass and stuck it between his teeth. He wore a cap with a broken bill. A wisp of his sandy hair stuck out from under the bill, and his pale-blue eyes were fixed on doc. Something about those eyes made doc nervous. He ran a finger across his forehead. It came away damp.

"Been fishin' here long?" Ed asked.

"About an hour, I guess," doc answered.

"I just came from a half mile below the old dam," Ed said. "Water looks good at the dam."

Doc felt a knot of cold begin to form deep within him. "Thought I'd try it here first," he found himself saying.

Ed's long fingers played with the trigger guard of the .22. He said nothing, but his eyes didn't leave doc's face.

Doc threw his line back into the water. A trickle of sweat ran into his left eye. An approaching train whistled hoarsely, and Ed got to his feet, spit out the grass blade and fumbled in a pocket for cigarettes. Doc reached into a pocket and jerked out his handkerchief. The handkerchief unrolled, and the wrist watch fell out and bounced toward Ed.

The game warden moved suddenly. He reached down and pounced on the watch as if it were a fish flopping toward the water. The train rumbled over the bridge. It was a freight train, and it was going fast. Doc could feel the ground shaking under his feet. He could feel something else, too. The hard, rapid pounding of his heart.

Ed didn't say anything until the roar of the train had subsided into a distant rumble.

"Busted your watch crystal, eh, doc?" he said, and there was a one-sided grin on his lean face.

"Yeah," doc answered hoarsely.

"Saw some broken glass near the dam," Ed went on. "I guess a check would show if that glass was the same as what's left in your watch."

Doc wondered if he looked like he felt. Guilty and scared.

"Found Jeff West in the water near the dam, too," Ed continued. "Dead. Looked like he'd been hit on the head. Murdered, maybe. I didn't touch him. Figured that would be a job for the sheriff. Hurried to the road, hopin' to catch a ride to town. Saw your car parked by the bridge. Jeff's car was parked behind it. Figured you might be fishin' here. Figured you'd drive me into town. Didn't know you'd busted your watch crystal then."

Doc looked at Ed. He'd known the younger man for a long time. He and Edna had gone to Ed's and Sally's wedding a couple of years ago. He and Ed were friends, even if there was a matter of ten years between their ages. But now Ed was staring at him as if they were strangers.

"Listen, Ed," doc said, "I was at the dam. I slipped and fell down the bank. Spilled my bait and smashed my watch crystal. Then I saw Jeff's hand sticking up out of the weeds. Everybody knows about the trouble Jeff and I had. I got scared, and, like a fool, came here instead of going to town and reporting to Tom. You don't think I killed Jeff, do you?"

"I'm just the game warden," Ed said. "Murder ain't my business. You goin' to take me to town, doc?"

"Sure," doc answered. "I should have gone to town right after I found him, instead of—"

The coldness of Ed's pale eyes stopped him. Carefully, Ed put the wrist watch into a pocket.

"Save it," he said, "and tell it to the sheriff."

Doc unjointed his fly rod, dumped the remaining worms into the creek and turned his one fish loose. Ed kept the walnut stock of his .22 resting against the ground, while his long fingers moved impatiently up and down the gleaming barrel.

"You lead the way, doc," he said.

Silently, they returned to the road. In the distance, a crow cawed hoarsely, and overhead a buzzard circled in the clear blue sky. Doc went around back of his car, squatted down in front of Jeff's maroon coupé and studied the dusty ground.

"You can tell by the tracks that Jeff's car was parked here after I'd parked mine," he said.

"Sure," Ed nodded. "That's why your story of findin' Jeff after he was dead don't add up, doc. How could Jeff already be dead, and then drive his car up behind yours?"

"Somebody else must've driven his car here," doc said lamely.

"Maybe," Ed said. "Maybe, not. Ain't no foot tracks in the dust, so he must've got out on the weedy side. I don't know much about this fingerprint business, but I got a hunch the fingerprints on the wheel and the gear-shift will tell who drove the car last. For your sake, doc, hope they're not Jeff's fingerprints."

Doc didn't look at Ed, then. Inside, he felt a little sick. He had a great fear that only Jeff's fingerprints would be found in the coupé, for if the murderer had driven and left it here, he'd certainly have been careful not to leave his own fingerprints. Doc stared underneath the coupé. He saw a green grass blade sticking to a gob of grease. At the time, that didn't mean anything to him.

He got stiffly to his feet. "Let's go."

Ed had stepped up to the car and was staring into it. "The keys're in the switch," he said. "Guess I'll lock the doors. Wouldn't want anyone messin' up them fingerprints."

Using his handkerchief, he opened the left door, and doc saw Jeff's Panama and blue sports coat lying on the seat. At the time, they didn't mean anything to him, either.

Ed got the keys and locked the coupé. Doc got into his own car and started the motor. Ed climbed in beside him and propped the .22 between his long legs. They rode to town in

deep silence, and doc parked in front of the jail, which stood behind the courthouse. The sheriff and his wife lived on the lower floor of the two-story brick building, and Spangler had his office in a front room. He came to the door when Ed knocked.

Ed didn't waste any time. "Jeff West's been murdered, I reckon," he said, "and his body's in the water, kind of jammed between the west end of the old mill dam and the creek bank on the topside of the dam. There's a bad bruise on his head. Looks like somebody must've hit him, and he fell in, or was thrown in. I didn't move him. Figured that was up to you."

Spangler ran thick fingers through his stand-uppish gray hair, and his eyes moved from Ed to doc, then back to Ed.

"Come on in," he invited.

Doc and Ed went into the office. Doc slumped down on a straight chair in front of the sheriff's desk. There was a faint smell of coffee in the air. That, he knew, came from the kitchen where Maude Spangler was getting supper.

Outside the window, the low sun was making things look red. Doc sighed. He felt tired. And scared.

Ed Little said, "Doc, maybe you'd ought to tell your story first."

Doc told things just as they had happened, and saw a mingled look of surprise and worry come into his old friend's red face. When he finished, Spangler made no comment.

"Let's hear your side of it, Ed," he said.

Ed lit a cigarette. He smoked as he talked. He'd walked from his home to the creek a half mile below the dam; then had turned upstream, hoping to get some shots at a few bullfrogs as well as to run across fishermen and check their licenses. At the dam, he'd see where someone had kicked loose some dirt and rocks.

"Kinda looked like there might've been a shuffle," he said.

"That was where I slipped and fell," doc put in.

Ed went on as if doc hadn't spoken.

He'd climbed down to the dam, noticed some bits of broken glass; then he'd seen Jeff's hand and had parted the weeds and had seen the man in the water. After that, the rest of his story was the same as he'd told doc. Also, he mentioned the fact that Jeff's car had been parked by the bridge after doc had parked his.

He laid the car keys on the sheriff's desk.

"Locked Jeff's coupé," he finished. "Figured you'd want to have the fingerprints checked."

The sheriff picked up the keys. They jingled musically. Now, doc noticed, there was a smell of bacon added to that of the coffee. It was supper time, and Edna would be eating a sandwich and drinking a glass of milk at the drugstore. She wouldn't expect him back until after dark.

The sheriff reached out and lifted the phone and called the bank. In spite of the lateness of the hour, someone answered, and Spangler asked when Jeff had last been in his office. He hung up and glanced at doc.

"Jeff left the bank about two," he said. "Took his car to Al's to be greased and washed."

He made another call, this time to the service station.

"Got his car about four thirty," he said after he'd put the phone back. "About the time you left town, wasn't it, doc?"

"I didn't leave till five," doc said.

Spangler made another call. When he hung up, he shook his head slowly.

"Dr. Croft's out on a call," he said, "but I left word for him to come out to the dam as soon as he can. We got to have the coroner in on this, but we might as well go ahead and look things over."

He opened a drawer and got out a big flashlight. As if on second thought, he reached into the drawer again and came up with a heavy service revolver. He put the flashlight into one coat pocket and the gun into another.

"Maude," he called, "I got to make a call. Be back as soon as I can."

He shoved to his feet and walked through the door. Doc and Ed followed.

When they came to Ed Little's place, Ed said, "Hold on, a minute, sheriff. I'd better tell Sally I won't be home for supper."

The sheriff stopped his car, and Ed started to climb out, but Sally Little came to the front door and stood just outside the screen. She was small and dark with shoulder-length black hair. She had a nice figure. Pretty, too.

"Reckon I won't be back for supper," Ed called. "Jeff West's been killed, and I gotta go help the sheriff."

Sally made no reply. She turned abruptly and hurried into the house. Ed settled back on the cushions.

"Should've told her to do the milkin', too," he mumbled.

The sheriff shifted gears noisily.

There was still a half hour's sun left in the sky when they drove across the wooden bridge and stopped behind Jeff West's coupé. They got out and walked around in front of the coupé. The sheriff squatted down and studied the tire tracks. He got down on his hands and knees and looked under the coupé.

"They sure waste a lot of grease when they service a car," he observed. "Looks like Jeff drove over a patch of weeds. There's some leaves and grass caught underneath."

He got up and looked inside through the door glass.

"Left his hat and coat. That ain't like Jeff. He was always fussy about wearing a coat. Even in hot weather."

That was when something clicked in doc's mind. He shoved his pudgy hands deep into his pockets and stared at Ed Little's big feet. The stock of the rifle rested on the scuffed toe of Ed's right shoe. Doc felt his heart begin to hammer hard.

The sheriff took off his hat and ran his fingers through his hair. His square red face held a worried look.

"Come on," he said, and turned toward the path that followed the creek to the dam.

They came to the dam and stopped. The water in the mill pond lay quiet. For a moment, no one said anything, then Ed lifted his rifle with one hand and pointed.

"Jeff's hand's stickin' up out of them weeds," he said.

The sheriff snapped on his flashlight, and the square-cut ruby on the dead man's hand glowed like a red eye. He turned off the light. None of them was in any hurry to climb down the bank to where the dead man lay.

Doc dug out his pocket knife. He opened a bright blade, whacked off an elm sapling and began to trim off the leaves and branches with studied care.

"I had as good a motive for killing Jeff as anybody could have," he said, "but I didn't do it."

"Nobody's said you did," the sheriff growled.

"Ed the same as said I did," doc said.

He sat down on a limestone rock and began to peel the bark off the sapling.

"I remembered how Jeff trimmed you in that oil deal," Ed said. "Naturally, the first thing I thought—"

"Naturally," doc interrupted. "But, maybe, there are some others who hated Jeff, too. You, for instance.

Ed laughed shortly. "Jeff never beat me in a deal."

"I got it figured out like this," doc went on. "You were heading to the creek on foot this afternoon. Jeff came along and gave you a lift. You had your gun. You made him drive you to the dam over the old road. That's how come there're weeds and grass sticking to the underside of Jeff's car. You brought him down to the water on the other side and clubbed him with the butt of your rifle.

"That's crazy, doc!" Ed said. "I didn't see Jeff until I found him in the water."

"After you clubbed Jeff, you thought that someone might have seen you riding with him. So before you threw him into the water, you took his hat

and coat. You put 'em on, knowing that if anyone should see you in Jeff's car, they'd think you were Jeff. You decided to drive some distance away and let people see you so they'd say that Jeff was still alive after he'd given you a ride. Then you intended to hide the car in some out-of-the-way place not far from here and walk back home. You thought it would be days before anyone found Jeff. But you saw my car parked beyond the old bridge, and that gave you a better idea."

"Doc, you're talkin' like a fool!" Ed said hotly.

"Go on, doc," the sheriff said. "So far, you interest me."

"Ed must've followed close behind me and watched me from the trees. That's why the birds got so quiet all at once. He saw me slip and slide down the bank and break my watch crystal. He could tell I was scared when I found Jeff. He watched me high-tail it along the ravine, cross the road and head for the railroad bridge. He waited awhile; then came to where I was fishing. I'd played right into his hands by running. Then, when I pulled out my handkerchief and the watch rolled out, that was just the way he wanted it."

"Very nice, doc," Ed said dryly. "Only when the sheriff has the fingerprints checked in Jeff's car, he'll know it's no good, because mine won't be there!"

"You could have been careful about your fingerprints," doc murmured. "You could have guided the car by holding on to the spokes of the wheel, and then have wiped your fingerprints off without touching Jeff's. You—"

"Doc," Ed cut in angrily, "I don't like the way you're talkin'!"

Sheriff Spangler shook his head. "Like you say, doc, Jeff's car could've been over the old road. We can check that, maybe, by looking for fresh grease on the weeds between the ruts. But that don't prove that Ed drove and parked it like you say. You, or anybody, could've done that."

Ed laughed shortly. It had a ring

of quick relief in it. He took off his cap and brushed back his sandy hair.

"Besides," he added, "there's no reason why I should kill Jeff West."

Doc got to his feet. He felt like an old, old man. "Your wife," he said, "is a mighty pretty girl, Ed. And Jeff had a weakness for pretty girls."

The game warden stiffened. His fingers whitened about the rifle barrel, and he stepped forward threateningly.

"You leave Sally outa this, doc, or I'll—"

"Take it easy, Ed," the sheriff said quietly. "Doc's in a bad spot, and you can't blame him for trying to figure his way out of it." He faced doc squarely. "You got to do better than that, doc," he went on unhappily. "Talk like that is worse than none unless you can back it up."

Doc shut one eye and sighted along the neatly trimmed sapling. Then slowly he lifted his round shoulders.

"All right, Tom," he said. "I'll back it up."

He glanced at Ed Little. The man's lean face was flushed, his eyes burned dangerously. Doc looked at his old friend, the sheriff. Spangler stood with his stocky legs spread a little, his hands resting on his hips. It came to doc that what might happen in the next few minutes would mean the difference between being convicted of murder and walking away a free man. Suddenly, he lifted the sapling and swung it at the sheriff's head.

Instinctively, Spangler's left arm shot upward to ward off the blow. A blow that never landed, for doc stopped his swing in mid-air.

"See what happens when a man's about to be clubbed on the left side of his head?" he said. "You did exactly what Jeff did when Ed started to club him, Tom. He lifted his left hand, too. The hand he wore the ruby ring on. And the gun struck the ring. If you'll examine the stock of Ed's rifle, you'll see what I noticed a few minutes ago. A square dent! And if that ruby won't fit into that dent, I'll eat it!"

Spangler swung around on Ed Little and reached for the rifle. "Let me see—" he began.

Ed leaped back. The .22 came up and centered on the sheriff's chest.

"Stay where you are!" he clipped.

"So doc was right?" the sheriff said quietly.

"Sure," Ed said. "For a couple of months, I've been wondering about Jeff West and Sally. Today when he picked me up, I decided to have a showdown with him. I asked him to drive me to the dam. He did. We got out and walked down to the water. I accused him of seeing Sally, and he laughed at me. He said that I was a fool to think I could keep a girl like Sally from playing around. That's when I hit him. I took his coat and hat and then threw him into the water. The current must've carried him over here. But you ain't goin' to do anything about it, sheriff! You—"

That was when doc swung the sapling a second time. Hard. It struck the game warden across his flat chest. The man staggered back, and the sheriff's fist shot out. The blow caught Ed on the point of the chin. He went down on the stony ground, and he didn't get up.

The sheriff picked up the rifle and began to examine the walnut stock.

Doc's knees felt weak, so he sat down on the limestone rock again. He looked up at the sheriff and grinned.

"That ruby business 'was just a bluff," he said. "Figured if Ed was guilty it might turn the trick."

In the spring, Doc Dirrim still goes fishing for bluegills almost every afternoon. When the sheriff comes into his drugstore, for a coke, doc still tells him he's nuts to go to Minnesota to fish for pike.

"It takes a smart fisherman to catch bluegills the way I catch 'em," he says.

The sheriff just grins and drinks his coke. Either that, or he goes with doc to the old mill dam on Elm Creek to fish for bluegills.



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