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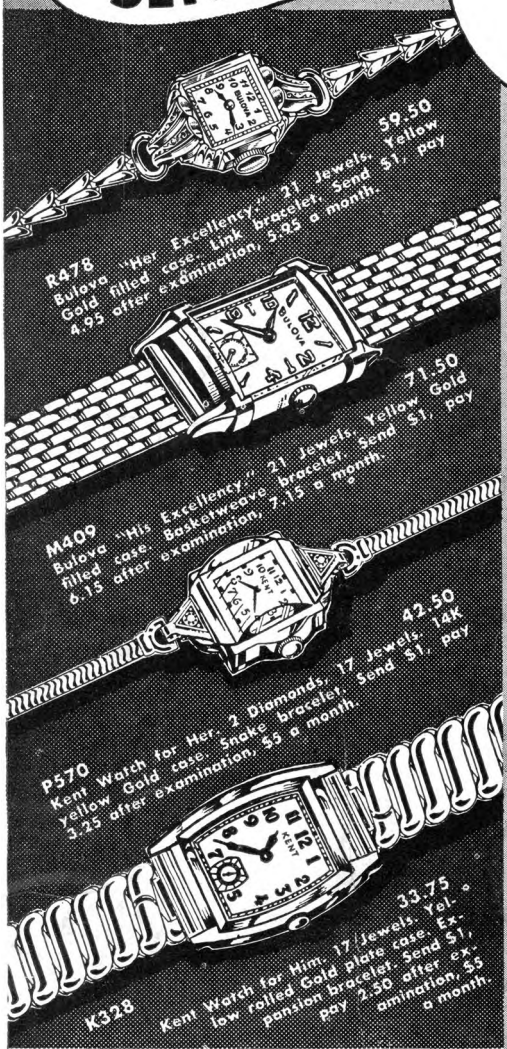

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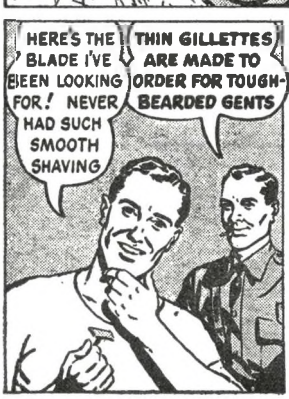


AMERICA'S MOST UNUSUAL DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

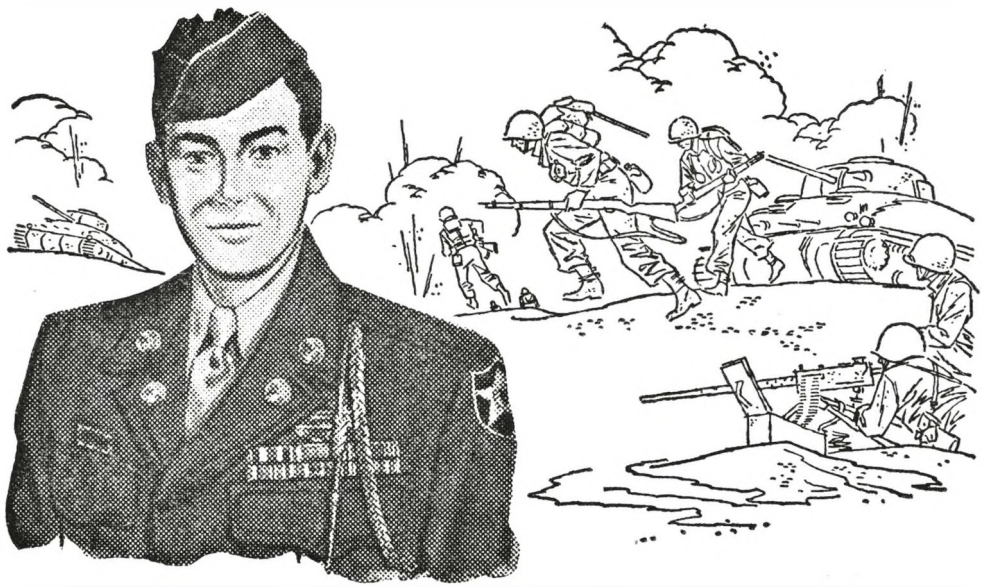
DETECTIVE TALES

15 STORIES — 25 CENTS

VOL. THIRTY-NINE — APRIL, 1948 — NUMBER ONE

May Issue Published March 26th!

Published monthly by Popular Publications, Inc., 2256 Grove Street, Chicago 16, Illinois. Editorial and Executive Offices, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, 17, N. Y. Henry Steeger, President and Secretary. Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice-President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter June 5, 1936, at the Post Office, at Chicago, Illinois, under the Act of March 3, 1879. Copyright, 1948, by Popular Publications, Inc. This issue is published simultaneously in the Dominion of Canada. Copyright under International Copyright Convention and Pan American Copyright Conventions. All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction, in whole or in part, in any form. Single copy, 25c. Annual subscription for U.S.A., its possessions and Canada, $3.00; other countries 75c additional. Send subscriptions to 205 East 42nd Street, New York, 17, N. Y. For advertising rates, address Sam J. Perry, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, 17, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts, enclose stamped, self-addressed envelope for their return, if found unavailable. The publishers will exercise care in the handling of unsolicited manuscripts, but assume no responsibility for their return. Any resemblance between any character appearing in fictional matter, and any person, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and unintentional. Printed in the U.S.A.



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MEN of the Second Infantry Division—the famous "Indian Head" Division—can hold their heads high in any company of fighters. For this division is entitled to wear the famous Fourragere of the Croix de Guerre.

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CAREERS WITH A FUTURE

U. S. Army and U. S. Air Force

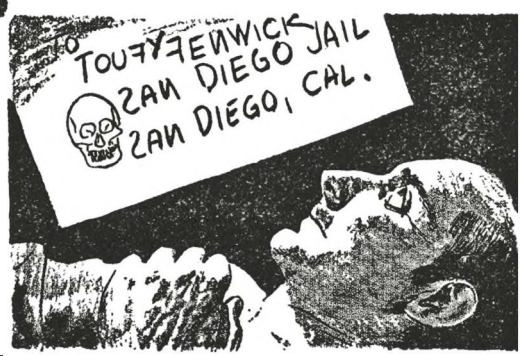
ODDITIES IN CRIME

By MAYAN and JAKOBSSON

The court was hushed. Spectators craned forward, solemnly expectant, as the jury filed in, took seats. The black-robed judge brought the moment to its traditional climax with the customary, "Gentlemen of the jury, have you reached your verdict?"

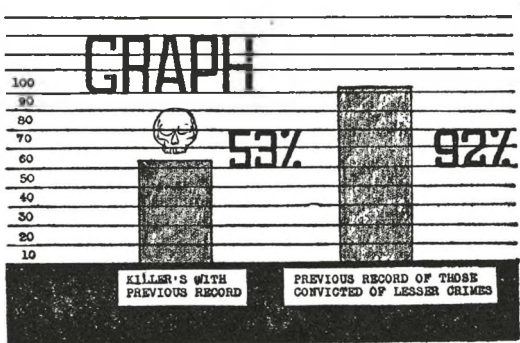
The foreman proved equal to the occasion. With all the majesty of a great, free-speaking democracy behind him he intoned, "We, the jury, find OUR CLIENT, the defendant, not guilty."

This happened in Arkansas, not long ago.



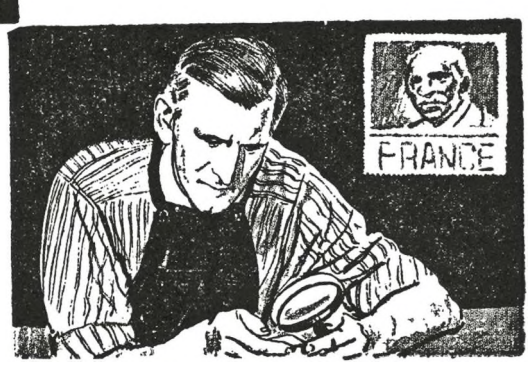
When Toughie Fenwick, San Diego badman, finally got himself nailed for murder and sentenced to the gallows, he asked his pals to write. They did and he literally devoured the letters. Then he lay down on his cell bunk, slept peacefully, and when they came to get him in the morning there was no need to hang him—he was dead.

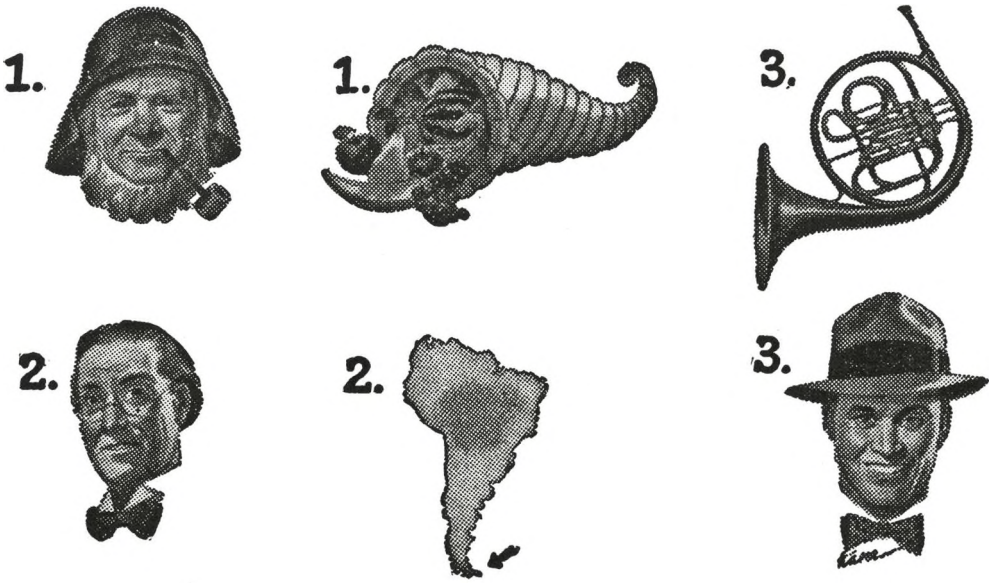
The good citizens of San Diego, though, felt cheated and passed a law that the jailer must TASTE each letter mailed to his charges from the "outside." For Fenwick's mail had been saturated with morphine by friends wishing him—well—good-night.



If you have never been arrested or appeared in court for any breach of law, don't put your arm out of joint patting yourself on the back. You may just be saving up for that one big splurge. A recent criminological survey in Massachusetts showed that, statistically, killers are our most law-abiding citizens. Only 53% of them have previous convictions for anything ranging upward from traffic violations—as compared to 92% previous convictions among persons sentenced over a given period for other crimes!

With top collections appraised at over a million dollars, postage-stamp rarities have become a fertile field for speculators and "menders"—i.e., gents who can patch up imperfect specimens so masterfully that not even the minutest microscopic examination will reveal the dirty work. One Sam Singer got so proficient that he found himself buying back his own phonies—until, so the story goes, he learned to work in a microscopic "M" for "Mended" on each stamp!





Match up the people and the horns

(It may mean money to you!)

THE FIRST TWO, of course, are very easy.

The sea captain (1) goes with Cape Horn (2); and the musician (2) with the French horn (3).

That leaves the Average American (3) matched up with the Horn of Plenty (1).

As such an American, you'd like that to be true, wouldn't you?

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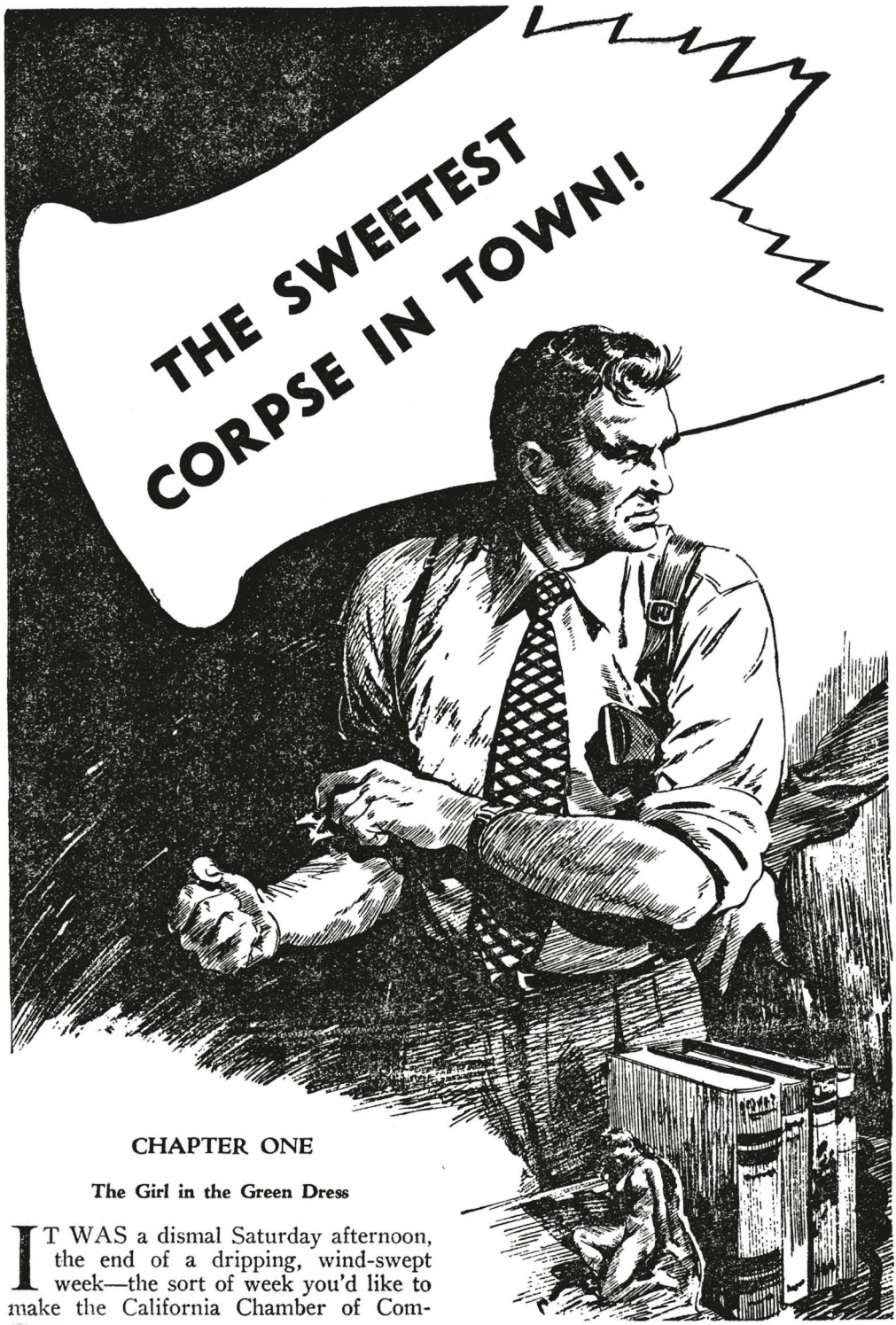


CHAPTER ONE

The Girl in the Green Dress

IT WAS a dismal Saturday afternoon, the end of a dripping, wind-swept week—the sort of week you'd like to make the California Chamber of Com-

$10,000,000 worth of louse lay dead in soft-lipped Seraphine Smith's apartment, with the jagged edge of her milk bottle buried in his throat. . . . Which made it just the right setup for me—you know . . . smart, stay-out-of-trouble Tony Lark—to set out the Welcome mat for that armful of lethal loveliness . . . and turn my bachelor apartment into the neatest little killers' rendezvous ever to be picked by the Homicide Bureau as target for tonight!

He had ample opportunity to study the butt of the .38 Positive jutting from the holster under my arm. He studied it, too, with a look of horror on his face.

Smashing Murder Novel

By

PETER PAIGE

merce eat minute by minute. Prices were still climbing and crime in Pacific City (pop. 30,000) had taken a holiday—two factors which made my bank balance as dismal as the weather. Which was why I didn't throw young David Coxe out of my office the instant his foot crossed the threshold.

The foot, I may add, was shod in a hundred dollars worth of brown calfhide that featured hammered-silver decorations and a heel that was higher than the heel of the average cowboy boot. It raised the hundred-dollar white Stetson an extra two inches from the floor—and four or five hundred dollars of brown tweed tailoring with it.

The second boot followed the first into my office, and the face under the Stetson broke into half of a nice, white-toothed smile. It was a clean-looking young face—straight nose, square chin, deep tan—but the smile died short of his eyes which were the color of dirty ice.

They swept around my office, a two-second job for a myopic—which should give you an idea of my office. They settled on my eyes and stuck.

"I guess you know who I am," he said.

I KNEW who he was—the lad who was making half of Pacific City wonder if Communism wasn't the answer. He was the lad who fell into roughly ten million of the items my wallet lacked on his twenty-first birthday and celebrated the event by boasting that everyone who had crossed him in his twenty-one years would be sorry.

He was twenty-four or -five, now. I couldn't even start to list the citizens who were "sorry." A Mexican girl who had forced his guardians to pay support for their common-law child found herself framed into jail for street-walking. I knew of a detective lieutenant who had once dared to issue a ticket to young Coxe and accompany the ticket with a public tongue-lashing for speeding through a school zone—and wound up in uniform on a nightly prowl-car beat.

I said, "I've seen you around, Coxe. You've been pointed out to me."

The smile tightened a bit.

"Yeah. I've heard of you, too, Lark. They say you were the smartest and toughest dick the force ever had—and you've been even smarter and tougher since they kicked you out. Want a job?"

"Doing what?"

"Being my bodyguard."

"No."

The smile leaped away from his face, leaving it expressionless, as if smiling was an effort and no expression was his normal expression. He turned toward the door, took a step, then swung back to my desk and forced the smile back to his lips.

"Can you give me a reason, Lark?"

"I couldn't bring myself to use my hands on the kind of people who'd probably swing at you."

He didn't like that, but he swallowed it, retaining some of his smile.

"Fair enough, Lark. I can handle hands. But guns are something else again."

"Someone threaten to shoot at you?"

Coxe nodded slowly.

"Red Gunnerson told me he'd get three hundred dollars out of my wallet or my hide."

I laughed. "Red talks like that. You lose to him?"

Coxe straightened and looked over my head out the window, across the rain-swept alley to the next building's wall.

"I lost to a stacked deck," he said.

"How do you know that?" I asked mildly.

"I tell you that's what it was," he told the wall across the alley. "I'll see Gunnerson in hell before I'l pay him a lousy red cent. And he can't go to law about it. The game was stud."

"It'll cost you more than three hundred to keep a bodyguard hired," I shrugged.

The grey eyes dropped down to mine.

"It's the principle of the thing, Lark. No tinhorn crook is going to shove *me* around!"

I didn't like it. Coxe was a punk any way you looked at him. Guarding him from Red Gunnerson's bullets would be a cinch, because Red probably didn't even own a gun and that kind of cops and robbers simply wasn't played in this section of California.

I said, "Tell you what I'll do, Coxe. I'll get an armed guard down from Frisco. You can specify what sort of man you'd want breathing into your ear twenty-four

hours a day. It'll cost you twenty-five a day plus his expenses."

The half smile transformed itself into a bitter sneer.

"You mean you wouldn't want to go around breathing in my ear for twenty-four hours a day?"

"Something like that, Coxe."

He reached the door this time. Then he turned around and I watched his lips untwist themselves from the sneer and retwist into a rueful smile. He returned to my desk.

"I'm poison, eh?"

"It's not personal, Coxe. Just a matter of business. Most of my clients are from Pacific City."

"Even for just five days?" he urged. "I'm taking my sister east Thursday. From now until we board the plane Thursday morning—"

"No," I said.

His smile grew cynical. He dropped a brown leather wallet on my desk that probably cost more than the desk and extracted five bills and slid them across to me. "Take a look, Lark. Five hundred dollars to breathe in my ear for five days!"

As I said at the outset, this was a Saturday afternoon when mounting prices and dwindling crimes had reduced my finances to a point nudging extinction. Five hundred dollars under these circumstances were, roughly speaking, five hundred dollars.

"No interference with ordinary citizens taking it upon themselves to swing at you?" I asked the cynical smile.

"If Gunnerson sends goons—"

"That, I'll handle," I cut in. "I mean non-professional sluggers. You know what I mean."

The smile remained cynical.

"I know what you mean, Lark. Let's go."

"In a minute." I raised my phone and spoke to the operator and then to a curt bass grunt, "Red? Tony."

"H'lo, Tony. What's the good word?"

"I understand you had some trouble with young David Coxe."

"No trouble, Tony. The punk welshed on me. He shows his ugly yap in my joint again, it'll get clobbered. But no trouble, Tony. Why?"

"I'm undertaking to keep him unclobbered, Red. That's the good word."

A bad word entered my ear, followed by a violent *click*.

"They're probably reviving him with smelling salts," Coxe drawled. "Let's go, Muscles."

We went.

That was at four-thirty, Saturday afternoon.

AT FIVE of the same afternoon, Coxe growled, "Why, the slimy, sneaking louse!" and dropped his boot on the brake of his Cadillac hard enough to almost put my head through the windshield. He tore out the door and raced up the porch steps of his main ranch house and grabbed the shoulder of the man who had been standing there, knocking on the front door.

The man was a plump, soft-looking character in a brown sack suit. He wore horn-rimmed glasses under a brown fedora and an expression of acute dismay when David Coxe grabbed his shoulder.

In the man's left hand was a bouquet of small blue dahlias. The dahlias fell to the porch as Coxe heaved the man to the porch steps. One of the hundred-dollar boots sprawled the man down the steps. Coxe leaped after him, roaring, "I warned you to keep off my place, Bowers! I told you!"

By then he was on the plump man who was rising from the mud of the driveway. He helped the man to his feet, at the same time shoving him down the driveway.

The plump man turned to whine, "If you'll only let me see Anita, Dave—"

It seemed to be the wrong thing to say. The spectacles leaped from the plump face as David Coxe's palm landed on it. The glass shattered on the rocks bordering the driveway.

Coxe spun the man around and launched him down the driveway with a kick. The man scurried away through the curtain of drizzle, making the wide curve of driveway at an awkward trot as Coxe shouted at him behind a waving fist, "Next time I'll shoot you for trespassing! You hear that, you damn lump of lard?"

Whether Bowers paused to listen I didn't notice. I had been halfway out of my side of the Cad and now my attention was glued to the front door where a chubby girl with the same dirty grey eyes

as David Coxe had appeared. She was mouthing a string of curses that would have aroused envy and admiration in the toughest joints on Skid Row.

They seemed to produce no reaction in David Coxe. He called to me over his shoulder, "C'mon, Lark," and mounted the porch steps. As he passed the girl he palmed her chin and sent her sprawling backwards across the porch.

Then he whirled from my fingers jabbing stiffly into his spine.

"Booting trespassers off your place," I told him, "is one thing. "Pushing a lady around is something else."

His scowl gave way to that cynical smile.

"That's no lady, Lark. That's my sister."

The door slammed behind him. The girl came over to me. Aside from her eyes, she bore no resemblance to her brother. Her mouth was soft and petulant, her hair a dirty blonde without even a hint of curl. She wore it combed back from a neat part in the center. Her chubbiness bulged a powder-blue riding habit. She wore no make-up.

"Got a butt?" she asked me in an incongruous baritone.

She took one from the pack I proffered, held it jutting up from the corner of her mouth while I lit it, then blew a cloud of smoke in my face.

"You're awfully tough looking. Are you tough?"

"I'm Tony Lark," I said, smiling.

"A wit!" A smile borrowed her face briefly, then returned it to the pout. "Phil's no wit. He's just a nice guy who understands a girl needs a little lovin'. What if he is ten years older? Suppose he is only a bookkeeper?"

"Phil?"

Her cigarette left a trail of smoke as she gestured toward the curtain of drizzle through which the plump man had disappeared.

"Him." She dropped the barely smoked cigarette to the floor and ground it under the heel of her riding boot. "Ten million blasted dollars, and I have to live like a blasted nun!"

"No law keeps you here," I suggested.

"The hell it doesn't!" Her chin jerked toward the door. "That's my legal guardian. I'm sixteen."

"A court could change that," I shrugged. "Just for him pushing you around as he did a few minutes ago."

This aroused her scorn.

"That's real bright! And will you tell me—if I pull some damn-fool stunt like that—how I'll ever tie into any of the ten blasted million?"

"We must never forget the ten blasted million!" David Coxe said, emerging from the front door. He had changed to a black suit and a black Stetson. A large pearl held a black silk tie to his dove-grey shirt. He winked at his sister. "Behave, kitten." He winked at me. "Come on, Lark. I'll show you how to live—even in Pacific City."

His sister's raucous monotone followed us down the porch steps, into the Cad and down the curving driveway. It started: "Why don't you show him how to drop dead, you dirty, woman-beating son of a—" and so on and on and on. . . .

"That's why I'm taking her east," young Coxe explained as we rolled into Pacific City. "I'll send her to one of these finishing schools and then marry her off to some eastern society punk. Maybe even a governor, or a European prince."

"Or someone else with ten blasted millions?"

The corners of his eyes searched my face for a hint of sarcasm. Finding none—on my face—he relaxed into a smug grin.

"Yeah."

AT SIX he started showing me "how to live" by throwing a seven-dollar steak on the floor of the Lido Dining Room in order to convince the waiter it was too rare—and then booted that hapless man when he stooped to retrieve the meat. He left the waiter a ten-dollar tip at the end of the meal—which seemed to hurt the guy more than the steak on the floor or Coxe's boot in his *derriere*.

At seven Coxe asked the bartender of the Coco Club the price of the huge mirror behind the bar. The bartender said two hundred dollars—and ducked as a beer bottle sailed over his head into the mirror. The bartender came up with a fungo bat which he forgot to use when the three hundred-dollar bills spread fanwise in David Coxe's hands registered.

We sat there a while, sopping up Scotch

while Coxe's eyes thoughtfully studied a slim, school-teacherish woman at a table nearby. Suddenly he snapped his fingers. "Hey! That gives me an idea I've been toying with for six years!"

His idea sent him to a phone off the bar. We killed the next half-hour nibbling through more Scotch highballs. Then we rode through the rain to the waterfront, up Beach Hill to the Beach Crest Hotel where he nosed the Cad to the curb.

"This may surprise you," he said. "But no cracks, Lark. I'm playing this clean."

He entered the ramshackle structure that almost looked its hundred years—a building that sprawled in all directions over half a city block. But you have probably seen it. Hollywood Studios often use it when they're on location around Pacific City and I have seen it in pictures as a baronial mansion, and more often as a haunted house. One of those places that got ten dollars a day for a room during the summers and settled for that much a week during the rest of the year.

I sat in the Cad and toyed with my pipe and gazed through the grey curtain of drizzle. When Coxe finally reappeared on the main porch, escorting a vision in an emerald-green evening gown, I was too surprised even for cracks.

He handled her as if she were marked "fragile" and introduced us there in the drizzle as I slid from the seat to let her get between us.

"Mr. Lark. Miss Smith. Tony, Miss Smith used to correct my spelling in English Eight. Would you believe it?"

On second thought I believed it. Put her around thirty, but give her one of those faces that remain the same between twenty and forty. Her pale gold hair swept up. Her eyes seemed to be purple—large, widely spaced and candid. Her face was delicately fashioned out of clean curves and hollows, and her lips seemed on the verge of laughter.

What filled the emerald-green evening gown actually filled it.

What I am trying to say is that in a less inhibited world I would have beaten David Coxe to death right there and dragged her by the pale gold hair to the handiest cave.

As it was, I grinned idiotically and mumbled, "Meetcha," and she turned on a smile that included dimples and said:

"David was an excellent speller, Mr. Lark." Her brows arched a trifle. "Lark? The name is vaguely familiar."

"The same Tony Lark who used to be captain of detectives." Coxe told her. "Let's get out of the wet, Miss Smith. I promised to show you the world beyond your ivory tower."

She turned the voltage on him.

"Call me Seraphine, David."

He winked at me over her back as she stooped to get into the Cad.

"Okay, Seraphine."

Ten minutes later we rolled into a parking lot south of Pacific City and I said, "Just a minute, Coxe!"

"Don't be an old woman, Lark," he said, winking at Seraphine Smith. "She's a big enough girl now to see how the other half lives."

"Of course I am!" She smiled into my eyes. "I have always wanted to see what went on inside Gunnerson's Tavern. And this fabulous creature, this Red Gunnerson, I would love to see if he is as sinister as he is purported to be. Why not, Tony?"

She was like a five-year-old kid about to see her first circus. Looking into those eyes, I couldn't bring myself to tell her why not.

I led the parade.

CHAPTER TWO

$10,000,000 Corpse

IT WASN'T, compared to what larger cities have to offer, an impressive bistro, Gunnerson's Tavern. In fact, aside from the three-man orchestra, it looked pretty much like any other barroom. The bar filled the wall to the left. Red leather booths lined the wall to the right, with a handful of tables scattered before them. The orchestra—a pianist, drummer and saxophonist—occupied a small dais in the rear. Behind the dais was a door leading to the room where draw poker, a pastime California does not consider gambling, parted the unwary from their loose change until midnight when all California bars must close. After midnight the windows were curtained and other forms of poker

were employed to reillustrate Barnum's human equation.

Red Gunnerson was not in evidence when we entered. The dance floor was packed with the usual Saturday night crowd. The bar was packed with older people. One table on the edge of the dance floor was being vacated as we pushed into the mixture of smoke, beer fumes and babble that passed for air in Gunnerson's Tavern.

We occupied it and Coxe ordered champagne from the girl who came to clear the table and smear its surface with an evil-smelling rag.

Red Gunnerson remained out of sight through several rounds of champagne. I began to relax and enjoy Seraphine Smith's wide eyes enjoying the flushed faces about us, the uninhibited chatter, the faces being slapped, the occasional kisses, occasional flare-ups, the off-beat cacophony and the herd of tightly packed dancers swaying in a sort of mass orgy to it. David Coxe, as the champagne struggled with the Scotch and beer already in him, seemed mainly concerned with various striking features of Seraphine Smith's anatomy.

Somewhere along the flow of champagne they became lost in the swaying mass of people on the dance floor, leaving me to sip the bubbly and brood that there were certainly harder ways to earn five hundred dollars in five days.

It was somewhere in the midst of my pleasant brooding that the music and babble became a sudden void of silence.

A woman's scream broke the silence. The dancers parted and I had a sudden glimpse of David Coxe's left cheek turning redder and redder as Seraphine Smith's right hand repeatedly struck at it.

That was the picture—Coxe standing there, gaping, and her lips twisted with contempt and her hand swiping at his face as if she were trying to kill a fly on it.

The next picture was her reeling backwards with her hands flying to her own face from the impact of David Coxe's big fist.

The third picture was David Coxe spinning toward me from my hand on his shoulder, then bowing toward me from my other hand deep in his gut, then jerking erect from my knee rising into his descending face, then looking briefly east and west as my fists struck his jaws alternately.

I think both fists, both knees and a foot all had a part in finally dropping him.

I remember gaping around that crowd of frozen faces for Seraphine Smith.

She was gone.

Red Gunnerson was there instead—a big man and a tough man under a layer of softness that recent years of good living had added. One red brow was raised ironically.

"I thought your job, Tony, was to keep him unclobbered."

"I just quit."

David Coxe gaped wildly up from the floor.

"Quit? You're fired!" he snarled. He wiped the back of his hand over the blood dribbling from his nose, then tried to wipe a drop of it from the black silk tie, then turned a bitter mask up to us. "Two crooks. A crooked cop and a tinhorn. When I finish with you slobs—"

My shoe got in the way of the rest of his sentence, and this time he lay sprawled on his back and motionless.

"Now I'll have to buy a shine," I told Red Gunnerson.

"You mean I owe you a pair of new shoes," he growled. He nodded at two of his lads who had shouldered through the mob of gapers. "Pour the lug in a cab. Give the hackie five and tell him to just keep rolling away from here." He put a heavy arm around my shoulders and said, "You was never a champagne man, Tony. Let's have a man's drink."

I raised the hundred-dollar black Stetson from the floor and wiped my shoes with it, then tossed it back on the floor.

We had several "man's" drinks.

IT WAS still raining when a cab unloaded me before the cottage on Chambliss Avenue, the five rooms, bath, kitchen and assorted closets I call home. I wasn't exactly wobbling. I wasn't exactly spinning on dimes, either.

I got through the wooden gate, up the three porch steps, through the front door I rarely lock for reasons that are too involved to explain here. I groped into the living room until I found the three-way floor lamp. I think I was between the

second and third clicks of the switch when I realized I was not alone in my living room.

My imagination filled with ideas about the uninhibited David Coxe.

But it wasn't David Coxe who gaped in horror at the muzzle of my .38 Positive slanting up at the middle of her.

Seraphine Smith.

A tan coat that buttoned up under her chin had replaced the emerald evening gown and her pale gold hair was a bit awry. Everything else seemed the same—except possibly a layer of terror under the surface shock my pistol had brought to her eyes.

She had been waiting there in the darkness in my easy chair—behind me as I fingered the switch. Now she stood facing me and some of the initial shock left her eyes as I dropped the Positive back under my lapel.

"I remembered where I had heard of you," she whispered. "When it happened, I—I—" she gestured weakly—"ran. I knew I should go to the police. But I couldn't—then. Thinking what would appear in the press, how they would misconstrue—everything. So I—"

"Take it easy, kid," I said to her. "It just goes under the heading of another barroom brawl and no names ever reach print. You take off your coat and sit down and I'll whip up some coffee and we'll chit-chat about it."

Her head shook impatiently. "You fail to unders—" She had been mechanically undoing the buttons of her coat from her neck down—and now she became aware of what was happening from my expression.

Her features turned flabby then. She uttered a low moan and wrapped the coat tightly about her—but not before I had seen that her next garment was a pink slip, torn at the bodice. And beneath the torn fabric the creaminess of her flesh held raw streaks, like fingernail scratches.

She stood there with her arms entwined about herself and trembled like an autumn leaf in a sudden breeze while two fat tears slid down the hollows of her cheeks.

I murmured, "Steady, kid. Coxe overreached himself and you want him out of your room, or maybe in the clink. You just get a grip on yourself and I'll—"

Something thumped to my rug.

Her.

She had a strong pulse. I carried her to the divan and snapped my fingers under her closed lids. They remained closed.

I opened her coat and examined the scratches. They ran down from her collarbone to her breasts.

There were dark, damp stains on her slip that seemed to have no relation to the scratches.

I glanced at my watch. It was eleven-thirty.

It was eleven thirty-five when her eyes snapped open. As she rose to a sitting position memory brought her hands to her coat where they discovered it had been buttoned. She flushed as her eyes found mine. Then she smiled wryly.

"I despise women who faint."

"Coxe would make Lena the Hyena faint," I said.

Haggardness chased the smile from her face.

"He's dead," she whispered.

We sat looking at each other across the living room.

"You?" I breathed.

She nodded slowly.

"How do you know he's dead?"

Her eyes widened. "But that's how he was! On his back . . . not moving . . . not breathing . . . and all about him—blood. And parts of the milk bottle sticking into his face—"

"Milk bottle!"

"—and the neck of it still in my fingers," she moaned. "It was all so swift—him trying to—to—" her eyes and hands toured wild circuits—"to *force* me! And then all I could think was to leave that place, hurl the neck of the bottle from me and step out of my torn dress and get my coat and run away from the sight of David on his back and the blood pouring from his—*stop that! You're hurting me!*"

I probably was hurting her. I had crossed the room and gripped her shoulders and shaken them. I brought my face inches from hers and growled, "You *sure* he was bleeding?"

"That was what was so horrible! He was—*will you stop it?*"

I stopped it. I released her shoulders. I shouted into her face, "How much blood do you think a man can afford to lose?

Beach Crest Hotel. What room is it?"

A ghost of understanding entered her eyes then.

"Six," she breathed.

"Key?"

A frightened head shake.

"You sure he was bleeding?"

A frightened nod.

"Cross your fingers," I told her over my shoulder as I snatched my hat and trenchcoat and made for the door. "Stay here. Don't answer the phone and lock the door behind me. I'll key my way back in."

I didn't linger for a reply. A bleeding man was not a dead man. But he was on the way. . . .

I DIDN'T notice the black sedan nosed to the curb before the Beach Crest Hotel until I was abreast of it and then it was too late to pretend I hadn't been running. A voice behind the glowing cigarette behind the wheel barked, "Hey, you! What's the panic?"

I wheeled and came up to the door with the police insignia stencilled in gold on it, and the voice behind the cigarette softened.

"Oh, it's you, Captain."

I recognized Billy Farrel, a solid sort of cop.

"Hi, Billy. I was trying to trot off my insomnia. What's with you?"

The glowing cigarette bobbed in the direction of the porch.

"We got a noise complaint."

"We?"

"Ned's inside. A school teacher's room, yet. Probably doin' her homework out loud."

"Long time since I've seen Ned," I mused.

"Yeah. He ain't been the most sociable guy since they bust him from lieutenant. It's like drivin' around with a totem pole. Say, Tony. Why don't you go up and say hello? At least you'll get outta this wet."

"Think I will," I said.

The glowing cigarette tip waved me into the Beach Crest Hotel.

It wasn't difficult to find Room 6. You crossed a lobby that resembled a hunting lodge. You mounted wide, solid stairs and walked down the first corridor until you reached the closed door behind the unconscious old woman.

She lay on her back on the corridor floor—a greyed woman in a faded pink wrap-around. Her pulse was fluttery, but a pulse. I stepped over her and pushed into Room 6.

Patrolman Ned Lendine looked up with a black scowl which faded a little as he recognized me.

"'Lo, Tony. It's the Coxe punk."

Ned had been squatting on his haunches and holding the crystal of his pocket watch to the lips of David Coxe. To do this he had to raise Coxe's head by the black. curly locks. Now he pocketed the watch and let the face drop back to the floor.

"Hi, Ned," I said. "I was passing and Billy said you were up here." I wiggled a thumb toward the woman in the corridor. "What's she posing for?"

Lendine's scowl returned. "Meet Mrs. Scudder. She hears a noise and hollers copper. Then she follows me up and peeks over my shoulder. One peek—bingo!"

I touched one of Coxe's hundred-dollar boots with the same shoe I had used on his face earlier in the evening.

"Dead?"

"On arrival. With a milk bottle. Can you imagine?"

The remains of the milk bottle lay all around the remains of David Coxe. The neck of the milk bottle seemed to be balanced on a raw spot behind and below his left ear. The fact that it hadn't toppled off when Lendine raised the head piqued me. I glanced inquiringly at Ned. He nodded and I touched the bottleneck gently with my thumbnail. It wasn't balanced there.

It was jammed into Coxe's skull.

Ned groped a cigarette from a crumpled pack.

"Look at that dress on the floor, Tony. How I read it, he tried to attack her and she clobbered him with the bottle and followed him down to the floor with the bottleneck for the finish."

"That's how it could read," I brooded, gazing down at what remained of the emerald-green dressing gown, a limp huddle of fabric beyond the corpse.

"She don't get the chamber for clobbering *him*," Lendine brooded into the flame of a match he was applying to his cigarette. "Maybe a few years. What she ought to get is a gold medal."

"If she did it," I said.

NED FROWNED at me. He had a good face for frowning. He was even bigger and tougher than Red Gunnerson, but Ned's was a blond toughness. Golden stubble glinted over the crags and crannies of his face. His jaw bulged like a threatening fist.

Only his eyes belied the general air of hardness—and there was a story behind his eyes. It went back to the day I was still captain of detectives, the day I answered a call that Ned—a lieutenant of detectives at the time—had sent from his own home. I found him alongside the bathtub on his knees, still trying to tighten the tourniquets he had applied to his seventeen-year-old daughter's wrists. It was too late by then. Later, an autopsy disclosed her trouble had been man trouble. But then—alongside the bathtub—I tapped Ned's shoulder until his eyes turned to me and I asked, "She give you a reason, Ned?" He continued to look at me and I left it at that. But it was then his eyes, which had formerly been friendly brown eyes, acquired the expression with which he was regarding me now—an expression of bitter despair, the bewildered look of a trapped animal.

"*If* she did it?" he prodded.

I pointed to the black curls. "Okay to touch, Ned?"

"Why?"

"I want to see if she did it."

Ned held a lungful of smoke a long time before letting it plume from his nostrils. He nodded slowly.

"I'm just a patrolman now, Tony. Maybe an angle in this could start me back up."

"I'm just here for the exercise," I said.

"Go ahead, Tony," Ned nodded. "Pull one of your rabbits out of the bag. Touch all you want, but it ain't pretty."

I had noticed that. Now, squatting on my heels and lifting my erstwhile employer's head by the black curls, I noticed it again. Some of it, the blackened left eye and bruised lips and bent nose, had been my handiwork from Gunnerson's Tavern.

Slivers of glass embedded in the raw flesh of his forehead were a new touch, as were the trails of dried blood spreading, spider-web fashion, all over his face from his nostrils. The right eye bulged almost all the way from its socket.

"It still reads the same to me," Ned rumbled. "He tried to make her the hard way. She stops him—the hard way. Open and shut. Hey, Tony?"

I let Coxe's face return to the rug and rose, dusting my hands.

"I'm just here from insomnia, Ned. But I'd leave it more open than shut. Where's—"

"Good Lord!" Someone croaked from the doorway.

It was the old woman of the corridor, crouching halfway into the room. Grey locks straggled down around a face that would have been chalk-white were it not for violent dabs of rouge and lipstick. A bony hand wavered toward Coxe.

"That's not how he—"

"Wanna talk to you!" Ned growled, plowing into her. He backed her into the corridor, muttering, "Whaddya mean holding back so long before calling in?" He winked at me over his shoulder. "This'll take a minute, Tony."

The door got between us.

I scowled down at David Coxe and wondered how blood streaming from his nose could wrap itself all around his face without getting on the tip of his nose—*when his face pointed down!*

An impulse caused me to crouch alongside one of the outflung hands and examine Coxe's fingernails. There were dark brownish stains on their inner surfaces that could have been bloodstains.

I glanced up at Ned Lendine, back in the doorway and scowling down at me over that hammer jaw.

"I spotted that also, Tony. Part of the same story. Isn't it?"

"Could be," I shrugged. "It's your headache."

"Not mine," Lendine scowled. "Homicide rates lieutenants and captains. All I rate is chasing kids in hot rods." He shifted his scowl to the monk-cloth drapes through which were oozing the screams of an approaching siren. "Here comes Captain Svenson, sneaking up on the killer—"

"That lets me out," I said.

Neds tortured eyes studied me.

"Your screwy brain figure a gimmick, Tony?"

"If it does, you'll get it, Ned."

"Okay, pal."

I walked down the corridor and down the wide stairway to the lobby where Mrs. Scudder stood peering out the glass of the front door. She turned fright-dazed eyes on me. My smile seemed to increase her fright.

"What was that you started to say upstairs?" I asked her.

She regarded me with outright horror. Her mouth opened twice before words emerged, and then they were:

"Nothin'! Nothin'! I wasn't gonna say nothin'!"

She ducked past me and scurried across the lobby, her pink gown flaring out behind her. A door across the lobby swallowed her with a slam that rattled the windows.

I was a block away in the rain-swept night when the siren grumbled into reluctant silence before the Beach Crest Hotel.

I kept walking . . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Homicide Homework

I SAT on a hard chair facing Seraphine Smith in my easy chair and took her cool hands in my hot paws and told her, "Before you ask me anything I want to tell you something about this crime-detecting business.

"You start with someone and ask some questions and hear some answers and then move to another person and keep doing that. Sooner or later, how the answers jibe or clash or overlap gives you a sort of picture, and you match the picture to your facts and if they match, and you're not too cynical or conscientious, you call it a solution and let it go at that. If you're cynical or conscientious, you try to imagine every possible picture from the answers that might fit your facts, and you call the one that fits most of the facts your solution—and then cross your fingers and hope you are not sending an innocent person to prison.

"What I'm getting at," I said, watching confusion pucker her brows, "is that, from the facts I've seen and the answers I've heard up to here, two pictures are forming already. The law is accepting the wrong picture. I think it's the wrong picture because of what Coxe told me. And because of what you told me, added to what he told me, I'm going out on a long, long limb. I'm—"

"You *talked* to David?" she gasped.

"Figuratively. He'll never be deader," I said, holding her trembling hands. "But he managed to tell me he put those scratches on your body and that you splintered the milk bottle over his head and he fell on his back and lay there while you stepped out of your dress, grabbed your coat and got out—which is substantially your story. And also the landlady's—although she nutshelled it into the word: 'Nothing.'"

"Now you're confusing me," Seraphine Smith said, withdrawing her hands from mine.

"I don't mean to confuse you. Let me elaborate. When the police found Coxe he was no longer on his back—but his face. And the neck of the milk bottle you claim to have tossed away was embedded in his mastoid. The police picture will be that you followed Coxe down to the floor, rolled him over and slammed the jagged points of the bottleneck into his neck."

"But I didn't!" she moaned.

"How the blood dried on his face convinces me you didn't," I assured her. "But the law in this town, like the law in most towns, would rather have a simple, air-tight picture like that, with you in the middle, than a subtler one which involves some unknown, X, who came upon Coxe on his back in your room and finished the job you started."

"But *who*?"

"That's my department," I said. "The only motive X would need would be to have ever had personal dealings with Coxe at any time—which rules out motive as a starting point in our inquiry.

"X was somebody who got into your room between the time you left and the time Ned Lendine arrived. Which narrows it down to someone who knew you and Coxe were out together tonight—and that boils down to the citizens in Gunnerson's Tavern, or someone who followed Coxe to your hotel. Or, on an outside chance, someone who came to visit you, found Coxe, and had a good enough motive to finish the job you started."

"Nobody would visit me at that hour."

"That's your department," I encouraged her. "Everything concerning you is your department. I want you to paint me a word picture of you. Everything that ever happened between you and David Coxe, going back to the time you first knew the world held an animal by that name."

"But I just knew him as a student. That was six years ago, Tony. He was bright and—" her lips twisted wryly— "interesting. I met him once about three years ago at a class reunion and he was pleasant and charming. What else can I say?"

"You could tell me what he said this evening to bring your hand to his face."

Almost, it was as if I had slapped her. I was afraid for a moment that she was going to slide back to hysteria, but her lips clamped on it and parted just enough to say, "He put his hand on my—"

"Never mind the geography," I cut in. "He got smart and you slapped him and he socked you and I took a hand—and then what?"

"I rode a cab home."

"This is like pulling teeth," I grinned at her. "What did you do there?"

"I—" she gestured weakly— "I cried. I was shocked and frightfully hurt. I cried a little and then I ate a sandwich and drank some milk and I felt better. I carried the empty bottle to the door to set it outside for the milkman.

"David must have been waiting in the corridor. He came into the room, forcing me back, mouthing obscenities—like a small boy boasting of what he would do—but a small boy in the body of a man capable of doing what he boasted. But the things he said were—were—"

I COULD almost see the things he'd said in her dazed eyes. We were both on our feet now and she was gripping my lapels and I was holding her shoulders and the force of her memory in her eyes made it natural for me to pull her toward me and for her to bury her eyes against my chest.

"Never mind what he said," I breathed. "Just what he did."

"He—he caught me in his arms and tried to kiss me and I tore back out of his arms," she told my chest. "But as I drew back he caught the front of my gown and ripped it down almost to the hem and stood there with most of my gown in his hands.

"He was *laughing*, Tony—laughing and lurching toward me and taunting me, and I struck out at him to fend him off. But I didn't realize the milk bottle was still in my hand—not until I saw it disintegrate on his face.

"He lay sprawled on his back with the blood streaming from cuts on his face, not moving, not seeming to breathe. All I could think of doing was to leave that place. I don't remember getting out of my dress or getting the coat from the closet. I do remember throwing the neck of the milk bottle away from me. I left the room with the coat in my hands, struggling into it as I ran down the corridor.

"Either because it was not yet buttoned, or because of my expression, or merely the fact that I was running, the man in the lobby acted startled to see me coming down the stairs. He started to say something, but his being there added to my terror and I ran madly into the night, into the rain, running—"

"What man?"

"I don't know. I thought of you and that was when I associated Lark with the man who had solved the Hunter Massacre and that bowling-alley case and I had the fantastic notion that you could prove, somehow, that what had happened hadn't —*stop shaking me!*"

"I'm not shaking you!" I yelled at her, removing my hands from her shoulders. "How you found me doesn't matter. A man in the lobby at that time matters. Do you think X's grow on trees?"

Her eyes grew enormous.

"Of course!" she breathed.

"What was he like?"

Tears flooded her eyes.

"Tony, I was so terrified, I—I didn't notice. Just a . . . man."

"Old or young?"

"I don't know."

"Big?"

"I couldn't say."

"Was it Red Gunnerson?"

"I never saw him, Tony. How could I tell?"

"I don't know how you could tell," I scowled at her.

I stood staring at her and then she whispered, "Tony, what shall I do now?"

It was a good question. A good answer would have been: "Sit here while I phone the law. I've broken half a dozen laws up to here. Not only could they take my permit away, they could plant me in San Quentin for years for such trivia as withholding evidence in a homicide, being an accessory after the fact—and so forth."

That would have been a good answer. But the words became scrambled with the recent memory of her slenderness trembling in my arms and came out:

"Go into my bedroom. Crawl into my bed and get some sleep. I'll use the divan. That's all we can do now."

That was all we did.

SUNDAY was as dismal as Saturday had been. What the radio reporters chose to call "The Bottleneck Murder" seemed to be making even more of a splash than the wet—as was bound to happen when the corpse represented ten million haircuts and the alleged corpsemaker was a missing schoolmarm who happened to be beautiful.

According to the radio, Seraphine Smith had been spotted variously in Stockton, Bakersfield, Santa Barbara, San Luis Obispo—and even Seattle. According to the radio again, Captain of Pacific City Detectives Frank Svenson averred the situation was cut and dried, the case was open and shut, the suspect would be captured and imprisoned within a matter of hours.

According to Captain Frank Svenson, who eyed me unhappily across the city hall desk that used to be mine: "Tony, you can't tell me she didn't do it!"

"I'm telling you nothing," I said mildly. "I'm asking you."

"What can I tell you that you can't tell me? You was there at Gunnerson's when it started. You dropped in on Ned at the Beach Crest when it finished."

"Billy Farrel suggested I go up," I put in.

"I know that!" he nodded vigorously. "I ain't tryin' to angle you into the kill. I'm just tryin' to get you outta my hair. What reason could you have for nosin' into it?"

"My nose," I smiled. "It doesn't smell right. You know how I get when something doesn't smell right."

"I'll sign an affadavit, but, holy cow, Tony—what more do you want? We lift the Smith dame's prints off pieces of the bottle—*and* the bottleneck. You know what kind of a punk Coxe was. He tried to make time. She stopped him." Svenson spread wide palms. "What else could it be?"

Svenson was a good stooge for a good detective, the function, with all due modesty, he had fulfilled when I was captain of detectives. On his own he was a good stooge for police routine.

He was a sandy-haired man with small, cruel eyes and a loose mouth full of dental gold. It was his manner to either bluster or whine—and he was whining now because my hands were ostensibly clean and because he knew I could have his job for the asking, a little gambit involving the commissioner's daughter that has been recounted elsewhere.

"What else it could be is what I'm after," I told him mildly. "Mainly, I don't like how he was found on his face with the bloodmarkings showing he'd been on his back a long time, bleeding. Which raised the possibility Miss Smith just conked him and scrammed, and somebody else stepped in to finish the job."

The tiny eyes grew suspicious and fixed themselves on me.

"You talk as if you're working for the Smith dame, Tony."

"Sure. I've got her stashed in my house."

"Well, who *are* you workin' for, Tony? Will you tell me that?"

"Coxe. The guy paid me to bodyguard him. The least I can do is work out his dough fingering his killer. Did Schultz turn in his report yet?"

Doc Schultz was the city medical examiner, a little, gnome-like quack with the ability to deduce, if a bullet was found in a corpse's head, that the corpse became a corpse from a bullet in the head.

"You saw Coxe, Tony," Frank whined, "and you're still asking?"

"I don't mean what killed him. I want to know when he died."

Svenson shrugged. "You know how it goes, Tony. It was a couple of hours before we could locate Doc. Someone had called him out to Watsonville on a wild goose chase. By the time he returned he

couldn't narrow it down too fine. Some time between eleven-thirty and midnight. Maybe she stunned him first and left him on his back, bleeding, until she got up enough nerve to roll him over and dig the glass into his neck. We'll find out when we catch her."

"What kind of wild goose chase, Frank?"

"Now what are you talking about?"

"Doc Schultz. What sent him to Watsonville?"

"A phone call. It's got nothin' to do with anythin'. Forget it, Tony."

"Who phoned him, Frank?" I asked patiently.

The two wide palms rose and slammed down on the desk that used to be mine.

"I don't know! Doc don't know! A wise guy. Some joker with a blab about Schultz's kid being in a scrape in Watsonville. The kid turned out to be in Santa Cruz where he lives."

"I never even knew Doc was married," I mused.

"Who did?" Svenson shrugged. "First I ever heard of the kid was last night. Now will you lay off?"

"What time did Mrs. Scudder phone in?"

Svenson's tiny eyes implored the ceiling for succor from me.

"Tony—"

"What time, Frank?"

"It's on the blotter at eleven forty-five. Now—"

"And Ned and Billy, Frank. What time did they get to Coxe?"

"Around midnight, Tony. Now, will you—"

I did.

THE HUNTING lodge lobby of the Beach Crest Hotel was empty. A window had been cut out of the door through which Mrs. Scudder had fled last night, a small window with a ledge at its bottom and a metal sign, Office, over it and a pushbutton on the ledge. There was emptiness in the small office beyond.

I touched the pushbutton and heard a bell ringing somewhere in the rear. Nothing happened. I depressed the button a full minute and heard the bell ring a full minute—and still nothing happened.

The door was locked, but by reaching through the window I was able to unlock it. I crossed the office, pushed aside heavy drapes and found myself in a small corridor with another door at the far end.

This door opened to my touch.

I found myself staring at Mrs. Scudder, who was lying on her back in a bed and staring at me. She looked like one of those D. P. pictures of a woman who had been methodically starved for years.

Her face, even her lips, was white as chalk, white as the grey hair forming a tangled nest between her face and the pillow.

The pink wrap-around was functioning only in spots. I walked around the bed and stood over her. Her eyes followed me, but the rest of her remained motionless.

Her teeth grinned at me from a glass of liquid on a small table alongside the bed. I ignored them for the syringe that lay alongside the glass on the table.

She stirred a little when I fingered it. She made a clawing motion, worked her toothless mouth soundlessly, then sank back into wide-eyed coma.

I rolled her sleeve back to the elbow

and clucked my tongue at the pincushion the skin about her elbow veins obviously was. I let the sleeve drop back over her little secrets and spent a futile five minutes prowling that little room.

The only interesting items were old snapshots lining a mirror, mainly of a young brunette of striking contours in typical beach poses—slinking on beach chairs, cavorting with lads over the sands, emerging from the surf, swimming cap in hand, brunette tresses streaming in the wind . . . .

Mrs. Scudder in happier days.

I returned to the bed and caught the staring eyes and asked, "What made you phone the cops last night?"

The eyes continued to stare. She didn't want to answer any questions. She wanted to remain in her private nirvana: Xanadu or the Taj Mahal or Versailles or Gregory Peck's arms—or wherever the narcotic in her veins led her away from the realities of this harsh apple.

The realities of this harsh apple gradually intruded upon her consciousness. I could see that in occasional flickers of her eyelids, her tongue slowly wetting her bloodless lips, her fingers clawing vaguely —all in response to an elaborate act I was performing. I was ostentatiously putting her hypodermic needle into my pocket, taking it out, examining it carefully, nodding my head wisely, then shoving it into my pocket again. I repeated this dumb, dull pantomime again and again.

In time—and I don't recall how many times I repeated the act—she rose on one elbow and reached a bony claw toward my pocket and mumbled, "Mush have i'. Gimme. Mine."

I brought the glass tumbler containing her teeth within reach of the claw and she automatically transferred them from the liquid to her mouth, and in that act seemed to recover more consciousness.

"Give you nothing!" I scowled at her. "I'm taking this—and *you*—down to headquarters!"

It took more time for her to react to this. She was sitting with her scrawny legs dangling over the edge of the bed now. The dream was out of her eyes. She had become furtive. Her eyes roamed the room nervously as if enemies were lurking in the shadows, waiting to leap at her. She rubbed the inside of her left elbow. She tasted her tongue and found it sour. She glanced toward the table, then at my pocket, then up to my eyes.

For a few breathless seconds I thought she was going to have my eyes to drop in that glass tumbler along with her teeth. I mean the lady finally reacted! She reacted in a flying leap behind claws aimed at my eyes!

FOR A FEW breathless seconds it was nip and tuck. But then I caught her wrists and we waltzed around that little room a while. I had to keep my shins clear of her flying heels. I had to keep jerking her store teeth off my arms.

I had to finally twist her wrists behind her back and force her with me down to the bed and take her saliva on my face and snap my head back from her efforts to mash my nose and mouth with her head.

In the end that dirty white mop sagged against me and deep sobs heaved into my chest and I told the mop. "Forget the cops. I dont care if you eat opium with a fork. You'll get your needle back. Just answer a few questions first."

Her eyes climbed my face to my eyes.

"Lemme go," she croaked. "I'll be all right now."

I released her wrists and she sat rubbing them alternately. Then she stretched out on the bed and brought part of a quilt over the lower part of her and favored me with a warm, friendly snicker.

"I really tore one, huh?"

"That you did," I said.

Her features sagged back to their normal expression of idiocy and she stared blankly at the ceiling.

"You're Tony Lark, huh? You were here las' night."

"I was here late," I said. "I never did get to learn what made you call the law in the first place."

"Callin' me a haggy old witch is what did it," she told the ceiling in her dull monotone.

I nodded and waited for more. The pause lengthened until it began crumpling in the middle.

"Remember me?" I grinned.

"Never cared if they had men in their rooms," she monotoned on, evidently remembering me. "Always figgered a girl's

business is her own business—like I'd like people to figger about me. But when they bring in bums an' call names through the door—that's somethin' else again!"

"Sure," I murmured to fill in another growing pause. "What time?"

Her eyes focused on me uncertainly.

"What time what?"

"When all this happened."

"I dunno. A little before I called the johns. Five-ten minutes. I dunno." She rubbed the inside of her left elbow. "Damn, I need a lift!"

"You had a lift."

"One grain don't take me far."

"Just a little more, Mrs. Scudder. You sure they were calling you names? Not each other?"

"That, too—but good!" She aimed a talon upwards. "That's her room. Room 6. Right up there. I could hear 'em from here. That's what woke me up—an' her a hoity-toity school teacher! She cussed him like I never heard anybody cuss anybody in my whole life—and I've been around."

"Him cursing her, you mean," I corrected.

This seemed to annoy her.

"Her cussin' him, I said! Called him things I never knew been invented. I went up an' knocked on her door an' yelled this is a respectable hotel an' they'd better calm down—an' that's when she did it. Called me a haggy old witch. Told me to go to hell an' mind my own business, the school-teachin' tramp!

"I minded my own business, all right!" Mrs. Scudder cackled at the ceiling. "Came down here an' called the johns. If I'd o' called before I went up they'd o' caught her right in the act, the murderin', haggy, name-callin', school-teachin', hoity-toity tramp!"

"And that was at eleven forty-five? When you called in, I mean."

"I dunno," she said.

"That's when it was. Now, when Ned Lendine arrived and you followed him up and passed out in the corridor—just what did you see to make you pass out?"

"I saw—"

"What?"

She didn't want to tell me what. She wanted to brood through a pause. The pause stretched until it sagged, then crumpled, then came apart at the seams, but it went on and on.

I touched her shoulder. It was like touching a corpse. Her eyes watched me touch her shoulder, but there was no understanding behind them.

She had drifted back to Xanadu or the Taj Mahal.

I let her drift. Once around that reviving routine was par for my patience—and eyes. I borrowed a passkey from a group of passkeys hanging on the office wall and went up to Room 6.

It looked better without the remains of David Coxe on the rug, but I didn't linger to ascertain how much better. I stuffed my pockets with soft pink thing from the drawers. I wrapped two dresses around my middle and buttoned and belted my trenchcoat over them and then spent a few moments listening at the door. The corridor sounded uninhabited. I swung the door open.

Ned Lendine stood regarding me over his sledge-hammer jaw.

He didn't appear surprised. He said, "Homework, Tony?" and stepped past me into the room, where he turned to face me.

"You?" I asked from the doorway.

"Homework," he said.

"You're off duty," I said.

"You're off the force," he said.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Man on the Staircase

THERE was nothing I could say to that. I looked at him and he said, "Aw, hell, Tony! Im just angling for a break back to lieutenant. What you said last night about her not doing it dug under my hide and—"

"I didn't say that, Ned."

"Then you looked it," he said, grinning. He had a surprisingly nice grin for that hard face. In fact, standing there in his salt-and-pepper raincoat and grey fedora, he was a nice-looking lad. The golden stubble was even shaved off his jaw. "Then Frank was complaining around headquarters this morning about you nosing into it. Frank's a carbon cop, but you know me, Tony. I always like to learn. When the other guys used to say your

hunches were from hunger, didn't I usually back you?"

"Usually," I conceded. "Tell you what, Ned. I get a big answer, I'll drop it in your lap."

His grin really blossomed now.

"How about a nibble, Tony?"

I raised a finger. "A. You found him face down with blood all over his face, but it didn't reach the tip of his nose." I raised a second finger alongside the first. "B. I have a witness who spotted Miss Smith away from here at eleven thirty-five last night. But the old witch downstairs didnt call in until eleven forty-five and that—according to her own story—was almost immediately after she heard a man and woman in this room cursing each other."

Ned Lendine nodded thoughtfully. "The blood makes sense, Tony. But about Millie's idea of the time—" his grin soured— "she's on the arm."

"Millie?"

"Millie Scudder. The landlady. Not only is she on the arm, she's pulled stretches for peddling the stuff. You know what the time element is to somebody on the arm, Tony."

That thought worried me. A dope addict can think a minute is an hour or an hour a minute.

I shrugged and we stood there trading stares of baby-eyed innocence—and then he walked over and put his arm around my shoulder, taking me out of Room 6 with him.

"Okay, Tony. I'd like to come up with answers that'll make a sucker out of Svenson when he latches onto the Smith woman."

"Just dig into Millie Scudder," I told him. "On the arm or no, her story puts a man and woman in this room after Seraphine Smith left it."

I left him with his finger on the push-button at the office window . . . .

* * *

Seraphine Smith asked, "What do you mean by a *treatment*, Tony?"

We were in my living room over my pipe and her cigarette after a mild feast she had concocted around a mess of clams. In the black dress she wore—one of the two I had smuggled from her room—she looked for the first time in our brief acquaintance like a school teacher. Not that it was bad. Her large violet eyes under the pale gold upsweep and over the delicately hollowed cheeks still acted like vitamins to my aging constitution. But it would have been harder to take her in my arms to soothe her now.

I think some of the classroom discipline with which we have all been instilled never fully leaves us. A certain amount of it was in my living room then.

"We're going to find out what the man in the lobby last night looked like," I told her.

"But I told you, Tony. In my panic, I—"

"In your panic you nevertheless saw him," I cut in. "Which means his image is registered somewhere in your memory whether you realize it or not. Other impressions at the time were so much stronger that they overshadowed the memory of him. But you never totally forget anything you ever experience. It may drop out of sight—even beyond recall—but it's still there. And your memory of this guy is recent enough to justify a treatment, which is exactly what it is—a memory treatment."

"That would make a good treatise in psychology," she said.

"You will have to concentrate hard enough to relive every moment of last night," I said. "For instance, at the moment you left Room 6, how were you holding your coat?"

"Across my back. It was half on and half off me."

"You'll have to be more explicit. Which arm was in which sleeve first?"

She frowned down at her cigarette, then snuffed it in an ashtray, then folded her hands in her lap and frowned down at them.

"The left, I think. It's usually the left, isn't it?"

"*Usually* has nothing to do with it. You'll have to concentrate on this, put yourself back in Room 6. Coxe is bleeding to death on the floor behind you. Your town dress is on the floor behind him. All you want is out. You're going out and struggling into your coat at the same time. How?"

"Left arm in the left sleeve first, Tony. I recall now I didn't get my right arm in

its sleeve immediately. My nails caught in the lining. Not until I reached the stairs—"

"Let's get back to the door. You leave it open or shut?"

"Shut. No! Open, Tony. I thought about it later, running through the streets, but I was too frightened to—"

"Going down the corridor," I cut in, "and trying to slide your right arm into the sleeve—what did you see?"

"Only the corridor, Tony. Nobody was there."

"Then describe the corridor."

"But you saw it, Tony."

"With my eyes. Now I want to see it with yours."

HER EYES narrowed in thought. "Well, there's a threadbare carpet runner raveling a bit at the edges. Black and dirty grey. Navy and gold originally, I think. Room 14 is across the corridor from my door, Room 5 adjoins mine in the direction of the stairs. A linen closet faces 5. Room 15 is across from Room 4. The public bath faces Room 3.

"Water was dripping from the hot water tap in the sink. The bathroom door was open, the bathroom empty. I almost tripped mounting the three steps to the upper landing of the stairway and trying to untangle my nails from the lining at the same time. But I did get my arm through the right sleeve then.

"Then I was descending the stairs and fumbling with the top button of my coat. I was halfway down the stairs when the fat man spoke. I tell you, Tony, the sight of him and his sudden voice, and how the light reflecting from his glasses made his eyes seem so huge, terrified me so, I—"

The words died as her own eyes became huge.

"Tony!"

"That's what I mean," I said to her. "Fat. And he wore glasses. Where was he in relation to you on the stairs?"

"Rising from the lounge chair facing the stairs," she breathed. "He was half out of the chair, his hand propping him from the arms. Definitely fat, Tony, and the glasses were horn-rimmed. He wore a brown, shapeless suit. Raised his left hand toward me and said, 'Miss—' That was all he said. Tony, I *do* remember him!"

"Sure. Would you recognize him?"

"I'm certain I would!"

"So would I," I said. I went to the phone and called the Watsonville police department and located Jack Penn, a lieutenant of detectives with whom I had swapped favors in the past.

"Yeah, Tony," his voice assured my ear. "Old Schultz was up here last night. Had a bum steer his kid done it again."

"Done what again, Jack?"

"Slapped some tramp around. He pulled it in Watsonville Manor about six months ago. One of your lads happened to be around and he squared the beef. The gal preferred a sawbuck to a beef."

"And last night it happened again?"

"Naw. The kid wasn't around at all, best we could find out. Just Schultz with ants. You know the story?"

"No."

"Schultz just got custody of the kid about a year ago, when the kid's old lady died back East. The kid has no use for Doc, wouldn't even live in Pacific City, figures Doc was to blame for some hard times his mom had after the divorce. Doc, on the other hand, would give his right arm for the kid to call him Pop."

Silence flooded my ear.

"That the story, Jack?"

"Whaddya want, plot complications? You should have seen old Doc's face when he tore into headquarters last night."

"Who squared the kid's beef with the girl the first time?"

"I dunno, Tony. One of your lads. Okay?"

"Okay, Jack. I owe you my right eye."

I struggled into my trenchcoat and hat, and Seraphine Smith asked me, "Where away now, Tony?"

"I'll see a girl about a question she asked me yesterday."

"What question?"

"She asked me if I was tough."

"Are you?"

"What do you think?" I asked her eyes which had glided to within inches of my eyes.

Seraphine Smith eliminated the inches and kept them eliminated while my arteries became unhardened and my temples turned back from grey to brown and my temperature spurted toward the ionosphere.

Then she pulled away and smiled. "I think you're a pushover, Tony Lark."

I followed my burning face out into the rain . . . .

MY BRAIN ticked in tune with the windshield wipers I drove through Pacific City. A lot of local brains were probably ticking over what the papers called the Bottleneck Murder. But Pacific City—what I could see of it through the fan-shaped clearings on the pebbled wet of my windshield—was largely indoors. I listened to the *click-clack* of the wipers and the *squoosh* of my tires on the pavement and forced my thoughts away from the fullness of Seraphine Smith in my arms and brooded that a Y and—possibly a Z—had joined the X who gave David Coxe the final nudge into eternity.

In fact, Room 6, between eleven-thirty, when Seraphine Smith fled from it, and midnight, when Ned Lendine and Mrs. Scudder first glimpsed the corpse of David Coxe, must have been as visited as a department store revolving door during a sale.

I tried to draw new mental pictures that included the open door of Room 6 and the fat man in the lobby and the woman who had cursed Mrs. Scudder through the closed door and what Mrs. Scudder had seen over Ned Lendine's shoulder and the anonymous phone call to Doc Schultz and the fact that David Coxe was such a universally hated punk—and I could imagine several pictures, but pictures that overlapped. Not one of them could include all the facts I had—and all of them put together created confusion.

I was still confused when I parked before the main porch of the Coxe ranch house.

The elderly Mexican woman who answered my ring took my name, then closed the door on my face.

Anita Coxe opened it.

"You're wasting your time, Tony Lark. He can't use a bodyguard any longer."

Her voice was still something borrowed from a stevedore after a hard night on Skid Row. She wore a coal-black riding habit with gold piping over the collar and pockets. Her hair was disheveled as if it had been pressed that way between her head and a pillow. Her eyes held tiny red flecks amid the dirty grey. Her lips were looser. The over-all effect of her expression was one of resigned dullness.

I said, "You don't look like someone who just fell into ten blasted millions."

"That's a hell of a thing to say!" she cried, slamming the door.

It slammed on my shoe and bounced open and I bounced through it. We stood staring at each other in the redwood-paneled foyer. I nudged the door shut behind me.

"All right, you're in." She shrugged. "Now what?"

"Chit-chat," I said.

"Chit your fool head off," she said. "I don't have to listen."

She turned and started slowly up the stairs and I called to her ascending plumpness:

"I want to talk about the haggy old witch you assigned to hell last night between eleven-thirty and eleven forty-five."

Her ascent couldn't have been stopped more abruptly by a stone wall. There should have been a muffled roll of drums to accompany her slow descent—then a loud boom on the bass drum heralding the breathless silence as she stood facing me again, her face ashen, her fists clenched at her sides. When she spoke her voice quavered.

"The louse squealed!"

"That's a side-issue," I said quietly. "The main issue is that you found your brother bleeding on his back. You rolled him to his face and jabbed that bottleneck into his neck."

There was more red than grey in her eyes now.

"*He* said that?"

"I said it. Just now."

"Not me," she said, trying to dig her stare past my eyes to my thoughts. "I didn't touch any bottleneck. I never saw the bottleneck. I never heard of it until they came and woke me up this morning." Her lips trembled. "I was going to *marry* him! Tomorrow!"

"Your *brother?*"

"That's a bright crack! Phillip Bowers, the fat, yellow-bellied, squealing son of a—"

It went on—the same dirge I had heard her direct at David Coxe yesterday, the

same delectable conversation to which Mrs. Scudder had been treated through the door of Room 6 last night, the things Mrs. Scudder "never knew had been invited."

It finally came to an end. Her eyes focused on mine. "You really think I did it? Killed Dave, I mean?"

"You or Bowers—or both," I said.

Her blonde fuzz shook violently.

"Not me!"

"Him?"

SHE NODDED thoughtfully. "Yes, Phillip Bowers. He wanted to marry me and Dave kept running him off. Phil spent a lot of time following Dave around—to get something on him. Last night he followed Dave to that woman's room. He phoned me from the room after she ran out and I came and saw him take the bottleneck and—" Her eyes caught a flicker in my eyes and her voice rose insistently. "All right, I lied to you about the bottleneck. I saw him take it and stab Dave and—"

"And then you came home and drank a glass of milk and went to bed." I grinned.

She put soft fingers on my wrist.

"Listen to me. You want the truth? I didn't see him do it really. I just *know* he did—later—after I was gone. That's what brought the old hag up to the door—Phil and me arguin'. He wanted us *both* to—" Her grip on my wrist tightened. "Stop looking at me like that! All right, Dave was my brother. But you didn't have to live with his hands slapping you all the time and his words making you want to find a hole to crawl into—and his blasted hands on the blasted money so tight I had to cry and beg for even a few dollars for a new slip."

I asked, "Where's Bowers? I'll have him picked up. You can write out a statement at headquarters."

She said, "327 Chamberliss—*no!*" The dullness vanished from her face, leaving it suddenly alert and sharp. "Listen, if he squealed, how is it you don't know where he—"

"I didn't know anything," I cut in gently. "Just that a woman used an unusual vocabulary on Mrs. Scudder through the door of Room 6 last night—and I'd heard your unusual vocabulary."

She aged a hundred years in one second.

"*Phil didn't squeal?*"

"Don't you remember, kitten? You did. Just now."

It was like slapping her face with a wet fish.

"You *know* I was lyin'!"

"That's possible," I conceded. "But I know also you were in that room after Miss Smith left—you and Bowers, who was probably the fat man Miss Smith saw in the lobby. Which rates a trip to headquarters to check what you saw—and they'll know how to make you tell what you saw. Let's go, kitten."

Her hands were on both my wrists now.

"Lark—Tony—it's worth a million dollars if you keep us out of it."

"Take it easy with that stuff, kitten. You've only got ten of 'em."

Her hands slid up around my neck.

"Tony," she breathed, "I'll give you anything you want—*anything!*"

"Just you in headquarters, kitten. That's all I want."

"I'll marry *you!*" she cried.

"God forbid!" I shuddered, drawing away.

She clenched her hands and stooped over them as if she had half of a stomach ache.

"But it was all lies, Tony! Nothing *really* happened. Dave was dead. There was nothing we could do, so we went away. Why drag us into it now?"

"Because you dragged yourselves into it last night. Lets go, kitten."

"Why there? I'll tell you anything you want to know here."

"Where did you learn about Doc Schultz's son?"

"Who's Doc Schultz?"

"Wrong answer. Let's go, kitten."

"Can I get a coat at least?"

"Take my advice and don't skip out a back way, kitten. It would look awfully bad to a jury—if this reaches a jury."

"That's your advice," she said dully.

"I'll wait for you here," I told her.

I watched her mount the stairs, then I filled and lit my pipe and looked around for a place to drop the match. There seemed to be no place in that foyer. I opened the door and flipped the match across the porch into the wet. I closed the door and turned toward the stairs, and the bowl of my pipe disintegrated.

It seemed to take hours for me to gape down at the empty end of pipestem jutting from my teeth, to glance down at the scattered bits of pipe bowl on the floor amid the clods of tobacco and the wisps of smoke rising from a few burning flakes.

It seemed to take more hours for me to note the hole in the doorjamb on a level with my pipestem, and countless additional hours for my eyes to march up the stairway to where Anita Coxe stood, sighting down at me over the long barrel of her rifle for a second shot.

They must have been fourth dimensional hours—timeless flashes of mind—because her second shot splintered the door. But I was already past the door.

I was across the porch and down the steps and jabbing my heel at the starter in my Terraplane.

I was halfway down the wide curve of highway, still in second, with the gas pedal jammed to the floorboard and the speedometer needle hovering around forty—and that bit of pipestem still gripped in my teeth—when the hole appeared in my left front fender.

So much for her third shot.

There may have been more. I was on the Santa Cruz Highway, racing for Pacific City, in third now, with the speedometer needle straining past seventy, that bit of pipestem still in my teeth.

I spat it into the rain.

I couldn't have heard a fourth shot. A symphony orchestra was booming a series of powerful chords deep in my chest. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

Too' Many Killers

THE WAY to make a man move is to push him off balance and keep him off balance in the direction you want him to move. The glimpse I let Phillip Bowers have of the badge inside my wallet pushed him off balance.

He looked, this rainy Sunday afternoon, like a man already deeply troubled—and as if sight of my badge was close to the straw that would burst him open at the seams.

In the doorway of the end room of the motel court that 327 Chambliss turned out to be—two blocks north of my own home—he seemed to need a shave, a bath, a big meal, a nights sleep and, above all, a friend.

He was the character I had seen David Coxe boot and slap away from the ranch on Saturday. His reddened eyes peered at me through horn-rimmed glasses. Dark stubble dotted his pudgy face. His white shirt, open at the collar and rolled at the sleeves, looked well sweated and much slept in. The original creases of his brown trousers were all but lost amid myriad criss-crossing creases.

Sight of my badge caused him to have trouble with his Adam's apple. He tried to say something—but the art of keeping a man off balance involves not letting him say anything.

I nudged him off balance, literally, by shoving him back into his room. A typical low-income bachelor's room. We can ignore its details. I glimpsed it but briefly. I kept his words from emerging by keeping his pink ears full of my words:

"Let's move, Bowers. Get your hat and coat—and a toothbrush might be a good idea. This your closet? Come on, man—*move!* We haven't got all day. Let's go, Bowers."

He wanted to pause and collect his wits and use his own words to bring the situation into focus, but my words and shoves made his wants futile, got a jacket on his back, a black raincoat over that, a brown felt hat on his brown stubble. My hands and chatter got him out of his room and through the rain to my Terraplane.

He had the pause he wanted in the two-block drive to my house and had gotten as far as: "Hey! Are you arresting—" when we reached the house.

I merely prodded him off balance again. I nudged him out the car, through my gate, up three porch steps, through the door and into the living room—where Seraphine Smith stood with her fingers laced together and her eyes wide and comprehending as I thrust Phillip Bowers to within a few feet of her.

"This him, hon?"

She nodded breathlessly.

I spun the man around to face me, and his eyes also were filling with comprehension.

"You're him," I told him quietly. "You

heard her. You saw her race down the stairs last night. Eleven-thirty. You went upstairs, found the room with the door wide open, saw David Coxe on his back on the floor of that room, on his back and bleeding. Then what?"

He jerked a stubby thumb over his shoulder. "She—"

That was all he said for the nonce. His face had jerked to the right from my palm on his brown stubble. The glasses slid halfway down his nose.

"Never mind her, Bowers. She was out in the rain, running. You were in that room with Coxe. Then what?"

He adjusted the glasses back to his eyes with trembling fingers.

"You're not—"

That, too, was punctuated by my palm, snapping his face the other way and completely dislodging the horn-rims. He caught them as they fell.

"Never mind me, either!" I scowled at him. "You, Bowers! All I want to hear about is *you!* What happened before you phoned Anita Coxe. What you were arguing about that made her curse you. What happened after the landlady yelled at you through the door. Those are the things I want to hear about, Bowers! Talk!"

He had the glasses back over his eyes again. He blinked owlishly at me. He blinked down at his trembling hands, then jammed them obstinately into his trouser pockets.

"I'll—I'll talk at police headquarters," he croaked.

"Here first," I said.

"Headquarters first," he said.

He was no longer off balance.

I TOSSED my hat on the divan. I slipped out of my trenchcoat, then out of my jacket, and dropped them on the divan. I unbuttoned my sleeves and rolled them up slowly, giving him ample opportunity to study the butt of the .38 Positive jutting from the holster strapped under my left arm.

He studied it. He studied it as if, by studying it, he could learn the secret of the atom bomb and where to find a furnished apartment and how to earn a million tax-free dollars.

I glanced around and caught Seraphine Smith studying my face with the same intensity Phillip Bowers was studying my gun. There was a flicker of curiosity in her face, a dab of doubt and—deep within her—an undercurrent of sheer horror.

"Better go into the bedroom, hon," I told her quietly. "It may not be nice. But he'll wind up talking to me. They always wind up talking to me."

The horror rose to the surface of her face then, sweeping everything else before it—but her eyes had left my face. They passed my shoulder and focused on the door of the living room behind me.

"Tony, maybe he'll talk to *me,*" Ned Lendine's voice drawled from behind me.

He stood in the doorway, sliding out of his black raincoat and letting it drop to the floor and tossing his uniform kepi on top of the coat. He was in uniform now, as impressive as a cop on a traffic poster—and just as expressionless, his bitter brown eyes examining Phillip Bowers over his out-thrust jaw.

The plump man swept by me in a dash toward Ned.

"Officer! This man tried to—"

The words broke off in a grunt as Bowers spun halfway around and came up against the wall with a jar that shook the furniture.

"Didn't you hear the man?" Ned asked him, casually rubbing the knuckles of his left hand in the palm of his right. "He doesn't want to hear about himself—or the lady. Just you, honey." Ned's eyes studied Seraphine Smith incuriously, then shifted to mine. "Took your advice and braced Millie Scudder again, Tony.

"The timing did seem cockeyed, morphine or no morphine. And that cussin' she got didn't seem like out of a classroom. So I figured another dame—and maybe another guy. And then when I checked the stuff in Miss Smith's room—you should have known we'd taken an inventory last night, Tony—I spotted two dresses and some flimsy stuff missing. So I came here. This Miss Smith?"

"That," I said, nodding toward Phillip Bowers, who was dabbing a handkerchief over his face, holding his glasses in his left hand and shuttling wild eyes between Ned and me, "is the guy she spotted in the lobby at eleven-thirty, the time she lammed. And he's the guy Scudder heard arguing with Coxe's sister, Anita—between eleven-thirty and eleven forty-five."

"Miss Smith didn't go back after eleven-thirty, Tony?"

"She was here with me until I got to the hotel a little after midnight, Ned."

"I buy it, Tony." Ned's unhappy eyes slid to Bowers. "You hear that, honey? What have you got to say for yourself?"

Bowers, his fat sagging inertly from the weakness of shock, had very little to say for himself.

"I want—a—lawyer," he croaked.

Ned's blond brows arched.

"You don't want to talk to me, honey?"

Bowers shook his head slightly, as if a hard shake would cause it to roll off his neck.

"I—I want a lawyer."

Ned clutched the front of Bowers shirt in his left hand and tilted Bowers back against the wall and grinned tightly into Bowers' wide-eyed face—and pistoned a blackjack three times into the softness of Bowers' paunch.

Seraphine Smith screamed.

Ned scowled at her over his shoulder.

"Why don't you go in the next room, lady?"

Her eyes groped from his eyes to my eyes.

"Tony! Its *sadism!*"

Ned spoke dryly over his shoulder, "Lady, the only reason Tony Lark ain't captain of detectives today is because the reform crowd caught him doing this to another man. He nearly killed the man—but it didn't matter. The man died in the gas chamber, anyhow—because of the things he said when Tony nearly killed him. Everything I know about making the goldfish sing, I learned from Tony Lark."

SERAPHINE SMITH looked at me as if I had grown a tail and horns, as if I were something with sixteen legs she had found under the flat side of a rock, as if she had just caught me beating a blind cripple to death with his own crutch.

I raised a hand to speak to her, but she spun away into the bedroom and the pictures on the wall bounced from the slam of the bedroom door.

"Don't she know it's on her account?" Ned scowled at me over his shoulder.

"I don't know what she knows. Let's get on with it."

"I didn't mean to queer you with her, Tony."

"It was queered before it started, Ned. Let's wind this up."

"Sure." Ned returned his attention to Bowers whose features were bubbling with sweat and soundless screams.

"I'll—I'll talk," Bowers croaked.

"Fine, honey," Ned nodded. "That's all we want you to do—talk."

"I—I'd been following Dave. When he went into the hotel, I couldn't tell which room. So I waited in the lobby."

"Why, honey?"

"To keep on following him."

"Why follow him at all, honey?"

Bowers' eyes bulged through his lenses toward me, then back to Ned.

"To get somethin' on him," he breathed.

"Or to get *him?*" I put in.

Bowers' eyes trembled shut. They ripped open again as the blackjack whipped into his paunch.

"Don't!" he whispered hoarsely.

"Please—I can't stand that!" His eyes rolled to me. "Maybe—but I didn't. Ask Anita Coxe. I called Anita when I found Dave on the floor. Dave was looking at me and trying to say something, but he couldn't talk, couldn't move. All that glass in his face, and the bruises. It was like he was paralyzed. I didn't know what to do. So I called Anita."

"Why not a doctor, honey?" Ned prodded gently.

The question seemed to upset Bowers almost as much as the blackjack had done. He opened his mouth—but his dancing Adam's apple seemed to be in the way of words.

I supplied the words: "Because he wanted Coxe to die, Ned. In order to get an Anita Coxe worth ten millions for his wife, he had to let Coxe die. But with Coxe looking up at him from the floor, he couldn't find the nerve to try anything. He thought Anita might have the nerve."

"Did she, honey?" Ned urged.

"No," Bowers whispered.

"You don't sound convincing, honey." Ned glanced at me. "You convinced, Tony?"

I shook my head.

Ned drew Bowers to him, then slammed the pudgy man back into the wall.

"You'll have to convince us, honey."

"She *wanted* to," Bowers whispered, "but she didn't. That was the argument. I—I said leave him alone. He'd bleed to death."

"That was smart, honey," Ned encouraged. "Not legal. But if you could get away from there without witnesses—smart."

"She—" Bowers croaked, "she wanted me to—to stab a piece of glass into his jugular—"

"What made you settle on the bottleneck, honey?"

This time Bowers shook his head violently, as if he wanted it to snap off his neck and go flying across the room.

"I—we—*didn't!* Didn't even see the bottleneck. The argument got loud. Anita, she gets loud. She got too loud. Someone yelled through the door to shut up and Anita, she don't give a damn about anybody. She yelled back.

"And then we had to get away from there." Bowers' eyes got down on their knees to me. "That's all we did. That's exactly what he did. All right—we wanted him dead so bad we could taste it. We thought if we left him alone, he might bleed to death. But we didn't use any bottleneck. We left him like that on his back—bleeding—*ugh!*"

Ned drew his blackjack away from Bowers' stomach and shook his head.

"You still haven't convinced me, honey. Maybe the two of you left him like that—but then one of you sneaked back later and cinched it with the bottleneck. After all, he'd seen you both. If he came out of it alive he'd cut his sister off without a cent. So you had to cinch it, didn't you?"

"We didn't even think of—*ugh!*"

"I think you did, honey."

"No—*ugh!*"

"Yes, honey."

"But we didn't—*ugh! Ugh! Ugh!*"

"You came back and killed Coxe, didn't you, honey?"

"*Yes.*"

Bowers was caved down almost to the floor, both arms wrapped around his stomach, sweat and tears and froth from his lips making his pudgy jowls glisten.

Ned's trapped-animal eyes turned to me.

"Paper, Tony? Pencil?"

I brought him a yellow scratch pad and my write-forever pen. He let Bowers sink all the way to the floor and slid the pad under the glistening face and forced the pen between Bowers trembling fingers.

I entered the bedroom and touched the shoulder of that black dress where Seraphine Smith lay face down on my bed.

The shoulder cringed as if a spider had touched it.

"He's signing a confession," I told her. "Whether it stands or no, it at least clears you."

She turned a tear-streaked face up to me.

"I'd rather go to jail myself!" she cried.

"Murder isn't a game of tag," I shrugged. "It's part of the jungle that still clings to us, and if we have to dip into the jungle now and then for ways to cope with it, why that's just how it has to be."

"Not among civilized people!" she protested.

"A murderer is a savage and it takes savagery to corner him. Civilization or jungle, that's how it is."

She buried her face back in the pillow.

I returned to the living room where the pen continued to scratch over the yellow sheets. I shrugged at Ned's raised brows. He thrust out his lower lip and returned my shrug, then angled his face toward the phone.

I used the phone, then lit my pipe and settled in my easy chair and watched Ned watching the moving pen and brooded over the picture in my mind that was finally complete. . . .

WHEN Phillip Bowers finally looked up from his signature on the bottom of the third yellow sheet, his eyes became the grand-daddy of all gaping eyes. They practically filled his face.

They watched the papers pass from Neds hand to Captain Frank Svenson's hand. They watched the gnome-like Doctor Schultz read the scrawled confession over Svenson's elbow.

They shifted to Mrs. Millie Scudder, who stood alongside a uniformed patrolman, her chalky face wearing the severe dabs of rouge and lipstick that made her resemble a rag doll, her eyes fastened bitterly on me.

They passed lightly over Seraphine Smith, sitting quietly at my side on the divan with her hands folded in her lap and her eyes gazing mistily at her hands.

They blinked crazily, Phillip Bowers' suddenly enormous eyes, at the spectacle of Anita Coxe, her black riding habit smeared and torn, standing—subdued, but still defiant—between two equally battered-looking patrolmen.

He opened his loose mouth to say something, Phillip Bowers—but the words refused to come. His lips worked soundlessly. He dropped his face to his palms and sat like that, propped between floor and wall.

Svenson cleared his throat. "This seems in order and I witnessed him sign it. I'll—" He produced a pen and scrawled his signature alongside Bowers' signature. He passed the papers to me. "I have to hand it to you, Tony. I'd have settled for the Smith dame—Miss Smith, I mean."

"Hand it to Ned," I said, taking the confession. "He did the thinking. I just did some of the legwork."

Ned Lendine's eyes did everything but reach across my living room and pump my hand.

Then they did everything but slice my throat from ear to ear. I mean his eyes suddenly bulged as much as Phillip Bowers' eyes had bulged.

He even made a gesture—but he was much too far away to keep me from tearing Bowers' confession into halves, then into quarters, then tossing them at Captain Svenson's big feet.

Everyone in that room was looking at me as if I had just plucked my right ear off my head and eaten it.

"Mrs. Scudder!" I called out sharply. "When you looked past Ned Lendine into Room 6 last night—what did you see?"

Frank Svenson was scarlet. He blustered: *"Listen here, Lark—"*

"What she saw," I told him in a voice even louder than his, "was David Coxe flat on his back—the way Anita Coxe and Phillip Bowers had left him—the way Seraphine Smith had left him before that.

"And the next time she looked, David Coxe was *on his face* with the bottleneck in his neck!" I gestured toward the bitter-eyed woman. "Go ahead, Frank—ask her!"

He didn't have to ask her. He didn't even have to look at her. All he had to do was watch the tide of crimson rise over Ned Lendine's rugged face, the daze of Ned Lendine's eyes, Ned's thin lips drawn back from his teeth.

"Bowers!" I snapped at the fat man whose face had forsaken his palms to gape incredulously at me. "Where'd you meet Doc Schultz's son?"

"Who," Bowers whispered, "is Doc Schultz?"

"You hear that, Doc?" I scowled at the wizened medical examiner. "Four people had the opportunity to kill David Coxe. All four of them had motives. The one who did it wanted you out of the way long enough to be unable to narrow the time of death too fine. Seraphine Smith. Anita Coxe. Phillip Bowers. Ned Lendine. Which of 'em knew enough about you and your son to bait you to Watsonville last

night? Which of them was it, Doc?"

There was no need for an answer. The gnome face jerked toward Ned Lendine—and that had to be it.

"You're the lad who pulled Doc's kid out of that scrape in Watsonville six months ago, aren't you, Ned?" I called across the room. "There's no point denying it. Doc knows it, and we can get Jack Penn down from Watsonville to prove it. You knew if Doc saw Coxe ten minutes after you'd killed him, Doc would be able to narrow the time to ten minutes. But a few hours delay would compel Doc to hedge a little—half an hour, as it turned out. And a half an hour suited you fine. So you phoned him that dream about his kid being in another scrape in Watsonville last night, didnt you, Ned?"

I was talking to a roomful of backs and Ned Lendine's face, and it was a frozen face, a crimson face, a non-answering face.

FRANK SVENSON aimed an incredulous expression at me.

"Lark, youre crazy! Why should Ned—"

"Tell him if I'm crazy, Ned," I went on, ignoring Svenson. "It has to be you. The timing proves it has to be you. Miss Smith left Coxe alive at eleven-thirty. Anita Coxe and Bowers are her witnesses. They saw him ten minutes later and he was alive. And on his back. That's the crux of it Ned; he was still on his back when you entered that room. Mrs. Scudder saw him on his back over your shoulder. The next time she looked he was on his face.

"So the only picture that fits all the facts is the picture of you rolling David Coxe to his face and jabbing the bottleneck into his mastoid.

"And I can figure a motive, Ned," I went on, not liking what I was saying, but having to say it because the pressure of events forced me to be the funnel through which the truth had to pour. "I'd say the suicide of your daughter was your motive, Ned," I said quietly. "It was always assumed she didn't talk to you when you found her dying in the tub, but you never actually stated she hadn't talked. And if she had—and the man who drove her to suicide was David Coxe—that would be motive enough for you to give him that last nudge over the brink.

"He might have died anyhow, but you couldn't be certain of that—and the set-up seemed foolproof. Mrs. Scudder was unconscious in the corridor behind you. All you had to do was kick the door shut and do the job—and then phone Doc Schultz and launch him on his wild goose chase.

"Who'd know the difference? Miss Smith? She'd be the goat. Her denials would be taken as a matter of course—and ignored. Mrs. Scudder? Who'd listen to a hophead? But it needn't come to

"That's the crux of it, Ned; he was still lying on his back, still alive. . . ."

that. A threat to incarcerate her where she couldn't get her dream juice would reduce her testimony to nothing—which it did.

"How could you know Anita Coxe and Bowers had been in Room 6 between Miss Smith's departure and your arrival? But they were—and that spoils it, Ned. I'm sorry, guy—but I couldn't let you get away with framing Bowers and I couldn't let Miss Smith take the rap. David Coxe was the man who drove your daughter to suicide, wasn't he, Ned?"

Ned Lendine was probably also sorry. He was stepping toward me with his Positive rising in his big fist. He was eyeing my Positive as it leaped from my shoulder rig into my fist—but I don't think he saw it.

I don't think he saw anything but the black secrets locked in his brain as his Positive rose past my head to his head and blasted.

He was dead before he hit the floor.

I gaped at my own weapon trembling in my fist—and I can't say to this day whether I could have found the will to pull my trigger had his weapon remained leveled at my head.

THE END

HALF-PAST KILLING TIME

By D. L. CHAMPION

What did I care about the storm outside, when I was in Perkins' snug little house . . . cosy with Perkins' pretty little wife . . . drinking Perkins' smooth, warming Scotch. . . . And with my gun under my arm, there wasn't a chance in hell for a sniveling, insignificant little slob like Perkins to spoil a setup like that!

A STORM lashed at the city outside the windows. The couch on which I sat was comfortable; the whiskey in my glass was excellent, and the girl at my side was pretty. I sucked at my cigar, leaned back contentedly and said, "Let it rain."

Helen Perkins smiled at me, and then a little frown marred the white line of her forehead.

She said, "Honey, are you sure he's in Philadelphia?"

I said, "Sure." I dropped my voice a tone and added, "What if he isn't?"

She looked a little scared. She was small and blonde, about twenty-six. Her

"Innes," the inspector said, "you're a bright boy. Let's see you get out of *this* murder rap."

eyes were blue and vacuous. Her mind was not that of Einstein and she was superstitious as a witch doctor. She carried a rabbit's foot in her purse. She had a rusted horse-shoe tacked on the wall above her bed. She never walked under a ladder and she was more afraid of a black cat than the atom bomb.

But none of these things lessened her charms on a rainy night. After all, I wasn't married to her. Perkins was.

She said, "It'd be awful if he walked in on us, wouldn't it?"

"It would be awful for him."

She looked rather smug at that. "You don't like him, do you? You're jealous."

I sighed and put down my cigar. I have learned the hard way that to save later complications it is better to put a woman in her place as soon as opportunity allows.

"Baby," I said, "I'm not jealous. I don't like your husband because he's a punk. A brainless, spineless bookkeeper type. How he ever got in with Big Sam Sanders' mob, I'll never know."

She said, "You're with the mob, yourself."

"I'm not a lousy chauffeur like Perkins. You know damned well what I do."

She shuddered and I grinned at her. There was but one tool in my trade and I carried it in a shoulder holster. It was an automatic and it was for hire. At the moment, Sam Sanders paid me a fat retainer to keep it loaded and ready when called for.

She put her hand on my arm and said, "Sometimes, I don't know why I see you, Innes."

I said, "I do," and kissed her on the mouth.

I disentangled myself and got up for another drink. As I walked across the room, I put my hand in my coat pocket. My fingers touched something round and large. Instinctively, I took it out and tossed it in the air.

Helen said, "What's that?"

I caught the two-headed Mexican peso and showed it to her. "That's my lucky piece."

She examined it eagerly. "Is it really lucky?"

I squirted soda in the glass. "Twelve arrests. No convictions. What do you think?"

She gave her little-girl look. She said, "Give it to me? Pretty please, Daddy?"

I shrugged my expensively tailored shoulders. Why not? I was in a beneficent mood. Besides, I wasn't really superstitious. I'd picked the coin up in Mexico and never been broke enough to take it to a bank for the eighteen cents it was worth. I used it as a gadget to play with when I wanted something to do with my hands.

I said, "Keep it." She squealed with delight and kissed me. Guys have got less for mink coats.

It was almost six in the morning when I shook some of the fumes from my head and said, "I better be getting home. Your husband'll be getting back soon."

I put on my hat and coat. Helen walked to the door with me. She said, "Good-bye, darling." I'll take good care of that luck piece. Perkins has probably seen you with it. I'll hide it where he'll never find it."

She was so scatter-brained that she probably wouldn't. Not that I cared. Perkins had neither the guts nor the intelligence to molest me. On the other hand, Helen was one of the three people in the world he could beat up. I told her so, said, "Good-bye," and went out into the dawn.

I taxied home to bed and the sleep of an innocent child.

IT WAS three days later on a Wednesday morning when Perkins rang my doorbell. I had just picked up the morning papers from the hall and was reading them over my first cup of coffee. When I opened the door, Perkins shuffled in like an apologetic bookkeeper who has just spilled ink on the boss's vest.

He was a little guy with a curve in his back and a grey complexion. His eyes were dull and his hair was going. He sniffled constantly like a man who has been born with a cold and never cured it.

He said in his faded voice, "Big Sam wants to see us downtown."

I grunted. I didn't ask him why because I knew quite well that Big Sam Sanders would not confide his plans to the mob's chauffeur. I finished my coffee, got my hat and coat and went downstairs to the coupe Perkins had waiting at the curb.

We drove downtown in silence. Perkins stared at the road and I studied his

weak features. I wondered how a spirited dame like Helen ever stood him. He was a punk from way back. A gutless, dim-witted mug who should have been workin for an insurance company.

A guy in my profession can afford to be something of a snob. I didn't like punks and I didn't like him.

Big Sam Sanders sat at his battered desk. He was a fat lad, with a face as red as Santa Claus, a paunch as large and a laugh as hearty. He did not possess Santa Claus's other characteristics. A vast majority of the electorate believed that the mayor and the councilmen ran the town. The coppers, the police reporters and the politicians knew better. Big Sam ran it.

He nodded to Perkins and slapped me on the back.

"Innes, old kid," he said, "mighty glad to see you."

I'd heard effusive greetings before. I said, "What do you want?"

"I got a job, Innes. It's Layten."

My eyebrows lifted. I said, "The assistant D. A.?"

Big Sam nodded.

I said, "Why not the governor?"

A flicker of irritation crossed Big Sam's fat face. He said, "Is that a wisecrack?"

"No, I said, "not exactly. It would be easier to get the governor. Leyten is after you. Once, he indicted me. Everyone knows I'm working for you. Who do you think is the first guy they'd pick up? Three guesses."

Big Sam flushed. "You always figure everyone's a dope but you, Innes. Naturally, I'm covering you."

"On that job, you'd better cover me with an iron curtain."

"I am," said Sam.

There was a moment's silence broken only by the sullen hiss of Perkin's sniffling.

"Look," said Sam, "Layten knows a lot. But my leak in the D. A.'s office tells me that he's the only guy who does. Today is Wednesday. Tonight Layton is going up to a hunting cabin, a few miles north of Titusville. He's taking a briefcase and he's going to do some work. He's going alone. When he comes back everything he knows will be on paper and there'll be indictments. Get it?"

"I get it," I said. "I still say the governor would be easier."

"Let me finish," snapped Sam. "Perkins will hire a car. He'll drive you to Titusville. There's a dirt road which skirts the village. You'll use that. Half a mile from Layten's, Perkins will park on the dirt road. There's not much traffic. He'll pretend to fix a flat. You'll travel the last half-mile on foot through the woods. Get it?"

I nodded. "You've told me how to knock off Layten. Now tell me how to get away with it after I've done it."

"The doorman of the Regal Club will swear you went into the place at one o'clock Thursday afternoon. A bellboy will swear he took you to the private card room. There, you played poker from two until six. You played with me, Harry Russell, Art Conlon and, get this, Innes—Holy Joe Danvers."

I grunted. Danvers made it good. Danvers was a politician. He was, for the record, a God-fearing, painfully honest guy. The voters swore by him, and so did the press. He had in some miraculous way covered up the fact that he was the most devious crook in the country. If Holy Joe Danvers gave me an alibi, I really had one.

"Good?" said Big Sam.

"Good enough."

"Perkins," said Sam, "go out and arrange for a hired car tomorrow. Pick Mr. Innes up at ten in the morning. In the meantime, Innes, I'll go over a map with you. I got a layout of the Titusville district right here."

I said, "The pay for this, naturally, is over and above the retainer."

"Five grand over," said Big Sam Sanders.

I ARRIVED home a little after midnight. I'd spent the evening in the bars with some of the boys and a pleasant alcoholic haze enveloped me. I stripped down to pyjamas and a bathrobe, set out a bottle and proceeded to swallow a few nightcaps before retiring. At one o'clock the doorbell rang.

I found Perkins on the threshold. He had a bottle under his arm and the smell of whiskey on his breath. He was breathing hard and he looked more miserable than usual.

"Innes," he said, "will you please let me come in and have a drink?" He added ingratiatingly, "I brought some good

Scotch. At least I think it's good."

I was benign with liquor. I didn't get sore. Perkins had never called on me socially before. He wasn't in the class I drink with. I said, "All right, come in. But to what do I owe this unprecedented honor?"

He grinned at me weakly. He said, "I'm sorry, Innes. But that job in the morning has me jittery."

I said, "Why? All you've got to do is drive the car."

"I know. But I'm jittery, anyway. And I've been drinking. I'm afraid I might let something slip if I stay out in the bars. But I had to drink with someone. And it don't matter if I let anything slip to you."

I took the bottle from him with my right hand. I reached out and seized his throat with my left. I said, "Do you know what would happen if you let anything slip?"

His eyes met mine and they were the eyes of a beaten dog. He said wearily, "You'd kill me, Innes. I know that."

I let him go. "All right. Get some glasses from the kitchen and let's try that stuff you brought."

He poured two stiff slugs. I emptied my glass at a single gulp. After the first eight drinks I never bother with soda. The drink tasted lousy.

I said, "You can dump that cheap stuff down the sink, Perkins. From here on in we'll drink my stuff. It cost more."

He nodded docilely enough. An hour ticked past and we made inroads on my bottle. I was sleepy then. I stood up and yawned. I said, "I'm going to bed. See you at ten." I gave him my grimmest expression and added, "And keep your mouth shut."

He said, "Yes, Innes," respectfully and began to put on his coat. I went into the other room and threw myself on the bed. I must have gone to sleep within sixty seconds.

I awoke to hear the ringing of the doorbell. My eyes were heavy and there was an ugly taste in my mouth. My body felt fine, eased and relaxed. I was vaguely aware of a faint pricking tingle on my forearm. As I sat up I had an impression that the bell had been jangling for some time.

I shuffled out to the door and admitted Perkins. He sniffled repulsively and said, "We ain't got much time, Innes. It's almost ten o'clock."

"Make some coffee while I get dressed."

He took off his coat and went into the kitchen. I stepped into the shower and took it hot and cold. Twenty minutes later I sat down to the toast and coffee Perkins had prepared.

I said, "Were the papers outside the door when you arrvied?"

He nodded. "There in my coat pocket. I picked 'em up while I waited for you to answer the door."

I drank coffee and read the front page. Behind me Perkins sniffled drearily.

I said, "How's the weather?"

"Drizzling. It's been raining all morning."

"Hell," I said "Aren't those weather guys *ever* right? It says here fair and warmer."

As I finished my toast I felt my arm itch again. I scratched it, then rolled up my sleeve for a look. Some six inches above my wrist there was a tiny red mark. I must have scratched myself somehow in a barroom.

Perkins said whimingly, "Innes, would

you please do me a very little favor?"

"What is it?"

"I forgot to bring my handkerchief. And I got this cold. Will you lend me one of yours?"

"If it'll stop that damned sniffling I'll lend you a dozen. Top bureau drawer in the bedroom."

He went in to get it while I took the automatic from my desk, examined it

Helen Perkins

carefully and slid it into its holster. Perkins emerged from the bedroom. I said, "Car downstairs?"

"Yeah."

"All right. Let's go."

The black sedan passed through the city, through the scattered houses of the suburbs, into the countryside. The sky was grey as a dirty shroud. Rain beat against the windshield. Perkins stared at the slippery road. He seemed scared. I looked at him with contempt. What the hell did he have to be scared about?"

I felt pretty good. I always do before I go to work. I was tense, but not too tense. I was alert and my brain was functioning.

We skirted Titusville and I studied the map. After a while I tapped Perkins on the shoulder. He turned a pasty face to mine.

"Okay," I said, "park here. Under this tree."

I fastened my coat collar and jammed down my hat. I stepped out into the rain. I said, "Wait here and don't get panicky. I won't be long."

I was exactly thirty-three minutes.

I looked at my watch as we hit the city limits. The timing was right. We rode for fifteen minutes more when I said, "Let me out here. Take the car back where you got it. I'll taxi home."

He nodded nervously. I got out of the car. It was still raining.

I FOUND myself before a coffee pot and realized I was hungry. I went inside and ordered coffee and a double hamburger. I felt pretty good now, like a salesman who's bringing home a big order. Layton, whom I'd never liked, was stone cold dead and I had five thousand dollars.

I reached for my coffee and my elbow hit the guy sitting on the next stool. I said, "Sorry," looked up and saw a guy with grey hair wearing a clerical collar.

He smiled at me and said, "That's all right." As I lifted the thick sandwich to my lips, he said, "That smells good. I'd like to try one but—"

He made a wry gesture and returned to his glass of milk and doughnut. I grunted noncommittally. I don't rub shoulders with the clergy.

I paid my check, went out into the rain again. I bought an evening paper at a newsstand, thrust it in my pocket and hailed a cab. In another quarter of an hour I was in the lobby of my apartment house. So, I immediately observed, was Sergeant Hopkins of Homicide.

Hopkins said, "Hi, Innes, I'm waiting for you."

I said, "For what?"

"Some guy got knocked off this afternoon. Western Union sent him out a wire and the messenger found him dead. The inspector wants to talk to you."

"Okay," I said, "You get the taxi. I'm wet enough."

* * *

Inspector Latrobe mangled the end of a cigar with his teeth. He said, "Innes, you're a bright boy. Let's see you get out of this one."

"What's the rap? I asked. "Someone steal the atom bomb?"

He shook his head. "Layten's dead."

I shook my head, too, and clucked like a sympathetic hen.

Latrobe said, "He was killed about three this afternoon. In his hunting lodge four miles north of Titusville."

"Three o'clock," I said. "At three o'clock I was at the Regal Club, playing

poker with Sam Sanders and some of his cowhands. See, I'm out. No hands and no lawyers."

Latrobe frowned. There was a trace of bewilderment in his voice as he spoke.

He said, "It's my business to keep an eye on Sam and his boys. I usually know where they are. They were at the racetrack this afternoon between two and five."

I blinked. A little stab of fear hit the pit of my stomach. But there was no percentage for Sam in crossing me on this deal.

I said, "Your boys have things a little screwed up. Holy Joe Danvers was in the game, too."

"You'll have to do better than that," said Latrobe. "I happen to know that Danvers went to the state capital this morning. He's head of a housing committee that's conferring with the legislature."

The stab of fear came back. This time it stayed with me. My belly was a vacuum and my knees were weak. My mind and memory functioned automatically.

I said slowly, "Give me just a minute." I sat down on a hard chair. The veil dropped from my brain. Each incident came back to me clearly. Now, I could see the significance.

There was the Scotch with the odd taste. There was the pinprick in my arm which could have been caused by a hypodermic needle used to put me back to sleep when the dope in the Scotch showed signs of wearing off.

There were the morning papers in Perkins' topcoat pocket. Why in God's name would a man pick up papers outside a door and put them in his pocket? Unless he hadn't picked them up at all but had brought them with him. There was the weather report. Fair and warmer. The day had been drenched with unremitting downpour.

Ultimately, there was the priest—the priest who wanted a hamburger sandwich and couldn't have one.

I said in a voice which wasn't my own. "Give me another minute. I want to see the evening paper."

I took it from my pocket, unfolded it with trembling fingers. In the upper right hand corner the weather report announced clouds and rain. It took an effort to focus my eyes on a single line of type beneath the masthead.

Friday, November 6th, 1947.

Between the doped whiskey and the hypodermic, I had slept thirty-two hours. I had an alibi for Thursday. I had a complete, foolproof, unassailable alibi for a day I'd spent in my own bed!

I don't know how I kept my voice steady. I said, "Tell me, did you find a handkerchief with my monogram on it about a half-mile from the—the scene of the crime?"

"Why, yes," said Latrobe. "The Titusville sheriff picked it up about an hour ago. That was careless of you, Innes."

I didn't answer. I couldn't. My throat was dry; my vocal cords frozen. Now, I knew how all those other guys had felt—those guys who had stood trembling, looking into the muzzle of my automatic, looking and knowing they were dead.

A uniformed copper opened the door. He came into the room and said, "Inspector, there's a kid downstairs. One of those kids who shines shoes in the park. He says a guy gave him a buck to bring this in with a message for Innes."

Big Sam Sanders

He handed a shining, silver disc to Latrobe. Latrobe said, "What's the message?"

"Well, this guy told the kid to tell Innes that this-here's his lucky piece. He's going to need it more than Helen."

Latrobe was suddenly asking me questions. But I didn't hear him. My face was in my hands and my back was bent. God knows I never thought I'd let a copper see me cry.

This is just a rib, I kept telling myself. Just a pickup date, isn't it? Yeah, with a gal holding an automatic in my ribs.

Nose to the Gravestone

We had a great time ribbing each other, Rinty Ripple and I—gagging about the lengths of our noses, pulling stunts on each other. . . . But the best caper was pulled by me when I posed as Rinty, ran off with Rinty's gal—and then started ducking Rinty's bullets!

By TOM MARVIN

THE CHINESE cook in Ma Malloy's boarding house thinks all white men have big noses. I hear all Chinese think the same. But the cook must surely have marveled the day he first slanted eyes on the new lodger, Rinty Ripple. Come to recall, he must have turned a startled hair or two the day he saw *me* coming up Ma Malloy's battered steps with my cardboard suitcase.

I figure the size of a man's nose is his own business, as long as he keeps it out of other people's. I admit my own beak is no peanut that died on the vine. It's a trifle . . . well, strong, maybe four-or five-thousandths outsize. But Rinty Ripple's nose—lord love the Irish!

About a week after he checked into Ma Malloy's, I met him coming out the front door one afternoon, carrying a towel-

covered basket. We'd nodded a few times in the hall, but this day he stopped me. "Aren't you Ben Shellew, in that elite third floor front? My name's Ripple. I was just going for a swim."

We crunched hands. He was almost as tall as I, and a generous ten pounds heavier; bony-faced, merry-eyed and orange with his new sunburn. He might have been two years older than I, say thirty, and you could tell that he hadn't sat in one place all his life.

I put on my trunks and we ambled down to the shore. Rinty had a dozen bottles of beer in his basket and we opened two and put the rest on the cool side of a rock and sat down to bat the breeze.

"What do you do for a living, Ben?" Rinty asked, sizing me up.

"Bank teller," I said.

He grinned. "Not at the Midge Park Bank, I trust."

"Lord, no. I value my life above mere cash. At the Bazel First State. What's your racket?"

He said airily, "Selling. Can you stand another brew?"

As he broke out the second brace I coudn't keep my eyes off his jumbo nose. He kept studying me, too, with those bubbling eyes, and finally he said, "Boy, a farmer could sure use you at cherry-picking time. Hang your nose over a branch and you could pick with both hands."

"Me?" I hollered, flabbergasted. "*Me?* Listen, buzzard beak, when you die they'll have to cut a slit in the coffin lid to close it! Then they'll shellac the part of your nose sticking above the sod, and there's your monument."

He threw back his head and roared. Pretty soon I did, too.

"Well, let's go in the water," I said. "But don't swim on your back. You'll scare the sharks away."

I ran down and dived into a breaker. When I came up, Rinty was still loitering on the shore, lighting a cigarette and killing his beer. A man came shuffling through the sand and begged a light off Rinty, and they stood there chatting. He was a handsome old duffer—blue pin-striped suit, neat grey hair, clipped grey mustache, fanning himself with his grey homburg while he talked. Pretty soon he trudged up the slope to the street, and Rinty hit the water beside me.

We had a lot of laughs that afternoon. We kept the nose feud going, and I was staying four or five touchdowns ahead of him in the persiflage. Rinty's nose was really an inspiration for me.

That evening Rinty knocked on my door. "Put on a necktie, Ben. I got us a couple elite dates waiting down in the car."

The bank had just started its Saturday closing schedule, so I didn't have to work the next day. I followed Rinty down to his muddy sedan and climbed into the dim rear seat and he introduced me to the girls. His was a fair looker. I couldn't see mine very well in the dark, but her name was Griselda and her voice and scent were acceptable.

But when we pulled up at the bright lights of the Exotic Club, I discovered just how good Rinty had jobbed me. Man, what a nose Griselda had! Bigger than mine. Bigger, even, than his. Bigger than both of ours pasted together. I don't know where he found her. I could only stare dumbly. I excused myself in a hurry and made for the bar.

Downing four fast shots, I thought: "I'll be damned if he gets the laugh on me. This liquor will fix it so I won't even notice that nose."

Then I went back to Griselda—and spent the evening seeing not just one magnificent beak but two! What a night.

So, you see, I don't blame myself too much for what happened. I was then a couple touchdowns behind in the rib, and I was only playing for a tie.

MY CHANCE came that Sunday evening. Rinty was talking on Ma Malloy's common-property hall telephone, and I could hear him from the head of the stairs.

"Meet me in the lobby of the Tivoli Hotel," Rinty was saying. "Wear an onion in your hair so I'll know you. I'm alergic to hibiscus. I'll be carrying a bottle of bubbly water, so you'll know me. We'll go somewhere and kill it." He murmured something I couldn't catch, and then he said, "I have to make a stop on the way, baby, so if I'm not there exactly at nine o'clock just stand hitched for a minute."

Well, could I pass an opening like that? She didn't know what Rinty looked like. If I beat him to the Tivoli I could cop his babe. And crow about it for a week. That would make us even on Griselda.

Rinty was puttering in his room when I slipped down to the street. The bottle of bubbly water worried me a little. Champagne isn't standard diet for bank tellers. But I figured the gag was worth it.

In the joint on the Five Corners I got a bottle of the best, Louie trusting me for it, and then I took a cab. If it had been any hotel but the Tivoli I'd have felt conspicuous walking in with an unwrapped bottle of champagne.

Pushing through the door I felt a sudden twinge of doubt. What if Rinty was somehow slipping me another hotfoot? What if this babe's nose was even bigger than Griselda's! If possible. But then I saw her sitting under the clock, and my qualms went overboard.

She had the onion gamely in her hair. When she saw me sheepishly crossing the lobby with my jug she plucked the onion out and dropped it in an ash stand. She was a cool number in Nile green, with hair blacker than sin and matching lips—and I mean lips—and a petulant mouth. And a nose par for the course. After the doubts I'd had, her nose looked so good to me that for a minute I thought I knew her from somewhere.

She glanced from the bubbly water to me and drawled, "Yum!" and gave me a cool hand. "I'm Delia Holmes, the onion queen."

"And I'm Rinty Ripple," I said. "A fast man with a full jug."

Her tawny eyes sort of blanked out. "That stop you had to make—you dropped off at the courthouse and changed your name?"

Ah, the Warning Winds down my back. I coughed to hide my hollow laugh and tapped the bottle. "Champagne always confuses me. What's my name, please, ma'am?"

"If I understood correctly, you're Ben Shellew."

I made a fast grab for the sliding bottle. I thought: "That damned Ripple has done it to me again!"

Delia Holmes didn't smile. "Does that stuff confuse you even before you uncork it? Is your name Shellew or Rinty Ripple?"

Well, now was my chance to turn east or west. I could say: Yes, b'god, I'm Shellew, and the guy who phoned you is a character to keep your eye on. Or I could string along with Rinty's rib until I fathomed it. After which I would bend it back on him good. I turned east.

"You unmasked me, babe. I'm Ben Shellew, with papers to prove it."

She said, "Your nose is your bond, handsome."

Somehow, though she had gamely worn the onion, there just didn't seem to be much real humor in this doll. For a ticking minute I felt it wasn't worth it. But then the challenge of bending the rib back on Rinty got the better of me. "Let's promenade," I said.

Delia Holmes used a modified Samba for a walk. "We'll go out the Aldrich Street door," she said, half whispering. "Act as if everything was normal."

"Isn't it?" I said. "My girls always wear onions."

Holding the door for her I saw Rinty Ripple swagger into the Tivoli lobby through the main gate. He carried his jug like a picket sign, looking eagerly around for a girl dolled up with an onion. He sat down under the clock, in the chair that Delia Holmes had just vacated in time, and folded his hands across his washboard stomach to wait.

"If you get lonesome," I thought, "open the bottle."

We turned down Aldrich Street in the dusk. "When I phoned you I wasn't too sure you'd go for this," I said.

"You needn't be gallant, Shellew. Since I phoned you."

So I decided to let her do the leading.

"Where'll we kill this jug?" I said.

"Exactly where I told you we'd kill it."

I thought: "I must remember some time to let her do the leading."

HALFWAY down Aldrich Street she steered me into an alley lighted by a solitary bulb over the rear door of the Tivoli Hotel. There was a car loitering in the alley, with a man leaning on its right front fender. He straightened as Delia Holmes approached with her modified Samba walk, her heels echoing on the

cobblestones like slow-moving castanets.

"This is the guy, Ham," she said.

He was a little bull. His chest was the thickest part of him. He leaned forward on stiff, short legs, resting his chin on his chest. Looking up at me like that, he resembled a little bull all the more. I stuck out my hand, but the little bull just tossed his horns.

Delia Holmes tapped me on the shoulder. "Bend down, Shellew."

Maybe I sort of puckered up as I lowered my head. Anyway, the next thing I knew she was knotting a handkerchief around my eyes.

"Cut it out!" I said.

The little bull sank a fist in my chest. It left a hot, dry lump, like heartburn.

"Stick out your duke," he hissed. "Feel this. Feel it! It's a gun. It shoots. Delia's going to hold it. Right in her itty-bitty paw. You make a move for that blindfold, you catch daylight. Hear me?" He slammed me on the cheek. "You hear?"

"I hear," I said.

What good's a Warning Wind when it's past-due?

Delia Holmes' hand on my bicep guided me into the rear seat of the car. I listened to the sounds around me: the girl joining me, the little bull slithering under the wheel, the *whir* of the starter, the careful engaging of gears. We moved over cobblestones.

That's when all the larking drained out of me. When we moved. Until then I'd been clinging to the hope: "It's a lulu of a rib." Even the blindfold, even the smash in the chest, even the cold gun. Just a rib. But now, as the car moved, I knew. This was business.

Fear sharpened me up. Until then I had talked and looked and listened like a guy normally does seven days a week. Really not paying very damned much attention to what goes on. But now everything became sharply focused and real. I was like a guy alerted for something big —a fighter honed for the big battle; a halfback up for the playoff game; a bank teller sensing a bum check sliding under the wicket. . . .

That's where I'd seen her! Delia Holmes, of the hair black as sin and petulant red lips to match. The girl at the wicket. She'd come into the bank on Friday and handed me ten sawbucks and asked for a hundred-dollar bill. I'd counted the tens and slid her a spanking new C-note, not looking up at her—manners, you know—but conscious that she wasn't missing anything about me.

I thought: "Remember all this, Shellew!" Confusedly I began remembering, visualizing, cataloguing. This is a Packard. The little bull's name is Ham. We are bumping down the cobblestones behind the Tivoli Hotel. From Wright to Aldrich. That's east. Over in that corner her scent is violet. Her dress is Nile green, hair blacker than sin, lips to match, nose par for the course, height about . . . my shoulder? I don't remember. Her figure? Modified Samba walk, anyway. How about her legs? A cop told me once he always spotted dames by their legs. A married man, too. What kind of legs on her, Shellew? Lord love me, but I hadn't noticed. She'd been sitting down in the lobby. Suddenly I had the unreasonable feeling that I didn't remember anything about her, that I wouldn't know her again if I saw her under a microscope. . . .

The Packard turned out of the alley, joining traffic, merging with noise and lights. Left turn. That's north. North on Aldrich.

"Unkink yourself," Delia Holmes said. "You haven't got the old wind up, have you? Just look on this as sort of a—a treasure hunt." She laughed and the little bull in the front seat snickered.

The Packard turned again. Right. East again. Would this be Logan street? Or Raymond? Logan, probably. . . . This is foolish, I told myself. Quit wondering. It's just a Rinty Ripple rib. It's just a pickup date, isn't it? With a girl who brought a little bull along to drive the Packard. You don't have to wear this condemned blindfold if you don't want to. It's still a free country. Take it off.

I reached for the knot.

"Shellew!"

The gun was an icicle against my neck. I felt the Packard swerve, and then the little bull leaned over the seat and belted my chest again. The heartburn spread up into my throat and left a sour taste.

The little bull said, "What's eating him, Delia? He asked for this but he don't like it. You sure that's Ben Shellew?"

"I'm sure, Ham."

"Is he one of them clay pigeons that works in the Midge Park Bank?"

"At the Bazel First State."

Midge Park? Was this the tribe that was always sticking up the Midge Park Bank? Every time a gang got short of cash it strolled into Midge Park and made all the employees lie on the floor. . . .

"I don't like this deal," the little bull complained. "It ain't normal. I warned Moose. How did this guy get your name in the first place?"

"That's what Moose wants to find out," Delia Holmes said.

There's another guy, named Moose. Remember that, Shellew. We just made another turn. Right. Right on what? Sherman? Kenesaw? Turn again. Doubling back. It's dark now, under the tight handkerchief. We're rambling faster. Must be on country road but . . . I'm lost.

"Car following!" Delia Holmes whispered.

THE PACKARD slowed. We rode silently, waiting, me counting: One-and-two-and-three, like a photographer spacing off the seconds. Only, his seconds were harmless. The following car rattled past us.

"False alarm," the little bull grunted. "He's swinging off."

"You sure? I don't think so."

"I'm sure."

The smooth flight of the Packard again. Delia Holmes nudged me with the square automatic. "Where are we, Shellew?"

If I said nothing they would wonder if I knew. Or I could make a stab at it and listen to their reactions.

"Northern Slope," I said.

They laughed.

So it wasn't Northern Slope. Or maybe it was.

The Packard lurched and the tires spun on gravel. Side road.

"Stop," Delia Holmes said. "Cut the lights."

The little bull swung the car off the road, low branches slapping on the top. "What's eating you?" he said irritably.

"I told you we were tailed. There's a car coming up the lane. Without lights."

I could hear the little bull slithering out of the seat. "It's stopping back there. A guy's getting out."

"Go take him," Delia Holmes said.

We waited in the darkened car. I didn't hear the little bull moving out; I heard no shot; but pretty soon he came back, walking noisily and heavily, as if toting a burden into the front seat. The Packard bumped back into the ruts of the lane, turned right, rolled to a stop. The little bull said, "Take Shellew inside. I'll wake this other guy up."

Delia Holmes' hand on my bicep guided me along a path. I missed the first step and clumped like a Percheron. Then down an uncarpeted hall, our footfalls thundering . . . onto a thick rug . . . someone playing a Romberg medley on a piano . . . a damp breeze from an open window carrying rural night sounds . . . fragrant pipe smoke. . . . Someone pushed my chest and I plunked down in a stuffed chair, still holding my silly bottle of champagne, still counting insanely: One-and-two-and. . . .

The piano playing stopped. A man's voice, a new voice, soft as his own music, said: "Take off the handkerchief. Enjoy the trip, Mr. Shellew?"

"No," I said, rubbing my eyes.

It was hard to focus right away. Delia Holmes, sitting in a red leather chair, was still holding the square gun. The new man sat opposite me, on the bench of the grand piano, smoking his pipe. Sitting down, he didn't fool me for a minute. This guy had size, from his massive shoes up to his massive chin. He had no more neck than a turtle, just shoulders to the ears. He was perhaps forty years old, wearing brown trousers that didn't match his brown jacket or mustache. Flowered tie, nail polish sparkling in the lamplight, heavy gold ring. A dandy, and a giant.

"Not scared?" he asked, amused. "It's just a routine meet. I'm Moose Cruger. What can I do for you?"

"You can tie on the handkerchief and take me back to the Tivoli lobby."

He chuckled. "You must realize you've come too far to turn around now. Frankly I'm delighted you're here. I rather expected someone else."

"Who?" I said.

"A man named Rinty Ripple. Posing as Ben Shellew."

I sat freezing in the Warning Wind.

"Mr. Shellew." He knocked out his pipe. "If Rinty Ripple had kept this appointment with Miss Holmes . . . could you guess where he'd be now?"

"With his luck," I said, "he'd be up in Room 1313 drinking his champagne."

Moose Cruger shook his head. "Ripple loves to swim. You see, I keep an eye on the people who keep an eye on me. Ripple would have drowned tonight while taking a moonlight swim. I love that expression the newspapers are so fond of: 'He drowned while swimming.' Nobody drowns while swimming. People drown while *not* swimming. . . . Mr. Shellew, how much was it?"

"How much was what?"

"The amount you've embezzled from the Bazel First State Bank."

I said, "Damn your hide!"

He shot off the piano bench like a spring uncoiling. One beefy hand knotted in my necktie. He made two of me. "Mr. Shellew, would you like to run the risk of drowning while not swimming? How much did you embezzle?"

I just stared at him.

"How did you know that Miss Holmes was a good contact with me?"

The bronze clock on the mantel, supporting some flying angels, read 9:52. I thought: Have I been in this mess only fifty-two minutes? I changed hands on the bottle of champagne and shrugged.

"Mr. Shellew, I must ask for more frankness from you. . . . No? Well, sir, you wanted to make a deal, and we are going to make it. And on my terms!"

Moose Cruger went to the door and bellowed down the hall, "Ham, bring that other fellow in here!"

IT WAS my first lighted view of the little bull. Thickness and meanness. An all-over Russian haircut. A carrotty nose. I'd expected something like that, just from his voice . . . but I ogled when I saw the man he was pushing ahead of him, the man he had sapped in the dark lane. A handsome old duffer; blue pin-striped suit, neat grey hair, clipped grey mustache. The man Rinty Ripple had been talking with on the beach.

His face was white, his eyes lack-luster, and he was wobbling like a kid walking barefoot on rocks. The little bull had roughed the old gentleman up out of all proportion to the need.

Moose Cruger tugged the old man's wallet from his breast pocket and shuffled through the identification cards.

"Christopher A. J. Howell, of Boston. Banker's Investigative Service." His amused glance encompassed the little bull and Delia Holmes. "Panting along the trail of the Midge Park badmen."

He inclined his massive head toward me. "Mr. Howell, you should be interested in meeting this gentleman. He's Ben Shellew, a teller at the Bazel First State. He has just retained me professionally to extricate him from a slight case of embezzlement."

Cruger's head thrust back and he laughed. "We'll be laying 'em in the aisles at the Bazel First State bright and early in the morning. Before the examiners catch up with my jittery client. Who can tell what amount goes into my pocket and what into Mr. Shellew's?"

Old Man Howell's dull eyes brightened with contempt. "And in return for your professional services," he said, "Shellew is fingering the job for you?"

"Fingering it? My good man, he's paving the way!"

"It's a lie," I said.

Cruger signaled, and the little bull pushed Mr. Howell ahead of him to the door. Watching them recede down the hall, I thought: For that gratuitous information Howell is going to be treated to a moonlight swim. And after Cruger gets what information he needs from me I'll be having a dip myself.

With Howell's departure, Cruger dropped his amiability. He said, "Let's put it all on the barrelhead. How did you know that Miss Holmes was a contact with the people who pulled the Midge Park jobs?"

I sat sullenly holding my champagne bottle.

"Did Rinty Ripple tell you? How well do you know Ripple?"

I said, "What makes you think *I'm* not Rinty Ripple?"

"Come, Shellew! We know better than that. Miss Holmes got your letter stating your proposition. I sent her to the bank to get a look at you. Then she phoned

your boarding house as you directed. You kept the appointment at the Tivoli. You're Ben Shellew. You have only one thing in common with Ripple. The size of your nose. . . .

The little bull stopped in the doorway. "Moose, I'm going down the lane and put Howell's car under cover." He clomped away.

"Shellew, what's the setup in that bank?"

I tried to stare him down.

"What are you going to walk into tomorrow?"

As soon as he gets his information I drown while not swimming.

"Shellew, get out of that chair!"

He cuffed me on the shoulder and sent me reeling down the hall. He pushed me ahead of him down a flight of black stairs into the musty basement. I heard him fumbling with the crossbar of a door. Then his shoe drove against my back and booted me into darkness. My face flattened against a rough concrete wall and the silly bottle of champagne dropped on my instep. Automatically I picked it up, feeling a foolish relief that it wasn't broken.

The crossbar banged and Cruger said through the door, "Think on it. I'll be back in an hour. You won't get a second chance, believe me."

It was blacker than spades in the cubbyhole. Two of the walls were concrete, and the two wooden walls might as well have been. There was no window. Even on tiptoe I couldn't reach the ceiling, although I could touch a furnace cold-air pipe that disappeared through one of the wooden walls. Feeling my way, I circled the room with my champagne bottle, listening to my own breath, the tread of feet upstairs, the playing again of the Romberg medley.

"Shellew!"

I backed up into a corner, straining to pinpoint the whisper.

"Shellew, it's Howell. I'm in this next cubbyhole."

"Listen," I said, "I'm not mixed up in any bank robbery."

"Shut up. Got any matches?"

"Just a lighter."

"Pass it to me."

"Through a two-inch wall?" I said.

"There's a space around this cold-air pipe. A couple inches at least. Pass the lighter. Volney took my gun and matches."

"Volney?"

"That little man-eating rat," Howell said. "Ham Volney. Pass the lighter. There's a window in this room."

I PUSHED the lighter through the space around the cold air pipe and held it until Howell's fumbling hand found it. Then I set the champagne bottle down, locked my hands around the pipe and pulled myself up so I could see through the space into his cubbyhole. He snapped the lighter and held it up to the mud-splashed window.

"Barred," Howell muttered. He snuffed the lighter.

"Listen, Howell," I said, "Cruger was lying. I just bumbled into this mess by trying to be funny. I don't rob banks."

"Shut up."

I could hear the muffled rapping of knuckles on the pane of the mud-splashed window, and I said, "You doing that?" But the lighter flared again, and in its wavery light I looked at the dirty window.

Through the bars I saw that enormous nose. Then the bony face, the bubbling eyes, the broad grin. . . .

"Rinty!"

He winked down at Howell. He made some kind of hand signal that I didn't understand. And then his grin evaporated. A flashlight beamed down on him, squatting there. His startled face turned upward into the glare. He had time only to hunch his shoulders and squint his eyes. Then the shower of blows fell on him.

The little bull dropped to his knees beside Rinty, flashlight in one hand, blackjack in the other. His arm beat a tattoo.

My hands began to perspire as I watched and I lost my grip on the cold-air pipe. I picked myself up from the damp floor. My hands were sweaty, like coming up to bat. And no sand. No bat, either. No gun, no key, no freedom, no chance of crashing out of the cubbyhole to lend Rinty a hand.

I jumped for the pipe again and pushed my face against the crevice. But the light at the window was gone. Howell whis-

pered, "They dragged him into the house."

"Listen, Howell, are you going to get it straight that I'm no bank robber?"

Feet thundered overhead, and through the wall cracks I saw a flashligh bobbing down the stairs. A lock ground, and the little bull strode into Howell's cubbyhole. He leaned forward on short, stiff legs, resting his chin on his chest. He brought the hard heel of his palm up against Howell's chin. The old man's head cracked against the concrete wall and he slid down on the seat of his pants. The little bull set his flashlight on the floor and took the leather sock of buckshot out of his pocket.

Howell moaned through the whole beating. I know I couldn't have stood up under it, and Howell was thirty years older. My hands finally got too sweaty and I lost my purchase again on the pipe. I paced the black hole, listening to the rhythmic thumps of the sap, to Howell's dispirited moaning, and to a new sound . . . the whimpering of an animal. I thought in surprise: Who's whimpering? And then I realized the whimpers were coming from me—a pacing, caged, helpless and frightened animal.

The beating ended, but the moaning went on. I trembled in my dark cage, inanely counting: One-and-two-and . . . now he's coming for me, now it's my turn. . . .

"Shellew," the little bull called through the door, "Cruger wants to see you upstairs."

His flashlight danced; he muttered as he scraped the crossbar along the rough wood. My hands were sweaty again, like coming up to bat, and no sand. The door swung back and I stepped into it and hit him with the champagne bottle. He kept leaning forward on his short, stiff legs, lower and lower until he jack-knifed. My sweaty hands wanted to paste him again, but I just stood like a fool watching him sink and giving hanks that Moose Cruger had forgotten to take away my bottle of bubbly.

I pushed open the door of Howell's cubbyhole. The old man had stopped moaning. Looking at his raw face I shivered for him, and my hands started sweating all over. I ran up the stairs and moved along the hall, swinging the bottle like a nightstick.

Rinty was propped against the red leather chair, Delia Holmes holding the gun carelessly on him and Moose Cruger towering over them. Rinty was weaving on his feet, his face a glistening blur of red through which his huge mottled nose protruded. I rared back and threw the bottle.

It crashed on the keyboard of the grand piano. They wheeled around as the discord crashed in the room. Instantly Rinty slapped the square gun from the girl's hand and kicked it out of Crugers' reach. Maybe he tried to kick it toward me, but it skittered off the side of his shoe like a hurried punt and disappeared under the flounces of the sofa slipcover.

Rinty's rush against Delia Holmes carried her to the rug, and he locked her arms. That left Moose Cruger and me separated by the red leather chair.

Rinty said, "Pick up the hod and start laying brick, Ben."

I went across the red chair parallel with the floor. I used my head more for a ram than for thinking. Cruger stiff-armed me, rubbed my face against the rug and upset the chair on my back. By the time I shrugged it off he was sliding on his belly under the sofa. I should have been scared, but it only made me mad. A big boy like him going for a gun. Why, the guy made two of me.

I snatched up one of Cruger's feet and yanked on it. His shoe came off. But he didn't reach the gun. Vaguely I heard Rinty cheering, and out of the tail of my eye I saw him clamp a fresh lock on Delia Holmes. I thought sourly: "The lucky stiff always tops me. He dawdles there with an armful of violet scent, but look what I'm bucking." I stomped on Cruger's stockinged toes.

He bellowed in rage and reared up. I grabbed the collar of his brown jacket and yanked it halfway down on his arms, tying him up. Then I spun him around and picked up the hod. Stomach, chin, stomach, chin. Always up, because he made two of me. Taller, wider, heavier, but also fatter, dumber, yellower. He quit with a gentle sigh. The whole house quaked when he landed.

I let him bounce. I went under that

sofa like a pearl diver on piece work. I jammed the square gun in Rinty Ripple's shaking hand and then I clattered along the uncarpeted hall, down to the dark basement.

The little bull hadn't stirred. I dragged him upstairs and laid him out under Rinty's gun. I'd fretted more about the little bull than about massive Moose Cruger. When a big guy wades into you, *maybe* he'll lick you, but when a tough little cookie lashes out it's quite probable. . . .

Rinty was jabbering on the telephone. His gun hand was fairly steady, so I didn't worry. I went back again to help old man Howell. There was a stationary tub in the laundry and I wrung out some cloths in cold water. At first, the more I swabbed his face the worse he looked. I lost track of time, alternately swabbing and listening to his heart. Then I came back from a trip to the tub to find a white-suited interne bending over the old gentleman.

"He'll make it," the doctor said. "Go upstairs and lie down."

THE LIVING ROOM was crawling with cops and broad-beamed guys I didn't know. Rinty was talking and writing things in a leather notebook. Flashbulbs popped and reporters battled over the one telephone. The gabbling and general confusion made the room tilt, so I pushed a cop off the sofa and stretched out.

Rinty and I were almost the last to leave. We climbed into his muddy sedan and headed for town, and as soon as we cleared the dark lane I knew that I'd guessed right. This was the Northern Slope section.

"Howell will be okay," Rinty said. "He looks like a floorwalker but he's a tough old bird. He's been through worse than this. Did you know he's my boss? The Banker's Investigative Service. We were trying to crack those Midge Park bank-robbery jobs."

"You're a dirty, underhanded rat," I said.

"Don't get sore, Ben. I told Howell it would be okay to let you in on it. But we had this good tip that Delia Holmes was the bossman's gal, and he didn't want to take a chance. I had to make the contact with her. I had to impersonate a teller for one of the other banks and try to find their nest. . . ."

"So you picked me to impersonate because my nose is almost as big as yours."

"Bigger, of course," Rinty said. "I'll leave it to any fair-minded guy."

"Not now it isn't. That little bull really ballooned yours."

Rinty said, "What made you bust into this meet? You almost got into trouble. Howell was planted in the Tivoli lobby. He was going to tail Delia Holmes and me, but when he saw you pick her up instead, why he just followed you out to Cruger's farm."

"How did you find the place?" I wanted to know.

"I sat down to wait for her, and I saw an onion in an ashtray, so I figured something got mixed up. I rushed out on Aldrich Street, where Howell was supposed to have his car parked, and he was just pulling away. So I tailed *him*. You're a sucker."

"Sucker?" I said. "Did you get a load of that Samba walk?"

Rinty snapped his fingers. "Lord, I forgot! I had a date to do some parlor duty tonight." He glanced at his dashboard clock. "It's only eleven-thirty. I still got time."

He stepped on it and we rocketed into town and turned down Converse Street.

"Drop me off somewhere and I'll take a bus," I said.

"What for? You still got your bottle of champagne. We'll let you stay until it's gone."

He pulled up at a yellow-brick duplex and we went up to the door. As he rang the bell, Rinty exclaimed, "Whoa! I forgot my bottle of bubbly water." He trotted back to his car.

I could hear his girl coming to the door, and I yelled: "Rinty!" But he hopped into his car and took off down Converse Street like a comet.

The door opened. "Why, Ben!" she said.

Too late, I swung around and looked at her, but all I could see was that magnificent beak.

"Hello, Griselda," I said.

The Woman Who Lived Too Much

By LES TREMAYNE
(Star of "The Falcon," MBS)

The murder evidence was all against Liu Fook . . . but what jury could believe evidence—against the word of a trusted family servant?

IF YOU had been up that early, you could have seen old Liu Fook at work. It would have had to be very early, though, before the rising sun had lifted the crown of morning mist that encircles San Francisco's Nob Hill.

Perhaps, if you knew old Liu well, as most of Mrs. Rosetta Baker's friends did, you would say a word to the old man about not working so hard. Such an admonition would have been received in silence. For Liu Fook did not change easily. He was a man of method. Slowly, painstakingly, he did his work, his mop swishing back and forth as unerringly as a metronome sounding the endless passage of time, his age-weakened legs carrying him about in a stiff, hobbling gait, the face out of which his dark, cold eyes peered, set in the resignation of the defeated.

On December 8, 1930, for the first time in ten years, Liu Fook's schedule was changed. For that was the morning that old Liu's employer—his boss-missy, as he called her—was murdered.

Old Liu was a stubborn, an unchanging man, and perhaps in the wisdom that is ascribed to all old Orientals, he had foreseen this. Certain it was, that with the liberty of an old family servant, he had warned the boss-missy, Mrs. Baker, against what he considered her Bohemian ways. Her answer is not recorded, but probably she sent him about his business, considering that what she did was her own affair, and that she was certainly not answerable to any old Chinese!

What she did wasn't so bad anyway. Middle-aged though she was, she liked to mingle with theatrical people, and the night before she was murdered, she had been out with a man considerably younger than herself. Liu claimed that he had seen her in the embrace of the young man.

At any rate, Mrs. Baker was dead. Liu had found her, her nightgown and a sheet tied around her throat, her jewelry and money missing, the room bearing signs of a violent struggle. Mrs. Dix, Mrs. Baker's friend and neighbor, had called the police. What the police found wasn't destined to make Liu's lot any happier.

There was the matter of a piece of skin, first. It was found on the floor of Mrs. Baker's bedroom, and it matched a large wound on one of Liu's fingers. And there was the matter of the soaking pants. The police found them in a pail where someone had put them to soak out the bloodstains on them. Grey hairs that matched Mrs. Baker's were found adhering to the pants.

Liu denied that they were his—until Mrs. Dix testified that she remembered having patched those selfsame pants.

The jewels and the money were found, too, hidden in a pile of rubble near Liu's quarters.

It all added up—but San Francisco didn't believe it. Every family on Nob Hill that could afford one had a Chinese servant, trusted, pampered like a pet.

Liu went on trial for murder. The police produced photographs of the piece of skin and Liu's finger. They produced the bloodstained pants and the grey hairs. They brought into court the recovered money and jewels. They produced testimony that Liu had a cut on his face the morning of the murder. They found witnesses to testify that Liu had quarreled with Mrs. Baker several times and had been fired and rehired. They came up with a leather heel found in Mrs. Baker's bedroom from one of Liu's shoes.

The defense had nothing but feeble objections to offer.

The jury was out exactly twenty-one minutes. They brought in a verdict of "not guilty."

A few days later Liu sailed for China.

And who murdered Mrs. Rosetta Baker? You'll have to ask *her*.

Action-Packed Novelette of Killers On the Loose!

I'LL BE

A tiny, black gun appeared in Perez's hand. "Well, Pete," he said, "Señor George has had an accident, no?"

CHAPTER ONE

The Visitors

GRACIE said petulantly, "No I don't want to go to another lousy movie and no I don't want to take a walk in the park and no I don't want those petrified Websters over for another screaming evening of contract, and now will you shut up?"

She tinkled the ice in her empty glass, scowled down into it, held it out to her husband. "You can make me another one of those drinks," she said sullenly.

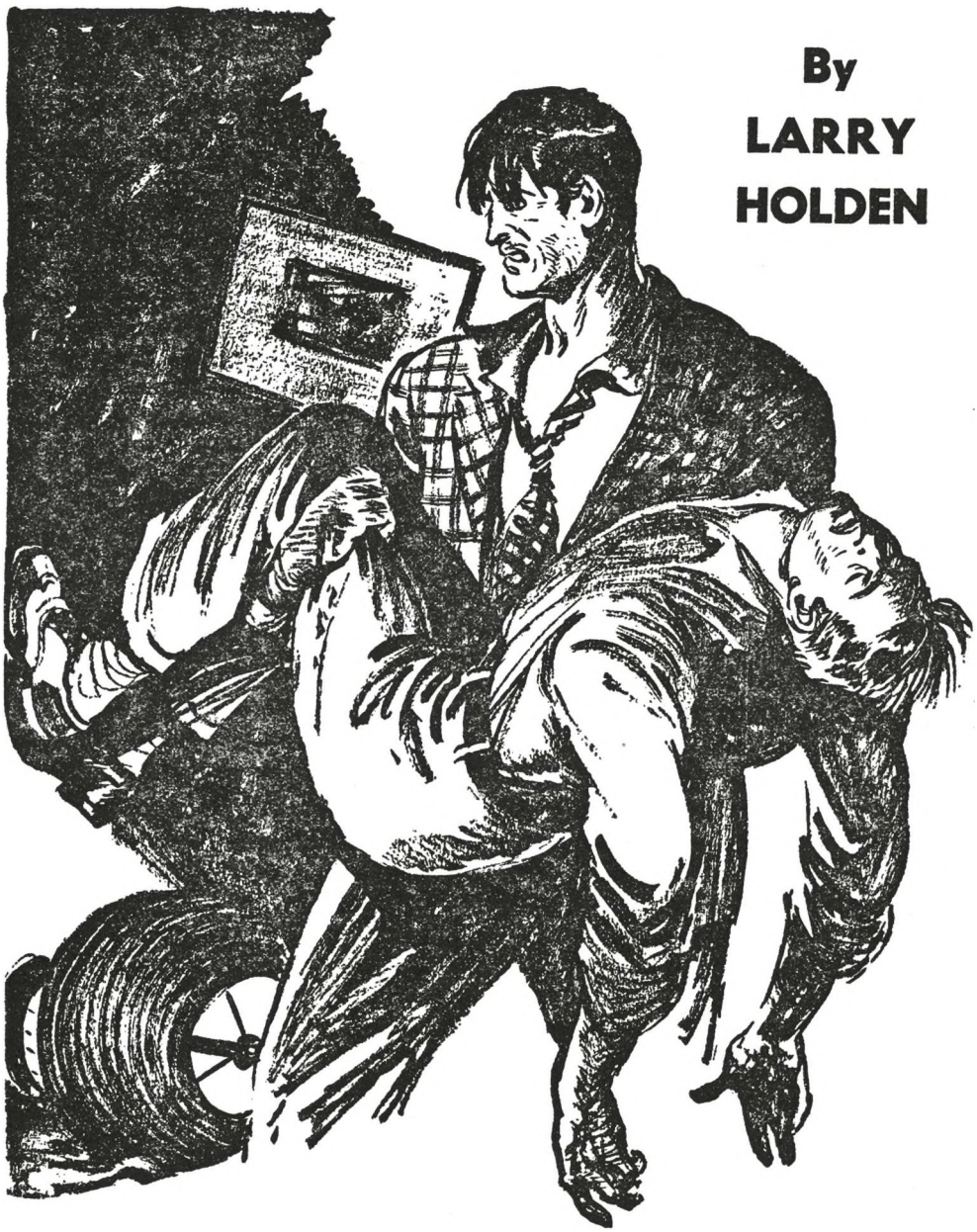
"Another one?"

"Yes, another one! And for God's sake, George, put some *gin* in it. What are you saving it for—Christmas?"

He said patiently, "No, Gracie," took the glass and went into the kitchen.

HOME FOR MURDER!

By
LARRY
HOLDEN



The blood was a crimson network on his face, and out of his chest a great red flower had welled, spreading over his shirt front. . . . "Pretty smart, George," he said. "You snatched the emeralds, then sicced those hoods on me. Well—" his gun rose—"here's something even smarter!"

The front doorbell chimed, then ding-donged like a church fire. Gracie threw down her magazine. George grimaced unhappily. He took off his glasses and nervously polished them on a paper napkin. He hoped it wasn't the Websters. He liked the Websters—solid, respectable people—and he knew that Gracie, in her black mood, would be sure to insult them, noisily, blatantly. He washed her glass at the sink and dried it slowly. He was tired.

In the other room, Gracie shrieked with surprise and delight, and George heard her cry, "So they kicked you out of South America, too! They got wise to you."

An answering masculine voice rumbled, "You're a blonde again."

"Like it?"

"Always did. Eat it with a spoon."

Gracie shrieked again and giggled. George came from the kitchen, smiling, carrying her glass. She was struggling coyly in the embrace of a tall man, whose brown, reckless face was bent over Gracie, seeking her averted mouth with a grinning kiss. Behind them stood two other men—a heavy, round-shouldered one, grim, and a slight, dapper man in a linen suit, who watched with hot, eager eyes.

George said, "Well, it looks as if we have company."

Gracie stopped struggling and the tall man released her. She poked primly at her hair. "This is Pete, George," she said, then giggled again. "Pete was my first husband, the one who ran away with a redhead."

Pete held out his hand, grinning. "That's the malarky," he said. "She ran out on me with a bellboy from Atlantic City." He was a little drunk. He waved his arm at the two men behind him, and George caught a glimpse of a shoulder holster and the black butt of a gun.

"Brought a couple friends," he rumbled. "The ugly one's Durkee, and the mahogany one's Perez. Say, kiddo—" he put his arm around Gracie's waist—"how's about digging up a couple tomatas and us having a party? I kinda promised the boys a good time."

Durkee and Perez nodded coldly at George and glared at Pete. This was not their idea of a good time. Their faces had fallen into scowls from the moment of George's entrance from the kitchen.

"I don't know any single girls," Gracie said in a warning voice, "None at all."

"The hell you don't. What about that fat, sloppy one I always liked—what was her name?—Millie."

Gracie's voice toughened, "I don't know Millie any more, Pete."

THIS TIME Pete got it. He nodded owlishly and pulled a bottle from the sagging pocket of his wrinkled sport coat. It was half empty. "We'll have our own party," he said. "I brought some tequila. Le's have a drink to the old days. Whip 'em up for us, will you, George?" He tossed the bottle to George, who looked uncertainly at the pale liquor. He smiled. His smile was still pleasant. He looked at Durkee and Perez and asked politely:

"The same for you gentlemen?"

Silently, Durkee held up four fingers and Perez just nodded. George went back into the kitchen. When he returned with the five drinks on a tray, Durkee and Perez were sitting side by side on the sofa, Gracie was curled languidly in the wing chair by the window, and Pete was hanging over her, one elbow hooked on the mantel over the fireplace, talking eagerly and boastfully.

". . . Panama City," he was saying. "Pulled a knife and I let him have it. Busted his neck, and that was when I lit out for S.A. on the next freighter." He guffawed.

George served the drinks and perched himself on the edge of the lounge chair, facing the sofa. "He didn't really kill anybody, did he?" he asked, to make conversation.

Durkee and Perez exchanged a swift, covert glance, and Perez said carelessly, "Of course not, señor. Pete, he just likes to talk, you understand? And when he dreenks. . . ." He shrugged and spread his hands.

Durkee moved his arm. His coat fell open, and George saw that he, too, was carrying a gun. George stared and felt an icy prickle of apprehension. The talk of killing did not seem like too much of a joke, despite Perez's careless denial. He laughed uneasily.

"I understand," he said. "It's . . . just talk."

"Si, Pete, he's a great talker. Means notheeng."

Pete turned his head. "Whattya mean, means nothing?" he roared. "I'll show you how much it means, Gracie. Take a look at this." He pulled a small leather bag from his inside pocket and hefted it in his hand, grinning wolfishly at Durkee and Perez, who were suddenly rigid. He opened the bag and spilled a handful of glittering green stones across his broad palms. "Them's emeralds, kiddo," he said, "South American emeralds, the best in the world. And there's more where they came from. Me and the boys here is forming a little syndicate—soon's we get a little financial backing. Say, here's an idea. Hey, George, how'd you like to put up fifteen thousand bucks and come in with us?"

Gracie's eyes spread like spilled water, and her hand went up automatically and took a stone from Pete's palm. "Emeralds?" she said. "Are you sure these are real emeralds?"

"They don't come any realer. How's about it, George? Fifteen thousand bucks and you're in."

George looked from Pete to Durkee and Perez. Their faces were hard and glowering, and Durkee's mouth was as thin as a piece of string.

George said hastily, "That sounds fine, Pete, but I—I don't have fifteen thousand."

Gracie looked up sharply. "We have this house, don't we?" she demanded. "That's worth fifteen thousand, isn't it?"

"Yes. But Gracie, I can't sell the house. It's all we have."

Perez interrupted. "Pete eez joking, señora," he purred. He shot a blazing glance at Pete. "There eez no deal in emeralds. We weesh to buy a banana plantation, and a friend of mine, who ees in Chicago, ees to put up the money. Eez that not so, Pete?"

Pete rattled the emeralds in his hand and scowled. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah, sure. Bananas." He avoided Gracie's suspicious eyes. He rattled the emeralds again. "These are fakes. I carry them around just for laughs."

George felt the mounting tension, and just to make conversation, he said, "I thought there were too many to be real, ha, ha. It's Colombia in South America that produces emeralds, isn't it. I remember that from grade school. The Colombian government holds a monopoly on emeralds, and they've made it illegal for anybody else to . . ." He faltered, suddenly aware that Perez's eyes had sharpened to murderous, glittering pinpoints. "That's how I know they couldn't be real," he ended lamely. He wet his lips and nervously took a quick swallow from his drink.

Perez put down his glass, half finished, and stood. "I theenk we go now." He looked significantly at Pete. "We have other visits to make."

Pete said angrily, "Wait a minute. . . ."

"No, no, please. We go, eh?"

Durkee growled. "Yeah, let's scram. C'mon, Pete, we got a big night ahead of us."

Pete met the menace of the two glowering men with a reckless laugh. "Sure," he said. "The sooner the better." He poured the emeralds back into the bag. The last one he dropped into Gracie's incredulous hand. "Something to remember me by," he said. Huge and broad-shouldered, noisy, laughing, he herded Durkee and Perez ahead of him out of the

house, going out by the front door.

George closed the door and leaned against it. He touched his forehead with his fingertips and looked surprised when they came away glistening with perspiration.

"Whew," he said, "they sure gave me the willies, those two. Did you see their faces, Gracie? That little Spaniard looked as if he'd cut my throat."

Gracie did not answer. She was watching the emerald as she rolled it to and fro over the palm of her hand. Her eyes were shiny and covetous.

GEORGE had breakfast alone the next morning. Gracie always slept until ten or eleven. He felt vaguely depressed, and he couldn't put his finger on the cause. Gracie had been very snappish the night before, after the men had gone, but that was nothing unusual. She was getting harder to please all the time.

He washed his dishes. He sliced a banana and a peach for Gracie, put them in a dish and placed it in the ice box. Before leaving the house for his office, he glanced at the sky, then took a furled umbrella from the closet beside the front door. It was a half-hour walk to the office of the insurance company where he worked. He had a car, but Gracie liked to use it for shopping, and George had convinced himself that the daily walk did him good. "Keeps the weight down," he always said, patting his belly.

He had not gone two blocks before a shiny yellow sedan prowled to the curb beside him, and Perez's dark face appeared in the window.

"May we geeve you a lift, señor?" he asked courteously. He opened the back door.

George started and was about to refuse, but the words died on his lips as he caught a glimpse of Durkee's glowering face over the steering wheel.

He said, "Thanks," and climbed into the back seat. The car moved on slowly.

Perez looked gravely at George. "This is not altogether an accident, you understand, señor? I wanted to talk weeth you —about last night."

George nodded shortly. "I . . . what is it, Mr. Perez?" Durkee, he noted, had a black eye and a cut, puffy lip. He held his umbrella firmly across his lap.

"Thees talk of Pete's last night," Perez said smoothly. "I hope you do not attach too much importance to it."

"About the bananas?"

"No, not the bananas, señor. About the emeralds. You have forgotten the emeralds?"

"No."

"Eet would be much better if you did, señor," Perez said earnestly. "Notheeng but trouble can come from remembering foolish talk like that. Trouble for everybody."

George's heart thudded and he gripped his umbrella more tightly. This was a threat, barely concealed. He stammered, "I—I had no intention of repeating it to anybody, Mr. Perez. No intention at all."

A gleam of contemptuous amusement appeared in Perez's eyes, but his voice remained suave. "I knew you were an intelligent man, señor," he said. "And we are warning you for your own good, you understand. Pete ees a very hasty and violent man. He might not understand your good intentions, yes? Your wife is a very attractive woman, señor."

George leaned forward and pointed. "The next corner is where I get off," he said hurriedly. "My office is just across the street." He put his hand on the door lever. He was not going to waste any time getting out when the car stopped.

Perez went on softly: "Also, she seemed to me to be a woman of very strong will, no? I would not let her talk me into anything foolish eef I were you, señor."

"Anything foolish? I should say not! No indeed! Sell my house? I couldn't do that. I wouldn't hear of it. Indeed not."

"I said you were intelligent, did I not, señor? It ees true. And," his voice sharpened, "I would also keep in mind, señor, that Pete weel be gone within a week. He may pay the señora some little . . . gallantries, but it weel be of no importance. You must take my word for that, señor, and restrain your natural jealousy."

George exclaimed, "What!" and looked startled.

Perez smiled. "I theenk you are a patient man, señor. Lean upon your patience for the next few days." He touched Durkee lightly on the arm. "Thees is where Señor George weel leave

us. Right here at thees very corner."

Durkee stopped the car and stared straight down the street. George got quickly out of the car and walked across the street without looking back. His hands were trembling, and he kept saying fretfully to himself, "How did I ever get mixed up with such people? How did I ever get mixed up with such people?" He was annoyed, not frightened. He stopped in the luncheonette and had another cup of coffee before going up to his office.

CHAPTER TWO

Blackjacking

GRACIE was as gay as a calliope when he got home that night for dinner. She had on an evening gown he had never seen before, a new one, cut deeply in front, and her honey-blonde hair was done high on her head with a soft cascade of wispy curls. She threw her arms around his bewildered neck and kissed him before he had time to put down his umbrella.

"Pete's taking us out to dinner!" she cried gaily. "He wants to apologize for bringing those men here last night. Isn't that nice?"

George protested mildly, "But I was thinking about taking my vacation Monday, Gracie, and I wanted to stay home with you tonight and, well, make plans."

"We can make plans tomorrow, Georgie. It's only Thursday. Tonight we're going to have a whizz-bang. Now hurry and change your clothes."

She pushed him into the living room. Pete was sprawled in the lounge chair and he came lithely to his feet. He had been drinking again. It was in the looseness of his grin, in the reckless, dancing gleam of his eye. His tie hung a little away from his collar and there was a smear of lipstick on his chin.

There was also a crescent-shaped cut on his cheekbone, and his knuckles looked scraped, as if he'd been in a fight.

He said, "Hiya, George. Sorry about those two monkeys last night. They're a pair of comedians and I wish I'd never had anything to do with them." He grimaced and laughed. "Put on your best bib and tucker, amigo, and we'll see if I can make it up to you tonight."

George could not take his eyes from the streak of lipstick across Pete's chin, and his hands tightened at his sides.

Gracie looked quickly at Pete and said, "Pete's been out all afternoon with a new girl friend, George, and he ditched her just to take us out. Wasn't that nice of him?"

"Why didn't he bring her along?"

"Ah, hell," Pete said easily, "she was a slob. You wouldn't have liked her."

Gracie gave George's shoulder a playful little shove. "Hurry and change, Georgie. We're going to the *Gaite Parisienne* for dinner."

George gave them another suspicious glance and walked heavily to the bedroom. He remembered what Perez had said, but he trusted Gracie. She might have kissed Pete—she had kissed him the night before—but it probably didn't mean anything. Anyway, she had gotten rid of her black mood, and that was the main thing—that she be happy.

When he returned to the living room a half-hour later, shaved and cool in a dark blue tropical-worsted suit, the lipstick was gone from Pete's chin, and Gracie was sitting in the wing chair at the opposite side of the room. They were chatting casually about bananas.

The *Gaite Parisienne* was a merry night club perched high on the Palisades, overlooking the Hudson River.

The food was excellent, the chorus naked and the bill exorbitant. The waiters spoke French, but only on demand, and there was no extra charge for it.

George sat across the table from Pete, and Gracie sat between them. Gracie looked around happily, hungrily.

"I used to dance in a place like this," she told George. "That's where I met Pete. The Hotsy-Totsy Club, it was called. Remember, Pete?"

"It was a dump. You were the best thing in it. Ever miss it, kiddo?"

Gracie glanced warily at George and shook her head. "It was no life," she said primly. "Some dope from Weehawken always trying to paw you or something." She smiled sweetly at George. "George was always a gentleman," she said. "We met when I went to his office to cash in my insurance policy."

Pete said, "That sounds respectable enough," but his eyes were jeering. Gracie flashed him a warning glance and

he grinned, almost giving her a wink.

She squealed with delight when the champagne came in a silver bucket. "You'd better enjoy it," Pete told her. "It's fifteen bucks a bottle." He waved the waiter away and filled the glasses himself.

George had never had champagne before. He drank very little of anything. After his second glass, he decided he liked it better than ginger ale.

Pete picked up his knife and made a few crosses on the tablecloth in front of him. "George," he said, "I had a particular reason for taking you and the missus out tonight. There's no sense beating around the bush, see?"

George didn't see, but he nodded. The champagne was making him very friendly and receptive. He looked into his glass and watched the bubbles rise lazily. He smiled at Gracie, but she was looking at Pete, her full lips half parted.

"It's like this," Pete said, making additional diagrams with his knife, "that talk about emeralds last night was the real McCoy. That stuff about bananas was the malarky."

George's hand fell away from his glass. He said faintly, "It was?"

"Yeah." Pete hunched himself forward in his chair and dropped his voice a notch. "The way I'm going to swing it, there'll be millions in this emerald deal. I've got five thousand bucks deposit on the fastest, sweetest little speedboat you ever laid eyes on. They'd need a plane to catch it. All I need is another five thousand and that part of it is set, get me?" He looked up.

George said, "Yes, but—"

Gracie touched his wrist with her fingertips, slid her hand under his. "Listen to Pete, Georgie," she urged. "Listen to him before you say anything."

GEORGE shook his head unhappily. His mind was made up, and he didn't want to know anymore of Pete's plans. The less he knew, the better off he'd be.

Pete hitched his chair an inch closer to the table. "I got five thousand in my belt," he said, patting his stomach, "but I'll need another ten to swing the Colombia end. I got everything lined up down there. A couple fellows I met down there have a mine the government don't even know about, and they'll sell me the stuff in potato sacks. You saw these last night." He tapped the pocket into which he had dropped the bag of emeralds. "Grade A, every one of them. None better. One trip, just one—" he held up a significant finger—"and we'll all be rolling in it. Two trips and we'll have our own yacht."

Gracie said eagerly, "We'll be rich, Georgie! Rich!"

George shook his head firmly. "In the first place," he said, "It's illegal. . . ."

"Illegal!" Pete laughed and spread his hands on the table. "Hell, it's illegal here in the United States for anybody to have a monopoly like the Colombian government has, and I'm an American citizen, ain't I?"

George kept shaking his head. "And in the second place," he said, "I'm not going to sell my home. I worked hard to get it and I want to keep it. I'm just an ordinary citizen, Pete. I don't need a lot of money. . . ."

Pete said slily, "But what about Gracie here? Maybe she'd like to have a little more dough to spend."

Gracie snatched her hand from under George's and said angrily, "Yeah, what about me? How far do you think your lousy seventy-five a week goes these days? Maybe I'd like a fur coat one of these times, or a new car, or something. Why don't you consider me once in a while?"

"I *am* considering you, Gracie. That's the reason I don't want to take everything we have and put it into this scheme of Pete's. Suppose he's arrested. . . ."

Pete said, "Arrested!" and sneered.

"I'm just supposing," George said patiently. "If it *did* happen, we'd be broke, and it takes a long time to save fifteen thousand dollars. No, Pete, I want to keep what I have."

Gracie sat in wordless fury. George tried to pat her hand but she pulled away from him. He looked at Pete. "And what about Durkee and Perez?" he asked. "I thought you three were working together?"

"That worrying you, amigo?"

"No, but I imagine it might worry them."

Pete leaned back in his chair and drawled as insultingly as he could make it, "The boys got you scared, George?"

George looked steadily into Pete's jeer-

ing face. "I'm not scared of them," he said truthfully. "But do you think they'd let you get away with having me in on the scheme if they didn't want me?"

"As far as I'm concerned, amigo, I can declare both of them out any time I want. The hell with them." Then, as he looked at George, his grin fell away at the corners, drew together, and his mouth tightened. Through the slits of his veiling lids, his eyes had a speculative glitter. "But maybe you got something there, amigo. Yeah. They're bad boys to fool around with, both of them. In fact, if they even thought we were sitting here talking like this, the pair of us would be cold meat by tomorrow morning. Durkee'd put the slug on you for a buck, and Perez'd slip a knife into you just for the hell of it. I know them, and maybe that's why I was so anxious to get out of the deal with them. Yeah. But I kinda forgot the other side of it." He glanced quickly at Gracie.

Her face was white. "You mean," she said thickly, "you're not taking George in on it? Listen, give me one more day, just one more day and I'll have him running to you with the money, begging you to take it. Just one more day." She disregarded George entirely, looking fiercely into Pete's face. Her hands tightened to white little knots.

The orchestra began softly to play *April In Paris*. Pete shoved back his chair, his long, sly grin dancing at the ends of his mouth again. "Nix, Gracie, nix. Maybe George here's got more than you think he has. Let's you and me dance this one." He held out his hand.

She glared. "Dance with you after—"

"Now, now, kiddo, you dance with papa and he'll tell you all about it." He winked, took her arm and practically lifted her from the chair. "Have another drink, George," he said over his shoulder as he danced Gracie into the shifting crowd on the floor.

When they came back to the table, there was a furtive air of secretiveness between them that George missed. Gracie smiled at him and lightly touched his shoulder before she sat. "I'm not sore any more," she said.

George smiled gratefully and took her hand as Pete ordered another bottle of champagne.

GEORGE awakened the next morning, feeling as if his tongue had been pickled in brine. A nagging headache had settled at the base of his skull. They had not gotten in until after four. He ate his lonely breakfast and walked briskly to the office, but somehow this morning the walk did not have its usual tonic effect. He was heavy-eyed all morning and could hardly keep his mind on the figures he was compiling for the new brochure that had to go to the printer's the next day. By four in the afternoon he knew he was going to have to work overtime on it, and he called Gracie and told her he didn't know when he'd be home.

"After ten probably," he said. "Why don't you go to a movie?"

"I've been to a movie," she said sourly. "I'd listen to the radio only I've heard that too."

"I'll get finished here as quickly as I can, Gracie, and we can go out for a beer and a hot dog. Okay?"

"Okay? Why shouldn't it be okay." Then she squealed and unexpectedly giggled.

George said suspiciously, "What was that?"

"What was what?"

"What were you giggling about?"

"I was giggling," she said bitingly, "because I was so happy you are going to take me out for a beer and a hot dog. What do you want me to do—bust into tears?"

"No, Gracie." His voice sagged wearily. He hung up, feeling sick. He didn't have to be told more plainly. Pete was with her. He slumped in his chair and sat staring across the paper-littered waste of his desk. There was no solace in remembering that Perez had warned him of this and had added the rider that Pete would be gone within a week.

There was one thing he could see clearly: Gracie and Pete were the same kind of people—reckless, moody, casual, sometimes even conscienceless.

But there were things a man couldn't permit if he wanted to keep his self-respect, if nothing else, and this was one of them. He picked up his pen and went to work fiercely on the columns of figures before him, his mind a turmoil. He loved Gracie—only God knew why, he

admitted despairingly to himself—and he was not tamely going to turn her over to Pete. Pete would destroy her. Pete destroyed everything—honesty, integrity, love—and he would break Gracie if she stood in his way for a moment.

He would start his vacation immediately. Today was Friday. He would leave a note saying he was starting his vacation tomorrow, and the first thing in the morning he would take Gracie away. He would take her to California; she was always talking of going to Hollywood. He'd take her to Hollywood, though it was the last place he wanted to spend a vacation, but it was bait and he was sure Gracie would snap it up. The decision seemed to cleanse his mind, and he finished his work in a burst of exultant energy. He put the papers on his secretary's desk, together with the vacation note, and left the office. He hesitated on the sidewalk outside, then crossed the street to the Hurdy-Gurdy Tavern.

A half-block away, a small black coupe had started to life as he stepped from the office door. It crept silently forward, then stopped again when he crossed the street to the tavern. It waited until he came out again, walking briskly, his head high. It waited until he turned into Chestnut Street, then, running with parking lights only, passed him. It ran three blocks beyond and parked in the deep shadow of a wide-armed oak. A man slid from it, crouching. He ran lightly back down the street about twenty feet and stood behind the concealing bole of another tree. He tightened his hand on the blackjack he held. It had a spring in it and he whipped it experimentally against his thigh.

A half-block back, George passed briefly under the feeble radiance of a street light and kept coming steadily. As he passed the tree, the man sprang out silently and swung the blackjack with all his strength. He cursed as he felt it strike only a glancing blow. George yelled, stumbled forward a few paces and fell to his hands and knees, his hat rolling away across the sidewalk. The man leaped at him and swung again, savagely, hastily, this time catching George on the left shoulder.

A ceiling light sprang on from the porch of a nearby house and a voice yelled hoarsely, "Hey!" The man caught a glimpse of several people sitting on the porch, holding glasses in their hands, and a bulky man in his shirt sleeves running down the steps. The attacker threw a wallet on the sidewalk beside George and sprinted up the street toward his car. Instead of stopping at George, the bulky man kept running. The attacker turned at the door of the car, fired a shot into the air and squirmed behind the wheel. The car roared up the street in first gear and darted around the corner.

George was sitting up when two other men from the porch reached his side. They helped him to his feet and one of them picked up the wallet from the sidewalk. The bulky man came back, looking crestfallen.

"You okay, mister?" he asked anxiously.

One of the women on the porch called shrilly, "Is he hurt, Mike? Can you tell? Is he hurt?"

George mumbled. "I'm all right." He winced as he raised his left hand to touch his head, then winced again when he did touch it.

"You're lucky, mister, believe me! Cripes, I thought he'd kill you, the way he swung." The bulky man laughed shakily.

The other man said, "Here's your wallet, mister. He didn't get away with that, anyway."

George took it mechanically and slipped it into his hip pocket. He started. His own wallet was still there. Now he had two wallets. "Did you get a look at him?"

"Well, to tell you the truth, mister, I didn't. But he was a big one, a tall, wiry fella. And when he fired that gun I was too busy jumping in the hedges to even get his license plate. You wait here a minute. I'll get the car and take you home. Hey, Ma," he raised his voice and called to the porch, "I'm gonna take this fella home. He's still a little groggy."

George protested, but the bulky man said," You wait here," and a few minutes later a huge old Studebaker sedan backed noisily down the driveway. They drove him home, looked embarrassed when he

thanked them, then turned the unwieldy car and rumbled down the street.

CHAPTER THREE

Too Smart to Live

GRACIE was standing, white-faced, in the middle of the living room when George lurched in.

"My God," she said shakily, "what happened to you?"

He grinned feebly at her and touched the back of his head with his right hand. There was blood on the tips of his fingers. He wiped them on his handkerchief.

"I was held up," he said thickly. "He hit me on the head. Make me a drink. I'm going to the bathroom. I feel dizzy."

He stumbled past her to the bathroom. He bathed his face with cold water, gingerly held a wet towel to the back of his head. The nausea passed and he sat on the edge of the bathtub. He took the wallet from his pocket. He turned it in his hands and finally opened it. Inside was an Illinois driver's license made out to James J. Durkee. George stared unbelievingly at it. James J. Durkee. That wasn't right. That wasn't what he had expected. Durkee was short, thickset and round-shouldered, and shambled when he walked. There could be no mistaking Durkee's heavy figure—but the bulky man had said the attacker was a big fellow, tall and wiry. That didn't fit Durkee at all. And it didn't fit Perez, who was short and slight. With fumbling fingers, George emptied the wallet into his lap. There was an Esso credit card made out to J. Durkee, a photograph of a nude girl bashfully hiding behind her hands, a membership card to the Kit-Kat Club admitting J. Durkee and party, a thin sheaf of five and ten-dollar bills and nothing else. There was no doubt—it was Durkee's wallet. George looked at it incredulously. It was wrong, entirely wrong.

He stood and reached automatically for the doorknob. His mind turned futilely. What he needed was a drink. His head ached dully. He opened the door and stood stiffly staring. A blinding light seemed to explode and the room whirled. He clutched the door jamb.

Pete, disheveled and breathing heavily, stood before the sofa, his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his crumpled sport jacket. His jaw was thrust out and a little to one side and his eyes burned with a hot and reckless light.

Behind him, Gracie leaned against the mantel over the fireplace, her hands hidden behind her back. Her face was sharp and pointed, and her eyes darted to and fro between the two men.

She leaned a little toward George and said huskily, "Pete just dropped in. I told him you were held up."

Pete said, "Yeah. Sorry to hear it. Any idea who it was, George?"

George stood there motionless. His body tingled as if he were standing on the deck of a violently vibrating ship. Their voices seemed to come from a long way off through a tunnel. He was still clutching Durkee's wallet in his shaking hand. It was Pete who had tried to kill him. He was sure of that—and just as sure that if he revealed that knowledge, Pete would kill him right there. His tongue thickened in his mouth and refused to form the words that might save him.

"What have you got there, George?" Pete asked softly, pointing his chin at the wallet. "Let's take a look at it." He took the wallet from George's unresisting fingers and flipped it open. He whistled just a little too quickly. "It's Durkee's," he said. "Now what the hell do you think of that! How'd you get hold of it, George?"

George stammered, "He—he dropped it."

"Who dropped it—Durkee?"

"Th-th-the man who held me up."

"Durkee?" Pete was insistent, urgent, pressing. "Was it Durkee, George?"

George forced his head to nod. He had to appease Pete. That was first, that was immediate. After that he would find a way out.

"The people on the porch," he said rapidly. "They said the man was short and heavy. One of them found that wallet. He thought it was mine and gave it to me. Durkee must have dropped it."

The tenseness went out of Pete's muscles and his face loosened with relief.

He straightened up. "Remember what I said last night, George? Durkee's a tough character. He'd beat out your brains for a buck. Here," he pushed the wallet back into George's hand. "You keep this wallet, George, in case something turns up later. Know what I mean?" he winked.

Holding the wallet, George knew that he had made a mistake. He had not appeased Pete. He just opened the way for Pete to kill him with no risk. They had him where they wanted him—with Durkee framed as the potential killer.

"You look all in, George," Pete said. "Gracie, give the guy a drink. Give him a good stiff one. He's had an awful jolt. Give us all a drink." He threw his heavy arm around George's shoulders and led him to the sofa. "Sit down, amigo. You'll feel better with a drink inside you."

Gracie passed them with a quick sidelong glance at George and went into the kitchen. Pete grinned down at George.

"Relax, amigo. I'll turn on the radio and get some music."

GEORGE watched his lithe stride, fascinated. Pete hunkered down before the radio, whistling softly, and twirled the knobs. The electrical hum swelled into *Getting Sentimental.*

"Tommy Dorsey," Pete said over his shoulder. "I always liked that guy. After we have our drink we'll take a little ride in the moonlight along the river and maybe stop in some place for a hot dog. You don't have to worry about Durkee any more. When he finds he's lost his wallet, he'll be scared witless. He's probably on his way back to Chicago."

George answered, hardly knowing what he said, but he felt he had to keep answering. He didn't want to arouse Pete's suspicions. Not now. He wanted time. Given time, he'd figure a way out of this. Time.

Gracie came back from the kitchen carrying a tray on which were three glasses with ice cubes in them and a bottle of whiskey. She put it on the cocktail table. Pete took up the bottle and winked at George.

"We'll give you a good stiff one, amigo."

He filled the highball glass to within an inch of the top. George's will was too paralyzed to protest. That much whiskey would make him drunk. He wasn't used to drinking. Gracie had always derisively called him one-drink George. That's what they wanted—to make him drunk. Now he knew why Pete hadn't killed him immediately. The narrow escape from the people on the porch back there had made him cautious. He wasn't going to chance any more witnesses. They were going to get him drunk, take him to some quiet spot and kill him, unmolested. That was his chance. The longer he stayed sober, the longer he stayed alive. He held his glass tightly but he did not drink.

Gracie said impatiently, "What's the matter now? Don't you like it? Or would you rather have a nice weak cup of tea. My God!" She took the glass Pete offered her, threw down her drink with an expert toss of her head and held out the glass for another.

Pete threw down his drink just as quickly and poured two new ones. "What the hell," he said, "we might as well be drunk as the way we are. Let's make a night of it. Let's celebrate George's escape. Here's to you, Georgie."

George raised his glass and took a tiny sip, conscious that they were watching him narrowly.

Pete said soothingly, "Relax, George. You're a friend of mine and I look out for my friends. See this?" He flipped his gun from under his armpit. "Never go without it. That's another friend of mine. You got a gun, George?"

"Sure, George has a gun—a .22 rifle!" Gracie laughed too loudly. She jerkily lit a cigarette, tilted back her head and watched George through the smoke. Her hands were shaking. She sat on the sofa beside him and cuddled close. "Let's you and me have a loving cup, George," she purred. She lifted the glass from his hand and took a deep swallow, gave it back to him. "Now it's your turn. Bottoms up!"

They were backing him into a corner where he couldn't refuse to drink without making them suspicious. "I can't drink that way," he said wildly. "You know I can't drink that way. I never could. It makes me cough. I get sick to my stomach."

Pete took Gracie by the arm and roughly pulled her to her feet. "Leave the guy

alone," he snapped. "How can he enjoy his drink if you keep yapping at him? You want him to enjoy his drink, don't you? C'mon, let's dance and leave him in peace."

As they turned out into the open room beyond the cocktail table, George quickly poured his drink down between the cushions of the sofa. He held the empty glass in his lap, hiding it, but they discovered it the moment they stopped dancing.

"Well, what do you know about that!" Gracie cried. "St. George finished his drink. Build him another, Pete. Can't leave a man sitting around without a drink."

"That's a fact." Pete snatched up the bottle and, taking George's glass, filled it again. He held the bottle to the light. "Well, that polishes that one off." He loosened his tie and collar button. He was sweating. "Getting hotter'n hell in here."

George said quickly, "Let's open some windows."

Just as quickly, Pete said, "Nah, it's damp outside. Hey, Gracie, dance with the guy. Go ahead, George, dance with her. I wanna sit this one out."

He pulled George from the sofa. Gracie scowled, but submitted to his stiff embrace. George danced clumsily, one of time with the music, stumbling over both his own and Gracie's feet.

He began to talk, lifting his voice in a travesty of gaiety. "I haven't had a party like this in a long time. Maybe it's what I needed. I was feeling pretty low, but I feel fine now. What's your hotel, Pete?"

"The Berwick." Then, suspiciously, "Why?"

"I'll drive you home when you get drunk. You said you were going to get drunk, didn't you?"

Pete laughed harshly. "Sure. Surest thing you know."

Gracie said, "You're a little too sober yourself, George. Have another drink. You dance beautifully when you're just a teeny-weeny bit high. Finish your drink and I'll dance this one out with Pete." She pushed him back into the sofa, put his glass in his hand and raised her arms to Pete.

Pete jumped up and took off his sport jacket and threw it on the sofa. "Getting hot," he muttered. His eyes were restless and he kept wetting his lips. It was stretching out too long and the tension was getting to him.

He pulled Gracie to him and she snapped angrily, "Watch it, will you. What do you want to do, break my arm?" She looked ready to claw his face.

"All right, all right. I'm sorry." Then, over her shoulder he said to George, "How's about our going out for that little ride, George?"

George said hurriedly, "I haven't finished my drink."

"Well, don't take all night. The joints'll all close up. Gracie here wants a hot dog."

"Yeah, I'm getting hungry. Finish it up, George, and let's go."

"Wh-why don't you two have another drink while you're waiting? I don't drink so fast."

Pete grabbed up the bottle. "I could use a drink, damn it." He grinned wolfishly at Gracie. "I thought you said this husband of yours couldn't drink? I'm beginning to think he's got a hollow leg or something. Oh, hell, this damn bottle's empty. I suppose it's the last one in the damned house, too!"

"There's another one in the kitchen. I'll get it." Gracie walked jerkily across the floor.

Pete strode after her. "I'll help you find it." He closed the swinging door behind them. Their voices were muffled but George could hear them arguing fiercely. Then it died down, and at the end, Gracie giggled half hysterically, as if something inside her were stretching too far and too tight.

George looked desperately at the front door, hardly listening to them. All he wanted to do was get away. If he tried to slip out in his car, they'd hear the motor, but he might do it by running, by dodging through backyards and hiding. He put his hand on the sofa to lift himself and his heart leaped. Under his fingers he could feel the little bag of emeralds in Pete's coat pocket.

TREMBLING, with a furtive glance toward the kitchen, he thrust his hand into the inside pocket and drew out the leather bag. He glanced around the room, then, quickly crossing to the fireplace, put

it carefully behind the picture that hung over the mantel. He glanced toward the kitchen again and darted into the front hall. With frantic haste, he leafed through the phone book for the Berwick Hotel, found it and silently prayed as he waited for the bell to ring.

As he sat, he suddenly discovered that he was swearing. A steady stream of mumbled curses poured from his lips, almost meaningless, a jumble of spiny, scarring words.

The receiver clicked to life at his ear, "Berwick Hotel."

"I want to talk to James J. Durkee." He glanced over his shoulder again, his glasses glinting worriedly.

The receiver clicked again, and this time Durkee's grumbling voice came through.

George whispered, "Pete's at his girl friend's house. You and Perez are going to get left." His heart thundered against the cage of his chest.

"What's that?" Durkee said quickly. "What's that again, pal?"

"Do you want to be double-crossed?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Why don't you ask Pete? Ask him why he's spending so much time with that girl and her husband."

He hung up with Durkee's voice exploding in his ear. He was shaking so hard he had to sit and compose himself before he went back into the living room. He gripped his knees, and his knuckles paraded across the back of his hands, a ridge of hard, white knobs. He could have called the police, but this was better. He had nothing to bring to the police, no real proof, no real charge to make against Pete. This was a better way. He went to the archway and peered into the other room. It was still empty. A muscle twitched just under his right eye. It twitched again, then beat as regularly as a pulse. He walked back to the sofa with the jerky movements of an automaton. Now he was scared. Now he was really scared. He saw his glass standing on the end table and he snatched it up and poured it into the sofa.

He stared, horrified, at the spreading stain. He hadn't meant to do that. He had meant to hold that drink until Durkee and Perez came. Now the glass was empty and there was no liquor to pour into it. He no longer had an excuse to delay the ride they meant to take him on. He looked at the kitchen door.

"Can't you find the bottle?" he called. His voice cracked, "It's on the second shelf in the pantry next to the vinegar."

There was a pause, then Gracie's voice answered sullenly, "What were you hiding it for?" A moment later they came out, each holding a tumbler half full. George hid the emptiness of his glass, wrapping his hand around it. He jumped up.

"Ice cube," he mumbled. "Drink's getting warm." He stumbled past them, holding his glass at his side. The bottle was on the gas range. He snatched it up, pulled out the cork and filled the glass. He tipped a little of it into the sink and put in an ice cube.

Gracie and Pete were dancing. They danced as if the music were a dirge and the floor had been spread with tar. Their arms were around one another but stiffly held, just making the gesture. Pete's eyes darted to the glass in George's hand and he stopped dancing.

"I'll be damned," he said softly. "The little jerk's gone and made himself another drink!"

Gracie turned. She clenched her hands. She cried, "This is going to go on all night. . . ."

Pete said shortly, "Shut up!" He pushed her away from him. "What's the idea, amigo? I thought we were going as soon as you finished the last one."

"I—I j-just put an ice—"

"The hell you did! That glass is damn near full. You made yourself a refill." He picked up his jacket from the sofa and swung into it.

"I've had enough of this horsing around," he said. "We're going and we're going now. Put down your drink."

Gracie's hands fluttered. "I—I think I'll stay here," she whispered. "Just you two go."

"The hell with that!" Pete grinned mirthlessly. "You're not leaving me out on a limb. We like your company."

"I—I don't feel so good, Pete."

"You'll get over it."

"Please, Pete. . . ."

"Shut up!" he shouted. "You're coming and that's all there's to it. C'mon, George, put down that damn drink."

GEORGE gaped at him. His last, meager bluff had been called. Pete was going to kill him, hardly bothering to conceal it now. A sudden, racking fury seized him. He hurled his glass at Pete's face, yelling inarticulately. He leaped for the kitchen door, but in turning, tripped over the edge of the throw rug before the sofa. He plunged into the lamp table beside the wing chair and crashed head and shoulders into the wall.

Pete dived at him and they rolled into the chair, clawing at one another. Pete's hand scraped across George's mouth, fumbling for his throat, and George sank his teeth into it, grinding his jaws. Pete cursed and beat the side of his face but he hung on. Pete drew up his knee and drove it into George's groin. George moaned and doubled up, his eyes rolling up into his head. Pete stood, panting. He sucked at his hand where George had bitten it. He threw his hair back out of his eyes and, stooping, took George in his arms.

"Open the door," he snarled at Gracie, "Come on, snap it up!"

Gracie's mouth hung open. She stared at the blood dripping from Pete's hand, then turned and crossed the room with dragging steps. She opened the door, then fell back into the room, walking slowly and stiffly. Following her came Durkee and Perez. Durkee's hand was deep in his side pocket. The two fanned out on either side of the arch. Perez's questing eyes leaped from Gracie to George, groaning in Pete's arms. Perez's face was sallow and when he spoke he could hardly keep his teeth from chattering. He looked badly frightened and ready to run, but Durkee stood behind him, a black gun held in his hand like a rock, his face brooding and dark.

"Well, Pete, Señor George has had an accident, no?" Perez tried to keep his voice light and satirical. It jangled like a breaking banjo string. A tiny, black gun appeared in his quaking hand.

Gracie cried out and darted toward the door. Durkee swung his arm and caught her, back-handed, across the mouth. She staggered back into the room.

Pete scowled. He turned and threw George on the sofa. When he turned back, he was grinning recklessly. He hooked his thumbs in his belt and said lightly, "That's a helluva way to come in on a friend—with guns in your hands. This is a stickup, Durk?"

Durkee did no answer. George moaned and rolled off the sofa. He wavered to his hands and knees and started to crawl across the rug, wagging his head limply. Durkee gave him a brief, flickering glance.

Perez chattered, "Not a stickup—a checkup, yes? Do not move your hands, Pete. I am warning you!"

Pete jeered, "And what do you expect to hit with that popgun—the north side of Jersey. Hold it still." But it was at Durkee's steady gun that he was looking. "What's on your mind?"

"We theenk you double-cross us, Pete." Perez seemed to take courage at putting it into words, for he plunged on: "We can see what you are up to, Pete. We can see you intend to kill thees George and get the money from hees wife. We are intelligent men. We can see also that once you have thees money—Durk and me, we can go wheestle, eh? We don't theenk so, Pete!"

Pete said in disgust, "Aw, hell!"

George had crawled the length of the sofa and was now making his way along the edge of the rug behind Pete. His mouth hung slack and his staring eyes were fixed on the wall ahead. When he reached it, he held on the door and laboriously pulled himself, hand over hand, to his feet. He leaned his forehead against the cool wood and closed his eyes.

Perez watched him nervously. He looked at Pete. "I theenk we take no more chances, Pete," he said hurriedly. "We have talked it over, Durk and I, and we theenk we want our ten thousand dollars back. Throw me your money belt. But I am warning you," his voice rose shrilly, "no funny business weeth the hands. The money belt, please!"

Pete drawled, "Don't forget the five thousand I spent on the boat."

"We have thought of that also, but we cannot afford to lose five thousand dollars, no? So we theenk we take that little bag of emeralds you carry weeth you." He held out his hand. The fingers fluttered.

Pete's mouth thinned and he looked from Perez to the gun in Durkee's hand. For a moment his eyes narrowed, calculating his chances, then he shrugged. He slid his left hand into the right side of his jacket—and stopped. His eyes flew wide, and he pushed his hand deeper. The jacket jerked as his fingers scrabbled in the bottom of the empty pocket.

Perez said quietly, "No emeralds, Pete?"

Pete glared at him and crouched. Durkee jerked up his gun. He wet his lips.

George's heart lurched and he clawed at the light switch. He croaked, "Gracie! Gracie!" and plunged the room into darkness. Durkee's gun bloomed, and a moment later, Pete's. Gracie's scream rose, skirling higher and higher until it seemed impossible for it to reach further, and then it collapsed in a bubbling moan. Durkee's gun roared again; then both guns volleyed together. The thunder seemed not only in the room, but inside George's head as well, and, mingled with the echo of Gracie's scream and the panting groans that floundered through the darkness, it was like the nightmare that precedes madness.

THE sudden silence was worse. George fumbled frantically for the light switch. He had to see. The lamps leaped out of the darkness at him. Gracie was face down before the fireplace, one leg drawn up and both arms outflung, as if she had been crawling. Durkee was sitting on the floor, his back against the wall. His clawed hand was the center of a crimson flower that had blossomed in the middle of his shirt front. Of Perez there was no sign, but the front door hung open. He had fled when the shooting began.

Pete stood, wide-legged, in the middle of the room, blood crimsoning his head and running down the right side of his face. His left arm hung useless, and a ribbon of red wove from his fingertips. His glance found George in the doorway.

"Smart," he said thickly. "Smart. Snatched the emeralds, then sicced them on me. Smart. Well, here's something that's even smarter."

He raised his gun. The muzzle swung in a tightening arc, like a probing finger. His face squeezed together with the agony of effort. His right shoulder lifted and he leaned forward as if to throw all his weight behind the pulling of the trigger. George jumped sideways, away from the door. Pete tried to follow him with the searching gun, but he had reached his limit. The gun folded over his hand and dropped to the floor. His knees sagged and his hands reached blindly before him as he went down. He was dead before he hit the rug.

Numbly, George walked around him toward the phone in the front hall.

THE END

PISTOL POLITICIAN

By DAMON KNIGHT

He thrust the snout of the revolver almost into the stranger's face. "Get going!" he said.

They had known each other as youngsters. . . . So when Lloyd Stone chose to follow the rocky road to political power . . . what was more natural than to have his ex-pal, racketeer Will Osterman, swing along on his coat-tails—right to eternity?

IT WAS a funny thing about Will Osterman and Lloyd Stone. They both grew up in the same neighborhood—on the wrong side of Irontown—both quit school at fourteen; both had their names on the police blotter before they were sixteen. They even looked a little alike: big, dark-browed Will Osterman, and skinny, solemn Lloyd Stone. It was nothing you could put a finger on, exactly, but there was a look about the two of them that made people think they were brothers.

When they were seventeen, they both landed in Clay County Reform School. That institution was no better no worse than a great many of its kind—meaning that it was a place where petty thieves learned to be pickpockets, burglars and worse. Both of them endured it, learned what they could, and went out at the end

of two years. Will Osterman was back after six months. Lloyd Stone never came back.

That was the turning point, you see. That first hitch in the reform school had taught them both the same lesson: that you have to be smart to stay on the right side of the bars . . . but they learned it in different ways. Osterman learned the slow but easy way—learned how to jimmy windows and open safes, to handle a blackjack and a pistol, to run a confidence game or a liquor blockade, and, finally, which palms to grease and how much. It took him five years and three more convictions, but he found out how to do the things he wanted to do, and still keep out of penitentiaries.

Stone took the hard way and the quick way. He got a job and went to school at night and hung around the district headquarters of the Progressive Party in between. He worked hard—his boss and his teachers and the ward heelers all combined to make sure of that—but year by year he rose a little higher toward the ranks of the People Who Are Never Arrested. As for the people who are *always* arrested, he had stopped being one of them on the day he left the reform school.

They were both twenty-two when they met again. That was in 1929. Will Osterman was just back from an extended stay in Chicago, Baltimore, and other places which he didn't see fit to mention. He had a new suit, a manicure, and a great many plans, and he was on his way to grease the palm of Alderman Waldo J. Crum. In the alderman's outer office, presiding over a typewriter, a telephone, and a huge stack of papers, was Lloyd Stone.

Osterman gave him a casual glance, flicked a card at him. "Tell the alderman I'm here, bud."

Stone said, "Hello, Will."

Osterman stared at him, then raised his black brows. "Well, strike me blind! Glad to see you, kid!" He grinned and thrust out his hand.

Stone didn't move. He said, "Stay out of this district, Will."

"How's that again?"

"Stay out. This district is clean, and we're going to keep it that way."

"I don't get it," said Osterman slowly. "What are you tryin' to pull? Tell the alderman I'm here."

"He'll tell you the same thing, only in political language. You used to be a friend of mine, so I'm giving it to you straight. Get out, or you'll be sorry."

Osterman rubbed his chin. "I think," he said, "that you and me are gonna have trouble, Lloyd."

"Likely," said Stone. "Still want to see the alderman?" When Osterman said nothing, he picked up the telephone and read off the name on the card, which was not Osterman's own.

Osterman marched in and saw Waldo J. Crum, who was hearty but vague, and who palmed a bill with a forgetful air which was somehow too convincing to be quite satisfactory. Fifteen minutes later, as he was strolling peaceably down the street, taking note of the prosperous citizens who passed, a policeman took him by either arm and marched him off toward the railroad station.

They paused in an alley, where the policemen quietly and efficiently gave him the beating of his life in places where it would not show. Convinced, he bought a ticket on the next departing train.

He was not solaced to learn, several days later, that a trio of rival bootleggers, supported by several well-known Chicago gunsels, had successfully moved into the Irontown district he had marked out for his own. . . .

NINETEEN-TWENTY-NINE passed into history and the boom years of Prohibition with it. Nineteen-thirty-three brought Repeal and the end of an era. Osterman turned to greener pastures. It was not until early in 1939, when the two men were 32 years old, that he came to Irontown again.

Osterman was older and perhaps a little wiser. As always, he had a new suit on his back, plans in his head, and very little else.

Stone was Mayor of Irontown.

They met, this time, in the living room of Stone's modest frame house. "Well, Mr. Mayor," said Osterman with heavy irony, "this sure is a pleasure. Yes, *sir*."

The years had filled out Stone's spare figure somewhat, but his spine was as

erect and his gaze as unblinking as ever. "I believe you have some business with me, Osterman," he said. "Suppose we get to it."

"No hurry," said the other, stretching himself out in a leather armchair. "Yes, *sir*. Sure is a pleasure. Sit down, Mr. Mayor, I don't mind."

"I'll stand," said Stone, "until you tell me what your business is, or until I decide to have you thrown out."

"Wouldn't do that if I was you," said Osterman, grinning tightly. "Not to an old friend like me. Remember the time you did it before—had me kicked clear out of town?" He gestured. "Why, hell, that was ten years ago. Naturally you wouldn't remember that far back—you're a big shot now."

Stone said nothing.

Osterman leaned forward. "But I remember it," he said. "I've been waiting ten years to pay you off for that, *Mister* Stone."

"What took you so long?" asked Stone.

Osterman grinned, leaning back into the chair again. "I was waiting for you to slip," he said, "and you did." He paused to light a cigarette.

Stones' face was a little paler, and his fists were clenched at his sides. "Go on," he said grimly.

"I heard a rumor," said Osterman deliberately, "back in Chi about a year ago." He peeled back his long upper lip and picked a shred of tobacco from his teeth. "Kind of an ugly rumor, you know what I mean? . . . Yes, *sir*. I dropped all my other business and spent my time tracking down that rumor. Finally I found a guy that could put me wise. Funny thing, too—" he peered up at Stone through the smoke of his cigarette—"that guy was one of the old Patty Rourke gang. Remember—the boys that moved into your district the day you kicked me out of it?"

"I did what I could to keep them out," said Stone. "I wasn't strong enough—then."

"Later you was, eh?" said Osterman. "You know, the way I heard it, it wasn't that way at all. Way I heard it, it was an outfit named the Reform Committee that kicked the gangs out of Irontown, in spite of City Hall."

"You heard wrongly," said Stone with feeling. "The so-called Reform Committee is a gang of villains and cut-throats. If I had my way, every last one of them would be electrocuted."

"Electrocuted," said Osterman reflectively. "Oh, now I get you. You mean what they do to *murderers* in this state." Grinning, he took a folded sheet of heavy white paper from his inside pocket. He opened it and held it just out of Stone's reach.

"This," he said, "is what that guy I was telling you about give me. It's a little different version from the one the papers had about the killing of that Franz guy, the boss of the Reform Committee. Seems like he wasn't plugged by gunsels unknown in an alley, at all. Seems like you done it yourself, in a room at the Hoover Hotel."

He tapped the paper with his other hand. "This names names and places," he said. "It's all in here. The guy who wrote it was there an' seen it himself. Now he's kicking off, anyways—he run into another guy that didn't like him—so he ain't afraid to spill."

"That document will never stand up in a court of law," said Stone.

Osterman snorted. "Who're you kiddin'? This'll send you to the chair, and you know it."

They stared at each other in silence for a moment. Stone stood where he was, making no move to take the paper.

"If you know this much," he said finally, "you must know the rest. It was self-defense; I had no choice. That hoodlum, Franz, who took over the rackets in Irontown when we chased out the Rourke gang, asked me to meet him for a conference in his hotel room. I went. He demanded that I connive with him in his criminal operations. When I refused, he attacked me. I barely got out of the place alive."

"Yeah?" said Osterman. "Right before election, too, wasn't it? Funny how Franz's body got into that alley."

"It had to be hushed up," said Stone. "Otherwise it would have been a victory for Franz and all that he stood for. To prevent that, I committed a crime. I admit it. And now . . . what do you want?"

Osterman stretched luxuriously in the chair. "Plenty," he said. "I'll take two

grand tomorrow morning—shut up, you've got it!—and more later, whenever I want it. Here—" he tossed the photostate toward Stone—"you can have that. I got more copies. And besides that—"

He stood up, grinning wolfishly. "This town is my onion from now on, Mr. Mayor. I'll do what I damned well please in it, for as long as I damned well please . . . and if anybody tries to stop me, the original of that'll go to the governor, and copies to all the newspapers. Meanwhile, you can go on and play mayor. Just remember, in case you get any ideas about accidents—I got insurance!"

He walked out.

Stone bent slowly and picked up the photostat from the floor. He read it through once and then, with trembling fingers, tore it into small strips. . . .

THE WAR YEARS came and hurried by. Stone, growing a little greyer and a shade stouter, was elected in 1942 for a second term. Osterman, with a little better suit on his back and wilder plans in his head, scurried in and out of Irontown—deserting his steady revenues there for hoped-for windfalls farther east, coming back when it got too hot for him elsewhere. The two men had no contact except when Osterman sent to him for money and Stone gave it.

Then came 1946, and the climax of those two strange careers shaped itself inevitably.

Osterman blew into town on a raw day in November. The wind was kicking up confetti in the streets, and newsies were shouting under huge black headlines. Osterman hurried down the street from the railroad station. He didn't stop to buy a paper; he had other things on his mind.

Things like three determined men waiting outside his hotel in Chicago. If he hadn't spotted them in the shadows . . . no chance to get his car out of the hotel garage . . . suicide to go to the railway terminal. He'd ridden the el to a suburban stop, hitch-hiked to a town across the Indiana line, and caught a train there. Even now he might not be safe. . . . It might have been smarter to stay on that train all the way to the coast, hole up somewhere in upstate New York or Connecticut, even head toward Canada.

But he knew that was only the panic talking in him. This wasn't like running from the bulls; these men were old-time mobsters who knew his instincts because they were their own, who would follow him wherever he went and kill him, because they had been paid to.

He wondered frantically, for the hundredth time, if it could have been Stone himself who had put the finger on him. And for the hundredth time he told himself that it was impossible. Stone wouldn't dare, for one thing; for another, he had kept his movements undercover, as always. He had let no one know he was in Chicago but those with whom he had dealings. And of the latter, there was one who had an ancient and honorable reason for killing him.

He cursed himself briefly for gambling over his head, then damned Stone bitterly and at length for not replying to his wired demand for money. . . . But he'd fix that. Yes, *sir!*

This, he told himself, was the payoff. It was his hole card he was playing. That, at least, he had had the sense to keep in reserve—not driving Stone to despair with too-heavy demands, not making too much trouble in Irontown—keeping his insurance paid up for the moment when he would need it.

He paused on the curb, looking for a taxi—a grey-haired, slightly stooped tall figure in a rich new overcoat. The cabs went past swiftly in the gathering dark, not slowing at his signal. He stepped farther out into the street, arm raised. . . .

He saw the grey sedan swooping at him. It roared past as he dived for the curb, pulled himself under a parked car. There was a raucous stuttering sound, and vicious little things whisked through the metal of the car over his body. He crawled toward the curb, heart shaking itself loose inside him.

He heard squealing brakes up ahead. He pulled himself out from under the car. He had maybe ten seconds, he told himself, before theyd be back. . . .

A coupe was just pulling away from the corner a few yards down the street. He sprinted for it, flung himself onto the running-board. He saw a startled face looking out at him from the driver's place,

felt the car begin to slow. He wrenched open the door, tumbled in and thrust the snout of his pistol against that face. "Get going!" he said. The car leaped forward, narrowly missing a pedestrian, and roared up the cross-street. . . .

"I shook them," said Osterman, hoarsely. "But they'll be here. That's where you come in. Get on that phone. Get the cops up here. When they come lookin' for me, they'll run into a cordon of bulls. Some laugh!"

Stone looked at him across the width of the polished floor. Light from the great crystal chandelier over them gleamed on his almost-white hair, on his dead-white face. He was sitting at a little table against the wall, pen and paper spread out before him. His slight figure was encased in a full-dress suit, and as he looked at Osterman, he began putting on a pair of white gloves with meticulous care.

"What if I don't?"

Osterman's eyes bugged. "You dope!" he shouted, taking a photostat from his pocket and waving it. "Have you forgotten what'll happen to you if I use this? Get on that phone, and stop fooling around."

"I am not fooling," said Stone, looking boredly at the photostat, "and I will not get on that phone." He rose and came forward, smiling a small, wintry smile. "There are obviously several things that you don't know, Osterman."

Osterman had his gun in his hand. "What're you talking about?"

"For one thing," said Stone wearily, "I am no longer Mayor of Irontown. The Liberal-Reform candidate won. For another, the inauguration ceremonies took place yesterday. The incumbents have had ample time to acquaint themselves with their new responsibilities." He stopped, listening to a faint, high keening.

"That would be the police," he said. "I suspect that they are coming here, after all."

"I don't get it," said Osterman shakily, backing off. "Is this a double-cross?"

Stone smiled that maddening smile again. "Rather," he said, "a triple-cross. Your Chicago friends, out there in the dark, are going to be as disappointed as we two are."

OSTERMAN could feel his nerves shattering. The gun was trembling in his hand. "What're you talking about?"

Stone smiled frostily and said, "Give me the gun." He reached out and took it from Osterman's hand.

"I had thought of poison," said Stone, "but—"

The sirens soared nearer, howled down upon them, then stopped outside and moaned themselves to sleep. Osterman turned his head to listen. There was a thunderous banging at the front door.

"Lloyd!" shouted Osterman. "Don't let 'em—"

A shot was his answer.

Osterman swung around and stared, fascinated, at Stone's kicking legs, sprawled oddly on the parqueted floor. Blood welled from a hole in his right temple. The gun lay on the floor near his gloved hand.

The papers on the little table caught the light. "What was he writing?" muttered Osterman to himself.

When the massed policemen stampeded up the stairs and burst into the room, he was still looking dazedly at the note Stone had left. It was brief:

To Whom It May Concern:

I have done a magnificent job of swindling Irontown. First and last, during my term as comptroller and my two terms as mayor, I have taken more than one million dollars from the city, and moreover, done it so well that so long as the city government was in my hands, no suspicion could be leveled against me.

However, all good things must come to an end. Life was a good thing.

Lloyd Stone

He hardly heard the voices that said, "Gawd! Somebody beat us to it!" and "I'm just as glad, Sergeant. Better than him being stood up in court and tried for grand larceny."

He felt the police lieutenant step up to him and take the photostat from his hand. He heard a voice saying, "Look at this, Davis—he'd been blackmailing Mayor Stone. There's your motive, all right."

But he didn't really understand what was going to happen to him until he saw the lieutenant lean over the table, read the suicide note, then pick it up in his gloved hands and slowly tear it across.

A FRIENDLY CALL

By MORRIS COOPER

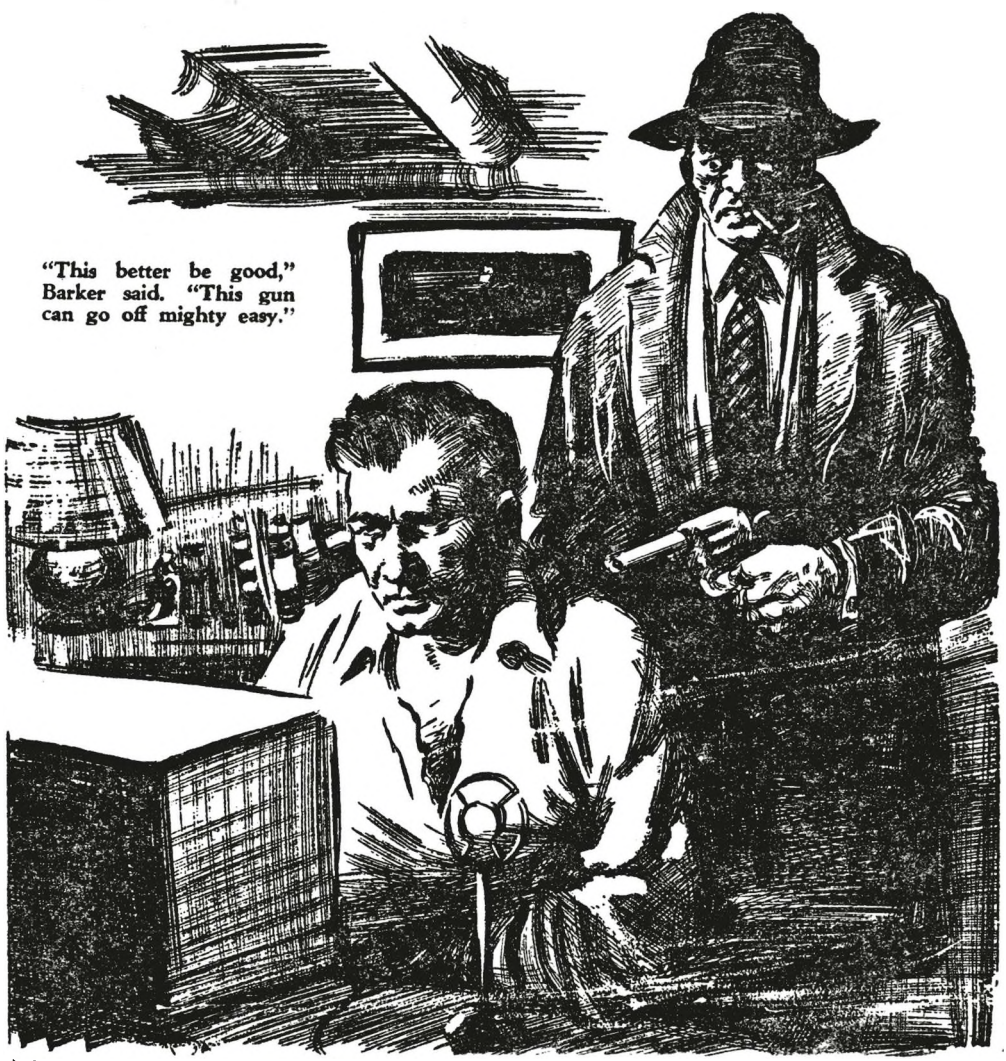
"You won't kill me," Driscoll told the stranger. "Because if you do—who'll be left to tell the world what a clever man you are?"

THE STEP on the cabin stoop was slow and cautious, and Steve Driscoll heard a careful hand on the knob.

"Come on in," he sang out. "The door isn't locked."

Steve heard the door open and felt the fresh night wind blow across his face. A thin, high-pitched voice complained, "Its dark."

"I know." Steve laughed and shifted



"This better be good," Barker said. "This gun can go off mighty easy."

the pipe in his mouth. "There's a switch right by the door."

There was a click, and the man's voice sounded again: "What's the idea of—" There was silence for a moment, and then the voice again, in a sudden tone of discovery. "You're blind."

"That's right." Steve shifted in his rocker. "Mind closing that door? There's a draft."

The wind suddenly left his face and Steve heard the door close. "You're a stranger around here, aren't you?"

"What makes you think that?" The man's voice was suddenly sharp.

"Everybody around here knows me," said Steve. "Not many people come through these woods this time of year."

"Oh." There was a note of relief in the exclamation. "Car broke down at the foot of the hill," he explained, "and my friend has gone for help."

"He's got a long walk," Steve told the stranger. "Sit down. If you want any, there's coffee on the stove."

Steve heard the man move about, the clang of a cup on the table. Then: "That's a funny-looking radio you got there."

"It's a sending and receiving set," Steve told him. "I'm an amateur—a ham."

STEVE listened to the pouring of coffee, waited until he heard the pot put back on the stove. "How come you were heading this way? There's nothing here for tourists."

"Got lost," explained the stranger. "Must have taken the wrong turn."

"There's no turn—" Steve stopped, sat quietly. His hand moved toward a switch, and then he felt a sudden pain as something smashesd down on his wrist.

"Only used the butt end this time," he heard the stranger say. "Next time it'll be a bullet."

"You're Barker." Steve sat straight in his chair, stopped rocking. "You must be Barker."

"That's a good guess. What else do you know?"

"You killed a bank messenger about an hour ago."

"Right," Barker's voice cut into Steve's ears. "If you don't want to be next, sit still and don't try anything smart."

Steve knocked the ashes from his cold pipe. "They'll never think of looking for you here."

Barker laughed. "Don't I know it! In a couple of hours, a Cub is going to land near here, pick me up, and then you can tell the whole world I was here."

"If you let me."

"Why shouldn't I, unless you try something? Nobody saw me—including you." Barker thought that was funny and started laughing. "All they got is a name, and that isn't mine."

"There's always fingerprints," said Steve.

"Got them there, too." There was a note of pride in Barker's voice. "Wore gloves all the time. Even got them on now. You were the only thing I didn't figure."

"Me?" asked Steve.

"Yeah. Spotted this cabin, but I figured there was nobody living here. However, everybody's entitled to one mistake, and this one won't hurt me."

Steve tamped tobacco into his pipe from a humidor that stood on a smoking stand next to his chair.

"How come you heard about me?" Barker's voice broke the silence. "Didn't think the news would be out yet."

"The police band. I listen to their calls sometimes." He struck a match, and with his little finger as a guide, held it over the bowl.

"Neat job, huh?" asked Barker.

"You didn't have to kill the messenger." The sound of a cricket came from outside.

"Sure I did. He was the only one who saw my face." Steve heard Barker sit down. "Besides, what's it to you?"

"I don't like killers," said Steve.

"No. Now ain't that too bad." Barker's voice had an ugly edge to it. "I don't have to leave you alive, you know."

"I know," admitted Steve. "But you will. Otherwise there'd be no one to tell the world what a clever man you are."

"S-a-y!" Steve heard Barker rise from his chair, then sit down again. The killer laughed. "Maybe you're right, at that."

Steve puffed at his pipe, and Barker laughed again. "Maybe you think you're going to get in touch with the law as soon as I leave. But you won't. Know why?"

Barker answered his own question. "Because you'll be fast asleep. And you

won't wake up for a couple of hours." Steve heard the slap of Barker's gun against his palm.

The sudden ringing of the telephone brought Barker to his feet with a bang. "Who's that?"

"How should I know?" asked Steve.

"You'd better answer it." Steve crossed to the phone with practiced ease.

"Wait a minute." Steve could feel Barker's breath against his cheek. "This gun—" Steve felt it jam into his side—"can go off mighty easy."

Steve lifted the receiver. "Hello. Bob? No, nothing. Just a little tired." He felt the gun bore into his side. "Where's Quentin? Oh. And Ruth and Rickie. No, don't bother. I'll see them tomorrow. Good-night."

He hung up the receiver and walked back to his rocking chair.

"Who was that?" demanded Barker.

"Just a friend. Wanted to know why I wasn't on the air and I told him I was tired."

"Who's this Quentin?"

"His son. The kid's in the Navy and I wanted to know if they'd heard where he was. Said no. Ruth and Rickie are his two small children. They were in bed."

Steve heard Barker sit down. "You certainly went into a lot of family history."

"He'd think it was funny if I didn't ask. I always do. And you told me to be careful."

"Okay." Steve heard a match strike. "Got anything to drink around here?"

"No liquor, if that's what you mean."

"What did you think I meant, milk?" Barker got up and started to move around.

"Looking for anything in particular?"

"Those ears of yours are pretty good, aren't they?"

"Have to be," said Steve. "They take the place of my eyes."

"I was looking for some rope," said Barker. "I figured on knocking you out and then tying you up. But now—"

"Now you think you'll kill me." Steve's voice was calm.

"That's right. There isn't much chance, but I might get caught, and I don't want to leave any evidence around."

"Evidence?"

"You," said Barker. "I talked too much, and you've got a good memory."

"But I don't know what you look like," protested Steve. "How could I give anyone a description?"

"What's got me worried," said Barker, "is that they might ring me in as a suspect."

"Why should they do that?" demanded Steve. "You said no one knew you and that Barker isn't even your name."

"But the police do know me, under other names, and my goose would be cooked if they brought me around for you to identify."

Steve spoke calmly. "I still can't see what's worrying you."

"All the cops would have to do is make me talk in front of you," said Barker. "Your ears would do the identifying."

Steve sat there, clenched pipe between his teeth. "Are you going to kill me now?"

"There's no hurry. I'll wait till my plane comes."

STEVE leaned his head back and took the pipe from his mouth. Only his ears heard the soft footsteps outside the cabin. Then there was a crash as a booted foot smashed open the door and a soft voice drawled, "Drop that gun before you turn around, or this shotgun will cut you in half!"

Barker's voice was sullen as he spoke to Steve. Bob was on the phone, calling the police.

"You were mighty lucky, having him phone you."

"No luck at all," said Steve. "You called him."

"Me!" Barker's voice was incredulous. "How?"

"When you switched on the lights. Bob's a ranger on lookout duty, and he can see this cabin from his tower. When I want to talk to him I switch on the lights. If I'm not trying to get him over the air, he calls me on the phone."

"But I still don't know how you tipped him off."

"Bob's a bachelor. And when I gave him those three names, it didn't take him long to catch on. Quentin—Ruth—Rickie. QRR. Every ham knows that's the amateur distress signal. Sort of a landlubber's SOS."

STAND-IN FOR THE CORPSE

By

LAURI WIRTA

Life was one big fiesta for lucky Edouard Benet . . . until he put his chips on the wheel of marriage and watched the ball stop—on murder!

THIS IS the story of a humble, gullible little man with the golden touch of Midas: a man whom fortune favored and whom she never let down.

Edouard Benet was born in Marseilles, France, of modest parentage, towards the middle of the last century. Just when a fairy godmother swatted him over the head with her magic crowbar is open to question, but it must have been a healthy stroke. For he had no sooner landed on these shores to seek his fortune as a common laborer, than she gave him what he wanted by burning down one of the biggest hotels in the city of his choice, New Orleans. He got a job immediately with a pick-and-shovel gang, clearing away the debris.

His first day on the job he unearthed a $3,000 cache, which became his through the simple law of possession. With it he outfitted himself as a waiter, got a job in a restaurant in the French Quarter, and parlayed this humble calling into a $25,000 bequest from a wealthy patron.

Next this little man who could do no wrong bought a grocery store and prospered enough to branch into real estate and the stock market. He finally discovered himself effortlessly wealthy, anxious to retire and acquire a wife. With the same childlike faith in providence he had exhibited the day he got himself born into vicissitudes, Edouard Benet scanned the matrimonial ads and finally settled on what seemed to be the best bet for a man of his years, wealth and temperament—a comely widow of forty, of modest means, named Clara Burch.

Their correspondence ripened into inevitable romance, and on St. Patrick's Day in 1896, Clara set steam from St. Louis to New Orleans on the sidewheeler, *City of New Orleans,* to meet and marry Edouard.

Edouard was waiting at the dock when his wife-to-be arrived. But, instead of being forty, brunette and comely, the Mrs. Clara Burch who tripped gaily down the gangplank of the *City of New Orleans* and waved to him was a lush blonde of twenty-six—decidedly beautiful. But the transformation seemed no more unacceptable to Edouard than getting paid $3,000 for a day's work with a pick and shovel, or $25,000 for being a waiter.

He even went a little breathless at his good fortune when Clara starrily explained that she preferred mature men, and had used an older sister's photograph in their correspondence, for fear that he would mistrust her youth and not want to marry her.

"Nevair!" cried Edouard gleefully and carried her off to the preacher and set her up as the mistress of his mansion.

It was the canary that first tipped him off that all blondes that glisten are not fourteen carat. The canary grew seriously ill from neglect, and Edouard started looking for his bride to tell her a few tender facts about birdlife.

He found her missing—along with fifty thousand cash!

At long last Dame Fortune had revealed herself to Edouard Benet in her usual guise of the will-o'-the-wisp and, feeling really human for the first time in his life, he set out to catch her. Local police told him they could do nothing until his wife had been missing long enough for him to establish desertion—and even then they could not make her give back the money.

Greatly agitated, Edouard went to St. Louis, his bride's home town, only to establish, with the aid of a private detective,

(Continued on page 127)

Marry the Nightmare!

In the arms of his new love, George Palmer hoped to escape the nightmare he had left behind . . . only to find that with the ring he had slipped on the lovely Melna's slim finger—he had wedded his own deadly past!

By
DAN GORDON

THEY shook his hand and took his picture with the other passengers disembarking. George Palmer raised the briefcase that held the letter of credit for a hundred thousand dollars, and pretended to wave to someone on the dock.

Most of his cash, the rather sizable account in the Bank of Hong Kong, had gone with the war. But if the war had taken the rest of his money, it was a

Almost without direction from his mind, his hand slid to his inner breast pocket and drew his pistol halfway out.

bargain, because the war had enabled him to lose his identity in the concentration camp. They, the Americans, were sorry for him. Although, actually, the food, the life in the camp, had been no worse than what he had been glad to endure as a child in a Polish slum. As a price to pay for admittance to a country where the spending of money would be enjoyable, it was all negligible. He was not here, either, under any cloud, on any probation. He had simply been admitted as a Hong Kong merchant who had an American passport —no questions asked.

He was satisfied now that it was no trick, that no one had followed him. He had been walking around San Francisco for two hours, and his experience told him he was not shadowed. So—he would buy a ticket for Los Angeles. A man in that fabled, sunny city should be able to enjoy himself with a hundred thousand dollars.

Waiting for the train to be made up, he walked slowly towards the cocktail lounge. There was a small table available on the edge of the room, a divan to sit on. His heavy body did not adapt itself to barstools and chrome chairs.

A waitress hurried to serve him, impressed, as sensible women always were, by his heaviness, his obvious air of wealth and success. He knew he was ugly, almost grotesque in his weight and darkness, but women cared more for success than for beauty.

He ordered a glass of Fundador brandy, and when it came he tipped the girl a whole silver dollar. She had a charming smile. California women, it was well known, were superb, healthy, beautiful and lively.

HIS LUCK was fine. Or possibly it was just that the progress through the world of a man who did not have to consider minor expenditures was smooth. Once on the train, he found an unoccupied booth in the club car behind the diner and spread his bulk in it. A chair would have been uncomfortably tight. The booth was for four people, but with him in it, there would be room for only two more. He promptly ordered a brandy, Fundador, the most expensive drink on the wine list, and again tipped with a silver dollar. The waiter would now be glad to have such a man as Palmer occupy two places.

The train rolled smoothly through the close-packed towns of the bay area. George Palmer sipped his brandy slowly; he had never been a drinking man. To amass a fortune through the vices of others, and nibble it away through a personal vice would be too ironic. George Palmer did not believe in irony. He believed in hard work and thrift.

Two young men in new suits came and sat in his booth. George regarded the fraternity pins in their lapels and smiled. They were talking baseball.

"Tex is the most dependable batter, even if he is a little slow."

The other one disclaimed all admiration of Tex. "Dead weight, strictly dead weight on anybody's team, Skip."

"He knocked Barton out of the box. That's plenty rugged, Hoppy, and you know it.

George Palmer raised an eyebrow at the nickname, and turned to regard Hoppy with a professional eye. No. Definitely not. Anyway, little they said seemed to have any relation to any previous method of handling English that he had ever encountered. But, then, he had not lately encountered any Americans of this age and social condition. Not in sixteen years, since he had left El Paso for the Orient. . . .

On impulse, he said, "Could I offer you gentlemen a drink?" They had ordered nothing, nor had the steward—probably disillusioned by past small orders and nonexistent tips—stopped at their table.

The boys looked at each other. It was possible, George Palmer thought sardonically, that their mothers or their teachers had told them not to talk to strangers on trains. Hoppy said, finally, "Well, sir, I'll take a beer." Then he bent his head and a slow flush came up out of his shirt collar.

Skip said, "Coke," firmly.

George Palmer swallowed the last of the little thimble of brandy, and the waiter appeared instantly at the foot of the table. "A beer, a coke, another Fundador," George Palmer said. The waiter stood there a moment, looking at the young men; then he shrugged a little and went away to get the order.

George Palmer bit back a smile; the

wine card had said it was against the law to serve drinks to minors. These boys, then, were under twenty-one.

The drinks were brought, and George Palmer made an effort to work up a conversation with his guests. It was difficult. He gleaned that they had just graduated from some school and were going to enroll in another, that they were both going to become—

There was a girl across the aisle. She was watching them with just the right sort of amused interest.

He smiled at the girl, and her lips bent upwards for the most shadowy fraction of a moment.

George Palmer cleared his throat. His young guests stopped some pig-latin chatter with each other and looked at him attentively. He said, "It has been very kind of you to honor me."

This stunned them. Again that red crept up the neck of the one called Slip or Skip or some such name. They stared down at the empty glasses, they looked furtively at each other, and then they were gone, leaving a little flurry of thanks behind them.

George Palmer smiled at their backs, and then kept the same smile—frank, open, amused—on his face as he turned it towards the girl across the aisle. She tried not to smile back, and then did, her whole face lighting up, a very white face under very black hair; she wore no hat.

His luck was still good, as it would always be good from now on. She rose and came across the aisle to sit in the booth with him, but nothing she did, no single gesture, would permit the thought that she was doing more than pass part of a tedious journey with a congenial conversationalist.

He ought to know people, George Palmer thought. In order to emigrate from a Polish slum at fourteen to the United States, throw up a profitable second-hand metals business at twenty-five, become a successful opium dealer in the Orient and still retire, a respectable Los Angeles citizen, at forty—a man had to know people, precisely and without a single error.

This was a nice girl, a lovely girl, and that meant his luck was still holding. Because there was no use in having money to spend without a girl, a woman, to help you.

This girl—or one like her—was necessary to the new, retired scheme of life he intended. Perhaps he would buy apartment houses with his money, and she could decorate them.

He started to say, "Will you have a drink?" then changed it to, "May I buy you some refreshment?" You had to talk right to ladies.

She laughed. "Are you trying to buy insurance against being bored?"

"I'm sure you would never bore me, my dear. Fundador brandy?"

She nodded slowly. "Anything. I don't drink much."

"I can well believe that you have none of the vices, my dear."

She laughed, a laughter as bright and brittle as the California sunshine through which the train rolled so smoothly and swiftly. "Oh, really, Mr. Palmer, you don't know much about American debutantes."

His hands flattened on the table. "You know me? My name?"

She gestured across the aisle. "While you were playing host to those two puppies, I caught it several times."

He let out his breath slowly. Of course.

Her voice, till now, had been brittle and gay, a real lady's voice. But it was soft and tender for a moment: "You don't want to talk about yourself?"

"Let's talk about you," George Palmer said.

"Oh, me!" she laughed. "It's not interesting. Clubs, benefits—nothing important. I'm a left-over, you know—too much education and all the wrong kind. I'm of no use in the world."

George Palmer felt a real thrill at his heart. She was lonesome; the right time meant everything. He might search a year before he, with all his money, found a real lady when she was lonesome.

"Sometimes," he said, "to be lovely, to be gracious, is enough, my dear."

The train continued to glide through the sunshine.

HE HAD napped, briefly, in the automobile as Melna drove swiftly, monotonously, across the desert. Now he awoke as the car stopped, and it was

remarkably like China—the dusty street, the straw-hatted peasants, the blue sky, the tawny hills beyond. But it wasn't. It was just a desert town in California, and he and Melna were on their honeymoon. He studied her out of the corner of his eyes.

Such a wonder would, certainly, part from him if she knew he had to hide from the Federal officers. Well—he would get on to this new, easy way of living soon enough. There had been prohibition when he left the States, and he knew that at times lamisters and worse could buy a bottle of liquor and not fear running into the law. This was like that.

Still, he sweated till they left the trooper and the filling station.

"You're such a duck, George," Melna said. "Anyone can tell you're an important man; you wouldn't dare be so fat if you weren't."

He laughed. A real lady can say anything and get away with it. Imagine some tramp pulling a crack like that.

Now they were turning into the private road of the Oasis, where they were to spend their honeymoon. The desert was gone now; miles of underground pipe and an army of Mexican gardeners kept these grounds green, these trees growing.

Here and there among banana trees and palms nestled little bungalows, each complete with bedrooms, living room, private bar, and it was in one of these they were to stay. Mr. and Mrs. George Palmer, paying forty dollars a day, and getting all that that implied!

He glanced hastily back through the tunnel of the years, back, back through the discomfort of being a narcotics exporter in Hong Kong to being a second-hand metals dealer in Chicago, to driving a junk wagon in Newark; back, back till he was a kid, always hungry, in Warsaw; back till he was in the little village, before he ran away from stupid parents who didn't know you could always eat.

The vista made him dizzy; he had always been so lucky. Lucky and—well, call it decisive.

Melna stopped the shiny car at the door of the main building, and a Mex kid, bright in a bellboy's monkey jacket, leaped out. "Mr. Palmer? I'll show you your house." He stood on the running board, pointing, and Melna swept the car, at forty miles an hour, through the green grounds. Nothing like China here!

Decisive. To know a good thing when it came along. To grab Melna when he met her, overriding the doubts a lesser man might have had. Say she was broke, say he had had to give her money twice in the day they were in Los Angeles. He had the money, and he knew a good thing when he saw it, and he could afford to buy himself a lady when he wanted one. . . .

They were stopped now, and the boy was lugging the bags in. George Palmer followed slowly towards his first married home. He looked at the sky, at the green lawn. He was happy.

Then they were alone, the boy gone off, happy with a five-dollar tip.

He smiled at Melna. Mrs. George Palmer.

And he smiled, watching his wife, his bride, fumbling in her handbag, a new one. Then, slowly she pulled her skirt up, exposing one thigh. Among a pattern of little red dots, she pressed the needle, removed the hypodermic, dropped the kit back into her bag. The skirt again covered her thigh.

There was a roaring in George Palmer's ears, but he heard his wife's voice. The lady said, "I'll never have to wait till I really need it again, will I, George? Not with your connections."

Anger and frustration filled him then, and almost without direction from his mind, his hand slid to his inner breast pocket and drew the pistol he kept there halfway out. Then his hand relaxed, and he let the gun slide back in. It was no good.

He sat down in a chair. It groaned a little, and it was tight, but that didn't matter. He had— She had known who he was. Most of the agents were hoppies themselves. She had known. She had—

He would have to hang onto her. An addict scorned is a sure stool pigeon.

She was standing there, smiling at him, and he felt his muscles tense again in anger.

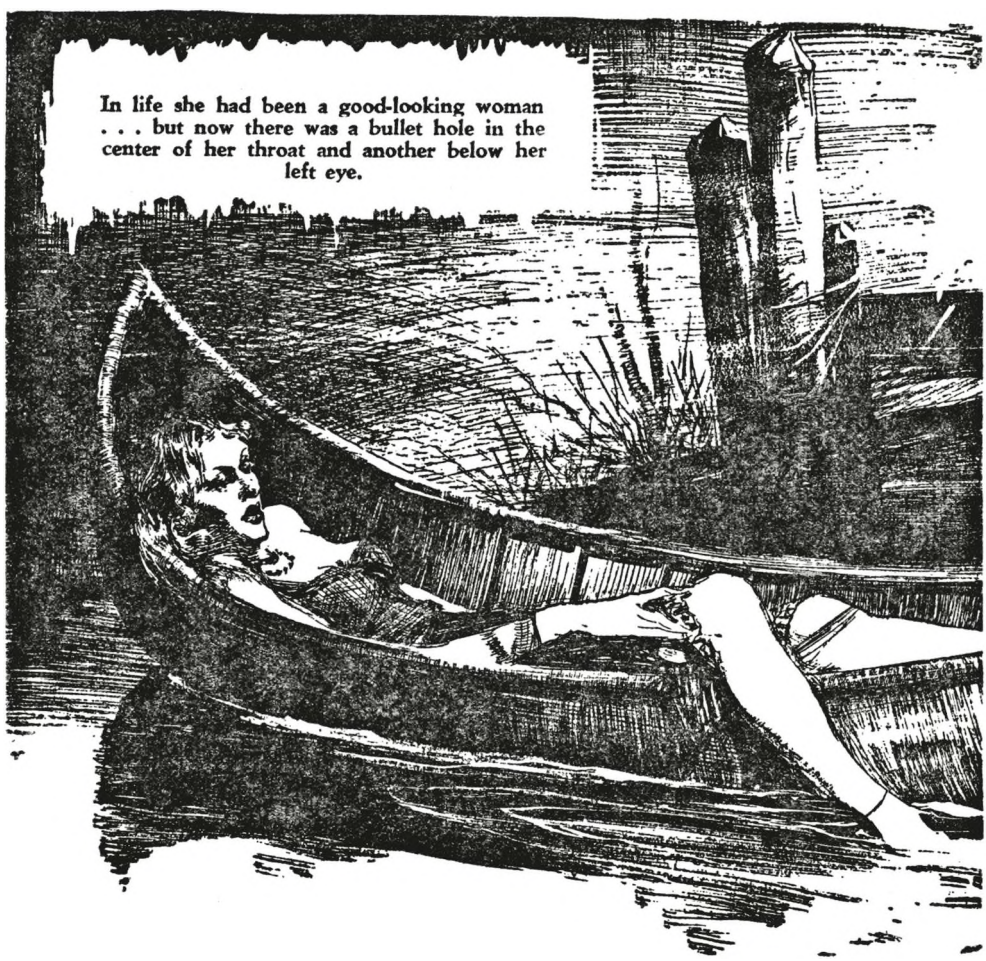
Then, slowly, he smiled. "I'm a lucky guy," he said. "I'm one guy who knows his wife'll never leave him."

He went towards her slowly, to begin his new married life.

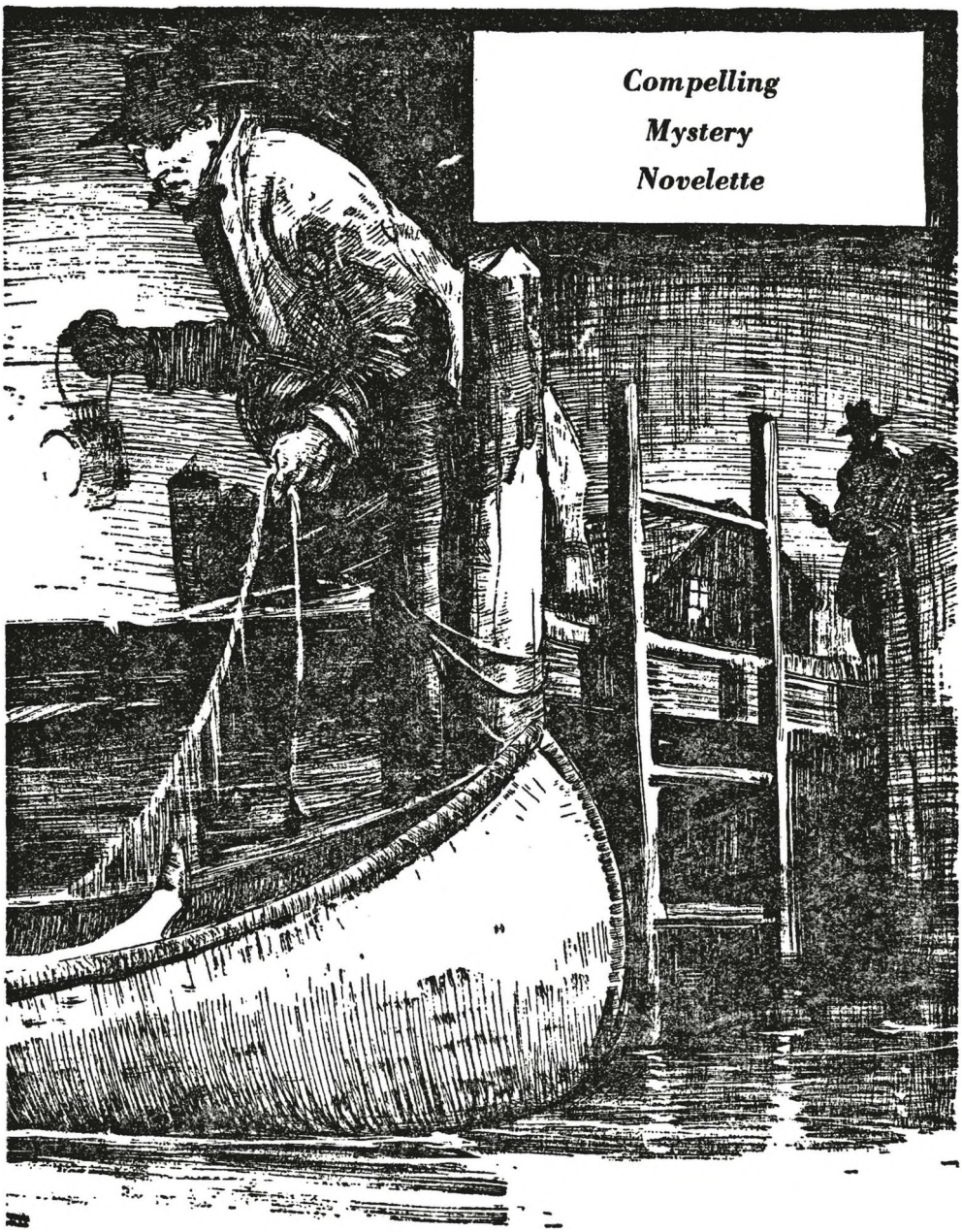
DEAD CENTER

By

ROBERT MARTIN



She lay in the bottom of the canoe, one leg trailing limply in the water. . . . Just a gal who had run through too much liquor, too much money—and too many bullets!



CHAPTER ONE

The Missing Millionairess

MY NAME is John Deegan and I'm a private investigator. I don't wear a .38 in a shoulder clip and I have no red-headed secretary. In fact, I don't even have an office. If anybody wants me they either write me or call my landlady, and she yells up the stairs. If I'm out she leaves a note under my door. I'm forty-two years old, single, weigh around two-ten, and I drink—but not anything. I try to keep my clothes pressed and my shoes shined. I work mostly for

insurance companies, bonding houses and credit-rating corporations. One of my clients got involved in a murder case once, but the police caught the killer before I knew there had been a killing.

So when I came home one hot summer afternoon I was surprised to find a note under my door to call Richard Conover, a private citizen who lived in Erie Hills in a big white house surrounded by clipped grass, a swimming pool and three terraces. He had once been an insurance salesman, and that is how I knew him. But after he married the young and handsome widow of a steel tycoon he stopped peddling insurance. In fact, he stopped doing anything but spend his wife's money on horses, cars, craps and—I had heard—young and shapely blondes.

I washed my face, combed my hair over the bare spot on the back of my head, decided I could get along without shaving until morning, went back down to the phone in the hall and called Richard Conover. He answered almost before I had the receiver settled over my ear.

"Deegan?" he asked before I could say anything.

"Yes."

"I've been waiting for you to call. Can you come out here right away?"

"I'd like to eat first. Don't tell me you're selling insurance again and another policy holder plugged the doors and turned on the gas?"

"No," he said. "This is important. How soon can you get out here?"

It was ten miles out to Erie Hills from where I lived. I said, "Half an hour. Okay?"

"Okay. Come in the side door off the east terrace. I'll be waiting."

I went out to the street, got into my 1940 coupe and headed away from town. I had two beef sandwiches and a cup of coffee at a drive-in, and then I started up the long winding drive leading to Erie Hills. The sun had gone down and I drove in the dusk past the far-spaced houses. When I reached Richard Conover's place I circled the asphalt drive until I spotted what I thought was the east terrace, but I wasn't sure. A terrace flanked three sides of the big rambling house, and I wasn't carrying a compass. I parked the coupe and tried to figure it out. I remembered a corny riddle: *Why is the sun like a pancake? Because it rises in the yeast and sets behind the vest.* But the sun was down and I had made so many turns coming out that I couldn't remember in what direction it had gone down. So I got out of the coupe and knocked at the door opening off the nearest terrace.

I KNOCKED twice before the door opened. A tall, lean man in a grey tweed suit stood looking out at me. He had a long, tanned face, and his grey eyes looked almost white in the dusk. I had never seen him before.

"Yes?" he said in a cold, clipped voice.

"Which way is east?" I asked him.

He looked at me blankly. "What?"

I repeated my question.

He said, "This side of the house faces west. . ."

"Thank you." I said, and I walked away. As I turned the corner of the house I looked back. He was standing in the door watching me.

I went around to the other side of the house and knocked on a door almost hidden behind a trellis of roses. They smelled good in the still summer air. The door opened immediately, and Richard Conover grabbed my arm and pulled me inside. He was a big man, well built, with a slightly puffy face, straight glossy black hair, a large nose and a strong chin. He was wearing white buckskin shoes, grey flannel slacks and a thin white pull-over decorated with yellow pineapples and brown hula dancers.

"Did anybody see you?" he asked me.

"I went to the west door first. A guy gave me my bearings. I flunked in navigation in the second grade."

He cursed under his breath. "That damned snooping George. Oh, well, come on."

I followed him down a short hall with the walls lined with hunting prints and into a long, narrow room containing a green-covered dice table, two poker tables with drink slots around their rims, a cold fireplace, a small bar along one wall and a lot of chromium and red leather chairs. Conover motioned me to one of the chairs and moved to the bar.

"What'll you drink, John?"

"Beer," I said. "Who's George?"

"George Baker, my wife's secretary. Damned nosy snooper. He's been whining about calling the police." He took a bottle of beer from a small refrigerator behind the bar, opened it, came around and handed it to me.

"Glass?"

"No, thanks. Now what about the police?"

Conover poured himself a stiff jolt of Scotch, dropped an ice cube into it, and turned to face me. "You and I used to get along in the old days, John. I'm in kind of a jam. Myra's been away for three days, and I'm worried about her. I've looked all over hell, but no luck. George, damn him, says he's been looking too. I want you to find her."

"Who's Myra—your wife?"

He nodded. "She left three days ago to attend a women's garden club meeting in Lakeville. She hasn't returned, and she didn't go to the meeting."

"What's wrong with calling the police?"

He waved a hand impatiently. "Myra wouldn't want that. They'd just blunder around and make a lot of stink. She's pretty well known, you know, and she hates publicity. I—"

A door at one side of the bar burst open, and a girl staggered into the room. She was young, and she could have been pretty, but she wasn't pretty now. Her lips were pale, and a heavy loop of yellow hair hung over her face. Her eyes burned hot and black in her head. Behind her stood the cold, thin man called George.

He said to Conover in a tight voice, "I couldn't stop her. She—"

The girl broke in: "I can't stand it any more, Richard. You still love me, you know you do. You've got her money now, but we had more than money . . . remember, Richard? Hell with Myra . . . take me back. . . ."

Conover said sharply to the man called George: "Get her out of here."

The thin man grabbed the girl by the shoulders, but she twisted away from him, lurched across the room and flung her arms about Conover's neck. He backed away and tried to unlock her fingers, but she hung on. George made another grab for her and she began to scream, long and loud. I watched, fascinated. It was like a scene from a tenth-rate French melodrama.

The girl clung to Conover. She was sobbing brokenly, and her voice was thick. "You don't love her, Richard. Hell with her. Take me back, just you and me. . . ."

Conover looked at me over her head. His face was grim, and he jerked his head at me, but I stood still, sizing things up. The tall, lean George was white with rage, and he pulled at the girl viciously. But she clung to Conover like a drowning woman to a lifebelt, and the three of them staggered and struggled around the room.

From between his teeth Conover snapped at me, "Damn you, John! Get her off me."

I grinned at him and stepped in. I got hold of both the girl's slender wrists and pried her hands loose from Conover's neck. I pulled her hands down behind her, jerking her loose. She screamed and even tried to bite me, but I held her close, with both of her small wrists in my left hand and my right around her waist. She was warm and young and slender, and she smelled of whiskey. She was like a greased eel, but I managed to hang on to her, and I looked questioningly over her tossing yellow head at Conover. George stood glaring, panting a little, a gleam of hate in his eyes. I couldn't tell whether the look was for me or for the girl.

Conover snapped at George, "Get her out of here. Take her home and see that she gets to bed. And if you let her in here again—"

George stood still, watching the still struggling girl in my arms. I knew he didn't like the job, and he was trying to decide how to get out of it—and still save face with Conover.

I said, "I'll take her home. Where does she live?"

Conover looked relieved. So did George. "Will you, John?" Conover said. "I'll pay you, of course. She lives at 1538 Olive Drive—but come back here. I want to talk to you."

"Talk to me now," I said.

THE YELLOW-HAIRED girl had quieted down a little, and she was now leaning heavily against me, breathing hard. She kept muttering under her breath: "Richard . . . Richard. . . ." I picked her

up in my arms, and she didn't weigh an ounce over a hundred pounds. She lay limply, and I carried her to a leather divan along one wall and set her down. She turned her face away from me and muttered incoherently.

Conover looked at George and jerked a thumb toward the door. George glared at me, turned abruptly and went out.

Conover scowled at his back. "Secretary!"

I said, "If you don't like him, why don't you fire him?"

He shrugged. "Myra hired him."

"Talk to me now," I said, and I jerked my head at the girl on the divan. "She'll keep."

He said in a low voice, "I told you. Find Myra. Bring her home—and it's a hundred bucks extra, over your fee. I can't have her running around loose like this. Look in the big bars and the flossier hot spots. She's done it before—gets a silly idea that I still go for Lily."

"Is that Lily?" I asked, nodding at the girl on the divan.

"Yes. My ex-wife. We were divorced two months before I married Myra. Just one of those things. We couldn't get along—"

I broke in: "And Myra had more money."

He looked at me steadily. "You always were like that, John. Lily and I just didn't get along, and then I met Myra—oh, to hell with it. I want you to do a job for me, and I'll pay for it. Take Lily home, and try and locate Myra. You fellows have methods—I know that from my insurance days."

"Where else would she be besides in a bar?"

"It'll be a bar," he said. "A fancy bar some place, where her money will do her the most good, or a hotel, where they'll put up with her. She has her favorite places. I looked in a few of them, and I even went up to the cottage on Deer Lake. She hid away there once, but I didn't find her."

The girl on the divan began to sob again.

I said, "Let's play games. How do you stand on this deal with Myra?"

He lit a cigarette very carefully and dropped the match into a jade ashtray before he answered. Then he said, "Damn it, John, I just want you to do a simple little job for me—like locating a wife on a binge. I can't be chasing around asking if anyone has seen my wife, can I? She's worth a lot of dough—"

"Dead or alive?" I broke in.

He looked at me coldly. "Remember this, John. If anything has happened to her, I hired you to find her for me. She'll probably be home tomorrow with a fantastic story, but I can't take a chance on that. I've got to find her."

I moved over to the divan. "I'll take the job," I told him, "but I don't like it. I'll take it because you gave me a lot of business when you were selling insurance for North American. I'll take this babe home, like you said, and I'll try and find your wife. It'll cost you twenty-five a day, plus expenses, and I'll remember that hundred-buck bonus if I find her."

He said sharply, "John, you've got to find her."

I leaned down and picked up the girl. She seemed to be asleep, and her lashes looked black against her white cheeks. She lay quietly in my arms as I carried her out the door and down the passageway. Conover followed me to the outer door, and as I went out, he said softly, "Be careful, John."

I carried the girl across the terrace and put her in the coupe. Her lips moved a little, and she mumbled something, but she didn't open her eyes. I got in beside her and started the motor. A head poked in the window at me.

The man called George said, "Maybe I better go along with you, sir?"

"Maybe you better go to bed," I told him, and his head jerked back out as I put the coupe into gear and pulled out of there.

CHAPTER TWO

Lady in the Dark

I FOUND 1538 Olive Drive without any trouble. It was a small brick apartment building in a quiet section on the north side of town. I got out and went into the small lighted lobby. There was a bank of mail boxes along one wall, and one of them was labeled: *Lily Reed, Apt. 2-C*

I went back out to the car. The girl had her head back against the seat, and her eyes were open.

I said, "Come on, honey. Beddy-bye for you."

Her eyes shifted to me, and she said languidly, "Myra trapped Richard with her filthy money. He loves me."

"Sure," I said. "Where is Myra?"

She looked at me suddenly in a dazed sort of way, and then she began to fumble with the door latch. I opened the door for her, and she got out to the sidewalk and stood swaying. I steadied her with a hand on her arm. I repeated my question.

She flung my hand aside. "Ask Richard," she said, and she began to laugh a little wildly. Then she crossed the walk and entered the apartment building. I saw her press an elevator button, and I waited until she entered and the doors closed. Then I walked down to a drug store on the corner, bought a package of cigarettes and drank a glass of ginger ale. When I got back to my coupe, there was a piece of paper sticking under the windshield wiper. At first I thought it was a parking ticket, but when I looked at it I saw that it was just a plain sheet of note paper with penciled writing on it.

I read: "You'll find Myra Conover in a canoe beneath the dock at the cottage on Deer Lake. North side, yellow boat house."

I put the note in my pocket and headed for Deer Lake. It was an exclusive resort in the foothills twelve miles out of town. Here was a nine-hole golf course, tennis courts, and summer cottages surrounding a spring-fed lake. The lake was about five miles long and a mile wide, with most of the cottages clustered around the southern end, and so I had no trouble locating the Conover cottage at the edge of a pine woods on the northern side. It was black dark when I got there, and I had to use my lantern to check on the color of the boathouse. It was of corrugated metal, yellow-painted, and the small dock ran out into the water beside it. I walked out on the dock.

There was a rope tied to an iron ring bolted to the dock, and I pulled gently. The red-painted tip of a canoe nosed out from beneath the dock and slid silently out on the still black water. I turned my light on it. A woman lay in the bottom of the craft. She was on her back, sprawled in a stiff ungraceful position. Her legs were bent a little, one of them trailing in the water. She was wearing a black skirt and a sheer blouse. The skirt was twisted up over her knees, and the blouse was stained a dark brown. Her long black hair tumbled over the bottom of the canoe beneath her head. I figured that she was about thirty-five, and in life she had probably been a good-looking woman. There was a bullet hole in the exact center of the hollow of her throat, and another just beneath her left eye. Her eyes were open, and the pressure of the bullet had made them a little crossed. The blood on her throat, face and blouse was dry, and I guessed that she had been dead for at least a day, maybe two.

I flicked off the lantern and sighed deeply. A soft night wind fanned across my face and made the water gurgle and slap against the piling. I stood still until my eyes became accustomed to the darkness. After a bit I could make out the outline of a one-story frame cottage at the crest of a short grassy slope beyond the boathouse. Back of the cottage was a thick second-growth pine forest which ended, I knew, at the state highway two miles away. Across the lake there were a few lights in the cottages of late season tenants, but on this side the cottages were far-spaced and empty.

I moved silently off the dock and started up the grassy slope toward the cottage. I passed the dark bulk of my coupe parked on the narrow stone road beside the dock, and the grass swished softly beneath my feet. And then a dark shadow moved beside the boathouse, and I froze to my ankles. For once in my life I wished that I carried a gun. I stood still, feeling like a duck in a rain barrel, and I didn't know whether to flop to the ground or make a dash for my car.

A voice from out the darkness decided for me. "Stand still," it said. "Don't move."

The shadow came closer, moving slowly. One thin edge of the moon shown over the pine forest then, and in its dim light I could make out the figure of a man. He was walking slowly toward me from out

of the black shadow of the boathouse, and I saw the dull gleam of the gun in his hand. Five feet from me he stopped.

"Who is it?" he said, and I recognized the cold, clipped voice.

"It's Deegan," I said. "You got out here fast."

George Baker, Myra Conover's secretary, stepped closer, and I saw the faint sharp outline of his pale face. He was hatless, and the collar of his coat was turned up against the damp cool air. It gave his tall figure a sinister appearance.

"So that's your name," he said in his flat voice. "Deegan. What are you doing up here?"

"Looking for Mrs. Conover," I said. "Have you seen her around, by any chance?"

"Yes, I've seen her," he said harshly. "And you saw her too."

"Yeah, I saw her. From the size of the holes it was a fairly small gun. What caliber rod are you packing, may I ask?"

He took a quick step toward me, and his gun snapped up. Then he said in a choked voice, "Damn you, I found her just like she is. Then I saw your lights coming around the lake, and I ran my car into the woods. I waited beside the boathouse to see who it was. We've got to call the police."

"That's right,I said. "And you may as well put that gun away."

HE LOOKED down at the gun as though he had forgotten it was in his hand. Then he dropped it into his coat pocket, and I breathed easier. He lit a cigarette and began to pace around on the grass. He began to speak, and I had the impression that he was talking to himself.

"Poor Myra," he said. "I knew she was up here. I've been bringing her food and liquor. She wanted to get away from Conover—they've been quarreling for a week. It isn't the first time. She didn't go to that garden club meeting—she just wanted to get away from him for a few days. She trusted me, and she told me where she was going. Tonight I listened at the door. I heard Conover tell you to find her, and I heard him mention Deer Lake. So I came up here ahead of you to warn her and I found her in the canoe. . . ." He flung his cigarette viciously away from him and turned to face me. "Well," he said, "what are you waiting for?"

"You loved her," I said. "Myra."

He didn't say anything for a couple of seconds. When he spoke, his voice was cold and quiet. "Yes. I've always been in love with her. That's why I've been her flunky—just to be near her. She knew it, and Conover knew it—but he couldn't do anything about it. He liked Myra's money too well. And he had Lily."

"His ex-wife?" I said.

The moonlight was brighter now, and I could see his face more clearly. "It was kind of a screwy deal between them," he said. "Conover got Lily to divorce him so that he could marry Myra and get his hands on Myra's money. He promised to take care of Lily and to see her often—until they could work something out. Conover pays for Lily's apartment and her clothes. Or rather Myra does—did. Lily came to see Conover often when Myra was away, and I heard them talking. Lily wanted Conover to divorce Myra and maybe get some kind of a settlement out of her, and Conover kept stalling her off. I've heard them shouting at each other about it when Myra was gone. . . ." He stopped talking and moved toward the cottage. "I'm going to call the police. They can take it from here."

I followed him along the side of the boathouse up toward the cottage. He was ahead of me, and a little to my left, and I moved silently behind him, thinking of the dead woman in the canoe beneath the dock. And then something slammed out of the night at us, and I saw a bright stab of flame streak out from a corner of the cottage. I distinctly heard the *spat* of a bullet as it smacked the side of the boathouse, and I dropped to the ground and hugged the grass. I raised my head a little, and ahead of me I saw George standing like a man with his shoes embedded in cement.

"Get down, you fool!" I yelled at him, and in that instant the flame from the corner of the cottage spat viciously again, and once more I heard the whine of hot lead zinging over my head toward the boathouse behind me. When I raised my head again, I saw in the moonlight the

figure of George running toward the cottage, and I saw the gleam of the gun in his hand.

I tried to shout, "No!" but no sound came out, and I tried it again. "No! Get down!" I yelled, and my voice was hoarse in my ears.

But he kept running up the hill, and the gun in his hand barked twice before he reached the corner of the cottage. He disappeared behind the cottage, and the night was suddenly very still. I got cautiously to my feet and moved up the slope toward the cottage. I gained the corner of the building and peeked around it. All I could see was the dark mass of pine woods beyond. And then I saw a figure emerge from the trees, and I flattened myself against the wall. The figure came close, and I flicked on my flashlight.

George Baker said sharply, "Turn it off. He may still be out there."

I cut the light and waited. The pine woods brooded darkly, and from somewhere near me a cricket began to chirp, hesitantly, as if he were testing the night for competing sounds. George stepped up beside me, and the two of us waited in the darkness for maybe a full minute before I said softly, "There's a lot of woods for him to hide in."

He held up a hand in a listening attitude and looked toward the dark mass of trees.

"To hell with it," I said suddenly. "He's probably to the state highway by now."

"I saw him running for the w[illegible]" George said. "I followed him a little ways, but it was too dark."

I flicked on my flashlight and turned the beam on the grass beside the cottage. Nothing but grass. The wall and the corner of the cottage didn't tell me anything, either. Just a white-painted wooden wall with a lot of nails driven into it to which were clinging the green tendrils of ivy. I moved along the side of the cottage toward the woods with my light trained on the ground. At the edge of the trees beside a rotting log something gleamed in the light. I leaned close—a .25 caliber revolver with a pearl handle. I dropped a handkerchief over it and picked it up. I clicked open the cylinder. Two shots had been fired from it—very recently. I'm no gun expert, but the smell of the muzzle told me that. I turned the weapon over in my hand, and I saw a small silver plate in the butt. The initials on the plate were: *M.T.H.* I moved back to the cottage. George Baker was seated on the steps of the porch smoking a cigarette. I sat down beside him.

"Who is M.T.H.?" I asked him.

He looked at me quickly. "Why?"

"He dropped his gun in the rush of his getaway," I said, and I opened the handkerchief and turned my flash on the gun.

He looked at it silently. Then he said, "That's Myra's gun. Her first husband gave it to her. She kept it in her room. Her name before she married Conover was Myra Theresa Hall."

I said, "You got a key to the cottage?"

He nodded silently and stood up. I looked out over the lake and I saw the lights of a car coming along the narrow road.

"Wait," I said.

The car came up the road along the lake and stopped behind my coupe. Its lights flicked off, and we could see the shadowy form of a man hurrying up the grassy lawn to the cottage. I stood up to meet him.

Richard Conover's voice said sharply: "Deegan, is that you?"

"Yes."

"Who's that with you?"

"George."

He cursed under his breath and came close. The moon had cleared the pine forest now, and the landscape had a pale, blue-black look to it. Conover was hatless, and his eyes were a little wild.

"Is she here?" he asked.

"Who?" I said.

"Lily—the girl you were supposed to take home."

"I thought you wanted me to find your wife."

He waved a hand impatiently. "She'll show up. She always does. After you left, I got worried about her—Lily, I mean. After all, I feel more or less responsible for her, and I went to her apartment to see if she was all right. She wasn't there, and I found this note."

He handed me a piece of paper, and I turned my flash on it. I heard Conover say to George Baker in a sneering voice:

"I wondered where you had gone, Georgie, my boy."

George didn't answer him, and I read the note.

> Richard, darling, I can't keep it up. I'm sorry for the trouble I've caused you, but it just won't work. I hate her so. I'm going away—forever.
>
> Lily.

I put the note in my pocket and said to George Baker, "Unlock the door."

"What are you going to do?" Conover wanted to know.

"Call the police," I told him. I hesi-

Richard Conover

tated, and then I decided to let him have it. "Somebody murdered your wife."

He stared at me blankly in the moonlight, and his mouth worked silently. It wasn't very pleasant to look at him, and I turned away and followed George into the cottage. It took me five minutes to get the sheriff of Buckhorn County on the phone, and when I finally did I gave it to him fast and straight, all of it. I ended by telling him: "Get this: Call the city cops and tell them to pick up a girl named Lily Reed, Apartment 2-C, 1538 Olive Drive."

The sheriff repeated the name and address, and then I hung up.

Conover was watching me like a man having a nightmare, and George was was watching Conover.

"Where is she?" Conover asked me in a hoarse voice.

"You've got me mixed up," I said. "Who do you mean—Lily Reed or your wife?"

"Myra—my wife, damn you."

"In the canoe, beneath the dock. But you'd better not look."

He turned and walked slowly out of the cottage. George watched him go, a sneer on his lean, tanned face.

CHAPTER THREE

Too Many Bullets

I WALKED out on the porch, and George followed me. In the moonlight I saw Conover walk to the dock and move slowly toward the canoe's anchor rope. I waited until I saw the faint flare of a match, and then I walked across the grass to the boathouse. I turned my flash on its corrugated, yellow-painted walls. I found one of the bullet holes about where I had figured it would be—three feet to the right of where I had been standing when the first shot had been fired from the corner of the cottage. But I knew that two slugs had hit the side of the boathouse, and I looked for the second bullet hole. I went over the wall, inch by inch, but I couldn't find it.

I heard a soft step behind me, and I turned. George Baker was watching me. I said, "He fired at us twice, didn't he?"

He nodded silently and then jerked his head toward the dock. I followed his glance, and I saw Conover step off the dock and walk rapidly up the road toward his car.

"Conover!" I yelled at him.

He kept on going.

I ran up the road after him, and I reached him just as he opened the door of his Buick convertible. I grabbed him by one shoulder and swung him around. His eyes glittered in the moonlight, and his face was like a dead man's. He struck my hand from his shoulder, turned and reached into the car. When he swung around there was a big, black automatic in his fist.

"Stand back, John," he said from between his teeth. "You're out of this now. I can handle it better than the police." He jerked the muzzle of the automatic at the figure of George standing by the dock. "There's the man who murdered Myra. He killed her because he was jealous of her, because she wouldn't divorce me and

marry him. For years he's been hanging around her like a dog. I knew it. Myra told me. He was hanging around her when she was married to Jim Hall. She laughed about it, but she wouldn't get rid of him. But he turned on her at last. I've seen the hate in his eyes when Myra kissed me in front of him. I think she enjoyed it. He killed her." He pushed me violently away from him and started for George Baker.

I jumped after him and grabbed for his arm. He jerked away from me, and I tried again.

I heard George say in a flat voice, "Let him come," and I saw that he was holding his gun carelessly at his side.

I grabbed Conover's arm. "Don't be a fool," I snapped. "Give me that gun."

He tried to shake me off, but I hung on to his gun arm. He struggled with me, cursing under his breath.

I heard George Baker say again, "Let him come, Deegan."

The words seem to enrage Conover, and in a violent burst of energy he wrenched his arm free, and the big automatic blasted deafeningly in the still night. I swung with my fist then, as hard as I could, and smacked Conover on the side of his jaw. The blow slammed him against the side of the car, and he slumped to the road and lay still. My hand throbbed as though all the bones were broken. I looked at George Baker. He was down on one knee, but he had his gun pointed at the still form of Conover. I moved over to him.

"Did he hit you?" I asked him.

He nodded silently, and I saw the dark stain on his coat sleeve just above his elbow. He stood up slowly, and his teeth glinted in the moonlight. "You were too close for me to take a shot at him," he said.

"Thanks," I said, and I flashed my light on his arm. There was a lot of blood, and I helped him take his coat off. I bound a handkerchief above the wound. From the way his arm hung, I knew that the bone was shattered. "Have to get a doctor," I told him.

"To hell with it," he said, and he turned to look at the still form of Conover lying in the road beside the Buick convertible. "Sure, I loved Myra," he said in a low, bitter voice. "It was like a fever in my blood. I've had it for years—ever since we worked together in a drug store in Cleveland, before she met Jim Hall. She married Jim for his money, and then Jim died and she married Conover, the handsome slap-'em-on-the-back insurance salesman. But Conover loved his little wife, Lily—only he loved Myra's money more. . . ." He shrugged his wide shoulders helplessly and looked out at the dock where the canoe lay.

"And by killing Myra," I said softly, "Conover figured that he could have her money and Lily too?"

He nodded grimly. "That's the way I figure it."

He was still holding the gun in his hand. I took it from his limp fingers and put it in my pocket. He acted like a man in a daze, and he didn't seem to notice. I sighed deeply. Then I said, "You figure wrong. *You* killed Myra Conover."

He turned and looked at me. "So that's why you took my gun," he said sadly.

"Yes," I said. "You killed Myra because of jealousy. It was eating you up, and you couldn't stand to be taunted by her any more. You killed her yesterday,

and you came up here ahead of me tonight and fastened a gun to the corner of the cottage with the barrel pointed at the boathouse. You hooked the gun over the ivy nails, and you probably used a couple more to hold it rigid. Then you tied a cord to the trigger of the gun, kept the cord in your hand, and waited in the darkness by the boathouse until I showed up —so you could put on your little act. to throw suspicion off yourself. You knew that I would show up because you planted that note in my car telling me where I would find Myra Conover's body. I arrived on schedule, and when the two of us started for the cottage, you pulled the cord and discharged the gun—twice. You didn't want to hit anyone, and you were careful to steer clear of the spot where you knew the bullet would strike. Then you ran bravely forward, blazing away like a hero. You got to the cottage ahead of me, ripped the gun off the wall and then pretended to chase someone into the woods. You dropped the gun with Myra's initials on it in an attempt to pin her murder on her husband. You killed her in a fit of jealousy and because you couldn't stand to be taunted by her any more."

He began to laugh. "What nonsense," he said. "Fantastic—"

I GRABBED him by his good arm, and I reached into his coat pocket. He twisted and tried to squirm away from me, but he had a broken arm, and he couldn't do much about it. From his pocket I jerked a balled-up length of strong, thin cord—enough to reach from the cottage to the boat house. He stood still and watched me silently.

"I didn't tumble to it," I told him. "Not until I found only *one* bullet hole in the side of the boathouse, when I knew that two bullets had struck it. That meant that the second bullet had hit the boathouse at exactly the same spot as the first. Not even a crack marksman could do that. So I knew that the gun would have to be fastened down to shoot in the same spot twice. You overplayed a good hand—you pulled that cord just once too often. With only one shot you might have gotten away with it, and I would have sworn that somebody was shooting at us, somebody implicated in Myra's murder; and since you were apparently one of his targets, that would clear you. . . . You killed her while you were out in the canoe; why didn't you just dump her into the lake?"

He turned away from me and looked up at the stars. "I couldn't do that to Myra; she's always been afraid of the water. It's just that I couldn't stand it any more. We were out in the canoe yesterday afternoon, and . . . she laughed at me once too often. I loved her more than anything, and I killed her. . . ."

He turned to face me. He said quietly, "I mean this, Deegan. Can't you say that you killed me—when I tried to get away?" He tapped his chest over his heart. "Right here, but make it quick." He backed up a little, facing me squarely, and his mouth began to twitch.

"No," I said. I turned toward the form of Conover. That was a mistake. He leaped for me, and his left fist smacked against the side of my head. I stumbled, and another jolting blow caught me on the chin. The stars swirled in the sky, but I managed to get his .32 from my pocket, and I swung it wildly with all my strength. It connected somehow and he went down.

I stumbled around in a circle for maybe a minute before the bells stopped ringing. Then I sat down in the middle of the road and looked at the forms of the two men. Conover was beginning to stir a little, and I watched him dully.

* * *

The police found the girl named Lily in a bar a block from her apartment. She admitted writing the note to Conover, and she said she had really intended to go away. But when she got as far as the bar, the whole thing slipped her mind. . . . Richard Conover didn't get his wife's money. Before the estate was settled he got drunk one night and ran his car through a bridge railing and sailed a hundred feet to the river. They found him the next day. George Baker died in the chair. The papers called him "The Love Killer." I don't know what happened to Lily. The last I heard she was a carhop at a hamburger drive-in. And I'm still doing insurance and credit jobs. Only now I carry a gun.

THE END

A REAL GONE GUY

By

DAVE SANDS

Everything was going in slow motion: the bottle coming for my head, and both of us clawing for our guns. Mine came out first.

We made a fine combination, Sally Vincent and I: Me, an ex-cop staggering down Skid Row with a bottle of hootch in my hip pocket . . . and Sally—the loveliest corpse ever to be twisted, hangnoose fashion, around a man's neck!

THE ROAD was getting steeper, and every time I took a step my foot slipped back a little, leaving a smooth, slick place ahead of my toe. I wished the car would hurry and pass so I could get back on the macadam.

The rain came down as if it intended to keep on coming down forever. I could feel it, icy cold, starting down the back of my neck. Then I hit a soft place in the mud. It came up as far as my ankle, poured down inside my shoe.

She stopped the car while I was still swearing. When she rolled the window

down I could see the little, crooked smile. She said, "Ride?"

"Thanks." I went around the front end.

The smell of gin hit me strong, plenty strong. I don't like gin. Got sick on it once. I was wondering whether it was better to ride with a dame that was polluted or struggle on in the rain. I guess it showed on my face.

She laughed. "Not me," she said. "Some fool stumbled against me in town while I was getting into the car. He was walking along pretty blind, I guess. He smashed his bottle on the door."

I said, "I didn't really think—" But of course I had thought. Why shouldn't she be a lush? I was one. A good one. Detective Sergeant Hammond, Ex. A stumble-bum on the road. . . .

"Going all the way to Gemston?" I asked.

"Not quite. I just left there. Drove around the long way. I had the windows rolled down, hoping I'd get rid of the smell before I took it home. I like the stuff on the inside—never bathed in it before."

I let it pass. She wasn't a saint and neither was I. It made me enjoy the ride.

The trees go by easy when you're riding. I watched them and lowered the window some so I could hear the tires hiss.

She was sizing me up. At first I'd thought of telling it straight—in case she asked, of course—that the only difference between me and the ordinary bum was that I didn't care for trains. But she didn't frown when she looked at my suit, and I realized how it was. The cloth wasn't frayed or worn. It had been one hell of a suit. It hung on me now, all right, but the rain had fixed all that. You couldn't tell how many nights I'd slept in it. The mud around the cuffs could have been put there today—thrown up by passing cars.

"Married?" I asked. She had a look. Even if she was married, she wasn't the kind to work at it—not very long or hard.

"Not now. I was."

The house was okay. Kind of a neat little place. I've seen them for sale in various towns, labeled Honeymoon Cottage. When she said I should come in and dry off, I gave her the old I-can't-do-that routine. All the time I was saying it, I was gathering up her bundles, following her up to the house.

In my left hand there was a brown-paper bag that had a familiar feel. I gripped it, feeling the outline. It wasn't a bottle of milk.

She opened the door while I dripped on the steps. "Come in. I'm wet, too."

I said, "Oh," regretfully, as I puddled on into the room. "I'm afraid I—"

"Forget it. You stay right here and dry off." She tossed her coat on the studio couch, put a match in the fireplace and swept off into another room. Pretty soon she began to heave out some clothes—men's clothes—shirt, trousers and socks.

I looked at the heap of dry clothing, crossed to the table and checked the paper bag. I was right. It wasn't milk. A jug, and what a jug! Scotch, and a brand I hadn't seen in many a thirsty year. The jug had been tapped—there were maybe two drinks missing. But it was a quart instead of a fifth. I didn't mind that at all.

KNOWING it was there took away the need for haste. I got the dry clothes and went out on the porch. There was a dry spot on the tile because of the overhang of the roof. The house was well back from the road and there wasn't a thing in sight. I stripped and rubbed down with the towel she had thrown, put on the dry clothing and let my stuff lie in a heap. There was no point at all in hanging it up. It woudn't dry out for two days.

She was sitting by the fire when I went back in. Beside her on a little table there were glasses. She said, "Want to make us a drink?"

I said, "Sure." Offhanded. Easy. I could take it or leave it alone.

While I poured them, I looked at the quilted robe. What I could see, I liked. Up until now I'd been so busy thinking of booze, there hadn't been any time. Now I noticed the way her skin glowed in the light. I handed her the drink and she nodded her thanks, leaning forward to get it. Our eyes met and she laughed, leaned back then, tossing her head, throwing the little damp ringlets of hair upward, away from her eyes.

A casual guy, that was me. Joe Hammond, pouring his own. I could take it or leave it alone, but I took it and carried it to my chair. *My* chair was good. My chair and maybe my girl. Me. And only a little hour ago I didn't have the right time.

She said: "I'm Sally Vincent."

"Joe," I said. "Joe Hammond."

"Shall we drink?" She raised her glass.

"Not yet. I like to watch it a while."

She put her glass down. "I'll wait."

"Don't," I said. I switched my eyes to the fire, not thinking about her, not thinking about her at all. The fire popped and it reminded me of the way the street lamps had sounded the night I'd shot them out. Drunk and shooting out street lamps. Detective Sergeant Hammond. His last official act. Old Pinky Banes, the chief, hadn't liked that. Nor had he liked letting me go. I'd said, "I was drunk, Chief. It won't happen again. . . ."

"You're a big boy now, Joe," the chief had said. "It's a shame, lad. But you're through. You're drunk too many times."

So the hell with Pinky Banes and his badge. I had got me a job tending bar for Rico. Rico was straight, as crooks go. I got along fine until I had one too many and gave five cases away. The road came after Rico. The road sure was hard on your shoes. . . .

Sally Vincent was saying something. "Don't you drink?" she said again.

"Now and then," I said. "I was thinking." I smiled and picked up my glass.

She held hers up, twirling it in the light. "A present," she said, "from that lousy rat, my husband."

"He must still like you. It looks like a friendly brand."

She smiled and it wasn't pretty. "That," she said, "or what I've got on him. You know," she added thoughtfully, "before they made him district attorney, he wasn't a bad guy at all." She stared at the fire and gulped her drink.

"Torches," I said. "Always torches. Well, your husband has good taste in Scotch."

She shook off the mood and turned gay on me. "How do you know?" she said. "You haven't tasted yours." Then, back to the husband again: "We had a couple in his office—or I did. Of course," and she switched to a too-sweet tone, "a man in his position can't afford to drink during the day."

Watching her sip hers, still twirling mine untouched between my fingers, I thought, I'm starting another binge, baby. You're only having a drink. . . . The thought made me smile, and the girl smiled back.

She was holding that same smile. Only it had become fixed and startled and frightened as she stiffened and slid down in her chair.

I said, "Boy, it sure hits you, doesn't it?" and started mine to my lips.

Sally Vincent let out one shuddering moan—the last sound she ever made. Very slowly, I put down my glass, still full. I wasn't thirsty just then.

Taking her pulse was unnecessary. I'd seen them that way before. I felt for it, though, just to make sure. It's a thing you do for a friend.

There wasn't anything. Not anything at all. I stood up and moved around the room, wiping off things I had touched. Among other things, I'd get rid of my glass. My thirst was beginning again. Maybe another jug in the house? Perhaps, but not for me. Somebody hadn't liked Sally, hadn't liked her at all.

In the bedroom closet I found a pile of men's clothing, folded, way back on the shelf. I took off the ones she had given me and shoved them back under the pile. Naked, I walked out of there. I knew she wouldn't mind. On the porch I pulled on my own clammy duds. They smelled like wet wool and were cold.

I checked the outside for footprints, then slogged through the rain towards the town.

THE GUY in the lunchroom was skinny. He had tattoos all over his arms. I said, "Got some work I can do to pile up the price of a meal?"

"You do anything?"

"Yeah, anything."

"Okay. Sweep out the joint. Broom's in back of the door."

I took off my coat and laid it in the back booth. I had the broom in my hand when the cop came in the door. He was big and rosy and healthy and young. A farmer or college boy.

The cop said, "On the bum, buddy? I watched you come down the street."

Lucky Joe Hammond. He watched me come down the street. How far down the street? Did he know I'd just come to town? If he did I was in for some fancy grief. A vag drifting in and behind him a woman murdered, thirty minutes back on his trail. I had to set it up in his mind so he thought of me as a guy who had been here, been here for some little time.

"Not exactly," I said. "I'm broke, though."

"How long you been in town?"

"A week," I said. "More or less. I'm a fighter. Bummin' isn't my business, but I bet on myself and lost."

He chuckled. I could see he liked that. I thought I'd give him some more. "I'm only fair," I said meekly. "Sometimes I win, but—"

"Cup o' coffee, Harry," the cop said. "You're all right, buddy. All right. First fighter I ever seen who wasn't an ex-world champeen—or gonna be one next week."

Farmer. I scratched off the college boy. That nose talk was strictly from soil. I showed my teeth politely and made motions with the broom. The slob sucked hard on his coffee. It wasn't pretty like a juke box, but, hell, the tune was free. . . .

He said, "No kiddin', you any good?"

"Depends, officer."

"Fella down in Exeter is lookin' for a match for Saturday. You been there yet? Name of Tony Gage."

I said, "Thanks. I'll look him up."

That farmer was sure some talker.

The one I met that night didn't talk so much. And I didn't like what he said: "Let's go." I was walking along near the freight yards when this guy stepped out of the dark.

I said, "What—"

"Roundup. Don't argue. Just come along." The dope had his right hand on my wrist. I clamped onto his hand and swung his arm around his own head and by the time he'd finished spinning, I had my hammerlock.

Reaching with my left hand, I plucked his gun. Then I let him go, stepped back and threw a cartridge into the chamber. "Sucker," I said. I was panting.

He wasn't afraid. "We'll see," he said. "We'll see."

Backing away, I circled him, hoping he'd hold the pose until I was well in the clear. He didn't. I heard the whistle behind me and the noise of running feet. At least I wasn't stupid enough to bet on myself in a race. Instead of taking the corner, I dove behind a square trash can—the kind the city provides.

The law came pounding along. He played it nice and cagey. He took the corner wide. He said, "Ah—" when I reached out and got him and slugged him behind the ear. His left leg let go first, and it spun him out in the street. He was heavy, but I dragged him back on the sidewalk so he wouldn't get hit by a car. All that I held against him was that he wasn't a very good cop. I had been. A very good one. . . .

Headlights swung into the street three blocks down. I left him there and faded, taking his blackjack and gun.

The roundup would mean they were calling it murder. They hadn't bought suicide. Somebody, anybody, could have seen me ride with the dame in the car or watched me walk down the road.

You don't buck the law without money. A vag hasn't got a chance. And if you're smart you don't tell it to just any cop. You head for the guy with the brass. . . . Coming out of a dark side street, I walked to a corner drug store, got the use of a nickel from a sleepy clerk: "I left my wallet at home."

Pinky Banes, my old chief, said, "Sure," when they asked him about reversed charges. He sounded sorry right away when he found out who was calling. I talked to him fast and desperate. I told him how it was. He listened, or at least I thought he did, then he said, "Drunk again." I was chattering like a madman when the phone clicked and Pinky was gone.

One cab driver couldn't tell me. The next one knew pretty well. About two hours later I rang the bell of the district attorney's house.

I rang the bell and we were looking at each other. I said, "My name's Hammond. I've got a story might interest you. It's got to do with your wife."

We stood there like that for a while.

Then he said, "Won't you come in?"

He turned on some more lamps and I saw then that he wasn't the kid that he seemed. There were small, hard lines around his mouth and those blue eyes looked frosty close up.

"Vincent," he said. "Clark Vincent. Sit down."

I said, "Could I have a drink?"

His back was to me as he mixed. I said, "Sorry about your wife."

The siphon stopped gurgling, then fizzed again. "Don't be. We were separated. We didn't get along."

He turned, carrying the drinks. I thought: A nice guy, very nice. But also, a chilly boy.

RIGHT then I knew it was time to cease and desist. To drink my drink and breeze. D. A.'s don't have social evenings with tramps. The guy was treating me too well. "I just dropped in," I said brightly, "to tell you I saw Mrs. Vincent this afternoon. She picked me up and gave me a ride—for a little way. I was bumming into town."

He said, "What else is on your mind? You wouldn't come up here for that. You could tell that to any patrolman."

I tried my drink and the stuff was good. I could feel it making me smarter, making me cheerful and warm. Pretty soon I was thinking I might as well, so I gave it to him straight—how I was an ex-dick on the bum, the girl, the house and the booze.

"About that liquor," the D. A. said. "Did she mention where she bought it?"

"She—" and then I remembered. My voice went on, flat and slow: "She didn't buy it," I told him. "She said she got it from you."

One of his hands flew up in the air and thudded down on the divan. He said, "Of course. Hammond, I'm awfully grateful to you."

I kept my eyes on him, but let out the breath I'd held in. I said, "I was afraid—I mean, being a man with police training, I could see how this would look."

"Forget it," Clark Vincent said, "You're not the type for poison. No, man, you're not the type."

I reached for my drink and adjusted one trouser leg, just like it had a crease. I'd fooled around with enough shady boys to know that there are no types. But if Vincent said he could spot killers by ear, so much the better for me.

"Excuse me," said Vincent, getting up. "Be back in a moment. I want to make a call." He left the room and shut the door. I heard the phone dial spin, but his voice was low and even. I couldn't hear what he said. For that matter, I didn't try very hard. I liked the warm room pretty well. While I waited I ambled over to the jug and fortified my drink. When Vincent came in, my drink was dark amber, and I was back in my chair. I raised the glass and tilted it back, letting the stuff slide down.

"Have another," he urged.

"No." I smiled when I said it, but one little corner of my mind not yet hit by the booze, kept telling me to get out of there. I was hoisting myself from the chair, moving to the door.

"I demand," he said, "that you stay for another. What kind of host would I be if I let you go with one drink?"

He sure was hipped on being a host. He even sounded annoyed. A man in my spot doesn't prod district attorneys—not when he can please them by merely lapping up booze. I guess the drink tasted as well as the first. I couldn't really tell.

Ten minutes later the farewell slug I had poured for myself hit me where I lived. I asked my pal for another drink. He sure was a wonderful guy. He played some records he had around and pouring myself another drink, I remembered a girl who went with some of the songs. He poured the one after that. We lied to each other about tough boys we'd caught. Having a wonderful time. . . .

I was lying on the divan with my feet propped up on the end. The glass in my right hand was still half full. My cigarette dropped on the rug. He let it stay, and I laughed, watching the thin blue smoke rise up. I'd pick it up in a minute. I chuckled and closed my eyes.

From out in space I heard his voice, warm, friendly and only curious: "Hammond, how did she look?"

So he still loved the dame. He'd been that way about her even though she was something of a tramp, even though they'd split. Well, I'd try to make it good.

"Like an angel," I said. "There was a fire in the fireplace, and the lights looked good on her hair."

"I know," he said. "I know." His voice was a little sad. "Hammond, you remember what she wore? She looked so well in clothes. . . ."

"A robe," I said, still dreamy. "A nifty quilted job. It fit like a robe oughta fit and it had lots of little flowers. . . ."

"That'll do it, boys. Come on in."

I sat up and blinked. The cops were filing in through the door that led to the other room. The district attorney wasn't drunk. Nobody was drunk but me. And I wasn't nearly so high as I had been—or as high as I wanted to be.

Clark Vincent sounded tired: "Here's a confession I had him sign." He handed the paper to a white-haired cop who took it and nodded his head.

"Didn't sign anything!" I said, but I knew I had. That was when we had been bosom buddies only a short time ago. Wanted to keep in touch, we said, so I wrote out my name and address. Not *my* address. I didn't have one. The address I gave was my father's. They'd hear about this at home. . . .

"Seems peaceful enough," Vincent was saying. "Don't believe he'll give you any trouble."

"Go to hell," I said.

I HAD been in better jails, but never before on the wrong side of the door, facing a murder rap. They let me see the papers. The boys gave it quite a play. Sally Vincent had been plenty wild for a girl born in this little burg. She'd been drunk, they said, when she picked me up. The car still smelled of gin. They didn't mention a motive, which seemed kind of silly to me. If I had the booze and the girl and was getting drunk, what would make me kill? Just a hobby, I guess. A pastime. A thing I did for laughs.

Flipping the pages from front to back, I found only one thing I liked. That she'd been to see Clark Vincent the afternoon she died. The sob sister who wrote that up went all out for grief. You could almost hear the catch in her voice, see tears like plastic balloons. Vincent had given Sally the sum of two hundred clams. In spite of the pull at my heartstrings, I managed not to cry. I seized that fact like a reformer unearthing a brand new sin. She had been to see her husband the afternoon she died. The dame had been blackmailing him.

And I had carried a jug from the car, an already opened jug!

A small-town turnkey leads a lonesome life. Mine was no exception. I believe he really enjoyed the talk till he gave me that cigarette. I grabbed his arm and spun him around, held his throat with my left forearm while my right hand went for his keys.

The man at the desk was surprised to see us. I said, "Leave your hands on top of the desk. Don't make me plug this guy."

The turnkey, feeling his gun in his back, said quickly, "He'll do it, Tim."

I guess Tim thought I would. A guy who would poison a woman wouldn't stop shooting once he started till he killed all old men in sight. To the turnkey I said, "That squad car outside. Where d'ya keep the key?"

"You go—" Tim said.

"This is no time to be brave," I told him. I counted. "One. . . ." very slowly. "Two. . . ."

Tim got up and lifted the key from its hook. I stepped back and jerked my head at the door. The three of us went outside.

Before I left, I took their guns and threw them inside the car. The two old men ran back inside as I gunned the sedan down the street. Barring a very unlucky break, I was set for a breathing spell. With the squad car radio working, I could more or less follow the play.

That radio began barking like a frenzied dog before I had gone five blocks. Slouching in the seat, I kicked the gas, took a corner in a screeching side slip, and sent the cruiser flying right through the heart of the town. Somebody could be following. I didn't bother to look.

Then I was on the stretch of road that led to the state highway. I passed a clump of trees, and behind me I heard a motorcycle blast into life. The bike boy made with his siren. I slumped farther down in the seat and bore down on the gas. We screamed along through the darkness and the sound of the car's motor got higher,

and higher. But that siren was getting near.

I pressed my foot down, trying to shove it through the floorboard. It hurt the ball of my foot, but the front wheels got a little lighter. I could feel them . . . *tramp, tramp* . . . through the wheel in my hands. It had been a long time since I had tampered with that much speed.

The truck came down over the hill in a free-rolling run. I knew we were in for trouble. Moving the way I was moving, I needed a lot of road. Behind me the siren shrieked again. I carefully loosened my grip on the wheel, held it with the tips of my fingers. The truck got bigger and bigger. It was covered with flashing lights. Its horn let out a warning blast. I was almost on it now, swaying and sliding and weaving. The car was too light for that speed. *Now*! I gave the wheel a touch right, a quick one left, dainty, feather-light. And I was clear and by.

The truck driver wasn't so lucky. The guy must have wrenched at his wheel. I couldn't see, but from the noise he made the odds were good that his cargo was scattered all over the road.

Ten miles on, I spotted a lighted crossroad, slammed on the brakes and ran the car off the road, behind some trees. From there I walked to the corner, promoted a ride in an out-of-state car, headed back the way I had come.

We came to the spot where the trailer had rolled. The salesman I was riding with slowed down to crawl through the wreck. The driver of the truck was healthy and cursing. I saw him waving his arms. My bike boy was talking with another cop. I knew him by the mud. He was covered all over including his face. To the right I saw an open field. I guessed he had taken to that.

There wasn't much left of the night, but what there was I spent in a vacant lot, not far from the D. A.'s house.

My boy came out while I watched the house. He drove away in his car. Up the street another car started and trailed him. Clark Vincent had a guard. I climbed in through the window and checked the house, finding nothing I liked but a gun, a Special, like the one I used to have. It fitted well in my hand.

Out in the garage the picking was better. There I found a jar of rat poison, or rather, half a jar.

Back in the house, I shaved with Clark Vincent's razor, combed my hair with his comb. The phone rang once, and I let it ring. Then I knotted my tie and put on my coat and went out to canvass the block.

IT TOOK me some little time. I went from house to house. "Madame? Mr. Gregory, of the Acme Exterminator Ser-

vice. Have you been troubled with rats?" It came up the way I thought it would in a neighborhood like that. If there were any rats in the block, Clark Vincent had them all.

I went back to the D. A.'s house and picked out a comfortable chair. Comfortable, meaning it faced the door and that its arms were far enough apart to let my arms swing free with the gun. There was bourbon on the table. I put the jar next to that.

At one-ten my boy came in. With the gun in my hand before he opened the door, I felt cozy. "Sit down, friend," I said.

He said, "Hammond, be careful. This place is surrounded by now. What the—" He saw the poison; he couldn't miss it under the lamp.

I said, "Strange how rats bother *you* and leave all your neighbors alone."

He sighed and sat down in the chair, saying, "Hammond, why couldn't you stay out of this?"

I flipped my coat to one side and put away the gun, watching him sit up straighter. The boy was quick to take heart. Something creaked in the next room. I wasn't sure, so I watched Vincent, decided I was wrong. "I was willing to skip it Saturday night," I reminded him, "and you, friend, dealt me in."

"That was a mistake," he said.

"A bad one," I agreed tonelessly. "Because I don't see any way out for me — a drunkard's word against yours. So I thought I'd take you with me. I'm a guy likes company."

"You can't—"

"I'll do it chum. The first thing stirs around this place, I'll plug you and then go look. If you've got guards outside the house, you better pray they stay there."

"You chatter too much," Clark Vincent said. "Killers don't make all that noise."

"Excuse me," I said politely. "I'm only learning the trade. You, now—how come you killed your wife? Slight case of prolonged blackmail, so you slipped her a permanent micky. Right? After that some guy who owed you a favor broke a bottle of booze on the door. All set for suicide —except somebody saw her with me."

"Yes," he said absently. "An old woman. You passed her cabin that day as the two of you drove to the house. She was really no good," he added. "Sally, I mean. . . . A man in my position—" He stopped, and I could see he was just remembering who he was. My gun had shaken him up some, that and the sight of the jar.

Watching the lines on his face, I knew he was going to play rough. That was the way I wanted it.

He was surprisingly good with the bottle. I remember admiring that. He had it sailing through the air. Everything went in slow motion: that bottle coming for my head, that in the middle, and on either end two men clawing for guns.

I got mine out and snapped one at him. I guess I heard the shot. It was either that or the bottle crashing against my head.

From a long way off I heard Pinky Banes saying, "He's still pretty good with that gun." I opened my eyes. My old chief and two guys I didn't know were bending above Clark Vincent.

"Get him?" I asked.

"Got him," one said. "Right between the horns."

Pinky Banes stood above me and rubbed his moustache. "I got to thinking," he told me, "after you called last night. . . . You owe me a dollar-sixty," he added, "and you look right natural with all that booze running down your face."

"I'll laugh afterwards," I told the crusty old goat. "Right now I want a drink."

"I guess," Pinky said judicially, "you must be shaky, at that." He went to Clark Vincent's bar, a leather-upholstered job, came back with a brimming glassful and put it in my hand.

I hoisted the glass, held it there to feel the old anticipation. It didn't come.

Pinky Banes was watching and I forced a grin as I handed the glass back, still full. "Sorry, Chief. I can't get it down."

"In that case, son," said Pinky Bane, "you'd better go wash your face. I realize you've been having a busy time, but I like my men to look sharp."

The old goat looked downright happy as he drank my whisky neat.

Master MANHUNTERS

by Ben Nelson & Stookie Allen

ACE AMATEUR

IN 1919, NORFLEET, RANCHER, FOUND A WALLET IN A DALLAS HOTEL, PLANTED SO ITS "GRATEFUL" OWNER COULD LURE HIM TO SPECULATE IN A PHONY COTTON EXCHANGE. FRANK LOST HIS LIFE SAVINGS. IDENTIFYING PHOTOS OF THE 5 SWINDLERS, HE WAS MADE A DEPUTY AND STARTED A ONE-MAN VENDETTA.

LEARNING THEIR HISTORIES, HE TOURED THEIR HAUNTS AND JAILED THREE. HE COLLARED ANOTHER IN CANADA, BUT THE CON-MAN KICKED HIM IN THE FACE AND ESCAPED. FRANK GOT HIM ON A UTAH STREET.

HE CORNERED JOE FUREY, THE LEADER, ON A FLORIDA PIER, WHERE THE SWINDLER JUMPED INTO A MOTORBOAT AND FLED.

LATER, FUREY ESCAPED AGAIN BY DIVING THROUGH THE WINDOW OF A TRAIN! IN DAYTONA A CONFEDERATE FELLED FRANK WITH A GUN BUTT.

WITH HIS SON, PETE, HE TACKLED FUREY IN A MIAMI CAFÉ. A COP BARGED IN, GUN DRAWN, AS FUREY YELLED "ROBBERS." NORFLEET IDENTIFIED HIMSELF JUST IN TIME AND HIS AMAZING FOUR-YEAR MANHUNT COVERING 18 STATES AND FIVE COUNTRIES WAS OVER!

KEEP OUT OF MY BIER!

Thrilling Crime-Detection Novelette

By
C. WILLIAM HARRISON

All I needed was two warnings to get off the Bonnell case to make me stick my neck out so far that anyone with an extra murder on his hands could hang a frame right plop *on the dumbest private dick ever to take a joyride to the gas chamber!*

CHAPTER ONE

Too Many Clients

I WAS sitting at my desk idly wondering if I could pick up a few extra dollars by rewriting cooking recipes lifted out of L. A. newspapers and selling them to the Frisco sheets. I once knew a guy who did that. He also rehashed obituaries and other newsy items for the trade magazines. He was the only successful writer I ever knew. He managed to celebrate his thirty-seventh birthday before he died of starvation.

I wasn't getting very far along with the recipe business. It didn't seem to mesh with my personality. In fact, I had just about given up the idea when the man with the red tie walked in. He didn't

While I was still staring at the legs, something swished behind my head. I bent over the legs without wanting to, but I could no longer see them. Everything had gone black.

bother to knock, the way the sign on my office door said. He just walked in like a friendly neighbor.

"Are you Clancy Hatch?"

I gave him a quick once-over. He looked poor enough to be honest, but that impression didn't go with his face. He had a heavy jaw, a long, tight mouth, and eyes that were as cold as Hennessey's hands the day they buried him. For my money he looked like another attempt to collect last month's payment on my file cabinet, and I didn't want any part of him.

"No," I told him. "Go away."

"The sign on your door said Clancy Hatch," he said stubbornly.

"It also said Seymour Graves," I said. "Which is who I am at the present moment. I'm a writer, sonny, and you're disturbing my creative processes."

He said he didn't care what he was disturbing. He came across the room in a slow, solid walk.

He stopped in front of my desk. His small eyes flicked around the office, and he saw but one desk, one file cabinet and two chairs, one of them for customers.

He said, "There's only one guy operating in this joint."

"That," I answered, "could be a bone of contention, my friend. I tell you I am Seymour Graves."

"Probably a name you write under," he grunted. He surprised me. The lad had brawn and he also had brains.

"So you are also Clancy Hatch, the private eye," he said. He thrust both hands into the pockets of his coat. I knew then that he was a poor man because he had a hole in the lining of his right pocket. It was that hole that the muzzle of his gun poked through. It was a king-sized automatic.

He grinned at me. "It's a nice day, ain't it, Mr. Hatch? Or is that another of them bones of contention?"

I TOOK my hands off the typewriter keys, and folded them in my lap. I wanted very much to show him how peacefully harmless I was.

"Tomorrow will be another nice day, won't it, Mr. Hatch?" he said.

I told him I hoped it would be.

He said, "There won't be any doubt of it if you butter your bread on the right side, Mr. Hatch." He was a very polite gentleman, like Digby O'Dell, on the Fibber McGee program.

Then he took his left hand out of his coat pocket, and he was holding a nice fat sheaf of bills. He gestured with the greenbacks in his left hand and the gun in his right.

"I'm just a big boy at heart, Mr. Hatch," he said. "All my friends like me because I'm always thinking up games to play."

I couldn't resist asking him about his enemies, but he had an answer for that.

"I don't have any enemies, Mr. Hatch." He tilted the automatic up so I could look into the black muzzle. "Believe me, I don't have a single enemy."

I didn't have the heart to doubt him. I believed him thoroughly.

"This is one of my games, Mr. Hatch. Which would you prefer to have, five hundred dollars cash or a .45 bullet?"

I made like one of the Quiz Kids. "That's an easy one. The money, of course."

"You're a smart man," he said. He tossed the sheaf of bills to my desk. Then he stopped grinning. "This time you hit the jackpot, Mr. Hatch. But there's a forfeit in my game. If you don't drop the Bonnell case you have to pay the penalty."

I just stared at him. "The Bonnell case?"

"The penalty is a .45 bullet, Mr. Hatch," he said and back-stepped to the office door.

"Hey," I said. "I don't even know—" But he was already out the door.

I got out of my chair and ran across the room. I jerked the door open and almost knocked the startled mailman down.

"You've been listening to too many Bumstead programs, Mr. Hatch," the mailman said. He held out a letter.

I didn't even look at the letter. "Where'd he go?"

"Who?"

"The man with the red tie."

The mailman shrugged. "I don't know. I just came out of the Acme office and I didn't see anyone. Here's a letter for you."

I stepped back into my office, closed the door and locked it. I tore the end off the letter and pulled out the contents.

There wasn't much in the envelope, only a check for a thousand dollars and an unsigned typewritten letter. I read it numbly.

My dear Mr. Hatch:
Enclosed you will find my check in the amount of one thousand dollars. I trust that, as you agreed in our telephone conversation, you will give no further interest to the Bonnell case.

The letter was unsigned, but there was a signature on the check: Roger P. Millhaven.

I crossed the office to the metal cabinet, opened it to the "S" file, and took out the bottle of Scotch. But the second shot did not give any more answers than the first.

I had never even heard of a Bonnell case.

THE TELLER at the bank was a thin, stooped young man with a small puckered mouth that could have been shaped only by the responsibility of handling too much money.

He looked at the check, raised his eyes and smiled. "Sure it's good, Mr. Hatch," he said. "I'd like to break my back carrying all this kind of paper that Roger P. Millhaven could indorse. Do you want this in cash or shall I deposit it to your account."

"Put it on your books," I told him. Now I would have a thousand dollars to keep company with a five-spot that was normally my sole interest in the bank. "This Millhaven guy has a few bucks, huh?"

"A few," the man in the cage admitted. His smile was beginning to look a little uncertain. "Do you mean that you do not know Mr. Millhaven?"

"Never heard of the lad," I said. "It's happened ever since I started Luxing my undies. Strangers seem to go out of their way just to give me money. You might get Millhaven on the phone and keep the record straight, though."

He did. He talked in a low voice, with the telephone mouthpiece close to his lips. Then he cradled the phone and came back smiling again. He reached for my deposit book and entered the money.

"Thanks, son," I said. "It just goes to show you what a nasty suspicious mind you're developing."

I went outside, and the sun was beginning to burn its way through the thin film of high fog. I started toward my car, stopped on the corner to get out a cigarette. I put it between my lips and forgot to light it.

According to the two names on my office door I was both a private detective and a mystery story writer. According to those two names I was a combination that was hard to beat. I was two brains in one. As a shamus I solved crimes, and as a writer I set them down on paper. I worked with crime from both sides of the fence.

I stood there on the street corner and tried out my shamus brain. It got me no place; I had no facts with which to work. I tried out my writer brain and got no further. I had never dreamed up a fictional situation as strange and impossible as this one I found myself in.

I had been hired by two different men to drop a case I had never even remotely heard of. On the surface, my position in the matter seemed simple enough. I had never in the first place been hired into the Bonnell case, whatever that was, and so I was quite willing to drop it in view of the considerations received. For fifteen hundred dollars I would agree to abandon any case I did not have.

But it wasn't as simple as that. Roger Millhaven had written out a thousand-dollar check in my favor, said money binding an agreement he claimed we had made over the phone. And Millhaven had confirmed his check when the bank telephoned him. So it followed that Millhaven must have some reason for his certainty that I had been retained to handle the Bonnell troubles.

Likewise, the gunman with the red tie must have been equally certain that I was on the Bonnell case. It was Red Tie who unsettled my peace of mind. Men like him can be difficult to argue with. They can also be dangerous. For twenty-eight years I'd had a habit of breathing regularly, and I didn't relish the prospect of Red Tie helping me to break that habit.

I stood there on the street corner all wrapped up in my troubles. "What I've got to do," I said aloud, "is to find out who Bonnell is, get myself hired so that I can drop the case."

A passer-by gave me a startled glance. "Were you speaking to me?" he asked.

"I never talk to strangers," I told him and headed for the telephone booth in the drugstore.

I telephoned all my competition in the city, thinking that this Bonnell lad might have aired his intention to hire me but had secretly changed his mind and retained one of the other agencies. I tried Acme, Beaumont, Pinkerton, the Confidential Detective Agency—all of them.

I told them my name was Bonnell and asked if they had anything to report on my case. It was a nice bluff, and it proved that I had something in common with all the other private eyes in the city—none of us knew anything about a Bonnell case.

I had better luck at Bess Nolan's office. Bess has a suite of rooms in the Hamblin building, and it is here that her staff of slaves gather and whip into shape the juicy little gossip items which appear in syndicated columns and go out over the air as "The Nolan Side Of The News."

A pair of trim ankles were all that Bess Nolan had left of her girlish figure. She glanced at them reminiscently, reached for another chocolate and gave me an up-from-under glance with her cool blue eyes.

"Sure, I know Roger Millhaven and Paul Bonnell," she said. She had a slightly husky voice which must have been seductive before her once-slim body had gone on a career of its own. "What about them, Clancy?"

"So that's his name," I said.

She gave me a sharp, probing stare. "You mean you didn't know his full name?"

"There are," I told her, "umpteen Bonnells listed in the directory, and I had no way of knowing which was connected with Roger Millhaven."

"So you came to me to do your fishing," Bess said angrily.

I grinned at her.

She picked up a book, slammed it down on the top of her desk. "Damn it, Hatch, how many times have I told you that my office is not an information bureau? What else do you want to know?"

"All about Roger Millhaven and Paul Bonnell."

"Why?"

I shrugged.

"Look, Hatch, trying to act coy doesn't become you," Bess said. "Tell me why you want to know about Millhaven and Bonnell, and I'll give you the low-down on them both."

I shook my head. "No."

"Don't you trust me?" she demanded harshly.

"The last time I trusted you, Bess darling, was the first time I walked in here. You offered that same bill of goods, and I bought. Then I didn't get to hear what I wanted until you made your Sunday night broadcast. I lost a nice fee because the police also have a habit of listening to you."

"Clancy, I'll give you my word—"

"No."

"All right," she said, "but I'll cut out your black heart if you double-cross me on any story. Anyhow, what I've got to tell you every other Hollywood gossip knows."

SHE TRIED to cross her legs, failed, and bent forward to lean on the desk top. "Roger P. Millhaven is one of the top writer-producers in the business. If you had an eye for anything but pretty legs you'd have known that. Millhaven is rich, single, a thoroughly nice guy even if he is—or was—an incurable introvert."

"What do you mean—was?"

"He started showing up at the night spots a few months ago with a gal named Mary Saxton. The whisper is that they're engaged."

"Who's Paul Bonnell?"

"A hack writer," Bess said. "He's one of the best screen writers in the business, but he's still a hack. Sam Cabel is his agent. Bonnell is married to the former Rita Lamson, but he doesn't work steadily at it. Neither does Rita, according to the grapevine."

"What connection does Bonnell have with Millhaven?" I asked.

"I wouldn't know," Bess said. "They're as far apart as the sun and moon. Millhaven is a genius, if there is such a thing. Bonnell is a hack, even if he is one of the top lads at screen-writing technique." I chewed the end off a cigar, dropped it in the chrome-plated ashtray.

"Do you know any lad who has a liking

for red ties? He's big, almost as tall as I am, and must weigh about two-thirty. Looks like a gunsel, and probably is. Probably spends all his money on red ties and expensive shoes. When I saw him he was wearing a sharkskin suit—"

"Monte Casslon," Bess said.

I looked at her.

"That red tie doesn't mean a thing, sonny, take it from me," Bess said. "Monte Casslon used to be a hired gunman but he turned gentleman after some of his friends were rubbed out. Casslon bought himself a little restaurant on La Brea Avenue and turned respectable."

"I wonder," I said, "if Casslon is chummy with Roger Millhaven."

"You might just as well wonder if Truman will run for re-election on the Republican ticket," Bess snapped.

"They both have something in common," I told her slowly. "Casslon and Millhaven, I mean. They both have a financial interest in me."

Bess straightened in her chair and her cool blue eyes gleamed. "What's that?"

I told her about my new-found wealth.

"Are you telling me," Bess said sharply, "that Roger Millhaven paid you one thousand dollars to drop the Bonnell case?"

"That's right."

"And Monte Casslon gave you five hundred dollars for the same reason?"

"He also had a gun to help persuade me."

Bess was like a hungry terrier gnawing a bone. "But what *is* this Bonnell case?"

"I don't know."

"Damn it, Clancy Hatch, I warned you—"

"If I knew, I wouldn't be here, would I?" I said. "Regardless of what you say, there must be some connection between Millhaven and Paul Bonnell. I think I'll have a little talk with Bonnell's agent and see what he knows."

"Not without me, you're not," Bess said.

I got out of my chair and stood over her. "Monte Casslon is a big man with a big gun. And you'd make a nice, big target, sweetheart."

"Me and my fat!" Bess said bitterly. But she was no less determined. "Then I'll send Nora Heath with you."

Any other time I would have kissed Bess Nolan's hand for her suggestion. Nora Heath is the girl I dream about in my idle moments. But I didn't relish the prospect of spending the rest of my life dreaming about a beautiful girl who had become a corpse.

"Look, Bess, on jobs like this I'm a misogynist."

She didn't know what the word meant and she didn't care. She punched a button on her desk and I walked out with Nora Heath trotting beside me.

We went directly to Sam Cabel's office, but he wasn't a very communicative man. He was too dead to talk.

CHAPTER TWO

The Frame

THE BULLET had struck Sam in the back, just under his left shoulder, and it had plowed through his body with just enough momentum to carry it across the office. I found the slug, blunted and shapeless, close to the wall near the door.

I looked at Nora's white face, and wondered if I was going to have a fainting woman on my hands in addition to a corpse.

"You'd better get out of here," I told her. "Go back to the office, and stay there."

Nora tried to straighten her twisted mouth. "Bess would eat me alive if I walked out on any job she gave me."

"To hell with Bess."

Nora closed her eyes.

"Then find yourself a drink," I told her more gently. "There ought to be a bottle around here somewhere."

The thought of drinking out of a dead man's bottle seemed to sicken her all the more. She walked unsteadily to a chair and sat down. Which was better for both of us. I wouldn't have to pick her up if she fainted, and she wouldn't have so far to fall if she did. I turned to Sam Cabel again.

It was a .45 slug. I registered that fact along with the memory of the muzzle of Monte Casslon's automatic.

I turned, not touching anything, and studied the room. Sam Cabel's body was

slumped forward on his desk, and behind him was an open window. Evidently, the murderer had been in one of those buildings across the narrow street. He had waited until Cabel's secretary had left the office to go home, and then he had fired his bullet into the man at the desk.

It was a nice, clean murder. Efficient. The murderer would have been careful not to be seen waiting in that building across the street. He had timed it well, and his shot would have been muffled by the normal traffic sounds on the street. Or accepted as a backfiring exhaust. So that was that.

I circled the desk and touched Cabel's still-warm wrist. He couldn't have been dead more than a very few minutes, and I wondered if the killer might still be hanging around across the street, waiting for a chance to send the corpse some company. Just to prove to myself that I was brave, I turned my back to the window and tried to slip my hand into the dead man's inner coat pocket. I heard Nora Heath's audible shudder.

"Clancy, must you . . . do that?"

I gave her my calloused-detective smile. "He wouldn't care. He wouldn't care at all, honey."

Nora had been hit hard by her first glimpse of violent death, but she was coming out of it fast.

"The police would care," she said evenly. "They'll know someone went through Cabel's pockets if you smear that blood on his coat."

"That," I told her, "is the only reason I'm not going through his papers, honey."

I turned to the four-drawer metal file cabinet, wrapped my hand in my handkerchief, and opened the A-D drawer. There was a file in Paul Bonnell's name, the most recent entry being a very terse letter written by Sam Cabel terminating all business relations with Paul Bonnell.

Reading over my shoulder, Nora whistled softly. I felt the same way, but I let her do the deducing. She was pretty good at it.

"Sam Cabel and Bonnell had a fight. It must have been a big one to make Cabel tell a commission earner like Bonnell to take his business elsewhere. Maybe it was also big enough to make Bonnell come back here with a gun."

She stared at me with the question in her grey-green eyes. I let the question pass, slipped the letter back into the file and opened the E-H drawer. If Sam Cabel had ever considered taking his troubles to me he had not bothered stating his intentions on paper. So I discarded the possibility that Cabel might have written me a letter which I had not received.

I stooped, pulled open the I-O drawer, and removed the paper-board file which had been assigned to Roger P. Millhaven. There was not much in it, only the carbon copy of a letter the agent had written to Millhaven. It read:

Dear Mr. Millhaven:

I would like in all sincerity to express my regrets for the actions of my former client, Paul Bonnell. I say "former' client because I have just notified Mr. Bonnell that his business is no longer wanted by my organization.

If you desire to contest Bonnell's claim to the sole ownership of "Sing Not At Dawn." I shall be glad to testify that it was your work, not Bonnell's, which developed the script to its epic proportions. Too, I will employ a reputable private detective (Clancy Hatch has been recommended) to help secure evidence in your behalf.

Sincerely yours,
Samuel D. Cabel.

I SLIPPED the folder back into the drawer and looked at Nora.

"Ever hear of a script called *Sing Not At Dawn?*"

"Only rumors," Nora said. "Magnar Studios bought it, but they haven't released any publicity on it yet."

"Much money involved?"

"Not much. Only a hundred and ten thousand."

I closed my eyes and considered that sum against the checks I received for my epics. There was a slight difference. You'd hardly notice it after you bought your first two yachts.

"This Bonnell lad," I said, "seems to be a rather enterprising character. He probably dreamed up a once-in-a-lifetime story idea, but being a hack he couldn't handle it. He got Roger Millhaven to help him, and when the script was finished Bonnell registered it with the Guild under his own name. Millhaven was left out in the cold."

Nora said, "Bonnell couldn't get away with that."

"Why couldn't he?"

"Because Sam Cabel undoubtedly sat in on their story conferences. Cabel could testify that Millhaven was part owner of the script."

"Sam Cabel," I said, "is dead."

"But where does Monte Casslon come into this?"

"You ask the cutest questions, honey. I don't know." I rubbed my handkerchief on the file cabinet where I might have accidently touched it. "Neither do I know why Cabel didn't follow through with his plan to get in touch with me."

Nora had nice legs and a nice shape and a beautiful face. She also had brains.

"When the police see Cabel's letter in that file they'll believe he actually hired you."

"That's right," I told her. "They'll also learn that Millhaven paid me a thousand dollars to drop the case. They won't believe that I wasn't on it in the first place. Which puts me right in the middle of things."

Nora made a funny sound in her throat. "But, Clancy, what are we going to do?"

"You are doing nothing. This is my worry, honey, and you're going back to your office where you belong."

She didn't want to. I ushered her to the door of the dead man's inner sanctum and closed it after her. Then I turned and stared at the room. Nothing had changed. The setting sun was still slanting its diffused rays through the open window and the blood was still on the desk top and the dead man was still dead.

I had seen all there was to see in that office but I didn't want to leave. There was a strange sort of fascination in looking at the trap you've walked into and knowing you could walk right out of it. But you couldn't escape.

Sam Cabel was dead. He could no longer testify against the man who had stolen fifty-five thousand dollars worth of literary property. But Roger Millhaven, if he was still among the living, could testify against Bonnell. I wondered if I should see Millhaven first or have a friendly little chat with Paul Bonnell. I couldn't make up my mind.

I used my handkerchief on the doorknob and frame. I opened the door and walked into the gathering gloom of the outer office. I saw the legs first, but I didn't see them protruding beyond the far side of the receptionist's desk until I almost tripped over them. It was careless of me.

I stopped, and while I was still staring at the legs something swished behind my head. I bent over the legs without wanting to, but I could no longer see them. Everything had gone black.

I heard that gentle sighing sound again, and fragments of light exploded behind my eyes and were suddenly lost in darkness. I didn't even care.

IT TOOK me a million years to come awake. I wanted to keep sliding on through space, but a voice kept calling my name and trying to pull me back. When I opened my eyes it was Nora Heath bending over me.

"Are you always so hard to get awake?"

"Only when I'm around dark blondes," I told her. I rubbed the swelling lump behind my right ear but there was no blood. So I had been cut down by a sap.

There was an inch-long rip in the shoulder of Nora's dress, and her hair was disheveled. There was a faintly red bruise just over her left cheekbones.

"So you got it too," I said.

"I wasn't playing hide-and-seek behind that desk," she said angrily. "I was going toward the door when I thought I heard something behind me. I didn't get a chance to turn. That was when the sandman came."

I sat there on the floor and tried to figure it all out, and my brain felt about as active as a water-logged sponge. But it didn't take much effort to guess how it was, and I didn't like it.

The killer had shot Sam Cabel from across the street. He had waited until he was certain the sound of his shot had caused no alarm, and then he had started for Cabel's office. But in the meantime Nora and I had showed up. He had hidden in the outer office, sapped Nora and then waited until his chance came to rock me to sleep.

"Why did he take all that risk?" Nora wanted to know.

I didn't answer her. I wrapped my hand again in my handkerchief, went into the murdered man's private office. But the lethal bullet was still on the floor. So were all the letters in the file cabinet.

"Those letters could be used as evidence against Paul Bonnell," Nora said. She was trying to be helpful "If it was Bonnell, he'd have taken those letters, wouldn't he?"

My head ached and I told Nora about it, but she wasn't interested.

"Wouldn't he?" she pressed.

"That's how I'd put my money," I agreed. But there were too many other angles in this case, and none of them made sense. Why had Sam Cabel stated his intentions of hiring me and then failed to get in touch with me? Why had Roger Millhaven, who had been clipped out of his half interest in a hundred-thousand-dollar movie script, mailed me a thousand dollars to drop the Bonnell case which he thought I was working on? Where did Monte Casslon come into this? I could make with the questions but not with the answers.

"Let's get out of her," I said "We've got things to do."

Halfway across the outer office, the heavy object bumped against my hip. I reached into my coat pocket, and brought out the .45 automatic. I looked at Nora and cursed bitterly. I didn't have to tell her what that gun meant.

The murderer had seen Nora and me enter Sam Cabel's office. He had sapped me for no reason other than to plant the gun on me. And now my prints were on it.

A siren was moaning a few blocks away, and that sound abruptly cut off as the police car drew nearer. I pushed Nora out of the office, took a hurried wipe at the doorknob and frame. We avoided the elevator in favor of the stairway. We went down the stairs with the gun in my coat pocket bumping heavily against my hip.

We had just pulled away from the curb when the first police car swung in at the front of the building. I didn't crowd the traffic any as we got out of that neighborhood.

Nora said, "Can't you go any faster?" She was afraid and she didn't care if I knew it. Which kept us both on even terms.

Nora said, "Are you going to get rid of that gun?"

"How? Wipe off my prints and throw it down a sewer?"

"Yes—yes, that's it! You've got to do that, Clancy."

"For all I know," I said grimly, "this gun actually belongs to me. I've got one like it in my office or in my apartment. I don't know where I left it last. Whoever murdered Sam Cabel went out of his way to plant this gun on me. Maybe he also went out of his way to steal my gun in order to help tie the frame on me."

I swung off of Sunset into Vine, driving with one eye on the rear-view mirror.

"If this is my gun, and I throw it away, it'll be found sooner or later. Ballistics will prove it's the one that killed Sam Cabel, and the gun will be traced to me. I'm allergic to gas chambers, honey."

She had nothing more to say.

I DIDN'T know whether there was one car tailing me or two. I turned off Vine on Hollywood Boulevard, and only the grey convertible followed me. I turned on Cahuenga, but I didn't go far enough to pick up the freeway. I pulled in at the curb in front of a small men's clothing store, went inside, and bought a pair of gloves from a clerk who acted as if selling gloves in July was a daily routine. The grey convertible was still on my tail when I pulled away from the curb again.

I kicked up the speed a notch, swung back toward Hollywood Boulevard just as if I knew where I was going. I found a parking space just short of the boulevard, and we got out of the car. I didn't glance toward the convertible pulling in at the curb fifty feet behind us.

I took Nora's arm and swung her around the corner, walking fast.

I said, "We're being tailed. I'm going to leave you here, honey. Find some guy dressed about like me, and walk at his side. Give him a song and dance, if you have to, but stay with him. Walk three or four blocks up the street, then ditch him and come back to the car."

I ducked into the next open doorway, leaving Nora all alone with a bad case of

nerves. I could have picked a better place to hide than a ladies foundations store. A middle-aged woman with a shape that no girdle could mould came toward me, smiling.

"Something for you, sir?"

"I never wear them," I told her. I had to get out of this broad-windowed, brilliantly lighted room. I started walking toward the rear of the store with the stout woman trotting after me.

"If you're the building inspector or something . . . that is the ladies' dressing room, sir!"

I apologized politely. I tried the next door, and it opened into a stock room. We went inside. I ignored her rising suspicions.

"Nice place you've got here," I said. I kept my eyes moving. "Do you know Bill?"

"Who?"

"Bill."

"Do you mean Bill Worden?"

"Sure," I said. I decided that whoever was tailing us would be well up the street by now. "He's a swell guy, isn't he?" I said and walked out of the store.

The key was still in the ignition, just as I had expected it to be. Whoever it was tailing us was taking no chances on having to fumble with a key if we doubled back on him in a hurry. But if there was a title card in the car it would take more than my hasty glance to find it.

I stepped on the starter and swung the convertible into the boulevard's traffic. It took me two blocks to find a motorcycle cop, and I timed the corner signal just right. I went through the red light, heard the cop's sharp whistle and through the rear-view mirror saw him gun his cycle away from the curb. I pushed down hard on the gas pedal, and drove just like a native of Los Angeles. I had the gun wiped clean by the time I reached the next corner. I cut the wheel sharply, hit the brakes, reached through the open window and then sent the gun skidding into the sewer.

It was an interesting experiment in police psychology. The motorcycle cop was only a few yards behind me when I got the convertible in gear and gunned it around the corner. He could have caught me, and he clearly wanted to. But he was also curious about the sewer. I got away clean.

I left the convertible where I had found it, and was waiting behind the wheel of my car when Nora climbed in.

"Did you find you a man?"

Nora gave me an irritated glance. "Did you think I couldn't?"

"With what you've got, I never had a doubt," I said.

"We talked about the weather and things," Nora said. "Not being a private detective, he was very nice." We were coming into Beverly Hills. "What's this about us being followed?" she demanded.

"I lost him way back there, honey. He wasn't so hot."

She gave me a suspicious, half-angered glance. "Did you see who he was?"

I shrugged with more confidence than I felt. "Male or female, I wouldn't know. I never saw anything but the car. Whoever he was, I let you lead him around while I studied the ladies' underwear situation. I used to read catalogues, but now I go right into the stores like a big boy. Besides I had to get rid of that gun. I threw it into a sewer drain."

She swung toward me, startled. "Here in Hollywood! Someone might have seen you."

I told her that I had considered that possibility.

CHAPTER THREE

Meet Mrs. Murder

ROGER MILLHAVEN'S house was a small modernistic structure sitting high on a terraced hill that footed the Santa Monica mountains. It had broad picture windows and a flat shed-type roof, and seemed to be holding its breath to keep from sliding down into the canyon it overlooked. Pampas grass flared on the hillside among manzanita and scrub oak, and beyond the canyon's mouth the city pointed its fingers toward the darkening sky.

I punched the button, and Millhaven opened the door. I told him my name, and he accepted it with attentive gravity. The name of Clancy Hatch could have meant everything to him or nothing.

He led us down a short hallway and into a living room with walls of polished knotty pine. There was a lot of nice comfortable furniture that would not show the wear if a man was as carelessly awkward as men are. A large Indian rug centered the floor.

Millhaven lit a cigar and offered us a drink.

"Maybe you won't want me to drink your whiskey after you've heard my business," I said.

His smile was slow and careful. "Are all detectives as sinister by nature?" he asked.

"I didn't tell you I was a detective, Mr. Millhaven."

"I'm familiar with your name," he said. He spoke it as a matter of fact, but it was noncommittal. He was a short and rather round man, with crisp hair that was beginning to show its first grey. There was a trace of sadness in his eyes, the sadness of a man who has lived too long with his own thoughts.

I said, "This morning I received your check for a thousand dollars, Mr. Millhaven. Also your letter explaining that the money was in payment for my agreement to drop the Bonnell case."

He nodded. He didn't say anything. Sitting there in that huge overstuffed chair, he looked no more subtle or harmful than a kewpie doll. I knew a little old lady once who gave that identical impression when the jury found her guilty of committing three particularly nasty murders.

"Your letter," I said, "stressed the fact that you and I had reached our agreement over the telephone." I reached for my pipe, filled it. "Just when did you have your talk with me, Mr. Millhaven?"

"Why, it was four days ago, wasn't it?" Then he bent forward a little in his chair. "You should remember. It was about four o'clock, on Thursday. . . ."

"At four o'clock last Thursday," I said, "I was in San Bernardino on a tip about a loan skip artist. It was a bum tip, Mr. Millhaven."

The frown deepened between his eyes. "Then it was someone else that I talked to. But he answered to your name."

I didn't reply to that one. No reply was called for. Someone had sent me chasing my nose to San Bernardino and had borrowed my office and name to carry on his own business.

Millhaven said, "Thursday morning a man who identified himself as you telephoned me and said he had been hired to investigate the Paul Bonnell affair. He wanted to ask me some questions, but I told him I would not talk until I had more proof of his identity than what he had offered over the phone. He asked me to phone him at his—at your office at four o'clock. I did, and we came to our agreement that he would drop the Bonnell case. If it wasn't you I spoke to, then who was it?"

I didn't know. I let his question pass. I said, "Why do you refuse to contest Bonnell's claim to that script you helped him develop. Dropping fifty thousand dollars without a fight isn't my idea of good business."

He spoke slowly, quietly. "I think Miss Heath can tell you that I've always had a reputation of being a poor mixer. It was a complex that kept me from feeling at ease among other people. I tried, but I couldn't help myself.

"One day I ran into the agent, Sam Cabel, and he introduced me to Paul Bonnell. Bonnell was the kind who never knew a stranger. He was discussing a big idea he had, and I offered a suggestion or two. Before long he was coming up here for conferences, and afterwards we would go some place for a nightcap. Bonnell was good for me; he drew me out of myself. In a way, he put me on my feet, and one day he introduced me to a certain young lady who is going to be my wife soon. I wouldn't have Janice if Paul Bonnell hadn't laughed and kidded me out of my inferiority complex."

"And because of that you're willing to forget the fifty grand Bonnell cheated you out of?"

Millhaven nodded. "Having Paul claim sole ownership of that script was hard to take. I didn't care so much about the money as I did about losing his friendship. No, I won't contest his claim. He's on the top now, but he won't stay there long. Hollywood will expect Paul to produce another *Sing Not At Dawn*, and he can't do it. Once he hits the skids, he'll go clear to the bottom. He'll never come

back because Hollywood will never forget his one big hit. Everything he does will be measured by that one script, and it will ruin him. That will be his punishment."

I took a firm grip on my pot-bowl pipe. "Sam Cabel has been murdered." I waited, studying his expression, but it didn't tell me anything. He seemed to have drawn himself into a shell.

"If I were you," I said, "I'd start hoping the police won't believe your story. If you manage to sell them on it, they might think you were so determined to let Paul Bonnell drown in his own sins that you'd murder Sam Cabel just to keep Bonnell from being investigated for literary theft."

We left him sitting there in the pine-paneled room. In that large chair he looked small and pitifully old.

PAUL BONNELL didn't live in a home on a mountain, but he had no reason to be ashamed of that. His house was a California stucco, with a porch and sun deck overlooking the beach at Santa Monica. There were palms along the sides, and a flagstone-floored patio was tucked inside the curving arms of a tall adobe brick wall. The roof was red tile. The crushed stone driveway led to a basement garage.

I tugged experimentally on a hand-woven cord hanging near the door, and the chimes inside were as rich and mellow as those of a church. It made me feel poor just listening to them.

I tugged the cord again and decided Paul Bonnell wasn't so important. The chimes played only one tune.

The woman who opened the door could not have been over thirty. She was tall, and the clinging aquamarine house pyjamas she wore didn't hurt her figure. She had hair that was as much red as it was brown, and her mouth was wide and soft-lipped.

"I'm Mrs. Bonnell," she said. Her voice was soft and faintly throaty, with music in it. "I believe my husband is lying down, Mr. Hatch. I'd rather not disturb him. Can I help you?"

She made the question sound very interesting. "I'm afraid only your husband can handle this matter, Mrs. Bonnell," I said. I showed her my card.

She opened the door wider, and that was our invitation to come in. She led us through an archway, into a broad, well-lighted room.

Rita Bonnell motioned us to sit down and then moved absently to the huge stone fireplace. She watched us a moment in agitated silence.

"I'm afraid I'll have to ask what business a private detective has with my husband," she said finally.

I didn't want to answer that one. She was a nice kid. I didn't want to see her hurt. I wanted to tuck her into my pocket and shield her from what was coming. I let her have it as easy as I could. But there's little you can do to soften murder.

I said, "I'm trying to make a way out for you, Mrs. Bonnell." Then I realized how far out on a limb I was about to push myself. "What kind of a car do you own?"

"A Buick convertible. Grey." Anxiety was in her eyes. She asked quickly, "Was Paul in an accident today?"

"Did he have the car out this afternoon?"

"Why . . . yes."

"Nobody else used it?"

She shook her head. "Only Paul. Mr. Hatch, if he had an accident—"

I said bluntly, "Mrs. Bonnell, this might turn into something unpleasant. Why don't you call your husband for me and then go out for a walk."

Rita Bonnell eyed me a long moment, silently. Then he mouth tightened and she said firmly. "Mr. Hatch, I thank you for trying to—to consider me. But if my husband is in any trouble I'm going to be be here to help him all I can. Now please state your business and I'll go get Paul."

I let her have it straight. "It's about the *Sing Not At Dawn* script which your husband developed with the help of Roger Millhaven. Your husband cut Millhaven out of his share of the profits—a fifty-thousand-dollar literary theft. Sam Cabel was your husband's agent, and he threatened to testify and give evidence to prove your husband's guilt. This afternoon Sam Cabel was murdered."

Her face whitened. "Paul couldn't do such a thing," she said quietly. She

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"She ran out, hoping to escape him," Big Dan said. "Unfortunately, he chased her."

DEAF, DUMB, AND DEADLY!

The rottenness was there all the time, but Big Dan Malloy never saw it. . . . He saw only the dream — the wide streets, the gracious homes, the playgrounds, the parks. . . . And when murder brought the great political machine he had built crashing down about him, there was only one course left for Big Dan: To build, with bullets, a new and mightier machine . . . and then trace, with his own ebbing life's blood, a new party line for free men to follow!

CHAPTER ONE

Goon Squad

THEY KNEW Dan would want a band. There were five in the line of march. They knew he would want his friends to lift a parting cup. Drinks were free on the levee that day. Ignoring the funeral cars his mourners

Dynamic Novel of Bullet Politics

By DAY KEENE

insisted on walking. Beggars walked beside bankers. Bricklayers walked beside gamblers. Housewives walked beside painted dance-hall girls. One reporter clocked the procession. It took it two hours to pass a given point. Rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief, doctor, lawyer, merchant, chief—all had one thing in common: all of them had lost a friend.

The life of Big Dan Malloy? It was nothing to write about. Big city bosses are a dime a dozen. But his death was another matter.

The beginning of the end, as far as Malloy was concerned, came shortly after midnight on the morning of the seventeenth. The night was warm and lush with the promise of spring. Phelpsburg on the Bluff lay dark and silent in stolid slumber. Not so Phelpsburg under the Bluff. Here the night was still young and the levee lay sprawled like a laughing wanton, drunk with laughter and music and song, one light-jeweled arm snugging the river bank. Between them the Valley, that row on row of ancient tenements and shacks, slept fitfully, as best it could.

The few who saw the car described it as large and black and official looking. It parked in front of 421 and three men got out and entered the building. A moment later the leader of the trio rapped firmly on a door.

Roused from slumber the occupant of the flat started nervously. The icy hand of fear reached for his heart and squeezed it. Then he remembered, and smiled. This wasn't the old country. This was America where a man could go to sleep secure in the knowledge that the worst a midnight rap on his door could mean would be a bill collector. And he owed no man a penny.

He padded bare-footed to the door and opened it and the three big men crowded into the tiny living room. "Your name Finklebaum?" the leader of the trio demanded.

Slightly puzzled, the tailor admitted his identity. Then he thought he recognized his callers. They were undoubtedly from the police, seeking information concerning the accident to which he had been the only witness. "I'll light a light," he offered.

One of the men stopped him. "Never mind a light. On your way home from work tonight you witnessed an accident on the corner of Front Street and Gale?"

The little tailor grew voluble. "Did I witness an accident? Such reckless driving I hope I never see again. Drunk or crazy the man at the wheel was. Eighty miles an hour he must have been going. He ran right over the little boy and didn't even stop."

The leader of the trio tapped his chest. "Never mind that. We know what happened. Describe the car."

Finklebaum did so accurately.

"And the man at the wheel?"

The tailor was pleased to oblige.

"And the license number?"

Finklebaum knew that, too. He had liked little Marty, the newsboy, and had taken special care the information he was able to give the police was accurate. Half apologetically, he added: "But all this I told the officer on the beat. It was a big blue car with—"

One of the three men stopped him. "You saw it all wrong, chum, see? It wasn't a big blue car. It was a small red coupe with a woman at the wheel. And the license didn't begin with a one. It began with a five or a six. You aren't quite certain which."

The tailor began a protest. "But I am. With my own eyes—"

A hard slap in the mouth stopped him. "Wise up, chum. *It wasn't a big blue car. It was a small red coupe.*"

TEARS smarting his eyes, Finklebaum stuck to his guns. Someone had given the officers wrong information. If they looked for a small red coupe with a woman at the wheel they would never find the man who had killed Marty. "Begging your pardon," he insisted, "it was a big blue—"

A second blow, this time a clenched fist, cut him short. He dropped to his knees, got back to his feet again, and a third blow sent him sprawling on the floor.

In the bedroom Mrs. Finklebaum woke up. "Is anything wrong, papa?" she called.

Terror entered the tailor's heart. He knew now what the three men wanted. They hadn't called for the truth. This

was what was called a fix. But mama musn't be brought into the picture. "Go to sleep, mama," he called from the floor. "I'm only getting a drink of water."

She sighed and the bed springs squeaked as she turned over and dropped off to sleep again.

"That's playing it smart," the leader of the trio said. "You discussed the accident with your wife?"

"No," Finklebaum lied. "Not one word to mama did I say."

"Fine." The big man, a grotesque figure in the half light of the shabby room, kicked him in the groin. "Now repeat the description of the car you saw."

Writhing in agony the tailor gasped, "It was a small red coupe with a woman at the wheel. The license began with a five or a six. I'm not quite certain which." Mentally he prayed his God would forgive him such a lie. But in the morning he would make it right. In the morning before he went to work he would do down to Big Dan Malloy's clubhouse and tell Malloy the whole thing. It didn't matter to Big Dan if you were Irish, Polish, or Jewish. Big Dan was the working man's friend. If you couldn't get a job he found you one. If you needed money he lent you some at no interest. If you needed coal he sent it, and always at Thanksgiving and Christmas there were big baskets of food for the poor. No matter what your trouble was, Malloy would help you with it. All you had to do in exchange was vote for the good people he told you to.

Big Dan wouldn't stand for this for a minute. If these men were police, he'd have their shields. If they weren't police, he could take care of that, too. Big Dan Malloy was a man like Abraham Lincoln, or maybe George Washington. He was the father of the Valley.

The leader of the trio seemed to read the tailor's mind. "And if you are thinking of blatting to Big Dan, I wouldn't. Big Dan sent us, see?"

He emphasized the remark with another kick to the pit of the prone man's stomach and the three men left the apartment closing the door quietly behind them. The coroner was, later, to give as his official opinion that the deceased, one Jacob Finklebaum, late resident of 421 Front Street, had died of an internal hemorrhage caused by a severe beating at the hand or hands of a party or parties unknown.

MORNING was hot and sour in Malloy's mouth when he awakened. He lay long minutes staring at the ceiling of his modest bedroom wondering why he ever combined lobster and champagne. He didn't like either of them. Both gave him indigestion. It all just went to show a man what could happen to him when he got out of his class. To hell with Reardon. Once the election was over and the mayoralty in the bag the other boys could have the uptown high life. He'd stick to ham hocks and beer. An evening at Katie's was his speed. He glowed as he thought of her. He ought to marry Kate. He really should. Neither of them was growing any younger. Perhaps he would marry her when the election was over.

A big man, weighing close to two hundred pounds, he swung his feet to the floor, and hoisting his bulk onto them, padded across the floor to the window and stood staring out at teeming Front Street. It still looked much as it had when he had been a boy. The first World War had interfered with his plans. Then the depression. Then World War II. But it wouldn't be much longer now. He couldn't reform the world. He had no intention of trying. But he could rebuild the Valley, and a model housing development was the main plank of Reardon's platform. At last he had found one of the silk-stocking crowd who agreed with him that the tenements and shacks should be torn down and replaced with model houses grouped around a park containing a playground and a swimming pool.

He smiled briefly, then remembered Marty. Marty would never live in one of the new houses, swim in the new pool. Some son had run him down. Kramer should have something on it.

Dialing Central Bureau he told the operator, "This is Dan Malloy. Put me through to the chief." Kramer said he had a head like a boil and wanted to know how *he* felt.

"Lousy," Malloy admitted. "But that's neither here nor there. About that hit-and-run last night, Jack."

A moment of silence followed; then

Kramer said, "Oh. You mean that news kid over on the corner of Gale." A second, shorter pause followed. "We're working on it, Dan. I have the description of the car right here somewhere. It was a small red coupe with a woman at the wheel. And the witness thinks that the license began with either a five or a six."

"Well, get off your rear end and get on it," Malloy growled. "No one can run down one of my people and get away with it."

He banged up the receiver and rinsed the sour taste from his mouth with an ounce of rye. He must remember to tell Kelly he would guarantee the funeral expenses, also to find out how Marty's mother was fixed. She probably wasn't. In that case he would have to see Reardon about a small job in the city hall for her.

Still damning all hit-and-run drivers, he dressed carefully and padded out into the living room. Shelly and Blyth were playing double solitare as they waited for him. Both men wanted to know how he felt.

He lied that he felt fine.

The usual crowd was waiting in the foyer of the clubhouse. A local wag had once boasted it wasn't as large as the wigwam of Tammany Hall but it did almost as much business. If you wanted to do business in Phelpsburg either on or under the bluff you saw Dan Malloy first. He had, a reporter once estimated, grafted three million dollars in his day. But little of it had stuck to his fingers. He had always his people to consider. If he scraped fifty thousand dollars off the top of a paving contract there were that many more tons of coal and baskets of food and clothing distributed in the Valley that winter.

The morning was run of the mill. Mrs. Thompson's boy Phil was in the pokey again and if Mr. Malloy would please get him out she promised he would go straight. The teaching appointment hadn't come through for Sally Frazer despite the fact that her name stood high on the list. Could he get Mike Toole a job if Mike promised to stay sober? Jenny Goetz had run away again and her frantic mother and father were afraid she was in one of the joints on the levee. Sweet little Mrs. Best had written the Veteran's Administration time and time again about Harry's insurance. What did he advise her to do?

He made his decisions swiftly. Phil belonged in jail and he would stay there. Sally's teaching appointment would be in the mail before nightfall. The Faber Plant on the river needed a stationary engineer. All Mike had to do was go down and say Dan sent him. But God help him if he got drunk on the job again. If Jenny was in one of the joints on the levee she would be home in two hours, but if she was as man-crazy as she appeared to be the thing to do was get her married off. He knew just whom to wire in the Veteran's Administration but until the affair was straightened out Mrs. Best had better accept a small loan of, say a hundred dollars. Harry's kids had to eat, didn't they?

The small fry out of the way, he was allowing himself his first real drink of the day when the commotion in the outer hall began.

"Just a nosy reporter," Blyth informed him. "Tom is throwing him out on his ear."

MALLOY didn't like reporters. They said nasty things about him. They didn't understand what he was trying to do. They didn't realize that when a man couldn't buck a river the best thing to do was to swim along with it, diverting as much life-giving water as he could. Nine days out of ten he would have shrugged. This morning, thinking of Marty, he ordered, "Nix. Bring him in here. Maybe he has something on that hit-and-run up on Front and Gale."

Blyth hesitated, did as he was told.

The reporter proved to be Carson, a cocky leg man from the *News-Tribune*. He came in straightening his coat and giving Shelly dirty looks. "You and your gorillas," he scowled at Malloy. Standing between Blyth and Shelly, both big men, he looked like a ruffled fighting bantam cock. "Come on. Break down, Dan. Give. Why are you beating the tom-tom for Reardon? Don't tell me that you've fallen for that crook's model housing development plank?"

Malloy kept his temper with an effort as he pointed out that slum clearance was nothing new and that the Valley had been due for a renovation for some time.

"Sure," Carson agreed. "But surely you're not so naive that you don't know

that Reardon and his clique," he named them on his fingers, "Morris the labor leader, Peters the states attorney, and Chief of Police Jack Kramer, *are* the Faber Prefabricating Company and they only want Reardon elected so they'll get the contract."

Shelly massaged his right fist. "I don't believe you. But if what you just said was so—so what?"

"So," Carson answered him hotly, "neither my paper nor I believe in model housing developments where the floors won't even hold an ice box and you can throw baseballs through the walls. Smart up, Dan. They're the same gang that built those G. I. houses across the river. They clipped the poor guys for plenty. Now the ceilings are beginning to sag, rain trickles through the roofs, and the plumbing won't work in half of them."

Looking at Malloy, Blyth said, "He's nuts. You know how reporters are. All the time trying to stir up a scandal."

Big Dan was inclined to agree with him. But of all the reporters in Phelpsburg he liked Carson best. Carson was a Valley boy. More, he was a fighter. "Can you prove what you've said?" he asked him.

"Can you prove the moon isn't made of green cheese?" the reporter retorted.

"You know it isn't. So do I. But I can't *prove it.*"

Malloy motioned him out and both Blyth and Shelly hastened to assist him.

"Besides," the reporter had the last word from the door, "what good is proof going to do the taxpayers after the city has voted a fifty-million-dollar bond issue, Reardon and his crowd have put thirty of it in their pockets, and the poor folks here in the Valley have exchanged one rat trap for another?"

The door snicked solidly behind him and Malloy returned to his drink. Blyth and Shelly were good boys. Both had been with him for years. Both kept their ears close to the ground. They would have heard some rumors if Reardon and Morris and Peters and Kramer had really bought out the Faber company. It was a manufactured story, a ten-day newspaper sensation thought up to discredit Reardon's campaign. None of the four men was above skimming a little graft off the top of a deal, but none of them would dare to give his people the same kind of a raw deal the Faber campany had given the veterans across the river. The government was still investigating that one.

He poured a second drink. His village would be white and solidly built. There would be lawns between the houses. There would be a big community hall, a swimming pool, a playground, and a spacious park with a statue of St. George slaying a dragon right smack in the middle of it. He chuckled at the thought of St. George. If it hadn't been for the statue of St. George slaying a dragon that Katie had taken him to see when both of them had been kids, he would probably still be a longshoreman, a bouncer in a dive, or a muscle man for some union. He had been all three in his time. But the statue had stayed in his mind. Every man had his dragon. The rickety firetrap that was the Valley was his. And this time he would slay it. This time he was on the right horse. Despite what Carson said, Reardon was a good man. He came from one of the best families in the city. He had Phelpsburg's best interests at heart.

Opening his inner door to see what was detaining the boys he saw them leading a weeping woman down the outer stairs. On the walk, Shelly gave her some money.

When they returned a few minutes later with a traction-company official interested in obtaining a new franchise, Malloy postponed their discussion to ask what Mrs. Finklebaum had wanted.

Shelly said, "Her husband Jake got himself beat up last night and died of heart failure or something. I gave her fifty dollars and told her we'd take care of the funeral expenses."

Making a mental note to look into the matter later, Malloy nodded his approval and turned to the traction-company official. That individual wanted to know what the good word was.

"Vote for Reardon," Big Dan told him soberly.

CHAPTER TWO

Katie Was a Lady

THE RED neon sign in front spelled "Katie's."

A few yards from the river, it had been

a waterfront saloon for years. Deep, comfortable, leather booths lined one entire long wall. A battered mahogany bar took up a good half of the other wall. All else was in keeping. An unabashed plumb nude hung over the cash register between two gigantic stuffed channel catfish. A ship's bell chimed the watches. The walls were covered with pictures of river celebrities ranging from Mike Fink to the captain of the Robert E. Lee. The only radical changes Katie Bishop had made were the sign, a small dance floor, a band, and a singer or two, as a come-on for the monied trade. She served man-sized drinks, good food, and plenty of it. The innovation had been a success from the start. Katie had all the business she could care for.

The club was on the levee but no rough stuff was tolerated. Katie saw to that. A tall, buxom, red-haired woman, she could lay out an obnoxious drunk with either her fist or her tongue. Not that she had to, though. Everyone on the levee knew she belonged to Big Dan Malloy. The back booth was his second office.

River fog swirling in the door behind them, Malloy, followed by Blyth and Shelly, came in shortly after eight. Big Dan was both tired and hungry. It had been a hard day and a long one.

Katie met them, smiling, at the door. "Another day, another dollar."

Blyth and Shelly went directly to the bar.

"Anyway, another day," Big Dan admitted. He felt depressed. He had felt depressed all day but didn't know exactly why. "The other boys show up yet?"

"They're in the back booth." Katie told him. She hesitated, adding, "You sure know what you're doing, Dan? I don't like that uptown crowd."

He wanted to know why. She couldn't tell him.

"I just don't, that's all."

He chucked her under the chin. "A woman's intuition, eh?" Sighing, he walked on to the back booth. First Carson, and now Katie.

The four men greeted him boisterously. The levee and the Valley voted as Big Dan told them to. And the levee and Valley vote decided any election.

Reardon shook hands with Dan limply. "I still feel like hell," he admitted.

"You should," Malloy said frankly. "What happened to you last night?"

The candidate for mayor grinned. "What did you expect me to do? Make a speech to that D.A.R. crowd in the condition I was in? I took a powder and went down to Larry's Turkish Bath." He picked up his drink with thin fingers that shook slightly. "Anyway why should I make speeches with Honest Dan Malloy to sell me to the city?"

State's Attorney Peters and Chief of Police Kramer both shook hands. Crowded into the back booth, Morris merely grinned, "Hi, Dan. Looks like things are coming our way at last, eh?"

Malloy grunted it seemed so and dropped down across from Reardon. Katie served him herself, a heaping plate of corned beef and cabbage and a foaming stein of beer. Eating as he talked, Malloy wanted to know if Kramer had made any progress in tracking down the hit-and-run driver who had murdered Marty. Kramer reported they were still searching for the car, a small red coupe driven by a woman.

Malloy pointed out, "You knew that much this morning." Sipping the foam from his beer he added, "And what's this I hear about Jake Finklebaum being beaten up so bad he died? You get anything on that yet?"

Kramer said rather testily, "Not yet. Hell, give me time, Dan. With a mayoralty campaign in its last stages, do we have to sit here and talk about a crippled news kid and a tailor that couldn't even talk good English."

"Why shouldn't we?" Malloy wanted to know. "They're our people."

Morris poured oil on the slightly troubled waters. "Come on now, boys. Cool down. Jack is doing his best. I know that he is, Dan. He'll crack both cases in a few days, but right now the important thing for us to think about is cinching the mayor's chair."

"That's right," Peters agreed. "We have a chance to give the people a decent administration for once and we mustn't allow anything to side-track us."

BIG DAN looked across the table at Reardon and suddenly wasn't so certain he was riding the right horse after all. He came from an old and a good

family, true. But the stock was wearing thin. He hadn't realized before how weak Reardon's chin really was. More, he drank far too much. And a man who needed a drink should never take one. It was his own inflexible rule.

Reardon finished his drink and ordered another round. Peters reported he had spoken before the Bar Association that afternoon and he thought they could count on most of the lawyers in town. Morris boasted he had labor solidly back of Reardon. The Valley development alone would assure two thousand men full dinner pails for the next five years. He continued before Malloy could speak, "And none of that prefabricated junk like that Faber outfit put out. This is going to be a development that Phelpsburg can be proud of. Good, solid houses with grass between them and a swimming pool and playgrounds for the kids."

Malloy felt much better. Carson and Katie were wrong. These men, with the exception of Kramer, were from up on the bluff but they felt the same way about the Valley that he did.

The lights dimmed for a specialty number and a slim little thing in a white evening gown that seemed to have difficulty clinging to her bosom began a torch song. Her voice was low and throaty but her face in the amber spot was somehow frightened. From time to time as she sang she glanced at the booth where the five men were sitting.

Experienced in such matters Malloy thought, "The kid's in a jam of some kind. I'll be seeing her one of these mornings." She looked like one of the Bessemer girls but he couldn't be certain. Girls changed so much more than boys did.

Reardon licked his lips. "A tasty dish. A very tasty dish indeed."

Peters nudged him in the ribs. Kramer said sharply, "Shut up."

No fool, Malloy saw the side play but did not understand it. He did know he was suddenly sick of the company he was keeping. He wanted to be alone. Perhaps alone with Katie. His depressed mood had returned. Tomorrow he would pick up the burden again but tonight he wanted to be alone.

His sharp eyes picked out Blyth and Shelly at the bar. If he excused himself to go to the men's room, then slipped out the kitchen door, perhaps he could shake them, too. They were good boys but he got tired of having them always at his heels.

Morris was pointing out that the twenty-third ward would be their weakest spot and to that end he had arranged for Reardon to wind up his speaking campaign at a rally there Friday night when Malloy hoisted himself to his feet and mumbled something about being back in a moment.

The only light was the spot on the singing girl. Neither Blyth nor Shelly saw him leave. The others expected him back. Feeling slightly like a truant school boy, he paused in the kitchen door to glance back at the singing girl. He wished he knew why she was so frightened and of what. He would make a point to find out in the morning.

The cook wanted to know the good word.

"Vote for Reardon," Malloy told him. But he no longer said it with conviction. He no longer was so certain he was right. There was something unwholesome about the man. Perhaps the housing development plank *had* blinded him. Perhaps it wouldn't do any harm to have another talk with Carson.

Away from the river there was no fog, the night was warm. He knew everyone on the levee. Everyone on the levee knew him. It was, "Good evening, Dan," and, "Hello, Joe. How are Mable and the twins?" from one block to another.

He bought a flower from old Jennie, the blind woman who peddled wilted gardenias in the bars, gave a bum a quarter, and Marty's successor a dollar.

The youth, a bright-eyed urchin, wanted to know if the cops had got the guy who had killed Marty yet.

"The dame," Malloy corrected.

"Don't give me that," the youth told him. "I hear it was a guy in a blue car on Murphy's original report but someone made him eat the book."

Murphy was the officer on the beat. 'Eating the book' was swearing to false testimony. His eyes thoughtful, Malloy asked the youth if he knew the name of the witness from whom Murphy had obtained his description.

"Yeah," the youth said. "It was Jake Finklebaum. Him that tripped over a flock of fists last night." Then as if fearful he had said too much he crossed the street to sell a paper to a non-existent customer.

HIS EYES even more thoughtful, Malloy resumed his stroll, a sour taste in his mouth. He was out of the levee and in the Valley now. Whole families clustered against the heat on dingy front stoops and rusted fire escapes. All greeted him as usual but he either imagined it or the greetings lacked their usual cordiality. He decided it wasn't his imagination. He knew the Valley. He knew it as a physician knows a patient's pulse, a lover his mistress' heart beat. *Something was wrong.*

Turning off Gale he walked up Front Street until he came to the door he was seeking. Dry-eyed, too grief-striken to cry, Mrs. Finklebaum opened the door but didn't invite him in.

Hat in hand, Malloy told her, "I can't tell you how sorry I am, Mrs. Finklebaum."

"I'm sorry, too," she said stolidly. Fear replaced the grief in her eyes. "Thanks for the money, Mr. Malloy. Maybe now you better go." She attempted to close the door in his face.

Malloy blocked the attempt with his foot. "Now wait a minute, Mrs. Finklebaum. I liked Jake. I think he liked me. And I want to get to the bottom of this."

"Yes?" Open disbelief spread across her face. "Then instead of coming here why don't you find the three big men in the black car."

This time she would not be denied. She closed the door and Malloy had the distinct impression that she spat. He rapped on the door across the hall and a hulking laborer in his undershirt and dangling suspenders opened it.

"Look, my name is Malloy," Malloy introduced himself. "I want to know more about Jake's death, but Mrs. Finklebaum seems afraid to talk to me. How about you? What can you tell me?"

From somewhere inside the flat a woman's voice shrilled, "You keep your big mouth shut, John. We don't know nothing about it."

The man in the doorway shrugged. "You heard the missus."

It had been a long time since Malloy had used force. But he still could if he had to. One big hand grasped the front of the man's undershirt and lifted him off balance while his other fist raised like a sledge. "Talk, damn you! What's this about three big men in a black car? What did they do?"

"That's as much as I know," the other man protested. "Although some of the neighbors who seen it said that it looked official. Now lemme alone. I don't want no trouble with the cops."

Malloy shook him. "Keep talking."

"Honest, Mr. Malloy. That's all I know. Except they say it concerned some accident Jake saw on his way home from work."

Malloy lowered him to the floor and the man promptly closed the door leaving him alone in the shabby hall that smelled of stale grease and countless thousands of skillets of fried onions. Somehow suddenly weary, feeling old and baffled for one of the few times in his life, Malloy padded down the uncarpeted hall and stairs to the street.

In the yellow pool formed by the nearest street lamp a pigtailed girl was playing sky-blue by herself with a battered tin can cover for a lager.

". . . some of the neighbors who seen it said that it looked official."

That could mean much or nothing. There were a lot of black cars in Phelpsburg. Any one of them large enough could look like the big black cars the plainclothes boys rode in. And none of the boys on the force had any reason to want to beat up Finklebaum. Or had they? What if Murphy had been forced to eat the book?

His anger rising, he thought of phoning Kramer at Katie's and decided against it. Jack was a good politician but a lousy policeman. The thing to do was to talk to Murphy himself. If Murphy had taken a bribe to cover someone he'd get it out of him.

He walked slowly back down Front Street looking for the patrolman. He had walked less than a block when the rising hackles on his neck told him he was being followed, had probably been followed from the Finklebaum apartment. He stopped to

light a cigar and looked behind him. No particular man or woman stood out from the crowd on the walk or the chattering groups on the tenement streets. He couldn't explain how he knew he was being followed. But he did.

For a moment he regretted having given Blyth and Shelly the slip. No man could build a machine like his without making enemies. A lot of people liked him. But there were those who didn't, racketeers whom he'd had run out of town, fancy men whose stock in trade had been locked up for clinical observation, disappointed contractors, cranks. Shrugging, he walked on. If trouble was brewing he could handle it.

Failing to find Murphy on Front Street, he returned to the call box on Gale. It was a few minutes of nine and the beat cop would have to make his pull on the hour.

It was a neighborhood of small stores between the Valley and the levee. Most of them were closed. The streets were dark. The sensation of being watched continued. Sudden suspicion filled his mind. Perhaps things were going on on the levee and in the Valley that he didn't know about. Blyth and Shelly were good boys but they weren't infallible. They couldn't be everywhere. Perhaps he had grown too confident. Perhaps he was sitting back of his desk too much. Perhaps his head had grown as fat as his paunch.

He was ashamed of the relief he felt when he caught sight of the glitter of brass buttons under a quarter-block-distant street light. The patrolmen came on slowly, trying store doors as he walked. But when he reached the call box it wasn't Murphy. It was Simpson, a relief man.

In answer to Malloy's question, he said he believed that Murphy must either be sick or drunk. At least he hadn't shown up at roll call. He did, however, know the patrolman's address.

"He lives in Room 310 at the Eagle Hotel," he informed Malloy. "He's had the same room for years."

Malloy thanked him, turned away, turned back. "About that hit-and-run on this corner last night, Simpson. I don't suppose you'd know anything about it?"

The patrolman tugged his note book from his hip pocket and scanned it in the light from the street lamp. "We've got orders to keep our eyes open for a small red coupe," he told Malloy, "with a license beginning with either a five or a six."

"Yes. I know all that," Malloy began, stopped as the patrolman added:

"But the only car I know of down here in the levee that answers that description belongs to Miss Bishop. And you know yourself, Mr. Malloy, that Miss Katie is a lady. She wouldn't run over no kid, then speed away at eighty miles an hour."

CHAPTER THREE

The Report

HIS FACE expressionless, Malloy thanked him and walked on. But his calm was all on the surface. This was beginning to smell like a frame. Katie did have a red coupe. He had purchased it for her himself. Its license number, if he recalled correctly, was 5-6332. But Katie seldom drove it, much preferring taxicabs. Most of the time the coupe stood out in back of the club used by any of her employees who cared to drive it.

If it had been Katie's coupe that had run down Marty it could explain a lot of things. It could explain the feeling of hostility he'd felt during his walk through the Valley. It could explain the black car that looked official, and Mrs. Finklebaum's acting as she had. It could also explain why Jack Kramer had made no progress on the case and why he had tried to dismiss it as immaterial. Out of mistaken loyalty to him Kramer was a big enough fool to try to snow such a thing under. He might well have sent three of his boys to 'talk' to Finklebaum and they had 'talked' to him too hard.

But it hadn't been Katie in the car. That much he knew. Drunk or sober she would have stopped. Besides, if the newsboy was right and Murphy had eaten the book, it wasn't a red coupe driven by a woman who had murdered Marty. It had been a man in a blue car.

Stopping under the street lamp on the corner of Water Street he took the newspaper from his pocket and skimmed through it until he found the story in a small box on an inside page. No smart

reporter, as yet, had ferreted out its possible connection with the tailor's death. In fact, the witness wasn't named. The story read:

> Shortly after ten o'clock last night Martin Geiger, 14, of 645 W. Olive Street was killed by a hit-and-run driver on the corner of Gale and Front Streets in the city's 44th motor fatality of the current year. Police Officer Thomas Murphy who questioned the only witness to the accident states that the murder car appears to have been a small red coupe driven by a blonde woman.

Folding the paper, Mallory returned it to his pocket and looked down Water Street toward Katie's neon sing. He wanted to talk to Katie, warn her to be on her guard. But he wanted to talk to Murphy first. Someone was doing something to someone. And in that case someone was certain to have been well paid.

The Eagle Hotel was less than three blocks away, on the semi-respectable edge of the tenderloin. A frail old man back of the desk peered over his glasses at Malloy and beamed.

"Mr. Malloy. This is a pleasure." He insisted on shaking hands. "And what can we do for you?"

Malloy asked if Tom Murphy was in his room and the old man consulted the key case.

"I believe that he is," he decided finally. "But I doubt if Mr. Murphy will be with us much longer." He turned back smiling "You've heard of his good luck?"

"No," Malloy admitted, "I haven't."

The old man ran on: "He was telling me just an hour or so ago. He came in, well, you know, not quite himself and when I asked if he wasn't on duty tonight he told me he intended to quit the force as a wealthy uncle of his in Canada had died and left him a large sum of money. In fact, he requested I try to get him a plane reservation for Montreal on a flight leaving in the morning."

"How nice," Malloy said quietly.

Ignoring the elevator he padded on up the stairs. Room 310 was in the rear of the hall next to the *EXIT* sign. Light shown over the transom but the only sound in the room was that of a man's rhythmic snoring. He tried the door. It was locked. But stepping out on the fire escape he found it extended under the open window.

Murphy, still fully dressed, was lying on his back blowing alcoholic bubbles at the ceiling. Raising the window as far as it would go, Malloy crawled through it into the room.

Before throwing himself on the bed, Murphy had automatically emptied his pockets. A half-filled pint bottle of whiskey stood guard on the dresser top over a heap of silver change and a handful of crumpled bills of ten and twenty-dollar denomination.

Smoothing them carefully, Malloy counted the wad. There was less than three hundred dollars. Either Murphy had sold out cheaply or he had only collected his first payment.

He shook the sleeping man. "Hey, you! Wake up!"

The patrolmen snored on. Wetting a turkish towel in the bathroom, Malloy slapped the man's face with it. Murphy groaned in his sleep, turned his head to escape the towel but continued to snore. Losing his patience, Malloy picked the man up bodily, carried him into the bathroom and, propping him under the shower with one hand turned on the cold water with the other.

Murphy came awake spluttering and fighting. Still holding him under the water, Malloy gave him the back of his free hand and then the palm. "Shut up and stay under there until you can talk. Then, by God, you're going to! I want to know who paid you how much to eat the book—and why."

Half drowned but comparatively sober, Murphy was finally allowed to stagger out of the shower and collapse on the edge of the bed. "You have me all wrong, Mr. Malloy," he whimpered. "Honest. I never ate no book. I don't know what you're talking about."

Malloy uncorked the pint and allowed him a short drink. "Don't give me that. You know better and so do I." He set the pint back in its nest of money. "Now start talking before I beat your face in."

The patrolman whimpered and hiccupped but refused to talk. Malloy knocked him flat on the bed then pulled him erect again.

"I mean it! Your own mother won't know it when I finish with you. Jake was a nice little guy that never did anyone a

harm. He thought this was a great country. He thought I was a great guy. Now he's dead and so is Marty." He slapped Murphy's face hard, then prompted, "You turned up at the corner of Front and Gale last night to make your pull and found Jake kneeling beside Marty. He told you a man in a blue car—"

"No," Murphy protested. "No."

"Yes," Malloy insisted. "And you wrote it down so on your report. But before you got to the station you destroyed your original report and made out a new one because someone got to you. I want to know who."

He lifted his fist again and Murphy's resistance caved. "No, don't hit me, Dan. Please. I'll talk." His rolling eyes chanced on the window and grew suddenly round and large and completely sober. "No!" he screamed. "Don't I—"

Later Malloy realized someone pulled the main fuse in the switch box in the hall. All he knew at the moment was the room had gone suddenly dark and a gun was bucketing in the window. Instinctively he hulled himself away from the man on the bed and flattened himself against the wall. It was over almost as suddenly as it had begun. In the intensified silence that followed there was a scrape of hurrying feet on the fire escape. Then doors on the hall began to open and a man's voice wanted to know:

"Where did those shots come from? And what the hell happened to the lights?"

Feeling in his pocket for a match, Malloy struck it and examined the man on the bed. The old desk clerk had been wrong. Murphy wasn't going anywhere. He would never tell anyone why he had eaten the book or who paid him how much to do so. Murphy was through with talking. . . .

THE HEAT WAVE had lasted too long. The rain had been too long denied. It fell now in a downpour that ran ankle deep in the streets of the levee and routed tenement dwellers from bed to put pans under their dripping ceilings.

Two o'clock became three. Three o'clock became four. Alone in Katie's apartment over the club, Big Dan Malloy finished one quart of whiskey and began on a second with no visible impairment of his physical or mental faculties. He seldom drank heavily. He had done so perhaps three or four times in his life.

From time to time Katie or Blyth or Shelly, who had resumed their guard in the hall, looked in to see if there was anything he wanted. There was. He wanted to know why Murphy had eaten the book, who had shot him to prevent him from talking, who had murdered Jake Finklebaum, and why whoever it was back of this thing had attempted to pin the hit-and-run on Katie.

He told Katie as much shortly after four.

"Well," she said dryly, "you won't find your answers in a bottle. You'd better sober up and begin to pull some wires. Jack has covered the shooting as best he could but the fact remains you were in Murphy's room. And you can imagine what the opposition papers are going to do to that one in the morning."

He knew as well as Katie did that he should be on his horse and riding. Downstairs in the back booth Kramer and Morris and Peters and Reardon were busy attempting to fix fences, make certain the shooting and the investigation certain to follow would in no way reflect on Reardon's mayoralty prospects. The machine could do it. But the machine was driverless without him.

He pulled Katie down on his lap. "Did anyone use your coupe last night?"

"I've told you I don't know," she told him. "They could have. It stands out there in back with the keys in the ignition most of the time. But if it was a blue car that ran Marty down where does my coupe come in?"

Malloy sighed. "Among a few other things, that's what I can't figure out." He was suddenly tired of fixing, of politics, of repairing other men's broken fences, of attempting to slay dragons that refused to be slain. Katie was warm and soft in his arms. Her hair was fragrant against his cheek. They had missed so much they might have had. "How would you like to chuck the whole thing?" he asked her. "You could sell the joint. I'll buy a small farm or plantation and we could maybe raise enough cotton or something to get by

on? And live like two human beings."

She said, "You've said that so many times, Dan," and he saw that she was crying.

"I mean it this time," he told her. "We'll get married and settle down. And maybe even have a kid or two."

Katie wanted to know when.

"Right after election," he promised.

She got to her feet, renewed her make-up and patted her hair into place. "I'll believe it when we take off. But right now I have to go down and police a barroom full of drunks."

Shelly's voice, in the hall, sounded worried as he asked how the chief was doing.

"He isn't drunk. He isn't sober," Katie told him. "He's what I would call mellow."

The cynicism in her voice stung Malloy into action. Katie had heard the record so often she no longer believed it. But this time he would show her. As soon as Reardon was in office and the Valley housing development well started, he would step aside and let one of the younger men pilot the machine. He would buy a plantation. Not a small one but a big one. He'd raise more damn cotton and cane than anyone else in the state. He'd see to it that Katie lived like a queen.

He found his shoes and put them on. His coat gave him more difficulty. He was drunker than he had realized. Before plotting a course of action he'd have the boys walk him down to Larry's and steam some of the whiskey out of him.

Blyth and Shelly were sitting on the stairs. Both men got up as he opened the door. Shelly was still hurt. "You're not going to try to give us the slip again now, are you, Dan?"

Malloy pledged his word he was not.

"You seen what happened before," Blyth said earnestly. "God almighty, Dan. When I think how you might have been killed up there in that dumb copper's room, slugs coming so close they almost kissed you."

Malloy glanced at him sharply but made no reply. The stairs were steep and demanded all of his attention. They led down the back over the kitchen and opened on the hall of the addition Katie had had built on to house dressing rooms for her entertainers.

Weaving slightly as he walked, Malloy started for the bar, stopped alcoholically curious in front of a dressing room door behind which a girl was crying. He opened it and looked in.

Clad in only filmy scanties and a bra the frightened girl of the amber spot turned to face him defiantly, tears mingled with the cold cream with which she was removing her make-up. "And what do *you* want?"

"Just to know why you're crying, honey," Malloy told her gently. "What's eating on you? What are you so frightened about? Come on. Tell Uncle Dan."

She seized a jar of cold cream from the make-up shelf and hurled it at him. It broke and splattered over the wall five feet from his head. "Get out. Get out of here. I hate you. I hate all men."

Malloy closed the door. Blyth and Shelly were trying hard not to smile. "That was a boner," the big man admitted. "I must be drunker than I thought." He pulled himself together with an effort. "Tell the boys to stick right where they are for another hour or so. Tell them I'll be back. Then you guys walk me down to Larry's."

Shelly hesitated, said, "They have a much better steam room at Carlson's."

"I said Larry's," Malloy told him.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Split

THE STEAM ROOM behind him, Malloy lay down on the marble massage slab with relief. He felt much better already. He had been a fool to allow this thing to get him. There was some logical explanation. Some punk was getting too big for his britches. All he had to do was throw the machine in high gear and dig him out before the opposition blew up the three deaths out of all proportion.

Reardon *had* to be elected. The housing project *had* to go through. He lay relaxed, grunting, as Larry's capable hands alternately cupped and flexed, pummeled and kneaded his body.

A stocky little Levantine with an atrocious command of the English language, the rubber had purchased the name of Larry with the bath house home twenty years

before. As he spanked Malloy's quivering flesh he told him frankly, "You gatting fat, Dan. Your shape she look like hell. Batter you should got more exercise."

"I intend to," Malloy grunted. "Right after the election. I'm going to buy me a plantation and grow more damn cotton than you ever saw."

The bath house owner was skeptical. "Ho. I bat you. You beeg damn fool jus' like me. I reech. I got money last me rest of life. But the only way I go out of Valley is in coffin."

Malloy asked why he didn't go back to the old country for a visit and Larry scoffed, "Ho. What I do hang around all those foreigners? They don't even spake Ongleesh." He grew confidential. "This on upty-up I hear. They gonna tear down all ol' tanamants an' build up nice new white houses?"

Big Dan said it was. "The bond issue has already gone through and the housing development is right in Reardon's platform. We're going to have a park and an auditorium and honest-to-God houses at a rental a working man can afford to pay."

Larry didn't think much of Reardon. He said so, added, "Whaz more, I tol' him right to my face to tak his money an' put it he know where."

"What money was that?" Malloy grunted.

The bath house owner explained. "The money he try for geeve me to say he here in my steam room las' night at tan o'clock. He say he was supposed to be macking speech but he out tomcatting around the levee an' he don't want his wife should find out. I tal heem gat someone else for to do heez lying."

Malloy lay still for a long minute under the kneading fingers, then sat up on the slab. "Okay. That's all, Larry. Get me my clothes."

The rubber began a protest, looked at Malloy's face and did as he was ordered.

Blyth and Shelly looked up from well-filled ashtrays as Malloy emerged from the inner bath house. Ignoring them, he used Larry's office phone to call Katie. "I want the name and address of that little singer of yours," he told her. "The one who wears a strapless evening gown and sings in an amber spot."

Katie said the girl's name was Ann Lacey and gave him an address on Olive Street. He thanked her, hung up and walked out of the bath house, Blyth and Shelly followed.

The gutters were small rivers but the rain had stopped. The eastern sky was grey with morning. "Now, look, Chief," Shelly began, then stopped as if not quite certain just what to say.

There was nothing in Malloy's voice to indicate he heard him. Stepping off the curb into the street, he whistled down a cruising owl cab and gave the driver the address on Olive Street. After a split-second hesitation the two men got into the cab with him.

A few blocks from the bath house, choosing his words with care, Blyth spoke for the first time. "Now look, Dan. We know how you feel. But don't go flying off no handle. There is too much at stake. And you know as well as I do that nothing is ever perfect. There is a fly in almost every ointment."

"So I have heard," Malloy said dryly. They rode a few more blocks in silence. Then Malloy added, "But when we get to the address I gave the driver, don't try to stop me from going in. And don't try to come in with me. If you do there is going to be more trouble than I think you're capable of handling."

Shelly protested, "You have us all wrong, Dan. We're with you all the way."

"So you say," Malloy said.

In front of the Olive Street address he ordered the driver to wait and disappeared inside the building. Blyth and Shelly waited, smoking incessantly and pacing the walk in front of the cab. Malloy reappeared in less than fifteen minutes.

"Now, Katie's," he told the driver.

HERE and there an all-night bar or restaurant was still open, but morning and the rain had dampened the levee's ardor. Wreathed in the morning fog rolling in off the river, the few pedestrians on the street looked distorted and unreal. Katie's sign was turned off and the heavy drill shade was drawn, but lights seeped out from around the edges. Three big, expensive cars were still parked at the curb.

As Malloy strode across the walk to the

door, Carson materialized out of a nearby doorway. "What's the all-night caucus about?" he demanded. "Can't you masterminds decide on whom to pin Murphy's corpse?"

"Scram," Shelly said.

"N-no," Malloy contradicted the order. "Stick around, Carson. I may have a story for you, maybe not. I'm not quite certain yet. I'll call you in if I do." He grasped the door by the knob and rattled it. "Let me in, Katie. It's Dan."

Behind Malloy's back Blyth showed Carson the butt of the gun in his shoulder holster and jerked his head toward Phelpsburg on the Bluff.

Before the reporter could answer Katie opened the door and the three men filed into the club. Kramer and Peters and Morris and Reardon had left the back booth in favor of stools at the bar. All four men were sober. All four faces were haggard with strain. State's Attorney Peters was using the phone. He hung up as Malloy neared the bar and turned to face him.

"What a beautiful time for you to pick to get drunk."

"Wasn't it?" Malloy agreed. He walked behind the bar and drew himself a beer. "You'd better go upstairs, Katie."

Katie shook her head. "No. Why did you want Ann's address?"

Reardon looked at Shelly. Shelly inclined his head slightly and Reardon's face grew even more haggard.

Malloy strolled around in front of the bar. "Suppose you ask our candidate for mayor. I should have smarted up when he made that crack in the booth last night but I thought he was just being juvenile. I've heard of men going to a lot of extremes to get a girl. But, believe me, this is the first time I ever heard of threatening to frame her for murder."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Morris demanded.

Malloy sipped his beer. "That hit-and-run on the corner of Front and Gale. Are you certain when you left the meeting the other night, Reardon, that you went directly to Larry's? Go on. Tell us. I want to hear you lie."

Reardon looked at Kramer for support. Kramer got down from his stool. "Now look, Dan. We all make mistakes. And with election as close as it is we can't afford a fight within our own party."

State's Attorney Peters nodded sagely.

"I'm not fighting," Malloy said. "I just want to get a few things straightened out. You do drive a big blue car on occasions, I believe, Mr. Reardon?"

Reardon said sourly, "I'm sorry. You have to believe that, Malloy. I didn't mean to hurt the kid. In fact I didn't even know I had run into anyone until I felt the bump."

Katie walked over to stand beside Malloy. "I don't get this."

Big Dan explained. "Reardon walked out on his own meeting the other night to come down here and pester Ann. He was too smart or too afraid of you to come in the front way. So he came in the back way and made himself obnoxious in Ann's dressing room until, to get away from him, she walked out, got in Katie's coupe intending to take a ride, hoping he would be gone before it was time for her next number. Unfortunately it didn't work out that way. He got in his car and chased her."

"And ran over Marty."

"And ran over Marty."

Reardon buried his face in his hands.

"A crippled news kid," Kramer sneered.

"He got a big bang out of life," Malloy told him. "So did Jake Finklebaum. You had to think fast on that one, didn't you, Jack? No one got to Murphy. He didn't change his report until after he had gotten to the station and you recognized Reardon's car from the license and the description."

Kramer asked hotly, "What would you have done? Signed a manslaughter warrant for our candiate for mayor with all we have riding on the election? And as far as Finklebaum is concerned all we did was cuff him around a little bit to impress on his mind it was a red coupe and not a blue sedan he had seen."

"You and Blyth and Shelly."

Blyth wanted to know how Malloy knew. He pointed out that Kramer had to take someone with him he could trust, someone in the machine, and they were logical suspects.

"But why pick on my coupe?" Katie asked.

Kramer told her that Reardon, sobered

by the realization of what he had done, had phoned him almost immediately, explained the circumstances and the coupe's description had been the first one to come to his mind.

MALLOY allowed the statement to pass. "And now we come to Murphy. Blyth or Shelly killed him, of course. One of them probably pulled the main switch in the hall while the other one let him have it. Blyth gave that away tonight when he was feeling so sorry for me because the slugs almost kissed me. If he hadn't been there he wouldn't have known how close they came. I wasn't as smart as I thought. They trailed me to Finklebaum's, then back to the Eagle. You'd hoped to get Murphy out of town before I could talk to him. But when you couldn't—" He shrugged.

Peters sighed. "Well, now it's all out in the open. We wouldn't have had to keep any of it from you, Dan, if we hadn't been afraid of your reaction. You're such a nut about your people."

"That's right," Malloy agreed quietly.

Katie squeezed his arm. "Steady, Dan. Don't lose your temper."

"I don't intend to," he assured her.

Morris poured himself a drink. "All right. Now it's all out in the open. As Shakespeare once said, Reardon is a poor thing, but our own. With him in office, we run the city. The question is, Malloy, now you know all the facts of life are you going to continue to play ball with us or not?"

Malloy told him, "That depends."

"On what?"

"The Valley housing development."

Kramer growled. "For heaven's sake, Dan, stop being such an old woman. The bond issue has been voted, hasn't it? The money is there. Of course we'll go through the motions. We'll put up shacks of some kind. That's why we bought out the Faber plant." He stopped short.

"Don't be a fool, Dan," Peters said quickly. "Think of your cut. We can stay well inside the law and make a couple of million apiece."

Malloy set his beer glass on the bar. "Watch him," Morris cried.

"I've a gun in his back," Shelly said. "Blyth and I are tired of working for peanuts. We're declaring ourselves in. And you or no one else is going to cut us out of our share. Understand me, Dan? We'd rather not. But we'll hold you right here in the club if we have to until the election is over. Meanwhile we'll spread the glad tidings that the good word still is Reardon."

"You're not such a big shot," Blyth added.

"No," Malloy agreed with him. "It wouldn't seem so."

He knew suddenly that he wasn't. He wasn't a big shot in any sense of the word. He was a political fancy man. For a petty share of the loot to pass on to his people he had put Jack Kramer in office. He had put Peters in office. He had said the good word was Reardon. He was standing in the presence of the chief of police, the states attorney, and Phelpsburg's future mayor. And the money once dissipated would never be voted again. There would never be an auditorium or a swimming pool. There would be no solidly built houses with lawns and flower gardens between them. There would be no park with a statue of St. George in the center. Instead all the money would buy would be a jerrybuilt slum little better than the one that now existed.

He asked, "But if I do play ball?"

"You get your cut," Peters assured him. "We want you with us, Dan. Hell, you're our pal. You made us."

"And if I don't play ball?"

Kramer said dryly, "I think I have covered that contingency. Murphy's report reads, 'a red Ford coupe, license number 5-6332, driven by a woman.' The only witness to the accident is dead. So is Murphy. You were in his room when he died. It is possible the gun that killed him might be traced to you. The coupe is licensed in Katie's name. Everyone in the city knows how it is between you two. You'd naturally want to protect her. But after years of being a big shot it would be very unpleasant for you to do a life stretch up the river knowing that Katie was over in the woman's section doing a ten-year manslaughter bit."

Kramer paused then. "No hard feelings, undertsand, Dan. Like Peters just said, we're pals. But with as much at stake

as we have, after Reardon pulled that bonehead play of his, I had to protect us all against that Sir Galahad complex of yours."

"St. George," Katie corrected him, tight-lipped.

THAT possibly was what did it. After years of living with them the dragons got in Malloy's eyes. The smart thing, the only thing to do, was to play ball. Instead Malloy reached casually for his glass of beer, shattered the glass on the wood and, turning, ground the jagged ends in Shelly's face. Screaming in pain, Shelly pulled the trigger of his gun. He couldn't miss at the distance. Malloy had known he wouldn't. The slug tore through Malloy's side. But before Shelly could shoot again he had the gun. He had figured on that, too.

Blyth added a second slug to Malloy's bulk but, receiving one through the mouth in exchange, lost all interest in the matter. Kramer had the only other gun. Aiming swiftly, but with care, Malloy shot him through the stomach before Kramer could get his gun out of its holster.

Morris vaulted the bar and lay trembling on the beer-slimed grating. Peters and Reardon ran for the front door. Peters managed to wrench it open and slide through. Reardon failed to make it.

Katie tried to stop Malloy's wounded side with her fingers and, failing, helped him into one of the booths, begging him to sit still while she went for a doctor.

A doctor could do him no good and Malloy said so. "I want to talk to Carson." The reporter stood framed in the doorway as he named him and Malloy beckoned him to the booth. "Come in, son," he said thickly. "I haven't got much time. And I want to tell you a story about a park and a statue of St. George."

Out on the streets sirens were sounding now. But it was quiet in Katie's bar when Big Dan Malloy had finished. He lay with his head on Katie's bosom, a half smile on his lips

Carson removed his hat, not out of respect to death but to the man. "Don't cry, Katie."

"I'm not crying," she said, dry-eyed. She wasn't. She was too proud to cry.

THE END

STAND-IN FOR THE CORPSE

(Continued from page 73)

a shocking reality. The woman he had married was not Mrs. Clara Burch at all—or even a reasonable facsimile—Mrs. Burch being still brunette and forty and, currently, very dead.

She was found floating, obviously murdered, just off Cape Girardeau, some 300 miles south of St. Louis. The story, as it was pieced together, was that she had met two men and a blonde on shipboard, while on her way to marry Benet. The trio had murdered her, tossed her overboard, and the blonde, Emma Waters, had then passed herself off as Clara Burch to the expectant bridegroom. The names of her male accomplices were Nicholas Kraemer and James Scanlan, riverboat gamblers.

While Benet was recovering from the startling end of his romance, he received a death threat from his tormenters, demanding an additional $50,000 cash and that, when he refused to pay it, he barely survived a shotgun blast which hospitalized him.

EDOUARD recovered from the bushwhack attempt and, with blood in his eye, traveled to Pensacola, Florida, still seeking his wayward wife, pausing only long enough to annul his marriage to her. He never found her—though the police eventually did.

The courts tried Emma Waters and James Scanlan for the murder of Mrs. Clara Burch—Nicholas Kraemer having escaped them just before the trial—and both won acquittals on insufficient evidence. The trio went back to their nefarious careers—until James Scanlan killed a man in an argument and was hanged! And until Kraemer grew jealous of another man's attentions to Emma—and shot her dead and then himself. Before he died, Kraemer made a full confession of the murder of Clara Burch.

But what of the little man with the golden touch, the poor man's Midas—the man who could do no wrong? We left him in Pensacola, where he'd gone vengeance-bent, but grown strangely disinterested in what happened to those who had wronged him. Why? He'd met and married a wealthy widow!

(Continued from page 109)

turned abruptly, her back stiff and proud, and crossed the room to the open stairway. She went up the stairs without once glancing toward us. There was a balcony overlooking the living room, rimmed by a wrought-iron railing that curved gracefully down the stairway.

Rita Bonnell went along the balcony, started into the open doorway of a bedroom up there. She suddenly halted.

"Paul!" she cried out.

And then she plunged deeper into the room, out of sight. Her scream, thin with horror, came back through the open door.

"Paul, don't!"

A gun roared.

PAUL BONNELL was dead when we got up there. He was stretched out on a bed, with the gun in his hand still smoking. Rita stood close beside him, her eyes tight closed; she was swaying slightly, like a leaf moved by a gentle breeze. Her voice was dull with horror.

"He must have heard what you said. I saw him standing here by the bed. He had the gun in his hand. I tried to stop him. . . . I tried to."

There was a blue satin bedspread on the bed, and it was stretched taut by the weight of the dead man's body. Except from the impression Bonnell's body made in it, there was not a single wrinkle in the spread. Muzzle flame and burned powder had darkened Bonnell's shirt around the small hole over his heart. He had died without a single struggle.

"He was standing beside the bed when he shot himself?" I asked. "He fell across the bed, like he is now"

"Yes," came Rita Bonnell's dull whisper. "Yes."

"It won't work, baby," I said.

She opened her eyes, and the horror of the last minute was still bright in them. She looked at Nora. She looked at me.

"Nine times out of ten a man doesn't die that easy when he's shot in the heart, baby. He kicks around a little. There's a last spasm of movement which Bonnell didn't make or he'd have mussed that bedspread. I don't think this is that one time out of ten, baby; I don't think this is the exception. I think your husband was lying

there when you came up the stairs, knocked out by something you fed him. I think he had the gun in his hand, but you squeezed his finger on the trigger just after you screamed for him not to shoot. I don't think this will work at all, baby."

The horror brightened in her eyes, but now it was something deep and more personal. It wasn't the horror that came from committing a murder. It was the horror of seeing clearly and bitterly what lay ahead in her own future.

"Maybe I'm wrong about you, baby. I hope I am. Maybe I'm wrong about you hiring Monte Casslon to bait me into this case in order to have me around for an alibi when you faked your husband's suicide. But pressure on Casslon by the police will bring out the truth in that."

"Please," Rita Bonnell whispered. "Stop saying such things."

"I hope I am wrong about you," I said. "It's not nice to know that a beautiful woman is going to walk into the gas chamber just because she wanted a lot of money her husband would have thrown away on parties. It's not nice to think you'd murder Sam Cabel and plant the murder gun on me, and then tail me so you'd know what I did with the gun. But that's how it could be if you wanted me

for a fall guy in case your fake suicide of your husband didn't go over. But a paraffin test will show whether you fired a gun today or not."

She moved with unexpected suddenness. She grabbed the gun out of the dead man's hand, and whirled, and she was no longer beautiful. Her finger was white around the trigger, and her eyes smoldered.

She circled around to the door, and Nora and I made no attempt to stop her. She was backing out on the balcony when the chimes sounded in the room below. She started to turn her head, an unconscious movement of habit, and I threw myself at her. The gun in her hand roared, and I felt the heat of its flash.

I chopped the flat of my hand across her wrist and the gun fell. I got my arms around her, but it wasn't as pleasant as I would have thought five minutes ago. She kicked and fought and tried to use her knee on me. I had her, but I didn't know what to do with her. A man can't slug a woman, even a murderess.

But it was different with Nora. She was a woman, and she had no scruples when it came to dealing with one of her own sex. She took off her slipper, raised it determinedly. The heel of a slipper is very hard.

The police who had been playing with the door chimes charged upstairs and took control of the situation.

"This gal," said the homicide sergeant, "wasn't half smart. She murdered a movie writer's agent named Cabel this afternoon, and the gun she used—"

"Did you trace it?" I asked innocently.

"Yeah. Registered in her husband's name. Then she ran through a stop light in Hollywood this afternoon, but the cycle cop got her license number. Like I said, she wasn't half smart. The cop also saw her try to get rid of the murder gun by throwing it into a sewer. . . ."

I tucked Nora's hand under my arm, and we walked out of the Bonnell house. The moon was throwing its pale track across the Pacific, and the air was soft and warm. It was a nice large night, and I enjoyed it thoroughly. But Nora helped, definitely.

THE END

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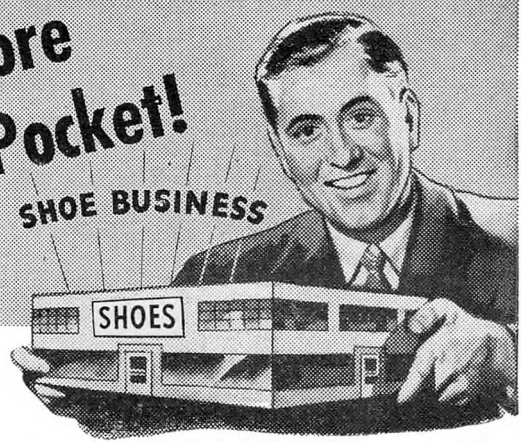

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