

25¢

THE SUSPENSE MAGAZINE  APR

# DETECTIVE TALES

**ALL THAT  
BLOOD MONEY  
CAN BUY**

A GREAT  
SUSPENSE STORY

by **JOHN D.  
MacDONALD**

**JAMES  
NOBLE  
GOGGIN**



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HAND OVER THAT CAMERA!

LOOK OUT-BEHIND YOU!



UGH!

I'LL TAKE THAT GUN!



ALL SET! SHERIFF'S GOT AN EMPTY CELL FOR THIS BIRD. SAYS WE CAN DEVELOP YOUR FILM, TOO

SWELL! LET'S GO!

HIDING NEARBY, ROD SEES THE FLASH AND COMES TO RESET THE CAMERA, BUT THEN...

LATER AT STATE PARK HEADQUARTERS



WHAT A PICTURE! LET'S CALL IN THE REPORTERS

I'M A FINE-LOOKING SIGHT TO BE INTERVIEWED. HAVEN'T SHAVED SINCE FRIDAY

WE CAN FIX YOU UP WITH A RAZOR



TRY THESE THIN GILLETTE BLADES

THANKS



SAY! I SURE GO FOR THOSE BLADES! THEY REALLY DO A QUICK, SLICK JOB!

THIN GILLETTES ARE PLENTY KEEN AND EASY SHAVING!

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I'LL BET MY SYNDICATE WILL PAY PLENTY FOR THAT PICTURE!

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HE'S CERTAINLY GOOD-LOOKING

FOR FAST, CLEAN, GOOD-LOOKING SHAVES AT A SAVING, TRY THIN GILLETTES. NO OTHER BLADES IN THE LOW-PRICE FIELD ARE SO KEEN AND SO LONG LASTING. BECAUSE THEY'RE MADE TO FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR. PRECISELY, THIN GILLETTES PROTECT YOU FROM NICKS AND IRRITATION. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES IN THE CONVENIENT TEN-BLADE PACKAGE

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# DETECTIVE TALES

25c



Combined with F.B.I. DETECTIVE STORIES

VOL. FORTY-NINE

APRIL, 1952

NUMBER TWO

### Three Daring Detective Novelettes

- ALL THAT BLOOD MONEY CAN BUY!** . . . . . **John D. MacDonald** 14  
—was plenty. For Davisson it bought death. What would it buy his beautiful widow?
- CASE OF THE COME-HITHER CORPSE.** . . . . . **Winston Bouvé** 58  
—took Nem Parsons into the middle of a strange triangle . . . to find out who had played second fiddle to the Grim Reaper. . . .  
*Copyright 1926 by Popular Publications, Inc., under the title: "Sackcloth"*
- TWO ON A SLAB.** . . . . . **Mason Noble** 84  
—was one too many for Wiley—who had a strong prejudice against a private eye getting *that* cosy with a client!

### Four Gripping Short Stories

- MURDER IS MY BUSINESS!** . . . . . **Ray Bradbury** 6  
—and business is good!  
*Copyright 1944 by Popular Publications, Inc., under the title: "Killer, Come Back to Me!"*
- THE DICTIONARY GUY.** . . . . . **Richard Goggin** 38  
—added a new word to Jensen's vocabulary: Murder!
- BLONDE STAND-IN.** . . . . . **John P. Foran** 49  
—made just the victim Detective Eddie Lane had in mind for a murder rap: his own two-timing girl friend!
- DEAD MAN'S DEBT.** . . . . . **Don James** 75  
—required an expensive repayment—Hennessey's own life!

### Three Special Crime Features

- THE CRIME CLINIC.** . . . . . **A Department** 100

Next Issue Published  
March 19th!

Any resemblance between any character appearing in fictional matter, and any person, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and unintentional.

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This man will get ahead

This one won't ...

### CAN YOU TELL WHY?

They went to the same school, live on the same street, both have bacon and eggs and coffee for breakfast, both twirl a ball at Martin's Bowling Alley Monday nights.

### WHAT MAKES THEM DIFFERENT?

One thing—what they're doing about the future. The man who hasn't got any future isn't doing anything about it. That's why.

The man who *has* a future is doing something about it right this minute. He's building it with an I.C.S. course that will prepare him for a job he knows he'll be able to fill when it comes.

The dreamy man expects breaks—somehow they never come. The wide-awake man is letting I.C.S. show him how to *manufacture* breaks. They'll be his because he's ready for them.

Which man are YOU going to be like? If you're made for something more than a dead-end job that pays little and holds you back . . . if you feel the urge to climb and grow . . . check off, below, the field you want to get ahead in and send the coupon. Do it while you feel like it—don't let the urge die.

How about it, fellow?

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# Murder Is My Business!

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the title: "Killer, Come Back To Me!"*



**Brogelman's gun was in his hand,  
ready...**

**By RAY  
BRADBURY**

**I**F YOU'VE never watched an autopsy, then this is what they do. They cut the body down the middle. Not all the way, but far enough for you to see everything from collarbones to kidneys. When the peels of flesh are tethered back with bright surgical clamps, the various organs thus exposed are examined closely before being sliced out with an expert move of the scalpel. They are then set aside for chemical analysis. The brain is removed from its case by the simple expedient of lifting the skull off in a circle from the ears up.

If you're a criminal, you get special attention. You're not much different inside from anybody else, but the doctors keep looking, as if some day they'd actually find a criminal's body that didn't have a heart.

An interesting case turned up at our laboratory this morning. They brought in

the cadaver of one John Broghman. He had little blue tattoos patterning his chest and pelvic regions. On second look, you saw they weren't tattoos, but bullet holes.

I'd like to tell John Broghman's story as it came to me, flat and cold and naked on an autopsy table.

He had big lungs and good muscles. He had sponge sacs in his rib casings that one day sucked in the air of the world and liked it. From the build of him you could see he was from a small town where those lungs could grow and get started. Then you can see where his father and mother died; you can see where he had a younger

*(Continued on page 8)*

**Johnny Broghman had to walk and talk like the dead man,  
and love the dead man's girl. Would he have to die like the  
dead man, too?**



# I Will Show You How to LEARN RADIO-TELEVISION SERVICING OR COMMUNICATIONS by Practicing in Spare Time



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You build the modern Radio shown below as part of my Servicing Course. I send you speaker, tubes, chassis, transformer, loop antenna, everything you see pictured and EVERYTHING you need to build this modern Radio Receiver. Use it to make many tests, get practical experience.



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I send you all the parts to build Transmitter shown below as part of my new Communications Course. Conduct actual procedure of Broadcast Operators, practice interesting experiments, learn how to actually put a transmitter on the air.

**EXTRA PAY IN ARMY, NAVY, AIR FORCE**

Knowing Radio, TV, Electronics can help you get extra rank, extra prestige, more interesting duty at pay up to several times a private's base pay. You are also prepared for good Radio-TV jobs upon leaving service. Mail coupon TODAY.

**NEW**

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"While learning, made \$5 to \$10 a week in spare time. Now have a profitable spare time shop."—L. ARN- OLD, Pontiac, Mich.



"I accepted a position as Radio and Television Technician . . . was promoted to manager of Television Service and Installation."—L. HAUGER, San Bruno, California.



"Have my own shop. Am authorized serviceman for five manufacturers and do servicing for 7 dealers."—P. MIL- LER, Maumee, O.



"Four years ago, a bookkeeper on a hand-to-mouth salary, am now a Radio Engineer ABC network."—N. H. WARD, Ridgefield, Park, New Jersey.



"When I enrolled, had no idea it would be so easy to learn. Have equipped my shop out of spare time earnings. I am clearing about \$40 to \$60 a month."—J. D. KNIGHT, Denison, Tex.



## I Will Train You at Home with MANY KITS OF PARTS I SEND

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Keep your job while training at home. Hundreds I've trained are successful RADIO-TELEVISION TECHNICIANS. Learn Radio-Television principles from illustrated Lessons. Get PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE experimenting with circuits common to Radio and Television. Many students make \$5, \$10 a week extra fixing neighbors' Radios in spare time. Special Booklets start teaching you the day you enroll.

### Television is TODAY'S Good Job Maker

In 1946 only 6,000 TV sets sold. In 1950 over 5,000,000. By 1954, 25,000,000 TV sets will be in use, according to estimator. Over 100 TV Stations are operating in 35 states. Authorities predict there will be 1,000 TV Stations. This means new jobs, more jobs, good pay for qualified men.

**Send Now for 2 Books FREE—Mail Coupon**  
Send for my FREE DOUBLE OFFER. Get actual Servicing lesson. Also get my 64-page book, "How to Be a Success in Radio-Television." Read what my graduates are doing, earning. Send coupon in envelope or paste on postal. J. E. SMITH, President, Dpt. 2CF7, National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D. C. OUR 38TH YEAR.

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**A TESTED WAY TO BETTER PAY...MAIL COUPON NOW**

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(No salesman will call. Please write plainly.)

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CITY.....ZONE.....STATE.....

The ABC's of SERVICING

How to Be a Success in RADIO-TELEVISION

(Continued from page 6)

brother who wasn't much help; you can see where they moved in with an aunt and uncle who didn't love them, and you can see where the uncle made Johnny Broghman work—too young and too hard—in a coal shaft. Those spots on Johnny's lungs—that's what tells you all about those years.

Then you look at Broghman's cold, inert stomach and you see the shaping hand of hunger that had bruised it. Right here.

And now, if you'll look closer, deep in this cold, corrugated brain, you'll find the hatred and the wondering and the wanting of Johnny Broghman growing and making a sort of tumor, a fester spot. Right inside this brain. . . .

**B**ROGHMAN stood on the corner of that dusty little town, watching grasshoppers sweeping over the hot blue sky in a curtain.

The bank was across the street. A stolen automobile, its motor still running warm, was parked in front of it. He'd parked it there with his own hands and then strode across the hot asphalt to stand here on this corner, sweating, thinking, knowing that there was something ahead of him that he wanted.

He wasn't certain what it was. Maybe it was in the bank. Maybe it had to do with guns, power, danger and—something else.

The gun was heavy in its leather nest under his arm.

Something he'd wanted for a long time. What? Something he wanted now.

A woman walked along with a slow, thoughtful walk. Her eyes went through him, away, and then slid back again to make a man of him, up and down, and her red lips parted as if she knew his mind. Broghman swallowed thickly, trying to look away.

She stood there, eyes narrowing. Then she revolved slowly, put one foot after the other with a sort of measured rhythm, and

went away with her hair like long fire on her neck, and her eyes like amber metal that could catch emotion and keep it there.

Broghman's body relaxed. He began to walk. Across the streaming street, up the high curb. His big ears pricked, alert. There—the car motor, still muttering inside its casing. Now into the cool cavern of the bank. Cool expanse of marble. Shining cages that kept domesticated animals inside them with cool green money at their pale, domesticated fingertips.

Broghman lifted the dead weight of the gun, fitted into his calloused hand.

From there on, things resolved into slow, sludgy, underwater gestures of people suspended in a slow-motion film. Lazily, his face slowly shading white under the regular pallor of his skin, the little teller shifted a slow hand to money stacked in green layers, extracted it sluggishly, shoved it gradually forward until it sank into Broghman's palm. He pocketed the money. It took what seemed like long minutes to do it.

Then things speeded up to triple action. An alarm gong was like a kick of adrenalin setting things into blurred quickness.

Broghman ran across smooth stone acres. People shouted. Everything whirled hotly in his eyes when the sun struck him as he entered the daylight.

He didn't know if it was the sun or not, but when he twisted the car door open, he pulled back and gasped.

*She* waited for him in the car.

That woman with the hair like long fire and the eyes like yellow metal, who'd walked by him a few minutes ago, looking into him and knowing him and walking on. Her hard fingers gripped the steering wheel, so that the knuckles stood out whitely.

Recovering, he swung sideways into the seat, poking the gun. "Get out!"

"No." She said it simply, and meant it.

He pushed the gun further, against her

(Continued on page 10)



**\$100<sup>00</sup> A WEEK in CASH**  
**PAID DIRECT TO YOU**

**FAMILY HOSPITAL PLAN**

**Policy Pays for a Day, a Week,  
 a Month, a Year—just as long as  
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**SAVE MONEY!**

There's a big advantage to buying this policy by mail. This method of selling is less costly for us—and that's another reason why we are able to offer so much protection for so little money.

**JUST LOOK**  
**The Large Benefit This Low  
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The Service Life Family Hospital Plan covers you and your family for about everything—for every accident, and for all common and rare diseases after the policy has been in force 30 days or more. Very serious disease such as cancer, tuberculosis, heart disease, diseases involving female organs, sickness resulting in a surgical operation, hernia, lumbago and sacroiliac conditions originating after the policy is in force six months are all covered. . . . Hospitalization caused by attempted suicide, use of intoxicants or narcotics, insanity, and venereal disease is naturally excluded.

The money is all yours—for any purpose you want to use it. There are no hidden meanings or big words in the policy. We urge you and every family and also individuals to send for this policy on our 10 day free trial offer—and be convinced that no other hospital plan offers you so much for your \$1.00 a month!

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 For Hospital Bills, up to \$500.00  
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**TOTAL OF \$1,500.00**

**3c A DAY IS ALL YOU PAY**  
**for this outstanding new Family Protection**

Wonderful news! This new policy covers everyone from infancy to age 70! When sickness or accident sends you or a member of your family to the hospital—this policy PAYS \$100.00 PER WEEK for a day, a month, even a year . . . or just as long as you stay in the hospital. What a wonderful feeling to know your savings are protected and you won't have to go into debt. The money is paid DIRECT TO YOU to spend as you wish. This remarkable new Family Hospital Protection costs only 3c a day for each adult 18 to 59 years of age, and for age 60 to 70 only 4½c a day. This policy even covers children up to 18 years of age with cash benefits of \$50.00 a week while in the hospital—yet the cost is only 1½c a day for each child! Benefits paid while confined to any recognized hospital, except government hospitals, rest homes and clinics, spas or sanitariums. Pick your own doctor. Naturally this wonderful policy is issued only to individuals and families now in good health; otherwise the cost would be sky high. But once protected, you are covered for about every sickness or accident. Persons covered may return as often as necessary to the hospital within the year.

**This is What \$100.00 a Week  
 Can Mean to You When in the  
 Hospital for Sickness or Accident**

Money melts away fast when you or a member of your family has to go to the hospital. You have to pay costly hospital board and room . . . doctor's bills and maybe the surgeon's bill too . . . necessary medicines, operating room fees—a thousand and one things you don't count on. What a Godsend this READY CASH BENEFIT WILL BE TO YOU. Here's cash to go a long way toward paying heavy hospital expenses—and the money left over can help pay you for time lost from your job or business. Remember—all cash benefits are paid directly to you.

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**REMEMBER—\$100.00 A WEEK CASH BENEFIT IS ACTUALLY \$14.25 PER DAY!**

**FREE INSPECTION . . .  
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 Address.....  
 City or Town..... State.....

(Continued from page 8)

white blouse, finger taut on the trigger.

"I said *get out!*"

Her answer was to engage the gears, jump the accelerator, thrusting the car away from the curb, shrieking rubber. She pushed the car to seventy miles an hour before he knew what she was doing. He had glimpses of darting trees, spinning signs, buildings, with her voice biting through it all:

"*I'm driving!* Wherever you want to go, *I'm driving!*"

Sitting there, the color rose in his protruding cheekbones. He glanced back at the vanishing main street. "Move fast, that's all. Take Highway 43."

"Don't be dumb," she snapped at him. "That's a graveyard road. We'll go *my* way. I *know* this damned burg inside and out, like a book."

He realized he was shuddering, and had to clasp his knees, bending to ease the sick pain in his belly, as if he'd been shot.

"What's wrong?" she said. "They get you?"

"No." He made himself straight. "I'm all right."

**T**HEN, while the miles spun under them, he kept silent, nursing his pain. Once, glancing up, he saw her sharp profile against running skyline, green trees, bright gas stations. Her lips were full to stubbornness, and hard like the even teeth backing them up. The eyes were the startling part, cold and hard. They didn't belong. Not with all that flame on her head falling in loose, whipping fingers of color to her shoulders, tucked behind almost manlike ears.

After about five minutes she said, "We've lost them." She held the speed high, through hot desert. "How much money?"

He counted it. "Seven hundred."

"Chicken feed." He saw her trim ankle muscles tauten, pressing out more mileage.

Slowly, he touched the curve of her leg with his blue eyes, coming up along her brown woollen skirt to the open neck of her white blouse where the cords of her throat went stiffly, yet beautifully up.

"Stop the car," he said quietly.

She ignored him.

"Who in hell are you!" he demanded, "running me around! This was *my* job!"

"It's *ours*, now." She gave him her brief, metallic glance. "You're no killer. I know. It's not in your face. Your eyes are open too wide for killing."

"Stop the car."

Parked, she looked straight ahead. "I'm cutting myself in," she said to the road. "I've been outside a little while, but I'm coming back in."

He twisted her from the wheel.

"You're damn well in."

He kissed her so it hurt them both. The world went away. A siren, if it had whined, would not have been heard, or a gun shooting.

She pulled back, eyes angry and yet—puzzled—a moment.

"Don't do that again," she said evenly. She made the wheels roar again. "I'm the one who does that! Remember from now on, *you!*"

It was his turn to be puzzled. "Okay, okay," he said.

Desert wind came in the windows, searing, burning them.

She parked the car for the night on a little dirt road equipped with stars, a moon, and ranch lights hanging on the foothills.

She slid from the car, shoes rustling in dry thatches of bramble.

He said, "Why'd you climb in my car today?"

She had her answer ready.

"You were headed for the morgue. I put you on a detour. You need training. The way you walk, talk, hold a gun. You looked like a kid waiting for a ticket in

(Continued on page 12)



**6**

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**GIVE YOU DAILY CASH**

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Name .....

Address .....

City ..... Zone.... State.....

.....

(Continued from page 10)

front of a dime movie, today. Like you were waiting for somebody to take you in."

"Yeah—"

"Let me finish. Remember Ricky Wolfe?"

"God, *yes*."

"I was with him," she said, "for five years."

The name of Ricky Wolfe was like a hammer striking. Ricky Wolfe, the big-time, all-around gangmen. A guy nobody proved nothing on, with a capacity for gin and blood that was legendary.

She stood there and told him about it. "Six weeks ago they killed him. In Iowa. Threw his body in the river. Only way you could tell it was him, was his wallet. They never had a print of his fingers." She breathed deeply. "So I came west again, here to California, covered up a while working as a waitress—"

"Then I came along."

"Yeah. I saw you and knew that you needed training, or you'd be dead too soon. Ricky was different. He was broken in when I got him. But I always wanted to see what I could do with a beginner."

She turned to him. "You're only good as your woman is good. If she's a heller, a whiner, a baby, you'll be on a dead-slab in no time. She won't let you think clear." She showed him her hard white fingers. "My nails are clipped too short for a cat. I won't rip your back. Now—it's up to you. You want to die tomorrow or four years from now?"

"Is it that way?"

"That's the way it is."

He suddenly broke, standing there. He didn't know why, but he just had his arms around her, trembling.

"I'm glad you came. I wouldn't want to be alone tonight."

She kissed him.

Then she slapped his face with her hands, twice, hard.

"A kiss is for one thing! A slap's for

another! You're not a kid! Learn that, if you stick with me! Grow up!"

In his nostrils was the warm clean smell of her body, with no dime perfume to spoil it.

He waited for her to make the first move.

"I'm not a kid now. . ." he said.

**H**E WAS wanted. For the first time in his life people actually were seeking him. The same people who'd shoved him into gutters, starved his parents, ignored him in coal mines, refused him coffee dimes—these same people were horrifiedly aware of him now, and concerned with his welfare, and what he was doing each day.

Brogman, in angry, shocked rips, tore the morning paper into pieces.

Julie set a steaming coffee mug on the table of the Motel Inn room and ordered, "Drink it. And quit reading papers. They lie like hell."

He felt of his big brown hands and the gun shining on the blue tablecloth. "God's sake, Julie, I'm not a criminal. I'm a human being."

"Sure. Both of us are. Self-preservation, you know."

He learned to walk tall, stiffer, with his guts tucked in. She told him how to talk faster, pull a gun by the swiftest, safest method, pressing it close to his body so only a few people would see it. She could have written a book about banks. There were ways of hitting people's nerves with the knife edge of your hand to knock them out as good as a gun—she showed him. A mustache appeared sandily on his lip. His hair grew sandy on his neck, and grew the way she ordered it to grow.

It was acting, rehearsing, for a bigger part.

In his dreams, her voice struck again and again at him.

"No, no, Johnny! Not *that* way, *this* way!"

The day Julie bought the new car and

(Continued on page 102)



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# All That

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# Blood Money Can Buy!

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By  
**JOHN D.  
MacDONALD**

There was only one barrier between  
Davisson's young and beautiful wife  
and those fat insurance policies—  
Davisson himself!

## CHAPTER ONE

### *The Uncertain Widow*

**L**ONG AGO he had given up trying to estimate what he would find in any house merely by looking at the outside of it. The interior of each house had a special flavor. It was not so much the result of the degree of tidiness, or lack of it, but rather the result of the emotional climate that had permeated the house. Anger, bitterness, despair—all left their subtle stains on even the most immaculate fabrics.

Darrigan parked the rented car by the curb and, for a long moment, looked at the house, at the iron fence, at the cypress shade. He sensed dignity, restraint, quietness. Yet he knew that the interior could destroy these impressions. He was in the habit of telling himself that his record of

Using the pick as a lever, Darrigan  
broke a piece of the cement free. . . .



successful investigations was the result of the application of unemotional logic—yet his logic was often the result of *sensing*, somehow, the final answer, and then retracing the careful steps to arrive once more at that same answer.

After a time, as the September sun of west coast Florida began to turn the rented sedan into an oven, Darrigan pushed open the door, patted his pocket to be sure his notebook was in place, and walked toward the front door of the white house. There were two cars in the driveway, both of them with local licenses, both of them Cadillacs. It was perceptibly cooler under the trees that lined the walk.

Beyond the screen door the hallway was dim. A heavy woman came in answer to his second ring, staring at him with frank curiosity.

"I'd like to speak to Mrs. Davisson, please. Here's my card."

The woman opened the screen just enough for the card to be passed through, saying, with Midwest nasality, "Well, she's resting right now. . . . Oh, you're from the insurance?"

"Yes, I flew down from Hartford."

"Please come in and wait and I'll see if she's awake, Mr. Darrigan. I'm just a neighbor. I'm Mrs. Hoke. The poor dear has been so terribly upset."

"Yes, of course," Darrigan murmured, stepping into the hall. Mrs. Hoke walked heavily away. Darrigan could hear the mumble of other voices, a faint, slightly incongruous laugh. From the hall he could see into a living room, two steps lower than the hall itself. It was furnished in cool colors, with Florida furniture of cane and pale fabrics.

Mrs. Hoke came back and said reassuringly, "She was awake, Mr. Darrigan. She said you should wait in the study and she'll be out in a few minutes. The door is right back here. This is such a dreadful thing, not knowing what has happened to him. It's hard on her, the poor dear thing."

THE study was not done in Florida fashion. Darrigan guessed that the furniture had been shipped down from the North. A walnut desk, a bit ornate, leather couch and chairs, two walls of books.

Mrs. Hoke stood in the doorway. "Now don't you upset her, you hear?" she said with elephantine coyness.

"I'll try not to."

Mrs. Hoke went away. This was Davisson's room, obviously. His books. A great number of technical works on the textile industry. Popularized texts for the layman in other fields. Astronomy, philosophy, physics. Quite a few biographies. Very little fiction. A man, then, with a serious turn of mind, dedicated to self-improvement, perhaps a bit humorless. And certainly very tidy.

Darrigan turned quickly as he heard the step in the hallway. She was a tall young woman, light on her feet. Her sunback dress was emerald green. Late twenties, he judged, or possibly very early thirties. Brown hair, sun-bleached on top. Quite a bit of tan. A fresh face, wide across the cheekbones, heavy-lipped, slightly Bergman in impact. The mouth faintly touched with strain.

"Mr. Darrigan?" He liked the voice. Low, controlled, poised.

"How do you do, Mrs. Davisson. Sorry to bother you like this."

"That's all right. I wasn't able to sleep. Won't you sit down, please?"

"If you don't mind, I'll sit at the desk, Mrs. Davisson. I'll have to make some notes."

She sat on the leather couch. He offered her a cigarette. "No, thank you, I've been smoking so much I have a sore throat. Mr. Darrigan, isn't this a bit . . . *previous* for the insurance company to send someone down here. I mean, as far as we know, he isn't—"

"We wouldn't do this in the case of a normal policyholder, Mrs. Davisson, but your husband carries policies with us total-



ing over three hundred thousand dollars.”

“Really! I knew Temple had quite a bit, but I didn’t know it was that much!”

He showed her his best smile and said, “It makes it awkward for me, Mrs. Davisson, for them to send me out like some sort of bird of prey. You have presented no claim to the company and you are perfectly within your rights to tell me to be on my merry way.”

She answered his smile. “I wouldn’t want to do that, Mr. Darrigan. But I don’t quite understand why you’re here.”

“You could call me a sort of investigator. My actual title is Chief Adjuster for Guardsman Life and Casualty. I sincerely hope that we’ll find a reasonable explanation for your husband’s disappearance. He disappeared Thursday, didn’t he?”

“He didn’t come home Thursday night. I reported it to the police early Friday morning. And this is—”

“Tuesday.” He opened his notebook, took his time looking over the pages. It was a device, to give him a chance to gauge the degree of tension. She sat quite still, her hands resting in her lap, unmoving.

He leaned back. “It may sound presumptuous, Mrs. Davisson, but I intend to see if I can find out what happened to your husband. I’ve had reasonable success in such cases in the past. I’ll cooperate with the local police officials, of course. And I’ll need your cooperation, too. I hope you won’t mind answering questions that may duplicate what the police have already asked you.”

“I won’t mind. The important thing is . . . to find out. This not knowing is . . .” Her voice caught a bit. She looked down at her hands.

“According to our records, Mrs. Davisson, his first wife, Anna Thorn Davisson, was principal beneficiary under his policies until her death in 1948. The death of the beneficiary was reported, but it was not necessary to change the policies at that time as the two children of his first marriage were

secondary beneficiaries, sharing equally in the proceeds in case of death. In 1949, probably at the time of his marriage to you, we received instructions to make you the primary beneficiary under all policies, with the secondary beneficiaries, Temple C. Davisson, Junior, and Alicia Jean Davisson, unchanged. I have your name here as Dinah Pell Davisson. That is correct?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Could you tell me about your husband. What sort of man is he?”

SHE GAVE him a small smile. “What should I say? He is a very kind man. Perhaps slightly autocratic, but kind. He owned a small knitting mill in Utica, New York. He sold it, I believe, in 1942. It was incorporated and he owned the controlling stock interest, and there was some sort of a merger with a larger firm, where he received payment in the stock in the larger firm in return for his interest. He sold out because his wife had to live in a warmer climate. She had a serious kidney condition. They came down here to Clearwater and bought this house. Temple was too active to retire. He studied real estate conditions here for a full year and then began to invest money in all sorts of property. He has done very well.”

“How did you meet him, Mrs. Davisson?”

“My husband was a sergeant in the Air Force. He was stationed at Drew Field. I followed him here. When he was sent overseas I had no special place to go, and we agreed I should wait for him here. The Davissons advertised for a companion for Mrs. Davisson. I applied and held the job from early 1944 until she died in 1948.”

“And your husband?”

“He was in the 14th Air Force and he was killed in a crash landing at Chengtu. When I received the wire, the Davissons were very kind and understanding. At that time my position in the household was more like a daughter receiving an allowance. My

own parents died long ago. I have a married sister in Melbourne, Australia. We've never been close."

"What did you do between the time Mrs. Davisson died and you married Temple Davisson?"

"I left here, of course. Mrs. Davisson had money of her own. She left me five thousand dollars and left the rest to Temple, Junior, and Alicia. Mr. Davisson found me a job in a real estate office in Clearwater. I rented a small apartment. One night Mr. Davisson came to see me at the apartment. He was quite shy. It took him a long time to get to the reason he had come. He told me that he had tried to keep the house going, but the people he had hired were undependable. He also said that he was lonely. He asked me to marry him. I told him that I didn't love him, in that way. I told him that I had affection for him, as for a father. He told me that he did not love me that way either, that Anna had been the only woman in his life. Well—Jack had been the only man in my life, and life was pretty empty. The Davissons had filled a place in my life. I missed this house. But he is sixty-one and that makes almost exactly thirty years difference in ages. It seemed a bit grotesque. He told me to think it over and give him my answer when I was ready. It occurred to me that his children would resent me, and it also occurred to me that I cared very little what people thought. Four days later I told him I would marry him."

Darrigan realized that he was treading on most dangerous ground. "Has it been a good marriage?"

"Is that a question you're supposed to ask?"

"It sounds impertinent. I know that. But in a disappearance of this sort I must consider suicide. Unhappiness can come from ill health, money difficulties or emotional difficulties. I should try to rule them out."

"I'll take one of those cigarettes now,

Mr. Darrigan," she said. "I can use it."

He lit it for her, went back to the desk chair. She frowned, exhaled a cloud of smoke. "It has not been a completely happy marriage, Mr. Darrigan."

"Can you explain that?"

"I'd rather not." He pursed his lips, let the silence grow. At last she said, "I suppose I can consider an insurance man to be as ethical as a doctor or a lawyer?"

"Of course."

"For several months it was a marriage in name only. I was content to have it go on being that way. But he is a vigorous man and after a while I became aware that his attitude had changed and he had begun to . . . want me." She flushed.

"But you had no feeling for him in that way," he said, helping her.

"None. And we'd made no actual agreement, in so many words. But living here with him, I had no ethical basis for refusing him. After that, our marriage became different. He sensed, of course, that I was merely submitting. He began to . . . court me, I suppose you'd call it. Flowers and little things like that. He took off weight and began to dress much more youthfully. He tried to make himself younger, in his speech and in his habits. It was sort of pathetic, the way he tried."

"Would you relate that to . . . his disappearance?"

**F**OR a moment her face was twisted in the agony of self-reproach. "I don't know."

"I appreciate your frankness. I'll respect it, Mrs. Davisson. How did he act Thursday?"

"The same as always. We had a late breakfast. He had just sold some lots in the Lido section at Sarasota, and he was thinking of putting the money into a Gulf front tract at Reddington Beach. He asked me to go down there with him, but I had an eleven o'clock appointment with the hairdresser. His car was in the garage so

he took my convertible. He said he'd have lunch down that way and be back in the late afternoon. We were going to have some people in for cocktails. Well, the cocktail guests came and Temple didn't show up. I didn't worry. I thought he was delayed. We all went out to dinner and I left a note telling him that he could catch up with us at the Belmonte, on Clearwater Beach.

"After dinner the Deens brought me home. They live down on the next street. I began to get really worried at ten o'clock. I thought of heart attacks and all sorts of things like that. Of accidents and so on. I phoned Morton Plant Hospital and asked if they knew anything. I phoned the police here and at Reddington and at St. Petersburg, I fell asleep in a chair at about four o'clock and woke up at seven. That was when I officially reported him missing.

"They found my car parked outside a hotel apartment on Reddington Beach, called Aqua Azul. They checked and found out he'd gone into the Aqua Azul cocktail lounge at eight-thirty, alone. He had one dry Martini and phoned here, but of course I had left at that time and the house was empty. He had another drink and then left. But apparently he didn't get in the car and drive away. That's what I don't understand. And I keep thinking that the Aqua Azul is right on the Gulf."

"Have his children come down?"

"Temple, Junior, wired that he is coming. He's a reserve officer on active duty, a lieutenant colonel of ordnance stationed at the Pentagon."

"How old is he?"

"Thirty-six, and Alicia is thirty-three. Temple, Junior, is married, but Alicia isn't. She's with a Boston advertising agency, and when I tried to phone her I found out she's on vacation, taking a motor trip in Canada. She may not even know about it."

"When is the son arriving?"

"Late today, the wire said."

"Were they at the wedding?"

"No. But I know them of course. I met them before Mrs. Davisson died, many times. And only once since my marriage. There was quite a scene then. They think I'm some sort of filthy little opportunist. When they were down while Mrs. Davisson was alive, they had me firmly established in the servant category. I suppose they were right, but one never thinks of oneself as a servant. I'm afraid Colonel Davisson is going to be difficult."

"Do you think he might have had worries?"

"None. He told me a few months ago, quite proudly, that when he liquidated the knitting company stock, he received two hundred thousand dollars. In 1943 he started to buy land in this area. He said that the land he now owns could be sold off for an estimated million and a half dollars."

"Did he maintain an office?"

"This is his office. Mr. Darrigan, you used the past tense then. I find it disturbing."

"I'm sorry. It wasn't intentional." Yet, it had been. He had wanted to see how easily she would slip into the past tense, showing that in her mind she considered him dead.

"Do you know the terms of his current will?"

"He discussed it with me a year ago. It sets up trust funds, one for me, and one for each of the children. He insisted that it be set up so that we share equally. And yet, if I get all that insurance, it isn't going to seem very equal, is it? I'm sorry for snapping at you about using the past tense, Mr. Darrigan. I think he's dead."

"Why?"

"I know that amnesia is a very rare thing, genuine amnesia. And Temple had a very sound, stable mind. As I said before, he is kind. He wouldn't go away and leave me to this kind of worry."

"The newspaper picture was poor. Do you have a better one?"

"Quite a good one taken in July. Don't get up. I can get it. It's right in this desk drawer."

She sat lithely on her heels and opened the bottom desk drawer. Her perfume had a pleasant tang. Where her hair was parted he could see the ivory cleanness of her scalp. An attractive woman, with a quality of personal warmth held in reserve. Darrigan decided that the sergeant had been a most fortunate man. And he wondered if Davisson was perceptive enough to measure the true extent of his failure. He remembered an old story of a man held captive at the bottom of a dark, smooth-sided well. Whenever the light was turned on, for a brief interval, he would see that the circular wall was of glass, with exotic fruits banked behind it.

"This one," she said, taking out a 35-millimeter color transparency mounted in paperboard. She slipped it into a green plastic viewer and handed it to him. "You better take it over to the window. Natural light is best."

Darrigan held the viewer up to his eye. A heavy bald man, tanned like a Tahitian, stood smiling into the camera. He stood on a beach in the sunlight and he wore bathing trunks with a pattern of blue fish on a white background. There was a doggedness about his heavy jaw, a glint of shrewdness in his eyes. His position was faintly strained and Darrigan judged he was holding his belly in, arching his wide chest for the camera. He looked to be no fool.

"May I take this along?" Darrigan asked, turning to her.

"Not for keeps." The childish expression was touching.

"Not for keeps," he said, smiling, meaning his smile for the first time. "Thank you for your courtesy, Mrs. Davisson. I'll be in touch with you. If you want me for any reason, I'm registered at a place called Bon Villa on the beach. The owner will take a message for me."

## CHAPTER TWO

### On the Prowl

DARRIGAN left police headquarters in Clearwater at three o'clock. They had been as cool as he had expected at first, but after he had clearly stated his intentions they had relaxed and informed him of progress to date. They were cooperating with the Pinellas County officials, and with the police at Reddington.

Temple Davisson had kept his appointment with the man who owned the plot of Gulf front property that had interested Davisson. The potential vendor was named Myron Drynfells and Davisson had picked him up at 11:15 at the motor court he owned at Madiera Beach. Drynfells reported that they had inspected the property, but were unable to arrive at a figure acceptable to both of them. Davisson had driven him back to the Coral Tour Haven, depositing him there shortly after 12:30. Davisson had intimated that he was going further down the line and take a look at some property near St. Petersburg Beach.

There was one unconfirmed report of a man answering Davisson's description seen walking along the shoulder of the highway up near the Bath Club accompanied by a dark-haired girl, some time shortly before nine o'clock on Thursday night.

The police had no objection to Darrigan's talking with Drynfells, or making his own attempt to find the illusive dark-haired girl. They were reluctant to voice any theory that would account for the disappearance.

Following a map of the area, Darrigan had little difficulty in finding his way out South Fort Harrison Avenue to the turn-off to the Belleaire Causeway. He drove through the village of Indian Rocks and down a straight road that paralleled the beach. The Aqua Azul was not hard to find. It was an ugly four-story building tinted pale chartreuse with corner balconies

overlooking the Gulf. From the parking area one walked along a crushed-shell path to tile steps leading down into a pseudo-Mexican courtyard where shrubbery screened off the highway. The lobby door, of plate glass with a chrome push bar, opened off the other side of the patio. The fountain in the center of the patio was rimmed with small floodlights with blue-glass lenses. Darrigan guessed that the fountain would be fairly garish once the lights were turned on.

Beyond the glass door the lobby was frigidly air-conditioned. A brass sign on the blond desk announced that summer rates were in effect. The lobby walls were rough tan plaster. At the head of a short wide staircase was a mural of lumpy, coffee-colored, semi-naked women grinding corn and holding infants.

A Negro was slowly sweeping the tile floor of the lobby. A girl behind the desk was carrying on a monosyllabic phone conversation. The place had a quietness, a hint of informality, that suggested it would be more pleasant than during the height of the winter tourist season.

The bar lounge opened off the lobby. The west wall was entirely glass, facing the beach glare. A curtain had been drawn across the glass. It was sufficiently opaque to cut the glare, subdue the light in the room. Sand gritted a bit underfoot as Darrigan walked to the bar. Three lean women in bathing suits sat at one table, complete with beach bags, tall drinks, and that special porcelainized facial expression of the middle forties trying, with monied success, to look like middle thirties.

Two heavy men in white suits hunched over a corner table, florid faces eight inches apart, muttering at each other. A young couple sat at the bar. They had a honeymoon flavor about them. Darrigan sat down at the end of the bar, around the corner, and decided on a rum collins. The bartender was brisk, young, dark, and he mixed a good drink.

WHEN he brought the change, Darrigan said, "Say, have they found that guy who wandered away and left his car here the other night?"

"I don't think so, sir," the bartender said with no show of interest.

"Were you on duty the night he came in?"

"Yes, sir."

"Regular customer?"

The bartender didn't answer. Darrigan quickly leafed through a half dozen possible approaches. He selected one that seemed suited to the bartender's look of quick intelligence. Darrigan smiled ingratiatingly. "They ought to make all cops take a sort of internship behind a bar. That's where you learn what makes people tick."

The slight wariness faded. "That's no joke."

"Teddy!" one of the three lean women called. "Another round, please."

"Coming right up, Mrs. Jerrold," Teddy said.

Darrigan waited with monumental patience. He had planted a seed and he wanted to see if it would take root. He stared down at his drink, watching Teddy out of the corner of his eye. After the drinks had been taken to the three women, Teddy drifted slowly back toward Darrigan. Darrigan waited for Teddy to say the first word.

"I think that Davisson will show up."

Darrigan shrugged. "That's hard to say." It put the burden of proof on Teddy.

Teddy became confidential. "Like you said, sir, you see a lot when you're behind a bar. You learn to size them up. Now, you take that Davisson. I don't think he ever came in here before. I didn't make any connection until they showed me the picture. Then I remembered him. In the off season, you get time to size people up. He came in alone. I'd say he'd had a couple already. Husky old guy. Looked like money. Looked smart, too. That kind,

they like service. He came in about eight-thirty. A local guy, I could tell. I don't know how. You can always tell them from the tourists. One Martini, he wants. Very dry. He gets it very dry. He asks me where he can phone. I told him about the phone in the lobby. He finished half his cocktail, then phoned. When he came back he looked satisfied about the phone call. A little more relaxed. You know what I mean. He sat right on that stool there, and one of our regulars, a Mrs. Kathy Marrick, is sitting alone at that table over there. That Davisson, he turns on the stool and starts giving Mrs. Marrick the eye. Not that you can blame him. She is something to look at. He orders another Martini. I figure out the pitch then. That Davisson, he went and called his wife and then he was settling down to an evening of wolfing around. Some of those older guys, they give us more trouble than the college kids. And he had that look, you know what I mean.

"Well, from where he was sitting he couldn't even see first base, not with Mrs. Marrick, and I saw him figure that out for himself. He finished his second drink in a hurry, and away he went. I sort of decided he was going to look around and see where the hunting was a little better."

"And that makes you think he'll turn up?"

"Sure. I think the old guy just lost himself a big weekend, and he'll come crawling out of the woodwork with some crazy amnesia story or something."

"Then how do you figure the car being left here?"

"I think he found somebody with a car of her own. They saw him walking up the line from here not long after he left here, and he was with a girl, wasn't he? That makes sense to me."

"Where would he have gone to find that other girl?"

"I think he came out of here, and it was just beginning to get dark, and he looked

up the line from the parking lot and saw the lights of the Tide Table just up the road, and it was just as easy to walk as drive."

Darrigan nodded. "That would make sense. Is it a nice place, that Tide Table?"

"A big bar and bath houses and a dance floor and car-hops to serve greasy hamburgers. It doesn't do this section of the beach much good."

"Was Davisson dressed right for that kind of a place?"

"I don't know. He had on a white mesh shirt with short sleeves and tan slacks, I think. Maybe he had a coat in his car. He didn't wear it in here. The rules here say men have to wear coats in the bar and dining room after November first."

"That Mrs. Marrick wouldn't have met him outside, would she?"

"Not her. No, sir. She rents one of our cabañas here."

"Did she notice him?"

"I'd say she did. You can't fool Kathy Marrick."

**D**ARRIGAN knew that Teddy could add nothing more. So Darrigan switched the conversation to other things. He made himself talk dully and at length so that when Teddy saw his chance, he eased away with almost obvious relief. Darrigan had learned to make himself boring, merely by relating complicated incidents which had no particular point. It served its purpose. He knew that Teddy was left with a mild contempt for Darrigan's intellectual resources. Later, should anyone suggest to Teddy that Darrigan was a uniquely shrewd investigator, Teddy would hoot with laughter, completely forgetting that Darrigan, with a minimum of words, had extracted every bit of information Teddy had possessed.

Darrigan went out to the desk and asked if he might see Mrs. Marrick. The girl went to the small switchboard and plugged one of the house phones into Mrs. Mar-

rick's cabaña. After the phone rang five times a sleepy, soft-fibred voice answered.

He stated his name and his wish to speak with her. She agreed, sleepily. Following the desk girl's instructions, Darrigan walked out the beach door of the lobby and down a shell walk to the last cabaña on the south. A woman in a two-piece white terrycloth sun suit lay on an up-tilted barwa chair in the hot sun. Her hair was wheat and silver, sun-parched. Her figure was rich, and her tan was coppery. She had the hollowed cheeks of a Dietrich, and a wide, flat mouth.

She opened lazy sea-green eyes when he spoke her name. She looked at him for a long moment and then said, "Mr. Darrigan, you cast an unpleasantly black shadow on the sand. Are you one of the new ones with my husband's law firm? If so, the answer is still no, in spite of the fact that you're quite pretty."

"I never heard of you until ten minutes ago, Mrs. Marrick."

"That's refreshing, dear. Be a good boy and go in and build us some drinks. You'll find whatever you want, and I need a fresh gin and tonic. This glass will do for me. And bring out a pack of cigarettes from the carton on the bedroom dressing table."

She shut her eyes. Darrigan shrugged and went into the cabaña. It was clean but cluttered. He made himself a rum Collins, took the two drinks out, handed her her drink and a pack of cigarettes. She shifted her weight forward and the chair tilted down.

"Now talk, dear," she said.

"Last Friday night at about eight-thirty you were alone in the bar and a bald-headed man with a deep tan sat at the bar. He was interested in you."

"Mmm. The missing Mr. Davison, eh? Let me see now. You can't be a local policeman. They all either look like fullbacks from the University of Florida, or skippers of unsuccessful charter boats. Your complexion and clothes are definitely

northern. That might make you FBI, but I don't think so somehow. Insurance, Mr. Darrigan?"

He sat on a canvas chair and looked at her with new respect. "Insurance, Mrs. Marrick."

"He's dead, I think."

"His wife thinks so too. Why do you?"

"I was alone. I'm a vain creature, and the older I get the more flattered I am by all little attentions. Your Mr. Davison was a bit pathetic, my dear. He had a lost look. A . . . hollowness? Do you understand?"

"Not quite."

"A man of that age will either be totally uninterested in casual females, or he will have an enormous amount of assurance about him. Mr. Davison had neither. He looked at me like a little boy staring into the candy shop. He did not know just how to go about it. I was almost tempted to help the poor dear, but he looked dreadfully dull. I said to myself, Kathy, there is a man who suddenly has decided to be a bit of a rake, and does not know just how to go about it."

"Does that make him dead?"

"No, of course. It was something else. Looking into his eyes was like looking into the eyes of a photograph of someone who has recently died. It is a look of death. It cannot be described. It made me feel quite upset."

"How would I write that up in a report?"

"You wouldn't, my dear. You would go out and find out how he died. He was looking for adventure last Friday night. And I believe he found it."

"With a girl with dark hair?"

"Perhaps."

"It isn't much of a startling place, is it?" Darrigan said ruefully.

SHE finished her drink and tilted her chair back. "I understand that the wife is young.

"Comparatively speaking. Are you French?"

"I was once. You're quick, aren't you? I'm told there's no accent."

"No accent. A turn of phrase here and there. What if the wife is young?"

"Call it my French turn of mind. A lover of the wife could help your Mr. Davisson find . . . his adventure."

"The wife was with a group all evening."

"A very sensible precaution."

He stood up. "Thank you for talking to me."

"You see, you're not as quick as I thought, Mr. Darrigan. I wanted you to keep questioning me in a clever way, and then I should tell you that Mr. Davisson kept watching the door during his two drinks, as though he were expecting that someone had followed him. He was watching, not with worry, but with . . . annoyance."

Darrigan smiled. "I thought you had something else to tell. And it seemed the quickest way to get it out of you, to pretend to go."

She stared at him, and then laughed. It was a good laugh, full-throated, rich.

"We could be friends, my dear," she said, when she got her breath.

"So far I haven't filled in enough of his day. I know what he did up until very early afternoon. Then there is a gap. He comes into the Aqua Azul bar at eight-thirty. He has had a few drinks. I like the theory of someone following him, meeting him outside. That would account for his leaving his car at the lot."

"What will you do now?"

"See if I can fill in the blanks in his day."

"The blank before he arrived here, and the more important one afterward?"

"Yes."

"I'm well known up and down the Gulf Beaches, Mr. Darrigan. Being with me would be protective coloration."

"And besides, you're bored."

"Utterly."

He smiled at her. "Then you better get dressed, don't you think?"

He waited outside while she changed. He knew that she would be useful for her knowledge of the area. Yet not sufficiently useful for warrant taking her along had she not been a mature, witty, perceptive woman.

She came out wearing sandals, a severely cut sand-colored linen sun dress, carrying a white purse. The end tendrils of the astonishing hair were damp-curled where they had protruded from her shower cap.

"Darrigan and Marrick," she said. "Investigations to order. This might be fun."

"And it might be dull."

"But we shan't be dull, Mr. Darrigan, shall we. What are you called?"

"Gil, usually."

"Ah, Gil, if this were a properly conceived plot, I would be the one who lured your Mr. Davisson to his death. Now I accompany the investigator to allay suspicion."

"No such luck, Kathy."

"No such luck." They walked along the shell path to the main building of the Aqua Azul. She led the way around the building toward a Cadillac convertible the shade of raspberry sherbet.

"More protective coloration?" Darrigan asked.

She smiled and handed him the keys from her purse. After he shut her door he went around and got behind the wheel. The sun was far enough gone to warrant having the top down. She took a dark bandanna from the glove compartment and tied it around her hair.

"Now how do you go about this, Gil?" she asked.

"I head south and show a picture of Davisson in every bar until we find the one he was in. He could have called his wife earlier. I think he was the sort to remember that a cocktail party was scheduled for



that evening. Something kept him from phoning his wife."

"Maybe he didn't want to phone her until it was too late."

"I'll grant that. First I want to talk to a man named Drynfells. For this you better stay in the car."

**T**HE Coral Tour Haven was a pink hotel with pink iron flamingoes stuck into the lawn and a profusion of whitewashed boulders marking the drive. Drynfells was a sour-looking man with a withered face, garish clothes and a cheap Cuban cigar.

Darrigan had to follow Drynfells about as they talked. Drynfells ambled around, picking up scraps of cellophane, twigs, burned matches from his yard. He confirmed all that the Clearwater police had told Darrigan.

"You couldn't decide on a price, Mr. Drynfells?"

"I want forty-five thousand for that piece. He offered thirty-six, then thirty-eight, and finally forty. He said that was his top offer. I came down two thousand and told him that forty-three was as low as I'd go."

"Did you quarrel?"

Drynfells gave him a sidelong glance. "We shouted a little. He was a shouter. Lot of men try to bull their way into a deal. He couldn't bulldoze me. No, sir."

They had walked around a corner of the motel. A pretty girl sat on a rubberized mattress at the side of a new wading pool. The ground was raw around the pool, freshly seeded, protected by stakes and string.

"What did you say your name was?" Drynfells asked.

"Darrigan."

"This here is my wife, Mr. Darrigan. Beth, this man is an insurance fellow asking about that Davisson."

Mrs. Drynfells was striking. She had a heavy strain of some Latin blood. Her dark eyes were liquid, expressive.

"He is the wan who is wanting to buy our beach, ah?"

"Yeah. That bald-headed man that the police were asking about," Drynfells said.

Mrs. Drynfells seemed to lose all interest in the situation. She lay back and shut her eyes. She wore a lemon-yellow swim suit.

Drynfells wandered away and swooped on a scrap of paper, balling it up in his hand with the other debris he had collected.

"You have a nice place here," Darrigan said.

"Just got it open in time for last season. Did pretty good. We got a private beach over there across the highway. Reasonable rates, too."

"I guess things are pretty dead in the off season."

"Right now we only got one unit taken. Those folks came in yesterday. But it ought to pick up again soon."

"How big is that piece of land you want forty-five thousand for?"

"It's seven hundred and twenty feet of Gulf front lot, eight hundred feet deep, but it isn't for sale any more."

"Why not?"

"Changed my mind about it, Mr. Darrigan. Decided to hold onto it, maybe develop it a little. Nice property."

Darrigan went out to the car. They drove south, stopping at the obvious places. They were unable to pick up the trail of Mr. Davisson. Darrigan bought Kathy Marrick dinner. He drove her back to the Aqua Azul. They took a short walk on the beach and he thanked her, promised to keep in touch with her, and drove the rented sedan back to Clearwater Beach.

**I**T WAS after eleven and the porch of the Bon Villa was dark. He parked and as he headed toward his room, a familiar voice spoke hesitantly from one of the dark chairs.

"Mr. Darrigan?"

"Oh! Hello, Mrs. Davisson. You star-

tled me. I didn't see you there. Do you want to come in?"

"No, please. Sit down and tell me what you've learned."

He pulled one of the aluminum chairs over close to hers and sat down. A faint sea breeze rattled the palm fronds. Her face was a pale oval, barely visible.

"I didn't learn much, Mrs. Davisson. Not much at all."

"Forgive me for coming here like this. Colonel Davisson arrived. It was as unpleasant as I'd expected. I had to get out of the house."

"It makes a difficult emotional problem for both of you—when the children of the first marriage are older than the second wife."

"I don't really blame him too much, I suppose. It looks bad."

"What did he accuse you of?"

"Driving his father into some crazy act. Maybe I did."

"Don't think that way."

"I keep thinking that if we never find out what happened to Temple, his children will always blame me. I don't especially want to be friends with them, but I do want their . . . respect, I guess you'd say."

"Mrs. Davisson, do you have any male friends your own age?"

"How do you mean that?" she asked hotly.

"Is there any man you've been friendly enough with to cause talk?"

"N-No, I . . ."

"Who were you thinking of when you hesitated?"

"Brad Sharvis. He's a bit over thirty, and quite nice. It was his real estate agency that Temple sent me to for a job. He has worked with Temple the last few years. He's a bachelor. He has dinner with us quite often. We both like him."

"Could there be talk?"

"There could be, but it would be without basis, Mr. Darrigan," she said coldly.

"I don't care how angry you get at me,

Mrs. Davisson, so long as you tell me the truth."

After a long silence she said, "I'm sorry. I believe that you want to help."

"I do."

She stood up. "I feel better now. I think I'll go home."

"Can I take you home?"

"I have my car, thanks."

He watched her go down the walk. Under the street light he saw her walking with a good long stride. He saw the headlights, saw her swing around the island in the center of Mandalay and head back for the causeway to Clearwater.

Darrigan went in, showered and went to bed. He lay in the dark room and smoked a slow cigarette. Somewhere, hidden in the personality or in the habits of one Temple Davisson, was the reason for his death. Darrigan found that he was thinking in terms of death. He smiled in the darkness as he thought of Kathy Marrick. A most pleasant companion. So far in the investigation he had met four women. Of the four only Mrs. Hoke was unattractive.

He snubbed out the cigarette and composed himself for sleep. A case, like a score of other cases. He would leave his brief mark on the participants, and go out of their lives. For a moment he felt the ache of self-imposed loneliness. The ache had been there since the day Doris had left him, long ago. He wondered sourly, on the verge of sleep, if it had made him a better investigator.

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Second Visit

**B**RAD SHARVIS was a florid, freckled overweight young man with carrot hair, blue eyes and a salesman's unthinking affability. The small real estate office was clean and bright. A girl was typing a lease agreement for an elderly couple.

Brad took Darrigan back into his small

private office. A fan turned slowly, stirring the moist September air.

"What sort of man was he, Mr. Sharvis?"

"Was he? Or is he? Shrewd, Mr. Darrigan. Shrewd and honest. And something else. Tough-minded isn't the expression I want."

"Ruthless?"

"That's it, exactly. He started moving in on property down here while gas rationing was still on. You wouldn't know the place if you saw it back then. The last ten years down here would take your breath away."

"He knew what to buy, eh?"

"It took him a year to decide on policy. He had a very simple operating idea. He decided, after his year of looking around, that there was going to be a tremendous pressure for waterfront land. At that time small building lots on Clearwater Beach, on the gulf front, were going for as little as twenty-five hundred dollars. I remember that the first thing he did was pick up eight lots at that figure. He sold them in 1950 for ten thousand apiece."

"Where did the ruthlessness come in, Mr. Sharvis."

"You better call me Brad. That last name makes me feel too dignified."

"Okay. I'm Gil."

"I'll tell you, Gil. Suppose he got his eye on a piece he wanted. He'd go after it. Phone calls, letters, personal visits. He'd hound a man who had no idea of selling until, in some cases, I think they sold out just to get Temple Davisson off their back. And he'd fight for an hour to get forty dollars off the price of a twenty-thousand dollar piece."

"Did he handle his deals through you?"

"No. He turned himself into a licensed agent and used this office for his deals. He pays toward the office expenses here, and I've been in with him on a few deals."

"Is he stingy?"

"Not a bit. Pretty free with his money,

but a tight man in a deal. You know, he's told me a hundred times that everybody likes the look of nice fat batches of bills. He said that there's nothing exactly like counting out fifteen one-thousand-dollar bills onto a man's desk when the man wants to get seventeen thousand."

Darrigan felt a shiver of excitement run up his back. It was always that way when he found a bit of key information.

"Where did he bank?"

"Bank of Clearwater."

"Do you think he took money with him when he went after the Drynfells plot?"

Sharvis frowned. "I hardly think he'd take that much out there, but I'll wager he took a sizeable payment against it."

"Twenty-five thousand?"

"Possibly."

"I could check that at the bank, I suppose."

"I doubt it. He has a safe in his office at his house. A pretty good one, I think. He kept his cash there. He'd replenish the supply in Tampa, picking up a certified check from the Bank of Clearwater whenever he needed more than they could comfortably give him."

"He was anxious to get the Drynfells land?"

"A very nice piece. And with a tentative purchaser all lined up for it. Temple would have held it over six months for the sake of paying a lower capital gains tax, and then he would have unloaded it for sixty thousand. He wanted to work fast so that there'd be no chance of his customer getting together with Drynfells. It only went on the market Wednesday, a week ago today."

"Drynfells held it a long time?"

"Several years. He paid fifteen thousand for it."

"Would it violate any confidence to tell me who Davisson planned to sell it to?"

"I can't give you the name because I don't know it myself. It's some man who sold a chain of movie houses in Kansas

and wants to build a hotel down here, that's all I know."

**D**ARRIGAN walked out into the morning sunlight. The death of Temple Davisson was beginning to emerge from the mists. Some time after he had left the Coral Tour Haven and before he had appeared at the Aqua Azul, he had entangled himself with someone who wanted that cash. Wanted it badly. They had not taken their first opportunity. So they had sought a second choice, had made the most of it.

He parked in the center of town, had a cup of coffee. At such times he felt far away from his immediate environment. Life moved brightly around him and left him in a dark place where he sat and thought. Thought at such a time was not the application of logic, but an endless stirring at the edge of the mind, a restless groping for the fleeting impression.

Davisson had been a man whose self-esteem had taken an inadvertent blow at the hands of his young wife. To mend his self-esteem, he had been casting a speculative eye at the random female. And he had been spending the day trying to engineer a deal that would mean a most pleasant profit.

Darrigan and Kathy Marrick had been unable to find the place where Davisson had taken a few drinks before stopping at the Aqua Azul. Darrigan paid for his coffee and went out to the car, spread the road map on the wheel and studied it. Granted that Davisson was on his way home when he stopped at the Aqua Azul, it limited the area where he could have been. Had he been more than three miles south of the Aqua Azul, he would not logically have headed home on the road that would take him through Indian Rocks and along Belleaire Beach. He would have cut over to Route 19. With a pencil Darrigan circled the area. Temple Davisson had taken his drinks somewhere in that area.

He frowned. He detested legwork, that

dullest step-sister of investigation. Sharing it with Mrs. Marrick made it a bit more pleasant, at least. It took him forty-five minutes to drive out to the Aqua Azul. Her raspberry convertible was under shelter in the long carport. He parked in the sun and went in, found her in the lobby chatting with the girl at the desk.

She smiled at him. "It can't be Nero Wolfe. Not enough waitline."

"Buy you a drink?"

"Clever boy. The bar isn't open yet. Come down to the cabaña and make your own and listen to the record of a busy morning."

They went into the cypress-paneled living room of the beach cabaña. She made the drinks. "We failed to find out where he'd been by looking for him, my dear. So this morning I was up bright and early and went on a hunt for somebody who might have seen the car. A nice baby-blue convertible. They're a dime a dozen around here, but it seemed sensible. Tan men with bald heads are a dime a dozen too. But the combination of tan bald head and baby-blue convertible is not so usual."

"Any time you'd like a job, Kathy?"

"Flatterer! Now prepare yourself for the let-down. All I found out was something we already knew. That the baby-blue job was parked at that hideous Coral Tour Haven early in the afternoon."

Darrigan sipped his drink. "Parked there?"

"That's what the man said. He has a painful little store that sells things made out of shells, and sells shells to people who want to make things out of shells. Say that three times fast."

"Why did you stop there?"

"Just to see if anybody could remember the car and man if they had seen them. He's across the street from that Coral Tour thing."

"I think I'd like to talk to him."

"Let's go, then. He's a foolish little sweetheart with a tic."

THE man was small and nervous, and at unexpected intervals his entire face would twitch uncontrollably. "Like I told the lady, mister, I saw the car parked over to Drynfells. You don't see many cars there. Myron doesn't do so good this time of year."

"And you saw the bald-headed man?"

"Sure. He went in with Drynfells and then he came out after a while."

"After how long?"

"How would I know? Was I timing him? Maybe twenty minutes."

Darrigan showed him the picture. "This man?"

The little man squinted through the viewer. "Sure."

"You got a good look at him."

"Just the first time."

"You mean when he went in?"

"No, I mean the first time he was there. The second time it was getting pretty late in the day, and the sun was gone."

"Did he stay long the second time?"

"I don't know. I closed up when he was still there."

"Thanks a lot."

The little man twitched and beamed. "A pleasure, certainly."

They went back out to Darrigan's car. When they got in Kathy said, "I feel a bit stupid, Gil."

"Don't think I suspected that. It came out by accident. One of those things. It happens sometimes. And I should have done some better guessing. I found out this morn'g that when Temple Davisson wanted a piece of property he didn't give up easily. He went back and tried again."

"And Mr. Drynfells didn't mention it."

"A matter which I find very interesting. I'm dropping you back at the Agua Azul and then I'm going to tackle Drynfells."

"Who found the little man who sells shells? You are *not* leaving me out."

"It may turn out to be unpleasant, Kathy."

"So be it. I want to see how much of

that tough look of yours is a pose, Mr. Darrigan."

"Let me handle it."

"I shall be a mouse, entirely."

He waited for two cars to go by and made a wide U-turn, then turned right into Drynfells' drive. The couple was out in back. Mrs. Drynfells was basking on her rubberized mattress, her eyes closed. She did not appear to have moved since the previous day. Myron Drynfells was over near the hedge having a bitter argument with a man who obviously belonged with the battered pickup parked in front.

Drynfells was saying, "I just got damn good and tired of waiting for you to come around and finish the job."

The man, a husky youngster in work clothes, flushed with anger, said, "Okay, okay. Just pay me off then, if that's the way you feel. Fourteen hours labor plus the bags and the pipe."

Drynfells turned and saw Darrigan and Kathy. "Hello," he said absently. "Be right back." He walked into the back door of the end unit with the husky young man.

Mrs. Drynfells opened her eyes. She looked speculatively at Kathy. "Allo," she said. Darrigan introduced the two women. He had done enough work on jewelry cases to know that the emerald in Mrs. Drynfells' ring was genuine. About three carats, he judged. A beauty.

Drynfells came out across the lawn, scowling. He wore chartreuse slacks and a dark blue seersucker sport shirt with a chartreuse flower pattern.

"Want anything done right," he said, "you got to do it yourself. What's on your mind, Mr. Darrigan?"

"Just checking, Mr. Drynfells. I got the impression from the police that Mr. Davisson merely dropped you off here after you'd looked at the land. I didn't know he'd come in with you."

"He's a persistent guy. I couldn't shake him off, could I, honey?"

"Talking, talking," Mrs. Drynfells said

with sun-struck sleepiness. "Too moch."

"He came in and yakked at me and then when he left he told me he could find better lots south of here. I told him to go right ahead."

"How long did he stay?"

Drynfells shrugged. "Fifteen minutes, maybe."

"Did he wave big bills at you?"

"Sure. Kid stuff. I had my price and he wouldn't meet it. Waving money in my face wasn't going to change my mind. No, sir."

"And that's the last you saw of him?"

Darrigan asked casually.

"That's right."

"Then why was his car parked out in front of here at dusk on Friday?"

"In front of here!" Drynfells said, his eyes opening wide.

"In front of here."

"I don't know what you're talking about, mister. I wasn't even here, then. I was in Clearwater on a business matter."

Mrs. Drynfells sat up and put her hand over her mouth. "Ai, I forget! He did come back. Still talking, talking. I send him away, that talking wan."

Drynfells stomped over to her and glared down at her. "Why did you forget that? Damn it, that might make us look bad."

"I do not theenk."

Drynfells turned to Darrigan with a shrug. "Rattle-headed, that's what she is. Forget her head if it wasn't fastened on."

"I am sorrreee!"

"I think you better phone the police and tell them, Mr. Drynfells, just in case."

"Think I should?"

"The man is still missing."

Drynfells sighed. "Okay, I better do that."

**T**HE Agua Azul bar was open. Kathy and Darrigan took a corner table, ordered pre-lunch cocktails. "You've gone off somewhere, Gil."

He smiled at her. "I am sorrreee!"

"What's bothering you?"

"I don't exactly know. Not yet. Excuse me. I want to make a call."

He left her and phoned Hartford from the lobby. He got his assistant on the line. "Robby, I don't know what source to use for this, but find me the names of any men who have sold chains of movie houses in Kansas during the past year."

Robby whistled softly. "Let me see. There ought to be a trade publication that would have that dope. Wire you?"

"At the Bon Villa, Clearwater Beach."

"How does it look?"

"It begins to have the smell of murder."

"By the beneficiary, we hope?"

"Nope. No such luck."

"So we'll get a statistic for the actuarial boys. Luck, Gil. I'll rush that dope."

"Thanks, Robby. 'Bye."

He had sandwiches in the bar with Kathy and then gave her her instructions for the afternoon. "Any kind of gossip, rumor, anything at all you can pick up on the Drynfells. Financial condition. Emotional condition. Do they throw pots? Where did he find the cutie?"

"Cute, like a derringer."

"I think I know what you mean."

"Of course you do, Gil. No woman is going to fool you long, or twice."

"That's what I keep telling myself."

"I hope, wherever your lady fair might be, that she realizes by now what she missed."

"You get too close for comfort sometimes, Kathy."

"Just love to see people wince. All right. This afternoon I shall be the Louella Parsons of Madiera Beach and vicinity. When do I report?"

"When I meet you for cocktails. Six-ish?"

On the way back to Clearwater Beach he looked in on Dinah Davisson. There were dark shadows under her eyes. Temple Davisson's daughter had been reached.

She was flying south. Mrs. Hoke had brought over a cake. Darrigan told her he had a hunch he'd have some real information by midnight. After he left he wondered why he had put himself out on a limb.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Beneficiaries

AT 4:30 he grew impatient and phoned Robby. Robby read the wire that had already been sent.

JAMES C BROCK SOLD NINE UNIT  
CHAIN CENTRAL KANSAS JULY

Darrigan thanked him. It seemed like a hopeless task to try to locate Brock in the limited time before he would have to leave for Reddington Beach. He phoned Dinah Davisson and told her to see what she could do about finding James Brock. He told her to try all the places he might stop, starting at the most expensive and working her way down the list.

He told her that once she had located Mr. Brock to sit tight and wait for a phone call from him.

Kathy was waiting at her cabaña. "Do I report right now, sir?"

"Right now, Operative 73."

"Classification one. Financial. Pooie. That Coral Tour thing ran way over estimates. It staggers under a mortgage. And he got a loan on his beach property to help out. The dollie is no help in the financial department. She's of the gimme, gimme breed. A Cuban. Havana. Possibly night-club training. Drynfells' first wife died several centuries ago. The local pitch is that he put that plot of land on the market to get the dough to cover some post-dated checks that are floating around waiting to fall on him."

"Nice work, Kathy."

"I'm not through yet. Classification two. Emotional. Pooie again. His little item has him twisted around her pinkie. She throws

pots. She raises merry hell. She has tantrums. He does the housekeeping chores. She has a glittering eye for a pair of shoulders, broad shoulders. Myron is very jealous of his lady."

"Any more?"

"Local opinion is that if he sells his land and lasts until the winter season is upon him, he may come out all right, provided he doesn't have to buy his little lady a brace of Cads and minks to keep in good favor. He's not liked too well around here. Not a sociable sort, I'd judge. And naturally the wife doesn't mix too well with the standard-issue wives hereabouts."

"You did very well, Kathy."

"Now what do we do?"

"I buy you drinks. I buy you dinner. Reward for services rendered."

"Then what?"

"Then we ponder."

"We can ponder while we're working over the taste buds, can't we?"

"If you'd like to ponder."

They went up to the bar. Martinis came. Kathy said, "I ponder out loud. Davisson's offer was too low. But he waved his money about. They brooded over that money all day. He came back and waved it about some more. Mrs. Drynfells' acquisitive instincts were aroused. She followed him, met him outside of here, clunked him on the head, pitched him in the gulf, and went home and hid the money under the bed."

"Nice, but I don't like it."

"Okay. You ponder."

"Like this. Drynfells lied from the beginning. He sold the land to Temple Davisson. They went back. Drynfells took the bundle of cash, possibly a check for the balance. Those twenty minutes inside was when some sort of document was being executed. Davisson mentions where he's going. In the afternoon Drynfells gets a better offer for the land. He stalls the buyer. He gets hold of Davisson and asks him to come back. Davisson does so. Drynfells wants to cancel the sale. Maybe he offers Davis-

son a bonus to tear up the document and take his money and check back. Davisson laughs at him. Drynfells asks for just a little bit of time. Davisson says he'll give him a little time. He'll be at the Aqua Azul for twenty minutes. From here he phones his wife. Can't get her. Makes eyes at you. Leaves. Drynfells, steered by his wife's instincts, has dropped her off and gone up the road a bit. She waits by Temple Davisson's car. He comes out. He is susceptible, as Mrs. Drynfells has guessed, to a little night walk with a very pretty young lady. She walks him up the road to where Drynfells is waiting. They bash him, tumble him into the Drynfells' car, remove document of sale, dispose of body. That leaves them with the wad of cash, plus the money from the sale to the new customer Drynfells stalled. The weak point was the possibility of Davisson's car being seen at their place. That little scene we witnessed this morning had the flavor of being very well rehearsed."

**K**ATHY snapped her fingers, eyes glowing. "It fits! Every little bit of it fits. They couldn't do it there, when he came back, because that would have left them with the car. He had to be seen some place else. Here."

"There's one fat flaw, Kathy."

"How could there be?"

"Just how do we go about proving it?"

She thought that over. Her face fell. "I see what you mean."

"I don't think that the dark-haired girl he was seen with could be identified as Mrs. Drynfells. Without evidence that the sale was consummated, we lack motive—except, of course, for the possible motive of murder for the money he carried."

Kathy sat with her chin propped on the backs of her fingers, studying him. "I wouldn't care to have you on my trail, Mr. Darrigan."

"How so?"

"You're very impressive, in your quiet little way, hiding behind that mask."

"A mask, yet."

"Of course. And behind it you sit, equipped with extra senses, catching the scent of murder, putting yourself neatly in the murderer's shoes, with all your reasoning based on emotions, not logic."

"I'm very logical. I plod. And I now plod out to the phone and see if logic has borne any fruit."

He went to the lobby and phoned Dinah Davisson.

"I found him, Mr. Darrigan. He's staying at the Kingfisher with his wife."

"Did you talk to him?"

"No. Just to the desk clerk."

"Thanks. You'll hear from me later, Mrs. Davisson."

He phoned the Kingfisher and had Mr. Brock called from the dining room to the phone. "Mr. Brock, my name is Darrigan. Mr. Temple Davisson told me you were interested in a plot of gulf-front land."

"Has he been found?"

"No, he hasn't. I'm wondering if you're still in the market."

"Sorry, I'm not. I think I'm going to get the piece I want."

"At Reddington Beach?"

Brock had a deep voice. "How did you know that?"

"Just a guess, Mr. Brock. Would you mind telling me who you're buying it from?"

"A Mr. Drynfells. He isn't an agent. It's his land."

"You contacted him last Friday, I suppose. In the afternoon?"

"You must have a crystal ball, Mr. Darrigan. Yes, I did. And he came in to see me late Friday night. We inspected the land Sunday. I suppose you even know what I paid for it."

"Probably around fifty-five."

"That's too close for comfort, Mr. Darrigan."

"Sorry to take you away from your dinner for no good reason. Thanks for being so frank with me."

"Quite all right."



Gilbert Darrigan walked slowly back into the bar. Kathy studied him. "Now you're even more impressive, Gil. Your eyes have gone cold."

"I feel cold. Right down into my bones. I feel this way when I've guessed a bit too accurately." She listened, eyes narrowed, as he told her the conversation.

"Mr. Drynfells had a busy Friday," she said.

"Now we have the matter of proof."

"How do you go about that? Psychological warfare, perhaps?"

"Not with that pair. They're careful. They're too selfish to have very much imagination. I believe we should consider the problem of the body."

She sipped her drink, stared over his head at the far wall. "The dramatic place, of course, would be under the concrete of that new pool, with the dark greedy wife sunbathing beside it, sleepy-eyed and calous."

He reached across the table and put his fingers hard around her wrist. "You are almost beyond price, Kathy. That is exactly where it is."

She looked faintly ill. "No," she said weakly. "I was only—"

"You thought you were inventing. But your subconscious mind knew, as mine did."


IT WAS not too difficult to arrange. The call had to come from Clearwater. They drove there in Kathy's car, and Darrigan, lowering his voice, said to Drynfells over the phone, "I've got my lawyer here and I'd like you to come in right now, Mr. Drynfells. Bring your wife with you. We'll make it business and pleasure both."

"I don't know as I—"


"I have to make some definite arrangement, Mr. Drynfells. If I can't complete the deal with you, I'll have to pick up a different plot."

"But you took an option, Mr. Brock!"

I was the square at the square dance!




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"I can forfeit that, Mr. Drynfells. How soon can I expect you?"

After a long pause Drynfells said, "We'll leave here in twenty minutes."

On the way back out to Madeira Beach Darrigan drove as fast as he dared. Kathy refused to be dropped off at the Aqua Azul. The Coral Tour Haven was dark, the "No Vacancy" sign lighted.

They walked out to the dark back yard, Kathy carrying the flash, Darrigan carrying the borrowed pickaxe. He found the valve to empty the shallow pool, turned it. He stood by Kathy. She giggled nervously as the water level dropped.

"We'd better not be wrong," she said.

"We're not wrong," Darrigan murmured. The water took an infuriating time to drain out of the pool. He pulled off shoes and socks, stepped down in when there was a matter of inches left. The cement had set firmly. It took several minutes to break through to the soil underneath. Then, using the pick point as a lever he broke a piece free. He got his hands on it and turned it over. The flashlight wavered. Only the soil underneath was visible. Again he inserted a curved side of the pick, leaned his weight against the handle. When it cracked free, he got his hands under it, lifted it up slowly. The flashlight beam focused on the side of a muddy white shoe, a grey sock encasing a heavy ankle. The light went out and Kathy Marrick made a moaning sound, deep in her throat.

Darrigan lowered the broken slab back into position, quite gently. He climbed out of the pool.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"I . . . think so."

He rolled down his pants legs, pulled socks on over wet feet, shoved his feet into the shoes, laced them neatly and tightly.

"How perfectly dreadful," Kathy said in a low tone.

"It always is. Natural death is enough to give us a sort of superstitious fear. But violent death always seems obscene. An

assault against the dignity of every one of us. Now we do some phoning."

They waited, afterwards, in the dark car parked across the road. When the Drynfells returned home, two heavy men advanced on their car from either side, guns drawn, flashlights steady. There was no fuss. No struggle. Just the sound of heavy voices in the night, and a woman's spiritless weeping.

At the Aqua Azul Kathy put her hand in his. "I won't see you again," she said. It was statement, not question.

"I don't believe so, Kathy."

"Take care of yourself." The words had a special intonation. She made her real meaning clear. Gil, don't let too many of these things happen to you. Don't go too far away from life and from warmth. Don't go to that far place where you are conscious only of evil and the effects of evil.

"I'll try to," he said.

As he drove away from her, drove down the dark road that paralleled the beaches, he thought of her as another chance lost, as another milepost on a lonely road that ended at some unguessable destination. There was a shifting sourness in his mind, an unease that was familiar. He drove with his eyes steady, his face fashioned into its mask of tough unconcern. Each time, you bled a little. And each time the hard flutter of excitement ended in this sourness. Murder for money. It was seldom anything else. It was seldom particularly clever. It was invariably brutal.

**D**INAH DAVISSON'S house was brightly lighted. The other houses on the street were dark. He had asked that he be permitted to inform her.

She was in the long pastel living room, a man and a woman with her. She had been crying, but she was undefeated. She carried her head high. Something hardened and tautened within him when he saw the red stripes on her cheek, stripes that only fingers could have made, in anger.

"Mr. Darrigan, this is Miss Davisson and Colonel Davisson."

They were tall people. Temple had his father's hard jaw, shrewd eye. The woman was so much like him that it was almost ludicrous. Both of them were very cool, very formal, slightly patronizing.

"You are from Guardsman Life?" Colonel Davisson asked. "Bit unusual for you to be here, isn't it?"

"Not entirely. I'd like to speak to you alone, Mrs. Davisson."

"Anything you wish to say to her can be said in front of us," Alicia Davisson said acidly.

"I'd prefer to speak to her alone," Gil said, quite softly.

"It doesn't matter, Mr. Darrigan," the young widow said.

"The police have found your husband's body," he said bluntly, knowing that bluntness was more merciful than trying to cushion the blow with mealy half-truths.

Dinah closed her lovely eyes, kept them closed for long seconds. Her hand tightened on the arm of the chair and then relaxed. "How . . ."

"I knew a stupid marriage of this sort would end in some kind of disaster," Alicia said.

The cruelty of that statement took Darrigan's breath for a moment. Shock gave way to anger. The Colonel walked to the dark windows, looked out into the night, hands locked behind him, head bowed.

Alicia rapped a cigarette briskly on her thumbnail, lighted it.

"Marriage had nothing to do with it," Darrigan said. "He was murdered for the sake of profit. He was murdered by a thoroughly unpleasant little man with a greedy wife."

"And our young friend here profits nicely," Alicia said.

Dinah stared at her. "How on earth can you say a thing like that when you've just found out? You're his daughter. It doesn't seem—"

"Kindly spare us the violin music," Alicia said.

"I don't want any of the insurance money," Dinah said. "I don't want any part of it. You two can have it. All of it."

The Colonel wheeled slowly and stared at her. He wet his lips. "Do you mean that?"

Dinah lifted her chin. "I mean it."

The Colonel said ingratiatingly, "You'll have the trust fund, of course, as it states in the will. That certainly will be enough to take care of you."

"I don't know as I want that, either."

"We can discuss that later," the Colonel said soothingly. "This is a great shock to all of us. Darrigan, can you draw up some sort of document she can sign where she relinquishes her claim as principal beneficiary?" When he spoke to Darrigan, his voice had a Pentagon crispness.

Darrigan had seen this too many times before. Money had changed the faces of the children. A croupier would recognize that glitter in the eyes, that moistness of mouth. Darrigan looked at Dinah. Her face was proud, unchanged.

"I could, I suppose. But I won't," Darrigan said.

"Don't be impudent. If you can't, a lawyer can."

Darrigan spoke very slowly, very distinctly. "Possibly you don't understand, Colonel. The relationship between insurance company and policy holder is one of trust. A policy holder does not name his principal beneficiary through any whim. We have accepted his money over a period of years. We intend to see that his wishes are carried out. The policy options state that his widow will have an excellent income during her lifetime. She does not receive a lump sum, except for a single payment of ten thousand. What she does with the income is her own business, once it is received. She can give it to you, if she wishes."

"I couldn't accept that sort of . . . charity," the Colonel said stiffly. "You heard

her state her wishes, man! She wants to give up all claims against the policies."

**D**ARRIGAN allowed himself a smile. "She's only trying to dissociate herself from you two scavengers. She has a certain amount of pride. She is mourning her husband. Maybe you can't understand that."

"Throw him out, Tem," Alicia whispered.

The Colonel had turned white. "I shall do exactly that," he said.

Dinah stood up slowly, her face white. "Leave my house," she said.

The Colonel turned toward her. "What do—"

"Yes, the two of you. You and your sister. Leave my house at once."

The tension lasted for long seconds. Dinah's eyes didn't waver. Alicia shattered the moment by standing up and saying, in tones of infinite disgust, "Come on, Tem. The only thing to do with that little witch is start dragging her through the courts."

They left silently, wrapped in dignity like stained cloaks.

Dinah came to Darrigan. She put her face against his chest, her brow hard against the angle of his jaw. The sobs were tiny spasms, tearing her, contorting her.

He cupped the back of her head in his hand, feeling a sense of wonder at the silk texture of her hair, at the tender outline of fragile bone underneath. Something more than forgotten welled up within him, stinging his eyes, husking his voice as he said, "They aren't worth . . . this."

"He . . . was worth . . . more than . . . this," she gasped.

The torment was gone as suddenly as it had come. She stepped back, rubbing at streaming eyes with the backs of her hands, the way a child does.

"I'm sorry," she said. She tried to smile. "You're not a wailing wall."

"Part of my official duties, sometimes."

"Can they turn this into . . . nastiness?"

"They have no basis. He was of sound

mind when he made the provisions. They're getting enough. More than enough. Some people can never have enough."

"I'd like to sign it over."

"Your husband had good reasons for setting it up the way he did."

"Perhaps."

"Do you have anyone to help you?" he asked impulsively. He knew at once he had put too much of what he felt in his voice. He tried to cover by saying, "There'll be a lot of arrangements. I mean, it could be considered part of my job."

He detected the faintly startled look in her eyes. Awareness made them awkward. "Thank you very much, Mr. Darrigan. I think Brad will help."

"Can you get that woman over to stay with you tonight?"

"I'll be all right."

He left her and went back to the beach to his room. In the morning he would make whatever official statements were considered necessary. He lay in the darkness and thought of Dinah, of the way she was a promise of warmth, of integrity.

And, being what he was, he began to look for subterfuge in her attitude, for some evidence that her reactions had been some part of a clever act. He ended by despising himself for having gone so far that he could instinctively trust no one.

In the morning he phoned the home office. He talked with Palmer, a vice-president. He said, "Mr. Palmer, I'm sending through the necessary reports approving payment of the claim."

"It's a bloody big one," Palmer said disconsolately.

"I know that, sir," Darrigan said. "No way out of it."

"Well, I suppose you'll be checking in then by, say, the day after tomorrow?"

"That should be about right."

Darrigan spent the rest of the day going through motions. He signed the lengthy statement for the police. The Drynfells were claiming that in the scuffle for the paper,

Davisson had fallen and hit his head on a bumper guard. In panic they had hidden the body. It was dubious as to whether premeditation could be proved.

He dictated his report for the company files to a public stenographer, sent it off airmail. He turned the car in, packed his bag. He sat on the edge of his bed for a long time, smoking cigarettes, looking at the far wall.

The thought of heading north gave him a monstrous sense of loss. He argued with himself. Fool, she's just a young, well-heeled widow. All that sort of thing was canceled out when Doris left you. What difference does it make that she should remind you of what you had once thought Doris was?

He looked into the future and saw a long string of hotel rooms, one after the other, like a child's blocks aligned on a dark carpet.

If she doesn't laugh in your face, and if your daydream should turn out to be true, they'll nudge each other and talk about how Gil Darrigan fell into a soft spot.

She'll laugh in your face.

He phoned at quarter of five and caught Palmer. "I'd like to stay down here and

do what I can for the beneficiary, Mr. Palmer. A couple of weeks, maybe."

"Isn't that a bit unusual?"

"I have a vacation overdue, if you'd rather I didn't do it on company time."

"Better make it vacation, then."

"Anything you say. Will you put it through for me?"

"Certainly, Gil."

AT DUSK she came down the hall, looked through the screen at him. She was wearing black.

He felt like a kid trying to make his first date. "I thought I could stay around a few days and . . . help out. I don't want you to think I—"

She swung the door open. "Somehow I knew you wouldn't leave," she said.

He stepped into the house, with a strange feeling of trumpets and banners. She hadn't laughed. And he knew in that moment that during the years ahead, the good years ahead of them, she would always know what was in his heart, even before he would know it. And one day, perhaps within the year, she would turn all that warmth suddenly toward him, and it would be like coming in out of a cold and rainy night. ♦ ♦ ♦

## THE MAN FROM LIMBO

*Powerful Suspense Novelette*

By John D. MacDonald

Wally Block, phony crusading reformer, was a cinch to be the rankest, richest mayor in Brasher's history—until he tipped his hand to the man who knew too much . . . and couldn't remember it!

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Plus exciting detective fare by William Campbell Gault, Westmoreland Gray and others in the April issue—on sale Feb. 1st.

"Johnny!" Alma started to shake all over. . . .



# The Dictionary Guy

By RICHARD GOGGIN

The little man had a smoking gun in his hand and a grin on his face. "You don't get the point, Jensen," he said. "How are you going to explain away this corpse . . .?"

**Y**OU KNOW the feeling in the evening when you turn the corner to your street and its just getting dark and the Christmas holidays are over. And you can almost shut your eyes and drive the rest of the way because you're home.

Because you know that seven more houses and seven more garage entrances is a house that belongs to you.

Jensen bent over getting out of the government coupé. Then he straightened up, stretching. He took his hat off and ran a hand through his short black hair. One of the Marabel kids screamed past him in a brand-new Christmas wagon and Jensen waved.

"You better watch out," the kid yelled. "I nearly mowed you down."

She opened her door and called to Jensen just as he started up the steps to his house. "Could you come here a minute, please?" She had a frog in her voice that caught on hard consonants.

"Sure," said Bill. He jumped to one side as the Marabel kid raced down the sidewalk again. Then he crossed the street and walked up the angled stone steps. She stood there in the doorway, waiting for him. "I'm Bill Jensen," he said. "You're Mrs. Peterson, aren't you?"

You meet them every now and then, their bodies a little too full, a smile that comes too quick, a pouting, thrust-out lower lip like a fighter's.

"That's right," she said. "Alma Peterson." She couldn't seem to get going for a minute. Then she said, "I've just been putting dinner in the oven. I'm a mess."

"Oh, no, you're not," said Bill. And stopped suddenly. They both laughed self-consciously.

"I wanted to ask you if you read very much."

Bill looked at her. "Read? Now and then. Nothing special. Why?"

He began to notice it. He'd gotten his mind back where it belonged and he could actually feel her fright. She tried to laugh naturally.

"Have you got any large dictionaries? You know, the big ones. The unabridged?"

What the hell is coming off here, thought Jensen. "Why, no," he said. "As a matter of fact, I haven't."

She threw her head back as if she were trying to remember something she'd memorized under stress. "I wonder if you'd be interested in a two-volume set of Webster's Unabridged?" Her voice began to rattle. "They come in an attractively bound set that won't rip or tear or get dirty. And besides, we're making a special offer of a five-year encyclopedia service."

She couldn't help herself. As she talked she fumbled with the neckline of her house-dress. Her hands came into motion and her whole body began to move. "It's actually the best buy in the Bay Area, Mr. Jensen."

**B**ILL felt embarrassed for her. And nervous. Something was too forced. Too eager. "I really don't think . . ." he started to say.

The fright sprang back into her eyes, as if she only kept from pleading with him by a tremendous effort of will. "The encyclopedia service only costs thirteen cents a week. And the dictionaries are free."

"It's just that I don't want any," he said. "I'm sorry but—"

"They'd be wonderful for your front room or your den." She rushed on. "Anywhere in the house." She was nearly shaking. Finally she made up her mind. "Come on in. Don't stand there in the doorway, Bill." She got caught between a blush and a panic. "You don't mind if I call you Bill, do you, Mr. Jensen?"

"Why, no," said Bill. He paused on the doorstep a moment. "I'll come in, but you're wasting your time. I don't need any dictionaries."

Her eyes suddenly welled with tears.

"What's wrong? What's wrong, Mrs. Peterson?"

"Nothing," she said. She tried to straighten up and make her pitch, but something gave way. "I . . ." She sat down on the living room couch like a rag doll a kid had kicked the stuffing out of. "I . . ." she repeated. She burst into tears.

"I want to tell someone," she said. "I have to tell someone."

Jensen just about understood her words through her tears. "Go ahead," he said. "Go ahead, Mrs. Peterson. Get it off your chest."

"I can't tell my husband," she said. "He's a good guy." The tears came again. "No tramp like I am."

Jensen felt naked standing there listening to her. "That's no way to talk. What's troubling you?"

"It's this dictionary guy," she said. She chewed the words and spat them out. "He's making me sell them."

"I don't get it. Who is this guy? What's he done to you?"

She froze. She pulled a handkerchief from her housedress and began wiping her eyes. Then she looked at her wristwatch, a tiny round little Elgin that clung to the under side of her right wrist. "I have to stop," she said. "My husband'll be home any minute. Please, Mr. Jensen, don't say anything about this to anyone, will you?" She paused. "Promise?"

"Sure," said Bill. "I promise." He waited a moment. "I'd like to help you."

She looked at him with startled, suspicious eyes. The tears welled again.

"I mean that. Lord, we live across the street. I don't know what's bothering you, but if you want to tell me, maybe I could give you a hand."

She looked at the Elgin and made up her mind. "Could you come back tomorrow morning?" Even in the midst of her upheaval her hands began to wander toward her neckline. "Tomorrow morning about nine?"

Bill thought rapidly. "I could make it."

She kept drawing deep breaths one after the other. "Yes, yes," she said. "Nine will be fine." She nearly pushed him toward the door and then grabbed at his coatsleeve. "You will come. You will, won't you?"

Bill stood there looking down at her.

An awkward friendly feeling swept through him. "Of course. I just told you I would." He opened the door and turned to leave.

"And don't tell anybody," she begged. "Not even your wife. Please!"

"I won't. Don't worry about it."

JENSEN leaned back in his chair. He looked down the long rows of buyers, expeditors, clerks. So he should have told his wife. So he should have his head examined, sticking his nose into something like this Peterson business. His hearing seemed unaccountably clearer than usual and the noises of the office hit him one after the other. The telephones, the typewriters, the adding machines, and the incessant hum of fifty people talking to each other, to someone on the phone, to themselves. He jerked forward in his chair and got up.

"Paul." He stopped in front of Paul Nathan's desk.

"Yes, Bill?" The assistant chief of the department looked up.

"I'm going to run out to the Bethlehem plant on Thirty-eighth Avenue. I want to jog them on some castings that are due the end of the month."

"Sure, sure," said Nathan.

Bill parked his coupé at the end of the street, the short end near the city reservoir. What the hell am I worried about? he wondered. So a couple of the neighbors do see me. He started down the street. So my wife sees me. He hesitated a moment, then backed up and cut through the south end of the reservoir.

The short cut took him out just above the Peterson's house. He hesitated again, looked up and down the street, and then ran quickly up the steps to the door.

He'd barely touched the bell when the door opened. She didn't have a housedress on. A string of beads looped twice around her neck and slid into a low-cut street dress. She held out a hand to Bill that felt loose and warm. "I'm glad you came, Bill," she said. He tried to drop her



hand but she clung to his. "Come on in," she said. "I'll fix us a cup of coffee." Her eyes were brighter this morning and she seemed easier. "You must think I'm an awful fool."

"No, I don't." Bill walked past her and sat down on the living room couch. "I simply wondered what was eating you, that's all."

She disappeared into the kitchen and came back in a few minutes with two cups of coffee. She placed them on the low table in front of the couch and sat down alongside him. "I'm scared," she said. She moved closer to him. "I'm glad you came. I think I would have gone nutty if I hadn't been able to talk to someone."

"That's good," said Bill. He sat there and waited.

She wiggled embarrassedly. "I don't know how to begin this." The second she began talking about it, her eyes darkened. She left the couch abruptly and began walking around the room. By the window, she stopped and faced him. "I met a guy. A dictionary salesman. He came by the door a couple of weeks ago and fast-talked his way into the house. . . ." She paused.

"Yes?"

"He—he got fresh. He made—advances."

"Oh." Jensen let his imagination toss that around a bit.

"I don't know what got into me." She made it a simple statement of fact. "I couldn't help myself." The panic crept back in her. "He's no good. I'm scared he's going to kill me."

"Take it easy. Why do you think he's going to kill you?"

The fear in her was bad enough, but her hands kept clenching and unclenching as if they were wrapped around someone's neck. Boy, thought Bill, this woman was in rough shape.

"He keeps coming back. Day after day. He takes things from me. A ring. Money. Little bits of it. A dollar. Five dollars."

She walked back and forth before the low coffee table. "It's driving me out of my mind. I'm scared to tell my husband. I'm scared to go to the police." She stared down at him. "A week ago he made me begin selling his dictionaries. He made me." She stopped. And then the tears stopped. "I don't know what to do. I don't know how to get out of it."

"You've really got yourself a jam," said Bill.

SHE moved around the coffee table and Jensen buried a sudden impulse to move to the opposite side. She sat down beside him again, all soft and helpless. "What am I going to do?"

"I guess I'd call in the cops. This boy sounds real nasty. I wouldn't fool with him."

"But then my husband'll find out."

She smelled good. In fact, wonderful. "I'd still call them," he said.

"You want to see what he did to me?" She pulled down the left shoulder of the street dress before Bill could say anything. Her shoulder was round and soft. Just below an old vaccination there was a large ugly discoloration. Bill pulled his eyes away from it and they stared at each other. Then she let her arms fall by her side, loosely.

They didn't hear the key in the front door. When they looked up he was standing in the entrance to the front room, staring at them. "You having fun with her?" he said. He was a little guy, dressed in a plain grey business suit. He had on black shoes, not too well polished, and he carried a beat-up grey hat in his hand.

Jensen jumped up from the couch.

"Johnny!" Alma looked up at the guy as he walked toward them. She started to shake all over.

"You're a bad girl, Alma," the guy said. "Go on into the bedroom and straighten yourself up."

Jensen unfroze and started for him.

The guy took a stubby gun from his

shoulder and pointed it at Jensen. "Don't be a hero."

Mrs. Peterson started crying.

"Go on, Alma. Do like I told you."

She stared at both of them for a moment and then ran into the bedroom like a little girl.

Jensen tried to shake himself out of it. He ought to be in the office. It was only 10:30. Perry would be expediting and he'd be buying. That was the way it was. The dictionary guy said, "I asked you what your name was." He held the gun loosely in his right hand.

"Huh?"

"What's your name? I want to know."

It was his voice. "Jensen," said Bill slowly. "Bill Jensen."

"My name's Carey. Johnny Carey. How are you?"

"Good." The word slipped out of Bill's mouth and hung there, popping and unexpected.

"I'm glad. You live around here, Bill?"

Jensen nodded.

"Married, I suppose?" The guy shook his head almost apologetically.

The burn began coming. "Listen, Carey—"

"Shut up. Shut up and you listen." He took out a notebook and began writing in it.

You can feel it, thought Jensen. The room's loaded with it. This guy isn't even crazy. He knows what he's doing.

"I want you to sell some dictionaries for me," the guy said. He laughed brightly. "I need the money."

"What the hell's coming off here?"

"I'll tell you," the guy said patiently.

"If you'll only listen." He put away his notebook. "You're going to sell dictionaries for me because I caught you with Alma Peterson and you wouldn't want your wife to know about it." He held the gun up a little so Jensen could see it more easily. Then he tucked it away in his shoulder. "Maybe I'll even ask you for ten or

fifteen dollars a week on the side." He grinned. "I don't know. I haven't come to that yet."

The guy must be crazy, thought Jensen. You don't talk about extortion like this. You get excited and the guy is always dressed like a razor and there's a white handkerchief standing up in his breast pocket.

Carey's eyes flickered once toward the bedroom. "You get the sales pitch from Alma. I don't have the time to train you."

When he was gone, Alma came out.

Jensen kept shaking himself. He fumbled in his pocket and took out some cigarettes. "You want one?"

"Please, please." It took her nearly thirty seconds to light up from Jensen's match.

"The guy's nutty."

"No, he isn't," she said. "He's not nutty at all. That's what I thought at first."

"Then . . . ?"

"He likes it." She waited a little. "He knows what he's doing, all right. You'll find out."

The Marabel kid whooped down the street in the gathering darkness. He didn't see Bill till it was too late and his wagon glanced off Bill's shin. "What the hell's the matter with you?" he shouted after the kid.

The kid's laughter drifted back to him, thin, derisive and frightened.

**D**OROTHY JENSEN opened the door and kissed him. "How'd it go?"

"Okay, okay," said Bill.

"Well, excuse me while I drop dead. I was only asking." She was tall and slender. She had a quiet, oval face and long blonde hair tied at the back of her neck in a big bun.

Bill knocked a coat hangar loose in the closet and bent over to pick it up. He put his coat on it, swearing under his breath. "I'm sorry," he said. He thought desperately for a minute. "That damn office is

running me ragged. This armament program's got everybody jumpy. They're shaking up the whole department."

"Oh." Dorothy stood in the doorway between the living room and the kitchen, looking at him. "Is that all, Bill? I thought last night you weren't really feeling yourself."

He looked back at her and fought down the inclination to tell her. "Sure, that's all."

"All right. Go on in and sit down. I'll fix us a martini."

"I could use one." The words came right from the soles of his shoes. He walked into the living room and sat down in his chair.

Dorothy handed him a martini and took a sip from her own. "Boy," she said, "some people and their children—"

Bill twisted in his chair. "What happened?"

"I met the nastiest little guy today," she said, "that I think I've ever met."

The martini spilled on Bill's leg.

"What is it? What's bothering you, Bill?"

He took out his handkerchief and wiped the trouser leg. "Nothing's bothering me. I spilled a martini. Is there a law against it?"

"All right." She took another drink of her martini and then put a cigarette in her mouth. "Give me a light, will you, Bill?"

He took out some matches, lit one and held it up for her as she bent over him.

"Thanks, darling." She walked back and sat down on the couch. "About three o'clock the doorbell rang and when I answered it, here was this little man standing there." She began to laugh at the recollection. "He was absolutely the worst phony I've ever seen. He gave me this high-powered sales talk about some dictionaries and tried to force his way into the house."

"What was his name?"

"I don't know. Carey, or something like that. I took one look at his dictionary and that was enough. Nothing burns me up as

much as people trying to make a fool out of me."

He tried to be casual about it. "What happened?"

"I threw him out of here so fast he never knew what hit him." She patted the bun of hair at the back of her neck. "I've half a mind to call the Better Business Bureau. I'd bet my bottom dollar the whole deal was crooked."

"Why stick your nose in?"

"Oh, I didn't. But I'm still tempted to."

"Now, look . . ." He finished the martini and set it down. "Why don't you let people mind their own business?"

"For heaven's sake, what's eating you?"

Bill jumped. "I don't know. I feel lousy. Let it go at that."

"All right." Dorothy picked up the martini glasses and walked toward the door. She stopped once, hesitated, then shrugged her shoulders and continued into the kitchen. "It'll be about twenty minutes," she called in. "The meat isn't quite done yet."

"MR. JENSEN?" The operator's voice was bright and cheerful. "I have an outside for you. You want to take it at your desk?"

"Okay," said Jensen. He drummed on the desk a moment, waiting.

"Hello, Bill."

"Hello? Hello? This is Jensen talking. Who's this?"

"It's Johnny Carey," the voice said. "I was having coffee and I thought I'd like to talk with you a while."

Jensen glanced around the office. "What's on your mind?" He paused and the fear began riding him. "I can't talk to you here. Can I call you back?"

"You can talk to me here," the guy said. He laughed. "You are, aren't you?" He waited a moment. "Well?"

Jensen picked up a pencil and began scratching on the memo pad in front of him. "What do you want?"

"I want to know how the dictionary sales are going. I want to help you, Bill."

Jensen pointed the pencil and dug it into the memo pad.

"Talk up, Jensen. I can't hear you when you mumble." He sounded as if he had all day.

"I can't talk to you here," Bill repeated. "I work here. They're watching me."

"I don't care," said Carey. He came to the point. "You sold any yet?"

"No," Bill said hesitantly. "It's only been yesterday."

"Get busy then," Carey said. "And listen, the next time I call you up, talk to me. Don't tell me your troubles."

Jensen hung up just as Nathan walked by. "Who was that?" asked Nathan. He paused by the desk curiously.

"What?"

Nathan looked at him. "Well, don't bite me. It's your business."

"I'm sorry, Paul." Bill tightened his grip on the lead pencil. "I'm still trying to shake that guy loose on those castings."

"Oh," said Nathan. "I know what you mean. Don't knock yourself out on it, Bill."

"Thanks, Paul." When he walked away Jensen flung the broken ends of the lead pencil into the wastebasket. He looked at the papers in front of him, but nothing made sense. He looked around the office once, shook himself and got up.

Kelly's Cafeteria was a half a block from the office. There was a large paneled telephone booth in the men's room. Alma answered right away.

"Hi, Bill, how are you?" She sounded real happy.

"Hello, Alma." He hesitated a moment and then decided to go along with her. "When do I learn this sales pitch?"

"I'm so glad you're being sensible about it. I told—". The frog tittered in her throat.

"You told who—"

"Oh. I'm just being silly. What I

meant is that I'm glad you're acting sensible about the whole thing."

"You been talking to Johnny?" He tried to make his voice completely casual.

"Why, yes," she said. There was a little pause. "Why, yes, as a matter of fact I have. He thinks it's better if we meet each other somewhere away from the house. Less talk, you know."

"You sound as if you were snowed under again, Alma."

"I don't want to talk about it. You understand? You understand me, Bill Jensen? I just don't want to talk about it."

FOR a fleeting second he wondered if Carey were standing at her shoulder, prompting her. "We can't go around crawling to this guy the rest of our lives, Alma."

"Listen, Mr. Jensen"—her voice rose two octaves and a shrill quaver, nearly a whine, crept into it—"when I want your advice, I'll ask for it."

"Okay," he said. "Keep your shirt on. Just remember that what I do is my business."

"Oh, no, it isn't. You're in this just as deep as I am." In back of the whine her back arched and she spat it out. "If you start anything this whole thing is going to hit the *Examiner* with a splash you'll never hear the end of."

She's balmy, he thought. One move and she'd probably do it. But in spite of himself he began to burn. "I thought you wanted to get rid of this guy."

"Maybe I've changed my mind."

It came to him very slowly. Carey was right. It was like a game to her that she couldn't stop playing. "All right, Alma," he said. "You win." But if I'm right, he thought, she's playing me off on Carey just as hard. "Johnny a little jealous?"

The arched back quieted down and she purred. "Maybe," she said. "How'd you guess?" She sounded like a three-year-old girl, bright and curious.

"It just hit me. You know, Alma, I really think Carey is in love with you."

"He doesn't love anybody but himself." The words burst out of her like a geyser.

"I think that's right, too. But why else would he tell you to stop seeing me at your house?"

She paused. "I've changed my mind," she said suddenly. "You come on out tomorrow morning. What time is best for you?"

He almost laughed out loud. "Nine o'clock. I'll tell my boss I'm inspecting at Bethlehem." He waited a moment. "You sure Johnny won't mind?"

"I'll worry about Johnny." She sounded as if she'd mulled something over and felt almost confident.

**B**ILL stood there, ringing the bell halfway up the wall on the left side of the house. The door had a tiny iron grill on it, like an old-fashioned speakeasy entrance. He rang the bell again, shifting from foot to foot and glancing swiftly up and down the avenue. Finally he grabbed at the brass doorknob and pulled impatiently. On the pull it banged to and when he pushed back with the reflex it swung wide for him.

He stood there nervously a moment or two, then stepped over the brass door sill and raised his voice. "Mrs. Peterson?" He sensed there were open windows in the house. On the kitchen floor to the left of him he saw the quick flickering shadows that the blowing curtains made.

He raised his voice louder. "Mrs. Peterson! Alma! Are you in?" He turned from the warm sunlight in the kitchen and started toward the cool darkened living room, when he stopped. He paused there, sweating, while the air from the living room blew coldly and heavily against him. Then he pushed himself forward one step at a time.

She was stretched out on the low green couch in a white play suit. It was like a tennis dress with a short pleated skirt. And

for one confusing moment she looked very beautiful. Then he began breathing again and she was a dead housewife named Alma Peterson, a little on the plump side, whose face had a neat black hole in it and was twisted in terror.

"She can't play with you any more."

He spun around toward the voice. Carey had stepped out from behind the door to the living room. He held the stubby little gun steadily. The grey sack suit still looked as if he had taken a short nap in it. But something was in the voice that hadn't been there, as if something he had been holding back was destroying the flat brittle hatred.

The guy's really crazy, thought Bill.

In spite of Carey's concentration, his eyes flicked sideways to stare at the dead woman. "I warned her," he said. "I . . ." He pulled himself together with an effort. "But that doesn't interest you and me, does it, Bill?"

"How do you think you're going to get away with this, Carey?"

"That isn't exactly the point, Jensen. The point is how do you think *you're* going to get away with it?"

Bill stood there, watching him.

"You're supposed to be out at Bethlehem, aren't you, Jensen?"

"Go ahead," said Bill. "You're doing pretty good."

"That I know. Now I'll tell you what you really did. You drove out here to keep an appointment with Alma. When you got here, she told you she didn't want anything more to do with you. And when she told you that, you shot her." His eyes wavered again to the couch and the gun hand drifted with it.

"Why'd you do it?" asked Bill. Then he realized he didn't have to. It fitted. "You were in love with her, weren't you, Carey?"

The drifting stopped.

"I have to laugh. The tough guy. Where's all your armor, Johnny?" To get

him off balance, Bill thought. For one second. He forced a dry chuckle. "Lover-boy Carey. I'll be damned. You didn't really want anyone to have a good time with her, did you, Johnny? Not me, not her husband, not anybody but Johnny Carey." He inched forward on the rug. "You were jealous, weren't you, Johnny?" He waited a moment and then drove it home. "Jealous because you knew damn well she really hated your guts."

The arm wavered, drifted sideways, and Jensen leaped. As he hit the rug with Carey beneath him, he heard the gun clatter against the wallboard. He struck once, feeling the soft give in Carey's stomach, and then dove for the wall.

**W**HEN he came up with it, the dictionary guy was standing up straight, watching him with a twisted steady grin. He reached slowly and lazily toward his shoulder while Jensen pulled the trigger.

"If you'd just asked me for it, I would have given it to you, Bill. I bought it specially for you." He grinned crookedly. "There was only one bullet in it. That's in Alma." His hand came down from the shoulder with the twin to the gun in Jensen's hand. "All right, Bill," he said. "You can put it down." He paused. "Slowly. Don't let those fingerprints get all smudged."

It's like when you've reached for a step that isn't there. And the terrible down, down, down feeling is all you know.

"You're right," Carey said. "I did love her." Jensen caught a feeling of vast distance, nearly a worship.

"But she was playing with you, wasn't she, Johnny?"

The guy shifted his grip a little. "Maybe you're right. But she won't any more."

He's talking himself into it, thought Jensen. Another minute and he's going to let go. He began inching forward again.

"Go ahead," Carey said. "Maybe you'd rather have it this way than sweating it out

through a trial. It'd be easier this way."

Jensen froze.

"Now you're acting smart. With a good lawyer and enough money you might talk yourself out of it." Two or three small beads of sweat gathered on the dictionary guy's forehead and trickled down toward his eyes. He reached up and wiped them away. He looked at the watch on his wrist and nodded. "Back up." He took two steps toward Bill.

Jensen inched backwards, watching the guy steadily. "You'll never get away with it."

"I'll get away with it." Carey moved past him toward the door. "I'll read about it in the papers, Bill. And when I do . . ." He stopped at the door and grinned. "Why, I'll come forward like a public-spirited guy and tell my story." He opened the door. "The ballistics will do it. The ballistics and your little story to the boss about Bethlehem." He chewed it over for a moment as if he were straightening out the story in his own mind.

"I've been in Oakland all week. New territory. I'll be shocked by my former customer's death." He tried to settle the mask once more, but his eyes flicked again toward the dead woman. "I'll see you," he said. "Have a good time."

**W**HEN the door slammed, Jensen leaped toward the phone, stopped, and began shaking with anger as the realization of Carey's words bit into his mind. How the hell the guy knew about Bethlehem . . . He spun around and stared at Alma. Her left arm was hanging loosely over the edge of the couch, clutching a torn piece of paper. Jensen ran over and pulled. The fingers were already stiffening around it. He pulled at them until he was able to remove it.

It was a piece of her calendar pad. She must have taken down what he'd said to her, word for word. He crumpled it up and stuck it in his pocket. He started for

the phone again and froze when he heard the crash in the street.

He raced through the doorway leading to the kitchen and ran to the open window. The Marabel kid's wading pool was right opposite. Two top sailboats were drifting idly on the muddy water. Then he saw Carey's Ford in the middle of the street. It was rammed broadside into a Chevvie sedan. There were two guys in sack suits climbing out of it. Jensen looked twice before he saw Carey crouched down beside the Ford.

The dictionary guy had his gun in his hand, firing. The shot sent the two guys scrambling behind the Chevvie. Carey watched them for a second and then turned and dashed for the house. Jensen tore himself from the window and leaped for the side of the door leading from the kitchen to the hall. He heard Carey's shoes rap up the stone steps. They stopped once and two more gunshots clapped into the hall and through the house. Jensen caught the quick flash of the long dark shadow enter the hall and the next second he was on top of him.

They went down with Jensen's knee buried in Carey's stomach. The dictionary guy caved in and Jensen grabbed the gun from his hand. He could hear one of the men outside shouting. "Take the back way. I'll take the front. Don't rush. I know he's hit."

Jensen crouched on the floor and released the magazine catch. He yanked the magazine out, pressed the spring quickly and flipped one small greasy shell into his hand. Then he rammed the magazine home into the gun he took from his pocket. He stared at the other gun for a second. Then he raced for the open kitchen window and sighed with relief when the gun and shell disappeared in the little concrete wading pool.

When he got back to Carey he saw the glaze in his eyes and the tiny hole in the grey vest and the bright little clot of blood

around it. He raised his voice and yelled. "Don't shoot. I've got him." He yelled it over and over till the guy at the front of the house finally answered him. Then he bent

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over the dictionary guy and lifted him by the lapels. "Carey, Carey," he said, "can you hear me?"

The guy moved his head.

"I just wanted you to know I think you're smart, Johnny." He lifted Carey a little higher and shook him. "The ballistics ought to do it, huh, Johnny?"

Carey tried to do something, but instead he began coughing up blood all over his imitation Foulard tie. When the two guys rushed in, Jensen stepped aside for them. They watched Bill for a second and then bent over Carey, but his eyes were already closed.

One of the guys looked up. "You live here?"

Jensen shook his head.

"You know this guy?"

Bill nodded.

"What the hell was eating him? We only wanted to question him. Some woman named Jensen phoned the Better Business Bureau. Said he was pitching a bum dictionary. Something like that."

"You're cops?"

They nodded.

"That's right," Bill said. "I'm her husband. He's just killed a woman, too. She's

in the living room now. Take a look."

One of the guys ran into the room. The other one stared at Jensen. "Where do you fit into this?"

Jensen watched him a moment. "I was trying to help her," he said. "She was all messed up with this guy."

"You'd better come along with us. They'll want your story."

They let Dorothy in to see him about three o'clock. "Are they going to hold you?" It seemed like the only question on her mind.

"I don't think so," said Bill. Everything began focusing. "The lieutenant here seems to think there'll only be an inquest."

"That's good. That's real good."

"It'll still be a mess," he said. "Probably the papers—"

"So it's a mess. Then we'll be out of it."

He wondered for a second if she knew everything or was just guessing. Then he realized it didn't matter anyway. "Thanks," he said.

When she was nearly to the door, she stopped and turned around. "I forgot to tell you. I saw the Marabel kid when I was coming down. He wanted to know if your shin was all better." ♦ ♦ ♦

## Bloody Hands

SERVING A LIFE SENTENCE in Arizona is an Apache who probably never heard of Shakespeare but who could give Lady Macbeth a few pointers about the indelible stains murder leaves. Back in 1935, Golney Seymour killed Henrietta Schmerler, a white student of Indian lore, at the East Forks settlement, Arizona. G-Man J. A. Street, assigned to the case, could get no proof or incriminating testimony from the rest of the tribe against Seymour, so he subjected the tribesmen to a test with "magic water." The water when it touched the hands of the killer was supposed to turn to blood. Everybody passed with flying colors—except Seymour. On his hands the water turned a violent red, and he confessed.

The trick? On Seymour's hands G-Man Street used colorless orcin, which turns red upon contact with acid. An Indian's skin is strongly acid because of a heavy meat diet. The moral is: Avoid meat—or murder. Or G-Man Street.





"You want this ring back?"  
he'd said. "All you got to do  
is ask. . . ."

By **JOHN  
P. FORAN**

# BLONDE STAND-IN

Now, for the first time, Eddie understood how it was between them. And he couldn't let her die—even though she'd asked for it. . . .

**C**HARLIE DAVIS had the phone to his ear, listening patiently, when Eddie Lane came into the detective room with an assignment slip in his hand. Charlie looked up.

"Just a moment, Mrs. Hunt," he said

quickly into the phone. "Here's Eddie now."

Eddie dropped the slip on the desk. "A guy named Brulacher—shot dead." He took the phone. "Hello, Florence," he said, perching on the edge of the desk. "How's every little—"

"My husband is back, Eddie." Her voice crouched tensely in his ear, rushed on anxiously. "And he keeps calling me, telling me what he'll do when he gets home from the office. I—I've never heard George talk this way, even when he's drinking. Eddie, I'm scared."

Eddie pushed his hat back. Every other time George came home from his swing around the New England shoe factories—his nasty mind feeding on the suspicion that Florence was running around with other men while he was away—he would get drunk and slap her around.

"You better go over to—to your sister's," he said. Even now he couldn't get Nita's name past his lips. "Stay there until George sees it off."

"But Eddie, George might follow me, make trouble for Nita—"

"No, he won't." He'd told George what would happen if he ever went near Nita's apartment. "Do as I say," he said patiently. "It's the best way."

"All right, Eddie. Eddie, I—I know it isn't fair to involve you, but you're the only one I can tell—"

"Sure, sure," he said. "Any time, Florence."

He put the phone down. The way she stuck by that louse, and so quick to defend him when anyone said a word. He'd thought Nita loved him that way—she was Florence's sister—and he was glad because that was the way he'd gone for Nita. All out.

Until the night Nita saw him taking Blossom Keeler into the Swan Club. Everybody, including Nita, knew about Blossom, but he'd also assumed Nita knew he wouldn't be caught dead with a girl like Blossom except he was on a job.

The next night when he went over to Nita's and didn't bother to explain, she flew into a rage. She hurled accusations, vases and ashtrays, and drove him from the apartment.

He'd never quite understood Nita's impulsive explosive nature. He was a big man, slow-moving, quiet in his ways, and he found a mixed bewilderment and delight in Nita's sudden moods and shivery pleasures. But that night he saw her outburst through George's nasty and completely unfounded suspicions, and the scene became an ugly thing.

He tried to forget, and sometimes he did for a while, and then Florence would call him about George and it would sweep back over him.

"Well, well, Harold Brulacher!" Charlie tilted back in his chair and grinned at the assignment slip. "So one of Harold's girl friends finally gave him the business!"

"What?" said Eddie blankly. "Who?"

"You don't know about Harold's fancy way of shaking off a dame he got tired of?" Charlie picked up his hat and set it on the back of his head. "He'd get real mean, see? Get the dame so mad she'd want to kill him, and that was Harold's cue. He'd hand her a gun loaded with blanks and she'd pull the trigger and Harold would grab at his chest and flop on the floor."

Eddie moved impatiently. "Let's get going."

He left Charlie with his mouth open. Charlie glared at the phone. He got up and followed Eddie out to the car. They headed for Harold's house.

CHARLIE eyed his partner, but as usual Eddie's big square face, set hard, gave no indication of what was going on inside. Charlie wasn't quite as big as Eddie, dark hair, small even features, quick gray eyes. He hesitated, then went on cheerfully.

"So the dame, thinking she'd killed Harold, would scam. Then Harold's lawyers would appear and talk about attempted

murder and prison terms, only they'd rather avoid the scandal, so if she would sign papers promising she wouldn't bother Harold again—"

He chuckled and said, "But this dame was smart. She must have slipped a live shell into the gun and—"

"Yeah, yeah," said Eddie.

"Well, if you know," growled Charlie, "why didn't you say so? Say what's with you and this Mrs. Hunt, anyway?" he growled. "For four months, now, every time she calls you aren't fit to live with."

"If you don't like it," said Eddie, as he slammed the car to the curb, "you can ask for another partner."

Charlie's hand tightened on the door handle. He said, "If that's the way you want it," and started out.

Eddie caught his arm. "I'm sorry, Charlie, that was a stupid thing to say."

"Oh, I talk too much," said Charlie quickly. He climbed out. "Let's wrap this one up."

They nodded to the patrolman standing in front of a small renovated building squeezed between two towering apartments and walked up a flight of stairs.

A short dapper man stopped peering through an open door and minced toward them. "I'm Anton Pell, the manager," he offered.

"Yeah, sure," said Eddie, and stepped into a large living-dining room. An immense blue-glass fireplace dominated the right side of the room. An oriental rug ran from under an oversized divan, past a dining suite on the far side, and lapped at the bookcases and window drapes lining the left wall. The rug also ran under a body sprawled in the middle of the room. A patrolman turned from the street window as they stopped by the body.

Harold lay on his back, right leg drawn up so the foot was under his left knee. A wide red stain where his shirt was belted under grey slacks narrowed up to a scorched hole just below the heart. Neither detective

actually saw Harold's large florid face, pale grey eyes and brown hair. They didn't care enough.

Eddie looked around, and the cop's pointing finger targeted a snubnosed .38 on the table flanking the divan. A brilliant light stabbed Eddie as he moved. He saw a diamond ring beside the gun.

"Funny thing," said the cop. "The gun's loaded with blanks!"

Eddie picked up the ring. The diamond was at least six carats and blazed with a flawless intensity. Charlie pursed his lips in a soundless whistle.

Eddie tossed the ring, caught it in a big fist. "Where is she?"

"In the bedroom, there." The cop jerked a thumb at the hall opening off the back of the room. "Won't talk, won't say a word, just says she shot him. Pretty, though, and she's got a shape that's—"

"Yeah, yeah," said Eddie, and stepped into the hall. The first door on his right was open, the bedroom, and he swerved in. He stopped so suddenly Charlie bumped into him. A tight, half-suppressed "*Nita!*" escaped Eddie's lips.

Nita rose to her feet, her blue eyes widening on him, her soft lips parting for a choked, "Eddie! Oh, I'm so glad to see you!" She rushed at him, clung to him, quivering.

For four months he'd ached for the feel of her in his arms, and now he felt only a dull burning anger. He reached up and broke Nita's grip. He pushed her away.

Charlie looked on in stunned silence.

Nita fell back. "Eddie, you're here officially?" She sank weakly into the chair.

"Officially." His voice was impassive. "Did you kill Harold Brulacher?"

"Yes, Eddie."

**H**E HESITATED. He knew Harold's type of woman, flashy blondes with mask-like faces and manufactured bodies. Nita wore a simple black frock, a mere trace of make-up, yet even with her blonde hair

mussed and her blue eyes dimmed with tears, she had a loveliness no amount of sophistication could match.

But the ring was in his hand, and there was the knowledge that only one kind of a woman visited Harold's apartment. He couldn't stop it, any more than he could stop showing her the ring and asking, "For value received?"

Nita stiffened. "You know that's not true, Eddie."

"I do? How do I know? Do you mean I should trust you?"

Nita bit her lip. "I guess I deserve that."

"Modest girl," said Eddie mockingly.

Nita slumped into the chair.

Charlie cleared his throat, moved between them. "Why did you shoot Harold?" he asked.

Nita said dully. "He wouldn't give me the ring." She looked down. Her hands were gripped tensely in her lap. She relaxed them. "Harold showed me the gun and said, 'Go on, shoot me,' and the gun went off and—and frightened me. I think I ran. I seemed to wake up in my apartment—"

Charlie frowned. "You left here and then came back?"

"I forgot the ring." Her voice was low and remote. "I was going to call the police, and the door opened and the manager came in—" She lifted the tips of her fingers to her temples, pressed them back into her hair.

Eddie moved suddenly. "Let's go. We can get her statement at the house."

"Eddie." Nita got up quickly. "I—I know what it looks like, Eddie. A man like Brulacher—now I know what a fool I was for not trusting you."

"Now you know," said Eddie. "Now I don't give a damn." He turned and walked out.

The remote look came back in Nita's eyes. She started out. Charlie put out a hand.

"What's your full name?"

"Nita Morrow."

"Do you know a Mrs. Hunt?"

"She's my sister." Nita stiffened. "Florence doesn't have anything to do with this!" she said swiftly.

"Nor with Eddie," said Charlie. "It was you. What happened between you and Eddie?"

Nita flushed. She said, "Blossom Keeler."

"Blossom!" Charlie made a face. "Not Eddie!"

"I know," she said helplessly. "I know!"

"This is a mess." Charlie scratched the back of his neck. He sighed. "Well, let's go."

The manager looked hopeful as they came out. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Did you hear the shot?" asked Charlie.

Anton nodded eagerly. "Yes, I was upstairs, talking to another tenant, Mrs. Steele. You see, she keeps complaining the boy doesn't walk her dog—"

"What time was it?"

"About six, I think. The way Mrs. Steele talks and talks. I went down to my office. I kept thinking I heard a shot, we've had so much trouble with Mr. Brulacher, so I came back up—"

"How long after you heard the shot?"

Anton hesitated. "Well, about fifteen minutes. You see, Mr. Brulacher can—could get very nasty at times, but I opened the door anyway, and she was standing by the telephone, so I called the police and—"

"Thanks." Charlie touched Nita's arm and they went down the stairs.

Back in the detective room, Eddie stood staring out the window while Charlie typed out Nita's statement. Nita Morrow, 26, born in New Jersey, employed as secretary to Mears, Hamel & Mears, brokers . . .

A pretty blonde girl whose apartment had been burglarized. The way her blue eyes sparkled when she came to the precinct to identify her fur coat. She had insisted on a reward—if not money, then would Eddie come to dinner the next evening? Her keen

interest in his police work. He was on the force six years. Detective, first grade, preparing to take the lieutenant's exams. The way she liked to boss him, especially when she curled up in the sofa with one of his examination books and hurled questions at him. "You're going to be a *good* lieutenant if I have anything to say!" she would tell him.

THAT had done it. He'd been afraid of her sudden, inexplicable moods. Yet even when they quarreled over things he couldn't understand, she called him and said she expected him to have his next lesson letter perfect. No matter what happened, she always made him feel his work was important.

"Why did Harold promise to give you the diamond ring?"

The question smashed Eddie's thoughts, and he waited tensely for Nita's answer.

"Harold promised to give me the ring if I went up to his apartment," she said in a low voice.

Charlie's typewriter remained silent. "Do you realize what that implies with a man of Harold's reputation?" said Charlie.

Nita was silent. Eddie felt Charlie's eyes on him, then the typewriter keys rapped heavily against the report.

"Sign here, please. . . . Now come with me."

Eddie turned from the window and slumped in a chair. He was staring woodenly at the floor when Charlie came back.

"I got a feeling about this one, Eddie," said Charlie. "Something off-key." He waited, probing Eddie's set features. "You going to ask off this one?"

Eddie looked up. "No, why should I?"

"You and Nita. A defense attorney could—"

"I'm not holding back on her account."

Charlie came over and put his hands behind him on the edge of the desk and sat on them. "There's been times when you near drove me nuts nailing a case down solid.

But I always went along, I sort of liked you for it, for making sure you were absolutely right. But the way you're bulling through this one—"

"She's guilty, isn't she?"

"That's what I mean," said Charlie quietly. He went back to his desk and started to read a newspaper.

"She confessed, didn't she?" Eddie glared at his partner. "What am I supposed to do?" He jumped up and stared out the window. The newspaper crackled as Charlie turned another page.

The door opened and a woman came in slowly, carefully. Charlie didn't look up from the paper, and her eyes swung on to Eddie. She stopped. "Eddie."

Surprised pivoted Eddie. "Florence, what are you doing here?"

"A man called Nita's apartment," she told him. "He said Nita was arrested."

Eddie shot a baleful glance at Charlie's bent head. He said heavily, "Nita shot and killed Harold."

Florence took it in the same careful way she'd come into the office. Quick thought moved in her eyes as she backed to a chair and sat down. She was a little heavier than Nita, her hair a few shades darker, her face marred by lines of tension about her eyes and mouth.

She said carefully, "It's all my fault, Eddie."

The newspaper crackled as Charlie dropped it in his lap. "Tell us about it," he said.

The lines about Florence's mouth tightened. "I went to a cocktail party this afternoon—the Websters," she said, looking up at Eddie. "You've met them, Eddie, they're nice people, and I get so lonely with George away on his route—"

"Did you go alone?" asked Charlie.

Florence nodded. "Harold offered to take me home," she went on, "I knew his reputation, and he'd asked about me, found out my husband was out of town, but another couple left with us, so when Harold

suggested we all go up to his place for a last drink, I didn't see any harm. Then Harold asked to see my ring—"

**E**DDIE looked down at Florence's left hand. "Your engagement ring."

"Yes, Eddie. Harold said he wanted to buy one like it for his girl friend. He wouldn't give it back. He went into a silly routine about a forfeit, a kiss for the ring—after the other couple left. I knew what Harold would be like if I stayed, so I left without the ring."

"What's the name of the couple that went up there with you?" asked Charlie.

"Joan and Peter Krantz." Florence gave him their address and went on. "I was frantic. I knew what George would say if he came home and found the ring missing. So I called Nita. She told me to go home and not worry. She'd get the ring and bring it to me. She must have rushed over to Harold's and—and—" Her voice choked off.

Eddie said, "Go out and see Sergeant Rickey. He'll give you a few minutes with Nita."

Florence licked her lower lip. "Eddie, I think George knows," she said slowly, carefully. "The way he talked on the phone, his voice gloating, hinting about things happening to Nita and me while he was away. I think he came back ahead of time and followed me. He's done it before, and he couldn't know about Nita unless he followed me to the drugstore and overheard me phoning her."

Charlie leaned forward. "You mean he'll testify against Nita?"

Florence hesitated. "I—I don't know," she said uneasily. She came to her feet, her hands clasped tightly about her handbag. "Nita needs you, Eddie," she pleaded, "and you know what to do. You're a good detective, Nita always said so. She said you saved a man once. Everybody thought he was guilty—"

"Old Zeke Linhof," said Charlie.

Eddie gave him a look. "Nita shot Harold. It's a matter of record; there's nothing I can do about it."

"Eddie." The lines about Florence's eyes and mouth were like taut wires. "I know Nita should have trusted you; no matter what happened, she should have stuck by you. But she was so afraid, somehow—"

"Afraid of what?" demanded Eddie.

"Of you—of everything. Even as a child Nita was that way—so eager to be loved, so quick to be hurt."

Eddie's face remained impassive. Florence glanced helplessly at Charlie. He said gently, "Go in and see Nita."

Eddie turned back to the window. Nita afraid of him, after the way she'd bossed him? Made him buy bright ties and colored shirts, and get haircuts, and wouldn't let him eat starchy foods because he was putting on too much weight? "I'm taming you," she'd told him, "fixing it so you can't live without me."

He was the one who had known fear. Something he'd say or do, he never knew what, and Nita would be cross and unreasonable. He'd be filled with a nameless dread. He'd find himself saying things, he was a brute, he had no right to treat her this way, would she please forgive him?

For what? What had he done?

No matter what, he thought, echoing Florence's words, she should have stuck by him. The thought broke. That worked both ways, and Nita was in trouble, facing years in prison if she didn't get help.

He cleared his throat. "Charlie, you still got that feeling?"

Charlie's answer was explosive. "That's the stuff, Eddie!" He was on his feet, reaching for his hat. "You talk to Nita, I'll check back over Brulacher's, the Krantz couple—"

"Wait, Charlie!" said Eddie, alarmed. "You talk to Nita. I—"

"Are you on this case?" Charlie wanted to know.

NITA jumped up as Eddie came into the detention room. "Why did you have to drag Florence into it?" she demanded. Her blue eyes flashed angrily. "You know George will make her life miserable when he finds out!"

He'd expected anything but this. "I know how Florence feels," he said stiffly.

Nita colored swiftly. "I waited for you to explain about Blossom," she said defensively.

"Would that have changed anything?"

"Yes! A woman likes to know, and you were always so composed, so sure of yourself! You never let me feel you needed me."

He stared at Nita, remembering how many times she'd insisted he tell her he couldn't live without her, the way she'd quivered when he did.

"I can live without you," he said, "but it isn't worth the effort."

"Eddie!" Her eyes filled. "It's that way with me, too!"

"Sit down," he said. "We have a long uphill climb ahead of us."

He guided her from Florence's phone call through her visit to Harold's apartment. She'd made the mistake of telling Harold about George's jealousy, and Harold had used it as a lever to get more than a kiss. She'd fought off Harold's advances, and suddenly he'd had a fit of laughing, as though it was a huge joke. Then he'd handed her the gun.

Eddie frowned. "We can make a case of it," he said. "You went up there to save Florence and Harold goaded you into shooting him—we can establish that routine—a plea of temporary insanity, maybe a light sentence," he finished reluctantly.

"Eddie, can't you keep Flo out of it?" she said anxiously. "Get the ring back to her before George finds out?"

Eddie brushed it aside impatiently. "I can't be bothered with that now." He got up. "Maybe I won't get you off, Nita, but we'll put up a good fight."

"I won't mind so much now," she said.

He caught her suddenly, crushed her against him. "As long as we have something to live for," he said.

Charlie was sitting in the car outside Harold's house when Eddie arrived in a taxi. He probed Eddie's expression. "Old poker face," he growled. "How'd it go with Nita?"

"Guess I was pretty dumb. A tramp like Blossom, I should have explained."

"Who knows what to do when it comes to a woman?" said Charlie cheerfully. "I checked with the Krantzses. They came out about twenty to six, left Florence standing on the curb very much upset."

Eddie nodded. "Nita got her call shortly after."

"I've been thinking, Eddie." Charlie pushed his hat back. "The time it took the super to get up to Brulacher's, Nita's story about shooting Harold, running away and coming back—I don't know. Nita covered for Florence on the ring. Let's take it another step. Let's say Florence went back up to Harold's. When he refused to return the ring, she shot him. Then she phoned Nita and they talked it over and Nita agreed to take Florence's place—

"Now don't jump me," he said as Eddie started to interrupt. "I realize Florence would have shot a blank. But I'm assuming someone who had access to Harold's apartment and wanted to get even with him slipped a live shell into the gun. We can work that out later. Right now here's the way I figure it. Florence is a married woman; she visited a bachelor's apartment; it's a crime of passion. Not so good. But if Nita went up there to protect Florence and wound up fighting for her honor—that's much better, isn't it?"

"No good," said Eddie flatly. "Nita wouldn't lie to me. And she tried to keep Florence out of it, didn't she?"

"Sure, she's playing it smart."

Eddie hesitated. He kept remembering the careful way Florence had told her story.

Her belated admission that George knew about her visit to Harold's apartment. Maybe she was treading carefully between her sister and her husband, fearful for Nita and of her husband. Maybe she was, as Charlie figured, the key to the case.

"I don't buy it," he said, "but I was going to stop by Florence's and make sure George doesn't slap her around. Let's go ask Florence about it. Let's make sure."

He took the wheel and drove uptown to an apartment house just west of Broadway. They walked up three flights. Eddie stopped at the Hunt door, started to ring the bell. A muffled shout came through the door. A heavy object shook the walls, thumped on the floor.

"He's home." Eddie jabbed his thumb at the bell button.

**G**EORGE opened the door. The violence they'd heard moved in his whiskey-flushed features, his heavy breathing. "Well, what do you want?" he said sullenly.

Eddie put out a big hand and pushed George aside. In the living room Florence was poised behind a wing chair, her hair mussed, a bruise high on her left cheek, angry red thumb marks on her throat. A triangular chunk of plaster was gouged out of the wall behind her.

Ignoring her embarrassment, Eddie crossed the room and picked up a metal bookend. He tossed it to Charlie, who hefted its weight and glared at George.

"What I do with my wife is my business," blustered George. He went over to the table and poured an inch of whiskey out of a half-filled bottle. He gulped it down. "Well?" he said defiantly.

"So you know about Nita and Harold Brulacher," said Eddie.

"It doesn't surprise me." George wiped the back of his hand across his cruel mouth. Over it his eyes slid around to Florence. "I know the kind of women who go up there."

"You know a lot," said Eddie. "You followed Florence this afternoon, and when she went up to Harold's you were sure you'd finally caught her being unfaithful. Even after she phoned Nita and told her about Harold keeping the engagement ring."

George stared at Eddie, his eyes slitted. Florence stood behind the chair, watching her husband.

"Eddie." Charlie looked around, as though seeking a place to set the bookend. "I got it right in the palm of my hand, only I don't know what to do with it."

Without taking his eyes from George, Eddie said, "Hang on to it." He watched George pour another drink, and as George gulped it down, he said, "So you killed Harold, George."

George didn't choke on the drink. "Don't say things like that," he grinned. "Florence is a nervous woman."

Florence had gasped at Eddie's abrupt charge. The lines on her face came taut. "That's not true, Eddie," she faltered. "It can't be!"

George went over to the television console and leaned an elbow on it. "Nita shot Brulacher, Eddie." He smirked. "She confessed, didn't she? So you just try and prove otherwise."

"I will," said Eddie quietly. "You waited for Nita. You know she's quick-tempered, you figured she'd make a scene and you'd kill Harold and put the blame on her. When she fired a blank at Harold and ran away, you thought she'd handed you the chance to commit the perfect crime."

"And I suppose Brulacher cooperated?" sneered George. "He waited for me to put a live shell in his gun and shoot him?"

"You held your gun on him," said Eddie. "The one you carry on the road when you handle large sums of money."

"That's your story," said George coldly. "Like I said, prove it."

"You're not so smart, George." Eddie



moved a step away from Charlie. "There's two sets of marks on a bullet. One from the gun's rifling and a second mark made by the press of the shell casing. Ballistics will prove the bullet came from the kind of shell you use—"

George stiffened. "Lies! All lies!" His voice rose to an angry bluster. "I have an alibi! I was right here in this apartment when Nita shot Brulacher!" He glared wickedly at Florence. "Tell them I was here!"

"George." Florence's hands squirmed on the back of the chair. "Nita is under



arrest for murder. She'll be sent to jail—"

"What do I care!" shouted George. "Tell them I was here!"

Florence's mouth opened, twitched spasmodically.

"That's that," said Eddie. "Let's see your gun, George."

"All right, I'll show it to you!" George's hand came from his hip, holding a .38. "Look at it, wise guy, not a blank in it. Yes, I shot Brulacher with his own gun. I put a bullet right in the middle of the burn made by the blank, and now I'm going to kill you! And you!" He turned on Florence, his eyes blazing wildly.

"Now look, George," said Charlie soothingly. He took a step away from Eddie. "You had a reason to kill Harold. Jealousy. But this will be premeditated murder. You'll get the chair."

"Stand where you are!" George swung the gun on Charlie, cursing.

Eddie moved a step in the other direction. George swung the gun again, and as he did so, Charlie hurled the bookend at his head. Eddie fell away, his hand darting

inside his coat. George ducked the book-end. Flame spat from his gun. Eddie fired a split second later.

George staggered back, then fell forward. His hands and knees couldn't hold him. He fell flat on his face. Florence's shrill scream faded into hushed silence.

Eddie got to his feet. "Nice going, Charlie," he said.

Charlie was staring at the small round hole in the wall inches from his head. "Good thing I shaved this morning."

Florence was crumpled behind the chair in a dead faint. Eddie picked her up and stretched her out on the sofa. He chafed her cold hands while Charlie examined George. "Still alive?" he asked.

"Yeah, he'll live—for a while."

"Thanks for keeping my feet on the ground, Charlie," said Eddie.

"Just call me Cupid," said Charlie cheerfully. He tilted his head, looked down at Florence. "Say, she looks kinda pretty when she's relaxed."

"A lot of woman," said Eddie. . . .

**N**ITA got up as Eddie unlocked the detention room door and came in. "What is it, Eddie?" Her blue eyes probed his big square face. "Is—is Flo all right?"

"Your release." Eddie handed her a slip of paper.

"Eddie, I'm free?" she said, bewildered. "I can go?"

"I'll explain it on the way," he said. "Right now Florence needs you."

Nita started out. "Eddie . . ." she said uncertainly.

"It's all right," he said quickly.

"No, I must tell you. I'm such a fool, I keep doing such foolish things."

"I should have explained about Blossom."

She took his arm and he felt her quiver as she said happily, "I guess I'm in love with the smartest detective on the force!"

He smiled. "The luckiest," he corrected.



# Case of the

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Ladies' Man

**N**EM PARSONS leaned back in his swivel chair, rubbed a reflective thumb across a smooth, pink jowl, and surveyed his caller with blue eyes as wise and innocent as an infant's.

A plain, drab, black-clad woman faced him, hands clasped tightly in her lap, worn

# Come-Hither Corpse



Nem pointed to the stain on the baseboard.  
"That's blood, Mr. Sutton—fresh blood!"

*A Nem Parsons Story*

**By**

**WINSTON BOUVÉ**

The curving lips and blue eyes cast a come-hither appeal. How could she know that the Grim Reaper would respond so ardently?

face twitching with worry. But her halting story kept the old detective alert and interested.

"And there's no trace of her, hide or hair, since she left the Suttons and started home. I'm near distracted, Mr. Parsons—not that Rose Miller was as dear as a daughter to

me, being only my husband's niece and a girl who wouldn't take a word of warning or scold from any one—but she's young and flighty, and hasn't a soul but me to look after her."

Parsons puckered his lips, squinted thoughtfully at the cabinet photograph Mrs. Miller had laid upon his desk. From the water-marked sepia folder a plump, pretty face, lit by laughing, coquettish eyes that must have been blue, smiled at him.

The girl's face was shallow and her beauty might have lacked distinction. but Nem knew that those soft, big eyes, that curved mouth and dimpled chin, spelled allure to most men. There was something pitiful about the photograph. It was so like a challenge to a game already won.

For that sweet, come-hither look would attract men who could best Rose Miller easily and willingly; that rustic beauty, fresh and lovely now, was destined to early ripeness and decay.

"Must have been a mighty pretty girl," Nem said softly.

The inadvertent past tense caught the woman up with a gasp.

"Must have been—then you think what I do! Rose never ran away, Mr. Parsons. She had no reason to, winding me and her uncle around her finger as she did. I thought of that first off. And if she'd run away she'd never have left all her good clothes, her savings, like she did.

"And who'd she run away with? She liked George Link best of all the fellows she had hanging around. But she didn't like him well enough for that—a fickle, changeable girl like Rose! Besides, he's as worried as I am. Clean crazy about her, George is."

Nem grunted, passing an enormous hand tenderly over the greying fluff that fringed his baldness and made him look like an elderly cherub.

"George Link, who has the garage, corner of State and Elm? Nice-looking young fellow."

He hadn't been on Bridgehaven's police force for twenty-seven years without knowing a good deal about every one in the small manufacturing city and its environs. Link, he knew, was a hard-working, efficient young mechanic, who had become owner of the garage he had spoken of, in spite of his wild ways.

For George Link was wild, in the parlance of Bridgehaven; attractive to women, with his black hair and ruddy coloring and splendid physique, and attracted by them; able to hold a vast amount of liquor after a grilling day's work, and still beat all comers in the pool parlor.

Nem felt a sudden prescience of tragedy. The instinct that made him as good a detective as he was, told him that Rose Miller was in sore need of aid—or possibly beyond it.

"Yes," her aunt in law said dully. "If only she hadn't played fast and loose with him she'd be better off now. Something's happened to her, Mr. Parsons—something terrible!"

Nem patted her shrunken shoulder reassuringly.

"Now don't go imagining things, Mrs. Miller. I'll go see Link, and then I'll drop in on the Suttons, where she works. They might know something they didn't think to tell you over the phone."

NEM regretted, as he heaved his vast bulk up out of the chair that encompassed it, that Arthur Sutton and his wife had to be involved in the affair, and all that it foreboded.

For the Suttons had had their share of tragedy already. Sutton had brought his wife to Bridgehaven seven years before, when he became professor of economics at the Industrial College on the outskirts of the city. They had not occupied the pretty brick bungalow two years when an automobile accident had left Alice Sutton a cripple for life, paralyzed from the waist down, chained to bed or wheelchair.

Sutton had dedicated his life to the care of the invalid; and, whatever the cost to the man, he had fulfilled his tragic obligation beyond the letter.

When Nem had parted from the troubled little woman on the steps of the red-brick building that was headquarters, he turned up State Street toward Link's garage.

During the short walk in the April sunshine he checked off all that he had been told, all that he had gleaned, from Rose Miller's aunt. And when he faced handsome George Link as that individual crawled out from under a truck, it was with conviction.

"My name's Parsons," Nem began, mildly. "Rose Miller's aunt came down to headquarters this afternoon, feelin' real worried about Rose—"

Link flung down the greasy wrench he held, wiped his hands on his overalls.

"If she hadn't, I would have." His dark eyes glittered. "Want to step into the office? We'll be more private there."

He preceded Nem into a cluttered, dingy little room, cleared off one of the two chairs with a sweep of his elbow for his caller, and dropped into the other.

"I suppose you think I know something about her. Ask anyone who was at Riordan's pool last night if I wasn't there from half past nine till midnight, missing most of my shots, waiting for her!"

He ripped out the words savagely.

Nem dug a leisurely thumb into the bowl of his aged pipe, waited for Link to vent the anger that boiled within him.

"A little after ten I called up Sutton's house, and Mr. Sutton said she'd just left. Wherever she went she didn't come here, as she said she would. And that's all I know, except—"

"Except that you've got some idea of what might have happened to her," Nem finished for him.

The young man's black eyes flickered, fell. He was obviously ridden by fear, not for himself, but for the girl. Ridden too with

an uncertainty about what to tell Nem.

"Just that, Mr. Parsons. I'm not saying it did happen, but the housekeeper where Rose works—Rose is sort of companion nurse to Mrs. Sutton, who can't walk—has it in for Rose, and on my account." He hung his dark head, struck the battered oak desk with the flat of his hand.

"Reckon I'd better come clean with you. The housekeeper up there—Ellen Clark, her name is—and I, well, we kept company until Rose came along. Ellen's older than I am: she's forty anyway, and I guess she likes me a lot. Women her age sort of get batty about a man, sometimes.

"I'm not holding any brief for myself, but it wasn't all my fault. Then when I met up with Rose, it was all off. Ellen took it hard, all right. But she soon saw that her ranting around wouldn't do any good. So she took it out in being nasty to the girl."

Nem, squinting through his smoke, filled in to his own satisfaction the gaps in the story.

"And last night, Ellen's night off, she came down here to the garage right after supper and made an awful rumpus. She was wild, all right. She cried, and raged, and—threatened." Link's voice was low, toneless as he recounted the scene. "She swore she'd kill Rose if I didn't stop seeing her, even if she had to swing for it! I laughed, and she took herself off. And Rose never showed up. That's all I know."

## CHAPTER TWO

### Wild Woman

NEM drew on his pipe, mammoth hands resting on his knees.

"Weren't you kind of uneasy?" he asked meekly.

Link made a vicious stab at the scarred desk with the penknife he was playing with.

"Not then." A sudden red crept up to his temples. "Rose doesn't keep all her dates with me, you see. She's got me com-

ing and going, Mr. Parsons. I—I take a lot from her that I wouldn't take from any other girl in town."

There was pathos in his look, and Nem remembered the challenging coquetry of the sepia photograph. But he was too anxious to take the next trolley out to the Suttons' home on Golden Hill Avenue and interview Ellen Clarke to offer more than brusque solace.

"She may turn up any time. Don't worry, and keep quiet until you've heard from me."

He saw the street car lurch around the corner, and lumbered toward it. His flapping grey clothes, his clumsy girth and gait, made him elephantine, ludicrous. But he swung on to the trolley ahead of the men who had been waiting for it, and seated himself far up in front, close to the motorman.

He nodded to the scattered handful of passengers.

"Business kind of dull this time of day, isn't it?"

The motorman chuckled, not averse to breaking the rule placarded above him.

"It's lively compared to what it is later on; lots of times I make the run from Golden Hill into town with the car empty. Easy shift, mine. From four to midnight."

"Guess you know most everybody that gets on and off, then?" Nem mused, and leaned forward confidentially to catch the answer on which hung more than the motorman could guess.

When he got off the street car at the foot of Golden Hill, he contemplated the climb ahead of him. The last rays of the sun illumined the hill, cast a sort of glamour upon the modest dwellings that dotted the avenue sparsely. For Golden Hill had never been developed as much as other outlying sections of Bridgehaven. Ten minutes' walk brought Nem to his destination—the last house on the street, just over the crest of the hill.

The Sutton bungalow stood well back

from the street, on a lonely site. Beyond it stretched empty fields that would one day be plotted off into neat suburban streets. Behind it, below the flower and vegetable garden that bespoke Arthur Sutton's hobby, the lot degenerated into swamp land that had yet to be drained.

Nem mounted the veranda steps, rang. But it was not Ellen Clarke who admitted him. A tall, gaunt man with tired eyes and dark hair streaked with grey, greeted him courteously.

Nem stated his business diffidently, was grateful for the professor's response as he showed him into the book-lined study to the left of the center hall.

"We'll be glad to tell you all we know, Mr. Parsons. As a matter of fact, Rose Miller's aunt got in touch with you at my suggestion. She called up several times during the morning. My wife and I are very much worried, naturally. Care for a smoke?"

Nem took the proffered cigar, sat gingerly on the worn leather chair. He rather liked Arthur Sutton. His slender, bony face was a mask that he had probably schooled himself to wear. But his eyes burned through it hotly.

"Unfortunately I can't tell you much. I went out directly after supper last night. I am tutoring one of my pupils in mathematics—Lloyd Dodge, on Walnut Street." The ghost of a smile touched his lips.

"My pay isn't adequate to all my needs, unless I take on outside work. We worked there until ten, and I strolled home, in spite of the light rain and his offer to drive me back. It was just ten-twenty when I unlocked the front door.

"The phone was ringing. It had waked my wife, who was already in bed, asleep. Some man asked for Rose, but she had left some time earlier, it transpired, after getting Mrs. Sutton to bed." He paused. "My wife is very much of an invalid, you see. When Rose didn't come at her usual hour this morning we were puzzled, for she

has been very faithful. And when the aunt called up to ask about her . . .”

He shook his head in perplexity.

**N**EM scratched his creased pink neck with a pudgy forefinger.

“Mind if I go out and talk to the house-keeper?” he asked. “It seems she and Rose Miller weren’t very good friends, but she might know something about the girl.”

He heaved himself up.

“Ellen Clarke?” Arthur Sutton flicked off the ash that tipped his cigar. “Certainly. She’s a competent, capable sort of woman. Indispensable to us. But she had little enough in common with Rose.”

He preceded his caller down the pleasant center hall of the bungalow, off which the various rooms opened, to the kitchen.

Through its western windows the setting sun sent its shafts of light upon the immaculate blue and white workroom, upon a tall, deep-bosomed woman who was paring po-

tatoes at the sink, lost, apparently, in deep thought.

She looked up, and Nem saw a heavy-boned, rather sullen face between smooth wings of black hair. Her eyes were lightish, hard as agate. Only a handsome, sulky mouth redeemed her from absolute plainness. And that betrayed the volcanic violence of her, at which George Link had hinted.

“This is Mr. Parsons, from police headquarters,” said Sutton. “I’ve told him all we know of Rose Miller.”

Nem saw the woman’s thick brows meet, heard the clatter of the knife as it dropped. She raised her hand to her lips, sucked at the bright thread of scarlet that appeared between thumb and forefinger. Nem tendered a large, clean handkerchief, and clucked sympathetically under his breath.

“Right dangerous peelin’ potatoes with a big knife like that. Apt to cut yourself bad.”

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She moved her heavy shoulders impatiently.

"What should I know of Rose Miller?"

If the old detective had ever seen hate, it smoldered in her eyes now.

"We're trying to figure out where she is, and why," Nem said. "You know any reason why she should run away like this?"

Sutton leaned against the wall, arms folded, thin face immobile. Once more Nem got the impression that he was too absorbed in his own tragic problems to be anything but remote.

The housekeeper's colorless skin seemed to go a shade paler.

"No. Wherever she is, good riddance to her! Smirking, doll-faced—"

A soft creaking sound stopped her tirade against the missing girl. Nem turned to see a rubber-tired wheel chair, propelled by the woman who sat in it, glide over the threshold. Alice Sutton had been a pretty girl, might have been a handsome woman. But, though she was no more than thirty, the indefinable aura of age was about her.

Her pallid skin was taut over her cheekbones; her grey eyes were sunken; her smooth, parted chestnut hair gave her the look of an austere madonna. A tragic figure, all told, with her thin, fragile hands emerging from the loose sleeves of her dark red dressing gown, her helpless limbs covered by a light robe.

Her eyes met her husband's, and Sutton explained Nem's errand.

"I can't tell you precisely when she left last night," Mrs. Sutton said, wrinkling her pale forehead. "She got me to bed a little after nine, and gave me my sleeping medicine. Mr. Sutton was out, and it was Ellen's evening out as well. I told Rose to run along, without waiting for Mr. Sutton to come back.

"She was tidying my room when I dropped off. I have a vague memory of hearing the door close—and then the ringing of the telephone awakened me, some time later. My husband had just come in

and was answering it. The call was for Rose—"

"I told Mr. Parsons about it."

Sutton rearranged a pillow at his wife's back, and she thanked him with a pale smile.

Ellen Clarke wiped her powerful hands on the crash toweling close at hand.

"She went off in a hurry, Mrs. Sutton—such a hurry that she didn't stop for her raincoat. It's hanging in the outside pantry!" she told them defiantly, with a jerk of her dark head toward the door in question.

"And it was raining hard between nine and ten," Nem mused aloud.

He lumbered across the kitchen in his soft, creaking shoes and opened the pantry door. The small cubicle was used almost as a storeroom. A sink occupied one corner; a washing machine and other articles of household equipment filled most of the available space; but just opposite the door was a row of hooks. From one hung a green raincoat.

"This it?" Nem asked.

A little surprised gasp from Mrs. Sutton answered him.

"Yes. Why on earth didn't she wear it? Her frock was light, too—"

But Nem was inside the dark little room, taking the garment from its hook, kneeling with a grunt of discomfort to examine baseboard and floor.

Not one of the three could see what held him tense and expectant. He rose at last, round pink face inscrutable and solemn.

"She didn't wear it because unless I'm mightily mistaken, she didn't leave this house alive, Mrs. Sutton." His blue eyes fastened upon the frightened, ashen face of the housekeeper, who was plucking at her apron.

"I knew when I came up here that she hadn't gone back to town by trolley last night, as she always did. Now I know more than that." He gestured to a dark, brownish stain on the baseboard that the girl's green coat had concealed. "That's



blood, Mr. Sutton—fresh blood. She was probably lying here, dead, when you got in last night!”

Arthur Sutton passed a dazed hand over his forehead.

“I . . . such a thing couldn't have happened!” he muttered mechanically. “Lying here—good God!”

Alice Sutton clutched her husband's hand, and Nem looked at her with compassion.

“I'm sure as if we'd already found her.” He looked away from the housekeeper's livid face. “We'll have to search.”

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Under the Sod

NEM'S mournful certitude wrenched a shuddering sigh from the invalid's lips. It evoked a defiant challenge from Ellen Clarke.

“I don't believe it!” she cried. “If it's true, it's no more than what she deserved!”

“Ellen!” said her mistress sharply.

Nem looked at the trembling housekeeper.

“Where did you go after you left George Link's garage last night, Miss Clarke?”

She glared at him, terror on her face.

“So this is his doing? Your snooping around here—oh, I could kill him, and her too!” She laughed on a hysterical note. “But I didn't, God knows!”

“Mighty foolish of you to go down there with your threats,” he said softly.

Alice Sutton spoke in a breathless whisper, one thin hand at her throat.

“I—I knew nothing of all this. What does it mean?”

Sutton quelled the housekeeper with a look.

“Is it necessary that my wife listen to all this? She isn't strong enough to stand such a scene, Mr. Parsons.”

He was behind the wheelchair, and he touched his heart with a slight, significant

gesture. Nem glanced over at her pityingly.

“'Course not; just make her comfortable, and come back to me.”

Sutton guided the noiseless vehicle out through the kitchen to the front of the house. Nem surveyed the housekeeper, waved her into a chair with a curt nod of his head.

“You haven't answered me, Miss Clarke. Where'd you go after you left George Link at the garage?”

Her hands twisted feverishly in her lap; her light eyes gleamed with fear and malevolence.

“I went—walking.”

“Alone?” Nem persisted.

“Alone. Oh, I was mad enough to strangle her. I'll grant you that. I reckon you know why. He was mine, George was, until she came along with her simpering face and yellow hair. But I took it out just in walking last night. It was pelting rain, but I didn't mind that. I walked out Easton way—miles and miles, I guess!”

“Meet anyone?” Nem inquired mildly.

She shook her head.

“Not a soul. It was close to one when I came in. I'd sat on a stile, thinking, for I don't know how long.” Defiance edged her tone again. “I suppose you're looking for an alibi; why don't you find your dead girl first!”

He couldn't help pitying anything so consumed by venom. She was an embodied fury as she crouched there in the kitchen chair, glaring up at him.

“Reckon I will.” He turned to face Sutton, who had come back, and was looking from one to the other. “Guess I'll have to ask you to show me around, Mr. Sutton. It oughtn't to take long.”

Sutton shivered, his eyes still resting upon the housekeeper, as if she were exerting some strange charm over him.

“Of course. I still can't believe . . . Where do you want to look?”

“Start with the cellar,” Nem suggested.

The master of the bungalow led the way

through the storeroom, with its gruesome mark of violence, to the cellar door. His flash lighted Nem's creaking steps down the short flight, while he followed just behind.

The basement was a tidy, barren place. The coal bin was empty, yawning black under the shifting disk of light. The partitioned-off vegetable closet at the far end contained only a few cabbages and perhaps a bushel of potatoes, beneath which not so much as the body of a cat could have been hidden. There was no shed, no possible place of concealment.

"Nothing here, thank God!" Arthur Sutton murmured, mopping his forehead.

He showed the strain imposed upon him by the gruesome task, and Nem felt again that this was an unnecessary evil to fall upon these people, who had already borne so much.

But he peered into the furnace and found its firepot, its grate and ash receptacle clean and guiltless.

"Stopped the furnace, I see."

"The past week's been unseasonably warm," Sutton reminded him. "Mrs. Sutton likes the fireplaces. Finished down here?"

NEM covered the last foot of cement, which gave no sign of having been tampered with, and sighed his assent.

"Satisfied. I'll say you're a careful housekeeper, professor. You got your cellar slicked up nicer'n most."

Sutton ignored the praise.

"Where next?"

Nem pondered, one hand on the stair rail.

"No upstairs to your place, is there?"

"Nothing but an unfinished attic, which is more air space than anything else."

"How do you get up to it?"

"Only by ladder, and that's out in the tool house—up through a trapdoor in the center hall."

Nem smiled.

"Not likely that any one would carry a dead body up a ladder and through a trapdoor when it'd be a whole lot easier to carry it out of the house. The likeliest way to dispose of a corpse is the ordinary way, Professor. Burial. And you've got plenty of ground."

Sutton followed Nem upstairs, and they passed directly outdoors from the storeroom. Nem stood beside his pale, perturbed host, looking down the slope into the little dell that formed the garden. Only a small, unpretentious building that seemed destined for a garage stood between the bungalow and the swamp land.

"How far does your land go, Mr. Sutton?"

"Down to that wire fence this side of the swamp."

"H-mm!" With ponderous, easy tread Nem lumbered down the path that led to the small building, tried the door with a rattle of its padlock. "What's this, a garage?"

Arthur Sutton nodded.

"If ever I can afford a car, yes. Right now I use it as a tool house."

"Keep your shovels and picks in here?"

"Yes, but the place is always locked."

Nem rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"Who's got the key?"

"It always hangs in the outside pantry," Sutton told him. "Where you found the bloodstain."

"Mind getting it?" Nem asked, peering through the panes, and turned to watch the professor's wiry stride up the small slope to the bungalow. He emerged from the outside pantry a moment later with the key dangling from his forefinger, swung down the path to the tool house, and unlocked the swinging doors.

The interior of the tool house, like the cellar, spoke a good word for Sutton's orderliness. At the far end stood a carpenter's bench, clean of shavings. A tool cabinet bespoke his handiness. Rakes, shovels and hoes hung from nails on the studding

of the little shack, all oiled and polished and clean.

A suit of blue-denim overalls hung from another peg, above a clean pair of rubber boots. These Nem inspected with a casual air, and photographic certainty of detail. He came to a pile of gunnysacks stacked neatly in one corner, felt them. They were damp, sufficiently impregnated with fresh loam to soil Nem's hands. And on one he discovered a tiny green plant.

He looked up, under lip puckered between his teeth, to see Arthur Sutton staring out of the window, toward the bungalow. He looked troubled, eager perhaps to be with his wife in this time of stress.

"What are these for, Mr. Sutton?"

The man started, as if his thoughts were elsewhere.

"Those are fertilizer sacks. I'm saving them because I get a dime rebate on each. Look out—they're covered with garden loam. I just finished spading my early garden before the rain. I wanted to get the fertilizer in—"

Nem straightened with a grunt. He appeared to have gleaned all he could from the tool house. He stood in the doorway, looking over the land.

"You haven't planted yet, have you?"

"Not yet," Sutton said in that tired voice of his. "I'll do it as soon as the ground dries a little more. It's pretty damp down there."

"Reckon gardening's your hobby, Professor," Nem said. "Do you depend a lot on your garden for your greens?"

"Yes. And I'm a bit late getting things in this spring. I started my hotbed earlier, though," he vouchsafed as he saw Nem's round eyes fasten upon the cement cold frame that nestled against the bottom of the south slope. It was perhaps six feet long, and four wide, with thin cement walls two feet high on the north side, sloping to a foot high on the south,

Nem directed his steps there. The glass panes had been removed and were stacked

in orderly array against the wall. The tender, early grass of the lawn bordered the frame; and the look of it to the south attracted Nem's interest. It seemed to have been recently beaten down as with a roller, or some heavy weight, for the length of the hotbed, and was just beginning to straighten up again. The hotbed itself was planted with serried rows of radishes about an inch high. But these brought a puzzled frown to Nem's brow. They should have been flourishing, yet they drooped forlornly above their rich soil.

He bent grotesquely over them, pudgy hands resting on his knees.

"Radishes look kind of peaked, Mr. Sutton. Funny for 'em to wither down, after last night's rain."

But he had no need of calling Sutton's attention to this irregularity. For he, too, was staring at the hotbed, eyes intent, pale face set.

"You're right," he told the detective in a brittle voice. "I'm gardener enough to know that these plants have been tampered with. But—why?"

NEM'S own voice quivered with excitement as he acknowledged the fear that leaped into the other man's eyes.

"They've been taken up and replanted, within twenty-four hours," Nem said. "It was done in the dark, too—or else done mighty carelessly, for the rows aren't a mite regular."

Arthur Sutton was a canny man. He dashed a hand across his brow. "It's the size and shape of a grave, Parsons."

Nem nodded.

"It is a grave. The Miller girl's. I figure whoever made it her grave thought that resetting the radishes would keep anyone from looking further down. Kind of lucky that radishes can't be transplanted without withering on the next day. Lucky, too, I came up today, before they got strong and healthy again."

Sutton touched the little muscle that

throbbled steadily in his lean, dark jaw.

"Horrible!" Yet he seemed to believe Nem's theory, unwillingly enough. "But the dirt—where was it piled?"

Nem pointed to the trampled-down grass.

"Those burlap fertilizer sacks in your tool house were used to protect the grass. And—I found a young radish plant on one of the sacks. Let's go get a spade and see how near right I am."

He had to guide the other man back to the tool house. Arthur Sutton walked like a man in a daze.

"Could Ellen—would she have thought of anything so macabre?"

"She's big and strong enough," Nem admitted gravely. "And she hated Rose Miller enough to kill her." He picked up two shovels, halted by the pile of sackcloth. "Want to lay down the sacks to keep your grass fresh?"

Sutton shook his head.

"Good God, no! Let's find out as soon as we can."

They retraced their steps, and with ruthless disregard for the tender, withered plants, threw out the moist loam in spadefuls.

Scarcely two feet down, Nem's shovel found a soft obstruction which made him withdraw the implement quickly. Sutton stood by, transfixed with horror, while Nem ladled handfuls of earth aside.

A bit of light blue cotton appeared, then a tendril of yellow hair peeping beneath a ragged square of sackcloth. Soon they looked upon lost Rose Miller as she stared up at the sky with sightless, astonished blue gaze, fixed now upon eternity.

"Poor child!" whispered Sutton.

Nem, still holding the square of burlap that had protected her soft, round prettiness from the desecration of loose earth, uttered an untranslatable sound. He was staring at her stiff, folded hands, arranged as reverently as any corpse's for burial.

Between the cold fingers were laid a

handful of withered crocuses; and in the midst of the faded flowers there protruded, from the girl's breast, the horn-handled knife that had found its sheath in her heart.

"God!" said Arthur Sutton, and turned away.

Nem covered the pitiful, blind face with the sackcloth, looked past his companion to the bungalow on the hill. He was thinking of Ellen Clarke and the knife she had used to pare potatoes. This small sharp blade, buried in the crimsoned bosom of the dead girl, must have come from the rack above the sink.

"We won't leave her like this long," he said, and they made their way to the house.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Odes for the Dead

THE inquest took place in Reynold's Undertaking Parlor at noon the next day. After the legal formalities, lean, lank Tom O'Malley, chief of Bridgehaven's police force, walked back to headquarters beside Nem in sulky silence.

At the station he followed Nem into the dreary little den the latter chose as his office, flung himself irritably upon the edge of Nem's flat-top desk.

"Why you haven't arrested the Clarke woman for the murder is a mystery to me," he barked bitterly. "She's as guilty as bloodshed can make her, or I'm an Indian!"

He clamped a thin black cigar into his wide mouth and rumbled his red hair.

Nem packed a fresh load into his battered pipe and mournfully regarded an incipient crack in the bowl.

"Kind of looks that way, doesn't it?" he sighed. "'Fraid I got a bad piece of wood in this pipe, Tom, though it cost me—"

"It's a plain, unvarnished case of jealousy," O'Malley interrupted. "Motive, opportunity and malice are all there. You know what women of that age and tempera-

ment are—sex complexes and all the rest of it.”

Nem looked down his nose in a way that made O'Malley yearn to punch him.

“So the books say, Tom.”

“It's as clear as daylight. Ellen Clarke had been brooding over George Link's defection, and at the little chippie's flaunting him before her, for a long time. Wednesday night brought things to a head. She knew Rose had a date with Link later in the evening. She gave the girl one last chance when she went down to Link's garage, stormed at him, threatened to cut the girl's heart out if she didn't let him alone! And he laughed at her. That laugh was what signed the girl's death sentence, Nem.

“Ellen O'Rourke didn't go walking in the rain—not then, anyway. She went back to the Suttons', slipped in the back way, knowing that Sutton was out, that Mrs. Sutton would be asleep before ten o'clock, when the girl would be leaving to meet George. The house was hers.

“She hid herself in that back closet you tell about, hate boiling up in her. She waited there, fingering that paring knife—waited for Rose to come in for her raincoat. And when she did, Ellen Clarke stabbed her. The girl died between nine and ten, remember.

“Sutton never used that outside pantry; when he got in and found the telephone ringing, his wife played into Ellen's hands by saying Rose had left. Later, when Sutton had gone to bed at the front of the house, Ellen stole out, buried the girl, set back the radishes, and crept into bed. Her yarn of rambling through the rain couldn't be proved or disproved. If there isn't a complete chain of circumstantial evidence, then I don't know a June bug when I see one.”

Nem smoked serenely.

“Sounds real nice,” he commented. “Sure, Ellen Clarke could've done all that.”

His chief uttered an unclassified sound

halfway between a yelp and a snort of frustration.

“What in hell keeps you from arresting her, Nem?”

“Burlap, Tom. Sackcloth, you might say. That and a kind of hunch of mine—mebbe she's guilty, like you say. Sound's reasonable. But if she is, she'll give herself away soon enough. Guilty knowledge gets 'em, every time.”

Nem's pipe was going at full blast now. He leaned back in his chair, elevated his soft kid shoes to the top of his desk, and loosened their strings with a grunt of relief. Then he leaned back, pudgy hands linked behind his pink, bald head, and contemplated the ceiling.

O'Malley slid off his perch, and went out to his own sanctum. Nem sat where he was for a longish time—a seemingly immobile, ponderous mass of flesh. Then the mass took life once more.

“There ought to be something. A girl like that, sentimental, stuck on herself and her conquests.”

He lifted his feet off the desk and tied his shoes. Then he went out once more into the cold sun, of the April afternoon.

A SHORT walk took him across town, in to the oldest, poorest section of the city. The small obscure street he sought, hardly more than a lane, was soon reached. Three ragged children were playing in the spring freshet that ran through the gutter of number 65.

“Rose Miller live here, sonny?” he inquired of one of them.

“Yes, sir. She did, anyhow,” the urchin said, round-eyed and curious.

Nem mounted the two steps from the sidewalk, crossed the dilapidated porch gingerly. His tug at the ancient bell brought to the door Rose Miller's aunt.

Her face showed lines of sorrow, but no traces of tears. Life had hardened her against surrender to emotion.

“I dropped in, Mrs. Miller, sort of

hoping that you'd let me look through Rose's things."

Her face softened.

"I'll let you do anything, Mr. Parsons, that'd help you find out who killed the poor girl. What things of hers do you want to see?"

Nem stepped into the shabby hall.

"Everything, I guess. I'm not looking for anything in particular. Did she have a room to herself?"

"Oh, yes. She was dead set on that from the time she went to work."

Nem followed her up the narrow, creaking stairs into a small room at the back of the house. The window shades were down. Mrs. Miller bustled across the floor to raise them, flooded the room with light.

A little old-fashioned poster bed, neatly made up and covered with a cheap pink spread filled one corner of the room. The windows were hung with flowered challis—the same stuff that, tacked to a shelf, improvised closet space for the dead girl's dresses.

A dressing table held a pathetic muddle of rouge and powder, presided over by a gaudy carnival doll, such as are given as prizes at summer beaches. Here stood empty candy boxes with tied ribbon; snapshots of Rose in swimming, Rose surrounded by youths, Rose with George Link.

And one other snapshot, that of a slender, smiling man who shielded his eyes against the sun in such a way as to render the likeness almost unrecognizable. Nem lifted it from its solitary place, scanned it for a long moment, lips puckered in a soundless movement.

Then he turned to the cheap little desk that stood between the windows. The half dozen books standing there beckoned to him.

"Give me free rein, Mrs. Miller?"

"Of course."

Nem fingered the few volumes gently. *Pilgrim's Progress*, unsullied, and probably a school book; *Five Little Peppers*, much

thumbed; *Philosophy of Love*, read and re-read; as were two novels of Laura Jean Libby's in paper covers and an old copy of Swinburne's poems.

Swinburne's lyrics, on Rose Miller's desk! That was worth any man's interest. Nem pounced upon the book, and his round blue eyes roved to Mrs. Miller. She was flecking a bit of dust from a chair, evincing no interest. It was clear that she did not guess the strangeness of Rose Miller's having that Swinburne on her shelf.

Nem looked at the yellowed flyleaf. A name had been erased carefully from the middle of the page, so carefully that the portion of paper that had borne that scrawl of ownership was worn almost transparent. But the first letter of the name was decipherable. Nem brooded over that, and over the inscription that had been made so recently at the top of the page:

To Atalanta  
March 2, 1926

There was one marker in the volume—a thin strip of paper halfway through. Nem read the scored stanza to himself, round eyes sorrowful, lips moving softly:

From too much love of living,  
From hope and fear set free,  
We thank, with brief thanksgiving,  
Whatever gods there be  
That no life lives forever;  
That dead men rise up never;  
That even the weariest river  
Winds safe at last to sea.

And in the margin was the notation: "So I too thought—until you came."

Nem laid the book down, turned to Mrs. Miller.

"Rose was sort of popular with the boys, wasn't she?"

She nodded grimly.

"Too popular. Boy crazy, Rose was, but she was a good girl. Mr. Parsons, you—you believe that, don't you?"

Nem's childlike eyes circled the room again, with its pathetic notes of sentiment,

of aspiration unguided. And he lied staunchly.

"Course she was a good girl!" He ran through the few unimportant letters tucked in the pigeonholes of the desk. "Well, I guess that's all for now. I'm much obliged, Mrs. Miller."

She twisted her apron helplessly.

"Did you—did you find anything?"

Nem sighed.

"Quite a lot, Mrs. Miller, quite a lot."

And he creaked cautiously down the stairs, out into the April weather.

**BY MEANS** of a transfer at the junction point he rode out to Golden Hill without delay. He stared out of the car window unseeingly all the way, wrapped in some inner contemplation.

There were no signs of life, other than a curling plume of smoke, about the Sutton bungalow. Nem paused in front of the house; then, treading noiselessly on the springy turf, he skirted the little porch and terrace and took the garden walk down toward the hotbed with its gruesome heap of dirt still piled by the cement wall.

The tool house was open. Arthur Sutton was in there, standing with his back to the door, arms folded on the tool cabinet, dark head bowed. His attitude was expressive of despair, Nem thought.

"Mr. Sutton—" he said.

Sutton turned as if that gentle summons had been a pistol shot. He was grey of face, grim of jaw. And for that brief, betraying moment his eyes were those of a man doing penance, bitter penance, for past sins. Even amazement did not cloak that naked suffering of his. But amazement served to cover the transition from agony to nonchalance as he came toward Nem.

"Any news, Mr. Parsons?" he asked impersonally.

"Some," admitted Nem, and saw a darting flame in those dark eyes.

"What news?"

"That Rose Miller read Swinburne."

Sutton's poise was perfect. Nem knew from that instant the full strength of the man he was dealing with.

"Scarcely news, Mr. Parsons, to me at least. The child was ambitious, wanted to cultivate her mind. I helped her. I gave her my own copy of Swinburne, in fact."

Nem sauntered further into the tool house, closer to Sutton, who still stood beside the tool cabinet.

"Reckon I don't know much about poetry, Mr. Sutton, but I'd hardly say Swinburne was the sort of literary food for a young, uneducated girl."

Sutton's dark pallor was suffused with color.

"She had understanding—" and he snapped his teeth shut over the rest of his speech.

Nem loomed even closer.

"And she had a very decent burial, Mr. Sutton. Doesn't it strike you as queer that Ellen Clarke, hating her as she did, would have laid crocuses in her hands, covered her dead, pretty face with sackcloth to keep the garden mold from her blue eyes and her yellow hair."

"What the devil are you getting at?" Sutton demanded.

"Just trying to figure things out," Nem said softly. "No, Mr. Sutton—the one who buried little Rose Miller was mighty fond of her—or had been."

Sutton stared at him with a sort of tragic hostility.

"And who was it?"

Nem parried.

"Ellen Clarke wouldn't have dragged those denim overalls over her skirts, either; and she'd have been in too much of a hurry to change."

"What makes you think they were used?"

"Little flecks of burlap lint, bits of fresh loam, in spite of your brushing. After you'd filled the grave, Mr. Sutton, you carted the sackcloth back to the tool shed and got the lint on your overalls doing it."

"You accuse me of Rose Miller's murder?"

The man's face was a mask, not good to look upon.

Nem loomed past him, forestalled his sudden protective motion toward the tool cabinet, jerked open the little wooden door and found the trifle he sought—a withered scrap of green and yellow bloom.

"I accuse you of loving Rose Miller and of bringing her to her death—and putting her in her grave—the grave you tried to make decent with sackcloth and a handful of early flowers. These!"

Nem unfolded his thick fingers upon the ruined crocuses, round eyes fixed upon the unhappy man.

"Arrest me then," said Sutton. But Nem turned to the door.

"You might better act as if you were innocent, for your own sake, Professor. Think it over for a spell."

When Sutton's tragic face lifted from his hands the detective was gone.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### A Woman's Weapon

NEM PARSONS did not pause long in the pleasant blue and white kitchen.

The housekeeper was washing dishes at the sink, and looked up dourly at Nem's unheralded entry. She straightened, shook her powerful hands free of the soapy water.

"What do you keep pesterin' me for? Why don't you go and find out who killed the girl?" she demanded, voice cracking from sheer nervousness.

"Didn't come to see you, Miss Clarke," Nem reassured her. "I'd like to see Mrs. Sutton. Where is she? In her room?"

A look of intense relief relaxed Ellen Clarke's sullen features.

"Yes," she said shortly, and turned back to her work.

Nem passed on through the pleasant

hall, bright and vivid again with the lowering sun, his soft shoes making the merest squeak. The door of Mrs. Sutton's room was open. The invalid herself was there, sitting in her wheelchair between the two sunny windows. The book she had been reading slid from her thin hands as Nem's elephantine bulk filled the doorway.

She turned her chair with a deft twist of one hand so that she faced him more squarely, so that the sun streamed in more directly over her shoulders, cast a shining aureole upon her smooth chestnut head, enriched the splendid garnet dressing gown she habitually wore.

"Oh, Mr. Parsons, have you come with news, or to ask more questions?" she wanted to know. Her sad mouth smiled mechanically, but her grey eyes, in their hollows, were anything but gay.

Nem cautiously seated himself.

"There's quite a few things I'd like to know still," he admitted, apologetically.

She leaned back against her pillows.

"I hope I can help you. I feel so sure that poor Ellen Clarke had nothing to do with Rose's death—"

Nem shook his enormous head.

"You're right there, Mrs. Sutton. Ellen Clarke is innocent."

"Oh." She caught her breath a trifle. "Then—who could have done it?"

Nem's childlike eyes were not fixed on Alice Sutton's face, but on her thin, drooping left shoulder and its covering of patterned silk.

"I reckon I'll be able to tell you that soon. First off, I want to ask you a question. Did you know of your husband's friendship with Rose Miller?"

The woman's white hands tightened upon the arms of her chair, but her face remained immobile.

"Yes. I suppose you'd call it that. We both liked her—were willing to do much for her."

"What, for example?" Nem urged.

She bit her thin lip.



"Why, consideration, time off, good wages—what a strange question!"

Nem's bland blue eyes met hers. "I think you know what I mean."

He saw the pulse in her thin throat quicken its beat; her light breath raced unevenly between the pale, parted lips, and he was all solicitude.

"You don't feel well, do you, Mrs. Sutton? Can I get you something? A glass of water from the kitchen?"

She shut her eyes wearily, as if she craved respite of any sort.

"Yes, please. Do you mind?"

Nem got the water from the housekeeper and took it back to the invalid's room. Mrs. Sutton roused herself from her lethargy at his entry, thanked him with a wan smile. Nem stepped close beside her, to help her drink; then awkwardly, inadvertently, as he held the glass for her, he spilled a few drops from the overfull glass upon her shoulder.

All contrition, he waited until she had drained the water and handed back the glass. Then he took his handkerchief and clumsily mopped at the damp spot.

"I'm the awkwardest old cuss that ever wore shoe leather," he apologized.

"It was nothing," she said. "I feel better now. What else have you to ask?"

NEM did not heed her question. He had finished wiping up the water he had spilled. Now he held his broad white handkerchief up to the light. A large stain of lightish red was visible upon it.

Alice Sutton's deep-set eyes followed Nem's.

"What's—that?" she asked.

Nem looked at her pitifully.

"Blood, Mrs. Sutton. Rose Miller's blood. I saw the dark, stiff, stain on your dressing gown in the sun here. It wouldn't show up anywhere else. Then I moistened it—"

He had to admire her audacity. She laughed a little, though her lips were ashen.

"But the garnet dye—"

"That robe is made of fast-dyed silk; it wouldn't even run in the wash, I reckon. The stain that came off is blood. I'm sorer than I can say, but I've got to hold you for the murder of Rose Miller. Your husband buried her, to protect you, but you killed her, while he was out, while she was getting you ready for bed. She bent over you, and you stabbed her with an upward thrust of that sharp little paring knife. . . ."

Alice Sutton's lips moved, but she uttered no sound.

Nem went on: "I can show how it happened to be in here—the weapon. You keep your pencils sharpened real nice, don't you? All of them"—he nodded to the trayful of delicately pointed pencils on her desk—"were sharpened just lately, probably Wednesday. And you didn't take the knife back to the kitchen." His eyes left the betraying litter of sharpenings in the shallow waste basket, returned to the invalid. "Too bad you didn't, for I don't believe you planned to murder Rose. It was just a wild impulse, wasn't it?"

Alice Sutton inclined her head.

"It came over me suddenly. I heard her answering the phone, after Arthur had gone out. I thought she promised to meet him. I knew, God help me, that she had won him. Her look, the very tones of her voice, betrayed her! And I, chained here to this chair, had to see it all, had to submit to her treachery—and his suffering. He did suffer, for he loved me. And I—I loved him more than he can ever know. That was why I sat here that dreadful evening, nursing that sharp, deadly little knife. And then, as she bent over me, young and lovely and alive—as I can never be again . . ."

Her tragic voice died away; her waxen hands covered her face.

Nem cleared his throat, blinked out at the golden afternoon that had suddenly, blurred.

"I'm mighty sorry for you, Mrs. Sutton. But the law—"

The cripple sucked in her breath.

"I know. I know. But my husband? He did what he did to save me, in expiation for his own sin. He must not suffer for mine!"

"I understand!" said Nem gently. "It won't go hard with him, Mrs. Sutton. Your confession'll clear him, right enough."

"I'm glad you know the truth," she whispered at last. "It was too terrible for me to keep—for him. Now they'll come and take me away, won't they?"

Nem bent his head.

"I'm part of the law, Mrs. Sutton."

She smiled faintly.

"Before you do your duty, will you hand me that little pasteboard box of pellets? My heart is very weak."

She pointed with an unwavering forefinger to the stand beside her bed. Nem picked up the little round box, shook the tiny pellets.

"Strychnine?"

She breathed short assent, leaned forward to draw his eyes with the magnet of her own.

"I'm not strong," she told him. "I—I cannot face all that is coming. I have suffered so much already."

She might have been referring to the actual arrest, to the legal procedure she faced. But Nem, looking at her stricken face, knew that her words meant infinitely more than that. His big hands closed convulsively upon the heart stimulant she asked for.

"What's the dose?" he wanted to know.

Those tragic, asking eyes!

"Six pellets—crushed in a little water."

To most people Nem looked like a shabby old fellow, distinguished only by a kindly mouth, incredibly innocent eyes. To the woman in the wheelchair he was suddenly transfigured; he was no longer a bald old man who saw everything; he was justice and mercy incarnate. For without looking at the legend on the box, he spilled six tiny pellets into his enormous palm and reached for the glass of water.

"Here. Reckon these will see you through."

Then he strode to the door, called the master of the house sharply.

Sutton was close at hand; at the sound of his hurrying footsteps the woman in the chair stirred, lifted her ashen face.

"She wants you," Nem told him as he brushed past, and watched him bend over his wife in an agony of love and tenderness.

"Alice, you're ill! Your medicine."

She seemed to grow smaller, younger, to relax utterly in her husband's arms.

"Alice—Alice—" he mourned. But he could not warm her wasted hands, hold off death. He could only kneel beside her, in penitence, as she died.

And Nem, with hushed step, went from the room, tearing to bits the cover of a pasteboard box on which was printed: "Dose—one pill in water." ◆ ◆ ◆

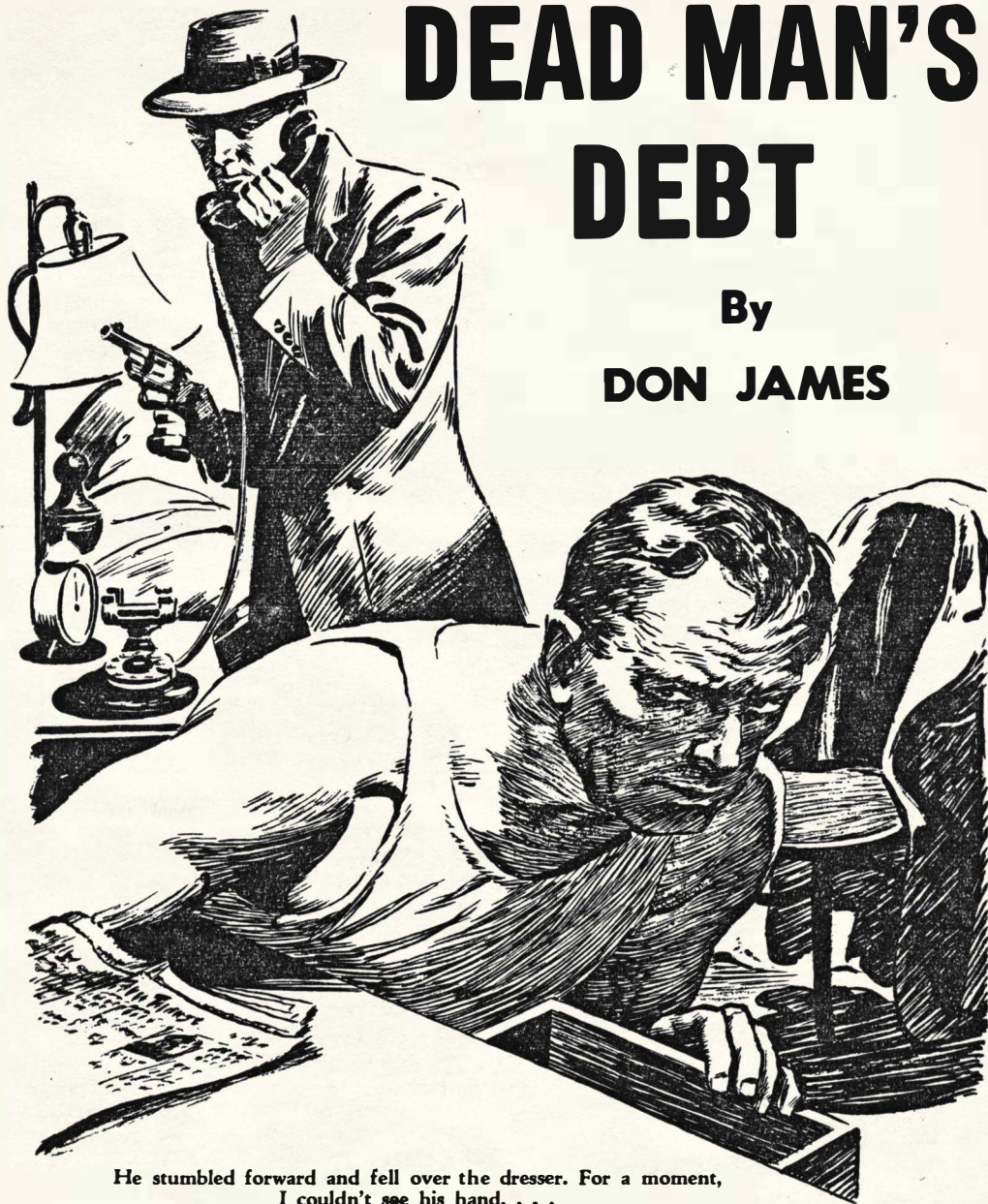
### Switcheroo

THE TOWN WAS Nagasaki, the year 1914, when Albert Johansen, Norwegian tourist, ran into a fellow Caucasian, who bought him a few drinks, and awoke on board a ship bound for San Francisco, a prisoner. He arrived and was tossed into San Quentin, under the name of Peter Grimes, to serve a three-year term for forgery. Not until some fellow Norwegians arrived to serve prison terms at San Quentin did he manage to make himself understood. Investigation established that the friendly fellow he'd met had been the real Peter Grimes, who on his way to the U.S. to serve a prison term, had gotten his guard drunk, stolen the latter's papers and badge—and foisted poor Albert off on the ship authorities as himself!

# DEAD MAN'S DEBT

By

DON JAMES



He stumbled forward and fell over the dresser. For a moment, I couldn't see his hand. . . .

He owed a debt to the dead. The cost: one life. . . .

I WAS sorry about Hap Hander. I looked down at his body, seeing the smile-wrinkles at the corners of his eyes, the thinning grey hair, the features that had been pleasant, and shook my head.

"He was all right," I said to Kurt.

A photographer from the lab took a flash picture. The coroner filled out a report using a pinball machine as a desk. Outside, a uniformed man kept a crowd moving and two white-coated men with a stretcher pushed through toward the door.

I turned away and went to the short bar and sat on a stool. Kurt eased his big cop's body on one next to me and read the notes he'd made in his notebook.

"Stickup job," he commented.

I glanced at him. "Think so?"

"Sure. Hander worked his joint alone. Around six-thirty in the evening he didn't have too much business. People are home for dinner. Somebody spotted that and got him. The cash register's cleaned out."

I sighed. "Probably. He was a good guy."

"I didn't know him," Kurt said.

"I did. I grew up in this neighborhood. It was as tough then as it is now. Not a very good place for kids."

I hadn't thought about it for a long time. Now I had kids of my own and I was rearing them in a better neighborhood, and it was a long time back to the other.

Hap Hander's place had looked about the same then. There was no pinball machine, but the single pool table was in the back, with the bar and the tobacco counter. Hap was about middle-aged then, and once he had done some fighting in the ring. He'd knocked around the country and it was rumored that he'd run stuff down from Canada during Prohibition.

He knew most of the ward politicians and the small-time racket boys. He did a fair business and he wasn't too ambitious, especially after his wife died. He was content to make a living and be friendly. And it was a hell of a way for a guy like Hap to die.

Over at the pinball machine the coroner finished his report and put away a fountain pen. He looked down at the machine and then glanced at me.

"One slug did the job, Mike. But maybe a couple more shots were fired. Looks like one ricocheted off the glass."

I went over to the machine and saw the small hole in the glass. It was hardly larger than a pinhole on the surface and splayed out underneath the way a wind-

shield sometimes does when hit by road pebbles.

There were no marks on the ceiling or walls. It didn't make much difference. A dozen shots might have been fired, but it took only one to kill him. We'd get that slug for ballistic checks in case we ever found a likely gun.

"Stickup?" the coroner said.

"Looks like it."

He grunted and nodded to the white-coated men. "You can have him if it's okay with the lieutenant."

I nodded and watched them lift Hap into the stretcher.

"Not too important, was he?" the coroner asked.

"No," I said. "He wasn't too important. Only to a few people here and there. I'm one of them."

I hadn't meant to add that last sentence. He gave me a puzzled look.

"A murder is always important to Homicide," I said tightly.

I WENT back to the bar and sat down again and stared at the spot where Hap Hander had been stretched on the floor. A wide stain was there now and I remembered it was almost the exact spot where I'd stood those twenty years ago while Hap Hander said what was on his mind.

"Mike," he said. "Let's have a talk about Spike Collard."

For an eighteen-year-old punk I thought I had a pretty wise smile when I wanted to use it. I used it on Hap. "Yeah?" I said.

"I hear Spike offered you a job runnin' bets for him."

"Right."

"You'd kinda like to be in that small-time mob Spike's runnin'?"

"It's not small-time. It's pretty important."

Hap snorted his disdain. "Listen, Mike Hennessy. Listen to me and remember what I'm tellin' you. Stay out of that mob."

"Why?"

"It's no good. You got somethin' to you. I knew your old man before he got killed on the docks. He was a right guy. We were in the same outfit overseas. Your mother is a nice woman. You stay away from Spike Collard and his mob. Tell him it's no go."

I lit a cigarette and used the wise smile again. "It's none of your business, Hap," I said.

"Feel that way about it, huh?"

"That's it."

"Mike, these are tough times. There's a depression on. A guy has trouble gettin' smokes once in a while."

My conscience began to bother me and I felt an uneasy blush creep into my face. I didn't say anything.

Hap said, "You've lifted about four cartons of smokes from me during the last half year. I shoulda called you on it, but I figured you'd pay me some day. I figured it'd start to trouble you and you'd tell me. You know me well enough that you wouldn't figure me to raise hell with you. I've let you hang around here long enough."

"You can't prove a—"

"Cut it out, Mike. I'm no dope. I've been around. But maybe I figured this wrong."

"What do you want?"

"I'll forget about those smokes if you'll stay away from Spike."

I said something very unpleasant. I had a five-dollar bill in my pocket that Spike had given me for running some errands. I pulled it out.

"Take the dough for those cigs out of this," I snapped. "Hell, I always meant to pay you."

"You still want to work for Spike and be a punk?"

"I'll do okay with Spike."

Hap sighed and turned away without taking the money. "We'll see," he said quietly. "We'll see."

The next day a big, rawboned cop in uniform picked me up and sat me down in a prowler car beside him.

"I'm Sergeant Tom Corcoran," he said. "Hap Hander tells me you lifted four cartons of cigarettes from his place."

Sweat broke out on my forehead. "Listen, mister, I tried to pay him for those cigs."

"After he called you on it. Nope, son. I'm afraid you're in for a session."

For an instant I felt an intense, helpless anger toward Hap. The big cop must have sensed it. He shook his head.

"Don't blame Hap. He's trying to help you."

"A hell of a way to help!" I blurted.

The big cop had started the car. He didn't answer and I sat there rigidly until he suddenly swerved to a curb and motioned for me to get out. He took me into a small gymnasium beside a welfare house. Some kids my age were shooting baskets. The big cop yelled at them and they grinned as if he was the biggest guy on earth. He called them over and introduced me.

They were friendly and asked me to get into a gym suit and shoot a few baskets with them. I looked uncertainly at the big cop. I couldn't catch the score on this.

"Maybe later," he winked at the other kids, and took me into a small office.

"I'll make a deal," he said. "One I wouldn't make with Spike Collard, incidentally."

I stared at him.

He said, "If you'll work out with the boys here for one solid month, and if you'll take a job I know about and keep it for one month, Hap and I'll forget the cigarettes. If you don't, you can face charges. What do you say?"

I chose the month at the gym, and the job as office boy for a private detective agency. Three years later Hap and the big cop, Tom Corcoran, were the first to congratulate me when I got my probationary

appointment as rookie on the city police force.

NOW, twenty years later, I sat at the bar and stared at the stained floor. Tom Corcoran had been dead five years. Now Hap was gone. It all seemed a long time ago, but a slow, deep anger was building a fire in me. It was no way for Hap to go. Somewhere in the city someone was looking apprehensively at every cop he saw, making plans to take it on the lam, or to hide out for a while. Someone had murdered Hap Hander and the most I could do for a man who had changed the course of my life was to find his murderer. Abruptly I felt a stab of conscience that I hadn't stopped in more often to see Hap. Finding the man who killed him would be inadequate payment for all that Hap had done for me.

"Damned inadequate!" I said aloud.

"What?" Kurt said.

"Nothing. Let's take a look around. Picked up any witnesses? Anything?"

"Nothing," he said.

Carefully we went over the place again. I looked at the empty cash register. I talked with our fingerprint man and the other technicians.

"Nothing, Lieutenant. Just a stickup. Nothing on who did it."

After half an hour Kurt and I left for headquarters.

"You seem kind of disturbed by this one," Kurt said.

"Hap was a personal friend," I said briefly. "This one gets special attention."

Kurt glanced at me and nodded. "The works," he said.

\* \* \*

Stickup artists can be easy to tag, or as tough as anything in the book. One of your greatest helps can be the *modus operandi*—the methods the stickup artist uses. Most of them use the same methods again and again.

They wear masks, or dark glasses, or

use certain phrases, or line up people in a certain way, or tie up a victim, or use a sap on him, or one of a dozen other things. *Modus operandi* is easier to spot in burglary jobs, but you'll often find a pattern in a stickup man's jobs, too.

Witnesses are your best bet in those cases—bystanders, or the victims. We had no witnesses and the victim was dead. We had no history of similar cases to check against, no known stickup man who worked a certain way because we didn't know the way our man worked. Our files were useless. There was nothing to put on the wire to other states.

That made it a tough job. We followed other methods.

A small, thin man with a nervous voice answered a telephone and told me he'd keep his eyes open.

"But I ain't heard nothin', Lieutenant."

"Let me know, Jake."

In the background was the noise of a saloon, and I know that Jake would look too indifferent as he turned away from the telephone. Some newspaper men use a polite name for him: "underworld contact." The underworld has another: "stoolie."

Kurt and I watched the morning line-ups. We checked every stickup case reported. We worked with the robbery detail, the other departments. We followed every possible lead.

We grilled bums from the skid row, slick con men picked up in bus stations, punk kids pulled in for service station stickups.

We got nothing.

A thin man with a scar on his left cheek held up a beer tavern on the West Side.

"Where were you the evening of October 21?"

"In Des Moines."

"Can you prove it?"

He smiled and the scar made a queer twist in his cheek.

"Yeah. I can prove it. I was in the

Des Moines can on a drunk rap. Call 'em."

Kurt called them. The man had told the truth. We gave him back to the boys who had brought him in.

A thick-set punk held up a café on the South Side. He shot a bullet into the ceiling and he ran out into the arms of two prowl car cops who just happened to be passing. Luck.

I waited for a report from Ballistics. It finally came.

"Sorry, Lieutenant. It's not the gun."

We set him under a bright light and asked him questions.

"... October 21?" he said. "Where was I? How in hell do I know? That's almost three weeks ago."

"A man was murdered that night. You'd better know!"

Fear crept into his eyes. He thought hard and looked at my office calendar. Then he smiled in relief.

"At the fights with my girl. Her name is Nellie Simms. We ate at the Chop House with another guy and his dame and then went to the fights. We partied all afternoon in Nellie's room. Plenty of people saw us."

It checked.

Other homicide cases crowded in. An usher found dead on a rooming house stairway. A love-nest shooting in the apartment district. A man killed his brother-in-law at a stag brawl. A mannish-looking woman murdered a very feminine-looking girl.

I crowded all the hours from my regular day that I could, and I used overtime hours to look for the one who clouded up my life and peace of mind like a thunder cloud on a spring morning. The man who killed Hap Hander.

I barked at friends. I snapped at my kids.

"Take it easy, Mike," Kurt said. "We'll find him. We'll break this case yet."

THE fourth week started.

I got up quietly, so as not to disturb Mary, and went to the living room and smoked a cigarette. It was 3:00 A.M. The house was very quiet. The neighborhood was quiet. The cat woke up and stared at me, resentful of the light. She stretched, turned her back to me and went to sleep again.

Mary came downstairs in a bathrobe, looking much too young and lovely for thirty-eight years and three kids.

"What's wrong, Mike?"

"Just a case that has me down."

"Hap Hander's?"

I nodded. "What else? I'm missing something. Something's there that I should see. Sometimes I almost have it, and then I draw a blank."

"It'll come, Mike. But when you worry about it, you don't sleep and you need your sleep."

"I'm not as young as I used to be—that's for sure!" I grinned.

"You'll do," she smiled. "Want some coffee?"

"Sure. Coffee never kept me awake yet."

"It's a good time to talk something over with you, anyhow," she said.

I glanced at her, but she had turned toward the kitchen.

She waited until we had sampled the coffee.

"It's Jimmy," she said.

I sighed. Jimmy, my eldest son, is no better and no worse than any average high school sophomore. He has his troubles.

"In love again?" I asked.

She shook her head and looked down at her coffee.

"Grades bad?"

"No. They're good."

"Then what...?"

"Now listen, Mike—don't be hard on him. You remember how you used to be yourself. Remember that business with that Spike Collard and things."

A small stirring of alarm bit into me. "What's he done, Mary?"

"Pinball machines."

I stared at her and then smiled in relief.

"You mean he's playing them?"

She nodded. "During his lunch hour. We've had a committee in PTA looking into those things and I'm on it. Mrs. Halloway, Mrs. Sloan, Myrtle Kollister and I went out investigating today and—well, you can imagine my embarrassment, Mike, when we saw Jimmy playing one in a drugstore near the school. I could have died!"

"Want me to take care of it?"

"If you will, Mike. I hate to—"

"Sure. Maybe I can do some good about the whole thing. I'll talk to Grinsted of the racket detail. He's after the games. He'll throw a scare into that druggist. And I'll have a talk with Jimmy. In about three minutes I can tell him how they're made for suckers. They're gimmicked so that—"

I stopped speaking and stared at Mary until her eyes widened in concern.

"Mike! What's wrong?"

"Gimmicked!" I said. "Maybe it's a lead!"

"I don't understand what—"

I didn't bother to explain. I leaned over the table and kissed her. She giggled as if she were a high school kid.

"Mike Hennessy! Behave yourself! In the kitchen at three-thirty in the morning! Necking like a—"

"M-m-m-m!" I said.

**T**HE front of the shop was loaded with pinball machines in various stages of newness and repair. In the back office a short, chubby man rubbed his bald head with a pudgy hand and nodded vigorously.

"Thanks, Lieutenant. Thanks a lot. They're not supposed to make payoffs. For amusement only. Glad to know when a proprietor is making payoffs. We don't want no trouble. I'll have that machine

taken out of that drugstore at once. You won't have to worry about it any more."

I smiled to myself. I'd already talked with Grinsted of the racket detail. He'd suggested my call first. His call, later on, would be more to the point, but I needed information.

I said, "Incidentally, Grostich, I hear you've had a few machines gimmicked by wire artists."

"Maybe," he admitted guardedly.

"Got one around here that's been gimmicked? I'm curious."

He looked at me searchingly and then nodded. "I got one we just brought in a coupla weeks ago."

He led me to the front of the place and pointed to a machine.

"Do you always bring them in for repairs when they've been gimmicked?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Depends. One like this we'd usually fix where it is, but the guy who had this one is out of business. Maybe you know about him. Hap Hand-er."

A small knot hit the pit of my stomach and then eased away.

"Yeah. I know. How was the machine gimmicked?"

He pointed to the small hole the coroner had discovered. My hunch was right.

Grostich said, "The machine artist uses a heavy rubber band and a small heavy shot or ball bearing. He pulls it back like a sling shot and lets go. The shot makes a small hole like this one. Then he slips a piece of wire in and when the number of the hole underneath lights up, he trips it with the wire and gets a payoff."

"Doesn't someone get wise?"

"Once in a while, but those machine artists are smart. They keep nickels over the hole, or a cigarette, or ashes. Sometimes they work in pairs and the other keeps the proprietor busy. Then there are other ways. They drill holes in the sides and—"



"Had many of these lately?" I interrupted.

His eyes became veiled. "Yeah. A few." "Any idea who's the artist?"

"Hard to tell. They blow in town and get out."

"Any who hang around here all the time?"

"Three or four." He scowled and made up his mind about something. "Look, Lieutenant, I know this is really your business, but we can take care of it for you—in a way. We usually catch up with these guys and tip off our customers and that stops it without trouble to you or anyone. We don't like to have our customers—I mean the proprietors—bothered by the police and—"

"You mean the machines are unlawful for payoffs and your customers hesitate to make a charge against anyone taking them for some dough. There might be a kick-back on payoffs."

"Well, if you put it that way."

He was getting nervous.

I said, "Was Hap smart to the gimmicks and methods?"

He nodded, glad to get off the subject of payoffs. "Sure. He'd been around a long time. This is the first time anyone ever got away with it there."

"Who was the artist, Grostich?"

"I don't know, Lieutenant. That's straight dope."

I stopped smiling.

"Give," I said. "I'm from Homicide. Rackets are Grinsted's job. He'll see you later. Right now, Homicide wants answers from you. Straight answers."

He shook his head helplessly.

I said, "Maybe we better take a trip to headquarters where we can talk."

"I tell you, Lieutenant, I don't know who it was."

"But you know something."

He looked as if he'd have liked to walk out of the place and keep walking. His feet moved restlessly.

I said, "You're heading for trouble if you're concealing information."

"Okay. It's so little I don't think it will help. We—I mean some of the boys—caught up with that guy last night. They sort of worked him over."

"So that's the way you handle things," I said thinly. "Hoodlum methods. Maybe we'd better look into that, too."

He held his hands out, palms up.

"What else can we do? We never killed anyone. Just a working-over and—"

"Who is the guy?"

"I don't know. He got caught red-handed. The boys didn't want no trouble in the place, so they followed him and when he turned into a cheap hotel down on Third they nabbed him and took him around to the alley."

"What hotel?"

"I think they said the Elite. It's a dump near skid row."

He was beginning to sweat.

"One thing more," I said. "If that machine isn't out of that drugstore by noon, you and I are going to have a talk. And sometimes I talk better with my hands. Understand?"

"Believe me, Lieutenant. That was a mistake. I'm always telling the boys, 'Not near no schools.' Someone's going to get hell about this."

I nodded and walked out of the place.

THE day clerk at the Elite was accused to having cops inquire about guests.

"I'm not on nights," he shrugged. "Don't know who it was."

"Where's your night man?"

"Asleep."

"In the hotel?"

"Yeah."

"Call him and find out."

"Can't it wait? He's just got to sleep and—"

"Call him!"

He looked at me and bit his lips. He

said, "Yes, sir," and turned to the switchboard. He asked his questions and hung up.

"A guy registered as Sam Connors. He came staggerin' in late. Really been worked over. Bud—that's the night man—had to help him to his room, but the guy wouldn't let Bud call a doc."

"What room?"

"420. You want me to take you up?"

I held out my hand. "I'll take the key."

He hesitated, shrugged, and handed me the key.

I hoped I wouldn't have to use it. It's better when you're admitted. It was better this time. A hoarse voice from the other side of the door told me to come in.

He was in bed. His face was a mess of bruises and cuts. His hands were battered as if someone had stamped on them. His eyes were almost swollen shut.

"Yeah?" he said.

I looked around the room and the coat draped over the back of a chair looked heavy in one pocket. I went to it and pulled out a gun and casually swung it over one finger by the trigger guard.

"Didn't get a chance to use it?" I asked.

"No."

"Okay. Now answer another question. Where were you the evening of October 21st, about six-thirty?"

He sat up in bed and stared at me through the slits of his swollen eyes.

"Listen, mister, what do you want?"

I brought out my badge case and showed him the metal. He leaned back on his elbows and continued to stare at me. For a moment I thought I'd seen him before, but the brief study of a morning line-up isn't enough to impress a face that will survive for your memory after the face has been beaten to a pulp.

"October 21st," I said. "Where were you?"

"I don't know."

"I'm going to take you in," I said.

I picked up the receiver of the wall tele-

phone and put through my call to headquarters. The desk clerk listened in.

"Get off the line," I snapped.

The click sounded above the ringing signal. A desk sergeant answered and I told him to send a car. I asked to be transferred to the laboratory and got Lain, our ballistics technician.

I said, "I'd appreciate it if you'd hold up your lunch hour until you can check a gun for me, Harry. I'm a little anxious about it. I think it's the gun that killed Hap Hander."

The beaten man was sitting on the edge of the bed, his eyes centered on me.

Harry asked a casual question and I said, "Pinball machine artist. I think he was gimmicking the machine and Hap caught him at it and they had a beef and the guy killed Hap, cleaned out the cash register and lammed. He's got a gun—a .32 and your slug is from a .32. A few other things check. And if that bullet from Hap's body checks with the gun, we've got a killer."

I dropped the receiver into its prongs. The man had left the bed and was walking toward a dresser.

"That's far enough." I said.

"I've got a bottle here," he said. "I need a drink."

"I'll get it for you. Go back and sit on the bed."

He stopped and swayed. His back was to me and I saw him clasp his hands over his stomach.

"Sick . . . I'm sick . . ." he moaned.

I started for him as he began to sag. He stumbled forward and fell over the dresser, one hand grasping at the side edge for support, his other hand between him and the furniture.

His knees were buckling when he shoved away, and suddenly the knees were no longer sagging and he whirled in a half crouch. He had a short-nosed automatic in his hand. Somehow he had opened a drawer and got it out. It was aimed high.

"Not me," he said. "You don't get me for that rap!"

I stood on the tips of my toes for an instant as I stopped, my hands down, his other gun still suspended on my finger.

"So you're guilty," I said softly. "You know the slug will check with the gun."

"That's right, bright boy Hennessy. Hap caught me and I gave him the works. And you won't tell anyone about it."

He still aimed high. I dived low. A shot skimmed my shoulder. Another burned my left arm as we went down. I brought his other gun up and felt it jam into flesh, and his small automatic was suddenly pressed into my side.

Maybe I said a small prayer that the gun was loaded. I don't know. My finger squeezed the trigger and a muffled shot was between us. In the confusion I didn't know for an instant if it was the automatic he held, or the gun I held.

Then I knew.

I PICKED the automatic from his limp hand and listened to his breathing. His swollen face grimaced grotesquely and his lips bared back in pain. His front teeth were edged with the gold of dental bridge-work.

I'd seen bridgework like that before! And he'd called me "Hennessy." He knew me.

"Yeah," I breathed. "It's you—Spike Collard."

A little blood edged over the corners of his mouth as he tried to talk.

"Hap always was—a wise guy," he whispered. "He—spotted me, too."

"We haven't seen you for a few years, Spike. You didn't do so well. Small-time stuff. Pinball machine artist. A punk's racket. Things didn't pan out for you, Spike."

"Go—to hell."

He relaxed to complete limpness. I stood and started to tremble. It had been close. Too close. Now there was only my own

breathing, and there was no other living person in the room to see the fear in my eyes as I realized how very close I once had been to something like the dead man at my feet. Once, twenty years ago.

I went to the dresser drawer. He hadn't lied. A bottle was there. I uncapped it and raised it silently and said, "Thanks, Hap."

It was the first and only time I ever had a drink on duty. ♦ ♦ ♦



## YOU CAN'T RUN FAR ENOUGH!

By G. T. Fleming-Roberts

No one is safe from them . . . not even you and me, with our own little safe, careful lives. . . . For the killers—the greedy-handed predators and the vultures are lurking outside, waiting with inhuman patience for the first little entering wedge— And then. . . .

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# TWO ON

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**I**S YOUR name Wiley?" The man who asked the question had to stretch himself to make five feet, even in the elevator shoes he wore. He smiled around a highly polished set of false teeth and his Adam's apple bopped up and down behind a bright bow tie,

I wasn't in a hurry for trouble. I tried being



The word from the Syndicate was out: Goddard had to die. But since when did a private eye like Wiley get pally enough with his clients to make it a tete-a-tete on a mortuary slab?

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# A SLAB

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By **MASON  
NOBLE**

*Hard-Boiled  
Murder Mystery*



I picked up the champagne bottle. "I'm taking you in, Bruce," I said. . . .

polite. "That's right," I said. "I'm Wiley."

He smiled some more and turned his head so I got a profile of the false teeth. They were a fine, expensive-looking set. He didn't look like a man who could do you much harm—that is, unless the two overweight wrestlers who stood on either side of him held your arms behind your back. He said, "I'm Lee Collins."

"That's nice," I said. "Now, will you step across the street and have a drink with me, Mr. Collins, or will you step out of my way while I go by myself?"

"I'd rather have a talk with you, Wiley." He nodded toward a nice, dark alley just behind us.

I shook my head. "I'd rather have a drink."

The two wrestlers each grabbed himself an arm and twisted it behind my back. In the ring, they might have looked like a couple of hams, but on the deserted street of the little desert town of Paxton, they were performing like champions. I couldn't make a single move that they didn't want me to without dislocating large sections of my backbone. I stopped trying. We went up the alley to a nice, smelly spot between a couple of garbage pails. The wrestlers shifted me into reverse and backed me against a brick wall.

"What do you want in Paxton?" The one called Collins stood directly in front of me, but I had to look down my nose to see him.

"Just a little vacation, friend." I sniffed at the assortment of foul odors. "I came for the fresh air."

"Very funny." He had taken a roll of nickels from his pocket and was wrapping his right hand around them. He shook his head sadly. "You're not long for this world, shamus."

The blow caught me on the side of the jaw and jarred a gold inlay loose. They waited until my head cleared and I could hold it up again. Then, "We know you're an investigator from the Pacific Agency.

We know you came here to see a man named Goddard."

"Then you know that someone tried twice to kill this man Goddard," I said.

This time he didn't hit me. He loosened up another friendly smile and offered it to me. "That's not important. I want to know what Goddard told you about Fairmont."

I shook my head and kept my eye on the handful of nickels. "I can't discuss my client's business without his permission."

He uncorked another right hand and this time I went under. I hung suspended in black space. I searched about for objects or shapes of some kind that I could start counting, but I could see nothing. Gradually, a grey window opened in the black. My head was hanging on my chest so that all I could see was the outline of my feet. I needed a shine. A voice like the sound of breaking furniture said, "Ask him about Bruce." It was one of the wrestlers who spoke, and from the cold silence that followed, I could tell that what he had said had been a mistake. That was my second break. Fairmont and Bruce. That was something to go on. I wanted more. My mind whirled. "Where is Fairmont and who is Bruce?" I raised my head and realized that I had said it aloud.

**C**OLLINS was giving one of the wrestlers a disgusted look. "A strong back and no brains," he said. Then he turned to me. "Go back where you came from, Wiley, and keep your health. You're no good to me. You don't know anything."

I didn't tell him that I knew more now than I had ten minutes ago. I didn't tell him anything. I just stood and waited while he hauled back the handful of nickels and threw them at me again. This time, the black space I hung suspended in shook several times before it stood still, and when it did, it stood so still that it made me sick to my stomach. In that black, I felt I was losing everything, even the desire to find

something again that I could see. I dreamed up sets of false teeth and began counting them. When I lost track of how many I had counted, I dreamed up a stone hatchet and began smashing them. When they were in small enough pieces, I stuffed handfuls of them in my mouth and chewed on them. They were as hard as stones and they hurt my teeth. They were stones.

A bright light flashed in my eyes and out again. The whir of a speeding automobile passed close by me. I was lying on my face on the side of a road and it was a mouthful of gravel I had been chewing on. I spat it out and raised my head. I could make out a brightly lettered sign stretched across the road between two poles: "Good-by, Friend. You Are Now Leaving The Town Of Paxton."

I pushed myself painfully to my feet and shouted into the dark night, to no one in particular, "I am like hell, friend!"

It was a year and a half before a truck stopped and picked me up. The driver was a man of great wisdom. He stared once at my bleeding face, lit a cigarette for me, and from then on kept his eyes glued to the road and said nothing. When he let me off in front of my hotel, I gave him a couple of bucks and told him, "Thanks, buddy."

The hotel doctor was named Cartwright. His name and his manner were more like those of an undertaker. He went over my face with iodine and a styptic pencil as though he were getting it in shape to be dutifully regarded by my next of kin. He said nothing as he worked. I began to feel strangely as though I were watching the whole thing from some distant spirit world. The first sign he showed of not thinking I was already dead was when he packed up his bag and asked me for ten dollars.

I called Goddard, but the line didn't answer. Then I located the house detective and warned him that I'd complain to the management if anybody so much as walked

past my door for the rest of the night. I went to sleep.

"Wiley, this is Goddard. I've got to see you right away. It's urgent."

I didn't remember picking up the phone, but I had it in my hand. There was a lot of dirty, grey light pouring in the windows, and my face was burning hot. I said, "Okay, Goddard, if you're spending lots of money this morning, I'll be right over."

When I dropped my key at the desk, the clerk told me, "There was a young lady asking for you."

"Did she have a name?"

"Helen Dodge."

"Nice name," I said. "I don't know her. Was she—"

The clerk winked knowingly, a little intimacy just between us fellows.

I tried to look naughty. "If she calls again, tell her I'll be back at eight o'clock and if she's wearing her blue jeans I won't buy her a dinner."

GODDARD'S home was at the top of a hill top in the exclusive part of Paxton. The Fourth Infantry Division would have been a little crowded in it, but I imagine Goddard made out all right. The butler answered the door and he gave me a "Let's have no rough stuff, now, Jack" look.

The creases in Goddard's forehead were deeper than they had been the day before. I pushed a little and got my troubles in ahead of his. "Let's talk about money," I said.

"I have something important to show you," he said.

I repeated it. "Let's talk about money."

He dropped his shoulders. This was talk he understood. "All right," he answered, "I sent your agency a check for part—"

"What's between you and the agency is between you and the agency. Let's talk about you and me."

"All right," he said. "Talk."

"Once a year I get ready to quit my job," I told him. "For this year, I'm ready now. When I came to this town, I didn't know what the case was all about. After I talked to you, I still didn't know what it was all about. Since then, I've learned a few things. But I learned them the hard way." I pointed to what was left of my face. "Whoever tried to kill you means business, and I'm not getting any help from you. Anything I can do, I'm going to have to do the hard way. I'm not ready to work that hard for twenty-five a day and expenses. I want two hundred dollars now and another three hundred when the case is closed." It was quite a speech. I was all out of breath.

Goddard hauled out his wallet. He had to use both hands just to lift it. He peeled off a one-hundred-dollar bill and handed it to me. "I'm not trying to cut your price," he said. "You get the rest of the down payment if you're still on the case after you've seen what's upstairs. Come, take a look."

I nodded. "I also want the answer to a question."

"What's the question?"

"First let's see what's upstairs," I told him.

We climbed a mile and a half of stairs that were carpeted like pillows. He opened a bedroom door and showed me. It was important, all right.

It was a blonde, the kind you date if you're making a hundred thousand a year, the kind you marry if you own more than a million. She was wearing a nightgown that only that kind of a blonde would dare to wear. Her hair was made up for a dinner engagement. She was beautiful. But she was dead. She was lying on the floor beside the bed, one arm stretched out in a curve in front of her, her pretty face buried in the thick carpet.

"Nice," I said. "Yours?"

"My wife."

"When did you find her like this?"

"Just before I phoned. That's why I wanted you right away. I didn't know what to do next."

"Have you called the police?"

"No." Goddard was as pale as the nightgown.

"Call them," I said. "We can't just dig a hole and bury her under the front porch. They're going to find out sooner or later, and police don't like bodies that have gotten too cold. I'm still on the case, Mr. Goddard. I'll do what I can to get you out of this."

He tore himself loose from another hundred. "Find the murderer of my wife and I'll double the balance you asked for. How's that sound?"

"I'll do what I can," I promised. "Now for my question. Who is Bruce?"

I thought he had been pale before, when he showed me the body of his wife. But that had been the flush of health alongside this. He was frightened right enough. He said, "I haven't any idea."

Bruce was too important for me to drop it there. "Look," I said. "You hold right onto your boyhood secrets. I have no interest in all the wicked things you've done. Just give me some more name to go with Bruce."

"Mattock." He said it as though it were a word that carried a special curse.

"One more question," I added. "Did you kill your wife?"

He snapped back, "I'm not paying you eight hundred dollars to be rude to me."

"You're paying to get out of a bad jam," I told him. "You're not paying to improve my manners. Did you kill her?"

"I most certainly did not," he said. "We had our differences. I wanted a divorce and she wouldn't give me one. We quarreled. Plenty of witnesses can be found. It won't look good in court. That's why I need you."

One thing was plain. He would have liked to kill the girl. But it was also possible that he didn't.



## CHAPTER TWO

## The Talking Girl

THE Paxton police force had just as much feet as any other police force. As soon as they trampled and sat on everything in the house, they went away. But they took us with them. They locked up Goddard in the vault downstairs. They left me in a peeling brown paint office on the fourth floor and went back to their pinocle game. I waited an hour and forty minutes, according to my G. I. watch. Then the Chief, an oily little political hack named Chapman, came back with a sergeant. He shoved himself behind the desk and lit a cigar by scratching a match on the wall. A real, live tough guy. The sergeant just leaned on things and looked disgusted.

"We're booking Goddard for the murder of his wife," the Chief announced.

"What does Goddard say?" I asked.

"He says he didn't kill her, of course."

"Maybe he's lying," I suggested. "Did you use your little knuckle-rapper on him?"

"Maybe we could use something on you, Wiley," the Chief growled. "Maybe you're implicated in this."

"You're right, Chief," I said. "I held the girl and Goddard made faces at her and frightened her to death."

"I think I'll just book you on suspicion." He wasn't taking a rib very well.

"Want a Crime Commission investigation?" I asked, as pleasantly as I could. "My agency isn't national, but it carries some state protection behind it."

We glared at one another for a few minutes. Then he said, "Get out of my office, Wiley. But stay in town, in case I want you."

"By the way, Chief, what did the girl die of?"

"She had cyanide for dinner."

On the way out, I looked questioningly at the sergeant. He shrugged his shoulders.

"What can you expect when a paint salesman gets to be boss? Things were different when Bill Dodge was chief."

The name stuck with me. "What happened to Bill?" I asked. He was sorry he had even mentioned it. He looked miserable. I told him, "Okay, Sergeant, just pretend I never asked."

On the street, a man in a worn, blue-serge suit picked up my footsteps and followed me. The muddy sunlight gave me a headache and that made my jaw ache. I turned into a tavern and found two empty stools at the end of the bar. I took one of them and the blue-serge suit took the other. I told the bartender, "Just leave the bottle." I poured one and shoved the bottle to the man next to me. Then I turned to him. "Look, I've had about enough of detectives for one morning. Finish yourself a drink and then go back and tell Chapman I said to give you the day off."

He opened his wallet and shoved it to me. It was a detective badge of the Los Angeles Police force. "Larson's the name," he said.

"Well, Larson, what can I do for you in this distant desert haven of health and happiness?"

"Why do you suppose there's a town here at all?" he asked.

"I don't know. The pleasant surroundings attract a high class of people?"

He wasn't having any wise cracks. "Gambling," he said. "Here, the syndicate can make its own laws. It owns the wire service, the bookies, the real estate. It even owns the police department you just went up against."

"There was once a chief named Bill Dodge," I said.

"He's still around. He runs a hamburger joint. When the syndicate moved in, they jockeyed him out."

"You like to gamble?" I asked.

"I've got business here," he answered. "I'm after a cop-killer. An L. A. detective named Vandeman was shot twice in the

head and dropped in the ocean. It traces as far as the syndicate and stops there. I'm out of my district. I'm here without any backing. But you've got no strings on you. You could push a little weight for me."

"Nix," I pleaded. "I've got one murder on my hands, and that's plenty in this town."

HE SHRUGGED his shoulders. "I just thought that you'll be back home some day, and it never hurts to have friends in your own bailiwick."

"Okay, Larson," I said. "What about this Vandeman?"

"He was a crook. He was in charge of the Seventy-second District. The syndicate set up a branch there and he gave them protection. Now he's dead. The last time he was seen alive, he was on his way to the Bamboo Lounge on Cleary Street. We found his body in the ocean, but we never found the gun. That's all there is."

"No leads?" I asked.

"Just one. There was a singer at the Bamboo Lounge that Vandeman used to make passes at. Two months ago, she pulled out and came to Paxton."

"What's her name?"

Larson laughed. "We don't know. She got off a bus in this town and we haven't seen her since. She's about five-foot-six, a brunette, and never wears but one piece of jewelry—a pearl hanging from a diamond clasp. She was billed as Renee at the Bamboo Lounge. She did one song—*Temptation*. She did it five times an evening. The rest of the time she spent sitting at peoples' tables."

I changed the subject. "Who's Bruce Mattock, Larson?" Time was wasting and there didn't seem to be any more to the Vandeman angle.

"You won't find him," Larson warned. "He's the syndicate's trouble-shooter, a big man. He doesn't pull anything himself. He just hires the boys to do it. We think Vandeman worked with him in the

Seventy-second, see, but we don't know."

"And Lee Collins?"

"Local talent. You can pick them up a dollar a dozen anywhere."

"Look, Larson," I said. "You can do something for me. Something happened at a place called Fairmont. I don't know what, and I don't know where it is. But if it's connected to Vandeman, it might be in L. A. Get a listing on all the Fairmonts and put your boys to work combing them."

"Okay." Larson poured himself another drink and I gathered up my change.

Sometimes it's hard to find a bookie. In Paxton, you had to comb them out of your hair. I placed five bets and mentioned the name of Mattock as many times. Each time, I got a dead-fish stare and no answer. One little weasel gave me back my money and told me to blow. I'd about decided that I wasn't going to make a fortune on the races when it happened.

It was one of those dead-end streets, tucked away from the more respectable parts of town where people go to get lost, or go because they are already lost. The man who brushed against me was in his fifties and he was tired.

"Want to lay a little bet?" he asked in a voice just one notch above a whisper.

"No." If he had any real business with me, it would stand up under a little rudeness.

"The breaks have been bad, mister. They won't let me operate in the open. If they knew I was working this street, they'd come and get me. Give me a break." The number of scars on his face said that he'd been come for and gotten a few times in the past.

"Yeah. Things are tough everywhere." I was going to give him the quick brush, then I stopped a minute and thought of home and my own bookmaker. I could see Old Sam now, his greying hair, his tired eyes, standing there among his forms and tips and scratches, a stub of a pencil behind his ear and a stub of a cigar between

his teeth. Some day, when I was far away from him, he might come into a streak of misfortune. I could only hope then that some stranger would pause and lend him a helping hand. I slipped the old boy a fin. He didn't give me a spiel of gratitude, but he looked it.

"I'm Chester," he said. "You can always find me somewhere around here. If there's ever anything I can do for you . . ."

**T**HIS time I switched the cards around. I gave him the name of Vandeman to mull over.

"You a cop?" He asked.

"Private," I answered. "Just sorting some facts for a client."

His face grew hard and something like anger came into his eyes. "Ask Mattock who killed Vandeman."

He was ready to let it go at that, but I pushed it a little further. "How would you know about Mattock and Vandeman, Chester?"

"I wasn't always a street-corner bum. I had money once. I was in a poker game, a big one. There was a fight." He let it go at that. But first he warned me, "Don't use what you know until you're in a better spot than you are now. Somebody could get hurt." Then he was gone.

When I came down the stairs, she was sitting in the lobby, waiting. The desk clerk gave me another wink and I grinned. Her hair was auburn and her lips were too red to stay very far away from for any great length of time. She wore a black dress that curved in and out the way a black dress should. It was belted tightly at the waist and had little white buttons down the front. The neckline was something you might dream about, if you had a lucky night.

"Hello, Helen," I said. "You must have been waiting a while. That outfit has the desk clerk growling in his cage."

She didn't glance down to give herself an additional approving look, as a more

vain woman might have done. She looked sharp and she knew it. She let it go at that. I grabbed a handful of very smooth arm and steered her toward the dining-room. We ordered, then sat in silence. Finally she broke it.

"I need your help," she said. Her eyes on my face reminded me of the adhesive tape stuck all over it.

"I cut myself when I was shaving," I said. "You would like to talk to me about your father. Once upon a time he was the chief of police of Paxton. Then the bad boys came to town and pushed your honest father out of his big office and into the greasy kitchen of a lunch stand. They gave the job to a dim-witted paint salesman who would do what they told him to. And now you want me to beat up all the bad boys and get your father's job back for him and everybody can live happily ever after. Isn't that about the size of it?"

"I've talked to Lieutenant Larson," she said. "And he says that you only talk hard, that really you have a very soft heart."

I reached up and touched the adhesive tape. "So far," I said, "the bad boys have all been beating me up. Are you sure it wasn't a very soft head that Larson told you I had?"

That made her smile. I liked it. It was better than trying to make her laugh. She reached out her hand and I snatched it up. "Go ahead," I whispered, huskily. "Bribe me." The waiter came with the roast beef and she talked while we ate.

"The lieutenant says you're looking for Bruce Mattock."

"Larson talks too much," I said.

She went on, "All I want is a chance to talk to Mattock when you've found him."

"What could you say to Bruce Mattock?"

"I'd offer him a truce," she said. "He'd have a better front with a well-known man like my father in office. In return, my father would promise to stop fighting him."

I was surprised. "Would you really let

your father work for a man like Mattock?"

"He has to work for someone," she said. "And Mattock is the big man now. You work for Paul Goddard."

"What does Goddard have to do with this?"

"He was Mattock's lawyer. He used to handle all the syndicate's business in Los Angeles."

Information kept coming from the most unexpected places. I twisted this new one around a little. "Maybe he played poker, too," I said. She gave me a peculiar frown. "It's nothing. I just remembered a little man named Chester. Does your father know about this plan of yours?"

"Not yet," she said. "But he'll go along. He has to. He can't dish out pie and coffee at his age. It's breaking him. Will you help me?"

"No. It's crazy," I told her. "In the first place, I may never find Mattock. In the second place, your father wouldn't hear of it. And in the third place, Mattock wouldn't have any part of it. The only deals he buys are the ones he cooks up himself. Does it stand to reason that he's going to fight with a man and throw him out of office, and then take him back again and trust him just because a few fine words are spoken? Well, does it?"

She bit her lip and shook her head. She was getting ready to cry. I reached out and grabbed her hand again. "Let things ease along for a while," I told her. "Nobody knows what's going to come out of all this. But my bet is that it'll be a big explosion, and that your father will wind up on top. Incidentally, how did you know about Goddard and Mattock?"

"It was in my father's files."

"Then forget you ever saw it," I said. "Better yet, forget all about Mattock. Even a hamburger stand can get to be a pretty hot place. Let's go home."

I steered her through the lobby, my arm around her waist. It was cozy. The man sitting in the leather chair, behind the

racing form, was the little man with the false teeth. "Hello, Lee," I said. He only clutched the form tighter and pulled it closer to him.

I put the girl in a cab and sent her home. On the way back across the lobby, I didn't even look at the little man. I wasn't ready yet for another talk with Lee Collins. I grabbed the house detective by the elbow. I told him, "The man in the chair over there is carrying a gun." I held onto the elbow and shook my head. "Don't give him any trouble. But then, don't let him give you any trouble. And don't let him go upstairs, unless you want your hotel turned into a shooting gallery."

## CHAPTER THREE

### A Tight Frame

WHEN I opened the door to my room, the phone was sounding off. The night operator said she had a call for me and another one waiting. I told her to put them on. The first was Helen.

"It was a lovely evening, Ted."

"Yeah, it was nice," I said. "We'll do it again tonight. Good night, Helen."

"You sound as though you were trying to get rid of me."

"I have another call waiting. In my business, there aren't any hours."

"All right, I'll go. But there was something I forgot to tell you."

"Well?" I fished a cigarette out of the pack with one hand and hoped the other party had patience.

"Paul Goddard had a girl."

"Dandy," I said. "What's her name?"

"Janice Frome." The voice was waiting, expecting some response from me.

So I made some response. "And you think Goddard killed his wife because of this girl."

"I think the police may have that idea."

"I've met the police," I replied. "I don't think they're capable of having an idea."

"Oh, you're not even interested." The girl was peeved. "I don't think you're a detective at all. I'm going to bed."

"Good night, Helen," I whispered, in my meekest manner, "I'll see you tonight."

The other call was a man named Gorman.

"I'm Paul's lawyer," he said.

"I have a question for you, Mr. Gorman," I said. "Does one lawyer charge another his usual rates, or do you sort of do one another a favor?"

"I'm Paul's friend. I expect no fee for this." The voice was too indignant.

"For what?" I asked.

"For defending Paul."

"That's what I meant," I continued. "What about this defense?"

His tone became businesslike. "We'll ask for an early trial. Paul will plead guilty. We'll have—"

I interrupted, "Will you ask for an early execution, too?"

"I don't like your tone, Mr. Wiley."

"You don't have to like it," I told him. "All you have to do is frame Paul Goddard into the gas chamber, and call me in the middle of the night to make sure I'm not going to throw any monkey wrenches into the plans. What makes you think a case can even be built against Goddard?"

"His own story is all the case that will be needed," Gorman answered. "He says that his wife had been nervous and upset. They had quarreled. She went to bed and couldn't sleep. She asked for a cup of warm milk. Paul fixed it for her. He decided a shot of brandy would calm her down and he added it to the milk. The police chemists have the decanter of brandy. It's loaded with cyanide."

"All circumstantial," I said.

Gorman continued, "Under examination, Paul's story went all to pieces. He admitted that his wife never drank, that he kept the brandy for his own use. He admitted that the night of the murder he did not drink any of the brandy. He admitted

that there had been a fight. There are dozens of witnesses to show that there had been fights before, that he had wanted a divorce and that he had threatened her."

"All circumstantial," I repeated.

"There is a girl who will testify that Paul offered to kill his wife before. She broke off with him because she was afraid he would do it."

"Janice," I said. "Have the police picked her up?"

"No, but she's around. They can get her when they want her. Also, they've traced the poison. It was obtained by a man named Lee Collins who delivered it to Goddard."

"Okay," I agreed, "it's a nice case. The only thing that might queer it is the Vandeman angle."

"The what?"

"Don't try to act, Gorman. You're not good at it. Paul was in a big poker game with a policeman named Vandeman. There was a fight and this Vandeman got himself dead."

"Paul didn't kill him."

"Paul was a witness, and that's worse. I know about it and that's just as bad. Your case isn't going to the jury until I'm taken care of. What's the offer?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't waste my time, Gorman. You were supposed to call to find out how much I knew. Now you've found out. Make an offer or hang up the phone and let me go to bed."

THERE was a long silence. I could hear sums of money being added up in his head. At last, he answered. He sounded as though he had mortgaged his home. "There will be an envelope with five thousand dollars delivered to you in the morning."

"Don't bother," I said.

"See here, Wiley—"

"No, Gorman, *you* see here. I'm not in

this for chickenfeed. And I'm not ready to discuss my business with a shyster lawyer. You can tell Bruce Mattock that when he's ready to talk price, he knows where to find me." I slammed the receiver down for emphasis.

I went to sleep. I dreamed about an envelope with five thousand dollars and wondered. It wasn't the first time I'd been offered a bribe and it wasn't the first time I'd wondered about it. Honesty isn't something that comes with a birth certificate. You have to work at it. I was working at it. The telephone rang, and a morning operator gave me a voice full of sunshine, "Good morning—it's ten o'clock." I had her look up the number of Janice Frome's apartment and ring it for me.

"This is Gorman's office," I said. "Mr. Gorman left some briefing for you. I'll be over in an hour."

The apartment was modern, all in white and light grey, the kind that requires a good maid and a good income. The girl was modern, the kind who would always have a good maid and a good income.

"Hello, Janice," I said. "Have you talked to Paul?"

She shook a head of bright red hair. "You know I haven't. What are my instructions?" The voice was cool.

"Aren't you going to offer me a cup of coffee?"

She looked puzzled, as though she couldn't remember where the kitchen was. Then she said, "Of course. I'll be back in a minute."

There was probably a phone in the kitchen, but that was all right. It would give me the few minutes I needed. There was a desk in one corner by the windows. I went through the drawers. In the middle one, toward the back, was a jewel box. It was a small box. It wasn't used for the expensive ones, just the important ones. I fished out an earring, a pearl pendant and a diamond clasp. I dropped it in my pocket. I closed up the desk and moved over

to the radio. I went through the records and found one of *Temptation*. I had it playing when she came back into the room.

The cool look was icy now. "You're not from Gorman's office, Mr. Wiley."

"You're right," I admitted. "But I do have some briefing for you."

She sat in a low chair opposite mine and crossed her legs. "Well?" Her voice was throaty.

They were nice legs. I looked at my wrist watch. "Don't waste your come-hither talents on me," I told her. "Whoever you called, it will take them ten minutes at least to get here. I'm going to spend five and then I'm going. I just wanted you to know that Bruce is up to his eyebrows in trouble, and that if you're going to save your pretty neck, you better start thinking about it now."

Her eyes were questions.

"When you're ready, I have a friend who can make the arrangements."

"What will I have to do?" A nice girl, always ready to make a deal.

"Just information," I said. "You could start by telling me about Paul and Bruce and Vandeman and the big poker game."

"I wasn't in the game. I wasn't even in the room." She said it too loudly. Immediately, she knew she had said the wrong thing.

"Then the game was held upstairs, above the Bamboo Lounge?"

Her face was bright with rage. "What kind of a low, miserable grifter are you?"

"An underpaid one," I said. "Just like you."

At the door, I turned once more to her. "You shouldn't have dyed your hair," I said. "It's a mess."

WHEN I came in the office, Chapman scratched another match on the wall. He looked up at me and bit down on his cigar. The sergeant was leaning against the water cooler.

"I want to see Goddard," I said.

Chapman shook his head. "Can't be done."

"He's my client," I said. "He owes me some money."

"Tough." Chapman was being firm this morning.

I tried another angle. "I want to talk to Bruce Mattock."

"Who?" The confusion on his face was genuine. This was rich. He wasn't being given orders at all. He was just so dumb that he was volunteering to do everything that Mattock wanted.

"It's all right, Chief," I said. "I just dropped by to leave you a thought to ponder over. If you wanted to poison your wife, would you put the poison in her milk or would you put it in your own bottle of brandy and then pour some brandy in the milk? And when you were done, would you pour the rest of the brandy down the sink, or would you put the bottle back in your liquor cabinet so it would be there when the police chemist arrived?"

"Yeah, that is kind of funny." The confusion on his face was reaching levels of panic.

I got up to leave. "Don't work too hard at it, Chief. You're not used to it."

Outside the office, I asked the sergeant, "Does Goddard know he's being framed?"

He shook his head. "He doesn't see anyone but his lawyer."

"That must be a great comfort to him. And Sherlock Holmes in there doesn't know that Mattock is pulling the strings?"

He shook his head again. Then he touched my elbow. "You got a gun, Mac?"

I nodded.

"Use it if you have to," he said. "Don't play it fancy. You're in the middle, and guys in the middle make good targets."

I found Larson in front of the same tavern. We walked up and down the sidewalk where we could talk with nobody snooping.

"Things are moving," I said. "Have you got the necessary papers to take Mat-

tock back to L. A.—assuming I latch on to him?"

He nodded. "Is Mattock my boy?"

"I think so." I handed him the pearl earring. "She's a redhead now and her name is Janice Frome. Mattock was using her to contact Goddard. She was staying free enough to play it either way. It looks now as though she'll play it with Mattock against Goddard. There was a big poker game upstairs, over the Bamboo Lounge. The girl knows about it, second hand. Vandeman and Mattock and Goddard were all in it. So was a little gambler named Chester. I think Mattock popped Vandeman and he's out to get Goddard now because Goddard was a witness. Maybe Goddard threw a threat at him."

Larson stared hard. "Wiley, you're guessing."

"The best anybody can do right now is guess. There aren't any newsreels on it. What did you find about Fairmont?"

"There's a village named Fairmont. There's a theater, a gas station, an amusement park, two laundries, a grocery store and a pool hall—all named Fairmont. The boys have photos and are digging them now. How's your case?"

"Goddard stands tight in a frame. They won't let me talk to him. They've got a good case. The frame fits him nice and snug."

"What makes you think he didn't kill his wife?" Larson wanted to know. "You got a reason?"

"There's six hundred dollars in it for me," I said. "But that's only one reason. Too many people are too busy trying to prove that he did. I was offered a bribe last night and this morning they're out gunning for me."

"Want me to stick with you?"

"Not just yet," I answered. "But stay where I can reach you. Stay close to Bill Dodge's lunch room. I'll call you there. I've got to talk to Chester. He may be the testimony you need."

**F**INDING Chester wasn't as easy a job as it had been the last time. Most people just didn't know him. In the late afternoon, I found a sailor in a tattoo parlor who remembered him. A couple of men had taken him home drunk. The hotel was a flop house called Kingsley's. Chester had a little closet of a room on the sixth floor. The two men hadn't brought him home drunk at all. They'd brought him home dead. His wallet and everything else in his pockets had been removed.

"Call the police," I told the manager. I found an alley door out and went back to the center of town. For the rest of today, I wanted lots of people around me.

I was sore. When a harmless, little man just wanders into something that's not even his affair and has to die just because he wandered in, then I'm burned up. I called Helen and waited for her in front of a movie. We found seats in the back, where we could talk.

"I couldn't wait until tonight," I said. "It's your big, brown eyes that do it." I reached over and touched the lobe of her ear. It was as though I were going away some place and might not come back. I wanted somebody to say good-bye to.

I pushed her chin back and kissed her. I said, "Good-bye, Helen."

"Where are you going?"

"I don't know, but it won't be fun. If everything works out right, I'll meet you at the hotel around eight."

"All right, Ted, I'll be waiting." Her lips were slightly parted and her eyes were sleepy. She wanted to be kissed again, right then. She said, "There's something new you ought to know."

"Okay," I said.

"Goddard's wife had a visitor the afternoon of the murder—Janice Frome."

"She came to see Goddard."

"No. He was playing golf. She came to see his wife. They spent an hour together, in the library."

"Chummy, wasn't it?" I said. "How

long had the Goddards been married?"

"About six months. Just after he came to Paxton."

I asked her, "How did you learn all this?"

She smiled like a little girl who has gotten "A" in arithmetic. "I asked the butler."

"Of course," I said. "That would be too simple a thing for me to think of. You'd make a good detective, Helen—if you weren't so pretty."

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Boss Killer

**I** GOT back to my hotel without anybody machine-gunning me. I locked the door and got on the phone. Nobody answered at Janice Frome's apartment. I called the police station and got my sergeant. She hadn't been there. That would mean she was with Bruce Mattock. Next, I called Dodge's lunch room. Larson was there.

"Stay close to the phone for the next couple of hours," I told him. "If I don't call, go out looking for Lee Collins. Try Janice Frome's apartment. It's on Elm and Lowry—the Westchester—apartment 8."

"You sure you don't want me with you?"

"Look, Wiley, there's a safer way to play it," Larson said. "When I talked to the department, they told me that the Senate investigation is pushing west. There are three F.B.I. men assigned to Paxton. They'll be here within a week. Don't stick your neck out. Just sit tight for a while and let them handle it."

"I sat tight for one day and an old man was killed. Mattock knows the heat's on. What do you think's going to happen in seven days of sitting tight? No dice, Larson. Tonight's the night."

"I'll be here when you want me." Larson hung up the phone.

I got a pint out of my suitcase and Gor-



man's office on the phone. When he answered, I told him, "Wait a minute. I'm pouring a drink." I threw the phone on the bed. There was a glass tumbler on the shelf above the wash stand. I rinsed it out and poured it a quarter full. I took plenty of time. I didn't spill a drop. Good nerves. I picked up the phone again.

"Go ahead, Gorman."

"I've been wanting to talk to you, Wiley. I—"

"You're not talking to me," I interrupted. "I called to talk to you. Just hang onto the phone and listen. I don't know how cute your friend Mattock thinks he is, but I'm going to find out. Last night I told you that if he wants to do business, he'll have to talk to me. So far, I haven't heard from him. I'm getting tired of waiting. The price is twenty-five thousand, and I want the money tonight, before midnight. If I don't get it, I'm going to take what I know and fly into Los Angeles. Is that plain enough?"

"Plain enough," he replied. "Where are you, Wiley? I'll send someone over for you."

"I'll bet you will, at that," I thought to myself. I looked out of my window and surveyed the stores across the street. The sign on the cigar store said, "Taney." "I'm calling from a pay phone in Taney's cigar store," I said. I hung up.

I put the pint and the tumbler by the window sill and turned off the room lights. Waiting in a dark room is good. It doesn't just add the time, it multiplies it. You can go over your whole life in five minutes and it seems to take thirty-five years to do it. If there are some dark places there, it takes longer.

I doused the cigarette and gulped another quick drink. A grey sedan had pulled to a stop in front of Taney's cigar store. I checked my revolver for the tenth time and watched. The two wrestlers got out and a slender man I'd never seen before. Lee Collins was driving. He sent the

slender man around to the back and the two wrestlers to the front door. He stood by the car. In a minute, one of the wrestlers returned. There was some hurried talk and waving of arms. The wrestler went back in. Lee Collins turned and looked at the hotel.

"I'm up here, baby," I said, to myself. He came across the street.

"You're coming alone," I whispered. "Stout fella." I crossed the darkened room and went out. I locked the door behind me and went down the hall. About nine steps from the back stairs, I stood and waited. When the elevator hit my floor, I started for them. I took them four at a time. At the bottom, I listened. He was taking them four at a time, too. In the alley, I made as much noise as I could. In the darkest part of it, I found a parked car and ducked behind it. He didn't try to sneak around anything. He walked straight toward me and he walked fast. When he was alongside me, I stepped out in front of him.

"Is your name Collins?" I asked.

WHEN he shoved his hand in his pocket, I used the elbow to spin him around and I gonked him behind the ear with the heel of my hand. It was enough to daze him while I relieved him of his gun and searched his pockets until I found the roll of nickels. I watched him while he shook his head.

"Feeling better?" I asked cheerfully.

He decided to make a fight of it. When he had gotten to his feet, I let him have the nickels on the side of his jaw. I waited. When he had gotten to his feet again, I let him have the nickels again. The wait was longer this time. This time, he stayed sitting. I tossed him the nickels.

"You take these," I said. "They're no good. They bruise your knuckles." I took out his automatic and held it by the barrel. "Where's Bruce Mattock?"

He looked sullen and said nothing. I

shrugged my shoulders. "Tonight I'm reckless," I said. "I don't care whether you answer my questions or not. I'd just as soon keep banging you around all night." I slapped him across the mouth with the butt of the gun. The teeth weren't so good. They cracked.

"Too bad some of those teeth aren't real," I told him. "I'd like to break off a few—just for old time's sake. Who killed Chester, Lee?"

He didn't look so sullen, but he still wasn't saying anything. I hauled back the gun again. He raised his hand in front of his face and whimpered, "Don't hit me again. It was Albert and Gus."

"I'm disappointed in you, Collins," I said, disgusted. "You're not so tough. Which one killed him?"

"It was Gus." He sniffed a couple of times. "It's been like this ever since he put those two dames on the payroll."

"One dame would be Janice Frome. Who was the other?"

"Louise. He picked her up a year ago."

"The name doesn't mean anything to me. She was a blonde, wasn't she?"

He nodded.

"She was the girl who married Paul Goddard, wasn't she?"

He nodded.

I had a hunch. "Get on your feet," I told him. "You're going to take me to Goddard's place."

He stood up. "I don't know where it is."

I shoved him suddenly against the car and he fell down again.

"Honest, I don't know where it is."

I helped him to his feet. "I believe you, Lee. I believe you." I took the clip out of his automatic and gave the gun back to him. "Put it in your pocket. We're going to get a cab and you're going to take me to Janice Frome. If I have to shoot you, I'll do it. It'll be self-defense. You were carrying a gun. I didn't know it wasn't loaded."

I tossed the clip into a garbage can. We went out the alley to the street in back of

the hotel. I hailed a cab and put Collins inside.

"Go ahead," I said. "Tell him where to go."

He muttered, "Westchester Apartments."

His mouth was bleeding badly. I gave him my handkerchief. "Clean yourself up," I said. "You look as though you'd been in a fight."

When Janice opened the door, she was laughing. She wore a white silk dress with thin shoulder straps and a bare midriff. Her hair was slightly mussed. She looked at me and stopped laughing. She started to shut the door.

"I've got Lee Collins with me," I shouted into the room. "I'm either coming in, or I'm going to take him down to Chapman and have him sing for the Chief."

"Let him in, honey. Let him in." The voice was pleasant. The accent was Harvard. The man was Bruce Mattock. The girl opened the door wider and we went in. I pointed to a chair and motioned Collins into it. There was an open bottle of champagne on a coffee table. I found myself a glass and poured me one.

"You really shouldn't have gone to all this trouble," I said.

**M**ATTOCK smiled. "You've been a long time getting here, Wiley." He was a tall man with not quite enough weight for his height.

"You're a hard man to find," I said.

"So you want twenty-five thousand?"

I shook my head and held up my empty glass. "No, I just want another drink."

Mattock turned to the girl. "Pour the man a drink, honey."

Janice brought over the bottle and leaned over my glass. She was good at leaning over. I told her, "Thanks, honey."

Mattock's mouth was hard. "Gorman said you wanted twenty-five thousand."

"You going to give it to me?"

"No."

I shrugged. "It was just something I told Gorman. I wanted him to send me Junior here." I nodded toward Lee Collins. He was holding my handkerchief up to his mouth. "You owe your boy a new set of teeth, Bruce. He lost them in the service."

"Get to the point, Wiley."

"That is my point. That's why I brought Lee up here. I wanted to give him a chance to see that you don't give a damn about his teeth. You don't really care whether he gets a new set or not."

The girl threw her hands up in the air. "This is nonsense."

I smiled at her. "You think it's nonsense, and so does Bruce. But Lee doesn't think it's nonsense. Look at him. He's eating it up. He's wondering just how much he really is worth to you. And he hasn't even been told yet the part he's going to play in the Goddard trial. He doesn't know yet that he's going to have to face a jury and tell them that it was Paul Goddard he bought the poison for."

Lee Collins squirmed in his seat, his face coloring.

"You just sit still, you little runt," Mattock growled. "I'll talk to you when I'm done with laughing boy." He was playing right into my hands.

"But it's all right, Mattock," I laughed. "Now that he knows, he hasn't got brains enough to see the play clear through. He doesn't know that once he's given that testimony, he'll be dangerous to you because he could always go back and admit that he had lied." Collins squirmed again and started to get up. I finished it off. "He doesn't know yet that he's going to have to wind up with Chester." That did it. Collins snarled with rage. Without thinking, he hauled the automatic out of his pocket and pointed it at Mattock.

I gonked him again and wrenched the gun from his hand. I held it loosely. When I turned around, the girl was standing in front of me. She splashed her drink in my face and grabbed for the gun. I held onto

it for a little while and then let it go. She tossed it to Mattock. He turned it around and pointed it at me. I held my breath for a minute, but he didn't pull the trigger. The play was still good.

"Like a basketball game isn't it?" He smiled. "That was nice, Wiley. But why didn't you let him shoot me?"

I pretended to glower at the girl. "I want you alive, Mattock. And the little man hasn't any love for me either. He might not have stopped with you."

Mattock was completely settled back into his calm again. He said, "You're a nervy guy, for a dick. Well, where do we go from here?"

"There's nowhere to go," I said. "It's the end of the line. It's all on ice. You did kill Vandeman, didn't you?"

He nodded. "I killed him. He was a four-flushing bum. He played a lousy game of poker, and when he lost too much, he cheated. He called a hand wrong and then wouldn't show it. Paul and I drove him to the ocean. On the way back, I tossed the gun in the lagoon."

"On the way back from the ocean," I said. "In a lagoon. The amusement park—that would be Fairmont Amusement Park, right?"

He nodded again. "Paul had been saving his money. He had too much of it, and he decided to quit our enterprise. You know how it is. Nobody quits. It wouldn't be good for business."

I laughed. "So Louise was sent to keep him in line, even if she had to marry him to do it. And when Paul found out that she was on the syndicate payroll, he wanted a divorce and he threatened you with what he knew about Vandeman. I think that's all I need." I stood up.

**M**ATTOCK stood up, too, still pointing the gun at my chest. He said, "We'll all go out the back way."

I shook my head. "I'm taking you in, Bruce." I picked up the champagne bottle.

"Are you coming quietly, or do I have to brain you with this?"

"I'm going to kill you, Wiley."

"Not with that gun. It isn't loaded. Go ahead. Try it." I started toward him.

He snapped the trigger twice and I hit him with the bottle. He let go of the gun and reached for my throat. I hit him again. He dropped to one knee and I hit him a third time. This time, he fell. He lay on his face and didn't move. He had a hard head. He was tough and he had brains. He was just in the wrong business.

I didn't see the girl. She came at me from behind. She grabbed a handful of hair and sunk her nails into my face. I half turned and brought the heel of my foot down on a silver slipper. She let go of my hair. I smiled sweetly at her before I hit her. She fell against the chair Lee Collins was sitting in. He was being a very good boy. He was just sitting there. I winked at him and picked up the phone.

Larson brought some of the local police with him. I pointed to Mattock. "There's your boy. The gun you want is at the bottom of the lagoon at the Fairmont Amusement Park. Goddard's your witness. He'll talk."

"What happened to your case?" Larson wanted to know.

"There isn't any case," I said. "It was a murder that backfired. The syndicate was out to get Goddard and they decided to use his wife to do it. Collins got the poison and delivered it to Janice Frome. She turned it over to Goddard's wife, who soaked his brandy with it. Then she got the brandy herself; instead of Goddard. It was all an accident—or a joke of some kind."

Helen was waiting in the lobby and the desk clerk was grinning. She was wearing the black dress.

"Is your father home?" I asked.

"No. He won't be home until later."

"Good. Let's go home," I said. "I didn't want to see him until later, anyway."



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**D**O YOU know your next-door neighbor? Or did he just move in recently? Perhaps he keeps his blinds down more than most other people on the block. Perhaps he rejects your friendly advances, indicating that he doesn't care to make friends. These things you set down to natural reserve. Some people, you know, are inclined to be solitary. So you figure that's the answer.

But is it?

Let's consider a statistic. Did you know that over sixty percent of the murders committed in the United States go unsolved? That for every four murderers sent to the penitentiary or to the death house, there are six who are walking free—and might be living right next door to you?

And, of course, this is just a statistic that applies to the *known* murders. How many murders go unsuspected? Aunt Minnie has had a bad heart for years, and when the doctor comes around after she's kicked off, he shakes his head and murmurs something about her heart "having given way at last." Does he think of doing an autopsy on Aunt Minnie that might disclose the strychnine in her stomach? He does not. Instead, he fills out the death certificate, noting, as the cause of death, some form of heart failure.

He has no way of knowing that Aunt Minnie's devoted nephew Gerald has just gotten plain tired of waiting for the old girl to kick off and has decided to speed things up a bit. After all, Gerald can't be expected to wait *forever* for his inheritance!

Do you have a neighbor named Gerald? Has he just come into some money from an aged aunt?

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# CRIME CLINIC • •

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Well?

There was a case in Brooklyn several years ago where a woman and her mother both died of arsenic poisoning. The police arrested the woman's husband and held him for murder. He was tried three times, and on the third trial exonerated. But *somebody* knocked off these women. Who?

In Connecticut, recently, police dug up an old lady on the prompting of several local citizens and did an autopsy on her. Poison, the coroner said. But nobody has yet been brought to trial.

In Chicago, for many years the police department had a record of something like one murder solved out of every ten committed. What happened to the killers who got away?

Are they living next door to you?

That tough-looking guy with the flashy convertible and the faded blonde wife—who were they before they moved to your block? The man looks as though he never did a stitch of work in his life. Ask him a question about tommy guns. Maybe he could answer you.

In Fall River, Mass., some forty-odd years ago, somebody took an axe to Lizzie Borden's parents. Lizzie was tried but never convicted. Yet *someone* did it.

That genial old gent down the block with the Yankee accent—was *he* ever in Fall River?

Someone killed a union organizer in New York a couple of years ago in a crowded business building. There were scores of witnesses, but somehow, strangely, no one can recall exactly what the murderer looked like.

But if you think back, maybe you'll re-

call that dark, sinister-looking man who stood near you in the store when you bought this magazine. He was leaning against the tobacco counter, looking casually at you, his hard, narrowed eyes measuring you. . . .

For what?

Don't look to us for the answers, friends. We don't know them. We wouldn't know a murderer if we stumbled over him. All we know is that we're walking cautiously these days and looking over our new neighbors with a wary eye. You never can tell for sure. . . .

But one thing you *can* be sure of—and that's the fact that year in and year out, issue after issue, for the most exciting reading in the murder field, **DETECTIVE TALES**



is your best bet. Where murder is at its deadliest and blondes at their wickedest, that's where you'll find **DETECTIVE TALES'** authors, taking it all down to pass it on to you in the most thrilling dramatic form.

The next issue of DT will be published March 19th. We'll see you then with some more advice on What To Do Until the Coroner Comes.—*The Editor.*

(Continued from page 12)

drove into Victorville, Broghman found himself sweltering in the little two-by-four room, rumaging idly through her traveling kit, sorting out handkerchiefs, a lipstick, a packet of photographs.

Shucking them from their envelope, he lined the pictures side by side on the bedspread in the sunlight. It took him a minute to understand what his eyes were looking at.

At first, they had looked like pictures of himself.

This one here, standing by the sedan in a dark suit. There was something about the dark cloth over long, muscled bones. Something suggestive in the posture. And *this* one. Himself, almost. In hiking breeches, a shabby hat cocked over rebellious hair. And the last one—Julie with her arm around this man who didn't look at all like Johnny Broghman but at the same time did.

It gave him a stunned feeling, like having a body in two places at once. "I'll be damned," he said softly.

The door opened a few minutes later, while he was still looking. Julie's hard silhouette stood in a square of sunlight. There was just a flicker of surprise in her cheek muscles, before she shut the door.

"Recognize yourself?"

"That isn't me."

"It's enough like you to make it worth a hundred grand if we work it fast. Worth a million if we stick it a couple years. Those pics were snapped when you were boss-man of L. A. when you cleared twenty grand a month or you thought things stunk pretty badly."

He just sat there, waiting.

She stepped forward, slowly, her eyes full of funny, intense light. Her voice was like a sing-song prayer.

"Ricky Wolfe's not dead any more. He's back from the grave, in this room, now, sitting there, and he doesn't know it. He's going back. Back to L. A. to be boss-

man again." She stared down into his features, and her eyes were burning amber. "What do you think of that—*Ricky Wolfe?*"

THE new dark suit fitted like grafted skin. One side was padded out a little; Ricky had been built that way. Higher heels added height to Broghman. He learned to talk with a faint lisp, chewing a cigar. But still he kept saying the same thing to Julie.

"I keep telling you it won't work. I don't look like him. For a moment, yeah, if you look quick, if the light's bad, if you're half blind. You're crazy. You want to kill us both!"

"Shut up!" she hissed. "Or I'll do the killing now."

He bit his cigar fiercely.

There were lists of facts, names, alibis to digest. Julie crammed them down him. The leaves fell off the calendar as if in a high wind. Then Julie, one day, elevated a stein of beer, yellow like her eyes and in a softer voice said, "Tomorrow's the big day. L. A., here we come." She drank beer. "How's it feel to be Ricky Wolfe?"

His hand shook. He looked at his face mirrored, distorted in the half-emptied bottle. The cigar. The mustache. He wanted to blurt, "It won't work. An old gag like this won't fool people." But there was that look in her eyes, hot as boiling gold, so he shut up.

She was talking again, almost to herself. "I can't say what it was like, that noon at the bank. You standing there. Something about the way you stood, your face, like Ricky made up in a slightly new package. Lord, how it yanked my insides."

He thought it was a nice gesture, this next. He clinked his glass against hers. "Let's drink to our new life—together."

She got mad. "No," she snapped. "Let *me* say things like that. I keep telling you!"

Looking at her, trying to understand

what ticked under her red hair, he sheepishly downed his beer.

\* \* \*

It seemed right that she drove the car to L.A. all the way. It was a picture-postcard day. She pressed the speed way up and kept it there when it was safe, her hair streaming like a scarlet banner . . . They swerved corners to Spring Street and Third, parked the car, and walked—two dark suits reflected in shop windows—toward the bookie joint. He couldn't figure it out. It was crazy—but he was actually enjoying it.

Brogman knew the place from Julie's pungent description. A huge magazine shop smelling of old books in musty pyramids; dimly lighted; slouched figures moving around in the dimness; phones jangling far back in the twenty aisles and hundreds of tables.

Back in that dusty place, where naked light bulbs hung in the high ceiling, the biggest horse racket in L.A. tucked away its profits and shilled its suckers.

The door to hell. Brogman felt his heart pounding. What if he forgot facts, figures, words, names . . .

Julie shoved him on. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the dark after sun. People's faces blurred in the gloom, and he was moving his hard heels, rapping like knuckles, following the sullen redhead with the pendulum walk.

A lot of seated men jerked up, a lot of reading men stopped reading, a lot of talking men caught their tongues in their teeth, a lot of smoking men choked on their cigarettes. It was like flinging a boulder into a stagnant pond, watching ripples skim out and rush back.

"Ricky! For God's sake, fellas, it's him!"

"Ricky!"

"I'm seein' things!"

A sound of bodies stirring, shadows moving, and then one single voice saying,

"That's not Ricky Wolfe." And again, "That's not Ricky."

It was a flat statement.

Brogman felt his gun in his palm slip like a frightened animal. His breath hissed in his nostrils. In the silence that followed, he stopped dead still and there was only the sound of Julie's high heels tacking along the wooden floor and slowly, with a kind of frozen dread, coming to a halt, too.

Brogman turned. Out of the shadow a guy slipped who was too well dressed. With a long white horse-face and red-rimmed, tired eyes and sweat on his cheeks. A sort of balding guy, whose features set off a trigger in Brogman's mind. Merritt. Julie'd given a description. Merritt, from the old days. One of Ricky's sidekicks, a jealous kind of gungsel. Merritt.

There was something in Julie's expression. Almost fear. It looked strange to her. Out of place. Lost. Her hand crawled along her dark purse, vaguely.

Brogman knew it was no use. It was no use all along.

"That's right," somebody else agreed. "It ain't Ricky at all." The voice sounded awed, funny, disappointed in its surprise.

Merritt said, "What you trying to pull, wise guy? You and the redhead?"

Brogman's jaw stiffened.

"No," he admitted evenly. "No, I'm not Ricky."

He heard Julie's gasp. He continued.

"I'm not Ricky Wolfe. Not at all. I don't have to be him. I'm me. I'm myself! You, Merritt, you don't count for beans!"

The darkness began to swim. Everybody was sort of held by Brogman's voice, waiting.

"You can't get away with an old trick like that," was Merritt's quick reply. "What are you—kids to try something like this?"

Brogman pulled his gun, and while the darkness got darker, and there was only Merritt in front of him, and the others waiting, he fired three shots.

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## DETECTIVE TALES

Merritt folded over the bullets and fell flat down on his head, choking.

"Ricky!" It was Julie's voice. He had a flash of the metal jaws of her purse flipping wide, her gloved hand burrowing inside, extracting a little blue gun.

"I'm in!" said Broghman. There was a sort of power to the way he mouthed it. He sort of grew upward. He seemed to fit his suit better. Everybody else still stood, looking at his face, as if they were seeing the devil and couldn't run away.

**B**ROGHMAN took in every face. Names, date, facts, figures that Julie'd given him. Here. One face, a fat red one with beer smelling from its lips. "Kelly!" He snicked it out, with a jerk of his gun. "You know what to do. Get moving with this body!"

"Sure, Boss!" Kelly moved his big stomach and big shoulders and fat, long arms.

Broghman glanced around. "You, Rhodes, help him. Get your car around in the alley, on the double."

Rhodes hesitated.

"Well?" asked Broghman.

"Sure," said Rhodes hastily. "Sure, Boss. We'll take care of the stiff."

Other shadows were becoming men now, taking the cue from the others. Someone grabbed Merritt's feet, someone else his arms. There was a shuffling of running feet back through the dark little office, more orders, more swearing.

You keep people running so they don't have time to think. No time to get mad, thought Broghman. Keep them excited, keep their eyes fixed on something else, *then you fool them.*

It didn't take more than a minute for the body to vanish through the back door into the alley. A car roared outside. A small crowd gathered in the front door of the shop.

(Continued on page 106)



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## DETECTIVE TALES

(Continued from page 104)

"Clear them away!" Broghman flipped his gun through the air. "Catch, Sammy," he told one of them. Sammy scuttled through the back office with the gun. To the others Broghman gave a brief going-over. "Any of you want to pull out, pull now. Any of you don't like me, say so. I'm in."

Kelly emerged from back, wheezing, mopping sweat off his huge pink face. "Everything's okay, Ricky." He caught himself. "I mean—" He groped for a name.

Broghman gave him one. "If it makes you feel better—call me Ricky, too."

Kelly felt better. He grinned. "Okay—Ricky. We always did get along, didn't we?" He stopped and thought about that. "Didn't we—almost—I guess—" He stood there.

There'd be a cop in a moment. Broghman shook his head, and he and Julie and Kelly went into the back office with two others.

Julie was just watching him all this while, holding onto her purse, examining his face. "It happened," she said. "It happened when you shot Merritt."

"What?" he asked.

She didn't have to answer. A cracked mirror hanging on the dirty wall told him. He saw his eyes there, and shivered.

Out of the past he heard Julie's voice saying, "You're no killer. It's not in your face. Your eyes are open too wide for killing."

In the mirror, now, they were narrowed to hard slits.

He broke away from looking at himself. "Let's move. Brentwood. That's where my house is, the one with the swimming pool, huh, Julie?"

"Sure," she said, softly. "Sure it is."

"Come on, then. You too, Kelly. And you boys. Lots of work for us."

(Continued on page 108)



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## DETECTIVE TALES

(Continued from page 106)

"Sure, Boss."

They meant a lot, those two words: "Sure, Boss."

They all went out together.

IT WAS a big impressive house in Brentwood. You could fall in its swimming pool if you didn't watch out. The bathrooms had glass doors. It glittered.

Walking around the huge garden surrounding the place, Broghman figured how it had all worked, how Merritt had been an unpopular sort of guy, how Ricky's spot had been vacant, discounting Merritt, for weeks now following Ricky's death. Things hadn't jelled yet.

So a lot of guys had wanted Ricky back. When people want things bad enough, they get them. Even if they have to make believe. So Broghman filled the part. He was near enough to the original, so they made him into a kind of duplicate of the old boss. Something strictly from a psychological text.

But seeing the house and the garden, now, after all the excitement died down, he realized that it meant nothing to him. Not a thing. What in hell *did* he want then? What? Even, there was something about Julie. . . .

There had to be a party. So Los Angeles could meet a guy named Broghman.

He bought a corsage for Julie for the party. He gave it to her in a cellophane box and watched her face change at sight of it. She twisted the box apart and tore the flower into pieces and dropped it on the floor.

"That's not what I want. I keep telling you. Don't give me anything like that."

She walked off.

He picked up the mashed flower, smelled it. It smelled all right. He shook his head.

The house was full of mist from cigarettes, coming and going in great fogbanks. Bottles rattled against bottles,

## MURDER IS MY BUSINESS!

champagne tumbled into glasses, everybody talked too much. It was Friday night. Merritt had been killed and taken away Wednesday. Broghman stood in the middle of the noise. This was the circus Julie ringmastered for him, so all the big lions could look at their new tamer, sit up, give a jealous greeting, shake hands maybe. Things were smooth. Julie saw to it that people who were small-time stayed on the outer fringe, while the big Joes got through. There were plenty of them.

"So they call you Ricky, too?"

This was an old man with white hair. Name of Vanning. Some sort of contact with one of the biggest lawyers. Soft pink face, long and intelligent looking, slightly wrinkled, constantly smoking imported cigars. "Like to see you after the party, Ricky," he said softly.

"What about?"

Vanning chuckled a little. "We're surprised at your showing up, Ricky. We're respectable business men, yes we are. It's like having a ghost coming among us. But I must admit you were clever. Used a psychological trick. Very good."

"Keep talking."

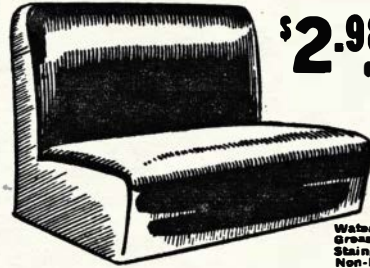
"In spite of the fact that you showed some originality in the way you took Ricky Wolfe's place, you're still one of the old-school gangsters. The kind of person who used to rob a bank with a gun—"

"What's wrong with that!"

"Unscientific. We're business men. We do our work with hints, words, a little pressure here and there. Quiet transactions. We use psychology, too, but use it all the time." The old man brushed back his soft white hair. "Now, listen to me, young man. From now on, criminality works behind a desk. It's been tending that way a long time, but now it's here to stay. Science prevents you from being out in the open any more. People won't stand for it."

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## DETECTIVE TALES

"So what do we talk about after the party?"

"About you quieting down, my boy. You attract attention. You're old-fashioned, make too much noise."

"So I gotta change!"

"We can give you an office downtown—"

"I'm not made that way!"

The old man kept smiling, his eyes twinkling. "On occasion, if we are forced to, we can revert to old-fashioned gangsterism, too, let me tell you. We can kill you, legally, any time, and take credit for it."

Brogman considered Vanning a moment, his heart pounding, his eyes narrowed.

Vanning looked at Brogman's eyes. "Hill Street and Sixth. The Leighton Building, after midnight. You be there."

When Vanning walked away, Julie's face said "No" to Brogman, with an exclamation point after it. But liquor and self-power both were fogging his brain.

The rest of the party wasn't even a decent memory. It was blotted out by a kind of excitement, the same excitement that had followed him ever since he had met Julie. It was like a big drum being pounded in his brain.

The door slammed on the last of the departing guests. Julie held onto the doorknob, feeling it. All of the steel had poured out of her as if through a secret release. She was hardly a healthy cat animal any more. She trembled.

They padded upstairs together, through the suddenly quiet house, no words passing between them. They closed the door to her room and the first words that she said were: "You're not going down tonight to see Vanning. He knows he can't handle you. He's afraid of you. He'll kill you!"

He kissed her on her full obstinate lips. She smelled fresh even after the liquor. Her finger bit into his arms.

**MURDER IS MY BUSINESS!**

"Oh, Ricky, Ricky," she gasped.  
 He fell back as if she had struck his face.  
 "What did you say?"  
 "I didn't mean it."  
 "You said *Ricky!* You said it!"

**W**EAKLY then, dazed, he repeated her words and then said, "You love him. You love a dead man. I should have guessed. You made me try to look like him; you risked your life on it. You made me look, walk, talk like him, so *he* could hold you again, so *he* could kiss you again, hurt you again!"

"Please . . . Johnny!"

His eyes were wide open again. "You don't love me. You tried to dig up Ricky out of the grave. I should have guessed when the gang acted the way it did at the book shop. They wanted Ricky back, too. They took a substitute for want of the real article. And all the other little things—"

He started groping for the door like a blind man. "You didn't want me to kiss you. *You kissed me.* That's the way it was with Ricky. You did things *for* him. When *I* did things, you resented it, you slapped me. It was off key, off character. It wasn't Ricky, it wasn't him at all. The flower I gave you, you didn't want. Ricky never gave flowers. And if I said nice things, you were angry—"

Julie got in front of the door, her breath hissing. "You can't go out! Vanning'll kill you."

"You afraid I'll get killed? Afraid *Ricky* will die again?"

He beat it at her, like fists, while his unfeeling hand sought the gun in its leather vest under his arm. "Afraid *Ricky* will die again! Couldn't stand that, could you? Couldn't stand having him killed again!"

"No." She said the word softly. "I couldn't stand it. I'm sorry, Johnny, but that's how it is." She shook her head, as

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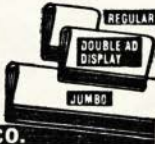
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**DETECTIVE TALES**

though trying to fight out of a dream. "Don't you see, Johnny? We're both the same. I'm not Julie. You don't want me. You want—your mother. Somebody you can cling to. Somebody to take care of you. The mother you never had, Johnny. And I—I want Ricky. We met in front of a bank, Johnny, you and I, and we both wanted something and we tried to get it and it fell apart in our faces." She gripped him, spoke convulsively, "Oh, Ricky, hold onto me tight . . ."

Ricky! The name was like an iron poked into his brain, stirring all the self-doubts and longings that wracked him. He didn't say anything, but what he was thinking through the liquor fog was, "I'm Johnny Broghman! I'm myself! Damn them—all of them, I don't need a woman to lean on. Not my mother, not Julie . . . not anybody."

He didn't will it precisely. But there it was. His eyes were closed almost down, the Rickey way. His gun shot twice and knocked her back. He could feel her hands pull away from him, clinging to the last.

He leaned against the door, swallowing, wiping at his eyes which were blurred. Then he went downstairs, the gun still in his hand. With every step he could feel himself growing stronger. Now he was free. He didn't need a woman to lean on, and now he had proved it.

He had killed twice and now he would kill again. The old man with the pink face, Vanning. The one who called himself a business man, and who thought he could make a desk punk out of Johnny Broghman. Vanning, who thought he could boss Johnny Broghman the way he had bossed Ricky Wolfe. Johnny Broghman was a better man than Ricky Wolfe had ever been. Julie had found that out.

Broghman opened the front door. . . . He got it before he had walked halfway down the drive to his car. Vanning's men, in the black car parked in the night shade



## MURDER IS MY BUSINESS!

of bulking trees, reached for him with tommy guns. The line of bullets hit him and he folded over them as a man folds over an invisible wall.

The guns kept spitting long after Johnny Broghman had slumped down like a little kid on the lawn to take his evening sleep. . . .

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You see, Johnny Broghman was my brother. ♦ ♦ ♦



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-Continued from Back Cover

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