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DETECTIVE TALES

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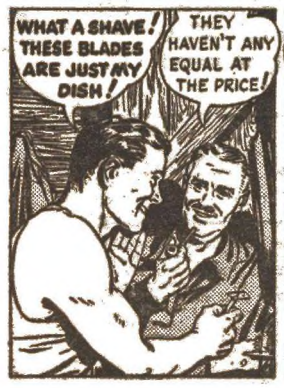

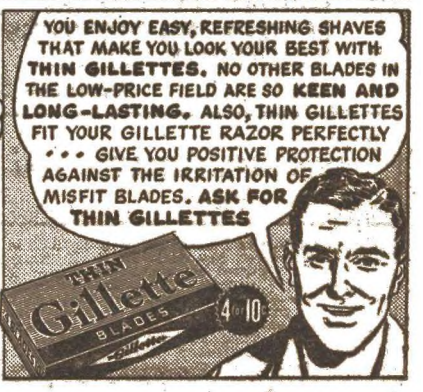

AMERICA'S MOST UNUSUAL DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

DETECTIVE TALES

12 STORIES — 15 CENTS

VOL. THIRTY-SEVEN — AUGUST, 1947 — NUMBER ONE

Thrilling Murder Novel

1. **SOFTLY CREEP AND SOFTLY KILL!** ..... ***Peter Paige*** **6**
—Lucille Cannon's boozed-up subconscious told her, so that luscious, blonde hunk of fluff went on a nightly nursery tour, looking for babies to . . . quiet. . . .

Three Gripping Crime-Detective Novelettes

2. **ROPE ENOUGH FOR TWO!** ..... ***William R. Cox*** **40**
—was twice as much hemp as private-eye Joey Paschal needed, to pay for his crime of falling asleep with a corpse. . . .
3. **HOUSE OF SILENT DEATH** ..... ***Henry Norton*** **64**
—called Sheriff Lovatt along the lonely, winding road to Bald Mountain and the grim, still world that lay beyond. . . .
4. **MILKMAN, KEEP THOSE BULLETS QUIET!** . . ***Russell Branch*** **82**
—or you'll wake up the dead . . . which classification, if, I keep on hobnobbing with those Hollywood hoods, is liable to include *me!*

Five Smashing Short Stories

5. **WE COULD MAKE SUCH BEAUTIFUL MURDER TOGETHER** ..... ***Alan Ritner Anderson*** **31**
—that man-hungry blonde told Red Blasco. . . . But first, she had a date with the Devil in hell!
6. **THE $64,000 QUESTION** ..... ***Talmage Powell*** **50**
—was one that Hobe never got a chance to answer. He died too soon.
7. **IT'S IN THE BAG!** ..... ***Joel Reeve*** **57**
—that is, Fingy Malone's corpse was. And all John Lawe had to do was hop in another sack to join his friend. . . .
8. **IT COMES UP DEATH!** ..... ***Dan Gordon*** **75**
—cried Tommy Brady, and rolled his coffin cubes for another bout with the Grim Reaper. . . .
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—killer, or you're liable to see, staring back at you from your mirror, the countenance of a corpse!

—AND—

10. **ODDITIES IN CRIME** ..... ***Schwartz and Jakobsson*** **39**
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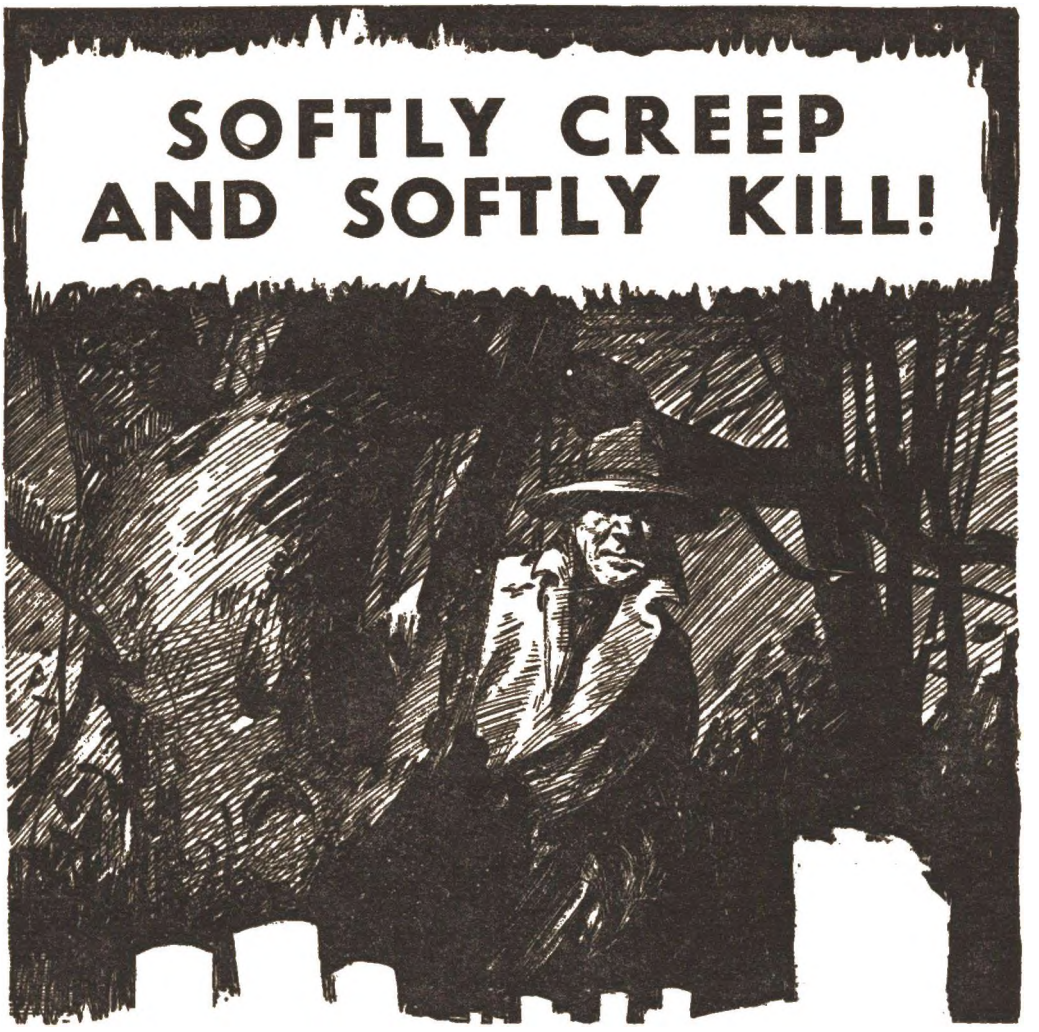
By
PETER
PAIGE

●

Compelling
Murder - Mystery
Novel

She paused exactly twenty-seven times, each time to enter a front yard and hear a baby howl until papa or mama ended the protest with a dry diaper or bottle or parental cake-walk.

SOFTLY CREEP AND SOFTLY KILL!



The singing idol of every girl was marooned on an iceberg that was slowly drifting south—and melting—and the villainous Boris was waiting for him on top of the Empire State Building to shove him off.... But for a real jam, take the case of my client, that lovely, luscious hunk of fluff, Lucille Cannon, whose dainty, dimpled hands, for all I knew, had left four bloody bodies in her boozing, baby-crazed wake!

CHAPTER ONE

Charnel House

THE WOMAN was one of those pleasantly stuffed blondes, like those Adolph's robots singled out to improve the breed. She had tight dimples on either side of a steady smile. Her blondeness curled about her ears in tidy ringlets, but there were enough of them to make the effect interesting. She was about five-seven. Her calves, hips and bosom were all comfortably full. I estimated she was between twenty-five and thirty-five. She wore a smart beige suit with a short jacket open wide in front to reveal an aquamarine blouse.

She entered my office behind that pleasant smile and allowed her blue-green eyes

to take in the furnishings—which would be a thirty-second job for a myopic. She added an inch to her smile when her eyes found me. Holding my eyes with hers, she took three quick steps toward my desk, reaching it—which should give you an idea of my office.

She gently slid into the stiff chair that faced my desk, crossed her legs, smoothed her skirt until it reached the dimple in her knee, then told me brightly, "I'm stiff. I mean I'm stinking drunk. If I wasn't I'd be running for the woods screaming. One way or the other, I wish I was dead." She continued to smile.

I said, "I'm Tony Lark."

That fact along with "Confidential Investigations," was stenciled in gold leaf on the frosted upper half of the door through which she had just entered. I thought it might be apropos to mention it in case she had mistaken my door for the ladies room.

"I know you're Tony Lark," she said, retaining that smile. "Used to be a cop."

"That's right."

"I need another drink, Tony Lark."

"Pacific Street is crawling with bars," I said.

"I mean now."

"I know what you mean. I rarely use the stuff and I don't keep any around."

Her eyes became like blue-green marbles. "Why, I thought *all* private detect—"

"I saw the same movies," I cut in patiently, "and read the same books. Did you want to see me professionally, M—" I glanced at her left hand, but there was no wedding band on it.

"Miss," she said, losing her smile to stare bitterly down at her ringless connubial finger. Her eyes returned to mine and that smile reappeared. It was actually one of those snap-switch jobs; drunk or sober, she had it under control.

Eyeing me steadily, she asked, "Do you know what it is to be two people? I mean two separate people and one didn't know what the other was doing—except in dreams now and then. And you didn't understand the dreams?"

I said, "Not lately."

She asked, "I mean, are you still a cop? If I tell you something, would you turn me in? Everyone knows you're the smartest detective they ever had in Pacific City and you'd be chief of police today if you didn't step all over people who got in your way. I mean would you want to marry a nice guy, never knowing if you'll wake up some morning with his head split open on the pillow next to you?"

I said, "Which question do you want answered first?"

"Does it matter?"

"I guess not," I grinned at her. "They all add up to no. I'm no longer on the force. Anything you tell me is confidential. And I would not like to wed a guy who's going to spill his brains on the pillow. Also, I'm commencing to get your drift. You've got a bad case of Hunter Massacre meemies. Half a million citizens in Pacific City still wake up screaming over it, and you're probably at the head of the parade."

"Hunter Massacre meemies!" she cried, losing her smile. "Me? Don't joke about it, Tony Lark! *Do you know what happened to those people?*"

Her face disintegrated then into a million quivering lines and deep sobs bubbled through her lips. I stepped around my desk and gripped her quaking shoulders. She rose and buried her face in my chest and poured all the suffering of this vale of tears into it.

HOLDING her like that, I thought about the Hunter Massacre. It was less than a week old. All I knew was what the papers said, and they were still saying it—and they would go on saying it. Citizens all over town had added new bolts to their doors and new latches to their windows and screens. Radio prowl cars were picking up every strange man found walking alone on a side street after dark. Mothers were probably that moment subduing recalcitrant brats with warnings about the "Fiend," as they would for generations to come.

The gas man had found them. He was collecting an overdue bill and nobody answered his knock on the door. This was at nine o'clock on Tuesday morning. As he knocked, the school truant officer came by to report that young Jimmy Hunter had failed to make his classes for the umpteenth time that term, ten-year-old Jimmy being the Huck Finn of the neighborhood.

The milk was still on the porch and the morning *Clarion* lay untouched on the lawn.

At that moment, William Frisby, publisher of the *Clarion*, the man who happened to employ Fred Hunter in the capacity of circulation manager, was raising Hades with his staff over Fred Hunter's failure to meet an important engagement.

The phone inside the Hunter cottage was ringing. It had been ringing off and on for half an hour as Mrs. Lucille Weston tried to cancel a luncheon appointment she had with Sarah Hunter in the Pacific Inn Coffee Shop that noon.

It was a seven-room cottage, bought by Fred Hunter for five thousand dollars back in 1934 and easily worth three or four times that today. The neighborhood had suddenly blossomed with expensive homes, being pictur-

esquely situated on a bluff that commanded a magnificent view of about thirty miles of Pacific shoreline. As a matter of fact, the house to the left of the Hunter cottage was the new fifteen-room dwelling of Homer Bowry, mayor of Pacific City. The home on the right, as I grimly knew, belonged to Mark Campbell, commissioner of police.

As for the family, aside from Fred, Sarah and young Jimmy, there was baby Frances Mary, eight months old. Normally, there was a combination maid-nurse who lived in one of the seven rooms. On this Tuesday morning, however, she was three hundred miles away in Los Angeles, visiting a sister who had become ill.

That accounted for the Hunters, as ordinary and average a family as you could find in these United States. He belonged to the Rotary and was on the executive board of a a boy scout troup. He was a pleasant fellow in his late thirties with a college background, a passion for bowling and the beginnings of a rubber tire around his waist to match the growing patch of skin above his ears.

Sarah Hunter belonged to a bridge club that met five afternoons a week in member's homes. She had been a waitress, but now she was accepted socially in all the upper middle class doings of Pacific City. Since our town boasts no higher class, that was tops.

Jimmy Hunter, as I mentioned, tended to the normal American tradition of juvenile cussedness. He had run away twice, once to be a cowboy, the second time to become a B-29 pilot. He played his quota of hookey, drew irregular marks at school, fought his occasional street fights, fought his mother over such items as washing behind his ears, bathing nightly, eating green vegetables and using such fascinating terminology as "Hubba-hubba!"

Baby Frances Mary, like all babies aged eight months, wet her diapers hourly, cried when she was hungry, when she was full, when she heard a loud noise, when she heard no noise, whenever everybody else yearned for peace and quiet.

Altogether a most normal family on that Tuesday morning when the gas man and truant officer knocked futilely on their door.

The gas man, being no respecter of reputations or neighborhoods where overdue bills were concerned, left the truant officer at the door and circled the cottage, peering through the windows.

When he arrived at Jimmy Hunter's bedroom window the gas man glimpsed what seemed to be a man crouching behind the bedroom door. It was difficult to tell because the venetian blinds were down, but at one point something had disturbed the slats enough for him to have an inch of clearing. In the darkened room he was certain he saw someone crouching behind the bedroom door—*waiting for bill collectors to depart,* he thought grimly.

He rapped sharply on the window pane.

Someone in the next house, the police commissioner's house, called over to ask what he thought he was doing. He yelled back he was minding his own business and it would be wise for that someone to mind *her* business, little realizing he was addressing the police commissioner's wife, Mrs. Phyllis Anderson Campbell.

For emphasis, he turned back to the window and rapped harder in order to give the crouching bill evader notice that the jig, so to speak, was up.

That rap did it. The crouching person suddenly slid completely to the floor and the gas man found himself peering at what looked to be a fully dressed man. His confusion lay in the fact that the man seemed to have two heads.

Peering with all the intensity of his bill collecting soul, the gas man suddenly realized he was not looking at a two-headed man at all. The man on the floor had the normal complement of one head—*but it was split neatly down the middle!*

A POLICE radio car arrived first. The patrolmen, gas man at their heels, tried to force the front door. It wouldn't force. They tried the back door. It wouldn't force either. They went around and tried the windows. Some of the windows were open, but they were of the type popular in the middle thirties; they had little sections that opened like doors and these were blocked by venetian blinds and the patrolman didn't want to spoil any possible evidence inside. They had seen what the gas man saw. Time did not seem to be of the essence.

Police Commissioner Mark Campbell arrived with the half a dozen detectives who comprised the Homicide Squad. He commended the patrolmen for their judgment, then ordered the back door smashed.

A few minutes later, they saw the things that were to horrify a nation as swiftly as radio, ticker and newsprint could spread the word.

The man on the floor of Jimmy's bedroom was undeniably Fred Hunter. They found Jimmy under his own bed, as if the fiend had thrust him there to hide his grisly work —and well he might, because Jimmy Hunter's head and torso had certainly been hacked and smashed and sliced by a maniac.

Horror was added to horror when they entered the master bedroom and found Sarah Hunter on her own bed, on her back, her arms flung apart wide—and her head almost

severed from her shoulders by a terrible wound in her neck.

Even before their eyes grew adjusted to the sight of the scarlet bedding, someone glanced in the crib and saw baby Frances Mary's head smashed from the top, crushed as you would crush an egg.

This is no place for the gory details, for the spectacle of commissioner and detectives racing for the fresh clean air outside where they spilled their guts in violent tremors of horror.

Suffice it to add only that the maniac had made no effort to conceal the weapon. It lay on the rug of the master bedroom for all to see: a small boy scout axe, with hair, flesh and clotted blood clinging to its shiny blade.

* * *

That was Tuesday and this was Friday, and from what I saw in the papers the police were no further advanced in the case than they had been that Tuesday morning. The papers had not put it like that, of course. That very morning I had read a statement of Commissioner Mark Campbell.

"We are following several significant clues," the statement said. "We have a suspect in custody now. We promise important developments within a week. The citizens of Pacific City can rest assured that justice is moving swiftly on the heels of the fiend who perpetrated this horror!"

Which meant the police had no clues worth mentioning. They had a tramp in custody. Pacific City always had at least one tramp in custody, and the latest was probably nominated "The Fiend" to calm public terror. If the citizens of Pacific City had an ounce of brains in their assorted heads, they would sleep behind locked doors and latched windows and keep a supply of hand grenades under their pillows!

* * *

Now this blonde Amazon was having her personal case of the screaming meemies on my size forty-four chest. I patted her plump shoulders and told her, "You'll be all right, honey. These things happen every so often, but it never leads to epidemics. You go home and marry that 'nice guy' and sooner or later you'll wish he did split his head open some night—"

"Don't joke about it!" the blonde croaked, thrusting herself away from me. "I need a lift! Haven't you *anything* to drink?"

"Pacific Street—"

She shook her blonde ringlets. She leaned over in the stiff-backed chair and buried her face in her palms for a few seconds. When she raised her head the dimpled smile was back.

"I wouldn't blame you for throwing me out of your office," she smiled.

"Just what did you want to see me for, Miss—?"

"Cannon," she smiled at me. "Lucille Cannon. Do you think I'm crazy, Tony Lark?"

I gaped at her. "Crazy?"

"I was," she nodded, holding that tight smile. "Ray Milland had a lost weekend. I had a lost year. Dipsomania was the word for mine also—with complications. At first I would start to hoist a few at a bar and then learn it was a couple of hours later—"

"Haven't we all?" I murmured.

"Not the way I spent those lost hours, Tony Lark. They'd tell me I'd said I was going to go around exterminating babies. Once I walked into a toy store, bought some dolls and smashed their heads on the floor. Sometimes they'd tell me I actually picked up a knife and invited whoever was around to come along and watch me do it—kill babies, that is."

I stared at the frozen smile of this blonde Amazon and held my counsel as she continued to talk.

"After a while I would raise a glass of bourbon to my lips, and the next thing it was a couple of days later. People saw me sneaking up dark alleys and acting mysterious. One time they picked me up in Central Park —that was in Manhattan where all this started. I had come upon a group of nursemaids with carriages and threatened to bash in the heads of all the babies there with a rock. I was fined fifty dollars and sentenced to thirty days. I told the julge truthfully that I couldn't remember a thing past drinking a Scotch highball in MacGowan's. The sentence was suspended. Am I boring you, Tony Lark?"

SHE WAS still smiling, eyeing me steadily with those blue-green orbs and flanking her teeth with tight dimples.

I shook my head.

"The funny part of it was that when I was sober I was crazy about babies," she said. "I used to beg my friends to let me care for theirs at night so they could go out. I was the world's champion volunteer baby sitter.

"But then I started blacking out for a week at a time—and always the same story. A man would pick me up where I was drinking, and then I'd start looking for babies and a weapon and he'd drop me as if I'd grown horns and a tail.

"And then came a time when I couldn't account for a whole month. A December. I had a cocktail in the Brass Rail. The next thing I knew I was in Kansas City, in a little rooming house on the Missouri side. Christmas had come and gone and I couldn't remember it. I was working as a hasher; I'd been working there two weeks. I had lost twenty pounds. I

was known as Mary Smith. I was doing well as a hasher—except where children or babies were concerned. Then I was considered a little 'queer.' The point is, I never needed a job. My dad left me enough in trust so I can draw ten thousand a year as long as I live. Am I taking up too much of your time, Tony Lark?"

I shook my head.

She lost her smile briefly to ask, "You sure there isn't at least one shot around here? Even beer?"

I nodded.

She turned the smile back on and said, "Skip the hearts and flowers. I moved to Los Angeles and became Lucille Cannon again and went on looking for the right guy to marry. And then one day I stepped into Mike Lyman's for a drink. Fourteen months later I found myself talking to a psychiatrist. I was in a mental institution. I had been there over a year. This was the first sign of normal intelligence I had shown in all that time. They had brought it about with a chemical injection. You don't want to hear the clinical details. . . ."

I shook my head.

"It took me another four months to get out of there," she went on. "By then I knew what had been happening to me all those years; knowing what was at the bottom of it was part of the cure. It went back to my childhood. I was just a kid of four when my sister was born and my mother died. I blamed my sister. I hated her. I wished she would die. She caught polio and died. That was at the bottom of it, the shock. When I was sober I tried to make it up to all babies. Drunk, I tried to justify the way I had felt toward my baby sister.

"It was a combination of dipsomania and something called schizophrenia. But I was only mildy a schizo and it was dependent on my being a dipso and when they cured me of the latter, the former was considered cured also. Do you follow me?"

We sat staring into each other's eyes. Her smile never faltered, but I was commencing to understand the purpose of her visit. I understood it in the back of my neck where my hackles were slowly coming to attention.

"Go on," I breathed.

"As a matter of fact," she said, smiling, "I didn't touch a drop after my release from the institute—until last Monday."

"Keep talking!" someone croaked hoarsely. Me.

"I've met the more or less right guy," she said, retaining that same degree of tight smile. "His name doesn't matter. We're going to be married sooner or later, I hope. We had a quarrel over the weekend. The quarrel isn't important either, just that we had it. You know how those things are. You feel the world is coming to an end. He called me up yesterday morning and got on his knees over the phone, so the world isn't coming to an end in respect to that. The point is I had an awful lot to drink on Monday. I went through a fifth of rye at home; then I went to a bar and started on rum and cokes."

"Go on!" I prodded her thickly.

"I came to on Tuesday night," she said, retaining that tight little smile. Her teeth were very white and even—have I mentioned that? It was a pleasing smile in spite of its steadiness, one that would ordinarily produce a smile in you in response to it. But at that moment my lips could spread only if I inserted two fingers in the corners of my mouth and pulled.

"Get it off your chest," I mumbled.

"I came to in my own house," she said. "I was on the davenport of my living room, fully clothed. My clothes were wringing wet. It had been raining Monday night. My shoes were muddy. There were tears in my nylons and scratches all over my legs. My dress was ripped in several places. My hands were filthy and there seemed to be dark brown stains on my fingers. Don't interrupt me now!" she said hastily as I opened my mouth to speak. "I took a bath and renovated myself and then scrambled some eggs and made some coffee. I turned the radio on while I ate and hit a news broadcast and heard all about that family at 325 Bluff Drive, how someone had murdered that eight-month-old baby—"

Her smile wavered a little then. I started to say something, but she shook her blonde head to stop me. She croaked in a voice suddenly gone out of control, "Just one more thing, Tony Lark. I also live on Bluff Drive—302 Bluff Drive, half a block and across the street from where that baby was murdered."

I stood up and nodded at the door. "Let's go, kid."

She stood up and lost her smile completely. "You said whatever I told you would be confidential!"

"It is," I assured her thickly. "Let's go, Miss Cannon."

"Where?"

"Pacific Street. I think we both could use a drink!"

CHAPTER TWO

Lady in the Night

ONCE upon a time there was a homicide detective captain named Tony Lark. The difference between Tony Lark and other homicide detectives was that Tony Lark had imaginative ways of learning facts.

Where Tony Lark's imagination failed to

coincide with Pacific City's regular homicide procedure was in the question of cutting through various little laws, regulations, statutes and ordinances which are supposed to keep the basic rights of citizens secure, keep the police on their toes and at the same time keep traffic moving.

But *I* often found it expedient to tap private telephone lines, to plant phony evidence to get a legitimate confession, to make a reluctant witness fear me more than the vengeance of the man he was shielding, to force myself into houses without benefit of court order or warrant and, sometimes, to employ a lie detector known at large as a hunk of rubber hose.

I well understood that such practice on the part of the police in general would automatically create fascism, which I am against as much as the next guy. It was merely that I believed a straight line was always the shortest distance between two points and if sometimes the shortest distance betwen me and a killer was his wife's affections, why that was merely how I did my job.

Eventually, of course, I pushed around a guy with connections. Whereupon Commissioner Mark Campbell and I had some fast words on the subject and I retired to become Private Investigator Lark. All of which may seem so-whatish to you, but it explained why, on this Friday afternoon, I commenced pouring alcohol into the peculiar system of Lucille Cannon. After I got the first shot of bourbon into her, I introduced a second. Then a third —and so forth. It was how I walked a straight line to an answer.

Some time before the "and so forth" I paused enough to tell her, "Okay, honey. If you can stand my price I'll find out if you're the local fiend. But if it turns out wrong, I won't be confidential anymore. You'll go back to the hatch."

We were in a tiny booth in the rear of the Aloha Inn, a dive designed to provide that South Sea atmosphere. The "atmosphere" consisted of hula murals in the Balinese tradition, straw and bamboo trimmings and bar girls in grass skirts.

Lucille Cannon gripped my sleeve. "All right, Tony. If it's wrong I'll want to go back to the—hatch. What's your price?"

I ignored the smile between her dimples and said, "Twenty-five a day and expenses. Five cents a mile in case I have to travel. A hundred dollars down."

She drew away, fished into her beige-colored handbag and produced two fifties. Then she wrapped herself around me tightly and pushed her dimples into my cheeks hard and I tasted the firm softness of her lips.

About ten years later she unwrapped herself and breathed, "God, I needed that!"

I signaled a girl in a grass skirt and we had another drink. I lost count after that.

At midnight, with a gentle rain falling, I slid my '36 Terraplane to a halt in front of 302 Bluff Drive.

Lucille Cannon sat quietly at my side. She had been silent through the last ten drinks. Her solitary response to anything I said had been to turn on that automatic smile. She did not seem drunk. Short of her failure to respond to conversation she could have passed in most gatherings as sober. Her poise remained steady, her eyes clear. Her smile was friendly but impersonal.

I was not drunk myself, being one of those characters alcohol fails to affect except in a regurgative way—and I had behaved true to form three times up to there.

I escorted Lucille Cannon to her door and watched her find her key and then lead the way in. I closed the door against the gentle rain and followed her into the living room, where I switched on the light. It was one of those green and white modernistic rooms with long, low places to rest and some logs and kindling in the fireplace awaiting a match —which I provided, starting a cheerful little blaze.

She settled her plumpness on a long, low divan directly before the fireplace and lay gazing at the cherry and butter flames. I found another divan and produced my pipe.

Two pipes—maybe an hour—later she suddenly rose to her feet and asked me, "Would you care to see something nice?"

She asked it impersonally, without any inflection or expression to indicate she knew who I was. They were her first words since ten drinks back when she had tinkled her glass against mine and drunk to our friendship.

I said I would like to see something nice.

She left the room.

She returned with her arms loaded. There was a tiny bassinette and a doll and doll's clothes and little blankets and sheets. Even diapers. She laid them all down on the floor except the doll, which she set tenderly on the divan. She raised a warning finger to her lips and said, "Shhh!"

I nodded, but she was no longer aware of me. She put a diaper on the doll and crooned to it softly. She called it "Laurie baby." She put a tiny undershirt on it, then a nightgown, cooing to it and keeping up a line of motherly chatter. Then she rocked it in her arms and told her the story of Little Red Riding Hood.

Her voice grew softer and softer. Finally she whispered, "Laurie baby asleep?"

She nodded and gently laid the doll in the bassinette on the floor and covered it with blankets. She kneeled at its side, leaned over and kissed it. She rose and glared angrily at the light. She took swift strides to the wall and flicked the switch, plunging us into dark-

ness except where embers glowed satanically in the fireplace.

I watched her silhouette tiptoe back to the divan. From the outline of the crimson glow I saw her head drop into her hands. Her shoulders began trembling. I heard low, keening sobs.

She wept softly like that for almost half an hour. I sat where I was and said nothing. For doing this Commissioner Mark Campbell would have kicked me off the force all over again. Aside from failing to report what was possibly vital evidence in a homicide, I had filled with alcohol a proven dipsomaniac—who was possibly a homicidal maniac—in an effort to see how she spent her "lost weekends." It just happened to be my way of taking a straight line.

Her sobs finally ceased. She rose suddenly and plowed blindly into the foyer, out the front door and into the rain. She went without her raincoat, hat or purse. I grabbed my trenchcoat and hat and followed her.

THE rain slanted down from the west, materializing under a sort of low-hanging fog that glowed redly in reflection of Pacific City's night lights.

My blonde question mark strode up the street, with me several yards behind. She passed Mayor Bowry's house, the Hunter cottage and Commissioner Campbell's house and continued along Bluff Drive.

In the middle of the next block she suddenly halted and stood poised as if she were listening. I did likewise. All I heard was the kiss of rain on the pavement and the distant sounds of traffic.

But then she turned into the driveway of the nearest house. I followed swiftly. I almost spoiled it, almost ran into her. I stepped back into the dripping shadow of a dahlia bush barely two yards from where she again stood poised in an attitude of listening.

She was facing a window in the green cottage at the head of the driveway.

And then I heard what she must have heard: the faint, wailing cry of an infant. It came from that window. It grated on my ears, babies being items I leave gladly to others. But as my ears strained automatically to tune in on all she heard, I became aware that Lucille Cannon was crooning softly under her breath something like, "Poor baby darling. Hush, darling! Mother's here. What is it you want? Water? Of course, darling. . . ." And so it went until the window suddenly filled with yellow glare.

A man's voice reached us: "Edith, the little widget did it again! I wish they'd invent some kind of cork—"

Eventually the baby's cries ceased and the light went out. The rain continued to soak down into the bushes and grass and bounce on the pavement.

The frustrated blonde suddenly turned and strode back to Bluff Drive. She passed close enough for me to nibble at her ear. Either from the rain or sorrow—or both—her cheeks streamed wetly.

She continued along Bluff Drive, away from her own home. She had a good stride and I had to extend myself to keep up with her. My trouser cuffs clung soggily to my ankles and my feet squooshed in my shoes.

It became the most tortuous, the most devious straight line I had ever pursued in search of an answer. In the hours that followed, Lucille Cannon led me through miles and miles of Pacific City's residential streets. She paused exactly twenty-seven times, each time to enter a front yard and hear a baby howl until papa or mama ended the protest with a dry diaper or bottle or parental cake-walk.

Several hours later, when my trousers had become icy wet tights that clung painfully to my legs and my hat-brim had sprung a leak, giving my ears and neck an unwelcome bath, she finally turned back into her own driveway, into her own cottage, back to the divan in front of the fire that was now a single dot of glow amid whitish ash.

She dropped on the divan and promptly fell asleep.

My watch said three-twenty.

My watch said eight-forty when she awoke with a sudden, startled outcry. She gaped at her outer garments draped over the backs of chairs pushed close to the fire I had revived and kept alive all night.

Her ringlets were awry now and her face was strictly from hangover—but I had seen worse emerge from beauty parlors.

I said, "Remember me?"

She nodded.

"Remember why you hired me?"

She nodded again and something like terror entered her blue-green eyes as they swivelled to gape at her drying clothes.

"I started working last night," I told her. "I primed you into one of your blackouts. You spent several hours wandering around in the rain. You will notice your clothes are wet and torn. Your legs are scratched. Your hands are grimy and there are all sorts of stains on them."

Her eyes screamed at me.

I grinned back at them. "I was with you all the way. You only wanted to hear the sound of babies. When they stopped crying you lost interest. Getting to where you could hear them better, you frequently had to wade through mud puddles and rose bushes and the like, which accounts for the mud, scratches and stains. Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

A smile replaced the scream on her face; not the automatic smile of yesterday. This one had to work through the sags and hollows of hangover, but it emerged with a tremblingly happy effect.

I told her, "Okay. Up to here I'm convinced you're all right, that they cured you of the whatsit back at the hatch and you're just screwy for a brat of your own, which puts you in a class with the rest of your gender. Now I'm going to play along with the cops and give them a lift toward the actual killer if I can, and argue them out of it in case they become intelligent and compile a list of all former hatch occupants in Pacific City and eventually settle on you. But first I want you to promise me you won't touch a drop until this business is all over. Do you understand that?"

She said she wouldn't touch another drop as long as she lived. I told her until we had the final results was long enough. Then I went to the fire and collected my outer garments. My suit and coat were only warmly damp now. My hat was still soggy. My socks had dried, but the instant I donned my shoes they became saturated again.

Lucille Cannon lay watching me as if I had just saved her life, handed her a million dollars, introduced her to Van Johnson and found her an apartment in Hollywood. She mentioned breakfast, but I told her to get back to sleep, that the bags under her eyes needed emptying and nothing but shuteye could do that. She wrinkled her nose at me and I tripped over the bassinette as I moved toward the door.

It spilled the doll and all its trimmings to the floor, but Lucille Cannon didn't mind that now.

"What's all that on the floor?" she asked, her brows wrinkled.

"Don't let it throw you. It was all part of your frustrated mamahood act. You—"

I can't remember to this day what I was going to say. I had been putting "Laurie baby" back into the bassinette as I talked and my fingers had dragged forth what I learned later was a receiving blanket, one of those oversized flannel handkerchiefs they swaddle baby in at the outset of his long trek through this vale of tears.

This particular one was streaked with dried mud. There was a deep indentation in one corner of it. It had dried around this indentation, forming a sort of moulage impression of a small heel—the heel of a woman's shoe, for instance.

What stopped my conversation and had my thoughts in an uproar were three embroidered initials in the corner where the heel imprint was: F.M.H.

Frances Mary Hunter!

Lucille Cannon sat whimpering, trying to force words through twisted lips.

"Okay, okay!" I cut her short. "You don't know. Monday night you took a drink—and then it was Tuesday. Last night ditto. And all you wanted was to soothe babies by remote control last night. So I'm still on your side. But the going will be rougher. Are you listening?"

It was almost as if she were slipping back into that "other self" again, but she nodded faintly.

I said, "The drinking remains out—is that understood?"

She nodded again and then her face split into a million quivering lines and she rolled over and buried them in her arms.

I wadded the receiving blanket into my trenchcoat and left.

CHAPTER THREE

Dead Men Don't Bleed

MRS. MARK CAMPBELL was a wispy, tired-looking woman who daily expended the energy of a truck horse. She stared at me without recognition as I stood before her door. Then light dawned in her pallid orbs and she exclaimed, "Why, it's Tony! What on earth have you been doing to yourself?"

"I'd like to see Mark," I told her. "Tony" and "Mark." The old buddy-buddy stuff despite the fact that he had stepped on my face when I tripped. But that's life. I needed a word from the guy and there I stood, hat in hand.

"Of course, Tony. Come in. You'll have breakfast with us? Norma has been begging me to ask you over. You never did finish that extravaganza about Sammy-Boy." She turned to shout to the maid. "Hulda! Set up another place for breakfast. Mark! We have company." All this as I followed her down the hallway.

There was a full-length mirror on the wall in which I glimpsed myself briefly in passing. I winced at my image. My clothes looked as if I had worn them day and night for a month without changing. My beard was a blue mask over the lower half of my face. My eyes teetered redly on bluish pedestals.

I felt the way I looked as I followed the chattering woman into the clean, bright kitchen of the Campbells and shook Commissioner Campbell's soft white hand, nodded to fat Hulda, their maid for as long as I could recall, and winked at young Norma, eleven years old who commenced bouncing like an India rubber ball and screaming for me to tell her how that bobby-sox idol, Sammy-Boy Symphonetta, got out of the lion's cage. It had been agitating her for a month, her mother

laughed, ever since I had put him in there.

In due time I had washed most of the grime from my visible surfaces, I had consumed a breakfast of grapefruit, bacon and eggs, toast and several cups of black coffee. I had taken Sammy-Boy out of the lion's cage, talked him through five minutes of adventures and marooned him on an iceberg that was slowly drifting south—and melting.

The table talk had been light and personal, carefully avoiding such delicate topics as why I dragged myself into that nice clean home after a night in a sewer, my future as a private operative and what had happened to those "nice Hunters" next door—until I shook Mrs. Campbell's hand, brushed off young Nora's pleading hands and accompanied the commissioner to his garage where he proceeded to step on my face again.

"Boozing!" he snapped as he slid behind the wheel of his Pontiac roadster. "My opinion of you keeps dropping, Tony. What I fail to understand is, what happened to your pride? How could you let Norma and Phyllis see you in this condition?"

Mark Campbell, if I failed to mention it, was a soft man, physically. He had doughy-looking features. The corners of his lips drooped. His brown hair was thinly scattered on a pasty-white pate that was seeping through. He had quivering jowls and pale eyes that always seemed on the verge of becoming wet.

His appearance notwithstanding, the guy was a born mixer, an unaffected little man who usually said the right words in the right places. He ordered a good meal, mixed a good drink, never beat his wife and carried five snapshots of young Norma in his wallet.

Commissioner of police being a political appointment, and Mark having served a long apprenticeship on the force—from switchboard clerk to chief of police—his appointment as commissioner was natural when a reform administration swept the old gang out of office. Mark dutifully went along with the reform crowd, ultimately sweeping Tony Lark off the force.

Now, with one foot on his running board, Tony Lark told him earnestly, "You're jumping the gun, Mark. The boozing was incidental. I happened by a bar and heard a guy sound off against babies. He was tight and a nut on the subject. I stayed with him all night before I found out definitely that he was in Reno all of last Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday—"

Campbell looked across the adjacent driveway to the seven-room cottage there. His eyes returned to me and I nodded solemnly.

"That was on my mind, Mark. After I proved to my satisfaction the guy *was* in Reno, I walked around the rest of the night thinking about the Hunter job. That explains my appearance. But I don't have enough facts to properly organize my thinking. The thing is under my skin, Mark. I'd like a crack at it."

Campbell frowned down at his steering wheel. I knew the thoughts behind that pudgy face. I was off the force but my record, with all due modesty, *was* impressive. The department was stumped. The newspapers couldn't be appeased forever The politics involved probably kept him awake in a cold sweat nights. He licked his soft lips.

"Well, you always did have a good brain for homicide puzzles, Tony. But I don't know—"

IT WAS time to pave the way for my ace. I told him, "My ramblings brought me past here several times last night." I nodded at the cottage beyond the two driveways and forced what I hoped was an impish grin. "I took the liberty of crawling the grounds next door. I knew I couldn't spoil anything because if your technicians haven't finished with it yet you better get some new technicians." I glanced over at the neighboring yard and dropped a feeler. "What happened to the Hunter dog?"

The pale eyes followed my gaze to the tiny doghouse behind the Hunter cottage.

Campbell said, "Bull terrier. He was run over last week. . . ."

"And you didn't think of casing the doghouse," I tried.

"Why should we?"

"Why overlook anything?" I shrugged, reaching into my trenchcoat pocket and producing my ace, the pink receiving blanket. "Last night I found this in the doghouse," I said, handing him the blanket. "What do you think, Mark?"

He fingered it. He noticed the dried streaks of grime. He traced the indentation that could have been caused by a woman's heel. His stubby finger touched the initials: F.M.H. He asked me, "How the devil could it have gotten in there?"

Now that it was official I could afford to relax. I shrugged. "Maybe a stray dog's been using the house to keep out of the rain and dragged it in. Or a cat. Or some kids. The point is it might have been on the baby when—"

The blanket did it.

Campbell said, "I'm sorry I sounded off at you the way I did, Tony. You want to come down to headquarters now?"

That was the word I wanted.

"This afternoon," I told him. "If you'll sort of pave the way for me there—"

He nodded briskly. "All right, Tony. I'll leave word. And Tony—"

"Yes?"

"No more—ah—horsing around. Another caper like the last and you won't just be

thrown off the force. Youn understand that, Tony?"

"Of course, Mark!"

A comet whipped by my side and planted a buttery kiss on the pudgy face as the commissioner leaned over to receive it. He backed his roadster to Bluff Drive, then swung toward the heart of the city, leaving young Norma to yank at my sleeve and plead, "Please, Tony, how did Sammy-Boy get off the ice? Tell me, willya, huh? Huh, Tony? Tony? Tony? Tony?"

This from eleven years of slender steel with jet black eyes that formed a startling contrast to the maze of freckles under them and the straw-yellow braids over them. Being an only child, and soft Mark Campbell's child at that, she ruled the man who ruled a good portion of Pacific City.

Norma Campbell was America's "gimme!" kid number one. The sad thing was that she usually "got." Which was why I derived a sort of sadistic delight in leaving the stories I told her hanging in midair.

This time I shook my head, told her she'd have to await my next visit to learn how Sammy-Boy got off the iceberg. *If he did,* I added ominously. She followed me all the way out to my Terraplane, pleading with me. When she saw me slide behind the wheel she screamed, "You better tell me or I'll send fifty dragons to destroy you with their breaths! I'll send lions and tigers—"

I started the engine and she screamed, "Tony, wait! I want to show you what I got!"

I lit my pipe and waited until she reappeared with a pair of roller skates. She strapped them on and did a few clumsy turns. For the sake of a peaceful getaway, I told her she was the most wonderful skater in th whole wide world, and then I drove home and to sleep, leaving her fierce little ego at its normal state of inflation.

As I contended earlier, the homicide procedure of a modern police department is close to perfect. Among other factors, its thoroughness can be traced to the need of amassing sufficient evidence to withstand a jury's "reasonable doubts" and secure convictions. This evidence, only a fraction of which is ever shown a jury, includes more facts and detailed data than a hundred untrained men could accumulate in a hundred times more time than it takes the average homicide squad.

TO BE specific, on that Saturday afternoon, Stan Finlay, police photographer, showed me far more than I would have seen had I entered the Hunter cottage along with the gas man and the half a dozen detectives.

He was a young edition of Commissioner Campbell, a soft little man who would faint dead away if he ever looked into the business end of a revolver. But his knowledge of lens openings had sent more than one revolver operator to the gas chamber.

"They ain't pretty," he grinned, spreading out full views and detailed close-ups of the Hunter family.

Fred Hunter was shown lying face down on the floor of Jimmy's bedroom, the fingers of both hands touching the open door as if he were a Moslem bowing toward Mecca. Originally, he had been on his knees, with both palms and face propped against the door—until the gas man's sharp rapping on the window dislodged him. His head was split like a log of kindling.

"From behind," Stan Finlay told me. "The kid kept his axe sharp. It hit Fred Hunter's fontenelle, went right through and bit into the door. Look."

He showed me a tremendous blow-up of that section of the door and the axe bite in it.

I stared at him. This was something new.

"You mean the guy was on his knees with his head against the door when he got it"

"That's right, Tony. Doc Schultz figgers he was out. It reads like he tripped on somethin', hit his head against the door an' passed out cold. Look—" He pointed to the area around the axe bite in the picture of the door. The paint was certainly scuffed. "We brought the door in," Stan Finlay offered. "Got it in the basement. Olson picked some hairs outa the paint. Fred Hunter's hairs. It reads like Hunter tripped on something all right, but we can't figger what. Shoes couldn't do this—"

I saw what he meant. He had unrolled another blow-up, this of the floor near the doorway, the spot where Fred Hunter must have been standing before he dove into the door and knocked himself out. There were deep, raw scratches on the floor, seven of them. They averaged about six inches in length and covered a ten-inch area.

"One of the kid's toys," I frowned. "An ordinary stumble won't knock a guy out, not when he bumps into a flat surface with give in it. But if he stepped on a toy and the toy slid under him, that would give him enough momentum to be conked cold. But not for long."

"It didn't have to be for long—with the killer waitin' there with the axe."

"What was he doing in his kid's room at that time of night, anyhow?"

Stan Finlay shrugged. "I jus' take the pitchers. Captain Svenson figgered a toy, but he couldn't find nothin' that coulda made them scratches. Anyhow, here's the rest of the kid's room."

I went through these with little interest. They were dimension pictures, showing the distance from every point in that room to every other point. We proceded to views of

the master bedroom. They weren't pretty.

Sarah Hunter lay on her back with her arms flung wide. Her face was untouched, the regular-featured face of a simple-looking woman. Instead of a neck there was a wide, gaping wound. There was a lot of blood.

"Musta been sleepin' when she got it," Finlay guessed.

"They find out if she usually sleeps on her back?"

Finlay grinned. "Nah. It takes a Tony Lark to figger somethin' like that." He lost his grin, unrolled some more prints and said, "These make me sick."

I saw what he meant. They made me sick, sent me stumbling down a corridor to the latrine to unload. Then I came back and forced myself to go over them carefully. Pictures of baby Frances Mary Hunter. The flat of the axe had been used on her, to crush her head the way you'd crush a hard-boiled egg.

My interest was more in her bedding than in her. There had been a sheet under her and a receiving blanket over her and a quilt over that. I could visualize *two* receiving blankets between her and the quilt. The bedding had been disturbed before the axe blow fell.

"Commissioner figgers she was standin' up in the crib an' cryin'," Finlay said.

"That's a thought," I nodded.

Finlay had dozens of other dimension pictures. I was about to pass these by when another thought struck me.

"Hey, how did the killer come and go?"

Finlay grinned. "That should be right up your alley, Tony. You're the best puzzle man we ever had. Lookit."

He showed me views of the two doors, the front door bolted by a safety chain and the rear door locked by a sliding bolt.

"Let's see the windows."

The little photographer did and that reduced the problem to slim proportions—nine and a half inches slim, to be exact. In that seven-room cottage only two windows had been unlatched: one in the master bedroom and the other in Jimmy's bedroom. The master bedroom window eliminated itself because it opened on a soft garden bed in which closely spaced shoots were commencing to appear. The bed ran from the window to a slat fence three yards away and not even a cat could have left that window without crushing some of the shoots or leaving deep paw prints in the soft loan. Which left Jimmy Hunter's window—and there the venetian blinds were down, allowing exactly nine and a half inches leeway through which someone could have entered or departed. The police knew there was a play of only nine and a half inches there because when they forced the blinds to ten inches at the point where the window was, three of the slats snapped.

I tried to estimate whether Lucille Cannon could wedge her ample figure through that nine-and-a-half-inch gap. It was a moot point.

"Any prints?" I asked Stan Finlay.

"Part of a stranger," he said. "That's what makes me think it was a nut. He didn't even wear gloves. But he musta had a angel sittin' on his shoulders because all we got is half a thumb. You wanna see more, Tony?"

I told him I had seen enough. I shook his hand, gave him a two-bit cigar and went to the basement where I examined the murder axe, the bedding and the door to Jimmy Hunter's bedroom and learned nothing new.

SERGEANT SMITH, in charge of the fingerprint bureau, went by the given name of Alice. She was a tall, graying woman with thick ankles, bony features and silver-rimmed glasses. She gave lectures on juvenile delinquency to women's clubs and she knew practically all there was to know about the art of raising finger traces from plane surfaces.

"I can't help you even a little bit, Tony," she told me after some preliminary badinage. "Every last print we raised in that house is accounted for."

I said, "Hold it, Alice. Finlay told me you raised the thumb of a stranger on the axe handle."

"That's what I thought," she shrugged. "The F.B.I. matched it from Naval records and it turned out to be Henry Willis. He's scoutmaster of the troop in which Jimmy was a cub. Fred Hunter was a committeeman of that troop. Willis was over for supper Monday evening. He handled Jimmy's axe then."

"Henry Willis, hey?" I mused.

She laughed, showing large, horsy teeth. "Captain Svenson thought so also. But Henry drove up to Frisco right after that supper. He checked in at the "Y" at eleven that night and was awakened by the night clerk at five-thirty Tuesday morning. And Doc Schultz said it all happened between midnight and two on Tuesday morning."

"Well, whose prints besides his did you raise around the cottage?"

"You want the entire list, Tony?"

I nodded and she brought it to me and I may as well have not asked. It merely happened to include, aside from the defunct Hunters and their maid, all their neighbors, all of Sarah Hunter's bridge club members, most of Fred Hunter's friends, practically all the kids in the neighborhood, the gas man (from an earlier visit), the grocery delivery boy—well, that should give you an idea.

I thanked Alice and hunted up Doc Schultz, the gnome-like little medico who had served as city coroner for as long as I could remember.

"You saw the pictures, Lark!" he snapped.

"That's all! They died between midnight and two."

"How did you decide that?"

He was an irritable little devil. His eyes seemed swollen behind gold-rimmed glasses. He barked at me, "You questioning my judgment, Lark?"

"I'm just questioning you—period!"

Doc Schultz glared at me. He removed the specs to glare at me better. He put them on again and stated sharply, "I used three methods. The degree of alimentation. Thermal. And a simple deduction arising from the fact that the baby had been given its ten o'clock bottle of formula, but the two o'clock feeding was still in the refrigerator. She was still on a 'round the clock schedule. That satisfy you?"

"I just wanted to know," I told him mildly. "How about the cause of death?"

He was outraged.

"Don't you read the newspapers? Four people are practically decapitated with an axe and you ask what killed them!"

"Just a thought," I grinned at him. "Fred Hunter was unconscious when he got the axe. How do you know he wasn't already dead?"

"He wants to know how I know!" Doc Schultz screamed at the ceiling with a gnome-like expression of great pain. "He never heard that a dead man fails to bleed, that only a live man bleeds at death!" he told the ceiling.

"That can be argued a little," I scowled at him. "The blood is still in a corpse. It's no longer being pumped, but if there's an opening in the bottom of the corpse—and Fred Hunter's head and neck were certainly opened and lower than his torso—why can't gravity cause the blood to ooze out?"

We volleyed that idea around awhile, settling nothing. I finally told the little man I didn't think he'd know a corpse if he saw one, and left to hunt up Sergeant Olson in the lab.

* * *

Olson had something new.

He was a pleasant, blond man with child-like eyes and a curious aversion for chemistry at which he was proficient. He yearned to swap hot lead with killers in dark alleys. I think he read too many books. But he was a nice guy.

He showed me the results of his investigations. He had traced bloodstains, flesh and hairs to their respective owners from the axe blade, proving beyond all shadow of a doubt that the axe had spilt the skulls of Jimmy and his dad, crushed in baby Frances Mary's skull and split the neck of Sarah Hunter.

The one new thing was something he had pried from baby Frances Mary's clenched fingers. It was a hair.

A blonde hair.

"It doesn't match any of the victims," Olson said. "The maid fails to qualify. It's a female hair. I can't determine the age too closely—but she's not too old. I got samples from most of the women whose prints Alice raised—even the mayor's wife. But they don't make it. The baby couldn't have held it long. A blonde woman who hasn't entered the case yet. I wish I knew who she was—"

"Don't we all?" I muttered bleakly.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Cat and the Mouse

CAPTAIN FRANK O. SVENSON sat behind my old desk and favored me with a golden grin, a literally golden grin resulting from gilt caps on his front teeth. He wore dirty blond hair in a clipped, military brush, did exactly as he was told at all times and knew enough to give the homicide, narcotics, vice, and safe and loft details their respective heads, which made him a more or less satisfactory captain of detectives.

After the customary exchange of insults I needled: "Where's your suspect, Frank?"

He turned to spit in a brass cuspidor, a new decoration in the office. "What suspect, Tony?"

"Something I read in the papers."

"You're kiddin' me, Tony," Frank grinned. I grinned back at him and shrugged.

"That's what I thought. I just wanted to be sure."

Frank added more saliva to the cuspidor. "We're workin' on it. Anybody asks you, we're workin' on it. How about you?"

"What about me?"

"The commish fell for your routine, but I know you from when, pally." He scowled at the onlooking detectives. "If some of these hawkshaws learn how to locate their own heads once in a while maybe *we'd* ha' turned up that blanket when it still might ha' done us some good!" He spat for emphasis then favored me with a gilt leer. "Come on, Tony. You ain't pokin' around for your health. Who's payin' the freight?"

I showed him two wide eyes.

"No kidding, Frank. It's just that I hate to see a killer like that floating around loose. It keeps me awake nights."

"Either it's dough—or you're apple-polishin'," Frank scowled.

"It's not either," I protested. "Campbell thought I might brew a sort of outside slant. What have you got?"

Frank leaned forward with an expression of great sincerity. "Why, we got a regular old fashioned massacre, Tony. Ain't you heard? This family on Bluff Drive: papa, mama and two kids. Some joker takes a axe and—"

"I should have known better than to ask," I cut in wearily.

"That's right," Captain Frank O. Svenson grinned. He shrugged. "What *can* we do in a case like this, Tony? You gone through the traces all afternoon. You know what we're up against. No foreign prints, so I put teams on the familiars—just in case. Even the mayor and commissioner. But they're all accounted for—in bed or otherwise—between midnight and two; every last alibi is solid.

"So we angle it for motive." Frank spread massive paws. "What kind of motive calls for that kind of party? Nothin' is lifted. No known enemies anywhere around the family. We even got to figurin' it was one of these here mutual jobs: three kills and a dutch—but that don't jell either. None of 'em coulda done to themselves what was done. D'ya see what I mean, Tony?"

I said he had a point. He spread those paws again.

"What's left? Okay—a nut. But even nuts gotta have at least a nutty motive, right? Right! So that's the angle. We're gettin' a list from the Secret Service. You know. They keep track of released nuts in case the president ever comes through so they can keep 'em outa the way until the president is gone.

"We got a list from our own hospitals an' clinics an' sanitariums an' we're bracin' all the local docs on the q.t. to slip us names of possibles and we're getting reports in from all over the country from institutions on released nuts—and we're matchin' all those names against the city directory, the phone book, hotel registers and so on.

"After that we'll go into each ex-nut's case, if his time Monday night and Tuesday morning ain't accounted for. We'll hunt for any kinda motive, like he don't like the *Clarion,* or he blows his top when he runs across little punks like that Jimmy Hunter was, or—"

I told Frank I thought he was on the right track, exchanged some more light chatter with the boys, then collected a key to the Hunter cottage, some names and addresses and took my leave.

I was, as the poet said, making haste slowly.

* * *

Names and addresses; an investigator can truthfully say most of his time is spent hunting names at addresses and popping tedious questions in search of pertinent answers. I knew the boys had been to all the names on my list, so I angled for a branch.

William Frisby, publisher of the *Clarion* and Fred Hunter's boss, said, "Lark? *Tony* Lark? *Captain* Tony Lark?"

I grinned. "At this rate it will be half an hour before you reach, *'Former* Captain of Pacific City's Detective Bureau, Tony Lark?' "

He frowned at that, which gives you the humorless Mr. Frisby. It was five-thirty and I had intercepted him as he was leaving for a dinner engagement. We stood on his porch on Crest Drive and had it out.

"What I want from you, Mr. Frisby, is the closest man in your organization to Fred Hunter. The guy he had lunch with and brought out to the house once or twice a week. His buddy."

"I thought you were no longer on the force, Lark."

Which gives you another idea of Frisby: humorless—and careful. Put that inside two hundred pounds and six feet of conservatively dressed business executive and you have the *Clarion's* publisher.

I told him, "I'm a private investigator now and I'm working on this with the commissioner's sanction. I'm not after money or a state secret. All I want is Fred Hunter's office buddy."

"This is highly irregular—"

"So was Fred Hunter's head when last seen," I said dryly.

"Hmm!" He finally said, "Raymond Selig, Fred's assistant. I believe they bowled together."

I got the address without knocking him down and applying live matches to his feet, which surprised me.

RAYMOND SELIG turned out to be a lanky man sprawled on the bed of a San Luis Street furnished room. He sprawled on the bed and gnawed at an apple and held a two-bit copy of Irving Stone's *Lust For Life* open with one long finger and told the landlady, "Sure I'll see him. I'll see anybody." He saw me and said, "Come in! Come in! Hey, you're Lark, aren't you?"

I came in and told him I was Lark and I was interested in some intimate data re the late Fred Hunter.

"Hell, I already told Frank Svenson all I know, guy. Why don't you see him?"

"He asks questions," I told him. "I listen to answers."

Selig grinned broadly. He had a lot of mouth with which to grin. He had a lot of nose to go with the mouth. It was all—grin, mouth and nose—exceedingly pale. He wore a shock of brown hair almost down to his left eye.

"I know exactly what you mean," he said. "Confidentially, I don't think the squarehead could detect his way out of a paper bag. What answers are you after?"

"Dirt," I said.

His grin faded. "Hey, guy! Fred was okay!"

"He isn't okay now," I shrugged. "What's the difference? We're all spotted a little here and there. It wouldn't mean anything to him.

His wife wouldn't mind. It'll have no bearing on his kids' futures. Anyhow, this is exclusively between us."

"Is it?"

"That's what I said."

Selig turned the book over, set the apple on it to hold it down, rose to his feet and pounded a short beat on the rug. He was about seven feet tall and one foot slim, standing. He finally paused before me and said, "You could hurt that kid awfully easy. I don't see what she's got to do with the killings, but you always were a little brilliant about pulling answers out of thin air."

"Now you've whet my curiosity," I told him. "What kid?"

He shrugged delicately. "It wasn't serious—I think. About once a week. Sybil Harris. She hangs around the Zanzibar on Pacific Street. Take it easy on her, will you, Lark? She's still reeling."

I said, "I've heard of Sybil Harris before this."

He said, "What cop hasn't? She's a cat."

"Didn't Fred like his wife?"

"Every guy likes to put his fingers on something different now and then. But I don't think you'll dig anything there. I don't think you'll dig anything out of Fred's past. He was just another guy named Fred—and he walked easy. He bowled a three hundred game two years ago. That was the highlight of his life."

At the door I paused with my hand on the knob and looked back over my shoulder. "Selig, I have a funny question. Fred's wife—Sarah Hunter. Would you happen to know if she slept on her back usually?"

Selig's eyes became enormous.

"How should *I* know?"

* * *

The Zanzibar was as close as Pacific City came to a night club. That is, after eight a Negro sat on a dais over the bar playing a piano, a blonde whispered tunes into a mike and you paid the twenty percent extra amusement tax.

At seven, when I entered it, three women sat spaced along the circular bar at regular intervals, all of them sipping beer. Two men who looked like visiting ranch hands huddled over a nickel slot machine and the barkeep was stooping low to get light from under the bar on the words of the newspaper he was holding.

I took a stool between two of the women and waited patiently until the barkeep finished the item he was reading. He folded the paper under his arm and approached with his chin angled at me interrogatively. I told him, "Make it a Harwood and soda and tell me how I can reach Sybil Harris."

The barkeep went about preparing the highball. When he set it before me and reached for the bill I had laid on the counter, he said, "Never heard of her." He shot a quick glance at the woman to my left.

Knowing barkeeps from way back, I turned to the woman at my right, a red-headed woman in a black dress with white lace trimmings, and said, "Hello, Sybil."

Without glancing at me, she told the barkeep, "He's bothering me, Al."

The barkeep laid change from my bill on the bar and looked steadily at me. I looked steadily back at him. The woman to my left, a heavily fleshed brunette, slid off her stool and said hoarsely, "When the joint starts crawlin' with cops, that's when I take my business someplace else."

She walked out in silence while Al and I continued to gaze into each other's baby blue eyes. He finally licked his lips and said, "She says you're botherin' her."

I said, "Go away, Al. Go to the other end of the bar and polish a glass."

I told the redhead, "We're starting wrong, Sybil. I'm digging into Fred Hunter's yesterdays."

"Never heard of him," she said, continuing to look forward where the dark blue mirror gave practically no reflection in the shadowy lighting of the place. She sipped her glass of beer, then said, "Why don't you get wise and take a walk? I paid off this month."

I asked, "Don't you want to help me catch the guy who planted the axe?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. Do me a favor and drop dead."

"I'm talking about Fred Hunter. He saw you at least once a week for a long time. A man will say things to a new girl friend he wouldn't mention to his relatives or close friends. Fred may have dropped a word to you that will lead me straight to his killer. Come on, kid, soften up."

"Why don't you go outside and get run over? You're bothering me. *Al—!*"

I aimed a finger at the barkeep's face. "*That* end of the bar, sonny. And get busy with a glass."

He croaked, "Why don't you lay off her? She's havin' a hard time."

"She'll have a harder time if she keeps horsing around!" I told him. I turned to the redhead. "How about it, Sybil?"

She turned to face me. She was cross-eyed. Aside from that, and from the fact that the left side of her mouth curved down bitterly, she almost seemed beautiful. She said stonily, "All right. Let's go to my room; we can talk there."

I nodded agreement. She slid off her stool and walked unsteadily to the door. I followed. The ranch hands didn't seem to be having

much luck with the slot machine—but then who does?

SYBIL HARRIS took my arm in the street. We walked half a block, then turned into a grimy little hotel. You had to walk up a flight of stairs to the desk where a gray-haired man in clothes he had worn without changing for ten years stood poking a black fingernail into yellowed stumps of teeth.

"This is the dump I live in," Sybil Harris said.

The man waved a hand at Sybil with a negligent motion. Then his yellowish eyes widened. His mouth widened in a yellower grin.

"Well," he grunted, giving me a leer, "if it isn't Captain Lark. You're doing all right, Syb—"

She shrugged and moved down the corridor, muttering, "I'm moving into the big time now!"

I followed her to her room, a small roach trap containing a double bed with rusted, paint-chipped frames and a sag in the middle. A tired and beaten bureau, a hundredth-hand chair, a fly-specked mirror, a chipped gray bowl and a large pitcher of scummy looking water completed the room's furnishings.

Sybil Harris sat down on the bed. She had an expectant smile on her face.

"Look," I told her, "all I want from you are some memories of Fred Hunter. Remember?"

Her smile vanished then.

"Yeah," she said dully. "So what? I didn't do it."

"Of course not. But he talked to you—"

"Sure. They all talk."

"We're concentrating on Fred Hunter now."

"Okay. He talked to me. It's a hot day. Maybe it's gonna rain. His wife's a mouse; she don't understand he's got to spin wild sometimes. He's got two great kids. One of 'em's wild, but he'll get under control. The girl's a sweetheart. He's thinking of getting her in the movies.

"He bowled three hundred. He bowled two-twenty-six. Seven strikes in a line last night. Some guy named Frisby thinks he can play pinochle, but he don't even know how to meld—whatever that is. He woulda been a major in the Army if they didn't need him on the paper so bad. He bought his boy skates and in only three days the kid's a wonder.

"Except for the mouse I'm the only girl he ever touched. If he'd of known me twelve years ago he'd of married me and left her hashin' on Pacific Street—" Sybil Harris buried her face in her arms and wept. She glared up through welling tears and choked at me, "You hear that, big shot? I'd have been Mrs. Fred Hunter!"

I said softly, "Sure, honey. And last Tuesday you'd have been in bed without a neck. . . ."

"I'd hu-have lu-lu-loved it!" she sobbed.

I put five dollars on the bureau and left.

* * *

Captain Frank O. Svenson's voice on the phone was indignant. "How should I know where she hashed? I can't even tell you the day she graduated from grammar school, whaddya think of that?"

I patiently told him, "Their married life is an open book; you told me that yourself. All I'm trying to do is turn back a few more pages. Who *would* know where she hashed?"

"How'd I know? Listen, Tony, you let me run the bureau. You stick to your divorces and watchman jobs. I think Campbell slipped up, dealin' you in in the first place!"

I said, "Go to hell, Frank!"

He said, "Same to you, Tony!"

We hung up.

* * *

Raymond Selig was still engrossed in the peccadillos of Vincent Van Gogh, as recounted by Irving Stone. He looked up at me from

the bed. The apple was now a core on the bureau. He said, "You again!" He indicated the book. "This guy sliced off his ear and sent it to his girl friend. Crazy! And now his paintings are worth over twenty million bucks! How do you like that?"

I said, "Fine! Fine! That's great! What do you know about Sarah Hunter?"

"I thought you were after Sybil Harris."

"Same melody. New lyrics. Now I'm after the Mrs."

"This guy can write!" Raymond Selig said reverently, laying the book face down. "Fred's wife?" He pursed his lips thoughtfully and nodded. "Okay, I guess. Kind of quiet. Say hello to you at the door when you come in and you don't hear a word out of her until three hours later—and then she's handing you your hat and the word is good-bye." He grinned. "Believe me, I don't know on which side she slept!"

"Where'd he meet her?"

"Down in Marino's, on Pacific Street. When she hashed there it wasn't the dump it is now.

"They hit it off okay," Selig went on. "Never really quarreled. Whenever they had a difference of opinion she'd just close her yap and keep it closed. The silent treatment. He always wound up begging her to pop off again. I don't know why. She had one of those little squeaky voices. Ah, hell! She was a mouse."

That was becoming monotonous.

CHAPTER FIVE

Lady in the Clink

MARINO'S Cafe was, to put it kindly, a dump, a ptomaine trap, a garbage can that opened on Pacific Street.

The chef followed two hundred pounds of waitress out to where I sat behind the counter. He was a Greek with swarthy skin and whitish hair. His apron was stained with the grease of a thousand hamburgers.

"Ya wanna see me? Whatsamatta, ya no lika the grub? Why ya no go someplace else?"

I lied, "Your grub's fine. I wouldn't think of going anyplace else. I came through Pacific City twelve years ago, dropped in here and I still drool over that meal!"

He shook his head. "I no here twelve year. I buy heem from Nick Vennutti eight year back an' losin' dough alla time, the beeg chisel! Hey, ya wanna eat somethin'?"

This to my back as I glided toward the door. I glanced over my shoulder and decided the kindest act would be to not answer. The two-hundred-pound waitress was staring dully at my back and picking her nose. My appetite would be dead for a week.

Nick Vennutti was one of those rare importations, a blond Italian. It was a yellow, buttery blondness and he kept it well oiled and combed. His face expanded the lower it went, terminating at wide jowls. His torso expanded down from his shoulders, making him a sort of blond Buddha.

He sat behind his desk in his tiny office on the second floor of the Pacific City Sport Palace, his visible means of support. The Palace did well enough, containing as it did the city's biggest bowling alley, the best pool and billiard and snooker tables in town, a room full of penny and nickel amusement devices, a bar and a lunch counter.

The invisible means of support included a bookmaking office in a "secret" room on the second floor; the room was secret to practically all of Pacific City. Nick paid off.

Now he sat behind his desk and blinked at me and worked up a slow grin. "Yeah, Tony. I bought the place from Pedro Marino and then unloaded it on a Greek."

"Sarah Hunter," I said.

"Sarah Davis when she worked for me, Tony. What's the idea? She was a nice kid."

"Okay. She was a nice kid. She played for a jackpot and connected. What else?"

"A dozen years are a long time, Tony. Sarah Davis blew in off a ranch in Santa Clara County. Five hens and a cow on two acres, but they call it a ranch. She did her work. The customers liked her. Then Fred Hunter made his play for her. What else can I say?"

"Would you happen to know how she slept? I mean, on her face, or her side, or her back?"

His swollen gut began to quiver with mirth. He had a peculiar sense of humor, Nick Vennutti. When the silent laughter dribbled away to nothing, he said, "No."

"Is there anything else you remember about her, anything out of the ordinary, something that could tie in with a massacre?"

"What could there be, Tony? A sort of quiet kid, but she sure went after Hunter. I guess she knew what she wanted. I used to see her picture in the paper a lot after she married him. Lived out on Bluff Drive, right next door to the mayor. A sort of—"

"Mouse?" I supplied.

"Yeah. That's it. Even her voice. I'd put her down as a mouse, Tony, and let her go at that."

* * *

That was Saturday night. I had fished a little into Fred Hunter's yesterdays and found the outlet of his libido. And I had learned Sarah Hunter was a sort of mouse.

It was Saturday night and the streets of Pacific City were thronged with townsfolk, ranchers and an overflow of revelers from San Francisco. Juke box syncopation spilled from the open doors of bars. Slot machines tinkled through the night. Double lines waited before the city's three main movie houses. Pins clattered in the bowling alley. Ivory balls spun off green felt cushions into other ivory balls.

This was Pacific City's weekly night to howl and this was how it howled. While Fred Hunter and Sarah Hunter and Jimmy Hunter and baby Frances Mary Hunter lay silent in the damp earth and the boy scout axe of which Jimmy had been so proud lay equally silent in the basement of city hall.

Lucille Cannon also lay silent—on the divan in her darkened living room, before the fire which sent weird shadows dancing on the walls.

I touched her shoulder and she turned slowly to look up at me. It was too dark to read her expression.

"Been drinking, kid?"

Her blonde head turned slowly from side to side.

"Don't," I told her. I lied, "I'm making real progress. I'm ten jumps ahead of the law now. I have a swell lead to the killer. You sit tight, lay off the giggle juice and by Monday you'll be able to hook this nice Joe with a clear conscience and commence having your own babies."

She lay motionless. I reached down and plucked a blonde hair from the back of her head. She continued to lay motionless. I dropped the hair into an envelope. Then I leaned down, patted a plump shoulder and walked out.

That was Saturday night and I had seen all the names at all the addresses of which I could think. There was nothing else to do. I drove home and spent the rest of the night pretending I was asleep.

SUNDAY morning I used the key Svenson had grudgingly released and leisurely wandered through the Hunter cottage, using my eyes and poking into odd corners.

Offhand, my first opinions were that Sarah Hunter had been a very meticulous housewife, that Fred Hunter had been the usual sloppy householder, that Jimmy Hunter, despite his cussedness in the world at large, was a disciplined lad at home and that baby Frances Mary Hunter, like all babies, practically ruled that particular roost.

To illustrate the last, for instance, it was evident the entire family schedule revolved about the infant. Fred Hunter's pipe rack, humidor and other smoking trivia such as matches, pipe cleaners and ash trays were all in a cabinet tacked to the wall of the laundry room, which happened to be the glassed-in back porch. It was obvious his smoking was relegated to that area.

In the kitchen the baby's schedule and formula, penned on prescription blanks, were tacked to the wall over the red-checked table. The main shelves were devoted to items such as Pablum, milk bottles, nipples, a baby scale and so forth.

In the living room, besides Frances Mary's play pen there was a sewing machine with a basket on the broadloom containing half-finished baby garments.

The master bedroom held an entire bureau for baby clothes, diapers, baby blankets, quilts and so on, along with the crib.

That Jimmy hewed to the line at home was evinced by the fact that all his toys, with one minor exception, were neatly stowed in a toychest in his room. The exception was a skate key on the floor near his chest.

In the chest I found a football, a Lone Ranger badge, the remains of a chemistry set, parts of an electric train, about three hundred assorted bottle caps, a decaying beetle in a jar, an air rifle with a small box of BB shot, a catcher's mitt and mask and chest protector, a fungo bat, nine marbles, a frayed checkerboard, the leather sheath of an axe, twenty-three comic books, a boy scout handbook, four broken model airplanes and a jar containing ninety-three pennies.

That none of this weird assortment found itself on the floors, or in drawers or closets of the house was final proof of Jimmy's self-discipline at home.

As for Fred, his casual traces were legion. In the bathroom, for example, a safety razor lay on the sink where he had evidently left it when he sallied forth to bowl his last. His next to last worn shirt lay on the edge of the baby's playpen in the living room. His bureau drawers were masterpieces of disorder and confusion. His clothes hung sloppily in the closets. His hat lay under the clothes tree.

Sarah Hunter's housewifely excellence was demonstrated in hundreds of little ways. The kitchen gleamed. Even the inside of the refrigerator had been scoured, although the food in it was mellowing somewhat. The gas and electricity had been turned off by Mark Campbell's orders. The bathroom was an exception, but this was due to Fred Hunter's razor and someone's late shower leaving a cake of soap in the tub, a soiled towel hanging over the tub's edge, the shower curtain drawn and a trace of dried soap and grime and hairs around the chrome of the drain outlet.

The upper walls of the house were free of dust and the windows shone on their insides—rain had spotted their outer surfaces. The venetian blind slats had been dusted. All in all, a most conscientious housekeeper.

The dining room, like most dining rooms in America, showed signs of little use. I passed on to the first guest room, which turned out to be barren, except for the walls where someone had started to paste large decals of Disney characters. Evidently, this was intended to become baby Frances Mary's room.

The second guest room—and last room of the cottage—was evidently the maid's room. There, I turned up something a little out of the ordinary—maybe not so unusual at that, now that I think of it.

Under a pile of pinkish slips and whatnots in a bureau drawer I came across a small collection of erotica. Aside from several pamphlets—*My First Sin, Paris Night, A Woman's Confessions*, to cite a few—there were about twenty photographs of the sort usually shown with leers from men's wallets in barrooms and stag parties.

As I was sifting through these, the door to the maid's room groaned open and someone yelped.

I turned to behold a bony-faced woman with red, fluttery hands. She gaped at me through horn-rimmed glasses and opened her wide mouth to scream again.

"Hold it!" I snapped at her. "This is police business. If you want to check on me, go next door and ask the commissioner. You the maid?"

She swallowed the scream and nodded dumbly.

"Been with the Hunters long?"

"Ten months." She had a dried, flat voice.

"They talk to you down headquarters?"

"Yesterday."

"Did they think to ask you if Mrs. Hunter usually slept on her back?"

"No."

"Did she?"

"No."

"You sure of that?"

She was outraged.

"I took care of her before and after the baby came, didn't I? Mrs. Hunter couldn't sleep on her back. At the hospital she had to take barbituates in order to sleep. The only way she could sleep naturally was face down. Goodness! I certainly ought to know!"

"Anything else you might add? I mean that they forgot to ask you? About who could have done this—?" I waved my hand to indicate the massacre and saw her eyes widen in horror at what my hand held—about five of those photographs.

A tide of crimson swept up from her neck until it enveloped her bony features. She made a croaking noise, then whirled on her flat heels and sprinted away from there. She was out on Bluff Drive and half a block gone, with her feet still flying when I reached the door.

I let her go, and returned to Jimmy's room where I tried to match the toys in his chest against the scratches on the floor where his father had tripped to eternity. But it was no go. The closest objects were the broken airplane models—but Fred Hunter's shoe would have crushed them.

I FOUND Frank O. Svenson in the Pacific Inn Coffee Shop, treating his wife and two boys to lunch. After an exchange of social ritual with the family, I drew him aside and asked him, "Did you check on that maid, Frank?"

"Penelope?"

"If that's her name."

"Penelope Roberts. Yeah. She's airtight. L. A. checked for us. She couldn't have been here Monday night if she flew up in a jet." My erstwhile rival grinned wolfishly at me. "You been through that drawer, hey, Tony?"

"It was a stab," I shrugged wearily. "One of those repressed jobs—"

"A dame like her!" Frank mused, shaking his head. "That all you wanted, Tony?"

"No. Who took the last shower in the Hunter tub?"

"Now, Tony, will ya tell me what who takes a bath has got to do with a deal like this?"

"I just want the whole picture."

"You would! Anythin' else?"

"Yes. How far back did you go into the Hunters? I mean, any psychos in the background?"

"Nagh. Ordinary squares on both sides."

"She used to hash for Nick Vennutti."

Frank grinned goldenly. "Tell me somethin'!"

I told him, "You could have saved me a couple of hours last night by letting me in on that, at least."

Frank's eyes forsook the grin for pure venom. "Go to hell, Tony!"

I said, "Same to you, Frank!"

I smiled pleasantly at his wife and boys on the way out.

That was Sunday noon. I brooded through a steak. I had good reason to brood. Sooner or later the police list of all released asylum inmates would be checked against local residents and Lucille Cannon would become a headline: FIEND CAPTURED!

It would then take something like nuclear fission to tear her loose from the clutch of circumstantial evidence they would easily weave about her. She was a natural, the answer to Campbell's and Svenson's fevered dreams.

I did not enjoy that steak.

I drove back out to the Hunter cottage, usurped Fred Hunter's favorite easy chair, lit my pipe and resumed my brooding.

I tried to picture Lucille Cannon as the fiend. Several details spoiled the picture. Psychologically it was wrong. According to her own story, before her cure she had never actually harmed a child; she had merely put on a show, talked about it. And it was wrong physically. I could not imagine her bulk sliding through a nine-and-a-half-inch clearing. Also, it was wrong from the point of view of two bits of evidence. In the first place, how would she know where to find that axe? From the picture of Jimmy's neatness at home, I guessed the axe had been in the toy chest. In the second place, what happened to the *something* on which Fred Hunter stumbled hard enough to knock himself out?

One strong item against her was that receiving blanket. And one item that would be for or against her was that sample of her hair in the envelope in my pocket.

Well, narrowed down, no law said that particular receiving blanket had to be on the baby at the time. How else could it get out of doors?

I went outside and looked—and there lay the answer. Behind the Hunter cottage ran a clothesline and on it were several items of baby clothes: three tiny undershirts, two gowns, a wool blanket, four pairs of socks, a bib—and two pink receiving blankets, duplicates of the one I had found in Lucille Cannon's home!

And there was a space large enough for one more—*with two clothespins on the ground under that space!*

I returned to Fred Hunter's easy chair and my pipe and renewed my brooding.

The axe had been found in the master bedroom. Could Sarah Hunter have, from some un-mouselike impulse, exterminated her family, then herself? I had to dismiss the idea. It would have been a good trick with mirrors.

Well, what did I have? I had a vanished *something* on which Fred Hunter stumbled, a woman's blonde hair, the fact that Sarah Hunter usually slept on her face—but died on her back, a nine-and-a-half-inch aperture through which the killer left, no visible motive and absolutely no suspects.

MANY HOURS later I had all that and a headache too. Also, I was hungry. It had grown dark outside. It was a good time, I thought, to help Lucille Cannon stay on the wagon by putting her mind on other things, a supper for her favorite detective, for instance.

No lights showed at 302 Bluff Drive, but no lights had shown last night. The door was unlocked, as it had been Saturday. I entered and felt my way to the living room.

The fire was out. That was different. So was the divan. Instead of Lucille Cannon, the toy basinette containing "Laurie baby" lay on the divan.

I switched on the overhead lights and found more novel touches that had the short hairs of my neck quivering. Bottles. Two empty fifths of Schenleys alongside the divan.

I touched the switch to douse the lights and a man's voice from the doorway barked, "Hold it just like that!"

Over my shoulder I recognized Detective Sergeant Rufe Malloy. He recognized me at the same instant and lowered the muzzle of his Positive which had been aiming at my back.

He spoke over his shoulder, "It's all right, Commissioner. Tony Lark got here ahead of us." He grinned at me. "Hiya, Tony."

I used six thousand pounds of will power to force an answering grin and said, "Hi, Rufe."

Mark Campbell appeared in the doorway.

"How the devil did you get on to her? They just picked her up half an hour ago!"

"She talk, Mark?"

"Nothing that makes sense. You haven't answered my question, Tony."

It was, as the wags put it, a sixty-four dollar question. I passed it off lightly. "I've been looking up and down the block. They tell me this lady lives alone and has a habit of prowling nights and since it's just down the block from the Hunters I thought I'd look around and maybe talk to her when she wandered home."

That won the sixty-four dollars. Campbell grumbled, "If you had something like this, you should have put us onto it, Tony. Gotten a warrant, anyhow."

"Not after your warning to me yesterday morning, Mark," I grinned. "Wouldn't you more or less classify this as horsing around?"

He dismissed this with a grunt. "Well, she put us onto her, herself. Someone phoned in there was a prowler in Hillside. When the radio boys caught up to her, she was deep in a backyard, standing under a window. There was a baby howling in that room. Folks gone. Baby-sitter fell asleep. This Cannon woman was higher than Mount Whitney and mumbling about babies. They brought her in for observation. Around then we were checking our list of former asylum inmates—and there she was. Find anything here?"

I indicated the empty whiskey bottles and "Laurie baby" in her bassinette on the divan.

"You said she was mumbling about babies," I shrugged. "I just got as far as this room."

Mark rubbed a soft palm into a soft cheek. "She doesn't seem a bad sort. Want to go down and look at her? Doc Schultz says she ought to be sober in a couple of hours."

"No," I told him. "I see no point in get-

ting any deeper. I still have a living to earn. . . ."

He nodded, turned to Malloy and told him to search the house. Malloy passed the word to two more homicide men who had been waiting in the foyer. Campbell put a soft hand on my arm. "Come over the house anyhow, Tony. I'd like you to be around when the reports come in." He chuckled wryly. "Norma's been pestering the dickens out of me to tell her how Sammy-Boy got off that iceberg. . . ."

CHAPTER SIX

Sammy-Boy and Boris

I SAT on the edge of Norma Campbell's bed and said, "Well, Sammy-Boy knew it was the end. It was way off the shipping lanes. It was off the airplane routes. The iceberg was only as big as a mattress now and yesterday it had been as big as a house. There wasn't even a bird in sight, nothing but millions and millions of waves. There was a hot blue sky overhead and his little island of ice was melting faster and faster—"

"He got off, didn't he, Tony? Didn't he? Sammy-Boy swam all the way to San Francisco, didn't he? Huh, Tony? Tony? Tony?"

"How can I say when you keep yelling at me, will you tell me that?"

The edge of the bed on which I sat was uncomfortable. I shifted a little and that was more uncomfortable. I reached under the quilt and extracted the cause of my awkward seat, a roller skate. I gave her a look and started to put the skate on the floor, but she grabbed my arm.

"Please, Tony," she whispered. "I have to keep 'em here 'cause daddy doesn't want me to skate and he doesn't know I found them. Mommy says I can keep 'em, though. I'll be quiet, Tony—"

She snuggled the skate back under the quilt and pulled the quilt close to her chin to hide her pajama-less pelt. I said, "Well, Sammy-Boy knew it was the end. So he stood there while the waves started creeping around his ankles and he sang a sad song, his last song on this earth. He sang *I'm Waiting for the Last Roundup*. He really gave it the old business, put everything he had into it. And as he sang the water crept up his shins until it touched his knees. Pretty soon it was up to his hips and Sammy-Boy knew the end was near. You see, honey, he never learned how to swim. This was the end. With tears in his eyes he sang his last *toodlyoo*—and what do you think happened?"

"What, Tony?" Breathlessly.

"He saw something rise right up out of the water near him! He *grabbed* it!" As I said this I clapped my hands over her yellow braids and yanked. She squealed and I grinned and released them.

"That's what he grabbed, honey. Hair! What came out of the water was a woman's head! He grabbed her, then, being a gentleman, he immediately started to let go, but she said, 'No, Sammy-Boy, I want you to hang on!' Do you know what she was?"

"A mermaid!" Norma cried, clapping her hands.

"Correct! She had been listening to him singing and then she did what any red-blooded girl would do under the circumstances. She swooned. But when a mermaid swoons, she swoons *up!* That's how she rose to the surface. So she swam him to New York City through the Panama Canal because he had to appear for a broadcast there and he thanked her and wrote his autograph with one of those pens that write under water. He made his broadcast and got a million dollars. Then he rode to the top of the Empire State Building to see the world he almost left forever—and what do you think happened?"

"I don't know, Tony! Tell me! Tell me!"

"Somebody—I'm not telling who right now—just *somebody* sneaked up behind where Sammy-Boy was standing near the railing of the highest building in the whole world. And the next thing our Sammy-Boy knew, he was being pushed off the Empire State Building! Over he went, and then he was falling down, down, down. . . ."

I yawned and said, "Well, that's enough for tonight, honey."

"Tony!" she screamed, grabbing the skirt of my jacket as I rose from the bed. "What happened?"

"Who knows?" I shrugged.

"Tony, you'll tell me or I'll send dragons to—"

I said, "You, young lady, will go promptly to sleep or I'll send Mark to look under your quilt!"

She swallowed and said, "Yes, Tony. I'll be good. 'Night."

"Good-night, honey."

Mark Campbell was sitting in his living room in his vest and shirtsleeves. He was beaming.

"That does it," he said nodding at the phone.

"Yes?"

"Lucille Cannon," Mark beamed happily. He opened his palm, then coiled it into a fist. "Open and shut. Spent over a year in an asylum. Something to do with a homicidal mania involving babies. We'll have all the details by morning. But that's her motive.

"Then Malloy dug up a pair of mud-stained pumps. Dragged Olson out of bed and brought him down the lab. The mud on

the shoes had traces of a fertilizer Fred Hunter used on his grass. His own formula, mind you. I doubt if it can be duplicated on any lawn in the city. Finally, remember that blanket you found in the doghouse?"

I nodded dumbly.

"That heel-mark was made by the same shoe! And that ties it!"

He settled back in his chair, grinning like the soft little idiot he was. What had portended to be a political weight around his neck turned out to be a feather in his cap, to outrage some metaphors. Next election he could probably become mayor in a walk.

I asked thickly, "She talk yet?"

"Does it matter?"

"How about that hair in the baby's fist. Does hers qualify?"

He dismissed it with a pudgy gesture. "Why clutter up a jury's mind with technical data?"

What he meant was if the hair should prove to have come off some other woman's head, his case against Lucille Cannon would be jeopardized. Not that the guy would knowingly crucify an innocent person. He was morally certain that she and she alone had perpetrated the Hunter massacre. All of which meant no effort would even be made to match the hairs.

I asked, "Is she slim enough to have gotten through that window without cracking the venetian blinds?"

He laughed contentedly. "First things first, boy. We'll come around to the complete *modus* in due time. The way you carry on you'd think she was a client of yours."

"So you would," I muttered.

He said, "Don't misunderstand me, Tony. I appreciate your interest in the case. You came through in spite of our personal differences. After all, it was you who found that blanket. And you would have gotten her yourself if that prowler call hadn't come in first."

THAT WAS a thought for the week. With that and a nickel I could buy an airmail stamp.

I left the commissioner's house. I drove around town aimlessly for hours, trying to think. I was out on the end of a thin limb and there didn't seem to be any way off it but down. And every moment that brought Lucille Cannon closer to emerging from that "lost" night brought my limb closer to cracking and dropping me down.

I finally parked in a side street off Bluff Drive, walked back to the Hunter cottage, went in, felt my way to Fred Hunter's easy chair and commenced to think in earnest.

Lucille Cannon's footprint and the fertilizer stains could be explained. Frances Mary Hunter had been crying. My blonde client crossed the lawn to listen. The blanket had been blown off the clothes line by the wind and she stepped on it. When the baby stopped crying and she moved off, the blanket simply clung to her heel. She saw it, picked it up. Why not? Weren't babies on her blacked-out mind?

When the baby stopped crying—

The killer must have been hovering over the crib when Lucille Cannon approached. The baby was crying and the killer held the axe.... Then the baby stopped crying. Lucille Cannon wandered away, noticed the blanket, picked it up. Did she go on to hear more babies, or was that her last stop in the night? It didn't matter. She went home, fell asleep—and then it was Tuesday and she had no recollection of what had happened. A Wagnerian blonde like her couldn't wriggle through a nine-and-a-half-inch gap in a million years!

So much for her. But try to sell that to a politically minded lump of jelly and his thick-skulled captain of detectives!

In the meantime, the killer had smashed Frances Mary Hunter's skull. Was that before or after the others died?

Well, the axe was in that room—say *after* Jimmy and his pa had been killed. How about Sarah Hunter, who never slept on her back?

Suppose she had been sleeping on her face and awoke suddenly to see what happened to her baby? Did she scream? Probably. Probably she screamed and tried to come to her baby's rescue. She would turn around, sitting up—that's how face sleepers usually get out of bed.

What would a mouse like her do if she suddenly realized she could no longer help her baby? Faint, probably. And if she had been sitting up, she would fall back with her arms flung out.

And the axe would rise and fall again....

Which was assuming Jimmy and his dad were killed first.

Well, assume that. Even assume it was an ordinary prowler. The prowler sneaks in Jimmy's window, starts going through the toy chest. Just starts. Jimmy had been showing his axe to Harry Willis and that would leave the axe on top of the other toys. The prowler's hand was on it when Jimmy awoke.

Possibly Jimmy made an outcry just as his father entered the front door and locked it with the safety chain. The prowler heard approaching footsteps, grew panic-stricken, swung at Jimmy with the first thing at hand —the axe in his hand.

Fred Hunter stepped into the room. He stepped on *something* which caused him to dive headfirst into the open door, knocking himself out. The prowler is now panicky for sure. Possibly it all happened at once. As

Fred Hunter dove headlong, the prowler thought it was a diving attack and struck again with the axe—splitting Fred Hunter's skull from behind.

Then suppose Jimmy was not quite dead and moved, cried out....

The prowler would have been in an esctasy of panic then. The axe would rise and fall in a rain of swift blows to silence this new menace—accounting for the horrible condition of young Jimmy's remains.

Then the prowler fled blindly from the carnage, still gripping the bloody axe—stumbled into the master bedroom where Baby Frances Mary stood up in her crib and howled. At the same instant the prowler saw the figure of Lucille Cannon approach across the lawn.

More panic—another stroke with the axe.

Lucille Cannon wandered off, but Sarah Hunter was rising from her bed.

Still more panic. The prowler swung the axe again—then flung it away.

A reaction must have been setting in. The only question now was to get away, to flee this scene of bloody devastation. And in blind, dumb terror the prowler sought the way of entry.

Hold it! Suppose the prowler is covered with blood. People do funny things at funny times. A prior reaction to that of flight might be to eradicate the bloodstains. Which brought me back to the bathroom and the blonde hairs in the dried soap traces near the drain. I found a knife in the kitchen and an envelope in a drawer and scraped soap and hairs into the envelope, then returned to the easy chair and my hypothesis.

The prowler would flee next—out the window through the nine-and-a-half-inch gap—then away into the rain-swept night.

But on what did Fred Hunter trip?

I brooded over that through one pipeful of tobacco after another—until my pouch was empty—and then I sat sucking on the stem and brooded some more. I marshalled the facts I had again and again. I threw in the blonde hair and the scratches on the floor and added them to all the other facts and scrambled them around in one combination after another—and finally one combination shoved all the others into the background and made me want to sit in the Hunter's bathtub and cut my throat.

By then it was morning.

SERGEANT Olson's blue eyes widened.

"Holy smoke, Tony, there's a reader been out for you two hours now!"

"I know," I told him. "I was leaving Jimmy Hunter's teacher at the school when the flash came over my car radio. I guess I'm hotter than a peace conference now. Will you check these for me? They're important."

He glanced down at the two envelopes I proffered him, then up at me.

"Tony, I should turn you in."

"I'm holding a gun on you," I told him, filling my pipe with tobacco. "How about matching 'em?"

"What else can I do with a gun on me?" he grinned. He examined the envelopes, one of which was marked X and the other Y. He looked in them, then reached into the X envelope and withdrew a blonde hair with a pair of tweezers. He set the hair on one plate of his comparison microscope, covered it with a thin sheet of glass, then he put on the other plate the blonde woman's hair that had been found in baby Frances Mary Hunter's tiny fist.

After awhile he looked up from the eyepiece and shook his head.

"No, Tony."

"Try the other."

He let the X hair fall to the floor, then replaced it with a blonde hair from the Y envelope. When he looked up this time it was with a bright-eyed nod.

"Bingo!"

"I was afraid of that," I scowled.

"You want to tell me about it, Tony?"

"No."

Olson scratched the back of his neck and studied me.

"Tony, you're putting me on one hell of a spot."

"That's right."

"That blonde in the psycho ward—she's your client, huh?"

I nodded.

He indicated the comparison microscope. "She X or Y?"

"Why don't you pull a hair out of her head and find out?"

His eyes clouded.

"Captain Svenson says no."

"That's how it is." I said. I produced my third envelope and told him, "Ditto this, Olson, and then see if you can scare up blood traces in the goo."

Fifteen minutes later Olson was a very excited and very puzzled police technician.

"Bingo, bingo!" he breathed. "Hairs off the same head. Human blood in the soap—but I can't say anything more without more blood. Where'd you get it, Tony?"

"This," I told him wearily, "came out of the Hunter's tub. Our killer took a shower. You'll find more traces in the drainpipe. The next favor I want, Olson, is a leetle delicate. My revolver's in my office, where I can't go. I need a revolver."

"That's what you're holding on me now, isn't it? Your revolver?"

"Yours."

He grinned wryly and found his Positive in a drawer. He brought it to me and put it in my hand. He was one hell of a good guy. He yearned to make like Humphrey Bogart in dark alleys, but his instinct when a man was down was to offer him a hand instead of a foot.

I promised him a story to make his short hairs curl and a weekend in Frisco on me. Then I shook his hand and sneaked out of city hall with his Positive in my pocket.

* * *

Commissioner Mark Campbell's voice entered the phone booth in which I stood like a blast of iron fillings.

"Okay, Lark! Come in! This is official!"

I sent a blast of my own over the wire to city hall, "Next time let *me* talk—and maybe we can do business!"

I broke the connection, used another nickel and dialed another combination of numbers. Then I broke that connection, which was all it took to upset a trace on a dialed phone call.

My Terraplane was on a side street. I left it there and rode a cab out to Bluff Drive, then walked three blocks to the Hunter cottage and keyed my way inside.

I was tired and needed sleep and that seemed to be as good a place to sleep quietly as any.

It was.

AT THREE in the afternoon, my beard gone by way of Fred Hunter's razor and some cold water, my externals washed and my innards stuffed with some of the less-mellowed items from the Hunter refrigerator, I strolled over to the Campbell home.

Mrs. Campbell had evidently not been informed that all the badges for miles around had been ordered to pick me up on sight. She greeted me cordially. Norma's voice greeted me from her bedroom where she was settling down for her after-school nap. Mrs. Campbell asked me if I would stay there a while. She wanted to go downtown shopping and was afraid to leave Norma there alone. She said this in whispers and nodded toward the Hunter cottage to explain her fear.

I told her I would be there at least an hour, that I had an appointment with the commissioner.

As soon as she was gone I dialed headquarters and told Mark Campbell I was prepared to talk to him, but it had to be to him alone.

"All right, Lark. Where are you now?"

I heard a faint click, the noise of an extension receiver being plucked off the hook, and told him, "Stop horsing with me, Campbell. Get that joker off the line—"

The commissioner said wearily, "Do as he said, Frank."

I heard a grumble, then a second click. I told the commissioner, "327 Bluff Drive."

"All right, Lark. 327 Blu—*hey!* That's my home!"

"You are so right, Campbell. Your home and your daughter and me. Cosy, isn't it? Know what I mean? I mean I don't want to see anybody creeping toward the windows. I want you to come here all alone. Is that sufficiently emphatic—or should I elaborate?"

"My God, Tony! I'll be there alone. Immediately!"

"Fine!"

The line went dead.

Norma's voice was screaming from her room: "To-*neee!* To-*neee!*"

I entered her room and grinned at her. She was lying in her bed with the quilt up to her chin and gushing at me, "Did Sammy-Boy die, Tony? Did he? I couldn't stand it if he died! Tell me what happened!"

I sat on the edge of the bed. From there I commanded a good view of the driveway and Bluff Drive. The revolver made a heavy sag in my pocket. I placed it on the bedstand, then filled my pipe and lit it. Norma watched these preparations with growing irritation.

"To-*neeeeee!*"

"Later, honey," I grinned at her. "I'm in no mood for a fairy tale now. I just want to sit here and think. If you go to sleep like a good girl, when you wake up I'll tell you exactly what happened when our Sammy-Boy fell off the Empire State Building."

She closed her eyes and pretended to sleep. I smoked my pipe and gazed out the window across the two driveways to Jimmy Hunter's window and pretended to think.

In about ten minutes I saw the nose of Commissioner Campbell's Pontiac turn toward his driveway. I told the silent girl, "Honey, this morning I was over the school. I talked with your teachers and the other kids. They told me you and Jimmy Hunter were always fighting because you wanted him to lend you his skates and he wouldn't do it."

The commissioner stepped out of his car now and strode toward the front door.

Norma's jet-black eyes gaped at me.

"That's your dad, honey," I told her gently. "He's coming because I called him. I'm going to tell him about these skates under the quilt. I'm going to tell him you didn't find them, that you stole them from Jimmy Hunter...."

I rose then and walked softly to the door and stood listening for the front door to open. Without looking back, I went on, "I'm going to tell your dad that last Monday night you sneaked out of your window and sneaked into Jimmy Hunter's window and stole his skates from his toy box—"

"Tony!" her voice screamed behind me. "If you tell dad I'll send a hundred dragons to breath fire on you!"

"You can't stop me with dragons," I said, listening to the front door open. "You're just a selfish little girl who doesn't know enough to keep from stealing—"

The front door clicked shut.

"Here comes your dad now—"

"Tony, I'll kill you dead—!"

"You'll do nothing of the kind. You'll go to jail for being a little thief—"

Footsteps crossed the living room. I swung my eyes back to Norma Campbell.

She sat erect in bed, her both hands directly before her—gripping Olson's revolver and aiming it directly at me. Her face was a tight, expressionless knot.

"You stupid little thief!" I laughed at her.

A blob of orange flame spat from the gun's muzzle.

I crumpled to the floor, my ears ringing from the blast, my nose filling with acrid fumes.

The roar of that revolver smashed through the house again and again. The bedroom door was flung open and the revolver blasted again.

I glanced up at Mark Campbell, his face a trembling mass of dough, screaming across the room, *"Norma! Norma! Norma!"*

The revolver barrel swung sharply to him and two swift blobs of orange flame spat at Mark Campbell.

At the same instant I gripped the fabric above the back of his knee and yanked, toppling him down over me. His face landed inches from my lips.

"Play dead!" I whispered harshly.

A metallic click echoed in the room.

Something dropped heavily to the floor. There came a noise of bedsheets rustling.

Then silence.

MARK CAMPBELL and I rose slowly from the floor. I didn't look at him. The revolver was on the floor. Norma Campbell lay on her back. Her eyes were closed. She breathed heavily.

"Blanks," I muttered, not looking at Campbell. "One of my screwy ideas. I'd threatened to expose the fact that she swiped Jimmy Hunter's skates last Monday night."

"She has no skates!" Campbell croaked from my window. "I wouldn't allow it!"

I walked over to the bed, gently raised the coverlet and withdrew the pair of skates. Norma continued to sleep. I heard Campbell's footsteps approach behind me. I couldn't look at his face.

"Jimmy Hunter's skates," I breathed, looking at them. "She got them out of the toy box when Jimmy awoke. The nearest thing to her hand in the open toy box was the axe. She put the skates on the floor—when she went to Jimmy—

"That's what Fred Hunter stumbled on. Long, deep scratches in the floor. Match 'em to the skates. A man stepping on a skate in the dark would fall hard enough to knock himself out."

"Tony, you're mad!"

"Not only is she slim enough to climb through a nine-and-a-half-inch gap, but she sleeps raw and she swung that axe through that nightmare raw and then she showered the traces off her and when she woke up the next morning in her own bed nobody could see the difference. She's spoiled enough to let nothing get in the way of what she wanted. You just saw what happened when I threatened to expose her."

"It's insane—circumstantial—a set of coincidences—"

"Not her hair," I breathed. "I gave Olson two samples this morning. One from Lucille Cannon. One of Norma's hairs. Norma's hair matched—"

I heard his steps stumble out of the bedroom, across the living room. I heard the

(Continued on page 94)

WE COULD MAKE SUCH BEAUTIFUL MURDER TOGETHER

By ALAN RITNER ANDERSON

"This is it, Red. It'll sure hand the devil a laugh when I blow in wearing slacks and a sweater and a ding-dong hairdo—with a big, bloody hole in my chest!

BLASCO examined the hallway floor for telltale blood spots. There were none. A low-watt bulb lighted the hallway yellowly and the fly specks on it cast circular shadows against the cracked walls. He drummed the door with his fingernails for the third time.

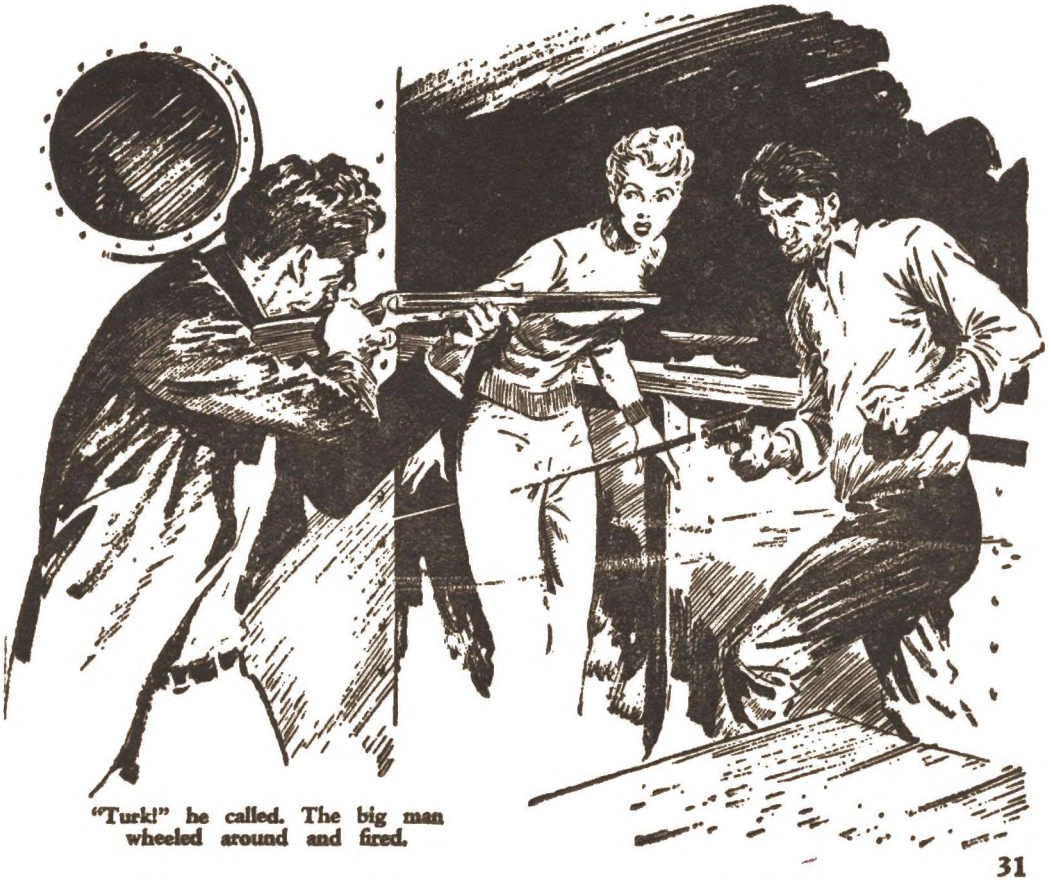
The lock rasped and the door opened a few inches, the edge of it trembling as the check-chain rattled taut. He saw the whites of eyes in the narrow rectangle of darkness.

"Yeah?" The man's voice was thick.

"You the doc?"

"Maybe yes, maybe no."

Blasco stuck out his left hand palm up so the man could see the wet redness of it. "I'm



"Turk!" he called. The big man wheeled around and fired.

hurt." His voice trembled. "I got hurt."

"Where?"

"Small of back. Near the spine."

The man tsk-tsked woefully. "Bad," he said. "Gun?"

"Knife. I don't think it's bad. I can't see it."

"I don't know you at all," said the man.

"I'm Red Blasco. A guy I met—"

"Beat it!"

The door started to close. Blasco stopped it with his foot and pulled a bank note from his right pocket. He fanned it at knob level and heard the man suck in his breath when he saw the 100's in the corners.

"Look!" said the man. "G-guys are in town. On account of the little girl getting kidnapped up north."

Blasco kept fanning the bill. "G-guys are everywhere," he said. "Hell, I'm small stuff. Hit a little trouble. A century note is good wages for a few minutes work."

The bill was snatched from his hand and the check-chain rattled. Blasco stepped into total darkness. The door closed with a soft thud. The odor of a thousand meals mingled with the sharper aroma of stale cigar smoke and cheap gin. A cluster of flame-tint bulbs went on in the ornate ceiling fixture.

The man was short and grotesquely fat with pock-marked cheeks and pitted teeth. His bloodshot eyes were close-set and squinting, and he looked as if he'd been drunk for five years. The effect of his coarse-featured ugliness was like touching something cold and slimy.

"I lack the bedside beauty," he said bitterly, baring his gums in a mirthless grin.

Blasco took off his hat. The doctor glanced at his wavy hair. "Red is right," he said. "A disfiguration in your racket."

Red Blasco didn't reply.

"Leave a blood spoor?"

"No. I wadded my shirt tail up against it."

"Belly down on the davenport!"

Blasco stretched out on the old leather-covered davenport with wooden arm rests. The doctor bared the wound with surprisingly gentle fingers. "Nice and neat," he gloated. "Clean as a whistle. Razor, was it?"

"Knife."

The doctor was deft and quick. Blasco got up, stuffing his sodden shirt tail into his trousers. "Look." he said. "I'm a stranger. I've got to hole up. Another century if you make a connection."

The doctor pursed his lips, asked, "How hot are you?"

"I don't know," Blasco said. "I only pulled the job a couple hours ago."

"Would you be carting a gun that was fired recently?"

"Yes," Blasco said, voice flat.

"A kill gun?"

Red Blasco shrugged. "Don't know."

"Take it easy a second," the doctor suggested. "Maybe there's something on the radio." He waddled out of the room. Blasco paced restlessly. The doctor came back in a surprisingly short time. "He's alive," he said. "Lung wounds are tricky. They've got you tagged, and good. Red hair, gray eyes. Six foot even and about two hundred pounds."

"Five-nine," Blasco corrected. "And one sixty-five."

"The hair and eyes are bad. I called a dame. On account of the snatch, she has to nick you a hundred a day."

"Okay," Blasco said.

"You wouldn't be in on that snatch, would you, Red?"

Blasco glowered. "Snatch a six-year-old girl, then run out and pull a stickup?"

The doctor went to the door. "Slip me the dough," he urged. "Then scram. You make me nervous, Red. All my patients make me nervous."

Red Blasco put on his hat and went to the door. He handed the doctor another hundred-dollar bill. "What's the score?" he asked. "Where is the place?"

"Next block on the other side of the street, toward the bay. Verne Apartments. The front door will be unlocked. First floor rear. Her name's Thelma."

Nodding, Blasco left the apartment. He went down the creaky stairs and reached for the knob of the front door. Through the high-set window of it, he saw the black glint of a police cruiser rolling to a stop.

He spun around, gray eyes frantic. He saw a stair well to the basement. He ran there lightly and started down. The steps groaned protestingly. Halfway down, the front door opened. He froze. He opened his mouth wide so they wouldn't hear his labored breathing.

THEY WERE cagey. They stood motionless right inside the door for a full minute. One cop scaled the steps two at a time. When he began to knock on the doctor's door, the other cop sneaked up. Blasco tugged his hat-brim down all the way around, began to play with the ends of his bow tie. He couldn't keep his hands still.

Something soft struck Blasco's ankles. The hair on his neck stiffened and he had to take a deep breath and hold it to keep from crying out in alarm. The stair well filled with a strident mewing. He stooped and scooped up a dirty black and white kitten.

Upstairs he heard the doctor's thick voice, heavy footfalls into the apartment. He cradled the kitten in his left forearm and stroked its backbone. The throaty purr

seemed as loud as the drone of a bomber.

The policemen came down the stairs fast and wordlessly. Red Blasco leaned left, watched them go out the door. He put down the kitten and started it cellarward with a tail pat. He heard the police car drive away.

The street was deserted. Swarms of insects whirlpooled around the street lamp and cast rippling shadows across the pavement. He crossed the street and walked down the sidewalk hugging building front where the shadows were deepest. A green sedan rolled past and a woman's soft laughter made him feel lonely as hell.

The door to the Verne Apartments was unlocked as promised. He entered a small corridor. Myriad sounds reached him in muffled confusion. The place was partying. He heard competing radios, the clink of glasses, laughter and the murmur of voices.

The door at the end of the hallway swung inward halfway. A white hand appeared, index finger crooking. Blasco went there and sidestepped into a small living room. A bridge lamp with a fringed shade shed dim cones of light against floor and ceiling. The furniture was mail order and shabby.

The door clicked closed and he was suddenly aware of a spicy perfume. She was tall and thin with brassy yellow hair piled high on her head in a compact mass of ringlets that looked like compressed gold springs. She wore tennis shoes, brown slacks, a dark blue turtle-necked sweater. Her upper lip was thick and arched, the lower a thin red line. Her hungry eyes were purplish-blue, almost indigo.

Blasco waved a hand at the room. "This it?"

"No." Her voice was high but not shrill.

"I'm Red Blasco."

She nodded absently. "I'm Thelma. Just Thelma." There was nothing demure, modest or guarded about her head-to-toe scrutiny of him. Suddenly self-conscious, he took off his hat and parked it on the overstuffed arm of the davenport.

"Umm! Beautiful hair," she said, her voice a caress. She took out a cork-tipped cigarette, put it between her red lips, wagged it up and down. He snapped his lighter, extended it. She grabbed his wrists with both hands as she lit up. Her palms were hot and moist, her encircling fingers vise-like. In the orange glow he saw little wrinkles etched around the corners of her mouth and eyes. He thumbed the lighter closed. She gripped his wrist tightly a moment, then let go, dragging her long fingers over the heel of his hand.

"You're a jerk!" she said, her nostrils flaring with sudden anger. "Why don't they throw looks and brains together for a change?"

He didn't say anything, just put the lighter in his pocket and let his face go deadpan.

"A six-year-old kid gets snatched," she said. "Cops go on overtime. Feds pour in from everywhere. So you stick up a warehouse and shoot a guard. I should slug you."

She made a fist with her right hand and tapped him gently on the point of the chin. He grabbed her wrist and pulled her to him. She spat out the cigarette and ground it into the rug with the toe of her right shoe. Her eyes went shadowy, her mouth loose-lipped. She pressed against him with face uptilted and eyes slitted. He kissed her. Her fingernails were like knife points against the muscles of his upper arms. She rubbed her lips over his and flattened her nose against the hollow of his cheek. She broke free with a quick backstep.

"If you're smart," she said, breathing gustily, "you'll beat it out of town."

He blinked. "Why—why, I thought you were going to—"

"You don't know what you're getting into," she said.

His jaw went stubborn. "I'll take my chances," he said.

"Don't blame me for anything," she said.

"Why can't I stay here?"

"The owner's coming back. We go out in the bay. There are twenty boats tied up there waiting to be junked. Just one watchman. A money-hungry old duffer called Pop. He gets the dough."

"Boats," Blasco said. "Sounds good."

"Perfect. Cops can't pull a sneak raid. You can get from one boat to another. A slick hide-and-seek. The cops were out twice. They didn't even come close."

"Sounds good," he repeated.

"You'll have trouble. A big slob named Turk. He goes for me in a big way. He's crazy jealous, even of the old man. And he's a killer. We'll have to play it cagey."

Blasco took a deep breath and said, "Let's skip the woo."

Smiling, she shook her head gently. "Not me. I like to play with fire. They'll take your gun. Don't beef. Just fork it over."

"I don't like it," he said, scowling.

"I told you to take a powder."

"What if the guard I shot croaks?"

She shrugged, looked at her wrist watch. "We better get started. There's a moon." She picked a leather jacket from a chair-back and handed it to him. He helped her into it. Before he could let go, she caught his hands and crossed his arms over her chest, tilting her head back against his left shoulder.

"Maybe you won't mind hiding out," she said.

His arms tightened about her. Her shoulders shivered and hunched, and she gripped his hands hard. She released him abruptly and

stepped forward, rubbing her eyes with the heels of her hands.

"There's a gunnysack full of groceries in the kitchen," she said shakily. "Go get it!"

He came out with the gunnysack and found her beside the bridge lamp. A black shawl covered her bright hair and was wound around her neck. She caught the lamp switch. "Out the window!" she said and turned off the light.

He raised the shade and opened the window, climbed down into a small moonlit yard surrounded by a six-foot board fence. He helped Thelma down, lowered the window. He followed her into a narrow alley littered with rubbish and lined with garbage cans. She walked with short, choppy steps, but fast. He trailed her, glad for the silent crepe soles of his oxfords.

THEY WERE passing through the fifth alley when a dog came out of a yard, yapping furiously. Blasco stopped. Thelma wheeled around, gritting her teeth. The dog came in at arm's length, a shrill-voiced fox terrier barking like crazy.

"Kill it!" Thelma said. "Hit it with the sack. It's full of canned stuff."

Blasco crouched down on his heels and snapped his fingers. "Hi, boy!" he called. "Hi-ya, feller?"

The dog stopped yipping and backed off, ears up, head cocked, the stub of its tail wagging interest. They heard a door open. "Rex!" a man bawled. "Get in here!" Head and tail down, the dog slunk back into the yard. The door banged closed.

"One of those," said Thelma softly. "The kind-to-animals punk. Drill a guard through the lungs, then make with a pooch who might have got the two of us rubbed out."

Blasco straightened up and shouldered the gunnysack. Thelma came up and kissed him on the mouth so hard her teeth dented his lips. She had just started away when the wail of a siren jerked her to a stop.

"Fire truck," she finally said, her voice edged.

The catwalk under the abandoned dock zigzagged between the thick wooden piles. It creaked and shivered as they walked it. Slivers of moonlight filtered through the cracks above them like gossamer curtains of silver. Dirt and splinters fell about them and struck the water with soft little splashes.

Thelma got into the rowboat and took the gunnysack. "Sit in back!" she whispered.

"I'll row."

"Nuts! I thought you got slashed in the back."

"I forgot."

She groaned. "You're dumb. Sweet, but dumb as hell. I love you for it. I hate wise guys. You're the kind needs a woman."

"Guess maybe I do," he admitted, climbing into the boat and sitting in the stern.

"You got a woman," she said very softly.

He didn't reply, just sat there rubbing his chin.

"Me, damn it, me!" she said, her voice intense.

He rubbed his chin harder. "Okay," he said. "Okay."

"Romance," she lamented. "Don't you know a woman likes to hear a guy say sweet things, even if she knows he's lying?"

He clutched his knees. She leaned forward and placed her hands atop his. The moonlight faded away and blackness closed in.

She jerked her hands away and the boat rocked as she shoved off from the mooring. They drifted out from under the dock and saw fat black clouds overhead. Thelma rowed with nice precision, the oar-tips cleaving the water just right and coming out of it with just a faint dripping.

He made out the ships. They towered black and mountainous, their masts seemingly piercing the bellies of the dark storm clouds scuttling across the sky. The freshening wind kicked up little waves and the bow of the rowboat sliced through them with a hollow slapping sound.

She swung in between two vessels, shipped oars, let the rowboat drift. A wooden ladder appeared. She caught it deftly, tied up to it. A coil of rope dropped into the boat, scaring the wits out of Blasco who started to paw for the .38 under his left armpit. Thelma's hands fluttered whitely as she fastened the rope to the gunnysack, jerked a signal. The sack sailed up and away.

"I go first," she said. "I'll tell you when to come up."

She went up the ladder with the dash and verve of a seasoned fireman. He sat there rubbing his hands together and fighting down the temptation to fire a cigarette.

"Okay, Red!" she called down, the sides of the boats echoing her voice and doing creepy things to it.

He went up with fair speed. A huge, gorilla-like shadow loomed at the ship's rail and a rough hand gave him an assist to deck. He saw the white smudge of Thelma's face in the background.

"Blasco, huh?" asked a guttural voice.

"Yeah."

The man's laughter rumbled deep in his chest. "I'm Turk. Got bad news for you. The guard croaked. We got it on the radio."

Red Blasco rammed his hands deep into his coat pockets. He rocked back and forth on his heels for thirty seconds. "Sure?" he finally asked. "Positive?"

Turk grunted. "I got ears. The guy

croaked. So it's a murder rap now, chum."

Thelma's slim fingers caught Blasco's right arm. She led him over to a squat deckhouse with a flat, overhanging roof. She opened a steel door, warned, "Step up."

He stepped over the raised threshold into a dark cabin that stank of whiskey and kerosene fumes. The door closed with a metallic clatter. A cupboard door opened and dazzling brilliance flooded the cabin. An old man took a gasoline lantern from the compartment and hung it from a hook in the ceiling.

The old man was skinny and stoop-shouldered. His walrus mustache and flowing beard were a dirty gray. Tobacco juice leaked from the corners of his mouth and his beard was stained with it. His big knuckled hands were vein-laced and restive. He rubbed his grizzled hair and looked at Blasco with pale eyes.

The cabin contained two built-in davenports, a long table with benches cleated to the legs, a few stray chairs. There was a square table in a corner, on it a battery radio and a two-burner kerosene cook stove.

Turk waddled over to the table and skidded the gunnysack beneath it. He turned around, rubbing his fat nose with the back of his right hand. Blasco felt the hairs at the nape of his neck stiffen. Turk said, "Gimme the heater!"

Blasco surrendered the .38, studying the big man as he did so.

Turk was short and broad, big-bellied, with beefy shoulders. A black, half-inch stubble of beard grew clear up to his eyes, accenting the purplish-red of his bulbous nose. His belt slanted down in front to hold his belly supportingly, like a sling. He had small, squinting, pig eyes.

Thelma said lightly, "How's the wound?"

Blasco slipped his left hand into the back of his trousers and felt the bandage. "Okay," he said. "It's okay."

Turk said, "You're heavy on the good looks, Red. Plenty heavy."

Blasco didn't reply. Thelma lit a cigarette. "You fat-headed fool!" she said. "Think a guy who's just found out he's a murderer feels like making passes?"

"I didn't say anything about him making passes," said Turk pointedly.

The old man dry-washed his hands, bobbing his head. "Five hundred in advance," he suggested, his voice a cackle.

Blasco took out a wallet and worked out five hundred-dollar bills. The old man craned his neck and tried to peek into the billfold. He took the money, smacking his lips.

"I feel a little shaky," Blasco said.

"I'll show you your cabin," Thelma said.

"Let Pop do it," Turk said. He sat down at the table, opened a quart of whiskey and quarter-filled one of the water glasses. The old man went to a cabinet and got out a candle in a rusty holder, lit it with a shaky hand. His voice was fretful. "Come 'long."

The wink Thelma gave Blasco was meaningless. He followed the old man into a short corridor flanked with wooden doors slatted at the top. The cabin was small. There was a double-deck bunk, a dresser, one chair. There were coat-hooks screwed into the wall and an eight-by-ten mirror nailed above the dresser.

BLASCO went to the mirror as the old man backed out and closed the door. His face looked drawn and pinched in the yellow light of the candle on the dresser, and his cheeks were mottled with tiny spots the color of putty. His lips were puffed and sensitive.

He went to the lower bunk and stretched out on his side so he could keep an eye on the door. Weariness poured over him like a flood of warm water. He was hungry for a cigarette, but was too physically and mentally exhausted to bother. He dozed fitfully.

The opening door brought instant wakefulness. It was Thelma. She leaned against the wall, her eyes dark with worry. "You were yelling," she said. "A bad dream, I guess."

He sat up, bent at the waist to avoid hitting his head on the bottom of the upper bunk. "I guess," he said. "I don't know."

"I've been crossed up," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"I had a rod hidden. A .25 automatic. It's gone."

Blasco rubbed his jaw. "Yeah?" he said, still drunk with sleep.

"I had big ideas for you and me," she said. "Not small stuff like milking slot machines either. But we've got to figure out how to get out of here."

"Why?" he asked, blinking in surprise.

"You found a hideout easy," she said. "Too easy. Hell, Turk's been looking for a fall guy all week. I tried to warn you. Then I thought we could back up a deal with Turk with the .25."

"I don't get it," he said, brow knit in concentration.

"If the cops come out again," she said very softly, "Turk's going to kill you."

"Why? That's dumb."

"Like hell it is. To make a red herring and let him and the old man get out from under. It's too late to get the dough. They're after a sure out."

"Talk sense!" he said. "Talk sense!"

"They've got the Fleming kid. Does it add up now?"

"No."

Thelma tugged down her sweater. "The cops find you dead, the kid dead. Pop speaks

his piece. You came out and forced him into it. You lost your nerve, killed the kid and blew your own brains out. That's the way it stacks up. Only I've a hunch Turk plans to chill the old man."

"I don't trust you," he said. "I don't trust you at all. Why throw in with a stranger?"

"You saw Turk. He's an animal. You've got what it takes. Women go for your type. We'd take them for plenty, the goofball wives and silly fat widows with dough."

"Why kill the kid?" he asked. "Why?"

"Do I have to draw pictures?" she demanded. "The kid can talk. She has to go if Turk's to get out from under. Now look! The windows and portholes are boarded up and covered with black paper on the inside. No dice. The door you came in is the only bet."

Blasco stood up, licking his lips nervously, his face ashen. She grabbed him by the upper arms and shook him gently.

"Keep listening. We haven't much time. We can't wait for the cops to come. You've got to get out now. Stay away from the ladder we came up. It's wired to an alarm in the cabin. The hatches are off. Ladders go down to the hold. Go down there and hide. I'll come down whistling *Some of These Days,* if the coast is clear."

"Okay," he said, nodding.

"I'll go back now. Come out. I'll dial in some dance music. Give me a twirl. Only let me handle the conversation. I'll ask you to dance. Spin me over to the door and crash out. Got it?"

"Yeah," he said, conscious of the cold sweat on his face.

"I don't want to see the kid die," she said. "I'm no good, and the Greeks have a word for me. But I'm still a woman."

He said, "If we get out of this mess, I'll give you the world on an oyster shell."

Thelma blinked and laughed. She said, "You mow me down. I didn't think you had it in you." She pulled his head down and kissed him hard, her fingernails raising welts on the nape of his neck. She said, "Here I go. Don't flub it!"

She left the cabin. He stood there cold and palsied. His nervous system was short-circuited, and when he moved toward the corridor his actions seemed erratic and exaggerated.

He entered the cabin with his heart trip-hammering and finding it difficult to suck enough air into his lungs. He assumed the expression he used in poker when he got aces back-to-back in five-card stud.

TURK and Pop sat at the table playing black-jack. Thelma stood watching, her thighs pressed against the table edge. They all looked up. Turk cleared his throat, said, "You look lousy, Red. Pour him a snort, Thelma."

She poured a good three ounces into a water glass. Blasco took it, drained it with a jerk of his head. He held out the glass and was surprised at the steadiness of it, then put it down quickly.

Thelma went to the radio and switched it on. It hummed and squealed; then hot rhumba music flooded the cabin. She tuned it out and brought in a dreamy waltz played with a lot of strings and muted brass.

"Dance me around, Red," she suggested.

Blasco combed back his hair with spread fingers. Turk looked up, smiled affably now that he had a cozy out. "Go on!" he urged. "Take your mind off your troubles."

He took her into his arms and danced off woodenly. She jammed so tight against him that their knees rubbed and her hair was like wire against his cheek. She whispered, "Relax!"

He couldn't. But he drooped his shoulders in a sloppy slouch and shortened his strides. He twirled her around and saw that Pop and Turk were absorbed in the game, the old man having four cards up and chortling happily. Blasco reversed, studied the door handle, made a mental note not to forget to step over the raised threshold. He backed her toward the door and felt her go stiff.

The music ended when they were ten feet from the door. There wasn't anything to do but break apart. They did so shakily. He saw the point of her tongue race around her lips. The announcer was saying that someone-or-other was going to do the vocalizing on the next number.

Turk's surprised voice came explosively. "Hey, kid!" he bawled. "What'cha doin' out of bed?"

Blasco wheeled around. The little girl stood in the doorway to the cabin corridor. She wore blue flannel pajamas with a big NF on the left breast. Her brown hair was disordered, her brown eyes misty-soft with sleepiness. She rubbed her chin and looked around shyly, her lower lip thrust out defiantly.

Her eyes opened wide and enormous when they focused on Blasco. Her mouth made a big O, then wreathed in a smile.

"Daddy!" she screamed. "Oh, Daddy!"

Terror was a sudden tempest in his chest, goosepimpling his flesh and paralyzing his nervous system. The child raced toward him, arms outstretched. No one moved; no one spoke. Turk sat spellbound, his mouth foolishly agape. The old man sat studying his bony hands.

The power to move came warm and tingling to his body. He sidestepped behind Thelma and wrapped his right hand around her neck. She stood like a soldier at attention, heels and knees together, palms pressed against thighs.

Nancy Fleming threw her arms around her

father's knees and buried her face into the backs of them. She began to cry. He said, "I'll break her neck, Turk. Before God, I will."

Turk sat panting for breath, and slobber flew from his fat lips. The old man rocked gently from side to side, making a choking sound.

"Nancy," Blasco said. "Piggy-back, Nancy, piggy-back."

Sniffling, she said, "Yes, Daddy."

She tried to climb up, couldn't make it. He went down slow on bending knees, sliding his arm across Thelma and hugging her around the thighs. Nancy climbed up, soft arms circling his neck and her bare heels digging into his hip bones. He straightened up. Thelma didn't move. But as he moved his arm up again, he felt the pulsating flutter of her heart.

He backstepped, dragging her along with him. His free hand found the door handle. He twisted it, shoved. He remembered the raised threshold just in time. He stepped back over it as he gave Thelma a shove forward. He hurled the door closed.

Inky blackness enveloped him. He couldn't see a thing. Turk! What if he shot through the door? He sidestepped quickly, felt his way along the deckhouse. They'd extinguish the lantern before they came out; he felt reasonably sure of that. They, too, would be momentarily blinded. That might help him, and it might not.

His vision improved. He made his way toward the stern. He saw a fat barrel atop a wooden platform beside the rail. It gave him an idea. He shoved it. It was heavy, probably filled with sand. He gave it all he had. It tumbled over the rail and vanished. The spanking splash took a long time in coming.

He spun and saw an open hatch with a ladder top sticking up over the edge of it. Too risky, he decided, knowing nothing about ships. He ran to the rear of the deckhouse. With sort of an electric shock he realized that Nancy was crying hysterically, shrill and loud. He said, "Hush, honey, hush!"

She couldn't. He tripped over a pile of loose canvas. He swung his daughter down and clapped a hand over her mouth. In the pale moonlight her eyes were liquid brown and tears came from them in a steady scream.

"Close your eyes, honey!" he said, voice low.

She closed her eyes so hard her forehead wrinkled. He started to tremble as if struck by a chill, and the courage went out of him. Her eyes flew open.

"Again, honey," he said.

She closed her eyes again. He slugged her on the right side of the head, caught her before she fell and hugged her small body hard

against his chest. He stroked her hair, his throat working. Then he laid her unconscious body against the deckhouse and covered her with a piece of canvas.

He wormed his shoes off, rose on tiptoes and grabbed the edge of the roof. Pulling himself up warily, he inched forward, flat against the metal roof.

He heard the shuffle of shoes on deck. "If the cops saw the light we're sunk," Turk said.

"You got a fall guy," said Thelma bitterly. "The kid's old man. That tears it; it really does. What if they'd found—"

"Damn you, shut up!" said Turk savagely.

THE ROOF was cold. He inched forward and stuck his head over the doorway just as the old man came out. Pop had a double-barreled shotgun. He was scared silly. He propped the shotgun against the deckhouse and took out a pint of whiskey.

The man on the roof waited until the old man stowed the bottle. Then he dropped. It was quick and easy, and he didn't make a sound. He stepped over the body of the old man, shotgun in hand. Both hammers were back. He slipped his index finger across the triggers.

He peered out around the corner of the deckhouse. Turk was a shadowy bulk against the rail some twenty feet away. Turk said, "Where the hell'd he swim to?"

"Turk!"

The big man wheeled around whipping the automatic toward the corner of the deckhouse. He fired.

The shotgun thundered in reply, twice. He could tell by the jolting recoil that it was loaded with slugs. Turk went down and the automatic skidded chatteringly across the deck. The redhead dashed out and scooped it up. Turk was dead.

He ran to the back of the deckhouse and uncovered Nancy. She was still unconscious. He began to stroke her forehead.

"Hey, Red!" Thelma's voice sounded faint and far-away, but she was only ten feet beyond Turk, face down with arms outstretched. She coughed rackingly. "That did it, Red. That did it."

He turned her over gently. "I didn't see you," he said. "Honest to God, I didn't see you at all."

"I caught a lungful," she said. "Through the back." She laughed. "Mother love—hell! They ought to give the fathers a hand. What a gent! You even gave that louse Turk a break."

"Is there a first aid kit anywhere around?" he asked.

"Skip it! This is it, Red, this is it. It'll hand the devil a laugh when I blow in wearing slacks and a sweater and a ding-dong hairdo."

"Please," he said. "Please, Thelma. I want you to know I would have given you every break in the world."

"You're quite a lad," she said. "You played the big time with an all star cast. How'd you get the wound?"

"Police surgeon," he said. "If I got by the doc, I'd have a chance. They knew you were out here. Tire marks by the dock. If I didn't make contact with the kidnappers, I was going to swim out."

"And depend on the police radio description to get you by."

"Yes. That stickup gave me my chance. The description of the killer was a natural. It could almost have been me. Only the commissioner was in on it. Cops almost trapped me at the doc's. I was scared silly."

"The kid looks like her mother, Red. She must be quite a lady."

"Yes," he said.

"Why'd the commissioner let you do it?"

"War training. I was a Ranger. I had a good chance. And then, I matched that description."

She lifted a bloodless hand. "Kiss it," she said, her voice a hushed whisper. "Like—like I was a princess in an ivory tower."

He did so. Her hand suddenly became limp and heavy and he heard a queer rattle deep in her throat.

"Daddy!" Nancy's fear-laced voice snapped him out of his reverie. He picked her up gently and held her tight. She snuggled her face into the hollow of his shoulder and began to stroke his face.

"Why, Daddy," she sniffled, "you're crying, too."

"Yeah," he admitted in a choked voice. "Sometimes when you see a person the way they might have been, it makes you feel bad inside."

ODDITIES IN CRIME

By SCHWARTZ and JAKOBSSON

In London, some years ago, periuked and powdered Judge Sir Ernest Wild requested that the complainant in the case under consideration step forward—and promptly lost his judicial poise.

Into the awed silence of the court broke a man's happy voice, "Y'r honor, I've always been pretty lucky. . . ."

The gent who was putting up the kick was also serving as a juror, trying his own case!

Fifty-four years ago, come this August 10th, Windsor Dudley Cecil Hambrough, Scottish student, was found shot to death on a hunting trip. His friend and insurance beneficiary, Alfred Monson, was tried for murder—and the court, in a unique decision, left the case open, not convicting Monson, because of insufficient evidence, but declaring him subject to rearrest and trial at a moment's notice, for as long as he lived.

Monson was never tried again. But on August 10, each year, in leading Scottish newspapers, appeared a personal notice: "In memory of our dear son, Windsor Dudley Cecil Hambrough, murdered. 'Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. . . ."

According to F.B.I. records, the most dangerous criminal America ever produced was a gent of whom you've probably never heard, one Charlie Chapman. J. Edgar Hoover claims that compared to him most publicized hoodlums, even Dillinger, were just Tyros. A successful, honest contractor, he'd amassed a fortune when he decided to turn bandit. Then he quickly piled up a total of more than 150 years in jail terms—of which he served only twenty-nine months! He finally lost his last battle, and paid with his life, in 1942.

To Marie Leveaux, notorious voodoo queen of New Orleans just before the turn of the century, belongs the dubious distinction of getting away with murder—literally in the shadow of the gallows. Antoine Cambre, scion of a wealthy Louisiana family, was about to be hanged for murder. Friends and relatives vainly begged him to commit suicide in order to avoid disgrace, finally appealed to Marie, who got herself appointed to minister to the doomed man's last wants—and baked him a poisoned cake. Cambre dropped dead just before he reached the noose! Marie never paid the penalty. She died a ripe old witch.

ROPE ENOUGH FOR TWO!

CHAPTER ONE

Joey and the Twenty G's

JOEY PASCHAL held firmly to the arm of his stout companion. The desk clerk, who was named Archie Slab and looked it, goggled his eyes, but Joey frowned, shaking his head and took the stout man to the elevator. They went up to the fourth floor and Joey took the key and opened 402.

It was a good-sized room with two beds, a comfortable chair, a small radio and the air of being lived in permanently which few mid-town hotel rooms can boast. Joey put Julius Sonenberg on the bed. The fat man spread his arms and sighed. It was a job to take off his shoes and coat and pants.

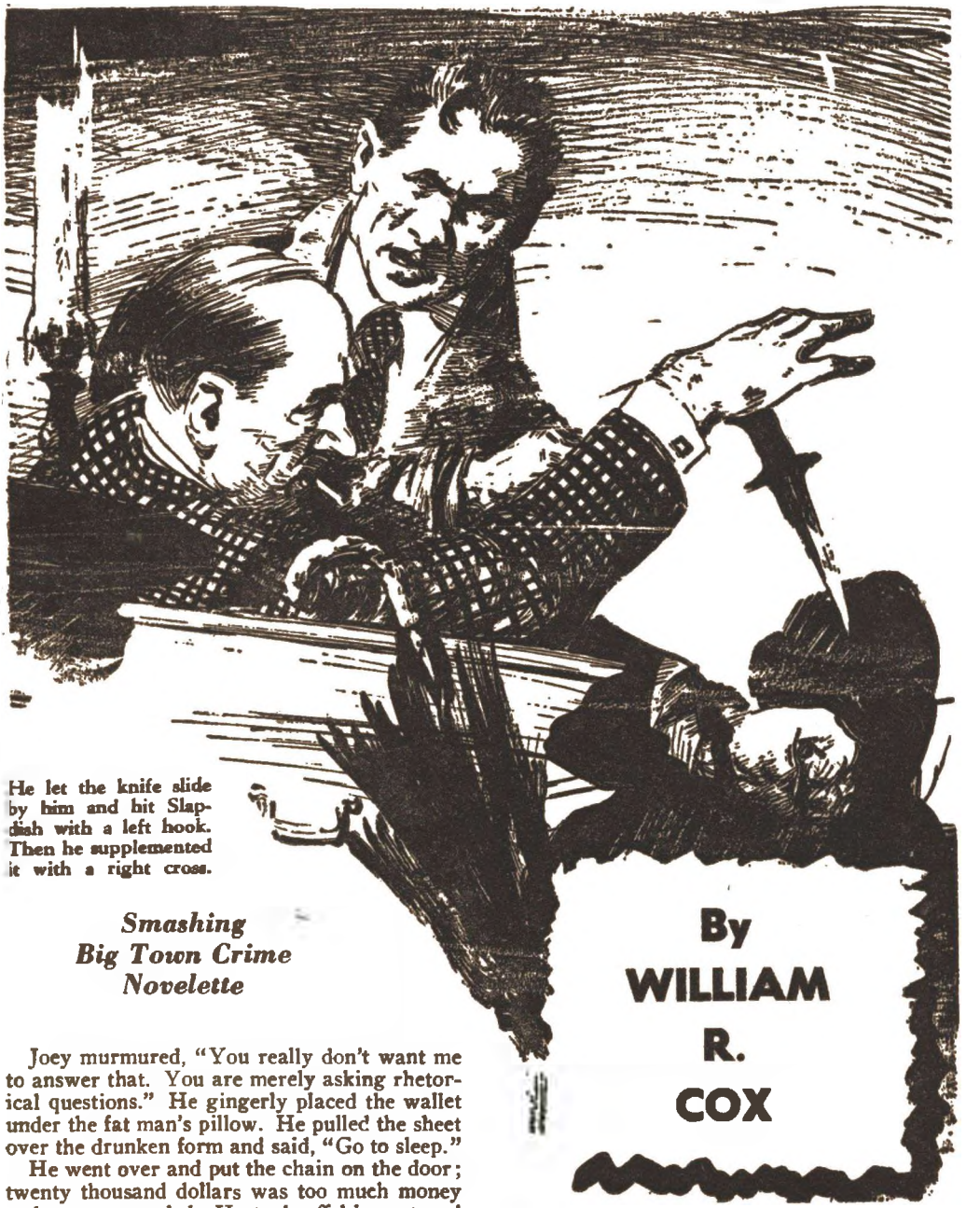
As he tried to hang up the pants, Joey saw the wallet slip to the floor. He closed one eye and stared. Joey was pretty drunk, too; not as drunk as Julius Sonenberg, but pretty drunk. He bent and managed to pick up the wallet. It was so fat with money that it was almost obscene. There was a snapshot of a blonde woman, much younger than Sonenberg. Joey stared at the snapshot and felt a little sick, and not from liquor, either.

Unexpectedly, the fat man said from the bed, "That's Isobel. That's my wife. I was tellin' you 'bout her, wasn't I?"

Joey said, "Never mind that. Get some sleep, pal."

Sonenberg's eyes did not focus, but his voice was clear enough. "Got to talk to someone. See all th' money? Twenny thousand damn' dollars. Won it all thish afternoon. What good is it?"

"The only way I keep the lieutenant off you, I sell him suicide," Sam Gill said. "It wasn't suicide. You know it. I know it. But, Paschal, you work on this case. Because if someone starts singing about that twenty G's—brother, it's your hide!"



He let the knife slide by him and hit Slapdash with a left hook. Then he supplemented it with a right cross.

Smashing Big Town Crime Novelette

By WILLIAM R. COX

Joey murmured, "You really don't want me to answer that. You are merely asking rhetorical questions." He gingerly placed the wallet under the fat man's pillow. He pulled the sheet over the drunken form and said, "Go to sleep."

He went over and put the chain on the door; twenty thousand dollars was too much money to leave unguarded. He took off his coat and pants and shirt. He yawned. He was just

drunk enough to stick around and guard Julius Sonenberg and his wealth.

He was a blond young man with blue eyes now a little clouded and shoulders like a prize fighter—which he had been—but not a very good prize fighter, he was the first to admit. He had a couple of bullet scars gained in the war. He stared at the man on the bed in some perplexity.

Sonenberg said in his light, clear voice, "Married her when she was twenny. Too young. I'm too old. Isobel don't mean any harm. She just can't help herself. Drinks too much, sees a younger fella. . . . I'm too old for her. It ain't the money. Hell, I'm a big-timer, ain't I? She gets the dough. Got the house, ain't she? Cadillac convertible. All for Isobel. . . ."

Joey said, "Okay, pal, catch a bit of shut-eye, huh?"

Sonenberg said, "So she throws me out, I got this fine li'l room. I oughta be happy, with a room in Tavern House, m' own li'l radio, old guy like me. What I want with young gals, huh? Let 'er have fun. I don't mind what she does."

He sat up, his sparse hair on end where the pillow had ruffled it, his brown eyes popping, glaring at Joey. He said in a different voice, "But no divorce, y' unnastand? I won't hold still for that. She's my wife, see? And while I'm alive, buddy, she is goin' to be my wife."

Joey said soothingly, "Sure, pal. Go to sleep." He gently pressed the older man back in the bed. The wildly staring eyes, finding no opposition, became calm. Joey doused the light.

"No divorce," Sonenberg muttered. "Never . . . never . . . never. . . ." He snored gently, suddenly, his mouth still half open. The light from across the court struck past the curtain, which was half-raised to the height of the opened lower sash of the window. Joey started to get up and pull it down, to keep the reflected light off the man's face, but desisted.

He fell back on the pillow, staring at the ceiling. It was a hell of a mess, all right, but if he had not yanked Julius Sonenberg away from Damon Teal and Moe Slapdish, there would have been no twenty thousand dollars—and worse might have happened. Sonenberg had been drunk before the last race. Teal and Slapdish had lost money to him through their book.

Joey's eyes closed. Try as he might, he could not stay awake. He struggled, fought, then succumbed to that sternest of all masters, sleep.

There was a bad dream in there some place, probably because he had fought sleep. It doesn't pay to fight the old master. Bad dreams are your reward. He thought that was it, but he couldn't be sure, and when he awoke, sweating, his first impression was of something desperately wrong, something urgent which could not be remedied, but which was dangerous. He had the strong presentiment of danger of war days, when a night attack was imminent and you could actually smell the Japs coming. . . .

HE MANAGED to get fully awake and the first thing he noticed was the window-shade. It was askew. It was still up, but it was not straight. It had been straight when he went asleep, because it was one of the things he had noticed in the room, and his mind was like that: photographic about some details, not everything, but some things. The windowshade was one of those things.

He whirled up on the edge of the bed, snapping on a lamp. The glow spread in the prosiac, rather homey big room. The Tavern House was a hotel old enough to have spacious rooms but new enough to have good plumbing. He got to his feet, staring about the room. He was cold sober now and knew that he should never have stayed here, should have called a bellhop to put Sonenberg to bed, should have put the twenty thousand dollars downstairs in the safe with Archie holding the bag for it.

The chain was off the door. That was the first tip-off after the window shade. The nameless fear in him grew with the sight of that dangling chain. He stabbed at the switch to put on the bright ceiling light.

Then he thought of the half-opened window. He stared at his watch; it was four in the morning. He went to the window and softly closed it. He drew the shade, straightening it. He picked up his shirt and carefully used the tail to wipe the hard surfaces around the window.

Only then did he go to the bed. He stood staring down at the stout man. There was a tumbler half full of liquid on the night table. The odor of peach pit was so strong that Joey retched a little, reaching for his pants.

Julius Sonenberg did not look more attractive in death. Cyanide tastes very hot and bad, they say, and the fat features were contorted. Joey put his hand under the pillow with some reluctance, but he had to make sure. He searched very carefully, all around.

He wiped around the room, but that wasn't any good, either, he knew. Fingerprints or no, Archie Slab knew he was up here.

He put on his shirt and tie. He looked at himself in the mirror and he was not hung over. He merely looked a little tired. He sat down to think.

Someone had been very smart. This person had entered, getting Julius to let him in somehow or other, and had pulled the shade. Julius, with that whiskey taste in his mouth, had

probably begged for the water. Joey could stand some right now. He went into the bathroom. There was another glass but he drank out of the tap. Julius must have really sucked it down.

Someone had killed a couple of birds with one stone. Twenty thousand dollars was a nice haul. And Julius could never squawk.

There might even be a third bird, except that Joey was not having any of that. He thought it all out, shrugging into his coat. He could get out, maybe, with the help of his friends at the hotel and frame an alibi. But in the end Sam Gill would be around, and he would have to come clean. There was nothing to be done about Sam Gill, no matter what anyone said. Sam was honest and he was all cop.

Joey picked up the phone. Archie Slab himself answered. Joey said easily, "Anyone been in looking for me—or for Sonenberg?"

Archie Slab said in his high, nervous voice, "You have a terrible nerve, Paschal. Here you've been following poor Mr. Sonenberg for a week, trying to get evidence against him for Mrs. Sonenberg and now you turn up sleeping with him! I've a good notion to tell on you, Paschal. honest I have. Private detectives! Such *crooks.*"

Joey said patiently, "I hear you chirping, Archie. Now will you get me Murray Hill 7-5642?"

"You can't do these things in Tavern House, I tell you," scolded the desk clerk. "Just because Mrs. Sonenberg is beautiful and everyone—"

Joey said. "That was Sam Gill's private number I gave you."

Archie Slab said, "Oh! Oh! Paschal . . . . something is *wrong*. I'll lose my *job*."

"Dial the number, pretty boy," said Joey. "And the hell with your job. Hurry!"

The dial tone came through as the night clerk feverishly rang the number. The bell rang several times, then a sleepy voice grumbled, "Gill talking. It better be important."

Joey said, "Paschal speaking from Tavern House, Room 402. Jump over, will you, Gill?"

"Paschal? The private eye?"

Joey said, "Please, Gill, that is from motion pictures. I am not a movie dick. I am not tough, Gill. I'm scared."

"A murder?" Gill was coming awake; it was in his voice.

Joey said plaintively, "Would I be calling you to play charades?"

SAM GILL was a large man with flat feet and a round body like a water boiler and short legs. He wore double-breasted blue suits and gray felt hats winter and summer. His eyes were chilly gray and his mouth was hard. He said, "I am just a sergeant. The lieutenant was all for taking you downtown and really giving it to you. It could cost me, sticking up for you, a shamus."

Joey said, "I wish you would stop calling me by those names. I am a private operator. Divorces, nice and quiet. Missing persons found, maybe. Bad debts collected. Papers served. I am a peaceful detective."

Gill said, "You got a big, fat corpse, peaceful detective that you are."

Joey nodded, holding his head in his hands. It was seven o'clock and the metropolitan police are nothing if not thorough. He felt as though a vacuum cleaner had gone through his head. He said, "No fingerprints but mine. Nobody seen going or coming. And nobody knew he had the wad of cash except Teal, Moe Slapdish and me."

"Teal and Slapdish got alibis," said Gill. "They'd have an alibi on Judgment Day. The thing is, can you crack it?"

Joey said, "Why should I crack it? You don't think Julius was dumb enough to open the door and let those jokers in his room, do you?"

Gill said, "Well—how drunk was he?"

Joey thought that over. Then he said, "Like I say, Gill, I carry a license, it's just to make a living. I go to Fordham nights, when I get a chance to attend classes. Some day I hope to be a lawyer. Julius was pretty drunk. I had a few with him, decided it was a good idea to take care of him. I fell asleep and Julius—got some poison."

"The only way I keep the lieutenant off you, I sell him suicide." Sam Gill lit a cigarette, his face harder than ever. "But it wasn't suicide. You know it. I know it. The lieutenant don't know about the twenty G's, because I thought why complicate matters now? But, Paschal, let me tell you something. You better drop everything else and work on this case. Because if you don't give me a lot of help and somebody starts singing about that twenty thousand frogskins—brother, it's your hide."

Joey said, "I see. The sergeant would like to be a lieutenant, huh?"

Sam Gill shoved a careful fifteen cents across the counter of the side street lunch wagon to pay for his sinkers and coffee. "Don't try to figure it out. I'm giving you a break. Make something out of it and we can do business around midtown. Muff it—and see what it gets you."

The big detective lumbered out. Joey sat and finished his coffee. His mind was beginning to work—slowly, but with some degree of efficiency, he hoped. He paid for his coffee and went out of the lunch wagon.

He walked toward Broadway. He saw the lights of Tavern House, but did not go near

the hotel. He saw a cab cruising the curb at the Avenue of the Americas and got into it.

He got off at Grand Central and went down to a ticket window and bought a one-way to Greenwich. He went to the gate and just made the milk train. He got on and walked through to the smoker. The man who was following him stayed a car behind.

There was not much traffic going out to the suburbs at that hour. The detective in the next car must have been a rookie, for he busied himself playing that he was not watching Joey, staring out the window, walking back for water, otherwise making himself conspicuous by assumed nonchalance.

When Joey dropped off at 125th Street, the detective was immersed in the morning paper, serene in the belief that his quarry was bound for Greenwich.

CHAPTER TWO

Tinhorn Trouble

THE SUBWAY went downtown swiftly, and Joey came up at Times Square, took the shuttle and got another train down to 14th Street. He hit the streets at eight-thirty and walked past the old home of Will Porter and thought how that immortal had been in jail, and how Joey Paschal could easily emulate him.

The apartment was an old one, refurnished, and painted like a worn-out hag. He pressed a button and the buzzer worked. He went into a narrow hall and started up a flight of stairs. The sun was shining outdoors and his eyes were blinded in the darkness. He saw a man coming down and pressed against the wall, unable to distinguish a thing about the descending person.

He was on the first landing when it occurred to him that the shape of the man going down the stairs was familiar. He turned sharply to have a look. There was no one in the hall below.

Joey rubbed his eyes. Then he went quietly on down the hall on the second floor of the apartment. The man, he knew, had not been an acquaintance. He was another policeman; he had the look of the police. He was probably waiting in the hall below to trail whoever came out of apartment number 206.

Joey listened outside the door. Fortunately, he had not pressed the bell for this apartment, knowing any bell would get him in. He did not hear any sound. He took a key from his pocket and gingerly used it in the door. He went in and closed the door behind him, making no noise at all.

The blonde woman stood against the far wall, her hands spread a little, as though to brace herself for further shock. She had large round brown eyes and she had not washed off all the shadow she habitually applied. Her lips were newly made up, with that downward, full curve which makes so many modern women seem sullen, unhappy. Her figure, beneath the robe, was ample. She was exceptionally beautiful, except for the sulkiness.

She said, "I thought it was you." Her voice was without emotion.

Joey said, "Hello, Isobel. I guess you've heard about Julius."

She said, "You saw the cop, didn't you?"

Joey sat down on the couch, his back to the windows. He said, "A hell of a thing, isn't it, Isobel? Poison. Pretty bad, huh?"

"The only thing bad about it is the cops," she said, still without emotion. "He had insurance. He had a bank account."

Joey said slowly, "He had twenty thousand dollars."

Mrs. Sonenberg stared at him. "No more than that? Why, he had at least a hundred thousand last year. He played those horses too much. I always told him, damn him. Damon Teal and Moe Slapdish got him, I'll bet."

Joey said, "Well, you can take it away from them."

She pulled the robe tighter about her lovely figure. She said, "You're a character. Where do you come into this? You never did get me any evidence. You kept saying Julius slept with a whiskey bottle. Just why are you here, Joey? Do I owe you anything?"

"No, my job ended last night—in a glass of poison," said Joey. "You don't owe me a thing. I just thought I'd drop around and talk about Julius."

She came away from the wall and reached for a cigarette. She flicked the lighter at its end and inhaled. She said, "It's been nice knowing you, Joey. This is all pretty much of a shock. But one thing I know: you and I, we haven't got a thing in common. We never had. And I don't want to talk about Julius. It was a mistake marrying him. He wouldn't divorce me and I hated him for that. Now he's dead; let him be dead. And so-long, Joey."

"Sure," nodded Joey. "You don't need a detective—now." He got up and wandered about the apartment, staring at each object of furniture as though he had never seen it before. He went into the bedroom, unchallenged by the woman. He came out and she was sitting down, smoking, staring out the window. He said, "Why did you want to divorce him? To get a money settlement?"

She said, "You heard me, Joey. It's all over. Take a powder, like a good boy. You don't want any trouble."

He looked at her, and she was soberly serious and not unfriendly. He nodded.

"You're okay, Isobel. I'll be seeing you around."

He went out of the apartment. He closed the door behind him very silently and slid to the back stairs. He hesitated, then went up to the roof. He thought the alley between the two houses was narrow enough. He went back, pulled his hat hard down on his head, bent his knees, leaped lightly. He got over without making a noise, which was important.

He went down the fire escape of the next house and hesitated, waiting for a detective to show his head. None did, so he dropped to earth and went back to the 14th Street station, took a train uptown and got off at Grand Central.

It was noon when he drifted into Lubin's. The delicatessen-restaurant was full of people. Joey knew most of the Broadway crowd. The columnists were his friends. Max Nogrody, the big lawyer, was interested in Joey's attempt to study for the bar. Lubin himself had helped Joey get business from time to time. The booths in the rear where the gamblers and musicians and actors hung out were populated with his acquaintances.

He paused beside Damon Teal, a lean man with the smooth, contained features of a preacher—or a confidence man. Teal wore the most conservative clothing at midtown and his cravats were a marvel of quiet elegance. His shoes were always shined, even at the track. He was a beau, and very proud of it. He was in his middle forties and had never worked a day in his life.

Opposite Teal sat Moe Slapdish, who resembled a mattress badly tied for storage. The ill-assorted pair shared a book on the horses, and sometimes banked crap games, poker games, anything to make a lazy dollar, Joey well knew.

Teal said, "Sit down, Joey. We got troubles."

"Yeah," said Joey. He sat next to Slapdish, where he could watch Teal. "We really have. You'll never get back your twenty grand from Julius."

"And what about you, getting on that lush with him?" asked Teal gently. "You're supposed to be the law, sorta, aren't you? And there you are, drunk with this gee you are supposed to be watching for his storm and strife."

Joey said, "Stop talking like motion pictures! I swear, everyone is doing it. And who told you I was supposed to be watching Julius?"

"You did, when you were drunk," said Teal calmly. "Out at the track. When you were counting that twenty grand to make sure we did not cheat your old pal, Julius. Or maybe it was your old pal's wife you were worrying about?"

Joey waited a moment. Then he said softly, "I sat down here to be friendly. Maybe I made a mistake?"

Damon Teal's face had not changed. "All I know is that you were hired by Sonenberg's double-crossing frau to tail him and get divorce evidence. Never mind how I know. Then you turn the poor devil up for stiff in the Tavern House and Sam Gill buys you off with a cock and bull about suicide. With twenty G's of our money he is killing himself? Julius? That I will not ever believe, Joey."

The air in Lubin's seemed thicker. Joey said, "So?"

Teal said, "We just want our cut. You can deal it to us any way you want. But, Joey, deal us in. Twenty thousand is too much. We can't afford it. Julius would have put it back, of course. But you do not bet on the dogs."

Joey said, "I think I see what you mean. You think I—"

"Don't say it," Teal interrupted. "There are cops all over the midtown sector. And you don't want to start anything, because if you should, there would be a squawk that would throw you in the pokey and keep you there from now until they bounced that switch on you."

Joey said, "Are you sure you can afford it, Damon?"

"I can't afford to lose twenty thousand," said Teal grimly.

Joey said dismally, "I see what you mean." He got up and looked down at the two. Moe Slapdish was a fat man, almost as fat as Julius Sonenberg had been. But Moe was hard where Julius had been soft. Moe's eyes, pig-like, hated most people and right now they were measuring Joey Paschal. It was reported privately that Moe carried a knife in his sock, a razor in his vest and a gun under his armpit, and that the fat man would use all three to gain a point he considered worth the candle. Joey said, "I'll be seeing you. I hope not."

He went out of Lubin's with no word for his friends. He had a heap of thinking to do and again a detective was on his trail. He saw the man stop for a light, signal to another. The big wheels of the world's greatest detective force were grinding in full form again. Joey felt like something being passed off as hamburger steak.

BY NIGHTFALL Joey Paschal was as haggard as Broadway, and without the lights to make a fake of it. He went into the side street lunchroom and Sam Gill was waiting for him. He sat down and spread his hands, hunching his shoulders. "I've got nothing, absolutely nothing."

The big detective said stonily, "You've

been playing games with the boys, they tell me. In and out of Grand Central. Funny business down at Mrs. Sonenberg's."

"I didn't like being followed," said Joey. "But I'm getting used to it. Do these shadows sleep with me, too? Because I have got to sleep."

"Can you?" asked Gill drily. "There is twenty thousand in cash floating around midtown in the kick of a killer. If you don't turn it in pretty soon, the lieutenant will want a patsy. And you'd make a good one, you and your charades with the dead man's wife."

Joey said, "She's a client—or was . . ."

"Sure, I know," nodded Gill. "A client. We investigated the alibis of Teal and Slapdish. They were in a Turkish bath on 46th Street. Either of them, or both maybe, could have slipped out and back, but not with their clothes on, the man says. On account of in this place they take a ticket and lock up your clothing and you don't get it back until you leave. They didn't get it back, the man says. On Mrs. Sonenberg we did better. She claims she did not leave her apartment, but nobody can corroborate that. In other words, Mrs. S. has not got an alibi."

Joey said wearily, "But none of those three was seen in the Tavern House, nor even near it. And I was there, and whoever came in, I didn't see him—or her—either."

"That is right," said Gill. "Archie Slab can see the entire lobby from behind that desk and the little sissy is far too timid to leave his post against orders. He has instructions from the manager to watch everyone going in or out of Tavern House. Midtown hotel managers do not take chances of anything going on of which they are not aware, you know. They want their cut, too!"

Joey thought about Teal and Slapdish and their cut of Sonenberg's twenty thousand dollars. He said, "What time did Julius die, do you know?"

"The medical examiner puts it at about two o'clock, from the contents of his stomach. They can't be sure, and that won't go for evidence," said Gill. "But say between one and four."

"I kept dreaming," Joey said half to himself. "The drinking in the afternoon seemed a good way to keep in touch with Julius, the poor guy. He was unhappy about Isobel. He wasn't interested in other women, but he wouldn't divorce her. Isobel wasn't interested in getting married again, either, I don't think. The whole thing was bad, him being so much older. But it still doesn't make sense, Gill."

"That missing twenty thousand makes sense," said Gill sharply. "If I turn that up to the lieutenant, you're a gone goose."

"Can't you take these cops off my tail?" Joey asked plaintively. "I might get some place without plainclothes men in my beard."

"I didn't put them there," said Gill grimly. "The lieutenant did. You better get some action. He won't be patient much longer."

Joey said, "But I'm not a cop, I tell you. This is not my racket."

"You had better make it yours," said Gill flatly. He put down fifteen cents and walked out.

Joey waited five minutes, then went up 47th Street to the Tavern House. It was almost eight o'clock and Archie Slab was in the office, getting ready to take over for the night.

Archie said, "Joey, you look *rough*. Why don't you go upstairs and take a nap? Really, Joey, you look *desolate*."

Joey said, "Look, sonny boy. Are you positively certain no one came through this lobby last night who resembled Damon Teal or Moe Slapdish—or anyone who could have been hired by them?"

Archie's eyes rolled in his head. "Please, the police have been all though that, all *through* it."

"Nor Isobel Sonenberg?" He gave up hopelessly. Isobel might have hired anyone, even someone who dwelt in the hotel and could enter without suspicion.

He said, "Slip me the pass key, Archie. I have to get in that room."

The desk clerk said, horrified, "Why the police have *sealed* that room. *Nobody* can go in it. Not even the *manager*." Archie was outdoing himself. His hands flung around, making incredible gestures. There was no use arguing with Archie when he was like this, Joey knew.

He went out of the office and back to the men's room. After a moment he found the fire door at the rear of the lobby. There were stairs, of course.

He went patiently up to 402. They had taken the guard off, but there was a little wire seal on the door, all right. Joey shrugged and went upstairs and tried a skeleton key on 502, hoping the room was empty, but so desperate now that he knew he would have to make a try to bluff it though. He opened the door and staggered in, essaying a small hiccup in case he needed to play drunk.

But Room 502 was empty. Joey closed the door and crossed to the window which was directly above the window of 402. He opened it, leaned out and stared down.

The window of 402 was half open, the way it had been when Joey had gone asleep the previous night. There was no light coming from 402.

Joey went back inside, tore the bed covers from the beds. It was a risky thing, a dangerous thing to do, with the windows across the court staring like large, rectangular orbs, but he had to do it. There was something very

wrong, and he either had to find out what the score was or give up and go to jail—and maybe to the chair for murder if Sam Gill was vindictive enough to send him.

HE TIED the sheets together and tugged a bed to the window, where he jammed it tightly. He looped the end of the sheet-rope around the bedstead. He eased himself out of the window and started down, hand over hand, trying to make it quick as possible. He dangled, swaying, in the opening of the window of Room 402, caught at the sill, balanced himself. He let go of one end of the sheets he had fashioned together and pulled, and the other end whistled down the air shaft. He hauled it into Room 402.

He sat for a moment, collecting his senses. He was panting a little, mainly from fear that he had been seen from across the court. Then he pulled down the shade and turned on the lights.

The cops had searched the room, photographed it, dusted it for fingerprints. Yet there was something wrong.

He walked around aimlessly for a moment. He had no experience in searching for lost things. He only knew that something very important had been lost.

After all, the police had not been searching for any particular object. The glass containing the poison was obvious, on the night table. There had been no reason to tear the walls down looking for anything.

Joey went to the side of the bed on which Julius Sonenberg had died. He stood staring down at it, trying to remember everything that had happened. He had taken the fat wallet, he knew, and placed it under Sonenberg's pillow. And the murderer had got the money. . . . Or had he?

Supposing the murderer had not got the money? It changed everything, and provided the key for which Joey had prayed.

He got down on his hands and knees and looked under the bed. Then he realized that they had certainly taken the bed apart. He arose, dusting at his knees. He had been dreaming, he remembered, and things had been all wrong, with people moving about. He shivered. That was when Julius had been killed by the silent, whispering murderer who dared to hand him cyanide while Joey slept in the other bed, tossing, dreaming. . . .

But supposing Julius had arisen in his drunken stupor? Drunks did strange things—things they could not recall the next day.

Joey said aloud, "That could be it." He stood in the center of the room, staring about. The police had looked everywhere, of course. Everywhere any ordinary object could be supposed to have been placed.

He tried to put himself in Sonenberg's place: supine, drunken, yet eager to hide the money—posibly before he had let in the murderer? The bed table? Joey pounced.

It had been so close to the death potion! The killer had almost put his hand on it.

The little radio had never been noticed, nor thought of as a place of concealment. Yet its back was loose.

Joey exhaled sharply The fat wallet came into his hand. He counted the money mechanically. Twenty one-thousand dollar bills.

Julius must have been half-lucid, felt the money under his pillow, quickly put it where his nocturnal, secretive visitor could not find it. That had not prevented Julius from dying, however.

Who, then, had wanted the fat man dead? His wife, Isobel. Anyone else?

Joey mechanically put the wallet in his pocket and picked up his rope of sheets. He started for the door, remembered the seal of the police department. It was, however, no time to quibble. He stuffed the sheets into the closet, now empty of Sonenberg's possessions, and worked the latch on the door.

At that moment a key was inserted on the outside and a firm hand turned the knob in Joey's grasp, so that his own grip slid off, his hand dropped nervelessly to his side. He shrank back to the side of the door, scowling in the dark, the wallet with its bundle of money burning in his pocket.

The door sprang open. Joey crouched, his fists doubled. The door closed. Sam Gill reached out and turned on a light.

Joey said, "Hello, Gill."

The big detective swung around, one hand going to his hip pocket, his face red, his eyebrows going up into the shadow of his hat brim. Then he relaxed, slowly, as though forcing each muscle to his bidding. He said quietly, "This is a bad spot for you, Paschal. You've got no right here."

"Your're so right," added Joey. "But, on the other hand, what are you doing in here, past that seal on the door?"

Sam Gill said, "I see we will have to talk things over. Sit down, Paschal." He had not taken his hand away from his hip, Joey noticed. Still, there was nothing to do but sit down in the chair facing the bed where Sonenberg had breathed his last.

CHAPTER THREE

Accessory After the Fact

THERE was danger in telling Gill everything, Joey decided. All the time he was glibly explaining how he had determined to search the room he was wondering at the timing which had sent the detective into Room 402 at the precise moment he was attempting

to leave. He finished, "Well, that's it. Just plain nothing."

"No twenty thousand dollars, for instance? You think the cops are dummies, to leave all that dough stached in a hotel room?" Gill's voice was harsh, accusing. "What was the real idea, Paschal? What's with you and the dame?"

Joey said carefully, "Dame? Where does a dame come in, Gill?"

"Isobel Sonenberg," Gill said flatly. "You know her pretty well, for a shamus just working for a client. You go in and out of her joint like a shadow."

Joey sighed. That would be from the report of the cop downtown. He said, "Isobel Sonenberg is just an ex-client of mine. That is all, brother."

Gill said, "You were taking twenty-five a day from her. You were tailing her husband. You practically crawl in bed with him and twenty grand. He wakes up dead and you are still walking around acting silly. Is that sensible? Does that make you look good?"

Joey said, "It certainly makes me look silly. But I did not kill Julius Sonenberg. In fact, I am now sure someone slipped me a Mickey Finn. I never could have slept through two callers."

Gill said, "You could sleep through—What was that? Two?"

Joey let it rest between them for a moment. Then he said, "Supposing two people came in this room. I have been doped; they know I'll sleep. The first one comes in, Julius knows. But he is suspicious. He hides the money; he throws it out the window for all I know. He's drunk."

Gill said, "Two people!"

"The second one, Julius trusts. He accepts a glass of water. He keels over dead. The second one either finds the twenty thousand dollars—or he doesn't. The trouble is, no one has been acting like he found twenty thousand," mused Joey. "Teal always threatening. Isobel stooging around. . . ." He began to think hard about another figure. He thought very hard. He remembered a host of inconsequential things. He stared at Sam Gill.

Gill said, "They gave you a pill. At the track, maybe? When you were slopping it up with Sonenberg and Teal and Slapdish?"

Joey said, "That was it. A slow pill, that would work about the time we got home. Any simple barbituate would do it to a drunk guy."

Gill said, "I believe that story could be sold, but it needs boosting."

"I can boost it," said Joey. "At least I think so. You see, I seldom get that drunk. I can't remember it all, but some things are returning to my memory."

"I've seen that happen under third degree," said Gill ominously.

Joey said, "Well, never mind that. The thing is, I'm not a guy—I don't do such things. . . ."

Gill said, "You did it this time. You put your foot right in it."

Joey got up off the chair and took a couple of paces across the room, passing the window. He reached out and tugged and the shade went up. He stared across the court. The room opposite was dark, but its window was wide open.

Joey said, "I'll tell you one thing. Someone was registered in this hotel who knew what was going on. In that room across the way. And they knew enough to lower the shades while they were in here, lest someone else see what went on. I think we had better go down and check on who had that room, Gill. It would help us plenty."

Gill said, "Uh-huh. Except that the room was rented over the phone and paid for by messenger and nobody ever showed up to claim it."

"You mean you already checked," said Joey disappointedly. Then he said, enlightened, "you were over there, watching, when I came down into this room."

"Yeah," said Gill.

"You—you suspect me of killing Sonenberg and doing away with the twenty thousand until I can pick it up at some later date," said Joey. "You've suspected me from the start."

"Yeah," said Gill.

Joey sat down on the chair again. The room spun around, then leveled off and to his relief his head was clear. In fact it seemed he could see things a little better, as though some cloud had vanished. He said slowly, "You've been giving me rope to hang myself—a pretty clever stunt, at that."

"You and the dame," said Gill. "Don't forget her. She inherits."

Joey did not forget Isobel. He pondered for a moment. "But you are still willing to give me a chance? You think I might have something which would turn in the real killer?"

"If you ain't him," said Gill grimly, "you're the logical one to find him."

Joey said, "Okay. I'll try one thing. It's been in my mind now, for a little while. If it doesn't work. . . ."

"Yeah," said Gill.

They went down, using the fire stairway and Sam Gill remained near the men's washroom, lounging against the wall like a weary beer barrel on legs. Joey went to a booth and made a couple of phone calls. When he came out Archie was staring at him reprovingly.

"Can't you ever go *home?* Or do you have a home?" demanded the night clerk. "I should think you'd move *into* the hotel, you're here so much."

"I'm meeting some people," said Joey. He bought some cigarettes and waited at the rear of the lobby. He thought things out and wondered if he were right. He wondered if Gill would really throw him in the pokey.

In a little while Damon Teal and Moe Slapdish came into the hotel. They saw Joey at once and came toward him. Teal said menacingly, "What about that message? Was it on the level? You got something? You better not be kidding around, chum. This is for real, you know."

Joey said, "Two tough little men!" Slapdish had his hand under his coat lapel and as Joey spoke he put another in his pocket. He was a fat menace, all right. Joey said, "All characters, everybody in the act. Look, there's Isobel now. She even parked the Cadillac Julius gave her in a hurry."

She was wearing a suit, and her cigarette was in a long holder which she trailed along. Joey thought she was not unlike that new girl in pictures, the slim one from the gangster shows. She stopped at the desk and Archie was scowling at her. They talked together.

Joey said, "Isobel Sonenberg, remember, Teal? What are you looking so tough about, Moe?"

Teal said, "Look, pal, we want that twenty G's and no conversation."

Joey said, "There are angles, my Broadway friend. Many angles."

THE WOMAN talked at the desk. Archie was fluttering his hands. Slapdish began to get that glazed, reddish look. Teal said, "I'm getting out of here in about five seconds, smart guy. And we want that dough, Paschal —or else!"

Joey said, "Look at Moe! He'd like to stick a knife in me. Or shoot me. I hear you are very tough, Moe. But I want to warn you—and your pal—you will get nothing but lumps from me." Slapdish gave way, warily, his jaw set.

Joey said rapidly in a voice loud enough to carry halfway across the lobby, "Excepting this much: Nobody but you and I know that Julius had won twenty thousand dollars at the track and had carried it away in thousand-dollar bills on his person, and that he was drunk and moaning the blues for Isobel. That is, nobody else but one person. So you called Isobel and tipped her off that her husband was drunk and mellow in his room in the hotel. . . ."

Teal said, "I don't even know the dame. Never saw her."

"That's a lie," said Joey coolly. "You've been playing her for a month. I've known that right along. She goes for you. She came on down here and went upstairs and talked with Julius, while I was sleeping under that pill you slipped me at the track. You two were safely in the Turkish bath, establishing your alibi."

Teal said, "That kinda talk don't get you no seats in the orchestra, chum."

Slapdish had his weight distributed and his eyes blazed a warning. But Joey said recklessly, "You and fat stuff here may be accessories, for all I know. Isobel—"

Slapdish chose that moment to pull out the knife, which was silent, instead of the gun, which would make a noise. He lunged for Joey, carving upward in the fine Sicilian fashion, aiming at Joey's groin.

Joey stepped backwards. He called, "Gill! Nail them! They're taking a powder." Then he let the knife slide by him and hit Slapdish with a left hook. It was a pretty good hook, but he thought he should supplement it with a right cross. Slapdish was easy to hit, but tough. It took another right to finish him, and then there was Teal.

Teal was not eager. He had to put up his hands, but he hadn't the stomach for it. Joey hit him with a short right inside, and Teal collapsed, holding his belly and moaning, all his elegance destroyed, his dyed hair down in his face, his thin-lipped mouth suddenly old and wrinkled.

Sam Gill was holding Isobel by one arm and his gun was pointed at Archie Slab. The clerk's face was greenish, but he was not afraid. He was half sick, but it was with frustration and anger, Joey saw. Joey went quickly behind the desk with Sam's handcuffs and put them on the slender, shaking, enraged night clerk. He said blithely, "If you knew what I've got in my pocket you'd be even sicker, sonny boy!"

Sam Gill muttered, "Slip it to them, quick, Paschal. You got no proof."

"I called Isobel and used Archie's voice." Joey shifted to falsetto and said, *"My dear,* I've *found* it. Come up, darling, at *once."*

The clerk glared and Isobel sagged a little in Sam's grasp. Joey said, "You might as well turn state's evidence. You went up there early, but Julius hid his money and was stubborn with you. Archie had been making eyes at you for a long time, so you paused and told him how Teal had tipped you that Julius had twenty thousand. But you denied to me that you knew Julius had made the killing."

Archie snapped, "You can't *prove* a thing. Not a *thing."*

Hammering at Isobel, Joey said, "Accessory after the fact gets you the chair, Isobel. Archie isn't worth it. He had access to rat poison, which is in the hotel stores. That's the first thing occurred to me, that he could get it. The cops can learn about those things. Then, it had to be someone who could come

(Continued on page 95)

THE $64,000 QUESTION

Sixty-four grand is a lot of money, Hobe . . . Enough to buy your dream car . . . and almost any woman you want . . . But, Hobe, how are you going to spend that money when you're face down in the swamp with your belly full of rat poison?

After supper, while she held the lamp, he hid the money under a loose board in the kitchen.

IT WAS nearing twilight and Hobe was standing in the front doorway of his sun-baked, frame shanty when the car came screaming down the highway. He watched the car as it hove into view, a long, sleek, maroon sedan that was eating up the miles of the straight, hot ribbon of Florida road. Tourists from Miami, Hobe labeled whoever was in that car. Tourists always drove cars like that and tore over the Florida countryside as if they owned it.

Watching the car, Hobe's lips curled, and his eyes got beady and bright. A car like that must cost over two thousand dollars. A man could get just about any woman he wanted with a car like that. Hobe touched his tongue to his lips.

The car flicked past, and Hobe stared out in the hot, lowering night. Here the earth was flat, baked sand, mottled with palmetto and tall Florida pines, dripping Spanish moss. The stench of the everglades in the distance seemed to hang in the dead, insect-laden air. Hobe softly and strenuously cursed the dozen acres

● ● ● By TALMAGE POWELL ● ● ●

that made up his farm. Lila had tricked him. She was an old maid with a face like a dried-up apple, crazy for a man, any man. Even Hobe. She'd let him think she had a little money as well as the farm, the damned hag! Anyhow, he told himself bitterly, he was married to her. She'd got her a man—but he'd been cheated. As far as he was concerned, ground rattlers and rank, green palmetto could claim the land and the house could rot down. And he was stuck with it. Lila would never leave him or let him leave. He was a man, and she'd never give him up. He'd seen once how obstinate she could be. He'd wanted to take out some insurance on her, but something in his manner had frightened her, and she'd said so.

Hobe switched his glance back toward the car. It was a quarter of a mile down the road now. He could barely make it out. It was that twilight hour when visibility is at its worst. But Hobe could see the car well enough to know that it hadn't slowed any, and his hand began to grip the decaying door jamb. His muscles drew him rigid; his breath flared in and out. That curve-off there was doubtless the most treacherous curve in all Florida, cutting at an abrupt right angle because of a fill. The curve had a way of jumping at you in this narrow, arrow-straight road where it seemed no curve should be. The road hadn't been built for speed in the first place, and at this twilight hour if a man wasn't watching his driving and missed seeing the caution sign. . . .

Hobe heard the squeal of brakes, even from here. Without knowing it, he had propelled himself out into his sandy yard. He stared, fascinated, eyes wide, moisture flecking his lips as the heavy maroon sedan slewed for a split instant, then shot out into space, twisting crazily, as if the car were attempting to make the curve with its wheels on air, limned against the lowering sky. Then the sedan was gone down behind the fill, and Hobe heard the shattering sound of its crash. He went running down the road.

When he reached the curve he could hear insect life beginning to buzz again. He could also hear the faint hiss of water trickling on hot metal that turned it into steam. He paused for a second on the edge of the road, staring at the car. It had made a half revolution, landing on its top. The whole top was caved in as if the car had tried to bury itself in the black sand and muck down below the fill. Somehow, it didn't look like a car at all, with its four wheels pointed up in the air like that. The left front wheel was spinning idly; they must have had a loose brake shoe.

Hobe went sliding down the bank, a short, squat man with the shoulders of a gorilla, his blue work shirt, open halfway down the front, revealing a chest that was vast and deep and matted with heavy dark hair.

He slopped through the muck, which was barely sole deep on his shoes. In the rainy season this depression in the earth was bad: a black hell hole of water breeding mosquitoes. But it had been dry for months now, and beneath that thin film of muck, formed by the seeping waters af a small, lazy, black stream over to Hobe's left, the black sand was brick-hard.

HE WAS within three feet of the car when he heard the soft moan. He bent down, squinting. There were two men in the car. The driver was jammed below the wheel, on the roof of the car, which was now its floor. Hobe could tell that he was dead. No man could live with his head smashed in on the left side in that manner.

The other man was up-ended on the roof of the car, bleeding from a gash across his forehead, his right arm in a crazy position, as if he were trying to rub his forehead with his elbow. He groaned softly, "Get me out! Get me outa here!"

Hobe tried the door beside the groaning man. It was wedged tight. With a grunt, he tried the back door of the car on the same side. The back door opened with a squeal of twisted metal. Hobe sucked in his breath. There was money scattered over the back of the car, more money than Hobe had ever seen in his life. Over beside the other door lay a black bag, burst open from the shock of the crash. Hobe reached out his hand. He was trembling so hard his fingers would hardly work. He picked up a bill. It was a thousand dollars. A thousand dollars in this one little old piece of paper, Hobe thought. And there were dozens of them. Dozens! Hobe was whimpering softly like a hungry panther finding meat.

The living man in the front of the car was coming out of his cloud. He was trying to push himself up, that broken arm impeding him, blood gushing from the gash in his forehead blinding him. With his good arm he was clawing at a pocket in his coat, which was twisted about him.

"Damn you! Take your hands off that money!"

Hobe, like a drugged man, had crawled inside the car. On his knees on the fine plush upholstery of the roof, he had buried his hands in the money. He spun now, facing the man who was mouthing curses at him. The man's clawing effort succeeded; he wrung a gun from his pocket.

Before he could bring the gun to bear, Hobe was upon him. Hobe's first slugging blow caught the man on the broken arm like the smash of a sledge hammer in the hands of a

circus roustabout. The man screamed. Hobe hit him again, in the face, and the man went limp.

Hobe wiped his mouth off with the back of his hand. He listened. There was no sound, except the buzzing insects, the soft hiss of water on hot metal, and his own shallow breathing. He bent down low and peered through the window of the car. The edge of the road as far as he could see was silent, deserted. He turned and began stuffing the money in the black bag, mouthing little rumbles of gutteral laughter that were without meaning.

He crammed the bag under his shirt. Then he turned back to the dead man and the unconscious one. The unconscious one was breathing shallowly but steadily. Hobe's eyes glittered; his lips drew themselves in. His big, powerful, shaggy hands reached forward, ever so slowly. . . .

Ninety seconds later, Hobe clawed his way up the bank to the fill. He scanned the road. He was still the only person on it. The whole flat countryside lay dead and silent and muggy with tropical heat. Hobe turned back and looked at the car once more. There were two dead men in it now. One had died of a broken neck.

The house was still a rotting shanty, but it had changed. It had no power over him now. He could laugh at the house and the hot, arid acres surrounding it. He could even laugh at the thought of Lila. One day soon he would walk away from the house and never return.

Still at a loping run, he crossed the yard, went to the tumble-down tool shed in the back of the house. He was aware of the pleasant pressure of the black bag beneath his shirt.

His face was oily with sweat, burning, as if lighted from a fire within. His gaze scanned the tool house. It was cluttered with rusting tools, a plow, the handles of which were rotting away. On a rickety work bench he found the long length of stout, heavy twine he was looking for. He had only minutes in which to work before Lila would be home, and his hands trembled as he picked up the twine. He knotted one end of it about the middle of an old tire tool. The other end he knotted to the black bag. With the burden of tire iron, cord and black bag under his arm, he went out of the tool house.

A twisted ladder, a rung here and there long since broken away, was leaning against the side of the tool shed. He dragged the ladder behind him, across the yard, over to the shanty he called home. There he laid down the black bag, cord and tire iron long enough to prop the ladder against the rotting side of the old brick chimney.

Atop the ladder, the black bag in his hand, he could look down the chimney. He had no fears for the safety of his money. A fire wouldn't be built in the fireplace below for weeks. He itched to count all that money. There must be fifty or sixty thousand of it, but he knew he hadn't time. Later he would fondle the money. Now there was only time to hide it before Lila came home.

He lowered the black bag down in the chimney, playing out the cord. He reached the tire tool and set the iron across the mouth of the chimney. The tips of the iron stuck out over the edges, That wouldn't do. He moved the iron until it was diagonally across the top of the chimney, the long way. The ends of the iron reached just to the edges of the bricks. There were no out-protruding tips of the iron to be seen from below.

His money suspended in the chimney, Hobe climbed down the ladder. He dragged the ladder back out to the tool shed and was coming back around the side of the house when he heard the clattering arrival of a Model-A Ford. He knew the sound of the car well. He grinned.

Lila was home.

SHE WAS getting from the car as he came running across the yard. She reached back in the car for a bag of groceries, turned to face him as he came running up. She was a thin, bony woman, dressed in a cotton print dress, her faded brown hair drawn to a bun at the back of her head like a drab cap over her pinched, tight face. She worked at a citrus cannery over in the village, besides taking care of the house. She always worked around the house, cooking, cleaning, scrubbing, as if she got pleasure out of telling Hobe what a clean woman she was. "I can't abide filth! I just can't abide it!" She said it over and over, until sometimes Hobe thought he was going crazy with it.

"I reckoned you'd never get here!" Hobe said. "Lemme have the car key. I got to drive over to the village an get Sheriff Sam Clark. There was a wreck down the road a minute ago. Two men went off the curve, over the fill. Killed them both plump dead!"

She glanced off in the direction of the curve, looked back at him, handed him the key. "Nothing we can do?"

"I told you they're both dead, killed in the wreck."

"Well, try to hurry back. I brought us some fish for supper."

He got in the car and drove off. He dreaded to face Sam Clark, but he knew it had to be done. When the wreck was discovered, they'd know he should have seen or heard it, being home. If it came out some way that the two men were carrying money, and he didn't report the wreck, it would look bad. This way,

Hobe would just deny that there'd been any money in the car if the question ever came up. Even Sam Clark couldn't get blood out of a turnip, Hobe thought. If it comes up, Sam can't prove he took any money, as long as he told it simple and stuck to it, no matter what the sheriff might suspect.

But Hobe didn't believe the question of the money would come up in the first place. He remembered the appearance of the two men, the way the live one had cursed him, the way the live one had drawn a gun. Crooks. Carrying crooked money. Men like that didn't let people know they were carrying a bagful of money around with them.

It was quite dark when he returned to the house, but not yet moonrise, and the night was black and thick with heat. As he parked the Ford in the yard, he could see lamplight guttering in the window of the living room. He crossed the yard and entered the house. He smelled fish frying, but aside from the distant sizzling of fish in the pan out in the kitchen, the house was silent. Then, like a man feeling the pressure and pull of another's gaze, he twisted about. Lila was standing in the darkened doorway to the bedroom. She wasn't moving, just looking at him. She didn't speak. In the wan yellow light her face looked even tighter than usual, her eyes gleaming. The breath caught in Hobe's throat. As big and strong as he was, he felt a faint tremor of strange fear stir inside him.

"Wh-what's the matter?" he said.

Her lips moved like a mummy's. "You dirtied my fireplace."

He whitened beneath the shaggy growth of beard, his gaze jerking to the fireplace. A mound of soot was there; some of it had billowed out in the room, blackened a rim of the wide plank flooring about the hearth. He looked back at her, his breath coming and going like little knots being jerked in a string.

"I cleaned the fireplace just day before yesterday," she said, "when I scrubbed in here. I cleaned it good. You know I can't abide filth!"

The soot. He hadn't thought of that, lowering the black bag of money down the chimney. He'd been too pressed for time, too eager and elated to think that the lowering of the bag would knock soot from the inner walls of the chimney.

"I found the money," she said.

She moved across the room toward him, shadows chasing across her face, reminding him of a witch. "You found it in the car that wrecked, didn't you, Hobe?"

He was too stunned to speak. She'd entered the house; her tight gaze had seen the soot; she'd squatted and looked up the chimney to see what had knocked the soot down; she'd found his money. . . . His money!

He could hear her breathing in the room like a rasping hornet. She clawed at his arm. "I won't tell, Hobe! I won't tell! Here, in the bedroom. I done counted the money. Sixty-four thousand dollars, Hobe!"

Clinging to him, she went in the bedroom with him. He scratched a match, touched it to a lamp. The money was on a mound in the middle of the bed.

For a moment he forgot she existed. He lurched across the room, buried his hands in the money.

She laughed, suddenly. It grated on his ears. He turned and looked at her. She clutched her arms about his barrel chest, pressed herself to him. "I won't tell, Hobe," she said again, whispering. " This is the luckiest thing ever happened to us. Did you have to kill the men in the car to get the money? No, Don't tell me. I don't care! I only know we got sixty-four thousand dollars, ain't we, Hobe "

He stared down at her.

She was shaking like a palm in a high wind, pawing at him, pressing herself to him. It sickened him.

"What'll we do first, Hobe? Where'll we go? Away from here, won't we? And some clothes for me, Hobe Some real nice pretty clothes, the like of which I never had before?"

Laughter came back to her, shaking her harder and harder, until the whole house was filled with the sound of it, until his head was rocking and bursting under its wild impact. She seemed to fall away from him, sinking on the edge of the sway-backed, iron bed. She buried her face in her hands and kept laughing. He walked over and shook her shoulder.

She quit choking on the laughter, though it still shook her in gusts. "All my life," she cried, "I've been ugly Lila. Lila who was fitt'n to just work like a slave. Lila, the old maid! I knowed it when they tittered behind their hands in the village. I knowed the women were making fun of me when they talked to me. Ain't nobody ever been kind to me. But I ain't a stick, Hobe! I ain't a clod of dirt! I'm a woman, with all a woman's feelings. I want nice things. I want to go to places I never seen. I'd like to live in a real nice ho-tel for awhile. I'd—just like to stretch out and be lazy and have people wait on me and order them around, like *I* always been ordered around!"

She stood up, ran her hands over his chest. "I won't have to go back to the cannery, will I, Hobe?"

"I reckon you won't," he said. He slipped his arm about her, staring out into space over the top of her head. "And the clothes'll be first,

real nice ones, the likes of which you've never had before!"

THEY ATE fish together in the kitchen. The fish were scorched and tasted bad. She was too excited to eat. Hobe ate steadily, smiling at her, patting her shoulder now and then, considering ways of killing her.

After supper, while she held the lamp, he hid the money under a loose board in the kitchen. She put the lamp on the table when he was finished. She wandered into the living room, eyes shining a little. He sat down by the kitchen table and rolled himself a cigarette, thinking of it.

He smoked four cigarettes in all. He got up and went into the living room. The room was dark, but the moon had risen now; the Florida sky was blazing with stars. He could make out the vague outlines of the sagging wicker furniture she couldn't abide filth on.

Dimly, he saw her shadow in the chair over in the corner. "What're you doing, Lila?"

"Just thinking."

He stood and looked at her . He was doing a lot of thinking himself. Suddenly his thinking was cut off. He was standing there, looking at her, the darkness hiding his eyes, when the first pain hit him.

The pain was low, in the pit of his belly. It doubled him over. It tied his breath up and sent blood pounding in his head. The next pain was close on the heels of the first. It was horrible. It clenched his teeth and brought huge drops of hot sweat out on his forehead. He tried to scream. At last he croaked a word out: "Water!"

He was aware that her shadow had moved from the chair. Where was she? He couldn't see her. He couldn't see anything. He was like a blast furnace inside, and the flame and pain were growing, spreading out all over him. He lurched toward the door. "Water—water!" he was saying, but no words came out.

He stumbled through long corridors of darkness, the flame bursting through his whole insides. *There was bug killer on the place. The fish at supper had been scorched and had tasted bad. . . .*

The floor under his feet turned soft. He was in sand. He was in the back yard. *Water!* Hoarse sobs of pain were tearing out of him. He was tearing at his stomach with his hands.

He pitched to his knees. The sky was pitching crazily, the stars whirling. He fell on his face.

In a few moments he was dead.

Lila let at least five minutes pass before she moved from the shadows at the corner of the house where she was standing, watching him. She approached his inert body slowly. Now that she had poisoned Hobe she knew exactly what she must do. It was as if the plan had been taking shape in her mind a long time.

She looked out at a field grown with tall, lean pines. Half a mile off yonder lay Big Cypress swamp, a place to hide his body. In the tool shed were lengths of rope and enough old pieces of iron to hold him prisoner forever below the surface of the black water. And over there in the corner of the yard was the wheelbarrow. She'd have to take him in that, make an extra trip for the rope and weights. She couldn't risk putting him in the car and going around the road to Big Cypress. But it didn't matter; she had all of the long, silent night. And she could do it because the years of barren toil had given her strength far beyond her size.

She looked down at him. "It was you or me, Hobe. I knowed that the minute I found the money. You figured that with sixty-four thousand dollars you could get most any kind of woman, didn't you, Hobe? Well, I figure that with sixty-four thousand dollars I can get most any kind of man!"

Lila turned toward the wheelbarrow.

SHE AWOKE. It was morning and she was in her bed, but for a moment Lila lay numb, gripped in the memories of the night that came back to engulf her. She endured a moment of trembling violently, but then thoughts of all the real nice things ahead came to her and the moment passed.

She had breakfast out in the kitchen, she cleaned her house and she watched for the rural mail man. It was Saturday, and she was making it a routine Saturday. If the cannery had been working on Saturday these days, she'd have gone on to work there as usual.

She heard the hum of a car. But it wasn't the mailman. He drove a coupe, and this was a dusty black sedan. She watched it pull into the yard. A lean, rawboned man got from the car, slammed the door behind him and came striding across the yard toward the house. It was Sheriff Sam Clark. A tiny pulse beat in the hollow of Lila's throat.

"Howdy, Lila."

"Hello, Sheriff, How come you're out this way today?"

"I want to talk to Hobe."

She let a moment pass. " He ain't here."

She watched his nostrils draw in; he wiped his palms on the thighs of his pants. "Where is he?"

"I—I don't know."

"Did you have a quarrel?"

"No, he just walked off last night."

"You should have let me know," he said almost angrily.

"Why? He's done it before, lots of times. But this time—this time if he don't come back in two or three days I'm leaving myself."

He looked at her, and she could see it

ticking through his mind: *Lila's lost her man. The sorry old maid couldn't hold even that lump of man.*

"Where'll you go, Lila?"

"I don't know. Up north somewhere, maybe. I've got a little bit of money saved."

"I see."

Well, that had fixed it. Wings hammered in her throat. After two or three days now she could leave and they wouldn't think anything funny.

"What did you want to see Hobe about, Sheriff?"

"That wreck last night," he said. "The car had Miami plates on it. We checked with Miami and found out the two men in the car were a pair of crooks, names of Alf Granger and Ted Biddle. There were three of them when they left Miami, as best as we can find out. The third one was a man named Sime Karkins, and it's got us plumb mystified where he's gone. Could be that he just left the other two, or could be also that the other two killed this Sime Karkins and dumped his body somewhere. But that ain't exactly what brought me out here. Lila, did Hobe take anything out of that car before he came in and reported the wreck?"

"Take anything? What do you mean?"

He went off on another tangent. "You say Hobe just walked off last night?"

She nodded.

"Did he carry anything with him?"

"Not that I seen."

"Then he must have come back and got it where he'd hidden it after you were asleep," Sam Clark mused.

"What are you talking about?" she demanded. "What did Hobe get?"

"Money, Lila. Miami tells us that those crooks in the car must have been carrying nigh onto a hundred thousand dollars. Hobe must have took the money and run off. I wouldn't expect him back, Lila."

She couldn't help it. A high, keen laugh ripped out of her. Sheriff Clark misinterpreted it and looked at her pityingly. "I wouldn't expect Hobe back, Lila, unless it's in handcuffs. Alf Granger, Ted Biddle and the missing Sime Karkins were a bunch of counterfeiters. Something tells me that Hobe won't get far when he tries to spend that money!"

She stared at him, numbly, her jaw dropped, her eyes jutting. He misinterpreted that, too, and said, "Maybe I shouldn't have throwed it at you so fast, Lila. But he's no good. Forget him—forget him!"

Then Sam Clark whirled abruptly and went to his car.

SHE DIDN'T move. She didn't appear to be breathing. She watched the car until it was out of sight.

Counterfeit!

She felt cold; she looked out at all the flat acres of palmetto, lean pines, hot, hateful sand. She looked at her work-roughened hands; she looked down at the faded cotton print dress she was wearing.

Counterfeit!

She stumbled back into the house. She fell into a chair and stayed there a moment, one arm hanging limply over the arm of the chair, staring at nothing. She bit her lip and when she received a vague taste of blood she stood up and her eyes began to focus.

There was no helping it, not now. What was done was done. There was only one thing left: safety. She had to be safe. She couldn't spend any of that money because they'd catch her and guess pretty soon where it had come from and know she'd done something to Hobe. She couldn't leave the money lying under the loose plank in the kitchen floor. She couldn't hide it anywhere. No hiding place would be safe enough. She'd found it in Hobe's hiding place. Someone might find it in hers. And if the money were found in her hiding place, the result would be the same as if she had tried to spend it.

She went out to the kitchen, and when she came back she was carrying the black bag full of money. With an old catalogue she started a small fire in her fireplace. She opened the black bag and stared at the money a moment; then she began feeding it to the fire, a thousand-dollar bill at a time, watching the bills curl and turn to black ashes in the pale pink flame. When all the money was gone, she stirred the fire up and put the black bag in. Soon it was also nothing but ashes.

She walked out to the small, lean-to back porch and picked up a washtub that was resting upside down on a wash bench. She carried the tub back into the living room and with the fire shovel scooped up the ashes and put them into the tub. It took her several minutes; she was working very slowly. With a damp rag she wiped out the fireplace carefully and dropped the rag in the tub.

She picked up the tub and left the house. She cut across the back yard, moving with aching slowness, the hot sun bringing tiny beads of perspiration to her upper lip.

Two hundred yards from the house, angling toward the road, the small black stream ran. Lila dropped the damp rag in the stream first, watched it go swirling lazily off. The water would wash out of the rag any of the ashes that clung to it; anyway, no one would ever examine a rag far down a creek bank for the ashes of counterfeit money. She sifted the ashes into the stream a few at a time and when the tub was empty she bent and scooped up some water. She swished the water around in the tub several times and dumped it into

the stream. Then, with the tub dangling from one hand, she walked back to the house

She placed the tub on the bench where it had been, stumbled into the house and made her way to the bedroom. She barely managed to get into bed. She was very ill.

But she was safe.

Late the next afternoon Lila was walking down the main street in the village. Being Sunday, and hot, the town was very quiet, the old, low buildings sleepy in the sun, heat waves dancing over the hoods of the few cars angled diagonally in to the curbs.

Lila was almost regretting having come to town. Word was around. The few people she'd met had stopped her to talk. To pry. To stare at her. To feel glad they weren't in her shoes, an old maid whose husband had run off. But it wasn't as bad as the house. She couldn't have stood the house any longer today, the silence, the heat, the aching aloneness, the crowding in of recent memory. If her eyes were sunken, encased in dark circles and her hands were trembling, the people she passed evidently had figured it was because Hobe had run off.

She stopped at a shop window and looked through the dusty glass at the dresses and hats. She heard the squeal of brakes on the street behind her, but she didn't look around until Sheriff Sam Clark's voice sounded at her elbow.

"I just been out to your place, Lila. You weren't there. I high-tailed back to town, saw your car parked down the street, and saw you walking along."

She turned to face him. The way he was looking at her jarred her back, like a heavy blow across her cheeks.

"We still been looking for that missing crook, Sime Karkins, Lila," Clark said. "We didn't find him, but the police will turn him up in some town one of these days, I guess. We've about decided his partners didn't do anything to him. We looked around a bit on the off-chance they'd killed him and dumped his body somewhere. Only sensible place to dump a body is out in Big Cypress, Lila. We went out there, and dragged a little with grappling hooks. Like I say, we didn't find Sime Karkins."

He took a step toward her, which brought him almost against her. "But we found a body, Lila. *You know whose body we found!*"

Her eyes had been on his face while he spoke as if something fascinated her. Her mouth, thin and pale, worked. She tore away and ran toward the street. She was halfway across when he caught her. She screamed. He was saying something to her, trying to quiet her, but she couldn't make out the words. She kicked and fought and screamed, and people began to gather.

Gradually she sensed that wall of staring people about her and slowly susbsided. Sheriff Clark started dragging her down the street toward the jail. The knot of people followed, jabbering. Clark stopped, looked at them. "Today is Sunday," he said. "Anyhow, we ain't supposed to be Romans."

He held both of Lila's wrists, one in each of his hands, with a tight grip and towed her on toward the jail. She looked back once. The people were still standing in the street, talking and looking at her.

That night some reporters came all the way over from Miami and Sam Clark let them stand outside her cell and fire questions at her. She knew it would be in even the Miami papers Monday morning.

IN MID-AFTERNOON on Monday the keeper came back to her cell with a man. He was a lean, thin-faced man of about forty, loosing part of his slick, black hair in front. He was dressed in a very rich blue tropical worsted suit with a white flower in the buttonhole. He came into the cell with quick, decisive motions, his eyes raking her. As if he was writing down a number in his mind, she thought.

He waited until the keeper had gone and they were alone. Then he said, "Okay, toots, your worries are over. My card."

She looked at the card. It said that he was B. R. Bahmiller, an attorney, with offices on Flagler Street in Miami.

"I saw it in the papers," he said. "I knew Granger and Biddle and Sime Karkins. Very good friends of mine. I read your story. My case, I say. Bernie Bahmiller, that's me. The fastest mouthpiece in the whole state of Florida—hell, the whole East! I got connections. I never lose a case. Now make it fast. I only got minutes until that keeper gets back. You killed him?"

"Him?"

"Your husband."

"Yes."

"Because of the money?"

"Yes."

"He took the money out of the wreck of Granger and Biddle's car and you killed him for it?"

She looked up at him. "Did Sheriff Clark put you up to this to get me to say—"

"Hell, no, no, no! Look." He jerked a wallet from his pocket, a sheaf of papers from his inside coat pocket. She looked at them. "I guess you're really Mr. Bahmiller, a lawyer, all right."

"And you better trust me. I'm your only hope. With me you might beat this thing. Without me, you're cooked. Now, Hobe got the money and you killed him for it?"

(Continued on page 96)

IT'S IN THE BAG!

"That was some bundle you got," the doorman said. But the joke was that it was no bundle; it was Fingy Malone's corpse.

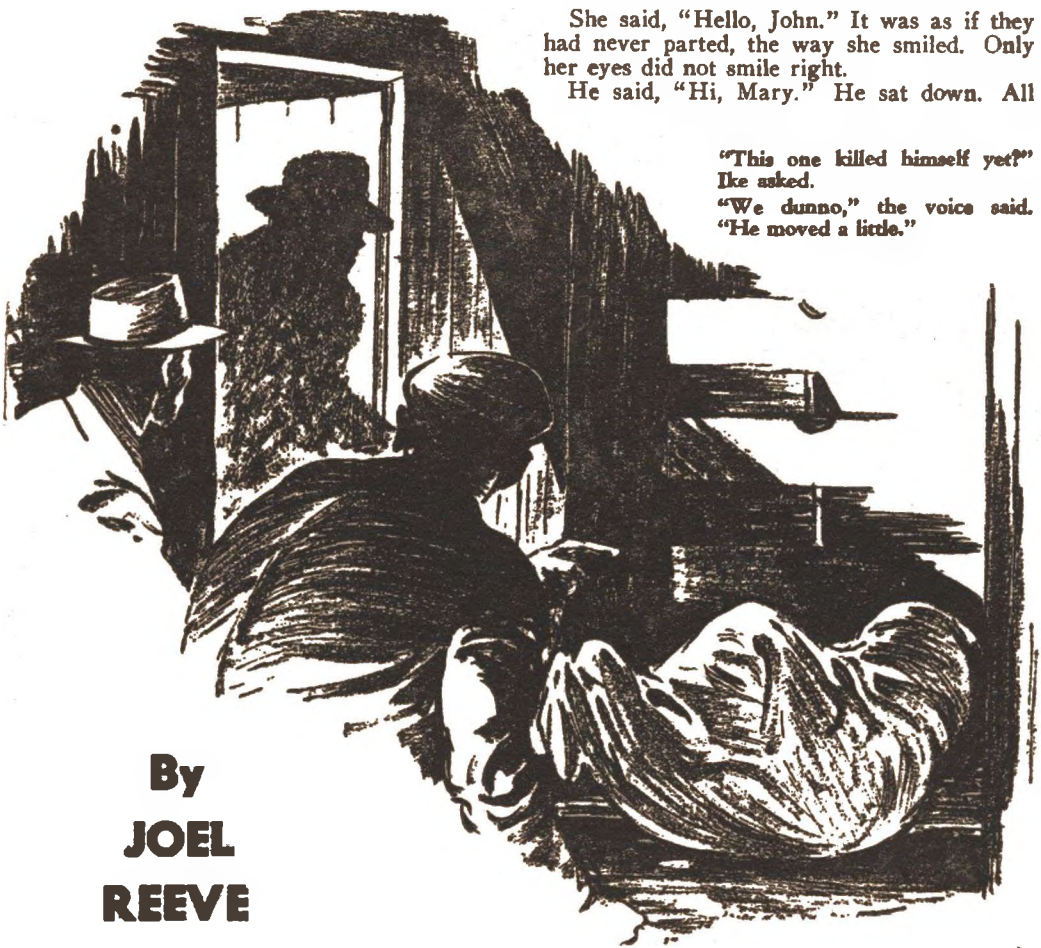
By JOEL REEVE

HE SAW her in a club on 52nd Street, eating a solitary lunch. It wasn't one of the big places, like 21 or the Stork, just a small club where the food was good. She looked about the same except for her eyes. She was small and erect and dark and her nose tilted just right, but her eyes were wrong.

He went across the room, a small man, moving neatly, dressed in quiet, decent clothing, the only mark of his personality expressed in the scarlet of his Sulka necktie. He had fixed his nose after the fall from the trapeze ten years before. It had been eight years since they had parted in Terre Haute, the day he had left the circus.

She said, "Hello, John." It was as if they had never parted, the way she smiled. Only her eyes did not smile right.

He said, "Hi, Mary." He sat down. All



"This one killed himself yet?" Ike asked.
"We dunno," the voice said. "He moved a little."

his movements were fluid from the early training. He sat watching the door.

She said, "I heard you were in New York. You look fine, John."

"I was fine," he said, smiling a little. He had a reckless grin and he looked straight at her, but past her, too, watching the door. "I was great until your husband moved in."

She said, "I heard you were doing good with the numbers."

"I got out of that," he told her. "I'm legit, now. I got squared with the bulls and everything."

She was not finishing her dessert, vanilla ice cream. She could eat anything she wanted, always, because she never weighed over a hundred and five. Her figure was exquisite and he had to keep his mind off it, and off the old days. She said, "You quit at last? Why, John, that's good."

"I've got a place," he said. "It's a small place, but I run it on the level. It's on Route 8."

Her eyes did not change. They just weren't there, and she betrayed no knowledge of the problem which was burning him within, burning with a bright fire. He said, "So you married him in St. Louis. You said you wouldn't, but you did."

She did not reply. The ice cream was melting.

John Lawe said, "There is gambling upstairs, you see."

"Gambling?" She put the spoon carefully beside her dish. "Oh, I see." She seemed weary on the moment. "Always something, isn't it, John?"

"I'm squared with the district attorney out there. It's out in the county. My joint is straight," he repeated. "I don't make a million, but me and Fingy do all right."

"Fingy," she said. "Always Fingy. How is the lovely character?"

He said, "Fingy is on the level."

"I know. Fingy is your partner. Always Fingy."

He said, "I never thought you'd marry Ike Carrocci."

She stared at him deliberately and now her eyes widened, and there was momentarily a tiny spark in them, as of old. "You went away with Fingy. You never said anything after that last night. You were the proud type. You were noble. You thought I'd stay on the high wire and wait. I got tired of the high wire, John."

"Our parents were kinkers," John said. "I thought you'd stick with it awhile. I had to make a decent buck, didn't I?"

"No," she said flatly. "Any kind of a dollar would've been all right. If you'd wanted it that way. But when you didn't, I took the only way I knew: Ike."

"And you don't like it," he said huskily.

"I married him," she said. "He's at least as cute as Fingy." It was a bitter remark. There was bitterness in her and there was despair. Her eyes went blank again.

John said, "Fingy is supposed to meet me here. Funny you should be here. Fingy is seeing Ike this morning."

"I know nothing of Ike's business," she said shortly.

"He didn't bring you here? He didn't ask you to eat here?"

She was suddenly angry. She picked up her purse and the check. He tried to take the check, but she jerked it away. She said, "I don't give a damn what you think, John Lawe. I just plain don't give a damn, that's all."

He said, "Then why are you crying?"

She got away from the table before he could move a hand. She always had that quickness, from her training. He remembered the way she walked, shoulders high, like a boy, an athlete. She went out of the place before he could think of any way to stop her and his heart bled a little.

HE ORDERED a scotch and soda. He did not want to eat. He watched the door and tried to compose himself to await Fingy and the news Fingy would bring.

Fingy had been the owner of a flat joint with the circus when John was a kinker in the Bodoni troupe. He was an elderly man with a nose like an ant eater, bald, flashy in his habiliments, loud, vulgar. But he had a golden tongue, he had a brain like a Wall Street broker, seeing only percentages. He had shown John Lawe how to break into the numbers racket in New York, banking small on John's meager savings, taking the long chance, allying them with the bigger boys. Then, when it got too hot, Fingy had seen the way out, had negotiated for the roadhouse on Route 8, named it The Hangout, persuaded the D.A. that it was better to have a clean joint than the dives that were operating on the clip.

That was the trouble. Abie the Goat Levine had been running a wolf den and the D.A. had closed him. So Abie had run for help—straight to Ike Carrocci.

Fingy knew all this. Fingy had stool pigeons all over the place. Fingy knew everything.

Fingy was as straight as a die where John was concerned and was by certain standards a thoroughly honest man, however you took him, John thought defensively. Mary was too tough on old Fingy. It was Fingy who thought of going straight to Ike Carrocci and offering him a percentage to lay off. It was the only smart thing to do: lay the cards on the table and pay.

John Lawe had argued. He had hated it.

Ike Carrocci, out of the St. Louis of the old era, was tough. He was not above murder. He ruled all the minor racketeers, he was in white slaving, dope, everything. He was very big. But John did not want to give in to Ike because Ike had married Mary.

Fingy just said, "I know, old keed, it's a pain in the keester. But we're on a spot. We got this joint and we got everything in it. So Mary's his wife; so maybe he'll listen to reason for old times' sake. You wanna live, doncha, pal? I wanna live. I got plenty I wanna do in this old world. I ain't young, but I like life."

John said, "I know you're right. You're always right. But I got a bad feeling about it. I don't like it at all."

That was the way it had been. Fingy went to call upon Ike at the headquarters over on Eleventh Avenue. There was a big warehouse which Ike owned. Stolen goods, smuggled goods, all kinds of things went through that warehouse and Ike had his offices there. Some people said Ike lived there, surrounded by tough bodyguards like Li'l Arthur Kerry. They said he had a secret apartment there, although he gave his address as Fifth Avenue, where he kept a swanky penthouse.

John watched the door of the club and a band came in and played some hot jazz for the college boys. It was Saturday and some of the youngsters danced. John watched them, but kept one eye on the door.

At three o'clock he was sweating beneath the collar of his nine-dollar shirt. Fingy was never late for an appointment. He was now two hours overdue. He kept thinking of Ike Carrocci, his beady little eyes, his bullet head, his hairy hands. Ike was big and burly, but his head was small. Desperately, John tried not to think of Ike and Mary being married.

The door swung. John's eyes ached from staring against the light of the opened door. A man came in, looked around, walked straight to John's table.

John kept his hands steady. He was not tough. Neither Fingy nor John were tough. They were just ordinary people, like other people, trying to make a decent dollar. This man was tough; he was very tough. He was Li'l Arthur Kerry, Ike Carrocci's man. He was no bigger than John, but he was tough.

The door swung again. Ike Carrocci sauntered in, smiling at the head waiter, waving a lordly hand bedecked with a diamond like a locomotive headlight. He had white teeth which were his only attractive feature, and he smiled a lot. His lips were quite red, for a man. He came over and pulled up another chair. He said, "You're John Lawe. I remember you in St. Louis."

"Hello, Ike," said John.

"You're quite a character," said Carrocci. He twisted the ring on his finger. The backs of his hands were matted with black hair. They made John faintly ill looking at them, at the well-kept nails, the stubby fingers.

John said, "Just a country boy trying to get by." He had to keep it down, to show no animosity.

"You made a couple mistakes," Carrocci told him carelessly.

Li'l Arthur could just as well not have been there except for the bulge under his armpit which spelled safety for his boss. He had a white, expressionless face and a vast disinterest in anything that went on about him.

John said, "You think so, Ike?"

"I don't think," said Ike. "I know. First place, you shouldn't gone to the D.A. out there. That's canary, John."

"We wanted to be wired in," shrugged John. He wouldn't beg to this man. He wouldn't crawl. He couldn't—not Mary's husband.

Carrocci said, "You broke the rules, John. You shouldn't done it. Then, you come in here, you have lunch with my wife."

"No," said John tightly. "I was as surprised as she was."

"She was surprised." The veneer broke for a moment. Ike did not smile and his lips were cruel and mean. "Like hell she was surprised. Don't give me that, John. It's no secret how she treats me. Why, even Li'l Arthur knows. . . ." He got control of himself. He said in his low, harsh voice, "You're through, John. You're dead. I remember you inna circus, you were good. I remember you got outa the numbers decent. Mebbe you ain't all the way bad. But you're through. Go home and see what I sent you and you'll know. I'm givin' you just time to lam. I dunno why, but I'm givin' it to you. Just time enough. You get in your heap and start drivin', see? And if you ever get in touch with Mary, you'll wind up...." He shrugged. The low-voiced tirade seemed to have solaced him. He smiled again. "Good-bye, John. And I don't mean so long!"

He got up. Like an automaton, Li'l Arthur got up. Ike Carrocci wandered to the door, greeting an acquaintance or two. Li'l Arthur waited, bending as though conversing with John, although he never uttered a word. Ike went out into the street. Li'l Arthur straightened and followed him.

John shivered. He paid his tab. His knees were curiously weak as he retrieved his hat and went out. He took a cab and gave the address of his apartment on the East Side, a nice place where he and Fingy had lived for a few months, since The Hangout had begun paying off.

The dread within him was a cancer. Neither he nor Fingy had ever carried a weapon. They had conducted themselves as businessmen.

They had moved slowly, carefully, in the demi-world, avoiding trouble. Now Ike Carrocci brought it to them in a large bundle. Now they were in for it.

HE GOT out of the cab and instinctively looked up and down the placid, pleasant street. There was no one in sight, but a delivery truck had just pulled away.

When he entered the lobby the attendant said, "A package just came for you, Mr. Lawe. The man insisted upon puttin' it in your place. It's a heavy bundle, Mr. Lawe. I hadda help him."

John took the hint and gave the man a dollar. He went up in the self-service elevator and used the key to the apartment.

It was in the middle of the living room floor. It was a burlap sack.

He looked at it and was ill. He went into the bathroom. He came out again and stared at the sack. It was indeed bulky. It was hideous. He had been in St. Louis during the heydey of the rackets. He wiped the palms of his hands. Little pools of sweat formed again and his handkerchief was soaked. He felt as though he were going to faint. Then, he thought he would go crazy.

He walked around the sack. It lay on its side, wrinkled at the corners, bulging. He went back into the bathroom and got a razor blade. He cut himself once, but he managed to slice the string. It was the hardest job he had ever done.

There was another sack inside the first one. His hand was steadier now. The illness was departing. Inside John Lawe a cold wall was forming. His old self was behind that wall, protected. Something new was in him, had entered his soul when he saw that ominous sack in his living room. He carefully cut the second sack open.

A shoe popped out of the opening. It was a new shoe, two-toned, narrow, elegant. The sock was bright blue.

He did not need to look further to know the terrible truth, the truth he had known when he walked into the room. But he worked gently, cutting the whole sack away, tenderly, as though it mattered. He cut it from Fingy's bald head, and when he moved the burlap the body rolled over on its side and he could see the hideous job which they had done.

He had never seen it before. He knew it came out of St. Louis; he had heard it described. But he had never seen the victim of a sacking. He had never seen the distorted, garrotted features of the victim. He stared horror-stricken at what was left of Fingy Malone.

The twine was wrapped around Fingy's knees. There was a lump on his temple. The twine had been brought up and strung around Fingy's scrawny neck. His long legs were doubled. He had been thrust into the sack jackknife fashion.

The idea, John knew, was to put the unconscious victim alive in the burlap with the lethal noose around his neck and fastened beneath the knees. Upon recovering consciousness reflex action of the knees would draw the string tight. The macabre humor of the situation was that the cause of death was "suicide."

It was moments before John Lawe could think of the police, moments spent sincerely weeping inside himself. His eyes were dry, his face a mask. But within him he wept for Fingy Malone, the ex-flat joint man who had gone with a laurel branch to Ike Carrocci and had received the reward of the peacemaker.

It had grown dark when he got up stiffly from the floor. He mechanically picked up the pieces of burlap and stuffed them into the incinerator. Wincing, he cut the twine from Fingy. The cadaver jerked, stiffened. There had scarcely been time for rigor mortis to set in, he realized. He knew little about such things.

He had to think. He paced the floor, cat-like in the graceful moving of his limber legs. He had been a very good kinker and he had kept himself supple. He had lost his best friend and he walked up and down, trying to figure it out.

He could not turn Fingy over to the cops. It would do no good. On the other hand, he could not let Fingy lie in the middle of the floor. There was a strict New York law about dead bodies. He had to get rid of Fingy. It was probably the most terrible thing of all, but he knew he must do it.

The simplest way, Fingy had always said, was the best.

He went into the kitchen and looked at the box of knives in the case hanging on the wall. Fingy had been a proud cook and always kept his knives sharp and polished. John selected a medium-length carving tool and felt the edge. It was sharp as a razor. He tore a piece of brown paper, folded it around the blade, creasing it sharply, then tied it with string. He put it inside the waistband of his trousers, fastening it skilfully, using his knowledge of knives from an old circus act he had known.

He went back into the living room and regarded Fingy's corpse. The wall was thickening and he was moving automatically now, obeying the dictates of a mind grown cold and bright and harsh. He went to the telephone stand and picked up the book.

It was listed under her name, Mary Carrocci. He dialed the number.

Mary answered at once. John said, "I've got to see you. I'm coming up there."

"No! You can't come here."

He said, "All right. I'll meet you."

"No," she said. Her voice was husky. "What's happened, John?"

"I must see you," he said again. "Where can we meet?"

"He has me followed." She stopped, as though she had not meant to say that much. "Maybe I can get away. How about your car? Can you use it, pick me up in the park, by the lake?"

"Yes. In an hour?"

She said, "He's at the warehouse. I'll do it, John. Oh, John, I'm sorry . . . sorry. Be careful, John."

"Sure," he said. "Sure, I'll be careful. I'll meet you on the far side of the lake, near the boat house."

"I'll take a cab," she said. "John, is it terrible?"

"Pretty terrible," he said. "But you can help."

"I'm sorry I left that way this noon," she said. Her voice was warm, as it had been long ago. "I shouldn't have done that to you, John. You deserve better of me."

He said, "It's all right, darling. We'll talk about it." He hung up the phone and his hands were sweating again. He looked at Fingy for a moment or two, then he went to the door, opened it and went into the hall. He locked the door carefully and took the elevator down to the lobby.

The doorman said, "That was some bundle you got."

"Yes, just some crazy guy sending me a dumb present," said John. "I'll see you later."

He went down the street to the garage and waited patiently while they got out his convertible. It had been an extravagance, the Continental, but he loved it. He touched the fender with his fingertips, ran a hand over the anachronistic spare tire set upon its proud rear, climbed behind the wheel and agitated the twelve cylinders. It was a car no one could miss. It was spectacular in a dignified way.

He drove across town, stopping at each red light. He entered the park and took his time, noting the passage of time by his strap watch. When the hour was up, he pointed at the lake and drove swiftly to the boat house.

He got out of the car and sauntered toward the dark outline of the building. When Abie the Goat and Li'l Arthur leaped upon him he was ready for them. He did not fight very hard. He was a little man and would not be expected to put up a great battle. Besides that, he was not tough, and his assailants were very tough indeed.

But he did yell. He opened his mouth and yelled very loud. He hoped no one would hear him, especially the park cop, but he had to make them hasten. He felt the blackjack go against his temple and dimly heard Abie the Goat say, "Cram 'im in there. The jerk screamed so loud. . . ." Then everything went black.

THE AWAKENING was the thing which was touchy. His knees were up under his chin, all right. The twine was hard around his neck. They had only put him in one bag, because he could detect a little light through the loose weave of the burlap.

He remained as quiet as a mouse, thoroughly relaxed. His hands were tied behind him and that was the first problem. He began working on them. It was absolutely essential that he get them free.

He was acquainted with ropes. He had to be very careful of the one wrapped about his neck and his knees. He held very still and did things with his small wrists. The rope slipped off his hands. He then had to be doubly careful.

He heard a voice. The tones were muffled, but he could distinguish the words, all right. Someone was saying, "I think he come to. I seen the sack move."

"It's time he come to," said another voice carelessly. "I didn't tap him hard. Ike wants him t' take it."

"He'll take it, all right. It ain't good in them sacks."

"You never been in one."

"You ain't kiddin'. But I seen plenny people in them sacks. It ain't good in there."

"That Fingy went in easy. He was old."

"Ahhhh. . . .Fingy! The boss shouldn't of done it to the old character. *This* is the boss' guy."

"Oh, sure. He was wit' the broad, wasn't he?"

"That's what I said. This is his guy."

There was a silence. John reached back into the years of his youth for patience and immobility. His father and mother had trained his muscles to do his bidding. He breathed only in the very top of his lungs. The burlap was of inferior manufacture and a raveling tickled his nose.

He could prevent a sneeze with an old trick of putting his finger hard against his upper lip. But his hands were behind him. He could not bend his head because of the twine. He fought with all the control he had over himself, frenzied with fear. Such a commonplace thing as a sneeze would certainly tip them off that he was conscious and not strangling in their devil's noose.

He was going to lose. He knew it. He held his neck muscles rigid and fought. A door opened and closed.

The two voices chorussed, "Hiya, Boss? Here he is, Boss."

In unison with them he sneezed, muffling the sound as best he could. The unmistakable rumble of Ike Carrocci's voice answered, "Where's the woman?"

John gathered himself, doubled into a jackknife, crammed in the burlap. One of the voices said, "Inna other room, like you said."

"This one killed himself yet?"

"We dunno," said the voice. "He moved a little."

"I want to see this one. I want her to see him. Then they both go into the cement and the river," said Carrocci. "Roll him around. I wanna see him. If he ain't done it yet, I'm happy. This one is mine."

"Sure, Boss."

A foot struck savagely against John. He rolled a little in the sack. He moved, then. His hands came stealthily around. He made a choking sound with his throat.

But he did not move neck or knees. The twine hung loose, hurting a little, but not stopping his breathing. He got his hands at his belt. He slid the knife out.

He had no illusions about what was going to happen. He would wind up in the river, all right. Mary would wind up in the river, also. If there was an after-life, he thought grimly, Mary would enter it with him. They would get him, all right, but he had a slim chance of doing his job before he went. He thought of Fingy's protruding tongue, his swollen, old, dead face.

He had some trouble with the brown paper, but his fingers were nimble and supple. He got the knife out. It was fine and sharp. He waited, choking again, even as he cut the twine. He kicked a little with his feet, as though they were still tied and he was strangling in the sack.

Ike Carrocci said, "He's goin' out. The hard way. Lookit him kick. That's the jerk I knew wouldn't leave town without seein' my wife."

One of them said, "You want her to see it, Boss?"

John kicked again. Carrocci said, "Yeah, yeah! Bring her in. Let her see it." His voice was thick with passion.

The door squeaked. John put the knife through the sack at a spot near the floor. It cut pretty well. He ripped it hard, spreading the cloth with his toes so that it held taut, and let the knife cut swiftly.

He came out rolling, like a cat from a paper bag. He had the knife and he rolled as fast as he could, trying to see the room. His eyes were blurry from the darkness within the sack, which was bad.

But he spotted the bulk, the amazed, startled, transfixed bulk of Ike Carrocci. He heard Abie the Goat whine, "Hey! Somethin's wrong!"

Then he was on his feet, grateful that the deadly Li'l Arthur had gone to fetch Mary. He got to his feet and stabbed at Abie the Goat with the knife, keeping Abie between him and Ike, who was across the room and farthest from him. He heard Abie scream and shoved past.

His vision cleared and he saw Ike reaching inside his coat. He took off in a flying leap from circus days. He moved like one of the trained cats, seeming to float through the air and across the room. He hit Ike with his slight body and threw the bigger man off balance. Ike's hand came out bearing a gun.

John sliced savagely at the wrist with all its hair. He saw blood spurt. The gun dropped to the floor.

The door opened. Ike yelled, "Arthur! Get 'im!"

Again John swung. He jumped high, coming around. There was the loud report of a gun. Li'l Arthur was very fast with his weapon.

MARY DID not scream. He wondered about her, but couldn't look. He was feinting Ike. He was making the fat man back into a corner. He slashed again and Ike's other hand dripped gore. Ike tried to grab him, but John was far too quick, sliding away, trying to make himself a bad target. There was another shot, and he wondered where the bullets were going. None struck him.

Abie was moaning, "I'm killed! He killed me. . . ."

The blade of the knife was delicately red. It matched John's pretty Sulka tie, he thought crazily, feinting at the evil figure of the big man. Ike Carrocci yelled again, "Arthur! Damn it, Arthur, get him!"

John went in under the arms which bent to protect the big man. He used the point of the knife, striking upward. He got it into Ike's belly and twisted it, ripping, as he had been told the old knife fighters did in foreign climes. Not for nothing had he listened to the old tales and played with the knives of the gypsy performers in the circus.

He came away, wheeling, thinking only of Mary now. He saw her standing against the wall. In her hand was a snub-nosed automatic pistol. On the floor lay Li'l Arthur. The gunman was breathing, but he was doubled over, holding his belly.

She stammered, "He was going to shoot you. I turned the gun and he—he shot himself."

"They meant for me to throttle myself," John said. "That's a laugh, huh?"

"A laugh?"

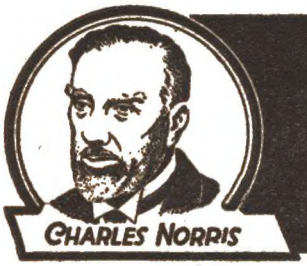
"Just an expression," he said inanely. Ike Carrocci was down, breathing hard, staring at them.

She said, "I—I called the police."

"You did what? When?"

"They didn't tie me very good," she said.

(Continued on page 98)



Master MANHUNTERS

by Ben Nelson & Stookie Allen

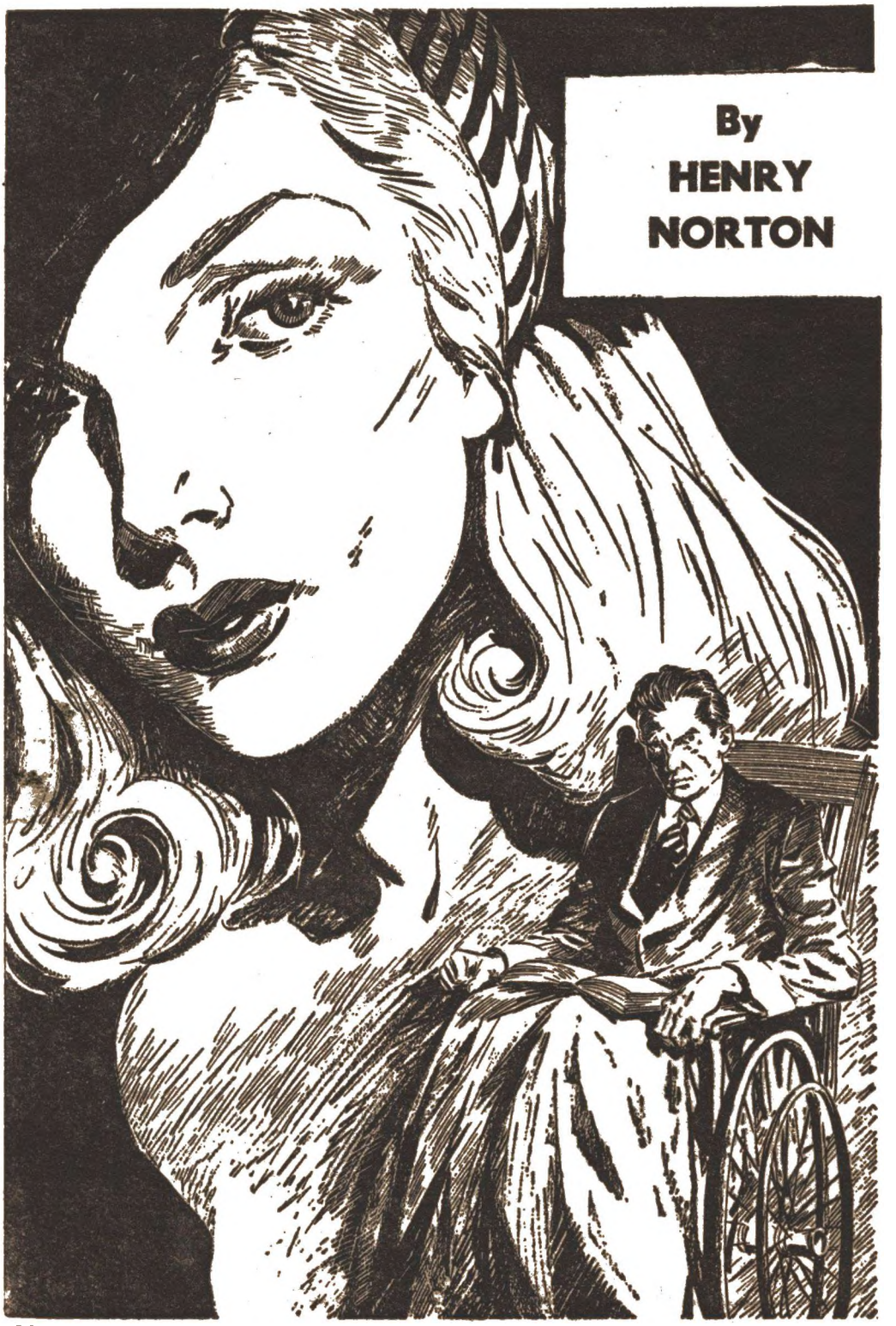
"DOCTOR SHERLOCK"

NEW YORK'S CHIEF MEDICAL EXAMINER, DR. CHARLES E. NORRIS, SPENT 18 YEARS CONVICTING THE GUILTY AND FREEING THE INNOCENT.

DR. NORRIS PROBABLY KNEW MORE ABOUT THE WHY AND HOW OF VIOLENT DEATH THAN ANY LIVING MAN. FROM THE NATURE OF WOUNDS ON A WOMAN'S HEAD HE SENT POLICE LOOKING FOR A PINT-SIZED MURDERER, AND FROM TEETH MARKS ON A TELEPHONE BOOK PUT THEM ON THE TRAIL OF A POWERFUL MANIACAL KILLER.

NORRIS PROVED THAT EWELL, THE SOCIETY BRIDGE EXPERT, DID NOT PUT A BULLET INTO HIS OWN FOREHEAD; AND HE SPOTTED THE HAMMERLOCK DOT KING RECEIVED BEFORE DEATH AS A VICIOUS ATTEMPT TO MAKE HER REVEAL SOMETHING.

FROM THE POSITION OF A CIGAR, A GUN AND THE COURSE OF 2 BULLETS, HE EXPOSED A PLOT TO MAKE A SUICIDE LOOK LIKE A MURDER — AND SEND A MAN WHO HAD SLEPT THROUGH IT ALL TO THE ELECTRIC CHAIR. "DR. SHERLOCK" LITERALLY MADE DEAD MEN TELL TALES!


By
HENRY
NORTON

HOUSE OF SILENT DEATH

Far below Inspiration Point, trapped in twisted steel, lay the bodies of Temple Snow and Irene Grayson . . . calling Sheriff Lovatt along the road to Bald Mountain, and the grim, silent world that lay beyond. . . .

A "Sheriff Lovatt" Crime Novelette

CHAPTER ONE

The House on Bald Mountain

"NOW, WATCH," Clete Parker said. He eased the car along the driveway until it was no more than ten feet from the garage door. At that point the garage door, one of the overhead kind, lifted quietly and soared up out of the way. Clete drove the car in and turned off the motor. He grinned at Sheriff Lovatt.

"How about that?" he said.

"How about what?" asked Lovatt.

"The garage door—the way it opened."

"Seemed to work all right."

What a dynamite pair they made, Sheriff Lovatt thought. Grayson, the crippled atom scientist, and Irene, his beautiful, man-crazy wife. . . .

"It opened itself."

The sheriff looked around casually, and then did a quick double-take. He got out of the car and looked at the garage door poised in its cradle on the ceiling. He looked back at his deputy.

"Who opened that door?" he demanded.

Black-haired Clete Parker threw back his head and laughed, pounding his doubled-up right fist against his thigh. It was rare enough that he got ahead of the gray little sheriff, and Lovatt's puzzlement now was a heady sort of victory.

"Come here and I'll show you."

Clete pulled the door down, and then walked back to the spot in the driveway where two slender steel poles raised themselves above the height of a tall man's head. There were glass lenses on each pole, pointing inward.

"Electric eye," Clete explained. "There's a beam of invisible light across there. When it's broken by the aerial of the car radio, it operates a small electric motor and raises the garage door. Slick, eh?"

Lovatt eyed him stonily.

"Craziest thing I ever heard!"

Clete stretched up his left hand and interrupted the course of the electronic beam. Behind them the door of the garage again moved smoothly up. The sheriff trotted quickly into the garage and looked in both corners by the door. Clete laughed again.

"No hidden accomplices," he said.

Sheriff Lovatt looked thoughtful. He pulled down the door and heard it latch. He came back to Clete.

"Do it with your other hand," he said.

Some of the amusement left Clete Parker's face. His left hand was one of the clever artificial members that a grateful government provided for those fighting men who had been unfortunate enough to lose one of their limbs in the recent war. Missing a hand had proved no handicap to Clete as a deputy sheriff—he was big, smart, and plenty of man. That Lovatt even remembered it now was proof that the sheriff was grasping at straws to explain the garage door's strange behavior.

But it made no difference. Clete's right hand broke the electronic beam, and again the garage door lifted. It was a common enough phenomenon in a city. To Lovatt, sheriff of Jefferson County, in the small logging town of Mill Center, it smacked of black magic.

"Where'd you get that thing?" he asked.

"Carl Grayson made it for me."

"[illegible]ayson? Oh, that young professor that built the house on top of Bald Mountain?"

"He's quite famous in electronic and nuclear research, you know," Clete said. "He was one of the main guys in the A-bomb experiment. Has a big laboratory in his house and still does a lot of work. Knows all about these things."

Lovatt digested this information silently, his small shrewd eyes studying the poles. "Well, if he's so blame smart," he said finally, "why didn't he put an electric eye rig in the far end of the garage, so when the car was clear in the door would close?"

Clete's jaw dropped. "My God," he said reverently.

He had no actual right to surprise; he'd seen it happen too many times before. But always the sharp direct thinking of Sheriff Lovatt was of the startling variety. Given a new and utterly foreign subject to consider, the sheriff's logical mind had cut unerringly to the heart of it and made an improvement.

IT WAS generally only in the presence of his deputy, Clete Parker, or of Coroner Del Moon, that Sheriff Lovatt thus exposed his mental powers. To the people of Mill Center he preferred to remain an unobtrusive elected officer of the law, going about his humdrum duties—getting them done always, but never in a spectacular fashion.

He was not an impressive figure, this man who had been sheriff of Jefferson County for twenty-seven years. He was small, wiry, dressed in rumpled gray, with a broad-brimmed hat set squarely on a narrow, contemplative face. His skin, his eyes, even his voice went along with the predominant grayness of his personality.

He was unobtrusive as mist along a gray stone wall; he made as little impression on those he met as was possible. And that non-impression was carefully calculated.

Lovatt had been sheriff for so long that most people had forgotten about him. It was not a populous community, and a more obvious figure would have been hit by political lightning long before. Lovatt owed his political longevity to his doing a good job in a quiet way, accepting neither praise nor blame for the job at hand. He knew the law, he knew his own powers; and he cared less for either of them than for a shadowy lady who was his constant companion—the lady men call Justice. If there was another influence in his life, it had never made itself manifest.

They closed the door and walked up the single flight of stairs to the sheriff's office. It wasn't much of a place—a three-room suite in the front corner of a gray, native stone courthouse, with cheap tables and chairs and a few unobtrusively sturdy file cases. Clete went to his desk and began working down through a thick pile of tax statements, but Lovatt stood for a while by the window, looking down into Wide Street.

"Clete," he said finally. "Tell me about this man. This Professor Grayson."

"Not much more to tell," Clete said. "He's

a cripple; some experiment blew up on him or something. He gets around the house in a wheel chair."

"What kind of experiment?"

"The A-bomb. I heard some place he's got radiation burns, and not much hope of getting well. Oh, he gets around the house all right, does a lot of work in his laboratory. He's even got ramps built outdoors so he can wheel himself around the yard if he wants to."

"Married?"

"Oh, sure."

Something in Clete's offhand answer brought the sheriff's eyes around in thoughtful appraisal. Lovatt said, "What's the wife like?"

Clete said quite rapidly, "She's a very beautiful blonde gal, with a shape that would make Methuselah get up and walk."

"How well do you know Grayson—and his wife?"

Clete's face reddened and he looked at Lovatt for a moment or two in silence, grinning the uneasy grin of a small boy caught in the act of swiping apples—not penitent, but abashed.

"There's nothing wrong about it," he said. "Carl encourages Irene to go out with other people, as long as he isn't able to take her himself. She isn't having an affair with anyone."

"Is he an old fellow?"

"Hell, no, he's about my age," Clete said. "Darn nice guy. Likes to sit around and chew the fat over a highball in the evening and plays about the worst bridge in town. You ought to meet him, Sheriff."

Lovatt said, "I'm going to, tonight."

He was thinking that trouble was on the make in that modern, white sprawling stucco house on top of Bald Mountain. Unnatural forces were at work. There was too much mastery of nature's secrets to please the quiet gray sheriff. Electronics, nuclear fission—they were meaningless babble to all but a small dispersed handful of men working in isolated laboratories around the earth's face. Yet from those abstract concepts and those modest workshops had been spawned the gutting of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the screaming murder of the rocket bombs, the killing power of the proximity fuse. No man should know so many ways to kill off his neighbors.

Clete made the needed arrangements, so that the sheriff's call would have no official appearance. They sent the little county car skimming up the twisted road to Bald Mountain at seven-thirty, and pulled up in front of Carl Grayson's home at eight. Lovatt got out and looked back down the road, where the lights of two following cars were tiny twin points of brightness against the massive backdrop of nightfall in the wooded hills.

"You c'n see pretty near all the road from here," said Lovatt, "from where it turns off the highway to where it pulls right in at the front door."

"That's one of the things he likes about the location," Clete said. "I don't know where else in the county he could've got such a view."

"Or such a crowd," Lovatt said sourly.

THERE WERE half a dozen cars parked around the curving drive in front of the house. Temple Snow's big Packard was at the head of the line, a maroon convertible with shining chrome and white sidewall tires. It represented the power of money in Mill Center, for the car was one of the first new models delivered, its delivery sped, according to report, by the hefty Snow bankroll.

There were other cars too: Jack Roberts', the Damons', lined up in order of arrival, and, significantly, a car for each of the young unmarried men. Each had come alone in his own car. As if, the sheriff thought, each of them had come out with the express intention of taking Irene Grayson away with him. Not the easiest situation in the world, Lovatt decided, no matter how platonic the lady's relations were.

It was Irene Grayson who met them at the door, opening it and releasing a burst of conversation and music from within. Clete Parker had made no mistake about her beauty. She wore a strapless evening gown of palest green that brought creamy color to her fair cheeks and lent enchantment to her honey-colored hair. Her smile was as warm for Sheriff Lovatt as if she had been greeting an old friend.

"I know lots about you!" she said gaily.

Lovatt turned a look of dourest suspicion toward Clete, and her laugh was a chime.

"Don't blame Clete," she said. "I looked you up. Do you realize—" she shook a half-mocking finger under his nose— "that this is just about the only county in the United States that hasn't had an unsolved crime for twenty-seven years?"

"Then I'm sure you looked it up, ma'am," said the sheriff evenly, "because your memory wouldn't cover anywhere near that many years."

Irene Grayson chuckled and took his arm. "Gallant!" she said. "My whole life barely covers twenty-seven years! Now come and meet Carl—he's dying to get acquainted!"

They walked through one world into another—from the almost feverish gaiety of the cocktail party in the living room into a spectacular aerie whose entire wall was glass, where a calm, dark-haired man sat in a wheelchair with his head framed against the shining blackness of the window glass. There was

a soft robe over his knees. A book lay face down in his lap. Carl Grayson's face was tired as he turned slowly to greet his guest, but his voice was strong and pleasant.

"Glad you came out, sir," he said.

Lovatt crossed the room to shake hands. There was steely strength in the man's hands, the deftness of hands that knew a delicate job and worked at it. Lovatt let his eyes move from the calm, friendly face to the racks and banks of equipment that filled the end of the room in orderly confusion.

"Wouldn't've missed it," said the sheriff. "You sure got a mess of equipment here, Mr. Grayson. Reckon you could make just about anything from a mousetrap to a machine gun."

"It's fairly complete," Grayson agreed, and the look of quiet pride in his eyes as they swept over his laboratory was the sort of regard a man usually reserves for a person he loves.

"Quite a gadget you made for Clete," said Lovatt.

"Did you like that? I've made a few small things for most of Irene's friends—a burglar alarm for the Damons, a spotlight for Temple Snow that follows the direction of his front wheels—I don't know what all. They're nice kids."

"Clete tells me you're one of the greatest men in the world."

"He's a little too kind," Grayson laughed. "And I suppose you know by now that my wife thinks you're one of the nation's great men too."

Lovatt nodded. "Ladies don't generally take much notice of law enforcement," he said. "I wonder if she's afraid of something?"

Silence followed the deliberate words, a silence that drew itself out infinitely fine until Grayson broke it with words equally deliberate.

"Are you, Irene?"

"Of course not!" she said. "Just interested in our local celebrity, is all. I—my guests will —you'll both excuse me, won't you?"

The door closed behind her, and the two men stared at one another for a moment. Then Grayson's face lined itself in a grin that was almost pure delight.

"You meet so few people who can carry a thought to a logical conclusion," he said. "Sit down, Sheriff!"

CHAPTER TWO

Plugging Rat Holes

CLETE knocked on the door an hour later. He found Grayson leaning back in his chair, talking animatedly to Lovatt. The sheriff was standing, looking down at the black landscape below, broken only at intervals by the moving lights of a car, far away and lost in immensity.

"Sorry to interrupt," Clete Parker said.

"Not at all," said Carl Grayson.

He turned back to Lovatt at once then. "But if that's the case, Sheriff, then there is no criminal class. Anyone can commit a crime!"

Lovatt said, "Not only can. Does."

"Nobody is above suspicion?"

The sheriff's face in the upthrown light of the desk lamps was curiously masklike. Long years of living in sun and wind and rain had failed to tan his skin. It had given his countenance a pervading grayness, so that in the upward striking light there was only composure, broken by the glinting slits of his alert eyes.

"There isn't any such thing as suspicion, really," he said. "Say there's a life-taking. Everyone who's been in contact with that life can have a reason for wanting it ended. Not just a burglar, or a jealous husband, or a mad killer—anybody. If you go into a case with that idea, you ain't so dang' likely to overlook the real killer."

Delightedly, Carl Grayson thumped the arm of his wheel chair. "But there isn't anybody thinks that way! You figure the three M's: motive, method and means. You must want to, you must have a way, you must have a weapon! That's standard police procedure."

"And a standard policeman couldn't find the seat of his pants with both hands!" said Sheriff Lovatt.

"Absolutely right," said Clete Parker.

They looked at him, and he realized that in spite of Grayson's greeting neither of them had realized he was there. Grayson mumbled something about did he want anything.

"Nothing special," Clete said. "Just dropped in to tell you two gossips that the party is breaking up, and how about heading back to town?"

"Breaking up, how?" asked Lovatt.

"Everybody is leaving."

"Is—I mean, what about—"

Clete picked up Grayson's words, casually as only a young voice can be casual. "Irene rode down to the town with Temple Snow to do a rhumba and eat a hamburger with chili. Jack and I are going to meet them at the Crossroad Tavern, then we'll be at Ethel's Allnight Lunch."

"That everybody?" Grayson asked dryly.

"Damon's taking a few more down," Clete said. "I just wondered if the sheriff wanted me to go back with him or was he going to stay a while."

"Go along with Jack Roberts," Sheriff Lovatt said. "I got a lot of unfinished talkin' to do."

"I was hoping for that!" Grayson said

heartily. "You'll find I can brew up a choice hamburger in my own fashion, sir, and it'll be a pleasure to have you here."

"Pleasure to be here," Lovatt said.

Clete Parker left soon thereafter, his going almost unnoticed in the intensity of the conversation. Grayson talked greedily, as if he had just discovered a common language with his guest. It was well toward morning before the little county car broke the majestic silence of the mountain top with the whir of its starter and Lovatt began his slow, precise drive down the twisting canyons toward Mill Center. Behind him in the great window of Grayson's study the lights winked out once, came on again in salute, and then went dark with an air of finality.

As dark, Lovatt thought to himself, conning the small car around the dangerous grades, as utterly dark as the inside of the human brain.

SHERIFF Lovatt went home, but not to sleep. The talk had not been confined to law enforcement, although Carl Grayson had been far better able than the average man to bring out the sheriff's theories on that subject. But shot through their conversation had been things from the scientist's own mental storehouse: casual mention of the coming of interplanetary travel, or robot planes and rockets, of atomic warheads large enough to destroy great cities, of walls of force and death rays and underground homes and weather control and medical wizardy—the whole glittering cavalcade of science so simply and casually expressed that it had taken on the world-destroying implication of a Wagnerian opera.

Lovatt got up and dressed at dawn, the sleepless night having brought no sign of fatigue to his face. He went into Ethel's All-nite and breakfasted on steak, wheat cakes and fried eggs, topping off the meal with a wedge of Ethel's apple pie. Then he filled his pipe and smoked, leaning back in the small booth and staring at the heavy coffee cup in front of him.

Temple Snow found him there.

Temple Snow, with his blond hair still slickly combed on a well-shaped head, with his white grin as quick and friendly as ever, but with a rapidly swelling bruise under one eye and a darkening lump on his jaw. He stood a moment at the door of the small lunchroom, then came over and slumped in the booth.

"Your deputy's got a wallop," he said.

"Clete give you the shiner?"

"Hell, no," said Snow. "We were on the same side. Brothers in strife, you might say. I was in for somewhat of a trouncing till Clete gave me a hand."

"Mind sayin' what it was about?"

"Clete'll tell you anyway," said Temple. "We had a few drinks at the Crossroad and Jack Roberts got a little top-heavy. Started making a heavy pass at Irene Grayson. So I remonstrated, and got slugged for it. Clete stepped in then and polished off Jack."

"This is at the Crossroad Tavern?"

Snow nodded, then leaned across the table. "The woman hadn't ought to drink," he said. "She was getting a little—well, silly. But nobody but a louse like Jack Roberts would try to take advantage of it. I took her home right after that."

"Was Grayson up?"

"I didn't see him. I just unlocked the door—she seemed to be all right by that time—and said good-night to her without going in."

"Hell of a mess," said Lovatt sourly.

"Nothing to worry about," said Temple Snow.

"You make an enemy of an ex-prizefighter, Jack Roberts. You involve my deputy in a fight in a tavern. You quarrel over a married woman and then take her home drunk. And it's nothing to worry about!"

"Well, I'm sorry about Clete, but the rest of it doesn't matter," Snow said. "I'll take my chances with Jack Roberts any day—and the rest of it."

"Looks like you'll have to," Lovatt said.

Snow touched his bruised jaw thoughtfully and grinned his disarming grin. "Maybe you better lend me Clete for a bodyguard," he said.

"Clete's gonna be busy," the sheriff grunted.

He went out without any more words and climbed the steps to his office. It was early, but he counted on the inverted time of celebrants to help him as he called the Crossroad Tavern and he was not disappointed.

"You're closed," he said tersely.

The indignant proprietor sputtered demands for an explanation. Lovatt listened unmoved, waiting for the excited man to finish talking.

"There's no reason," Lovatt said, "except I don't like your kind of business in this county. So just close up for a while. Maybe you c'n open later, if you run a decent place."

He turned from the phone to find that Clete Parker had come into the office and had heard all of the conversation. Clete looked at him uneasily.

"That wasn't morals or ethics, Clete," Lovatt said quietly. "My job's to prevent trouble in this county. If that place keeps runnin', it'll start trouble. That's why I shut it down."

"Seems like making a fool of myself is just about the best thing I do," Clete said.

"Mmmm." The sheriff's dry voice was noncommittal. "Clete, I've been thinkin' it'd be a

good idea to get the county tax roll out a few weeks early this year. S'pose you get right to work on it? I figure you c'n manage it in a week."

"A week, yeah, if I work night and day," Clete said. He grimaced then, realizing what Lovatt was up to. "Okay, Sheriff, I'll have it in a week."

Lovatt nodded. He'd plugged as many rat holes as he could without bringing things too much in the open. If trouble was coming now, it'd just have to come.

GRAYSON called two days later with a cordial invitation to spend an afternoon, and Lovatt sensed an urgency behind the man's casual words. The sheriff found Grayson in his wheel chair on a flagged patio overlooking the valley. A pair of powerful binoculars lay in his lap. He waved genially as the sheriff came up.

"Like to inspect your domain?" he asked.

The sheriff took the glasses.

"If it was really mine," he said, "I'd do some fixin'."

Lazily, Grayson said, "Like a certain king."

"Spanish feller," said Lovatt. "Said if he'd been present at the Creation, there'd been a number of things he could've improved."

He surveyed the scene below with calm attention.

"When do you get time to read?" Grayson asked.

"Guard rail needs fixin' on Inspiration Point," Lovatt muttered. "Read? Oh, I don't read so much, but I generally remember what I do read."

"Principle of complete utilization," Grayson said. "Very sound. By the way, I made one of those following spot lights for your car, like I did for Snow. Thought you might like it."

"Nice of you."

Grayson grinned. "Have to keep busy at something," he said. He pressed a button on the arm of his wheel chair. A few seconds later a small metal box near his head spoke in Irene Grayson's voice.

"What is it, dear?"

"Would you bring some drinks, and that gadget for Mr. Lovatt?"

"Oh, is he here? How nice."

The sheriff stared at the compact metal box.

"Quite a gadget," he said.

"Almost the same as a walkie-talkie," Grayson explained. "We have them in several places around the house. I'm often in need of service, you see."

There was no bitterness in his voice, nothing but a calm acceptance of fact. Certainly, Lovatt thought, the man could not be accused of helplessness.

Irene Grayson came toward them across the flagstones. She wore a hostess gown that brushed the stones, with wide flowing sleeves to her wrists. She greeted the sheriff with frank pleasure. She set the tray down and took both of his hands warmly.

"You're good for this house!" she said.

Her sleeve fell away from her slim arms and Lovatt saw four dark bruises on the white flesh, as they would have been made by the crushing grip of an angry man's hand. He let his glance linger, deliberately, until her own eyes followed his. She looked back at him, levelly.

"I hope to be good for any house," said Lovatt.

Grayson said crisply, "Will you make a drink, dear?"

"I'll make three," she said.

The spotlight was a sealed, streamlined affair of shining chrome and frosty glass. Carl Grayson propelled himself down to the sheriff's car, cut deftly into the wiring system and installed the light. It was miraculous to watch his hands in action—swift, sentient fingers raced through the manipulation of tools and gear.

When he was done he turned and grinned at Sheriff Lovatt. "There," he said. "Hope you like it."

The sheriff handed him the binoculars.

"Like to inspect your domain?" he said.

Carl Grayson took the glasses, and for a long and quiet moment the two men looked at each other, unsmiling.

* * *

"Yes," Clete said sullenly. "I bruised her arm!"

The sheriff had returned to town about dinnertime, and gone straight to his office. Clete was still there, working on the diminishing pile of tax estimates. Lovatt had not accused his deputy of causing the marks on Irene Grayson's arm. He had simply stated that the marks were there, and then waited. Clete's confession came at once.

Lovatt said, "Mind tellin' me why?"

"She was going to kill her husband," Clete said. "She'd had a drink too many, and it just seemed like she went crazy. We were in the kitchen, and she picked up a knife and started toward the laboratory,"

"What'd she say?"

Clete shook his head. "Sheriff, she gets crazy when she drinks. Something about not going to put up with his threats any longer. You know, I think that accident he had must've—well, it's changed their marriage in more ways than one. Wrecked it, I guess."

"Clete, why didn't you tell me this?"

Clete Parker's black brows drew into a straight hard line above his eyes. "Because I wasn't supposed to be going out there," he

said. "You put me to work on the taxes so I wouldn't have time to go out. But I went anyway."

"Why?"

"That damn' Jack Roberts!" Clete burst out. "You remember how Temple got his black eye. So now he's got the idea all he has to do is pour the drinks and—"

"You're gettin' all mixed up," said Lovatt. "Why not simmer down. I ain't mad about your goin' up there, I halfway expected that. But not tellin' me is different."

"Carl Grayson called me last night," Clete said. "Told me Roberts'd been out there and they'd had a lot of drinks, and would I please come out. So I went."

"All right," Lovatt said. "I was just askin'."

The office phone shrilled.

Clete picked it up, answered three times with an affirmative monosyllable and slammed the receiver down. "Again," he said. He looked at Lovatt accusingly. "It only takes one or two drinks to get her started."

"He want you to come out?"

"Right away!" Clete said.

He started for the door, and the sheriff caught his arm. "A few minutes won't matter." He launched into a rapid and detailed account of the protest Banker Chamberlain had made about his tax statement. Clete went to his desk for a pencil to note the details and five minutes went by.

Then Lovatt said, "Okay, go ahead now."

Clete was halfway down the steps to the street floor when the explosion came. It was from behind the courthouse, and Lovatt and Clete Parker rounded the corner at about the same time, to find the county garage a mass of smoking ruin. Inside the collapsed structure the county truck was burning with bright violence.

"You leave a cigarette in the pickup?" Lovatt demanded.

"I don't think—I couldn't have," Clete said. "I haven't had it out for an hour, and a cigarette would've burned itself out in that time!"

"Make sure!" said Lovatt urgently.

"I couldn't have," said Clete. "I can remember now. I smoked one, and threw it out a block before I drove in. Sheriff, who could've done this?"

"Most anybody," Lovatt said.

Del Moon, the county coroner, came up the basement stairs from his own office and stood blinking at the wreckage like some great bear aroused from hibernation. He shambled closer and peered at the burning truck.

"Anybody hurt?" he said.

"Happened just as we were comin' down," Lovatt told him. "Somebody must be mad at us. Wonder if it could be that tavern guy?"

"At the Crossroads?" Clete leaped at the idea. "You shut him down, didn't you? By the Lord, I think I'll go out and knock some onswers out of him, the—"

"Hold your horses," said the sheriff. "Del, you mooch around and see what you c'n find out about this. Clete, you take my car an' go on where you were goin'. Likely it's time for you to be there if you're gonna be any help to anybody."

Moon looked after the departing Clete.

"You think the tavern guy done it?"

Lovatt said, "Del, I don't know. I'm up against somethin' that's too big for me, an' that's a fact."

Moon said casually, "Well, it'll shrink or you'll stretch, one or t'other."

It was midnight when Clete came back. He stopped by the sheriff's home, and found the gray little man in front of a fire with slippers and pipe. Lovatt listened to Clete's unremarkable story of the evening's events with grave attention, shaking his head a little when he found that the situation at Grayson's had called for no such heroic measures as it might have.

He filled his pipe anew, puffed it into life, and rubbed the gleaming bowl of the briar against the side of his nose thoughtfully. He held the dark wood up and inspected the shine that the oil of his skin had given to the polished surface of the pipe.

"Clete," he said, "hell's gonna open."

CHAPTER THREE

Smashup

IT DID, quite suddenly and horribly, two days later, and it came in a manner he had not anticipated. He had sent Clete out in the afternoon to repair the guard rail on the twisting road that led up to Grayson's mountainous retreat. He had assumed that Clete would seize that opportunity of calling on Irene Grayson, as long as his duty led him so close, and he had seen nothing greatly wrong in that. The kid had been putting in long hours on the tax reports. He deserved some fun.

There wasn't any fun in Clete Parker as he brought the road truck to a screaming stop in front of the courthouse and came leaping up the stairs.

"They went into the canyon!" he said hoarsely. "Get Del Moon and come on! I've got a wrecker coming from Jackson's, but it's no good, Sheriff! Their car must've rolled over fifty times!"

"Who went into the canyon?"

"Temple Snow—Irene was with him! Just below the curve where I was fixing that guard rail. Jack Roberts is climbing down to the car,

but there isn't a chance in hell of their being alive."

"Anybody call Grayson?"

Clete said, "Not till we know for sure—"

Lovatt shouted for Del Moon as they reached the bottom of the stairs. They ran to Lovatt's little car at the curb, and by the time the sheriff had kicked the motor to life the bulky coroner was climbing into the back seat with his medical kit.

"What's up?" he said wheezily.

"Accident on Bald Mountain Road," said Lovatt.

"Smashup?"

"Went off Inspiration Point," Clete said.

"Oh, Oh!" Moon said. "Know the name of the corpse?"

Clete winced but did not turn around. "It's Temple Snow and Irene Grayson," he said. "I was working on the guard rail a hundred yards above there. They waved as they went down, and then Jack Roberts came up the hill just about the time I heard the car go over."

"Inspiration Point," Moon grumbled. "So I have to crawl down a five-hundred-foot canyon to give an accidental death verdict I could give right now."

"How do you know it's accidental?" asked Lovatt.

"Hell, they wouldn't do it on purpose!"

"It coulda been done to 'em."

Silence rode with them in the little car then, as it climbed the winding road to Inspiration Point and sudden death. Del Moon digested the sheriff's terse comment, staring thoughtfully off to the left where the canyou deepened as they climbed.

Jack Roberts' car was still parked close to the curve, a little above it, and it had been joined now by another car, pointing down the grade. Ray Damon and his wife stood by the highway shoulder, looking down into the rugged fold of the canyon below.

"Where's Roberts?" asked Lovatt.

Ann Damon pointed down to where in the dimming light of day Jack's heavy figure could be seen, edging through the tangled brush about halfway to the maroon car that lay like a crumpled toy far below them.

"Hasn't he got there yet?" Clete snapped.

"That's quite a climb," Damon pointed out.

"But he started down the same time I started back for help," Clete said. "Hell, I wish I'd sent him back now. I'd've been down there."

"You c'n start now," said Lovatt. "With Moon."

Del Moon sighed and took his small black medical kit from the seat of the car. He shambled. to the road's edge, gave one last pained look at the steep slope below, and plunged over the side. He strode carelessly down," with great bearlike strides.

He looked like a bear, this gruff, unpleasant man whom Lovatt kept on and on as coroner of the county. Del Moon had been starving in private practice when Lovatt became sheriff, starving because no one would voluntarily take his ills to the caustic, cynical doctor who looked and acted like an angry bartender. Del Moon had been coroner of the county ever since. He was a brilliant diagnostician and a shark at autopsy, and his loyalty to Sheriff Lovatt was fierce and unswerving.

Lovatt prowled along the edge of the road until he found the marks where the car had gone over. The downhill lane was on the outside of a long curve; it took but a small deflection—or the lack of it—to send the car crashing into the flimsy guard rail. Properly, it was not a rail but a steel cable set in ring bolts with sturdy posts every twenty feet. Three posts had been uprooted and the cable snapped where the big convertible had started its downward plunge. Judging from the tracks, the car had simply swerved into the fence. There were no skid marks.

Ray Damon came down to where the sheriff stood.

"Anybody know how it happened?" he asked.

Lovatt shook his head. "Clete an' Jack both saw the car just before it went over, but they didn't see it go."

Damon said, "Anybody told—Grayson?"

The sheriff squinted over his shoulder. Far up the rise of the mountain, situated where the windows looked down on this curve—on most of the road—he could see Grayson's big white house. He jerked a thumb at it.

"Don't imagine anybody needs to," he said softly.

They watched then, not talking, while Roberts ripped through the last fringe of brush, scrambled down a sheer rock wall to the ultimate bottom of the incline, and came to the car. So swiftly had Clete Parker and Del Moon gone down that they were beside him by the time he had pried open the battered door of the convertible to peer under the crushed-in top.

Del Moon shouldered both the younger men aside. He thrust his arm within the car, and for a moment was motionless. Then he turned and made an unmistakable sign to the watchers up on the road. A sob caught in Ann Damon's throat.

Both dead then. It was the only outcome possible, considering the shattering fall of the maroon convertible from the highway to the rocks below. Both dead; who could have survived such a crash? But in Lovatt's mind a slow rage began to burn, a fury against any act of God or man that could so wantonly bring extinction to two human beings. It was, the sheriff supposed, his own fear of death

that expressed itself in this utter hatred of man's mortality, in the determination that if blame could be assigned, the death would be repaid.

Lovatt went to his car. No need to tell Del Moon what to do next. Moon was an old hand at this; he'd take care of getting the bodies out, of all the details. And the bright convertible, symbol of wealth and authority, would rust in the canyon bottom, robbed of any chance parts left undamaged enough to be worth the taking. An ironic comment on man's pretensions, a sort of sermon in twisted steel. Thinking in this vein, not in words but in the sense of the thoughts only, the sheriff drove on up to the house on Bald Mountain.

Carl Grayson was out on the front porch to greet him. The man had wheeled his chair down the front ramp to the low patio that bordered the drive. There was anxiety in his face, in the quick flow of his words.

"Was it Temple's car that went over? Irene —?"

The sheriff walked over to Grayson before he answered. His face was solemn. "Both gone," he said. There was no shock to his voice; it was cool, pitying.

"I was almost sure," Grayson said.

He brought his fine hands up to cover his face.

Lovatt's words tore them away.

"It could've been done three ways," he said. "It was not an accident. It was murder."

THEY WAITED then, sitting in the laboratory that commanded a view of the falling valley below, that looked out over the folded hills until far away and almost gone from sight was the sullen wink of the sea. They sat with binoculars that brought the canyon bottom hatefully close to view and watched while stretchers were manned and the slow toilsome process began of moving the bodies to the highway. When the caravan of cars had begun their journey up toward the house, Grayson began talking.

"I'm afraid I know what they've found," he said. "Her overnight bag, packed. She was going away with him. She almost told me so before they left. Almost. . . ."

"The Damons were here?"

"They left a few minutes later. Ray isn't one to hurry over his drink. But I don't think they knew what was going on. It was—well, civilized."

"Wasn't it?" said Lovatt's biting voice. "So civilized you may not be able to recognize your own wife when they bring her body up here!"

He looked long and somberly into the man's stricken eyes and then went out to greet the others. The stretchers were covered. Moon gave him a hopeless look as the men he had summoned carried them in and set them on the floor.

"Ripped to ribbons," he said. "Both of them."

"What'd you expect?" asked Lovatt.

He made no effort to move the canvas from the bodies. He made a beckoning motion that brought them all with him into the laboratory, leaving the stretchers and their bearers in the outer room. There was Jack Roberts, and the Damons, and Del and Clete. Grayson gave them his broken greeting, then was silent.

"It could've happened this way," Sheriff Lovatt said sourly. "Jack Roberts was comin' up. He could've nudged 'em off the road."

"You serious?" Clete said.

"Clete, I been tellin' you murder don't just happen," Lovatt said. "It has to live in a man's mind till he figures he can get away with it. Then all rules are off and anybody is a killer."

"You're crazy," Jack Roberts said harshly. "I'd ought to beat your silly ears off. What in hell makes you think I cared about the—"

Clete Parker's doubled fist caught the last word before it could be offered and rammed it back down the man's throat. Jack ducked and countered instinctively, bringing a ham-like hand against the deputy's jaw. Lovatt moved then.

One slashing hand came down on Clete's nose, and the black-haired deputy collapsed in stinging, eye-watering rage against a chair on the corner. The smooth side of the sheriff's gun-barrel smacked across Roberts' temple, and the ex-fighter slumped down, not out, but dazed. Lovatt bared his teeth as he talked to them then.

"I didn't say that's the way it happened," he said. "Damn it, Clete, there was an anchor rock across the road. You coulda pulled that guard cable tight and shunted 'em off the road, just as easy as Jack coulda crowded 'em off."

Angrily, the deputy said, "So why would I?"

"Read Aldous Huxley," the sheriff snapped, and then suddenly Grayson's dry chuckle filled the room. The sheriff turned to look at him. He motioned to Del Moon.

"Del," he said, "take Jack and Clete under arrest, and take 'em to jail now, in the ambulance. You can come back and get the bodies."

Moon blinked at the sheriff once. Then his ill-tempered face broke into a grin of surprising warmth. "I been waitin' for this day," he said. "Come along, you two characters, or I'll bump your heads together an' tote you in piggy-back!"

When all the others had gone, Lovatt said quietly, "It was a rough way to die—like she'd been rolled around in a drum full of broken glass."

Calmly, Grayson said, "Pretty bad, I guess."

"I haven't looked and I won't," said Lovatt. "I want to remember her warm and young and—well, maybe a bit man-crazy, but glowingly alive and full of warmth and youth and love."

"Stop it, will you!" Grayson raged at him suddenly.

"Then tell me," Lovatt said.

"I knew she was going with Snow," said Grayson.

"There isn't much you don't know," Lovatt said.

Grayson smiled, and there was a chilling, merciless quality in his smile. "What I didn't know," he said, "was that I'd bump up against somebody like you, Lovatt."

"Suppose you tell me," said Lovatt.

"All right," said Grayson. "I put a small explosive device in the spotlight for Temple's car. It could be set off by remote control. Remember the proximity fuse?"

"I've heard of it," Lovatt said. "They used 'em in the war."

"Just enough to blow off his front wheel," Grayson said. "I could watch the car and time it from here. You can't let a woman like that get away from you, Sheriff."

"I wouldn't know."

"So when I knew she was going, finally, I blew them over Inspiration Point. The smashup would destroy all trace of the explosion. I timed it so Clete or Roberts could be suspected, but I didn't think you'd arrest them."

"I sent them down in the only car you hadn't tampered with," said Lovatt. "The Damons', Snow's, my own, you've put gadgets on. Like you did in that garage door opener that you tried to kill Clete with. If I hadn't made him stop and talk, you'd have got him then."

Grayson shrugged. "I was jealous," he said. "He was young. He was virile. But it doesn't matter now. I suppose you know I'm going to kill you as you drive back to town?"

"I know you're plannin' to," said Lovatt. "But I don't think you will, Grayson. There's only one thing in the world more explosive than the A-bomb, an' that's the human mind. You've done two killings. You can do more. But if you do, it'll gain you nothing, neither safety nor profit nor the peace of mind you want for your last few hours. You've outlawed yourself, Grayson. There's only one answer to that and, knowing you, I think you've planned for it."

He shook hands with the quiet man then, and went out. He drove down the winding road, knowing that his life depended every second on the pressure of Grayson's hand on a tiny switch. He came to Inspiration Point at dusk, and stopped his car.

Behind him the far windows blinked dark, then light, then dark again in salute. Behind him the house and part of Bald Mountain lifted in a blast that must have been a little like Hiroshima. Lovatt clamped his teeth on his lower lip and drove into Mill Center, the crimeless city.

THE END

IT COMES UP DEATH!

Tommy Brady saw the intentness, deep down in the glittering eyes. It wasn't the stakes and he knew it. Gypsy John worshipped the game.

By

DAN GORDON

The nervous clicking of dice was the only sound in the cabin when Tommy Brady rolled those coffin cubes—and bet his life they'd come up.

"New shoes on big feet,
Movin' uptown;
Corn pone and pigs' feet
In mah backgroun'. . . ."

TOMMY BRADY grinned and waved amiably to the Negro piano player across the midway. The boy was plenty good. Tommy spun the wheel, listening while the beat rose to eight, and made a mental note to add a few more pieces—make it a regular band—just as soon as he could get his mitts on the carnival and get rid of Papa Bob.

The wheel slowed, stopped, "And the number's ten!" Tommy said.

The stout woman in front of the board looked disappointed and nudged her companion. "They do it with magnets," she

whispered, and put another dime on number three.

Smiling at her, Tommy twirled the wheel again, and, looking beyond the pair, saw the two men with the quick eyes and white faces. They stood out, here. They wouldn't have been noticed in the East, where they called it Carnival, but here, where it was Fiesta, Tommy cast them a wary glance.

"And it comes up two!" Tommy Brady said.

The woman looked at him reproachfully and towed the man away.

Tommy swept up the coin, spun the wheel and turned to the men. "Nevada?" he said.

"Now and then," one of them said.

"What makes you think—" the other said belligerently.

"Easy," Tommy told him. "While I was still in the high chair they gave me a chuck-o-luck cage, told me it was a rattle."

"Bright boy," the man said approvingly. "How's the grift?"

"No grift. Every wheel on the lot is straight."

They looked at each other. "Think of that," one said mockingly.

"Except this one," Tommy told him. "Once a night I drag it when the boss comes by. I can't hit it every time, but he wins a kewpie every three-four days."

"A kewpie?" the man said.

"Yeah. One o' them dolls. When he gets a trailer full, his old lady dusts off a few and gives 'em back to me. He never notices."

"Sounds screwy."

"Uh-uh. He's a nice old guy. Gives him a lotta pleasure. Makes him think he's a fool for luck. Everybody on the lot knows about it, 'cept him."

"Well, well," the man said. "A carnival with straight wheels—an' the owner wins kewpies."

Tommy got the tone, not liking it. He looked over their heads, seeing Sunny Dunne up on the platform in front of the peep-show. Her father, Papa Bob, wouldn't let her dance inside, but she looked nice up there on the platform. "That's the way it is," he said flatly, looking at them again.

"What number's your boss play?"

"Nine."

"An' where might we meet this sterling character?"

"Trailer," Tommy said. "Over there."

The barker at the peep-show finished his spiel and Sunny came over with a coat draped light on her shoulders. "Who're the boys?" Sunny asked.

"I'd be the last guy to use you for a shill," Tommy said, "but as long as you're standin' here—" He slid a dime on the five and twisted the wheel. It whirred busily.

"Never saw 'em before," Tommy said. "They're dealers, though—or have been. I can spot a dealer from here to the ferris wheel."

Sunny said, "You know Gypsy John Morley?"

"My old man did. I never saw him."

"Look over there."

The man wore black. All but his shirt. The shirt was white. Tommy Brady couldn't see the face in the shadow of the hat-brim. "I doubt it," said Tommy. "Gypsy John wouldn't come to a carnival. Not even if you call it a Fiesta."

"He's to this one," Sunny said. "Used to see him when I danced in the place on Sunset Strip."

The man called Gypsy John sauntered into the crowd and Tommy lost sight of him. The piano moved to a sensual beat and Sunny Dunne skipped off to entice the yokels. Tommy kept the wheel going, getting a little play now. Later, it would be better.

WATCHING the trailer, he saw Papa Bob Dunne open the door for the men. He waited, not long, and then he grinned a little when the door flung open and the two men spewed forth, aided by the foot of Papa Bob. They sprawled in the dust, then got up, brushing their clothing as they slunk off to lose themselves in the early crowd. Admiring Papa Bob's ability as a bouncer, Tommy thought of hiring him—after he'd clipped him for the carnival, of course. . . .

"And a kewpie for the lady," Tommy Brady said. "Or would you prefer a lighthouse, madame?"

She took the lighthouse and that was to the good. The kewpies cost half a cent more. A rancher came up in his Sunday suit and laid a dime on the nine. Tommy turned the wheel and watched it spin and he didn't drag it at all. The man grinned self-consciously and took himself away.

Arranging the prizes, Tommy didn't hear the step. He heard the coin on the oilcloth. Turning, he saw the white-faced man, the dime on number nine.

He wondered where the other one was, and why this one's yen for a kewpie. "Want to see how an honest wheel looks when it spins?"

This guy needs a kewpie doll; he needs a kewpie doll bad, Tommy told himself.

The man said nothing.

With the little eyes unwinkingly on him, Tommy spun the wheel. It whirred smoothly, its colors blending in the dazzle of speed. He dragged it, then, and it slowed, went slower still—and stopped with the arrow on nine.

"And it comes up—" Tommy started the cry. A winner was good for the play. The

gun whammed sharp and hard in his ears and it drowned out the name of the number.

The plaster toe of the kewpie was gone, and so was the white-faced man. Tommy leaned over the counter and saw him, down in the dust for the second time that night. Only this time he wouldn't get up: "It comes up death," Tommy whispered. The man in the dust said nothing.

The crowd, forming quickly, blocked the path of the near-sighted sheriff. Fumbling through the crowd, he made it at last and stood peering over the counter at Tommy. "Thought I heard a shot," he said.

"That ain't a welcome mat you got your feet on," Tommy said. "Get off that body."

The sheriff stepped back. Then he leaped back, forcing a muttered protest from the stepped-on members of the group. Looking down at the body, he was mopping his brow when Papa Bob ambled up.

"Who got 'im, Tommy?" the carnival owner said.

Tommy lifted his shoulders. "Dunno, Papa Bob. Slug came from in back of the wheel. I heard it whistle. The gun's here," he added, touching it with his toe.

The sheriff circled the body and climbed the counter and stood looking down at the gun. "Where'd it come from?"

"Somebody threw it from in back."

"Doubt if it's got any fingerprints then."

"Probably not," Tommy said. Walking to the rear of the tent, he found the new slit in the canvas. "Take a look here," he called.

"Seems to me—" the sheriff began. But the excited chatter of the crowd drowned his voice.

Thoughtfully, Tommy crouched, sighting past the wheel toward the midway. There were two thin walls of canvas and each had been cut. A line projected through the two openings would pass through the nine-square on the board. Drawing Papa Bob aside, he said, "Right in line with the nine. And a guy looking through the holes wouldn't be down far enough to see the face."

"So?" said Papa Bob.

"So the guy who shot this lug wasn't aimin' at him. He was gunnin' for *you*."

"Wasn't anywhere around," Papa Bob said unbelievingly.

"I know. I know. But I saw you say goodbye to the boys when they flew outa your trailer. They had it fixed to knock you off. They couldn't see your face, but the first guy to win on number nine was gonna get it. White-face there, he was supposed to bet on number nine so that his partner could line up the gun. But some rube bet on the number first, and when white-face won, his pal let him have it, thinking it was you. You should have acted nicer to 'em, Papa Bob. . . ."

Papa Bob said softly, fiercely, "Whatdya want? I should shake hands with 'em? I told them I didn't want to sell. They started to get tough."

"They wanted to buy the carney?" Thinking of the sleepless nights he'd spent clipping the yokels in the towns they'd passed through, Tommy had trouble controlling his voice.

It wasn't a play he'd dreamed up suddenly. He'd been working on it for a year, sitting in on all-night sessions in the poolrooms and bars of the little towns, quietly buying up the mortgages outstanding on Papa Bob's equipment.

He had nothing against the old man except Papa Bob's Sunday-school prejudice against gambling on the lot. Even that was to the good. It meant that the carney had a good reputation wherever it had been. The better to shear the sheep, once he got rid of Papa Bob. . . .

Moving closer, Tommy heard Papa Bob talking to the sheriff.

"Damn right," Papa Bob was saying. "I'd kick 'em out again."

"Sounds bad," the sheriff said.

Tommy, looking at the wheel, at the unlucky nine, moodily shifted his gaze and stared at the mob in the midway. The old man didn't have sense enough to clam up. Some friend should put him wise. But the hell with that. The friendship gag was overworked.

"You mind if I close up?" Tommy said to Papa Bob.

"Why, I dunno, Tommy. We need everything we can get. Got a note coming due on the first."

Wondering what the old man would think if he knew his wheelman held the note, Tommy said, "Won't be much play tonight—with stray bullets flying around."

"Where you goin'?"

"Oh—around." First, thought Tommy grimly, I'm going to find out who's barging in on my set-up. Then I'm going to stop him.

"I guess it'll be all right."

"Thanks," Tommy said. He cleared the counter at a bound and trotted for the tent that housed the peep show. Behind him he heard the voice of the sheriff raised in dubious protest.

Sunny grabbed for a robe as he barged past the screen. "Hey!" she cried.

"Turn off the modesty," Tommy said. "No time for it. Slide into something slinky and we'll go see your friend, Gypsy John."

"But why?"

Tommy, pacing to the other side of the screen, talked through it while she dressed. "When Gypsy John and two hoods show up on the same night at a carnival, and one of the hoods gets shot, there's some connection.

First, we find out what Gypsy John's angle is. We'll see what gives after that."

Sunny came from behind the screen and said, "We'd best be careful, Tommy."

Seeing it there in her eyes, he knew that she wasn't afraid for herself, but for him. Not liking it that way, he said, "Don't go sentimental on me, baby. I don't buy that taffy."

"I forgot," she said, smiling at him. "But I don't think you're as grim as you sound. Inside, I mean."

"Skip it. We visit Gypsy John."

"Where?"

"He runs a gambling ship off the coast, don't he?"

"Yes."

"Then we go there. If he's not there yet, he'll be there before the night's over."

THERE wasn't a moon, but they could see the cluster of lights in the blackness. Tommy helped Sunny Dunne down into the speedboat. He found seats for them between two couples in evening clothes and watched while the man in the yachting cap gunned the engine and twisted the wheel. The bow came up and the wake streamed aft, dim white and phosphorescent. "A hell of a place to pitch a carnival," Tommy said with a grin.

The gambling ship rode smoothly on the long ocean swells. Standing in the main game room, Tommy eyed the layout appreciatively.

"Class," he said. "Solid class."

"It's beautiful," Sunny agreed.

A man came up with a white-toothed smile. He kept it on even after he looked at Tommy's shoes. "Good evening," he said. "May I help you?"

"I want to see Gypsy John."

"Of course. And your business?"

Tommy decided the smile was permanent. "Dealer," he said. "Tell him I'm the hottest wheelman Colossal Carnival's got."

"Carnival?" the man said. The smile spread —not much, but some. "I'll see if he's on board," he said.

With his dusty shoes on the thick blue carpet, Tommy Brady felt much at home. He smiled at Sunny, liking the way she looked in the gown, liking the nervous click of the dice, the softly chiming cocktail glasses. "It's a carnival," he said. "Classy, but carnival."

The man with the patented smile came back, moving easily through the crowd. His voice was the same, but faint surprise showed around the edges. "He'll see you," he said. "Follow me, if you please."

Gypsy John was small and dark, with black and brilliant eyes. He held the chair for Sunny and said, "Wheelman." He said it cordially, pleasantly. "You looking for work?"

"No," Tommy said. "I came to tell you about your boys."

"Boys?" said Gypsy John.

"The two you sent to the carnival tonight. One of them is dead." Watching the face with its sardonic smile, its pleasant lines, Tommy thought of his father.

"So?" Gypsy John said.

It wasn't going well, not well at all. Tommy Brady looked at Sunny and seated himself on the edge of the desk. "Cubey Brady was my father. I think you knew each other."

"Cubey Brady! Why didn't you say so? I took him once for a hundred grand."

Tommy grinned. The old friendship routine —enough to turn your stomach. . . . "I know," Tommy said. "And he won it right back again."

"That's right," said Gpysy John, his eyes turning inward. "I had forgotten about that."

"About those boys—"

"Yes? What happened?"

"Dopey," Tommy told him. "Clumsy as they could be. They planned to knock off the boss, pin the rap on me. Your orders?"

Gypsy John shook his head impatiently. "Go on," he said. "What happened?"

"Well, they gave the old man a pitch about buying the carney. He must have thrown them out. So one of 'em drifts behind the canvas. Early in the evening, before they tip their hands, I tell them how the boss always plays the nine. Every evening he plays the nine. Fine. One guy drifts behind the canvas, the other one is supposed to move out front, in line with the nine-square, so the guy in back with the gun can check his position. . . ."

"Fools," Gypsy John said bitterly.

"Unlucky, too," Tommy said. "Some yokel breezes up and plays the nine—just stumbles in accidentally. Then the target lad comes up. He plays the nine, See, the trigger man already has his sighting. One man has been by the nine. This guy is number two. He can't see the face because of the awning comin' low. When I drag the wheel and let the second guy win a doll, that clinches it for him. He blazes."

"Stupid, very stupid," said Gypsy John. "I am only sorry they do not shoot each other."

"But why the play? What are you doin' buying carnivals?"

"A matter of necessity," Gypsy John said. spreading his hands. "We may have to close down here."

"I don't get it."

"All carnivals. We're picking up every one on the coast. We have plenty of business here, but the heat is picking up. We've got to have a place to go. Some of our trade would follow."

"Logical," said Tommy Brady, "but not worth murder."

"Decidedly not worth murder," Gypsy John agreed. "Those men were not following orders.

The shooting was *their* idea. I suppose your boss got them sore."

Tommy looked at the little gambler. "I came to see if you'd forget about buying the carney."

"Why?"

"I got reasons."

Gypsy John looked at the girl. "So?" he said.

"No. No dames involved. My father went in for all that stuff. He was a sentimental guy, Cubey Brady. He won a million dollars and died in a one-dollar room."

"Your father," said Gypsy John, "he had a lot of friends."

"Yeah. It did him a lot of good."

"It would have—if they had known. He was too proud to let them know."

"Okay," said Tommy impatiently. "He had a lot of friends. One thing he always said—that you were a good gambler. A rough guy, but a good gambler."

Gypsy John bowed and said nothing.

"So we roll for it," Tommy proposed. "Winner gets a crack at the carney. Okay with you?"

Sunny said, "Tommy, you can't do that. What if—"

"Don't bother me."

The girl drew back.

"Well?" Tommy said.

"You're on," said Gypsy John.

"The guy who was sliced—the cops'll be nasty about that."

"I think not," said Gypsy John. "I think many cities will be glad to hear of his death."

"The other one?"

"I'll know where to find him." Gypsy John opened the drawer of his desk, threw out a pair of dice.

THEY DIDN'T speak—not even a word—they didn't breathe on the dice. They rolled the dice upon the desk, bounced them against the books. Tommy Brady, watching Gypsy John, had the thought that the stakes didn't mean much to the gambler. And then he caught the intentness, deep down in the glittering eyes. It wasn't the stakes and he knew it. Gypsy John worshipped the game. It was his life.

Tommy Brady didn't crack a smile, though he felt like shouting and singing.

One little muscular line twitched in the corner of Gypsy John's mouth. "The carnival's yours," he said.

They shook hands on it.

It was cooler on the way back. And the speedboat was less crowded. Tommy Brady, thinking of the dice, brought them from his pocket and tossed them over the side. He didn't hear them splash; he didn't see them sink. But as surely as if he had followed them down to the bottom, he knew which numbers were up.

"Why throw them away?" said Sunny Dunne.

"I didn't" he said. "Here they are." He opened his hand and showed the straight dice in the gleam of the boat's range light. "And y'know," he went on, "it's a shame, in a way, that I like you and Papa Bob."

"Why?" she asked him.

"Well, a guy who can palm a pair of miss-outs and run 'em in on Gypsy John is missin' a whale of a future." He grinned down at her, admiring the fit of her head in the crook of his arm. "I hope no shrewd oyster finds them dice. He'll own every pearl in the Pacific inside of a year. . . ."

Another boat put out from the ship. A faster, sleeker boat. Watching it come, Tommy wished he had brought a gun. The second boat looked like trouble.

It flashed across the bow of their boat and when it came alongside, the swarthy man at the wheel extended a slip of paper. "For Mr. Brady," he said.

Tommy took the note, unfolded it, held it up to the light.

> My dear Mr. Brady: I think it best to tell you that I permitted you to run in those dice—because of the friendship between your father and myself. While I had not intended to tell you, I feel that not telling you would perhaps lead to overconfidence, always a fatal thing.

The note was not signed. Feeling the sweat on his palms, Tommy thought of Gypsy John, of being caught on board the gambling ship while switching dice on the owner.

"Well," said Sunny with urgency, "tell me. What does it say?"

Far out on the water, Tommy saw the clustered colored lights of the gambling ship. "You know," he said absently, "you and Papa Bob—you're friends of mine."

"Silly, I know that. What does the note say?"

"It says," Tommy Brady said slowly, "there's something to this friendship stuff. It seems Gypsy John knows the guy who owns your father's mortgage. Gypsy John said he can fix it. We'll tell Papa Bob not to worry anymore."

"Let's see," she said, reaching for the note.

Moving the paper out of her reach, Tommy said, "The light's no good. Readin' in this light would be an awful strain on your pretty eyes."

He opened his fingers lazily and the note fluttered aft in the wake.

"The last bandage is off now," the doctor said. "Miss Roberts, bring the mirror from the table."

DON'T LOSE FACE!

"I KNOW you can't wait till I get those bandages off. You've been fidgeting for the last three hours, haven't you? Well, you just be patient five or ten more minutes. I'm waiting for Miss Roberts, my assistant. She's probably on her way back from lunch now."

Damn it, why the hell did you let her go away before you finished? You want to keep me in this butcher shop the rest of my life?

"I know how uncomfortable you must feel with your face all covered and not being able to talk. But I'll tell you—some surgeons may think me excessively fussy, but I like to have assistance in removing bandages. That's an important process, particularly in plastic surgery. Experience has taught me you can tear off bits of adhering tissue if you're hasty, and set the healing back."

For God's sake, can't you shut up? Can't you go away and suck a lollipop?

"If your lips and nose are in the condition I expect them to be, I don't see any reason why you can't go home right away. I'll want to see you twice a week for the next two weeks, however, to make sure the healing progresses satisfactorily."

You'll see me. You'll see a dust storm. That'll be me hitting for Canada. Not Montreal, either. Saskatchewan. Or Manitoba, maybe. Look me up some time. I'll enjoy splitting a skull with you.

"Before you leave the office, though, I'll want you to give me your opinion of the results of the operation. I keep a complete file of patients' reactions. After all, that's the only way of judging whether I've been successful or not, to know if I've achieved what

Whose face would stare back at him from the mirror: His own, or that of the man he had killed?

the patient wanted. But before I ask that, I have to ask why the patient resorted to plastic surgery in the first place."

Why? I'll tell you. Sure I'll tell you. Because I killed a guy. Okay? Put that down in your book. Because I killed a guy and don't want to get caught. That'll look nice in your book. Make sure you spell all the words right. You want to know who I killed? Everybody knows who. You were reading about it when I came into your office. His picture was right there on the front page. Gerald Carter. Sure. I'm the guy who killed him. Got it? The cops don't know about me. That's because I planned it so it'd all come out right. But I'm not taking any chances. Maybe something screwy'll happen and somebody'll find out some day. By that time I won't be here. And I'll look like somebody else. Got all that down? Okay.

"Speaking of patients' reactions reminds me of the case of a man who underwent extensive remodeling at the hands of a certain Philadelphia surgeon about five years ago. When the patient looked in the mirror afterwards, he found he'd been made to look almost exactly like his worst enemy, a business rival he had hated for years. What do you think of that? Funny situation, wasn't it?"

It's a scream, Doc. You slay me. You ought to be on the stage.

"You know, I was just reminded of that story two days ago. It's been on my mind ever since—ever since I read the terrible news about Jerry Carter."

For God's sake, shut up, you big-mouthed baboon.

"YOU READ about it, of course. Did you ever hear anything so cold-blooded? God that was a blow to me. Good-natured, big-hearted Jerry—that man had more friends than anybody I knew. How could anybody kill him? The man who did it must have been either completely heartless or insane, one or the other. I never knew anybody who didn't take an instant liking to Jerry."

Here's one who didn't, Doc. Right here. Here's one who hated his guts.

"As I was saying, I got to wondering if there was anything I could do about that horrible thing. I couldn't think of anything; I'm not the Philo Vance type. But then I recalled that story I just told you about, and the idea hit me that if by some quirk of fate the murderer ever came into my hands, I'd know what to do. I'd make his face look as much as possible like Jerry's. By God, that'd punish him worse than anything the law could devise."

You're crazy, Doc. You're crazy. You've gone off your nut.

"It'd be perfect. Everywhere the murderer went, he'd carry his guilt with him. Every time he looked in the mirror, he'd see a corpse."

Just my stinking luck to get in the hands of a nut. Why the hell were those other two doctors I went to first out of town?

"I'll confess I'm one of those old-fashioned people who believes in fate. I've seen it work too often to be skeptical. I've seen it work in such mysterious ways that I didn't recognize it until long afterwards—guiding my hands without my knowing it. Ever since I heard about Jerry's death, I've had this feeling. I've been picturing the murderer coming into my hands. I've been visualizing Jerry's features, visualizing what I'd have to do to remodel a face to look like his...."

He's crazy. Plain crazy.

"Ah, here she is! Miss Roberts, our patient is on pins and needles to see the results of our little operation. Let's get those bandages off."

It's impossible. He couldn't suspect anything. He couldn't. I didn't act nervous when I came here. Not nervous at all. Except when I saw him reading the papers. But he didn't know what I was sweating about. He couldn't know anything. It's crazy.

"Now, hold still, old chap. This isn't hurting you, is it?"

It's crazy. He couldn't do what he said even if he knew who I was. How could he? Fate. Crazy goof. Crazy. Crazy.

"*Please* hold still! We'll be finished in a minute and you can get dressed and leave, but I don't want anything to go wrong at the last moment."

But if he—if he knew—Doc, if you did anything like that, I'll kill you!

"Now here's the last one coming off. Miss Roberts, bring that mirror from the table."

So help me, I'll kill you. If you did anything crazy like—

"Here you are—have a look at a new man!"

Is it my imagination or—CARTER! My God!

"Say, where do you think you're going? Now you just sit still! We'll get your clothes. Where are you going? Come back here. You can't go out in the corridor like— Stop him, Miss Roberts! He's hysterical. Hey! Come back here! Get him, get him! He's going down the stairs! The man's out of his mind. Call the police! Call an ambulance! Call—"

* * *

"I tell you, Miss Roberts, when I heard he had blurted out a confession to the police, it almost knocked me over. Here was the situation I had dreamed about—the murderer in my hands—and I find out too late to make him look like Jerry Carter!"

MILKMAN, KEEP THOSE BULLETS QUIET!

Maybe some day I'll be able to tell my children about how Daddy became involved in the Case of the Philandering Milkman. At the moment, though, I'm too busy trying to collect my twenty-five fish a day from a dead client—and living long enough to pin a murder on a killer whose description fits me like a custom-made shroud!

CHAPTER ONE

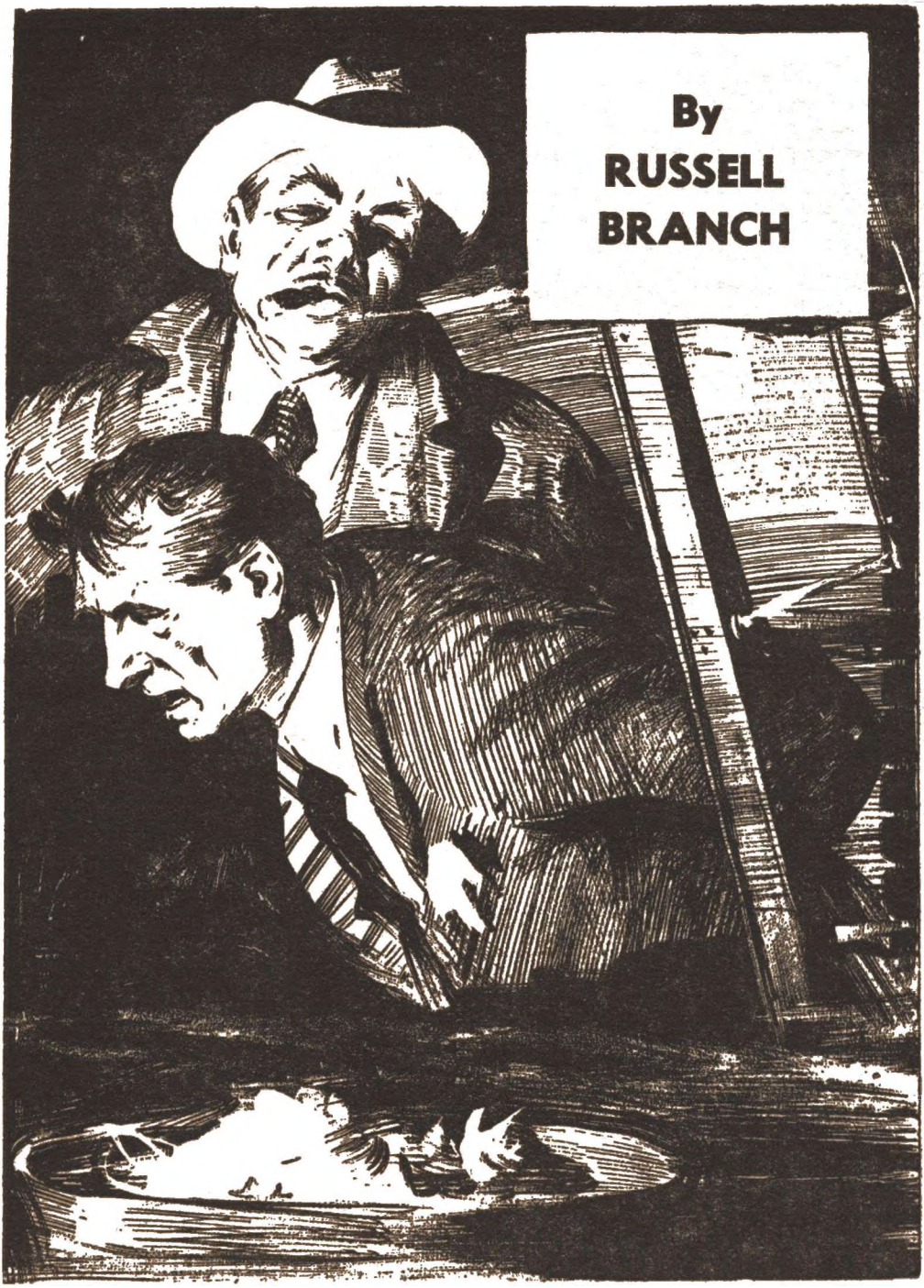
Mayhem in the A.M.

I SHOULD have gone to the beach. . . . It was one of those soft, warm, dreamy afternoons. Even through the smoky haze of downtown L. A. it was a beautiful afternoon, and it would have been just that much nicer at the beach.

To hell with the office, I told myself. Are you your own boss, or are you? Did you just collect a fat fee, or did you?

I decided the answer was yes. But I also decided I was a fool if I thought that check

The voice was calm, dispassionate, almost friendly. "We're warning you, chum. It's too big for you. Stay out of it and stay healthy."



Thrilling Novelette of Movieland Murder

would last more than a weekful of warm Wednesdays like this one.

So I compromised. I turned in at Sid's for a beer, and along with the beer I got my next job. A little job with big troubles, which probably proves something about compromising.

Sid's is a small slot off Fifth near Hill, made to order for business men who take their secretaries out for "coffee" and operate on the theory that people drink more in the dark.

"You're cheating the Department of Water & Power," I announced to the portly gentleman behind the bar.

"What I don't use in electricity I make up for with the water I put in my whiskey," Sid answered doggedly, just as if we hadn't gone through the same routine a hundred times before.

There was one other customer two stools away. A girl, staring at us with her mouth open.

"It's only a gag," I told her amiably, just because it was Spring and she was a girl and I like both of them.

Sid set bottle and glass before me without being asked. "Did you see that joe I told you about?"

I savored my brew and nodded. "You're a pal, Sid. He had a friend who had an enemy, the insurance company paid off, and everybody's happy. I really ought to give you a hunk of this check in my pocket."

Sid shrugged it off, as I knew he would. And then, because it was that sort of afternoon and the girl seemed lonesome, he stage-whispered to her, "Don't look now, miss, but here's the boy who solved that big Medley Fur Store robbery."

"With Sid's help," I amended modestly. I could afford to be modest, because the Medley haul had made headlines.

But I guess I was too modest. The girl looked at me dubiously and went back to her highball. Two more customers came in and Sid went down the bar to take care of them.

"You're a detective," somebody accused me suddenly. It was the girl again. Apparently that wasn't her first drink.

"I am," I agreed amiably.

"A private one?" she wanted to know. "I mean people can hire you?"

Who was I to deny it?

"A detective," she went on, as if anybody was arguing with her. "That's what I need, a detective!"

The others were looking at us. I got up hastily and put a bill on the bar. "Let's discuss it in my office. It's just down the block."

SHE CAME along like a good girl, and we went out into the blinding sun. After I got my sight back again I looked her over. Not bad. Not good, either. And no longer as young as she used to be.

Too much water had gone under the bridge too fast. Oh, her figure was all there and she knew what to do with it, and she had the nicest mop of natural auburn hair I've ever seen, but—well, maybe it was those lines beginning around the neck and eyes. Faded and jaded, as Sid liked to say.

"Nice day," I observed cleverly.

She nodded absent-mindedly and kept walking, all wrapped up in her thoughts. I decided it wasn't such a hot day after all.

By the time we reached the Norton Building I had her all classified and filed away. Former showgirl, maybe the movies. A couple of respectable diamonds and a hand-blocked print dress that must have cost plenty—several years ago. She'd married money and lost it. I was right about the money, anyway.

For she said, as I ushered her into my palatial cubbyhole, "Oh, I was *hoping* you wouldn't be too expensive."

"We're just folks," I admitted. "And an office is just a place for me to collect the mail between cases, anyway. The name on the door is Laird, Frank Laird."

Smooth? Sometimes I surprise even myself.

She had her legs arranged now and was ready for business. "Just how much do you charge, Mr. Laird? I've never—"

I interrupted with a smile. "It's customary to begin with the problem, Miss—?"

"Mrs. Brimmer. It used to be Frances Fairlee—in the pictures."

She offered the latter hopefully, and I mentally checked off another hit. The name didn't mean anything to me, but then I have a hard time keeping Ingrid Bergman and Greer Garson straight.

"Oh, yes," I lied pleasantly, and waited.

"I want my husband followed."

Another lousy key-hole job! I tride to look interested.

"Why?"

She looked surprised.

"Why do you want your husband followed?"

"Well, I want to know where he goes, who he sees. Everything he does."

She was either dumber than I gave her credit for, or hiding something. I decided to be dumb too.

"Mrs. Brimmer, if you want me to look for something, you'll have to tell me first just what I'm supposed to look for."

She hesitated the slighest flicker of a fake eyelash. "I want a divorce. Isn't that the usual way of getting that sort of evidence?"

I nodded wearily and reached for my scratch pad. His name was Robert B. Brim-

mer. Forty-three years old, slight build, brown hair and thin moustache, no particular habits —good, bad or indifferent. She made him sound like a jerk, but then there just might be more than one jerk in Southern California.

"I'll have to have a picture—or maybe you can point him out to me."

She looked surprised again.

"Detectives aren't supernatural," I assured her. "Friend of mine once tailed the wrong man on a case like this. Turned out it was the wife's boy friend, instead of the erring husband."

She didn't get the point of the joke, but she agreed to send a photograph by messenger, and I went back to my scratch pad.

"Occupation?"

"Why, I—I'm not exactly—not what you'd call—"

"I mean your *husband's* business, Mrs. Brimmer."

"Oh . . . it's the Meadow Dairy Company."

I found myself wondering why the wife of a butter and egg man should be wearing an outmoded dress—particularly with butter and eggs at their current prices. But I limited myself to writing down the rest of the details and still didn't know any more when I had finished.

Mrs. Brimmer got to the point that was bothering her most. "How much will this cost?"

I decided the dress was three years old, at lease, and felt just a bit sorry for her. A routine job for me, and she was going to need whatever she got out of it in the way of alimony.

"Twenty-five a day, and—"

"Will fifty be enough to start?" she interrupted anxiously, her hand already in her purse.

So I just skipped the part about expenses and got up too. "If you can just give me something to go on, Mrs. Brimmer, it'll save time —and money, for you. Any names . . . acquaintances . . . where his business takes him?"

"I really can't," she said, pausing at the door, "You can check his route at the dairy, but please don't let him know about it."

Then she turned and rolled out the door. She needed a girdle and I needed a keeper. . .

Because that—as I would be able to tell my future children some day—is how Daddy became involved in the Case of the Philandering Milkman.

DON'T GET me wrong. I've got nothing against milkmen. Some of my best friends are milkmen. I just don't like the hours they keep and the work they do. Not when I have to follow them.

As a matter of fact, I didn't like Mr. Robert Brimmer himself when I spotted him in the grisly light of early dawn. It was about the time I like to be going to bed. Fog drifted across the feeble street lights and I wished I had worn my topcoat. In the rear of the Meadow Dairy plant busy men loaded delivery trucks, and my friend was among them.

It wasn't much of a picture that the loving Mrs. Brimmer had sent me, but then the subject wasn't much either. A scrawny little guy with a scraggly moustache; there was no mistaking him. I made a mental note of the number of the truck he was loading and wondered briefly about the taste of some men's wives.

Then I went out the gate again to my car, pausing en route to admire what must have been the newest and slickest of the slick new Cadillacs. My own heap parked behind had at least five things in common with it: four wheels and a radio.

So I listened to some record jockey who said it was time to get up you sleepy-heads, ha, ha—but it sounded like sour grapes to me. I switched to a newscast instead, and learned that the world was still going to hell in a hurry, courtesy of Marvin Jewelers.

Then the milk trucks began coming out of the yard, and I wondered idly how they managed to drive standing up like that. Brimmer was cheating. He was sitting behind the wheel, perched up high on a little folding seat.

We went east on Ventura Boulevard, south through Cold Water Canyon, and eventually back to civilization. The very best of civilization. Beverly Hills, in case you don't know, pays more income tax per square mile than any other suburb in the country.

My friend began making deliveries just south of Sunset, and I prepared myself for a boring morning. I parked around one corner and watched him make his way down the first street. Then I drove to the next corner and we repeated the process. Brimmer seemed oblivious. He just delivered milk and butter and eggs, busy thinking about whatever it is that milkmen think about at 6 o'clock in the morning.

Me. . .? I was thinking about what private eyes usually think about: money. I wondered how Mrs. Brimmer hoped to get enough alimony out of a milkman's salary to justify hiring a shamus at even twenty-five a day.

But I didn't get the answer to that, or anything else. We just delivered milk, lots of milk. Along about eight-thirty Brimmer did spend all of fifteen minutes at one house—long enough to drink a cup of coffee supplied by a friendly cook. If it was anything more than that, he was a better man than I was.

Noontime came and we had lunch at a

beanwagon near Wilshire. Brimmer didn't even kid with the blonde waitress, who certainly was the kidding type. He just ate his blue plate special in glum silence. I gulped down my sandwich and went on out while he was just beginning on a slab of apple pie.

It was obvious I was wasting my time. Whatever went on with Robert Brimmer went on after business hours, and I could pick him up again when he reported back to the dairy. I paused by his truck to look through his route list and estimate how much time it would take him to finish.

He must have wolfed that pie. A hand touched my arm and a nervous voice asked, "Looking for something, mister?"

I made the best of it. I didn't even turn around. I just kept leafing through the sheets and growled over my shoulder, "Your route's too light for the time it takes you, Brimmer."

Then I turned around. He had pale blue eyes, and they were puzzled. Puzzled and troubled both.

"I'm Jones," I added. "Company inspector."

He was indignant, all five-feet-four of him. "The supervisor himself takes this route on my day off! Ask *him*. . . ."

I shrugged, but the pale blue eyes had gone shrewd now. "Another thing, mister, I never heard of the company using special checkers."

"Maybe there're things you don't know about Meadow Dairy," I assured him, staring him down. Then I walked back into the beanwagon. The pie had looked good—and I didn't want him to get a look at my car.

The milk van was gone when I came out. But not far. It was parked around the first corner I passed—just where I should have been parked.

I didn't enjoy my company much, driving back toward the Valley. Not that the case was important or that it made much difference anyway, but it was chagrinning, to say the least. For a man who'd just cracked a big-time robbery, it was downright humiliating.

However, back at the Meadow Dairy plant I resisted the impulse to go in and ask for a job washing bottles. Instead I parked in the row of cars on Ventura and went to sleep with one ear open.

In the middle of the afternoon the trucks began rolling home, like horses coming back to stable. Friend Brimmer in Number 132 showed up just about when I had estimated he would. If he had finished his route—and I presumed he had—he certainly hadn't been any other places and done any other things.

The men in white started homeward. Some came to the bus stop near me, others scattered to the every-day jaloppies parked along the side street.

But not Mr. Robert Brimmer. He made a beeline for the fancy car I had admired that morning and unlocked the door just like he belonged to it. Yes, that brand-new shiny 1948 Cadillac. I decided there was more to the Brimmers, husband and wife, than met the eye.

Just to rub it in, my old hack balked out of sheer jealousy. By the time I got it started, the sleek rear end of three thousand dollars had disappeared in the traffic on the boulevard, headed in the general direction of Los Angeles and New York. It was a fine morning's work.

But I found him again. Oh yes, by a clever bit of detection that was up to my day's standard. In my pocket I found the address Mrs. Brimmer had given me. In my street directory I found how to get there. In the driveway I found the Caddie. Just like that.

The house was up to the car, almost, in a pretentious quasi-Spanish sort of way. Not Beverly Hills quite, but close enough for comfort. I did some more heavy dozing, wishing I could really hit the hay as Mr. Brimmer undoubtedly had.

At five-thirty he came out again, quite the boy in his glad rags. A Bob Hope sport-jacket, brown suede shoes, pansy-blue gabardine slacks. Ah, I thought, we're going places.

We did. We went to a restaurant where it takes five to even catch the headwaiter's attention. Or rather, Brimmer ate there. I remembered about the expense I had so generously waived, and ate in a drive-in across the way.

Then we went to a movie. Then we went back home, put the Caddie to bed, and turned in. But we did this all alone, including the last, unless Mrs. Brimmer was in the picture by then.

It was all, as you see, strictly ho-hum. . . .

Until I took my own weary self home and walked into the worst beating I've ever taken.

CHAPTER TWO

Unfinished Business

THERE WERE two of them, and they caught me out by the garages in back of my apartment house. I put up my car, locked the door, and walked smack into them around the corner of the garage. They didn't even give me time to be surprised.

One of them smashed something short and heavy across my face, and at the same time the other grabbed my arms from behind. That first unexpected blow left me weak and dazed, and my struggling didn't do any good. It just got me a knee in the small of my back.

To save my backbone I relaxed. The fellow in front, a big hulk with a hat on the back of his head, measured me deliberately and then sank his fist in my kidney. I tasted dirt.

They hauled me up again and I heard a

voice a million miles away. "You'll lay off, Laird—if you know what's good for you."

The voice was calm, dispassionate, almost friendly.

I must have answered something, because the voice came back at me, not so friendly.

"We're warning you, chum. It's too big for you. Stay out of it and stay healthy."

I shook my head, just to clear it. But he must have got me wrong, because that sap smashed into my face again. This time I went down and stayed down.

Heavy shoes began thudding monotonously into my ribs, then lower down.

Lay off, Laird. Lay off, Laird. Lay off. . . .

I tried to hang on. I think I got to my knees again. But I couldn't quite make it. That fiery pinwheel threw me off, far off into space, and I started falling. . . .

* * *

When I landed, I was on the ground. The night was cold, the dirt was cold and my face was numb and cold. But a fire was burning in my innards.

I still don't know how I got to my room. Maybe I crawled like a wounded animal going back to die in his burrow. But I didn't die. I woke up in my own bed, with the ceiling light glaring in my face and my own revolver on the pillow next to me. More instinct. Generally I keep the gun in my closet unless I think there's a good reason to carry it.

Lay off, Laird. Lay off. . . .

Remembering that voice was like a conditioned reflex. Nausea welled up in me again, but I made it to the bathroom. Then I went back to the cool clean sheets again, until the middle of the afternoon.

The rest of it was spent at the doctor's, having x-rays and one thing and another. I wound up with some tape on my ribs and the admonition to take it easy for a while. So I went back home and opened a bottle of bonded bourbon I'd been saving for a rainy day.

In the back of my mind, I'd already assumed it had something to do with that fur robbery. But now I went over it, it didn't fit. The police had taken public credit on that one, since they had actually done the mopping up. I'd been satisfied with my name on the insurance company check, and they were the only ones, outside of Sid, who knew my part in it.

Besides, that was all cleaned up now. And the two strong-arm kids had warned me to lay off as if it were something I was working on now. But there wasn't anything else. Nothing but a half-pint milkman and a wife who wanted a divorce.

But still, a milkman with a new Cadillac. I poured myself another shot of Kentucky's best and picked up the telephone book. Nobody answered at the number listed for Robert Brimmer, so I went back to the bottle. And eventually to bed, neither healthier, wealthier, and certainly not wiser.

TEN O'CLOCK the next morning found me in my office, catching up with the European situation and Li'l Abner. Eleven o'clock found Mrs. Brimmer there, right on the nose as agreed, and brimming over in a green silk number. Not in the same class as that print, but a lot newer and a lot tighter.

I had a feeling she'd put it on just for me, so I took my feet off the desk, put the newspaper down in their place and bowed her into the other chair. Then I took out my wallet and handed her a couple of bills.

She accepted them automatically, still staring at my battered phiz. "What happened to you, an accident?"

"You should see the other two guys," I told her. "Not a scratch on them."

"What—what's this?"

"Twenty-five dollars."

"Yes, but why?"

"Because I only worked one day for you."

"Then you've found out something already?"

I shook my head. "Uh—uh."

"Then why—?" She seemed really puzzled, but then she had been an actress of sorts at one time.

"Because," I answered, "you hired me for a routine key-hole job. When I stick my neck into something serious I like to know it beforehand. I also charge more, because life's too short as it is."

"But that's what I want—a divorce!"

I looked at her and she had decency enough, at least, to drop her eyes.

"Leave us be brutally frank, Mrs. Brimmer. Your husband—well, he delivers milk for a living. Not a bad job if you like milk and outdoor exercise, but you know as well as I do he's not making a fortune at it. You also know as well as I do that there are easier—and cheaper—ways of getting unspliced, if that's all you want."

"Maybe I'd better tell you more about it," she murmured.

"It might be a good idea," I agreed.

"Well," she began, "I met Brimmer three years ago at a night club where I was working. He was on a vacation, he said, and well—well, we had a lot of fun together. And ended up in Las Vegas, getting married like a couple of dopes. I knew he wasn't any bargain, but I was tired of working and he seemed like a nice enough little character and—"

"And he had a lot of money?" I suggested crudely.

"I thought he did then," she snapped, "the way he threw it around. But it gave out after

two weeks and we came back to L.A. He went back to his job and I found out he wasn't even making as much as I had been earning myself. So I left him."

I cocked an eyebrow at her. "And now, three years later, you suddenly decide you want a divorce?"

"I just didn't want any more to do with the little punk," she said harshly. "Not even enough to get a divorce. Until a month ago I bumped into him on the street, all dressed up like a million bucks again—and with a blonde mink on his arm."

"You suddenly saw green, after three years' separation?"

She dismissed the notion with a sneer. "Jealous? Of him? What I saw was red. Because he looked so damned prosperous. He is, too. I found out he's got a new car and a big house that would've cost plenty even before the war."

"I noticed that too," I nodded. "So. . . .?"

"So," she concluded, and her voice was ten years older, "I want a divorce, but not for nothing. When I tried to talk to him about a settlement, he just laughed at me. Before I sue, I want to know where all that money's coming from and—"

"And how much you can get out of it," I finished for her. "You sure picked a backward way of going about it. And you won't have a chance, even with a good laywer."

"I'll worry about that," she said. "I still want to know where his money's coming from."

I thought it over. We were down to brass tacks now, I was sure. And she was smiling at me and it was pretty pathetic.

"Please, Mr. Laird. Just for me."

I got up and felt the weight of my S & W shift under my arm. "No, Mrs. Brimmer, not for you—although it's going to cost you more. There're a couple of guys I have to see about an accident."

SO I went back to my milkman because I didn't know where else to start. The next day, Sunday, we slept late, puttered around the yard for a while, and went to the auto races in Gardena.

Monday morning we were back on the job again, delivering milk. No mob, no trouble, no nothing except milk and more milk and a milkman who kept looking over his shoulder.

I stood it until noontime and then drove downtown to my office. The phone was ringing itself silly when I opened the door.

A feminine voice that reminded me of coffee cream said, "Mr. Laird, please. Mr. Bronson calling."

I didn't know any Mr. Bronson, but I did know how to play that game. I clicked the cradle once and gave it right back to her, "Mr. Laird is on the wire. Go ahead, please."

A brisk man's voice came in. "Laird, this is Bronson, out at Apex Studios. We've got a job for you."

I was surprised, but not that surprised. "Mr. Bronson . . .?"

"Production manager at Apex," he told me impatiently. "Can you be out here soon?"

"I'm tied up all afternoon," I told him. "Make it tomorrow morning."

He seemed willing to let it go at that. I hung up and thought it over. Then I picked up the phone again, dialed the Apex number, and asked for the Production Manager—just to check.

The same creamy voice answered. "Mr. Bronson's office."

I eased the receiver down. That finished the milkman for me. I didn't realize my fame had already reached the mighty Apex portals, but who was I to kick a break in the teeth? Studio jobs paid real money, especially when it was something they had to call in an outsider for.

But there was still that one unfinished piece of business, and I decided to clean it up in the most direct way possible. I'd go out to Brimmer's house about the time he was getting home from work and have a heart-to-heart talk with him.

Well, it turned out that Mr. Brimmer wasn't home. But Mrs. Brimmer was. Somebody had made an awful mess of that pretty auburn hairdo I had once admired. . . .

I found the front door standing half open, and her just inside in the front hall. She was sprawled face up, and death had been unkind to those lines under her chin. It had also made the bright green dress hideously cheap.

The murder weapon was in plain sight: a big, heavy, wrought-iron candle holder whose mate still stood on the carved hallway table. And that was all. . . .

Nothing else seemed to be out of order in that gloomy pseudo-Spanish residence of Mr. Brimmer's. No sign of struggle or search; just that scene of sudden, brutal death in the hall. I had to come back there to use the telephone.

I got the police, gave them the address and then hung up while the man at the board was still demanding my name. Because staring me in the face was the word "Apex" and the number I had called back only a couple of hours ago. They were written at the top of a telephone number list tacked up in the phone niche.

It was too much of a coincidence to suit me. First a beating and threats. Then an offer of a job out of the blue, from a guy I'd never heard of before and an outfit I'd never worked for before. And now this: my client dead

at my feet and not even a good excuse for being there.

It took me fifteen minutes to reach Apex, even omitting the stop signs. First the receptionist, then the girl with the sugar-and-cream voice.

I'd always heard that studio secretaries ran a higher average voltage than their actresses, but the girl was still too good to be true. She looked like she sounded, and I let it go at that because I had other things on my mind.

Mr. Bronson didn't look any more like the production head of a big motion picture company than I did, except that he obviously had ulcers. No older than me, just as tall and skinny, and wearing a suit that didn't fit any better than mine. He looked awfully busy, also surprised.

"I found I could make it after all," I apologized.

He sprawled back in his chair, gestured to the other seat nervously. "Well, Laird, here's the situation. I won't blame you if you refuse, but at any rate it's not to go farther than this office?"

"Of course," I murmured.

"Well," he began again. "Some of our big stars are playing the ponies and—"

I guess I must have looked surprised because he interrupted himself with a grin.

"Hell, don't we all? But the point is, they're doing it during working hours. You have any idea what it does to production costs every time somebody ties up a whole set for five minutes, just because he's off in a corner laying a bet on some nag?"

I shook my head, but he didn't answer his own question. I judged from the sorrowful expression on his face that it was plenty.

"We can't get tough with our big stars," he went on. "Their feelings get hurt too easy—and besides, some of the directors are even worse. We've got the telephone situation under control now. But still it goes on, all over the lot. Somebody's making book right on the sets. An electrician here, a grip there, maybe one of the carpenters—and it's organized. We need an outsider to come in and clean it up for us without tramping on any expensive toes."

I LOOKED out the window. It was on the ground floor, and the afternoon sun was shining on some lush gals walking past in evening dresses.

"You can write your own ticket," Bronson was telling me.

And I was still looking out the window, but I was standing now, and I interrupted him.

"Look, out there by that sign. Stage Number One . . . those two men, the two on the outside, just turning the corner. Who are they?"

He turned and took a look, and then he turned back to me with a funny expression. "A couple of the boys. I don't know their names. Friends of yours?"

"Not exactly," I said, and that was one big understatement. Because from where I stood, they looked strangely like the two plug-uglies who had given me that going-over.

"Think nothing of it," Bronson grinned. "Every lot keep a few of them around, for odd jobs. As I was saying, you can name your own price."

I sat down again. "Mr. Bronson, I'm just a two-bit private detective. I've never done any studio work before and I haven't any connections. You can't tell me Apex Pictures looked me up in the telephone book, not when there's Ray Schindler or some other big shot to be had."

Bronson looked surprised, but he was still friendly. "Laird, you were recommended by the front office, which is good enough for me. That's why I'm telling you, confidentially, that you can write your own paycheck."

"Who?"

He shook his head. "Sorry. What difference does it make?"

"It makes a lot, to me."

He hesitated, then shoved a paper from his desk drawer in my direction.

It was an office memo, marked CONFIDENTIAL, and dated last Thursday. It said, in a scrawl:

> "About that deal we talked over yesterday, there's a good man named Frank Laird in L.A.
>
> L.M."

"L. M.?" I asked.

Bronson hesitated again, and lowered his voice. "Lou Markham."

Even I knew who Lou Markham was. Producer, aviator, playboy, screwball millionaire.

"I'd like to talk to him," I said.

Bronson shook his head again and this time he meant it. So I got up and offered him my hand.

"I'll think it over, Mr. Bronson. Tomorrow will be okay?"

He nodded and went back to whatever it was that was giving him ulcers. I went out and stopped by the Voice.

"Now I'm supposed to see a Mr. Markham," I said innocently. "Where's his office?"

She answered me by picking up her phone. Then she put it down again. "I'm sorry, but Mr. Markham has gone for the day."

"Where does he live, honey?"

Her smile was like a vanilla frosted. "I'm sorry, but I can't give you that information.

I'll try to make an appointment for you tomorrow, if you want."

I let it go with an insincere "Thanks" and went on out. But the gal at the reception desk gave me the same routine, including the fact that Mr. Markham's home address was a top secret.

But did that stop me? Not me. I'm a detective, remember? I tried the Apex switchboard operator. Then I tried the telephone operator with a gag about an emergency call—and found myself talking to one of those telephone-service outfits. I also called a friend of mine on the *Motion Picture Reporter*, or at least I had thought he was a friend of mine.

When my supply of nickels ran out, I even drove over to the Sunset Strip and bought one of those "Guides to the Stars' Homes" that they sell along the road to tourists.

Finally I drove back downtown and dropped in on another pal who writes a movie column for one of the morning sheets. He didn't know either, but he picked up his phone and in a couple of minutes a kid dumped a fat manila envelope on his desk. On the outside it read "Markham, Lou" and inside there was a thick batch of old newspaper clippings.

My pal leafed through them and finally handed one to me. It was a very small clipping, stamped July 11, 1943, and it stated simply that one Agnes Nilson, 22, dancer, had been accidentally drowned in the swimming pool at the home of Louis Markham. The body had been discovered early in the morning after other guests had departed from a party given to celebrate the completion of the noted producer's latest picture, "Merrily Married."

It also gave the address, in Beverly Hills, but that was all.

I handed it back to him with a whistle. "You sure spread yourself on that one. What was it, a publicity stunt?"

He shrugged. "Nope, it happened all right. She just got potted and fell in. It was that sort of a brawl. But she was just an unknown chippie—and Lou Markham is a very important guy. Lots of money and lots of pull, or didn't you know?"

I left my pal still smirking cynically just like reporters do in the movies, and nabbed my first bite to eat since breakfast, along with the early evening newspaper.

Maybe the death of one Agnes Nilson hadn't made headlines three years ago, but Mrs. Robert Brimmer's sure had. The story went on to say that her husband, from whom she had separated, had been arrested at his place of employment and was being questioned. But police were also looking for a mysterious stranger who had been seen leaving the house earlier. The description wasn't very flattering, particularly that "emaciated" business, but it was too accurate for comfort.

And I still wanted to see a man about a job before they caught up with me. When I finally located Mr. Lou Markham's modest mansion in Beverly Hills I was even more anxious, because that house was very familiar to me. In fact, I'd been there just that morning, watching a milkman named Robert Brimmer making a delivery.

But I didn't get to see Mr. Markham, not right then.

Because just as I started in the long circular driveway a car pulled up behind mine at the curb, and somebody told me to "Hold it!" The car was white and black and the men in it were two of Beverly Hills' finest.

I held it.

CHAPTER THREE

A Ride Through the Hills

THEY were very polite, as Beverly Hills cops always are. And I didn't argue, because there didn't seem to be anything to argue about.

At least not until they got me to the station. The lieutenant who interviewed me was even politer. In fact, after I had shown him all my credentials he was downright apologetic.

"I'm sorry, Laird. We had this complaint about a prowler, and the boys just took too much for granted. Some guy's been hanging around there the last few days."

My mouth fell open, but I got it shut quickly again. "Quite all right, Lieutenant, quite all right. With a record like yours out here in Beverly, the boys are bound to get a little over-anxious at times. And as a matter of fact, I have been haunting that neighborhood. On a case."

"Anything we should know about?"

I smiled casually. "Naw, just a dame who wants to know the sad truth about her husband."

"Husbands are one thing we do have, even in Beverly." He grinned and held out his hand. "You run into any trouble, let us know."

I hated to do it. He was so damned nice I hated to walk out of there, knowing how he would feel when he found out the city police were searching for a murder suspect who looked just like Frank Laird, private detective. So instead of walking, I got the boys in the prowl car to take me right back where we had started from.

Then I started up that long driveway again, and this time I made it. A white-coated Oriental houseboy answered the door, and I informed him that Mr. Robert Brimmer was calling on Mr. Markham.

The slant eyes regarded me impassively. "Blimmer—iss milkman."

"It's a small world," I reminded him—

and I was inside the door by then. "Just tell the boss there's a man to see him about the swimming pool."

The fabulous Lou Markham was disappointing. He was stocky, middle-aged, and dressed in a conservative pin stripe. He received me in his library, and he looked just like an ordinary hard-headed businessman. Except for one thing: the revolver he laid carefully and ostentatiously on the littered desk before him as I came in.

"You're not Brimmer," he stated flatly.

I smiled, with a wary eye on that gun. "You know Mr. Brimmer then?"

He was smooth and impatient at the same time. "Sure I know him. Fellow that delivers milk here. Who are you?"

"Laird," I told him. "Frank Laird. Frankly, I'm a bit surprised, Mr. Markham. Surprised that a man as busy and important as you should be personally acquainted with your milkman."

"What do you want?" he snapped.

"About that job out at Apex—the horse-betting thing. I understand that—"

"See Bronson, the production manager," he interrupted.

"I did, Mr. Markham. But I understand you recommended me personally for the job. I'm very flattered."

He frowned and leaned forward, one hand on the desk near his gun, and I shifted my weight a bit. He still hadn't asked me to sit down.

We stared at each other for a few seconds and then he finally shrugged, like a poker player with a full house. "I asked Bronson to handle it himself, but it doesn't matter. Your friend Brimmer asked me if I could find a job for you, and as it happened, we were looking for a private detective. If you want the job, see Bronson."

"I'm still flattered," I said, "since Robert Brimmer is not even what you'd call a speaking acquaintance of mine."

He was still as smooth as ever, but getting more impatient. "I wouldn't know anything about that. This Brimmer fellow once helped me out on a—on an unpleasant little matter several years ago, and I was just trying to return the favor. If you want the job you can have it. I've already had Bronson check your record. But don't bother me about it any more."

It was now or never. "All right, I'll see Bronson again," I told him casually, and turned toward the door.

A nerve crawled up my back, but there was no movement behind me. When I finally made the doorway I glanced back. He had already gone back to the script on his desk.

The houseboy appeared out of nowhere and actually smiled at me as he held the door open. When it was safely closed behind me I took a deep breath of that expensive Beverly Hills air and started down the driveway. It was dark and cool now, and I—

And I had a gun in my back. At least it was a reasonable facsimile of one. A voice I recognized said some words I recognized: "We told you to lay off, Laird."

I started to raise my hands and turn slowly. Then my right chopped down hard and my left followed through.

It works in the movies. It had even worked for me once before in a tight spot. It worked

this time—on the man with the gun. The only catch was the other guy, the second one whose arm was already coming down in a full-arm swing. In turning, I walked right into it. . . .

MY FIRST returning thought was that Frankie Laird, detective, had finally landed just where so many of his critics had consigned him. There was a rumbling noise, a smell of hot oil, a hissing of steam.

Then I got my eyes open and decided I was still in this world after all. In fact, I was in my own heap. The rumbling came from an overheated engine and the steam was coming from the radiator. My big friend with the hat was driving, and I was slumped on the seat beside him, completely trussed up.

The car was grinding away in second, climbing slowly, and I caught a pungent whiff of sun-baked chaparral through the open window by my head. We were somewhere deep in the hills between Beverly Hills and the valley—hills where the deer and coyote still roam and where more than one poor guy has taken his last ride.

"Where the hell . . . ?" I demanded.

My friend shook his head sadly. "We warned you, Laird. You should of listened." Then he cussed as the car balked, and jammed it savagely into first.

"Take it easy!" I yelled at him indignantly. "I can't afford a new car."

He chuckled humorlessly. "You won't be needin' one, pal. This one's gonna last you the rest of your life."

Headlights flashed around a turn behind us. The door handle was digging a hole in my right arm, and for a second I considered pushing it and taking my chances on rolling free.

But my friend paid no attention to the car behind, and I thought better of it. We obviously had company.

I looked at the driver again. "You're a damn fool," I told him. "You're being played for a sucker."

"Just obeyin' orders," he shrugged. "Nothin' personal, pal. You should've listened, that's all."

I talked hard and fast. "The guy who gave you the orders is trying to squeeze out of a murder rap. Two murders. Don't be a sucker!"

"We know what we're doin'."

"The cops are already looking for me," I told him. "Any accident happens to me, they're going to find out about it right now. And you and your pal are gonna wind up behind a nice big eight ball."

"We got protection," he snarled. "Shad-up."

But I could tell I had him worried. We had reached the top of the ridge now and the lights of the valley spread out below us. The spot we finally stopped at looked like it had been made especially for necking.

Only that wasn't what we were here for. Ahead, the shoulder of the road sloped down to an unprotected edge and then dropped off into thin air. The lights below were a million miles down.

My friend pulled on the emergency brake and I started talking again. But he wouldn't listen. He just waited until the car following us pulled up behind on the inside, and then he got out and went over to it. My talking had done some good, because I could hear him arguing with the other mug. The only trouble was, my friend was losing the argument. . . .

I squirmed sideways against the door and pushed the handle down until I felt it give behind me. Then I raised my tied feet up, said a quick prayer, and shoved them against the emergency brake. It was the first time in nine years I'd been grateful to that old crate, with its old-fashioned brake lever.

The handle gave and the car started to roll. There was a shout from the other side, but my eyes were glued to the edge of the dirt ahead, my back tensed against the door to keep it from catching shut again.

I threw myself backward against the door the same split second I felt the front wheels go. Then I was rolling over and over like a trussed turkey, with the brush and dirt tearing at my face. On my final flop, which landed me in the middle of a century plant, I lay still, wondering how many more ribs were broken.

Below me the dark hulk of my coupe was crashing end over end down the sheer ravine. On the edge of the road above me, silhouetted against the stars, were my two playmates. One of them started down through the brush, heading straight for me. But the other one called him back. "If he ain't dead now he never will be. Come on."

"He's still got them ropes on him, Joe."

The other one pointed. "*That'll* take care of that. Let's get out of here. Somebody might of heard the crash."

I twisted my neck again. Three hundred feet down, flames were already licking up around the dark hulk of my wrecked car. A car ground away on the highway above, and then I was alone in the big wide night.

If there's any group of police servants more on their toes than the Beverly Hills police force, it's the Mountain Fire Patrol. They were on the spot in fifteen minutes, and then the captain took me back to the Cold Water Station in his red coupe.

There was a report to fill out at the station, and then they let me go. I simply told them

the truth: that I had gone off the edge in my car and had been thrown free. So I hitched a ride down the canyon to civilization again and found a drugstore with a telephone. I couldn't wait to be a hero.

It took some talking, but I finally got the man I wanted on the homicide detail. He wasn't too pleased.

"What the hell do *you* want? We're busy down here."

"It's that Brimmer bump," I told him. "The man you want is Lou Markham, the producer."

Silence, then, "Where do *you* come in on this, Laird?"

"I was doing a tail job for Mrs. Brimmer. She wanted to know where his dough was coming from. I found out, but the man he was blackmailing, Markham, got to her first. When she ran into him at her husband's house, I think she guessed the answer and tried to cut in on it. Anyway, Markham killed her, because he was already being bled all he could stand. You see, three years ago—"

"Yeah, I know," the good lieutenant interrupted. "Three years ago a gal got herself drowned in Markham's pool. The milkman found her, and it was written off as an accident."

"The milkman was Brimmer," I told him. "And he became suddenly wealthy soon after the inquest. Figure it out for yourself."

"I have," said the copper sarcastically. "But I still need your help to clear up two points. In the first place, Brimmer isn't talking, and we haven't got a thing on him because he's alibied for every minute up to the time his wife was found. In the second place, we've already cleared Markham too. Because he and some other movie big-shots were in conference with the mayor himself for three hours before, during, and after the Brimmer dame was killed."

I felt suddenly deflated. "Well," I said, "there's still that tall, skinny gent somebody saw leaving the house—at least according to the papers. When I find him, I'll let you know."

"I'll let *you* know," the lieutenant said. "And I'll be seein' ya."

He wasn't kidding. There was a radio car waiting for me when I walked out of that drugstore.

IT WAS time for breakfast before I finally convinced the homicide boys that all my efforts had been on the side of law and order.

And that's *all* they'd been, I told myself morosely over a lousy cup of drugstore coffee. For fifty bucks I'd been beaten twice, wrecked my car, and nearly lost my life. I'd had the small satisfaction of identifying the two torpedoes in the headquarters file, but it seemed the police already knew all about them, too, in connection with a bookie organization.

However, I didn't spend too much time moping over it. I blew the last two bucks of the fifty on a taxi all the way out to Apex Pictures. And Bronson was there, already beginning to accumulate his day's crop of ulcers, and not particularly happy to see me so bright and early.

We discussed salary, and I reminded him again that the front office wanted me and nobody else, and finally I ended up with a contract form that gave one Frank Laird, "production analyst," a sizable lien on the Apex payroll department for the next thirty days.

I started to bow out, but he stopped me at the door. "Laird, it's only fair to warn you. We're convinced this book-making is an organized set-up throughout the whole industry. If so, it's a big racket, and you may be walking into serious trouble."

I laughed bitterly at the familiar words. "Trouble! I've already had it, and not even getting paid for it. I got taken for a ride last night, I got beaten up last week. In fact, I had my face pushed in even before I'd been—"

I swallowed my words on that thought and went on out fast. That was just it! I'd been beaten and warned to lay off by those two thugs even before I'd been offered the job myself!

Markham's memo had been dated last Thursday. A confidential memo that could have been interpreted only by the man who wrote it and the man it was intended for. And yet the bookie gang had been tipped off. . . .

By someone who didn't like my interest in Brimmer and wanted me out of way for reasons of his own. Someone who had undoubtedly been at that studio party three years ago; someone Mrs. Brimmer, once of the movies herself, had recognized to her everlasting regret. The person Brimmer had been blackmailing; the only other person besides Markham who fitted the picture—and a guy who also fitted a newspaper description I thought had applied to me. . . .

The Voice was staring at me as I stood there by the door with my thoughts hanging out. I eased my gun out, just in case.

"Honey, if you'll get the police in here for me, I'll do a favor for you too."

She reached for the phone, but asked in that chocolate malted voice of hers, "*What* favor?"

I reached for the door knob. "I'll fix it with your boss so that you can go to the beach on warm Wednesdays."

And we did. In her car.

THE END

(Continued from page 30)

whir of the dial on his phone. I heard his voice in a low, croaking mumble.

I lifted the quilt and gently placed the skates back on the bed. I picked up Olson's revolver and dropped it in my pocket.

Norma's eyes opened. She smiled at me.

"Tony—"

"Yes, honey?"

"What happened to Sammy-Boy?"

The croaking voice continued in a dry monotone in the living room. I couldn't hear the words. I filled my pipe and lit it. It was like smoking straw.

I said, "Well, Sammy-Boy was falling, remember?"

"I remember, Tony."

"Well, the guy who pushed him off the Empire State Building was Boris Karloff. But what Karloff failed to notice was that one of Sammy-Boy's suspenders caught on the railing, just as Sammy-Boy tumbled over.

"Sammy-Boy fell a long way. But that suspender kept stretching and stretching—and then all of a sudden it began pulling Sammy-Boy back *up!* It pulled him all the way back to the top of the Empire State Building, over the railing and into Boris Karloff's back, knocking that villain to the floor. Sammy-Boy sat on him until the police came. Everybody clapped hands. Sammy-Boy sang a sweet song. They gave him another million dollars and he lived happily ever after and never fell into danger again for the rest of his life."

"That's wonderful!" Norma breathed. She said, "I love you, Tony."

I said, "I love you too, Norma."

She closed her eyes and fell asleep.

I walked into the living room and looked at Mark Campbell's back where he sat facing the dead phone.

"She doesn't know what happened," someone croaked. Me.

His back remained motionless.

"There are places she can be sent," I said. "It's a disease—just like measles. They could cure her—"

Someone croaked, "You want back on the force, Tony?"

That was him.

I said, "The blonde. Lucille Cannon. She's my client."

The back of his head nodded.

I said, "Turn her loose."

Another nod.

I said, "To hell with the stinking force!"

I walked out into the blinding afternoon sunlight and wondered how long it would be before I could look into anybody's eyes again.

THE END

(Continued from page 49)

into the room with impunity—and that was Archie. Julius trusted him, Isobel. He played dopey all the time and Julius used to tip him to look after him. So when you couldn't get the money, Archie thought he could. After all, Isobel, you're not in love with him, are you?"

She flung up her head and her dark eyes showed fire for the first time. She said, "With *him?* Archie Slab?"

Joey sighed. "I didn't think you were. You see, Gill? She'll talk. He called her and she said he had been up there and couldn't find the money and accused her of taking it and double-crossing him. . . ."

"That sissy! Talking to me like that," she said strongly. "I thought Julius had killed himself. Archie Slab was up there. He told me he was. He was—nasty about it. As if he had something on me."

Sam Gill said, "You'll both have to come in. And those crumb bums on the floor. You'd better get me a wagon, Paschal. We got plenty of hauling to do.

Joey made the call. He saw Isobel regarding him strangely and winked at her. He had wiped her fingerprints off everything when he wiped his own off, of course. Archie had wiped, and Joey had wiped and between them they had let her out, but Archie hadn't known it. Archie had thought he could pin it on her, with the prints, and that the cops were holding it back. That's why he had been so tough about everything.

Because Archie had wanted the money, the twenty thousand. It meant power and glory to the little night clerk. Poisoning a fat old gambler like Sonenberg didn't mean anything to Archie Slab.

Joey said into the phone, "This is Paschal, working with Sam Gill. Send a wagon to the Tavern House. We're carting away some junk."

He had shown Isobel the way out, at any rate. And he had the twenty thousand in his pocket. It was her money, of course. If he turned it in there would be plenty of trouble. If he held it out nad gave it to her later, it would save everybody a lot of embarrassment. Besides, she would be very grateful. She looked very appealing standing there, staring at him, wondering if his wink had meant that he could save her.

Well, he could. He could save her for another occasion. . . . There would be plenty of them.

Sam Gill was staring at him, too, and that was not so good. Joey decided that he must think some more about the twenty thousand. . . .

THE END

(Continued from page 56)

"Yes."

He rubbed his hands together. "Just what I told my sidekick when he laughed at me for saying I was coming over to see you. You tell the sheriff where the money is?"

"No."

"You tell anybody?"

"No."

His eyes glistened. He rubbed has palms some more. "Fine," he said, "fine. We're going to get along. We're going to do business. We're going to beat this thing. Just leave it to little Bernie! All you got to do is tell me where you've hidden that money—*after the trial.* Fair enough? Shows you I got confidence in the way we're going to beat this, doesn't it? I got connections, toots, and I'm the best fixer in the state! Just one or two little papers you have to sign and we'll get busy right—"

"I haven't got the money," she said. "I burned it."

He stared at her, aghast. "You—you burned it?"

"It wasn't any good. It was counterfeit."

His face went ashen. He looked as if he needed to sit down. "Counterfeit? Oh, no, toots. Not the money that Hobe took out of the wrecked car. There was counterfeit dough in the beginning—a hundred grand of it. But Granger and Biddle and Sime Karkins had connections. That's why they were scramming out of Miami, toots. They'd sold that counterfeit dough, sold it for sixty-four thousand dollars in genuine, honest-to-goodness United States currency!"

He whirled and rattled the cell door as if he had to get out of there quick. "One of these days I'll learn," he muttered. "I'll learn to leave them alone. I'll learn they're all fools. I'll learn that anybody that messes with murder is nothing but a clunk, a dumb clunk, that's all—a pure, unadulterated ignoramus that couldn't get away with it in a million years!"

The keeper came. The keeper and Mr. Bahmiller, without a single backward glance at Lila, went off down the corridor. She sat on the cell cot and saw things: the cannery, Hobe lying on the earth with his fingers dug into the sand after the poison had finished with him, the house and the arid acres. She saw thousand-dollar bills curling in flame and becoming black ashes.

Finally, in the hot vacuum of silence rose Lila's thin, subdued, weeping wails. Had she desired she could have been a lot louder with it without bothering anyone. She was the only inmate of the little jail. There was nobody else around to care.

The Crime Clinic

IF YOU don't have murder in your heart, gentle reader, don't bother with this page. Go somewhere else. Read *Oddities in Crime* on Page 39 or Peter Paige's novel, *Softly Creep and Softly Kill!* Or go watch the Dodgers play. But go away. You're wasting your time here. This is advice to murderers we're handing out today.

Are you all set, killers?

First of all, unless you're a resident of Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, North Dakota, Rhode Island, Wisconsin or Puerto Rico, you'll have to travel. In every other state and territory, they're mighty hard on murderers. But in the places mentioned above, they understand these things. All you can get is life imprisonment. . . .

You take the other states now. . . . Not so good. Uncivilized. They fry their killers. Or hang 'em. Or put them in a gas chamber. A thing like that is hard on a man. Unhealthy, you might say.

So if you've got murder on your mind and you live in a state where they get foolishly upset by a little thing like homicide, you'll have to pack your stiletto away and move to a healthier climate—healthier for you, that is.

But if you're one of those dilettantes, pal, the kind who can't get serious about things and uses his axe for making kindling, we've got the answer for you, too. All you want to kill, if we get you right, is time. Right? Well, just pick up your copy of DETECTIVE TALES and go to it, killer. Old D.T. is murder on boredom, brother, just murder!

And just to prove that little homicidal point to you, we've lined up a real assortment of mayhem and murder for next month's issue, featuring a gripping Day Keene novel, "Crawl Out of That Coffin!" plus novelettes and short stories by W. T. Ballard, Cyril Plunkett, Henry Norton, Don James and others.

Well, don't take any wooden bullets, men. . . .

—THE EDITOR.

(Continued from page 62)

"Remember the rope man in the circus when we were kids?"

"Yeah. I just got out of a sack with his help."

Carrocci's face was livid with fear and hatred. Abie the Goat was moaning in a minor key. Li'l Arthur was silent, like always. Mary did not look at them. She looked at John and her eyes were back in her head, exactly as of old.

Mary said, "I knew they had you. I went downstairs to a phone and called the cops."

"They forgot about me," John said. It was all sort of dreamy, but he had to tell her. He wanted to tell her everything, everything he had ever known, ever done all his life. He said, "They didn't know I was a kinker and double-jointed, that I did an act one time, doublin' in brass, playin' frog man. Do you remember that act?"

"You could hold it in the sack," she nodded. "I knew you wouldn't strangle. But I was afraid he'd shoot you."

"You could've left after you called the cops. You could have got away and been safe," he said. "Couldn't you?"

"And leave you here?" Her eyes were fully alive now. "I left you once, John, when I married him. It didn't work out."

John sighed. The knife in his hand was red. It was suddenly distasteful to him. He put it carefully in a box. The storeroom was littered with boxes. There were noises downstairs, loud voices.

He said, "That'll be the cops. Fingy's over at my place. They put Fingy in a sack. So I knew they'd put me in one if I got with you. So I called you and let them do it. I—I didn't care what happened. If he got me, it'd be all right. But I knew you hated him. He tipped it off himself that you and he weren't living together."

She said, "That's right, John. Not for a long time."

Heavy feet tramped to the door. John went over and opened it. The door squeaked once more. He said, "This way, officer. I've had to mess up Ike Carrocci. Also, I got to report a death at my apartment."

A voice said, "Carrocci, huh? Heck, the captain was movin' in on him tomorrow, anyway. Got orders. Carrocci was through. Don't worry about it, bub." A big detective walked in, stared around. He whistled. He said, "Say . . . Abie the Goat and Li'l Arthur. You mess them up, too?"

John said wearily, "It's a long story. You mind taking this girl and me down to headquarters together? We got a lot we want to talk about."

MONEY ISN'T EVERYTHING-

(OR IS IT?)

BY GROUCHO MARX

WHAT do you want to save up a lot of money for? You'll never need the stuff.

Why, just think of all the wonderful, wonderful things you can do *without* money. Things like—well, things like—

On second thought, you'd better keep on saving, chum. Otherwise you're licked.

For instance, how are you ever going to build

that Little Dream House, without a trunk full of moolah? You think the carpenters are going to work free? Or the plumbers? Or the architects? Not those lads. They've been around. They're no dopes.

And how are you going to send that kid of yours to college, without the folding stuff?

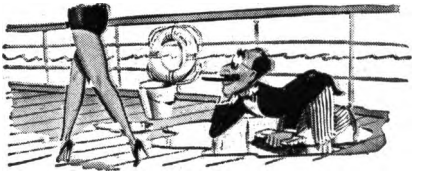
Maybe you think he can work his way through by playing the flute.

If so, you're crazy. (Only three students have ever worked their way through college by playing the flute. And they had to stop eating for four years.)

And how are you going to do that world-traveling you've always wanted to do? Maybe you think you can stoke your way across, or scrub decks. Well, that's no good. I've tried it. It interferes with shipboard romances.

So—all seriousness aside—you'd better keep on saving, pal.

Obviously the best way is by continuing to buy U. S. Savings Bonds—through the Payroll Plan.



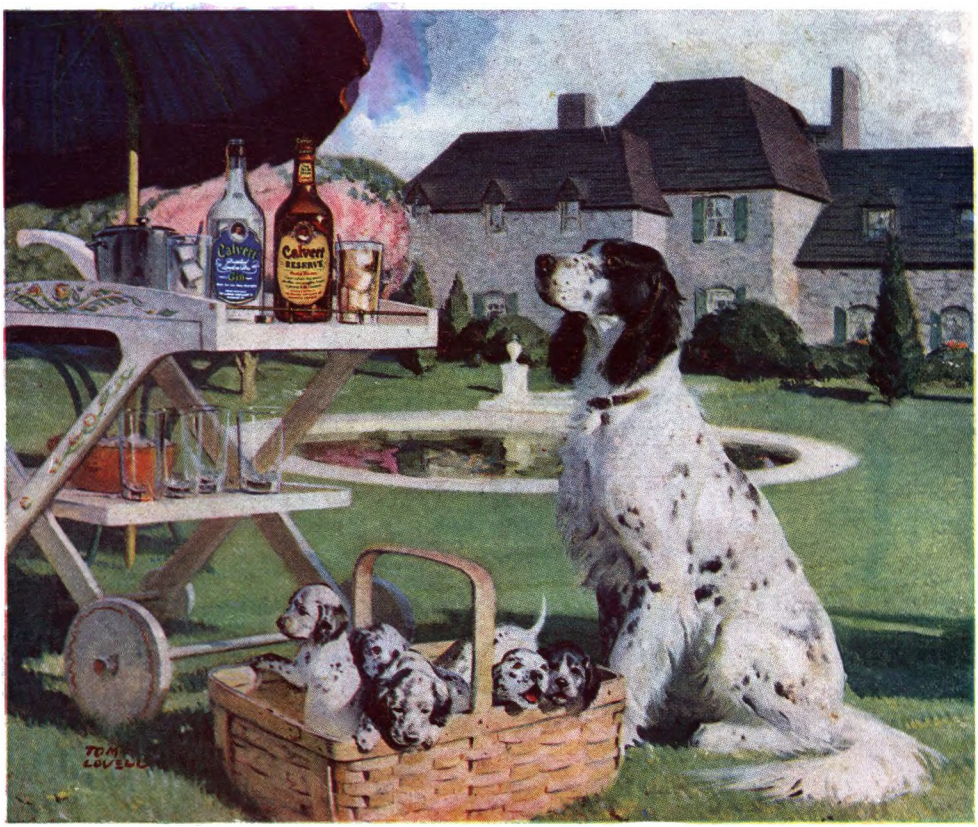
They're safe and sound. Old Uncle Sam *personally* guarantees your investment. And he never fobbed off a bum I.O.U. on *anybody*.

You get four bucks back for every three you put in. And that ain't hay, alfalfa, or any other field-grown product.

Millions of Americans—smart cookies all—have found the Payroll Plan the easiest and best way to save.

So stick with the Payroll Plan, son—and you can't lose.

SAVE THE EASY WAY... BUY YOUR BONDS THROUGH PAYROLL SAVINGS



"The drinks here are well bred, too!"

For that cooling highball, thoughtful hosts choose
the agreeably light whiskey of good taste, Calvert.
And for a frosty collins — well — Calvert makes the best gin, too!
Whichever *you* prefer for your summertime drinks — good-mannered whiskey
or soft-flavored gin — just remember

Clear Heads Choose Calvert

Calvert

BLENDED WHISKEY

and

DISTILLED LONDON DRY GIN

Calvert Distillers Corporation, New York City.
Calvert "Reserve": Blended Whiskey, 86.8 Proof, 65% Grain Neutral Spirits.
Calvert Distilled London Dry Gin, 90 Proof, Distilled from 100% Grain Neutral Spirits