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THE SUSPENSE MAGAZINE



25¢

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MURDERING
KIND!**

by **ROBERT TURNER**



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LATE THAT NIGHT

DETECTIVE TALES

25c



Combined with F.B.I. DETECTIVE STORIES

VOL. FIFTY

DECEMBER, 1952

NUMBER TWO

Four Dramatic Crime Novelettes

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—had baited a trap for me—and the world was beating a path to my grave!
- SO LOVELY—AND SO DEAD!**.....*Fletcher Flora* 48
—was my sweetheart, and the only way I'd ever find her killer—was by being the next to die!
- COP FOR SALE!**.....*Mark Hope* 70
—but the price is death!
- THE HANGMAN'S LAST SUPPER**.....*Tiah Devitt* 92
—was a dismal affair, with only the Grim Reaper invited!

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A GENT who climbs into someone else's house in the middle of the night, planning to carry off everything that isn't tied down, has to be equipped with more than his share of gall.

There just isn't any room, in the profession of burglary, for someone who is easily embarrassed. The work doesn't permit it. You never know when some angry homeowner is going to come roaring down the stairs, demanding to know what for.

And there are other vicissitudes, too, which require a cool head and a barrel of nerve. It's unfortunate, in a way. If he hadn't gone wrong in the beginning, a successful burglar might easily have made a name for himself, following a more praiseworthy career.

Still, for sheer audacity, we think you'd have to go far to find the equal of Frisco Joe—at least, the way Harold Helfer tells the story. . . .

Somebody else would have panicked under the circumstances, but not Frisco Joe. There he was, on the porch of this cream-bricked home, trying to push open a window, when suddenly, of all people, there comes this cop into view strolling down the darkened street toward him. It wasn't only that it was two in the morning, either, when

all actions and appearances are doubly suspect, but here was Frisco Joe hotter than a bowl of chili in Tampico, wanted for house-breaking from Sacramento to St. Paul, not to mention a few other places.

The big question was whether the cop had actually seen him at the window. If not, he could step over to the door and pretend to be opening it with a key, an action far less suspect. There wasn't much time to think. The cop, idly swinging his night club in the light of the quarter moon, was only some fifty yards away.

Frisco Joe cursed under his breath—should have picked a poorer neighborhood; they don't have cops on beats in the cheaper ones. He decided to stay put. There was a time when it was best to brazen things out. He not only stood by the window but he continued to tug at it. When the cop's footsteps sounded only about fifteen yards or so away, the burglar turned and called out, "Hello, there—I wonder if you could give me a hand?"

When the cop—one of the beefy-faced, heavy-jawed kind—got on the porch, Frisco Joe, lowering his voice somewhat, said: "Forgot my key—don't want to wake the missus. She hasn't been feeling well. Window doesn't seem to be locked from

(Continued on page 8)

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(Continued from page 6)

inside, just stuck. Can't seem to get it open, though."

The cop, putting his night club in its holder at his side, got both hands on a pane and began to push upwards. His beefy face quickly reddened with the strain. It was all Frisco Joe could do to keep from chuckling out loud. This was rich. This was really going to be one to tell the fellows about! After a minute or so of struggling with the window, the cop turned to him with a sigh and said, "Maybe it's not locked on the inside, but it's sure stuck. Is there any other window you can open?"

Frisco Joe thought quickly. He said, "Well, yes, around the side—but any of them might wake the missus up. She's had a tough time lately. Wouldn't want that to happen."

He wasn't kidding about that, either. If the "missus"—or anybody else in the house—got up, his goose was cooked. Since he didn't know the layout of the house, his only reasonably safe bet, especially with a cop at his elbow, was the front living-room window.

Frisco Joe said, "Maybe I'll just go on to a hotel."

The cop said, "That would be a shame. Here, let me try again."

ONCE more he put both hands on the sill and once more, leaning towards the window, he pushed. His face was turning the color of a carrot. Sweat was beginning to glisten in the folds of his skin.

With each passing second, Frisco Joe was beginning to enjoy the situation more and more. Why, this was just about one of the funniest things that ever happened! Why, it was practically—what was the word for it—a classic! That's what this was, classic!

Frisco Joe said, "I'm afraid I'm putting you to a lot of trouble."

The cop said, "Well, that's what we get paid for, you know, to help people out."

Then, his face screwing up with still more determination, he strained even harder at the window.

Frisco Joe had to turn away for a moment. It was like something that belonged in a screwy movie. If the papers ever found out about this, boy, oh, boy, would they have a field day!

The cop, still grimacing with effort, was saying, "I still think you're right that it isn't locked from the inside. It wouldn't give as much as it does, if it was. It probably just hasn't been opened in some little time and a kink has developed in the sash."

The cop paused for a moment, took a deep breath and, with perspiration now breaking out all over his fleshy face, went at the window again with every ounce of strength.

Trying not to sound too facetious, but enjoying it hugely, Frisco Joe said, "Well, I'm sure going to call your chief and tell how nice you've been, trying to open the window like this for me."

Apparently inspired by this, the cop mustered up every atom of his beefy strength into one last supreme effort—and there was a sharp, snapping noise. The window had given.

Frisco Joe permitted himself a look of pure delight as he gazed at the open window. Then he took the cop's hand and shook it. With staunch simplicity, the burglar said, "You have done me a good turn I'll never forget."

And the cop said, "Glad to do it."

Frisco Joe sat himself down on the window sill and then swung both of his legs inside.

Frisco Joe had begun lowering the window from the inside when the cop made a gesture too. It was rather swift and there was a clicking sound to it and—to his astonishment and horror—there Joe was with a pair of handcuffs around his wrist.

"What's the big idea!" Frisco Joe demanded angrily.

(Continued on page 113)



AS HEALER. One Lady writes: "My sister suffered very badly for years, but since I gave her a Joan the Wad to keep near her she is much easier. Do you think this is due to Joan or the water from the Lucky Well?"

AS LUCK BRINGER. Another writes: "Since the war my wife and I have been dogged by persistent ill-luck and we seemed to be sinking lower and lower. One day someone sent us a Joan the Wad. We have never found out who it was, but, coincidence if you like, within a week I got a much better job and my wife had some money left her. Since then we have never looked back and, needless to say, swear by 'Queen Joan'."

AS MATCHMAKER. A young girl wrote and informed me that she had had scores of boy friends, but it was not until she had visited Cornwall and taken Joan back with her that she met the boy of her dreams, and as they got better acquainted she discovered he also has "Joan the Wad."

AS PRIZEWINNER. A young man wrote us only last week: "For two years I entered competitions without luck, but since getting Joan the Wad I have frequently been successful although I have not won a big prize. But I know that . . . who won \$5,600 in a competition has one because I gave it to him. When he won his \$5,600 he gave me \$280 for myself, so you see I have cause to bless 'Queen Joan'."

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HURRY

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AS SPECULATOR. A man writes: "I had some shares that for several years I couldn't give away. They were 14 cent shares and all of a sudden they went up in the market to \$1.10. I happened to be staring at Joan the Wad. Pure imagination, you may say, but I thought I saw her wink approvingly. I sold out, reinvested the money at greater profit and have prospered ever since."

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JOAN'S COTTAGE, 2, LANIVET, BODMIN, CORNWALL, ENG.
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Pity the Poor Penman!



Jim the Penman could make a better C-note than anyone outside of the U.S. Treasury—but he lost money every time he did it!

By **SKIPPY ADELMAN**

THERE are only five or six men, in this nation of one hundred and forty million, who possess the skill to engrave the portraits and incidental designs on the steel plates from which we print our paper money—and all of these work for the Bureau of Engraving and Printing. No one of them ever makes an entire plate: some men are better suited to do the portraits and others the surrounding areas. The bills, therefore, represent a composite effort of the finest craftsmen.

No counterfeiter could hope to match the government's array of engraving talent. That is why all the phoney-money makers will photograph the bill to be counterfeited and make their plates by photo-engraving. National Currency was introduced in 1863. In the years since then, only one man has had any success making counterfeit bills by free-hand means. His name was Emanuel Ninger, but until the Secret Service finally caught up with him and learned his identity, he was known as Jim the Penman.

Ninger would trace the outlines of a hundred dollar bill upon a sheet of blank paper cut to the size of currency. Then,

using a fine artist's brush, dipped in green or black ink of his own manufacture, he would draw the thousands of fine lines—some breath-takingly intricate, others long and straight and close together—which make up a hundred dollar bill.

His hand-worked bills were so close to the original that, in spite of their suspiciously high denomination, they passed inspection in dozens of banks.

But Ninger was thoughtless about the kind of paper he used, making no attempt to have that as authentic as his pictorial work.

He was captured by the Secret Service in 1896, while trying to cash one of his bills in a New Jersey bank.

Ninger's skill was so great that he doubtless could have obtained a job with the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, making legitimate currency. His earnings there would have been much greater than the amounts he received as a counterfeiter—it took him a lot longer to draw a phony hundred dollar bill than it would have to earn that amount as a highly skilled federal employee. ◆ ◆ ◆

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THE MURDERING KIND!

Smashing Mystery

By
ROBERT TURNER

Somebody—somewhere—had decided this was my night to die, so they baited a trap with some luscious blonde cheesecake—and the world started beating a path to my grave!

IT STARTED off just like any other Friday night. I left my office in the *Excite* Publishing Company building on Forty-Sixth Street at five-oh-five. I went across the street to the quiet, dim little bar in the Hotel Marlo where every Friday night for the past year or so, I'd been stopping off after work for a dry Manhattan. I felt good. I had that Friday-payday glow of satisfaction that you get



when you've got a good tough week's work behind you, money in your pocket and two free days at home with Fran and the kids ahead of you.

I wasn't looking for any trouble. I would have the one drink, leave the Marlo and



Her mouth hung slack . . . I looked over her head toward the doorway.

make the five thirty-seven Express bus to Jersey. I'd meet Johnny Haggard on the bus, and we'd bull it all the way home about our jobs and what we were going to do about the crab grass on our so-called lawns.

Johnny lives next door to me in Green-acres, a new development just outside of Wildwood in North Jersey. There are plenty of acres there, but not much of it green, what with the thin layer of topsoil

the builders used over all that fill. Anyhow. . . .

No trouble. No excitement. Nothing different. Everything the same as usual. That's what I thought. . . . But a couple of things happened.

The Marlo is a small, old, sidestreet residential hotel. The bar is tiny, very dimly lighted, quiet, with no juke box and usually not very crowded. Sometimes I'm the only one in there having a drink at five-ten. But not tonight. There was a girl there, all alone at the bar when I came in.

There was nothing special about her at first glance. And that's all I did, at first, was glance at her. Believe me. Listen, I've been married ten years and I appreciate a good-looking woman the same as the next guy. I kid with the guys and sometimes with Fran, just to needle her a little, about stepping out and fooling around. You know. But you also know it's talk with most of us guys. After all, a man's got a swell wife, a couple of fine kids, a nice home. You can't have everything. So you make up your mind to that and forget about the things you don't have.

Herb, the tall, gloomy-looking bartender at the Marlo, saw me come in the door and had my Manhattan half made by the time I got onto one of the leather barstools. I sat there, savoring the first lemon-peel-tart smooth burn of the drink in my mouth, trickling down my throat, and looked at myself in the backbar mirror. I was not the only one. The girl at the other end of the bar was looking at my reflection, too. Our eyes met. She let them hold for a moment and then dropped her gaze, almost shyly.

Some girls can do a lot with their eyes. This one could. I don't know how to explain it. Her eyes were very dark, extremely widely set, kind of intense and brooding looking. With that one look she seemed to say: "You seem interesting to me. I think I could get to like you. If you study me closely I think you'll feel the same way. And if you spoke to me, if you did it nicely,

not in a wise-guy way, I wouldn't brush you off. But *you'll* have to make the approach. I wouldn't dare." You know what I mean?

So using the backbar mirror, I looked her over more carefully. She wasn't well-dressed. She was wearing a trench coat, with the back of the collar turned up and no hat. Her hair was thick and blonde and hung gracefully about her shoulders but that's all you could say about it. Her nose was a little too broad and her mouth too wide and full-lipped, but somehow those features seemed to fit just right with the dark, brooding eyes and although she wasn't striking, she was a damned attractive girl. The quiet type. The kind who wouldn't want a lot of money spent on her, who would be content to just sit and have a couple of drinks with a guy and talk and maybe go to a movie or something. . . . You can see the way my mind was working.

I'D ALMOST finished the Manhattan when our eyes met in the mirror again and this time, they held longer and I got the feeling that both of us were trying to tear our gaze away and couldn't. It was as though we were looking very deep into each other, hungrily. And then when she finally yanked her gaze away, I felt shaken and a little giddy, as though this was my third Manhattan instead of my first.

I glanced sideways at her and she had her legs angled off the stool and crossed. She was wearing high heels, not extreme, but enough to give her naturally gracefully curved legs what seemed like extra length and sleekness. I suddenly realized that my heart was pounding too hard, and so were the pulses in my wrist.

Herb, the bartender went down to the girl, seeing she'd finished her drink. He asked her if she'd like another. She hesitated and then caught my glance in the backbar mirror again and turned quickly away and said, "Yes, please." Her voice was soft, husky, almost a whisper.

I knew then that I'd better get out of there, fast. All kinds of crazy thoughts and ideas were going through my head. I drained my glass, started to get up and somebody swatted me on the back. I wheeled angrily to look into Ronny Chernow's handsome, grinning face.

"Hi, Kip," he said. "Living dangerously, I see. Sitting in a cozy little bar, drinking cocktails and flirting with a pretty girl! Ah, you sly old dogs, you quiet ones, you never can tell about your type."

I got very red. I started to tell Chernow that in the first place I wasn't flirting, in the second place I was only thirty-one years old, at least a couple of years younger than he was. But he wasn't even looking at me. He was staring at the girl at the end of the bar and smiling at her. He was looking at her the way guys like Ronny Chernow always look at girls, as though she wasn't wearing anything; patronizingly, as though he was thinking: *You're not too bad, Baby. Maybe I'll give you a great big break and go after you!*

But the girl wasn't paying any attention to him. Chernow turned back to me. He took hold of my arm. "Hey, you're not running off so soon. Have another drink with me. Or will Momma spank if you miss that first bus home?"

What can you say to a remark like this? If you deny it, then go, you make it sound true, anyhow. I thought about the girl at the bar. She was listening to this. The loud way Chernow always talked, she couldn't help it.

I knew what Ronnie Chernow really thought about me: I was stuffy, not a sport, a guy who never had any fun, was regimented, never varied his routine—a man on a treadmill, going like hell but never getting anywhere. I didn't care what Chernow thought about me. But I cared what *I* thought. And suddenly, crazily, I wondered if he was right. I had to prove that he wasn't.

"Okay, Ronny," I said. "If you're buy-

ing. I hear you're a tight man with a buck."

That got him. Chernow was always talking about how much money he made and spent. "*Me?*" he said. "What are you talking about? Why, I spend more in one—" Then he stopped and grinned, realizing I'd turned the needle around on him. "Okay, Kip," he said.

While Herb made the second Manhattan, I looked at the clock. It was five-twenty. By now, I should have been a block away, on my way home, on the way to that five thirty-seven Express. I knew now that I was going to miss it. It was the damndest feeling. Maybe it was silly, but I felt a little sick and scared, apprehensive. In the five years we'd been living in Wildwood, I hadn't missed that bus. I'd never stayed in town one night, even. Now that I realized that, it seemed a little ridiculous. At the same time I felt a slight exultation, a sort of breaking loose feeling, of strange freedom. I drained half of the Manhattan at one gulp. I looked at Ronny Chernow in the mirror behind the bar.

He was big, handsome, in a red-faced, square-jawed sort of way. His carefully touseled, boyishly curly hair made him look younger than he was. A lot of the girls in our office were crazy about him. He was the vigorous, aggressive, breezy type and he was always kidding around with the girls and always letting hints drop to other guys in the place that he'd dated a number of them and found them vulnerable.

He was the business manager of Emcee Publications and I don't know what he made, but it must have been somewhere around ten thousand a year. But he spent and dressed as though his salary was three times that. Being single, though, with nobody else's way to pay through life but his own, I guess he could do that.

It was hard to like the man. He was big-mouthed and overpowering. But it was just as hard not to admire him. He was everything that I was not and I thought

about that, sitting here. At least Ronny Chernow had color. I was drab. His kind of life was excitement. Mine was boredom, monotony. Men like Chernow felt sorry for worms like me.

I began to rebel against that. I told myself: *I'm going to have a little change. I deserve it. I'm way overdue. I'll show this big, handsome jerk next to me that I can have fun, too. I'll call Fran and tell her I won't be home until late. I'll stay here, have another drink or two and then go someplace for dinner. Later, I'll go to the fights at the Garden.*

"Ronny," I said. "You're a real 'round-town boy. Where's a good place to have dinner? I'm staying in town tonight."

His thick handsome brows rose as though I'd said I was going out to stick up a bank. "What!" he said. "You're finally going to break away from Momma's apron strings? Congratulations, kid. I'd just about given you up. Maybe you are human, after all." He slapped me on the back again. "Where you going? Got a date?"

I began to enjoy this. I wanted it to last a little longer. I began to almost like Chernow. "Now, look," I said and winked at him. "Have I asked you where you're going tonight, who you're going to be with? Does Gimbels tell Macy's? It's none of my business. Maybe this isn't any of yours."

He looked dubious but didn't press the point. We finished our drinks and Chernow said: "Well, since you don't have to run, let's do this again." He flipped his empty glass with the back of his forefinger.

I didn't answer. I looked at the clock. It was five-thirty. I should call Fran. Somehow I dreaded that. That would be the final break with my routine. I hated to make it. Yet I had to call her. Then I remembered that she wouldn't be expecting me until six-thirty. She wouldn't leave to meet the bus at Wildwood until six-twenty. I still had plenty of time for that call. I watched Herb make two more

drinks. Then I looked toward the glass and saw the girl at the end of the bar staring at me again. Chernow noticed, too.

"Hey," he said. "That baby is giving you the eye. If she even half looked at me like that, I'd be down there sitting on her lap by now."

"Well," I said, sarcastically, "you're the Casanova type, anyhow."

He missed the sarcasm. "Listen," he said. His eyes appraised me. "You could do all right, too, if you'd give yourself half a chance. You're a good-looking guy—a little on the slim side, but not bad. You're too timid, though. Women like aggressive guys. You gotta go after them. You—"

"Hey!" I broke in. He was beginning to embarrass me. "Not to change the subject, but did you find out from the advertising department how come we lost that second cover ad?"

"They've switched to the Tripub Comics group for the next six months. But they'll be back as soon as Tri's circulation drops and you can goose ours up again. How about getting on the ball and doing that, huh, kid?"

"Sure," I began to burn a little. As editor of Emcee's Comic magazine group, I was responsible for circulation. "That's easy. Just get the old man to allow me five bucks a page more for the artists and a dollar a page more for the writers. Better art and better stories are what the kids are buying. I do the best I can on the lousy budget I got."

"I suppose," Chernow finished his drink, swung around on his stool. He was looking at the legs of the girl at the end of the bar. He made a whistling sound. "Man, look at those legs!" he said. "Kip, kid, if you don't make that before you leave here, I'll disown you . . . Well, I got to run. Have a good time, boy. Live dangerously!"

I waved and in the bar mirror, watched him breeze out of the place. I told myself to hell with him. The next time I caught the eye of the girl at the end of the bar, I

smiled. She looked frightened and turned her eyes right away.

"Herb," I said. He came toward me, wiping his hands on his bar apron, his amber eyes doleful. "Herb, ask the lady if she'll have a drink on me. At the end of the bar there."

The bartender's dolorous voice said: "You sure you want to do that, Mr. Morgan? I mean, I know it's none of my business, but. . . ." He broke off, half apologetically.

Something like a bell of warning seemed to toll inside my head. But I was looking at myself in the bar. Like Chernow had said, I wasn't a bad-looking guy. And that third Manhattan had hit home. I wasn't drunk but I was feeling—well—aggressive, cocky.

"Don't be silly, Herb," I said. "See if the lady'd like a drink."

HE AMBLED down to the other end of the bar, spoke to the girl. I watched her in the mirror. She registered a little surprise, a little confusion, just the right amount of each, very cutely. I didn't hear what she said, but saw Herb start to mix a martini, then take it down to her. She looked at me in the bar mirror, raised the glass and formed the words, "Here's luck," with her full lips.

I said: "Herb, make me another drink. I've got to make a phone call." It was quarter to six, now. I couldn't put it off any longer. I went through into the lobby to the phone booths. I called Fran, told her I'd been detained at the office, but was leaving now.

"I haven't looked at the schedule yet, Baby," I said. "So I don't know which bus I'll be able to get at this time. I'll call you from Wildwood and you can run out. Okay?"

"Kip," Fran said. "Are you all right?"

My heart skipped a couple of beats for no reason at all. "Sure. Of course I'm all right. What do you mean?"

"You haven't been drinking?"

I didn't answer for several seconds. Then I said: "Well, I stopped off and had a couple with Ronny Chernow. Why, I don't sound drunk, do I?"

She giggled. "No, silly. But you never call me 'Baby'. It just sounded funny, coming from you."

"Oh," I said. "Well, I'll see you later."

"Okay," she said. "Okay, *Baby!*" She hung up.

I realized as soon as I left the phone booth that the instant I'd spoken to Fran, I'd forgotten all about my resolve to stay in town for dinner and the fights. At the sound of her voice I'd instinctively reverted to my role of the faithful home-loving husband. Routine had won out. I shrugged. It was probably just as well. Away from the dim lighting of the bar and the sight of the girl sitting there all alone, I realized that I just wasn't cut out for that sort of thing, let's face it. I would go back, finish that last drink I'd ordered and take off for the bus terminal.

Back in the Marlo bar, as I passed behind the girl at the end, she half turned, said, huskily: "Thanks for the drink. Why don't you bring yours over here? I mean, it's silly for the two of us not to talk."

I got kind of choked up. My heart felt too big and thick inside my chest. I was sure she could hear it. I was suddenly glad that I'd made that mistake on the phone and committed myself about going home, now. If I hadn't, I'd probably take this girl up on her invitation. The way the sound of her voice hit me, the impact her eyes had upon me—well—a guy is only human.

I said: "Uh—thanks—but I've got to run, now. Some other time."

I went to my own end of the bar, gulped down the Manhattan, gagging on it a little. When I set the empty glass down, I misjudged the distance, set it down a little too hard. I knew then that I was a little tight. I knew when I got outside it was

going to hit me. I turned away from the bar and the girl spoke again:

"How about letting me buy you one, before you go? I mean, I don't want to be obligated. Please? Pretty please?"

This time her voice didn't get under my skin. It even annoyed me a little. She seemed suddenly overanxious and the soft huskiness had become harsh with the almost desperation tone of her voice now. And that repeated 'I mean' business grated, too. I was glad this was almost over and I'd had sense enough to get out from under before it was too late.

I had to pass her again to go out through the lobby exit. I said, almost abruptly: "No. No thank you. Next time. Good night." She half swung around on the stool as I started past and I had a nervous intuition that she was going to jump off the stool, confront me, block my exit, try to stop me from leaving. But she didn't.

I got out into the lobby and she must have been moving on tiptoe because I wasn't aware that she'd followed me out until she was right up beside me. She hooked her left arm through mine. At the same time I felt something hard being jammed against my right ribs. The arm hooked in mine pulled me forcibly to a stop. I looked at her. Out here in the bright light of the small hotel lobby, she didn't look so good. Her eyes were still beautiful but now their intensity, their broodingness looked sullen, almost angry. Lipstick was too thick on her wide mouth. Under the powder and rouge, her skin was coarse, grainy. But she was smiling up at me, invitingly. At least it would look that way to somebody else. But it didn't to me. Her face was too tight. The smile was too forced.

"Just a min—"

"Shut up, stupid," she cut me off. She was whispering, through her teeth, without breaking the smile. "I've got a gun in your ribs and if you make me, I'll use it right here. I could get away before any-

one even realized what happened. Understand? Do as I say."

I WANTED to laugh and at the same time a chill ran all over me. This was ridiculous. I was Kip Morgan, managing editor of the Comic Magazine Group at Emcee Publications, Inc., right across the street. I had never been arrested in my life. I had never known any woman like this before. All of my friends were respectable. And this was New York City, at the dinner hour. This was the Hotel Marlo, right in the public lobby, with the desk clerk and a bellhop only a few yards away and a portly old gentleman sitting in a lobby chair only a few feet away. This was all crazy.

"Are you kidding?" I said. "You. . . ." I let my voice trail off. I was looking down at her other hand and it was thrust inside the trenchcoat where nobody could see it. The hand that was holding a gun, she said, against my ribs. I began to know, right then that she wasn't kidding.

"Just walk with me slowly, toward the elevator. Don't say anything. Don't make any commotion or try to signal anyone. Don't try to break away. Behave yourself and you won't get hurt. I promise."

Sickness suddenly twisted at my stomach. I knew what it was, now. This was payday. It was a Friday and the Fifteenth. Payday for almost everybody in New York City. This was some kind of a new holdup gimmick. I thought of the hundred and twenty-five dollars in cash I had in my pocket. A full week's take-home. A whole week of getting up every morning at six-thirty and not getting home until almost seven at night. A week of deadlines and cajoling artists and script writers into getting their stuff in on time, of making out vouchers, and editing scripts and going over silverprints and a million other little chores and details.

A hundred and twenty-five bucks. And a mortgage payment due on the house. And food money next week for Fran. The

new suit for young Stevie. The party dress for little June.

Fury seared through me. And shame. Fury because this girl was going to try and steal my money, that money that meant so many things to so many people. Shame because she was so obviously cheap and vicious and I'd almost let myself be led on into taking her out. Because I hadn't gone home at the usual time, like someone sensible, because I'd let myself be jived into an extra drink.

I started to wrench violently away from her, then to grab her and howl for help. But she must have felt me tense. We were in front of the elevator, now. The gun ground deep into my ribs, hurting. She whispered: "You'd die, instantly. You wouldn't have a chance. Don't be a jerk. Be good for just a few more minutes and you'll be alive tomorrow."

The violent anger faded. Losing the money wouldn't hurt Fran and the kids half as much as it would their losing me. "Okay," I said. "But I think you've got the wrong guy. I'm broke. I deposited my money in the bank this noon." It was a last desperate play. It didn't work.

The elevator door opened and she whispered: "Be quiet, now."

We got in the elevator. The operator hardly glanced at us. A guy and a gal, arm in arm, getting into an elevator. What was that to get excited about? The girl, undoubtedly was registered here. So she was taking a friend up to her room. It was early in the evening. What was wrong with that?

Neither of us spoke after she said, "Fourteen" to the operator.

I remembered, crazily, that the fourteenth floor in all hotels is really the thirteenth. It's supposed to be less unlucky that way. It wasn't for me.

We got out and she guided me to the left, down the corridor. I heard the elevator door slam shut behind us. There was no sound in the whole hotel. Even our foot-

steps were muffled on the carpeting. I began to get really scared. The hollow of my spine got wet with sweat and my shirt stuck back there. Perspiration trickled coldly down my ribs, too. I thought once again, desperately, of yanking away, making a break. But at the same instant I realized that the girl would be even less likely to hesitate about killing me up here, with no witnesses. No. . . . My chance was gone. If there'd ever been any chance.

CHAPTER TWO

The Patsy

SHE stopped in front of 1409 and still holding that gun in my ribs, she crossed her other hand over to the right side pocket and extracted the hotel key. The door opened easily and she unhooked my arm, pulled the gun out from under her coat and shoved me inside. There was a short hallway and the room at the other end was lighted. The gun at my spine forced me along, into that room.

There was a man sitting there. I had never seen him before in my life. But he seemed to know me. He said: "Hello, Morgan."

He was slouched in a green leather-covered easy chair. A cigarette dangled from one of his slim, pale, long-fingered hands. Streamers of smoke went straight up. He was small and very thin, but not gangsterish looking. Not in the movie tradition, anyhow. His hair was crew-cut, a mousy brown color. His ears looked too large for his narrow, bony skull. He had level, gray, intelligent-looking eyes and they weren't shifty at all. They held my gaze, almost amusedly. But his mouth was what told me I was in for a hard time. It was tiny and pursed tightly as though he was mad at somebody and all tense and strung-up, even though he was sitting there so at ease and relaxed.

Still looking at me, he said to the girl:

"What the hell took you so long, Viv?"

She stood off to one side, still holding the gun. "Broth-er!" she said. "What a Sunday school boy. I did everything. Everything but go over and sit on his lap. I would have done that, but that spaniel-faced old barkeep didn't seem too crazy about what I was up to. Anyhow, I couldn't get him to bite. He was running right out on me and I had to practically kidnap him, right in the lobby. And brother, don't think that didn't make me nervous!"

That was funny. I'd never even given a thought to the fact that she'd probably been just as scared as I was down there. I said, suddenly: "Look, what's this all about? If you want my money, I'll give it to you. You'd take it, anyhow. But, please take it easy. I—I've got a wife and kids." My voice broke and I felt sick-ashamed, pleading, begging with these people. But I'd have gotten down on my knees to them, right then, if it would have helped me get out of there any faster.

"Money," the man in the chair said. He laughed. It was a quick, sputtering sound. "Sure, we'll take your money. Throw me your wallet."

I reached inside my jacket pocket and took out the wallet, tossed it to him. "I'd like the wallet back."

He took out the sheaf of bills, riffled through them. He tossed the wallet back to me. "Over a hundred bucks more," he said to the girl. "Vivian, I've got the papers all ready. You keep that gun on him. But if there's any trouble, watch what you're doing. Don't shoot me by mistake."

He reached down to the armchair-side old fashioned radio, and I saw that it was already lit up, turned on. He twisted the volume knob slowly and an orchestra playing a popular song grew louder and louder until it was almost deafening in the room. He said to Vivian:

"Now, if you have to shoot, it won't be

so noticeable. Nor when he hollers. I think he'll holler real good."

With the racket of the radio, I could only half hear what he said. But my mind filled in the rest of it. I was suddenly confused and I felt cold and ill the way you do when you've got a fever and you have to get up out of bed at night. I was weak as a child.

I tried to figure what this was all about but I couldn't make it.

I looked toward the hotel room desk and saw that it was covered with papers. The man got up out of the chair. He said: "Vivian, get behind him with that shooter and ease him over to the desk."

She jabbed the muzzle of the gun against my spine and I stepped toward the desk. "Morgan," the man said. His voice got taut, his words clipped. "Morgan, I'm going to ask you to sign something. I hope you refuse. I hope you try to give us trouble. Because then we'll have to make you sign it. And that's what I'd like to have to do."

I looked at him and he held his hands out toward me, his skinny, white, long-fingered hands. In the pinkish palms he held two rolls of nickels. He closed his fingers around them. His knuckles stood out sharply. With the weight of those nickels in them, those knuckles would make his fists like gnarled clubs. There was suddenly a roaring in my ears and my heart seemed to be up and choking in my throat. I hadn't been in a fight, been hit by a fist, since I was a kid. And only twice, then. I'd always hated fist fights. I'd avoided them. It made me ill to hit somebody else and to feel another's fist making that sickly smack noise against my own face was worse.

Turning away from him, I looked down at the top paper on the desk. It was a letter on Emcee Publishing Company letterhead stationary. My eyes seemed to ache and I had trouble reading. I kept wiping the flat of my hands up and down my trousers

but they still stayed slick with sweat. The letter was dated today. It said:

To Whom It May Concern:

For the past year I have steadily and regularly been embezzling company funds. All told, I have taken nearly \$50,000. This was done with the aid and connivance of Miss Elizabeth Tremayne, of the Business Department. How, will be obvious, Monday, when the books are examined.

The money has all been spent on gambling on horses and in bad stock market investments. I'd hoped to win or earn the money back and prevent eventual discovery, but this did not work out.

For all the trouble and disillusion this is going to cause, I am truly sorry.

I herewith, also append a list of the dozen or more different signatures I used on the company checks, to remove any doubt that I've been the culprit.

(Signed)

Under this was a list of signatures, names I didn't even recognize. But as I looked at this letter, it flashed through my mind what this was all about. Emcee Publication's fiscal year started on Monday. A complete auditing would be made. Whoever *had* been embezzling, knew their time was up and they couldn't avoid discovery. I was going to be the fall guy—in advance.

Something hit me in the cheek and for a moment I didn't feel any pain. Only shock and a slight dizziness. But the blow whirled me around. Something hit me in the stomach. I bent way over, took a stumbling step forward, my legs apart, and almost fell. I'd never felt so sick to my stomach. Yet all I could do was make gagging sounds. I couldn't seem to get any breath. As though from a great distance, down a long, wind-rushing tunnel I heard someone say: "Sign that letter."

The sickness left. I straightened up. The girl behind me said: "Give him a chance, Smitty. Don't bang up his face."

I stood there sucking in breath, trying to focus my eyes. I leaned on the desk, with both hands, looked down at that letter. That letter! I couldn't sign that, no

matter what they did to me. I couldn't take the rap for somebody else's crookedness.

I thought of the whispering and sniggering there'd be at the Emcee offices, Monday, after news of that letter spread around. . . . "That Kip Morgan," they'd say. "Who'd ever have thought it? But they say those quiet guys are the ones you've got to watch out for. Listen, I'll bet some dame got plenty of that dough, too!" . . . I could see the newspaper headlines, especially in the Wildwood Press:

LOCAL MAN CONFESSES \$50,000 THEFT!

I thought of my neighbors, of my kids going to school and the other kids pointing at them, whispering. I knew how cruel kids could be about things like that.

I wouldn't do it. To hell with them. I wasn't going to sign it.

SMITTY hit me again. His weighted, sharp-knuckled fist caught me in the kidney. I went twisting over to one side like a staggering drunk. Pain ran all through me in little flashes of fire, then ran all together in a balled-up flame of aching agony all up my left side and back. I felt tears hot and blurry in my eyes, then running down my cheeks. I looked at Smitty. His widerset gray eyes were crinkled at the corners as though he was grinning. But his little kewpie doll mouth stayed the same; it showed no expression.

"You're a real hero, aren't you?" he said. "That's beautiful. I like heroes."

He came toward me. And I suddenly didn't care about the girl with the gun behind me. Let her shoot me. Let them kill me. At least the pain would be over. Then they could never make me sign that letter. I swung at him with every ounce of strength I had left. He picked the blow off with his left arm like a lovetap. He took hold of me with his left hand, by the shirt front. His right hand whip-snapped back and forth across my cheeks and mouth, stinging hard. I felt the salty blood in my mouth.

Then his balled, weighted fist hit me in the stomach again. I don't remember falling. But I was on the floor, staring down at the green wall-to-wall rug. I saw Smitty's feet in front of me. He wore patent leather shoes, like dancing pumps, with small black leather bows on them. Then his feet disappeared. There was pain—vast, searing pain all through my ribs as he kicked me.

I cursed. I called him every filthy word I'd ever heard. I was crying, sobbing with rage and pain. I said: "Why are you doing this to me? Why, why? I never did anything to you! Stop it! Please, please stop!"

"For a thousand bucks we're doing it," Smitty said. I could hear him quite plainly in the momentary lull between the end of a song on the radio and the commercial. "For a grand I'd kick hell out of my own mother. So it's nothing personal, understand. But you'd better sign that letter."

The radio music blasted out again. I felt somebody grab me under the arms, lift me. Somehow I got my feet together under me and stood. But not for long. My knees seemed to have no bones in them. I fell backward and sat down on the edge of the bed. I leaned over and put my face on my hands, then looked at the smear of blood on my fingers.

There was suddenly a terrible noise and excruciating pain in my ear. It wasn't until later that I realized he'd slapped me over the ear with his cupped hand. For a moment, I couldn't even hear the radio. I rocked in agony and blubbered. I called to Fran to help me. I kept calling her name. It didn't do any good. Smitty kept slapping and cuffing me and when I'd fall over on my side onto the bed, his fist would wallop into my ribs or kidneys.

After awhile there was just a void of pain. I got numb all over, didn't think, didn't react. And then I realized he wasn't hitting me any more. I looked up through tear-fogged eyes at him and knew that as long as I didn't react he'd ease up on me.

At the same time, sharp thoughts seemed to flash suddenly through my brain. I felt filled with cunning. I told myself: "I can outsmart this guy. I can be crooked, too. I can double-deal *him!* Okay, I'll sign their damned letter. I've been stupid. What difference does it make? This is only Friday night and I've got my office keys. I've got until Monday morning. I can prove my innocence. What good is that piece of paper? I can show my cuts and bruises, prove that I was forced to sign it. I'll go right to the police and I'll help them find out who it was really stole that money."

Leering at Smitty and Vivian, I got up from the bed. I reached out toward the desk. "All—all right," I said. "I'll sign."

I started to walk toward the desk but my legs gave out. Smitty had to put his arm around me, hold me up until I got to the desk, could lean on it with one hand. I picked up the pen. I signed their confession for them. I had hardly put the pen down when Smitty hit me in the temple. There was an explosion of multi-colored lights. There was darkness. Then blinding light again. On and off. On and off.

I wasn't completely out. I was aware of being dragged along the floor by hands under my armpits. I could hear voices. I could hear that the radio had been turned off. But I couldn't move. There was a tingling all through my arms and legs the same as you get when you lie on one arm and it goes numb. I heard Smitty swear. He said: "Shut the window again, Viv. We can't do it, now. There's a damn cop standing in that doorway right across the street."

"So what?" she said. "He isn't looking up here. We can get him dumped out and the cop won't know anything about it until he hits the pavement. We'll be gone by then."

"Don't be stupid. Suppose he *does* just happen to glance up while we're easing him out the window. We'd never get out of the hotel."

Oh, yes, I'd been very clever, very cunning, to sign that confession for them. So clever, so brilliant—so stupified with pain, I hadn't realized they couldn't let me live. I was going to be a "suicide". That would tie in beautifully with the confession. How could they let me live to contest the thing?

Some of the numbness left my arms and legs. I realized I was huddled in a heap against the wall under the hotel room window. I thought of the way it would look out that window, down fourteen—no thirteen—flights. I thought about air rushing past me, taking my breath away as I'd fall, wheeling, turning, over and over. I thought of the sound I'd make, hitting the pavement down there.

"Why doesn't the fat fool go, get out of that doorway?" Vivian said. "Of all the fool places for a cop to stand around and kill time!"

Please, I begged, Please, God, don't let him move. Don't let him move, make him stay there. Right there!

"Listen," Vivian said. "Turn the radio on again. You can shoot him. Make it look like *he* did it, himself. I'm getting nervous. I want to get this over with and get out of here."

"Oh, sure," Smitty said. "With this gun. It can be traced, you goon. That's no good. There's got to be some other way. That damned cop looks like he's settled for the night over there."

There was silence for a moment. I felt my leg twitch and jerk, uncontrollably. Vivian said: "Hurry up. He's coming to, again."

I lay very still. I got cramped from the huddled position they'd let my limp figure fall into. But I didn't move again.

"His wrists," Vivian said. "We can break a glass. A sharp piece of glass and cut the veins in his wrists."

Smitty thought about that. I got afraid they would hear the thunder of my heart, know I was listening. Then Smitty said:

"No. First place, the police would wonder about him being all bruised up. Going out the window, that wouldn't have been noticed or thought anything of. Beside, the bleeding would take too long. We'll wait. That cop's got to leave sometime."

It came to me quite clearly, then, what I had to do. I didn't like the idea. I wasn't brave about it. I just didn't have any choice. It came to me that as far as they were concerned, I was already dead. There was no question but what they were going to kill me, by one method or another, sooner or later. They had to.

Knowing that I was going to die, anyhow, I suddenly knew that I'd make it as tough as possible for them, at least make a fight for it. Being shot wouldn't be any worse than being tossed out that window. I braced both hands against the wall and lunged away from it, scrambled to my feet, staggering back away from them. I was weak and trembling. Both Vivian and Smitty looked at me in surprise. Vivian still held the gun.

"Well," Smitty said. "Snookums woke up." He put his hands in his pockets, took out the rolls of nickles. "I'll have to rock him off to sleep again."

I STARTED backing away, slowly, toward the door. I saw Vivian raise the revolver, saw her fingers tighten, whiten, around it. I heard Smitty say: "Don't use that gun. We don't have to. The radio's off. They'd hear a shot all through the hotel. And there'd be no powder burns. It wouldn't look like suicide. I'll take care of him."

He came at me fast, half running. I whirled and got to the corner of the room where it turned into the hall leading to the door. I stopped and swung around again. He was almost on me and his own momentum was too much for him to stop. I hit him. I swung with all my might, from the knees. The blow smashed into his cheeks. But nothing happened. He just

swayed and looked at me with a sort of puzzled look in those wide-set, level gray eyes. I knew then that I was too weak to hurt him much.

I knew then that this was going to be like a dream I often had, where I was fighting somebody and I kept hitting them, hitting them, but nothing happened and they didn't seem to be hurt. They'd keep laughing at me. This was going to be like that. For one crazy moment I thought that maybe all this was just part of some nightmare. Maybe I'd awaken any moment and find myself at home in bed, with Fran curled up warmly beside me.

Then I heard Vivian say: "Get out of the way, Smitty. I've got to shoot him. We can't let him get away!" She sounded hysterical.

That was when I swung again. This time my fist hit Smitty on the point of the jaw and he staggered backward until his legs hit the edge of the bed and he sat down on it. I went down the hall toward the door, sprinting. I got the door open and looked back and saw Vivian turn the corner of the room and level the gun at me. The door slammed shut, blocking off the picture of that snarling, feline face of hers. I didn't think of direction. I just turned to the left and ran and turned a corner of the hall and saw ahead of me on the right, a door marked Fire Exit. I went through it and stopped. If they came after me, they'd assume that I'd gone down the stairs. So I went up. I went up two flights, three steps at a time, on my tiptoes, making as little noise as possible. At the top, I sprawled, exhausted, against the wall and listened. There was no sound from the fire stairs at all. Only the sound of my own labored breathing.

I went through into the sixteenth floor hallway, made my way to the elevator, rang the bell. It seemed like hours before the indicator crawled up to fourteen. I held my breath to see if it would stop there. It didn't. It came on up to sixteen. The

elevator operator, a middle-aged man with a hawk nose and glasses, peered at me curiously as I got in.

"Listen," I said. "If you get a buzz at the fourteenth floor, don't stop. Please. It—it's a matter of life and death."

I looked at the indicator bank and so did he. We both saw there was no signal to stop at fourteen. I leaned against the wall of the elevator and for the first time became really aware of the throbbing aches in my ribs and kidneys and at my left temple. There was a welt there from Smitty's knuckles. I took out a handkerchief and wet it with my tongue, wiped some of the blood away from my lips. There wasn't much. My lip was cut on the inside, was a little puffy.

"What happened?" the operator asked. He looked at me with that curious but unemotional expression that spectators at an accident always have.

"I—I had some trouble, that's all," I said. Sure. Just some trouble. Beaten up, almost thrown out of a window, but for the intervention of some kind providence. I got to trembling again, thinking about it.

The elevator reached the main floor and I walked, wobbly-legged, across the lobby to the desk. The clerk, a needle-thin man with great horn-framed glasses and a pointed nose said, "Yes, sir?" without hardly looking at me.

I took a deep breath. Down here in the brightly lighted, rather ancient and shoddy austerity of this hotel lobby, what I was going to have to say would sound melodramatic, ridiculous. I said: "You'd better send the house officer up to room fourteen-o-nine. I just escaped from there after being beaten up and robbed and almost killed. I—"

I stopped. A sickening shock went through me. I had forgotten that letter of confession I'd signed. Smitty and Vivian still had that. I looked up at the desk clerk again. He was peering at me as though he'd just crawled out of the wood-

work. "Are you—uh—*sure*, sir?" he said.

"Look." I took out my blood-smeared handkerchief and showed it to him. I curled back my upper lip with one finger so he could see the cut there. I pointed to my temple and the lump right in front of my ear. I said: "A girl accosted me here in the lobby and forced me up to her room at gunpoint. There was a man there and he—"

"Here in *this* lobby?" the clerk cut in. "What room was this, sir?"

I told him. I got sore. "Are you going to send the house dick up there or do I have to call outside police? I want you to hurry. They've probably left that room, already, as it is. But check it anyhow. And they can't get out of this hotel without my seeing them. I'll stay here with a cop until they *do* try to get out."

The desk clerk was looking over his file card. "Room fourteen-o-nine," he said. "We don't have a girl registered for that room. It—well—I suppose it *could* be a girl. The name is K. Morgan. No baggage. Paid one day, in advance."

"Morgan," I repeated after him. "That's *my* name. Let me see the registry."

He showed it to me. The signature was a reasonable facsimile of my own.

THEY hadn't made any mistake. They'd registered the room in my name. It would look like I'd taken it with the express purpose of leaping from the window, killing myself. At the same time I realized that they probably had another room of their own, on the same floor, that they could flee to, hide out in, if anything went wrong.

"Do you remember what the person looked like who registered for that room?" I said.

The clerk shook his head, looked at the registration. "Whoever it was, signed in at noon. I didn't come on until four P. M."

I watched the clerk pick up a desk phone, heard him ask for 1409. He waited quite

awhile, then hung up. "Nobody answers," he said.

"Of course not. They've gone."

But they were still in the hotel. I thought: *I'll have them call the police. We'll go to every room on the fourteenth floor. If we don't find them, we'll go through every room in the hotel. We'll get them.*

Then I realized that wasn't bright. Supposing I did find them. I couldn't prove anything. There were two of them, their words against mine. Even Herb, the bartender, recognizing that the girl was the one who'd been in the bar with me, left when I did, wouldn't prove anything. That was out.

I got a better idea. I told the clerk: "Never mind. Skip it. I'll handle it myself."

I turned away from the desk and went out onto the street. I crossed the street and got into a darkened doorway over there, where I could watch the hotel exit. I stood there. This would be better. One or both of them would have to leave the hotel sometime. They would have to report to whoever had hired them to do this to me. I'd follow, find out who it was. Then I'd really have something to work on. But, maybe they wouldn't go to their boss. They might telephone him or her and report on what had happened. Well, that was a chance I'd have to take.

While I waited, I went over the whole thing in my mind. I got the setup pretty clearly. They were trying to frame me for the embezzlement, so it must've been worked in a way that would have been possible for me to accomplish. There was only one way that was possible. I didn't actually handle any company cash. But I got the checks for other people and mailed them to them. To our artists and writers. Hundreds of thousands of dollars a year in checks.

The procedure was this. I had to voucher for a script or art work when it was turned

in, as managing editor of the comics magazine group. The business office made out checks for those vouchers and the individual checks, in turn, were given back to me to mail to the artists and writers. The average writer's check for a single script was sixty to seventy dollars. The average artist's check was for twenty dollars a comic book page, which meant their checks averaged about one hundred and sixty dollars. We paid editorial bills twice a week. It would be a comparatively simple thing for me, in connivance with somebody in the business office, to make out vouchers to phoney names, for scripts and/or art work that hadn't even been done, a couple of times a week. Then, when I got the checks, to sign them with the name they were made out to, then double-endorse them with another phoney name, with which I'd already established a bank account and deposit them to that account.

Liz Tremayne, the bookkeeper, if working with me on this deal, could easily cover for me on the books, until the end of the fiscal year when the regular annual auditing took place.

I had never thought of this possibility to defraud Emcee Publications out of thousands of dollars before. But I thought of it now. Plenty. The more I thought of it, the more I realized how badly that confession would make things look for me.

But since I hadn't done this, I had to figure out who had. Nobody but me handled checks and vouchers in the editorial department. Almost anybody in the business office could have worked the deal. All they had to do was get hold of a stack of editorial voucher forms from the stock room, learn to forge my handwriting, and—working with Liz Tremayne, who kept books and made out the checks—they wouldn't even have to be too clever with that. But how about the people who signed the checks? Wouldn't they get suspicious over a couple of extra checks being there twice a week?

The checks bore two signatures, M. C.

Malkom's, the president's, and the authorized counter-signature, which would be Ronny Chernow's, as head of the Business Office. Chernow! Since Emcee Publications put out other books besides comics—Confession magazines and a string of pulps—there would probably be twenty or thirty checks to be signed twice a week.

Mr. Malkom probably never even looked at them, but went through them and signed them one right after the other as fast as he could. Especially since the checks always went up for his final signature close to five o'clock in the afternoon. But Chernow wouldn't rush through those checks, signing them, without examining them. That was part of his job, to double check on things like that, make sure a mistake hadn't been made and two checks made out in error for the same material.

That did it. I knew then that Ronny Chernow was the one who had been working this embezzlement deal, who had decided to frame me for it. It all stacked up. Chernow, himself, gambled, played the market a lot. I'd seen the newspapers on his desk, turned to the racing entries and the market listings, many times. This was the answer to how he lived a life that would seem to take three times his salary.

I thought, then, too, about Liz Tremayne, the bookkeeper. She was a girl you could not figure. She was tall and neat, but you could never tell much about her figure. She always wore loose-fitting dresses or severely tailored suits. She wore double-lensed glasses and little if any makeup. She wore her brown hair pulled back into a severe bun. I remembered that she had nice features, but the way she dressed and wore her hair, you'd never notice that. She impressed everyone as being a very plain, unattractive girl. No sex appeal at all.

Yet, I also remembered, now, a long time ago, hearing Ronny Chernow, standing with a bunch of other men from the office by the water cooler one day, watching Liz Tremayne go past. Ronny had said: "You

see all that protective coloration? But it doesn't fool me. Put some makeup on that baby, fix her hair right, get her into the right dresses and take those horrible glasses off and I'll bet she'd knock your eyes out. And *that* kind—once you break through that icy surface—man, oh, man!"

We'd all thought Ronny was crazy, then. But I saw now where he could be right. And that tied in with Liz helping him out with this deal. The quiet, plain, bookish type like that often went crazy for a man who was a complete opposite like Chernow. Especially once he'd started paying a lot of attention to her, began softening her up. And a woman in love with a man, often would do anything for him.

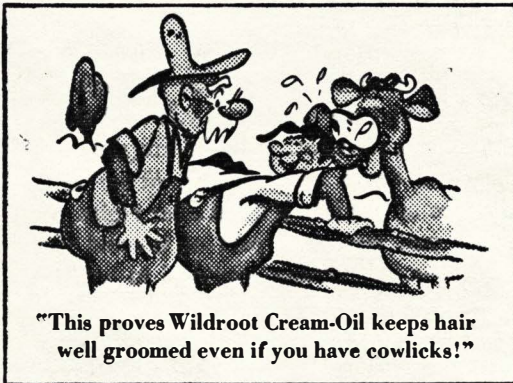
So there it was. Now what was I going to do with it? Chernow was my man. He knew I stopped in at the Marlo bar for a cocktail every Friday night. He'd hired Vivian and Smitty to do a job on me. He'd had her planted in the bar, then came in,

himself, to put the finger on me, so she wouldn't make any mistake and get the wrong guy. He'd even suckered me into staying for another drink, when I was ready to leave, tried to plant the idea in my mind of making a play for Vivian. It all tied in, nicely.

CHAPTER THREE

Ugly Duckling

ACROSS the street was a barber shop, with a clock in the window. The time was 8:10. It hardly seemed possible that all this had happened in only a couple of hours. It seemed like I'd been up half the night, already. And then I remembered Fran. She'd be expecting me home. I should have been there, even, before this. She'd get upset, worried. I had to call her. But I wondered what I could tell her. The truth would drive her crazy with anxiety.



"This proves Wildroot Cream-Oil keeps hair well groomed even if you have cowlicks!"



"He keeps his Wildroot Cream-Oil there because it's his hair's best friend"



"Since using Wildroot Cream-Oil I look twice as good!"

BEAVER KILLER

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**AS LITTLE AS
29¢
PLUS TAX**

I'd have to make up something to tell her.

I decided not to wait any longer for Vivian and Smitty to leave the hotel. Now I knew who was behind all this, I didn't necessarily need them. I walked down to the corner, entered a cigar store and called Fran. While I was waiting for her to answer, I counted the money I had in my pocket. I'd taken a five-dollar bill from my pay, this noontime, put that in my pocket and placed the rest of my cash in my wallet. Smitty had gotten that. Lunch and the drinks tonight had left me with a dollar bill and a few cents change from the five.

Fran came on and sounded relieved at hearing from me. I told her that as I was leaving the bar with Chernow, we'd bumped into a couple of other men from the office. They were going to the fights at the Garden, I told her and one of them had an extra ticket, so I'd decided to go along. I said I hadn't been able to get to a phone before. I hoped she wouldn't mind.

"Of course not, darling," Fran said. "Just don't be too late. And have fun!"

I hung up and sat there for a moment. Yeah. Have fun. I was going to have a lot of fun.

I left the cigar store and stood out on the street in front of it. I looked down Forty-Sixth Street toward Broadway. It was a long alley of flickering neon lights. I hadn't been in New York at night like this for years. But if I saw it every night, I think it would have affected me the same way. New York, even the Times Square area, is a business world by day. It's speed, turmoil, excitement. But it's in black and white. After dark the whole thing changes.

The pace doesn't slow, but now it's in full color and the moving neon lights heighten the effect of continual action. Reality, ugliness, is gone. You don't notice the dirt-littered gutters, the unpainted buildings, the grimy bricks and windows. Manhattan by day is a business woman, crisp, efficient, an executive, stern, no time

for anything but making money; a salesman, loud, swaggering, confident. By night the town's an exciting, painted woman of the evening; a young girl out on her first New York date; an actor between performances, out on the street in costume and greasepaint.

You stand in a midtown sidestreet at night and all your values change. The pulsing nightlife around you gets into your own bloodstream. Obligations, duties, ideals, slip away. Life is a carnival. Perspectives change. Nothing counts, suddenly, but laughing, singing, drinking, dancing. You need a pretty girl, to look at the promise in her eyes, to watch her tongue moisten her red lips, to watch her teeth shine in the darkness as she smiles at the things you are saying; you want to feel that girl in your arms as the chrome-like polish and smoothness of a name-band stirs the rhythm in you both; you want to get drunk, where all is beautiful, all gaily, fast funny talk, and none of it will ever end and there will be no morning, no hang-over, no regret.

In spite of what I'd been through this evening, and the jam I was still in, I felt that, for a moment. I could imagine what it would do to some people, *living* in all that, going out into it night after night. Because you weren't a part of it—and little of it was for nothing, you had to buy it—unless you had money in your pockets. Lots of money. I could imagine that this was what had happened to Ronny Chernow and perhaps Liz Tremayne, too.

But I forced all that out of my mind. I had to get this evening over with. I had to get to Ronny Chernow, get that signed statement of confession back and get him arrested for all he'd done. That was a big order.

What would happen if I went straight to Chernow, now, confronted him with the whole thing? He'd laugh at me, deny it, say I was drunk. Or possibly he would kill me. Or Vivian and Smitty, his hired

help would either be there, or get there after I arrived. No. That was out. I had to learn more, first, at least.

I remembered that the confession I'd been forced to sign implicated Liz Tremayne. I didn't doubt but what she'd been in on all this with Chernow. But I could not figure his mentioning her in the confession. Monday, when the whole thing came out, she'd be on the spot, too. She certainly wouldn't protect Chernow, then. There was only one answer to that. She'd been killed, probably, with another note and with the murder made to look like suicide, also. That would round it out nicely for Chernow. If that hadn't happened yet, it would soon. If it hadn't happened yet, I could save Liz's life. Once she saw the way her partner was double-crossing her, she'd turn on him, substantiate my story. If she was still alive.

I WENT back into the cigar store, called Liz Tremayne. There was no answer. But I had to find out whether she was dead yet or not. Her address was on West End Avenue and I took a subway up there. It was an old, run down apartment building, still bearing some trace of its glory days in the faded and torn canopy over the front and in the fat, whiskey-flushed doorman in his soiled uniform. There was no switchboard, but I learned from the mailboxes that Miss Elizabeth Tremayne lived in Apartment 3 M.

There had been no police cars in front of the place, no sign of excitement. I figured I'd gotten a break, that she was still alive. I rang the bell outside of her apartment. There was the click of high heels across the floor inside and the door cracked open. Then it was thrown wide. The girl who stood there didn't look like the Liz Tremayne of Emcee Publications, Inc. Business Office. In fact, for a flashing second I didn't even recognize her.

The hair that was always pulled into a tight, unattractive bun at the back, now

flowed softly, silkily about her shoulders. It had been just washed and treated with some kind of light rinse and it looked alive and all full of shiny highlights. It was a honey color, instead of just brown.

Liz was wearing makeup, tonight. Her lips were smoothly painted and glistening. There were artfully blended touches of color at her high cheekbones. Without glasses, her eyes were beautiful. They were a flame-blue, in striking contrast to the thick, black, spiky lashes and the thin, dark, neatly formed arch of the brows above them.

She was wearing a black lace and silk negligee, trimmed with what looked to me like pink angora. It was just held together by a belt in the front. She had everything necessary to wear something like that. What Ronny Chernow had said about her that day long ago, was true in spades. This Liz Tremayne knocked you out, all right. I couldn't get my breath that first moment of looking at her.

"Kip!" she said. She didn't even sound like the same girl I'd seen around the office for several years. When she'd changed her appearance she'd apparently altered her whole personality. "Kip Morgan, what are you doing here?"

I'd wanted to see what emotions registered in her eyes when she first recognized me. But it didn't work out. I wasn't looking at her eyes. When my gaze did finally rise to her face, she was smiling, puzzled.

"Something's happened," I said. "I—we'd better not talk out here."

"Of course," she said. "Come on in."

She stepped aside and I moved past her, down a short hallway and into the living room. The room was large, high-ceilinged. It was furnished more like a studio than an apartment. Instead of a sofa there was a studio couch. There was no matching furniture, no upholstered chairs. There were two leather-covered lounge chairs and several straight-backed ones. There were scatter rugs on the floor and prints of good paintings decorated the blue-tinted walls.

Between two enormous windows was a ceiling-high bookcase, with every other shelf decorated with knick-knacks, instead of books. I turned to Liz Tremayne.

"How well do you know Ronny Chernow?" I demanded.

She blinked. The color on her cheekbones seemed to darken. She held her hands clasped in front of her. Her voice was distant, cool, when she said: "What's this all about? You have no right to come barging in here, uninvented, questioning me about my private life!"

"All right," I said. I gave it to her right between the eyes. "Chernow has been embezzling Emcee Publications out of thousands of dollars for a full year. You've been his accomplice. I have proof, so don't try to deny it."

She fell back away from me as though I'd slapped her. She went deadly pale and now the spots of rouge on her cheeks stood out like red poker chips. Her hands clenched together until the knuckles stood out whitely.

"You must be insane!" she said. "Making an accusation like that! What in the world's the matter with you, Kip? What's made you say—or even think a thing like—embezzling funds? How?" She glanced toward the door of another room, a reflex action, but then caught it and turned her gaze quickly back to me again.

I got a crawling feeling up my spine. Supposing Ronny Chernow, when he heard from his gun-goons—Vivian and Smitty—that I'd escaped, had anticipated me, come straight here. He could be hiding in that room, right now, waiting to kill me himself, not trusting to hirelings this time.

I took a big, gulping breath and without waiting, or giving myself a chance to get really scared, I whirled around Liz Tremayne and walked to that room. While I was fumbling inside the door for the light switch, Liz leaped at me, tried to yank me away. But she was too late. My fingers found the wall switch and the room flooded

with light. Liz stood trying to pull me away from the doorway.

It was a bedroom, furnished with cheap maple furniture. There was nobody hiding there. But on the bed were two expensive alligator leather suitcases and a woman's purse. I started toward them and Liz grabbed my shoulder, wheeled me around, got in front of me, blocking me off.

"You have no right!" she half-screamed. "This is *my* apartment. Get out of here! Get out! I'll call the police—have you thrown out!"

She was strong. She kept pushing me back toward the doorway to the living room, away from those bags on the bed. She was so strong, she kept throwing me off balance, gradually forcing me out of the room. It was no time to be gentlemanly. I grabbed her by the wrists and flung her with every bit of strength in me, away from me. She went spinning and hit the wall with her back, jarring her, so that hair fell down over one eye. She leaned back against the wall, her head forward and lowered a little, her beautiful eyes, frightened, angry, blurred with tears, looking up at me through the thick black lashes. She was half sobbing.

"Call the police?" I said. "Go ahead. I'm going to do it, anyhow, when I get through here. Now, stay away from me. If you interfere, I'll have to knock you out." Big, tough Kip Morgan, a real rough cookie—when he was up against an unarmed girl. But I had to do it.

I went over to the bed and snapped open one of the suitcases. It was filled with women's clothing. On the top, lying face down, was a framed photograph. I turned it over and looked down into a portrait of smirking, handsome Ronny Chernow, dressed like Mr. John K. Rockabilt. I put it back down, shut the suitcase. I picked up the purse, opened it. Along with all the usual feminine junk, there was an airlines envelope, containing two one-way flight tickets to Mexico City. I put them back,

then tossed the purse back onto the bed.

"You and Ronny were running out on the whole thing, eh?" I said. "To Mexico."

She was still leaning against the wall. The tears had finally squeezed out of her eyes and were running down her cheeks. She pushed the hair back from her forehead and shook her head. Her gaze dropped away from mine, fell to the floor.

"How did you find out about it, Kip? We—we thought we had plenty of time. Until Monday, at least, maybe longer. Where's Ronny? Have the police got him?"

SHE could have been acting, but I didn't think so. There was a whipped tone to her voice. And the packed bags and the airline tickets told of her innocence. She was getting the big double-deal from Chernow and didn't even know it, yet. She was being made a patsy, too, right along with me.

"I don't know where Ronny is!" I told her. "How'd I find out about this? Because Chernow paid a guy and a girl to lure me to a hotel room. They beat me into signing a confession that I'd been the one taking the money, pulling that phoney check racket for the past year. Then they were going to throw me out of the window. It would look as though I'd committed suicide. You and Ronny Chernow would have been beautifully cleared. Neither of you would have had a thing to worry about Monday morning."

Her eyes widened. "But—but I don't understand. Why didn't Ronny tell me about all this? He told me that because I was implicated there wasn't any way of framing it on anyone else. We—we talked about that. We discussed trying to put it all onto you, Kip. But Ronny said we couldn't—not and keep me in the clear. He still had over five thousand left when he sold out what was left of his stocks. He said with just a few thousand we could live well for a few months in Mexico and that

he had some connections down there, that there was plenty of money to be made down there for a man with brains and looks and personality. So we were going to run for it. By now, I didn't care. I—I was just glad that it was over. . . . I—I guess he must have made a last minute change in plans and figured some way to put it onto you and still keep me in the—"

"No," I cut in on her. "He didn't. He planned it this way right from the beginning, Liz. I forgot to tell you. *Your* name was mentioned in that confession letter I was forced to sign. It fully implicated you. The only one Ronny Chernow kept in the clear, was himself. The way he was going to do that was to kill you, too. Another suicide. That would tie it all up."

She shook her head violently from side to side. Her mouth was slack, her eyes wild, trapped-looking. "No!" she cried. "You're wrong! It couldn't be that. Ronny wouldn't do that to me!" Her voice broke. "He loves me. We were going to be married in Mexico! You're wrong, wrong, all wrong!"

"He never loved you," I told her. "Or he wouldn't have gotten you into this in the first place. A guy like Chernow isn't capable of love, not real love. He liked you—he went for you—big, maybe. But not any more, Liz. He got tired of you. He was through with you. He wanted to get rid of you. This gave him an out on that, too."

She had her face in her hands, now. Her soft, silky, honey-colored hair hung over her hands as she bent her head. I couldn't hear her sobbing but I could see her shoulders shaking. I could see a vein standing out in her throat. She was pitiful. I felt a little sorry for her.

"Liz," I said softly. "How could you get mixed up in a thing like this—with a big-mouthed, phoney louse like Chernow? How do these things happen?"

After a moment she got control of herself. She looked at me, her eyes raw-red from crying, her makeup smeared. "How?"

she said. Her voice was ragged, bitter. "All right, I'll tell you how. Maybe you'll feel sorry for me. Maybe you'll figure some way to give me a break."

She told me. The beginning was an old story. Ronny Chernow was her boss. They worked late together a couple of nights. He bought her dinner. They had some drinks. It went on from there. She'd never known a man like Chernow, before. She was impressed, awed, overwhelmed by the way he dressed and the way he spent money, the places he took her.

"Places girls who work for a living, who are drab and plain, dream about, see in the movies, read about in the papers and that's all," she said. "The most expensive night-clubs. The clubhouse at Belmont. Flashy gambling places over in New Jersey. And Ronny—he was so smart about everything. He taught me how to fix myself up, how to dress. He made me—*pretty!* So that I felt as good as any of the women in those places. He drove me around in a Cadillac—a Caddy, Kip!"

"Didn't you wonder where he got the money, how he did all that on his salary?" I asked.

"He told me he was very lucky at gambling and played the market shrewdly," she said. "Listen, every night I was in such a dream world, I didn't think, didn't care *how* it was happening. Do you question miracles? Of course, in the daytime, at the office, I'd go back to my old personality. Ronny said it would be better that way, wouldn't cause any talk."

Then she told me how he trapped her. They went to Atlantic City for a weekend. He took a fifty-dollar-a-day hotel suite. He lost several hundred dollars at the race track there. When it was all over, he told her about the four fake artist's checks that he'd put through and held out and cashed, how it was a plan he'd long had in mind. He told Liz Tremayne that she was going to have to cover for him.

At first she refused. She was horrified,

sick over it. But he cajoled and threatened. He said if she didn't cooperate with him and he got caught, he'd involve her, anyhow. He told her that it would just be this once and there was no possible way of it being found out for nearly a year. She gave in, then. She covered for him. Then she was trapped and it became a regular thing.

"I knew we were going to have to face the music at the end," she finished. "But by then I didn't care, Kip. I didn't care. I was so damned in love with the man that I didn't care about anything. Do you understand, Kip. . . . But now he's—done this—to me!"

SHE started to cry again, but suddenly jerked convulsively all over. She cut off the weeping. She forced a little half smile around her mouth. The negligee was half falling away from one shoulder but she didn't do anything about it, even though she was conscious of the way I was staring. I couldn't help it. Even now, after all this, she was still breathtakingly beautiful.

"Kip," she said. She started slowly toward me. "Kip, I—I can't go to prison. I—I just *can't!* Kip, I never noticed before, but *you're* handsome, too. And you're clever. You've got personality, too. Ronny Chernow isn't the only one. You'd make out fine in Mexico, too. I'd help you, Kip; help you a *lot!* We'd make a striking couple!"

"Don't be crazy, Liz," I said. "I've got a wife, a family. Are you out of your mind? Stay away from me. It's no good, Liz."

But she kept walking, slowly, provocatively, her hands running down over her own hips, pulling the negligee tautly over them, lowering it from the shoulder some more. Watching her, little electric shocks started shooting all through me. My breath seemed to catch and hurt in my chest. Her eyes had cleared from the crying spell, now. Her teeth were very white and even against the red lips as she smiled.

"Mexico, Kip," she whispered. "You must've had dreams, too. I—I've got five hundred dollars in cash in my purse. That's worth a lot more in Mexico. We've already got the ticket. The plane leaves at seven in the morning. You're going with me, Kip. We'll both put all the past behind us—all of it. We'll start over."

I tried to back away from her, but my legs bumped against the bed. She came right up close against me. The faintly musky scent of her filled my nostrils, my whole head. I began to tremble. She pressed against me and her long, carmine-nailed fingers grasped my lapels.

"Just you and me, Kip," she said, her voice so low and throaty I couldn't have heard it if her lips hadn't been only an inch or so away from mine.

Her hands slid from my lapels up around my neck, then to the back of my head. They pulled my head toward her. Her mouth burned against mine and the lights in the room seemed to pinwheel. All thought, all reason went up in a burst of flame in my brain.

I found myself holding onto her by the upper arms, my fingers digging into their soft flesh.

And then the whole thing exploded. It was a muffled explosion, like clapping two thickly gloved hands together hard. Liz Tremayne went limp and, still gripping her upper arms, I was half pulled over with her. I looked at her face. Her eyes stared up at me, wide open and completely blank and horrible.

Her mouth hung slack and wet. I looked over her head toward the doorway.

Ronny Chernow was standing there. He was holding one of the pillows from the studio couch bent over double across one of his hands. For a second I wondered what he was doing with it. Then I saw the smoke wisping out from under the folded pillow. I couldn't see the gun at all but I knew it was there.

My hands eased from Liz Tremayne's

arms and she went down to her knees and then toppled over onto one side. There was a very tiny black hole in the back of the negligee, near the left shoulder blade. Red shiny stuff was beginning to ooze out of it onto the floor.

"She's quite the gal, eh, Morgan," Chernow said. "She can really turn it on, can't she? She was giving you full voltage. I taught her that stuff, Morgan. And all you jerks in the office thought she was such a pot, not worth a play. How wrong can you get?"

"Very," I said. "Very wrong, Chernow. As wrong as you've gotten. Now, you've just committed murder on top of everything else."

Ronny Chernow's thick, masculine brows raised. His hair was still curly and tousled, boyishly. He was still the expensively dressed, handsome, arrogant man-about-town. If you didn't look too closely. But now I could see the glassy gleam in his eyes, and there was a brutal twist to his thin, well-shaped lips. There was a nervous tic at one corner of his mouth. Maybe he didn't realize yet but this was all having an effect on him.

"You've got it wrong," he said. He gave a quiet, confident laugh. "*I haven't killed anybody. I didn't embezzle all that money. I didn't sign that confession that's in the mail right now, will be in old Malkom's hands, Monday morning. I didn't come here and shoot Liz. . . . You did all those things, Morgan. Don't you see the way it is?*"

I saw. There was only one way it could be, now. He was going to kill me, too. When Liz and I were found, coupled with the letter of confession, it would be a fairly simple thing for the police to figure. They'd find the plane tickets, figure we'd planned to skip, together. But at the last minute we'd had an argument, a fight about something. I'd killed Liz, then shot myself. That was the way the whole thing was going to figure.

CHAPTER FOUR

Smitty Pays a Visit

I WATCHED Ronny Chernow start toward me. He looked terribly big. Much bigger than he'd ever seemed to me before. He kept holding the couch pillow folded over the gun in his hand.

"Stand still, Morgan," he said. The smile was gone from his face. His lips were flattened against his teeth. The tic at the corner of his mouth was leaping crazily.

Sure, I thought, stand still so that you can get close enough so that there'll be powder burns on my shirt front. But I couldn't seem to make myself move. I felt frozen, carved out of stone. I looked down on Liz Tremayne, sprawled there, her legs twisted under her awkwardly. She looked like a broken rag doll. I wondered if she was having any of those dreams now.

There it is, I told myself. There's that other life you missed by getting married and settling down. There's Miss Manhattan At Nighttime. There's your glittering, crowded smoky hotspots and the throbbing, pulsing music and riding through the night in an open Caddy convertible, with a beautiful girl beside you. There's the easy, crazy, enticing, live-for-the-moment way. Lying there dead with a bullet in her back And coming toward you, a killer, with all those turning, tossing, conscience-stricken nights behind him, with the cruel desperation etched into his face, with fear like little maggots in his brain all the time.

He had all that stuff. He didn't settle for your life, the drudgery, monotony, the bills, the skipping the new suits and the beautiful shirts and ties because there was another baby coming, the long bus trip back and forth, kids squalling or sick or worrisome in some other way. But look at him. On the ragged edge of mania. He can't keep killing and killing. . . .

"That's right," Chernow said in the quietest voice I'd ever heard him use. "Stand nice and still. Nice—and—still...."

I had to stop watching him come toward me. My eyes swiveled to an electric clock on the dresser. I watched the second hand sweep around, knocking off the remaining seconds of my life. It was quarter to ten. I wondered what Fran was doing. The kids would be in bed. Fran would be out in the kitchen, probably, ironing. Or else she'd be watching television in the living room, remembering things about the programs to tell me about when I got home. Or maybe she was over at the Haggard's next door, gabbing with Helene, or playing Canasta. When I got home, she'd have the latest community gossip, and she'd brag about how much she'd won from the Haggards *When I got home?*

Ronny Chernow was only a step away from me, now. Quicksilver seemed to run all through me. The freeze left me. I screamed it: "I'm not going to die! I won't! *I won't!*"

I lunged toward him, slammed into him, knocked him off balance. There was a clicking sound. It wasn't until long later that I realized the gun had jammed on him, that possibly material of the cushion had caught the hammer or something. Right now I only wondered why didn't he shoot—get it over with. Why didn't I hear that muffled clap of sound again and feel the hurt and burn of the bullet striking me, the flood of pain or the nothingness or whatever it was happened when a bullet pumps into your heart and you die.

At the same time, I got halfway past him before he wrenched the gun from the cushion, tossed the cushion to the floor. I could hear someone shouting, screaming, cursing. For a second I didn't even realize it was my own voice. Then, as I started toward the door, I looked back. Chernow was right behind me. He had the gun raised. It was a small, nickel-plated revolver. He caught me with the barrel right across the top of the forehead. I went off balance and staggered, crashed against the wall and went down. My eyes wouldn't focus. The

walls and ceiling of the room were tilting, tipping, rolling lazily around and around my head.

As though from a great distance, I heard someone pounding fiercely on the door and rattling the knob. I tried to get to my feet, to hold onto the wall. But it kept wheeling away from me. Finally it slowed and stopped. I leaned against that wall, sort of crawled up it and got to my feet. I shook my head, looked around. Liz Tremayne was still on the floor, dead. The nickle-plated revolver was lying near her feet. There was now a terrible, thumping, shattering noise coming from the door, outside, leading to the hallway. I looked for Chernow but he wasn't there.

I walked over and picked up the revolver from the floor. I didn't have any clear idea why. I was still dazed. But I must have reasoned that I was in danger, needed protection. A gun was protection. Still holding it, I staggered out into the living room,

just as the front door of the apartment crashed open and a man half fell inside.

He was short and bull-shouldered. He was wearing a T-shirt and a pair of wrinkled, soiled slacks. His arms were thick and muscular and black with hair. His square-jawed, beetle-browed face looked nervous, hesitant.

"What's going on in here?" he said. "I heard screaming and before that what sounded like a shot. I live next door. Where's Miss Tremayne?"

I started to jerk my thumb toward the bedroom, to say, "In there—dead." But something stopped me. This thing was getting worse instead of better. Sure, Ronny Chernow had fouled-up on killing me. I was still alive. But there was still that confession he had mailed, there was still a dead woman—the one mentioned in the confession—in that other room, dead by the gun which I held in my hand. Chernow was gone. He was out of it. There was



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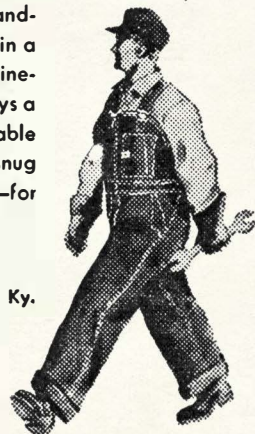
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only me. And the neighbor from next door to testify to the police about breaking in and finding me with the murder gun in my hand.

I said: "You back up, feller and get the hell out of here, quick!" I jerked the gun toward him. He turned and squeezed back out past that half broken-in door like a snake slithering out of a trap.

I knew he'd go back to his own flat, call the police. I could hear other doors opening along the hall, voices questioning about the commotion. I jammed the revolver into my pocket, headed for the open window that Chernow had gone through. I went out and down the fire escape the same way as he had. I dropped from the bottom rung into an alley, my feet stinging. I ran out into the sidestreet and kept running until I reached Broadway and a subway kiosk.

THE people standing on the subway platform, waiting for a train, quieted me a little, helped me calm down, to think. They all looked so normal, so bored and average. Just regular people, with regular every day troubles. No murders for them, no beautiful girls, nobody trying to kill them, no thrills, excitement. Maybe some of them were worried about debts, or somebody sick, or how they would break down Mr. So-and-so's sales resistance. Stuff like that. Once I must have looked that way, too. But not any more.

I caught some of the people staring at me. I stepped over to a gum machine, stared into the mirror. There was a dull red, swollen welt across my forehead just below the hairline, where the gun barrel had struck me. My upper lip still looked puffed. But it was really the expression in my eyes that had made people stare at me. My eyes looked harrassed, desperate, almost wild. They were deeply ringed underneath and bloodshot.

I turned away and tried to figure what I had to do, what would be best. There didn't seem to be any best. It was all bad.

If I went to the police, told them the whole story, they'd hold me. They'd get Ronny Chernow. He'd deny everything. They'd hold me until Monday morning, at least. The news would get out. The story would break in the newspapers. Fran would go crazy with fear and doubt and worry. Monday morning they'd go over the books and the phoney vouchers that Chernow had made out, to get his checks every week. Those vouchers he'd have had to keep, to jibe with the regular monthly check of the books by old man Lesvich in the accounting department. They. . . .

Those vouchers! They were my out! Handwriting experts could prove they were forged, that I hadn't written them. It struck me like a jolt of white-hot lightning. Those vouchers would clear me of this whole thing.

But then I realized that after failing to kill me, Ronny Chernow would realize that, too. Chernow was as smart, if not smarter, than I. He'd go get those vouchers—if he didn't already have them. Chances were, he did not. With me dead, he wouldn't have needed them. I stuck my hand into my pocket, feeling for the office keys. They weren't there. They were gone. I realized that Smitty and Vivian must have taken them, after they'd knocked me cold up in the hotel room.

A subway train roared in and I got on. It seemed to crawl down to Fiftieth Street. When it finally got there and I started running down toward Forty-Sixth and working over toward Sixth Avenue, it seemed that I wasn't really running at all. Again it was like a nightmare—the one where your feet are glued in mud, or for some other reason you're running like crazy, but not making any progress. But then I was there. I was pounding on the locked glass front door of our building. Inside, I could see the night register stand and the padded chair where Floyd, the night elevator man and watchman, always sat. He wasn't there. I kept pounding and

rattling on the door, going crazy, sweat beginning to roll along my ribs.

This went on for what seemed like ten minutes but was probably only two or three. Then I saw bent old Floyd and his bushy white hair ambling jerkily along the hallway toward the door. When he opened it, I pushed inside. He looked at me, half curiously, half resentfully, for all the racket I'd caused and for disturbing him. His eyes were still full of sleep.

"Has anyone else been here in the last hour or so, Floyd?" I asked. "Mr. Chernow. You know, the big, red-faced man, with curly hair, always well-dressed. Was he here?"

Floyd looked up at the ceiling. He dug through his thick shock of white hair and scratched at his head. Then he looked at me again. He yawned. "Wouldn't rightly know, son," he said. "Not if he had his keys, anyhow. I ain't let nobody in since seven o'clock, but you. But, then, I was down cellar, just now—uh—fixin' some things, so I wouldn't know."

What he'd been fixing down cellar was his ear. He'd been pounding it. I'd seen the old couch he had down there. But I didn't say anything. I pushed past him toward the elevator. At night they run the freight elevator, which is self-operating. I stopped before boarding it. I said:

"Floyd, this is important. Get it straight. If Mr. Chernow, the man I just described, comes here while I'm upstairs, you phone up there and let me know. Then call the police."

Floyd said: "Sure thing. I—the police?"

"That's right," I said. "You do as I say and don't ask any questions. This is important."

I got into the cold elevator, worked the cable until it brought me up to the business offices on the fifth floor. I got off. It was pitch dark up there. I switched the reception room light on, walked to the inner office door. It was unlocked. I walked inside and switched on the overhead lights

there. I stood for a moment, looking around at the empty desks and covered-up typewriters. It looked strange at night like this, the office unoccupied. There was a musty smell to the place, with all the windows closed.

I looked at the desk where Liz Tremayne sat and I got kind of choked up. For a second I seemed to see her sitting there, her hair pulled back in that tight, ugly bun, those double-lensed glasses on her, as she bent over her ledgers. The girl with the dreams—the Jekyll-Hyde girl. Dead now, at the city morgue. On a slab, with an assistant coroner probing for the greasy hunk of lead in her back.

Yeah, and with every cop in the city looking for a man answering my description, to pin that killing onto me. I had to get going.

The file cabinets stood in a row against the wall, over by the glass-enclosed office with the lettering on the door that said: RONALD CHERNOW, *Business Manager*. I went quickly through two or three files, before I came to the right one. It was labeled: *Editorial Vouchers*. It took me another five minutes or so to wade through batches of vouchers from the Pulp, Confession and Comics Group section, before I found the ones I wanted. Or where they should have been. They were gone.

Panic-stricken, my hands tore through the whole file again. Then once more slowly. All the vouchers for the past year were gone. Gone. The realization that I was too late slid over me like a weighted wet blanket. I half fell against the filing cabinet, my stomach banging the drawers back in.

I recognized the voice right away, even though it was subdued for Ronny Chernow. He said: "I didn't hit you hard enough, did I? I thought the police would have you by now."

I SPUN around. He was over by the receptionist's switchboard. A bulky briefcase with his initials on it rested on the

floor next to the switchboard. Chernow had another gun in his hand. This one was an automatic, bluish-black, snubnose, ugly-looking.

"I heard the elevator coming up," he said. "I switched off all the lights. I thought it was probably Floyd making a check of the building. I never thought you'd be bright enough—or is it dumb enough—to come here."

I looked down at his briefcase. "You have the vouchers in there, don't you? With me in the hands of the police, came Monday morning, and nobody could prove a thing against you, could they? If would be my story against yours. With my signature on a confession, and those airplane tickets in Liz's purse, making your story look much better."

"Exactly," he said. "Now you're going with me, Morgan. We'll go down in the elevator, and leave by the back way so Floyd doesn't see us, through the cellar. Come on, Morgan. Let's go."

The only thing I could figure by that was that he still had it in mind to kill me in some way to make it look like a suicide. Perhaps push me in front of a subway train, something like that. Perhaps he no longer even planned to kill me at all, but just wanted to make sure I didn't interfere with him getting out of the building with those vouchers. Outside, perhaps, he would let me go, knowing that eventually the police would pick me up. I didn't know. But I couldn't take any chances on any of that. I was sick of this whole thing. I was up to the ears with it. I wanted it to be over and I wanted out.

He apparently had no idea I was armed. When he bent to pick up the briefcase, he took his eyes off of me for a moment. My hand dug into the right jacket pocket, pulled out the revolver. I pointed it right at him and squeezed the trigger. Nothing happened. It was still jammed. I swore and threw the gun at him.

Then there was the shot. It echoed thun-

deringly loud in the empty office. I stiffened all over. I waited for the flood of pain that I knew was going to come. Instinctively I balled my fist and jammed it into my stomach. I sucked my lips between my teeth and started to bite on them. But the hurting didn't come. I'd once heard that when you get shot badly, you don't feel it the first instant. You're numbed with shock. I figured that was the truth.

And then I noticed that I was down on my knees. What felt like a cherry-hot poker went through my shoulder. I clamped a hand up there, just over the right breast and felt the hole in my suit as I went over onto my face. But I didn't black out. I lay very still, waiting for the second shot that would finish me. It came—louder, more choking, more deafening than the first. I didn't feel that one, either. Then I heard a voice and I knew why I wouldn't ever feel that second bullet. I hadn't gotten it.

I was sprawled on my side, to one side of a desk. I could look under the desk and I saw that Ronny Chernow was on the floor, too. He was on his belly, and inching himself along, clawing his way with both hands, dragging himself toward a pair of black patent leather shoes with tiny, shiny black bows on the toes. I heard the man called Smitty say:

"You can't renege on me, Chernow, you big, overdressed punk!" Smitty piled a gutter name on top of that. "When I called you and told you what happened, you said that was tough. Me and Vivian wouldn't get our fee for botching the job. I started to tell you we'd better, that we did half the job anyhow, got that guy to sign the confession for you and put it in the mail. But you didn't give me a chance. You hung up on me, after telling me where I could go for my grand. You didn't think there was anything we could do about it, did you? You don't know me very well, Chernow. I don't like welchers."

Chernow, crawling along the office floor almost got to Smitty's patent-leather shiny

shoes. He reached for them. Smitty stepped inside the reach and kicked Chernow in the face.

"You were just driving off in that big Caddy of yours when I got to your apartment, Chernow," Smitty said. "I followed you. I followed you everywhere. Even here. I got in with the keys I took from that other guy, that Morgan guy's pocket. I've been waiting for a nice quiet place to do this to you. No witnesses or nothing. I was just going to do it when you heard the elevator and put the lights out. So I waited."

Under the desk, I watched Smitty bend over Chernow and when Chernow reached for his throat, Smitty slammed him across the temple with his gun butt. It made a sickening sound. I gagged and covered my mouth with my hand, praying Smitty wouldn't hear me. I didn't move. I watched Smitty take Chernow's wallet from inside his jacket pocket. He pulled out a thick sheaf of bills, thumbed through them.

"Nice," he said. "What a break. Nearly five thousand, all in hundreds and fifties. This is a much better fee than you promised, Mister Chernow. It looks like Vivian and me are going to take a nice little trip. Florida, maybe. We've always wanted to go to Florida, even in the Spring."

He kicked Chernow again and when the other man didn't move, Smitty walked out of the office into the reception room, slamming the door behind him. I heard the old freight elevator wheezing and clanking as he went down.

I tried to get up, now. I got hold of a corner of the desk and tried to pull myself up. I didn't make it. I got freezing cold and sweat poured from me. I shook like a bird dog. Knife-shoots of pain stabbed through my shoulder and the feel of the sticky, wet blood there, turned my stomach.

I kept trying to pull myself to my feet and not making it. Finally, I got smart. I saw a telephone cord looped down from the desk. I grabbed it, yanked the instrument

down clattering to the floor. I dialed the 0 and when the operator came on, I said: "Police!"

She didn't seem to hear me. She kept repeating: "Operator! Operator!" I must have said "Police!" a dozen times before I realized that no sound was coming through my lips.

Then I tried to shout at the top of my lungs. The words came out in a hoarse, rasping whisper. But she heard me. She heard me give her the address and the floor number. But I didn't hear what she said. I was suddenly swimming in a sea of inky blackness. . . .

WHEN the lights came on again, I was in a hospital bed. I started to sit up, but there was a mule-kick of pain through my shoulder that stopped me. I fell back on the pillow. One of the men was tall, spare-built. He had a bald head, except for a thin rim of iron-gray hair just around the ears.

"Take it easy, Morgan," he said. "Everything's all right. We caught Smitty Smithers and Vivian Engles at the airport. They were going to Florida. But if Chernow dies they'll be going to a hotter place. And his chances aren't good. All we went from you is a few statements, right now, Morgan. Can you talk for awhile?"

I grinned up at him. "I could talk forever," I said. "And probably will. Go ahead. Shoot."

There were a lot of questions. They'd gotten most of the story from Smitty and Vivian and the dying Chernow. But I was able to fill in a lot for them, to explain how the embezzlement had been handled. When they were through, I found I was so weak I could hardly talk. And I felt sleepy again. They said they'd see me again in the morning. I smiled weakly, mumbled: "Somebody—call—my wife."

They said that somebody already had and I dozed off. When I awakened again, Fran was there. She was sitting beside the

bed, holding my hand. She smiled and said: "How do you feel, Kip?"

"Oh, boy!" I said. "Like a million. Let's jump rope or climb trees or something." I felt all scooped out. My shoulder was throbbing and my head was keeping time with it and every one of my nerve ends seemed to be jangling.

A middle-aged nurse came in, smiled at both of us and said: "I'm sorry. It's time for his medicine." She handed me two pills and a glass of water. I swallowed them and washed them down. The water tasted brackish. But in a few moments the throbbing in my shoulder and head eased. The nerves stopped jangling.

"Kip," Fran said. "I've heard the whole story several times already, but I still can't—can't hardly believe it. *You*, Kip!"

"Yeah," I said. "Me! Were you worried about me, Fran?"

"No," she said. "I was over at Haggards. Helene cheated as usual, but I ended up winning. I won—"

"Two dollars and eighty cents," I finished. Fran always won or lost that amount, to within a few pennies. It was really phenomenal.

"Two sixty-seven," she corrected.

I looked at her and grinned. She was wearing a plain, round little piece of blue felt that looked like a beany and had cost eight dollars. I remembered how I'd beefed about it. She needed a permanent but still her hair was pretty. It was just plain brown, with some strands of gray in it, but it was nice. She had her lipstick on a little crooked and there was a faint tracery of lines in her face and she looked very tired, but still cute. She was wearing her powder blue suit and for a woman with two children, I had to admit she still had one helluva figure.

"You know, Kip," she was saying, "in spite of what happened tonight, I think it would be a good idea for you to take a night off once in awhile. I thought about it after you called the last time and said you were

staying in town. I realized how awfully tiresome and monotonous it must be for you never to have a night off away from me and the kids."

I started to protest vehemently until I saw the twinkle in her eyes.

"Kip," she said, softly. "Those girls you got mixed up with, tonight. Were they very pretty—very young and pretty?"

"Good God, no!" I told her. "They were hags, both of them." I knew that was what she wanted me to tell her. I grinned.

Another nurse came into the room and went around to the foot of the bed to look at my chart. She was a young bleached blonde, and beautiful, a little doll, with her big blue eyes and a shape that even the crisp white uniform couldn't hide. She smiled over the chart at me and winked. I closed my eyes and rubbed the sight of her out of my brain.

"She was very attractive," Fran said in a moment and I knew the blonde nurse was gone.

"Nah!" I whispered. I was getting terribly sleepy again. I could hardly keep my eyes open. "She was a mess, a horror! Besides, after tonight, I *hate* pretty women."

"Is that *so*, Kip Morgan?" Fran said. "Where does that leave me? What am I, just a dowdy little housewife?"

I looked up at her. It was funny, the sleepier I got and the more I looked at Fran, the prettier she became. I mean *really* pretty. You know, from inside of her, like. I reached out and took her hand. I said: "They must've given me sump'n. Can't—stay—awake. . . . You goin'—stay here—with me. . . . Right here?"

"Yes, darling," she said. "All right. Helene Haggard is staying over at the house."

Her voice droned on and I wanted to tell her thanks for coming and for staying here with me and for being so pretty and being my wife and all, but I guess I went to sleep instead. ◆ ◆ ◆

By **GRAHAM
DOAR**



The body was awkwardly twisted, not easy to balance on the truck.

COLD IS MY GRAVE

—and lonely. . . . Care to join me—my murderer?

MANY a man has toyed with the idea of committing a murder at one time or another.

In most of us, fortunately, there is that something which stands as a censor between the thought and the action; call it what you will: decency, lack of sufficient greed, religion, perhaps just fear of retribution.

Whatever the something is, it had been left out of Jason Rand. He was no longer toying with the idea; he was planning, he *had* planned a murder.

Rand sat at his desk in the cannery office and listened to the departing footsteps as the last of the workers left the enormous wooden building. His hands shook slightly

as he lit a cigarette from the butt of the one that was singeing his lips. He told himself that there was nothing to be nervous about, that the plan was perfect, that nothing could go wrong.

He had reached the place where the overpowering need of his existence was to be rid of his partner, Hank Sandness; to get the management of their South Shore Fish Company into his own hands; to get the fifty thousand dollars partnership insurance on Hank's life; and, finally, to be free of Hank's well-meaning, bumbling stupidity that had held the profits of their cannery business to an almost non-existent margin for the past five years. The cannery would be all his.

The thought exploded in his mind, bringing suddenly unbearable tension, and Rand got quickly to his feet and left the office, walked out through the cold, deserted building. The cleaning tables and the cement floors had been hosed off to immaculate cleanliness, the refuse cans had been wheeled out to the fertilizer shed but the ineradicable odors of salmon and albacore still filled the chilly air. The place was unnaturally quiet with the cutting and capping machines not running and no cans rattling down the chute.

He threw over the heavy latch, pulled open the thick, insulated door of the freezing room and glanced around at the partially loaded coils. With its thick coating of frost, the room sparkled, glared unbelievably white and mercilessly cold. Rand saw his breath condense in the still, icy air and felt the pressure of the intense cold on the skin of his face, felt it strike through the heavy clothing he wore. He shivered and closed the door quickly.

There was the sound of footsteps coming from the direction of the engine room.

HIS momentary stab of alarm changed to annoyance as he recognized the lean, gangling figure and self-assured grin of Bill Sandness, Hank's nephew. "What are

you hanging around for?" Jason Rand asked the boy sharply.

"Oh, hello, Mr. Rand. I just stayed over to take a look at that condenser that's been acting up."

"So, you've been promoted to engineer? Has Walters been fired?" The sarcasm in Rand's grating voice was as thick and cold as the frost on the freezing coils.

Bill's face reddened but he continued to smile. "Sorry if I'm out of line, Mr. Rand. I just—"

"You just keep your hands off the machinery." He knew that his anger was unreasonable, but the tension of the past weeks and the hours ahead drove him on. "We have a refrigerator engineer on the payroll—he can do all the damage necessary without your help."

"Well, okay, but Uncle Hank said—"

"To hell with Uncle Hank. You stay out of the engine room. That's final."

"Why sure, Mr. Rand. Anything you say, Mr. Rand." There were two bright spots of color high on the boy's cheeks. "You can go to hell, Mr. Rand."

He spun on his heel and strode toward the outer door leading to the dock. Punching the heavy door open with a braced, brawny shoulder, he stopped to button the collar of his mackinaw against the swirling, wind-driven snow that was falling. He was grinning again as he called over his shoulder to the older man, "If the pressure gets down, just open the outer doors. The fish will stay frozen all right in this weather."

When he was gone, Rand checked the fastening of the door behind him, then turned back toward the engine room. The condenser was all right.

He found the things he wanted without any trouble. From the engineer's bench he took a pair of grease-stained leather gloves and shoved them in the pocket of his mackinaw. He took a small-sized squirt oil can from the tool rack above the bench.

In the washroom next to his office he emptied the oil from the can down the

drain, rinsed it with nearly scalding water, refilled it with cold. Back in his office, he put the water-filled squirt can in a drawer of his desk and lit another cigarette, glancing over the flame of his lighter at the clock on the wall. Five-thirty. Good Lord, it seemed impossible that only an hour had gone by since the quitting whistle blew, that it would be several hours yet before he would see the culmination of his methodically laid plans.

He heard the faint ding of the night watchman's clock and he got the bottle of bourbon from his cabinet and put it ready. He smiled as he remembered all the times he had scolded Hank for keeping Pedersen, the drunken old ex-seaman, on the payroll.

THE outdoor air seemed almost as cold as that in the freezing room and the walks were patched with treacherous, snow-covered ice. The northeast wind that for weeks had been pouring its icy breath down the Columbia gorge had driven the powdery snow into huge drifts and hummocks on the cannery docks and against the waterfront buildings. Traffic on the Astoria streets was dead. The highways to the south and east were blocked by the coldest winter since the weather station on North Head, across the river, had been built. The fishing fleet lay immobilized under glistening ice-coated decks and trolling masts.

Rand bent his head between hunched

shoulders and pulled his elbows tight to his sides as he walked toward his hotel. But the vicious bite of the wind, the bitter cold of that February night was a benison to him. This was a part of the plan. In weather like this there'd be nothing strange in finding a body frozen stiff, cold as a dead mackerel, down on the docks in the morning. Nothing strange at all.

The plan was now in motion. By ten o'clock old Pedersen would be blind drunk and, in the meantime, there was nothing to do but wait.

Rand had not foreseen the difficulty of just waiting. The food in the hotel dining room tasted more like sawdust than usual. He took only a few bites of the tough and tasteless meat, pushed away the soggy huckleberry pie and drank a third cup of black coffee.

He went up and sat in his room and tried to read the evening papers. The record-smashing cold spell occupied the front page of *The Budget*: the damage done to local industry, surveys of possible flooding with the spring thaw, pictures of the countryside buried in snow. The forecast from the weather bureau for western Oregon and Washington promised more of the same and no relief in sight.

"Unless," wrote the editor of *The Budget* on a plaintive note, "there should come sighing out of the West the soft and pleasant breath of our beloved and long-delayed Chinook."

AMAZING THING! *By Cooper*

SENSATIONAL NEW TING CREAM FOR FOOT ITCH (ATHLETE'S FOOT)

- REGULAR USE HELPS RELIEVE ITCHING - SOOTHES BURNING BETWEEN CRACKED PEELING TOES - AIDS HEALING AMAZINGLY!

FIRST USED IN HOSPITALS NOW RELEASED TO DRUGGISTS GUARANTEED

TING MUST SATISFY YOU IN A WEEK - OR MONEY BACK!



IN LAB TESTS **TING CREAM** PROVED EFFECTIVE IN KILLING SPECIFIC TYPES OF ATHLETE'S FOOT FUNGI ON GO SECOND CONTACT!

EVEN IF OTHER PRODUCTS HAVE FAILED TRY AMAZING TING CREAM TODAY! GASELESS, STAINLESS ALL DRUGGISTS ONLY 60¢ A TUBE




Rand dropped the paper to the floor and lit another cigarette from the butt of the last.

And there was nothing to do but wait.

IT WAS past ten when he picked up the phone beside his bed and told the desk he was turning in, leaving his usual call for seven. He hung the *Do Not Disturb* card on the knob of the door and went out and down the fire escape, feeling his way cautiously over the icy metal in the pitch dark. It wouldn't be evidence, if it should come to that, but every precaution taken was that much gained.

From a phone booth he called Snug Harbor, the beer joint where he knew he would find Hank Sandness. It was more of a home to Hank than the cheerless house he had lived alone in since the death of his wife.

Hank was a little drunk, the result of his custom of adding a slug of rye whiskey to every second glass of beer he was served, and was peeved at being pulled away from his eternal cribbage game.

"Yah, yah," he said. "Oh, it's you, Yason. Vot iss it, t'en?"

Rand felt his usual surge of anger at his partner's accent, the foreign lilt of his speech. After thirty years in this country, a man should be able to speak English. He said, "Listen, Hank. Pedersen's drunk again."

"Oh, no, Yason. I don't t'ink so. Not on t'e yob. He promised me not to drink on t'e yob."

"I don't give a damn about his promises I tell you he's drunk! You'll have to go down there and see about it. Or would you rather I'd go?"

"Oh, no, I'll go down." Rand had counted on this. He knew the soft-hearted Hank wouldn't risk his hurting the old man's feelings. Hank asked, "How you know t'is, Yason?"

"I was down a while ago to get some books out of the safe. Pedersen wasn't

around and I looked for him. I found him all right. The old souse is stretched out in the nice warm engine room, snoring like a band saw."

"Did you talk to him? Maybe he's sick."

"He'll be sick when he wakes up all right. He's got a breath you could run the condensers on. Well, Hank, are you going down and straighten the old bum out or shall I?"

"Keep your shirt on, Yason. I'll go right away."

"And you're going to fire that drunk?"

"I suppose so, Yason. I suppose so."

"Good! I'll see you in the morning then, Hank."

"Yah. Good night, Yason."

HANK SANDNESS'S slight but leathery figure turned quickly as Rand came into the engine room. "Vell, Yason, I t'ought you vas gone to bed."

"Thought you might need a hand with the old man." Rand stamped snow from his boots. "Man, those walkways are slippery."

"Yah. Tonight comes chinook. I smell it."

"Oh, sure. All you old sea-dogs can smell the weather. Wrong." Rand gestured at the night watchman, snoring on a pallet of overturned fishtrays. "No good, huh?"

"He's pretty drunk, Yason. I guess I call Bill to come stay tonight, hey?"

Rand took a deep breath. "I wanted to talk to you about that boy, Hank. He's messed things up again."

Hank looked at him in surprise. "Bill? Bill's a good boy. Yust learning t'e business, yah, but he vorks hard, Bill does."

"Oh, sure. He works hard, all right, but he does everything wrong. Come take a look at the way he's loaded the freezing room." Rand started out the door and Hank followed him muttering.

Swinging open the heavy frost-lined door, Rand waved a gloved hand at the coils, the

gray-skinned, white-rimmed albacore lining the wooden trays. He said, "The kid's been told a dozen times that when the coils aren't fully loaded, the trays go on the lower levels."

Hank stepped past him into the glare of the white room.

Rand held the heavy door with one gloved hand while he applied the nozzle of the water-filled oil can to the aperture around the iron rod of the latch. He pressed twice with his thumb, went through the door with a lunging motion and slammed it shut.

Automatically he braced his shoulder to hold it tight but he knew that wasn't necessary. He knew the water he had squirted around the metal rod would freeze almost before the door was closed. He knew that the latch was already as immovable as though made of solid metal. That Hank was as firmly locked in the freezing room as though a stone wall barred his escape. And Rand smiled.

Nothing less than the blows of a heavy hammer would break that ice lock. And there was no hammer in the freezing room. He heard faintly the sound of Hank's fist beating the thick door. *Not for long*, he thought. *At forty below, he won't last long.*

And now, again, the waiting.

The plan was working beautifully; neat, simple, craftsmanlike—it couldn't fail. In a few hours Hank would be dead, frozen as cold and stiff as one of the big fish in the trays. No marks of violence on his body, just frozen to death. Just as though he might have stumbled drunkenly into one of the heavy snowdrifts outside and failed to get up again—in time.

And that, of course, was where his body would be found—in the huge drift beyond the side door. It might be some time, it might be a week or so before the body was found at all if more snow should fall from the gray and ominous clouds that had shrouded the city for days.

"Poor old Hank. He got drunk once too often. I warned him. Everybody warned him but he wouldn't quit. All the time, every night of the week staggering home drunk as a lord. Well, this time he didn't make it." Rand could hear them now, the righteous, sorrowing voices.

Five hours, he figured. Five hours, more or less.

He sat in the shadowed room. The dim bulb over the safe in his office, the green light over the door of the freezing room, the faint seepage of illumination around the edges of the engine room entrance; these were the only lights in the building. And, in the near-darkness, the minutes crept by more slowly than he would have believed possible.

He finished the remains of his pack of cigarettes in the first hour. After that he gnawed at his nails and tried to keep from looking at his watch.

IT WAS almost two o'clock and no one could possibly have any legitimate business in the cannery. But the front door, the one that led out to the street directly, was grating open. A man's steps echoed sharply through the building.

In a flash, Rand was out of his chair and crouched in the shadow of his desk. The steps went by the door of his office and on down the corridor. Cautiously, he stood up and looked through the glass of the door.

The dim and shadowy figure stopped beside the door to the freezing room and appeared to be looking about. Furtively. A match flared and the intruder lit a cigarette.

In the flare, Rand saw that the man was Walters, the refrigeration engineer. The match went out and he watched the coal of the cigarette move on toward the door of the engine room. The door opened and Walters, dressed, Rand saw now, in his best clothes, went on in.

In a few minutes there were the sound of steps coming back—and this time they came straight toward Rand's office! If he

were found here—at this time of night—and his partner's frozen body discovered just in front of the place. . . .

Rand squeezed himself in under the desk.

The engineer came on into the office but, luckily for his cowering employer, he didn't turn on any lights. He picked up the phone and dialed a number.

"Bill?" His voice was a little thick. "Nuts, boy. That condenser's all right. Anyway, it'll hold up for a while yet. Thanks for calling me and don't think I don't appreciate it because I don't—but outside of a little leakage it's okay. Yeah, I know what a slob Rand is and I haven't got time to listen to it again. Hey, old Pete—you know, the watchman?—he's passed out colder than a frozen flounder back in the engine room. Suppose I ought to call somebody about it? Rand maybe—or Hank? All right, the hell with it then. See you tomorrow, huh?"

The phone clicked down, the heavy heels pounded away toward the front door and Rand felt the cold sweat trickle and drip from his chin, felt his heart chokingly in his throat and swallowed hard against its pressure.

He wished, he wished desperately that he had a cigarette.

It was only ten past three but the waiting had become unbearable. After all, Hank was a small man, not more than, say, three times the weight of a good tuna. He should be—it should be—done by this time.

Anyway, Rand couldn't wait any longer.

He cast a cursory glance at the old night watchman's recumbent form as he entered the engine room. Pedersen, he saw, had rolled to his side and was lying half off the improvised bed of fishtrays, but his snores resounded as loudly as ever. Rand walked across to the engineer's tool bench and selected a heavy, brass-headed maul from one of the racks.

He had reached the door again when the words came, mumbled indistinctly over

toothless gums but clear enough to freeze Rand in his tracks.

"Yaysus! Ay t'ink ay need anot'er drink!"

He was back through the door in a flash, the heavy maul balanced in his vibrating hand. Pedersen had rolled again to his back and his pale, washed-out eyes were wide open, blank in the dim light, staring straight at the ceiling. And while Rand trembled, weighing the hammer in his hand, the eyes blinked, closed, and the snores began again.

He waited. He waited a long time, immobile, undecided. But the old eyes remained closed and the wasted, tall form didn't so much as twitch. Finally Rand turned and went out.

Even through the padding of the folded leather glove which he held against the handle of the latch, his blows with the big maul seemed to ring and reverberate in the empty building. Rand's heart was pounding so that his head seemed thick and the sound came muffled to his ears. Almost sobbing, he struck again and, this time, felt the latch give.

It took all his trembling, wasted strength to pull open the heavy door. The white glare struck him like a blow and the deathly chill oozed from the opening like a slug-gish tide. Rand began to shiver, uncontrollably, staring with wide, blind eyes at the stiff, contorted, frost-rimmed features of his dead partner.

There was the blank sheen of ice over the open blue eyes and they looked exactly like the round, accusing eyes of the frozen fish in the trays. "Like a frozen flounder," Rand giggled and the cackling sound horrified him.

With a gigantic effort he nerved himself for the final step of his carefully planned murder.

BEFORE moving the body, Rand replaced the hammer in the engine room and took a last look at the still slumbering

Pedersen. From its place at the edge of the cutting floor, he selected one of the newer, more quiet hand trucks and wheeled it to the door of the freezing room. The body was awkwardly twisted, not easy to balance on the truck.

He was perspiring slightly by the time he reached the side door of the cannery next to the docks; the side where the whipping winds had piled the snowdrifts deepest. Rand left the truck balancing its grisly burden while he braced one shoulder against the heavy door and pushed slowly, trying to avoid the inevitable screech of the hinges.

It was pitch black outside and the wind had died.

No. Not died. He felt it now. Only it was coming from the wrong direction, blowing gently and with a soft warmth from due west. And bringing with it, the warm and misty rain, which fell steadily, soakingly—melting the snow!

It was the chinook, Rand realized, the warm, almost soundless rainfall that blows in from the Pacific without warning and can change harsh winter to soft spring on the coast in an unbelievably short time—and it must have been going on for many hours!

Rand looked despairingly from the dark wet shine of the dock planking—the sodden patches that had been great snowdrifts but a few hours before—to the hand truck with its frosted burden. That finished that. There was no chance now of convincing anyone that Hank Sandness had frozen to death outside, lying in a drunken stupor under the snow. Hell, a month-old baby wouldn't be injured by exposure on a night like this.

Well, all right. There was still the river.

But what about the insurance? What about that fifty thousand dollars?

The hell with the insurance. The thing now was to get rid of the body, get it out of sight, out of mind—be done with it once and for all.

Anyway, the body would be found most likely. They usually were—a few days, a week. Be pretty hard to identify, of course. Oh, the hell with it.

Rand cursed as he bent over the hand truck, sick with loathing, bitter with disappointment. He cursed again, aloud this time, when the corpse's frost-covered clothing clung to the metal of the truck. He tugged and lifted.

Hank weighed little but the burden was awkward to carry and it was horrible to feel its icy coldness pressing against his breast. Rand staggered slightly as he walked onto the dock, placing his feet carefully on the slippery boards. At the waist-high, two-by-four rail, he paused a moment to get his breath. He looked down at the body in his arms and saw its frosty coating thickening in the warmer air. Rand shuddered.

"So long, partner!" he said. And gave a lunging heave to clear the rail.

But the frozen corpse clung, pulling him with it, the frost holding to the fabric of his mackinaw as it had held to the truck. Rand sobbed aloud, fought desperately for balance, thrust with one hand against the two-by-four. His rubber-shod foot slipped on the wet, worn planks of the dock and his whole weight went forward into the railing.

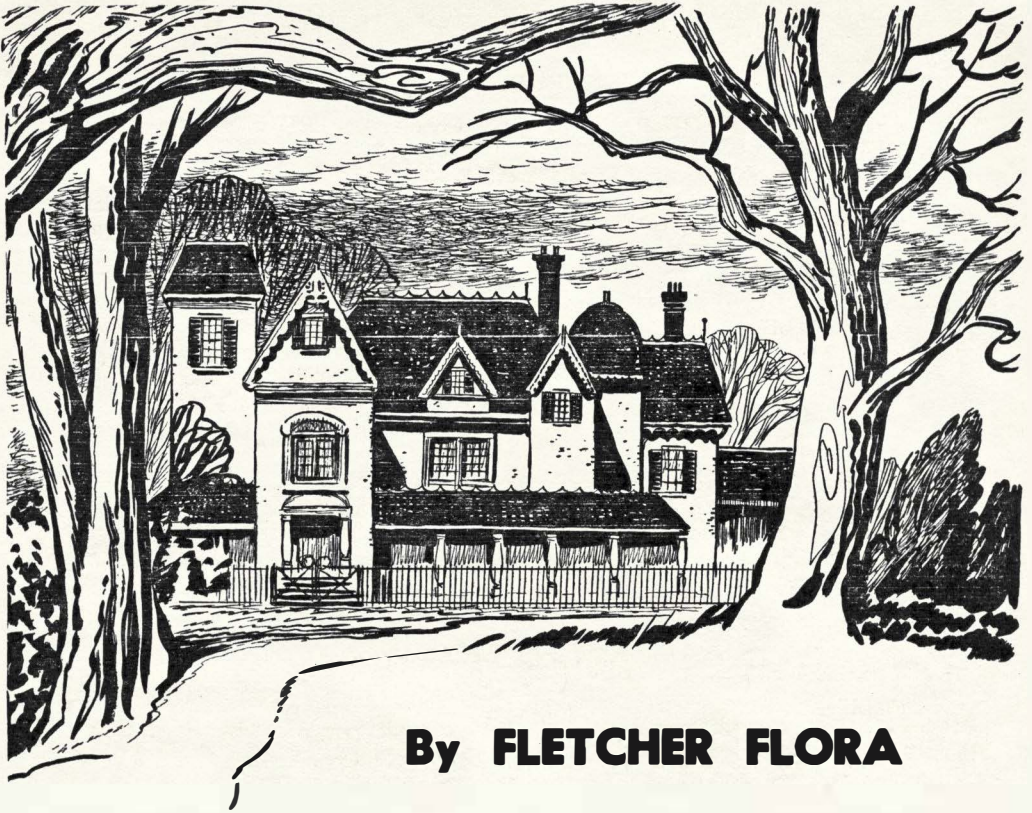
There was a rending crack as the railing gave and broke under the combined weight of the two bodies. Rand screamed as he felt himself going and, in the engine room, old Pedersen muttered and turned in his sleep.

No other ears heard the night-piercing scream.

The dark and oily shine of the treacherous, deep, unquiet Columbia billowed gently with the surge of the flooding ocean tide. Tiny dimples pocked it from the warm and steadily falling rain. Far out, near the middle, bulked a huge log floating. Nothing else marred the deceptive quiet of the water's surface. ◆ ◆ ◆

His hands were at my
throat as we crashed into
the railing. . . .





By **FLETCHER FLORA**

SO LOVELY— AND SO DEAD!

THERE was no light showing through the crack under the door, and no one answered my knocking. Under the pressure of my hand, the door whispered inward into darkness. Through the slats of a Venetian blind, the light of a street lamp outside fell through to make the pattern of a trellis on the floor. Push-

ing the door shut behind me, I groped in darkness for an elusive light switch, that didn't seem to be where I remembered it.

Through the pattern of the trellis, a shadow moved toward me with a rush. The arm that I threw up in protection was knocked aside by a blow that caught me on the side of the head and sent me

A hand reaching out of the dark past had killed Margaret Hadley, and the only way I would ever find her killer—was to be the next to die!

crashing into the wall. On buckling knees, I tried to slip sideways and away, but a hand, brushing my face, grasped me deliberately, almost gently, by the coat and pulled me back into heavy knuckles that smashed my mouth and sent me spinning into a sick world of nauseous, flaring colors.

I threw a fist wildly and felt it slip harmlessly above a twisting shoulder. Then the pitiless knuckles smashed again and again into my face with slow and murderous deliberation, while the hand on my coat held me up to meet them. The only way of escape was through the sick world of flaring colors into utter darkness. I took the way and went.

Later, I came up out of the darkness in a slow, shuddering spiral. Lying quietly on the floor by the wall, I listened intently and heard no sound. With a tremendous effort, I opened my eyes. Light still lay in a trellis pattern on the floor. Terror sharpened my hearing, as memory of that destroying pain returned, and I heard faintly from the bedroom the ticking of a clock. Nothing more.

After a long time, I turned over carefully onto my stomach and lay still again. My face was a mass of raw and burning agony. My head expanded and contracted in a kind of cadenced torture. Fighting nausea, I drew my knees up under me and found the wall with my hands. With infinite caution, I stood and waited for the retching sickness in my stomach to subside. Then, sliding a hand along the wall, I found the light switch and snapped it.

Turning, I looked around the room. Everything seemed to be in order—just as I remembered it. The worn rug, the shabby furniture, the cleanliness that couldn't do much against its handicaps. Moving along the wall for support, I reached the bedroom door. Feeling around the edge of the doorway on the wall inside, I found another switch and produced light. Standing in the doorway, bracing myself with a hand on each side of the frame, I looked

with breath cut short in my throat and sickness returning in a flood to churn my insides.

Everything here, too, was in its proper place. But nothing was in order. Nothing in this room or in all the world was in order, or would ever be in order again. Because of Maggie. Because of Maggie, who had lived here and had now died here. Violently. She lay on the floor between the old brass bed and the tired dresser against the wall at its foot. Except for her shoes, she was fully dressed and looked at first as if she had merely gone to sleep in the wrong place. That was the way she looked before you saw the ugly blue marks on her throat, the starting, terrified eyes, and the thick tongue pressing against the teeth in her open mouth. She had been beautiful, and she was ugly. She had been alive, and she was dead. Forgetting my need of support, I went across the bedroom fast, reeling a little, to the bathroom.

Inside, I stood over the sink, clutching porcelain, until sickness was gone again. In the small mirror of a medicine cabinet, I looked at the black and red reflected face and finally decided that it was mine. Running water into the basin, I did what I could to clean it up. The lower lip would need stitches.

After a while, I sat on the edge of the tub and tried to think, but I couldn't make anything out of my thoughts. They traveled in circles through throbbing confusion and came out nowhere at all. I had only one idea that made any sense, and that was that I must call the police.

I got up and went back through the bedroom, not looking at Maggie, and back out into the living room. There was no phone in the apartment, but I remembered one in the hall. I went out and called the police and came back again.

Sitting in the living room, on the faded sofa with a broken spring, I waited for the police to come and tried to remember

all the times Maggie and I had sat together on the sofa. I found myself going back over all the times, from the latest to the earliest. It gave me something to do, and I had just remembered twenty-three specific times when the hall door opened and a thin, undersized man in a double-breasted gray suit came into the room. He was followed by two other men who looked like detectives and were.

THE thin man pushed his hat onto the back of his head, exposing a few wisps of gray hair, and looked at me. After the first startled expression at the sight of the smear for a face, his eyes made no concession to the emotion at all.

"You the guy who called the police?"

"Yes."

"What'd you say your name is?"

"Grieg. Norman Grieg."

"On the phone, you mentioned murder. Where's the body?"

"In the bedroom."

"Okay. You wait here. You can smoke. If you need a drink and there's anything around, help yourself. I'll be back."

He turned and went into the bedroom, the detectives following. Sitting on the sofa, I could hear them moving around and talking, but I couldn't understand anything they said. Pretty soon more men came in from the hall and over to the bedroom. I heard the explosion of flash bulbs and smelled powder.

Trying again to think, I made a little better job of it than before. I tried to recall every impression I had got of the man who had attacked me in the dark, because I knew the thin, gray man would have questions to ask, and it would be better for me if I had some answers to give. Not that there was much to recall. You just don't get much of a picture of a man who beats you into sudden insensibility in the dark. About all I could remember were the hard, cruel hands that clutched and smashed with pitiless power.

A fat man wearing a black Homberg and carrying a black bag came out of the bedroom and hurried across to the hall door. Behind him, the thin man in the double-breasted suit stopped in the doorway to the bedroom and said, "Just when you think you've seen everything, something new comes up. Thanks, Doc."

The fat man paused with his hand on the knob, looking back and shaking his head.

"Must have been a giant," he said. "Never seen anything like it before."

He opened the door and went out, and the thin man began prowling the living room. Nothing seemed to interest him much, and he ended up in a few minutes in front of the sofa. His eyes, looking down at me, were still very carefully guarded.

"I didn't tell you my name," he said. "It's Muller. Detective Lieutenant."

I didn't say anything, and his eyes moved slowly over my ruined face.

"You mean to tell me that little gal in there did all that before you finally managed to choke her to death?"

Words came blurred from between my puffed lips. He leaned a little forward and listened carefully.

"You're joking," I said.

"I could tell a better joke than that, Buster. This isn't funny. Not to me. Not to you. Especially not to you."

"I didn't kill her. She was dead when I came."

"Yes? How come you came?"

"I had a date with her."

"We got her name as Margaret Hadley. That right?"

"Yes."

"How well did you know her?"

"We were planning to be married."

"Oh. How long you known her?"

"About a year."

"You come here often?"

"Whenever I could. Maybe twice a week."

"That isn't very often for a guy to see the girl he's planning to marry."

"I'm a graduate student and part-time instructor at the University here. I don't have many free nights."

"I see. Was Miss Hadley a student, too?"

"No. She was assistant to the University librarian."

"You notice anything strange about her lately? Anything that might indicate she was in trouble?"

I answered carefully, trying to say what I felt without giving it exaggerated emphasis.

"I think so. For about a week she's been rather remote. Worried, I think. I had an idea maybe she was working too hard."

"Do librarians work so hard?"

"This was unusual. The Stoneman library, you know. Maybe you remember that old man Stoneman left it to the University when he died some time back. Recently, Margaret and Dr. Cross, the librarian, have been working on it. They went out to the Stoneman place together to see to the packing of the books about a week ago. Since then, they've been cataloging the stuff, trying to get it properly classified for the stacks."

"I see. Now we're to the big question. Where'd you get that face?"

I TOLD him what had happened as exactly as I could. He leaned forward a little farther, listening intently, his eyes frozen in an expression of sharp attention. When I'd finished, he straightened with a sigh.

"Look, Buster. You say you threw one punch over this guy's shoulder. How'd you throw it?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"How'd you throw the punch? Up? Down? Straight out?"

"Oh. Just about straight out, I think." He shook his head.

"I don't think so. Not unless he was

crouching. You heard the Doc when he went out. The fat guy. He mentioned a giant. There's a bruised place on the girl's throat that was made by a thumb. There're four places made by fingers. The places made by fingers come all the way around the throat to the place made by the thumb. Get the idea? She was choked to death with one hand. A big hand. The hand of a big guy."

I saw again the shadow coming at me through the pattern of light. I sensed again the man who had held me easily with one hand while he beat me brutally with the other. The hands had been big, all right. But not the man. The man hadn't been any taller than I. Six feet, that is. I shook my head and said so.

Muller didn't answer. I saw that he was looking down at my own hands, and I held them out.

"They're not big," I said.

He sighed again and shrugged.

"No. Not big enough. It's hard to tell about things in the dark. You must be mistaken. We're looking for a big man. Maybe not a giant, like Doc said, but a real big guy."

He turned away and prowled. Apparently not looking for anything in particular. Just prowling. After a while, he came back.

"Think, Buster. Think hard. Can you think of anyone at all who might have had a reason for killing your girl?"

"No one. Not one at all."

"No idea who the guy was who attacked you in this room tonight?"

"No."

"I can see you're not going to be any help. I never saw a guy who knew less about a girl he was going to marry. How about family? She got any?"

"There's a mother. Lives upstate in a little town called Shelby."

"That's something. We'll get in touch. For all the good you are, you may as well go home. Leave your address."

A detective wrote my address in a little book, and Muller went back into the bedroom without another word. No one tried to stop me when I walked out of the house and away.

CHAPTER TWO

Murderer's Trail

I GOT patched at the infirmary on the campus and went back to the room I rented on Wadlow Street. It was eleven o'clock then. Lying there within the four pressing walls, I thought bitterly of the strange ends little beginnings come to. You meet a girl in a place where you've gone for a couple of beers and company, and what began as beer and company winds up as plans for matrimony just as soon as a guy can get that last big degree and scrape together a few bucks. And all the time, though you don't know it, beer and company and all plans whatever are nothing but diversions on a short road to death. Death by strangulation in a shabby room.

Until tonight, I hadn't realized how little I knew about Maggie. Trying to find something back of the present that would point to the killer with big hands, I couldn't remember a thing of any significance. A giant, the medical examiner had said. But he wasn't. I could swear that the man in Maggie's dark living room had been no taller than I.

I lay there a long time, almost an hour, thinking of the killer with the hands of a giant who wasn't a giant. I shivered, remembering those hands. The one that had reached out in darkness to grasp my coat, fumbling in passing at my face and throat, had felt huge.

The Stoneman library. I wondered if there might be anything there to explain Maggie's brutal death. It seemed so innocent, the inheritance of some books. Something that happened frequently and

uneventfully in the life of a University library. But it was the only connection of any kind that I could make. Maggie and Dr. Cross, the old librarian, had worked on the books together. If there were anything, anything strange in the inheritance at all, he might know about it. After a while, I got up and went downstairs to the telephone in the hall.

While the phone rang in long, persistent bursts at the other end of the line, I remembered Maggie's mentioning that the librarian was alone in the house of a Mrs. Crowder, where he lived a rather solitary life in a single room. The landlady, it seemed, was currently making an extended visit with an ailing sister. I let the phone ring until the operator told me that my party didn't answer, and then I thanked her and hung up.

Upstairs, I stood in my room and looked at my bed, but the long and sleepless hours of a morning there did not bear thinking of. I put on my coat and went back downstairs and out of the house. Walking south, I crossed the boundary of the campus and after a while moved into the great shadow of the library. The library where Maggie had worked, young and vibrant in the dim light of towering stacks, touching with fingers that had touched my face and hair the dry and brittle bindings of old books. Now she was gone, as if she had never been, and there was nothing saved for me. Not even in printer's ink. No little particle between buckram or leather.

THE library was built on the brow of a hill, so that the rear wall of the building plunged to its foundation several stories below the main entrance at the front. I went around the building and down the slope of the hill. The massive sack of gray stone grew in gloomy and menacing grandeur with every step I took. I came out of its shadow onto a curving drive and went on down into a street of old residences. It was here that Dr. Cross

lived alone in the house of Mrs. Crowder.

There was a light in a rear room on the second floor of the house, visible only as a thin, verticle streak between drapes not quite fully drawn across a window. But no one answered my ringing. I stood on the porch with a thumb on the bell button and listened to the shrill clamor of the bell deep in the hall inside. When I had decided that there would be no answer, I opened the door and stepped into the hall. It was then that I heard the music.

It came faintly, from the rear of the floor above. The music was that of strings and reeds and brasses. It was a sigh of breath from the darkest depths of the most abandoned hell. It was the black despair of the last man in his last hour. There was no terror in it, and no fear, for it was beyond fear and beyond terror.

As I stood listening, the music stopped and the old house fell silent. Then the music began again, moving down the dark stairs upon me. Somewhere on the floor above, an automatic record player was repeating the final movement of Tschai-kowsky's *Pathetique*.

The music grew louder as I went up the stairs. I saw that it was coming from the room at the rear in which I had seen the light from outside. A thin yellow line marked the bottom of the closed door. I knocked on the door and waited, but there was no response beyond it except the continuation of that terrible musical sorrow. I turned the knob and pushed, and the thin line fanned into its source. Symphonic damnation swelled up around me.

The record player stood against a wall, its top braced open. From where I stood in the doorway, I could see the arm of the machine rise and fall smoothly above the platter that spun beneath it. Dr. Cross sat in a heavy leather chair facing the player. I could see no part of him except his left arm and hand, which trailed over

the arm of the chair, the fingers of the hand curved slightly, almost touching the worn pile of the rug. I didn't speak to him. I knew, even then, that there was no use. He was beyond hearing. My voice or Tschai-kowsky's, no matter to this old man. His senses were tuned only to silence and night and whatever comes with death.

I went over and looked down at him and saw without surprise the brutal marks on his throat. The glaring eyes, the swollen tongue. The strangler's identification. For a time I looked, and then I turned and went out of the room and down the stairs and out of the house. The black music of death faded behind me, ending abruptly with the shutting of the front door, and I stood alone in the cold street, wondering what I should do. Wondering if there would ever again be anything worth the doing.

I didn't call the police. A little time would make no difference now to the old librarian, and I couldn't bear the thought of Muller so soon again. I found a stone bench behind the Museum of Natural History and waited there for day.

When the east began to wash a little with light, I had made up my mind about two things. The Stoneman library must somehow have been the link between a girl, an old man, and death. And I would find the strangler. Somehow I would find him, even if it brought his fingers to my own throat.

Before the campus came to life for early classes, I went back to my room on Wadlow Street. I shaved and changed my shirt and put on my other suit. I thought for a moment of the classes I should teach and the studying I should do. Then I went out on the job that had become bigger than all the others together. On the corner below the house, I caught an eight o'clock bus into the city.

The Stoneman residence was on Stoneman Place, a private street in a section that

had once been exclusive. Stoneman Place itself still retained its distinction, but the surrounding area, with little consideration for the rich elbow it rubbed, had slipped with time into ungraceful decay. I carried the sense of its hopelessness with me up to the massive door of the Stoneman mansion.

A maid admitted me and put me into a room off the hall. It was a large room, and it could have been light if someone had drawn the drapes back from the windows. Apparently they preferred shadows in this house. The only sunlight came from windows at the end of the room that looked out on a rear lawn. A piano stood before the windows, and a man sat at the piano. He was playing, but nothing in particular. Just scales and chords. I walked toward him, but he didn't stop playing. The only concession he made to conversation was to reduce the volume of the piano a little. With the light behind him, I couldn't get a clear view of his face, but I got an impression of gaunt somberness behind horn-rimmed glasses.

"My name's Norman Grieg," I said. "I've come to see Miss Stoneman."

His voice, rising above the chords, still managed to carry the timbre of softness, almost dreaminess.

"I'm Oliver Moon," he said. "I was the old man's secretary. My present status is that of fiance to Miss Stoneman. Perhaps I can do something for you."

"Perhaps. I'm interested in the library that was left to the University."

"Yes? Are you from the University?"

"I work there. I'm not acting officially in this matter."

He shrugged, turning his head so that the light behind him struck a sudden flash from his glasses.

"Then I can't see why I should talk to you about the matter."

"Maybe Miss Stoneman will see it differently."

"Maybe. Marion is usually very gener-

ous about impositions. Shall we wait and see?"

WE WAITED through three chords and a scale, and Marion Stoneman came into the room. She was tall and heavily built, and none of the things that money buys had made her anything but plain. Her hand in mine was strong and firm but icy cold.

"Mr. Norman Grieg," Oliver Moon said. "Or is it Doctor? One never knows with University people. He's come about the books, my dear."

Marion Stoneman's eyebrows lifted a trifle.

"A Miss Hadley and a Dr. Cross have been here. I thought they were handling the library."

"They were. Not now. They're dead."

Oliver Moon's hands hung suspended over the keys for a moment, and then dropped to sound another chord. Marion Stoneman's breath eased past her lips with a sigh.

"Dead? Both of them? That's very tragic, of course, but I can't see how I am concerned."

"Miss Hadley and Dr. Cross were murdered. Strangled. There's always a reason for murder. I've been thinking it might lie among the books your father left to the University."

She turned, moving to the piano.

"How fantastic! They're just books. Volumes my father gathered over many years. Are you connected with the police?"

"No. Miss Hadley and I were engaged to be married."

"Oh. I'm sorry. But I'm sure you're mistaken in thinking the books may be involved. Why should they be?"

Something oppressive lay against my ear drums, and I realized suddenly that it was silence. Oliver Moon had given up his finger exercises. From the piano, he said, "I worked with the books quite a lot. It was one of my duties. If you're thinking

of a rare volume valuable enough to induce murder, you're wasting your time. Take it from me, there was no such book in the library."

"It could have been a volume whose value was unknown," I said. "Except to someone who was willing to kill to keep it from becoming known. ●ld Cross was an expert on such things."

Oliver Moon laughed.

"I see. Someone, perhaps, who planned to recover the book from the University stacks after it was cataloged. A place it would never have reached if your Dr. Cross or Miss Hadley recognized its value."

"That's the general idea. It makes some kind of sense. Nothing else does."

He laughed again, resuming his soft chords.

"My friend, the rare book motive is trite even in fiction. Besides, the old man was a scholar, not a collector. You better start over."

On the polished surface of the grand, Marion Stoneman traced invisible designs with a long index finger. The sunlight touched her hair, and for a moment she possessed a beauty that was not her own.

"I've such an odd feeling," she said. "About Miss Hadley. She was to see me this afternoon. Probably she told you."

"No. She didn't tell me."

"She called yesterday for the appointment. Thinking back, I seem to remember that she sounded rather distressed."

Oliver Moon's fingers were in the low keys, working lightly.

"My dear, your imagination is busy after the fact. You didn't mention her distress at the time."

"Sometimes it's only after the fact that you see the significance of things," I said. "Did she tell you what she wanted?"

"No. I suppose now that I shall always wonder."

"Yes," I said. "I suppose so."

She turned and came to me across the shadowed room. Again her hand was in

mine, and again I felt a little shock at its coldness.

"I wish I could tell you how sorry I am, Mr. Grieg. I've always found myself clumsy about such things. Please extend my sympathy to Miss Hadley's family."

"There's only her mother," I said. "I'm going to see her now."

Behind me, as I shut the door of the room, there was no sound but the spaced reverberations of Oliver Moon's eternal chords.

CHAPTER THREE

The Orphanage

THE railroad station was at the east end of the main street, and from its platform you could look straight through the town to the fields on the west side. It was a distance of about ten city blocks. Two of the blocks were occupied by stores and offices. There were also a couple of restaurants and a movie theater painted bright blue. I went down the street to one of the restaurants. A fat woman in a stained white wrapper was behind the counter. There was a peculiar little bulge beneath her lower lip, and pretty soon I saw that she was loaded with snuff. Even that was not enough to kill the hunger that was gnawing at my insides. I ordered a hot beef sandwich and coffee. By a battered alarm clock sitting on a shelf in front of some canned soup, I saw that it was shortly after two o'clock.

"Nice town," I lied.

The woman looked at me as if she considered the lie too obvious to encourage.

"You figure to stay?"

"No. Just stopping for a few hours."

"I thought so. Fewer the better. For you, I mean. This town's a jumping off place. No one in his right mind would stay here."

She took a shot at a Number Ten can on the floor, and I applied myself to the

sandwich. It wasn't hot, but the gravy hadn't actually begun to congeal, so I managed to choke it down. I considered telling the fat woman how good it was, just for the sake of points, but I remembered in time she wasn't susceptible to lies. I ate and kept still.

"Looking for someone in particular?" she asked.

"Yes. A Mrs. Hadley."

"Sarah Hadley?"

"I guess so. I don't know her first name."

"Must be Sarah. She's the only Hadley in town."

"This Mrs. Hadley is a widow."

"That's Sarah. You know where she lives?"

"No. Maybe you could tell me."

"Sure. Go right through town. First corner west of the business district, turn south. There isn't any numbers on the houses. Hers is the second one, east side. Needs paint."

I thanked her and went out, leaving a half dollar on the counter. Without asking a question, I'd learned one thing. The news of Maggie's murder was not yet known in the town where she had lived as a child. If it were known at all, it would be known to everyone. Apparently Muller was in no hurry about sending a man to see Mrs. Hadley. No doubt he had his reasons. One of them, I thought suddenly, might be because he was busy at the house of a Mrs. Crowder. The house where an old librarian sat dead in his chair before a repetitious phonograph.

I turned at the corner as directed by the fat woman and saw the house that needed paint. The floor of the front porch sagged under my feet as I crossed it. It was a decadent, defeated house. Not a house of death, but a house where death would be a kind of salvation.

THE woman who answered my knock might have been designed by a dyspeptic interior decorator to harmonize with

the dreary architecture of the house. Her face was the face of a woman caught up in perpetual sympathy with her own misery. She didn't speak. She whined. I felt a shock of dull pain to think that Maggie had come from this place. From this woman.

"Mrs. Hadley?"

"That's right, young man. What do you want?"

"My name's Norman Grieg. I'd like to speak with you a few minutes. I'm a friend of Margaret's."

Her lips twisted against her teeth. The whine sharpened her nose.

"I don't know why a friend of Margaret's should come to see me when Margaret doesn't bother to come herself. You can come in, if you want."

In a square, ugly living room, I sat in a lumpy mohair chair. Mrs. Hadley sat rigidly on the edge of the sofa which was the chair's mate. Behind her, the wall was a design of soiled and faded roses. A stain had spread on the ceiling and crept almost half way down the wall.

"Now, young man, perhaps you'll tell me what you want."

I wondered how to begin. How do you tell a sour, defeated woman that her daughter has been strangled? How do you tell her what you want, when you don't really know yourself? Just a hint of something. Just the shadow of a finger out of the dead past pointing to a murderer.

"Margaret's dead," I said.

She just sat looking at me. I saw no shock in her eyes. No grief, no pain. Just a sharp retraction into a kind of breathless weariness.

"Dead?"

"Yes. She was murdered. The police will be contacting you."

The wariness was there in her eyes, remaining, and now there was also a sort of ugly hunger, a flash of unholy satisfaction. I felt suddenly sick. The cold gravy was slime in my stomach.

"I told her she shouldn't go. I told her when she went away with her grand ideas of education. She thought she was too good for me and for the community whose charity she took. Was she in trouble? Who killed her?"

"I don't know who killed her. Neither do the police. She was in trouble, but it wasn't the kind of trouble you're thinking. Mrs. Hadley, someone had a reason for killing your daughter. It must have been a big reason. There may be something in the past, something that happened in this town, to explain it. Can you think of anything?"

She was prim again. Rigid and guarded. Untouched by love or grief or death itself. In no gutter of any city could you find a woman more damned.

"She was not my daughter, you know," she said.

For a moment we sat alone, that lost woman and I, in a still world bounded by faded roses. Then the clean wind of a bigger world blew in, and I felt a great relief to know that Maggie, who had died in pain and ugliness, had at least not been tainted by the sour blood of Sarah Hadley.

"No," I said. "I didn't know."

"She was not my daughter. Anyone in this town can tell you that. I took her from the orphanage when she was twelve. I thought she could help me around the house. I thought she would remain in common gratitude to care for me in my old age. But she went away. When she was eighteen, it was. Ten years ago. She never returned. Not once. And now she's dead, you say. You will understand, perhaps, if I seem unmoved."

"You never legally adopted her?"

"No. I took her to raise. She used my name. That's all."

"Do you know of anyone who might have wanted her dead?"

"No one. To my knowledge, I am the only person she ever injured."

"Think, Mrs. Hadley. Can you recall anything at all that might have any sig-

nificance? Maybe something that seemed very minor at the time."

"I can think of nothing."

I had no heart for more. At the door, I turned and said, "This orphanage, Mrs. Hadley. Is it near here?"

She stood at the sofa, making no move to show me out.

"It's just out of town. About a mile by the road. Go out of town by the main street. West, that is. Go north at the first turning. It's about a mile altogether."

"Thanks," I said, and I made no effort to keep the irony out of my voice. "I'm sorry to bring you this bad news, Mrs. Hadley."

But she was untouched, beyond recall in her own sour hell.

"Margaret Hadley became a stranger to me ten years ago, Mr. Grieg. I'm a poor woman. I have enough only for my own needs. You will not expect me to assume any obligations."

"I'll bury her," I said.

FAR back off a narrow road the orphanage sat, a crumbling red brick building that leaned against the rise of a hill. The long drive that approached it from the road was lined with ancient oaks and maples. More of the great trees scattered over the large unkempt yard, crowding the house itself, stretching their gaunt arms above the slate roof and giving me the uneasy feeling that they were holding the place mesmerized.

Three small kids in jeans and sweaters were playing listlessly under the trees in the front yard. In the rear, I saw a couple other kids coming down to the house from a barn farther up the slope.

I went up across a wide porch into a hall. The floor was almost black from innumerable applications of oily sweeping compound and had long ago begun to splinter away. I stopped inside the door for a minute, adjusting to the oppressive, heavy air. The institutional odor of the place,

animal and antiseptic, surrounded me like an invisible fog. At the end of the hall there was a closed door with a small sign posted on the hall side. I went down and read the sign: MR. HENDERSON, SUPERINTENDENT. When I rapped on the door, a voice invited me to enter.

A man sat behind a desk in an early, interior dusk that was the room's own. The light was too dim for me to distinguish his features until he stood up and came around the desk to meet me. Then I saw that he was old and stooped, with the skin drying on his bones. His grip was firm enough, however, and his voice was soft and resonant, without a quaver.

"Mr. Henderson? My name is Norman Grieg. I've come to talk with you about a girl who lived here a long time ago."

"Sit down, Mr. Grieg. I've been here over a quarter of a century. Possibly I may remember her."

He resumed his seat, lacing his bony fingers on the desk in front of him. The little light that entered the room behind him struck a highlight from his bald dome.

"Who is this girl, Mr. Grieg?"

"Margaret Hadley."

"Oh, yes. Little Maggie Hadley. I remember her very well. Her name was not Hadley, of course, when we had her here. She took the name from the lady she went to live with. Her parents lived on a farm nearby. The mother died in childbirth. The father died later as the result of an accident while ploughing. Maggie was about two at the time and was placed in the care of this institution. She remained here ten, twelve years. I've forgotten exactly. A pretty child. Intelligent. I wasn't happy about placing her in the home of Mrs. Hadley, but unfortunately I'm not the final arbiter in those matters. Later, she went off on her own to college and made a good career for herself as a librarian. I used to receive infrequent letters from her. None now, I think, for all of two years. Are you a friend of Maggie's?"

"We were engaged to be married," I said. "She was assistant librarian at State University. I'm an instructor there."

He stared for a long time at his laced fingers.

"You spoke in the past, Mr. Grieg," he said. "I'm an old man and have become sensitive to the tense."

"Margaret Hadley is dead. She died last night in her apartment near the University. She was strangled."

He kept staring at his laced fingers. Outside the window behind him, the black branches of an oak were like other fingers scratching at the glass. The sound of them was a dry, rasping whisper in the room. The old man's voice, when he spoke, was hardly louder.

"I'm very sorry," he said. "The thought of little Maggie. . . . If I can be of any help. . . ."

"I want to find the person who killed her. I know so little of her past, of the people she has known. I came here to see if you could suggest a line to follow."

HE STIRRED restlessly, the light slipping over the curve of his skull.

"I knew her as a child. What could there be in a girl's childhood?"

"Who knows? If you would just talk. Just tell me what you remember."

"There's so little. A small child. A young girl. She did her chores around the place. She did her lessons and learned quickly. She got along well with the other children. She was brought here in the fall, I remember, because it was a terribly bad winter that year."

"Who else was here then?"

"Who else?"

"What other children, I mean."

"It's so hard to recall. A long time ago. So many children came and went altogether. In the spring, I remember, Otto Bloom was placed in our charge. The spring after Maggie came. They grew up together, Otto and Maggie. Otto stayed on after

Maggie left for Mrs. Hadley's. No one, of course, was willing to take him in. He was permitted to leave on his own when he was eighteen. Several years after Maggie's departure, that was."

"Who was Otto Bloom? Why do you say no one was willing to take him in?"

He lifted his face, and I had a strange notion that his eyes had retreated suddenly into their sockets. Oak fingers fumbled at the window. Even outside, now, the shadows were deepening. The name of Otto Bloom was a whispered echo inside my skull. Somewhere, sometime, I had heard the name before. The old man stirred again and spoke.

"You are not a native of this section, Mr. Grieg. If you were, you would not need to ask those questions. Otto was the only son of Mona Bloom. The only child. He was the fruit of her fourth and last marriage. To the elder Otto Bloom, that is. Mr. Bloom was a wealthy farmer who lived not more than five or six miles from this place."

"The name Bloom seems faintly familiar, but I can't place it."

"Mona Bloom was a murderess, Mr. Grieg. She killed Otto Bloom with a hatchet as he slept. Alone, in the middle of the night, she buried his body in an orchard below their house. When the body was found and an investigation started, it was learned that Mona Bloom had been married three times previously. In every case, to a man of some wealth. One had simply disappeared and was never heard from again. The other two had died suddenly, one by falling, somehow, on a pitchfork, the other by what was written off as a heart attack. Mona Bloom murdered them, of course. After her conviction for murdering Bloom she confessed the others. Boasted of them, indeed. She died on the gallows."

"What kind of boy was Otto?"

"What kind would you expect? We tried to keep his mother's story from him, but such things cannot be kept secret. Who

knows what knowledge like that would do to the heart of a boy? He was gloomy, withdrawn. He brooded, but he was intelligent. Remarkably intelligent. He read omnivorously. When he left here at the age of eighteen, he had an education that would be a credit to any college graduate. I never heard from him. Where he went, what he did, I don't know."

I felt very strange. The tapping of the oak fingers at the window seemed suddenly very loud. As if they were tapping a message. A message my brain was on the verge of grasping.

"Tell me, Mr. Henderson. Is there anything in particular that you can remember about Otto Bloom? Other than what you've told me. Something that might mark him quite distinctly."

The old man shook his head. He turned his chair suddenly, sharply, so that his profile was toward me. Against the fading light of the window, his naked head and wasted face were the silhouette of a brooding hawk.

"Nothing. I can recall nothing else." He paused, as if he were listening intently to the faint voice of the past, and when he resumed speaking, his words were measured, dropping slowly and tiredly into the still, shadowed room. "Except that, for a boy who had little use for exercise, he was extremely strong. Much of his strength, I think, was in his hands. *He had very large hands.*"

I stood up, and the room was no longer still, for I heard above the rustle at the window, filling this crumbling place with sudden terror, the spaced reverberations of crashing chords.

"Thanks very much, Mr. Henderson," I said.

He arose, lifting his arms and letting them fall.

"I'm afraid I've not been of much help to you."

"On the contrary," I said. "You've told me everything."

I WENT out of the orphanage and down the long drive to the road, and he was waiting for me there in the darkness beneath the ancient trees. We walked down the road together.

"You've seen the old man," he said, and his voice was like the sighing of the wind in the branches overhead.

"Yes."

Strangely, I was not afraid, because it is too late for fear when you are walking with death on a lonely road. We went downhill to a point where the dry bed of a narrow stream was spanned by the rough planking of a bridge. He stopped there abruptly, turning to stare back at the gloomy bulk of the old orphanage against the hillside. His voice sounded light and free, rising in release from a great oppression.

"He told you, I suppose, about Otto Bloom?"

"He told me. He said that Otto had large hands. Strong hands. Then I remembered the chords. I don't know much about music, but I know a little. It would take large hands to strike some of those chords. It was a mistake to mention where I was coming."

"You're clever, Mr. Grieg. But no matter now. For a long time I had to live with the knowledge that I was the son of a murderer. Now I am a murderer myself, and I no longer find the knowledge a burden. Indeed, I feel a strange elation, Mr. Grieg, as if I had come at last into my true heritage."

Bitterness rose up within me.

"Sure," I said. "Murder. A young woman. An old man. Now me. That's only three. You're still under family par."

I heard a long sigh.

"There will be time to improve the record. Later, I may devise something appropriate for the woman who is to be my wife. It was fear of some such thing, I suppose, that compelled little Maggie to behave so rashly. She recognized me, you see. When

she and the old librarian came about the books. After all these years. I thought at first she might keep my little secret, but when she called yesterday for the appointment, I understood my error. It seemed obvious that she had confided in the old man and was following his advice. You can see that I was forced to act. As moral people, they couldn't stand by and see a wealthy woman marry in ignorance the son of a woman who had made a career of marrying and murdering for money. Unfortunately, moral people must bear the consequences of their morality."

"As murderers must bear the consequences of their murdering," I said.

His voice rose on an eerie high note of inner laughter.

"A myth, Mr. Grieg. The files of the police are heavy with unsolved murders. Yours, I think, will be among them!"

He threw himself upon me so suddenly that I had time to do no more than reel backward. His hands were at my throat as we crashed into the rotten railing of the old bridge. The decayed wood snapped like punk, pitching us headlong into the ravine.

I twisted violently, wrenching his body over to take the full shock of the impact beneath me, and for a moment I felt his iron fingers go slack. But only for a moment. Before I could pull myself away, they resumed their deep, relentless probing for my throat.

I threw my arms out, clawing at the hard earth, and my fingers closed on a jagged stone.

Long after it was unnecessary, I continued to lift the stone and bring it smashing down.

Afterward, I sat in the dry ravine beside the body of Oliver Moon until I could breathe normally again. Then I got up and walked back up the hill to the orphanage, and on the way I kept thinking of what the preacher had said about the sun rising and the sun setting, and everything coming in the end to its beginning. ◆ ◆ ◆



She caught a dazed glimpse of Steve pivoting, his lips thinned. . . .

SING A DEATH SONG

They were the only witnesses to trackless murder—in a town where squealers died!

A BITTER wind stormed in from the sea, leaped over the deserted boardwalk and swirled around the shuttered bungalows huddling like frozen animals in the snow drifts. Only one of the thirty-six bungalows comprising the Haw-

kins Court, the corner one farthest from the beach, showed a light.

Ella sat in one of the Windsor chairs in the middle of the living room, her feet soaking in a pan of hot water. She shivered deliciously as Steve, kneeling in front

By JOHN FORAN

of her, massaged her ankles. "Oh-h-h, that feels good," she said.

Steve nodded. "Yeah, I can feel the heat moving up my arms."

"Steve." Her dark eyes moved over his brown hair, the lock falling down over his forehead. She reached out a hand and brushed it back. "Steve, we've got to go to the police and tell them what happened."

"That would be smart." His voice was rough, his fingers gentle on the red welt marring her shin just above the ankle. "Go to the cops, the very men who are giving Lance and his fat friend protection, and tell them I saw Lance shoot the man right on Beach Avenue? Yeah, very smart."

He sat back on his haunches. "And the police will tell us to go home," he went on cynically, "they'll take care of it—yeah, by giving Lance a call and telling him to pay us a quick visit—"

"Steve!" Ella was shocked. "The police wouldn't do such a thing!"

"No?" Scowling, he ran a wet hand through his hair, leaving a damp streak in it. "Listen, those two killed the man found on the beach last summer. I've heard the talk, everybody knows who did it, but have the police done anything about it?"

"Steve, who is this Lance? Why should the police—"

"He's the strong-arm boy for the beach bookies," he told her. "Remember I pointed him out—with the bookie who was taking bets right out on Beach Avenue, around Ninety-sixth Street." He grunted. "Somebody tried to pull a fast one or refused to pay off, so—"

She stared at him. "Steve, what are we going to do?"

"We're going to stay right here," he said flatly, "we're going to mind our business."

Helplessly, she looked around the room. Behind Steve the red-brick fireplace he'd built during the summer, with Mr. Hawkins' permission. The bookcases, under the side windows, the pillows that turned them

into window seats, too. The gate-leg table they'd picked up in the junk shop and sanded and glued and varnished. Steve's comfortable chair flanking the fireplace, and behind her the brand new love seat, her pride and joy.

Their little world, so snug and secure until. . . .

She lifted her head, listening to the wind screaming around the cottage. Sleet pattered across the porch like human steps. A frightened look came in her eyes.

"Steve, we can trust the police," she urged. "Goodness, if we can't, who *can* we trust?"

"The police!" He pushed impatiently to his feet. He went over to the window and peered out.

His eyes were gray, deep-set under jutting brows, his cheekbones prominent, his chin strong. Concentration drew his brows together and thinned his lips; and then, to Ella, he resembled a prize fighter closing in for the kill.

That was why she hadn't liked him at first. She'd dreamt of him losing his temper and beating her with his fists. But after she got to know him—it was funny, he was the gentlest man she'd ever met, and she loved him for it, yet now she reveled in her first impression: He was hard, ruthless, he walked with the gentle tread of a ferocious tiger.

He isn't scared, she thought, not even if those two killers come here after him.

SHE turned her head and glanced at her reflection in the mirror over the gate-leg table. Her blonde hair curled softly above her small face. Swimming every day and eating regularly—she looked and felt so much better than when they'd been cooped up in a one-room apartment in the city. Fresh and lively—pretty, even.

At least, Steve kept telling her she looked so much better than when he used to come up to the assembling department to repair her riveting machine. She used to look so

skinny, he told her, so nervous, like she was scared of him, of the machine, of everything.

Well, she *was* scared of everything in those days. Like the day he sat beside her in the lunchroom. His thick shoulders, his big hands. She nibbled nervously on a toasted sandwich. He ordered hot soup, a plate of beef, a large milk. And he kept scowling at her. She wanted to tell him it wasn't her fault the riveter broke down so often.

She jumped when he said, "That all you going to eat? Here, drink this." He pushed the glass of milk over.

"Please," she said timidly. "I'm not hungry."

"Drink it, you hear?" He scowled fiercely.

Suddenly she smiled; it came all by itself. Without a word, she drank the milk. And all the while looking at him over the rim of the glass, wondering why she'd been scared of him.

"What's so funny?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing," she said, smiling mysteriously.

That was the last time she was afraid—of anything—until now.

Steve whirled from the window, startling her. "Why did I have to bring you back by Beach Avenue?" he said harshly.

"Because you were so afraid I would catch cold on the boardwalk—"

"I was a fool to take you out in the first place!"

"It was my fault, Steve, I insisted."

She wiped her warmed feet on a towel and slipped them into the mules Andy bought for her birthday. She picked up the pan of water and carried it out to the kitchen. Not a kitchen, really, not even room for a table, just a shelf for pots and pans while she cooked. But the gas range was good, with the oven relined and the door fixed.

Steve can do anything, she thought proudly, pouring the water into the sink. Yes, anything, he isn't afraid of anybody

or anything at all! He's really brave!

Comforted, she washed the pan and put it away, then washed the sink. She hung up the cloth and went back to the living room. Steve was at the window again, peering out.

"Do you think they recognized us?" she asked.

"I don't know." He turned, biting his lip worriedly. "We just turned the corner as Lance got out of the car and shot that man." He moved over to the fireplace and held out his hands to the fire, though the room was nice and warm. "It was the one in the car, looking up and down the avenue. If he spotted us they'll come here and—" He ran his hand through his hair.

Ella sank into the love seat. She hadn't seen the shooting, didn't even know exactly where it happened. Only that she was with Steve, one hand deep in his overcoat pocket, her fingers entwined in his, her head bent, letting him battle the storm for her.

She shivered, feeling again the rough way Steven grabbed her and shoved her out of sight. He dragged her between two bungalows. Bewildered, she stumbled through the snow, tripped over that board, hurting her shin, and fell face down in the snow drift. Steve lifted her up. The wind whipped curses from his lips—the first time she ever heard him use such words—as they ran along behind the bungalows. She stumbled into the rear of their house gasping for breath, so cold and wet and frightened, she could only cling to Steve and sob.

A sudden gust shook the bungalow. Ella opened her eyes and found Steve watching her. With his head half-turned, listening, his eyes had a furtive look. She forced a smile. "I'm not afraid to go to the police, Steve."

His eyes slid away, as though she'd told him he was. "You don't know what you're saying," he said irritably.

"Steve!" She moved to him.

"Don't you realize what will happen to

you—to everything we've found here?"

"But we can't cover up for murderers."

"We're only protecting ourselves," he cried. "These men—gamblers, thieves, killers—let them kill each other! We're nobody, if we get into it, who's going to protect us?"

"But Steve, the police—"

"Oh, shut up about the police!"

He pushed her aside and hurried over to the window. She watched him peer out into the stormy night. She'd never seen him act like this before, shouting at her, rushing back and forth—like a trapped animal!

"Can't you understand?" he cried without turning his head. "I told you before we were married, I said we'd never be able to afford a home in the country like you always wanted. I'm not that smart, just handy with my hands. But you married me anyway, and only by luck, because Mr. Hawkins liked you so much when we came here on my vacation, he let us have this cottage rent-free for taking care of the Court."

He turned uneasily. "Please, Elly, all we have to do is keep our mouths shut and we're safe—"

Ella felt cold all over. Fear. She knew all about fear. She'd lived with it constantly until she met Steve. He was so strong, he looked so fearless—how many times she'd taken his big hand and laughed, just because she'd felt so safe, so sheltered.

But now. . . . The cottage trembled violently as though it was ready to collapse. Sleet reminded her of splintering windows. What if they went to the police and Steve was right? What if the man in the car saw them and told Lance? Why were they staying here, waiting to be killed?

SUDDENLY she burst into tears. She didn't want to cry, she wanted to keep calm, to help Steve—

Sleet walked across the porch.

"Steve. They're here!"

She screamed it, backing away from the door, and when it didn't open, she went

weak all over. She collapsed into the love seat beset by all the fears she'd cast aside.

"Every time I hear people pass the bungalow," she sobbed, "every time I wake up at night, and if I ever pass those two on Beach Avenue—Steve, I'll be so scared! They'll know right away!"

"All right!" he said harshly. "All right, go pack a bag. There's a train to the city in an hour. You can stay with Clara tonight and I'll—"

"No, Steve." The prospect of going to the city, alone, frightened her. "I want to stay with you."

"No, you go to the city now. I'll go to the police—in the morning."

He wasn't going to the police, he'd just tell her he went. She hated herself for hearing the lie in his voice. "I won't leave you."

His hand tightened on her arms until they hurt. His eyes blazed down at her. "All right," he said bitterly, "if you don't care what happens to you."

Blinking tears from her eyes, Ella changed to dry clothes. She put on her heavy coat and wrapped a scarf around her neck. Steve pulled on a thick blue sweater. He picked up his overcoat. They were ready.

Ella stopped by the front door. "Steve." She wanted to feel his arms around her, to get close to him for a moment. "We're doing the right thing, Steve, you'll see."

"Let's not stand here," he said roughly, refusing to look at her. "We'll get all sweated up."

The storm rushed at Ella, choking off her breath. It wrapped icy fingers about her and sent her skittering over the slippery walk. She caught at Steve for support.

Steve kept his hands jammed deep in his pockets so she couldn't slide her hand in. He plowed through the snow and she stumbled after him, fighting tears.

In the bus he sat stiffly beside her, like a stranger. She tried to think of something to say. She never had any trouble talking to Steve, the words just bubbled out. A doz-

en times she'd caught herself and wailed, "Steve, I talk too much!"

"Sure, but I like it."

"You'll get bored some day."

"Think so? I thought I told you. As of now I wouldn't know what to do without you."

"Steve!"

"What?"

Ella's thought tumbled back to the lurching bus, the raging storm. Steve was glaring at her. She realized she'd spoken his name aloud. She stared blankly at the frosty window.

They stamped snow from their feet outside the police precinct and went in shaking it from their clothes. A sergeant sat behind the desk, filling out an official form. "Yes?" he said, without looking up.

Steve hesitated. He put a hand on the edge of the desk.

The sergeant's head lifted. He speared Steve with an impatient look. "Well, what's on your mind?" He slapped the report aside like he hated filling out forms.

"We want to report a murder!"

The words popped out of Ella's mouth. She was only trying to cover for Steve, so the sergeant wouldn't see he was afraid. Contempt showed in the sergeant's eyes as he switched to her. "What murder?"

Ashamed of what she'd done, Ella remained silent, waiting for Steve.

"Well? Well? What's the matter with you two?"

Steve's hand tightened on the desk. He said, "We—we saw a man named Frankie shoot a man on Beach Avenue."

"Oh, you did." The sergeant glared at Steve. "Whereabouts on Beach Avenue?"

"On—just past Ninety-sixth Street."

The sergeant's beefy face settled into hard lines. "How long ago?"

As Steve answered, the sergeant's hand jumped to the phone. He barked into it, "Lieutenant, there's a couple out here, the Beach Avenue job—" He slammed the phone back on the cradle. "What's your

name? Where do you two live?" he barked.

A door banged open at the rear and a tall hawk-nosed lieutenant strode over to them. "These the two?" His sharp eyes bit into them. "Who did it?"

"Frankie," said the sergeant. "The bookie?" he said, glancing at Steve.

Steve nodded.

"How do you know him?" snapped the lieutenant.

"Well, I—I've seen him around."

"Exactly what did you see?" The lieutenant reached for a scratch pad, a pen. He scribbled on it as Steve told them what happened. The sergeant kept his eyes riveted on Steve as though he was memorizing Steve's features.

The lieutenant pushed the pad at Steve. "Sign that," he said.

Steve's hand trembled as he wrote out his name.

"Well, looka here," said the sergeant sarcastically. "We got us a public-spirited citizen."

"Yeah, we ought to give him an Oscar of some kind," said the lieutenant.

The sergeant laughed. "Frankie will want to do that."

"I'm going to love telling him," grinned the lieutenant.

Steve stared bitterly at Ella.

"Have you talked to anyone about this?" asked the lieutenant. "Well?" His eyes sharpened. "Did you or didn't you?"

"No," said Steve reluctantly.

"Then don't." The lieutenant relaxed. "Just go home and stay there. We'll take care of everything."

Steve turned on his heel and strode out. Ella hurried to catch up with him.

"I told you!" he cried, going down the steps. "Did you see them make an official record? A scratch pad! He can tear it up right after he phones Frankie—" The wind choked off his voice. "Don't talk to anyone!" he shouted. "Go home, stay there! Wait for Frankie and his pal to come and kill us!"

Ella whimpered, certain now that was exactly what was going to happen. "Steve, let's not go home," she said anxiously, "let's take the train to the city. We can stay at Clara's, she'll let us sleep on the couch—"

"It's too late to think of that!" he flung at her. "The train doesn't leave for at least half an hour. They'd have plenty of time to catch us at the station. Well, I hope you're satisfied," he added.

THEY came to the bus stop at the corner. Steve turned his back to the storm, and from force of habit, Ella swung in front of him, out of the wind. She looked up. Steve's eyes slid away. They stood close together, silent, embarrassed.

Ella clenched her hand in her sleeve. It was all her fault. Her and her silly romantic ideas. She'd expected too much of Steve. He did go to the police, didn't he? That was a lot more than most men would have done. She should be proud of him instead of feeling she'd lost something precious tonight.

"Steve." She forced her hand inside the pocket of his overcoat. His hand was cold and clammy. Her fingers recoiled—only from surprise—and then it was too late. Steve pulled his hand out of the pocket. He turned away.

"Here comes the bus," he said harshly.

They plowed through the snow to the Hawkins Court. "Let's go in the back way," she said. She unbuttoned her coat. "I'll make some hot tea," she said, and made her voice cheerful. She would act as though nothing had happened and maybe after a while—"And there's the cakes I brought from the bakery—"

Steve was reaching for the bottle of whiskey they kept for when they had guests. Steve seldom drank but now he poured it like water, gulped it down. He saw her watching. "Well?"

"I—I'll just put these things away—" She hurried into the living room. She touched the love seat as she passed by.

"Oh—!" She stopped suddenly, clutching the coat to her chest.

Shadows moving in the bedroom became a man standing in the doorway. A big black-haired man with a rough face contorted by a mocking smile.

"Who—who are you?" she faltered, while inside her voice cried, "*Frankie!*" Frantically, she glanced over her shoulder. The voice climbed up into her throat. "*Run. Steve—run!*"

Steve stood in the kitchen doorway, his hands gripping the sides. For a moment Ella thought he was going to follow her advice. He didn't move. His eyes were riveted on the gun that appeared in Frankie's hand.

"Where you been," asked Frankie, "out in this storm? Where you been, Steve?"

He moved into the living room, moving sideways to make room for a short fat man. Standing side by side, they seemed to fill the room with a heavy oppressive evil.

Ella fell back a step, her hand to her throat. She felt Steve's hand on her arm. He pushed her aside.

"I told the police Elly didn't have anything to do with it," he said. "She didn't see it happen, she can't testify."

"So you did go to the police," said Frankie softly.

The fat man mouthed curses.

"You know I went," said Steve. "The lieutenant phoned you, didn't he?"

"What?" Frankie's rough face twisted into a frown. "You crazy?"

"Pour it to him, Frankie," urged the fat man, "pour it and let's get out of here."

"Just a second, Marty. You keep him covered." Frankie slipped his gun back into his shoulder holster. He said to Steve, "Then why'd you go to the police?"

"I went," said Steve doggedly. "Let Elly go. She isn't in this."

"You dirty fink!" The fat man stepped close to Steve. He lifted his gun. "I'll show you who's in this!"

"I don't get it." Frankie caught the fat man's arm. "He goes to the police, he

thinks those dumb cops are giving us protection—say, this guy wants to die!”

“Then why don’t you let me satisfy him?” snarled the fat man.

“Steve went because I wanted him to go,” said Ella. Swift pride flowed through her. She moved to Steve’s side.

“Elly!” Steve shoved her away. “Please don’t kill us,” he said. His voice became quavery. “Please, I’ll do anything—” He lifted his hands as he sank to one knee. “I’ll go back to the police. I’ll tell them—it was snowing hard, the wind, I couldn’t see in the storm—”

“No, Steve,” said Ella. “Don’t beg.”

“Well, what do you know.” An evil grin spread over the fat man’s face. “Look at the tough guy. A rabbit.”

“They’re all the same when it comes down to it,” grunted Frankie.

“Watch this.” The fat man lifted his gun to Steve’s head. “Watch him rabbit all over the place!”

ELLA closed her eyes, determined to keep them squeezed shut until she was murdered. She uttered a choked scream as a shot blasted the room.

It was followed by a hoarse shout, violent movements. Her eyes flew open. Steve had hold of the fat man’s arm, holding it up and out. Frankie was moving around the fat man, trying to get a shot at Steve.

Steve pivoted on one knee and put his back against the fat man’s barrel-like waist. He snapped the fat man’s gun arm down over his shoulder. He humped his back. The fat man went up in the air, kicking futilely, punching at Steve with his free hand. Bent over, Steve kept turning with Frankie’s circling feet, holding

the fat man between them with a grip on a pant’s leg.

Frankie cursed, lashed blindly around his friend’s bulk. The gun raked the side of Steve’s face.

Elle jumped into it as Steve staggered, dazed by the blow. She fastened on to Frankie’s wrist with both hands. A sweep of his arm sent her staggering, but she managed to hang on.

Steve recovered, heaved upward. The fat man was flung against Frankie, his legs rammed Ella. They all staggered back, Frankie toppling over the chair beside the fireplace. The chair went over backwards, taking Frankie, the fat man and Ella with it.

Ella landed on her back. She caught a dazed glimpse of Steve pivoting, his brows drawn tight, his lips thinned. He closed in. Ella’s hair fell across her eyes. A second shot exploded streaks of fire. A terrible weight fell on her, choking, smothering. . . .

She came out of darkness remembering her grip on Frankie’s wrist. She saw something and grabbed. A leg. She wrapped her arms around it and hung on.

The leg didn’t move. The room was still. Ella opened her eyes. The fat man made a thick bundle of clothes on the floor in front of the fireplace. Frankie was sprawled across the chair.

She looked up. Steve stood over her, breathing deeply, a finger hooked through the trigger guards of two guns. From the floor he looked twelve feet high.

He said, “Don’t bite my leg, Elly.”

She started to laugh, and choked so hard on a sob she couldn’t breathe.

Steve picked her up. “All right, Elly,” he said gently. “It’s all over now.”

(Continued on page 112)

THE COPS CLEANED UP!

Two Philadelphia detectives assigned to break up the numbers racket spent four months on the job, posing as betting men. They made fifty arrests—and cleared \$200 on their bets.

Webb B. Garrison

ODDITIES IN CRIME

By JAKOBSSON and STONE



This may well be the century's least profitable crime: To prevent exposure of a youthful misdemeanor, Warren Mullett of New Haven, Connecticut, paid a friend nine thousand dollars in blackmail money, over a period of twelve years. It kept him constantly broke—but he feared the law more than he feared poverty. One day, however, the demands of his own growing family became greater than his fear—and he went to the man he had robbed twelve years before, and confessed.

His crime? He had stolen twenty dollars worth of spark plugs from a garage owner. The puzzled garage man had never even noticed the loss, and refused to prosecute. It was Mullett's friend, Edward Horrocks, who went to jail for blackmail, instead.

A smart, thorough pack of jewel thieves descended upon a British resort hotel at Margate, during the summer of 1937. So devastating were their operations that the hotel's name and trade were ruined for the season, forcing the management to close down, and sell its effects at auction. None of the loot was recovered for a long time.

A dozen years later, a Mr. and Mrs. Mackie, same city, examined some second-hand furniture they had purchased from a junk dealer and then stored for years in the attic. In a commode drawer, they found a fortune of jewels—the whole of that ruinous 1937 haul.

It must have been a comfort to the hotel's old owners to know that the thieves hadn't been richer, either.



Very few criminals arouse sympathy, if not admiration. Our candidate for the most understandable jailbird of the year is Mrs. Kathleen Audrey Tossey, of Bell, California. Mrs. Tossey was arrested on suspicion of arson, last spring, for setting fire to her own house.

She did not complain or cringe in remorse. She told the straightforward truth. She had decided, she said, on a good spring cleaning. She took inventory, measured the job ahead against her time, strength and standards of cleanliness—and then, instead of compromising, she achieved the only possible solution.

She set a match to the place.

According to Max Tauber's will, his wife Frances was to receive twenty thousand dollars from his estate. However, she died before he did. When Max shortly followed her, legal heirs of both mates went to Chicago court, each claiming the legacy. Frances, claimed Max's cousins, had never lived to possess the money, therefore could not bequeath it.

In this case, the husband's relatives were thrown out of court. Reason Frances had died first was because Max murdered her, dying next day himself of suicide. The moral: Murder is never legal—and if your rich uncle commits it, you may find his funds tied up.





COP FOR SALE!

Sometimes, even in a good cop, there's something buried deep inside that no one can control—something called
Death!

By **MARK HOPE**



"What the hell is this?" I said. "Get this body down to the morgue. . . ."

BY THIS time it's best the public get the facts straight. I'm putting it all down now, in case anything happens to me. So that the truth is here for anyone to read. It was a nasty case, a helluva case, and only part of what appeared in newspapers all over the country is true. If only to get it off my chest, and clean up some of the names that otherwise would remain dirty, I'm typing this out against the day I resign.

My name is Bob Lyons. I'm the night Chief of Police in Santa Vesalia, a sea-coast town in Southern California. I've held the job eight years, working my way up from a patrolman on the boardwalk. I have a wife, Sally, and one son, Jim, who's eighteen. Santa Vesalia is a town where a good many of the movie colony live, and in all my years here I've gotten to know quite a few prominent people, movie stars and directors and producers. I've done

small favors for them and they remember me at Christmas. But most of all I've kept in well with them because of my son Jim. My own life has been a pretty rugged one, though I'm not complaining. Except I'd like it to be a whole lot smoother for Jim. And knowing big shots like that never hurts.

Up until three days ago my life ticked along as smooth as a grandfather clock. My family was happy. I had plenty of friends, enough money came rolling in. It was a big hello here and have a cigar there. What the fellow would call peaches and cream. Then that phone call came.

It was from Frank Binyon. The boss. While he talked to me I could see his face hanging in a cloud over the phone. A hard, seamed face. As real as a baseball. He told me he'd be down to see me at eleven that night. Except he wouldn't come to the station house. I was to meet him at the corner of Fourth and Elwood where he'd pick me up. Okay, I told him, Fourth and Elwood.

I called my best man in off a radio car to fill in for me. At a few minutes before eleven I left to walk over to the meeting place. It was a beautiful night. A deep blue-black sky, without any stars up there at all. Only the moon. It hung up there like an enormous eye watching the world. Below the sheer cliffs which border our town I could hear the ocean, sighing and beating in to shore, then falling off to return again. And again. A beautiful calm night.

A small black coupe pulled into the corner at maybe a minute past eleven. I got in, saw that it was Frank Binyon himself and we drove off. I offered him a cigar. but he shook his head, so I lit my own.

"What's up, Mr. Binyon?"

He cut his eyes over at me, gave me that hard, affable smile which always made me think: *Watch out, here comes a curve.* But he said nothing. He said nothing for the next ten minutes until we were out of the

city limits and he had parked the car.

It was very quiet where we were, quiet enough to hear a handful of crickets on the roadside whirring on and on and on, endlessly, the way they go.

"Got a job for you," he said.

"What kind?"

"Don't ask any questions," he said. "Listen."

What the hell. I thought, while the crickets went on and off, on and off.

"I came to Santa Vesalia in forty-four. The war was on. It was a good time for me. And I built up a good organization. In forty-five you started working for me. When you began you and your wife and boy lived in three rooms over a bakery. Don't interrupt. Now you own your own home, you drive a good car, your son goes to college, your wife gets her clothes made to order. I did that for you, Bob. And in all that time I never asked for a real favor. Except maybe to look the other way now and then. And because I and the organization took over your job was easier. Things was organized. All that's true now?"

Suppose it was. It was even true about my police work being easier since he had taken over the town. Even crime is easier to deal with when all the strings are in one hand. If you want to find out something you know right away where to go. And if you don't want to know, there are always fall guys around to make the public think you're on your toes.

DON'T judge me. A lot of cops are honest and good. But like so many others I had passed a point years ago when I suddenly realized I was trying to catch a waterfall in a tin cup. It was no use. Binyon had made me a good offer and I had become one of the boys.

"Well—?" He was still looking at me, still wanting me to say it was true.

"Okay. You've gotten value received," I told him.

He continued to look at me as though

he didn't like my tone when I spoke.

"What do you want me to do? Run you up a tea cosy? Sure I've been on your payroll. So has everybody else in town."

"Yeah," he said, with a trace of satisfaction in his voice. "It's my town. I own it like you own the watch in your pocket. Only—only it won't be long unless we move fast."

"What's the matter? Is something wrong?"

"Love is wrong," he said. "Even with racket boys, it happens. Listen."

He had a lovable habit of saying "Listen" and then making you wait four or five seconds until he thought the silence was respectful enough. Right then an old Hudson sedan came flapping along behind us. One of its tires was flat, clean flat, and it went flap-flap-flap in the quiet night long after it was out of sight.

"You know Danny Agnello. Well, Danny is a pretty good lad. Good con lad. For a couple of weeks now he's been seeing a lot of Lola Harper."

It didn't fit. Lola Harper was my son's girl. Jim had fallen in love with her hard, at first sight, the first time he saw her in "White Paradise." He kept asking me to introduce him, but I turned that down. Right now I wanted his mind on school-work and Lola Harper was too cute a bonbon not to develop a craving for

"Which would be all right." Frank Binyon went on, "except that this Harper party turns out to be a pretty dizzy dame. A fluff-brain—you know what I mean? Right away she wants Danny should quit the mob, and if he don't she says she's gonna squeak on him. She takes it like he ain't a serious kind of feller. Like he ain't got a good job and all. She says now it's time he smartened up and settled down. And she loves this Danny and nothing we say makes her give an inch. It's at the point now where Danny is afraid to leave her out of his sight, 'cause the first chance she gets maybe she beats it to the cops. See?"

"How much does she know?"

"Enough." Out of habit he was going to pass it off with a smile, but then his face sobered. "Bob, she knows so damn much that if she ever starts talking there won't nobody be safe right up to the Governor."

The crickets kept whirring on. They had one job to do and they did it.

"So?"

"I hate crickets," said Binyon. "Da-da, da-da. Like some kid practicing piano. Da-da-da. Bob, tomorrow morning a body's gonna wash up on the beach."

"Not on this beach it isn't."

"What's that mean?"

"You listen to me for a minute. Binyon. Up to now I've taken your money and done your work. Everything's been apple pie. But, and it's a helluva big but, murder is out."

"Did you think it was going to be softball all the way? How do you think I got where I am? There comes a time, Bob, when heart can't figure in it at all. When only headwork will get us out of a tight corner. And that's where we are now. This Harper dame gets around. She knows a lot of big squares. A few words out of that dame and she kicks the whole thing to pieces. Me, you, Bradley, everybody. Listen. Talk like this I might have expected from Bradley or that sourball, the Mayor. That Jacksie. But not you. You got a head on your shoulders, Bob."

"That's where I like it. On my shoulders. And not over a gas bucket fighting to hold my breath."

"Look. It ain't *your* job. Matter of fact I'm not even gonna tell you who does it."

"That won't be hard to guess."

"All right, all right. What do you want us to do? Sit on our rumps, and let everything go to hell? For Pete's sake, think, Bob. Think! I picked you to stand off the heat because you're solid, because the Chief ain't got the brains to find his head unless somebody ties a whistle on it. You're solid

and you're smart. Think. You play this right and there's an extra five gees."

"Thanks. You can make it twenty-five or fifty and the answer is still no."

"Mind answering one thing? Only one thing. Why? Answer me that. Why?"

"I'll tell you. Letting hoodlums push each other around and cut each other up is one thing. Even letting them take a few squares to the races don't bother me any. It's money, only money. But human life is something else again. Maybe I'm not a very good cop, Binyon. But I'm not that bad. I'm a long way from being that bad."

"All right. You don't want to play it friendly. Then I got only one alternative."

"So?"

"I don't like to do it, Bob." He shook his head regretfully. "I don't even like to suggest it."

"So it's the end of a fine romance. What is it?"

"Pressure. This town thinks you're a pretty swell guy. What if they found out different?"

He'd touched a button there. Like any man with pride, I valued a good reputation. But I couldn't let him see that. I just sat, pretending not to be very interested.

"What if your wife found out?"

"You think my wife's deaf-dumb-and-blind. She knows."

"The papers then." He hesitated, evidently having thought of something sharper. "What if your son gets to know the kind of guy you are?"

That did it, "You dirty son! You leave that kid out of it, Binyon. Or there won't be only one body wash up on the beach!"

He smiled. That killer smile, like somebody carved an upward line in cut glass. He smiled because he knew he had me then. He'd pressed the right button.

WE LEFT it at that. He drove me back to Santa Vesalia. I got out a few blocks from home, walked the rest of the

way and turned in. From my bedroom window I could see the same moon in the sky, like the eye of some giant conscience. But the sound of the sea had somehow changed. It was sad now, sad like it had been watching men kick the truth around a little too long.

It was a bad night. Usually I sleep like a top, through sunlight and all, but this night I kept hearing the waves roll and pound into spray for hours. The next thing I remember was Sally's voice in my ear. She was shaking me by the shoulder to wake me up.

"My, you certainly are a hard one to wake up this morning, sleepyhead. Chief Bradley just called. Wants you to come right down."

While I got into my clothes, I realized it must have happened. Feeling me bound and delivered, Binyon had gone ahead. Sally kept giving me funny looks all through breakfast, but I managed to pretend everything was okay and got out of the house as soon as I could.

There were four or five people in Bradley's outer office waiting to talk to him, but as soon as Miss Willoughby, his secretary, saw me she sent me right in.

Bradley was sitting behind his desk, studying a newspaper. He's a big man, Bradley, used to be a shotputter in some small-time college. Though there are better cops, he's a first class politician. If he never does much right, he sure as hell never does or say anything to put himself in wrong. After telling me he was sorry he had to wake me up, he threw the paper so that it landed slap under my nose.

There was a large picture of Lola Harper attending some recent premiere, on the arm of a movie actor. The headline over it could be read ten feet away. It said:

LOLA HARPER'S BODY FOUND ON BEACH.

What he wanted me to say I don't know. We kept looking at each other with one of those stares that are half-tough and half-ashamed like we were saying—*Well, you're*

a fine so-and-so you are, only I'm not much better myself.

"What I don't know isn't going to hurt me any, Bob," he said. "We've been moving in the direction of some mess like this for years. Right now I'm fed up. I think I'll turn the Department over to you and take a trip. Maybe I'll come back and maybe I won't. Anyway I'll be gone for about a month. That okay?"

"Maybe it's better that way. Where you going?"

"Oh hell, someplace where they use cocoanuts for money." He gave a short, hard laugh like a bark. "Which is why I got you out of bed, Bob. This is all your baby."

That left me right on the razor's edge. "Have a nice time." But I wasn't judging him. In his shoes I might have done the same thing. I folded the paper over so I couldn't see Lola's smiling face anymore. "Guess I'll go down and see the lab detail."

CHAPTER TWO

Poor Dead Girl

THE boys were all down at the beach. This was the biggest thing that had happened in our town since the Thelma Todd death. Everybody was taking it very holy and big. They had the laboratory truck there, driven right to the water's edge, and a rope quartering off that section of the beach so the crowd couldn't get within peeking distance. The news boys were all there. Ten more cops than had to be were there, and when I had shouldered my way through the mob, I'll be damned if even the body wasn't still there. The poor dead girl was rolling back and forth in a pocket of rocks, and overhead the seagulls were wailing down at her, screeching and snapping.

"What the hell is this?" I said. "Get that body down to the morgue."

"Only one more now, Chief," a guy from the *Bulletin* yelled. He was perched on a nearby rock, angling his camera down to get one of her face.

"The hell you say. Brody, get a blanket and get that girl downtown."

"But, Chief, it don't matter none to—"

"You hear what I said?"

He dropped his eyes then, came back with a blanket from the lab truck, and while enough flashbulbs went off to make a noon sunrise, Brody and another cop—Jerry Tomlin I think—got Lola Harper decently into a police car.

Sometimes people, all people, make me sick. This was one of them. The news boys gathered around me then, putting their own particular brand of questions. I told them I didn't have a damn thing to say until I'd seen the reports, that we weren't even sure it was murder yet. . . .

A round of jeers greeted this. "Maybe it was something she et," a guy called, and another one said, "G'wan, the whole thing's a publicity gag."

"Write it your own way. Say anything you damn please. And for me you can say that the Department will do everything possible to uncover the facts."

As I watched the lab truck go toiling through the sand after Lola's body and thought of all the time and knowledge and patience that would be poured into finding exactly what had happened in the last several hours, the expert photographs, the chemical tests, the autopsy, the report of the cop who had found her, all the precise and professional opinions, I could see Frank Binyon grinning at me again. Because all this earnest headwork and fine intention would matter as much as the confetti on last New Year's Eve. I almost called after them "Wait a minute. I can tell you who did this in three seconds." But I didn't, only watched the truck go swaying through the sand.

By the time I got back, Bradley had left. There was a memo on my new desk to call

the Mayor, the afternoon paper boys were waiting to see me. Mr. Gingold from Lola's studio would appreciate it if I called him. There was this and there was that and three other things. I took them as they came. The whole thing had blown up into a tornado and the needle would be stuck at hurricane velocity for days.

Right then and there a rookie cop came in to see me. It was the same Jerry Tomlin who'd helped Brody cover up the body. He was a friend of my son Jim. Sometimes he came over to the house and they threw a football around.

"Chief, this ain't a tough one. This Harper thing."

"That so? Tell me about it."

"I looked her over pretty careful, Chief, and that was a pro's job. Somebody slugged her hard enough to knock her cold, but not so cold that she wouldn't go right on breathing, and then pushed her in the water. Probably a boat no more'n a mile or two out."

"Why do you say that?"

"I've done a lot of swimming around here, and if it was any further out there's a current running there that would have carried her down to Point Roma. I betcha they find water in her lungs. She was drowned on purpose, by a pro, and you and me know, Chief, if the job was that good—" The kid would make a good cop. He was young, he lived clean, he did something with his head besides separate his ears, and maybe he could twist and turn through the labyrinth and emerge on top. Maybe.

Tomlin went on. "That means that Frank Binyon oughta know something about it."

"We can't pull in Binyon without evidence, Tomlin."

He looked like a kid who'd just run eighty yards for a touchdown except that the referee happened to remark that his team had been offside when he started and the whole thing was no score.

"Whatever you or I may think, or even

know, about Binyon," I went on, "he still has some mighty important friends around here. And I'll tell you something else. The guy Lola Harper worked for, Bill Gingold, tells me that if it turns out to be an accident, Hollywood will be a whole lot happier. The studios have had too much scandal recently."

"But if it's a homicide, Chief, it smells to call it anything else."

"Are you going to run this down in your spare time?"

"Boy! That's exactly what I wanted to talk to you about. That's my dish."

Then I gave it to him straight. "Then consider yourself transferred as of now to traffic detail. Report to Captain Milstead in the morning."

His face fell. He gave me a funny kind of salute and started to walk out.

"Oh, Tomlin, another thing. There are a bunch of news reporters outside. If I hear you've been talking to them you'll be up for a board. That's all."

ALONE, I figured out what I was going to tell the newspapers myself, then told Miss Willoughby to send them on in. They came in politely enough, eight or nine of them. After a little preliminary joking they got down to business. All of them had evidently been instructed to milk the story for all they could. They asked me to say whether I was ready to say it was murder, whether she had been alive when she hit the water, whether anyone had been brought in for questioning, whether any arrests were expected, what the Coroner had to say, why had Bradley picked this time for a vacation, whether Lola's friends had been investigated yet, whether I had known her myself, who her nearest relatives were, question after question until finally I shoed them all over to the District Attorney's office.

Before they got there I reached him on the phone. "Charley, this is Bob. On that Harper business—it looks from here as

though we'll never get very far with it."

"So soon? What's the angle?"

"Well—Lester tells me her producer would like the whole thing kiboshed as fast as we can." Lester was our code name for Frank Binyon.

"Oh." There was a silence from the other end of the phone. He didn't need any diagrams.

"Fact is, I'm not even sure we can prove jurisdiction. For all we know it may have happened outside the three-mile limit."

"This smells. But it's an idea. Maybe we can hand it to the Federal boys."

"I'm going to try. You getting much pressure?"

"Plenty. Bradley knew what he was doing all right. She had a lot of friends."

"Something will come along to blow it off the front page."

"We hope. They got you in a nice spot. Well, keep me informed, Bob."

Later that day one of the newspaper boys came back to see me. His name was Maury Hawkins. He asked me if I'd talk off the record.

"Depends. What do you want to know?"

"All the other boys are sure as hell it was murder. But I'm not convinced yet. Hell, maybe she was on a party. Maybe somebody pushed her as a gag, and when she fell over and they saw how serious it was, they clammed up. What do you think?"

"I plain don't know, Maury. A girl leading a life like that—she didn't come out of a convent you know—liable to do almost anything, go almost anywhere on impulse, it's hard to figure."

"There's talk been going around for some time that she was on the hop."

"Just talk. Something like that is not hard to spot. Say, I once had a guy come in here and seriously try to convince me that Lon Chaney was still alive only now he calls himself Ronald Colman. Figure that one out. But we can't go into court with talk."

"Do you want to go into court?"

"Hell, yes. What else? But we have to have facts. And evidence. That's a helluva question to ask *me*, by the way."

"Sorry, but some of us think you'd just as soon this had happened way out in Ohio."

"Why not? Our job is to keep the town behaving itself. And somebody getting themselves killed, however it happened, shows we're not doing as good a job as we might. A case like this gets to be everybody's business. The more fingers in the pie the tougher it gets to crack. You know that."

"Why did Bradley pick right now to take a vacation?"

"Far as I know, he's been planning that vacation for weeks. One thing or another kept coming up time after time. Finally I guess he just decided to go anyway. Why?"

"Maybe he figured this was a good chance to get out from under."

"You're pretty sure of yourself, Maury. A man loses a lot of friends that way."

"My assignment is to find out what happened. Friends have nothing to do with it. And from where I stand the whole thing is beginning to smell. The studio wants it hushed up—why? This Department isn't breaking its neck to bring anybody in—why? Bradley takes a powder—why? Nobody seems to care one damn that an innocent, intelligent girl got herself bumped."

"I can't pull rabbits out of a hat. This is life, not the movies. Suppose I filled up our cells with a lot of cheap suspects, and gave you plenty of copy. That's all it would be—copy. On the other hand, I'd be wasting a lot of official time and money that might better be spent running down real leads."

"Why not bring in Frank Binyon?"

"You talk like a child. What in hell does Binyon have to do with it?"

"If he didn't do it himself, he probably knows who did. Let's not kid each other, chum."

"Binyon! Binyon is like the bogeyman. Every time some dame gets her purse snatched the cry goes up, get Binyon. Why Binyon?"

"Binyon lives here. He operates here," said Maury. "He's in the know. And this was no small-time job. Whoever bumped Lola Harper must have had her on a yacht out there. How many local residents own yachts?"

"Plenty. You'd be surprised how many. And everyone is a personal friend of God. Ever stop to think of that?"

That stopped him for a minute. I looked at Hawkins then and I saw the beginning of trouble. Did you ever see a lake on fire? First it starts with a spot of oil in one corner, then that sails around until it sets off a second and in half a minute the whole sheet of water is one great big flame. If one newspaper got light of the truth, another would pick it up. You can fill in the rest yourself. I began to try to smooth down Hawkins' feathers.

"You know, being a cop isn't the easiest job in the world."

"Not being a cop is even harder," he said. Then he walked out.

THAT was one night I was glad to get home. For the rest of the day the phone had never stopped ringing, the people kept coming, the questions got more pointed, the Mayor got into the act promising hourly miracles, and all the while I couldn't get it out of my mind that Maury Hawkins had a match in his pocket and all he had to do was toss it onto that oil-soaked lake.

Funny. I remember we had pot roast for dinner that night. With those little browned potatoes and onion rings. My favorite dish. Afterwards Sally and Jim and I sat around the table talking. Jim told me he might be elected captain of next year's basketball team.

"With the betting scandals and all, Dad, they want to make sure they're electing somebody honest. And I guess if you have

a cop for a father that doesn't hurt your chances."

"Oh sure," I said, giving him a smile that hurt inside. "How are you and Barney Hogan's daughter doing?" I teased him.

"Oh we do all right," said Jim. "We sail. What are you making with the Lola Harper case?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Bob!" the Mrs. said. "You don't have to snap his head off."

"Sorry."

But it was too late. Jim gave me a surprised look, then excused himself and left the table.

Alone, Sally and I looked at each other. She reached out and patted my hand.

"They pushing you hard these days, Bob?"

I didn't answer her. I don't like lying to my wife.

"What really happened to Lola Harper, Bob?"

"My God—you too?" I said. "It's been nothing but that one question put a dozen different ways by fifty people all day long." I pushed away my plate, shoved my chair back and went out into the backyard.

The backyard is about the one place left that's all mine. It was nothing but a fence running around some concrete when we moved in, but I soon fixed that. I broke up the concrete and got down to the real earth, spaded it, planted it so that it came up green the next spring. Our Oldsmobile I built a shed for, and a room off that I fixed up for a workshop. It had a nice set of tools, a work-bench, a lathe, a power saw, and I went out there and skinned my thumb now and then.

I went straight there from the table, thinking it would help. But when I had picked up a fine piece of maple wood that I was going to turn for a table top, I began to shake inside. There's something honest and plain about working with your hands, about the soundness of good wood. . . . It all made me realize what a twisted liar I'd become. My actions in the office today had

been one tricky deception from beginning to end. I'd lied to the newsmen, lied to Tomlin, lied to Hawkins, and now I was beginning to cross up my family. My son. If souls have any substance to them, mine had a tag on it now which read: *Marked down since yesterday. Cheap at \$5000.*

That night I fell straight from sleep into a nightmare. I was out swimming someplace. Probably in the Arctic Ocean because the water was pure liquid ice. I was trying to catch something but the way it often is in dreams, every time I grabbed it, the thing would turn into something else. I got it square in my hand, whatever it was supposed to be, and then it turned into a little wriggling mermaid. I remember hearing something else. A filing sound, like a diamond-dust edge sawing steel, but when I looked around guessed it was made by the jagged edges of the icebergs clashing together, and then Sally woke me up.

It turned out I'd been walking in my sleep. We were out there in the backyard, with the wind blowing through my pajamas and the sound of the sea crashing at the end of the block. Sally had been very careful how she woke me up.

"At first I wasn't going to wake you," she said. "Just lead you back upstairs where you'd be warm, but you kept muttering something like—"

"You know this hasn't happened in years. What did I mutter?"

"It sounded like 'It's the only way. The only way.' And you wouldn't come with me. So— Look, this is another thing. From somewhere you've gotten grease all over your hands. How you got into that I simply don't know."

Sure enough. There was black grease over both hands. Looked like automobile grease. How had that happened? Funny. I went back to bed and lay awake for hours. Since this Binyon thing a tension had been building up in me, building and building until it seemed to lay out a path in the lower depths of my mind I had to walk.

CHAPTER THREE

Judgment!

NEXT day I felt better than at any time since the whole business had started. Relieved somehow. Somewhere, somehow a decision had been made. The nagging suspense was over. The decision was clear-cut, definite, and whatever it was, it would happen soon.

At about twelve o'clock, Miss Willoughby came in to tell me there were a bunch of schoolkids outside. High school kids. Along with the murder, the usual routine of police business had been running. Thefts and accidents and assaults. But I like kids and told her I'd see them.

They came filing in by twos, like there was a teacher with them. They stood there for a minute, very solemn, staring around, before they began nudging and pushing at one youngster to speak for them.

"Mr. Lyons, Chief Lyons, we know you, and we've all taken our lunch hour to come over and talk to you."

"Why sure, kids, I'm glad to see you taking an interest in the Police Department. Make yourselves comfortable. Tell me what's on your mind."

"Chief Lyons, I—Chief, we're the Lola Harper Fan Club, and I'm President. My name is Chet Tyler and—"

Evidently he wasn't making enough time to please his friends. Some kid in the back cried "Ask him what's takin' so long!" and another kid called out "You know who killed Lola yet?"

I said nothing.

"That's it, Chief Lyons," said Chet, "that's what we're here for."

"First of all, do the teachers know you're here?"

"Miss Murphy told us to come. She's our faculty advisor."

Lying to an adult isn't so bad because you figure he's discounting half of what you say anyway. But lying to a kid is an al-

together different story. The sight of their young faces waiting there, simply looking at me, trying to understand something way beyond them was not pleasant to watch.

"For one thing, we're not at all sure that Lola was mur—done away with. And when we do know more about it, you'll read it in the papers as soon as anyone. Now I've got a lot of work ahead of me, and I imagine you children had better get back to school."

As they moved towards the door there were a few backhand complaints. "Ah, baloney!" I heard one of them mutter, and somebody else said, "So that's wudda Cheese-a-Police is like. Ha-ha!" The giggling started then but in another minute the office was quiet and empty again.

There's a phone in the bottom drawer of the Chief's desk which connects directly with one the Mayor has. No chance of anyone listening in on a switchboard. Phil Jacksie answered at once.

"How's the weather over there?" I said.

"Dirty. Is Lester still in town?"

"Far as I know, Phil. You going to ride this out?"

"What else, Bob? We've gone too far to pull back now."

"When's the last time you spoke to him?"

"Oh couple of hours ago. He says to sit tight, go as slow as you can, and wait for a break."

"Thanks. Maybe this gets me a Purple Heart. Here's somebody coming in now. Call you back."

I replaced the phone as the detective in charge of the Harper case, Al Bishop, came in.

"Well, Bob, I've run everything down. Maid. Friends. Her agent. Her best girl friend who was her stand-in as well—"

"Murder?"

He gave me a disgusted look. "No. It was what you might call a Russian suicide. Of course it was murder, Bob. A damn neat job. She left her place around nine-

thirty, went out to a boat—a yacht I guess you'd call it—with a racket boy named Agnello. Danny Agnello. The boat was owned by a man named Benson, George Benson. You know—the guy with the Packard agency in town. From there on nobody agrees with nobody. It's all guesswork. How far do you want me to go?"

"Keep working, that's all. Keep working."

"What are you going to do with the stuff if I get it?"

We gave each other a long straight look. "All right, Al. That's the last wisecrack I want to hear for awhile."

"Then you better never hire women for cops in this town. They can't keep secrets."

I picked up the desk phone and asked Miss Willoughby if Maury Hawkins was still sitting in the outer office. He was. I told her to send him in in a minute or two.

"Al, I think it's a good idea if you tell all this to Maury Hawkins. The guy who works for the Courier. Except—no names. If he wants to track it down, that's up to him. No names."

"So that's the way it goes. Santa Claus is going to be good to you this year, huh?"

"Never mind. You'll get your cut. No names."

When Maury Hawkins came in, he and Al exchanged nods. Only Al gave him a funny kind of smile. He might have been thinking *Oh, baby! What a sleigh ride the public is going on this time!*

I asked Al if he'd mind repeating his findings to Maury. He told the newsman about what he'd told me, except that Al didn't know who owned the yacht, Al didn't know who'd been Lola's escort to her last party. Told that way, his information threw about as much light as a firefly winking at midnight in the Grand Canyon.

"That's all," I said to Al. "Keep plugging."

He went out.

"The other day, Maury, you asked me if we had any leads. This is all we have

so far. The works. That's all we have."

Maury shook his head, puzzled. "I don't get it, Bob. Nothing goes any place."

"The other day you were hitting everybody on the first pitch. What happened to the old confidence?"

"The boss told me to keep my eyes open, that's all."

"Bosses are always telling people like you something. And you jump right through the hoop. You're a big boy now, Hawkins. Think for yourself."

"Anyway, thanks for giving me this solo. An exclusive is something. Anyway, a new lead."

"Sure. It puts a whole new complexion on it," I said.

NOTHING much happened after that until four o'clock. Then Miss Willoughby came in to tell me my son Jim was outside. She added that he had a peach of a black eye.

It was a beaut of a shiner all right. But I didn't ask him about it right away. He'd tell me in his own good time. Usually Jimmy liked coming to see me at work. But today he seemed to be walking a tightrope, ill at ease.

"Dad, I wish I knew how to say this to you, but—"

"Suppose you just say it, son. It can't be anything very bad."

"Dad, you've always been my best friend and— Guess you noticed the black eye."

"Bet the other fellow doesn't look any better. Who was he by the way?"

"Jerry Tomlin."

"Mmm, what was it all about?" *Here it comes*, I thought.

"Well—" My son appeared to be hesitating, then he took the plunge. "Now Jerry said all this, remember. I didn't. He said you were laying down on the Harper case. That you didn't want to find out who killed her. That you were dogging it and—"

"You socked him. I would have myself."

He looked at me then, pretty much the way the kids who had been in earlier had looked. Puzzled and curious and all at sea. But where you can face a lot of people who look like that, a crowd of other people's children, this was my own son.

"Do you believe it?" I asked him.

"No, I don't believe it, Dad. No. But tell me. What *did* happen?"

For a moment there he never knew how close he was getting the truth. It would all be so simple if I could break down and simply tell him the truth. Then the moment passed when I remembered that Jacksie was in it, and Binyon, and Al Bishop. Besides myself and what Jim believed in, a lot of people would go down if I broke now. And besides it seemed more important to me to tell my son what was satisfactory to him, what he could take pride in and live by, than a bunch of cynical facts.

"Son, you believe in me, don't you?" He nodded. "And you think I'm a good cop, don't you?"

"The best."

"Then have a little patience. I know who killed Lola. I've known from the beginning but we'll never get him unless he feels he's perfectly safe. Sometimes you have to use strategy in these things."

His eyes grew big and shining. "I knew it, Dad. I knew it all along. That's practically what I told Tomlin. Boy, he'll be surprised all right."

"In a day or two, maybe three, I'll spring the trap and there you are."

He was smiling from ear to ear. "Sav, Dad, I'm sorry I had to ask you, you know. But—"

"I understand, Jim. See you at dinner."

Then he asked me not to do anything against Jerry Tomlin because it had been a fair fight all around. I told him I wouldn't and he went out. Satisfied.

I was washing up at my home when the telephone call came. Sally called me out of the bathroom, and I walked downstairs drying my hands on a towel.

"Yes?" It was Binyon.

"Only called to say, Bob, you're doing a nice job in there. Nice headwork. Now that the heat's dropped off some—"

"Has it? Not where I sit."

"It will. You bet your sweet life it will. First thing I want you to do tomorrow morning is take anything hot out of the files and burn it. You got that?"

"Brother, you can go to hell."

"What did you say?" He was too surprised to trust his own ears.

"I said you can go to hell. And don't call me at home anymore. I don't even want the sound of your voice in my house."

There was no reply but a quiet hum on the line. I hung up.

Sally had been fussing at something in the kitchen. Now she stuck her head out of the door and smiled at me. "Bob, is there anything you'd like to tell me?"

"Such as and for instance? Nope. Everything's peaches and creams. Except I think I'll take a short ride before dinner."

"Well, I can hold things back awhile. You won't be gone *too* long, will you?"

"Oh, maybe fifteen minutes."

I was way wrong about that. But I didn't know it then. I got into the Olds and drove back to my office. Not Bradley's office but the room off the cellblock that was mine. There was a typewriter there. I could lock the door and draw the shades and be my own man.

That's where I wrote this. All the way through I kept telling myself: "You're a cheat and a liar and a disgrace to your trade. Everybody knows what Binyon and Agnello are. But you wear an honorable uniform. You pose as a decent man. Agnello killed to save his own neck. With you as an accessory. But all you did it for was to keep your secret safe. To make people go on thinking you were quite a guy."

Then I would begin arguing with that, saying: "But, after my death, when they find this confession, what can anybody say

then? In the end I came clean. In the end I put down a truthful record, cleared innocent people, wrapped the whole thing up nice and neat. Maybe I was a lying heel for awhile. But this record sets me straight as a cop and a decent man."

I slugged all that out as fast as I could, then folded it across before I made ready to slip it inside a large Manila envelope. Across the face of the envelope I wrote: *Maury Hawkins, Los Angeles Courier, Urgent.*

Near where the stamps would ordinarily have been I printed: *Not to be opened or delivered until after my death. Bob Lyons.*

* * *

Maury Hawkins received that envelope two days later. He read it through with a kind of wry triumph, triumph because after all he had been right, but. . . . Then he went out and did some investigating of his own. He looked over the car wreck at the garage, talked to Jim Lyons and Bob's wife Sally before phoning his boss.

"I've got a wow of a Sunday feature for you, Jack."

"Well, shoot it in."

Maury went home, set up his typewriter, sharpened a couple of pencils, took all the cigarettes out of a couple of packs so they'd be easy to hand when he wanted one, and began working. It was seven P.M. when he started. By the time he had squared together the last of the typewritten sheets, the morning light was bright blue around the edge of the shades.

He sat there, tired, faintly happy, smoking one more cigarette as he read over the final paragraphs: "The accident happened five minutes later. Bob Lyons was driving towards home, on the cliff road, hearing the thunder of the ocean below, when the cross rods to his steering gear broke.

"That was no accident. There's no way to prove it, either way, but the facts are there

(Continued on page 111)

A man without a future, a kid without a chance—together they made their last grim stand against guns that spelled—

DEATH FOR TWO!

By
LARRY HOLDEN



Then, when he came to the corner of the shack, he saw how slim his chances were. . . .

R ESENTFULLY, Mitch watched the small blue-and-white speedboat come through the Pass from the Gulf and sweep erratically into the bay. He watched it for a moment, then pushed himself up from the cot on the porch and limped awkwardly into the house. He didn't want to

see anybody. As he went inside, his too-sensitive ear listened bitterly for the hollow thump of his right leg. The right was the artificial one.

It'll take a little while to get used to, the doctor had said cheerfully. But after awhile you'll never notice it.

Never notice it!

He stood inside the door and waited for the speedboat to go away. Others had come in before, expected to find something, but the bay was a dead end, a half mile of desolate mangrove shore. The only way in or out was the Pass.

Mitch scowled. The speedboat was coming closer. He lifted an inch of curtain back from the window and peered out. Sure enough, it was coming toward his rickety dock. But it was swooping crazily, first to the right and then to the left, as if the driver were drunk. It did not slow down. It kept coming and coming. Mitch swung open the door and yelled angrily, waving the boat away, but he was too late.

The speedboat smashed into the side of his dinghy, caromed off and crashed into the dock. The driver was thrown over the windshield. As the speedboat began to settle in the water from the hole in the bow, the driver, clutching a package to his breast, crawled to the dock, clambered to his feet and lurched up the path toward the shack.

Mitch stepped ominously out on the porch. His dinghy, crushed, had already filled with water and sunk. His fists tightened. He had come to this lonely point on the Florida shore to shut himself away from people, and his anger was doubled as he watched the lurching drunk. A young kid drunk, at that.

Then his eyes moved up the limply flapping left arm to the blossom of blood on the shoulder. The boy wasn't drunk; he was hurt.

MITCH clumped down the path with clumsy haste, catching the collapsing boy in his arms. He swore, but supported the boy up to the shade of the porch, where he laid him on the cot. The kid was not entirely unconscious, for he curled up on the cot, still clutching his package. He had lank sun-faded hair and a thin white face. Mitch ripped the shirt away from the shoulder and saw the bullet hole. The slug had

gone through the fleshy part of the armpit. Painful but not necessarily dangerous. The boy was suffering from shock more than anything else.

Mitch went into the shack and tore up a pillowcase for bandages. He picked up a bottle of whiskey from the kitchen on the way back to the porch. Last night the bottle had been full—now there was a bare quarter of it left. A nagging headache reminded Mitch where it had gone.

The boy's eyes were open and watched him mutely as he pulled a chair to the side of the cot and sat down. Mitch uncorked the whiskey.

"This is going to sting," he said shortly.

He splashed the wound and swabbed it, then bandaged it deftly. They had taught him first aid in the Marines. The boy moaned a little, but that was all.

"Could you use a drink?" Mitch asked.

The boy nodded whitely, and Mitch held the bottle to his lips. A little color came into the boy's cheeks. Mitch did not ask what had happened. He did not want to know. All he wanted was to be alone again. Alone with his damn tin leg.

"Well," he said finally. "I guess we got to figure a way to get you to a doctor. We can't call one, because I don't have a phone. You very neatly sank both boats, so that's out. The road's supposed to go out to the highway, but it's seven miles long and hasn't been used in ten years. It's probably a jungle of mangrove, sea grape and palmetto. So, if you have any ideas, let's hear them."

He didn't expect an answer. He was just thinking out loud. The boy's eyes were huge and dark and reminded Mitch uncomfortably of other eyes he had seen in another place, a very violent place, and the eyes had been filled with terror. Mitch looked away from them.

"We got to get you out of here," he said brusquely. "Aside from the fact that you need a doctor, I don't want company." His glance fell on the package the boy was

clutching. "What's in that, a light lunch?"

He reached for it. The boy clung to it for a moment, then surrendered it weakly. Mitch snapped the string and unrolled the paper. Inside was a baseball and a fielder's glove. Across the back of the glove was inked the name Bobby.

The boy's mouth worked painfully, and at length he managed to say, "Don't touch. Fingerprints."

Mitch said sharply, "Fingerprints?"

"Frankie Szabo's," the boy whispered.

Mitch's eyes narrowed. Szabo was supposed to be Miami's number one bad boy. He looked down at the baseball and glove. It was a small glove, a child's glove. What connection. . . .

He sucked in his breath when he remembered what he had heard over the radio yesterday afternoon. The drowned body of the kidnapped boy, Bobby Ferguson, had been found floating in Biscayne Bay. The name inked on the baseball glove was Bobby—and it added up to Bobby Ferguson.

"Where did you get these things?" Mitch demanded. Then more quietly, "What's your name?"

The boy said dully, "Lew."

"What's the story, Lew?"

Mitch had to pry it out, word by word. Not that Lew was unwilling to talk. He was apathetic. Szabo had kidnapped the Ferguson child, but while he was taking the boy out to a boat in Biscayne Bay, the child had leaped overboard. They dived for him, but when they found him, he was dead, Lew was not actually in on the kidnapping. He was Szabo's driver.

Szabo had given him Bobby's ball and glove and told him to get rid of them. Lew wanted out, but you just didn't walk out on Frankie Szabo. When he was handed the ball and glove with Szabo's fingerprints on them, Lew thought he saw the way out. He left, then called Szabo and told him he wanted to be left alone. The ball and glove were supposed to be his insurance. Szabo had followed him.

And all the while he was digging out this information, Mitch wondered dourly why he was asking these questions. He did not want to get mixed up in this. He did not intend to get mixed up in it. He put it down to morbid curiosity.

Mitch saw Lew's eyes flicker, then he heard the muffled roar, and he swiveled in his chair to see the big mahogany powerboat surge through the Pass into the bay.

Mitch said tersely, "Szabo?"

The boy closed his eyes, and he had his answer. He hurriedly rerolled the ball and glove in the brown paper and his eyes darted for a hiding place. He thrust it up on the rafter of the porch in the dark corner. The futility of this action did not strike him until he realized that Szabo was out to kill Lew. And now himself. Already, Szabo was in the shadow of the noose, and either Mitch or Lew could settle that noose around his neck. Szabo had to kill!

Mitch quickly slid his heavy arm under Lew's shoulders. "Come on, boy," he said urgently. "We got to get out of here."

Lew turned his face away.

Mitch started angrily, "Come on, kid. . ."

He stopped. Lew was clinging to the side of the cot. He wasn't going to run. He had reached the end. He was capable of neither flight nor defense. He was perfectly willing to lie there and be slaughtered when Szabo came up. He had passed through terror to apathy. He had given up.

Mitch swore and chopped at Lew's wrist with the side of his hand. The boy whimpered and released his grip. Mitch heaved him to his feet. He glanced over his shoulder. The powerboat was half way across the bay, coming slowly and searchingly. It would not be long before they'd spot the little blue-and-white speedboat sunk in the shallow water at the foot of the dock.

Mitch pulled the boy's good arm around his neck, grasped it in his right hand and, supporting Lew around the waist with his left arm, started up the marl road toward the highway, seven miles east. Lew stag-

gered and stumbled at his side—but he was moving his legs, he was walking. His eyes were closed again.

Mitch snapped despairingly, "Come on, show some guts!"

THE boy seemed beyond hearing. He lurched along, his chin bobbing against his breastbone at every step, his eyelids squeezed tightly together. Trying to shut out the world.

Mitch noted, with a kind of panic, that the road was becoming narrower, that the spidery roots of the mangrove had crept in from either side. Within a hundred yards, there was barely room for them to walk side by side, and Lew kept tripping over the high arched roots.

The throaty roar of the powerboat suddenly stopped, and Mitch involuntarily looked back over his shoulder. The bay was hidden from view by a turn in the road, but he knew why the motor had stopped. The boat had reached the dock, they had found the little blue-and-white speedboat. Listening tensely, Mitch could hear the voices back there. He hitched Lew's arm more tightly around his neck and quickened his pace. It would take Szabo a little time to search the shack and the immediate vicinity, and time was what Mitch needed desperately.

He muttered, "Come on, boy," and tried to go faster.

The road gradually narrowed to nothing but a solid wall of mangrove, ominously thick and too treacherous underfoot to try to bull through. God only knew how many miles of it there were, or how a man could keep direction once he was in it. Fifteen feet high it stood, thick-leaved and dark. But even had there been markers, Mitch could never have gotten through it, half-dragging the boy as he was. He was a long way from having perfect control of his artificial leg. He cursed the leg once, briefly, then cocked his ear and listened again for the voices. He could hear them faintly, and

he could tell they were still searching around the shack, for they were not coming closer.

He looked at the labyrinthine thicket of mangrove—and saw nothing but death there. Inside a half mile, they could be hopelessly lost with nothing to look forward to but death by starvation. If the snakes didn't get them first. Or the mosquitoes. The mosquitoes could do it in one night, agonizingly. Thank God the breeze was still coming in from the Gulf. It swept the mosquitoes inland.

The only way out was across the bay, through the Pass and five miles up the Gulf to the fishing village. But to get to the bay, they had to pass Szabo.

He turned and started back along the road, hauling Lew with him. He went back as far as he dared, then turned into the mangrove. Thank God it was sandy and not swampy, for he practically had to carry Lew—but soon even that became impractical, for the mangrove became thicker and thicker. It was all a man could do to get through by himself.

Mitch snarled, "Boy, I'm telling you, if you pulled a wingding like this in Korea, we'd have left you to the butchers. Come on now, snap out of it!"

Lew did not respond right away, but after awhile he said faintly, "You were in Korea?"

Mitch said bitterly, "I left a leg there. Can you walk by yourself for a change?"

He took his support away. The boy swayed and put a hand on Mitch's arm to steady himself.

Finally he whispered, "I'm all right now." Then, after a pause, "Thanks."

"Follow me," said Mitch. "Do exactly what I do, step where I step and try not to make any noise. If you see a snake, stand still. It won't touch you if you don't move. This is rattlesnake heaven in here."

Mitch walked slowly and cautiously at right angles to the road for about a hundred feet. It was hard, for they had to step

from root to root, clinging to branches to keep their balance. The roots were now too close to walk between them, but not so close that you couldn't slip between them and break an ankle. Mitch felt Lew's hand on his arm and the boy whispered, "Snake."

Mitch stopped. His eyes followed Lew's pointing finger and, in one of the few open sandy spots about twelve feet to the right, he saw the familiar diamond pattern of the snake. It was about six feet long and thicker around than his arm. It was watching them curiously, but it had not sprung into a striking coil.

Mitch whispered back, "He won't bother us, but keep your eyes open."

He angled away from the snake toward the house. He could hear the voices more plainly now, loud and angry, but with an undercurrent of fear in them.

Mitch had his eye on another open spot ahead, and when they reached it, he swiftly cut off several leafy branches with his fishing knife.

"Lie down and spread these over yourself," he whispered to Lew. "They won't spot you unless they step right on you. I want to wait and see what they do."

There was just about space for them to lie side by side. Mitch caught a glimpse through the trees of two figures trotting up the road, and he gripped Lew's arm for absolute silence. Only a hundred feet separated them from the road, and he could see the men quite plainly. They were thick-set and short, and their faces had an intent, feral look.

When he saw what they were carrying, he clenched his teeth. They were carrying rifles. That ruled out a quick dash for the powerboat. He'd take his chances against a hand gun, but with rifles they could stand on the porch of the shack and pot him half way across the bay.

He watched until the thickness of the intervening thicket hid them completely. Somewhere, a flock of birds began jabbering noisily.

LEW stirred at his side, and Mitch knew the shoulder wound was paining him. He pressed the boy's arm to reassure him.

"It's not so bad, kid," he whispered. "I've seen boys with worse than you've got take it without a whimper."

Lew gasped, "What . . . what . . . your branch in Korea?"

Mitch said shortly, "Marines."

"I . . . I tried to get in the Marines. They turned me down."

"You don't know how lucky you were."

The boy was silent for a moment, then he muttered, "That's no way to talk."

"No? You still got both legs, haven't you? What do you know about it?"

"All the same, the Marines are special. . . ."

What was so special about losing a leg, Mitch wondered bitterly. What was so wonderful about that? Major Keogh had tried to talk him into taking a job in basic training, a job nursemaiding green punks. But Mitch was finished. He wanted no part of any part of it.

Lew muttered, "I wanted to be a Marine first, but I'd have taken anything."

"Why didn't you?" Mitch said savagely.

"Leaky heart. I didn't know I had it, even. But I've keeled over a couple times, so I guess I got it all right." Then, slowly, "Do . . . do you think they'll go easy on me if I turn in that evidence against Frankie Szabo?"

Mitch whispered quickly, "Sure. They always do."

But Bobby Ferguson was dead. If they didn't hang Lew, what would they give him—twenty years? Life? With a bad heart, he'd never come out of jail alive.

But you couldn't say that to a kid. You couldn't rob him of hope.

Lew said nothing more. Mitch glanced at him and saw that the boy had covered his face with his hands. Mitch patted him lightly on the shoulder—then pressed hard for silence. The two men, carrying their rifles, were coming back slowly along the

road, looking from side to side into the mangrove. They did not show much eagerness to walk into that ominous thicket. Mitch held his breath until they passed and went around the bend. A few minutes later there was an angry roar from the shack.

"Stupid crumbs!" it bellowed furiously. "He's got a bullet in him. How far can he go? Find him. Maybe he's hid out at the end of the road. Find him, or it's the end of all of us!"

"Szabo," said Lew in a low, dull voice.

Mitch watched the two men return along the road. Their eyes darted more sharply, and Mitch pressed his face into the sand. All they needed was a glimpse, a suspicion, and they would empty their rifles into it. He counted up to a hundred, then cautiously raised his head an inch. He breathed again. They were past. They were going to the end of the road.

He heard a warning drone around his ears, and he felt as if a cold hand had squeezed his heart. Mosquitoes. The wind had shifted to the south and very shortly the mosquitoes would be swarming by the millions. In an hour they'd be a torment, in two hours an agony.

He put his lips close to the boy's ear and whispered, "Szabo's the only one at the shack. I'm going to see what I can do. If I can get him, I can take care of those other two monkeys. You just lay low and don't move."

"You'll never get him," said Lew hopelessly. "He'll kill you."

"Leave it to an old Marine, kid."

In an odd voice, Lew said. "I was almost a Marine once myself, if they'd. of had me. . . ."

MITCH went warily through the mangrove, staying a hundred feet in from the road. You couldn't creep through mangrove. Especially with a tin leg you couldn't creep. You either walked upright, clinging to the branches, or you didn't go through at all. He felt as conspicuous as a white

horse as he stepped shakily from root to root, and the sweat he licked from his lips tasted saltier than ordinary sweat.

His heart beat drunkenly in his chest. In the last ten feet before the shack, the roots seemed to reach up to trip him. He made those last ten feet in a rush, and when he reached the shack, his good leg was shaking so that he had to lean against the wall for support. Again he cursed his artificial leg.

He forced a kind of calm on himself and started around the shack, keeping close to the wall, ducking under the windows. He had no plan. He was hoping to find a chance, that was all. If there had been a gun in the house, it would have been easy, but there was no gun. He already carried the only real weapon, his fishing knife. They had taught him to use a knife, in the Marines.

Then, when he finally came to the corner of the shack, he saw how slim his chances were. A heavy-shouldered man, cradling a rifle in his arm, was standing on the dock, scanning the bay for movement. Szabo. When he finished scanning the bay, Szabo turned and stared into the mangrove. Now Mitch could see the ruthless, out-thrust chin, and too, he could see the greasy shine of fear on Szabo's blue-black jowls.

Mitch calculated the open space between him and Szabo—fifty feet of clear sandy path. But if Szabo came to the house . . . Szabo wasn't coming to the house. He was planted watchfully on the dock, his rifle ready across his arm. Behind him, the big powerboat rocked gently on the bay.

There was a chance, a bare chance, a minimum chance of creeping down the side of the path through the mangrove and sea grape and making that last fifteen feet across the dock with a rush. . . .

But Mitch did not have to be told how much of a rush a man with a tin leg could make, and this time he did not even curse the leg.

Then he thought of the fishing rods that

hung from hooks on the side of the shack. *There* was a chance. He could come walking out into the open, pretending he had been fishing. Then, when he got close enough to Szabo, he could. . . . But how close would Szabo let him get? There was an alert mind behind that heavy, crafty face. But it was a chance. Nobody ever won a battle by *wishing* the enemy out of existence. The chance had to be taken.

He slipped around to the side of the house where the rods were hanging. He took the one that was rigged with a nylon dude, for that was the most plausible. His hands shook, but that was a familiar feeling. His hands always shook before combat. And the accelerated thudding of his heart was familiar, too.

BUT he had not gone ten paces when a shout rang out from the mangrove, and he froze. It was a moment before he realized it was Lew who was shouting.

"Frankie, hey Frankie, you rat! Come and get me if you think you're big enough. Come on, Frankie, I'm right here!"

Szabo's head jerked up and his reflexes were so fast that he was already running before Mitch recovered from his shocked disbelief. Lew had gone mad! Szabo sprinted up the road, thirty feet to the left of where Mitch was standing, and Mitch could do nothing to stop him. He was close enough to see the eager glitter in the man's eyes, but not close enough for anything else.

Knowing the inevitable end—for the men had rifles—but refusing to think about it, Mitch limped heavily across the porch and took down the parcel containing Bobby Ferguson's baseball and glove. For a moment, he stood there with it in his hands, feeling a terrible impotence. He prayed for a miracle.

Lew's shout rose again—and this time the crack of the rifle cut it off sharply. There was a shudder of silence, then Szabo screamed:

"You fool, you killed him! Quick, he

might not be dead yet. We gotta find where he stashed that stuff. . . ."

Mitch went crazy for a moment. He picked up the chair and smashed it against the porch post. Armed only with a chair leg, he started heavily up the road. It was not until his tin leg kicked out just a little too far and he fell jarringly that he realized what a foolish, vainglorious gesture he was making.

Lew would not appreciate that. It would be a literal spurning of the sacrifice Lew had made.

Mitch picked himself up and walked slowly down to the dock and stepped into the powerboat. The keys still dangled from the ignition lock. He cast off the painter and pressed the starter button. The engine roared. He swung the nose of the boat, pointed it at the Pass and gave it full throttle. Half way across the bay, he looked back and saw Szabo come running out of the mangrove. The man threw his rifle to his shoulder and got off a shot.

There were more shots,—but the powerful boat was doing forty-five. He was through the Pass and into the Gulf before Szabo had fired five shots. Now it was only five miles up the coast to the fishing village, and from there he could call the State Police or the Coast Guard. Szabo had no way of escaping from that shack, with the mosquitoes as jailers.

When Mitch stepped ashore at the fishing village, he felt as if he had come back from a long detour. Lew had sacrificed himself that he might live. Deliberately. There was no doubt. He had felt shamed, but that was gone now. He was whole again.

After he had called the police, he would call Major Keogh at Quantico and go down on his knees if necessary to get that job in basic training.

What was it Lew had said? "Marines are special. . . ."

Well, dammit, maybe they were! Special enough for a guy named Lew, too! ♦ ♦ ♦

THE COPS GOT FIVE

—But the con who got away accomplished one of the most remarkable criminal feats of all time!

By **FREEMAN H. HUBBARD**

IN THE grim, exciting annals of American jailbreaks, Frank Gregware has a minor distinction: no other convict is known to have made a successful getaway by riding an engine cab through the prison gates.

The big fellow with dark hair and bushy eyebrows was convicted in Federal court of taking part in a mail train stickup on the Union Pacific near Omaha in November, 1909. For this he drew a life sentence to the Leavenworth pen and because he was handy with tools he worked in the carpenter shop there.

The shop had windows facing a U. P. spur line. Every morning at eight, except Sunday, he watched the western gates swing open for a switching engine to back in, sometimes with carloads of coal and other supplies, often merely to distribute cars and take out the empties.

Gregware studied the movements of the dinky. One cold January morning in 1910 he edged over to his cellmate, Art Hewitt, who also was assigned to the carpenter shop, and said in a low voice:

"Y'see that engine? Why can't we run over to her some day an' ride outside?"

"Don't be funny!" croaked Hewitt. "We ain't got guns. S'posin' the engine crew won't listen to reason? We'd be stuck like June bugs on flypaper."

Gregware grinned. "Not the way I look at it." And he outlined a neat little plot he'd concocted.

Hewitt smiled too. "Now you're talkin' smart, Frankie boy."

When the time came for exercise in the

prison yard, they let four other cons in on the scheme. They were Tom Keating, former engineer on the Lake Shore & Michigan Southern line who had turned bandit; John Gideon, involved in the hold-up of a Northern Pacific express in Idaho in 1905; Ted Murdock, forger, and Bob Clark, train robber. All four worked in the tailor shop near the western gate.

It took Gregware and Hewitt months of patient effort to complete the details of their secret plan, because they could operate only while the guards' backs were turned. The job was slow and tedious, with frequent interruptions. Finally on Thursday, April 21, 1910, everything was ready for the getaway.

At eight A.M. the engine whistle wailed and the penitentiary gates yawned. Six men in bluish-gray dungarees dashed out, two from the carpenter shop, four from the tailor shop, and reached the dinky in a few seconds.

Guards on duty in the prison yard were not permitted to carry guns, lest the convicts overpower them and take their weapons. So Reed and Burnett, stationed near the western gate, were unprepared for the rush of desperadoes who flourished long-barreled pistols obtained from some mysterious source.

Reed, threatened with instant death, was forced to climb on board the engine.

"Get goin'!" Gregware ordered the engineer, Charles Curtain.

The startled hogger yanked his throttle open to the last notch. His engine, with no cars attached, lunged forward. Meanwhile,

the other guard whacked Keating on the head with a club. But the con, with blood trickling down his low forehead, was only temporarily stunned. He raced after his confederates and climbed aboard the engine just as she was getting under way.

BY THAT time the prison alarm had begun sounding. A hail of bullets flattened themselves against the locomotive boiler and the tender, but ricocheted off. The gates started to swing shut. The hogger, seeing the track ahead of him suddenly blocked by closing gates, shut off steam and reached for his emergency brake.

It looked as if the bold venture were doomed to fail; but in a flash Keating, the ex-engineer, saw what was about to happen and laid a heavy paw on the throttle, jerking it wide open again.

Like a battering ram, the switching engine sped on. She smashed through the half-closed wooden gates, splintering the timbers right and left, clung to the rails, and was soon on the open prairie, speeding over the U. P. main line in the direction of Lawrence.

Back in the distance, the prison alarm grew fainter. After rocking and swaying at top speed for about six miles, they reached a thick patch of woodland.

"Stop here!" said Gregware.

The hogger eased back his throttle and clamped on the brakes.

"Now kill the engine!"

Millard reluctantly opened the grate and dumped a glowing mass of coal onto the Kansas prairie.

"You two," Gregware barked, jabbing his weapon toward Curtain and Millard, "take off your clothes, everything you got, underwear an' all!"

The crew men obeyed. Gregware and Hewitt shed their prison suits and donned the civilian garb. After that the six criminals scattered. Murdock, Hewitt, Keating, Clark and Gideon were recaptured. A boy of ten spied the forger hiding in a haystack,

waiting for darkness, and summoned a posse of farmers. But Murdock did not give up until armed prison guards arrived.

"Throw your gun over here," a guard ordered, "and walk out with your hands up!"

Murdock said with a smirk, "The joke's on you."

His "gun" was a dummy, carved out of wood. All the fugitives had similar weapons. Gregware and his cellmate had fashioned them at odd moments in the carpenter shop.

"I'd feel a helluva lot safer with a real forty-four," Gregware had said, "but these little beauties will do the trick."

They did, too. Gregware himself slipped out of sight.

TWENTY-FOUR years later, in March, a man who gave his name as Lawrence Fahey was arrested in Edmonton, Alta., Canada, for a minor traffic violation. In accordance with routine procedure, he was fingerprinted. Canadian Mounties were amazed to learn that his prints were identical with those of the American jailbreaker, Frank Gregware, which they had on file.

Gregware was happily married and engaged in a legitimate business at Edmonton. When the U. S. Department of Justice took steps to extradite him, the former train robber had so won the respect of his fellow citizens in Edmonton that they rallied to his defense, flooding American officials with petitions on his behalf.

Then a rare thing happened. The law was discovered to have a heart. Attorney General Homer Cummings, at Washington, had an investigation made, found out that Gregware's record since escaping from Leavenworth was excellent, and called off the extradition proceedings.

Said he, "We don't think it would serve any useful purpose to put Mr. Gregware back in Leavenworth."

The ex-bandit agreed. ♦ ♦ ♦

By
TIAH DEVITT



Standing there, as if braced to face a firing squad, was a girl. . . .

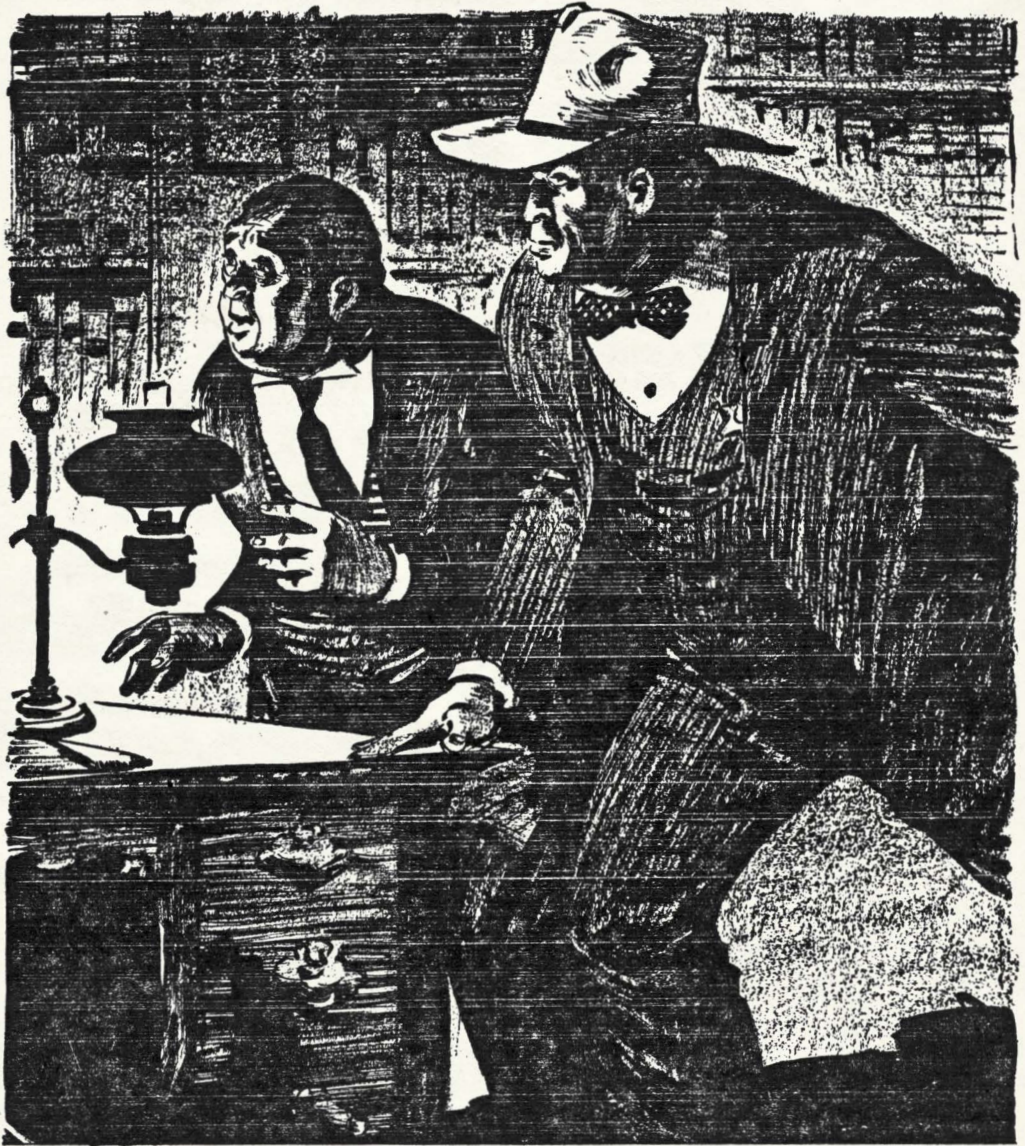
BILL KANE parked his stripped-down, geared-up streak of lightning in the grove at the foot of the estate and proceeded up the dark winding drive on foot. He wasn't sure of his way and the raw stinging sleet didn't add to the visibility, but he knew that somewhere above him was "Hangman" Hackett's tomb-like monstrosity of a house. And in the house would be the old man. That was one thing in Bill's favor. The old man was bound to be at home. He hadn't been off

the grounds in four years—not since he'd had his gall bladder removed.

Bill remembered the cracks about that operation and chuckled. "Take out the old man's gall bladder? Hell, there won't be nothing left of him!"

"Hangman" Hackett wasn't really a hangman. He owed the nickname to an enterprising Hollywood agent who, after a long and frenzied search for a countenance that would chill and repel cinema-goers the world over, saw Hackett. In

Hangman Hackett had spent his entire existence destroying other people's lives. Now he was dead, and everyone was afraid he'd manage to destroy one more person—his own murderer!



THE HANGMAN'S LAST SUPPER

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ecstasy he rushed up to that formidable gentleman and cried: "Mr. Hackett, you got to do it, you owe it to the public. You got to play the hangman!" And the wealthy Hackett had refused—most ungraciously, at that.

Bill turned up his coat collar and climbed higher. Hangman Hackett wouldn't be alone in the house. There was his sister, a pale wraith of a woman who always reminded Bill of a widow's veil moving gently above the mound of a new grave. And there was Anne. Anne who used to look like a pastel portrait of a pretty girl done by a very bad artist. But she was different now. Bill's pulse quickened thinking about her. She was alive, there was laughter in her eyes, light in her hair, a lilt to her voice. Why, for Anne, a man could face anything—even Hangman Hackett.

Bill stopped. Crouched on the cliffs at the edge of the sea, the waves furiously pounding on the rocks below, was the house, dark, grim, silent.

Bill turned down his coat collar, mopped his damp face, squared his shoulder, and marched across the terrace. He went up the stone stairs into the shadows of the vast, cave-like veranda. He found the heavy, iron-banded door, the great, unused knocker.

"Baby," he said softly, "here I come," and pulled the knocker with thundering echo. The silence fell again. Bill hitched his shoulders and knocked, louder, imperiously. He wanted Anne to hear—he never wanted her to know how weak this whole proceeding actually made him feel.

He didn't hear a sound from the other side, but slowly the great door opened wide, and a squat, soft, fat figure with a white pudding face appeared.

"What do you mean, arousing the household this hour of the night?" the pudding-face said.

"I want to see old man—I mean, Mr. Cyrus Hackett," Bill said.

"Mr. Hackett is not at home," the butler

said; his voice had the metallic tone of a bad victrola record.

"Don't be silly," Bill said, putting a large foot in the door. "Mr. Hackett is always home. I'm Bill Kane, and I want to see him immediately on most important private business—or do you want a sock in the jaw?"

The butler stepped back quickly. "Mr. Hackett is not at home," he repeated, with much less conviction.

"No?" Bill said, and ran a strong thumb into the butler's midriff with such velocity that the man doubled up with a startled grunt.

"Show me the way," Bill said, and pushed past.

Maybe, he reflected, this wasn't the way Anne wanted him to do it, but he had to get in, didn't he? He couldn't stand out on the terrace and yell: "Hey, I want to marry your niece!"

The butler recovered and started down the hall. Bill followed. Suddenly a door at the right of a great stairway flung open and a tall man, cruelly caricatured by the light behind him, appeared.

"What the meaning of this infernal din?" The words came like the hiss of a rattler.

It's the old man, Bill told himself. *He looks like the top head on a totempole.*

"This person forced his way in, sir," the butler whined. "Shall I call the police, sir?"

"Nuts," Bill said. "Mr. Hackett, I'm Bill Kane. I want to talk to you about—well, I'm going to marry your niece, and she—well, she'd be happier if you gave your consent."

THE figure in the doorway seemed to grow taller, taller and leaner and more malevolent. Like a worm-eaten image of Satan, Bill thought, carved from rotting wood.

"Leave my house!" the old man said. His voice whistled between his teeth like a dying wind.

"No," Bill said coolly. "Come inside and we'll talk, Mr. Hackett. You've a right to know who I am and what my prospects are."

Deliberately, Bill stalked into the study.

Hackett stood staring at him, then with a most amicable glance in the butler's direction, he stepped inside and closed the door. Without a word he walked to his desk and sat down. He studied Bill, long and unblinkingly through narrow, lashless, sunken eyes—and the devil in his own soul must have mocked him. *This is what all your money and power can't buy, Hackett: Youth! Youth!*

Bill was undaunted by his host's silence.

"I guess this is a surprise to you," he said. "I know the first thing you're going to say—that I can't afford to marry your niece. Now, I want to put you right on that point. This isn't a case where you just put another plate on the table, Mr. Hackett." Bill grinned, disarmingly, but old man Hackett was not charmed.

"I've got a swell job," Bill said. "I'm an engineer. I design airplane motors. I'm with Eaglecraft, the best company in the world! I'm making a hundred and fifty a week now, and—"

"I am not interested in you or your affairs," Hackett said. "Get out!"

The color rushed into Bill's face, he swallowed and took a determined step forward. It was never easy to keep his temper.

"Listen," he said indignantly, "do you think I like standing here discussing my personal affairs with a perfect stranger? Well, I don't! I'm only doing this for Anne. And since I have the decency to come up and talk to you, I think you ought to have the decency to listen. It's her future I'm talking about—aren't you interested in that?"

"Where did you meet my niece?" old man Hackett said.

"I didn't," Bill said. "First I saw the car. Say, Mr. Hackett, that new sixteen cylinder job of yours is a honey! I was

panting to get under the hood, but that monkey-faced chauffeur of yours—oh, well—I was looking at the car when Anne came out of a shop. I was struck dumb."

"Her beauty, I presume," Hackett said. His scathing sarcasm was lost on Bill.

"No," Bill said, "her dead pan. How could a girl have a car like that and look as bored as she did? Why, I knew if I was to explain that job to her—show her it was finer than a thoroughbred horse—"

"You accosted my niece on a public thoroughfare, I take it. Fine, gentlemanly thing to do!" Hackett said.

"I didn't accost her," Bill said. "I knew who she was."

HE DIDN'T add that everybody in the village knew who she was. That everybody on the Pacific Coast had heard of Hangman Hackett's niece. Some said the girl wasn't very bright, that's why he had her watched day and night. But most people said it was just his cussedness. They said she had never had a playmate, never had a toy. That she never ran and she never laughed. On the rare occasions when she left the estate she was always accompanied by her aunt and two bodyguards. She looked neither to the left nor the right on these drives, just sat staring ahead, a pale zombie-like child.

"But I did get curious about her," Bill said. "I wanted to talk to her about that car. It took me weeks to smoke her out."

"To what?" Hackett said.

"To get her to come out of the house and then to get her to watch and signal back, when I signaled to her from the plane."

"Plane?" Hackett said. "Do I understand you presumed to fly over my property in an airplane?"

"Upside down," Bill said.

"Upside down?" Hackett said.

"Yeah, that's a sure way of getting attention, and then I just bailed out, came down in your formal garden. I'll never for-

get how anxious she looked, running to help me."

Hackett's gray face went through slow, torturous changes: astonishment, incredulity, outrage. "Why wasn't I told of this!" he said; and he thought: *Emily—Emily knew of this, scheming behind my back—she'll pay, she'll pay!*

"I guess they thought you wouldn't like it," Bill said.

"My disapproval didn't influence you, I take it, Mr.—"

"Kane," Bill said. "No. Not after I talked to Anne. Why, it was just like talking to an angel, or a girl from Mars. Never seen a movie, never had a hot dog— Boy, will she have fun when we're married!"

Cyrus Hackett pushed back his chair and got to his feet, the lean cords in his neck twitched like springing hemp, his sunken eyes were hot with fury.

"You! You!" he said. "You'll never marry my niece—get out of here—get out, I tell you!"

Bill sat perfectly still. "I will marry her," he said quietly, "and I'll take care of her. I'm not afraid of you, and she won't be either, after I take her away. I came here to give you the chance to do the decent thing, the thing that would make her happy. She loves me and there's no reason why you shouldn't give your consent to the marriage. I'll give you time to check me, and my family and my job and my future."

"Your future!" the old man sneered.

"My future," Bill said, "and it's a big one. I'm good, Mr. Hackett, and I know it. I'm going to the top and Anne's going with me!"

"You're going to the top!" Hackett said and laughed. He leaned over the desk. "You won't get to the top. If you ever attempt to see my niece again, you won't have a job. You won't be able to get a job! I'll see that you're blackballed all over this nation! I'll see you a penniless bum in the gutter. I'll break you as I've broken

hundreds of men before you! And as to your 'angel,' your 'girl from Mars'—I'll tell you this: She's the daughter of a jail-bird, spawn of a common criminal, born in a charity ward! Now get out and stay out!"

For an instant Bill stared unbelieving into the old man's contorted face, then the blood rushed to his head. He jumped up with a violence that sent his chair crashing backward.

"Why you cadaverous old skull!" he shouted. "You speak of Anne like that and I'll strangle you." He reached across the desk and caught the old man by the throat—"And you won't break me! You won't live to break me!"

CHAPTER TWO

Bill Kane Did It!

HENRY WALSH, sheriff of Cliff county, sat at the breakfast table playing rummy with his wife. Nothing, Henry said, gave a man a sense of ease like sitting playing rummy while his whole day's work waited to be done. Henry had a rare genius for taking things easy. He looked and moved like a sleepy hippopotamus.

"Folks in this county like the law to take things easy," Henry said. "No use running around arresting people for a lot of petty little offenses—it's just a waste of the taxpayers' money. When real trouble comes along, Henry'll handle it." Folks seemed to feel that way. They re-elected Henry so regularly that only a crackpot would think of running against him.

Mrs. Walsh was about to draw a card when the telephone shrilled. Henry heaved his vast bulk out of his over-sized, reinforced chair, and answered.

"Yep, this is the sheriff—huh?"

"This is Bloomer, sir, Mr. Hackett's butler. Mr. Hackett has been murdered, sir! I just found him dead on the library floor."

"Well, keep your shirt on," Henry said.

"Don't touch anything, don't let anybody in—"

"Dr. Graham is in, sir," Bloomer said. "I called him immediately."

"All right," Henry said, "I'll be over, just take things easy."

Henry hung up the phone and turned to his wife. "Ha!" he said. "After all these years, somebody has finally murdered old man Hackett."

"Well, blessings on us!" the lady said. "It just goes to show, Henry, that the good Lord knows what he's about. He wasn't going to let that old scoundrel die unpunished."

"Now, Ma—" Henry said.

"Don't you 'now ma' me," Mrs. Walsh said. "Rosalind Hackett and I were girls together, and a prettier, livelier, finer girl never lived. He drove her out of the house with his petty, sneaking meanness, and he let her die in want, his own baby sister, his own flesh and blood. I hope he fries, Henry Walsh, I hope he sizzles!"

"If the Lord wanted to strike The Hangman down," Henry said, "He should have done it Himself. This way, Ma, is plumb against the law, in California."

Twenty minutes later, Henry, and his long, lean, earnest deputy, Kip Martin, drove into the Hackett estate. The agitated butler admitted them to the house.

"This is a dreadful thing, sir," he said.

Henry yawned. He didn't like people who got agitated.

"Don't take it too hard," he said drily.

"I betcha there's a nice legacy for you in the Hangman's will. You wouldn't have put up with him all these years just for a salary, Mr. Bloomer."

"Why," Bloomer said, "why—I had no idea. I—"

"Where is he?" Henry said.

The butler tiptoed down the hall to the library door.

"In there," he whispered.

Henry pushed open the door. Hangman Hackett lay lumped on the floor behind

his desk, eyes staring, mouth blue and drawn back from his long yellow teeth. One of his claw-like hands seemed to tear at his throat, the other was knotted in agony.

PONDEROUSLY, Henry knelt beside him. Carefully he moved the hand and stared at the black bruises on the scrawny withered neck.

"Was he—was he strangled, sir?" Bloomer quavered.

"Kip," Henry said to his deputy, "call up the coroner, and get Doc Graham, wherever he is. Then start scouting around."

"Dr. Graham is with Miss Emily," Bloomer said. "She—it's a horrible shock for her, sir, in her condition. Cancer, you know."

"Yeah," Henry said. His eyes traveled slowly from the body to the overturned chair on the opposite side of the desk.

"You didn't hear that chair go over, and take a peek to see what was going on?" he said to Bloomer.

"I heard it, sir," Bloomer said, "about ten last night, it was. Miss Anne heard it too, sir, I'm sure she did. She was waiting in the hall. Miss Emily may have heard it, that I can't say. She was in the pantry getting Mr. Hackett's bedtime meal. She always fixed the tray herself."

"If you heard it, why didn't you come in to see what the rumpus was about?" Henry said.

"Because," Bloomer said, "Mr. Hackett wouldn't have liked me to interfere. He had a visitor, a Mr. Bill Kane. He forced his way into the house, and quarreled with Mr. Hackett. I—" The butler lowered his voice, there were small beads of perspiration on his pasty brow. "I—heard him threaten Mr. Hackett! I heard him say—"

"That's a lie!"

Henry and Bloomer both jumped.

"Bloomer is lying!"

Henry pivoted and looked toward the

door. Standing there as if braced to face a firing squad, was a girl, a girl so exquisitely feminine she reminded Henry of a heroine in a Victorian novel. Her long pale hair was brushed softly back from a cameo face and done in a great knot at the back of her slender neck. Her eyes were blue, intensely blue with dark sweeping lashes. She wore no rouge and no lipstick; the whiteness of her skin was intensified by the whiteness of her anger.

"Miss Anne," Bloomer said. "I—"

"You talk too much," Henry said. "Can't you see the little lady is upset?" He smiled at the girl and got to his feet.

He walked to her, careful to keep his bulk between her and the thing on the floor.

"Now, Miss Anne," he said soothingly. "I'm the sheriff, and I have to do a little investigating, but don't you worry. Nobody is going to stampede me into rash thinking or acting. We're just going to take things easy."

The girl looked up at him quickly, gratefully, but Henry saw at the bottom of those blue eyes an expression of stark fear.

"Mr. Sheriff," she said, "that quarrel last night. That was my fault. All my fault—and Bill didn't threaten Uncle. He—he—" She stopped helplessly, searching for convincing words.

"Of course he didn't," Henry said. "And if he did, he had a reason."

"He did have a reason," Anne said eagerly. "We were going to be married. Oh, we could have run off but—I did so hope Uncle Cyrus would approve. I can't," she added simply, "see how any one could disapprove of Bill."

"I'll bet he's a fine feller," Henry said warmly. "Where does he work?"

"At Eaglecraft," Anne said. "He designs airplane motors and things. He's just wonderful. I doubt if they have any one else with his ability."

Henry grinned. "See here," he said, "why don't you telephone Bill and have

him come up here? He'll want to be with you at a time like this."

For an instant she hesitated. Then she said, "All right. I'll call him as soon as he gets to the plant." She started to go, and then turned back, her great eyes imploringly fixed on Henry's. That look haunted him for days.

WHEN she had gone Henry picked up the desk phone and got through to the village: "Hey, Pete," he said, "beat it over to Eaglecraft and get all the dope on Bill Kane. Put a tail on him too. If he comes up this way, let him come. If he starts to clear out, nab him." He hung up. Bloomer cleared his throat. "Sir," he said, "I *did* hear Mr. Kane threaten Mr. Hackett."

"Then why didn't you jump in and defend the old man?" Henry demanded.

"Because Miss Anne sent me away," Bloomer said stiffly. "She was lurking in the hall, unknown to her uncle, when the young man arrived. She waited to see him out. I saw them together on the terrace."

"And why," Henry said, "didn't you rush in and tell the old man his niece was going off with Kane?"

Bloomer's eyes shifted. "I—was protecting Miss Emily."

"Protecting Miss Emily?" Henry said.

"Quite," the butler said. "If Mr. Hackett had known she was—er—encouraging Miss Anne in her romance, he would have been—very angry at her. . . ."

"Oh," Henry said quietly. He took a step toward the butler. "How much has Miss Emily been paying you not to tell the old Hangman that a couple of kids had fallen in love?"

"I assure you—" Bloomer ruffled like an indignant hen.

"How much?" Henry thundered.

Bloomer made an effort to recover his dignity. "Miss Emily was always generous with the household staff," he said.

"Bribing the whole damn lot of you, so

the kid could have a little fun!" Henry said. "A fine household! Now then, did you see Hackett after you saw Kane and Anne leave?"

"No," Bloomer said. "I never entered the study unless Mr. Hackett rang. And he couldn't ring—because he was dead!"

Henry studied the butler a long moment. "You're giving that boy a lot of breaks, aren't you, Mr. Bloomer?" he said softly.

The butler said, "He murdered Mr. Hackett!"

"Who murdered Hackett?" Dr. Graham asked, cheerfully, coming into the library.

Henry shook hands with the doctor. He liked John Graham. He liked a great physician who went around in an old sweater and a pair of faded slacks.

"Sorry to have been so long," Graham said. "Miss Emily is taking this hard, I'm afraid, Henry. She's in no condition to be questioned."

"That's okay," Henry said. "There's no rush. Do you know when she saw her brother alive?"

"She heard the rumpus in the library," Graham said. "She was setting out the old skinflint's supper. It scared her to death, and she ran to her room. She knew the old man would have her scalp. She spent the night in fear and trembling, and then this morning learned he was murdered."

"She didn't see him, then, after the boy left?"

"No," Graham said. "He was the last person in the world she wanted to see. I'm afraid Anne didn't see him either. She told me she went out with Bill, and they sat in his car and talked. Then she slipped back into the house and upstairs. There was a light in her uncle's library as she crept past the door, but she did not go in."

"Mr. Bloomer," Henry said, "we won't keep you from your buttlng any longer. But don't try to leave the house."

"I have no intention of leaving the house," Bloomer said icily, and stalked out.

HENRY went over and carefully closed the door.

"Doc," he said, "are you putting on the death certificate, and testifying before the coroner's inquest, that Hackett was strangled?"

Graham lit a cigarette. "Obviously," he said, "he was strangled. Whether he was strangled to death, I wouldn't know without making a thorough examination. His heart may have given out. He might have died of shock following the—rumpus."

"How long would you say he's been dead?" Henry asked.

"Better ask the coroner," Graham said.

"That coroner," Henry said, "wouldn't know a brain tumor from a wisdom tooth. I'd like to have you make an examination, Doc. I think we need your help on this case."

Graham blew a smoke ring. "I'm awfully busy, Henry," he said. "Ethically, I can't very well interfere with the coroner."

Henry looked at him. "Quit stalling, John," he said. "What are you afraid you'll find?"

"Maybe," Graham said, "I'm just an old softy. Maybe I don't want to help hang young Bill Kane."

"Maybe," Henry said, and his big face was perfectly expressionless.

Graham stabbed out his cigarette and moved to the door. At the door he turned.

"Say, Henry," he said, "what ever became of Rosalind Hackett's husband? The girl's father?"

Henry shrugged. "I don't know," he said. "There were some mighty nasty stories—"

"Yes," Graham said. "They say that Hangman Hackett railroaded him to prison." He paused. "He'd be out by this time, wouldn't he?"

Graham went out and closed the door.

Henry was methodically examining the library windows when the coroner arrived. Dr. Percival Pomeroy was a chesty little man with the strut and crow of a bantam

rooster. He owed his position to a political alliance on his wife's side.

"I'll leave you," Henry said, "to make your usual thorough and brilliant examination."

"All right, Henry," Pomeroy said genially. "I'm always glad to cooperate with a man who, though not having the advantages of advanced education, appreciates the ability of men who have. We will cooperate with you to ensure the earliest apprehension and conviction."

"Yeah," Henry said.

HENRY found Kip, his deputy, in the dining room, earnestly making notations in a battered note book.

"Hank," Kip said looking up, "this is awful. Nobody around here ever looks at a clock. Now listen—Bill Kane arrives about a quarter of ten, so the butler says. I bet he started early, but with that fog last night, he'd have to creep."

"Probably," Henry said.

"Well, now, while he was talking to the Hangman, Anne and that butler were both in the hall. They both admit it! And the old lady was shuttlin' back and forth from here to the pantry. The old gent always had himself a supper, sittin' right here at the head of the table." Kip pounded the place before him.

"Fine," Henry said.

"But from here," Kip said, "we run into trouble. Nobody knows just when the row in the library started. The butler says it was 'about' ten. Anne doesn't know what time it was, but she told the butler to go to bed. Well, he didn't go to bed—that's what he says—he came out here and asked Miss Emily could he help her. She said for him to go up and ask the cook where the raisins were. He goes up and asks the cook—his wife—and there aren't any raisins, and he comes down and tells Miss Emily so. She says the old man will have to take the cereal without raisins. They set out his supper, and go up the front

stairs together. All is quiet in the library.

"When the butler gets to his rooms up on the third floor, his wife says it was ten-fifteen. They look out on the terrace and see Anne and Bill Kane. Now if Kane killed him, it musta bee between ten and ten fifteen. That's as close as we get."

"Bloomer and his wife the only servants?" Henry asked.

"Nope. There's a maid. It was her night out. She came in about eleven. She says she made some hot milk to take to Miss Emily; she's supposed to sort of look after her. She came in to get a spoon and saw old man Hackett's supper set out, but untouched. She took the milk to Miss Emily, who was in bed and, as she puts it, 'in a state.' Then she goes to bed."

"Any check on the time the maid got in?" Henry said.

"Yep," Kip said, "that Oriental chauffeur drove her. He says 'leven o'clock'."

"Nobody saw anything suspicious?" Henry said. "No strangers hanging around, except Kane?"

"Nope," Kip said.

"Well," Henry said, "get a couple of the boys and go through the grounds with a fine tooth comb. Look under the library windows, check every possible entrance. Somebody might have slipped in after ten-fifteen. I'm serious, Kip."

Henry went back down the hall and wasn't surprised to see the library door swing open and Pomeroy bounce out.

"Open and shut," the coroner beamed. "Hackett was strangled to death. I hear you already have a suspect. It's child play, Henry. We'll measure his hands against the marks on the throat. Undoubtedly, if we dig under his nails we'll find microscopic bits of flesh from the old man's neck. Your suspect is practically hanged, Henry, and you may rely upon me to handle the inquest in a rapid and satisfactory manner."

"How long has Hackett been dead?"

(Continued on page 102)

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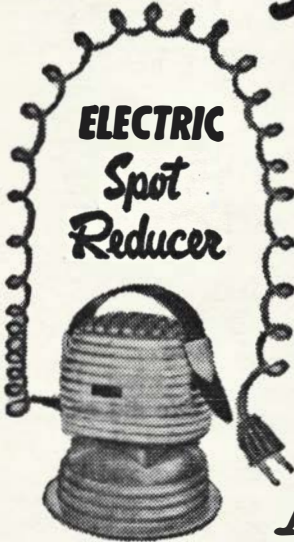
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DETECTIVE TALES

(Continued from page 100)

"Hard to tell," Pomeroy said, "to the minute. But near twelve hours, Henry."

Henry looked at his watch. It was half-past ten. As he looked up he saw Bill Kane and Anne standing in the hallway.

CHAPTER THREE

Midnight Snack

ANNE looked like a frozen statue, frozen except for the liquid terror in her eyes. Bill simply stood, young and powerful, his extraordinary hands at his side. Extraordinary, because they had the slim fingers of a draftsman, and the power of a mechanic. Bill's face was a dead gray.

"Your uncle was alive when I left, Anne," he said simply. "We did quarrel, I took him by the throat and shook him like a kitten, but he was alive and hissing curses at me when I left."

"I know he was alive!" she said.

"If he was alive when Mr. Kane left," Pomeroy purred, "all Mr. Kane has to do is prove it."

"I beg your pardon, Pomeroy," Henry said, "but in this county a man is innocent until he's proven guilty!"

Pomeroy whirled furiously. "The law enforcing agencies of this country," he said, "will have no difficulty proving guilt, in spite of the laziest, most inept, inefficient sheriff who ever held office! I warn you, Henry, I shall spare nothing to bring the killer of Cyrus Hackett to justice!"

With a righteous puff the little coroner departed.

Henry rubbed his chin thoughtfully. Then he turned to Bill.

"Son," he said at last, "Hackett was a frail old man. And a big guy like you has a lot of strength, more power than he realizes."

"I didn't kill him," Bill said huskily.

(Continued on page 104)



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DETECTIVE TALES

(Continued from page 102)

"You lost your temper," Henry said, "and you're a big guy. I'm a big guy myself, that's why I always take things easy."

"But, Sheriff," Bill said, "if I'd meant to strangle him I would have grabbed him by the windpipe. I just shook him, and my hand went half way around his neck."

"Well," Henry said, "we'll take your whole story later. Right now I want you to go along to the laboratory with Kip . . . Kip!" he called.

KIP loped into the hall, and Henry gave him his instructions.

"And Kane," Henry said, "I don't have to tell you, do I, that if you escaped now, any jury would believe that you deliberately killed Cyrus Hackett so you could marry Anne, and she'd inherit his money?"

"I'll stick to Kip like he was my mother," Bill said. He looked down at Anne. "Wait for me," he said, and her smile said she'd wait forever.

When they were gone she turned to Henry. "Mr. Sheriff," she said, "you forgot to arrest him! You believe he's innocent!"

"If I arrested him," Henry said, "he'd have a right to call in a lawyer. And the mouthpiece would tell him what to do and what to say, and to answer questions."

The light in Anne's eyes died. "Then—you're trying to trap him," she said.

"Little lady," Henry said, "if we can't find another suspect I want that boy to go before the inquest in the best possible light. I want the folks of this county to know that he voluntarily came up here, that he voluntarily went to the laboratory, voluntarily told his story. He's in a jam, honey, and he's got to shop for the smallest penalty."

The next hours Henry was absorbed in routine business. Although the night had been damp, no footprints were found under the library windows, no signs of any intru-

THE HANGMAN'S LAST SUPPER

der. Fingerprints in the library were Hackett's, Bloomer's, Bill's. The laboratory telephoned that a thorough check conclusively proved that the marks on Hackett's neck were made by Bill's hand.

Henry re-questioned Bloomer and learned nothing he didn't already know. He questioned the maid, Sarah, a level-headed, middle-aged woman, who'd been employed in the house for seven years.

"Did you hear Mr. Hackett in the library, Sarah," Henry asked, "after you returned at eleven?"

"No, sir," Sarah said. "But I wouldn't, I only came as far as the dining room."

"Didn't you think it funny he hadn't eaten his supper?" Henry said.

"No sir," Sarah said. "He didn't usually eat till around midnight."

"You didn't see anything wrong, feel anything wrong?" Henry persisted. "Didn't you think Miss Emily being upset, was unusual?"

"No, sir," Sarah said. Then her mouth hardened. "He was a devil," she said, "the way he treated that poor woman, and her so sick. She's anxious to die, Mr. Walsh, her life has been that bad. If it hadn't been for Miss Anne, I think she would have done away with herself."

"Sarah," Henry said, "I'm going to ask you something, and I want you to tell me the truth. Could Miss Emily have got out of bed and come downstairs without anybody knowing it, before you had come in, that is?"

Sarah thought. "She was too weak to take the stairs often," she said, "and I'm sure if she had, Cook would have heard her. Ears like a fox, she has—and eyes. She would have seen the light go on in Miss Emily's room if she didn't hear her. But the windows were open, and she'd be listening, knowing I was out. You know how it is when there's sickness. Cook would have kept a sharp watch."

"Get the cook," Henry said.

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DETECTIVE TALES

SARAH went out and came back shortly, followed by a placid, moon-faced matron, whose girth argued well for her cooking.

"Would you like a nice piece of pie, Mr. Walsh?" she greeted him.

"Thank you, Mrs. Bloomer," Henry said. "I'd like nothing more, but I want to ask you a few questions. You've been in the house a long time?"

"Twenty years," Mrs. Bloomer said.

"Now, you're well acquainted with the house, and Sarah says you have ears like a fox."

Mrs. Bloomer beamed.

"Well, last night," Henry said, "did you hear Miss Emily get up after she went to bed? Or come downstairs, after she said goodnight to Bloomer in front of her own door?"

"She didn't come down," Mrs. Bloomer said. "She never was outside her door again. I could hear her cryin' her heart out. I thought about going down, but she is such a lady, Mr. Walsh. It would chagrin her to have the servants see her takin' on. Always she tried to keep up a front. But we knew."

"You are positive, you would swear under oath, she never left her room?"

"I'd swear it on me mother's Bible!" Mrs. Bloomer said.

Henry sighed. Then, shrugging his shoulders, he went on. "Bloomer says you're the first person down in the morning. Now, this morning, did you see anything out of the ordinary? Notice any little thing?"

"No, sir," Mrs. Bloomer said.

"Well," Henry said, "weren't you surprised when Mr. Hackett hadn't eaten his supper, or does he often leave it untasted?"

"He did eat his supper," Mrs. Bloomer said, calmly.

"Henry stared at her. "What!" he said. He heaved himself out of his chair.

"I said," Mrs. Bloomer said placidly,

THE HANGMAN'S LAST SUPPER

"that he did eat his supper. I carried out the dishes this morning—you can ask the chauffeur. I pointed out to him while he was having his breakfast that Mr. Hackett had eaten his cereal even though there weren't no raisins. What's odd about it, sir?"

Henry collapsed in a chair. "Odd!" he said. "Odd! If Cyrus Hackett ate his supper after eleven o'clock last night he was *alive* when Bill Kane left the house at ten-fifteen!"

Henry jumped up and started pacing the floor. "Lord, let me think," he said. "Let me think!"

He was still pacing when Bloomer appeared.

"The coroner, sir, wishes to speak to you on the phone. He says it's important."

"Hello, Henry, my good fellow," Pomeroy purred. "I'm afraid I was a little hasty, this morning. The county attorney felt—well, he's young, you know, and he wanted verification on a number of points, so he suggested we have in Dr. Barnes to help with the post mortem. And, this will surprise you, Henry. . . ."

"Lord in Heaven!" Henry cried. "Of course, of course!"

A GREAT full moon was rising above the calm dark water, when Henry stepped out on the porch where Miss Emily lay, propped with pillows, in her great bed. Henry stood hat in hand, looking down at her frail figure. Rosalind had been the beauty, he remembered, the gay, high-spirited one. But personally—well, he'd always preferred quiet, sweet-faced Emily, with her calm delicacy.

Henry tiptoed to her bed. "Miss Emily," he said softly. "It's Henry Walsh."

"Henry Walsh," she whispered, and she held out a slim little hand.

Henry took the hand, so ridiculously small, in his own great paw.

"Pull up a chair, Henry," she said.



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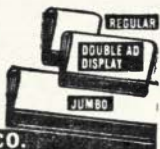
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DETECTIVE TALES

He pulled up a chair and sat down leaning toward her. She wore a long-sleeved nightgown, with a ruffle at the wrist, and it reminded him of something, something charming years ago, when girls were ladies and the better for it.

"Miss Emily," he said. "I've come to tell you, we've solved the case."

"I'm glad," she said.

"I know," he said. "You see, Miss Emily, it's a strange case—very strange, and I don't think our County Attorney can ever get a conviction."

"Why is it strange, Henry?" she asked.

"Well," he said, "you see, Cyrus Hackett was not strangled. He was poisoned, Miss Emily, by a twenty-five cent can of rat poison—this very can. . . ."

Henry held up a small rectangular case; its tin top glittered in the moonlight.

"Shame on you, Henry," Miss Emily said, "going through a lady's bureau drawers."

"I'm a detective," Henry said, "and there's one place a spinster lady always thinks a thing is safe—under her lingerie."

They both laughed.

"You see," Henry said, "when I found out Cyrus Hackett had eaten his supper, and then when I knew he'd been poisoned, it wasn't hard to figure. I'd been wondering why Doctor John Graham stalled. He wouldn't testify Cyrus had been strangled, and he refused to examine the body."

"John's a nice boy," Miss Emily said.

"The best," Henry said. "He was in a tough spot. He wanted to save Kane—and yet to save him he had to betray a confidence."

"No," Emily said, "I would have saved Bill Kane. He's a fine boy, Henry. They'll be happy."

"Sure," Henry said.

She raised herself and gripped his hand. "Henry," she said, "I had to do it! Cyrus would have done something so horrible—"

THE HANGMAN'S LAST SUPPER

so diabolically evil. You don't know what Cyrus could have done. He might have had Anne declared insane, had her locked up for the rest of her life!"

"But why would he, Miss Emily? Why has he kept her shut up all these years?"

"Money," Emily said bitterly. "Power and money! That is all Cyrus ever wanted, ever loved, ever cared about. The estate was left originally to the three of us—Cyrus, Rosalind, and me. Cyrus was executor and our guardian. Rosalind and I were both under age. He never meant to relinquish that guardianship. He meant to keep us prisoners and handle the money himself. But Rosalind had more courage than I. She ran away. She married. She was still under age. And Cyrus wouldn't give her a penny, and they were so young.

"They didn't know what to do, whom to turn to. He hounded them, Henry. Every job that boy got, he took from him. He crushed them at every step and every turn. He railroaded that boy to prison on a false charge, and gloated over it. He was showing what he could do to me, if I opposed him. He was happy when the boy died—And Rosalind died in misery and want, when Anne came. Died, Henry, from neglect. That was murder! I wasn't going to let him do to Anne what he had done to her mother. Foolish Anne, wanting to be married decently with her uncle's consent. Sending that boy up here to ask for her hand, when I had begged them to run away. Don't you see, Anne automatically inherits her mother's share of the estate. Cyrus would never stand for that."

SHE lay back. "When I heard the quarrel, I knew there wasn't a minute to lose. What he'd do, would be done like a flash. If he lived through the night, I probably would never have seen the child again—the only thing I've ever had to love, Henry—the only person in the world who loves me. I— I suppose I thought of it a

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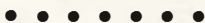
Operation of the battery, generator, starter, spark plugs, etc.

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THE CLUTCH

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DETECTIVE TALES

long time ago. I sent Bloomer on an errand and I mixed the poison with the cereal, in his milk—even his tea. I knew he'd be too upset, too deep in his scheme to even notice what he ate."

Henry shifted his chair. "Miss Emily," he said, "as I told you, this is a strange case. I don't think we'll ever get a conviction."

"I'll be dead," Miss Emily said quietly, "long before the case comes to a trial. . . ."

"But," Henry said, "I don't even think there'll be a trial, Miss Emily. This might just have been a practical joke."

"Joke?" she said.

"That's right," Henry said. "Have you read the printing on the can of poison—the very poison that was given to Cyrus Hackett? Listen, it says on the label in big, black letters:

"Kills Rats and Mice Only. Not a poison. Neol Company, Chicago."

"Not a poison," Henry repeated. "It's right here on the can! You might have given it to anybody as a practical joke. Over here on the sides it says: *'Can be used safely around the home, farm or barn. Will not kill chickens or domestic animals. A specific exterminator, kills only mice and rats!'*"

Henry put the can into the small hands.

"See, Miss Emily," he said, "a young County Attorney doesn't want to waste the taxpayers' money on a case like that. Why, any jury would know you don't know anything about biology. Probably you never studied it. This stuff, *not a poison*, kills rats and mice only—because rats and mice have no gall bladders. There's something in a gall bladder that offsets this stuff. You see," Henry added quietly, "it killed Cyrus Hackett—because he didn't have a gall bladder.

"Now I'll leave you to get some sleep. You want to get well and strong—it's been a long time, Miss Emily, since the Hackett place has seen a real nice wedding." ♦ ♦ ♦

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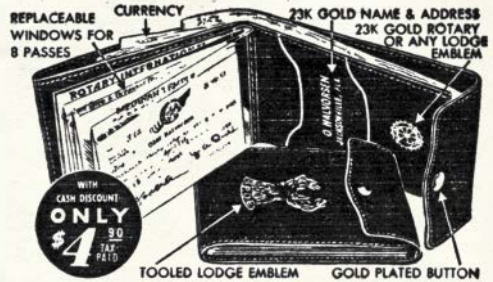
(Continued from page 82)

in Bob Lyons' testimony. It may sound like wild conjecture on my part. Probably, even Bob Lyons himself had no idea of what his unconscious mind was up to—until the moment those cross rods broke.

"Then, at once, he knew what he had done. In his sleep he had judged himself for being disloyal to his duty, condemned himself, and the only sad consolation he had now was that his wife and son were not in the car.

"He understood now why there had been grease on his hands the day Sally had found him walking in his sleep. He understood now the power of his conscience, that conscience which had filed the cross rods through to the near breaking point, and even as he wrestled with the wheel, he knew it was futile. By now his car was going about seventy miles an hour, and in the next ten feet, where he should have been bearing right, the car smashed instead through the pretty white fence like so much matchwood. The heavy car went falling through the air, end over end. When it landed, the door burst open and spilled him out, broken back and all, at the water's edge. He never felt the sharp edge of a bunch of keys in his pocket because by then he couldn't feel anything." ♦ ♦ ♦

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DETECTIVE TALES

(Continued from page 68)

She tried to stop shaking and crying and laughing. She clung to Steve, pressed her cheek against his. He winced.

"Oh, Steve, your face!" His cheek was swollen, his left eye puffed almost shut. "I'll get some ice—"

"Never mind. Just let me hold you." He looked down, scowling fiercely. "Why do I have to marry a girl with more courage than's good for her?"

"Me?" she squeaked. "Oh, Steve, I was so scared!"

"Yeah? Listen, you may not care what happens to you, but I do. For the rest of my life every time I think of what might have happened to you—" He shuddered.

Ella smiled but inside she felt shamed. She'd thought him a coward when all the time he was only proving how much he loved her. And when the time came he'd put on an act that fooled her as well as those two thugs. She wanted to tell him, the way he looked scowling at her, how utterly fearless he was, only she was afraid he'd feel kinda funny.

Lights flashed across the front windows. A car door opened, slammed shut. Steve moved over to the door as steps crossed the porch. He opened the door.

Ella breathed again as the lieutenant, followed by two detectives, walked in. They stopped, startled eyes sweeping over Frankie face-down on the chair, the fat man moving groggily on the floor.

"So they did come here!" said one of the detectives.

"Yeah, I had a feeling when they weren't at their place," said the lieutenant, "or in any of the bars that they'd come here." He pushed his hat back and stared at Steve. "The public-spirited citizen," he muttered.

Ella slipped her hand inside Steve's. She lifted her chin. "Will you please get those two thugs out of my nice clean living room?"



THE CRIME CLINIC

(Continued from page 8)

"The big idea is—" the beefy face now held a smile—"that, now that you're on the inside of the house, there's no mistaking that you've been caught red-handed.

"But you're making a big mistake—!" cried Frisco Joe.

"Hardly," said the cop drily. "I live here."

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The Editor

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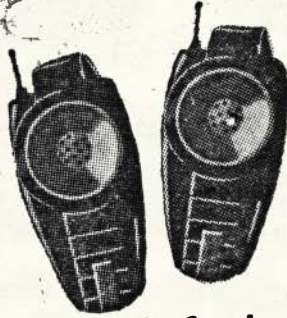
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