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MISTER MURDER GOES TO TOWN!

by **RICHARD WORMSER**
AND **DAN GORDON**

MULLALLY • MacDONALD AND OTHERS



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by **WM. CAMPBELL GAULT**

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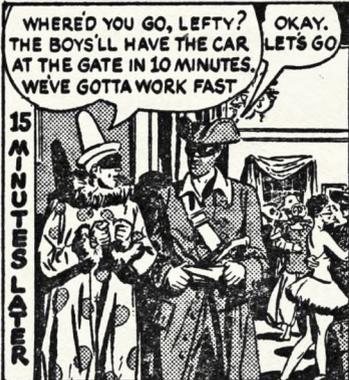
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VOL. FORTY-ONE

FEBRUARY, 1949

NUMBER THREE

Two Action-Packed Murder Novels

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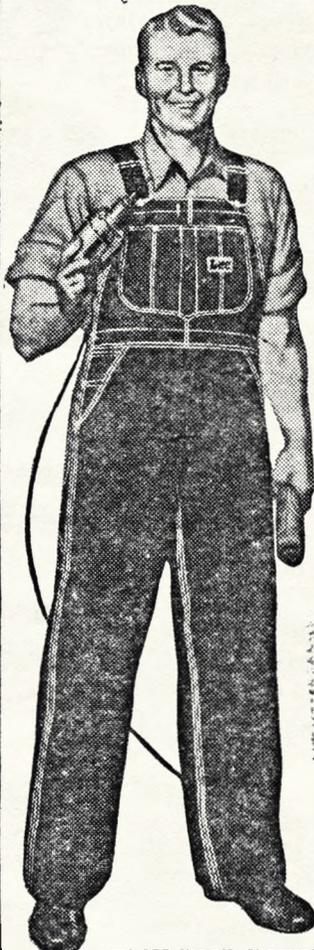
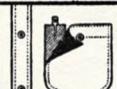
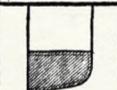
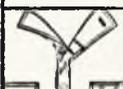
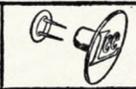
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YOU CAN'T GET AWAY WITH MURDER!



By NELSON and GEER

WEB OF JUSTICE

A flimsy spider's web saved the life of a Scottish king; another hanged a mayor of Charlottesville, Va. The mayor, Samuel McCue, escorted his wife Fanny home from church on the evening of Sept. 15, 1904. Ten minutes later, neighbors heard a scream. Shortly, Dr. Frank McCue, brother of the mayor, arrived running; then a policeman, revolver drawn. Inside, Samuel McCue sat on the bottom step of the stairs, holding his bruised and bleeding head in his hands. Above, in a tub of steaming water in the bathroom, lay the body of Fanny McCue, her breast torn by shotgun slugs, her skull crushed by a blunt instrument. "We were preparing for bed. Fanny'd run her bath," the mayor mumbled. "I heard her scream—looked up. In the mirror I saw the grease-smear'd face of a man in grimy overalls. He shot at Fanny. Then I went for him

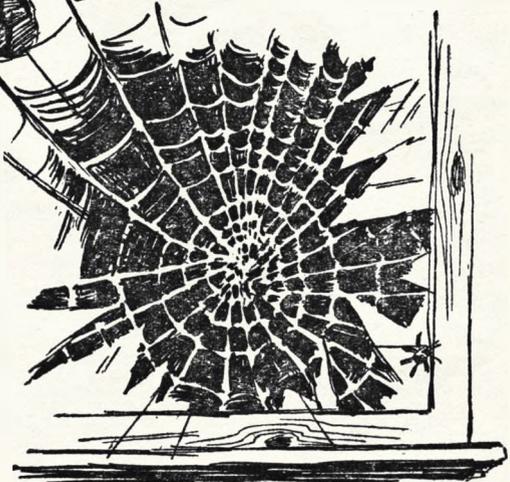


and he . . . hit me with something. When I regained consciousness I telephoned Frank."

A search revealed the mayor's shotgun and an exploded shell, both still warm; a bloody baseball bat; and a smashed window in a side bedroom. Since persons in a position to see front and rear of the house had not observed him leave, it was assumed he had leaped through that window and escaped. But who was he, and why? A \$2,000 reward was offered for the answers, but there seemed

to be none until Judge Edward McCue, another brother of the mayor, said that an hour before the crime he'd chased a man in overalls prowling near his home. He identified the man as a local house-painter he'd sentenced for drunkenness, who'd threatened to "get" both the McCues.

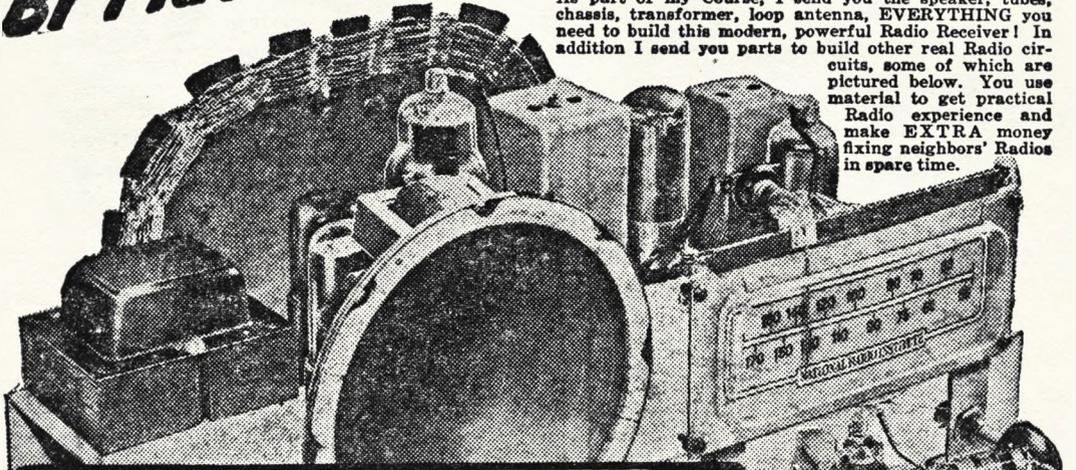
Meanwhile, lured by the reward, Albert and William G. Baldwin, renowned Richmond private detectives, arrived on the scene. They examined the exhibits, the bathroom and bedroom, came finally to the shattered window. There they found the evidence that clinched the case they'd been building up. It was a spider web stretched across the outer side of the window frame. It was an old web, and no one could possibly have leaped through without destroying it. This proved McCue had lied, and that the murder was an inside job. McCue was hanged.



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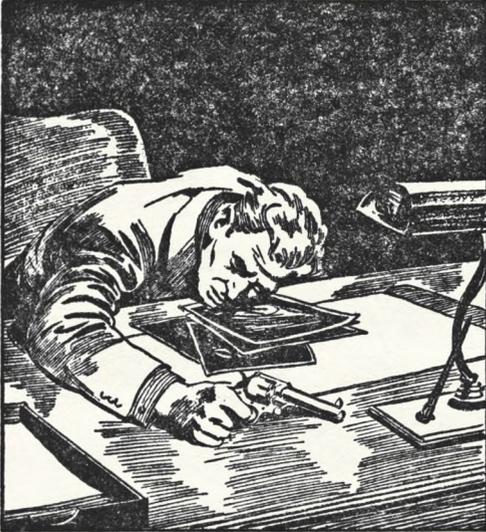
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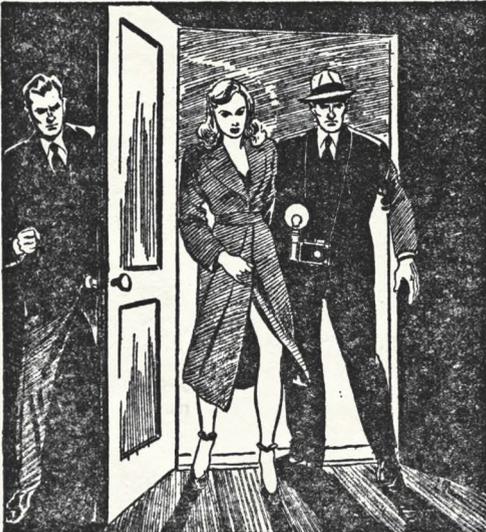
For Next Month



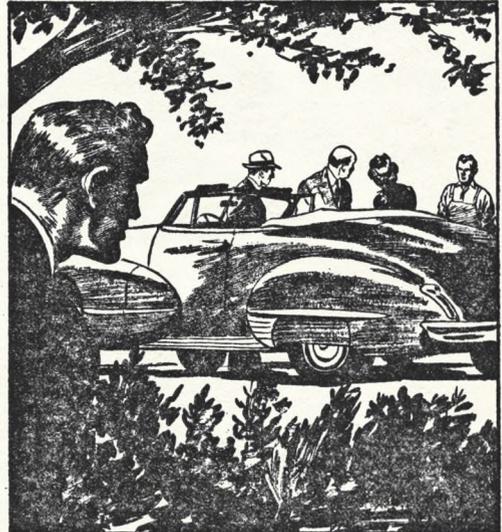
It was the death of his friend, Frank Manwaring, that put private eye Lyle Britt in the murder business. For when Manwaring died, a bullet through his skull, the blackmail photographs that had blighted his life came to light. . . .



To catch the blackmailers, Britt follows in the footsteps of his dead friend. He checks into the tourist camp where Manwaring had once stayed. And, like Manwaring, he is shown to his cabin by lovely—and deadly—Jane. . . .



That night, Britt pretends to let himself be drugged, goes into his cabin, turns out the lights . . . and waits. Soon Jane and the photographer member of the ring show up, all set to frame him.



Later, having eluded the gang, Britt hides out on the edge of an orchard, hears deadly motel owner Abel Gar say, "Okay, we'll have him soon. The big boss is bringing up the bloodhounds. . . ."

The conclusion of this story will be told in the dramatic novelette, "Kiss and Kill!" by Alan Ritner Anderson, featured in the March issue of **DETECTIVE TALES**.

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MISTER MURDER GOES TO TOWN!

Dynamic Novel of Bullet-Law Town

It was only a pile of shacks and hot sand, that town of Camel. But it was all Jeff White's—lock, stock, jailhouse, and a million-dollar silver mine. For the cops were in his vest pocket, the town's prize pin-up dish was his for the asking—and the only law of that fear-ridden place rode in Jeff White's shoulder holster!

CHAPTER ONE

Blood Boss for Camel

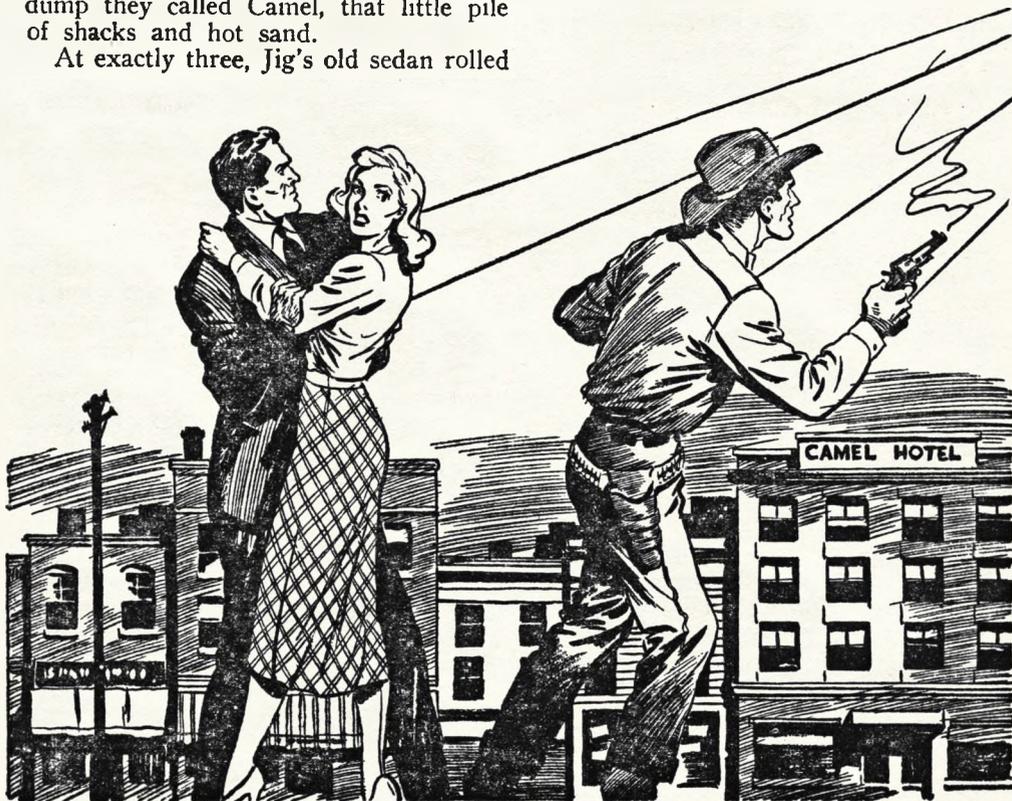
IT WAS going to work out all right. After hanging around bars and doing bouncing and picking up two bits here and a buck there, I was on my way. I knew I was, soon as I saw that little dump they called Camel, that little pile of shacks and hot sand.

At exactly three, Jig's old sedan rolled

up. He stopped in front of the hotel and I strolled over.

As the dust died down, I swore. Next to Jig was that fresh wife of his, Lana.

She said, "Hello, big shot. How's the



By **RICHARD
WORMSER**
and
DAN GORDON

"I'm the kind of guy likes
to pull the strings. Like
Napoleon, maybe. Yeah,
kind of like Napoleon."



mining expert coming along these days? Skinning 'em good?"

"What are you doing here?" I asked. "I didn't tell Jig to bring you."

"I came along," she said, "to see you didn't lead Jig into any trouble. Everything you've ever tried flopped, Jeff—being a cop, being a prize-fighter, being a race starter. When this one flops, I don't want it to fall on Jig."

Jig gave a queer, shame-faced grin and said, "She hadda come, Jeff. You know how she is."

"Well, let her stay," I said, climbing into the front seat with her and Jig.

I was glad to see her. Lana's the one dame I could ever talk to without trying to make love to or anything. And that's funny. She's as nice-looking a thing as you'd meet. Maybe it's because she's the one person in the world that's always been able to see through Jeff White.

WHILE Lana was getting their stuff unpacked, I lay down on the bed. Lana said, "Get a newspaper under your shoes, you bum. Where do you think you were brought up?"

"In the back room of a honkytonk," I said. "So were you."

She said, "Wise guy," but she began making three gin fizzes anyway. I watched her moving around the room.

"Lana," I said, "you shoulda gone into show business."

"Thanks for nothing, Jeff. If I'd ever made any money, I'd have had you in my hair all the time." She handed Jig his drink and said, "Go look out the window, Jig. The train comes through in a couple of minutes, and you can get a swell view of the engine from here."

"Okay," he beamed, happy that Lana and I were getting along for once.

His wife came and sat on the chair next to the bed. She watched Jig sitting on the window sill. She said, "What's the game, Jeff?"

"No game," I said. "I happened to hear that this Camel Mine had stopped producing silver as soon as this Stein crowd took over. So I went to see Stein and sold him on the idea that I would find out who was stealing his free silver. After all, I got a private dick's license."

"Yeah. You're a hell of a detective.

All you've ever used that license for is to cover you when you wanted to strong-arm someone."

"Stein didn't know that," I said. "And I had a couple of hundred bucks."

"You louse," she said gently. "After sponging meals off us for three months."

"It was capital, not income," I said. Outside, a train hooted, and Jig leaned out of the window ecstatically. "It got us this job, didn't it?"

She sipped her drink, looked at me over the edge of it. "How'd you use it?"

I pulled a couple of pieces of rock out of my pocket. "Here. I bought these from a guy I knew in Frisco."

She took them, turned them over. "What are they?"

"Almost pure silver," I said. "I took them to Stein, told him they were being fenced around the underworld." I took my rocks back, put them in my pocket.

"You're clever, Jeff," she said. "But it isn't good enough. Jig and I are pulling out tonight. We'll take the car for what you owe me for meals."

"Why?" I said. "This is legitimate."

"You've gotten Jig into enough trouble," she said. "He could get a good job in a garage if it wasn't for you. All the time coming around and making him quit work to follow you on one of your dirty swindles."

"We'll see what Jig has to say, Lana," I said. "You'll do what Jig says."

"Yeah," she said, "I suppose so. Isn't it bad enough that I had to fall in love with a dimwit, without he had a brother like you?"

"Jig's all right," I said.

"Sure. Jig's swell. At breakfast he tells me how a motorcycle works, at lunch he takes a backfire apart for me, and at dinner you show up. . . . What is it, hon?"

"It was a streamliner," Jig said, coming back from the window. "I dunno what they wanta make engines like that for, anyway. You can't see a thing."

"Drink your drink, Jig," Lana said.

I said, "Jig, there's a guy across the street that's going to kill me if he gets me. You want that?"

"Aw, Jeff, you know I don't. You always been good to me, Jeff, given me cars and—"

"All right, all right. Now, I'll talk to him, but I got an idea he's not the kind you can talk to. So—"

"I'll be right there, Jeff," Jig said.

I gave him the nod and went out. I felt—well, excited and scared, fine and terrified, all at one time. If I was ever going to be anything but a bum, taking punches for other guys, this was the break. I was going to take this town, make it my own. The sooner I established myself as really tough, the better.

I walked out of the hotel and toward the saloon.

I had seen him standing outside the saloon, and now he was walking away. His name was Ernie Collins, a big, fast, bowlegged man.

I shouted, "Hello, Collins. You're under arrest, boy."

"What?" He stopped dead. "What kind of a racket are you pulling now, you louse?"

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Jig, sidling around to cover him.

"Hard words won't help you, Collins," I said. "Mr. Stein sent me up here to pinch you. For lifting silver from the mine."

He hooked his thumbs in his belt and laughed. "Me? Me a highgrader? Why—"

My mind was working fine; I was never prouder of myself. And now that I saw my way, I wasn't so scared—oh, maybe a little, enough to make me want to lose the gin fizz. "Who's got a better chance? Who's ever alone in a mine but the blast man?" I asked.

I moved my hand up towards my shoulder so he'd think I was going for a gun. When I did, old Jig got his gun out; but Collins wasn't looking at Jig. He didn't even know about Jig.

Ernie Collins saw the move and went for his own gun. He cried, "You can't frame me, you—"

"Jig!" I yelled.

Two guns roared, but I had dropped to a knee. You take an emotional guy like Collins, and he'll shoot for the head. Every time. But I was mighty proud of myself for thinking of it.

Then it was all over. Ernie Collins was lying in the street, and Jig was looking dumb, holding his gun.

A clumsy old man with a big hat and a

star, came prancing out. I knelt quickly and slipped one of my hunks of rock into Ernie Collins' pocket, pretended to feel his pulse.

I stood up, "Sorry this had to happen, Sheriff. We're detectives, sent up to see who was highgrading the mine. We had a tip on Collins, and when I tried to question him, he pulled a gun. So my brother shot him."

The sheriff said, "Hand over your fire-arms, boys." I gave him mine; he sniffed it and handed it back. But he pocketed Jig's, and when he smelt that Collins' had been fired, he took it, too.

"I'll have to hold your brother," he said. "I can't hold you; you didn't do anything. But you're a material witness, and don't leave town."

"All right," I said. "I'll get a lawyer, Jig."

The sheriff bent, as I had done, to see if there was a possibility of a heartbeat in Ernie Collins.

He came up with my hunk of rock. "Silver ore," he said. "Huh."

"You see?" I told him.

"I'm going to hold your brother, anyway," he said. He led Jig down the street.

I headed for my rooming house. I didn't want to see Lana just then.

I WALKED into the Stover house, and there was the old lady sitting in the parlor with a big pitcher of lemonade all ready for me.

"Help yourself," she fluttered. She waited till I had a glass in my hand and was settled. "How do you like Camel?"

Her tone told me the answer. She would never be president of the Chamber of Commerce.

I sat there, yessing her. And planning. Like Napoleon must have planned before Austerlitz. And before Waterloo, too, only I didn't want to think about that.

But there should be a lawyer here by now. I had announced right in the middle of Main Street that I would get a lawyer to unwrap Jig, and the kind of lawyer I wanted was not the kind you went to see. He was the kind that came to see you.

But maybe because this was a company town, and a small one, there was no such a lawyer here.

But, I argued to myself—saying, “Yes, Mrs. Stover,” and “That’s right, ma’am,” out loud—but there ought to be. To hang around and pick up compensation cases and to chisel the miners out of dough to break wills—all that sort of thing should attract a shyster.

But—“Yes, ma’am, you’re right as rain”—where was he? Where was my little shyster?

Looking out the window, I saw Mrs. Stover’s daughter coming up the path with a big fellow in whipcords and field boots. She was pretty. That Marie was a honey.

They came in, got a flash of me and went to another room.

The old lady was saying something about that being Granger Janes. She said Janes’ cousins had owned the mine before Stein got it.

Boy, there was an item. There was enough so that Stein would let me stay up here till hell froze over. A disgruntled relative of the old owners—sure. That was where the silver had gone. He had been helping Ernie Collins sneak it out. It was so pat I could almost believe it myself.

Oh, if I could only get my little shyster, if he would only show up. The blood drummed in my head like a motor, and I hardly heard Mrs. Stover telling about how Marie had a date with Granger Janes and about how Marie was sick of Camel . . .

Well, Marie would have a little excitement later.

I left the old gal and started to go downtown. Maybe I’d better hunt up a mouthpiece myself. Except that, that way, I might make a mistake and get one with ethics. I decided to wait in my room.

The shyster showed up at six. His name was Forbes, and didn’t I want him to spring my brother?

“Sure,” I said. “Yeah, you spring Jig for me.”

He waited, holding out his hand a little. “By the way,” I said, “the new owners of the mine will want an attorney up here to look after their interests. You qualified to do that?”

“Why, Mr. White,” said this rat. “I was educated at—”

“Okay, Okay, spring Jig.” I had gotten his hand down. He was going to be a

big shot, you could see it in his eyes, and he was anxious to do me a little favor. “Wait, Forbes,” I said. “I’m making out my report to Mr. Stein. How about the local law?”

“Law? We operate here under the regular state laws of—”

“Oh, no. I mean cops, troopers, sheriffs and things.”

“Oh.” He sat down. “Well, the Janes family—that’s the mine—contributed to the sheriff’s campaign fund. So, after election, it was natural Flint Geers would be appointed deputy for this district. You might say that the Janes owned the law here.”

“I see.” I chewed a lip, gave it my best executive manner. “How about this Janes guy that’s still here?”

“Granger? Day super at the mine. He’s only a distant cousin of the old stockholder. A very expert mining man.”

“Yeah?” I walked around the room. “Yeah? He’s a crook, Mr. Forbes. A common thief!”

Forbes jumped back from me. “You have proof?” he asked. He was whispering. “Please be quiet. The Stover girl—Marie—goes with him.”

“She’s out,” I said. “She went out a while back. Listen. I want Janes pinched.”

I handed him my license and my letter from Stein.

“Hmm. A lawyer or a private detective is an officer of the law. We can talk Geers into arresting Granger if we insinuate that his political connections with the Janes family make him a suspect. . . . A very serious situation, Mr. White. We are doing a real service to law and order by having this matter aired.”

“Stop kidding, and let’s go. You work on Geers and we’ll all meet at the hotel lobby in fifteen minutes.”

“Yes, yes. Speed is the very essence of the law in these matters, Mr. White, to quote—”

“Get going.”

We started downstairs. The girl and Janes were gone from the front porch, but they had been talking loud. I had heard them say they were going downtown for a drink and then out of town for a movie. Yeah, speed was the juice, as my little shyster said.

BY THE TIME I saw the sheriff Mr. Forbes had apparently whipped him into line. The old man was talking in circles. "Always glad to cooperate with any other officers, Mr. White. Mr. Stein is entitled to investigate conditions in his property, though I can assure you he never once asked me to look into—"

"Yeah, yeah," I said. "Play ball with us and keep your nose out of that high-graded silver, and I'll see you don't go to the pen, Geers. If you're good, past offences won't count."

"Past—"

"We won't even mention campaign contributions and such," I said, grinning.

Over his shoulder I could see the Stover girl at the bar with her date. I said, "What road would you use to go to the movies?"

Pop Geers pointed. "The Borax road."

"Okay," I said. "Sheriff, you go to the edge of town. If Janes tries to leave town, pick him up."

Geers rubbed his big chin. "I hope you know what you're doing, Mr. White."

"About ten grand of free silver's been stolen," I said. "Where I come from, the law considers those things serious."

"Yes, but Granger Janes—"

"Is a cousin of the people that paid for your election. Yeah, I know."

He gulped and came into line. "I'll go."

When they were gone I walked across the street to the saloon.

The owner turned out to be a fat fellow named Marsh. His office was decorated with two old-style horse pistols and a couple of deer heads.

I said, "Marsh, I'm a special officer up here investigating the highgrading at the mine."

His face didn't move much.

"Ernie Collins has already been killed coming out of your place," I said. "Naturally you want to clear yourself."

"Why?"

"I wouldn't get tough with the law," I said. "Let me see your license. I've heard something about your serving liquor to drunks and—"

"What do you want, White?"

"I want to get this town fixed so I can find out where the silver's going and who Collins' and Janes' accomplices were. A bar's a good place to hear things.

So—I'm putting a man in as a sort of floor manager for you."

Marsh said quietly, "Go to hell, you chiseling louse."

I pushed his swivel chair over backwards, jumped and put a foot on his fat chest. "I guess you're one of them," I said.

He tried to roll and get out from under my foot. I took out my gun. "I know you're tough, fat boy," I said. "This is a tough country. I'm not going to get killed or have any of my men killed on this job. We already killed Ernie Collins for resistin' arrest—"

He said, "All right. I want to live. What do I do?"

"You pay my man fifty a week. He sees that you don't get framed into being a fence for this gang."

Marsh nodded, and I let him up.

Outside, I pulled an envelope out of my pocket, and wrote a telegram on it.

HAVE DISCOVERED PLOT ON PART OF ERNEST COLLINS AND OTHERS STOP COLLINS KILLED RESISTING ARREST HAD SILVER ORE IN POCKET AT TIME OF DEATH STOP SUGGEST YOU DO NOT DISCHARGE GRANGER JANES RELATIVE OF OLD OWNERS DESPITE ACTION OF SHERIFF IN ARRESTING HIM TONIGHT AS HE TRIED TO LEAVE TOWN RELEASED SO WE CAN WATCH HIM STOP WIRE A THOUSAND DOLLARS EXPENSE MONEY.

I put Stein's name on the top, mine on the bottom, sent it and went over to the jail.

Geers' car was just coming back. Geers got out first, then Granger Janes and Marie Stover.

I went over, said, "Hey, Geers, I didn't tell you to bother this lady. Her mother's a friend of mine."

Marie said, "I just came to see the excitement."

"Hang around, kid," I said. "That's my car there, in front of the hotel. Go sit in it."

"I want to hear you examine Granger—"

"G'wan," I said. "Kids like you shouldn't go into jails."

In front of the jail office, Jig was loose, waiting for me. I said, "Janes,

I'm sorry about this. But your connections with the old owners, the fact that you were a friend of Collins, and your position in the mine made it necessary to arrest you. I'll have to ask you to stay inside the town of Camel."

He was a cool young cuss. "You know damned well, White, that there has been no silver stolen. It's just a geologic freak."

He made a tired sort of gesture. "How can I explain it to you? You're neither a geologist nor a miner."

I said, "Then I'll have to go on with my investigation. You might try putting your geology into English."

He said, "Tonight I've got a date with a girl, and I've promised to meet friends."

"You can't leave town," I said.

"I'm not going to skip out," he said disgustedly.

"I'm only trying to keep you in the clear," I said. "If I let you leave town, my principal would jump all over me."

"If you try and frame me," he said, "I'll knock your front teeth right up into your ears."

I said, "Go tell your girl you can't come out and play tonight."

He went out with his fists clenched. That was a tough guy to play with; the big, quiet, educated ones often are. But I knew how to handle him.

I said, "Jig, how would you like to drive to Palm Springs and back tonight?"

Jig said, "I'll go tell Lana. And, Jeff, thanks for getting me out so quick."

"Oh, that wasn't anything. You're my brother, aren't you? But we haven't time to tell Lana. Follow me down the street with the car in a couple of minutes."

I trotted out. I had seen Marie Stover walking home, away from Granger Janes. I caught up with her and said, "What's the matter, have a fight with your boy friend?"

She kept on walking.

I said, "If your date's off, I have to go to Palm Springs tonight. Ride over and back with me?"

"I have to be at work tomorrow."

"We can make the round trip in three hours. Take two to do the night clubs there; you can still get a night's sleep."

Her eyes shone, though she shook her head. "No."

But I was too much of a gentleman to take that for an answer. Jig came along and we got into the car together.

CHAPTER TWO

Camel Surrenders

THAT FIRST NIGHT in town, I didn't sleep at all. I got this Granger Janes pinched and sprung again—this for the record. If the thing ever came to a trial, there would be no mining engineers on the jury, and he couldn't explain his side of the story to laymen. He'd proved that when he'd tried to explain it to me.

I had Granger Janes to beat. Always there is one guy like that, and this was the one. The fact that Marie Stover was his girl proved it; I had already spotted her as the prize of Camel's womanflesh.

So I killed five hours riding Marie over to Palm Springs and back. I made an excuse of business over there. What I wanted was to show her some bright lights and spend a little of Stein's money on her. This was a babe with too much zoop to be happy in Camel; she was ripe for a city slicker.

Okay. We passed a couple of muckers going out, and Camel would be gabbing to-morrow about Jeff White copping Janes' girl. That would bring it to an open fight, and Janes wouldn't know how to fight.

Coming back in the car, I got it all planned. A quick fight was the way to take Janes. He wasn't used to 'em.

I was a little gent with Marie. I held her hand to show her I thought she was pretty, but I didn't go any further. She had to stand up for me, put that little doubt in Granger Janes' mind that would make him uncertain on the battle line. . .

He was the sort of guy that would think any girl of his knew what she was talking about, just because she was smart enough to be his girl.

In the hall, at the door of Marie's room, I took her hand again, said, "Thanks for your company, Miss Marie."

She said, "Oh, thank you, Jeff. I had a lovely time." She closed her door, and I could hear her humming.

At seven I was strolling down the street. Let Camel see me as it went to work; let them know I was on the job.

I took a turn over to the hotel. Lana and Jig were eating in the restaurant. I went in and said, "The lunchroom was good enough for my breakfast."

"Mud'd be good enough for your breakfast," Lana said. "Jig and I are pulling out as soon as we finish this meal. We're taking the car for all the free meals you mooched."

"Aw, Lana," Jig said, rolling his eye at me.

I said, "I suppose Jig'll get a job in a garage for bean money."

"Why not? Lots of people have garage jobs."

"This is the thanks I get, trying to make something of my brother," I said. "Don't you want Jig to be rich, Lana?"

"See, Lana, I told you Jeff—" the dope said.

Lana said, "Oh, cut it out, Jeff. You—if you were a crook it wouldn't be so bad. A good holdup man or a kidnaper, or something clean like that. But you're not. You're a dirty little schemer that lets other people take the rap for him. Jig'll do it this time, just like every other time. Just like—"

Jig said, "You can't talk to my brother that way, Lana."

"All right," Lana said. She was not so pretty as she had been five years ago when Jig met her. "All right. Say, Jig, isn't that a Diesel truck out there?"

"Where?" Jig asked.

"It's gone now. I think I heard it stop down the street."

He was gone. Lana looked at me. "Yeah," she said. "I know. Jig's not right in the head, and God knows he isn't pretty, but I love him. And he doesn't love me. He loves motors and you, you heel, and that's all, and I'm tied to him. . . . I'm losing my looks, and I haven't got any pep left, and I look forty instead of the thirty I am, and all on account I had to love a guy with you for a brother."

I patted her hand. "It ain't so bad, pal."

"Don't touch me," she said shrilly. "Don't touch me! It's bad enough your just being here. Why don't you go away, Jeff? Go put poison in old ladies' grapefruit, or throw babies' candy in the gutter, or whatever it is you do when you start

some of these messes you get Jig into."

I stood up. "Be seein' you around."

She didn't look up, so I walked out. Jig was in front of the hotel examining a tractor and telling the man who owned it how to fix it.

When he saw me, my little brother came over. "Hi, Jeff. Lana feel better?"

"Sure. She just had the blues. I calmed her down."

"You sure can handle women, Jeff. . . . I guess if Lana left me, I'd never get another girl."

"Don't tell her that, Jig," I said. "You want to learn to be like me and get along with people, don't you?" When he nodded, I said, "Well, keep Lana thinking you'll leave her." I walked away to the mining office.

Just a little trouble there, to keep things stirred up. I walked over to the head penpusher. "The new president wants a complete breakdown of the books," I said.

"Sorry," he said. "But Mr. Overh—"

"I'm running this place now," I said. "Under order from Frisco. You heard me. I want—"

He said, "I'm awfully sorry, but without Mr. Overhaw's orders, I can't—" He was white around the lips.

"Okay," I said. "I like to see a man who's loyal to his boss. I'll remember that," I said, leaving an idea that maybe Overhaw was on his way out. I went upstairs.

WHEN I shoved open the heavy door, Overhaw was working on a chart. I said, "Overhaw, whatever you think of me, I represent the new majority interest in this mine. They want an accounting."

"So?"

"Just an order from you to your bookkeeper to cast up the books."

He bowed. "You're certainly within your rights there, Mr. White." He reached for the phone. "Stay within those rights, and we'll have no trouble."

I smiled and let him interpret the smile anyway he wanted to.

He said, "Bookkeeping. . . . Swift? Cast up an accounting for me, will you? If it runs to overtime, the company'll pay it."

"That's all," I said. "And thank you." Downstairs, I said, "That'll be ready for me when?"

"Tomorrow morning, Mr. White," the bookkeeper said.

"Fair enough." I went out, having given the whole bookkeeping department the idea that I was the boss of the works.

After that I worked the street, and it wasn't till the Elkhorn Bar that I had trouble. By then it was nearly noon, and the dayshift was coming in from the mine.

Chicago May, the proprietor at the Elkhorn ran his own bar. And no sooner had I bellied up to it, then he pulled a gun.

He said, "Listen, big shot. I'm no desert rat like this town. I've run 'em in New York and Chicago under prohibition, and I ran 'em in Alaska during a gold strike, when the cops were still trying to buy snowshoes to get up to where we was. I've seen them tough and I've seen 'em big, but I've never seen them so bad I couldn't handle them."

"Put up them firearms," I said, laughing. "We don't pick on right guys."

He looked at me uncertainly. "No shenanigans," he warned.

I flipped a silver dollar. "Have a drink on me, pal," I said. He hesitated, then poured two whiskies.

I said, "Listen, friend. I've taken this town over. You've been around. The law's mine. The other bars are mine. The pool halls are mine. These dopes out here are a bunch of babies, you know that."

"Yeah, but not me."

"Of course not," I said. "You're my partner. We're going to split the proceeds from your bar. I'm going to steer business to you."

"But that's the same thing."

"No it's not. Because you know what you're doing."

He gulped and played with the gun. "If I had any sense," he said, "I'd pretend to agree with you, and wait. You won't last here more than forty-eight hours."

"Why not? Granger Janes?"

"Sure. Be smart, city boy. Take it on the lam. Those days are gone forever."

"I'll show you," I said. I was wear-

ing a white linen coat, with my gun strapped under it. I shed the coat and gun, and said, "Janes'll be eating over in the hotel, won't he?"

The barman nodded, puzzled. I said, "Got a boy'll call him out for me?"

He rapped on the bar. A skinny, freckled boy came out from the back room. "Go over to the hotel," the saloonkeeper said, "and tell Mr. Janes that Mr. White wants to see him."

The boy goggled, started off at a trot.

In the mirror I could see Freckles telling his news to people he passed. I ordered another drink, but the bartender didn't hear me, so I sipped on his.

Afraid? Yeah. I was afraid. So afraid my stomach was turning. But that's what makes the difference between me and a sucker; suckers back off from being afraid. Wise guys go and get it over with.

I saw Granger Janes come out of the hotel. I saw the crowd lining up in doorways, out of the line of fire.

I let them wait. They could see me in there, but Granger Janes was no man to shoot at me through a window while I was drinking. Let them know I wasn't scared. Even if it wasn't true.

Janes had a gun strapped around his middle. He knew I carried a gun, and he put one on, too. Which was why I had taken mine off.

When the stage seemed set enough, I walked out, and, as always, when the real danger started I stopped being scared. The worst that could happen now was that I would get killed. I walked out to meet him.

Through a fog, a voice came to me. "Hello, Janes. Nice little gun you got there." My voice!

Janes said, "I hear you called me out."

I said, "Yeah." Calm. Like I'd shot a hundred men. I saw his eyes go to my empty holster. The dope was plenty worried.

I said, "Yeah," again. "I hear you're gonna knock me off." My voice was drawling, easy.

Janes pulled his gun, and it was like I could see his mind working. He wasn't the boy to be fooled by an empty holster. He *knew* I had a gun some place.

He knew it while he kept the gun pointing at my chest. I turned my back. The

way I wear my pants, there wasn't a place to hide a gun.

Facing him, I couldn't help the grin. I said, "Go ahead, Janes. Get it over with."

"Put up your hands," Janes said.

I heard the shake in his voice and knew he was cursing himself.

I let the grin get broader, knowing I had won. "Why?" was all I said.

Janes held the gun on me because he didn't know what else to do with it. Then he shoved it back in its holster, turned and marched away toward the hotel.

I went back to the saloon and finished the deal with Chicago May.

Camel had surrendered.

CHAPTER THREE

Wild Bill

LANA was wearing a kimono. Jig was sitting in a chair by the window, sound asleep.

I walked in, chucked my coat and said, "Go on with whatever you were doing, Lana."

She said, "Pushed your little chickens in the creek yet? Poisoned your dogs and put your tacks in the seats of old ladies' wheelchairs? What are you doing up here this time of day?"

I said, "You can start getting yourself measured for a set of diamonds, sis. Camel's mine."

"All except the jail, which is reserved for Jig."

"Stop wisecracking," I said. "I got every store in town fixed to kick in every week. I got the mine office crew convinced Overhaw is taking orders from me. I got the law scared not to cooperate with me. Lana, I tell you, Camel is Jeff White—Jeff White is Camel."

She leaned towards me on the bed. "Jeff, Jeff, what have you left open? What's going to fall on Jig?"

I said, "Underneath, Lana, you're just like me. You don't give a damn for anybody but yourself, do you?"

She shook her head. "You're wrong. Oh, I don't give a damn for society or the law or any of those things; I never met them, and neither did anybody else. They—they're just ideas. And the world has never done so much for me that I have to

be grateful. But, Jeff, I'm different from you. I love Jig. And you, you couldn't love anybody, anything, anytime. You know it."

"Aw, Lana—"

"Don't try and kid me, Jeff. You know it. That was left out of you."

"Yeah. Sure. But sometimes I wonder, Lana, if I'd met a dame like you when I was twenty—"

She said, "I've heard something like this before. It's the beginning of the build-up you give people when you know they're gonna be sore at you pretty soon."

"I never thought of that. Sure. Only with you, Lana, it isn't a build-up. I never was any good at kidding you."

"What's Jig suppose to do?"

"His job is easy this time," I said. "The bars pay to Jig. You and Jig can keep the dough. It ought to come to four hundred a week."

"Four C's!" she gasped. "And what do we have to do for it?"

"Nothing. Jig can go on driving me, because that's what he likes to do."

Lana said, "What do you get out of this, Jeff? You haven't done all this work to help out your relatives."

"I get the mine," I said. "The whole damned Camel Mining Company. And how do you like that?"

"I wish I knew the catch."

Jig woke up and said, "Hi, Jeff. Where we goin' today?"

I said, "You can drive me some other time."

I patted Lana's shoulder and went out. Her eyes were following me, but that was all right. She was the only real menace in Camel, and I had fixed her. All her life she had been dreaming of enough dough to buy Jig a garage so he could be loose from me. She'd be multiplying the take in her head now.

LUNCH HOUR had passed. I went over to the mining office, and the bookkeeping gang were all busy, getting out the report I had asked for. Swift greeted me nice. "Hello, Mr. White. We're hurrying as fast as possible."

They had Marie out of her cage and running an adding machine for one of the old wrens. Everybody in that office thought I had called Overhaw's number.

I hadn't at all. What I had done was wait until I had a good, tight atmosphere built up. Then I asked him for the one thing he couldn't refuse. An accounting. An accounting for Stein's agent. It was all I was really entitled to, but I could get a court order if I had to. So could the representative of any stockholder.

I said to Swift, "I'm afraid I'm going to have to short-hand you, but I'm sure that a good bookkeeping department like yours can function one hand short."

"Oh, yes, Mr. White."

Sure. He already saw Overhaw out and me in, and him a favorite of the king's. I said, "I want to go out to the mine and talk to some of the men. Who in your staff would know most of them?" I winked at Marie.

"Well, Mr. Crants, the paymaster," Swift said.

"I hate to take him away," I said. "Tomorrow's payday, and I want the men paid on time. Don't want any suspicion of discontent growing up, when the management might change hands at any minute. Has he got an assistant?"

"Oh, yes, Miss Stover. But, Mr. White, she couldn't get up the payroll by herself; her bond doesn't cover amounts that large, and we like things to be regular."

"I'm glad you're so cautious. I'll tell you. I'll take her with me. How's that?"

"Fine. Fine. But it'll make us a little late with your report—if you don't mind?"

"Not at all," I big-businessed, "not at all. Very good, Mr. Swift. And this is Miss Stover?"

Sure, I knew that everybody—except, apparently, old Swiftie himself—knew that I'd had Marie out all the night before. Trust that crew to tongue-wag. But this made it look a little nicer to Marie—who wanted to get off, of course—and a little worse to the rest of the town.

"Miss Stover, Mr. White," Swift mumbled. "You take the afternoon to help Mr. White, Marie."

"Yes, sir. What is it you want, Mr. White?" Her eyes were dancing! she thought this was good fun. She had forgotten how it was going to look to Camel.

"Come out to the mine with me," I said. "I want to talk to some of the men."

"Yes, sir. Wait till I get my hat."

She went upstairs and I waited, watching the old wrens in the bookkeeping enclosure. They were shooting looks at each other out of the corners of their eyes, getting ready to splatter a little gossip around town. By nightfall, Marie would be my girl, and like I said, Marie was a prize for the top guy. The miners would think of her that way.

We went out to the mine, then we went for a ride, and at five, I left her in front of her house and went up to the hotel.

Jig was in the hall. It seemed that the hotel's vacuum cleaner had broken down, and he was fixing it. I rapped on their door and went in.

Lana was lying on the bed in pajamas. She said, "Grief and glory, Jeff, couldn't you pick some other place to start trouble?" But her voice wasn't angry as it usually was when she talked to me.

"Kid," I said, "Papa is very pleased with himself."

"That's not news, Jeff. Go away and let me gently melt to death."

"If you thought more you wouldn't feel the heat," I said. "Now me, I don't even know it's a hot day."

"You've got ice water instead of blood," she said.

"How much did you collect today?" I asked her.

"What?" She sat up on the bed and reached for her bathrobe. I suppose she thought she could fight better with more clothes on.

"Didn't you send Jig out for the collections?"

"You told us—"

I said, "Hell, I come and tell you the street's full of gold, and you squawk because I don't wrap it up in tissue paper for you."

She shrugged into the bathrobe. "I knew there was a catch," she said.

"Some people are lazier than other people," I said. "But like I told you, I only brought you to let Jig make enough money for that garage he's always going to buy."

"What do we have to do?" She was still suspicious, but the thought of that garage made her mouth water.

I said, "Remember the time Jig opened up that station and took out an unin-

corporated license in the name of the P. W. Service Company? Okay. Have Jig take one to each bar and poolroom in town, and they'll give him the money, and he signs a receipt."

"Why don't you?" she asked.

I shook my head. "I'm sworn in as an officer of the law. That's why I had Jig left out."

She said, "This sounds like all the other places. And Jig ends up holding the bag."

I shrugged. "Okay, Lana. You'll live and die poor, then."

She stared at me. "If you don't get us this way, you'll frame us another. Stick your head outside and tell Jig to come in."

My dear, dumb brother had the vacuum cleaner together again and was beaming at it while it cleaned the hall carpet.

I called him in.

Lana said, "Jig, listen, carefully."

He got that serious look on his face that indicated he was concentrating what brains he had. "All you do," I said, "is go around to all these places with the

pieces of paper Lana is going to give you. Tell them that you are guaranteeing that they won't be closed for harboring illegal assemblies. Can you get that? Illegal assemblies."

He gulped. "Illegal assemblies, yeah."

I made him repeat it, then told Lana how to make out the receipts and the amounts and went home. Believe me, I was tired.

I WAS up with the birds. This was to be my day.

When I went downstairs there was the smell of coffee. I went into the kitchen and found Marie cooking breakfast.

I said, "How's about a cup of coffee for the star boarder?"

Marie was glancing from the clock to the mirror she was using to put on her lipstick.

I said, "You sure love that job of yours. What would old Swiftie do if you were late?"

"I'm not watching the clock for that," Marie said. "I'm timing those eggs I'm

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boiling." She got up, poured the eggs into a strainer and cracked them into a cup. "Just right," she said. "I'm not going to work, Jeff."

"Huh?"

"Never again. You don't want people to think your girl has to work for living."

Boy, she had changed fast. I said, "What people?"

"Camel," she said. "You told me I was your prize. You said a lot of things. Now—"

"Now, I gotta back 'em up, huh?" Well, there'd be plenty of time later to knock those ideas out of her. If I carried her along, which I might do.

She filled my coffee cup. "Oh, it's going to be fine. Lying in bed till noon in a hotel in Los Angeles or San Francisco. New dresses. Swimming pools and theaters and— But, Jeff."

"Yeah?"

"How about this girl at the hotel?"

"What? Oh, her. You mean Lana. That's my brother's wife, my sister-in-law."

"Really? I've heard she's your girl, that she—"

"She hates my guts," I said. I tossed Marie a twenty-dollar bill. "Go shopping or something, kid."

The heat was like a slap in the puss outdoors. I had learned to walk slow since I had come to Camel; if you hurried, you could drop dead.

I went over to the telephone office and got Stein's office in Frisco. I said, "Mr. Stein, this is White, out in Camel. Look, you better send out about a hundred private detectives at once; hell's broken loose here."

Over the wire I could hear him boiling and bubbling. "A hundred?" he finally said. "Those men cost! How long you think you'll need them?"

"I can break this up in a month," I said. I made my voice awfully earnest, like I was pleased with myself.

He screeched, "Look, I'm into that mine deep enough now. And now you want I should put another forty, fifty thousand in? You're crazy, you hear? Let the silver go, come home. On copper I can—"

"It's gone past the silver, copper stage now. The Janes family have their man

in here, a cousin, wrecking the mine."

Stein said, "Yes, you wired me about him—"

"The union's sent in Wild Bill Pollak, an agitator, and—"

Stein said, "Listen. I'm starting for there right away. Don't do nothin' till I get there." He had been grammatical and sorta stuck up when he started talking.

I promised him I wouldn't, and hung up.

I found Jig working along the street, his black face red in the heat. "How's the collections?" I asked. He said they were pretty good.

"Everybody kick in?" I asked.

He said, "That May who runs the Elkhorn told me to come back later. Jeff, I dunno—"

I said, "Okay. Hand over the cash, and let May go. Why don't you get Lana and take her for a drive?"

He said, "Chee, that'll be swell, Jeff. Things are good, huh?"

"Sure." As he trotted away, I grabbed him. "Hey, Jig. The cash, the cash."

He knew I'd told Lana they could keep it. He looked worried—not because he thought I was going to gyp him, but because Lana would think so and scold him.

"I want to put it in the bank," I said.

His grin came back, and he trotted after me down to the little two-desk branch bank. I said, "Wait here, and I'll fetch you the receipt." I had no time to fight with Lana that day, so I told the clerk; "We want to transfer this money to a good brokerage office in Frisco."

"Well, we can recommend—"

"I want one that specializes in mining stocks."

"McNally & Morgan are very reliable."

I said, "Okay. Only make it snappy. Put the account in the name of Lana, Paul and J. T. White, drawable by any of them."

He said, "I'll have to charge you wire charges and clear it through our Frisco correspondent. Ten—"

"Okay, okay, but hurry."

He wrote me out a receipt, and I handed it to Jig. "Give this to Lana to keep. Tell her I'm putting my dough in it, too. Then if anything happens to me, you and she get the money."

He said, "Jeff, if there's gonna be trouble, I ought to stay around and look after—"

"I was just joking. G'wan, scram. Take Lana for a ride."

So that would work. Lana didn't know enough about banking to know that receipt was worthless; I had checked the money right through, and it was only a record of its passing.

I FOUND little Forbesy, the shyster, in an office over the bank. I said, "Pal, the kill is today. You own any Camel stock?"

He said, "Oh, perhaps so, Mr. White. . . ."

I said, "Okay, Forbesy. Go sock a warrant on Mr. Peter Oscar Stein as a minority stockholder. Mismanagement and anything else you can find in your books."

Mr. Forbesy said, "Your client? Our client?"

"Was," I said. "Forbesy, who are you working for?"

He said, "An attorney must work for his clients at all times."

"Then you're not the guy for me," I said. "I want a man who's working for his own pocket." I started out the door, and Forbesy—of course—called me back.

"You owe me for services already rendered," he said. "You tell me I'm representing Mr. Stein—a man whose credit is certainly good with me—and then you say to sue him. I have not made a cent out of your account, and I have been put to great trouble and—"

I said, "Look, pal. You want to make money, don't you? Slap that reader on Stein, and then go short of the market on Camel. The bottom's fallen out of her."

He stared at me.

I grinned and left him to turn it over in his ferrety little mind. He'd do.

Then I called up the brokerage house in San Francisco. I got the office manager on the phone and said, "J. T. White, in Camel. You got my money?"

"Yes, Mr. White. A joint account. We—"

"Okay," I said. "Now listen. What's Camel Copper selling at?" There was a pause, and then he told me—nine and a quarter. "Okay," I said again. "Sell

short for me. Sell Camel as fast as you can. I'll call you back in a couple of hours."

He rang off, and I put in another long distance. To the Metals and Ores Magazine, in San Francisco. I said, "This is Mr. Hepping, of Camel. I got some trucks."

The girl on the switchboard said, "Who do you want to talk to?"

I said, "I own some trucks in Camel. I want to find out about the mine here."

Finally a man's voice said, "Yes, this is the copper-stocks editor."

I said, "This is Mr. Hepping. I been hauling for the copper company."

He said, "Yes, yes, but—"

I said, "I am a very cautious man, Mr. Editor. Now, I read in your magazine where you said the Camel Copper Company was okay, so I haul ore. Now for three days, they been shipping no ore, and the boys in the mine tell me they lost the vein, and who's going to pay me?"

He said hurriedly, "Wait a minute," and I could hear his voice saying, "Mac, get P.O. Stein on the phone and see about Camel. How's it doing?" Then back at me. "Mr. Hepping, are you sure you know what you're talking about?"

I said, "Listen, if I didn't know more about running trucks than you do about a magazine that tells a poor man a company's good when it ain't no good, I would. . . ."

I rambled on like that till a more distant voice said, "Stein's secretary said he left unexpectedly on a trip to Camel."

The editor said, "Mr. Hepping, if I were you I'd see a lawyer," and got off the phone.

I went back down the street.

Except for Chicago May, I was all set. Chicago May, the tough guy. He had failed to kick in. It was only chicken feed against the big killing now, but every dollar of chicken feed could be parlayed into a hundred dollars by night. And besides, no good general leaves loose ends around to trip over.

This big, fat May guy was behind his own bar. I said, "Chicago, old boy, you wouldn't be getting tough, would you?"

The look in his eye made me feel better. Jig, the dope, had probably messed things up.

Chicago May said, "Tough, Mr. White?" His hands moved under his apron.

"You'd better pay my brother the dough you owe him," I said, showing him the butt of my gun.

The door of the men's room opened, and we both dropped our hands away from our weapons. But it was only Wild Bill Pollak. He was staggering a little. He said, "Hi, punk."

"Cockeyed, huh?" I said. I thought of a new one. "I was looking for you. Orders came in from Frisco, from P. O. Stein, the president, to can you. No drunks in the mine, he says."

"Stein?" he roared. "Yeah? You can't fire me. I'm sober by the time I shoot, always have been, always will be. Where is this Stein? Lemme talk to him."

If having the bottom fall out of his stock, if having a reader slapped on him, if having an argument with Granger Janes didn't make Mr. Stein ready and eager to get out of Camel, then this would. Wild Bill was big, loud and drunk, and Stein was not used to street fighting.

I said, "Yeah. Stein. Now, scram. He'll be in town in an hour, take it up with him. Me, I'm talking business with Mr. May."

Wild Bill growled, "You are? You are, you little, stinking shamus? I've got a good mind—"

Things were breaking up. Chicago May's hand was back under his apron, and Wild Bill was weaving his shoulders.

I jerked out my gun and said "Hands on the bar, May, or I'll—"

Something hard hit me behind the ear. I felt myself sinking and the barroom went black.

After a while I got up again. I smelled like a distillery. I said, "This'll cost you your license, May," keeping my voice down, not letting him see how sore I was. "This place'll fetch you about two bits at a forced sale," I said.

I got out, went down the street, forcing myself to walk slow, to the sheriff's office. I didn't know the guy behind the desk, wearing the star. I said, "Where's Geers?"

This mugg said, "Outa town. The sheriff sent for him, over at the county seat."

CHAPTER FOUR

Quick Deal

I HAD to pass the saloon going back. May had a beer stopper in one hand, a .45 in the other, but he didn't say anything. Wild Bill Pollak was gone.

I picked up my gun and put it in my pocket. Then I went out, down the street to the Stovers, holding my head up. Camel wasn't going to laugh at me!

I went to my room. Mrs. Stover hadn't got around to cleaning it yet, so I sat at the table, looking out the window. Then, a funny thing began to happen. I felt like there was somebody in my bed.

Nuts, I told myself. Nuts, Jeff. Who'd be in your bed? Mrs. Stover? Napoleon?

I wouldn't look. If I looked, it was a weakness, and I was Jeff White, who was all iron.

Not looking became the most important thing in the world, and I stared out the window at the sun-baked street and Mrs. Stover's little patch of cactus until it seemed like the sun was coming down to me, Jeff White, and snapping at me.

A little white dog ran down the street and stopped to scratch. That broke it, and I laughed. Why shouldn't you look at your bed if you want to?

I turned and looked. It seemed to me there was somebody in the bed. Somebody long and stiff, with his shoes on.

It only lasted a second, but in that second I saw a patch on the shoe. I had been almost broke before I went to Stein, and I had had that shoe half-soleed. . . .

I was up, with my hand on my gun. There was nobody in the bed, of course. That's what I got for staring at the sun.

I turned my back on the window, and sat with my feet on the table.

If I went to the hotel, Jig and Lana and I could play pinochle till the noon train got in. I got up and went outside.

Golly, that sun! This was all right for muckers and desert rats and big saps like Granger Janes, but a man with brains couldn't fry them in that sun and not notice it.

I was passing by the back door of Chicago May's place. That fat-belly! Socking me over the head—me, the law, the king of Camel!

Supposing I sneaked in the back door, and knocked him out, left him as an example of what happened to people who got rough with Jeff White?

Half of me said no. The half that had sat in the pen reading those books on how to be a general. But it's hard to live in the sun and not get hot-blooded.

The first thing about being a good general is to keep yourself in condition. Napoleon had a stomach ache before Waterloo.

I was going to have a belly ache until I was even with Mr. May.

I slid in the back door, and I could see Chicago, his alderman against the bar, reading a newspaper and smoking a big cigar. He had his back half turned to me.

I took my gun out and held it by the barrel. Knock him out and rake his face from ear to mouth on each side with the sights, and he'd be an advertisement of what Jeff White could do.

My feet made no noise at all walking up on him. Just when I was six feet away, he laid down the cigar and turned a page in the paper.

I raised the butt of my gun.

And then he had turned and was facing me, and the barrel of his horse pistol was as big as a cannon in my face.

He said, "You ought to remember, White, a good bartender always watches the mirror."

IT WAS the last thing he ever said. My brain didn't have to tell my hand what to do. My gun was turning and the trigger with tightening, and there was a loud roar.

Chicago May made a surprised sort of face and cursed me. Then he was dead, holding his belly behind his own bar.

I was sweating hard. But it was all right, nobody had seen me come in.

I must take my gun with me. Take my gun and plant it on somebody else. Get out the back way and establish an alibi.

I had to skirt clear around town, past the station and over the tracks to get to the hotel without being seen.

Jig and Lana were just coming out, starting on their drive. Lana saw me first. "Hey, the sun getting you, Jeff? You don't look so well. Or is it giving away money that—"

I said, "Aw, forget the money, Lana. I told you you'd wear diamonds. Jig, I'd like to see you a minute."

Lana looked suspicious, but she had that phony receipt to show her I'd been on the up-and-up.

I worked Jig around so Lana couldn't see what was going on, and said, "Look, Jig. You and Lana haven't any cash, have you?"

He said, "Well, Jeff, I got five bucks if you need it, but I was gonna spend it on—"

I said, "That isn't cash, Jig. Here, take this tenner. Show the wife a good time, take her over to that swell hotel at Palm Springs and set her up to a good meal."

He got all twisted up with gratitude. He said, "You're awful good to me, I—"

I said, "And here. Here's a little present for you, personally. You know that trick .45 of mine you've always wanted?"

"The one with the German spring and—"

"Yeah. It's all yours. Now go and have a good time."

He put the gun in his pocket, fished out his old .38. "Well, take this then, Jeff. It ain't as good a gun as yours, but I been working on it, and—"

I pocketed it—that nice, clean, unused gun—and then said, "I'm going up to your room. Mind, Lana?"

She called back, "No. Have a good rest, Jeff." She was almost sweet to me. I went upstairs feeling clever.

I was Jeff White, General Jeff White. A touch of sun, that's all I had had. . . .

I put in a call to McNally & Morgan, in Frisco. The office manager said, "Mr. White. Mr. White! Camel's fallen from nine and a quarter to three and a half, and you've made—"

"I know," I said. "Yeah. Listen. Buy in at three. All you can get on my account."

He said, "It looks to me, sir, like you could almost buy the whole mine at that price. If we had a little more money from you, the firm would be glad to finance—"

Gawd, I was a dope. I had gone into Chicago May's to get money to send to these brokers, and then forgotten it. I said, "I'll send some right away."

"Oh, fine."

I rang off. What I was going to do would take nerve.

Down the stairs, through the lobby, steady, steady, tramp, tramp, left foot, right foot, the best defense is a good offensive. . . .

And back in the Elkhorn.

A fly was crawling across Chicago May's open eye. The right eye.

My stomach turned over, but I hit no sale on the cash register, and made a grab for all the bills. It was better if it looked like robbery, sure it was. And with Lana carrying that receipt around. . . .

No, that was not so good, because the guy at the bank would remember that it was I who had come to see him. I'd say that my brother, who wasn't very smart, had asked me to bank the money. Sure. His wife had the receipt, and he had the gun.

I had to take two shots of Chicago May's bourbon to get going. But when I was back in the alley, I counted the dough, and it was worth it. Eleven hundred gesmackers.

By the time I got through manipulating, I ought to be able to swing about three thousand shares. It depended on how good McNally and Morgan had treated me. That was enough to work on Stein with, and then I'd have his thirty thousand shares and—

I took the money over to the bank, saying, "Send this to McNally & Morgan. Same account."

The clerk said, "Yes, Mr. White."

WHEN I came out of the bank there was a limousine parked in front of the office. That would be P. O. Stein. Granger Janes and another engineer were talking in front of the hotel.

Marie Stovers was coming out of the De Luxe Fashion Shop. She had on a new dress, and her arms were full of boxes. When she looked at her ex-boy friend, her face got as red as the desert sun. Then she put her chin up and came on down the sidewalk.

Granger Janes said, "Been shopping?" He sounded plenty silly. "Why aren't you working at—"

Marie said, "I'm not working because

I've quit. Jeff White is taking me to Los Angeles and—"

"That his money you been shopping with?" That was Janes talking. The other man was sidling away.

Marie said, "You're blocking the sidewalk and—"

The big dope stepped aside.

I headed for the office, and as I crossed the street I heard somebody down the street shouting, "Hey, lookahere!" The voice was down near the saloon. I kept on going.

Granger Janes came in right behind me. He fumbled with the gun on his hip and yelled, "White, you louse, you're not going to—"

They grabbed him. Overhaw said, "Granger, whatever has gotten into you?"

"Sorry," Janes muttered.

Overhaw said wearily, "Mr. Stein, this is Granger Janes, our day mine superintendent."

I looked at Stein. He'd gained some weight. "I know your cousin, Bradford Janes," he said.

"About my fifth cousin," Janes said, like he'd been accused of something. "I hardly know him."

I wanted to laugh out loud, but I let it go with a grin. When Forbes came in, I wiped off the smile. I hadn't much faith in that lad.

He was good, though. My rabbitish slyster cleared his throat, said, "You P. O. Stein?"

Overhaw said, "It's customary to get announced before you barge into offices, Forbes."

Forbes said, "For you, then," and handed over a paper. His little heels tapped on the stairs going down.

A dirty pink flush started under Stein's collar and spread across his pan. He pulled open the paper, said, "One of those minority stockholder's suits for mismanagement and—"

He ran a hand over his heavy face. "Listen. Isn't there an air-conditioned hotel in town where we can hold this conference, Mr. Overhaw?"

"No," Overhaw said. "There's not an air-conditioning unit in Camel."

I said, "You don't need a conference, Mr. Stein. You can see what I'm up against here. What I told you this morn-

ing goes. For forty-five thousand dollars, I could—”

“This mine,” Stein said flatly, “ain’t worth putting forty-five thousand dollars into.”

Janes moved to the window and stood looking out. I drifted over behind him. A man was down in the street wearing a clean new star. There was a crowd around him, and he looked confused. Janes leaned out the window and yelled, “Hey, Jim, come up here.”

Jim raised his eyes, happy to hear Janes’ voice. “Someone has shot Chicago May.”

Behind me, I heard Stein make a gulping noise. “Do things like this happen all the time here?”

I said, “The town’s racket ridden. Somebody—” I kept my voice calm and let my eyes rest on Janes’ face—“somebody’s been shaking down the storekeepers. I believe the idea is that the men will only be allowed to trade at certain stores.”

Stein gulped. “Listen,” he said, “I don’t want any part of it.”

Granger Janes said, “I ought to go help Jim Sente. . . .”

Overhaw said, “All right, all right, go ahead.” He watched Janes leave.

Stein was talking. He was saying, “Listen, Mr. Overhaw. Listen. Can you get rid of Janes? Why, he tried to kill my man here!”

“Mining’s on the boom,” Yancey Overhaw said. “It’s hard to get good engineers. And Janes has a contract with us.”

Stein said, “I don’t know much about running mines, but—I dunno—it seems like everything has gone wrong. Look,

Overhaw, you wouldn’t like to buy my interest, would you? Ten thousand dollars on the line, and—”

“I haven’t got ten thousand dollars,” Yancey Overhaw said.

I said, “How about giving me a chance at that, Mr. Stein? I have about five thousand dollars in an account at McNally & Morgan’s, and I could let you have the other five—”

But Stein shook his head. “I want to get out clean,” he said. “No notes.”

There was an awful racket on the stairs, and Granger Janes came back with this guy Jim. Jim tapped his star. “Acting deputy,” he said. “Let me see your gun, White.”

“You see how it is,” I drawled. “Now they’re framing me for murder.” Lazily, I pulled the gun, handed it over, butt first.

Janes said, “A .38, huh?” in a disappointed voice. Then he stepped in and patted me. “No other guns.”

I took my gun, put it back in my pocket and said, “Why pick on me?”

“You were seen talking to May earlier today,” Janes said.

“By who?”

“By me,” a voice roared out on the landing, and Wild Bill Pollak, still a little drunk, swaggered in. “You threatened him and—”

I said quickly, “You see, Mr. Stein, they—”

“So this is Stein?” Pollak whooped.

“The guy that’s gonna fire me.” He took a step toward Stein. I stepped back to give him room. Granger Janes and the other guy grabbed him and shoved him out of the office.

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Stein could act when he had to. He thought he had to now. He picked up the phone. "Get me McNally & Morgan in San Francisco . . . Hello, Snedden? This is P. O. Stein. You got an account in Camel, named White . . . How much is it worth? . . . Okay, and thanks." He turned to me then and said, "You want to confirm the deal?" and I yelled a couple of words into the phone okaying it. Then he jiggled the receiver and got his own brokerage house. "This is P. O. Stein," he said. "I want you to transfer my interest in Camel Mining to the account of Jeff White at McNally & Morgan. That's right, McNally & Morgan. Five thousand's the price. That's what I said, five thousand."

Then he took a deep breath and almost ran down to his car.

Looking out the window with Overhaw, I saw him cross the street. He nearly collided with the men who were carrying Chicago May's body.

I turned to Overhaw and said, "As soon as I saw that man with a star, I knew Flint Geers had sold me out. But it didn't matter, did it, Overhaw? From now on, you're working for me."

When I looked at the street again, Stein was driving out of Camel.

CHAPTER FIVE

Duce White

WELL, what with one thing and another, I was pretty busy that afternoon. I went over Overhaw's books with him and showed him how he'd been running the mine wrong and made a list of people to fire. Now that the thing was in my hands, I didn't figure on paying out any fancy payrolls. I broached the subject of cutting Overhaw's salary, but when he started to squawk I let it ride. I had plenty of time to take care of that later. Anyway, it was a busy afternoon, and I didn't think of Jig and Lana for quite a while.

When I did, an uneasy feeling hit me. I started to worry about that gun that Jig had, the one that had killed Chicago May, and I was afraid that somehow Lana would find out about it and suspect something. In fact, the more I thought

about it the uneasier I got. In my mind's eye I started to picture it, figuring how it would be, and, as it turned out later, I wasn't far from the truth.

Lana would be sitting up there in the front of the car, her head back against the cushions, her eyes half closed. I had seen her like that, and I knew. She always said there was nothing so soothing as taking a ride in a car with Jig at the wheel. Maybe Jig wasn't so much in a spelling bee or on the dance floor, but put him at the wheel of a car and you knew that car was going to be driven as well as a car could go.

Anyway, I got a mental picture of them driving along on the road to Palm Springs, with Jig's dark, serious face intent on the road and on the music that a motor sang to something inside him. I got a mental picture, too, of Lana rolling over on her left shoulder so she could look at him. The images sharpened up in my mind about that time, so that the thing almost lost its appearance of fantasy and became real.

I could hear them, too: Lana saying, "This is fun, Jig."

"Yeah, I like you like this, Lana."

"Like how, babe?"

"Sort of—sort of kitten-like, instead of—" Words weren't Jig's strong suit, but that didn't bother Lana. She had known too many glib guys in her time.

"Instead of like a cat?" she asked.

Jig said, "Aw. . ." If you wanted to get along with Jig, you had to learn to read his grunts.

She told him, "It's only Jeff makes me get that way."

For the thousandth time in their life together, Jig said, "Aw, Jeff's all right."

"He's all right today. Giving us all this money, and the car, and letting us get out of town before any trouble started."

"Yeah. He gave me that nice gun of his, that .45 with the—"

"What?" Lana sat upright so quickly that she scared him into taking his foot off the accelerator. "He gave you his gun?"

"Yeah. It's the one with that German spring in it. I'm gonna take the barrel off and—"

"Let's see it," Lana said. The day was hot and oppressive, the road rough, and the car an old junkheap. Maybe she had

a touch of indigestion and maybe rheumatism was setting in. "Let's see that gun," Lana said.

Puzzled, Jig fished it out and handed it over. Lana sniffed it, broke it open. One cartridge had been fired.

"Pull over to the side of the road," she said. "I want to think."

She got the receipt from McNally & Morgan out of her bag, and studied it.

It would look to her like the receipt was all right, but, she'd be asking herself, why hadn't I left the money in the bank? Why had it been transferred to a brokerage office?

She wouldn't be able to figure that out, but since it was me, she'd figure the reason was crooked.

With that, her mind would calm down a little. There was no use being angry or hurt or worked up because a situation that had prevailed for years still prevailed.

And if she was to save Jig, she couldn't waste time being mad about it.

She said, "Turn the car around, old boy."

Jig nodded, and his foot and hand worked together on switch, starter and gas. Maybe that was why she loved him, for the beautiful, smooth way he moved. Or maybe it was because he had never yet questioned her love for him.

Humming, "Can't Help Loving that Man" Lana allowed herself to be driven back to Camel, the gun lying in her lap.

WHEN they rolled into town, something snapped in my fantasy. Or, rather, what happened was this. The fantasy snapped into reality. Because suddenly I realized that it wasn't fantasy any longer. I was standing in Yancey Overhaw's office, staring out on the street, for one moment seeing only the nasty little fantasy I'd built up, then the next moment seeing the fantasy snap into truth. It was like a fly busting into a bubble you've blown for yourself—one minute it's climbing the outside of the bubble, and the next, there's no bubble, only the fly.

That was how it was. Because I was looking down on the street in front of the hotel, watching this fly that was breaking up my dream bubble—Jig's car—pull up and park. Lana stepped out on the sidewalk and looked around.

That engineer, Granger Janes, who looked something like an educated Jig, was in front of the hotel talking. The other man was wearing a star.

Before Jig knew what she was doing, she had gone up to them, and said, "Officer, here's a gun Jeff White gave my husband this morning. Got any use for it?"

Jim Sente took the gun from her and said, "Your— Hey, it's a .45, Granger!"

Granger Janes said, "There is a destiny that shapes men's ends . . . Wow and whoopee! Give me one of those stars, Jim, and, Officer, do your duty!"

They pushed by Lana White as though they didn't see her, or remember her, and they took off, Granger Janes pinning on his star as they went.

Lana watched them go, and then she walked back to the car, a lift in her walk like she was feeling young and happy, or maybe like a girl feels when she's lost a couple of inches around the hips. I knew exactly what she'd be saying to Jig at that point: "I was wrong, Jig. It's all right for us to go out of town again. Let's go all the way to San Francisco this time, Jig." She got in and settled herself, and a moment later the car pulled smoothly away, the way it always started off when Jig drove, and disappeared down the road leading out of Camel.

Somewhere on the road to San Francisco was Stein's limousine, but I had no doubt that Jig would pass him without any trouble. When Jig drove, anything else on the road might as well have been standing still. Jig and Lana would be in San Francisco an hour before Stein's expensive limousine.

SO THERE I was in Overhaw's office, watching Lana hand Sente that gun. I moved away from the window. Overhaw had his own trouble. He was busy with his papers while I listened at the office door.

Marie's voice was saying, "You go in there, Granger, to pin a murder on him and you'll end up in a cell. You ought to know better by now than to monkey with—"

What was coming next, I didn't find out. I stuck my head out and said, "We'll need a witness. You— Oh, hello, boys."

My voice sounded fine. I was Jeff White, an important figure in the world of finance and commerce.

Granger Janes took a deep breath and said, "We found the gun that killed May. I suppose you never saw it before."

I switched my eyes to the ceiling. I said slowly, "Boys, I—well, I did. I hoped—But the law comes first. It's my brother's gun. Paul—we call him Jig. He isn't—well—bright. Tried to shake down some businessmen once."

Jim Sente said, "Yeah, his wife said—" "Have you arrested him?" I was leading them on, playing with them. "He had my car," I said, "and I'd hate for anything to happen to that car."

They stood there, and I could see them remembering the car leaving town with my brother at the wheel, the woman beside him.

I put snap into my voice. "The Camel Mining Company pays you men to run its mine," I said. "What are you doing in town this time of day?"

Before Janes could stop him, Jim Sente said, "I'm on the night shift, and Granger's on his lunch hour." Like a good little boy called up before the teacher.

Marie Stover laughed.

I looked at her and rationed myself to one small grin. "Marie, honey," I said, "I'll give you some more money to shop with. We'll blow for Los Angeles tonight."

Then I yelled, "Overhaw!" The half-open door behind me opened the rest of the way, and Yancey Overhaw crept out. "Fire these two men," I told him. "Give them their time."

Meekly, Overhaw said, "They have contracts, Mr. White. They—"

Janes' left fist was whipping out, coming for my stomach. I didn't move in time. The gun he was holding scraped the side of my head. I rocked with the blows, but he'd got to me, all right. My wind was knocked out, but I managed to sweep the heavy typewriter off the desk onto his feet. He went down to the floor, swearing.

I pulled back my foot and kicked him in the head.

My foot came back again. I had him cold, when his slug caught me in the shoulder. It knocked me over. . . .

I was on my back, and the gunsmoke was bitter in the air, and Jim Sente was saying, "It's all right. You only shot him in the shoulder."

Janes reached down and hauled me up on my feet. "You're under arrest for the murder of Chicago May," he said.

I hugged my shoulder. It was burning, now, and the blood was soaking through, staining my linen suit. I said, "You're fired, both of you. And I'm going to sue hell out of you for false arrest. You're not impersonating officers, are you?" I didn't feel like talking, but also, I didn't feel like going to jail.

Janes was rubbing his head. He said, "Take him to the jail, Bill. Hold him there."

The last thing I heard as we left the office was Marie Stover's voice. She was talking to Janes.

MY SHOULDER hurt like ants were crawling around in the bullet hole, and I was in the can. I had taken a shoestring and run her up until I owned a fine mining company, and it landed me in the can, with a slug in my shoulder.

I grabbed the tin cup and started to pound on the bars with it. Then I stopped. I was Jeff White, who owned Camel—mine, town and office—and I owned it because I was a little tougher than anybody else in town. To start screaming for a doctor would wreck that idea in everybody's mind.

I had to go on being tough. They had nothing on me. I had not shaken down anybody but Chicago May, and he was dead. Jig had shaken them down.

The shaking down had been done with letterheads of a service station that had once belonged to Jig.

As for Chicago May, I was in the clear there. Jig would be the logical suspect to kill May, who had sworn he wouldn't kick in. And Jig had had the .45. His wife had brought it back to try and clear him, frame me.

I was just telling myself all this to keep from thinking about what I had to do. I had to take that bullet out of my shoulder.

I stood up in that cell, and my head went around and around. It was making me sick already.

No, that was the sun. Remember the

trick it had played on me in Mrs. Stover's bedroom, when I had seen myself lying on the bed.

I sunk my teeth into my lip and got my coat off. Now my shirt.

It was off. I unhooked my lip and sunk my teeth into the shirt, tearing it into strips. I had seen slugs come out before; it always started a lot of bleeding.

When I had the shirt torn up, I went over to the wall. My knees felt like they were made of well-boiled spaghetti. Me, I always liked spaghetti *al dente*; this was too soft.

Jeff, you're going off, boy. Stop it, stop it. If I could keep from passing out, I was okay. Me, Jeff White, I would be okay.

I went to work. . . .

* * *

I came to lying on the floor of the cell. There was something in my hand. I tried to look at it. It felt as big as a light globe. It was the slug, The slug, the slug, the slug-dug-bug, the—

I sat up, and carefully I put my hand up and explored my shoulder. It was pretty wet. I took my clean handkerchief and wadded it over the wound. Then I wrapped the torn shirt around and around and I began to feel better. My face was floating around the ceiling, and it had a wreath on it, like them Roman generals. Caesar White.

There were cigarettes in the pocket of the coat, and I got one and sat back on the cot. There is no use denying that I felt bad, but I had a lot of confidence back. I was still as tough as was necessary for anything that was likely to happen in this world.

There was a clatter in the jail office, and then I had visitors. I was the only prisoner in the two-cell jug.

Granger Janes was there, with a guy I didn't know.

I said, "I want to see a lawyer. Get Forbes here for me."

Janes said, "This is Dr. Van Leer, White."

"Dentist, veterinarian or minister?" I asked.

"I'm a physician," says this guy. "They tell me you've been shot."

"News gets around," I said. "I don't need a doc. Here's your bullet back, Janes. Better luck next time."

The doctor looked in the cell and said, "Let me in there!"

"You can put on some good bandages," I said. "I put these on myself, with one hand."

He examined me quickly, then whistled. "You—you took the bullet out yourself?"

"The brownies did it," I said. "The little people."

He kept clucking and shaking his head while he put on new bandages, and I knew he would go out into that jail office and tell them what a superman I was, and—that was all that was necessary for them to believe I was one.

So it was just like I said. The boys and the doctor went out, and then Granger Janes came back. He said, "Want something to eat? We're going to take you over to Borax tomorrow to a judge and—"

I said, "I wouldn't, if I were you. Look, Janes. I'm no lawyer, and neither are you. But I'm smart enough to know that you cannot connect that gun with me, and you know it, too. On the other hand, I know that you're not wearing that star legally."

He got a funny look around his face.

I said, "I'll make a deal. Turn me loose, and I'll forget the shooting, the false arrest, the star badges."

"I can't trust you," he muttered, walking around the cell a little.

"That's right," I said cheerfully. "But you know damn well what I'll do if you don't turn me loose."

He shrugged, and then suddenly took the keys out of his pocket, opened the cell gate. "So-long," he said. "So-long."

I left him there, sitting in the cell. I went through the jail office, where the jailer was, and out on the street. The sun was still there. It caught up with me, it hit me in the face, and I jumped back into the jail office. "Take the sun away," I said. "Pull in the sun. I'm Jeff White, see, and when I say the sun don't shine on Camel, it don't shine."

The jailer said, "Get out of here, you stumblebum."

So I had my gun in my hand, and I blasted him down. He was behind the jail desk, see, and I let him have it, and he

went down, like Chicago May had done, holding his belly, doubling up behind the desk.

A little trickle of red went across the jail floor, and I heard Marie say, "Now, he's done it," and Granger Janes saying, "He wasn't tough enough."

They were in my cell, mine, and he was holding her, and they were laughing at me, laughing at me. So I put a slug through each of them cause it's like they say, when you start shooting, don't stop.

I would shoot them all, and I would make a deal with Mussolini to give me some Ethiopians to run Camel, yeah, I would. They would do very good in that sun, and they would call me Duce White.

Duce Jeff, that was me, but what was Stein doing holding up Chicago May and pointing to where I had shot him? Then Ma came and said, "You never would leave Paul alone, Jeff." Paul was Jig, and it was very important that I tell everybody Paul was Jig, so they wouldn't think my Ma was nuts. . . .

THE doctor said, "All right. The slug's out. He'll be okay. I think he's coming out of his delirium now."

It took me a little while to come back from where I had been. This was not even the same doctor I had seen when I was goofy.

"You're going to be all right," Granger Janes said. "Won't he, Pop?"

Pop Geers was there. "Yeah. Sure. We'll look after him okay. I run a good jail."

The doctor said, "What were you trying to do, White? Your shirt was all torn up, and your coat—"

I said, "I was going to take the slug out myself. You can't trust no one."

"Too tough for his own good," Granger said. "You nearly killed yourself, White. We've had to give you two transfusions to save your life at all."

I said, "Let me out of here. This is a frame-up, Doc; they're framing me. You know who I am? I'm the owner of the Camel Mining Company. I—"

Pop Geers said, "You're under arrest for the murder of Harold Chicago May. Anything you say will be used against you."

"I want my lawyer. I want Forbes."

Granger Janes said, "Forget it, boy. Forget it. Forbes appeared before a special hearing of the court, while you've been out, and said you had approached him with all kinds of illegal offers. Forbes sold you out, boy. And you don't own Camel. You don't own a share of mining stock."

I said, "You can't do this to me. You—"

"Forget it, boy. You had a joint stock account with your sister-in-law and brother, and she's just gone down there and closed out the account, so you can't lay a finger on it. The new owner of the Camel Mining Corporation is Mrs. Paul White. You've been out for twenty-four hours. You passed out trying to probe for that bullet."

I gulped. "You'll be sorry for this," I said. "I'm Jeff White and— Where's Marie?"

Janes said, "Los Angeles. I sent her there for a sort of rest. I'm marrying her, Jeff."

He sounded kind of sorry for me, and that was funny. A dope like that being sorry for Jeff White. Too tough for my own good, he says; well, maybe so. If I'd waited for the doc and not tried to take that bullet out of my shoulder, maybe I would have made out. But I think not; I think maybe way back there, way back, where I made my mistake was in taking Marie away from Granger Janes and parading her on the street that way, making a joke of him.

You can do anything to a guy, but you can't make fun of him. Then he forgets all the laws he runs by and does something illegal, like stealing a sheriff's star and shooting you.

Oh, yeah. Sure. As soon as they had me down, they all ganged on me. They took Jig's word that I had given him the gun, and they convicted me of killing Chicago May.

But I'm fooling 'em. I been sneaking string into my cell, and before they take me to the death chamber, me, Jeff White who owned a town, I'll do the Dutch. I'll put the rope I've made around my neck, and do it myself. They'll never get me. I'm too tough and too smart.

ODDITIES IN CRIME

By MAYAN and JAKOBSSON

1. Runaway Norma Parker, by the time she was 21, had outsmarted the whole New York police force. While the Missing Persons Bureau sought her high and low, Norma flitted in and out of police hands on various petty charges, somehow never being identified as her mother's missing daughter. Captured on hold-up charges, a review of her lengthy record at last revealed that she had been "lost" for four years.



2. When Al Wojcheck, of Ashuelot, N. H., decided to kill his wife, he bought some whiskey, poisoned it. On the way home he stopped off to down a few with a couple of friends, accidentally served the poisoned liquor. The two guests died, and Al went to the big house. He got rid of his wife, though. She divorced him.

3. Trouble with most perfect crimes is that they aren't necessarily foolproof—that is proof against fools, which murderers generally are. Only a dope would willingly accept the odds a killing entails; if you don't believe this, try to lay a bet on your ability to get away with murder with any recognized bookie. Joe Kelly, of Somerset, N. H., had actually made a clean getaway from a holdup murder which had netted him some \$60,000 and was skipping merrily about the country, totally unsuspected and disguised as a woman—cops who should have been looking for him had actually helped him across busy intersections on several occasions—when he made the mistake of reaching into his pants pocket to pay a bar check. He had forgotten he wore no pants, in the masculine sense of the word—and the unladylike exposure led to his arrest, the penetration of his disguise—and his conviction for mayhem!

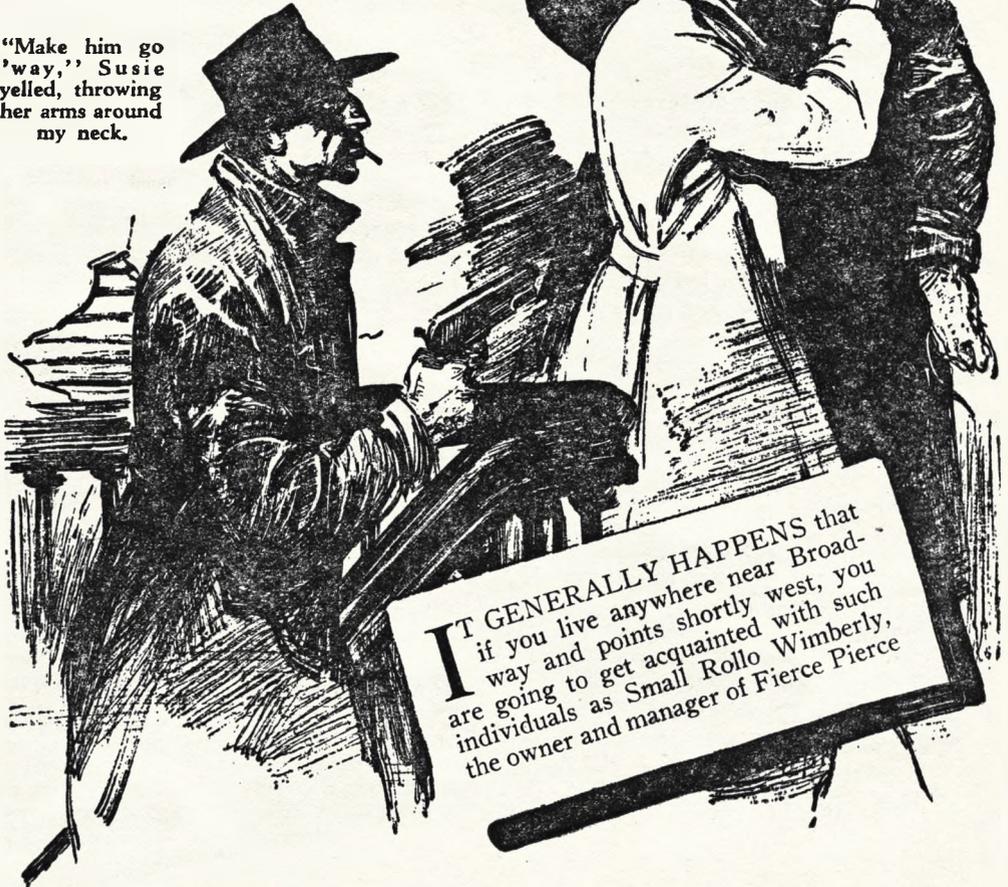


IT SHOULDN'T HAPPEN TO A DOG!

By
JOE KENT

Anyone who gets involved with wrestling manager Small Rollo Wimberly or his boy, Fierce Pierce Purdy (300 pounds of unconsciousness), should have his head examined. Or, anyway, that is what Harry Martin will tell you if you will go down to the City Jail where Harry is currently kept in wraps since Rollo wished that very dead fat lady from the circus on him.

"Make him go 'way," Susie yelled, throwing her arms around my neck.



IT GENERALLY HAPPENS that if you live anywhere near Broadway and points shortly west, you are going to get acquainted with such individuals as Small Rollo Wimberly, the owner and manager of Fierce Pierce

Purdy, and next comes plenty of trouble.

The way this happened was during a lot of confusion on a late Saturday afternoon. Rollo walked in and said, "Greetings, and the cream of the ale to you, Harry."

"Get out! Stand aside!" I yelled at him. I was busy and nervous, which I will explain: After getting discouraged with the vehicles they were throwing at me in the show business, I settled down and launched my little company, namely, Harry's Moving and Transfer. Mostly my work is with theater sets and getting some actor's stuff off the sidewalk after he gets evicted, or storing somebody's bunch of canary birds while they take a cure in Jersey. I have two trucks and a couple of guys I used to know in Newark, plus a part of a warehouse and some envelopes with my name and address. So it is a solid enterprise. But this Saturday afternoon things were coming unglued.

The way it was, a certain actress wanted her junk moved from somewhere to somewhere, and I sent my ace man, Gus. Then, just a minute before Rollo walked in, this certain actress phoned up. Yelling loudly, she said, "I'm going to sue! You'll pay for this! Oh, I could kill you!"

"Honey—" I said. She kept yelling. It was all because Gus had left the door of the truck open and her Snow-Snow was lost, gone. Snow-Snow was a big white cat, it turned out, and now she was lost in Times Square. Then Rollo walked in.

"The cream of the ale," he said again. "Harry, we have been friends for years, haven't we?"

"Don't start that again. Anyway, I'm busy. Get out."

"Harry, we were boys together. Will you lend me a truck for a moment? The need is desperate."

"Where do cats go after they leave Broadway and Forty-sixth?" I demanded wildly.

"A cat," Rollo said, "will generally go upwind." He reached for the key-chain to the old Dodge van. "You have no idea how I appreciate this. My nerves are shattered. Could I approach you for only five dollars?"

"No! Get out! Leave those keys where they are! You can't operate a clock, much less drive a big—" Then the door opened and the actress flew in. "Honey, remem-

ber how upset—" I began. And that was when Rollo ducked under her arm and departed with the keys. I was too nervous to care. Actresses always throw things. "Honey, now! Roberta, please—" She threw her umbrella. Then she began to cry like a worn-out violin.

WELL, that was the way it was. Finally I got this Roberta tacked together again and we started up Broadway, me on the west and Roberta on the other side, looking and inquiring of Snow-Snow. Finally, at eight o'clock she had to go to the Paradise Theater where she was playing in something. I kept looking until about ten, which was when I stopped for a rye in the Bright Hat Bar. Then I remembered Rollo and the truck, and a terrible feeling hit me. Unless you know Rollo, you cannot imagine. But once he used to be the advance man for a midget Indian, which will give you an idea; further, it is suicide to leave Rollo and a saloon on the same island with each other.

"Going," I said to the bartender, and banged out to a cab. All the way back to the warehouse I was remembering how Rollo probably didn't have a driver's license, and couldn't tell the difference between a steering wheel and a portable ironing board, anyway.

I unlocked the big doors and took a fast look into the garage, and my head began to ache. The old Dodge was gone. In the office I grabbed the phone and called the Woolley Hotel, but Mr. Rollo Wimberly didn't live there any more. No forwarding address. I tried Herb at the old Gaiety Club, but he hadn't seen Small Rollo or Fierce Pierce in months. But just in case I found them, tell them for him . . .

Then I heard this sound. It was somewhat like a B-29 going through a telephone booth. It was right outside. I dropped the phone and jumped toward the door. Too late. Rollo made a wicked lunge with the Dodge and the garage doors exploded inward. My Dodge exploded inward, also. There was a crash, then a busy-kitchen sound while glass and tin and such settled on the floor. Rollo opened the door of the cab and mopped his brow.

"Harry, do you know about one-way streets?" he asked. "Inventions of a warped mind, Harry, I assure you. I—"

"You're drunk! Look what you've done! Ruined! Get down from—"

He did. He swayed, reached out and took a grip on the air and smacked on his face as he fell. His black ribbon glasses flew off, his skinny legs kicked slightly, and that was all for Rollo. I could have counted a million. I walked over and put my foot in the middle of his silky black hat. I looked at the front of my Dodge, and I wanted to cry. It looked like something from a war newsreel. Then I noticed this big bundle in the back of the truck. It was a rug, but a very fat rug in the middle.

Because of knowing Rollo, I started unrolling the rug. Something heavy bumped around inside. Finally it rolled out. I took one look. I do not know what I said. I started backing away and sort of fighting the flies. Generally I am very philosophical about things, but not now.

This thing was a woman. Yellow, curly hair and a white baby face and a dozen shiny bracelets on each arm, but the main thing was her size: She was almost bigger than the truck. Naturally I closed my eyes and promised myself never to enter another saloon in my life. Then I looked again. This time she looked even bigger, and there was one more detail: She was dead Down under the sixth chin, her throat was fixed forever.

Just then the cop started yammering from the pile of splinters that had been the doors. I jumped. I slammed the truck door and said, "Yes, sir, yes, sir!" I choked. "Terrible gear trouble! Accident! Sorry to bother you, and I'll clear off the sidewalk instantly. Yes, sir."

Never was I so glad to see a man turn a corner. I grabbed Rollo and shook him up. It was no use. Rollo was through for tonight. It took me a horrible hour to nail some broken boards across the opening. Then I turned out all the lights, got my flashlight and took another peek at the large corpse. This time it looked like a mountain, and cold—dead for longer than a short beer's worth. And ugly, somehow, because of the size and that baby face that wasn't innocent, but pasty and sly and soft.

I crawled out. I tried Rollo again, but he was still dreaming. I worked through his pockets and found ninety cents, two pencils, a pawnshop ticket and a key-and-

tag to Room 433 at the Casino Hotel on Ninth Avenue. I figured Fierce Pierce might be there.

I loaded Rollo in a storeroom and, just in case of noise, tapped him once over the ear. Then I went to the Casino Hotel, which is no hotel to go to if you can avoid it honestly. It is fat and brown and dusty, and it is not polite to ask questions even quietly. I knocked on 433. Presently the floor groaned. The door opened and there was Fierce Pierce. I shuttled in and shut the door fast. "What has Rollo been doing?" I asked. "Where did he get that corpse?"

Fierce stared at me, and after a while you could see the words making the long trip to his brain. He smiled. "Huh?"

FIERCE weighed three hundred pounds. He had a face like a nightmare and hands that could twist a tractor apart. Once he had been a strong man in a Missouri circus. Then Rollo had found him and got him into the wrestling trade. It had looked like a bank with the doors unlocked. Fierce would make man-eating sounds and move his face around until women screamed and men perspired, and you'd close your eyes and wait for the other wrestler to die a horrible death.

But Fierce never won a match. Partly it was because Fierce had never caught on to the trick of thinking. But mainly it was because he couldn't stand to hurt anybody or anything. If the other guy yelled, Fierce would melt like a bowl of vanilla and the next thing, they'd be lugging him off to the showers. He didn't have even a jigger of killer instinct. Mainly he liked to sit in Central Park and feed the pigeons. Every once in a while he'd get arrested for accidentally breaking something and getting excited and not being able to explain. Anyway, it kept Rollo broke trying to feed him, and all the time Rollo was trying to teach Fierce to have some killer instinct. Once he even had him get blood transfusions from Murmuring Mace right after Murmuring beat the rap on the loan-shark murder, but it didn't work: Fierce was sick to his stomach all night, was all.

I took a deep breath and tried slowly: "Fierce, have you ever seen a big, fat woman with yellow hair who was dead?"

He blinked and frowned and after a

while it hit the bottom. He grinned. "Bertha." His voice sounded like a rusty pipe organ.

"Oh. Who is Bertha, Fierce?"

He looked around the big, dirty room as if I hadn't said anything. There was a solitaire layout on a rickety card table, then a couple of beds and a bathroom with some cans of beer under water in the bath tub. "Who is Bertha?" I asked again.

"Used to be married to Bertha," he said. "Married in the circus. Bertha was fat." This was practically an oration for Fierce.

"Oh," I said again. "Now tell me: What killed Bertha?"

That was too much. He shook his head and sat down. "Ask Rollo." He pointed to the floor. "Rug is gone, too, see?" He smiled.

"I see. Fierce, was Bertha in this room?"

"In here. Where the rug was."

"Thank you," I said. I walked out and mopped my face. Downstairs I stopped for one rye to ease my nerves. I did not look well in the mirror. Generally I have a calm, powerful appearance, as Josie often tells me and as I must admit—a sort of out-in-the-west look is the best way I can tell you. Only tonight I reminded myself of a sick horse from Yonkers. I put another rye in storage and hurried back to my little enterprise on West Forty-ninth. I am of a friendly disposition, but I was also getting mad at Rollo. So I pulled down the shades, hauled him into the office and gave him an oil can full of water in the face.

He sputtered and waved his skinny arms. "Whoof!"

"Yeah, and to hell with it! Where did you get that corpse from, and what's the idea of bringing it here?"

He started grabbing for his ribbon glasses. Rollo made you think of a cross between a phony duke and a bantam rooster. "Someone struck me!" he yelped. I told him he fell on his face, and what about the corpse?

"Is there any whiskey in the house? My head is splitting. Harry, listen to me. Remember we are companions." He grabbed my tie. "She had twenty-six thousand dollars, *all in cash!*" he wheezed shrilly.

"So you killed her for it and then borrowed my truck to—"

"No, no! Harry, how sordid!" He gave me the big-brown-eye treatment. "Believe me, Harry, it was exactly like I tell you: Fierce and I stepped out of the hotel room for a breath of air and a bite of duck at the Wayforth Cafeteria. That was perhaps three this afternoon. A shower came up. Certainly you remember the shower, Harry? We hastened back to our room and woe! Bertha lay upon the floor, dead as a whale in Tulsa." He waved his hands in my face. "Obviously something had to be done, and then I remembered Harry. I said to myself, 'Now, Harry and I have known each—'"

"Don't tell me what you said!" I found the half-pint of bourbon and touched myself lightly. "Now, listen, you will not get a drink until you tell me the truth. What about all the money you say she had?"

"I saw it. Down inside those suitcases she wears for shoes. Please, Harry." He waved at the bottle. "It was like this: Once Bertha and Fierce were married. I mean honorably. But finally Bertha gave up. She wanted class and culture, and Fierce couldn't learn to count, so she said no. But things just drifted along all these years and there wasn't any divorce. Nobody with class and culture wanted Bertha, I guess, and she got lonely and sort of unhappy, and then a couple of months ago she had a heart attack on account of her weight. So she started thinking and remembering Fierce. She wrote a letter, saying she'd quit the circus and was coming to New York to see him. I had to read him the letter. Well . . ." He looked at the bottle and sort of moaned.

"You were saying . . ." I prompted in my cold voice.

"Well, yes. So here she came last Friday. It was a terrible time because Fierce was getting transfusions again from Murmuring Mace, and Murmuring was getting nasty about not getting his money promptly, and Fierce kept getting sick at his stomach and not showing a spark of killer instinct. Then Bertha walked in. After a bit of talk and a few beers, I discovered that Bertha had always saved her money. This encouraged me. Later she said she had a bad ticker and Fierce was the only person who had ever loved

her, so she'd been thinking . . . I hurried out for more beer. Toward midnight I persuaded Bertha to let me glimpse the roll in her shoe. Harry, I swear—thousand-dollar bills! I saw them!"

"Skip it and get to the business," I said bluntly.

"But that's all. Bertha came to the hotel every day, or we would drop over to her place in the Glossock for a dry martini, and everything was moving comfortably. In fact, Bertha advanced me a small sum against my frozen assets in Italy. Then it happened. We stepped out today for a bite of duck, and Bertha was a corpse when we got home. That is the truth."

"And where is the bankroll, Rollo?"

HE LOOKED at me and shook his head. "Gone. I investigated. Gone. I was dismayed. You are aware of my feelings about the police. They have been rude to me in the past. So I said to myself, Harry will be glad to assist in—"

"And what are your plans regarding the corpse?" I asked.

"I thought we might—might take it upstate a bit and leave it quietly. Anything. You can handle that sort of thing so beautifully, Harry," he said anxiously. "And Fierce will never remember about the corpse or helping me move it down the stairs or anything. In ten hours it will be gone from his mind forever. Be reasonable, Harry."

I sat down and rubbed at the back of my neck. "Reasonable! You take my truck and bring back a corpse! You tear down my doors and wreck—"

"I was nervous. An officer attempted to halt me regarding a slight accident on a wrong-way street, but I sped away when he attempted—"

"What?" I was standing up and shaking. "You had a little accident and a cop tried to grab you?" I got Rollo's neck. "In my truck?"

"But I lost him. He leaped when I drove near the parked cars. He—"

I could hear myself talking. I couldn't see very well. I was trying to explain to Rollo about the numbers and the name on my truck, and how any minute an army of cops would rush in the door. And find a corpse. "We've got to get that woman out of here immediately!" I yelled.

It was a terrible business. First we had to push the Dodge aside with the Ford, then drag Bertha into the Ford, then tear down the boards I'd nailed over the broken doors. Rollo kept moaning, "Oh, why does everything happen to me, Harry? What have I ever done wrong?"

"You have never made an honest living, for one thing. Look at me."

"But you are strong, Harry. Great muscles, massive bones. All I've got to depend on is my brain." He was almost crying. "And I *saw* the money! In cash, right at my fingertips! If only—"

And then the telephone began to ring. Telephones don't usually ring at 2:30 in the morning in offices. Then I remembered about telling Susie we'd see a show and maybe have a beer. Susie is very lovely, and it is my understanding that we are going to get married when things settle down. Anyway, I grabbed the phone and said, "Sweetheart, baby, don't get mad, honey! I can gladly explain exactly why—"

"That's great, sweetheart," said a voice that wasn't my Susie's. It was a man, talking blunt, and I could tell he wasn't happy. "You can tell that little second-hand beachcomber to rake up the twenty-six grand, and in a hurry. That dead balloon stays in your garage until the money is in my lunch basket. If that truck even sticks its bumper outside, the cops will get something to work on. Are you listening to what I say?"

I cleared my throat, but unsuccessfully. "Uh. Oh, yes. If—"

"Fine. Tell him I want the money quick. I will call back, as they say, every hour on the hour."

"Uh," I said. "Wait! Let us discuss this affair very calmly. I—"

He hung up. I spun around and hauled Rollo up by his sooty shirt. "So you're a liar, too! So you *did* get the money! The whole story was—"

"No, no, Harry . . ." He began to turn purple for lack of air. I let him go and he flopped against the wastebasket. "Nothing could be further from the facts," he gasped finally. "No, no, Harry."

He was too scared to be lying, I had a feeling. "But if the guy on the phone was the killer, *he* didn't get the money. And he must have been the murderer. He—I have

a headache." I sat down. Then I got up fast. "But the cops will be coming in, asking about your trouble on the one-way—Oh, this is the end of my little business, I can see already! If you—Go nail those boards back across the door!" I grabbed the phone. There was only one thing to do, so I did it.

"Susie?" I said. "My pet, please listen to what—" She hung up. I phoned again. After about six minutes of ringing, she answered again. It took some time for me to get in a word. Susie was saying many things about me that were not true. When she finally choked, I got in a line:

"But, honey, there has been a death, and it's still in my Ford truck."

"A death in your Ford? Harry," she said in that soft, careful voice she will sometimes use to ask questions, "Harry, have you been drinking?"

"No. Honey, you've got to come down here and help me think."

After that, Rollo and I got Bertha and moved her from the Ford to the rear storage space where I was keeping Clarissa Morlan's sofa and love seat while she was in Reno. I locked the storage door.

WHEN Susie walked in, she took one look at Rollo, then stared at me. "I can imagine," she began. "And didn't you promise me never to associate with—"

"But I didn't. He came in and associated with my truck. Please, baby, only sit down and listen." She didn't sit down, but she listened. Her blue eyes began to get bright and dark. She put her hands on her hips. Susie is not very large, but she is very fast. I moved back a little.

"Stand still." She peered at Rollo. "You, is this the truth?"

He said yes, very quickly. He kept far across the room.

"In all of my life, I have never seen or heard . . ." Susie said and gave up. She began to walk up and down the room. I hoped she was thinking. Susie reads many books and goes to serious movies, and is very skilled at thinking in a pinch. Suddenly she turned around toward Rollo.

"Who knew about this twenty-six grand in Bertha's shoe?"

"Bertha," Rollo said promptly. "And myself, naturally. Fierce saw and heard about it, but that doesn't mean he knew. Otherwise, I think Bertha didn't like to talk about it in public."

Susie moved closer to him. "But whom did you tell?" she wanted to know pointedly. "And don't say you didn't breathe a word."

"Well, to be exact, I did happen to mention to a certain creditor that—"

"Who? Which creditor?"

"Murmuring Mace. You see, he was getting nasty about the twenty dollars I'd promised to pay him for giving Fierce the killer-instinct transfusions, and I only wanted to assure Murmuring that soon I would be glad to pay the entire—"

"Now, we are getting to the bottom of the soup," Susie said coldly. "Out of all New York, you picked a criminal, a murderer—"

"But I—I didn't tell him which shoe it was in," Rollo protested wildly. Susie hit him. Susie hits very fast. Rollo began to crawl along the wall and urge Susie to remember she was a lady.

"Shut up," she told him. "Did Bertha always carry the bankroll in her shoe? And did Murmuring know where she was?"

This situation calls for

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"Yes. No. I mean, I don't know. I mean, first she was staying at the Glossock Hotel, then there was some trouble about the beds breaking, and finally she moved to the Prince Maurice. Naturally I don't know whether Murmuring heard of it or not. It was the sort of thing I wouldn't mention. And I certainly don't know whether she carried her money all the time."

Susie gave him a look and started walking again. "Let me get this again: You characters were starting to open the garage doors and drive away, and then you got this phone call telling you to back up?"

Rollo and I nodded. "Next," said Susie fast, "where is Murmuring staying these days?"

"At the Lucifer Hotel. An unpleasant inn," Rollo began. Susie picked up the phone book and started looking.

"On West Ninety-eighth," she mused. "We will see." She phoned and asked for Mr. Mace. Mr. Mace was not in. "Strike two," she said softly, and she looked intently out the window onto the dark street. She lit a cigarette and frowned. I could tell Susie was thinking very skillfully at this time. Abruptly she stood up.

"You," she said, meaning me, "come on. And you," to Rollo, "sit here and keep the telephone from getting lonely. If your man calls up, tell him the deal is cooking. And don't try to do anything that seems intelligent to you!"

Susie and I walked out. The street was damp and glistening and very quiet. We turned east toward Tenth Avenue. We were walking fast and saying nothing. I was thinking about Murmuring. The way he got that name was from sitting off in some corner by himself, with his hands spread out and him looking at them and whispering to them. Once in a while he'd bend his fingers and smile, or once in a while break into a soft laugh. There was something unusual, I would say, about Murmuring. He had soft brown eyes and a grey face and he was thin. He walked sort of bent forward and looking straight ahead, like a man who was seeing something that nobody else could see, and he was trying to follow it wherever it was going. People used to say he was a snowbird.

I got to know Murmuring years ago when I was starting to break into show business as a character actor doing strong, ruthless parts. He was going with a little pretty in a show, and then the next thing we knew, somebody had wrapped a wire coat-hanger around her neck and hung her from a kitchen door. Later I heard people saying quietly that maybe it had been Murmuring. I did not ask him.

"Stop talking to yourself and walk faster," Susie snapped at me. By this time we had practically circled the block. When we got back to Forty-ninth Street, Susie stopped. "Three bars, one night club, two cafes, and that flop house. Plus the subway holes," she said. I asked what about all that. "Where he could get to a telephone," she said. "The point, Harrison, is this: He is nearby. He looks. He phones. See?"

"Oh. Certainly," I said. "The thing to do: I'll give those places the old break-'em-in! Straight in and at him! A couple of pops over the ears and he'll tell us—"

"Harry, you are such a wonderfully simple type," Susie said. "Murmuring has been hit by experts. He won't tell you which tooth hurts. What is needed is a trap. So." She turned and stuck her finger against my chest. "Listen. Go back to the office. Walk fast, like a man who's done what he went out to do. I will bet that a phone call follows you right in the door. When it happens, say you've got the money and agree to deliver it. Or let Rollo deliver it. Make a package of old newspapers. Is that clear?"

"Certainly." I did not like the way Susie was talking. "But then what happens when it isn't the money? Have you ever thought of that?"

"Slightly." She gave me a push. "Go on. I will see you sooner than I care to."

I WENT back to the office where Rollo was finishing my half-pint of whiskey. "Harry," he said miserably, "maybe we should go to Quebec."

"And take Bertha?" I was getting sore again. I made a fat package out of old wrapping paper. Before I got the string tied, the phone began to holler. It was the guy, and I said the money was ready.

"Nice," he said with a wet-lipped sound.

"Tell Small Rollo to take a walk to Tenth Avenue and then turn uptown. Tell him to throw the money into the first trash can he passes where nobody is looking, and then keep going. If anybody follows him, or if Rollo happens to turn around, the cops will start climbing through your trucks like mice in a pantry."

"Yes. I will tell him," I said gloomily. I told him, and Rollo looked even more discouraged.

"I wish I was in Quebec this very minute. I am afraid of this situation, Harry. Do you think he will shoot me in the small of the back?"

"No," I lied, and handed Rollo the package. He pulled his knees together and limped out the door. About four minutes passed; then the door banged open in a hurry and in came Susie and Fierce Pierce, looking sleepy and very ugly.

"Hurry," Susie commanded. "Bertha! Get her into the Ford, and get her there fast. Roll her in the rug. Don't stand there, hurry!"

I hurried and Fierce lumbered around like a happy bear. Susie was jerking off the last boards from the door. "Now—in," she snapped. "Drive fast to Murmuring's hotel. The Lucifer, West Ninety-eighth."

Not since the army have I abused a car so much. We were boiling up Broadway at Seventy-second Street when I heard somebody let out a yell. I got one peep at a prowling car, then at the cop that was yelling at me. I knew he'd spotted my number, or maybe I'd missed a light.

"Faster," Susie yelled. "Make a turn! Shake him off!"

I made a turn and did something terrible to a cute coupe that was parked on the left. A siren started crying. We made another turn. The siren faded away. Finally I let the Ford sag to a stop half a block from the Lucifer, which is certainly not much of a hotel for anybody's mother.

"Give me three minutes with the clerk," Susie said, "then you and Fierce gallop through and up the stairs with that rug and Bertha. Mace's room is 508. Fierce can handle the lock. I'll be there right behind you. Try not to make any more noise than I know you will." Then she jumped out and ran into the hall of a lobby. I started counting.

"Moon. Moon tonight. Pretty," Fierce observed pleasantly.

"Thank you," I said. "Get out and pick up one end of Bertha."

I will say this much for Fierce: He cannot think, but he can carry a corpse in a rug. We went through the lobby like we were All-Americans playing the Percival Junior High. We went up the stairs on pure momentum. When we hit the fifth-floor corridor, I pointed to Murmuring's door.

Fierce didn't really understand. He just put his hand on the knob and pushed and walked in carrying the door with him. Just as we got Bertha inside, Susie came along. "It's a wonderful thing what a fainting woman can do to a man," she panted. "He's still looking for the ammonia. Put her on the bed. Now, get all the light globes and put them in your pocket. Murmuring must have a nervous build-up. Now, let's get out of here!"

But instead of going downstairs, we went up one flight behind Susie. She gave us the hush, and there we sat on the steps like kids waiting to see Sister get kissed goodnight. About twenty minutes passed. Then light footsteps sounded below us. They turned into the fifth-floor corridor, and I could almost feel Susie's brows going up in a curve. I counted eleven, then I heard this sound that made me think of a guy hitting himself with a hammer in the stomach. Out came the breath, then silence. Murmuring had struck a match and looked at his bed, I figured. Then it happened. Susie leaned out the little window and let out a scream that was worse than in opera.

"Help! Police, help, help! Murder!" she screamed.

Things came quickly to a boil right then. I heard Murmuring busting along the hall; then he leaned over the stairs. His face was white instead of grey, and wet instead of dry, and in his hand was a large .38 that was dancing like a flag in the wind.

Doors began to slam open and people in nighties said, "Huh? What?"

Big footsteps were rumbling around in the lobby, then getting closer up the stairs. And from where I was peeping over, you could see Murmuring trying to decide what to do, and mainly he was getting somewhat hysterical. The gun kept danc-

ing, and his lips folded back to show two rows of yellow teeth. Then a cop bulled into sight from the third floor, and Murmuring made up his mind. The .38 roared. The cop did a jump backward, his face changing shape in a hurry, and Murmuring spun around and started running along the corridor. People began yelling down that corridor. The .38 banged again and Murmuring reappeared, this time very hysterical in every way. That was when he came bouncing up the steps and practically into our laps.

FROM the scream Susie let out, I knew this hadn't been in her plans. She threw her arms around my neck and yelled, "Make him go away!"

Murmuring took one hard look, and you could see him getting the whole answer. You could also see him moving the gun toward my eyes.

I threw the only thing I had in my hand—one of the light globes. I yelled to Fierce to grab him. The .38 roared and Susie kept screaming. In the middle of all this, Fierce grunted in a funny way—like somebody had stepped on his toe. I got a glimpse of a red patch filling up around his shoulder. Then he started reaching toward Murmuring, and right then the killer instinct came bubbling up. But it wasn't his shoulder that caused it. You will not believe it: Somebody had let a little black dog out of some room, and there was Murmuring, all tangled up with the dog and stepping on its tail, and the dog howling like it was going to die.

"Dog. Nice little dog," Fierce growled at Murmuring; then he put his big hand around Murmuring's hatband and you could almost see Murmuring's skull bend inward. He yelled. His fingers flew open and the gun flew out. He kicked as Fierce lifted him off the floor and the dog's tail. He kept yelling in a weaker voice as Fierce stared at him like a hungry gorilla. Then Fierce gently put his other hand against Murmuring's face and pushed. I will never forget the sound. Murmuring stopped yelling. When Fierce opened his hands, Murmuring rolled down the stairs and stopped where the cops were waiting.

"Little dog," Fierce said again, very softly. "Nice dog."

"Is that man dead?" Susie asked in a shaky voice to the cops. They were holding a huddle over Murmuring. Finally one looked up.

"Give him another minute, baby," the cop said.

Then in came a hard-faced gentleman with a look of authority. "What's all the frolic about?" he said.

Well, I will say this: It is amazing how conditions change when the corpse is in somebody else's bed, and Susie is doing the telling. She picked up her skirt a little and stepped daintily over Mr. Murmuring; then she gave the hard guy a timid little smile and said, "I will tell you all about it, sir." Which she did, from the first, through the middle, and to the end. "And I am sure you will find fingerprints and death knives and all kinds of valuable proof if you just look around his room," she added. "I am very sorry that it got so confused at first, but I am sure you understand. I wasn't there to arrange things, or I would have called you the very first moment."

The hard guy began to melt toward Susie and he said something like, "You poor little kid, doing your best . . ." Then he gave me the eye, and the hard look came back. "You, you big ape, letting a little girl in for this!" Then he yelled at the cops. "Go get Rollo! Arrest him. This guy, too!"

So that is the way it turned out, and I am writing this because I have the time on my hands in jail: Thirty days and three hundred dollars for causing public disturbances with corpses and other technicalities. Rollo is with me, also, doing the same for reckless driving, driving without a license, resisting arrest, and also the corpse. But that is not all. Naturally they found the twenty-six grand in Bertha's new hotel room, in an old shoe. And what did the court do? I will tell you bitterly: They appointed Susie Fierce's guardian. She put all but a hundred rocks in a Fierce Pierce savings account, and the hundred she is using to buy Fierce some thinking transfusions from an honor college graduate in Twelfth Street. She says she will not be happy until the last drop of Murmuring's killer blood is out of Fierce.

It is killing Rollo.

BLACK WIDOW

He was just a wizened little man with a scrawny neck and a big nose—and a knife in his throat.



There was only one person who could save Sam Dolan from the execution chamber—me. But why should I, while I was living on Sam Dolan's money, and eating Sam Dolan's food—and making love to Sam Dolan's wife?

**By TALMAGE
POWELL**

SAM DOLAN was going to die. He was going to have the life knocked out of him by several thousand volts for a murder he hadn't committed. He was caged up in the death house, waiting to die, knowing it was going to happen. The papers knew he would die, the judge that sentenced him, the man who would

execute him. Everybody knew he was going to die—except the woman he was married to. She refused to believe it.

I saw her that first time in my office. She came in, let the door swing closed, and stood against it. She was a slip of a woman, dressed in cheap print, wearing cheap hose, clutching a large, worn handbag. Everything about her was clean and neat—almost prim—and you knew just by looking at her that she did her own house-keeping and knew how to put a wash out on the line.

At that moment I didn't know her from Eve and to me Sam Dolan was just a name in the paper.

"Mr. Carruthers?"

"Guilty," I said, "of being same. Won't you sit down, Miss—"

"Mrs. Dolan." She sat down and tucked her feet under the chair so that her toes rested on the floor. "I'm Mrs. Jennie Dolan—and my husband is the Sam Dolan the papers have been featuring."

I went around the desk and sat down. She said, "Mr. Carruthers, I want you to get my husband out of the death house."

I didn't laugh. I met her gaze. She had enormous questioning blue eyes. She tipped her lips with her tongue and said, "I know how it must seem to you. My husband was tried in a court of law and found guilty. You'll say to me that the police made a far more extensive investigation than you'll be able to, that you can't do anything for me."

She was pretty fast on the uptake. "How'd you happen to come to me?"

"I only have three hundred dollars. I borrowed that on my insurance. It took every nickel we could raise for Sam's trial. So I—I thought with only three hundred, and you being in a building in this end of town . . ." She colored, dropped her eyes.

"It's okay," I said. "You haven't insulted me. Let's see the color of the three hundred."

She laid the three hundred on the desk. I pushed it with the top of a pencil. Both of us were looking at it, and the money took on a strange, sudden quality, almost like a queer bond between us.

"Just what do you want me to do for this?"

She dropped her gaze again and

watched her thin fingers snap and unsnap the catch on her bag.

"There was a witness at my husband's trial," she whispered, "a little man named Patrick Perry. I don't think he told everything he could have." She snapped the bag hard and left it that way. "I want you to get the truth out of him, Mr. Carruthers."

"The police must have questioned him," I reminded her.

The faint whisper turned to steel. "But you can do things—use methods—that the police can't."

"Even if I have to beat this Patrick Perry half to death?"

She caught her lip in her teeth. "Even if you have to do that. I was awake all night thinking about this. There is a chance that Perry told the truth. But Sam swears that Perry didn't. I have to know, don't I?"

"With a man in the death house, I suppose you do." I pushed back in my chair. "You must love Sam a lot, Jennie Dolan."

"No—I can't say that I love him. You look surprised. Maybe he didn't kill the girl that night, but he was in her apartment. I've taken a lot from Sam, but that seemed to kill something in me. If you free him, I suppose I'll carry on with him, because now his drinking and things like that can't hurt me any more. If I hated him, I might let him die. I just feel nothing for him. Yet I'm all he has left, and I wouldn't leave a wounded dog to lie in the street."

It seemed to me that whatever else he was, this Sam Dolan was a grade-A fool.

SHE'D WANGLED permission for us to see Sam before coming up to my office. She had been that sure of herself. She didn't say much on the short ride up to State Prison. She seemed to enjoy the ride even in my groaning sedan, the fresh air of the country brushing her small, pale face. She watched the scenery crawl by as if she didn't get to see new scenery very often.

We had to wait in an office; then we went through doors that clanged, and down dull grey, steel and concrete corridors. The guard stopped at a cell and said, "Dolan!"

Inside the cell Sam Dolan swung off

his cot and stood up. In his prison grey he was short and stocky, with a neck like a bull, a square face and hair that stood up on his head like the black bristles of a brush. His nose looked as if it had been broken three or four times. He called his wife honey when he said hello to her, but there was a kind of veiled contempt and impatience in his eyes when he looked at her.

The guard stood outside the locked door and watched us. Jennie said, "This is Mr. Carruthers, Sam, a private detective. He's coming to find Patrick Perry for us."

Sam Dolan looked me up and down. He didn't sneer, but he didn't seem too impressed. He sat on the end of the bunk, hands clasped behind his head, and leaned against the wall. "I'm pretty damn well railroaded, Carruthers. Think you can really do me any good?"

"I can try."

"And take Jennie's money, of course, just for the trying."

"Sam!"

"What else did you give him?" There was a thin sneer in his voice, and she looked at the floor, going beet red. Then and there I learned to hate Sam Dolan.

"Guard!" I said. At that moment, I would just as soon have helped them dust off the welcome mat in the death chamber for him.

I felt his touch on my arm, and I turned back to face him. He was a big bruiser and I guess he'd browbeaten her for so long and had so many men step lightly for him that his attitude had got to be a habit.

"I didn't mean that the way it sounded, Carruthers. But shut up here, facing the chair—well, you get half crazy. You're my last hope. Don't walk out on me." He was almost whining by the time he finished. I felt like telling him to go to hell, but I looked past him, and her wide blue eyes decided me.

"Let's hear your story, Dolan."

He wasn't able to tell me a hell of a lot I couldn't have got from the court transcript. He was going to burn for the murder of one Blanche Sloan, a fast-living blonde. For several weeks prior to her death Sam had been carrying on an affair with the Sloan woman. She'd taken him for every nickel she could, then

given him the gate. He admitted that he felt like killing her, but claimed someone else had beaten him to it.

"I guess it was in the cards for her to get murdered," Sam said, not looking at his wife. "She was that kind of dame, Blanche was."

On the night of her death Sam fed the fuel of his anger at a bar called the Swanee River. Stinko, he'd decided to go up to Blanche's place and have it out with her. Between having her and the load of alcohol in his blood, he was in a fever.

He'd gone to her apartment. The door hadn't been locked and he'd walked in. She wasn't in the sitting room, nor the bedroom, nor kitchenette. He'd decided she must have stepped out. He helped himself to a bottle of rye in the sitting room and waited for her. He'd been drunker than he'd thought, and the rye had knocked him. He'd passed out trying to get the window up for some fresh air.

The whole time, Blanche Sloan had been dead in her bathroom.

Dolan popped his big knuckles. "She'd been strangled, with a towel. I woke up with a cop shaking me and a girl friend of Blanche's looking like she'd scream at every dark shadow the rest of her life. The girl friend had found the body.

"I tried to tell them I hadn't done it. There was only one out for me—a scrawny little bartender in the Swanee River named Patrick Perry. He served me all that evening. The cops established that Blanche was killed between ten and eleven, and I didn't leave the Swanee River until after two. This Patrick Perry knew the time I left because I asked him. See, I was waiting on Blanche that night. Finally, I knew I had been stood up, which is why I went on to her place. I asked this Patrick Perry the time, He said it was two-twenty, and I said that I had to go teach a dame not to stand me up. He couldn't have forgotten. But at the trial he just said that he'd noticed me in the Swanee River early in the evening but that he didn't know what time I'd left."

"He's the only one who saw you?"

"Hell, lots of people must have seen me. But what are people in a bar? Just shadows. Who'd remember me? The lights are extra dim in the Swanee River, anyway.

"It was a lulu for the cops, and they pinned it on me. What else could I expect? No alibi. Found with the body. And absolutely no evidence that anybody else had come or gone from Blanche's apartment all that night. The D. A. called it a sordid love killing while I was in a drunken rage, and the jury agreed with him. I've had one or two charges against me in the past and that didn't help any. So I'm here."

The guard outside the cell said, "Okay, okay, time's up."

Dolan stayed slouched back on his bunk as Jennie and I rose to go. At the cell door, she said, "Mr. Carruthers will find Patrick Perry, Sam. I know he will."

Dolan licked his thick lips and said huskily, "I hope Caruthers is man enough to make him talk."

IT WAS almost dark when Jennie Dolan and I got back to town. She lived in a small frame house on lower Conover street. It was a neighborhood where kids swarmed on the sidewalks in summer and men sat on their front porches in undershirts. You could get a faint whiff of Conover street garbage cans mingled with the smell of the river.

I parked the car, and I could hear her breathing beside me. "The house looks kind of pitiful this time of day, doesn't it?" she said. I didn't think she wanted me to answer, so I didn't. She said, "We shouldn't have to live like this. Sam used to make big money as a boss on construction jobs, but somehow even then we never had anything."

I don't know why I did it, but I reached forward and took her hand. Maybe looking at the pale oval of her face, lost, hurt, like a child's, did something to me.

When my hand touched hers, something happened to me. I heard the sibilant speeding of her breath. She shivered, exactly as if a chill breeze had struck her. Both her hands closed over mine, almost in a fierce grip, and her fingers stroked up my arm. I saw her face coming closer, like a white blur of paint against the dark canvas of night. I could feel her breath against my cheek now, and behind her slightly parted lips I caught the faint gleam of her teeth. I kissed her and moved my hands up to her shoulders, and

her flesh burned through the cloth into my hands. She was soft and yielding, as if she didn't care how long I kissed her.

I let her go, still tasting her lips on mine. "You call me by my first name from now on," she whispered. "You call me Jennie." Then she slipped out of the car and was gone.

The next morning, I realized I hadn't slept well, and I was still thinking about her. I sat on the edge of the swaybacked bed and looked at the room I called home. The plaster was cracked, the floor bare, the mirror on the bureau browned with age. I wondered what I'd done with my life, how the years had managed to slip past me.

I dressed and went out on the bustling street. I ate sinkers and coffee for breakfast, got my car out of the alley and drove down to Headquarters.

I asked about Patrick Perry and learned that he was just a punk of a bartender. If he'd ever been mixed in crime before, he hadn't been caught. He had no record. The address the lads there had was a place on Water Street, down near my own rooming house.

The Water Street place was a huge frame house that had been converted into a commercial establishment. It needed paint. A sagging porch ran across the front of the house. Over the porch was a wooden sign with some of the letters blurred that read: Rooms, Light house-keeping Apts.

A tired-looking woman in a dirty house dress was sitting in the front-porch swing, giving her baby a jiggle now and then when it threatened to cry on her shoulder. I asked if the landlady was in and she called shrilly, "Mrs. Hawkinnnnns!"

A door slammed in the gloomy hall, and a wizened woman came to the door. She needed some teeth and from the way she squinted her gimlet eyes she needed some glasses. She wiped her hands on her apron and said, "Yes?"

"I'd like to see Mr. Perry."

"He ain't here."

"When do you expect him back?"

I dunno. He moved out three days ago."

"Did he say where he was moving?"

She pushed a fingernail under the ball of mousy hair at the back of her head

and scratched. "Are you the police?" "No," I said. "But I could make it worth your while if I could talk to my old friend Patrick."

I didn't miss the gleam in her eye, but then she shrugged. "He didn't say where he was moving. But he did leave a few of his things here."

"Will he be back for them?"

"I dunno. Maybe. Maybe not. Don't prowl in things people trust to me to keep. Don't know if the stuff is worth his coming back for."

I slipped my wallet from my pocket and showed her the corner of one of Jennie's fifty-dollar bills. "My name is Carruthers, office in the Johnson Building. If you find where Patrick Perry is living, you call me up and I'll give you this. Understand? No strings attached."

She raised her beady eyes from the bill to my face and wiped a tiny gleam of saliva from the corner of her rat-trap mouth. "If he sets foot around here, I'll call you."

She kept her eyes on me until I'd driven away. I turned the little anti-draft window until the breeze was blowing full in my face. I felt as if I needed some fresh air.

AFTER LUNCH, I went to the Swanee River bar. It was a hole-in-the-wall, wedged between two office buildings. There was a long bar, and on beyond that a small area given to booths. Nobody that looked like Patrick Perry was tending bar.

I watched the fat man mop the bar with a rag for a moment, bought a beer I didn't want and asked him what time Perry came to work.

"He ain't working here any more," the

fat man said. "Quit two, three days ago." "That so?" I raised my brows. "Pat didn't say anything about quitting to me. Where'd he go?"

"You got me. I'm new here. The boss might tell you. He's in the office, in back."

It wasn't much of an office, a gloomy little rat hole at the end of a short corridor. I stood in the open doorway and cleared my throat. The sawed-off, roly-poly man behind the desk looked up. He was red of face, grey of eye and bald on his head. He had massive, drooping lips and a flat, wide nose.

"Hate to bother you," I said. "But I want to inquire about someone. You're the owner?"

He clasped his hands together, rested them on the invoices on his desk and said, "I'm Swanee Jackson. What was it you wanted to know?"

"I just got in town, Mr. Jackson, and I'm looking for an old friend, Patrick Perry. Last I heard of him he was working here. I understand he quit."

"Yes, he did. Last Wednesday."

"Do you know where he went?"

"I'm sorry, I don't." He gave me a smile of dismissal. "Wish I could be of more help." He picked up an invoice, and I thanked him for his time and went out.

The rest of the afternoon I tried to pick up a lead on Patrick Perry. But I was working with only half of my mind. All the time she was there in my thoughts, bothering me. And when night began to steal softly over the earth, I told myself I should report the day's results.

I drove over to her house, knocked, and she answered the door. She took my hat,

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and I went in. It was a simple, poor, plain house. In a way it was like her, lost, with something intangibly but infinitely sad about it. What the place needed was laughter.

She looked different tonight. There was a sparkle in her eyes, and she had put some lipstick on.

"I thought you'd like to know what I've been doing on the case," I said.

"I would—but later. I knew you would come by. I have to go out in the kitchen. I'm cooking dinner for you."

I walked over to the window and looked out in the soft darkness. "What if you had been wrong? What if I hadn't come by?"

"I'd be watching the food get cold in that case, wouldn't I?" she said. I heard her go out in the kitchen. I didn't move from the window for a few moments. I just stood there, thinking how young the night was. . . .

DID YOU EVER try to put your hands on a wisp of smoke on a windy day? That's the way I felt searching for Patrick Perry in the days that followed. He had vanished. He was around none of his old haunts. I tried to interest Pomeroy at Headquarters, but officially the Dolan case was closed and they were too busy to get interested in Patrick Perry.

I wondered about Sam Dolan now and then, if he was tough enough to take the waiting and gnawing silence in the death house. I had a picture of Patrick Perry I'd got from a newspaper file, and every time I looked at it or showed it to somebody I thought of Sam Dolan.

I went by Jennie's house to report no progress the first two nights. The third night we didn't talk about the case any.

Then on the afternoon of the fifth day came a break. It had been a day of leg-work and I was tired and bedraggled when I walked down the corridor toward my office.

Mrs. Hawkins, the Water Street landlady, was waiting outside the office for me. She was wearing a straw hat decorated with dusty artificial flowers. Her gimlet eyes fastened on my face. "I've been waiting for you, Mr. Carruthers."

I unlocked the office, let her shuffle inside, and closed the office door.

"Give me the fifty dollars."

"You know where Patrick Perry is?"

"You promised me the fifty dollars. Let me have it first."

Jennie's three hundred wasn't what it had been, but the fifty wasn't quite alone in my wallet. I creased the bill, and Mrs. Hawkins snatched it from me.

"Patrick Perry came back after his things. Asked if anybody had been asking for him. I told him no. He didn't know it, but I followed him. He's staying at a cheap hotel across town, the Marianna. I saw him go in and get his key at the desk."

Mrs. Hawkins moved to the door. "Is Perry mixed up in that Blanche Sloan murder case? Is that why you're looking for him?"

"No, it's something else."

She didn't believe me and looked as if her natural instincts were going to lead her to try and pry more information out of me, but I showed her out.

I flopped down in the desk chair. I don't know how long I sat there thinking about it. Finally I got up, left the building and drove over to Jennie Dolan's. I told her that I'd located Perry and that I was going after him late tonight.

When I finally caught up with Patrick Perry that night he had a knife in his throat.

I gave the slouching clerk at the Marianna a quick flash of my buzzer and scared him into telling me that Patrick Perry was up in his room, and into lending me a passkey. I went up in the creaking old elevator, down the shadow-ridden corridor, and put my ear to Perry's door. I heard nothing, so I unlocked the door and went in. I pulled my gun, slid my fingertips down the wall until I found the light switch. When I snapped the lights on, I saw him: a wizened little man with a scrawny neck and a big nose—and a knife in his throat.

Then my scalp got up and needled across my skull. I heard a slow, faint, rattling breath. And Perry's eyes, glazing, were staring straight at me.

I moved to the bed. There was nothing I could do for him, no matter how much his dying, tortured eyes pleaded. He'd been left for dead by a fast-moving killer. He was tough, all right, or he wouldn't have lasted this long.

Without knowing it I had my notebook and pen in my hand, and I had the feeling that he knew without being told what I wanted. I said close to his ear, "You want to get the person who did this, don't you, Perry?"

Anger and hatred flamed in his eyes for an instant.

"I promise you I'll get him for you, Perry. You can go out knowing that. But I've got to know."

A faint breath hissed in his throat. I bent my head until my ear touched his lips. I didn't get what he was trying to say at first.

I looked at him. "Jackson? Swanee Jackson, the man who owns the Swanee River bar?"

Perry nodded with his lids. Breath came from him again like the eerie whisper of hidden gusts in a deep cave. "Blanche . . . Swan's wife . . ." I got that much and a word or two more so that I understood. Jackson had been carrying on with Blanche. She'd threatened to go to his wife, who had money. Jackson had killed Blanche, and Patrick Perry had lied when Sam Dolan wandered into the middle of the mess, a perfect patsy.

I had it all written down, and I put the pen in Perry's hand and guided it to the page. His wavering scrawl was just barely legible. I was afraid he would die before he finished it. He didn't get to put the final loop in the Y in Perry. The effort killed him.

I stood up. He was still looking at me, but not seeing me now. I wiped my hand across my face and stuffed the confession in my pocket, the confession that would free Sam Dolan.

I WENT to her house first, to Jennie's sad, lonely house. I knew that Pomeroy at Headquarters would raise hell with me for not reporting Perry's death right away, but I didn't care. It was her case, not his.

She opened the door right on the heels of my knock, as if she'd been waiting near the door for me. The light was behind her. She must have read things in my face.

"Come in," she said in a soft, sad voice. "Come in, darling."

I handed her the notebook. "It's all there. Jackson did it. He killed Perry, too. I found the little man dying. I haven't called Headquarters yet. I wanted you to be the first to know."

There was only a small light burning in her living room, and it cast shadows over the hollows of her face. She read the confession, and then she stepped up and kissed me. It burned my lips like acid, and it burned all the way down inside me.

She whispered. "Nobody knows but us two and the killer, and the killer will never talk."

I heard paper rip. She was tearing the confession in shreds. The acid of her kiss was on my lips, and my eyes were tortured on her face. I couldn't tear my gaze away from her face. Every bone, every line of it, stood out starkly, and it was the color of new cotton.

I moved then and wrenched the pieces of paper from her hand. I put them carefully in my pocket. They could still be pasted together.

"Do you know what you're doing, Jennie?"

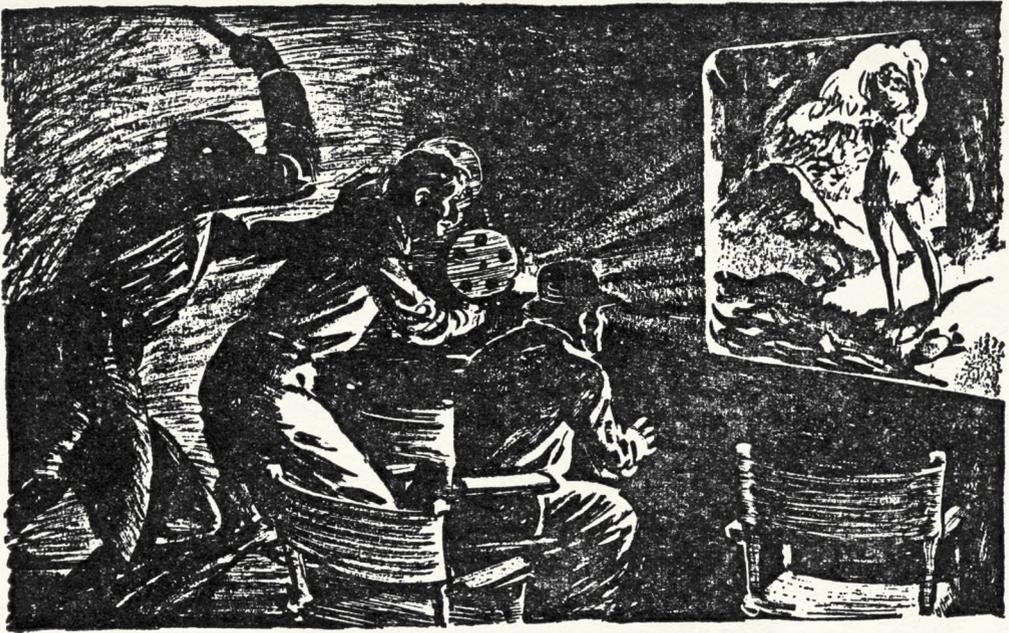
She stared at me like a sleepwalker trying to come awake. She shrank away and sat down on the old worn couch and put her face in her hands. Her sobs bubbled out into the stillness of the house and the sound fled for the darkest corners.

"He'd never let me divorce him and go to another man. He'd always stand between us. . . ."

She was wrong. She could have divorced him, and I could have handled Sam Dolan one way or another. But I didn't say it to her. I didn't say anything more. There was too much fire and pain in my throat to speak.

I walked out in the night toward my car. I felt hollow, and I knew that a part of me had died and remained behind in her house. I'd looked for something all my life, and I thought I had found it with Jennie, but now it was dead.

The sound of her weeping followed me toward the sidewalk. It would follow me a long time. But that other—that look on her face as she'd tried to tear a man's life in little shreds—that look would follow me forever. . . .



THE SWIMMING CORPSES

Thrilling Novelette of Hollywood Homicide

CHAPTER ONE

The Pool of Blood

DAVE SMITH, he of the corduroy blazer, tan gabardine slacks and saddle shoes, was on extremely good terms with the world that Saturday morning. Friendly. His grin radiated as far as his second double chin.

Why not? It was a perfect day, a Southern California Chamber of Commerce day—of all places, in Southern California. Small truant puffs of fog, chased in from the Pacific, were blasted when they hit the Santa Monica foothills. Birds hollered impatiently for gardeners to start sprinkler systems which would serve forth their breakfast worms.

Dave had the top down on his Packard, and the sun toasted his shoulders, broiled the creases deeper in his neck. Yet at every dip of the boulevard he plunged into

a pocket of cold air left over from the night before. Dave shivered until he was back in the sun but felt nothing more sinister than goose-flesh during these clammy passages.

At forty, Dave Smith's instincts were mostly retreats. His sixth sense had gone the way of his waistline.

The Packard swung familiarly into a gravel driveway that tunneled through a small grove of pepper trees fronting a cream-colored Georgian mansion. Twenty-five rooms—all gushingly described in this month's *Movie Town, Inside*. Dave parked behind a forest-green Lincoln Continental, went to the door.

Tommy Malcolm let him in. Tommy, his client, six feet four, massive shoulders, dark curly hair, chiseled features. And

By DONN MULLALLY

It was all one to Dave Smith, movie hot shot, whether Mavis Blake, ex-queen of the bump-and-grind circuit; or Jay Clarke, her bodyguard; or even Tommy Malcolm, Dave's hundred-grand-a-year meal ticket had dumped the two corpses into the swimming pool. That is, it was all one to Dave until he started to hear those corpses yelling to him: "Come on in—the slaughter's fine!"



**"I drowned them, Dave,"
Tommy said.**

hungover, padding about in a terry cloth robe and leather sandals. He crushed Smith's hand.

"Dave," he said, "thanks for coming right out."

"Don't mention it, kid."

The agent dropped his Panama on a hall chair, smoothed his thin hair. He smiled. "What seems to be your problem, Tommy?"

From where he was standing Dave could see enough of the living room to know there had been quite a brawl here last night. Full ashtrays, empty glasses and bottles, a table lamp overturned.

Tommy said, "Come on, I'll show you."

He led the way down the hall, outside again through a French door. They started across the lawn toward the swimming pool, Tommy's robe flapping in the breeze his long stride kicked up. Dave trotted after him.

At the black marble rim of his pool the actor stopped and allowed Dave to make up several steps he'd lost. He pointed to the deep end. "There, Dave—on the bottom. Do you see them?"

Against that black marble, Dave couldn't miss.

"I found them," Tommy went on, "when I came out for my morning dip. I thought I was seeing things. I wish to hell I had been!"

"Who are they, kid—do you know?"

Tommy's head jerked nervously. "Signe. And the man—the man is Barry Queens."

DAVE turned away from the pool. There was something obscene about staring at a nude, dead female, even through ten feet of water. Especially when one was in company with the lady's husband. Dave didn't know what to say, what he was expected to say.

"Do you have any idea how they got there?" was his best.

Tommy did. "I drowned them, Dave."

Just like that. Smith looked around desperately for a soft spot to drop his hundred and eighty pounds. He couldn't stand there forever without legs.

He wobbled to an orange-and-green-striped glider off the apron of the pool, slumped. Tommy slumped beside him. Tommy was still mumbling—in a foreign

language, it seemed. His words ricocheted off Dave's numb, frozen brain.

Gradually he forced sense out of what Tommy was saying. There had been a party celebrating the final day's shooting on his latest monkey-opera, *Jungle City*. Tommy had exercised a host's prerogative, passed out—remembered being helped up to bed. Then nothing, until he found the bodies of his wife and Barry Queens, his producer.

After he phoned Dave, Tommy had started rattling around the house. The servants were off for the weekend, so he was alone. That was when he'd found the suit he'd been wearing the night before—in a wad on the bathroom floor, soaking wet, smelling to heaven of chlorine.

In his dim, hungover way, Tommy made a lot of that. He couldn't recall falling in the pool, or even diving in—and there had to be a reason why he wouldn't remember.

"Dave," he was almost pleading, "this has to make sense, somehow. Suppose after the party last night Signe and Barry go for a moonlight swim. I come to, up in my room, maybe hear Signe laugh. I don't know. So I see what's happening and blow my top. I—I come down here, grab them both, hold them under water—"

"And then forget the whole thing?" Dave shook his head. "I doubt it."

"But the suit, Dave," protested Tommy. "It didn't just walk down here to the pool and jump in by itself."

He stopped, ran his hands frantically through his hair. "Isn't it true that sometimes a man is so shocked by what he's done, his mind rejects it, draws a blank?"

Dave got to his feet slowly. "You've been seeing too many psychological pictures, kid." He strained a smile into the corners of his mouth, holding out a hand to help Tommy up. "Come on, the bodies will keep where they are. And I'm not sure I want to break that story of yours on a poor, unsuspecting cop. Let's make a pot of coffee and talk it out."

DAVE SMITH emptied his cup, looked across the breakfast table at his client. Stylishly stripped to a G-string, Tommy Malcolm was lord of the studio jungle—kicking toothless old lions out of the way while he strangled cotton-stuffed

pythons with his bare hands. As a performer he'd never be a threat to Lassie's Ken-L Rations, but the moron fringe seemed to go for his muscle flexing.

Malcolm wrinkled his gorgeous brow, studying the owl-sharp face on the other side of the table. "Dave," he said, swallowing heavily. "Dave . . . do you think I'll get the chair?"

Dave didn't. "No, Tommy, even if I was ready to buy your theory of the killing. I'm no lawyer, but I don't see how you can be charged with more than manslaughter. And with a topflight mouth-piece, I suspect you can beat that. But I'm interested in the other side of the penny. Just for argument's sake, say you didn't kill Signe and Barry. Someone else did, framed you. Now how could they do that?"

He was out of the breakfast nook, Tommy's eyes following him as if he were a tennis match in slow motion.

"X has a beef with Signe and Barry, is waiting for an opportunity to square it for keeps. He's at the party last night, sees you fold. Which is all the break he needs.

"He arranges for himself and Barry to be the last guests here. I don't know the mechanics, but it shouldn't be impossible for a person already set to kill. The servants shove off for the weekend—perfect. At the point of a gun, he makes Signe and Barry disrobe, go to the pool. He bats them on the head and rolls them in the water. Then he undresses you, dips your clothes in the pool, returns them to your bathroom. That simple!"

Dave stopped in front of his client and waved a finger at him. "Now you can either sell yourself on the idea you're guilty, or the evidence will sell itself to the police. Either way, X has done a slick brace of murders."

"Dave, I—"

"Look," Dave snapped, leaning over the table, "you want advice, don't you?"

"Yes, but—"

"All right—sit tight! Time is the only thing on your side. If it comes to that, your story is just as good tomorrow morning. You didn't feel like swimming today, understand?"

Tommy's head wobbled loosely.

"Good. Now let's work up a list of

your guests last night. I want to talk to those people."

The list was not a howling success. Not all Malcolm's fault, either. Blame it on an old Hollywood custom—party crashing. Wrench a cork from a bottle and the locusts gather; slice a ham or breast of turkey—the plague descends. There were probably twenty people eating his food and sponging his liquor last night whom Tommy had never seen before.

"Okay, kid, it's a beginning," Dave sighed as he folded the list and put it in his coat pocket. "We'll see where it takes us. I don't—"

The door chimes fractured that thought. Tommy's face blended with his white robe. Dave jerked a thumb to indicate upstairs.

"Hop into some clothes, Tommy," he said. "I'll stall."

Mavis Blake Queens, Barry's wife, seemed surprised that Dave was the one to greet her. She didn't faint, however, or scream with jubilation—she gave just a barely perceptible start when he opened the door.

"Mavis, darling!" he said as though he meant it.

Then he had her hand, drawing her into the house. He convoyed her to the living room, remarking, "Tommy's dressing—be right down."

He lit a cigarette for her to fondle dramatically. Mavis was a chesty female with long, straight legs, flat hips. She wore her red hair in a bun this morning, to go with her rust-colored riding habit, no doubt. Dave Smith had seen that hair down and dancing over her white shoulders, and he liked it better that way.

He said, "What's new, Mavis?"

Her large green eyes showed white. "Nothing."

"When are you going to make that come-back picture?"

"We're still looking for the right story," she said, meaning, "Skip it."

Dave grinned. "Good hunting, darling. In the meantime, is there anything I can do for you, like hurrying Tommy?"

The movement of her head said no. "Unless you know if my *deah* husband is on the premises."

"Is he supposed to be?"

She shrugged. "He didn't come home

last night and I see his car out in front."

Dave made what he hoped was a bright and guileless face. "The green Lincoln!" he exclaimed. "I wondered who went with that. Look, Tommy didn't mention Barry being here, but then I didn't ask him. He might be holed up in one of the spare bedrooms. Just a second, I'll see."

When Dave came downstairs again, he had Tommy with him—a well-briefed Tommy wearing tennis things. They went in to Mavis together. Tommy had the line.

"Hello, dear. Dave tells me you're short a spouse."

She nodded. "True—the heel."

Tommy Malcolm shook his head gravely. "I wish I could help you, honey. He was here last night, but that's all I know. Someone must've offered to drive him home and lost the way."

Mavis arched her lovely eyebrows. "I hope he has a better excuse than that!"

Davis wrote himself in. "You're not worried about him?"

She showed some very white, sharp teeth. "Not until I get my hands on the louse. Well, thank you, darlings. I'll send a chauffeur over for his car."

Mavis rose with her bosoms, allowed them to float her gracefully toward the door. Dave and Tommy trailed along.

"If we hear from him," said Dave, "we'll chase him your way."

"That would be very sweet," she said, smiling as Malcolm opened the door. "Good-morning, gentlemen. And, Tommy—give my love to Signe."

Tommy followed Dave to the living room and dropped, watched his manager parade around a coffee table. "There," Dave declared, "went a blasted hunch."

"What d'you mean, Dave?"

"If that'd been anyone but Mavis Blake, I would've given odds it was our character X."

"The killer."

"Check. In fact," Dave went on sourly, "I was sort of counting on it. That's one way time works for us. The murderer is on the outside, doesn't know what goes on in here—except that no boddies are being found. It can worry him—maybe enough to want to pay you a visit."

"But Mavis—" Tommy objected, waving one hand.

"I know," Dave agreed. "She's too smart a dame. The California community property law takes care of the girls when they want to ditch a husband. They don't have to kill the old man to bleed every dime he's got. Uh-uh—any babe who works her way up from burlesque to Mavis' position doesn't pull a blooper like that!"

CHAPTER TWO

The Hottest Place in Town

SOMETIMES a broken record is a pretty handy substitute for a brain. Dave Smith thought so. The tires of his Packard were crooning on the asphalt along Beverly Boulevard, and their song went, "*Any babe who works her way up from burlesque to Mavis' position doesn't pull a blooper like that!*"

He'd heard himself say it, had jumped as if it'd been a spook. But he hadn't cracked to Tommy Malcom. He'd said, "Look, baby, if I'm going to run down your party guests, I'd better get started. You hang on here; I'll be in touch. If you have any visitors, watch yourself—they could be X."

Then he was back to his broken record. What he had meant to be a whitewash of Mavis Blake Queens had backfired all over him. It wasn't so white now. He'd heard stories about her start in pictures, rumors—Hollywood's second biggest industry. Ordinarily Dave could take his gossip or leave it alone. But when a man's life depended on it, a client's life at that, and ten grand in commissions every year, one particular Hollywood fable came to the surface. Instantly.

He stopped at his office long enough to tell his secretary he'd be out most of the morning. He also gave her the list of Malcolm's guests.

"Honey, here's what you do," he told the girl. "Contact these jokers, tell 'em Malcolm found a diamond bracelet after the party and we're trying to get a complete rundown on who was there. If anybody says they lost a bracelet they're lying, but kid them along and see how many names you can get."

He kissed her affectionately on the head for good luck, dodged out the door ahead

of an inkwell. Nice kid, Dolores—but she should improve her aim.

Speaking of aim, Dave realized he would need a scatter gun to bring down the wild hunch he was stalking. After his first no-success hour he felt more as if he was carrying a bean-shooter. He made the rounds, from Louis B. Mayer's barber to the shoe-shine boy at Paramount. Nothing.

He prospected Gower Gulch, panning for information, and had worked his way out to the old Biograph Studio before he struck it. A wiry little Poverty Row character leaned back from his cluttered desk, leered at him.

"Sure, I know what you're talking about," he said. "I remember seeing it years ago."

Dave warmed over his enthusiasm. "It was Mavis Blake?"

"Definitely." The man broke a gold-capped smile in his lean face. "And brother, *that* was a reel! You know how she's built—well, it's all strictly Mavis!"

"Where can I get a print?"

Dave underwent a searching, cautious look before the man shrugged. "Haven't the foggiest notion, pal."

Quick curtain for a moment of hope. Dave started to leave. The man said, "Wait a minute. Maybe I know a guy, name of Mendez—Carlo Mendez—office on Santa Monica."

"Would a double-sawbuck get me the right kind of a knockdown to Mendez?" asked Dave.

"For sure, palsy."

A half-hour later, Dave and Carlo Mendez were leaning their elbows on the same oak-veneer desk—Dave counting the ciga-

rette burns that scalloped the edge. The Mendez racket was, according to the sign on his office door, Special Effects. On appraisal of that bland, unctuous face, Dave was willing to bet any effects Mendez handled would be very special indeed.

"Yeah," Mendez said, kneading his fat cheeks, "we can do business, Mr. Smith, long as you're Benny Manx' friend. Just what'd you have in mind?"

Dave told him. "I understand Mavis Blake made a stag picture about twelve years ago. I wondered . . ."

The dark little man across the desk was already moving his bald head negatively. "You call a tough shot, Mr. Smith."

"You can't deliver?"

Mendez snorted. "It's impossible, Mr. Smith. Five years ago, yes; but that was before she married Barry Queens. He bought the negative and all the prints off the market—kind of a wedding present. They say he burned the whole works."

"So I've heard," Dave admitted. "But I thought possibly one print might have escaped. Perhaps someone had it who appreciated . . . art. Wouldn't sell. Know what I mean?"

Carlo laughed. "It's a shame, Mr. Smith, there aren't more connoisseurs in the world. You'd better let me arrange something else."

"No—" Dave shook his head.

He saw Mendez had started cleaning his fingernails with a paper match. "Sorry." Carlo's thick lips pouted. "I hate to let money walk out of my place of business, Mr. Smith, but . . ."

Dave picked that shrug off in mid-air. "You don't have to, Mendez—if you'll do a job for me."

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His fingernails immaculate as they'd ever be, Mendez looked up. "I hope it's dishonest, Mr. Smith." He smiled.

"Well, not quite," explained Dave, "but maybe you'll like it anyway. Here's the point. I believe you're wrong about the Blake film; there's a print in existence somewhere. But I don't have the contacts. You can find out how many prints were processed from the negative, how many Queens was able to buy—the rest of it. Here's two hundred on account—" he dropped twin C-notes on Mendez' desk—"and there'll be another hundred if you can show me Queens did buy all the prints. Locate our fugitive, and I'll pony up three more. Deal?"

Mendez' fat hands closed lovingly on the bills. "You hired yourself a boy, Mr. Smith."

DAVE spent the rest of that Saturday morning in his office. Dolores had typed a list of Malcolm's party guests as compiled from her calls. It was considerably larger than Tommy's, and—this was no surprise to Dave—nearly every dame on it had lost a diamond bracelet last night. Tommy's place ought to look like a jewelry store.

He called his client and gave with a pep talk. The actor needed one—his case of nerves came over the wire.

"You've got a tough assignment, kid," Dave told him. "I know what I'm asking, but believe me, Tommy, the only thing you can do for Signe now is to clear yourself."

Tommy's reply was barely audible. "Maybe I don't deserve to be cleared—maybe I can't be."

"I'm a gambling-type man," Dave boomed in what he meant to sound like confidence. "When there's nothing to lose, I say shoot the works!"

Early in the afternoon he heard from Mendez, an oily voice oozing out of the telephone receiver: "Mendez speaking. Mr. Smith, we have located that merchandise."

Dave bounced to his feet. "When can I see it?"

"Your convenience."

"I'm on my way!"

Financial considerations came first with Carlo. Dave paid the three hundred with-

out argument, was shown to a small, airless cutting booth across the hall from Mendez' office.

"I have it on a Moviola for you, Mr. Smith," Carlo said. "That may diminish its artistic qualities, but I don't have a projection room and I'm sure you will be able to satisfy yourself."

"Where did you find it?" Dave asked.

"My secret, Mr. Smith," replied Carlo, locking the door. He snapped the light switch, started the machine.

Dave watched the title, "The Old Swimmin' Hole," jitter and shake past the lens. Then came a shot of Mavis tripping down a country lane. She was all decked out in a crinoline dress and picture hat with a floppy bow. The amateur, jerky photography added nothing to Mavis' feeble acting. She came to the edge of a stream, did a big take into the camera to indicate how much she'd like to go swimming, then started her strip tease.

Carlo Mendez was breathing down his neck and the booth was hot, gamy—or maybe it was Mendez' greasy sport shirt. Dave would never know. Because right then something crashed against the back of his head and he was falling . . . into that celluloid swimming hole with Mavis. But now it was dark.

Completely black.

Dave didn't just open his baby blue eyes and gurgle, "Where am I?"

He found himself scratching at a splintery floor, trying to rise to his hands and knees. What he'd taken for Dream Street fog was smoke—stinging his eyes. He was outside Mendez' cutting room in the corridor, without any idea how he got there. Smoke billowed from the cutting room, exploded, belching fire into the hall.

There was only one way out, and Dave took it, crept past the door, hugging the floor.

Mendez. . . . Dave saw a form in there like a steak under a broiler. Nothing could be done for him now. Dave got to his feet, staggered, ran out of the building. Smoke chased him through the door.

Across the street, an extra player with pancake make-up on his face was leaving a tuxedo rental shop. He watched Dave weave to his car, grind the starter and

get away. Great! Dave could depend on his license number being as hot as that cutting room.

So he checked the Packard in a parking lot across from Columbia Studios and hopped a cab. He gave the driver Barry Queens' address in the valley.

As they put Cahuenga Pass behind them, Dave made an effort to straighten himself out, at least mentally. Physically, he was too beat up to bother—a throbbing lump behind his ear, clothes smoke-streaked and burned. His wristwatch was a casualty, too, the hands jammed at two-thirty.

What had happened at Mendez' place? Could Carlo have slugged him? Why? And if he did, how did he get caught in that fire? When Dave keeled over, he might have fallen against the Moviola, caused a short. Carlo had probably dragged him clear, then gone back to save his putrid film. He should have known better, Dave told himself.

BARRY QUEENS' first smash as a picture producer had been a Civil War epic. So it followed that he owned the only "plantation" in San Fernando Valley. And it was as authentic Old South as a quarter of a million bucks could make it. White columns, oleanders and magnolia, acres of lawn with two swimming pools and a formal garden, stables, plushy "slave quarters." Everything except cotton fields and Little Eva.

Dave did his bit toward Yellow Cab's next dividend payment, crossed a mint-julep-type verandah and made with the copper door knocker. An extremely cultured colored gentleman with tufts of white wool over his ears answered the door.

Cornelius was very sorry, suh, but Mrs. Queens was out.

"I'd like to wait. It's very important."

"Yes, suh—right this way."

The butler led him through a towering foyer to a library-sitting room, made certain cigarettes and magazines were available, and left. Dave realized how lucky he was that old Cornelius had been with Queens long enough not to sic the bloodhounds on him.

He punished the cigarettes, was too keyed up to more than riffle a couple is-

sues of *Life*. Which was just as well. Otherwise he might have missed the lady he was waiting for when she flashed by. Dave dropped the magazine, galloped after her, yelping, "Mavis!"

A large hand closed ungently on his shoulder, spun him around. "Where d'you think you're going?"

Jay Clarke, Mavis' cousin, had him backed to the wall. Over a broad, tweed shoulder, Dave saw Mavis watching from the curved stairway.

"Hello, honey," he called. "Tell your relation to unhand me."

Jay Clarke was one of those family parasites every star blossoms out with. All muscle and no brain, an ex-fighter—he was supposed to be a scenarist. At least, Barry had kept him in an office in the Writers' Building at his studio. But the only writing he did was on a form sheet.

He wadded the front of Dave's coat, his free hand balled—as big and knobby as a cauliflower.

"Stop it!"

Mavis flew to Dave's rescue, and just in time, too. Jay let him drop, looked disappointed, surly, his no-forehead bunched in a scowl.

"Haven't I been through enough today?" she demanded.

"I'm sorry, Mavis," the oaf stammered. "I thought—"

"When I want protection, I'll say so," snapped the lady. She turned on her charm in Dave's direction—a little shop-worn, but a good try.

"Forgive Jay—he means well."

"Not to me, honey," said Dave, straightening his coat. "But let's not discuss relatives. I've got a few of my own I don't brag about."

Jay couldn't be insulted. He stayed with the party as they filed into the library. When Mavis and her muscular cousin were seated on a two-place leather davenport, Dave swung his Sunday punch.

"About Barry, honey—I'm afraid I've got bad news."

He had expected a reaction something like what he saw happen to Mavis, but not until *after* he told her where she'd find her husband. She cried, "Oh, no!" and folded over as if he'd kicked her in the stomach.

Mavis had improved as an actress since she'd made *The Old Swimmin' Hole*, although she was still no Bergman.

"What's the matter, dear?" asked Dave. "Don't you care to discuss Barry?"

"No, Smith, she doesn't!" That from Jay.

"I wasn't asking you, big shot, but maybe you'd like to tell me why not."

"A damn good reason, flesh merchant. Mavis just identified Queens' body at the Beverly Hills Morgue. That's why I was trying to give you the bum's rush—and I still go for the idea."

Mavis unwrapped a fresh spasm of hysterics. All that was left for Dave was to stand in the center of the room and mumble he was sorry.

The understatement of the century!

Tommy Malcolm—that dope, that moron, that louse! And Dave Smith—sucker, sticking his neck out for Tommy so the big smoked pork could chop it off!

"If you're through," sneered Clarke, "you can leave."

"Yeah," answered a very subdued Dave Smith. "I'll call a cab."

There was a telephone on the knee-hole desk by the window, but he didn't have to use it. Jay had a better idea. He was driving to Beverly Hills and would give Dave a lift.

Dave's choice was limited. Jay had clamped onto an arm, dragging him toward the door. Mavis didn't interrupt her howling even to say good-bye.

Jay batted his foreign-made jalopy diagonally across the valley to Ventura Boulevard, then cut off again at Beverly Glen Road. The most direct route—and the darkest, least travelled. Which didn't add to Dave's happiness.

They topped the ridge and started down, the lights of Beverly Hills spilling out in front of them. Jay burned rubber swerving into a gravel parking place on the shoulder of the road. A casual motorist would think they were neckers. Dave was pretty certain that wasn't what Jay had in mind.

"Okay, sweetheart," growled Jay from his side of the darkened car, "leave us talk. I want to know why you had to barge in on Mavis."

"You were there, Clarke. You heard what was said."

"Yeah—what was said. I'm curious about what wasn't said."

"For instance?"

"How'd you know Barry had been murdered?"

"Malcolm called and told he he'd found the bodies."

"So you romped right out to break the news to my cousin?"

"Give that man a cigar!"

"Very funny." Jay Clarke bit off the words, spat them out in the dark. "And you're a lousy liar, too, Smith!"

"Wait'll I have a little more experience," chuckled Dave. "In the meantime, suppose you take me home."

"Suppose you walk home, flesh peddler!"

"Okay, baby—there's a first time for everything."

Dave slid out, slammed the door before he realized he had a mouthful of cheese. There was about a foot of loose gravel between Jay's crate and a sheer drop-off. Jay gunned his car in reverse, clashed gears and spun his tires, aimed his right fender at Dave. The headlights bearing down looked as big as kettle-drums.

He could never claim any credit for what he did then. Fear and nerves exploded—and Dave made like a glider. He launched himself into the black, empty air, fell until it wasn't empty. For a split moment it wasn't black, either, but the lights he saw were all for him.

CHAPTER THREE

Pokey Pals

A VERY bushed and bleeding Dave Smith came to in the gnarly arms of the scrub growth on the side of the hill. He was glad to settle for being alive. Climbing back to the road was a labor of torture and hate and desperation. In daylight he never would have made it. If he could have seen his torn hands, the faint progress they brought him . . .

He finally dragged himself onto the gravel shoulder, sat there bawling like a drunk on Mothers' Day.

The rest was easy. A cinch. Two miles of road all downhill, crooked as the seams in a bowlegged gal's nylons. And Dave's

wobbly knees, his feet that didn't always go where he meant them to, added a few curves of their own.

At Sunset Boulevard he caught a bus, rode to the Beverly Hills station. As he got out, the driver said, "You all right, buddy?"

Dave looked at him. Narrowly. "Yeah. This blood you see on my face—I live under a curse."

He shuffled around the corner, crossed the street and entered the first hamburger joint he came to. Out of deference to the customers, and to keep his face off the griddle, Dave went immediately to a little room with plumbing and washed up.

When he came out again, nobody offered to give him a screen test. But on the other hand, people went on munching rare hamburgers. Dave ordered a cheese-nutburger and a bottle of beer, glanced at a newspaper on the counter. That's all it took, a glance. A guy named David Smith, artists' manager, had his face on page one. It seemed the cossacks wanted him for questioning regarding an arson-killing in Hollywood.

Dave looked at the battered puss in the mirror in back of the counter, swollen, turning blue in spots—not much like that picture. And if there was anything in the old theory of hiding a thing in plain sight, he'd never find a better place. The Beverly Hills combination city hall, police station and jail, in all its glory, could be seen right through the front window of this ground-cow emporium.

Dave toyed with his second bottle of beer. A lot of things made sense now. Unrelated things.

The stag picture existed—so it might have been a club Barry had been holding over Mavis. He might have waved it too close though causing her and Jay to give him the business. Then Carlo Mendez had gotten foxy and found the remaining print of *The Old Swimmin' Hole*. Jay and Mavis would want to know who was interested in that picture, would let Carlo bait the trap for them—then try to finish both Dave and Carlo. Sure, it could happen that way, almost had to. Otherwise, why had Jay made another pass at knocking him off?

Everything made beautiful sense except that dopey move of Tommy Malcolm's.

Why had the hamola decided to spill his guts to the law? Tommy hadn't decided anything that big for himself since he learned to tie his own shoes. Maybe that was it. It was too big. After all, Signe was his wife. And Barry Queens wasn't a damn bit deader than she was. Dave had to admit he kept forgetting Signe.

A bike cop shouldered through the swinging door. Very large, rosy faced, a .38 low on his hip. Dave concentrated on keeping a steady hand as he poured beer in his glass. More or less succeeded. The officer paid him no mind, straddled a stool.

Dave went back to the newspaper. Between them, he and his client almost pushed a U.N. debating bee and a Jap earthquake off the front page. Of course, Tommy Malcolm rated more space, with a special feature by a gal reporter. Tiger Man Tommy and the Unfaithful Wife—she really dressed up Malcolm's assumptions. One sentence in all that tripe rang a bell with Dave. Tommy had turned himself in at about two-thirty.

Dave folded the paper, shoved it across the counter. He bummed a cigarette and a light from the cop. There was a pay phone on the wall. Dave thumbed through a badly chewed directory, found Benny Manx' home number. He blew a nickel on an idea.

Benny was home. Naturally Benny had read the papers, too. He was a little excited about talking to a guy wanted for murder.

"Listen, Benny," Dave told him quietly, so the officer up front wouldn't be dragging an ear, "relax. I didn't kill your pal Mendez—and you can help me prove I didn't."

He waited for Benny's, "Count on me, chum."

Then Dave asked his question—the one for the giant jackpot. The answer made his hand wet on the receiver.

"You're sure, Benny?"

"Hell, yes!"

"Okay, baby—thanks. If I beat this, you'll be taken care of."

"If you don't," laughed Benny, "I'll bake ya a cake with a gas mask in it. So long, toots!"

Dave hung up. The cop was still there. Good. Smith tapped his shoulder. The

lad in blue looked around, started fumbling through the pockets of his leather jacket for another smoke. But Dave wagged his head.

"I just put one out," he smiled. "You look like a smart boy," he went on, "a comer."

The cop was scowling, and his large red hands gripped the edge of the counter. "All right, Mac, if this is a rib . . ."

"No rib. I just like to see a young guy get ahead."

The officer's boots scraped on the floor. He towered over Dave. "You trying to promote a night's lodging?"

"I knew you'd understand," Dave said. He picked the newspaper off the counter, held it across his chest so the cop had to see his picture. "Rotten likeness, isn't it, old man?"

The cop shifted his eyes from Dave's face, lumpy and discolored, to the picture and back again a couple times. His wind-burned jaw went slack. "I'll be damned!" he said.

"No," Dave said, "you'll be a sergeant!"

DAVE got action. He was escorted across the street, booked, and run up to the office of the chief inspector. He told his version of what had happened in that cutting room while he was with Carlo Mendez. The chief, a B-Unit Eddie Arnold, didn't seem too impressed.

"Smith—that's a very weak story," he growled, "if you don't mind my saying so."

"I don't mind at all, Chief—so long as you're open-minded enough to let me prove I'm leveling."

The chief was as open-minded as most cops. Accommodating, too. He gave Dave his very own cell, adjoining Tommy Malcolm's. "So you two killers can keep each other company," he boomed as the barred door clanged shut on Dave.

Tommy didn't say anything until they were alone. He'd been sitting on his bunk watching the new tenant move in.

"Dave!" He read surprise into the name as he came to the bars separating them. "What're you doing here?"

"I'm not slumming, baby," Dave said, orienting himself to the bunk, lavatory and wash basin in his suite. "As a matter

of fact, I'm almost as famous as you are."

"Famous? I don't get it."

"I'm supposed to have murdered a guy—a little bloke I never saw before today, named Carlo Mendez. Mean anything to you, Tommy?"

"Mendez . . ." The actor registered deep thought. "I can't say it does. I—"

Dave laughed. "He ran a special-effects library on Santa Monica Boulevard," he explained, going to his bunk, sprawling. "That was his front—actually his racket was peddling pornographic movies. Surprised you never heard of him."

"After all, Dave," Tommy objected, "why would I—"

"I don't know, Tommy," sighed Dave. "Only there are times when I suspect you're not as dumb as you act."

"Dumb? I—"

"Yeah, like now," Dave went on. "You have no idea what I'm doing in the can although I'm on every front page in town with you, and I see you've got a stack of newspapers in your cell. I know you performers have trouble reading anything except your own notices, but—"

"Okay," Tommy pouted, "I was only trying to make conversation."

"Let me get us started," Dave broke in. "About twelve years ago a burley stripper named Mavis Blake cooked herself with the circuit by insisting on too much bump and grind. A judge gave her six months for putting on an indecent show, and when she came out she was washed up.

Dave lit a cigarette, kept talking through the cloud of blue smoke around his head. "She didn't go hungry—there were plenty of boys willing to keep her in groceries. But Mavis was smart—she had plans, a goal. To get there she needed important money.

"Let's say one of her buddies was a cameraman," Dave continued. "Maybe it was originally his idea; anyway she appropriated it. They picked a muscle-bound leading man, went to a secluded spot in the country and whipped out a nasty one-reel epic entitled, *The Old Smimmin' Hole*. She sold the thing outright for probably five grand."

"Is this a conversation or a monologue?" asked Tommy from his side of the bars.

"Since you were Mavis' supporting

cast," Dave said, "I'll let you say a word now."

"You're nuts!"

"That's a word," Dave said cheerfully. "So I'll go on. With her end of the sale, Mavis made the right contacts. She not only was a legitimate success, but she married a very respectable and decent little guy named Barry Queens. A real Hollywood story."

"Where d'you get that stuff about me?" Tommy growled.

"Benny Manx—a fan of yours. Or maybe he's a critic. He didn't think much of your . . . performance."

Dave was off the bunk, walking the length of his cell. "Of course, Queens had to find out about *The Old Swimmin' Hole*, and being a gentleman he went out and blew quite a hunk of dough buying up that film. However, there was one print that wasn't for sale, not for cash.

"Frankly, Tommy, I always wondered why Barry was so eager to renew your options. I'm not that hot a salesman, and if there ever was a no-talent jerk his name is Malcolm."

Tommy snorted. "I suppose I killed Barry because I was tired of high living?"

"Did I say you killed him? It's an idea, though, isn't it, baby?"

Dave stepped on his cigarette butt and turned. "Let's say Barry got fed up with you three jokers.

"So he told Mavis to start shopping for a divorce—a nice, inexpensive one. He was not splitting up the community property. He probably put it to Mavis this way—she could sign a waiver, or he'd simply can you and that would take the wraps off her debut as a movie star."

DAVE'S TOUR of his cell brought him close to the bars and Tommy. He didn't seem to notice how close, or the black scowl on the actor's face. "Barry's mistake," he continued, "was underestimating you three characters. He should've known you'd gang up. It was all you could do. Once he divorced Mavis, you were dead. And you preferred to have it the other way around.

"The crime-of-passion play—Barry and Signe dying together—sounds like it was Mavis' inspiration, but you bought it,

because given a choice between your comfort and little Signe's life, the kid didn't have a show.

"Then Carlo Mendez spoiled the whole picture for you, didn't he, Tommy?" Dave said, grinning crookedly. "He remembered the print of *The Old Swimmin' Hole* that wasn't delivered to Barry Queens, knew you had it. When I made it worth his while, he contacted you. What happened then between you, Mavis and Jay should've been worth the price of admission. This was the development you hadn't foreseen, the possibility of someone finding the real reason for Barry's death. You knew you couldn't ad-lib around that picture. So Carlo had to go—and his customer, also."

Dave stopped in front of him, his round chin actually unpleated, jutting. "You hid out in that cutting room, tapped us both on the head, dragged me into the corridor, set my watch for two-thirty and broke it. Then I can see you go back, whop Carlo a couple more times for insurance, switch some nitrate base film for that stag picture. You probably stuck an end of it to a light bulb with a piece of scotch tape. The heat of the bulb would set off the film. Boom! And by then you were long gone, turning yourself over to the police as a contrite, amnesiac wife killer."

Malcolm's powerful hands flashed between the bars, fastened on Dave's throat. It didn't take a lot of acting for Dave to gurgle, go limp. He wasn't breathing. He felt Tommy fumble with his belt buckle, and a second later a leather loop drew taut around his neck. He was being hoisted off the floor. That was enough. Dave kicked out frantically with his short legs.

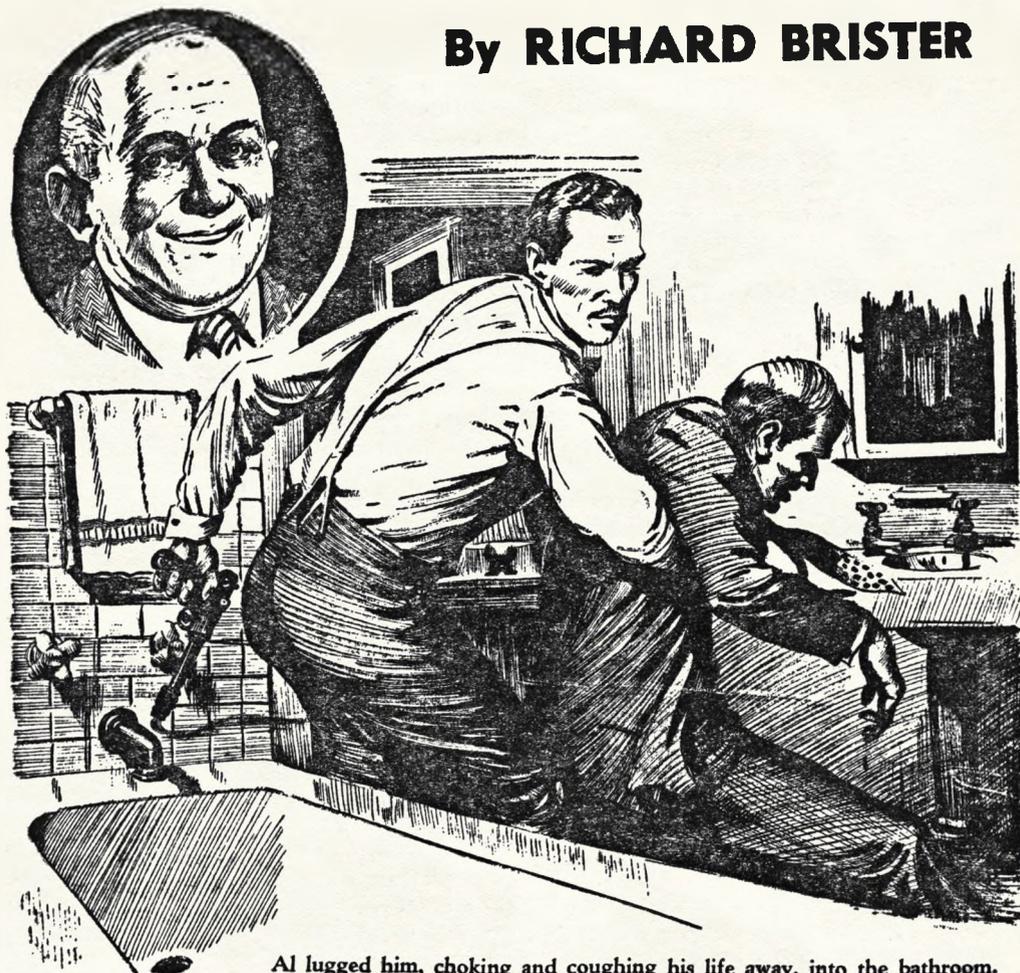
And the Marines landed. The kick had done it, broken a fine wire fastened to his ankle, threaded from a tiny mike under his lapel to a dictaphone in the chief's office.

The first thing they did was cut Dave down.

"If they ask me," the chief rumbled, "you rate an Oscar on that performance."

"Don't," choked Dave, massaging his sore adam's apple, "don't call me an actor!"

By RICHARD BRISTER



Al lugged him, choking and coughing his life away, into the bathroom.

WHEN THIEVES FALL OUT

ARTHUR F. DINGLE. The *F* stood for Fenton, no less, Al learned from one of the bellhops.

"What else do you know about him, kid?" Al asked, teasing a dollar out of his billfold while the boy's eyes fixed on it. "This his first season down here?"

"As far as I know, it is, Mr. Davis. He's new at the Parkview this winter."

"This isn't the only hotel in Florida," Al suggested.

"Seems to me I heard someone saying he lost his wife last summer," the boy said, his eyes still caressing Al's half-offered dollar. "Maybe she was the stay-at-

"Son," the old guy told con man Al Davis, "you'll never amount to much in this business. You're pig-headed and stupid. Besides, I would hate to see a nice-looking young man like you get—mussed up, shall we say?—over a little thing like fifty grand!"

home type, Mr. Davis. You can't tell."

"In Scranton, Jimmy?"

"Anyway, he tips awful good, Mr. Davis."

"So I've noticed," Al said, and handed Jimmy his dollar. "I'd tip better myself, if I was rolling in it like Dingle. Well, thanks, kid."

"Thank you, Mr. Davis."

Al got talking to Dingle in the lobby two nights later. He was one of these bumbling fat men, friendly as a pup, and as democratic. Never notice him in a crowd. He neither dressed up nor acted up to his kind of money. Even when he was handing out five- and ten-dollar tips he managed not to appear ostentatious.

He'd been out golfing that afternoon, and had broken a hundred. He acted as if he'd discovered oil on one of the fairways.

"You seem to get your money's worth of entertainment out of your golf, Dingle," Al said, grinning.

"I enjoy it. No game just like golf, Davis. Gives me quite a boot, playing in winter. First year I've been down."

"Oh?"

"But not the last." He got a simple grin on his fat, flabby face. "My wife—God bless her—was an invalid during her final twelve years. Lost her last summer. Know she won't mind if the old man kicks his heels up a little before he goes to join her."

"Out for some fun now, hey?" Al said.

The fat man nodded. "I've worked pretty hard all my life. Doctors have warned me to relax now. The mines seem to get along fine without me, and—"

"Mines?" Al said.

Dingle looked at him, registering the slight deflation of ego experienced by all local big shots who discover, their first season down, that they are very small shots in the Southland.

"Coal mines," he said.

Al thought about that very briefly and switched subjects adroitly. "Speaking of relaxation, how do your tastes run, Dingle? I'm pretty much a straw in the wind for tonight. If you'd care to hit a few spots . . ." He let his eyes roll upward in a way to suggest something lewd and saw a little-boy grin climb over the face of the fat mine owner from Scranton.

"Right down the old alley, son. That'd

be right down the alley. Let's do that."

They made a tour of the glitter spots. Dingle wide-eyed, awkward as a country boy on his first trip to the big city. Unsure of himself with *maitres*, hat-check girls and waiters, he bought their tolerance with tips that were too large for Al's comfort.

He had a prime sucker here. Al was almost sure now. When you latch onto a prime sucker in Florida at the start of the season, you do well not to advertise it.

He got Dingle back to the Parkview before midnight, bade the fat man a tipsy good-night, then telephoned a message to the Western Union office. He had his reply before noon the next day.

COAL MINE OPERATOR NEAR
SCRANTON STOP A NUMBER ONE
DUN AND BRAD RATING STOP
PROBABLY MILLIONS STOP MIAMI
FIRST TIME THIS WINTER STOP
INVALID WIFE DIED LAST SUM-
MER STOP SHE HAD THE BRAINS
STOP SLICE IT THICK ALBERT
MABEL

HE HAD to grin, sitting there on the hotel bed, reading that answer. He would indeed cut a nice thick slice off the sucker now that he had his confirmation. You had to check on things before going ahead on a big take if you wanted to stay out of trouble.

He picked up the phone and called Dingle's room number. The fat man's voice sounded more chipper than he'd anticipated.

"Thought you might feel fuzzy," Al told the mouthpiece.

"I had a good time." Dingle's laugh trailed through the wire, as if a good time and a hangover the next morning could not go together. "I guess it was good Scotch, Davis."

"It was cut Scotch. Look, last night when we staggered in, it was Art Dingle and Al Davis. I don't know any *Mister* Dingle this morning."

Dingle's short laugh dripped with pleasure. "Okay, Al."

"You keeping that golf date you mentioned last night, Art?"

"I sure am," said the mine owner. "Why?"

"Been some years since I've tried my luck on a golf course. Thought I might

join you if I wouldn't be intruding."

"Glad to have you, Al." He seemed genuinely pleased. "That'll be jim-dandy. Suppose we meet downstairs for lunch in a half-hour, then trundle on out to the course in my car?"

"Fine," Al told the phone, smiling a little.

The smile stayed inside during lunch with the sucker. Dingle liked gabbing over his vitamins. He mentioned off-handedly that this enforced semi-retirement made him feel useless at times. "Come to think of it, you never mentioned what you do, Al."

"Do?"

"For a living?"

Al grinned. "Afraid I'll have to rate myself as a playboy."

Dingle looked uncomfortable. "You mean you never—"

"I worked for ten years after I got out of Princeton," Al said. "Had it figured that way, you see? More to this life than just working. I made my little stake and retired young. I mean really young, Art. And I still don't regret it."

Dingle's fat face held more respect now than it had held a moment before. "Why, you must be in your early forties now. And you say you quit business ten years out of college?"

"That's right."

"Must have been *quite* a little stake you piled up," Dingle said. "This isn't the least expensive hotel in Miami. How'd you—"

"Oil."

"You mean—"

"Wildcatting. I seemed to have a natural knack for it, Art. Instinct, or something. Though of course I leaned hard toward geology at Princeton."

"Oil. Say, I've always had kind of a half-baked yen to take a flyer at that, Al. More gamble to it than coal mining. More excitement. Jenny, she always said a man ought to stick to what he knows best, and she'd never let me put a nickel anywhere but in coal mines."

"Jenny was your wife?"

"That's right," said the fat man, suddenly grave.

"Smart girl," Al said. "Oil is no place for outsiders. You can lose your shirt. I still fool around a bit through my old con-

nections, and oil's never hurt me. But I'd steer mighty clear, Art, in your shoes."

"S'pose you're right, Al."

But there was a fringe of excitement on the words as Dingle spoke them, and Al had been conning his way around the resorts long enough to know that the bait had been taken. From now on, events would follow a definite and natural progression. Dingle would stew in his own juice for a while. Then he would approach Al timidly with the suggestion that if ever anything red hot came up—for instance, something that required just a bit more capital than Al could obtain quickly—why, he certainly hoped Al wouldn't hesitate to call on Art Dingle.

And Al would say, "Well, all right. But it's not at all likely," and bait his sucker along until the time seemed exactly right for the killing. He had packaged himself very nicely for this job, he thought, and the bill of goods had been sold to Dingle without any trouble. Princeton had been a nice touch. Just naming one of those Ivy League schools was worth fifteen minutes of the routine guff.

"I'll slice him thick enough to suit Mabel," Al thought. "I'll slice him to shreds, and never a squawk out of him after. I caught something real cushy, this time."

DINGLE'S golf partner was waiting for him at the first tee, a thin, bald man around sixty who had a nervous habit of blinking through his thick glasses every ten seconds. Bunged up in one leg, so that his golf swing was affected. Drove a hundred yards off the first tee, and acted as if he'd done something stupendous.

He had met Dingle on the golf course three days before. He played even worse golf than Dingle played, and there was the love of one duffer for another of that ilk between them. Dingle said, "Al, this is Hank Southworth, from Detroit," and Al shook with the man, but decided instantly that he did not like him.

Between blinks, the dark eyes behind Southworth's glasses looked too shrewd for Al's taste. One of the cardinal rules of the take is to get the sucker alone before you go to work separating him from his money. A sucker accompanied by a

smart, or even middling-smart, friend is no longer a sucker.

Al stood up to his ball and tried, valiantly, to louse up his drive. But always he had enjoyed natural ability as an athlete, and even though it was several years since he'd last swung a driver, at a roadside range, he got his ball two hundred yards out there.

Dingle and the thin man from Detroit exchanged glances. "Guess we're out of our league," said the sucker.

Al swore gently under his breath. From then on he was more careful. He purposely dubbed his second shot into the rough, wasted two strokes getting out of the high grass and finally holed out for an eight on the par four hole.

Dingle and Southworth took sevens and kidded him unmercifully about it. "Takes more'n beef to play this game," Dingle said. Al withstood the jibes with a smile, and from then on he was in.

So was friend Southworth, however, and on the tenth tee, Al probed gently into the background of his rival for Dingle's attention.

"How'd you leave things in Detroit, Hank?"

The thin man smiled. "With pleasure. It gets mighty cold up there."

"I spent some time there in 1935," Al said. "That's when the Tigers were really rolling. Remember the bunch they had then? Greenberg, Pete Fox, Gehringer, Schoolboy Rowe, General Crowder. Never forget those columns Iffy The Dopester was writing in the *Free Press*."

"Matter of fact," the old man said, "I'm not much of a ball fan."

"You had to be, in Detroit that summer," Al said. "That whole town was ball crazy. Why—"

"I've never quite understood it," said Hank Southworth.

"What?"

"All this fuss about baseball." The Detroiter glanced at Art Dingle. "How about you, Art? Do you—"

"I'm a fan, myself. Got down to Shibe Park to watch the Phillies quite a few times last summer."

Al let it lie for a while. On the way down the thirteenth fairway, he idly asked the Detroiter what line of work he was in.

"Investment broker," said Southworth.

Al nodded, but peered sharply at the old man as Southworth came to his ball and addressed it.

From then on he kept his conversation with Hank Southworth on a cautiously casual footing. When they finished the round, he shook warmly with Southworth, expressed the hope that they could get together again, meaning not a word of it. There was something about the tall thin man from Detroit that made him feel itchy inside, and unsure of himself.

He sent a wire north before dinner. Check on an investment broker in Detroit, name of Southworth, Henry. He phoned it in from his room, and he got results from the query far sooner than he had expected. He was getting into his dinner jacket when the investment broker in question walked in without bothering to herald himself by knocking.

Al looked foolishly at him. "What in—"

"Suppose I talk first, Davis. You sent a telegram some time ago, asking for information about me."

"Y-you—"

"I was half anticipating something of the sort. I paid the switchboard girl who put you through to the telegraph company ten dollars."

"And—" Al fumbled.

"Let's quit sparring around with each other, son."

Al said guardedly, "All right."

The tall thin man with the blinking eyes looked at him coolly. "I've been in the business long enough to know another con man when I see one, Davis."

Al made a face. "I had a hunch you were on the make with Dingle," he said. "You pulled too much of a blank on the baseball."

Hank Southworth said, "You're going to have to back out of this, son."

Al's mouth hardened a little. "Am I?"

"I had Dingle staked out three days ago, son. He's private property."

"Not so you'd notice, he isn't, Southworth. I've had my eye on him longer than that. I've done a lot of groundwork on the chump. In another week or so he'll be eating out of my hand."

HANK SOUTHWORTH said, "Son, I don't like to sound arbitrary, but I have prior rights to the sucker and I in-

tend to uphold them. I would hate to see a nice-looking young man like you get himself all—mussed up, shall we say?—over a small thing like this.”

“A small thing!” Al said. “Listen, Dingle’s worth fifty grand. A hundred, to a smooth operator.” He did not like the way the older man was looking at him. There was iron in the soft-looking old-timer, and a suggestion of ruthlessness which cut through Al’s shell of bluster and scared him a little. Always he had shied away from violence. Even the thought of being “mussed up,” as Southworth had so euphemistically put it, could turn Al’s stomach to butter. “Look,” he said, suddenly conciliatory, “there’s enough gravy in that boat for two of us. Let’s take him together. We—”

Southworth shook his head. “I never work with anybody.”

Al’s temper flared. Why should he let a skinny old man push him around? Pride conquered fear for a moment, and he said stubbornly, “You’re not bluffing me out of a big take like this, Southworth. I’m not cutting myself out of this deal. That’s final.”

The old man’s eyes blinked at him through the thick lenses. “Son,” he said almost sadly, “you’ll never amount to much in this business. You’re pig-headed. And stupid. . . . You’re quite sure—”

“I said that was final.”

The thin man from Detroit nodded in a frozen-faced way and limped out of the room.

“What’re you going to do?” Al said nervously, but Hank Southworth ignored the question, closed the door firmly behind him.

Al stood there for thirty seconds, then suddenly walked to the closet, took a long-barreled Luger from a special holster built into one of his sport coats and put it down under his belt, where his clothes would conceal it. He hurried to the door and opened it in time to hail Hank Southworth before the man turned the far corner of the corridor.

“Yes?” the older man said coldly.

“Been thinking things over,” Al said. “Got an idea that might interest you.”

Southworth looked doubtful, but he limped back and into the room, closing the door. “Well?”

“A split,” Al suggested. “You can work him alone, if you insist. But I don’t see why I should step out of this picture for nothing. Say . . . forty percent of the take?”

“No.” The older man’s eyes blinked and he shook his head vigorously. “Nothing doing.”

“But—”

“I don’t split with anybody,” said Southworth.

Al pulled the Luger out of his belt band and pointed it at him. He squeezed the trigger once, and again, and the gun, which had a silencer on it, made two sharp spitting noises. The old man fell back against the wall, his head sagging on a neck which seemed suddenly scrawny and tired. He was about to capsize onto the carpet when Al grabbed him and lugged him, choking and coughing his life away, into the tiled bathroom. He dumped the dying man unceremoniously into the bathtub, then ruthlessly abandoned him there, running out to listen at the door of his suite for sounds of alarm.

He heard voices coming along the carpeted hall, feminine voices talking unintelligibly about “a perfectly stunning beach ensemble” in somebody’s store window. The voices swept by his door, and all was quiet for several minutes. Nobody had heard those two shots. Or if anybody had heard them, they had failed to identify the noises as gunshots.

Al could feel his heart pounding furiously under his ribs. He never had killed a man before. He felt no guilt, only curiosity as to the swift impulse that had driven him to shoot Hank Southworth. Fear, he thought. The old man’s veiled threats had frightened him badly.

And something inside Al had rebelled at the thought of losing this take, for suckers like Dingle come once in a lifetime. One big score like this and Al could quit operating, go into some legit racket and learn how to sleep nights.

Southworth’s rasping breaths suddenly stopped, in the bathroom. Al glanced in there and scowled, wondering what you do with a dead man in your hotel bathroom after you’ve killed him. Then he saw his partly unpacked wardrobe trunk on the floor of the closet, and a small grin gradually melted the hard lines of his face.

A HALF-HOUR later he was on the phone, talking with Dingle.

"Art, this is Al—Al Davis. Say, I'm afraid I won't be able to make dinner with you tonight. I've been called out of town. Something pretty important, and I'm checking out."

"Oh?" The sucker's voice contained genuine regret. "Sorry to hear that, Al, just when we were getting better acquainted." Regret changed to something sharper as the voice rattled on. "Important, you say?"

"That's right."

"Look, Al, I don't mean to pry—is this a business matter? Or a personal matter?"

"Well-ll."

"It's oil!" Dingle accused. "You got a deal cooking. And you were keeping the lid on."

Al said, "Look, Art, I'm kind of in a rush. Lots of packing to do, and—"

"Now," Dingle almost whined. "Now, Al, you promised, if ever anything good came up— Listen, when does your train leave?"

"I'm coming up there."

"But—"

"No buts. I'm coming up there. See you in a couple minutes," said the sucker, and hung up.

Al put the phone back in its cradle, chuckling softly. His eyes swung around the room, disordered from packing. All evidences of the murder were gone. Hank Southworth's body was crammed, along with some of Al's clothes, into the trunk, which was securely locked.

After a moment, Dingle came in without knocking and picked up where they'd

left off over the phone. The sucker had that hungry look on him that makes an easy mark of them.

"All right, all right," Al said finally. "It's an oil deal. I may as well admit it. But I don't need any help on this, Art. I can handle it on my own."

"Where? Where is it, Al?" He looked like a little boy whose toys are about to be taken from him.

"Texas," Al said. "New development fifty miles out of Houston."

"How much you investing?"

"Three hundred," Al said.

Dingle stared at him, slack-jawed. "You mean—three hundred thousand?"

Al nodded at him.

Dingle said, "Al, listen, that's a pretty big stack of chips for one man to be buying. You sure you wouldn't like to edge off a little by letting me in for a small percentage?"

Al shrugged. "It's a bother, to be brutally frank with you, Art. As I say, I'm prepared to swing this alone and—well, look, don't take it so hard. How much did you want to come in for?"

Dingle looked hopefully at him. "Say—fifty?"

Al frowned. "It's against all my principles. It just complicates matters. Tell you what I'll do, Art, I'll scoot up there and look these fields over, and if there's anything doing, I'll give you a buzz. How's that listen to you, Art?"

"I don't believe it. You'll never remember Art Dingle up there in Texas. This is the brushoff you're handing me, son." He looked thoughtful. His plump face brightened. "Take me along."

Al shook his head. "I work alone."



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Al said, "I don't like to do it, Art. Anyhow, it's impractical. Banks are all closed. You couldn't get a check certified at this hour. And an uncertified check for fifty thousand is an awful headache."

"Now, listen, son," said Dingle, really desperate, "suppose I was able to scare up cold cash?"

"Cash? At this hour?"

"They know who I am here at the Parkview. Mr. Sykes—he's the manager, y'know—was telling me the other day that they keep a king's ransom in the hotel vault for the convenience of their wealthier patrons who like to go in for this high-stake gambling. Fifty thousand would probably sound like small chickens to Sykes if I went down there and asked him to take my check for it."

Al sighed. "Well, if you're sure it's worth that much bother. But don't say anything to Sykes about what you want it for? This deal is red hot. I don't want any leaks."

Dingle's fat face beamed. "Son, I know how to keep my mouth shut. Just you give me five or ten minutes now, and you'll have that money." He almost ran through the door, eagerness written all over his soft body.

Al sat there, grinning at the door through which the sucker had vanished. All you had to do was get them hungry and it was duck soup to take them. If you'd baited the trap right, they'd bungle straight into it, in plain daylight.

In a little while Dingle would come back and practically force Al to accept his fifty grand, after which Al would kiss the sucker off smoothly and make his departure. The trunk, with its grisly cargo, could be taken care of later, when he was miles from Miami and from the sucker. They'd never catch up with him on this one. Dingle was the prideful sort of chump who'd take his loss in stride rather than emblazon his classic stupidity in the newspapers, if Al knew him.

HE GRINNED wider as he heard foot-falls in the corridor that sounded like those of Dingle. Altogether a very nice

take. Fifty thousand red apples represented a lot of laughs, a lot of dames, a lot of . . .

The door opened and Dingle stood there, pointing a pistol straight at Al's chest. He was the same Dingle Al had silently laughed at, these past days, and yet not the same man, somehow. There was hardness in him, and the hand that held the gun seemed to know what it was doing.

Al swallowed and said, "What—" Then his heart thudded as Dingle's free hand pulled a badge from his pocket. "You're a cop. But, damn it, I had you checked. I had you looked up, in Scranton!"

"There is a coal mine operator in Scranton named Arthur F. Dingle," said the fat man behind the businesslike pistol. "I happen to have borrowed his identify for a week or two, with his permission. You didn't check carefully enough, Davis. Even if you'd had a picture, you might not have tumbled. Dingle and I are practically doubles. . . . All right, boys, come on in and put the cuffs on him."

Al sat there, feeling the cold clasp of the cuffs on his wrists, trying to shake off the sensation of shock that set his brain spinning at tangents.

"We've got you tight on this one, Davis," the fat man was saying. "No smart lawyer is going to buy you out on this job. You'll do ten to twenty for this."

It was on the tip of Al's tongue to say something smart like, "Yeah? Well, you still can't make it stick, copper. I'll beat this rap." Then his eyes swung down toward his wardrobe trunk, and a cold hand of dread clamped down on him. Suddenly his shoulders started to shake, and he was sobbing.

The man with the gun was embarrassed. "Come offa that," he growled. "What's eatin' you all of a sudden?"

Al looked up at him, almost hysterical at the brutal irony of it. He'd wanted Dingle all to himself. That's why he'd killed Southworth. He wondered how they did it in Florida. Gas? The chair? The gallows? He looked at the man with the gun and there were no smart words in him.

JOURNEY INTO NIGHT

By NICK SPAIN



"You want it in the belly instead of the head?" Tommy asked.

THEY waited until his passengers were clear of the wharf, then came out to him and stood looking down into the boat with their bleak and shiny eyes. There were Tommy Henshaw and Little George and one he didn't know.

Tommy said, "You prayin', Steve?"

Steve Wilson, the man on his knees, laid down the soft brush, and the water ran like quick-silver across the varnished deck. "No," he said. "Just washing her down. Brought a load over from the

Maybe he was wrong worrying so hard about his future, Steve told himself. For what future does a man have—with a gun pressed in his back and a tightening finger on its trigger?

mainland just now, and she gets dirty.”

“Load of what?” asked Little George.

“People. Passengers. That’s all I ever carry.”

“Reason I thought you might be prayin’,” said Tommy, “is you’re a lucky ex-con. I figured prayer might be the answer.” He turned and looked at George. “You know any other way a guy with a record like Stevie’s could get to run a putt-putt all over Millionaire’s Cove?”

Steve glanced about to see if anyone had heard that part about convicts and records. There was no one else on the pier. “I had a good war record,” Steve said then. “They didn’t go back beyond that.”

“Good for us,” Tommy said. “Not so good for them.”

“How’d you find me?” He had thought he was set, once he’d saved the money for the boat and got this job on the island—set with Mary and the house just back from the beach and the little, secret, shallow cove where they swam every morning at dawn. . . .

“We got ways,” said Tommy Henshaw. “But we didn’t come to pay you a visit. We’re out here to do a job. We plan on cuttin’ you in.”

The one Steve didn’t know snarled, “You didn’t say nothin’ about that.”

Tommy said, very softly, “Go easy, Smoke. You good at walkin’ on water?”

“Naw,” Smoke answered, “but you keep on slicin’ the take, there won’t be cigarette money.”

“There’ll be plenty. When that old Dalton dame throws a party, society turns out like ants at a picnic, and the wrens can barely stagger, their neck are that heavy with loot.”

Steve said, “Mrs. Dalton giving a party?”

“Don’t give me that, Stevie. You can’t live on the same island and not know when that witch is tossin’ a brawl. I saw them swells get out of your boat. Where d’ya think they’re going? Beachcombin’? Diggin’ clams?”

One part of Steve, the part that remembered the wild years, could not help admiring the thorough way Tommy Henshaw cased a job. The other part thought bleakly of these men who had arrived to threaten his life with Mary, to destroy

the peace and happiness of the island.

“We’ll drop in on the party at midnight,” said Tommy. “That’ll give them a chance to get goin’ good. You and your boat be here then. We’ll be down right after that.”

“Then?”

“You take us to the mainland. If we get away as neat as I think, nobody sees us leave.”

Steve said slowly, “Right.” He moved away from them toward the stern of the boat.

“An’, Steve—” Tommy’s voice was quiet and menacing.

“Yeah?” He moved his head to one side.

“We heard you’d gone legit. That don’t mean you’ve gone crazy, does it? You wouldn’t cross us, of course?”

“I’ll be back at midnight,” Steve said.

“Good kid. See you. We gotta locate the cable.”

They turned and went off the pier with their lazy, indolent steps. Arrogant and deadly. Those three figures seemed to poison the air, dim the evening sun.

Steve Wilson moored his boat securely and followed the curving shoreline down the road that led to his home.

DINNER was good, but dinner was always good. And Mary was always lovely. Steve watched her moving about the room, carrying dishes out.

She paused with an armload at the kitchen door and said, “No late reading tonight, my boy. You’re too hard to get up in the morning.”

“I won’t read. But I think I’ll take a walk before I turn in. You go on to bed.”

“Steve—is something the matter?”

“No. Everything’s jake. I got little things on my mind.”

“Well, get them off. Remember, you’ve got a swimming date—at the cove, first thing in the morning.” She went through the door and out of his sight. The last thing he saw was a flashing silken leg and a mop of shining hair.

Steve got up and went outside. That swimming at dawn made you feel good, but it sure played hell with your sleep. He grinned a little, thinking of the morning battles when Mary tried to get him up as he stubbornly clung to the bed. . . .

Then he thought of the cove and the sand, and of Mary, sleek and golden there in the morning light. "I'll be there," he promised, "one way or the other." The words went away on the cool night air, and Steve Wilson turned up the road.

The boat was where he had left her, a long black shape beside the pier. There was no moon, and the sky was covered with new, invisible clouds.

Steve went aboard, feeling his way very surely inside the familiar hull. Beneath the seat near the wheel he found the gun, slipped on the safety, stuck the gun in his belt. Then he sat down and leaned tautly against the cushions. He had about two hours in which to decide what he wanted to do.

The lights from the Dalton beach house stood out bright in the distance. You couldn't hear the music, but sometimes you thought you could. Steve pictured the scene inside, the women with their beautiful gowns, the men with their polished manners—except for the ones who'd be tight by now. . . .

At eleven-thirty, Steve knew he couldn't let it happen. People here on the island were nice even if they *did* have money. And they had been good to him. He thought of Mary, felt the gun snug and cool against his belly under the shirt. Abruptly, he climbed out of the boat and walked toward the Dalton house.

There was a patio, Spanish style, that lay on one side of the house, and Steve was standing there, wondering how to find the three men, when hell broke loose inside.

It seemed as if the women all screamed at once, and the men sent up a shout. Steve brought the gun out and stood indecisively near a large window that gave entrance to the room.

Someone came through the window and hit him. That someone screamed, very close to his ear, and he thought his eardrums would split.

Mrs. Dalton. The old girl had been lamming through the window, and if she hadn't run into him she'd be down on the beach by now. Steve said, "Easy, Mrs. Dalton."

"Wilson! You! You and those men!"

"I'm not—" He let it go. Little George was right behind Mrs. Dalton. Little

George with a gleaming tommy gun. George said, "Oh, it's you, kid. You figure we might have trouble? Come up to give us a hand?"

Steve looked at the tommy gun, at Mrs. Dalton's bulk. "Yeah," he said. "Thought three might not be enough. I came along to make sure."

"The more the quicker," George said cheerfully, "but it looks like we're doin' okay."

The other two came backing out, Tommy and the one called Smoke. Tommy saw Steve and said, "Let's ride, kid. Oh-oh. Who's the wren?"

"Housekeeper," Steve said hastily. "I ran into her on the way in. She was headed for the kitchen." Inside, there was no sound at all. Steve wondered until he saw Smoke still in the window, sweeping his gun in a slow arc, covering the room.

"Ready?" Steve asked.

Tommy Henshaw said, "Let's go."

They trotted along as best they could with the heavy bags between them. Back in the house the lights began to go on and off. Shrill voices blended to make a sound like a hive of hysterical bees.

Steve heard the hoarse breathing of the other men. You couldn't really do much running if you trained on babes and booze.

Tommy loped on, passed the pier. In the blackness, Steve almost missed it himself. They couldn't have picked a darker night. Any other night there'd be stars, at least. . . . Steve let them run on for another ten yards, then yelled, "Here it is!"

They came back, panting, and stumbled into the boat. Steve marked the sound the sub-machine guns made as they laid them on the floorboards. Grinning tightly in the dark, he found the lines and cast off.

There was a scraping noise as someone picked up a gun, and Tommy's worried voice said, "Steve?"

"Yeah, I'm here." Steve kicked the motor into life and the boat ghosted ahead with only the tiniest burbling noise trailing aft behind her. "Looks like we're clear," Steve said.

"Clear?" growled George. "I'm dead. After this I'm stickin' to banks. Runnin' along through the dark like that, a man might break a leg."

STEVE chuckled, and then, from back in the stern, came Tommy's soft-voiced drawl. "Don't get so happy, boy. You ain't told us yet what you were doin' up there. Don't tell me you couldn't wait to deal yourself in on that caper."

"Straight," Steve said. "I been running this boat back and forth for more than a year. Nothing ever happens. I just couldn't stay away." He heard an unconvinced grunt from Tommy, and they left it there for the moment.

Only for the moment, though. Tommy hadn't swallowed that. The boat moved on, suspended in an inky void, running without lights. Tommy said, "How 'bout some speed?"

"Not a chance," Steve told him. "There's plenty of boats in the harbor can outrun this one, but if we keep the noise of the engine down, they'll have to find us first."

"He's right," George put in unexpectedly. "I was with a mob once, runnin' junk. We used to creep along slow."

Tommy grunted. The man called Smoke made fumbling sounds in the dark. He sounded almost cheerful as he said, "That bar back there was overloaded. I'll lay odds not one of you chumps thought to bring a drink."

They had not, but Smoke had provided two fifths, and Steve heard the sounds of the bottles being passed around. It came his turn, and he sipped lightly, sipped and checked the small green dots on his watch. One-fifteen, he made it. And the sun didn't rise until five.

Tommy said idly, from the stern, "How come you went legit, kid?"

"Girl," Steve answered shortly. "Met her during the war. She won't let me work nights." He smiled to himself in the dark, wondering if any of them had ever known a girl like Mary, a girl to feel serious and silly about—always, year after year. . . .

By two in the morning, his passengers were getting noisy. The savage evil within them, never far beneath the surface, began to come to the top.

"How much longer?" rasped George.

"Couple of hours," Steve said carelessly.

"Open her up." That was Tommy.

"It would be better—" Steve began.

The boat tipped briefly. Something dug into Steve's back, and Tommy said, "Do like I said, dummy. You want it in the belly instead of in the head?"

Silently, Steve shoved the throttle ahead. The boat surged forward, got up on the step and roared along through the night.

"Better," Tommy grunted.

"You don't want to plug me," Steve said mildly. "How would you find your way?"

"Don't be too sure I don't want to. George here knows about boats. Take a looka this gadget, George."

Little George lurched forward and stood weaving uncertainly above the dim glow of the compass light. He steadied himself with his right hand. His left hand gripped a bottle. "Coupla points off," he announced.

Tommy poked Steve with the gun. "Get her on."

"Sure. I guess I'm sleepy." Watching George's face, Steve brought her five degrees starboard. "Better?" he said.

"Yeah," said George. "Now you're cookin'." He went aft and slumped down in his seat.

Steve no longer looked ahead. He was busy, feverishly busy, watching his compass, checking his watch. Now that they had dropped the old pal routine, he felt much better about the thing he meant to do. What was it Tommy had said? "*You want it in the belly instead of in the head?*" That was nice. If he played along, he'd get a slug in the head. If not, they'd get real mean and give it to him painful.

He could hear them behind him, and he knew now they weren't going to sleep. High from the night's excitement. They'd still be awake at dawn.

But he had to slow her down. He couldn't risk it at this speed. *Nobody* was that good with boats. Steve put out a cautious hand and pulled the throttle back.

The motor muttered softly, the bow dropped down and the boat crept on. Tommy Henshaw barked ominously, "What now?"

"Seaweed. There's a big kelp bed about here. We'll have to take it slow."

"What for?"

"Ever see that stuff tangled in a screw? Bad," Steve said. "Take you hours to

cut it free. We'll open up when we've circled the bed."

Onward, though in that velvet blackness they seemed to hang in space. Steve spun the wheel, picked up a boat hook and lowered it into the water.

The men were quiet, now. That seaweed, Steve thought, has them worried. He tried the boathook again.

Then he brought it up, held it aloft for an instant, drove it down, point first, through the fragile hull of the boat.

Sounds of swearing, and Tommy Henshaw's "What happened?" coming through the stream of curses.

"Dunno," Steve yelled. "Can't tell in the dark. Maybe we've hit a rock." He yanked the boat hook free and threw it over the side. The water jetted in through the hole and sloshed in the shallow bilge.

Little George grabbed Steve's arm, shouting, "You got us into this! Now, get us out, or I'll plug you."

THE WATER was rising quickly now.

Steve opened the life-jacket locker, passed the jackets out. "Put 'em on."

"How?" Smoke yelled.

"Any way. It don't matter. And there's no hurry. She won't sink. She's fitted with air-tight tanks." Moving aft with an armful of jackets, Steve found the first gun on the floorboards. He threw it over the side. By the time he found the last one, the water was over the seats.

Tommy said, with terror in his voice, "Whatta we do now, Steve?"

"Sit tight," Steve answered. "Man's got no chance swimming all alone. Best we stick to the boat."

"An' get picked off like pigeons come mornin'?"

"There's worse things than serving a stretch," Steve told them. "Drowning's one of them."

The water came up even with the gun-

wale. Smoke had started to pray. He fumbled for words a little, but it sounded almost like a prayer.

Tommy said in a low, grating voice, "I should have plugged you back there. We couldn't of done any worse than this—" He broke off, and Steve heard a splash.

Warily, Steve brought out his automatic. If he could stall them off until daylight . . . They'd handle easy by daylight, but three of them in the dark . . . "Sit still," Steve said. "You want to tip us over?"

"Somebody moved that gun," Tommy growled. But he no longer splashed around.

It was very quiet in the boat, and when the dawn came, it had been long since anyone talked. Tommy broke the silence with a mighty roar of rage. "Yuh dope! Hit something, did we? The damn fool run us aground!"

Steve Wilson was almost happy. It had been a long, cold night. But now it was almost daylight, and they were safe inside the cove. The hole in the bottom would patch all right, and the engine would be okay once he got the salt water out. Twenty-five yards away lay the beach.

Steve said, "Overboard you go, boys. Don't be afraid. It won't come up to your chest." He watched with a lopsided grin while they fumbled in the water, searching for their guns. They gave it up then, and one by one eased themselves over the side.

Steve waded behind them, careful to keep his gun out of water on the way to the beach.

They climbed the hard-packed sand, and Steve said, "Sit down there, boys."

They sat, and Steve sat also, a comfortable distance away. There really wasn't any sense in him walking them in. Mary would be down pretty soon, on time for that morning swim.

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LAY ON, SIR HUBERT!



"Scoundrels!" Sir Hubert shouted.
"Bloody, misbegotten thieves!"

By **DAVE SANDS**

HAVING been born in the slums, Herbie Carpis knew a slum when he saw one. He continued his search for Sir Hubert Masfield, feeling vaguely unhappy, not only because in a matter of hours he would be obliged to come up with a "distinguished" escort, but also because the fact that an inspired Shakespearian actor was reduced to residence in these grim streets seemed somehow a reflection on his, Herbie Carpis', ability as an agent. Herbie didn't like

Broadway agent Herbie Carpis knew when he was licked. For when you cast a tottering, Shakespeare-quoting old billygoat against two killers—the customers will have to read the reviews on the obituary page!

that. Before the Chinese laundry, he hesitated, poked his head in the door. "I got a client," he said to the smiling Chinese. "Guy named Sir Hubert Masefield. You got him hid back there?"

"Upstairs," the Chinese answered. "Sir Hubert live upstairs."

Herbie thanked him and sought the rickety wooden stairs that clung indecisively and without visible means of support on the side of the red-brick building. He was panting from the exertion when he reached the upper landing and timidly tapped the door.

The voice came from within, a full voice, with depth and richness. It roared, "Enter, friend, for the love of God! Do not demolish my door!"

Herbie said, "Hi, Sir Hubert."

The actor said, "Ah, Carpis, thou craven, crawling creature. 'Tis long since I've met thy greedy eye. What brings you to my castle? Your passion for ten per cent?"

Herbie eyed the gaunt figure on the studio couch, winced at the worn dressing gown. "An actor," he said. "An actor without a shave."

"Did you," inquired Sir Hubert, "bring your bloated carcass to this end of the town solely to comment on my lack of grooming?"

"Grow a beard," said Herbie. "To me, Herbie Carpis, it ain't nothing. Only tonight, you should have a shave, you should take Miss Williams to the ball."

Sir Hubert swung his legs from the couch, whipped the robe tightly about his knees, grasped a cane and shouted, "Be gone! Do you think I'm a simpering fool? A blasted gigolo?"

"For fifty fish, you can simper."

"I— Fifty, Carpis?"

"Yeah. The price is good."

SIR HUBERT swung the cane like a riding crop and strode up and down the room. Then he paused before Herbie, towered above the little agent and fixed him with his eye. "A moment," Sir Hubert said. "If I'm to get fifty dollars, what are you getting, my cherubic little flesh peddler? Or would you have me believe that you have sought me out in my degradation for the sole purpose of earning an honest five?"

"Miss Williams," said Herbie wearily, "is the best friend of Gertrude M. Guild, the frosted cocoa queen. She is coming to visit, and she has even more money than Mrs. Guild, who has practically all the money there is."

"In my youth," Sir Hubert said, "I would have had you thrown out, Carpis, for attempting to influence my decision by the mention of sordid wealth. But now I am old . . ."

Something stirred in the far corner of the dimly lighted room, and Herbie Carpis, startled, turned in that direction. He made out a small man squirming from another slovenly couch. The little man nodded curtly, advanced to the window and stood there, scratching and blinking against the light.

He said, "Sounds like a nice touch, Hube."

Sir Hubert said, "Mr. Carpis, my friend, Mr. Runty McGill."

Runty said, "Hiya, Carpis. How's the agenting doge?"

Herbie considered Runty McGill. A pickpocket. He could be a pickpocket. Maybe something worse. "Mr. McGill," Herbie said heavily, acknowledging the introduction. He swung back to Sir Hubert and said, "This party is strictly formal. How to act won't give you no trouble. 'Gallantry and good manners,' Mrs. Gertrude Guild says. That's you. You should act like always."

Sir Hubert inclined his head. "Runty, my cape, if you please."

The man called McGill crossed the room, returned with an old-fashioned opera cape which he draped on the old actor's shoulders.

"Thank you," Sir Hubert said. He twirled the cane and said, "You may count upon me, Carpis. I shall cherish the beautiful rose you call Miss Williams, be she ever so faded. And I must confess, Carpis, that you come at an opportune time. I just happen to be sorely in need of funds."

Herbie, somewhat shaken by this admission, said, "You mean you're glad to see me?"

"The devil," Sir Hubert quoted, "'hath power to assume a pleasing shape . . .'"

Herbie fished in an inner pocket and produced a slip of paper. "It's all down

here. The time, the names and address."

Runty McGill craned his neck, reading the slip of paper. He whistled and said, "Morgan Drive! That address is really class."

Herbie said, "Yeah. But not a big party. Maybe thirty people, she said."

"Not enough," Runty suggested, "to have private dicks on the ice?"

"Me," Herbie said coldly, "I wouldn't know about that."

Runty said, "Yeah. I guess you wouldn't. Well, I got things to do, soon's I get something to eat. Pleased to have met you, Carpis."

Herbie nodded and watched the little man slide into another room. In a moment he heard the sound of an ice-box door and the careless rattle of dishes. Jerking his head in the direction of the kitchen, Herbie spoke to Sir Hubert. "You know him very long?"

"Briefly," Sir Hubert said. "But he is a sunny soul. His cheerfulness has been a great comfort to me while I withstand 'the thousand natural shocks the flesh is heir to'. Besides, this is his apartment."

Herbie thoughtfully watched the aged actor gracefully pose with his cane and flowing cape. Sir Hubert Masefield had once been a name, a name and a personality synonymous with money and fame. Now the fame and the money had gone, leaving nothing but grace and a manner, and the habit of living in a bygone era that would never come again.

Herbie tried to shake off the sadness, but the feeling persisted, and his voice came out hollowly as he said, "Do me a favor, Sir Hubert, and do a good job on Miss Williams. For somebody else I wouldn't care. But Mrs. Guild is a woman sends me lots of business—from angels for backing plays, to social jobs for clients that need them bad. Everything should go off smooth."

"Your implication," said Sir Hubert bitingly, "is that the charm which has served to mesmerize thousands of women could fail on one poor old maid. You are being insulting, Carpis, and I bid you good-afternoon."

He didn't leave the neighborhood right away. He crossed the street and stood beneath a drooping awning until Runty McGill came out. Herbie sighed as McGill set

out at a brisk, efficient pace. Herbie sighed and waddled along behind at a distance of fifty yards.

Runty McGill traveled rapidly without looking back. Where the trash cans were thick on the sidewalk, and the children split the air with raucous, jeering cries, Herbie turned aside and waited behind a flight of worn stone steps while Runty shoved through the sagging door of the Morning Star Cafe.

Minutes later, Herbie came to the door. Through the filthy glass, between the painted letters, he saw the gum-chewing waitress. She was sluggishly moving to serve Runty McGill and another man who had joined him. Herbie propelled his stomach before him and took the adjacent booth.

He was in time to hear the jubilant whisper, "Morgan Drive!"

When it became apparent to Herbie that he would hear no more, he arose and drifted out of the place.

As he sat at his office desk with his eyes fixed unseeingly on the vase with the single flower that his daughter, Sarah, had picked, he thought of phoning the police. He rejected the thought when he considered how little he really knew. Runty McGill *could* have been merely telling a friend how lucky Sir Hubert had been to land a Morgan Drive job. And maybe the little man's interest in "ice" had been passing and momentary—like the business of caring which movie star marries and divorces what man.

MR. GERTRUDE GUILD'S house huddled shyly on the rear of several acres in a section of town where they sold the land by the square inch.

Circling the house, he came to the kitchen. There was a cook, and a guy who looked like a butler, and a coming and going of maids. The people glanced at him without curiosity, and he made his way down a carpeted hall and stood where he could see the dining room and Mrs. Guild's guests.

Sir Hubert was bending above a rosy, white-haired woman who seemed to be taking it well. Having spent forty-odd years in formal clothing, Sir Hubert wore his jacket with gracious, unconscious ease.

Herbie forgot his worry enough to smile. And then he saw the cane.

The actor was leaning on it now, and as Herbie watched in horror, Sir Hubert thrust the stick before him like a sword, to illustrate a point. No one but Herbie seemed to think this performance out of the ordinary. But Herbie had rigid notions concerning socially acceptable conduct, and when his client moved gracefully near the door, Herbie hissed sharply. The actor turned his head.

"That cane!" Herbie whispered shrilly. "Get rid of that thing before you poke out somebody's eye!"

Sir Hubert drifted closer to the draperies which hid Herbie Carpis from the gaze of those in the room. "Must you cling to me like the old man of the sea? I have carried this cane, Carpis, in the drawing rooms of the world, twirled its shining magnificence at court before crowned heads. I will trouble you to remove yourself from the presence of your betters. In short, you can go to hell."

"Actors," spat Herbie fiercely. "Always they're hard to handle when they get their bellies full. So you've had a square meal. But you louse up this job and you don't work even so much as before—not even once a year."

"Be gone," Sir Hubert said. "This cane is part of a gentleman's equipage. As such, I shall carry mine." And while Herbie Carpis wrung his hands, Sir Hubert strode magnificently across the room and smiled down on Miss Williams.

Herbie parted the draperies farther and swept his eyes about the room, taking in the brilliantly colored gowns of the women and their unostentatious jewels. Miss

Williams was keeping her face toward Sir Hubert like a flower absorbing the light. It occurred to Herbie that she would have been a young girl at the height of Sir Hubert's fame. If she had been an admirer, a fan, she might not know how Sir Hubert had slipped—might think he had merely retired.

He was dwelling on this pleasant thought when the two hoods came into the room.

They entered through the windows at opposite ends, and they came forward with grim intent, holding their ready guns.

A male guest shouted, "A holdup!"

One of the gunmen, the tall thin one, said, "That's right. And we're not amateurs, chum, so don't get no bright ideas."

Several ladies squealed with penetrating shrillness, and the other gunman said, "Cut out that noise."

Sir Hubert cried, "Runty!"

The little gunman whirled on him and said, "Watch what you say, you sap. You ain't too good to get it."

BEHIND his shielding draperies, Herbie Carpis groaned aloud. Fully half the people in the room had heard Sir Hubert, had seen him recognize Runty. From here on nothing good could possibly happen. In the eyes of Mrs. Guild, Herbie Carpis had furnished an escort. The escort had furnished a friend who had instigated a hold-up . . . Herbie placed his palms on either side of his face and silently rocked his head.

The tall, thin gunman unrolled a canvas bag and moved methodically among the guests, stripping them of wallets and jewelry. Pausing before Miss Williams, he

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waited briefly while she fumbled with a reluctant choker clasp. Then, tired of waiting, he grabbed at the necklace and jerked.

Sir Hubert stepped forward, brandished his cane and said sternly, "I say!"

The gun swung toward him briskly, and the man barked, "Easy, grandpa."

The *grandpa* did it. Sir Hubert roared like a frenzied bull, and then he was wrenching at the knob of the cane. The cane became longer, surprisingly, and the slender wooden sheath went sailing through the air, leaving a blade of needle-like slenderness alive in Sir Hubert's hand.

The gunman blinked and fired, but Sir Hubert was crouching with his right side forward, in the fencer's classic pose. The shot missed, and the actor danced ahead. His feet slithered soundlessly over the silken carpet. The long thin blade flashed before him. It leaped, held for an instant as it stuck to the gunman's wrist. When the blade moved again, the blood spurted out.

The thin man dropped his gun. One of the guests had presence of mind to stoop and pick it up.

"Scoundrels!" Sir Hubert shouted. "Bloody, misbegotten thieves!"

He spun gracefully, saw Runty snarling on the other side of the room. "Tracherous villain!" Sir Hubert screamed and climbed atop the piano.

Runty was ready and waiting. He stood with his gun and his wide-planted feet and snarled, "Come down off'n there, you old goat, before you break a leg."

"Ha!" Sir Hubert said.

Herbie Carpis hid his face in the draperies. "Poor old man," he moaned brokenly. "He don't know they'll really shoot him. He thinks he's in a play." He opened his eyes and looked out again in time to see his client hurtling through the air.

Sir Hubert soared like a bird from his perch atop the piano, but something went wrong with his landing gear, and he and Runty went down in a screaming tangle upon the carpeted floor.

Above the two writhing bodies, the haft of the sword-cane whipped back and forth like a willow wand in a breeze. Herbie couldn't tell where the point was, and he didn't want to know.

He turned and trotted out through the kitchen, a beaten, broken man.

HE SAT again in his office with the night behind him.

The phone rang in the outer office, and Herbie cringed involuntarily and shot a glance at the door. Then the instrument on his desk buzzed demandingly. Herbie picked it up.

"Sir Hubert Masefield," the girl said. "He's calling from Royal Oaks."

Royal Oaks was a luxury hotel. If his client had crawled off to hide out there, it was costing forty a day.

"Ah, Carpis," Sir Hubert said.

Herbie said, "No matter what you're charged with, you should leave that hotel right away."

"My accommodations," Sir Hubert said, "are none of your concern. I contemplate resuming my activity in the theater, and I phoned to ascertain if you can obtain a vehicle for me, a really suitable play."

"Delirious," said Herbie. "You're talking out of your head. Me, I'm a ruined man this morning. You are putting blood on Mrs. Guild's carpets and scaring her friends to death. You and your phony cane. What kind of business is that?"

"The sword-cane," said Sir Hubert, "was the natural weapon of a gentleman long before you were born. Particularly do I cherish the weapon since it has won me a lovely bride."

"Bride?" said Herbie vaguely. "I thought your wife was dead."

"I refer to the current Mrs. Masefield—formerly known as Miss Williams. Following last night's excitement, she and I eloped to Royal Oaks."

"But Miss Williams," Herbie protested, "is a very rich old lady."

"Quite so," Sir Hubert said. "Now Carpis—about that play."

Herbie blinked against the cold blue glare of fluorescent lighting; then he computed the cost of production, adding items in his head. "A hundred thousand," he told Sir Hubert, "will do it."

"Done," said Sir Hubert's voice. "And naturally, Carpis, I shall play the lead."

Herbie Carpis smiled upon the wilted rose there in the glass on his desk. He held the petals to his nose, and they smelled just like ten thousand dollars, ten percent of the deal. Reverently, he put down the rose.

"Naturally," he said.

SO SORRY YOU DIE NOW!

By BUDD HOWARD

When Sadamichi Hirazawa walked out of the Teikoku Bank that winter day, he left twelve corpses behind him for the coroner—and for the police, one of the toughest manhunts in the history of crime!

IT IS DOUBTFUL that Sadamichi Hirazawa, Japanese artist and poet, will win any prizes for either his poetry or painting, but if the time ever comes when awards are passed out for superior ingenuity in crime, Hirazawa will probably be right up there with all the master criminals of the ages.

It was on January 26, 1948, that Hirazawa executed the mass murders that were to result in more than 22,000 persons being questioned by Tokyo police, and was to make one of the biggest newspaper sensations Japan has ever seen.

It was a bright morning, and the employees of the Teikoku Bank were busily at work, heads bent over ledgers; in the cages, cashiers counting out their yen; at the officials' desks, the manager and assistant manager poring studiously over their accounts. Into that scene walked Sadamichi Hirazawa, a small black bag in his hand, a smile on his face.

"So sorry," he told the guard who asked him his business. "Tokyo Bureau for Prevention Epidemics. Everyone must take pill. Stop disease. Very good. You take one?" He smiled pleasantly and reached into his black bag for a pill, which he gave to the guard with a little bow.

The guard made a little bow in return and swallowed the pill. "For a humble one such as I, this is much honor," he told Hirazawa, and they both bowed again. From the guard, Hirazawa proceeded to the bank manager where the same scene was duplicated, and from there he went to every employee of the bank—twelve, all told—bowing, passing out pills.

In a few minutes the "disease-preventing" pills—in reality potassium cyanide—had done their deadly work. All the bank employees became violently ill, and Sadamichi Hirazawa leisurely went into the cashiers' cages and scooped up all the money around, 164,000 yen (\$607) in cash and 17,450 yen (\$65) in checks. Then he bowed once again and walked out—leaving twelve corpses behind.

For seven months Tokyo police questioned likely suspects, to no avail. But while this mass interrogation was going on, one police officer, gentle, scholarly Hajime Gataki, was pursuing his own line of inquiry, which consisted of spending evening after evening with Hirazawa—writing poetry. Both of them were connoisseurs of this delicate art, and they wrote gentle poems in competition. Under the influence of the Muse, such a friendship developed that eventually Hirazawa confessed his crime to Gataki, without resort to more customary methods of grilling.

Possibly, among his other cultural accomplishments, Sadamichi Hirazawa is a lover of Gilbert and Sullivan. If so, he can probably well appreciate the sentiments of that other unhappy Japanese, in the *Mikado*, who melodiously told how awful it was:

. . . To sit in solemn silence in the dull,
dark dock
Of a pestilential prison with a life-long
lock;
Awaiting the sensation of a short, sharp
shock
From a cheap and chippy chopper on a big,
black block.



RIPE FOR THE KILL!

CHAPTER ONE

Pursuit

JAKE found the apartment the first week in August. It wasn't much. Two rooms and a wall kitchen, in a mud-colored building off Broadway on Ninety-seventh Street, and the apartment was on the court. But it was a place to live and Josie said take it. Josie was Jake's sister. She was the referee in an on-the-cuff advertising agency near Times Square. Jake,



Suspense-Packed Crime Novelette

By

FRANCIS K. ALLAN



"Help!" Josie screamed.
Archie saw her then,
and his gun came up.

*Willy was a quick guy with a sketching pencil. Also a quick
guy at borrowing a fin. But there were some things Willy
was slow at. Like returning that fin. Like marrying Josie.
Like solving murders.*

at the moment, was nothing. Nothing, that is, except a tall sandy-haired piece of what was left after malaria in Panama.

So they moved in. Josie with her portable radio-phonograph, two paintings, one Siamese cat and a dress she still owed three payments on. Jake was strictly out of the suitcase at this point. He was supposed to be "getting the feel" of things again, finding out he was still alive and forgetting how it had felt to drill dry holes instead of oil wells in South America.

The first night was steamy hot. The enclosed court was filled with the blaring of radios. Two couples on the third floor traded punches. Light globes and bottles exploded in the court.

"Home," Josie said with acid sweetness. "And all our own."

Jake was playing solitaire. From his face you could tell he was nervous. You could tell by the twitch of nerves in his temple, the way he didn't smile and the way he watched the cards without blinking. After a while, much too softly, he said.

"Pull down the window, Josie." And then, after another long time, he got up. "Going for a walk." He went out very quietly. Josie knew enough to leave him alone. She knew he felt lousy, probably. She knew he kept thinking of his money, down to the last borrowed dime, that was just a hole in the ground somewhere south of the equator. She knew he'd get over this, but it wouldn't be tomorrow or next Monday. She sighed and shook her dark curls and put on a Benny Goodman record and turned it loud. She felt better. Josie was small and pretty and she didn't believe in fairy tales, even with mink coats. Josie believed in the Bowery Savings Bank and the IRT subway and ten-cent beer.

SHE WAS in bed and it was after midnight when Jake came in.

"How was the walk?" she asked in the darkness.

"Something strange happened," he said slowly. His shoe hit the floor beside the daybed in the front room. "Downstairs, just as I came in. A woman was coming down the stairs, tiptoeing, and with a funny look. She was funny, too. She looked old and not old, sane and not so

sane. Strange eyes." Jake paused. Josie waited. "She stared at me a long time. It was so peculiar I just stood there. Then she came toward me, just like someone walking in a dream. Her hand—it was cold and bony—touched my chin and she said, 'Phillip! Phillip, you—' That was all she said. She whispered it in a breathless, trance-like voice, then something happened in her eyes, all over her face, and she ran."

"In New York, as I always say, you meet all kinds," Josie said. She turned over and went to sleep. Jake was sleeping when she fixed her breakfast and left for the office. All day, as usual, she was busy keeping Furgol, who had the capital, from screaming at Herb, who had the talent in the firm of Furgol and Herblock. It was a fairly calm day, however. Only once did Furgol wish he was dead, and at five o'clock Herb still had his tie on. "Not even a knockdown today," Josie said to the door as she locked it and went home. On the IRT.

Jake was sitting by the window, a solitaire layout in front of him. He was just staring out the window. His daybed was still the way it had been and the breakfast dishes were in the sink. Josie started to say something, then sighed.

"What did you get for dinner?" she asked.

Jake didn't seem to hear. After a long time he said, "I was talking to the elevator guy. The old one with the bad leg. He says her name is Kathryn Barron and she's lived in the same sixth-floor apartment for at least fifteen years. She never goes out except at night, late."

Josie frowned. "Very cute. Who is this who does such tricks?"

"Her," Jake said with mild annoyance. "The strange woman who called me Phillip and then ran away. I've been thinking about her all day. There's something about her that gets me."

"Well," said Josie, "there's something that gets me, too, and it is called hunger. All of a sudden I don't want to cook. I am going out and blow myself to a six-bit special. What about you, Jackson?"

He did not turn his head. "That's her window. Up there, the one with the torn place in the shade. I've been watching. She watches me."

"How cunning," Josie said, suddenly angry. She walked out and had two martinis before dinner, then went to a double-feature. As she went home, she was sorry. She should have made Jake come along. The doctors had said he'd be melancholy, probably. What he needed was to get out, stop thinking about himself, start seeing people. He ought to be dropping in at the *Banner* and the *Star*, letting somebody know that a rewrite man could be had. Tomorrow, maybe, Josie hoped.

Jake wasn't home. It worried Josie a little. She got in bed and read a while. At two o'clock she turned off the light, but she couldn't go to sleep. The heat of August seeped in from the court, stale and second-hand, as though the air had been breathed and rebreathed until its last fragment of freshness was drained.

Josie pushed back the sheet restlessly and smoked a cigarette in the darkness. For some reason—she didn't know why—she went to the window and tried to remember which window was the woman's. She wished Jake would come home. Then she felt angry with herself. After all, Jake was thirty. He'd been to war without her, so he could probably take a walk without her. She went back to bed.

At 3:20 she was awake when the front door opened and closed quietly. She heard the daybed sigh as Jake sat down. He lit a cigarette. Through the open door she watched the glowing coal.

"Jake?" she called softly at last. "Is anything the matter?"

"Matter? Nothing's the matter." He didn't sound like himself. Silence lasted, then he mused, "I followed her all the way to Third Avenue. And she seemed to know someone was following—the way she acted, glancing back, hurrying, then darting into doorways and down side streets. She's fantastic, I tell you," he whispered. "The woman is a freak of some kind. I knew it the moment I saw her eyes."

"Who wants to worry with a freak?" Josie demanded irritably.

Jake paid no attention. "On Third Avenue she went into a dingy all-night delicatessen and bought something. The package wasn't as big as a folded handkerchief. Then she slipped and doubled

and circled her way home. From here to Third Avenue, after midnight, to buy a cracker. And her clothes! Listen, they're from the revolution! She—"

"Oh, nuts! I'm tired of hearing about it." Josie closed the door and pulled the sheet up angrily. The next day she felt tired. When Herb and Furgol started screaming at each other, she stood up and threatened to quit. They almost jumped out the window. Furgol gave her a five-dollar raise and Herb went home with a sick headache.

WHEN Josie got home, a slow, hot rain was falling. She was wet and hot and sorry for herself. Jake was gone again. The daybed was unmade. The dishes were not washed, and the last four inches were gone from the bottle of Scotch. That did it. Josie picked up the bottle, aimed it savagely for the concrete court and let fly. It exploded with a gratifying smash. Josie dusted her hands.

As she started to turn from the window, she saw Jake's face. It was indistinct, blurred beyond the unwashed window of

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the sixth floor. She stared at him, and for that long interval she had the sensation that he was lost. He was a total stranger, someone she had known long ago but who had slipped beyond her call. His face was remote and foreign. He was not Jake, not her brother. He was a stranger who stared at her from a woman's window, and then he turned away.

Josie was frightened. She didn't know why. She felt an unhealthiness in the air about her. The reality of normal life seemed to fade. For a moment she felt that she were dreaming. Then she shook her curly head angrily and put on her next-to-best dress. She put on her imported perfume. She walked out. From the drugstore, she called Patsy's Bar on Third Avenue.

"Is Mr. Willy Ransom there?" she demanded. "He's the one with the old suit drinking whiskey on the cuff."

Willy was there. He was happy to hear her. "If you're not still mad at me, I will buy you a drink," he offered. "If you can lend me a fin for a short spell."

"Stay where you are, William. I'll be there."

Josie had known off and on. Willy was a comic strip creator of self-admitted genius. Willy had one trouble only: No one bought his comic strips. In seasons of blackest disaster, Willy took his folding camp stool down to Greenwich Village and did sidewalk portraits for two bucks a throw. Josie regarded him as impractical.

"Willy," she said as she walked into Patsy's, "encourage me."

He bought her a drink and borrowed the five. His face was pleasantly rounded. His hair was not quite red. His eyes looked very wise and understanding. His suit looked very old. His bow-tie needed cleaning. "What's wrong?" he inquired calmly. Josie told him, because it was always nice to tell Willy things. Even if he didn't understand, he was very sympathetic. And sometimes he understood. When she finished, he nodded and blinked wisely.

"I'll look into the matter tomorrow. Let's have another drink." About midnight Willy took her home. He kissed her, and Josie looked at him resignedly.

"Why don't you settle down and make

money and ask me to marry you?" she wondered wistfully. Willy nodded. Sympathetically, as always.

The apartment was dark when she opened the door. "Don't turn on the light," Jake said in the darkness. Josie stood there. Finally her eyes adjusted and she made out his profile at the window.

"What are you doing?" she asked coldly.

"Watching." His voice was flat and far-away.

"I saw you at her window." Josie waited. "Jake, what's the matter with you? You're acting crazy. Jake."

"I was talking to her. There's something fantastic in it. Something big. I got her to talking. I had to help her. Prompt her. It was like questioning someone who was semi-conscious. She . . ." He stopped and leaned closer toward the window.

"Jake, listen to me and get away from that window," Josie begged. "Jake, this is giving me the creeps! I don't like it!"

"You don't understand," he said in a voice that was miles away. "This is like probing a lost cavern. Like discovering a sunken city of the past and exploring the rooms. Waking the corpses who were trapped when the volcano erupted and covered them and—"

"Stop it! I don't want to hear it!" Josie cried. "I hate it, you understand! I'm afraid of it! I—"

"There! She turned out the light!" Jake breathed raptly. "She'll go somewhere, and it won't be to Third Avenue! I know! It was in her eyes!"

"Jake! Jake, don't—" Josie gasped. He was out the door and down the corridor. Josie jerked up her purse and ran after him. When she reached the dark street, she glimpsed him turning the corner into Broadway. When she reached the corner he was a hundred feet ahead. He was moving furtively, keeping in the shadows near the walls. And beyond him was a woman. Josie knew she must be the one.

Her dress was long and black. Her head was bare. Her hair was grey-white. In the distance she seemed unbelievably thin. She moved with bird-like rushes—darting ahead, jerking, seeming sometimes

to hop and skip in her nervous haste.

JOSIE stopped running. She stood still, torn between a blind fear and a cold determination. Determination won.

"Okay, kiddies," she said uneasily. "Let's make it a real parade."

She began to follow. The hot, misty rain had begun again. Here and there a red neon light cast a crimson glow. A few people hurried from the subway exits, newspapers held over their heads. Tires of cabs made a thin sucking sound on the wet streets.

The woman continued down Broadway to Eighty-sixth Street, then turned east. At Central Park West, she crossed into the park and followed the walk through the park to Fifth Avenue, then south again to Seventy-second.

Josie was soaked. She was tired. Her feet hurt, and her head was beginning to ache from the drinks. Still she followed stubbornly as the woman and Jake turned east at Seventy-second and continued to Madison Avenue. At Madison Avenue the woman stopped. She seemed lost. She started uptown, turned with an air of confusion, stared up at the building tops, then decided to go downtown. She began a frantic shuttling from one side of Madison to the other, pausing often to stare at some building front or into some darkened shop window.

Suddenly she began to run. She ran awkwardly, as if each step were desperation. She ran across the street and toward a plain brown mansion, four stories tall. At the foot of the stone steps, at each side of the entrance, was a pair of iron wolfhounds, lanky and black. The woman reached out and touched one of the hounds, and then Josie heard her cry out in a softly excited voice.

She drew back from the hounds and started up at the mansion. Now her movements were silent and jerky. She moved to the narrow passageway that opened off the side street. She disappeared into the darkness.

Josie saw Jake slipping down the opposite side of the side street. He started across the street, hesitated, went on and finally dissolved into the same darkness. Josie stayed where she was. She was afraid. The sensation swept over her in

almost uncontrollable force. This was part of some dream, she kept thinking foolishly, and if she would only close her eyes, she would end it. She would find herself back in her bed, and none of this would be true.

She closed her eyes. She was trembling. And then she heard the scream. It was the most grotesque sound she had ever heard. It was a sound that was shrill with horror. It was a woman's scream, wild and high, and it struck through the walls of the mansion and cut the night with its terror. Then it came again. Again and again. It became a rhythmic pulsation of horror that had plunged out of control. It ended only when the screams choked and strangled and collapsed into silence. There was an interval of silence. Josie did not breathe. Her fingernails cut into her palms. She stared at the mansion, and then she heard the clatter of footsteps.

The woman appeared from the passageway, running clumsily. A full minute later Josie saw Jake. He came out running, too. His long legs settled into a lope. His arms flapped at his sides. Josie screamed at him. He did not hear. Then a fat man appeared, lumbering after Jake. The woman had disappeared. And then Josie could run no further. She stopped and leaned against a wall and tried to breathe again. At last she walked to Park Avenue and found a cab to take her home.

CHAPTER TWO

Lethal Letters

THAT NIGHT Jake didn't come home. Josie fixed her breakfast next morning, stared at it, then dumped it in the waste can and put on her hat. It was still raining.

In the middle of a letter, Charlie Furgol stopped dictating and frowned. "Josie . . ." After the third time, she heard him. "Maybe you don't feel so good," he said. "In fact, maybe you should go home."

"Home?" She looked at him stonily. "Tell me more. Tell me about firesides and stuff. Tell me— I'm sorry, Charlie." She stood up and shook her head slowly. "I'm getting to be the emotional type, seems like. I think I'll take a big walk around Times Square."

She didn't. She went home, took a deep breath and took the elevator to the sixth floor. In case of doubt, she told herself, go straight ahead and pretend you're a tractor. So she knocked at Kathryn Barron's door.

There was no answer. She knocked four times and there was no answer. Her fingers touched the knob. She turned it and the door opened. She stood on the threshold of a small furniture-packed room. The room was stale, airless, dusty. The furniture was old, massive. Newspapers, paper sacks, battered luggage, outdated, clothes were stuck everywhere. And Josie stood there.

This is what they say don't do, she was thinking. This is entering without permission or something.

And she did it. She closed the door silently behind her and looked at everything. She didn't like anything about this place. She moved to the door into the bedroom. The bedroom was even more crowded and dirty. The closet door bulged with the mass of antique clothing. Carton boxes stuck out from beneath the bed. A few crumpled crackers lay on a paper napkin beside the window. In the bathroom was a bird cage and stand. There was no bird.

Josie shook her head. Suddenly she wanted to get out. She had no right or reason for being here, and the wave of fear seized her again. She turned swiftly toward the door. She froze still as she heard the latch click. The hinges whined softly. Josie touched the wall and backed into the bathroom, dismay and fear in her throat. She heard the door close. Silently she edged the bathroom door to a slit.

She heard a quiet footstep, silence, then a rubbing or pulling sound. Something rattled gently. A methodical tapping followed. Another footstep, and Josie began to breathe again.

It was Jake. His hat was turned down at the brim. It was dark with rain and his coat was soaked. His features were intense. His eyes glistened darkly. His lips were slightly parted and he seemed to be breathing fast and softly.

He lifted a heavy, metal-bound suitcase from the floor and stood it on top of a massive dresser. Carefully he tapped

around its top, then around the sides and bottom while he listened, his head tilted and his ear near his tapping fingernail.

At last he shook his head, put the suitcase down and lifted a small steamer trunk. It's metal was dusty and rusty with age. Again Jake tapped and listened. Josie found herself coldly and horribly fascinated by her brother's face, by the grim intensity she saw there, by the strangeness she did not know and could not penetrate.

She simply watched in silence, and suddenly Jake leaned closer. His tapping became insistent, frantic. A wordless exclamation came from his throat. He fingered the lock furiously. He hammered it with his fist. He drew his knife out and pried at the lock. He cursed softly and stood there, seeming to listen toward the outside corridor. Then, with sudden decision, he lifted the steamer trunk, moved to the door, and Josie heard it open. She could not see him. Moments passed. She heard it close. Jake was gone.

Josie rushed silently to the corridor. He had vanished. She ran to the head of the stairs and looked down. Three flights below she could see Jake's lean fingers sliding along the railing. And there they left the railing as he turned into the third-floor corridor.

The fool! The crazy fool, Josie thought. He's taking it straight to our apartment!

But when she reached the third-floor corridor, Jake had vanished again. She hurried to the apartment and unlocked the door. Jake was not here. She rushed back to the corridor in confusion. Perhaps she'd been wrong. Perhaps it had been the second floor. Or the fourth. She ran back to the stairs and up to the fourth floor. He wasn't here. She went down to the second floor. Finally she stopped, out of breath and suddenly angry with herself. She tried to understand why she was so dismayed by all this. Jake was being a fool, but why should she? Maybe you just did these things, the very way you went in burning buildings to save your children, but *why*? Jake was a big boy now. In fact, she decided with a rush of bitter fury, to hell with James William Sawyer. She turned back toward the stairs and there she came face to face with the woman she knew was Kathryn Bar-

ron. She stood still as she stared into the glassy-bright blue eyes, and Jake's voice echoed in her startled mind: "*She looked old and not too old. Sane and not sane. Strange eyes. . . .*"

KATHRYN BARRON continued to stare at her as she climbed the stairs. At the third floor, she turned. Josie felt as though a cold, moist hand had passed across her throat. She climbed to the third and saw Kathryn Barron turning the corridor, going toward the apartment. Josie heard a restless tapping. When she made the turn in the corridor, she found Kathryn Barron standing at the door. She was tapping again. Josie drew a thin breath and moved her tongue across her lips.

"What do you want?"

Kathryn Barron turned around jerkily and stared at her. There was suspicion mingled with hostility in her eyes. She did not answer.

"I live in this apartment," Josie said stubbornly. "What do you want?"

"Oh." The woman drew back slightly. "Where is he?"

"I suppose you mean my brother. I don't know where he is. Why?"

"I must see him. I must talk to him. I need him quickly," she said nervously. Her voice had a rattle like dry paper.

"Why?" Josie asked bluntly. Kathryn Barron's face was like a skeleton's covered by grey tissue. Her lips were in constant restless motion; her fingers twitched incessantly. Her grey hair was unclean. Her old-fashioned clothes were unclean. But there was something else, something deeper. And Josie felt her mind snatch at it. *This woman was evil. Bitter, abnormal, evil, and darkly clever.*

"Why? Why do you want to see my brother?" Josie repeated harshly. "Why don't you leave him alone?"

The woman seemed not to hear. She leaned close to Josie and her breath was swift and harsh. "Tell him I must see him. Tell him it's all coming back to me now. All of it. I know it all now."

She hurried away. As Josie stood there, staring after her, she heard a footstep behind her and turned to find Jake. He looked lean. His face seemed darker and his eyes seemed sunken.

"I didn't know you'd be home so early." His voice was low.

"I . . . had a headache." Suddenly Josie felt an uneasiness, even a fear of her brother's mood. She opened the door, and Jake followed her into the apartment. The odor of whiskey was strong on his breath. He moved to the window and looked out and up. Up to *her* room, Josie knew. The silence became unendurable to her.

"Jake, can't you—won't you tell me what you're doing?" she stammered.

He turned and stared at her suspiciously. "What makes you think I'm doing anything?"

"But I—I know that—" She stopped, genuinely frightened now. "I just know you're . . . not the same," she said.

"The same as what? As when? How am I supposed to be?" His voice was low and hard. Josie backed away from him until she reached the door into her bedroom. He watched her coldly.

"I don't know. I—I've got a headache," she said.

"I'm all right. All right. Don't forget that. I know what I'm doing. I always know what I'm doing. I don't need you to tell me. I don't need anybody to tell me. Don't forget that."

"I won't. I—I'm going to bed." She closed the door frantically. She leaned against it and realized she was trembling. She felt ill and cold. She moved to the bed and sat down. She watched the door and listened to Jake's footsteps prowling. They became a consuming obsession. She tiptoed to the door and knelt down at the keyhole. She saw the blue material of his suit. She could not see his head.

He was standing across the room at the table where her radio-phonograph stood. She heard the latch of the top click. Then Jake knelt down and she could see the back of his sandy-haired head. He was doing something to the radio-phonograph. Something where he used his knife. Once he twisted and stared toward the door, and for that interval she was looking straight into his eyes and she could not believe that he did not know. But he did not know, it seemed. He turned back to the radio-phonograph, and finally he straightened. He sighed and moved to the window. He stood there for several minutes, looking

up—toward the apartment on the sixth floor, Josie knew.

At last he turned decisively and crossed the room to the door. It opened and closed, and silence grew. Josie waited ten seconds, then jerked the door open and rushed down the corridor. The elevator was rattling down in the shaft. She turned into the stairs and stumbled down. She heard the elevator opening at the main floor. At the landing between the first and second floor, Josie stopped. Jake's flat voice was saying, ". . . Let me speak to him, please."

A FULL MINUTE passed. "Hello?" Jake said. "Isn't it true that an old friend of yours came back last night . . . ? Let's talk about it at the Cragley Hotel on Second at ten tonight. Good-bye." Josie raced back up the stairs and through the corridor to her bedroom. She closed the door and waited, breathless. But Jake did not return. Then it came to her: He must have gone up to Kathryn Barron's apartment!

She slipped to the window and looked up through the rain. The shade was drawn. She turned and moved to the radio. She lifted the lid and stared into the maze of dials. She touched the turntable, then the needle-cup. She had no idea what she was looking for or what Jake had done.

Then she noticed the tiny scratch on the polished wood beside the screw—a screw that held the speaker-screen in place. And Josie remembered Jake's knife.

She stood up and moved to the main door. She pushed the bolt into the slot, then got a knife from the kitchen drawer. She loosened the screw and the screen section toppled out. And out rolled a ball of cotton about the size of a baseball. It fell to the floor. Josie lifted it. She probed into it and felt something small and hard. She dug. She found them. She knew they were diamonds. Large diamonds, larger than any she had ever seen, much less held in her hand. There were nineteen of them.

Nineteen diamonds. A thousand dollars each? Nineteen thousand in all? More than that, perhaps, Josie thought wildly. And Jake had hidden them here. He'd taken the trunk. He'd appeared from the

other end of the corridor without the trunk, and here were these . . .

Footsteps sounded in the corridor. Josie froze. A door opened and closed. With trembling fingers she pressed the diamonds back into the cotton and thrust the cotton into the speaker. She replaced the screen. She glanced either way down the corridor, then tiptoed in the direction from which Jake had come.

The corridor turned and came to a dead-end. There were two doors. One was numbered; the other, a smaller door, was not. And this, Josie knew, must be it. She turned the knob. The odor of floor oil and dirt and grease seeped out from the darkness. She closed the door behind her and fumbled for the light switch.

This was a storeroom. There were mops, brooms, broken chairs, floor-sweeping material, a few cans of dried paint. And the steamer trunk. She moved to it. The lock was smashed. She opened the lid. Tightly packed old clothes billowed out. The odor of moth-balls swept through the air. There were two small drawers, and these were crammed with letters. Josie stared at one. It was addressed to Kathryn Prince, at an address on Madison Avenue. Madison Avenue . . . Josie's memory swept back to the night before, to the mansion and the screams. She looked at the letter again. It was over sixteen years old. Kathryn Prince. Not Barron.

Josie started to return the letter, hesitated, then thrust it in her pocket. Suddenly she had to get out of the room. All of this was wrong, dangerous and wrong and insane. It was crazy of Jake to hide the trunk in here. It would be found and the woman would know.

Josie hurried down the hall. She did not stop to get her raincoat or hat. She did not use the elevator. She ran as far as Broadway and the little bar and grill. There, in a booth, she took out the letter. The handwriting was flowing and bold. The note was brief:

My dearest,

I have your note and am so glad to know *he* is away this week. I will meet you in the usual place. I know you are worried, but you must not be foolish, my darling. He hates you and he hates me, but I don't think he will kill anyone. Love.

Phillin.

Josie stared at the letter a long time, and as last put it back in her pocket. She closed her eyes and tried desperately to think. It was after four o'clock. She rose abruptly and went to the telephone. Willy wasn't at home. He wasn't at Patsy's Bar. She left a message for him to call her or wait.

For a long time she sat without moving in the booth. She was tired. She had to think. She couldn't think. Someone rapped at the door, wanting in.

She went back to the booth and tried again to think. Jake had known there was something in the trunk. He had stolen it, taken the diamonds, hidden them again. Why? Because he planned to dispose of them. And when that happened . . .

Josie rose abruptly. She hurried down Broadway to the five-and-ten store. Rain dripped from her hair as she stopped at the costume jewelry counter. Here were imitation diamonds set in glistening bands. They were twenty-five cents each. They were about the same size, the largest ones. She counted out nineteen. It was four dollars and seventy-five cents, the salesgirl said.

Josie took the package and moved away. At the household counter she picked out a small pair of pliers. They would do to get the stones out of the bands.

Josie was tired and wet when she reached the apartment. Jake was still gone. She closed herself in the bedroom and worked frantically with the pliers. One by one she loosened the stones from the setting. Once more she slid the bolt on the main door, opened the radio speaker, and emptied out the diamonds. She folded the imitation stones into the cotton and closed the speaker again.

Where? What to do with the diamonds?

She rushed through the tiny apartment. An early darkness was falling. The bed? But people always hid things in beds, and Jake was going to *know* she had done it. In her powder box! Buried in the powder!

She moved swiftly. She was just finishing when the knock came at the door. "In a second," she cried frantically.

"Telephone downstairs for you, Miss Sawyer," the elevator operator called.

It was Willy. "I'm at Patsy's. They said

you called. What's happening, baby?"

"Oh, Willy, Willy, this thing is terrible! I—I can't tell you over the phone! I've got to see you immediately, Willy."

"Likewise," he said wryly. "I've been calling there and at your office all day. Have you read the papers?"

"No. What is it?" Josie whispered.

"I dunno. It just depends on my memory for little things. Also, upon whether Jake was visiting around Madison Avenue last night. You wouldn't know about that, would you?"

"Willy, I—

Willy, what happened on Madison last night?"

"Let's have a drink. Grab yourself a cab. Something tells me trouble." He hung up. Josie grabbed a cab.

CHAPTER THREE

The Prowler

WILLY wasn't at the bar. He was sitting alone in the back booth, a damp newspaper in front of him and an owlish look on his face. Without a word he turned the paper around to face Josie and put a stubby finger on the story. The tabloid headline said,

HE LOOKED LIKE ROGER ROBERTS,
SAYS HYSTERICAL FU-FU OF PROWLER

"I screamed. I screamed and screamed and finally he ran," sobbed Edith Prince, better known as Fu-Fu to her friends of the yachting crowd. Technically, Fu-Fu is the wife of Waldemar Prince, who has bought and sold more diamonds than most people you will find. Fu-Fu met the press in the upstairs salon of her Madison Avenue mansion this morning. She wore a Paris-creation robe, and a kindly eye could see that Fu-Fu was all upset. In fact, before the party blew up, things got more out of hand than usual, which is a lot where Fu-Fu is concerned. In certain confusion, things appeared to be like this:

It was nearly two in the morning, and Fu-Fu was strolling in the hall. When asked why, Fu-Fu dissolved into hysterics. But she was strolling and who should she meet but a man. At this point Fu-Fu became much more lucid. This gentleman was tall. His hair was wavy and sandy. His eyes were dark. In fact, said Fu-Fu he was exactly like Roger Roberts, the movie actor. Exactly. I am devoted to Roggy, you know, Fu-Fu admitted, and I just couldn't believe my eyes. But it wasn't Roggy, because this man ran. Roggy

wouldn't have run away from me, naturally. After that, Fu-Fu decided mistily, I simply fainted. Everything went black and then the maid was standing there with the brandy.

Careful inquiry brought out that the prowler had taken nothing, apparently. He was described as about thirty, wearing a grey-blue suit, a white shirt and a blue tie with stars in the pattern. He was thin and pale, and Fu-Fu says he had the biggest belt buckle she'd ever seen. A long distance call to Hollywood revealed that Roggy was on location in Arizona and didn't have a big belt buckle.

Then Waldemar Prince arrived at the party. Waldemar was not happy, and when Waldemar is not happy, nobody around him is happy. First he smashed a photographer's camera. He threw the photographer into the hall. He picked up a lamp. Other reporters departed promptly. Fu-Fu screamed and the door was slammed. A butler escorted the press to the door and slammed it firmly. That was how it was on Madison Avenue this morning with Fu-Fu.

Slowly Josie looked up at Willy. He gestured. "Like Roger Roberts. That's Jake on the nose. Then that tie. Same kind he was wearing at dinner the other night. And that tug-anchor of a belt buckle he bought in Mexico. So I said, Willy, what about this stuff? Then I called you."

"Listen to me, Willy, and listen hard, because some of it goes very fast on the corners." Then Josie told him everything.

Willy's almost red hair seemed to rise stiffly. His eyes grew. When Josie had finished, Willy cleared his throat. "Roscoe," he said to the waiter, "blend a strong pair of martinis and bring them this way without delay." He looked at Josie again. "It says Fu-Fu was strolling in the hall and wouldn't say why; says she got hysterical about it. Me, I think she met Kathryn Barron and got hysterical. The thing about Jake? Maybe a red herring, like they say sometimes."

The martinis came. Willy continued, "So we have Fu-Fu Prince and a Kathryn Barron with letters addressed to Kathryn Prince. This Kathryn Barron-Prince has a trunk equipped with diamonds, and old Waldemar Prince is the world's fattest diamond trader. So what have we got when we add it all together?" He rose. "I will find out. Just like you lend me money, the world is full of people who lend me facts. Keep your seat and order two

more martinis. I will be back soon."

Josie waited. Willy was gone nearly ten minutes. "I have learned about Fu-Fu," he said. "She is forty-plus. A gay child who will take a drink. My informant thinks Fu-Fu has not had a brain cell in operation since Coolidge. Fu-Fu loves publicity. Without publicity, she would die tomorrow; she even has an agent. Before she married Waldemar, about twelve years ago, she was a song-and-dancer and regarded as a lovely. But now, no. Fu-Fu is growing tired, maybe. Too many yachts. But my friend is looking through the morgue at the *Star* and will call me back when he finds out where Kathryn fits." Willy seized his martini.

"Also," he continued, "I have been thinking about Jake. I called my friend who is a doctor in a respectable way. He listened. He is going to read the page on malaria again, but he thinks he remembers how people can jump off the scooter after such as malaria. It's from depression. Melancholia. Mix it up with Jake losing his dough and such, and maybe we get a candidate for the rest-cure ward. We will—"

The waiter called Willy to the telephone. He came back in a prance. "We are in a hurry. We are going over to the *Star*," he said promptly. "Alexander thinks he has found something warm."

Alexander was waiting in the morgue. He was a tall and gloomy-looking man with a faded red bow-tie and sparse hair. "There was a Kathryn Prince," he said in a mournful voice. "She was Waldemar's first wife. A pianist. Temperamental. A hint of scandal mixed in, here and there and even so far as Europe and Paris. In short, not a kid to stay home with the pot-roast and knitting. But then comes the business. About sixteen years ago in the south of Jersey. That's where Waldemar had a villa. One night the villa went boom. Blew up and then burned up the other part. Waldemar was in Miami. But Kathryn was staying alone at the villa and they say she got the business. Burned up or blown up or both. But definitely off the program hereafter. Waldemar screamed that enemies in the diamond racket had tried to get him. He did a year's mourning and dedicated a hospital wing in Kathryn's memory. Then he married Fu-Fu."

"Um-hum," said Willy softly. He looked at Josie. Josie was finding it hard to stand up. She opened her mouth to say something, then the telephone rang. Alexander got it, listened a few moments. Then a look of grey incredulity swept across his face. He made a gurgling sound and clapped down the telephone.

"The Great Man from upstairs says get the hell out to the Waldemar Prince place, but fast! I'll see you tomorrow or the—"

"Oh, no!" Willy put in. "You're seeing us now." He grabbed Josie's arm and hauled her along in the wake of the hurrying Alexander. "We are your assistants, name of Smith and Jones."

Alexander gave him a cold stare. "When we get there, keep your mouth shut," he said. "I wish you wouldn't come."

"Willy, maybe we shouldn't—" Josie started. Willy glared at her.

"I will handle everything," he said firmly. They ducked into a cab behind Alexander. It was still raining, and it was dark.

THERE were seven cars, including two police coupes, at the Prince mansion when the cab halted. Alexander bolted across the walk and into the strong arms of a cop. "Press. Press," Alexander panted.

"So're the others and they didn't get in, either. There's a nice bar around the corner. We'll send word when we need you."

Alexander began to argue. Willy took Josie's arm and set off at a casual stroll toward the corner. He turned, and they reached the service passage at the rear. A cop eased himself off the wall.

"Hunting something, mister?"

"Been a little trouble here?" Willy inquired politely.

"And why would you be asking?"

"Ha, from Ireland! Come closer to the light. Ah . . . Surely it is a fine face you are wearing. Wait!" Willy burrowed into his pocket and came out with a pencil. Next he came out with a sketch tablet. "Now . . . with the chin a bit more, and soon we'll be having something to take home to the wife." Willy sketched furiously. "An Irish face for sure."

The cop grunted. Willy turned the pad a moment to let him glance at the sketch.

The cop grunted again.

"And what seems to be the trouble inside?" Willy asked absently.

"Hard to say. These big places, you don't get the truth so fast."

"Was anyone hurt?"

"The maid, she's the one who's talking. It's her that called us, saying the mistress was missing all of a sudden."

"Gone, huh? But— No, right where you are. What a jaw! And so she is missing? Any signs of violence? Any idea why she's gone?"

"Seems there was a prowler around last night. Fellow they said that looked like Roger Roberts, but it wasn't him. I don't know. They talk about Brooklyn and Harlem and such, but it's places like this where the worst always happens."

"True. Oh, true. And it looks pretty bad, huh?"

"Kind of like there was a tussle in the lady's room before she got taken away. Things scattered around and turned over. Piece of wire on the floor, pointing to where she might of been choked. This prowler last night—they're saying in the paper that he was wearing a blue tie with stars in it."

"Yes?" Willy's tone was suddenly soft. Josie did not breathe. "Turn just a little more to the light. You mentioned a tie . . ."

"Looks like a piece of it on the floor up there now. 'Course, you and the lady here wouldn't mention—"

"Oh, no," Willy said. His voice had gone dry. Josie felt the back of her knees start to give. She held to the building wall, and it seemed to tilt. She was going to fall. She was going to faint. She gritted her teeth and swore she wouldn't faint. And finally, as though from far away, she heard Willy saying,

"And there it is. A pleasure. Take it home, buy a little frame and hang it on the wall. And good-evening." He gripped Josie's arm and started her moving. "Don't say anything," he whispered starkly.

They got a cab. Willy gave Josie's address. And then Josie began to cry. Not loudly. Very softly and terribly. Willy held her hand.

"If he— If he did— He had a tie like—"

"Yes, sir," Willy broke in loudly and

laughed. "Shut up. We've got a driver riding with us," he breathed.

The apartment was empty when they rushed in. Willy knelt down.

"Our friend said wire, didn't he?" he murmured quietly. There was a long strand of tough limber wire in his hand. He rose. Josie followed him into the kitchen, from the kitchen into the bath. Willy groaned. He stood aside and Josie saw it.

The bath towel was crumpled in the tub. It was dark with stain and the stain was still damp. Jake must have washed his hands, Josie thought. There was blood on his hands and now there was blood on the towel. It was just as simple as that. Just as simple as murder.

She screamed softly and covered her eyes. The insane chant kept circling her brain: *Just as simple as murder. . . .*

She opened her eyes and stared at the window. "I'm going crazy, Willy," she said flatly. "I can't stand any more. I can't! I—I keep remembering how it was. He'd sit there—right there at that window—hour after hour, looking up at her window. Waiting for her to go so he could follow her. That's her window up there. I hate it! I hate her and everything about—" She stopped the wild rush of words and clenched Willy's arm. "Look. The light's on up there. The shade's down and you can see a shadow. See? Someone's moving in her room and—Willy, it's Jake up there again! I know it is!" She jerked the door open and ran down the corridor.

Willy caught her at the fifth-floor landing. He seized her shoulders and made her stand still. "Maybe it's Jake. Maybe it's not. And if it is, maybe Jake isn't the same Jake that we can walk in and say cheerio to. Not now, maybe. Take it calm. Like old William. Hysterics get nothing. First, we saunter along and see what's doing. Easy."

Willy moved ahead of her up the stairs and walked along the hall of the sixth floor. Josie tiptoed after him. He paused at Kathryn Barron's door and listened. His brows worked up and down. He frowned, motioned her to be quiet, then knelt down and tried to look through the old-fashioned keyhole. Abruptly he leaped back, spun and dashed toward

Josie, waving her back toward the stairs.

"Down," he breathed shrilly. "Somebody with a big stomach is coming out."

They shuffled down the landings. At the foot of the stairs, Willy paused momentarily and listened. "Yeah. Coming down," he reported. "Let's do our waiting in the dark." He walked fast out the lobby and moved Josie into the dark doorway of the laundry next door.

The man appeared and stopped. He was not a tall man, but his stomach was huge and his shoulders were powerful. His face was shadowed by his down-turned hat, and he wore a long grey raincoat. In each hand he carried a massive suitcase. Those, Josie knew instinctively, had come from Kathryn Barron's room.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Man With the Diamonds

THE MAN looked up and down the street, hunched his shoulders and hurried across the street to a dark coupe. He stowed the suitcase into the turtle-back, slammed the lid and squeezed himself under the wheel.

"You want to know something," Josie said abruptly. "If I was just picking the guy who looked most like a big diamond man, that would be my boy. And, Willy, that's the man who ran after Jake last night!"

"Um-hum. But why doesn't he go somewhere now? All packed up. If he—" A scream, faint from the distance above and beyond walls, floated down through the rain. It came again, accompanied by the distant sound of shattering glass. "Now comes the next part," Willy murmured. "Stay and watch Fatty while I find a cab." He slid away in the darkness.

Josie heard another scream from high in the building. Then a man's voice shouted, "Fire!"

A window on the street side of the building slammed up, and the shout rang clearly, "Fire! Fire up here!"

And then, with a gentle roar that sounded strangely contented, the motor of the coupe began to turn. The parking lights winked on, and it moved away from the curb. Josie watched it turning into Broadway. It vanished.

"Josie!" Willy called as a cab munched to a stop. The rear door swung open. Josie darted in. "Down to Broadway, then he turned uptown," she said. "Willy, there's a fire back at the building," she whispered. "And he set it. I just know he started it. Something tells me. He started a fire in her room so people wouldn't find out who Kathryn Barron really was, Willy. *I know that.*"

"From feminine intuition, huh?" He peered at her sharply. "Straight ahead, now," he ordered the driver. He bent forward and searched the traffic that flowed ahead. "There's our boy," he murmured. For a moment he turned back to Josie. "But if you're right, and he's burning her stuff to destroy identification, that means *she* isn't around any more. It means he's certain she isn't around."

"That is what I was thinking, Willy," Josie said in a small voice.

Willy seemed to chew on it as he turned back to watch the coupe. It turned east and continued to Second Avenue, then turned downtown. In the eighties it pulled to the curb. The fat man got out and stood on the sidewalk. He spun his lighter. Several times the tiny flame blazed and was then extinguished.

"Easy. Pull up at the corner," Willy said to the driver.

Suddenly Josie leaned closer to the window. She saw it again: The flicker of fire at a third floor window in a building. Another lighter, answering the signal from the sidewalk. And then Josie saw the faded name at the doorway of the building: Cragley Hotel, Day or Week.

"Willy," she whispered as they got out of the cab, "that's the place Jake mentioned on the phone. He said, 'Okay. The Cragley on Second at ten.' I remember."

Willy made a wry face. "Well, we're here. So let's go to the party. But very cautiously."

"And the man signaled from that third-floor window, the one in the middle."

"What big eyes you have," Willy said. They entered the lobby. It was nothing more than a wide hall with a battered table where there were a few letters and magazines. A closed door bore the word, Manager. A flight of narrow and dark stairs jutted upward at the rear of the hall. There was no elevator.

"I love these joints," Willy murmured. "You can tell what they cooked in here last month. There's always a fight on Saturday nights. I wish we had that big Irish cop walking in front of us."

Willy was trying to be funny, and Josie knew he didn't feel that way. She should be funny back at him to keep up the act, about now, but she couldn't think of anything.

"Willy," she said, "I'm afraid, Willy."

WILLY did not answer. They reached the third floor. One yellowed bulb was burning at the ceiling. There were eight doors, all closed. Willy pinched her hand and tiptoed forward to the door at the front of the hall. He knelt and listened. He scratched his neck and listened closer. Josie reached down and slipped off her left shoe, then her right, and padded after him. He gave her a back-handed quiet sound and finally peered around.

"Jake and the Waldemar, doing talk-talk," he said soundlessly with his lips. He peered around the hall. Josie looked at the doors and frowned. Immediately on the left was a smaller door than the others, shabbier and scarred. Willy was thinking about it, too. He turned the knob. The door opened into blackness. Willy followed his head in, then reached back and gave Josie the come-on. Just before the door closed, she made out the form of a derelict sofa, a few broken lamps and chairs, and an overflowing pail of floor-sweep. Its chemical odor filled the room, and as the door closed, the only light was the dingy glow that filtered through the old-fashioned transom, shining in from the front room. Josie could hear the almost inaudible blur of voices—one of them Jake's. "I'm willing to be frank, of course. The price is the only consideration." That was not from Jake.

Jake said, "I've got what you want. That's the important part. It's up to you."

"True. Quite true, I am sorry to say."

Willy steered Josie to his hunched shoulders. "Climb up and see how bad it looks," he whispered. He gave her a boost. She swayed to his plump back, steadied herself, clutched the door-moulding, and reached on her toes to peer through the transom.

She looked into a square room that held

an iron bed, a boxed-in closet, a wash-basin, a 1946 calendar and two shaky chairs. It also held Waldemar Prince and Jake, facing each other across the lumpy bed. The yellow light spread a sickly glow over their faces and drew angular shadows along the dismal walls. Josie did not like the view at all.

"The point I am trying to make is this," Prince was saying stubbornly. "You claim, as you say, to have 'the stuff.' If so, what's the point in my talking? Perhaps I don't know what you mean."

"But you do," Jake said. His face looked old and sallow. He gestured, and Josie saw his fingers trembling. "It makes no difference who says what, anyway. I'll talk first, if it'll prove anything. I know that you tried to murder Kathryn. You tried to kill her because of her infatuation for a certain man named Phillip. She was supporting him, giving him diamonds she took from you. But on the other hand, you were not precisely honest with her, either. Were you? Won't you admit she probably had a reason to want to grab a sack of diamonds and leave you?"

"Go on," Waldemar said, a nerve twitching in his temple. "I am a perfect conversationalist. I do nothing but listen."

"I will," Jake said bleakly. "This part should prove that I'm not building it out of dreams. I know Kathryn is alive, and I know where she is. She did not die in the explosion and fire. But she *did* suffer amnesia. However, the amnesia is gone now, and she remembers it all very well. She remembers, for instance, the time when you agreed with her that the marriage was hopeless and that you no longer cared for her. But there was a practical side, also. You had no cash, but you had a fortune in diamonds tied up in Switzerland. She had cash but no diamonds. Without love and beyond marriage, why not a loan? And thereafter profit for both. I think you remember? And I doubt that I could dream up these details."

"Go on," Waldemar said sullenly.

"You got her money. You got the diamonds. But you stalled her. There were 'delays in international transit.' You had the fortune, she had nothing, not even her original cash. So the practical thing for you to do was . . . what? Kill her, of

course. You wanted Fu-fu, anyway."

"Is that all?" Prince asked. A mist of perspiration covered his face. From time to time he ran his tongue across his lower lip.

"Isn't it enough?" Jake countered. "You tried to kill her and you have gone on believing that you had succeeded. But she was only shattered in the explosion. She escaped. Eventually some submerged memory led her back to her luggage that she had sent away, in preparation for her flight with Phillip. Since then, so long ago, she has lived in fear, unable to remember the reasons for her fear. But now she remembers, because I have helped her. She remembers, and she is alive, and you *know* she is alive. Fu-fu saw her, and you *know* Fu-fu saw her."

"Fu-fu . . ." Waldemar smiled wearily. "Fu-fu sees many things; not all of them are real. However," and his face grew old again, "let's be practical. Let us even assume that all you've said is true. Next comes the price of your silence. That is something we can probably agree upon. But a more important factor is the certainty of your *permanent* silence. You follow me?" He raised one curved brow. "What sort of—shall I say bond?—can you offer?"

JAKE'S fingers continued to tremble, and his eyes were sunk deep in their sockets. "After all, you're the murderer. That doesn't give you a great deal of chance to make clauses and conditions, does it?"

"Perhaps not," Prince agreed slowly. "So I'll have to assume that when you are paid, you will keep your mouth shut and want no more. That's a lot to assume. But there's one more factor. Who knows about this? Who besides you, I mean?"

"No one. I do my own—" Jake stopped, but it was too late. Josie saw the relaxation spread over Prince's face, and his eyes took on a softer and victorious glow. He had gotten what he wanted, at last, and Josie knew it and Jake sensed it. He became rigid, his face set in an intense stare.

"Thank you," Prince said very softly. "And now, I suppose, it is only courteous for me to do a little talking. So I will." He lit a long cigarette and blew out the

match with a delicate gesture. "First, I'll congratulate you on your success in curing my first wife's amnesia. You should have been a doctor, my boy. I congratulate you further on your general display of resource and logic; perhaps, on the other hand, you should have been a lawyer. But there is one occupation for which you have virtually no talent." He paused and smiled. "I urge you—never try to be a detective."

"What makes you think I would?" Jake asked slowly.

"My *own* intuition." He tapped his temple. "I have brushed an elbow with blackmail before; your act didn't fit. You didn't know your own price; you only wanted a conference. Now, why? I asked myself. And where is his price tag? An odd blackmailer. Or not a blackmailer at all, I suspected. On the contrary, I concluded, this gentleman is mainly interested in making me say certain things in front of an audience. An unseen audience, naturally, but one with ears. Am I not right?" He paused, and Jake said nothing.

"The hell with it," Prince said impatiently. "It was a nice game, but you're a fool. So is your private detective who was to listen so carefully. All right, Artie," he said. The closet door opened and a dapper man with the ugliest black eyes that Josie had ever seen came out. With a gun. He smiled and bowed gracefully at Jake and gestured back to the floor of the closet. There, bound and gagged, his eyes peering up helplessly, lay a bulky man in a grey suit.

"Your private dick you'd planted," Waldemar Prince said. "My man, who took care of your man." He nodded to

Archie. "And I suppose he may as well take care of you. If—"

"Don't you dare touch him!" Josie screamed. Willy let out a wail of horror and bounced her off his shoulders. She banged to the floor and scrambled up. She bolted for the door and down the hall toward the stairs.

"Police!" she screamed. "Help!"

As she spun into the stairs, she saw Willy. He was bowling out of the room and into the hall. At that moment the door of the front room opened and Archie lifted his gun. It came down with a terribly soft sound on Willy's ear. Willy flopped like a dead fish.

"Help!" Josie yelled. Then Archie saw her and his face changed color. The gun came up and Josie leaped down the stairs. The gun roared and plaster dust showered in her hair. Josie sailed the last flight and ran squarely into a large man with another gun. She hit him and screamed again. He picked her up and gave her a shove that sent her windmilling toward the door. Then it seemed that many guns began to work, all at once. Someone screamed. It was probably Willy being killed, Josie realized.

She stumbled into the street, and a big hand snatched her to one side. "Help, police! Help—"

"Cool off, sis," a voice commanded. "Half the cops in this precinct are sitting in that building now."

"Huh?" Josie spun around. Then she got mad at this big rock-jawed man who looked so calm. "Don't stand here! They hit him! Hit Willy, and maybe they're killing him! Go make them stop!"

The man looked at her and grinned. "Tough, aren't you?"

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Josie took one step back and hit him. He blinked. Then glass shattered from the third-floor window and spilled on them. The man jerked Josie off the walk and doubled her down behind a parked car. The next time Josie looked, the man had a gun.

Then Josie saw Prince. He was at the shattered window. The crimson light from a neon bar sign painted his face livid. Sweat poured off his jowls. His eyes bulged. A diamond stickpin glittered on his bosom and a gun sparkled in his hand. He was writhing and twisting, looking wildly down to the street, then turning back into the room. The man beside Josie spoke gently.

"Two to nothing he takes the jump. Close your eyes if you faint easy."

JOSIE knew she would faint very easily tonight. She closed her eyes. The man beside her grunted softly and his fingers twitched sharply. Then Josie heard the sound: heavy and soft and thick as it smacked the sidewalk.

"And there went the guy with all the diamonds," the man murmured.

One last shot roared and echoed inside the building. It held a note of total finality. At last a man appeared at the shattered window.

"All over for tonight, Cap," he called. "Everybody's okay but Archie and a little tub with red hair."

"That is my Willy!" Josie wailed. "Leave him alone!"

"Take it easy, sis. Who are you?" the big man wanted to know.

"I'm Josie, and that is Willy who was helping me because Jake had gotten himself into a terrible mess with a woman and—"

"Oh. Oh, now I start seeing. You're the guy's sister; the one he said would make a fuss if she heard anything about it."

"What?" Josie began to get mad again.

"Take it easy, take it easy. I'm Ed Barney, employed by the city as a detective, and you're not supposed to hit me. But, kid, you've got one screwball of a brother. He comes boiling into the station, talking about somebody with diamonds and amnesia, and finding the lost wife

of Waldemar Prince, and all the time looking like a guy running a temperature. So we dust him off and say sure, go home and sleep it off. He yells and says he'll show us—he'll bring us the diamonds to prove it. Then he bounces in again with a bunch of glass pebbles and says here are the diamonds. Then we call the doc, thinking maybe this guy needs a bed and a needle. Which the doc says he does, very definitely. But the guy keeps shouting that he knows what he's doing, and he's trying to prove he isn't a big flop in life, and if we'll just listen to him, we'll find out and then he'll get a job on the Force. Stuff like that, such as only a crazy man would say. But then comes a call that says Fu-Fu Prince is missing. I took another look at Mr. Jake and asked myself, Could he be only half crazy? So we tested him out. One of the boys dropped in at the amnesia girl's place just in time to pull her out of a fire with her head banged in. Maybe she will live; maybe she won't. The chances are that Fu-Fu is dead somewhere. Jake had a talk with her, and she must have been crazy enough to tell Waldemar all she knew. Then another dick comes over here with a private card, where Jake says he had the blackmail party fixed. The dick lets himself get tagged, to help Prince think he is winning. The rest of the boys tiptoe in, ready to handle things calmly, provided no girls make screams. See?"

"Oh, yes. And funny. Wonderful!" Josie was practically incoherent.

At that moment Jake appeared. He looked glassy, and a cop was helping him along. There was a vague smile on his face as he saw Josie and Barney. "Who is crazy now?" he asked dreamily.

Barney only grinned. Josie choked. "I hope you are sick at your stomach for a week!"

The two big men appeared, supporting Willy. His left ear was very fat and pink.

"I didn't get time to throw my left!" he cried bitterly. "I was mauled from the rear."

"You were wonderful," Josie said, "and I don't care whether you ever get a job or not."

That was just what Willy wanted to hear, and he beamed happily.

THE END

TODAY'S SPECIAL—POISON!

By
V. E.
THIESSEN



When bigger and better cops were made, Dermott Slade, con man, killer and man of parts, would out-fox them. And when bigger and better corpses were made, Dermott Slade would build them. So, of course, when a bigger and better death trap was built, who else would crawl into it—but Dermott Slade?

Whitehall choked once, half rose from the park bench and clutched at his throat.

WHEN Dermott Slade turned to murder he did so with the same relentless precision that had made him a successful confidence man.

Sitting in the one room that was his temporary quarters, Dermott lifted his head to stare out the window at the man he intended to kill. Rex Whitehall, a tall, grey-haired man, was walking down the

street toward him. Dermott glanced at his watch. It was precisely seven in the fall evening, almost dark. As he glanced out the window, Dermott could see Whitehall turning into the entrance of the Vopopulous Grill, across the street. Dermott grinned. Whitehall was on schedule as usual. Dermott could set his watch by the punctual arrival of Whitehall at the grill.

That meant that Dermott had fifteen minutes to finish the murder.

He had one more menu to type. Dermott seized the printed blank, rolled it into his machine until the printed square marked TODAY'S SPECIAL was under his keys. He glanced at the stack of finished menus beside him. Today's special was the same as yesterday's, though some other items had changed. Dermott had only to type this final line: DELUXE HAMBURGERS—WITH FRENCH FRIES—25c

The thought occurred that Whitehall would be eating across the street, that he would be eating the day's special as was his invariable custom, and so, in a sense, this last might be considered as his obituary. The thought amused Dermott, and he let his mind run over the murder plan, and grinned.

He jerked the menu from the machine, dropped it on the others and glanced at his watch. Thirteen minutes. He got up, opened a small cabinet and drew out a vial of chemical and a Roi-Tan cigar. Carefully he stripped the wrapper from the pierced end of the cigar. He rolled a bit of paper to a funnel shape and began to sift the chemical until about a quarter of a gram had gone into the hole. He tapped the cigar, compacting the chemical somewhat, then carefully folded the cellophane wrapper back to its original condition.

When Whitehall put that cigar in his mouth and drew smoke he would also draw a few grains of potassium cyanide. Sure it would taste funny, but for a moment Whitehall would blame it on the sulphur in the match. Then it would be too late.

The acids of the stomach, working on the potassium cyanide, would have converted it to hydrocyanic acid—prussic acid—and death would be almost instantaneous.

DERMOTT put the rest of the vial back in a drawer, slipped the cigar in his side pocket, picked up the menus and went out of his room into the night. Going across the street he glanced at his watch. Eight minutes. Whitehall would be eating his hamburger now.

The beauty of this plan was that it was perfect. In addition to the shrewd knowledge of human nature that is the tool of every confidence man, Dermott had a theory of crime, a theory on the simple art of murder.

The secret of successful crime, according to Dermott, lay in never being suspected. Modern police laboratories were so well equipped, routine so perfect, that once a criminal was suspected, the evidence to convict could be found.

If one were hanged for leaving a fingerprint, according to Dermott, the error was not in leaving the fingerprint, but in being suspected, for only then did they take the second print for the comparison.

There was no reason for the police to connect Dermott with Whitehall. Though Dermott had been watching Whitehall for two weeks, he had never spoken to the man, never been seen with him. The only possible connection was through Sam Watt, Dermott's erstwhile companion in confidence games, and Sam was dead.

Dermott pushed his way into the Vopopulous Grill. Nick Vopopulous grinned at him from the grill, and Nick's twelve-year-old kid beside him said, "Hi, Dermott."

"Hi." Dermott tousled the kid's hair, handed the menus to Popo. "Here's tomorrow's garbage list," he kidded.

"Thank you." Vopopulous dumped the menus in a drawer, then flipped hamburgers on the grill.

Dermott stood a moment, looking down the counter. Several customers were in the little place. That made it better. At the far end, Whitehall was finishing the last of his cup of coffee.

Any moment now, Dermott told himself. His hand was on the cigar in his pocket. He grinned at the Vopopulous kid. "Gimme one of those cigars," he said.

The kid held the box toward him. Dermott extended his hand, picked a cigar.

"I'll take one of those too," Whitehall

said, behind him, at the front counter.

As the kids eyes flickered toward the sound of Whitehall's voice, Dermott dropped the palmed cigar. He struck a match to give him time while he watched Whitehall. If Whitehall changed his habits now, Dermott would have to act fast to get that cigar back.

Whitehall's routine was right in the groove. He took only one cigar, the handiest one, and thrust it in his upper coat pocket.

Dermott eased out his breath. The murder was done. He tousled the kid's hair again, called, "I'll get the new menu copy in the morning, Popo," and turning, walked out of the grill. In the street, Dermott stood a moment, considering, before he mounted the steps to his room.

Once inside the room he poured himself a quick, short drink. He took only one—Dermott was not the kind of man to hamper himself with too much alcohol. Besides, he had only twenty minutes; after that he had to go to the park to find Whitehall's body.

He sat down and began to think methodically over the entire chain of events, probing for any weak spots, for any link that might throw him under the fatal suspicion of the law.

His knowledge of Whitehall had begun with the death of Sam Watt, Dermott's partner. This death was in no wise due to an unsuccessful scheme; it was due to one of those quirks of mother nature. Sam Watt had died of pneumonia.

Sam Watt had been versatile. He had been involved in the notorious Gatesville jewel robbery. The last of the proceeds of that robbery, a huge perfect diamond, was at present reposing in the heel of Whitehall's shoe. According to Watt, half of that diamond was his, and this interest in illegal booty he had willed Dermott just before he died.

THE MORE Dermott had considered the facts, the less it appeared he could demand the diamond, or that Whitehall would honor such a claim. Never one to plan without first determining the facts, Dermott had located Whitehall and watched him. The arrangement whereby he lived in this tiny room and typed menus for Popo, the Greek across the street, was

merely a means to study the man, Whitehall, who ate there. When the fact had developed that Whitehall was entirely alone, without connections, living quietly on his bank account until conditions should be better to fence the stone, Dermott's mind first began to consider the direct method of getting the stone.

It appeared to be the perfect opportunity. His connection with Whitehall could never be traced. Though he had watched the man for weeks they had never met, never spoken.

And so Dermott Slade had decided. There had been only the problem of determining whether the stone still lay in its hiding place in Whitehall's shoe heel, or whether it had been fenced or concealed in some new place.

The matter had been determined to Dermott's satisfaction by the simple expedient of a wad of gum dropped under Whitehall's shoe. Whitehall's reaction to Popo's innocent offer to clean the shoe with a kitchen knife had been slight but revealing. Dermott was satisfied.

Dermott glanced at his watch. By now another step in the lonely pattern of Whitehall's habits would be complete. Whitehall would have gone to the park that lay nearby and would be sitting on one of the benches on the west side. He would sit there in the dark, quietly consuming a small bottle of whiskey, a lonely, thoughtful old man. When the whiskey was gone Whitehall would take from his pocket the cigar he had bought at supper and smoke that until it was the merest fragment of a butt. Then he would rise and go to his apartment and retire.

It must, Dermott thought, be a lonely sort of life, knowing that the wealth that lay in his heel was a thing that made friendships dangerous, made any publicity undesirable. Still, for a hundred thousand, a man could stand a few months of the simple life. And at least Whitehall had liquor and tobacco.

Dermott rose, shrugged into his coat, slipped a short screwdriver and a pair of gloves into his pocket. Then he went out of the room down the stairs into the night and began to walk slowly toward the park.

There was no problem with Dermott as to disposal of the stone. He knew a private collector who would pay more than

a fence for the jewel, and the jewel would never again be seen in public.

Dermott could see the hundred thousand. He began thinking about a trip to Bermuda. It would be lovely there, and good hunting if he could pick up another helper as good as Sam Watt had been.

He pulled his thoughts up short. Trouble with you, Dermott, you think too much, he told himself. You start spending it before you get it, and you'll goof up somewhere.

By now the black night shape of willows that fringed the park was in his view, and he cut across the street and onto the grass of the park. On the other side of the willows, deep in shadow, was the solitary bench that Whitehall had established as his own.

When Dermott reached the fringe of trees he looked at his watch. By now Whitehall must be finishing the whiskey. Dermott crept slowly between the trees.

He could see Whitehall through the foliage, and for a moment he had the fear that he had mistimed it, that he was late. Then Whitehall moved and some object came hurtling toward Dermott. He ducked, and the hard glass of a whiskey bottle crashed against a willow. Whitehall had finished his pint. Now his dark bulk was fumbling in his pocket for matches.

Dermott tensed, turned his head this way and that. The crucial moment had arrived. If luck held there would be no wandering lovers.

His luck held. The match flared, and Whitehall drew on his cigar. The end of the cigar glowed for an instant. Then Whitehall took the cigar from his mouth, looked at it. He choked once, half rose from the park bench, then fell twisting onto it again. Dermott's heart hammered. The diamond—if only the diamond were still there.

By the time Dermott had slipped noiselessly beside him, Whitehall had stopped breathing. Dermott wasted no more than a single glance, dropped to one knee and began to use the screwdriver on the right heel of the dead man's shoe. A moment later the heel came away and a cool hard lump fell into Dermott's hand.

He gasped at the size of it, risked holding it momentarily under the moonlight

that filtered through the trees. It glittered with the thousand iridescent lights that perfect gems contain. Dermott thrust it into his coat pocket. He picked up the cigar. Might as well let Popo's hamburgers take the blame for the poisoning.

Then he put the heel back on and began an even, unhurried walk back to his room.

Once there, he set about the final steps of destroying evidence. The cigar was shredded, and cigar and remains of the potassium cyanide were washed down the drain, washed long and carefully, to clear the trap of poison. The poison itself would not be traced. Dermott had flown to California, visited an old school friend who taught analytic chemistry at the university. While looking at the laboratory, the cyanide had somehow found its way into Dermott's possession.

The police would check for poison sales within a radius of two hundred miles, Dermott figured. Unless he were suspected and his actions traced, there was nothing to lead the police to the California laboratories.

And there was nothing to connect him with the crime. Dermott filled the clean vial with aspirin and placed it in his desk drawer, now an innocent receptacle.

The diamond he placed in a small cardboard cylinder. He wrapped this carefully with tape and thrust a copper wire entirely through the cylinder thus developed. Then, opening the back of his radio and pulling the chassis out, he added this to the similar mass of odd condensers and resistors inside. The screwdriver was ordinary; he dropped it with other tools in a drawer.

The pattern was complete. Dermott smiled and began to prepare for bed. He slept as soundly as a baby.

WHEN he arose, the pattern of the night before came back to him, and he checked it again, smiling at the neat perfection of the plan. He would have to show up for the menus, tell Popo he would be leaving at the end of the week. It wouldn't be wise to draw attention by leaving now.

When he reached the grill he found Popo in a dither. The boy was trying to comfort him.

"Hi, kid." Dermott tousled the kid's hair. "What's eatin' your pop?"

Vopopulous waved fat hands wildly. "Police," he shouted. "Police come here and drive all my trade away. It's in the morning paper." He pointed a pudgy, shaking finger at the paper.

Whitehall's body had been found by ten-thirty that night. With their customary vigor, the police had completed identification and a swift autopsy in time to make the final edition of the morning paper.

Dermott ordered coffee, read the article slowly and carefully. According to the analysis, the dead man's last meal had consisted of hamburger, french fries and cyanide. Dermott grinned.

* * *

At two o'clock in the afternoon two police detectives were at Dermott's door. He stared unbelievably at them; then his mind began to click like a well-oiled machine. Certainly he had anticipated this. As a bare possibility, Popo or the kid had mentioned him, and the cops were merely making the routine check of anyone known to have eaten at the grill.

One of the detective, a big, blond man, said, "Mr. Slade, we want to ask you some questions about a man named Whitehall. You knew him?"

Dermott's breath was tight in his chest. With a little care this would be the final questioning. After all, there was no link between the dead man and himself.

He said, "I didn't know Whitehall, never spoke to him."

"Just what connection did you have with the grill?"

"A slight one," Dermott explained. "I'm looking for a job, something in the advertising line. I don't have a lot of money, and the first time I ate across the street I noticed the greasy, handwritten menus. Popo can't write worth a darn, so I offered to type his menus for meals."

"When do you type these menus?"

"In the afternoon. Popo gives me the copy at breakfast. I go job-hunting the rest of the morning. Then after lunch I type the menus. I take them over to Popo's at supper time."

"Did you take these menus over last night, the night before Whitehall was killed?"

"Yes."

"Did you see Whitehall?"

Dermott considered. "Yes, come to think about it, I did."

"What did he eat?"

Dermott's mind was racing. Popo would have told him about Whitehall's always eating the day's special. That had been hamburger the last couple of days. Might be best not to let them know he had noticed such facts.

"I didn't notice," Dermott said. "The paper said hamburger and french fries. They were on special yesterday and today."

The blond man nodded at his companion. "I guess that does it," he said.

Dermott relaxed. Suspicion would never touch him.

The other man came up beside him and took his arm. "You'll have to come to Headquarters with us," he said.

Dermott pulled away, lifted amazed eyes. "But why?" he demanded.

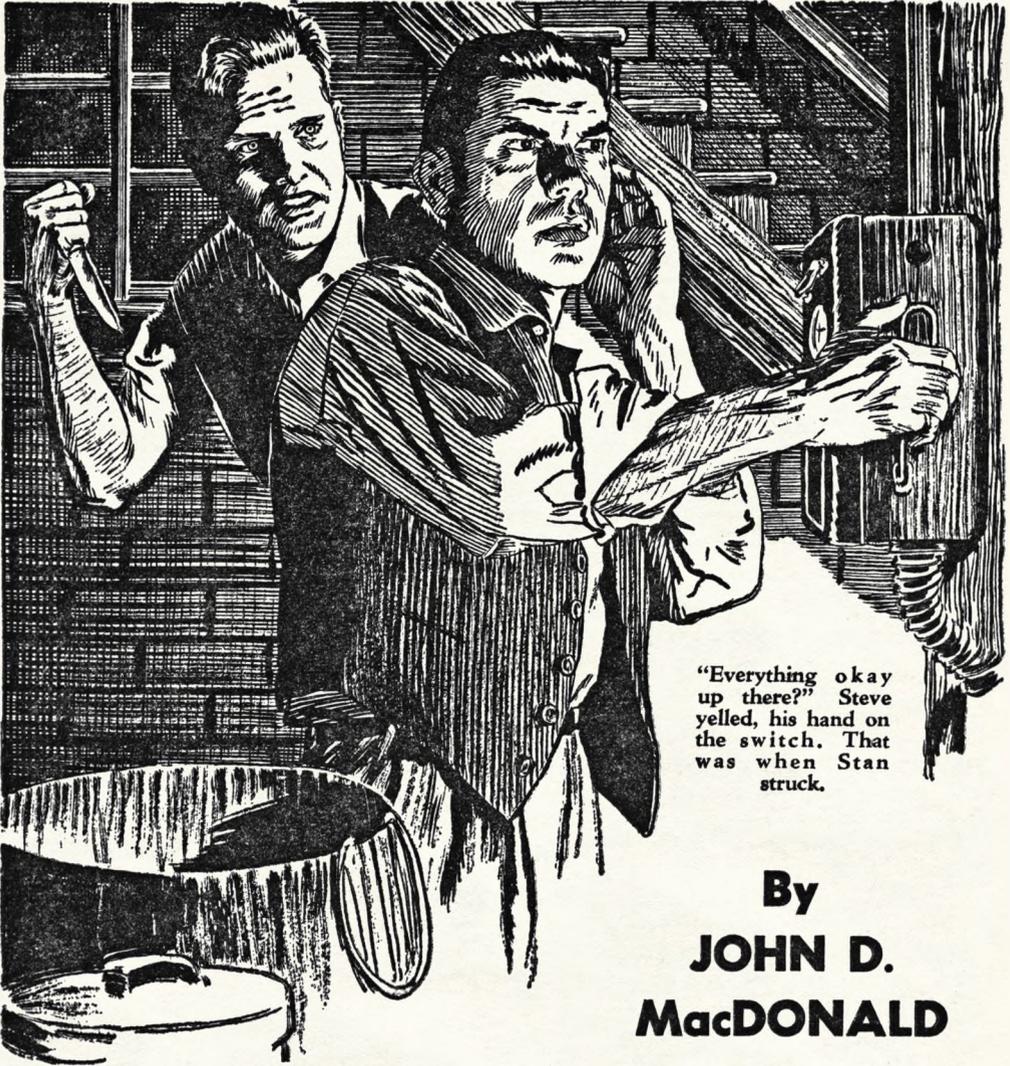
The blond man said softly, "A lot of times when a man writes and is thinking about something else, he writes what he is thinking about without realizing it. I'm afraid you made that mistake. Your confession to Whitehall's murder is on one of those menus. If they were written after he was killed, then anyone might have made a mistake like yours. But you typed this menu before Whitehall ate his fatal meal."

His mind whirling, Dermott lifted his eyes to the menu that was thrust before him. The day's special was before his eyes, the typed letters as black as the maw of a dungeon. In the dim recesses of his mind, imagination flared fiercely, and he could see the tentacles of the law, reaching, plucking a fact here, a fact there, learning about the laboratory in California, finding the jewel after days of combing the room.

He was suddenly aware that sweat had started in the palms of his hands.

The menu read simply:

DELUXE HAMBURGER—
WITH CYANIDE—25c



"Everything okay up there?" Steve yelled, his hand on the switch. That was when Stan struck.

By
**JOHN D.
MacDONALD**

KILLERS' NEST

Every day the kid hung the wash out on the line and put the carriage in the sun, and every evening he sat by the window, reading. For that, Art explained, was the only kind of window-dressing to hide a nest of killers—a nest that only the Grim

Reaper would ever smoke out!

SHE CAME to the back door of the cheap new frame house, and Stan Ryan didn't ask her in. He went out, pulling the door shut behind him. The back porch was a six-by-six platform without roof or railing, supported by cinderblocks. New, unpainted steps, giving promise of a short life, descended steeply to the muddy, grassless soil of the back yard.

Stan looked at her, saw that she was young and too thin, a vanishing prettiness in her pale face. Her brown hair was

coarsened by a cheap permanent, and great globs of yellow-brown mud clung to her raddled shoes. Her hands were reddened, the skin rough, the knuckles swollen.

He gave her a polite and distant smile, and she opened her mouth to speak, but had to wait because of the whining grind of a trailer truck going by on the wide highway that lead to the city eight miles away.

When the truck roar faded, she put on what was obviously a social smile and said, "I'm Mrs. Clarey and I live right down there." She pointed, laughed thinly and added, "I guess I must be your nearest neighbor, Mr.—"

"I guess you are," he said, still wearing the cool smile, ignoring her request for his name.

Obviously that was all she had planned, the conversation up to that point. Her smile began to have a strained quality, a smile painted on a thin face.

"George and I, we saw the baby carriage on the front porch and we thought that being neighbors and all . . . your wife . . ." She lost the sentence and flushed.

"She isn't well," Stan said.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Is there anything that I—"

"No, thanks."

She scraped some of the mud off her shoe onto the edge of the top step, then decided that she shouldn't have done it, as she bent over and shoved the clod loose with her thumb. She straightened up, rubbing her thumb on the palm of her other hand, her smile gone.

"I guess I'd better go and come back when Mrs.—when your wife is feeling better."

"You do that."

She went awkwardly down the steps, picking her way across the mud toward the strip of pasture that separated the two houses. The back of her neck under the tightly curled hair looked flushed. She turned and glanced back quickly and went on, moving as though she wanted to run from him.

STAN RYAN waited until she had crossed the rise in the middle of the pasture and disappeared on the far side. He could see the green roof of the Clarey house. He spat out into the mud, turned

and slowly moved back into the house.

Sticky dishes were piled high on the kitchen drainboard and a neat row of empty bottles was lined up under the sink.

Stan Ryan was drenched in sweat, as though he had run a long way or lifted a great weight.

Art Marka stood in the dining-room doorway, his hands in his pockets, a stubble of black beard on his face, a cigarette in the corner of his mouth. His pale blue shirt was stained dark in wide patches at the armpits.

"How are your nerves, kid?" Art asked.

"As good as yours."

"You know, kid, we really got an asset in that honest puss of yours. Even freckles you've got. Everybody trusts a man with freckles. She take it okay?"

Stan shrugged. "Guess so. She won't be back. She'll probably tell her punk husband tonight that we're pretty unfriendly. No more than that. I told her my wife was sick."

Art sighed and stretched. "Kid, I wish you had a wife and I wish she was here and I wish she wasn't sick. This place gets on my nerves. I need a break."

From the dining room, where the shades were drawn, Steve Jadisko said, "Stop dreaming, moon boy. Come on back. I'm about to knock on you."

"Rummy, rummy, rummy," Art muttered. "Go take my hand, kid. I'll stake you. I'm going to take a nap."

Stan went in and sat across from Steve at the cheap new maple table. The top had long dark scorch marks from cigarettes, pale rings from careless glasses.

Steve Jadisko was short and squat, with a face like a grey paving stone, an underlip that hung pendulously away from yellowed teeth. He looked like a moron, but Stan knew that Steve was probably smarter than Art Marka, who had planned the kidnaping.

Stan picked up Art's hand and began to play mechanically. The word kidnaping had an alien and foreign sound to it. An unreal sound. It was a word that brought on night sweats. Even though it had happened over three months before.

Steve knocked with eight, added up Stan's hand, marked the score.

Marka had picked the family right. They had paid the hundred and fifty thousand

without a whimper, and the small bills weren't marked. Art had insisted that the kid be kept healthy because then, if things went wrong, there was a better chance of a jury recommendation for mercy.

Steve had been the one who was in the second car when the exchange was to be made. He had the kid on the floor in back in the basket. Art had picked up the bundle and run back to the first car and as soon as Art had checked the bundle by ripping open a corner, Stan had given the two beeps on the horn that was the signal to Steve to unload the basket.

But when Steve had shown up at the crossroads, the kid was still with him. Still in the basket. The kid had started to bawl, probably for food, and Steve, getting nervous, had pulled the blankets up over its head to stop the yammer. The kid had stopped.

Before Steve had unloaded, he had taken a look and found the kid's face blue because it had smothered.

So at the crossroads, Art had made Stan take it back into the brush and scoop a hole in the leaf mold. The cold sweats came at night when Stan dreamed of how the body had felt in his hands, how still it was, how incredibly heavy.

So, of course, the family had blatted their troubles to the FBI, and it hit the papers the day after the boy scouts had found the grave, and now it was a death rap for sure. Stan Ryan thought a lot about death. Often he found himself clamping his solid thigh between strong fingers and feeling the aliveness of himself, picturing the blood rushing through the veins and arteries. It was a hell of a thing that they wanted to take him, Stan Ryan, and make him dead, dead, dead.

There had been no point in getting rough with Steve Jadisko because it was done and nothing could change it. Sometimes in the night Stan woke up and thought he had heard the kid crying, the way it had cried in the cellar room where they had kept it for those five days before the payoff, five days while the family got the cash together.

Art had planned the hideout. A month before they had taken the kid, Art had bought the house two hundred miles away, eight miles from a big city. A cheap and lonesome house, a get-rich-quick venture

by a small, sloppy building contractor.

Stan had lived in the house for two weeks before the kidnaping, following the routine that Art had set up for him.

After the kid was buried, they had split and gone to the house. The only car they kept was legitimate, a grey '38 Plymouth business coupe. Registered. Stan Ryan did the buying. Art and Steve hadn't left the house in three months, hadn't been seen by a soul.

It had died off the newspapers, except for an editorial now and then. "Why haven't the brutal murderers been apprehended?"

Stan sorted his new hand, sighed and said, "How soon do we leave, Steve?"

"Hell, kid! You know as well as I do. Another month and a half. Then we divide and split up."

"Where are you going, Steve?"

"Kid, if I should tell you and if they should grab you, they got ways to make you tell them. If you don't know, you can't tell them a thing."

Stan knew where he was going. To Mexico and from there to Guatemala. He had heard that they didn't extradite you from there. And it was cheap. If he was careful, his thirty-five thousand might last the rest of his life. Sixty-five to Art and fifty to Steve.

FOR A LONG TIME Stan had been nervous about them killing him and leaving him in the house. But Art had explained that nobody should try anything funny because it might give the cops a quick lead and it would be easier to follow a trail from a known place, and if anybody got wise, they might well be signing their own death warrant.

Steve glanced at his watch. "Time for your housework, mother," he said.

Stan walked to the front door, took a cautious look around, then stepped out, grabbed the baby carriage and wheeled it into the front hall. Dust from the traffic had collected on the pale blue blanket. He took it out and shook it.

Testing the front door to make certain it was locked, he went out onto the back porch, across the muddy yard, and untied the end of the clothes line that was fastened to the corner of the garage. It was a lot easier to take in the line, clothes and all,

than to take the clothes off each day and then hang them back on the line. He held them high to keep them out of the mud, untied the end fastened to the house and took the whole wad inside, dropped them in a corner of the kitchen. The line held aprons, women's underthings, T-shirts, shorts, a couple of sheets. All the things necessary to show that the house was occupied by a man and wife.

The following day he would hang the washing back out, push the carriage out onto the porch, bringing it in at regular intervals, putting it back out. There was a celluloid rattle with a red plastic handle that had to be placed on the front porch steps or on the dirt below the front porch railing.

Steve came into the kitchen, looked over the larder, said, "Kid, you'll have to go to town tomorrow. We're getting low."

Stan felt the deep tremor in his gut. He dreaded the strain of shopping, the strain of keeping from looking behind him as he walked from the car to the store, the strain of keeping the little car at a speed of not over thirty-five as Steve had instructed him.

In the evening they had a regular routine. The front-room shades were not drawn, and Stan had to spend a certain amount of time seated in the window, reading. Art and Steve never showed themselves by an unshaded window. All lights had to be out by ten.

Steve moved ponderously around the kitchen, his hands deft and quick. Stan watched him for a moment and said, "Ham and eggs again?"

Steve straightened up. "Maybe you'd like this job, Ma?"

"No. Go ahead. I'm not bitching."

When the meal was on the dining room table, Stan went up and awakened Art. Asleep, Art's face had settled into flaccid lines, the skin under the stubble of beard looked like a rancid crust on a bowl of grease. When Stan touched him, Art jumped violently, his eyes staring and startled. Then he relaxed, swung his legs over the side of the bed, his face in his hands.

"Shouldn't sleep during the day. My mouth tastes like the bottom of a dishpan."

He followed Stan down the stairs. They ate silently and quickly. The coffee was hot, strong and black. Steve hissed out his cigarette in the dregs of his coffee.

"That's a dirty habit!" Art snapped.

Steve laughed flatly, without humor. "Sensitive, Arthur? Go to hell!"

"I'm going nuts in this place," Art said petulantly.

Neither of the other two answered him. Stan carried the dishes out to wash them and Art got the cards, brushed the crumbs away and started to shuffle them.

When the dishes were done, Stan watched them for a time, yawning. He went and sat in the lighted front room, turned the light out at nine and went up to bed. He lay in the darkness, thinking of the thin woman who had called. Not bad eyes. Maybe with a little meat on her bones . . .

Well, there'd be women in Guatemala. Women who would look more than once at a young guy with better than thirty thousand bucks. The memory of the weight of the dead kid in his hands was trying to push its way up out of his subconscious, but he fought it back. Hell, they didn't have a line on the three of them yet. No, it had been played smart. Careful.

Sleep was black soft water that lapped at him, finally washed over him, carrying him down into a frightening place, a sweaty sickening place. . . .

SUDDENLY he was wide awake, a cry stifled on his lips. Sweat was cold on his face and he sobbed softly. In the darkness he glanced at the luminous dial on his wrist watch. Only nine-thirty. He had only been asleep twenty minutes. He pounded the pillow into a new shape, tried to relax.

From a distance he heard the drone of voices. Art Marka and Steve Jadisko. He frowned. Usually they were quiet over the rummy game. He wondered what they were talking about. There was no chance of getting down the stairs, because already the new staircase creaked badly.

He was sleeping in his underwear. Silently he rolled out of bed, padded down the hall and into the end bedroom, the one where Steve slept. The dining room was under that bedroom.

He knelt in the dark on the bare floor,

stretched out on his belly and put his ear to the varnished hardwood. When he stopped breathing, he could just make out the words. Steve's voice. "... but he's the cover, Art. You can't do it until we're ready to haul."

"I know that. The way I figure it, we stuff him in the furnace and they don't find the punk until next winter. When he starts to stink, it goes up the chimney. We get all set before we do it. We split his end even."

Stan got slowly to his feet, went silently down the hall and got into his bed. He lay with his eyes wide open, looking up into the darkness. He did not feel the least bit afraid. Instead he felt a cold wrath. He was the cover. He was the fall guy. Kill him when his usefulness was over.

Oh, fine! Then he felt a deep, excited thrill that ran up his back. They had given him his freedom. The take was in the brown suitcase in the back of Art's closet. Kill the two of them, take it all and leave. One hundred and fifty thousand sounded a lot better than thirty-five. Maybe with a hundred and fifty, he could stop remembering the dead kid and the picture in the paper where the father was holding up the kid's mother, where she looked as though she'd slip right down onto the floor if he let go.

Killing them was easy to say, not so easy to do.

He turned on the light. Quarter to ten. He pulled his clothes on, went noisily down the stairs.

"Hi, guys!" he said airily.

"Thought you folded, kid," Steve said.

"Couldn't sleep. Thought I'd get myself a drink." He went on into the kitchen, rinsed out one of the coffee cups, sloshed it half full of rye. The liquor was warm and he almost gagged when he finished the big jolt. But it began to radiate warmth through him, and that was good.

He heard the slap of cards on the maple table, heard Steve say, "Knock with four, sucker. Catch you big?"

"Lemme see. Twenty-eight, thirty-three, thirty-six. Satisfied?"

"That takes care of the first two games, and damn near a Schneider on the third."

Stan forced himself to be calm. The odds were that the kitchen circuit and the dining room were on the same fuse. There

was a pinup lamp over the breakfast booth, with a fake parchment shade. He strolled over, out of sight of the card players, pulled the plug out of the wall. With a kitchen knife he quickly unscrewed one of the little brass screws that held the wire tight, wrapped the loose wire around the other post. Then he plugged it back in. There was a crackle, a spit of blue sparks, and both the kitchen and the dining room went dark.

"What the hell?" Art said in a hushed tone, and Stan smiled in the darkness as he heard the fear.

"Nothing. I turned on this lamp out here and I guess it's shorted. Must have blown the fuse. I'll take a look. Maybe one of you guys ought to come along. I'm no electrician."

Steve was the one who joined him. Steve clicked the cellar light on. Stan felt afraid. He hadn't thought of the cellar light. He had wanted it to be in darkness.

Together they went over to the fuse box, and Steve opened the black metal door. He peered in at the fuses. "Here it is. This one," Steve said. "You got a penny, kid?"

"Don't think so."

"Wait. I got one." Steve twirled the fuse out, pulled the switch on the side of the box and the cellar lights went out. Stan heard the clink of the penny, the grate of the fuse being turned back into the socket.

The cellar lights went on. Steve, his hand on the switch, yelled, "Okay up there?"

"Okay," came Art's answering yell.

AT THAT MOMENT Stan struck with the kitchen knife. Right under the left shoulder blade. The metal grated on bone and slipped away. Steve grunted in pain and whirled with uncanny speed, his eyes narrowed, his mouth twisted with pain. He reached toward his hip pocket.

Stan grunted with the force of the blow as he blindly stabbed down at Steve's face. Steve stood perfectly still for a moment, one eye suddenly wide. In the place of the other eye was the dark protruding handle of the paring knife.

As he fell heavily on his side, rolled over onto his back, Stan looked down at him and giggled. Then he made a soft retch-

ing sound, turned away, weak with the sudden sickness, his hand against the rough, whitewashed wall. He pulled the switch down.

"Now they're out again!" Art called. "What are you guys doing down there?"

"Just a minute," Stan yelled hoarsely. He tugged at Steve, rolled him over onto his face. The knife handle gritted against the cement floor. Stan got the flat automatic out of Steve's hip pocket. He worked the slide, heard the clink of a round hitting the floor. He thumbed the safety off and went up the stairs.

As he stepped into the kitchen, he called back, "I'll see if Art's got one, Steve."

He knocked against the door frame, blundered into the dining room. "Say, Art, we need a penny to fix the fuse. You got one?"

"I hope you guys know what the hell you're doing down there. The lights going off like that give me the creeps. Did I hear Steve laughing?"

"Yeah. He was laughing. Now you can laugh, Art."

"What are y—" That was all.

It was as though the slugs drove the breath out of Arthur Marka's chest. The darkness stank of smokeless powder. Stan stood and listened. A heavy truck went by, and then two lighter cars.

Slowly he exhaled. He lit a match, shook it out. Three in the chest and the last one in the face. Art was slumped in the chair, his chin on his chest, both arms hanging straight down.

In the darkness, Stan pushed him off the chair. He hit with a sodden, dead sound. Stan found his heels, dragged him to the cellar stairs, got behind him and pushed. Art Marka's body rolled noisily down the steep flight, thudded against the cement at the bottom.

He turned out the cellar light, went up to his room, saving the money until last. He packed his few clothes, walked through the darkened house to the back door. Very simple. Two suitcases on the kitchen floor. One full of money. All for Stanley Ryan.

The car was gassed up. Lock the door and leave. The clothes and the carriage were in and the front door was locked.

Three feet from his head the bell

shrilled. He started violently, stood shaking in the darkness. He cursed. Crouching, he ran to the front of the house, looked cautiously out the front room window.

A white trooper car was parked in front, the motor running.

Caught like a rat in a trap.

He slipped out of his coat, threw it aside, transferring the gun to the right-hand pocket of his trousers. With trembling fingers, he unbuttoned his shirt down the front.

He turned on the hall light, opened the front door, yawning, and said, "What you want?"

Two tall troopers stood there, and behind them, her eyes wide, stood the thin woman who had paid a call in the middle of the afternoon.

The trooper nearest the door looked disgusted. "Mister, we got funny stories and we have to look into them."

"He's the one! He's the one!" the woman said shrilly.

"Yeah, lady. We know. Mister, I understand your wife is sick. Is that right?"

Rising hope gave Ryan the courage to smile. "Not very sick. Just a little under the weather. You know how it is. She only had the kid about four, five months ago."

"If I'm not too curious, what is all this? What did this woman say to you? She called this afternoon and I thought she acted a little off her rocker."

"I might as well tell you, mister," the trooper said. Ryan moved out onto the porch.

Suddenly the woman darted into the house. Ryan made a grab for her and missed.

One of the troopers grabbed Ryan and the other one went after the woman. The trooper who had taken Stan Ryan's arm said, "Joe'll grab her. She's just a harmless nut I guess."

Stan, listening, heard the woman go up the stairs, the trooper pounding behind her. He knew there wasn't much time. The woman would be looking for a woman and a baby.

The money was in the kitchen. There was a small chance. He turned half away from the trooper, let his hand drop down

(Continued on page 130)



By
**WILLIAM
CAMPBELL
GAULT**

*Gripping
Racketeer Novel*

HOT SHOT, BIG SHOT —DEAD SHOT!



CHAPTER ONE

Fattened for the Killing

IT IS ESTIMATED there are over two billion human beings in this world. About all that could be said for Charles Nelson was that he was one of them.

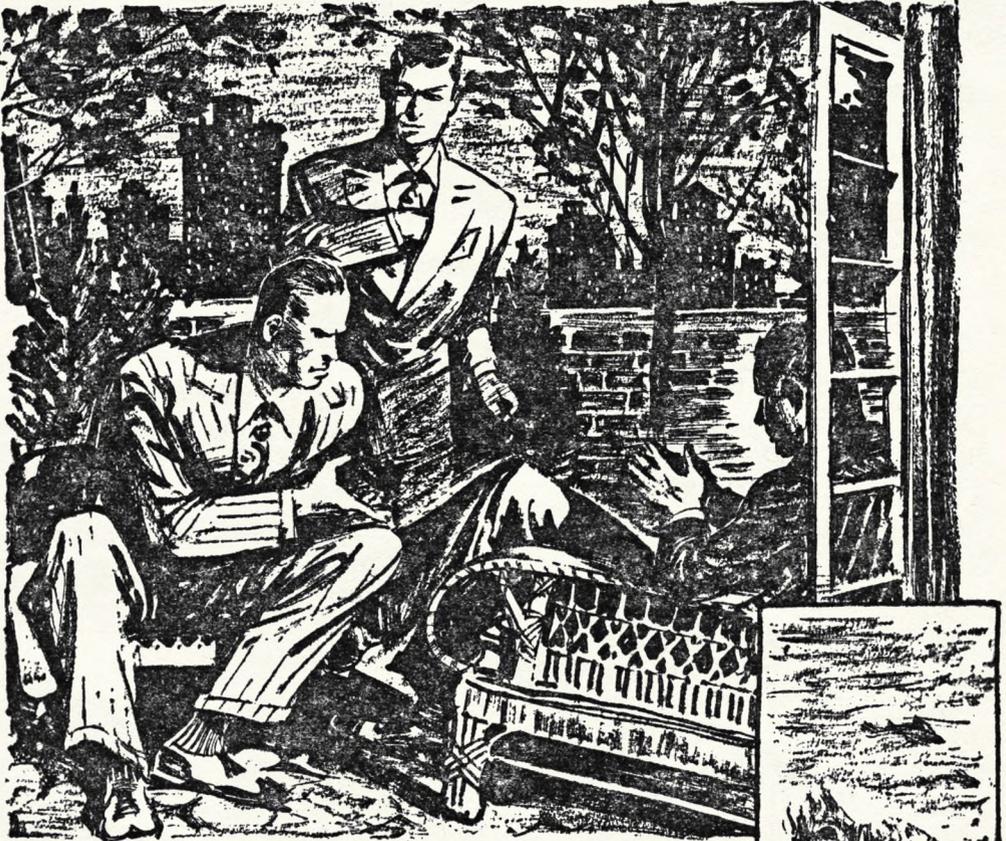
Charles had a small job in a big store and a small room in a big house. Charles had a small place in a big world. Besides this, he had two pairs of shoes in good repair, three suits, five shirts and other ac-

cessories, ties and such, in proportion.

On Monday evenings he went to the movies, preferably a movie of masculine and virile adventure involving some romance. If none of this category was available he settled for romance, which is always available—on the screen.

On Tuesday evenings he went to the Y.M.C.A. gym and worked on the parallel bars for an hour. The second hour he

Charlie Nelson was the ordinaryest guy you'd want to meet. He liked movies, and he worked out regularly in the YMCA gym, and if you stacked all the books he'd read on top of each other they'd probably reach as high as Espenhour's Department Store, which was where he worked. In fact, there was only one thing wrong: He had no future. For, you see, Charlie was the spit an' image of gangster chief Pete Calvano, for whom a concrete footbath, followed by a permanent rinse in the river, was waiting.



"I'll take the east side," Maloney said, "and you can have the west side. If anybody gets ambitious, we work together."

spent in the pool perfecting his crawl. On the other five evenings of the week Charles read. He read indiscriminately. He had sampled Joyce and savored Guest. He had mastered fourteen different slam conventions and favored the California. He had never played a game of bridge in his life. He knew all the involved mathematical possibilities of the various poker hands but had not played for ten years.



At that time he had played ten chips for a penny—and lost twelve cents.

Charles was now thirty-two, five feet eight inches tall, in sound physical condition and, for some reason, restless.

This was in June. On June eighth he was transferred from draperies to sporting goods for no reason that he knew of. He knew little enough about sporting goods, but that could be remedied. He had known nothing about draperies before going to that department.

On June ninth he was showing a lady a marked-down badminton set and extolling its virtues when he was uneasily aware that he was under scrutiny.

There were two men down the counter a few feet, and both of them were staring at him. One man was tall and broad, the other was short and broad. They both had brown eyes and thin mouths. They were both dressed expensively and not well.

They seemed to be waiting for Charles to finish with the lady. Another clerk came to offer his services, but they shook their heads and nodded at Charles.

There wasn't any reason for Charles to be nervous, but he was. The lady decided against the set and left.

Both men were smiling now, and the shorter one said, "I got to hand it to you, Boss. You sure took off the weight."

"I beg your pardon?" Charles said.

"And your voice," the big one said. "Why not the face, Boss?"

"There must be some mistake," Charles said. "You gentlemen have obviously mistaken me for someone else."

"Okay, okay," the shorter one said, "if that's the way you want it. We've been combing the country for you. The organization's going to hell. And Sam's dead. But if you want to play store, with the moola to be made, it's your business. You're still the boss as far as I'm concerned."

CHARLES smiled at the man's reassuring homage. "I'm sorry, but nothing you say is making sense. Who's Sam?"

The two men looked at each other and then at Charles. Some doubt, now, in their eyes. One of them said, "What's your name, Mac?"

"Charles Nelson. And I've been employed by this store for twelve years. You can check that with the personnel manager if you're in any doubt. I don't know any Sam. I'm not playing store, and I have no idea what organization you're talking about."

In the eyes of the taller man, the doubt was replaced by speculation. "Twelve years? That's the gospel, Charlie?"

"As I said before, sir, you can check it with the personnel manager."

The tall man looked at the shorter one and said, "Either it's Pete's double, or it's Pete."

"We could check," the shorter man said, and looked at Charles. "Mind telling us the whole name again, and if you've got any identification—"

"Not unless you gentlemen are from the police," Charles said stiffly. "Espenhour's insists on courtesy to all, but I'm sure it doesn't include cross-examination."

The big man looked at his short partner and said, "Cute, huh?" Then he looked at Charles, and his smile was ingratiating. "It's pretty important to us, Charlie. Pete was our best friend, you see. And we want to be sure."

Some of Charles' nervousness returned. He hesitated for only a second before displaying his social security card.

The big man's smile was still evident. "Thanks," he said. Then he cocked his head on one side and surveyed Charles. "I'll be damned," he added. "A little more beef on you and—" He shook his head.

Charles watched them go down the aisle, talking earnestly. A few minutes later he was selling a set of matched irons to a customer, and business was brisk after that. The morning's strange incident returned to his memory only rarely during the day.

But on his way back to the rooming house that night his imagination dwelt on it, for lack of other sustenance. Perhaps an uncle, a fabulously wealthy, hitherto unknown uncle, had died in Tibet leaving *everything* to him. And these men were investigators for the estate, and the talk of Pete had been trickery, an attempt to cheat him of his inheritance.

They looked tricky, both of them, and if they thought they could cheat Charles Alvin Nelson of his rightful inheritance

.. He began to build up a good peeve. By the time he swung into the walk leading up to the rooming house, he had taken it to the Supreme Court, where, scorning counsel, he had argued his own case so eloquently and so fervently that . . .

From the porch, someone said, "Hello, Charlie. Bad day?"

Charles looked into the brown eyes and smiling face of the larger of his morning's visitors. Behind the tall man, his short companion leaned against the porch railing, smoking a cigar. He removed the cigar from his face long enough to smile, and then returned it.

"Not particularly," Charles said. "Were you men here to see me?"

"That's right. We've a proposition to lay before you, Charlie, a business proposition." He paused. "We can't talk here."

Charles regarded them both suspiciously a moment. "We can talk in my room. However, I think it only fair to warn you that Espenhour's has been more than generous with me."

"How generous, Charlie?"

"I am earning well over fifty dollars a week right now, with my commissions." He was earning fifty-four, most weeks.

"We'll do better than that, a lot better."

The suspicion remained in Charles' eyes. "Espenhour's is a solid, reputable firm and will continue in business. So long as they do, my job is secure."

"We'll give you a contract," the man said. "For life, Charlie." He smiled at his companion as he said this, and Charles had a sudden, unreasonable premonition.

It vanished, and he said, "We'll go to my room."

There was only one chair in the room, and both men declined it. Charles sat in that, and the other two sat on the bed.

THE TALL MAN seemed to be the spokesman. He said, "This man you resemble, Charlie, this Pete, was very important to our . . . business. He was a kind of—of well, figurehead. Since he disappeared, the organization has been—oh, call it shaky." He paused to meet Charles' gaze candidly. "We want you to take Pete's place."

"To . . . impersonate him?"

"That's right."

Charles shook his head. "That would be dishonest."

"Maybe. It would save a lot of jobs. It would keep a big organization from going bust. And it wouldn't be permanent. Pete will be back now that—now that he's probably had enough vacation. It might only be for a couple weeks."

"I thought you said it was a contract for life," Charles pointed out.

There was no lack of poise in the big man's manner. "The contract would be, but maybe not the job. After that, after Pete comes back, if he does, we'd keep you on salary. You could be one of those—those *stand-ins*, like they say in Hollywood."

The shorter man coughed. Otherwise, the room was quiet.

Charles studied them both, their clothes, their faces. Then, "What kind of an organization is this?"

No pause, no fumbling for words. "Political," the big man said. "You'll meet some important people, Charlie."

It could be political, Charles thought. They look something like politicians. He was leary of it still, but he'd had twelve years at Espenhour's.

"What would the salary be?" he asked.

"We'll say two hundred a week."

Charles shook his head in wonder. But the tall man evidently took it for negation, for he said quickly, "Okay. Three hundred. We're not going to quarrel over a hundred, are we?"

Charles had not been in trade for twelve years without learning a few fundamentals. "We won't quibble," he agreed. "We'll call it four hundred and a deal."

The two men looked at each other, and then they both laughed. The taller one said, "Charlie, you're a card. Shake hands with Nick Arvid, Charlie."

Charles shook the shorter man's hand.

"And my name's Al Judson. And from now on, your name is Pete Calvano. We're going to get along all right, Pete."

"I hope so," Charles said. "I'll see my superior tomorrow about a leave of absence."

"Check," Al said. "Better put this down, Pete. It's where you'll be living from now on. We'll be waiting for you there tomorrow noon."

The address was in the fifties.

"Top floor," Al explained. "You've got the whole top floor, and not a cent in rent to pay."

They were both standing now, studying him. "It beats me," Nick said. "It sure beats me."

Al nodded. "We'll have to fatten him up, thought."

"Like a noodled goose," Nick agreed.

It was a term Charles had come across in his reading. It meant, he recalled, a goose that is force fed until it is fat—and ready for slaughtering.

They both turned at the door, and they both smiled. Al said, "See you later, Pete. And don't forget—mum's the word." He shook his index finger at Charles.

"Mum's the word," Charles replied.

When they'd left, he turned to survey the small, bleak room he'd occupied for five years. A whole top floor in the Fifties. . . .

It was a restless night. He kept trying to visualize himself as a political figure-head, but he wasn't quite able to. The closest he came was picturing himself as a keynote speaker at a national convention, party undetermined.

Mr. Jelke, his immediate superior at Espenhour's, wasn't pleased about Charles' decision. But when Charles explained it was necessary to straighten the muddled affairs of an uncle who had recently died, Mr. Jelke was mollified. The leave of absence would be arranged.

CHAPTER TWO

Ruth

AT NOON, Charles was standing in front of a large, marble-faced apartment building in the fifties, gazing up at the top floor. It was with some hesitation that he entered the lobby.

Al and Nick were sitting on an upholstered bench in there, and they rose to greet him.

Charles said, "I suppose I could get a cab to pick up my clothes, but I thought perhaps one of you gentlemen had a car."

"Think nothing of it," Al said. "Pete's got a couple closets full of clothes up there that'll fit you after you're heavier."

He led the way to an elevator door at

the rear which he opened with a key. "Private," he explained. "To the roof only."

The floors shot past, as Charles' stomach filled with butterflies. Then they were stepping into an ornate, high-ceilinged entrance hall. Through an archway into a two-story living room only slightly smaller than the Grand Central Terminal.

The carpeting was thick and soft in here, the furniture modern, massive and ugly.

"It's almost too big for one man," Charles offered.

"It is," Al agreed. "Nick and I will be staying here with you. And a couple servants."

They went from the living room out onto the roof garden. There was grass up here, a regular lawn. There were deck chairs and huge sun umbrellas and flower beds and a barbecue pit and even a couple of very small trees. It was true suburban living, thirty stories up.

Something happened to the starved soul of Charles Alvin Nelson as he viewed these wonders. He stood a little straighter, and he wasn't nervous, at the moment.

Al said, "Well, Charlie?"

Charles said, "Pete, you mean. Pete Calvano. It'll do."

Al looked at Nick, and Nick looked at his cigar.

Al said doubtfully, "You haven't been playing us for fish, have you? You sounded a lot like Pete, just then."

Charles permitted himself a smile he considered enigmatic. "That's what you want me to sound like, isn't it?" he asked.

"Sure," Al said, and he laughed. It was a slightly nervous laugh, Charles thought.

They left him after a little while to see about getting some food and recalling the Filipino boys Pete had formerly employed. Charles spent the time they were gone in going through Pete's wardrobe. They'd been right about that; he'd need some poundage if any of it was to fit.

He sat out on the terrace then, considering all that had happened. He was naive, but not naive enough to believe completely the story about politics. It seemed to him that racket would be a better description of Pete's business. No doubt politics was a part of it, and there

was little less doubt it was *crooked* politics.

But he had done nothing crooked, as yet, unless the impersonation could be defined as that. He wondered what his decision would be if he did have to make a choice between right and wrong later.

Up to now, these decisions had been comparatively simple. Morality, he now realized, was more difficult when the wages of sin were in the upper income brackets.

When Al and Nick came back, the Filipino boys were with them. Both of the boys were carrying parcels of food. Good, fattening food, as Al explained.

"Although," he explained further, "it doesn't seem likely we're ever going to get you as heavy as Pete was. You'd better say you went to one of those spots where you reduce. That's it—you've been on a reducing diet all this time."

Charles nodded. Then, "Outside of lying, what else am I expected to do, Al? I mean, what *wrong* things?"

"Not a thing," Al said. "All you have to do is be seen with us. We want the boys to know you're still alive. That Pete is, I mean. You don't think there's anything fishy going on, Charlie?"

"It's too early to tell." He sighed. "Who pays for all that food?"

"The organization. Your four hundred is gravy, pure gravy."

"I see." Charles paused, then looked meaningfully at Al. "And do you think Pete is still alive?"

Al didn't flinch from Charles' gaze. "I think he is. When he disappeared, two hundred G's disappeared with him. And there's no pockets in a shroud, Charlie."

"Two hundred G's. Is that two hundred thousand dollars?"

"It ain't rubles. That's a lot of the green, but Pete is a fast man with a dollar. I figure he'll be back for more."

"And why should he disappear?"

"Well, there was this Sam, see? And Sam didn't like Pete, being a kind of competitor. And Sam was the kind of—of unscrupulous guy who might resort to physical violence against joes he didn't like. Pete is no guy to promote trouble, so he just dropped out of sight for a while, the way I figure it."

"Couldn't he go to the police?"

"He could, but as I said, Pete don't like *any* kind of trouble."

Nick coughed and went over to look at the terrace.

"And now Sam's dead," Charlie said. "How did he die?"

"Silliest damned thing," Al answered. "He must have got his feet caught in a tub of concrete and fell in the river. They were dredging the river, and they found him, and he had his feet in a tub of concrete." He smiled. "Any other questions, Charlie?"

"Just one," Charles said gravely. "How dumb do you think I am?"

Al stared at Charles, and Nick coughed again. Then Al started to laugh. He laughed until the tears rolled down his cheeks. Even Nick smiled a little.

"Charlie," Al said finally, "you'll kill me yet."

"Never," Charles said. "Isn't it about time to eat?"

Al and Nick ate with him. There was a thick soup. There were mountains of potatoes and a good rich gravy to go with them. There were dumplings and noodles and pastries. The Filipinos were not dietary experts, but they knew what was fattening.

CHARLES ate as much as his stomach would hold. Eating was really one of his duties, and he was getting well paid for it. He tried to see it that way rather than the road to deception. His conscience was not healthy, but that was only because he'd never had occasion to use it. It still existed and was active.

After lunch they sat out on the terrace, and Al briefed him as to the routine for the next few days. He would stay in the apartment; his few appearances outside would be in the car, in the company of Al and Nick.

"We've already breezed it around that you're back," Al explained. "The gang will be expecting to see you with us, and that'll help. Otherwise, stay here. And don't answer the phone or the door, Manuel will take care of that."

"Which one's Manuel?"

"The guy who smiles the most. The other one's Juan, the guy with the gold teeth. Juan'll do the cooking and cleaning, Manuel will answer the phone and the

door, and wait on you. Some setup, huh?"

"Some setup," Charles agreed. "I just hope I don't get my feet caught in a tub of concrete and fall in the river."

"Oh, Charlie," Al said, "don't get me started again."

When they'd left, it seemed very quiet around the place. Occasionally he caught a glimpse of Manuel, but no more than the glimpse. Manuel moved quickly and always seemed to be headed some place important.

He felt stuffed and uncomfortable sitting out on the terrace, looking at the city all around him. He felt unhappy, despite the four hundred a week and this mammoth apartment. He almost wished he was back at Espenhour's.

Almost, but not quite. Because even though nothing was happening at the moment, there was a definite sense of something about to happen, and it had been sixteen years almost to the day since anything important and exciting had happened to Charles. Sixteen years ago he had graduated from high school, fourth in his class.

Since then there'd been no girls, no dances, no picnics, no games in the life of Charles Alvin Nelson.

The brown-eyed boys were back before dinner time, and they were looking pleased with themselves.

They'd spread the word, and the word had taken hold. Things were falling into line. This was Al's terminology, and he looked content as he sat down to a game of gin rummy with Nick.

It had been an inactive day for Charles, and even watching this most inane of card games was a change from the terrace view. He watched, and learned that both of the men were, from a card-sense standard, at the gin rummy level. Even this game they didn't play perfectly, and it's almost impossible for a card player to play it otherwise.

He made no comment.

At dinner he said, "If I'm going to be stuck here for a while, couldn't one of you boys get me something to read? There isn't a book or magazine in the place."

"Read?" Al said, and looked at Nick.

"I got some comic books in the car," Nick said.

Charles shook his head and named the

magazines he'd like. Then he added, "Or maybe we could get up a poker game."

Al looked at Nick and Nick at Al. They both smiled. Al said, "That might not be a bad idea, Charlie. We could get a couple of guys that didn't know Pete very well and kill two birds with one stone. They'd breeze it around that they played poker with Pete."

Nick nodded. "You'd better be sharp, though, Charlie. Poker's *our* game."

"I'll do my best," Charles promised.

The couple who came to Al's summons were just a couple of guys named Joe. One was Joe Shallock, who was fat and loud, and the other was Joe Burke, who was short, thin and loud.

The fat one drew to inside straights and the thin one raised on three hearts. Al and Nick weren't much better.

Despite this, Charles had made no money in the first hour. He was playing only cinches, and none had come along. All he'd lost was the ante in the draw games, however.

In the second hour he fell heir to two promising hands and milked them both dry.

In the third hour he felt the trend of luck changing, and he rode it until he was saddle-sore.

In the fourth, fifth and sixth hours, his luck was only ordinary and he went back to cinches.

At three o'clock, when the game broke up, he had won far less than his share of the pots, but he was seven hundred dollars ahead.

"You were sure lucky," Al said. "One of these nights we'll get you into a really big game."

"Maybe I wouldn't be so lucky in a big game," Charles admitted. "Don't forget the magazines tomorrow."

He was aware, as he went to his bedroom, that Nick was studying him thoughtfully.

THEY took a ride next morning, and Charles picked up his own magazines. He bought them at a drug store chosen by Al, a modern place on the west side, a place called Calvano's.

"This is where Pete got his start, only four years ago," Al explained. "This girl in here hasn't seen him since."

The girl was behind the fountain when they entered. She was a fairly short girl, a slim brunette, and she stared at Charles when he entered.

For a moment it seemed like she was going to smile. But she didn't. She said, "Good-morning, Pete. You're looking thinner."

"I am a little," Charles said. "I've been on a reducing diet."

She looked at him sharply, and Charles guessed that his voice had been the cause. He said, "And I was sick for a while, a throat infection."

"I noticed your voice was different," she said, and looked away.

Charles didn't look away. Her attraction was strong for him. She wasn't any particular beauty, though she was pretty enough. But something clicked in Charles, and he feasted his eyes.

Al said, "Here's the magazines over here, Boss. They've been moved since you ran the joint."

It was a magazine rack to suit the most omnivorous reader. Charles chose two science magazines, an astrology magazine, two general publications and couple of detective magazines.

"This will do for tonight," he said. "We can come back tomorrow."

The girl was regarding him curiously. He paid for the magazines, and when she handed him his change her fingers touched his hand briefly. Charles trembled.

Out in the car again, Al said, "Think she got wise, Nick? She acted kind of funny."

"Maybe she sailed for Pete," Nick said. "Maybe that's why."

"I think she did," Charles put in. "The way she looked at me, for a second . . . She's pretty, isn't she?"

"Not to me," Al said. "I like 'em with a little more meat on the bones."

Nick added, "You can have her."

"I wish I could," Charles said.

This was very funny to Al, and he broke down again. When he came to, he said, "Maybe we'll have a party one of these nights, and you can invite her, Charlie."

"What's her name?" Charles asked.

"Ruth," Al said. "I forget her last name, but Pete's got it in his books some place. He still owns a piece of that joint."

But after the first word, Charles hadn't

listened. Ruth. . . . Pete's girl? Well, maybe Pete was dead.

Charles had dealt with many women customers, young and old, in the twelve Espenhour years. This was the first time any one of them had registered an impact on him. He was still thinking of her when the Cabby stopped in front of the apartment building.

Al said, "Nick and I got to see some people, Charlie. Get right up to the apartment now. We wouldn't want anything to happen."

Charles nodded and left the car. From the lobby he watched the car drive off, and then he walked into the first-floor flower shop.

"I want some roses," he told the girl.

"How many?"

"About fifty dollars worth," he said, and gave her the address. "I don't know her name, but it's a drugstore and they're for Ruth, in the drugstore."

He signed the card "Pete."

Upstairs, he sat for a long while on the terrace watching the clouds, until Manuel called him to lunch.

Al and Nick didn't get in until three, and when they did, they looked worried about something. Al was saying, "We've got to take the chance, Nick. We can't afford to wait."

Both of them came out to where Charles was reading on the terrace.

Al said, "It's a showdown, Charlie. There's a guy wants to see you. He wants to see you tonight."

"As Pete?" Charles asked.

"As Pete."

"Who is he?"

"He's a guy named Maloney," Al said. "He . . . sort of took over Sam's organization when Sam was found in the river."

THERE must have been a draft in the room then, for Charles felt a chill. He said, "Why? Do you think he's coming to make sure I'm Pete?"

"Maybe. He says he wants to work together. He says he's tired of . . . competition."

Nobody said anything for a moment. Then Nick said, "I don't like it. That guy's wise to something. He ain't the kind wants to work with anybody."

"So?" Al said. "And if we tell him he

can't see Pete? He'll really smell something fishy." He looked at Charles. "What do you think?"

"I'll do my best," Charles said. "You'll have to brief me on what he's going to talk about."

Al looked at Nick. Then he looked at Charles and shook his head. "He'll do all the talking. No matter what he says, tell him you want time to think it over. Admit nothing, which'll be easy, if you don't know anything."

Charles was silent a moment. Then, "What if he tells me something the police should know?"

Both of them stared at him. Finally Al said, "Well, what if he does?"

"I didn't promise to do anything illegal," Charles pointed out.

"That's right. You didn't sign up with the police department, either."

Al's face was hard as stone, and Charles considered his next words carefully.

But before he could voice them, Nick said, "You thinking of running out on us, Charlie?"

Charles looked from one to the other. "No."

"That's good," Al said. "Because we've really got a contract, a verbal contract, and I'd hate to think you'd be the one to break it, Charlie."

They were silent through dinner; both Al and Nick were too silent for Charles' peace of mind.

Then they went out onto the terrace. Charles had a small whiskey out there. He was sitting where the lights from the living room just missed him, in comparative shadow.

The thought of the impending visit was the big thought in his mind, but the thought of Ruth, from the drugstore, was a recurrent and more pleasant one. Perhaps it was just Pete's face she had liked. If that was it . . .

Al said, "Nick will stay out of sight, in case Maloney should be silly enough to try any rough stuff. I'll bring Maloney out here, and you stay right in that chair. Let him do the talking."

Charles nodded, and the silence set in again.

It was an ideal June night, warm and balmy. It was no night to be waiting for a competitor named Maloney.

The bell chimed, and Al went out toward the door, while Nick went over and stood in the darkness behind a small tree. Charles took a deep breath and waited.

CHAPTER THREE

The Big Money

THE MAN named Maloney came out with Al a few moments later. He was a thin, tall man with tremendous shoulders and a narrow, high head. Charles didn't rise to greet him, nor did he shake hands.

Maloney took a chair nearby; Al flanked him to the left.

Maloney said, "Been away, Pete?"

"That's right."

"Lost some weight."

"Throat infection," Charles said.

"What's on your mind?"

"Peace."

Charles said nothing.

"There's enough for both of us, Pete. There's plenty."

Charles said nothing.

Maloney stirred in his chair, and now there was some sharpness in his voice. "You don't think I'm scared, Pete? You don't think I'm running for cover?"

Charles shook his head.

"I know who took care of Sam, but I'm holding no grudge on that. Sam was my boss, not my friend. It's just good sense to work together, Pete. I'm making more than I can spend now, and so are you. We don't need to be enemies."

Al said, "He's making sense, Boss."

"It sounds good to me," Charles said.

Al said, "You don't think we had anything to do with what happened to Sam, do you, Maloney?"

In the dimness, Charles could see the ironic smile on Maloney's thin face. "We won't talk about Sam. Sam's dead. We'll forget all about him."

Charles nodded.

"I'll take the west side," Maloney went on, "and you can have the east side. If anybody gets ambitious, we work together."

Charles looked at Al.

Al said, "Sounds reasonable to me."

"Me, too," Charles said.

Maloney rose then, and he looked grotesque against the light from the living

room. Charles rose, and they shook hands, and then Al and Maloney were walking through the living room toward the door.

Nick came out from behind the barbecue pit, and he was scowling. "He's a smooth one," Nick said. "I trust him just as far as I can throw this building."

"He's a good businessman," Charles said. "If you can't lick them, join them. Just like Espenhour's did with Mason's."

Al was back now. Al said, "Peace, it's wonderful. You did all right, Charlie. Maybe we ought to give Charlie a raise, huh, Nick?"

Nick said nothing. Nick shook his head and lighted a cigar, and went over to look at the lights of the city.

"Nick don't believe in cooperation," Al said. "We understand modern business principles, don't we, Charlie? We're up to date."

"I don't know," Charles said. "What business are we in, Al?"

Al chuckled. "Printing. Or maybe you'd call it the publishing business. We take care of the pikers, Charlie."

From the edge of the roof, Nick said, "Why don't you show him the books and the plant? Why don't you tell him everything? You talk too much, Al."

Al was silent a moment, studying Nick. "Maybe," he said finally. "You're not scared, are you, Nick? You're not scared of Maloney?"

"I'm not scared of *anybody*," Nick said quietly. He turned his back on them.

Al regarded that back for moments, and then he shrugged and looked at Charles. "You play gin rummy, Charlie?"

"A little," Charles said.

They played five games, and Charles made a hundred and fifty odd dollars, despite the fact that Al got what breaks there were in the games.

When they'd finished, Al said, "You were lucky again, Charlie. Your luck can't last forever, though."

Charles made no comment. Nick was still out on the terrace when he turned in. He was nervous about Nick. He locked his door.

He lay awake for more than an hour, remembering Al's words about the printing or publishing business, and "we take care of the pikers."

Charles had no idea how the pikers were

taken care of, but he was determined to find out. And tomorrow he'd get some more magazines. At Calvano's.

HE MENTIONED it at breakfast, in the morning.

"You sure read fast," Al commented, and then he smiled at Charles. "Or is it Ruth?"

Charles knew he was blushing, but he met Al's gaze evenly. "I read fast. I like to read."

"We'll drive you over after breakfast," Al said, and then he looked thoughtful. "Or maybe not. That's on the west side, Charlie. That's Maloney's territory."

"But surely he wouldn't care if I went over to get some magazines," Charles protested.

Al was frowning. "If all three of us went, it wouldn't look good. Maloney wouldn't like it." He paused. "I'll tell you what—Manuel can drive you over in my car, and we'll use Nick's car today." Again he paused. "You did a good job last night, Charlie. If you don't talk any more than that today, you'll get by."

"I'll be careful," Charles promised.

Nick said nothing. Nick had probably issued his quota of words for the month last night.

Manuel was a skilled chauffeur, but Charles sensed that he was along for another reason, also. For when they stopped in front of the west side drug-store, Manuel came in with him.

The place was filled with roses, and their odor was heavy on the warm air. There was a boy behind the soda fountain, but Ruth was not in sight.

She was, the boy told Charles, compounding some prescriptions in the rear of the store.

"There aren't many women pharmacists, are there?" Charles commented.

"I don't know," the lad said. "Anything I can do for you, sir?"

"I just want some magazines," Charles said. "I'll pick them out." He went over to the magazine rack.

He took his time at the task, giving it only part of his attention. Twenty minutes later he had a small pile, but Ruth still hadn't appeared.

Charles ordered a hot fudge. He dawdled over it for another ten minutes

and then ordered a double chocolate malted.

He'd had a full, rich breakfast, and the malted was slow going. Near the magazine rack, Manuel fidgeted.

Charles said to the boy, "Must be a lot of prescriptions this morning."

"I don't know, sir," the boy said. "Miss Dreyer didn't say."

So that was her name, Ruth Dreyer. Charles downed the last of the malt and ordered a banana split.

The boy shook his head but prepared it without comment.

Charles said, "I see Miss Dreyer got my roses."

Now the boy showed interest. "Did you send those?"

Charles nodded.

"Then you're Pete Calvano?"

"That's right."

The boy glanced toward the rear of the store and then bent closer to Charles. "Say, how about me getting some of those football pool tickets in the fall? I know a lot of guys at high school want some, but nobody around here handles them." Again he glanced toward the rear. "Since Miss Dreyer took over this place, you can't get any of that stuff here any more."

"What else can't you get?" Charles asked.

"Policy slips or baseball pools or basketball cards. You can't get *anything*."

"Lot of the kids want them, huh?"

"Sure. Lot of the men want 'em, too."

We take care of the pikers Printing and publishing And distribution, too, to high school kids.

"But Miss Dreyer's too much on the up-and-up," the lad went on. "Just 'cause her brother's a cop, I suppose."

"I suppose," Charles said.

"I could be your agent for this territory," the boy said. "It's a lot better than working here, huh?"

Near the magazine rack, Manuel was all ears, though he tried to look unconcerned, leafing through a copy of *Vogue*.

"If you don't like to work, it's all right," Charles said. "But we don't sell on this side of town."

From behind Charles a voice said, "Were you thinking of taking another job, Jimmy?"

Charles turned to see Ruth Dreyer in the doorway of the prescription section. She was looking cool and beautiful in light green shantung.

The lad behind the counter flushed and didn't look at his employer. "Not exactly, Miss Dreyer."

"Because if you are," she continued, "you really should talk it over with your mother first."

He nodded, saying nothing.

Charles said, "Good-morning, Ruth."

"Good morning, Mr. Calvano." Her blue eyes held neither animosity nor cordiality. "You've developed quite a taste for ice cream, I see."

"It's good for my throat," Charles explained. "I hope you enjoyed the roses."

"I do. Thank you." For a moment indecision was plain on her mobile face, and then it stiffened in resolve. "Though roses in that quantity are rather wasteful, don't you think?"

"I suppose," Charles agreed. "I wanted to— It was because—" He took a breath. "I suppose."

Her smile was purely muscular. "Well, I'm very busy. Thank you again, Mr. Calvano." She went back out of sight.

But not out of mind. Charles considered the possibility of a Marshmallow-Cherry-Royale, and decided it might be too much, everything considered.

MANUEL had finished perusing *Vogue* and was waiting respectfully near the door. Charles looked toward the prescription department and sighed. Jimmy said nothing, but he too was looking toward the prescription section. Only he shook his head in annoyance.

Charles said, "She's right, Jimmy. Take it from a man who should know. There are lots of fine ways to make a living, and the way you suggested isn't one of them." He went over to join Manuel at the door.

"I'll probably be back tomorrow."

Jimmy nodded. Charles and Manuel went out. Manuel said, "Very pretty girl, Mr. Calvano. Very pretty."

"Very," Charles agreed.

They rode home in silence.

Nick and Al weren't there. If they had been, Charles had intended to tell them he was quitting. He'd have no part of a

racket that preyed on high school kids. He'd have no part of any racket.

That last, however, might not be completely true, he realized. Al had defined the business as political, and Charles had an out for his conscience there. But self-deception was not one of his vices, and he knew that Al's definition had not even seemed reasonable at the time.

It was the four hundred a week that had worn the horns. It was the twelve years at Espenhour's that had made the offer too tempting to reject. He hadn't wanted to analyze the job then, and even now, knowing what the business was, he could still hesitate.

The first wave of his loathing had vanished when Al and Nick came home. Charles said nothing about quitting, though he intended to at the proper time.

"It's like old times," Al said. "It's wonderful."

"You don't publish books then, I suppose," Charles said dryly. "I understand there's a slump in the book business."

Al shook his head. He regarded Charles amiably. "Have a good time this morning?"

"Not so good," Charles said. "I ate too much ice cream, I guess." He paused. "I found out Ruth's last name. It's Dreyer. Her brother is a policeman."

"Dreyer?" Al said. "It wouldn't be Lieutenant Dreyer, would it? He a plain-clothesman, Charlie?"

"I don't know," Charles said.

"I remember that's the name now," Al said, "but Pete never said about her brother being *that* Dreyer. He's poison, Charlie. He's out of Homicide."

"He wouldn't have anything to do with the publishing business, then," Charlie pointed out. "You wouldn't have any trouble with the Homicide Division."

"All cops are the same," Al said. "They're all bad. You didn't say anything foolish over there this morning, did you, Charlie?"

"Nothing," Charles said, "as Manuel will inform you. I only had a few words with Ruth. She was very busy."

Al was looking at Nick. "Dreyer . . . Nick, do you remember, was Pete sweet on this Ruth?"

Nick shook his head. "Nah. She was just some babe he hired for the store

when she was in high school, and then she took a course, and when Pete got too big for the store, he sold her most of it."

Al was smiling again. "Well, maybe that Pete wasn't sweet on her, but this one is, huh, Charlie?"

"She's a very pretty girl," Charles said.

"The woods are full of 'em," Al said. "Kind of money you're making, you wouldn't have to travel that far for a girl, Charlie."

Charles looked at Al evenly. "You don't need to worry. If I was going to run to the police, I'd tell you so directly. I'm not interested in the lieutenant, only in Ruth."

Nick grunted something Charles didn't catch, and Al looked at him wonderingly. Then Manuel came to tell them lunch was ready.

It was another quiet meal, due mostly to Al's preoccupation. Al was the voluble one, and his silence seemed to quiet the others. Al, it was plain, was thinking.

After lunch, he said, "How would you like to get into a *real* poker game, Charlie, for important money?"

"I haven't got that kind of money," Charles answered.

"Your credit's good with us," Al said, and looked at Nick meaningly.

"That's right," Nick said.

Charles tried to figure the angle, and there was only one that made sense: Al wanted him to be indebted so he would be forced to stay on the job. Al was worried about Charles' leaving.

Charles smiled. "Honest game?"

"I'm no card sharp," Al said, "and the guys I intend to bring in aren't likely to cheat a guy they think is Pete Calvano. But I want to warn you, they're free-wheeling poker players."

CHAPTER FOUR

The Phone Call

THE PATTERN of the game was the same as the other time, though the players were different. Neither of the free-wheelers played the game their predecessors had, but neither did they rely on cinches alone.

It was slow going until Charles hit a streak. He played it out to the bitter end.

This was at table stakes, and he kept all his winnings on the table. About three o'clock that afternoon, he got his best hand of the game, aces full.

It was the kind of hand he was waiting for; it wasn't a hand he'd expected any opposition on. Al was the only one left in after the draw, and Al had not been able to open, though he'd drawn only one card. Charles' hand was pat.

Al's draw should give him a flush or straight, if successful. Al had no way in the world of knowing what Charles held.

Charles bet six hundred dollars and Al raised.

Al could have drawn to a straight flush, of course, but the possibilities of that were *very* remote. Al could have refused to open with an adequate hand, too, but that wasn't his game.

Charles raised back.

Al smiled and shoved in every chip he had in front of him.

Al figured him for a straight or a flush, it was clear, and Al had a high flush. Charles met the bet.

Al had absolutely nothing but four clubs and a heart.

Charles stared at him wonderingly, and Al said, "Just a bluff that didn't work."

Charles still stared at him. "You mean, you bluff to win?"

"In a game this size? Sure. Why else would a man bluff?"

"You could look it up," Charles said, and thought of the twelve years he'd wasted at Espenhour's while this sort of thing was going on.

They finished up around six, and Charles was eight thousand dollars ahead. The free-wheelers left, bemoaning their luck, and Charles and Al went out onto the terrace.

"There's something wrong with Nick," Al said. "He's not acting right. You two have a fight or something?"

Charles shook his head. "You mean he's— I mean, is it about me he's not acting right?"

"Well, that's about it, Charlie."

Charles took a deep breath. "Maybe I'd better go back to being Charles Nelson." He took another breath. "I learned something today, Al, that made me change my mind about the business."

Al said nothing.

"I learned what you meant by *pikers*," Charles continued. "You meant high school kids, didn't you, Al?"

Al shook his head slowly. "No, Charlie. Pete never sold to minors, and that's the way we're keeping the business. So you learned what we're selling? From Lieutenant Dreyer?"

"No. I never met him. I learned it from a kid, a high school kid."

"On the west side?"

Charles nodded.

"Delaney," Al said. "Delaney'll sell to anybody and hire anybody."

Charles looked at Al for a moment. "There's no reason to, but I believe you, Al. When Pete ran the drugstore, he sold to kids, didn't he?"

"When Pete ran the drugstore, he got his tickets from Delaney. Pete was small potatoes then, and he took orders."

"I'm still quitting," Charles said. "I haven't the—well, call it guts, Al."

Al smiled and put a hand on Charles' shoulder. "You know, you might even be an honest man. Though if you are, you're the first I've met. What have you got against gambling, Charlie?"

"Nothing, unless it's a sucker's game, unless the percentage makes it a sucker's game."

Al shrugged. "You were breaking the law, right here, this afternoon. You know that, don't you?"

"I know it. It's being done, every day, by respectable people. When it's organized, it changes. People get . . . found in the river."

"You think I had something to do with that, Charles?"

"The business did."

Al looked more thoughtful than annoyed, and Charles was glad he'd spoken his mind.

Finally Al said, "You'll give us a little time on this? You're not running to the police?"

"I'm not running to the police. How much time, Al?"

"Oh, couple days, anyway," he said uneasily. "I want to tell Nick, but I want to tell him when he's in a better humor."

WHEN they came in to dinner, Nick looked at both of them suspiciously. "Something happen?" he asked.

"Charlie was trying to tell me how to play poker," Al answered.

"That made you unhappy?"

"No."

For a long moment both men stared at each other. It was Al who finally looked away.

Nick said, "Something's going on around here. I figure it's my business."

Al looked at Charles and then at Nick. "Charlie's going to quit us."

No emotion in Nick's face. His voice was flat. "That's the way I figured him, from the first day. I didn't like any part of the deal, you'll remember, Al. When does he figure to quit?" He didn't look at Charles.

"As soon as I can," Charles said.

Now Nick looked at Charles. "You're in a hurry?"

"I promised Al I'd give him some time."

"Before you run to the cops?"

"Why should I?"

"You're the kind that does. You were pretty nosy over at the drugstore this morning."

Charles was nervous, but he tried not to show Nick that. "I found out what I wanted to," he said.

Nick looked at Al and shook his head. But he said nothing more.

The two of them went out again after dinner, and Charles went out to the terrace to read. He couldn't keep his mind on the print. He was almost nine thousand dollars richer than when he'd left Espenhour's, and that should have been enough to make him happy. But he wasn't.

In his thirty-two years of ordinary living he'd picked up, somehow, a code of fairly strict ethics, and it was taking a beating now. That bothered him more than Nick's attitude.

He went to bed around ten, locking his bedroom door again. He didn't hear Al and Nick come in, but he did hear them talking when the first grey of dawn came through the east windows of his bedroom.

It was four o'clock.

He heard the murmur of their voices and strained to make some sense of it, to catch a coherent phrase or significant word. There wasn't anything—excepting the tone of their voices which indicated they were arguing.

They could have been arguing about any of the many details of their business, or they could have been arguing politics or batting averages. Charles had the uncomfortable sensation that they were arguing about him.

He watched the faint ripple of the silken curtains in the morning breeze, looked around at the tasteless, ornate room, and wished himself back in the rooming-house, working for Espenhour's.

The murmuring of voices went on and then subsided. It was only four; Manuel and Juan would be asleep. Soon, Al and Nick would be asleep.

His eyes went from the curtains to the phone, there on the bedside table, and his mind searched for a friend, someone less alien than the four he shared this apartment with, someone to call and talk to, just for the reassuring sound of a friendly human voice.

There wasn't anybody.

He looked again at the phone. He reached for the phone book and opened it.

The buzzing came over the wire in two short intervals. One pair, and another. Another.

Her voice was sleepy. "Hello?"

"Ruth?"

"Yes?"

"Pete."

No sound.

"Ruth, you're still there?"

"I'm here."

"I— It's important that I talk to you."

"Then talk."

"Not now, not this way. Ruth, I'm not—" He broke off.

Nothing from her.

"I'll be over, this morning, to get some magazines. Believe me when I say it's very important that I talk to you."

"Important to *you*?"

"To me. I guess that wouldn't make it important to you."

No words from her.

He looked at the phone in his hand, He said, "Good-bye," and put it back on its cradle.

It was four-thirty-five. He tried to go back to sleep, but it was hopeless. He went over to sit in the chair near the windows. He was sitting there when someone rapped on the door.

DETECTIVE TALES

He hesitated, then went to open it. It was Al, in pajamas.

"I heard you talking," Al said. "I thought maybe you were having a bad dream."

"I was," Charles told him. "I'm eating too much."

Al nodded. "Nick's in a bad frame of mind. Be careful, won't you, Charlie? Don't argue with him."

"Okay. I can use your car again, can't I, Al, to go to the drug store?"

Al looked at him closely a moment, before nodding.

CHAPTER FIVE

In the Corpse's Footsteps

NEITHER Al nor Nick were up when Charles ate breakfast at eight-thirty.

Charles had the morning papers all to himself, and he read the feature story on the first page. Another body had been found in the river, another 'tub slaying' as the papers termed it. Disintegration was so far advanced that it would be difficult for the body to be identified, though every effort would be made to . . . etc, etc.

Manuel came in with some fresh coffee, and Charles said, "We'll use Al's car again today, Manuel. I've already talked to him about it."

Manuel nodded. "Yes, sir. What time will we be going, sir?"

"As soon as I finish this coffee," Charles said.

It was another nice morning, and the Caddy purred through the bright streets like an overgrown cat. When they rode near the river Charles kept his eyes averted.

At Calvano's, Jimmy was behind the soda fountain again.

"Is Miss Dreyer here?" Charles asked.

Jimmy nodded toward the rear of the store. "Prescriptions," he said, and shrugged.

Manuel stayed at the front of the store, missing nothing.

"I think I'll have a coke," Charles said.

But before Jimmy had a chance to draw it, Ruth Dreyer's voice called from be-



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hind the grilled window, "Mr. Calvano, will you come back here a moment, please?"

Charles felt suddenly warm, and his step was brisk as he went through the door into the back room. The shelves were lined with bottles and cartons. Toward the rear, there was an open space, and Ruth was sitting at a desk back there.

She wasn't alone.

The man sitting in a chair near the desk was heavy, with a broad intelligent face and deep blue eyes. He rose as Charles approached.

Ruth said, "Pete, I guess you know Walter."

Charles took the hand extended to him and tried to think of something bright to say. All he could think of was, "I guess I ought to."

This was undoubtedly Lieutenant Dreyer of Homicide.

The deep blue eyes regarded Charles thoughtfully. "It's been some time since I've seen you, Pete. You've changed."

"I explained about that to Ruth," Charles said. Then he took the jump.

"You haven't changed much, Walter."
"You remember me then?"

Charles nodded.

"But not as Walter, I hope."

Charles held his breath.

Ruth said, "I knew it. Pete Calvano wouldn't send *anybody* a store full of roses. I knew it, Dick, all along."

Charles felt his knees getting weak. He said, "What's all this about?"

"That's what we want to know," the big man said. "You phoned Ruth this morning at four-thirty. Why?"

"I wanted to talk to her. I wanted to tell her something, so that if anything happened to me . . ." Charles looked at the floor.

There was a silence, broken finally by Dreyer. "Well—"

Charles looked up. "It was for Ruth, not for the police. You're Lieutenant Dreyer, aren't you?"

The man nodded. "And I think you'd better tell me about it, too."

Charles shook his head. He didn't look at Ruth. He couldn't look at her.

"Listen—" Dreyer said.

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DETECTIVE TALES

But Ruth said quickly, "Oh, shut up, Dick. Can't you see he's all right? If he wants to talk to me, alone, he will."

Now Charles looked at Ruth, and the warmth returned. She was smiling at him, for the first time, a *real* smile.

"You did like the roses then?"

"I did," she said. "We can go upstairs, if you'd like to talk to me alone."

The lieutenant said, "That won't be necessary. I'll go."

RUTH sighed and indicated the chair her brother had vacated. "What was it you wanted to tell me?"

"It's just for you. It's a secret—unless something happens to me," Charles said gravely.

She nodded, asking no questions.

Charles started with meeting Nick and Al in the store, and told her everything in detail from then on. When he'd finished, he laid a packet on her desk.

"There's over eight thousand dollars in there," he told her. "I want you to have it if anything—"

"Happens to you," she finished for him. "And what makes you so certain anything is going to happen?"

"Just a hunch," he said.

Again she sighed. "And why should I have the money?"

Charles took a deep gulp of air. "Because I want you to. Because . . . there's nobody else, Ruth."

She seemed to blush. "No relatives, close friends?"

"Nobody," he said.

Some moisture in her eyes now, and she looked away. Finally, "Charles, I've been thinking. You could quit them. You wouldn't have to go back to Espenhour's, either. I need a man in the store, really. You could buy an interest with this money." She paused, looked at him beseechingly. "Charles, don't go back."

"Why not?" he asked, and his voice was low.

"Because I don't want you to. Because . . . nobody ever bought me a store full of roses before." She was crying now.

Charles went over to put a hand on top of her head. "Ruth, please—I— Don't worry about me."

"But there's nobody else," she said.

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"Me, too," he said. "I'll go back and tell them I'm quitting. I promised Al I'd hang around for a while. Al won't let anything happen to me, Ruth."

He went out to the front of the store, and Manuel still stood near the magazine rack. But Charles had the impression that he hadn't been there all the time. He thought he'd heard the door of the phone booth close, some minutes before.

He said, "We'll go home now, Manuel. I want to see Al and Nick before they leave."

"Yes, sir," Manuel said.

They went through the door and stopped. Al was there, looking worried. Nick's car was at the curb, but not Nick.

Al said, "I've got to talk to you, Charles." And to Manuel, "You take Nick's car back. Tell him—tell him I'll see him later." Al was perspiring freely as he handed Manuel the keys.

"What's the matter?" Charles said.

"Nick's on the warpath. He's out to get you, Charlie." He nodded toward the car. "Let's get out of here."

Charles climbed into the front seat, and Al got behind the wheel. The Caddy gunned away from the curb, and Al said, "Nick was on the extension when Manuel called me. What'd you tell Dreyer, Charlie?"

"Not a thing. I didn't think he'd be there. Nick wouldn't do anything . . . foolish, would he?"

"He would. I think you'd better lay low for a couple days and let me talk to him. I've got just the spot for you." He shot a glance at Charles. "What did you tell the girl?"

"I told her I was quitting in a couple of days. I told her she shouldn't worry about me, that you'd promised everything would be all right." Charles was embarrassed. "I said you'd take care of me."

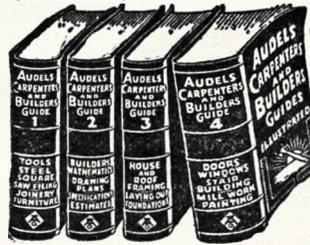
"I will, Charlie," Al said.

They went east, over the bridge, and then Al turned the Caddy down a street that led into an industrial section. Here, in front of a fairly modern small plant, Al parked the Caddy.

"Our publishing business," Al said, and smiled. "We print tickets and programs and flyers."

"And other things," Charles added.

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DETECTIVE TALES

"Upstairs," Al said. "On the second floor. On the third floor there's an apartment."

"But wouldn't Nick find me? Doesn't he come here every day?"

"Sure. But this is the last place he'd suspect. He never has any reason to go up to the third floor. It's where Pete lived before he hit the big money."

"What's that smell?" Charles asked.

"That?" Al sniffed. "Oh, that's the river. It's only a block from here."

They went up a set of back steps, meeting no one on the way.

Charles said, "I'm not going to forget this, Al. Putting yourself in danger just for me. You're a real friend, Al."

Al opened the door and gestured Charles in. "I try to be."

This door led into the kitchen, and they went through that to a larger room beyond, a combination sleeping and living room. In one corner there was a drop-leaf table. There was a studio couch against one wall. In another corner there was a mammoth, leather-upholstered chair.

Nick was sitting in the chair.

"Came along without any fuss, huh?" Nick said.

"Not a squeak," Al said.

Charles looked from one to the other. His eyes came to rest, finally, on Al. "You lied to me," he said.

"And you to me, probably," Al said. "Sit down, Charlie." He shoved a straight-backed chair toward him.

Charles sat down. Al stood in front of him.

"Now," Al said, "we'll have it straight and slow, Charlie. This would be a bad time to lie."

"I've told you the truth," Charles said.

Al's right hand flashed out and caught Charles on the ear. He went over sideways. Al's foot crashed his side, and ribbons of light flashed through his brain.

"The truth, Charlie." Al had a hand in his collar, and he lifted him bodily back into the chair.

Nick came over to stand behind him.

"I've . . . told you . . ." Charles began.

Al's right hand smashed his mouth. Charles felt a tooth snap, and then blood was welling in his mouth. He saw another fist coming his way, and he tried to duck.

Hot Shot, Big Shot—Dead Shot!

He didn't make it, and night descended....

WHEN he came to, he was bound tightly, hands and feet, lying on the living room floor.

The shades were all down. From the kitchen he could hear the sound of voices.

Nick was saying, "I never realized until today that you took care of Pete. I figured he'd taken off. That's Pete they found in the river, isn't it?"

"That's Pete," Al agreed. "Only he's been dead a long time. And Joe Burke and Shallock both saw Pete *this week*."

"Stoolies," Nick said. "Who's going to believe them?"

"The law." A pause. "I took care of Sam and Pete, Nick. This baby's yours."

"So?"

"So. If I go to the chair, you go, Nick. Partners, you know."

A silence.

Charles could feel his nausea returning, and he fought it.

"You're smart, Al. And now they'll never be able to prove that wasn't Pete those stoolies saw. Not unless they find him."

"You catch on quick."

"Hasn't this jerk got any relatives who'll miss him?"

"He hasn't got anybody. I checked that."

Nick sighed. "I'm no good at mixing that concrete, though."

"You'd better not be. That'd be like writing the law a letter. We'll take him up to the lodge."

"And—"

"And bury him in the woods on our property up there."

Another silence, and then Nick said, "Right."

Charles tried to free his hands, but the wire they'd used cut into his wrists more firmly than ever. He rolled over on his stomach.

He heard steps, and then he saw a pair of feet. Al's voice. "Feeling better, Charlie?"

Charles said nothing.

"He's still out, Nick said. "I'll get some water."

The water he brought was cold, and in a pail, and shocked Charles into a groan.

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DETECTIVE TALES

Then Al had him by the collar again and lifted him to a sitting position. Al squatted, to meet Charles' gaze.

"We're getting out of here, Charlie. We made a mistake. We're taking you back to the apartment. Think you can navigate?"

Charles nodded slowly. "Mistake?"
"That's right. It's all over. We're not going to do anything more to you. Here, I'll untie you."

Al went around behind while Nick bent over to support him. Al had wire cutters in one hand, and he snipped the bonds. Charles tried to rub some circulation into his hands while Al was cutting the wire from his feet.

Then they both helped him up. He stood there a moment, swaying, his whole face aching from the broken tooth, his stomach unsettled. Now to the lodge, to be buried. . . .

Al said, "Apologies aren't going to make you feel better, Charlie. I was wrong, is all."

"No, you weren't," Charles said.
Al stared at him.
He could tell Al about Ruth and forestall his own death. He could tell Al what he'd told Ruth—and put her on the spot.

"What do you mean, I wasn't wrong, Charlie?"

"I mean, I was going to quit, and that would be breaking my promise. I had a beating coming, but I didn't think it would be this bad."

Al looked at Nick, and Nick shook his head. Al said, "Okay. We're going to get you home now. We'll get a doctor."

Charles nodded.
"I'll go ahead," Al said. "You bring up the rear, Nick."

Al went ahead. For just a second, Charles paused. Once they got him into the car he was a goner. After they had him safely out of the building, this feigned cordiality would vanish. But what could he do against two men, both of them probably armed?

He followed Al. Nick followed him.

They went through the kitchen, into the hall, and down the first flight of steel steps. Charles kept hand on the rail for support, a support he no longer needed, because his legs were sound.

Hot Shot, Big Shot—Dead Shot!

They went down another, and Charles could feel his heart beat now and the nausea returning.

Al turned, to look past him, at Nick. Al said, "I'll go out alone, once we're at the bottom. We don't want anybody to know Charles is mixed up with us, if he's going to quit. I'll give you the sign, from out there?"

Nick must have agreed with a nod, for Al half turned to start down the steps again.

That was when Charles pushed him.

He had a glimpse of Al hurtling down those steel steps, head first, and then he was running down as fast as his legs would carry him.

He heard Al's scream and Nick's shout. He heard the report of a gun and felt the smash in his thigh. Then he was tumbling himself as the leg crumpled, and he saw the row of steel steps coming up to meet him, and he saw the still figure of Al sprawled at the bottom.

WHEN he came to, he was in bed, a hard, high bed. It was a hospital bed. There was a wide, intelligent face nearby, the face of Lieutenant Dreyer.

"Had to kill them both," the lieutenant was saying. "I was waiting outside the drugstore when Al picked this patsy up, and I followed them to their plant. The boys are tearing that joint apart now. I guess I can modestly say it was a nice clean job all around."

The man on the other side of the bed was obviously a reporter, for he had a notebook in one hand and a pencil in the other. "How about this guy?"

"Well," the lieutenant said, "he's more stooge than anything else, but he'll get a couple of years if I can trace—"

"He'll *what*?" somebody said.

Charles looked over to see the best face of all, near the door, the face of Ruth Dreyer.

Her voice went on. "If you think, Richard Harold Dreyer, that after all the boys you've scared away from me, you're going to send this darling to jail, you can—"

Charles closed his eyes again, and a big smile found its way to his face.

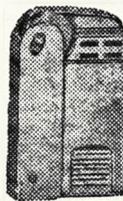
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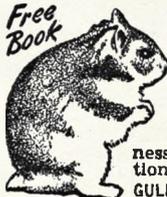
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DETECTIVE TALES

(Continued from page 107)

until his fingertips touched the cool butt of the gun.

From somewhere upstairs the woman yelled loudly. Stan yanked the gun out, shot twice at the middle of the trooper.

He ignored the clothes, grabbed the brown suitcase. Someone shouted hoarsely. A more authoritative gun roared.

The coupe motor caught the first time, and he was glad that he had backed it into the garage.

It jumped down the drive and a figure ran out from the side of the house, an orange-red jet of flame spurting toward the car. The car swerved, thumping on the rim, wedging against the side of the house.

He ran fifty feet before the slug smashed his shoulder. The impact drove him over onto his face and he rolled, sobbing, yelling with pain and fear and the knowledge that he would die.

TWO DAYS later, after Stanley Ryan had dictated his confession to the police stenographer who sat by his hospital bed, he said to the lieutenant, "I've been thinking. Why did that Clarey woman bring the troopers around?"

The lieutenant, a weary-looking man in his fifties, inspected the end of his dead cigar and said, "Why, son, she thought you'd gone out of your head and killed your wife and kid."

Stan puzzled over that. "Why should she think anything like that?"

"She has two little kids of her own, son. She found the weak spot in all of your window dressing."

"Weak spot?"

"Sure, Ryan. Weak as hell. You see, you had those things on the line every day and every day she'd take a look, because she missed the one thing that should have been out there. She missed the one thing real bad. And finally she had to come over to talk to you. If you'd given her a chance, she was going to ask about it. There was one very necessary thing that wasn't out there every day blowing in the breeze. And young Mrs. Clarey knew there wasn't any diaper service that far out of town."

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