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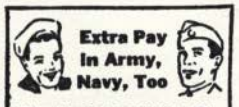

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Missing Page

Detective Tales [v26 #2, January 1944] (10¢, pulp)
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46 · The Clue of the Careless Carrot · Edward J. Donovan · ss
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76 · The Expendable Spy [Everett Zebulon Bart (Easy Bart)] · F. Orlin Tremaine · ss

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Wealthy Henry Jason lived in his big home alone except for a maid, a gardener, a chauffeur and a housekeeper. Noted for his philanthropies, he had no known enemies. The maid reported stumbling over Jason's body when she started into the library to do some dusting. She told the police Jason had had three callers during the morning, his lawyer, a nephew, and a stranger. An autopsy showed poisoning as the cause of death. Who was the poisoner?

There was a single clue... a finger print on a glass

One of these finger prints identifies slayer!

Who Was Guilty?

1. Nephew
2. Attorney
3. Gardener
4. Maid
5. Housekeeper
6. Chauffeur
7. Stranger
8. The Slayer

CAN YOU POINT OUT THE KILLER?

The police found the stranger to be a philanthropic associate of the murdered man who had no objection to being finger printed. Finger prints of other suspects were obtained without the necessity of making routine prints. The Bureau of Identification at police headquarters ordered the arrest of the slayer immediately after checking the several index finger prints with that on the drinking glass. Study and compare prints above. You should be able to point out the murderer. Can you?

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Gentlemen: Without obligation, send me the "Blue Book of Crime" and complete list of Identification Bureaus employing I.A.S. graduates. Also give me information regarding cost and terms.

(Literature sent *only* to persons stating age.)

1	2	3	4
5	6	7	

Who Was Guilty? Put cross in square above

Name..... Age.....

Address .....

City..... State.....

53% of all U. S. Identification Bureaus *Employ I. A. S. Trained Operators*

There's a thrill in Scientific Crime Detection, and there's good money in it, too. The demand for I.A.S. trained finger print experts is increasing each year. This fine profession can be learned at home in spare time. Send today for FREE *book* and list of all the Identification Bureaus employing I.A.S. students and graduates. Use the coupon. If you wish to do so, indicate identity of the poisoner of Henry Jason by making cross in square provided.

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THE CRIME CLINIC

YOU'RE a hero and you're coming home with an honorable discharge and the Army Distinguished Flying Cross. It's your old home town where folks will know all about you, and you're naturally expecting some kind of welcome.

You're particularly curious about who the welcome will be from, because in that same hell-flaming incident where you gained the Flying Cross and almost lost your life, *you did lose your memory.*

There's nothing else the matter with you. You're whole and healthy now. You just don't remember anything that happened before you crashed in that sheet of flame. Who were you anyway, before you went into the army? Shoe clerk or banker? Garage mechanic or taxi driver? Cop or preacher or—crook?

It'll make a lot of difference in the kind of welcome you get.

Are you married or single? That's especially important because on the train you met an army nurse who is the kind of girl you want to spend the rest of your life with. In fact, without her, life seems like a cold potato proposition.

Are you broke and live in a furnished room? Or do you have a bank account and a couple of cars, and live in a big stone house on top of a hill somewhere?

Those were some of the things that made Web Black look forward to his homecoming with feverish curiosity. What kind of welcome was he going to get? He was braced for almost anything except for what happened.

Somebody tried to kill him the first minute he stepped off the train.

In the next twenty-four hours three more attempts were made on his life. Who were his mysterious assailants? Who were his friends . . . who were his enemies? Web Black lived a perilous and gun-fast life until he found out.

And make no mistake about it—he *did* find out. And so will you when you read "The Man Who Came To Kill," the long feature novel in next month's issue of DETECTIVE TALES. It's by that fine writer Day Keene who, incidentally, has a dramatic, hard-driving story in this issue you are now holding. "Blood on the Good Earth," it's called. Turn to it for a further forecast of what's in store for you next month.

"THE Man Who Came To Kill" is only the curtain raiser for next month's reading feast. John Wade will be back again! The hard-fisted, in-fighting straight-as-a-die ex-crook, and his gun-fisted companion, Ricky Boles, buck a murder combine that not only threatens to unseat their friend, Governor Fortney Castle, but aims at the Fascist overturn of the entire state government.

GET OUT OF TOWN, JOHN WADE!

That's what Gesi Varenti, and the murderous Mosers told him.

Their guns ringed him when they said it. But then tough, loyal Ricky Boles came in with "Mr. Thomas," and evened things up. "Mr. Thomas" went dut-dut-dut-dut-dut, the way the kids do with their mouth when they're playing war. Only Ricky's victims stayed down.

The time came when Ricky fell too, because this *was* war. War on the home front, war against the native Fascists who were trying to overthrow the government just as determinedly as the gray Nazi hordes are trying to do it on world battle-fronts.

Ricky fell, and John Wade, alone, stood between him and death . . . and between the Governor and death . . . and between the possible enslavement of a whole people. "Pursuit of Murder," by William R. Cox is a long novelette, as modern as today's fighter-bombers.

In this same sensational February issue are many more stories of the caliber you have become accustomed to demanding in DETECTIVE TALES, stories torn from the flesh of life . . . by such able writing men as D. L. Champion, Dane Gregory, Robert Turner, C. William Harrison, Fredric Brown, and others. On sale December 24th.

The Editor.

MAKE YOUR RESERVATION FOR A PLACE AMONG THE LEADERS IN THE COMING VICTORY ERA OF MIGHTY INDUSTRIAL-COMMERCIAL GROWTH & DEVELOPMENT- JUST MAIL THE COUPON!

LET THE DEAD SPEAK

By FREDERICK C. DAVIS

CHAPTER ONE

Tonight I'll Die

THE scrawl on the envelope said: The finder of this letter will please take it straight to the office of District Attorney Dumfries. Do not open it. Don't allow anyone else to touch it. If possible, don't even let anyone else learn that you've found it. Place in the hands of the district attorney personally and quickly. This is a matter of life and death.

Mark Ogden.

The enclosure read:

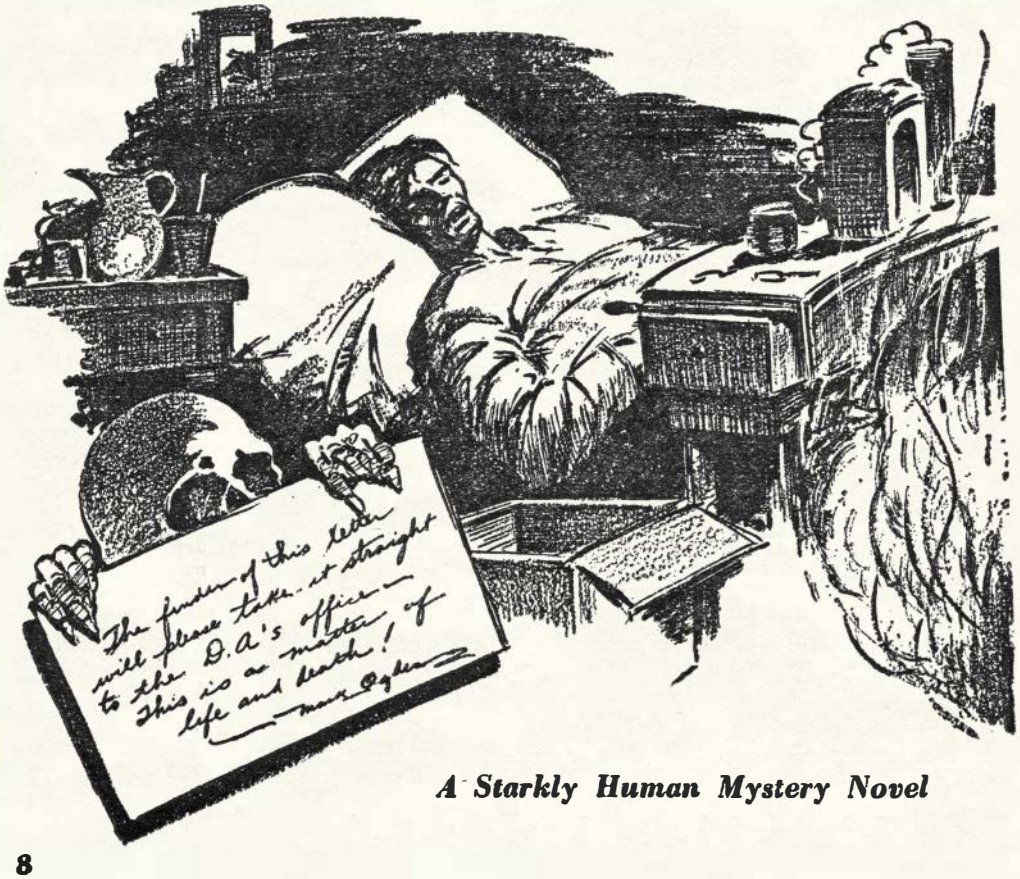
District Attorney James Dumfries,

Dear Jim,

I will never live to finish this letter. It may stop abruptly at any point—in mid-sentence or even in the middle of a word. Perhaps I have so little time left that it will consist of only a few hurried lines. But I mean to carry it on until the last minute, writing as rapidly as I can, with the purpose of helping you to bring to justice the person—or the *two* persons—who killed me.

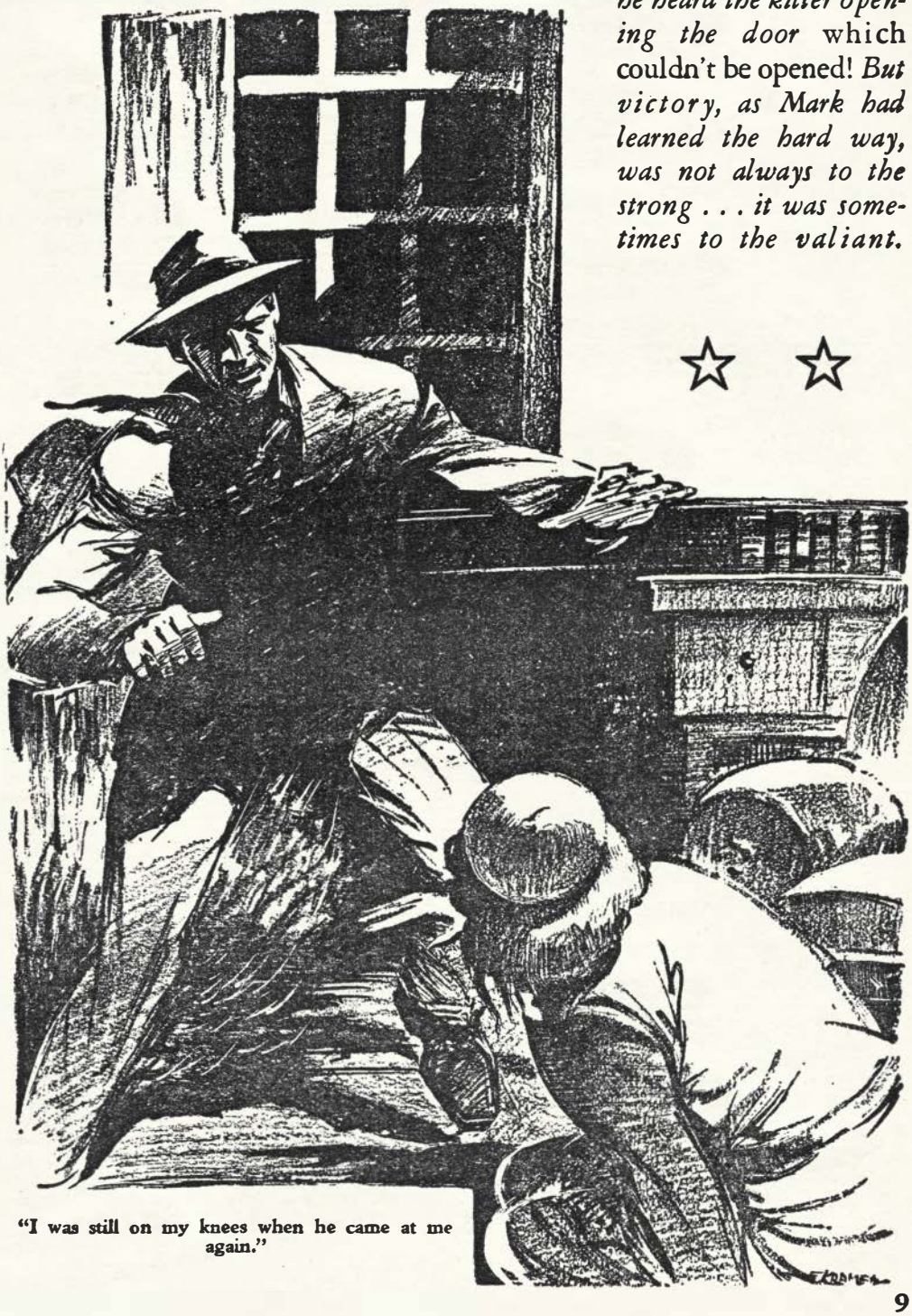
When this letter ends you will know that I was forced to drop my pen and that a moment later I died.

I can't possibly send this letter to you in any ordinary way. At the last second I intend to stuff these pages inside an envelope on which I've already written a message, seal it and drop it out the window beside my bed, trusting that some-



A Starkly Human Mystery Novel

Weak from a bullet-mauling in Tunisia, Mark Ogden knew that he didn't have a Japanazi's chance when, alone in a sealed room, his phone line cut, the lights put out, he heard the killer opening the door which couldn't be opened! *But victory, as Mark had learned the hard way, was not always to the strong . . . it was sometimes to the valiant.*



"I was still on my knees when he came at me again."

one may happen on it and take it to you as instructed.

When this letter reaches you—*if* it ever reaches you—I will be dead. I don't know now in what manner I'll die, but I'm sure my death will seem to have been accidental. Don't believe that, Jim! Regardless of what the circumstances may appear to be, you must understand, when you read this, that I have been murdered with malice aforethought. I write this advisedly, Jim.

My death has been planned with patience and cunning. I'm forced to believe, against my will, that it is the evil work of two persons. If this is true, then I can name one of them now—but with the deepest reluctance.

I still can't quite believe it of her. At one moment my whole mind cries, "She wants you dead!" and at the next moment it recoils from the thought in horror. A thousand times I've told myself, "But she can't possibly be capable of it—not the woman who loved you—not your wife—not Joyce!"

Please understand, Jim, that I'm not accusing Joyce. I can't be sure about her. When I look back at everything that's happened, ghastly suspicions of her crowd upon me. Yet they're only suspicions. At this moment I have no proof of any of them. Finding that proof, if it exists, Jim, must be your job. If Joyce is really innocent, then nothing should stop you from establishing the fact. But if you find she is guilty beyond question, let the law punish her faithlessness, as it would punish any other.

In either case Joyce won't, of course, take an active part in this final attempt to kill me. (Yes, Jim, there have been other attempts.) The hand to actually deal out my death will be a man's.

✚ ✚ ✚

I'M CERTAIN there *is* a man—if I have time I'll soon tell you why I'm so certain—but at this moment I must admit I don't know who he is. If—I write this with pain and regret—if there have been clandestine relations between Joyce and this man, they have been cleverly concealed from the very beginning. He might be anyone—almost any man in town. When he strikes—perhaps within the next few minutes, or perhaps not for several hours, but certainly before this night is gone—perhaps then, at last, I'll know him. *And then it will be too late.*

It's a terrifying thing, Jim, realizing I'm going to be killed tonight. I'm full of a sense of hopeless desperation. But I'm trying my best to be clear-minded.

For endless minutes I have lain here, my pen lifted, listening, straining my ears to find sounds in the night. I've heard nothing, but still I feel something deadly closing in on this lonely house—death creeping closer with every passing minute.

While there is still time I want to tell you as level-headedly as I can, and as far as I'm able to continue—

Note Inserted by District Attorney James Dumfries:

Mark Ogden's letter was found. When the final attack on his life was made, as will be seen, he managed to throw his letter out of the window just as he'd hoped to do. For a time it lay on the grass, unnoticed in the excited confusion which followed. Picked up by Arthur Snell, a member of the fire department, it had already been trampled, muddied and soaked with water which caused the fresh ink to blur. As soon as he was able, Snell followed Mark Ogden's instructions as written on the envelope and delivered it. Although parts of it are almost illegible, and although Mark wrote under the stress of rising terror, it's a strikingly equitable account of the events that culminated that same night in a way which no one—not even Mark himself—could foresee.

Mark Ogden's letter resumes:

I thought I'd heard a footstep outside the house. For long minutes, again, scarcely breathing, I listened. But there was silence, only silence. . . .

What has Coroner Carter decided by now, Jim? In what "accidental" way does he say I died?

It must seem to have been purely an accident, something that Dan Warden, when writing it up in the *Herald* tomorrow, can call "a regrettable accident, probably a result of the dangerous experiments on which Mark Ogden was working."

Don't believe it for a minute, Jim!

You know I'm not even thinking of work tonight. My bench is in place, yes—the high-legged, castered table which straddles my bed, and as usual it's cluttered with my apparatus and tools—but I've no intention of touching them. This letter, if it ever reaches you, will in itself be proof that I've spent these last minutes, or these last few hours, in writing to you—writing as rapidly as I can move this pen, ceaselessly, until the last possible moment.

I have been completely alone in this house since late afternoon. That in itself isn't unusual—but having grown sure that this is the night when I'm meant to die, I've safeguarded myself as best I can.

All the blinds are drawn and all the windows latched—including the window at my left elbow, which I may have to unfasten quickly, in order to throw this incompleted letter out, at any moment. The rear door is bolted and the front door is locked. The lock on the front door is brand new. I had it installed only a few hours ago.

Why a new lock?

Because one attempt to kill me has already been made tonight!

It happened early this evening. I was tired. Pushing away the work-table which spans my bed—the table on which I'm writing so rapidly now—I dozed.

A faint sound wakened me—a footstep on the porch. The room was black, but there was still a little gray light outside, enough so that I could vaguely see a figure through the frosted pane of the front entrance.

I knew it wasn't Joyce. Only a few hours ago she'd left town on business, to be gone overnight—or supposedly she had. And it wasn't Nora—Nora Royce, who comes in to clean and cook and take care of me during most of the day—because Nora's small. The shadow behind the pane was big, that of a man. I thought for a moment he might be a friend dropping in, but he stood there, looking over his shoulder as if to make sure his approach hadn't been observed. And he didn't ring.

His furtive manner was ominous—and suddenly I felt freezingly certain it was Death who had come to my door.

Note Inserted by District Attorney Dumfries:

IT'S necessary to interrupt Mark Ogden's letter at this juncture in order to explain briefly two points. First, it was natural, gripped as he was by a profound agitation, that Mark should write this letter rather disconnectedly. Feeling every moment was precious, he couldn't immediately go back to tell his whole story in straight chronological sequence. Instead, he felt impelled to put it down more or less in reverse order, like a newspaper account, so that he could speak first of the startling incident which was freshest in his distressed mind. Here he has gone back, not to the real beginning, but no farther than an early hour of that fatal night.

Naturally, too, since these passing minutes had suddenly become so vital to him, he wasted none of them explaining certain aspects of his situation which were already well known to everyone in town.

Mark had no need to mention, for example, that prior to that unforgettable December, he was a designer and maker of custom-built radio receivers. Possessing remarkable ability as a radio engineer, he concentrated on high quality, painstakingly producing sets which were musical instruments of the finest fidelity. His plant, located near the center of town, was quite small and his staff numbered only two or three technicians—including his wife, Joyce, whom he had trained in the intricacies of radio circuits.

When hostilities began, the Navy at once awarded Mark a contract to build a large number of short-wave marine units. Expanding his facilities and working night and day, he fulfilled his commitments admirably. To Mark, however, this part he was playing in the war seemed too trivial. Arranging, with Joyce's consent, that she would continue to manage the plant in his place, he applied for and promptly was granted a captain's rating in the Army Signal Corps.

In the vanguard of our invasion forces in Tunisia, Mark was caught in a terrific bombing near Mejerda. He became a casualty—a particularly baffling sort. Although he seemed uninjured physically, he was paralyzed below the waist. After

weeks in the base hospital he was shipped back to the United States, and after several months of resultless treatment in the Army's neuro-psychiatric hospital in Atlanta he was sent home, both his legs still completely useless.

Joyce continued to run the plant while Mark plunged into a program of experimental work at home. The dining-room was cleared of its usual furniture and Mark's bed was placed there as a matter of convenience. A special bench was built for him so that he could work while sitting up, propped against pillows.

A small but complete radio research laboratory, it was equipped with all the tools, meters, testing instruments and supplies he needed. Here he worked eagerly on certain new hook-ups to be incorporated in his famous receivers after the duration. Nora Royce came in to clean and cook for him during the day while Joyce spent long hours at the plant. Meanwhile Mark continued to receive medical treatment.

His friend Andy Knowles—Dr. Andrew Knowles—explained that Mark's paralysis was caused by something called a "psychic trauma." During the first World War this same affliction, or something very like it, was known simply as "shell-shock." The paralysis was the peculiar effect of some deep-laid, emotional short-circuit very difficult to define, especially in a chap as high-strung and sensitive as Mark. Whatever the true cause was, his condition didn't improve. He remained in bed, unable to rise from it, utterly incapable of taking a single step.

It was a bitterly ironical thing that this man, having survived the cataclysmic battle for Tunisia, should come back to face death in his own home, at the hands of a murderer against whom he was physically incapable of defending himself—a killer who came stealing to his doorstep in darkness.

Mark Ogden's letter continues:

I WATCHED the shadow of the man behind the pane. My impulse was to call out, "Who's there?" But I didn't. Another sound stifled my voice in my throat—the metallic ripple of a key sliding into the lock.

A key!

It was such a small, commonplace sound. Yet it stunned me into weakness.

For weeks now my anxiety had mounted. The haunting fear that I was meant to die soon had grown until it had become a dread that never left me day or night. During the past week, for that reason, I'd insisted on keeping all the doors locked while I was left in the house alone. If a visitor came, I'd call him around to my window. Having reassured myself in this way, I'd hand the key out, my visitor would use it, come in to talk and return it to me.

So far as I knew, Nora, Joyce and myself were the only ones who possessed a key to my home. Yet this man, this furtive phantom of a man at my door, had used a key!

Where had he gotten it? From Nora—a sweet-smiling, conscientious kid who always fussed over me so devotedly as to really embarrass me? It seemed highly unlikely. From Joyce, then? Suddenly my doubts of her flared up again. Joyce had given her key to this man! He was her lover. He had come to kill me now.

Trying even then to quench my suspicions, I heard the click of the lock as it yielded. I lay still, incredulously watching the door swing open. The shadow-man moved into the vestibule with a certain stealthy briskness, as if knowing exactly what he intended to do and how he meant to do it. A sort of instinct warned me that to stir would bring him upon me all the faster—and yet I coudn't lie here supinely. A desperate, dangerous desire gripped me—a desire to see who this man was.

I lifted one hand to the lamp on my work-table, tilted the shade toward the door and snapped the switch.

The room stayed dark.

At the same instant I'd heard another click from the doorway, and I knew what had happened. The man standing there had thumbed the wall-switch. He knew it controlled all the floor-plugs in this room, including the power-supply of my work-bench and my only source of light! He knew that and quickly he'd made sure I wouldn't glimpse his face.

He stood there quietly—a vague, unrecognizable presence in the gloom. Then I saw a small glowing spot—a cherry-red spark—rise in an arc from his side to

his mouth. It was a lighted cigarette. When he drew on it he took care to shield his face from the brightened shine. It dimmed again—then it began to float closer. He was coming across the room toward me.

As weapons, the few tools on my bench —the small screw-drivers, the wire-cutters and even the soldering iron—were useless. However I might try to fight him off, he could overpower me easily. I could do nothing more than lie here helplessly and watch him drifting nearer.

He towered blackly over me. Then his dark hands moved swiftly. First he dropped his live cigarette into the wastebasket sitting beside my bed. Next, his fist swung like a club to my temple. I blacked out.

But I couldn't have been unconscious more than a short minute. When my eyelids swam up there was light in the room —red light, flickering. Thick black smoke was pouring up from the flaming scrap paper in the wastebasket. Flames had begun to creep over the sheet and the blanket that covered me.

The man was gone. He had left the fire to do his deadly work for him.

CHAPTER TWO

Fire Trap

CRAZILY battling it, I first caught up the vacuum jug from my bench. Thank God it was full of water! Just before leaving, Nora had filled it for me. Blessing her thoughtfulness, I spilled the water into the basket and over the bed. The flames sputtered, sending up smoke even more biting. Twisting to fling the window open — remembering that the fumes of burning wool and cotton are as deadly as hydrocyanic acid gas, which is actually part of them—I beat at the smouldering embers with a pillow.

At last they were all extinguished. I pushed my head out the window as far as I could, breathing deep of the clean air. Exhausted by this small effort, my lungs stinging, I realized then, Jim, that if, fortunately, I hadn't recovered from the blow as quickly as I had, I'd never have recovered at all.

You see how cannily it was done, so as to make my death appear to have been accidental? Coroner Carter would have concluded, with good grounds, that I'd dozed off with a burning cigarette in my fingers. In the *Herald* tomorrow Dan Warden would be writing, "—a fatal mishap of the kind that happens too often in the home"—but actually, Jim, it would have been a shrewdly planned, subtly executed murder.

As I lay here in this empty house, my pulse pounding, I pictured that man—the man who'd tried to kill me—waiting to learn whether his plan had succeeded. Where was he now? Back in town, listening for the fire-siren to begin its howling? Or, feeling he was perfectly safe from detection, had he dodged away only a short distance to a nearby spot where he could watch for the smoke and the flames to burst up? Was he waiting and watching at this very moment—and when he saw he'd failed, would he come back?

I couldn't answer those questions, Jim, but a realization did hit me hard. It was that he couldn't stop now! He'd pushed himself too far for that. He'd gone to such lengths, and his objective had been so close within his grasp, that he couldn't abandon his plans; he'd have to try again. In my heart I knew he *would* try, and that next time he'd make absolutely sure I'd die.

At the moment, Jim, this was just a strong hunch. Now something else has happened that makes me *know* this is the night set for my death.

For the next few moments I watched the door, lying back breathlessly, my mind searching for some sort of security. My hand went out to the telephone sitting on my bench—but who could I call? A series of names ran through my mind—Nora, Andy Knowles, Chief of Police Charlie Mace, Dan Warden among others—and I discarded all of them.

Nora was just a kid. Andy, being one of the few doctors in town who hadn't gone into the armed services, was constantly on call. I'd already confided in Charlie Mace, but—well, the less said about him now, the better. You, Jim, I knew, were still away on your vacation. Really it was no good, this idea of asking someone to stay with me. Actually it might mean the death of my companion

as well as myself—and I couldn't selfishly invite a friend to come in and die with me! At the very least, it would only delay the evil hour—merely cause my murderer to wait until I was alone again.

Finally I decided upon the only thing it seemed I could do.

I called Frank Keogh's hardware store. Fortunately Frank was still there. I asked him if he could come to my home right away. He said sure, he guessed so, he was just about to close up shop, and what could he do for me? I told him there was something wrong with the lock on the front door—it jammed sometimes. It wasn't worth fixing, being pretty old, I said, so I'd like to have a new one.

"They're pretty scarce these days," Frank said, "but I've got five or six left in stock. What kind—?"

"Bring all of them. I'll make a selection."

"Okay," he agreed. "I'll be right along."

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IT WAS my last phone call, Jim. Sometime afterwards I heard a noise outside the house—a furtive prowling sound. I called from the window, asking who was there. Nobody answered. Instead, the noises sneaked away. In a cold spasm of the mind I gripped the phone. But although I rattled the contact bar repeatedly there was no dial tone in the receiver. I stared at the useless thing, knowing it had been deliberately put out of working order.

My only means of communication with the outside world was cut off!

That, Jim, convinced me—made me frigidly certain that death will come back tonight. It's why I'm dashing off this letter. It's my only hope—not of saving my life, but of bringing retribution down upon my murderers. My only hope, Jim—dashing off line after line, raging against time—time growing ever shorter—

Note by District Attorney Dumfries:

Mark Ogden was quite right about the telephone. Next day the investigation disclosed that the wire running down the side of the house had been bent back and forth until it had broken apart.

Mark was left with no other means whatever of calling for help. Houses are few and scattered in that section on the outskirts of the town where Mark had located his home. There were few pedestrians—hardly anybody ever strolled past. The high hedge bordering the deep yard screened Mark from the road. If he tried to call from his window to any car that chanced to roll by, we may be sure his voice didn't carry.

He had been completely alone for long hours, and now he was completely isolated as well—utterly defenseless against the new attack which he felt must come at any moment.

Mark Ogden's letter:

While the darkness deepened I watched that door.

After twenty minutes—twenty ages—a car stopped. Footfalls crossed the porch and the door-bell rang.

"Who is it?" I called.

"Frank Keogh."

"Come around to my window, will you, Frank?"

I'd closed the sash. When a figure appeared in the gloom outside the pane I made doubly sure it *was* Frank Keogh. Then I lifted the sash again, handed my key out and asked him to hurry right in. He trudged back around the house and I vaguely saw him open the door, a box under one arm.

He lifted his handsome head to sniff the burned smell in the air. Then he saw the wet spot on the rug, and the ragged, black-edged corners of my sheet and blanket.

"What happened, Mark?" he asked quickly.

"Just a minor accident," I said. "Let's see those locks."

He had them in the box, together with the few tools he might need. Bringing them to my bed, he returned my key, as my visitors always did. My "accident" seemed to bother him, but I parried his questions by thanking him profusely for coming. He was one of the busiest chaps in town—besides running our biggest hardware store, he was active in civilian defense, served two evenings a week on the ration board, and constantly shuttled about the county in his car for several

other local organizations. Installing locks wasn't his job, but he seemed cheerfully willing to do me a special favor. A very obliging, personable young guy, Frank. I chose one of the six locks he'd brought—the strongest—and after examining the old one, he said it would need a little fitting. He prepared to go right at it.

"Just a minute, Frank. How many keys come with this lock?"

He said there were two. I took them out of the box.

"Just these two? That's all? Could any other key be used to open this lock?"

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"NOT a chance," Frank answered. "This is a high-grade line of merchandise. Every lock of this make has a different key. These are the only two keys in existence that'll open this one."

"Good!" I said grimly.

"If you want duplicates, though, I can make 'em," Frank suggested. "I've got a key-cutting machine in the store.

"I don't want any duplicates," I explained, "and I'll keep these two right here. But suppose somebody came to you and asked you to cut a third key for this lock. Could you do it?"

"Not without having one of those to use as a pattern."

"All right," I said, coldly relieved. "Go ahead, Frank."

While he worked he cheerfully whistled. It took him fifteen minutes. He borrowed one of the new keys, tried it, found it functioned perfectly, then brought it back. I closed them in my left fist—and I have them there still, even as I write this letter.

"Do me another favor, will you, Frank?" I asked. "Make certain the back door is bolted."

"Sure thing."

I listened to his movements in the kitchen. The bolt on the rear door was as old as the house itself, and I remembered exactly how it worked. It stuck part way and you had to push pretty hard; then it shot into its staple with a distinctive whack. I heard that characteristic sound,

and when Frank came back I knew that bolt was really stoutly set.

"Anything else, Mark?"

"If you don't mind, Frank, please draw all the blinds."

Not minding at all, he pulled every blind down to the sill—and yet, strangely, this didn't rid me of the feeling that eyes in the night outside were watching me.

"Look, Mark," he said, running his fingers through his curly black hair, "is anything wrong here?"

"I'm a little jittery, I guess from being alone. Sit down. Let's talk and have a drink."

"Wish I could," he answered, "but I've got a date and I'm sort of late now. If there's anything else I can do, though—"

"There is," I said at once. "My phone's out of order. Will you report it? I think the trouble's right here, somewhere near the house."

He wagged his head. "Sure, I'll do that. It's pretty late, though, so I don't suppose they'll get at it until morning, but I'll try to hurry 'em up for you. Well, I'll just put the new lock on your bill, Mark. Good night."

As he went out I heard the new lock sink its spring-bolt into the socket with a strong, forceful snap.

I've told you all this about the lock, Jim, in the hope that it might help your case. I'm sealed—and the two new keys are sealed with me—inside a house which no one can enter without using force. For a while that fact made me feel secure. I thought, "Nobody can come through that door — nobody on earth — including Joyce!" But now, Jim, my sense of security has passed.

Thinking back, I've realized again how diabolically subtle and shrewd they are. I know that nothing can really stop them. The new lock will merely make it a little harder for them to reach me. More and more, as these endless minutes pass, I'm flooded over with a sense of helplessness —overwhelmed with a hopeless feeling that in spite of everything I might do I'm about to die:

Note by Dumfries:

At this point the character of Mark's handwriting changed. Until now his pen had skimmed across the pages, each stroke speeding headlong to catch up with the next. But here he paused, to wait and listen in the silence, and minutes passed before he went on.

Having written in great agitation, he had, at the same time, purged his mind of his fears. Having outlined his desperate predicament on paper, he was able to see it in clear perspective. Although he remained unable to identify the man who meant to kill him, he had also, by now, accomplished the greater part of his purpose.

In these next passages his written letters no longer flee across the page; they sit up straight, their spines stiffened. This, I'm sure, doesn't indicate that Mark had merely resigned himself to the inevitable. On the contrary, it shows he'd prepared himself to meet the ever-threatening hazard, and when it came to fight it as best he could.

CHAPTER THREE

Short Circuit to the Grave

The letter:

I'M amazed, Jim, to see how many pages I've written. When I began I felt I'd have too little time to tell you much of my story. The fact that I've been allowed to go on living this long must mean that my murderers have become very sure of themselves.

They have good reason for that, of course. It's past midnight now. Certainly I'll have no chance visitors at this hour. It's highly unlikely, as Frank Keogh surmised, that the telephone will be repaired tonight. I'll remain alone and isolated here, a sitting target to be hit whenever the hunters choose. I can do absolutely nothing to hinder them, and all the rest of this night is theirs.

I still mean to go on writing until the last possible moment, Jim, for in order to understand all this as clearly as you should, I'll have to go back to the very beginning.

When I was brought home from the convalescent hospital I was deeply touched by the sincere solicitude all my friends showed me—which, of course, includes you, Jim. You were one of those who spared no effort to build a new world

around me—one in which I could live without legs. In your basement shop you built this table especially for me, and Joyce urged me to resume work on my new FX circuits. Thanks to all of you, I became a reasonably useful person again—and yet I couldn't help wondering how Joyce must secretly feel, having for a husband a half-man who must be cared for like an ailing infant.

Not that Joyce showed the slightest outward sign of impatience. Of course! She seemed eager to do everything possible for me—consulted me on production and technical problems, encouraged me in my experimental work and tirelessly lavished small attentions on me.

There was no one better able to carry on at the plant for me, but her hours there were very long and she now had, besides, the responsibilities of a home and an invalid husband to care for. All this seemed too much of a burden for any young woman to shoulder—particularly a convivial sort like Joyce, who loved her good times, and especially since it seemed impossible to get any domestic help because so many girls had gone into high-paying defense jobs. But then, surprisingly, that swell kid Nora Royce popped up with an offer to take on the house and me during the day, and the whole thing smoothed out nicely.

For weeks, Jim, while it went on like that, I endlessly told myself how fortunate I was to have her for a wife—until that appalling morning three weeks ago.

It was rather early. Joyce, after giving me my breakfast and making sure I'd want for nothing for a short while, had hurried down to the plant. Nora was due to come on the job in about half an hour. My bench was in place, and I happily prepared to get to work.

I reached for a pair of wire-cutters hanging on the rack at the back of the bench and instantly I was caught in the grip of a muscle-cramping agony.

A terrific electrical force was streaming through the upper part of my body. It held me utterly rigid. And despite the intense pain—despite my utter inability to pull away from it—I could see exactly what had happened.

At one side of my bench sat a power-transformer of the type used in all AC sets, except that this one, especially built in the plant for my experiments, developed an unusually high voltage. The potential across the secondary was actually nine hundred volts. Yesterday I'd soldered two wires to the secondary terminals, preparatory to installing it today. The bare end of one of these wires had somehow become hooked into a hole tapped in a metal chassis, and upon this chassis, when leaning forward, I'd placed one of my hands. The other wire had somehow become lodged behind the wire-cutters and was making contact with them. Instantly the full nine hundred volts had surged through my arms and across my chest, seizing every muscular fiber in a cataleptic power.

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ALTHOUGH my vision blurred and queer lightning-flashes filled my eyeballs, I could see this while I sat here in the clutch of that relentless, tenacious, invisible power. It might have killed me within a few seconds but for the fact that the current flowing through my muscles was comparatively small. That is, although the voltage was high—more than eight times that of the ordinary house-lighting circuit feeding the primary of the transformer—the amperage was correspondingly lower, a fraction of one ampere. Yet it was deadly. Certainly if it should continue, even that small current would soon clamp my heart to a fatal standstill.

I could see what had happened, Jim, yet I couldn't extricate myself. My flesh was part of a powerful electrical circuit which could be broken, for example, simply by raising my hand off the chassis—yet I couldn't lift so much as a single finger. Or I might break it also by merely withdrawing my other hand from the wire-cutters, but that whole arm was cramped as hard and immovable as a marble statue's.

The horrible part of it was that, although my muscles were inflexibly held, my mind remained clear. I could think—and I remembered quite positively that when finishing my work last evening I'd disconnected that power transformer. Yet it was packed with deadly, inexorably

flowing forces now—and it couldn't have become plugged in accidentally. I realized at once, Jim, that this was actually a trap intentionally set while I slept.

The transformer had been deliberately connected—one wire had been deliberately hooked to the chassis which I must automatically touch while leaning forward to get the cutters with which the second wire had been deliberately left in contact!

My mind cried out wildly that this was an act of murder! And who could have done it—who else on earth—but Joyce!

I believe it was this appalling thought that somehow gave me the capacity to try my utmost to outwit the attempt. While I sat there, locked in agonizing rigidity—smelling the scorched odor of my fingers burning—I endeavored as rationally as I was able to find a way of breaking the circuit flowing through the upper part of my body. I saw that the wire-cutters were hanging in contact with the second wire in such a way that a slight nudge might dislodge them. Yet how could I deliver that small, vitally necessary jar?

There was no possible way except by making a supreme effort of the will whereby I might manage to move some member of my body slightly. I found that, although my neck-muscles were drawn painfully tight, the middle part of my body—the region between my hips and my chest—was comparatively unaffected, since the current was flowing by the most direct path from hand to hand. At last I managed it. Like a graven image possessing some small measure of volition I succeeded in toppling myself sideward.

The wire-cutters, glued to my fingers, dropped off their hook; their contact with the second wire broke—and I fell back, exhausted in every nerve, amazed to find myself still alive and telling myself dazedly that I had very narrowly escaped death—death not by mishap, but by intent!

Yet was this really true? Recovering enough strength to push myself back to a sitting position, I tried to take a reasonable view of it. After all, I might have plugged in the transformer myself during one of those momentary blank periods which we all experience when preoccupied. We all automatically do little things sometimes without becoming aware of it until afterward. Was that the explanation? It simply couldn't be possible, could it, that Joyce wanted me to die?

Then, Jim, I began to remember.

The day, not long after that unforgettable December 7, when I'd told Joyce I wished to enlist. What had her reaction been? Had she protested? Had she argued that I was already doing my part in laboring eighteen hours a day to build the units of a vital frontline communications system? No. In fact, she'd even urged me a little. And why had she? Was it understanding of the urge I felt—unselfish patriotism? Or was there lurking in back of her mind the thought that I would never come back?

Even then I'd realized in a vague sort of way that Joyce and I were no longer as happy together as we once had been. On those few occasions when I'd found time to step out, she'd danced too late with too many men, and had drunk a little too much. At home we quarrelled too often over trivial things. Somewhere in my own mind was the thought that we were heading for a break.

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THEN when I came back home, with both my legs paralyzed, how did she react? With great generosity, as we both know. But what were the true reactions in her secret heart? Did my helplessness really arouse her scorn? Did she resent being bound to me? Were all her little attentions really her way of justifying to herself the terrible plan that had already taken root in her mind? Was she pampering me in much the same manner a man condemned to death is given the best he might wish?

I'd learned, too, that all the while I'd been away she'd carefully kept up the premiums on my life insurance, even though my service in the armed forces might render it invalid, and even though the payments must have been a severe financial drain! Was this evidence of her loyalty and hope—or callous cupidity?

Lying here, still numbed and weakened by the murderous electrical shock I'd suffered, I recalled these things. When Nora came in to hustle about and fuss over me as fondly as if I were a brand new baby, I said nothing to her of what had hap-

pened. I debated a long time—Nora had finished and was gone again, and I was once more alone—before taking up the telephone. First I called you, Jim, but I learned you'd just left town with your family, to be gone three weeks on a well-earned vacation. Then I rang Dan Warden and asked him to come to the house.

He slouched in a chair beside my bed and bantered with me while I unwillingly approached the questions I had to ask him. You know Dan well, Jim—lazy and dissolute, shrewd and a bang-up newspaper reporter, sly and brutal at times, resourceful with a dogged will to win out, but honest in his own peculiar way. Devastating with the girls, too, and still unmarried. But also—and this was the important thing to me at the moment—he was a reservoir of local gossip and scandal.

Finally I got the words out. "Look here, Dan. You'll probably think I'm a heel for bringing this up, but I've got to know—for a special reason. I realize Joyce is a very attractive, vital young woman. I was away a long time. I couldn't reasonably expect her to spend all her days working at the plant and all her nights sitting alone at home. Well, I've heard a few hints I don't like, and I want to get them cleared up in my mind—especially if they aren't true."

Dan thoughtfully rubbed his dimpled chin, then he shook his sleek head. "You've heard more than I have, Mark."

"You mean I've been worrying over nothing?"

"That's level, Mark."

I heaved a sigh. "Thanks for getting the idea out of my mind! I had to ask you, but forget it now, won't you?"

Smiling his charming smile, he assured me, "I didn't hear a thing you said just now. Look, I brought a pint along. Let's hoist a couple."

But even while we drank, as old friends, those suspicions began to gnaw again at the back of my mind. When Dan said good-by with such apparent comradeship, and sauntered to the door with his air of casual, sly-seeming self-assurance, I watched him with narrowed eyes.

Had he told me the truth? If so, it might simply mean that Joyce had carefully concealed from everyone her illicit relations with another man. On the other hand, Dan might have lied to me, and that would mean—

It would mean that Dan Warden himself was the man!

Then, ashamed of my doubts, yet feeling an inescapable chill inside me, I waited for Joyce to come. She worked quite late at the plant that day. When at last her car hummed into the driveway and she opened the door, I stared hard into her face. Was it merely a shadow of fatigue I saw in her eyes, or a deep, secret disappointment? I couldn't know, Jim! Whether she was happy to be home with me again, or whether all her gestures of affection were false, concealing the hate she felt for me because I still lived—I couldn't know!

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Note by Dumfries:

AN impartial estimation of the two young women who were closest to Mark Ogden will be of value here. Repeatedly in this letter Mark writes of Nora Royce as a "kid." That's understandable. For years she was, to him, just "that kid next door." It's odd, though, that he seemed not to realize the eight years difference in their ages, so momentous a matter when they were both gangling youngsters, had become not nearly so important. Actually Nora, at twenty, had grown into a very lovely young woman.

Mark writes that Nora "strangely" popped up with an offer to look after him

and his home. It really wasn't strange at all. Just before Mark's return Nora had been busy as a nurse's aide; qualified to care for him expertly, she left the hospital simply because she felt a very deserving, disabled war veteran needed her. The fact that the veteran was Mark Ogden made all the difference, of course. The only strange thing about this situation is the fact that Mark, still looking upon Nora as a kid, never realized that all her life she'd loved him. And even now, when his wife couldn't watch after him properly, she could and did.

In contrast to the fresh blonde beauty of Nora there was the cool dark beauty of Joyce.

In one way it was astonishing that this highly attractive young woman should ask Mark Ogden to train her as a radio technician, but in another way it was quite logical. Radio engineering and electronics is a field complex enough to engage the most active mind. In its limitless possibilities Joyce seemed to find fulfillment.

Then, when she married Mark, she appeared to have found in him at last everything she had so long desired.

But her contentment soon passed, as it always had. Her old restlessness returned in full force, although by now she had learned to hold it more under control.

She already had a fine husband, a good home, important work, a comfortable amount of money, many friends, a broad opportunity to live a full, thoroughly worth-while life. Still, she smouldered with a desire for something more than all that, something perhaps impossible to attain, the impossibility of which would never stop her.

With all this, she clung to a certain odd personal code. If she had once planned to divorce Mark, she'd banished all thought of it when he came back home, a cripple. Now she couldn't walk out on him. Her marriage vows, she'd once said, were full of solemn meaning for her.

"For better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health—*until death do us part.*"

The letter:

I said nothing to Joyce about that almost-fatal electric shock. During the week that followed I came to feel it really had, after all, been an accident. Until—

I'm not proud of my reaction to the next attempt on my life, Jim, but I'll have to tell you about it.

At noon Joyce phoned me from the plant, as usual, to ask if everything was all right. I told her I was alone, but to think nothing of that. I'd had an early lunch and I'd be busily at work all afternoon.

Perhaps an hour later, while I was aligning a set of r.f. coils, I heard a faint noise in the kitchen. I sensed that the rear door had opened—at that time the bolt wasn't always kept closed—and someone had stolen in.

Not able to see into the kitchen, I called, "Who's there?"

The vague sounds stopped, but there wasn't any answer. Then they came again—odd sounds, the faint swish and ripple of pouring liquid. Again I called and again no response came. It was unnerving. Someone was there in the kitchen, doing something strange — a peculiar dogged, daring presence that ignored my demands to be answered. The way it quietly went on with its unknown work was ominous. I listened intently, bewildered and fearful. And after a few moments there were no more sounds at all—the presence had gone.

I resumed work, not knowing what it might mean, and at first the odor was almost undiscernable. Gradually, however, it grew stronger. Suddenly I identified it. Naphtha!

CHAPTER FOUR

Death at the Door

A LARGE can of naphtha was kept in the pantry for cleaning purposes. Sometimes Joyce used it to dip her gloves. Long ago I'd warned her always to take the can and the basin outside, for naphtha evaporates quickly and the vapor is highly inflammable. I realized now what had been done. Some unknown person had prowled into the kitchen, had poured a basin full of the stuff, had left it—and the fumes were rapidly suffusing through the whole house.

It was potentially as dangerous as a bundle of dynamite sticks attached to a

lighted fuse and burning while I waited.

The vapor, circulating freely in the air, formed an explosive mixture. The smallest spark might set it off. And in the course of my electrical work sparks often jumped!

Realizing this with a cold jolt of fear, I at once disconnected all my apparatus. But this didn't eliminate the danger. In the kitchen, for example, the electric refrigerator automatically turned itself on and off, and each time the motor started or stopped a spark might fly from its brushes. That tiny flicker could send a cyclone of raging flame through all the rooms with such instantaneous, terrific force as to blow out every wall.

Another "accident" was in the making, Jim—one even more deadly and more certain than the first.

The realization threw me into a state of terror. Now, now of all times, I had to try my utmost to make my legs obey my will.

I flung back the blanket, swung myself to the edge of the bed, straightened, pushed myself into taking a first step—and fell, sprawling.

But I could use my arms. My legs were numb and limp, but my arms had strength. I pushed myself across the floor with awkward swimming motions. As I dragged myself up the two steps leading into the kitchen the fumes poured more strongly into my gasping lungs. I saw then that the cellar door was standing open—the heavy vapors, flowing over the floor like thin water, were cascading down the cellar stairs toward the pilot flame in the furnace that would touch them off at the very foundations of the house.

Frantically forcing myself toward that door, I slammed it shut. Then I twisted across the floor, lifting myself on my hands, searching for the basin of naphtha. It was out of sight. I thought it must be sitting at the back of the counter beside the sink. Gripping the counter's edge, I pulled myself up, groping for it.

Despite all my straining efforts, I couldn't reach it.

I was a little crazy, I think, as I propelled myself, slipping and sliding, across the linoleum floor to the refrigerator. Very carefully I pulled out the plug. Then I began scrambling from window to window. Most of the sashes were latched. Those that were free I could raise only a few inches. Far too little air wafted in—the danger remained. And even as I did this there was the horrifying chance that the friction of my body dragging across the rug would generate that dreaded, devastating spark.

Even if I used the telephone to call for help, the contacts of the dial mechanism might cause the spark that would destroy me!

I managed to reach the knob of the front door, to jerk it open, to thrust myself desperately out to the steps—and as I did so I heard the squeal of brakes in the road. A car door slammed and quick footfalls hurried toward me. I thanked God for the lucky chance that someone driving past had happened to see me. And of all men, it was Chief of Police Charlie Mace.

"In the kitchen!" I gasped at him. I'd breathed too much of the fumes—my mind was spinning with their anesthetic effect. "The basin—get it outside!"

Before I could make him understand what I was trying to tell him, it seemed that people came swarming from nowhere. First it was Nora—her class at the hospital had let out earlier than she'd expected, so she'd hurried back. She grasped at once the meaning of my babbled words and ran into the house while Charlie Mace lifted me and carried me back to my bed. I insisted he open all the windows wide, and all the doors. Noises at the rear of the house told me that Nora had carried the basin of naphtha outside. Next Andy was there—Dr. Knowles. Having dropped in at an unusual time to give me a check-up, he listened to my pounding heart through his stethoscope and demanded to know what had happened.

"It was done deliberately!" I cried at them. "That stuff left in the kitchen—so the whole place would be blown up!"

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NORA rushed into my room to listen while Andy and Charlie tried to put down my agitation. Presently I grew quiet, eyeing them. Andy was cool, efficient, as dapper and good-looking as

always, but doubtfully frowning. Charlie Mace, that beautiful hulk of a man, blinked dubiously at me.

"It's too much to believe, Mark," he said. "Who in the world would possibly want to kill you?"

"No one, of course," Andy answered. "In your condition it's perfectly natural that an idea of this sort might take hold of you, Mark, but there's absolutely nothing to it. Put it out of your mind."

I was about to protest that it wasn't simply a groundless notion when Nora spoke.

"It's all my fault," she said quietly. "I used the naphtha to clean my cuffs and I was in such a hurry to get down to the hospital I just forgot to pour it back into the can, I guess."

"You see, Mark?" Andy said, smiling while I stared blankly at Nora, and to his mind this seemed to explain and dispose of the whole matter.

They didn't believe me; I couldn't convince them that someone had shrewdly planned to kill me, not just once, but twice now. Full of despair, I didn't try.

"Charlie," I said, instead, "please put a man to watching this house. I want it watched day and night.

Charlie Mace glanced at Andy, and Andy nodded. "Sure," Charlie said, "if it'll make you feel any better, Mark." Then they tried again to quiet me, asked Nora to stay until Joyce came, and after a little while they went out. They paused on the walk and I could hear the curious question Charlie Mace asked.

"Just where did Mark get this queer idea, Andy?"

"Mark's condition," I heard Andy Knowles answer, "is hard to explain and even harder to treat. Mark underwent terrifying experiences on the field of battle. One of the purposes of the stiff military training given all soldiers is to teach them to repress their natural instincts, including one of the most fundamental and most powerful, that of self-preservation. Soldiers when fighting in the field must stifle their natural impulses of flight or concealment. Well, sometimes a man as sensitive as Mark can't make that very difficult adjustment. The result is a sort of tangle, a snarl in his mind—a neurosis."

"You don't mean he's insane?" Charlie Mace asked.

"Not at all," Andy answered quickly. "The neurosis develops in a way peculiar to the make-up of the individual. In Mark's case it's paralysis of both his legs, and evidently it's also taking the form of a certain fear—a fear, carried over from the battlefield, that someone is trying to kill him. In other words, the terrific emotional stresses he underwent in Tunisia have been converted to his home situation. Although he knows he has no real reason for thinking somebody wants to kill him, the idea remains fixed in his mind."

"Then everything's really all right here?"

Andy answered thoughtfully. "Yes, except that Mark is dangerous to himself. His present condition is really a disguised wish to die. This wish for death might somehow suddenly work out. That is, Mark might subconsciously cause himself to suffer a fatal accident."

"Well," Charlie Mace said, "I'd better humor him—have his place watched for a while. And I guess we'd better not tell anybody about this, either."

Through my window I stared after them as they went out the gate. Handsome, intelligent men both! Charlie was recently divorced, and Andy's wife had died two years ago!

I thought what a fine spot Charlie Mace was in, as our chief of police—how easily he could murder me and then, by shrewdly misinterpreting the evidence, how easily he could get away with it! And Andy! If Andy wanted me dead, how neatly he had set the stage for it with his professional pronouncement that I might bring a fatal accident down upon myself at any minute!

He was preying on my mind now, Jim—that unknown lover of Joyce's. Dan Warden—Charlie Mace—Andy Knowles! One of them? Which? Which? . . .

My senses in turmoil, I found Nora standing at the foot of the bed, gazing at me wide-eyed.

"Why did you say that?" I snapped at her. "You didn't use that naphtha. Someone else did it—someone who sneaked into the kitchen and out again while you were gone. Why did you lie?"

Nora said, "Gee whiz, I didn't want

any trouble over a little thing like that!"

A little thing—the certainty that I was marked for murder?

The dread kept gnawing at my mind, Jim, even though Charlie Mace did detail one of his patrolmen, Art Cook, to watch this house. At odd hours Art simply sat in his car across the road. As the days passed his periods of duty grew shorter. Well, I couldn't blame him. It must have seemed a boring waste of time. I wasn't surprised when he stopped coming altogether to the house.

That was two weeks ago, Jim. Fourteen days passed without incident. My wariness faded. Even my fears gradually ebbed. Those two attempts on my life took on an unreal, dreamy color, as if they'd never happened. I began to feel I was safe again. I began to breathe freely again. Until—

Late this afternoon, hours before I'd expected her, Joyce's car hummed into the driveway. She hurried in anxiously to see me.

"Mark, something's wrong. Our last consignment of sets tested perfectly before we shipped them, but I've just had a call from Commander Black. He says they break into oscillation. He was about to reject the whole lot, but I made him agree to wait until I've checked them. Maybe the r.f. chokes are defective, or it may simply be dampness. I've got to rush right down to Newport, and I can't get back until tomorrow. But will you be all right here?"

"Sure I will," I said at once. "By all means hop right along and get those sets into shape."

She hastily packed an overnight bag, kissed me and rushed off. I thought how splendid it was that she could tackle and correct such an important and ticklish problem for me. Those sets were needed urgently and vitally, so of course I was worried. Wanting to learn at first hand just what the symptoms were, I put through a call to Commander Black at Newport.

"Exactly what about that last lot of sets?" I asked him. "They tested all right when they left here."

"What about them, Ogden?" he said. "They've passed our tests with flying colors, as usual."

"You see, Jim, what I'm driving at?"

Joyce had lied to me. Perhaps she was actually leaving town to be gone overnight—or at least for part of it—and if so, she was acting upon only one possible reason. To provide herself with an alibi for the time of my death!

It was then, Jim, that the frozen certainty took hold of me—the conviction that tonight is the night I'll be murdered.

Time passes very slowly when you're waiting to die. These hours have been endless—this letter alone has saved me from going mad—and yet since I first touched pen to paper nothing has changed. I'm still alone here, still isolated—all the blinds drawn, the rear door bolted, the front door fastened with its new lock and its new keys still grasped in my left hand—the telephone still useless—

Note by Dumfries:

Here the character of Mark's handwriting again changes. Suddenly the strokes begin streaking across the page.

The letter:

It's coming now!

A moment ago I heard a rustling in the grass. Someone has approached this house.

He's being very quiet, very careful. He knows he needn't break in. He can kill me from the outside, through closed windows and locked doors. I think it will be another fire. Why? Because the evidence of the last previous attempt on my life—my scorched rug, my charred sheet and blanket—must be wiped out or accounted for. Another blaze will do it—a big one, engulfing the whole house—to be caused, no doubt, by "overloaded wiring"—my electrical work—

It's silent again. But he's still there.

Now, once more, he's moving—coming still closer. I hear him near—

The lights have gone out!

CHAPTER FIVE

The Man Who Killed

I CAN'T see these words as I write them. The room is utterly black. Every glimmer of light has vanished. That was easy. The light-leads were

shorted somewhere outside the house, blowing a fuse in the box on the pole—and that will make it appear all the more that I caused the fire myself while working here at this bench.

He's near the door—getting ready—

Now I know who he is! He's—

Note by Dumfries:

Thus Mark Ogden's letter ends.

For the sake of completing the record of this reprehensible crime, I've asked Nora Royce for a written statement.

Statement by Nora Royce:

I hardly know how to start—it was so bewildering and it happened so fast.

You see, even though Mark didn't bother to tell me about all this, I knew how he felt—I just knew, that's all—and I was terribly worried too.

That day when the electric shock almost killed him, for instance, his face told me something terrible had happened. And his eyes—they looked haunted. I tried to get him to confide in me, but he just brushed me off, as usual. Well, I made up my mind I wasn't letting anything happen to him if I could help it. He paid hardly any attention to me when I was around, so it was easy for me to watch him without his knowing it.

And that day when the basin of naphtha was left in the kitchen, I knew in my heart what it meant, but what could I tell him? The truth would've been too horrible. So I took the blame myself, thinking it would make him feel better. Instead, he bawled me out. I didn't mind that. There was only one thing I really cared about. I just didn't want anything to happen to Mark.

I was there yesterday, too, when Joyce rushed in and out with her story about the defective receivers. As usual, Mark hardly noticed I was around, but I heard the whole thing. And after he made that call to Newport I saw how horribly pale he turned. The haunted look in his eyes was more terrible than ever. It was the look of a man gazing into the face of Death.

But what could I do? Plump myself down in a chair alongside his bed, with maybe a baseball bat in my lap, and say, "Mark, I'm going to stay right here and protect you!" It would've sounded too silly. He'd have snapped my head off. I'd have been just one more thing for him to worry about, because I'd have been terribly afraid that I'd get killed too. It was a funny thing about Mark, the way he treated me like a kid half the time and ignored me entirely the other half. I knew the reason for that, but he didn't. It was because he loved me.

Well, the only thing I could do about him yesterday afternoon was to pretend I didn't have any idea what was cooking. So, when quitting time came around, I just said so-long, as I always did, and left. I guess he thought I'd just wander off downtown and treat myself to a lollypop or something. What I really intended to do was to come back and watch Mark's home all night. But as it happened I wasn't able to come back right away.

I got an emergency call from the hospital. It was one of those things you can't turn down. It would've been perfectly awful if a patient at the hospital should die because I hadn't come. So I had to go, and I really did feel Mark would be safe for a little while.

LORDY, I was at the hospital longer than I thought I'd be! But the minute I was free, I phoned Mark just to make sure.

There wasn't any answer. The operator told me the line was out of order.

I flew!

Leaving my car a little way up the road from Mark's place, I ducked across the field and slipped into the garage. I started watching—scared silly, but nothing could get me away from there now. Mark's letter says those hours seemed endless. They certainly did to me too! But I stuck, and finally—it must have been three or four o'clock in the morning—

At first it was just a shadow. I wouldn't have seen it at all, it was so dark and vague, except that it made a little noise. My heart went into high as I watched it drifting along the edge of the driveway. It was a man, carrying something—I couldn't see what.

First he went to the back of the house and did something. I heard a sputter. There'd been little chinks of light shining through the drawn window-blinds and

suddenly they disappeared. Then the man turned to the front of the house.

I thought at least I could scare him away—or I could die trying. I slipped out of the garage, being as quiet as a mouse —quite a desperate mouse. His back was turned, and I was pretty close behind him—when, all of a sudden, like a wizard, he disappeared.

I made a sort of crazy grab at the air where he'd been, jumping forward. It was lucky I did. I didn't even touch him, and for half a second I didn't know where I was, but then I found myself inside the house.

There were footfalls in the dark room, moving toward the bed.

I squeaked, "Look out, Mark!"

The man had to forget about Mark for a minute. I must have scared him plenty. Until then he hadn't even known I was there, but all at once he gave me his whole attention. A big hand grabbed my throat. A huge fist whizzed through the air—I couldn't see it, but I heard it coming. Every tooth in my head was rattled right down to the roots. I must have taken a nose-dive because I remember the way my face dug into the rug.

Then I realized I had a terrific headache, I was trying to get up and the room was full of blinding light. The glare came from the center of the floor. There was a vicious, sputtering, hissing sound. I was so dazzled I couldn't see for half a minute, but I knew what was going on.

Being a sort of air raid warden, I'd seen several demonstrations of incendiary bombs. They didn't use real bombs, of course, but small thermite flares. Those things were almost impossible to put out. The bright, white, terribly hot fire burning in the center of the room was one of those.

They were supposed to be used to show green wardens like me how an incendiary charge behaved, and this one was being used instead as a weapon of murder.

Through the glare I managed to see Mark. He lay back on the pillow, still as death, a bruise on his forehead. That same brutal fist had clubbed him. He was knocked out.

The man was still there—a huge, black shadow looming against the blaze. I was still on my knees when he came at me again. This time he used both fists, driving them with all his might. Limp and flat, I went back to the floor.

The next thing that happened is so like a dream in my mind that I'm still not entirely sure of it.

I felt myself being dragged. The room swam in front of me—a great box so filled with raging flame that I knew the whole house was a goner. The leaping blaze concealed the bed. I didn't know who was pulling me toward the door—all I could think of was that Mark had to be gotten out of there as quickly as possible. Mark, not me!

I yelled his name and a voice answered, gasping from behind my head, "Shut up, you crazy kid, you're all right!"—and it was Mark's voice.

Then we were on the porch. I managed to realize that Mark had recovered from the blow and had not only gotten himself out of that room, but me too. I just stared at him. He was on his knees —not sprawled out helplessly, as I'd expected, but on his knees. And while I watched him, my eyes popping out of my head, he actually grabbed hold of a post of the porch, pulled himself up to his feet—and clung there.

"Mark, Mark!" I yelled at him. "You can't stand up like that! You're paralyzed!"

"I had to get you out of there, didn't I?" he roared at me. "I couldn't let you stay in there and roast, could I?"

I THOUGHT we were both crazy. He was doing things he couldn't do. I was seeing him do things that couldn't be possible!

He guided himself along the porch rail and went stumbling down the steps. There he fell, and I rushed to pick him up. He got his feet under him again—he couldn't possibly do that, I kept telling myself, but he did—and then, clutching my arm, he went tottering along the driveway. I began to cry. I sobbed so hard I thought my eyes were playing tricks on me. Over and over I told myself Mark wasn't really walking, he wasn't really driving my car, wasn't really tottering up those steps— the steps leading to the apartment on the second floor of the building that sat backed up to Mark's own radio shop—Keogh's Hardware Store.

Then he was just inside the door, steadying himself, staring at Joyce and at Frank Keogh.

"I played right into your hands, Frank," I heard Mark saying bitterly. "Before you came to the house tonight you made a duplicate key for every one of those six locks you brought. No matter which one I selected, you could let yourself into my home whenever you chose—to kill me."

There was a bright glitter across the room—a revolver in Frank Keogh's hand. His face was like a mad dog's. He fired twice. Mark was more than a little mad too. He flung himself across the room right in the face of that gun. There'd never been anything the matter with his arms or hands. He grabbed the gun with one fist and slammed the other into Frank Keogh's face. Frank dropped, knocked cold, and the gun went sliding across the floor. I grabbed for it, and so did Mark—but already, with the quickness of a leopardess, Joyce had it. She fitted it to her hand.

Her eyes were a black blaze of hate. She fired once and a little blood spurted from the upper part of Mark's left arm. He closed in on her. It was a frantic struggle, but tight—they almost didn't move at all. The next report was muffled. Joyce melted down, red streaming out from between her breasts, the revolver still clenched in her hand as her body struck the floor.

I don't want to tell any more about it. I'd much rather think ahead. Mark's all right—just his left arm was hurt, and he's carrying it in a sling. We're going to do a wonderful thing this evening. A wonderful, wonderful thing. We're going for a walk together.

Note by Andrew Knowles, M.D.

Jim Dumfries has asked me to add a word of medical explanation to Nora's statement.

The dramatic cure of Mark Ogden's affliction was by no means a miracle. The reason lies soundly in the facts known to him from the beginning. His paralysis, psychic in origin, was obscurely caused by the deep and necessary repression of his instinct for self-preservation on the battlefield. When he fought the attempts to kill him at home, his predicament was exactly reversed—he gave full expression to that instinct, the knots in his mind were untied, and the symptom of his neurosis—the paralysis—automatically disappeared. Astonishing as it may seem, it's nevertheless true that his would-be murderers unwittingly, by their very efforts to kill him, made him a whole man again.

Final Postscript by Dumfries:

At the very beginning Mark Ogden wrote that he would never finish his letter. He was right; he hasn't finished it and he never will. Now, however, since some time has passed, I'd like to end it for him—simply by saying I've never seen a happier young couple than Mark and that wonderful "kid," Nora Royce Ogden.

THE END

BLOOD ON THE GOOD EARTH

By DAY KEENE

Coopen emptied the clip at the left rear tire.

When Mort Coopen tried to join the army they told him he was morally unfit . . . so Mort went South from Chicago to make his own war in the black dirt country of Illinois.

This was the tall corn country. Here, also, wheat and oats and soy beans grew. Here the cattle and hogs waxed fat in the lush green river bottoms—and murder was in the making. . . .

MORT COOPEN came home to kill the man who had murdered his brother. He came on the day that his brother was buried. Mort's suit was cheap and wrinkled. His shirt was black with the grime of the road. His beard was four days old. Sheriff Tucker saw him swing off the way-freight but failed to recognize him.

"You," Tucker stopped him. "Hold it!"

Coopen looked down at the gun and smiled thinly.

The sheriff recognized him then. "Mort Coopen!"

"That's right." Coopen nodded. A big, raw-boned man, his face was lined with

dissipation. His eyes were bloodshot. His breath reeked of cheap whiskey.

Sheriff Tucker frisked his pockets and his arm pits for a gun.

Coopen lied: "I'm not heeled." He took his wallet from his pocket. "But you'll want to know. The local draft board will want to know. Everyone in Cartersville will want to know. So I'll tell you right now why I'm not in the army and you can broadcast the fact." He flashed a registration card. "The army doesn't want me. I'm 4F."

Tucker waited for him to continue.

"I am morally unfit to be a soldier," Coopen told him bitterly. "I killed a man. And I've come back to kill another. Who shot Johnny?"

The sheriff mopped the sweat band of his hat with his handkerchief. "I wouldn't know, Mort. I wish I did. It was one of the gangs from Chicago, or maybe from St. Louis, out on a black market raid. They've been operating through the county in refrigerator trucks. They got six of Johnny's young beeves and left him lying in his barnyard."

The big man fumbled a crumpled pack of cigarettes from his pocket and straightened one into a reasonable facsimile of a cigarette. "Well, thanks for nothing," he said.

He lighted the cigarette. With his heavy-calibered automatic strapped flat to the inside of his thigh, he strode up Main Street looking neither to his left nor right until he came to Joe's barber shop.

Sheriff Tucker followed slowly. Mort Coopen was primed for trouble. If he kept the chip that he had on his shoulder, he was going to find it—fast. Cartersville tempers had worn thin.

Clayton stopped Tucker in front of the pool-room. "Did I just see Mort Coopen go by?"

Tucker nodded. He didn't like Cal Clayton. There was a Cal Clayton in every small town. Cal had bootlegged during prohibition. He still did under local-option. He ran a game in his back room where farmers lost more money than they could afford to.

The pool-room owner continued: "I couldn't believe my eyes. How long has Mort been gone?"

"Six, seven years," the sheriff told him and walked on, and didn't look back.

Clayton's voice was amused. "So help me. He looks like a bum."

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FROM the window of his office, over the harness shop, the sheriff looked down at Main Street. The street was black with rigs, and cars, and even farm trucks. Johnny Coopen had been well liked. Farmers for miles around had come to pay their last respects.

Tucker told his deputy, "And a hell of a lot of good a big funeral is going to do Jane Coopen with a young 'un and two hundred and fifty acres to look after."

Tait Harris yawned. "Think Mort has come back to claim the farm?"

"I wouldn't know," Tucker said. "It's his farm legally, I guess. He was the oldest son."

He opened his afternoon mail. There was little but a wanted dodger and the Chicago Sunday paper he subscribed to. He glanced at the dodger, put it in his desk drawer, and then skimmed through the paper.

There was little in it that he didn't know. Few sections of the country had been safe from black market raiders. They had struck again in Tazewell and in Logan counties. Due to the excessive Spring rains and floods, and the subsequent shortage in feed, beef was scarce, and growing scarcer.

A church bell tolled in the distance. Tucker brushed the ashes from his vest and reached for his hat as he stood up.

"Here's a good one," he told Harris. He pointed out the item in the paper. "That Chicago hood they call The Farmer just beat the hell out of his draft board because they refused to re-classify him as 1A."

The deputy looked at the distorted picture of the hoodlum struggling between two detectives. The Farmer's coat and shirt had been ripped from his back. His face was turned from the camera.

Tait Harris pointed to an eagle tattooed on his shoulder. "He must have been a sailor at one time. Catch me begging to shoulder an MI if I made as much money as that guy."

"Stole as much money," Tucker cor-

rected. "And he wasn't begging to shoulder a rifle. It's just a publicity stunt of some kind. All of those hoods are cowards."

* * *

The little brick church was crowded. Jane Coopen sat alone with her son in the mourner's pew. Hers was a fragile beauty and her grief had added to it. She looked like a bisque doll dressed in black.

Mort Coopen stood in the rear of the church, staring at his brother's wife. His clothes were still unpressed, but he had bought a clean shirt. He looked much better, shaved.

Tucker warned him "I don't want any trouble now, Mort."

Coopen demanded "You didn't kill Johnny, did you?"

"No."

"Then we won't have any trouble. All I want is the lad who killed Johnny."

Tucker said: "Now look here, Mort—"

A half dozen feminine voices shushed him into silence. The organ had ceased playing. The service had begun.

". . . I am the resurrection and the life . . . he that believeth in me, though he were dead . . . yet shall he live again. . . ."

When the organ had ceased to play, Mort Coopen strode down the aisle to the coffin and held up his hand for silence.

"I'm Johnny's brother, Mort. And I just want to add a few words to what has already been said. Sure. Johnny was killed by a big city gang. But those lads are blind in the country. I know. They need a finger man." His blood-shot eyes searched the shocked faces of his brother's friends. "And one of you is that man, the man I'm here to kill. Whoever you are, if you'd care to speak up now you'd save us a lot of trouble."

His answer came from an open window of the church. The slug burned a welt across Mort's cheek, and thudded into a Sunday School banner. Then everything was confusion.

Jane Coopen held her son to her, wide-eyed with fear. Most of the women screamed. Mrs. Peabody fainted in front of the sheriff. By the time Mort had disentangled himself, most of the men had crowded out the door and were milling in front of the window.

Cal Clayton panted "He must have ducked around the church and mixed with the crowd as we came out."

An angry chorus of voices agreed.

Mort Coopen stood staring at his brother's wife. The slug had missed her blond head by a scant fraction of an inch. He hadn't been the intended target. He was a nothing, a no-one. They weren't afraid of him. It had been Jane whom they meant to kill.

One big hand fondled the gun in his pocket.

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THE full-bodied dry fragrance of ripe grain was on the still night air. Sound carried a long way. A train whistled faintly for a crossing. At a nearer distance a cow lowed contentedly and the bleat of a calf answered. A dog barked at the moon.

The big truck traveled without lights.

"And the sheriff—?" the driver demanded.

The man beside him said scornfully: "Forget him. He and his damn vigilantes had a tip that you boys might show up over Oak River way." He chuckled. "They're nothing but a bunch of apple knockers."

The driver shrugged "Some of them apple knockers shoot damn straight. And how about this brother of the guy we killed?"

The man on the seat beside him sneered: "He's a stumble bum that keeps his nose in a bottle. I've got something all figured out for him."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. The next time we pick up a load out that way we'll butcher where we make our kill and stow the hides under the hay in his barn."

The driver chuckled "I catch." He sobered. "But how about the dame? Buck says that she seen his face real plain."

"I'll take care of Mrs. Coopen," the other man said shortly. "I made a try at the church and missed. I'll do better next time."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." He leaned from the cab of the truck and studied the sleeping countryside. "Just over this next rise. I salted the pasture this morning. They should be right by the road."

They were. The big truck rolled to a stop. Four men in the rear got out and shot the cattle through the head with repeating .22s that made scarcely more noise than pop guns.

Buck Carder grinned. "You know, The Farmer was all wrong about this racket. For seventy cents a pound, and it costing us nothing on the hoof, I could do this all night. It's better'n bootlegging."

* * *

Mort Coopen was shocking grain near the house when Sheriff Tucker drove up to the farm. Deputy Harris stayed in the car while the sheriff crawled through the fence.

The red had faded from Coopen's eyes. His cheeks had begun to tan. The back of his blue denim shirt was black with sweat. He seemed annoyed to see Tucker here.

"So what do you want?" he demanded.

Tucker fanned himself with his hat. His eyes were puffed from lack of sleep. "To talk to you," he said.

Coopen continued shocking wheat. "I'm listening."

The sheriff said "Jim Black lost eight head last night over at Lickskillet."

"So?"

"So Tait and I can't cover the whole county ourselves. We had a tip that they might come over Oak River way and we were spread out there with a posse. But we were waiting in the wrong spot. Jim must have heard the popping of the .22s and tried to stop the truck as it drove away."

Mort Coopen's jaw muscles tightened.

"They ran him down, then shot him. One of his boys found his body this morning."

Coopen paused, a shock of wheat in his hand. "And you want me to join your vigilantes. Is that it?"

"You made big talk at Johnny's funeral," Tait Harris called from the car. His eyes were as red-rimmed as the sheriff's. "And we need all the help we can get. This thing is driving us nuts."

Jane Coopen came down from the house with a jug of fresh buttermilk still dewed with the cold of the well house. "I thought that you men might be thirsty."

Tucker drank gratefully from the jug and handed it to Mort.

The big man sneered: "No thanks. I prefer my own liquid refreshments." He tugged a pint bottle of Cal Clayton's red-eye from a pocket of his overalls and drank.

Jane said: "I wish that you wouldn't, Mort. At least not in front of the boy. Please Mort."

Tucker turned to see Johnny's five-year

old son on the front porch of the house. He was watching them with interest.

Coopen corked the bottle and returned it to his pocket. "Whose farm is this?" he asked.

His brother's widow admitted: "It's yours, Mort. But—"

"Then get on back to the house," he told her. "I'm talking business with the sheriff."

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THE girl turned abruptly and walked back to the house. Tucker saw her dab at her eyes with a corner of her apron. He wanted to beat Mort's face in. But the big man was technically correct. This was legally his farm.

"So? About joining the vigilantes?"

Coopen shook his head. "No can do. I'm too busy. Besides all that I'm interested in is the man or the men who killed Johnny."

Tait Harris called from the car: "But they're the same gang, Mort."

Mort Coopen shrugged. "Maybe. But I've got work to do. If I'm going to winter fifty head, I've got to have something to feed them."

Sheriff Tucker made one last try. "Did you ever know a hood in Chicago called The Farmer, Mort?"

The big man shocked his bundle. "I've seen him. Why?"

Tucker nodded at the house. "The afternoon that Johnny was buried I had Jane look at some pictures that I sent to Chicago for. She identified a man named Buck Carder as one of the gang that was here the night that Johnny died."

"So?"

"He's one of this Farmer's gang."

"I'd like to met this Buck Carder," Mort said sincerely. "And this Farmer—"

Tait Harris yawned. "He's on the lam. We got a 'wanted' on him this morning. It seems that he and his boys took time out from cow stealing to stick up a bank in Aurora and The Farmer was thoughtless enough to leave his hat behind him."

Coopen stood staring at the house.

Tucker persisted "Don't you see, Mort. You could be a big help. You admit that you've seen Farmer. The law hasn't a picture of him that's worth a plugged two-bit piece. You also admit that the gang has a finger man. And as we have it figured out this lad could be Farmer. Maybe he tours through here as a traveling salesman. Maybe he's the lad who took that shot at you. There were a lot of strangers to Johnny's funeral."

Coopen returned to his shocking. "If I see The Farmer I'll give you a ring. But it wasn't The Farmer who took that shot at Johnny's funeral."

"You're positive of that?"

"I'm positive." Coopen drank from his bottle again, glumly this time. "Now go on. Stop bothering me. I've got the rest of this field to shock before I can call it a day."

The sheriff drove off slowly. "Mort must know that hood, The Farmer, well. Did you see that look in his eyes?"

His deputy jeered: "That was fear. Mort was just blowing at Johnny's funeral. He didn't expect to get shot at. He's a coward."

"Might be," Tucker agreed. "I think I'll wire Chicago and see what they know about him."

Tait Harris licked at his lips and looked back at the farm house. The fragile blonde widow was shaking a rug in the yard. "Mort left here before my time. Why did he leave in the first place?"

Tucker told him grimly: "He fell in love with his brother's wife." He added: "And there are those who say that she was in love with him."

Tait Harris admitted quietly: "Jane is a damn pretty woman."

* * *

The butcher's fat belly bobbled. "Lady, don't be silly. You see what I have in the case. I only get so much from the jobber, and that's usually gone by noon."

The woman leaned across the counter. "But Mrs. Brown told me," she whispered, "that if I came here and mentioned her name—" Her words gushed on in the same conspiratorial tone.

"Well, why didn't you say so in the first place?" The butcher's whisper matched hers. "Sure. I can sell you a ten pound roast if you want one, without any red points, too. But it'll cost you a dollar ten a pound. I couldn't make it cheaper

to my mother. I'm telling you the truth."

She made a mental count of her household money. It would only be this once. But it was nice to know a place where—

"I'll take it," she told him, thin-lipped.

Elated, she hurried from the shop with the roast in her shopping bag. It was more than a piece of crudely butchered and unsanitary beef. It would have gagged her if she'd stopped to think. It wasn't beef, but human flesh that she had purchased, flesh seasoned with Jim Black's blood and salted with his sweat. . . .

It was almost ten o'clock that night when Mort Coopen called it a day and picked up a pail in the barn to help his brother's widow with her belated milking.

"I'll cut that last stand of grain in the morning," he told her.

She looked up from the cow she was stripping. Her face was lined with fatigue. "We'll have to have help," she said. "You can't go on like this."

He said: "There's a war. You go to the house. I'll milk."

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SHE shook her head and they milked for a moment in silence. Johnny's boy had curled up like a puppy and gone to sleep on top of a grain box.

Coopen asked: "You're positive Buck Carder was one of the gang that was here the night Johnny died?"

Jane nodded. "Sheriff Tucker showed me his picture."

The big man hesitated, said: "It's none of my business, Jane, but it might help me find the man I'm looking for if you'd tell me just one thing."

"Yes?"

He asked bluntly: "How many men in town have made a play for you? Who are they?"

She answered him just as bluntly: "Cal Clayton, Tait Harris, and Bill Connor. He was our hired man," she explained. "He came to town after you left."

"And—"

"I laughed at them," she said simply.

Coopen considered the remark. Laughter sometimes was a dangerous thing.

"Look. I want to go to town for half an hour or so," he told her. "And I want you to go with me. I don't dare to leave you here. I want you to come with me."

She stared at him, openly puzzled.

"That shot in the church," he explained, "wasn't meant for me. That's why I couldn't join the vigilantes. I don't dare to leave you alone. Trust me. Believe in me. I know what I'm doing."

There were still quite a few cars on Main Street. Coopen bought some candy for his brother's boy, then climbed the stairs to the sheriff's office. The door was locked.

A lounging loafer told him: "If you're looking for the sheriff, him and the boys have gone over to Spring Lake. One of them big refrigerator trucks was seen on the Lake road."

Coopen asked: "Who gave them the tip?"

The man shook his head. "I don't know that. It was someone who phoned Tait Harris."

Coopen crossed the street to the pool room. A pimply-faced youth was in back of the counter. "Cal's not here tonight. But I can take care of your order. What'll it be, Mr. Coopen? A couple of pints of the same?"

Coopen waited for the whiskey. "You wouldn't know where Cal went?"

The youth winked. "Sure. But don't tell Sheriff Tucker. Cal's gone for a fresh supply."

The big man re-crossed the street, gave the candy to the sleepy boy, and climbed into the car. "Where does this fellow Connor live?"

The cottage was frame and small, down near the railroad tracks. Connor's wife came to the door. "Why, Bill's with the vigilantes," she told Coopen. She saw Jane in the car and sniffed. "And that's where you'd be if you was a man instead of gallivantin' around with Johnny's widow at this time of night, and your brother not four days in his grave."

She slammed the door in his face. Coopen pointed the car back toward the farm. They had been gone perhaps an hour. The house, the great white barn, and the twin silos looked the same. Still there was something wrong with the picture, something that wasn't quite right, and Coopen told Jane so.

"I've lived by my wits too long, not to know the feeling."

He inspected the cattle first. The milk cows were all in their stanchions placidly chewing their cuds. The beef cattle were all in the barnyard. The fences and gates had not been touched. There were no strange tire treads in the road.

"You're over-tired," Jane told him. "You haven't stopped for a moment since sun-up."

She went up to the house with the boy. Coopen sat down on the granary stoop, uncorked one of the bottles and started working on it.

The cheap liquor burned on its way down but failed to ease his fatigue or dispel his premonition of danger. The latter was nothing uncommon. The fatigue was new.

After a time he slept, his back against the door jamb.

The phone ringing in the house awakened him. Jane called to him from the porch.

"It's Sheriff Tucker, Mort. Tom Hanson on the next farm—"

He got up and walked toward her. "Has lost some cattle."

"Five yearlings. But how did you know?"

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"THAT'S what was wrong," he told her. "It was their blood that I smelled. The wind is blowing this way. But I had so much rot gut under my belt that I failed to recognize the odor."

Car lights bobbed over the hill.

"Here they come," he told her, and walked down to the road to meet the sheriff.

Tucker was leading the cavalcade. "They come by here?"

Coopen shook his head. "Not since eleven o'clock. They must have hit between ten and eleven when Jane and I were in town."

Tait Harris said: "You're taking this damn cool."

"What do you want me to do?" Coopen asked him. "Bawl? They weren't my cows."

It was the wrong thing to say. A sun-blackened farmer got out of his car and walked up to the little group. "How come that you're still dressed at three o'clock in the morning?"

Coopen told the truth. "I fell asleep on the granary stoop."

Cal Clayton joined the group. The pool-room owner said: "Mort has been talking about a finger-man ever since he came back to Cartersville. He knows this country pretty well. And if he is as tough as he *pretends* he is, he also knows the gangs."

Tait Harris said thoughtfully: "You might have something there. He admitted knowing The Farmer."

Clayton continued harshly. "How do we know that *he* didn't kill Johnny?"

"Damn you!" Coopen broke forward and hammered Clayton with his fists.

A dozen farmers overpowered him.

The bootlegger got up spitting blood. "That freight-train entrance on the day that Johnny was buried could have been an alibi. So could that shot that was fired at him. Maybe one of his own gang fired it to set him right with us."

Sheriff Tucker said: "You're talking nonsense, Cal."

"I dunno 'bout that," Bill Connor said sullenly. "Now that we're here, let's look around."

Coopen shrugged free and walked over to Clayton. "Where were *you* between ten and eleven?"

"Buying a couple of cases of whiskey," Clayton told him. "And if it comes to a show-down, I can prove it."

The sheriff stared thoughtfully at Coopen.

Tait Harris lighted a cigarette. As big a man as Coopen, Tait's antecedents were unknown. He had come to Cartersville some years before with a telephone line gang, had liked the town, and stayed. A man above average intelligence and a good mixer, the farmers had liked him from the start. "As far as that is concerned," he said, "we've nothing but Mort's word that Tom Hanson's cattle were high-jacked between ten and eleven. And as far as I can see, that is the *only* hour that Mort has an alibi for. Tom didn't miss his cattle until almost two when he phoned us at Spring Lake."

"Five minutes of two," Hanson said. "I looked at the clock, after."

"Hey! You fellows, come here!"

The voice sounded from the barn door.

"And bring Coopen with you," a second voice added coldly. "Hell. No wonder we couldn't catch them. They've been slaughtering right here in the barn!"

Work-hardened hands hurried Coopen toward the voices. An unused box stall of the barn was a shambles. Hides and entrails were scattered on the cement with hay forked over the mhastily.

"Now, wait, you fellows!" Tucker said.

His voice was lost in the roar. A hand plucked his gun from his holster and Tom Hanson pushed him back against the wall. The farmer's face was contorted with anger.

"You stay out of this, Tucker," he raged. "Those were my yearlings. There isn't a man in this crowd that hasn't lost some critters—critters that should of gone to our boys in the Army, or some legitimate packing house, instead of the black market."

PHIL BLACK forced his way through the crowd and beat at Coopen's face while four farmers held the big man. The youth was crying with rage. "So you're the one who killed my dad. Well, damn you. I'll kill you!"

Coopen avoided the blows as best he could. "You've got me wrong. This is a frame."

Tait Harris seemed disappointed. "I thought that you had more guts than that. Every cheap hoodlum yells frame."

An unidentified speaker shouted: "Cut a piece from the rope on the hay fork."

Booted feet pounded up the barn stairs.

Sheriff Tucker, hemmed in by farmers, shouted: "Stop them, Tait!"

His deputy shook his head. "Stop them yourself, if you want to. I'm not going to throw a gun on my friends to protect a killer."

"Stop! He didn't do it! You must believe me. Please."

Her blue eyes wet with tears, and her hair a golden cloak down her back, Jane Coopen came running from the porch. She tried to force her way through the circle of men to Mort.

Clayton nodded at two of the farmers. "Take her back to the house. This won't be pretty to look at."

They pulled the girl away screaming.

The men who had gone for the rope returned. Bill Connor began to tie a hangman's noose. "If you're going to talk, you'd better," he said. "Who are the rest of your gang? Where can we pick them up?"

The only light was a barn lantern hung on a harness peg in the wall. Coopen searched the faces of the crowd. There was no mercy in their eyes. They had suffered too much. Words would have no effect. They were satisfied with his guilt.

"At least make it outside," he said quietly. "And let me have a last drink."

The crowd moved with him to the wide middle doorway of the cow barn. The men who were holding his arms released them so that he could get at the bottle showing in his pocket.

He uncorked the bottle and drank.

Harris figured the trick too late. "Watch him! He's got a gun."

But Coopen had hurled the bottle by then into Connor's face and his gun was in his hand. The farmers gaped at him open-mouthed.

"Sure. You can take me back," Coopen told them. "But I'll get seven of you first. Which seven will it be?"

There were no volunteers.

Coopen opened the circle with his gun. "There's no talking to you boys right now, but you're making a big mistake. I—" He backed a step into the darkness, tripped over a wagon tongue, and lost his balance. Before he could recover it an alert farmer had batted the gun from his hand.

"I've got him, boys!" he bellowed.

Coopen twisted free. The other men didn't dare shoot for fear of hitting the farmer. When they did, the big man was gone, his legs pounding down the creek lane.

The sharp crack of rifles trailed him.

"Fan out!" someone shouted through the babble in the barnyard. "Keep him headed toward the swamp. It'll be daybreak in an hour."

Coopen ran like a hunted fox, twisting, turning, doubling back upon his trail. He knew this creek bottom well. He and Johnny had played in it as boys. . . .

Dawn was breaking in the east. The

hunt had reached the swamp, three miles away. Cautiously, Coopen lifted his head from the hassock of grass behind which he lay concealed. He could see the barnyard and the road. The cavalcade of cars was gone. Only one car remained. But the lighted lantern still hung in the barn. A big refrigerator truck stood in the barnyard.

The man behind the murder was clever. With nobody left to talk, nobody would know how many of Johnny's beef cattle were gone. The big truck had parked on some side road, concealed in a clump of trees, waiting for the signal that it was now safe to proceed. Before the posse searching the swamp for Coopen returned, the truck would be miles away.

Coopen made certain that the clip in his gun was filled, then got up and walked through the gray toward the little knot of men working swiftly in the barnyard.

"Hello, Butch," he said.

The man started as if he had seen a ghost and his hand streaked for the gun in his holster.

Coopen shot him deliberately. "That was for Johnny," he said. "I told you the racket was wrong."

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THE other three men legged it for the truck where the driver sat racing the motor. Coopen lifted his gun again, held his fire as a man stepped out on the porch of the farm house. "What was that shot?" the man demanded. "Where are you fellows going? Who—"

The hoodlums ignored him to pile into the truck. It careened off down the road. Just before it had reached the bend, Coopen laid his gun hand over his left elbow, took careful aim, and emptied the clip at the left rear tire. It blew out and the speeding truck failed to make the turn. It crashed into the bank instead. The gas tank exploded with a roar and the truck began to burn.

Coopen continued to the house without stopping to reload. "If you've hurt Jane," he told the man on the porch, "I'll kill you with my hands."

He heard her crying inside the house. Her dress had been torn, exposing her bare shoulder, but she was otherwise unharmed.

"He's mad," she sobbed.

Tait Harris leveled his gun. "I still win," he told Coopen. "Those were your boys after all. You had a quarrel and they killed you. But before you died, you killed Jane. I'm going to discover your bodies."

Coopen looked at the terrified girl. "You're all right, Jane?"

She nodded, sobbing. "Tait hated me because I laughed at him. He's been the man in back of all the stealing and the killing. He was boasting when we heard that shot. No one even suspected him. He was free to travel the roads. As the sheriff's deputy, he'd steer the men away from where his killers were working."

"Mort's killers," Tait Harris corrected.

The big man shook his head. "I wanted no part of the racket and said so. That's why I pulled out. That's why the boys framed me on that Aurora bank job. They wanted to keep me on the lam. But I didn't know before I left that they were the ones who killed Johnny."

"They didn't," Tait Harris sneered. "I did. Johnny recognized me."

He leveled his gun on Coopen and the big man dove at Tait's knees as the slug blasted over his head. Tait wasn't boasting now. He was fighting for his life. He tried to trigger the gun again and Coopen wrenched it from his hand.

The two men, of a size, were rolling now on the floor, first Coopen on top, then

Tait Harris. Then Coopen's fingers found the neck-hold they were seeking.

"Tell Johnny I sent you," he said.

The deputy sheriff's eyes bulged from his head. His back arched in a bow. Then his body relaxed on the floor.

Coopen got groggily to his feet and wiped the sweat from his eyes to see Sheriff Tucker and Tom Hanson in the doorway.

"We doubled back, too," Tucker said. "I figured that's what you'd do." He mopped at the sweat band of his hat. "But I didn't realize what we'd find."

Hanson's eyes were bugged. His voice was hushed with awe. "Tait was the guy all along. No wonder he wanted us to lynch Mort. I heard him say myself that he shot Johnny."

Coopen stood swaying on his feet. It was a statement, not a defense. "I came back to kill the man who killed Johnny, and I've killed him."

Hanson continued excitedly "And there's a dead hoodlum and two slaughtered beeves in the barnyard, and Mort wouldn't steal his *own* beef."

The truck down the road was blazing fiercely now.

"Clip down there," Tucker told Hanson. "See if any of them are still alive."

The farmer raced through the dawn.

Tucker stared at Coopen. The big man's shirt had been ripped from his back in the struggle. He had an eagle tattooed on his shoulder.

"Then, you're The Farmer, Mort?" he asked.

"I was," Coopen admitted.

"And you really wanted to fight? That's why you smashed up your draft board?"

Coopen nodded. "When I read about Johnny I went crazy. But the army wanted no part of me." He hesitated. "So—well, I thought maybe I could come back to farming." He added defensively. "Farming is sort of like fighting."

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"SORT of," Tucker agreed. He took the wanted dodger from his pocket and studied it thoughtfully. Mort was undoubtedly bad. You had to be to grow to his stature in Chicago. Still, his killing of Harris was self defense. And he had been framed on the bank job. Any fool could see that.

Jane watched him, her eyes wet with tears.

She loves him, Tucker thought. Those old stories I heard were true. She's always loved him. And he went away because of her—and because he loved Johnny too.

Coopen straightened his shoulders with an effort. "So?"

Tucker twisted the dodger into a spill and ignited it over the chimney of a lamp to serve as a match for his cigar. "You've a job of farming to do," he said. "And see that you stay at it."

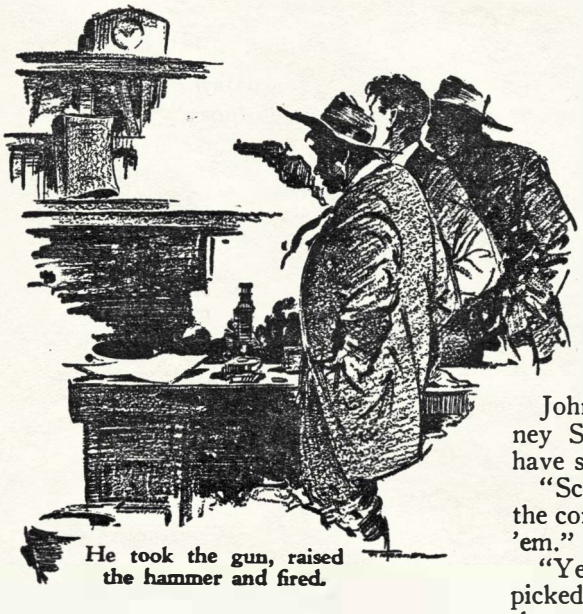
Jane started to cry again, but she was smiling.

Sheriff Tucker walked out on the porch. For years the law had sent men like Mort to prison in an effort to reform them. It seldom worked. But if you gave a man like Mort a farm to fight on, and perhaps a woman and child to love—

"Hell," Tucker grinned at the sunrise. "I'd be a pretty dumb sheriff if I didn't know that there were more ways than one to skin a cat."

BULLET BAIT

By ROBERT S. MANSFIELD



He took the gun, raised the hammer and fired.

That murder bullet from a .38 barrel on a .45 frame, could either frame Johnny Geiger out of his job—or put him in congress!

CORONER BLAKE FOREST walked into the district attorney's office and dropped a pellet of lead on Johnny Geiger's desk. Johnny closed his law book with a snap, hoping the quickness of his hand had concealed the copy of a mail-order gun-collector's catalogue he had been studying.

The coroner sniffed. "The returns indicate," he said, "that Jerome Paisly came to his end by murder—to wit, by shooting in the back—at the hand of person or persons unknown, on account of this bullet which entered between the shoulder blades and penetrated until halted by the sternum of Mister Paisly. He is," he added virtuously, "quite dead."

Johnny Geiger picked up the bullet. It was obviously from a revolver, the nose somewhat flattened by its recent impact on Jerry Paisly's breast bone, but with the remainder unmarked.

"It's a .38," Johnny said. "Looks like it might be one of those Winchester center fires with the bottle-neck shell for the .38 on a .45 frame, but I'd have to check it. What do you think, Blake?"

"I wouldn't know," the coroner said.

Johnny shook his head. "That lets Barney Schmidt out," he complained. "I'd have sworn Schmidt killed Jerry Paisly."

"Schmidt could have more'n one gun," the coroner suggested. "He's crazy about 'em."

"Yes," Johnny admitted, "but he was picked up right after the shooting, and there wasn't any place where he could have hidden another gun. He had his Peacemaker on him, and it was fully loaded. If this was a .44, now—"

"It ain't," Forest said. "Even I know that. So Schmidt's out. Anybody around got a .38 on a .45 frame?"

"Only about half the county," Johnny said. "Oh, hell, Blake, why didn't you make it a .44? There isn't another of those 1872 Colt's Frontier models—the one they called the Peacemaker—this side of Moe's hock shop in Bend. Schmidt's got the only one. And he hated Paisly and nobody else did, and with Paisly out of the way, Schmidt stands to get the Horse Hill range and maybe pick up Paisly's sheep plenty cheap."

Blake said, "If you can prove that, bub, you'll be a public hero and might even get elected senator. But you can't make it stick." He looked up as the door creaked, and made a face at Johnny. "I got to be going," he said, and sidestepped the bulk of Attorney Fremden Lawlor.

Lawlor sat down uninvited. "Johnny," he said, "I want you to try Barney Schmidt on a charge of murder."

"That's a funny one coming from you,"

Johnny said. "You're Schmidt's lawyer, aren't you?"

"That's why I'm asking it. The town's saying Schmidt's a murderer. Try him, give him a clean bill of health, and he's set up again. Just release him for lack of evidence, and he stays under a cloud. You're sworn to uphold justice, and that's all I'm asking—even if you don't like Barney."

"I don't like you, either," Johnny said, "but I know the feel of a barrel when I'm over one. I'll prosecute."

Ten seconds after Lawlor had gone, the coroner came in.

"Well?" he said.

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"LAWLOR wants Schmidt prosecuted to whitewash him," Johnny said. "This is a neat way of making political hay out of an act of sweet mercy. When it comes election time, Lawlor will point out that I charged an obviously innocent man to satisfy a petty dislike and thereby wasted the taxpayers' money and, fortunately for the innocent man, lost the case to that sterling character and candidate for district attorney, Fremden Lawlor."

"Yeah," Blake said. "You check the bullet?"

Johnny shrugged, and dug into the big drawer of his desk, emerging with a box of the Winchester .38 center-fire specials. He put one new shell and the spent bullet under the twin eyepieces of his microscope and stared at them.

"It's the same," he said. "The bullet was fired from a gun with a pretty worn barrel; the only real mark is a slight flattening on one point at the rear." He came back to the desk and sat down, toying with the loaded shell.

Jake Sellers, the sheriff, came in.

"How long you goin' to hold Barney Schmidt?" he wanted to know. "You ain't got any charge filed."

Johnny looked up. "First degree murder, Jake," he said. "What you got there?"

"Shell. My kid found it over where Jerry got shot." He tossed it down. "It's a .38, though. Don't fit Barney's gun."

When Jake had gone Johnny said, "That just clears Barney Schmidt plenty. Jerry gets killed by a .38 slug, there's a .38 shell case on the scene, and Barney's toting a .44. And I've agreed to prosecute."

"Forget it," Blake said, but Johnny shook his head.

"I'm dead sure Barney shot him, but the evidence points the other way."

"You almost make me wish I'd brought in a .44 slug and lied to you about it."

Johnny Geiger sat up straight. "You didn't tell anybody else it was a .38?"

"I just told you."

"Then how was Lawlor so sure there wasn't any evidence against Barney?" For a moment Johnny looked triumphant, then his face fell. "He knows, Barney's guilty, all right, but what difference does it make?"

He jammed the loaded .38 shell into the chamber of Schmidt's gun. Blake's eyes popped.

"It fits!"

"Sure, the shell fits the chamber, but the bullet doesn't fit the barrel. It's too small. It'd keyhole and come out all mussed up if it got through at all. . . . Hey wait!" He put the gun down.

There was an ancient county directory on the shelf, and this, backed by a copy of Jason on Torts, he placed against the far wall. Back at the desk, he took the gun, raised the hammer and fired. Blake ran for the books and they dug the pellet from chapter forty-three of Jason.

"It didn't keyhole," Blake said, but Johnny Geiger wasn't listening. He was looking at the newly fired shell, comparing it with the one Jake had brought. Shortly he put them down, took the two bullets and put them under the microscope.

"Well?" said Blake.

"Lawlor knew too much too soon, all right," Johnny said. "And Barney thought he knew too much about guns. That Peacemaker is so well lined, and that .38 center fire packs so much extra charge, that before there's a chance for the bullet to waver, it's out in the open. The marks of the firing pins and the marks on the bullets are identical." He looked happily at the ruined books. "And that," he added, "puts a hole in the whitewash."

Trapped by Nazi spies, it seemed that the lovely torch singer would get her wish when she sang:

I'LL DIE WHEN YOU DIE

By HARRY WIDMER

Explosion after explosion rocked the tanker.

FIRST ENGINEER JACK HARDESTY climbed the spidery iron ladder rising from the steaming cavern of the engine room. That troublesome starboard screw was now turning with the beauty of mechanical perfection, driving the Royal Navy tanker eastward through the black of a North Atlantic night.

Hardesty's shirt, ducks, hands and arms were covered with grease, but his gold-braided officer's cap was spotless. On reaching his cabin deck, he latched the steel engine-room door and let the quiet of the passageway wash over him. Then he went to his own cabin.

An electric fan whirred pleasantly. His gray kitten looked up from the cushions

of the built-in lounge and stretched luxuriously.

"Hello, Evil Eye," said Hardesty. "Want some milk?" The kitten yawned and went back to sleep, and Hardesty restless after his trick below, flicked off the light and stepped into the passageway.

The door of the next cabin opened and a big, bush-haired Norwegian joined Hardesty in the dimly lighted passageway. Hardesty was the only American on the tanker. The rest of the crew were Norwegians. The big fellow beamed on Hardesty as he said:

"That special record I am going to play now, Jack. You like to hear it too?"

A warm, friendly grin lifted ten years from Jack Hardesty's face. The first engineer on a loaded tanker in convoy doesn't get around to do much grinning. "I'd sure like to hear your girl sing, Ulf, but—"

"The beautiful girl I am going to marry," put in Ulf Jorensen proudly. "Like an angel she sings, that girl."

All that day, the first out of Hoboken, Ulf Jorensen, first officer of the *Norman Prince,* had talked and bragged about the beautiful American torch singer who had made a record of a song especially for him.

Hardesty said: "I'd sure like to hear her—after I've had a breath of air. Just put in four hours below."

Ulf Jorensen bobbed his head understandingly. "When you come back, Jack."

"See you then, Ulf." Hardesty moved along the narrow passageway. When he opened the deck door the passageway light automatically blacked out. He stepped out onto the night-shrouded deck and gratefully filled his lungs with the tangy sea air.

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THERE was not a flicker of light anywhere in this world of inky blackness, yet Hardesty knew that there were men working, smoking and eating in all the ships in the giant convoy. The *Norman Prince* was riding low in the water, its steel hull divided into mammoth oil tanks. He carefully picked his way over the huge squares of concrete that formed a bomb cushion over the steel decks. Grasping the ladder, he climbed into the super-structure toward the starboard machine-gun nest. The air up there would be fine.

Halfway up he heard muted music coming from a ventilator. Then a girl's rich, young voice.

Hardesty backed down the ladder and moved across the cement cakes to be nearer the ventilator by the rail. Something in that young, sweet voice drew him with irresistible force. He was nearing the rail with its cable to repel magnetic mines when he heard:

"I wanta sigh when you sigh."

So this was Ulf's special record, mused Hardesty. Ulf's girl—whom he was going to marry. But try as he could, Jack Hardesty couldn't visualize *that* voice singing to Ulf Jorensen. A mighty fine fellow was Ulf, but still—

"Cry—when you cry. . . ."

Hardesty felt that those softly murmured words were being crooned to him alone. The thought filled him as the gentle, plaintive tones filled his ears.

"Die—when you die,
Then I'll be hap-pee. . . ."

A terrific explosion lifted the cement squares and steel deck of the tanker, catapulted Hardesty over the rail and slammed him into the black, cold swells of the Atlantic.

As he hurtled through the thundering brilliance that enveloped his world his first thought was that a German U-boat had penetrated the destroyer screen and torpedoed the tanker. Then the icy water closed over his head.

Sharp chills stabbing through him drove the fog from his brain as he broke the surface. The whole night was now a vivid, bright orange. The steel hull of the *Norman Prince* lay open like a gaping wound, baring its mortally pierced heart—the twisted, flame-gutted void that was the engine room.

Hardesty, now almost numb with the icy water and explosion shock, could see other ships in the convoy. They were startled, orange-tainted things desperate-

ly scurrying from the fiery tanker. Then Hardesty saw a destroyer slash in toward the *Norman Prince* to pick up survivors.

Explosion after explosion rocked the tanker. Waves of burning oil gushed over the decks and spread on the water. Hardesty saw the fiery foam rushing toward him as the surf rushes up a sandy beach.

His last thoughts, as he went under, were of the furry little ball called Evil Eye—and of the girl who wanted to die . . . when he died.

* * *

That girl was Doreen Grey. And Hardesty's trail to her started with that destroyer picking him out of a burning sea—the lone survivor of the *Norman Prince*—then to a hospital in England; to routine answers to naval officers; to a return convoy; to the Paintbrush Club on Long Island.

The Paintbrush Club was as cozy and intimate as a Long Island hostess' cocktail party. The only commercial touch was the "butler" presenting the bill; otherwise you would have imagined yourself in a friend's living room.

Hardesty relaxed in a deep, comfortable chair and drank scotch and water. He remembered the close scrutiny his gold braid had undergone at the entrance door, and the ensuing cordial welcome. And he recalled that First Officer Ulf Jorensen had come here with Long Island friends. A glance about the luxurious room at the other guests confirmed that the Paintbrush's clientele leaned toward the exclusive.

A piano tinkled across the room, and the chatter of the guests died into an expectant silence. A girl's rich, sweet voice began the romantic rhythm of *All I Do Is Dream of You.*

Hardesty leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. He was a practical, hard man—but that voice had haunted him since he first heard it at the tanker's ventilator. He wanted to hear it again when he wasn't on a ship in convoy—where any girl's voice would be the voice of an angel.

Yet now that same feeling persisted—that she was singing to him, coming closer and closer. He shook his head to clear it of that clinging impression, and opened his eyes.

He saw her then. Doreen Grey, finishing the last notes of her song, was standing not five feet from his chair.

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JACK HARDESTY came out of his chair with supple ease and stood looking down at the top of her honey-blonde head. The girl gracefully acknowledged the polite applause of the other guests, then raised her eyes coolly to Hardesty.

He said carefully: "I have a message for you—about Ulf." His dark eyes flicked to a lounge. "Would you care to sit down?"

Her eyes, searching his, were still puzzled. With a little nod of her head, she gathered her flowing skirt and eased onto the lounge. Hardesty sat down beside her, placed his empty glass on the little table before them.

The butler-waiter appeared from nowhere.

Hardesty's eyes, mirroring the tragedy of hellfire seas, were not the eyes of a man on the make. He spoke quietly to the girl. "I did not intend to embarrass you, Miss Grey. I only wished to tell you about a friend of yours—First Officer Jorensen of the *Norman Prince.*"

The waiter fumbled with Hardesty's glass, nearly knocking it over. He mumbled an apology.

"Oh!" said Doreen Grey. "Ulf Jorensen. . . ." When she smiled her whole face seemed to sparkle. "How is he?"

Hardesty nodded toward his glass. "Will you join me in a drink, Miss Grey?"

She shook her blonde head. "But I'll take a cigarette."

He opened his case, saying to the waiter: "Another scotch and water." Then he lighted the cigarette for the girl, fired one for himself. "Ulf Jorensen—" he said simply and directly—"is dead."

Shock flashed in Doreen's eyes. She was silent for long, strained moments. Then: "It's all so terrible. All these nice young men—"

Hardesty was carefully studying her. "Ulf," he said quietly, "was under the

impression that you were going to marry him."

Amazement widened the girl's eyes. She seemed at a loss for words. Finally she managed: "It's—it's really the first time I've heard of it."

The butler-waiter returned with the scotch and water.

Hardesty waited until the waiter had moved off out of earshot before he said: "Ulf died while he listened to your record."

"How did it happen?"

"We struck a mine—when you sang, *Then I'll be happy.*"

Color drained from Doreen's face; a shudder ran through her lovely body.

Hardesty laid a weather-browned, calloused hand over her slender fingers. "I didn't mean that the way it sounded, Miss Grey. That song of yours has meant a lot to me. I had never intended telling you this—but somehow—it's hard to explain—but your voice seemed to guide me through that sea of burning oil—"

Her cool, slender fingers laced themselves with Hardesty's, clung tightly. She said nothing, just held on as if she was glad of her part in helping a fighting man through a horror of burning oil on a night sea.

Hardesty was thinking: Maybe Ulf did misunderstand this girl's friendliness. Maybe he was merely boasting—

"Here you are—Doreen!" A young man with slicked-down light hair stopped in front of the lounge. "We go on the air in thirty minutes. We haven't much time for rehearsal."

Doreen started guiltily, loosened her fingers from Hardesty's. She said: "May I present Jules Bachman, our band leader, Mr.—"

Hardesty got to his feet. "My name is Hardesty," he introduced himself.

Bachman smiled good-naturedly, pumped his hand. Then he nervously hunched the shoulders of his white dress jacket, tugged at his maroon tie. "In just thirty minutes, Doreen. . . ."

Turning to the girl, Hardesty said: "I must be leaving now, Miss Grey. May I see you again?"

"Please do." Doreen gave him her hand briefly, then swirled off with the band leader.

HARDESTY reclaimed his officer's cap from the hat-check girl and stepped onto the wide porch of the Paintbrush Club. A bright moon was climbing into the heavens, showing Long Island Sound and the wide macadam road which led to the bus stop. There were only two cars in the parking lot, testifying to the patriotism of the Paintbrush's guests.

Hardesty walked slowly along the winding road. Thoughts of Doreen filled his mind. Her vibrant smile—and her voice.

He was nearing the bus stop, walking slowly along the road bordered by high hedges—when a man moved from the shadows and leaped upon him.

Hardesty saw the glint of an upraised knife. His reaction was instinctive. Living day and night on a tanker, expecting a torpedo or a mine at every second of the minute, every minute of the hour, had sharpened his reactions.

He whirled, crouched like a coiled spring. His steely fingers found the knife wrist. His right hand, fingers extended, rigid as a rock, found his assailant's throat. He hugged the man to him, forced the knife behind the man's back . . . then toppled the man over backward, falling heavily upon him.

It was a swift, deadly counterattack. Not a word was spoken—not even a startled oath, calling upon God to damn someone. The assailant's knife was piercing his own heart. In silent minutes the man was dead.

Hardesty got to his feet, stared quietly down at the butler-waiter who had brought him scotch and water in the Paintbrush Club. Then Hardesty dragged the body behind the high hedge and returned to the road. No one seemed to have witnessed the silent, violent struggle.

Hardesty took out a cigarette and steadily lighted it. He was not shaken, nor did his hands fumble. Any nervous qualms he had had about life and death had gone down into the deep with the gallant *Norman Prince* and little Evil Eye.

Very carefully Hardesty dusted himself off. Then he retraced his steps to the Paintbrush Club.

He even selected the same chair.

"Your order please, sir?"

This new butler-waiter had come up

from behind him, so Hardesty had no chance to see what his reaction might have been.

Hardesty said: "I'd like the same waiter I had before."

The waiter was dusting ashes from the table-top. His head still bowed, he answered: "Mike is now off duty, sir. Was there anything special, sir?"

"I'm afraid," said Hardesty, "that I didn't tip generously enough." He took two half dollars from his pocket, held them up spread apart between thumb and forefinger. "Put these in Mike's eyes."

The waiter's head jerked back. "Beg pardon, sir?"

Hardesty dropped them carelessly on the table. "Bring me a scotch—MacTarvish—and water."

When the scotch came, Hardesty carefully smelled it. MacTarvish all right. He tasted it, a drop on his tongue. It had not been poisoned. Having piled away that brand day and night in convoy he would have known if even a stray grain of sand had gotten into the glass. He sat back with a fresh cigarette.

There was no expression on his face as he watched the broadcast taking place at the far side of the room. Doreen's voice, singing softly into the mike, was not audible to him. Nor was the personality-kid chatter of the grinning, slick-haired band leader.

After the broadcast Hardesty walked over to the bar, stood beside Doreen.

A quick warmth brightened the blue of her eyes as she saw him. "Hello."

The band leader leaned back on his stool, flicked a hand in greeting. "Hi. Will you join us?"

"Thanks," said Hardesty. He looked steadily at the girl. "Do you know what happened to the waiter, Mike?"

"Why, no—I don't." She turned to the band leader. "Jules, where is Mike?"

Jules Bachman spoke into his upraised glass, "Maybe he went off duty." He drank and put down the glass, glanced over at Hardesty. "Have you any complaint about Mike?"

Hardesty shook his head. "Mike did his best."

The band leader finished his drink. "Doreen, would you like to make a recording for Hardesty?"

Blonde Doreen raised her eyes to Hardesty's. "If you have a favorite song you'd like me to sing, Jules will make a special recording for you."

"That's mighty nice of you both," said Hardesty.

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THE band leader slid off the stool. "Think nothing of it, Hardesty. It's little enough to do as my bit in this scrap." He flicked his hand in farewell. "See you later—up in the studio." He breezed off, nervously hunching his shoulders in his white coat.

Hardesty faced around toward the bar and looked into the mirror, watching the girl's profile as she gazed after the band leader. Then she turned around, her eyes meeting Hardesty's in the mirror.

"Hello," she said to his reflection. "You came back to the Paintbrush quickly.

"Yes," Hardesty told her reflection. "Tomorow—" he told his lie slowly—"I'm being confined to ship. That means we may be pushing off tomorow night." He smiled at the concern that darkened her eyes. "You see now—why I came back for another look at you."

There was a silence between them.

It was Doreen who spoke first. "Tell me about—Ulf."

"He said you were going to marry him."

Doreen shook her head. "He couldn't have meant it. Why, we barely knew each other."

"I believe I understand it, now," said Hardesty quietly. "Ulf mistook your friendliness for affection. He built up his thoughts till he actually believed them himself." Hardesty smiled wryly. "Anyway, thoughts like that would help a man in convoy—when he gets the U-boat jitters."

Doreen's voice was very low: "I can't picture you having the U-boat jitters—or any other kind of jitters."

Hardesty chuckled. "There have been times, Miss Grey, when I wished mightily that I'd never set foot aboard a ship and I mean it."

The girl finished her drink. "It's good to know that a song of mine might help a little out there on the water. What song

would you like me to sing for you now?"

Hardesty's eyes imprisoned hers. "The one I favor is *Then I'll Be Happy.*"

A puzzled frown drew the girl's brows together. "But isn't that the song that Ulf Jorensen—?"

"Yes," said Hardesty quietly. "I never did hear it all the way through."

"Then you come right up to the studio with me. There's another recording up there. If you like it—it's yours."

"Swell!" said Hardesty.

The studio was on the second floor of the Paintbrush Club. When they entered, Doreen closed the door and led the way across the room to the record file. "And here's the recording," she announced, taking a black disk from the rack. "Would you rather hear it on the studio set, or on a portable?"

"Either way," said Hardesty.

"Then we'd better use a portable. That's the way you'll listen to it on your ship." She glanced about the studio, then went over to a shelf holding paper-wrapped cases.

Hardesty took the portable from her and stripped off the brown-paper wrapping. Then he opened the case and wound it with the handle, saying: "This one looks exactly like the portable Ulf brought on shipboard with him."

"It's the same model," agreed Doreen. "And this one will be yours. Jules will present it to you with the recording." She placed the disk on the turn-table and released the catch. The record spun as she lowered the needled sound-box.

The soft music swept Hardesty back across time and space to the *Norman Prince*. Again he was walking over the cement deck blocks to the ventilator near the tanker's rail. Again that young, sweet voice seeped into his very veins:

"I want to sigh
When you sigh,
Cry—when you cry."

And again it seemed that those softly murmured words were being crooned to him alone.

"Die—when you die,
Then I'll—"

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THE studio door was flung open. Band-leader Jules Bachman slammed across the room and swept the needle off the revolving disk. For a moment he hung over the portable like a limp rag.

The butler-waiter moved into the room and closed the door. He pointed a long-snouted automatic at Hardesty.

Jules Bachman regained some of his

composure. He glared at Doreen. "You damned romantic fool! You almost blew us all to hell!"

Doreen's face drained of color at the vicious force of his words. "W-what do you mean?"

Hardesty's voice was taut, vibrant with leashed ferocity. "I believe I know what he means, Miss Grey. That little portable case houses a high explosive bomb. Not powerful enough in itself to sink a tanker, perhaps. But capable of smashing the tanks, igniting the oil—"

Doreen's lovely young face mirrored the horror that marched across her mind with full understanding of Hardesty's words. "Then that record and portable that—Ulf—"

Bachman's heels clicked audibly as he bowed to the girl. "Your part was magnificent—worthy of the Iron Cross."

The butler-waiter put in practically: "Just one mishap, *Herr Hauptmann.* There was one survivor." He took two half dollars from his pocket and tossed them at Hardesty's feet. "I shall take particular pleasure, Mr. First Engineer Hardesty, in placing them—in your eyes."

Doreen turned frantically pleading eyes to Hardesty. "But I had no idea . . . I never suspected—"

Hardesty's head jerked toward the portable. "You proved your innocence when you played that record."

Jules Bachman hunched his shoulders in his white coat, rubbed his hands briskly together. "Sorry I can't let you love birds coo into the night—but there's business ahead." He turned to the waiter. "Did you clear the club?"

The waiter's automatic never wavered from Hardesty as he answered: "I passed around the word that one of our waiters had been murdered—and hinted at the searching police investigation which would follow. The club is cleared, *Herr Hauptman.* Even the help have gone."

Backman nodded approvingly.

Hardesty, eyes narrowed to slits, moved purposely forward. He was seeing the *Norman Prince* split in two, its shattered hull disgorging waves of burning oil. And superimposed on that scene of fiery death was the blond face of Jules Bachman.

The butler tilted his automatic. "One step more—and you'll all burn in hell!"

Hardesty chuckled dryly. "After a flaming tanker—hell ain't so hot."

Bachman retreated before Hardesty's steady advance, suddenly cried out: "Shoot the damned—"

"I wanta sigh
When you sigh,
Cry—when you cry."

Bachman and the waiter froze in abject terror. When they were capable of physical motion, they turned awe-struck faces toward the portable.

Hardesty struck Bachman, sent him sprawling. Then Hardesty tore the gun from the waiter's hand, matter-of-factly breaking the man's arm in the process.

Doreen's mouth was still mutely holding the last note she had uttered. When she saw Hardesty expertly trussing the two Nazis with wire, she sagged limply to the floor.

Hardesty lifted her to her feet, gently shook her. "You should get the Congressional Medal for that singing you just fooled the Nazis with."

"I knew you wouldn't stop—till they killed you," she mumbled against Hardesty's Royal Navy tunic. "I just couldn't get to the portable. My legs wouldn't move. I—I made myself sing—"

Bachman made his obscene comments in German.

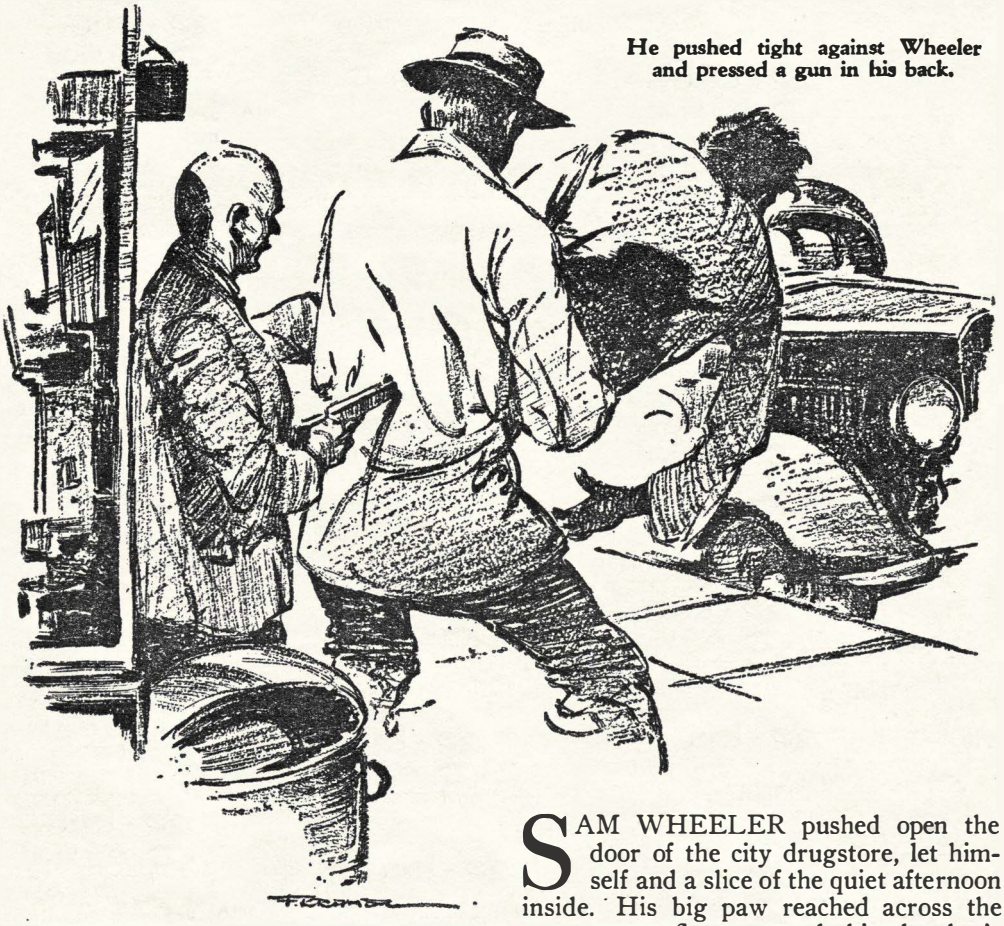
Hardesty guided the girl to the studio door. "You get out of here as fast as you can. Run along the road toward the bus station. I'll catch up with you." He pushed her toward the door.

Doreen had made about one hundred yards along the road when Hardesty, running hard, caught up with her. Without a word he curved an arm about her waist and swept her along with him. At the bus station, now deserted, he drew her down to the ground in the protection of the wall, said grimly, "I told Bachman he was on the *Norman Prince.* In a second—he'll believe it. . . . There it goes!"

The earth and sky seemed to crash in an ear-splitting thunder of noise. Hardesty hugged the girl closer to him—the girl he had dreamed about. The girl who wanted to sigh . . . when he sighed.

THE CLUE OF THE CARELESS CARROT

By EDWARD J. DONOVAN



He pushed tight against Wheeler and pressed a gun in his back.

With a little long-distance help from Ma and Pa on the farm, Sam pitched in to pry his brother out from under a murder rap in the big town.

SAM WHEELER pushed open the door of the city drugstore, let himself and a slice of the quiet afternoon inside. His big paw reached across the counter to flow around his brother's smaller hand.

"Hullo, Mike." He glanced around the modest little shop, "So this," he grinned, "is where you're learnin' about life."

Michael Wheeler tried to look as pleased as he should, after not seeing Sam for several months. He almost succeeded, except for a mild sort of quizzical apprehension in his eyes.

"Sam! Where'd you drop from? Why

didn't you let me know you were coming? We'll have to—to celebrate."

Sam chuckled. He was a blonde giant of a farmer with a touch of golden sunshine, country style, in his eyes and hair. He wore mail order gray tweeds that somehow didn't fit around his muscular frame as smoothly as they had the chap in the catalogue.

"Ma sent me," he said quietly.

Michael's expression indicated that his quizzical apprehension was justified. "Ma?"

"Yeh. From your letters she figured you'd run into snags, so she steered me down to see what was what."

The elder and smaller Wheeler looked annoyed. "She's wrong. I'm—I'm getting along swell."

"Ma says you ain't."

"Aren't."

"Aren't, ain't, isn't. Take your pick. But you know Ma."

"But—but I can take care of myself. You tell Ma that—"

Sam Wheeler gave another bland chuckle. "Not me, Mike. You tell her. You can telephone and—"

A short thickset man with dark eyebrows, and upper teeth that were spaced and stuck out like the prongs of a rake, stampeded in, pushed in front of Sam and faced Michael from across the counter.

"Well, what happened?" he demanded. "Last night was the night. My place was the place. Where were you, Wheeler?"

Michael looked flustered. "I—I thought it was tonight."

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HE GLANCED at Sam, then at the tall, stooped man who emerged from the dispensary. "It's all right," Mr. Graham," he said quickly to the tall man in the manner of an employee to his employer. "These men want to see me personally. This is my brother, Sam, and you know Mr. Hogan."

The tall druggist nodded slowly to Sam Wheeler, then his black eyes steadied on the toothy individual.

"Yes," he said deliberately, "I know Hogan."

He spun on his heel and went into the back again.

Hogan laughed. "My best pal," he jeered, then crowded close to the counter. "So you thought it was tonight?" he snapped at Michael.

Sam Wheeler tapped him on the shoulder. "Just a minute, old man, you horned in on a private conversation."

Hogan swung around, and Sam got a close-up view of the jutting teeth. "Suppose I did; so what?"

Sam Wheeler gravely inspected the row of ivory. "All they need," he remarked thoughtfully, "is to be pushed in a bit, then they'd line up better."

He looked undisturbed, but his very calmness must have meant something to Michael, for suddenly the elder Wheeler started around the counter. "Wait Sam," he cried out. "Don't!"

But Sam Wheeler was moving. Hogan read his intentions correctly, backed away, his right hand jumping up to his coat lapel. Wheeler's big hands moved faster. One seized Hogan's elbow.

The other clamped around Hogan's wrist just as the hand belonging to it appeared, holding a gun. Wheeler chuckled, shook the weapon free as if it had been an apple on one of his trees back home. It fell to the floor, and he kicked it across the polished linoleum. Hogan cursed, strained, and pulled, trying to break away. Wheeler picked him up bodily, carried him kicking and squirming towards the exit. "I'll finish this outside, Mike," he announced over his shoulder.

He didn't come back.

There was a black sedan at the curb, its motor running. The driver, a bald-headed midget had gotten out and was standing near the drugstore entrance. He pushed in tight against Wheeler, pressed a gun into his side.

"Okay, big guy, let go."

Sam Wheeler stiffened, and his face took on again the expression Michael hadn't liked, back in the store. Abruptly he relaxed, shrugged his shoulders and released the kicking Hogan.

The midget glanced at Hogan. "Now what?"

Words choked in Hogan's throat. He sputtered and fumed. His mahogany eyes blazed. "He—he—damn you, get into that car."

Quietly, Sam Wheeler obeyed.

Back in the store Michael made a wild scramble for Hogan's gun on the floor. It was out of reach under a showcase. He lay flat, stretched his arm and got it. Jamming it into his pocket, he dashed outside. But there was no sign of Hogan or his brother.

Mr. Graham met him on his return inside. "What happened, Michael? Where's your brother?"

"Sam's—gone. Hogan took him."

The drug proprietor frowned. "You mean—?" He looked thoughtful. "He'll be all right. Hogan is afraid to go too far; the police, I understand, are just waiting a chance to get something on him."

Michael shook his head. "I can't understand it. Sam is usually quiet and good-natured. But he loses his temper sometimes, and when he does he goes wild. I mean he—he finishes what he starts. There's generally a mess all around. And I could have sworn he meant to start something, but—" he paused, took a breath. "I'll bet it was Pee-wee Soame, Hogan's driver." He looked hopefully at his boss. "I wonder what I should do now?"

Mr. Graham glanced at the clock. "You better knock off early and go home. Wait until you hear from your brother. There's not much you *can* do."

It was about seven that evening when Sam Wheeler walked into his brother's apartment, grinned good-naturedly at its smallness and made a swimming motion with his hands as if straining for more room. Still grinning, he sat down in a chair against the wall.

"Kinda cramped, ain't you, Mike? Considerin' all the space you had back home. Not much sunshine either, and no fresh smells. You really like it here?"

Michael waved his hand. "Never mind me. What happened? Where'd you go today?"

Sam stretched his legs. "For a little ride with Hogan and his buddy 'Pee-wee'. They took me to Hogan's place."

"And then what happened?"

"Oh, we had a little talk. Then Pee-wee got careless with his gun, so I took it and had a couple of swings at Hogan's teeth. So Ma was right, you are in a fix? Let's hear about it."

THE elder Wheeler looked worried. "You shouldn't have done it, Sam. You shouldn't have hit Hogan. He's tough, and he doesn't forget. You better clear out and go home. This isn't the country. I'll handle it my own way."

"Sure, sure," Sam chuckled. "And what will I tell Ma?"

"Tell her—" Michael hesitated, groping for inspiration. "Oh, tell her anything. Tell her I'm getting along dandy."

"You tried that in your letters."

"But—but— Well, what do you suggest? How much did Hogan tell you?"

Sam Wheeler threw his hat on the table. "Let's me and you have a talk first."

An hour or so later Sam was in his hotel room opposite the apartment house in which Michael lived. He sat at a table before a window that faced the street. From his suitcase he took paper, pen and ink.

On the top page he wrote, "Report. First Day." Underneath he outlined a detailed account of his experiences in the city.

"You was right, Ma," he wrote. "Michael is in a fix. And it's about money. He got the idea of buying you a fur coat, and started gambling with a bunch of sharks to get the money fast. It was at a place called the Blackbird Club. They kept at him, made a big guy of him and took his notes until he owed them quite a pile. And now they figure he belongs to them and should do what they say.

"I met two of them, a feller named Hogan and one he called Pee-wee. We had quite a chat at Hogan's place, and when I figured I had learned all I could from them, I left. I think Hogan ain't the real boss, although he acts like it. He has a big safe in the room we were in, and there's a bundle of money in it that made Pee-wee lick his lips when he saw it.

"By the way Ma, some of the furniture got busted when I was leaving. Do you suppose they'll bill us for that?

"Anyway, I came outside and ran into the guy who lives next door. His name is Walter Maxsted. He's about Pa's size, only on him it's mostly fat and his nose is round and red just like Pa's, only I think Pa's is redder. He was planting his victory garden, and what he didn't know about it would fill our new silo. So I gave

him a hand, and we got talking. He said he didn't know much about Hogan except that he worked in the Blackbird Club, and I said he must be top man to rate all the cash he keeps in his safe. And do you know, Ma, Maxsted got right interested. He asked me all about what went on in Hogan's place. I wouldn't be at all surprised if he made a try for that money himself. Ha-ha. Although Pee-wee seen it first.

"So that's how it is, Ma. I'm just waiting to see what happens next. One way you could help Mike is to forget that promise Pa made you, and let Pa loose with a pack of cards in that Blackbird Club. He—

"Gee, there's Mike coming out of his place. I'll tag along and see he don't get into any more fixes."

Sam Wheeler followed his brother. In a shorter, more direct route than when with Hogan and Pee-wee, Sam found himself being again taken to Hogan's home on Ellwood Street. Michael didn't once look back. He strode along like one who had finally decided to get an unpleasant job over with.

They reached Ellwood Street just as darkness began feeling its way around corners in a fifth-columnist drive against the yawning day. Sam waited in the shadows half way up the block and watched the street lights bud and bloom.

His brother entered Hogan's without knocking. When he came out ten minutes later, he looked like a man who wanted to run but didn't dare. He walked quickly past Sam and didn't see him. His face showed white in the dim light.

Sam Wheeler hesitated, drawn between his desire to overtake and question Michael, and the urge to investigate the thing himself. He decided to have a look.

No one opposed him when he entered; no one met him in the darkened hall. There was a stillness that made his nerves tingle. He approached the back room slowly, instinctively quiet.

The light was on, the safe door wide open, the safe itself empty except for a few official-looking papers. Signs of the struggle he had had with Pee-wee and Hogan were still in evidence, but something new had been added. Somebody else had since fought in that room; more furniture was tossed about and here and there on the floor were little cream-coloured flakes that looked like sawdust, as if the contestants had tugged apart a stuffed doll or toy. The bald-headed Pee-Wee was gone.

All this, Sam Wheeler saw in his first quick glance around. Then his eyes turned to Hogan on the floor. The gambler was stretched out on his back before the safe. His head had been hammered. He lay—dead—in a pool of blood that reached out to embrace the snout of a revolver lying close by.

The gun looked like the one Wheeler had shaken from Hogan in the drugstore that afternoon.

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IT was shortly after midnight when Sam Wheeler telephoned his mother. She had a two-tone voice, one tender, gentle, motherly—the other crisp and businesslike. It was the business voice that came to Wheeler over the wire.

"That'll be you, Samuel. And either you've been drinking, or something has happened to Michael. God forgive me, but I hope you've been drinking. You'll regret it, though, if there's any furniture bill like when you and Pa went electioneering in Paddy Bulger's beer parlor."

"I ain't been drinking, Ma."

"Then—then, it's Michael."

"Yeh. He's in jail."

Wheeler heard the sharp intake of his mother's breath. It came to him clearly, pushed ahead by a sudden silence that sagged the wires.

Finally, she spoke again, haltingly. "Why, son? What has he done?"

"They say he murdered a man named Hogan."

The crispness, tinged with relief came back into her voice. "Rubbish! You or Pa, maybe, in one of your wild fits, God forbid. But not Michael."

"Mike's fingerprints were on the gun they found, Ma, and they say it was the one that hammered Hogan to death."

"Rubbish! You get along and prove he didn't. Will you need Pa?"

Sheer enthusiasm foamed in Sam Wheeler's voice like froth on milk at milking time. "I sure do. Together we

could tear this place all to hell, Ma—"

"Very well," she interrupted. "I'll bring him down on the morning train."

Wheeler's voice lost its lightness. "You mean you're coming too, Ma?"

"That's exactly what I do mean."

Wheeler hesitated, then started stuttering. "Just a minute. I just thought of something. There's one angle about this thing I better try out by my lonesome first. Then if I need Pa later on, I'll let you know."

"Hmph," she retorted. "Just as I thought. I see myself letting you and Pa get together down there alone. And another thing, Samuel."

"Yes?"

"No beer. Not even to celebrate when you get Michael out. Not even one pint. You understand?"

"Okay, Ma."

"And I'll expect Michael and you the day after tomorrow on the afternoon local. You'll be in time to help with the chores."

The next day Sam Wheeler was busy. He made several calls, one to the City Hall where he struck up acquaintances with an old-time gardener on the grounds. They talked shop a while then Wheeler touched on the murder of Toothy Hogan. The old gardener had his own theory, and gave it freely, along with other information about Hogan and his cronies. Wheeler also visited Pee-wee Soame's rooming house, and afterwards had a long talk with his brother's boss, Graham, the druggist.

Evening brought a warm drizzle of rain. Sam Wheeler sat at the table in his hotel room, his forehead wrinkled in thought, his fingers toying with a pen. Outside there was a small patch of sky the building contractor had forgotten to block out. Absently he watched it grow darker. Rain drops started drumming against the window like angry bees.

Sam hunched over the table, began to write. As on the day previous he wrote at the top of the page, "Report. Second Day." Then underneath he wrote in his bold, clear hand:

"Mike's picture is in the papers, Ma, and its a sight clearer than the one of Pa the time he was run in for putting on that egg-throwing demonstration with those sixty day old eggs at the road show you said was drawing the crowds from our church social. It looks bad for Mike, but I got my own idea, and I'm trying it out later on.

"I got a lot of things cleared up to-day. I wondered why Hogan wasn't shot, when whoever did it had a gun. The police say the killer was afraid shots would be heard and attract attention.

"I went to see Mike and he told me how the gun the police found got there. He said he went to see Hogan intending to get back the notes he had signed. He took the gun to protect himself. When he saw Hogan stretched out on the floor dead, he forgot everything, dropped the gun and high-tailed it. So the gun the police have, didn't kill Hogan.

"And guess what, Ma? I learned at the City Hall who owned the building where the Blackbird club is, and from the owner I learned who paid the rent. It's that red-nosed guy Maxsted, the one who lives next door to Hogan. He's the boss of the club, but doesn't want it advertised. That's why he told me he didn't know Hogan, I guess. But Hogan worked for him, and so the money Hogan had was really Maxsted's. Maxsted then wouldn't have to kill Hogan to get it. I don't trust him though, even if he has planted a Victory garden.

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"AND I learned from an old gardener I met that Hogan and Mike's boss, Graham, used to be partners in business. Hogan gypped Graham out of a lot of money. That was years back. And Graham was seen around Hogan's place last night about eight o'clock. That was before Mike got there. When I asked Graham about it he told me he was delivering a parcel in his car. A hurry-up call. The people he delivered it to were out when I went around to see them.

"I went to see Pee-wee Soame too! He swore he didn't know anything about the killing. But I'm glad I went to see him. His hands were breaking out in what looked to me like the start of a good dose of poison ivy, so I went to see my gardener chum and he told me there was only two places in the city with poison

ivy. I found what I was looking for in the first place. A piece of lead pipe, Ma, someone had buried. I dusted the earth off carefully and there were hairs on it along with some brown spots that the man at the police station said might be blood stains. They are going to test it and call around and see me later.

"And now I'm going to try out my idea and see if I can't get Mike out of jail."

Sam folded his report carefully, put it and the pen away. Then for fifteen minutes he was busy arranging the furniture to his satisfaction. His last move was to loosen the light bulbs in their sockets. The room partially capitulating to the evening shadows and gloom. Wheeler surveyed the effect critically, satisfied himself that the light was dim enough for his purpose, then picked up the phone.

"This is Sam Wheeler," he said when he got the connection, then gave his address. "You can't get away with it, old man."

"Get away with what?"

"You know damn well, what," Wheeler barked back, his voice roughening up. "After you killed Hogan, what did you do with the money? Buy carrots?"

He waited for an answer, but none came. The line went dead.

He put the phone away thoughtfully, chuckled and sat down.

After a twenty-two minute wait three men walked into his room, indistinct figures in the faint glow from the street lights that filtered in through the windows. They stood a moment, huddled together like the front of a miniature church, the tall one in the middle forming the steeple. There was nothing hurried in their motions, just deadly finality. The eyes of the steeple spotted Wheeler across the table. His right hand whipped up and three shots crashed into Wheeler's face. . . .

It wasn't his real face, just a reflection in the mirror he had set up for the purpose. And before the intruders realized their mistake, Sam himself was in action. The two smaller men didn't last long before his mighty fists. The third man was tougher and almost succeeded in getting another shot in. Wheeler grabbed his wrist just in time, twisted the gun away. Muscles toughened by farm work came into play and the killer gave ground. They fought silently, except for their strained breathing. Back and forth they pulled each other then Wheeler's fist found an opening. . . .

On the train next afternoon Michael Wheeler gazed at his younger brother in admiration.

"What made you suspect Maxsted?" he asked.

"Carrot seeds," Sam answered absently. He seemed worried about something.

"Carrot seeds?"

"Yeah. He spilled them all over the room when he was fighting with Hogan. They looked like sawdust but I recognized what they were, when a city fellow wouldn't. And I remembered that he was planting his garden. He must have got mighty sore when I told him about Hogan having all that money and realized Hogan was double-crossing him. We were lucky at that, getting Pee-wee to tell us that Maxsted gave him that lead pipe to hide. With what Pee-wee told the police, they were able to wring a confession from Maxsted. But look, Mike, I bought a bottle of scotch for Pa. It's in your bag."

Michael Wheeler gulped "In my bag? What the hell, Sam. If Ma—"

Sam Wheeler leaned over, placed a comforting paw on Michael's knee. "I thought of that. Ma will be so tickled to see you, she won't think of it being in your baggage. She'll expect it to be in mine. And anyway you can talk Ma out of getting mad, if she does happen to find it. You always could. Heck, Pa'll be expecting a present of some kind."

When the train slowed for the station, Sam looked out the window.

"Well, here we are. And there's Ma on the platform. Her mouth is kind of set ain't it? And look at Pa! He's licking his lips already, the old son of a gun. Still and all, I wish Ma's mouth wasn't so set looking. Come on, and don't be so scared of that bag. Handle it natural-like."

Trouble in Turpentine

By STUART FRIEDMAN

He swung the rifle like a bat.

When the killer ran loose in the turpentine camp, Conchie Joe got a lesson in democracy that was bound to last him for the rest of his life.

TWO hundred yards ahead a lean, shirtless man in blue denim pants and straw hat came out of the woods. The mare Harp Manders was riding picked up her ears.

"Trouble," Harp Manders said softly. He felt like adding: "At last!"

He pulled a bag of makings from his damp shirt, rolled a smoke. Things had been brewing too long. The heat, first. The dead August days had blanketed the miles of green slash pine, making the work for the squads of turpentiners almost unbearable. And in every breath and bite of pone or beans or salt pork was the smell and taste of turpentine. The still that separated the crude gum into war-vital turpentine and gum rosin sent out the odor continually.

Usually, as Harp knew from thirty years as woods rider, the upper Florida peninsula got the benefit of gulf or ocean winds. This year it was becalmed. And be-cursed, Harp thought, snicking a match aflame with a thumbnail.

The heat wasn't all, Harp Manders reflected, studying the approaching man. The two new men had been trouble from the start. They weren't turpentiners. "Conchie Joe" Epps was a Conch fisherman from way south on some Key or other above Key West. A smooth-talking man full of the tales of Conchmen, of fishing and salvaging cargoes wrecked in Caribbean waters.

Conchie Joe had smooth-talking hands, too, when they got on a deck of cards or pair of dice. For, though it wasn't Harp Manders' place as woods rider to know such things, he knew Conchie Joe Epps had cleaned them all out on payday, three days ago. The womenfolks of the workers had come to Harp about it. They had raised hell, proper.

Good chippers were hard come by, was one reason Harp Manders didn't do anything about it. Conchie Joe Epps was smooth as Carolina corn with the hack. The first week he'd handled five thousand trees. The second eight thousand. Harp's

best chippers couldn't handle the hack much faster. With the trees requiring a fresh cut every week, to keep the precious crude gum sap flowing fast before cold weather stopped it, Harp could overlook plenty when a man was as nimble as "Conchie Joe". Harp wondered, though, if he'd overlooked too much.

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THE man coming, Harp saw, was the *other* new one. Just a kid. Called himself Bert Campbell, though Harp suspected the kid wasn't born with that name, because he was some kind of Latin. Maybe one of the Tampa Cubans or Italians. He was seventeen, and he'd been next thing to desperate about getting the job. He wrote letters by the basketful to somebody, and did his best on the job. Harp had set him to work as a dipper, emptying the white gum from the cups attached to the metal gutter at the bases of the trees, once a week. Nights and Sundays, in off hours was when Bert Campbell caused trouble. The womenfolks had gone daffy about him, some of them, and even if he didn't do a thing out of line the men resented him.

"Mr. Manders," Bert called, still a dozen paces away. "Will you come right now? Red Bollen had a bad accident over in Crop six. He fell on his hack."

Harp brought his mare to a stop. His fingers snapped the burnt matchstick he'd been holding. Then he grinned.

"They been baitin' you, son," he said tolerantly. "A chipper like Red Bollen don't fall onto his hack no quicker'n he'd step on his thumb."

"*I* saw him. Mr. Manders," Bert protested, his large brown eyes intense. "There is no joke. He is dead!"

Harp Manders straightened in the saddle, flung down the broken matchsticks.

"Dead, huh? M' best chipper. . . . Campbell—that ain't your name. What is it? What you workin' here for, anyhow?" As Bert blinked at him, Harp waved his hand impatiently. "Get the answers set in mind and bring 'em with you, and make positive they're true answers! You hear?"

Harp slapped the mare's rump, headed for Crop six.

A puller and not a hack had killed Red Bollen, Harp saw. That was as he'd guessed, for nearly all of Crop six was in the fourth season. The shorter V-shaped hack was used the first three seasons of the pine's turpentine producing life. After the first three years, the badly scarred trees had heavier, gnarled bark. To cut down to the sap veins it was necessary to use the longer cutting instrument. A deadly tool. Harp could only see the handle, like something growing out of Red Bollen's gut, just under the chest.

A little like the way Japs killed themselves, Harp guessed, from what he'd heard. Only Red Bollen, curled on his side, knees pulled up, didn't have his hands on the puller handle, or any ways near it. Red wasn't a man to take out his sorrows on himself anyway. More likely he'd have saved up his mad for night, and slapped his woman around. So that left one thing here. Murder!

Harp Manders looked up from the body, listened, brows bunching slightly as he heard the loud revving of a truck motor. He knew the sound as that of the pick-up truck which collected the filled barrels of crude gum, hauled them to the still. There was no call that he knew of, though, for making a race track of any of the pick-up lanes. He peered down the narrow aisle of pine to the collection barrel, standing at the truck lane at the far end. The truck was on that lane. It was coming from the direction of Crop five—that Harp himself had just left. Harp went quickly to the mare, swung aboard and started riding.

The truck was a stone's throw away as he reached the tire-grooved lane. The truck, with "Conchie Joe" Epps and big-eared Sam Sams, another chipper, riding the running boards, slowed, and stopped to Harp's signal.

"Th' hell's the idee?" he roared. "Are y' crazy drunk!"

"Been a killin', Manders. We just found Mack Dorn with his puller stuck through his back," Conchie Joe yelled to him.

"I just seen Dorn hour ago!" Harp exclaimed. He fumbled in his saddle bag, pulled a whistle out by its cord. "Red Bollen's been killed too. Two my best chippers!"

"That damn furriner!" big-eared Sam Sams said sourly.

"Who you talkin' about?" Harp snapped.

"That calf-eye kid, calls hisself Bert Campbell," Conchie Joe said. "Like I was tellin' Sam Sams, never trust no furriner and never trust no man goes under a wrong name."

"Conchie, I want you t'keep that big mouth closed. "You don't know nothin' about that kid," Harp said.

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CONCHIE cried, "The driver that makes the run inta town from the still seen the name on the kid's letters. They was all to a Mrs. Campinni down in Tampa."

Harp Manders stared long minutes at the Conchman, the while slowly wiping the mouthpiece of the whistle on his shirt-sleeve.

"Red's back there," he said at last. "Get his body and Dorn's, and report to camp. I'm callin' off work for today till we get things straighted up some."

He gave four short blasts on the whistle, repeated it several times, then headed the mare back toward camp. His eyelids drooped, and the leathery contours of his face seemed to slump with his worried thoughts. Nowhere along the way was there a sign of Bert Campbell—or maybe Campinni. Harp hated to believe he had been so badly fooled. Could be the kid was nuts—a renegade. It was a fact that the Tampa Italians were a hundred percent loyal, but Bert might be different. Maybe that'd explain his asking for man-killer work here in such a forsaken stretch of country.

The next hours were pure hell for Harp Manders. It had been his job to break the news to the widows, and then to console them. Word had been phoned in to the sheriff, but he hadn't got in from a fishing jaunt, and it was hard telling what time he'd arrive. Meantime, the remaining dozen chippers had gathered outside the office shack, listening to Sam Sams and Conchie Joe trying to fan up a fever.

"Two of us kilt a'ready," Sam Sams said. "That Bert kid looks to murder ary one of us chippers, I tell y'. First he comes makin' so purty fer our womenfolk, and can't git 'em—"

Harp slammed his open palm on the scarred old desk, got up and left the office shack. He charged into the assembly.

"T' your shack, Sam Sams. You ain't goin' to lay your family troubles at the kid's door. You, Conchie—you come with me down to *your* shack."

"Fine with me, Manders," Conchie said easily, "But I claim ain't none of us c'n call his life safe long's that kid's loose. Been three hour since rest of us come in. Where's he at?"

"I'll not say," Harp said tightly. "But I ain't no elected officer th' law. None of us are. When the posse goes out after Bert, it goes legal. If th' kid's a killer, th' law'll say what's to do."

Harp wrapped a big hand around Epps arm, shoved him along. They walked in silence to the Conchman's shack. Inside the sparsely furnished place, Harp glanced around at the various sized pinkish, spiralled Conch shells ornamenting the walls. Epps uncapped a bottle of lime juice, proffered it.

"Have some sour?"

"Nope," Harp said. "I want a look at your cards and dice, Epps."

"Aw—that!" Conchie Joe laughed. He tossed his hat on the bed, scratched vigorously at thin, damp-matted grayish hair, took a cardboard box down from a shelf. "Take a look. They're all on the up!"

Harp gave the two decks, and three pairs of dice a cursory going over, handed them back.

"Don't want them used next payday, anyways," Harp said. He reached aimlessly in his shirt for the makings, then said, suddenly. "Conchie, you're too good a man to be stirrin' so much trouble. What you got against Bert?"

"Nothin'. Not a thing, Manders, 'cept I think he done the killin's."

"I don't," Harp said. "And I think I know where we can find him. I want you to go along with me—'thout th' others knowin'."

"W-well. Sure," Conchie Joe said. "But, Manders, somebody done those killin's."

"Right," Harp said. "You and me's going to find out *why*."

The sunset had nearly faded out by the

time they left camp. Harp carried a Winchester hunting rifle balanced easily in the crook of his arm.

"I keep my eyes open," Harp told Conchie Joe. "Then try and put what I see together so it makes sense. F'rinstance, Red Bollen had been dead hours before we found him."

"How you know that?"

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"WELL, a chipper good's Red never gets none of the gum off the trees on his clothes when he's workin'," Harp said. "But on his shirt was plenty of it. And it wasn't yellowish, the way the sap is when it's runnin' out fresh. The stuff on his shirt was white. The sap won't turn white for hours. That all stacks up to Red falling against a tree—say in the middle of the morning."

"Maybe," Conchie Joe said. "Though it don't make no difference when he was kilt. He's just the same dead."

"Not quite just the same," Harp said. "I think they got some way of checkin' a corpse's stomach to tell when he last et. It'll show Red never had lunch. So what's that mean, I ask myself, Conchie. Well, simple enough it means Red Bollen was killed somewhere else than where we found him. Reason he was moved, was because the place he was working when he was killed was close to something that the killer didn't want connected with a corpse."

"I don't git what you're sayin'."

"Well, Red was workin' this mornin' on the edge of Crop six—very close to Crop five. Red saw something happen right near the middle of this farm. There's ten crops, so between five and six would be the middle. Right? Then, Dorn, this afternoon, working crop five, saw something too. So he died. Bert come to tell me about Red's body. The killer overheard it. So the killer, who'd just got through killin' Dorn, too, had a smart idea. Figured he'd tie up Bert so he couldn't speak for hisself. We'd all then figure Bert was the killer. Figure him a Mussolini kind of Italian, maybe, who come to wreck the farm—"

"That's how I figure it, myself, Manders," Conchie Joe Epps said.

They came to the division between crops five and six. Harp Manders came to a stop.

"I looked through some the kid's personal stuff—diary and all. Found why he had to change his name—'cause he ran into a lot of folks like Sam Sams and you, that wouldn't let an Italian name on their payroll. Even his old man got laid out, and Bert's only fifteen, so the Army wouldn't have him, yet," Harp said. "So all in all, I'd as soon kill a man as not

who'd take dirty advantage of a kid like that. If th' boy's dead— Where is he, Conchie?"

"You askin' *me?*"

"Shut up. I don't want lies. Lead me to him."

"You're just guessin'!" Conchie yelled, backing away.

Harp started to grab for his shirt, then stopped dead still. There was a sound of thrashing leaves a distance back in crop five. Harp measured the distance to Conchie, then sprang, his left fist flying unerringly at Conchie's head. He watched the man go down, then turned and ran into the woods, headed toward the thrashing sound. He detected muffled voice sounds after a few steps.

In a minute he was down beside the kid. Bert was tied hand and foot, and partially covered with a debris of vine and palmetto leaves. Harp's knife slashed the ropes.

"Know who did it, son?"

"Yes, sir!" Bert said hotly. "Conchie Joe. I don't know why. But he did it."

"It's clear enough why," Harp said to himself. "It shoulda come to me long before that Conchie was too damn good a chipper."

Harp made his way grimly back to the clearing. Conchie Joe was stirring. Harp stopped before coming into the open. He had a good hunch what was back of the whole business—but only a hunch. Might be a good idea to give Conchie rope enough to lead him to the answer. It'd be tricky, Harp Manders knew. He held his hand back, kept Bert from moving further.

"We'll watch him," Harp whispered. "Keep quiet."

CONCHIE JOE got to his feet. He didn't waste a moment to see if Harp was around or not, but set ahead at a dead run. Harp had to come out of the woods, use the clearing in order to keep pace. A hundred yards on, Conchie slowed, turned toward the edge of crop five. He walked stealthily, his head bent forward, as though searching. Then he stopped, went down to his knees.

Harp broke into a dead run. He caught the rifle by the end of the barrel in both hands. He swung it like a bat, knocked Conchie Joe sprawling head over heels.

He handed Bert the rifle.

"Keep him covered. Shoot if he runs—" Harp panted. "I'm goin' to be awful interested in whatever he was about to do—"

Half a minute later Harp Manders whistled, got to his feet.

"Gimme the gun, son," he said. "Know what Conchie Joe was here t' do?"

"What, Mr. Manders?"

"Fire the whole blankin' ten crops of this turpentine farm. This is the central point. Two men saw him puttin' the final touches on the system of fuses. Prob'ly got gasoline spotted all over the ten crops, and just waitin' for the wind that would help the fire along—" Harp turned to Conchie, staring up fearfully. "Nothin' stops some of these turp producers. Even hire murderin' arsonists like you, Conchie Joe."

Bert asked. "Why'd they want to burn this farm, Mr. Manders?"

"A few of us hereabout have refused to go in with a gang that's got the idea of holdin' up all production so the price'll soar on turp and gum rosin. Some of us wouldn't listen—and we been refusin' to boycott our country's military needs. I guess none of us figured how damn far some of these Nazified crooks would go for an extra dollar."

"I never killed those men, though, Manders," Conchie Joe cried.

"Y' clumsy fool, y' got their blood on you right this minute," Harp said, his voice dangerous. "I told you I kept open my eyes. I see you got on two shirts, man—in this weather. The one underneath is the one'll hang you."

"Gimme a chance, Manders," Epps whined.

"Y' talked your way in, but not out—"

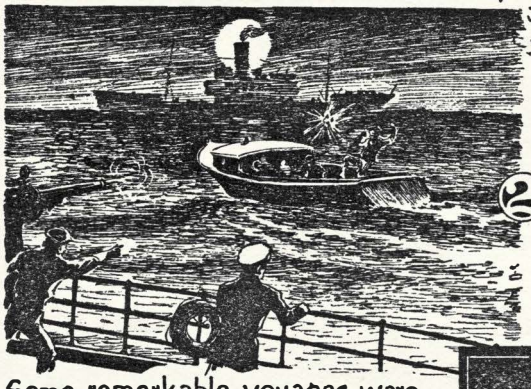
"Talked my way in—wh-what you mean?"

"Tales about bein' a Conch—'Conchie Joe' Epps!" Harp said scornfully. "You're a *turpentiner* gone bad. Damn cinch anyways you're no Conch. When I went in your shack I saw that. Because a Conchman loves the meat in them Conch shells—much as he loves his "sour"—but a Conch never keeps a Conch shell in his house. He considers 'em bad luck—and I don't guess you'll argue *that* point!"

WHEN GANGDOM RULED

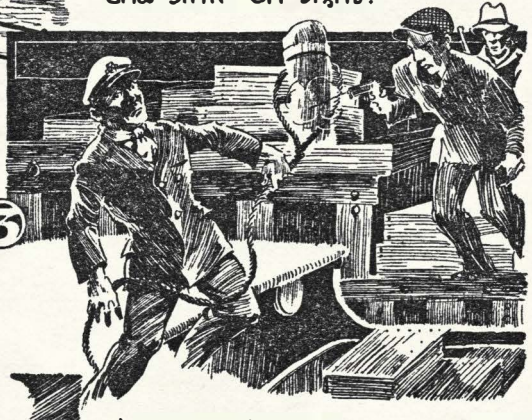
·AN·ILLUSTRATED·CHRONICLE·OF·THE·TURBULENT·TWENTIES· by WINDAS

Piracy on the high seas was revived in its most brutal form during the lurid years of prohibition. A motor launch was found off Florida. It contained five bullet-shattered dead men, each with a dollar bill and a broken bottle clutched in rigid fingers. What was the meaning of this savage, shocking mystery? It has never been solved.



Mother ships hove to off our coasts, playing sea-saw in silhouette against a rising moon, or shrouded in fog, as boats from shore crept out to take on contraband whiskey. More than one rum-runner's boat failed to return to port, for our Coastguard had orders to "shoot and sink" on sight.

Some remarkable voyages were made by the rum-runners. Ben Stone drove a twenty-foot cruiser, deep laden with liquor, from Port Royal to Miami, through a howling gale that had half our coastwise shipping storm-bound. But his seamanship didn't save him when hi-jackers blasted him as he tied up to a secluded quay.



There was the tragedy of the ALL ALONE when that notorious Canadian schooner was shelled by the U.S. Coastguard. There were a hundred other tragedies in some of which officers of the law were murdered by these modern pirates. For sea-going bootleggers slew ruthlessly in order to protect their ill-gotten gains.

Justice, Full Measure

By RODERICK LULL

The boy said, "I'll watch all I can, Sheriff."

The sheriff had to choose between justice for the living and justice for the dead.

THE telephone bell reached down into the well of sleep, and brought him slowly into unwilling wakefullness. He turned from side to side in the hot bed. In his part-consciousness he was thinking of the letter he would write to his son. Then the bell rang again, and cursing gently into the darkness he picked up the instrument.

It was like the reenactment of a play seen so many times it had lost all individual meaning. The half-familiar voice saying, "Sheriff! That you, Sheriff?" and his own voice, heavy with sleep and edged with irritation, "Yes, yes, what the hell is it?"

Then the disordered explanation and his own voice again, "All right, Crane, I'll be along. You phoned the doc yet? Well, you can do it as well as me."

He got slowly out of bed and stood erect, a massive man, the shoulders and upper arms tremendous, the head bald as an egg and gleaming, now, with sweat. He got into the light underwear and the

rumpled poplin suit and the splayed canvas shoes. The heat was solid as water, and as heavy.

He thought, "Crane said it was an accident. So why do they wake me up in the middle of the night? The damn fools call me for everything." He thought it without rancor or special interest.

His son's letter was on the table and he glanced down at it. He did not read the words. They were fixed in his mind, as was the shape of the censor's stamp, the color of the envelope, and the envelope's look of having come a long way and passed through many hands.

The letter said:

I'm fine, and so is the war. Wish I could tell you about a lot of things, but they will have to wait. Hope everybody at home is all right. Don't be do damned lazy—let's have some real news in your next, and that doesn't mean the problems you're having with the delinquent taxpayers. If you see Jack Roberts say hello for me and tell him to write. I've wondered if he and Nora are married yet. I hope he won't let that ugly step father of her's bluff him down....

He shook his head and left the house. The sand under his feet was glazed, and even the worn upholstery of the old car was too warm to the touch. He thought, "Anybody who likes the desert can have my part of it." Then he wondered how many times in the last twenty years he had thought the same thing.

He drove slowly, guiding the old car with one hand. Five miles down the road he saw the lights of Henderson's place, a sprawling building with a sign saying, "MOJAVE TAVERN" across the false front that was supposed to make it look like a Mexican hacienda and didn't. The air was so clear that he thought he could all but look through the window and into the big front room with its bar and juke box and tables and chairs.

Walking to the door he thought, "I'll have to get hold of Jack Roberts and tell him to write my boy. "There's nobody Fred would rather hear from than Jack. It's funny how two kids should take to each other in the cradle, practically, and keep it up ever since. In spite of Nora."

Again it was like a scene from a play. There was Crane, the swamper, with frightened, vacant eyes and a trembling, unshaven chin. There was Nora Henderson, standing against one wall and looking at him, her pretty face confused and disturbed, her hands moving a little at her sides, her eyes intelligent and searching and telling him nothing. And there was the bulk on the floor that had been Theodore Henderson. Blood ran in a thin, neat, diminishing stream from Theodore Henderson's broken head to the fireplace ashes.

He did not kneel down, because kneeling was a hard, sweaty thing, and there was no necessity for it. The doc would do that. He would make official what was now completely obvious. The man was dead, from a blow on the head.

He stood looking down at the body, measuring the size of it, thinking of Henderson. He thought coolly, "I suppose it's a bad thing, but I can't be sorry he's dead. It's a bad thing to feel that for anyone but I can't help it and there it is."

Then he sat down in a leather chair and said to no one, "What happened?"

As he had expected, it was Nora who moved. She came away from the wall and he noticed a stiffness when she started to lift one arm; she let the arm fall. She said, "He slipped and struck his head against the fireplace. You can see the mark on that brick. He was excited. He'd been drinking."

Always, he thought, there were overtones in a voice that you wanted to follow and could not follow, because they led back and not forward; they led back into a secret place and closed the door.

"Yes." He was looking at Crane now and the man's eyes were shifty and frightened. Crane moved suddenly and dropped into a chair.

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HE HEARD Nora's breathing, full and a little hurried. "He'd been drinking," she said again. "You know how it was—how it's always been, Sheriff. We'd had—well, words." She paused, then spoke more rapidly. "It wasn't over anything special—just the usual argument. I'm grown up now and he wasn't my real father and I'd a right to say what I wanted to do. Then he turned quickly and—the way I told you—he slipped, hit his head. It killed him."

"Who else was here?" he asked her.

"Just Crane. And my brother. No one else."

The sheriff thought, "Crane, the witness." He asked her, "Where is your brother?"

"He went for the doctor. There's something wrong with his phone."

The sheriff nodded and rubbed a hand across his eyes. He said, his eyes closed, listening, "Jack Roberts?"

The answer came quickly, as if she were waiting and ready. "Jack Roberts had nothing to do with it. My stepfather was getting over the way he felt about Jack." Her voice caught, but she went on immediately. "Jack's making good money now in the plant, and that changed my stepfather's mind."

The sheriff heard the doc's car coming. Then there were two sets of footsteps on the porch. The door opened and he saw the doc's face, cheerful and wise like a parrot's, and behind his shoulder, sullen and dark, the face of George Henderson.

The doc said, "Well, well," and crossed the room to the body. He saw the girl and said formally, "I'm very sorry about this, Nora." This duty done, he knelt briskly and leaned close to Theodore Henderson's big, black-thatched head.

The sheriff was looking at the floor near Henderson's body. It was a dark wood floor and dirty now, as is the floor of any public room at the end of a day. Dirty, except for one little patch. That was clean and shining, as if someone had swept and mopped it carefully.

The sheriff said, "Nora, would you get me a pack of those Epicure cigarettes up there? I'm afraid I've run out."

She had to reach well above her head for the cigarettes, and started to reach with her right arm. Then she winced sharply and reached with her left arm and got the cigarettes and brought them to him.

He thought, "She won't look straight at me. It's too bad!" She was looking a little to one side, her face stiff the way faces are when people try to make them show nothing.

He closed his eyes again, as if against weariness from the heat and the light and all that was in the room. He put his hand over his closed eyes and let himself think. He thought of Jack Roberts, and Nora, and of his own son, and of what his son had lost. There had been the night his son had stood stiffly in front of him and said:

"Nora won't marry me. She's in love with Jack."

He remembered that it had been quite a long time before he had answered. Because already in his mind he had come to think of his son and Nora married. He had found the prospect good. But more than that, he knew that his son had wanted Nora more than he had ever wanted anything.

"I see," he had said. And then, "Jack's a good fellow." And after that, "I'm sorry. I'm very sorry." He had thought helplessly, "Jack is like my own son, too—but he is not my own son."

He thought now, his eyes still closed against the room, "She chose between them. If something happened so that she didn't marry Jack Roberts, she might be still here when my own son comes back. She is young, and the young forget easily." He heard the doc's old knees creak, and opened his eyes.

The doc's voice rattled out the professional words.

The sheriff nodded. "All right, Doc," he said.

He stood up again and the girl was back against the wall, watching him. Crane, the swamper, was still in the hard chair, not watching him. The boy, her brother, was half-hidden in the shadows at the unlighted end of the room, only his eyes alive.

Suddenly the sheriff smelled the room; smelled hard drinking without purpose, and brawls without meaning, and high-cracking laughter that made you sick. And there was an over-smell, which was the brute smell of the late Theodore Henderson.

But always, he thought clearly, something was left behind. After a little while of searching he saw the pipe, lying in a dirty ash-tray on one of the tables. It was a small-bowled, long-stemmed pipe of the kind popular with many men. Theodore Henderson had smoked cigars. George, the boy, smoked cigarettes. As for Crane—he did not know, but if the swamper smoked a pipe at all it would be old and

reeking and black. Crane, he thought, had been there; Crane knew, and it would not be hard to make him talk.

He looked at the girl and said, "Don't go away, Nora."

She started to speak and he didn't stop her. He just let the sentence run down until it trickled out weakly like an engine dying from lack of fuel.

He said, "When I want you I'll come here after you. Until then, stay here."

He heard her brother move and he waited, not turning, for something to be said. But when he looked into the corner the boy was again motionless, his eyes as bright as an animal's.

He walked out the door then, and the doc followed him.

He said, "It could have been like Nora said. He could have fallen, drunk."

The doc said, "He drank all the time. Men like that don't usually fall. Habitual drunkenness brings its own peculiar equilibrium."

The sheriff said nothing. The doc walked past him toward his car. He looked back and his eyes were wise. "Well, Ben?"

"I wonder what you'd find with an autopsy? I say it just out of curiosity."

The sheriff drove back to town and when he reached the office it was almost light. On his desk was a pile of unanswered mail and a basket of tax warrants that needed looking after. He felt infinitely languid.

Eight o'clock came and he left the office. At the door he paused to look at the framed motto on the wall.

A FULL MEASURE OF JUSTICE TO ALL.

Some predecessor had put it there and he had always meant to take it down. It annoyed him. It was as if an uneasy conscience had hung it in punishment for a long-past guilt. But he had never, somehow, got around to taking it down.

He drove up on the Rim, feeling angry with the world. The Rim was a great shelf of rock overlooking the desert, and in the dead center of it was a single house. Before he reached the house he stopped the car and sat looking out across the desert. A remarkable place. It looked trackless and infinitely barren. But there were little water holes, and men who were familiar with the desert knew where they were. In the occasional piles of granite rock there were caves where it was cool and moist. A man who knew where to go and who had a source of food could live a long time out there. A man who had spent much time in the desert and knew its ways. A man who had a reason for hiding out.

Before he reached the house the short, thin figure of a ten-year-old boy ran out. The boy reached him and said, "Gee—hello, Sheriff!"

The sheriff talked slowly, and the boy nodded, looking eager and mysterious. "Sure, Sheriff. I'll watch. I'll watch all I can, Sheriff."

"You probably won't see anything," the sheriff said. "But you might."

Going back, he thought firmly that he was being a damned fool. But there was something he had to know. There was so often something you had to know outside the line of duty, and it drove you out into the heat and caused you effort you didn't want to make, and kept you from the work the county expected. There was something he had to know about Jack Roberts and Nora.

He thought of how his son had congratulated Jack Roberts on his engagement to Nora, showing nothing but a smiling, interested face, and for a moment he was fiercely proud.

When he got back to the office the deputy was there, drinking pop. The deputy said, "I ran into the doc and he told me about it. You tell me a tough so-and-so like Henderson just fell over and killed himself and I tell you you're crazy. Not that I wouldn't be glad for it to happen. I would've been glad to push him myself."

The sheriff said, "Shut up, Hank." He saw the silly sign that said:

A FULL MEASURE OF JUSTICE TO ALL

He went home and sat down at the old desk and pulled a piece of paper toward him and began to write.

Dear Son—It was fine to hear from you and to know you're all right. The papers are full of the fighting where you are. I know you are doing your part, because you have always done your part, but do the best you can to take care of yourself. Of course, your duty comes first. . . .

He was, he thought savagely, writing like an old woman, and he tore the sheet of paper into little bits and dropped them on the floor. He began again, thinking that the heat was slowing his mind up, thinking that if he could really cool for only a few minutes everything would come clear and firm in his mind. He wrote:

Dear Son—I'll do my best to give the news from here. I haven't seen Jack Roberts, but I'm looking for him. Theodore Henderson was killed last night, and there's no question in my own mind but what—

He tore that one up, too, and went over and sat down on the hot, unmade bed. He wondered if his son thought very much of Nora any more. Men in ever-present danger, he knew, did an extra lot of thinking. Where his son was, there would be many nights when you'd think that maybe this was your last night. That would lead to a long lot of thinking. It would be natural for his son to think of Nora at such a time, and to hope.

The sheriff lifted his fist and drove it hard against the crumpled pillow. Then because there was no place else to go, he left the house and drove back to the office. His hands automatic on the wheel, he remembered the small-bowled pipe in the ash-tray, and what Theodore Henderson looked like, dead, and Nora's eyes, like two windows with the blinds pulled down. And Crane the witness.

It was late that afternoon when the boy who lived on the Rim came in.

The boy was sweating and out of breath. "He went out a little while ago, Sheriff. He was carrying a knapsack. He was going toward the Great Rock."

"All right," the sheriff said. "Here." He found a half-dollar in his pocket and gave it to the boy. "That'll be all, bub."

He figured in his mind how long it would take a young, active man to walk across the desert to the Great Rock, and how long it would take two young active men to walk back from it.

He thought, "Perhaps only one will be coming back from the Great Rock to here." He reached out for the thought, quickly, and let himself play with it. One of them could go on. He could go twelve miles and strike a secondary highway. There he could get a lift and in a day or two he could be five-hundred miles away. . . .

AT EIGHT o'clock he set the alarm for three, took a cold shower and went to bed without drying himself. He lay very still in bed, and didn't let himself think of anything at all. Once he started to count sheep leaping a stile, but the concentration of it began to invade the drowsiness, so he abandoned it. When the alarm rang he got up and took his revolver from a drawer and put it in his jacket pocket. It felt bulky, and he took it out and put it back in the drawer. He was acting like a man who'd been to too many movies, he thought.

Anyway, it was probably a wild-goose chase. He sighed and went out to the car.

He drove fast, and came to where the road that led to Henderson's branched off. Above him was the Rim, vast and black and lifeless. A quarter-mile farther on was a group of great palms, spotted in a close rectangle around a small water hole, and he drove his car in among them and switched off the engine and the lights.

He walked back, taking it easy, not using the flashlight. He came again to where the road branched off, and sat down wearily on the hard sand. He closed his eyes and listened. The night was enor-

mously still. The sky above the mountains was beginning to lighten faintly.

The sheriff heard the sound then, and he stood up quickly. It was a sound that a man could make, walking. A moment later he saw the light. It was a tiny light and it bobbed, and he knew it to be a flashlight carried in a man's hand.

He stood waiting without switching on his light. He thought, "If he went clean away and lost himself, Nora would forget him in time. In a year or so my son may be coming back."

Now the light was close and a voice said, "The road's just ahead of here."

The sheriff thought, "That still doesn't mean there are two. Men alone in the desert at night often talk to themselves.

He moved toward the light and switched his own light on. It picked them out clearly. They froze, as animals freeze, caught in the glare of headlights. He saw George Henderson, who was a little ahead. Then he looked at Jack Roberts.

He said, the words seeming very loud, "This is the sheriff, boys. Go along, George. I want to talk with Jack."

They did not answer, and he walked on until he was five feet from them. He said more sharply, "Get going, George." And after a minute the boy mumbled something and walked rapidly away.

Jack Roberts' voice, sudden and sharp, said, "Where've you got her?"

The sheriff's mind was heavy and perplexed. He did not know until that moment how much he had counted on George Henderson's coming back alone.

Jack Roberts said, "George told me what you said to her. How she wasn't to go any place and you'd come for her when you got ready. I would have been there when you came only she coaxed me into going. She thought I'd gone clear away. But I told George where I'd be. I told him I'd wait there and for him to come out and tell me about it.

"Yes," the sheriff said. The light was coming on fast now, and the desert was catching fire from the sky.

Jack Roberts took a long step toward him. The sheriff looked into his face, realizing that this was the first time he had seen it clearly in a long while. It was an angry face, with a little vein pulsing in one temple. The grey eyes were bloodshot and intense and the chin was a hard, stubborn thing.

"You're to leave her alone," he said. "You've got me. I'll say whatever you want me to say."

He could have gone away, the sheriff thought. Then he thought, "I must have known all along it would be like this. I wanted him to go away, and at the same time I wanted him to come back."

He straighted his shoulders. "They'll be easy with her," he said carefully. "They're always easy with women."

Jack Roberts shot forward, and the sheriff saw his fist start. He shifted slightly, feeling his weight, and the fist touched the edge of his shoulder and was gone. He punched the boy once, low in the ribs, and he heard the air go out of him and saw his face change color. Then the boy was lying on the sand, looking up at him, his face blank.

The sheriff said, "All right, Jack. Tell me."

Jack Roberts got slowly to his feet and pressed a hand against his side. He said, "You know how to handle yourself."

"Tell me," the sheriff said, and felt the monotony of the words.

"ALL right. I didn't have to see him. But I wanted to. I wanted to see what he'd say. You may not know it, but he'd acted a lot better with me since I went to work in the plant and was making good money. I came to tell him I was going to enlist, and I was going to marry Nora before I left. And he said—"

There was a pause, and the sheriff said, "I know about what he said. There was something queer about him. He wanted her under his thumb. All the time. He had to have those two to boss around, George and Nora. All the time."

"Yes. So we had an argument, and that was when he grabbed her. He grabbed her and twisted her arm. There was a beer bottle on one of the tables and I picked it up and hit him. I never thought about it. I picked it up and hit him, because he was still twisting her arm."

The sheriff saw the clean spot on the floor. She had swept up the pieces of the broken bottle, and mopped the place where beer had spilled. Her hands would have

been clumsy and shaking, but she had mopped it very clean.

Jack Roberts' voice said steadily, "I knew he was dead when he fell. I knew nobody could fall like that and not be dead. Only I shouldn't of let her talk me into going away."

"It didn't make any difference," the sheriff said.

"I won't be making any more trouble, Sheriff. I'll tell them I killed him and how it happened. So you'll be taking me along now. Only if it's all right with you I'd like a chance to see her. I may not be seeing her much for a while."

The sheriff wondered what his son was doing right this minute. Maybe he was fighting and maybe he was just sitting around his quarters doing nothing. Very likely he was thinking of Nora. Very likely he'd developed the habit of thinking of her most of the time.

The sheriff shook his head; it was aching a little. "Go and see her," he said. "She'll be wanting to see you."

"I'll come down to your office after I've seen her."

The sheriff shook his head again and smiled. "I don't want to see you. You'll be joining the army right away, I expect. Do you figure to marry her before you join?"

He saw the boy's hands move, and his body grow tense. The boy said, "Wait a minute—"

"There's nothing to wait for. I'm going. I haven't time to stand around here gabbing all day. But I asked you if you planned to marry her right now."

"Do you think it'd be all right?"

The sheriff let his breath out slowly and moved toward his car. He spoke straight ahead of him into the desert, but he spoke loudly enough so that the boy behind could hear him. "It's right," he said. "You get along now. She'll be waiting."

He got the motor going and the boy was still standing there, watching him. He didn't look back. This was the finish of it, he thought. Of course there was Crane, the swamper. Crane could talk and make trouble. But he couldn't worry about that.

He waited until eight, then called the doc. He said, "Did you get around to looking inside Henderson?" He looked down at the phone, waiting, thinking idly that it was an ugly, impersonal instrument. All it could give you was a man's voice, and there was a lot more to a man than a voice.

"I did it yesterday," the doc said.

"I don't imagine he was in very good shape," the sheriff said.

"Of course not. After all the liquor he'd soaked up—"

"Yes," the sheriff said. "I imagine he could have just keeled over easy enough. If he had an extra large skinful, say. I imagine it's possible."

"Matter of fact," the doc said, "that's about what happened, by the looks of the heart. Brain concussion too, but not necessarily fatal."

A little later the sheriff started a new letter to his son, and now the words flowed easily out of the pen:

I saw Jack Roberts and he's fine. He and Nora are to be married soon, and then he plans to join the Army. It could be that you two will be together over there some day. . . . Theodore Henderson met with a fatal accident the other day. . . .

When he finished the letter it was fine and fat and newsy. He started out of the office, looking down at the letter in his hand, ready for mailing. The deputy's chair was in the way and he blundered into it and banged it against the wall. The framed sign that said,

A FULL MEASURE OF JUSTICE TO ALL

tumbled off its nail and dropped to the floor.

He stood there looking down at the sign, noticing that the glass hadn't been cracked. It was good tough glass, he thought. Then he bent over, not liking the effort, and picked up the sign and hung it back on the wall. It was a silly sign, he thought, but it had been there a long time without hurting him and it wouldn't hurt him if it stayed longer. Anyhow, he was used to it by now and he always had been one for letting well enough alone. He was plain lazy, he thought, and always would be.

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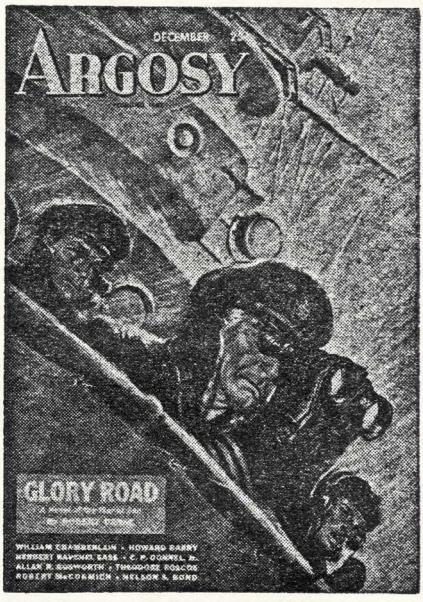

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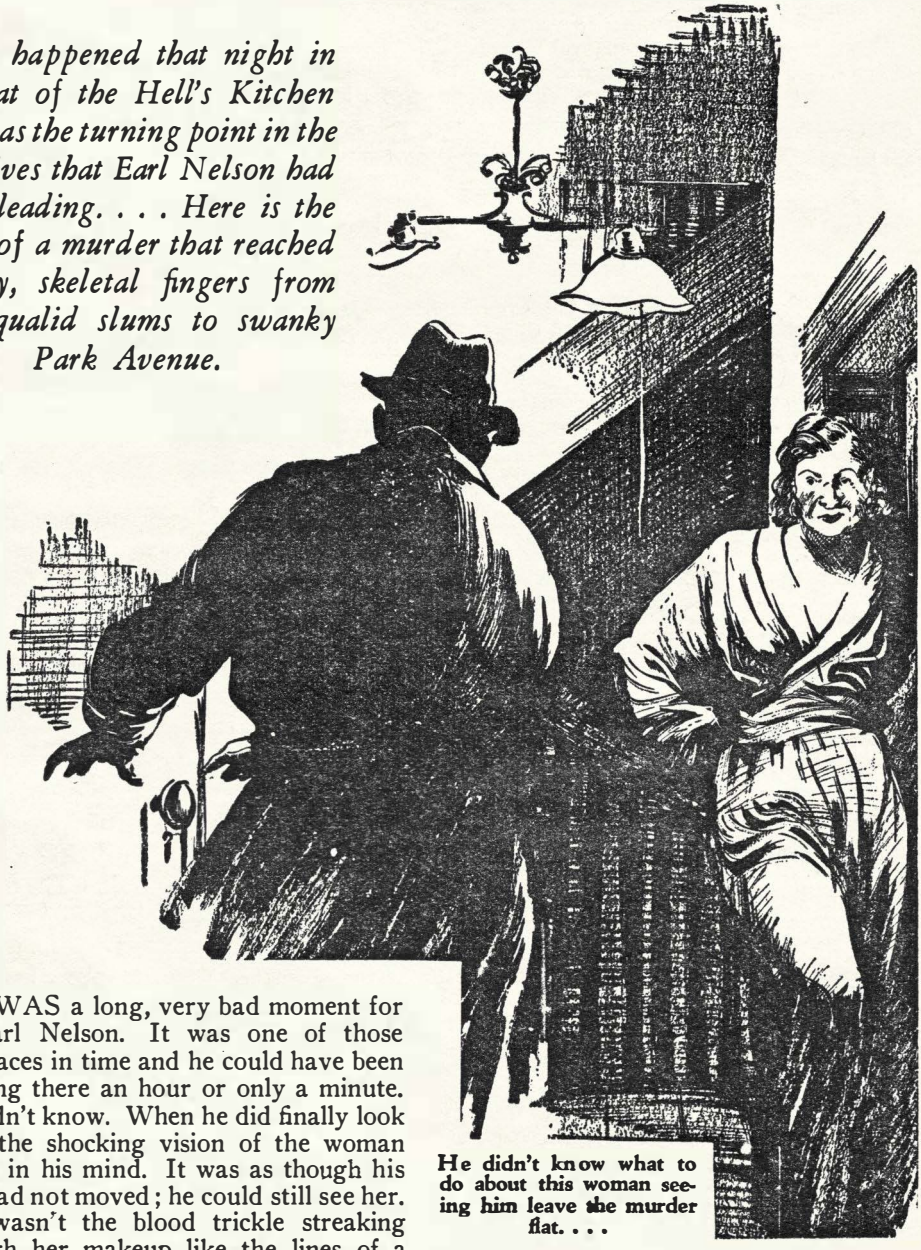

He didn't know what to do about this woman seeing him leave the murder flat. . . .

IT WAS a long, very bad moment for Earl Nelson. It was one of those spaces in time and he could have been standing there an hour or only a minute. He didn't know. When he did finally look away the shocking vision of the woman stayed in his mind. It was as though his eyes had not moved; he could still see her.

It wasn't the blood trickle streaking through her makeup like the lines of a river on a map that got him. It wasn't that she was dead, even. He was too emotionally numbed, still, for that to hit all the way home. It was what the years had done to this woman—Jeanette Molloy.

The mouth that had once been a cute, self-indulgent pout was now loose and lax. The skin was grainy even through a thick-

ness of rouge. There were pouches under her eyes. She didn't look forty at all. She looked sixty.

He shook his head and the vision slipped away. He found that he was looking across the small, shabby parlor and into a wall mirror at himself.

"She's not the only one," he said.

His own features had fallen apart these last few minutes. His fingers went up to the thick iron gray hair at his temples and now it did not make him look distinguished as Eileen always said. It just made him look old.

He did not look like Earl Nelson the famous cartoonist, the man-about-town. He looked like an old man who had been holding himself together by a forced tremendous vitality for too long and who had suddenly gone to pieces.

He was glad Eileen was not here to see him like this. Thinking about her helped.

Through an open window somewhere in the back of the flat the sound of drunken, off-key singing came up from Tenth Avenue. In a neighboring flat a man snored raucously.

Earl was suddenly perspiring. The close air of this tenement flat grew harder to take. He looked around at the drab furnishings and irrelevantly, he thought, *What a place to have to live!* . . . His eyes flashed over the corpse of the woman on the floor. He changed his thought. *What a place to die!*

He quite suddenly could not get out of there quickly enough. He threw glances all around the room, saw no evidence that would tell the police anything. Tiptoeing, he stepped away from the corpse of the woman on the floor. In the back of his brain beat a million little impulses—there were things that he should do here before he left. But there was this pull to go and he was all roiled up inside and his feet just took him along and that was all there was to it.

He went out into the hall. A single dirty bulb hung from a chain out there and its light made his handsome, middle-aged features appear sallow and sunken again as they had looked that moment back inside when he had lost control.

He turned from shutting the door quietly behind him and found a woman standing in the doorway of the flat across the hall. She was grinning at him. Even with the width of the hall between them he could smell the alcohol on her breath.

She didn't say anything, just grinned with that little drunken knowing look.

"You're a gentleman," she said. "I ain't never knowed a *real* gentleman, but I can tell." It was strange to hear her speak. A big, blowzy redhead, like her, in a faded kimona, with that thin, whiney voice. "Whyn't you come see me, too, Handsome. I'm good as *her*. But I ain't had no real gentleman call on me."

EARL NELSON felt his heart jumping. He didn't know what to do about this woman seeing him leave the flat. He half raised one hand in an explanatory gesture. "I was just—" Whatever he was going to say, he didn't finish.

He pulled his eyes away. He made his legs move. He walked very fast down the hall and down the stairs and out onto the street.

Perhaps, he thought, *she was too drunk. Maybe she won't remember or be able to describe me.*

A block away he was still thinking about the woman. He decided that she must be the neighbor Eileen said her mother was always fighting with. He kept hearing that ridiculously squeaky voice. He kept seeing the way she had grinned at him.

There was a light haze over the street and it put a muddy halo around the dimmed street lights. It gave an unreal, dream-like aura to the deserted avenue. It made Earl Nelson feel like one of those little shadowy symbols of terror who slink across the jackets of mystery novels. He kept looking behind him, but nobody was there.

Now he began again to ponder the man who had followed him all the early part of the evening. At least the man *could* have been trailing him. Earl Nelson hadn't been sure. But he had shaken him, anyhow, before coming to Jeanette Molloy's Tenth Avenue tenement.

He went down to his studio in Greenwich Village, but Eileen was not there. He thought that perhaps she might have gone there to hide. He went back to the tavern on Lexington Avenue where they

always met—where she had failed to show up earlier—and that was just a last hope and it washed out as he had suspected that it would.

Where else to look for Eileen, he didn't know. He *ought* to see her. She had to have help. She would need money and advice. He was the only one who could give her those things. She would be crazy with fear and worry. Anyone would. He wondered how long it would be before the police learned of Jeanette Molloy's death. He wished he knew what had happened up there. It must have been pretty damned bad to lead to murder.

He turned into his own apartment near Sixty-Fourth street and the doorman said, "Good evening, Mr. Nelson," just like any other night, just as if everything were all right.

He nodded and went on past the desk, across the lushly carpeted lobby and into the elevator. The elevator boy grinned at him as the lift shot up.

"Those last two cartoons of yours in this week's *Metropolitan* are honeys, Mr. Nelson," he said.

Earl Nelson tried to remember which ones those were. He said, "Thanks, Jimmy. Glad you liked 'em."

"I don't know how you do it," Jimmy said. He shook his head. "What a sense o' humor!"

Yes, he thought, *Nelson the funny man, the pen-and-pencil Pagliacci!*

"It's a racket," he said, deprecatingly. "Just like running an elevator, Jimmy."

They stopped at the twelfth floor then and Nelson got out, walked down the hall. Standing before the door, he straightened his shoulders, set his features. He hoped Marcia had gone to bed. He didn't know whether he could get by her tonight. It had been bad enough all those other nights. And she had been acting awfully strange lately, as though she suspected something.

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SHE was sitting in the corner by the radio in the big chair. She put down the magazine that she held. He knew that she hadn't really been reading.

"Hi," she said. She smiled but there was something about the way she did it that made him feel very funny inside.

"Hello, Marcia," he said. He walked across the room without looking at her, taking off his jacket. He slung it across the chair, took a cigar from a humidor, flopped into another chair.

He took a long time to light the cigar and then through the protection of the smoke cloud he'd made, he looked at her. He said, "You don't look well, Marcia. I really wish you wouldn't sit up like this. It's quite late."

"I know," she said. She had a soft, soothing voice. She was a slight woman, not thin, but delicately boned. She had a small, pretty, matured face and her hair was all gray, beautifully coiffured. Instead of making her look older, though, her hair accentuated the youthful loveliness of her face. Nelson could never realize that she was only a year younger than himself, that she was the mother of a boy as big as Earl, Junior.

He looked briefly in the general direction of the boy's bedroom and it was almost like a long, caressing touch, that look.

Nelson hadn't wanted to lie and sneak on Marcia the way he had done. It was largely because of their son that he had done those things. Because of Marcia, too. He wondered what would happen, now. It would be hell on a kid of thirteen.

Marcia had got up from the chair. She was standing over by the window now, looking out into the night. She seemed so tiny there, between the richly colored drapes.

"Earl," she said, without turning around, "I've got to talk to you. I'll try not to be melodramatic. I—"

Her voice trailed off. He saw her fingers clench around the drapes. The light caught in the diamonds of her wedding ring for a moment, flashing.

"Go on," he said.

She waited just a moment and during that time his palms got damp and he could feel the pulses in his temples and he kept thinking over and over, *Here it comes. Here it comes.* HERE IT COMES!

"You were so obvious, Earl," said Marcia. "You were so—well—unclever, I—I couldn't help suspecting. I guess it was because you weren't *used* to doing things like that. Right from the beginning

you acted strangely. You got so quiet, so preoccupied. And you started going down to the studio, you said, at nights, to work. Then there was that lipstick on your collar, that one night."

He remembered that. She was right, he hadn't been clever, he hadn't known about the things to be careful of, to look for. He had seen the lipstick the next morning and got it off.... But apparently that had been too late.

She was still talking, saying:

"... and so I hired this detective, Earl. I hated to do anything like that. It seemed so sneaky. But I had to *know*. Please understand, Earl."

She stopped talking again. She still hadn't turned around. He hoped she wouldn't. He didn't want to have to face her. If she was only some other kind of woman. If she raved and cursed and threw things at him— But this was Marcia. This was what made it so damned rotten.

"I see," he said. He remembered the man following him. It had not been his imagination.

"She's awfully young, Earl," Marcia said. "Terribly young. Oh, Earl, how shall I tell you—"

"You know all about her, then," he said.

"Well—a lot. He checked as much as he could. I had to, Earl, had to find out as much as I could. Her name is Eileen Molloy and she's a stenographer for an advertising firm and she lives with her mother in an old tenement on Tenth Avenue."

"That's right," he said. "Your man did a good job."

How it sounds, he thought, *the middle-aged rich man and the Hell's Kitchen stenog. What the tabloids could do with that!*

MARCIA turned away from the window. She swerved toward a table, picked up a cigarette. Her long, pale slim fingers were trembling so she could hardly light it.

"I don't want to go sob sister on you," she said. She made a little futile gesture with her hands. "I just don't know how to—how to cope—well, what do we *do,* Earl? I mean, what *is* it? Do you—love her?"

He jerked his head angrily. "Of course I do," he said hotly. "She—"

He stopped. He shouldn't have said that. It had just come out. Anything he could add now would just make things worse. He couldn't *explain.*

"Well, I don't know, Earl." The tears came, then. She didn't cry. There were just two wet streaks down her cheeks. She wheeled suddenly away from him, toward the bedroom. She said: "I'm sorry. I thought we could talk it over tonight, Earl. Perhaps—tomorrow."

He heard the slap of her mules across the bare floors between rugs and then he heard the bedroom door close. He kept sitting there. The cigar had gone dead in his fingers. He set it down. He got up and walked across and stood in the same window where she had stood and looked out. He could see down onto the street. The beat cop was walking along, swinging his club, and there was that same haze, yellowish, in the street light. There was nobody else on the street. A cab shot through, fast.

He turned and looked at the rich furnishings of the apartment. He thought of that other flat he'd been in tonight—the contrast. He could see Jeanette Molloy lying there, twisted and dead.

"I've got everything," he said to himself. "I'm a big-shot in my profession." He glanced at some framed originals of

his cartoons over the bar. "I've made a lot of money. I'm mildly famous. I've got Earl, Junior, and Marcia. . . . And it can all go like that." He made a gesture with his hands.

He flopped on the sofa and sometime in the next few hours he dozed off. . . .

It was bright morning when Marcia woke him up. She shook him and he sat up slowly, rubbed his eyes and his whole face with his hands. He felt stiff all over. He looked up at her.

"Wake up, Earl," she said. "Some gentlemen want to talk with you. They—they're from the police."

He twisted to look around her. He saw the two men standing in the doorway of the room. They were both oldish and slightly built, neatly dressed. They held their hats in their hands.

"Police?" he repeated.

It all came rushing back to him, then. He felt a surging in his stomach. He stood up and swayed just a little, but caught himself. He smoothed down his ruffled gray hair, poked sleep from the corners of his eyes with his fingers.

Just take it easy, he thought. *Wait till you awaken a little. Let* them *talk.*

"Some coffee, Marcia," he said. "Quickly, if you can." He rubbed his face some more, motioned toward the chairs. He said toward the door: "Come in. Sit down."

They did that. Nelson took a chair, facing between them. The oldest one spoke. He had a sharp, thin face with small, narrow gray eyes and a slightly hooked nose. He had sandy hair clippered very short around the ears and in back. His lips were wide and muscular and kewpie shaped.

"Sorry to bust in on you like this, Mr. Nelson," he said. "I'm Lieutenant Baker from Homicide." He gestured toward the other man. "This is Sergeant Daley, my assistant. A woman was killed over on Tenth Avenue last night. We thought perhaps you could help us."

Hold tight, Nelson told himself. *Very tight.*

"Yes," he said. His voice sounded all right. "Why? Why should I be able to help?"

Marcia came in with the coffee. She had the percolator on a tray and three cups. She said to Baker and Daley, "I thought perhaps you gentlemen—"

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EARL NELSON drank his coffee black. It scalded his mouth a little but he hardly noticed. "Yes?" he prompted.

Baker blew on his coffee, took a sip and set it down. "There really isn't much to it," he said. "We got the girl—the daughter. There's not much question she's the one who did it, but we'd like to clear up this angle on it. You see the girl had one of your cards in her purse when we picked her up, Mr. Nelson. And a neighbor, across the hall described a visitor to the murder apartment, late last night. That description fits you pretty much."

There was a pause as Baker went back to his coffee. He suddenly looked straight at Nelson. There was a little twist to one side of his muscular lips. "The kid's name is Eileen Molloy."

"What you're saying," Nelson finished his coffee, fumbled for cigarettes, "is that this girl killed her mother? Are you sure she did it?"

"Not this early we aren't *sure,*" Baker said. "We never are. That's the way it's lining up. Neighbors testify that the mother was pretty rotten to the girl. They used to fight a lot. It was the girl's nailfile did the job. And we caught her in the West Side bus terminal, getting ready to blow town."

"I see," Nelson lit his cigarette, fighting not to let his fingers tremble.

"What about that card, Mr. Nelson? What about that woman's testimony? Was it you?"

Earl Nelson looked at both these men. Daley had poured his coffee into the saucer, was sloshing it noisily, peeking up from under his shaggy brows toward Nelson. Nelson sat there puffing his cigarette.

He realized that it was all going to come out now. That blowzy red-headed woman must not have been as drunk as he had thought. It was all going to come out.

"Yes," he said, finally. "I—know that girl. I did go up there last night."

He looked up toward the door of the room. Marcia was standing there. Her

arms were folded and she was leaning against the jamb. Her face was very quiet, but a waxy paleness had settled on her features. Her cheekbones stood out against it.

Baker's narrow, intelligent eyes blinked. He sipped at his coffee, stared at Earl Nelson. He looked around the room. His eyes stopped at the cartoons on the wall.

"Oh," he said. "You're *that* Nelson. She's a pretty kid. What'd she do, model for you?"

"No," Nelson said. "Our relationship was—personal."

"Why did you go up to her house late last night?" Baker demanded, quietly.

"I had a date with her at ten o'clock. She didn't show up. I—I had something I wanted to discuss with her, so after waiting a couple of hours I went to her home."

"Was the old dame dead when you got there?" Daley wanted to know. He looked toward Baker for approval and this time he caught Baker's look and got very red. "Sorry, Lieutenant," he mumbled.

"Yes," Nelson told them. "Jeanette Molloy was dead when I got there. It was quite a shock. I didn't expect her to be there at all—she usually works nights —and to find her like that. . . ."

Lieutenant Baker stood up. "I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to come downtown with us, Mr. Nelson." He shot a quick glance toward Marcia in the doorway. "We can go into this business more thoroughly down there."

"Of course," Nelson said. He stood up, too. "I—if it's all right, I'd like to speak to my wife for a moment."

Baker nodded and Nelson strode across the room. Marcia had disappeared. He found her standing by the bedroom window looking out. She turned when he came in, took a couple of steps toward him. She grabbed his hands, and her grip was so tight it hurt him.

"Earl, you—you didn't have anything to do with this—crime?"

Her eyes bored into his. He didn't look away. As gently as possible he took his hands from her. "No," he said. "No, Marcia. I wish I knew what to say to you. I wish I could tell you—"

He broke off and she said, quickly: "What, Earl? Tell me what?"

"Nothing." He turned his face away. "I'll see if I can keep this quiet. I don't know, though. If any newspapermen do come, you don't have to see them."

He turned away and went back out into the living room. Baker and Daley were standing waiting, with their hats on.

"Okay," Nelson said.

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RIDING down in the police sedan Nelson wondered whether he should tell the police the truth—the whole truth. Either way it was going to bring disgrace to his family. Whether the story came out that he had been having an affair with a girl accused of murder—or if the other story was made public—he could not decide which would be the lesser of the two evils.

He thought about Eileen, too. He knew that if she had killed Jeanette, there'd been a good reason for it. He'd help her all he could. He'd spend every cent of money he could raise, if he had to.

An assistant D. A. named McCormick was down at Headquarters. Nelson told him that he'd met Eileen Molloy several weeks ago and that he'd been seeing her regularly ever since, in the evenings.

"Your wife didn't know about this affair, did she Nelson?" Lieutenant Baker put in, after awhile.

"No," Nelson said. "And it wasn't an affair." His face got red and the lean underside of his jaw ridged.

"What would *you* call it?"

Nelson clenched his fists but he didn't answer. Baker went on: "Did the kid's mother — this Jeanette Molloy — know about you and her daughter."

"I—I don't think so," Nelson said.

McCormick and Baker looked at each other. "What do you think?" McCormick said.

Baker pursed his kewpie lips, pulled at them with his fingers. "I don't think this angle is going to help us much. I don't even know why we should bother. We've got the kid's confession. She had a fight with the old lady about dough and killed her, lost her temper. I guess that's all there is to it."

"You mean Eileen confessed?" Nelson said. "She admits she killed her mother?"

"That's right." Baker watched him closely. "What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing," Nelson said. "I guess. . . . Can—can I see her? I'd like to talk to her. I'd like to get her a lawyer, too."

The homicide detective and the assistant D. A. exchanged glances again. McCormick nodded and Baker went out of the office. A few minutes later he came back with a young girl handcuffed to a police matron.

She was tall and slim. She had a lean, strong jaw for a girl. Her eyes were very big and very blue. All her makeup had worn off and there were smudges of tiredness under her eyes. She stood looking at Earl Nelson.

He put one hand out toward her in a tentative gesture. He smiled and his face felt stiff. He said: "Hello, honey."

She didn't smile back. She looked away from him toward Baker. "I don't know this man," she said. "What are you pulling?"

"Save it, Eileen," Baker said. "Mr. Nelson's told us all about it."

Nelson realized then, that she had been trying to protect him, keep him out of it. He felt a quickening inside of him. She was a good brave kid. Even in all this trouble, she'd thought of him, tried to give him a break.

He walked over to her, caught her free hand. As soon as he touched her, she broke. She flung her arm around his neck and buried her face against his shoulder and sobbed.

"Could I talk to her alone?" he asked McCormick. "Just for a few minutes? Alone?"

McCormick fiddled with the watchchain across his paunch a moment, then ordered the matron to take off the handcuffs. She did that and they all left the office. Nelson and Eileen were there alone.

She stopped sobbing a moment and he said: "Tell me all about it, darling. It's all right, now. It's all right."

After drying her eyes a little on his handkerchief, she said: "She found out about us, yesterday. Mother found out who you were. I don't know how, but she did. When I came home from work last night, she pitched right into me. She—she wanted me to blackmail you. We had a big fight about it."

SHE stopped talking all of a sudden, leaned back and her eyes searched his. "But you know about that. Isn't that why—" She broke off, quickly, glanced back over her shoulder toward the closed door of the office.

"*I* didn't know," he said. Little frown lines formed between his eyes. "How could I, Eileen? . . . But never mind that. Go on."

"That's all," she said. "We had a big battle about it. I told her I couldn't do that to *you*. It was bad, darling. It was terrible. She hit me. She chased me all over the house and—and—"

The sobbing came back. He waited until she quieted again and then he said: "But why didn't you meet me at the tavern? If you'd done that, I could have helped."

She gave him that queer, searching look again. She said: "I was too *scared*. When I went back there about an hour later and saw her lying there like that, I—I got panicky. I knew on account of the nailfile and the fight we'd had that the police would think I did it. I went to a movie and stayed there until very late and then I went to the bus station. I was going to run away."

"Wait a minute." He gripped her arms hard. "Let me get this straight. What do you mean, you went back there, Eileen?"

"Just that. I went back and she was dead, then, and I realized that right after I left the first time, she must have phoned you or something and when you knew that *she* knew, you went crazy and went there and—"

"Eileen," he broke in. "You think *I* killed her? You mean you *didn't?* You've just been covering me?"

"Shhh!" she glanced back over her shoulder at the door, again. "It's all right. *You* can't get involved in it. You've got to think of your family."

He didn't get a chance to answer that. The door opened and McCormick and Baker and the matron came back in. Nelson jumped at them.

"Listen," he said. "This girl didn't kill her mother. You hear that. She didn't do it. She thought *I* did it and she's been shielding—"

"I know," Baker stopped him. "I heard the whole thing. There's a bug under that

desk there." Baker stood and stared.

"So you know!" Nelson said. "She didn't do it. You've got to let her—"

"And maybe you two knew there was a bug in here," Baker cut in. "Maybe that was a cute little act you cooked up to throw us off."

"But it wasn't!" Nelson was almost screaming. He watched the matron lead Eileen out of the office. He started after her.

Baker and McCormick stepped between him and the girl. "Take it easy," McCormick said. "If there's any truth in what you two said in here, we'll find it out. Now, listen, Mr. Nelson, you just go home and take it easy. We'll get in touch with you."

He went up to his studio in the Village and went to work fiddling around with roughs, scratching around for an idea for a new cartoon.

All day long, as he worked, he thought about Eileen and the murder of Jeanette Molloy. He went over all the angles. He didn't go out to eat. He kept working with his hands on pencil and paper. He kept working with his mind on his problem. His problem and Eileen's problem.

By six o'clock that evening he had made up his mind. He would go home to Marcia. He would tell her the whole thing. He'd put himself at her mercy. That was the right thing, and no matter what happened, no matter what it did to his life, he had to do that. Maybe the two of them could help Eileen.

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HALF an hour later when he walked into his own living-room once more, three people were there. Marcia was sitting in the same chair she'd used last night. On the sofa was Lieutenant Baker. Sitting next to him, her hands folded in her lap, was Eileen.

Earl Nelson stopped in the doorway. He looked from one to the other. He opened his mouth several times but words wouldn't seem to form and he never did say anything.

"Come on in, Earl," Marcia said. She smiled. It was the old smile that she used to have, that he hadn't seen in several weeks now.

He looked at Eileen. She was smiling, too. Only it was more like a grin. She looked as though she was bursting with something. She was freshly made up and she looked prettier than he had ever seen her. She was wearing a dress he hadn't seen on her before.

He kept looking at that dress and he became more and more sure of it but he still couldn't believe it. It was one of Marcia's. It was one of his wife's dresses and Eileen was wearing it.

"Where've you been, Mr. Nelson?" Baker said. His long, muscular lips twitched. "We've been waiting for you quite awhile." He looked at his watch. "It's a good thing you came. I've got to get back downtown."

"What is this?" Earl Nelson said.

"Nothing much," Baker said. "It's just that your daughter's free. She's clear as a whistle." He grinned outright, then. "So are *you*," he added. "All the way around."

"Oh," Nelson said. "You—you found out—about that?"

Marcia got up then. She came running across the room to him, very fast. She threw herself into his arms.

"Yes," she was saying, "yes we found out, Earl, that Eileen's your daughter, that you were married before—to Jeanette Molloy."

He pushed her away. He held her at arm's length, his fingers gripping hard into her shoulders. "But you know what that means, Marcia. You and I—and Earl, Junior. Marcia, the divorce that Jeanette got was no good. It was a phony. I didn't know that until after I married you."

"I know," she said. "Eileen has told me the whole thing. How she saw you one day when you went up to the advertising agency where she works, on business, how she recognized you from an old picture her mother had. She told me how you both decided to not let anyone know because it would all come out and it would make *our* marriage — well — no good."

"Yes," he said, a little dazed. "Jeanette Molloy had never associated me with Nelson, the cartoonist. She—"

"But it's all right now," Marcia cut in. "Lieutenant Baker checked back and he found out that there was another divorce put through by Jeanette a year later, and that one was okay, so—"

"You're not kidding?" he said. His eyes went wide. He felt himself start to tremble. He looked at Baker. The lieutenant's face was split in a grin. He nodded affirmatively.

"But, look," Nelson said. "Jeanette was murdered. Eileen—what—"

"We got the killer." Baker stood up, picked up his hat, twirled it on his finger. "That redheaded dame who lived across the hall, Mr. Nelson, the one who tried so hard to put the finger on you. Jeanette Molloy had been going after the redhead's husband. The redhead got barrelled that night, and had a battle with Jeanette. In a drunken rage, she killed her."

Swiftly, then, Baker gave Earl Nelson the rest of it. He told him that they knew Nelson wasn't the murderer. Jeanette Molloy had been dead long before he got there. And they figured the girl was lying. It didn't make sense that she would wipe fingerprints off the murder weapon and then leave it right there for the police—her own nailfile. So Baker had gone to work on tenants in the house. It hadn't taken long to break the redheaded woman down, once he got on the right track.

Marcia went over and sat down beside Eileen, then, and put her arm around her. She looked up at Nelson. "I feel so old," she said. "Can you imagine me, Earl, with a grown daughter?"

He just looked at her. On the way out the door, Lieutenant Baker jerked his thumb back toward the framed cartoons on the wall. "I like those things, Mr. Nelson," he said. "I got a rumpus room down in my basement at home. I wonder would you mind giving me a couple of those—autographed—some time?"

"Sure," Nelson said. He didn't even look at Baker, didn't see him leave the apartment. He kept staring at his wife and daughter. And then Earl, Junior, came galloping in from outdoors.

Nelson looked at all of them—the whole family. He got a silly grin on his face. He began to feel kind of numb in the knees and he staggered a little as he walked toward them. But he didn't care.

ODDITIES IN CRIME

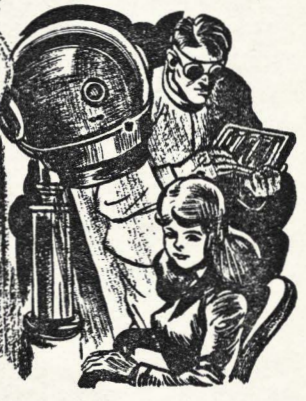
by JON L. BLUMMER

A single hair may be the key to a mystery.

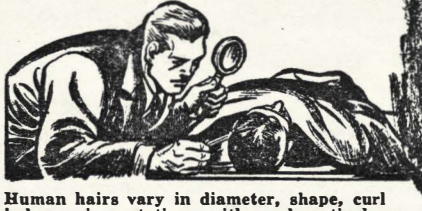
A few hairs on the sweater of a murder suspect tied him to his crime when tests showed that they corresponded to the known hair of his victim.

The hair is the last part of the human body to deteriorate. Even after twenty-five years the hair of a buried corpse changes so little that it may be identified as male or female.

The FBI uses a microtome, a miniature guillotine, capable of slicing a cross section of hair 1/25,000th of an inch thin. Under the microscope the patterns formed by the pigmentation cells, almost as individual as fingerprints, may determine whether two hairs came from the same head.



Hairs that seem alike under ordinary light, glow in different colors when exposed to violet ray. Hair from a natural blond may shine with many hues but that of a bleached blond will always fluoresce with the same color. One woman won a divorce when hair from a hair brush in her husband's apartment was subjected to the ray test and proved to be that of his stenographer.



Human hairs vary in diameter, shape, curl index, pigmentation, pith and cuticular scale. One scientist has classified 22,000 varieties. This knowledge brought to justice a murderer who attempted to collect his own insurance by partially destroying the body of a man similar in appearance to himself.

THE EXPENDABLE

Inspector Cardigan's clothes were melting away.

Professor "Easy" Bart's new curve-lined assistant, glamorous Ellen Parr, didn't know whether the professor was just plain zanypate-wacky, or the brilliant—if eccentric—criminologist that his university degrees proclaimed him to be. But after she saw him turn Inspector Cardigan green—that's right, green—she was ready to believe anything . . . if she could stay alive long enough.

SPY

Introducing a Startlingly New Crime-cracking Combine: Professor "Easy" Bart, and Gartergirl Ellen Parr, in the First of a Great New Series. . . .

By F. ORLIN TREMAINE

CHAPTER ONE

'Easy' Does It

"HOW do you know the war won't land in the front yard here the minute you've gone?" Professor Everett Zebulon Bart looked over the rim of his coffee cup like an owl blinking at the sun. Across the table, Dr. Frank Temple shrugged.

"No point in debating your logic. I know it's unbeatable. But my own is very simple. War—doctor—front. I figure I'm needed."

"Zanypate piffle!" Bart exploded, snatching up the morning paper and waving it. "Young Van Pelt's disappeared," He glared triumphantly at his friend.

"What?" Temple half rose from his seat, then dropped back limply. "But they may not even call you in on it at all."

"I'll give 'em five days," Bart snapped. "If he could evaporate with four police bodyguards on the job night and day, he can stay evaporated, and will as far as the police are concerned."

Dr. Temple sighed. "You overlook one thing, Bart, that even you can't change.

I signed up yesterday and was accepted. I'm in the service."

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TEMPLE'S eyes roamed about the walnut-panelled den, and over its familiar if unusual trappings. The wrought-iron incense burners in the four corners, the hearth with its vari-colored flames, the two leather chairs, the gadgets! The twelve by twelve room had a narrow border of glass eyes set four feet above the floor, staring at you wherever you happened to sit, and whatever the light might be.

"Never forget that eyes may be watching you, ears listening to you, wherever you are and you'll miss a lot of trouble," Bart had said when he had that border inset. Leaving all this would wrench out something that was part of Frank Temple's life.

The disappearance of Henry Van Pelt might be the forerunner of malevolent acts all over the nation. The papers had hinted at the revolutionary nature of his new weapon. Temple sighed again and got to his feet.

"Good-bye, Easy. I'm going to miss you. But you'll find someone who can help on this Van Pelt thing, I'm sure."

"Au revoir, Frank. I'll miss you, too. But you'll be back." Professor Bart was lighting a little cone of acrid incense in the corner nearest the hearth. He moved to the second corner and lighted another, then moved toward the third. Temple departed quietly. The incense held its own significance. "Easy" Bart was already working on the Van Pelt mystery and his thoughts were no longer contained within the room.

Bart, medium height, trim but slightly stooped, finished lighting the cone in the fourth corner. He frowned slightly as his eye caught the littered table, but he pressed a knob on the molding and the table disappeared through the panelled wall. Then he sank into a leather-upholstered chair before the hearth.

After a moment one foot moved enough to press a button and multi-colored tongues of flame licked at the artificial coals in the grate and set them aglow.

The professor* sat silent and unmoving, his eyes focussed on the dancing flames. Pungent fumes from the incense permeated the air and he inhaled deeply. Gradually the pupils of his eyes contracted until they looked like tiny beads reflecting the flames.

The phone rang. Bart's depressed a tiny lever on the hearth, and without so much as turning his head he said:

"Yes?"

The voice at the other end of the wire seemed to speak from within the room.

"Professor Bart?"

Bart still remained motionless, but answered as if the other person sat beside him.

"Of course it's Bart. What can I do for you? I have time to hear just ten words."

Bart smiled at the muttered epithet, and warned: "That's three gone."

"Bart, be reasonable. It's about Van Pelt. There's hell to pay—"

"Oh, that!" Bart was sarcastic. "I won't touch it until you've worn out the rest of the brains in the country. But have your reports teletyped to me here anyway. I'm always interested."

Bart's foot lifted from the lever and the police inspector's voice was cut off. Once more the professor inhaled deeply and stared at the flames. Half an hour slipped away. The cones of incense had burned out but the fumes still hung heavy in the air. Bart eased himself from his chair and moved briskly to the side wall where, through a hinged panel, he extracted the reports which had come in via teletype.

Adjusting his glasses and switching on a small desk light, he sat down before a full-sized desk which opened from a hinged panel. The professor's manner was keen and alert as he made notes substantiating the train of thought which had been built up in his brain during the period of concentration. He wrote:

Henry Van Pelt was thirty-seven years

*FOOTNOTE: Professor E. Z. Bart resigned from his chair in general science at Presidion College when his uncanny deductions solved the *Regua* murder in Chicago without his even visiting that city. The *Abbott* case, and the famous *Wine Glass* mystery followed. Bart's New York address has been held a comparative secret by his friends, and by the police and the intelligence services.

of age. Born in New York City. Took a pre-med course at the University of Rochester. Switched his interest to chemistry. Took courses at Columbia University in New York. Became interested in special research, the nature of which cannot be divulged for military reasons. Spent a year abroad pursuing this study at Cambridge, England; Heidelberg, Germany; and at the Sorbonne in Paris, France.

BART examined his notes again, and stopped as he came to the reference to the Sorbonne. He reached toward the wall, and spun an almost invisible dial until it clicked into the fourth notch from the top. His right foot automatically depressed a tiny lever and he waited. Presently there was another clicking sound, and a man's voice spoke brusquely:

"Grove Drake speaking."

"Yes, Grove. Bart calling. Any luck?"

"Three have passed. Three out of more than two hundred."

Drake's voice seemed to come from within the room just as the inspector's had earlier. And Bart simply spoke in his ordinary tone of voice without turning his head. The amplifying system was so fine he had no need to bother with crude instruments, yet he sounded displeased as he answered:

"Why in tunket three, Drake? I only need *one!*"

"She's on her way to you now," Drake told him stiffly, "I have two in reserve, just in case—"

"Okay." Bart sounded relieved. "Data?"

"Some. I've checked with the F. B. I. and the police files. She was cleared for defense work but never took it. Answers original, even ingenious. Age 24. Orphan. White. Blue eyes—"

A bell rang.

"Just a minute, Drake."

Bart spun a disc, opening a ground glass plate, like a camera finder and, by means of a periscope arrangement, examined the person who stood by the front door.

"Look's as if she's here, Drake. Stand by." Bart lifted his foot and the connection was broken.

Louise Nina Parr stood uncertainly before the huge door of the house to which she had been directed. It was set in a wide lawn, the yard surrounded by a high stone wall. The door swung silently open. She stepped inside, and the door swung silently to, behind her.

She was alone in the hall, and despite herself a little shiver raced down her spine.

In swift review, the morning's interview with Mr. Drake flashed through her mind. Two hundred questions that sounded like a psychiatrist's dream! Her answers had been partly honest, partly facetious. Yet here she was, so they must have been satisfactory!

A voice from nowhere directed her to a door at the end of the hall, where she stepped into a walnut panelled room and looked into a long row of gleaming eyes. They sharply accentuated the eerie feeling of unreality that had gripped her as she entered the house.

"Won't you sit down?"

Bart examined the girl from head to feet with his bright penetrating gaze as she crossed to the chair. She colored slightly.

"How old are you, Miss Parr?"

"Twenty-five."

"Twenty-four," said a voice speaking apparently from within the room. Louise Parr jumped involuntarily.

"Which is it?" Bart asked sharply.

"Why—why, actually I'll be twenty-five next week—"

"Where were you born?" Bart asked.

"Kalamazoo, Michigan," Louise answered, remembering the answer she had given on the questionnaire.

"Madison, Wisconsin," said the disembodied voice, and Miss Parr stirred uncomfortably. The voice sounded oddly like the Mr. Drake of the interview. Yet how could it be?

"What is the truth?" Bart asked softly. "Madison, is it not?"

The girl nodded.

CHAPTER TWO

Brains and Legs

"YOU see," the professor said, "a criminologist is really a personified lie-detector. Let's be frank with each other. I'm looking for an

assistant. She must be daring, frank, honest, but also ingenious; so I didn't mind too much your inventiveness on the questionnaire.

"Before you decide you must know that the job involves danger. You must obey orders instantly and without question; knowing that your complete trust in me is essential even if I tell you to walk into a fire, or dive into an icy sea.

"And I must be able to place my full faith in you, for my life may depend upon you many times."

Louise Nina Parr took a deep breath. Professor Bart had grown in her mind, while he spoke, into the great man the newspapers had called him.

"I definitely want the job," she said. "I trust you. I want risk and adventure." Bart noticed that she had a low, pleasing voice, and that she was a very beautiful woman.

"Good," he said. "Remember we are at war, and we work on many things which have to do with the war. We must be careful. Tell me frankly anything I ask."

"You make it sound as if I had no right to modesty," she said. "If I work for you I must tell all!"

Bart was the impersonal professor analyzing a specimen on the slide of a microscope. He cleared his throat.

"Modesty," he observed, "is simply a form of coquetry, a method of sex-allurement through mystery. It has a normal place in life, but has no place in the relationship between a criminologist and his assistant. Let's start with your name."

The girl was suddenly serious, thinking. This man, this place, everything about him spoke mystery; yet to him there was no allowable mystery in life—nothing in the world that could not be solved like a mathematical equation!

"My name is Louise Nina Parr," she said.

"Hm-m. If you work with me we will use the initials only. L. N.—Ellen. That's it. Ellen is quick to say, and logical."

The professor paused. "Ever belong to any youth movements? Four-F? Turn Verein? Bund?"

Her answers were vigorous negative shakes of the head.

Suddenly that voice sounded again from within the room.

"Answers correct. Logic checks ninety-two percent. Investigation complete. All clear New York and Washington on Parr."

"Thanks Drake. Dismiss the others. That's all."

Ellen noticed that Bart did not even turn his head when he spoke.

"Does that man listen to everything we say, professor?" she demanded, in a dismayed voice.

"Only when I bring him in," Bart said. "He's simply been tracing your life and activities from the day you were born until now. You heard the verdict."

Ellen Parr shook her head dazedly and shrugged.

"Well, did you find I'm an honest woman?"

"What was your job with that carnival last summer, and why did you leave it?" Bart countered.

"Why, I tried to be a dancer but wasn't too good at it. I left because of a man."

"All right. Now we've got to get to work. Stand up. Let me see your legs."

Ellen Parr rose without question and pirouetted, model fashion, holding her skirts above her knees.

"Good." Bart snapped. "Do you attract attention in a bathing suit?"

"Yes," she answered simply, "I have a very good figure."

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"BEING a clever woman, you'll know how to use these very definite assets in any crisis where the momentary distraction of attention from me may save my life. I am quick with a gun, but a second is sometimes very important."

"Yes, Professor," she said.

"Use a quick name for me, too," Bart snapped. "My initials are E. Z. You will call me *Easy*. Quick names sometimes save a life in a crisis."

"Yes, Easy."

"Now, Ellen, let's get to work. You'll have fifty dollars a week and all expenses. You'll live here, but there's no time for luggage and arrangements now. We're on a case. You're a stenographer. There's a notebook and typewriter in the desk. You'll make ten copies of this item and

take them with you. When you've rented and furnished a house you'll have time to get these copies to all metropolitan papers before night."

The panelled desk swung down. Ellen sat before it and typed as he dictated.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

NEW WEAPON ANNOUNCED BY PROFESSOR E. Z. BART

Famous Criminologist Turns Inventor

A new weapon, destined to turn the tide of war, was announced today by Professor E. Z. Bart, of.....Street, Hoboken, New Jersey.
Armor and armored weapons may become useless before the year is out according to the professor, provided the manufacture of the new weapon can be expedited.

"That's all on that, Ellen, but hurry. Here's a thousand dollars," Bart laid a roll of bills on the desk beside her. "Keep track of it. Use whatever you need. Rent a house in Hoboken for one week—or a month if necessary—furnished. Fill in the address and get this notice to the papers. If you lack clothes buy an evening gown, a tea gown, and a sports outfit. Phone me here at exactly five o'clock this afternoon. The number is Eddington 4-1000. This is your test and your assignment. Good luck."

Bart watched Ellen tuck her notes away as she went to the front door, then turned toward his laboratory.

"My secret weapon better be good," he mumbled. Then he laughed and opened the door.

"Easy" Bart's laboratory was an amazing nightmare of test-tubes, wires, electric motors and gadgetry. Rows of glass-stoppered chemical containers lined one wall.

Bart lost no time. He reached under a table and depressed a tiny lever which in turn slid back an inset panel in the wall to reveal the only non-mechanical contrivance in his domain—the safe—huge and old-fashioned. Only two persons in the world knew the combination, Bart and Frank Temple.

He twirled the dial, and the massive door swung open. But before the great door opened, steel bars slid across both exit doors and locked automatically.

From the safe Bart took a black book and scanned the carefully inked-in formulas until he found the one he sought.

In five minutes he was deep in test-tubes and vats, reaching quickly for this jar of colored liquid, that one of crystalline powder, the third of viscous milky fluid. Confidently he mixed, boiled and stirred, referring now and again to the formula.

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THE hours flew by, but at four-thirty in the afternoon Bart poured his vicious-looking concoction into four square gallon tins. These he packed in two suitcases, one tin at each end of each bag. In the space between he dropped a clean shirt, collar and ties, soap, razor and brushes.

For the first time Bart showed signs of nervousness and strain. His foot pressed the lever while he turned the dial on his chair arm.

"Yes, doctor?" a pleasant, comfortable-sounding woman's voice answered.

"No dinner tonight, Mary. I'm going out. Back day after tomorrow sometime. Can you give me a quick sandwich and coffee?"

In just about the time it takes to pour a cup of coffee, a table appeared through the wall.

Bart gulped the food with his eye glued to the watch lying beside his plate. Quarter of five. Suppose the girl failed? Every-

thing depended on her at this point. Finishing his food he flipped a lever on the air-conditioning control. The room chilled rapidly. It grew cold. Bart got to his feet and paced back and forth. He could see his breath now, in the frosty air, but his brain was clear as a crisp winter morning. He flapped his arms and held his hands over his ears to ease the nip of cold.

A bell rang.

Bart flipped the air-conditioner back to normal, glanced at his watch and pressed the phone lever with his foot. It was five o'clock.

"Easy?" The voice sounded to him like liquid sunshine.

"This you, Ellen?"

"Yes. It's five. I've had a time. I look like a limp dishrag. My hair's a mess and my feet ache like—"

"Zanypate piffle!" Bart exploded his favorite epithet, "What have you done? Report and *fast.*"

"Oh, I'm sorry. Of course. You live at 92 Pentagon Street, Hoboken. One month sublease for $125.00.—"

"Never mind that," Bart cut in again. "Were you followed from here? How do I get there?"

"No, I wasn't followed. I doubled my trail over and over to make sure. To get here take the tube or ferry to Hoboken and hire a cab!" Ellen's voice seemed on the verge of exasperated tears, but Bart pressed on.

"How about the newspapers?"

"They've been notified," she answered, "and I bought my clothes. That's all you said to do."

"All right. All right," Bart's brain was racing, setting up the counterpoint to the coefficient in his complicated set of calculations. "Wait for me at the house. I'll be there at seven. Evening gown. Look your best. Order dinner from caterer. Set table for two."

"Look my best!" Ellen Parr wailed, "How can I even look decent after—"

"Listen, Ellen," Bart spoke softly. "We met this morning. This was a tough day. Try to last it out. It's big."

Something like a sigh, or a stifled sob, echoed in the room. Then:

"All right, Easy. I'll make it. Anything else?"

"Just one thing, Ellen. Got a gun? Know how to use one? Answer quickly."

"No, Easy, I haven't, but I know how to use one."

"Good girl. See you at seven sharp."

The phone clicked off. Easy Bart settled his vest down into place, donned a slouch hat and managed to lug the two heavy suitcases to the curb. A taxi slowed and stopped.

CHAPTER THREE

The Ghost in Green

AT EXACTLY seven o'clock a cab stopped before a pleasant conventional house in Hoboken. Bart clambered out awkwardly and reached back for his bags. He turned to the door. It was swinging open slowly.

Bart stiffened and stepped quickly aside, hand dropping to his hip. Ellen Parr's ringing laugh dispelled his sudden start and she appeared in the hallway.

"Hurry, Easy. Dinner's on the table and I'm starved. I just wanted to show you how your front door affected me when I first saw it, hours and hours ago!"

Bart had the grace to laugh at himself as he picked up the heavy bags and carted them inside.

"I'll hurry, Ellen," he said, "but there are several little things I have to do before I eat."

Bart was busy unpacking the four tins of liquid from the suitcases. He handled them very gently.

"Show me through the house quickly," he said. "You're sure there's no one in it?"

"Positive," she said, and Bart thought her face held an expression of disappointment. He couldn't understand why.

Ten minutes later the two came back to the diningroom. Bart glanced at the still warm dinner on the table as he placed a can of his liquid under the cloth beside his chair. He placed a second container just inside the door from the front hall, tinkered with it a moment, then threw a cloth over it. The third can he left just inside the front door, and carried the fourth through to the back and placed it beside the back door.

Ellen switched on the table light. Bart looked at her squarely for the first time

since morning. And he stopped stock still.

Ellen Parr was dressed in a decolleté gown with a low neckline. It was backless, displaying her flawless skin and beautifully shaped shoulders. The dress itself was purplish satin, contrasting stunningly with her perfectly dressed hair and white skin. The dress clung to her body lines with an allure that was undeniable. Suddenly Bart understood that look of disappointment. She was a woman!

"Perfect, Ellen." He didn't know how to say more but felt it necessary to do so. "Turn around as you did this morning. Let me see. Hmm. Great! How did you manage to get suited so perfectly in the time you had?"

Ellen smiled. The day's struggle seemed more worthwhile now. Bart reached in his side jacket pocket and produced a diminutive revolver with pearl-inlaid handle. He held it out on the palm of his hand.

"Careful," he said, "It's loaded. I don't know where you can keep it in that outfit, but try."

Ellen beamed, but hesitated. "Is what we are doing that dangerous?"

Bart nodded.

"Watch, then." She reached out and took the little gun as she sat down on a side chair. Her body swung slightly as she bent her knees, and the skirt fell apart revealing a graceful leg up to the garter. Into this garter she slipped the revolver. It was within the reach of one swift move, sitting or standing.

"I think, Ellen," Bart told her, "although it is too soon to be sure, that you will make an excellent assistant. Let's have dinner."

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ELLEN was famished. Bart watched, squinting across the table like an owl, as she ate half-cold turkey, vegetables and fruit. He noted that her manners were good, that she ate daintily, used correct utensils and chewed with her mouth shut.

Keeping track of the time, he noted the exact minute when his watch hit eight-fifteen. Both had made good progress on dinner and were feeling better.

"Pass your plate," he said brusquely. "We must have food on our plates and be eating if visitors come. How are you in a crisis?"

"Cool and collected. It's afterward I want to cry on somebody's shoulder."

"Good." Bart grunted. "The first part, I mean. Tears are messy anytime. Now listen closely. The first editions of the morning papers will be on the streets in a few minutes—at eight-thirty. If our criminals are normal they'll check the papers instantly and will see our item—but I don't think they can get here before nine."

Ellen was gazing at him wide-eyed. One hand, a very pretty hand Bart noted, was at her bare throat.

"You—you—set up this house to lure them here—" "*Certainly* I aim to lure them here." Bart barked the words. "Did you read about the disappearance of an inventor named Van Pelt?"

Ellen nodded.

"Well, that's our problem. I have reason to believe they did not obtain all they were after, so we offered it to them in the newspapers. Wasn't practical to use my house, so here we are. Please remember to look your most naive best. Wide eyes, fluttering hands, coquetry. Cross your legs or do whatever is necessary at the crucial moment to give me time. Being a woman you should know. We'll see before the evening's over if my guess is right."

Ellen shrugged. "I'm game to try. Meantime I forgot to tell you the phone is connected in case we're marooned here and need anything."

Eight-thirty came and passed. The minutes started ticking away toward nine. Despite herself, Ellen's eyes kept wandering to the door, to the windows. Every slightest sound made her jump.

"Steady Ellen," Bart said softly. "I'm counting on you. What we're doing may involve the welfare of the nation."

"Thanks, Easy. I think I like you well enough so I've *got* to come through. Don't worry." She made herself smile.

Five minutes past nine! Ten after.

A dead limb cracked on the ground outside the window. Ellen caught a glimpse of a face and was suddenly calm. She smiled across the table at Bart and started to cut the pie. He understood.

"It's been a wonderful dinner, Ellen," he said, "I'm almost sorry it's over."

Somewhere a door creaked—or a floor board.

Both toyed with their pie. Both kept darting quick glances at the windows, and each watched the doorway behind the other. They did not speak.

Ellen caught sight of the face at the window again and signalled to Bart with her eyes. The air grew tense with waiting. It was nearly nine-thirty.

The lights went out suddenly.

"Must be a fuse." Bart remarked aloud.

He slid from his chair, silent as a shadow, and backed quickly to the wall beside the door. He picked up the gallon container and uncapped it without a sound; then waited, holding his breath. At the other end of the table he sensed motion. There was a little cry and the click of metal. He made no move.

Slow, stealthy footsteps came nearer through the hall. He heard breathing beside him in the door, heavy breathing. He caught the shadow of a big man, standing uncertainly—and as quickly as a cat can spring he dumped the contents of his tin over the intruder.

There was a startled grunt. A huge fist crashed against the wall where he had been a moment before. A second shadow moved. The balance of the can's contents found its mark and spread over the second intruder.

"Lights." Bart called, lowering his voice to a deep basso.

"Lights," one of the shadows echoed, and a moment later the lights came on.

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FOUR policemen stood with revolvers drawn, tight against the wall. Inspector Cardigan, of New York, to whom Bart had spoken that morning, stood in the doorway nursing a bruised fist. The police guns were leveled at Bart who made no move.

Inside the kitchen door stood Ellen Parr, handcuffed, but with her little gun leveled on her captor.

"Don't shoot, Ellen," Bart's voice sounded tired. "These damn fools have spoiled everything." He turned on Cardigan.

"You idiot! If it hadn't been for you I'd have had our men, whoever they are. You can mess things up worse than any—"

Bart broke off in the middle of his sentence and started to laugh. Despite himself, one of the policemen let out two guffaws before he could check them.

Ellen doubled forward as she laughed, and stuck her little revolver back into her garter.

Inspector Cardigan's clothes were melting away wherever the liquid had touched him, and it had poured down his whole right side from above the waist. The cloth didn't just tear or rot. It actually melted and was gone, leaving the flesh bare. *And wherever the liquid had touched the flesh, that flesh turned a vivid green!*

"Won't you sit down, gentlemen?" Bart invited, "and must you keep handcuffs on my assistant? Put your guns away and let's finish the turkey."

But Cardigan was still standing, speechless and unbelieving, gazing down at the green flesh which showed, somewhat immodestly, where the clothing had disappeared. A second man in civilian clothes was in a state somewhat similar to Cardigan, both mentally and physically.

"Don't worry, Cardigan. It won't hurt you. It was planned to do just what it did," Bart grew sarcastic. "If you'd kept your big nose out of my business the alarm would be out right now for men in your exact condition. The green will wear off in a few weeks but you'd have had plenty of time to pick 'em up. Now there's about one chance in a thousand of my getting them here."

Cardigan was spluttering.

"What's this invention stuff?" he demanded. "I thought it was somebody using your name, and it could ha' been *them.*"

"You *thought!*" Bart fumed.

Ellen Parr realized, as the minutes passed, why Inspector Cardigan held his post in a great police department. He pinned a towel around his waist and sat down at the table. Turning to the gray-haired man who had shared his chemical bath, he said:

"I'm sorry for this, Bracken. It so happens that this shower attendant means well. I'd like you to sit in with us for a

few moments. Have the men go back to their station and send a car around in half an hour. Meantime maybe they can rustle up a couple of pair of pants for us."

The police holstered their guns and started out at a nod from Bracken. The inspector removed the handcuffs from Ellen, and she carved liberal pieces of cold turkey and passed the full plates.

"Meet Inspector Cardigan, of New York, and Detective Bracken of Hoboken, Ellen," Bart said, "Gentlemen, Ellen Parr. She takes Temple's place as my assistant."

Cardigan grunted and took another bite of turkey. Talking with some difficulty, but completely ignoring the ridiculous state he was in, he reviewed:

"The F. B. I. picked up seven agents they had under surveillance. Harvey, in Boston, cracked down on two saboteurs. Jaines, Chicago, picked up a known agent ticketed through from New York to the west coast. Left here two hours after Van Pelt disappeared. Newspapers raising particular hell. As for you. You sent us on another crazy jaunt."

"*I* did?" Bart looked jained.

"Your voice is known to every cop at headquarters," Cardigan waved a turkey bone at the professor menacingly. "You can't disguise it. That call at 5:30 from the paybooth on Tenth Avenue was *you.* So we checked through to Paris. Don't ask me how, but we did."

"Good." The pupils of Bart's eyes seemed to contract. "What did you find?"

"Still playing school, aren't you, *professor?* The *Sorbonne!* Sure, certainly, there were Germans went to the chemistry labs in Paris. Three in Van's class came to America. One toured for six months and went back. Second is a professor in some little two by twice college in Texas—perfectly sound citizen. Third is a hospital lab chemist in New York. Intelligence tailed him six month without single suspicious contact. Doesn't even mix with German groups."

Cardigan took a deep breath and returned to his turkey. Bart's eyes shone.

AS BART locked the front door behind the visitors his manner changed. He locked the rear door and went to the basement. After examining every shadowy corner he locked and barred the outside entrance, then mounted the stairs to the kitchen. Ellen was clearing the dishes from the table. She smiled at him.

"Come," Easy said. "We may as well get a good night's sleep. But first you'll have to help me mount one last gadget."

Bart put two of the remaining tins of liquid in a bedroom closet. The third he suspended behind a drape above the top of the stairs to the second floor, and proceeded to rig an ingenious tripline so as to spill it over anyone who mounted the stairs.

"Don't forget and try to go downstairs, Ellen," he warned, "unless you want to look like Cardigan. This house will be haunted by green ghosts."

They laughed together.

"Now try to sleep. There's hard work ahead," Bart said, but Ellen hesitated.

"I want to do what's right," she said, uncertainly, "but is this—my staying here alone—conventional, Easy?"

"Conventional?" Easy blinked uncomprehendingly for a moment. "Conventional! Zanypate piffle! Is crime conventional? You're my assistant. You *happen* to be female. Forget it. You're in a war! Continuous and without let-up as long as you work for me."

He glared at her like an owl, through squinted eyes. Ellen felt as if some new revelation of intelligence had doused her in a cold shower.

"Yes, Easy," she said softly. "Goodnight." She went into her room and closed the door.

Ellen Parr lay awake, thinking back over the hectic pace of the day. Something tremendous was afoot and she was a part of it. But, although a party to the action, she was conscious that she had not yet been taken fully into the professor's confidence. Her faith in his keen deductive faculties mounted as she realized how he had used the police to gain information. She was certain he did not feel this to be as futile as he had led Cardigan to believe. She wondered what new experiences lay ahead. There were no regrets. One need never fear intelligence. That was her last thought before dropping off to sleep. . . .

Bart examined the tripline carefully when he rose, about seven. Nothing had

happened during the night. He carefully unstrung the suspension line, capped the container and placed it in the closet with the other two.

He heard dishes rattling downstairs, caught the aroma of frying bacon, and smiled. Ellen had negotiated the tripline safely and was probably very proud of the accomplishment.

Copies of all the morning papers were on the dining table when he reached it.

"Good girl, Ellen," he said, delving into the headline stories. They ran the gamut of reaction from sarcasm toward the police to foreboding as to the outcome of the war because of the loss of Van Pelt's new weapon. Some of the writers even deigned to worry about Van Pelt himself!

"Do you like your eggs turned, Easy?" Ellen asked. She stood in the doorway gracefully, dressed in her sports outfit, a shirtwaist, short plaid skirt, and painted legs.

"Same as yours," he answered shortly.

She turned back to the stove, exasperated because he hadn't noticed her. The man took a lot for granted. She hadn't hired out as a cook. She fairly slapped the plates down on the table. Bart shoved his horn-rimmed glasses back on his head and looked up.

"Let me see your outfit, Ellen," he said, picking up his fork.

Ellen stiffened, then relaxed and laughed. The man was unpredictable. She stepped out beside the table and pirouetted, then curtseyed.

"Excellent," he said, "Excellent. Provocative, yet good taste. Carrying your gun?"

CHAPTER FOUR

Coney Island Contraband

ELLEN'S head bobbed an affirmative. Her teeth gritted. She'd pique the interest of this mathematical equation in pants if it was the last thing she did on earth! She deliberately lifted the skirt to display the tiny revolver in the garter at the top of the painted stocking, but Bart's eyes were back on his newspapers.

"By the way," he asked, "have you any identifying marks or scars that are hidden so they couldn't be duplicated by an observing conspirator?"

"Why—!" Ellen's hand dropped unconsciously to her right knee.

"Not the scar on your knee. That would have been seen. Came from a fall on glass, didn't it?" Easy's eyes never raised from his paper.

"You *do* observe some things, don't you Easy?" She laughed ruefully, thinking how she had tried to attract his attention.

"That's my business," he said, and took

another sip of coffee, not watching her.

"Why, no. I don't think I have, but—"

"All right. We'll discuss that later." She sat down, and together they ate breakfast. Afterwards he asked brusquely, "Ready for today's assignment?"

"Ready sir." Ellen jumped up and cleared the table quickly.

"It's quite a job. Get a woman in to wash the dishes. Buy a rug to replace the one we ruined last night. Go to the New York city morgue and find out what hospitals, if any, have dissecting laboratories, and where the laboratories are located. Find out where they buy their cadavers. Also get the names, ages, nationalities and educational backgrounds of the attendants at these laboratories. In case of trouble—but only in case of trouble—phone Inspector Cardigan at headquarters.

"I'll be back here at four o'clock sharp this afternoon. Meantime I can't be located because I'll be on the beach at Coney Island."

Ellen shook her head dazedly and gulped.

"You'll be *where?*"

"You heard correctly. On the beach at Coney Island. Make sure you aren't followed today. That's important. Better go to a movie, and out the side door for one thing. At this point, though, I think you're too new to be the main object of attention where I'm concerned. We're on a big-game hunt, Ellen. . . ."

Bart wandered idly down to the Ferry and crossed the river oblivious to possible watchers. He took a crosstown trolley to the subway, then carelessly boarded a Coney Island train.

At ten o'clock Bart was riding on a merry-go-round to the amusement of early visitors at Coney. But, whereas most of the observers laughed and turned away, one man's eyes followed his figure each time it circled the carousel.

When the machine slowed down Easy slipped around behind his watcher, whose eyes were straining to relocate him. Looking over the man's shoulder, Bart said quietly:

"Tell Cardigan to give you something better to do than follow me around, will you? I'm busy and I want to be alone."

"But, Professor, orders are to protect you! The Inspector knows you're on something big, and your life can't be risked." The dick was very serious.

"Look, my friend," Bart was just as serious, "Haven't I been on dangerous cases before?"

"Yes, sir, but—"

"Have I ever been killed?"

"Well, no sir, but—"

"Then why expect me to be killed now? Besides, didn't he tell you not to let me see you?"

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WITHOUT waiting to see the effect of his words Bart walked through a door at the back of the carousel, padlocked it behind him, and weaved his way through a labyrinth of passages to the boardwalk. When he arrived there he was alone.

He ducked into a public bath and called for a locker and swim-suit. The manager winked and supplied one which bore no identifying marks.

"Same routine?" the man asked.

"Yes. Thanks, Sam. You're a help."

"Okay, prof. One hour."

Bart changed to swimming trunks within three minutes and disappeared among the throngs of early bathers on the beach. His squinty, owlish eyes scanned faces with lightning-like darting glances that might have been chance, but which missed nothing. Four times he spotted cameras on the beach area where they are forbidden in wartime; and in each case he circled and returned to examine both camera and possessor at close range. Once he spotted a man with a small telescope, and sat down to play with handfuls of sand.

At eleven o'clock Bart entered a public bath a mile down the beach from the one where he had undressed. Sam was waiting inside, and handed him a key to a dressing room where his clothes hung in order. He dressed hurriedly and hiked to the subway, taking the train at another station.

By twelve noon he was lounging in the shadow of a door across the street from the morgue to which he had dispatched his new assistant.

She emerged an hour later, glanced up and down the street, and turned west,

walking hurriedly. Bart followed, padding from doorway to doorway like a cat, eyes darting everywhere with rapierlike keenness.

He saw two men converge on Ellen from behind, saw her quick glances to left and right as they took her arms and continued to walk. A grim smile settled around Bart's lips and his breath came faster. His elbows pressed imperceptibly against his sides to catch the comfortable feel of his guns. The chase was on. . .

Two taxies rolled through the streets of lower Manhattan. The first drew up before an old red brick building near lower Third Avenue. The second rolled by and turned the corner into the next street. It stopped abruptly.

"Wait for me," Bart said, and rounded the corner in time to see his quarry disappear into the building.

Easy returned to the cab, drove on two blocks and dismissed it. He entered a phone booth and jiggled the hook impatiently until he got his number.

"Cardigan. Don't talk. Listen. Get a squad quickly to 342 Blosset. Locate two men holding Ellen Parr prisoner. Move fast. Don't release publicity even if it seems sensational until you hear from me. Get the girl free so she can get back to Hoboken by four o'clock. It's your move now, Card. I'll phone later."

Bart bought papers. He rented a room, second floor front, across the street from the red brick house, and was settled in an easychair by the window inside of ten minutes. His eyes watched the doorway across the street while he scanned the latest news reports.

Fifteen minutes later men sauntered into doorways on both sides of the street. Bart saw them and knew others were taking up posts in the alley behind the house. He caught glimpses of two men on the roofs of adjoining houses.

Cardigan's big bulk appeared at the next corner and gave a signal. Slowly the men converged on the red-brick front. A hand was waved from the roof, and the faces there disappeared.

Two detectives eased their way through the front door with drawn guns. Two others took up positions out of sight from the front of the house but within easy reach. Complete quiet reigned for a moment, and Bart's head sunk on his chest. His eyes closed, as if he had fallen asleep.

CHAPTER FIVE

Heil Schicklegruber

WHEN Ellen left the office of the morgue with the data hidden carefully, she glanced up and down the street to make sure she wasn't being watched, then turned west. It was still early and there was plenty of time before she was due in Hoboken.

Her thoughts turned to Easy Bart. He was the most amazing contradiction she had ever met. Spending the day on the beach at Coney Island! Was it possible he expected to learn something there? Or was his announced destination a blind?

It was the first time Ellen had forgotten to be alert and check the possibility that she might be followed. Still, as Easy had remarked, she was still new in his employ.

A man brushed against her right side. She drew back and bumped into a man who had appeared on her left.

"Keep right on walking, Miss Parr," the first man told her, linking his arm familiarly through hers. At the same moment she felt the pressure of metal in her left ribs, and, looking down, caught the bulge in her second companion's pocket.

Her steps faltered as panic seized her, but the steady pressure from both sides carried her along so that passersby saw nothing wrong.

Ellen felt smothered. Yet, now that it had happened, she was less worried about herself than about letting Bart down.

The men bundled her into a cab and sat back, with the gun still pressing into her side.

She made no move toward the driver, because grim faces on both sides, and the feel of that gun-muzzle, told her such a move would be suicidal. How would Bart act under the circumstances? What had he told her that could help? Only one thing. He had said "being a woman you will know how to use these very definite assets" and "forget that you're female except for purposes which further our battle with our opponents."

A sudden hope, for which there was no

possible reason, sprang up within her. Easy had told her to trust him. Maybe if she—

She noticed that both men were trying to keep watch of all passing cars and men, and to keep watch out the back window as well as out both sides and to the front of the car.

Deliberately Ellen slid down in the seat, hitching her brief skirt above her knees. She crossed her legs nonchalantly, and smiled as her captors stole glances at her trim underpinning and relaxed their vigil at the windows. If Easy needed help, and was near, he'd have it! Besides, her brazen posing might distract these men's minds from the thought of searching her minutely for a weapon.

The big blond one did slap her sides and waist lightly, saying: "I beg pardon, Miss Parr, but this formality is, as you probably know, quite necessary."

Ellen boiled inwardly but kept her show of calm. In crossing her legs she had deliberately planned to cover the bulge of the tiny gun in her garter. When they missed it she managed a smile.

"So long as you keep it a formality," she said, "I've only been on this job two days and am not yet fully equipped, I'm sorry to say."

The two men scanned the street in both directions as the cab slowed in front of the red brick house. . . . They mounted three flights of wooden stairs.

The room they entered was large, and comfortably furnished. A well-stocked shelf of books on chemistry and medicine indicated the bent of the occupant. Two heavily draped windows faced the rear, but both curtains were drawn. Without electric light the room was dim.

"Won't you sit down, Miss Parr?" the spokesman asked.

"Your request is my command, sir." Ellen tried to sound calm although her heart was thumping. The air in the room was tense, as well as close. She chose a comfortable chair.

A muffled thump on a door in the wall made her look around as one of the men went to the closet and opened it.

"I suppose it does get uncomfortable in there, Van," he said, "but you're such a stubborn Dutch fool there's nothing else we can do with you when we go out."

ELLEN gripped the arms of her chair and forgot her poise. Her eyes popped in surprise before she remembered that now, if ever, she must be feminine and not appear too bright.

Her late captor dragged a man, bound hand and foot and gagged, out of the closet and dumped him into the other big chair. The eyes of the bound man glared with hatred for his captors. Muffled sounds came from the gagged mouth.

"Will you promise not to yell if we remove the gag?"

The man nodded vigorously, and the gag was yanked away, letting him gasp deep breaths of air into tortured lungs. Ellen watched wordlessly but made no move—for the gun held by the other man never wavered from its aim at her midsection.

"Let's make Miss Parr comfortable, Hans," the spokesman said.

The second man passed his gun to the leader and got a clothesline. He tied Ellen's arms at the elbows so that her body could move slightly, but her hands wouldn't reach either knot. The rope looped across her waist, but was tied in back of the chair. A loop was fastened loosely around her neck, after which Hans poked two ends under the chair from behind.

"You'll have to uncross your legs, Miss Parr," the leader said, "so Hans can complete his job. He's very good at it. As long as you sit quietly you'll be comfortable."

Ellen obeyed and Hans tied her feet separately to the two ends of rope. She *was* comfortable, but when she tried to kick one foot forward the noose tightened on her neck with choking pressure.

"I see what you mean," she said.

It was astounding, the quiet that ruled the room. Not a voice had been raised, not an angry syllable uttered, yet of the four persons in the room two were prisoners held at gunpoint!

The bound man suddenly started to struggle against his bonds. When he subsided, Ellen felt his eyes on her.

"I suppose you were dragged here because of me," he said finally.

Ellen shrugged. The ropes did not prevent that.

"I really don't know," she said, feign-

ing ignorance. "Who are you anyway?"

"I'm Henry Van Pelt," the man told her, and she saw that he fitted the descriptions she had read, "These idiots kidnaped me. Some wild idea they were helping their friend *Schicklegruber* to win the war."

The sarcasm he managed to get into the pronouncing of *Schicklegruber* was masterful, but it brought quick results. The spokesman took two steps across the room and slapped his face smartly.

"A brave man, Hugo!" Van Pelt said, "A very brave and great man. Undaunted in the face of overwhelming force!"

Hugo smiled wryly and returned to the couch. After a moment he spoke to Hans.

"Why not make Van comfortable like Miss Parr?" he asked. "They'll be good company for each other when we go out."

Hans grinned and proceeded to truss the missing inventor as he had tied Ellen. Hugo leaned back on the couch and half-closed his eyes. He could have been German, or Scandinavian, but the most noticeable characteristic was the lines of strain about his eyes, as if he were very very tired.

Her mind drifted to Bart. What was he doing? What would he do when she did not appear at four o'clock? Van Pelt's voice roused her to the present.

"You haven't answered my question," he reminded her.

She nodded. "Yes. I'm working for a criminologist. Do you know Professor E. Z. Bart?"

Van Pelt's eyes widened. "He on it? Good! That may make my friends here do some thinking."

Hugo stirred slightly and waved his hand, as if nothing mattered.

"Our job is done," Hugo said, looking Van Pelt in the eye, "Nothing the police can do changes that. You can die quickly if necessary. We have what we wanted. And we are, as you Americans say, *expendable.*"

A chill raced up Ellen's spine and settled at the base of her brain, like a ball of ice, as the man spoke. Something in this picture didn't fit. His remark explained the tired lines in his face. She knew he expected to die.

"Where's Bart now?" Van Pelt asked.

Ellen laughed, pretending to be amused.

"He can't be reached until four o'clock this afternoon, because he's on the beach at Coney Island!"

The reaction to her mimicry was unexpected. Van Pelt strained forward in his chair and choked. Hans turned around as if he'd been shot. Hugo jumped to his feet.

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ELLEN'S eyes darted from one to the other of the three men, racing in time with her brain. Evidently Easy did tell her more than she had thought—but she would have given much to see his squinty eyes appear at the door above a gun; or even with a can of his liquid invention.

Van Pelt was the first to recover composure and laugh.

"What on earth is he doing at Coney Island?"

Ellen returned his smile, pressing her knees together to get the reassuring feel of her little gun.

"He tells me what to do and nothing else," she said. "Today I was to buy a rug, get a woman in to clean, and deliver a flock of papers to various addresses. That's done. In case of trouble I was to phone the police. I'm due back at the house at four. Now I may lose my job. I've flunked it."

She was keeping check on the time. Arrived at the room at one-thirty; now two-fifteen. She hoped against hope that Bart was closer than she thought he was, for the climax was coming. And Ellen was one up on Bart. She was in the room with the man they were seeking. He was alive. And if these men were trapped and tried to shoot Van Pelt, Ellen had the power to save his life—for her hands were free, and she had her gun!

It was two-thirty when she heard the first stealthy footfall outside. The men did not notice. A little later a board creaked in an adjoining room. All around had settled a deadly quiet. Suddenly, a knock on the door. All four froze.

"Who's there?" Hugo spoke finally.

"Police. Open up," a heavy voice commanded. Van Pelt was startled into silence

for a moment, then he yelled frantically: *"Crash the door down. It's me. Henry Van Pelt."*

Pandemonium broke loose in the hall. Hugo fired one shot at the door, then turned the gun toward Van Pelt. Hans stood still in stupefied panic, his eyes glued on the door as it splintered under the weight of shoulders jammed against it. Hugo half-turned toward the door again, and Ellen swiftly had her little gun cupped in her hand. The door splintered again and quivered on its hinges.

Slowly, without another word, Hugo drew a bead on Van Pelt's head. Van's screams were lost in the noise outside. Ellen hesitated, heart in her mouth. Her teeth bit into her lower lip but her gun didn't waver.

She saw Hugo's trigger finger whiten, and her gun spat flame and lead once . . . twice.

A look of complete surprise crossed Hugo's features. A spot of blood oozed through his clothing at the shoulder. His gun hand sagged and the other hand came up and pressed over the spot. His gun clattered to the floor.

Then Hugo steadied. He leaned over, picked up the gun with his good hand, and aimed it at Van Pelt again.

Ellen fired again, her teeth clenched.

The door crashed open and men swarmed into the room. Cardigan came through with the first wave. Hugo was knocked sprawling on the couch. Hans was handcuffed so quickly he just stood, looking down at his hands wonderingly.

Cardigan crossed to Ellen and cut the noose from her neck. He leaned over and cut the ropes from her arms and ankles, then helped her to stand.

"All right, Miss Parr?"

She nodded. "How did you know?"

"Bart phoned us."

Ellen fainted in Cardigan's arms.

When she came to, one detective was chafing her wrists, another was holding a wet rag against her head. She sat up, and Cardigan yelled at her.

"Better get back to Hoboken by four, young woman, as you were told." He came over and helped her to her feet.

"I will," she said smiling. Easy *couldn't* have been on the beach, she was thinking.

And he *did* come through in the pinch! "But, Inspector, isn't the case solved?"

"Looks that way, Parr, but you're still under orders, and I know Bart." He lowered his voice, "Good shooting, Parr." He waved to the guards to let her pass, and yelled: "Hannigan, see Miss Parr to her house."

Ellen's thoughts were riding high! Cardigan had called her "Parr". She was *accepted!*

CHAPTER SIX

Cargo of Cadavers

BART was pacing the floor like a caged tiger when they arrived at the house. Ellen ran up the steps as if someone were chasing her. Hannigan paid the cab and followed.

Bart looked at Ellen up and down critically.

"Where's the feminine allure we counted on?"

"I used it, Easy," she told him as if he knew everything that had occurred, "when they took me in the cab. It stopped their watching for tails."

Bart nodded.

"And—and Easy, I shot a man three times! I ——"

Bart grinned and dropped his hands on her shoulders.

"I sort of expected you would, little girl. You did well. But I'm afraid Cardigan slipped up again."

"Slipped up?" Hannigan and Ellen spoke together.

Bart nodded. "Yes. Where's the data, Ellen? Got it? We've got to work fast. Need details."

"But—but they found Van Pelt. He was a prisoner in the room with me—"

Bart held up one hand, grabbed the papers with the other.

"Get Cardigan on the phone, Hannigan. Ellen, you've got five minutes to primp. We're going out."

Ellen disappeared upstairs as Easy reached for the phone.

"Cardigan? Did you give out that Van Pelt's found? Hold the story. Do as I say. This plot's deeper than that. Meet me in forty-five minutes at Bogart and

Duane. Bring somebody who knew Van Pelt well . . . Not yet. Hold the story for three hours and you can give 'em an extra. Bye."

Ellen came down the stairs two at a time as Easy dropped the phone back in the cradle. Her hair had been fluffed into order, her face washed, and new rouge and lipstick applied. She had changed to an afternoon dress and was ready. Bart nodded and they moved toward the front door. . . .

The five persons that met at Bogart and Duane streets in New York walked slowly along the block. Easy Bart was doing the talking:

"This is a story with pictures as we go, Card. Hugo Schneider was the lab attendant at Bogart Hospital. Pretend I'm the attendant. You are my friend. We're alone. I've invited you up to the lab. Can't very well take four guards along when I show you a secret I've discovered. Besides we're not supposed to go up there after five o'clock, because the lab is closed, and the entrance to it is locked from inside the hospital.

"So we've ducked the guards. We're alone. And here we go, down this alley."

Bart led the group down a narrow alley behind the hospital building. Half way through the alley he stopped at an outside elevator shaft. He opened the door to the shaft wide, and leaned in. He pulled a cable and the car started slowly upward from the basement. As it passed the ground he stepped on quickly and Cardigan followed.

"You see, Card, for two it was simple. We'll have to stop for the others." He reversed the cables and the car went down again, stopping on the alley level. When Ellen, Hannigan, and Payne, one of Van Pelt's assistants, had stepped on, Bart started the car upward again.

"Notice, there are no entrances to the hospital as we pass the various floors. This is because the car is used exclusively to reach the laboratory which is on the roof, and it sometimes carries cargoes of cadavers."

The slow upward journey ended at another door, which pushed inward, and the party stepped into a huge, white-tiled room.

"Here," Bart pointed to a tiled vat filled with greenish liquid, "is where cadavers in process of dissection are kept." He pulled upward on a hook, and brought a human arm to the surface. Pointing to a long table that looked like black enamel, he added, "That is where they are carved up."

"This," as he led the party along the far wall and opened a little door, "is an electric incinerator, a small crematory, capable of disposing of all flesh, bones, offal, clothing, and if necessary jewelry."

"Now, inspector, if I were under orders concerning you, and I wanted to circumvent the police and still live—might I not invite you up here with me after hours?

"A knife is silent. There are plenty of them in that array," Bart waved his arm along a cabinet of surgical instruments. "If there is blood, I can simply turn on this flush and wash down the entire tiled floor. Notice the way it drains?

"I mustn't remain up here too long after hours. It might raise suspicion, so I can't take time to incinerate your body. But I can drain off your blood quickly, *'rolling'* your body out on the table to assure proper pallor, while the incinerator disposes of your clothing. Then, later—"

Cardigan had not missed a word. He was becoming agitated. He was seeing the plan for a perfect crime worked out before his eyes.

"I know, Bart," he said, "but—"

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I'M NOT through yet, Card," Bart led the way slowly past the apparatus to the black wall into which were set about fifty vault-like doors, three deep. "This is the 'icebox' in which cadavers are kept until used. Suppose there were thirty here. Your body makes thirty-one. So I slip the tag from the wrist of one of these and attach it to your wrist. If someone by chance finds a cadaver without a tag he isn't going to make too much fuss. And in a week the condition of yours will be exactly the sam as the others. So here we stop."

Bart turned to Payne, "It's a gruesome job I've asked you here for, my friend. I want you to examine every body in this icebox. I think Henry Van Pelt is here."

Every one of the four people with Bart gasped in surprise.

"Van Pelt is safe," Ellen said, "He was saved today."

"That is what the German agents want us to think. Imagine what it would mean to put their man safely in the inner circles of our military secrets where Van Pelt has been!" He paused. "Ellen, my child, why do you think they let you keep your gun, and left your hands free to use it? Cardigan, my good flat-ended friend, why do *you* think Ellen was able to shoot Schneider *before* he could kill the impostor? . . . Schneider, my friends, is expendable."

Ellen gasped, "Why, he *said* that very thing."

"Of course he'd be bound to let something slip. He didn't want to die, *yet he brought you up there to shoot him.* He was a good soldier."

"It's preposterous," Cardigan exploded.

Bart had already started pulling out the long slabs, each bearing the cold, bluish body of an unfortunate. A girl with straggly blond hair; the body of a fat middle-aged man; an emaciated elderly woman whose scrawny arms rested beside protruding ribs; an accident case. The parade went on. Ellen watched for a moment in awed fascination, then turned away for she could do no good. Bart worked methodically and Payne looked at each in turn. Once or twice he hesitated, then shook his head.

But when number 24 rolled out he stared, leaned closer. He lifted the hair behind the left ear and saw a scar there; then he paled and straightened up.

"My Lord," he gasped finally. "It *is* Henry."

Cardigan was at his side instantly, arm about his shoulders. Ellen came back quickly. The body on the slab could have been twin to the man who had been held in the room with her.

"You are positive, Payne? This is vital." Cardigan said.

"Positive, Inspector. If you have any doubt, he has a carbuncle scar on his right elbow, and his left center front tooth is false, on a small bridge."

Cardigan checked the two points as calmly as if he were checking data on paper. He nodded.

"All right, Bart. You win as always."

* * *

"How in hell did you do it, Bart?" Cardigan's voice was still subdued in wonder as they got into the waiting police car.

"The *Sorbonne,*" Easy told him. "People don't go to the Sorbonne ordinarily to specialize in chemistry, but Van Pelt did. He must, therefore, have had a special reason for going—some peculiar thing on which the school happened to have facilities.

"*But* if a German attended both Heidelberg *and* the Sorbonne with Van Pelt—and then came to America— It requires only primitive reasoning, Cardigan, to know that *his* special reason was Van Pelt.

"They didn't try to rob me of my *new invention.* Therefore they were not so much after Van Pelt's formula as they were anxious to keep us from using it. And if, by expending Van Pelt's friend Hugo Schneider, they could move their own man into his place in our military councils, what a stroke that would be for the Fatherland!

"I had considerable juggling to do. Had to throw Ellen, here, out as bait. They took it, but they were playing me, too. They tried to make my bait clinch their game. When Ellen told me she had shot Hugo I was positive. By the way, how is he?"

Cardigan looked up. "I'll let you know. Guess he'll be all right. Shoulder and arm wounds. Small calibre."

"Hope so," Bart said. "He got a dirty deal for a good soldier. The substitute for Van Pelt will prove to be the bad one. Glad you stopped that story. You can give the papers a real one now."

The car slowed down, and stopped at the Hoboken Ferry. Easy Bart climbed out, and helped Ellen down, much to her surprise. The car roared away.

Bart looked up and exploded, "Now why in tunket did he leave us here? He knows where I live."

Ellen laughed. "Probably thought you wanted to use up at least one more day's rent!"

"Zanypate piffle," Bart said.

THE END

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