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I.F. transformers—What they do, repair hints
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Inside story of carbon resistors
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How condensers become shorted, leaky
Antenna, oscillator coil facts
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Dial lamp connections
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Isolating defective stage
Locating defective part

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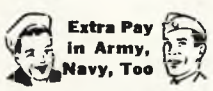

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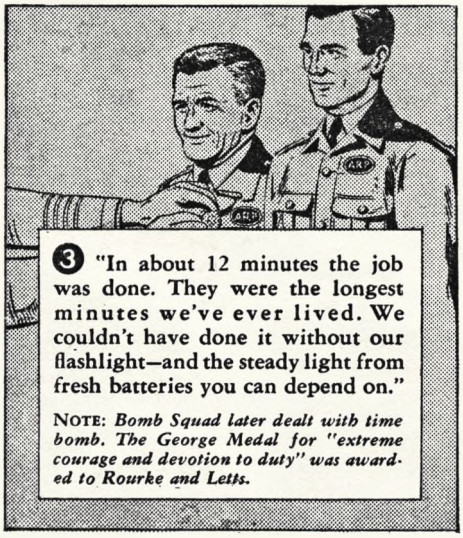
INCHES FROM DEATH, THEY WORKED LIKE FIENDS!

A true story of the blitz in England as told to a War Correspondent by Arthur Letts and Frederick Rourke, gas repair men for the Thames Estuary District, Greater London.

❶ "The night sky was filled with enemy planes, and the earth shook with explosions. At the height of the raid we learned a bomb had smashed a gas main near the works. Rourke and I volunteered for the fixing job...

❷ "We found it," continued Rourke. "A big delayed action bomb sitting on a severed pipe in the middle of a three-foot crater. We set to work. Letts held the flashlight, taking care to shield it so the Nazis couldn't see it, while I blocked the broken pipe with clay.



❸ "In about 12 minutes the job was done. They were the longest minutes we've ever lived. We couldn't have done it without our flashlight—and the steady light from fresh batteries you can depend on."

NOTE: *Bomb Squad later dealt with time bomb. The George Medal for "extreme courage and devotion to duty" was awarded to Rourke and Letts.*

OCD approved flashlight regulations stipulate careful shielding of the light from a flashlight during a blackout, as Arthur Letts did. Likewise wartime economy demands strict conservation of both flashlights and batteries.

Use your flashlight sparingly—save batteries! Don't buy a new flashlight unless the old one is beyond repair! Don't hoard flashlight batteries! Don't put in a more powerful bulb than your flashlight calls for—it simply wastes power!

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DETECTIVE TALES

July Issue
Published May 25

VOL. TWENTY-FOUR JUNE, 1943 NUMBER THREE

An Unforgettably Dramatic Novel

Three Stirringly Different Novelettes

Five Powerful Short Stories

—And—

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Printed in U. S. A.

THE CRIME CLINIC

WE LIKE this issue of DETECTIVE TALES because, like the mythological toad, it has a diamond in its head. That diamond is Frederick C. Davis's novel, INVITATION TO KILL.

In an era where, to quote well-known teacher of writing, "Modern stories do not present characters—they present characteristics," Mr. Davis has had the flawless nerve to draw a powerful character. We remembered forcibly, as we read this story, a man we once knew who was like Mr. Davis's Stafford—in that he, too, held on to the narrow steel girder of his faiths with an almost incredible steadfastness.

You may know his life-story, which he forced on the world's attention from the shadows of the death cell. We would like to begin a little later, on a spring evening five years ago, when we were waiting to see him off on a plane leaving New York. We had known him for only three days, in a business sort of way—yet, also, we knew his extremely well.

He was a tall, tough-muscled man in his fifties, with a gaunt, cheerful face and a faint foreign accent. He kept being frankly bewildered by the size and noise of New York. He expected to be airsick on the plane—but he'd be glad, he said, to get back to Rochester and the Golden Rule Barber Shop, and his wife.

He had had two lives, really—the second had started a dozen years before, when the signature of President Coolidge had made him a free man. Before that, there had been only tragedy.

He'd come to Alaska at the age of nineteen from a Europe grown too small for his adventurous spirit. Born to a minor branch of Balkan royalty, he'd forsaken a good deal of comfort to stake out a boy's dream in the wilderness, and to build his own career in a newer and less trammeled world. He'd had beginner's luck—young man's luck. He'd found gold.

He went to register his claim. He returned to find his cabin burned down, and men ready to testify that he had set the fire to conceal the murder of an old prospector. He felt the charges were insane—but at his trial the prosecution produced charred bone remnants which were enough to convict him of murder.

He spent the next few years of appeals and re-appeals of his case in a jail cell whose dimensions were too small to permit him either to stand erect or lie down at full length. Later, when this condition was discovered, its cruelty led to the indictment of the local gaolers. Eventually his case reached Presidential review during the administration of William Howard Taft, who commuted his sentence to life.

He was transferred to Leavenworth. While there, he decided that his only recourse would be a legal technicality, and to that end he studied law in his cell. With the aid of a Kansas City lawyer, he succeeded in re-opening his case and bringing it to the United States Supreme Court. *On the startling and unique grounds that the commutation of his sentence without his explicit consent had been illegal—he sued to be either executed or set free!*

But William Howard Taft was now Chief Justice—and upheld his own ruling!

By now, however, his case had aroused nationwide support. Influential sympathizers brought about a thorough re-examination of the primary evidence against him—*and further competent testimony established definitely that the originally incriminating charred bones found in his cabin had been the bones of a dog!*

When he left Leavenworth at last, with a full Presidential pardon, he had spent nearly two decades in prison—for a murder that had never been committed!

We watched him standing there, waiting for his plane in the gathering night, and the incredible part of it was that his cheerfulness matched yours—or any man's. He was wholly without bitterness.

His mind was full of his barber shop which he called the Golden Rule—and of the community good-will organization of the same name, which he had founded and headed, back home. And that was the phrase he told us to remember, when we finally shook hands. It reads, if you remember ". . . as you would have others do . . ." not ". . . as others have done. . ."

THE EDITOR.

MEN! Whether You are 16 or up to 50

Serve Your Country Best... in a

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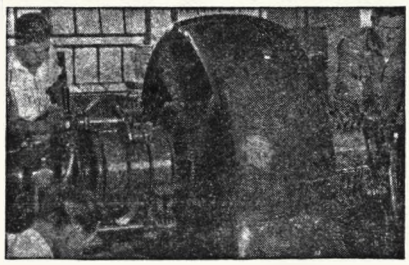

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Send me your **Free Book** and **tell me about your plans to help me get a good war-time job with a peace-time future.**

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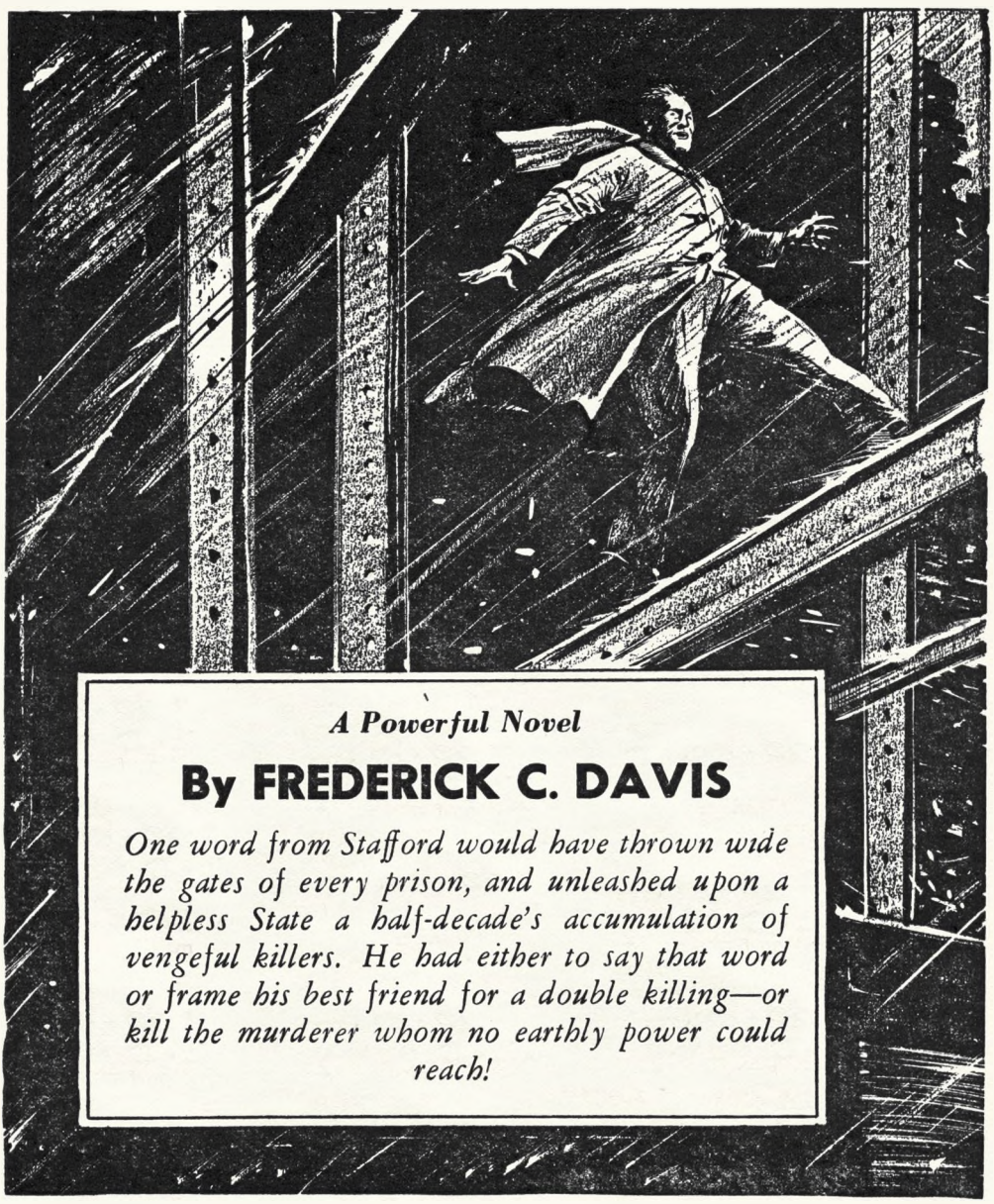
INVITATION TO KILL



A Powerful Novel

By FREDERICK C. DAVIS

One word from Stafford would have thrown wide the gates of every prison, and unleashed upon a helpless State a half-decade's accumulation of vengeful killers. He had either to say that word or frame his best friend for a double killing—or kill the murderer whom no earthly power could reach!

The icy girder, six inches wide, allowed

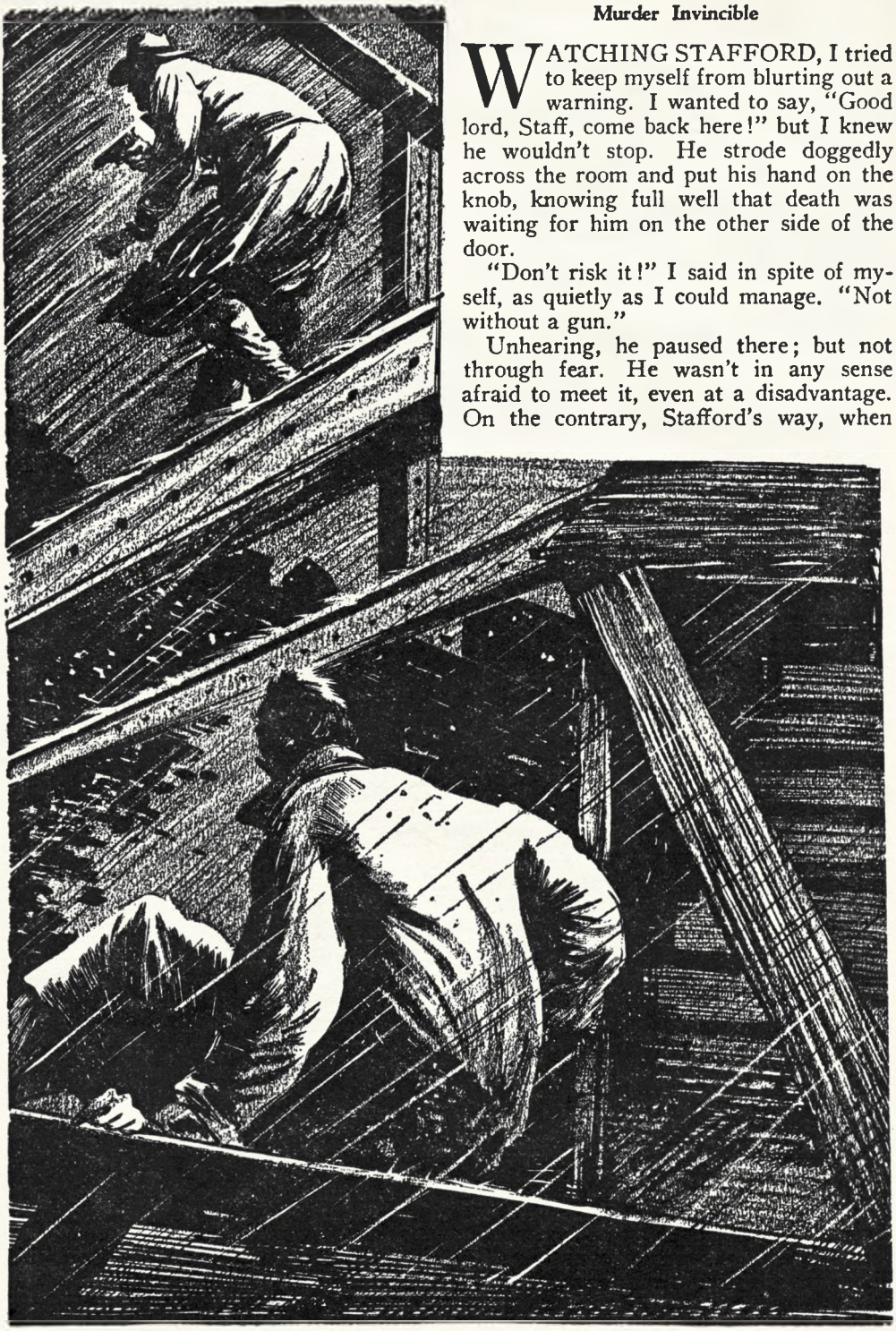
CHAPTER ONE

Murder Invincible

WATCHING STAFFORD, I tried to keep myself from blurting out a warning. I wanted to say, "Good lord, Staff, come back here!" but I knew he wouldn't stop. He strode doggedly across the room and put his hand on the knob, knowing full well that death was waiting for him on the other side of the door.

"Don't risk it!" I said in spite of myself, as quietly as I could manage. "Not without a gun."

Unhearing, he paused there; but not through fear. He wasn't in any sense afraid to meet it, even at a disadvantage. On the contrary, Stafford's way, when



only a slow forward creep. . . .

faced by a dangerous assignment, was to head right out, take it as it came and get it done.

He hesitated a moment because that sagacious mind of his was at work. While death waited for him on the other side of the door he began forming a plan—perhaps a plan by means of which he might stand a remote chance of licking it.

If such a chance existed at all, it was the slimmest possible one. Death for Stafford seemed an utter certainty, because he'd asked for it with such challenging directness—but the glint in his grey eyes meant he was ready to play any gamble now, no matter how long the odds against him.

It might not strike at once. Stafford might possibly have a little time left. The night might pass quietly, and the next day too—perhaps the next few days, even. But inevitably the moment would come.

Every minute of every hour Stafford would know that sudden death was stalking him. There was no place where he could find safety from it, no way he could forseee just when it would hit. The whole thing must be decided in a murderer's mind—in the ruthless brain of the man who was prepared to kill him.

We knew only one fact about the waiting killer. Though we hadn't an inkling of his name, or of his position in the city, we were sure of this: he could do it and get away with it. Once Stafford was dead, the man who had murdered him would remain untouched by the law—immune to prosecution.

The clearest-cut certainty in all this crazy predicament was this—Stafford had been marked for death by a man who could, at any chosen moment, kill him with impunity!

Stafford was fully aware of this. Tonight we had learned just how and why the killer had gained his startling advantage over the law. Such a thing, flaunting every decent person's sense of rightness, shouldn't, of course, be possible. But it was true. It was a monstrously unjust but inescapable fact. A man who had already killed two victims was now determined to kill Stafford also, and once Stafford was dead his murderer could sneer at the police and the courts and continue to walk the streets scot-free.

Stafford thought of that and the plan kept forming in his mind as his hand grew tight on the knob.

"For lord's sake, Staff, don't risk it!" I pleaded with him again. "Not without a gun!"

Still he didn't hear me. His shoulders drawn square, he twisted the knob, pulled the door open and stepped into the street where falling sleet whispered in the darkness.

♣ ♣ ♣

YESTERDAY had been an overcast day and with the coming of night a chill rain put a sharper bite in the air.

The street lights bleared through the windshield of Dan Stafford's car as he tooled it carefully across the South Side. The radio was tuned to the police wavelength. At intervals the headquarters announcer twanged out orders to the fleet of squad cars touring the city. We talked, paying little attention, until Stafford sat forward with an ear cocked.

"Thirteen-thirteen Veach Street, top floor," the voice was repeating. "Signal thirty-four."

Signal 34 meant, "Approach with caution—go armed."

"What's up?" I asked. "You know that address, Staff?"

"I know it," he said, "and I don't like it. Sheila Preston lives there."

"Your friend Phil Preston's wife?"

Stafford swung around a corner before answering. The place was only two or three blocks ahead. He headed directly toward it through the rain.

"That's right," he said. "She left him three months ago. Phil's still pretty hard hit. She plays around too much. I've been worried there might be trouble. Sounds like it's gone and happened."

When it came to worrying, Stafford was the most unselfish guy in the world. He never worried about himself, but always about somebody else.

For example, down there on the South Side, where we'd spent the whole evening, Stafford kept the boys' club going in an otherwise unrented building near the midtown bridge. A big room full of wood- and metal-working tools, a little printing shop and such things, it was open to any

neighborhood kid who cared to use them. Stafford had started it eight years ago, paying for the whole works out of his own pocket. It gave the kids an opportunity they wouldn't have found elsewhere to get started in useful and well-paid trades. Stafford had been worried that unless he kept them busily interested and out of trouble, they might turn into bums and crooks.

Every afternoon or evening he dropped in. He loved to guide the kids along, being an expert craftsman himself, and they, in turn, loved to hear him talk. He was a detective lieutenant, now a special investigator assigned to the district attorney's office, and the kids, ranging in age from eight to twenty, would sit there goggle-eyed while he told them about various exciting cases, which always ended with the culprit's taking a good stiff rap.

Stafford would use these stories to prove his favorite point. "That's how it goes. You or I can make an honest mistake and still get ourselves straightened out. But when a crook makes a slip, that's all he needs—just one slip—and he's done for."

Coming from anyone else it might have sounded corny, but Stafford always got it across because he believed it so sincerely. In the same way, whenever he helped the kids at the benches, he'd show them how their school work applied to the job at hand, and then he'd add a fatherly fillip all his own.

"This saw-cut has got to be absolutely square. In geometry they teach you the shortest distance between two points is a straight line, same as here. It's like that whatever you're doing. The best and quickest way is to stick to the straight and narrow."

"Stick to the straight and narrow," was Stafford's pet line, and although it certainly wasn't subtle he somehow avoided being stuffy. He actually made it attractive.

The kids' record proved that. Scores of them had made good, and some of them were now repeating Stafford's lines to their own kids. He was immensely proud of them—particularly proud of one named Philip Preston, who was doing nicely these days as the foreman of the *Reporter's* press room.

THE address where Phil Preston's alienated wife lived was just ahead in the block when we saw the man come out of the entrance.

Heavy-set, he moved queerly on stiff-kneed legs, as if overloaded with drink. Just at that moment a pair of headlights swung into the street from the intersection beyond—a prowl car answering the flash from headquarters. The man must have recognized its green-and-gold markings. Prodded by quick terror, he lurched into a jerky run in our direction.

Stafford veered his sedan to the curb and ducked out. The man saw Stafford blocking his way. The prowl car was rolling closer behind him. He was caught between two fires. Staring around wildly, he looked for a way to squeeze out—and found one. He flung himself against a door in a high, unpainted wooden fence and disappeared into the gloom inside.

The fence stretched across the front of a building which was being wrecked. The work of demolishing the old Waldoria Hotel had begun more than a year ago. The contractor had gone bankrupt and the operations, tied up in litigation, had stopped. The half-wrecked shell hadn't been touched in six months. Recently there'd been considerable agitation about it, because it was an eyesore, and also because the steel framework was needed for scrap.

The bared girders formed a black, criss-crossing pattern against the dripping night sky. The lower part of the brick walls remained standing, a sort of pit filled with the rubble and debris of the torn-out upper floors. An enclosed wooden stairway clinging precariously to the half-gone façade, zigzagged all the way to the windy top. It wasn't a safe spot at any time, and the gate in front was now the only way in and out.

The fleeing man had, in his blind effort to elude Stafford, stumbled into a hazardous cul-de-sac.

Blocking the gate, Stafford heard stumbling footfalls on the wooden stairs, clattering higher. Next the prowl car swung to the curb and a patrolman popped out. Stafford never carried a gun, but the cop had a service revolver in one fist.

"He's up there, isn't he, Mr. Stafford?"

The stairway was like a steeply inclined,

pitch-black tunnel. The ragged footfalls had moved far above and as we listened their echoes rattled away.

"Keep watching those stairs," Stafford said, "while I phone in for more men."

We hustled up the block, leaving the two patrolmen on guard. Just inside the entrance of 1313, a brownstone front remodelled into small apartments, a woman with ink-black hair and eyes stood mutely wringing her hands. Evidently she was the one who had phoned the alarm to headquarters. Since the radio had mentioned the top floor, Stafford and I climbed. Beyond the last landing a door stood open, and in the center of the room beyond we found a dead woman.

She was about twenty-five and she'd been pretty, in a cosmetically vivid, voluptuous way. She wasn't pretty now. One bullet had hit her low in the neck and a second squarely in the center of her forehead. She'd slumped backward, evidently killed instantly, and her housecoat had flipped up over her stockinged knees. The expression frozen on her face was one of scornful laughter.

STAFFORD circled to the telephone. He spoke to headquarters in a low voice, his terse words launching a man-hunt. Disconnecting, he stooped over a blue metal revolver that had dropped to the floor just inside the door.

"Your pal Phil Preston's wife?" I asked.

His face set and hard, Stafford nodded.

"Separated from him, you said. She evidently wasn't the kind who'd settle down to a good book and a quiet fireside. The let's-have-another-drink, whoop-it-up type. This setup looks expensive. Did she have a good-paying job?"

"After she left Phil she began secretarying for a shyster named Lewis Wyley, but he couldn't have paid her very much for that." Stafford's mouth twisted with distaste. "I've seen them together. In fact, she was playing around with three or four men—working up a mess of trouble for herself, and this is it."

"It wasn't Phil Preston we saw running into that wrecked building, was it?"

"Phil's tall and lean. That man was chunky."

"Evidently one of those guys she played around with didn't take it in a spirit of fun. The serious sort. First, maybe, he tried other ways to steady her down to him alone, but it didn't work, so then he couldn't stand any more of it and used a gun—which *did* work."

Stafford's lips pursed. "You mean she was shot, through jealousy, by the man we saw scramming out of here. I hope it was that way. We'll soon see."

Headquarters meanwhile had been ordering and getting fast action. Another squad car had stopped in front of the place and two patrolmen were tramping up the stairs. Stafford left them in charge of the corpse and went down. Reaching the street, we saw that the police department was already putting on a spectacular show.

Three more prowl cars had taken strategic positions near the remains of the old Waldoria, their spotlights turned up on the black steel skeleton. A riot squad car was stationed across from the wooden gate. Its floodlights spashed a glare through the partly demolished structure. A crowd was beginning to mass on the sidewalks, and more cops were holding it back. We sidled through and reached the stairway just as the riot squad began to go into action.

"The back of the building's covered. He can't get out. Spread out on the platforms and we'll spot him. But watch him—he may have a gun."

Moving with trained coordination, they drifted up the stairway. Its roof leaked, soaking the wooden steps. At each landing two or three men sidled onto a drenched platform. Stafford and I eased onto one about halfway up. It was just a small square formed by loose planks that sagged treacherously under our weight.

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THE lights glaring up from the street cast a confusion of shadow-shafts through the falling rain. Flashlights criss-crossed, seeking the fugitive. He had to be somewhere inside this wet shell, either among the heaps of soggy rubbish below, or clinging to some precarious point of the superstructure. Then a call:

"There he is!"

Swiftly the shafts converged, focussing at a point on our level, in the very middle of the framework. They brought a white, terrified face out of the darkness. The fugitive stared down, blinded. He lay flat on his stomach on a beam, clinging with both knees and both hands. There was something odd in his expression—something scared yet dreamy.

He just put his head down on the hard steel and lay there, as if he didn't care any more. Voices howled at him to come in, but he paid no attention. He stayed there, stretched out loosely, sprawled in vacant space.

The only way to get him, Stafford decided, was to go after him. Before anyone else could get started, Stafford ventured out. He appeared to be walking slowly and carefully on empty air. The black I-beam under his feet was almost invisible until the lights helpfully shifted back along it.

I held my breath, knowing that Stafford shouldn't have attempted that. High places made him dizzy. More than once I'd seen him back away from an ordinary window just six or eight stories above the street, gripped by an incontrollable vertigo. This was much worse. He was advancing along a path suspended in a void, a path only six inches wide, wet and slippery. One misstep would hurtle him down to the piles of rubble far below, and the best he could hope for then would be a long stretch in the hospital. But he slid along like a blindfolded tightrope walker, arms extended and see-sawing a little to balance himself, and when he reached the man on the girder he stooped over.

The return trip was even riskier. Nobody else could get out there on that thin beam to help Stafford, so he had to manage the job alone. Backing up, step by step, he dragged the man whose arms and legs dangled like a straw-stuffed dummy's. When Stafford reached the platform he was gasping. He grabbed my arm to keep himself, even then, from pitching off into space.

Flashlights gathered around. Stafford stepped back with his mouth screwed into a tight grimace.

"Luke," he said to me, "that's Lewis Wyley."

"The shyster the girl worked for."

"There's a bullet hole in his back," Stafford said.

"Hello! Then my theory's all wrong. Wyley couldn't be the one who shot the girl. Somebody else shot them both."

"How could he live?" Stafford murmured, almost to himself. "How could he walk and climb with that bullet in his back? Who was he trying to get away from when he cleared out of that apartment?"

"The killer, of course. He was so badly hurt he didn't know very well what he was doing. A nasty piece of business, Staff—double murder."

Stafford's face was dark-lined in the glow of the flashlights and he spoke next in a tone so low I hardly caught his words.

"I've got to pick up Phil Preston. I've got to bring him in for this—even though I'm damned sure Phil's no killer."

That necessary little job would be hard on Stafford. But it was only the beginning. The rest of it, all unforeseen now, was going to be even tougher.

CHAPTER TWO

The Web

PHILIP PRESTON sat alone in a little office in the district attorney's suite. A clean-cut chap, he had dark, forthright eyes and a strong, handsome face. He was confused, hit hard by the scandalous death of his alienated wife, and conscientiously worried because he'd had to be away from the *Reporter's* press room the whole day. While he waited, nerves on edge, hoping to be released at any minute, the case against him was building up power.

As chief assistant district attorney, I'd questioned him. At the time of the murder, he'd told me, he'd simply been alone at home, reading. It wasn't good. In fact, it was damaging. Preston had no alibi.

When Stafford appeared, looking heartsick, he had a fistful of signed statements. The chief had suggested that somebody else might work the case, since Preston was a good friend of his, but Stafford had insisted on handling it himself. He'd wanted to make sure no evidence in Preston's favor was overlooked. Now his pinched mouth testified that if there was

evidence in Preston's favor he hadn't so far managed to dig any of it up.

The spruce, alert-eyed man who came in with Stafford was Mitchell Miner, who ran the city's smartest private detective agency. A few years ago Miner had had a shabby little cubbyhole of an office, but he'd built up his clientele until he now had a whole floor in a building on Broad Street, with his name in gold on the windows, a stable of aggressive operatives and a policy of charging stiff fees. Sometimes I suspected Miner was too smart, but he testified for the State as often as he appeared for the defense, and counsel always treated him with the respect due a highly successful, affluent man. I didn't know what part he might play in the Preston-Wyley murder case, but he was ushered directly into the office of my chief, Steve Clay, while Stafford stepped into the room where Phil Preston waited alone.

"Phil," Stafford said, "it's queer. I've been scratching up evidence all day, and it's all bad, and yet I'm damned if it convinces me. In spite of it, I don't believe you did this thing."

"Thanks, Staff," Preston said.

"I've known you for eight years. I got you interested in printing presses. You were the first kid who ever puttered around the club, and among them all, swell as they are, you're aces with me. You've always stuck to the straight and narrow. I'll never believe you could make the one fatal slip that a crooked-hearted man always makes. You're simply not that kind."

"Staff," Preston said earnestly, "I couldn't lie to you. If I'd done it, I'd have to tell you the truth. But I didn't do it."

Stafford looked down at the statements he had rolled up in one hand and wagged his head. "Just sit tight, Phil. I've got a job to do for my chief and I can't shirk that, but just leave this to me."

"Why, sure, Staff," Preston said, and smiled.

STAFFORD went into the office where District Attorney Clay was talking with Mitchell Miner. The chief was a brisk-mannered, highly capable, thoroughly decent guy. If he was strong-minded as hell sometimes, it was invariably because he felt the force of his official responsibilities. He and Staff and I had been staunch personal friends years before he was first elected, and this was his third term. In our opinion, having worked close to him for five years now, Steve Clay was the best prosecutor the county had had within the memory of living man.

Equitably, Stafford spread out his reports and proceeded to give the chief his information without pulling his punches, just as if he'd never before laid eyes on Preston.

"This is a statement I got from Mrs. Margarita Jenkins-Cole. She lives in a penthouse at the Colony Apartments. Divorced, has a six-year-old daughter."

Everybody knew a little about Mrs. Margarita Jenkins-Cole. The divorce suit a year or so ago had been headlined. There'd been a bitter court fight over the custody of the child. Mrs. Jenkins-Cole's social position had slipped a bit, but obviously she still lived in independent luxury on a substantial alimony award.

"Sheila Preston was a close friend of hers," Stafford went on. "According to her, Sheila was definitely through with Phil. He couldn't give Sheila all the excitement she wanted in life. Phil, though, was mad about Sheila and never stopped trying to persuade her to come back to him. Mrs. Jenkins-Cole warned Sheila she'd better stop laughing in Phil's face whenever he begged for a reconciliation. Phil was so in earnest, she said, and still so much in love with Sheila that he might do something reckless."

Stafford hated to have to tell the chief all this, but it was necessary.

"Mrs. Jenkins-Cole was in Sheila's apartment yesterday when Phil came in, emotionally upset. He demanded a showdown with Sheila. He'd heard how she'd been seeing other men, and he couldn't stand that. She told him to get out and leave her alone, and then he blew up. He threatened Sheila and slammed out. Sheila, as usual, just laughed him off, but Mrs. Jenkins-Cole was scared."

Mitchell Miner spoke up.

"What I have to say fits in here, Steve. When Staff asked me what I knew about the Prestons, I said I'd rather make my statement to you personally."

"Go ahead, Mitch," the chief said.

"Phil Preston came to my office a week ago. He wanted his wife watched. He said his interest wasn't in getting evidence for a divorce, because he didn't want one. He was just anxious to know how his wife was spending her evenings."

"What was his idea?" Steve Clay inquired. "He must have had a pretty good notion anyway. Was he just torturing himself?"

"He impressed me as being extremely jealous of her," Miner answered. "Having heard she was playing around, he was imagining still worse things. Reluctant as he was to believe them, he realized they might be true and the uncertainty was wearing him down. He couldn't keep his mind on his work. This thing was driving him to distraction. What he wanted was reassurance. He hoped to learn there was nothing in it."

"But there was?"

Mitchell Miner smiled wryly. "Yesterday, when I reported to Phil Preston, he was stunned. It was even worse than he'd imagined. He just sat there beside my desk with tears in his eyes. Then anger began to get him. He mumbled to himself, 'I'll kill her for that!' and he went out of the office with his face white as death."

Steve Clay asked quickly, "You heard him speak those words? 'I'll kill her for that?'"

Miner nodded.

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"THIS case is building up," Steve said. "What else have you got there, Staff?" and, disheartened, Stafford referred to another statement.

"This one's from Sam Kappes, pawnbroker, 67 West Street. I don't like Kappes. His reputation's none too savory. Ordinarily I wouldn't trust him, but offhand I don't see what other connection he could have with the case, so here's what he says.

"Early yesterday evening a man answering Phil Preston's description came into Kappes' shop. Kappes definitely identifies Phil's picture. Phil told Kappes

he wanted to buy a camera and kept asking to be shown others. Kappes had to go into his back room to get several more of them. After all that, Phil left without buying. Later Kappes discovered a revolver missing from his showcase. He was going to report the theft to headquarters but other customers kept coming in, he says, and he didn't get around to it until this morning. I showed him the revolver used to kill Sheila Preston and Lewis Wyley. He identifies it as the gun stolen from him yesterday. The serial number checks with his records."

"Did Kappes discover the loss of the revolver immediately following Preston's visit, and before any other customer came in?"

Stafford forced out the admission, "Yes."

"Is that still another statement you have there?"

"Statement by Mrs. Dora Bernardi. She and her husband manage the building at 1313 Veach. They live right across the hall from Sheila. She's a dark-haired, dark-eyed woman, the one who phoned in the first alarm last night.

"Mrs. Bernardi says Phil Preston came to Sheila's apartment every few days. Every time, she says, there was a loud argument. She saw him come in again last night. He was all tightened up, she says—looked like he'd worked himself up to the point of doing something desperate."

"Let me put in here, chief," I said, "that Preston admits he was there during the evening."

"Mrs. Bernardi saw him go into Sheila's apartment," Stafford went on. "Deponent was in her kitchen and heard Sheila laugh just before the three shots were fired. She heard a hallway door bang. When she got her own door open she saw a man running down the stairs. She says it was Phil Preston. She saw Sheila lying on the floor, shot dead, and Lewis Wyley—he lived in another apartment in the same building—leaning against the table with blood dripping down the back of his coat." Stafford put in a remark. "Pretty careless of Wyley to turn his back on an enraged husband with a gun."

"The wife was shot first, then Wyley got hit as he was heading for the door," the chief surmised.

Stafford sighed again. "Mrs. Bernardi phoned headquarters then. She was downstairs, waiting for the cops to come when Wyley staggered down the stairs and out. She says she didn't dare try to stop him." Stafford slid the three statements in front of Steve Clay. "That's all."

It was more than enough. It was as complete a murder picture as ever I'd seen—and yet Stafford, I felt certain, still couldn't believe Phil Preston was actually guilty.

"Preston's theft of the gun, hours before he committed the crime, clearly shows premeditation," the chief stated. "We'll charge Preston with first degree homicide. I'll ask the grand jury to indict first thing in the morning. I won't say thanks, Staff. You've done a fine job, but I know how sorry you are the case has shaped up too strongly against Preston."

"You speak as if I've finished, chief," Stafford said quietly. "Matter of fact, I've just gotten started."

CHAPTER THREE

Kill-Money

WHEN STEVE CLAY left his desk for the day Phil Preston had been duly arraigned and locked in a cell. Stafford had been out of the office most of the afternoon, trying his damnedest to achieve the apparently impossible—to uncover some particle of evidence in Preston's favor.

I knew how Stafford felt about it. Preston was the outstanding product of his South Side Club. Over and over again Stafford had cited him as a shining example to the other kids. While the crooks Stafford talked about consistently met their finish as a result of only one inevitable slip, Preston, in contrast, had made himself a fine, upstanding young citizen despite obstacles and a few natural mistakes. He was living proof of how it paid to "stick to the straight and narrow."

If Preston should now stand convicted as a two-time murderer, it would make a mockery of all the years and the thousands of dollars which Stafford had devoted to the club. Not only that, but the ideals of

the club would stand betrayed, and its benefits permanently obscured.

So it wasn't only Preston that Stafford was working to save. It was the faith of those other kids as well. It was also the creed by which he himself lived and by which he inspired them to grow.

A hellishly tough assignment! I still couldn't see how Stafford could stand a ghost of a chance of winning out.

Returning to the courthouse after dinner, having some urgent work still to be done, I found all the offices dark except the chief's. Stafford was in there, looking a little haggard, as if he hadn't even taken time out to eat. He was so intent on what he was doing that he scarcely noticed me. Moreover, he was busy with a task that wasn't exactly up to his ingrained ethical standards. He was digging into the chief's private letter-file.

After pouring over several letters and carbons, he replaced them, stared at me, then pulled several pages of notes from his pocket.

"Luke, here's a copy of Lewis Wyley's state income tax report for last year. Notice the total of the gross. And here's a list of his bank deposits covering the same period. Notice that total! Wyley's income last year was actually ten thousand odd dollars higher than the amount he reported."

"Even if Wyley was an income tax evader," I asked, "how can that possibly affect the case against Preston?"

"It wasn't simply an instance of evasion," Stafford answered. "The bank deposit slips show that every dollar of this ten thousand was deposited by Wyley as cash. That means the money wasn't paid to him as legal fees."

"What was it, then?"

Too absorbed to explain, Stafford shifted to another note. "You remarked last night that Sheila Preston lived in an expensive setup. That's true. Not only was the apartment rent high, but the furnishings cost plenty, and she had a whole wardrobe full of high-class clothes, not to mention jewels. Here's a record of the salary paid Sheila by Wyley—thirty dollars a week. Here, again, is a copy of her bank deposits since she began working for him. Notice how they recently took a big jump upward. More than a thousand dollars within the last month! And again every cent of those surplus deposits was cash."

"Men," I said.

Stafford shook his head. "Better than that, Luke. The price-tag on her couldn't have been that high. Something else, much better than that."

"I still don't figure how all this can tie into the murder case against Preston."

"You come with me. I've got a hot lead—too hot, maybe—and I may need a witness."

I FOLLOWED him down. He started off before I was hardly inside the car door. He didn't think to mention where he was headed. He was still too preoccupied to talk—and too shaken.

Considering the dangerous condition of the streets, he drove a bit too fast. The weather had turned sharply colder. All day a fine drizzle had fallen, and now the puddled pavements were freezing. Sleet was beginning to rustle and hiss against the windows. Few pedestrians had ventured out, and fewer cars were rolling, but Stafford, skidding a little on the corners, kept going in that direct, dogged way of his.

He swung into the driveway of a wealthy-looking home in a fashionable development. He tapped the brass knocker of a Colonial doorway. Presently a man looked out—a man of about fifty, with iron-gray hair and a smoothly handsome face touched with a shadow of dissipation.

"Mr. Willian Wainwright? I'm Daniel Stafford, special investigator assigned to District Attorney Clay's office."

Disconcerted by Stafford's presence, Wainwright nervously led us into his study. I recalled that he was a partner in the brokerage firm of Wainwright and Carwithen.

"I wish you'd phoned me before coming," he said. "Fortunately my wife is not at home this evening. If you must talk to me again, I'll come to your office."

Rebukes weren't stopping Stafford.

"Let me make it perfectly clear," Stafford began, while I wondered why the devil he was here and what he was leading up to, "that I don't intend to put my nose into your private affairs. I want to say also that of course I'm completely sure you

haven't the remotest connection with the death of Lewis Wyley last night. I simply want to get a clear picture of Wyley's criminal operations. As one of his victims, I feel you'll want to cooperate. In fact, your contacts with the district attorney have already shown that."

Peering at him, Wainwright said, "My only intention all along was to get free of that damned leech Wyley. Well, his death releases me. I can avoid all publicity now. I must insist on that."

"All this will be held strictly confidential, Mr. Wainwright," Stafford said, while I still wondered what the hell it was all about. "Now. A month ago you went to District Attorney Clay with a complaint. Lewis Wyley, you said, was blackmailing you. We won't discuss his basis for demanding blackmail."

Stafford held a few notes in one hand. Glancing over his shoulder I saw, to my astonishment, the scrawled name of Mrs. Margarita Jenkins-Cole.

"You'd become fed up with paying blackmail to Wyley and you wanted him prosecuted," Stafford went on. "District Attorney Clay assured you he'd take such action as the facts merited. A week later he wrote you to the effect that he was reluctant to proceed on uncorroborated evidence. He had, however, talked with Wyley and warned him off. The district attorney thought this was the happiest solution of your problem, since there'd be no scandal and he felt confident Wyley wouldn't molest you again."

Wainwright frowned. "It was no solution at all. The district attorney's warning had no effect on Wyley. The damned leech went right on bleeding me."

Stafford nodded. I decided I didn't like this talk one damned bit. It threw an unfavorable light on Steve Clay. Though no district attorney can possibly prosecute every one of the thousands of complaints that come to his desk, the chief's handling of this matter had clearly been perfunctory and ineffectual.

"Wyley continued to blackmail you," Stafford said. "You were about to resort to a more drastic means of stopping him, I believe, when it was suddenly made unnecessary by Wyley's death."

Wainwright stated flatly, "I told Clay, only this week, that unless he took prompt action against Wyley I'd go over his head to the Attorney General. But now that Wyley's dead, I'll of course do no such thing. I very much want the whole affair kept quiet."

"It will be kept quiet," Stafford promised. "Was Wyley the only one who collected money from you?"

"I happen to know that the young woman—Sheila Preston, his secretary—worked hand in glove with him. She collected money from—from another victim."

He meant, no doubt, Mrs. Margarita Jenkins-Cole.

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STAFFORD rose. "Please don't be disturbed by this, Mr. Wainwright. You're clear of the whole ugly business now. Thank you and good night."

Wainwright let us out the door. Back in the car, Stafford sat frowning. He was rooting into a hornet's nest, and though I still couldn't quite get the point, I felt his anxiety. He expected there'd soon be swarms of trouble buzzing around his head.

"Damn it all, Staff," I said, "this burns me up. Wainright had the courage to tell off a blackmailer. Even though it would have stirred up a big stink he was willing to see it through. But our office let him down. We could have moved against Wyley, but we didn't. That's not like Steve, not like him at all."

"Steve had a reason for that," Stafford said quietly. "Wainwright's wasn't the only blackmail complaint he shelved, either. I've traced four or five others. In each case a warning stopped Wyley, though in Wainwright's it didn't. Luke, it's the first hint you and I have ever had that Steve's conduct of his office may be open to question. But don't jump to conclusions. Steve must have had a good reason."

Abruptly Stafford started off again. The sleet was coming down faster. It stuck to everything it touched. The street lights had caps of ice. The branches of trees were bent under the weight of their thickening crust. The pavements were glistening sheets. Hard pellets rattled against the windshield as Stafford drove. He sent the car skittering around corners

until he pulled to a sliding stop in front of Steve Clay's house.

It was treacherous going along the walk to the door. We rang and presently the chief appeared, wearing a comfortable lounging robe and slippers. He greeted us genially, though I sensed a trace of strain in his manner, and he led us into the living room where the fireplace logs gave off a soul-easing glow.

Haze floated in the air. I smelled the fragrance of a cigar. Steve Clay was alone, and I smelled cigar smoke, and the chief was smoking a cigaret.

"Sit down," he invited. "You look positively grim, Staff. What's up?"

Stafford sat stiffly, frowning at Steve. He said, "Both Wyley and Sheila were pushing a blackmail racket, as collectors."

"I've known that," Steve said, "without being able to prove it."

Prove it? All the proof he'd ever need was the testimony of the victims. Stafford, however, didn't point out that fact.

"WYLEY had been mixed up in it for some time," Stafford said. "After Sheila had worked for him a while, she also got into it. I think she collected from the women victims while Wyley handled the men. The agreement was that Wyley and Sheila would keep a percentage of the take for themselves and turn the rest over to the brains. They were only the collectors."

"Well?" Steve said.

Hating every word of it, Stafford forced himself to go on.

"One of the victims was a wealthy broker, a married man named Wainwright. He began to kick up about it. In fact, he prepared to take steps to expose the whole racket, so they had to settle his grievance quietly. Word was passed to the man behind Wyley and Sheila. That man, in turn, instructed them to lay off Wainwright and the woman with whom Wainwright was secretly having an affair. That would satisfy Wainwright and the woman. The pressure would then be off and the racket could go on."

Steve Clay was sobered. His face was drawn. He said nothing.

"Wyley and Sheila, however, had a brighter idea. They decided to continue to bleed Wainwright and the woman on their own. That is, they went on collecting from these two victims, saying nothing about it to the man behind them, and keeping all the cash for themselves. They got away with it, but only for a short while, because Wainwright squawked again. This time, in order to get clear of them, he threatened to take his complaint all the way up to the Attorney General. Mr. Big soon learned about Wainwright's intention and realized, then, that he really was in a spot."

With a nervous jerk Steve flicked his cigaret into the fireplace. The cigar smoke still wafted in the air. I glanced uneasily at the doors behind us, the doors connecting with the adjacent rooms. Someone, I felt, might be back there listening. But the whole house was silent while Stafford's dry voice paused.

"Mr. Big had to stop Wainwright's impending complaint to the Attorney General, and at the same time he had two double-crossers to settle with. He accomplished both purposes at once. It wasn't Phil Preston who shot Wyley and Sheila. It was the bigshot of the blackmail mill."

Still Steve was tightly silent.

"A double murder," Stafford said. "There were several reasons why the case couldn't be permitted to go unsolved. It was too important. It would also be a blot on the D.A.'s record, and the D.A.'s record must remain as spotless as possible so that he can be reelected. Also, the investigation might hit on the blackmail trail, might possibly ride over the D.A.'s head and eventually flush out Mr. Big. A quick solution of the case would be much better all around. It was easy for Mr. Big to find. Phil Preston's situation made him the perfect fall-guy."

Now Steve spoke, his voice strained. "It's too pat a theory, Staff. Every crook claims he was framed."

"In Phil Preston's case it's true."

"How can you say that? Those sworn statements, Staff! You got them yourself."

"Sworn lies."

Quietly Steve asked, "Can you prove that all three of our State's witnesses are liars?"

"I've already proved it to my own satisfaction," Stafford answered. "I've looked

into records. I've asked questions. I've added two and two. I've learned enough about our three State's witnesses to be certain their statements are false."

"How can all three statements possibly be false?" Steve demanded.

"Blackmail," Stafford said. "A thread of blackmail weaving through every part of the case, tying it all together."

CHAPTER FOUR

The Murderous Moralist

STAFFORD was working up to something tremendous. I still couldn't see it clearly, but it was enough to shake him to the core. Also, it was handing Steve Clay the jolt of his life. Seized with agitation, the chief began pacing back and forth in front of the fireplace, his slippers making soft sliding sounds, while Stafford pressed the issue.

"Mrs. Jenkins-Cole's statement laid the groundwork for the case against Phil Preston. Well, at the time of her divorce, Mrs. Jenkins-Cole had a tough fight to retain the custody of her child. Since then she's gone off the deep end over another man—a man who happens to be married. Her ex-husband could sue and get the child away from her, if he knew about it, which he doesn't. She's left herself wide open to blackmail, and she's paid it—not only in the form of cash, but also in the form of a false statement incriminating Phil Preston."

Steve moved back and forth, head down.

"A year ago there was a payroll robbery at the Arlico plant," Stafford doggedly continued. "In the chase the stick-up man had to abandon his loot. A hot suspect was tracked down. Luke handled that case when it came to trial. The defendant won an acquittal because a woman gave him a strong alibi. Luke knew she was committing perjury, but he couldn't shake her. The crook's name was Frank Bernardi. He now manages the apartment house at 1313 Veach and the woman who alibied him is now his wife. Both of them could be sent to jail by someone who can prove her alibi for him was perjured. Somebody *can* prove it—which, incidentally, is why Sheila and Wyley both lived in that building almost rent-free—and Mrs. Bernardi is the intimidated witness who falsely states she saw Phil Preston fleeing from the murder room."

I was dazed. Stafford was revealing the case against Preston, which had looked so unassailable, to be the nastiest mess of skullduggery I'd ever encountered. But still Stafford wasn't finished.

"For years Sam Kappes, the pawnbroker, has been suspected of operating as a fence. Headquarters has never been able to pin it on him because no stolen goods have ever been traced to his shop. He caches the stuff in some other place. Before a case can be proved against him that storehouse must be found, but they've never been able to spot it. Somebody, though, knows exactly where it is. That's how this certain Mr. Big was able to obtain the revolver from Kappes—a revolver he meant to use for a specific purpose last night. That's also how he persuaded Kappes to state, falsely, that it was Phil Preston who stole the gun."

Steve stopped pacing. "These accusations of yours are not provable, Staff!"

"But they're true. A blackmailer told our three State's witnesses exactly what to say and forced them to say it—Sworn lies are sending Phil Preston on his way to the chair. Without those statements you couldn't even hold Phil."

Pale and tense, Steve retorted, "I don't know those statements are false. Your suspicions aren't proof of it. Lacking proof, I can't throw them out. I've got to try Preston for first degree homicide. I've got to take the testimony of those two women and that pawnbroker. My duty leaves me no choice. What's more, the court wouldn't allow me, even if I wished, to impeach my own witnesses."

"You'll convict Preston? Knowing in your heart he's innocent, you'll convict him?" Stafford faced Steve squarely. "Why, Steve? What's forcing you to that? *Who's* leaving you no choice?"

STEVE was silent, white-faced, until I said, "I think you'd better answer him. I'm speaking as a friend, not as your assistant. But if you don't answer Staff I'm through being both. I'll hand you my resignation right now, walk out and offer my services to Preston."

"That's how Luke feels about it," Stafford said. "I don't feel that way. I'm not resigning. I'm going to fight this thing to a finish my own way."

Steve stared at us. "You've both worked with me ever since I took office! You both know from the inside how I've handled it. It isn't possible you've both come to believe I'm a crooked district attorney!"

"I don't understand it," I said. "I've always considered you the cleanest, squarest guy I've ever known. I've always rated you the best prosecutor the county ever had. Until tonight. Now, suddenly, I don't know."

Steve grew even more tense. His face was so colorless he almost looked dead. He said, "I've something to tell you—provided you'll give me your word never to repeat it. Or is that asking too much?"

"We're not out for your blood, Steve. We just happen to be a couple of guys who draw the line at playing dirty pool, that's all. If you want my word, you've got it."

"And mine," Stafford said.

"Then listen," Steve said. "Listen. . . ." For a long moment he stood perfectly still, and then he began. "I'm not a lawyer."

It didn't register. He gazed at our blank faces and forced himself on.

"I'm not an attorney-at-law. I'm not a member of the bar. I have no right to plead in any court. As a prosecuting attorney I'm a forensic fraud."

What the devil was he saying? How could these terse, incisive assertions carry any meaning?

"Eleven years ago," Steve continued in a sickened voice, "I just happened to drift into this city, broke. I happened to get acquainted with—well, a certain man. He fed me, gave me a cot to sleep on, told me how to earn a few dollars in a slick way. I began showing up at the Magistrates Courts. My next step was to get myself next to a few trivial cases. On my first attempt I simply persuaded a complainant to withdraw his complaint, and the prisoner, thinking I was a lawyer, offered me five dollars.

"Soon I became acquainted with various arresting officers and at times I could argue them into letting a prisoner go. I got to know the court clerks too, and often I was able to get a complaint reduced or thrown out. I was very successful at it. Defendants in all sorts of minor cases began looking me up. I was kept busy. Not an inspiring picture, is it? But it's what may be called the beginning of my—my career in law."

With deadly seriousness Steve went on.

"THEN I found myself actually inside the bar, pleading cases. I'd become known—and mistaken, of course, for an attorney. I acted and talked like one. It was a simple matter to acquaint myself with court procedure and to imitate real lawyers' tactics. Nobody ever asked to see my law school diploma, of course. It was never necessary for me to show any credentials. I simply presented myself and was accepted. The more familiar my face became, the easier it was to do it again."

I just listened, my mind whirling.

"I took all the cases I could handle, and they grew in importance. One of them was a petit larceny charge which suddenly turned into grand larceny. It was transferred to a higher court and I went along with it. I won it, too. I began to get a fine reputation. My name appeared in the papers. I became politically active. I was actually more successful than many accredited attorneys were. I began to feel, by the lord, I *was* a lawyer, even though I had no law degree and no impressive diploma. The big step came when I was

actually invited to become a partner in the law office of old John Kellerman. He didn't check up on me, of course, any more than anyone else did, but he was delighted with my successes.

"I began to move in the right circles. You know the political set-up here as well as I do—locally, there's no real opposition to the party in power. The opposition survives only by making deals—there's one in every election. Having been accepted by the right people, not a soul ever doubted my qualifications. Then, as you know, at a time when the prosecutor's office was far behind its calendar, I was appointed special prosecutor. By election-time my record—and my friends—spoke for themselves, and I was elected district attorney. I've held the office for five years now—and I've no more right to practice in court today than I ever had."

He paused, his mouth wryly twisted.

"But I've done my best," he added. "Always knowing in the back of my mind that I was a fraud, I tried my damnedest to make up for it by being painfully honest in practice. I think my record as district attorney speaks for itself—except—"

"Except for that one man," Stafford said. "The man who fed you and gave you a place to sleep eleven years ago. He's known from the very beginning."

Slowly Steve nodded.

"Who is he, Steve?"

"I can't name him."

"You've got to tell us who—"

"I won't name him, Staff! I can't!"

"Since the very beginning," Stafford said, "he's been safe from you. He could commit any crime, provided he committed it with a little discretion, and you couldn't touch him."

"Isn't it clear what he could do to me if I dared press any charge against him?" Steve answered. "He'd hit back. He'd expose me."

Stafford took a step closer to Steve. "So you've let him get away with it. Over and over. Wholesale blackmail!"

STEVE'S fists went white. "Listen to me, Staff! I'm not purely selfish about this thing. My career would be wrecked, yes—I'd even go to jail myself—but that's the least of it. In my five years as district attorney I've prosecuted hundreds of cases. Hundreds of men are still in prison because I sent them there. Do you realize what would happen if the truth should come out now?

"Every one of those cases would be appealed again! Every conviction would be reversed! Half of all those hundreds of trials would have to be repeated. The statutes of limitations would free scores upon scores of crooks. It would throw our law-enforcement agencies into a state of chaos. Every court in the county would be disrupted for years to come, hopelessly tying up our administration of justice. It would mean utter, impossible turmoil, Staff! I can't let that happen, no matter what the cost of avoiding it may be. And there's one more thing. There are men I've convicted who can't appeal, who can't be turned free now—the murderers I've sent to the death-house."

I could only stare, appalled.

"Somehow I don't care about all that," Stafford said evenly. "I've got a swell young guy named Phil Preston on my mind. He's up for murder. He's on his way to the chair, and he's innocent."

"I've told you, Staff, how my hands are tied—but I'll do my best. Those statements haven't been published so far, and the grand jury hasn't seen them. I'll try to get them withdrawn—or changed to something more indefinite. I may be forced to use parts of them for whatever they're worth—but I'll find some way out—I'll do my best—"

Stafford stood very still, his eyes narrowed at the chief. For a full minute he didn't speak. Then he said, "Your best won't be good enough. Not while the pressure's on you. Not while somebody's telling you there's got to be a fall-guy to keep his own skin whole and to keep the D.A.'s record looking its best."

He moved doggedly toward the door, leaving Steve confused and startled.

"Staff, hold on! What're you going to do?"

Stafford turned back to face him again. "I'm going after that special friend of yours—the man you won't name."

Once more I became aware of that haze still hovering in the air—the haunting tang of cigar smoke—and the ominous possibility that someone in a room behind us was listening.

"Good lord, Staff, don't you realize it won't do any good to bring him in?" Steve blurted. "I won't dare move against him!"

"I wasn't thinking of bringing him in," Stafford said softly. "I wouldn't bother with that. First I'm going to find out who he is. Then I intend to get him. I'm going to put him in a place where his lying blackmail victims needn't be afraid of him any longer—in a place where he won't hold his power over you any more, Steve. That means his grave. I'm going to *get him!*"

Then, in that some unswervably dogged manner, Stafford went out—took his first step toward it.

CHAPTER FIVE

Death Spans the Storm

STAFFORD gripped the wheel as he drove, and he was silent. Motionless and wordless beside him, I still tried to grasp the full import of Steve Clay's startling confession. Sleet rattled against the windshield, and at times the rear wheels spun, whirring against the ice-plated pavement. The storm had driven everyone else inside; there were no pedestrians, no other cars. We moved alone in a dark, cold world suddenly knocked out of its orbit.

"You can't do it, Staff!" I said at last. "This thing is completely unofficial, completely outside your job as a law officer. You can't deliberately set out to kill a man. Not you!"

He sent the car sliding into the street where he lived, still saying nothing.

"Maybe you can get away with it," I went on earnestly. "Once you've killed that man, I suppose Steve won't dare move against you any more than he's dared move against *him*. You gave Steve your word never to repeat what he told us, but after all, you do know. But that's not the real point, Staff. You won't be able to live with yourself. You're not the kind of guy who can deliberately commit a murder and shrug it off."

Stafford swung to the curb, braking, and the locked wheels skidded a little.

"And what about the club?" I persisted. "Those kids admire and trust you. How can you ever again hand them that line of yours about sticking to the straight and narrow? You've always told them a crook needs to make only one slip, then he's done for—and you might make a slip yourself. Then, when they've found out about you, what'll it do to them? Just keep remembering those kids, Staff. You can't let them down."

Stafford said levelly, "I'm going to get that rat."

He was in the grip of an unshakable determination. Moralizing wouldn't stop this moralist. There was no use talking to him at all.

He got out of the car and turned to the door of the little ground floor apartment where he lived. I went close at his side across the icy sidewalk. We climbed the stoop and Stafford slipped his key into the lock—and then it happened.

It happened without warning, but with deadly suddenness and intent.

The two reports were deafening bangs. They burst viciously out of the darkness of the street where the only sound had been the whispering of the falling sleet. I was conscious of two brilliant flashes of fire on the opposite sidewalk. Twice there was a forceful *spat* against the bricks near the door-frame. Particles of lead and mortar and ice flew, stinging into our faces.

We spun about. Across the street, almost lost against the dark front of the buildings, a shadow moved. It darted into a doorway, then out again. I caught a flicker of gunmetal, as a weapon lifted again. Stafford had started toward it. He was near his car when the third shot blasted.

This time the bullet caromed, flying skyward with a fading wail. I dove after Stafford. Arms flung around him, I dragged him down. We were sheltered behind his car. Neither of us was armed—all we could do was crouch down and wonder how long the man with the gun would dare keep it up. We heard quick, skidding footfalls. Lifting a little, I saw the two-legged shadow dodging out of sight past the corner.

A few heads were poking out of sleety windows up and down the block. In half a moment, seeing nothing and letting it go at that, they drew back into the warmth. again.

STAFFORD'S impulse was to head around the corner after the gunman, but I had a firm grip on his arm. I pulled him across the sidewalk to his door and pushed him in. While the room was still dark, I shifted to a window —but the shadow of the killer didn't reappear. Finally I pulled the blinds down and snapped a switch.

"That was a close one, Staff—but you asked for it!"

Stafford was deeply thoughtful. "I know what you mean. When we went into Steve's place we interrupted a conference. He'd been talking with the man. He thought we'd stay only a few minutes, so he'd asked the man to wait in the next room. What I said to Steve was overheard."

Staring, I blurted, "You knew that, and yet you talked as you did! You've certainly asked for it!"

Stafford nodded, and his smile was tight. "I didn't expect him to come after me quite so fast, though."

"He isn't finished. He'll keep coming. He has you at a disadvantage because he knows you, but you don't know him. He'll try it again, Staff! The next time you step out that door you'll make yourself a target again."

Stafford looked mildly surprised. "You don't expect me to hide in here like a scared rabbit, do you, Luke?"

"Listen! If he kills you, he'll get away with it. Steve still won't be able to move against him even if he murders you."

"That's why I've got to get him first," Stafford said.

I stared incredulously at the windows and the door. Outside, in the street, death was lurking. This was a big, well-policed city. We had a clean administration. Staff and I were part of it—and Steve Clay too. Yet Steve wasn't truthfully a district attorney—he wasn't even a lawyer—he was a pawn in a crook's game. So far as that crook was concerned, our efforts to administer justice were futile. He was bigger than we were. He was a murderer waiting to silence Stafford, and once Stafford was dead his killer could laugh at the law and go scot-free. Even if Steve should attempt to prosecute him, Steve could never get the case started. He was completely disqualified to hold the office he held. A few words in the right ears could destroy him.

"I still can't realize it," I said. "There's never been a squarer, better prosecutor than Steve—except about that one man. Nobody, no matter how influential, has ever been able to push Steve away from his duty—from the straight and narrow, as you always put it, Staff—except that one man who's got Steve exactly where he wants him."

"He's got Steve," Stafford said, "only as long as he lives, but no longer."

Stafford hadn't taken off his coat and hat. He stood there in the center of the room, his canny mind beginning to work.

"What're you going to do, Staff?"

"I'm going to start getting him right now. First, it will help to know who he is. I've got several leads—three, to be exact. The two women witnesses and the pawnbroker. I may be able to make them talk. Mrs. Bernardi might be the easiest to work on. The murders happened right across the hall from her—she's jittery. I'm going to see Mrs. Bernardi."

I grasped Stafford's arm again. "Not tonight! The streets are empty. The darkness will give that man a better chance at you. He's probably waiting right now for you to show yourself again. Let it alone, at least for tonight!"

Stafford reminded me quietly, "Phil Preston's going to be indicted for murder first thing in the morning."

He turned, strode doggedly across the room and put his hand on the knob.

"For lord's sake, Staff, don't risk it!" I pleaded with him again. "Not without a gun!"

Unhearing, he drew his shoulders square, pulled the door open and stepped into the street where a killer immune to the law might be waiting. . . .

✤ ✤ ✤

I EXPECTED to hear the clap of another shot instantly—but there was no sound except the whispering of the sleet against the panes.

I went after Stafford. As I slammed the door behind me he frowned.

"Better stay inside, Luke," he suggested quietly. "You've been telling me it's not safe out here."

"He'll have to get us both," I said.

"Either that, or I'll be a witness against him—no matter how much hell it may play."

Stafford smiled. "You couldn't bring yourself to do that to Steve, and I'm pretty sure I wouldn't want you to. Better stay inside."

"I'm sticking with you, Staff."

He didn't waste time arguing. We looked carefully up and down the street, and it was all quiet. The sleet pelted and the lights shone from the windows, and nothing moved.

We got into the car. Stafford stepped on the starter and the motor ground. It didn't catch. After a full minute of trying, Stafford got out and lifted the hood. I stared up and down the street again, feeling a sharper chill, until Stafford said levelly, "Come on, Luke, if you're coming. We'll have to walk."

I slid out, my nerves tightening. One glance under the hood was enough. It had been done while we were inside the apartment, behind the drawn blinds. The distributor cap had been unclipped. A vital part, the rotor, was missing. Without it the car couldn't run.

Walk! The sidewalks were so icy that we'd have to move at a creep. We'd be so busy keeping our equilibrium that we'd have hardly any chance to watch anything other than our insecure feet. Any dark doorway, any shadow banked against the buildings, might conceal the waiting killer. He'd disabled the car in order to force us to mince along in the open—to make Stafford a clearer, surer target.

"It's not far, Luke," Stafford said.

It was only a few blocks, but that was more than far enough.

Stafford was already inching ahead.

We reached the intersection and we crossed it. I was oppressed with a feeling of terrible loneliness. It was a dead city. It was desolate, deserted. We were the only living souls in it—Stafford and I, prowling precariously along—besides the killer.

Ordinarily we could have covered those two blocks in two minutes, but already it seemed we'd been creeping along for hours. Skidding a little, neither of us dared grab at the other for fear we'd both go down. We clung to lamp-posts, or to the fronts of buildings as best we could. But now, at last, we were coming near a respite. We were on the same block as the house at 1313 Veach. It was still a street of silence except for the hissing of the sleet.

Then the pair of headlights beamed around the corner.

The car turned at the next intersection, the one beyond 1313, and aimed itself straight in our direction. The shafts of its headlamps glared at us. We stopped, breathless, as if we'd been impaled by two long shafts of silver. Then, keeping us trapped in the full brilliance of its lights, the car began to slow—to stop.

Stafford was slightly ahead of me. He called back, "Get out of sight, Luke!" and stared into the car's glare.

WE HEARD the slam of a door. The driver had left the wheel. He was standing beside the car, invisible behind the blinding shafts. So far neither Stafford nor I had been able to shift more than a few feet.

The gun spoke again.

Somewhere between us the bullet hit

with a hollow thud. Stafford flung himself sideward. As I caught up with him he gently pushed me. We stumbled into a sort of black pocket, hearing a flat slamming noise. We were off the street. Looking up, I saw black lines criss-crossing under the sky. We were inside a board door, inside a wooden fence, and the skeletal remains of the old Waldoria Hotel reared above us.

"Get up there!" Stafford said.

We sidled into the mouth of the stairway. It angled upward invisibly. Once inside that steeply inclined tunnel we had to climb. The steps were treacherously slick. The roof was leaky; they'd been wet and they'd frozen. Pressing our hands against the walls, we were able to help ourselves along a little.

Below us were footfalls. The man was inside the gate now; he was at the base of the stairway. He heard us. The whole structure seemed to quake with the shock of the shot he fired upward.

It was crazily like last night—only this time two officials of the law were the quarry, and the hunter was a murderer.

I counted back. Since the beginning the man with the gun had fired five times in all. If the gun was a revolver, and if he hadn't reloaded while waiting for Stafford to reappear, he had only one bullet left. But if the gun was an automatic, he had four or fire bullets more.

When we reached the second landing the question about his gun was suddenly answered. He cut loose with a reckless fusilade. Firing in rapid succession, he sent four bullets rocketing up the stairway. He couldn't see us; he simply blasted out in the hope that one or more of his slugs would find a target. Stafford paused beside me, breathing fast.

"Luke!" Stafford whispered.

"In the leg!"

"Get up, Luke!"

"I can't move my leg!"

"Give me your hand," Stafford said. "Hang onto me, Luke. I can help you—"

"Get clear of him!" I blurted. "He's coming up, Staff! For God's sake, get clear!"

Pushing against the floor, I wrenched myself away from Stafford. He groped for me, without finding me, as I slid myself out on the platform. The planks sagged under me, and the ice-coating on them gave off crackling sounds. I huddled down, listening. A voice spoke. It was a guttural voice, appallingly close.

"You might as well call it quits, Stafford. I've got you cornered."

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TWO pairs of feet knocked against the steps, both climbing. The higher sounds were Stafford's. The man with the gun was getting nearer to him. I clung to the edge of the platform, the sleet stinging down on me, peering into the stairway. I saw the faint movements of the man. I couldn't shift toward him because the shock of my punctured leg had struck a numbness all through me.

He disappeared, again climbing upward. Stafford's noises were higher now. I couldn't see either of them inside the steep tunnel of the stairway; I could only listen. Their sounds went higher. Higher until they reached the top.

There was a moment of silence. Then I saw a little cloud against the sky. It drifted off the loftiest platform; it moved out into the open space of the steel framework. It was creeping along one of the girders. Stafford! Stafford, whom high places made overwhelmingly dizzy, was inching out on a thin beam coated with treacherous ice!

I thought this was the finish. Retreating by the only path left to him, Stafford had emerged into the open. The glow of the city revealed him. It was a faint light, but it was enough to make him a definite target again. The girder, six inches wide, allowed him no movement except a slow forward creep. One bullet could pick him off, send him hurtling down.

But the other man didn't fire. My hopes clutched at the possibility that his gun was an automatic holding only nine bullets, and if so he'd already fired them all—he had none left. It was merely a hope, a wild prayer. But he wasn't letting Stafford go. He was still stalking Stafford.

A second cloud floated above me. It moved in the same slow course at the first. The man had ventured onto the same beam. He was sliding along after Stafford. It was a crazy, grotesque chase. Its

very slowness was nightmarish. Scarcely an inch at a time, the man advanced along the girder after Stafford as Stafford continued to retreat, scarcely an inch at a time, toward the limits of the hazardous path suspended in a stormy void.

It went on interminably, like an insane mind's illusion, until at last it could go no farther.

Stafford reached the upright beam that had once formed a part of the rear wall of the building. There he had to stop. His only possible move now was to lower himself, to grip the upright in knees and arms, and slide down. Ordinarily he might have managed that in a few seconds, but the ice forced him to move with extreme caution, with excruciating care—and the man was close behind him.

I saw him turn. His back pressed against the upright. Both his hands were behind him, gripping it. The man faced him. I saw the man raise one arm. He gripped his gun by its barrel. The weapon, then, was actually empty. He was intent upon wielding it as a club. He lifted it high, slashed it downward.

Stafford swiftly ducked his head and swung aside. The force of the man's blow, meeting only empty air, twisted him—flung him off balance.

A scream broke out high above me. It trailed down through the sleet-laden darkness. I felt the jolt against the piled debris below. Then it was very quiet.

Stafford was curling himself around the upright, and beginning to slide down, when I managed to push myself off the platform and into the stairway. My leg still refused to respond, but I got myself down.

There'd been no time so far for my mind to work itself beyond immediate dangers. Now I began to get a perspective on the power that had forced Steve Clay to its will. Blackmail practised at many opportunities! It led logically to only one conclusion, considering *all* the testimony against Phil Preston. Even before I reached the man lying among the sleet-covered mounds I knew it had to be Mitchell Miner.

Clambering over the heaps, Stafford reached him as I did. His neck was broken, his skull fractured. He was dead. . . .

STAFFORD'S car sat behind the *Reporter's* plant the next afternoon after the last edition had rolled off the presses. I was alone in it. My leg was stiffly painful, but I could manage to get around a little. I should have been in bed, but this was one time I wanted to be with Stafford.

After a while Stafford, grinning broadly, came out of the press room with Phil Preston. Phil was all slicked up, beaming. Climbing in with Stafford, he tossed a fresh *Reporter* into my lap.

On the front page of the paper was a headline reading, PRESTON EXONERATED, RELEASED. The biggest headline, though, was the one shouting, CLAY RESIGNS AS D.A. TO RUN FOR SENATE!

That brought a smile. Senators are usually lawyers, but a law degree wasn't necessary as a qualification for the office. Steve Clay's career as a "forensic fraud"—during which he'd done a world of good—was ended. It was a foregone conclusion he'd win the election, probably by a landslide. I must admit, too, that my smile was also prompted by the fact that Steve had suggested my appointment to fill out his unexpired term as D.A.

There was another headline. It appeared over the story concerning Mitchell Miner's death. "Mysterious," the paper called it, because nobody could figure out what Miner had been doing in a half-demolished building at the height of a sleet storm. So far as Stafford and I were concerned, that puzzle would remain forever unanswered. Officially there was no need for any further investigation. The headline stated, CORONER DECLARES MINER'S DEATH ACCIDENTAL.

But was it, really? It certainly wasn't murder. Nor was it suicide. And yet, because Miner had actually brought it upon himself, it wasn't exactly accidental.

Stafford had what he considered to be the right answer. When he'd first heard of the verdict, he'd said, with a wry grin—thinking of that ice-crusted girder stretching through the empty night air—"It was another case of a crook's making his one inevitable, fatal slip. He was simply a guy who couldn't stick to the straight and narrow!"

THE END

That Kill-Crazy Cadaver

Sammy's not to reason why—Sammy's but to kill—and fry!

I broke out Pete's gun and shot him in the head. . . .

By DANE GREGORY

WHEN somebody sends you a free century in the mail, you can't very well say to yourself, "Well, I earned a cool hundred today." Or maybe some people can. But a hot C-note is worth only sixty-five dollars or so—and I've got friends who would gladly pay as much for a quiet laugh.

I looked at the address again and it was mine, all right: *Samuel (Sammy) Dykes, Esq., 1416 Knoblock Way, City.* But there wasn't any letter inside the envelope, and there was no return address in the left-hand corner. Just this yard from the green bolt.

I thought what anybody would think. *Some wise guy,* I thought. *Better shed it quick, Sammy.* So I put the hundred in another envelope and mailed it special delivery to my throat.

"I'm sending you something on account, A. J.," I told him over the phone.

I didn't like the way he was crowding me all the time. He'd saved me trouble

and that was just fine—but I still don't see how a lawyer rates two or three fees for doing one piece of work.

He said, "I'm glad to hear that, Samuel."

I said: "It's only a hundred."

"Oh. That's not a great deal of money these days, Samuel. Will there be more soon?"

"You'll get what's coming to you, one of these days, Counselor."

"You know, Samuel," said this sore throat, "I was just about to make some such remark myself. The next time you happen to need a good attorney for a bad job, you're likely as not to get what's coming to *you*. I'd find work right away, Samuel. Really I would."

He hung up.

That would have been the end of it, maybe, except that when I opened my mail next day there was another hundred dollar bill inside. This time the man sent his business card, and it wasn't the kind you can buy for a dollar on First Avenue, either. It said:

EVERETT C. SMALLEY
Suite 767, Ames Building
Your Investment Broker

I didn't get it. On top of the fact that I had no money invested anywhere, I'd never heard of this Everett C. Smalley. But the Ames building is a good clean office address in the chrome and bleached oak belt downtown, and it stood to reason a man at that kind of pitch would not be fobbing off hot century plants on total strangers.

So I kept this one for my own use. I put it under the living-room carpet and waited for the mailman to repeat.

The third hundred came to me inside the upper half of a magazine advertisement that showed a man with a hard jaw putting the finger right square on me. He was tough about it. He said:

Are YOU making the most of your opportunities?

I still didn't get it.

The fourth day there was no hundred. Nothing came out of the envelope but a publicity shot of a large blonde actress and a folded page from one of these little desk calendars. December 27, it said—and by my time here it was almost the last of April.

I called A. J. again. "It's strictly a hypocritical case, of course, but what would you figure if somebody sent you something like that in the mail?"

"I'd put two and two together and have a neat rebus, Samuel. The blonde would seem to mean: Come up and see me sometime."

"Oh. Well. All right, then, if you're so smart—does the date mean anything?"

"That's an easy one," said the throat. "Mr. Smalley is telling you that Christmas is over."

"SMALLEY?" I said. "Smalley? What gives you the idea that—" A. J. had a quiet laugh. "We like the man, Samuel."

"That means you and who?"

"Both Mr. Petronius and I," said the larynx, "were quite favorably impressed by him. We met him just last night at the Club, and since then I've taken the trouble to make a few inquiries regarding his background. It seems quite stable, Samuel. Very stable indeed. We're glad he's taken an interest in you. Really we are. . . . Well? Well, Samuel? Well?"

"You don't have to write me a book," I said. "I'll put on my thinking-cap and rush right over."

This Everett C. Smalley was a middle-sized man with thick black hair and the same kind of mustache. The mustache bothered me a little because it was too much like Thomas Dewey's. He wore rimless eyeglasses as thick as my hand and an expensive piece of wool nobody could have mistaken for a zoot suit.

He said: "Have a cigar."

I already had one. But they were very nice cigars and so I had another.

"You needn't bother to sit down," said Smalley. "We'll only be a second or two."

I sat down. "I like to sit down even for a second or two."

"Very well." He opened the desk and took out a sheaf of legal-size paper. "By the way, Sammy—may I call you Sammy? There aren't any dictaphones planted in this room. Even if there were, Sammy, a dictaphone record is not admissible evidence in a court of law. Be-

sides all of which, Sammy, a man cannot be put in jeopardy of his life twice for the same crime."

"I know all that. What of it?"

Smalley smiled. He said: "For reasons you will understand, I have taken the time to assemble a complete dossier on you, Sammy. I'm going to tell you what I've found, and I want you to correct me if any of my data is spurious. Agreed?"

"Oh, I guess so."

"Very well. You were born in San Francisco in 1914. Poor but honest parentage. At the age of sixteen you were employing a staff of younger boys and successfully operating your own business. You sold plate-glass window insurance to small merchants at the rate of seventy-five cents a week."

"It was a dollar a week."

He made the correction. "In your early twenties you were a successful distributor of salacious literature until arrested for violation of the interstate commerce act. Subsequently served one term for armed robbery and one for assault. Emigrated to this state upon your release. Am I right?"

"Uh-huh."

"Here," said Smalley, "you associated yourself in a vague capacity with a man whose name is all but incredible—one Oscar Petronius. Mr. Petronius operates the Castanet Club and what I believe is popularly known as the laundry racket. Let us say you were employed by him as a sort of Japanese ambassador without portfolio."

"I don't get it."

Smalley smiled again. "Well, well—no matter; business is a cut-throat game at best. Held twice on suspicion of murder. Released for lack of evidence. Arrested a third time for the bombing of a small laundry on State Street. Victims: Charles Sing, proprietor, and—let's see, now—a Miss Margaret Woolfolk who just happened to be passing by. Both died."

I said: "Now wait a minute, here! The jury gave me a clean—"

"I know. I have met your attorney, Andrew J. Curtin, and a very able man he is. As a matter of fact, Sammy, he is now my attorney, too. Where were we? Acquitted on testimony of ten defense witnesses who demonstrated beyond a shadow of doubt that three state's witnesses were liars."

"And maybe they were," I said.

"Well and good. That brings us up to the present. At the moment I believe you are twenty-nine years old, have a permanent 4-F rating with your draft board, and are, by profession, a murderer."

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I THOUGHT what anybody would think. *Hey!* I thought. *How about this now?* I got up and put on my hat.

"Leaving?" said Smalley.

"Yes," I said.

"I doubt it," said Smalley.

He took a thousand-dollar bill out of his pocket and tore it in two like a man with a breakfast grouch breaking a shredded-wheat biscuit. He put half of the thousand under his palm and snapped at the other half with one fingernail. Smalley's electric fan folded it over the lip of Smalley's gorgeous gaboon.

I stood there looking down at it.

"I don't get it," I said.

"Pick it up, murderer."

"Well. But what good is just half a—"

"Call it," said Smalley, "a picture-puzzle that will be assembled for you in toto at the proper time and place. I have no intention of quibbling with you over terminology, sir. You are a murderer. You are a double, a triple, and quite probably a quadruple murderer. You murder, murder and murder. Is that understood?"

"It's not a nice way to put it," I said. "And I don't admit it, anyhow."

Smalley tapped the sheaf of paper. Smalley's mustache twitched above his teeth. "I went to the trouble of preparing this record for precisely the same reason that I would investigate a new issue of stock. Assuming that what I have found is true, I think you're well worth buying. One might even call you a guilt-edged security, Sammy."

"Yeah? Buying for what?"

"I want you to murder a man," said Smalley, "at eleven o'clock tonight."

You never know, do you? Nice clean office and all that, but when it came right

down to the pinch he was just as human as the rest of us. I said:

"Who?"

"His identity will be revealed to you in good time. For the present it needn't concern you."

"Oh, brother," I told him. "You'd be surprised how much it needs to concern me. I'm still not admitting anything, see, but what if he turned out to be a cop or a federal man?"

"He wears," said Smalley, "a monocle."

"You mean like the cops put on your—"

"No, no! Monocle. In his eye. Does he sound like a policeman or a federal man?"

I LOOKED at the other half of the thousand. Smalley was pecking away at it with the point of a desk-set pen. I hated that; he was liable to spoil it. I said:

"Well, he sounds like an Englishman. Maybe an English lord or something. You're not trying to get me mixed up in any fifth column business, are you?"

"No Englishman, Sammy. No personage. As a matter of fact, he is an impostor of the lowest order. That doesn't mean he is not a dangerous man, however. He is."

"Oh. Hard guy, huh?"

"Monocle and all," said Smalley, "he is as hard a man as you are likely to meet. When you put the pistol to his head, you will be disposing of someone who has himself murdered two men in cold blood and is contemplating a pretty fiendish vengeance on a third. Remember that, Sammy. In all fairness, I want you to know the calibre of the man."

"And you can't reach him through the cops, huh? Well, go on."

"He is about forty-five. Bald. Cleanshaven. He will probably be wearing a black overcoat, black hard-brim hat, and a green scarf. I say probably. He may or may not carry a gold-topped walking stick. In any case, you will know him."

"He sounds like a jerk."

"He is. A man without value to himself or the world. Kill him as swiftly and

painlessly as possible, however. I'd use at least three bullets."

"Boom-boom-boom."

"Right."

"Where?"

"City Park."

I said: "Oh, brother! I'm still not admitting anything, see, but City Park—"

Smalley spat on the other half of the bill. His eyes came up to mine and they were the eyes of a man I would not care to meet in a graveyard.

"You will not interrupt, Sammy. There is a Venetian sun-dial and a rustic pine bench close to it. If you know the park, you know that at that particular spot there is no foliage where eye-witnesses could possibly be lurking. And Riddle will—ignore that, please; it's not his real name—the man in question will be there."

His eyes again. They bothered me. He said:

"All that is arranged. He will be waiting there to keep a rendezvous with my —with a woman, but the woman will not be there. Do you begin to see, murderer, why City Park is the place?"

"Kind of," I said.

"You will proceed from the scene of the crime to Mr. Petronius' office in the Castanet Club. Our Mr. Curtin will also be there—you may check with them both if you wish. In case the police are interested, Sammy, there will be incontrovertible evidence that you were with me at eleven o'clock."

"An alibi? A four-sided alibi, huh?"

"I mean," said Smalley, "that I have this day invested certain moneys in certain of Mr. Petronius' enterprises. Unless you botch the job tonight, the four of us —you, I, Curtin and Oscar—are soon to be associated in an adventure of considerable importance to us all. I can't tell you the whole story just now. I can only tell you this: That the man in the park is one of several who must die."

"Hey! How several?"

He gave me the skin of his teeth. "That will be all, fellow murderer. Good day."

"Wait a minute! How about the—"

I watched his half of the thousand disappear into his coat. "When you have done your work, Sammy, the parts of the picture-puzzle will fit together."

I went south with another cigar.

"Well," I said. "Well, all right. But I'm still not admitting anything, see?"

I'VE NEVER been one to insist on a good north light for my work, but the dim-out seems to bother me a little when there is fog. Only when there is fog, understand.

There was fog that night. I mean the bad kind, cool and creepy, that wraps you around and around in the dark till you're as alone with yourself as a fork in a gather of spumoni.

I sat on the concrete edge of the kids' sandpile till my wristwatch said 10:54. I wasn't looking forward to it, see. It's all very well to shoot fish in a barrel, but even A. J. Curtin and Oscar Petronius didn't seem to know whether this barrel held a sucker or a swordfish.

I went across the parkway, walking slow.

I kept one hand in the slash pocket of my ben.

The hand had a thin rubber glove on it and the .38 a nice set of Pete's latents. I mean to say it was Pete's bessie girl, though that would have been headline news to Pete. I hadn't forgotten how he'd tried to leave me up Smoke creek on the Charlie Sing unpleasantness, and if there were any questions at all this time it was old Pete's turn for the sixty-four-dollar one.

I went to the sun-dial and the bench, treading fog.

Except for one or two peanut items, this Everett C. Smalley had called the turn. The clay-pigeon's scarf was green as a shamrock. His hat was a derby—oh, mamma, *what* a derby—that sat a quarter-mile north of the brow so that his big bald head shone white in the mist. . . . but there was a gold-topped stick across his knees, all right, and when his cigarette light broke back into his face I could see the icy gleam of the spy-glass.

No two ways about it, he was target for tonight.

He said: "Good evening, friend."

I said: "What makes you think so?"

"Now that you speak of it," said the jerk, "we do seem to be having rather a rum go of weather. Nahsty. . . . Ah—that is—you have business here yourself, old fellow?"

You twit, I thought. *You phony.* I kept one hand around the bessie girl and popped a cigarette between my lips with the other.

I took two steps toward him.

"Could be," I said.

"Why, that's a bit of a coincidence, you know. As it happens, so have I." He hawed once to show me how well he could do it. "A veddy personable young woman, and I expect to be seeing her veddy soon now. What are you—"

"Touch me off, will you?" I said.

The gold-topped cane slid from his knees and thumped softly in the grass. His right hand came up out of his benny with something small and hard in the palm.

He said, "Delighted, old boy," and pressed the trigger.

The flash of the cigarette-lighter ran up between us so that I was looking him dead in the eye—the naked eye, that is to say. And brother, I knew then that Smalley was right: you don't tweak noses when you're up against someone like that. You don't snap garters. It was an eye as round and black and ugly as the bore of a .45.

I said, "Thanks." I was shaking a little. I broke out Pete's gun and shot him in the middle of the head.

He made a whistling sound. The derby bounced like your brother-in-law's check and the monocle fell the length of its ribbon.

I shot him again.

He fell off the park bench and went thumping along toward his pretty cane, but the third shot put an end to all that.

"You're a real tough guy," I told this guy. "Weren't you, brother?"

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THIS place of Pete's is cross-town from the park, and when you're traveling by side-streets an hour is par for the course. I didn't thumb any rides on the way over, see.

Tonight it was so quiet front and rear that when this dope came pegging along in my shadow he sounded like all the wooden hammers at Coffee Dan's. He said:

"Hi, Sammy!"

I said: "Beat it, Jack. I don't know you."

"How was that again? Did you say—"

I hurried a little. Wouldn't you know it? He hurried, too. "Beat it, lush!" I told him through the collar of my coat. "Employees only out here, see? Go sell your extras."

"Lush?" said the guy. "Well, for—well, I'll be—well, of all the—"

I had my hand on the door of Pete's private office. The guy walked into me hard and fast and we walked through the door together.

As it turned out, he was Lieutenant Emerick of the homicide squad.

I have never seen so many police in so small a room. It was weird. Even without all the newspaper reporters, assistant D. A.'s and visiting firemen, you couldn't have crowded that many cops into one little room. They passed me around from hand to hand, all of them looking at me the way cops do, and by the time I'd reached the mop-up man everybody knew who I was but me.

I came down hard on something under a sheet. It was soft enough to be an ottoman but it seemed to end in a point of red tissue paper. I shook my head and looked up at the faces.

"I don't get it," I said.

Emerick had frisked me at the door: he had the .38 and my half of the thousand dollar bill. "Well," said Emerick, "who does? You've got good nerves, Sammy. *I* couldn't sit there."

Everybody watched me. No one tried to stop me. I pulled at the sheet.

The point of paper grew an inch at a time until it was the size and shape of a beer-funnel. Not the same color, though. I screamed.

Oscar Petronius had had chip-diamonds set in his teeth when he was a professional horseshoe-bender with a circus. I don't know whether it was a good idea or not. He looked terrible lying there with his fat lips parted and the red paper dunce cap set askew on his head.

"Pete," I whispered.

"He can't hear you," said Emerick. "A forty-four bullet is so deafening when fired at point-blank range. Oh, no, Sammy—I wouldn't turn down that other sheet. It's only Counselor A. J. Curtin

and his wearing the same kind of hat."

And so it was. My stomach caved. "I don't *get* it!" I said.

"We found this empty hanging on Pete's hatrack, Sammy. Intended for you, I guess."

It was a red paper dunce cap with nobody under it.

"Ought to look good on you, too," said Emerick. "It's funny you should have happened to turn up at this particular time and place, Sammy. You don't know how funny. There's been a pickup order out on you for the past half hour."

I said: "On *me?* Why, A. J. was my lawyer! Pete was the best friend a man ever— I don't like a forty-four anyhow."

"Oh, we're not accusing you of anything as fancy as this. You haven't got the imagination, Sammy—and besides, H. Q. just called up to say they've already brought in the killer." Emerick put the dunce cap on my head. "Boys, a path."

"You can't *do* this to me!" I said. "It's fascism! I'll see my— what charge?"

"The usual," yawned Emerick. "Just plain murder."

THEY took me to this little room at Central where the smoke was as fat and crawly as the fog outside. The faces floated in it like barrage balloons in the dusk.

Inspector Laurent said: "I guess we all feel a little sorry for you, Dykes."

I tore the dunce cap into confetti. "I'm clean as a baby."

"You had a kid of your own, Dykes, you wouldn't put it quite that way. The .38 alone is enough to cook you."

"It was Pete's .38! I just happened— get me a lawyer!"

"What lawyer would touch a case like this? Only the late A. J. Curtin."

My cigarette tasted like the first one on a New Year's hangover. I wanted to settle down somewhere in the country and raise chickens.

"But we're still not satisfied with any of the answers, Dykes. It's too pat. Too involved. Too crazy. It gets curiouser and curiouser. Say, where did I pick up that line, anyhow? It sounds like—"

"In this case," said Emerick, "it ought to be right out of a book called *Malice in Underland.*"

"And very good, too, Lieutenant. Ever try selling your stuff? Dykes, have we told you yet about the man we just brought in for double murder?"

"No," I said. "Who?"

Laurent was smiling a little. "The most conspicuous assassin I have ever known, Dykes. And the least obvious. A hundred witnesses saw him walk through the cabaret room of Petronius' night spot. That many people heard the shots in Petronius' office. Yet the man hasn't asked for a lawyer yet, and the fact of the matter is: he doesn't even need one. He's safe."

"I don't get it," I said.

"And no one at all tried to stop it, Dykes—not even the beat cop who happened to be hoisting a quick one at the bar. He was such a bizarre sort of murderer that everybody in the room thought he belonged with the floor show."

"Is it a riddle?"

"Yes. When is a double murderer beyond the law, Dykes?"

"I give up."

"I would, too. When he's a murderer dressed in a bright green scarf and a derby the size of a muffin. When he's the baldheaded man with a monocle who walked through the Club at 10:21 carrying three paper dunce caps in one hand and a gold-topped stick in the other . . . now do you get it, Dykes?"

IT WAS like having a stitch in the brain. All the faces ran at the edges and were nothing but eyes that watched me through the smoke. I said: "It's prosecution! You're just trying to trap me into a confession! You can't make me believe—that it was the same guy as the one at City—"

"Oh-oh! Watch it, boy—after all, you're not supposed to know yet where we picked up the body. Or even what it looked like."

"I know my legal rights. I didn't say boo."

Laurent shook his cigar ash onto the tatters of the dunce cap. I could see his teeth again. "And him with a white-hot .44 right in his overcoat pocket, Dykes. It's a wonder you're alive at this minute. Both of you quarreling, too—"

"Quarreling?" I whispered. "Who says we were—"

Such kind eyes! "Anonymous call-in at 10:45. Vicinity of park. Somebody with too much frog in his throat said that Samuel Dykes and a low comedy Englishman were in violent argument over a matter of finances."

I began to beat at the arms of the chair. I began to pant. "There *couldn't* have been any call like that! Because it ain't true, see? It's crazy! At 10:45 I was—"

"Well," said Laurent. "Where?"

I'd been stalling around at the kids' sandpile, but how could I tell him that?

He shook his head. "If it weren't for the pecuniary motive, you might be able to hash up some sort of defense. After all, the man was a dangerous criminal. Now that I think of it, maybe that's why there *is* a pecuniary motive."

He lifted his palm from the side of the chair. I saw the thousand-dollar bill.

"Torn," said Inspector Laurent.

I could feel it coming. I put my face in my fingers and began to cry.

"Not sliced neatly. Torn. Half of it in the pocket of your vest and the other half clenched in a corpse's hand so tight that it took the wrecking crew to extract it. You think there's any juror in the world too dumb to put this picture-puzzle together?"

I tried to get up from the chair. My knees let go and I fell across the pieces of the dunce cap. "I won't burn alone! I'll prove an alibi or take somebody else down with me! Smalley! Everett C. Smalley. A rich guy, see? Important. And I was with *him* at eleven o'clock. You call him! You just let me *talk* to him! I was with him all—"

"At eleven o'clock? You swear that?"

"On my word of honor."

"The curiousest part of it is," said Laurent, "that Smalley *does* back you up —and the jury will undoubtedly believe you both. . . . Why didn't you ask *us* about Smalley, Dykes? Matter of fact, he used to make quite a bore of himself around here."

I waited.

"Everett C. Smalley was a man very much in love with the Margaret Woolfolk who was your innocent bystander in the Sing laundry blast. Yours, Curtin's and Pete's. Curiouser yet, the park cop tells me that Smalley and the Woolfolk girl used to meet every night at that particular park bench."

I wanted to run. I wanted to faint. I knew what Laurent was going to say next, and I wanted to drop dead before I heard him say it.

Laurent said: "And although he seems to have made a few little changes in himself, Everett C. Smalley is the man you murdered in City Park."

FIVE VERY SMART GUYS

By STUART FRIEDMAN

"Dirk Hunter has just kicked off from poison. . . ."

They were five smart chiselers together, and the killer was the smartest of them all—until Mike Boyd's hyperthyroid aunt stepped out of the forgotten years, and fingered Mike as the final corpse!

IT WAS nine a.m. and the five of us were assembled in a back booth of Mook's cafe. At that hour all decent folk were already at their work, but we of Ajax Advertising Agency figured a business man needed half an hour to finish his sleep after he got to his desk. So we never began applying the pressure

till nine-thirty. In the meantime we were letting black coffee do our setting-up exercises for us.

Across from me was Fats Banner, a pink blimp of a man, to whom this idea of coffee alone was a bitter thing. Banner was so fat he was practically shapeless, and every few weeks he would renew his attempts at dieting. On such occasions we had to put up with his nasty temper or kill him. Salesmen were too hard to get for the latter course of action.

Next to Fats sat John Meredith, the aristocrat of Ajax; the only man with a press in his suit. Meredith let his scornful glance go to Dirk Hunter, who was slumped in a seat next to the wall.

"Hangover again, Dirk?" Meredith said, his nose seeming to sharpen with disapproval.

Dirk didn't say anything, which was unusual. I leaned out, looked past Tex at my side. Dirk was pasty-faced, his eyes a red-rimmed portrait of the man he'd become. I sat back, feeling sorry for him. I understood from good sources that he'd been tops once upon a time. A dozen years ago he'd been art director of one of the big New York advertising agencies. What had happened since was very sketchy, and he never spoke of it. He'd been with me six months.

Tex Repp, a lean, dark little man with a perverted humor, looked across at Fats.

"Dieting again?"

Fats Banner glowered at him.

"I am. I don't mind it a damn bit. I like it," he snapped. He sipped daintily from his coffee mug.

"Understand the government is using fat for explosives. Are you going to enlist?" Tex purred.

"Shut up," I said, punching him in the ribs.

Tex Repp chuckled. He looked like something keeping well forward of a posse chase in a Saturday afternoon thriller. He had a beard that required four shavings daily to keep him looking human. But he was my best salesman. He had one sport however that was going to earn him crutches sometime. When he was on the phone giving his spiel, he was fond of insulting his prospect in six-syllable words, uttered in the most angelic tone. No one had ever caught on yet, and Tex figured anyone with a good enough vocabulary to understand him probably wouldn't be very handy with his fists.

John Meredith looked at his watch, and said in that punctilious tone of his. "It's after nine. Hadn't we better get started?"

"We had," I said. "Drink up, Dirk."

I looked down the table at him again. Dirk was a complete blank. The night before must have been a heavy one. He sat with one finger hooked in the handle of his coffee cup, moving it aimlessly from side to side.

"I'll be up," he said, without looking at me. "I'll be there."

"Don't let me catch you getting a jug."

He exhaled angrily, shook his head with impatience.

"I said I'd be up. Wait'll I drink this."

I got to my feet, unhooked my topcoat from the hanger at the head of the booth and stood aside for Tex to slide out. On the opposite seat Fats drained his last drop of coffee, sighed and labored to his feet. I led the way to the cashier's cage. Our waitress went back to worry over Dirk. She was a big, healthy kid, the kind that always wanted to baby his kind. Besides, Dirk had once done a sketch of her and that made her his perpetual slave.

I didn't know just why I kept looking at him, feeling a little uneasy. There was a guy loaded with talent. It was a lousy shame he had boozed his way down the ladder. He could work, and he did. Grimly, when he drove himself. He poured everything he had into his selling. I'd seen him get so worked up that when he'd finish the phone spiel, he'd lean back trembling, utterly exhausted.

WE LEFT Dirk, took the elevator to the fourteenth floor. Fats and I led the procession down a back corridor to a frost glass door marked Ajax Advertising Agency. Michael Boyd, Manager.

That's me.

The place was hot, and I went the length of the room, flung open a window before hanging up my things. There was much shuddering and shivering, and somebody finally closed it. Fresh air had no place in the lungs of a "boiler room" man.

This was the "boiler room", where the

pressure was applied. Once upon a time, the scarred relic of a table which served as office for all the phone salesmen, had had a dozen men beating the resistance out of the town's business men. Now Ajax was a shell of itself. I was lucky to get salesmen of any kind, and I had to work a phone myself. The gang I had now was sharp. They didn't submit any notes from their Sunday School teachers when they came for their jobs—and I didn't ask any. I asked just one thing: the ability to sell. They had it.

Ajax isn't regarded highly in the Capital A set of Advertising. The reason is purely technical, and has to do with quantity rather than quality. Larceny isn't considered quite respectable in sums under $500. Ajax specializes in program advertising, where a good ad is $25. Sometimes they run upward of a hundred dollars, but those times are rarer than Jap conscience.

After a great deal of unnecessary fuss and winding up, all of us were at our phones, our order pads on one side, and lists of prospects' phone numbers on the other. We worked in our own peculiar fashions. Fats, who had the phone across from me, sat poured over the top of the table, arms and upper torso bent forward. Tex Repp had the phone next to him. He sat with chair sidewise, one arm on the table, his feet on another chair, in a position as near to lying down as he could manage. As for John Meredith, he was his prim self even at work. He never unhitched his tie, and he sat like the illustrations in the physiology books, spine straight, feet apart. I was apt to take any pose. Often I got up and paced the length of my phone cord if I was meeting too much resistance.

At present we were doing a high pressure job on a little book called the Bird Lovers' Tenth Annual Convention souvenir Program. The next call on my list happened to be to a Mr. Appleby Jones, owner of the A-J Bottle Mfg. Co. In case you're wondering why a bottle manufacturer should have an ad in a bird lovers' society program, it just happened that one of the bird society committee members owned the city's third largest milk company. This man bought all his milk bottles from the A-J Bottling Co.

It was a perfect "tap", or pushover sale.

I dialed, got a connection with the bottle maker.

"Mr. Jones, this is Michael Boyd, one of the committee members of the Bird Lovers' Society. The Bird Lovers as you undoubtedly know are having their tenth anniversary next month."

"As I undoubtedly do not know," A. Jones informed me. With all respect to the feather fanciers A-J wasn't the only one unaware of this.

"Well," I said, as though his ignorance were high treason. "We are. Mr. Dobbin, who owns the Dobbin Dairy Products Co. was of the impression that you were a bird lover. He's going to be chairman of the big show."

"Fine. Tell old Bill to send me half a dozen tickets. Be glad to buy 'em."

"Wonderful!" I exclaimed. "I'll tell the ticket committee. But Mr. Dobbin wanted me to call you in regard to the program."

"Program?" he said, freezing slightly. I suspected he knew about programs.

"Oh, yes. That is the committee Mr. Dobbin heads. He is determined to make it a huge success. The finest book the society has ever published. It is to be a monument, in a manner of speaking, a memorial to celebrate—" I was getting warmed up, ready to build the thing to something on a par with the Creator's six-day job on the universe.

A-J cut in rudely. "How much he expect out of me?"

"Let me find out, Mr. Jones . . . I'll have to look at this list of Mr. Dobbin's. Oh, here it is—your name is right at the *top*. It says $100, and there are two exclamation points after it. Ha. Ha. I wonder why he did that?"

There was a series of sounds, then silence.

"How much space that give us? Front, back and inside covers and double page center spread?"

"Now let me check, Mr. Jones. I feel so ashamed being such a greenhorn. I'll find out the price for you in just a minute. . . . Oh, yes. One-half page, one hundred dollars."

"Why that's an outrage! I can print the whole program for that money," he said

hotly. He was wrong. It was going to cost us a hundred and fifty, all told.

"Is that high, Mr. Jones? This is my very first time doing advertising work, you know," I said. It is fatal to let the customer know he is dealing with a professional salesman. "I'll tell Mr. Dobbin you think that's too much money."

"Don't bother," he said quickly. "I'll buy it. Send someone over, and my advertising manager will give you a cut to fit the space."

I HUNG up, scribbled out the order, and made a notation to pick up copy. It was true that Appleby Jones wasn't going to increase his business by so much as one extra bottle sold by being in the program. But the point that appealed to him so strongly, even though I didn't quite put it in words, was that if he didn't buy the ad he would make Mr. Dobbin mad. And a mad Mr. Dobbin might not buy any more bottles from him.

Tex scooted over an order from the Jasper Restaurants, and winked. The Jasper outfit had the concession to sell all the eats in the auditorium where the show was going to be held. That is, they would have it now . . . I had seen to it that none of the contracts with caterers had been signed yet. Jasper had paid off, if you want to call it that, so they were in.

I began dialing the next number on my list when the door to the corridor burst open. In the entrance was our waitress from Mook's, backed up by half a dozen men.

"That's them," she said timidly.

"O.K., sister, you can go."

A block pattern of a man swept in, trailed by several others. His jaw, chin and shoulders were square, and even his black felt hat made a straight line across his forehead. He progressed half the length of the boiler room before speaking. Tex eyed him sardonically.

"You look like the dowager who was ordered to swab sewers," Tex said. "I presume from the absence of courtesy and your peculiar head structure that you are from the police, probably a sergeant with a brother-in-law in the commissioner's job."

"Shut up, you," the blocky man said. One of his strong arm assistants chuckled. "Who's manager of this louse nest? I'm Sergeant Bagg."

Fats began to roll with laughter. "Bagg is police commissioner. It must be his brother, not brother-in-law, Tex."

"All right, all you cuties," Bagg exploded. "All of you bunch up together and make like a booth here at the end of the table."

"What language do you speak, Sergeant?" John Meredith inquired archly.

"I mean the bunch of you come down to this end of the table, scoot up your chairs in the positions you was in in the booth at Mook's Cafe."

"Why?" I demanded. "I'm Boyd, manager here. This is an office. What authority—"

"Shuddup. Your salesman Dirk Hunter just kicked off from poison. You guys was all there."

THE ribaldry went out of us. We arranged our seats quickly. I sat at an end with Tex at my side. Fats and Meredith were across from me and

Tex respectively. The vacant chair by Tex was where Dirk had been. Bagg sat in that chair.

"O.K. Finnegan, you're the waitress. Five cupsa Java. Go on, make like a waitress with five coffees," Bagg said.

Finnegan scowled and stood at the end of the "boiler room" table.

"She had them on a tray," I said. "She balanced an edge of the tray on the table, set the cups off onto the table right about here."

I pointed to a spot roughly center between me and Fats.

"Then what," said Bagg. "She shove 'em down to you fellows, or you all grab for yourselves?"

"She put her tray down in the next booth, then came back, and handed out the cups," I said. "Isn't that right?"

Meredith and Fats nodded.

Bagg got up. "Any one of you coulda done it. Which one did?" He came around, pushed Finnegan aside, planted himself at the end of the table. "Which one poisoned the coffee?"

"Who'd kill Dirk?" Tex snorted. "His only enemy was himself."

"He was extremely despondent," John Meredith said, nodding his head. "I believe he killed himself."

"Anybody else notice that?" Bagg said. His small grey eyes looked carefully and slowly from one to the other of us.

"I did," I told him, meeting his eyes.

"Sure," said Fats. "He was sour on life."

"O.K.," Bagg said, turning away. "That's what the waitress said."

Bagg walked toward the door, then turned and came back slowly. I had the odd feeling that he was under-playing. He walked slowly, and I knew his eyes weren't missing the slightest movement or change of expression about any of us.

They took our names, addresses, and statements about what happened. We all had the same story. Nobody saw anyone slip anything into Dirk Hunter's coffee. Everybody noticed that he was depressed. That seemed to be it. Bagg opened the door, let his men pass, was about to leave himself.

"Oh, Boyd," he said casually. "Come here a minute will you?"

I followed him into the hall. He walked a few paces beyond the Ajax door, glanced back, then said in a low voice.

"Hunter was murdered. He told the waitress just before he died. A quick poison. The coroner guessed nicotine. The autopsy will show." Bagg said. His manner was urgent and he kept looking back at the Ajax door to make sure no one was listening.

"Who was it?" I said, stupidly. "Which one?"

"Can't tell yet. I've wired the Los Angeles police for a picture, and some further description. The man used to call himself Joe Hamm. All I know is that this Hamm was involved in a sixty thousand dollar bank holdup in L. A. two years ago. One of the buddies is in prison. Another one got shot in the getaway. Hamm disappeared with the money."

"AND one of those men is Hamm?" I said in awe. I didn't quite grasp it yet. "You mean one of these men working in here for nickels has that much money?"

"Smart," Bagg said. "He's waiting for it to cool off. Waiting till everybody in the country has forgot the case, including the police. In the meantime a job like this covers him."

"Funny he didn't tell the waitress who Hamm was."

"I don't think he knew he was poisoned till it was almost too late. He told her the name of Hamm, and didn't have time for any more. I figure he recognized him—"

"Dirk had lived in Los Angeles once," I said.

"Drop down to headquarters later," he said. "In the meantime, I don't want to let Hamm know anything."

Fats and Tex had their overcoats on, when I went back.

"Where they take Dirk?" Tex asked. "I'm going to see him."

"The morgue, I suppose," I said. "I don't know."

The whole place gave me a weird feeling. I couldn't help studying these men. One of them was a murderer. One of these apparently harmless salesmen was a cold, scheming killer.

"I can't work," Fats said. He kept shaking his head, sending odd ripples

down his bulging chins. I wondered if it could be he. Hardly. Bank banditry didn't seem a job for a round, slow fellow like Fats.

Tex and John Meredith? That didn't seem possible, either.

Meredith resumed his seat at his phone.

"I'm going to work," he said. "You can go maudlin over a fellow like that if you want."

I went into my office, got an extra key from my strongbox., I tossed it on the table, and got my coat.

"Lock up when you quit. I won't be back."

Bagg was going over Dirk's personal possessions when I walked in on him.

"There's a hitch, Boyd," he said looking up. He opened his desk drawer, laid a sheaf of papers out for me. On top was a telephoto of Joe Hamm.

I frowned as I picked it up. It was certainly the picture of nobody I had ever seen. I read the description of the bank bandit. About five-eight in height, weight 160, sandy hair. The height was about the only thing that fit any of the salesmen.

"What then?" I asked. "Plastic surgery?"

"There's no surgeon that good. Not a one of them looks anything like that picture. Can you think of anyone it fits?"

"Not offhand," I said. "Let me trace it. We have hundreds of contacts at Ajax. I might have seen someone who looks like that—a customer or someone."

He handed me an onionskin paper, and I traced off the features of the missing Joe Hamm. I folded it and put it in my pocket.

"The poison was nicotine," Bagg said. "Anybody knowing the process could have extracted it from cigars or cigarettes."

HE OPENED his center drawer, withdrew a large square cardboard, on which were wired an assortment of bottles. The top display was a small glass coffee creamer. Bagg poked a stubby forefinger at the creamer.

"The nicotine was in this," he said. "This creamer was used for liquid sugar—the way that restaurant has been serving sugar since rationing. Pure nicotine is colorless, just like the simple syrup. Since Dirk Hunter was the only one of you who sweetened his coffee, it was a perfect setup."

"Of course," I said excitedly. "The waitress brought it over to the table before she got the coffees. Someone had the poison container, and did a sleight of hand."

Bagg nodded. "The size of the things would make it easy for a man to cover two of them at once. Then, instead of handing Dirk the syrup, he gave him the poison, then later, casually pocketed the harmless container."

I closed my eyes a moment, tried to recall the scene exactly. She'd brought the single container of liquid sugar—she'd set it on the edge of our table—she'd walked to get our tray of coffees. Fats put his hand out, I believed, and slid it part way down the table. But had Tex or Meredith then scooted the container on to Dirk Hunter?

Bagg was watching me soberly. I shook my head.

"I can't be sure. That business of Dirk's sugar is such a familiar routine—I've seen it scores of times—that I can't be sure of what I actually remember from this morning and what might really be part of some other morning. I didn't pay any special attention."

I bent over the card again. "What are the rest of those bottles?"

"Gin bottles," Bagg said wryly. "Couple of ounces apiece, they made handy nip-ups. Hunter had them in his vest pockets, and coat. Musta kept himself soused."

"I'll be damned!" He'd certainly fooled me.

Bagg leaned forward. "Ever see that bottle down in the right corner?"

I peered at it. "Thyroxin. What's that?"

"A chemical substitute for the stuff your thyroid gland produces. If the gland doesn't do its work, this thyroxin is used. But Hunter's doc didn't prescribe this for him," Bagg said pointedly. "Fact is, Dirk Hunter's gland worked overtime. Made him skinnny and irritable. Hunter had *too* much—so thyroxin is the *last* thing the doc would give him!"

It was over my head. I remembered an aunt who'd had an operation on her thyroid. She'd always been skinny and bad tempered. I hadn't seen her in years.

"Hunter carried gin in that bottle," Bagg said. "It might look like the same as his carrying the other bottles. There's one difference, though."

"I don't see it," I said. "It was just a handy—"

"Wait," Bagg interrupted. "All these others are just ordinary bottles. The thyroxin was somebody's prescription. This somebody was a friend—at that time, anyhow. Because he knew Dirk's habit of nipping. Chances are Dirk Hunter broke one of his regular nip-up bottles, and this friend gave him the thyroxin one."

"Dirk could have found it," I protested.

"I think he wouldn't use a strange bottle without scalding or scrubbing it. The label's still pasted to it, so he didn't do that. He merely rinsed it," Bagg pointed out.

"Couldn't you find the doc who prescribed that stuff?" I said.

"We did," Bagg said, clamping his lips. "He's no record of such a prescription."

"How about fingerprints?"

He detached a sheet from the Los Angeles police report. "Read it."

I read. It noted that Joe Hamm had never been arrested. The identification of him was given by the accomplice who was now in prison. Also a snapshot was found, the snapshot which was reproduced in the telephoto. Several persons in his rooming house described Hamm to the police. Notably, one Dirk Hunter, an artist employed in an amusement park concession.

"Dirk Hunter definitely did know him," I said looking up. "And recognized him. You think Dirk threatened to expose him?"

"Or blackmailed him," Bagg finished.

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I SPENT the rest of the afternoon in my apartment. It was almost dark when I decided I had better go back to Ajax, and find out how John Meredith had made out during the day. I tossed some letters from my family, which I'd been reading, back into my desk. When I opened the drawer I saw the edge of an enlargement they had sent me after Christmas. It was a group picture of family and neighbors, just as Dad started to carve the turkey. I took the picture out, looked at it for a moment, then put it back. The important thing about it didn't register at the moment.

It was dark outside when I opened the door to Ajax. I switched on the light and went to the mail stacked by my phone. I slit the letters, got the checks which had been sent in for ads. I finished making the ledger entries of them, and filled out the deposit slip for the morning.

I opened John Meredith's drawer, noted that he had listed four new orders, totalling sixty dollars. I was ready to leave, when I felt the onionskin paper in my pocket. I unfolded it, studied the tracing of Joe Hamm again.

I decided to experiment with it. Perhaps a plastic surgeon had remade the face. I tried a number of changes. Moving the hair line, putting on a beard, fooling with the nose. It was no use. I started to erase the lines. In doing so, my eraser took away the original chin line and part of the jaw. I had a sudden quickening. For some unaccountable reason memory of the picture mother had sent came back.

I remembered when I had first seen the picture I had been a little troubled by the absence of one of my aunts. Then the picture came back to me clearly. She wasn't missing from the photo. She was in her traditional place, on dad's left. And I hadn't recognized her for one reason!

Quickly I took the tracing of the picture of Joe Hamm, erased the face outline completely, retaining only the hair line, the eyes, nose and mouth. Now—I roughed in experimental lines, forming a new face. A brand new face! And it was a face I knew very well. The realization stunned me.

I sat staring at my handiwork, utterly amazed. But then, it was not so fantastic. If I had not recognized my own aunt, why should I have known Joe Hamm?

I started to dial the phone excitedly, to let Bagg know. Something stopped me. A faint sound.

For the first time I became aware that I was alone in here. One of the men I had been working with was a murderer. I felt the blood pounding at my temples. There was a faint creak of the floorboards,

and I realized somebody was standing behind me.

"A very good drawing," a voice said.

I WOULDN'T have known the voice, although I had heard him make a thousand telephone calls with that same voice. It was entirely different now.

"Very clever of you," I said. I knew my tone betrayed me. I tried to make it casual, but it didn't work. "A brilliant disguise, in fact."

"It took a damn artist to know me."

Then I felt the cold muzzle pressed against the back of my neck. An uncontrollable shudder ran through my body. I hadn't the slightest hope that he would leave me alive. Dirk had known. . .

"Only you and I know," I said. "You know I'm not the kind to squeal."

The gun remained pressed at my neck as I got up slowly. When he would shoot I didn't know. But he would eventually. I had to make a try. Even if the chance was a thousand to one, it was better than the one I had if I made no fight. Besides, his disguise handicapped him. Elaborate as it was, it was bound to give me the advantage physically.

I dodged sideways, grabbed behind me with both hands, caught his wrist. I yanked forward with all my strength, pulling that gun wrist over my shoulder. The gun exploded in front of me. The bullet spanged into the wall in front of us. I had his arm stretched harmlessly out ahead of my body, and began to apply pressure to his wrist. Suddenly I felt his other arm slip around under my chin.

For a moment panic seized me. It took both of my hands on that powerful gun arm—and in the meantime his other forearm was vising my throat.

As the lights began to fade, I shifted my weight to my right foot then, and stomped with all the force I could muster on his left instep. He yelled, let loose my throat.

I could hear his hissing whimper. It was now or never. Suddenly I twisted the arm I was holding to, so that now it was palm up. It stretched over my shoulder, straight ahead of me. In that position, with me pulling down on his wrist with both my hands, the arm was stiff

as a board—I bent suddenly at the knees, then sprang up with all my force, at the same time yanking down on his wrist. There was no way for the arm to bend. It didn't. It broke.

I shoved the gun from where it had fallen to the table over to the floor on the opposite side. Then I picked up one of the phones.

"Be right over," Bagg said tersely. "God, what's that screaming?"

"It's Joe Hamm," I panted. "Who else?"

BAGG kept shaking his head and looking from the telephoto of Joe Hamm to Fats Banner. Fats wasn't screaming now. He was moaning, and begging for a doctor. The arm hung dead in his bloody coat sleeve.

"Get his confession, then take him to a hospital," Bagg ordered.

He turned back to me. "I always thought that thyroxin business meant something."

"Fats was desperate to reduce. When Dirk Hunter got to talking about his thyroid trouble, and explaining how it made him skinny, Fats got a bright idea. He could use it to reduce."

"You went to the same doctor as Dirk Hunter," Bagg said, looking down at Fats. "I talked with him. He said you wanted him to make you reduce. But he doesn't fool with diets."

"So I swiped a prescription blank," Fats said sourly. "I read up on thyroxin, and that's what I needed, no matter what any damn doctor tried to tell me."

"Must have read up on poisons, too," I said.

"The funny part, though," Bagg said wryly. "If you *had* reduced you'd have lost your disguise. Plenty of cops would recognize you skinny like you used to be."

"So what!" Fats yelled. "So what! Did *you* ever carry around an extra hundred pounds? Hell, I'd rather be in jail."

"You will be," I said easily. I turned to Bagg. "You know that aunt I was telling you about? She used to have an overactive thyroid. When she got it fixed, she got fat. So fat I didn't even recognize her picture. Like Fatso here. As he expanded, all the characteristic lines of his face were erased. Like this," I said.

I picked up the sketch I had made of Joe Hamm-Fats Banner. Erasing the original lines, then drawing a circle around the old outline had the same effect as the hundred pounds had had on the real life Joe Hamm.

"Maybe Fats was overconfident. Or maybe he was willing to take any chance to get control of the Frankenstein disguise he'd created for himself. Because he must have known Dirk as one of the roomers in his rooming house in Los Angeles. Anyhow, Dirk's remarks about his thyroid condition keeping him skinny made Fats cultivate him. Dirk didn't recognize Fats. Not at first. Not until he decided to draw a sketch of the man Fats would be when he had taken off the weight he wanted to. As soon as Dirk made that sketch, he knew who Fats really was," I said. "Then—blackmail?"

"Yes," Fats said sourly. "He wanted ten thousand. By damn. I didn't go through hell holding onto that dough just to have some little muscler cut in. I told him so!"

"So he threatened to expose you," I finished.

Bagg riffled through the stacked currency. The bank loot had been wrapped in oilskin and hidden right at Ajax. Fats had taken off the baseboard in the clothes closet, scooped out a section of plaster, and kept the money here.

"There's a nice reward for us," Bagg said slyly, eyeing me.

After all, anybody connected with Ajax Advertising Agency can use a friend on the police.

"We sure deserved it, chief," I answered.

WHEN GANGDOM RULED

·AN·ILLUSTRATED·CHRONICLE·OF·THE·TURBULENT·TWENTIES· by WINDAS

Not all who played their little part in the Drama of Prohibition Days were sinister. Some, the victims of Ruthless Racketeering, were colorful characters and very admirable. Take the case of Michael Malloy. He was slated for death for the sake of his five-thousand-dollar life insurance policy. Three times he was poisoned; once shot; twice run over by an automobile, and finally left to perish of pneumonia in the snow. But he refused to die, and was nicknamed "Durable Mike Malloy" by admiring New York policemen.

Then there was Catherine Gooley, whose sister was the innocent dupe of a Dope Ring in Cleveland. Over her sister's body she swore revenge. Posing as a dope-peddler, she risked death, and worse, a dozen times until she ferreted out the mysterious Big Boss of the Ring. Then she held him in a swank night club under the menace of her gun, until agents arrested him and put him where he will lure no more innocents to a horrible fate.

Tony Reubens was star full-back on his high school team, until two stray bullets from a gangster's machine-gun smashed his thigh and arm—in the street fight that cost the notorious Stepani his life. But the kid had a quick eye and a good memory, so that he was chief witness for the State in the trial which sent two of the slayers to the chair. No amount of intimidation could faze Tony, which was just too bad for the gangsters.

The Loan Shark Racket numbered its victims by thousands. Small-loan borrowers paid from seventy to seven hundred per cent interest.... or else. But two bruisers who tried to collect oversize payments from Jim Brannan made a mistake. Jim had been mate on a lumber schooner and didn't scare worth a hoot. He threw one 'collecter' through a third-floor window, and bounced the other down the stairs so hard, an ambulance was needed to carry him away. All of which started an investigation which finally squelched the Loan Racket in Brooklyn.

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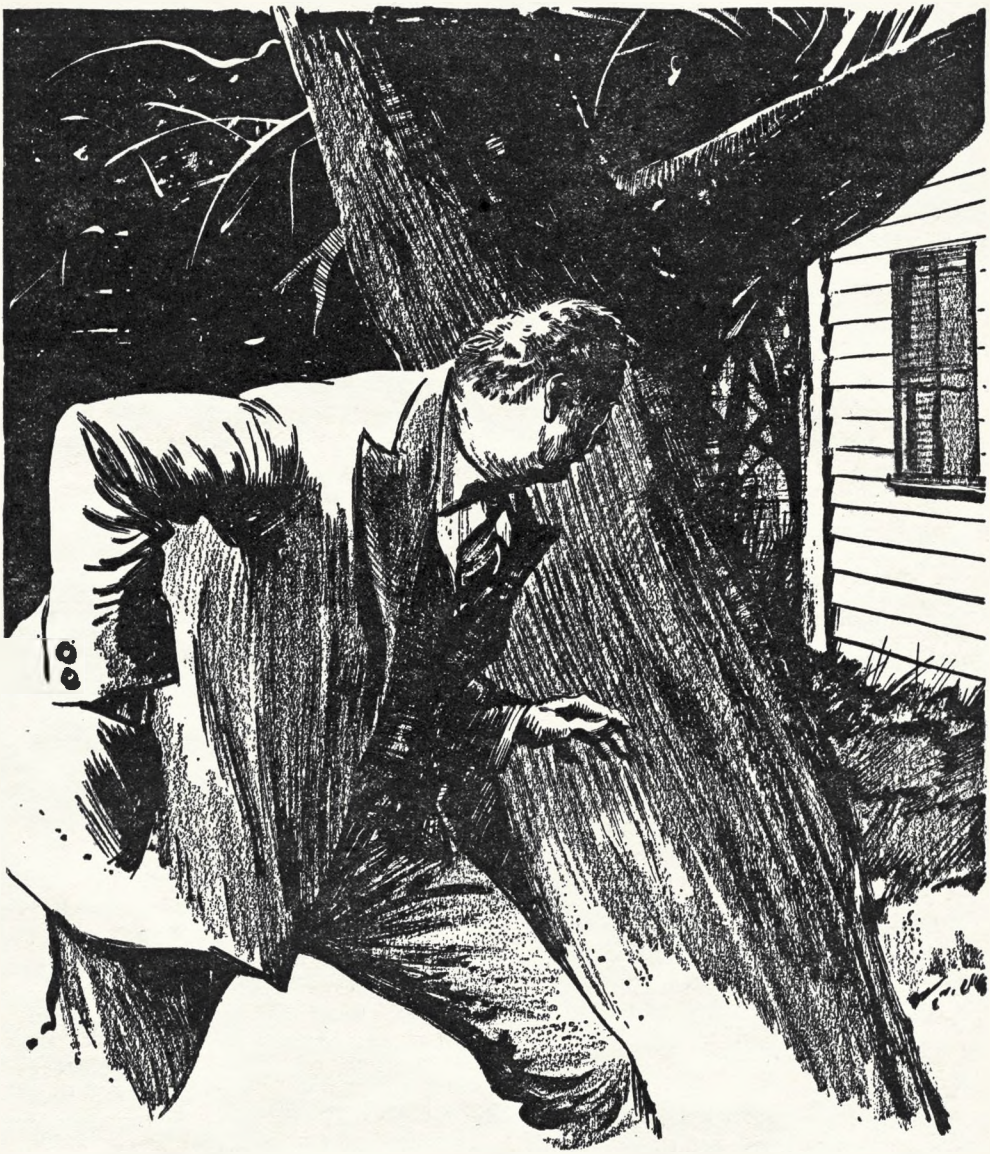

He had taken something out. What?

A Stirring

Novelette

By EDWARD S. WILLIAMS

Not even the killer knew who had committed the murder. Fat Sam Tibbetts alone was aware of what happened in the magnolia grove on the night he decided to frame the killing on another corpse—so that the living might go free!

THE CABIN • •

CHAPTER ONE

Kill-Crazy

REMEMBER that day? Sam Tibbetts remembers it, although for more reasons than one.

That was the day the Man said, No more pleasure driving, my friends. No more running out to the local juke joint for a beer and a bite. No more Sunday picnics. No more Lover's Lane. It's home sweet home for you, my friends, from this day on, at noon. Maybe for the duration —who knows? There's a war on.

"Well," thought Fat Sam Tibbetts aloud, "they might as well bring on the bombs. They might as well set up a battery on the hill and shell me out. This does it. I'm a casualty."

Fat Sam cursed softly and thumped a futile fist on his desk. He called out then, "Connie, come here." And Connie Clarke thought dully, "Here it comes. This is when he tells me. What'll I do now?"

Sam Tibbetts, owner of Magnolia Grove: E-A-T BAR-B-Q D-A-N-C-E CABINS FIT FOR KINGS—laid his huge bulk back in his complaining chair. Sorrowfully he regarded the worried, dark-haired, pretty girl who answered his summons.

Feature by feature Sam examined her piquant face and found it as good to look at as it had ever been. For seven years he had taken pleasure in Connie Clarke's mere presence. She had been like a daughter to him. And now . . . "Oh, hell!" Fat Sam thought.

"Connie," he said, anxious to get it over, "they have scuttled me. I'm not blaming anybody, you understand. There are boys being killed today who will be missed a lot more than Magnolia Grove or Fat Sam Tibbetts. Anyway, I'll not starve. I could," he chuckled, "live off my own fat for six months if I had to I reckon. . . .

"But there it is, Connie. I've been torpedoed."

Slowly Connie Clarke nodded. "Yes, Sam," she said, "I've been expecting it. It's this gas shortage, isn't it?"

Sam agreed that it was. "I'm closing," he said, "at the end of the week. But I'm paying you a month's salary then. It ain't much, I know. Fact is, I'm surprised you haven't quit me long ago for one of these high-paid defense jobs. Why is that, Connie?"

The girl's blue eyes clouded; her gaze wavered away from his. "Because," she said in a low, troubled voice, "money isn't everything, Sam. Because you've been good to me. You gave me a cabin for my own and never—made passes, or anything. Because it's so peaceful and beautiful here, and I—I'll hate to leave."

She choked off and Fat Sam's moon face wore a smile. "Now that," he said, "makes me feel good, Connie. But don't you reckon Harry Mahoney had a little somethin' t'do with your stayin'?"

"Yes," Connie answered, faintly smiling.

Sam chuckled, then turned serious again. "Connie, why don't you an' Harry get married? I know you're a little older than he is, but anybody with an eye in his head can see he's crazy about you. An' I'd sorta like to see you settled 'fore I lock the door. Harry's a good boy."

Connie said nothing. She couldn't. The reason she had given Sam Tibbetts for staying on at Magnolia Grove as a waitress was true. But there was more to it.

Defense workers have to stand investigation. Connie couldn't. Defense workers have to have a clear background. She didn't. As for marrying Harry Mahoney—much as she wanted to—well, she might as well want the moon. Harry *was* a good boy. Too good for the likes of her.

Connie stifled a sob, turned it into a shrug and a strangled laugh. "Harry? Why Sam, Harry's just a friend—a good friend."

"Oh . . . I see." He sighed and spread his pudgy hands. He wouldn't meddle. Whatever else he might do, Fat Sam minded his own knitting and let other people tangle or untangle their skeins of life to suit themselves.

"SO THERE it is, Connie. I'll miss you. I wish I could give you more. But the eighty bucks'll take you somewhere else an' let you look around while you decide which job you want."

"Thanks, Sam," she smiled. "But you don't have to give me anything. I've got some money saved."

"The eighty'll add to it," Sam said.

Then he and the girl both fell silent. They had said about all there was to say, and each felt the inadequacy of words. Bemused, each started at the sound of a car's stopping on the cinder drive out front.

Sam said incredulously, "A customer?" then scoffed, "Naw. Just somebody after a road-map or somethin'. I'll go, Connie."

He went from his office into the big, clean, empty room with its neat tables and chairs, polished floor, and silent jukebox. The man who entered was young, dark—almost swarthy in appearance. He scanned the room swiftly, furtively, before he looked at Fat Sam. Even then he didn't look him in the face. His gaze centered on Sam's vast waistline. His words were quick and nervous.

"Look," he said, "I—I'm about out of gas. My wife is—well, she doesn't feel so good. I'm anxious to get her home.

But I've lost my gas coupon book. Could you, I mean . . ."

"Son," Fat Sam cut in kindly, "I couldn't—"

But the youth didn't let him finish. Almost desperately he said, "I swear I'll send you the coupons the day I get another book! I'll pay you a dollar a gallon —five dollars! I'll leave my watch—my wife's rings—my—"

He stopped and spun around at the sound of an oncoming motor. He half crouched, staring out at the road, relaxing only when they all saw that it was a big tractor and trailer that pulled to a halt behind the other car.

Emerging from Sam's office behind the lunch bar, Connie also saw the truck. Her eyes lighted. It was Harry Mahoney. He was half an hour overdue on his run now, and Connie had been worrying.

The dark young man said earnestly, "Five bucks a gallon, Mister. How 'bout it—before this other guy comes in?" He fingered his wallet.

Sam sighed. "I am only human. The sound of five bucks a gallon is good in these old ears. But I couldn't sell you gas for five bucks a drop, son. My tanks are dry."

"What?" the boy recoiled. He seemed stunned, utterly defeated. "Well, what *am* I going to do?"

Harry Mahoney came in, limping only slightly on his polio-crippled foot. He saw only Connie Clarke when he opened the door. "Hi, kid," he greeted, "Draw one in the dark and fry two looking at you." Then he grinned at Sam and nodded to the stranger.

Harry straddled a bar stool and leaned on his elbows, drinking Connie in. He was a good-looking, strapping youth, save for that malformed foot. He was freckled and red-thatched. His one bitterness was that his foot kept him behind the wheel of a truck instead of in the cockpit of a P-40.

Fat Sam called, "Hiyah, Harry," then told the stranger what he could do.

"You might stay the night here. We can make your wife comfortable in one of our cabins. We can phone Maysville for a doctor, if need be. An' somehow, tomorrow, we can get you some gas."

The other stared at him, then swung abruptly toward Harry Mahoney. "Look, fella," he began ingratiatingly, "I need gas the worst way. We could siphon some out of your truck and I'll pay you. . . ."

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AGAIN the door opened. They hadn't heard this man's car. They looked at him and then at Connie, for her sudden gasp was almost a scream of terror. And her reaction blinded them all to that intense crouching desperation of the dark young man until he'd got a good look at the newcomer.

But Connie looked at the man in the doorway and cried out.

Harry rapped, "What the hell? What's the matter, Connie? What . . ." Then his eyes followed her gaze to the door.

The man was tall and big and blonde. His pale eyes were narrowed and his right hand stayed in the pocket of his grey topcoat. He carried a black suit-case. At first he studied the three men, but when he saw Connie his eyes flew wide. He came toward her, staring unbelievingly.

"Connie. . . ?" he croaked. Then he shouted it, triumphant, somehow menacing. It brought Harry Mahoney swinging up with his fists clenched and his eyes combative.

But the blonde giant pawed Harry aside as though he had been a child. There was tremendous strength in the man. Harry caught at his arm and Connie cried out frantically,

"No, Harry! He'll kill you! He's—he's my—I'm married to him."

She turned and fled. The big man seemed about to vault the bar. He stopped, turned, roared laughter.

Sam Tibbetts approached the newcomer. His fat man's geniality gone, Sam said, "My friend, I don't understand this. Connie never mentioned being married. Not in the seven years she's been with me."

"Been with *you* . . ." the other stopped roaring and grew deadly quiet. "Been *with* you . . ." He looked at Sam's rim of white hair and his tremendous fatness. Then he shook himself and laughed. "No. Uh-uh. Not that way—and that's a break for you, Fats. Where does Connie stay?"

Harry Mahoney snarled from the savage depths of shattered hope, "Sam, this

is your place. But throwing this gorilla out is a job for me. I don't care who he is. Connie doesn't want him. She's afraid of him, that much is plain."

Sam rapped, "Harry!" but too late. Harry moved in fast and threw his fists ahead of him. The blond man took three punches before he got in one. But one was enough.

It hurled Harry back—never good in his balance on that bad foot. It blasted him back, reeling, whirling, and dropped him on his face a dozen feet away.

Harry didn't try to get up.

"Keep that," the blond man said, "out of my way. I'll take a cabin. Come on, show me where it is."

He had never yet set down the suitcase. He didn't now. Sam said:

"You'll have to register, Mister."

"Walsh. Sign it yourself. Vincent Walsh. Come on."

"Do you and your wife want a cabin?" Sam inquired of the first arrival.

"I—I guess so," the youth said in a shaken voice. "My name's Har—Hassett. Mr. and Mrs. Joel Hassett." He said that last quickly.

Fat Sam took keys from behind the bar. He was shaken to his very marrow, but he didn't let it show.

Strange people, these. The boy had started to say Harris, or something beginning with H-a-r. And after seven years, a husband of Connie's had unexpectedly showed up.

Poor Connie. Poor Harry. But Fat Sam minded his own knitting, no matter what happened.

Harry Mahoney finally got up off the floor. He started for the door. There was hell in his heart and murder in his eyes and he didn't see the third stranger who had entered and stood watching Harry pull himself together. The man said:

"Do you—uh—work here? Can I get some gas?"

"See Sam," Harry raved thickly. In the same hysterical tone, neither knowing or caring whether the stranger heard, he said, "I'm gonna kill that monkey! I'll cut his damn black heart out!"

He lurched on out.

The stranger looked narrowly after him. Then he scanned the room thoroughly.

CHAPTER TWO

Build-Up for Murder

FAT SAM TIBBETTS studied Mrs. Joel Hassett—if that were her name—without seeming to.

He opened the door of Number Three—a nice cabin with a fireplace in the tiny living room and a double bed in the bedroom. There was a shower in the bath.

Sam turned on the light.

The girl didn't look sick to him. She was blonde and lovely—a picture of health. But there was something abnormal in her blue eyes—something Sam couldn't exactly figure out—a sort of furtive shame and dread.

Her reactions weren't right. She didn't send her eyes prying into corners, looking for dust and dirt, like most married women. She didn't poke at the bed or turn the spread back, looking for dingy linen. She would have found neither, but Sam's long experience had taught him to expect that from married women.

The girl said huskily, "Yes, it's all right. We'll—take it. Are you sure you can get us some gas tomorrow?"

Sam spread his hands. "Honey," he said, "I am sure of death and taxes, nothing more. But I know a man in Maysville—our nearest town."

"Couldn't you phone him now?" Joel Hassett blurted eagerly.

Outside, Vincent Walsh bellowed, "Come on Fats. Snap it up."

Sam said, "He wouldn't be there tonight. I'd have to go in and get the gas myself, anyway."

The girl's voice quavered when she said, "Hadn't you better show that man a cabin?" She nodded toward the door, obviously anxious to see the last of Sam.

Fat Sam looked at her twisting hands and the damp handkerchief she held. He wondered where Joel Hassett's wife kept the rings the young man had offered as security for gas. They weren't on her fingers. But Sam smiled and said,

"Mister Walsh does seem a bit impatient. If you folks want anything just push that bell button over there."

"Thank you." Mrs. Hassett's eyes followed Sam's to her hands. She put them behind her suddenly.

Sam went out and led the way to Number Eight.

Vincent Walsh's pale, contemptuous eyes scanned the interior. He flung back bed clothes, flushed the toilet, turned on the shower. Apparently disappointed that he'd found nothing out of order, he scowled, "Okay, Fats. Fix the bed."

"Fix it yourself," said Fat Sam. "The rate for this cabin—to you—is twenty-five dollars a night. In advance."

Walsh's mouth fell open. "You—*what!* Why you lousy grease-ball, you—"

"Another thing, Mister Walsh," Sam cut in in his level, wheezing tone, "there is a State police barracks not far down the road. Harry Mahoney may have brought what he got on himself. But if you try anything with me it'll be you who starts it and I'll have you jailed. Get that, Mister Walsh. And now, twenty-five bucks. I don't care if you stay or go."

Surprisingly, Vincent Walsh laughed. He set his suitcase down for the first time. He took out his wallet and thumbed out a twenty and a five.

Passing it over he said, "By God, Fats, you've got guts. I like a man with guts. Now—where's Connie?"

Sam regarded him silently, without liking. Walsh's eyes blazed with his quick wrath. But Sam spoke first.

"If Connie Clarke was married to you, Mister Walsh, I can understand why she left you. I know now why she stayed here so long, and what she was hiding from. I can only wonder why she didn't divorce you."

"Because she couldn't, damn you!" Walsh blared. "Because *she* left *me*. Because she's a stir-bird—an ex-con. And if there was any divorcin' done, I'd do it. Where is she? I've got a right to see my wife."

✚ ✚ ✚

SAM nodded somberly. "Legally, I suppose you have. Connie lives in Number One cabin. She's lived there for seven years and no man—not even myself—has ever gone in there without her permission. Remember that, Mister Walsh. And remember that State police barracks. Good night."

Sam left, considerably disturbed. There was a storm in the making here. But hard though it was, Fat Sam Tibbetts still minded his own knitting. He went back to the main building, and found the third stranger still standing, there, waiting.

This newcomer was also young and dark complected. But he was smiling, easy, friendly.

"Howdy," he said, as Sam entered. "You the boss?"

Sam said he was. The other inquired, "What was the matter with the party on the floor? He went out of here breathing fire. He was mumbling about killing somebody."

Sam's eyes narrowed. He had seen Harry's truck still outside. He had decided it was best to get Harry started on the road again. But this—and where was Harry?

Sam shrugged. "Just a kid—mad. Ran into a right hook in an argument. He'll get over it." But Sam wasn't as sure as he sounded.

The other young man said, "None o' my business anyway. Name's Burns—Martin Burns. I'd like to put up for the night, or get some gas. How do you stand on that?"

Fat Sam grinned. It was relaxing to talk to a reasonable human again. He said, "I can put you up and feed you, but I've got no gas. Can you get to Maysville on what you've got?"

"How far is that?" Burns queried. "I'm new to this territory. Just assigned."

"Salesman, eh?"

"Out of Richmond. Wholesale groceries."

"Maysville is about seven miles down the road," Sam told him.

"That far?" Burns looked doubtful. "Maybe I can make it. But I wouldn't want to take a chance at night. I'll take a cabin. What are your rates?"

"Got a nice one for five bucks, Mister Burns."

"Okay. Wait 'til I get my sample cases."

Sam showed him to Number Five.

There was no light in Number One—Connie's cabin. There was no answer to Sam's knock on her door.

Again, Fat Sam Tibbetts wasn't interfering. He only wanted to know what had

become of Harry Mahoney. He didn't like Harry's continued absence after what Martin Burns had heard him say.

That was why he started back to Number Eight. But he stopped short as he skirted the rear of Number Three.

MRS. JOEL HASSETT was sobbing monotonously. Sam heard the dark young man's voice raised pleadingly, stridently.

"But damn it, Helen, was it my fault the guy wasn't there? Was it my fault the tank leaked, or somebody stole most of our gas?"

The reply, muffled by sobs, was lost to Sam. Joel Hassett was in the living room, Sam discovered when he stole around to the window. Hassett was standing at the closed bedroom door. Sam heard,

"I tell you it'll be okay. They won't catch us here. The fat man'll get us some gas tomorrow, and afterward we can tell 'em to go to the devil. I'll be gone soon, Helen, and you—"

He broke off as the girl answered something Sam still couldn't hear. But his shrewd mind supplied a ready answer to this minor mystery.

These two kids, he thought, were no more married than a pair of rabbits. They had started eloping and something had happened to prevent their being married. They had run out of gas and were stranded together overnight.

That would explain the girl's air of furtive shame, even though there was nothing shameful about it. Probably the boy was due for induction into the Army. That would explain his statement that he'd be gone soon. And the girl's—or his own—irate parents were no doubt the ones he could tell to go to the devil, once his girl was legally his wife.

Sam dismissed them from his mind. He went on. They could iron out this difficulty between themselves and no harm be done to anybody. Tomorrow he would get them some gas with his own coupons. . . .

Moving with surprising speed and stealth for one of his bulk, Fat Sam went on through the grove of dark, huge magnolia trees from which his place had taken its name. He saw no one, heard nothing, until he reached the side of cabin Number Eight. Again he paused beside a lighted window.

Connie was not inside. Neither was Harry Mahoney. Walsh was there alone.

The man had his suitcase open on the bed. His back was turned to the window. He lifted something out of the suitcase and strode to the door of the cabin, still never turning toward Sam. Opening the door cautiously, Walsh peered out both ways and then went out. Sam sank to the ground where he stood and froze there. But Walsh didn't come around this side.

Sam heard the shrill creak and rasp of drawn nails from the front of the cabin. There was a faint bumping, thudding sound. Then Walsh reentered the cabin. Sam heard the door close and rose up again. Walsh came in empty-handed.

But he had taken something out. What? Why? Where had he left it?

Under the front step, more than likely, Sam thought. It would be easy to lift up the box-like step which was nailed to the sill of the cabin only. But *what* . . .

Then he gasped. Walsh took packet after packet of stacked and paper-banded currency from his valise. Swiftly he packed it all together and wrapped it in a newspaper.

Walsh put the package back into the suitcase and covered it with clothes. He shoved the suitcase under the bed. He donned hat and topcoat and went out again. Sam heard him carefully lock the door. He heard the receding foosteps on the gravel path in front.

Fat Sam himself avoided the gravel.

CHAPTER THREE

The Corpse-in-The-Grass

THIS, too, came under the head of minding his own knitting. For seven years, Sam Tibbetts could have thought no more of Connie Clarke if she had been his own daughter. He liked Harry Mahoney, too. If he could forestall tragedy by a little judicious snooping, whom did it harm?

From a distance Fat Sam watched Vincent Walsh stride down the row to Connie's cabin. Nothing happened. No dark figure leaped at this man from ambush.

Walsh knocked at the door of Number One, and cursed, and knocked again. He tried the door. It was locked. He turned back, muttering profanely under his breath.

Sam hid behind a magnolia.

The memory of all that money was vivid in his mind. He wanted badly to look under the step of Number Eight, but he didn't dare, yet. He turned his mind to Connie, and Harry. Where the devil had they both got to?

Walsh changed his mind and swung back to Connie's door. He sat down on her step. Sam had a sudden idea and melted back into the gloom.

Years ago, Sam's cabins had numbered only three. They had been located further back in the grove. Now he used two of them as chicken houses. The other was a storage house for odds and ends. Connie might be hiding there.

She was, he discovered with relief. He knew she was there as soon as he saw the door. The padlock was gone. Connie had the only key to that lock, since Sam had lost the other one.

Connie was there, safe and hidden. Maybe in the morning Walsh would drive on and leave her unmolested. Now if he could only find Harry and get him on the road. . . .

Sam didn't go in and let Connie know he knew where she was. He turned back toward the main building. His route skirted the rear of Number Five, where he had left Martin Burns. And yet again Fat Sam pulled up short and silently beside a window.

There was no light, *but Martin Burns was talking to someone.* Burns was saying something in a sort of mumble of which Sam could not make out a word.

He peered earnestly through the darkened window. This was his knitting, too. Burns had paid for a single lodging. But he was certainly talking to someone. And if another person had been hiding in his car, to join him later in the cabin, then Burns was going to pay for two lodgings —or somebody was.

But no one was there except Burns. Sam saw him move finally. He had been sitting on the edge of his bed while he talked. Now he rose and went into the tiny bath and turned on a light and Sam could see the rest of the room.

There was no one at all with Burns. The salesman had one of his sample cases open on a chair beside the bed. He had been hunched over it while he talked. Maybe he'd been memorizing his sales spiel. Maybe saying his prayers. Sam didn't care which, now. He went on back to the restaurant.

Harry Mahoney was there.

"Gimme coffee, Sam," Harry said miserably. "I been lookin' all over for Connie. Where is she?"

"I dunno, Harry," Sam's relief flowed out in his voice. "But Harry, hadn't you better be on your way? You got a truck to get somewhere. Connie's hidin'. When this Walsh leaves she'll come back. You'll see. She'll be here on your nex' trip, and then . . ."

He stopped uncertainly.

"Yeah," Harry said bitterly. "What then! She's *married* to this baboon. You heard her say so. An' Sam, I—I wanted to marry her myself!"

"Something," Sam said confidently, "will turn up." He was thinking of all that money in Walsh's valise.

He drew a cup of coffee and retired into his office.

A MOTORCYCLE came roaring out of the night. Sam heard it and knew it for what it was: a State trooper on routine patrol. This was Wednesday, so it would be Bill Ross.

But the motorcycle swerved in at Magnolia Grove and stopped, and that was not routine.

Fat Sam leaned back and looked out as the front door opened. He saw the State cop enter. He saw something else, too, that brought a startled scowl to his face.

Harry Mahoney was no longer sitting at the lunch bar. Sam had not heard him go out. Neither had he heard the sound of the truck's leaving.

The trooper called, "Hey Sam."

Sam answered, "Here, Bill. Come on back. Is Harry Mahoney's truck still outside?"

"Is that Harry's truck?" Ross came around behind the bar and into the tiny office. Between them, Fat Sam and the big cop all but filled it. Bill Ross added, "It's there, and three other cars. Who're the people, Sam? I'm checking on pleasure driving. Makes it tough on you, but it's governor's orders."

Sam regarded him soberly, thinking of the two kids in number three. It would be a rotten break for them if they were hailed before a magistrate with their hangdog air and flimsy story. But then he smiled. If their license was in order the magistrate could marry them. It might work out.

Burns, the salesman, was obviously not pleasure driving. And as for Vincent Walsh. . . .

Sam's eyes dropped to the opened paper on his desk. There, on an inside page, was an item he'd been looking for.

Sam said eagerly, "Listen, Bill," then read, " 'Morgan City, January 6. A bank messenger was robbed and murdered here last night while enroute to the Morgan Machine Tool Works with a twenty thousand dollar defense payroll.

" 'The hold-up was unwitnessed. The messenger's body was not discovered until some hours after the murder, and police are at a loss for clues. However, it is believed to be the work of a lone bandit.' Have you," Fat Sam looked up inquiringly, "got any dope on that, Bill?"

The trooper shook his head, then countered, "Why, Sam?"

"Bill—" Sam hesitated, then went on, "generally speaking I mind my own business, but this once I'm gonna bust my rule. I've got a fellow here with a wad of money in his suitcase. I mean a *lot* of dough. I saw it. I was snoopin' around after somethin' else and I saw this man—"

"You mean," Bill Ross's eyes widened, "you think maybe he's the guy who pulled *that* job?"

"I mean I think he ought to be given a chance to explain that money."

Ross snapped excitedly, "Who is he?"

"Name of Walsh—Vincent Walsh."

"Come on, then—wait a minute. Have you by any chance got a young couple here, or seen 'em? The man's dark, young—about twenty-two or three. The woman's blonde and pretty. Don't know what kind of a car they're driving, or anything else about 'em. But the FBI wants 'em—bad."

FAT SAM TIBBETTS felt suddenly as though he'd been kicked in the stomach. He had started to rise. Now he sagged back into the chair with a thud that rattled the windows.

"The FBI," he mouthed dazedly. Then he closed his mouth, after which he thought to inquire, "What for, Bill?"

"They're Germans. Born and raised here, but members of one of those Nazi youth bunds. They're the worst kind of spies, Sam—American citizens by birth, but Germans by blood and Nazi by training. They've been collecting dope on our shipping and convoys and radioing it out to U-Boats. The G-Men almost caught up with 'em yesterday, but they were tipped off and got away. . . .

"That," he confided, "is the real reason for this check-up I'm making. The pleasure-driving ban gives us a chance not only to stop cars but to go in places like yours and get a look at everybody. But you've seen 'em?"

Sam sat bemused and stunned. Was this posible? Could he have been so far wrong in his judgment of Mr. and Mrs. Joel Hassett? Could it be that their act was cleverly conceived to give just the impression that Sam had got?

Slowly he rose. Anything was possible these days. Sam said, "Come on, Bill. Maybe I've got your spies for you, too. But first, let's do a little chore out front."

Sam led the way out. The trooper waited by the door, watching approvingly while Sam went from one to another of the

three cars, removing the distributor heads from each motor. The black coupe was Walsh's. The big green sedan was the Hassett's car—the spies. . . .

Sam stood beside it, shaking his head sadly. Those two were young to be traitors. But their youth would not keep them from the hangman if—

He heard a sound. Standing between the green sedan and the smaller, cheaper, two-door job that was Martin Burns', Sam's keen ears caught a faint, hardly identifiable noise.

He stood motionless, holding his breath to listen. It was not repeated, but it had come from somewhere nearby—somewhere very close. And it was not the sound of contracting metal from a cooling exhaust; it was not any normal sound that might emanate from a parked car. It was more of a human sound—like a muffled sneeze, a cough.

Sam tried the door handles of the green sedan, and of Burns' car. Both were locked. He peered into all three cars and saw no one, nothing. Then a new thought struck him suddenly—a startling thought full of posibilities that connected with something else that had happened here tonight.

Bill Ross called impatiently, "Come on, Sam. You've fixed their cars so nobody'll get away. Let's go."

"Just one minute, Bill."

Sam grunted to his knees and looked under the cars. He saw no one. He tried the trunk handles, and they were all locked. The cop said, "What the hell?" and Sam answered, "I'm gettin' potty, I guess, Bill. Thought I heard somebody here . . . Oh, well. . . ."

He turned to Harry Mahoney's big tractor and climbed into the cab. Harry wasn't there, but the ignition key was in the switch. Sam took it, his mind so full of this new wondering that he forgot to worry about Harry. He came down and led the State cop toward the dark and silent grove.

THEY passed Connie's cabin—the first in the row. It was still dark. Vincent Walsh was no longer sitting on the step. Sam said:

"The couple's in Number Three, Bill. There's a fella named Burns who says he's a salesman, in Five. Walsh is in Eight."

"I want to see this couple first," Ross answered tautly.

"Okay, go on."

Then the cop stumbled. He barked a sharp oath and staggered on a step before he recovered and spun back. He knelt, pawing around in the dark. Sam grunted, "What the devil?" and Ross's flashlight showed him the answer.

Across the path, sprawled on his back with his face bloody, lay Vincent Walsh.

Fat Sam cursed bitterly and knelt beside the speechless trooper. Sam grabbed Walsh's limp wrist and could find no pulse. He slid a hand under the man's coat and felt no heart-beat. He reached up and turned the battered head to one side. His fingers came away bloody.

Sam rose.

Walsh was dead, so recently killed that his blood had not yet ceased flowing. His forehead was gashed deeply, but that was not the blow that had killed him. His death wound was behind his ear. And even that might not have proved fatal but for one thing.

Behind Walsh's ears were the unmistakable scars of an old mastoid operation. People who have undergone such surgery have thin bones there. A child might kill such a man with a blow behind the ear. Or a woman might. . . .

Fat Sam stood dazed, wiping the blood from his fingers on his handkerchief. Involuntarily his eyes turned toward that invisible storehouse where Connie Clarke —no! Connie Walsh—had been hiding.

Or a woman, Sam thought. *Or Harry Mahoney.*

He thought kaleidescopically of the young couple in cabin Three, and of a man who numbled unintelligibly to himself in Number Five. He thought of that strange sound from one of the parked cars. Then Bill Ross recovered his wits and his voice.

"He's dead, Sam," Ross blurted the obvious. "He's been murdered. And here, by George, is what killed him!"

The probing light sought out a rough-barked stick of firewood, two inches thick by two feet long. Dropped beside the path close to Vincent Walsh's body, the stick was bloody at one end.

Bill Ross said, "Too rough for fingerprints, I'm afraid. But this is what did

the business. Who is he, Sam? Know him?"

"Walsh," Sam said. "The man with the dough."

"I'll stay here," Ross directed. "You go phone the Barracks. Tell Corporal Ellis to bring the technical squad."

CHAPTER FOUR

"Where's Connie—"

HE MUST move fast, Sam knew. He must find Connie and Harry. He knew in his heart what had happened, but he must know for sure. And he must find out about that sound from a parked car that had put a new thought in his mind which had grown until it was an obsession. This was all his knitting, now. If he didn't go surely and fast, murder would knit a hangman's noose around the neck of someone dear to him.

Sam turned and trotted obediently back along the path. But where it turned at Connie's cabin toward the main building in the road, Sam left the path and became silent. The dark magnolias hid him.

He knew that Connie had left the storehouse as soon as he saw the door hanging open. But he called out anyway.

"Connie!" Sam whispered urgently into the shadows, "Connie, answer me if you're here. It's important."

There was no answer.

Sam trundled on, his weight cushioned by the turf—always kept raked clean of fallen leaves and twigs by Connie's passion for neatness.

He skirted the rear of the row of cabins on his way back. There was no light, no sound, in Number Three. The dark-haired youth and his blonde girl were quiet, if not asleep.

Sam went on. There was no light in Five, where Martin Burns had mumbled to himself. But Burns was not asleep.

Sam saw his shadowy figure moving about in the room. He saw Martin Burns unstrap his largest sample case on the chair beside the bed. He lifted its lid. And again there was that strange garbled human mumbling of undistinguishable words. But now, suddenly, Sam knew what they meant.

He hastened on.

He knelt beside the front step of Number Eight. Sure enough, it was loosened from the bottom sill of the cabin. Sam lifted the edge. He pawed underneath. His hand struck something smooth and cold and he drew it out.

It was a leather brief case. Sam stuck it under his arm and rose. He used his master key to open Vincent Walsh's cabin door.

Quite in the dark, Fat Sam grunted in his reaching under the bed for Walsh's suitcase. He pulled it out. He scattered its contents about the floor—all save the package which his fingers told him was wrapped in newsprint. He put that package into the briefcase.

Sam straightened and shoved the briefcase up under his coat. He secured it under the waistband of his voluminous pants. His belt bid fair to cut him in half with the added bulk, but he was so big that a little more bulk around his middle made no difference beneath his tent-like coat. He went out and locked the door. He moved away fast, laboring, now, for breath.

In the restaurant, Sam went to the phone as ordered. He called the barracks, hung up, and turned to see Harry Mahoney enter the door. Harry was pale and haggard.

The boy said dully, "You're right, Sam. I'm leaving, only I guess I lost the key to the truck. Must've been when Walsh knocked me out. I—"

Sam cut him off bluntly, "No, Harry, I've got your key. And you've waited too long, son. Walsh is dead—murdered. Did you kill him?"

All color drained out of Harry's face. He stammered, "M-murdered! I swear I didn't kn— *Where's Connie?"*

Fat Sam knew, then!

WHERE'S CONNIE. . . . where's Connie. . . . It was a constant din in Sam Tibbetts' mind. Had she completely lost her head and tried to run away? How could he help her if she had been so foolish?

Sam had it all figured out in his mind, but how could he swing it if Connie had completely damned herself by running?

"Sam," Bill Ross appeared in the door and spoke grimly, "we can't find Connie Clarke. And listen, Sam, about that money

you say you saw in Walsh's cabin—are you sure?"

Fat Sam loked offended. "Bill, why would I lie about a thing like that? Have I ever lied to anyone, to your knowledge? Do you want me to take an oath? I'll take it, by Jupiter!"

The trooper looked puzzled. "How much would you say there was? And where did he have it?"

"Why, in his suitcase, Bill. He wrapped it in a newspaper and covered it up with his clothes. But hell, how the devil could I know how much there was? I couldn't count it. You—Bill, *you don't mean it aint there?"*

"That's not the worst of it, Sam. Walsh's suitcase was dumped out on the floor. The money's gone. Exactly how did you come to be watching him? Why?"

Sam looked at Harry. But it had to come out, sooner or later. He said, "Bill, this Walsh turned out to be Connie's husband. She'd left him, you understand. He was a heel. He came in here and yelled at Connie and she broke down and said he was her husband. Harry, here, lost his head and took a poke at Walsh, and Walsh laid Harry out. I was just tryin' to stave off disaster."

Ross nodded grimly. "Yeah. That checks with what Burns said, and the couple in Number Three. Come on with me, Sam. You, too, Harry."

Harry Mahoney said nothing. But his lips tightened and his hands clenched.

"Where we going?" Sam queried.

"Back to the cabins."

"What about those kids—the Nazi spies?" Fat Sam appeared shaken, stunned.

Ross said, "That couple answers the description, all right. The man gave me a song and dance about eloping and not finding the preacher home—then running out of gas. We didn't find anything on 'em, but the phone number the guy gave me to call doesn't answer. Anyway, we'll have a G-Man here soon to identify 'em. Meanwhile, we've got this murder to clear up. Come on."

Martin Burns and Corporal Ellis regarded them seriously when Ross opened the door of Number Five.

Burns sat on the bed, in pajamas. His big sample case was open on the chair beside him, filled with cans and bottles and packages of food. Burns' eyes were narrow when he answered the corporal's unspoken question.

"That's the man!" Martin Burns said. "When I came in he was on the floor, knocked out. He went out muttering about killing somebody."

Harry Mahoney still said nothing.

Fat Sam sidled his bulk between the corporal and the bed. He stood in the bathroom door, filling it. There was no light in the bathroom.

The corporal said, "Your name's Harry Mahoney?"

Harry nodded. Sweat beaded his forehead. His freckles stood out on his pallid face.

"You were—well, you thought a lot of this Clarke girl?"

Harry's eyes turned savage. Still he said nothing. Corporal Ellis went on, "This Walsh turned up and there was a scene. Connie Clarke admitted he was her husband. That was the first you knew about her even being married. You jumped Walsh and he knocked you kicking. After you came to, you threatened to kill him, didn't you?"

NOBODY was looking at Fat Sam. All their eyes were riveted to the still silent Harry Mahoney. Balled in Sam's hand was the handkerchief he had used to wipe Vincent Walsh's blood from his fingers.

He dropped in on the floor behind him. His foot pushed it out of sight under the chest beside the door.

Harry spoke suddenly, harshly, "How does that prove I killed the guy?"

"It doesn't," the Corporal said evenly. "But it sets up a motive. Have you got an alibi, Mahoney, for all your time since Walsh arrived?"

Again Harry didn't answer.

It was ticklish business and Fat Sam knew the risks he took. He drew in his mighty belly and that loosened his belt. It released the briefcase, which slid down under his coat. Sam caught the edge of it with his fingers and eased it around behind him. Getting it to the floor without dropping it, or attracting attention, was something he just couldn't figure out.

"Well," the corporal said, "have you?"

"No," Harry blurted desperately. "I was out and around, lookin' for—" Then he stopped, seeing where that was leading.

Looking for Connie, he'd been about to say, and Connie was nowhere to be found. A dry sob racked the youngster. He clamped his mouth shut.

"Looking for what?" the trooper asked. "Who?"

"Go to hell," Harry Mahoney said.

"Mahoney," Corporal Ellis finished it, "You're under arrest on suspicion of murder. When we find this girl—and we will —I think—"

The door opened and there was Connie.

Her dress was torn. Her hair was disheveled and her face and arms were briar-scratched. Her voice was low, but steady.

"I killed him," she stated. "He found me and he tried to make me go—"

"Shut up!" Harry shouted. "She's lying to try to save me. I killed him and I'd do it again, damn him! I—"

"Harry—no! Don't listen to him," Connie cried frantically. "He—"

"Shut up!" Harry yelled.

And it was no problem, after all. Fat Sam let the brief case slide down his leg, stooping to do so, and no one saw him. They had forgotten his existence. As he had done with the handkerchief, Sam pushed the briefcase under the chest in the bathroom.

Then Sam smiled and lurched out into the room. "Gentlemen," he wheezed, "there has been a grave mistake—" and he stumbled awkwardly into the open sample case on the chair and knocked it over.

Cans and bottles went rolling. Martin Burns came off the bed with a savage oath. "You clumsy ox!" he blasted, then stopped.

As suddenly as his rage had risen, it calmed. "I'm sorry," he muttered. "I'm upset, I guess. Filthy temper anyway. I certainly didn't mean to. . . ."

Fat Sam turned and smiled on Burns satanically. "I can well understand that you should be upset, Mr. Burns—I can indeed! Because *you* murdered Vincent Walsh. *You* killed him for the money you needed so desperately in your get-away from the G-Men—Bill, *search that sample case.'* "

Martin Burns dived for the pillows on the bed. He got the gun from under the pillow before anybody else had moved. But Fat Sam was very close to him.

Sam flung his unwieldy weight across man and bed. The gun roared. The bed collapsed. Sam grabbed the barrel of the pistol in both hands. And there was a surprising pad of muscle under the soft fat that encased him.

The gun blasted again as he turned it. Martin Burns shot himself full in the temple. The bullet went in one side and out the other and what it did when it came out was not a pleasant thing to see.

Connie Clarke fainted. Fat Sam, now that it was over and things had worked out so well, almost did himself. He got up slowly and stood watching the corporal pawing at Martin Burns' sample case. He heard Corporal Ellis say what Sam knew he was going to say.

"There's no money here, Sam. But . . . My god, it's a radio! Built right into the sample case. . . . Sam, what *is* this?" And Fat Sam explained.

THEY found a terrified, half-smothered blonde woman in the trunk compartment of Martin Burns' car. She had a small radio with her. They found papers in her possession that damned both her and Burns as Nazi agents.

And there was a blood-stained handkerchief, and a briefcase full of money under the chest inside the bathroom door of cabin Number Five. Lettered on the case in gold leaf was a name: Morgan Machine Tool Works.

That answered all questions. . . .

And now it was morning, and a beautiful one. It was April, and soon the magnolias would bloom. It saddened Sam to have to close up Magnolia Grove and leave for a job somewhere else. Work had never appealed to Fat Sam Tibbetts. But food and comfort did, and somehow he'd have to get those two items.

He sighed and leaned back in his chair. Then he saw Connie standing in the doorway watching him.

"Come on in, Connie," he invited.

Hesitantly she said, "Sam, I—I really thought I'd killed him when I hit him with that stick. . . . I hadn't meant to kill him, but when I hit him and he fell. . . ."

She paused and shuddered. Sam thought, "And so you did kill him, Connie, so you did." But aloud he said, "Why Connie, *you* couldn't have busted that thick skull with an ax."

"I was hiding in the storehouse, Sam," Connie went on. "Then I thought how silly that was. I got to worrying about what Harry might do. I started back to look for Harry and he—Vince—stopped me on the path."

Sam nodded. That was about as he'd figured it, but he didn't say so.

Connie said, "He wanted to take me into his cabin, Sam. When I refused, he grabbed me—tore my dress—hurt me. I guess I went wild, then. I wrenched away from him and fell, and my hand hit that stick. I picked it up and hit him twice and he fell down. Then I ran through the woods for a long time. When I came to my senses, I was back in the grove again. I saw them take Harry into the cabin and I sneaked up to the window and listened."

Again Sam nodded. "You see, Connie, how deceitful appearances can be."

"Yes," she whispered. "And Sam, I've been deceiving you all along. I'm a—I served a year in the penitentiary—for stealing."

"You never stole anything from me, Connie," Sam said.

She cried miserably, "I never stole anything from anyone! It was Vince. He brought that stuff home. It was just after we were married. Then he ran out—"

"Yes, Connie," Fat Sam cut in, "but that's all over and done. You're free now. Free in all ways. You've paid more debt than you ever owed. Now, life owes you something."

Slowly the bitterness faded out of her eyes. Hope returned, and Connie was beautiful again. "Yes, Sam?" she prompted.

"Harry knows all about it. He knows you weren't to blame. He'll be back on his return trip tomorrow night."

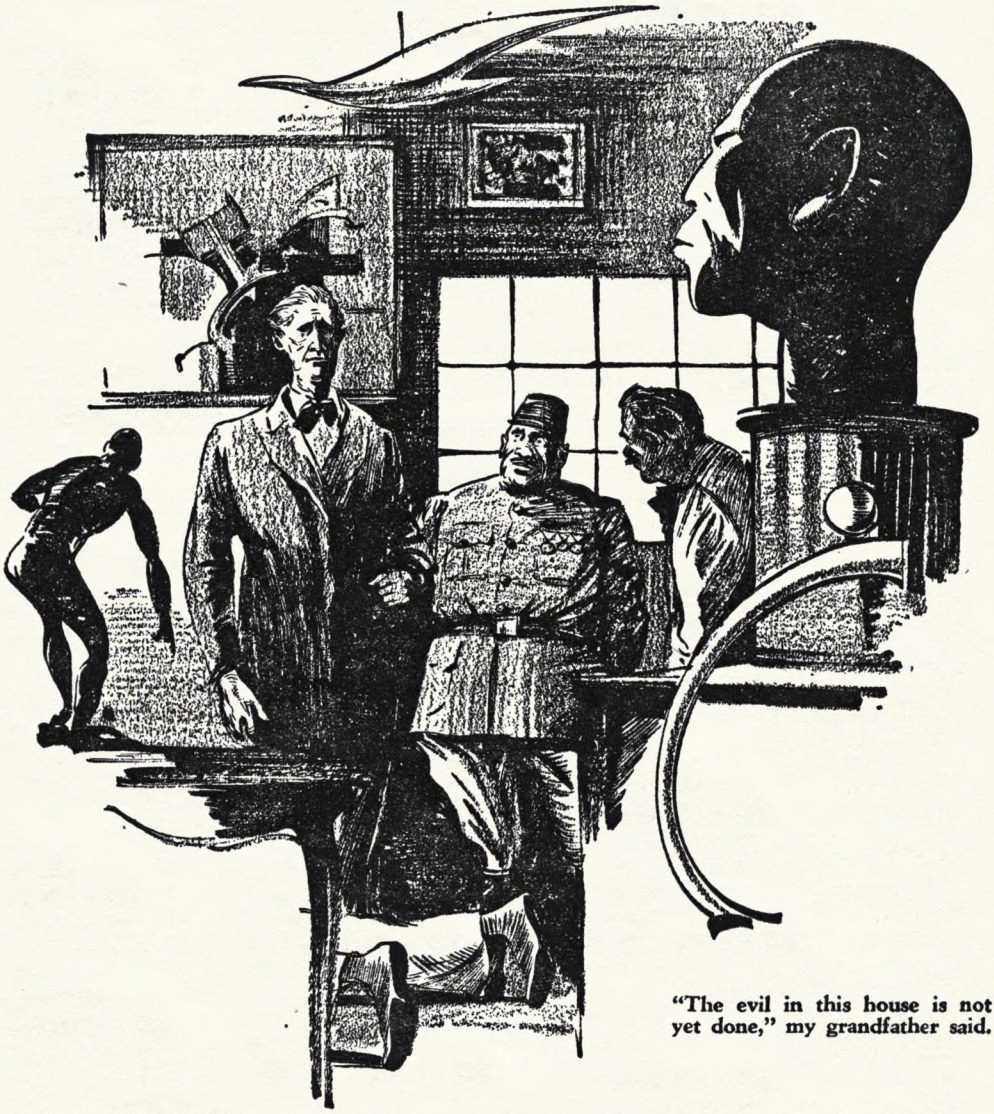
"Do you think he will, Sam? I mean—ask me again?"

Fat Sam grinned. "He told me he'd be workin' up his nerve."

THE END

Now I Lay Me Down To Die!

By RICHARD HUBLER



"The evil in this house is not yet done," my grandfather said.

Lucifer Monckton commanded death that spanned the ages, and dared an earthly court to convict him of the murder of his nephew—but the malice of the corpse was greater than Satan's own wisdom!

THE dead man lay sprawled in the sunlight like some great, obscene insect pinned to a bright board. His body strained forward as a sprinter's might be at the end of an exhausting race, arms outstretched to the final thew, calves knotted through the thin cotton cloth of the blue trousering. The bare feet and flesh of the back, bare to the waist, showed slug-white, unlovely against the rug of Mazatlan black.

The face remained hidden under the rolls of muscle that ridged the great shoulders.

My grandfather Isaiah looked at the body. "Basil Monckton, gone to Divine judgment," he said in his slow, beautiful voice.

"The man is dead," said Pepe, the chief of police of Sinaloa, reprovingly.

"His evil is not interred with his bones," said my grandfather. "It lives on in the bosom of his uncle."

"Did I hear my name?" said a derisive, rasping voice. My grandfather turned, Pepe with him. In the doorway stood a little, hulking man with a curiously pale face. His eyes were large and dark, liquid like those of a poet. He had the high forehead of a dreamer and the sensitive fingers of an artist. But his smile was terrible.

"I will name you, Lucifer Monckton," said my grandfather quietly. "I will repeat: the evil in this house is not done."

"Has evil been done, then?" inquired Lucifer Monckton lazily. He passed beyond the body with a smooth, catlike stride and stood opposite my grandfather. "My nephew comes to my room in my absence and has a heart attack. Is that evil, Isaiah?"

My grandfather looked steadily into the dark and shadowed eyes opposite him. Momentarily; they could not withstand his stern look. Monckton's eyes filmed and fell.

My grandfather swept the room with his glance. It was a room worth more than a casual survey. Like all those in western Mexico, it was of khaki adobe daubed over with lime whitewash. It had a low, pole-beamed roof but its dimensions were enormous. It ran sixty feet or more in length, more than forty in width. The floor was of polished mahogany, the roof above was of sheet-iron. The windows were barred with intricate patterns of wrought iron.

It was a room Lucifer Monckton had designed for his hobby, a peculiar treasure-house. For Monckton was no more than a human magpie. He was an omnivorous collector of all things, without rhyme or reason in his taste.

In one corner stood a statuette of red sandstone, fashioned in the blunt, modern-primitive style of Jacob Epstein; beyond it was a glass case containing two early Limoge plates in blue and gold enamel with the embossed figure of the Christus upon them; the rough, full-frenzied colors of a Van Gogh competed with the suave technique of Dali upon the wall. A suit of mail from the eleventh century, a fine fir plywood chair by the Finnish artist Sven, a stand upholding an illuminated Testament dating from Charlemagne were grouped in a corner. It might have been accurately said that this room of Lucifer Monckton's held the treasure of centuries from the Aztecs to Zorn.

IT WAS a mad collection, but one of immense value. Monckton had moved the contents of his treasure-room to Sinaloa in western Mexico because of its worth. He had financed the trip from New York to the hills outside the little mining town of Mazatlan to escape having to pay tribute to the government for his years of assiduously playing the magpie. He feared the war taxes.

He and his nephew, Basil, had reinforced the adobe with steel bars and thick steel netting. They had installed storage battery burglar alarms and laid in a supply of firearms. They had even guarded against the possibility of entrance through the roof by these devices. And, finally they had erected a lightning rod.

My grandfather Isaiah considered this an insult to God, but it was a practical device. The western part of Mexico is subject to flash thunderstorms of terrific intensity. In the region about Mazatlan, there was hardly a great tree on any promontory that did not bear the black brand of lightning stroke. The house of Monckton stood upon a bluff above a dry arroyo and Lucifer Monckton was wise to take no chances with the bolt of God.

It was the lightning rod that first set my grandfather against the man. Mexico had few foreigners in that district. Usually newcomers were welcomed as a respite from the eternal sun and scenery of brown, scorched earth. But after one or two visits to the Moncktons, my grandfather came back shaking his head. He refused to go again. He said the house was evil.

My grandfather Isaiah had lived in Mexico most of his life. He was a man of simple tastes, with a small inheritance, who had retired to Sinaloa province to

indulge in a compilation of his own peculiar philosophy. But he never had time to even draw up his categories—he was too busy practicing what he wished to write.

He was a tall man, wiry and lean, but of great strength. It was no feat for him to lift a 300-pound sack of flour in each hand to shoulder height and hold it there for minutes. His hair was fine and long and pure white. His face, indeed, his whole body, was tanned to a swarthy brown. He kept his face clean-shaven but affected long side-burns. He never wore a hat and was much respected for it.

Originally a Vermont Yankee, he was a God-fearing man. He loved Shakespeare as well and could quote both from the Bible and the Bard with equal ease. Sometimes he confused the two.

He spent most of his time feeding the natives pills of his own prescription—he had been a doctor in Vermont—and lecturing them in solemn accents. He had taught most of them to understand English, as he disliked Spanish for its slitherings, as he said. The only native he had taught to speak it, however, was his best friend, Pepe, the local police chief.

PEPE and he had developed a deep friendship. Through my grandfather's modest gifts of deductive reasoning and scientific training, a few criminal cases had been solved with great credit to Pepe. Most of them had occurred in the other provinces where vacationists and expatriates from various countries had settled. Most of the Mexican variety could be traced to either passion or drunkenness. Pepe, with my grandfather as a silent partner, had something of a reputation.

As a result, my grandfather Isaiah enjoyed certain privileges. On this day, in the treasure-room of Lucifer Monckton, he was taking advantage of them.

"Prowl if you like, Isaiah," said Monckton good-naturedly. "I dare say it relieves your feelings. Once a detective, always a detective, I understand."

His gibe had no effect upon my grandfather. He was kneeling between the outflung arms of Basil, gently disengaging the head of the corpse from its twisted position under the massive shoulders.

The room was silent. Pepe chewed on his gum; Monckton stayed where he was, five feet from my grandfather.

"What do you find?" he asked jeeringly. My grandfather Isaiah put down the head of Basil and rose.

"I find murder," he said.

Pepe gasped. He quivered from his bare brown feet up through the sweat-stained blue-and-gold of his official uniform. He pulled his official hat down.

"Who did it, Isaiah?" he demanded.

"God," said my grandfather simply. Monckton expelled a too-long held breath and exploded into laughter. Pepe deflated as a pricked bladder. "You cannot arrest God, *patron,*" he said sullenly. "I am not sure it is not a great sin, what you said."

"God may do murder," said my grandfather in his deep voice, "and it may be justice. I find this thing premeditated. I find it a killing. I also find it just and a part of God's inscrutable will."

As though dismissing the subject, he strolled further down the room. He passed by the iron cot in the corner where Lucifer Monckton always slept. He hesitated, then returned. He pressed the bare springs, felt the thin blanket.

"Monckton," he said, "you sleep in this room, do you not?"

"Yes, Isaiah. Except last night."

"Where were you last night?"

"I went for a walk down the arroyo. The heat was stifling."

"That is so, Isaiah," said Pepe. "I went for a walk myself."

"And," said my grandfather, "you claim that when you returned you found your nephew Basil dead upon the floor?"

"That is so," said Lucifer Monckton. His great eyes, narrowed in suspicion, searched my grandfather's face.

My grandfather took a long black cigar from his pocket and lit it. Through the smoke clouds he peered at Monckton.

"You must be quite hardy," he said, "to sleep on a bare iron cot. Is the blanket your only mattress?" Monckton laughed dryly. "Yes," he said, "if it will satisfy your curiosity. I am hardy. I am proud of it. And it is cooler with a single blanket. Are you done?"

"Not done," said my grandfather evenly. "Not yet." He went to the window and looked upward at the blazing blue bowl of the sky.

"WILL you stop this damned mummery and get out?" cried Monckton. "There is a dead man here. He will stink in another two hours. He is my flesh and blood. I have the right to demand his immediate burial!"

"That is so, Isaiah," said Pepe.

"There is also a crime here," said my grandfather. "I have said it was a judgment of God. I have yet to determine the instrument."

He returned to the body. I saw his gaze fasten on an object just beyond the right hand of the dead man. At the same time, I heard the sharp insucking of breath of Lucifer Monckton behind me. Pepe heard it, too; he stiffened.

My grandfather picked up the object. It was a large key, perhaps twenty inches long. It was made of heavy wrought iron, filigreed delicately along the handle. It was overlarge and resembled one of those souvenirs which are sold to tourists.

"I offer this as worthy of your attention, Pepe," said my grandfather. Pepe reached for the key eagerly. My grandfather waved it out of his reach. "Not yet," he said. "It is dangerous."

He turned to Monckton. The little man's face was beaded with sweat. He was clenching his fists spasmodically but there was an air of irrefragable defiance about him.

"Monckton," said my grandfather slowly, "what was your nephew Basil's work before he came to Mexico?"

"He was an electrical engineer," said Monckton sullenly.

"Did he, a technical man, have any idea of the worth of your collection?"

"He was technical, as you say," replied Monckton. "But he certainly knew my things were valuable. Very valuable. He once threatened me because I would not sell some of them and set him up in the electrical contracting business."

"I did not ask you that."

"Well, now you know it," muttered Monckton. My grandfather Isaiah moved back toward the corpse.

"Pepe," he said. "I give you two more objects and a drop of blood."

My grandfather pointed to a small stand in the center of the room. "See," he said. Clear in the dust was the outline of the key. My grandfather fitted the key into the spaces. There was no doubt: the key had rested there.

"See," said my grandfather. He pointed to the gasoline pressure lamp hung from the ceiling. Pepe looked bewildered.

My grandfather crossed rapidly to the body of Basil Monckton. He lifted and twisted the head with a deft surgeon's hand. "The drop of blood," he said.

Pepe bounded to his side. There, on the inner part of the ear, was a tiny drop of blood. "That," said my grandfather, "is the story of how Basil Monckton was murdered."

My grandfather stood up and looked down at Lucifer Monckton. "Monckton," he said, "this is an evil thing."

"What has he done?" protested Pepe.

"I will explain," said my grandfather Isaiah. "Basil Monckton wanted money for his proposed business. He wanted to return north. You, Monckton, would not sell a trinket. So he decided to steal them.

"You knew he would make the attempt. So you laid a trap. You put the key upon the stand just below the lamp. You even shaded the lamp so that the light would fall directly upon it. Then, confident of your devil's design, you went down the arroyo. Basil came as you anticipated. He died."

Pepe pulled his ear in perplexity. My grandfather took up the key. "Read, Pepe," he said. "Read the engraving that runs along the handle."

PEPE read, stumblingly, aloud. " 'Hee Who Twistes Mee, Puts Mee To His Eare; Shale Heer Ye True & Onlie Musick Of Ye Spheeres.' " He looked up wonderingly, then started to put the clef of the key to his ear. My grandfather jerked it away.

"Stop!" he roared. Pepe looked frightened. He had never seen my grandfather so aroused.

"This is the instrument of murder," said my grandfather. "Basil Monckton saw it lying on the stand, picked it up, read and obeyed the instructions. He is dead by this demon's device."

"Note," he said, "there is even an arrow telling which end to put to the ear. And a lip to prevent the instrument from its deadly working unless it is actually pressed into the eardrum. Look, Pepe."

Carefully, with his fingers, my grandfather held back the lip at the clef-end of the handle. He twisted the ornate grip at the other end. It turned sharply. A long needle, like a serpent's tongue, licked out of the other end and instantly returned to its hiding place. But it remained exposed long enough for everyone to see it bore a gruesome stain on its glitter.

"It is the Sorceror's Key or a clever imitation," said my grandfather. "Invented by a lover of the Middle Ages who was jilted by his love. He gave it as a wedding present to the bride and had his revenge. A devil's tool, Pepe."

"It is the original," said Monckton's dry voice. It held not a whit of fear. "Your deductions, Isaiah, are quite true. But I do not see how I can be held for my nephew's murder. He was here bent on burglary. He made a fatal mistake. That is all."

"Not all," said my grandfather. "There is still the motive."

"Nothing can be proved," Monckton shrugged. Pepe nodded soberly, albeit he had a wild look on his face as he glanced at Lucifer Monckton as though he saw a monster unchained.

"One more thing," said my grandfather quietly. "Another drop. A drop of oil. There is oil on the lip of this key, Monckton, where it is pressed against the ear. There is oil on your dead nephew's ear. Is it customary to keep such a lethal thing of hell in working condition?"

"It is customary for me to keep my relics in a state of preservation," said Monckton. He sniggered behind his hand. My grandfather Isaiah and Pepe stared at him in disbelief. Monckton stared boldly back, a sly animal that had escaped the trap.

My gradfather paid no heed to his sneer. He advanced upon Lucifer Monckton and held him with his burning eyes.

"Will you confess?" he asked in his sonorous tones. "Will you confess, cleanse yourself and save your soul from damnation?"

"Confess?" Monckton said blandly. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"For the last time, Lucifer," said my grandfather. There was silence in the room. A fly buzzed against the ceiling. Monckton sucked in his thin lips.

"I really don't know," he said, "what you are talking about, Isaiah."

"There is no court of law which can convict you," said my grandfather.

"No court?" said Pepe in dismay.

"None in the nation of Mexico nor in any other nation on earth," said my grandfather. "But there is a Higher court and a Higher verdict already passed upon Lucifer Monckton."

He turned to go out the door. But Lucifer Monckton leaped after him and caught him by the sleeve.

"You—you wouldn't murder me yourself, would you?" he demanded.

My grandfather swept him aside, cold fury in his eyes. Monckton went crashing back into the stand that had held the fatal key.

"I would not touch you, Monckton," he said. "You would not murder me because you are afraid of man and his justice. I would not murder you because I am sure of God and His justice."

"But you are a fanatic, you know," murmured Monckton, relieved.

" 'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord,' " said my grandfather in his organ-like accents. " 'I will repay.' "

He glanced at the sky. "There will be a storm tonight," he said abruptly. "It has been very dry lately."

THAT night at supper, my grandfather was sombre and disinclined to conversation. He sat at the head of the long mahogany table and listened only with half an ear to Pepe's jovial conversation. Outside, the heavens crackled and rolled with thunder. Suddenly the skies opened and the rains poured down. My grandfather put his chair away from the table and stood up.

"The case is sealed against Monckton!" he said. "Let justice take its course!"

Awed, we waited. There came a terrific crash of thunder and the world lit up in a pale and awful glare. My grandfather's long, white hair lifted with the static electricity. We heard the low booming of water rushing along the arroyos. The storm had passed.

The box telephone on the wall of my grandfather's house rang three short times and one long. It was my grandfather's ring. He answered. It was for Pepe.

"Ah!" Pepe said in huge excitement. *"Ah! Si!"* He banged down the hook and turned to my grandfather Isaiah.

"Isaiah!" he said incoherently. "Lucifer Monckton is dead!"

My grandfather's head was between his hands. He seemed sunk in gloom. "I know," he said softly. "I know."

"He was struck by lightning," babbled Pepe.

"As he lay in his bed," said my grandfather softly.

Pepe stopped short. His eyes widened in amazement. "How—how did you know?" he demanded. He looked as though he stood before a magician, a sorcerer.

"I knew," said my grandfather. "I knew because I had eyes and I had faith. Lucifer Monckton's death was planned months ago by Basil. That is why it was Divine judgment that his own was visited upon him first.

"Lucifer might have saved himself by confession, even though he had plotted the destruction of his own nephew. But he could not cleanse himself."

"What—what was it?" asked Pepe in a whisper. The storm was dying now, the rain lashed at the windows no more.

"The lightning rod," said my grandfather as if it were of no consequence. "The grounding line was attached to the iron cot. Basil was an electrical engineer. He knew the iron springs and frame would conduct the current perfectly. He knew that Lucifer's cot was a perfect electric chair, a home-made execution block, waiting only on God's pleasure."

He rose. "I am tired," he said. "Good night, Pepe."

"But, *patron,*" stammered Pepe. "If you knew and did not warn this Monckton—you are guilty—you have connived with the powers under the earth!"

My grandfather stood at the stairs. His face was ineffably sad, the face of a great judge who has seen the depths and heights of life pass before him.

"Who will say what powers are above or beneath, Pepe?" he said. The words hung, full and rounded, in the still and humid air. "I only know I must not pry into the mind of the Almighty."

Blast, Little Screwball, Blast!

Benny's back bar lights were dimmed by the lit-up screwball who had his first drink there—and followed by blasting a multiple murderer, right under the dazzled eyes of Detective Dugan who, until then, had never tracked down anything but the dog-house!

Somebody tossed the battle of Stalingrad right into the room with us....

By JACK BRADLEY

BENNY'S TAVERN is just one hundred yards across the street from the station house. From Captain Barlow's office windows you can see the glow of Benny's back-bar lights and, all the time Captain Barlow was ripping the hide off me, I was staring at those cheerful lights.

". . . . . and so what happens this morning?" the Captain wound up, after he had finished going over my life history. "This morning Shanks Bonell walks into the Jarnell Manufacturing Company

five minutes after the payroll has been delivered. He conks Monty Barnes, the office manager with his rod—damn near takes the poor guy's jaw off! He takes a pot shot at Mel Harmon, Barnes' assistant, when Harmon tried to grab up the payroll bag and run—and winds up drilling the plant watchman between the eyes, making his getaway!"

Barlow paused, panting. Then he went on, "Every newspaper in town is wanting to know what we are going to do about it, guys are sitting up nights, thinking of new ways to describe the inefficiency of the police. Every detective in the precinct—except you, of course—is out trying to get a lead on Shanks Bonell's hideout. And where were you all this time, Dugan? You? Why, you were in that damned joint across the street. You were sitting in Benny's Tavern, lapping up drinks on the taxpayer's time."

"Standing," I corrected gently. "What little drinking I do is usually done standing at the bar."

For a moment, I thought Captain Barlow would choke. He sputtered, ran his finger under his collar and then managed to calm himself enough to carry on his tirade.

"You—all right, you were standing. And I have a pretty good idea, Dugan, that you're going to be standing a lot more. In a uniform. I haven't made up my mind yet whether to just put you back to Detective Third Grade or to slam you into a uniform and be done with it. In the meantime, I have an assignment for you and if you bungle it, God help you. Now listen.

"For reasons of our own, which you would be too dumb to understand, we brought Henry Mullet, Jarnell's bookkeeper, down here, tonight. He's out there in the hallway, now, throwing a fit because coming down here caused him to miss his pitcher of iced tea. It seems he *always* has iced tea on Friday nights.

"Now I want you to take this guy home, Dugan, and to stay there with him until you hear from me. Whether that's ten hours from now or a hundred and ten. And, above everything else in the world, see to it that he doesn't meet those newshounds. If Henry Mullet speaks one word to a reporter—before you hear from me again, you'll be back pounding a beat. Is that clear, Dugan?"

Before I could answer, the office door opened and Lieutenant Cronin came in. I wondered how on earth a man could look so crisp and cool in ninety degree heat. Cronin gave me one contemptuous look, then came over to Captain Barlow.

"He's gone up to his room. The beat patrolman just phoned in. I've already stationed a man at each end of the block. Shall we start rolling?"

CAPTAIN BARLOW looked at his watch. "Better allow another half-hour, Lieutenant," he said. Then he saw me still sitting there. "All right, you," he snapped. "You have your orders. What are you waiting for?"

"I'm sorry, Captain," I said. "But I still don't get the set-up. Is this bookkeeper, Henry Mullet, mixed in the holdup?"

Captain Barlow snorted disgustedly. "Mixed in it! Why, the dopey little screwball's never been mixed in anything in his whole life. He's worked on the same job at Jarnell's for fourteen years, taking orders from anybody that happened to notice him long enough."

"Then I don't understand. If he's only a harmless bystander, why send him home under police escort?"

"To keep him away from the reporters, you lame brain! Now then, do you want to get started or would you rather go home and get your uniform out of the mothballs?"

There's no use trying to talk to the captain when he's in one of those moods, so I went on out into the hallway. And the minute I saw Henry Mullet, I wished I had just gone on home and got my uniform out.

He was a scrawny, little guy, about fifty years old and he looked like one of these stuffed birds in a taxidermist's window that has been standing there so long its feathers are beginning to shed in spots, dusty and mouldy looking. Put an old-fashioned, high, detachable collar on one of those birds, hang a musty green umbrella over one arm and you have a pretty fair description of Henry Mullet, as he came up to me.

"Mr. Mullet?" I said as politely as I

could. "I am Detective Dugan. I have been assigned to take you home. Shall we go?"

He mopped his wrinkled, little face with a handkerchief. "I can really see no logical reason for the captain insisting that I need a police escort," he said and so help me Hannah, he talked just like he looked, in a high, squeaky voice. "I am, of course, only too willing to cooperate, but I have already given all the information at my disposal and coming down here, tonight, has caused me to miss my pitcher of iced tea. I *always* have iced tea on Friday nights, sir!" And the little screwball glared at me as if *I* had caused him to miss that damned iced tea.

I said something apologetic and led him out toward my car. I was beginning to feel pretty rotten. Cronin, Captain Barlow and the others would soon be heading to some hideout getting ready to blast out Shanks Bonnell. Their pictures would be in the papers, they'd be the glory boys. Me? I was playing nursemaid to a screwball bookkeeper and heading for a pitcher of iced tea.

And just then I looked up and saw the dim, cool lights of Benny's Tavern and I didn't even bother to think things over. "Mr. Mullet?" I said, "it's terribly hot tonight. I wonder if you'd care for a cold drink before you go home?"

✤ ✤ ✤

HIS wizened, little face lit up at once. "An excellent idea, Mr. Dugan. Excellent!" By that time I had his arm and was steering him into Benny's. "We could have a nice glass of iced tea," he finished brightly.

Iced tea! And in Benny's Tavern. He might as well have asked for a can of opium.

"Uh—well, now, I don't imagine that they serve iced tea in here. But why don't you just have a Cuba Libre, instead? That's what I'm going to have."

"I am not accustomed to alcoholic drinks, Mr. Dugan."

"Well, anyway, you try just one of these Cuba Libres, the way Benny mixes them," I said and steered him down to the end of the bar.

He watched anxiously as Benny splashed rum and coke into a tall glass. "That's not *whiskey* he's putting in my glass, is it?"

"Not one drop of whiskey, Mr. Mullet. Just a bit of rum to flavor the coke."

"Oh. That's all right, then. I can't stand whiskey. Can't bear it. My wife gave me some whiskey for a cold once and it made me deathly sick."

Benny slid the two drinks down to us and they were tall and dark and cold. Ice tinkled gently and beads of moisture stood out on the glass. It was cool and dim there in the barroom and I could almost forget the blistering things Captain Barlow had said to me.

Henry Mullet picked up his glass like a rookie cop lifting a time bomb, tasted it and smiled in relief. "It is a really excellent drink," he said. "Almost as good as iced tea. "

He drained his Cuba Libre in one thirsty gulp and cleared his throat importantly. "You know, Mr. Dugan, I am reminded of something my father once told me. Father was a drinking man—used to stop off at the corner saloon every night for his glass of beer—and father once told me that a gentleman never accepts a drink in a public place without buying one in return."

"If you're trying to insist on buying me a drink, Henry, far be it from me to say no."

"Unfortunately, I have no money on me except my carfare—"

"Oh-oh!"

"—however, it has just occurred to me that possibly the proprietor, here, might be willing to cash a small check."

I guess my face must have lit up like a waiting bride's when the victim finally does show up after an hour's waiting at the church. "Say no more, Henry. They know me in here. Hey, Benny! Bring the fountain pen over to my friend, will you?"

Well. That was the beginning of a beautiful friendship. After we had that drink, I bought another and then I started in trying to find out what he knew about this holdup. And he didn't know any more about it than I did. Shanks Bonell had come into the office right after the payroll bag had been put on his (Henry's) desk and pulled a gun. The

office manager, Monty Barnes, had tried to jump him and Shanks had banged his rod against the guy's face. The plant watchman had tried to pull his gun and Shanks had drilled him between the eyes. Then Mel Harmon, Barnes' assistant, had tried to grab the payroll bag and run out of the office and Shanks had snapped a shot at him. Harmon had dropped the bag and dived into another office. And in the confusion that followed, Shanks Bonell had faded out of the office with eighteen thousand dollars in a plain, black, leather bag.

Henry Mullet stared somberly at his glass. "It made me realize, for the first time, Mr. Dugan, just how helpless I was in an emergency," he said slowly. "There is no use to deny the fact that I hate Monty Barnes and Mel Harmon with all my heart. Day in and day out they have ridiculed my old-fashioned clothing and my set ways, they have called me the cartoonist's dream of a bookkeeper. Nonetheless, the fact remains that when an emergency occurred, they were able to do something and I was not. It is not that I am a coward, Mr. Dugan. It is only that I am too accustomed to taking other people's orders."

I drained my glass and clapped the little guy awkwardly on the shoulder. "Yeah. Sure. I know how it is, Henry. Come on, I'll buy a drink."

But I felt a lot different about the little guy from there on. He wasn't just another screwball now. Because I knew how he felt. I had felt that way when Cronin looked at me in the Captain's office.

SUDDENLY Henry banged his glass on the bar with the air of a guy getting ready to say "Eureka!" In fact he did say it. "Mr. Dugan!" he exclaimed. "I know now why Mel Harmon was not shot by that bandit when he snatched up the payroll bag. Is it not clear to you?"

"All that's clear to me is that Shanks must be a rotten shot or he was excited."

"Nonsense, Mr. Dugan!" The little guy was really going, now. And it wasn't just liquor. He was more or less drunk, sure. But he was not staggering and his speech was not thick. He was sure of himself, now. This was a new Henry Mullet. Liquor hits some people like that when they're not used to drinking at all.

"Nonsense, Mr. Dugan!" he repeated. "There is a much simpler explanation. I suppose it would add greatly to your prestige if you were able to solve this case and apprehend the criminal before we return home?"

"Well, now, yes, Henry. I suppose it would help my standing with Captain Barlow—if anything would—but then, on the other hand, maybe we'd better just forget it for tonight and go on home."

"Not at all. Not at all. Mr. Dugan, how do you suppose that criminal gained the information that enabled him to enter our office at the exact time the payroll was delivered?"

"Are you talking about an inside tip-off, Henry? If you are, forget about it, my friend. That's the first thing they would have thought of. They've probably gone over the life history of everybody in the office with a finetooth comb. Just who do you suspect, anyway?"

"Why, it's quite obvious. Mel Harmon, of course. The man is a dissolute character. Day after day he comes to work with the smell of whiskey on his breath and a racing sheet in his pocket. A man like that would be a logical associate of criminals."

"Yeah. Logical, maybe, but if there had been anything off color about the guy's record, Captain Barlow and those guys would know about it by now."

He went on talking as though he had not heard me. "And there is another matter—a matter equally important, to me at least. For more years than I care to remember, Mel Harmon has made a laughing stock of me and tonight I feel in the mood to make a fitting reply. I am seeing things more clearly tonight than I have seen them for fourteen years."

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ANYWAY, I found myself thinking I could always tell Captain Barlow that he had had to go up to see Harmon about something that he had left at the office.

Harmon lived in a furnished rooming house, way up in the Fifties. A frowsy-looking landlady let us in and Henry went on upstairs ahead of me. He knocked at

a door and Harmon opened it. A red-faced, beefy guy damn near twice Henry's size. There was a racing sheet in his hand and, back of him, I could see a quart of rye on the table. Henry stepped into the room and shook his skinny finger under Harmon's nose.

"Mr. Harmon," he said firmly, "some one in our office gave information that enabled that criminal to stage his holdup, this morning. And I am morally certain that you are that man. Where—is—your —ah—confederate, Mr. Harmon?"

For a minute or two, the big, beefy guy just stood there staring at Henry with his mouth open. Then he slammed the paper to the floor and humped up his shoulders.

"Say, what is this!" he yelled. "First those cops tell me not to leave the house tonight under any pretext and now you, you half-pint screwball, you come bustin' in here and accuse me of being finger man for a stickup artist. Why, if you was half a man, I'd break you in two, you—"

He stepped forward, shot out one huge paw and grabbed a fistful of Henry's shirt front. I edged forward. . . .

Henry Mullet's face wore a look of dreamy contentment. Shifting his feet leisurely, he reached clear down to his ankles and swung the sweetest haymaker I've ever seen in my life. Brother, it was a honey! He didn't telegraph the punch. Hell, no! He wrote a leisurely letter about it. And the very calmness of that punch was what put it over.

Those skinny knuckles crashed against Mel Harmon's front teeth and the big guy flipped back against the table like a high diver starting a takeoff. He hung there for a moment and then quietly slid to the floor, the whiskey bottle tipping over and sending a small stream down his shirt front.

Henry Mullet stood there looking down at his tormentor, still wearing that look of dreamy contentment. I came up and touched him on the arm.

"Henry," I asked, "was that the first time you ever swung on a guy?"

"Yes," he said gently. "Yes, I believe it is. Once, when I was a small boy, I had an altercation with another boy but we were separated before we actually came to blows. Yes, Mr. Dugan, I am quite sure that this is the first time I have ever—as you put it—swung on a guy."

"In that case, it was worth it. Even if it costs me my badge. But I think we'd better go now, before that mug wakes up. I can't just let you stay here and slaughter the guy. After all I'm the law."

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I NEVER saw two words stir up so much commotion as those last two. No sooner had I said, "The law," than I heard a gasp from the dim hallway, back of me and a dark, skinny form hurtled forward. I caught the glint of a gun-barrel flashing up and was too surprised to duck. The gun chopped downward in a vicious blur of light and then somebody tossed the roof down on my head. I hit the floor with a crash, not out but close to it. Through a field of shooting stars, I heard Henry yelling.

"There he goes! That's him!"

And I knew that in some wacky manner I had flushed out Shanks Bonell! I rolled over weakly, pulled my gun and fired a couple of shots down the stairwell after him but that was really just for the record. "Detective Dugan, although wounded, fired two shots at the fleeing criminal." I knew I had no chance of hitting him.

I got to my feet and pounded down the stairs and out onto the street. Shanks Bonell, as I had expected, was gone. But I did hear the sound of sirens and they were close. Far closer than they should have been considering that I had fired at Shanks less than a minute before.

Two prowl cars roared into the street from one direction and two more from the opposite. A heavy sedan flashed past them, siren wide open, and slid to a halt in front of me, two men leaping from it, even before the heavy machine had stopped.

And the man in front was Captain Barlow.

He sprinted across the sidewalk, gun raised, and skidded to a halt before me. He peered forward a moment and then his gun slowly lowered.

"Oh, no!" he moaned softly. "No, no! It's not you! But it is! I might have

known something like this would happen. If I had only tied you down somewhere before this started. Oh. Oh."

"That was Shanks Bonell, Captain. I fired at him and missed. Maybe we can nail him yet if we hurry."

"What are you doing here, Dugan—you and the other screwball?" he asked quietly. Too quietly to suit me.

"Well— Mullet, here, suddenly remembered something he had to tell Mr. Harmon before he went home and I could see no harm in his coming by here for just a moment. So, well—"

"Have you seen the evening papers, Dugan?"

"No, sir."

He turned to Cronin standing grimly quiet, beside him. "Show him, Lieutenant."

Cronin pulled a newspaper from his pocket and held it up before me. The headlines were splashed all over the front pags. "Mel Harmon, assistant office manager, accused of taking part of payroll during confusion of holdup. Released after hours of questioning. Bookkeeper sure that bandit got only part of payroll."

"Why, then, that's fine, Captain," I said brightly. "This Mel Harmon is upstairs now. I'll go up and put him under arrest. We can soon persuade him to tell us where part of that payroll is, anyway, and he might even know where to locate Shanks Bonell."

I started back up the stairs. Captain Barlow reached out one hand and nearly yanked my shoulder loose, dragging me back.

"You stupid looking, thick-headed lame-brain, is it possible that you don't get it, yet?"

"I'm afraid not."

"We planted that story with every newspaper in town, Dugan. We deliberately called in the newshounds, gave them that phony story and then sent Mel Harmon home to act as bait, hoping that Shanks Bonell might fall for it and try to reach Harmon. That was why I wanted you to take Mullet home. So he couldn't tip off the press that there really wasn't any more payroll. We worked like demons on this trap and you, you—you—" He choked up, unable to continue.

"I see." My voice sounded small and faraway and I felt my knees going weak.

"BUT there is one bit of good news, out of this whole mess," Captain Barlow continued. "I do know, now, what I'm going to do with you. I'm not going to have you put back in harness, again. I'm not even going to have you demoted to third grade detective."

"Thank you very, very much, Captain, Sir."

"No, I'm not going to have you put back, again." Suddenly his face turned purple and he squalled out at the top of his lungs. "Not a bit of it! I'm going to kick you so damn far off the Force, you boneheaded, halfwitted, drunken lame-brain, that you'll be shoveling sand off the tip end of Long Island! Now get the hell out of my sight before I murder you!"

With that he turned and walked back to his car, Cronin at his heels. For a long, long moment I stood there, looking down the street after his disappearing tail light. Then I was aware that Henry Mullet was tugging excitedly at my sleeve.

"Come, Mr. Dugan. There is even yet time to retrieve success from the pit of disaster. Get into your car. Quickly."

"It's no use, Henry. Shanks Bonell is half way to Harlem by this time. Let's go home."

I climbed drearily into my car and kicked the motor into life. Henry laid a

skinny hand on my arm. "Wait here for just another moment. Then Mel Harmon will come out to go to his confederate. I have seen the same thing happen time after time in the movies."

I was too heartsick to even try to explain to the little guy. I put the car in gear and started to throw in the clutch.

And, so help me Hannah, before I could raise my foot from the pedal, Mel Harmon *did* come sailing out into the street and started yelling for a cab. He was too excited to notice us and I even heard him give the cabbie the address.

"That is Monty Barnes' address," Henry said with quiet satisfaction. "I have been there often. Now do you see?"

"No, I can't say that I do, Henry, but that doesn't matter, any more. From here on, I'm just along for the ride."

Henry started fumbling in the glove compartment of my car. "I noticed a gun in here when you reached for cigarettes, a short time ago," he said. "And if we should encounter this criminal again, you might require assistance."

He pulled the gun out. It was a huge, old style .45 automatic, so big it should have had wheels on it. I took it from him and shoved it back in the glove compartment.

"No dice, pal," I said firmly. "This is a wacky night but I gotta draw a line somewhere and I draw it at your blasting some guy, just because they do it in the movies. And, anyway, that gun doesn't fire more than half the time. The safety catch is jammed on it. I'm taking it down to have it repaired for a friend."

Mel Harmon's cab pulled up in front of a small, one-family, frame house. Harmon leaped out, tossed a bill at the cabbie, and raced up the front steps. I pulled in back of him and Henry led the way into a driveway to the rear.

"There's a kitchen door back here," he said calmly. "It is usually unlocked in hot weather."

Suddenly I froze in my tracks and reached for my shoulder holster. Passing a side window, I could see a good strip of the living room from under a drawn shade. And sitting quietly at a table was Shanks Bonell and a man with a bandaged head whom I knew to be Monty Banks. On the table between them was the black, leather payroll bag of the Jarnell Manufacturing Company!

The front doorbell rang again, a loud continued burr, this time and Monty Barnes got up from the table, his lifted hand bidding Shanks Bonell wait. I slipped the safety catch on my gun and tiptoed around to the back. Henry was just pushing the kitchen door open. I followed him in.

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OUT in the front hall, I could hear Mel Harmon, so angry he was half yelling. Monty Barnes said something soothing in reply and then the front door closed and Barnes was coming back along the hallway. I edged up closer to the connecting door, put my ear to the wood.

"Who was it? And what did he want?" It was Shanks Bonell's voice.

"Mel Harmon," Barnes said. "He's all steamed up. Says that our bookkeeper, a little screwball by the name of Henry Mullet came up to his place, tonight, and accused him of being mixed in this stick-up. I told him we'd straighten it out Monday morning."

"He didn't, now, say anything about the rest of that payroll—the part I missed—did he?" Bonell asked softly.

"For God's sake, Bonell, I've told you a dozen times there wasn't any more to that payroll. You got it all. Don't you suppose I know what it was?"

"Yeah. But why did they hold Harmon for questioning?"

"How do I know? Probably to make a showing. They had to do something."

"Look, chum. We got a nice racket, you and me. The cops have got nothing on you and, me, I can lay low. You play straight with me and we split eighteen grand—or more—and you go back to the office Monday morning a hero. Then after a few weeks, you leave and we work the same trick somewhere else. But you try holding out on me and things won't work out so nice, chum."

"Stop talking like a kid, Bonell, will you? It's bad enough to have a head like this without listening to a lot of wild talk—"

I felt a gentle pressure at my side.

Henry Mullet was turning the door knob with one hand and in the other was that overgrown cannon from my car! How on earth the little screwball had managed to slip it out when I wasn't looking, I don't know, but he had.

I signalled in silent frenzy for him to give me back the gun and step away so I could have a chance of getting to that killer without committing suicide outright.

And before I could make a move, the damned little screwball screwed up his wrinkled face in a grin—probably the first time in his life he had grinned like that—and kicked the door wide open!

Shanks Bonell lashed around in his chair like a striking snake and, almost in the same movement, flung himself sideways to the floor, his hand streaking in a blur of movement to his shoulder. I snapped a shot at him, missed, and knew that I'd never in the world be able to get in a second shot before that deadly little rat got in his next shot. With my last free movement, I tried to push Henry out of the way and felt my hand pushing empty air.

Shanks Bonell's gun blasted orange flame in the hot little room and I felt my leg buckle under me and saw the floor rising up. As I fell, I saw a sight I'll never forget as long as I live.

Henry Mullet was standing spread-legged, in the middle of the room, lifting that enormous gun with both hands, pressing the trigger with all his might and grinning from ear to ear.

"That safety *does* stick," he grinned calmly. And Shanks Bonell rolled to a sitting position and fired point blank at him. That shot must have caused Henry to jerk loose the safety catch on the big gun because somebody tossed the battle of Stalingrad right into the room with us.

I never heard anything like it. Henry Mullet wasn't bothering to aim at anything. He just stood there in the center of the room, holding up that overgrown cannon with both hands, spraying lead around the room like he was using a garden hose. The roar was rocking my eardrums and the biting smell of cordite hurt the nostrils.

I saw Shanks raise his gun again and I took careful aim and let go. Shanks' face suddenly blossomed red and he eased back onto the floor, just as Monty Barnes leaped past him. The office manager's eyes were wild with hysteria.

Henry calmly raised the big gun and smashed it full into Barnes' face. I saw that bandaged head hit the floor and then I just sorta said the hell with it and went to sleep. . . . . .

* * *

When I woke again, I was lying on a couch and the room was full of people. I saw the dour face of Captain Barlow bending over me and thought, "Oh-oh." Henry Mullet was sitting in a chair talking.

". . . . most remarkable piece of detective work I have ever seen. Mr. Dugan questioned me closely and then deduced that Mel Harmon must have had a part in this affair. We trailed Harmon here and, with the dauntless courage one might expect in a man of this type, Detective Dugan entered the room and engaged the criminal in combat. But for this misunderstood man, that desperate criminal might *never* have been brought down!"

There was some more but I didn't hear it. Captain Barlow was bending down over my couch of pain. "Listen, Dugan," he whispered tensely, "I still don't know whatinell this is all about and I got a hunch you don't either but those reporters are down on my neck about the Harmon story and I'm caught with my pants down. String along with me and you'll be a detective first grade."

Somehow I managed to nod my head weakly. Then I turned my head and tried to listen to Henry. I saw a Police Surgeon cutting away his coat—I didn't learn until three weeks later that he had a bad bullet crease across the ribs—and tried to call out to him. Then I gave it up. Henry didn't need any help. He could take care of himself.

LIST OF THE DEAD

Only the abnormally sensitive ears of John Smith—the formerly blind detective—heard Death drumming a soundless roll-call for the surviving heroes of the world's first AEF!

He went down hard . . . and the gun in the window blasted again. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

The Killer-Fruit

THERE was no breath of wind. The air had a peculiar, almost empty stillness. The sun was gone, but the sky was a strange orange tint, and when a person breathed, the air didn't seem to reach the bottom of his lungs. "I'd like to see a barometer," Smith said. "I've got a feeling the pressure is mighty low."

Bushelmouth was steering the car through the late afternoon traffic. He put his head out the window, sniffed, and pulled his head back in again. "Ah don't know nothin' 'bout meters, but dis is sto'my weather, if'n you ask me."

"We don't get weather reports any more. There may be a hurricane bouncing around somewhere in the gulf."

"Den let hit stay down dere," Bushelmouth said. "Dey aint bad heah in Nuorlins, but I 'member once I was over to Bay St. Louis when one dem things got dere. Lord God! You open yo' mouf de wind'd blow yore teef out!"

"With that mouth of yours," Smith said, "you could swallow a small size hurricane and nobody'd ever know what happened to it. Slow down. I think this is the house in the middle of the block."

By WYATT BLASSINGAME

A Fast Action Detective Novelette

"Dat place?" Bushelmouth regarded the building as he pulled the car to the curb in front. It was a huge, paintless, three storied frame building with gables and cupolas and balconies all over it. A

few lights glowed palely from dirty windows, and above the roof the sky, losing its orange tint, showed gray and dirty looking. "Hit look like whoever built dat had took one sniff of marihuana too many."

It was a section of the city that once had been expected to boom, then flopped. There remained a few of these relics of the last century scattered among warehouses and wholesale stores. Most of these were closed now. A big van, hauled by two truck horses passed, the noise of its wheels loud in the almost eerie stillness of the evening.

Smith got out of the car. "I should be back in a few minutes," he said. "Over the telephone the man sounded drunk as a coot. And crazy too."

"How come you bother wid him? He ain't got no money, or he wouldn't be livin' round heah."

SMITH went up the steps, a small man but so well built, so poised and easy in all his movements, he was likely to seem larger than he was. He entered a long hallway that smelled of dust and yesterday's cooking. Overhead a naked bulb burned dimly and tacked to the door on his right was a sheet of paper bearing the word, "Janitor." Smith knocked.

The door opened while he still had his hand raised, and a man who wore overalls and big handlebar mustaches peered out at him. From behind the man's knees and hips and waist, so that he seemed half buried in them, children peeped out also. The man said, "Everything already rented," and started to shut the door.

Smith put the flat of his hand against it and held it open. "I'm looking for a man named Paul Duval."

The janitor pulled his mustache and looked embarrassed. One of the kids began to snicker and then all of them. The janitor said, "Shut up! Shut up all of you!" and struck back at them without looking behind him.

Smith said, "Which is Duval's room?"

"On the top floor. The last one in the back."

"Is he there?" The man had telephoned him only a short while before, and this didn't look like a place with a phone.

"He just come in. About three, four, five minutes ago," the janitor said. He had a Cajan accent.

Smith said, "Thanks," and began to climb the stairs. On the second floor a radio was playing, a man and woman quarreling, somebody laughing. The sounds all mingled in the hallway and the air was full of a thousand odors. Somebody was cooking spaghetti and using a lot of garlic, and somebody else was cooking shrimp. Smith climbed on to the third floor, walked back down the dimly lighted hallway to the last door, and knocked.

There was no answer. This floor was not quite as noisy as the one below, and here at the end of the hall the sounds had a detached, empty quality. Smith found that he was breathing harder than the climbing of two fligts of steps should have made him. He was aware of a slightly hollow feeling in his lungs, a tension of the nerves that could be caused by nothing but the atmosphere. There must really be a storm coming, he thought.

He knocked again, louder. When there was no answer, he tried the door, but it was locked. He bent and put his eye to the keyhole. The room was dark, but not too dark for him to tell that the key was on the inside of the lock. He listened, and his ears, which some men said were unnaturally acute, could catch a myriad of sounds, but from inside this room there came no sound at all.

He knocked a third time. The next door down the hall opened and a man's voice said, "For God's sake, Duval, quit stumbling around and making so much noise! What—oh, I thought you were that drunk that stays in there."

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IT WAS a burly, heavy-shouldered man in his middle thirties. He was in need of a shave and clean clothes. "You looking for that lush?" he asked.

"I'm looking for a man named Paul Duval."

"That's him. Probably passed out." The man came down the hall and took his fist and hammered on Duval's door. "He's in there. I seen him go in not ten minutes ago, drunk as usual."

"I'll get the janitor to bring up a key

and see what's wrong," Smith said.

The janitor didn't want to. He was eating his meal and there were flecks of food about his mouth. The kids peeped out from behind him on both sides. "Duval, he is only drunk. Go knock again."

"Knocking doesn't do any good. Bring up a key."

The janitor started to complain, then stopped short. He leaned forward, his face only a foot or two from Smith's, staring at him. "I have seen you before, or a picture, yes? You are—?

"My name's Smith. I'm a detective."

"John Smith! Ai God! I have read the papers about you, yes!" He began to grope through his pockets for keys. "I take you up. Come, yes, we go up. Why is it you wish to arrest Mr. Duval?"

"I don't want to arrest him," Smith said. "He phoned me to come and talk to him. That's all."

The burly man with the stubble of beard was still standing outside Duval's door. The janitor said, "Hey, Dick. This is Mr. Smith. Mr. John Smith, the detective! His name is in the papers, his picture, many times. I have seen them. This is Mr. Hurston, Mr. Smith. He lives in the next room."

Hurston nodded sourly at Smith and let it go at that. To the janitor he said, "This souse must have passed out. I practically knocked the door down and can't wake him."

"We will see." The janitor got the door open and all three of them filed in. The janitor flicked on an overhead light. "Mr. Duval?" he called.

It was a single room, with an unmade bed and a table and two chairs. There was a whiskey bottle on the table and a paper bag that held bananas. On the far side of the room a French window let out onto one of the numerous balconies that grew like warts all over this house.

"Out here," the janitor said. "He must be." He stepped out onto the balcony—then jerked back. He made a hissing sound.

Smith stepped past him. Light from the French window showed the full length of the little balcony, showed that no one was here. It also showed the place where the balcony rail was broken, a part of it dangling out over empty space.

Smith stepped forward. There was a tightness in his lungs now. He leaned over. In the alley far below he could see the crumpled, grotesque shape of a man's body. "There's Duval," he said.

There was no warning. His foot shot wildly from under him! He seemed to be pitched upward. He flung his body backward, arms waving, and three stories below him he saw the alley pitch and tilt, the gathering night whirl on end as his body half turned in the air.

He struck on one foot, at the very edge of the balcony where the rail was already broken. His body was leaning out over space and time seemed to die while he stayed there, the seconds dragging out through years. Then, somehow, he flung himself forward and sprawled full length on the floor of the balcony.

From just inside the room the janitor and the man called Dick Hurston stared motionless, mouths gaping, down at him. But as Smith stood up the janitor began to sputter, "You—you step on a banana peel! See!" He leaned over and took a badly mashed banana peel from the floor.

CHAPTER TWO

Roll-Call of the Dying

MARION SMITH looked up from her typewriter and grinned at her husband. She was a golden blonde and looked like a cherub with a

chorus girl's figure and Satan's sense of humor. "John Smith, the famous detective. Seeking publicity, no doubt."

Smith said, "Any publicity from this newspaper would be bad. What I want is information." He put on her desk a sheet of paper on which was written a list of names. *Edgar Brussard. James Wayne. Philip Sanderson. Henry Lavine.* After each name was a date, the earliest some six months before; the latest only two weeks ago. After the last name and date there was a long line of question marks.

"Who are these fellows?"

"That's what I came here to find out." His pleasant, good natured face was serious, the old scar showing palely across his forehead. "I got it from the pocket of a man named Paul Duval. He was dead; he had fallen from a balcony. It may have been an accident."

"You mean that it wasn't." She was going down the long, dusty hallway toward the paper's morgue. She said, "Come on, tell me about it."

"I got a phone call just as I was about to close the offiffice. The guy on the other end sounded drunk, and goofy. He said somebody meant to kill him. He said he didn't know when or who or why. But he was sure they meant to kill him—and soon."

Unlocking the door to the files Marion turned to look at her husband. "You don't generally waste time on screwballs."

"He—well, I didn't have anything to do at the time."

"You usually prefer sleeping."

He was silent, and finally she snorted in disgust. "It's a military secret, I reckon." She pushed open the door and clicked on a light. "This Duval was dead when you got there?"

"He'd fallen from a balcony. It seems like he was drunk, as usual, and eating bananas and had stepped on one of the skins and fallen through the rail. It would have been easy to do. I almost proved that."

She swung around. The laughter was gone from her face now. "John—what—?"

"Mine was an accident, there's no doubting that. I just stepped on a banana peel and almost followed Duval to the alley three floors down."

"You're not lying, John? Nobody tried—?"

"Nobody pushed me. Let's start the list with Duval himself. See what you've got on him, if anything."

The first record was dated March 1918. Paul Duval had been awarded the Distinguished Service Medal for gallantry under fire. There were one or two other references to him when he came home from France. He had been something of a hero. He had taken a job as a life insurance salesman. The only other reference to him was dated 1925, when Duval had gone to a government hospital to recover from a nervous breakdown. This was only a line or two.

"Your man seems to have outlived his fame by a good many years," Marion said.

"Yes. See what you have on Henry Lavine."

Lavine's record was remarkably similar to that of Duval. He had been decorated for bravery in World War I; for a short while he had been a local hero, then had dropped out of sight. In 1931 he had been arrested for burglary and given a short term. The last reference was a brief obituary dated only two weeks before. The date was the same as that on the list opposite his name.

Smith said, "Let's try the next name on the list."

It matched the records of the other two. A small time hero of the other war who had obviously gone to the dogs since then. He had been found on the streets, dead of acute alcoholism, six weeks ago. Again the date beside his name matched the date of his death. And both the other names on the list followed that exact pattern.

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THE scar on Smith's forehead showed more plainly now and his blue eyes had an icy look. He said, more to himself than to Marion, "Maybe there was something to Duval's story. Maybe he wasn't such a screwball. Or at least he had an idea. . . ."

"What?"

"He said somebody was trying to murder all the men who had been good soldiers in the last war. He said these men couldn't get any protection now, and there

was some plot to kill them because they had been good soldiers. That talk was crazy, of course, but—"

Marion said, "So that's why you went there! They won't let you in this war, so you try to fight the last one. That's why you answer a phone call from a man who's obviously crazy!"

"Well . . ." Unconsciously his forefinger traced the old scar on his forehead. Years before he had stumbled on a bank holdup and a bullet had put that line from eyebrow to hair; powder burn had blinded him and for ten years he had lived in darkness. It was during that time he had developed his sense of hearing to a keenness that was almost animal. A new technique in operating had restored his sight and it was after that he had become a private detective.

But much of his success he owed to those dark years—and the uncanny instincts which the blind develop.

Marion went on hotly, "So you investigate some crazy drunk's wild story, just because he talks about saving the country. Why should anybody want to kill off a bunch of bums—and these men obviously were bums. Two of them have jail records. One is a hophead. One's a drunk. Why in the name of God should anybody want to kill them? As well as I can tell from these clippings there wasn't a dollar between the lot of them. And none of them were doing Government work, or capable of it."

"But they are dead."

"Accidentally. They've been drinking and doping themselves to death for years."

Smith nodded. "You are right, probably. Still—" He put his finger on Duval's list, on the long line of question marks. "Those could be for persons who are to die next."

"The man was crazy. He had a fixation. He kept a list of old soldiers who have died recently and he got the idea they were being killed."

"Perhaps. And yet—" He lit a cigaret, let the smoke drift out of his mouth. His eyes had a dreamily stubborn look. "I think I'll check on it."

"What are you going to do?"

"Go back to Duval's place. I'd like to look it over more carefully."

CHAPTER THREE

Death Hides in the Rain

THE wind was blowing in fits and starts when Smith left the newspaper building. A sudden, violent blast would howl down the streets, it would seize the car and shake it, hold it back, and as suddenly release it. In the periods of calm the air seemed not to exist at all, so that a man had to breathe quickly and deeply to satisfy the needs of lungs. The rain came in short bursts, and sometimes it fell straight down, sometimes it was blown level and hard as gunfire along the streets.

Bushelmouth kept the windshield wiper going. "Aint you gwine to eat tonight, Mistur Smiff? Hit's gettin' mighty late."

"Is it my supper you're worrying about, or yours?"

"Well, sto'ms does make me hongry."

"Everything makes you hungry."

"Mostly hit's just waitin' 'tween meals makes me de hongriest." He swung the car over to the curb. "Heah dis nightmare house again."

Smith got out. It was a period of dead calm now. Overhead there was no moon, no stars, only an empty blackness. There were no street lights within half a block, but the headlights of the car tunneled through the darkness.

"If you can find a place close around you can go and eat now. But go easy on those tires."

As he went up the steps to the rooming house the wind struck like a blow. It almost knocked him from the steps and the rain lashed at him. His raincoat battered at his legs. Then he was inside.

The janitor was all for going up to Duval's room with him. The janitor talked fast and with both hands, but said nothing he hadn't said when Smith was here before. Smith got the keys away from him, patted him on the back, got him back in his own room, and climbed the stairs alone.

In Duval's room he switched on the light, closed the door behind himself, and stood quietly for several minutes, looking about. The police had been over the place when they had come to take the body

away, they had been sure the death was accidental and there didn't seem to be anything to indicate otherwise. Yet there was the coincidence of the telephone call and the other deaths.

The paper sack of bananas was still on the table with eight bananas in it. Smith frowned a little. That was a lot of bananas for one man to eat—but they were cheap in New Orleans and Paul Duval had evidently spent most of his money on whiskey.

HE WENT over the room carefully. There was nothing unusual about it; it was like a thousand other cheap and dirty rooms about the city. He opened the French window onto the balcony and rain machinegunned in, whipped by the wind. The wind staggered him as he stepped out into the full force of it. It howled and tore at him like a drunken woman. It whipped his blond hair about his face; it battered him so that he had to bend low to move against it.

He took hold of the rail to support himself. It seemed solid enough but it was old and he remembered what had happened when Duval fell against it that day at twilight. The alley beneath was completely invisible in the darkness. The wind shook at Smith and at the rail as he made his way to the broken gap and knelt and took a flashlight from his pocket.

It was hard to see, even with the flashlight, because of the beating rain. But the broken edge of the rail was shiny at the top. He wiped his thumb across it and it was smooth. He leaned closer, centering the beam of the light on the rail.

The rail shook in his hand. There was a sharp, high whine past his ear. And far below him another sound that might have been a tin can wind-driven down the alley, or might have been a car backfiring—or might have been a gun!

He jumped backward. Something hit the balcony under his feet, screamed thinly as it richocheted upward, ripped his raincoat. From the alley below came muffled sound—and this time he knew it was a gun!

He spun into the room, stood with his back to the wall beside the window. The window was still open and the rain drove in, making a puddle on the floor. The wind was a dull roaring now, stronger than ever, and even Smith's straining ears could catch no other sound.

He crossed the room, keeping out of line with the window, clicked off the light. He went back to the window again, onto the balcony. But the night was only a vast darkness out of which the wind and rain hurled themselves furiously upon him. He stepped back into the room and closed the window.

With Duval's door locked behind him he went down the hall to the next door, knocked. There was no answer. He knocked again, listening. He could hear the storm muttering outside, hear a radio playing in another room, the sound of it brassy with static. But from the room of the man who had been introduced to him as Dick Hurston there was no sound at all.

He went down the stairs and knocked on the janitor's door. This time it was a boy about eight who answered. "Poppa's gone out to get a beer," he said. "He went out right after you came in."

Smith said, "Your father saw Mr. Duval when he came home this afternoon. Did you see him too?"

"Sure I seen him. He nearly busted his snoot on the steps."

"He drank a lot, huh?"

"Whenever he could get it," the kid said. "Last few days he's been stinko all the time. Poppa says he musta put the bee on somebody for some money."

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THROUGH the glass panel beside the door Smith saw car lights gleam dimly through the rain, stop, and go out. That would be Bushelmouth back again, he thought. He asked the boy where his father went for a beer and the boy said it was a place half way down the next block. Smith thanked him, opened the front door and went out.

The car was parked on the far side of the street, barely visible through the darkness and the driving rain. The wind, howling down the street almost turned Smith around and he had to hunch his shoulders and fight against it. His hat pulled low over his forehead, shoulders down, he started across the street.

A block away another automobile turned the corner. Its lights pushed back the darkness and in the glow of them the rain flashed like silver bullets. The lights showed the car parked at the curb—the same make and model as Smith's but a different color!

Smith never saw the face of the person back of the wheel. The inside of the car was only a splotch of darkness. But light flickered along the gun barrel thrusting from the car window. Smith flung himself back and sideways, and at the same instant flame penciled toward him from the gun muzzle and the sound of the shot was like dim thunder in the storm!

The bullet ripped at his flapping raincoat. The coat wrapped about his knees and he staggered and a gust of wind struck him like a fist. He went down hard, rolling in the street. The gun in the car window blasted again; the bullet slashed at the pavement inches from Smith's face and bansheed off through the night.

He kept rolling, but he was full in the light of the oncoming car. He was a clear target, even through the rain. The next bullet burned a welt across his shoulder. Then he hit the high curb and was stopped there. He couldn't roll over it and there was a space of seconds while his body was comparatively still before he could get his legs under him and jump. The next bullet would be dead center.

The night was filled with the roar and crash. It was the shock of the bullet hitting him, Smith thought, even as he leaped, ducking sideways across the walk. And then he realized that he hadn't been hit. He was in thick darkness.

He swung about. The car whose lights had been on him a few seconds before had crashed into the one parked at the curb! Its lights were gone with the crash and from the darkness he heard Bushelmouth yelling, "Mistur Smiff! Mistur Smiff! You hurt, Mistur Smiff?"

CHAPTER FOUR

Madman's Maze

JOHN SMITH did not answer. That rolling in the street had jammed his gun in its holster, and the raincoat added to his difficulties. Then he had the gun free, and was running, bending low and keeping in the darkest shadows until he was ten yards down the street. Here he swung across to the other side and back towards the cars.

Now he was walking again, catfooted, his head forward and bent a little to one side, listening, straining his ears against the noises of the storm, trusting his acute hearing more than he did his eyes in the darkness.

He heard Bushelmouth calling him, heard him pounding across the street toward the spot where he had lain. But from the cars there came no sound.

A water oak grew in the space between street and sidewalk and Smith stepped close against it, gun ready. "Bushelmouth?" he called.

He heard the Negro's roar of answer, heard him running toward him. "Wait!" Smith shouted. "Where is the person who was in that car?"

Bushelmouth was beside him on the walk now. "You aint hurt, Mistur Smiff? Lord God! I seen you rolling cross de street and dat guy shootin' at you. I thought you wuz done fur."

"Where is he?"

"Oh him's gone. He beat it right time I done run into him. He went back dat way."

Smith cursed under his breath. No chance to catch the man now. But there was a way, perhaps! He raced back to his own car; its headlights had been smashed in the wreck, but his flashlight showed the tires still good. He whipped the light to the car ahead. The license number was PT 345-435.

Bushelmouth said, "Ah show am glad dem tires didn't blow. Ah knew you'd give me down de country if'n I blew 'em out. Dat's why I jes bumped him sort of easy."

"Hard enough to ruin his aim, thank God. And thank you! Now untangle these two and let's get going."

"I pick up on de other one. You back dis one out."

Bushelmouth bent and caught the bumper and straightened. He weighed two hundred and thirty pounds and there was no fat on him. The bumpers came free.

The bar in the middle of the next block had the first phone Smith could find. It

took him then almost five minutes to get the information he wanted. License number PT 345-435 belonged to a Cole Johnson who lived on Napoleon Avenue off St. Charles. Smith banged up the phone, whirled, and started out.

AT THE bar he stopped a moment, looking around him. This was where the janitor of Duval's building was supposed to have come for a beer, but the man was not in sight here now. Smith said to the bartender, "The janitor of that funny looking three storied building in the next block—has he been in here tonight?"

"You mean Tom LeBru?"

"I think that's his name."

"He aint been in."

"Thanks." He plunged out into the rain, climbed into his car beside Bushelmouth. "Out St. Charles to Napoleon. And hurry!"

"Us aint got no lights."

"I'll hold the flashlight. Get going!"

The car moved as fast as possible through the storm. There was little traffic, and even the policemen must have taken shelter, for no one stopped them about their lights. Water *whushed* up from under their tires, rain beat against the windshield. "Whar us goin' in sech a hurry?" Bushelmouth asked.

"To see the man who owned that car you wrecked."

"Look like you done seen enough of him."

"I haven't seen him at all."

"Well how come he was tryin' to shoot you?"

"I don't know."

"He mad at you 'bout somethin'?"

"I don't know."

"Who is he?"

"The man who owned the car is named Cole Johnson, a clerk at the Court House. I'm hoping he is the man who was driving it. If not—"

This was his only lead, and something had to come of it. He no longer doubted that Paul Duval had been killed—or at least had been helped to kill himself. That iron railing to the balcony had been filed so that the slightest weight would break it. And someone had tried twice to kill Smith, once while he was on the balcony, once as he left the house. If it hadn't been for Bushelmouth's lights gleaming on the gun barrel he would be dead now. The killer had been waiting until he got a chance to be absolutely sure—until Smith got close to the car.

But why? What lay back of Duval's death and these attempts on his own life? Why should anyone want to murder men who had once been known for their bravery, but who had disintregrated into penniless, broken-down bums, petty thieves and hopheads and drunkards? It was all as crazy as Duval had sounded over the phone.

And yet there were the file marks on the balcony. And there were two attempts within half an hour on his own life.

And there were the question marks at the bottom of Duval's list of the dead. Did they indicate others who were to be murdered in this same mad pattern of killing?

"Heah's de address," Bushelmouth said.

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IT WAS a small cottage with a few lights showing dimly through the rain. Smith put his pistol in the left hand pocket of his raincoat, kept his hand on it. Then he was out of the car, fighting his way through the howling wind to the porch of the cottage.

The door was opened by a big man with dark hair and dark, regular features. He wore a blue silk dressing robe, and beneath this dark trousers and black shoes were visible. Both the shoes and the trousers were completely dry. The floor of the livingroom was dry and there was no indication that anyone wearing wet clothes had come in or out recently.

Smith noticed these things in the same instant he was stepping into the house, forcing the door behind him shut against the wind. "Mr. Cole Johnson?"

"Yes." The man's face clouded a little as though he were trying to place Smith.

"My name's Smith."

"John Smith, aren't you! I knew I had seen you or your picture." He held out his hand. "Come on in. Sit down. I didn't think my car was so important the police would send you around."

Smith's face showed nothing, but his left hand tightened on the gun in his pocket. "Your car? What about it?"

"You didn't come about that?" Johnson looked puzzled, then laughed. "That's how important each man thinks his own troubles are. My car was stolen from out front an hour or two ago."

"You reported it to the police?"

"Right away, as soon as I discovered it was gone. Probably I was foolish to leave it out, but it was parked right in front of the house and I didn't think there was any danger."

Both men were still standing, and against Johnson's big-framed body Smith looked even smaller than usual. His face showed nothing of the disappointment that he felt. If Johnson was telling the truth—and the times checked—he was back with almost nothing to work on—while a determined and cold-blooded killer stalked him through the storm.

He said, "You work at the court house don't you, Mr. Johnson?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever heard of Paul Duval?"

The man was thoughtful, rubbing a finger along his blue-shaved chin. "I don't think so. Does he work at the court house?"

"No. He died today, fell off a balcony. I wonder if he left any property, any will of any kind."

"I work in the probate office," Johnson said, "but that's not exactly my line. However, I could look it up for you tomorrow."

"I'd appreciate it. And some others too, if you can. Henry Lavine, Philip Sanderson, James Wayne, Edgar Brussard. Remember seeing a record on any one of them?"

Johnson shook his head. "Nothing that I remember. I'll take down the names and check on them tomorrow." When he had written them down he said, "You have a reputation of working on pretty big cases, Mr. Smith. Is this—"

The door bell jangled and Johnson said, "Excuse me a moment?" He stepped to the door, opened it. Wind whipped in, making the curtains rattle, blowing a spray of rain. The noise of the storm was so loud that Smith barely heard the voice of the man outside. Then Johnson turned back, saying, "Someone to see you, Mr. Smith."

A small man stepped inside. He had a hat pulled low over his forehead and with his left hand he held a handkerchief against his nose and mouth as though about to sneeze. With his right hand he took a .45 automatic from his pocket. He leveled it at John Smith, and fired.

CHAPTER FIVE

Bald Man's Bait

IT WAS the simplicity, the audacity of the plan which made it nearly perfect. Smith had certainly not expected a killer to walk into a lighted room, ask for him by name, and then fire. The move caught him almost flatfooted—but not quite. Already someone had tried to murder him, and his nerves were drawn and tight. He saw the man's hand dip into his pocket, saw the gun lifting free.

He hurled himself sideways. He heard the gun crash, saw the spit of fire almost at his eyes. The boom of the shot, the whip of the bullet past him all blended; then the second bullet ripped the floor as he struck and rolled and got behind a heavy, overstuffed chair.

His own gun was in his hand now. He couldn't see the killer because of the chair, but Smith did not need to see. During those ten years of blindness he had lived by sound rather than sight; he had practiced shooting at sound for hour after hour. Now, in the stillness echoing the shots he heard the scrape of the other man's shoes. And he fired twice.

The cry was short and choked; it died with the crash of his gun. Then the body, falling on the floor made a dull thud.

Silence came down on the room as John Smith stood up. Outside the wind had lulled for a moment as though resting, and Cole Johnson's voice sounded strange in the stillness as though he were choking, "You—you killed him! You shot him right through the chest!"

The storm struck again. And with it came Bushelmouth, bursting into the house, yelling, "Mistur Smiff! What happen?" He saw Smith, swung wildly about, huge hands fisted. But there was no one threatening, and the body on the floor lay quiet. "Who's dat?"

"A man named Pinks Gruman," Smith said. He was standing over the body, looking down at it. The tightness in his chest had gone away, but there was bitterness. He had thought for a few seconds this might be the end, might solve his problem for him. "A gun punk," he said. "A hired killer without brains enough of his own to come in out of the rain. Every cop in the city knows him. But unless they know who he was working for now, I haven't learned a thing."

MARION'S face was clouded with fear and her lips trembled a little no matter how she tried to keep them from it, later, when Smith told her about it in the living room of their home. She had mixed him a scotch and soda, and the ice made a tinkling background to her words as he pulled at it slowly.

"If Duval was murdered, it's a case for the police," she said. "You've got enough evidence to get Lieutenant Rutgers to work on it. That's why they're after you. Turn your evidence over to him." She looked at Smith to see what impression her words were making. His face was set, determined, and she felt suddenly helpless and very afraid. "John! Oh you—you fool! It's not your case! No one hired you for it! Get out of it while you're still alive!"

"I've talked to Rutgers about it. The police are going to work on it. But I want to work on it too." He went over and put his hand on her shoulder. "Even if I did drop out, the person back of this business wouldn't know that. He seems determined to get me. All right, that's a game we can both play. And I'll be safer playing it than trying to forget about it."

"You could get out of town until it's over." He looked down at her and she said, "All right, you won't run away, you—you damned fool!" Then she caught his hand in both of hers. "But be careful! Please be careful! You don't even know who is after you! It might be anybody! And if he hired one person to try and kill you, he can hire others. A half dozen! A dozen! You don't know how many there will be!"

"I'll be careful."

She released his hand. She sat there and tried to make herself think clearly, calmly, so she could help him with the case if it were possible. But there didn't seem to be any help. "You haven't found any connection between the various men on Duval's list?"

"No. The police will work on that tomorrow. It's the sort of thing they can do better than a private detective. And they are going to get after the stool pigeons who knew Pinky Gruman, on the chance of learning something there."

"What about this man Johnson?"

"His car was stolen. At least it was reported stolen to the police about seven-thirty. Whoever was in it at Duval's must have realized I would go to the address of the owner in an effort to check on him, so they went there too, or sent Pinky rather."

"You don't think it was Pinky Gruman in the car?"

"It might have been. But I don't think he could have figured out going to Johnson's all by himself. He was strictly a trigger-thinker."

Marion looked down into the glass she was holding. "What are you doing to do?"

"I keep remembering those question marks at the bottom of Duval's list and thinking they were meant for future victims. While the police are checking on Pinky Gruman and checking the list of dead men, trying to find some connection, I'm going to try to find the next prospective victim."

IT WAS slow and tedious work. He spent a day and a half looking through old newspaper files, listing citizens of New Orleans who had distinguished themselves in the last war. The majority of these, however, had also done well since the war. These names he marked off. Some were dead, some had moved away. By the end of the third day his long list had been cut back to only a few names.

The police had also been working. Lieutenant Rutgers told him wearily, "We know that at least one of the men on Duval's list was murdered. A man named James Wayne. An autopsy shows he had been given arsenic. It had been fed to

him, probably, over a period of time. He was drinking enough about then to kill most men; there wasn't any doctor called in until after his death, and the diagnosis was acute alcoholism—which was partially right."

"How about the others?"

"Lavine got an overdose of dope. One was hit by an automobile while drunk, and crossing the street; another killed himself with rotgut whiskey. That's the way it goes."

"Have you found any connection between them?"

"We've talked to practically everybody who knew them. Brussard and Philip Sanderson were acquainted slightly; the others don't even seem to have known one another. Certainly they haven't associated with each other in the last ten years."

Smith said, "Cole Johnson checked on them in the parrish records for me. None of them left any money or property that he could find."

"Not a cent. None of them had ever had any money, except—" The police lieutenant paused, rubbing a finger along the side of his nose. "They all seem to have come into a little money just before they died. At least they had plenty for liquor, or dope, or whatever they used. That, and one other thing, is all we've found that ties them together."

"What's the other?"

"About a year ago—we can't be sure because it's just hearsay from persons who knew them—but about a year ago they all of them seem to have had a little spurt of money."

"Did anybody know where it came from?"

"Not definitely. But a fat bald-headed man in a big automobile visited at least two of them about that time."

That was all Smith had to work on when he started checking the list of names he had made from the newspapers. The list took him into all parts of the city, into tenements and down alleys, and outside the city. And always he knew that a murderer might be following, might be waiting around the next corner, behind the next door on which he knocked. He kept his gun loose in its holster, and kept working.

THE man called Sam Allender lived in a cheap but clean and decent rooming house on Canal Street. He was a tall man, a little stooped and thin. His hair was gray about the temples. His face was pleasant, but weak.

Smith said, "I'm from the newspaper. We want to do a Sunday feature about men who were heroes in the last war."

Allender's face lighted with almost childish pleasure. "Come on in. I wasn't much of a hero, but—"

"You won the Distinguished Service Cross."

"Yes. It was sort of lucky." He was like a boy, pleased and eager. He talked willingly. "I tried to join up this time, but they wouldn't have me. I've got a bad heart."

Smith rather liked the fellow. He felt sorry for him, and he felt almost ashamed of what he was doing, what he planned to do. Yet this man might be slated to exchange his name for one of the question marks on Paul Duval's list of the dead.

Smith said, "How about a drink? It gets dry talking."

"No . . ." There was something almost like fear in the man's eyes. "I—I don't drink any more."

"There's a bar in the next block. Walk down while I have one. You could take a beer anyway."

"I—well, all right."

Allender had a beer, and then another beer, and then he switched over to whiskey. "I really shouldn't," he told Smith. "It's the first time I've had a drink in months. I used to drink too much, so damn much I got myself in trouble. My nephew pulled me out. He made me quit drinking. He'll be mad as hell about this."

"Who is your nephew?"

"Cole Johnson. Works at the court house. You know him?"

"Slightly." Smith felt a pulse of excitement beating in his throat. It might be only a coincidence, one of those things that happened. Still . . .

"What sort of fellow is he?"

"One of the best." Allender leaned forward and tapped the table in front of Smith with his forefingers. "Very best! I'd been dead, or in jail, or God knows what, if it wasn't for him. I was down flat broke, a bum, sponging liquor. And

he got me on my feet again. He'd be mad as the devil if he knew I was taking a drink now. He's going to get me a job when I'm better. I'll be on my feet—be somebody again."

Smith said, "I'll tell you who's been drinking mighty hard. A fellow you may know. He was in the last war. Man named Paul Duval."

"DUVAL?" Allender wrinkled his forehead. "I've heard the name. Maybe I knew him when I used to go to the Legion meetings."

"He had a friend who was interested in service men. A big fat man with a bald head. Drove a big automobile."

"You mean E. J. Nash. He used to come and see me about a year ago. That was when I was drinking a lot and he was always talking about what would I do if I had money. Would I use it for liquor or would I quit drinking and go into business or what and what. Just a lot of wind, that's all he was."

"What's happened to him?"

"Don't have the faintest idea. Ain't seen him in a year." He wet his lips. "What say we have another drink?"

"No thanks. I'll walk back up to your place with you."

"Let me buy one. This is on me."

"No thanks. We've had enough."

"Just one more. I—" He stopped. He was looking past Smith and Smith turned, saw the man who had lived next door to Paul Duval, the man called Dick Hurston, standing there. He was looking at Allender and his thick lips were curled back in a half sneer, half snarl.

He said, "Soused again, huh?"

"I—I'm not." Allender stood up.

Smith said, "Hello. What are you doing in this part of town, Mr. Hurston?"

"I work near here. Seems all your friends are bums. Paul Duval, then this sot."

"I like them." He walked out with Allender, went with him toward his rooming house. "Where did you know Hurston?"

"I had a little trouble with him in a bar, when I was drinking heavy."

"What kind of trouble?"

"Just a—a fight."

When Allender was back in his room Smith went to the nearest corner drug store, phone Cole Johnson. "You've got an uncle named Sam Allender?"

"Yes. He's been having a couple of drinks. That's my fault. But until they have worn off you better keep an eye on him, make sure he doesn't go get any more."

"Who's this talking? Is this Mr. Smith?"

"Yes. I was talking to your uncle about Paul Duval and his list. And about a man named E. J. Nash. You know him?"

"No."

"How about Dick Hurston?"

There was silence, then Johnson said slowly, "I know him. He's a crook of the nastiest kind. When my uncle was drinking heavily Hurston took advantage of him, got him into a mess with the law, and let all the blame drop on Sam. I hope you're not trying to dig up that old trouble on my uncle. It didn't really amount to anything. He never wanted to hurt anybody in his life. He's weak, but he's really a swell fellow."

Smith said, "Tell him to be careful these next few days. Mighty careful." He hung up, and went out to his car.

CHAPTER SIX

Murder and Moonwash

THERE was a great deal in the newspaper files about Mr. E. J. Nash. He was wealthy and eccentric—and very much of both. In the swankiest section of town he'd built a huge house mixing in it every possible type of architecture and painting every door, windowframe and filler a different color. The neighbors howled in protest, and Mr. Nash added more colors, gave the whole thing to some carnival side-show people who had gone broke. He'd built an eighty thousand dollar church in the poorest Negro section of the city, then just left it open for any or all denominations to use as they pleased, and finally some hoodoo cult had taken sole possession.

Nash, himself, was out of the city, however. It took Smith some time to learn that approximately a year ago he had gone north to a world-famous clinic, and was believed to be suffering from stomach

cancer. Smith put in a long distance call, but was told that Mr. Nash's condition was extremely critical and he could not talk to anyone. Mr. Nash wanted any questions about his affairs referred to his attorney, Harrison Magill.

This wasn't easy. Magill, Smith learned, had been a reserve officer in the army and called to active duty six months ago. However, Mrs. Magill said, he was due home that night on a three day leave.

Smith met the train. The station was swarming with men in uniform.

He saw a man in a lieutenant's uniform greeting a woman with two little boys. He took out the picture of Harrison Magill that he had obtained that afternoon and looked at it, then made his way forward. "Lieutenant Magill?" he said.

The man turned to look at him, a handsome, black-eyed man in his middle thirties. "Yes?"

Smith introduced himself. "I'm sorry to bother you. But I need some information about a client of yours, E. J. Nash."

Harrison Magill frowned. He was moving with his family toward the door of the station. "See me tomorrow."

"It would be best if we could talk tonight. It is, in fact—" he lowered his voice, "a matter of life and death. Your life perhaps."

"That's absurd," Magill said. "The old man is something of a screwball, but he would never cause murder."

"Not intentionally perhaps. But—"

"Tomorrow." Magill snapped the word, turned away and walked off.

Smith cursed under his breath, stood watching the man disappear in the crowd. Then, suddenly, he started after him, keeping just in sight. He saw Magill get into a car with his wife on the seat beside him, the kids in the back. Smith sprinted for his own car and managed to swing behind the other one as it moved down Canal.

IT WAS a clear night with a half moon riding high in the sky and a promise of fall in the air. The cars moved out St. Charles, going steadily but not fast. Traffic streamed past them, but Smith had little trouble keeping his position, though he couldn't tell whether or not the former lawyer knew he was being followed.

A few blocks beyond Tulane Magill turned left. This street was lined with oaks and only flickers of moonlight came through. About the middle of the block was a big stone house set far back from the street and Magill turned into the drive leading to it. Smith swung after him, slowing down, cutting off his own lights.

The drive was lined on the left with bamboo, lifting itself high and black against the sky. On the right azaleas formed a chest high hedge. Just back of this the dark figure of a man loomed up. He was abreast the lawyer's car and Smith could see him dimly in the backwash of its lights. His right hand was drawn back as though about to throw a baseball.

With one sweep of his hand Smith had the gun from under his coat, and fired, not trying to take aim, knowing there was no time to aim.

The man jumped at the crash of the shot. His hand was already moving forward and over his head as he threw. He jerked as though trying to stop the thing he was throwing, and couldn't. It sailed out, hit the back of the lawyer's automobile, bounced off.

Smith's car was plunging through the azaleas, bouncing to a stop. He didn't wait. He flung himself out on the far side, hit the ground flat, tightened himself against it as though to bury himself.

He felt the earth quiver before the sound hit him. It was like a blow. It shook his whole body, jolted him along the ground. It was a great, all-enveloping, crashing roar and then a great sheet of flame rose up from the driveway and some of the bamboo came crashing downward and a great hole was ripped in the azaleas.

Then Smith was on his feet and running. He saw the man who had hurled the hand grenade, a dark figure under the moon, streaking across the lawn. His gun cracked, cracked again. The man stumbled, reeled to the left, spun about. There was a gun in his hand and the muzzle of it blossomed fire. Smith heard the bullet wasp past his ear. Then he fired again, carefully.

The man turned half around and fell on his back.

The lawyer's car was off the drive and in the bamboo when Smith reached it. But

no one was hurt and Magill was digging frantically for a pistol. "No need of it," Smith said. "I think it's all over now."

"Who was that man you shot—"

"I haven't been over to look at him," Smith said. "But I have an idea." He walked across the moonwashed lawn with Magill beside him. They looked down at the body.

"You know him?" Smith asked.

"I've seen him—"

"Around the Court House probably," Smith said. "He worked in the Probate Office. His name's Cole Johnson."

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MARION said, "Quit stalling, damn it! How'm I going to write this if I don't know the straight of it?"

"There really wasn't anything to it, not after Lieutenant Magill—Attorney Magill—explained about Nash's will. That Nash is a charitable fellow—but a bit eccentric.

"About a year or so ago he was reading about some of the heroes of this war, and that reminded him of some from the last war. He got to thinking about it, about men who had been big shots for awhile, then gone to the dogs. He wondered if, given a chance, they could come back, make something of themselves once more. He decided to give ten thousand dollars to each of ten men who had gone bad, see what they would do with it. He made a will to that effect, but his original plan was to give it away before he died, to two men at a time, so he could watch. But he became seriously ill and had to go north to a hospital."

"Leaving a will that, after his death, these men would each get ten thousand dollars?" Marion asked.

"Yes. And if any one of them should die, his share would be divided between the others."

"The men didn't know about the will?"

"Nobody knew about it except Nash and his lawyer. Only he had set aside some property, the money from which was to be used for this particular purpose. There was a record made of that, and our friend working in the Court House discovered it. Which wouldn't have mattered a bit, except that one of the men happened to be his uncle, a man named Sam Allender."

"You mean he was killing off the others so that Allender would get their shares?"

"And he would get Allender's. But to start with, it wasn't exactly murder. These were all bums, remember, picked for that very reason, and he encouraged them to drink or dope harder than ever. Given a bit of help, they all would have killed themselves eventually. But Mr. Nash was dying in the hospital, and James Wayne was stubborn about dying, so Johnson gave him arsenic, a little at a time, to help the liquor.

"When I started hanging around, he knew he had to kill me. He went about it so obviously that for a while he had me fooled—actually, having reported his car stolen, it was safer for him to use it than any other. If he were stopped, he could claim to have found it—or he could abandon it, as he finally did.

"He went after both Magill and me after he'd talked to his uncle, and learned that I was looking into Nash's affairs. He saw me waiting for Magill at the train—saw me speak to him. He knew that the will would come up. He didn't stay to find out that Magill didn't let me ride home with him—" Smith paused, and for a while his eyes stared at the ceiling and there was a queer expression in them. "If I'd been in Magill's car, instead of following it, I wouldn't have—"

Marion blinked and bent over the typewriter keys, as if suddenly afraid to look at him. She choked a little and then she said, "Keep to the point. . . . He—he was nice to his uncle, wasn't he?"

Smith grinned, "Sure. His uncle had a weak heart. And Johnson had to keep him alive or his whole plan would go blooey. He had to look after Allender, at least until the money was paid."

Marion stopped pounding on the keys and stood up. "Another human interest angle shot to hell!" she gritted. "Must I spend my life glorifying my own husband?"

But the light in her eyes, as she brought him his scotch and soda five minutes later, said quite plainly that she didn't mind a bit. . . .

THE END

BIG JOE'S LAST HAUL

By JAMES A. KIRCH

Joe lumbered forward: "I told you no killing. And there's been two killed already."

Big Joe's boy reached out of a hero's grave to name the father who loved him—his murderer!

THE truck driver jammed the brake to the floorboard and burned two hundred miles off his tires. He glared at the two cars parked across the road, and then he opened the door and climbed slowly out of the truck. He was a

big, awkward man, with a slow-moving mind. A babe in the woods.

A slim, dark-haired man slipped out of the roadster and came forward slowly. He moved in tight little steps, as if he were walking on eggs. He kept his right hand in his pocket.

The driver said, "Look, Mac, you gotta get them crates outa the way. You're blockin' the road." It never occurred to him that anything here was going to be wrong.

The slim man kept coming towards him and the driver made out the handkerchief that came up to the man's nose. He cocked his right hand uncertainly, and then two men appeared at the side of the road, near the front of his truck. They each held a shotgun pointed his way.

"Wait a minute," the driver said. "Wait a minute, now. What is this?"

The slim man was within ten feet of him, now. His right hand was still in his pocket. The driver's startled gaze went back to him—and froze there. The man's skin, above the handkerchief, was a flat, pasty grey and his black little eyes were as unwavering as a snake's. The flesh under the left eye twitched in short little jerks. The driver's stomach went cold.

"Wait a minute," he said, weakly. "I'm a married man. I got two kids. What is this?"

The slim man's voice was sweet; liquid and sweet, like a preacher's.

"Move," he said to the driver. "Start hiking across the meadow. Start fast."

The trucker said, "I . . ." and then he turned and dove into the ditch. He scrambled up the bank and started to run like a rabbit.

One of the men with a shotgun laughed hoarsely and stepped out into the glare of the truck's lights. "Gees," he said. "A truck-load of coffee. Gees, Max, that was easy."

The slim man, Max, jerked the handkerchief from a wet red mouth and a pointed chin. His little eyes dulled with disappointment, as if he'd been cheated of his fun.

"Too easy, Willy," he said. "Too damned easy." He turned and walked back to his roadster and the man called Willy climbed into the coffee truck and swung it around, driving North.

BIG JOE MALLET shifted his heavy bulk back in the chair as the two men came into his office. He was a mountain of a man, with a huge, shaggy head, arms like anchor chains, and the heavy grace of the big ones. There was too much of him to fit in the chair.

His voice boomed with energy. "Well, Max?" he asked.

Max nodded. He didn't say anything; just nodded.

"Any trouble?"

Max shook his head and Willy cut in eagerly.

"A pipe, Boss. Max here just tells him to scram, and I'll bet the guy ain't stopped runnin' yet. So we got another load of coffee."

"Good," Mallet said. He shifted his bulk forward a little. "If you ever run into trouble, I want you to take it easy, Max. Remember what I told you."

Max said, softly, "I know what to do, Mallet."

Big Joe's eyes stirred. "I'm not sure, Max. I got a lot of experience behind me in this racket. I was bootleggin' and hijacking for ten years, before repeal made it sort of illegal. With people yelling for cheap liquor, coffee, sugar and the rest of it, I can run a nice, new racket. But I don't want no trouble. I don't want one of you hot-headed guys going screwy on me. We can handle this clean." He hesitated a minute, his eyes studying Max. "What I mean," he finished, slowly, "is that I don't want no killings. I went through Prohibition without 'em, and I don't want none now."

Max's lower lip pushed at his teeth. His right hand clenched a little, but when he spoke, his voice was still soft and smooth. "I know what to do, Mallet," he repeated. He turned and walked out of the office, and Big Joe drew in his breath, as though the air were cleaner with him gone.

"I don't like that guy, Willy," he said, harshly. "I'm not surprised his draft board turned him down."

Willy shrugged. "He scares 'em, Boss," he said. "When the drivers get a look at Max coming towards them, they generally scram." Willy's eyes widened a trifle as a thought hit him. "Hell, that guy even scares *me*."

"Yeah," Mallet said. "That's what I mean." He picked up a picture from his desk and studied it broodingly. "If we only had Tommy here."

Willy crossed the office to the desk to look at the picture of Big Joe's son. He nodded admiringly. "A captain, ain't he, Boss?"

"Naval Lieutenant," Mallet said. "Gun Commander." He grinned a little. "Tommy always could shoot." He set the picture back on the desk and drew a road map towards him. "Now, look, Willy," he said. "This liquor truck will hit the spot I got marked with a cross at eleven p. m. There's a back road here"—he drew a line on the map—"that'll take you within two miles of our warehouse. Got it?"

Willy nodded. "Yeah," he said. "His eyes narrowed a trifle, as though he were thinking. "These trucks, Boss," he said, slowly. "Ditchin' them where the cops'll find 'em, like you been telling us, is kinda risky. Suppose we run 'em into the Sound?"

Big Joe's fist pounded the desk top. "In the Sound?" he barked. "You crazy, Willy? You can't ruin stuff like that. Don't you know they can't make trucks no more?"

"Is that my worry?" Willy said, wonderingly.

"No," Joe said. "No." His heavy voice was thick with sarcasm. "Only when they run out of trucks, they don't ship stuff. And when they don't ship stuff, this country'll be in a hell of a jam. You ever think of that?"

Willy shook his head. "Gees," he said. "Gees, I never would've figured it like that."

"All right," Big Joe said. "You let me do the figuring." His eyes turned again to the picture on his desk, and he shook his head heavily. He looked up to find Willy's eyes on him.

"Look, Willy," he said. "When you grab that liquor truck—keep your eye on Max, will you? I don't trust that guy. I think he's got an idea he's a torpedo. And we don't want no explosions."

"Sure," Willy said. "Sure, Boss." But the way he said it made Joe afraid he was too dumb to handle it. He wished to hell he'd never dealt Max into the game.

WHEN the phone rang, at midnight, Big Joe thought it was Willy. He smothered the receiver in his beefy hand. "Yeah?" he said.

"This is Farrows," a voice said. "Ted Farrows, of the Blade. We just got a story from somewhere in South America on our wire."

"So?" Joe said.

The reporter's voice was low. He sounded as if he didn't know how to say it. "It's about your kid, Mr. Mallet," he began. "Lieutenant Tommy Mallet."

Joe's hand tried to crush the receiver. "What happened to Tommy?"

"His ship hit trouble," the reporter said, awkwardly. "A sub found them."

"What happened to Tommy?" Joe repeated.

"He put up a battle," the reporter went on. "They think maybe he scored a hit. They—"

"What happened to Tommy?" Joe said, again. His voice deepened, thundered with fear.

"Dead," Farrows said, softly. "He went down with the ship. He kept firing the gun until the end."

"No," Joe said, tightly. "No. He could swim. Tommy could swim. No!"

"Sorry," Farrows said. "You might as well have it straight, Mr. Mallet. He's not just missing. A destroyer picked up his body."

Big Joe just sat there, holding the phone in his hand. The reporter waited a moment, then said, "Mr. Mallet, I'm in a booth in your section. I could run up and give you the details, if you'd be interested." He paused for an answer, and then he said, again, "I could run up and give you the details."

"Yeah," Joe said, heavily. "Yeah. Come ahead." He let the phone fall to the desk and lie there, not even hearing the buzz of the dial tone as Farrows hung up. He was sitting there like that, studying Tommy's picture, when the reporter opened the door.

"Sorry, Mr. Mallet," Farrows said. He was a young man, maybe five years older than Tommy, with light blond hair and clear eyes. He sounded as if he meant he was sorry.

Big Joe motioned him to a chair. "You had some details," he said, wearily. "I

guess I'd like to know how it happened."

"Right," Farrows said. "He'd been assigned to the gun crew of the *Carbineer,* a freighter sailing from Brazil. A sub caught them and ordered them to abandon ship. Lieutenant Mallet had just the one gun at the stern, but he put up a fight. The sub sent two torpedoes into the *Carbineer* and then shelled her. His gun was outranged so he didn't have a chance, but the survivors are pretty sure he scored a hit. The sub pulled away without diving and a few hours later a naval patrol plane sank a surfaced sub with light bombs. If it was the same one, it means Lieutenant Mallet managed to cripple it."

"He could shoot," Big Joe said. "He always could shoot." He nodded slowly, studying Tommy's picture. "What were they carrying?" he asked. "The freighter, I mean. Guns?"

The reporter shrugged. "Not guns, Mallet. Not from Brazil. They don't tell you the cargo. But you can guess, pretty easily. My guess would be coffee."

Big Joe's hands jerked. His heavy jaw hung slack and the word seemed to choke in his throat. "Coffee?" he said. He used the word as if it were new to him.

Farrows nodded. "That's a guess," he admitted. "But it's a good one, I think. That's one of our big imports from Brazil."

"No," Joe said. "Oh, no. Tommy ain't crazy. He'd never let them kill him for a lousy load of coffee."

"It was the ship," Farrows explained. "Protecting it was his job. It was bringing in something we're short of—and he did what had to be done." He looked at Big Joe a moment, then reached for his hat.

"Well," he said. "I'm sorry, Mallet. That's all I have on it."

"Sit down," Joe said, roughly. He got up and lumbered to the window, staring down into the street. He stood there like that until his brain stopped reeling—until he'd figured it all out for himself.

Until he'd seen his son fighting it out with a guy like Max—instead of running away like the trucker had done.

His head rocked slowly. When he turned back to the reporter, his face was a tightly drawn mask.

"I'm gonna give you a scoop, kid," he said, spacing his words carefully. "It's a confession, sort of. The story of how a guy sent out a torpedo to kill his own son. . . ."

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FARROWS was hardly out of the office when Max and Willy came in. Max was smiling softly to himself, but Willy's dull face was twisted to a frown. Neither of them noticed the change in Big Joe. They were too full of themselves.

"Well, we got it," Willy said. "We got the liquor."

Joe stared at them wearily. "You boys have to blow," he said. "I'm taking the rap on this alone. I told him I planned it, and I carried it out. So you boys can scram. Our racket is over."

Willy said, "Huh? What do you mean?" Max didn't say anything. His right hand dropped to his pocket, but he didn't say anything.

Joe told them what he meant. He'd confessed the hi-jacking to Farrows—he'd even signed the reporter's notes. He'd told him he'd done it alone, and he'd told him where the stuff was hidden. He'd busted the thing wide open, but he was taking the rap himself. They could scram.

But they didn't scram. They stood there, staring at him for a minute, and then Max looked at Willy. "I'll handle the reporter," he said, softly. "You watch Joe while I'm gone." He went out of the room on soft cat feet, the hand in his pocket shaking a little.

"What's he up to?" Joe demanded. He looked at Willy, but Willy didn't answer him. "What's the matter?" Joe asked. "I'm coverin' you guys. And I'll give you some cash to make up for what they find in the warehouse. This is all my idea, see? You don't have to worry. I'll cover you both."

Willy said slowly, "You can't do it, Boss. You don't know how it is. We ran into trouble."

"Trouble?" Joe repeated. An uneasy feeling needled his spine.

"Yeah," Willy said. "Max killed a guy."

Joe stared at him blankly. "Killed a guy?" he said. It didn't register with him.

Then the shock of it hit him and he thought: First Tommy—now somebody else; that proves it. That proves I was right.

His huge body quivered like a blast-shaken boulder. His words thundered in the room. "I told him not to pull that. I told you to watch him, Willy. I told you to watch him."

"What you told us don't matter now," Willy said. He'd just remembered Big Joe wasn't the boss any more. "What you told us didn't do no good. It's done. But Max'll take care of it."

"He can't," Joe said. "Not any more, he can't. I already gave Farrows the dope. If it's a murder, the police'll follow this through. Max can get ready to burn.

Willy forgot again that Joe was no longer the boss. "At the boathouse," he said. He remembered, suddenly, that Max had said to watch Mallet. "You'd better stay here," he said, nervously. "You'd better wait'll Max gets back." His hand inched towards his pocket.

"Sure," Big Joe said. "Sure." His arm came out like a rope swung from a ship and he caught Willy's shoulder. He lifted the man from the floor, twisting the shoulder until Willy's gun hand came into view and then he rapped the side of his head with his mallet-sized hand, cracking it as gently as you break an egg. He lowered Willy slowly to the floor and then he turned heavily and lumbered from the office.

If it's murder, they won't stop with me when Farrows spills his story."

"*If,*" Willy said. "You mean if, Joe. Farrows won't talk."

"No," Joe said. "He'll just burn up the wires. He's probably in his office already."

"No," Willy said, queerly. "He ain't in his office."

Joe said, "He left . . ." and then he stopped saying it. "You got him?" he said, heavily. "Before you came in here, you got him. Is that what you mean?"

Willy nodded wisely. "We saw him coming out," he explained. "Max got suspicious. He didn't like a reporter hanging around. He thought he might have told you something—or you him. He had the boys pick him up. So he's safe."

"Yeah," Joe said. "He's safe. That's good. I wouldn't want Max to burn." His eyes closed a little and his big head shook. That's fine," he said. He started across the room towards Willy, his huge arms swinging like cables. "Where's he got him?" he asked, quietly. "Where did Max send him?"

HE WAS in the cab, on the way to the docks, before he remembered he'd forgotten a gun. There wasn't time to go back. Joe clenched his huge hands fiercely. When a snake has already rattled, it's too late to start hunting a weapon. You use what you have.

He left the cab at the edge of the wharf and pounded towards the boathouse, the rotten boards sagging under his weight. He flung the heavy door wide and stormed into the building, stopping in the center, like a baffled bull. The boathouse was empty.

He's moved him, Joe thought. *Max has taken him someplace else for the kill. I've got to figure where.*

The thing was, he couldn't figure where. He knew that. There were dozens of places, and by the time Joe had sorted them out, Farrows would be dead. He stood there for a moment, shaking like a bull pawing the ring, and then he heard a board creak over his head and remembered the attic. Max would be in the attic.

He went up the ladder clumsily, his big bulk overflowing it, his hands smothered

the spokes. His shoulders burst the flimsy trap door from its hinges. He was through the door, on his feet in the attic, before he saw Max and Farrows at the rear.

The reporter's hands were hanging loosely at his sides—he was groggy, helpless. His coat had been ripped from his back and his shirt was open at the chest. Max stood beside him, smiling. Big Joe could imagine the rest. Max had a knife in his hand.

"Max!" Joe snapped. "Max, listen."

Max didn't move. He'd heard Joe climbing the ladder and he'd seen him burst through the door—but he had his knife ready. He wasn't worried about Joe. There was harsh laughter in his voice.

"The boy lost his notes, Joe," he said. "The notes on your confession, that you signed for him. And he won't tell me where he lost them."

"Max!" Joe said, again. He was trying to jar him out of it with his voice. He knew now that Max was worse than he'd figured.

"I'm busy," Max said. "Don't bother me, Joe. I'm in conference." His bright little eyes were on Farrows, but Joe knew he was watching him, too. If Joe had had a gun, Max could probably have killed him before he could reach it. But Max wanted him closer, so he could get the knife in easily. As long as Joe kept moving forward, without reaching for a gun, Max wouldn't make his move.

Farrows twisted his body, swinging towards Joe. His voice was a horrible croak. "He's crazy, Mallet," he said. "Why doesn't he finish it?"

"We're in conference," Max said, softly. "We've got business to settle. Where are the notes?"

"Lost," Farrows screamed. "I tell you I lost them!"

Joe lumbered forward. "Max," he said, quietly. "Listen, Max." His legs felt like water-soaked logs and his arms hung like weights. His forehead was soaking with sweat. "I told you no killing. And there's been two killed already.

"Two?" Max said.

Joe nodded heavily. He didn't bother to explain. There was no use trying to tell Max about how he felt about Tommy's being killed. He concentrated on the business at hand. He'd thought he could get within range of Max and take the knife away from him, but he knew now that that was a laugh. You don't take knives away from people like Max; not if they're expecting it, you don't. He couldn't do a thing. If he tried to grab Max, Max would kill him.

Max read his mind. "That's right," he said. "Play nice, Joe. You don't want to get hurt."

"No," Joe said. "I don't want to get hurt." He pushed his legs like pistons as he dove forward.

He saw the shocked fear on Max's face as he came at him, and then he saw the flash of he knife and felt the steel bite into his chest. He didn't even feel the pain.

His heavy hands caught Max's shoulders and he raised the man, slamming him back against the wall. He slammed him twice, and then his hands grew weak and Max fell to the floor, his broken neck twisted at an angle. Joe stood there, staring at him, until his own knees buckled under him and he sat down on the floor. He was sitting there like that when Farrows finally managed to lurch over to him.

"He stung me," Big Joe said, wonderingly. "Can you tie it? He just stung me." His big head fell forward, jarring the hilt of the knife, and his eyes closed slowly. "That's all." He was dead before he knew he was dying.

Slowly Farrows buttoned his shirt, put on his torn coat. He made his way down the rickety ladder painfully. There was a phone in a boathouse and he picked it up and dialed.

"Yeah, chief," he said into it then. "Your dope was right—the old man had a story, all right. Only—well, getting him to tell it wasn't too hard, except where I had to make him believe that destroyer picked up the kid dead—he claimed the kid could swim, and he was right. It's going to be kind of tough. . . ."

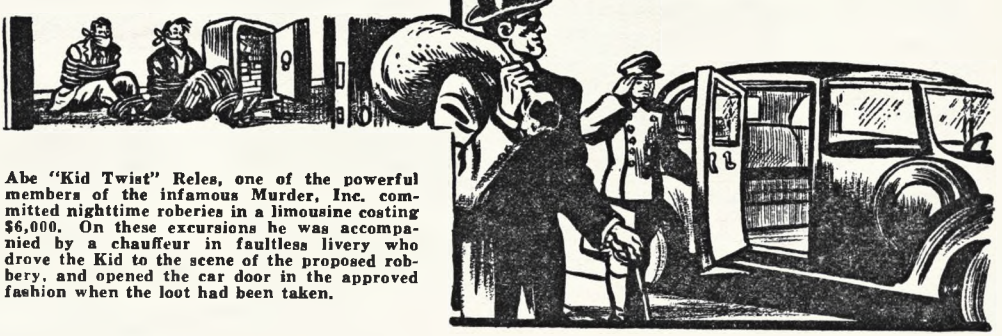
He told what had happened; then listened a while, and a queer look spread over his battered face. "Huh?" he said. "His wounds, eh? Well—then they can talk it over by themselves."

ODDITIES IN CRIME

A bartender was found murdered early one morning. Beside him on the floor was an ordinary smoking pipe, which was taken by the Police and examined under the microscope. The under-side of the pipe-stem proved to be rough and the upper-side smooth. The Police reasoned that the owner had artificial upper-teeth which prevented him from bearing down on the upper surface of the stem. All the customers of the bar who had artificial upper-teeth were examined, and suspicion centered upon one man. Later examinations by microphotography brought to light two letters scratched on the bowl of the pipe. They proved to be the first and last letters of the suspect's name. He confessed to the crime.

Color-association has a definite psychology to it, and it is this factor which police employ in the Mirror Confession Chamber, a room with walls and ceiling that are mirrors. The suspect sits in the middle of the room and is questioned by an unseen examiner who watches through an aperture in the walls. Lights are focused on the suspect, and without his knowledge are gradually turned to green. The suspect, unaware of the gradual change in light, sees only his sickly, greenish tinged face staring back at him guiltily from the walls. If he is neurotic or weak-minded, and the chamber is used most often on this type of person, he imagines his complexion has testified to his guilt, and confesses all.

An infallible test for bloodstains is the application of benzidine and hydrogen peroxide, which will instantly turn the hemoglobin or coloring matter of the blood a deep-blue. If the bloodstain is old, it is necessary to moisten it first with pyridine before applying the other two chemicals. This test is so extremely sensitive that it will expose blood clots on mummies that have been embalmed for 5,000 years.



Abe "Kid Twist" Reles, one of the powerful members of the infamous Murder, Inc. committed nighttime roberies in a limousine costing $6,000. On these excursions he was accompanied by a chauffeur in faultless livery who drove the Kid to the scene of the proposed robbery, and opened the car door in the approved fashion when the loot had been taken.

The dead man who stayed out late needed no alibi—even his jealous wife admitted that—but everyone else he had ever known did, while the cringing killer led Prof. Mephisto down a dark and devious trail—to one he had called a friend!

THE METICULOUS MURDERER

A Prof. Mephisto Novelette

By MEL WATT

Mulcahy was skillfully inching into the doorway while he talked.

CHAPTER ONE

Death Needs No Alibi

PROFESSOR JONATHAN TACK, instructor in abnormal psychology in the Crime Lab at Central University, never had liked telephones. The evening this particular call came, Tack and his wife Clara and Larry Rhodes, who lived a couple of houses down the block, were sitting around engaged in the intellectual pursuit of indoor target shooting.

Clara loaded the spring-gun with a "bullet" made of a stick with a rubber suction cap at one end, stretched her slim legs out in front of her, cocked her blonde head to one side, took casual aim, and knocked a cardboard effigy of Mickey Mouse off the rack.

"Nothing to it, boys," she drawled. "Any time you want lessons. . . ."

She twirled the gun by the trigger guard, and flipped it to her lanky husband, hitting him on the knee. He let out a

howl and the leg jerked wildly in the air. He shot her a smile poisoned with forgiveness, and assured her: "That's all right, pet, I don't mind wearing a crutch."

Larry Rhodes said. "This is getting monotonous. No woman has a right to be that good. I'd hate to have her after me. Or would I?"

He was a big blond fellow, a spoiled playboy, with a goodlooking but immature face, a pair of staring light-gray eyes, and a satyr's grin that made young girls shiver and the more experienced women smile.

Clara's inviting mouth twitched with amusement. She was that rare specimen: a lovely woman with a sense of humor. She began to sing lightly: "Oh, the daring young Rhodes on the flying trapeze—"

Larry reddened a little and Tack chuckled. His lean deadpan face looked a bit satanic when he did that. His black hair, worn bare at the temples, added to the effect—his pupils called him "Prof Mephisto."

He spoke with a dry solemn drawl, "She's always acting like that. I'm only keeping her till she gets a bit frayed around the edges, say about forty, then I'm going to trade her for two twenties."

It was at this moment that the phone rang.

"Telephone," Clara said, not moving.

"Wrong number," Tack said.

Clara sighed, and got up. "Man's work ends with the setting sun, but woman's work is never done. Marry a lazy man, and keep thin. I'm wearing away to a shadow."

"If the phone's too heavy," Tack offered, "I'll—"

"Hello," Clara said into the phone. Her quick smile faded as the voice at the other end talked on. An expression that was partly amused, partly concerned, came over her face. "Yes . . . yes . . . oh, I wouldn't worry, Marian. He probably just doesn't want to be disturbed. Yes . . . yes, of course . . . if it'll relieve your mind, we'll be glad to. Right away. Goodbye."

She replaced the phone, and turned to her husband.

"It's Marian Innes. She's in a dither about Jim. He went back to the office after supper, and he's supposed to be home hours ago. She can't get him on the phone, and he's got their car. She asked us to run her down to the office."

Tack looked gloomy. "I wish I were far away on a desert island, with no frantic females who make mountains out of molehills. The poor guy just probably stepped out for a drink, and met a pal."

Clara sniffed. "Then he's no gentleman. A gentleman should always inform his wife before going out on a bender." Her expression became more serious. "She really is pretty upset."

LARRY RHODES looked from one to the other of them, then stood up and flipped them a farewell. "Good hunting," he said, with a vacuous grin. "Trailing strayed spouses is hardly my idea of a terrific evening. Be seeing you."

Tack got out his car, and he and Clara drove down to the house at the end of the block, where Marian Innes was waiting for them. Marian's pale, fading prettiness was paler than usual, and her thin face was stiff from tension.

"I know this is an imposition," she apologized timidly. "But I can't understand . . . it's not like him. . . ."

Clara and Tack tried to reassure her, but she went on, "It's not like him." Her voice trembled a little. "At least, he has never before . . . he likes a drink, but he's never stayed out . . . if he'd just called me . . . it gives me the strangest feeling. . . ." Her words ran out, and stopped.

Tack sighed softly. "All right—hop in."

When they got within half a block of the office building, Marian craned her neck out the window, and suddenly cried out excitedly: "His light's on! See? On the fifth floor!" Relief eased her tense voice, and she laughed shakily. "Why on earth couldn't he have answered, even if he was busy? Just wait till I get my hands on him!"

Tack drove into the parking area behind the building, and they walked around into the small lobby. It was an old, small building, and there was no signing in and out. They got into the self-operating elevator, and Tack pushed the fifth floor button.

When they emerged, Marian led the way. Her thin back looked stiff and un-

compromising. Tack nudged Clara and whispered out of the corner of his mouth: "Looks like an all-out frontal attack. When the shooting starts, find your own foxhole."

Marian was well up ahead, and she scarcely paused to turn the knob and sweep right through a door marked: *Innes & Stanton, Investments.* It didn't seem to occur to her, but it occurred to Tack that a man was a bit foolish to leave an office door unlocked while working late at night.

The thought was cut short by Marian's shrill cry: "Jim!"

Tack and Clara paused for the space of a second to glance at each other. Clara whispered: "What on earth!"

They hurried into the office. Marian Innes was standing by a desk, her body as stiff as a statue, her hands clenched by her sides, her eyes fixed and staring, but every muscle in her deadwhite face quivering uncontrollably.

Seated in the chair before the desk was her husband. The upper part of him was lying on the desktop, his arms stretched out ahead. The left side of his broad face was resting against a blotter. Near his right arm stood a glass, with a little amber liquid still in the bottom of it.

THE moment of shocked silence was shattered by Marian Innes. The words broke out of her like glass splintering: "He's cold. I touched him—and he's cold."

She was staring dazedly into space. Her thin mouth suddenly curved into a line of dreadful mirth. Little sounds issued from her throat, starting as low sobs and rising to witless giggles. It was infinitely more horrifying than the body on the desk.

The horror of it was in Clara's white face as she pleaded with her husband: "Jonathan! Do something!"

Tack had already moved. It was brutal treatment, but it was the only quick way to save Marian Innes from complete hysterical collapse, and perhaps save her mind. He slapped her sharply across the face.

She stared at him with surprise, and put her hand to her red-streaked face like a hurt little girl. She became aware again of the body on the desk, and said drearily: "He's dead, you know." Then she gave a tired little sigh, and fainted.

Tack caught her as she fell. There was no place to lay her flat on her back except the floor. He lowered her gently, and Clara knelt beside her and began rubbing her wrists. Tack got a paper cupful of water from the cooler and handed it down to Clara.

"She'll be okay, just keep working on her. I want to look around."

He walked slowly around the desk, his gaze taking in everything. He bent over the glass on the desk, and sniffed at it. He looked into it closely, and frowned.

"Jonathan." The subdued, little-girl voice was, surprisingly, his wife's. He said: "Yes?"

"Is he . . . is he really cold?"

Tack made his voice casual: "Uh-huh. Dead several hours."

"How . . . how awful for her!"

"Tend to your knitting, pal."

He had stopped beside the wastebasket. He knelt to look closer. When he rose, he stood gazing at the body for a full minute, as if seeing a picture. A picture he didn't like.

"Jonathan." Clara's tone was sharper this time.

"Yes?"

"This water doesn't seem to be doing much good. Isn't that whisky in that glass on the desk?"

"Uh-huh."

"Well, for heaven's sake!" Clara exploded. "Bring it here!"

"Can't. It's got veronal in it."

Clara gasped, and the paper cup fell from her hand. "V-veronal! But that's a sleeping powder, isn't it?"

"Uh-huh." Tack kept his voice casual without sounding flippant. "He took enough to sleep from now on."

Clara sat in shocked silence for several moments, then she lowered her white face into her hands. A weak whisper came through her fingers: "I think I'm going to be sick."

Tack had seen it coming and had stepped quickly to the water cooler. He came back with a cupful of water, and with his other hand took her by the back of her neck and pushed her head down to her knees and held it there for several moments. Then he straightened her up

and ordered her to drink the water. She did, and the sickly whiteness left her face.

She looked up at him with moist eyes and a weak smile and whispered: "Sorry."

Tack's face was grim, but he made his voice sound matter-of-fact: "These things are never pretty. But when you walk into them, you've got to see it through. Here, I'll help you bring her around, as soon as I make a phone call."

He went back to the desk, and picked up the phone with his handkerchief. He dialed a number, and when he got it, said: "Sergeant Mulcahy, please." He spoke briefly, and hung up. Then the two of them went to work on Marian Innes.

They finally brought her around just about the time Sergeant Mulcahy and his men arived. Tack explained quickly, in low tones, and the sergeant nodded.

"Clara," Tack said quietly, "take Marian home now. One of the sergeant's men will drive you. I'll be along after a bit."

CHAPTER TWO

Meticulous Murder

CLARA and an officer helped Marian from the room. Marian was too stricken to offer any resistance. She turned her dazed eyes once towards the desk, but Tack's body blocked her view.

When they were gone, Sergeant Mulcahy snapped out of his silence. He gave Tack a wide Irish grin and rumbled amiably: "Ye're a sight fer sore eyes, perfessor. Even if it does take a stiff to bring us together." A fine sensibility was not one of the sergeant's strong points; he claimed policemen couldn't afford it. Mulcahy wasn't tall, but he was broad and beefy, giving him the appearance of bigness. His face was the map of Ireland, but behind it was a hard-working, shrewd brain. Having worked with him on several cases, Tack knew the sergeant.

Mulcahy squinted at the body. "Poison, is it, now? And how did ye know?"

Tack walked around the desk, and pointed at the wastebasket. The sergeant followed him and looked down and saw a small tin box lying open on top of the papers. He knelt and picked it up with a handkerchief, and laid it on the desktop. Traces of a white crystalline powder clung to the inside of the tin. On the lid was a label, upon which was typed: Veronal.

Tack pointed at the glass on the desk, and said: "He took it in a glass of whisky."

Mulcahy looked pained, and opined: "'Tis a shameful way to treat good liquor." Then he looked around guiltily, cleared his throat, and said soberly: "'Tis a sad business. I wonder why he done it?"

Tack said: "They're usually trying to run away from something that's got beyond them."

The sergeant peered closely at Tack, and said: "Yeah." He picked up the phone and said: "I better call the partner, Stanton. What's his number?"

Tack looked it up in the directory, and Mulcahy made the call. He talked briefly, carefully omitting any mention of the dead man.

He was replacing the phone, when the medical examiner came in. He was a big strutting man devoted to large muscles and strenuous exercise, and wore a persistent look of disapproval for the less vigorous bulk of the human race.

His examination was brief, and routine. He asked Mulcahy if he wanted an autopsy, but the sergeant shook his head in the negative. The M. E. glared at tin box, glass, and body, and said with disgust: "Suicides! Cowards—every single one of them."

Tack drawled mildly: "Don't kid yourself, doctor. It takes nerve to rub yourself out." He grinned with just a hint of malice. "Try it yourself sometime and you'll see."

The M. E. reddened at the grins and chuckles around him. He left the room snorting: "Rot!"

Mulcahy called after him: "Hey! How long would you say this guy's been dead?"

"Can't say with any certainty," the M. E. snapped peevishly. "Three-four hours. What difference does it make! He's a suicide, isn't he?"

Mulcahy made a noise with his lips, and said: "I wouldn't let him doctor me horse, if I had a horse."

Tack grinned. "Most doctors aren't like him."

"Praise be!" the sergeant said. "One of his kind is one too many."

THE M. E. hadn't been gone five minutes when the elevator door clanged again, and heavy footsteps hurried along the corridor. The door burst open and a short stocky man spoke breathlessly to the policeman just inside the door.

"I'm George Stanton! I was called. . . ."

His round little eyes saw the body at the desk, and they almost popped out. His round pink face sagged.

The sergeant let Tack explain. Stanton's small pale-blue eyes remained wide and staring, and he shook his bald head as if in a daze.

"But I can't believe it! Jim! Why would he do a terrible thing like this?"

lar-alarm bell on the outside of the building. Anybody tampering with the safe, without knowing the combination, sets off the bell." Stanton forced a thin smile at the sergeant, and added: "There's a police station two blocks east. The criminals wouldn't get far."

He stared again at the body. "I can't believe it! I had no idea . . . when I left, he showed no signs . . . I've been away for a week in Washington. This is terrible! Terrible!"

He sank into a chair and drew trembling hands across his face.

"Hey, sarge, looka here."

The request came from one of Mulcahy's men who unobtrusively had given

"He musta had a reason," Mulcahy said slowly. "It mighta been a business reason. I guess you better make a check-up."

Stanton looked as if he had been clubbed.

"Jim Innes would never. . . ." Fear broke over his round face. "Yes. Yes, I'll check, of course. But it won't be possible until tomorrow. We seldom keep much in our safe here. Sometimes some registered securities that a customer is going to call for early. Sometimes a few negotiables that we're going to use as collateral in a deal."

He went to a safe built into the wall and opened it. Tack noted that he did not pause to recall or look up the combination. He said: "There's nothing here now," and shut the safe again.

Tack remarked casually: "Seems to me you'd need a pretty stout safe in this building. It's a rather easy building to enter."

Stanton looked at him sharply, and replied with strained impatience, as if Tack had interrupted needlessly:

"Best on the market. And it's connected by electrical contact with the burg-

the small tin box a dusting of powder. When the sergeant came over, the man said: "Seemed to me pretty shiny for a metal box this stiff had handled. See there? It ain't got any prints on it."

Tack stepped quickly to the sergeant's side and they both looked closely at the box. The surfaces were as clean of marks as polished metal. The two men gazed at each other as if someone had dashed cold water in their faces.

Mulcahy said gruffly: "Why the divil would he bother to wipe his fingerprints off?"

Nobody spoke. The sergeant looked at Tack, and said gloomily: " 'Tis a horse of another color, this."

"A horse of quite another color," Tack said, quietly. "A black horse, let's say, and its name is murder."

"Murder!" The cry came from Stanton. He was sitting up rigidly in his chair. His little round eyes were panic-stricken. "That's ridiculous! This other thing is bad enough. But murder! You're crazy!"

Tack shrugged. "Facts are tough things to get around. And that unsmudged tin box is a fact. It doesn't make sense—not with a suicide."

IT WAS an early hour in the morning when Tack got home. Clara had stayed with Marian Innes. He got into bed, but he didn't sleep. One thing was obvious: if Jim Innes had been given poison, it had been given to him by someone he trusted, or at least had no reason to mistrust. He and his murderer must have had a drink together, and afterwards the murderer cleaned his glass and put it back in the desk drawer, where the sergeant's men had found two clean glasses and a half-full whisky bottle. The only prints on the bottle were Innes's. The only prints on the glass on the desktop were likewise Innes's. That left only one thin thread—the tin box—on which to hang murder. But Tack knew that many murderers had been hanged on less.

In the morning, after he had dressed and made himself some coffee, he phoned Clara to see if everything was all right. Clara told him it was, but that she would stay with Marian a little longer. She asked questions, but Tack told her little, saying only that things were in Mulcahy's hands.

"Stanton's making a check-up of the business this morning," he said. "Don't say anything to Marian yet. I'm going down to see Mulcahy."

As he was leaving, Larry Rhodes showed up. His solemn face looked almost mature.

"You really ran into something last night, didn't you!" he said, awesomely. "I saw Clara on Innes's porch, and she told me. She wouldn't say much, though. What happened? His heart, or something?"

"Uh-huh, his heart stopped," said Tack, laconically.

Rhodes looked crestfallen, then something of his blasé manner returned. "Aw, come on, prof, give out!" he said peevishly. "Nobody ever lets me in on anything. Look, I'm a big boy now!"

"You might let yourself in on Marian and Clara," Tack suggested. "Maybe they have some errands to run. There's nothing like a handy man around the house."

At police headquarters he found the sergeant looking sleepy and doleful. Mulcahy's elbows were on the desk, and his big fists propped up his beefy face.

"You look like a picture of all-is-lost," Tack said. "Hasn't Stanton called yet?"

"He's comin' down here as soon as he's checked up," Mulcahy droned. He sighed loudly. "I ain't had a wink of sleep. Me wife, she's a very peculiar woman. I git home in the wee hours of the mornin', and she's mad as a wet hen. Does she let me git some sleep and rest me weary body? She does not! She spends the rest of the night givin' me hell. 'Why don't ye git a dacent job so's we can live like other people?' she says. 'A dacent job indeed!' I says, 'and what's wrong with me career in the department, me that's gonna be a lootenant one of them days?' Then she's off again." Then he said glumly, as an afterthought: "We checked Stanton. He come in on the seven o'clock plane last night."

The amusement left Tack's face. "Seven o'clock! That would be about the time Jim Innes went back to the office."

"Yeah," Mulcahy said sleepily, with his eyes closed. "Yeah."

IT WAS about an hour before noon when Stanton showed up. His face looked sick from fear and worry. He wasted no words. He tried to keep his voice down, but it was high-pitched with tension.

"There's twenty-five thousand dollars in negotiable stocks missing and unaccounted for," he told them.

Mulcahy and Tack gazed at him, saying nothing. His eyes darted nervously from one to the other, and he spoke jerkily: "Nobody but Jim and I had access to the stuff. There is only one possible answer. He must have got into a desperate spot, borrowed the stocks for collateral to try to recoup, and lost. Then, in despair, he took his life."

Tack said quietly: "There's still the hard fact of the tin box with the prints wiped off."

"I hear," Mulcahy said softly, "ye got back last night on the seven o'clock plane."

Stanton froze. He stared, pop-eyed, at the sergeant for a full dozen seconds.

"I see," he said, thickly. "You think I might have had something to do with this." His voice rose shrilly: "Are you hinting that I killed Jim Innes? Why in heaven's name would I? I'm not in a financial spot! I don't need money!"

"Why," Tack asked quietly, "if Innes needed money, couldn't he have asked you for it?"

Stanton swung his arms wildly. "How should I know? I suppose he couldn't stand the shame. Jim was proud."

"From what I know of him," Tack said, "he didn't seem the sort of man who would toss money around."

"He wasn't," Stanton said quickly, "until the past year. He got himself involved. . . ." Stanton looked suddenly startled, and his lips closed tight.

"Better keep talkin'," Mulcahy warned quietly. "Better tell it all. Ye're in a spot, y'know."

Stanton looked beaten, and spoke wearily: "I suppose so. He got himself involved with a woman."

Tack said coldly: "Stanton, I think you're lying."

Stanton sat up and showed fight. "I'm not lying! You put me in a spot and told me to tell all I knew, and that's what I'm doing!" His voice dropped but he went on hastily: "Don't get me wrong. This wasn't a cheap affair with Jim. He was really in love with this woman. He wanted to marry her, but he couldn't bring himself to divorce his wife. He was that sort. He and his wife had never really been in love, but she was so helpless and dependent on him that he didn't have the heart to cut loose from her. Jim was softhearted and emotional. This other woman —you couldn't really blame him for that. It was just one of those things that happen, and there isn't much you can do about it."

Mulcahy asked: "Did his wife know?"

Stanton shook his head slowly. "I don't know. Probably she suspected." He smiled faintly. "I understand wives have an intuition about such things. I wouldn't know; I'm a bachelor."

Tack asked, shortly: "How does it happen you know so much about this thing?"

Stanton looked at him and said evenly: "Jim Innes and I were partners for fifteen years; partners and friends. We didn't have many secrets from each other."

"This other woman," Mulcahy said. "What's her name? Where is she?"

Stanton started to protest: "I'd rather not. . . ."

"I think ye'd better," Mulcahy said mildly. "We'll find out anyways. It's better if you play along with us."

CHAPTER THREE

Man-Trap

STANTON looked down, and said reluctantly: "Anna Belden. Fairview Apartments." He was silent for a few moments, as if he felt ashamed. Then he raised his eyes, and pleaded: "Can you keep this quiet for a little while? Just give me time enough to replace these stocks, with my own money. I want to save the business. It's my whole life."

Mulcahy let him go, but told him he'd have to be within call at any time. When he had gone, the sergeant gave a low whistle.

"Now what do ye make of that? A man wouldn't be likely to kill a partner to cover up his theft of stocks, and then go out and buy the stuff back. Now would he?"

Tack looked thoughtful. "Perhaps not—if money were the only motive."

Mulcahy frowned. "This woman angle now. What do ye think of it?"

"I don't know yet," Tack said slowly. "I'm beginning to feel like hell. I know all these people. And this thing is getting messy."

Mulcahy said hopefully: "Mebbe it was suicide after all, in spite of everything. That'd be the simplest solution."

Tack's lean face was grim. "Yes, that would be the simplest solution. But I still see a little tin box with no prints on it. He'd be bound to leave some sort of mark on it—and why should a suicide wipe it clean? No, sergeant, I still believe it was murder."

Mulcahy still frowned, and he spoke in a puzzled tone with a trace of skepticism in it: "That tin box now—it seems like a dumb thing for any murderer to do, when he fixed everything else up so slick."

This was familiar ground to Tack. "The result of preoccupation, sergeant," he said.

"Meanin' what?"

Tack's sober face broke into a grin. "I didn't mean to talk like a comic-strip professor, sergeant. But it might help to

sketch a picture of the murderer's state of mind. He's just murdered a man. He's not scared, but he's tense. His mind is concentrating on just one thing: get rid of any telltale fingerprints. Do it quickly, and get out of there. So he uses his handkerchief to wipe the arms of the chair he's been sitting in; wipe any part of the desk he has touched; wipe the glass he's been drinking out of and put it back in the desk drawer—and, in his single-track preoccupation, wipe the tin box and drop it into the wastebasket. Anything that had his prints on it, including the tin box."

Mulcahy was nodding slowly. "Yeah. Sounds reasonable, when you tell it." He sighed loudly, and his sleepy eyes were closed as he droned: "I read in a book once where it said poison was a woman's weapon."

Tack's face was pale. "Don't believe all you read."

A MAN came in and handed a paper to the sergeant. It was the autopsy report on Jim Innes, which Mulcahy had ordered after the discovery about the tin box. It merely corroborated what they knew.

Mulcahy heaved himself from the desk with the resigned look of a martyr.

"And I thought I had a nice simple suicide on me hands," he grumbled. "I should be on me back instead of on me feet. But I suppose I gotta go check on this woman Innes was runnin' around with. You comin' along?"

Tack shook his head. "Not this trip, sergeant. If you don't mind, I'd like to do a little exploring of my own."

The sergeant looked long and hard at Tack. Tack grinned faintly, and reassured Mulcahy: "No, sergeant, I'm not going to do anything the law wouldn't approve of. I don't like murder—no matter who did it."

Tack had a definite objective in mind, as he set out for the Innes & Stanton office. When he got there, he found the only occupant to be a thin and nervous brunette tapping a typewriter.

He said, politely: "I represent the Summit Insurance Company. I'd like to ask you one or two questions regarding Mr. James Innes. . . ."

The nervous brunette hastened to explain: "Oh, I'm sorry. I'm—I'm just a substitute. Miss Hollis is the regular secretary. I—I just sub for her sometimes, when she's sick." The girl ran her tongue over dry lips. "W-when she got here this morning and Mr. Stanton told her about—about Mr. Innes, I guess she fainted and had to be taken home."

"I see," Tack said. "Can you give me her address?" The girl looked it up and gave it to him.

At the Buckingham Arms, an old and massive building of one and two-room apartments that fell somewhat short of its elegant name, he pressed the buzzer of a mailbox with the name: Miss Eileen Hollis. When a feminine voice answered through the speaking-tube, he explained politely that he represented the Summit Insurance Company, which held a life insurance policy on Mr. James Innes, and he would take only a few minutes of her time if she would be so kind. There was a brief interval before he heard the click of the entrance door-lock being released.

Eileen Hollis lived on the second floor: 224. When she opened the door to him, she was trying to appear very contained and impersonal, but she didn't quite succeed in veiling the fright in her eyes. Normally, Tack thought, her face would be somewhat arrogant. Just now, she looked pale and nervous. She was a tall brunette, with striking dark eyes.

Tack gave her a sympathetic smile. "I hate to bother you, Miss Hollis. I know what a shock a thing like this is. But it's rather urgent, and I thought perhaps you could give me some information."

She looked at him puzzledly. "What sort of information?"

"Just general observation. Yesterday, for instance. Did Mr. Innes seem to act strangely? Did he seem extremely nervous, depressed, anything at all you noticed?"

SHE frowned thoughtfully for several moments, then said: "Not particularly. He was often nervous and depressed. The investment business is rather difficult these days, you know."

"Then," Tack pressed, "you wouldn't say it was anything very unusual?"

Some of the arrogance came back to her face and she spoke with studied sarcasm:

"If you're trying to ask me if Mr. Innes looked in a suicidal mood, I wouldn't know. I'm not familiar with suicidal moods."

Tack smiled. "Of course not." Purposely making it vague, he added: "We just like to be certain."

She looked puzzled again, and spoke with some impatience: "I can't see any purpose in your questions. When Mr. Stanton told me about it, he said it was plainly suicide."

"But that's just the point, you see," Tack said smoothly. "Suicide isn't established. The police have good reason to suspect murder—and they are going to make a thorough investigation."

All arrogance and color drained from her face, leaving it stiff from shock.

"Murder!" she said weakly. For several moments she didn't seem to have the strength to say anything more. Then she drew a deep nervous breath, and expelled it with words of sharp protest: "I don't believe it! Those stupid police are just trying to be important and get publicity!"

She stared at him, and seemed to shrink before his manner of calm certainty. She said feebly: "But—how horrible!" Suddenly her body sagged in complete exhaustion and she looked as if she were going to be sick.

Tack sprang up. "Here! Let me get you something."

"No! No!" she protested weakly. "I'll be all right. If you'll just leave now. I can't stand any more shocks today. I'm—I'm not used to horrible things like this."

"I'm sorry," Tack said, sympathetically. "Lie down and rest, and try not to think of it too much. And thank you for seeing me. Goodbye, Miss Hollis."

He let himself out, and his footsteps echoed along the hard floor of the hall. At the stairhead he paused to light a cigaret, and listen. Then swiftly and softly he went back to the door of 224. He was in time to hear, faintly but unmistakably, the metallic click of a phone dial being spun. He caught the sound of urgency when she spoke, but the words were only a low jumble through the door, and he didn't wait for any more. He hurried back softly to the stairs and down.

There was no mask of sympathy on his face now. It was grim.

IN A CORNER of the apartment-house entryway was a door leading to the basement. He pushed the bell-button, marked "Janitor." It was some little time before he heard the slow clop-clop of feet on the cement steps. The janitor turned out to be a Swede named Klingelhuts. He looked rather like a blue-jay. A tuft of straw-colored hair stuck up from the top of his head. His face came out to a sharp-tipped nose; his chin receded into his shirt collar. He was bothered with rheumatism, and kept rubbing his legs.

He said: "Ya? You vant to rent apartment?" He said it in a tone of voice that hinted plainly he hoped Tack wanted no such thing.

Tack said: "Well, not exactly. . . ."

"You selling somet'ing maybe?" Mr. Klingelhuts cut in quickly. A happy look of relief spread over his face, and a smile split it from ear to ear. "Then ay can't let you in," he said cheerfully, "Salesmen-fellers and dogs ain't allowed."

Tack winced slightly, and thought this had better be nipped in the bud. He did something he resorted to very rarely: he took out his special police badge and showed it to the janitor. "Police," he said pleasantly, to make sure the janitor understood.

"Oh-h-h, my goodness!" Mr. Klingelhuts gasped, seeing prison staring him in the face. "Ay wass yoost goin' to haul all dat trash and yunk outa t' basement ven you ring t' bell. Ay ban so busy ay ain't had time. . . ."

Tack smiled patiently. "We'll give you a reprieve on the trash and junk," he said. "Have you a vacant apartment on the second floor? I don't want to rent it; I only want to use it for a few hours."

The janitor looked puzzled, but even more relieved. "Yaw, sure," he said quickly.

Tack said: "First I'd like to use your phone."

Tack left the basement door open, so that he could hear anyone leaving the building. He followed the janitor down and into a basement room which featured comfort rather than taste, and which stressed masculine indifference to dirt.

Tack called police headquarters, hoping Mulcahy had returned. The voice at

the other end said: "No, he isn't back yet . . . hey, wait a minute, he's coming in now." Presently the sergeant's voice answered. He was puffing.

Tack said: "I think I've got something, sergeant." He explained briefly his discovery, and his plan.

"I'll wait in the entryway," he told Mulcahy. "Bring a piece of soap-eraser with you."

"Soap-eraser?" Mulcahy made a feeble attempt at humor: "What you gonna do, perfessor, rub somebody out?"

Tack grinned. "No. Just cut up a bit."

The sergeant groaned. "Well, I hope this ain't another wildgoose chase. I feel like I'm on a Cook's tour of this town."

THE janitor's mouth had dropped open and his eyes looked ready to fall out. "Sa-a-ay!" he gulped, his adam's apple bobbing wildly, "you mean ve got a crook in dis place?"

Tack assured him soberly: "You find them in the best places in town."

He thought for a moment, and then called his home. Clara answered.

"I just got in a few minutes ago," she told him. "Marian got a phone call. Her sister's coming. She said she'd be all right."

"A phone call," Tack said, quietly, "I see. Well, I thought I'd better call you to tell you not to expect me till you see me."

"Playing detective again, eh?"

Tack grinned. "Uh-huh."

He hung up, and turned to the janitor. "Now if you'll show me the apartment, as soon as the sergeant gets here."

Mulcahy arrived about ten minutes later, grumbling: "I wisht I'd stood up to me old man. I niver wanted to be a cop anyways. 'Twas him that made me."

The janitor took them upstairs. There were two vacant apartments on the second floor. Tack chose the one nearest to Eileen Hollis's apartment and on the opposite side of the hall. He thanked the janitor; and the sergeant added the warning to keep his lip buttoned.

"Yaw, sure," Mr. Klingelhuts assured them, and he went away looking like secret agent X19.

The sergeant turned to Tack. "Here's your bit of soap eraser. What's it for?"

"Preparedness, sergeant," Tack smiled. He took out his pocket-knife and began carving the eraser. While he was doing this, he asked Mulcahy: "What luck did you have?"

"A wild-goose chase, like I said," Mulcahy said glumly. "The Belden woman left town two days ago. On a buyin' trip to New York. She runs a swell dress shop. We're checkin'."

Tack had trimmed the eraser down to a small oblong. He opened the door a few inches and tried to fit the oblong into the small aperture into which the springlock snapped when the door was closed. He trimmed it a little more, and this time it fitted perfectly.

"Well, now we got a jammed doorlock," Mulcahy said, with amiable sarcasm. "Are ye expectin' a visitor, and makin' it easy for him to git in?"

Tack grinned. "No, but I think Miss Hollis is, and this should make it easier for us to get in." He explained: "All the doorlocks are alike in these apartment buildings. At least, I know this one's the same as Miss Hollis's. I told you over the phone she was panic-stricken when she phoned someone. Either she'll go out to a rendezvous with that someone, or that someone will come here to her apartment. I rather think it will be here, because I don't think that someone would want her to go out, until they'd had a little talk."

"A hunch, is it?" Mulcahy asked, skeptically.

Tack took the bit of soap eraser from the aperture, and closed the door to within an inch of the jamb.

CHAPTER FOUR

Diller-Killer

HE LOOKED at Mulcahy and grinned. "In a pinch, sergeant, do you think you could act like an air-raid warden?"

"Who, me?" Mulcahy rumbled. "Soap erasers! Air-raid wardens! Now wait a minute, perfessor. . . ."

"I assure you there's method in my madness. Here's the picture: when and if Miss Hollis has a caller, I want you to rap on her door, explain you're the warden

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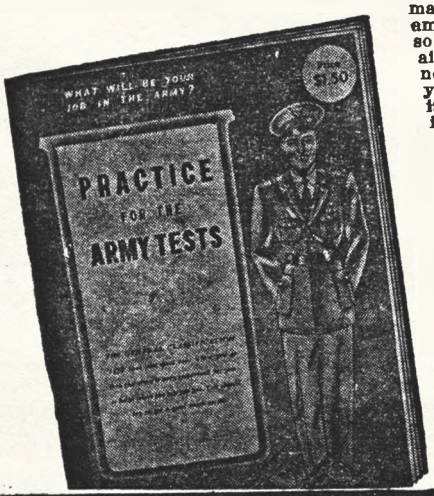

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for the building, and ask her if she's got the blackout curtains everyone's supposed to keep at hand. While you're doing this, I want you to slip this piece of soap eraser unobtrusively into the aperture in her door-jamb."

The light dawned on Mulcahy. "Oh, now I begin to git it!"

"I knew you would," said Tack. "We've got to be able to ease her door open a fraction of an inch, to hear what she and her caller are saying. You can't hear through a closed door; I tried. And I can't act as warden because she knows me."

"Okay," Mulcahy said. But immediately he followed it with a protest: "But we might be here all the rest of the day and night, and nothin' happens! Are ye sure now. . . ."

"I'm not sure of anything," Tack said. "That's the chance we have to take. But," he added, "I'll bet you my set of tires something will happen soon—and greater faith hath no man than that."

It happened even sooner than he expected; in less than an hour.

The sergeant was beginning to champ at the bit a little, and was grumbling because there was no place but the dusty floor for him to sit when Tack—who had looked around from his position at the door to grin at the sergeant—peered out again. And saw a figure standing before Eileen Hollis's door!

It was as sudden as that. The caller must have come up the stairs and along the hall very softly and swiftly. Tack stood for a moment as if he'd been struck by lightning. Then he said under his breath: "I'll be damned!"

The door of 224 opened. Tack caught a flash of Eileen Hollis's frightened face. The caller stepped inside and the door closed.

Mulcahy had heard Tack's soft exclamation and was at his side.

"A visitor, is it?"

Tack nodded. "We'd better give them a few minutes. Then it's your cue."

"Ye look kinda white around the gills," Mulcahy observed. "Did ye recognize the party?"

"Yes," said Tack, shortly. The sergeant didn't say anything more.

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THAT short wait was one of the longest they had ever undergone. Neither spoke, but both wondered what was happening, what was being said, inside apartment 224.

They waited ten minutes. Then Tack said, quietly: "Zero hour, sergeant."

Mulcahy nodded in agreement, and went went out. Tack watched him go along the hall to 224, and knock. There was a pause, then he heard the sergeant raise his voice as if in answer to a question called from just inside the door: "It's the air raid warden, Miss."

The door opened a few inches, and Eileen Hollis's pale face appeared.

Tack could hear the sergeant's rumbling voice plainly: "I'm just makin' a check-up, Miss. I have to make sure everybody's got the black curtains they were told to git. Have you got yours?"

Tack couldn't make out what the girl said, but she was shaking her head.

He caught Mulcahy's solemn rebuke: "I wouldn't put it off any longer, Miss. Better git it." Mulcahy was skillfully inching forward into the doorway all the time he was making talk. "Y'see, it's the law now, and pretty soon they're gonna start handing out fines." Mulcahy stretched a point.

The sergeant kept his glib Irish tongue going until he had accomplished his object. When he stopped talking, and stood listening to the girl, Tack knew Mulcahy had succeeded.

Eileen Hollis withdrew and the door closed.

Mulcahy returned to the empty apartment, grinned rather sheepishly at Tack, and said: "Okay, mastermind. It worked."

"Thanks to you," Tack reminded him. "Nice going, sergeant." Tension drew Tack's face tight, but he spoke calmly: "Let's go. And rub your rabbit's foot, if you have one."

They slipped out and along to the door of 224.

Tack glanced at the sergeant, who nodded to him to go ahead. He closed his hand over the doorknob and turned slowly. Then, very gently, he eased the door away from the jamb, a fraction of an inch at a time.

NOTHING happened. Tack put an ear close to the opening. For several moments he heard nothing, and wondered for a bad instant if they were standing in there silently watching the door. Then, abruptly, a voice spoke. Tack knew, from the direction, that it came from the other room of the two-room apartment; and he glanced at the sergeant and signified his relief.

Eileen Hollis's voice rose, and there was unmistakable panic in it: "You said there would be no trouble! You said the plan was foolproof. Foolproof! You're the fool! You've blundered somewhere!"

"That's enough of that! I didn't blunder. I wiped everything clean; attended to every detail. So come on, now, act your age. We'll get out of here and have some fun when it all blows over."

"Blows over! Blows over! It won't blow over! I tell you that insurance man was certain. The police know something, and they'll keep probing and hammering until someone breaks! I couldn't stand it! I can't stand it, now I tell you! They'll come and ask questions, never taking their eyes off me, getting more and more suspicious; then they'll take me down there . . .!"

The girl's voice broke, and she began to sob desperately.

For a full minute, there was a silence broken only by the sobs. But something ominous grew in the silence. Tack was keenly aware of it. His intuitive sense, sharpened by his nervous tension, warned him there had been a sudden change in that room; that something was about to happen. His body was as rigid as a rock.

The voice of Eileen Hollis's visitor mingled with her sobs. It was a cool voice now; almost casual.

"So you've lost your nerve completely," it said, evenly. "That's too bad. I'm disappointed in you. All ready to go to pieces and talk your head off the minute they say 'boo' at you! Yes, I think you would." Abruptly, the casual voice turned coldly vicious: "So I'll have to make damn sure you won't!"

There was a quick gasp, a low outcry suddenly choked off, and then no sound at all. The stillness was weird.

Tack glanced at Mulcahy. The sergeant

had his gun out, and he nodded. Tack pushed the door open, and they strode swiftly across the room to the doorway of the adjoining room.

Tack's cold eyes pinned the man who was in the act of strangling Eileen Hollis with the silk cord of her negligee, and he spoke quietly:

"All right, Rhodes. End of the line for you."

Mulcahy growled: "End of the line it is, for you, me murderin' bucko. A line looped around your neck. We hang 'em in this state."

Larry Rhodes stood as if he had been suddenly paralyzed. The silk cord slipped from his hands, and Eileen Hollis sank slowly to the floor. Tack knelt quickly beside her and loosened the cord. Rhodes watched dumbly. Tack looked up at him, and thought how astonishing it is how a human face can change. The vacuous, grinning face of the playboy was gone. Tack observed, with professional interest, the curiously conflicting emotions stamped on it now. The loose mouth trembled like that of a petulant, frustrated child.

Mulcahy growled again: "Don't be makin' any funny moves, me lad, or I'll let ye have it here and now."

Tack, from his kneeling position, spoke with quiet contempt: "I'm sure he won't move, sergeant. He's frightened to death of guns. He would probably faint at the sight of blood. He doesn't mind murdering, but he has to do it without bloodshed." Tack gave the sergeant a brief, tight smile. "Abnormal psychological quirk in the gentleman."

This was true. Rhodes was cringing away from Mulcahy's pointed gun, his face terror-stricken now. When he at last found his voice, it was a fear-crazed croak:

"Don't—don't point that gun at me!"

It would have sounded funny, in any other circumstance than this.

Mulcahy snorted disgustedly, and called headquarters and told them to send along a patrol car.

"YOU," said Clara to her spouse, two hours later, "are the most exasperating man I ever knew! Tell me about it!"

THE METICULOUS MURDERER

"All I said was: 'Can I have a cup of coffee?' Can't a guy have a cup of coffee in his own house?" He eyed his wife with reproach.

"Phooey on your coffee. Tell me all, or there's going to be another murder."

Tack sighed. "Rhodes was broke. That big house his folks left him was a white elephant, and he couldn't or wouldn't go to work. Eileen Hollis was his inamorata, or one of them. He got a cute little idea, and talked her into it. She was hep to everything about Innes & Stanton's business, so she tipped Rhodes off when there was twenty-five thousand in negotiable stocks in the safe, which Innes doubtless intended to use on a quick deal. You follow me?"

"With bated breath," Clara said impatiently. "Go on."

"Innes thought nothing of it when Rhodes dropped in that evening for a friendly chat and a drink. They were neighbors, and Innes knew Rhodes was a screwball anyway. So Innes poured drinks. And Rhodes, using some ruse to get Innes to leave the desk for a few moments, quickly loaded Innes's drink.

"When Innes was dead, or dying, Rhodes got the combination of the safe from Innes's notebook. The Hollis witch had told him where Innes kept it. The rest is obvious—"

Clara's eyes snapped. "What burns me up," she said, "is that murdering thug coming to our house, after he'd done his dirty work! To shoot cardboard ducks and things. The very idea!"

"The idea," Tack said, "is typical of his kind. Murder didn't mean a great deal to him. He'd succeeded with his scheme. He was feeling good. He thought he'd drop in here and relax. . . . Didn't like guns, though. Not even play guns. Didn't you see him cringe when I tossed it to him, and close his eyes when he fired? Queer duck, our Rhodes. Now can I please have a cup . . ."

"All right, all right! That's men for you! Always thinking about their stomachs."

"You wrong me, sweety-face. I think of you, too—once in a while."

He ducked just in time.

THE END

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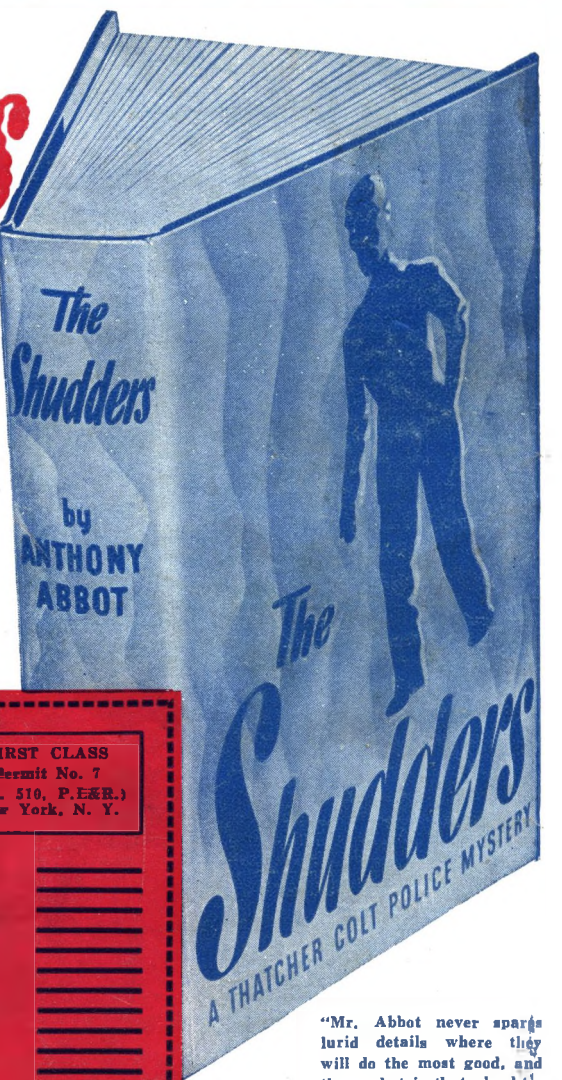

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