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STORIES

TALES

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**THAT
MAD,
MEAN**

MURDER-MAN!

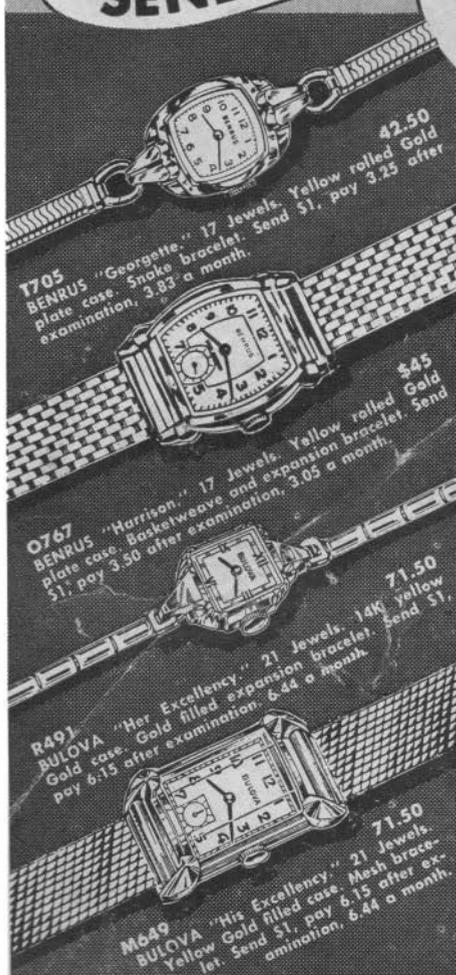
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Eight Hours Later

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NEWSCAST? GOSH,
I WAS JUST GOING
HOME AND CLEAN
UP

DO IT AT THE
STUDIO, NOW
TO FIND THAT
SERUM PILOT

WAIT
'TILL THE
DOCTOR
FINDS OUT
IT'S ME!



HERE'S A
RAZOR,
DOCTOR

THANKS



REMARKABLE
BLADE! I'VE NEVER
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REFRESHING
SHAVE!

IT'S A THIN
GILLETTE...
PLENTY KEEN
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SHAVING



YOU FLEW
THE SERUM!
WHY...

BUT YOU
NEEDED
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QUIET! TEN
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VOL. FORTY-ONE

MARCH, 1949

NUMBER FOUR

Dynamic Crime Novel

1. **THAT MAD, MEAN MURDER-MAN!**.....*Peter Paige* 10
—had two dates to keep: one with a dead man's girl—the other with the dead man himself, who baited a grave with a pair of ten-grand bills!

Three Action-Packed Murder Novelettes

2. **HOMICIDAL HONEYMOON**.....*Francis K. Allan* 46
—came after the marriage that shouldn't have happened to a corpse!
3. **LETHAL LITTLE LADY**.....*Charles Larson* 82
—made perfect bait for MacCaffrey's murder trap!
4. **KISS AND KILL!**.....*Alun Ritner Anderson* 106
—was the motto of that deadly blackmail ring. But Britt had his own slaughter logan: A corpse in time—saves mine!

Six Thrilling Detective Short Stories

5. **A STOMACH FOR KILLING**.....*Dan Gordon* 34
—left Blake Henley with a thoroughly indigestible dead blonde!
6. **RED, BLACK, AND DEAD!**.....*Janice Glant* 40
—was Daniel—who got a free ride on Martha's murder-go-round!
7. **TERROR BY NIGHT**.....*Talmage Powell* 64
—couldn't frighten Tired Sam Hewitt... for his ally was seething, silent, and deadly!
8. **TOO MANY CURVES!**.....*Donn Mullally* 72
—had Larry Rankin rocking on his size twelves, and batting, in that killers' league, a fat .000!
9. **HAPPY DEATH-DAY, MARGIE!**.....*Jack Bradley* 94
—was the best Mike Burns could offer in the way of good wishes.
10. **BLOOD ON THE MENU!**.....*Morris Cooper* 102
—didn't interest Deputy Sheriff Bert Powell, who was too busy eating his heart out over those escaped cons!

Five Gripping Short Features

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April Issue Published
February 25th!



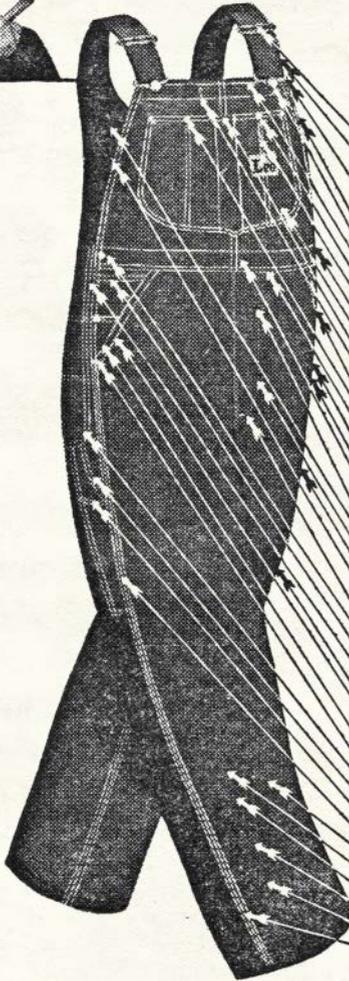
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**CUT-
 THROATS'
 CARNIVAL**

By

JIMMY NICHOLS

Knife thrower Carl Mott couldn't legally avenge his murdered sister, but when a man plays around with deadly toys—well, accidents will happen!

NO ONE who was working for Cociver Brothers' Carnival during the summer tour of 1927 has forgotten the night in the tank town of Chippequawa, Arkansas, that Frank Doyle, the knife thrower, pinned his partner, Clara Mott, to the wall with an eight-inch stiletto through her heart.

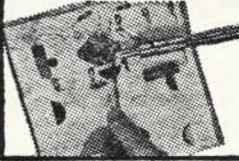
It was an accident, of course. Still, it was a might funny kind of accident and Frank had never made mistakes. He was a pretty good knife artist—too good, really, for a broken-down outfit like the Cocivers, and he knew it. He couldn't quite do everything he said he could, but he'd cut off the glowing end of a cigarette with a 45-foot toss, and one of his favorite stunts was removing the earrings from Clara's tender, pink earlobes or cutting a ribbon bow out of her long, blonde hair. Most of his stunts centered around her lovely face. That was why the accident was so strange—that when he missed, he was so very wide of the mark.

He said Clara lost her nerve and dodged. He said it up on Stage 6, that night, when her body in its spangled briefs was slumped against the bloody target.

"She moved!" he shrieked. He whirled

(Continued on page 8)

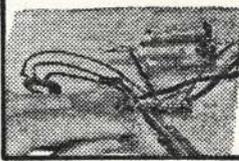
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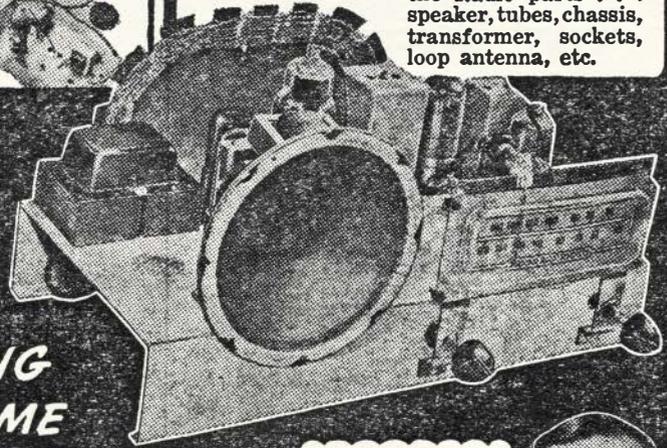


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The ROSICRUCIANS

San Jose (AMORC) California

(Continued from page 6)

on the paralyzed audience, two knives still glistening in his belt. "Didn't you see her move?"

In the front row, two heads nodded slowly.

"Sure," said one. "She leaned to the left."

"Naw," protested the other, "she jumped straight up in the air!"

There was neither medical examiner nor coroner in Chippequawa, but the



"How would you like me to work with you?" Carl suggested. "You can even announce I'm the dead girl's brother."

sheriff called it accidental homicide and the Cociver Carnival reluctantly moved on. Reluctantly, too, they fired Frank Doyle. They would have liked to keep him. The crowds will always pay to see a killer. Trouble was, they couldn't get another girl who would work with him.

Not a girl like Clara, anyway. She was not only easy to look at, but she understood the business, too. She had learned the angles from her brother, Carl, who was a good hand with a knife himself. They had traveled together with a vaudeville act until Clara met Frank. It was Carl who came down from Chicago to claim the body. When he learned that Doyle had left town a few hours before, he started off right on his trail. He had a letter for him, he said.

When he finally caught up with him, it wasn't Frank Doyle any more but Signor Joey Tessini. The face was the same, though. He was working in an opera house in Birmingham, Alabama, and he

(Continued on page 126)

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THAT MAD, MEAN MURDER- MAN!

Somewhere in that dinky, endlessly searched-over room, Ernie McConnell, painter, thief, lover—and now corpse—had secreted twenty grand. . . . Which made my job very simple: All I had to do was live in McConnell's room (easy), make love to the same girls (easier), and (easiest) follow in McConnell's faltering footsteps to the brink of the same grave!



Dynamic "Two-D" Kidd Crime Novel

**By
PETER
PAIGE**

"Close the door, Tom." The Chief said in a quiet voice. "I think we've been taken for a ride, and I'd like to find out about it."



CHAPTER ONE

Voices in the Upstairs Room

STANDING on the front porch I could look through two open doorways to a room in which a pair of hands poured beer from a bottle to a glass. I rapped on the panel of the front door. One of the hands drew the glass of beer out of sight. It set down the empty tumbler almost immediately. I knuckled the door again. The other hand released the

beer bottle, closed into a fist and hammered the table, causing bottle and glass to jump.

"I heard you the first time!" a female frog roared. "What you expect me to do—carry you in?"

I brought my bag to the door of the room, which turned out to be a small office, and told the woman in the wheelchair, "Kidd. The *D* is doubled. What I'm after is a room."

"You and everybody else."

"Let Congress take care of the others. I'm looking out for me."

She seemed annoyed. She had probably been born seeming annoyed. Her features were pure flab out of which peered slitted, moist, bloodshot eyes. Her nose was a broad stub, her lips thickly petulant. She wore a mane of white straw which came down to the faded Indian blanket that covered her immense shoulders. Dime-store jewelry bedecked hands that seemed a hundred years old. Only the wheelchair seemed incongruous. She needed a broom.

"I'm looking for me," she mimicked. "Can't you read?"

"Anything special?"

"The sign on the sign."

I walked out of the house, crossed half the lawn, read the sign and the sign on the sign, returned to the office doorway and said, "It says Mrs. Kane's Rooming House. Reas. Rts. Transients. The sign over that says No Vacancies."

"Well?"

I HAD been tutored to handle a "Well?" but, within sight and scent of this witch, the tutoring seemed inadequate. The tutoring had commenced two hours earlier this Sunday morning when a call from San Francisco filled my ear—which was in Pismo Beach—with Captain Snow's sorrowful: "Unfortunately you're the closest available op to Heatville, and Thomas, the agency manager there, needs an outside op fast."

"What makes it so damn unfortunate?"

"Don't prima donna on me, Kidd. Thomas' wire stressed tactfulness. The op—and I quote him—must be tactful enough to learn what a man successfully hid from his wife and associates for fifteen years without allowing the man, his wife or associates to know what he is doing.

End of quote. You get the problem?"

"And I don't qualify?"

His reply was a pregnant silence during which I could visualize him gnawing his fingernails, shutting his eyes and probably twitching a little. When he spoke next his voice quavered.

"You have to qualify. It's a question of renting a certain room in Heatville before anyone else gets to it—and you're the only outside man we can get there in time. Mainly, I want you to concentrate on *tact*. I want you to act as if you liked people, instead of your usual routine."

"What's my usual routine?"

Came another silence during which I could envision his twitches becoming more pronounced, then:

"You're to keep your connection with the agency concealed throughout. You'll make just one contact with Thomas—in Room 715 of the Heatville Inn—but not until you rent the room."

"Suppose the room isn't rentable?"

"Thomas' wire says it should be. He says you should tell the landlady that you read of a vacancy in this morning's paper. You might check her ad before arriving. You're to present yourself as a prospective ranch buyer. It's—" He told me the address and treated me to a five-minute harangue during which *tact* was mentioned exactly seventeen times. Then he broke the connection and probably spent the next fifteen minutes on his knees in an attitude of earnest prayer.

And now the room didn't seem rentable. In a carefully scanned copy of the *Heatville Express* I had not only found no ads mentioning available rooms in Mrs. Kane's Rooming House—there had been no ads for *any* rooming house, not with the front page featuring pictures of migratory harvest hands bedding in their cars, in the parks, in adjacent fields, this being picking time in the Heatville Valley, added to the normal housing shortage.

So, silently cursing the ineptitude of Thomas, I answered Mrs. Kane's "Well?" with, "According to the papers you should have a vacancy."

"What papers?" she snorted, as I knew she would. "I didn't put no ad in no pap—" Her mouth suddenly gaped wide, revealing all seven of her teeth. Cackles began issuing from the gaping maw. The

Indian blanket jiggled. Tears squeezed from her slitted orbs.

This was laughter. "Inner Sanctum" would have paid her a mint for it. "You're the smartest feller I seen in a long month!" she finally gasped through her mirrh. "Imagine thinkin' of that! As a matter of fact, Ernie McConnell was shot dead right where you're standin' now!"

I stood very still where I was standing then and mutely apologized to Thomas.

She twisted her face over her shoulder and bellowed, "Henrietta!"

"What you want, ma?" a husky voice throbbled from an inner room.

"C'mout here. Want you to show Ernie's room." Her voice dropped to an intimate rumble. "Got that room registered at daily rates, mister. I could get ten a day for it like that." She snapped two gnarled fingers soundlessly. "It's registered at three. I'll let it go for five. Don't mind you draggin' beer up there, but no cookin'—and women stop at the front door."

"Want me, ma?" the husky voice asked, entering the office by a rear doorway. It preceded a tight black sweater that featured brand new femininity. Tight black slacks betrayed a too-healthy appetite. There was a plumpness amid her features that pointed to her mother's flab in years to come, but the years had still to come and the features amid the plumpness were a standing invitation and promise, soft, innocent lips and large, friendly eyes that seemed to regard me with purpose as well as interest. She was chewing something that left chocolate stains on her small, even teeth when she spoke.

SHE WATCHED twenty-five dollars of the agency's money disappear under her mother's blanket, then led me up a flight of stairs, back along a corridor and through a door to a room right over the office.

"Ma's robbin' you," she said softly, coming in after me and closing the door. "Ernie only paid her eight dollars a week."

I eyed her curiously. She chewed her candy expressionlessly.

"Don't you like your ma?" I asked.

"That's got nothin' to do with it," she said evenly. "I want you to like me and

maybe take me out. Nobody ever takes me out—except Ernie—and he smelled of paint all the time. It made me sick. And sometimes his teeth slipped when he kissed me. You got your own teeth?"

"My very own," I breathed.

Then I looked around the room and almost forgot to breathe. My first reaction was to plow back downstairs and take back the agency's twenty-five by way of the old hag's throat.

This defunct Ernie McConnell must have been a daisy, I thought. He seemed to have, for instance, taken apart the plumbing of the room's sink and forgotten to reassemble it again. The bedstead was in pieces; its pieces were in parts. The stuffing of the easy chair lay on the bare floor beside it. The floor was bare because the carpeting had been rolled to the wall, which in turn had had its floorboards pried loose. On the floor in front of the closet were about fifteen large cans of paint and enamel—with the paint and enamel that had been in the cans now in broad baking pans, giving the room a distinct aroma.

The electric fixtures had been torn free and clumsily replaced. I flicked the light switch and got sparks along with illumination. I unflicked the switch and looked at the girl, who had swallowed her cud and was now cleansing the chocolate stains from her teeth with her tongue.

"They didn't find it," she said. "They even cut open his belly at the morgue and looked into his guts, thinkin' he might have eaten it. But he didn't."

"They didn't find what?"

One of her large eyes closed. "You ain't fooled me, honey. You might fool ma, but I read detective stories all the time. I bet I got the best collection of true detective magazines in Heatville. But you won't find it. Ernie never had it. It was all a big damn lie."

"Ernie never had *what*?"

That eye closed again, bringing half her cheek with it. "You don't have to play dumb with me," she said huskily. "Didn't I figure you out already?"

I somehow managed not to scream. I sneered instead. "How do I know you're not guessing?"

"You're after the twenty G's," she said calmly. "But you're wastin' your time. I told you Ernie didn't get it from that fat

slob in the first place. His wife's lyin'."

"What fat slob?"

"*You* know."

"Yeah," I teased, catching the rhythm of her mind, "but how do I know *you* know?"

"Mayor John Penne. And I don't believe he's still unconscious like it says in the paper—not after thirty hours. Ernie couldn't hit him that hard, even with a revolver. Ernie's a mouse—*was* a mouse, I mean. I once almost broke his arm when he tried to put it around me while he was drivin'. I like people to do one thing at a time. And Ernie didn't even pay attention to the signs."

"Signs?" I breathed, clutching at a straw from the whirlpool of straws that spun at me each time her mouth opened.

She opened her mouth again. "When he broke the mirror last week. I told him he would have bad luck if he didn't bury a piece of it in the cemetery at midnight the same night."

"This mirror?" I prompted, fingering a small square mirror that lay flat on top of the bureau."

"Of course not, silly! The one he had before. He laughed at me—and now look at him."

"I'd rather not," I declined, thinking of his exposed guts. "What twenty thousand dollars?"

This seemed to irritate her. Her lips twisted and her eyes grew narrow and shiny. "You'll be sorry you teased me!" she whispered.

The door blotted her indignant—but provocative—back.

I looked at myself in the square mirror. On the wall over the bureau was a dust-free pattern where an oval mirror had hung, the one Enie McConnell probably broke to his everlasting discomfit. I looked back at me from the mirror. Neither of us enjoyed the prospect.

I seated myself on the opened-and-sewed-together-again mattress under the room's solitary window. Later, I would put the mattress on the bare spring and call it a bed. Now I sat on the mattress and the girl who had just slammed out of the room spoke indignantly into my ear:

"Ma! That mean-lookin' feller who just took the room; he's really after—"

She was speaking in my ear—but I was

absolutely alone in that room. I rose to look around and her voice vanished. The room was still empty.

I sat down again and the old witch mumbled into the same ear; "Saw that the minute he didn't kick at the rate."

"But suppose he finds the money?" the girl told my ear.

"There ain't no money. Or if there was, Ernie passed it to someone else, that Hober girl more'n likely. After six detectives and Bill Brett spent twenty-one hours in that room lookin' for it, you think Dracula upstairs is gonna find it?"

Raising my head a few inches, my ear emptied of voice as completely as if I'd turned off a radio.

It was growing on me then. Acoustics. Something about that house's construction channeled sound from the office below to a tiny area over the mattress.

I lowered my ear to that area and caught a series of cackles Macbeth would have recognized instantly. From the cackles emerged: "After Frankenstein gets tired of huntin' the dough at thirty-five bucks a week, we'll find another fish, and after that another. It's like Ernie willed it to us—and we won't have to spend a cent fixin' up that room. They'll all want it exactly like the detectives left it. And to skim some cream off the top we'll collect from the city for damages!" She started whinnying, then cut it off with a growl: "Leave that damn candy alone until you're married. You want to blow up like a balloon?"

CHAPTER TWO

Man in a Coma

THE SMALL, tanned man behind the door of Room 715 of the Heatville Inn blinked nervously at me through silver-rimmed glasses.

"The word is Snow," I told him.

He yanked me inside, darted quick glances up and down the empty corridor, then shut the door carefully and locked it.

"You think we're safe?" I whispered hoarsely.

He threw me a sour glance, then nodded toward the woman in the room's lone chair and said, "Mrs. Penne is our client."

She had probably been one of those

homely girls who became an attractive woman through the force of her personality and the selection of her wardrobe. It was her personality that made me note her self-assurance before noticing the boniness of her features, and it was her smart violet-grey tailoring that drew my attention immediately away from her boniness to her architecture, which sufficed.

She nodded. I nodded. Thomas raised a smoking cigarette from the edge of a tray and asked, "Get the room?"

"What's left of it."

"They take you for a prospective rancher?"

"When I left I mentioned I was checking the realty layout, but I think they think I'm after twenty grand."

"You know about that?"

"Fragments. The law searched my room, thinking McConnell stashed the dough there prior to being shot dead and after rendering unconscious with a revolver someone called Mayor John—" I broke off and looked at the woman, who nodded.

"My husband, Mr.—"

"Kidd," I told her. "The *D* happens twice."

Thomas dropped his cigarette. He left it on the floor to start a smoke signal. I used a shoe on the signal and looked at him. He looked like a man who had just been punched in the solar plexis.

"Mr. Kidd," the lady repeated. "My husband has been mayor of Heatville for two terms now. He drew the twenty thousand dollars from our joint account Friday afternoon, but I didn't learn about it until Saturday, although I knew he had that much money with him when he tried to sneak out of our house Friday midnight. The money took the form of two ten-thousand-dollar bills inside an envelope which dropped from a hip pocket when he slid from our bed and dressed in the dark. When he started downstairs without noticing it on the floor my curiosity was naturally aroused."

Her expression seemed to seek a comment.

"Naturally," I commented, glancing toward Thomas. He was studying his shoes, which needed a shine.

"He must have noticed the money was gone, halfway down the stairs, because I

barely had time to drop the envelope and get back under the covers before he returned. He struck a match to find the envelope on the floor. I heard him reach the front door this time, and I waited for it to close behind him—but it didn't. I went to the window and saw a man in overalls running across our lawn to a Buick sedan parked at the curb. Not knowing what to—"

"Mrs. Penne caught the license number," Thomas cut in, eyeing my shoes, which also needed a shine.

"Auto poker." The lady smiled wryly. "Have you ever played it?"

"You mean finding poker hands in passing license plates?"

"I found a full house in the Buick's plate, which is why I remembered it," she said. "After finding my husband unconscious on the foyer floor, I phoned for an ambulance, then gave the number to the police. Then—"

"Why," I cut in, "was the mayor carrying that much money out of the house at such an hour?"

"Right now we're following the money, Kidd," Thomas told Mrs. Penne's shoes, which would have been ruined by a shine, being open-toed, with chic, grey bows. The ankles they supported were also chic, as so often happens with bony women. Thomas said, "The money seems to be the key to the whole business. It wasn't on the mayor when Mrs. Penne found him, which indicates McConnell took it with him to the Buick."

"You sure McConnell was the man running across the lawn?"

"No doubt about it, but let's stick to the money. If McConnell had it when he drove away, it was still with him when he reached Mrs. Kane's Rooming House."

"Why?"

"Mrs. Penne's call was recorded by the desk sergeant at ten minutes past midnight. At twenty-four minutes past midnight McConnell drew up to the rooming house. We know this because a girl McConnell had stood up for a date the same evening, Gladys Hober, had been waiting on the porch to read him the riot act, and she noticed the time. Her watch was later checked against the headquarters clock."

"Did she read him the act?"

"That's not the point. Next day detec-

tives drove McConnell's Buick along the shortest route between the Penne house and Mrs. Kane's house; they drove it four times and their fastest time was fifteen minutes."

"What did they prove?"

"Allowing a few minutes for Mrs. Penne to reach the phone after noting the license, it indicates McConnell had no time to stop along the way, so that the money was still on him when he reached the rooming house."

"That's reasonable," I agreed.

"Gladys Hober didn't read him the act," Thomas went on. "McConnell brushed past her, raced up to his room and slammed the door. She went to her own room on the ground floor, and that's the substance of her testimony. Mrs. Kane, who lives under McConnell, heard him moving around in his room until fifteen minutes later when she heard him race downstairs and out the front door—which indicates, if we accept the women's testimony, that the money was still in his room."

"Why not on him?"

"I'm getting to that. During this time identification of his plates was being made through Sacramento. When McConnell raced out the front door the first patrol car had arrived and its two patrolmen were dismounting. They didn't know him, but he had a good enough idea about them to drop the bag he was carrying and yank a .38-caliber revolver from his waistband. He managed to get off one shot that hasn't been located yet. They put three slugs in his chest, spinning him back into the lap of Mrs. Kane, who was wheeling her chair toward the sudden noise. He was dead by the time the patrolmen reached him.

"And that's the size of it," Thomas said. "Everything gets eliminated down to nothing. The money wasn't on him or in his car or in his room. Matrons searched Mrs. Kane and Gladys Hober, the only two other people in the house at the time, and it wasn't on them."

"How about Henrietta?"

"Who?"

"Henrietta Kane, the daughter."

THOMAS shook his head. "There's a curious footnote on her. Around the time this was happening she walked up to

a squad car parked near the cemetery on the other side of town—about two miles out—and asked for a lift back in. They brought her home."

I said, "Nothing ever gets eliminated to nothing. It wouldn't be the first time a cop palmed what he was looking for and pretended to go on looking."

"That's a weak link," Thomas admitted, looking at Mrs. Penne.

"Another weak link," I said, also looking at the alert little lady, "is the money's existence in the first place." The little lady's hackles bristled. I couldn't see her hackles; the evidence was in the flaring of her nostrils and the sudden exclamation points in her grey eyes. "Slip of the brain," I said, grinning at her. "I should have considered you wouldn't hire me to find money you'd invented."

"You are not employed to find money," she said icily.

"I'm not?"

Her expression relented a little at the confusion in mine. "Oh, I'd certainly like it back—but not if getting it back will endanger my husband's career."

I said, "I seem to have missed a beat in this conversation."

Thomas told my shoes, "Mrs. Penne wants us to learn what you asked before—what reason impelled her husband to sneak out of the house at midnight with the twenty thousand dollars."

"Why not simply ask him when he snaps out of his coma?"

"Because then it may be too late," Mrs. Penne retorted. She shot an irritated glance at Thomas, who remained absorbed in my shoes. She shifted the irritation to me. "Please try to exercise a little imagination, Mr. Kidd. For my husband to have done that without confiding in me indicates he was in serious trouble, serious enough to require a payment of twenty thousand dollars. Since the money has been taken, he must still be in trouble. It is his nature to bear his burdens alone and in silence—but this may be a burden he can no longer bear alone. It may be something that could come to a head and ruin him while he lies unconscious in the hospital. I want you to get to the bottom of it without letting him, or anybody else, learn what you're doing."

"Except you," I said.

"Not even me," she said.

I looked helplessly at Thomas. He was looking out the window.

"That's another beat I missed," I told the lady, who had risen and was drawing violet-grey gloves over her long, slender hands.

"It's very simple, Kidd," Thomas told the window. "When you get the answer you're to judge whether he's in danger. If he isn't, you tell me and that ends it. If he is, you're to see if anything can be done to help him. If something can, you're to do it, sparing no expense—but you're not to tell Mrs. Penne or myself anything beyond the fact that the situation is under control. If the situation is hopeless, then—and then only—you're to bring all the facts to Mrs. Penne."

"That's so simple even Einstein could probably understand it," I breathed.

"It puzzles you that I should wish to remain ignorant of my husband's problem?" Mrs. Penne demanded.

"It puzzles me," I admitted.

"You realize he went to great pains to keep me ignorant of his problem?"

"Yes."

"You must have enough imagination to assume the problem might involve a woman, or gambling, or something else of a nature not calculated to insure domestic tranquility."

"That much imagination I've got," I said.

"It is really very simple," she said slowly, as if explaining the operation of a seesaw to a man with two heads. "Knowledge can sometimes destroy the happiest marriage and I happen to love my husband. I intend to go on loving him, and I want to do it without an unnecessary handicap. If you wish to pursue this matter further, I will be home later in the afternoon. I am going to my husband's bedside now. Good-day, gentlemen."

The door closed gently behind her.

I WASTED a shrug of helplessness on Thomas, who was brooding at the window. It rated a brood, displaying a segment of Heatville, the answer to any man whose doctor orders him to live in a frying pan. The vista involved several table-flat blocks of housing, about twenty table-flat miles of ranches, and the distant sun-

browned sides of a mountain range—all of this shimmering through heat waves.

"You go for her poetry?" I asked.

Thomas looked at me then. He looked at me as if I had six legs and antennae and was emerging from a forkful of lettuce he was bringing to his mouth.

"You *that* Kidd?"

"Don't crowd me, Thomas. I'm trying to behave tactfully."

"The Kidd they talk about through the agency—the one who started that riot in Pacific City and drove that girl artist insane?"

"That seemed to bother Snow also—but more eloquently. So what?"

"My God!" Thomas moaned, sinking into the chair Mrs. Penne had vacated.

I felt crowded, practically to the wall. I told him, "I was the only op close enough to get McConnell's room. You're stuck with me, so why not relax and get used to the idea? It wasn't a very big riot. Honest."

"Sorry," he mumbled, raising his glasses to his forehead and pushing his brown eyes into his palm. They were crinkled eyes that probably bubbled over with good humor normally. He pulled them out of his palm and they dripped unadulterated sorrow. "No hard feelings, Kidd. But did Snow mention that the future of the Heatville office rests on the outcome of this case?"

"Every agency manager says that about every case. So I find old Penne has a chick on the side, or picked too many wrong gees at the races—and I pay off the chick or pressure the bookies off his neck—or I fumble and it busts into headlines. How could any of that lock your door?"

"The same way my door's been locked the last two months," he said painfully.

"How?"

"I was doing all right until the water situation set Chief Brett and the Pennes at each other's throats. They each wanted to hire me to dig mud to sling at the other. When I had to refuse both assignments because of the agency's position on such matters, they each suspected the other had gotten to me first."

"What water situation?"

"There's only so much water in this valley, about enough to irrigate the ranches and fill the faucets. Some factories want

to move onto the fill where the river leaves town, but they need a city grant to function. The Pennes don't want 'em because they'd use up water going to the ranches now. The Pennes are realtors who made the grade selling and financing ranches. They're in deep. Chief Brett, on the other hand, owns the land the factories want, and they want it expensively enough for him to want them—so it's a city council deadlock."

"This Brett is Chief of Police?"

"He runs the police and they run Heatville—or did until the Pennes moved in. They more or less control the county. When I wouldn't play ball with either of them they set out independently to drive me out of Heatville. They underbid all my uniformed guard contracts, took over my payroll work, angled into my petty theft investigations—and that practically did it. I wired Chicago that there was no point hanging on. Chicago wired back to sit tight and wait for a break. Well, this is a break; if we make Florence Penne happy we'd at least get a lot of the county business back. But if Brett gets wind of the fact that Mayor Penne is in hot water, he'll dredge for the details himself and use it politically, which would aggravate Mrs. Penne into raining our county business all over again. You want to repeat that crack?"

"What crack?"

"About agency managers?"

I didn't.

We spent a minute shrugging our brows at each other. It was a moot situation any way you looked at it. I had to produce fast answers, but you can't produce fast answers by pussyfooting around tactfully. On the other hand, the problem was so delicate that only tactful pussyfooting could lead me to its answers.

I asked, "Anything else?"

"Just walk softly, Kidd. Please."

"Sure."

I walked softly out of the room.

I WALKED softly into the Heatville Hospital's lobby and told a stout nurse behind the glassed-in reception desk, "I have an appointment with Mrs. Penne outside her husband's room. Where is it?"

"319—at the end of the corridor on the third floor. But—"

Her *but* followed me across the lobby to the elevator, which I ignored for the stairway that circled up behind it. On the third-floor corridor I made a swift, but soft, U-turn as I glimpsed Mrs. Penne emerge from a door at the end, dabbing a pink handkerchief at her eyes and saying something to the nurse at her side as they passed the uniformed patrolman seated before the door. I made my U-turn into a room whose door stood slightly ajar.

The room smelled of medications and glistened from an array of glass, chrome and white-enamel fittings and the medical paraphernalia amid the fittings.

I waited behind the door until I heard a woman's voice—not Mrs. Penne's—call out, "I'll be in the cafeteria, Officer," followed by a masculine grunt, followed by an elevator door opening and shutting, followed by silence.

I draped a stethoscope around my neck, gripped a thermometer in my left hand and stepped boldly into the corridor. I marched to its end and nodded curtly to the uniform, who was awkwardly concealing a lighted butt in his cupped palm. He said, "Nothin' stirrin', Doc."

I said, "Has Dr. Gillespie been here yet?"

He said, "I just got on half an hour ago, Doc. Nobody's been in but his wife."

I said, "If Gillespie arrives, tell him I'm with the mayor. Dr. Kildare."

He said, "Gotcha, Doc."

I walked softly into the room and shut the door.

The man on the bed seemed in his middle forties, but well preserved. His hair was a wild, black bush. His face was tanned and squarely featured. His narrowed, greenish eyes were open and staring fixedly at the ceiling.

I seated myself at his side and put the end of the stethoscope on the huge mound formed by his chest, leaving the prongs around my neck. I softly said:

"I'm no doctor. I'm a private operative employed by your wife to dig your hocus-pocus with the twenty grand. She thinks you're too proud for me to let you know I'm digging, but I think the quickest source of answers is the horse's mouth, if you'll pardon the expression."

He continued to stare expressionlessly at the ceiling. I passed a palm over his

eyes and watched the result carefully.

They blinked.

"That's your first answer," I told him. "You're in this make-believe trance to figure your own answers; but if all you could do up to here was draw the dough to pay off, it stands to reason you're stuck and in need of some professional help—namely, me."

He continued to gaze blankly at the ceiling.

"Look at it this way," I tried again. "It has to be a dame, a graft or blackmail. You thought twenty grand would tame it Friday midnight. Your wife is willing to use up the whole bankroll to tame it now. And she doesn't want to know how I do it or why—on account, she says, she doesn't want any tawdry knowledge sullyng the bright, pure flame of your connubial ecstasy. What can you lose?"

His eyes almost twitched—then they settled back into that dead, unwavering stare.

"If you don't cooperate willingly I'll have to get devious," I needled him softly. "I lack the patience to pussyfoot around until I have a billion assorted items to sift and sort to an answer—when it might be too late. So if you don't come across now I'll bring in a psychiatrist, suggest your condition is psycho-somatic and suggest further you be shot with truth serum and pumped for data that might lead to the mental whyfor of your imitation trance. In the process your twenty-grand secret will come out anyhow, so why not—"

I didn't say any more.

I didn't say any more because his sudden fingers on my throat bottled my remaining words on the useless side of my tongue. His fingers were dragging my throat across his massive chest to a position before his eyes, which were now treating me to that grim, unyielding stare.

The rest of me, following my throat, was about as useful as a hole in a blimp. My fists should have been slamming at his middle, at his temples, at his anything; but my fists were hands digging at the thumbs he was trying to push to the back of my neck the hard way.

His eyes became red.

His face became red.

The pillow under him became red.

The redness was beginning to blot him

from view, fill my head with throbbing, to push my brain into soft, feathery blackness. . . .

Somewhere in the blackness one dull thought struggled to break through his grip on my throat, one lone idea that managed to squeeze through and trickle down my spine, flow into my thigh up to my knee, jerking my knee forward convulsively. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

The Listeners

I HAD been sleeping.

A hard floor was tilting my face against the coolness of a metal bedpost. Something was making a rhythmic creaking sound overhead. I started to rise. I sat down again and let the floor and my stomach steady themselves. The second time I got all the way to my feet and rocked with the floor until it settled.

Mayor John Penne was having his own troubles. His knees were up to his chest and his hands were at the juncture and he was rolling from side to side and gripping his lower lip with his teeth.

My neck didn't feel the least bit sorry for him. My neck wanted to reach down and shake hands with my knee.

"That's all you need to win the election," I said, astonished to discover my normal tenor had become a hoarse baritone. "My corpse on your hands."

He turned pain-wracked eyes on me, but through the pain was that same implacable determination. I could see what his wife meant by saying he was the type who bore his burdens alone and in silence. I could see also his hands quit his groin enroute for a repeat performance.

I don't think he saw my fist.

I didn't see it myself—until it bounced off the square edge of his jaw.

His jaw pushed his black mop back into the pillow. His hands relaxed. His legs slid forward until they were straight under the covers.

I brushed the remains of my borrowed thermometer off the bed to my palm and tossed them far under the bed. I lifted the stethoscope from the floor, eared it, put the business end against his chest and listened. I heard the Anvil Chorus.

I also heard a soft voice drawl, "Think he'll live, Dr. Kildare?"

I hadn't heard them enter the room.

Two men, if you didn't count the face of my old friend, the uniform, gaping in from the open doorway.

The man who had spoken could have been anywhere from forty to sixty. He was thin enough to make a profession of it, his thinness being encased in a khaki shirt unbuttoned at the collar, tan whipcord trousers, a tan Stetson and a brown gunbelt featuring a huge revolver that lay with its silvered butt forward on his left hip.

The gaunt face under the wide brim of his Stetson was accented by thick straw-colored brows cocked over pale, pink eyes and by deep creases that etched his cheeks down to a large mouth that was now curled sardonically.

"Dr. Gillespie couldn't make it," he went on, "so we came instead, Dr. Kildare."

"That was thoughtful," I said, depronging the stethoscope from my ears and laying it carefully on the white night table.

"We're pretty thoughtful," the blond man said. "Close the door, Tom."

The other man blotted my friend, the uniform's, gaping face with door.

This man was on the fresher side of forty. He wore a brown gabardine business suit and no hat on fuzzy red hair that floated at least six feet off the floor. His nose had been bent and left bent. His jaw overdid it. His eyes were dark and cloudy.

He turned from the door and the blond man asked me, "What hocus-pocus about the money?" In the same tone he added, "I think we had a ride, Tom. Slip His Nibs a needle and see if he jumps."

The redhead approached the bed and, incidentally, me.

I rose before him and said, "You can't—"

My remaining words became entangled with the redhead's elbow, which bounced off my spine through my abdomen. His elbow was made of cast iron.

My abdomen was made of sorrow. I started to use the floor, but Tom wouldn't have it. Tom wanted me hard against his chest while his hands explored my clothing. I wanted to operate my lungs.

By the time my lungs operated, Tom was busy elsewhere, and my wallet, my Colt .32, my keys, bottle opener, pipe, matches, tobacco and two unpaid bills were on the foot of the bed where the sardonic blond man's long fingers were dipping idly through them.

Tom's broad back was to me, but all I could do was practice breathing. Inhale, exhale, twitch; inhale, exhale, twitch; inhale, exhale—gape. Tom had unpinned a gold badge from inside his wallet. He was jabbing the badge's pin into various portions of Mayor Penne's lax anatomy.

The anatomy remained lax.

"He's like a light, Chief," Tom puzzled at the blond man, who glanced up from my pistol permit and queried:

"Kidd?"

I WAS inhaling and exhaling like a professional now. I could even muster enough excess energy to scowl at Tom, who was repinning his gold badge to the inside of his wallet. He paused to raise his murky eyes to me.

"Answer the Chief, you!"

"Kidd," I told the blond man.

"Out of Frisco?"

"Out of San Francisco."

"What agency?"

"I free-lance."

"We'll check that," he said softly.

"Where you staying in Heatville?"

"Mrs. Kane's, on Maplewood."

The men exchanged brief glances.

"That's cozy," the blond Chief said.

I didn't comment.

"What hocus-pocus about the money?" he asked.

"What money?" I commented.

"You want to come downstairs and hear us play your conversation off the wire?"

I didn't. I already knew what I'd said. I wanted to hire Tom to boot me around Heatville three or four times. If what I'd said was on a wire, there had to be a microphone hidden in the room. And what other "Chief" could this be but Chief Brett, the man I was to keep from learning Mrs. Penne's fears anent hubby's hocus-pocus with the twenty grand? I thought of Snow's sermon on tact and Thomas' pleas that I walk softly, and I felt like asking someone to stop the world so I could get off.

I said, "You people spent a lot of time scratching for the dough which *had* to be where you scratched—but wasn't. That's hocus-pocus in basic English. Mrs. Penne hired me to scratch a little. Since the last two people known to have seen it were the mayor and McConnell, and since McConnell isn't available, I tried prodding a lead out of the mayor. You heard me."

"We heard you break off suddenly in the middle of a sentence."

"What did you expect—punctuation? I thought he might be faking his trance, so I tried needling him out of it. Verbally," I added, scowling at Tom, whose sullen face remained sullen. "He wasn't faking, and I tired of my syllables—and that happened amid a sentence. You want a diagram?"

"After that we got noises," Tom growled.

"Like a bed creaking?"

"You tell us," Brett drawled.

"That must've been me shaking him."

"After *that*," Tom carried the ball, "you asked him if he wanted your corpse on his hands."

"I don't think I asked him that," I said. "I think I *told* him my corpse on his hands wouldn't help his next election. It's a delicate subject, gentlemen, but after considering the situation the simplest answer seemed to be that the dough *was* found on McConnell or in his room, but that the finder was a keeper and, wanting to re-

main a keeper, he'd take steps to ease me off his neck if my prolonged pussyfooting turned his way, which is what I meant by my corpse on the mayor's hands if he couldn't provide me with a shortcut to the dough. I may have said it awkwardly, but that was my idea behind my words."

"I searched McConnell's room!" Tom growled. "You saying I—"

"Tom!" Brett said.

"But, Chief, this clown's saying that I—"

"I hear what he's sayin'," Chief Brett drawled, eyeing me keenly. "He's pushin' you off balance with words and turnin' the conversation his way. Let's turn it back. Kidd, why'd His Nibs have that kind of money in his house in the first place?"

"I never gave it a thought."

"Give it a thought," Brett urged softly. He was a soft-spoken man. He worked hard at it.

"Maybe he wanted to buy a used car," I shrugged. "Why don't you wait around and ask him?"

"We will."

"How about me?"

"If you try to leave Heatville before I've checked your statements I'll chase you with a warrant for impersonating a doctor."

"I mean now."

"Who's keepin' you?"

I was out of that hospital before he reached the question mark.

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IT TOOK some time before I could drive my Chevie away from the curb. I sat watching my hands on the wheel and searching through the mass of jelly between my ears for an idea. After a while my hands on the wheel stopped trembling, but the only idea I found was to take the shortest road out of Heatville and drive at least a hundred miles without looking in my rear-vision mirror once.

I drove to the Heatville *Express* offices instead and spent a few hours digging into Mayor John Penne's public past. . . .

Fifteen years ago front-page wedding announcement in the *Express* ended:

. . . Young Johnny Penne is the lad from the deep South who's been ramrodding the Davison Ranch bunch and had to practically use a pitchfork to keep Heatville womenfolk off him. Congrats, Florrie Davison! You roped a comer!

He began "coming" when Papa Davison lost the Big Argument to a stubborn bronc and "Young Johnny" became "Mr. John Penne, of the Penne-Davison Ranch." In later clippings he was ". . . of the Penne-Davison, Crooked Elbow, Bent Fork and Double B Ranches." He became the Penne Realty Company, State Senator Penne, U.S.O. Chairman Penne, etc. Up to seven years ago, when he first became Mayor John Penne.

On that occasion he rated a two-page splash with pictures, one of which showed him in carnival tights removing the curl from a horseshoe with his bare hands, a spectacle that returned the ache to my throat.

The only new item to me, about the twenty grand, was Mrs. Florence Penne's statement that McConnell had gotten the dough from a wall safe, that he'd been surprised by Mayor Penne returning late from a political meeting, that she heard the scuffle and ran downstairs to see McConnell fleeing the scene—which was certainly a demonstration of quick thinking on her part.

No item about McConnell in the *Express* was over two days old, but he'd gone out in a blaze of publicity. Aside from the gory details, it boiled down to the dull facts that in the ten years McConnell had lived in Mrs. Kane's Rooming House he had been a sober, hard-working house painter who had no regular companions,

went to church, never smoked and drank nothing stronger than beer. He was John Doe, in person, little more than a number in the census between his birth and death certificates.

In the three photographs they showed of him he seemed to look the part. His hair was parted by a wide swath of bare scalp. He wore a long nose, sad mouth and rimless glasses that bulged his eyes.

I left the *Express* library with little more than hunger pains.

* * *

Mrs. Kane's door was closed, but I heard her mumbling behind it in accents too low for me to distinguish words—even with my ear against her door.

I mounted the stairs, keyed open my door and stood with my hand on the knob gaping foolishly at the slender finger that wagged urgently to get my attention.

It had my attention.

It wagged before a face that missed being beautiful by fractions of inches—a mouth a bit too wide, a nose a shade too short and cheeks that were just a wee bit too hollow.

Her face was encased in a strawberry-blond halo. It was poised over a lot of smooth tan that was briefly halted by an apple-green halter and by an apple-green skirt that flared over her limbs where she crouched on my mattress, which still lay under the window.

Seeing that she had my attention, she crooked the finger for me to join her on the mattress.

I backed into the hall instead. I keyed shut the door, tried the knob—and the door swung open, explaining that.

I joined her on the mattress and her pantomime was instantly explained in full as Mrs. Kane mumbled in my ear:

" . . . know he's after the money, you old goat! Once the idea spreads around, they'll be linin' up ten deep to rent Ernie's room. If you had the brains a flea's born with you'd forget him and look into that Hober tramp like I told you to. She'n Ernie were thicker'n thieves. What?"

After a pause, her mumble went on: "Sure I got no use for her. What's that got to do with it? Ernie had the money when he passed her on the porch, didn't

he? Everybody knows *that*. What?"

After a longer pause: "You say he's a private peep. I admit he's ugly enough to be a snoop—but you're the biggest damn liar in the whole county, Bill Brett. You'll what? Who? Listen! If I catch that woman-crazy Tom Fuller hangin' around my house I'll empty my .45 into him—Captain of Detectives or no Captain of Detectives! If he so much gets in reachin' distance of my Henrietta again, there's one-two little things about you I can tell the tax boys. Don't you forget that for a single minute, you old goat!"

A metallic click concluded the monologue.

"Telephone?" I whispered.

THE BLONDE took her fingers from my arm and smiled her gold-flecked green eyes at me, transforming her almost beautiful face into a strikingly beautiful face. "You can talk out loud," she said out loud. "The sound only travels one way. Ernie and I checked it once when the old bag was out."

"Before or after he passed you the money on the porch?" I asked her out loud.

She slapped my face.

I slapped her face.

We sat glaring at each other.

"You *are* an ugly old snoop!" she breathed.

"And you're that Hober . . . girl," I breathed back at her.

"Ernie passed me no money!" she said furiously. "Ernie had no money to pass in the first place. He was a good guy. He worked hard and minded his p's and q's and he was saving his money to marry me. I'm sorry I slapped you, but you shouldn't have said it."

"If you go around slapping everybody in Heatville who's saying it, you'll wear out your arm. Now take it easy, I want to tell you something."

"Go ahead."

"I've been a snoop—but the program now is to settle my ugly old self on a ranch with the fifteen thousand Uncle Willy left me. The reason I mention it is on account I can recite chapter and verse in the cases of half a hundred good, hard-working, p-and-q-minding guys I've known who went berserk at the sudden chance to hit a

crooked jackpot: bank tellers, lawyers, doctors, teachers, ministers, cops—almost any trade or profession you might name. Nobody's immune."

"You didn't know Ernie."

"I've been told that I didn't know Tom, Dick or Harry—but it was always Tom, Dick or Harry I grabbed on the boat to South America with a one-way ticket and the swag."

"But he had no motive to—"

I cut in, "Twenty grand is its own motive. You mentioned he was saving his dough to marry you. What was the ante?"

I braced my cheek for another visit from her palm—but she gritted her teeth at me instead. Her words ground through her teeth.

"You're the nastiest person I've ever—"

"I'm nastier than that," I cut in, "but we're evading the issue. The subject is Ernie's motive."

"The subject is nothing!" she cried, gaining her feet in one swift motion. "I don't believe there was any money. The only person who claims there was is Mrs. Penne, and she's so crooked, she—she—why, everyone knows she's up to her neck in graft. The police searched Ernie and they searched me and they searched this room and there simply was no money; but they had to say something after murdering Ernie in cold blood, and the police in this town are as crooked as the Pennes and they—she—oh, you make me sick!"

She whirled to the door and had it half-way open when my next question caught up to her:

"If you really believe there was no money, why'd you sneak in here to search for it?"

Her mouth opened and closed three times without producing a sound. Then her hand manufactured a lot of sound as it slammed the door behind her bouncing indignation.

"Noisy damn bugger, ain't he?" Landlady Kane's voice growled in my ear.

"Leave him be, ma," Henrietta's husky accents replied. "He's sore he ain't found the money yet. You really think he's lookin' to buy a ranch, ma?"

"Lay off that candy, girl, Suppose he is?"

"I was just wonderin' how much he was fixin' to spend. He's pretty old. I bet

he's almost forty. He must have been savin' for a long time. Wouldn't it be funny if he already has twenty grand?"

"I'd bust a gut laughin'," her mother muttered dryly.

* * *

I studied myself in the square mirror. I didn't look so old, I thought, and in the interest of accurate reporting I wouldn't exactly call myself ugly. Sure, my nose has been pushed around a little, and too many Pacific Islands worried creases in my face and tightened my lips, but most of my hair was still along and ditto for my teeth. My eyes seem to irritate citizens. They seem ordinary to me—greyish holes out of which I notice stuff—but Snow once told me they always gave him the impression I was going to laugh in his face or knee him in his guts.

I turned the mirror over and noted where the paper backing had been torn from the black enamel—which wouldn't have been a bad place to hide two ten-thousand dollar bills at that.

I put the mirror down and considered other places. The detectives had emptied McConnell's paint and enamel cans, but it took me to rip off their labels—fruitlessly.

It took me, also, to poke my head out the window in case he'd thumb-tacked or pasted them to the outside wall. He hadn't. The window casement had been opened and probed, but they'd overlooked the hems of the monk's cloth drapes. I didn't—and collected ten years' accumulation of dust.

I became annoyed, annoyed and eager. I ceased this fiddling and proceeded to case that room from wall to wall, from floor to ceiling, inch by inch, minute by minute—until I ran out of inches and the minutes had accumulated into hours and all I got out of it was the urge to sleep.

I slept.

CHAPTER FOUR

Little Miss Murder

MRS. KANE puckered her fat features at the paper bag in my arms and grumbled, "Didn't say you could cook in

that room, mister. It ain't allowed."

"Who cooks beer?" I said, grinning.

Her fat features unpuckered—like wrinkles smoothing out of a lump of dough. She said she'd heard of people sticking a hot poker into brew. I said she was thinking of other people. She offered me the use of the bottle opener which was attached to the office wall. I said that was right friendly of her. She asked me if I was a solitary drinker. I said not when I could help it. She coyly offered to help it, so I carried my six quarts of beer into the office and used the opener on all six. Two hours later I was four quarts poorer and not exactly capable of spinning on a dime, but in possession of enough of my faculties to grow alert when mine hostess, the witch, leered: "You're a dick, ain't-cha?"

"Kidd," I leered back at her.

"You know what I mean. Bill Brett told me. He's a crook—but then who isn't?"

"That's a fact. I was mentioning ditto to that dish last night, that Hober girl."

"She's a bag," Mrs. Kane snorted, reaching for the fifth quart.

"From her it's mutual," I shrugged. "So there you have it."

"People stink," Mrs. Kane grumbled. She up-ended the quart, inhaled deeply from its neck, set it down, burped gently through her fat fingers gently tapping her lips, then raised a corner of her Indian blanket and blew her nose into it. Her legs belonged to a five-year-old girl. She let the blanket drop and growled, "Go to the circus if you wanna see freaks, you!"

I nodded vigorously. "I will."

"Pretty soon you won't have to," she said, scowling. "They'll drop an atom on Frisco—*woosh!* Next thing, everybody's walkin' around with two heads—whoever's still walkin' around."

"Except Ernie McConnell," I said somberly.

"That creep?" she snorted.

"Now he's a creep?" I snorted back at her. "In the paper, you said he was the nicest—"

"Never mind what I said!" she cut in hoarsely. "You tell the paper one thing. Up here—" she tapped her head significantly—"you know the difference. He had his chance with Henrietta. You know my Henrietta?"

"Sweet kid," I mumbled.

"A doll, a regular little doll. If some smart man doesn't grab her off real quick, she'll wind up in pictures. You mark my word."

"Marked."

"You married?"

"Yup," I lied.

"Ernie wasn't—but he was gettin' around to it. And then *she* wiggled into the picture."

"Gladys Hober?"

"Five years she's been livin' here and never gave him a tumble, she and her damn howling. And then all of a sudden she's right in his lap!" Mine hostess hefted the quart and waved it toward the office window. "Out there on the porch."

"What howling?"

Mrs. Kane set the bottle down and explained, "That's what the argument was about—she on his lap and him wantin' so to marry her he just kept beggin' over and over again, like he'd been stuck on a island without women for ten years and suddenly had Betty Grable shipwrecked into his arms. But she—you think she'd say yes, sittin' in his lap and all like that?"

"Yes."

"You're a fathead. All she wanted was for him to send her to some furriners back East who'd teach her to howl louder. She said if she made the grade howlin' she'd pay him back with interest; but if she didn't, she'd come back and play house. And that poor dumb creep kept yessin' her and yessin' her until I got so mad I felt like pullin' my .45 and—hey! How about leavin' some for Cookie?"

I held out the bottle. She snatched it and concluded the quart. I said, "Cookie, you're a windbag. You jabber and jabber and say nothing. I asked you an hour ago—what howlin'?"

Tears bubbled from her slitted eyes. "Ain't nobody called me C-C-Cookie since my poor Henry went."

"You probably talked him to death. You mean singing? You mean Gladys Hober wanted McConnell to finance her to get voice training—get paid back with interest if she clicked, get her if she didn't?"

"Ain't that what I said?" she demanded. "Ernie could have had Henrietta. I don't

know why, but that girl could have any man she wants in Heatville—but she had to be soft on Ernie. But him? When he got shot he fell right into my lap. He's dyin' and he knows he's dyin'. Does he tell me where he planted all that dough? Does he say where to send his remains? Does he say good-bye?"

"You're beginning to sound like a radio announcer, Cookie. What the hell did he say?"

"Coo-ookie!" she sobbed.

"What did he say?" I yelled into her face.

"The New Look," she yelled back through her sobs. "Just on account my Henrietta got nice enough legs to wear short skirts, he can't think of her nice legs. He's gotta think of that tramp's long skirts coverin' the toothpicks she walks around on."

"You mean his last words were, quote, The New Look, unquote?"

She glared at me through her tears. Her groping hand found the sixth quart and raised it over her tilted face. If I wasn't there I wouldn't have believed it. With all the brew already in her she kept that bottle up-ended until most of the quart was down her gullet.

Then she tossed it aside and grinned her seven teeth at me as the bottle smashed on the floor.

"Ya know wha' I think?" she leered thickly.

"What?" I leered back at her.

"I think yer nothin' but a lousy ol' geek, ya geek!" Her shoulders heaved in the first half of a giggle and came down on the second half of a snore.

She was asleep.

SHE CONTINUED to snore. I thumbed up an eyelid. It remained up. She looked better with it down. I thumbed it down. I made my way to the sink and let cold water dribble over my head while I pondered my progress.

This was Monday afternoon. Monday morning I had kicked around town and learned the following new items:

Ernie McConnell had been a non-union house painter, undercutting prevailing rates.

Gladys Hober was an early-morning disc jockey at the local radio station. She

exercised a weak soprano between platters of Dinah Shore, et al, and came out, in the opinions of various citizens, a poor third to Dinah and et al.

Mayor John Penne had been known to blow his top, but he was popular withal because his furies had been vented upon worthwhile objects—namely, a drunk off-duty cop who'd manhandled a Chinese laundryman, a stranger who tried to revive the Ku Klux Klan during the war hysteria against local Japanese, a councilman who originated a filthy whisper anent Florence Penne and a drugstore cowboy who used too much whip on a Palomino during an Old Settler's parade.

Florence Penne was considered the brains of the family, particularly when it came to receiving bonuses under the table, a talent for which she was spoken of with great admiration.

Having accumulated this assorted trivia, I added to it the data I had accumulated since arriving in Heatville and tried to find in all or any of it a pattern that could explain how Ernie McConnell became entangled with Mayor John Penne's vanished twenty grand.

The only pattern I could find was that Gladys Hober might have pulled a badger deal on the mayor and sent Ernie to collect, and the mayor's sudden temper exploded into Ernie's sudden revolver barrel—which might explain Ernie's cryptic "The New Look" and Miss Hober's palm on my cheek when I suggested Ernie passed her the twenty grand when he passed her on the porch, which, in turn, could explain the missing dough. She would have had almost fifteen minutes to plant it outside the house somewhere, while Ernie pattered about his room, while Mrs. Kane listened to him putter from below and while the law was tracing the license number to Ernie.

The only weak item in such a picture was Mayor Penne's clothes. Why should he take the trouble to get dressed in order to slip downstairs and hand over the blackmail bite?

I was still asking myself why when I pulled my dripping head out from under Mrs. Kane's cold water tap. I groped my way into her bedroom where I found a towel and nothing else of interest. A second bedroom disclosed more piled true de-

tective magazines than space, most of them smeared with chocolate stains.

I returned to the office and toyed with the sleeping hag's eyelid again. Tiring of this pastime, I left the office and bore my confusion upstairs to my room where the first thing that caught my eyes was the chair I had last seen beside the bureau.

It was now dropping on me from the ceiling.

My hands stopped it a short inch above my scalp.

I was looking into the frightened eyes of Henrietta, who was hanging onto the other, or motivating, end of the flying chair. We must have presented a cunning tableau standing like that in the doorway, holding the chair over our heads.

Beyond Henrietta I could see the confusion of a new search added to the original mess. This one centered about my suitcase, which lay forced open on the floor with all my Heatville possessions on the bed beside it.

"Tsk, tsk!" I tsked.

Her mouth hung open. Her teeth, minus the chocolate daubs, were good—small and closely spaced, but white and even.

"Let's put it down now," I said. "I don't think it'll rain any more."

She uttered a sharp giggle. We set the chair on the floor. I pulled the door shut behind me. She wore a tight brown satin dress that accentuated her womanhood.

"You're cute," she crooned huskily. "You don't get mad." She snickered. "Ernie blew his top the first time."

"When he caught you counting his underwear?"

"I was only fifteen. I always liked to know what's going on. You're a shamus, aren't you?"

"I used to be an operative, if that's what you mean. Now I'll be a rancher."

"I don't believe it. I read about operatives all the time. They're usually too poor to pay their rent even."

"Me, too," I said, adding, "until Uncle Willy kicked off and left me fifteen grand." I patted the wallet-holding pocket in my jacket and watched her disbelief and belief battle to a draw in her large eyes.

"Fifteen?"

"Roughly speaking."

"And you carry it around?"

"It's not heavy."

She giggled breathlessly. She fingered my biceps and drew close to me and smiled wistfully up into my eyes. "Honey, when are you gonna ask me out? I get so damn tired of going out alone."

What could I say?

What would you have said?

I said it.

IT WAS a cool evening for Heatville and she wore a tan topcoat over the satin dress. She had worn it through a steak supper and a hammy movie, and now it was buttoned up to her neck in the drive away from Heatville's lights to the neon sign of a deadfall known as Denny's whose specialty, a drink called Denny's Stinger, she promised, would live up to its name.

The coat covered her pretty completely, but I have a good memory, so a few hundred yards short of Denny's neon sign I drove off the highway, killed the engine, switched to parking lights, wooed some rumba music from the radio and slid my arm around her shoulders.

"Now it comes trouble," she told the receding taillight of a passing car.

I pushed my face into her face. It was like kissing an exceptionally limp pillow. I drew my face back an inch and asked, "No?"

She said, "If that's a sample, I'm not buying."

I said, "That was just an introductory offer; this is the sample," and pushed my face—into a handful of fingernails that filled my eyes with tears.

My elbow sent her away from me. I put my handkerchief to my cheek, then held it under the dashlight and gaped at

the four streaks of blood on it. She sat huddled against the door, holding her palm to her cheek from my reflex elbow. Neither of us said anything.

I switched off the radio, turned on the lights, started the engine and tooled my Chevvie into a sharp U-turn, heading back toward the lights of Heatville.

I saw her hand dart toward me and poised my elbow for a repeat performance—but her hand settled on the ignition key, turned it, yanked it out and held it beyond my fast grab. Then I became full of the job of tooling the coasting car out of the highway's traffic. We rolled onto a slightly soft shoulder and stopped.

"I'm sorry, honey," she said softly. "I didn't intend to hurt you. It's just that I don't like you to handle me like you own me just because you bought me a supper and a movie ticket. Please don't take me home now. I like you. Honest, I really like you. You can kiss me, but be nice about it. Like this. . . ."

Five minutes later the key was back in the ignition lock and I was U-turning back toward Denny's, but driving was purely a matter of conditioned reflex. If Ernie McConnell taught her what she demonstrated in those five minutes, I remove a mental hat to Ernie McConnell, loose teeth and all.

I drove my cloud into a wide parking lot where about two dozen other cars already stood. From within the low, rambling, redwood log structure came the jittery strains of be-bop along with much gabble and laughter.

We floated into the roadhouse and were immediately pressed back by the mass of whirling couples. The bar to the left

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was completely obscured by a wall of human backs. To the right was a vast area of booths, mostly packed, featuring dim lighting and half a dozen waitresses.

We had to dance to reach the booths. It was more like wriggling through a bargain-basement crowd than dancing, but it had its points and we finally were spilled into the booth area in time to grab a corner booth a young couple was vacating.

An open kitchen door hid most of the booth from the dancers. Glancing in the open doorway I spotted an unpleasantly familiar redhead gnawing a chicken leg and talking to a chef.

"That's Tom Fuller," Henrietta said, following my glance. We slid into the booth across from each other and she added, "He's Captain of Detectives. Here comes Betty. Put a handkerchief over your face, honey."

Betty turned out to be a gum-chewing blonde who mopped the table with a beer-scented rag. She ignored the handkerchief against my cheek and nodded when Henrietta ordered two stingers. "Isn't this place cute?" Henrietta asked happily after Betty vanished. "Aren't you glad you came? Wait'll you try your stinger!"

The stingers came; three of my dollars went. I said the booth was cute. The walls were high and thick enough to keep us from hearing our neighbors' conversation, which I hoped was mutual. The dim light came from a shaded wall lamp that hung low over the table. Henrietta said, "Here's to nothing," and sipped her stinger.

I said, "Ditto," and sipped mine.

Henrietta giggled at my widening mouth and eyes. If they didn't make it of liquid pepper, it was because nitric acid took up too much room.

"It gets you, doesn't it?"

"That," I breathed hoarsely, "is the understatement of the week!"

She said, losing her giggle, "Tom Fuller is crazy about me."

I asked, "Want him to join us?"

She said, "Later. After you hand me the fifteen grand."

My mind was still coping with the stinger. I asked, "What fifteen grand?"

"The fifteen grand in your wallet."

"Why should I give it to you?"

"To keep me from screaming," she

said. She was unbuttoning her tan top-coat as she said it. She added, "They'll come running when they hear me scream. Tom'll be there, and then you'll spend a lot of years in jail if Tom don't kill you first. And—"

SHE CONTINUED to talk, but I stopped listening. I was gaping at the top of her brown satin dress as the coat fell away from it. The bodice of the dress was ripped and crumpled and the pink flesh beneath was marked with long fresh scratches, like fingernail scratches, that started a little under her face, which eyed me calmly and speculatively as her voice droned on.

My mind dropped the stinger and leaped off the cloud and arranged her expression when I'd mentioned Uncle Willy's imaginary legacy, and her fingernails in my cheek when I tried to do what she'd been practically begging me to do, and the five minutes when she had turned on just enough steam to bring me back on the road to Demy's. My mind arranged these memories with the memory of her coat buttoned up through supper and a movie and the drive out, and my mind drew the astounding conclusion that I had been neatly baited, hooked and had.

When my mind considered she might actually start screaming unless I produced fifteen thousand dollars right then, it chucked everything and went blank.

"I'll give you till I count ten," she was saying. "One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . ."

My wallet showed at "Six."

She reached for it at "Nine."

My hand on the wallet closed and rose twelve inches to bounce the "Ten" right back down her newly scratched throat.

I whirled around the table's end to join her on her seat, buttoned her coat back up to her neck and pocketed my wallet.

"Happy, kids?" Betty, the waitress, poked her head around the kitchen door.

"Like larks," someone told her—me.

"I guess you kids want to be alone," Betty said, grinning at the spectacle of Henrietta's head against my shoulder in my one-armed embrace.

"Good guess." I tried to grin back at her. Betty's head withdrew and I wondered if the blood I'd been sweating

showed. However, I had other worries.

The music continued to grind, something about a tree in a meadow. My mind continued not to grind. I drained the stinger in my glass, and my brain snapped back into place.

I unscrewed the bulb from the wall lamp, turning the booth into shadow.

I poured Henrietta's stinger into the socket, turning the shadow into sudden blackness that blotted every single light in Denny's. The tree was no longer in the meadow. The only sounds were a few shouts, a few squeals and a wide assortment of titters.

I fired three rapid shots into the ceiling. The titters changed to wild screams and the pounding of many feet.

My feet pounded along with the others. Henrietta's feet pounded air in front of me, her other end flopping in air behind me with her middle entrenched firmly on my left shoulder.

I used the kitchen door. Someone in the kitchen struck a match when I was halfway through it. Briefly, I glimpsed the dour face of Detective Tom Fuller eyeing the tiny flare he'd brought to life, cupping it with his palms and raising his eyes.

If he saw anything, it was the swinging heel of Henrietta's right shoe, swinging toward his face. He yanked his head back exposing his midsection to my advancing left knee which advanced.

He grunted. He jackknifed, bringing his face down—into my right knee which advanced up. That raised his head to a point where I could use the barrel of my Colt in my free hand most effectively. I used it effectively and stepped over him, aiming toward the night-framed outline of a doorway. Someone else in the kitchen whispered, "Tom! What happened?"

I didn't linger for an answer. Henrietta was gaining weight. I carried her past a row of garbage cans and lugged her into the confusion of the parking lot, which was a bedlam of lurching cars and running people. Headlights were blazing to life and sweeping over the hordes plunging from the darkened roadhouse door.

A wild-eyed young couple were giggling themselves into a Packard parked alongside my Chevvie. The lad's eyes bulged.

"Sh-sh-shot?" he gasped.

"Naw. Fainted," I told him.

"Wh-what happened inside?" he croaked. "Sounded like a k-k-killin'!"

"Beats me," I said. "All I want is out. How about lending me a hand with Mabel?"

He lent me two hands, and my Chevvie became part of the vehicular confusion cascading away from the darkened Denny's. Distant sirens were already threading needles of scream through the night. As Henrietta began to stir at my side I turned off the highway and followed my headlights down a side road that wound deep into the darkness. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

Twenty Thousand Reasons

HER EYES opened slowly. They studied the blackness beyond the windshield a while, then swiveled to study the shadowy brush beside the parked car. She looked back through the rear window at the tiny headlights crawling up and down the highway about half a mile behind. Her gaze came around and rested briefly on my face, then dropped to my revolver slanting up at her from my right knee where my left hand gripped it.

I said, "Tough luck, kid. You had a pretty good idea back there, but it wasn't good enough."

"How'd you do it?" she whispered.

"That's not the point."

Her eyes flicked around the blackness, returned to mine. "Where are we?"

"That's not the point either. The point is who sicced you on me?"

She tried a giggle and let it die in the face of my expression. "I got it out of a magazine," she whispered. Her whisper began to tremble a little. "Why'd you say 'tough luck' like that?"

"You'll find out in a minute. You get the deal on Mayor Penne out of a magazine also?"

"Honey," she whimpered. "Please don't talk to me like that. Please—"

She reached a faltering hand toward my arm. I used the arm to shake it off and my hand on the arm to slap her head back against the window. I felt like a hero, the kind of hero for whom horsewhips were invented—but I also felt on the teetering edge of bingo.

"Turn off the sex, Cuddles. Just keep your fingers crossed and hope you come up with the right answers. You put the arm on John Penne out of a magazine?"

She sat huddled in the corner with her palm where my palm had landed. Tears glistened on the tips of her fingers. One of them dropped to her lap as her head bobbed.

"Was McConnell in on the bite?"

Tears sprayed sideways off her fingers as her head shook.

"Then how'd he beat you to the payoff?"

"I don't know," she said in a trembling voice. "I was supposed to get it at the cemetery, b-b-but—"

"Where's the mag now?" I cut in.

"H-h-home," she whimpered.

"Home it is, then," I said, fingering the ignition button. I had to use both hands to zig-zag the Chevvie back toward the highway on that narrow road. During the last zag my revolver dropped to the floorboards from between my legs. I braked fast and reached for it—and grabbed air where the barrel had been.

It jabbed hard into my side as Henrietta screamed, "Put your hands all the way up, you—you—"

She was coiled in a tight ball at my side and her trembling was transmitted to my ribs through the revolver's barrel.

"Easy, kid," I told her quietly.

She screamed, "If you don't put your hands up, I'll—"

I put my hand on the barrel and felt it jerk as her finger convulsed on the trigger.

There was a barren click.

I let it click six times around the clock to convince her she was trying to shoot an empty weapon. Then I took the weapon from her unresisting fingers and made a show of deliberately wrapping my handkerchief around the butt. I put the wrapped weapon in my left side pocket and grinned wolfishly at her in the darkness.

"Thanks, Cuddles," I told her. "Since Friday midnight I've been batting my brains trying to figure a fall guy for a little deal I had to pull. The deal happened Friday midnight near the cemetery, where the gun you just covered with your fingerprints put two slugs into a guy who is now buried *under* a coffin in the cemetery. Remember the cemetery Friday midnight,

where and when you asked the cops in a patrol car to drive you back to town?"

She didn't want to remember. She wanted to sit there with widened eyes and a widened mouth and tremble.

"Who the corpse is—or why—isn't important. The chances are he's under another corpse's coffin for keeps—unless someone sends in an anonymous tip. I want you to think of me as Mr. Anonymous. You've read the crime mags; you should know the score. Is the picture clear, Cuddles?"

The picture was a low moan that issued from her lips.

"That's three things I want you to keep in mind," I went on. "You were seen where and when he was shot dead. Your prints are on the gun that shot him dead. And the gun stays with Mr. Anonymous, who thinks very highly of Mayor John Penne. I want you to concentrate on that last item. Are you concentrating, Cuddles?"

She was concentrating. John Barrymore never had a more attentive audience.

"The next question," I continued, "is where at home is the mag that fingers John Penne?"

IT WAS under her mattress.

I left her over her mattress, face down and motionless. She was past crying. Her little house of cards had turned into a cold deck, and she was concentrating on the idea.

I left her mother in the wheelchair in the office where she continued to snore, where her eyelid continued to remain laxly toyable.

I carried the magazine to my room and spent about ten minutes learning why Mayor John Penne left his bed to dress and carry twenty grand out of his house Friday midnight.

It was a 1930 issue of this magazine. The name under the more youthful, but unmistakable, face of the mayor was not John Penne. The face, full and profile, was on a page full of other faces under the heading: **WATCH OUT FOR THESE MEN!**

Cheechobee County, Florida, offered five hundred dollars for information leading to his arrest. Citizens were warned that he was "exceptionally strong and dangerous." He was wanted to serve

eight more years of a ten-year term on a turpentine farm. He had been convicted of manslaughter.

I folded the page into my shoe and began packing. There were no more secrets. The answers were all neatly arranged in my cunning little brain. It behooved me now to get out of Ernie McConnell's room before the answers started exploding in my face.

Then the door slammed open and Captain of Detectives Tom Fuller exploded into my vision, with Chief Bill Brett, behind him, yelling, "Tom! Hold it!"

Tom didn't look so good. He moved awkwardly and he wore a new patch of adhesive where his red hair met his temple. He was moving awkwardly toward where I was rising from my suitcase. He was clawing at his hip and mumbling something that brought a dribble of wet down his chin.

"Tom Fuller!" Brett roared. Accompanying the roar was a sharp click as the huge revolver leaped from Brett's leather holster to his hand and his thumb cocked the hammer.

The redhead froze a yard short of me. He looked over his shoulder, his hand on his hip holster.

Brett drawled quietly, "This'll be handled my way if it means you get carried out feet first, Tom. Empty your hand." The big detective's hand came away from his hip slowly. Brett drawled at me, "Told you we'd check, son. You're an agency man. Not only that. You built a reputation takin' all kinds of chances and gettin' away with it—up to here.

"Up to here," he said softly, "we got a little riot out to Denny's tonight. Some joker shorted the electric system pourin' whiskey in an open socket. Then he blasted three shots into the ceilin' and started a panic. Accordin' to witnesses it's likely this here joker was a mean-lookin' feller about your build.

"After we check your prints against some prints we picked up at this joker's table," he went on quietly, "and then check your pea-shooter against the slugs we probed outa the ceilin', I think up to here's where you stop gettin' away with takin' chances. You want to say somethin'?"

I said softly, "I could give you twenty

thousand perfectly good reasons why you'd be wrong."

"Chief!" Tom Fuller pleaded hoarsely. "Just give me five minutes alone up here with him. All I want is—"

Brett's drawl iced through the redhead's plea: "Go down and set in the car, Tom. Now."

"Chief, I tell you he was *seen* at Denny's. He's just talkin'. You said yourself he could talk his way through a—"

"*Tom!*" The name coiled off Brett's tongue like a whip. He shifted his chill gaze from mine to plant it deeply in Fuller's smoky orbs. The redhead suddenly dove out of the room, slamming the door behind him. We listened until his feet reached the bottom landing and the front door slammed. Then Brett drawled, "That was a mighty round figure you mentioned, son."

"You struck me as a reasonable man," I said.

"Where could you find twenty thousand good reasons?" he drawled.

"In this room."

"Don't give me that, son. There ain't a square inch of this room I don't know personally."

"McConnell mentioned where when he died. The New Look."

"He had that Hober wench in mind," Brett drawled. "Mrs. Kane gave me all the background on that."

"Mrs. Kane had the Hober wench in mind," I said. "McConnell was telling her where to find the dough, but his last breath punctuated his statement prematurely. Don't get itchy. I'm gonna use my revolver. It's empty and I'll hold it by the barrel."

"Go ahead," he nodded, still gripping his cocked artillery piece.

I drew my revolver gingerly, gripped the barrel and commenced using it. "What McConnell actually was saying was, 'The new looking glass.'"

"I'll be damned!" breathed Chief Brett, watching my revolver butt shatter the square mirror, revealing glimpses of green paper where shards of glass splintered loose.

"He was alone up here for fifteen minutes," I said, handing him the smashed mirror and pocketing my revolver. "That gave him enough time to paste the bills

to the back of the mirror with quick-drying enamel, then paste paper over the enamel. How I see it, he didn't know whether he'd gotten away without being spotted, so he planned to leave town until he could be certain. And knowing that if he was picked up and the bills were found on him he'd be a gone gosling for sure, he pulled this hocus-pocus with the mirror. How do you see it, Chief?"

Brett had both bills free of the glass now, although getting the enamel off the bills would present another problem. His baby cannon went back to its leather nest. The bills went into his shirt pocket.

"I don't reckon I'll ever find the joker who started that ruckus in Denny's, son," he drawled, buttoning his shirt pocket over the bills. "You've given me some mighty powerful reasons why it can't be you."

They were powerful enough to get me past Tom Fuller and away into the night.

MAYOR JOHN PENNE no longer had a uniformed watch dog at his door. But he still had a microphone planted in his room. He awakened as I finally found it, taped under the drawer of his night table. He was up on his elbow, eyeing me grimly as I tore it loose from its wires. I backed away with it, kicked off my shoe, picked out the nineteen-year-old clipping and tossed it to him.

"That started it," I told him as his big hand closed on it. "Did you know who was putting the bite on you?"

His fingers smoothed the clipping. He studied it expressionlessly, then raised his eyes and shook his head slowly.

"A twenty-year-old delinquent," I told him. "Henrietta Kane. She studies true detective mags for blackmail angles and happened on that. She was at the cemetery Friday night. But McConnell, who had the room over the phone Henrietta used to make the appointment, heard her make it through an acoustic freak in that house's construction. He intercepted you. His motive was to use the dough to ante into the affections of a chick who has delusions of voice. That's half the story. Are you with me?"

He nodded warily.

"The other half concerns your future. McConnell, of course, is eliminated. Hen-

rietta doesn't want to play any more on account she thinks I can throw her to the wolves on a framed murder rap if she bothers you again. That leaves myself as the only other person who knows your little secret and I'm working for your wife, not to mention what I think of the Florida turpentine farms of nineteen years ago."

He scowled at the disconnected mike on the night table. "Knew Brett had one concealed in the room," he muttered in a voice that originated around his toes. "Heard Brett mention it Saturday morning, when I first recovered consciousness. Didn't know exactly where and couldn't risk getting up to look for it."

"Why not?"

"Somebody might have picked such a moment to enter the ward—and learn I was up."

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

"I couldn't let anyone know I was conscious," he said wearily. "Brett would ask questions. I would have to explain how I happened to be leaving my house at midnight, fully dressed and with twenty thousand dollars in my pocket."

"The papers had it that you were returning to your house from a political meeting and the dough was lifted from your wall safe—your wife's story," I said.

"I didn't know that," he breathed, gapping at me. "That was what I was waiting for, to learn what Brett knew. But Doc McKeever had warned the orderlies and nurses, and even Florrie—Mrs. Penne—not to say anything that might unduly excite me if I recovered consciousness while they spoke. And I couldn't ask Florrie because of the concealed microphone. Nor could I let her know that I was conscious until I knew whether she'd learned about—" his fist crumpled the old clipping—"this."

"That almost sounds logical," I said dryly, "but you couldn't lie there the rest of your life. Suppose this Doc McKeever's orders were followed carefully and you never got your answers?"

"I was gambling on one more day. If by then nobody evinced knowledge of the actual facts I was going to fence their questions until I got home and spoke to Florrie privately."

"Suppose," I went on, "you heard some

orderly crack about how Brett is waiting for your recovery to serve a warrant for your arrest as an escaped felon. Then what?"

"Then," he growled, fixing me with that implacable stare, "I would have continued my deception until the best moment for me to leave this place and city." He shook the clipping-holding fist. "They had me in a sweatbox two weeks before I broke out and escaped—two weeks in a box in which I couldn't stand erect, sit or lie down, living on stale corn pone and swamp water, having to—"

"Don't describe it," I cut in hastily. "I was with the Marines on three Pacific invasions. Anything stronger than that turns my stomach. The only problem you have left is how to soothe your wife. She knows you started to leave the house with the payoff. If you could invent a good political payoff, you might get away with it. Any questions?"

He said, "The money—"

"That I couldn't trace. Any other questions?"

"I—I don't quite know how to thank you," he said awkwardly, "or how to apologize for what I did to you Sunday."

"Don't," I said.

THOMAS pumped my hand as if he expected oil to start flowing from my mouth. "I had you all wrong, Kidd," he said, grinning. "The whole agency has you wrong. Mrs. Penne phoned an hour ago to say the agency can write its own ticket in the county. That must have been the smoothest, neatest operation in the agency's history."

"I wouldn't say that," I murmured modestly.

"I don't mind telling you," he rapturized on, "that I spent the last thirty hours expecting sudden headlines to blast the case wide open. I'll tell you what. Mrs. Penne wants me to put someone on the trail of the money. I'm going to wire Snow and ask him to leave you here for the job."

"I wouldn't put anyone on it," I told him hastily. "Leave it to the treasury boys; just give them the serial numbers of the bills and they'll nab 'em when they reach a bank. If they have trouble backtracking the bills you might soften the job by mentioning Bill Brett."

"You sure, Kidd?"

"I'm as sure as if I saw him pocket them," I told him. "The one thing I can't stomach is a crooked cop. Sooner or later he'll try to spend them, and when he does you won't have to worry about him muscling into your city business any more."

"I don't worry about him now," Thomas said, grinning harder. "This morning we got back a plainclothes guard job he'd taken from us, a roadhouse a little way out of town, but still in the city limits. Someone started a riot there last night and Brett's man, who was on the premises, didn't lift a finger to stop it. In fact, the roadhouse owner not only wants the regular guard back, he also wants two men detailed to track down whoever started the riot. You say something, Kidd?"

"What's the quickest road out of Heatville?" I said.

THE END



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A STOMACH FOR KILLING



He was out of breath from carrying the heavy board, and he wanted to wait. But that was too dangerous. Someone might come along.

By DAN GORDON

Blake Henley enjoyed his work, figuring that love and blackmail make a fine combination. And if he had to murder a sucker or two—well, who'd ever suspect an upright, fine figure of a man like him?

THERE was money shaking them down, because the things they did when the moon stood still behind Diamond Head were strange and weird and unlike the things they did in the old home town.

Blake Henley knew all about it, having just wound up an affair with a wealthy

widow who had fattened his checking account without complaint, and had accepted the moment of parting with philosophical calm. He thought of her fondly as he stood waiting for them to open the door of the clipper. They took their time about it, but Blake was in no particular hurry. He was working at his trade.

The passengers from the States walked almost in single file. Blake Henley watched them, crossing them off in his mind. His eyes dusted lightly over the males, rested longer on the women. The first woman, middle-aged and stout—he'd tackled a couple of those in leaner times, but now, in this prosperous era, he resolved to combine a little pleasure with business, though it might mean waiting a few more days, meeting a few more planes.

Eyes lighting, he considered the slim ash blonde with the lithe, athletic walk. Glancing sideways, he checked the newspaper men. If the girl were some kind of celebrity, he'd have to pass her up. Years ago, when he had been a comparative amateur, a well-known screen star had informed him that if he wanted to blackmail her, he'd have to stand in line.

The camera men and reporters paid no attention to this girl, however, except to view with appreciation her golden, shapely legs. Blake Henley waited until she turned to look back at the clipper, then placed himself in her path.

They collided, and it was clearly her fault. She staggered, steadied herself on his arm and said, "Oh! I'm terribly sorry."

"Quite all right," Blake said. He gave her the smile, conscious of how white his teeth looked against the brown of his face. It was a good smile. It should have been. He devoted fifteen minutes to perfecting it, religiously, every day. "Quite all right," he repeated. "Nothing damaged but my toe."

She answered his smile, and went on to the row of cabs. Blake looked after her thoughtfully. The setup was fairly ideal, if only—damn it, the thought was absurd, but she reminded him vaguely of Lola Pantage. And he hated to think of Lola Pantage. He had trained himself to keep that memory buried deep in his mind.

Of all the women he had known, she was the only one he had killed.

The cab driver said, "Smatter, mister?"

You look like you just seen a ghost."

"Hungry," Blake Henley told him, turning on the smile. "Came down here without any breakfast." The other cab rolled out of sight, but finding the girl wouldn't be any problem. There weren't that many hotels. Blake shut the door behind him. "Royal Islander," he said.

THERE was a section of beach in front of the hotel, marked off for its guests. To the left, facing the ocean, the public bath houses offered a solution to those reluctant to pay—or incapable of paying—twenty-five plus per day.

Blake carefully hung his tailored slacks in the locker, spent some time worrying about the soft surplus flesh beneath the bronze skin at his middle. He was careful to hold in this blossoming paunch as he crossed the beach and entered the tepid water.

Once in, he let the flabby muscles relax, and swam seaward with a lazy stroke that put no strain on his arms.

He swam a long way out, because the girl would need time to check into the hotel, time to unpack things and hang them up, time to get bored with her room before she came to lie in the sun with the other guests on the sand before the hotel.

Out where the breakers began, he rolled on his back and inspected the sky. On the horizon were the eternal cloud banks, but over his head the sun shone brightly, and the sky was Hawaiian blue. Blake held his breath as each comber passed. He didn't have to watch for them. You could hear the ruffled water at the top of each tumbling crest.

The surf board came hurtling at him soundlessly, sliding at racing speed just ahead of the shore-bound wave. Blake heard the shout and opened his eyes to see the point of the board coming toward him like a projectile. In terror, he flung himself sideways, felt the board brush lightly against his legs, saw the fear on the face of the beach boy standing on top of the board.

Then the wave went by, and the board was gone. Blake trod water, feeling the weakness deep in his stomach, the strength drain out of his legs. Thinking of her again. Thinking of Lola Pantage. Remembering the way her face had looked that moonlight night when he'd struck her

head with another surf board, out here, far from shore.

Rolling into position, Blake tried an energetic crawl to chase the thought away. It worked but not too well, for he was still thinking of Lola Pantage when he waded out through the breakers in front of the Royal Islander. Thinking that this was the very spot where her body had washed ashore.

He needed a drink, but that wouldn't do. The new girl might not care for the stuff on his breath this early in the day. Carefully holding his stomach in, he was confident that his figure looked reasonably youthful as he entered the exclusive little slice of beach and lay on his back in the sand.

Without seeming to, he checked the other bathers. The girl had not yet come. It was just as well. He had time to reorganize his thinking, to tuck the thought of Lola Pantage away into the darkened corner of his very convenient mind.

Walking like a goddess in a French swim suit, she picked her way through the sun bathers. An attendant followed with a beach robe. When he started to spread it, she spoke to him and chose a spot closer to Blake.

Blake said, "Hello there!" when she was settled and the beach attendant had gone.

Lazily, she rolled, and the movement awakened the long, graceful muscles beneath the tan skin on her legs. She said, "Ah, the man with the toe. My name's Mildred Wimple."

"Blake Henley. Have you been in?" Wimple. Scads of dough in the family, no doubt. It took such a lot of background to enable anyone to sound haughty and proud while pronouncing such a name.

She said, "Not yet. Let's wait."

Amiably, he agreed. He liked the implied camaraderie of the "let's," and the smooth inflections in her voice that spoke of finishing school. They talked and laughed in the afternoon, and at five, he bought her a drink.

Blake wasn't the man to rush a job. But this pigeon was so ideal, so perfect for his plan, with her graceful woman's body and her round and innocent eyes, that he found himself revising his schedule. With luck and a little moonlight dancing, he

might save at least a week, might complete the important part of his play immediately—tonight.

They dined together in a bamboo-furnished place he knew. It had charm and exotic atmosphere, and it fronted on the sea. At Blake's suggestion, they applied themselves to downing a number of drinks. Mildred Wimple became more talkative, and her laugh grew rather wild—a condition Blake could understand, for, while he prided himself on his capacity, he himself was somewhat high.

Not to high to attend to business. Across the yellow candles, he looked deeply into her eyes. And by this and other devices employed with his usual skill, he came at last at ten P.M. to Miss Wimple's hotel room.

Or suite, counting the living room. Mildred Wimple changed to a sari, a remarkable garment that managed to conceal almost nothing with the help of ten or twelve yards of cloth.

Blake said, "Remarkable, darling. You look like the spirit of the islands." He leaned back, enjoying the comfortable feel of the cushions.

"Thank you," Mildred said.

"You know, you seem so unlike the average tourist, I really have trouble believing this is your first time out."

"It is, though." The sari cloth made a silken murmur as she mixed a pair of drinks.

BLAKE got up and joined her. They were close, quite close. He put both hands on her shoulders, feeling the smooth firmness of the muscles beneath his hands. She didn't move away, but continued to stir one drink. Her perfume was all around him. He found the scent delightful. Blake Henley was a man who took pleasure in his work.

When she turned to him with the drinks in her hands, he kissed her very gently. It was a tender, respectful gesture, and he did it very well.

The next would be a more pleasant kiss, but that would follow the drink. Blake fervently wished that Mildred looked less like Lola Pantage.

Or that Lola, the girl he had killed, had not made him a murderer, with her crying and recrimination, and threats about the

police. Still, the thing had been simple enough. Women always believed what they wanted to believe. And when he'd told her his threats were a joke, she had swallowed it quickly enough. That, and his offer of marriage. She'd been the happiest of women when she'd gone to her death in the surf on that fragrant, moonlit night.

But Mildred was saying something. "What are you thinking of?"

Blake, coming back from his secret world, said, "Of you, and the beauty of your eyes, and the distance from here to the dawn." He glanced at her quickly. A line like that could get you a laugh if the mood were not just right.

She sighed and snuggled back against the cushions. Her mood was exactly right.

Blake sensed it, and he put down his



"Tell me about the man," Blake said.

drink. In accordance with his stepped-up schedule, it was time for the passionate kiss.

He'd begun it, and Mildred was melting into his arms, when the tap came, sharp and distinct, at the door. She answered the door, spoke softly to a bell-boy who glanced briefly at Blake, gave her a telegram. Blake also rose. He didn't particularly mind the delay. He passed the moment inspecting himself in an excellent full-length mirror. He looked very well in his slacks and jacket. The fat didn't show at all. Pleased, he moved closer to the glass, while behind him Mildred ripped the envelope, read the telegram.

She laid it on the table. It was folded,

but as Blake passed the table, he saw the name of the signer.

And the name was Martin Pantage.

He said, as casually as he could, "I couldn't help seeing the name, Mildred. I knew some Pantages back in the States. I wonder if they are the same?"

"Possibly. But I doubt it, unless you lived around Pittsburgh." Blake shook his head, and the girl went on. "Incidentally," she said, "my name is Pantage, too."

The fear came on him swiftly in an overwhelming tide. He stared at the girl and knew that his posture was poor, his shoulders were sagging, but at the moment he didn't care.

She laughed at his troubled face and said, "Oh, of course, I shouldn't have lied to you, but it's not as serious as that."

Blake said, "No. Of course not." He didn't dare say more.

The girl's face was serious now. She said, "One of the reasons I came out here was to find out about my sister. She died out here two years ago. Drowned. When the body was washed ashore, everyone seemed satisfied that it was an accident. I'd feel the same way, except—"

"Yes?" Blake Henley said.

"Well, Lola was a competent swimmer. Then, too, there was a man."

Blake had started to light a cigarette, had his lighter cupped in his hand. He was conscious, suddenly, of gripping it so that the metal cut into his flesh. He said, "Tell me about the man."

"There's nothing to tell. She sent a picture once—of the two of them together. She talked about him in all her letters, including her last. It must have been a big affair."

Blake said, "What was his name?"

"She never mentioned it."

Lighting the cigarette, Blake maintained the perfect control he had over his soft, well-kept hands. He had forgotten the picture that roaming photographer had snapped. But why should he have remembered? That day had been soft and sunny, and murder a future thing. . . . He said, "Where does the man come in?"

"Why, if they'd been so fond of each other, don't you think it a little strange that he shouldn't write to us, her family?"

"A trifle," Blake agreed. "Won't you sit down?" He waited until she was

seated, sat beside her. The light from a lamp illuminated the soft curve of her throat, and he caught himself wondering how long she would struggle if he suddenly cut off her breath. Quite a while, no doubt. And she was strong. Besides, the bell-boy had seen him with her. That picture. He wanted to ask for a look at it, but if the likeness were good, and she saw him and the picture at the same time . . . No. She was drunk, but not *that* drunk. Blake said as carelessly as he could, "What do you plan to do?"

"Ask questions." Her voice was remarkably sober. "Show that snapshot around. I'll find out who the man is if I ask the little people—the waiters, busboys and bartenders in all the Waikiki bars."

Blake said, "I doubt if anyone will remember. You said it has been two years. Those people come and go, and to them all tourists look alike."

Mildred said, "He wasn't a tourist. Lola's letter mentioned that he'd been in the island for years."

THERE was something about her voice, some hint of knowledge withheld. She couldn't know, but she might suspect. There was one sure way for him to find out. He said, "You shouldn't dwell upon it tonight, at any rate. Suppose we have another drink, then go for a moonlight swim?"

The silence grew long between them, and he watched her with narrowed eyes.

Then, abruptly, she seemed to shake off her mood. Her voice was almost gay. "Let's," she said. "I get low whenever I think of Lola, but I shouldn't spoil our evening."

"Anything," he whispered softly, "that worries you, worries me. And we'll certainly look for your man tomorrow. But let's not spoil tonight." His voice trailed off. He kissed her, finding the act very pleasant. Her lips were soft and aware.

At his suggestion they parted. Blake left the hotel first. Going out through the lobby, he took particular pains that his departure should be observed by the same bell-boy who had delivered the telegram. If the lady went swimming later that was none of his affair. He could tell them the last time he'd seen her she'd been preparing for bed in her room.

Blake folded his clothing with care and hid it behind a fallen palm that lay well up on the beach. He wasn't thinking of murder. It really wasn't necessary to dwell on a thing of that nature. You put it out of your mind until somewhere, out in the surf, the moment came. . . . He was more concerned about the growing flabbiness of his well-muscled body. Either he'd have to take some exercise or resume his operations in some other quarter of the globe. It was almost impossible to mingle with desirable people in Hawaii without lounging about on the beach. He would be ever so sorry to leave, for he did love the climate so. . . .

These were his thoughts as he strolled up the beach toward the canoe club. There would be a surf board or two left outside, rentals returned after closing.

Mildred was already there, standing alone in the shadows. Breakers down at the water's edge tumbled in the ceaseless rhythm established by the ages, and the sound of distant music filtered down from the nearest hotel.

Mildred said, "Surf boards! Can we take one?"

"Easily. The club keeps a boy on watch, but he doesn't waste his time down here. He leaves right after the boss."

Suppressing a grunt, Blake lifted the board and bore it down to the water. Beside him, Mildred was having fun with the sand, matching Blake's longer stride.

He wanted to wait before going in, for he was slightly out of breath from lugging the heavy board. Waiting was dangerous, however. There was always the chance that a strolling couple would see the two of them there, would remember, tomorrow or later, that the girl had been with a man.

Blake sighed, lowered the board quietly to the water's surface and waded out to sea. Mildred splashed beside him. Awkwardly, happily, like an excited child.

The changing face of the moon looked down and found them far from shore.

"I'm tired," the girl said suddenly. "I'll have to rest a while."

Blake waited until a swollen wave lifted him high in the air. He scanned the surface, and all around there was nothing but water. Nothing stirred on the face of the sea but the undulating swell.

Blake said, "Over here. You can lean on the board and rest." His voice held a strange, unusual note, for the time had come.

Time to kill.

She was swimming toward him, weakly. He turned the blunt nose of the board toward her and jabbed it ahead viciously, aiming it at her head. His mind had become a spinning top, but he knew the board had struck something, and the girl wasn't there anymore.

He waited, alone with his whirling mind. Another wave passed and hissed shoreward, molten beneath the moonlight, silver and frothy green.

Behind him the girl's voice spoke. He was sure it was her voice, though the tone was now clipped and brittle. She said, "You didn't quite make it, sucker. Let's see you try again."

Blake Henley went mad. He didn't know that he cried aloud, but his squeal of rage trailed thinly over the water as he thrashed toward the girl.

She went down before his hands touched her. Blake Henley dived in pursuit. Porpoise-like, she eluded him. Though once or twice he gripped her, her flesh was smooth and slippery, and she slithered from his grasp. If he could only get his hands on her throat. . . .

He couldn't. He knew that, when exhaustion fought through his fear-crazed brain and halted his flailing strokes. He lay there upon the surface, beaten, gasping for air.

And from somewhere beneath the water, strong, slender hands gripped his ankles. They were dragging him down

to the ocean bottom, drowning him.

The world became a whirling blur full of pain and terror. And over all there was weariness and the horrible pain in his lungs. Blake Henley lost consciousness then. . . .

HE DIDN'T want to get up, later, when, beaten and half drowned, he was stretched on the hard-packed sand. He had the feeling of having been talking, deliriously, for his throat was parched. He could hear the voices. One was Mildred's. Blake opened one eye when the man spoke, and recognized the bell-boy he had seen at the hotel.

The girl was breathing heavily. She said happily to the bell-boy, "Well, that winds up the Pantage dame. Think Acme will give us a raise?"

"Don't know. They ought to."

Acme. That would be the name of a detective agency, no doubt. Hired by Lola's people. Blake thought these things without particular interest. Lying there, with his hair in the sand, he would have said that nothing could wound him. He would be stronger presently, and he was still alive. If there were women on the jury when he finally came to trial. . . .

The detective in the bellhop's rig said, "I was worried about you, Milly, out there all alone."

Milly answered, "You needn't have been. He wasn't much of a swimmer." And then she added the words that were to torture Blake Henley constantly until the day of his execution. She said thoughtfully, "Can you imagine a dame like Lola Pantage going for that flabby jerk?"



AT LAST! A DRESSING AMERICA'S BEEN WAITING FOR

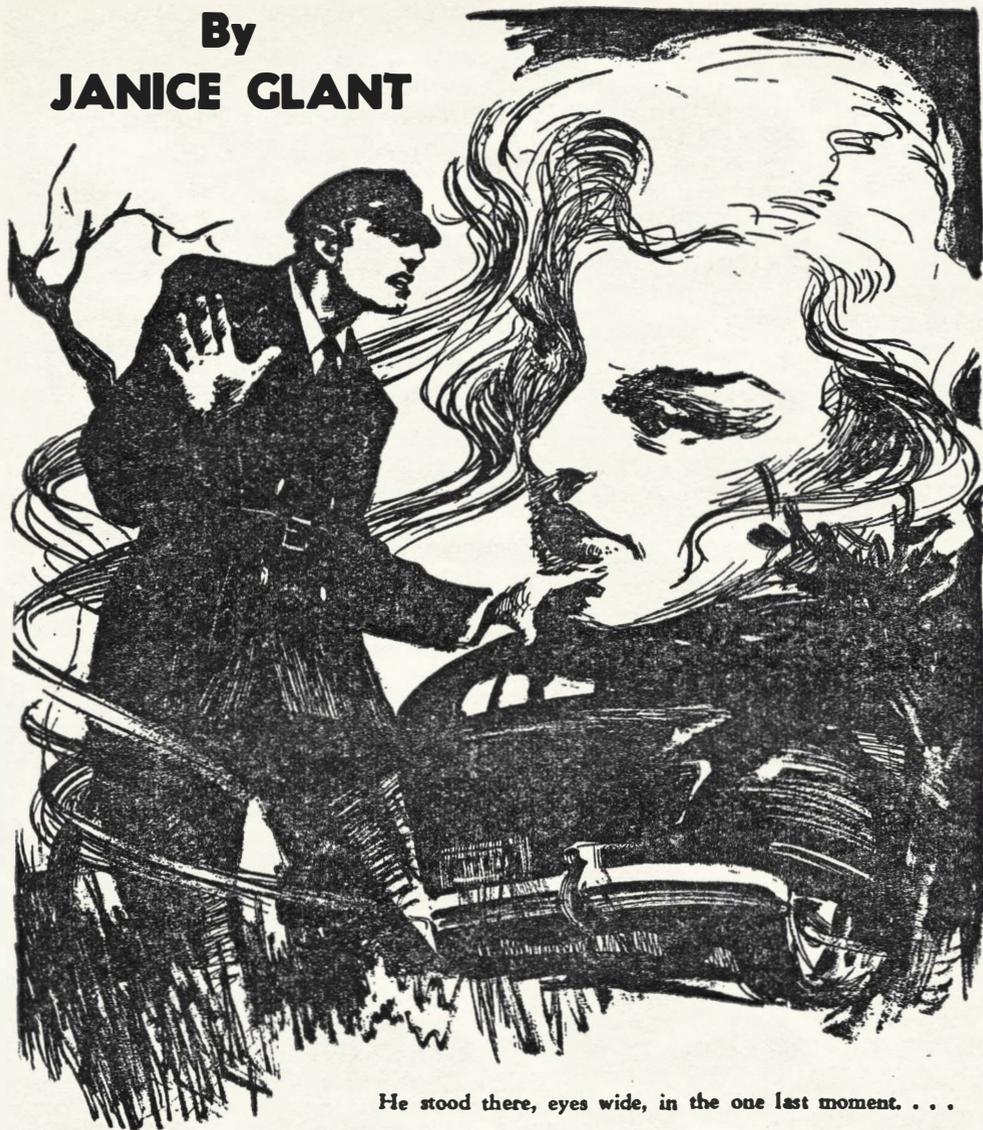
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By
JANICE GLANT



He stood there, eyes wide, in the one last moment. . . .

RED, BLACK, and DEAD!

*She spoke like a mother to him—
she said—but her voice had a
strange timbre, and back of Martha
Moody's eyes danced the strange,
glinting eyes of murder. . . .*

STANDING at the window beside the front door of her house, Martha Moody was putting on her gloves. She did this by tugging at the leather in vicious little jerks, often pinching the backs of her hands, but this she did not notice. Martha was watching the car that waited for her under the porte-cochere—

the car, and the chauffeur who was slouched beside it. He would straighten up quickly, Martha knew, the instant she appeared, touching his cap smartly and ushering her into the tonneau.

She gave a stiff wrench to the glace kid between her fingers. "Daniel," thought Martha Moody. "Black and red Daniel." And, in truth, the man lolling so nonchalantly beside the gleaming limousine did give the effect of a study in black and scarlet. His face, whipped by the chill river wind, was as ruddy as a sunset. Martha fixed her attention on the rich black broadcloth of his uniform, then lifted her eyes again to his face—broad and hard, stubborn and red. She pressed her full lips together and gave an extra strong tug to her glove.

As the front door slammed behind her, Daniel looked up. Hugging her furs around her tall, chunky self, Martha extended one thick leg towards the steps. They were going to be difficult; the river mist had half congealed upon them. She looked down upon the man waiting below. "Help me," she told him.

At once he was at her side, his heavy hand grasping her arm. "Yes, ma'am," said Daniel, guiding her down.

Martha climbed into the back seat, leaning heavily on that firm hand under her elbow—a hand that later tucked the leopard-skin robe around her and then withdrew itself respectfully to await further orders.

"The country," said Martha shortly. "Go by way of the river."

"Yes, ma'am."

The car flowed like the river beside it, as smooth as ice, as powerful as Martha's thoughts. But these thoughts were not of the grey river or the grey concrete buildings rising steeply on the other side. Martha's thoughts were of something red—something that lay neither to her right nor her left, but directly before her—the red back of Daniel's neck. And it was red, that neck, brawny and windburned—irresistible to Martha's eyes. It was a neck, she thought, that might well support the bullet dome of a Prussian officer, or the rolling wild-eyed head of a bull, but instead, there it was before her, on Daniel's shoulders, supporting his round, hard head.

MARTHA reached into the built-in vanity case in the arm of the seat and drew out the mirror. Her own face looked back at her. It was a mature face, she told herself, marked with lines, to be sure, but lines of character, not petulance or weakness. Moreover, the whole was smoothed over with powder and colored with rouge so that the effect was substantially good. Martha replaced the mirror.

The neck met her eyes.

No, it was too much! Really too much! When she, Martha Moody, the wife of Hector Moody, was unable to walk into her own kitchen without confronting the revolting scene she had witnessed there last night—it was unendurable. There they had been—Betty, the parlor maid, her silly young face alight with mirth, and Daniel, redder in the face than ever, laughing down at her. Of course, Betty had been pretending to polish a silver urn, but that would not have fooled a blind woman. And Martha was not blind—far from it! One look at Betty's stupid, stunned features had told her all she needed to know. Naturally, the two had stopped what they were doing when she appeared, but she knew very well what had happened the moment she turned her back. No, there was no use going over it. It was obvious that Betty was unreliable, a trouble-maker—possibly even a thief. Yes, thought Martha, the girl must be gotten rid of at once. Immediately. And once Betty was gone, never again would she have to look at her meek, tight-skinned young face all flushed and damp with enjoyment.

The car had left the city and was passing through a bleak stretch of flat countryside. Martha stretched out her legs, stirred restlessly and leaned forward. When she settled back, she picked up the speaking tube.

"Daniel," she said, "is the heater working up there?"

He nodded his head vigorously so that the tendons came and went in his neck. "Yes, Mrs. Moody. It's working fine."

"Well," Martha told him, "it's not working back here. You'd better stop and see if you can adjust it."

A few seconds later, Daniel's sleekly brilliantined head was on a level with Martha's knees, his strong meaty fingers

deftly exploring the mechanism of the heater.

Turning to face the barren field beside the road, Martha spoke thickly, "You'd better come farther into the car, Daniel. You can hardly work bent over that way."

Daniel looked up at her, puzzled. "It's the wires, ma'am. It looks like they just parted company with the unit. He rubbed a hand over the back of his head. "It beats me," he said. "I sure didn't notice anything wrong with it when I cleaned out the back seat this morning."

Keeping her eyes on the field, Martha said, "But, you say the heater in the front seat is working."

"Yes, ma'am."

"In that case," said Martha, "I'd better ride up there." Her legs under the leopard skin stirred. "It's very chilly today," she said.

Standing on the frozen earth beside the car, Martha felt the rocks underfoot cutting into her thin soles. Her coat fell open; the damp wind stirred through her clothes. It felt good, refreshing. In the folds of her coat her right hand flexed. The palm of the glove on that hand was oil-stained now—torn a little, too. The wires on that heater had not been easy to wrench out.

She took a last deep breath before allowing herself to be helped into the front seat. Daniel offered to fetch out the leopard-skin rug and drape it around her, but Martha declined. "Thank you, Daniel," she said graciously, "but it seems to be quite cosy up here as it is."

Up in front, the car felt alive. It rushed forward at Daniel's command, slowed at his touch, throbbing gently all the while beneath Martha's feet. She noticed that Daniel drove with his mouth slightly open, the tips of his short, square teeth showing between his parted lips. Martha turned away. For some reason or other, her breath was coming faster than usual.

"Daniel," she said at last, "I want to talk to you."

The man turned a little. "Yes, ma'am?"

Martha spoke slowly. "I have been wanting to have a little chat with you for some time," she said. "As you know, Daniel, I am not a disinterested employer. I take a genuine interest in my help's welfare."

Daniel nodded. "You and the mister, both," he said.

Martha looked directly at him for an instant. "Mr. Moody is a very busy man. Naturally, he likes everything to run smoothly, but he leaves the details to me"

"He's a real gentleman, ma'am," said Daniel.

A little impatience crept into Martha's voice. "Daniel," she said briskly, "it's about last night that I particularly want to speak. I don't usually interfere in anyone's personal affairs, but when I see something taking place under my own roof that is so out of line, so thoroughly deplorable as what I am forced to believe *might* be taking place there now, then I feel it's nothing more than my duty to do something about it."

DANIEL shot her a swift glance. When his eyes returned to the road his mouth was closed, no line of white showing between his curved red lips.

Martha, busily removing her gloves, didn't notice. She went on: "Betty Andrews," she said, "is a girl I befriended. I took her in, Daniel. I gave her a chance when no one else would hire her. I doubt very much if she could have obtained employment in any other home in this city. Any other respectable home, that is."

Daniel's voice came suddenly and strong, "She seems respectable enough to me."

A thrill of rage raced up Martha's spine. He's defending her, she thought. I was right! What I read on that simpering girl's face last night was true!

But her tone when she spoke was dignified and tinged with pity. "I know she seems so, but that's the danger. No, Daniel, I'm very much afraid that Betty is not the type of girl I can tolerate in my household." She stole a glance at the chauffeur, but his face was unreadable, set. "I intend," said Martha, "to give her as good a reference as my conscience will permit. Naturally, I will have to insist that she use it to find employment in some other city."

Daniel's mouth was hard, his breathing quick. His chin extended. "If she goes," he said, "I go too!"

Martha had been looking out the win-

dow. Now she turned, astonished. "What's that?"

The car slowed forcefully as Daniel lifted his foot from the gas pedal. "If she goes, I do too!"

Oh, thought Martha, this was absurd, utterly and absolutely absurd. The boy thought she was his enemy, thought she was Betty's enemy, thought she was trying to harm the girl.

"Daniel," said Martha softly, "listen to me. I'm your friend. I know what a woman like Betty can do to a man. I know how she can wreck him."

She lifted her left hand tentatively, as if undecided what to do with it. "Daniel, you've got a very good position here with us. What a fool you'd be to give it up, to sacrifice a secure future with us—with me—for the sake of a stupid, immature girl." She let her left hand slide along the seat between them. "You won't be a fool, will you, Daniel? You'll listen to a woman who's nearly old enough to be your mother." She put her hand lightly down on Daniel's warm, hard thigh. "You'll listen to me," she said gently, urgently, "Won't you, Daniel?"

The car leaped forward as Daniel's foot



A woman like Betty could wreck a man, Martha told him.

went down on the gas. "Take your hand off my leg," he said harshly.

Martha smiled reproachfully. He's bashful, she thought warmly.

"Off, off!" said Daniel, but when Martha merely continued to gaze tenderly at him, he lifted his hand from the wheel and gingerly, like a man touching something dead, picked up her hand and flung it aside.

"You're the fool!" cried Daniel. You, with your airs and your talk about being old enough to be my mother! Well, you're

old, all right, God knows! But, that don't stop you from wanting me for your boy friend!"

Martha looked at him, frozen. "Daniel," she breathed.

"Shut up!" said Daniel. "I quit. And what's more, I'm taking Betty with me. There may be danger in your house, ma'am, but it don't come from her! I'll tell you what you are, Mrs. Moody—you're poison, that's what!"

Martha spoke faintly. "That will be quite enough, Daniel."

"No, it won't," said he, "not yet it won't. There's one thing I intend to do before I leave your big, fine house and that's have a word with your husband. He's a delicate type of a man, but I like him all the same. He's too good for you, if you ask me, and I'm going to put him wise to you!"

Martha's right hand crept out of her pocket and moved to the window turn-handle. She rolled it down. A cold rush of air entered the front seat.

"What's more," said Daniel, "it wouldn't surprise me in the least to find out that you took one of them big hands of yours and pulled out the heater wires on purpose. They sure weren't out this morning."

"Stop the car," said Martha.

"I will!" said Daniel. "As soon as we come to a turning place, I'm going to stop and put you in the back seat where you belong! If it's cold back there, you can wrap yourself up in your animal skin!"

MARTHA'S face was white. "Now!" she said hoarsely. "Stop the car now! I dropped my glove on the road."

Daniel said, "Oh," and gave her a swift look. He braked the car.

He got out of his side and came around to the right-hand door. Martha shook her head weakly. Her hat was on crooked, her hair disarrayed. The skin of her face lay in downward, sagging folds.

"Go back and pick up my glove," she said. "It's one I don't want to lose. It's grey kid. I'll get in back while you're gone."

When he didn't move, she looked at him pleadingly. "Please," she said brokenly.

Daniel gave her a long, steady look. "Okay," he said at last.

Martha sat still, listening to his footsteps receding. The fool, she thought, the ignorant, imbecilic fool! Did he think for one moment that his ludicrous imaginings would be believed? Did he actually suppose that Hector would listen while he spun his fantastic story? Oh, the fool!

The footsteps behind her were barely audible. Martha slid a few inches to the left on the smooth leather seat. The rear-view mirror was focused too far over; she put out her hand and tilted it her way. Martha's mouth smiled. The great, strong, square idiot was in middle distance now. He walked with his head down, searching for her glove. The oaf, thought Martha; despite all his virtuous outrage, there he was, doing her bidding, a servant still!

Martha slid over a little further to the left. The keys were still in the ignition lock, of course. She had known they would be. What could a brute like Daniel know about a finely constituted woman such as herself that would cause him to pocket those keys before leaving the car? Nothing. He knew nothing of her nature. He had no faintest conception of her courage, her patrician capacity for daring. He thought, probably, that all women resembled his Betty—submissive and docile, eager to bend their heads to a strong man's yoke. Oh, the fool!

Martha slid further to the left. She was behind the wheel now, and leaning forward, she turned the key in the ignition lock.

In the rear-view mirror, Daniel was still clearly visible, still walking along the road with bowed head, searching for her glove. Martha reached into her pocket and drew it forth. She put it on. Then she put both grey-gloved hands on the wheel.

The starter seemed fairly to leap up, touching her foot like a caress. The engine turned over as silently as a jeweled clock. Martha put the gears in reverse.

Daniel was now about fifty yards to the rear, still walking steadily away from her. Like a hunter drawing a bead, Martha took her sights. The wheel had to be calculated with special care, due to a slight curve in the road. But now she had it. A twist to the left at just the right instant—which she felt in her bones she knew—would take care of that to perfection.

The rear-view mirror again. Daniel had stopped. There was a clump of grass shielding a roadside ditch. In it he had paused to search.

Deep within Martha the action began, rolling up and out of some well in her diaphragm. It ran up to strengthen her arms. It ran down and spurted out of her foot. The car shot back.

The curve was there and gone then, the car whipping around it expertly, guided by that surging strength from the bottomless well inside Martha.

Then Daniel's head popped out of the grass exactly like a startled rabbit's, eyes wide in deathly amaze. Then it was gone. Martha heard a soft plop, and then felt a gentle rolling bump, hardly perceptible under the big car's low-pressure tires.

She let the car roll backward a few hundred yards, as the powerful something inside her was mindful of the danger of tell-tale tire marks on the asphalt. Then she stopped and drove leisurely forward again.

Daniel lay sprawled where the car had spun him aside. He lay outstretched, arms and legs flung wide.

Martha climbed out of the car and walked springily around to examine the right rear tire. No mark was on it. The bumper was likewise unmarked.

No car had passed in some minutes. The road had been deserted during the entire episode. Martha stood still, relaxed and at ease, as she drew off her unsoiled left glove. Then she strolled back a few yards and dropped it in the ditch.

Blood had gushed out of Daniel's mouth, trickled from his nostrils. Martha took note of this and tenderly wiped some away with her handkerchief. Then she went to the back of the car, drew out the leopard-skin robe and draped it over him. She tucked it in all around him, making him warm and cozy.

Far away, far in the distance, a speck was approaching—a car. Martha took up her blood-stained handkerchief and took a stand at the roadside. She began to weep.

THE NEWS was received too late for the last edition, but the following morning's paper told the story in full. A

(Continued on page 127)

DETECTIVE TALES

ON THE SPOT

For Next Month



They stopped Detective Herman (The Great) Stone in the corridor of headquarters, that strange pair, the woman demanding that Stone arrest her husband for two-timing her with a blonde. But Stone only laughs. He has more important business on hand, like finding . . .



Who killed Turk Chorom, jewel fence? But when the bellhop tells Stone that Chorom's last visitors were a mousy little guy, something like the quiet little husband Stone has seen in headquarters, plus a plushy blonde, Stone starts to think. . . .



Reports come into headquarters shortly after about a luscious blonde plus a little mouse of a man, engaged in holdups and murder. Again that blonde and the little man. . . .



Stone sets out to catch the little man—and does. But by the time he hears the footsteps behind him, it's too late, for that blonde wields a mean lead pipe. . . .

For the conclusion of this story, read Day Keene's mystifying Herman "The Great" murder novel, "Homicidal Baby" . . . featured in the April issue of DETECTIVE TALES. Out Feb. 25th.

HOMICIDAL HONEYMOON

By _____
FRANCIS K. ALLAN

*Action-Packed
Murder Novelette*



Pullman gave a majestic leap and landed atop the corpse. "He will get his paws all sticky and dirty!" Tutti screamed. "Stop him instantly, Mully!"



CHAPTER ONE

The Corpse in the Storeroom

SERGEANT MULLINS McCARTHY was a man of cautious thought and powerful shoulders. His face was large and pleasant. His hair was sandy. His eyes were Irish blue. He was fond of his work on the police force, he was

Mully McCarthy is a sergeant on the New York cops, but that does not mean he knows everything. And it would take a lifetime to learn even a very little about Tutti, who is Mully's wife, and about Pullman who is Tutti's demon cat, and about what goes on in Tutti's alleged brain, when several corpses turn up on the mad-cap McCarthys' honeymoon.

kind to his mother and he suffered mightily with the misfortunes of the New York Giant baseball team. He had been to night school and to Paddy's Bar and Grill on Third Avenue. His outlook on life was serene and his future was promising, indeed.

Then he married Tutti Wilson.

The whole affair was very hard to explain in view of Mully's past record of caution, but there it was. It was all very simple. Mully was reading serious books that winter, which is how he happened into the DeLuxe Rental Shoppe on Broadway, somewhat above Eighty-fifth Street and only a short stroll from Mully's room, also on Eighty-fifth. And there was Tutti. Her first day. Very bright, not very large. Black, curly hair, black eyes, a perky face and a perfect figure. She thought it was wonderful for a cop to be reading big historical books, and she let it drop that she was in New York since last Tuesday only. From Pale Creek, Wis. She was awfully excited. Did he actually *see* and *touch* dead people in his profession?

Sometimes it happens, as with drink or dice or such, that a guy who has always been in the front choir on Sunday will suddenly lose his grip on the hymn book entirely. So it was with Mully, who had been thinking very little of women up until then. But this day he shuffled around in the Shoppe, looking big and handsome and foolish, and saying yes, once in a while they got a stiff in his business. And wasn't it maybe lonely, not knowing anybody and being so far from Pale Creek, Wis.?

"Well, yes," said Tutti seriously. "But of course, I always have Pullman."

"Who is Pullman?" Mully wanted to know.

"My beautiful big yellow cat with the orange-red stripes," Tutti said. "We are inseparable. Pullman is the finest and most intelligent cat in the world. He was thrown from the Pacific Limited as it passed through Pale Creek going ninety miles an hour. They found him in an upper berth and threw him out, which accounts for his name. Pullman. There isn't another cat like him."

"Oh," said Mully uncertainly. At that point, many will argue, Mully should have realized certain things about Tutti.

THEY were married three weeks later, on a late Friday afternoon, with Sergeant Gilliford and Captain Hutter and his wife and many others there to see it and say, Wasn't it fine and such a lovely couple!

Then they got on the train and went to Mountain Castle, which everybody knows about. It's on the Hudson River about eighty miles above New York City, and many celebrities go up there to rest up and drink quietly and breathe. It is fifty bucks a day, towels included, and Tutti said maybe they would not let Pullman in. "No," said Mully, "I guess not." Already Pullman had scratched Mully several times and bitten him once on the hip while Mully was attempting to kiss Tutti. Pullman resented Mully and wished to break it up.

It was a very lovely room, with a nice view and a feeling of class. Tutti threw her arms around Mully's neck and said she loved him and that they were going to be awfully happy, both of them together making a go of it. She was going to help him in a million ways.

Mully grinned like an idiot, and then Tutti opened the black suitcase and there was Pullman. He yawned and glared at Mully, and Mully stopped grinning. "You slipped him in here on our honeymoon?" he demanded.

"Certainly. You know very well he wanted to come. He has never been on a honeymoon before. Nobody will know."

Mully returned Pullman's bleak stare. Pullman was a hard egg, with no nonsense. He had one eye, as a result of leaving the Pacific Limited at too many miles per hour. He was large, and his left-rear hip was stiff. Most of the time he looked as if he were wearing a horrible rum hang-over. Mully wished very much that Pullman had not come on this honeymoon, but he loved Tutti so much that he could not bear to make her unhappy.

They went downstairs, leaving Pullman, to have a cocktail in the Mural Lounge. In one corner was Georgie Prescott, the famed radio comic, with his deadpan wife-stooge, Ruthie. Also was Waverly Turnbull, the English actor, and Gus Gunnison, the famed Broadway columnist, to mention only a few. It was very important to be seen at the Mountain

Castle now and then, or the word got around you were slipping. Nobody knew who Mully was, but naturally it worried them, and they started guessing he was an important Hollywood producer, very likely, catching a bit of the snow and solitude, and Gus Gunnison scribbled something down in his book.

"I have never had a martini before," said Tutti, "but aren't they wonderful?"

"Go very slow," Mully said. "Martinis aren't like beer."

Tutti said they were a wonderful help to thinking, just like now. Just look at all those people sitting around, and all of them made so much money and weren't one-millionth as smart as her own little Mully. So she was just sitting here with this cooling martini and thinking about what to do about it. . . . There was a dangerous dreamy mist in Tutti's eyes.

Mully said everything would work out all right. Steady and calm was the best way. Such as— He paused and then said, "See the guy smoking the cigar over there by himself? Shoulders like a piano, lion-mane haircut? That's Dwarf Yancey. When he gets up, you'll see how he gets his name. Legs like a couple of sawed-off milk bottles."

"Is he in the milk business?" inquired Tutti.

"Dwarf is in every business. For a few grand a week he will guarantee that nobody will pour arsenic in your sherry or drop a bomb in your lobby or worry you at all. Insurance without written policies, you see. Protection. And Dwarf makes a nice take-home salary. He is a cultured little gorilla who reads poems and goes to music concerts and first-night openings,

then puts on his frock coat and blackjacks some poor guy with a two-stool hot dog stand. I wonder what he is doing here, incidentally."

"Maybe something terrible is going to happen and we will see it," Tutti breathed eagerly. And at that precise moment it happened.

There was a long, wounded-bull roar from several floors upstairs. Something crashed. Doors began to slam. A woman, much like in opera, began to give out great wails. Then the elevator door opened and a little man burst out yelping loudly.

"Murder! It's murdering Mrs. Flar-ington's Bitsy-Witsy! Murder!"

With that, the manager and the waiters and the maids poured into the elevator and disappeared. Gus Gunnison went racing up the stairs. Abruptly Mully rose. Being a cop for nine years had given Mully a certain intuition that he could not explain. Right now he was wondering about Pullman.

"Wait here," he said to Tutti. "I will be right back, I hope."

He rumbled up the stairs behind Gus. The turmoil was coming from the fourth floor. Mully's room was on the third. He opened the door and took a fast look everywhere, then groaned wildly. Pullman was gone.

THE MOUNTAIN CASTLE was an ancient building with transoms over the doors. The transom was open. Mully was a detective. He raced for the fourth floor, thinking it had been a very short honeymoon and now they would be thrown out, and before even one night.

The fourth floor looked like Times



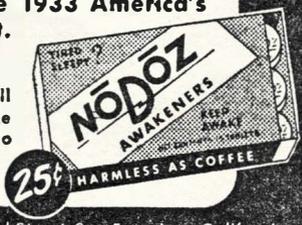
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Square having a nervous breakdown. The manager was wringing his hands and begging everybody to please be calm. A couple of big waiters were lugging away a huge unconscious woman in an old pearl-grey dress and pearls and lace, straight from the seventeenth century. A maid was fanning her as they eased her along.

"Oh, poor dear Mrs. Flarington," somebody moaned. "She just lived for her Bitsy-Witsy. She will go back to Boston and die, I am sure."

"What's the mixture?" Mully asked a waiter quietly.

The man looked around him three times. "Mrs. Flarington's poodle has been injured by a mountain panther and is now missing," he breathed. "Bridget saw the whole dreadful affair, sir."

Mully spoke to Bridget, a maid. She was trembling and white. She had stepped out of the service stairway, she said. She had heard a scream from dear Mrs. Flarington's suite. She had started to investigate. Suddenly this monster—this red and yellow monster, maybe larger than a tiger—had leaped out into the hall, dragging Bitsy-Witsy, poor bleeding Witsy! Witsy had been screaming. Mrs. Flarington had collapsed in the chase. Witsy and the lion had vanished. No, she hadn't any idea where. Upstairs, downstairs. She didn't know.

Mully began to sweat. He turned and took the stairs three at a time to the top sixth floor. He scoured the hall and called very urgently. He repeated the process on the fifth. He skipped the fourth and tried the third, even searching his own room hopelessly again. The second was a failure. The main floor was tough. Dining rooms and bar and lounge and game rooms and such, all with people.

Beyond the maze of halls and pantries around the kitchen, Mully discovered a gloomy dark passage that led to the basement. Upon striking a match, he also discovered a few drops of blood on the linoleum floor. His fingers itched to get at Pullman. He started down the dark steps. Abruptly a hand touched his chin and jerked back, as did Mully. Someone gasped softly. Then this someone gave Mully a mighty shove, sending him sprawling backward on his head, and sharp high heels walked over him in a

hurry. He blundered up and stalked after his assailant. One trim heel only was disappearing down the long corridor. Mully moved faster, being thoroughly aroused. And as he arrived at the Mural Lounge, where he and Tutti had been having a martini, he saw Tutti taking her seat nicely, dusting her hands and looking innocent. Mully walked over and sat down, shaking deeply.

"That was my teeth you kicked, you know," he said savagely. "What—"

"Oh, Mully, I thought it was some terrible character in the darkness! But, Mully, listen!" She leaned across the table, black eyes shining. "Things are happening! I personally have been investigating and—"

"So have I!" Mully yapped, downing the end of his martini. "Your Pull—"

"It is not polite to interrupt, Mully, so listen. You were speaking of the gentleman named Dwarf, remember? So after you ran away, I was looking at him and thinking. I realized that his attitude was sinister. He was up to no good. When he went into the lobby, I tiptoed after him. Everybody had gone upstairs to see about the confusion. There he was, creeping around, glancing and positively lurking, Mully."

"Yes, of course, but about Pull—"

"I am telling you about Dwarf. He suddenly ducked into that little room that says manager on the door. He shut the door. Very promptly I pulled a chair over and stood up to look through the transom. Mully, I personally saw him remove an envelope from the safe, which was open."

"It is a wonder he didn't squeeze your neck. From now on, leave Dwarf alone. He is not a game. He is all business and—"

"Thereafter I followed him while he lurked toward the basement. I don't know what he did down there in the darkness, but he did it with a steady tapping sound. Mully, I want you to give it your attention and solve the case and get in the picture section of the papers and become distinguished!"

Mully looked at his bride thoughtfully, as if he were seeing a few things for the first time and they seemed to unsettle him. He got a grip on himself. "Yes, Tutti, honey. And now listen to what I have to

say about Pullman. Pullman has vanished, carrying a bleeding poodle. That is the turmoil. We are about to be thrown out in the snow. If anybody finds out—”

Tutti was already on her feet, horror on her face. “Not my Pullman!” she said very loudly. Mully made a grab and missed. Tutti was streaking for the stairway. By the time Mully reached the third floor, Tutti was on hands and knees, crawling along the hall and pausing at each door to give a little crying sound that seemed to be, “Pullllluuummmmpetpetpet, sweet.”

“If the hired help see you, they’ll tie us both with ropes,” Mully hissed desperately. “Please stand up and be—”

“He will answer me if he has the last spark of life remaining, I know, I know,” Tutti moaned. Mully observed that Tutti was weeping. Mully began to lose his grip on the situation.

“I will be fired! It will get in the papers! The Inspector will see it! Please think of my future and get up off—”

“Oh, Mully! He’s in here! He’s moaning for me!” Tutti seized a knob and hurled a door inward. Mully covered his eyes and waited for something horrible to happen. It did. There was a sodden bump on the floor. Mully opened his eyes and saw Tutti, one hundred percent fainted on the floor. Mully’s great love surged into his throat. He leaped forward, making anxious sounds over Tutti. Only by accident did he glance into the dim room. He stopped all sound-making. He did not breathe. For five seconds he was frozen. Then he rose slowly, very silently, and looking very much like Mully, the cop—hard face and clear eyes and coiled-spring motions.

First he glanced up and down the hall. Then he lifted Tutti and eased through the doorway. He shut the door with his shoulder and dropped Tutti in a chair. Then he took a long hard look at Gus Gunnison. It was not pretty.

Gus was on the floor. His head had changed shape and color. Now it was covered with blood. His jaunty body looked birdlike and useless. It was. Mully took another hard look and realized that Gus was dead. Gus, the little wasp-tongued columnist with his unpredictable outbursts of sentimentality; Gus, who

wouldn’t pay for a glass of beer, but would give fifty thousand to a charity hospital; Gus, who hated and loved and scorned and praised, all in a wild tumult of emotion, was dead.

CHAPTER TWO

Dolores

IT WAS hysterical-headline stuff, Mully knew in a corner of his brain. Gus’ paper, the *Ledger*, would have a screaming fit in every edition, plus prizes and trips to the moon for the guy who solved the murder. The management of the Mountain Castle would go out and shoot itself in horror. Mrs. Flarington would rush back to Boston and never return. In short, it was going to be a noisy place for spending a honeymoon.

All of this went through a corner of Mully’s mind. Meanwhile he looked around the room. It was not a guest room, but a storeroom for linens, mops, mirrors, curtains, extra card tables and such. One small window looked out upon the gathering darkness. There was no door except the one into the hall. There was no death weapon in sight. Mully was sweating gently. He wanted to think very carefully before he did anything. This was not strictly routine. This wasn’t Manhattan. Here, he was just a guy with a bride who had a cat named Pullman, and Mully had an uneasy feeling that something could easily get started in a big way as a result of Pullman and Tutti.

In fact, he was sure of it suddenly. He picked Tutti up, peered into the hall, made a fast exit and closed the door, then raced the fifteen feet to their own room. Promptly he locked the door and put Tutti on the bed. She opened her eyes and said, “Everything went black, Mully.”

“Yeah. I know. You take it easy. You just stay where you are and take it easy.” He paced the floor.

“Mully, I promise never to drink another martini. It is just like they say about seeing elephants and snakes, isn’t it, Mully?” she whimpered.

“It certainly is, yes. Now, try to rest and don’t talk.” Mully kept circling the room and frowning and smoking. He listened for sounds in the hall, deciding

that would start the apple rolling again. He was not sure he wanted the apple to roll again.

"Tutti," he said suddenly, "if you promised me something, you would never break the promise, would you?"

"Oh, how could you say such a thing? Never, never, Mully!"

"Fine. Then please stay right in this room. Do not even open the door. Do not say anything to anybody. I will be back soon. In fact, keep the door locked."

Tutti looked very small and frightened as she nodded solemnly.

Mully hurried downstairs, patting down his chair and straightening his tie. The atmosphere had calmed, much as the ocean does between storms. The manager kept peeping over his shoulder nervously. The doctor was upstairs with a sleeping powder for Mrs. Flarington. Georgie Prescott, the radio comic, was putting on a load with his wife, Ruthie. In another corner of the Mural Lounge, Waverly Turnbull, the English actor who looked like a liquor ad, was puttering with a Scotch and soda and blinking behind his glasses. Now and then he would clear his throat and the chandelier would shudder in the ceiling. There was no sign of Pullman or Dwarf Yancey or Bitsy-Witsy.

Then Dolores came in. Dolores was Gus Gunnison's Girl Friday. She was also tall, willowy, and ash-blonde. Dolores had a smooth figure that made beautiful chorus girls sigh. She had eyes that worried men of all ages. Dolores was also smart—in fact, many said it was Dolores and not Gus who kept the hot-needle in the column. Dolores had been born in Brooklyn, educated in Times Square, and widely traveled on the subway. It was very hard to give Dolores the easy wink. She believed that men were descended from talking mice.

She spotted Mully and stopped with one eyebrow up. He gave her a hush sign and nodded toward a corner table behind a drooping potted tree.

"Have you been stealing from the police retirement fund to get here?" she demanded, sitting down and agreeing to have a Manhattan.

"I am on a honeymoon," Mully said. Dolores said he had lost his mind. Mully skipped that.

"Have you seen the genius I work for?" Dolores wanted to know.

"Umm," said Mully, thinking it over. He decided to come in from the back door and slowly. "He was in here earlier before a lot of noise upstairs. What are both of you here for—and don't say you're resting. The *Ledger* doesn't believe in rest."

"The *Ledger* believes only in circulation." She sipped the Manhattan.

"And why did you say you were here?"

Dolores gazed at him with cool, grey eyes. "I am on my honeymoon with Gus, the genius. I am now a dewy bride thinking of lacy frocks and curtains."

MULLY started to say something. Then as he kept staring at Dolores he realized that she had told the truth. He strangled and put down his glass. "But you hate men! And Gus most of all!"

"Oh, yes. That's why I married Gus. He understands me. He is a sour, disillusioned old rascal with a pot of money and a bad heart. Anyway, I love him in a nasty little way. I want another Manhattan."

"Uh." Mully did some more uncomfortable thinking. "Have you noticed Dwarf Yancey?"

"Mully," Dolores said patiently, "you are like a bulldozer trying to slip up on a mouse without letting him notice. Yes, I have noticed Mr. Yancey. I also noticed that he arrived like a gentle-looking bear, then took a suite and came down for whiskey sours. That was yesterday at noon. I have no other lurid details for you. Tell me about your bride. Is she on the honeymoon, too?"

"And why not?" Mully demanded. "She is devoted to me. But that is not here or there. Dolores, something very bad has happened, and I hate to be the one to tell you. You—you are not the screaming and fainting type, I hope?" he asked.

"Almost never. What is your problem, Mully?"

Mully hunted for words. "Well—your honeymoon is about over."

"For what reason?"

"Gus is—now, please do not scream—Gus is dead, Dolores."

Dolores gave him a strange long look, then laughed drily. "You have a lousy sense of humor. Think of something else next—"

"His body," Mully continued doggedly, "is in a storeroom on the third floor. Tutti found it a few minutes ago. Nobody has heard. It's the truth."

"Mully," Dolores said, getting up slowly, "I don't believe you, but I'm not laughing. This little storeroom—which way, Mully?"

Mully led the way upstairs and along the hall. He looked both ways, then touched the knob. "It's not like it had been just a gun. It's not nice." Then he opened the door and Dolores walked in slowly. He closed the door. He could say this for Dolores: She would bend, but she didn't break.

She was kneeling over Gus with her cigarette lighter flickering and trembling in her hand. Her other hand started down, froze, then slowly touched Gus' limp fingers. Mully could have counted a hundred while the lighter flickered, and not a sound came from Dolores. At last she rose. The lighter went out, and the room was dark.

Dolores said very softly, "It was lousy, but it wasn't a joke after all, was it?"

Mully said nothing. He peered into the hall and eased Dolores out. She was softening fast now. "He kept saying . . . worrying, but I always laughed. You know how I laugh. I laugh like crazy even in church, Mully. So he said he was worried and I kept laughing and—and—" She sobbed, and suddenly Mully was holding her and patting her shoulder and making sounds that didn't mean much.

Which is when he noticed Tutti, standing in the doorway and giving him a very bleak eye as he patted Dolores. He stopped immediately.

"This is Dolores. Dolores, this is Tutti.

My wife Tutti. Now, Tutti, be calm. Dolores is upset. You come in this room, Dolores," he said. He shut the door fast. "Dolores is—was Gus' wife, Tutti. I have known her around, and we are friends. Be calm. It is all right."

Tutti continued to look frosty, but Dolores paid no attention. Mully grabbed the phone and ordered a tray of Manhattans sent up.

"Where is Pullman?" Tutti demanded.

"I don't know. One thing at a time. Everything is confused." Mully was feeling very harried suddenly, hoping the girls would not become disturbed. He tried to approach the situation logically. "Dolores, when you are settled a little bit, we have got to discuss. We—"

"Discuss!" She spun, her eyes blazing. "You sound like a violet in the moonlight! Discuss, you say, when—"

"Don't you shout at my Mully!" Tutti erupted. "If anybody—"

"Calm, calm!" Mully commanded. The Manhattans came and helped. Dolores lost her steam and wilted in a chair. Mully tried again. "You were saying something about Gus being worried. Did he say why?"

"He *knew* he was going to be killed, and I just laughed at him," Dolores said heavily. "Nobody ever kills people, I said."

"Why did he think somebody was going to kill him?"

"Because of his interview up in the Bronx with that man named Barney Berry. The guy that used to be the Park Avenue blackmailer. Then he went blind and died without a penny, up in a lousy little room all by himself. But before he

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died he called Gus up for a long talk. Gus used to know him when Barney was in society and getting rich, and Barney wanted to get a load off his chest before he died."

"What did he tell Gus that was so hot?"

"Oh, he told Gus who he'd blackmailed and why, and who had paid to keep what quiet. Loads of hushed-up dirt on everybody from ex-senators to polo-playing brokers and debutantes, on down to Crawling Cantrell, the Bowery Beggar King. He unloaded all this on Gus because Gus used to plug him as an international dandy in the column, and that pleased Barney. Then, too, Barney was blind and bitter at dying and being broke so long, and he wanted to leave a hot charge of poison on the cheerful lads who were going to go right on drinking and singing after he was stiff in the ground. I don't know. You tell me what goes on in the mind of a guy like that." She ran her fingers through her hair and got up to walk around restlessly.

"Gus couldn't use the stuff in the column," Dolores continued. "And no matter what else the little bum was, he wasn't a blackmailer with second-hand scandal. He gave Barney a hundred-dollar bill and a bottle of rye. That was the end, said Gus to Gus, knowing Barney would be dead soon. Well, came the next week and another heart attack, and sure enough, Barney was in the charity ward for his last set of pills. This time he got a nurse to promise to take Gus a bunch of old letters he'd saved. He died the next day. The nurse brought Gus the letters. But something was wrong. Gus figured the letters were supposed to be the inside hidden drawer for Barney's biggest kicks. But the stuff was sweet as a baby's kiss.

"Gus didn't understand it until Lou Bradley came out in his column in the *Banner* saying that Barney had talked to Gus just before his death and had given Gus some very explosive papers and pictures. Then Gus got the picture: The little nurse had not only tipped off the story, but had stolen whatever was hot in the letters. The little nurse was also vanished by now—quit, packed, moved and gone. Gus began to sweat. He got a couple of anonymous calls that worried him. So that's the way it was: Gus had heard

things from Barney that he wished he hadn't heard, and worst of all, the rumor was out that he had information he didn't really have, so he didn't know what it was he was supposed to be afraid of. That's what really got him—not knowing from elephants or gnats, see?" Dolores downed a Manhattan. "And that's also what got him up here in this velvet-lined eagle's nest."

"You mean nerves? Needing a rest?" Mully asked.

"I mean a conference with the other end of an anonymous phone call. I mean about the letters or pictures Gus didn't have and never seen. Do I have to hand you a map?"

TUTTI began to bristle again. Mully got in between fast. "Gus came up here to meet somebody, but he didn't know who? About Barney's blackmail file?" Dolores nodded and tried to squeeze something from an empty Manhattan glass. Mully chewed the end of a dry cigarette and frowned. "Tell me this," he said stubbornly. "What *was* all this fire-alarm gossip that Barney told?"

"That is the beautiful part," Dolores snapped wearily. "For the first time in his life, Gus got a great blast of honor and white-knight stuff caught in his throat. He wouldn't tell me. Better not to know than to know and pay the price. Etcetera, etcetera. So I am just like the little girl who got kissed in the dark: I don't know who, and it burns me up."

She squeezed the Manhattan glass again. "But," she said bitterly, "Dwarf is here. Gus is dead. I am alive, and I am mad. Did I tell you I liked Gus, bum that he was? I did. I was married to him for less than two days. I hate to get gypped. I scream. I kick. I become sadistic and think of ways to get even. In short," she said, "the party has only begun. Tell that turkey to roll up some more Manhattans."

"Umm," said Mully uncomfortably, hoping Dolores was not going to get drunk. "But there is one very important detail we have not covered. What about the body and notifying the local cops from somewhere?"

"That is your business. You are a law-abiding character. I admire the streak in you, but it bores me. For me, that is. Do

you want me to throw myself into the manager's office screaming?"

"No," Mully decided.

"Do you want me to call some local constable and wail like a moronic bride?"

"No. Yes. Listen, there is a corpse," Mully reminded her. "He can't stay there forever like a—busted alarm clock. Can he?"

"Why can't he? He can't get any deader. You, Mully, are lacking in imagination. If he is left, what happens? The murderer begins to wonder why; he asks himself questions in the dark. Nerves go up and down his spine. And next he has got to take one little peep to prove something to himself—he doesn't know what. Is that logical to you, Mully?"

Mully growled and walked around the room. "It ain't routine," he exploded. "It ain't right. It's wrong."

"Because I am not acting sentimental? Mully, I am different. I am the hard type. I hide myself. I am tough, understand, like a rock."

"I am tired of listening to her, Mully," Tutti stated frankly. "I am worried about Pullman. Please go away," she said to Dolores.

Dolores gave her a long look and then began to laugh. Mully didn't like the sound of it. He grabbed Dolores and hustled her out into the hall.

"Easy. Take it easy," he whispered. "Go to your room. Sit and think. Don't do anything rash without telling me so we can leave first." He shut the door and mopped his face. He felt exhausted and totally confused. Tutti looked at him coldly.

"Do you know what I think? I think that Dolores killed Gus, is what I think!"

"Tutti, honey, please do not say such wild—"

"And I am of half a mind to snoop around and show you!"

"Pack your bags!" Mully almost screamed. "We are going home at once! I am not nervous, but I have had enough! Pack everything and get—"

His words were broken by a tremendous crash from below, then a barrage of screams and yells. "Pullman! I know it!" he gasped and leaped for the door. He hurled it open. At that instant a swiftly moving streak of yellow and crimson

rounded the stairs and roared through his legs. Tutti gave a gay cry of joy as Pullman leaped into her arms.

"Keep it locked! Keep him in there!" Mully ordered and slammed the door. He raced toward the lobby to inspect Pullman's havoc.

A meat chef was standing in the center of the lobby, a cleaver in one hand, a carving knife in the other. Blood trickled off his chin from a neat lace-work of scratches on his nose. He was screaming in a mixture of French and Italian. The text of his comments concerned a dead mongrel found in the pantry, behold! Likewise the filet mignons were ravished upon the floor! And behold, likewise, a lion of terror had flung itself in his face! Behold that he was resigning!

He hurled the carving knife to the floor. The dapper little manager scurried back and forth, urging Philippe to recall his dignity and return to the kitchen. Philippe hurled the cleaver. Waverly Turnbull, the English actor, departed briskly by way of the ladies' powder room. Dwarf Yancey sat hunched at a corner table, chewing a cigar and glaring bleakly at the turmoil. His eyes flicked toward Mully, and a jerky twitch of recognition hit his face. His black brows came together across his nose, and he removed the cigar from his mouth, leaving an empty circle between his lips.

CHAPTER THREE

The Dwarf's Last Trip

DWARF was not a citizen to remain long without the answers. He crooked his finger at Mully, meanwhile beckoning a waiter for a round of Scotch. "Sit down," he said to Mully. "This is a noisy little party for so early in the evening." Dwarf was a gorilla at heart, but he had a penthouse veneer. He also believed in the head-on approach—at times, anyway, such as now.

"Mully, I wonder what you are doing in this phony lap of luxury."

"I am on my honeymoon. Tutti had heard of the place, so here we are."

Dwarf inspected each of Mully's ears. "Could that possibly be true?" he marveled pointedly. Mully nodded. "And ab-

solutely *no* other reason brought you here?" Dwarf persisted.

"Absolutely no other," Mully said, which was true.

Dwarf peered vaguely at the end of his cigar. The drinks came, and he wished Mully a very prosperous and happy life. Then he hunched forward. "I have no reason to doubt your honesty, Mully. On the contrary I regard you as an exception to the general rule of cops. I am going to speak frankly and privately. If you are interested in what I say, you may stay in your seat. If not, walk away and forget it. No harm done. Right?" He moved closer.

"You have no official status here. Perhaps you have a little spare time on your hands. Are you interested in turning a private fee, unknown to any save you and me?"

Mully remembered what Tutti had said about Dwarf taking the package from the safe and slipping down to the basement. He found himself getting somewhat curious but not convinced. "A fee for what?" he asked.

"Please listen hard, because some of this sounds as if has mirrors behind it. Maybe it does, but they aren't my mirrors. You remember Barney Berry, the society blackmailer?" Mully nodded. Dwarf continued softly, "Maybe you noticed in the papers a while back that Berry had a heart-to-heart talk with Gus Gunnison before he died? And maybe you've noticed that Gus is around here with that blonde named Dolores?"

Mully continued to nod and watch Dwarf's face. Dwarf seemed to find a bad taste in his drink. He frowned and pushed the glass aside.

"Well, a few years ago I had a little trouble up in Canada. It is not important, except that a Toronto cop got in the middle of a private argument and picked up a stomach ache as a result of a bullet. I did not leave my name and address, and nothing ever came of it. *Except* that I was tapped for a five-grand hush fee a few months after it happened. I paid and, funny as it sounds, that stopped it. I did not know at the time that Barney was the man behind the bite. However, he was, because he told Gus Gunnison about it before he died. Gus used to give him a

few plugs in his column, and I guess Barney loved him. Anyway, Gus got worried a week ago and he wanted to see me for a quiet talk. That was when he told me about Barney being the black-mailer on the Toronto affair. Gus said he just wanted to get his record straight with me, because somebody was very unhappy at him. And was it me? I told him no." Dwarf frowned again.

"It worried me, you see? In Toronto they are still looking for the owner of my fingerprints, and one simple phone tip could change a lot of my plans. But Gus swore he would never be the one to tip them off. And I believed him. Why shouldn't I? He came to me and told me, straight out. *But*, he said, something was missing. A nurse had disappeared with information that Barney had sent to Gus as he died. Gus had a description of the nurse—a lot of details on her habits, friends, background. But it wasn't his style of work. He said he would be more than happy to forget the whole thing, if I would find that nurse and grab the information. Gus strictly didn't want any. He wanted out and away from the dogs. He was starting to get nasty phone calls. Would I handle it, saving his nerves and my skin at the same time? I had only one answer to that naturally. I— Are you believing this, Mully?" he asked intently.

"I'm still sitting at the table. Keep going."

"The nurse sounded all right, somehow—pretty, twenty-three, engaged to a medical student in the Bronx, never in trouble, lived alone in a one-room apartment on West Seventy-sixth. The medical student thought she'd gone home to visit her folks in Richmond, Virginia; in fact, she'd phoned him and said her momma was sick and she'd be gone at least two weeks. But when I called Richmond, they hadn't heard of little Barbara and momma wasn't sick. I was handling all this through Wetzel, my lawyer, who never knows who he is working for, if questions come up.

"But it began to look like one of two things: First, either Barbara had decided to go into the blackmail business herself, and had faded into another masquerade; or second, something had happened to Barbara and it wasn't Barbara who called her sweetheart at all. The second sounds

more like the picture to me for some reason. Then, day before yesterday, I got a phone call from a girl. Would I be interested in taking a trip to the Mountain Castle? Had I ever thought of going back to Toronto and holding out my hands to the cops? I said yes, I would be very interested in a trip to the Mountain Castle. The price of admission, said the little lady, would be seventy-five hundred in small-denomination bills. I was advised to drift in and conduct myself like a tired businessman who wanted nothing but rest and contentment; I would be informed of the plans from time to time. So."

DWARF put down his cigar and stared bleakly around the room. Waverly Turnbull had returned and was patting the perspiration off his chin, meanwhile pulling on a Scotch and soda. It was very calm in the lounge. In fact, Mully found it disturbingly so. He wondered what Tutti and Pullman were doing. It was hard to keep in mind that this was a honeymoon.

"So," Dwarf continued, "I arrived with my bankroll, but knowing that I was feeding a bad customer. There is something about blackmail that makes you feel bad, Mully. It can last so long unless you can . . . weed it out by the roots, let's say."

"You say it. I'm just listening," Mully suggested.

Dwarf peered at him thoughtfully, then continued: "I came with the idea of seeing all there was to see. A note was waiting at the desk for me. No signature. The clerk said he didn't know who'd left it. He'd just found it on the desk, addressed to Mr. Yancey, to be held until his arrival. The note said to stick around and don't be impatient and leave the bundle of cash in a plain package with the manager for safe-keeping. I did. Then suddenly I looked around while having a drink in this room, and there was Gus Gunnison. This was last evening. We stepped outside and asked each other what we were doing here, and wasn't it a coincidence? And it turned out he'd gotten a phone call, too, telling him to come up with a bundle of cash to buy the missing information, keeping his mouth shut always.

"Gus wanted the stuff only to pass it

along and get off the griddle. He'd just married the blonde named Dolores, and he kept groaning about how nice it would be to get a little place in the country and settle down and never again hear of Broadway and dirty angles and such. Maybe I am crazy, but I believed him. We decided to sit and wait and see. That doesn't mean we liked it, understand? Anyway, that was yesterday. Since then we've been waiting. At noon today another note showed up in my box. It said to get the money, put it behind the cans of paint in the tool room in the basement and go back to New York at nine o'clock this evening. If you are not in Manhattan in your apartment by midnight, the Toronto gentlemen will hear about it, natch. . . . Natch," Dwarf repeatedly acidly, then pulled back his cuff and looked at his wristwatch.

It was fifteen minutes to nine. Mully scratched his ear and looked up at Dwarf's face.

"So the money is behind the paint cans," Dwarf said sourly. "I have been trying to find Gus and ask him what gives with him. But I can't find him. As they say in dice, the hour's late and the boss has got a date. I am heading back for Manhattan with a very uneasy feeling inside me. I have a hunch I am doing something I will wish I had never done, to put it mildly. On the other hand, I can't risk staying for the last feature. But *you* have no reason to leave. So we come to the point. I want to know who gets that money. I can't stay to see for myself. I will make it a profitable evening for you, if you will simply sit here and keep an eye on that long corridor over there; it leads to a flight of basement steps. And here is the tipoff. I poured a can of black paint on the floor when I was down there. The place is dark. The guy will be in the paint before he knows it. He will come out messy or barefooted. When that individual appears, look at him closely and remember him for me. And for five thousand dollars," Dwarf added. "Finally, the New York Police Department will never hear about this little chore, I promise you." He paused and raised his brows. "Yes or no?"

Mully gave it a long thought while he frowned. "Dwarf," he said finally. "t.here

is nothing in the book that says I cannot sit here and drink. There is nothing that keeps me from thinking that a man should not be leaving black paint behind him. But about the money . . ." Mully sighed sadly. "Please do not mention it. People will think I am crazy. I think so, too."

AT NINE O'CLOCK Mully heard Dwarf's big Buick droning away down the hill. He purchased another highball and contemplated the situation. Mully was not a man of profound faith in the truth of all spoken words. He regarded it as likely that Gus had told the truth; however, Gus was now dead. Possibly Dwarf had spoken with the purity of a saint; that was debatable. It was also interesting to imagine exactly what Dwarf would do, or would have done, had he been able to obtain the blackmail information. Certainly, according to Mully's thinking, there would be a series of profits involved, for Dwarf.

Mully was enjoying his highball, however, and feeling a pleasant glow within his stomach. Long ago Mully had abandoned the effort of trying to understand everything perfectly. It merely confused him in his work. This entire affair was very irregular, indeed. Some certain authorities were going to be hard to convince. Mully realized that he should be worrying—or better still, gathering his bride and her cat and hurrying back to New York before anything else happened. He asked himself why he was not following this reasonable course. "Because," he advised himself solemnly, "this is my honeymoon and I am getting somewhat drunk. Also, it is very hard to follow a reasonable course and still be married to Tutti."

All of this made sense to Mully, whereupon he ordered another highball. He perceived, vaguely, that his entire attitude was radically changing since meeting with Tutti and Pullman. Doubtless, he admitted, for the worse.

This patient reverie was shattered. A long, ghostly and hair-raising wail filtered down from the floors above. It came again, then again, with the monotonous precision of an insane animal howling at the moon. Mully thought of Pullman. He rose, swayed, balanced himself against the

chair, and aimed himself at the door. Many other guests were rising and investigating. The dapper little manager came out of his office; he looked as if he had had all he could take.

"I will kill myself, I will, I promise," he moaned bitterly, and went surging up the stairs ahead of Mully. In the corridor of the third floor, Mully saw it.

Pullman was sitting outside the door of the storeroom where Gus lay dead. He was gazing soulfully at the closed transom, meanwhile giving out with lunatic yowls of hunger and warped pleasure. Tutti was wringing her hands. The manager began to dance furiously and call for help. Tutti saw Mully and rushed toward him.

"I can't do a thing with him! He smells tragedy and blood! Pullman can almost always smell tragedy and blood. It will go on all night that way. You must do something to soothe him, Mully. He will work himself into a nervous state!"

Guests were crowding up the stairs and peering. The manager swung a leg at Pullman and missed. Pullman flicked his tail in a manner that Mully recognized too well. He rushed in to save the dapper little manager. He started to scoop Pullman up and hustle him away.

Pullman was not having any. He was very occupied in giving his tragedy and blood song. He raked Mully across the eyes, then up the nose with his claws. Mully bellowed and let go, stumbling back. As it happened, he crashed against the storeroom door. There was a crisp splintering sound, and the door flew open. With a bawl of glee, Pullman gave a majestic leap and landed atop the corpse of Gus Gunnison.

"He will get his paws all sticky and dirty!" Tutti screamed. "Stop him instantly, Mully!"

Mully was staggering around in the dark room. He stumbled across the corpse and fell upon his face. Pullman yowled and hissed and spat, guarding his treasure. At this point the manager snapped on a light. For an endless moment he peered at the scene before him. His bright black eyes seemed to leap from his head. His hair seemed to raise and dance. His face became grey. With a sound of horror, he leaped back into the hall and slammed the

door, locking Mully and Pullman inside.

"Yes, ah, splendid. Quite all right. Bit of a noise, but all over now!" he was gasping to the guests in the hall. "Back to the lobby, back to your rooms, all over now, yes, indeed, ha, ha! My God."

MULLY blundered to the door and out into the hall. The manager seized him and panted in his ear, "Anything but a scandal! We must be delicate! I am confident we can iron everything out nicely. Oh, I am so shaken!" He grabbed a waiter and thrust him against the door. "Stay here. No one goes in or out, and I am including you!" He pushed another waiter against the opposite wall. "You will stay here and watch Maurice! And you," he ordered a nervous clerk, "will remain there and keep an eye on Hosforth. I want no triple-crossing!" He clutched Mully's arm and began working him down the stairs toward his office. "I admire your calm, your attitude, oh, yes, and we will just have a little chat before things go any further."

He slammed the door of his office and pulled out a bottle of sherry. He pulled out a box of cigars and dusted the chair for Mully. "Now, you . . . er, Mr. . . .?"

"McCarthy. Mully McCarthy."

"Right. By all means, help yourself." He mopped his forehead. "Yours is an inspiring manner, Mr. Mully. I appreciate it greatly. You can easily understand my position in the matter. Publicity. Scandal. A corpse in the Mountain Castle. They would throw me to the wolves. They would fire me like a cannon. The police—oh, the police are barbarians! Insane men with—"

"I am on the New York Police Force," Mully explained solemnly, and sampled the sherry. The little manager clutched the desk and swayed, his eyes glazing. Abruptly he plopped into his chair.

"I am devoted to the police! Just my little joke, that other—"

The door opened, and there stood Tutti. There was a light in her eyes. "Mully, they want to talk to somebody who knows, and I said you were exactly the man." She stepped inside and two tall, weather-beaten men followed. Their boots were wet. Their eyes were suspicious. Mully knew a cop when he saw one, and he perceived that he was now seeing two.

He gave Tutti a cold glance. The little manager was sinking slowly into a state of horrified coma. Mully managed to rise. The gentlemen said they were Sanders and Bedford, out of the town of Riverton at the base of the mountain. Mully identified himself uncomfortably. Tutti beamed, and Sanders and Bedford looked wary.

"In New York maybe you heard of a guy named Dwarf Yancey?" Sanders asked.

"Oh, yes." Mully was thinking hard against the mist of whiskey. He decided to give it the head-on approach. "In fact, Dwarf was here no more than an hour ago. I said hello to him."

"And he left in a hurry?"

"He mentioned having to get back to New York on a matter."

"Well," said Sanders wryly, "he will get back there in a box only. He missed the corkscrew turn and went over the cliff. He is dead and his car looks like an egg-beater." Sanders gave this a moment to sink in while he peered at the

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sagging manager. "We figured he'd been here, since the road comes from nowhere else. We are also interested in a couple of other things. First, the .38 automatic in his pocket, and second, the blood-stained hammer in what used to be the tool compartment of his car. The blood didn't come from Yancey. He was thrown clear. But it came from somebody, and it didn't do 'em a bit of good. This little lady says see you." He waited pointedly.

"Naturally," Tutti put in very brightly, "it came from the corpse in the tiny little room upstairs, don't you think, Mully?"

This statement caused the manager to moan hysterically. Mully attempted to swallow. Sanders and Bedford spun around, stared at Tutti, then gave Mully the business eye. "What corpse in what tiny little room?" they demanded in harsh chorus.

Mully made a tremendous effort to pull himself together. "I am glad you are here," he said. "In fact, we had just stepped in here to phone you. There is a corpse. It is going to be a big blow-up, and you boys have a hot case on your hands. The corpse used to be Gus Gunnison, the Broadway columnist."

The boys wet their lips. They said they would like to step upstairs, immediately.

CHAPTER FOUR

Pullman to the Rescue!

TUTTI led the way enthusiastically.

"To be terribly frank," she confessed, "I have been giving this a lot of thought and have many interesting ideas."

"Uh-huh?" Bedford said. "You mean, you've known about the corpse quite a while, maybe?"

"Oh, hours and hours! Right this way."

Mully's fingers itched as he looked at his bride's lovely throat. The little manager dragged himself along dejectedly. Tutti swept the door of the storeroom open. The waiters looked uneasily at the manager. Bedford walked in, followed by Sanders.

"Well!" came the blunt exclamation. "So this has been just this way for hours and nobody—" Bedford did not complete his statement. He screamed like a bull

with a sore throat. Mully heard him leap- ing about frantically. He heard Sanders curse. He heard Pullman spit, and then Sanders also began to howl. Abruptly the two guardians of law and order came piling out the door, beating wildly about their ears. Bedford was bleeding slightly above the right eye. Mully closed his eyes and shuddered. He was convinced that his career was ruined. He would certainly go to prison.

"You must be very polite to Pullman," Tutti was explaining. "He has a possessive streak about corpses, I guess, so just stand in the corner and look from a distance. That will make him realize that everything is all right, see? I will show you." She led the way in again.

Bedford followed gingerly, fists raised doggedly. Sanders gave Mully a very unpleasant stare. "There are a lot of things I am going to want to talk over with you, Jack," he asserted. "So don't go anywhere."

He followed Bedford, also raising his fists. Mully crept to the door and looked. Pullman was comfortably perched on Gus' corpse, his tail flicking dangerously while he eyed Bedford and Sanders, who stood in the corner. Mully shuddered again. Tutti was explaining where Pullman got his name and how clever he was, actually, and also how she and Mully had just been married and this was their honeymoon.

"Yeah," said Bedford without sentimentality, "but how can we make him quit sitting on the corpse?"

"I guess we will just have to wait until he gets fascinated with something else. After a while he will be hungry, I think. After all, there's no hurry. Why don't we all go have a martini? I never had martinis until today."

Bedford muttered something to Sanders, and Sanders nodded uneasily. Whereupon Bedford left Sanders with Gus' corpse and Pullman, and ordered everybody to come back to the office with him. Dolores was standing at the end of the hall. Her eyes were large and bright as if she had been doing a lot of crying, and she stared at them stonily.

"What have you been doing?" she wanted to know. "Not that I care."

"You soon will," Tutti asserted. "This is an officer, and Mr. Dwarf is dead. His

car looks like an egg-beater, the gentleman says. He is going to cross-examine us, I think."

"Shut up," Mully said sourly. He introduced Dolores to Bedford, who spent a few moments studying her lovely legs and figure. Dolores seemed about to cry again.

Bedford said he knew how hard this was for her, just married and all, but could she manage to bear up a little while and come downstairs? She informed him that she was not the emotional type; she just liked to cry and look old-fashioned, see?

Downstairs in the manager's office, Bedford wanted everybody to sit down and start at the beginning. Tutti did so promptly: "The way it was, Mully walked into the little bookshop where I was working, and right then I knew he was the only one I'd ever—"

"I mean the corpse upstairs, please, lady." He turned to Dolores. "You tell it."

"But I've already told it to Mully. Gus was worried about the blackmail information that he didn't have. Don't ask me what, because I don't know. It came from Barney Berry before he died, and then the little nurse turned rat and stole some of the information. That's all."

Clearly it did not supply Bedford with all the missing pieces. He stuck a cigar in his mouth and glared at Mully. "You from the big-time, you tell us how it looks to you. In small words. We are in the hick country now."

Mully gave it a long hard think. He was sorry he had brought Tutti on this honeymoon, but it was too late now. He decided to select certain of the nicest truthful parts and let Bedford have them politely.

He did. He told him of his conversation with Dwarf, and of Dwarf's story of the blackmail information, of being summoned here on the seventy-five-hundred-dollar payoff, and finally, of the instructions to Dwarf to return immediately to his Manhattan apartment.

Mully did not mention Dwarf's offer of five thousand dollars if Mully would watch the corridor to the storeroom downstairs. Nor did he mention the storeroom or the black paint, or any hint of money that

Dwarf had offered him. He doubted that Bedford would have understood.

BEDFORD chewed his cigar with distaste. "There is something I would like to understand: How come that the corpse stays up there all afternoon, and nobody gets around to picking up the phone and reporting it?"

"Pullman was lost and I was very distressed," Tutti said.

"I told Mully," Dolores said. "I said he could do what he wanted, but for me I didn't want a lot of screaming and asking. Gus was dead, period. Furthermore, I am not ready to swallow everything that Dwarf said. For my money, dead or alive, Dwarf was the fattest, shortest snake in existence."

"And I am sure you were too shocked to understand the importance," Bedford agreed kindly. Then he was looking at Mully again. Mully suddenly found himself thinking about Dolores with something besides confidence or joy. Abruptly he did not understand, if he had ever understood, why she hadn't wanted to call the cops. "But you," Bedford was snapping, "you know better! Or do you? Letting a corpse lay around like fish on ice! If—"

"You can stop popping your tongue at me. I have heard it done for years," Mully said, coming suddenly to the end of his patience. He had a headache and wanted a drink. He wanted to push Mr. Bedford's melancholy nose up between his coal-black eyes. Mr. Bedford perceived as much. It seemed to give him an inward satisfaction. He cocked his head and thrust out his jaw. He spoke in a voice that reminded Mully of a bad movie.

"Oh. City stuff. Wise guy, huh? You too bored for sandlot stuff, huh? Maybe, for instance, you would just like to try—"

"Nuts, you strong, brave, little men," Dolores snapped. "Go back to your corners and listen to me. Gus was my husband, so I am supposed to be the maddest. I am not, however, so mad I cannot think."

"Sure. You tell us, lady," Bedford said. He admired her legs again.

"Simple," said Dolores. "Barney had a blackmail load on Dwarf, and the news leaked out that Gus had been in a death-

bed conference with little Barney. So Dwarf became excited in a homicidal manner. An element of profit was also mixed in, which is not unlike Dwarf, so far as I have heard. Not only, he said to himself, would he quiet Gus permanently, but he would also persuade Gus to reveal all items which might be profitable in the future, in case Dwarf liked the looks of blackmail. Gus came romping up here, as per invitation, merely hoping to get a cancelation on the contract, and instead he got murdered. That is, after being forced to hold a long and intimate conversation concerning what Barney Berry told him. As for me, I think Dwarf liquidated Miss Nurse—and long ago, just to make the picture have a fat red herring in the middle." Dolores paused and gave the eye around. "Is that clear, or should I break it down into shorter words?"

Bedford chewed his jaws solemnly and nodded. "I think that is all very logical, lady." Mully was still thinking it over and not completely liking the taste in his throat.

Tutti put her hands on her slender hips.

"I wonder something," she said. "For instance, how many wheels were on Dwarf's car when you found it? Or what about the brakes? Or maybe the steering wheel? Huh?"

Bedford spun around with a very odd light in his eyes. "That's a funny guess, coming from this far away from the scene of the accident. I mean, the number of wheels and—"

"Ignore her," Mully demanded wildly. "She does not know. She does not count! She merely talks! She isn't responsible for—" And then he happened to glimpse the lovely face of Dolores, and he perceived that something had struck a deep chord. He stopped, his jaw wobbling. He dragged it back into place. Dolores was also getting her face back into position. Tutti was pulling her jaw in again.

"In other words, there *was* something wrong with the car to make it go over the cliff, right? Even Pullman would have known that. And so—"

NO SOONER had Tutti mentioned Pullman than a roar came from the lobby, penetrating the office. Bedford hauled open the door and bolted out.

Sanders came leaping down the stairs. Bent over his shoulder was something that resembled a butterfly net. It was a curtain rod, attached to a net curtain, and therein was an infuriated Pullman—trapped in the net, but clawing violently at Mr. Sanders' neck. Mr. Sanders made a wide turn around the lobby and passed them at a fast gallop.

"Tried to trap him!" he yelled. "Something went wrong! Killing me! Help, help!" He passed the waiter loaded with highballs, and the waiter went down in a heap. Mr. Sanders made another circuit at high speed, beating at his neck and demanding assistance at once.

It was precisely at this point that Mully happened to notice the floor. He noticed again and saw the black stains, vaguely shoe-shaped, that pointed toward the stairs.

He glanced over at Bedford, who was juggling his .32 uncertainly. In an unobtrusive manner Mully started tiptoeing toward the stairs. He passed the landing and moved faster. At the fifth floor the black tracks turned into the corridor, and at Room 507 they vanished beyond the door. Mully took a solemn breath and knocked. Ten seconds passed before the door was opened. Waverly Turnbull looked at him with the expression of a man who didn't want to be annoyed.

"Yes?" he asked coldly. "I can't recall that we've met."

"I am looking for my wife's cat," Mully said, and pushed his way in. It took Turnbull another ten seconds to close the door and cock his left eyebrow. Mully was making a great point of looking under the bed.

"Indeed?" Turnbull said. "But after all, old chap, a cat . . ."

"This is not just a plain cat. This is a very special cat." Mully gave a look at Turnbull's hands and found them dirty. He thought of Turnbull, loosening the lug-bolts on Dwarf's car wheel, for instance. That would be dirty. He kept looking around, like a man hunting for a cat; then he rose. He considered that he was about to make a mistake, but he also considered that many mistakes had been made already. One more would scarcely hurt. So, at the proper time and at the right angle, Mully unwound a shattering

Missing Page

as possible. He felt as though he had a rash in his straw-colored hair. Involuntarily, his hands started to rise.

"Keep them down on the bar," the girl snapped.

He watched her slide off the high stool, move toward the open end of the bar. He hadn't been so lonely since DiMaggio slammed his best outside curve into the stands with two on in the last of the ninth. The tiny heater in her fist was beginning to look as big as Joe's bat, too.

Of course, he didn't have thirty thousand people watching him be lonely. He didn't have anybody, except this girl.

He had noticed her earlier in the evening, when he took over from Mike, his regular bartender. A pretty, well-dressed blonde kid with an upsweep nose and hairdo, sitting by herself. Larry marked her down as a gal with a big, beery sorrow and forgot her. She'd been perched there at two-thirty as the last scoffer called it a night, and Larry had gone over, suggested she do likewise. That's when she'd made with the gun, snapping it out of her bag.

She edged around the end of the bar now, prodded Larry toward the cash register. She said he was to open it and step back. She had one of those junior-grade suitcases ladies carry on a shoulder strap, and it was open.

Larry balked. "Kid, be smart," he said. "Put that gadget away and scram. I'll forget I saw you."

The girl shook her head. Her eyes and the gun stayed on the target. "I'd really hate to burn a hole in that beautiful tailor-made shirt, Mr. Rankin," she said.

Larry shrugged, took a step. "All right, honey, but when the cop on the beat checks in here, don't say I didn't warn you."

AS HE WAS speaking, Officer Perrini shouldered through the double doors. Larry heard the girl gasp, and the pressure of her gun on his kidneys slacked off. He spun, whipped the gun out of her hand and dropped it in his pocket—so smoothly, Perrini missed the whole play. He had a big hello for Larry, glanced at the girl with only casual interest.

"Hey, Clipper," brayed the cop, easing onto one of the high leather stools at the bar, "what about the shellacking the Sox

handed your old ball team today?"

Larry grinned apologetically. "I guess the boys were having a bad day. We all have 'em."

He smiled at the girl. The amber light from the neon around the bar mirror separated her from the makeup on her face. Her eyes were a deep, unblinking purple in a white mask. "Honey," he said, "why don't you sit down? We'll be through here in a minute."

He watched her mount a stool at the end of the bar, keeping her hands out of sight. Larry could imagine them clenched tightly together, shaking.

He closed out the cash register and put the important money in a bag with a deposit slip, leaving enough change to start Mike out in the morning. He switched off all but a single light over the bar, took the girl's arm. Larry Rankin didn't let go of it, even to lock the doors.

They walked across the street with Perrini lumbering beside them. Three spooks in the fog—silent, subdued by the drab blacks and washed-out whites that envelop a city at three A.M. Larry dropped his money in the night-deposit box at the bank.

"Another day, another thousand dollars," grinned Perrini, starting to drift away. "I'll see you tomorrow night, Clipper."

"Just a minute," Larry said. "You might as well take this young lady along with you. She tried to stick me up just before you came in."

"Huh?" Perrini gasped. "I thought—"

"Yeah," said Larry. "I know what you thought. Here's the rod she pulled on me."

The girl was a small disappointment to Rankin. He'd expected her to blow her pretty blonde top, turn into a shrieking, swearing, kicking little monster. He was holding her at arm's length, so she couldn't get at him with those spike heels. But he was wrong.

Her head wilted when Perrini clipped a bracelet on her wrist. In the grey light from the street lamp, Larry thought he saw her chin tremble. No fireworks, no smart cracks. She wasn't a tough kid, or even a kid pretending to be tough. She was beat, period.

Larry Rankin leaned against the cold stone wall of the bank, watched their two

figures moving from street light to street light until they merged with fog. He shivered. "She was asking for it, wasn't she?" he snarled angrily to himself.

He climbed in his car and drove home without waiting for an answer.

He wasn't proud of himself. Already he could see tomorrow morning's papers: TAVERN OWNER CAPTURES BLONDE BANDIT. Rankin was a hero because he had taken a gun away from a scared little punk. A dame at that. Some hero!

Up to now he'd liked the idea of running a neighborhood grog shop. After his arm had pooped out, he'd found himself on a very plushy scrap heap. And dull. The joint kept him from going nuts. It was small, comfortable, a spot where a man could have a drink and watch a ball game or the fights on video. Rankin enjoyed getting behind the bar himself on the bartender's night off—serving his friends, arguing baseball.

Well, that was finished. Now, when he rang up a sale, he'd be reminded of a girl doing time. His mind would trot out a picture of the girl—fragile, defeated, with Perrini, six feet of San Francisco cop, towering over her. Larry went to sleep wondering how he'd like shaving in the morning, when he had to look at himself in the mirror.

WITH and without the whiskers, Larry thought he looked like the devil. Maybe worse after he'd shaved. Ridges of bone punched through the tight, leathery skin on his face; the circles under his eyes were blacker. He was old, older than the day a doc told him he was through on the mound. Older than he felt when he put on his uniform for the last time.

And all because a stupid babe had stuck a gun in his back. Rankin slammed out of the bathroom with soap behind his ears. He didn't know exactly how, but he was going to do something about this situation. He had a long time to live with himself yet, and he couldn't always be ducking mirrors.

He got dressed and drove downtown to headquarters. There was a guy he used to play sandlot ball with in Golden Gate Park when they were kids. A police captain now. Larry figured he could count

on Bert Terkle to listen to him anyway.

Bert hadn't changed much over the years. He was still short and chunky, dark. The way he hunched at his desk as Larry told him about the holdup recalled how he'd squatted behind the plate. That made it easier.

"I know I sound like a prize chump, Bert," Larry wound up, "but I've got a crazy hunch about the girl—that she's not really a crooked dame at all. Maybe she's in some kind of a jam—needed a few fast bucks and made a mistake. If I'm right, I don't want to press charges."

His friend squinted at him across the desk, shook his head. "I'm sorry, Clipper. She's booked for armed robbery. It's up to the courts now to see she gets a square shake."

Rankin's brown, knobby hands fumbled with his hat. He studied the blank wall above Terkle's head. "That's it, then."

"I'm afraid so."

The time had come, Rankin knew, to say things and bow out of the office. But he couldn't.

"Look, Bert," he said. "Would it be against the rules or a lot of trouble to show me what you've got on her? If I saw where she'd had her name all over the blotter, I guess I'd feel different."

Terkle shrugged. "That can be arranged," he smiled.

He had the girl's card brought in from the booking desk, glanced at it himself before passing it along to Rankin.

Laura Brook, the card read, Address: 2118 Taylor St., City. Age: twenty-five. Sex: female.

Rankin skimmed the rest of the statistics, found what he was looking for. Previous Offenses: None.

He looked up into Terkle's noncommittal expression. "What did I tell you?" he said. "This is the first time the kid's stepped off base."

The captain wagged his head. "That's a little misleading, Clipper," he explained. "It means this is her first arrest in San Francisco. We'll have to wait until the F.B.I. reports on her prints before we know for sure she isn't another Bonnie Parker."

Rankin handed the card back to the captain. "I don't suppose I could talk to her," he said.

Terkle hunched his blocky shoulders. "Why not? Of course, I think you're going overboard for this dame, but I guess that's your privilege."

He picked up the phone on his desk and asked to be connected with the women's prison. Rankin was sweating out the side of the conversation he could hear, jumped a foot when Terkle slammed the phone in his cradle. The captain reared back in his chair and snorted. "That does it! There's your sweet young thing—little Miss Innocence herself!"

Rankin was on his feet. "What's she done?"

"Nothing—that wouldn't have occurred to any gun-wise moll," Terkle scoffed. "She's got herself sprung already. She's out on bail."

Larry Rankin's lean face flushed. "That's criminal?" he asked testily.

"No," Terkle scoffed, "it's not criminal, pal. But you'd be surprised how many of these characters know right where to lay their hands on bail money."

Rankin couldn't answer that and remain friends with Terkle, so he let it go. "Maybe you're right," he mumbled, backing awkwardly toward the door. "Anyway, Bert, thanks for everything."

LARRY RANKIN argued with himself all the way to the parking lot where he'd left his car. And lost. It went like this: Who was Rankin to know more about criminals than Bert Terkle? Maybe Bert hadn't seen Laura, but crooks were his job. Would Bert try to tell him how to pitch to Ted Williams?

He was afraid he knew where he was going when he started the car. 2118 Tay-

lor Street. How was he supposed to forget Laura when he couldn't forget her address?

He cruised over to Russian Hill, found the apartment house where she lived. It was a brick-and-plaster monstrosity, lumpy with bay windows, circa 1910, like most of the stuff in the block. Rankin parked. Her name was posted beside a push bell. Miss Laura Brook. He leaned on it.

An electric lock on the door clicked its teeth at him and he entered the mausoleum-with-pot-roast atmosphere of the building lobby, rode a self-service elevator that wheezed him to the fourth floor. Her door was open on its chain. A plump-faced little man peered out through the crack.

"Yes?" he snapped. "What do you want?"

"Miss Brooks," drawled Rankin. "I want to talk to her."

Cherub-face shook his chins violently. "Not today. She isn't in."

Rankin didn't insist. He slammed his left hand against the panel, reached in and closed two hooked fingers on Chubby's handpainted necktie. He jerked the little guy up tight, said to his popped eyes, "Tell her Mr. Rankin is here!"

He heard Laura say, "Let him in, Chet."

"All right," croaked Chet. "I'll open the door, but you'll have to let go of my tie."

Rankin gave him only enough slack to get the chain off the door. "Just so you won't forget I'm out here," he said.

He had his free hand on the knob. As it turned, Rankin released the bright

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piece of silk, threw his shoulder against the door. He heard wood smack against Chet's well-upholstered jowls, and stumbling into the apartment, saw him spin drunkenly toward the far wall.

Laura stood in the curve of the bay windows. "Are you always so charming when you call on a lady, Mr. Rankin?"

"Okay," Rankin said. "We're even for last night."

Chet snarled something uncomplimentary from his corner. Rankin turned to him. "Why don't you run along, sonny?" he said. "We won't be needing you."

Laura's small friend was loaded with false confidence. He clenched his fists, came milling in. Rankin caught nearly everything on his elbows and forearms without trying to strike back. Then he got too cocky and Chet landed one fairly solid punch to the button. It didn't confuse Rankin, but Chet stepped back holding his hand.

"You hurt yourself, I hope," Rankin grinned. He grabbed Chet by the collar, marched him stiff-legged to the door, sailed him into the hall. He shut and locked the door, but not before he had chirped. "Don't think it ain't been nice, pal—it ain't."

Laura hadn't moved. She could have been drying her honey-colored hair in the sunlight streaming in the windows. She regarded Rankin as though he were a particularly disgusting species of bug.

"I hope you won't miss Chet," he said.

She raised her lovely shoulders. "Would it make any difference if I did?"

Rankin dropped into a wing-back easy chair, rubbed his underslung jaw. He smiled. "Frankly, no. I didn't come here to spar around with you or any of your guys."

"Why *did* you come?" she asked. Laura had her arms crossed. Her foot tapped impatiently.

"One question, and I want a straight answer. What was that thing all about last night?"

Rankin had slowed down enough to take in the girl's apartment—very chintzy, feminine, with maple furniture. It squared with his ideas about the kid. And then a door opened. One to the back of the flat. A gent even skinnier than Rankin shuf-

fled into the room. He was stylishly tailored in a baggy, oversize bathrobe, needed a shave. When he saw Laura's company, his loose, blue-lipped mouth sagged. He muttered what must have been apologies and quietly faded as he'd come.

"Who," asked Rankin, "was that?"

"My brother. He's sick."

"And the joker I heaved out of here—Chet. Who is he?"

"My boss, Mr. Hanley. He's head cashier of the Mutual Trust Loan Company."

"You his secretary?"

"No, assistant. And he paid my bail. Is there anything else you wish to know?"

Rankin grinned. "Yeah. Why did you pull a gun on me?"

She left the question where he dropped it, turned and became very interested in her neighbor's laundry drying on the roof next door. Rankin toyed with the idea of shaking an answer out of her.

But that door swung open again and brother joined the party. He coughed discreetly into a facial tissue he held to his mouth. "Please forgive me, sir," he rasped painfully to Rankin. "I overheard. Perhaps I can explain."

Rankin watched him scuff across to the davenport, let himself down as if it were a hot bath. "All right," said Rankin agreeably. "Why did your sister try to stick me up?"

"No, Boyce!" cried Laura when her brother started to open his mouth. "Please let me handle this!"

BOYCE shook his long face at her. "Sis, haven't you taken the rap for me long enough? You see," he said to Rankin, "If Sis has done anything wrong, it was probably to protect me."

"Protect you from what?"

Brother and sister looked at each other while time and Larry Rankin hung in suspense. Finally Boyce sighed. "It's no use, baby. We can't go on. This is where we get off."

"Get off what?" Rankin wanted to know.

"I'm a fugitive," the man said through a spasm of coughing. Rankin noticed that Laura's eyes had become very large and wet.

"Six months ago I escaped from a prison farm in Mississippi. It's not important why I was there." Boyce coughed again, went on, "My lungs are shot, so they put me in sick bay. Another prisoner and I escaped. Came out here. I found Sis. She's been looking after me."

"That's fine," Rankin nodded. "But I still don't get the connection with her fling at armed robbery."

"The other prisoner," coughed Boyce, adding bitterly, "my friend. He's been blackmailing Laura, threatening to go to the police about me."

Rankin cocked an eye at the girl. "How much have you given him?"

"Ten thousand dollars," she whispered.

Rankin whistled. "Where did you get that kind of money?"

"The firm," she answered listlessly. "I've made out false loan receipts. That's why I held you up. I was desperate."

"You wanted to get ten grand to put back? Lady, business just isn't that good!"

"I know," she said. "But I only needed enough to cover several payments that were due from fictitious borrowers."

"You'd been doing this regularly, the stickup routine?"

"No. You were the first."

Rankin leaned back in his chair, studying her face. He could believe her or not. At least she wasn't trying to sell him anything with a big, fat emotional scene. "Okay, I understand that now," he said, hoping he wasn't being a sucker.

Brother was barking into a fresh tissue. "You and this buddy of yours," Rankin said. "I'm still confused. If he goes to the cops, they'll grab him, too, won't they?"

Boyce shook his head. "No, unfortunately. Kramer is able to get around. He'd slip off the police and be long gone before they realized they wanted him. I—" he hacked some more—"I've run as far as I can."

Laura went to her brother, helped him to his feet. She said, "Please go back to bed, Boyce."

The consumptive lurched shakily toward the door, smiling crookedly at Rankin. "You look like a right guy," he gasped. "Give Sis a break if you can. She's a good kid. She didn't ask to have

a black sheep like me for a brother."

Laura helped him out of the room. Rankin heard Boyce coughing until somewhere in the back of the apartment a door closed. The girl returned with a resolute tilt to her chin. She did have quality.

"Very well, Mr. Rankin," she said. "You've seen all of our dirty linen. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

He said, "Yeah. Help me load it in the Bendix. Let's start with the heel who has been gouging you. What's his name and where do I find him?"

She shook her blonde curls. "I can't let you do anything about him. If it went wrong and the police got Boyce, he'd die, Mr. Rankin. He wouldn't last six months in prison."

Rankin agreed. "If he went to prison. Frankly, I doubt if the Governor would sign extradition papers on a man in Boyce's condition."

"I can't gamble on that," she declared.

"Look at the spot you're in," Rankin insisted. "You're charged with a felony. Chet is probably on your side, but his bonding company will be on his neck the minute they connect Laura the girl bandit with their trusted assistant cashier. They'll check all your transactions—and you know what happens then?"

That did it. Laura broke down. Rankin watched her, not sure what to do, let her have her cry or try to talk her out of it. He did both.

"Look," he said when she had partly subsided. "I want to help you, but I can't do much unless you give me that cookie's name and address."

Laura choked several times, finally managed to stammer, "I—I d-don't know where he lives. His name is Nick Kramer."

"How do you contact him?"

"A call. I leave a call for him at a certain number. He phones back and arranges the meeting."

"Good. And this number you call—any idea where it is?"

"It's a bar down on Broadway, I think."

THE KNOT HOLE, where Nick Kramer got his calls, had a giant, economy-size case of halitosis. Beer, antiseptic and stale tobacco smoke. Larry

Rankin found a stool at the end of the bar where he could watch the creeps who wandered in. For company he had the happy thought that this all might be for nothing. There was no assurance Kramer would come by.

Okay, what was he doing there? It had been his idea to trap Kramer, trail him to where he lived and have a showdown for Laura's ten grand. She hadn't twisted his arm. Not really. He had a fast alibi—for himself. He felt sorry for the the gal. Yeah, Big Brother Larry Rankin, the working girl's friend. Who was he kidding?

When he nursed one beer for two hours, the bartender came over and looked at him carefully. "Mac," he said, "sure you ain't takin' it too fast?"

"What do you want me to do," asked Rankin, "buy the stool?"

"I'd settle for you payin' the rent on it."

Rankin bought another beer, told the barkeep to have a drink on him. That arrangement worked pretty well. By ten o'clock the bartender was riding high. Rankin was just bored and a little tired of flat beer. But none of the men who had come in answered Laura's description of Nick Kramer.

About ten-forty-five the hit-and-run was on. Rankin was staring moodily into a cloudy glass, wondering how much more of this he could take. He'd been studying faces and builds until he was about convinced everybody looked like Kramer. Or nobody did.

Then this blocky, dark-faced man in the flashy pin-stripe suit breezed into The Knot Hole. He had the manner of a successful alumnus out of a class of bums. He had the cleft chin and close-set eyes Laura had told Rankin to look for. It was Nick Kramer, all right. The bartender passed a piece of paper across the mahogany to the man. He scowled at it. Laura's message.

Kramer did a fast turn in the phone booth, then came back and ordered a shot of rye, which he tossed off with an elegant sweep of a pinkie. He nodded to the barkeep and shoved along.

As Rankin stepped into the street, he spotted Kramer a half-block, swaggering past store fronts like the neighbor-

hood myaor or a politician on tour.

Tailing him was no game. Rankin never worked so hard in his life to appear casual. The night air was cool and neon-lighted fog made the city alive, a great, unwieldy galleon under full sail.

Kramer left the Broadway honky-tonks, started up one of the dark, narrow alleys that traverse Telegraph Hill. This was old, old San Francisco: bleak frame buildings, sinister relics that had escaped the Great Fire, anemic streetlights. And silence—as though the hill were isolated from the rest of the city by a sound-proof wall.

Rankin could hear his man grating over the rough stone pavement ahead even when, between feeble islands of light at the corners, he was out of sight. Rankin tried to move more stealthily himself, although he imagined Kramer knew someone was in back of him. However, it was a public street, Kramer had no reason to question his right to be there.

And then panic. He didn't hear Kramer moving ahead of him. Rankin stopped, straining for any sound at all. Had Kramer dodged into a doorway to wait for him to pass? Rankin rubbed his wet palms against his thighs.

Somewhere near, lumber groaned a mild protest, and Rankin picked up a scuffling and thumping like a man walking up steps. Not more than ten feet from where he'd been standing Rankin discovered an empty lot that ended in a cement retaining wall. A wooden stairway cut diagonally across it. Apparently, during Rankin's bad moment, Kramer had been getting his breath at the foot of these stairs. He was over halfway up them now.

Rankin waited until his man's blurry silhouette showed over the top of the wall, then tackled the steps. If Kramer had suspected a tail, he knew for sure now. Rankin's number twelves weren't exactly little cat feet.

By the time he had put the last wooden step behind him, Rankin was blowing. He narrowed his eyes, looked around. He'd come out on a bald outcropping of rock. Then he heard gravel scrape near at hand. Someone said, "Got a match, buddy?"

A blot of shadow solidified at Rankin's

elbow. Nick Kramer. Rankin's effort to sound matter-of-fact didn't quite come off. "Sure—here."

He fumbled a lighter out of his inside coat pocket. Kramer shoved a cigarette into the fire, his eyes looking up at Rankin intently, small points of fire themselves.

Rankin was a sitting duck, his head outlined by the glow from the lighter, his mind on Kramer. A mistake. A very large mistake. Somebody made the back of his skull with a sap. Rankin didn't feel anything particularly. He heard a loud crash, like a street car being dropped over a cliff, and the world, including Nick Kramer's burning eyes, tilted—then spun away to a black and sticky pool of oil.

WHEN he finally waded out, there was still plenty on him. Blood, not oil, but sticky. And pain. As he struggled to sit up, nausea swept over him, pressed him back against the cold rocks, gagging. Kramer's little helper hadn't been satisfied to knock him out. There were loose teeth in his jaw, and his mouth felt as big as a first baseman's mitt.

He was supposed to be dead. Rankin knew that, and was almost sorry Kramer and company had botched the job.

Rankin had another go at lurching to his feet. Made it this time, began stumbling down that long wooden stairway. Each step shook him up, jolted his insides until he sat down to keep them from falling out.

He'd been taken. His friend Captain Terkle should see him now—huddled on this splintery perch, all alone, beat up, licked.

How dumb can a guy get?

Laura and her boy friend-boss Hanley were probably looting their firm together; that story of the brother's had been the red-herring department. The only part of Laura's pitch that had any chance of being true was her motive for the robbery. The rest was strictly for laughs.

Rankin grasped the rail, hauled himself erect. It was six blocks to the soft leather seat of his car. There was a pint in the glove compartment, and the thought of it kept him moving.

It didn't let him down. He sat there in his car, the half-empty bottle resting

in his lap. He should call the police, he knew, but the whiskey changed his mind. This was his inning and he wanted it all to himself. Larry Rankin was growling like the twelve cylinders in front of him as he shot away from the curb.

* * *

At Laura's apartment he caught Number One trying to steal home—in reverse. Her brother, a suitcase in his hand, darted from the door and began loping down the street. For a guy in the last stages of T.B., he was very damn spry. Rankin cut him off at the first corner.

"Hold on a second, pal," Rankin called, sliding across the seat to get out. "I want to talk to you."

Boyce's sunken eyes actually bugged, white in the frosty light from the street lamp. As he skidded to a stop, he swung his suitcase at Rankin stepping out of his car, and the old Clipper caught it with his chest. There must have been something in it besides extra socks. Rankin grunted, staggered against the car and lost his footing. He took a short count on the back of his lap. Boyce had shoved off like an umpire escaping from Brooklyn.

Rankin swore, getting untangled from the suitcase and the car door. He saw his man had taken a long lead, getting longer with every stride. Rankin's hand closed on the whiskey bottle he'd left on the seat. Here was a crucial pitch. He sailed it after the suddenly fleet consumptive, saw it ricochet off the side of his head. Boyce staggered, went to his knees.

He was still on the sidewalk when Rankin got to him. It looked easy. Rankin reached down to collar him—and learned his first lesson in Judo. Laura's poor, sick little brother twisted like a wounded bobcat, grabbed Rankin's outstretched hand. The next thing Rankin knew, two big feet were planted in his belly, and he was sailing through the air to a very rough landing.

He staggered to his feet with Boyce plastered around him like corn husks on a tamale, threw himself over backward. His full weight landed on the madman hammering at his head. He heard Boyce deflate, felt him come unstuck.

The Clipper didn't wait for applause from any gallery. He rolled off Boyce

and stood over him. When the red haze cleared out of his eyes, Rankin found himself holding Boyce between his knees, smashing his fist into what looked like something from the corner butcher's.

He stopped, gulping air into his lungs. He shook Boyce without response, dropped him and felt his throat for a pulse. It was there.

Rankin loaded Laura's brother over his shoulder and tramped to the building where she lived, fifty long yards away. There was no answer to her buzzer, so he laid all over the whole line of buttons on the panel. The door came alive like a nest of wet rattlesnakes.

He carried Boyce down the corridor to the elevator, past a line of frowny heads popping out of apartment doors. He dumped his boy on the floor of the cage without a word for the bathrobed little building manager tugging at his coat. But before he closed the elevator door, he asked the manager, "Got your keys with you, Pop?"

The bald head bobbed.

"Okay, come on!" Rankin jerked him into the cage and slammed the door.

He toted Boyce to Laura's door and waited while the manager made with the key. He wasn't set for what he saw when the door opened. Rankin heard the manager gasp, "Oh, my goodness!"

But he was already entering the room with Boyce draped over his shoulder like a serape. He dumped the brother on Laura's davenport, ripped off his tie and bound his hands. His belt did for Boyce's feet. At the same time he barked at the manager. "Snap out of it, Pops. Call the police and an ambulance."

Once Boyce was secure, Rankin knelt beside Laura. There was no point in worrying about Nick Kramer. The whole top of his head was hammered in, obviously by the blood-dripping poker in Laura's hand. She looked as if she might have fainted after seeing what she'd done to Kramer. But Rankin noticed a swollen, discolored place on her chin. Boyce's work? Or she could have hit it when she fell. It depended on what you wanted to believe. What the cops wanted to believe.

The manager was still squeaking excitedly into the phone in Laura's dressing

room. Rankin got off his knees and went back to Boyce, patted him, but not out of affection. He found what he was looking for in the hollow of Boyce's chest, under his shirt. A fat grouch bag. He had the money counted and in his pocket before the manager jittered in from telephoning. Ten thousand dollars—exactly what Laura had embezzled. Quite a coincidence, Rankin didn't think.

He sent the manager after a wet towel, was rubbing Laura's wrists when her eyes fluttered open. She looked at him, terrified. Rankin's puffed lips twisted into a crooked smile. He knew he wasn't pretty. "It's me, honey," he said gently. "I only look this way during the full of the moon."

AFTER Kramer's body was hauled away to the morgue and Boyce provided with one-way transportation to the pokey, Rankin had a time with Laura. He gave her the ten thousand, and she insisted on crying. Nobody could say she didn't have a good, long howl coming, the way her brother had taken advantage of her loyalty. He wasn't a fugitive—the whole deal with Kramer had been cooked up to make her embezzle dough which found its way back to Boyce. When he saw it was over, he set out to liquidate Kramer and his sister.

Rankin hung around until Laura cried herself dry. Somehow, he wound up holding her, trying to quiet her racking sobs by cuffing her clumsily on the shoulder blades. "You're all right, honey," he said. "At least, you're almost all right."

"Al-most?" she quavered.

"Yeah," Rankin said. "You're still on the hook for armed robbery, remember?"

Laura's blonde curls tickled his nose.

"Of course," he said, "there's an out. If we get married, they can't force me to testify against you."

She pulled away from him, looked into his eyes as though he had dropped a gag she didn't quite understand. He felt a big egg hatching under him.

Laura finally smiled. "Is that the best reason you can think of for marrying me, Mister Rankin?"

He drew her back. "Give me time, baby," he chuckled, "give me time. I'm sure to think of something else."



By NELSON and GEER

THE WITNESS

The man probably had no idea of committing murder that night in July, 1942, when he staggered into the Green Parrot Bar & Grill on New York's East Side and demanded a drink of Max Geller, the proprietor. "Robber! Robber! Robber!" Geller's parrot screamed above the altercation that followed. The man drew a revolver. "Robber! Robber! Rob—" Shots punctuated the parrot's words, and Geller slumped, a bullet in his heart.

Once murder had been done, the man's only thought was to get away with it. Hurrying to his home nearby, he packed a bag and caught a train to Baltimore where he vanished into the anonymity of a job in a large shipyard.

Detectives investigating the slaying could get nothing from the frightened human witnesses



although the parrot, far more voluble, kept squawking, "Robber! Robber! Robber!"

Detective John Morrissey, doing some undercover sleuthing in the neighborhood, learned that the bird often amused Geller's customers with its uncanny ability to pick up and repeat their names. He began to figure. There was no evidence of robbery so it wasn't saying "Robber!" even if it knew what it was talking about. What then was it doing? Why, obviously repeating a name like Robert, Roberts or Robertson.

Checking neighborhood patrons with names even vaguely resembling "Robber," Morrissey



eliminated all but one, Robert Butler, an ex-taxi driver. The missing suspect's family, placed under close surveillance, was seen contacting a hackie pal. He too was watched.

A letter addressed in handwriting similar to specimens of Butler's was delivered to him and secured by police. They arrested their suspect in the Baltimore shipyard next day.

Robert Butler, pleading guilty to manslaughter, received a 7-year sentence—a killer fingered by a bird that didn't know what it was talking about. Or did it?





“He was dead before the .32 got him,” MacCaffrey said. But Raquel paid no attention. Her eyes were fixed, unblinking, on the candle flame.

CHAPTER ONE

Beauty and the Beast

THE PHONE rang. “Now, listen,” my wife said, “if that’s that loathesome friend of yours, MacCaffrey, you can just tell him to go—”

“Eh, eh, eh,” I said. I picked up the phone, and it was MacCaffrey.

“Hello,” he said. “Charlie?”

“Hello, Mac.”

My wife closed her magazine and put



LETHAL LITTLE LADY

She was all the visions a man ever had, put together. Her eyes were liquid brown, and her hair was black satin, and her body was the stuff of dreams. . . . So when Detective Captain MacCaffrey had to bait a murder trap, who could be better use than the lovely—and doomed—Raquel?

By CHARLES LARSON

her hands on her hips, which was not an easy thing to do since she was sitting in my over-stuffed chair at the time.

"Say, Charlie," MacCaffrey said, "can you get away from the house for a minute?"

"Don't you invite him over here," my wife hissed.

Women, I'm forced to say, have never been partial to MacCaffrey, due, possibly, to the fact that he is an ugly, sullen brute with none of the finer sensibilities. I have known him, off and on, for nearly fifteen years, and I have never seen him exhibit one ounce of grace. He is without humility or tact, and I am as certain as I write this that he would rather die than acquire them. I remember the day he was made captain of detectives.

"MacCaffrey," I recall saying, "this must come as a great honor."

"Charlie," he replied, "you're so damn dumb you frighten me. Who the hell else could have handled the job?"

A strange man, MacCaffrey. A very strange man.

Into the phone now, I said, "Terribly sorry, Cap. Got company. Couldn't think of leaving them. Some other time."

In the background, my wife began to laugh gaily, chattering and tinkling the edge of a lamp with her bracelet. She reached out and hit several disconnected chords on the piano with her free hand.

"Sounds like a reefer brawl," MacCaffrey said.

"You know how it is," I said. "Friends of the wife's. Bunch of drunks, every one of them."

"Okay, Charlie. I thought I'd give you a break. Sorry I bothered you. I'll call another paper."

"Wait a minute." I motioned to my wife to keep still. "What do you mean you'll call another paper?"

"Now, forget it. It's only a small scoop anyhow. Not worth bothering about. But since you're a reporter, I figured—"

"Murder?"

"Just a little murder."

"Who?"

"Nobody important."

I frowned. "Well, then, what's the gag? Let the regular night men cover it."

"Sure."

"Why don't you hang up on him?"

my wife breathed angrily into my ear.

Again I waved to her to be quiet. She is a very sweet person, and I love her dearly, but at times . . . "Mac," I said, "please let's not get coy. If you got a story, give it to me. If you haven't, just hang up and let me get back to my crossword puzzle. Will you do that?"

He chuckled. "You throw the darndest parties," he said. "Crossword puzzle, Charlie?"

"The guests help me with the hard words," I said.

"Yeah." He chuckled again. "Well, kid, I'll see you around. Give my love to the little woman."

Sighing, I said, "All right. I'm beat. I give up." I got a pencil out of the drawer beneath the telephone, and cradled the receiver between my shoulder and my ear, like they do in the pictures. Most uncomfortable position in the world, but it looks good. "Give me the address," I said wearily.

"Olvera Street. The Golden Light Candle Shop. You won't regret this, Charlie. I knew I could count on you."

"Count on me? Count on me for wh—"

But he'd hung up. I sat there a moment looking at the wall, and then I put the phone back where it belonged.

"Well?" my wife said, and it was very, very frosty. She had come to the phone and was standing beside my chair. Although she was not moving, I had the definite impression that she was tapping her foot.

I gave her a big smile.

"Don't you smirk at me," she said.

"Honey," I said, standing up, "I swear I won't be more than twenty minutes. Just down there and back. Be a good girl." I kissed her on the tip of her nose.

Without a word she turned and marched back to her chair. It's an odd thing, but wherever MacCaffrey is, chaos is. It was going to be an awful night, and there was nothing in the world to be done about it.

When I went out, my wife called me "Charles." She did not kiss me good-bye. . . .

OLVERA STREET, which lies like a little scrap of Mexico in the center of downtown Los Angeles, had been roped off when I got there. The tourists had

been chased away by MacCaffrey's men, and the shopkeepers, dressed in their native costumes, looked scared and lonesome and dismal. Sergeant Hanson, a tall, conscientious Swede, was standing by a box of Mexican jumping beans, grinning at their antics. I crawled under the rope, and wandered over to him.

"It's little bugs inside that make 'em jump," I said.

"Eh? Oh. Hi, Charlie."

"Hi, Sarge."

"MacCaffrey's been screaming for you," he said severely.

"Well, goodness," I said, "I'll just scout right on over there."

He took it deadpan. "You better do that," he said.

I grinned at him. "What's the gimmick here, Hanson? Perfect crime? Police baffled? Heads gonna fall?"

"MacCaffrey's got it under control," Hanson said. "MacCaffrey's a good man." He thought about this for a while, and then amended, "MacCaffrey's a good cop."

I left him to play with the beans and headed toward the Golden Light Candle Shop. Olvera Street, I think, is unique in the world, and although I love it, it has always been imbued, at least for me, with a terrible sadness. It happens to be the last remnant of the ancient pueblo of Our Lady of the Angels, the last reminder, except for a few place names, of the lazy days when California was ruled by the dons and their lovely dark ladies. It is a tourists' paradise now, protected by law from extinction, like the buffalo. And this is a good thing. Also, a sad thing.

The Golden Light Candle Shop, stuck into the wall beside a puppet theatre, was bursting at the seams with a couple of dozen of Los Angeles' finest when I arrived. There was a smell of perfumed wax in the air. The shelves and the display cases were loaded with candles, all sizes, all shapes. Over the heads of the dusters and the fingerprint men, I could see MacCaffrey standing beside Frisbee, the medical examiner, listening to the first report on the corpse. And next to MacCaffrey, huddled into a corner, was this girl.

I felt awe when I first saw her, and I feel it yet, and I am as sorry as I can be that so many pretty words have been

wasted on virtual hags, because I'm afraid that you've been conditioned to these words and may fail to see that girl as I want you to see her. Recall, then, if you can, the dream you had at fifteen . . . the lithe and lovely person who swayed through your mind and smiled upon you and made you sick and weak with so much animal beauty. Her eyes were Spanish eyes, and her skin was fresh and brown, and she moved with breathless grace. I think you remember, and remembering, you may be able to see that girl, in the corner, at the Golden Light Candle Shop.

I made my way through the press of uniforms slowly, and got to MacCaffrey's side in time to hear the M.E. say, "I don't know what more I can tell you, Mac. The man was killed by a .32. Nasty job. Must have held the gun directly against his back. There are a couple things that worry me, but they can be cleared up in the autopsy. In the meantime, look around for the .32. That'll be your murder weapon."

He put on his hat and, turning, bumped

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full into me. "Oh, hello there, Charlie."

"Hello, Doc."

He looked at me in a calculating, professional way. "Seem a little pasty, Charlie," he said pleasantly. "Not long for this world." He nodded and went out, happy as a kid.

"Nice guy," I said to MacCaffrey, but my eyes were fastened on the girl.

MacCaffrey chuckled. When he failed to speak I finally glanced at him. He was smirking like an adolescent, looking first at me and then at the girl. I reddened.

"All right," I said. "I'm here. Hanson says you been screaming for me."

"Uh-huh."

"Well," I said irritably, "what's the scoop?"

"Scoop?" he answered. "No scoop. It's dirty, but it's usual." He lifted the sheet off the corpse with his toe. I found myself looking down into the dead and agonized face of a male Mexican about forty-five years old. "The owner of the place," MacCaffrey explained. "Somebody got him in the back when he was going over the books."

"Robbery?"

"Nope. Nothing touched."

"Any angles on the murderer?"

It was MacCaffrey's turn to be irritated. "What the hell do you think I been doing since I got here? Of course there's angles. He was killed by a kid named Julio Valdez."

"Why?"

WORDLESSLY, MacCaffrey nodded toward the girl in the corner.

"Makes sense," I murmured. "What happened? Julio get jealous?"

"If you call that sense."

"I call that inevitable. That's an awful pretty girl, MacCaffrey."

"You think so?" I found him looking at her, and all of a sudden, it was Beauty and the Beast, to the life. For a single second MacCaffrey, that squat and ugly little man, was terribly off guard and wide open, and I turned away. But I give him credit. The shutter snapped down almost as soon as it was opened, and his voice was dry as dust when he said, "Look for the murder weapon, Doc Frisbee tells me. It wasn't a .32 killed the Mexican, Charlie. She did the job. And it'll be her that kills

the kid, Julio. Because he'll come back after her. And we'll get him. And when he's sitting in the gas chamber, it won't be an executioner who pulls that little lever. It'll be her. She'll do it."

"MacCaffrey," I said, "damn if you aren't a poet. Or did you read that somewhere?"

He turned to me slowly, his eyes steady and chilled. "Sometimes I wonder why I keep you around," he said.

I cleared my throat and got awfully interested in the row of candles beside me. They were slim and straight as spears, bright yellow, lots of personality. They had been burned a little and were, as a matter of fact, the only tall, slender ones in the place. The rest were artistically pretty but a bit dumpy. Humming, I studied them until I felt that MacCaffrey had calmed down. I am, frankly, something of a coward. Let's face it.

I might have been standing there yet, to tell the truth, if I hadn't remembered suddenly that I'd promised my wife I'd be home in twenty minutes. Which also caused me to wonder why I was down there in the first place and, in turn, brought back the memory of the telephone conversation with MacCaffrey. "I knew I could count on you, Charlie," he'd said.

I turned, frowning. "Incidentally," I said, "just why did you drag me down here? I still haven't found out."

His face lost its chill then and dissolved into a semblance of a smile. "Oh, you'll love this," he said.

"Is there a story in it? Because if there isn't, I'm not playing."

"There's a story in it."

He glanced at the girl. "You remember I said that the murderer would be coming back after Snow White there? Okay. That's just where you come in."

"Is, eh?" I said warily.

"It seems," MacCaffrey said, "that Julio and the girl had an understanding. They were gonna be married when Julio could nail down a steady job. You see the pattern?"

"I think so. But go ahead. You tell it beautifully."

"Okay. The girl gets a job in the candle shop. For one reason or another, mostly because the owner of the place can feed her better than Julio can, she begins to

make excuses when Julio comes around. She's got no time for him any more. Still follow me?"

"I'm all ears."

MacCaffrey looked at my head critically. "You know," he said, "you damn near are?" He sighed and went on. "Anyhow, Julio finally sees the light. He warns the girl, once, twice, to stay away from the owner. But it doesn't go. So—" MacCaffrey shrugged.

"So Julio makes with the gun," I finished.

"He does."

"And now the girl's afraid she's next on the list."

"Correct."

"Excuse me," I said, "but I'm lost again. This is a dandy yarn for a lonely-hearts column, but I can't quite see—"

MacCaffrey looked tired. "Honest to God, Charlie," he said, "for a newspaperman, you got less imagination than anybody I ever saw. It's frightening." He pushed his hat back and rubbed his forehead. "Look," he added finally, "I'll give it to you again. In small words."

I tried to look alert.

"The girl," MacCaffrey said slowly, enunciating each syllable, "is on the spot. More or less. She's scared to death. But my job is to get Julio. Nothing more. I can't waste any men on protecting the girl, and I can't clap her into jail without an awful lot of bother. But somebody ought to take care of her. Not because anything's going to happen to her, but because she *thinks* something might. Okay. I'm big-hearted. So I throw the job to you. Is it getting any clearer?"

"It's getting clearer," I said, "but I don't like what I see."

"Why not?"

"I gather you're asking me, in your fumbling way, to take this walking target under my wing. Which is just peachy, except that I'm a married man, and I haven't got too much insurance, and what if Julio should go all to pieces and kill the both of us instead of just her?"

"Forget about Julio."

"Oh, sure."

"I said forget about him. We'll have him under wraps in an hour. And in the meantime—"

"No," I said.

"In the meantime," MacCaffrey went on inexorably, "you got yourself that story I was talking about. 'Twenty-four Hours With A Doomed Woman,' or some such slop. They'll eat it up."

Stupid as it sounds, he had something of a point there. They *would* eat it up. I began to look into the thing a little more closely. Which was a frightful mistake.

"You really think you can pull in this Julio without any trouble?" I mused out loud.

"Now," MacCaffrey said, "you're getting insulting."

I glanced at the girl, which is a little like getting hit in the stomach with a baseball bat, and I said, "Well, if you're sure—"

"Good!" MacCaffrey snapped. He took me by the arm and led me over to meet the girl, and the die, as they say, was cast.

"Raquel," MacCaffrey said.

The girl jerked her head up. Her eyes were dark and wide and terribly, terribly frightened. She was just a youngster, twenty-one, twenty-two years old, and she was lonely, and it wasn't her fault at all that she held violence in her slim hands. I was sorry for her, and I was sorry for Julio, and I tried to let her know it by smiling at her, and I think she understood.

"Raquel," MacCaffrey repeated, "I want you to meet a friend of mine. He's a newspaperman. He'll take care of you tonight. You go along with him, and he'll see to it that nothing happens to you. Okay?"

"I'm a big bother," Raquel said.

"Nonsense," I said. "No bother at all." I turned to MacCaffrey. "My car's just down the street."

"All right," he said. "You might as well take her to your place. I'll give you a ring when everything's set." He nodded at both of us. "Now beat it," he said. "I got work to do."

Obediently, the girl picked up a red purse and started out, glancing back now and then to make sure I was still with her. I wondered just exactly what I was getting into. It could turn out to be a very interesting evening. Or a very grim one. The things I do, I thought wearily, for the newspaper game. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Deadly Visitor

NOTHING out of the ordinary occurred during the ride home, although I kept my eyes on the rear-view mirror as often as the street ahead of me. No sinister shapes lurked on the corners; no hot-rods, driven by vindictive Julios, tailed me. There was only this girl, this Raquel, quiet beside me, and looking like something by Goya escaped from its frame.

It wasn't until we got well into Hollywood that she began to relax. I had just turned off Beverly onto Vine when I felt her eyes on me. I glanced at her, and she swung her head away again. But there was a trace of a smile on her lips.

"Still scared?" I said.

"Oh, no." She settled deeper into the seat, warm and lazy as a cat. "Not now. Not any more. Not when you are here."

I whistled softly and opened the side window to let a little air hit my face.

"Well," I said, "I think you can depend on MacCaffrey. If Julio can be gotten, he'll get him."

"MacCaffrey?" she said.

"The detective in charge back there."

"Ah." She shook her head contemptuously. "That one. The ugly one, like a monkey."

I chuckled.

Smiling, she looked at me. "No. Why do you say I may depend on him? You are the one. I am in your car. I am going to your home." She paused, and then added softly, "I depend upon you. Nobody else."

She continued to watch me out of the corner of her solemn black eyes. As for me, I paid no attention. I paid no attention so diligently, as a matter of fact, that we went through two red lights and a crowded crosswalk before we pulled up in front of the house. I must say that she kept her poise admirably throughout.

Just as I did, of course.

The light by the front window was on when we reached the door, and my wife—Marion, her name is—was listening grimly to the ten-o'clock newscast. She looked as though she hadn't stopped tapping her foot once.

I pushed the door open and bowed Raquel in ahead of me.

"Well!" Marion began. "Twenty min—" Abruptly she saw Raquel, and her words died in her throat. A horrible death it was, too.

Nor was the Spanish girl entirely prepared for the meeting. She stopped short, turned, and glanced at me questioningly. No one, apparently, had mentioned that I was married. Things were not helped one bit by her next words. "Your sister?" she murmured.

"No," I said. "No. My wife."

"Wife," Raquel repeated. Her voice was outrageously disappointed.

"It was a child marriage," Marion said dryly. "He didn't know what he was doing." She smiled sweetly.

"Darling," I said, "the damndest things happened tonight. . . ."

"I bet," Marion said.

I sighed and launched into the explanation. Marion heard me through without changing expression. At the end, all she said was, "MacCaffrey did this, eh?"

"He did."

"I might have known." She looked calculatingly at the girl, and it was an awesome thing to see the battle she put up in her own mind. Pity for the girl and her really desperate predicament fought tooth and nail against the primitive and unbounded hatred all beautiful women seem to feel toward other beautiful women. Pity, I am thankful to be able to state, won. More or less.

"Well," Marion said at last, "I imagine that our guest is tired, Charles."

Raquel seemed to have lost interest in the whole thing. "Yes," she said, "I am. Very tired."

"You'll take our room, of course," Marion went on. "I'm afraid the other isn't made up."

"Oh, please," Raquel said. "Do not go to any trouble."

"Any friend of Charles'," Marion replied, "is a friend of mine. It's no trouble, dear, believe me."

Her voice was so warm that, except for the "Charles," I might have been thrown quite off guard. I watched skeptically as they went into the bedroom, arm in arm. In a moment, I could hear them chattering and giggling like a couple of school girls.

What wonderful creatures women are, I thought. What extraordinarily puzzling and wonderful creatures.

AS I started to take my hat and coat off, the phone rang. I answered it, and it was MacCaffrey again.

"All quiet?" he asked without preamble.

"Reasonably so," I told him. "What about Julio?"

"We're working on it."

"I thought you'd have him within an hour."

"Whattsa matter? You worried?"

"Now why in the world," I said, "should I be worried? You got a berserk murderer running loose, just aching to get his hand in again. You let me take a potential corpse into my house. And now you call me and tell me you haven't even got a lead on our trigger-happy friend. Worried? Don't be silly."

"That's gratitude," MacCaffrey said. "After I let you in on the biggest story of your life."

"The longer you fiddle around," I said, "the more chance this has of turning out to be the *last* story of my life."

"Charlie, you're a bundle of nerves. Try a glass of hot milk. I'll see you in the morning."

I could hear him chuckling as he hung up.

I put the phone away and went into the guest room, where Marion was already starting to put up her hair. "Raquel get settled all right?" I asked.

"She did."

"What do you think of her?" I said warily.

"I think she's charming. A little scrawny, but what can you expect? Really a rotten figure. One of the worst I've ever seen." She shook her head, amused. "And what hair!"

"What's the matter with her hair?"

"Now don't tell me," Marion said, astonished, "that you like all those straggly ends flying around. The girl looks like a scarecrow."

"I don't know," I said. "I thought she was kind of cute."

Marion stared at me coldly.

"Not your type, of course," I started, but—"

"Oh, shut up," Marion said wearily. She got into her side of the bed and turned toward the wall. Now what on earth had I said this time, I wondered. I got into bed and turned the light out, and because I was so certain that I wouldn't sleep at all, I was asleep in five minutes, uneasily, but asleep. . . .

It was nearly my last.

I don't know to this day what woke me up. I only know that I found myself sitting straight up in bed, trying to see the luminous dial of the clock on the bureau, and that the palms of my hands were sweating as though I had been in the middle of a nightmare. It was a hot, moist night—a night that prophesied a blistering tomorrow—and it didn't help a bit to see that it was only one-thirty in the morning. Groaning, I lay back again, kicking off the one sheet that still covered me.

And then I heard it.

Soft as a whisper, distinct as death.

I lifted my head, and it came again, a tiny creaking, the slip of a foot across a bare floor. And it came from Raquel's bedroom.

I'd like to say that I wasn't afraid. But to tell the sober truth, I was scared witless. I thought seriously for a moment of waking Marion, and desisted only because I'm just not game enough to face a murderer and a screaming woman at one and the same time.

Very carefully I got out of bed and stood up, feeling more alone than I've ever felt in my entire life. I listened until my ears ached, and presently I heard the final desperate sound—the prim and dainty tick a gun makes when the safety is released.

Hurtling across the room, I kicked the connecting door open. The beam from a flashlight caught me full in the face. Stunned and blinded I stood there, helpless and hypnotized, like a moth in a candle. Furthermore, I got the scream I'd been trying to avoid. Raquel, it was, and I can't imagine why every glass in the house wasn't shattered by the tearing shrillness. The flashlight beam wavered erratically, and I lunged to one side in an effort to escape it altogether. But it was no good. My eyes continued to burn with the memory of the light, and I almost fell

when I crashed inadvertently into a chair beside the door.

I saw the outline of the man with the flash as he jumped toward me, and I tried to thrust the chair between us, but I had no time. Something—the flashlight, I suppose—slashed across the side of my head. The floor slanted toward me in a crazy-house kind of way, and the part of my mind that still functioned recorded a childish moan that could have come from no one but myself.

I fully expected that it would be the last sound I would ever hear. . . .

IT IS a terrible thing to regain consciousness after losing it so completely—a little like being born again. I had no head. A block of stone seemed to sit upon my shoulders, and my arms and legs were like wood, and I was certain beyond any doubt at all that my back was broken. Little by little, however, awareness of something besides my own body began to creep into me, and I remembered, with a certain frightened clarity, what had happened.

I was lying on my back, with my head—or whatever was left of it—cradled on Marion's lap. The bedroom light was on.

"I think he's coming around now," Marion said. She had been crying. She looked at me anxiously and then leaned down and kissed me on the forehead.

I cleared my throat, searching around in my mouth for my tongue. I found it finally and managed to mumble, "Raquel? Okay?"

Marion nodded. She motioned with her eyes, and presently Raquel swam into sight, standing over me. Her face was tired and white.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"Don't mention it," I said wearily. I gathered all my scattered strength and drew myself up to a sitting position. When the room floated back onto an even keel, I noticed that the window was open. My heroic stupidity had saved Raquel, if nothing else.

"Are you all right?" Marion said. "Shall I call a doctor?"

"Call MacCaffrey," I said. "And let me talk to him."

I held my head as steady as I could and got to my feet, weak as a grounded whale with the effort.

While Marion went to the phone I made my laborious way into the bathroom. I was afraid to look at my face until I'd washed it off, and even then it was as grotesque a sight as I ever hope to see.

By the time Marion called me to the phone I was able to navigate with slightly more success. I was also mad as hell.

Marion held the receiver out to me.

"Hello, Judas," I said.

"Marion told me," MacCaffrey said. "I've already sent some men out."

"Well, isn't that sweet? You've sent some men out? Don't break your back, MacCaffrey, closing those barn doors. The horse left some time ago."

"I'm a little disappointed in you, Charlie," MacCaffrey said. "Damn it, you practically had your hands on him. But I might have known you'd fluff it."

"What!"

"It's all right. I forgive you."

"You forgive me!" I shouted. I sputtered with rage until Marion had the good sense to take the phone out of my hands.

"Good-bye," she said coldly and hung up.

I sat down. "Why," I said bitterly, "didn't you tell him to go—"

"Eh, eh, eh," Marion said. But her eyes were twinkling.

In spite of myself, I smiled back. We were still there, grinning at each other, when Raquel came up to us.

"Excuse me," she said.

I looked at her, and all of a sudden I was mad at MacCaffrey all over again. Aside from what had happened to me, he'd come within an ace of signing this girl's death warrant, too. Remembered panic still shone from her lovely eyes.

"I have thought of something," she said.

"You poor little kid," Marion murmured. "It's been a pretty awful night for you."

"But worse for your husband," Raquel said. She took a deep breath. "I know now how terrible Julio is. How dangerous. To others as well as to me. I know now that he must be caught. And I think I know how that may be done."

We waited, listening.

Her voice was empty and bleak as she continued. "I am the only one he wants. If he knew where he could get me, if he

knew that I would be alone, unprotected, he would try again."

I said, "Raquel . . ."

"No. Listen. Even if the police do not know where Julio is, the people of Olvera Street, my people, will be able to get a message to him. Some of them—I know it—are on Julio's side. If I were to let them know that I will be alone in the candle shop tomorrow night, I am sure that Julio would come after me."

"Alone?" Marion whispered.

"Alone—as far as Julio will know." Raquel turned to me. "Your friend, the ugly man, can be waiting with me. Do you see?"

I saw. "And you wouldn't be afraid to do that?" I murmured.

"I will be terribly afraid. But I think it must be done."

She looked so small and pale and upset standing there that I could have kissed her. Purely a paternal feeling, however, which rather surprised me.

"Look," I said, "let's talk about it tomorrow. I think we're all too fogged up right now to know what we're doing. Let's get a little sleep—"

"Sleep!" Marion said. "Ha!"

"Sleep," I repeated firmly. "Even Julio couldn't be mad enough to come back tonight. And if he did—" I went to the front window and pulled the curtain back a bit. Beneath a group of trees in front of the house stood two men, trying as hard as they could to look like loiterers, and succeeding only in being their own sturdy selves—Sergeant Hanson and one of his boys. I'd heard their car drive up when Raquel was talking.

"If nothing else," I said, "MacCaffrey can be depended upon to keep those barn doors locked for the rest of the night."

"Well . . ." Marion began to say doubtfully.

"Good-night, ladies," I said. "Sleeping pills are in the medicine chest. I'll see you in the morning."

With a wave, I turned and wandered back to the bedroom.

All the rest of the night, I dreamed of Raquel sitting alone in the candle shop, with Julio waiting outside, and although it was a nightmare, I knew that it had to be done. I knew that it was the only solution.

CHAPTER THREE

Vigil in the Candy Shop

THE NEXT DAY was just as hot and sticky as I'd expected it to be. We got hold of MacCaffrey and told him of Raquel's scheme, and he was delighted with it. I tried to point out the dangers involved, but all MacCaffrey said was, "I'll be with her, won't I? Where the hell is the danger?"

"Charlie'll be with her, too," Marion said belligerently. "Won't you, dear?"

There's nothing I like better than a commitment I hadn't planned on, particularly when it may involve bullets, but I was trapped. And so our plans were laid.

At seven o'clock in the evening, then, I found myself lurking in the doorway of the Golden Light Candle Shop and wondering how on earth I'd go into this whole mess. I tapped on the door, and in a moment it was opened by MacCaffrey. "You're late," he said.

The shop felt like a little corner of hell. The air was wet and muggy, as though it had passed through an oven. MacCaffrey, I noticed, was in his shirt sleeves, although how he'd been able to stand it all day, even stripped down, I'll never know.

He had fixed himself a spot between two filing cabinets and had laid out a small arsenal on the chair next to him. In between the guns I saw three or four jumping beans, active as all get-out. Probably some that Hanson had given him. Raquel was sitting at the desk in full view of the door. She smiled tiredly at me when I entered.

"Everything set?" I asked.

"Yes. Julio knows."

It was an effort, in that heat, to speak. I wanted to reassure her, to tell her that everything would be all right and not to worry, but the words seemed ridiculous. How could she help but worry? And the last thing in the world I expected was that everything would be all right.

Silently, I went back to MacCaffrey and sank to a seat on the floor. It seemed the coolest place around. MacCaffrey glanced at me momentarily and then continued to study his jumping beans. His eyes were far-away and thoughtful.

It was then seven-ten.

By eight I was ready to scream. There was no sound except the erratic popping of those damn beans and the labored breathing of MacCaffrey. I had been waiting so tensely for something to happen that I all but lost my mind when MacCaffrey pushed his chair back suddenly and stood up.

Raquel and I both stared at him, wondering if the moment had finally come.

But all MacCaffrey said was, "It's too dark in here."

"What?" I said stupidly.

"She wouldn't work in the dark," MacCaffrey said. "We need some lights."

"Yes," Raquel put in. "Yes. That is true." She started to rise.

MacCaffrey, however, waved her back. He was looking around the room at all the candles. "Don't turn on the overhead lights," he said. "They'd show Charlie and me sitting here, too. A candle, I think. One candle, on your desk."

Again Raquel began to get up, but MacCaffrey had already gone over to the row of long, slim, yellow spears that had attracted me on the previous day. He peered at them for a time and chose one from the center. It was the only straight one among them. The others had all bent and lost their shape one way or another from the wilting heat. Whistling a little, he brought it back to the desk, set it in a holder and lit it.

Raquel was watching him carefully.

"Now, then," MacCaffrey said, smiling down at her. "Isn't that better?"

"Yes," Raquel said softly. "Much better."

IT WAS almost as though they had some secret between them, something they had forgotten to let me in on. Puzzled, I followed MacCaffrey with my eyes as he went back to his chair.

He sat down, prodding the beans with one finger. "Oh, Charlie," he said, "I forgot to tell you. Doc Frisbee called me this afternoon."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. You remember he said there were a couple of things about the body that worried him? Well, he performed the autopsy."

"And?"

MacCaffrey sounded sad. "And—he

found that the Mexican had been dead before the .32 got him."

"Well, I'll be damned," I said. I looked at Raquel, to catch her reaction. She seemed to be paying no attention. Her eyes were fastened, unblinking, on the wavering flame of the candle on her desk. It was as though she were hypnotized.

MacCaffrey, too, was watching the flame.

"Apparently," he murmured, "the poor devil had been stabbed."

"Stabbed!" I said. "But couldn't Frisbee have seen a thing like that without an autopsy?"

"That was the funny part. After the Mexican was dead, somebody held the .32 almost against the wound, and then pulled the trigger. That's why he couldn't tell."

Slowly MacCaffrey's voice drifted away. I couldn't take my eyes off Raquel. Her fingers, clasped together at the base of the candle, were trembling.

MacCaffrey rose, walked over to her and stood behind her chair. Raquel didn't glance at him. The candle flame was dying, for no reason at all. It burned, sputtering, with a low blue light.

"Raquel . . ." MacCaffrey whispered. "We picked up Julio at two-thirty this afternoon." At the same time, the candle went out.

In the blackness, Raquel screamed.

And all hell broke loose.

By the light that came from the street outside, I could see Raquel spring to her feet. She swept the candle off the desk and plunged it toward MacCaffrey's face. He ducked to one side and caught her hand as it swung past him. "Lights, Charlie!" he yelled, and then, at the top of his voice, "Hanson!"

Just as I snapped the light switch on, Hanson came hurtling through the door. Raquel was kicking and screaming, but MacCaffrey had grasped her by both wrists and was holding firm. He held out her hands, and Hanson snapped a pair of cuffs quickly onto them.

And it was all over.

The candle, dropped by Raquel, had rolled to my feet. It was only then that I saw why she had been so interested in it, and why she had thrust it at MacCaf-

(Continued on page 128)

ODDITIES IN CRIME

By **MAYAN** and **JAKOBSSON**

1. When Ben Green, New Orleans butcher, died rather suddenly of a baffling malady, his ex-business partner, Joel Anderson, made no secret of his satisfaction. The two men had quarreled bitterly. Only recently, Anderson boasted, he made Green "eat dirt"—goofer dust, dirt collected in a graveyard at the full of the moon. Unsuperstitious, Anderson had expected nothing beyond personal satisfaction from the deal.

Cops went to the cemetery, collected goofer dust at the full of the moon, and had it analyzed. It proved to be a concentrated essence of cholera, typhoid and scarletina cultures, some of which had been active in the ground for more than twenty years.

The charge against Anderson was—murder!



4. No one has ever taken a formal census of the underworld as such. But an actual list might startle the public. When they murdered Don Mellett, crime-fighting Ohio editor, back in the '20's, no one was surprised—he'd been attacking thieves and killers, and they got him. But the careful state investigation that sent four men to jail for the crime only caught one professional crook.

The others, who'd personally responded to Mellett's declaration of war on crime, were: Police Chief Lengel; Chief of Detectives Floyd Streitenberger; and Chamber of Commerce bulwark, merchant Ben Rudner.



2. Suspected of murdering 29 people, Jake Bird offered man's simplest defence to the State of Washington courts—drop dead. Authorities dismissed this as the resentful suggestion of a violent and untutored mind, and Bird was found guilty and sentenced to death. That was fourteen months ago. To date, the following have died: Detective Sherman Lyons, who arrested Bird; Judge E. D. Hodge, who pronounced the death sentence; Deputy Clerk Ray Scott, who handled the papers in the case; Undersheriff Joe Karpack, who questioned Bird.

Still alive, awaiting an answer from his latest appeal—Jake Bird.



3. One of the neatest getaway tricks in criminal annals was cooked up—and recently went bust—by Alexander Munroe, who with it baffled the police of two continents for twenty years. Munroe carried out extremely well-paying confidence frauds from New York to London—almost openly. He simply carried twin identities, records which proved that he was his own twin brother John—and as John frequently joined the authorities in efforts to catch himself! He finally slipped up on fingerprints.

HAPPY DEATH-DAY, MARGIE!

By JACK BRADLEY



Burns whirled around wildly as the Luger swept forward in a quick, short arc. . . .

Much had changed during Big Burns's eighteen years behind bars. But one thing would remain the same, always, for him—his love for Margie. And if that love called for Burns to lay down his life for her—well, what else was a big, awkward stir-bum like him good for?

THE SNOW had started falling early in the morning and now, in the evening, it was beginning to pile up in knee-high drifts. It threw a soft, cottony mantle over all of Mountain City, smoothing the grim ugliness of the factory district, softening the neon-lighted garishness of downtown Mountain Avenue into a dusty pink, and making the big pine trees in Rocky Mountain Park look like something out of fairyland. It

was hard to imagine trouble in a setting like this.

But over in the fashionable western slope section, a girl was talking over the telephone to a man. "I tell you I'm not going to pay you any more. You've bled me white already, and . . ."

Later in the evening a matron in one of the swank downtown apartment houses was saying to the same man, "But I just can't give you anything more, until the first of the month. My husband is already becoming suspicious and . . ."

In a cocktail lounge downtown, a well-dressed young man stared into his cocktail glass and fought down the panic that was rising in his throat. He was wondering what it would feel like when he sent a bullet crashing into his brain, tomorrow. . . .

Over on Railroad Street, a man ploughed doggedly through the falling snow toward the downtown district. He was in his middle fifties, with grey hair and a weatherbeaten face. Standing nearly six feet four, his huge bulk and wide shoulders made him almost mountainous. Old as he was, there was an alert springiness to his step that told of tremendous strength. His name was Mike Burns and he had been released, the day before, from State Prison.

When he reached Mountain Avenue, he stopped and looked about him eagerly as a boy seeing his first circus. Eighteen years! Why, the last time he'd seen Mountain Avenue had been back in 1930, and Prohibition had been in effect. He'd cracked a tin can of a safe in a loan office upstate and come into town with a roll that would choke a hippo. He'd headed straight for Baldy Rhone's Fisherman's Club, the best speakeasy in town, and in less than an hour the word was around. Big Burnsy just hit town with a roll. The best in the house and no questions asked.

ACTUALLY, though, Burns was not thinking of that wild, drunken night. He was thinking of the time, a few days later, when he had come down this same avenue with Baldy Rhone's kid Margie skipping along beside him. He was always in and out of Baldy's home in those days, any time he was in town, and Margie was just turning five—exactly the right age

to have a well-developed case of the gim-mies. She knew from long experience that "Uncle Mike" was the easiest of soft touches, and she meant to make the most of her next birthday, just two weeks away. Burns grinned at the memory of her eager chatter as they stopped before each shop window, looking for her birthday present. His grin faded as he remembered he had been picked up just two days later. Eighteen years!

Abruptly he pulled his prison-made coat tighter about his barrel chest and started walking rapidly down Mountain Avenue. Two blocks down he saw the huge sign, looming high above the buildings around it: Rocky Mountain Hotel. H. H. Rhone Ownership.

Burns had been told that it was one of the biggest and best hotels between California and the Mississippi, but the sheer size and grandeur of it took his breath away now. He stood there for a moment, in the falling snow, staring quietly at it, his leathery face twisted a little. Yes, Baldy Rhone had gone up in the world from the old days.

The uniformed doorman stepped out angrily as Burns came toward the main entrance. "Hey, you! Where do you think you're going? Around to the back if you've got any business here."

Burns stepped up to him and deftly slapped down the gloved hand. "If you wasn't Baldy Rhone's flunky, I'd pick you up under my arm and carry you inside with me, sonny," he said quietly. "I don't go around to the back of any joint. Now you get inside there and tell Baldy that Big Burnsy is here to see him."

The doorman's scowl vanished as if by magic. "Oh! You're Mr. Burns. I'm sorry, sir. Mr. Rhone is expecting you. If you'll follow me, sir?"

He left an indignant couple in evening clothes to call their own cab and led Burns inside. They went back past a dimly lit cocktail lounge, where exquisitely dressed couples danced to the soothing music of a famous name band, past rows of linen-covered tables, to a small table, where a man sat alone.

Mike Burns stared at the man almost hungrily. "Baldy!" he breathed. Yes, the same, pot-bellied, red-faced little guy with the same fringe of wiry hair around his

bald spot. Looking almost the same as he had eighteen years ago. The main difference was that he was wearing custom-tailored evening clothes now. That, and the fact that his once jolly red face was haggard with lines of worry. Rhone stood up slowly.

"Burnsy!" he cried. "You old horse thief, you!"

"I never stole a horse in my life. They don't put horses in safes." It was a standing gag between them, repeated almost like a ritual at each new meeting. Burns sat down at the table.

Almost at once there was a bottle of marvelous brandy on the table and, presently, the kind of steak he had dreamed about for eighteen years. He kept up a steady stream of talk about the old days as he ate, and he was almost through his steak before he noticed that Rhone was answering him with monosyllables. He looked at his friend alertly as he set down his glass.

"You got troubles, Baldy?" he asked softly.

"Yeah. But they'll keep for a while yet. What do you plan on doing now, Burnsy?"

"Oh—I don't know, exactly."

"I do," Rhone said curtly. "Exactly. You're planning on hanging around until your old reputation as a wizard of a safe cracker gets you in touch with some new mob. Then you'll be right back blowing them again."

"And what if you're right? Look at me, Baldy." Burns shoved his wrinkled face closer to the light. "I'm fifty-five years old and I got only one trade. If I drop that trade, what else can I do? I'll tell you what. Mop the floor of some damn gin mill for my eats and a place to sleep. No good, Baldy!"

"You know very well that I'd be glad to stake you to a roll and find a job for you."

"You ever hear of me mooching yet, Baldy?"

"I mean a job where you'd earn your pay, you stubborn old fool."

"Any job I could hold, you could find a dozen guys that could hold it better. And everybody would know it, within a week too. Nope. No pension, thanks, Baldy."

Rhone sighed patiently. "I thought you'd look at it that way. But listen, Burnsy. You've been out of circulation for eighteen years and you just don't know what it's like now. There aren't any more big-time safe-cracking mobs. The safes they got now put safe cracking in the same class with kidnaping. It simply can't be done. Why, I've got a safe in my own office that you couldn't crack in less than five hours, and there's so many alarms attached to it that you'd be nailed within five minutes after you started working.

"So, what does that leave you? A few old-fashioned tin cans in small offices upstate, in the hick towns. Twenty to fifty bucks a job. Until some State Trooper, in a car equipped with a two-way radio—a gadget you've never even seen—shoots you down like a bum."

"Maybe. It's still better than a gin mill swamper's job."

"Yes, I suppose I understand how you feel," Rhone said slowly. "And to tell you the truth, I'm selfish enough to be glad, sort of. Because I'm in one tough spot, Burnsy, and I need help. Need it bad. So bad that I'm offering five grand to the guy that can get into a certain safe for me."

"I'm listening, Baldy." Burns reached for the brandy bottle, his eyes alert.

"You remember a guy back in your time called Fat Boy Clines?"

Burns thought a moment. Then, "You don't mean that greasy-faced tub of lard, with the slick black hair and the scar on his face? The one that used to run errands for Joey Roanoke's mob?"

"That's him, Burnsy. Only, he doesn't run errands for Joey Roanoke any more. Joey got shot down in a mob war ten years back. Clines has his own mob now. His own mob and his own racket."

"What is it?"

"Blackmail!" Rhone spat the word out bitterly. "Blackmail on a wholesale scale. And he works the racket so slick that nobody but a louse like him would ever have thought of it. He gets something on some crazy young fool here in town, and then he puts the pressure on. As long as the sucker can pay, okay. When the sucker's bled dry and can't pay another dime, he—or she—works a friend into a frame, ar-

ranged by Clines. That louse has got half the kids—yes, and a lot of the older people, too—eating out of his hand. And, Burnsy, he's got Margie in one of those frames now!"

"Margie!" Mike Burns half rose from his chair, the stem of his glass snapped.

"Yeah." Rhone nodded wretchedly. "The kid went on a party with some of her friends, friends she'd known for years. It was just another party. Maybe a little more drinking than a bunch of kids that age ought to do, but nothing worse than that. She told me that herself, and you know that Margie never lied, not even when she was a kid.

"Somebody slipped a mickey into her drink—one of Clines' victims, of course—and when she woke up, she was in a strange room, alone. The next day the photographs came. I—" Rhone suddenly stopped talking and bowed his head in his hands.

"But, Baldy! I don't get it. Why didn't you kill this louse as soon as she told you about it?"

"For the same reason a dozen or more people in this town don't kill him," Rhone said bitterly. "He always lets his suckers know that he's got the evidence stashed away in that safe of his, and that if anything happens to him the whole mess will come out.

"And that safe of his is just about the latest thing in safes. It's going to take a master cracksmen to get into it. And the job is dangerous, Burnsy. I sent one of my boys to take a look at it a week ago, and they found him in an alley the next day. He had five slugs in him. I feel like a murderer sending you into something like this."

Burns answered as though he had not heard. "It's funny, but I remember promising Margie a birthday present the last time I was with her. She was five then, and they picked me up on a job before I could get the present. I never thought then that it would be this kind of a present." He sighed softly and twisted the brandy bottle in his gnarled hands.

Suddenly he put the bottle away, and his eyes became alert once more. "Okay. Let's start working this out. I'd like to get a layout of the Fat Boy's joint and where he keeps this box, if you can find

out for me. Yeah, and you'll have to get the soup for me. I've lost all my contacts in this town and it'd take me too long to get new ones."

"That's all been taken care of," Rhone told him. He pulled a slip of paper out of his wallet. "You go to this address and ask for Steve. He's got everything you need waiting for you."

He pulled another, and larger, piece of paper from his pocket. "Here's a complete layout of the Fat Boy's house with the location of the safe marked. And I can get Clines out of your way for about an hour, at best. There's a police captain downtown who has a kid that's in the same fix as Margie. He'll have Clines brought in on some phony charge, and he'll keep the beat cop out of your way for the same time. That's the best I can do for you, Burnsy.

"Why, that's plenty," Burns said grinning. He took the two pieces of paper and stuck them into his pocket. "Hell, it's just another box job. And if I can't open the can myself, Fat Boy can help me!"

"Okay, then. You hit Fat Boy's joint at eleven o'clock sharp. And now I guess you'd like to see Margie, before you go?"

Mike Burns' hungry eyes answered him.

"She's over at the house, waiting for you, Burnsy. One of my boys will drive you over when you're ready. And there's a complete outfit of clothes in one of the rooms here at the hotel for you. You want a rod for this job?"

"Naw. They'll probably frisk me before they let me in." He said it almost absently, his leathery face wrinkled in a half smile.

"Hey, Baldy? How much is eighteen and five, huh?"

Baldy Rhone got up from the table and squeezed his friend's shoulder. "That's right, Burnsy, she's twenty-three now. Come on, hustle upstairs and get into those new clothes. Don't keep her waiting. . . ."

IT WASN'T at all the way he had thought it would be. When he first saw Baldy Rhone's huge mansion, he had had visions of following some stiffly garbed butler in to meet a young lady who

would be a complete stranger to him.

Instead, the door had opened even before he rang, and a radiant girl in a misty evening gown was standing there, smiling up at him. She was a tiny little thing with soft, coppery hair and the same pert, up-tilted nose he had remembered all those bitter eighteen years in prison. She stood there for a moment, and he saw that there were tears in her eyes. And then she reached up quite simply and put her arms around his neck and kissed him the way she had when she was five.

"Uncle Mike!" He could hardly hear her whisper it.

When he finally put her down, she stepped back and said, "Come on, we'll go into my sitting room. Oh, there's so much to talk about."

But there really wasn't so much, because of the gap of years between them and, even more, perhaps, because of the thing that was on both their minds and which both of them carefully avoided mentioning. So they talked about inconsequential things, mostly the funny little things that had happened when they were together eighteen years ago. After a while they stopped even that and sat before the huge window, watching the snow falling quietly on the street outside. It was not until he saw that it was time for him to go that he mentioned the one thing uppermost in both their minds.

"Uh—Margie," he stammered clumsily. "That—that trouble you're in. I guess Baldy told you I'm taking care of that tonight?"

The proud little head lifted as she looked him straight in the eyes. "It's going to smash up my whole life if it keeps on. And I haven't done anything worse than being a damn fool, Uncle Mike."

"Why, I know that," he said. "You didn't have to tell me. Only reason I brought it up at all is I thought you'd feel better if you knew it was going to be all right after tonight."

He got up and reached for his coat. "Guess I'd better be going before the snow gets so deep I can't travel. Don't want to keep the Fat Boy waiting."

She went over to him swiftly and stepped inside his arms, and he saw that she was biting her lips to keep back the flood of tears.

She lifted her lips to his and whispered, "Oh, Uncle Mike! Be careful. Please, please be careful."

"Why, there's nothing to it," he protested. "I'm just keeping my promise about that birthday present. A little late, that's all."

He bent down and kissed her. Then he turned and hurried out of the house.

* * *

The address Baldy Rhone had given him was a small bar and grill on the other side of town. When he asked for Steve, a waiter in a greasy apron led him into a back room, and presently a skinny young man with ex-con written all over him came in with a small package. He handled the package with extreme care.

"Take it easy with this stuff, Pop," he said. "This ain't like the soup you used before the war. One spoonful of this would blow the face off'n a granite cliff, and a good, healthy sneeze would set it off. I got a whole pint of it in here."

Mike Burns took the package and looked at it thoughtfully, for a moment. Then, "Look, Steve, could you wrap this up so it looks like a special delivery package, huh? I might want some guy to sign for it."

Steve nodded readily. "That old gag, eh? Okay, Pop. Can do."

He came back with more paper and string and presently, when Burns left, he was carrying a neat parcel under his arm.

BURNS whistled softly under his breath, as he saw the big stone house set well back from the street. Fat Boy Clines had gone up in the world, all right. Gone up by way of the slimiest racket on earth. The big cracksman hunched himself up, put a look of half-frozen misery on his face and went up and punched the doorbell.

The man who answered his ring didn't look like the hoods of Burns' day, but Mike would have recognized him as one anywhere. He was a slender young man, well dressed, with flaming red hair, and he was almost drunk.

"I got a special delivery package here for Mr. Clines."

"Mr. Clines ain't here. I'll sign for it."

"Okay." Burns fumbled stiffly in his pocket, as though looking for a receipt

book. "Say, boss," he whined, "you wouldn't by any chance have a shot of something in the house, would you? Cripes, I'm damned near froze, wading through this snow."

"You already got a breath on you that would knock over a freight car," the redhead growled. "But all right, I guess."

He stepped forward and deftly slapped Burns' pockets, then led the way inside. Mike saw with relief that there was only one more hood inside, an eagle-nosed mug who looked at him sourly as he set the package on an ornate walnut table. The redhead went over to a liquor cabinet by the wall, and the eagle-beaked hood stepped forward to pick up the package. His coat fell open as he reached for it, and Burns saw a heavy black automatic in a shoulder holster.

"Hey! Don't touch that," he called out sharply.

"And why not?" Eagle-beak demanded.

Big Mike Burns grinned like a happy kid. "Because there's enough soup in that package to blow this dump into little pieces!"

He lunged forward, still grinning, his big body moving like a young man's. His gnarled left hand snapped out and clamped onto a handful of Eagle-beak's shirt front, yanked him close, while he swung a right hook with all his might.

Eagle-beak's head snapped back and Burns yanked the man's automatic from its holster. There was a blasting roar from across the room, and the hood flinched once, then sagged limply in Burns' grip. Burns knew he was dead. He held the body close to him for a shield, then raised the automatic. The redhead was standing by the liquor cabinet, a smoking gun in his hand.

"Drop it, punk," Burns said calmly.

The redhead froze where he was, undecided, and for a moment Burns thought he was going to try for another shot.

"Go right ahead, punk," he invited. "You can't make your pal any deader than he is now and I can drop you before you get in another shot."

The redhead crouched tensely for another moment, then let the gun drop from his fingers. His eyes were glaring like a madman's as Mike Burns came across the room toward him. Mike knew he

might explode into action any moment.

He walked up, spun the man around as though for a frisk, and then laid the flat of the big automatic against his skull. He breathed easier after that.

In a hall closet he found ropes and tied the redhead securely. He was still grinning as he picked up his package and went upstairs to Fat Boy Clines' safe. This was living again. This was like the old days. He laid his tools and the bottle of soup on a table and pulled back the drapes that concealed the safe. And then his grin faded.

Mike Burns knew safes, knew them as only a master cracksman can know them. And he knew, even at the first glance, that this safe was simply beyond his powers. The chromium alloy of the door would take hours of work, and he could see three sets of wires that, he knew, were alarm wires. The cutting of one of those wires would probably set off an alarm at some distant point.

Then he stepped back and saw two small lenses on either side of the drapes. He had never seen these before, but he knew what they were from stir gossip. Photo-electric cells. The electric eye. He had already sounded an alarm when he pulled back the drapes.

He went back downstairs in a rush. The redhead was still unconscious. Burns scooped up Eagle-beak's gun, checked it and the redhead's automatic, and then stationed himself by the door.

He didn't expect an answer to the alarm before ten or fifteen minutes, because of the heavy snow drifts, and his eyes widened incredulously when the door opened a minute or two later and Fat Boy Clines walked in alone.

He took two steps into the room, saw the bound-and-unconscious redhead and whirled around. Burns stepped up close, the two guns held steadily. Clines' greasy face tightened angrily.

"So that was why that lousy Captain Kiernan wouldn't let the boys come back home with me," he muttered. "He's got Big Burnsy working for him now."

Burns frisked him briefly, then spun him about and prodded him with one of the guns. "Upstairs, Fat Boy," he ordered, "and make it snappy. We ain't got too much time. I think I set off one of

them fancy electric-eye alarms of yours."

UPSTAIRS, he gave Clines a shove that sent him reeling against the safe. "Okay, open it up," he snapped. "I won't ask you twice."

Clines grinned at him. "Sorry, Burnsy. Afraid I can't help you. You see, I figured something like this might happen some day, so I keep the combination downtown with one of my boys. Now, I've got a couple of hundred bucks in my wallet, so suppose you take that and we just sort of forget this ever happened, huh?"

In one blurry movement, Burns swept the automatic up and crashed it against Clines' face. The mob leader went down and lay moaning on the rich rug, blood streaming from his shattered mouth. Burns reached down, yanked him to his feet, raised the heavy gun again. His leathery face was twisted in rage.

"Clines," he said through clenched teeth, "I never killed a man in my life before. But you've got something on a friend of mine in that safe. A kid that I'd give my life to help. And when I think about that kid, your slimy life means about as much to me as a cockroach. Clines, if you don't open that safe I'm going to pistol-whip you to death!"

He slashed the heavy gun back and forth across the Fat Boy's greasy face, his big hands grimly pushing down the pudgy, upraised hands. Actually it was only a few seconds, but it seemed hours that he slashed away at the bloody, slobbering mask of fear. And then Clines broke. Broke abruptly.

"All right," he sobbed. "All right. I'll open it."

"Okay. Make it snappy," Burns panted.

He stood grimly above Clines as the Fat Boy opened the heavy door and unlocked the drawers within. From time to time, he glanced at the door, the big automatic in his hand held ready. When the last drawer was unlocked he sent the Fat Boy sprawling with a contemptuous kick and began yanking out the contents of the safe.

There was a huge bale of currency and this he tossed aside. Then he came to the envelopes. Little, fat envelopes, each one

stuffed with photographs and papers. Each one holding a lifetime of misery for some human being whose name was written on it. Burns opened one or two of the envelopes, and after that he did not open any more of them.

"You slimy rat," he said quietly to Fat Boy Clines.

At one end of the room there was an ornate fireplace and Burns took up an armful of the envelopes, went over to it. As he touched a match to the pile, Clines raised his head, his shattered face a mask of anguish.

"Wait a minute, Burnsy. Wait. Listen to me. One hundred grand if you'll put those things back. Think of it, Burnsy! One hundred grand. More dough than you'll see the rest of your whole life. One hundred grand!"

Burns walked over and stood above him. "Clines, I wouldn't turn this stuff back to you for a million—no, not even if all these people were strangers to me. There's some things a guy don't do until he gets to be a slimy louse like you."

He riffled hurriedly through the rest of the envelopes until he came to the one labeled Margie Rhone. Then he gathered up the whole batch and dumped them onto the fire. He stood there, watching the last one turn to ashes, feeling a warm glow inside of him, and for a moment he forgot to watch the doorway.

He hadn't heard the soft whisper of footsteps on the thick rug. It was Clines' abrupt silence that warned him. He whirled around wildly, trying to bring up the automatic. He had one flashing glimpse of a tall, lantern-jawed man holding a Luger. Then the Luger swept forward in a quick, short arc, and he crumpled to the floor in a flood of exploding lights.

WHEN he opened his eyes again, there was a ringing in his ears and he knew that he had been unconscious for only a few minutes. But that had been enough. The room was full of men. They were Fat Boy Clines' mob, and they were gathered in front of the fireplace, staring hungrily at the pile of ashes that was all that remained of Clines' blackmail empire. Then the ringing quieted and Burns could hear the Fat Boy's voice.

“ . . . If you'd only been five minutes sooner, Al. Just five minutes. A million-dollar racket, and this damn stir bum sends it up in smoke. Right in front of my eyes.”

“We couldn't get here any sooner, boss. We left the club just as soon as the electric eye sounded, but the car stalled in these damn snow drifts and we had to come the rest of the way on foot.”

It was the lantern-jawed man with the Luger who was talking. He stared thoughtfully at the ashes in the fireplace for a moment and then turned to Clines.

“Wait a minute, boss. Wait a minute. I ain't so sure the racket's shot, even yet. Look. Nobody but us and this old stumblebum here knows that the stuff has been burned. And it's a cinch that he ain't going out of here alive.

“Okay, then. What's to prevent us from going right on, just like nothing ever happened? We ain't got the stuff to back up our shakedown, but the suckers don't know that. So we keep right on, just like nothing had happened, see?”

Fat Boy Clines face turned slowly to his henchman. “Al,” he said slowly, “I do believe you've got something. Yes, we can do it!”

Lying there on the floor, Burns felt an icy lump in his stomach. The plan would work, he knew. On the morrow, Clines'

victims would be receiving the same arrogant demands. All over town, there would be men and women sick with terror. And little Margie Rhone would be among them.

His head rolled a little to one side, and he saw something on the table. A plain, pint-sized bottle without a label. He suddenly remembered Steve's warning. “One spoonful of this stuff would blow the face off'n a granite cliff, and a good, healthy sneeze would set it off.”

He licked his lips and felt a brief spasm of fright then. Because he knew what he was going to do. Knew it was the only thing he *could* do. Only by destroying this nest of rats completely could he ever give peace to Margie and the others.

Oddly enough, no one noticed him getting to his feet. It was not until he reached out—almost leisurely—and picked up the bottle of soup that he heard a startled oath and saw a gun swinging up.

And by that time his fright was gone and he was grinning again. Grinning as he had back in the old days, when he'd just pulled a big job and he could hear the sound of the cops behind him. He was still grinning as he hurled the bottle of soup straight at the open fireplace.

Then the bottle struck, and a blinding sheet of light blotted out the whole universe.

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Bert had his .38 in hand as he stepped toward the restaurant's rear entrance.

BLOOD ON THE MENU!

By MORRIS COOPER

Deputy Sheriff Bert Powell was so busy thinking about those escaped convicts that he barely caught Ma Treadwell's crack about "going to another restaurant if he didn't like hers." And that was silly now, Bert thought—because Ma Treadwell's was the only beanery in town. . . .

BERT POWELL'S tongue darted out between his pursed lips like a hungry toad mouthing a green fly, and then made a swift, circulatory exploration of his gums, almost as though it hoped that by some miracle a new set of teeth had sprouted.

He looked down at the insipid bowl of

mush, and his leathery face wrinkled into new lines of disgust. "I can't eat any more of that baby food." Bert pushed the bowl away and half turned on the swivel stool.

Ma Treadwell cushioned her ample bosom against the counter and cupped one of her chins in the palm of her left hand.

"Don't go gettin' uppity with my food," she said. "Save your spleen for Doc Norris."

"Next time I get to the county seat," Bert growled, "I'm goin' to pull that dentist's teeth with his own yankers."

"Yeah," Ma Treadwell taunted. "You just talk big. I'm beginnin' to think maybe that deputy sheriff's badge has gone to your head."

Bert finished his turn on the stool and stood up. He gave an angry tug at the gunbelt around his waist and shifted the holstered .38 to a more comfortable position.

Ma grinned at the tall, lanky figure, floundering loosely in a pair of wash-faded levis and a khaki shirt. "You look right smart," she said. "Next time one of them movie outfits comes through, maybe you can get a job ridin' a jackass." Three of her chins quivered in unison as she chortled at her own humor.

"Funny," said Bert. He slapped a faded felt hat over his head and started for the door. "Funny just like your food."

Ma stopped laughing and lifted her bosom from the counter. "You don't like my food, Bert Powell, you can go eat somewhere else."

"Hah! That's really funny!" He let the screen door slam behind him and started up the town's single paved street, which formed part of a state highway and ran through AMILO, Unincorporated, pop. 493. A hundred and fifty feet up the street, he stopped in front of Bruno Cook's Combination Pharmacy and Mortuary. In the occasional deaths that occurred in Amilo, Bruno gave an unofficial assist until the coroner arrived from the county seat.

"What's the latest on those two cons who escaped from the state pen?" Bruno asked. Due to his association with the coroner, Bruno looked upon himself as an assistant to the law-enforcement agencies.

"They're still somewhere in the hills." Bert leaned against the window and fished a plug of tobacco from his pocket. Then he thought of his bare gums and gave a sad grunt.

Bruno grinned and laid a hand on his arm when he started to return the plug to his pocket. "Ain't nothing wrong with my mouth," he said.

Silently Bert handed him the tobacco,

watched him take a generous bite. He stared sharply at the undertaker for a moment. "You look sorta thoughtful, Bruno," he said. "What's eatin' on you?"

"Just thinking about them convicts and that thousand bucks reward that goes with them. Sure could use it."

Bert straightened away from the window. "Who couldn't? But I ain't hankerin' for the stomach lead that might come with that reward."

Bruno moved into the shade of his doorway and spat reflectively into the street. "Think you'd be afraid if they was to show up?"

"Wouldn't jump for joy."

Bruno hooked a thumb into his trouser belt. "What'd you do if they was to show up?"

"Take time out to make my will," Bert grunted. "And make sure to say I don't want to be buried by you."

BRUNO'S laugh followed him as he continued down the street. He waved at an occasional passerby. Nothing much to this, he thought, but a job's a job. And it was real restful.

He turned into a flat-topped brick building that had once housed the Amilo volunteer fire department. When the county took over that chore, they added a couple of locks to the doors and made it into the deputy's office. So far, he'd never had to lock anyone up.

Bert walked into the welcome coolness and sat down behind his paper-littered desk. He got the operator on the phone. "This is Bert. Gimme the sheriff's office." He waited a moment, and when the operator came back on, said, "Bessie, first chance you get, call Doc Norris and tell him I'm comin' in in a couple of days. And if he doesn't have those plates of mine ready, he better start runnin'."

He could hear the operator's chuckle, and then the voice of the sheriff's clerk came through the receiver. "This is Bert," he said. "Anything on Wilkins and Heller?"

"Same stuff," the bored voice answered. "Got men out combin' the hills, and we keep gettin' reports from all over the state about people spottin' 'em."

"Yeah, I know," Bert said. "Probably a thousand miles from here by now."

"Could be. And maybe they're not far from where you're sitting."

Bert glanced involuntarily over his shoulder. "Maybe so," he said. Then, "Listen, if you see Doc Norris, tell him I'll be in soon." Bert figured two messengers were better than one."

"Okay. And Bert, just out of curiosity —" he could hear the mirth in the clerk's voice—"what'd you do if those two cons showed up?"

"Yell. Yell so loud you could hear me and come runnin' with help." He slammed the receiver on the hook and leaned back in his chair. Everybody had a sense of humor today.

He tilted the chair against the wall and let his hat slip over his eyes. There were a couple of reports he ought to fill out, but he wasn't in the mood. The summer heat caressed him and he sighed contentedly . . . and dozed.

Twilight had fallen by the time Bert woke, his head snapping to awareness. He got to his feet, stretched lazily and slapped a hand against his lean belly. Time to eat, he thought.

Bert let the screen door slam behind him as he went into Ma's cafe. He glanced without interest at the man seated at the far end of the counter, his face half concealed by the sandwich he was eating. Bert sat down and leaned his elbows on the counter.

Ma poked her head through the service window and shouted, "Have your stuff in a minute." Bert watched, hoping against hope that one of her chins might get stuck when she withdrew her head.

He listened to the noise of banging plates in the kitchen, and then Ma came out, carrying a plate in her pudgy hands.

Bert looked at the steak she put in front of him. Large and juicy—and blood rare. Even with the best set of teeth Doc Norris had ever made, he knew he could never handle anything as beautiful as that.

Bert almost choked before he got out the words. "What am I supposed to do with this?"

"Eat it," she said. "I'm gettin' kind of tired lately, listening to you bellyachin' about my food. If you don't like it, you can get your meals at another restaurant from now on."

Bert stood up, his face livid. His Adam's apple twitched like a snapping rubber band, but before he could say anything, Ma had scooped the plate up and waddled back to her kitchen.

"Crummy joint!" Bert's words were aimed at the other customer. "Next time you drive through, remember not to stop." The man nodded.

He walked out of the restaurant and stood on the shadowed street until his breathing was once more normal. This, he thought, was really something.

Another restaurant, she had said. Go to another restaurant. . . . A queer idea began to run through his head, and he started for his office. Then he stopped. He'd look like an awful fool if his hunch was all wet. And besides, something might happen. . . .

Bert opened the rear door of the restaurant with his left hand, pointed his .38 at the backs of the two men who were facing Ma. He recognized one as the sandwich eater who had been sitting at the counter.

"Don't move," Bert said. "I wouldn't want Ma to have to go to all the trouble of washing a bloody floor."

FIVE HOURS later, he was sitting at Ma's counter again, spooning a plateful of mush. "You had me goin' there for a while," he said.

"I figured you was even dumber than you look," Ma said. "When you got mad and left, I was sure I was in the soup. Those men—" a shudder ran through her body—"were going to steal all my food and take me with them as a shield. And they threatened to shoot at the first suspicious move I made."

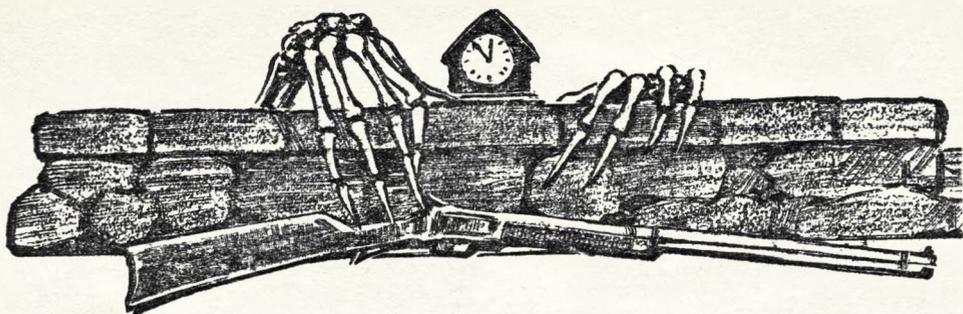
Bert grinned. "You would have made a good shield."

"When did you catch on?" Ma asked.

"Well, I started thinkin' about you giving me Bruno's steak. Even if you was real mad, I didn't think you'd go that far. And that crack about going to another restaurant—when you got the only one in town."

"What're you going to do with that thousand dollars?" There was a quiver of interest in all of Ma's chins.

"First," he said, "I'm gonna sit on Doc Norris till he gets my teeth. Then—" he grinned—"maybe I'll open me a little restaurant where I can get some good food."



I DISMEMBER MAMA

By WILL BARKER

Into song and legend has gone the gory tale of Lizzie Borden, the axemurderess who crawled to notoriety—over the bloody bodies of her parents!

THAT old crime fancier, the late Alexander Woollcott, loved to recite the following lines:

Lizzie Borden took an axe
And gave her mother forty whacks;
When she saw what she had done
She gave her father forty-one.

However, according to one witness, that wasn't so. When Bridget Sullivan, the Bordens' maid, was asked by the accused's lawyer if there was blood on Lizzie Borden's dress, she replied, "There was no blood!"

The lawyer's next question concerned the state of the accused's hair. He wanted to know whether it was disarranged.

"Miss Lizzie's hair was in order," Bridget Sullivan answered.

And because of this testimony, Lizzie Borden, of Fall River, Massachusetts, was cleared of the axe murders of her father and stepmother, Andrew and Abbie Borden. They took place over fifty years ago on August 4, 1892, and are only news now because Bridget Sullivan, their maid, recently died out in Butte, Montana. With her death, the sensational Lizzie Borden case is at last closed, though its memory still lingers on and has been kept

ever green by historians of crime.

Before his death, it was Alexander Woollcott who kept the Borden Case before the public. Now the ballet has had a hand in perpetuating the memory of the thirty-two-year-old New England spinster about whom the verse was written. Last year in New York City, dancers performed a ballet called "The Fall River Legend," which tells the story of Lizzie Borden and how she wielded the axe, fatal to her father and his second wife.

But this performance was not as exciting as the one put on in the New Bedford Courthouse in June, 1893. Then, that little building was jammed by thrill-hungry spectators who believed Lizzie guilty of the crimes of which she was accused. And while they were interested in her, they were equally interested in Bridget Sullivan, the first person to see Lizzie directly after the murders.

Bridget, a young Irish girl of twenty-six, had only been in this country a few years. When the trial started she had been employed by the Bordens for about three years. She was called "Maggie" by Lizzie and her sister Emma. And although not the principal in the murder

(Continued on page 130)

KISS AND KILL!

By

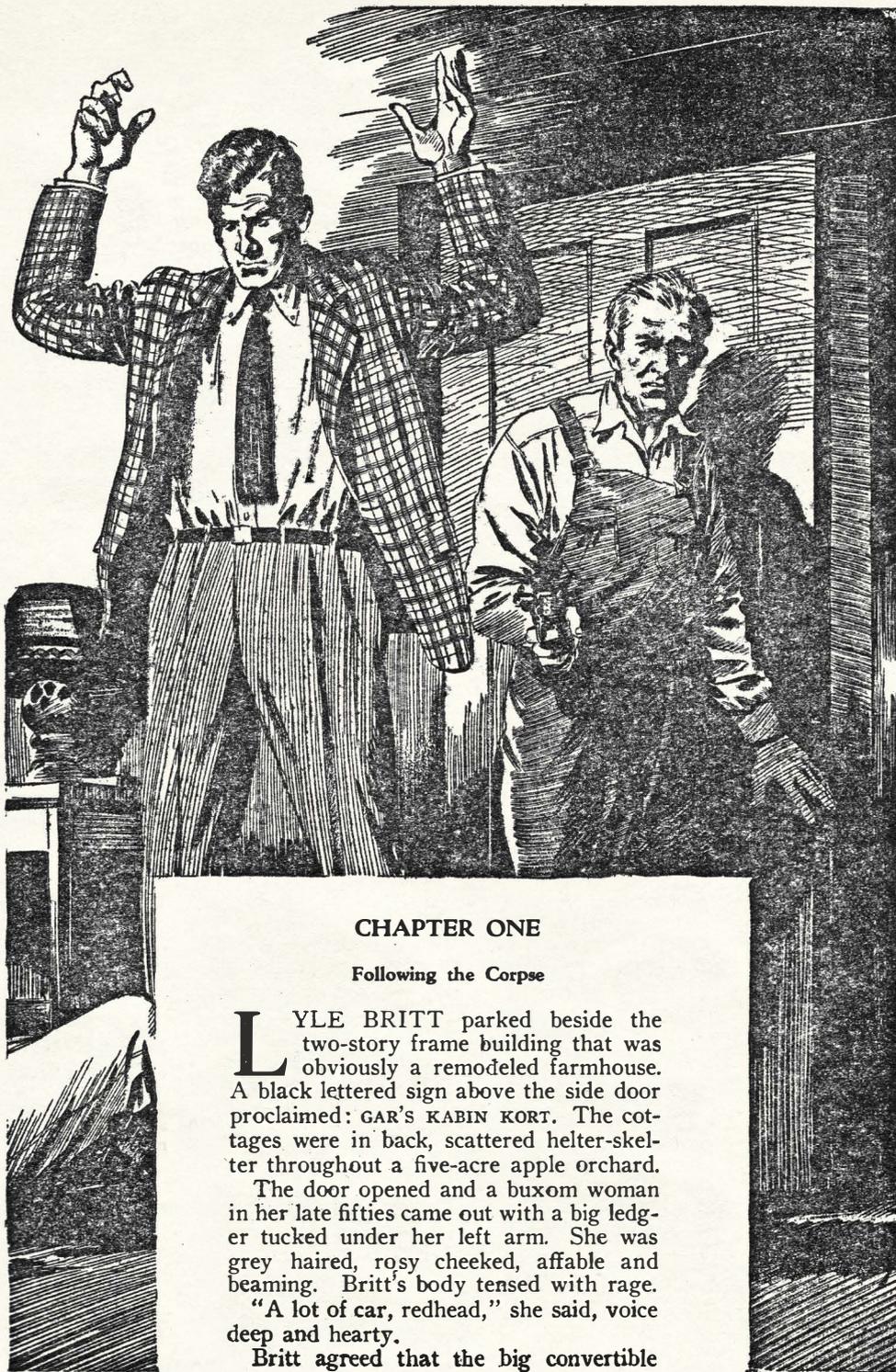
ALAN RITNER ANDERSON

*Thrilling
Blackmail
Novelette*

*The sign above the door said: Gar's
Kabin Kort, when Britt drove in—
just as his dead friend Manwaring
had done—and signed the register
—as Manwaring had done—and
was escorted to his cabin—as Man-
waring had been escorted—and
waited in the same lonely dark that
had surrounded Manwaring . . . for
his killers. . . .*



They had been standing side by side when they were shot. From the powder burns Britt could see that it had been close up—evidently by someone they had trusted.



CHAPTER ONE

Following the Corpse

LYLE BRITT parked beside the two-story frame building that was obviously a remodeled farmhouse. A black lettered sign above the side door proclaimed: GAR'S KABIN KORT. The cottages were in back, scattered helter-skelter throughout a five-acre apple orchard.

The door opened and a buxom woman in her late fifties came out with a big ledger tucked under her left arm. She was grey haired, rosy cheeked, affable and beaming. Britt's body tensed with rage.

"A lot of car, redhead," she said, voice deep and hearty.

Britt agreed that the big convertible

was a lot of car. Driving with the top down in the hot sunshine of late autumn had reddened his face and drawn his skin taut across forehead and cheekbones. It was an hour before dusk, and the ruddy rays of the setting sun made his grey eyes water.

A girl stepped out of the office. She was sixteen or less, and tight blue slacks and sweater molded her boyishly immature body. Yellow hair fell to her shoulders in a honey slick that framed a heart-shaped, shiny white face. She circled the car, slipped in beside him, slammed the door closed. Her red mouth went sullen as she sat stiffly erect and stared through the windshield with smoky blue eyes.

The grey-haired woman said, "I'm Mrs. Gar. Paw usually acts as guide. But he's ailing. Jane's taking his job temporary." She rested the open ledger on the door edge and handed him a ball-point pen. He signed: "Lyle Britt, New York, N. Y."

Mrs. Gar said, "Ten dollars. Steep, but worth it. With the race track nearby, we cater to the sports. They want the best."

Britt opened his bulging wallet, riffled the thick sheaf of bank notes and handed over a ten. The gesture had gone unrewarded. Mrs. Gar hadn't even glanced at the wallet. The blonde girl was studying Britt from the corner of her eye, appraising his rugged profile, his red hair, the cluster of freckles spanning his blunt nose.

Mrs. Gar said pointedly, "Hurry back, Jane."

Britt's anger sparked to a quick, hot tempest and he gripped the steering wheel until his knuckles whitened. Then he drove back into the orchard. Jane directed him with terse "rights" and "lefts." He needed a guide. Gravel lanes did a snake dance all over the place.

THE WHITE CABIN was at the rear of the orchard, next to a pasture, and a profusion of shoulder-high shrubs encircled the site. A flat roof projected southward to form a car port. Britt parked beneath it with the right of the convertible facing the side door of the cottage. Jane was out like a flash. She opened the door inward, letting the key hang from the lock.

She stepped down to ground level, recited, "There's a bar and grill in the building where the office is. The food's okay. But just short orders."

"A phone there?" Britt asked. "I want to phone New York for dope on tomorrow's races."

"A pay phone in a booth," she said.

Voice sly, he suggested, "If you're not busy, maybe we . . ."

Jane gave him a withering glare straight from a B picture and strode haughtily away, ducking under branches as she took a short cut through the orchard.

Britt's suitcase was a miniature trunk with a handle. He carried it into the cottage and parked it on the stand at the end of the bed. The place had class. Blond maple furniture, throw rugs on the polished floor, a taffeta spread on the double bed. He went around uptilting all the venetian blinds and turned on the overhead light.

Britt opened the suitcase. The pound of butter was still cool and not too badly crushed. He placed it on the dresser top and opened the wax paper so the butter would soften quickly.

Lighting a cigarette, he walked around the room. The front door of the cottage opened onto a red-brick stoop. Neither door had a bolt or check chain, and there was only one key. And both doors could be seen from the second story of the farmhouse.

Through the blinds Britt studied the pasture. The solitary wire of the electric fence would present no problem. The heavy convertible could roll through it easily and almost without a sound. The ditch between pasture and highway was shallow enough for the car to take on the diagonal, if he had to leave that way.

He moved to the rear window and peered out, noted the towering field of corn. He walked to the center of the room. The orchard and the corn field were ideal for concealment, if he should need it. It made up in a small measure for the remoteness of the cottage. He was sure that he could break the furniture to smithereens without the people in the nearest cabin hearing the racket.

His reflection in the vanity mirror caught his attention. The bright green slacks and gaudy sport jacket were de-

finitely not his style. Generally he was partial to modest blues and greys with nothing more decorative than a pinstripe. The flamboyant outfit, however, went with the five-thousand-dollar convertible and spelled the easy money of the race track—to those in the know.

Britt took a .25 automatic from the suitcase and went into the bathroom. The porcelain water tank was too obvious. The waist-high soap dish in the shower was made to order. He cocked the weapon, thumbed off the safety, and laid it in the soap dish. Then he dampened a wash cloth and covered the automatic. The effect was casual and realistic.

Back in the bedroom, he rummaged in the suitcase and came up with a blackjack, a silenced .32 revolver, a clothes line cut into six-foot lengths, several half-foot strips of two-inch adhesive with the sticky sides paired, and a fountain pen flashlight. He put the light in his inside jacket pocket and arrayed the rest of the items atop his clothing in the suitcase. He closed the lid and locked it, pocketed the key.

Britt went to the dresser and took a soup spoon from his pocket. He ate the butter. It was rough going. Greasiness slid down his throat and formed an oily lump at the pit of his stomach. He flushed the wax paper down the toilet, washed the spoon and parked it in the empty medicine cabinet.

LEAVING the cabin, Britt left both doors unlocked but carried the key with him. It was twilight. Miniature ten-foot-high lamp posts had been fashioned out of water pipe and placed throughout the orchard. Atop each one a low-watt bulb burned yellowly beneath a metal bonnet. The branches of trees below light level cast cobwebby shadows on the turf like ghostly lacework, and the effect was eerie.

A red neon sign on a standard beyond the farmhouse blazed: NO VACANCIES. Britt saw that the border of the lane opposite the office door sprouted a thick, eight-foot hedge no one had ever bothered to trim. It added nicely.

Mrs. Gar's hearty voice boomed out of the shadowy darkness beside the door to the office: "Come meet Paw, Mr. Britt!"

They sat in canvas chairs outside the

office door. Britt went over and was introduced to Abel Gar, a tall, stooped man in his middle sixties. They exchanged pleasantries in a scene of domestic bliss and tranquility as phony as a lead nickel.

Mrs. Gar adroitly steered the conversation into the channel she wanted. "Jane's our granddaughter," she explained. "And a blessing she is, with Paw ailing. Only I'm leary about her showing single men to their cabin." She chuckled throatily, and her big bosom trembled. "But maybe you're not single."

Britt, who was as free as the wind, sighed and admitted, "I must have that beat-up married look. Matter of fact, I'm married and have three children."

Even in that uncertain light, he saw Mrs. Gar's eyes glitter with malevolent triumph. She asked, "Headed for the races?"

"Yes."

Abel Gar asked, "Horse owner?"

"Not in my own name," Britt said, then lifted his arms in a prodigious stretch. "I'm bushed. I have a couple of phone calls to make. Then for a couple of double shots and off to bed."

"The bar's in front," said Mrs. Gar.

Britt said good-night and circled the corner of the building. The beer sign swung big and green above the tavern door. The few cars parked there bore local plates. He pushed through the swinging door. The tavern was long and narrow, and the bar ran along the wall to his left. There were no booths, just square tables seating four, and the fluorescent lights illumined the place with a garish white light. The swinging door in rear led to the kitchen and was flanked by the doors to the rest rooms.

Jane stood beside a table talking to a dapper little man nursing a beer. She wore a blue smock over her slacks and sweater. The man could have been a jockey except that he was flabby soft and overweight. He had a sharp, ferret-like nose and muddy eyes that never focused long on anything.

The men at the bar wore overalls and were waxing hot and mildly profane over a construction job that was killing them. Britt surmised that they lived in Fair Hope, a county seat of some ten thousand population, five miles east.

Jane came up and gave him a mechanical smile. "Want something to eat?"

Aware that she'd seen his searching scrutiny of the tavern, he said, "I'm looking for the phone."

Jane nodded, and Britt looked back over his right shoulder. The phone booth was in the corner so its front-rear axis bisected the right angle of the two walls. He went into the booth and closed the door. The glass windows gave him a complete view of the bar and all the tables. Conversely, he could be seen by anyone within the tavern.

He saw the bartender for the first time—a fat, untidy man wearing a dirty white shirt and in need of a shave. He was apparently the drinking-on-duty type, as attested by his florid face, bloodshot eyes and purplish, vein-laced nose. The "Bartender-on-duty" whiskey ad atop the cash register tagged him as "Gus."

BRITT arrayed a lot of silver on the shelf beneath the phone and, lips grazing the mouthpiece, gave the New York number to the long-distance operator. Jane was back talking to the jockey-like man. The close-set beer rings within his glass proved that he had been nursing it a long time. Gus was talking to the construction workers. Britt's collect call went through as if the whole system had been alerted for it.

Lottie, the Negro maid, came on the line with her voice so hysterically shrill that the earphone crackled. "They buried him, Mr. Britt!" she wailed. "They buried him deep in the ground."

"Stop it!" Britt commanded, voice harsh. "Of course they buried him. Where were the children?"

Sniffing, the maid's voice went sulky. "They was with their grandmaw in Maryland," she said. "That's where them four little boys is at now. They ain't comin' back till you—"

"Let me speak to Mrs. Manwaring," Britt interrupted.

Lottie's voice went shrill and crackly again. "She ain't here. That poor woman. She ain't in her right mind, Mr. Britt, she ain't."

"Where is she? Get hold of yourself, Lottie!"

"She's where you is."

Britt's throat worked, and he was suddenly damp with nervous sweat. He said, "Come now, Lottie. There wouldn't be time after the funeral for her to—"

"She hired a plane, Mr. Britt. She sure did hire herself a plane. But that ain't all. I ain't told you the worst."

"Let's hear it," he ordered, trying to keep the dread from his voice.

Lottie moaned softly, "That big gun ain't in the library desk no more. It sure ain't. She went out with a kill look in her eyes, she sure did."

"She must have left a message," he said.

"You is to call her at the best hotel in Fair Hope. She aims to register as Mrs. Phelps," said Lottie. "She's ain't in her right mind. It's voodoo, that's what it is. Voodoo!"

"Now, now. It isn't voodoo at all, Lottie."

"Then how come Mr. Manwaring blowed his brains out? Answer me that?"

"Easy. I've got a job for you to do in New York. That is, if you want to help Mrs. Manwaring and the four boys."

Her voice went indignant. "'Course I do."

"Then if anyone calls or phones, say that Mrs. Manwaring went to Maryland, understand?"

"Yes, suh. But don't you let that sweet lady kill nobody with that there big gun!"

Britt's voice was edged. "Frank Manwaring was a close business friend. If there's any killing to be done, I'll do it. That's what I'm here for." He hung up quickly and lit a cigarette. The unwanted, the unexpected, the monkey wrench in the machinery! Sick with dread, Britt realized that Rosa Manwaring had obeyed a crazy impulse of her hot Latin nature without thought of the consequences. Or perhaps she didn't care. Perhaps, in the violence of her grief, she wanted to share the grave with her husband.

CHAPTER TWO

Model for Blackmail

REALIZING that he was frittering away valuable time, Britt opened the local phone directory. In driving through

Fair Hope, he recalled the three-story, red-brick hotel and remembered that the name began with an S. He found it. Hotel Saft. The Saft family just about had the town sewed up. The name prefixed an auto agency, a hardware store, a diner, a theater, a real estate agency, and six gaso-line service stations.

He dialed.

"Hotel Saft." He could just make out the name through the girl's gum chewing.

"Mrs. Phelps, please?" he asked.

"She isn't in," said the girl, popping her gum with a liquid *bleep*.

"Whoa!" he protested. "You didn't even ring."

"She went out a few minutes ago. I saw her."

Britt wanted positive identification, so he improvised a lie. "It's like this, sis. I'm to meet her on business. But I don't know what she looks like. Give me the dope, and maybe I can catch her on the street."

The operator cracked her gum with relish. "A stunning brunette. Tall and willowy. Sort of Oriental. She's wearing a wine-colored suit with accessories to match, gloves, purse and stuff. Boy, you should have seen the salesman in the lobby give her the old eye."

"Thanks. I'll try to catch her on the street."

Britt left the booth and took a chair at the nearest table. Jane appeared, again asked, "Something to eat?"

"No."

"You look as if you heard bad news," she said.

An alarm went off in Britt's brain and he said, "A lousy racket, horse racing. The race isn't even run yet, and I've lost a pretty penny already."

She shrugged noncommittally and walked away. Britt glanced at his reflection in the mirror above the back bar. He was thirty-five, ordinarily passed for under thirty. Now his face was pale with strain, and wrinkles of worry formed tiny fleshy deltas at the corners of his eyes.

Would Rosa Manwaring go completely berserk and come out to the tourist camp? The possibility sickened him. The suicide had made headlines, and Rosa's photogenic beauty had appeared on the inner pages three days running. The Fair Hope

newsstands sold New York papers. He'd checked that angle by stopping and buying one.

There was nothing to do but grit his teeth and wait. He lit a cigarette, swiftly recapitulated the events responsible for his presence at Gar's Kabin Kort. Britt was a private detective, one of the best in the game, and handled only three accounts, on a yearly retainer basis. One was the bank where Frank Manwaring had headed the trust department. Britt made loyalty checks on employees, investigated applicants for jobs and dashed around the country tracing heirs who'd strayed from the family fold.

Then came the bombshell—Frank Manwaring's suicide. Newspaper headlines screamed the news to sensation-hungry readers. Bank accountants had worked overnight only to find Manwaring's accounts in apple-pie order. The newspapers had thereupon hinted cancer by tagging it "in a fit of despondency over an incurable disease."

Britt had met Rosa Manwaring from time to time, and she knew his profession. At the funeral parlor, she'd said, "Frank said that you've been a state policeman, an F.B.I. agent and a special investigator for congressional committees."

"That's right," he'd admitted.

"Then you can help me," she'd told him.

He had taken her home to the Manwaring duplex. The reason for the suicide was contained in one ugly word—blackmail. Manwaring had paid over twenty thousand dollars in the previous eleven months. She showed him the implements of the blackmail racket. The shocking pictures made Lyle Britt feel heartsick for Rosa Manwaring. Toward the blackmailers he felt a blind, merciless fury.

He had said, "I know what you want. Revenge without publicity. The name of the place shows in one of the pictures, and for a purpose. I'll take over. Did Frank ever drive your convertible out of the city?"

"No," she had said.

"Lend it to me. I want to put up a front. I want to look like a victim ripe to be plucked. Tourist camps publish directories. It'll be easy to spot. I'll phone you long distance as soon as I get there.

After that, sit tight and leave everything to me."

BRITT sighed now, staring apprehensively at the tavern door. The reason for Rosa Manwaring's impulsiveness was clear. Husband buried and sons safely away, she'd been faced with idleness, with the hellish suspense of waiting. So she'd simply gotten hold of a directory listing Gar's, chartered a plane and flown to Fair Hope, hoping, perhaps, to be of real service to him.

The fat was in the fire. Britt didn't even have a weapon on his person. He'd estimated that the take from the blackmail racket could run as high as a hundred thousand a year, and that was a conservative estimate. They were damnably clever. Their method of blackmail proved that. Murder? They wouldn't even hesitate. But they'd arrange it to look like an accident. They weren't fools. They'd obviously calculated their risks and had taken defensive precautions in case the blackmail backfired.

Britt roused from his reverie to the realization that Rosa Manwaring had had more than ample time to hire a car and drive out to Gar's. That heartened him. There were a dozen reasons why she might have left the hotel: to buy a tooth brush, to grab a bite to eat, or simply to walk around and work off some of her nervous energy. If by so thinking he was whistling in the dark, it at least took some of the pressure off him.

Britt stood up and dusted the front of his slacks. Seeing Jane bear down upon him, he ducked into the booth and phoned the hotel. Rosa Manwaring had not returned. He hung up, nursing the faint hope that she'd seen the folly of her trip and had gone back to New York.

Britt went to the bar. There was nothing to do but to proceed with his original plan.

"A double rye," he told Gus.

The drink was delivered with a surprisingly steady hand. Britt laid down a five-spot. Gus waddled down to the cash register and rang up thirty cents, returned and gave Britt four one dollar bills. He was the double-threat barkeep—the drinking-stealing variety.

Britt tossed off the drink with a jerk

of his head, tapped the empty glass. Gus refilled it. Britt lit a cigarette and watched the second hand of the electric clock on the wall begin its circuit of the dial. The bartender made the same play at the cash register, then went down and talked to the construction workers. Britt took the second drink in leisurely sips. After he finished it, he stood there thirty seconds seemingly lost in thought.

The men's room was deserted. Britt went into a toilet compartment and closed the door. He stuck the middle finger of his right hand down his throat, gagged it violently. He was sick, quickly and completely, as he emptied his stomach of the six ounces of whiskey. He doused his sweaty face at the washbowl and rubbed it with a paper towel until his cheeks reddened.

Back at the bar he drooped his eyelids and yawned elaborately. Gus waddled up. Britt said, "Give me a couple of those two-bit cigars. I'll have a smoke and hit the hay." He skidded a half-dollar across the bar. Gus rang up twenty cents.

The NO VACANCIES sign shed a vermilion glow across the drive. The Gars were gone, as were the canvas chairs. The improvised lamplights in the orchard were burning, and the grassy turf was a lacy network of grey-yellowness. Britt walked the gravel drive at the slow, deliberate pace of a person tired to exhaustion, scuffing his feet and reeling slightly. He felt sure that his remark to Gus about smoking the cigars would hasten matters. If the bed clothing caught fire, an unwanted crowd would materialize.

There was a car parked beside each cabin. A few cottages were partying, but not too violently, and a fat man sat behind the steering wheel of his sedan listening to a favorite broadcast. A mild breeze swayed the apple trees, and ghostly grey shadows shivered against the white of cabin fronts. The hairs at the nape of Britt's neck were stiff. Perhaps he'd been a fool to lone-wolf it. It would have done no harm to have staked out confederates in other cabins.

His cottage was so obscured by shadows that he almost missed it. He opened the side door and gave it a push to arc it inward until it struck the wall. Fountain pen flashlight in hand, he stepped on the

door sill and shot the narrow beam of brightness around the room. Nothing had been touched.

He switched on the ceiling light and locked both doors, leaving the key in the front door. Moving fast, he opened the suitcase and got out shirt, slacks and jacket—exact duplicates of the outfit he was wearing. He draped the garments over the backs of three chairs and arranged them so they screened the top two-thirds of the bed from view of anyone entering the side door.

The silenced .32 went into the snug top of his slacks and he slipped the thong of the blackjack over his right wrist. Switching off the lights, Britt flattened against the wall next to the side entrance so the opening door would provide concealment. He slacked his jaws to quiet his breathing and sharpen his hearing. Time stretched elastically until minutes seemed like hours. Inactivity nettled him. The air seemed hushed and sullen, like the oppressive atmosphere before the fury of a thunderstorm.

THEY blundered into the trap like silly sheep. They tried the skeleton key in the front door first. Finding that entry blocked, they came to the side door. The key rasped in the lock. The door arced inward. Britt, who'd alerted his muscles for that, sidestepped nimbly. The knob struck the wall and the door rebounded.

Jane's voice was a trifle shrill. "Let's hurry it up, Joey."

"Okay, okay," replied her companion testily.

Joey, the jockey-like little man, came into the room with left hand extended waist high to ward off any misplaced furniture. Britt saw him clearly in the dim light from the lamps in the orchard. Joey's hand struck a chair back. He stopped. Jane barged in and bumped into her companion's back.

Blackjack poised overhead, Britt stepped forward and swung for the yellow glint of Jane's hair. The blackjack caught her on the top of the head, bounced forward and caught Joey at the base of his skull. They collapsed on the floor with two close-coupled soft thuds and became dark heaps against the faint gleam of the polished hardwood.

Britt disengaged the blackjack and slipped it into his coat pocket. He closed the side door, transferred the skeleton key to the inside and turned it. Now both door locks held keys. He caught the metallic rectangle of the toggle switch, flipped it. Orange radiance flooded the room. Lighting the room was his first calculated risk. But he was reasonably sure than Jane and Joey would have done so. After all, they had reason to believe that Lyle Britt couldn't have been awakened by anything less than a cannonade.

Jane was curled up on her left side. Her black coat had fallen open. Her costume was the expected. Sheer black step-ins fringed with lace, with a matching strapless brassiere. Both items were wickedly French and highlighted the white skin of her immature body.

The camera with affixed flashgun attachment was inches away from Joey's outstretched fingers. It was a miniature camera, a 35 mm. German Contax worth as much as a small car. Britt picked it up and disengaged the flashgun. He put the camera in his pocket and hid the flash attachment in a dresser drawer.

Time had become a precious commodity. Britt went to work with efficient speed. He got the lengths of clothes line and trussed them like pigs bound for market. He knew his knots, and the best they'd be able to do when conscious would be to wriggle fingers and toes. He taped their mouths with adhesive, and the room filled with their soft nasal wheezing. He closed Jane's coat and buttoned it, not because of modesty but so her white skin wouldn't show in the dark of night.

Britt snapped off the light and clamped his eyes closed. He counted off forty-five seconds to adjust his vision to the darkness. He unlocked and opened the side door, stood in the doorway studying the tourist camp. The orchard lights were significantly out, but a measure of moon-glow filtered through the branches to form a filigreed pattern on the turf.

The farmhouse was dark. There was no sound save the whisper of wind in the trees and a muffled, distant snoring in a nearby cottage. He stood there a full three minutes with ears and eyes alert. There was no suspicious sound, no unexplained movement.

Jane and Joey were easy to handle. He wedged them on the floor of the convertible between front and rear seats, covered them with an auto robe brought along for that very purpose. He now had two hostages. Jane, because of her youth, would be the weakest link in the vicious blackmail racket. And the rustle of paper money might set Joey's tongue to wagging.

Britt slipped behind the steering wheel and eased the door closed.

The motor wouldn't start!

He switched off the starter after a few revolutions. When the most expensive car on the market didn't start right off on a warm autumn evening, the engine had been tampered with. He got out fast and crouched beside the convertible, right hand poised above the grip of the silenced .32 at his stomach. The silence was oppressive. He could hear Jane and Joey breathing gustily through their nostrils.

Britt straightened up warily and leaned over the side of the car. He removed the robe and slipped his hands under Jane's armpits. He lifted her out easily. He knew by the loll of her head that she'd be unconscious for some time to come. He still had a hostage.

CRADLING Jane in his arms as if she'd been a baby, Britt retreated into the concealment offered by the field of towering corn. Sixty feet within the field, he stopped. A vague uneasiness tightened his nerves. What was wrong? His flesh went prickly as he realized that the earth beneath the rows of corn was spongy soft and his footprints would be as sharp and clear as if imbedded in fresh cement.

Jane had become a hindrance. Moreover, Britt realized, wayward girls were a dime a dozen, and it was a hundred to one that all the blonde knew of the racket was her role in the scheme of things. He put her on the ground and retreated to the far end of the field. He turned left, went through six rows of corn, then returned to the edge of the orchard. His trail formed a narrow U. Like a hunter-wise moose, he was now in position to trail anyone following his original spoor into the corn field.

In the moonglow he saw that Mrs. Gar and the beefy barkeep, Gus, had dragged

Joey out of the convertible. Gus was hacking at the ropes with a pocket knife while Mrs. Gar held Joey erect. Gus yanked the adhesive. The pain jerked Joey back to consciousness.

"My camera!" he screamed.

Mrs. Gar slapped him. Joey's head rocked, and Britt winced at the harshness of the sound. Mrs. Gar's voice wasn't hearty any more. "What happened? Where's Jane?"

"Don't know," he said sullenly, answering both questions at the same time.

Mrs. Gar poised her big hand, ordered succinctly, "Talk!"

Joey cringed. "I don't know. We went in. Then bingo!"

Gus whined, "I knowed we should have laid off after that guy Manwaring—"

"Shut up!" ordered Mrs. Gar. "We got the local cops sewed up solid. And we'd know if Mrs. Manwaring spilled to the New York police."

"How?" asked Gus.

"The big boss put a shadow on her as soon as her husband bumped himself off."

Britt's back goosepimpled. Now he knew why Rosa Manwaring wasn't at the hotel. They had her. The New York shadow had trailed her to the airport. The pilot of the chartered plane would have to deposit a flight plan at the office. The "big boss" would have been telephoned the destination of the plane shortly after it had taken off.

"How's the redhead fit in?" asked Gus sulkily.

Joey cried, "You souse! Bet you didn't mickey finn his drinks. I seen him drink them."

"I did too!" Gus protested. "I give him a jolt that should have knocked him out for eight hours."

"Stop it!" Mrs. Gar warned. "Soon as you didn't show, Gus and I came up. Paw's phoning the big boss." Her voice edged. "Lucky thing Paw always takes the rotor out of the cars before Jane and Joey come up. We always figure for a double-cross."

Joey didn't say anything.

"You don't seem surprised," Mrs. Gar said.

"Shh!" Gus warned.

Fast-moving footsteps crunched up the

gravel drive. Abel Gar arrived, huffing and puffing. "The boss is bringin' a couple of bloodhounds," he said. "The redhead's afoot an'—"

"Now ain't that clever!" declared Mrs. Gar.

"Mrs. Manwaring's in town," Abel Gar went on. "The boss took her out of circulation."

The Gars, Gus and Joey trooped into the cabin. Britt was thoughtful. Bloodhounds! The big boss was damnably clever and resourceful. He wet a finger and tested the breeze. It was wrong. The gusty wind was carrying his body scent across his spoor and the dogs would leave the trail for the stronger airborne odor. A minute before he'd held the upper hand. Now he was back of the eight-ball.

CHAPTER THREE

Turnabout

HE TURNED right and passed through five rows of corn, turned right again and retreated to the far end of the field. His trail now formed a squat S that would at least take some time for the hounds to traverse. Ahead spread a recently harvested grain field, and beyond it loomed a dark woods. Britt crossed the field at a trot and was relieved to see that the stubble sprang back erect after his passing.

He entered the dark woods and searched for a water feature wherein he could wade and obliterate his spoor. The tract was waterless. Disappointed, he circled right and came out at the edge of the pasture about a quarter-mile below the tourist camp. He leaped the low electric fence and ran across the meadow. A ditch flanked that side of the highway and was deep enough for concealment if he wanted to belly down there against being seen by the occupants of passing cars.

The street lights of Fair Hope formed a white blossom of haze on the horizon. Britt began to walk down the edge of the road toward Gar's Kabin Kort, now and then glancing back over his shoulder to watch for cars. He reached the high hedge opposite the office. He parted the branches and peeked out. There was a service station fifty feet beyond the entrance to the

tavern where Gus had slipped him the drugged drinks. The night light burning inside the station shed a yellow glow over the two red gasoline pumps on the concrete apron.

The soft baying of hounds came distantly. Hands cupping both ears, Britt turned his head and located the direction, faced the apple orchard just as the muted baying grew louder. He nodded. The dogs were doubling back on the center sweep of the S. They were moving at a snail's pace, probably because their handler realized that the corn field would be an ideal spot for an ambush. Britt felt better. He had a substantial lead and could always slow pursuit by returning to the corn field or the woods.

Britt looked at the service station. The gas pumps gave him an idea that was pure inspiration. Heart thumping, he circled the end of the hedge and ran down to the first pump. As he'd hoped, there was better than a quart of gasoline in the hose. He let it run out on the concrete and scuffed the soles of his shoes in the wetness. He repeated the process with the other pump.

A profusion of trees and shrubs grew some thirty feet in back of the station. Britt sneaked into the shadowy concealment and took refuge behind the truck of an oak tree. He took out the silenced .32 and cocked it. He was fond of dogs and the solution of killing the hounds didn't even enter his head. His weapon was readied against the person or persons with the animals.

After a while he heard the muted baying of the hounds coming up the highway. He heard them pause and sniff gustily behind the hedge. Then they came into view, two of them, side by side. Leather muzzles muffled their full-throated outcries. Their collars were joined by a two-foot bench chain with swivel snaps at either end. Their progress was impeded by a ten-foot length of rope tied to the center ring of the bench chain.

Whoever was with the dogs trailed them at a safe distance to guard against ambush. Nerves tingling, Britt watched the dogs sniff and snort up to the first damp spot on the concrete apron of the gas station. Their sad, loose-skinned faces registered incredulous surprise as they

cast frantically for the lost spoor. Puzzled, frustrated and befuddled, one stretched out on his belly to think things over. His companion followed suit.

Lyle Britt went warm with triumph. As a kid, he'd worked at an oil refinery where he had speedily learned that gasoline fumes have the property of numbing the sense of smell. After his trick at the refinery, Britt had gone home to supper to find himself unable to tell what his mother had cooking on the stove—be it cabbage, saurkraut, onions or some other food with a potent cooking aroma.

Nothing happened. By rights, the custodian of the dogs should have appeared to stir them into action. Then Britt heard the crunch of gravel as a person unknown walked the entry lane that passed the office and led to the tourist camp. Britt frowned. He was getting nowhere. Each move he'd made had been quickly checkmated. But at least he was free.

The hounds were looking around rather forlornly. Britt whistled softly. Ears up, the dogs scrambled to their feet and trotted toward the thicket with tongues lolling and tails wagging. They stopped at his feet aquiver with friendliness, two male bloodhounds less than a year old. Britt tied the rope to a tree trunk.

By frustrating the hounds, Britt had at least gained time. Now the big boss would have to devise a new strategy. What next? Britt sneaked to the rear of the dark farmhouse. The porch door was ajar, so he slipped through it to gain cover and concealment. Revolver on the ready, he tried the kitchen door. It was unlocked. He passed through the kitchen, a private dining room, a small den and finally reached the office. The ledgerlike register was on the flat-topped desk.

Britt carried the register to the front window. The faint light was sufficient for his purpose. He found his signature in the six-inch-wide column. Something new had been added. The entry now read: "Lyle Britt & wife." The addition had been made in a credible imitation of his handwriting.

He left via the porch door and sneaked into the orchard. He looked around for the car which had brought the big boss and the hounds. There were no strange vehicles within the camp.

He froze as two muffled shots rang out. The reports came in quick succession and had the reverberating boom of a large-calibered weapon fired within an enclosure. The sound wasn't loud enough to awaken sleeping tourists. The conclusion was obvious. They had captured Rosa Manwaring. And she had brought her husband's .45.

Sick with dread, Britt moved to the rear of the orchard in proximity to the cabin he'd rented, moving in rushes to where the shadows were deepest. The dark of night was broken by a rectangular shaft of light as the side door of Britt's cottage opened and closed. The motor of the convertible came to life with a throaty rumble. Britt dashed to his right and crouched behind a bush beside the gravel lane as the rear wheels of the convertible spun like crazy. Britt sat down and crossed his legs, rested his right forearm against his right upper leg. The muzzle of the .32 covered the lane where the convertible would have to come into his vision to reach the highway.

ABEL GAR'S voice wasn't old and tired any more.

"I got you covered, Red," he warned from somewhere close behind Britt. "Aim that gun at the sky. And quick!"

Britt pointed the silenced .32 skyward just as the big convertible, running without lights, flashed by his hiding place. The .32 was jerked from his hand.

Abel Gar called softly. "You about, Ma?"

"Yes." His voice came from the shrubs on the other side of the drive. "Gus went back to guard the house."

"Give the boss ten minutes to reach town," Abel Gar ordered. "Then phone that I got the redhead up at his own cabin."

Mrs. Gar came out on the drive and hurried toward the farmhouse. She moved with surprising speed for a woman of her age and weight.

Abel Gar ordered, "Stand up, Red. Stand up and park your hands at the back of your neck. Like soldiers say, I'm trigger-happy."

Britt stood warily, interlaced his fingers and nestled his hands at the nape of his neck. He turned toward his cottage and

walked toward it. Abel Gar made no protest. Britt lowered his head and peeked back under his right armpit. The old man was staying a good six feet in rear, well beyond range of a sudden offensive move by his prisoner.

Abel Gar warned, "I'm a cautious man, Red. I survived the rum-running days of the twenties because I play it safe. I've killed before. I thought I'd let you know how it is."

Britt didn't reply. The side door of the cabin was ajar, and he saw that the ceiling light was on. He raised his right knee and gave the door a push. It arced inward, and the knob struck the wall with a soft thud.

Britt walked stolidly into the cottage. It was the expected, but the sight chilled his blood and goosepimpled his flesh. There was something grotesquely ugly about death that never failed to distress him.

Jane and Joey were face up on the floor beside the bed. The blonde girl was wearing her blue slacks and sweater. Her glazed eyes and white face registered such shocked surprise that Britt surmised that she'd taken the second bullet. Both had been shot through the heart, and the powder patterns on their garments indicated that the weapon had been less than two feet away. They had apparently been standing side by side when murdered. It all added up that they had been slain by someone they knew and trusted.

The door clicked closed, and Abel Gar ordered, "Take off your coat."

Britt did so. About to let it fall to the floor, he became aware of the weight of the camera and tossed the garment on the bed. Replacing interlaced hands at the nape of his neck, he turned and faced Abel Gar. The old man had a snub-nosed .38 in his right hand. The grip of Britt's .32 stuck out of Abel Gar's right pocket.

Fishing for information, Britt nodded at the .38. "That isn't the kill gun."

"It ain't the kill gun at all," agreed Abel Gar.

"The kill gun was a .45."

"The kill gun was a .45." the old man echoed.

"Manwaring's .45. She'll be found with it."

"She'll be found with pictures, too, Red.

There's got to be a strong motive."

Britt fought down his growing panic, assumed his poker face and made his voice matter of fact. "A double murder and a suicide," he said. "Neat."

ABEL GAR shook his head. "A woman with kids would think twice before doing a Dutch. She's been doped. She'll come to back in her room wondering how she got there. She might even believe it herself. Why else would she pack a rod?"

It occurred to Britt that the Gars had at least one redeeming quality. They were immaculate housekeepers, as attested by the tidiness of the cabin. Could he capitalize on that fact? It was worth the try. Thanks to the butter he'd eaten, the doped drinks, and the lack of solid food, his stomach was queasy and fluttery.

Britt looked down at the couple on the floor and bent from the waist as if better to view the bullet wounds. He corded his



Rosa Manwaring

stomach muscles and bunched his tongue at the back of his mouth near the opening to his throat. It worked like a charm. He straightened hurriedly. His face was pale and sweat streaked. He gagged. As a grand finale, he pressed his lips together and puffed out his cheeks, rolled his eyes.

Alarmed, Abel Gar cried, "Hey! Don't get sick here! Go in the bathroom if you're going to get sick."

Britt rushed to the bathroom. Bending over the toilet, he jammed his right fist into the pit of his stomach. He was sick. Finally he straightened up, sweating

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at every pore. Abel Gar stood in the doorway with the .38 on the ready. Britt swayed and seemingly had to place his hand on the wall for support. He waved at the shower stall. "Let me run some cold water over my head," he asked.

"Okay," said Abel Gar testily.

It was easy. Britt reached into the stall, twisted the valve and let cold water dribble out of the shower head. He bent over and let the water play over the back of his head. His groping right hand found the soap dish. He gripped the .25 automatic and straightened up shaking his head. Droplets of water flew around the room. Britt spun suddenly and aimed the automatic at the old man's midriff. Abel Gar's mouth gaped. His seamed face registered the ineredulous astonishment of a small kid seeing a magician pull a rabbit out of a high silk hat.

Eyes on the old man's trigger finger, Britt warned, "Don't squeeze! This little baby's all ready to speak. The hammer's back. And your gun isn't cocked. The first crook of that finger and you'll be unhappy. I know where to shoot so it hurts."

Abel Gar's right forearm lowered and the .38 pointed at the tile floor. The old man said, "I didn't dare cock it. It's got a hair-trigger. My hand ain't as steady as it was in the old days."

Britt took the .38 and the silenced .32, stowed them in his hip pockets. He ordered, "Go belly down on the floor. Three corpses on the floor would give a lot of fancy angles."

Abel Gar took one look at the shadowy brightness of Britt's grey eyes, then went into the bedroom and bellied down near the front door. Britt got rope and adhesive from his suitcase, trussed and gagged the old man. He got his coat off the bed and slipped into it. If he'd judged the time element correctly, Mrs. Gar would be phoning the boss.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Big Boss

B RITT left by the side door and hurried into the concealment of the corn field. They'd wrapped it up neat for the police. Mrs. Manwaring in her room,

KISS AND KILL!

seemingly passed out from drink, the kill gun at hand and the pictures to explain the motive. The convertible would be parked nearby to show the means of transportation employed. Private Detective Lyle Britt would have been the advance man hired to set the scene for the double murder. Yes, a district attorney could go to town with such material.

The camera! For a moment he thought the camera might contain shots that would aid him in cracking the case. Then he realized that the film, if exposed, would only attest to the racket seemingly operated by Jane and Joey. Nevertheless, he ducked the camera under his coat and flashed his light on it. The disk showing the number of exposures was centered on zero, proof that a new roll of film was in the camera, with no frames exposed.

Worrying thoughts pecked at his brain. How did the boss have an "in" with the police? How had they nabbed Rosa Manwaring so quickly? The Gars, Gus, Joey and Jane were mere implements. How could he get to the boss? Where was a starting point from which to track down the brains directing the blackmail racket?

The inspiration came electrically, and he went warm and breathless with excitement. Once again he retreated to the rear of the corn field, but turned left and described a semi-circle which brought him out on the highway some five hundred feet west of the service station. The moonlight was fitful, as low-flying, black-bellied clouds scuttled southward darkening the moon in intervals up to twenty seconds. He angled left into the thicket where he had tied the dogs.

The hounds leaped to their feet with tails wagging furiously and throats rumbling greetings. Britt untied them and surveyed the highway. It was deserted for as far as he could see. He rushed the dogs across the road, through a rail fence and into a pasture. He moved south until he was sure he couldn't be seen from the road, then turned left and headed in the general direction of Fair Hope.

He heard the distant wail of the siren as he came abreast of the tourist camp. He stopped. A winking red light was coming up the highway from the direction of Fair Hope. Then the siren and winking light

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cut out as the car drew to a stop by the office door. Britt was sure it was Abel Gar who got into the car. Then the police car drove into the orchard. He couldn't see the markings at that distance, but he surmised that the tourist camp came under the jurisdiction of the township police.

The police had been tipped off. And Lyle Britt would be wanted as an accomplice on a murder charge.

Britt shook the rope in his hands. The hounds looked at him a trifle reproachfully. He said, "Home!" The dogs wagged their tails. "Go home!" he repeated, waved his free hand. They understood, wheeled around, straining against the rope, and dug their toes into the grass.

At the end of half a mile the animals were panting, and Britt's arm ached. They were headed in a southeasterly direction which would miss Fair Hope entirely. They skirted several farmhouses and topped a gently sloped knoll. Ahead loomed a huge, three-storied house about five hundred feet south of the highway. The rutted lane leading to it was flanked by towering elms. Britt stopped. The hounds strained against the rope with noses aimed at a rambling shed fifty feet in rear of the house.

The moonlight brightened. Britt saw scrollwork beneath the eaves of the house, a spired cupola rising from the center of the roof, and other gingerbread considered swank in the eighteen-nineties. The place looked dead—as if it hadn't been lived in for years. Yet the house was in good repair, the lawn tidy. Britt had the creepy feeling that he'd stepped fifty years back into time and space.

He dropped to a knee and removed muzzles and collars from the hounds. They made a furious bee-line toward the shed, but outside a couple of soft "woofs" were too exhausted from dragging Britt along to break into joyous outcries. It wouldn't have mattered. If they'd bugled, Britt would be in position to rush forward and capture any one leaving the house to take care of the dogs. He watched the animals vanish through a small door in the side of the shed.

Britt left the dog harness on the ground and walked down to the lane. No one had

KISS AND KILL!

left the house, and no light appeared. He approached the place by the shadowy lane. A wide veranda ran the width of the house front and was crowded by an imposing array of wicker furniture. There wasn't a whisper of sound.

Britt stopped beneath the last elm in the row. The dogs could have been borrowed. But the owner would certainly know the borrower. Britt looked around. He saw that two twisted wires ran from tree to tree and terminated at a corner of the house. He looked in vain for the three wires that would supply electricity. The place had a phone but no electric power.

ENCOURAGED by the silence, he rushed across the lawn and tiptoed up on the porch. The mild breeze made a faint swishing sound through the wicker weave of the furniture, and a rocker moved to and fro in small arcs, as if occupied by a ghost. The small of his back went cold. The front door was big and thick. He tried the knob. The door was unlocked. He pushed it open an inch at a time. The hinges creaked softly. He stepped into total darkness and stood with mouth agape to better his hearing. There wasn't a sound. He took out his light and thumbed it on. The thin beam revealed a spacious hallway furnished with massive chairs and tables. One table held an old-fashioned coal-oil lamp with a fragile glass chimney. Beside it stood a brass candle holder with the stub of a candle. A faint mustiness hung in the sultry air.

The open archway to his right led into a large library lined with tiers of books on open shelves. Britt sneaked into the room. There was a telephone handset on the ornate desk. He took down a book and glanced at the flyleaf. His head spun airily. Matilda Saft! Hotel Saft. Gar's Kabin Kort was probably situated on this farm, as original land grants had been doled out in square miles, 640-acre sections.

The brilliant beam of an electric lantern caught him full in the face. Blinded, he froze. Then he replaced the book and looked at the impotency of the fountain pen flashlight in his left hand. The irony of the situation did not escape him. He

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DETECTIVE TALES

had three weapons on tap. But his hands were empty.

He said, "You were up in the cupola. Probably watching Gar's through a pair of binoculars."

It was a woman. Her voice was high and nasal and strangely muffled. "I've been waiting," she said. "I thought you'd be clever enough to think of the hounds." The quality of her voice put his teeth on edge. She spoke in a flat monotone.

"Why do you keep hounds?" he asked, because the unexpected question might throw her mentally off beam.

"The sheriff and the state police rent them," she explained. "It gives me inside information."

"I'm not a friend of the Manwarings sticking my neck out," Britt explained.

"I'm a private detective. A good one. I look before I leap."

"I will have killed a housebreaker," she said. "I'm a maiden lady living alone. I would shoot, not ask questions."

"There'll be a stink," said Britt. "The police might wonder why a private detective would call on you."

"I'm rich. I'm eccentric. You came to arrange the murders. You heard rumors that I keep a great deal of cash here."

Britt had squinted his eyes against the glare of the lantern. Now he saw that the woman's head was wrapped in a number of thick, black veils, hence the muffled quality of her voice. A mad, eccentric recluse who concealed her face.

He took a slow, deep breath, corded his muscles, then asked, "Why hide your face? Take off the veils and let's have a look."

Her soft, nasal breathing filled the room. The beam of light shivered. Her voice climbed up to crackling shrillness. "You—you—"

It was then or never. Britt ducked and dove, arms out like a tackle. His left shoulder crashed into her thighs just as she fired. The muzzle blast singed the hair on the right side of his head. Her feet shot out from under her and she sat down on the floor with a jarring jolt. The gun fell from her hand as her torso whipped back. The base of her skull struck the floor and sounded like two blocks of wood slapped together. Britt

KISS AND KILL!

felt the legs beneath his chest go flabby.

He worked fast. He tore down the drapes, ripped them into strips and lashed her to the arm chair in front of the desk. She was small and light. A black silk dress, twenty years outdated, covered her from neck to ankles. The black veils covered her face and head. Through the eyeholes punched in the netlike fabric he saw the glint of spectacles. He got the fallen lantern and placed it on the desk so the beam shone on her swaddled face. He went behind her and saw that the veils were secured by an ornate brooch.

He unwrapped the veils. She was bald! He stood behind her breathing hard. Then he walked around front and looked at her face. Horror grabbed his brain like the jaws of a steel trap. Nausea kinked his stomach, and for a moment he was afraid he'd be violently sick. Her face had been burned beyond recognition. It wasn't a human face. The ugly red scar tissues was so drum tight that it seemed ready to split. She had no lips and her gaping mouth bared yellow teeth.

She regained consciousness. Britt would have liked to forget the next few minutes. She fought her bonds like an animal. She screamed. She cursed. Then she whimpered and pleaded. Britt didn't interrupt. He waited until a measure of sanity returned to her twisted brain.

He said jerkily, "You know what I want. Pictures. Negatives. A list of the men you blackmailed. A full confession that will free Rosa Manwaring and kill the blackmail racket once and for all."

Breathing hard, slobber bubbled from her lips, and her pale eyes were poisonous. "You fool!" she raged. "Do you think—"

"Wait! How would you like to sit on a witness stand in front of a courtroom filled with your friends and neighbors? Don't kid yourself, I have enough to bring you to trial."

Her eyes went dull and lusterless.

Britt reached for the phone. "Let's have a party," he suggested. "The police. A few neighbors. I'll ask the newspaper boys to bring a photographer."

"You win," she said with a sigh of resignation. "You know you've won. I would rather die than face anyone."

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THREE DAYS later, Lottie ushered Lyle Britt into the Manwaring duplex. The maid's white teeth flashed. "You sure did earn your keep, Mr. Britt, you sure did."

He gave her a thin smile and followed her into the small den off the living room. Rosa Manwaring sat at the desk with a cup of coffee in front of her. Britt posted himself across from her, stood with the desk edge pressing his thighs. The widow wore black. It was not becoming. Her face was muddy looking, her black eyes dull. The red of her mouth seemed garishly out of place against the somberness of her face.

He handed her a manila envelope. "The negatives and the few extra copies she kept on tap."

"I was doped, wasn't I?" she asked.

"Yes."

"I acted like a silly child, flying to Fair Hope."

"You did," he admitted. "But it all came out in the wash. I got a confession from Matilda Saft. I got the negatives and prints. The state police were sweetly reasonable. The old lady jumped off the roof into a pile of bricks by the time I got back with the police."

Rosa Manwaring said, "I would have killed that blonde girl if I had met her. I really would. I was out of my mind."

Britt ignored her. "Matilda Saft fell on her face in a kerosene lamp when she was eighteen. She was a man-hungry kid. She decided to spend the rest of her life making men suffer. I got the details from her doctor. He's retired to an old men's home in Philly. She didn't want or need the money. She just wanted to make men suffer. Jane and Joey were the weak links. They would have talked too easily. So she killed them and framed you for the murder."

"How many other men were they black-mailing?"

"Twenty-six. A man would drive in. Jane would get into the front seat with him to act as guide. Joey was back of the hedge with his camera with a polarizing filter that would block out the windshield reflection. The picture would show the car, the license plate, the couple and the Gar's Kabin Kort sign on the building.

KISS AND KILL!

The conclusion? Violation of the Mann Act and the Pennsylvania law on contributing to the delinquency of a minor, a tough rap. The forged registration and the pictures taken in the cabin supported the evidence of the first picture. It was plenty to scare hell out of any man. They chose married men in the money. They made a fortune."

"Frank paid them plenty," Rosa Manwaring admitted.

"I'm going to make plenty," Britt confessed. "I've sent each man being blackmailed the evidence against him. I enclosed a letter saying that I unearthed the material working a case for which I received no fee."

"But that's not true!" she protested. "I'm going to pay you handsomely."

"I'm not going to take a fee from you," said Britt, voice flat.

Some of the color faded from her cheeks. She ran the tip of her tongue around her lips. "But why not?"

"Your husband lifted the gun to his head and pulled the trigger," he said. "Actually, you killed him."

"What do you mean?" Her voice was a hushed whisper.

"Frank showed you the pictures and told you the facts," Britt said. "You didn't believe him. That's why he killed himself. Because his wife didn't have faith in him. You went to Fair Hope to hurt Jane because she'd taken your man from you—you thought. I guess you figured that if I found out that it was actually a frame, I'd go noble and tell you it was a cheap pickup. Only I'm not noble. I want you to have something to think about until the day you die."

Britt got out of the building fast. One of the men blackmailed had sent a five-thousand-dollar check for the evidence. Others would follow suit. He'd make a killing. Britt thought of Frank Manwaring, and the money didn't matter a damn.

He was surprised to see that it was raining. Sidewalk and street were washed clean and glittered wetly in the grey light. The rain began to soak through his suit. He took off his hat and felt cold raindrops splatter against his red hair. It felt good.

THE END



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DETECTIVE TALES

(Continued from page 8)

was again looking for a partner. He was surprised but apparently very happy to see Carl.

"I've never been the same . . . since Clara," he muttered. "I'm nervous, no good at all any more. None of the show people will have anything to do with me. Last night, I nicked a young kid. He quit right away."

"How would you like me to work with you?" Carl suggested. "You can even announce that I'm Clara Mott's brother. If people see that I trust you, you'll make a comeback soon enough."

The two altered the act. Lacking a beautiful girl, they decided to gag it up—throw knives at one another. And the audience loved it. They laughed themselves hoarse when Frank threw a hatchet at Carl and broke his suspenders. It looked as though it was going to be even funnier when Carl threaded a letter on a long, thin blade and, calling, "This is special delivery!" whizzed it through the air. The audience expected the knife to land in the seat of Frank's baggy pants, which were elaborately stuffed with pillows for the purpose.

Unfortunately, Frank didn't turn around quite quickly enough. The knife went through his throat instead. A few in the horrified audience wondered why the blade flew so high—so wide of the mark. But Frank Doyle, alias Signor Joey Tessini, probably didn't wonder. His dying eyes traveled back and forth over the scrawled black words that were propped so conveniently under his chin. The lines all ran childishly together. The letter read:

Dear Carl: Frank made me steal mama's \$500. He said he needed it to marry me with. Now he says that he don't love me any more. He says if I try to leave the show he'll kill me but I'm going to try to leave anyway. Love, Clara.

An Alabama jury, however, refused to take a romantic view of the situation. They called it manslaughter. Carl Mott was sentenced to twenty years. He died in prison after serving three years of his term.

RED, BLACK, AND DEAD!

(Continued from page 44)

tragic accident, it reported, had taken place on the little-used Oval Parkway the preceding afternoon. Mrs. Hector Moody's chauffeur, one Daniel MacKelvin, who had been asked to retrieve his employer's glove that had fallen from the car, had been struck down and instantly killed by a speeding hit-and-run motorist. The killer had then fled the scene so quickly that Mrs. Moody—who was prostrated by the event—was unable to give more than a hazy description of his car. She thought it might have been a dark red sports model—a convertible—but she could not be sure. Nevertheless, the police were searching for such a car. An ironic footnote to the tragedy was supplied when the very glove the chauffeur had been seeking was found only a scant few feet away from where he lay. The account concluded with the information that Mr. Moody, the prominent art collector, was taking his wife to Florida immediately, in the hope that a change of scene would speed her recovery from the effects of having witnessed the dreadful occurrence. Mr. Moody was quoted as saying that it was little wonder Mrs. Moody was so distraught: She had, he said, regarded Daniel almost as if he were her son.

* * *

The trees in the Eastern city were turning green when Martha Moody stood just inside her front door, pulling on her gloves. They were of doeskin, soft and yellow as sunshine. But Martha was not thinking of the gloves as she pushed and pulled them over her fingers. Her eyes were on the car that was waiting for her under the porte-cochere—the car, and the driver who stood lounging against it. He would, Martha knew, toss aside his cigarette and spring to attention the instant she opened the door. But for now, he lounged there easily, his broad shoulders outlined against the limousine's glossy finish, his thick red neck rising like a column from the neat black broadcloth of his uniform.

"Dennis," thought Martha. "Black and red Dennis. . . ."

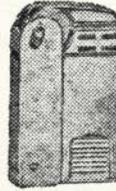
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DETECTIVE TALES

(Continued from page 92)

frey, and even why it had gone out. Sticking out of its wax top was the glistening point of an eight-inch hatpin.

I let my breath out in a long sigh.

MacCaffrey, after giving orders to Hanson about Raquel's disposal, came slowly over to me. He picked up the candle and stood looking at it. "Nice girl," he said.

I nodded, and sat down in the nearest chair. "All right," I said. "Tell me all about it, Sherlock. Or was it all luck?"

MacCaffrey smiled without warmth. "Nothing's luck, Charlie. Ever." He stared at the candle again. "Frisbee gave me the tipoff. Frisbee and this filthy hot day. After I heard the Mexican had been stabbed, I started to look around for the knife. I combed this place. And all the time I found myself looking at those candles. You notice anything crazy about 'em?"

I thought back to the row of long yellow spears. Each of them had bent under the heat except one.

"That's right," he said, watching my face. "The middle one. It had an awfully stiff wick—or maybe a hatpin. A pretty good place to hide it, especially if you're in a hurry."

"But at the house last night . . . I could have sworn . . ."

MacCaffrey's eye fell on Raquel's red purse, lying on the desk. He opened it and then chuckled. Slowly he pulled out a flashlight. A few hairs still stuck to it. My hairs.

"Why that little—" I began.

"She was probably trying to get away from your place and back here for the candle," MacCaffrey said. "You couldn't see her then."

I shook my head, frowning. "Well, where in the devil," I asked, "does Julio come in?"

"Julio," MacCaffrey murmured. "Julio was the sucker. Julio was the man in love."

"And you weren't kidding when you told Raquel you'd caught him this afternoon?"

"I was not. It was interesting to see his face when we told him Raquel had planned this little trap for him. He wouldn't be-

LETHAL LITTLE LADY

lieve us. He'd done so much for her. You see, Charlie . . ." MacCaffrey sat down beside me. "Raquel killed the Mexican. We don't know the motive yet, but it isn't important. Maybe he was playing around. Maybe it was an intended robbery. At any rate, Julio came in right after. In order to protect Raquel, Julio covered the stab wound with a gun shot. Together they hid the hatpin, and Julio left, assuming that Raquel would join him later. But she didn't. She wanted to be perfectly in the clear—by having Julio, the only one who knew the truth about the murder, out of the way. Hence the story about the jealous, spurned lover. And hence this little trap she'd planned for tonight. She expected Julio to show up. And she expected us to shoot him down before he, presumably, could kill her. Pretty, huh?"

"How did you figure it was Raquel in the first place?" I asked.

"Who else could it be?" MacCaffrey said. "Who else would Julio take the rap for? And why would he shoot a corpse—unless he was trying to hide the other wound? No, it adds up too well. But I had to prove—for my own benefit as much as anyone else's—that Raquel knew the hatpin was in the candle, and that she was capable of murder. And I doubt if she would have confessed under ordinary interrogation. She's a pretty cool little cucumber."

"Yeah," I said, and then, "Poor Julio. How could a man be that crazy?"

"You saw her," MacCaffrey said. And for the second time in my life, I saw MacCaffrey with that shutter down. "Funny thing, beauty . . ." he murmured.

"But to do all those things, without sense, without reason, just for a woman . . . just for beauty . . ."

MacCaffrey reached out and picked up the four brown jumping beans he'd been playing with. They jerked and rattled in his hand. MacCaffrey touched them softly with his fingers. "What makes the little blind bugs jump?" he murmured. "Without reason. Without sense. All their lives . . . until they die. They couldn't tell you. They don't know." He looked up at me slowly. "But they jump, Charlie. They can't help it. . . ."

THE END

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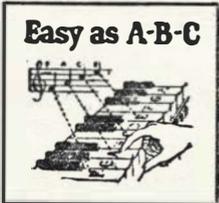
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DETECTIVE TALES

(Continued from page 105)

drama, spectators hung on her words as she explained that she had just gone to her room when Miss Lizzie shouted: "Come quick! Father's dead!"

Terrified, young Bridget Sullivan started downstairs. "What's the matter?" she called as she neared her employer's daughter.

Lizzie Borden answered, "Come in here, quick! Father's dead! Someone came in and killed him!"

And that was perfectly true, Bridget learned in a few minutes. Andrew Borden was dead on the sitting-room floor, hacked to pieces by an axe. Later she went upstairs and found Abbie Borden's body in a like condition. But search as she would she could not find the murder weapon and had to be content with Miss Lizzie's theory that a tramp had broken into the house and murdered both her father and stepmother.

Later, at Lizzie Borden's trial, the jury had to accept the tramp theory, too, for lack of any real evidence to the contrary. That, plus Bridget Sullivan's testimony resulted in an acquittal for Lizzie.

After being judged innocent, Lizzie Borden left Fall River for a time. She later returned, to dwell in a different house from the one in which her parents had met death. There she lived in seclusion until she died in 1927.

Long before Lizzie Borden's death, Bridget Sullivan had left Fall River, seeking a place far from the town in which she had received too much notoriety. She went to Anaconda, Montana, and lived there for forty-five years. She then moved to Butte, and lived for six years with a niece, Mrs. Kate Moriarty, who said that she had heard her aunt "mention" the Borden case.

Apparently, mention of the Borden case never aroused any curiosity in Mrs. Moriarty, never brought to mind a certain question. It is one that crime fanciers have been seeking to answer for years. That question is:

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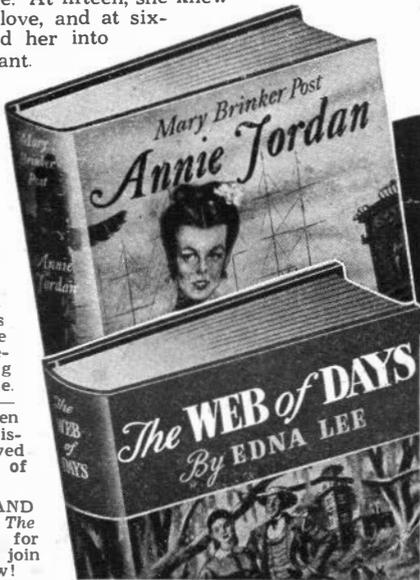
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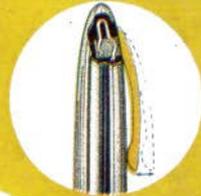
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