Detective Tales

MARCH 25¢

—And Murder Makes Four!
by WM. CAMPBELL GAULT

Detective Tales

Vol. 47 *No. 3*

CONTENTS FOR MARCH, 1951

NEXT ISSUE PUBLISHED JANUARY 26TH

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Published monthly by Popular Publications, Inc., 1125 E. Valle Ave., Kokomo, Indiana. Editorial and Executive Offices, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Henry Steeger, President and Secretary, Harold S. Goldsmith Vice-President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter at the Post Office, at Kokomo, Indiana. Copyright, 1950, by Popular Publications, Inc. This issue is published simultaneously in the Dominion of Canada. Copyright under International Copyright Convention and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction, in whole or in part, in any form. Single copy, 25c. Annual subscription for U.S.A., its possessions and Canada, $3.00; other countries 75c additional. All correspondence relating to this publication should be addressed to 1125 E. Valle Avenue, Kokomo, Indiana, or 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts, enclose stamped, self-addressed envelope for their return if found unavailable. The publishers will exercise care in the handling of unsolicited manuscripts, but assume no responsibility for their return. Printed in the U.S.A.

Blame it on the tropical sun, that same sun under which Nature is at its gaudiest—and most deadly. For the same sun beneath which flourish the delicately tinted orchids, the blood-red hibiscus, the riotous bougainvillaea, also produced Calumet Beach, a Mecca for tourists and ladies of dubious virtue, and those human counterparts of the slinking, silent-padding jungle creatures, the men of the underworld. Here William Campbell Gault takes you on a safari through a man-made jungle, colorful and gay—and sinister.

—And Murder Makes Four!

By WILLIAM CAMPBELL GAULT

AT TEN O'CLOCK, Dick phoned the room. "I think I've got something hot, Joe," he said. "Stay there until I get there, right?"

"Check," Joe said, not quite as interested as he should have been, perhaps. Dick was new to Globe and fairly young, with just a touch of the amateur's optimism.

So Joe said, "Check," and went back to the report he'd been working on for two hours. The Old Man wanted a resumé of the case activity so far, and there'd been a long trail. Hackensack to Miami and then to the West Coast.

It had been a month and a half ago that the Old Man had called him into his office. He'd been really hot. "Nobody," he'd said, "nobody in this bleeding world is going to take Globe for half a million. This is your baby, Joe. I'm giving you Dick Verch."

Somebody *had* taken Globe for half a million, so the Old Man's words were only partially true. Four smooth, capable and well-prepared characters had done that in the Currency Transfer Company office in Detroit.

"Dick Verch is kind of young, Chief," Joe said. "I—"

"Dick Verch is kind of smart, too," the Old Man interrupted, "and he doesn't load the swindle sheet. I guess you'll be eating the same food and sleeping in the same kind of room.

That way I'll *know* what's what."

That was the Old Man for you. Out to get a half-million back, but worrying about the expense account.

Joe said, "So he'll save you a hundred and lose us a half-million. The kid isn't ready." Then he said something that had seemed, later, like a premonition. "These boys have killed two men already."

"Joe, it's a bad morning to argue with me. I'm giving you Dick Verch. I'll want a report every day. Good luck." That had been Joe's dismissal.

Hackensack had followed, on a pigeon's tip, a tip that had extended to Miami and fizzled out. The Calumet Beach tip had come from the local sheriff. The Old Man must have screamed at the reports coming in from Calumet Beach.

Because all the hotels were resort hotels, and resort hotels have their own quaint conception of rates. They were terrific. If the four were still together, they were living very high in Calumet Beach.

Dick Verch was beginning to learn about expense accounts, despite his youth. Joe liked the kid more every day; they got along.

And the kid was a worker, out early and late, the way Joe had been before the depressing weight of his thirty-eight years and the corrosive action of rye and cynicism had dulled his fire.

Now, at ten o'clock on a Saturday morning, the lad had something "hot." In Hackensack and Miami, too, he'd seen smoke but found no fire.

So Joe said, "Check," and hung up. For which he was to feel guilty later. He'd been an operative too long for work that sloppy. He should have asked for more information than that.

He went back to the reports, finished them, signed them, took them down to the lobby and mailed them. Then he went into the coffee shop to await the return of eager Richard Verch, the working operative.

He had a small but succulent sirloin steak on toast and a really inspired tossed salad. He was on his second cup of coffee when he was paged for a lobby phone call.

The voice was soft and masculine. "Puma? This is Sheriff Quintito. We've got a body here at the morgue requires some identification. Your boy, I guess."

"I'll be right down," Joe said.

Calumet was a county seat, and the morgue was in the basement of the courthouse. Quintito was waiting in his office, the door open, and he came along down to the basement with Joe.

"Two soft-nosed .38 slugs," Quintito said. "More than half of his face is gone. He'd better be fixed before his wife sees him."

Joe thought of Dick's wife and a coldness moved through him. She had an idea Dick was a combination of Dick Tracy and Lord Peter Whimsey. Joe thought of Dick's four-year-old daughter. She thought Papa was Superman.

"He's a long way from his wife," Joe said. "There'll be time."

They went down a flight of worn terazzo steps. Joe kept his hand on

the railing for support. This wasn't something a man could build up a tolerance for, not this kind of dying.

The sheriff hadn't been wrong. One blue eye stared up at Joe impersonally; there was no other. The white bone of his skull and jaw showed through in ragged splinters. Most of the mouth was gone, along with the right side of his face.

But it was Dick Verch, and Joe nodded.

"There'll be some papers upstairs," the sheriff said. His voice was soft and respectful.

"Whoever it was wasn't taking any chances, was he?" Joe said quietly. "Two soft-nosed .38's in the face. Where was Dick found?"

"In the men's washroom of the Spanish House. That's—"

"I know where it is," Joe said. "And what it is." His eyes moved to the sheriff's dark, broad face. "Who found him?"

"The porter. Went in there to clean up, around noon, and—"

"Went in there to clean up?" Joe said. "You mean nobody heard any shots? Two .38 slugs and nobody heard any shots? What the hell kind of story—"

"Easy, Mr. Puma. The man was your friend and you're excited. He was found there; it does not necessarily mean he was killed there."

"Why would he be moved to a place like that?"

The sheriff shrugged. "Who can read the mind of a man who uses soft-nosed bullets?"

Joe said quietly, "And if he wasn't killed there, how do you know what kind of slugs were used? Don't tell me they were still in his skull."

The sheriff shook his head. "I'll tell you nothing but the truth. I'm glad you're angry. It's about time."

Joe said patiently, "About the slugs . . .?"

"They were on the floor beside the body. The killer is not only depraved, evidently—he is also contemptuous." He put his hand on Joe's shoulder. "Let's go upstairs." With his free hand he pulled the sheet back over the mutilated face of Dick Verch.

The sheriff's office seemed warm after the coolness of the basement.

"No reporters?" Joe said.

"Not yet. The proprietor of the Spanish House called me directly, and I thought it best to notify you before I called in the newspapers."

JOE LOOKED AT the phone and the sheriff nodded. Joe put through a wire to the Old Man, and hoped the hopeless hope that the Old Man would be tactful in notifying Dick's wife.

Then he sat next to the sheriff's desk and managed to light a cigarette. His stomach was queasy; his heart was pounding. He said, "This Spanish House . . ."

The sheriff was grave, his eyes distant. "The proprietor is one of the—the older residents. Before the artists came, even, and the tourists, he was here. These older residents have some privilege beyond the law. There's gambling, for one thing. The proprietor's name is Dommaz. I don't think he'd have anything to do with

murder. He doesn't go for violence."

"Gambling is one thing, you said. What are some of the others?"

Quintito studied Joe a few seconds. "I can only guess. He has boats. Perhaps dope, or duty-free gems, which is just my romantic mind. The boats, though, are seaworthy. He doesn't haul waste or garbage in them."

"Or use them for fishing?"

"Some, but only for his own guests and the patrons of his restaurant." Quintito's voice maintained its geniality as it said, "He's a friend of mine. In any interrogation, you'll be on your own."

"Without interference?"

Quintito nodded. "Unless, of course, he's molested."

Joe looked at the bland, dark face and wondered what went on behind it. "And the city police?"

"We're all older residents. We all hate murder, and that includes Mr. Dommaz." A pause. "I'm glad, as I said before, you are finally angry, Mr. Puma. But take your time. Be very careful."

It wouldn't do any good to ask him what he meant, Joe knew. This was going to be one of Quintito's cryptic days. It was his message that had brought Joe to Calumet Beach. A partially burned leather bag had been found. It had been checked against the bags used by the Currency Transfer Company. It was identical.

But it hadn't been traced to anyone in Calumet Beach.

Joe said, "I'll be careful," and stood up. He put his cigarette out in the big glass ashtray on Quintito's desk. His hand had stopped trembling. "If you want me, you can leave a message at the hotel."

He went out, a big man and an angry one and a sick one, and stood for a moment on the curb, in the bright sunlight. A half block to his right was the water; the town spread east, north and south from that.

It contained from twenty thousand to fifty thousand residents, depending on the season and the day of the week. It had started its growth as an artists' colony and been vulgarized by tourists, real estate dealers and dilettantes. But its basic beauty remained, behind the neon and the pseudo-Spanish and the sterile *moderne*.

The crackpots were here in great numbers, and four of them were killers. Dick's death had almost established that as fact now.

He went down to the stucco, flat-roofed building that housed the services of Boone and Diegel, Morticians. Dick's wife would need some kind of a face to look at before they buried him. Women were like that.

Then he went over to the Spanish House. It was set into the curve of the cliff next to the yacht basin, its wide verandah over the beach, supported by immense wooden piles black with age and water.

It was dim, coming in from the street side, cool and high ceilinged and peaceful, the hum of traffic outside distant and meaningless.

Peter Dommaz sat a table in one corner of the immense room. He was reading a book and drinking a cup of coffee. There was a silver pot of it

on the small table in front of him.

He looked up as Joe came over, and he put his book down. He rose. "I am sorry about your friend." He indicated the chair across from him.

Joe sat down and Dommaz asked, "Some coffee?"

Joe nodded. "Thanks, I will."

A waiter was already bringing another cup and another silver pot.

Joe's eyes were on the waiter's hands, pouring the coffee, as he said, "I wonder why my friend should have been brought here. I understand he wasn't killed here."

"There was only a smear of blood on the floor," Dommaz said matter-of-factly. He was a thin man, tall and with a strong face. His lips were thin, his teeth very white. He seemed very composed.

Annoyance stirred in Joe. He sipped his coffee.

Dommaz' eyes lifted to the doors facing on the balcony on the east side of the room. "There are some big games, as you probably know, which go on in those rooms up there every night. All types of men come here. Occasionally they make me a proposition of one kind or another, something they know I might handle and involving a worthwhile profit." He paused.

Joe lighted a cigarette and said nothing.

THE OTHER MAN'S grey eyes were humorously alight. "There is very little that goes on in Calumet Beach of which Peter Dommaz is not aware. There is nothing exceptionally profitable that goes on without my permission. It has been that way for twenty-five years. I had an offer the other night involving the transportation of four men by water to Mexico. I turned it down."

Joe was suddenly tense. He didn't stare at Dommaz or show any undue interest. "Four men—fleeing the country?"

"I suppose. It's an easy country to leave for anyone who isn't *seriously* wanted by the law. The kind of money this man offered, I realized his crime, or theirs, must have been stupendous. It must have included murder." Dommaz' smile was cool. "Any gentleman's code has rigid limits. Mine is considerably this side of murder."

"And Dick Verch's death?" Joe's eyes met the grey ones.

"Was a warning to me. I don't doubt I'll be approached again. They probably assume they've frightened me."

"And if they approach you?"

"I will point the man out to you, or see that you are informed."

"How about Sheriff Quintito, or the city police?"

"We have an agreement. They don't bother me, and I don't bother them." The strong, thin face stiffened. "I hate a killer, a pointless killer. I have watched you, Mr. Puma, and I think you could handle them very well. You have undoubtedly had experience with the type."

"Some. What'd this man look like? Do you know his name?"

"Not his name. He was very dis-

creet. He had a rotten, course face but a very quick mind behind it. He wasn't anything I could describe. He looked like a composite photograph of a dozen rogue's gallery portraits. He'll be back."

"I wish you had told me this before Dick Verch had to die."

"There were two reasons why I didn't. I didn't consider it your business before that. You were a different man before that."

"Different?"

"Soft. But not now, are you?"

"No." Joe saw a door open on the balcony and a very shapely leg start to come through. Then the leg went back and the door closed.

Dommaz followed his gaze to the balcony, saw only the closed door, and returned to Joe. "Young Mr. Verch was married?"

Joe nodded. "Why?"

"I was thinking of his wife. It will be a terrible blow."

"There's a four-year-old daughter," Joe added. "The state police never bother you, Mr. Dommaz?"

"Only my conscience ever bothers me, Mr. Puma, and that very rarely."

A hard-shelled cutie, Joe thought. He wondered how much moxie Dommaz really had under the surface.

Again the door on the balcony opened and the leg came through, but this time the rest of the woman followed. A dark and definitely Spanish beauty with an arrogant tilt to her head and a firmly modeled body.

Her hair was pulled straight back, without ornament, her dress was black lace over some shimmering white fabric. She stood there, one hand on the balcony, surveying the room below.

Again Dommaz' gaze followed Joe's frankly appraising stare, and this time Dommaz said, "My wife. Isn't she beautiful?"

"She certainly is," Joe said, and there was no apology in the smile he gave Dommaz. "You're very lucky." He stood up. "Thanks for the help. I'm going back to the hotel for a bath and some work that has to be done. I'll come back here tonight."

Dommaz nodded and extended his hand. It was dry and thin, an old man's hand. Joe took another glance at the balcony and wondered just how lucky Dommaz was.

If the old pirate was running dope, Joe ruminated, he'd be having trouble with the Feds. They don't play politics, not *that* branch of the Federal government. And there didn't seem to be any secret about Dommaz being on the outer fringes of the law.

CHAPTER TWO

HE WALKED BACK to the hotel slowly, thinking of Dick. By the time he turned into the lobby, he was thinking of the lady on the balcony. That first appearance by her could almost have been an invitation. But she was Dommaz' wife.

The clerk said, "Sheriff Quintito left a message for you to phone him when you returned, Mr. Puma."

Joe phoned from the lobby booth.

Quintito said, "We found a witness to two shots, about eleven o'clock, in

the Custer Cove area. Just the sound of them, you understand, coming from north of his house."

"Thanks," Joe said. "Anyone new in that area, recently moved in?"

"We're checking that now. I'll keep you informed."

Joe thanked him again and hung up.

In his room, he stretched on the bed for twenty minutes, rubbing the back of his neck and staring at the ceiling. Then he sat at the small desk and wrote a long letter to the Old Man.

He emphasized the fact that he didn't want another partner, that he felt he'd do better on his own. That should please the old miser. He wrote:

> ...a strange setup; a gent named Dommaz seems to have the crime rights in the town and he doesn't like murderers, he tells me. Think he's given me a lead. At any rate he's given me a cup of coffee and a handshake and we're on the same side of the fence at the moment.

After that he soaked in the tub for a half an hour. The sense of guilt for Dick's death stayed with him; he was the senior of the team—and he'd been careless.

He ate dinner at the hotel and went over to the Spanish House.

Most of the tables were occupied, and he went out onto the verandah. It would be cold here later; now the day's warmth still lingered.

From the dining room he could hear the music of a gypsy trio and below him he could hear the sound of the water slapping the piers. The highway in front was a major state artery, but the incessant clamor of its traffic was effectively muffled by the solid construction of the building.

Peace and profits and protection—a sweet setup. With scenery and good food, with a lovely wife. Joe's rye and water was halfway to his lips when he saw the lady in lace coming through the glass sliding doors leading from the restaurant proper.

She headed directly for him, and he rose.

"Mr. Puma?" Her voice was soft and pleasant.

He nodded. "And you're Mrs. Dommaz? I saw you this afternoon."

She nodded absently and took the chair across from him. Joe went over to help, but he was too late. A waiter came, bringing her some green fluid in a liqueur glass. He went away.

"I'm worried about my husband," she said. "He—he's not equipped to deal with killers."

"I think you underestimate him."

She shook her head stubbornly. "Everyone else overestimates him. He has the reputation from his younger days. He has the loyalty of influential men and undiminished courage but it is not enough, not for the kind of men who would—" Her voice broke.

"Who would do what was done to Dick Verch?"

She nodded without speaking. Her dark eyes searched Joe's face. She was sitting stiffly in her chair.

Joe said quietly, "Your husband has a good right arm now. Or maybe I should say right hand. A hand holding a gun. Me. I'm equipped to deal with killers, Mrs. Dommaz."

"Is one man enough, and one gun,

against four men and four guns?"

"We can't be sure of that. Your husband confides in you, doesn't he?"

"Always."

Joe said, "I think you can be sure that nothing will happen to your husband, not in this town."

She smiled wearily. "Those are his words." A pause. "He wants to know if the name Meredith Bentley means anything to you."

Joe nodded quickly. Meredith Bentley had been a long-time employee of the Currency Transfer Company who'd disappeared a year before the robbery. In a routine check of all former employees, the total disappearance of Meredith Bentley had seemed strange.

"That is the man who approached him regarding transportation."

"He lives here in town?" Joe asked.

"North of town, in the Custer Cove region. He came in right after you left this afternoon. My husband does not, of course, want his name mentioned if you interview this man."

"Of course. I'll need a car. Custer Cove is quite a distance from here, isn't it?"

She nodded. "I have my car, and I know the house. I'll be glad to drive you over."

"I wouldn't think of—"

She raised a hand. "It's my husband's wish."

She might as well have said "command;" it was in her tone. She went to get a cape while Joe paid for his drink.

The sun was going down now, a red ball reflected in the quiet water. The little coupé cut off the ocean road into a canyon road that climbed east toward the Custer hills. There was a sharp S turn just before they came to the summit, and she handled it very well, Joe thought.

The water was way below them now, and here was a house, its back to the road, its front facing the sea.

Joe's .38 was in the pocket of his jacket and his hand was firmly on it as he went up the path to the house. If Bentley should prove to be one of the four, it was clear he had separated from the others. This house wouldn't hold four people.

There was a small concrete stoop, and glass in the upper half of the front door. A face appeared in the glass before Joe rang the bell.

IT WAS, AS Dommaz had said, a coarse face. It was, at the moment, a scowling face, about on a level with Joe's.

The door opened, and the man said, "What the hell you selling?"

"Your name Bentley, Meredith Bentley?"

The eyes looked over Joe, and there was fear in them. His voice was ragged. "What gave you that idea? My name's Porterfield."

"Sorry," Joe said. "I made a—"

"Come in," the man said, and held the door wide.

Joe kept his hand in his pocket as he came in, and his eyes made a sweeping survey of the entire room. There were no other rooms.

The door closed and now Bentley stood with his back to it. There was

a gun in his hand. A .45 automatic.

Joe's eyes lifted from the gun to meet Bentley's glare. Joe said quietly, "You didn't think I'd come unarmed, did you?"

Bentley's hand was shaking. "You're a cop. Just like that other."

"Don't make the mistake of tightening your finger," Joe said. "I'd like an excuse to kill you."

"Cop!" the man almost shouted, and Joe saw the finger tighten. Joe heard the roar of the .45 before he started to pour some lead himself.

Joe's third shot must have hit bone, for Bentley slammed back into the door as though he'd been hit by a truck. Then he crashed.

Joe saw the bloody face of Dick Verch in his memory. He looked down and saw the blood coming out of Bentley's stomach. Just before he got sick he saw the wad of cardboard on the floor.

Three minutes later he was phoning the sheriff at his home. Mrs. Dommaz stood in the doorway, her face white, her eyes shocked.

"You'd better go," Joe said. "You'd best not get involved."

The sheriff's soft voice said, "Hello."

Joe said, "Puma, Sheriff. I came up here to 1342 Canyon Road to investigate a lead, and the character pulled a gun on me. He's dead, Sheriff."

"I see. I'll bring Chief Fuller along." A pause. "Wait for us."

Chief Fuller was head of the city force. Joe went out onto the concrete stoop in time to see Mrs. Dommaz' coupé make a U turn and head down toward the sea.

Joe fingered the wad of cardboard and watched the coupé disappear around a turn. It wouldn't be wise, he decided, to tell Sheriff Quintito about the cardboard.

The men who came with Fuller and Quintito were county men, deputies. They'd come quietly without a siren and they were all there, going over the house, when the ambulance came, just as quietly.

Only it wasn't an ambulance—it was a hearse from Boone and Diegel, Morticians.

Joe stayed out on the stoop until the body was carried to the hearse. Then he went in.

Quintito said, "We've found a little under a thousand dollars, Mr. Puma. Mostly in twenties. That money, though, wasn't identifiable, was it?"

Joe shook his head. "No wrappers?"

"None. We've found a driver's license issued to Meredith Bentley, and another, from this state, issued to Harry Porterfield."

"Meredith Bentley, a man by that name, was a former employee of Currency Transfer," Joe said. "They'll have his prints on file there."

Quintito said, "You look sick, my friend. Why don't you go out and sit in my car? We'll be through here in a few minutes."

Joe smiled his thanks and went out. He wasn't used to this kind of cooperation from either city or county officers, and there wasn't any reason why he should expect it. It made him a little uncomfortable.

In a few minutes the sheriff came along the path with Chief Fuller. The sheriff got behind the wheel; the chief sat in back.

"You'll want a statement now, I suppose," Joe said.

"Tomorrow will be all right. It seems pretty clear that this Bentley or Porterfield must have been one of the gang."

"I'd give odds on it," Joe said. "But how much closer am I? This will just scare off the others."

"Maybe," Quintito said easily. "But Bentley's been living here for a year, in that house, alone."

"A year?" Joe said. "That would mean before the robbery."

Quintito nodded. "We'll check with the stores and the utility companies to see if he was gone for a time, the time when that company was robbed. I'll phone you in the morning. Take it easy. You be careful."

Joe looked over at the sheriff, but it was too dark in the car to see his face clearly. This was the damnedest case.

"Nobody's going to leave town," the sheriff said, "except the tourists, and we're always happy to see that."

Chief Fuller said nothing at all.

They dropped him at his hotel, and he went into the bar. He had two double shots of rye before he went upstairs. He should write to the Old Man, but he'd written to him twice today and telegraphed him once. Tomorrow morning would serve as well.

He fell asleep around midnight.

He was awakened by his phone. It was Mr. Boone, of Boone and Diegel. Dick Verch was ready to ship. Did Mr. Puma care to see him? There was some pride of accomplishment in the voice.

Joe said, "No," and hung up.

IT WAS A BRIGHT, clean morning and the air coming in from the ocean side was warm. It was a Sunday morning, and the beach would probably be jammed. Though it was still early.

He put on his swim trunks and robe and went down the steps to the hotel's beach entrance. The beach was deserted.

The water was chilly at first, but he moved through it in a steady eight-beat crawl and he could feel the warmth of improved circulation moving through his body. He could feel the loosening of his big shoulder muscles and then the lassitude came.

He floated for a while, way out, riding the gentle swells, seeing nothing but the bright blueness of the sky overhead and closing his mind to the day before.

He was alive. He lived and was strong. The sun was bright and the water pleasant. He stayed out there for half an hour and then swam back leisurely.

A girl was standing at the water's edge, adjusting her bathing cap.

Her body was slim and firm, beautifully proportioned. Her face wasn't quite as young as her body, but it would do in any league. He couldn't see her hair but the coloring and the light-blue eyes would indicate it was blonde.

She smiled and said, "You're not a professional, by chance? You looked good out there."

"Professional?"

"Swimmer. Where did you learn to swim like that?"

"At Coney Island."

She made a face.

He smiled. "I could have thought of a lie, I suppose. About being a former inter-collegiate champion. Or Olympic. I hope I didn't spoil your day."

Her laugh was as cheerful as the morning. "Honesty is always refreshing." She appraised him openly. "You're a guest at the hotel, aren't you? I've seen you in the dining room."

"I spend a lot of time there," Joe admitted, "but how could you see me without my seeing you?"

Again she laughed. "Before this gets out of hand, I'm married." She stretched her shoulders and took a tentative step toward the water. "Happily." A frown now, and some doubt. "Happily— I think."

Then she was running into the water.

Joe was grinning as he turned to watch her. She hit the water flat, in a shallow, racing dive and went churning toward the open sea. She'd evidently done a lot of swimming herself.

He enjoyed his breakfast. He had a table on the patio overlooking the beach and he read the morning papers with his coffee.

After that he wrote to the Old Man about Meredith Bentley and then phoned the sheriff. He said, "I didn't know if you realized last night that today would be Sunday, Sheriff. Be at your office for a while yet?"

"Until noon, at least."

Joe was over there in twenty minutes and he made out his own report on the machine in the sheriff's office.

The sheriff said, "Bentley was gone from Calumet Beach for about two weeks in January. That checks, doesn't it?"

Joe nodded. "There's no doubt in my mind about him. It would need to be one hell of a coincidence if he was innocent. But who else? And the money?"

Quintito shrugged. His broad face was weary and his brown eyes heavy with fatigue. "I'm not thinking so well this morning. It will be their move next. Yesterday should smoke something out."

"I wish Meredith had lived long enough to talk," Joe said.

Quintito smiled. "That's a change from your state of mind last night. Last night you probably wished only that he had lived. This is more professional."

"Yesterday was a bad day," Joe told him.

CHAPTER THREE

HE WENT DOWN the bright street toward the sea. The ocean road was dotted with morning traffic now, and the beach was being populated.

Again there was that sense of seclusion as he left the bright street for the dimness of the Spanish House.

Peter Dommaz was out on the verandah. The silver coffee pot and the book were with him. There were only a few diners on the porch, and they were at the other end.

Dommaz smiled and gestured toward the coffee pot.

Joe sat down and shook his head. "Thanks, no. I've had four cups already this morning. Don't you think that was dangerous, sending your wife along last night?"

Dommaz said, "There is a line I read somewhere—'Look not too long from the bright face of danger.' Do you recognize it?"

Annoyance stirred in Joe. "No, but I'm practically illiterate. It probably wasn't meant for women."

"You're old-fashioned, Mr. Puma." The grey eyes were amused. "They fly, they engage in all athletics, they even wrestle in the mud."

Joe lighted a cigarette. "I wonder if this business will scare off the others."

"We'll have to wait and see."

"If the house was watched, they might have recognized the car. That would involve you."

"No more than I already am. Killers don't frighten me."

"They frighten me," Joe said. "They scare the hell out of me. Sane people are bad enough, but you can't figure a killer. I like to know what to expect."

"No, you don't, or you wouldn't be in this busines." Then Dommaz was looking past Joe and frowning faintly.

Joe looked up to see Mrs. Dommaz standing there. "I wanted to say hello to Mr. Puma. And tell him how—how I admire him."

Joe was standing now. "Admire me?"

"The way you went up to that house, not knowing if there was one man waiting there, or if there were four. You looked so . . . heroic."

Joe smiled. "Sit down and have some coffee and tell me more, Mrs. Dommaz." He pulled out a chair and held it.

Dommaz seemed faintly displeased. Mrs. Dommaz had left her señorita role behind; she was in white linen today and looking scrumptious.

Dommaz said, "Mr. Puma is waiting for you to be seated, dear."

Her face showed no annoyance. She sat down, and Dommaz gestured to a waiter.

When the man came, Dommaz said, "Some more coffee, Alan."

But Mrs. Dommaz said, "Not for me. Rye and water, Alan."

Dommaz said quietly, "It's not yet noon. It's still morning, Eve."

The waiter paused, looking from one to the other. Mrs. Dommaz said, "Rye and water, Alan. And you, Mr. Puma?"

"The same," Joe said.

The waiter went away. Dommaz said, "Mr. Puma was just telling me how much killers frighten him."

She looked at Joe.

He said, "Every time, I get the heebie-jeebies. I must have met a million of them."

"If you do, you conceal it very well. You didn't look frightened last

CURIOSITIES OF CRIME

JIM BROWN OF Palatka, Florida, stood convicted of murder. At his execution it was discovered that the warrant directed, instead, the hanging of the foreman of the jury which had convicted him. The fantastic clerical error won him a postponement and a subsequent commutation — and the tale even has a moral. Years later he was proven innocent, freed— and the state paid him $2,492 compensation!

AMONG THE PEOPLE who bear the name of Smith is one who pulled one of the cleverest stunts in police annals. Arrested for theft in Chicago, this particular Smith was taken into court for trial when something happened to distract the court's attention. When they looked again, all they could see was a guy busily sweeping the corridor. They didn't realize until later that it was Smith, who'd picked up a stray broom, swept his way right outdoors, paused to do a good job on the courthouse steps—before vanishing into the unknown!

WHEN FREDERICK BARNES, Liverpool, England, trolley car company clerical worker, wrote a letter to his newspaper urging police action to halt the series of burglaries in his neighborhood, he bit off a goodly chunk. His neighbors joined in the fun and the cops got furious. A police shakeup was in the offing when they nabbed the culprit—who proved to be Barnes' own wife!

night, Mr. Puma. You looked very sure of yourself."

"I had a staunch ally," he said.

Dommaz said, "I don't like to be rude, but I must leave you. I've an appointment for eleven."

He rose with dignity and left.

Eve shook her head. "You wouldn't know that he started out as a fisherman, would you? Half Swede and half Portuguese and now he's got most of the town thinking he's a Spanish gentleman."

"And you're his señora."

"From Park Falls, Minnesota. Got stranded in this salt-water tank town, Mr. Puma, and he was the biggest frog in the puddle. I've had almost enough."

"What book is that he's reading?" Joe said. "It looks like the same one, in limp leather."

"It is the same one, a book of poems. Browning, I think, though I've forgotten. He's been carrying it for years. He must be a slow reader."

Joe finished his drink and said, "I wonder if all marriages are as happy as yours?" He grinned at her. "It's a cold, cruel world beyond these walls, Eve."

"Let's have another rye," she said. She beckoned to a waiter.

The drinks came, and she lifted hers high, in salute. Joe answered it and said, "I wouldn't treat Peter Dommaz with any scorn. You know better than that."

She looked at him steadily. "You *are* frightened. Peter was right about that."

"And you were, too, last night. That was no act. You were about two breaths away from passing out."

She looked at her glass.

"And now you're restless," Joe went on, "and still frightened. What cooks, Park Falls?"

She looked up to meet his gaze. "Nothing cooks. I'm fed up. I've been trying to remember what *young* men are like."

"Don't look at me," Joe said. "I'm thirty-eight." Then: "Dick Verch was a young man. Did you meet him, Mrs. Dommaz?"

Her eyes were stones. "Never. What are you saying, Joe?"

"Just putting words together. He was a good-looking boy. You'd have enjoyed knowing him. Had a lot of sparkle."

She finished her drink and stood up. "I don't think I want to hear any more about him." She turned and went back into the dining room.

JOE ATE A big dinner that noon, keeping an eye peeled for the blonde. But she didn't appear. He was up in his room when Quintito phoned.

"Another corpse," Quintito said. "That motel about two blocks from where you are, the El Rancho. You know it?"

"I know it," Joe said. "Redwood fence along the front?"

"That's it."

"In five minutes," Joe told him.

It was standard western motel, with brands on the room doors instead of numbers, and on the furniture. With imitation Navajo rugs and pseudo-Remington prints. With refrigerator and electric range and steel shower stall.

This one varied from the others only because of the man on the floor.

A big man, with red hair, with a surprised look in his bleak blue eyes. With his throat cut from ear to ear.

Quintito said, "Slugged first and then sliced. Like a steer in the slaughter house. His registry name is Paul Duncan."

Joe said, "I've met him before. His police blotter name is Red Hogan and he's known as a rough lad in Chicago and Detroit. Find anything?"

"Six hundred dollars. Some wrappers." Quintito held them up, two stiff paper bands used to wrap currency. They were stamped, "Currency Transfer Company, Detroit."

"When'd it happen?"

"We don't know yet. After we learn when he ate, we'll know better."

"I wonder why he died," Joe said.

Quintito said, "There were four men to divide a half-million, and now there are two."

"I can't believe that anyone as experienced as Red Hogan would leave the company wrappers on stolen currency," Joe said. "It doesn't make any kind of sense. That's amateur stuff, and Red wasn't an amateur."

The black wagon of Boone and Diegel was again pulling up to the front of the unit. A small man with a small bag was climbing into his

coupé a few units up. The doctor.

The sheriff said, "Expected Fuller would be here, but he's taken the family on a picnic. Some guys only work six days a week."

Joe turned to face him. "You know more about all this than I do, don't you, Sheriff?"

Quintito's voice was mild, his face impassive. "You *know* everything I do."

"But you suspect some things?"

The sheriff looked at Joe steadily. "Nothing I'd voice. My imagination is active. You've no complaints, have you, Joe?"

"I've been treated very well," Joe agreed. "Only—and this is a big only—Globe Protection and Currency Transfer are kind of cold-blooded about a deal of this kind. They'd rather have the money than the men, especially when the money comes to half a million. I've got the damnedest feeling that I'm never going to see that money."

"Two men to go," Quintito said easily. "When you get to the last man, you'll probably get to the money."

"Not if I get to the last man dead," Joe argued. "This is beginning to look like an epidemic."

"The death of Mr. Verch," Quintito told him, "was the first murder in this county in eight months. The three deaths in the last two days can all be tied to the robbery."

They had Red on the stretcher now, and they were covering him with a sheet.

Quintito's voice went on: "Something that happened yesterday, something, probably, that Mr. Verch discovered has set off a fuse. Four men with half a million between them have had a month and a half to speculate on how easy it would be to raise their proportionate share. Yesterday they started to put their thoughts into action."

Joe was looking out the window. "A theory."

"But logical. Are *you* telling *me* everything you know, Joe?"

Joe didn't answer for a moment. Finally he said, "A private operative has certain loyalties to his sources of information—"

Quintito raised a hand. "Save it. Both Fuller and I are working with you and you know it. You wouldn't get this kind of cooperation anywhere else in the country. Isn't that right?"

Joe smiled at him. "That's right. Well, drive me back to the hotel, nice and slow, and I'll unburden my heart."

Now Quintito smiled. "Good."

Joe took it from the moment he'd left the sheriff's office the day before and told him every incident and bit of dialogue up to the present.

When he'd finished, Quintito didn't look so weary. He said, "I'm glad you told me all this. And you probably will be, too. Be very careful, won't you, Joe?"

Joe nodded and climbed out of the car. He paused a moment. "When the last one is dead, you'll tell me your side, won't you, Sheriff?"

The sheriff put out both hands,

palms upward. "What I know, you know. What I think is not evidence and possibly not even pertinent. Keep in touch."

The car made a U turn and headed back toward the courthouse. Joe went into the hotel.

HE WENT UP to his room and picked up the phone. He put through a person-to-person call to the Old Man at his home—collect.

The old boy started to splutter as soon as he was on, but Joe interrupted. "I'm getting writer's cramp," he said. "You'll read, tomorrow or Tuesday, that I shot and killed a man named Bentley, Meredith Bentley, last night and another man was killed, but not by me, today. This man's name is Red Hogan, and there was some CTC money in his room. I want all the dope you can get on both of them. I'd like it in a night letter, tonight, if that's possible. Or a straight wire tomorrow. Got that?"

The Old Man's voice was exceptionally meek. "Got it."

"If I remember the dope on Bentley right," Joe continued, "he had a brother who'd taken off about the same time he did, or a little later. Will you check that?"

"Of course. Do you have to take long-distance time to tell me my business? How much money have you recovered?"

"A little under sixteen hundred, and we're not sure all of it is CTC money."

"Fine," the Old Man said. "Dandy. That should pay for your lunches. Sixteen hundred dollars! Good-bye."

Joe stretched out on the bed and rubbed the back of his neck, staring at the ceiling. He fumbled in his pocket for a cigarette and brought out the wad of cardboard instead. He looked at it for a moment, and then flung it savagely at the opposite wall.

He was the guy in the middle and he had a million theories, but they weren't any more than that. Any operative above the hotel dick level would know just about what was going on, but nothing short of a Fed would be able to do anything about it.

He sat up on the edge of the bed, found a cigarette, lighted it, and stared moodily at the phone. A little later, he shaved and got dressed.

In deference to local mores, he wore no tie with his sport shirt. He slipped into a baggy and fuzzy tweed sport jacket and went down to the bar.

The blonde was there. Only she wasn't a blonde, she was a redhead and she looked as nice in white silk as she had in the bathing suit. She was at a table, all alone, and she waved.

Joe went over. "Waiting for someone?"

"My husband, but sit down anyway. I've come away without my purse. And I'm thirsty."

"Is your husband big?" Joe sat down and beckoned to a waiter.

"About fifty pounds lighter than you, I'd say. Very modern, too. He won't mind at all. Sometimes I wish

he'd be a little more unreasonable."

The waiter was there now, and she ordered Scotch, Joe rye.

Then she said, "What do you do?"

"I'm a lifeguard, up at Redondo. What do you do, besides wait for your husband?"

"Pick up lifeguards. Where's Redondo?"

"Up north a ways."

"Is it nice?"

"It's horrible. They're all horrible—Redondo, Manhattan Beach, Hermosa. Beach towns."

"This is a beach town."

"It isn't quite as bad. The girls are prettier."

She picked at the edge of the blotting-paper coaster with one scarlet nail. "I wonder what's keeping Don."

"Some blonde. Married long?"

"Two years." She took a swallow of her drink and went back to picking at the coaster. "All men are wolves, more or less, aren't they? I knew that before I was married. But it doesn't mean anything, does it?"

"I refuse to answer on the grounds that I might incriminate myself. Look, I'm not Dorothy Dix. Don't say anything that you'll be embarrassed about later."

"I don't embarrass," she said, and looked at him. "I wasn't speaking personally, just making conversation. I'm from Ohio. Where are you from?"

"Brooklyn."

"Everybody out here's *from* some place, aren't they? Aren't there any natives?"

"Some. That man who runs the Spanish House for instance."

SHE LOOKED UP quickly. "Are you speaking of Peter Dommaz?" Her eyes were wide.

Joe nodded, watching her face. "Know him?"

"Of course. You know about—You're teasing me."

"Believe me, Red, I'm not teasing you. What is it?"

"Eve Dommaz, that old man's wife. She's the one Don—" She broke off, shaking her head.

"Oh," Joe said.

"The señorita," Red said bitterly. "The gracious, lady-like, mysterious, beautiful—"

"She's from some place, too," Joe said. "She's from Park Falls, Minnesota."

"You're joking! Are you serious?"

Joe raised his right hand aloft. "Gospel truth. She told me that this afternoon. She told me also she was getting fed up with the old goat and this salt-water tank town."

"Fed up with the town, with her husband? That might mean—"

"It might mean nothing. Her husband is very well fixed, and this town might not be perfect, but it's probably better than Park Falls. With girls like Eve, it's mostly talk."

"You don't know Don," Red said. "He's—he's irresistible."

"To you. Have another drink."

"I haven't hardly started this."

"Bottoms up," Joe said.

She downed her drink, closed her eyes, opened them and smiled. The

waiter brought over another pair and set them on the table.

She said, "What's your name?"

"Joe Puma. And yours?"

"Mary Delahunt. Mrs. Donald Delahunt. Don't forget that *Mrs.* if I get drunk."

"I'll try. What does Don do to keep the wolf from the door?" Joe asked.

"Investments. He sells investments. Stocks and bonds and like that. He does very well, too."

"And now you're on your vacation?"

She shook her head. "Don makes a living wherever we go. He's clever. He says, the nice thing about his job, we can live anywhere, just anywhere."

Joe fiddled with his glass. She was young, but not that young. He asked, "How old are you, Mary?"

"Twenty-six, though *gentlemen* don't ask questions like that. What are you thinking about?"

"About Donald Delahunt. That's a nice job he's got. Maybe that's why he spends some time with Eve Dommaz. Maybe he's trying to sell her husband some bonds or something."

"You've seen her," she said. "If you knew Don, you wouldn't say that. He's susceptible to women like that, is all. But he'll come out of it. He's got to come out of it." Her voice was strained.

"If I had a wife like you—" Joe began.

But she interrupted with a whispered, "Here he comes now. Isn't he handsome?" Joe turned to look, rising from his seat.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE GENT APPROACHING the table had a crew haircut and a face that could have been twenty or forty. The hair was blond, sun-bleached, the smile engaging, the sport coat nothing you could pick up under a hundred dollars.

"He certainly is," Joe said.

There seemed to be, for only a fraction of a second, a hint of bleakness in the smile of Donald Delahunt. Then the charm came back into that boyish face and he smiled at Joe.

Mary said, "Don, this is Joe Puma. He's been trying to get me to run away with him."

"Without success," Joe said.

Don's handshake had the firm, friendly strength of all confidence men. He sat down, and Joe did, too.

Mary said, "Joe's a lifeguard, up at Redondo Beach."

"Is he?" Don's smile showed what he thought of *that*. "Are you drunk, baby?"

"Not yet. Where have you been?"

He was still smiling. "Later. We don't want to fight in front of the other man."

"Don't we?" She looked up at her husband, and she was no lightweight for the moment.

Joe said, "I'll be running along. I really shouldn't—"

Mary waved him to silence, watching her husband.

"Don't go," Don said. "I've been

working on a pretty big deal, and I've got to go back. I just dropped in to tell you that."

"How big, Don? About a hundred and ten pounds?"

"You're sounding like a wife," Don said. "That's enough, kid." He wasn't smiling now.

She looked at him, started to say something, and was silent.

Joe wanted to reach over and get a good grip on the crew haircut. He wondered what a good right hand would do to that boyish face. He reached for a cigarette and lighted it like the heavy in a B picture.

Mary said, "Don, I thought we'd planned on driving up the coast. I thought—"

Don turned to Joe. "Tell her about the Sunday traffic. Maybe she'll listen to you."

Their drinks came.

Don lifted his and said, "Success." He sipped it, and put it down. "Baby, if I close this deal today, you'll see so much of me you'll get sick. This one's the biggest yet, believe me."

She looked at him steadily. "I want to believe you, Don. But I've believed you before." She lifted her glass. "Success."

Don said to Joe, "She's a reasonable woman, most of the time. She wouldn't be human if she didn't get these little spells."

"I'll remember that in case she leaves you for me," Joe said. "Wives don't always understand about . . . business."

Don was smiling again.

Joe wondered if Don knew what kind of league he was playing in. Messing with Peter Dommaz' wife could be rockier than three-card monte.

Don finished his drink and stood up. "You be a good girl. I might not be back for a couple hours, or even longer." He turned to Joe. "Glad to have met you, Mr. Puma. Proceed with caution."

Joe nodded. "Luck, Mr. Delahunt."

Delahunt was almost at the door when Mary said, "Damn him! I've got all kinds of rotten words I'm thinking, Joe. But maybe he's telling the truth."

"Maybe."

"We've been here almost a year," she said. "A month and a half ago he went back east on some big deal. That was going to be the biggest one, too. After he came back from that, we were going to Rio. I'd love South America, he told me. Don was going to retire, at *his* age, and it was going to be such fun, in Rio."

And Donald made three, Joe thought. He said, "Did you ever meet a gent named Dick Verch, Mary?"

She shook her head. "Verch? No . . ." Then she was staring. "That's the name of the man who was killed in the Spanish House. That's the name that was in the paper this morning."

Joe nodded. "I knew him. I just wondered."

"Joe, the *Spanish House*. What's—"

"Nothing. Just coincidence. I was thinking of Dick because we were

thinking of Eve Dommaz. There's no connection." He shook his head impatiently. "I'm hungry, aren't you?"

She nodded. "I suppose I shouldn't be, with all the unrequited love burning in me. But I am."

"Stay right here," he said, "and discourage all advances. I'll be back."

He went into the lobby and up to the desk. He asked the clerk, "Is it possible to rent a car on Sundays in this town?"

"Certainly, sir. I'll have one brought around. A convertible?"

"A nice, big flashy convertible," Joe said, and pictured the Old Man's wrath. "Will it take long?"

"About three minutes."

Joe went back to the bar. Mary had finished her drink. He asked, "Have you ever had shish-kebab, or pilaff?"

"What's that?"

"Shish-kebab is lamb, roasted on a spit. With roasted tomatoes and peppers. Pilaff is rice cooked in chicken broth."

She made a face. "I don't like rice."

"You've never had rice, not in Ohio. I personally guarantee you'll love every grain. It's a little Armenian place, up in the mountains."

"You're being kind," she said. "Why should I spoil your day?"

"How do you know you will? If you don't go, I'll go up there alone."

"Oh, Joe," she said, and rose.

The convertible was a Buick, black as sin and big as a house. Joe cut it into the six-lane flow of Sunday traffic feeling like a king.

Mary said, "You're not really a lifeguard at Redondo are you, Joe?"

He kept his eyes on the road. "What makes you think I'm not?"

"They're big and dumb and they don't drive cars like this."

"I'm big and dumb, and I rented this car. Mary, try to have a good time. Try to grow up a little. You're going to have to, one of these days."

"You mean try to stop loving Don?"

"I mean try to stop thinking he's the sun and the moon. Try to think of him as another guy with a crew haircut in a world full of his kind. Stop thinking of him as special as much as you can."

"Is this a pitch?"

"No. He could disappoint you, is what I'm trying to say. And why not be a little ready for it?"

"I know," she said. "I'm twenty-six and I know what you mean. We left Cleveland in an awful hurry, and I wouldn't let myself think about the why of it. I've been afraid to ask myself any questions. I wanted it to be the way it seemed. I suppose that's infantile."

"A little of it's all right; we need it to live. You're wiser than I realized. Let's think about the pilaff."

At Gulliver's Gorge, they left the pounding traffic of the highway and cut between the rolling hills in a steady climb.

"Park Falls," Mary said, and started to chuckle.

ANDRIKIAN'S WAS IN the valley beyond Moravo and Papa Andrikian was at the cash register,

near the door, a smile on his face.

"Welcome again," he said. "I told you you'd be back." He smiled at Mary. "And this is Mrs. Puma?"

"For the afternoon," Joe said. "How's the kebab?"

"Never better."

Andrikian hadn't lied. The outside crisp, the inside juicy. Mary ate more pilaff than any lady should.

"It's wonderful," she said. "I'm not even thinking about Don, much. It's delicious."

They had a few drinks after that, and then took the Buick up into the Valos Migra hills, winding and climbing to the cliff that overhung the sea. He stopped in front of the stone bumper-barricade.

The moon was full, and there was a radio in the Buick. Joe lighted a pair of cigarettes and handed one to Mary.

"It is beautiful, isn't it?" she said. "When all the people are around, you forget how beautiful this country can be. What it must have been before the people came."

He nodded, saying nothing.

"Do you want to kiss me, Joe?" she asked. "I wouldn't mind."

"I don't want to kiss anybody who wouldn't mind," he told her. "Mary, why don't you go back to Ohio?"

"Are you serious?"

"I've never been more serious. Your boy's no good, Mary."

"Joe! That's rotten."

"Mary, I'm not a lifeguard. I'm a detective, and a damned fool, to boot. Don knows I'm a detective. Your Don is a confidence man who's in love with his own super-intelligence. Right now he's over his head and doesn't know it. He's smack in the middle of mass murder, and maybe he *does* know it, but I can't be sure."

"Joe— You're not— Why should I— How can I believe you?" Her hand was gripping his arm like a vise.

"You've got to believe me. And I think you do."

"You followed Don here?"

"I followed the gang. A gang who held up the Currency Transfer Company in Detroit in January, killed two guards and took off with half a million dollars. Two of the men have been killed here in the last two days, a man named Meredith Bentley and another named Red Hogan."

"In Detroit—in January? Don sent me presents from Detroit in January. That was where the big deal was, at the time."

"Believe me now?"

She didn't answer. She was crying. She was crying quietly, and then she began to sob and Joe could feel the tremor of her body transmitted through the springs of the seat.

I am probably, Joe thought, the lousiest operative currently west of the Rockies. Spilling my guts to the gang through the wife of one of them.

She said shakily, "I—I can't go back there now. Knowing what I've suspected right along, Joe, I can't—"

"You can get another room."

"At another hotel. Joe, I can't face him. I'm frightened."

"You get another room for tonight," he said. "I'll see you tomorrow, and we'll figure something out. I'll want to have a talk with the sheriff, first."

"The sheriff?"

"And the chief of police. They're working along with me; they've been unusually cooperative. I don't hide anything from them."

He started the motor and backed around to take the road down. He said, "Some other time I'll kiss you, Mary, and you'll enjoy it. And if not me, some guy. This world is full of guys."

"Let's not talk," she said. "Let's not say anything."

They didn't. He drove back to Calumet Beach through the now thinning traffic, planning his moves ahead. What she was thinking of, he couldn't know, but she'd been all right.

He checked her in at another hotel and told her, "You can get by for tonight. Tomorrow you can have your stuff sent over."

"Okay. Be careful, Joe," she said softly.

"You too."

She stood on tiptoe to kiss him on the cheek.

He drove back to his hotel, thinking of everything and nothing. He left the Buick at the curb, and asked the clerk, "Any calls?"

"A man to see you, sir. You're through with the car?"

Joe nodded. "The keys are in it. Where's this man?"

"In the corner of the lobby, over there, sir. He's been waiting two hours."

CHAPTER FIVE

JOE SAW THE high chair in the shadows near the deserted cigar stand, and the head protruding above the high back. He walked over. He had his key in his left hand; his right was inside his jacket.

The man sitting there was tall, and his face was in partial shadow. "Detective Puma?" he asked.

Joe nodded.

"I've some information for you."

"Who are you? What's your name?"

"I'm a guy who's been on a long trail. My name is Fred Englestadt. That name mean anything to you?"

One of the guards who'd been killed in Detroit had been named Englestadt. Joe said, "A brother?"

"That's right. I've got a house I want you to look at."

"I'm not in the market for a house, Fred. If it's something to do with the robbery, Sheriff Quintito or Chief Fuller will help you."

"My brother's dead," the man went on. "I'm not looking for a cop. I've seen too many scared juries and crooked judges in my time."

"Your brother may be dead," Joe said easily, "but his name wasn't Englestadt. Because that gent didn't have a brother, just two sisters, both married. And if your brother's name is Bentley, he was framed; there was a blank cartridge in the firing chamber, and the mechanism didn't work

after the first wad of cardboard came singing out. I didn't know his gun was a lemon, or I wouldn't have killed him."

"This thing I've got in my hand isn't a lemon," the man said.

Joe looked closer and saw it wasn't. It looked like a .38 from where he stood.

The man said, "I don't know if you've got a bellyache, or if your hand's on your gun. But I could put five shots into you before you'd pull it, and then you would have a bellyache. Five soft-nosed slugs."

"What difference does it make if I die here or at the house," Joe said. He could feel the sweat running down under his arms and along his back.

"Maybe you've got a story," the man said, "and maybe it even makes sense. But I don't figure to hear it here. It's too close to the courthouse."

"You're always going to be too close to the courthouse," Joe told him. "You'll never get smart enough to get out of its shadow."

The man said, "You want to die here and now? Or see a house?"

The sweat was soaking Joe's collar now. He said, "I'll take a look at it."

"Put your hands down then at your sides and head for the door. I'll be behind you."

Joe stole a glance at the clerk, but he was busy at a writing desk, his view screened by the service desk all around him. Joe put his hands at his sides and headed for the door.

"Turn right," the man said, and Joe turned right.

There was a Plymouth coupé there, and the gun prodded Joe's spine. "Get in. Slide in behind the wheel."

Joe slid in. The keys were in the ignition.

Bentley said, "Turn the key all the way; that starts it. You know the way to the house."

Joe started the motor and headed for Custer Cove. He said, "You killed Dick Verch?"

"That's right. He was just another dick, but he had his uses."

"As a warning to Dommaz?"

"Dommaz had the idea he could cut down the split by cutting down the jerks. That would mean Red and my brother and me. He put Verch on my trail. I gave him back to him. I left the slugs behind, so there'd be no doubt in his mind."

"Dommaz must have been the cutie who fixed your brother's gun," Joe said. "Why don't you go for him, instead of me?"

"I've got time for both of you."

"He fixed your brother's gun and sent me up there, loaded. You've got the wrong pigeon, Bentley."

"Maybe. I'm not bright. Dommaz is; he planned the deal. Meredith and I were here for a vacation, and we planned it all right there at the Spanish House. Dommaz did the thinking, him and Delahunt. They're still doing the thinking, and maybe you're in on it, huh?"

"You said it all when you said you're not bright, Bentley." Joe was moving along about forty now.

"You're trigger-happy. You're going to shoot yourself out of half a million dollars. How long do you think Delahunt and Dommaz will be buddies? With Delahunt making time with Dommaz' wife?"

"A lot of guys have made time with Eve," Bentley said. "If Delahunt is, with that doll he's got, he's dumber than I figured."

"He won't be so dumb when he takes off for Rio with half a million coconuts."

"He won't be taking off for Rio, not unless he does it in the next twenty minutes. He's not going any place."

Forty-five now, and here was the road leading up. Here was the bluff, and Bentley said, "Cut it down, monkey."

Joe swung, as though cutting into the side road. But part way through the turn he straightened the wheels again. The nose of the Plymouth was headed right for the bluff.

Joe was braced. Bentley tried to brace himself too late. The Plymouth smashed into the bluff, and Bentley went up, crashing into the windshield.

For a split second, Joe was motionless, his wind gone from hitting the steering wheel. Then his hand was reaching for his gun.

He caught Bentley across the temple, just as his head turned.

Bentley slumped forward, and Joe thought of Dick Verch. Joe slammed him twice more with the barrel of his .38, right at the base of the skull. . . .

BEYOND THE SHERIFF'S office, there was another, larger room and Joe went in there. A deputy lounged at the desk behind the railing, reading a colored comic section.

Joe said, "I've got a killer out in the luggage deck of his car outside. Man who killed Dick Verch."

The deputy got to his feet, frowning. "Oh, yeah. You're Puma. I'll be right with you."

Joe handed him the keys. "You might call the sheriff and tell him I'm going to the Spanish House. He'll probably be glad to hear it. He's probably been waiting to hear it."

The deputy grinned. "We couldn't be sure, and Dommaz is a big man around here. You want a couple of the boys to go along with you?"

Joe shook his head. "This is getting personal. That guy in the deck could be dead or alive. I didn't check."

"Fearless Fosdick," the deputy said, and grinned again.

"And if you're not too busy," Joe said, "you could send a man or two over to the Hacienda to pick up Donald Delahunt. He was one of the four." He reached over and put Bentley's gun on the desk.

"Delahunt. That makes four, Puma."

"Yeah. Dommaz was a kind of fifth wheel, the brain. I'll walk over." He turned and went out.

It wasn't quite midnight, and the Spanish House was still doing business. About half the tables were occupied. So was the one in the corner, though there was no book there,

or even the usual pot of coffee, tonight.

Dommaz looked tired and he didn't smile as Joe slid into the chair across from him.

"Waiting for Eve?" Joe asked.

Dommaz' chin lifted.

"She's out with Delahunt," Joe went on, "figuring what they're going to do with the half-million."

Dommaz' eyes flashed, and then dulled. "I've— It's apparent I've made some mistakes."

"Your first mistake," Joe told him, "was when you stopped selling haddock and started reading Browning. That put you in another league. You're just a busher, Peter. Your second mistake was marrying that señorita from Park Falls. But I think your biggest one was trying to play me for a fish. I've met too many really skilled operators. It wasn't enough to be the big man in this town—you had to send a raiding party to Detroit. That's a major-league town. And now you're nothing, you're a laughing-stock. Even your wife is laughing at you—right now—in another man's arms. Browning isn't going to do you any good at all."

Dommaz opened his mouth and closed it. His hand went below the table, and when it came out, there was a small, pearl-handled revolver in it.

Joe ducked, but there was no need to.

Dommaz put the barrel of the gun into his mouth before he pulled the trigger. . . .

The clerk said, "Seven o'clock, Mr. Puma."

"Thanks," Joe said. He got up and shaved and put on his bathing trunks. He inspected his hair and studied his profile and went lithely through the hotel lobby and down the steps to the beach.

The beach was deserted.

The water was chilly at first, but he moved through it in a steady eight-beat crawl and he could feel the warmth of improved circulation moving through his body. He could feel the loosening of his big shoulder muscles, but the lassitude wouldn't come.

He floated for a while, way out, riding the gentle swells, seeing nothing but the bright blueness of the sky overhead, thinking of Mary, but not looking toward the shore.

He was alive. He lived and was strong. The sun was bright and the water refreshing. He swam back leisurely, his head partially submerged most of the time, careful not to look at the beach.

Everything must be the same as yesterday.

But when he finally came to the shallow water, when he finally stood up, the beach was still deserted.

Jerk, he thought. What a ham I am. She didn't even stay here last night. I took her to a different hotel and forgot all about it.

QUINITO WAS SMILING when Joe walked in. He held out a hand. "Congratulations."

Joe took it without smiling.

"Who's talked, and what have they said?"

"Bentley talks and talks, saying enough. He's delirious."

"He didn't die?"

"No, though he was slugged hard enough. Did you want him to die, Joe?"

"Wouldn't it be best? As you said last night, where will you find twelve heroes? Where will you find twelve men without families, who will sit in judgment on a killer with friends? Justice can be a little twisted in a case like that. We're professionals, but those people in the jury box aren't. They've no desire to look at the bright face of danger."

Quintito smiled. "You're all wound up."

"Maybe. And now we get to you, which is along the same line. Your job, or one of them, is to apprehend criminals. You suspected Dommaz, didn't you? But he was a big man in this town. Too big for you to haul in on a murder rap."

"That's right. And if I was wrong, I would no longer be sheriff. And how many criminals would I apprehend without the job? We do the best we can, Puma, but we're servants of the people—and you know what the people are."

"All right. It's too early to argue. What about the money? What about Delahunt?"

"The money is in a safe-deposit box at the local Security National branch. Dommaz had a key and so did Delahunt."

"And Delahunt?"

"Made the mistake of resisting arrest." Quintito's voice was soft, his face bland. "He was killed, resisting arrest."

"That makes five dead here, and two in Detroit. The only one that really mattered here was Dick Verch." Joe expelled his breath. "I'll be over at the hotel, if you want me. Mrs. Delahunt's in the clear?"

"If you want her in the clear," Quintito said.

"I do. She may go back to Ohio or she may even wind up in Brooklyn. But first we want to see if it's true what they say about Yosemite. I'm getting to like this country of yours." ◆ ◆ ◆

CASE OF THE CURIOUS CANINE

● WHEN HIS BROTHER, Harry died, Emmett Hoffee inherited his dog, a mongrel named Sailor. Six years went by and Sailor had grown old when Emmett decided to take him on a last sentimental pilgrimage to Harry's old farm near Fairfield, Illinois. Something on his mind, Sailor began to dig.

He dug up a mason jar containing a letter from the dead man's widow to her lover, outlining plans for Harry's murder! Harry Hoffee's widow, remarried, confessed—got ninety years at the women's reformatory at Dwight.

Only a psychiatrist, perhaps, can measure and know the various components of the mind, its hidden guilts, its tortuous rationalizations, its dark and crafty impulses. But it takes a homicide cop to pit a man against himself, to use his own weaknesses and fears and ideals—even the worst of men have ideals; guilt is but the consciousness of failure to come up to them—as a club to beat him into submission, and lead him along the suicidal path of confession.

Case of Nerves

By JOHN D. MacDONALD

SERGEANT PAUL MARAN of the Homicide Division sorted his cards, then glanced over to where the boy stood, looking out the window at the rain-torn night, looking down at the wet sheen on deserted asphalt. Maran noted with professional approval the rigidity of the thin shoulders, the whiteness of the hand that gripped the metal bar at the foot of the bed.

"Pitch one out," Kryfer said. "I been waiting for a hand like this."

Maran, for one moment, felt a sharp envy for Kryfer. There was no weakness in Kryfer, and no imagination. Block-hard, solid all the way through. The third man at the flimsy table, Patrolman Davids, was of another cut. Lean and sour and sardonic. A cop who had seen too much and had ended up like Kryfer—feeling nothing.

Maran wondered if there would ever come a day when he, too, could cease to bleed slowly. He picked a jack from his hand and flipped it out, thinking the face on the card oddly wise and oddly evil.

Kryfer grunted with satisfaction as he took the trick. He slapped out an ace. The boy's room was small. The card table was placed between the bed and the closet door. It had the frayed rug, the chipped woodwork, the same smell of dust and clothing and disinfectant as in a hundred other rooms Maran had seen.

Maran saw the boy turn quickly away from the window, and he glanced over knowing that his heavy features showed nothing, that to the boy he was merely "cop," the face of the law.

"I don't get it!" the boy said, his voice high and shrill. "What are you staying with me for? What are you doing here?"

"Having a game, kid," Kryfer said with a froggish grin. "Wanna sit in? It'll make the time go. Only another hour and a half before they march your pal through the little green door up there. I bet those minutes are clicking off too fast for him, eh?"

"You can't move in on me like this!" the boy said, face white and fists clenched.

"We can't break up the game while I'm ahead," Maran said softly. "What's your objection to us, kid? This is just a friendly gesture. Thought you might like company the morning they burn your best friend."

He watched somberly as the boy made the long fight for control. The tight fists relaxed. "Okay, okay. So I can't throw you out. Have a good time. Enjoy yourselves."

"It's later than you think," Davids said.

The boy climbed onto the bed, stretched out on his back, dragged a match along the wall and lit his cigarette. He stared up at the ceiling as he smoked. There was no sound in the room except the soft patter of the cards, Kryfer's satisfied grunts, the hurried *tick-tock* of the cheap alarm clock, as frenzied as a demented woman knitting with empty needles. Down the valley a diesel bellowed faintly through the rain sounds.

Kryfer counted his tricks, marked the score, shuffled. The cards made a ripping sound in his big steady hands.

"Awful nice of you guys to drop in," the boy said bitterly.

"We know how it is, kid," Maran said. "Your best friend killing your girl and all that. A guy needs company."

The clock said twenty of five. Another hour and twenty minutes.

The boy said softly, "It was all done legal. I was at the movies when he killed her. It all came out in the trial. I didn't even know Sam was after Angie. I didn't know he'd try to cross me that way. But Sam was stupid. He should have guessed that the lab would find park mud on his shoes, that kind of grass seed in his pants cuffs. No alibi even. Just that he was sleeping. They had the trial and they convicted him and pretty soon he's going to die. Then you guys can leave me alone."

"Sure, kid. Sure," Maran said. "We'll leave you alone then."

The boy came quickly up onto one elbow, the cigarette hanging from one corner of the weak, unformed mouth, his eyes blazing. "You got no right to be here!"

"Just a friendly gesture, kid," Maran said.

"You guys are still pressuring me. You got no right. You got the guy you want. Ask the jury who killed Angie!"

"Your deal," Kryfer said to Davids.

"You think I killed her, eh?" the boy demanded.

Maran looked at him blankly. "Has anybody said so, kid?"

THE BOY FLUNG himself back on the bed. The wind veered and a sheet of rain slapped at the window. The boy started violently. Maran glanced over with pity at the thin face, the pointed jut of wristbone, the faded sweatshirt, the cheap slacks with the crease sewed in. A dark sock sagged, showing a waxy whiteness of flesh between it and the cuff of the slacks. Soft black hair grew there and Maran thought of another boy's leg, shaven by now—another boy with level eyes and the stunned, uncomprehending look of an animal beaten without cause.

"Go ahead and try it, Paul, if you want to," the lieutenant had said. "You know the normal methods didn't break him. He's tough enough and bright enough."

Ever since eleven o'clock when they had moved in and started the game of pitch, Maran had watched the boy veer toward the breaking zone and then turn sharply away as he fought for control.

Maran had the hopeless feeling that the boy wouldn't break.

"Your deal," Kryfer said. Paul Maran gathered the cards, shuffled them, dealt with characteristic care.

"You grew up with him, kid?" Davids asked, his tone idle.

"Yeah, I grew up with him. So what?"

"A rough night for Sammy. I suppose he's thinking about all his old pals. About you, even. And Angie."

"You're running off at the mouth, copper," the boy said.

Maran saw the rising glint in Davids' eyes and quieted him with a chopping gesture of his thick palm.

"Boy, how they jump when that juice hits 'em!" Kryfer said. "I was up the morning they give it to the ones kidnaped the Hotchkiss baby."

"You're upsetting the kid," Maran said.

The boy rolled off the bed and went back to the window. "Let him yak," he said. "He can't bother me. The only thing bothers me is having the room full of law. You guys persecute the poor people. If I had dough it would be all yessir and nosir and let me tear up that ticket, sir."

"The ace takes," Kryfer said, slapping the card down. "Come to papa."

"Just fifty-nine minutes left now," Maran said.

The boy turned away from the window, walked to the bureau and moved things around aimlessly on the top of it. Red spots stood out high on the pale cheeks. A strand of black hair curled across the forehead.

"That Angie was a cute gal," Davids said. "You could tell that even after the strangle job."

"Shut up! Shut up about her!" the boy screamed.

The three reacted as though the scream had been silent. "Comes the big red king," Maran said, playing the heart king.

"Let me by. I'm going for a walk," the boy said.

"Stick around," Maran said.

"What's the charge? Arrest me, you guys. Think up a charge."

"I suppose we could all go for a walk," Kryfer said.

"Skip it, skip it," the boy said. He sat on the edge of the bed, his hands deep in the pockets of the slacks.

"Forty-one minutes," Davids said, glancing at the clock.

"I can tell time," the boy said.

"He says he can tell time," Kryfer said. "Bright kid."

"What makes a guy want to be a cop?" the boy asked. "You guys must be proud of yourselves. You drawing pay for this?"

"Hey," Davids said, "that's my trick. That makes high, jack and game. Rack it up, Kryfer."

Maran wished he had a good answer to the boy's question. No sane man should want to be a cop. Unless he could be a cop like Kryfer. Emotionless. Functional.

"Nervous, kid?" Davids asked.

Maran saw at once that it had been the wrong comment. It had the effect of strengthening the boy. The boy relaxed visibly and gave Davids a knife-edge smile. "You want I should be nervous, copper?"

Maran cursed inwardly. The boy's calm lasted for twenty minutes. Then it faded more abruptly than had the previous intervals of calm. The boy lay back on the bed and nibbled his knuckles. He lit another cigarette. He pulled at loose threads in the sleeve of the frayed sweatshirt.

"Let's break it up," Maran said at last. "Only fourteen minutes to go."

"I can hardly wait," the boy said, drawling. But his voice trembled on the last word.

KRYFER GATHERED THE cards after totaling the score. At uneven intervals he shuffled them with a harsh, ripping sound.

"Do you have to do that?" the boy asked.

Kryfer smiled and riffled the deck again.

"Nine minutes," Davids said. "Do they keep on schedule up there?"

"Right on the button," Maran answered. "The warden takes pride in it. They got a sweep-second hand on a big clock. Just as it hits six they yank the switch and Sammy jumps."

"That's a good clock," Kryfer said. "It's right on the button."

"Eight minutes," Davids said.

"They'll be outside his cell by now," Maran said. "Wonder if his legs will hold him up."

"The priest'll be about ready to start," Kryfer said.

"You guys are corny. You kill me," the boy said. "You ought to sell that script of yours to TV."

The boy's lips had a bloodless look.

"Seven minutes," said Davids.

Kryfer stopped shuffling. The wind had died down. The city seemed like a dark beast, now settled more deeply into the last moments of sleep before the day began. Imperceptibly the east had lightened so that now the window was a grey oblong and the

electric light seemed more golden, weaker.

The boy came off the bed again like a spring uncoiled. He went to the window and leaned his hands against the sash, his head bowed, his body braced there.

Maran pointed to the clock and shook his head. Davids ceased to call the minutes. When it was three minutes to six the boy turned quickly and stared at the clock. It seemed to take him a long time to read the minutes.

He went and stood at the foot of the bed, both hands grasping the metal rod, his chin on his chest.

"Strapped in by now," Maran said in almost a whisper, "with the black hood on."

The boy began to shake visibly and the three men, sitting stolidly, could hear the sound of his breathing.

"*Now!*" Maran said loudly. The boy flung his head back so that the cords of the lean neck stood out, and for a few seconds his body writhed as though the current flowed through it.

Then he relaxed and let out a great sigh. He looked over at the three men and frowned a little as though seeing them for the first time. A hard light began to glow, deep in his eyes.

"It worked good, didn't it, coppers? Thanks for the visit. Don't say it hasn't been fun because it hasn't."

"What are you talking about, kid?" Maran asked.

"You thought I'd . . ." The boy caught himself. "You had the crazy idea that they were burning the wrong guy and you thought I'd crack. But I didn't."

"No, kid, you didn't," Maran said. He stood up. His legs were cramped. "Let's go, boys."

The chairs scraped as Kryfer and Davids pushed them back. The boy's young face had sagged into lines of weariness now that the strain was over.

"Come up and see me again some time, boys," he said. "The latchstring is always out.

Maran prayed that the timing would be right. He opened the door and listened, heard the sound of heavy footsteps coming up the stairs. The uniformed patrolman came to the door and handed Maran the envelope. Maran turned and gave Davids and Kryfer a puzzled shrug. The boy stood beyond Kryfer, his face guarded.

Maran ripped open the envelope, took out the sheet and read it. "What do you know!" he said. "They had a little technical trouble up the river. They don't burn him until tomorrow morning, same time."

"No!" the boy said harshly. "*No!*"

"You sound like you wish he was already burned," Maran said quickly, taking a step toward the boy.

The boy's eyes were wide and they saw nothing. "I can't go through it again. I can't go through it again."

He stumbled and would have fallen. Maran caught him and swung him back gently so that he sat on the bed.

The unformed young face went blank. The eyes looked through the far wall. The lips barely moved as the words tumbled out, the familiar torrential flow. . . .

"I borrowed his clothes, see. He was taking her away from me, see. I knew how hard he slept and knew I could get them back in his closet okay and put on my own clothes and get back into the show. She thought Sam was coming to meet her, but it was me and after I grabbed her she didn't make a sound. . . ."

Now they were just words in Maran's ears. Words with no meaning. He went heavily down the stairs and out to the department sedan at the curb. He said to the man behind the wheel, "Give them the call, Al. He split open. Complete confession. Are you sure they're holding the line open?"

"I just checked it a few minutes ago, Sarge. Right through to the warden."

"Okay. Put the call in."

"A good thing they burn 'em on standard time up the river, isn't it? Only a little after five up there now."

"Yes, it's a good thing," Maran said heavily. "Tell them I've gone home."

HE SAT IN the chair in his bedroom. He had heard the children start for school. There was a hardness within him, a lump that wouldn't soften. He sat with his jaw clamped tightly. He jumped when she put her hand on his shoulder. He hadn't heard her come into the bedroom.

"Paul," she said. "Paul, darling."

He came slowly back from an alien land. "Yes?"

"You've got to get some sleep, Paul. You've been sitting here a long time."

"Have I?"

"This one's over, Paul. Don't fret about it."

He sighed and stood up, yawning. He grinned at her and rubbed the chin stubble against her forehead. This one was over. The ache would go away. He imagined that he could feel it easing already.

"You're good for me," he said.

"Go to bed, you bristly old bear."

He climbed into bed. She moved with quick steps, pulling the shades against the morning sun, opening the window nearest him.

The rain had washed the air and its touch was clean and fresh against his face. The last thing he remembered was the sound of the door, quietly closing. ◆ ◆ ◆

Statement of the Ownership, Management, and Circulation Required by the Act of Congress of August 24, 1912, As amended by the Acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946 (Title 39, United States Code, Section 233), of Detective Tales, published monthly at Kokomo, Indiana, for October 1, 1950. 1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Editor Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Managing editor None. Business Manager None. 2. The owner is: Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Shirley M. Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. 3. The known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amounts of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None. 4. Paragraphs 2 and 3 include, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting; also the statements in the two paragraphs show the affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which the stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner. Signed, Harold S. Goldsmith, Publisher. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 2nd day of October, 1950. Eva M. Walker, Notary Public, State of New York, Qualified in New York County, No. 31-9506600, Certificate filed with: City Register N. Y. County, Commission expires March 30, 1952 (Seal)—Form 3526—Rev. 2-48.

There's nothing anyone can say about Hollywood that hasn't been said a thousand times in books, newspaper columns, magazines and what not. Sociologists have made scientific surveys to determine what makes the people in Cameraland tick. Congressional committees have held extended hearings to determine their political complexions. But one thing most of these writers and sociologists and investigators have rarely stressed. It is that movie people are much like everyone else: They fall in love, and out of love; they are subject to anger, and they forgive; they get drunk, and their hangovers are woefully normal. And occasionally, just like so many others, they kill. . . .

Blues For A Dead Lady

By STEVE FISHER

HE SAW THE huge iron-grille gate of the studio and he was aware of a strange, sick emotion because he had thought he would never see it again. Now he was here in front of it, showing his identification card, then turning his car into the wide studio street.

Nothing had changed, he thought. There were the ever-present extras, in costume, reading the call sheets on the bulletin board in front of the wardrobe department; the people moving to and from the entrance of the writers' and directors' building; a slim, pretty script girl in white slacks, wearing sun glasses, studying a mimeographed screen play; the sound stages, the studio commissary—everything the same.

He noticed that there was sweat on the palms of his hands. He wondered if he was afraid.

Then he wanted to laugh. Because he was most certainly afraid. He was afraid of the way people would treat him, of the reaction to his return. But he was on contract; they knew he would have to work here another eight months anyway, because even

bad publicity couldn't break that contract.

He parked his car, got out, fishing for a cigarette. He was actually trembling, and he felt cold in his stomach. Well, he had to face it some time, and there was no point standing here, stalling. He had work to do, that song to write. That song which had somehow been in his mind all these weeks, different in style and tempo from any song he had ever written. It was a blues song, and it was like, more than anything else, the crowd he traveled with. Hollywood's wildest bunch.

He was at the musicians' hall now, and he knew he couldn't run away. His mind had been over all that. No matter where he went he would still be himself, and he might as well be himself in the atmosphere he loved best. The song pluggers were all his pals, words-and-music guys.

Time was all that he needed. Each day, each hour, each single week that passed would be another layer of scar tissue over the wound, and pretty soon the thing that had happened would be forgotten. Not by everyone, though. There would be two or three who would never forget.

Nobody looked up at his entrance, not even the switchboard girl. No one said, "Hello, Johnny . . . so you're back," but maybe that was just as well. There wasn't even the banging piano, or the loud arguments. Everything was deathly quiet. He would have thought this was all right, except that on every other morning at this time there had been noise. Now, the silence was like a physical blow.

He told himself it would all work out, but at the same time his panic grew, choked in his throat. His mind fled back to his boyhood, when all the terrible things that had worried him eventually dissolved into nothing. But no one would ever say that this was nothing, and he had to keep repeating to himself that they *would* forget, that gradually he would emerge as Johnny Connel again, and no one would throw up the past to him because he was, really, a swell guy. He realized he had always been a happy-go-lucky soul to whom people gladly attached themselves.

He turned into the music room, which he had to cross to reach his office. He saw Manny and George. Manny, with curly black hair, wearing thick-lensed glasses, was seated at the piano, turned so that he faced him. George, lean and red-headed, was standing, holding a piece of music.

He nodded to them, and started to speak, when Lou Larsen entered, carrying a Strauss album.

Lou was large, grey-haired, a Hollywood hanger-on who was not on contract to this studio, but always got in, somehow, to pester the successful ones. He wore an open sports shirt, faded grey trousers. Years ago on Broadway he had written two or three hits; he had lived on the reputation ever since. His game was to claim he had a terrific idea and ask one of the good boys to collaborate with him. They always listened to his

idea and put him off. He always came back with another.

"Hey, guys," he said, "Richard Strauss has got something here you can lift bodily, see, and—" He saw Johnny then and shut up—just closed his mouth abruptly, slightly taken aback. He looked at the album distractedly, then turned and left.

THE INCIDENT CHILLED Johnny. He looked at George and Manny, half smiled through the whiteness of his face. Manny turned back to the piano and began tinkering with the keys. George had his knee up on the bench, pretending to write something on the sheet of music.

Johnny went on through to his office, resisting an impulse to slam the door. He sat down in the nearest chair, a chair he never used ordinarily. In an office there are chairs you use and like, and chairs you never sit in. He heard Manny banging on the piano, George's raw voice scaling through a half-written song. The songs they wrote meant more to them than any other thing in life.

Nice rhythm, but too much theft, Johnny thought professionally.

He thought of the way the whole gang had testified for him at the trial. He imagined then that they were his friends, and now he wondered if all the others would turn out like these three. He wondered why they had bothered to come to the trial to testify at all. He had wanted to believe it had been unselfish, but he understood now that it could have been only to save their own faces.

Anyway, he had been acquitted.

They had all liked Margot. Margot, a wealthy sub-deb with a reputation as the wildest kid in Hollywood when he married her, had led the crowd. She had shown him the life outsiders had long whispered about Hollywood. Drinking . . . all-night parties. . . .

Johnny had been shy, never really hep, and Margot had sort of led him by the hand. She had made him play and sing until he was the life of every gathering. At those parties he stayed at the piano all the time, or most of the time, and he was the only one who did any work. But he hadn't minded. He was all right unless somebody crossed him, then he was hot Irish—with a hot Irish temper.

. . . There was that unfinished song again; that song that went with those parties, those people. It was in his soul, in his ears, in every breath he took. Sooner or later he would have to finish it. . . .

He remembered the Saturday afternoon Margot was murdered. He had gone to the races in Inglewood alone, but instead of getting a seat in the club house, as usual, he had purchased a ticket for the stands. He had seen none of his studio friends, nor anyone else he knew—if they attended they were in the club house. Afterwards, it had seemed suspicious to the district attorney that Johnny had not been there himself on that one particular day. As it turned out, there was no way he could possibly prove he had been to Inglewood that afternoon at the exact time the crime was committed.

He arrived home about six o'clock, and Margot's body was in the library. She looked very lovely: the eyeshadow on her closed eyelids, her pretty, painted lips. She had been shot once, with her own gun which was on the floor beside her. If there had not been definite evidence of a struggle the coroner might have called it suicide.

Johnny remembered kneeling and picking up the gun in bitter rage and throwing it against the window, breaking the glass. Afterwards, the only fingerprints on the gun were his own, though the police theory was that Margot must have originally handled it, and the killer had wrested it away from her.

There was no apparent outside motive. Investigation revealed only a few ugly facts about Margot's life which Johnny had never known, and even now did not believe. In the trial it came out that she'd cheated, gone places with this man and that; it was proved that Johnny had a vicious temper. The district attorney summed it up as a domestic argument during which Margot had either pulled the gun—or opened the desk drawer to get it—to protect herself, and Johnny, enraged, had taken it from her and shot her.

Only one thing saved him—a surprise witness. A jockey Johnny knew casually had raced that afternoon in Inglewood. Johnny had waved at him as the horses were paraded past the post. After the race the jockey had traveled east for a few races. It was only when the trial began that he read of the murder in the papers and hastily returned to testify that Johnny's alibi was gospel.

That, and the testimony of the songpluggers that Johnny was a tame, unassuming little guy, not likely to murder, won the acquittal.

But the stigma remained. He sensed that they blamed him for whatever happened to Margot, that they felt circumstances in his and her lives must have brought about the murder, no matter who had committed it.

He was just Johnny now—without Margot he had no glamour. He was Johnny, soiled and frightened somewhat, sitting in the strange chair as numb as wood, that unfinished song in his mind drumming endlessly through his brain in a rhythmic monotony.

It could have been Manny, he thought. Manny, who never liked Margot much, could have murdered her. But why? There was the rub. It could have been George, for that matter. Old high pockets, red-haired George, who had stayed drunk for a week after that day Margot and Johnny had run off to get married. George had loved Margot. But why would he want to kill her?

Johnny's head ached. He didn't know. He didn't know anything, really. There had been just a single clue—a scroll of sheet music he had found on the floor in the murder room. The cops had examined it, and nothing ever came of it. At one point the district attorney contended it was Johnny's and that he had been read-

ing mystery books and was trying to plant stuff around, to louse things up for the cops.

Now he was here, and life had begun again. . . .

HE SAT IN the chair, and he didn't know how long he sat there. He was vaguely conscious of other piano players, others singers beyond the partition of his office wall. He heard conversation, too, and laughter, though it was always laughter broken off short and followed by a whispering silence. He guessed he must have been there for hours, but it didn't matter much.

He was a dead, motionless thing. There were times—or lapses of time—when he didn't care whether or not he ever moved again.

But at last he was beginning to wonder about these people, this clique Margot had led. He'd never dissected them before; it had never occurred to him, even remotely, that they could be anything but tops. Now he remembered that there were other cliques and groups in Hollywood who would have nothing to do with them, never invited them to their homes or parties, never spoke to them except when business necessitated it. It was funny. Yet he saw it quite clearly. Margot's crowd had been a gaudy little world apart from any other.

He decided it was not the fault of the crowd that he had been snubbed. It took people time to get over things—that was it. He guessed that he was simply bitter about what he considered injustice to himself. But now ambition stirred him—and this was all that persuaded him to get up and leave the office—the ambition to regain the good grace and esteem they had paid him once; to become Johnny Connel again, the guy with the sweet-hot piano that they'd all flocked around.

They must have heard him coming in the song shop. When he walked through everyone was busy, playing or singing or arguing. No one looked up at him. He paused at the door, trembling with an anger that throbbed in his pulse. He went down the steps and out the door. The air revived him some. A red metal sound-stage flag was wagging back and forth, a bell ringing—a familiar sight.

He passed people, plenty of the old crowd—Fred Myers for one. But none of them spoke, and by now he was becoming used to the situation. He knew what to expect.

It was two in the afternoon and he was hungry, but he didn't have the courage to enter the studio commissary. He couldn't face the mob.

He walked on out through the gate, across the street to a little sandwich shop where, at this hour, he was less likely to see people. He ordered a tuna sandwich and washed it down with milk. After a while he got up and paid the check. He lingered about, flipping through the pages of magazines on the rack. Finally he went over and began playing the pinball machine.

He was not exactly certain when Michael Hart came in and walked over to watch him play the game. He

knew, when he put in the third nickel, that Michael was there, however; and Johnny tried to pretend that he was measuring the distance he wanted to pull the plunger back, that he was making a skillful attempt to win the twenty-five-cent prize.

But he was seeing Michael Hart's reflection and, in his mind, the nights that he had innocently permitted Michael to escort Margot to openings. Nights when Johnny had a musical score to get out for a new picture. Michael had been named in the trial as one of Margot's "friends"—her best friend. Johnny didn't look up, but he heard himself saying "Hello, Mike."

Mike didn't answer right away—he just stood there, a broad-shouldered, handsome stock player, his face dark with sun-tan makeup, wearing a tissue in his collar so the grease paint wouldn't smear.

Finally he said, "I didn't think you'd do it."

Johnny kept his eyes lowered. "Do what?"

"Come back to the studio."

"Why shouldn't I come back?" He noticed that Lou Larsen was in the place now. The heavy, grey-haired ex-song plugger must have come in with Mike.

Mike's answer was silence, indicative of contempt; and Johnny's temper lighted like a match. "You've a lot of crust telling me what to do!"

"I'm not telling you anything," the actor said coolly. "I'm just surprised."

This Michael Hart might very well have killed her, Johnny was thinking. But he said, "Why surprised?"

"Because it's all changed now, Johnny. It was Margot we were crazy about. She needed a respectable front—that was where you came in. The dumb little piano player who followed her around like a sheep dog. You're the ghost of that murder, and all those parties, and nobody wants to see you again. Were you so dumb you didn't know that? Why don't you just crawl off somewhere and die? Why, everybody in town—everybody but you—knew that Margot was chasing around—"

Johnny pivoted on his left heel. His right fist landed squarely on Mike's mouth. Then Johnny was standing over him, looking down at the damaged face, rubbing grease paint off his knuckles.

Lou Larsen came over, shoved him aside. "You're such a dumb cluck, Johnny," Lou said. "The guy was trying to tell you—"

"Cut it!" Johnny said. He turned and went out.

HE WENT BACK across the street with traffic whirling about him, intent on going into the song shop and smacking everybody else as he had hit Mike. But when he was on the lot again his temper subsided; he began once more to walk slowly, his hands jammed in his pockets. He didn't know what he had gained, unless it was some information.

Everybody had known about Margot for months! But he had never known or suspected anything. He

had worshiped Margot as a kid worships a hero.

He kept walking, head down, for a while. When finally he looked up, he saw Mary Knight in front of him. She was standing there in white shorts, holding a tennis racquet with which she had probably been posing for publicity shots. Mary was stock, got a hundred a week for playing small parts in big pictures and big parts in small pictures.

He saw her now, her legs tan and attractive, her mahogany hair brushing her shoulders, rolled at the ends. And in the soft, cool darkness of her eyes he saw a pity from which he wanted to run away.

"Hello, Johnny," she said. "Welcome back."

He thought it was strange that she was the first one who had said that; it was what he had expected when he came to the studio this morning.

He was uneasy in her presence, a little afraid of her. She was the one person he hadn't wanted to face. She had been his girl when he first came out from New York. They'd gone everywhere those first few months.

But that was before Margot, before he had started traveling with the clique.

Looking at Mary he remembered that she had fought against the fast crowd that had dazzled Johnny. Whenever they had a date, Mary insisted they go off somewhere alone, not with the gang. He remembered that, and the sweetness and charm of her. She'd been a naive, unspoiled kid, and they'd had fun together.

He'd imagined, like a fool, that Mary's objections to Margot were based on jealousy. When Margot gave him a tumble he was all gaga—a dozen guys wanted Margot. But there'd been no big scene with Mary. They just drifted apart, and later when he told her that he and Margot were going to be married she had only smiled and said, "Swell! Good luck, Johnny!"

Afterwards, he and Mary had become friends again, because she came into the clique. First as Fred Myers' partner, then with somebody else. She changed, too. Once, when she'd been drinking, she'd said she joined the gang to be near Johnny—which was a laugh, of course. A big laugh. No one believed it, Johnny being such a tame little nonentity. Mary was gay and a little hard now, sophisticated.

Johnny said, "Hello, Mary."

She studied him. "How's tricks?"

He smiled, though it wasn't really a smile. "Tricks are fine. Just dandy."

"Any new songs in your bonnet?" She had caught his mood by now and was forcing conversation.

"One," he said. "One elegant song. But nothing boogie-woogie about it. Kind of a Gershwin quality. Not schmaltz, understand. Sweet and blue and slow." He was talking rapidly.

"Johnny," she broke in. She grasped his hand. "Johnny, you're trembling!"

He jerked the hand away. "I'm not trembling. And I wish you wouldn't . . . look at me like that. Just leave me alone! There's nothing wrong

with me." He scarcely knew what he was saying.

He moved along. His nerves were on edge. His emotions were confused. Or did he have any left? He felt Mary's eyes on his back, knew she must be staring after him. Well, let her stare!

It was an ordeal to go through the song shop, but the boys made it easy by pretending not to see him. He closed the door of his office and went back to his desk.

IN HIS APARTMENT an empty whiskey bottle lay flat on the table; an amber stream across the hardwood table showed where the last of its contents had dribbled. Johnny sat holding the telephone with one hand and trying to pour gin in a half-filled bottle of orange pop with the other. He was tired of the same old formulas you got all the time. What he wanted was variety.

He spilled some of the gin and held the telephone closer so that it pressed against his chest.

Doc Brown of the Los Angeles homicide squad sat across the room from him, watching. Doc was neither drinking nor talking; he was pretty patient for a big shot detective. He just sat and watched Johnny, his face pale.

"Hello, Manny," Johnny said into the telephone. "This is Johnny. Don't hang up! I've some things I want to tell you, baby. Listen, just give me a minute."

He put down the bottle and held the telephone with both hands, rocking with it until he fell back on the bed.

"I'm in my room, pal. The bedroom of my apartment. Been here for twenty-four hours. *Why* am I here? I was afraid I'd crack up.

"Yeah. That's a hot one, isn't it? That'll be the day—when Johnny Connel cracks up. For eight days, now, I've been coming to the studio and none of you guys would even . . . Wait! Don't hang up! If you do I'll knock your ears off.

"Sure I'm drunk. For eight days I walk through the song shop like I'm invisible. You guys don't see me. I was afraid if it went on much longer I'd commit mayhem. I've got a temper. A guy can take only so much. . . .

"So I came home. You know what I've been doing? You'll never guess, pally. I've been working—and drinking. I've written a song better than you or Fred or George or anybody else ever wrote—a blues song, sweet and hot and slow. And I'm taking it to New York with me.

"Yeah, I'm going to New York. That's what I had to tell you. I'm going back to the big town. Why not? What've you got here? Tropic nights, moonlight, a million pretty girls, cheap rent and food.

"But give *me* Union Square, and coal trucks banging through the cobbled, one-way streets in the Village. Give me walk-up apartments, and Tin Pan Alley. Hollywood can go to hell before I come back."

His voice was raw now, hardly more than a whisper. Doc Brown was staring at him.

"Well, I called you to tell you that —and to ask you one last favor. You're having a party tonight. Can I come up and tell the gang good-bye?

"What? You think I'd spoil the fun? Well, maybe I will. Because I'm coming anyway. I'm on my way, Manny!"

He hung up.

"I think I'm wasting my time," Doc Brown said.

"You may be. I don't know," Johnny said.

"Are we going to the party?"

"Yes," said Johnny, "and you'll soon find out whether you're wasting your time or not."

He poured some gin into a glass and gulped it down. Doc Brown whistled and Johnny wiped his hand across his face. When he got up he thought his legs would go out from under him.

He had his jacket on when he remembered the song he had finally finished. He opened a drawer, took it out and jammed it in his pocket.

He and Doc Brown rode to the party in a taxi. It was quite a fare because Manny lived on Sunset, halfway to the beach. Paying the fare, and looking at the lighted house—the colored lanterns all around the porch—something cold and sobering went through Johnny. He had the presence of mind to tell the cab driver to wait for him.

On the porch, Doc Brown said, "This idea of yours stinks. But if anything should come of it, I'll be here."

"All right," Johnny said.

He opened the door, his forehead already cooling, but his cheeks still hot. He stood there in the doorway with the song in his hand and he saw all of them. Manny and George and Fred and Lou and Mike and Mary and Gladys and Dolly. They saw him, too, for Manny must have related the phone conversation. They'd probably gotten quite a laugh out of it. Dumb Cluck Johnny. Always good for a laugh.

They saw him and they did nothing. They just sat or stood or kneeled, or went on dancing. But they were quiet, and suddenly the fellow they'd hired to play the piano lifted his hands from the keys.

Johnny faced their silence and their cold faces. Even Mary Knight was silent, with her hand at her throat, as though she were afraid for him.

Silly Mary! he thought. Well, he wasn't afraid any more. He would go through with it. He wanted them to hear the song because he had taken a few simple notes and woven something beautiful out of them. He wanted them to hear the tune. Then he would bid them all good-bye.

HE WALKED INTO the room, right between couples who had been dancing, and went to the piano. The fellow who had been playing got up and moved off. Johnny slid across the bench and then, trembling, adjusted the music in front of him, though he really didn't need to see the music to play this song.

He began to play. . . .

He didn't hear the hush now. All he heard was the rhythm and the

melody, so sweet and low, throbbing and beating, something weird and lovely. He finished, then he began to play it again.

The gang was song-drunk. He knew that. They wanted music the way babies wanted milk. He was not surprised when George came over after he had begun the number for the third time. He was not amazed when George leaned over and began to sing the words. He knew the words would wow them. He had written them himself.

He played, and George sang, and gradually the others thawed out. They gathered around, timidly at first, sheepishly.

"You've got a hit there, Johnny. A real hit!"

"Boy, what blues!"

He played with all his soul and being. His eyes, feverish now, were riveted on Lou Larsen. Big, grey-haired Lou, who hadn't had a hit in twenty years.

Lou's face had turned scarlet. He listened rigidly. And suddenly he could stand it no longer. He threw up his arms.

"Stop it! Stop it! You dirty crook! That's my song!"

The music stopped abruptly. Doc Brown had slipped into the house. Lou Larsen backed up, bewildered. His eyes were on Johnny.

"That's the best song idea I've had in years. But I lost my script—just a few bars of it—I dropped it in the song shop. You picked it up, Johnny. You've doctored it considerably, but—"

Lou Larsen became conscious of the eyes of the crowd on him. Lou had been a has-been for years, and the crowd was with Johnny, not him.

"I'll—I'll split with you on it, Johnny," he said. "Make it a collaboration. No hard feelings, just—"

That was when Doc Brown clicked on the handcuffs.

"You lost the script in Johnny's house," Doc said quietly, "on the day you murdered his wife!"

"I—I—"

"It was the only clue there was, and we weren't able to trace it to anybody. Naturally, it would have been foolish to make the discovery public. Nobody would ever admit ownership if we had. It was Johnny's idea to work those few scribbled bars into a finished number. He knew how jealous song writers are. The composer would recognize his own work and yelp."

Lou said thickly, "I lost it in the song shop, I tell you. I—"

"We had it photographed in the murder room. More than that, though there were no prints on the gun because you'd wiped them off, we have fingerprints taken from the desk in the library, and other objects. We haven't matched them yet. We'll take your prints, and if they happen to match—"

Lou Larsen screamed, and rushed at Doc Brown. The detective grabbed his prisoner, hustled him out the door. There was excitement and confusion, waiting for the police car to arrive. It took three men to hold Lou.

The public—but not this clique—

would be amazed to learn he was more concerned about the song than he was about his guilt. Yes, he had killed Margot. He was broke, desperately. He had evidence that she had been out with men other than Johnny, and he had gone to the house that day to blackmail her. For just enough to see him through a few hard days.

Margot had called him a cheap heel and pulled the gun from a drawer. He had grabbed at it, and in the scuffle he must have lost the script. In that same scuffle, he claimed, the gun had gone off accidentally and killed her. He had the presence of mind to wipe off the fingerprints, but he didn't stay long enough for anything else. No one had ever suspected him. But it was the loss of the song, certainly a hit if any one had ever written one, that grieved him.

THINGS QUIETED DOWN, and Johnny stood in the middle of the room, the old crowd gathered around him. They congratulated him. He wasn't so dumb; and he had a hit on his hands. A real, big-time hit.

He was back in. Why didn't he smile at them?

This was what he had wanted, wasn't it? Was he such a whacky guy that he was going to turn them down now that they had given him the okay nod? It was just a matter of hours and he'd be Johnny Connel again, just as in the old days. This was what he'd been eating his heart out for.

It was true, but he wasn't glad now; there was no victory in this. He was cold, and he felt as if he needed a bath. That was how they made him feel. He looked around the room and he saw broken glasses and lipstick-smeared cigarette butts. He saw something else, too, for the first time. These were Hollywood's shame children.

They'd forgiven him because he'd written a good song, not for any other reason. They hadn't known about Lou when they first gathered around the piano. He knew now why no other clique wanted anything to do with them. They were phonies, living fast and hard, from option to option. They were outcasts—the wild, sordid unwanted element. Hollywood's black eye. Their friendship wasn't worth anything.

This gang had known about Margot's unfaithfulness for months and hadn't told him. It was they who had killed Margot. Johnny saw now that he had been dumb, not dumb in the way they thought, but dumb because his sense of values had been all out of proportion; while *they* had thought he was dumb because he tried to be clean and halfway decent.

He rubbed his sweaty hands on his jacket, and he looked at these people's smiling faces. There was nothing to say. They were the wise ones, the witty ones. They were the names in tabloid gossip columns.

He just brushed past them, and he was surprised at how easy it was to push them to one side.

He moved through the door, and he was out on the porch. He had

never been so cold sober in all his life, but a fire was burning somewhere in his heart.

He saw that the cab, after all this time, was still waiting and now he moved down the steps and got into it. He reached out to close the door when someone's hand stayed it. He looked up. Mary Knight climbed into the cab beside him. She pulled the door shut, and the taxi began to roll. Johnny sat there, not looking at her, but looking straight ahead.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"To New York," he said. "As far as I can get from here."

"May I go too, Johnny?"

He looked at her. He saw the light from the passing lamp posts reflected on her face. He watched her for several moments, and then he bowed his head and bit his fist, and something choked up in his throat.

She put his head on her shoulder and held it there, held him close to her as the cab's tires hummed over the road.

Johnny Connel was crying. ♦ ♦ ♦

FINAL STRAWS

- THE CHARMED LIFE of Djuro Bushitch of Yugoslavia made him a national scourge. Convinced that the bullet hadn't been made that could kill him, he thrived on trouble both with the police and his neighbors. He engaged in a half-a-hundred gunfights, and carried at one time or another in him at least thirty-two chunks of lead, each enough to kill an ordinary man. His death came as a strange anticlimax during a fight with a fellow thug who criticized Djuro's singing. The other drew a gun and emptied all six slugs into the gangster. When Djuro refused to go down, his assailant drew a knife—and Djuro cashed in his chips. It was the first time anyone had used a weapon other than a gun on him.

- WHEN TOM HYMAN, London plumber's assistant, decided to desert his wife and family, he just moved a few blocks away from his slum home, set himself up as a fashionable doctor—and nobody found him for years. He prospered fabulously, wangling a membership in the Royal College of Surgeons, though he had no medical training—and at one time sold water as "insulin" to a wealthy diabetic patient at $10,000 a glass. He might never have been caught if he hadn't tried to branch out into blackmail—and got into a quarrel over the spelling of a word in the payoff agreement with a cabdriver associate. The cabbie, his feelings hurt, turned him over to the police.

Back some fifty-seven hundred and odd years ago, if you go by Biblical reckoning, Adam and Eve were ejected from the Garden of Eden for glomming onto some fruit they had no right to. When the Lord asked Adam why he took the forbidden fruit, Adam gave it to Him straight. (Those were the days before chivalry.) "The woman," explained Adam. "She tempted me." That was when women first got into the act. And just to prove that things haven't changed much in all these hundreds of years, here's author Gil Brewer with a modern-day Eve, still talking up trouble, and a modern-day Adam—still listening.

With This Gun—

By GIL BREWER

IT DIDN'T SEEM possible that Joan could talk me into a thing like this. There was a tightness in my throat as the wind lashed through the night off the Gulf, showering sand on the porch. Time passed too slowly.

I heard fat drops of rain splat against the clapboard sides of the cottage. In ten minutes I'd start off along the sea wall toward the Beach Club. The cold, hard butt of the .38 in my hip pocket reminded me that anything could happen.

If my brother Tad knew, he'd say, "Stay out of it, Danny!" But Tad was in Raiford State Prison on a manslaughter rap. Besides, he never wrote. He couldn't know how much I loved Joan. Or what I'd do to make her my wife. In one hour, if things went right, we'd be together. In a few days Joan would really be mine.

We'd talked of this robbery before. But somehow we'd always managed to scrape the crazy thought of it away. Until now.

I paced from one window to another, looked out at the night, waited, tried hard to remember the things Tad had told me. Things that had never meant much, until now.

The time I stole the bicycle light from the hardware store on Ninth Street, in St. Pete. I was fifteen. I came out of the shop with the light clutched in my hand, and ran smack into Tad. He was like that. He'd been in a bar next door.

"What you got there, Danny?" Even then Tad was somehow as old as Satan himself. Thin. wiry, hard as sheet steel.

My voice was all guilt. "Nothing," I told him.

"It's a bike light, kid. Where'd you get the money?"

"Saved it up."

"Sure." He took my hand, drew me into an alley. "Take it back."

"Naw." I was scared. The way he looked at me. His eyes got all yellow when he was mad and his mouth quirked at one corner as if it was worked with a string. He hit me, just once, not hard.

I tore back into the store, slammed the light on the counter, said, "Just lookin'," to the man, and beat it.

Later that night Tad didn't smile. "Sorry, Danny. Don't do it again. Ever. Here." He handed me five dollars. "Buy yourself a bike light. Try an' get the same one you glommed."

Next time I was seventeen and it was cigarettes. A whole crate, from the warehouse off Central. By now I knew Tad was no traveling salesman. With the folks dead and him my guardian, I figured I was hot stuff when he got mixed up in a Bolita raid at Ybor City. So I lined up the cigarettes with another guy, brought them home. I went out to sell some. When I got back, Tad was sitting on the crate of cigarettes.

"Hello, kid."

I swallowed. "Hi, Tad." He was quiet, but his eyes were yellow-flecked. He stood, stepped up to me slowly, balled his fist and broke my nose.

I was half again as big as Tad. But I didn't dare hit him. He was deadly, somehow. Tad couldn't really be anybody's brother.

When I got up off the floor, he hit me again. I tried to keep away from him, but he beat me till I couldn't move. He was savage about it. As if, maybe, if he didn't beat me enough it wouldn't be any good.

He quit and sat on the crate of cigarettes again. When he lit a cigarette, his hands shook. I lay on the floor.

"That's the last time, Danny. It's supposed to be wrong, I know. But I can't talk so good. If I just talked without busting you first, you wouldn't remember." He flicked the ash off his cigarette. "It's the wrong road, kid."

I swallowed some blood and blurted, "What about you?"

"I'm me, an' you're you. I'm too far on the road to turn back. I'm sunk, kid." Then he told me all of it.

How Pop hadn't really died when I was a few months old. Pop had been shot in the street, in Tampa. Mom had vanished before that. Pop was a paid gunman. Only he finally gunned the wrong guy.

"Way I see it," Tad finished, "it don't run in the blood, like folks say. It's what you see, how you live, how you get to believing, kid. I'm not going to play keeper, Danny. But I'll see you get a chance. You're going to college. You got to live right. The way I couldn't." His eyes turned cold and flat. "Society's funny. But it won't get to hurt you, Danny. Not if I can help it."

I still couldn't get off the floor and I was plenty mad about him busting my nose. I figured he shouldn't have done that.

"Take the cigarettes back, kid."

"Aw, but— Tad!"

He dropped his butt, stepped on it, and walked out of there without even looking at me.

I didn't see Tad much after that, but he wrote me a lot. He drove big cars, Caddies mostly, and I went to college. He visited me a few times. His women were with him, one at a time, as sleek as his cars. All beautiful and groomed like race horses. Blonde, smiling, and crisp as new one-hundred-dollar bills.

"Remember, kid. I'm me, you're you. They're just broads. Only they're dangerous broads. Don't get to thinking about champagne and caviar. Stick to beer an' pretzels. It's safer. And, to be honest, it's more fun." His mouth quirked at one corner when he said it.

I understood all that now. Next thing I knew, Tad was in jail. The numbers racket. I was in the war.

When I got out of uniform, I didn't go back to school. I opened a little bar, the Pink Goat, out on the beaches and took life easy. Tad was out of stir again, and he wrote from Los Angeles. Then Miami. He spoke of a woman he planned to marry. Then he killed a man. He had a good lawyer and went up for manslaughter.

"*Cherchez* the *femme*," he wrote, "then run like hell the other way." But according to Tad, he'd fixed this woman's clock in some way or another.

I wrote him regularly and heard from him often.

Then I met Joan.

She came into the Pink Goat one afternoon when I was behind the bar and she was everything I'd ever wanted. She ordered a dry martini.

She was dressed in white, her honey-blonde hair falling to golden-skinned shoulders that looked warm and made me want to touch them. Nearly as tall as I, she was warm and cool at the same time, with eyes like pale-blue diamonds, and soft, moist lips.

Her voice was liquid, cool. "Haven't I seen you somewhere before?"

I dropped the bar rag on the floor, stepped on it and grinned. "Shouldn't I say that?"

She smiled. I kept wiping my foot on the bar rag.

I said, "Probably you've been in here before. But I don't think so. I would have—"

"Noticed?" she put in. We both grinned. I leaned over to pick up the bar rag and bumped my head on the sink.

"Where do you live?" I asked.

"Down the beach."

"Me too. How far?"

"Just past that string of royal palms. I came down a week ago from New York. Rented a cottage." She sipped her martini.

There were five cottages just beyond the royal palms. One of them was mine.

"My name is Joan Warner."

"I'm Danny Cole." I gestured. "I own the joint."

"Some joint." She looked around, then back to me. "Danny Cole. We're neighbors. I live next door to you."

I put some ice in the shaker. "I know it," I admitted. I was glad nobody else was in the Pink Goat.

"Why don't you have a drink with me, Danny?"

"We'll let the Goat buy this one."

I shook two double martinis. An hour later I figured the Pink Goat needed a chance to graze, so I locked up, and we went home in her car to take a swim.

We were together a lot. I worked from mid-morning till late afternoon, after that I was with Joan. She was on a vacation, first time in Florida, two months. She was a secretary in a book store in New York and she didn't want to go back. I was in love with her from the start.

I wrote Tad and told him I was going to ask her to marry me.

Joan and I fished, picnicked, swam, danced, did all the things we wanted. We got to know each other well.

One day, while we were lying on the beach in front of my cottage, she rolled over on one hip and shaded her eyes with her hand.

"Danny, I'm not going back to New York."

I grinned and kissed her. Her body was sun-hot, her lips sweet. Her skin was a dark tan beyond the reaches of her white bathing suit.

"Danny, you don't get much out of the Pink Goat. We can't marry on that."

I tensed inside, then relaxed. "Season's a little off this year," I told her. "Never can tell."

She shook her head, sat up, stared at the rolling blue-green Gulf waters. "No, Danny. When we marry, I must have money." She didn't look at me, and I wasn't relaxed any more. "I always dreamed of doing things, going to far places. I love you, Danny. But the Pink Goat isn't enough."

"Yeah?"

She brushed sand off her thigh. "The Beach Club takes in a startling amount of money in a week."

I laughed. "In one day," I agreed. The Beach Club was a big place, sprawling all over a couple acres. Two bars, dining, dancing, refreshment bars, beautiful beaches and landscaping. "That's out of my class, Joan. The Pink Goat takes in a tidy bit."

"Tidy," she said. "That's the trouble. Tidy isn't enough."

I reached and drew her face around. "What do you mean, Joan?"

She looked at me. "Just this, Danny." She was excited. "I've been looking around. They hold a week's receipts right at the Club. In a strong box. Silly, but they do. They have a

nightwatchman, man named Finnigan. They close on Wednesday's at five and don't open until Thursday morning. Thursday is when they take the strong box to the bank in St. Pete."

I looked away, then flopped on my stomach and stared at the red and blue ribs of the blanket we were lying on. I was sick inside. She had no right to talk like that. I heard her speak and her hand was soft on my shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Danny. But I want things I've never had."

"Forget it. Forget it all, will you? And for God's sake, forget the Beach Club!"

She was silent for a long time. I thought maybe she was mad. Then she said softly, "It'd be easy, Danny. We'd have plenty then. Plenty." There was an undertone to her voice that sent aches through me. She went on. "We may as well be frank with each other, Danny. We love each other." Her hand smoothed my back.

I turned over, knocked her hand down, stood, and walked away. I stopped, looked around. She smiled at me. I went back to her, flopped down.

"Joan," I said. "We can't do anything like that. You know we can't."

"Why?" she said. "Just why can't we?" She got up and turned her back to me. "You scared, Danny?" she tossed over her shoulder.

I wasn't scared. Yet. Not much.

LATER, AT HER place, I talked to her hard. Tried to show her it was all wrong. Here she was, a secretary in a book store on vacation, planning robbery. "The Pink Goat'll bring in enough, Joan. We'll get married. I'll enlarge—that's right, expand." I must have sounded desperate.

She smiled. "All right, honey."

I was so relieved I couldn't see straight. For two days I held my breath. But she seemed to have forgotten all about it.

The third night we took a walk up the beach. On our way back I relaxed. She was at me right away, as if she was psychic.

"Danny. If you don't like the Beach Club idea, let's look some place else. But the setup's perfect at the Beach Club."

We were in front of her place. "Setup!" I said. "Where do you get that stuff, Joan?"

"Oh, Danny." Her eyes glistened in the moonlight. She looked helpless, almost lost. I wanted to put her in my pocket. It was like that.

"Look," I told her. "We've got to get this out of our systems. It's wrong." I hesitated. "I'm going home. You do the same. Then think, Joan. Think it out. Then, if you still want it . . ." I left it that way. She was getting at me from every angle. I loved her. I knew damn well I'd do anything she asked.

Home, I checked the mailbox again to see if I'd missed a letter when I came home from the Pink Goat that afternoon. Empty. I hadn't heard from Tad in over a month, and he always wrote once or twice a week, never missed. I figured he'd got sick of writing, maybe sick of hearing

about Joan. I was facing something that knotted me up inside.

I was in the kitchen drinking coffee when I heard Joan open the door. She came in wearing white lounging pajamas, with a red sash. She was just plain gorgeous and I knew I was going to hang on, no matter what.

I didn't move. She came to me, gently took the cup from my hand, leaned over and kissed me. "I've thought it out, Danny."

I could see it in her eyes. I pulled her close to me. "You want this thing," I said.

She nodded, her hair brushing my cheek. Her voice was a whisper. "It's the only way we can marry. Otherwise"—she shrugged—"it'll be a long wait. Maybe never."

The battle I was fighting inside was deadly. The coffee sat sour on my stomach. I remembered what Tad had told me, and then I looked at Joan.

"Okay." The words came as if it was somebody else talking. "We'll do it. But listen, Joan. Only this once. It's got to be that way. Just enough to get started."

"Yes, Danny. Yes. Only once."

"You're sure about them keeping a whole week's receipts? Kind of foolish."

She kissed me. "I'm sure, Danny. Oh, Danny! I knew you'd come around."

The decision made, I relaxed. She was obviously so happy about it all I could never ask her to back out again. I loved her and that was the answer.

Her words flowed, her eyes were alive. "I've checked everything. That's what I've been doing while you worked. It's our big chance. There must be twenty thousand, maybe more. I know right where they keep the box, in the office. The nightwatchman is an old man." She paused. "You'll have to fix him before you take the money."

I shriveled up again inside. "Fix him?"

She laughed and mussed my hair, went to the refrigerator, brought back a couple bottles of beer. She moved with a lithe, easy swing that I never tired of watching. "Sure," she said. "You know. Tap him lightly behind the ear?"

"Oh." I thought a minute. "Listen, Joan . . ." I stopped, couldn't go on.

She uncapped the beer, poured, handed me a glass. "Here's to next week's receipts, Danny, my love." She watched me over the rim of the glass, eyes shining. "C'mon," she said, "drink up."

I drank. It tasted like hell.

THE NEXT FEW days we planned it. Ten o'clock Wednesday night. She was to drive away from her place early so there'd be no suspicion. Then she'd park in a palmetto thicket off the highway, below the Beach Club, before ten. I'd wait at my place till nine-thirty, then go along the seawall, where Finnigan, the nightwatchman, sat when he wasn't making his rounds. I was supposed to belt him one, then go inside with his keys, get the whole box, and move fast to the car after putting the keys back on Finnigan

and locking the doors behind me.

That way, things would look queer. I'd give her the box. She'd drive to her place alone. I'd return by the seawall. We wouldn't even see each other that night. And we'd carry on as usual in the morning. We'd wait till things cooled. Beyond that everything was hazy.

"They'll think Finnigan is stalling," she said. "His story will be pretty darned weak."

"The poor old guy."

"He'd do the same, and don't forget it, Danny."

We were on the beach again, watching the flagrant beauty of the sunset. She unwrapped a towel. "You've got a gun," she said. "Look what I have."

She had a gun, too. She'd bought it in St. Pete that afternoon. A .32 Savage automatic. A deadly little thing. I lit a cigarette and looked away and my hands shook.

"Don't you like my gun?" she asked, her lip pouting.

"Sure," I said. "It's a fine gun." I didn't ask her why she wanted a gun. I was beyond that. The sickness inside me was coming back worse than ever.

We parted and she told me she'd be there in the palmetto thicket with the car at ten. "I love you, Danny. That's all that matters."

I didn't say anything. I just watched the lithe grace of her body as she moved away, the easy swing of her shoulders, the bunched towel in her hand with the gun inside.

I hadn't counted on the wind and rain, but as I stood there, listening to it, I knew it was to our advantage. Only I'd have to hunt Finnigan down. He wouldn't sit on the seawall in this.

I switched off the lights, stood a moment in the dark. I was scared and bitterly sick. And standing in the darkness with the Gulf roaring out there, I knew we weren't going to do it.

It was as easy as that. She'd listen, because I'd make her listen.

"If I just talked without busting you first, you wouldn't remember."

I wished I'd heard from Tad and wondered why, but it didn't matter now. I suddenly felt clean inside. She'd listen.

I hurried then, opened the screen door and stepped off the porch. I was happy and I felt like yelling it out loud. The wind blasted sand and rain at me. I sensed rather than saw the shadow come at me from the side of the porch.

I turned toward the movement and something struck me hard on the side of my head. I blanked on my feet, tried to fight, started to come back when something struck me again. I dropped to the hard-packed sand, tasting it in my mouth as I blacked out.

THE WIND AND soaking rain helped bring me around. For a moment I couldn't think, with my face in the sand. Then I remembered Joan and the Beach Club.

I pushed myself up and lurched dazedly toward the seawall. My clothes were heavy with sand and water. I got to the wall, knew I

should have checked the time first.

How long had I been out? Who'd done it?

Every step jarred violent pain through my skull. Something was wrong. I had to reach Joan.

I staggered along the wall, leaning into the lashing wind, and remembered the gun. I grabbed for my pocket. It was gone. I kept going. The highway would have been better, but I stuck to the wall.

The wind grew stronger as the rain let up and the moon broke through a rift in the black sky. I kept my eyes on the wall as I staggered along, trying not to think of what was happening.

At last the gentle turn and slope in the wall told me I'd reached the Beach Club. I cut sharp right, toward the palmetto thicket along the highway. I tripped and sprawled over what I knew instantly was a body.

It was the nightwatchman, Finnigan, wet and dead. In the wan moonlight I could make out the round hole in his throat.

I whirled and ran through the knee-high grass behind a fence of tall palms, toward the palmettos. I saw Joan and stopped, hidden behind the palms.

She stood braced against the side of her car in a white dress that clung to her, soaking wet. She shook a gun in the air and shouted at somebody I couldn't see beyond the car.

"Stand still, you crazy fool!" she cried. "You won't louse this up, damn you!"

I couldn't believe what I saw and heard. Yet, I knew it was Joan. Her face was contorted, her hair lank against her head. All the evil in the world radiated from her face and the way she held her body, angled, twisted.

Then I choked, because it was my brother Tad who spoke from the shadows, where I couldn't see.

His voice was quiet, easy. "You re not going any place, Joan. Except straight to hell."

Her teeth gleamed whitely. "You left me without anything in Miami," she blurted. "You turned the dough over to the law. Well, I'm paying you back. Your dear little brother you talked so much about will take the rap for murder." Her laughter was touched with hysteria. "You hear, Tad? You escaped to come back and help him. Now they'll get you both! Brothers in crime. Don't touch your gun, darling!" She wiped hair away from her face.

"You shouldn't have written me, Joan," Tad said quietly. "You should never have told me your plans."

I saw him then. He stepped out of the shadows toward her. He was wearing torn overalls and he looked gaunt and beaten against the big night.

She chuckled in her throat. "Danny thought I was sweet and innocent," she said. "And all the time I was only paying back his louse of a brother."

"Nothing matters now, Joan. I killed once because of you, and you crossed me. They'll get me sooner or later."

I saw it clearly now. She had

worked a mad frame to avenge what Tad had done to her. I saw them both as they were. Evil and rotten, clawing at each other like jungle cats. I saw two lives gone irrevocably bad. But I didn't want Tad dead.

I leaped forward, yelling, "Don't, Tad!" as he grabbed for the gun in his pocket.

Joan saw me and maybe it spoiled her perfect aim. Her gun spat and spat and Tad twisted sharply as if somebody had struck his shoulder.

I looked at Joan and her face changed. It fell apart as slug after slug from Tad's gun found their mark. She slumped down, her fingernails scratching on the metal of the car as she tried to hang on. Then she was just a heap by the running board.

Suddenly the place was brighter and I knew it wasn't the moon. It was a spotlight and there were cars on the highway. The police. They were coming toward us, through the grass.

I went up to Tad. He crouched, pushing himself up from the ground.

"Tad!"

"Hi, kid. Told you it was the wrong road."

"You're hurt, Tad," I cried. "And the law's out there."

He nodded. His mouth quirked at one corner and his eyes were smiling. "Sure," he admitted. "Don't run, or they'll cut you down. Joan called 'em just before she shot the nightwatchman. I was too late to avoid that. You'd have been found here, pawing around in the darkness with an empty cash-box."

"Empty!"

"Sure. Kid, this wasn't your stride." He shook his head. "Nobody'd keep a week's receipts in a place like that." He laughed. "You didn't even have sense enough to check it, kid."

"Why didn't you write, Tad?" His gun hung in one hand. He looked tired and blood dripped from the fingers of his left hand.

"I did write. Joan must have swiped your mail every day while you worked. You're a dope, Danny. Forget it all."

He still wasn't dead after I'd explained to several cops. I gave it all to them, straight. They let me talk to him, while he lay there bleeding on the wet grass. He knew he didn't have much time. "I was a trusty on the laundry detail at Raiford. Got out with the truck and driver. Slugged him and made the break. It isn't hard, kid. I didn't want to tip my hand. Wanted to get her solid. Silly, eh? I waited outside your porch and belted you one." He paused, breathing hard.

"My gun, Tad," I said.

"In your dresser drawer, where it belongs," he told me. "She wrote me, told me all about everything. I couldn't tip the law without involving you." His face twisted with pain and he clamped his lips and eyes tight. I glanced over at the white form that had been Joan. Plainclothes men and uniformed cops listened attentively to Tad.

"Spill it clean to 'em," Tad said. "You'll get off fair. You get a little time, it'll do you good." He closed his eyes again and sweat glistened all over

his face. Without opening his eyes, he said, "Leave me be, kid. And stick to beer and pretzels."

They took him away in an ambulance, along with the bodies of Finnigan, the nightwatchman, and Joan.

I rode into St. Pete with cops on both sides of me. They were decent and kind of quiet. The wind had ceased.

The night was lonely. But it would pass. Joan was gone as if she'd never been. I tried to think about all the things Tad used to tell me. But somehow I didn't need to remember any more. ♦ ♦ ♦

TATTLE-TALE OF COLEFORD

- "SCOTLAND YARD—HELP us! Our bank is being wrecked. Our best families are filing suits for divorce. We expect a suicide daily. . . ."

  This frantic appeal came from the authorities of Coleford, England. A flood of poison-pen letters was disrupting the town. Detectives from London who hurried to answer the appeal came face to face with a baffling mystery.

  Scandalous accusations, written in a disguised hand or made up of printed words chopped from a newspaper, had been mailed to well-known people from many post offices. Whoever had written them showed such a devilish familiarity with the lives of the people slandered—giving nicknames, names of servants, and other pertinent details—that each recipient believed the horrible charges to be true.

  Scotland Yard became convinced that the scandalmonger moved in the same high circle as the victims. When clues given by the nicknames were run down, there were no less than six suspects—all women and respected.

  A suit for heavy damages would follow if the wrong woman were arrested. What should be done? A detective had an idea worthy of Sherlock Holmes. Pretending to be a new post office clerk, he worked at the stamp window until each of the six suspects had wandered in and bought stamps from him.

  When the next poison-pen letters were mailed, he arrested Miss Diana Langham, daughter of a former Crown official, and a leading social worker. Coleford was in an uproar. No one believed she could be guilty.

  At her trial, the detective testified that he had sold her stamps marked with a special design in invisible secret ink. No other person had been sold stamps from this sheet. When ammonia was put on the stamps on a poison-pen letter received after these stamps were sold, the design appeared—a damning mark of Miss Langham's guilt. Stamps of a different design had been sold to the other suspects. But none of these designs appeared on the poison-pen letters. Miss Langham's sentence was six months.

Who among us has not, at some time, found himself numbered among the "sidewalk superintendents," watching intently as a giant steam shovel tears huge mouthfuls out of the earth, or a pneumatic drill bites its way into solid rock? Almost, we forget the men who control these powerful machines. Almost, we forget that they are like the rest of us, that at five o'clock, when the whistle blows, the steam shovel will come to rest and become only a mammoth piece of steel, while its master, reduced to human size, goes out to eat, and drink, and make love . . . and perhaps to die.

One Way Out

By JOHN HAWKINS

JOE ANDRESSON HAD lived too long. He had an hour left, perhaps two. And then—well, then we'd be all even. He'd had me in hell for a year. He'd cleaned me out—bank account, insurance, car, home and the rest. But that was over now. Joe Andresson would die before morning. And so it was pleasant talking to him in the dimly lit time shack.

"You"ll work the clamshell tonight," I said. "Tucker reported sick. His ulcers are howling again."

"Okay," he said. "And I need fifty bucks."

I went through the routine. I had to make it look good. I said, "My God, man, I haven't got a dime. I'm in hock now—I will be for the next six months."

He said, "Fifty bucks, Scotty. Or else . . ."

There was an ugly shine in his pale eyes. He had me by the throat and he knew it. The threat behind his soft, "Or else . . ." was real. But tonight would see the end of it, and the end of Joe Andresson.

"I'll get the money some way," I said.

He said, "That sounds better."

He stayed in the doorway a mo-

ment longer, squinting at me through the smoke of his cigarette. He was big, thick-chested and solid; and he was a little drunk. He made a fist of one brown hand.

"I should've thrown you to the cops months ago," he said. "I might do it yet. I will—if that dough ain't here when I go off shift."

"I'll have it here for you, Joe."

He left then. I heard a car motor roar, heard the snarl of gears as he whipped his sport coupé around the time-shack and headed down the grade. Joe Andresson liked speed and the cold breath of danger. He crowded his luck and his skill.

He ran a shovel the way he drove a car—gunning it with a sure and reckless hand. He was a good operator when he was sober, one of the best. Sober, he might have escaped the trap I'd set for him. But he wasn't sober. He was carrying a cargo. The fine edge would be off his timing and judgment of distance. . . .

The thing was simple. A sentence I'd seen in a magazine had shown me the way: "A normal man is a slave to habit," the sentence read. "He cannot escape habit; he cannot change."

And there it was, beautiful and complete. Joe Andresson was reckless and he drank too much. These two habits, deep-grained in the man, would combine to kill him. The police would find an answer far from the truth. They'd find motive and desire. They might even hang a man, but that would not be me. I was safe, because the police would swear Joe Andresson had been killed by mistake. They'd swear the murder trap had been set to catch another man.

My hand was steady as I turned my watch to the light. By now Joe Andresson would be climbing into the cab of the clamshell. The pitman would start the motor. Joe would reach for the controls. There'd be the soft whine of slowly turning drums. The slender boom would lift and swing. . . .

ODD, THE STEPS that lead a man to murder. There must be something ugly and unclean lurking in a dark corner of his mind, waiting. Outwardly, he's no different from any other man—at least my mirror shows a face that's normal enough. I still look like the same Scott McClane, Western Construction's superintendent-in-charge.

Roads, tunnels, bridges, buildings, docks—I built them all. I juggled equipment and material and made it pay. And I saw the profit go to men who knew little or nothing about construction. But that was all right. I wouldn't be working for other men always. I saved every dime I could get my hands on, piling it up toward the day when I'd have an outfit of my own.

The years got away from me—you don't buy cats and shovels and trucks for pennies. My checks were big, but they weren't big enough. I needed a bankroll before I started on my own. I got the itch for money. And then Western Construction bid low on the Beachport Tunnel.

This was a big job, an eight-hun-

dred-foot highway tunnel, cutting through the bulge of a cliff high above the sea. The drilling was easier than we'd expected. The rock was rotten; the drills bit through it the way they'd bite through cheese. The work was just well started when the state inspector dropped a hint that was plain. . . .

He was money hungry, and so there were two of us on the job. The rest was easy. We used cheap Grade-C timber, instead of clear-grained number one. My company was billed for number one. The inspector and I split the take. We used cheap cement. There are a thousand tricks, a thousand ways to haywire a job, and we knew them all.

It was the cliff that got us. That crumbling, easy-to-drill rock didn't have the strength we thought it had. And, in cutting corners, we'd stolen the margin of safety. Without warning late one winter night the cliff came alive. There was the rumbling groan of rock and timber. Half the cliff face went roaring into the sea. The tunnel was crushed and wiped away as though it had never been. The night shift was trapped. . . .

There was an investigation, of course. But the inspector had been in the tunnel. He was dead, buried under tons of rock at the base of the cliff. Experts testified for the police, but the best of them could only guess. They mentioned "glacial faults" and drew diagrams that meant little or nothing. Western Construction had a reputation for honest work. The sea had swallowed all evidence to the contrary. In the end, the police called it an "unavoidable accident." I walked out of the courtroom a free man—and found Joe Andresson waiting in my car.

He said, "How's to run me back to camp?"

I said, "Why not?" but I wondered.

"So the inspector gets himself knocked off," he said, as we passed the city limits. "Maybe that's a good thing. He can't lose his guts and talk if he's dead. The cops got no chance to play him against you."

"What's all this about?" I demanded.

He got a crumpled invoice from his pocket, smoothed it on his knee. "One thousand board feet of twelve-by-twelve, Grade-C," he read softly. The ugly shine was in his eyes when he looked at me. "Maybe them experts missed a bet, Scotty. They was so busy huntin' glacial faults they didn't bother to hunt rats. The cops're dumb, but they'd see a thing if it was shoved under their noses. I ought to show 'em this invoice. Yeah, and I ought to tell 'em what I saw. . . ."

"What did you see?"

"Rotten timber and rotten concrete," he said. "Ten men that died because the job was haywire. I can give the cops names and dates. And once they start checking! Once they start looking at you, and not at Western Construction—Scotty, I got an idea you'd go away for plenty long. I think they might even burn you in the chair."

"What do you want?" I said between clenched teeth.

"Money," he answered. "Just money."

I should have killed him then. I should have put my coupé over the bank and taken a chance on coming out alive. But I was afraid. Andresson was right. I'd go to prison if the police forgot Western Construction's reputation and began hunting evidence of sabotage. Fear closed my throat tight until I could barely whisper.

"How much?"

Andresson grinned. "Five grand, Scotty."

I gave him the five thousand. Three months later I gave him another five. He followed me from job to job, knowing I couldn't refuse to hire him. He'd appear in the door of the time-shack, grinning sleepily, saying, "I hear you need a good shovel runner, Scotty. How's to put me on the payroll?"

My savings were gone, completely gone, in eight months. I sold my car and my home. I borrowed on my insurance. And still the demands went on. Andresson took most of my salary. He bled me white and still he wasn't satisfied. His threats came more often. Half the time he was drunk on the job. The men began to talk. I knew murder was the only answer.

I made my plans carefully. Because I knew the man involved, I could cut down the element of danger. Still, the endless waiting was torture for nerves drawn thin.

JOE ANDRESSON HAD been working for half an hour when I left the time shack. Lights blazed around the clamshell, far to the south. I drove that way.

This was a road job, a new six-lane highway, smashing arrow-straight through what had once been a quiet residential district. I was working a thousand men in two shifts—form gangs, bridge and paving crews. Two hundred hatch and gravel trucks were on the move. There were cats, shovels. And there was the clamshell.

A clamshell is a type of power digger, but just now I was using it to pour concrete. Like this: An electric railroad crossed the highway at right angles. The railroad fill was high and the state engineers had designed an underpass. A temporary bridge was built for the railroad, and then power shovels ripped the guts from the railroad fill. Pier forms were built, towering high on each side of the new highway.

The trick was to lift the mixed concrete from the surface of the highway to the top of the pier forms. I used the clamshell, mounting a special bucket in place of the one used for digging. The clamshell then became a crane. The bucket was filled. The operator lifted and swung it gently in place to the top of the pier form.

There was a power line paralleling the railroad—a hot line, carrying a hundred and sixty-six thousand volts. The crane operator had to put the tip of his boom within two feet of the lowest wire each time he lifted a bucket to the top of the pier form.

And that was murder in the making!

Joe Andresson was reckless and he was drunk. His timing was shot, but he'd run crane as he always did—gunning the motor, matching his skill against the threat of lightning on the loose. He'd cut closer and closer to the low-swinging wire, because he knew the makers of the clamshell had thought of fools like him when they built the machine. They'd insulated the cab and the controls. They'd planned that any heavy charge would pass down the boom, through the tracks and into the ground. . . .

* * *

The noise was like the distant thunder of guns. A blue-white flash tore wide the night, living for an instant, lighting the whole south end of the job in its hideous glare. Then the dark pressed down again. But still the bawling thunder went on.

"Power line," a workman shouted.

I yelled something in answer, and tramped on the throttle. Somewhere, back in my mind, a cool voice said, "Make it look good, Scott. Get there in a hurry. . . ." But there was no hurry. Not really. Joe Andresson wouldn't be back for his fifty bucks. I'd fixed that clamshell, running fat wires from the base of the boom to the controls, to the seat support. Joe Andresson had gone out in a blaze of glory. He'd ridden the big lightning right into hell.

Fire had broken out on both sides of the railroad fill by the time I reached the underpass, started by the hot wire. I braked my pickup to a shuddering stop. The thunder had died—the break had kicked out a switch somewhere along the line.

The crew was scrambling down from the pier form.

"Fire hoses!" I yelled. "Get 'em goin'!"

I hurried the men, driving them to greater speed. White hose unreeled along the track. Water roared from shining nozzles before I turned away. I went back to the road. The foreman met me there.

"Brush fire," I said. "It won't last long."

"I'm alive," he said in a shaken voice, "but it's just God's wonder. That wire didn't miss me a foot when it come down. I was on top of the form and—"

"Anybody hurt?" I asked.

"Nobody I know of." He was pale and sweating. He lifted a trembling hand to brush at his mouth. "Like I say, it's only God's wonder. That fool Andresson—"

"Where is he?" I asked.

"At the clamshell, I guess. I ain't seen him."

We walked that way. I could feel myself go tight inside. Andresson was dead—sure, but I wasn't supposed to know that. I was supposed to be sore. The guy had wrecked a power line and started a fire. He'd raised hell with my job. Okay, I thought, I will be sore. I cursed Andresson in a low, hoarse voice. The foreman heard me, and so did the pit man.

"Where's Andresson?" I asked.

The pit man jerked his head at the cab. "Up there," he said huskily. "I been sittin' down. That flash scared

the hell out of me. I ain't been—"

"Andresson," I called. "Come on down here."

There was no answering voice. Wind touched my face coldly. From a little distance came the dying crackle of the fire, the hiss and splatter of water. I called again and in the waiting silence that followed my words I heard the foreman mutter uneasily.

He said, "Somethin' must be wrong. He—"

"Nuts!" the pit man said. "Nothin' could happen, except maybe he's scared stiff—or drunk. Those cabs are insulated. He never even felt a tingle from that wire."

I said, "Where's a flashlight?"

The pit man said, "Hell! I never thought of that." He got a light from his pocket, passed it to me. Thumbing the switch, I sent the white ray into the cab.

I KNEW ANDRESSON was dead. I'd planned his death. I knew what the light would show—and yet the sight of him stopped the breath in my throat. Somehow he looked strange, as though he had winced away from great pain, and had frozen in that unnatural position. A sharp and pungent odor seeped from the cab—the heavy smell of burned human flesh.

The light shook in my hand. Behind me, the pit man swore in shocked surprise. The foreman said, "God's glory!" and his fingers bit deep into my arm.

"I'm going up there," I said.

I pulled away from the foreman's grip, put my foot on the step and heaved my weight up. At that moment Andresson's body gave way and he fell, toppling away from the seat. His head brushed my leg.

Hoarsely, the foreman said, "What's wrong?"

I knelt beside Andresson's body. I had to do that. Light struck his face, shone on teeth locked in a horrible grin. I fought down waves of nausea. I knew why he had moved: My weight had tipped the cab enough to destroy the balance of his body.

"Is he okay?" the pit man asked. "Is he—"

"He's dead," I said. "Electrocuted!"

"He can't be," the pit man said. "I seen guys hit power lines before. I seen—" He pushed close to the cab then, stared into Andresson's face. "I think—" he said weakly. "Look out—I'm sick."

"Dead," the foreman said. "Gone to his reward."

The old man was closer to the truth than he knew. I thought of that as I climbed out of the cab. Joe Andresson was gone, but somehow I didn't feel the relief I'd expected. I'd seen violent death before—you can't work construction and not see it. There'd been the night shift on the Beachport Tunnel job—wiped out in a single instant, trapped by splintering timber and rotten concrete. I'd had a hand in that. But the men had died because of a mistake, not because their death had been planned. This was different though. This was murder.

A cigarette gave me back my calm.

The pit man returned from the darkness, white faced. The rest of the crew stood in a whispering group close by.

"What do we do now?" the pit man asked.

I bent my head. "The cab was insulated," I said, as if thinking aloud. "Something must have happened to throw the juice into the cab. I wonder . . ."

Together we knelt in the dust beside the tracks of the clamshell. I turned the light up, probing the cab floor. I saw the wires I had so carefully fitted into place. Overload had burned away the insulation. The air was thick with the smell of melted rubber. I waited.

The pit man said, "Look! Up there!"

"What?" I said. "What do you see?"

"Wires!" he said harshly. "The cab was wired so the jolt went into the control handles. Some dirty rat fixed it that way to kill Joe Andresson!"

I said, "You better call the police."

* * *

A howling siren announced the arrival of the state troopers. There were two of them, brown, serious men in neat blue and shining leather. They listened quietly to my explanation. When I'd finished, the younger of the two—I later learned his name was Dave Parrish—gave me a thoughtful nod.

"This is a queer one," he said.

The other trooper grunted agreement.

The rest was routine, though it dragged through hours. The crew was questioned. The pit man admitted he'd greased the clamshell at the end of each shift, but denied knowledge of the wires. An official photographer took pictures of the body.

"What's your idea about this?" Parrish asked.

I said, "So far all I've got's a headache."

"Who could have done that wiring Job."

"Anybody," I said. "The clamshell's locked up from midnight till morning. There's no watchman here."

"Did Andresson have enemies?"

"Maybe," I said. "But I wouldn't know. I didn't live with the guy. I just hired him."

"Did anyone else run that machine?"

This was the question I'd been waiting for. I hesitated, making sure he'd remember my answer. "Whit Tucker is the regular operator. This was Andresson's first shift on it."

The trooper whistled. "What's Whit Tucker like?"

"He's about forty," I said. "A good operator." I went on, describing the dry, cautious Whitman Tucker, watching Parrish narrowly as I talked. He was lean with the hard leanness of a fighting man. His jaw was square-cut, firm . His eyes were blue and cold.

"Let me get this straight," he said. "Tucker ran this machine regularly. The man who was killed had never worked on it before."

"That's right," I said.

"Who knew Andresson would work here tonight?"

I looked at him steadily. "I did. I knew it about twenty minutes before the shift went to work. Whit Tucker reported sick. Andresson usually works the shovel in the gravel pit, but this was more important. I sent him here."

"His being here was an accident then?"

I said, "You might call it that."

The pattern was building in Dave Parrish's mind. Already his thoughts were turning in the direction I'd planned. Soon he'd learn the wiring had been done for some days, and then he'd swear the trap had been set to kill Whitman Tucker.

Whitman Tucker was thin, ugly and bald. He was old beyond his years. He was over-cautious. He still had the first dime he'd ever earned, and most of the rest of them. He didn't drink or smoke. For thirty-eight of his forty years he'd been as cold as a mummy; he'd had about that much life. Then Tootles came along.

She was small, beautifully put together, and blonde at the moment. She was years younger than Whitman Tucker. She'd danced in a dozen cheap shows; she was doing a bad strip act when Tucker found her. Whit Tucker must have been kind in his fumbling way. He'd offered security. He had money and a fistful of insurance policies. Tootles had married him.

He bought a trailer and they lived near the job. We saw her there, blonde, luscious, and very sure of herself, and we wondered. Tootles and Whitman Tucker—a strip-tease dancer and a mummy. They were the opposite of each other in everything. Tucker, as though ashamed of his one burst of spending, clung to the pennies as only Tucker could. They fought often. And the job knew they fought, for Tootles' voice had carrying power.

Thus matters stood when Tommy Bale moved his trailer in beside Tucker's. Bale was an electrician—a solidly built, tanned giant. He was young. He had a lazy grin and hair that lay close to his skull in damp curls. Again the job watched and wondered, but this time the wonder was tinged with knowing laughter. . . .

"Maybe," said Parrish, and his eyes were shiny with thought. "Maybe I'd better have a talk with this man Tucker."

THROUGH THE NEXT two days I watched the thing take shape. The job was alive with whispers. The state trooper had talked to Tucker. He'd questioned Tootles for three hours. He'd spent an hour in the equipment shed where Bale kept his tools and supplies.

At noon the third day Parrish came hunting me. I was watching the paving crew pour an intersection and Parrish stood beside me, talking against the thunder of many motors, the shouting confusion.

He said, "How long's Tucker worked for you?"

"A couple of years."

He wrote that carefully in a note book. "Bale?"

"Six or seven months," I said.

He wrote something more in his notebook, swore sharply, and then fumbled in his pockets. "I busted my pencil," he said. "I've left my knife home."

I said, "Here. Use mine."

I gave him the knife.

"The wiring on that clamshell was done a week or more before Andresson was killed," he said. "Tucker rubbed elbows with death for a week and didn't know it."

"He was damn lucky," I said.

"Yes," he said. "Here's your knife."

* * *

I was alone in the time shack, late that same evening, when Trooper Dave Parrish returned.

"I've got this case wrapped up," he said.

I looked at him, waiting.

The ever-present notebook was in his hand. He consulted it, and then eyed me gravely. "You've got a big job, McClane. Your salary's big, isn't it?"

"It'll do," I said.

But I wondered at this turn of thought. Parrish couldn't know anything that implicated me.

"You earn a lot of money," said Parrish, "but you don't own a car. I wondered about that. You're a construction man, McClane. The rest of these construction men either have big cars or they have money in the bank. You have neither. You're not a chaser; you don't gamble. What happens to your money, McClane?"

"Maybe I keep it in a sock," I said.

"And maybe you've been blackmailed."

"That's a fine hop dream," I said.

"Andresson worked for you for a long time."

"Plenty of men have," I said. "So what?"

"That's what I asked myself," he said. "You would talk about some things and you wouldn't talk about others. That didn't fit, McClane. You're tight-mouthed and you've got the soul of a miser. You're broke, and that made no sense. You tried to steer me, tried to tie this kill to Bale and the blonde. And that was cockeyed. I hate a rat like you, McClane."

"What are you getting at?" I demanded.

"You murdered Joe Andresson!"

"Can you prove that?" I said.

A hard smile pulled at his mouth. "We couldn't," he said, "but we can now!" He got a slip of paper from his pocket. "I was sure you were too tight to throw away the knife you used on that wiring job. I broke my pencil to get a look at your knife, remember? I scraped some sticky rubber off the blade. I sent it to the lab."

His voice ran on but I didn't hear the words. I knew the laboratory could prove the rubber on my knife was the same as the insulation of the wire on the clamshell! I was trapped! I'd carried that knife ten years. The habit of carefully putting it back in my pocket—had caught me! ♦ ♦ ♦

"No person," says the Fifth Amendment to our Constitution, "shall be compelled in any criminal case to be a witness against himself." With this declaration our Founding Fathers hoped forever to rid this country of the torture rack and the age-old custom, then still prevalent all over the world, of "solving" crimes by physically squeezing confessions out of the weak and friendless. But that the third degree still exists, no informed American can doubt; and that its horrors have not been magnified, Paul Kingston here shows in—

The Scream-Proof Cell

By PAUL KINGSTON

THE HEADLINES ALONE couldn't have dragged Eddie Fallon from his morning coffee, and the column of print on the right-hand side of the paper wouldn't have meant much to him if it hadn't been for the letter Glory had.

The paper said, "An unidentified assailant shot and killed Detective James V. Quillan on the victim's porch early this morning. There were no witnesses. The dead man's wife heard the shots, ran downstairs . . ." That was about all, and who cared about Quillan's being killed? Eddie would be the last one to mourn that particular cop's death. No, not the last. The second to the last. The last one would have been his older brother, Joe. Eddie felt icy in the spine as he stared at his paper.

Glory was Joe's girl. She sang low, throaty songs in a night club, and because he was exiled thousands of miles away in Mexico, she sang the songs to Joe. But every man in the night club who leaned forward, staring wide-eyed at the slinky silk of Glory's gown, thought she was singing it to him, and loved it. She had brownish hair that curled without benefit of beauty parlor, and under that form-fitting dress she didn't need any fake fronts, either. She was an eyeful, and a nice kid, but even with Joe lost to her somewhere in Mexico, she wouldn't give any other male a tumble. Not even Eddie, although

they lived in the same apartment building and always had breakfast together before Eddie started out to work.

Eddie was twenty-four, slim, dark-haired, with honest grey eyes. He'd had an average kind of middle-class childhood with his two brothers, and he and Marvin had been willing to work for their living. Now Eddie drove a parcel delivery truck on the afternoon shift, and had a few thousand dollars in a savings account waiting for the time to buy a house. He had not given up hope that Glory would forget Joe and marry him and raise some kids, but when Quillan got himself cooling in the morgue as Eddie's coffee was cooling under the morning paper, that brought Joe back to mind, and their brother Marvin, too.

Eddie laid the paper down and reached back into the cabinet for the whiskey bottle Glory kept on hand for guests. Sometimes you need a breakfast of whiskey. He heard the steps on the stairs even as he poured it. He stuck the bottle back, drank the stuff down, and looked at Glory across the table. His hand was trembling. He tried to hold it still.

Glory had on a puffy dressing gown, and her hair was tumbling over her shoulders, beautiful as usual, but her eyes were a frightened blue, and her hand trembled so that the cup rattled in the saucer. She was connecting the letter with the headlines, too.

"They're coming," Eddie said, choking a little on the early rawness of the whiskey, as he nodded towards the door. She stopped trying at the coffee.

"Eddie," she said. "Eddie . . ."

He stood up and kissed her on the forehead. Even then, with those heavy steps on the stairs, he wanted to grab her and kiss her where it meant something, but she was Joe's, and so he didn't. All he wanted for her was happiness, and if she was happier waiting for the impossible than living with facts—well, he'd help her do that, too. Love is not always selfish.

The feet had stopped now. Knuckles were banging on the door. Eddie still had a hand in Glory's hair. "Don't worry," he said. "I won't say anything." She thanked him with her eyes. "But I'm a truck driver," he said. "Not a fiddle player. They won't railroad me, either."

Marvin had been a violinist. A kind, shy sort of kid, never strong, like Eddie, and never lawless, like Joe.

Eddie hurried to the door so they wouldn't break it down. He hoped the neighbors hadn't heard. It wouldn't be pleasant for Glory, anyway. He slipped back the latch and let them in. "You don't have to bust the damned door," he said, not keeping the hate from his voice. The one in civilian clothes he knew. A buddy of Quillan's, a part of the dirty political setup the city had been saddled with for four years. His name was Burthin. The other one was just an ordinary harness bull, the kind that stayed in uniform year

after year no matter who ran City Hall. Burthin, the detective. had straight black hair and eyebrows like a thatched roof, so close together they touched.

He grabbed Eddie by the arm, ran a dirty-fingernailed hand over him looking for a gun, and stuck cuffs on his wrists. "So you finally got up nerve enough to start keeping your promise, eh?" he said, in a kind of a snarl.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Eddie said, but he knew, all right. When they'd got Marvin on that cop-killing he hadn't done, Eddie swore he'd blast all three of the dicks to hell. They all got promoted on the deal, but even then Eddie never shot any of them. Quillan, Burthin and Saddo.

"Two years to get your nerve up, eh?" Burthin snarled again, and when Eddie didn't answer he gave him a flat hand across the face that made his scalp tingle. Burthin had a hand like the rump of a goat. Glory leaped at him then, her fingernails flying, and she got a good rake at his face before the blue uniform pulled her off.

"You cops are all alike!" she yelled, her eyes like angry torches. "Tie a man's hands and then beat him! First Marvin and now Eddie. . . ." The cop in uniform raised a hand, warning her to shut up, and she started to cry, furious, frustrated sobs. Eddie clutched his fingers together and raised both handcuffed hands to ease his feelings on Burthin's jaw, but the man knocked them aside with one big paw and jerked Eddie toward the door. The cop came along.

"Call Jimmy Kells," Eddie hollered back at Glory. "He hates this bunch of grafters as much as we do. . . ." Burthin had him across the teeth that time, and he spat blood on the stairs as they pushed him down. He might be dead before Glory even got Jimmy on the phone. Jimmy Kells ran a column in the *Herald*, the city's most helpful propaganda sheet working for a return of more or less honest city government. Jimmy Kells, like every other male in town who'd ever heard her sing, would do cartwheels on a griddle for Glory.

EDDIE HADN'T MUCH hope, though, because once they had their minds made up he'd killed Quillan, there wouldn't be enough left of him to spring out of the cell. Cop-killers always got pushed around. He'd seen Marvin when they got done with him, and he'd confessed to killing that cop at the jewelry store holdup. He'd been playing the violin the night of the holdup, working over something for the church. Eddie knew. He was there with him. But they didn't think much of brother-for-brother evidence in court. Joe was out that night—he was usually out—and after the robbery they never saw him again, or heard from him, either, until the letter came to Glory.

Burthin threw Eddie into the car, and the driver turned on his siren, although as far as Eddie was concerned they were in no hurry, and a lot of the people in the neighborhood would

just as soon have finished their morning's sleep. When they got to the jail they threw him into a cell, but they took the cuffs off first. Eddie was playing it dumb. There'd be plenty of questions later, he knew. He even ran a finger around his teeth, remembering that Marvin's mouth hadn't looked so good by the time they sent him up. "He fell down the stairs," they haid said. Eddie wondered how may flights they'd give him. Marvin looked as if he'd fallen off the City Hall roof. They let him have his violin in the prison, but he only touched it on the last day, and then he couldn't play it any more.

Saddo, the other dick of the trio, came to the cell an hour later. Those three, the ex-bodyguards of the crooked mayor—would the voters never wise up to this outfit?

"I want to have a little visit with you," Saddo said, his little mouth working around the words as if he hated to part with them. "Like a cigarette?" Eddie took it.

Saddo had his left hand behind his back. He put the cigarettes away, pulled out a big kitchen match with the right hand, scratched it on the concrete wall, and lighted Eddie's cigarette. Eddie was wary. With a quick movement, Saddo buried the burning match in his neck, and Eddie swung a left at the detective's jaw. Then he saw why Saddo had the hand behind him.

Saddo whirled a blackjack so fast Eddie barely ducked in time. It caught him on top of the head, a grazing blow that dizzied him. Saddo pushed him in the chest and he sat heavily onto the cot, his head feeling as if he'd been caught in a building collapse.

Saddo grinned with his little mouth. "So you finally killed Quillan?" he said, soft as a damned cat. "Want another cigarette? You seem to have dropped this one."

"Go to hell," Eddie said. "I never killed Quillan and you know it." He wouldn't break. He gritted his teeth. Let them ask!

Saddo shrugged his wide shoulders, a gesture that did not seem to move his back at all. He was hunched a little: a body like a barrel of garbage, little legs, a tiny head, with a mouth like a coiled worm. "An efficient police department," he said, "is a big help to a mayor. We got it."

"You're a bunch of crooks," Eddie said, so furious he trembled, and yet helpless to beat the guy to a pulp. "And when the city gets wise, they'll throw you out so fast—"

Saddo was swinging the blackjack, back and forth, like a pendulum. Eddie couldn't take his eyes off it.

"Stand up," Saddo said. Eddie did.

"Where'd you stash the rod?" Saddo asked, his voice as soft as his eyes were hard. "Where'd you toss it after you shot Quillan in the belly? You know what it feels like to be shot in the belly?" The blackjack swung, catching Eddie just above the navel, and this time he couldn't control his fists any longer. Through a sick haze he gave the detective a long one with the right, smack on the jaw, and before the blackjack was raised

again he jabbed Saddo with the left, then caught the blackjack on his right wrist, with a pain that jarred along the arm clear to the elbow, as if the bone were smashed in a thousand places and every one the center of pain itself.

Eddie planted another left where it would do the most good, right on the little mouth, and thought he felt the teeth give. There was satisfaction in that, even as the blackjack caught him alongside the head and the cell exploded into darkness.

When Eddie awoke he was lying on the cot, and he ached all over. In the tenderest places he hurt so much he was nearly sick. Saddo hadn't hit him there while he was conscious, he knew. The dog's brother had worked him over, enjoying the dirtiest kind of fighting while Eddie was unconscious. Eddie vowed then to kill Saddo, if they let him live long enough.

That was all he wanted now, just time enough to kill Saddo. They'd burn him for it, in the same electric chair that had taken the life of Marvin, but he'd burn with a laugh on his lips thinking about how Saddo had died.

IT WAS WHILE he lay there aching and planning, in his mind beating Saddo's face with vengeful fists, cutting his belly apart with a knife, blowing his brains out with a gun, that they came to get him. The key turned in the lock. It was another blue uniform. The cop jerked his thumb.

"C'mon.' He had to help Eddie to his feet. "You fell down the stairs," he said. "Better remember it." He made him walk in front, staggering more than walking, down the hall, up the stairs, and into the big room. A lot of City Hall parasites were smoking and missing the spittoons. One of the parasites made Eddie sign a paper. He couldn't read it. His eyes were too hurt to focus. They gave him back his watch and billfold, fountain pen, other stuff. The cop in the uniform jerked his thumb towards the sunlight streaming dustily through the door. Eddie stumbled out into it, not understanding.

Jimmy Kells was waiting. He helped Eddie into his car, parked by the "No Parking" sign. "I'll kill him," Eddie said. "I'm going to kill Saddo. They killed Marvin and I promised I'd shoot them, all three. Joe—*somebody*—beat me to Quillan, but I'll get Saddo and Burthin." He knew his talk was crazy, incoherent.

Jimmy was slight, blond, with a face tired—as a newspaperman's is likely to get—of looking at man's treatment of man. "You won't do anything of the kind," he said. "If you hadn't threatened them two years ago you wouldn't be here now looking as if you'd spent the morning in a cement mixer. Anyway, you won't kill Burthin. How the devil do you think I got you sprung?"

They were driving down Market Street, heading toward Eddie's apartment. "What the hell are you talking about, Jimmy?" Eddie said, fumbling with a flask Jimmy had passed

over to him. It was brandy. He drank about a third of it.

"I had the boss call the cops and tell them if they didn't turn you out he was going to bust the paper loose on them. He's going to do it anyway, but he didn't say that." Jimmy frowned, shaking his head. "If only we had something big. We'd clean them out, this election. Something that would rouse the people would do it."

"I don't get it. The cops didn't turn me loose because they were afraid of your paper." Eddie's head was still swimming.

Jimmy nodded. "Sure, but this helped: Burthin walked into a garage full of bullets a couple of hours ago, while you were taking a beating."

"I fell down the stairs," Eddie said bitterly, and then the import of Jimmy's statement hit him. "Who . . .?" as if he didn't know.

"Joe, of course," said Jimmy. "It's all right. Glory told me there was a letter. I told her to burn it."

"Now what?" Eddie asked, his head whirling still.

"With Burthin shot while you were in jail, they had no right to hold you for the Quillan job."

"Now what?" Eddie repeated idiotically.

"All I give a damn about is two things," said Jimmy, gripping the wheel hard and scooting between a couple of trucks. "Glory's happiness and clearing this bunch of crooks from City Hall." He drove for a minute without saying anything more, and then he turned to look at Eddie briefly with his shrewd eyes.

"All right," Eddie said. "But I'm closer than you are, Jimmy."

Kells nodded, a little sadly, Eddie thought. "I know that. But Joe's the one she wants, record and all. Lord, that girl knows he held up the jewelry store, she knows he bumped off that cop two years ago, and she knows he was always on the wrong side of the law before that. Still, she wants to go to Mexico with him!" Jimmy shook his head, marveling. "What was in that letter?"

Eddie unscrewed the cap off the brandy and took another swallow. "Not much," he said. "Joe beat it after the jewelry deal, figuring if he was out of the way Glory'd marry me. He always said he was no good. He never got in touch in all this time, until that letter to Glory. In it he said something like, 'I just heard that Saddo, Burthin and Quillan beat Marvin into taking the rap for the cop I got. I'm coming back to even up the score, but I can't face Eddie after letting Marvin down. He'd never believe I didn't know about it. I'm sorry I'm no good, Glory, but my star was wrong. I've been on the square since I got to Mexico, but that doesn't rub out the other. Marry Eddie, will you? I figured you had.' That's about all."

"All right," said Jimmy. "*You* tell *me,* what now?"

"Simple," Eddie said, not believing it was simple at all. "I find Joe, tell him she loves him and won't be happy with anybody else. If he has a straight deal in Mexico, then that's where they

both belong." Eddie took another swig of the brandy. He still needed it. "He thinks we believe he knew about Marvin taking the rap." He turned serious eyes to Jimmy. "Most of all, Jimmy, we got to explain that it's all right, that we know he didn't know about it or he'd have burned for the kid."

"How do you plan to find Joe?" Jimmy asked, "This is one hell of a big town."

"I stay with Saddo," said Eddie, shrugging. "They'll have cops around him now, but if I stick close and can get to Joe before he gets to Saddo—"

"The cops'll shoot the first guy they see following Saddo," said Jimmy.

"I got to take that chance," said Eddie. They were in front of the apartment.

"Listen," said Jimmy, "I'd like to marry Glory myself, you know that. But I don't want it this way."

"Go to hell," said Eddie, putting the brandy flask in the glove compartment.

"Listen," said Jimmy, "don't carry a gun."

"Remember what I promised about Saddo," said Eddie, gritting his teeth. "If I get him first, Joe'll go to see Glory and it will still work out all right."

"Because you'll be dead," Jimmy said.

"Go back to your typewriter, Jimmy," said Eddie, knowing he wouldn't. Jimmy made a living out of shadowing trouble.

CORPSE WANTED

IF YOU SHARE the popular notion that authorities have to prove somebody's been killed in order to hang you for murder, banish the naive idea. On the night of March 8, 1900, Alma Nesbitt and her mother, strangers to Hood River, Oregon, were driven at their request to the homestead of one Norman Williams. No one ever saw the two women again. Five years later Williams was hanged for their murder.

The Oregon Supreme Court said of the case: "No universal rule can be laid down in regard to the proof of the corpus delicti. . . ."

Williams mounted the gallows firmly, confided to the executioner, "You're hanging an innocent man."

The case can be, and has been, cited as a precedent in every state of the Union by prosecutors with corpus delicti troubles.

IN EDDIE'S LITTLE efficiency apartment he put on a clean suit and stuck a little automatic in his pocket. He had got it a year or so ago when parcel trucks were being stuck up right and left, but he hadn't carried it for so long it was dusty, and his permit had run out months ago. He wanted to soak the soreness out of his body in a tub full of hot water, and let Glory apply some liniment and sympathy, but there wasn't time. Joe would know his time was limited now, and he'd try for Saddo in a hurry.

Eddie gulped down a few aspirins to take the pain away from his battered body, and hurried back downstairs. There was a bus coming and he caught it back to City Hall. There was a restaurant across from the main entrance, a little joint where they sold greasy hamburgers and good coffee. He got some coffee and sat at the counter where he could watch through the window.

It was about four in the afternoon. He'd killed a lot of time falling down those stairs in the jail. He was suddenly hungry. There hadn't been any breakfast or lunch, either. The smell of the hamburgers was enough to take away a man's appetite, so he ordered a cheese sandwich and munched on it. It tasted like old wall paper, and it was hard to eat because of the soreness in his jaw, but it was something to keep his mind busy. He didn't take his eyes off the City Hall steps long enough to look at his coffee. He spilled it, fumbling, and the counterman complained as he mopped it up. Eddie could see him out of the corner of his eye, slopping a towel around.

He looked at the cup the next time he wanted a sip, and when he turned back to the window he saw Joe. There was no mistaking him. He was tall, with the rangy walk of a long-legged man who is always conscious of his height, and he still wore a soft, dark hat. Eddie threw down half a dollar or so—all the change in his pocket, and scooted out of the beanery, his heart pumping like a piston.

Joe was standing on the side of the steps, looking through a little book, like a tourist learning the sights. But one hand was in his coat pocket, and Eddie knew he wasn't fingering his change. He heard the clock strike in the tower—four o'clock. None of the big shots working on taxpayers' money ever stuck around after four. Joe would know that, too, of course. Eddie started to run, and people stared at him.

On the other side of the square he saw another figure out of the corner of his eye. It could have been Jimmy Kells, but he didn't check. He kept his eyes on Joe. Eddie was at the bottom of the steps when two cops came out, looked around, motioned, and Saddo came out between them. Eddie was making the steps four at a time now, but Joe was closer than he was, still intent on his book, with a hand still in his pocket.

Then Saddo saw Eddie running up the steps and stopped, pointing. Apparently he figured Eddie was about to get him, because the two bluecoats clawed for guns, and then Joe threw his book into the air, whirled, and started shooting. He didn't even take the gun from his pocket, just stood there, blazing away, slowly, accurately, putting at least four into the body of Saddo before the police turned from Eddie to bring him down. They both fired, several times, but Eddie could hear their bullets sing out over the city, after chipping the marble steps. Heedless of their shooting, Eddie leaped to Joe's side as he fell sprawling on the steps. They had finally got him.

Joe looked up at Eddie, holding Joe in his arms, the blood from his torn chest warm on Eddie's legs. "Look," Eddie said, trying to keep his voice level, and knowing he had to say it fast now. "We know you didn't know about Marvin. It's all right. He never knew you killed that cop." You couldn't have Joe worrying through all eternity about it. Joe smiled, the same old careless smile Eddie remembered from their youth.

His breath was a wheeze, and his speech was difficult. "Thanks, kid," he said. "I'm glad." One of the cops was kneeling beside them now, and hazily Eddie made out the faces of Jimmy and Glory and a crowd of death-chasers.

"Tell the truth now," said Jimmy to Joe. "Tell it here with witnesses. We can use it."

Joe grinned again, and Eddie knew it would be his last grin.

"I killed the cop they framed Marvin for," he said. "At the jewelry store. I didn't mean to kill him, but I did it. My gun'll check with the bullets they found in him." He panted, then went on. "I killed Quillan, Burthin and Saddo because they tortured a confession out of Marvin and murdered him in the chair and I had to even it up. Now print that, Jimmy, and get some changes made in City Hall." It was hard for him to keep going now, but he said a couple more words. He said them to Glory. "Eddie's a good guy," he said. "Marry him." Then he died.

Jimmy drove Glory and Eddie home. They didn't say anything for a while, then Jimmy spoke. "Joe was no angel, but the speech he just made will help us clean up the city, so maybe he'll end up with a halo, yet."

Glory had Eddie's hand in hers. She was weeping softly, but he knew that these tears would not go on forever. ♦ ♦ ♦

PUNISHMENT TO FIT THE CRIME

- FOR SHOOTING STANLEY MONTERO and his fianceé as they were sitting in a car, Ernest A. Dias was sentenced in Oakland, California, to be hanged twice.

  There have been other curious sentences imposed. For example, Stavisky, the swindler, was sentenced to seven years' imprisonment by a French court, although he was dead. Seefeld, the murderer, was given twelve separate death sentences by a court in Germany.

  The threat of strange punishment was always present at a temple of justice known as the "Lawless Court" which held sway over part of England in feudal times. This court was held at midnight, and the tenants of the land were obliged to attend. Should one of them be late, his land was taken away in punishment. Only once, as far as is known, was anyone late in getting to the "Lawless Court."

High above the Rio Grande you can see the silver flashes of their wings as airliners and private planes ply back and forth across the border, carrying passengers and perishable foodstuffs and copies of the New York Times *and all the other commodities that will not wait for the morrow but must be hastened through the clouds today. And who will say which flashes glance off planes carrying items stamped "Approved" by the Mexican and United States governments—and which carry human freight stealing into a country that has banned their entrance, or little packages of white powder . . . good for happy dreams on the journey to Hell . . . ?*

Killer in the Clouds

By T. T. FLYNN

IT'S A LONG ride from Chicago to Hollywood, even on the Santa Fé, and I hadn't figured that Frances Gunn and the circus would break it up. But they did. Right at Albuquerque.

The black transcontinental Pullmans were pulled up before the low grey-stucco hotel and station buildings. Passengers, townspeople, Mexicans, Indians and sombreroed ranchers were milling beside the train when I heard my name called.

I didn't like the sound of it. I was envisioning the Brown Derby, Cocoanut Grove, and what-have-you in Ali Baba town, even though I was heading there on Blaine Agency business, and I didn't feel like reading any telegrams that might head me elsewhere. But a man's got to make a living. I looked to see who was calling me.

It was a telegraph boy. I traded him a dime for the envelope—and met this Frances Gunn in the message from Lew Ryster, our branch manager at Hollywood.

THOMPSON NEW YORK AUTHORIZES ME DIRECT YOU FORGET CURRENT CASE BRINGING YOU

HOLLYWOOD STOP LEAVE TRAIN AT ALBUQUERQUE REGISTER ALVARADO HOTEL WAIT ARRIVAL BLAINE CLIENT MISS FRANCES GUNN COMING ALBUQUERQUE BY PLANE STOP SYMPATHETICALLY INVESTIGATE CIRCUS STOP FURTHERMORE REMEMBER YOU SUPPOSED TO BE GENTLEMAN STOP IF IN DOUBT ABOUT MEANING TELEPHONE ME STOP WIRE RECEIPT THIS MESSAGE SIGNED
RYSTER

The engine bell began to ring.

"All aboard!" called one of the trainmen.

I damned Lew Ryster and his bright ideas, jammed the telegram in my pocket and dashed for my luggage.

The train was pulling out when I stalked into the station telegraph office and replied to Ryster.

AM I BLAINE AGENCY INVESTIGATOR OR GIGOLO STOP WHATS SUSPICIOUS ABOUT WHAT CIRCUS STOP WHO SAID I WAS A GENTLEMAN ANYWAY STOP HAVE I FORGOTTEN THAT DIRTY DOUBLECROSS AT CATALINA TWO YEARS AGO STOP IF IN ANY DOUBT ABOUT MY MEANING TAKE THE NEXT PLANE TO ALBUQUERQUE OR DON'T BLAME ME SIGNED
MIKE HARRIS

"Collect," I directed, and walked along the platform to register at the Alvarado, the Harvey House located beside the station.

It was mid-afternoon, and I was back in the Alvarado lobby after a walk, when Lew's reply came.

CHISELER STOP I KNOW MORE THAN ONE WAY TO CURE AN EGG SUCKING DOG STOP MEET EIGHT SOMETHING PLANE SIGNED
RYSTER

So there we were, all friendly and out in the open; pals—and watch your throat when the lights went out if there was a blonde on the horizon.

After dinner I dented the expense account for a taxi and drove across the Rio Grande to the airport on the desert-like mesa across the river.

I was pretty mad.

THE NEWARK-BOUND plane came in from the west with exhausts spitting blue flame, and wing floodlights glaring as the plane landed and taxied ahead of a miniature dust storm to the concrete apron and marquee in front of the waiting room.

I hoped for the best as a fat man emerged—then a figure that would have beached a thousand ships if they had spotted her on the beach—and a minister—and a lean, nervous, dapper man with a cigar whom I recognized as Ben Diamond, ace director for Tropical Films—and two more of these gorgeous Hollywood orchids who were either waitresses about to be movie queens or movie queens about to be waitresses.

Then the pilot, business-like, hurried—and I groaned and wondered which of those face-of-gold and head-of-ivory camera cats Mike Harris had been hooked to welcome.

The first one sailed by me, and I recognized her as Lucille Le Marr, who wouldn't wipe her feet on Lew Ryster with her four-thousand-a-week contract with Tropical Films.

The other two waited for the pilot and surrounded him; and finally the co-pilot emerged with a last passen-

ger. He was carrying her striped traveling case. A fatuous smile was on his face and he looked as if he didn't know whether he had landed or not.

She was like that, that demure, smartly simple girl in the neat suit with a little flaring jacket that came only halfway to her waist.

She looked about doubtfully, and was suddenly relieved when she reached the waiting room doorway. "Mr. Harris?" she asked, pausing.

"Right," I said. "I was wondering if you'd missed the plane, Miss Gunn." I took her bag from the co-pilot. "I've a taxi waiting outside."

She gave him the last half of her smile. "You've made the trip *such* a pleasure, Mr. Logan."

We left him dizzy and desolated, and as the taxi started over the graveled airport road, I confessed, "Ryster's telegram wasn't very clear. He spoke of a circus and trouble. I gather I'm to put myself at your disposal, Miss Gunn."

"You're not going to like it, I know," she said doubtfully. "You see, the circus is playing at Braza City, Texas, tomorrow and next day, and then going on to Royalton. We'll have to go there. They're both oil towns, I understand."

"Both," I said. "And booming. One of our men was telling me about Braza City not long ago. It's mushroomed from nothing to one of the biggest little towns in West Texas. And so we're going to Texas? What's wrong with the circus?"

She sounded worried now, and more doubtful. She spoke slowly.

"It's my circus—John Gunn's Mammoth Circus and Wild West Show. My uncle, John Gunn, died about a month ago and willed it to me. I don't know much about a circus and I don't want to sell, but Bill Lambert, my lawyer, seems to think something is wrong, by his telegram."

"Your lawyer's with the circus?"

"Yes."

"Did you send him?"

"Well, yes. Bill's awfully accommodating. He said he'd take care of everything."

"And who wants you to sell your circus?"

"A man named Clyde Pepperday, who's managing the circus. He owns some of it—about twenty percent. He was a sort of a partner with Uncle John."

"Pepperday owns a fifth and wants to buy the rest; he knows how to run the circus and you don't seem to. Anything wrong with that?"

She said slowly, "No-o-o. The week after Uncle John died, Mr. Pepperday called me up on long distance. He said the circus wasn't making much money and I'd better sell out to him."

"And you wouldn't?"

"He wanted to buy on credit," she told me uncertainly. "And I've heard Uncle John say Pepperday was the crookedest man west of the Atlantic. Uncle John said if you didn't keep your mouth closed, Pepperday would steal your teeth and charge you for the stealing."

"Which seems to cover friend Pep-

perday. Why was your uncle partners with him?"

"I think Uncle needed some money once and Pepperday inherited some about that time." Frances Gunn laughed wryly. "All I heard Uncle John say was that Pepperday was so crooked it was fun trying to outsmart him. It kept you on your toes."

"So you sent your lawyer to watch Pepperday," I guessed.

"Not exactly, Mr. Harris. I sent a detective to watch Mr. Pepperday, but the detective was killed. Bill Lambert said he'd go and see what I'd better do."

"The detective was killed?" I said, lifting an eyebrow in the dark cab. "So—"

"It was an accident. I felt as if I were responsible, but Bill and Mr. Ryster both said I mustn't think so. A truck ran over the man one night. The circus travels in trucks—big ones. Bill Lambert told me he would see about the accident while he was looking at the circus books and deciding what I'd better do."

"And what," I asked, "did Bill decide?"

"Bill sent me a queer telegram," she told me. "He asked for a detective who could fly an airplane, jump in a parachute, fill in as a stunt man and do detective work secretly while he was traveling with the show. Bill said there was a job waiting for such a man. And Mr. Ryster told me you had a pilot's license, Mr. Harris, and could use a parachute, and were just the man for the job."

"So that's how it is," I mused. "All I've got to do is fly an airplane, jump in a parachute, tackle a stunt man's tricks—and look out for more trucks. No wonder Lew Ryster thought of me. Well, I've got my pilot's license in my suitcase."

She said with relief, "You'll do it then? Mr. Ryster wasn't sure you would."

"Good old Lew," I said. "I've only got one neck, Miss Gunn—and we might as well use it while it lasts. Now what do we do?"

AT NOON THE next day a bus from El Paso put me in Braza City. Frances Gunn had stayed over a day in El Paso so we wouldn't arrive together. I'd tried to ease her back to Hollywood. That circus truck that had pancaked her detective sounded screwy to me. A crooked partner who owned one-fifth of the circus and was hot for the other four-fifths wasn't soothing syrup.

But she had shown a determined streak I hadn't suspected.

"If anything is wrong," she had told me firmly, "I'll get to the bottom of it before I go home. You go ahead, Mr. Harris, and I'll follow as if I'd never seen you before. Bill Lambert's there, and we'll find out what this is all about."

Which left me wondering how helpless, demure and naive little Frances was after all. . . .

Braza City was a typical oil town on the boom, hair on its chest, easy money in its pockets, the stench of crude oil and natural gas in the air,

and no time for anyone who couldn't jump fast and gouge in the clinches.

The landscape was mesquite, sagebrush, greasewood, cactus, dust and rolling semi-desert, with little lazy-looking mountains poking up in the vast hazy distance around the horizon.

The bus bumped and lurched twenty miles off the highway over a rough, dusty oil field road. Miles from Braza City, the steel oil derrick became visible. A plume of black smoke edged the brassy sky. We came nearer and the white circus tents loomed above the gray mesquite. Lumbering oil field trucks roared past us in clouds of dust. We passed drilling crews sinking new wells; and the bus dumped eleven of us out before a two-story frame hotel that dominated a wide, dusty street lined with frame, tarpaper, adobe and galvanized-iron buildings. Braza City swallowed us for better or worse.

I paid two prices for a hot cubbyhole room in the Braza Hotel, got coffee, a sandwich and pie at the lunch counter off the lobby—and left my pie halfeaten when a crowd formed outside and calliope music shrilled and pulsed down the street.

From the curb I watched the parade pass—truck motors growling in low gear, six elephants padding majestically under rocking howdahs, clowns grimacing, beauties in silk tights bowing and smiling, the Wild West troupe of cowboys, cowgirls, and bored impassive Indians curbing nervous horses.

Not a bad outfit, this John Gunn's Mammoth Circus and Wild West Show. It was a mud show, traveling in trucks, but it would have made a respectable rail show. Three rings, anyway, I judged, with all the trimmings.

Two silver-winged airplanes were cutting figures low overhead, looping, barrel-rolling, spinning, d i v i n g, zooming. Nice ships, with power to spare. I put a crick in my neck looking up at them and wondering which one Mike Harris was due to fall out of and hope his chute had been properly packed.

Then I lighted a cigarette and trailed the parade to the show lot on the edge of town. The midway was already crowded; a spieler was ballyhooing from the pit show platform; grease stands were doing a rushing business in hot dogs, hamburgers and cold drinks. I wandered over beyond the tents to a flying field which had been roughed out from the greasewood and cactus.

The two planes were already hopping passengers for two bucks a jump; one was taking off as I got there and the other was coming in to land, and a sharp-faced young man was shouting through a megaphone:

"Two dollars a ride, folks—two for three dollars! Take a ride before the show! How many, mister?" he asked huskily, lowering the megaphone as I stepped out of the crowd.

"What's the chance of landing a job hopping a ship?" I asked.

He looked me over. "Got your papers in order?"

"Yeah."

"Can you walk a wing and dive?"

"I can do anything if it means cakes and coffee."

He grinned. "Ask for Pepperday at the ticket wagon. He'll probably be there; he's the boss."

MY QUERY AT the red ticket wagon brought Pepperday out into the sunshine. A lanky man with a black mustache, shirt sleeves held up rubber bands, a wide-brimmed black hat set back on his head, he was chewing gum, looked good-natured, drawled when he spoke—and his sleepy-lidded stare had a cold directness that made me believe all the little girl from Hollywood had said about him.

"Sixty a week and board," he offered, handing back my pilot's license. "One jump a day and any stunting Rick Lloyd needs."

"Who's Lloyd?" I asked.

"He's in charge of the planes," said Pepperday, still looking me over with the cold, sleepy-lidded stare. It made me nervous, made me wonder what the man was thinking about.

"Sixty a week isn't laundry money," I bargained. "How about eighty?"

"Sixty or nothing," he said flatly. "Make up your mind; I'm busy."

"Sold," I surrendered.

"See Lloyd when he brings his plane in," Pepperday directed, turning back to the ticket wagon.

So I saw Lloyd when he brought his plane in for gas. It was a twin-cockpit job, sleek, fairly new, with an oversized motor in the nose that shouted speed, more speed and power to waste for stunting.

The pilot who bounced out and walked away cupping a match to a cigarette had a smiling plump face, a genial air as he waved to the crowd.

Curly black hair clung damply to his forehead and he smiled as he inspected my license.

"Harris, huh? Where you from?"

"Here and there," I grinned.

"Where you been flying?"

"The last time I hopped for a pay check was a year and a half ago in Hollywood—flying a crate in Metro's *Cloudbusters of Sin*."

Which was the truth—only it was Blaine Agency business and another story that had put me in that crazy bunch of pilots and stunt men who had flown the wings off two dozen good ships and killed five of themselves before the picture was done. After that I'd sworn I'd live to be an old man—on the ground. But this Rick Lloyd was satisfied as he returned my license.

"If you went through that crazy flying brawl and came out in one piece I guess you can bat the ball with us, Harris. We fly until show time, and do a chute jump just before the matinee so the crowd'll be left hot for more excitement inside the tents."

"I've heard of a flying circus tagging a circus," I said. "But I never met a circus that carried its own air act."

"Pepperday's idea," he told me. "We make better than expenses hopping passengers—and the circus gets the free advertising."

"What do I do?"

"Go to work. Since the last guy left us, Nora Walker has been doing the jumps out of my plane. You make 'em from her plane. The chute's over there at the truck—helmet, goggles, overalls if you need 'em."

I looked up at the other plane. "Is that a woman?"

He nodded.

"What happened to the other guy who did the jumps?"

Lloyd pulled the helmet back over his moist black hair and shrugged.

"One of those things. His parachute didn't open one day. Be ready for your jump in half an hour."

CHAPTER TWO

THE JUMP HAD been advertised. In the next half-hour most of Braza City came to the show lot in cars and on foot to watch me break my neck.

I met Nora Walker when she taxied in to pick me up. A blonde, average size, not bad looking, her face had a strange wistful expression, half haunted by something—and her slow, soft way of talking didn't go with barnstorming like this and doing chute jumps after a man who had fallen to his death. She sure puzzled me.

She spoke to me over the side of her cockpit.

"There's not much wind today. I'll take you up to three thousand over town, and you should hit the field nicely." She smiled. "I've been diving over the side and getting it over with; but I've been getting shaky lately, and finally decided I didn't want any more of it. How do you want to leave the plane?"

"I'll drop off the wing and get it over with too," I said.

We took off in a fast steep climb. The upturned faces of the crowd, the circus tents and truck dwindled below. Soon we were droning high over Braza City and its avenues of toy-like oil derricks.

Nora Walker's plane had another big oversized motor that climbed fast. I looked back once and she smiled. At three thousand fete she wobbled the wings and I turned for a last look at her goggled face.

She was pale now, with white lines of strain at her nostrils, and she was biting her lower lip. Frightened, I thought; it must have been fright that had been haunting her on the ground.

I thought of her going over the side day after day, and I climbed out on the wing and dived off while I still had the nerve. My stomach came up in my throat while I counted ten and thought about the parachute that hadn't opened and the chance that someone had guessed I was a detective and might not want me around. You don't take fingerprints and look for clues if an imperfectly packed chute fails to open. You grab a shovel, scrape up the remains and agree with everybody that chute jumping is a fool way to earn a living.

The wind was shining in my ears and the ground was rushing up at a cockeyed angle when the chute bal-

looned with a pistol-like report, jerking me violently upright in the harness. I whooped with relief and concentrated on trying to hit the landing field.

A hundred yards out in the brush was the best I could do. Rick Lloyd was smiling when he drove to the edge of the field and picked me up.

"Sweet and neat," he told me breezily. "If you can push a plane like that, you'll do."

That was all, it seemed, for the day, except helping one of the mechanics pack the chute later in the afternoon. I was going to watch that. And watch it close.

The midway was jammed with a noisy, good-natured crowd. The Big Top was filling up. Money seemed free and easy.

I wondered about Pepperday as I pushed through the crowd. He had told Frances Gunn the show wasn't making money.

Which left Pepperday holding the answers. I made a mental note to do some checking and get the lowdown. Then my arm was jostled, and a guarded voice at my shoulder said, "Don't look surprised, Harris. I'm Bill Lambert. You went to work quickly."

The crowd flowed around us while I lighted a cigarette and looked him over—a big, pleasant-looking kid, several years at the most out of law school. Not much to tackle a shark like Pepperday.

"So you're the one who worked up this idea about a parachute jumper?" I said. "A hell of a hot idea. Why didn't you buckle on the chute and try it yourself?"

A closer look showed him nervous and jumpy. His eyes were bloodshot and shadowed; he looked as if he'd been drunk or hadn't slept much, and his smile was weak.

"I couldn't have done much good—even if I'd reached the ground alive."

"What d'you mean?"

Again his smile was weak. "I think someone has tried twice to kill me. A boggled parachute would do it nicely."

"Tell me about it."

"The first time it was a truck that got out of control on a hill and sideswiped my car. I lost a fender and stopped with two wheels over the edge of a fifty-foot drop. The second—"

"Did the truck go over?"

"No." He grinned wryly. "The driver managed to yank it back in the road and get it under control."

"Who was he?"

"A man named Brady," said Bill Lambert. "I didn't know his name then. Hadn't even noticed him around. He jumped out, ran back and said he thought I'd gone over." Lambert grinned at the memory. "I lost my temper and mussed him up before he got away and ran back to the truck."

I took another look at him. "Maybe you'll do after all. Who made the second pass at your neck?"

He was suddenly embarrassed.

"I shouldn't have said that. It couldn't have been anything but an

accident. That is—I think so."

"Sure," I kidded him. "Look at the fellow who was jumping ahead of me. He accidentally fell half a mile—the way I'm probably going to do. How did your accident happen?"

"That's how I know it was an accident; it happened in her plane also."

"Was that girl flying the man who was killed?"

Lambert nodded.

SO THAT WAS why her face had been pale and she had been biting her lip when I eased over the side. Then I thought of her doing the jumps herself after the other man's death, and I was ready to take off my hat to her. But . . .

"Wait a minute!" I said. "Something happened to *you* in her plane?"

"I asked Mrs. Walker to do a few stunts with me," said Lambert. "And at the top of a loop, while we were hanging upside down for a second, my safety belt broke. If I hadn't been holding to the seat with both hands, and my elbows jammed against the cockpit sides, I'd have dropped out. We found where acid or something had eaten at the belt fabric."

"Which only leaves me to fall," I said. "And so our Nora Walker is a Mrs. Where's the mister?"

"Her husband was the man whose parachute didn't open," said Lambert.

It floored me for a moment. "She went on flying and jumping?"

Lambert nodded.

"Why?"

"From what Pepperday told me, she buried him in the town where it happened and came on with the show. Said she wouldn't let it get her nerve."

"Hell!" I said. "She hasn't got nerves if she could do that! Thought a lot of her husband, did she?"

The big kid lawyer's defense of her was fast and heated. "Don't be a fool, Harris! She loved him! She's a game sport who wouldn't quit when other women would have folded up. *She* didn't have anything to do with my safety belt!"

"Of course not," I soothed him, wondering if lady parachute jumpers had turned out to be his weakness. "Who else besides her knew she was going to stunt with you?"

"I asked her at dinner in the cook tent. Seven or eight heard me—the ringmaster, the boss canvas man, Lloyd, Carnolla, the aerialist, and—"

"I'll guess," I said. "Pepperday was there too."

Lambert said, "Yes."

"Which brings us to the white meat," I said. "Why push me into this flying job? What did you uncover that made you yell for a detective?"

Lambert hesitated. "Nothing," he said. "Only I'm certain everything isn't on the level. Pepperday is covering something up. He doesn't want me around. Several of the circus people have talked with me. After John Gunn died—"

"How did he die, by the way?" I broke in.

"A heart attack," said Lambert, giving me a funny look. "He was riding between towns with Martin, the show doctor. Martin said it was

all over before he had a chance to do anything."

"You interest me," I decided. "What kind of a fellow is Martin?"

"A fat old soak," said Bill Lambert.

"Who issued the death certificate?"

"Some little county coroner viewed the body, I believe; and by the terms of Gunn's will, the body was sent to Los Angeles and cremated."

"You'll have a time proving all that wasn't on the level. What is Pepperday covering up?"

Young Bill Lambert shook his head.

"I can't tell you. But an old fellow named Higgins, who's had charge of the elephants ever since John Gunn had a show, told me the other night that things have changed. People who had been with the show longest and were closest to John Gunn have been let out. Pepperday acts as if he's the sole owner. There's a feeling that something is wrong. No one remembers that John Gunn ever had a heart attack before.

"One night the people in the next trailer heard Dr. Martin yell as if he was having a drunken nightmare. He cried out, 'Don't look at me that way.' And then turned the trailer lights on and sat up the rest of the night. He's been drinking more, has changed, won't say much to anyone. Old Higgins, the elephant man, swears circus troubles always go in threes. John Gunn's death was natural; but a man was run over by a truck, another man dropped to his death from a plane—and now everyone is waiting for the third death. The whole show, Harris, is gripped with fear. They're scared to death."

"What does Pepperday say about it?"

"Nothing," said Bill Lambert. "The man plainly doesn't want me around. He's grudgingly shown me the books, tried several times to convince me Frances Gunn will be wise to sell out to him, since she knows nothing about running a circus. But I have the feeling, Harris, that Pepperday is stalling for time and watching me for some reason. I'm sure I'm watched so closely there's nothing much I can do except check the records—and wonder whether my life really is in danger. And yet I haven't proof that anything actually is wrong."

"If you had the proof, you wouldn't need me," I said. "This other detective and the truck he collided with one night—was Brady driving that truck too?"

CITIZEN SLEUTHS

IN NEW BRUNSWICK, New Jersey, plain citizens have organized an amateur crime-fighting setup that makes it murder to try to get away with murder in New Brunswick. These unofficial sleuths have one of the finest crime laboratories in the country, with each man contributing a specialized skill he uses in daily life. A druggist works as toxicologist, a gunsmith heads ballistics, an oculist does the lens work, a photographer photographs, etc. They get together for the brainwork. Police consult them as a matter of course.

Other communities please copy!

"They don't know what driver of what truck was involved," Lambert told me. "It was raining and blowing hard; the trucks were fighting to get out of the mud, cab windows were closed, and by the time one of the canvas men stumbled over the body, ten or twelve trucks had passed the spot. Any one of them might have been to blame. The matter was closed as an unsolved accident."

"Accidents," I said, "will happen —and if you're being watched so closely, this is a damn fool stunt talking to me, even in a crowd. I'm staying at the Braza Hotel in case you need me. Scram now and forget I'm around."

WHAT I SAW of the circus matinee was no better, no worse than average. My mind was on other things, anyway. Pepperday mostly, trying to figure that lanky, black-mustached man.

What Pepperday was up to was plain enough. He owned one-fifth, wanted five-fifths. So his bottle-souse doctor slipped a coroner's Mickey Finn to John Gunn and left an unknown niece who'd probably be glad to unload at a fast price.

Only she hadn't been glad to unload.

She'd sent a detective snooping and that had called for more rough work. Smooth work, too, with an unknown truck taking the kickback. And then the girl's lawyer had barged in looking for trouble—and almost got it twice.

Oh, yes, the answers were plain, so plain they weren't answers at all. Pepperday would have to want his circus bad to start knocking them off so fast.

He'd have sense enough to know somebody would start asking questions. One murder might be a cinch, but two quadrupled the risk—and three made it a hundred times more dangerous.

With a whole circus jittery and looking for trouble, a smooth one like Pepperday would be more apt to stop and wait. Unless he figured he had to work fast and force a sale before he lost out.

The answers were too pat. They wrapped everything up too neatly. So I started looking around.

The show people were jittery, all right, waiting for that third tragedy. I was watching when one of the trapeze men missed his bar, flashed down and almost missed the net. The side net rope tore the skin on one shoulder as he flipped over into a sliding, sprawling fall on the ground, from which he arose dazed and limping.

And one of the big tawny devils in the tiger act had an explosion of nerves that carried him off the pedestal like a snarling thunderbolt leaping at the slender girl who had the act.

Women in the audience screamed, men shouted, attendants ran toward the great steel cage that held nine other tigers.

Heart in my throat I watched the girl face death with a flimsy wooden chair, a whip, and a revolver loaded with blanks.

She sacrificed the chair to the great clawing paws and crunching jaws. Her revolver crashed in the big cat's face, her whip slashed hard.

The safety door was two steps behind her, and she stayed there and backed the snarling tiger halfway across the cage while the other cats watched tautly from their pedestals, ready to leap in at the kill. The tiger's fury broke before her nerve; a leap carried him back on the pedestal—and she went on with the act.

I was weak as I turned away and went into the menagerie tent and found Higgins with the elephants. He was a bright-eyed, alert old fellow with his trainer's cap cocked at an angle and tobacco bulging one cheek. He spat in the straw.

"So you're the new parachute man? You got more nerve than I have, young feller."

I grinned. "I've heard a Jonah's riding the show. Someone else is due to get it."

His face went blank. "I got elephants on my mind an' nothin' else."

I WALKED OUT TO the flying field, noted down the plane numbers, and went into Braza City to the telegraph office and wired the Blaine Agency office in Washington to check on the planes.

That seemed to wind up the day, except for packing my parachute. We packed in the circus tent after the show, laying the big silk umbrella and tangle of shroud lines on a long strip of canvas unrolled on the ground.

A tall lantern-jawed Swede mechanic helped me. He dipped snuff, worked silently, and gave me time to watch a troupe of Jap tumblers practising new tricks and a couple of show kids getting lessons on the slack wire. Pepperday and his guests were behind me before I knew they were there.

"This is the new man I hired for the parachute jumps, Miss Gunn."

I turned, angry inside because she'd come sooner than we agreed, and this surprise meeting would have to be as strangers under Pepperday's cold, half-lidded stare. Then my blood froze. Frances Gunn was there all right. And so was Trixie Meehan, the little blonde torpedo of the Blaine Agency.

Heaven help the poor working boy—and Mike Harris, too, when Trixie Meehan's around. Never heard of Trixie Meehan? Lucky! And don't say Mike Harris never broadcast a warning.

Trixie looked as usual beside Pepperday's lank height—a little, fragile, innocent bit of fluff, so wistful and helpless any big he-man just knew she needed protection. Pepperday's indulgent smile showed he'd taken the hook. He'd know better if Trixie's usual luck held.

That blonde innocence hid more concentrated hell than any two investigators in the whole Blaine organization.

From Singapore to Sing Sing, Trixie was at home on the toughest cases the Blaine Agency got. And no matter where I went, Trixie managed to get in my hair. She was a curse. I could have nightmares think-

ing of her. Sometimes I thought she asked for assignments with me, but I never could prove it.

Anyway, here was little Trixie with Pepperday and Frances Gunn, giving me the eye, asking demurely and doubtfully, "Can *he* do such dangerous and responsible work? I mean —he doesn't seem to be the type."

"Yes, yes," Pepperday yessed her indulgently. "He did all right this afternoon, Miss Gunn. I think he'll do."

I said, "Miss Gunn? Uh—"

Pepperday said, "Harris, this is Miss Gunn, part owner of the show. She'll be with us a few days."

It knocked me dizzy. Trixie had traded names with Frances Gunn. Heaven only knew what scatterbrained scheme had been cooked up —and all I could do was stand there batting my eyes and looking as if it was pleasant news from home.

"Uh—howdy, Miss Gunn," I managed. And drew a ghost grin from my heels and cracked at her, "I don't suppose you'll be making any parachute jumps?"

Trixie tossed her little blonde head.

"I might. As long as we have planes with the show, I'm going to use them. Trixie," says Trixie to Frances Gunn, "wouldn't you like to go up now?"

"I don't think so," refused the real Frances Gunn hastily.

A sudden thought made me grin. "I can take you up as soon as we get this chute packed," I told Trixie. "Plenty of daylight yet."

"I believe I will," Trixie decided. "It will be all right, won't it, Mr. Pepperday?"

"I suppose," agreed Pepperday. He looked down at Trixie and fingered his chin. "Sure, it'll be all right."

I grinned at Trixie. "I'll be ready in fifteen or twenty minutes."

Trixie slipped me a dirty look that showed she knew what I was thinking.

"I'll be there," she said.

CHAPTER THREE

TEN MINUTES LATER the parachute was in the pack, and I heard a familiar, whistling whine not far above the Big Top canvas. A motor opened up in sharp bursts as a plane came in to land.

"Either I'm nuts," I said, "or one of those planes went up without my hearing it. They were both on the line when I came in here."

"Dot's Maxie," the Swede grunted.

"Who's Maxie?" I wanted to know.

"He flies odder plane."

"What odder plane?"

The Swede held up three fingers. "Vun, two, t'ree—t'ree planes ve have. Dot's odder von."

"Well, well," I said. "Three planes. Why didn't someone tell me ve got odder vun?"

I went out and saw the other plane kicking a grey dust cloud across the field as it lumbered into position between the other two ships.

They looked like three peas out of the same pod, all with oversized motors, all sleek and fast; and as I pushed through the dozen or so town-

ers hanging around curiously, I wondered again how Pepperday figured he needed an air armada like this for advertising.

The pilot who climbed out wasn't any bigger than I—and I've been called shrimp, sawed-off and runt so often I never notice it. He stretched himself wearily as I walked past the sharp-faced young ticket seller who was keeping the towners back; and as I ducked under a wing our Maxie barked, "Beat it! This ain't visiting time!"

"The hell you say," I said. "I'm with this outfit."

"Slim—how about this guy?" he called.

"He's doing the jumps now, Maxie. Name's Harris."

I got a white-toothed grin from Maxie's swarthy face. "My mistake. I don't like strangers mooching around when I come in."

"You must have been places today," I said.

"I hopped a guy over to San Antonio," he said. "We don't need three planes. I pick up all the outside work I can." He stretched again, picked up the parachute he had dropped on the ground. "Thought I'd have to come in here after dark. I've been buckin' a head wind for hours. See you later, guy. I want a drink and grub."

I lit a cigarette as he walked away. All day the wind had been smartly from the east. It should have been on his tail from San Antone—and he'd have been a fool to buck a head wind at a higher altitude. Maybe Maxie thought of that. Thirty feet beyond the plane, he stopped suddenly and looked back, and then went on.

I had an idea. Maybe he had left a map in the cockpit that would give an idea where he had been flying. I was climbing into the cockpit when the ticket seller yelled, "Keep outa there, Harris!"

"What's the matter?" I snapped.

"That's Maxie's plane. He don't want anybody fooling with it."

"Don't he?" says I. "Who's hurting his little tin go-cart?"

"That's the way he is. Climb down and leave it alone."

"And if I don't?"

"You'll probably get fired."

"It won't be you that'll fire me," I said, swinging back to the ground. "And if you ask me, this Maxie's a blowout."

"I ain't asking you. Tell it to Maxie. I'm only following orders."

"Follow some more orders then. Miss Gunn wants me to take her up. Have those greasemonkeys check one of these ships. And I hope she wants Maxie's plane."

He gave me a sour look and walked away. Trixie hadn't shown up yet. I was waiting for her when a hole in the lower wing, by the fuselage, caught my eye. Just a small hole, and a second hole directly above it in the top wing. And when I looked farther there was another little hole in the top of the fuselage not two feet behind the pilot's cockpit. I ducked down and found the companion hole under it in the bottom of the fuselage.

I whistled silently and said under my breath, "Nuts to San Antonio!"

Those weren't termite holes. Friend Maxie hadn't picked them up zooming over San Antonio with a pay passenger. Somebody had stood on the ground and cut loose at Maxie with a flock of bullets.

THE SWEDE AND another mechanic were getting Rick Lloyd's plane ready when Pepperday brought Trixie, Frances Gunn and Bill Lambert out for the fun.

"I'll take the ship upstairs for a few minutes to see how she handles," I told them.

"Not on my account, I hope," cooed Trixie.

"More or less."

"But I know I'll be safe with you, Mr. Harris."

"In that case," says I, "we'll just hop off and take it as it comes."

Pepperday's silence damned him. If he cared anything about safety, he'd have made me go up alone and get the feel of the plane. But he stood there chewing gum, and looking as if I was Old Man Safety First.

Trixie got in the front cockpit and I fastened her belt myself.

Trixie hissed in my ear, "If you stunt with me, ape, I'll haunt you!"

"You haunt me anyway," I told her. "You asked for this, baby."

I taxied once around the field to get the heft of the controls, and then gunned the big motor wide open and took the plane off the ground in a roaring climb that was almost vertical.

That oversized motor had everything. At four thousand, I cut the motor and flattened into a long glide and poked Trixie on the shoulder.

"What's the idea of this act you're putting on as Frances Gunn?" I yelled.

"Lew Ryster got me on long distance at Tucson last night and told me what a fool you were trying to make of yourself over this Gunn girl."

"Lew Ryster's crazy!"

Trixie's laugh had an edge.

"*I'm no gentleman,*" she mocked my telegram to Ryster. "*If in doubt about my meaning take the next plane.* Who told you you were a lady-killer, little man?"

Good old Lew—my pal! He'd had Trixie up his sleeve all the time.

"Anyway," Trixie went on, "Ryster was certain it was dangerous for this Gunn girl to come here. She insisted on it, and Ryster decided if I took her place and she took mine, I could collect any trouble meant for her. She's never been around the show. No one knows her."

"You're all screwy! Beat it back to El Paso. I don't want you around."

Trixie glared back at me defiantly.

"Who asked you what you wanted? We're here—and we're staying!"

"In that case, hang on!" I yelled over the cockpit cowlings.

"Mike—don't you dare!" screamed Trixie. "I'll never—"

The motor roar drowned her out.

I put the nose straight down in a power dive and flattened out at a thousand feet down with the wind

screaming, motor bellowing. Up we went—up and over in a tight loop that would have tamed a better kitty than Trixie.

Then for good measure I did a couple of barrel rolls, a wing slip, and dropped the nose down again in a corkscrew spin as we screamed down toward the crazily revolving circus tents.

Trixie was green when we landed on the bumpy runway and taxied back to the starting point. I helped her out and she gulped under her breath, "Mike Harris, I'll get even for this!"

"I'm glad you liked it, Miss Gunn," I told her loudly for Pepperday's benefit. "Anything I can do for you any time."

"Judas!" Trixie said between gritted teeth. "Oh! I think I'm going to be sick!"

All of which didn't solve the bullet holes in Maxie's plane, or explain what Pepperday was doing. I went into town to eat and think it over.

BRAZA CITY WAS a honkytonk on the loose. If you believe all you hear about the Rangers cleaning out the woolly Texas towns with dirty looks, go ahead and believe it. I went out after dark to watch the local sin.

Drilling crews, lease hounds, pipe line workers, truckers, gamblers, girls, oil speculators, businessmen, tourists —all were on the loose. The circus had its night crowd and plenty was left over. Booze, gambling, pool rooms, dance halls, were open around the clock.

Out in the mesquite, oil derricks were festooned with lights. Boilers spewed sparks; machinery clanked and hammered; long flambeau pipes, thrusting above ground, spewed red gas flames toward the sky.

I had several drinks, lost a few dollars at roulette, wandered in and out of a dozen wild spots, and a little before nine went back to the hotel.

My telegram from Washington was waiting.

> PLANES NOW REGISTERED GUNN CIRCUS FORMERLY REGISTERED APACHE FLYING SERVICE TUCSON AND LOS ANGELES STOP HAVE REQUESTED PHOENIX AND LOS ANGELES ADVISE YOU FURTHER SIGNED CRANSTON

All of which left the setup where I'd found it. But it was a long hop from Tucson to L. A. and something might come out of that territory.

I walked upstairs to my room, unlocked the door, stepped in, fumbling for the light switch—and got a gun rammed in my side instead.

"Take it easy, Harris!" threatened a low voice.

I took it easy while he closed the door and slid the big bolt.

He was only a dim shadow, but when the light came on there were two of them in the room. They looked like bad news from home. The room was a wreck. They'd pawed over the bed, jerked the mattress up, pulled out dresser drawers, emptied my suitcase on the floor. Two smoothies, or I didn't know our public enemies. Not small-time prowlers who'd make

a nervous play for small change any time they saw a chance. These two had class, cut on big-time lines.

The one who held an automatic against me was the younger, with sloping shoulders under his tailored coat, and a pale, square face split by a natty blond mustache.

The other was older, more solidly built, dressed as well, with a rock-like hardness about his wide, unsmiling mouth. He stood there in the middle of the room, hand in his pocket, looking me over silently as the younger one prodded me away from the door.

"Surprise," I said, grinning sourly at them. "What kind of an oil well are you two after in here?"

"Well, a comedian!" said the older man. His heavy voice matched his unsmiling mouth. He scowled as his automatic prodded me away from the door.

The younger one said, "We'll make it quick. Where's that briefcase?"

I said, "What briefcase? I'll help you look."

His fist clouted me on the cheek, knocking me over against the bed.

"Cut out the stalling," he snarled. "Where is it?"

I sat on the bed, rubbing my jaw, taking an eyeful of him for another time.

"If this goes on all night," I said, "I'll still be asking. I don't know anything about a briefcase."

They exchanged glances.

"Shall I give him the works?" asked the younger man.

"Frisk him."

He found the telegram in my coat pocket—just as the telephone rang.

"Maybe it's a Ranger coming up for the briefcase, too," I said.

The older man growled, "They don't tag any harder for two than one. Better hope it ain't a cop coming up."

Hope it? I was ready for a little silent prayer. Suppose it was Trixie Meehan on her way up here? Or Bill Lambert or the Gunn girl to spill more beans to Mike Harris?

The telephone rang again.

THE YOUNGER MAN cursed under his breath, prodded me away from the bed toward the middle of the room. "Shall I take it?" he asked the other.

"No. This guy can have it—and I'll split the receiver with him." He spoke heavily to me. "Know what'll happen if you yip over that phone?"

"I can guess. We won't have any trouble."

A third ring, and I lifted the receiver.

"Mr. Harris?"

"Yes."

"This is Nora Walker."

I'd already recognized her voice, strained, troubled, hurried. Behind me the younger man held his gun ready. Beside me the older one bent close, guiding half the receiver to his ear, so that he heard as well as I did.

He heard her name and his breath sucked softly in. He knew her. And I knew then their briefcase had a tie-in with the circus—and with Pepperday.

I said into the mouthpiece, "I just

got in. They've taken the lid off this town, haven't they?"

"I shouldn't be surprised," said Nora Walker. "You're planning to jump tomorrow, aren't you?"

"I suppose so."

"Don't," she said.

I was hot and nervous wondering what she'd say next. She was bringing trouble with a big T crashing down on Mike Harris. And I couldn't stop her.

"I'll have to jump," was all I could tell her.

"You mustn't! Take my advice!"

The thinnest whisper reached my ear: "Ask her why?"

I said glumly, "Why mustn't I jump tomorrow?"

"I can't tell you," said Nora Walker.

The line fell silent, but her fear reached over the wire to me. And again the whisper ordered, "Make her tell you!"

I could have been a hero and refused, but Mike Harris, slugged, shot, wasn't any good. Nora Walker had already tipped her hand, so I said, "Better tell me. I'll have to know. If I don't jump, I'm fired."

"Take my advice and quit anyway, and get out of here."

"Make her talk!" the whisper savagely ordered.

So I tried. "I'll have to know—"

The wire brought a choked sob of helplessness and anger.

"You fool—would I be warning you if I didn't have a reason? If you won't listen, I wash my hands of it!"

She hung up.

I hung up, too, and met the heavy-lidded stare by my shoulder.

And the one behind me snapped, "What was it, Ed?"

"The Walker dame told him not to jump tomorrow."

"Yeah? Look at this."

My telegram was handed past my shoulder. The older man read it and pocketed it.

"Still sure about that briefcase?" he said.

"I never heard of it."

"All right," he said, "you never heard of it. We'll go out and look around. You'll walk between us and look pleasant. If we see a cop or anyone you know, or you get an idea a smart trick might get you the breaks —don't. Get me—*don't.*"

"Plain enough," I said. "Where do we look?"

The other one gave a nervous snigger.

"That'll be something to think about," he said. "Let's go."

CHAPTER FOUR

THE HOTEL LOBBY held a score of people, but a thousand would have done me no good. I walked out between those two strangers, and we might have been three old friends heading for a drink.

Around the corner, past a bar, then a dance hall spewing music and hilarity out open windows, the older man said, "It was an alligator-hide briefcase. Still sure you haven't seen it?"

"Still sure," I said.

"Too bad," he said. "Get in."

We were abreast of a vacant lot stacked with drilling supplies. The big sedan parked there had a California license, and the older man opened the rear door.

I started to get in, and then Braza City seemed to blow up all around me. The blow came from behind, and I fell forward into the car....

The floor was jolting under me when I began to think again. I was in that big West Coast sedan, down behind the front seat, with my back painfully pressing against a sizeable metal object. The young fellow must have slugged me with his automatic, heaved me into the car—and now they were driving somewhere out of Braza City. And all because of an alligator-hide briefcase I'd never heard of.

I wriggled off the metal object under my back. It was a hydraulic tire jack. A moment of groping located the handle under the foot rail. Nothing had ever felt so sweet as that hollow metal handle about two feet long and just the right weight.

I came up to my knees. The dashlight glow silhouetted two heads over the seat top. I cracked the driver first and didn't care what broke as long as it wasn't the jack handle.

The blow made no audible sound. His head wagged forward, twisted down toward a shoulder as he wilted toward the wheel. I was striking at the other figure when a warning cry registered.

"*Mike—it's Trixie!*"

Surprise? Fear sickened me as I tried to stop the blow at the indistinct little head dodging back. The best I could do was take the smashing force from the blow.

Trixie's upflung arm struck the jack handle, deflected it down against the seat. A lurch slammed me over against the door and back as the automobile wrenched out of the ruts and crashed and bumped over uneven ground in a careening circle.

I lunged over the seat and grabbed the wheel. Trixie snapped off the ignition. The car rocked to a stop.

"What the devil?" I said weakly.

"You might have looked," Trixie groaned, rubbing her arm.

"Hurt you, baby?"

"No," Trixie admitted. "But it might have. What about this man?"

I hauled him up. His hat fell off, his head lolled limply. But his heart was pumping steadily. The match I lit showed that his hat had saved his scalp from being gashed.

"He'll do," I said, lighting a cigarette with hands still shaky. Then everything came back into focus. "What's the idea of joyriding out here with my corpse? If you were so thick with this skunk, why didn't you have him stop and look me over?"

Trixie lifted a small revolver from the seat and gave me the edge of her little tongue.

"Brainless, couldn't you see I had a gun on him? If I'd known you were going to wake up crazy, I'd have held the gun on you."

"Don't let me stop you. Where's the other one? How did you cut in on this?"

Trixie said, "I was coming to call when I saw you goose-step out of the hotel with those two strangers. It didn't look right, so I tagged along. I was in a doorway near that vacant lot when they pushed you in the car and one of them hurried back past me. I knew you needed Mother Meehan then, so I flashed my little cannon on this one and told him to start driving. He wouldn't walk. What's it all about, Mike?"

MILES BACK IN the night the red flambeau flames of the Braza City oil wells winked and wavered between the light-strung derricks. Around us the night was vast and empty; a small wind rustled through the dry mesquite.

"Seen either one of these rats before?" I asked.

"No," said Trixie.

"They knew my name. I surprised 'em tearing my room apart, and got a gun in my face when I walked in," I told her. "It's about an alligator-hide briefcase that I never saw or heard of. They want it badly. They're damn sure I know where it is. We were heading, if you ask me, out to some spot like this where we could all be pals—and no one would hear me yell. They wanted that briefcase out of me tonight or else."

"An alligator-hide briefcase," repeated Trixie. Her strong little hand caught my arm. "Mike, I saw a briefcase like that tonight! That woman pilot—isn't her name Walker?—had it."

I whistled. "She and I had a heart-to-heart over the telephone a little while ago and she didn't say anything about a briefcase."

"Maybe you swept her off her feet," Trixie said sweetly. "After all—when God's gift to women—"

"She telephoned my room and asked me not to make a parachute jump tomorrow."

"I thought you said you walked in on a stickup."

"They made me answer the telephone. Tell me about that briefcase."

"I never could tell that ego of yours anything!" said Trixie brightly. "But I'll try. This evening Bill Lambert and I were standing in the dark by one of the circus trucks, near the dressing tents—"

"Fast work," I admired nastily. "Taking your client's boy friend out under the stars the first evening."

"I thought it was pretty good my-

YOUR SERVANT, SIRE!

PROBABLY THE MOST successful badman of history was Adam Gordon, who established himself as a highwayman near the village of Wilton, England, in the thirteenth century. He robbed, looted and murdered at will, with particular attention to royal messengers and members of the king's retinue. Crown Prince Edward finally set out to run him down—and the outlaw forced him to single combat and cheerfully beat hell out of his majesty. Later, as Edward I, the prince offered him a pardon if he would surrender—which he did, to become a faithful crown servant.

self," Trixie said without shame. "He started it, though. Business conference. Big men take away all my will power, Mike. Too bad you're only knee high."

"I get along."

"People feel sorry for you," said Trixie. "Stop glowering, Mike. You're comic enough. Anyway, we were there conferring when this Walker girl came along carrying the briefcase. Lambert stopped her and introduced me as Miss Gunn. I didn't think anything of it at the time."

"The briefcase, the briefcase," I begged.

"It was just a briefcase," she said.

"And I'm a parachute jumper in a madhouse," I groaned. "Are they wise that you aren't the Gunn girl, or that you have a hook-up with me?"

"How do I know? This man will know when he wakes up."

"Where did the Walker girl go with the briefcase?"

"Over beyond the dressing tents somewhere."

"Help me plant this fellow in the back seat. I'll strap his elbows with his belt and you can ride with him."

"Ride where?" says Trixie.

"To jail," I said. "I'll do the talking; you back it up."

THE JAIL WAS a one-story brick building; the jailer sent around the corner for a big lanky Texan named Pike, who was the chief of police. He stood by the automobile and heard my story.

"I caught 'em in my hotel room," I said. "They must have figured they'd be safer if I was taken out of town somewhere and my head caved in. Miss Gunn saw them put me in the car and one of them walk away. So she put a gun on him, and then was so frightened she made him drive off before the other one could come back. They were driving when I woke up and cracked him with the jack handle. I guess he'll get over it."

"No one'll worry much if he don't," Braza City's head cop drawled. He peered at Trixie. "Don't tell me this little girl owns that big circus? Ma'am, you don't look big enough to wrangle a cage of canaries."

Trixie was as helpless as a kitten. "I'm still so frightened, Mr. Pike. Will—will this make much trouble?"

"Forget it," Pike assured her gallantly. "We've got so many like him around we handle 'em fast. Harris can make an affidavit. Better leave the car here. I'll drive you both over to the circus lot."

Simple as that. The stranger's billfold held a wad of currency and a California driver's license issued to a Perry Blake. And two guns, mine and his, both automatics. I got my automatic back. The sheriff drove us to the circus lot, where the brass band was still whooping it up inside the Big Top.

"I'll look you up tomorrow, ma'am," promised our big Texicano, getting a last moonstruck eyeful out of the car window.

"Please do, Mr. Pike," cooed Trixie, and when he drove away, Trixie turned on me. "So I was frightened and didn't know what I

was doing, was I? Where would you be, Mike Harris, if I hadn't been there?"

"Anywhere but here, I hope. Go find this Bill Lambert and pick on him," I begged.

Trixie tossed her little blonde head. "I'll help you find the Walker girl."

I glowered back at her.

"And start people wondering why we're suddenly so chummy? Nix! Go run your circus."

In the menagerie tent, I found Higgins, the old elephant man. He was chaining three elephants that had just come back from an act. He reached for a crumpled paper sack of chewing tobacco and looked me over.

"Nora Walker? Lives in her trailer. Took Queenie, one of the midgets, and Marjorie Wilson, in the tumbling act, to live with her after her husband died. One of them oughta be around there—second trailer from the end, the blue one, over beyond the dressing tents."

"Thanks."

Higgins crammed the chew in his cheek and had a last word.

"Zelda, the equestrienne, missed her hoss after the dive through the flaming hoop an' almost busted her neck."

"Nothing like a jinx to keep up interest," I told him. "See you at the funeral, old-timer."

Higgins frowned, as if a circus jinx rated respect—but my head had a bump that hurt like the devil, and somebody's pet jinx wasn't bothering me tonight.

Most of the show people lived in house trailers, a few of the single men bunked in the truck cabs, and still fewer used hotels and boarding houses. The trailers were parked beyond the dressing tents, all types and sizes, some lightend now and occupied, some deserted until the night show was over.

Nora Walker's trailer and the one next to it were dark. I knocked on the door on the chance someone was resting inside. No one answered. I was turning away when someone nearby called, "What is it?"

"I'm looking for Mrs. Walker."

"Isn't she there?" A girl came up to me in a dressing gown over tights, carrying a towel over her arm. "Nora's usually here by this time."

"Any idea where I can find her?"

She said, "Wait, I'll look inside. She may have left a note."

The door was unlocked. She snapped on a light inside—and screamed shrilly.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE JINX HAD made good. Only death could have inspired that terrified scream and sent her bolting out into my arms. She was crying hysterically, half strangling me with the hold she got around my neck.

"Easy," I begged, shaking her off. "What is it?"

"Oh, the poor darling!" she babbled. "I can't look again! Do something for her. It's murder!" And she screamed, *"Help! Murder! Help!"*

Nearby trailer doors flew open, and I jumped into the trailer with my heart thumping.

The interior was cozy, home-like, with curtained windows, electric lights, carpet on the floor, flowers in a vase. A double bed and a couch were made—and I stopped, staring at the candlewick spread on the double bed.

A doll, I thought at first, a crumpled doll dressed in a carefully styled black evening gown, studded with rhinestones. A doll had been hurled down on the bed and carelessly left there.

Then the sickening truth made me gulp. That doll-like little face had the waxen pallor of death. The tiny hands were clenched tightly. One little evening slipper lay on the floor, and the sheer little silk stocking on the tiny foot had a hole in the toe. Queenie, the midget, was dead.

Big hands had caught her up, handled her roughly enough to tear one strap of her evening gown, clamped down about her throat, squeezed, wrenched at her tiny neck. . . .

Only a broken neck would cause a head to twist around at that grotesque angle.

Outside, excitement and confusion were growing as the circus people came running; and inside, under one limp shoulder, I found a hundred-dollar bill with a hole punched through the center.

The girl who had found the body stood outside the door with several friends. She shook her head when I showed her the hundred-dollar bill.

"Queenie didn't have that much money. She borrowed five dollars yesterday until pay day."

"Mrs. Walker?"

"No. Nora's been paying back money she borrowed to bury her husband."

So we had an orphaned hundred-dollar bill, a murdered midget—and no briefcase that I could see. Someone in the gathering crowd called, "Here's Doc Martin!"

Wheezing, he climbed into the trailer with an old medical bag, and I remembered what Bill Lambert had said: "*A fat old booze hound.*" Which gave you Doc Martin, with a frazzle of grey hairs under a cheap Panama, a puffy, red-veined face, watery, blinking eyes, and a soiled shirt minus a button at the bulging waistline.

He reminded me of a grey-haired rascally old goat, grown weak and sly through the boozy years. This was the man on whose word John Gunn's death rested.

"She's dead," Doc Martin wheezed. "Did somebody say she was murdered?"

"It wasn't a heart attack," I cracked before I could stop it.

He looked quickly and fearfully at me. "Who are you, young man?"

"I'm doing the parachute jumps."

"I see," he muttered. He smelled like a keg of mash.

Then Pepperday came, pushing ahead of Bill Lambert into the already crowded trailer, while Trixie stayed at the door.

Pepperday was jolted out of his sleepy-lidded calm. He asked questions, seemed nervous and upset. He scowled when Doc Martiin wiped watery eyes and sniffled, "She was a cute little trick."

"Are you through here, Doc?" Pepperday asked bruskly.

The doctor went out like a whipped dog, and Pepperday turned on me.

"How'd *you* happen to be here?"

"I wanted to see Mrs. Walker about our hop tomorrow. Any idea where this hundred-dollar bill came from? It was under the body."

Pepperday was so upset the bill trembled slightly in his hand. "I never saw it before," he denied.

"Nor anyone else around here. Funny, eh?"

"Funny," Pepperday agreed after a moment.

That was all out of him. Then we had Pike, the chief of police, with us, and he quickly got at the real question. "Where is this Mrs. Walker?"

No one could tell him.

"Don't know who the hundred-dollar bill belongs to, either?" said Pike. "This hole in it ought to mean something. Most people take better care of a hundred-dollar bill."

"It might have happened when she was killed," suggested Pepperday.

"With what? A knife wouldn't make a round hole like this."

"I'm not a detective," said Pepperday. "But I'd like to see this settled by the time we leave tomorrow. A circus can't afford to have these things happen, Chief."

"What's your idea of it?"

"Robbery—what else?" Pepperday decided without hesitation. "No reflections, but you know these oil towns."

"I know," said Pike grimly. "And a circus don't always help. Harris, you found her? I'd like to see you outside."

A BRAZA CITY COP stayed with the body. Pike and I walked out under the stars to his automobile.

"Well?" said Pike.

"You heard it all," I said. "That hundred-buck bill has got me."

"This Mrs. Walker should know something. Where is she?"

I couldn't tell him that. "What about the man I left with you?"

"He's still unconscious."

I whistled softly. "Is it that serious?"

"I had a doctor examine him," said Pike. "He'll come out of it all right, but it may take all night. No great danger, the doctor says. Harris, I'm wondering if this has any connection with the burglary of your room. One of those men is still around."

"Find him," I agreed, "and if he hasn't got scratches on a hand, I'll eat prickly pear. Women always scratch; she's little, but her nails could gouge."

"You talk like a homicide expert."

"I read," I said, backpedaling from the slip. If Pike knew I was an agency detective, we'd be here in Braza City a year while he rattled all the circus skeletons.

Pike swore under his breath.

"Harris," he said, "we've got some bad ones around Braza City—but I never thought this bad. What about the circus?"

"Why not find the Walker woman? She might have some dope."

"Where would she get it?"

"She might have been in the trailer also," I said.

Pike got excited at the idea and promised a quick search of town for Nora Walker. More local police had arrived. The Big Top was beginning to empty. Rumor had somehow reached the town people, and they were swarming back toward the circus trailers.

I left the excitement and went to the airplane supply truck near the flying field. The parachutes were carried in a wooden locker inside the truck—four chutes nesting in compartments padded against chafing. An inked name card was tacked over each compartment. I looked at my parachute. The pack seemed all right . . .

Nora Walker might have been mistaken, or she might have tried to warn me against something beside my chute jumps.

The police had Nora Walker's description and that of the older man I'd caught in my room. Trixie, Lambert and the Gunn girl were handling Pepperday. I went into town and looked for the missing ones, and had no luck, and went to bed. . . .

The telephone blasted me out at eight-thirty in the morning.

"Yeah?" I mumbled in the mouthpiece.

"Rise and shine, Wonder Boy," called Trixie's velvet voice. "You're not pensioned off."

"You?" I groaned. "Go 'way! Beat it! I had one nightmare last night."

"Here's two more," said Trixie. "I'm getting my nerve back on black coffee in the hashery across the street. The back booth. I'll have coffee waiting."

"Not me."

Trixie said, "I just thought you'd want to know the circus doctor died last night, your boy friend at the jail was sprung on bail, and Pepperday suddenly wants to sell me his fifth of the show."

Braza City was just another dirty oil town as I ducked across the street and found Trixie in the lunch room.

"Doc Martin emptied three pints of Maryland Rye before he went out," said Trixie. "He was on his trailer bed, still dressed. They're calling it heart failure. Pepperday found him."

I whistled.

"The Doc found John Gunn dead; now Pepperday finds the Doc dead—which leaves Pepperday holding all cards. Did you say Pepperday wants to sell out now?"

"Which makes me think," said Trixie, "that the Doc's heart attack was real. Pepperday's too upset to have risked that death." Trixie stirred her coffee and frowned. "Higgins, the elephant man, told Bill Lambert the show's route was changed after John Gunn died. It

had been headed farther north. I asked Pepperday why the change. He gave me some vague nonsense about a hunch that business would be better toward Houston and Louisiana."

"Hooey," I said. "Who sprang this guy at the jail—and what about Mrs. Walker and the man Chief Pike said he'd try to find?"

"A lawyer," said Trixie, "got a judge out of bed before daylight and had the prisoner taken to a doctor. Cash bail was arranged and posted and it was all over before Pike knew anything about it. There's a political angle, Pike says. The lawyer also is crooked. We haven't a chance of finding out who put up that cash bail."

"And Mrs. Walker?"

"No trace of her."

THE DRONE OF an airplane rose to a roar as it passed low over the building and swung around over town.

"That's a twin-motor job coming in," I said.

"The second one this morning," said Trixie. "The oil men charter them, I understand." Trixie leaned toward me. "Mike, do you think the Walker woman is dead?"

"Could be."

"Are you going to make that jump today she warned you against?"

"Why not?"

"Please, Mike." Her eyes misted.

Trixie could soften me up when she looked like that.

"I'll see," I said. "It's no secret now who I am. That telegram in my pocket last night put the finger on me. All I have to do now is look out for trucks, parachute jumps, heart attacks and other minor accidents. I'm going to look up this truck driver named Brady who tried to run Lambert off the road."

Trixie shook her head.

"Lambert told me last night that Brady quit two days later."

I said, "Damn!" and finished my coffee at a gulp. "Everything fades into thin air. John Gunn was cremated. Brady quit. No proof exists about that other detective's death, or the safety belt that gave way with Lambert. The show route was changed unaccountably. Pepperday wanted to buy everything, and now suddenly he wants to sell out. Doc Martin's dead, just when it'll do Pepperday the most good. That rat got bailed out of jail. His sidekick vanished. If I ever saw one basket of scrambled eggs, we've got it."

Trixie agreed. "The way this circus is jumping from town to town, it'll take the whole western division of the agency to investigate all angles."

"To hell with angles," I said. "Those things are done. We're only here to find out what's wrong with Frances Gunn's circus. There's plenty to work on. The lawyer who put up that bail—Mrs. Walker's disappearance—that midget's murder last night—the hundred-dollar bill—Pepperday's change of heart. And there's a pilot named Maxie who brought the third plane in last night sieved with bullet holes. I forgot

to tell you about that last night."

Trixie sat bolt upright while I told her about Maxie's plane.

"Mike! That hole in the hundred-dollar bill! Could the bill have been in that plane?"

I laughed.

"In Maxie's pocket? Then Maxie's stuffed with sawdust, for he wasn't leaking blood when he got out."

Trixie's hand trembled as she shook a cigarette from my pack. Her blue eyes were snapping with excitement.

"Could it have been somewhere in the plane where a bullet passed through?"

"Why not? In something that was punctured by a bullet."

"A briefcase?" Trixie caught me up.

"Sure!"

"Mrs. Walker could have been coming from the plane last night when she had the briefcase—taking it to her trailer."

"I was around Maxie's plane first. They thought I got the briefcase."

"Her telephone call to you was intercepted, and they wondered if she wasn't in on it," said Trixie breathlessly.

"So her trailer was entered—and the midget was there!"

"And the poor little dear either had the briefcase or some of the contents," said Trixie, almost bouncing on the seat.

"She tried to scream or she knew too much, or she was in the way."

"Mike! We've got it! I know we've got it!"

"Maybe," I said. "Slow down, baby. We've got ideas worth about a dime a dozen if we can't prove 'em. Where's proof a briefcase was in the plane? Where's proof it ever held money? Or that Maxie, or anybody we know, entered that trailer? Where's proof of anything?"

Trixie deflated. "I don't know, Mike."

"Let's go out and find it," I said.

EASY ENOUGH TO talk. Once I knew a man who had committed murder. He knew I knew it and couldn't prove it. He left town laughing at me. Back at the hotel I found a night letter from Lew Ryster.

APACHE FLYING SERVICE LOS ANGELES AND TUCSON FORMERLY OWNED BY PARTNERS WILLIAM McGOWAN AND PERRY BLAKE STOP GENERAL FLYING SERVICE TO PALM SPRINGS TUCSON NOGALES TIA JUANA ENSENADA FRISCO RENO AND WHAT HAVE YOU STOP EXCELLENT PLANES APPARENTLY FINANCED STOP PARTNERSHIP DISSOLVED AND PLANES SOLD WHEN BLAKE INDICTED AND RELEASED ON BAIL CHARGED WITH KNOWINGLY FLYING BANK BANDIT KILLERS OUT OF STATE TO UNKNOWN DESTINATION STOP POLICE INVESTIGATION OF BLAKES RECORD REVEALED ACQUITTAL MURDER CHARGE MICHIGAN STATE AND THREE YEARS LEAVENWORTH FOR POSSESSION BONDS STOLEN IN MAIL ROBBERY STOP RECORD JUSTIFIES SUSPICION EXTENSIVE CRIMINAL ACTIVITIES WHILE OWNING FLYING SERVICE BUT NO PROOF STOP ADVISE THIS OFFICE WHAT CONNECTION APACHE SERVICE HAS WITH PRESENT CASE STOP EXPECT YOU TO DO UTMOST FOR CLIENT STOP TRUST MEEHAN IS A COMFORT SIGNED RYSTER

My pal! But Lew Ryster could have made a dozen dirty cracks and it wouldn't have mattered that morning. We had big-time crime with us. Killer bank bandits, mail hijackers, big-time crime against the background of a high-speed flying service.

What a setup! And what wouldn't I have given for the low down on the Apache flying service. Never mind the dissolved partnership, the planes sold to the Gunn Circus. The Apache Flying Service was still with us—Perry Blake and all. Probably William McGowan also.

I had a near chill at the thought of what might have happened on that little interrupted night ride with Perry Blake. Thank heaven for Trixie Meehan. Bless her game little heart! Good old Lew Ryster for sending her. Anyway I took the telegram around to Chief Pike.

"I kinda wondered about you," Pike drawled. "Blaine Agency, huh? Well, it's a good outfit. What do you make of all this, Harris?"

"Something big," I said. "And it's souring fast on them. That telegram in my pocket last night tipped them off. They'll move fast now. Look how quick Blake was sprung."

We were standing by a window of the jail office. Pike pushed his wide-brimmed hat back and offered: "I can arrest Pepperday and sweat him."

"No," I said. "They don't know how much we know. You didn't charge Blake with anything connected with the circus. Miss Meehan can keep an eye on Pepperday. This Maxie is around the planes; I'll watch him. Better have a couple of men around the show today—and keep looking for Mrs. Walker and Blake."

Pike nodded. "I've decided not to let the circus move on to Royalton tonight, out of my jurisdiction."

"There'll be hell over that," I said. "But you might blast something loose when they find the show can't leave."

So I went back to the circus lot—to those great, grey-white tents and fluttering flags and pennants that seemed to cry the impossibility of murder.

Braza City citizens were all over the place, still circus curious, and morbidly interested.

Maxie had started hopping passengers when I reached the field. There was no chance to examine his plane again. Rick Lloyd was bouncing around his plane. His plump face grinned a greeting.

"Cash customers waiting," he called. "Let's get 'em off the ground. I'll take you up today for your jump."

"No word from Mrs. Walker?" I asked.

His face clouded. "None. I'm worried about her."

"After that midget, yeah," I said, and walked on to the airplane truck to get my flying rig and parachute. And I wondered about this bouncing genial Rick Lloyd who had charge of the planes.

The big lantern-jawed Swede was

puttering around. Maybe he was a smoothie too, but I took a chance.

"Who is Rick Lloyd?" I asked.

"Bane flying boss,' said the Swede.

"Where'd he come from?"

"Vid me."

"Where'd you come from?"

"Pensacola," said the Swede stolidly. "We bane Navy men between hitches when Rick got this damn job vid circus. 'Ve have fun all summer,' Rick said, 'an' den ve go back to Navy.' "

"Two admirals slumming in the desert," I cracked. "Weren't you two with these planes before the circus got 'em?"

The Swede shook his head.

"Who hired you?" I asked.

"Ve got Navy friend at Tucson airport got us job vid Mr. Pepperday."

"Maxie come with you?"

"He came from Los Angeles—and dot's Missus Valker's chute. I know dot ink spot."

"What of it?" I said.

I grinned at his back as he stalked away, and felt better as I headed toward my plane. He sounded like the McCoy, which seemed to put the bouncing Rick Lloyd in the clear of the dirty work.

An hour later, I came in for a new spark plug. One of the strange planes was warming its motors. Chief Pike was standing near, watching the passengers, evidently making sure no one he wanted was leaving by air.

The twin-motor job took off, and my mechanic said, "Those big-shot oil guys travel in style."

"You'd hire a brass band if you had the dough," I said. "Say—what's the idea of Maxie taking off alone?"

"How do I know? He came in for gas an' his tanks was already three-quarters full."

Maxie made a wide swing over town.

The grease monkey said, "He's always goin' some place. Came in last night with bullet holes in his plane. Told me this morning he was flying low between here and San Antonio and some hunters cut loose at him."

"Maybe he's going back to wave at them," I said, leaving fast.

Pike was moving away when I caught him.

"That pilot who got shot at yesterday just left again! Want to come along? I'm following."

"Let's go," the big Texan said without hesitation.

CHAPTER SIX

RICK LLOYD WAS still in the air with passengers when I took my ship roaring down the field and jumped it in a fast low climb over Braza City. Maxie was out of sight now. He had headed southeast, across the greasewood-cactus-mesquite stretches of open country. I followed, flying low, the powerful motor wide open.

Little ranch tracks occasionally cut across the flat brownish-grey plain. Windmills and occasional ranch houses were the only signs that men lived below. Pike looked around and shook his head helplessly. I shrugged.

We both continued to search the infinity of space around us.

Pike had the better eyes. He pointed ahead, to the right. Then I saw it—a thin yellow cloud of dust that something had kicked up, now rapidly dissipating. The sun flashed off bright metal or glass, and I whipped the plane in that direction.

Less than a minute later I saw Maxie's ship down there on the ground.

The highway ran some three hundred yards beyond the plane. Maxie had landed on a natural flat, and an automobile was parked beside his plane.

Four people stood down there between plane and automobile. Their faces were little white spots looking up as we flashed past overhead. One of them wore skirts. A man was holding her arm—and my heart began to thump.

I had a hunch we'd found Nora Walker.

Inside my flying suit, under my arm, was the automatic I'd promised myself would stay close to Mike Harris for the duration of this case. Pike was looking around when I held the gun up. Nodding vigorously, Pike held up a revolver.

A quarter of a mile beyond the flat I banked sharply, throttled the motor, and came in for a fast landing. The ground was rougher than it looked; we bounced hard over a hummock, lurched, bumped toward Maxie's plane and the automobile.

"Look out!" Pike's yell of warning knifed faintly through the motor racket. Pike had lurched half up in his seat, waving his arms wildly.

The upthrust nose of the plane cut off most of my view. Almost anything could be happening. I slapped off the ignition switch, kicked hard left rudder, unsnapped the safety belt and started up to see what it was all about.

I caught one glimpse of the rolling automobile ahead and then it crashed at an angle into the propeller and nose of the plane. I landed against the padded cowling.

"Smashed propeller!" I thought helplessly.

The other plane motor was opening up.

Pike was steadying himself in the front cockpit, carefully aiming the revolver, then shooting.

Maxie's plane had swung around to make the run down the field. In the hot sunlight a man was running from the automobile toward Maxie's plane.

He was forty-fifty yards away—too far for Pike's revolver. But Pike fired again and the man stumbled, pitched forward, lay still.

Maxie's plane roared out in full power and rushed down the field past us. Maxie's goggled face stared—and in the front cockpit, Nora Walker tried to struggle up, and was dragged down again.

The man who yanked her down was last night's rat who'd been bailed out today—Blake.

I hit the ground with Pike.

"Can you follow them, Harris?" he asked.

I said, "Hell, no! What do you expect after running into an automobile?"

Swearing, Pike ran toward the body.

I swore too as I looked at the automobile and plane locked together. It had been a quick bold move to stop us, wreck us, keep us here on the ground while they got away. So simple to drive an automobile into a whirling metal propeller and bend it into uselessness.

Then suddenly I yelped with hope. I had cut the ignition, started the plane turning. The automobile had struck at an angle. The propeller, barely coasting around, had chewed into the car top. Plane and car were locked together, but that seemed the extent of the damage.

PIKE WAS GOING through the pockets of the man he had shot. When I got there his face was grave.

"Dead," Pike said.

"He's the one who was with Blake last night in my hotel room," I said. "He could have told us plenty."

"He won't now," said Pike.

He was taking a billfold, key ring, change, a purse, foutain pen and a watch from the man's pocket. He tossed two road maps on the ground with the other articles and looked in the billfold.

"This is McGowan," Pike said.

"And this," I said, "is a Texas map —and a Mexican road map."

Pike looked at the road map of Mexico.

"It's not much more than two hundred miles to the border," I estimated. "And a good place to duck to when the heat's turned on. Maxie went east from here, though. Toward San Antonio."

"He wouldn't get far in Mexico with an American plane," Pike said.

"Somebody," I said, studying the map, "is damned interested in points south of the border. Look at these spots from Nogales on east that are circled."

Pike looked and nodded thoughtfully. I said, "Each one's by a road. Over here in Sonora near Cananea, and here's one near Los Lomentos, not far east of the El Paso-Chihuahua highway, and this last one's near Coyame, southwest of Presidio, at the tip of the Big Bend.

"Double ring around that one," commented Pike. "What do you think?"

We looked at each other.

"Damned good place in that Big Bend country and south of the Rio Grande for a strange airplane to collect a few bullet holes," said Pike slowly. "That's wild country."

"Tell me why he'd take his plane there yesterday."

Pike shook his head.

"If he got shot at over toward San Antonio yesterday, I'm the bearded lady," I said. "This marked map means something—and this double-ringed spot is nearest to us. They've got the Walker girl. Pike, if we can get that auto untangled from the plane, let's go to Mexico."

"Pure guesswork. Have you got enough gas?"

"I'd rather guess wrong and be trying, than to twiddle my thumbs," I said. "I've got enough gas. We can get word east first to watch for them that way. . . . What's this—more trouble?"

An automobile had turned off the highway and was bumping over the ground toward us. Pike hastily reloaded his revolver. I slipped the safety off my automatic.

"Better get to the plane and some cover if there's going to be trouble."

Pike hurried with me.

Two Texas ranchers in wide-brimmed hats, Levi trousers and riding boots were in the old mud-streaked car that stopped in front of the plane.

"Hell of a mixup you got here," the first man out called.

Both were young, curious, suddenly alert and wary when they saw our guns.

Pike pulled back his coat and showed his badge.

"I'm chief of police at Braza City, boys. Little trouble here. How about helping us get this wrecked car out of the way?"

"Sure," was the ready assent. "We're heading for Braza City now. Gonna see the circus."

I said, "Boys, take a note to Miss Gunn, who owns the circus, will you? She'll give you the run of the show."

"Glad to, mister."

The ignition key was still in the car. With a little maneuvering we got the plane free and backed the automobile off to one side. The propeller was chewed some on the lead edge, but seemed still in balance. The dented engine cowling would not hurt.

Pike wrote hastily in his notebook, tore out the pages and slipped them in an old envelope.

"Give this to Rance Hodges at the jail," he directed.

I wrote my note, sketching to Trixie what had happened, where we were going. It would give her an idea what she was up against. The two ranchers waited for us to take off—and for the first thirty seconds that the motor spun I held my breath, fearful the prop was bent enough to vibrate badly.

But it whirled sweet and clean. The big motor was hitting perfectly. I wondered as we waved good-bye to the ranchers how big a fool I really was to head south across the Mexican border on little more than a hunch.

ON THE MAP you can see the Texas Big Bend thrusting down into Mexico like a great sprawling V whose sides are the Rio Grande River. Wild country, vast, lonely, with mountains on both sides of the border.

Five thousand feet up I headed for Alpine, on the El Paso-Del Rio highway. Beyond Alpine was the Big Bend. At Marfa, west of Alpine, was an Army flying field, but Army planes would be no help south of the border.

The maps helped. I sighted the road to Presidio, on the Rio Grande, and followed it to the river—and suddenly we were flying over Mexi-

can territory, uncivilized and rugged.

I idled the motor, the wind whistling as we lost altitude in a long glide.

Pike looked around inquiringly. His face was set, sober.

I called, "Somewhere along here, within twenty miles of the mountains!"

Pike's smile was thin. "What the devil do we look for?" he called back.

I shrugged hopelessly.

As we dropped lower the alkali desert gained reality. The thin air over this high tableland was bumpy from the glaring ground heat. Scrubby desert growth took form below. White sandy bottoms of dry arroyos looked like bloodless veins on a dead land.

A dust plume trailed a topless automobile under us. The driver was looking up, but did not stop. We went on. And again Pike was the one who saw what my city eyes did not quickly catch.

Off the road nearly half a mile, black smoke was rising. A mirror of some kind was flashing in our direction a heliograph signal.

I sighed with relief. I must have guessed right. Pike thought so. He looked back, nodding vigorously.

No other plane was there on the blistering alkali desert—nothing but a lone automobile, and two men were stamping out the source of the smoke and waving us to land.

I sideslipped in, straightened out to a smooth landing this time, rolled the plane up near the automobile, switched off the ignition as one of the men ran forward.

He was a Mexican, coatless, yellow striped silk shirt open at the neck, sleeves rolled up, coffee-brown face lean and smiling, and English not so bad as I climbed out.

"Thees better today, eh?" he called. Then suddenly he had a revolver out from the waistband of his trousers. "Who you are? What *you* doing here?"

So I knew I was right—and the first thing I thought of was Pike and his gun and the need for going slow and getting these Mexicans to talk. The other Mexican was standing at the car smoking a cigarette, waiting for us to join him.

I laughed and called to Pike, "I told you we'd get a gun in our faces when they saw I wasn't Maxie." I turned back to the Mexican. "Maxie said to tell you he had to be with Blake today. McGowan had some trouble."

"Who you are?"

"I hired out to fly for the circus. Name's Harris."

"Who *he* is?"

"That," I said, looking at Pike who was on the ground now and close enough to hear, "is a friend of McGowan's."

Pike had buttoned his coat over the police badge and his gun—but my nerves were jumping at the thought of what might happen.

"What happen to McGowan?"

"McGowan," I said, thinking fast, "shot at a detective who knew him, and had to leave."

"Dios! Trouble yesterday, trouble today! First we are drive away from Guadalupe, and they almost shoot Maxie down—and now trouble across the Rio Grande."

"Tough, ain't it?" I said, wondering where Maxie was now.

The second Mexican waited at the car with his coat on, straw hat pushed back.

Pike was watching, waiting. The Mexican in front of me seemed to be waiting for something also. I should, I sensed, do something.

"Maxie said we'd better get back quick," I suggested.

White teeth flashed at me.

"Sure t'ing. Sanchez he's got everyt'ing ready. Want to see it?"

"Yeah."

We went to the automobile. The burly Sanchez was in the back seat when we got there—and you could have knocked me over with a boo.

Sanchez was placidly cuddling a Thompson sub-machine gun on his lap. His stolid face had no expression as he nodded at me. He listened to rapid-fire Spanish from the other one, and grunted one word. *"Dinero."*

Silk Shirt indicated two cardboard suitcases on the front seat.

"You breeng the money?" he asked me.

"How much?" I stalled.

"Fifteen t'ousand—as usual."

I almost whistled. Fifteen grand! Fat chance Pike and I had of making good on that. Sanchez was eyeing us fixedly through the open car door.

"Bring 'em to the plane," I said, stalling again.

Silk Shirt lifted the suitcases out. They were heavy. I started to take one, then didn't. They would keep his hands busy. He was perspiring with the heat and weight of the suitcases.

"We got good place for next time," he told me. "Near Camaron, south of Laredo. On the map I show you."

It didn't take a rush of brains to figure this now. Sanchez had climbed out of the car and was stolidly strolling after us.

Pike gave me a look. He knew the danger was closing in, was taking his cues from me. And I didn't have any cues. With that tommy gun at our backs, fifteen grand was about all that would help. I'd promised the dough, hoping to get Silk Shirt and his suitcases over to the plane. Now no dough, and the big gun was there also.

I wondered if I could grab Silk Shirt, whirl him around and block the gun while Pike got into action. Of course I couldn't. Sanchez had his trigger finger set. He could cut us in half with bullets before we got started.

Then I heard it, and the Mexicans heard it too—the drone of a plane motor coming from the Rio Grande. They were instantly excited.

CHAPTER SEVEN

SILK SHIRT STARTED.

"What it is?" he snapped, dropping the suitcases, stepping back to look. They began to chatter in Spanish—but the tommy gun con-

tinued to cover Chief Pike and me.

"Point that the other way!" I called.

He ignored me.

From the corner of his mouth Pike said, "Do you figger it's what I figger it is?"

"Worse," I said. "What's the chance of nailing that guy with the gun?"

"None, while he's got it on us."

So there we were, with a strange plane hurtling toward us. I knew it was Maxie, and it was. He came down in a screaming dive that carried him roaring past not two hundred feet overhead. All three of them were up there, Maxie, Perry Blake, Nora Walker.

They knew us. Maxie banked in a steep circle, and through the racket of his motor Silk Shirt yelled, "Maxie! Why is Maxie follow you?"

"Ask him," says I.

Sanchez just stood there watching us, the tommy gun ready.

Maxie landed fast, too fast, bounced, almost ground-looped, blew his tail straight with a burst of the motor, and rolled yards past us before the brakes stopped him.

He was out of the plane like a rabbit, pulling a gun from inside his flying suit as he ran toward us, parachute banging on his hips. At the plane, Blake was hauling Nora Walker out of the front cockpit. Maxie reached us with his broad-cheeked, swarthy face grinning like a death's-head.

"Got 'em, huh?" he yelled at the Mexicans.

"What you mean?" Silk Shirt asked. He jerked his head at me. "You send heem because McGowan keel a cop?"

"Killed, hell!" said Maxie savagely. "They killed McGowan! Must have got McGowan's map and come over looking around." Maxie eyed the two suitcases and spat. "I had motor trouble and had to land for a little." He sneered at me. "Tried to get away with the stuff, did you?"

"What is the stuff?" I asked.

"Dope, you dope."

"I was wondering," I said. "Smart, ringing in a circus for a front."

Blake arrived with Nora Walker and heard me. She looked exhausted. Blake's thin face was lined, but he could still grin coldly at me.

"We thought the circus was pretty smooth," he said. "The heat was on the flying service racket we'd been using to jump stuff over the border. McGowan knew Pepperday from away back, and knew he was still throwing crooked curves at any chance. Pepperday wanted the circus. So we fixed it, and sold him the planes, and kept the circus as near the border as possible."

"You got Doc Martin to kill John Gunn?" I said.

Blake gave a high-pitched laugh at the memory.

"Martin wanted ten thousand, and got a hundred. And he couldn't squawk. Putting the heat on us meant the chair for him."

"Did you kill him last night?"

Blake shook his head. "Should have long ago, but Pepperday began

to lose his nerve. Tried to back out."

Maxie was hurrying back to his plane when I spoke to Nora Walker.

"Did you tie up with them?"

She flared back bitterly.

"Me have anything to do with the men who murdered my husband? All that's kept me alive is a chance to prove they did it! We knew something was wrong about John Gunn's death and the way the circus was handled afterward. They realized Jim was suspicious and murdered him. I saw him drop all the way. His parachute had been tampered with, and some day, I knew, I'd find who did it."

"Did you?"

She shivered.

"Yes," she said huskily. "I've been watching Maxie. Last night I heard him talking with this man Blake near the supply truck. They decided you'd have to fall the same way. That's why I telephoned you. Blake says they were in your room and heard me, and that was why they were sure I must have the money out of Maxie's plane. They kidnaped me because I knew too much."

"An alligator-hide briefcase?" I said, while Pike listened grimly and Blake grinned.

Nora Walker nodded—and any other time I'd have been proud of the way Trixie Meehan and I had guessed right over our breakfast coffee.

MAXIE CAME FROM his plane with an alliagtor-hide briefcase. He gave it to Silk Shirt.

"Count it, Truchas."

Then I noticed Maxie's hands. Both of them bore raw scratches on the backs. I saw again that tiny midget with her broken neck.

Truchas was down on his knees counting a cascade of twenty, fifty, hundred-dollar bills he had dumped on the ground.

"Some of them have holes," said Maxie. "One of those bullets yesterday went through the case. What the devil was wrong? You two weren't there."

Truchas shrugged without looking up from the counting.

"Bandits, *amigo*. We saw them coming and left *pronto*. Ees too bad."

"Too damn bad," said Maxie. "Hurry up with that counting. We've got to get back across the border, ditch the plane and get these suitcases started east. We can't go back to the circus. McGowan's dead; there's a hell of a bust-up due over there. Maybe we can get word to Pepperday to lam. All bets are off right now."

Truchas stuffed bills back in the suitcase, and looked at Nora Walker and Pike and me.

"What these people do?"

"Leave their plane here," said Maxie. "And nobody cares what happens. Take the men along with you also, if you want 'em."

Nora Walker bit her lip. Blake's high-pitched whinny of humor made me wish I'd hit him twice as hard with the jack handle.

Blake had dropped his parachute on the ground, one that Maxie had evi-

ROGUES' GALLERY

THE FIRST GENT ever to sell the Brooklyn Bridge was George Washington Parker, who originally did it on his twentieth birthday in 1883, and reputedly disposed of it at least fifty-two times later, getting up to $60,000 per deal. When a $200 sale got him sent to Sing Sing, he came out and sold Sing Sing to a customer for $36,000. Among other items he disposed of were: Statue of Liberty, $13,000; Metropolitan Museum of Art, $10,000; State Capitol at Albany, $8,000; Grant's Tomb, $4,000.

THE SPIRIT OF horseplay is still pretty rugged out Dallas way. Not long ago Pete Williams was pulled into headquarters there for killing Charlie Miller, an acquaintance.

"Shucks," Pete said, "we were just foolin' around. I went to Charlie's place and told him to leave my girl alone an' he said he wouldn't. So we just got to shootin'."

Eight of Charlie's bullets, by police count, missed Pete!

A MISSOURI FARMER got up at his customary ungodly hour one morning not long ago, and went to feed his chickens. Instead of his usual cackling covey he found only a single rooster, leering at a lone, self-conscious hen. To the perch was pinned a note:

We steal from the rich
And steal from the poor,
But leave this pair
So you can raise some more.

dently thought to provide for him. I asked Nora Walker, "Didn't they bring a chute for you?"

"Do you think they cared what happened to me?"

Grinning, Blake said, "Don't ask that cluck if he thinks." Blake picked up his parachute, grunted as he heaved up one suitcase.

"Let's go Maxie. Good-bye, Harris, you lousy dick. Truchas, they're both officers."

Truchas looked up, showing his teeth. "*Bueno.*"

Pike, Nora Walker and myself had to stand there before the tommy gun and watch those killers and dope-runners load the heavy suitcases in the plane and climb in.

Truchas was still kneeling, counting the last of the money when suddenly he cocked his head and jumped up, swearing in Spanish.

Pike said, "I'll be damned! Now what?"

The whine of Maxie's starter blotted out the faint drone of a plane motor that Maxie had evidently not heard.

Hope flamed across Nora Walker's face. Pike looked grim as he caught my eye. The swirling dust from Maxie's departing propeller blast eddied around us. Silk Shirt had drawn his revolver. The tommy gun still covered us.

A quarter of a mile away Maxie turned into the wind. His motor idled for a moment, and then its full-toned roar came faintly as it started the take-off run.

I clenched my fists as I watched a

plane streaking down out of the blue sky, dropping like a silver comet through the afternoon sunlight.

Maxie's plane took off—and the other plane dived down, down, and leveled off several hundred yards away. Not a hundred and fifty feet up it roared over us, pilot and two passengers in the front seat looking down. The tommy gun began to chatter. When I looked around, the stolid Sanchez was firing at the plane.

I glimpsed a mop of blonde hair and a familiar face looking down as the plane suddenly wobbled violently, swerved, and then zoomed wildly toward the sky.

"Run!" I called to Nora Walker.

Silk Shirt yelled a warning as I whipped my gun out from under the flying suit. Pike's revolver crashed, and my automatic spat at Sanchez.

He whirled, firing as he turned, fighting to bring the muzzle down. But he wasn't thinking fast enough to stop shooting for an instant and get set. One of us got him. He suddenly folded in the middle, fell back to a sitting position on the ground, rolled on his side. I started running toward him.

Silk Shirt had fallen on the money —and now, suddenly, Nora Walker screamed.

A THOUSAND FEET ABOVE us the vertically zooming plane was leveling off, whipping over on its side before the downward plunge—and a dark figure in skirts catapulted out into space and plummeted down.

"Trixie!" I yelled.

A parachute mushroomed out above Trixie—while the plane wing-slipped, leveled off drunkenly, and slipped again as the pilot fought for control.

Maxie's plane came roaring back and banked around so close to Trixie the air wash flung her about.

"The dirty rats!" I snarled.

"What are you doing?" Pike called to me, and I didn't answer.

I had my plane motor spinning before I fastened the safety belt. Trixie was still a hundred feet up when I gunned the cooling motor and started a wild take-off run that I'd never have tried in a sane moment.

Maxie had swung wide, seemed to be watching the crashing plane wobbling down. I climbed fast, watching them both. Trixie landed safely. The crashing plane weaved in with its tail low, struck hard, bounced, slued around, went over on a crumpling wing in a cloud of dust.

My motor was warming fast as I dove for Maxie's plane, throttle wide, air speed picking up. He headed for the mountains, and inside of five miles I was beside him, swerving so close he had to turn sharply to avoid a wreck. He tried to resume his course, but I turned him back again, and this time they both suddenly opened up at me with their guns.

The planes were only a length apart. I could see Maxie's lips cursing me. A bullet crashed through my instrument board—and I caught the control stick between my knees, heaved the barrel of Sanchez' tommy gun over the cockpit edge, squeezed the

trigger and held the leaping, kicking gun as steady as I could.

Bullet holes appeared in their fuselage. They sprang out along the side of Maxie's cockpit—and a spray of blood flew out of Maxie's neck as he fell forward in the seat. The plane slipped off on a wing, and I saw the terror that was suddenly on Blake's face. He scrambled out of the cockpit as the plane whipped down out of control.

I was still near enough to see Blake jump out and yank the parachute ring out—then start a slow somersault as he fell through that thousand feet of space oved the desert.

The only spare circus parachute had been the one that I had put in Nora Walker's compartment when I took her parachute.

Blake had my old parachute—and Nora Walker had been right. Blake's crowd had tampered with it. It didn't open.

Maxie's plane crashed near Blake's body and burst into flames—and I was shaking when I landed back by the Mexican's automobile.

Rick Lloyd was there at the car with a great bloody gash through his hair, a bottle of tequilla in his hand, and Trixie and Nora Walker working on him. The Swede was the other passenger who'd been with Trixie.

They had seen Maxie's plane crash. Nobody felt very hilarious.

"We'll be charged with forty brands of fancy murder if we're caught here in Mexico now," I said. "We've busted a dope-smuggling, murdering bunch—but we picked the wrong side of the border. After we get home we can notify the Chihuahua police to clean up this mess. My gas is low, the plane is light, but I can't carry more than four of you. Which leaves one."

"I'll go to Chihuahua and cross the border there," Pike declared.

The big Swede spat and shook his head slowly.

"Yah, me too. I see you in Pensacola, Rick. Dot's my next stop. Vidout a doubt, dis circus business is crazy and too much for me. Anyway, ve busted our jobs up here. Ve got no more to do."

Which, I thought, about covered everything. ◆ ◆ ◆

GARDENIA GIRL

● ONE HUNDRED AND TWO burglaries in one year was the record of England's phantom Gardenia Girl—who robbed only bachelors and invariably left behind her a scrupulously dusted and cleaned apartment, impregnated with the delicate scent of gardenias. To the toiling police of Manchester, she was raising a stink—but they finally arrested mousy little middle-aged Edith Annie Riley, who years before had been jilted at the altar by a gent who had absconded with her savings.

The gardenia scent had been a present from him!

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