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DETECTIVE TALES

December Issue
Published October 27th



VOL. TWENTY-EIGHT NOVEMBER, 1944 NUMBER FOUR

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THE CRIME CLINIC

THE meeting place was an automat on Broadway. The time was noon. The room was crowded and noisy. But the girl was beautiful; her hair was very black; her face faintly olive-tinted, oval and smooth. Steve Payne leaned across the table.

"Did I forget to tell you that I love you, Linda?"

"I don't quite remember. Not for the last five minutes, anyway."

"Did I ever say that we should get married?"

"Now that you mention it, I do recall that you hinted at something like that, in your imitably delicate way," she smiled.

"Don't forget then. . . ." Steve's gray eyes stalled a moment, attracted a figure entering the revolving door. "There's Ed!" he exclaimed. "Sit still, honey, I'll get him. You wouldn't believe it, but my brother-in-law is one of those rare characters called a private detective. Even so, he's an OK guy. . . . Hey, Ed," he called. "Come here and meet the future Mrs. Payne."

The stoop-shouldered, freckle-faced man was almost at their table. "I don't blame you for looking," Steve turned to him. "Doesn't she make any pin-up girl look a comic valentine? She's the very best, Ed, all the way from Tulsa, and teaches French at Miss Hamlin's school, and I'm marrying her next week, if I can live that long. . . ."

"Oh," he turned to the girl. "Linda, Ed Samuels, my brother-in-law. He watched them shake hands, smiling. Then abruptly, the smile was wiped off his face as he watched Ed's eyes open wide, then slowly narrow.

"I—I'm glad to know you," Ed said softly. Steve blinked. Ed's tone was cool, measured and very soft. "And so you're from Tulsa? Tulsa, Oklahoma, eh?" Ed went on. "And so you're teaching French to sub-debs at Miss Hamlin's School?"

"Yes. That—that's right," the girl said slowly. Suddenly, Steve noticed that her face, too, was drawn and flushed.

Ed smiled, straightening up. "I'll see you again. Soon!" he promised, and something went through Steve at the velvet threat in Ed Samuel's voice. He turned to Steve. "Come

and help me pick out a piece of pie," he said.

At the slot, Steve turned to his brother-in-law. "What the hell's the matter with you, anyhow? You act like Linda was poison. . . !"

"For a newspaper reporter who's supposed to have been around, you're just like any other damn dope!" Samuels said. Then he snorted. "So her name is Linda, and she's from Tulsa and teaching here? And, by God, you're going to marry her!"

Angrily, Steve's fingers locked in Ed's lapel. "What are you saying, you fool?" he blazed.

"Listen, kid," Ed gently disengaged Steve's hand. "That girl's name is not Linda Wilson. And never saw Tulsa in her life. And right this minute she's up to her neck in the damndest crime-ring—including blackmail, dope and murder—that this city's ever seen. I know, because I'm working on the case, and I've got enough on her—almost—to send her to the chair. But right now she's more valuable to me running around."

Steve's face purpled. "You—rotten—lousy—liar!" he said between his teeth, and swung his fist at Detective Samuel's jaw. . . .

The blow—which, by the way, didn't land—was something like the shot heard round the world, for it set off a dynamite-packed train of events—sinister, sudden and violent—which was to rock the high places of New York City; crime-packed, thrill-jammed days and nights when Steve Payne, reporter, was to wish he had never met either the girl he loved or his favorite brother-in-law, who was tracking her down with all the relentlessness of a blood-hound. . . .

Seldom, we believe, have we published such an absorbing human story of crime, mystery and intrigue as the one quoted above, and which will appear in the next issue. It is by Francis K. Allan, and represents one of the top-notch thrillers by that gifted writer.

Also, in the same big issue, *another* colorful and dramatic mystery novel, by another master of murder-fiction, Frederick C. Davis; plus an unusually strong selection of short stories, features and departments!

The December issue will be published October 27th!

THE EDITOR

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RAILROAD RANSOM

By C. T. SULLIVAN



A railroad is a mighty thing . . . powerful locomotives, steel rails, sturdy bridges, thousands of men, and millions of dollars . . . yet this one man held it in his hand as he would a toy . . .

MONTANA'S most famous dynamiter had black, shaggy hair hanging down over his forehead; black eyes, sullen in deep sockets, and a brain with one fixation—that of obtaining \$25,000 from the Northern Pacific. The dynamiter was Ike Gravelle.

It started in July 1903 in the well-appointed offices of the Northern Pacific at St. Paul, Minnesota. There officials read a letter, and tossed it aside.

The letter said the writer was holding the N.P. for \$25,000 ransom and, if necessary, he would destroy railroad property until the same was paid. The N.P. was given fifteen days to comply with the demand. The railroad was directed to tie a piece of white cloth to the drawhead of the last coach of each passenger train running between St. Paul and Spokane until notified how to pay the money.

On August 1, 1903, a section foreman living near Livingston, Montana was awakened at 2 a.m. by an explosion. He investigated and found that granite piers of the N.P. bridge over the Yellowstone river had been dynamited. The bridge was supported only by a pinnacle of stone. A freight train and a passenger train actually had passed over the bridge safely after the blast.

On August 5 a freight rolling across Montana struck explosives tied on the track and limped into a roundhouse with headlight blown away, pilot shattered and its front utterly blasted.

On September 22 Engineer John Brown, running a passenger train between Helena and Logan, struck dynamite on the tracks. At Claysoil, near Helena, dynamite was found between the rails. At Birdseye there were three successive explosions that spread rails.

The N.P. in the meantime had decided the letter was not from a crank but from a dangerous man. They displayed the white signal. A second letter from the dynamiter was mailed from Butte. It expressed pleasure that the N.P. had decided to comply with the writer's orders. It instructed the railroad to leave the money at a point along the right of way where a red lantern would be displayed

The railroad disregarded the order. Other blasts followed and the N.P. was notified the writer now wanted \$50,000.

The railroad was in a turmoil from St. Paul to Spokane. Railway officers, sheriffs and their deputies and police of many cities sought the dynamiter. They were spurred on by a \$5,000 reward offered by Governor Joseph K. Toole of Montana, \$5,000 by the Northern Pacific and \$500 by Park County, Montana—a total of \$10,500.

In October, 1903, a man was reported digging in the snow on the railroad tracks near Blossburg. James Keown, Frank Latta and Bert Reynolds took up his trail and after a thirty mile chase, captured Ike Gravelle, the dynamiter. He was sentenced to ten years in Montana state prison and fined \$5,000.

Gravelle was kept in the county jail. The jailor, named Jones, went to Gravelle's cell.

"Put up your hands," Gravelle ordered, after Jones had unlocked the cell door. He flashed a revolver. Gravelle forced Jones to walk ahead of him down the jail corridor, where they met Deputy Sheriff Tony Korizek. Jones unsuccessfully tried to warn him. Gravelle forced Jones and Korizek to turn to the wall. It is believed that Korizek tried for his gun for Gravelle shot and killed him.

Gravelle ran to the street and toward Governor Toole's mansion near the Helena business district. The pursuers fired shots and a woman caught in the line of fire ran to the front door of the governor's mansion. Mrs. Toole, the governor's wife, heard the shots and rushed to the door. She opened it and let the woman in. She then locked the door. Gravelle tried to enter the house but could not open the door.

A pursuer shot and wounded Gravelle in the arm. The rest closed in and Gravelle ran to the rear of the house—to find himself trapped by high walls. He took shelter in an enclosed alleyway. His pursuers, closing in for the kill or capture, heard a shot.

The dynamiter had blown off the top of his head!

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COME HOME TO THE CORPSE!

Starkly Realistic Crime-Mystery Novel

By G. T. FLEMING-ROBERTS



Somebody came from behind
and took him with a black-



If you'd married Edith, no one could blame you for sneaking out, like Wes, for a peaceful beer, even though it meant hell-a-mile when you sneaked back again. . . . But the kind of hell Wes returned to was something far more grim and deadly than the usual tongue-lashing of the vitriolic virago who shared—and did her best to wreck—his life. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

The Men at the Door

WES hadn't known Edith had a cousin named Al until after Wes and Edith had been married eighteen months. Then one January afternoon the plant physician sent Wes home with a bad chest cold, and when Edith let him into their apartment, why there was this dark, short-browed man with eyebrows like square chunks of licorice candy. Edith pointed, her palm upward as

though pointing was something she'd practiced in front of a mirror, and said: "Wes, this is Cousin Al," just like that, out of a not-so-clear sky.

Al lifted himself out of a lounge chair. His expensive dark suit with chalk stripes was patterned to lend him height and plane off some of his breadth. His right hand, bright with three carats of diamond, engulfed Wes' fingers in a crusher grip while eyes like ripe olives gave Wes a going-over.

"So *this* is Wes." Al was loud and patronizing. "How're you, fellah. Ha-huh-huh." Al's chuckle was not a happy sound, not contagious.

By the time Wes had washed and put on clothes that weren't covered with the dust of the pattern-making shop, Cousin Al was on his way out. In overcoat and black homberg hat he waved casually to Wes from the doorway.

"See you again, fellah."

And that was the last time Wes saw Cousin Al until the night of the murder. But he heard enough about him from Edith. All of their fights ended in the same round, with Edith reminding Wes that if Cousin Al were married, *his* wife wouldn't have to wear her trousseau forever either; she'd have mink coats and Daché hats. . . .

THE night of the murder, the quarrel was different in that it started with Al and his money instead of ending that way. Wes came home late from the plant to find Edith keyed up to a screaming pitch because the bathtub faucets were dripping. She'd been after the janitor all day, and if she had to sit there all night listening to that steady drip-drip, she'd go out of her mind.

Wes was dead on his feet. With all the war orders pouring into the foundry, the pattern shop was a mad-house. He didn't try to explain how tired he was to Edith because she'd long ago ceased to be interested. He went into the bathroom to look at the faucets, then came around into the adjoining bedroom. At the back of the clothes closet was a little door which divulged the secrets of the bathtub plumbing. Opening the door he saw a shoe box wedged between water and drain pipes. He scowled, stooped, pulled out the box, shook it. Then he slashed the string that bound it with his keen-edged knife and removed the lid.

The knife, the lid, the string fell from his fingers to the floor. Wes held the box in his hands, stared into it. He was bewildered, shocked, scared, like dreaming he'd gone downtown and forgot to put on his trousers. The box contained money—wads of money in neat packs of eye-popping hundred dollar bills.

Out in the living room, the satin-faced heels

of Edith's mules came clattering down on the floor. The sofa springs squeaked, and there was the startled swish of her taffeta housecoat. Wes came from the closet as she came into the bedroom. Her dark hair was tumbled from lounging all afternoon. Her eyes were so wide the white showed all around the blue irises. At first there was panic in her eyes and then the hard brightness of defiance.

"Snooping in my closet, are you?"

He didn't answer. He shoved the box toward her. "What—what's this?"

She laughed. "You wouldn't know, would you? You've heard about the stuff but you've never seen any!"

"Where—where—" He moistened his lips. Ugly thoughts whirled around in his brain like castings tumbled in a rotary cleaner at the plant, making meaningless clatter, raising a blinding dust.

"Cousin Al's," she said. "I'm keeping it for him for a while. He wants it to start a new business."

"Oh. He's got something against banks?"

Her eyes fled from his for a furtive second. Then she talked fast. "You wouldn't understand. Al's up there where he hears things long before they break in the papers. A new regulation. It's something about attaching private savings and giving war bonds in exchange."

Wes brought a wilted smile to his lips. "Confiscation of private wealth. I'm up there where I hear things, too. They spiked that rumor as coming from Berlin—not Washington. *Cousin Al*—"

He paused. The reflection had come unintended, as though prompted by something that had been going on in his subconscious. It brought a short brittle laugh from Edith's full red lips. She leaned toward him, one hand on her hip, the other clasp the low neck of her housecoat. Her face was waxen with only a faint apricot tint up high on her cheeks. She'd had something to drink, though Wes didn't know where she'd got it. The drink was part of her defiance, but the scornful narrowing of her eyes was something he'd been putting up with for a long time.

He said, "Go ahead, laugh. Out loud, I mean. Up to now I've been seven kinds of a jackass!" He dropped the box at her feet.

He left the bedroom, got hat and topcoat out of the living room closet. When he turned, Edith was in the living room with him, between him and the door. She looked a little scared.

"What are you going to do?" she asked, taunting in spite of her fear.

He started for the door. "You'd like to know."

She caught his arm, he brushed her off, reached for the doorknob. He was quite calm.

The only thing that hurt was his pride. He turned toward her once more.

"If you hadn't killed the love I had for you a long time ago, Edith, I'd strangle you with my bare hands. You notice, don't you, I'm not asking when *Cousin Al* was here last or how many times he's been here since that first time? I'm just not interested."

She laughed an unstable laugh that wavered between derision and hysteria. "Go on, Wes. Go out and get stinko on two beers! Wes—" She leaned out the door after he had entered the hall to shout at his back, "Wes, pick up a girl who understands, why don't you?"

This last struck her particularly funny and her brassy laughter echoed in Wes' ears long after he had left the apartment.

IT was a place on Illinois Street. Wes hadn't bothered to look at the name. It had a bar and tables, a noisy crowd, a piano perched on a little platform at the back with a gray-haired harpy of a woman to play it. Edith had been right about Wes and a couple of beers. He'd had one and a straight whiskey, trying to get hilariously drunk, but instead of that he was just feeling slightly numb. He wasn't used to liquor and it hit him like a lead pipe. It made him wonder if Edith had been right too about him not being able to pick up a girl.

There was one girl sitting alone at a little table tucked back in a corner between the wall and the piano platform. Wes never did know what made him think she'd be easy unless it was the black lace stockings she wore. He'd show Edith—or show himself, because Edith didn't matter any more.

He slid away from the bar, through the crowd to stop at the girl's table. It wasn't until he had his hand on the back of the chair opposite hers that he decided he was all wrong about her. She was looking toward the piano and it was her profile he saw—clean-cut, delicate features, the black veil from her small black hat just reaching the tip of her short straight nose. She had the poise that bar-flies never had, and probably money; hay hadn't bought the fur coat that was softly crushed against the back of her chair. He'd probably get his face slapped.

"You look lonely," he said. "My name's Wes."

She turned her head toward him. A half-smile on moist red lips widened, brightened. Her eyes scarcely touched his face at all, and it seemed that the veil lent them a strange misty quality that was out of this world.

"I'm never lonely when there's music," she said.

If that was a brush-off, her voice and her smile took the sting out of it. Her smile was in her voice, an inseparable part of it.

She made an indefinite but graceful gesture with her hand. "My name's Sal," she said. "Would you care to join me?"

"Thanks." He drew a breath, bowed stiffly. "How do you do, Sal?"

"Wes—" She tried his name, sounding as though she liked it. He liked it, too, the way she said it.

He sat down. There wasn't much chance to talk to the girl because they were so close to the piano. Between numbers, he offered her a cigarette, asked to buy her a drink. She said no thanks to both. They listened to the music, Wes uncomfortably tilting his chair, fumbling at his pockets, watching the girl and the strange ecstatic expression that came across her face as she listened.

Once she said, "She plays very well, doesn't she? I can always tell when the pianist is a woman by her touch."

Wes said he didn't know much about music. He liked to listen to it, all right. "On the radio sometimes. It's relaxing after a hard day's work."

That set him thinking just how few of his evenings with Edith had been relaxing. Her acid tongue, her equally disagreeable sulky silences had spoiled so many hours that could have been pleasant. Well, that was a page torn out of the book. He'd go back to the apartment long enough to get some of his things. Then tomorrow he'd see a lawyer about a divorce. He'd see Noll Brown. Noll was a crack attorney and he and Wes had gone to high school together. Being a personal friend would make the washing of soiled linen easier. . . .

WES looked across the table at the girl. She wasn't paying any attention to him, just half smiling and listening to the music. She'd done something for him, Sal had. Sal was decent. She'd unconsciously restored some of the self-confidence that Edith had been gradually whittling away for three years. Though they had not discussed his work, just being with Sal had made him feel there was more to pattern-making than saw dust and the smell of glue.

Wes excused himself for a moment, stepped to the piano, slid fifty cents across the top of the upright to the gray-haired woman. The woman nodded her thanks. Her shifting pale blue eyes studied him while rouged lips against husk-dry skin slashed into an unlovely smile.

"Play something for you, boy?"

Wes nodded. "Play 'My Gal Sal'." Then he went back to the table, sat down quickly, feeling red-eared and conspicuous. All through the number he didn't look at Sal. He sat silent and sweating, hands dangling and worrying him because they dangled.

"That was nice of you, Wes," came her velvet soft voice.

"Well—" He coughed. "I wanted to do something—" He couldn't explain. He leaned forward quickly, arms resting on the table. He tried searching Sal's elusive, misty eyes that lay behind the coquettish black veil. "Say, would you like to go some place where there's a band?"

Her smile faded. "Oh, I couldn't. I have to go home, really. It must be quite late."

"Ten after eleven. Can I see you home, then?"

"No, thanks." She was trying to get into her coat. In her haste, the shoulders of the coat fell down behind her to the seat of her chair. Wes got around the table and helped her with her coat. The coat, he thought, was mink like Edith was always talking about.

"You'll see me to a taxi, won't you?" she asked.

"Sure."

"It'll worry my brother when he comes back here for me, but he shouldn't have left me so long." Her warm fingers found Wes' hand, clasped it as she got to her feet. Then her hand slid up his arm and through it.

"Then you were a little bit lonely when I came along?"

"A little bit. You were nice, Wes."

She said that again, "You were nice, Wes," just before the taxi whisked her away from him. He stood there on the curb, watching after the cab until it was out of sight. Then he took a deep breath of chill air, turned up the collar of his thin coat, and started back to the apartment.

Thirty minutes later, as he was about to fit his latch key into the lock, the door of the apartment was suddenly opened. Wes stood there with the key in his hand. His eyes traveled up leather puttees, across blue serge, a bristling cartridge belt, brass buttons, up to a craggy red face with blue ice chips for eyes. Fear stabbed him swiftly. He stepped back, but not beyond the reach of the cop.

"Your name Wesley Robbins?"

He nodded, dumb-struck. His eyes searched the red face, then reached beyond. There were others in his apartment—other cops milling around. Dully the thought struck him that all this had something to do with the shoebox full of money. But after they'd hauled him into the living room the thought of Al's dough was knocked from his head by the sight of Edith lying behind the open door—Edith and the blood and the knife that belonged to Wes.

CHAPTER TWO

Out of the Frying Pan

"WE'LL try it once more, Robbins," the plainclothes cop named Haskins said quietly to Wes.

This time it was different. This time the body was gone and there was no attempt to shock or frighten him into telling what they called "the truth." They let him sit in the lounge chair while Haskins sat on the ottoman in front of him. A midnight hush had descended upon the apartment, and there was no one in the living room except Wes, Haskins, and a uniformed man who stood in the doorway and scraped at his nails with a knife. The detective began patiently.

"You still can't remember the last name of this man your wife called 'Cousin Al'—the man you and your wife quarreled about to-night?"

Wes shook his head tiredly. "I don't think she ever mentioned it."

"All right." Haskins was patient. "There's nothing you want to add or retract concerning this shoebox full of money?"

"Nothing. Whoever killed Edith must have taken it with him."

"If," Haskins said, "if there ever was a shoebox full of money around here. You see, Robbins, we strike cases like this every day in the year. Cases just like yours. A triangle, some jealousy, some booze, and a gun or knife. The same pattern over and over, so we get awfully damned skeptical when you drag in a shoebox full of money that nobody can find. It's a very interesting idea, but it's also a little bit screwy."

Haskins was silent a moment. His wrists were crossed on one knee and a cigarette burned between the first and second fingers of his right hand. He'd been burning up cigarettes like that for thirty minutes, just lighting them and letting the feather of smoke play up in front of his lean face like incense before a joss.

"All right. Now, after the quarrel, Robbins. What time did you leave here?"

Wes shook his head. "I don't know. Maybe nine or nine-thirty. All I know is that I was in this joint on Illinois Street at about ten o'clock. I think I went there straight from the house."

"But you don't remember the name of the joint?"

"No. I'll point it out to you if you give me the chance."

"You'll get the chance. And you were there in company of somebody named Sal from ten o'clock until a few minutes after eleven. You're sure of that?"

Wes was sure. "There was an illuminated clock in the tap room and I noticed."

Cigarette ash snowed soundlessly on the worn carpet. Haskins said, "That's the point. You don't know Al's last name. You don't know Sal's last name nor her address. You don't know the name of the joint where you had a beer and a Scotch. But, damn it, you

know the time you were there. Everything else is hazy like a nightmare—even the color of this Sal girl's hair and eyes. But you know the time you were in that joint. That's the only thing that fits, and it fits too damned tight."

Wes asked, "What time was—was my wife killed? You haven't told me."

Haskins snorted. "That's it. We haven't told you, but automatically you pop up with a shaky alibi exactly covering the time of your wife's death. The coroner's physician says between ten and eleven, approximately. That watch on your wife's wrist struck the door stop when she fell. The crystal was smashed and the hands stopped between two cracks on the glass, fixing the time between ten-thirty and ten-forty."

Wes' pulse quickened. His hand went out, closed tight on Haskin's hard, bony knee. "Then what are we waiting for? Give me a chance, can't you? I can prove where I was at that time. Listen, even if I don't know where to get hold of Sal, there's a gray-haired woman who plays the piano in that joint. She'll remember me, because I gave a fifty cent tip to her and asked her to play a piece I'll bet she hasn't played in years."

Haskins looked at his watch, stared at it, scowling as though telling time was a trick

that required a working knowledge of astronomy. Then he stood up, looked at the cop in the door.

"Okay, Mike. We'll run Robbins down to the station now, and on the way we can stop and check on this alibi." He turned to Wes. "I don't suppose you know either the first or hind name of this female piano-pounder?"

Wes shook his head. "Of course not. I never saw her before in my life."

Haskins said wearily. "Of course not. A perfect stranger. She's probably your mother."

Wes' fingernails bit into his palms and his teeth into his lower lip. He struggled against an impulse to hang one on Haskins' lean jaw. Haskins chuckled dryly, handed Wes his hat and topcoat. They left the apartment in a line-up like flying wild geese, with Haskins in front, Wes to the left and back, and the uniformed cop named Mike in the tail position. Haskins explained that there wouldn't be any handcuffs because there were medals for shooting pinned to Mike's underwear or some place.

OUT in the street a chill rain was coming straight down, drops the size of bullets smacking the pavement and the roof of the waiting police car. A couple of drunks were tacking along the sidewalk in front of the

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apartment, arms linked for mutual support, walking like Siamese twins. Haskins hated the rain, and his head was ducked low as he plunged for the police car. Mike was shoving Wes from behind when the thing happened that flipped Wes from the frying pan and into the fire.

The scuffle of feet was scarcely audible above the splatter of rain. There was a soft *chunk* sound behind Wes and an explosive grunt from Mike. Mike pitched to the sidewalk dead weight. Wes and Haskins twisted around, saw the two drunks, drunk no longer, stepping around Mike's sprawled form, closing in with gun and sap. Haskin's snatched at his shoulder gun, but before he'd got it in a talking position, somebody came from behind the cop car and took Haskins from behind with a black-jack.

It was sudden and silent, timed to the split second. There was for Wes an exalted moment of freedom damped almost at once by chill realization of what this really meant to him. He was free, yes, to be hunted by police now doubly sure that he was a killer and a member of a gang. He stood there an instant, hands dangling helplessly, then drew a shallow breath ducked his head, dashed into an opening between two of his shadowy liberators. The opening closed on his coat tails. Two hands clamped on his right arm while his weight carried him forward to spin on his right heel, shoulder twisted painfully. Another man caught his left arm, kept him from spilling on the pavement.

"Now take it easy, fellah. A helluva way to show your gratitude!"

Wes hadn't heard the voice in over a year, but he recognized it instantly. Cousin Al! Wes yanked himself forward and back, trying to break away from the pair as they dragged him toward the mouth of the alley that skirted the side of the apartment building. The cold muzzle of an automatic in the hands of the third man rammed his spine.

"Be good, fellah!"

He wasn't good. He got a foot in front of Al, tripped him. Al fell, dragged Wes down on top of him. One of the others clipped Wes behind the ear, a blow that stunned without plunging him all the way under. They picked him up bodily, carried him into the alley where a car waited. He was shoved into the back seat between Al and one of the others, while the third man climbed in under the wheel.

"That's gratitude," Al grumbled. "Down-right disillusioning to a Boy Scout." He put a big hand on Wes' shoulder, shook him. "Wake up, fellah. We're doing you a good turn."

"Yeah—" came like a sob from Wes' throat. They were doing him a swell turn. They'd done

everything but strap him into the chair.

The car rushed through the night, the tires sucking on wet asphalt, the cold rain spitting through a window open at the top. Close to Wes's ear, Al's voice came in a rumbling monotone like water in a culvert.

"You're on the spot, Wes. Behind the eight ball, and I mean really. I'm getting you out. I'm getting you the best mouthpiece there is. You'll see. He'll be waiting for us where we're going. When I tell 'em to come, they come. You'll beat the rap. All you got to do is shoot square with me."

They headed out East Michigan, bumping over railroad tracks, then turned sharply to the left in front of a squarish three story brick building. A white sign flared up in the rain-streaked headlight beams: "A. T. Morris. Poultry and Produce House. Wholesale and Retail." The sign was superfluous. The smell of burned feathers and filthy chicken batteries ought to have been enough.

Wes said, "This your place? You're A. T. Morris?"

"Yes," Al said. "One of my places."

Wes got to laughing. Even when he felt the gouge of a gun in his ribs, he still laughed. He couldn't help it. He was comparing the smell of fish glue that sometimes clung to him after he left the pattern shop with the nauseating stench that came from Al Morris' place of business. Beside this filthy reek you could sell *eau de* fish glue for ten bucks an ounce.

Wes was hustled out of the car between Al and the man with the gun. They skirted a pile of poultry batteries piled high on the sidewalk, climbed worn stone steps, pushed through double doors into a hall. The draft the doors made closing eddied dust and feathers up from the floor. There was dim illumination from guarded light bulbs high in the ceiling. Al led the way up a wide staircase that creaked and squawled under his heavy tread.

Up on the second floor somebody was pacing nervously back and forth—short pecking steps on hard heels.

"When I tell 'em to come, they come," Al said and chuckled. "Hi, Noll."

The pacing stopped. As they came to the head of the stair, Wes saw a slight, short figure of a man standing in front of a door marked "Office." In front of him dangled a brief case like a Scotsman's sporran. Noll Brown, reputed to be the city's crack attorney, hadn't changed much since Wes had known him in high school. Instead of horn-rimmed glasses he now wore *pince nez* that wobbled from bunched-up flesh between his eyes. His lower lip still drooped like an iris petal, showing his lower gums, and he still had a shrewd squint. He squinted now at Wes, but gave no indication of recognition.

He said to Al, "This should be good, Morris."

Tonight I was going to get caught up on some sleep."

"It'll be good for a couple of grand," Al returned. "I'll talk to you in a minute." He stooped in front of the door, unlocked it, motioned Wes to enter his office.

CHAPTER THREE

The Harpy

AL MORRIS propped up his square chin in the fork of a hand, his elbow resting on his desk. His thumb gouged up one blubbery cheek until his eye was only a glittering slot.

"Wes, you're in a spot."

"We're not going over all that again," Wes said irritably. He rested one knee on the seat of the chair Joe had proffered. "And we'll cut out the patronizing. You speak your piece, say what you want of me, then I'll say no and get the hell out of here." He uttered a tired man's croaking laugh, and added. "The smell in here gets me down."

Al said, "You ought to know what I want. I want my money. I went to your place *after* you'd knifed your wife. The money was gone. There was close to a hundred grand in that box. I got to have it. If I don't get it, don't think you won't get that hundred thousand volt kick in the pants."

"I haven't got your money," Wes said. He shivered. There was much heat in the office and the soaked collar of Wes' coat was clinging to the back of his neck like a hand of ice.

"Now, be reasonable, fellah," Al argued. "You're a long time dead, and after they ram the switch home up there at Michigan City, they tell me you die just as fast if you killed for a hundred grand or ten cents. All you got to do is tell me where you stashed the money. I send one of my boys for it. When I've got my hands on the dough, I call in Noll Brown. He takes your case. You've automatically got an alibi six blocks long. Big people, I mean, will swear they saw you drinking coke the time of the murder."

Wes shook his head. "I got an alibi. I had one until you and your mugs horned in, anyway." He took his knee off the chair and rested his clenched fists on the desk top. "You want to know how I think it was? You went to my apartment tonight after I'd left, to pick up your money. You found out Edith held out some of the money, quarreled with her about it. In the fight you picked up my knife and killed her. You wore gloves, so only my prints were on the knife. You ran out of there, with your dough, then had your men pull me out from under the cops to make me look even guiltier. When you get the frame nailed all neatly around me it'll probably include some

of that 'missing' money which you probably snatched from—from some war-plant payroll."

Al's oompah-horn lips curled scornfully. "That's reasoning like a worm, fellah. You want to know why Edith wouldn't have held out any money on me and why we wouldn't have quarreled? It was like this with Edith and me." He leaned back in his chair so his coat fell away from his broad vest and the gold chain and walrus ivory that glittered there. He fished down into a pocket, pulled out two folded pieces of pale green paper. He fanned them apart so Wes could see there were two of them—two railroad tickets.

"That's how it was with Edith and me," he said. "Two for sunny California."

IT wasn't the ghost of a dead love nor the goading wound of his pride that made Wes do what he did. It was simply that he hated the guts of this grinning, cock-sure Al Morris. Wes' long looping right had a steam whistle on it that told of its coming, but Al just had too much weight to pull back out of the way. Wes' knuckles glanced across the thick lips, opened them against teeth. Al's chair went slamming back from his desk, and when he got onto his feet, Wes was around the desk, ready for him. Al reached in under his coat for his gun. Wes let him have another in the middle. Al fumbled the gun, drawing it clear of the harness—and taking it from him was like taking candy from a baby.

Wes transferred the gun to his right hand. He felt a grin tightening his lips. He said a crazy thing, "Score one for fish glue and saw-dust."

"Now, wait a minute, fellah." Al had his hands half raised, his fingers were wide spread. His voice wasn't the deep assured bellow of a moment before.

Wes backed away toward the door. He said, "Thanks for the gun. The way you fixed things up for me, maybe I'll need it."

He went out into the hall. Al's gunman assistant straightened away from the stair rail, jaw dropping, eyes on the gun in Wes' hand. Noll Brown was in the hall. He stopped that *peck-peck* hard-heeled pacing, squinted at Wes through wobbling glasses. He raised his briefcase to belly-level as though the thing was bullet proof. Wes took a step toward him.

"Noll. Noll Brown. Remember me, Noll? In Latin you were top man and I was the dope. It's still like that. I'm still the dope."

Noll's squinted eyes widened slowly. There was a glimmer of recognition in their dark depths. "Wes—" He snapped his thin, crooked fingers. "Ah, Wes Robbins!" He put out his hand and then remembered the gun. His hand dropped. A dour apology for a smile twisted that lower lip of his. "We've come a long way from that Latin class."

Wes seized Noll's arm with his left hand. His voice was quiet, earnest. "You used to say you wanted to be a lawyer so you could defend the guy who was too poor and too dumb to do that for himself."

Noll said again, "We've come a long way from that Latin class."

Wes shook his head. "You've got to hear me. I've got to talk to you before I turn myself over to the cops."

Cold reserve stiffened Noll Brown's face. He *had* come a long way from that Latin class and the schoolboy ambitions to defend the small fry.

He said, "Do I get it right? You think you can force me to take a case at the point of a gun?"

"All I'm going to force you to do is listen. Their framing me for a murder rap. I've got an alibi. I can prove I didn't do it."

Al Morris opened the door of his office, stood there wiping blood from his mouth on the back of his hand. Wes swiveled the gun, covering Morris and his henchman. The latter slid a glance at Al. Al shook his head.

"Let him go," Al said. He nodded at Wes. "Be seeing you, fellah. In the papers. 'Wes Robbins, wife-slayer, paid the supreme penalty for his crime today in the electric chair at State Prison, Michigan City.' And as for you, you chiseling shyster," he flung at Noll Brown, "if you defend this punk I'll cut your heart out."

Noll Brown said concisely, "That would be suicide." Then he turned and walked ahead of Wes down the steps.

When they reached the street, Noll turned to Wes. His lips twisted wryly. "My car's up the street. Can you tell your tale while I give you a lift some place?"

Noll didn't ask Wes where he wanted to be taken. Wes didn't have any place to go, so he didn't care. Noll drove slowly, listened without interrupting while Wes talked. Wes told him about finding the money and about the quarrel with Edith. He told him that vague chapter about going to some joint on Illinois Street and listening to some unnamed gray-haired woman pound the piano. He told about Sal who didn't have a last name and no address, about the home-coming to homicide and the attack on the cops by Al's men.

After that, he went into the realm of speculation, spoke of his theory involving Al Morris and the missing money. The money was hot, he figured, and Al was hiding it from the cops. Possibly Edith had spent some of the money, let it slip into circulation before it had cooled off, thus blazing a trail back to Al Morris. Maybe Al had killed her on that account.

Noll Brown stopped the car at the curb in front of an apartment building with a canvas canopy reaching out across the sidewalk.

He said, "My place, Wes. Come on in and have a drink." He started to slide out of the car, but Wes caught his arm.

"Wait a minute. You believe me, don't you?"

Light from the apartment entry way reflected opaque glare from Noll Brown's glasses. "I believe you. Your chances before a jury are slim as a hangnail. We'll see what we can do, for the sake of the Latin class and an ambitious kid who wanted to be a lawyer so he could defend the dopes that got in trouble."

IN the sixth floor apartment, Noll Brown made highballs, tasted his, put the tall glass down on a cocktail table, paced away to return to it every now and then like a bee to a honeysuckle bloom. He didn't sit down. He rasped Wes' nerves with his constant motion. Between cigarette puffs and sips, he talked.

"Wrong about Al Morris' shoebox full of money," he said. "It's not hot." He buzzed back to the glass for a sip. "That is, he didn't hold up a payroll. More subtle robbery than that. He can spend it any day. He just doesn't want to be caught with it on his person at this particular phase of his career. And he couldn't put it in a bank because Bureau of Internal Revenue inspectors are watching him."

"Where'd he get it?" Wes wanted to know.

"From saps. People who get a kick out of beating the government ration restrictions. Retailers patronize him, too."

"You mean blackmarket?"

Pacing away from Wes, Noll nodded his head. He turned, flipped cigarette ash, came back to his drink. "Name anything you think you can't get from a steak to a radio and Al Morris can get it for you. If you want to pay those kind of prices. That poultry business fronts for the meat racket. He's got other places. He takes in big money and it's all spendable. The only trouble is, he's being watched closely. One slip and he's in for a long time."

"You don't think he killed Edith?"

Light glinted on Noll's glasses. "I didn't say that. Maybe he did. Maybe she changed her mind about going to California with him. Maybe they fought about that and he killed her. Anybody could have killed her. If she was attractive or if she wasn't, there are still a lot of morons going around who break in on lonely women and kill them. And then there was the money. Maybe the janitor knew about the money."

He paced away again, went to the window, stared at his reflection in the darkened glass. "This woman who played the piano in the tavern—she wouldn't make the best witness in the world. I know her. She's a former concert pianist. Liquor. She's a dipsomaniac."

He twisted around, pointed a finger at Wes. "That's why you can't give yourself up to the police. We can't risk an indictment and trial because the prosecutor will discredit our star witness. We've got to break this thing before it goes that far. The woman pianist—her name's Mehring—won't look good on the stand. I won't defend you if the Mehring woman is the best we can do."

Wes drank a little of his highball in an effort to put down an inner chill. "What about Sal?"

Noll shook his head. "From your vague description of the girl, the fact that she did not mention her name, would not let you take her home or learn her address, I gather that she was money gone slumming. If so, we'd never find her. As soon as this breaks into print, she'll go into hiding. She wouldn't go into court to defend a stranger whom she'd allowed too—well, pick her up. You can't blame her. The newspapers would crucify her."

Wes' lips tightened into a mirthless smile. "Not even if a man's life was at stake?"

"Not even that. Practicing law can be pretty disillusioning." Noll looked at his watch. "Three o'clock. I'll see if I can find out where the Mehring woman lives." He space-stared thoughtfully, eyes squinted, then bobbed his head like a robin sighting a worm. "I'll try Max Hart who runs the local amusement agency. He has the addresses of all the talent in town."

Ten minutes later, Noll Brown had the information he wanted. He disappeared into the bedroom to return after a short while carefully trigged out in derby hat, overcoat and pigskin gloves. He swept up briefcase and car keys on his way to the door. His lips twisted into a dour smile as he motioned Wes to follow him.

"If you've got a rabbit foot, rub it. You'll need all the luck you can get."

MADAME Gertrude Mehring—so read her card above the mailbox—lived in one of those old apartment buildings with bay-windowed front on Talbot Avenue. Hers was one of the two flats on the lower floor. Heavy green shades were pulled in the bay window but cracks in the filler showed illumination beyond.

Inside the foyer, Noll Brown took off his derby, put a gloved thumb on the bell, kept it there until Madame Mehring's frowzy gray head appeared in the door. Her pale blue eyes hurried over Noll and Wes.

Noll said, "Madame Mehring, I believe."

Her lips turned down at the corners, lending drooping black wrinkles like a Mandarin's mustache to the dry, powder-white mask of her face. She said, "The solicitor. The competent attorney. In plainer words, the shyster.

What's the idea of getting a poor sick woman out of bed this time of the morning? Come in, come in. And I might add there's no keeping you out."

She widened the opening in the door, showed her angular figure draped in an orchid colored satin wrapper.

"You're sick?" Noll said as he entered ahead of Wes.

"A bad cough." She demonstrated her cough and it didn't sound too bad. She waved elegantly at a small oak table that centered the bay of the front window. The table held a potted fern, a water tumbler, and a bottle of sherry. "For my cough," she explained. "I'd never touch the filthy stuff otherwise. It warms the pipes, loosens the phlegm—" Her eyes moved to Wes. "Who's this?"

Noll was elaborately apologetic. He introduced Wes.

"You've seen him before?" he added. "Tonight at the pub where you play?"

A crafty glint came into the faded eyes. "I see so many lovely people. I never remember names and always forget faces."

A sickening sinking feeling came into the pit of Wes' stomach. He took a quick step toward the woman who fell back in front of him. He put out strong hands and gripped her bony shoulders. Her knees buckled and she dropped into a platform rocker that complained loudly of even her slight weight. Wes leaned over her, his face within the sherry miasma that breathed from her red gash of a mouth.

"Take a good look," he said, voice husky. "I was at the table beside your stage, practically under your nose. I was with a girl."

"With a girl? How quaint!" She tittered, remembered to cough.

"You couldn't have missed the girl," Wes said. "She was—well, she was different than the rest of the crowd, beautiful, stylish, poised. Whenever you stopped playing, she clapped. She thought you were wonderful."

"I am. Carnegie Hall wants me, but I make more money at the Bide-A-Wee Inn."

Wes reached for her shoulders again, shook her gently. "You've got to remember! A man's life depends on it. I gave you a four bit tip to play 'My Gal Sal.' Nobody's requested that number in an age."

The harpy's face was a total blank. "You I don't remember from nothing. My public is so vast and all the shining faces look alike beyond the footlights—"

A small sound of glass on glass. Madame Mehring looked toward the bay window, uttered a small shriek, bounced out of the chair to throw Wes backwards. In the bay window, Noll Brown turned slowly from the little oak table. He had poured a brimming glass of sherry, had lifted it to his lips. Madame

Mehring seized his left arm, slapped at his right hand, spilling some of the wine.

"How dare you hog a poor woman's medicine!" She relieved him of the glass and put it carefully down on the table. She was seized with a fit of violent and artificial coughing.

Noll shrugged. "Last time it was *creme de menthe* for your indigestion. Sherry is cheaper." Noll reached around to his hip pocket and pulled out a leather wallet. From it he took three twenty dollar bills and fanned them under Madame Mehring's nose.

"Didn't you see my friend tonight? Wasn't he in that tap room between the hours of ten and eleven? Didn't he pay you to play a request tune?"

Madame Mehring shook her head. "He may have, but I do not remember. Begone with your bribe! It's too small anyway."

Noll added four tens to the three twenties. "A hundred dollars. You could afford to have indigestion again."

Madame Mehring sniffed. "A paltry amount. The great Mehring should play *I Remember You* for so paltry a fee! You would offer a dime for Beethoven."

Noll sighed, returned his money to his wallet. "Come on, Wes." He started for the door.

Wes stared from Madame Mehring to Noll. "But she knows. You can see it on her face."

Noll said sharply, "Do you want a lawyer, or are you planning to defend yourself? I said come on. We've got other witnesses."

Madame Mehring followed them to the door. "So sorry, gentlemen," she purred. "For a thousand dollars I think I could get a memory course. Remarkable what these memory courses achieve. Good night."

Out in the dark and rain-glistened street, Noll Brown wheeled sharply to face Wes. "If you had kept your big mouth out of this, we could have improved her memory for a hundred dollars. She didn't know but what it was a question of dented fenders. But no, you have to make a life and death proposition out of it!"

"Sure, me and my big mouth!" Wes' footsteps dragged disconsolately as they approached the car. Maybe the Mehring woman was his one chance. He'd played his cards wrong, lost his wad. He said, "She wants a thousand bucks! Where would I raise that kind of money?"

At the car door, Noll turned on him. "I'll handle that. I'll stake you." His voice whiplashed. "Trouble is, we've lost time. If the cops lay hands on you, Wes, I won't help you. I won't go into court and have the D.A. make an ass of me."

Wes' jaw thrust a little farther forward. "We'd better call it quits now, Noll, before you get in too deep to get out."

Noll's laugh crackled like a short circuit. "When it's time to quit, I'll know it. Get in the car, you big sap!"

CHAPTER FOUR

On the Lam

FORTY-FIVE minutes later, they were again in front of the apartment where Madame Mehring lived. Noll Brown had the thousand dollars in cash which he had picked up from his office safe.

"I have to have a lot of cash where I can get my hands on it in a hurry," he had explained to Wes. "You're not the only client I've had who gets himself into jams after banking hours."

Wes had laughed bitterly. "I'm the only client you ever had who had exactly one hundred and twenty-six dollars in the bank plus a hundred dollars in war bonds and not another damned thing in the world!"

They hurried up the approach walk, Noll's hard heels pecking on ahead, entered the apartment building foyer where Noll thumbed the bell. There was no immediate answer. The little attorney tried the bell again, shook his head doubtfully, then put a gloved hand on the doorknob. The knob turned, the door opened. Noll hopped into the woman's living room, stopped half way.

"Damn! We shouldn't have left without taking that wine of hers," he said.

Over Noll's head and shoulders, Wes saw Madame Mehring lolling half on and half off the leather covered couch. On the floor beside her was the empty sherry bottle and the thick water tumbler over-turned. Noll sprang to the couch, seized Madame Mehring's shoulders. He lifted her, shook her. Her slight frame wobbled loose-jointedly. There was a faint purplish cast to her parted lips.

"Wait a second, Noll!" Wes elbowed the lawyer out of the way, bent over the limp form of the woman. Cold fear moved up along his spine and prickled at his scalp as he touched the woman's wrist.

"She's dead!" he whispered. "Noll, she's dead!"

"Dead drunk," Noll said.

"She's dead, I tell you!"

The attorney took her wrist. The tick of a clock came faintly from an adjoining room. Noll's eyes met Wes', held them. His small head jerked. He dropped the woman's hand, drew a breath that hissed across his teeth.

"Hell!"

IN the street in front of the apartment building a car slowed down, brakes squeaking. Noll's dark glances scurried about the room. He said, "Black out the lights. Quick!" Then

he pecked to the front of the room to the dark shade drawn down over the bay window.

Wes sprang to the light switch, thumbed it down. In total darkness he heard the green shade crackle. A faint thread of gray light showed momentarily, then Noll Brown was on the move toward the door.

"Cops," he said. "Checking your alibi. Get out a back room window. I'll stall them in the foyer. Go to a third rate hotel, don't give your right name, phone me."

Noll got the door open. Wes heard him press the button of the night latch, then close the door softly. Almost at once, Noll pressed the bell-push in the foyer and the sharp brazen voice of the bell made Wes' heart jump into his mouth. The outer door of the apartment building opened and heels rang on the tile of the vestibule. Then there were voices—Noll Brown's voice and that of Detective Haskins.

"She doesn't seem to be at home," Noll said. "I've been ringing for half a minute."

The hammering of police fists was the sound that cured Wes of his buck fever. He started swiftly along the living room, ran into the platform rocker that uttered a plaintive squeak. The chair kept rocking in ghostly fashion even after Wes had stumbled into the next room—the room with the ticking clock. Dim night glow entered the window, showed him the end of a bed. He rounded the bed, trembling hands outstretched to the window. He got the window unlatched just as burly police shoulders started ramming the panel of the front door. He gave the window catch a hasty wipe with his handkerchief, wondering

as he did so how many finger prints he had left in the living room. He couldn't remember touching a thing except Madame Mehring herself, but then he had forgot a lot of important things in the past several hours. He got over the sill, all but fell on his face getting to a narrow walk between buildings six feet below. And then he was on the run, on the lam as those persons who were hunted by the law liked to put it.

Up alleys and back streets, he covered a mile the hard way to come finally into the lobby of the Hotel Dalton, definitely third rate, where rooms were rented by the week, the day, or the hour, and no questions asked. He registered under the name of William Rexford, paid in advance, and was shown to his room that looked out on dark roofs and water tanks. He sat down on the edge of the bed, waited an age of minutes until it was five A.M. by his dollar watch. Then he went to the phone, gave Noll Brown's number. Noll sounded sore about being awakened at this hour.

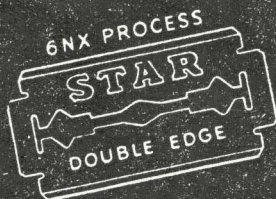
"Sorry to get you up at this time of the day," Wes said, "but I know you want to see me as soon as possible. This is William Rexford. I'm at the Dalton."

"Fine!" Noll replied. "You'll hear from me later. I'm anxious to close the deal. And don't forget, I've got an option. *Don't see anybody else.*"

HE didn't see anybody else. The morning dawned wet and predominantly gray. Wes waited through it without sleep and food far into the afternoon. Dusk came as the morning

DOES THE
MOON AFFECT
YOU, TOO?

NO, I GET MY
EFFECT WITH
STARS -
STAR BLADES!



4 for 10¢



with drizzling rain and a leaden sky, and the phone in his room jangled. Wes sprang up from the bed, staggered a little like a drunken man, lurched toward the phone. The mirror of the dresser caught a reflection of him in passing, showed him the shadow of a beard against ashen cheeks and the haggard circle beneath his eyes. He picked up the receiver. It was already talking to him in Noll's voice.

"...change our plans somewhat and hold our meeting at some other place. Certain persons whose opinion differs somewhat from ours are trying to see you at your present location and may possibly dissuade you from going through with it. You understand, Rexford?"

"Yes," Wes breathed. "I get you, sure." He hung up. Noll meant that the police were checking the hotels, putting out the dragnet for him. He picked up hat and topcoat, put them on with hat brim turned low and collar up. He left the room, took to the stairway, clattered down flight after flight to come into the lobby. He tossed his key on the desk, went through the coffee shop, and out the side door. He was three paces beyond the door when he saw the police car at the curb. A man in plainclothes was getting out about four doors down the street.

Wes twisted back, stepped to the yellow painted section of curbing in front of the hotel. A taxi stood there, its radio playing, the driver with a newspaper spread out on the wheel trying to read by the light that came to him from the hotel entrance. Wes seized the handle of the cab door, twisted it, got in, slid to the far side of the cushions. The driver crushed his paper, glanced over his shoulder as he plugged at the starter.

"Where to, sir?"

Wes blurted the first address that came into his mind—that of his own apartment.

"You want the radio off, Mister?" The driver reached one hand toward the dial.

"Yes," Wes said, then shouted: "No! Wait!"

AS the taxi rolled into the traffic lane, Wes threw himself forward in the seat, one arm reaching out toward the radio as though the music was a tangible thing. A dance band was playing *My Gal Sal*, playing it sweet and low. The music faded to background and the voice of the announcer came from the loudspeaker.

"Here she is, to brighten up the cocktail hour, your gal and my gal, Sal!"

"What was that address again, Mister?" the hack driver cut in.

Coming from the radio now was the velvet toned voice of a woman—a voice with a smile in it.

"Hello, nice people! The boys and I want to start out with a number we've done before

and which you liked well enough to ask us to do again."

"That's her!" Wes' trembling fingers pointed at the radio. "That's Sal! What station's that?"

The driver gave Wes a sidelong glance, nearly rammed a trolley bus doing it. He said, "A local. WVBD. What was that Alabama Street number you wanted to go to?"

"No." Wes shook his head. It was the first time he had realized what address he had given. If the driver had seen that address in the papers, if he had seen Wes' picture—

His hand dropped to the pocket of his coat, gripped the chill butt of the gun he had taken from Al Morris the night before. He said, "Get me to the radio studio. Where that program is coming from. Fast!"

They didn't get there fast. In spite of gas rationing, the downtown streets were clogged with traffic at this late hour. All the lights were against them and Wes lived the lingering minutes in a chilly sweat, counting them by his watch—five, seven, ten. . . .

The taxi stopped. The driver pointed "That building there. Four flights up."

Wes tossed the man a buck, got out, looked right and left. No cops in the hurrying throngs along the sidewalk. He crossed to a door with the gold letters "WVBD" on the glass, pushed it open. Stairs slanted steeply upward. He ran up the three flights, burst through double glass doors into a room paneled with sound dampening material. A girl at the reception desk gave him a practice smile that faded as she studied his unshaven face.

"Whom did you wish to see, please?"

Wes looked to the left toward a door marked "Studio A." "That girl," he gasped. "Sal. I've got to see her."

"Sorry, but that program is already in progress and no studio audience is permitted."

Wes shook his head. "I've got to see her. I've got to." He turned, started doggedly for the studio door.

"Please!" The receptionist came half out of her chair, then reached across the desk and pushed a frantic thumb against a button. A signal burred softly, and before Wes could reach the studio door, two men came out of an office on his right, caught his shoulders.

"You can't go in there. What do you want, anyway?"

Wes looked into a clean-shaven, well-fed face, close to his and threatening. "I have to see her. I can't explain. It—it's very important." He was getting control of himself now and catching up on his breath. "I'm a friend of Sal."

The other man put a hand up to conceal a smile. The first motioned to a chair. "Sit down and wait. She'll come through here in a minute."

Wes sat down with the two men standing on either side of him. His heart was pounding jig-time out of all accord with the sweet music that Sal sang. It was only a matter of seconds before the orchestra broke into the theme song, concluding the quarter hour. Wes hitched himself forward in the chair and watched the studio door. The music stopped. There was a scraping of chairs and a general bustle. The door opened and a man hurried out with a sheaf of papers in his hand. And then in another moment the door opened a second time and Wes saw her.

She was wearing the same coat, the same hat with its misty black veil that reached the tip of her pretty nose. She was clinging to the arm of a middle-aged, well-dressed man who in some respects resembled her. For an instant, she seemed to be looking straight at Wes, the sweet half-smile fixed on her lips. She gave no sign of recognition.

"That was sweet music, Miss Herron," one of the men beside Wes said.

"Thanks," she acknowledged, and came through the door, the fingers of her left hand delicately touching the frame. The man beside her drew her a little to one side.

"Careful, Sis. There's a chair."

Sal laughed gayly. "Don't worry so! I'm not a doll that breaks if she stubs her toe. Besides, I'm learning my way about here pretty well."

Wes just sat there, staring open-mouthed and wide-eyed as Sal passed him. When he drew a breath it came as a sob. Sal hadn't seen him. She had never seen him, though she had sat and talked with him through that fatal hour of the night before.

Sal was blind.

CHAPTER FIVE

Third Victim

WES stood in the phone booth in the corner drugstore and in his trembling hands his nickel beat a frantic tattoo on the coin box before he got it into the slot. He dialed the number of Noll Brown's apartment, failed to get an answer, returned the nickel, and called the little attorney's office.

"I've found her, Noll," he said in a hoarse whisper when Noll's sharp voice snapped across the wires.

"Who? Where the hell are you?"

"Sal. The girl I was with last night. She lives in the Fairmont Apartments on Meridian Street. She and her brother got in a cab and I heard the brother give the address."

"The Fairmont means money," Noll said. "What did I tell you?"

"Anyway, I'm going to try. I'm going to make her tell the truth to the police. Now"

"Wait—" There was a silent interval before Noll spoke again. "Meet me at the Fairmont in twenty minutes. Can you make it? You're hot as Dillinger ever was."

"I'll be there," he replied doggedly.

"Okay. This will take some careful handling." And Noll hung up.

Ducking every glance that came his way, Wes left the drugstore. Outside he was thankful for the rain and the chill wind that gave him an excuse for lowered head and turned up collar. Holding his hat down tight with one hand, he passed a cop on the corner, crossed the street to a Meridian bus stop. Five minutes ticked away before the bus came. When he got on, the bus was packed to the doors and he had to stand facing the rain-blurred windshield. So far, Lady Luck was riding with him.

He got off within half a block of the towering Fairmont Apartment Building. The sidewalks were deserted. People in this neighborhood did little walking, in spite of gas rationing. He entered the softly carpeted lobby, eyes alert for mailboxes. There was a desk in the foyer and a plucked and permanented blonde gave him a disapproving examination.

He found Sal's box, read her number. Wes turned back to the door, stood in the corner of the vestibule to wait for Noll.

An elevator safety gate clattered open, and Wes heard footsteps and voices in the foyer. He sent a furtive glance over his shoulder, saw Sal's brother and a woman leaving the elevator. The woman wore a cloth, fur-trimmed black coat and beneath it Wes glimpsed the white postage-stamp apron of a maid's uniform.

Sal's brother was saying, "I'm pessimistic enough about this operation to continue to push my application for a seeing-eye dog for her. But keep that under your hat. Sally's so certain she'll be able to see again—and there is every chance that she may. . . ."

They passed Wes, still talking, to get into a waiting taxi. Wes watched the cab drive away, and at the next corner it drew up to the curb to let the maid out in front of a small delicatessen. Wes looked at his dollar watch. If Noll didn't show up in a minute he'd—

The swift tap of hard heels sounded on the drive and Noll Brown appeared suddenly in the door swinging his briefcase. His gloved fingers clenched the sleeve of Wes' sodden coat. He looked right and left, eyes squinted shrewdly.

"She's here," Wes whispered. "And right now, she's alone. I'm sure of it. The maid went out with her brother a few seconds ago to pick up something for dinner, I think."

Noll bobbed his head. "Made to order. What's her number?"

"Eight-one-nine," Wes replied.

"Fine. I'll go right up. I'll sound her out. Give me ten minutes with her, then call the police. This is your last chance, Wes. Maybe if you were to give yourself up to the cops right in front of her eyes, that would bring her across. If my line doesn't." The dangling lower lip quirked wryly. "I've a pretty fair line."

Noll gave Wes a heartening slap on the shoulder and hopped into the foyer and across to the elevator that waited there.

"Nine, please," Noll said.

Nine? Wes took a startled step toward the elevator. Noll had got the number backwards, twisted it around in his excitement.

"Hey!" Wes ran the length of the foyer as the elevator safety gate slammed and the car started upward. His thumb struck the call button and plugged at it.

"You will have to wait until the car returns," said the cool voice of the blonde at the desk.

Wes turned, stared at the woman as though she was a mummy in a museum. All of the inexplicable things went tumbling through his mind like castings in a cleaner. And then it was as though somebody switched off the power of the cleaner and the meaningless clatter stilled and the blinding dust settled. He pointed shaking fingers at the telephone on the desk.

"Get the police."

"The—the *what?*" The blonde stared blankly.

"The police. Look—" He yanked back his collar and brushed off his hat. "I'm Wes Robbins. I'm in the papers. I'm wanted for murder."

THEN he wheeled, legged for the stairway, taking the steps three at a time in the beginning. On the fourth flight he began to realize that hours without food or rest had taken a lot out of his legs. He would have gained time by waiting for the elevator. He knew that now—now that stair risers seemed three feet in height and his shoes weighed him down like flatirons. But he kept going, desperation-driven. Two lives depended on his getting there in time—his own and that of the blind girl.

Because Noll Brown didn't know that Sal was blind. Wes hadn't told him for the simple reason that he feared Noll would put no faith in a blind witness. Noll's twisting of Sal's apartment numbers was the give-away. It had been deliberate. Noll's distinctly audible request for the elevator operator to take him to the ninth floor was deliberate. It gave him an alibi of sorts. He could ride to the ninth floor, get out, descend one floor via the stairway with scarcely a risk of being seen. Then he could get into Sal's apartment, do the

filthy job quickly, and again climb to the ninth floor from which he would descend by the elevator to claim he had not located Sal's apartment.

Wes could see it all now through the settling dust of confusion. Noll was preparing to defend Al Morris on black-market charges. Noll knew of the money Al had accumulated and hidden, had shadowed him to Wes and Edith's apartment, had killed for that readily spendable hundred grand—had killed with the knife that Wes had left behind that fateful night.

Only Noll besides the police had heard of Wes's possible alibi. Somehow, some way, Noll had contrived to kill Madame Mehring to smash that alibi, all the time keeping Wes from the cops, protecting Wes because Wes was the only key to the second witness of his innocence. Why did it have to be Wes who took the rap? Because once the police could discount the well-worn jealous husband motive, they'd start believing Wes' story about Al and the money. They'd start suspecting Al and his associates—among them, Noll Brown. And if they found the money in Noll's possession—

He took the last stumbling step, drove his unwilling body forward through the door into the eighth floor hall. His breath was coming in rapid shallow sobs as he threw himself against the door of eight-one-nine. He fumbled the knob. Locked. He straightened with an effort, plunged his hand into his pocket to bring out Al Morris' gun. The muzzle rattled an instant against the lock, and then he jerked the trigger three times. Before the roar had ceased, he had the door open, saw across a wide living room the open casements, the billowing curtains. There, against the black backdrop of the night, he saw two struggling figures—Noll and Sal. Sal's hips were on the low sill. She was clinging desperately to Noll and he was trying to break away to shove her backwards out the window.

Noll jerked backward, and the girl hung on. He slammed her across the face. Her hold broke and she tumbled to the floor. Noll twisted around, light glinting on his glasses, glinting on bared lower teeth. He had a gun in his hand, tried stopping Wes with a bullet that went whining harmlessly by. Wes kept coming, plunging forward on dead legs, his own gun gripped, but with the safety on. He couldn't kill, because his own life, his whole future depended upon the police getting the truth from Noll Brown's own lips.

He kept coming, and Noll triggered his gun again. Wes swerved. There was no great pain, only the impact and a numbness in his left arm. He moved in close, right arm swinging. Noll's third shot was fired while Noll was moving backward to strike a small table with his legs. Flame from the muzzle seered

Wes' cheek. And then Wes got in that blow—that blow that had everything he had left behind it, plus maybe a little prayer. The gun butt caught Noll under the chin, actually seemed to lift him to his toes. Noll pitched backward over the table, struck the floor with a bag-of-bones clatter to lie there still as death. And the force of the blow carried Wes forward, took him off balance on the follow-through. He clumped down to his knees, panting, conscious now of the warm stickiness inside the shoulder of his coat.

He turned on his knees toward Sal who crouched there on the floor beneath the wide open window. Her wide, unseeing eyes searched fearfully, her face twisted into a mask of nameless dread.

"Sal," Wes said faintly. "It's okay now, Sal. Everything's all right. Only I'm so damned sorry I got you into this."

"Wes! Oh, you *are* Wes, aren't you?" Tremulously came her little half smile.

Then the world swam and blackened before Wes' eyes as he pitched forward onto the carpet. He didn't see Detective Haskins entering the front door of the apartment. . . .

HASKINS, however, was one of the first persons he saw when he came to in the hospital after the removal of Noll's bullet. Haskins looked as tired as Wes felt, and that he explained, was from working on a tough little nut to crack, name of Noll Brown. The police had already started poking around in Noll's direction in their search for the killer. They'd associated the "Cousin Al" of Wes's testimony with Al Morris, who had been

THE END

picked up by the FBI, and that had led to Al's attorney. A little breaking and entering on the part of the police department had revealed the stolen money in Noll's safe.

Before that, though, they had followed the trail that Wes had blazed, discovering the body of Madame Mehring. There had been poison in the lady's sherry—some few and deadly crystals of photographer's cyanide. Then later, when Noll Brown became an object of police interest, a cop had found a neat little darkroom in Noll's apartment, and the cyanide had been conspicuously absent. After that, it was only a matter of time in the sweat room, Noll's endurance pitted against that of Haskins.

"You haven't anything to worry about, Robbins," Haskins said. "You've got your alibi. She's waiting to see you. Well, not exactly see you—"

Haskins bit his thin lips because Sal was already on her way in on her brother's arm.

"But maybe next time or the time after I'll see you, Wes," she said. "My brother's found a wonderful new specialist who thinks maybe he can help my eyes."

Wes said, "You'll be disappointed, seeing me. I'm not anything you'd want to paint and hang on the wall."

They laughed, her brother joining in, and her small soft fingers moved timidly across Wes' face, substituting for the sight that was to come. There wasn't anything Wes could do about it, flat on his back as he was.

He didn't know how it would turn out. All he really knew was that he'd always be in love with Sal, no matter how it turned out.

"You're hornin' in on things that don't concern you,"

the voice over the phone cautioned Mike Shayne. An unnecessary and futile warning, since the red-haired private shamus was always concerned with murder—particularly with a case of pre-war Monet cognac in the offing. An exciting new yarn in the famous series by **BRETT HALLIDAY**,

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BLACK MASK



The Mouse started through the wallet, paper by paper. . . .

CROOKED PATH TO GLORY

By DONALD G. CORMACK

HIS NAME was William Seevers, but the police and others who knew him called him just plain Mouse. If he'd had any friends they'd probably have called him that too.

Seevers was an ugly little guy. He stood about five feet two or three, and his manner was nervous and jumpy. His small black eyes were set close together, his decayed, broken teeth had a rodent look, and his large ears fanned outward prominently. All in all, Mouse was a perfect name for him.

He lived like a mouse, too. He was used to dwelling in dark, dirty places and he ventured out usually at night. He was apprehensive, easily frightened, and he existed on any loose crumbs he could find. Crumbs that didn't belong to him. The police tolerated him, though, because he was also an informer, a stool pigeon. Men like the Mouse usually are.

He was about as far as you could get from a hero. In all his life, so far, he'd never done anything even slightly heroic. When he dreamed at all—and it was only lately he had

Just to look at him, you wouldn't have thought he amounted to much. Yet, when the chips were down, his life turned out to be as good as anybody's. . . .

started that foolishness—it was of a quiet place where no one bullied him and where fear didn't dominate the present, disaster the morrow. That was Mouse's idea of heaven. That and Rose Kulick.

It was dark and the Mouse was standing on the corner of River and Front Street. A thin, misty rain was falling, causing people to hurry, collars up and heads bent forward into the drifting wet. It was also a Saturday night. To men in the Mouse's profession, that was a perfect set-up—hurrying crowds, poor visibility and pay-day-thickened wallets.

But a struggle was going on inside Mouse Seever's thin, pigeon-breasted body. He'd promised Rose he wouldn't lift any more wallets—or, as the Mouse put it, wire any more leathers.

Promises to Rose Kulick were important to Mouse Seever's because he loved her—the first girl he'd ever loved—and because it was around her peroxidized head that all his new dreams were built. He realized, too, that this was her final try for happiness; he was the last person in the world she would ever believe in. He couldn't let her down. After years of bitter disappointment, betrayal and cruel trickery she had held out her work-roughened hands one last time toward some crazy, shining dream she had. A place in the country—even an old broken down farm—and a husband. A legal honest-to-God husband.

The Mouse was conscious of his importance in Rose's scheme of things—as important to her as she was to him. He shouldn't break any promises. But, on the other hand, he wanted to take Rose out for a few beers when she was through work later on—and he didn't have any money. He was supposed to have gotten a job that week—a job washing cars, he'd told Rose—but his boasting had been a bit premature. He'd tried, all right, but he had so little to offer. He was small, weak and ignorant. The Mouse was nobody's bargain.

The outcome of his inner struggle was pretty much of a sure thing. In the prize ring of the Mouse's morality, often-defeated honesty usually went down for the count in the first round. This time he whitewashed the one-sided contest by telling himself he'd be hurting Rose more if he were forced to admit he hadn't an honest job yet. It would loosen the foundation of their precarious future before any building had even begun.

Mouse Seever's floated into the passing crowd like a vagrant autumn leaf drifting into a wandering stream. As a professional wire, Mouse was an artist. Before he reached the next corner, he had picked out his sucker, had maneuvered his position nicely, and had arranged a jostling collision that was absurdly innocent. He immediately apologized in his thin, piping voice, seeming frightened and

confused. He looked so wretched and forlorn that the fat victim apologized right back, twice as earnestly. It was almost a pleasure to be cleaned by Mouse Seever's.

Then he was around the corner, away from the crowd, the thick wallet pocketed and tightly clutched in his hand. The Mouse congratulated himself on a perfect job. It was a shame, really, he thought, that such talent as his would shortly go to waste. But now he felt light-hearted and peaceful. There was no longer any struggle going on inside him, and he had an undetermined sum of money. Only one last quick action and the job would be complete.

But right then the bottom dropped out of Mouse's scheme of things. Defeat crushed down on him numbly.

Detective Sergeant Bray stood just a few feet ahead of him, leaning against the glass window of a coffee pot as he probed his mouth with a toothpick. And there was no doubting but that he'd seen Mouse Seever's. The big, burly man in the Chesterfield overcoat raised one hand, shoved his derby on the back of his head, crooked his little finger at Mouse and wiggled it lazily back and forth.

THE Mouse realized with chilling dismay that he'd committed the cardinal sin of any wire. He'd allowed himself to be picked up with a hot leather still in his possession. Like a man on his way to the scaffold, numb with dread, he walked hesitantly toward Detective Bray.

The wizened little man shuffled to a halt about three feet from Bray and the detective's huge hand shot out, seized the Mouse's pipe-stem arm and jerked him up close. The powerful grip tightened, twisted, and the Mouse thought his arm would snap. His gasp of pain chattered into silence as Bray suddenly started to shake him like a rag, then released him as suddenly. Mouse knew Bray wasn't angry; this was just routine.

"Why, you lousy stoolie," Bray said, and Mouse nodded in sad agreement. "Where the hell have you been? I been looking all over for you, Mouse. I got a job for you—something big! If you never produced before, you'll produce now, see? And I mean *produce!*"

If it had been possible to feel relief in Bray's clutches, Mouse would have felt it then. The big man probably hadn't seen his little job of a moment ago—unless, of course, he was just playing with him. He'd soon know.

The Mouse's pallid face peered up at Bray in the misting dampness, but he said nothing. He had learned never to speak to a cop unless a question was asked. He knew what Bray was going to tell him, though, because Jack-

son of Homicide had grabbed him only that afternoon, over on Water Street, and had punched him around a bit too. When the boys got as tough as this, something big was really going on. The whole department was in an awful sweat.

"My orders come straight from the Commissioner," Bray told him. "He's promised a ten-percent blanket demotion, all precincts, for men out of uniform—unless we suddenly get good. I'm passing the herring right on to you, Mouse. You're a three-time loser on the books already; the next trip is your last. You'll make that trip, Mouse! Twenty-four hours after the Commissioners' deadline expires, you'll make it—unless you do me some good in the meantime.

"Keep those big ears of yours flapping!

thousand workers goes above peacetime-norm, that area gets colored pink. Index-pink's okay. It can be due to speedup, to inexperienced workers, to longer hours. But as the accident-factor goes higher, the index color gets darker. And this city, with an area for fifty miles around, is colored red.

"Know what that means, Mouse? Not just two or three enemy agents at work, but an organized outfit trying to cripple West coast production! With Europe out of the war, we'll be the country's production front—and they're working on it already!"

The Mouse didn't know about accident-factors or peacetime-norms, but he understood what Bray meant. And, even though he would have failed in every qualification the Army asked—physical, moral and mental—he

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Learn things—I don't care how! Pick up information the law isn't supposed to get! Drift around! Understand?"

The Mouse's former sense of relief didn't even have time to get started. His new set of shakes were just a continuation of the old. It was the old threat—and it was still as good as the first time. Co-operate or get the works.

"Sure, Mr. Bray. Sure!" His ugly little face was twisted in bewildered helplessness. "Mr. Jackson told me the same thing—only I don't know what to look for! I hear a million things every day. Any one of them could be what you want."

"Look," Bray said. "You read the papers. You know the number of accidents we've been having in the city's defense plants—break-downs, fires, explosions, what-not. The F.B.I. says the percentage is too high for this area. They've been investigating; they've had to detail more men out here; they've appealed directly to the loyal workers for co-operation. All that makes the headlines—and every word of it implies that the Mayor doesn't know his business, that the Police Commissioner is a dope and that the Police Department stinks. It means we've fallen far below other cities in aiding the government in the national emergency."

"I get it," Mouse said. "I catch."

"The G-men have a big map. I've seen it," Bray went on. "When the accident-factor per

was still fiercely patriotic. The Mouse was proud of being an American. Now, for the first time since Bray had grabbed him, his eyes stopped shifting nervously from the big man's hands to his tie and back again.

"You can depend on me," he said. "I'll listen good!"

Detective Sergeant Bray dropped his tough pose for a moment—something he'd never done in front of a stoolie before. The Mouse, though, was his own product. He'd grabbed the runt after that last rap and had promised him a fourth conviction—with or without honest evidence—unless he fell into line and learned to sing for the police. Seven years ago, that had been.

"I hear about you and Rose," Bray said quietly, noticing how the shrimp jumped and began to shake again. "Me. I'm all for it. The books tell how the two of you are slated to wind up in a year or so. You on a slab in the morgue with your tongue cut out and your lips sewed together. Rose in a—in a worse place. Your one hope is to get out of the city, never come back. That's the only way you can lick the books—and maybe this is your big chance. The government has plenty of reward money out these days, Mouse. You'll be due for a chunk of it if you're in on the kill."

Abruptly he turned his back on the trembling, wide-eyed Mouse and walked away with his usual solid deliberation.

MOUSE SEEVERS lived in the rear basement of a wretched rooming house. His room was furnished with a cot and mattress, a rumpled blanket, a wooden chair and an ancient wardrobe. The single bulb dangling from a cord overhead gave out a reluctant, pale glow, as though ashamed of illuminating such a place. But it was sanctuary to the Mouse; it was home. He was glad to be there.

Immediately he was inside, he locked the door, pulled down the ragged shade and fumbled out the wallet. Its thickness promised all kinds of wealth—but that's as far as it went. The Mouse slumped slowly down on the bed and sat there motionless, his face woe-begone and his eyes glaring at the wallet as though it had insulted him personally. Inside the money compartment there was a single five dollar bill and two ones. Seven lousy bucks! The rest of the wealth-promising fatness was due to wads of personal papers, memorandums, receipts. In money-order stubs alone there was evidence of thousands of dollars paid out in the past few weeks. None of it meant anything to him.

Mouse hurled the wallet across the room with a curse. It was just his luck to pick a rich man's pocket at the moment when that man was short of ready cash. He cursed again.

Not so long ago he would have accepted the seven dollars with a philosophic shrug and been content. But just now he needed money so badly that he had let his hopes soar; he'd imagined a hundred, two hundred dollars. He needed money because Rose had told him she had more than three hundred dollars in the bank and Mouse had intimated, without actually saying it, that he had saved just about as much. That made six hundred dollars, Rose had said, and with nine hundred dollars more they could start their new life.

Fifteen hundred dollars, that was her goal. With it they could buy a little country store, maybe, or a filling station, or some other small business. Even a chicken farm would be heaven.

Thinking of Rose, Mouse's hollow-cheeked, lined face lost some of its ugliness as it softened surprisingly. He remembered seeing Rose for the first time when she'd been a counter-girl over at Smitty's, and how she'd knocked his heart for a loop first thing. But she hadn't been able to see Mouse. After a solid week of his fumbling attempts at friendship, when it had finally dawned on her he was actually asking for a date, she'd laughed at him. She went on dates with other guys, though—drinking beer, seeing a show, dancing. The Mouse persisted—and got nowhere. He wondered long and earnestly what the magic combination could be.

Then one night when business was slow and Rose listened to him out of boredom he suddenly said the right thing. It frightened him at the time, the abrupt change that came over her. All he'd said was that he dreamed of getting away from the city, of living in the country where it was quiet, and of having a girl like Rose with him for companionship. Up to there Rose had just showed a vague interest. But when he repeated it, said he dreamed of a girl like Rose for his *wife*, that had made the big difference. From that moment on she could see the Mouse. From then on selling the rest of the idea was a breeze. Mouse often wondered why she'd cried when he first said the word "wife."

Rose and the Mouse had been married for a whole week now, but it was a secret. They weren't living together, though, and didn't intend to until the city was behind them and their new life had begun. That's why money was so important to Mouse Seevers.

Suddenly he bounced up from the cot and peered at a battered old alarm clock that stood on the shelf in the wardrobe. It was already after nine; the Mouse had to be going to meet Rose.

The problem of ditching the incriminating wallet was easily taken care of. The Mouse had a cactus plant on the window-sill—the only sort of living thing that would last in that gloomy atmosphere, he'd found—and he lifted the plant out of the pot, replaced it on top of the wallet. Now he was all set.

AS Mouse approached the Idle Hour Bowling Gardens, where Rose worked, he spotted the cops' Black Maria standing unobtrusively on a side street. He'd seen another one, hurrying along the main avenue so he knew a cleanup was under way. The sweat-boxes in the local precincts would be working overtime that night. At the thought of it, Mouse's hands and forehead beaded damply.

The Idle Hour was full of smoke, noise, odors and people, as usual. The alleys, billiard tables and shuffleboard games were all in use, and the small bar was crowded. The Mouse's quick-searching eyes found Rose over by the line of booths, serving some customers. He stood at the head of the short flight of entrance stairs, looking down at her for a moment. Mouse took a deep, proud breath.

It's true that Rose still had a beautiful figure, slim and well formed, but that was about all. She was well into her thirties; her bleached hair showed darkly at the roots; her once-pretty face was hard and mask-like; her wary, knowing eyes had obviously seen just about everything, most of it bad; and her rouged mouth told of the bitterness and pain that had followed her life. But to Mouse

Seever she was beautiful; maybe he could feel and see more than the casual observer.

Mouse didn't get a chance to go to Rose just then. Louie, a tough little hop-head who worked for The Turk, motioned him over to his booth with a jerk of his head. Mouse answered quickly, his knees feeling weak—and more courageous men than the Mouse felt the same way when The Turk sent one of his men after them.

Louie was alone in the booth and Mouse sat down slowly, cautiously, watching the man. He could tell by his eyes that Louie was high again; he knew he'd have to be careful. For a long moment each of them sat there, elaborately unconcerned, both taut and watchful. The Mouse lit a cigarette with a shaking hand.

"How's everything?" Louie asked suddenly. "How you doin'?"

"Fine," Mouse said with false enthusiasm. "Just fine!"

Louie batted some smoke from in front of his face impatiently. "Put out that cigarette," he snapped, and watched carefully as Mouse complied. "You work today, Mouse? Any luck?"

Caution gripped the Mouse. He could see Rose watching the two of them from a distance, her face apprehensive, and he wished he could reassure her. Meantime, his expression showed disgust.

"Work, Louie? Me, work, with that flatfoot Bray on my tail every minute?" He snorted. "It wasn't bad enough before so now the whole damn police department goes crazy. They got orders to pick up everyone but the mayor. They—"

Louie waved the small talk aside impatiently, scowling. One white hand began to tap nervously on the table. A nerve in the corner of his mouth went haywire, jiggling his face crazily.

"A friend of The Turk's lost something over on Front Street today," Louie said slowly. "A leather. He figures some wire hooked him by mistake. No hard feelings, you understand; nothing like that. Anyone can make a mistake. But this friend of The Turk's—a good friend—wants it back. Bad. So The Turk sent some of us out looking and asking."

The Mouse just shook his head, his pulses drumming a riot.

"Some wire hooked it," Louie went on doggedly. "He took out the dough—only a few bucks—and ditched the leather. That's okay. This pal of The Turk's wants to know where. Is it in the bay? In an ashbarrel? Is it burned? He'd give some dough to get that answer. He lost it in your territory, Mouse. Know anything?"

The Mouse shook his head again, afraid to speak. Warning bells were clanging in his

mind now. He knew he was face to face with ruthless, cruel extermination. He locked his hands so his trembling fingers wouldn't show.

"Think hard, Mouse," Louie insisted. "You got nothing to be afraid of. Like I say, if you speak up now, you got nothing to fear. If you don't, and we find out later—" Louie took a long, narrow-bladed penknife out of his pocket and began to clean his nails. He waited. "Thinking, Mouse?"

The Mouse was thinking, all right. He was thinking the chances were excellent that the wallet in his room was the one Louie was after. But to admit he had it—when he'd already had time to examine it at his leisure—would be a lousy method of committing suicide. He was afraid to tell Bray he had it, though. Even if the detective did forgive his lapse from grace in acquiring it, the Mouse was certain he'd see precious little of the reward money if the wallet turned out to be as important as it seemed. To get any substantial sum, the Mouse had to contribute some concrete help—in person and before witnesses.

The thought of using the wallet's information himself, alone, startled and frightened him. What a ridiculous idea! How could any sane—The sharp pricking of the knife blade against his wrist made him jump, suddenly conscious of Louie again.

"I think you better come with me, Mouse. I think maybe The Turk wants to talk to you in a more private place!"

Absolute terror came over the Mouse then. He couldn't move, couldn't speak. He could only shake his head slowly, hopelessly.

A HUGE hand suddenly reached into the booth, grabbed Louie by the lapels and dragged him to his feet. It was Detective Sergeant Bray who stood beside them, solid and wide. He lifted Louie up to his tip-toes, almost spitting in the hop-head's face, and then thrust him contemptuously toward a uniformed patrolman, jerking his thumb toward the front door. A moment later he was sitting opposite the Mouse, his eyes narrow and searching.

"Okay, stoolie, open up. Make with a few revelations."

The Mouse, in spite of his fear, was still thinking about the reward money—not because he was brave but because that money was the same to him as life itself.

"Mr. Bray," he asked in his quick, nervous treble, "will you promise a fair share of the reward mon—"

The room was suddenly spinning furiously, filled with red-tailed comets and blazing constellations. A dizzy droning filled the Mouse's ears. When everything settled again, Bray was rubbing one hand against its calloused mate. Pain came to the Mouse only then.

"You bargaining with me, stoolie? You selling something?"

"The Turk," Mouse forced out. "Watch him. He's in it."

"Now you're cooking, Mouse. That's the right kind of stuff—only it's old. We've already got The Turk lined up. Trouble is, he's under somebody's thumb. Scared stiff. Now cook some more."

The Mouse spread his hands helplessly. He ducked once, anticipating a blow that never came.

"That won't do, Mouse! For instance, what was that hop-head grilling you about? He's one of that outfit, so—"

A plainclothesman interrupted then, whispering something in Bray's ear, and a second later the two of them disappeared, going fast. The Mouse was now alone—and he'd heard the whisper: "New emergency at the Pan-Alco plant. Hurry call, pal."

The Mouse must have gone into a fog for several minutes, completely out of the world. When reality slowly faded back in it wasn't so different from his dreaming. Rose Kulick was sitting opposite him, the hard mask gone from her face. Her eyes were bewildered, troubled as she searched his face.

"What is it, Mouse? Are you in a jam? Are they after you for something? What is it, honey?"

Mouse managed a smile, even if a bit crooked. "I was just thinking about a deal that's on. A big deal, Rose. If it goes the way I want, we'll have more money than we ever dreamed of!" The bright, hard fear that jumped to her eyes brought Mouse up short. "I'm working with Bray, dear! The cops are with me on this one. The money I expect is government dough. A big reward."

Rose wasn't satisfied; she knew the Mouse too well. "Why are you so worried, then, honey? You look like—"

"Anybody'd be worried!" he snapped. "There're angles I got to study out. On top of that, I can't take you home tonight. I got to do something for Bray, Rose."

She nodded then, still not satisfied, sensing something of the truth, not believing him completely. "Okay, Mouse, whatever you say. You know best, honey. You can tell me tomorrow."

He left then, kissing her quickly, not trusting himself. At the door he paused for a moment, turned back, wondering if it would be the last time he'd see her. She was standing just as he'd left her, still watching him.

THE Mouse didn't take any chances on Louie being free and out knifing for him. He approached his rooming house from the back way, crept down the alley that ran beside his room. The cactus plant was right on

the window-sill; it was simple to pick up the wallet and fade silently away again.

Mouse didn't pause until he was in an all-night cafeteria, sitting at a table far removed from the rest of the few customers. Then he started through the wallet, paper by paper—and learned nothing. He examined everything that was there, studying each item carefully, but all he saw were strange names, addresses, meaningless notes and memoranda. Without some key, he was lost. Even the name of the man he'd lifted it from seemed innocent: José Vargas.

Finally, in bitter frustration, the Mouse had to admit this couldn't be the wallet Louie had been after. Furthermore, even if it was, how could he tell it was at all related to the sabotage outbreak in the city? There was no link, except Bray's reaction to Mouse's remark made in desperation: The Turk and the sabotage gang were somehow tied up.

The careless dropping of an ordinary business card was what changed everything. On the back, in pencil, was written:

Evanston Motors—Feb. 18—10 AM
Clay Dye and Foundry—Feb. 20—3 PM
National Arms Corp.—Feb. 27—1 AM
Pan-Alco, Inc.—Feb. 28—9 PM

There it was! Three defense-plant disasters that had made headlines—and a fourth that was even now being reported. Mouse had had this wallet in his possession hours before the Pan-Alco disaster had occurred, yet the note on the card called it correctly!

With shaking fingers he turned the card over. The printed side read harmlessly: *WAR WORKERS EMPLOYMENT BUREAU*, José Vargas, Director, 110 South Water Street, City.

The Mouse got up and left the cafeteria quickly.

* * *

Over on South Water Street the Mouse stood back in the full darkness, opposite number 110. He was terrified. He was shaking all over. He wished fervently he'd never had such a crazy idea as this. But he was there, in spite of his fear.

One thing Mouse had done before he left the cafeteria, one sensible thing. He'd called Detective Bray's precinct and left a message for him, telling where he was and asking help immediately. All he had to do was wait for Bray to get the message and realize what it meant. He felt that now he was sufficiently part of any raid to justify sharing in the reward.

South Water Street was an ancient, run-down place near the bayfront. Once a rooming

section for sailors, it was now given over to small businesses and warehouses. Number 110 had formerly been a private home, by its looks, but it had come a long way since. All its windows were boarded up except those on the second floor.

After a period of waiting, the night-sounds had a soothing effect on Mouse: the faint ship-calls from the bay; the distant rumbling noise from the living part of the city; nearer at hand the sudden clamor of a passing truck. Then, before he quite understood his action, Mouse found himself crossing the street, drifting up the alley beside the old house. The thought of money may have done it; a desire to show off before Rose; perhaps curiosity, too. But Mouse knew he was going to break into the War Workers Employment Bureau and take a quick look around.

Getting inside, for Mouse, was easy. He went in through a basement room similar to his own, crept up the ancient stairway to the main floor. Here Mouse found the offices of the agency, and there was nothing suspicious about them. Desks for interviews; a row of typewriters for the stenographers; a long line of steel filing cases; a bare waiting room. But Mouse was glad Bray and his men were coming. Certain that Vargas' business was just a blind, he could have told nothing from the evidence before him.

Mouse was a coward, and he'd never denied it. Once he'd seen the inside of the place, he was suddenly anxious to get out. Mouse realized that Bray might not get his message for hours yet. Meantime. . . .

Abruptly, Mouse had a bad case of the jitters. He wondered why he'd ever broken in the first place.

The jitters were short-lived, though; complete paralysis swept them away as a gun-muzzle came through the darkness to prod Mouse sharply in the back. A disembodied hand gripped his collar from behind, holding his swaying form upright. "Get going, pal," a voice said in his ear. "Make with the feet—straight ahead."

IN A sort of nightmare sequence Mouse saw himself herded out into the rear courtyard, through a gaping hole in a wooden fence that led to a second rear courtyard just like the one he'd left, and finally into the basement of the ramshackle house standing there. Every window of this place was boarded up, as though deserted, and Mouse knew he was in the gang's hideout.

The stocks of canned goods and provisions in the kitchen indicated that enemy agents remained here concealed until time for further usefulness. Beyond, at the end of a long hall where he was held waiting for a few minutes, Mouse could look into the huge living room.

It was a classroom now, with a dozen "students" listening to a practical lecture. The teacher, speaking in a foreign tongue, was indicating certain adjustments, pointing to other bolts on a huge wooden model of a complicated machine. From the motions of his hands, Mouse knew he wasn't teaching how to understand and *run* the machine, but how to understand and *wreck* it.

In the rear of the room were other working models; on the wall hung maps and diagrams. The whole thing fell easily into place, now. Here, in this school of sabotage, men were trained to wreck specific types of machines in a way that would leave them undetected. After that, the employment bureau connected with the school would find them the exact places they were fitted for, along with hundreds of other perfectly innocent and loyal workers who were listed at the agency. It was a well-hidden plan.

Mouse was prodded forward again, this time into a room opposite the classroom. It was apparently an office—and the man behind the desk was the same one Mouse had wired that afternoon on Water Street, the same fat man who had apologized so nicely after Mouse had jostled him. He was ending a phone conversation as the prisoner entered.

"If you're foreman there you ought to be able to fire anyone you damn please," Vargas was saying. "Never mind. We'll work it another way, like before. Simply arrange an 'accident' to remove one man in that section. But remember—one of my men has to be in section five before next Monday noon. That's all."

He slammed down the phone then, turned to Mouse, scowling. Slowly, though, at sight of Mouse, he began to grin. Mouse, his eyes bulging with fright, grinned back.

"So," Vargas said. "The little one. Good. Come, Manuel, we'll dispense with him immediately. A simple detail."

They were at the foot of the stairs when a second assistant came running to Vargas, whispering a message. The fat man stiffened a little, looked briefly at Mouse—and now his smile was grimly tight, utterly without humor. He led the way quickly to a rear room on the second floor.

Vargas didn't pay any attention to the two men waiting there. They jumped to their feet, crushing out cigarettes, but Vargas was interested only in the shuttered window. He opened it a crack, looked cautiously out. Mouse twisted until he also caught a view.

The employment bureau was ablaze with light; men tramped from room to room. Outside, other cops searched the alley with flashlights. It was obvious they wouldn't leave an inch of the premises unsearched, a single file unexamined.

Vargas cursed and swung back to the man who had captured Mouse. "Downstairs," he snapped. "Silence them. No talk, no lights. These police will be gone within an hour. They have no way of connecting the school with the bureau. We're safe—if we're quiet! Fix the little one. . ."

Before Mouse could think, a rough gag was thrust into his mouth and one of Vargas' assistants gun drawn, stood guard by the doorway. Vargas himself was intent on the window while the second man sat at the desk, his gun lying before him.

With a sick realization of utter defeat, both for Rose and himself, Mouse watched the police activity—so close, so efficient, yet so useless. If he only had some way to call them! He saw the reward money slipping slowly through his hands; in a few minutes more Detective Bray would become disgusted and would leave. Mouse didn't care much for himself. It was Rose he was thinking about. Rose and her last chance for happiness slipping away. And a strange, alien anger welled up in the Mouse then—fury at these men who had come to wreck his country's war effort, who watched contemptuously while Bray searched vainly, who stood right now but fifty feet from swift justice. And Rose's happiness.

Mouse Seevers felt like breaking out in tears.

It was the sight of the gun that gave him the crazy idea. Mouse had never shot a gun; he hardly knew one end from the other. But he knew that guns made noise—and of the right kind. Furthermore, he was such a harmless looking little shrimp, so completely terrified, that the others had almost forgotten he was there. Later they'd remember him, kill him off—handedly.

The Mouse's lunge would have done credit to an athlete; it was done with the desperation of a man leaping for his life. Actually, the Mouse was leaping to his death. But he made

it. He had the gun off the desk and in his hand before anyone knew he'd moved. And that was all Mouse asked.

His first roaring shot showered plaster down on Vargas' head. His second try was better. Vargas collapsed to his knees, his fat hands holding his stomach. Then something hit Mouse in the back—something that felt like a molten half-dollar striking flatly—and the terrific blow smashed him onto his face. He twisted quickly with the fall, shot the man behind the desk as neatly as an expert, forced the wild-shooting thug by the door back into the hall. Then, with painful slowness, Mouse worked his pain-wracked numbing body across the room until he could lean his back against the wall. The men from below would be coming now.

THAT was the way Detective Bray found the Mouse—leaning against the wall. His gun lay beside him, empty. Two other slugs were buried in his body by then, but he was still alive. He wiped blood from his mouth as he looked up at the incredulous Bray.

"That reward money," he gasped in quick, pain-lumped phrases, "It goes to my wife now—doesn't it—Bray?" The detective nodded solemnly. The Mouse smiled happily. Then he said: "Get Rose."

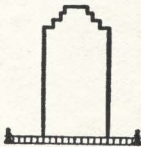
Mouse Seevers only just had time to tell Rose goodbye and that was all. Every cop in the room had his hat off when the peroxided, hard-faced girl he'd thought was so beautiful finally got to her feet, her make-up running with tears. In that moment, strangely, she really did look beautiful.

"My husband," she said, as though she loved the sound of the word, "my husband was one great guy. The greatest guy any girl ever—" she stopped, unable to speak.

"He was more than a great guy," Detective Bray said with quiet conviction. "He died for his country—and for you, Rose. He was a hero."

TEST SIGHT TASTE RIGHT

If the ladder is placed against building, how far up will it reach?



ANSWER.

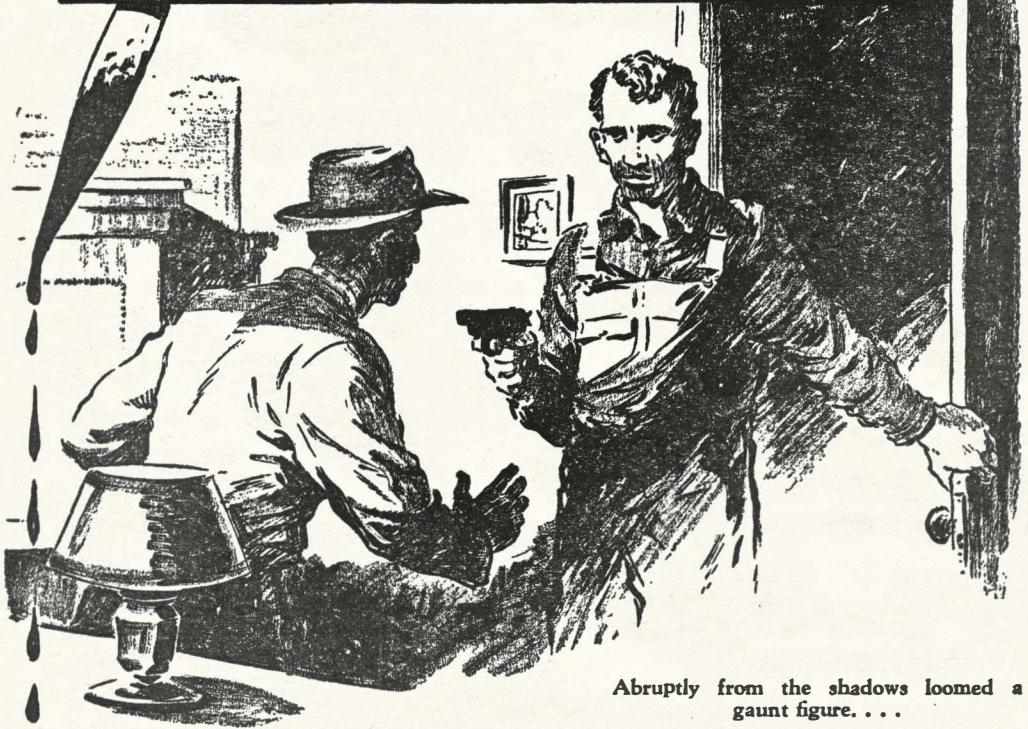
It will reach exactly to the top of the building.





KILLERS' REUNION

By FRANCIS K. ALLAN



Abruptly from the shadows loomed a gaunt figure. . . .

When a dead man stalked the city streets, sowing in his wake a crop of destruction and murder, Eddie Simmons stumbled in panic along the crimson trail, dreading to meet this strange juggernaut of death. . . . And dreading even more missing it!

THE light of dawn was growing when Eddie Simmons, late of the *Evening Star*, walked slowly home along Nineteenth Street in New York City. He walked slowly because he could still feel the rye whiskey, and because he was very discouraged.

The evening before, he had been fired.

According to Price, the managing-editor, Eddie was a little shrimp with too many big ideas! Price was right in calling Eddie little. He was five-six and weighed a hundred and twenty. Price didn't understand about the ideas, Eddie argued gloomily to himself. It was the duty of a good crime-reporter to be a detective.

That was the way matters stood with Eddie as he walked wearily along Nineteenth Street at six o'clock the morning after. He paused to survey a help-wanted sign in a gloomy furniture store. He sighed. And that was when he saw her.

Eddie had a good eye for beauty, and this

girl was beautiful. Her golden hair glistened like soft fire. He watched her crossing the street. She paused at the dusty dark doorway of an abandoned-looking loft-building. She squared her shoulders in determination, then pushed open the door and vanished into darkness.

He sighed again. Then he saw the man—tall and grey-faced, wearing a limp trench-coat and a black hat drawn low. Hands in his pockets, he was moving swiftly, on tip-toe. His eyes were locked on the building, on the door the girl had entered.

Something in the man's movements arrested Eddie's eyes. There was a hard, grim silence in the face. There was the stealth of a stalking animal in the taut body.

The man touched the door. Slowly he edged it open. His hand slid from his pocket. Eddie saw two things: First, something small and dark dropped unnoticed to the pavement. Second, he saw the gleaming barrel of a pistol in the man's hand.

The man vanished.

EDDIE'S brows went up. His tired eyes lost their dullness, began to sparkle. The truth of it was that Eddie had always been a detective at heart—a detective without a case or client. In imagination, he had trapped a dozen ruthless killers—had saved countless lives—through acts of daring. But . . . it had always been just a dream and Eddie Simmons now was just a little tired guy . . . without a job. . . .

He watched the aged building into which the girl and man had gone. Abruptly he stiffened.

A side door down the service-alley of the building was opening. The girl appeared. She was walking slowly, stiffly.

Close behind her walked a man. Eddie's eyes narrowed. It was not the same man who had followed her. A dark blue Homburg was on his head, and a fringe of grey hair showed about his temples. His face was sharp and handsome, and one of his hands cupped the girl's elbow. Eddie saw them turn the distant corner into Fifth Avenue. They were gone.

He looked again at the building, then crossed the street. He bent down to pick up the small object the first man had dropped. It was a leather glasses-case. The glasses were gone, but on the case Eddie saw:

HAUGHTON WELLES
THE TARRYMORE ARMS
MADISON AVENUE, N. Y.

He moved his hand toward the rusty knob of the door. Slowly he stepped into a dank hallway. There was no light, save for a greyish glow that spread down the dusty stairs

from above. Dust made a veneer on the floor, and only on the stairs was the veneer broken.

It's been a long time since anybody was in here—except two people climbing these stairs, Eddie realized. He listened. No sound reached his ears. A faint coolness stirred down his spine. He approached the stairs. He climbed past the second floor; there again the veneer of dust was unbroken. He passed the third floor. He reached the fourth. And here at the hallway, both pairs of footprints left the stairs and turned into the hall.

Eddie turned the corner. "D—damn!" he gasped. He froze. He swallowed. Gingerly, he advanced—one step, another, another . . . down the long length of the hall. There, at the last door, lay the crumpled, unconscious figure of the grey-faced man.

EDDIE swallowed again and knelt down, touching the man's shoulder. The man groaned thickly. His long head rolled slightly, and Eddie saw the ragged gash and the swelling bruise across the bony temple. Blood ran down the lines of the face, and stained the expensive shirt and tweed suit. Just beyond the man's limp fingers lay a pistol. And, half-tucked in his pocket, was a folded piece of paper.

Eddie hesitated and then unfolded it to read typed words:

Dear Haughton,

I expected you to try to follow. I am not a fool. You have only made it harder on yourself. I know who the girl is. Who she really is—understand? You will hear from me. Do not try to move it from your apartment.

"Uh . . . oooo," the man groaned heavily. Eddie quickly returned the paper to the man's pocket. He watched the eyes flicker open, stare at him blankly. They roamed to the ceiling and down the dirty walls. Slowly they cleared into a steely blue-grey.

Abruptly the man pushed himself up into a sitting position. Eddie swallowed for a third time as he saw the man's fingers silently close on the gun.

"Who are you?" the man asked coldly.

"Simmons. Eddie Simmons—that's my name," Eddie explained quickly. "You don't—don't need that gun on me," he added. "I just—just noticed you coming in and then I seen—saw that girl leave with the other guy and I thought it looked funny and I—"

Then the man noticed the paper in his pocket. He opened it slowly, with an eye on Eddie. Eddie saw the grey face drain, the muscles cord in the throat. The man cursed. Violently he heaved himself up, his inward turmoil suddenly giving him a maniac's vigor.

"Where is she?" he roared. He gripped

Eddie's shoulders. "Where did he take her? Where's Lorere? Tell me, damn you!"

"Listen, I—I don't know—know nothing!" Eddie choked. "I was just watching when you came in! I saw a man leave with this girl—"

The man cursed. He hurled Eddie against the wall and stumbled swiftly down the hall, thundered down the stairs.

When his footsteps faded and a door slammed downstairs, Eddie pulled himself up. His heart was pounding. And he was angry. It was a sensation he had almost forgotten. It heated his blood. And then it iced. He started thinking.

He retraced his steps to the stairs and looked at the footprints in the dust. None went up the stairs. None left the hall at any of the seven doors along the corridor. He followed the footsteps back to that last door where the man had lain. He turned the knob. His eyes widened. The door opened upon a narrow rear stairway. And there, upon the dust mantle, were the footsteps of the man and the girl. Eddie used that stairway to descend, and leave the vacant building himself.

Slowly he turned homeward again, but the interlude in the hall stayed vivid in his mind. The gun—he could see it now. The fury of the man's words—he could hear it now.

"Lorere," he said, Eddie recalled. "*Where is Lorere? Where did he take her. . .*" Eddie stopped as though a wall blocked his way. "Lorere . . . not . . . no!" he breathed. "It couldn't be—"

He began to walk more swiftly.

TWENTY minutes later he found Detective Abberson at the Myrtle Street Station. First he asked Abby about his children, about his wife, and then his sick brother. Finally, vaguely he said:

"Abby, didn't there used to be a guy around named Lorere?"

"Huh," the detective grunted, "Duke Lorere! He was the smartest, slickest jewel thief that ever worked the East coast. He was an artist."

"Whatever happened to him?"

"Murdered. Two years ago this fall. They never pinned it on anybody. They found his remains in a lime grave in New Jersey." Abby nodded reflectively. "Funny way for him to die—in a lime hole. . . ."

"Got a picture of him around?"

"Oh, maybe." Abby rose lazily and waddled away. Presently he returned with a small photograph. Eddie took it.

He felt a wave of blood hit his cheeks, and the breath dried out in his throat. "Yeah," he spoke distantly. But his heart was pounding. He knew. He *knew!*

Duke Lorere, the fabulous jewel-thief, was

not dead! He was alive! He had been with the girl when they left the building and vanished on Fifth Avenue.

"What's the matter with you?" Abby was speaking, "You're looking funny."

"Oh, I'm just tired." Eddie muttered. He waited around a few minutes more, then left. He walked slowly, thinking.

He was afraid, for Eddie was just a little guy who'd taken a lot of pushing. And he was worried, too. The hardest part of all was coming. He had to tell Wyn about his job. . . .

She was worried when he opened the door of the small apartment. He could see she hadn't slept much. He kissed her. For a moment he wanted to hold her close, to bury his face in the dark waves of her hair. He did none of those things.

"I . . . I had to work last night." It was the first lie he'd told her in many years. "I didn't even have time to telephone."

"Was it something important, Eddie?" she wondered eagerly.

"Oh, I don't know. It . . ." He stopped. "It could be," he said.

"Maybe IT's going to come true," she said softly.

IT was something like a dream. IT was the day when Eddie would be promoted. IT was an assistant city-editor's job. IT was a raise.

IT will never come true, Eddie whispered to himself. He knew it. He knew he wasn't smart. He was only what Wyn believed in, and Wyn couldn't see him straight. Love got in her eyes. Right now, he thought, she doesn't know. . . .

Suddenly he was angry at himself! He was no longer frightened. He was sorry for Wyn, but . . .

"Eddie! Where are you going?" she asked in surprise.

"I've still got to work," he said strangely.

"The job I was on last night—it's not finished." He kissed her again and closed the door before he had to say any more.

On the street he drew the glasses-case from his pocket. The Tarrymore Arms . . . Madison Avenue. . . .

Perhaps he was a fool. But he didn't care just then. The bus stopped and he got on. It was strange, then. . . . It was like he had boarded a bus bound for another world. A thrill of sharpness tingled in his veins. He wasn't a fired, tired little guy.

He was Eddie Simmons, and he knew that Duke Lorere was alive!

THE Tarrymore Arms was a massive, chill building. The dark walls of the lobby seemed to frown at Eddie as he moved slowly over the thick carpet. On the directory-board he found the name:

HAUGHTON N. WELLES . . . APARTMENT 5-B.

The one elevator was up, but at the end of a corridor Eddie saw a metal stairway curving upward. Quietly he tip-toed upward. At the fifth floor he moved down the hall. He stopped suddenly as a bent, bony figure backed out of a closet. As the man straightened, Eddie stared at him.

He was the dirtiest man Eddie had seen in a long time. His hair was dark and matted with soot. His grimy cheeks were sunken, and his chin almost met the tip of his nose. His dull eyes blinked.

"G'morning," he grunted. From the closet he pulled a mop and broom, then shuffled away. Eddie breathed a sigh of relief. He continued on to door 5-B. He drew a deep breath and knocked. There was no answer.

Eddie's fingers were damp and trembling as he pulled his key-ring from his pocket. Cautiously he selected a skeleton key, fitted it to the key hole. His heart leaped as he felt the lock turning. Gently the door swung inward upon a shadowy, gloomy room. Quickly he locked it behind him. He stood, scarcely breathing, in the cold austere living room of Haughton Welles' apartment.

The furniture was massive and dark. There was an air of emptiness in the apartment. "Like a kind of a morgue," Eddie whispered to himself. "Creepy. . . ."

He tip-toed across the room and peered

into a hall. He tried a closed door. It was locked. Eddie hesitated. The note had said there was something here—something that was not to be moved. . . .

He looked into the small neat kitchen, into the bath. The same air of emptiness hung in every room, but nowhere was there anything unusual. He returned to the locked door. He knelt down and peered through the key-hole. He saw the outline of a desk, of bookcases, a rug, a—

"Oh . . . God!" he choked. He froze. He felt his stomach tighten inside him. He felt the impulse to run, to shout.

He made himself take out his keys again. At last he opened the door. He edged forward until he stood just above the body of a round-headed, plump little man. The eyes were sunken and hollow. There was a ghastly purple-greyness to the flesh, and on the rug was the dried stain of blood.

It was one of the few corpses Eddie had ever seen, but he knew that this man had been dead for many hours.

He clenched his fist and swallowed heavily. Slowly he advanced and knelt down. He searched the man's pockets. He studied the identification card in the bill-fold. The name was Zefri Gaings. The address was the Gaings Watch and Jewelry Shop, Madison Avenue, N. Y. He found a small blunt automatic in one pocket, and a watch. As he lifted it, he noticed its feel—like a toy-watch, very light.

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He opened the case, and blinked. The case was hollow, lined with blue velvet. There were two diamonds.

Eddie turned the body. The death wound was a neat, deep gash from a knife, squarely between Gaings' shoulders. Just as the body rolled back to the rug, Eddie saw the gleam of metal. He moved the body again and thrust his hand under the back. He lifted out a key—a hotel key with a number-plate attached:

ROOM 375 CONROE HOTEL.

Maybe the killer dropped it! Eddie realized sharply. He knifed Gaings! His key fell. Gaings fell on it. The killer didn't notice! And, if the killer doesn't know where he lost the key, maybe he hasn't moved from the Conroe!

HE STOPPED as he heard a drawling voice speaking in the hall: "G'morning, Mister Wellth," the voice was lisping. Footsteps echoed along the corridor. Eddie straightened. His frantic eyes raked the room. He heard a key grating at the front door. Swiftly he tip-toed out of the room. Just as the door from the hall opened, he huddled down in a dark corner behind a huge sofa.

Steps started across the room after the door was locked. There was a harsh, choking gasp. "Open! Somebody's been in there!" Eddie peered around the corner of the couch. He saw the hard-faced man rush to the door of the room, his eyes were tortured. His hand, half out of the pocket of his coat, nervously fingered his gun. He seemed to listen. He tip-toed through the apartment.

Eddie waited silently, and for the first time he noticed that he still held Gaings' blunt automatic in his hand. Gingerly he dropped it in his pocket. The shrill ring of the telephone blasted through the silence.

Welles moved into the hall. "Hello? . . . Oh." His voice dropped to a raw whisper. "Where is she, Lorere?" he breathed. "What? . . . No! I'll pay! I swear I'll pay! . . . No, I swear I won't try to move it! I—how much?" There was a pause. "But, Lorere!" Welles choked. "That—that five grand she gave you is all—all the cash I've got now! . . . Yes, but . . . Give me three hours! I'll get it! . . . Yes, I'll be here!" Welles hung up and dialed again.

"Marlin?" Eddie listened. "Marlin, this is Haughton. I've got to have twenty grand in three hours! In *cash*. Send it to my apartment . . . No, I can't explain. I . . . I can't. Send me the money—"

While Welles was talking, Eddie carefully crawled along the wall, unlocked the hall-door, and slipped out. He hurried to the rear stairs and started down. He met the dirty, hunch-shouldered janitor coming up. The dull eyes blinked at him vacantly.

"G'morning," the man said listlessly. Eddie paused.

"How long have you been working here, Sam?" he wondered.

"Name is Rothcoe," the man said toothlessly. "I don't work nowhere tho long. Gueth it'th been about two month here." He kept staring stupidly at Eddie. Eddie spoke slowly: "I guess you know Mr. Welles. Who is he?"

"Wellth? Oh, him," Roscoe remembered. "Don't know. Theems like he'th kind of a lawyer. I don't know." He rubbed his dirty cheek.

"Did you ever see a pretty girl with him? A girl with gold hair?"

"Oh." Roscoe grinned a crooked, secretive grin. "Her—he thayth it'th hith thecretary. I then her a lot."

"His secretary," Eddie mused. And he remembered what the note had said: *I know who the girl is. Who she really is—understand?* He nodded to Roscoe and hurried on down the stairs. He found the address of the Conroe Hotel.

IT WAS a small shabby place. The lobby was drab. Eddie stopped at the house telephone and called room 375. There was no answer. He climbed the stairs. As he walked, he felt the weight of the gun in his pocket. Along the third floor hall were many doors. The mingled music from radios wandered to his ears. The roar from the El thundered through the windows. He knocked at door 375. No answer. . . .

He tried his skeleton key again and stepped into a small bleak room. Upon a table was an unfinished solitaire lay-out. Three empty brandy bottles stood against the wall. The window-shade was drawn, and the mid-morning sunlight sent a muted olive light through the green material. Eddie locked the door behind him, slipped the safety from the automatic, and placed it on the corner of the dresser. He searched the empty drawers. He found nothing around the bed. He opened the closet. There hung three custom-tailored suits, a half-dozen expensive pairs of shoes, and two hats. On the shelf were perhaps a dozen good-shirts. Eddie smiled softly to himself.

"Those clothes are too good for this hotel."

He searched through the suits. He found only matches, half a pack of imported cigarettes, and a handkerchief. He frowned. He studied the shoes. Upon one pair was a faint dusty stain around the soles. That was all.

He sighed, listened toward the hall, then tip-toed to the bath-room. There he found nothing but a few very dirty and grimy towels wadded on the floor. He opened the medicine-cabinet. There was a faint metallic gleam

from the half-closed end of a tooth-paste box. He opened the box.

"It—the death knife!" he whispered. Into the palm of his hand slid a slender ivory-handled dagger. Upon the blade was the dark stain of dry blood. Eddie stared thoughtfully at the floor. His fingers tingled as he held the knife. Slowly his eyes widened. Suddenly he gasped.

"Maybe! Maybe!" he whispered excitedly. He fumbled the knife back into the box, pushed it back into the medicine-cabinet, and tip-toed swiftly from the room.

When he reached the street, he hailed a cab. "The Tarrymore Arms on Madison Avenue," he ordered swiftly. He leaned back and mopped his damp face. He retraced his thoughts again. His heart began to pound! He was right! He knew he was right! It grew into a thundering chant in his brain. His feet urged the cab faster.

Twenty minutes later he hurried down the fifth-floor hall and knocked at Haughton Welles' door. After a few seconds the lock turned and the grim tired-faced man peered out.

"What do you want? Who are—oh," he recognized.

"Wait! Don't slam the door!" Eddie shoved a foot into the crack. "I've got to talk to you! About the girl! I've got to tell you!" That stopped Welles' brusque movement. His eyes widened cautiously. Gradually he let the door open. Eddie slipped in. Instantly Welles closed the door. Eddie faced him, and Welles dropped his hand to his pocket.

"What about her?" he asked in measured coldness.

EDDIE swallowed. Now it was going to be bluff, and he'd never bluffed in his life. He tried to bring a faint smile to his lips. Slowly he lit a cigarette and leaned back against the wall.

"I'll begin by telling you my name again. I'm Eddie Simmons. My business," he said flatly, "is private investigation."

"I don't need a private dick," Welles snapped bluntly.

Eddie cocked a brow. "Not if I could locate the girl?"

Welles' eyes narrowed. Uneasily they studied Eddie's face. "I don't think you know where she is," he said carefully.

"I know that Duke Lorere is not dead. I know that he is blackmailing you. I know that Lorere has her. And I know where Duke Lorere is staying!" Eddie climaxed.

Welles' jaw sagged. His lips parted. "You . . . know? Where? How do you know? Where is he staying?" The questions were frantic.

"How?" Eddie smiled again. "Well, I found his room in a hotel. I found his clothes and

custom-made shirts. At least, I assume they are his. Didn't Lorere kill Gaings?"

"You know about Gaings?" Welles breathed. His face was suddenly ashen and white. No longer did he stand erect and cool. He hunched forward and his mouth twitched. "You . . . how did you know?"

"Look," Eddie said slowly, "I've told you enough. You know I'm not bluffing. Now you're going to tell me! First, I want to know the whole story—about the girl, Lorere, and Gaings. If you work with me, I think I can save the girl. Is it worth it?"

"Worth it?" The words were soft. Welles seemed to curl them over his lips. "Worth it," he echoed. "Yes. It's worth it," he whispered. He sagged down in a chair. His body, his face was suddenly old and tired and resigned. "She is my daughter," he said emptily. "No one knows but me. She does not know. Only I know and . . . somehow Lorere has learned." He paused, shot Eddie a sidelong glance.

"Where is Lorere's hide-out?" he queried softly, intently.

Eddie opened his mouth, about to reveal the hotel's name and room-number. Then he checked himself. He was not ready to play that card.

But Welles played his own card next—it was the gun in his hand. "Tell me," he persisted softly.

Eddie stared in numb bitterness at the gun. He had misplayed his hand. He had failed. And then, suddenly, Eddie thought of Gaings. And, just as suddenly, he realized Welles hadn't killed Gaings. The game had reached the bluffing stage.

"Put away that gun, Mr. Welles," he said loudly. "You aren't going to kill me. If you do, the cops will pin the Gaings job on you, as well as my murder. If you don't—" he lifted his hands—"we can pin the Gaings murder where it belongs . . . on Lorere!"

Their eyes held steadily for a long moment. Then Welles' face seemed to sag. His eyes closed—the gun fell to the floor.

"I can't—can't stand this killing," he whispered.

Eddie drew a shaky breath. "That's better. Now talk—and talk fast! And don't miss a trick. Remember, you're only filling in details—for I know most of this."

Welles let his hands fall heavily on the arms of his chair. His voice was low and bitter.

"I am no lawyer. Oh, I took a law degree. I accept a few cases to keep up a front. Actually I am a—a broker in stolen jewels. I am the head of an international syndicate. I have been for years. I . . . It was money! I always wanted money. You see?" The words began to pour out now, as though some long-torn dam had burst. "Gaings was one of our out-

lets. He sold in small quantities. And Lorere was . . . years ago, he was our chief source of stolen stones. He was the greatest jewel thief of the twenties and thirties. He trained a few men and women to work with him. But then—it was two years ago—he got into trouble. It was just an income-tax charge, but it was an opening wedge to make him talk. We knew we were wrecked if he ever told his story. We . . .” Welles mopped his face. He stumbled on. “I did something I’d never done before. I planned his murder. I hired a gunman to kill him. I . . . Then something went wrong. Lorere must have heard of my plan. He outsmarted the gunman. On the selected night, he and the gunman disappeared. Neither was heard of again until two months ago when Lorere contacted me—and blackmailed me! He’d killed the gunman and buried him in the lime-grave in New Jersey! He’d planted his own ring and watch and belt-buckle in the grave. The gunman’s remains were identified as Lorere’s. And then he came back! And he *knew I’d plotted his murder!*” Welles choked.

“What happened?” Eddie prompted breathlessly.

“I PAID ten thousand in blackmail. I tried to fight back. I couldn’t trace Lorere, couldn’t find where he was staying! I knew he would bleed me to death. I refused last week to pay. And so . . . last night I was called to Brooklyn. It was a fake call. The person did not meet me. When I returned here, the body—Gaings’ body—was in that room! And one minute after I arrived, Lorere called me. He said he was watching every move I made! He said I would pay what he asked, or the police would be sent to this apartment! He said they would find proof that I was the murderer. He said they’d learn where I’d been staying the last four days—in some hotel in this town, he said. They’d find my clothes and the death weapon hidden there and—”

“Wait!” Eddie exploded. “Your clothes have been stolen? You’ve been out of town four days?”

“Some shorts, hats, three suits, and some shoes of mine are missing. And I have been out of town. Furthermore, if I tried to use it as an alibi to fight Lorere, I’d have to reveal that I’d been in Philadelphia selling stolen diamonds. I couldn’t. I was trapped. I—”

“But you don’t *know* where this room in this certain hotel is?” Eddie demanded sharply. Welles shook his head. “All right,” Eddie said, “you came back to this apartment after a fake call to Brooklyn. You found Gaings’ corpse. Then what?”

“I was directed to send five thousand dollars to an address and certain room on Nine-

teenth Street this morning. I was to send it by my secretary—my daughter. I did. I followed her, hoping to trap Lorere. But he got the drop on me, slugged me, and took her. Now he’s demanding more money for her safe return. And he’ll send the cops here to find Gaings, too! He won’t let me move the corpse if I could! He seems to know every move I make! I—oh, God, I don’t know what to do! I’m going crazy! I—”

“Why did you send your daughter into this mess?”

“I didn’t know Lorere knew who she actually was. You see, when she was a baby and her mother died, I put her in a home. I didn’t want her to ever learn about me—what I did. But when she came to New York to get a job, I managed to have her apply to me. I wanted to see her, know her. But she’s never known who I really am or what I really did. I’ve never wanted her to know. She’s innocent of any part in this. But Lorere has learned about her!”

“If I can save her, you’ll tell this story to the police?” Eddie asked. “You’ve got nothing to lose. That corpse is on your hands. Lorere is determined to wreck you. . . .”

Welles blinked his haggard eyes. “If you can save her, I—I will tell the truth to the police.”

Eddie mashed out his cigarette. “Call the manager. Tell him a pipe has broken. Ask him to send up the janitor.”

Welles’ jaw sagged. Eddie gestured. “Go on. Make the call.”

Welles shrugged and stalked from the room. He vanished down the hall. Eddie waited to hear the click of the dial. He heard nothing but a muted sigh. He frowned. He started toward the hall. Abruptly, out of the half-shadows, loomed the gaunt and dirty figure of Roscoe. Toothlessly and thinly he smiled, and the gun in his hand levelled on Eddie’s head.

“SO you wanted the janitor,” he said softly. “You’ve got him. Or rather, he’s got you.” The man’s grin vanished into a grey bleakness. “Don’t try to draw your little gun,” he murmured.

“But you . . . how did you—and Welles—” Eddie gasped.

“I’ve been listening. I came in by the fire-escape. And Welles is unconscious,” Roscoe explained ironically. “He didn’t see me when I hit him. He’ll never know who Lorere is, now.”

“You—you—you can’t kill me!” Eddie choked. “You—”

“On the contrary, I can. I think I shall.” Roscoe’s eyes narrowed curiously. “But I’m wondering about something. . . . Just how did you know that I was Duke Lorere?”

"I—in that room at the Conroe. . . . The towels were so dirty. But the clothes were very expensive. It wasn't right that a guy would get that dirty in those clothes—and the clothes weren't dirty, anywhere." Eddie swallowed. He felt sweat slipping down his cheeks, and his throat was dry. Frantically he kept talking: "I remembered how dirty you were. Then I saw that glass of water in the medicine-cabinet. I remembered how sunken your cheeks were. All of a sudden I thought: That's where you'd kept your false-teeth at night when you stayed in that room. You kept yourself dirty when you were here so Welles wouldn't recognize. I got to thinking. You were almost too dumb and stupid looking. But Lorere was very smart. If you wanted to disguise yourself, wouldn't you go to the other extreme like that?"

The man smiled gently. "Not bad, for a little guy like you. And you're right—I stole Welles' clothes. When I left work here, I

he leaped, he screamed with all the terror in him. He heard the gun blasting into his face. He felt a needle of hot fire race through his shoulder. He felt his arms drive into Lorere's chest.

Wildly, frantically he gripped and twisted. He tried to bite—to kick. A sinewy arm locked about his head, twisted, and crushed down. Then came the second roaring thunder. A tearing wave of pain cut through Eddie's ribs. He felt his body, his nerves stagger. He felt a blackness cross like a cloud through his head. He felt himself falling. He crumpled on the floor.

He heard a voice. It seemed to drift in from far away. He tried to see. Across the rim of his vision drifted the figure of Houghton Welles. The man leaned in the hall-doorway. A gun was in his hand. Blood streamed across his face, but his gun was lifting. Before it was up, Eddie heard Lorere's gun blasting out again! He saw Welles stagger backward.

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slipped in the back way at the Conroe. When I got to the room, I bathed, put on Welles' clothes, and left by the front way.

I put the Conroe Hotel key under the corpse where the police were to find it when I was ready. They would go there, find the death knife, Welles' clothes, and they would find witnesses to say that Welles had been seen leaving that hotel. All quite logical. And that is just what will happen . . . after he has paid all he can for protection." The man smiled, but suddenly the smile was insane with hatred.

"You—you're mad! Listen, you—you can't get away—"

"Oh, but I will. And I'm not a bit mad. "Now, I must ask you to step into the study with the corpse."

Eddie choked. His muscles refused to move. He felt himself trembling, shaking. He tried to speak. His tongue was thick and hot.

"Move! Move, damn you!" Lorere whispered. "Move or—" He stopped. A choking cough came from down the hall. Lorere cursed savagely. Welles was regaining consciousness. Lorere was desperate. Eddie knew. He had to kill and get out. . . .

Eddie saw the gun come swinging back upon him. He closed his eyes. He leaped. As

Eddie twisted feebly. He found the automatic in his pocket. With his last margin of consciousness, he levelled the gun. Into his wavering sight swam the figure of Lorere. Eddie waited one last instant. The gun froze on Lorere's head.

Eddie fired.

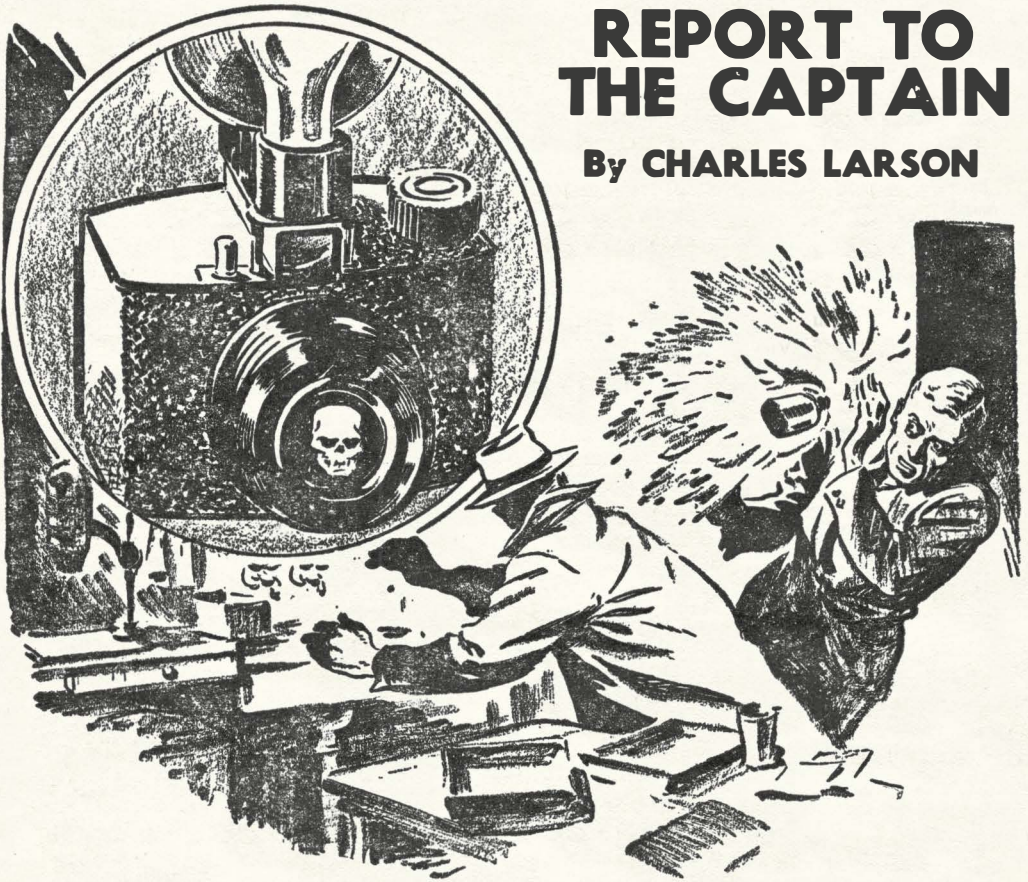
HE wasn't just a tired little guy without a job, anymore. He was Eddie Simmons, and he knew where he was going when he left the hospital that day in September. You see, he'd always dreamed about being a private-detective. . . .

Yes, he told the reporters, it had been a hard case. In fact, a dangerous case, he admitted. No, he'd never been afraid, though it had been touch-and-go for a minute, he remembered. Yes, he understood he was to get a five thousand dollar reward. And yes, it was too bad Welles and Lorere hadn't been captured alive. . . .

But inside, Eddie knew it was better that way. He never told them that the pretty girl with the golden hair was really Kathryn Welles. After all, she was innocent. He was glad she'd been found unhurt, for she was the only one worth saving. He left it at that. . . .

REPORT TO THE CAPTAIN

By CHARLES LARSON



The crack of the automatic coincided with the snap of his elbow as he threw the bottle. . . .

Detective Steve Nebraska was damned if he'd report the death of his prospective father-in-law as suicide. . . . And he was doubly damned if he didn't!

HE SAT down at his desk slowly, and one of his knees cracked as it always did when he bent it, but this time he didn't smile or wince or do it again just to feel the tiny imperfection in his body. He pulled a sheet of white paper toward him, and, after testing his pen on a blotter, began very deliberately to write.

TO: Captain of Detectives.

SUBJECT: Homicide.

His pen hesitated. Outside the police station, a street-car, one of the old ones with narrow, woven-straw seats, and a conductor who knew everybody, rattled and shook over a switch in the track. A newsboy shouted the earth's misery at women shoppers. Suddenly a memory flashed into his mind, held, evaporated. Nothing concrete. Just the recalling of

quiet things. Security. A bit of calmness. A laugh in the sunshine.

How long since he had laughed? Twenty years? Fifty? A thousand?

He shook his head, went on writing.

" . . . at eleven-thirty P.M., on the night of August 19, 1943 . . . "

At eleven-thirty P.M., on the night of August 19, 1943, he had gone up the steps of a brownstone apartment house just off Western Boulevard, in Hollywood, with a ring in his pocket, two fortifying drinks in his stomach, and a sense of well-being that verged on the idiotic.

He was a man in love. A blind beggar half way across the earth could have seen it.

He was very tall, and thin, and about him there was an air of awkwardness which added

a certain charm to the whole effect . . . when people weren't expecting him to fall down from sheer lack of balance.

The day had been good. It had started on a high note, and instead of dropping him around noon, had grown and grown, until he wondered how he could keep his reason.

At nine-thirty, he found he hadn't lost his number 18 shoe-ration ticket at all; at one-nineteen (he was sure of the time to the minute) he had been promoted from cop to plainclothes detective; and at ten-ten in the evening, just twenty minutes before his day ended, and with it his uniform, he'd succeeded in getting the prettiest girl he'd ever seen to say "yes" to marriage plans.

The few false notes in the whole crazy-happy scheme had been almost forgotten. It didn't seem to matter to him at all any more that the prettiest girl's well-to-do, society-conscious father would as soon have accepted Hitler as a policeman for a son-in-law. He was immune, strong, a detective, in love.

Carefully he pushed the buzzer over the name Edwin Grinnel, who was the father, and when the door clicked, he walked inside.

Prophetically enough, he was whistling a harmless little tune he had learned when he was six.

It went over and over in his mind, endlessly repeating, phrasing itself into weird rhythms, and interesting beats. . . .

"*Won't you come into my parlor?*" said the spider to the fly, "*Won't you come into my parlor . . .*"

He couldn't remember the rest. But it seemed to him that the last word was "die."

It rhymed so well. . . .

GRINNEL opened the apartment door himself when the young man knocked, and if there was a flicker of disgust in his eyes, the young man didn't see it.

Beyond the door, there was a sudden burst of laughter. A glass tinkled against another glass, and somebody began playing *Wonderful One* on the piano.

"I'd like to see Terry," the young man said.

Grinnel nodded. He didn't move, didn't stand aside for the other to enter.

"Who is it, darling?" someone called from the apartment.

Nervously, Grinnel turned his head.

He's like a great dog, the young man thought. Nobody could have startled him like that but her. I think he loves her almost as much as I do.

There was a girl at the door then, and the young man grew embarrassed and silly inside at the simple phenomena of noticing her eyes light up when she saw him.

"Steve!" she said. And then shyly, she

added, when Grinnel coughed. "Come in. Please."

"If there's something going on. . . ."

"Just Dad's friends. You know them all."

He hesitated, looking at Grinnel.

"For heaven's sake, Nebraska, come in," Grinnel said. "I won't kick you." He turned walked back into the room silently.

Nebraska said: "You told him about us?"

"Yes. Right after you called. He didn't like it, but . . ."

"But you do?"

"I do," she said quietly. "I do, very much."

Nebraska drew a deep breath. "Then that's that," he said.

Together they went inside.

There were four others in the apartment, besides Grinnel. Hanley Cronyn, the actor, played a chord at the piano when he saw them, and said: "A toast!" He picked up his glass obediently, and emptied it. He was already a little drunk.

In a corner, Liz and Callie Wilson looked up from a game of gin rummy.

"Stevie!" Liz said. "Our new detective."

"How are you, Nebraska?" Callie laid down his hand, whispered: "Gin," and beamed at his wife.

In a depressed voice Liz murmured: "That does it. You must cheat."

Terry took Nebraska to a sofa on the other side of the room, and they sat beside a morose looking gentleman named George who was staring at a small, flash-type camera in his hands as though daring the thing to snarl at him.

He glanced up briefly when Nebraska said something about the night being cold for that time of year, and nodded.

"Who's cold?" Liz Wilson asked over her shoulder. She raised herself on one hip to stare unbelieving at them. "With this damned heater cutting up like Hell gone mad. . . ."

"The night, darling," Terry explained patiently. "Outside. Do you want the gas turned down?"

"Touch that heater, and you take your life in your hands. I thought you were making disparaging remarks about Grinnel's power of host. Poor, sweet thing. I *asked* him to turn it on."

After that they all laughed, and went back to what they'd been doing before, and there was no sound in the room except the quiet slur of cards when Callie dealt.

Nebraska leaned forward, took Terry's hand. "Hi," he said softly.

"Hi."

He nodded at the rest of them. "I thought you'd be alone. There were one or two things . . ."

"We couldn't just . . . slip out," the girl said. "Might insult 'em."

"Yes."

"Of course. . . . I suppose if you *have* to have cigarettes. . . ."

"What?"

"Cigarettes."

"Cig—" And then he understood. "Oh, cigarettes," he said, "good Lord, yes." He got up, patting at his pockets. "I noticed a shop around the corner. Care to come along?"

"If you people don't mind. . . ." Terry said, standing.

"Gin," Callie Wilson said again. He looked up. "Mind what?"

"Mind us going out for some cigarettes. We'll be back. . . ."

Hurriedly Callie reached into his coat pocket. "Why didn't you say something? I've—"

THE kick that Liz gave him could be heard all over the apartment. She raised one hand to the back of her hair, and began humming in an abstracted manner.

"Oh," Callie said. "Yeah. Go on." He whistled a little through his clenched teeth.

"I think we'd better leave anyway," Liz said. She pretended to look at her watch. "I have to get this hulk up at six tomorrow. . . ."

At the piano, Hanley Cronyn yawned, got shakily to his feet, struck a pose, and waited for them to notice him. "It's been a wonderful party," he said, "but tomorrow I emote. I have an eight-thirty call at the studio. Could you drop me at a carline, Callie?"

"I could."

Cronyn nodded with great dignity, and ambled across the room to an ashtray.

"George?" Callie said.

The man with the camera stopped aiming it, looked up. "Ah?"

"Drop you somewhere?"

"Oh." He stood up. "Yes. Third house from the corner of Sunset, on Vine, if you're going that way."

"Where's Grinny?" Liz asked suddenly. She paused, bent over the chair holding her coat.

It was a simple statement, a quiet, curious question, but unexplainably Nebraska felt odd. It was as though he'd lost his flesh for a moment, and there were spider webs on his spine. He wanted to laugh at himself for his melodramatics, and yet the feeling was so real. . . . Disaster. Helplessness. One fractured second in time when things weren't right, or weren't going to be right. . . .

"I think I saw him going into the bedroom," Terry murmured uncertainly. "I ca—"

And then the bedroom door was opening, and Liz Wilson was saying in her high, nervous voice. "There you are, dear! We're leaving you. Do you mind?"

"So early?"

Grinnel walked to them, smiling, and Nebraska felt even sillier than he had before.

The old man had been sulking. Heaven knew he had a right to. Terry was too lovely a thing to lose with good grace.

Relieved, Nebraska took the girl by the arm, and walked with her to the door.

"I'm just going to the corner, Dad," she said.

Grinnel nodded, and made some remark about not staying out too late, and Nebraska thought comfortably: *He's over it. He's had his anger, and it's gone. Everything will be all right now.*

Everything would be fine.

. . . . as the spider assured the fly. . . .

When they were going down the stairs, George, the man with the camera, began to laugh softly.

Liz Wilson, who was two steps above him, looked startled. "Have I gone mad?" she asked. "I think that's the first time in five years I've heard you laugh, Georgie."

The other shook his head, and wiped silently at his eyes. "None of you noticed, did you?"

"Noticed what, dear?"

"The camera. I was taking your pictures. Infra-red attachment." He seemed immensely proud of himself.

"Isn't that sweet!" Liz said. She stared at her husband incredulously. "He took our pictures, Callie. Isn't that sweet?"

"Charming," Callie said.

"Which of my profiles was it?" Hanley Cronyn put in. Half-seriously he added: "Hope to God it was my right."

They reached the bottom, and stood in the hallway talking about the camera. Somehow an argument started between Hanley Cronyn and George about camera angles, and lighting, and when the woman upstairs screamed, almost a quarter of an hour later, none of them had left.

The second following the scream was one Nebraska remembered all his life. He had been shifting from one foot to the other, wishing they'd get on, when it came—a tight, mad, idiotic thing, bursting like a rocket over their heads, drenching them with bright terror.

HE remembered looking up, startled, and he remembered catching a glimpse of the faces around him. For an instant they were children's faces, filled with all the immature fear of unknown things in the dark.

Then Callie Wilson was saying, "Wha—" and running up the stairs, and in a moment the strain was gone. Swearing, Hanley Cronyn followed him.

"That's Mrs. Carnahan," Terry whispered. "The woman across from us, Steve. . . ."

"You stay here," Nebraska said. "Wait for me here. Don't come up."

He took the stairs two at a time, and the night wind from one of the open windows along the corridor swept across his face, and he trembled. . . .

Cronyn and Callie were standing before Grinnel's door, holding handkerchiefs over their faces. In the hallway, the odor of gas was cloying, overpowering, and Nebraska felt his stomach twist with its sweetness. Mrs. Carnahan, a dumpy, pear-shaped Irish woman in the graying fifties, was huddled against the wall.

"Nebraska?" Callie shouted over his shoulder.

"Yes, Callie! What's wrong with his door? Get his door open!"

"The damn thing's locked. He locked it when we left."

Hanley Cronyn drew back, kicked at the knob with one foot. Coughing, Nebraska shoved him aside, battered against the door with his shoulder until he heard it crack, and splinter, and finally give way.

The gas came at them, rolling, swirling, getting into their eyes, and their lungs, but it wasn't so bad that they couldn't see Grinnel. He was sitting in the easy chair by the heater, and even before they tore at his collar and dragged him into the hall, they could see that he was quite dead. . . .

Nebraska never knew for sure which one of them turned the gas heater off, but he imagined it was Callie. People and events moved in a strange haze around him. He got Mrs. Carnahan into her own apartment, and asked her the questions his text-book told him to ask her, but it was all so dream-like, so frantic. . . .

She'd come out into the hall, she said, for some reason (she'd forgotten in the excitement; maybe a breath of fresh air, or to stretch her legs) and she thought she smelled gas. Well, Carnahan had always made fun of her hearing burglars, and smelling gas, and what not, so she had tried to convince herself that everything was all right. But it wasn't. The gas smell had grown stronger. She'd knocked once or twice on Mr. Grinnel's door ("thinkin' he might be asleep, you know?") "Yes. I understand. Go on.") but he hadn't answered.

Then she'd screamed.

Was that all right. Had she done wrong not to scream sooner? She'd been so nervous, and Carnahan had always made fun. . . .

Nebraska assured her that angels couldn't have done more, and went back to take another look at the room.

The sick smell of gas hung like dust over everything. The curtains reeked of it, and when Nebraska stumbled against one of the chairs, he half expected it to rise in little clouds, like dust.

He'd posted Cronyn outside the door, and in the hall he could hear the subdued murmurs of all the inevitable curiosity-seekers. Callie had called the police from Mrs. Carnahan's apartment and then gone downstairs to be with Terry and Liz.

The windows of the room had been tightly closed. Obviously Grinnel had killed himself. Over and over Nebraska tried to believe that it had been suicide, that it couldn't possibly have been anything else, but still . . . in his mind. . . .

He made his way into the bedroom, searching vaguely for some tiny thing he could point to when the police asked for proof and there was nothing. Grinnel's robe, a wine colored affair with his initials embroidered in white on one sleeve, was laying neatly over the bed; a half mixed drink stood on the night table; bills were spread in orderly confusion over his desk. And the window behind the bed was open.

Hardly a suicide's preparations.

On an impulse, Nebraska went to the window, leaned out. Below him, the street took on the unearthly appearance of a miniature stage setting. There was no fire escape. To have entered the apartment by that window would have taxed the abilities of a comic strip character. With a start, Nebraska realized that he was assuming murder . . . and not suicide at all.

He shook his head, and returned to the main parlor. It *couldn't* have been murder. Aside from the absence of known motive, there was the crushing fact that Grinnel had locked his apartment door behind his guests when they had left, and it had still been locked when Mrs. Carnahan had discovered the gas. Further, no one had passed them while they stood in the hall talking. . . .

Accident was out of the question. At first he had believed that a strong wind might have extinguished the gas heater's flame without Grinnel noticing, but the tightly closed living room windows had kicked hell out of that theory.

He was turning to go again into the bedroom, when the police came.

They walked into the apartment slowly, three of them, with their note-books out, and their guns loose and ugly in their holsters.

One of them Nebraska knew. He was a big man, with the wide easy walk of assurance, and Ireland looked out of his eyes when he smiled.

He said: "What goes, Stevie?"

It was hard to answer. Nebraska felt strange and alien suddenly. He said: "You know as much as I do, Irish."

"We saw Grinnel's daughter downstairs. She told us you were up here. She said you'd been up here all evening."

"Yes."

The patrolman walked across the room, sniffing at the air, and his gun hit dully on his hip with every step. "Suicide?" he asked.

Nebraska hesitated. It had just occurred to him, in a kind of tired panic, that this was his first case. Since ten-thirty he had been a detective. Theoretically, he was superior to the three patrolmen beside him. Would it be so hard to tell them yes, it had been suicide? Who would know? With one word he could cut away all the routine, the rotten mystery, the endless questions. . . . And it *might* have been suicide. As a matter of fact, it was much more probable that it had been suicide than murder. A locked room. The impossibility of anyone entering after the six of them had left.

And yet . . . and yet. . . .

Slowly he raised one hand to his eyes, feeling the cool pressure of his fingers, and half-reveling in the child-like astonishment of the shooting, colored spears when he pressed.

Then he said, quietly: "No, Irish. It wasn't suicide." He dropped his hands, looked at them. "I think he was murdered." He drew a deep breath. "I'll draw up a list of the people who were here with me this evening," he went on. "One of us killed him. I don't imagine there's any doubt at all. . . .

AT his desk, he was dreaming. He'd dropped the pen on the blotter in front of him, and put his head in his hands, and miles away he could see the events he'd just written spiraling and turning in his consciousness as though they were appearing through a pair of cracked glasses.

He felt sick, and in a rush of nostalgia, he remembered how wonderful life and living had seemed only the day before. Where had all those things gone? Organically he hadn't changed. He was still twenty-six. He still had his arms, two eyes, his health.

He leaned over slowly, picked up the pen, and scrawled, *Stephen Nebraska* at the bottom of his report.

Then he pulled another piece of paper toward him, and still standing, he wrote,

Because of the unusual circumstances connected with the murder of Edwin Grinnel, I believe that my report should be considered in the nature of a resignation from this department.

He hesitated, his head down, his eyes closed. He hadn't believed it could hurt so much. Behind his eyelids the first sting of crying began, and he straightened suddenly, careful to think of other things.

He gathered the two sheets of paper together, marked *Captain—Personal* on the resignation, and walked quickly out the door

When he'd left the report and the resignation on the Captain's desk, and got into the noon sunshine, it was a little better. He moved along the stone-high parapet separating Pershing Square from the sidewalk, and when he came across a group of women waiting for the Sunset bus, he stopped because it was too much to go around them.

When or how or why he climbed into the bus when it came, he couldn't possibly have said. He found himself dropping a dime into the metal fare-box, and although he was surprised and a little indignant at the way his body moved without consulting his mind, he didn't go back.

They were already opposite City College when it occurred to him where they were going. He'd made the trip so many times. . . .

At Western Boulevard, he rang the bell and got off.

From the corner, he could see the brown-stone apartment house, and it seemed to him, too, that he could see past the walls, into a parlor on the third floor, where the prettiest girl always sat, and where Edwin Grinnel had been murdered. . . .

THE place was almost unattended. He was surprised until he remembered that his report couldn't yet have been seen and acted on. The patrolmen hadn't believed him. The preliminary report must have been suicide.

Upstairs, the manager, quiet usually, but upset and flustered at the death in her building, met him as he wandered into Grinnel's apartment. Suspiciously, she began: "No visitors. The policeman told me absolutely not a person was to come in here. He said. . . ."

Nebraska pulled out his wallet, showed her his detective's badge.

"Oh," the woman said. She looked at it carefully, her full lips pursed. "I see. Yes. Well, I suppose now"

"I'm sure it'll be all right."

"He said"

"Look, ma'am. . . ." Nebraska planted his feet solidly, aware that he had no legal right to do this thing, and mad because of that, and madder because the manager didn't trust him even so. "I haven't the time. . . ."

"All right." The woman raised her hands. "You fight it out with him. He told me to do something; you tell me I'm wrong. I don't know. . . ." Shaking her hands, she went down the hall. Behind her, a little wash of martyrdom eddied and died.

Stolidly Nebraska watched her go, and then he stepped into the apartment, and closed the door behind him.

The room had already taken on the hushed appearance of something not lived in. The blinds had been drawn, and the light that entered was golden and ghostly.

He heard the sound of his feet when he walked to the window, and the rumble of a bus starting outside, like the dignified Southern Senator clearing his throat. In the back of his mind, he'd half expected the girl to be here still, and he felt foolish and out of place in the room when he found that she had gone.

Still, what had happened in this room? Who could have moved through locked doors to kill? And *why*, above everything else, had there been any killing at all?

Some of them, Callie, Hanley Cronyn, Liz, or the photographer, George, had found the way to kill perfectly. They had discovered the magic that let them be downstairs talking to him, while they killed a man three stories above.

Softly, he prowled about the room, opening desk drawers, and examining papers wherever he found them.

And, in the bedroom, he discovered one of the answers.

At first, while he was reading the top letter of a pack laying unobtrusively among the unpaid bills, he didn't realize what he'd stumbled on. It was very unbusinesslike, very normal.

This one was hand-written, on ordinary gray paper, and it said:

Mr. Grinnel—

Leaving Alcatraz tomorrow. Thanks for what you've done, for the hope, and for the future. Will arrive in L.A. Saturday.

George Maxl.

And it was dated February 19, 1938.

Blackmail. Grinnel had been holding blackmail over an ex-con's head.

Nebraska read through it again, his hands trembling over the signature.

He folded the note, put it in his pocket, and hurried again into the living room.

He felt light-headed, almost drunk. The photographer, of course. The one man who was out of place in the pattern of things last night.

But how? How on earth. . . .

He moved his foot irritably over a raise in the carpet. What had he said when they were going downstairs? Something about doing something that none of the rest of them had noticed?

Under his breath he swore at the bunched up carpet, kicked at it, trying to find the answer to a most unanswerable riddle.

Suddenly he stopped.

Beneath his inquiring foot, the carpet moved, rolled, had firmness. He bent down, staring at it. From the metal outlet in the wall near him, a short length of green rubber hose protruded, lost itself under the thin rug he was standing on, and emerged, fat and ugly, at the back of the heater. The gas line.

Suddenly too calm, Nebraska found a match, struck it, and kneeling, lit the heater. Then

he stood where he'd been standing, with one foot over the hidden gas pump, and pressed down abruptly with the edge of his heel.

The tiny flow and shoot of flame stopped. In the quiet Nebraska could hear the beat of his heart, and the pound of it in his head. He let his foot up. Once more the gas came, free this time of interfering fire at the heater's jets, and hissed gently into the room.

He felt like screaming with the happiness in his mind. Why on earth hadn't he seen before. George, standing where he was, putting out a cigarette perhaps, just as they were leaving. . . .

It was so clear. So perfect. So damned crystal-simple.

He shut off the gas, and anxiously tried to find some flaw. And there was none. All of them had left without long goodbyes, without waiting to talk over the party with Grinnel. They'd gone, and the old man had locked himself into the room, and if he'd noticed the gas over the worry in his mind, he'd been too tired and much too numb. . . .

A board creaked behind him, and he started to turn, thinking: This is the policeman. The one the manager was telling me about.

He had time for thinking only. There was no question of protecting himself. A thousand elastic bands seemed to snap in his mind, and his head opened, and he could feel the coolness of metal crush downward over his ear. He fell soundlessly, breathless with the pain of it. Then he remembered nothing. . . .

DRUMS grew, receded, played fantastic Sambas in his mind. Coming back to consciousness was fully as painful as losing it. He rolled onto his back, wincing at the slickness of blood along the side of his face, and waited until the moths in his belly had quieted before he opened his eyes.

Nothing had changed. There were a few more shadows on the floor, and a bit more traffic pulsed in the streets, but he couldn't have been out for any great length of time.

He got to his feet carefully, stumbled into the apartment's bathroom. Warm water stung his face, and soon the wash basin was tinged red with his blood.

He couldn't call the police. What there was to do, he would have to do himself. The note was no longer in his pocket, and the blackmail that Grinnel had been holding over George's head was gone.

He shut off the water, and wiped his face on a purple guest towel. Then he walked out of the room.

George first, he thought numbly, and then the hospital. . . .

He walked all the way to the small house third from the corner of Sunset, on Vine, and when he got there his legs were tight with the

ache of coiled muscles. He tripped a little going up the steps, and a boy passing in the street stopped to look at him.

There was no answer to his ring, and he had almost turned to leave, when it occurred to him to try the door.

It was not locked.

He should have suspected then and there that something was wrong, but his head was throbbing, and his mind was dull and not at all up to par.

The living room he entered was dim, but he found what he was after.

George, the murderer, sat quietly in a straight-backed chair opposite the door, waiting for him.

Nebraska said: "You should have hit me harder, George. I'm still alive."

"I see."

"Your trick with the heater was good. It fooled me."

"It wasn't bad, was it?"

Nebraska couldn't have said when he realized for the first time that the voice wasn't George's, and that the eyes of the man across from him were too wide to hold any intelligence.

He turned.

In the doorway leading to a small dark-room, incongruous in the affair of the house, stood Hanley Cronyn.

Nebraska said softly: "Oh."

"Come away from the door, Stevie," Cronyn said.

Nebraska glanced back at the figure sitting opposite him, and he couldn't understand why he hadn't seen before that George was dead.

He said: "So that's the way of it."

"That's it. Come here, please."

Slowly, Nebraska walked toward the dark-room, and Hanley Cronyn backed into it, his hand gentle and loving around a short, blunt automatic.

"Hanley Cronyn," Nebraska murmured. "Stage name?"

"I sign my checks 'George Maxl.'"

"Yes. It wouldn't look good for an actor's public to know that he'd been in Alcatraz."

"Not good at all."

"Grinnel knew you before you were sent away, and he helped you when you got out?"

"He thought I had picture possibilities. But the returns he asked for helping me were way too high."

"I see." Nebraska put his hand on a table to steady himself. It was a small table, cluttered with photographic equipment, the way a photographer's table should be. "Why didn't you kill me back there?" he asked. He watched the white finger of Cronyn against the automatic's trigger.

"I tried."

"You should have aimed for my stomach, not my head. I'm a cop, Hanley. You can't hurt cops by smacking their heads."

Cronyn grinned.

"One more question," Nebraska said, "and then we'll get this messy business over with."

"What is it?"

"Why did you kill George?"

"A good question, Stevie. Go to the head of the class." Cronyn shot his eyes toward the still form in the chair. "He took pictures, remember? When I saw that you'd discovered my clever little method of murder, I realized that others might, too. They might if—" he hesitated, and grinned again, "—if they had a picture showing who was standing by the heater in the parlor last night. Proof, you see. George had such a picture. I had quite a time getting it away from him."

"Well. . . ." Nebraska began, and got no farther. The crack of Cronyn's automatic coincided beautifully and harmoniously with the snap of his own elbow when he threw the bottle of photographic developer he'd found on the table.

The bullet was fired too quickly to hit him, and the screams in the room weren't from his own throat.

THE bottle of developer had been open and the liquid had sprayed across Cronyn's face, and now the brave murderer was only a screaming man, hunched against himself, clawing at his eyes and his face with white hands.

Sighing, Nebraska scuttled across the room, picked up the pistol Cronyn had dropped, and waited for the people the murderer's screams were bound to bring.

He glanced over his shoulder when the door burst open, and he tried to grin when the boy who'd been staring at him outside, rushed to him.

"Hello," he said dryly.

"My golly—what—"

"I'm Nebraska. Detective. Call the police. Tell them the Grinnel murderer is out of circulation."

"Detective. Yes, sir."

"And then get an ambulance. And ask the doctor how long it takes for a busted head to heal."

He watched the kid scurry toward a telephone, and he hoped the doctor knew a way to heal wounds fast, because he had a lot of things to do. He had to marry the prettiest girl in the world, and he had to tear up a report and resignation, marked personal, on the Captain's desk. And, although the Captain had begun his vacation three days ago, there was the chance that he might return sooner than expected.



WHEN GANGDOM RULED

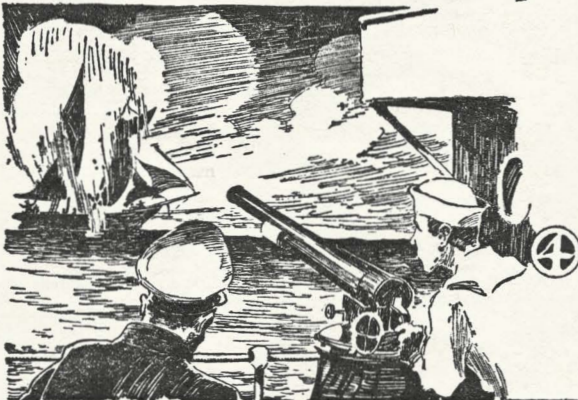
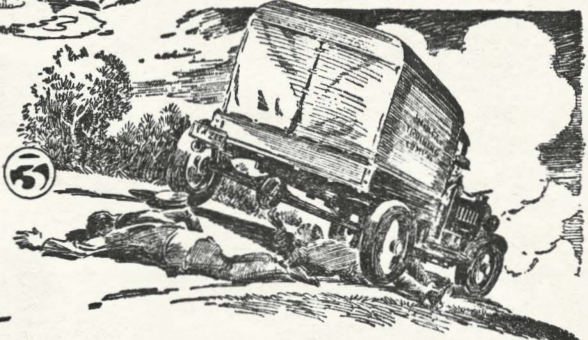
AN ILLUSTRATED CHRONICLE OF THE TURBULENT TWENTIES *by* WINDAS

In the tempestuous years of Prohibition, murder and sudden death went hand in hand with liquor smuggling. George Rawl of the Canadian Customs was shot down when he attempted to stop a truckload of bootleg whiskey bound south from the border to Detroit.



Modern piracy ravaged our seacoasts. From Bermuda, with a cargo of rum, came Pete Billings and his cutthroat crew. But they were hijacked by brother pirates, and their bones wash back and forth in the tides that lave Miami's golden beaches.


Many an illicit caravan crossed the Rio Grande. It was just outside El Paso that officers Shaw and Haywards were crushed beneath the juggernaut wheels of treacherous liquor lardrons headed for Chicago's thirsty throats.



The Pacific belied its name in those days, and there was little peace for Western Coastguards. The rum schooner GLORIA was sunk in a blaze of gunfire that almost caused an international crisis, for shady citizens of both Canada and the United States went down in her shattered hull, and politicians howled for explanations.



COME INTO MY PARLOR



She was very young, very
beautiful—and very dead.

By **CYRIL PLUNKETT**

CHAPTER ONE

Beautiful and Dead

THERE was no reason to expect this would be a different day from usual. It was June. The sun was fine and bright and warm. I mean some people claim to chills and premonitions, but I've never had one. It's true I had a hunch the time was soon to come that I'd meet the girl—but that was nothing but a pleasant daydream anyway.

So I can't say that I chilled, or thought once that Death might step into my life today—

I dare say you'd call me Mr. Average Guy. I mean I smoke and bowl and play cards and drink beer. I've served an army hitch—a short one as it happened. I'm twenty-eight and slim, of medium height and blond. I'd fit nicely into almost any crowd, no doubt—David Nord, drug salesman.

I got into Lakeview, my home town and the Acme Company headquarters, this Saturday afternoon as usual, on the three-fifteen.

Spine-Chilling Novelette of Murder

I'd had a good week on the road, a week fat with orders and commissions; and the Hens, the local ball club, were at home, playing Minneapolis under the lights, which meant Skid and I would catch the game, of course—as usual. My Saturdays—my life, as you may have guessed—fell pretty much in pattern. A taxi from the train to the Acme office; a half hour with the "old man"; two more hours sweating over orders at my desk.

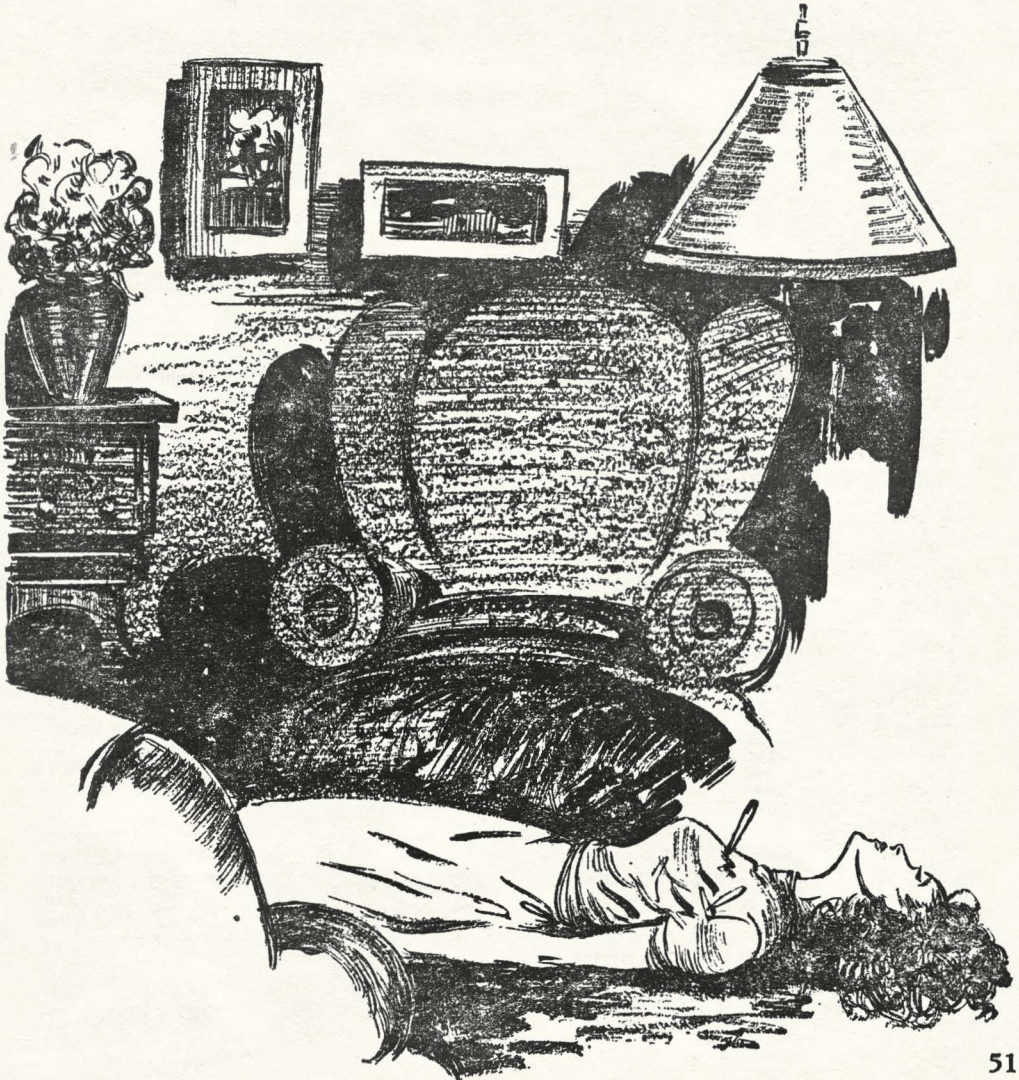
Skid always phoned me at five-thirty.

"What'cha got new in poisons, Davie?"

Skid said.

Skid Lockman. You know Skid. He was in the thirties, slightly bald, with a bland round face and a bland round grin. You know the kind of guy Skid is. Collar open

The girl I found in my room was breathlessly beautiful—and very dead. It should have been a simple enough thing to call the police and report the whole thing at once. . . . But the letter she'd written held me there, trembling behind the locked door, too paralyzed by sheer panic to think or act. . . .



when he's at the ball park. A hot dog in one hand, beer in the other, and yelling bloody murder. You know how he kids the girls in restaurants. Oh he's quite a guy, this Skid.

"Y, a b c d g I O U? How's the vitamin business?" Skid said.

His gags are pretty corny, but he always has one. "Fine," I said.

"Good week?"

"Fine," I said.

"Davie look. I've got two tickets for the game tonight. Kovac on the mound yet! Trouble is, now I can't go. Boss says nixie, Skidsie—you know? Company banquet, and they couldn't put it over without Skid Lockman to m. c. it."

"That's all right, Skid. I'll skip the game and go on home—"

He yelled, "Hey! You won't either! I'm sending your ducat over by messenger—and don't forget to tip him. Might get away myself, by ten. Tell you what, if I do—" Skid laughed and boo-booed like Crosby; then he sang, "Meet you out at the ball game—"

But he didn't.

I ATE alone, six to seven-thirty, slowly while I read the evening paper. You know, at the usual table, and the usual meal at the usual restaurant. Yes, it was just another day, as usual. And the Hens lost in a fast game, so it was early, eleven-thirty, when I dropped off the bus at home. As I turned up the front walk the door opened and Miss Morton came out.

Miss Morton always comes out at eleven-thirty. Every night, I guess. Like the U. S. Mail. Like destiny. Well, six nights a week, at least. She has a room—maybe two rooms, I don't know—up the hall from my suite. The fact is that I've never seen her except on her way to work. Two-three nights a week we pass at eleven-thirty, and she's always wearing slacks, dark glasses and a green scarf; she's always carrying a tin lunch pail. For a long time it was just, "Good evening." Then, as we learned each other's names, it became, "Good evening, Mr. Nord—Good evening, Miss Morton." Tonight she looked at me and paused though.

"Oh Mr. Nord!" she said. "You startled me!"

I have never startled anyone. I look at Skid sometimes and sigh and wish that I could be less like a—a metronome. That's what comes from shyness. I'd never get a sale if the Acme Company didn't have such a good line.

"I didn't expect to meet you," she said, "knowing you had company."

"Company?" I said.

"Yes, the girl. And then I heard your radio—"

"Girl?" I said. "What girl?"

She laughed. "And very pretty too, although I only got a glimpse of her as you let her in."

I shook my head. "But I haven't been home since Tuesday," I said. "Look," I said, pointing to my bag for confirmation.

It was dark, of course; her face was in darkness with the door light behind her, so I could sense, not see, her frown.

"And what's this about the radio?" I said.

"Oh dear," she said. "It was an impression really. I suppose it could have been another door. I suppose I could be wrong. Well—goodnight, Mr. Nord."

"Goodnight, Miss Morton," I said.

I went on up the walk. At the door something made me turn around. She too had turned, and was staring at me. Nuts, I thought. The gal was on the make, I thought. Slacks, dark glasses, a green scarf. Pretty thin, I thought, the way she'd made the play for me. In the lobby now, I stopped to pick up mail. The housekeeper, Mrs. Andras, was in the lower hall and coming toward me.

She frowned. No doubt about it this time. she stopped almost dead. "Why Mr. Nord!" she said.

Rosa is her first name. I was still in uniform the day I saw the For Rent sign and took the two room suite from her; the uniform, very likely, was the reason for her interest in me. Her husband was in service, in the Sea Bees, and often through the month that followed she'd invite me to her apartment downstairs for a chat, a cup of coffee. We'd talk about the war; she had an interesting deep voice and she was slim for thirty-five, and dark, and soon I'd come home from a trip to find my suits all nicely pressed, and Mrs. Andras would see to it I had extra towels—but now she was looking at me queerly.

"You're not just coming in?" she said.

Grinning, I said, "Ball game. You know how it is on Saturday. The Hens in town and Kovac pitching—"

"Yes, but I heard your radio playing," she said.

Twice now in five minutes. At last I frowned. "Skid," I said. "Probably he's waiting up for me."

"No," she said. "I don't think I heard Mr. Lockman come home."

She was wrong. She had to be. The funny thing though, Skid comes in like March. Like a roaring wind. You hear a door bang first; you hear humming or a whistle; he runs hell-bent up the stairs, and when he hits the hall you'd think he weighed two-forty.

"But I suppose," she said, "I could be mistaken."

I'd started up the stairs. "You haven't been spiking the coffee?"

She smiled as she answered, "No, but that's an idea!"

I walked along the upper hall, whistling just a little, softly. You know, glad the week was over. Glad that I was home. "Good evening, Miss Morton," I said with a bow at her door. And with a mental picture of the slacks I'd never liked, the dark glasses, the green scarf. I stopped whistling suddenly. Yes, the radio. From my room. My radio. I could hear the music plainly.

It didn't occur to me to wonder much as yet. To question how Skid could have gotten in. He had the suite across the hall from mine—that his key would open my door I just sort of took for granted. So I turned the knob, expecting to barge on, expecting the door would open. It didn't, and I bumped my nose. "What's this?" I said aloud.

But of course Skid had brought some new trick home, to be tried on me tonight. Cautiously I unlocked the door. I opened it. I went in and closed the door again. *Come to me my melancholy baby* . . . plaintive music from the radio. Someone singing. Saxophones and violins. The dial light was very dim. "Skid?" I said.

But there wasn't any answer, and I dropped my bag and reached out for the light switch. "Skid—?" I said. My finger snapped the switch. The light flashed on—and mine became the second motionless body in the room.

She lay on the floor, a girl. On the rug before my davenport. I could see the knife handle, the blood. She was very young and very beautiful—and very dead.

MY first thought, when thoughts came, was: *the windows*. But no one could see in. The shades were all drawn tightly. Rubber in my legs, I leaned against the door, my heart a frightened thing within me. *Come to me, my melancholy baby*—I looked at the radio. It seemed now the singer shared this secret with me and could see me. I stumbled on across the room and snapped the switch.

For a moment then I had a wild, a mad idea. Skid was behind this. Skid who'd hand you a live toad. Skid who'd say, "Have a smoke on me,"—and double up with laughter when the thing exploded. Yes, Skid was behind this. Doubtless hiding in my bedroom. The girl a friend of his, and the—the blood no blood at all but—

"Skid—" I said. My voice squeaked. My throat was tight and aching. I could hear my ragged breathing. "Skid—" I said. But only silence answered, and now I looked back at the girl, and she didn't come to life, or laugh, or say hello. She just lay there, cute little slippers, little feet and high heels; flesh dead white above her knees, above her sheer rolled hose. Her green silk skirt was badly dis-

arranged, the hem tight at her hips—I took a step. I reached out for her. The first thing I did was pull her dress down.

She wore a sweater, and the sweater fit her nicely—but of course the knife had made a hole in it. Dark hair, very dark, dark brown; I brushed it from her face. Small, sensitive and oval, with lips painted and sweet. There was something there about her lips—but my thoughts, those coming now, were jerky, incoherent. I knew that she was under twenty, maybe only seventeen. I knew—

"Skid," I whispered, pleading he would be here. But the bed was made, the bedroom neat, the bathroom empty. There was nothing, no one in the closets. I tore my suits and coats aside with sudden frenzy. . . .

The next few minutes aren't too clear. I must have locked the door. It was locked when Skid rapped and called out, "Davie!" I hadn't even heard him tramp the hall. I'd been sitting in the big chair, numb, just staring. "Davie!" Skid called. "Should I break in?"

"I—I'm busy."

"Busy, he says!" Skid didn't care that someone might be sleeping. "Who took the game?"

"The Millers."

"Kovac go all the way?" When I didn't answer he began pounding again and yelling, "What the hell's the matter with you?"

My whole body began trembling violently. I caught and held my breath as he turned toward his own door. He unlocked it. He went in, but he didn't close the door, so I knew he'd throw his hat to one side, and his coat off to another. I knew he'd tear off his tie, and then—I took a deep breath, snapped off the light, unlocked my door and slipped into the hall. I'd barely locked the door again and shoved the key deep in my pocket when Skid saw me.

"What's the matter, Davie?" he said.

He was warm. His face was sweaty-red. The red stopped abruptly at his pasty bald spot. He was pulling off his shirt. Lots of fuss. Lots of energy. The window made a loud noise as he raised it. "What the hell," he said. "Come in."

"Something that I—I ate," I said.

"That damn' little restaurant on Monroe Street?"

"Yes, Skid."

"Why, we'll sue 'em! They can't do a thing like that to Davie. How about a drink?" He grinned.

I was glad when he went in his bedroom. He kicked off his shoes. "So the Hens dropped another close one?"

"Yes, Skid."

"What a night," he said, his voice coming to me muffled. "I'm delighted to present our Mr. So-and-so Blah-blah. You know, Davie

speeches. The food was good though. Then we started dancing. Of all the clucks I work with!" He returned now, with a bottle and two glasses.

"Well, bub, here's to murder!"

YOU don't know Skid. Many times I've caught him looking at me queerly. I mean you'd think he was an open book, with large print splashed on all the pages, but he's not so simple.

Look, Skid, I need your help. That's what I wanted to say. Those words possessed my mind, were screaming in it. And still—a thready little doubt crept in. Why should he become involved in murder? Suppose he wouldn't help me? Then what would I say. Then someone else would know about the— the body.

But, Dave—alone—what can you do? I closed my eyes a moment, fighting this thought. I didn't own a car, and Skid didn't, either. I could see myself, the girl lumpy on my shoulder. I could watch, apart, as though I stood aside, each cautious foot of progress that I made. Down the hall, down the back stairs, past Mrs. Andras' door and into the dark court and the alley.

But suppose someone heard or saw me? And where would I take the body when I got outside with it? We live near a crosstown street, near a business district. You heard footsteps on the sidewalks all night long, cars and doors, radios and late laughter. How far could I get before—?

I shuddered as I knew I'd have to take the trip though. . . .

"Golly, what a night," Skid said. He held up the bottle. It was nearly full and he took a swig from it. "It's too warm to sleep. How's about it, Davie, should we sit around and chin?"

"No, I—I'm too tired."

"I'm not—I'm all pepped up."

"N—not me, Skip."

"Well—" He yawned. "Then I'll read a bit, I guess."

I knew I had to go back. The night, the darkness that I needed was already half gone. But how long would Skid read? And would he hear me when I left, when I took the girl down? I said goodnight and began to close the door.

"Leave it open, Davie."

"Open?"

"Sure, why not? I want a breeze."

"But you—" I bit my lip. "You won't be dressed, Skid?"

"Okay." He grinned. "I won't be dressed then. Who's to see me anyway?"

"Yes, Skid."

"Leave it wide open."

I took a deep breath. "Yes, Skid."

CHAPTER TWO

The Crimson Crevices

I HUDDLED in my living room. In the big chair, in the darkness, that Skid might think I'd gone to bed—and that I wouldn't have to see what was here, lying near me. I began to count the passing seconds, ticking off a finger at each sixty, but I got mixed up the second time around, and all the while I thought, *Relax, kid. Keep your head. Stay cool.* There was a place two blocks down, a vacant lot, a sort of thicket on the alley. I'd only have to go two blocks with the body.

Two blocks. That meant a street to cross, a lighted thoroughfare. And I visualized the street, a drugstore on one corner of the alley, and a big house on one corner, and a garage on one corner—but what else? No cajoling and no whipping spurred my mind; the fourth corner remained nothing, just a blot, and I became excited with this lapse of memory, fearful of the fourth dark corner. I began to tabulate all the stores, the buildings in that block. The grocery and the bakeshop and the little restaurant where I went for breakfast every Sunday morning. *This* was Sunday morning—I struck a match to see the time.

It was one o'clock.

How long would Skid read? I could hear him, the little sounds he made. He cleared his throat once. Then he turned a page, slapped it—or perhaps he'd put the book down? But he didn't get up, and I began to count again.

Why was the girl *here*? Who was she? And what time had the murder happened? The shock of coming home, tired but secure, and finding her had been too much at first; I'd been dazed. My mind had sort of blanked out, until Skid came. Now, curiously, I fought these questions, used every little device, such as counting seconds, visualizing stores and streets, to bypass or ignore them. There had to be a reason, of course, for this subterfuge, and sub-consciously I already knew the reason. *Something about the body—something dreadful.* But what? I didn't try to see or analyze. Get rid of the body! There was my one cry, above all else. All danger stemmed from the body—so get rid of it!

I rose at last, tiptoed to the door. Skid yawned then—ho-ho-ho-hum—loudly; his book shut with a crack. Now he'd get up! Now he'd go to bed! But he didn't. I waited and waited, stiff with tension. It was very still though. What could Skid be doing? Presently I got down on my knees, removed the key and looked through the keyhole. His room remained lighted, and I could see his legs, his stocking feet stretched out on a hassock. I knew his eyes were closed.

But did he sleep?

Damn that open door! He faced the door. Everything could be lost if he so much as opened an eyelid. I put the key back in the lock and turned it; slowly turned the knob. Oh, so slowly! There was a click, the lock released. The door moved toward me. A little moan came from across the hall, a snore.

Now, I thought. Now in a few more minutes. I could feel a breeze from Skid's room, blessedly cool. The wind was coming up. And then Skid's door began to move too, an inch, two—three inches, the hinges squealing. I stopped breathing. I knew I'd have to close Skid's door before the wind did. I knew I'd have to act at once—and fast. So I took a step, into the hall—the door swung ever farther and it slammed a split second before I reached it.

Nothing happened. There was no sound but silence. Finally I turned, sobbing as I reached my room; just standing in the darkness, trembling then, until—the questions. They drilled deep down in my brain. Lightning low on the horizon? It struck as I snapped the light switch.

The knife. My knife. Of course my subconscious mind had known it. I'd refused to see it earlier. I'd tried in every way I could to postpone all decisions. Yes, my bone handled, razor sharp letter opener. I saw more, the girl's fine strong teeth—and the crimson crevices. I saw the ring on her left hand, on the middle finger. An old ring, an old setting with great curved prongs. There was a dark thread, an inch or more long, caught in one of them. I saw a purse lying off to one side; and I picked it up and opened it—

SHE'D written a letter. She'd dated the letter late this very afternoon: *four-thirty*, it read, in round school-girlish hand at the top. *Darling*, it read; and then—

David, dearest — your poor little Jennifer! Oh David, I'm desolate! We've done things we shouldn't. Not our love, our kisses.

Darling, you know what I mean—those papers. Oh, we'll suffer for that—I know we will! I think Father might suspect me already. He watched me last night, oh so strangely. I wanted to call you last night, but I couldn't. I couldn't be alone at the phone.

David, what will we do? I must come to see you again, talk to you, plead with you. I won't stay so long as the last time. Please, David? I must talk to you. David, I must.

It ended there, suddenly, unfinished. It began there, for me. She'd written the letter, to me. She'd brought it to me. Here, where she'd been at least one time before. And I didn't know her, had never once seen her—and she was in love with me.

But to how many friends had she confided her love for—for "David"?

Miss Morton popped into my mind, slacks and dark glasses, saying, "And she was very pretty. I saw her as you let her in." Miss Morton wouldn't forget that. Nor I couldn't forget how she'd turned and looked back at me queerly. And Mrs. Andras, the housekeeper—very likely she'd meet the police first. "Yes," she would say throatily, "I thought he was home—before I met him coming in later, that is. Yes, I suppose he could have been in and gone out again."

Oh, I could hear them, the barbs in what they would say; and I could hear Skid's, "Yes, he did act—well, strangely. He said he was sick, but—" Well, what would I say? That I'd been to a ball game? And wouldn't *that* be a fine alibi! You could wander in and out of the stands and no one ever would notice. You could describe the game, inning by inning—but who couldn't, with a play by play account in the papers?

Jennifer. Poor kid. I looked at her. Jennifer who? My head began aching and pounding. Not the thicket down the dark alley, not now. And no fourth corner to worry about. Jennifer had come; Jennifer would stay. Here? I looked around. The bedroom? The bathroom? The closet? I remembered the sticky, the hot night. The sun, to blaze down on the morrow.

Oh my God, I thought, what will I do with her?

CHAPTER THREE

"Where's Jennifer?"

I AWOKE sitting in the chair. The wonder that I slept! But I'd seen the dawn, the gray of it becoming red. Yes, the night was

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long—but now what would the day bring? For a moment I just sat there, and then I heard again the sound that must have wakened me. Someone knocking. Someone tried the door.

"Who's there?" I said.

"It's I, Mrs. Andras."

"What—" I bit my lip. "What's wrong?"

"Aren't you going to church this morning, Mr. Nord?"

I waited all too long, and with each second knew less what to answer. She didn't go away though. "Mr. Nord?" she said. So I got up and shook myself and staggered to the door. She had a cloth tied around her hair, an apron and long gloves on. She had a dust pan and a vacuum cleaner and a floor mop. Crazily, I noticed how thick her eyebrows were when she didn't pluck them.

"Aren't you going to church this morning, Mr. Nord?"

I looked at her, and she thought, I guess, most reasonably, that I'd just got up. She laughed and said, "What a bout you've had with the sandman!" Then she sobered quickly. "I meant to tell you last night, and it slipped my mind. I'm going to the blood bank in the morning. The last time—Mr. Nord, I must be getting old. The last time I felt wobbly for two days. So I thought, since you'd be out to church, I'd clean your rooms today."

"Why don't you skip it this week?" I said.

"Oh, I couldn't do that, really!"

"I—I've scarcely been at home."

"There's plenty dust though." She was looking past me, and she saw the bath mat on the rug before the davenport. "*Mis-ter Nord!*" she said. "Tsk-tsk," she said, and she'd have come in if I hadn't jerked the door.

"Should I come back in an hour?" she said.

"No. No, I'll be busy."

"But you're going out to breakfast, aren't you? I'll do the rooms quickly. It won't take me an hour—"

I knew grimly she'd never spend an hour in this suite today. "I haven't decided when I'm going out," I said. "I'm very sorry, Mrs. Andras."

"Oh dear." She was a strong, a determined woman, not given lightly to shrugging off defeat or disappointments. "Is Mr. Lockman up yet?"

"I don't know."

"Oh dear," she said, "I won't feel like working much tomorrow."

The wheels squeaked on the sweeper as she pushed it down the hall. Yes, she was a determined woman, and she'd be back, later in the day or early in the morning. The next time she'd become suspicious. I looked at the bath mat. It barely hid the dark spot, the dark stain.

It was going fast on eleven now, and the

heat, the sun, was fingering at the windows and poking in. The heat promised to be terrible. How long before—an odor? I caught myself sniffing, and stopped then and shivered and looked around furtively. Too soon, yet, for an odor—but how long?

Strong white teeth, with crimson crevices. . . . Yes, I remembered each minute detail, the picture whole or in part, the horror of it. And I'd searched and weighed and wondered until my mind was going round in circles. A blue-black thread, caught on the prong of her ring. . . . A clue? Hope to hang my life on? Of course it was a clue. But if I guessed or used it in the wrong way, if now I made the wrong play. A girl who was named Jennifer. . . . *Look, mister, you maybe know a girl, oh maybe so high, a ring on her finger, named Jennifer? Hello, is this the bull shop? The cops? Don't try to trace or check on this call—it's on a pay phone—but you got a kid on the books listed missing? Who? Would I call if I knew? Her name, all I know is it's Jennifer.* There were no brass rings on this merry-go-round.

I sat down and put my face in both hands. The noose of Mrs. Andras was measured for my neck all right. She'd watch. I knew her. She'd see me, if I tried to leave the building—and I wouldn't reach the corner and the bus stop before—Yeah, I could see her in my mind, darting for her sweeper and her mop, her dustcloth and her dustpan. And the sweeper would squeak in the hall again, until—She'd unlock the door. She'd trundle in. "Tsk, tsk," she'd say, and reach down for the bath mat—

Suddenly there was sound in the hall, way up, by the stairway. I heard a man's deep voice. "It's the fourth door?" he said.

"Yes," Mrs. Andras said, "the fourth door on the right."

"Thank you," the man said.

Doom walked with his footsteps. They were heavy, inevitable. He rapped.

MY fingers were all thumbs. I'd lurched from my chair, to run to the bedroom; I'd grabbed a suit from the closet—without looking in. I'd begun to change then furiously. A dark suit, a dark tie. And my money? Just in case? *In case I squirmed and ran and got away from him.* I stuffed the wallet in my coat pocket, shaking now all over. The man rapped again.

"Yes?" I said.

My heart stopped beating. The crack I opened in the door revealed a uniform. My heart gulped and beat on swiftly. He was a naval officer. "Mr. Nord?" he said.

"Yes."

"David Nord?" His eyes were bright beneath tight and dark brows. He was big and

in the forties, forty five or so. He said in a crisp hard voice, "It would be best, I think, if you'd let me in."

"Yes," I said, "come in."

He looked around, at the mantle, the stand, a chair; a long and searching glance. Then he sat down on the davenport, his feet flat on the bath mat. "Sit down, Nord," he said, "I want to talk to you."

"Cigaret, sir?" I dropped the pack and picked it up and lit one. I'd tried—and failed—to keep my voice from quaking.

He didn't speak at once. He just stared at me, stripped me with his eyes, probed, looked into me. At last he said, "Where's Jennifer?"

In winter it's a howling wind, and perhaps the house rocks. But there always is a lull, a still and silent moment. The wind off somewhere, slinking into forests, or crouching on the hilltops, or with snow and ice, on mountains. To regain its spent strength. To get its second breath. And finally, when marshalled, it would try again, coming with a high and weird wail—

I listened. A car stood off outside, near, the motor running; in the alley perhaps. And someone yelled, across the court, "Ma, I can't get my dress on!" I heard a plane, high up in the sky. Heavy voiced, a transport or a bomber. But the wailing, the high and weird note, the wind? Despite that it was June I trembled and I braced myself.

"Is that your answer?" he said. "Silence?"

I tried to get the words out; coming, they surprised me. They were so unexpected and so clever. "I—I guess that I'm puzzled."

"Puzzled?" He didn't like the word, suspicious of it, not quite sure. "Nord, we found the diary."

I nodded. The diary—

"We thought that she'd retired last night," he was saying. "Too early; yes, we should have known. But she said she had a headache, and she went upstairs a little after eight o'clock last night."

He frowned. He made a small, a helpless motion. "We heard her in her room. It was warm, you know, and later we sat outside, on the terrace—"

I pitied him. I couldn't help it. I saw him on the terrace with his wife, the "we" he used; and I could almost hear the murmur of their anxious voices: "Yes, she's acting strangely. . . . She hasn't been herself for— for weeks. If only she would open up, confide in us—" But pain was fighting now with something else there in his dark eyes.

"She must have come down then, and stolen out the back way," he said. "We didn't go into her room. We called once, at ten or so, and she didn't answer and we thought that she was sleeping. Well, Nord, where is she? What did you do with her?"

My legs felt the chair behind me. I sat down. I crushed out my cigaret and looked at it. Then I said, "What makes you so sure she came to—me?"

He was trying to be patient. "I've told you. The diary. This morning we called her, at eight, for breakfast. And we went up and she wasn't in her room. The bed had not been slept in. We phoned several of her girl friends. Then we found—" He reached into his pocket, pulled out a stubby black book. He leaned forward as he leafed the pages. "It begins two months ago, with '*I met David.*'"

"Where?" I whispered, only when the pause had gone too long.

"Where?" His voice whipped at me. "What has that to do with it? You met her, and you've seen her, again and again. Always, according to the diary, here, or in the park, a dark place. Always without my knowledge, or her mother's, clandestinely. Why clandestinely? There must be something you want to keep hidden, something foul about you."

ANOTHER moment passed, while he took a deep breath. While he seemed to be trying desperately to control himself.

"Look, Nord. I try to be an intelligent man. An intelligent parent. I didn't come with a blacksnake. Frankly, I'm surprised at what I see. Nervous, yes, but you're young and rather clean-cut. Tell me—did you hope to marry her?"

I'd picked up the ash tray, something just to hold to. It slipped from my hand as he moved a little, as he kicked the bath mat. Gnawing at his lip he reached down. He straightened it. The beginning of the blood stain wasn't one half inch from his fingers.

"No answer?" His eyes blazed as he looked up at me. Then he rose. "All right, Nord. I've tried to keep my head. She's a lovely girl. I'm aware she's wilful and impetuous. Yes, I've tried to put myself in your place. But now—damn it, where is she? Where did you take her?"

Yes, I pitied him. I pitied *me*. Why couldn't I put aside this burden and tell the truth to him? A silly, a forlorn hope. *No, I didn't kill your daughter, mister.* Then what would he do? He crossed the room and stood above me, scowling.

"Damn you, is she *here*?"

I didn't want to look *that* way, toward the bedroom. I couldn't look at him though. He sucked in his breath and spun around, and I lost my senses in that frantic moment. I caught at his arm. He hit me. I don't know how it happened. One moment I was scrambling to my feet, and the next I was lying on the floor. He'd hit me. His hard fist traveled only a few inches. I lay there dazed as he strode to the bedroom.

"Jennifer!" he called.

He disappeared—I heard him at the bathroom door. "Jennifer!" he called. He raked the shower curtain.

Yes, this was the wind, the high wailing, the weird note. Fresh from snow and ice and strong from forests and high places. Bitter now and merciless. *He came around the bed and reached out for the closet door.*

"Jennifer!" he called.

He tried the closet door. Oh thank God that I'd locked it. The key was in my pocket, and I closed my eyes; when I opened them again he stood looking at me, his face becoming dirty red.

"All right, Nord," he said. "For my wife's sake I don't want a scandal. I'll give you two more hours. If there's an ounce of sense in your thick head you'll go to her and reason with her and ask her to go home. Because God help you, Nord, if you don't produce her, unharmed, when I come back."

CHAPTER FOUR

The Spider's Web

"I'M going to the blood bank in the morning," she'd said. Mrs. Andras. "I'll clean the rooms in so little time today, if you'll let me in." What difference did it make now when Mrs. Andras cleaned the suite? I could keep her out a few more hours, yes, perhaps one more day—but not this man, this—My mind stumbled. It struck me then that I didn't know his name. *Mr. Jennifer*, I thought. He was going to cost me everything, my life, and I didn't even know his name.

I got up off the floor. *Yes sir, I locked the closet door. The key? But you can't search without a warrant, sir! Oh, Mr. Jennifer swore out a warrant, did he? And you're police, detectives? All right, but it's hot in there. Like a bake oven. Hot as hell. You'll have to be prepared. I mean she won't look like she did last night, her skin so smooth and fair, you know—* I felt along my jaw. Two hours. *Two hours.* And five minutes gone already, or was it ten now? Why look into the mirror? Why stand there wiggling your chin and munching? *Your jaw isn't broken, Dave—and what difference would a broken jaw make anyway? The chances are you won't do much more eating.*

I found a pocket comb. I combed my hair, and all the while the two words that haunted, puzzled and dismayed me were *crimson crevices*. There was a lilt in them—only because of the alliteration? They prodded. They intrigued. But what did they mean? I removed my wallet, the dark thread I had put away. I studied the thread a long moment before replacing it. This clue, at least, was tangible.

Then I opened the hall door and peered out.

There was no one in the corridor, and all the doors were closed. Mr. Whosis, who lived up the hall, was not yet home from church. And Mrs. Something, up the hall, worked on Sunday in a restaurant. Of course Miss Morton slept. Slacks, dark glasses, she got home from work at eight or thereabouts—I wondered if she slept in them, the slacks, the green kerchief and the glasses. Did you ever have a dead girl in your closet and try to keep your mind clear?

I went across the hall, to Skid's door. Rapped.

He hadn't locked the door. I opened it when he yelled, "Come in." He'd just got out of bed and he wore only shorts and his eyes were bloodshot and the ruff of hair stood out around his bald spot. "Oi!" he said. He hit his head to show me how it ached for him.

"Going someplace, Davie?" he said. I still had on my suitcoat, my hands now in the pockets. "Or Davie, coming from?" he said. "Wait till I get some clothes on and we'll have breakfast."

"Sleep good, Skid?" I said.

He grinned. "In the chair, till almost morning. Look, the bottle there." It was down, the contents a lot down since I'd seen it last night. Since we'd had a drink together. "Now Davie, what did I have to do that for? With rationing yet! And oi, my head!"

"Skid—" I wet my lips. "Did I leave my key here last night?"

"Key?" He blinked. "I don't know, kid. Did you?"

"Remember three-four weeks ago? One night, Skid? I left it on the stand."

I'd followed him, back to the bedroom. He looked at me. "What's the matter, Davie?" he said. "What happened? You look—scared."

"So you didn't like to dance much with the clucks last night?"

He wrinkled up his face, his nose. "I don't get it?"

"I mean they wouldn't miss you—if you disappeared. You could come back then, in say an hour, and the clucks wouldn't be the wiser."

He'd stepped into his pants. He drew them halfway to his waist and stopped and stared. "Kid, have you gone nuts?" he said.

I walked over to his closet. "Where's the dark suit, Skid?"

"Dark suit? Oh, the cleaners. Why?"

I skipped his question, said, "When? And remember, you're going to have to prove it."

HE DREW up his belt. His big chest expanded. "Skidsie had a drink last night," he said. "You know how Skidsie is when he's poured a few in quickly. The wheels stop

turning. Or maybe I'm just dumb. But what the hell are you talking about?"

"Jennifer."

"Jennifer?"

"You killed her," I said.

He said, "I *what*?"

"You played around with this kid, and because she was under age you used my name, to protect yourself. You knew every move I made, and when I was out of the city you used my rooms to sweeten the dish. But the salad soured. Jail bait, something like that; and Skidsie wouldn't go to jail. Oh no. Skidsie's cute. The payoff's due, so he contrives to send me to the ball game, while he attends a party and alibis himself, and then— *I'm accusing you of murder, Skid. Damn you, Skid, you killed her. You left her lying on my floor.*"

He sat down on the bed. His feet were bare and they felt around for slippers, missed the slippers. He just sat there. "Oh, my God," he said.

"And you're going to burn," I said. "The suit's the rubber trick. You can't alibi that, Skid. We'll find it, cleaners or wherever it is. Her ring caught somewhere on your suit and snagged a thread."

"A—a thread?"

"Oh, you missed that little detail?" I laughed bitterly at him. "Like hell you did. You caught it all right later, and then you ditched the suit—"

He repeated queerly, "Snagged a thread?"

I was aware of something wrong. He wasn't looking at my face. His gaze was glued chest high on me. Then he got up, and suddenly he was coming toward me, but not cursing and not lunging. These were uncertain steps, slowed by—by awe or incredulity?

"Davie," he said, "I don't get it yet, not all of it, except—" He raised a hand and pointed to my left lapel. "Is it the woods you can't see, Davie, because of the trees?"

A puckered raveled area. On *my coat, my lapel*. My temples became pounding drums as now I looked at it, and scarcely knowing what I did I reached for my wallet. Yes, the thread matched. *From my coat, my lapel*. The room spun. I stood in the center of it, of a top. The walls spun round and round, and out of it, this mad and throbbing whirlpool, I heard Skid's voice, a flat stone skipping over water. The pitch too high. Coming through a filter microphone, it seemed, as he said,

"Now what's this, Davie—about murder?"

He crossed the chasm, the step or two apart from me. "Easy, Davie. Don't—*don't run away!*"

He lunged, hands outstretched to grasp; they touched but didn't hold me. They slid off my shoulder, off my sleeve. *But I'd seen and realized at last that something would have*

been—and wasn't—on his strong and stubby hands. I don't know how I got through the bedroom doorway then, so quickly, or how I got the door shut, but I was on the right side, and Skid was yelling, pounding on the other. I'd slammed the door and turned the key.

It didn't matter now when Mr.—Mr. Jennifer was due. The clock had leaped an hour. The clock *could* stop entirely when Skid broke free. But never had my mind seemed quite so keen, so clear. The suit. *My suit*. The suit had suddenly become dimensional. Important beyond measure. The rainbow's end, the key, the solvent.

Yes, the suit—and Skid's hands. *Not a mark on them*. So I knew who had killed Jennifer. And why. I knew the meaning of the crimson crevices.

There was a coin to toss yet though. I locked Skid's hall door, walked swiftly to Miss Morton's room.

She cried out at my first knock, "Yes—who's there?"

I kept right on banging at the door and calling out, "Miss Morton! Miss Morton!" Twin-fold, my purpose. To drown out the barely muffled bellow from Skid's suite, the thuds and splinter as his beefy shoulders drove against the panel. To surprise Miss Morton and confuse her with my urgency. "Miss Morton! Miss Morton!"

The key chattered as she unlocked her door. She'd thought to open but a chaste crack. I leaned against the door and it swung wide.

"Oh!" Miss Morton gasped.

No slacks? No scarf? No dark glasses? There was no time to be surprised though. She wore a sort of halter thing, a silky wisp of nightgown, her flesh, the round soft slimness of her body showing through it. "Oh!" she gasped and darted for a robe. I put surprise aside. It was *her* hands I'd wanted to see. Shoulders, arms, hands, her skin was fair and unbroken.

WHAT she thought or what she did when at last she turned around I don't know. I wasn't there when she turned around. I'd tossed and read the final coin. I was running down the hall, the back way, down the dusky stairs. There was a dark, a sharp turn, a corner where no sun would ever shine. A door there in the corner, ajar for breeze—and inside, the little room where I'd sat once on a sofa sipping strong hot coffee.

She stood in the little room. Dressed to go out, white purse, white jacket, white hat—and white gloves. Surprised? She was very clever.

"David!" Mrs. Andras said. "Mr. Nord!"

I leaned against the wall, panting from the run, fighting for my breath and to still the trembling in me.

"They'll be here soon," I said. "The police

—for Jennifer. They'll know, as I did, her killer was familiar with her and lives here, in this building."

She sat down suddenly.

"David, are you ill?"

I glared at her. She must be—*had* to be the one. I caught a flicker in her returning glare—and with it a staggering idea. She was so slim, so neat, but—why did she have to wear my suit?

And then I remembered something—an old trick out of a book. Still holding her eyes, I fished out a pack of cigarettes, stuck one in my mouth and tossed her the pack.

"Have one."

She caught the pack. But I'd seen enough. Beneath her trim skirt, her—his—knees jerked together. It wasn't that he wasn't sure of catching my toss. It was that his knees—just like Huckleberry Finn's—weren't used to letting a skirt catch anything. . . .

I lit my cigarette with shaking fingers. He was puzzled by that toss. He didn't yet realize he'd given himself away.

"David, are you ill?"

"The poor kid," I said. "Too young to really know what she was doing. She met a man, and she thought the feeling that she had for him was love. There was nothing that she wouldn't do for him, you see, and she was blind to the fact that she was being used. To steal some plans? The papers that she mentioned—something her father knew, or had invented, and concerning the Navy? Yes! She'd show her love, even to becoming spy, the poor kid.

"Well, she said, *Mrs. Andras*, didn't she? Terribly, for her one terrible mistake. I wonder now how far your net has spread, to how many others? But at least Jennifer at last realized that what she'd done was wrong, and she came here last night, to 'me', whom she knew as David Nord, the man she knew as Nord to plead with him. A letter hadn't been enough."

"Mrs." Andras snapped, unsnapped the gold catch on the purse. He said jerkily, "What are you—talking about?"

"Of course you couldn't be 'Mrs. Andras' for Jennifer. You had to be yourself—a man. You had to have male attire, too. But why use a suit of your own—when you had access to mine? Why rent when you had my apartment? I was away; you had a key. Yes, it was *my* suit snagged by Jennifer's ring—and that snag in *my* coat clarified everything. A *man* was the killer I wanted. A man who couldn't use his own clothes. And I suppose the idea behind the masquerade is that the

F.B.I. wants you—badly."

Andras flushed. I should have read the rush of blood, the glitter in his eyes, and then the ebb, his white lips. But the spring had been wound far too tightly.

"Did you see the crimson on her teeth?" I said. "In the crevices? Did you miss that, or think it wouldn't matter? The crimson was blood. Jennifer fought for her life and bit the hand of her killer—and *that's why you're wearing gloves today.*"

Yes, I should have gauged his temper and his cleverness; I should have watched his *purse*. There was a gun in his hand suddenly, and suddenly he was crouched a little and saying, "Fool! You stupid oaf!"

He backed around me, smiling as he found the doorway with his free hand. "I'm going to kill you, Mr. Nord," he said. "I'm simply going to shoot you and run screaming up the stairs. And then, before the police come, 'Mrs.' Andras will have disappeared."

He was talking low and very fast, and he was far enough away so that I knew I couldn't close the distance before death came. The gun up and his trigger finger whitened.

"But I won't believe you, pal," Skid said. From the hall and close behind him! I had never seen Skid move so fast. The other tried to turn, but Skid had his wrist and twisted it. The gun fell. Then Skid hit Andras and he fell to the floor. . . .

* * *

You know how it is, the trembling, the reaction. The cops, summoned by Skid Lockman—he'd phoned them from his room—had come, had gone. They'd gone upstairs, to my suite, with the killer. And Skid was upstairs too again and yelling, "Come on, Davie, we got to make more answers."

I sat on the top step with Miss Morton.

"Of course, the way you broke into my room," she said. "The way I was—" She blushed and looked away from me. "Then I heard Mr. Lockman, trying to break down his door and I unlocked it. We could hear you downstairs, every word—"

Hard to believe, I thought. Her feet were so darned cute in the tiny sandals and the high heels. And her eyes were—I got lost in them. The slacks, the scarf, the dark glasses were like putting housepaint on a Rembrandt.

"Hey!" Skid yelled. "The cops say to make it toot sweet!"

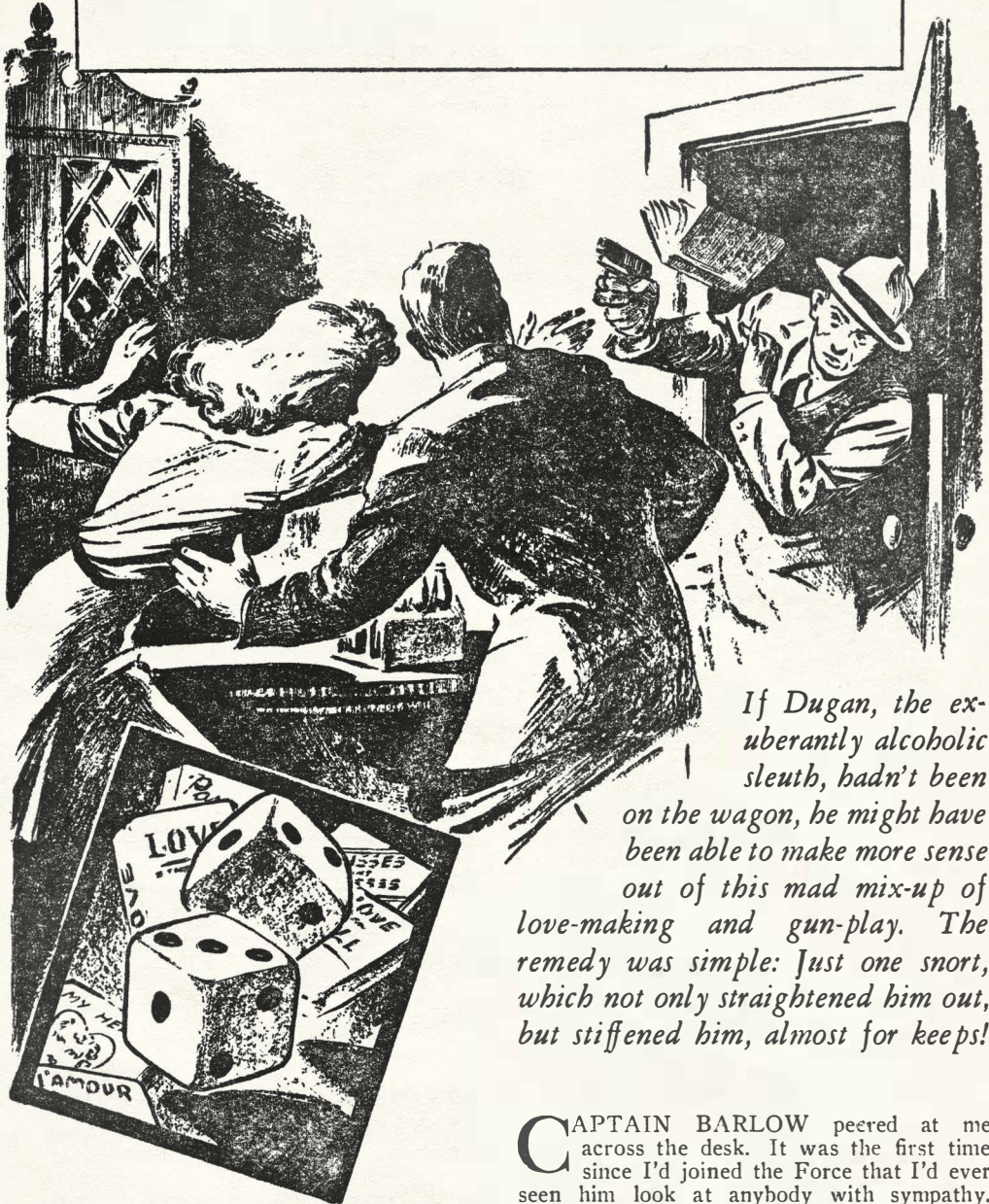
That was the word I wanted. Sweet. I smiled as I rose with Miss Morton. "You don't work Sunday nights though, do you?" I said.

THE END

Next month—TWO novels in this magazine—and BOTH by acknowledged masters of detective fiction: Frederick C. Davis and Francis K. Allan . . . plus a quota of exciting, gripping stories!

SLUGS AND KISSES

By JACK BRADLEY



If Dugan, the exuberantly alcoholic sleuth, hadn't been on the wagon, he might have been able to make more sense out of this mad mix-up of love-making and gun-play. The remedy was simple: Just one snort, which not only straightened him out, but stiffened him, almost for keeps!

Good old Verny! Quite calmly, she fired Love's Flaming Embers

CAPTAIN BARLOW peered at me across the desk. It was the first time since I'd joined the Force that I'd ever seen him look at anybody with sympathy. "When I make a mistake, Dugan," he said, "I'll always be the first man to admit it. And

I made a corker when I persuaded you to go on the wagon, a couple of months ago."

"Twenty-nine days, fourteen hours and twenty minutes ago, sir," I corrected.

"All right, then! But it *seems* months to me. That mournful face of yours is giving me the horrors and my cops are asking for transfers to other precincts because they can't bear to see you suffering. Now for Pete's sake go on over to Benny's and get a drink and then come back here looking human!"

I looked out of Captain Barlow's window. Directly across the street I could see the dim, soothing glow of the back-bar lights in Benny's Tavern and the rows of softly gleaming bottles. I choked back a sob and turned to Captain Barlow.

"No, Captain, I said I'd stay on the wagon for a month and I'll keep my word. It's only a few hours more. And I don't think I'd better go into Benny's until then. I dropped in yesterday for a plain lemonade and he damn near threw it at me. Benny doesn't like to serve soft drinks."

"Suit yourself, Dugan. But get the hell out of here until your time is up. That face of yours is giving me the creeps!"

I walked slowly out into the bright sunshine and, after a moment's hesitation, went across the street to Benny's Tavern. Benny looked up with a scowl as I entered. Reaching for a glass, he disgustedly splashed lemon juice into it, filled it with water and then slammed it down in front of me with a sneer.

"Here's your liquor and I hope it ain't too strong for you. Now will you take it and kindly get the hell away from my bar because you're driving business away. And also because there's a lady waiting to see you—over there in the corner booth."

"A lady to see me?" I wondered if it was a gag.

"Well, no, on second thought I wouldn't go so far as to call her that. But, anyway, she asked for Detective Dugan, so you'd better see what she wants."

I took my lemonade over to the corner booth and the moment I got there, I knew it was no gag. It was worse. It was Verny, the hat check girl from Big Mike Jordan's club. And—sure enough—she had one of those paper covered love novels with her. I don't think I've ever seen Verny without one of those damn things under her arm. This one was called *Love's Flaming Embers*.

She called herself Leonora La Verne—Probably from one of the heroines in those love stories. Everybody else called her Verny. She had a heart as big as a barn door and, back in the old Prohibition days, she once saved my life by firing a coat hanger at a coked-up killer just as he was cutting down on me.

I saw that she was drinking a tall, cold Cuba Libre. Little beads of moisture were standing out on the glass and I damn near moaned as I slid into the seat opposite her.

"Lo, Verny. What gives?"

She leaned forward excitedly, clutching *Love's Flaming Embers* to her. "Dugan," she breathed softly, "I've met Mister Right, at last. His name is Joseph Hansen."

I took a sip of my lemonade and set it down with a shudder. "Well, now, that's fine, Verny. Congratulations."

"But we're in trouble, Dugan, and unless you help us, all our Golden Dreams will be Shattered. He's a cashier, at the Baldwin Personal Loan Company and he's been bucking Mike Jordan's wheel."

"Uh-huh. Lost his shirt and then cleaned out the company till, eh?"

"Oh, no. Worse than that, Dugan. He came in with his boss last night and had a run of luck. He started in with a hundred dollars he borrowed from Mr. Baldwin, the boss, and he came out with five grand. And we were saving to buy a farm. A little Love Nest, all our own!"

"Well, for Pete's sake, Verny! I don't get it. The guys got enough for your farm, so what's the moaning about?"

"Don't you see? Now he wants to go back up there and win enough for a tractor. And tractors cost an awful lot, Dugan. He's going to lose everything, if he doesn't stop. And so—you're going with me down to the Baldwin Personal Loan Company and pick him up. When we get him up to my apartment, you're going to tell him to keep out of Mike's place . . . so we can have our Dream Home."

"I am not!" I said promptly. "Mike Jordan doesn't like to have his customers stop when they're ahead of his wheel. Mike has a flock of big time gunmen around and half the Big Shots around City Hall taking orders from him. I'll be very glad to steal a tractor from the Engineering Department for this guy, but I'm damned if I want to go back to pounding a beat out in the sticks. Sorry, Verny. . . ."

She looked at me shyly across *Love's Flaming Embers*. "Then there's only one more thing I can offer, Dugan."

"No good, Verny. I like you as a friend but when it comes to romance I just don't feel that way."

Those blue eyes hardened in a flash. "Listen, Flatfoot! If I ever start making passes it won't be at a precinct dick. What I meant was that I had a bottle of Mike Jordan's best rum up at my apartment."

I looked at the clock and sighed. "I'm still on the wagon, Verny. But—you saved my life once, so I might just as well hand it back to you, now. Come on, my heap's outside."

IN ALL my life I've never seen anything like the Baldwin Personal Loan Comany. There was the usual row of interviewing booths, found in all loan companies, but the main feature was The Quick Money Bar.

The Quick Money Bar was a Shylock's dream come true—a long, low counter at one end of the waiting room and money stacked up on it like lettuce on a vegetable stand. Money! Money! Money! Stack after stack of greenbacks with rolls of coins alongside.

Standing up to that bar was a line of the oddest customers a loan company ever had—longshoremen, some of them so drunk they could hardly stand—war plant workers, from around the corner, many of them still wearing their badges—truck drivers, fretting impatiently while their trucks waited outside—

Each man showed a metal tag to the cashier, who marked the amount he borrowed on a card. I took another look at the cashier and blinked. Verny's Soulmate was a tall, gangling guy with a stupid-looking face and the biggest hands I had ever seen on a human being. And she had passed up Broadway's wolves for this!

I heard a genial, "Hi, Verny!" and turned around. A big, well dressed guy with a toothy grin was standing beside us. Verny smiled cordially at him.

"Oh, hello, Mr. Baldwin. I want you to meet my friend, Detective Dugan. We came down to pick up Joseph!" She looked over at the cashier and all but mooned.

Baldwin's grin widened enough to show a couple more teeth. "How do you do, Officer? How do you like our little place?"

"Well, it's kinda different from the usual loan company," I admitted.

"Yup. Sure is. We give our steady customers a metal identification tag, same as the big department stores give their charge customers. Then, when they need a ten spot in a hurry, they just drop in, show their tag and they're out with the money they need in two or three minutes.

"Those fellows used to borrow a tenspot from some bartender when they were drunk and the next day the bartender would tell them it was twenty they had borrowed. Now they come up here and they have the exact amount they borrow marked on their own cards. I've saved those lads a lot of money, Officer."

He turned back to Verny. "Your boy friend will be over in a minute or two," he grinned. "His relief is coming on now. He's coming up to Jordan's with me tonight, to get that tractor."

"Oh, no, he's not," Verny said firmly. "He's through with Mike Jordan's wheel. Mister Dugan here is going to see to that."

Before Baldwin had time to reply, Hansen came over. The tall guy grunted a brief ac-

knowledge of my introduction and went over to Verny at once. His eyes were drooping as he took her hands in his enormous paws.

"It's been so long, Dear Heart," he said in a low voice. "So long since I saw you last. I've counted the hours."

So *that* was why Verny had passed up the wolves for this guy! They both spoke the same language! I looked at the slight bulge beneath his coat and wondered if it was another one of those paper-backed novels. I soon found out.

"I have the most wonderful news," he went on. "Dear Heart, we have our Dream Home at last!"

"Oh, Joseph! You mean you've actually *bought* the farm?"

He nodded solemnly. "Called them up today and told them I'd be down early in the morning with the money. I have it right here." He patted the bulge in his pocket.

I saw Baldwin's grin fading like an ice cube in July. "You're not carrying all that dough around with you?" he asked, horrified. "You shouldn't do that, man! Why don't you put it in the safe and pick it up in the morning before you go down to the real estate company?"

"Can't do it, Mr. Baldwin. I'll be going down before we open in the morning."

"All right, but you have a key to the office and you know the combination of the safe."

"Well, yes. But I wouldn't want to come in alone and open the safe and, anyway, it isn't necessary. I can leave it with Verny, overnight."

"He can and he most certainly will," Verny said cheerfully. "Come, Dear, let's go home. Oh! I'm so happy! The Home of our Dreams, at last!"

WE LEFT. As we got into my heap, I pulled Verny aside. "That guy is one of Mike Jordan's steady customers and you had to tell him that *I* was going to keep your boy friend out of the club. Mike's going to love me after this."

"Oh, stop worrying," she said gayly. "I'll explain things to Mike Jordan." She chattered away with Hansen as I drove, going over all the details about that damned tractor. Just before we got to her place, she asked me to stop.

"Joseph, Dear One, will you drop off and pick up a dozen bottles of coke, while we go on up and get ready? We're going to celebrate our luck."

And sure enough, we began celebrating right away. Or I did. I had parked the car and was just going into the doorway of Verny's apartment house when I heard a grave, "Good afternoon, sir!"

I snapped around quickly. Patrolman Grogan, from my station house was standing at

rigid attention, saluting me like I'd been an Inspector! This would give the boys something to talk about for days. I gave Grogan a dirty look, returned his salute and went on in after Verny. As soon as Hansen came in with the coke. I sailed in at once, anxious to have this thing over with and get out before Grogan left.

"I want to have a little talk with you, Hansen," I began.

A mild voice from the doorway said, "That will have to wait for a while, Dugan." I snapped around.

A short, chubby guy with bat ears and very thick lensed glasses was standing carelessly in the doorway, smiling affably, his hands in his coat pockets. I stared at him for a long moment, trying to place him.

And then I remembered! I couldn't place his face but that soft voice was a dead giveaway. I jumped to my feet.

"Specs Gomez!" I yelled. "You're under arrest, Specs!"

I don't know why in hell I didn't make a low bow and trot out the old anything-you-say-will-be-used-against-you. I might just as well have. My warning yell gave Specs plenty of time to pull out a stubby, little .25 automatic before I could draw.

Hansen just stood there, holding his bag of coke bottles and it was Verny who took over. Good old Verny, who'd been around Mike Jordan's joint long enough to think on her feet—but fast! Quite calmly, she fired *Love's Flaming Embers* straight at Specs Gomez!

It caught Specs right on the nose and slewed those thick-lensed glasses askew just as he fired. I heard the "Pop!" of his .25 and heard the bullet whining spitefully past my ear.

I don't think I ever saw anyone move as quickly as Specs moved then and yet the whole thing was like a slow-motion picture. I saw his jerking forward in the doorway . . . saw his hand straighten those glasses in one flashing movement and, as I brought my gun up, his finger tightened on the trigger again.

The roar of the big Police Positive was deafening above Specs' second shot. I stared stupidly at Specs as he slid to the floor with about half the back of his head blown away.

Then I saw Grogan's big red face looming up in the doorway, above his smoking gun and, all at once, I felt a hysterical impulse to laugh. Because every face in the room—even Specs's—seemed wearing a look of surprise.

"What happened?" asked Grogan bewilderedly. "I saw this guy speaking in after you and followed him.

I knew that was a lie. Grogan had followed me in to do a bit of fancy keyhole work, but I didn't feel like saying so. "This guy is a cheap gunman," I explained. "One of those cut-rates-by-the-hour killers. I helped pinch

him about ten years back and I'd forgotten his face. That's how he got the drop on me. Thanks, Grogan."

"Oh, that's all right, Dugan." He turned hesitantly to Verny. "Is this guy a—a friend of yours, Miss?"

"He is not," I snapped before Verny could answer. "And don't you go about getting any ideas about a love-nest triangle shooting! This other lad is Mr. Hansen, Verny's fiancée. I just came up to pay a social call and help them figure out a way to get a tractor, that's all. I don't know why this punk was gunning for me, but I can tell you now that the lady had nothing to do with it."

"A tractor! You been drinking, Dugan?"

"No, but he's going to and so are you and I, Officer Grogan. I think we can all stand a drink after this," Verny said.

I thought the hell with the wagon and took the first drink I had in twenty-nine days and too damned many hours. Mike Jordan's rum spread a warm, soothing glow over my whole tense body and for the first time I began to figure things. The way I doped it out, Baldwin phoned Mike Jordan as soon as we left and Mike promptly sent this guy down to scare me. The shooting probably wouldn't have occurred if I hadn't recognized Specs.

And I didn't like guys sending gunmen out to scare me. I took another swig of the rum and picked up my hat. "Grogan," I said, "you phone in a report on this to the station house and stay here until the boys come. I got an idea I want to run down, while it's still hot."

"Now wait a minute, Dugan," the big lug said anxiously. "Don't you go off half cocked. Captain Barlow ain't going to like it if you start roaring around, all on your own."

I was already halfway out the door. "That's just what I'm thinking myself, Grogan," I said.

I HAD a little trouble getting into Mike Jordan's office but when I finally did, the big gambler was surprisingly cordial. Mike was a heavy-bodied, moonfaced guy and—by all accounts—his games were absolutely on the level.

I told him what had happened. "And," I wound up, "I don't like guys sending gunsels out after me. Not even when they have the drag you've got, Mike."

He stuck a cigar into his moon face and stared at me quite calmly as he shoved the box toward me. "In the first place, Dugan, I wouldn't give a damn if this Hansen never came into my place again. I don't want thirty-five dollar a week cashiers hanging out in my place. In fact, he'd never have got upstairs at all, if he hadn't been with Baldwin. Baldwin's a heavy spender, here.

"And, for another thing," he went on, "if I ever did have to send a gunman out to see you, Dugan, I wouldn't send a punk like Specs. I've got better talent than that on my payroll."

"Yeah, I know that, Mike," I said slowly. "I thought of that angle, myself, after I'd cooled off a bit. But if it wasn't you, then who in hell was it? This Baldwin guy?"

Mike shrugged his thick shoulders. "I don't know why he would. The guy's not running a shylock racket, or anything like that. I check pretty close on my customers, you know."

I got to my feet angrily. "Well, I know one thing. I'm going down for a little interview with Mr. Baldwin and it's not going to be about a loan!"

"Suit yourself, Dugan. But don't get me mixed up in it. I got too many important people coming here for that sort of publicity."

He wasn't kidding. That rum was so wonderful that when I finally tore myself away from the bar, I saw that I'd have to hurry to catch Baldwin. It was already past closing hour.

My car was parked across the street. I was about half way over when I saw the big sedan roaring toward me. I stepped back a little to let it pass. The next thing I knew I was picking myself up out of the gutter.

There was a tear in my coat and my leg felt like it had stopped a pile driver but I wasn't badly hurt otherwise. The fender had barely grazed me. Somebody was getting desperate.

I HADN'T seen the face of the would-be killer who drove the car but I didn't need to. He had tipped his hand in that last, desperate swipe at me. I limped over to a drug

store, went into the phone booth and dialed VERNY's apartment. When she answered, I told her to put Hansen on.

There was a moment's wait, then I heard Hansen's "Yes?" He sounded worried.

"Listen, Hansen," I asked quickly, "do you drink? I noticed that you didn't take one with us before I left."

"Do I drink?" he repeated stupidly. "Why—why, no. I can't stand the stuff in any form. Even smelling a drunk's breath makes me sick. In fact, Mr. Baldwin nearly always waits on the drunks himself, at the Quick Money Bar. He's nice that way."

"Yeah. I know. Well, now listen, Hansen—I want you to go right out and take a cab to your office. Don't let anyone know you're coming and be sure to bring your key. I'll be in front of the place by the time you get there. Snap into it!"

I hung up before he could answer. It would take me about twenty minutes to get down there. I hoped I wouldn't too late.

Hansen was just getting out of a cab, when I drove up in front of the Baldwin Personal Loan Company. He was all set to give me one hell of an argument when I asked for his key but he never got a chance. I saw a light in the inner office and I didn't feel like arguing. I just took my gun from its holster, slipped it into my coat pocket and took his key.

"Listen, chum," I said quietly. "We're going into that office and we're going in without knocking. You make one bit of noise and I'm going to conk you over the dome with this rod—you understand?"

The gangling guy nodded and wiped his face nervously with a big paw. He was almost

Don't ever pose for a picture when there's

DEATH ON THE PALETTE



even if Edward Asa Scott is the artist. Ned had agreed to perpetuate Drusilla Morton's whiskey-bloated face in oils, but as a subject she soon became posthumous. She had tossed off a swig of brandy and was now quite dead. Poison—or the one drop of alcohol that broke the camel's back? Find out in this latest novelette about your favorite painter-snoop, by

LAWRENCE TREAT

Supply a little homicide harmony to the tune of

SLAY, FIDO, SLAY

and join Highland Park Price, the ace of sharpshooting shakedown sleuths, on the trail of a black in his distempered jaws. A thrilling new novelette, introducing the latest in knock-down drag-'em-out private peeps, by DALE CLARK.

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November issue on sale October 4th

 **DIME
DETECTIVE
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COMBINED WITH FLYNN'S DETECTIVE FICTION

green with fright. We tiptoed up the stairs and I slipped the key into the lock as quietly as possible. From the office I heard the faint sound of a chair being pushed back.

Baldwin was crouched down before the open safe and stacks of greenbacks were on the floor before him. He was sorting them over quickly, putting some into his pockets, shoving others back into the safe. I slipped the gun out of my pocket.

"Got 'em all picked out yet, Baldwin?" I asked. My voice roared in that quiet office.

The big guy jumped up with a startled gasp. For a moment he glared at me angrily, then he saw Hansen, back of me. "What's the meaning of this, Hansen?" he shouted.

"Cut it out, Baldwin," I said. "It's all over, now. The brainiest racket a counterfeiter ever worked out. You didn't need to sell your green goods to some fence at forty cents on the dollar. You didn't even need to hire a mob of hustlers to shove the queer.

"Oh, no, you had a better idea. A much better idea. You'd open up a loan company, draw in a lot of drunks and let them shove the stuff for you—and pay you a damn good interest for the privilege. You knew that twenties and even tens are looked at pretty closely but nobody even suspects a drunk going into a bar with a fivespot."

I snapped around to Hansen. "When he lent you that hundred dollars in Mike Jordan's, how'd he let you have it?"

"Why—why, it was all in fives—"

"Sure it was. And when he found out that you were going to pay it into a real estate office, where there'd be a money-wise cashier, he had to get it back. That was why Specs Gomez came up. He wanted to see you, not me. I was just an accident that happened."

Baldwin chuckled genially and lifted one foot onto the chair beside him. "What ever gave you this pipe dream, anyway, Dugan?" he asked.

"I began to get it a few minutes ago, when when you tried to blitz me with your car. You were afraid that I might have got Mike Jordan to check over his receipts and you wanted time to ditch this queer before I came down here."

Baldwin shrugged his shoulders like a man humoring a maniac. "Very well," he said. "Let's go down to the station house and—"

Suddenly his lifted foot kicked out viciously and the chair went spinning across the floor. It banged into my wounded leg and I felt like I'd been touched by a redhot poker. My gun arm jerked spasmodically and the next moment Baldwin was onto me.

It was like fighting a grizzly bear gone berserk. One hand grabbed my gun, wrestling savagely, while the other chopped down with

a piledriver punch. I felt the room reeling.

"Get that gun, Hansen," I gasped weakly. But the bighanded lout stood there like a fool with his mouth open.

I felt the gun slip out of my hand and then saw a glint of light on metal as it chopped across my face in a crashing blow. I began to slip . . . down. . . Baldwin raised the gun for a last, deadly blow—

Suddenly I saw a blackjack flashing past, saw my gun go spinning across the room. Then a couple of men were quietly and efficiently shoving the raging Baldwin into a corner, their hands frisking him thoroughly. I looked up and wiped the blood out of my eyes.

The men were two of Mike Jordan's boys and Mike himself was standing back of them a cigar in his mouth. He grinned a little, as another of his boys helped me to my feet.

"Good work, Dugan," he said quietly. "I began to figure things out, right after you left. I checked over my safe and found around six hundred dollars that this louse had worked off on me."

"I guess you're stuck with that," I said. "But you can get a lot of satisfaction out of it by coming into court and testifying against him."

THE cigar in his mouth almost dropped out. "You're crazy, Dugan! Why, it would mean the closing of my place if I had to go into court about this! A place like mine can't stand publicity."

"Yup. Still I gotta have evidence to convict this guy." I was getting another idea.

"But dammit it all, man! You've got Baldwin, himself, with his pockets full of the queer. You've got the testimony of his cashier and probably a lot of his customers still have some of the stuff he lent them. You don't need me."

"No-o," I said slowly, "I guess we *could* do without you. But . . . would you stand for a shakedown on this, Mike?"

"Write your own ticket," he said.

"Oh, I wouldn't take a bribe," I said. "It's another guy that has to be fixed." I was staring at young Hansen, standing there like a dope but I was really thinking of the time, way back, when Verny had fired that coat hanger at a killer and saved my life, just as she had today.

"Listen, Mike, you own a big estate up in the Catskills, don't you?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Well, you must have at least two or three tractors on a place that size. *And* if you can spare one of them—well I guess you've made old Dugan a party to a bribe. And that's something that's never been done before, Mike!"



HALF-PINT HOMICIDE

By RAY BRADBURY

The Douser had a very simple way of taking care of some very complicated people. . . . As witness his effective remedy for the fat, lush and powerful Mr. Schabold. . . .

IT WOULD be wrong to say that the Douser got the idea just as he was being pushed off Union Bridge by a man. Truth to tell, Douser tempted the man with, "Come on, push me," and then stepped aside, politely, allowing the man precedence.

The man screamed.

So did a train that passed below a moment later.

A few minutes later Douser was talking over a phone to a very bad fat man. The man's name was Schabold. Douser talked jovially with him. Nobody called anybody any names.

"Yeah, Schabold. My name's Douser Mulligan. And this corpse, under the Union Bridge, I mentioned, was one of your bodyguards—"

The news was not good to Schabold. Douser consoled him:

"Know just how you feel, Mr. Schabold. That's three of your boys hurt in one month. One shot himself accidentally, and is still in the hospital. Another was picked up drunk on Main Street, dripping counterfeit money. That's sad."

Schabold spoke a few sad words, like a fat boy who just lost a bag of candy: "You're the little sparrow who hangs around the Central Jail, are you not?"

"That's right. Well, see you around, huh, Schabold."

Douser hung the receiver back on its prong to sleep.

He walked up toward the Jail in a cold

winter wind. Things were becoming fun, now. The next hour he'd dawdle speaking with Sarge Palmborg at the jail, keeping an eye peeled, patiently, for a large ebony limousine containing one fat man, well worried. Life was dull except on nights like this, when he had many people, assorted sizes, hating his miniature guts. Yes, sir!

Sergeant Palmborg was standing in front of jail an hour later.

"Evening, Sergeant Palmborg!"

"So here you are again!" Palmborg looked down a million miles. "So." He lit his pipe in god-like movements. "Don't nothing discourage you?"

"Nothing," said the Douser.

A moment's silence. "They took away your badge a year ago for being so damn flippant."

"It was a frame. Look." Douser formed a frame with his hands. "With gilt edges, too. Feel."

"And," Palmborg proceeded with his gray calm, "they robbed your holster like a bird's nest. And here you are, again, looking like a small puss who's digested the canary."

"A fine meal," said Douser.

The sarge nodded back one shoulder. "A body's cooling in there, just brought in from the railyards. One of Schabold's men. Naturally, you know nothing about him."

"Naturally."

"He was one of them gunmen connected with that Detroit bank killing. They never could get a thing on him."

"Except a locomotive."

The sergeant snorted. "You're in deep, lad. I don't know if you've pestered Schabold or not. Whoever did it, is in for it deep. Schabold won't take it. Three of his men hurt since he arrived in town a month ago—"

Douser was about to comment, when thunder boomed the winter night, and a big ebony limousine roared out of nowhere. Schabold sprawled on its velvety rear cushion, fat cold pork, staring out. "Well—" Douser clocked him. "Right on time—" Douser waved.

"Douser," pleaded the sarge. "Take your fingers away from your nose." The car roared out of sight. The sarge bit his pipe. "I'd like to get something on that blackmarketing bum, that soft ton of bacon—"

Douser babbled. "I got a theory. Schabold's rich, always has been. Why, then, did he go crooked? I ask you. Remember the old bromide; each of us carries the seed of our own doom? That's Schabold. Figure out his seed and you got him. Listen, here, sarge—"

They conversed in a rising wind. Waiting. Douser's heart thumped like a toy tambourine. Waiting. And when the ebony limousine came roaring by again, the sarge, on cue, whistled, and walked out to intercept it, Douser at his heels.

THE limousine rammed on its brakes, heaving Schabold into one window: "What's the meaning of this?"

The sarge smiled. "Got your draft cards?"

Schabold produced his with a glitter of hard rings on soft fingers. The sarge okayed them, and nodded at the bodyguards up front. "You, too."

"Uh—" said the bodyguards, "we—that is—we come out in such a rush we—forgot to bring them."

"Well, well," said the sarge. "We'll have to hold you until the FBI checks your draft status tomorrow morning. Climb out."

"Tomorrow!" Schabold emerged in large soft portions from his throne. He searched the sarge's face, found nothing, and shifted his wrath to his men. "You—careless louts!"

"You can go now," said Palmborg to the fat man. "We don't want you. You're okay."

Schabold flapped big red lips, changed his mind, got in the car behind the wheel, silent. Watching him, Douser got an idea of a large grey helpless barrage balloon maneuvered in life's winds by obedient servants forever running in its shadow. Now the balloon's tie-lines were clipped. Let the blimp scream for orders, let the wind blow. Douser was here now, to answer.

Douser jumped in beside Schabold in the front seat, slammed the door, waved bye-bye at the sarge.

"Hey!" rumbled the blimp.

"Night, sarge. You know who I'm with if I'm dead tomorrow. Remember." Douser turned to the fat man. "Let's go!"

It was hard to tell who was most amazed. Mouths were open. Somebody swore. The motor boomed and the car heaved off into the winter streets, roaring.

Douser settled cozily, worming his small bottom about, chuckling. "Slow down. We got all night to talk. About ways of you killing me and me killing you."

The car slowed. "All right, what's the deal?"

"No deal. This is a safe place to spend the night, with you. In the lion's mouth, I guess you'd say. Everybody saw you spirit me off into the night, fat man. That's just another part of my master plan. You don't dare touch me, tonight, or even tomorrow."

The road rushed under the car in a quick rubber whisper.

"Tell you how it is with me, Schabold. Sometimes I don't sleep nights worrying about the criminals walking free in this world. I get mad. Then I do things about it. I make sure a guy's a real honest-to-god criminal, then I start clicking. I eliminated your boy friends first, because if something happened to me, you might try and frame it off on one of them. That's your usual trick. But I want—"

ed you—*alone*. Just you, me and the next twenty-four hours, darling. It's your move."

Schabold strangled inside his lapels. His eyes were grey, blind, shining straight ahead: his jowls shaking.

Glancing at the swiftly running scenery, Douser said, "There's your house, Schabold. You want to stop and pick up a gun—"

Brakes screamed. Douser bounced like a ping-pong on the windshield. Schabold looked pleased, and bulged from the car to pump across the street, Douser pattering after.

They found a gun in the kitchen. Douser cheerily helped look for it. "Is it in the wastebasket? No. Refrigerator? I knew you wouldn't carry a gun by the jail. How about this jar of berry jam?"

Schabold found the gun. Munching crackers, Douser followed him back to the car. Nobody made any phone calls to warn anybody to come help somebody. The car roared again.

Schabold, with gun, settled down, over the shock of things. The bright eyes began to think inside the fat. He poked up the speed. They boomed through Beverly Hills, Douser whistling happily. When he finished whistling he asked the fat man a favor:

"Please, Mr. Schabold. Take out your gun."

"What for?"

"For the hell of it."

Schabold pulled the gun. "Well . . . ?"

Douser gave directions. "Stick it against my chest."

The gun muzzled with ugly pleasure against ribs the size of a small birdcage.

Douser panted on his fingernails, rubbed them boredly on his knee-cap with a slow, languid motion. "Now—pull the trigger."

THE car purred down into a husky mutter. Schabold whispered: "Oh, I'd love to pull this trigger. And keep on pulling it, over and over." The eyes in the fat opened, closed, opened again. "Lord, what it would do to your pint-sized machinery. It'd be worth it—almost."

"Almost?" wondered the Douser. "I gather there is some doubt?"

The gun chewed his ribs, more.

"Enjoy yourself. Play with me. You think you got me in a spot where you can laugh. Play with me. Go on."

The car crawled slow, and the wind blew hard and cold through the window. Schabold kept whispering slow and cold, too:

"But I don't want a jail-rap, I don't like trouble. Not now, anyway."

He put the gun away, with a great battle of will.

Douser's heart played hopscotch, marking lines on his stomach and jumping up and down on it, hard. He sweated.

Schabold sat thinking a long while as they

drove toward the sea. Salt wind blew in from the stars, and Schabold chewed over an idea like a wad of gum, and finally smiled, the wrong kind of smile, at Douser. Douser swallowed, tightly.

The ocean rushed to meet them with a boom of surf and a stretch of snow white sand. Schabold stopped the car and looked at the waves, his mind going out and in with them, deciding. When next he spoke, his voice was thoughtful, soft. The anger was gone, the excitement and fury. In it was the sound of a man whose decision is made.

"Douser, it's either you or me. . . ."

Douser's heart leaped in its cage like a frantic red bird.

Schabold confessed a bit. "I came to the Coast to blackmarket gas. I'm a business man, you might say. You get in my way, hurt my men, bother me at all hours. Tonight, I decided to supervise your demise myself. I never do a job alone, I need help. And my men are convenient hooks upon which to hang prison terms in case anything happens. That Detroit job, for example, they never proved a thing on us. I let Louie Martin take the rap for that cop killing in Fort Worth. There's always a way, Douser," he said indulgently, gently. "I have never been in jail in my life. I pride myself on my clever record. Never been in jail. You, now, tonight, thought to get me alone, to joke with me, work on me. Well, now, little man," he finished dryly, "get out of the car, very slowly, please."

The gun was in Douser's side again. Douser gentled the door open, slid out. Schabold slid heavily after, eyes shining like a saint.

"Goodbye, Douser."

"Don't be a fool!" Douser cried.

Schabold fired his gun.

He kept firing it until it was empty.

BANG. Douser jerked. BANG. He shriveled with it. BANG. It kicked his eardrums. Bullets sang hot songs. BANG. Ricocheting off sea-pebbles. Stars shook like fireflies. BANG!

Silence.

The sea came in and went out, lifting its salty skirts.

And out of salt silence, Schabold's soft, genuine laughter.

DOUSER'S fingers crawled like wary spiders, chest, stomach, legs, arms, then flying to his face.

Schabold kept laughing. "You should—have—seen—your—feet!"

Douser said simply, "I'm alive."

"Certainly." Schabold laughed again.

Douser looked almost disappointed. "You missed me on purpose!"

Laughter tears ran down the fat man's face. He was having fun, playing Douser's game

right back at him. Now he climbed back in the car, flicked the keys in the ignition, chortling. "Well, I don't have to kill you, Douser," he said. "For the last hour I've worked on some way to kill you while I had the chance. It was tempting. My emotions got hold of me. Well, I'll wait. A week or a month. Until my boys are sprung from jail. Wait until my alibi is water-tight, then you'll vanish and they'll never see you again. Why, you haven't got a thing on me." He was confident. "Not a thing. All I have to do is drive off, leave you here, go home to bed, forget the whole matter."

"There's only one thing wrong with your logic," said the Douser, reaching into the car and extracting the keys from the ignition with a deft move of fingers. "I haven't changed *my* mind. You can put off killing me, *you* think. But who changes *my* mind? You been big and fat and loud and rich for years. I'd do anything to pin something on

"Well, *there*, then!"

Douser slapped him.

"Hey!" Schabold crouched behind the wheel.

"I bet you never been kicked in the shins," said Douser. "I bet nothing ever happened to you, except one thing, the thing that made you turn crook. What happened, Schabold?"

Schabold blinked.

"You heard me." Douser leaned forward. "What happened."

Schabold waited and said, "1929."

Douser nodded. "Thought so. Bathed, manicured all your life. Life didn't touch you. 1929 slammed you, though. You couldn't take meeting reality. You turned crook and went on being rich the wrong way. That's what I figured. Well, fat man, shake hands. I'm life, I'm reality catching up with you again. I'm the stuff you been running away from for years. Life. Pain. Reality. That's me. Shake?"

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you. Even if it meant killing myself."

Schabold looked at him as if he was a man from another star. "You're crazy. Crazy as a betel-nut!"

"Maybe." Douser jangled the keys. "If you drive off, leaving me here, I'll climb the palisades and jump off the cliff. Maybe I'll get killed, maybe not. Either way, it involves you for a prison term."

Schabold couldn't understand that. "I'm talking to a moron. You keep talking that way, I'll have to shut you up."

"Ah-ha!" cried Douser triumphantly. "See? You're trapped! No matter what you do, you're trapped. Kill me and you're caught with no one to pin the crime on but yourself! Don't kill me, and I'll kill you, or jump off a cliff—who knows?"

"You—you got a gun?"

That was funny. "No. Only my fists and my feet and a reputation for being a nuisance. I know you, Schabold. I've studied you a long time. Otherwise I wouldn't have risked coming with you. Some other Joe might've shot me. Not you. You're careful. Well, the fun's over. You ever been slapped in the face, Schabold?"

"No. . . ."

Douser was on the running board, one foot inside the car, kicking softly into Schabold's shins. Gently, at first. "I figure it this way—cops get killed everyday. What if I get killed? It's no worse. I have fun. I get my man. There!"

"Stop it, stop it, stop!" cried Schabold.

"I dare you to kill me! Come on, fat man!"

Schabold fell heavily out the opposite side of the car. Douser scrambled after.

Schabold panted out and in. "You—you can't—bother—m—me! Keep away, keep away!" he cried.

"Ever been strangled, Schabold? Let's try it!"

With a bear-like roar and a sweep of one arm, Schabold shook the clinging Douser loose like a cockroach. He threw his empty gun and missed. Douser kicked shins again.

"Getting your temper up, huh? Good." Douser danced around. "You're getting mad, Schabold. That's fatal. You're getting mad and you're going to die! You're an oyster with its shell off, soft and white underneath!"

Schabold lumbered forward. Douser darted around the car. "Tag, you're it!"

The fat man clutched a heavy rock and heaved it like a girl playing basketball, with

both hands. It clunked off the fender. Douser ducked and ran. Bellowing in a perfect fury, sounding the big expanses of his lungs, Schabold careened in heavy pursuit. He was off the edge, all the way. Instinctive self-preservation was overcome, swallowed by unthinking, bestial rage. He snarled.

"Douser, Douser, you little louse!"

They made a queer dreamy chase across deep sands with the sea-beat timing them, and only the stars watching. Ahead, half a mile off, was a necklace of lights lying by the sea—Venice Amusement Pier—calling them on.

IT WAS two in the morning when they reached Venice Pier, their tongues showing out of their mouths. The dark pier was deserted.

Slowing to a wary, quick-breathing walk, Schabold said,

"Oh, how I hate you, you louse."

Under the plankings the sea walked on salt feet between the piles. Schabold's feet were heavy, thick, tired, old, sludging.

Like a humming-bird, one moment Douser poised under Schabold's engulfing arms, the next instant he was gone.

Douser made movements.

Somewhere a merry-go-round burst into brilliant, blatan light. The blind eyes of Schabold focussed dully, bringing out of salt shadows horses frozen on brass poles. A calliope wheezed. Douser tossed a switch gaily. Horses shocked into leaping life, going around. Douser went around with them on a reeling world.

"Come and get me, fat man!"

Schabold obeyed, but the turntable threw him aside emotionlessly. He fell, and a moment later there were footsteps running, a night watchman flushing his huge belly and sweating face with a flashlight.

"Hey, in there!"

Schabold got up and hit the man a terrific blow. He wanted no outside distractions now. The night watchman tumbled, got up, and went off, yelling, for help.

"You just killed a man, Schabold!" taunted Douser, coming around, going away, coming around, going away. The calliope yelled with him.

Schabold began to cry, frustratedly. He held out angry fingers as if they, and wishing hard enough, would cease the revolving world where all values shifted and all horses laughed.

The merry-go-round stopped. With a chunky bleat, jowls shaking, Schabold clambered aboard, only to have the world jerk into life again. Screaming, he held to the swaying universe and could not find Douser, only a shadow running off down, away through a

corridor of awful music, like a little bird vanishing forever. . . . * * *

They found Schabold at dawn, seated on the largest horse of the merry-go-round at Venice, going up and down and around, the music blaring, him going up and down in a heavy, mechanical, lethargic rhythm. Schabold liked the horses. He didn't want to get off.

He kicked the officer who tried to get him down off his mount. He also kicked another officer in the stomach, and bit a third.

So they put him in jail.

Sitting on the sergeant's desk a few days later, Douser heard the story from the sarge's own gentle lips,

"Schabold went stir nuts. He was jailed for disturbing the peace, that's all. But he kicked an officer. Then he added to his crimes. He rattled bars, took swipes at people, tore off his clothes, threw away his diamond rings, screamed, and finally broke a little guy's arm, claiming the little guy's name was Douser. Yeah, Douser, mind you. Schabold finally confessed *everything*. Blackmarket deals, killings, robberies. It was like a load on his stomach he wanted to heave up, so he could feel better."

The Douser nodded philosophically. "Just like I said. We all carry the seeds of our own downfall. Schabold never knew reality in his life. He kept a roll of fat and bodyguards between himself and life. So what happened? He met me. I was real. I hurt. I was death, irritation and stuff he'd never really known. He couldn't get away from me. So he reverted to full childhood, pulled a baby's tantrum. His type is soft, once life bumps them they fall down all the way and are dragged back up with a noose around their throats. I tell you, sarge, it's sad."

Douser slid off the desk. "So there you are. More than one way to pin something on a guy. Let him do it himself. That's all I'm good for. I'm no sleuth. I just know how to bother people. Nuisance value. See you later, sarge."

The sarge said, "Where do you think you're going?"

Douser scowled. "Well, this morning's paper says Dutch Corelli is arriving on the one fifteen train today. I thought I'd go down and throw a mud-pie at him and study his reactions for future use."

"You might get hurt, Douser."

"Say, I never thought of that!" remarked the little guy.

A moment later he was running out into the sunshine, and the sarge was leaning back, shaking his head and cursing softly. . . .

ODDITIES IN CRIME

BY JON L. BLUMMER



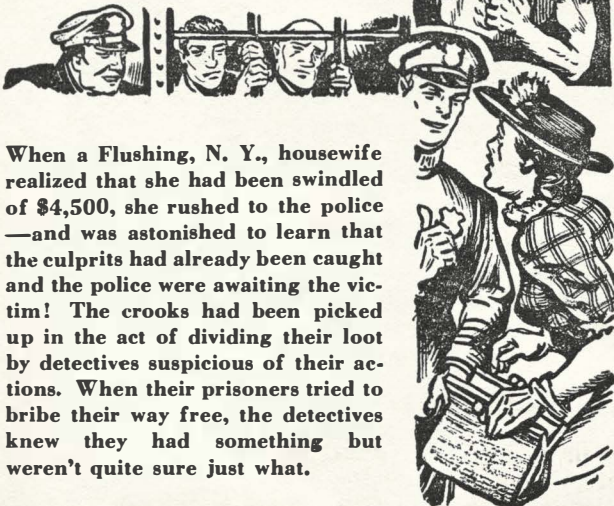
The couple walking in the park were suddenly beset by hoodlums and the man was shot. The hoods escaped in a waiting car and the hysterical girl was taken to police headquarters. There she would say only that she was the slain man's fiancée and that he had met her earlier that evening in the lobby of her apartment house; she was evidently terrified for her life. In her apartment the police found the butt of an expensive cigar, with a quill—of a kind then sold exclusively in Detroit. Investigation of the slain man's past disclosed that he never smoked. Suddenly confronted with the statement that the police were going to pick up her Detroit friend, the girl broke down. The man from Detroit was a gang leader who had traced her and demanded that she return to him. He had been in the apartment when her fiancé arrived. His gunmen had undoubtedly murdered her fiancé to force her to return to Detroit.

One postage stamp forger had an ingenious method of disposing of his counterfeit rarities. He'd place an advertisement in philatelic journals offering to buy certain rare issues from dealers at high prices. Then under a different name he'd write to dealers offering to sell the stamps at a low price. The dealers, anticipating a quick turnover at a good profit, fell for the dodge. The forger was well on his way before the trick was discovered.



The ex-convict looted the warehouse and fled to another state. He had a facial scar removed by plastic surgery and then, to make himself further "law-proof," hired a physician to remove the skin of his fingertips. The doctor cut away the flesh of his fingers and thumbs and sewed each finger into separate pockets cut into his chest. Some weeks later the fingers were cut loose, their tissue regenerated. The thug was picked up after another robbery but was held only because he could not produce his draft registration card. He felt that the terrible agony he had endured was now paying off, as he could not be tied to his past record by fingerprints. But he was wrong. The FBI used a powerful magnifying glass and the original tell-tale whorls stood revealed under the transplanted skin.

When a Flushing, N. Y., housewife realized that she had been swindled of \$4,500, she rushed to the police—and was astonished to learn that the culprits had already been caught and the police were awaiting the victim! The crooks had been picked up in the act of dividing their loot by detectives suspicious of their actions. When their prisoners tried to bribe their way free, the detectives knew they had something but weren't quite sure just what.





Too late he tried to duck. A two-foot length of pipe slammed at him. . . .

Ed was betting on a girl, Charley was betting on the gee-gees, but the killer was playing them both for a—

PARLAY ON DEATH

By

STUART FRIEDMAN

IT WAS a biting cold Monday morning, still dark outside when Ed Tulane rang in at 6:12. It was nearly as dark inside. A single bulb shone and that from the front of the big machine shop over the tool crib door. Even for Ed it was early but it was an important day and he needed time alone. He crossed to his bench unlocked the drawer and

set his lunchbox inside, then fished a cigarette out of his fresh-laundered jumper. Ed moved toward the front of the shop, scratching a match aflame on a milling machine, his thoughts on Leah. He had no way of knowing two people were watching him, and that one of them was a murderer.

He shot the burnt match at the sawdust-

filled spittoon by number 2 lathe, let the smoke out in a long sigh. Ed Tulane had resolved not to think of his shortcomings, because he'd done too much of that in the past. While it was true he was no longer young, he still wasn't bad looking. He was a skilled millwright, 24 years with Con-Am Steel & Malleable, one of the few upon whom the huge plant had to depend to keep operating. The shop gang wasn't a production unit which made it a target of efficiency "experts" and others with chart-minds. But when machines or equipment went haywire, it was the brains and ability of the men in his bunch that got things functioning. And Ed was proud of his part. Yet, he couldn't suppress certain qualms. Mainly, he couldn't be sure Leah was not still in love with Charley Bole.

Ed stepped over a pair of channel irons by the acetylene outfit, shrugged out of his overcoat. He passed the light over the toolcrib door, reached the handle of his locker. His body stiffened suddenly as a voice sounded in the dimness back of him.

"That you Ed?"

Ed's jaw tightened. Charley Bole!

He heard Charley's footsteps. Quickly he slipped the precious white velvet jeweler's box from his coat to overall pockets.

"Got something here in m'locker t' show you."

Charley's straight, colorless lips showed a wry grin as he passed under the light.

"I got some work," Ed said coolly, moved past him.

BACK at his bench Ed Tulane snapped on the cone light, lay the cigarette on his vice. He scrubbed his hands scrupulously clean on his fresh denims, cast a resentful look over one shoulder to make sure Charley Bole was still at the other end of the shop. Then he opened the box. It was a beautiful square diamond, elaborately mounted in platinum, set off by ruby chips. It had cost a lot. But he loved her a lot and marriage to Charley Bole had put her through years of hell that Ed wanted to make up to her.

Leah had been married to Charley Bole several years before. Charley had hit a pool ticket, thrown up his job in the shop, and snatched her from Ed all in one day. Slow, dumb, cautious, that's what he'd been, Ed thought angrily. Of course he'd had his mother to support, but afterward he realized there'd have been plenty for all of them. If he'd had it to do over he'd not have stuck to those old-fashioned ideas about having a solid bank account, and everything waiting on a platter for the "little woman." Maybe most people did spend their lives in debt—but anyhow they were getting something out of life. Much as he liked his work, and nice as the

folks were where he'd boarded since his mother's death, it wasn't like really belonging to anybody, or working for any special purpose. Now there was the war, of course, which made his job vital. But afterward he wanted a home. A real one. He wanted Leah to have nice things around her, and a feeling of security. Kids, too. Some guys thought he was a sap, but Ed didn't hold it against a woman for divorcing, and second fiddle or no she was the one he wanted.

"Whatcha got there?" Charley had sneaked up, looked at the ring now, grinning. "You ain't gone romantic on some woman, have y' Ed?"

Ed snapped the box shut, looked at Charley bleakly without speaking.

"Maybe then this'll move y' tongue."

Ed Tulane didn't need to look closely at the elaborately scrolled document Charley Bole unfolded. Numb fingers reached toward the burning cigarette on the vise, knocked it off onto the heavy planking of the worn bench.

"So she married you again," Ed said. He swept the cigarette to the floor, stood looking down as he ground it against the cement. "She likes standing in front of a sorting table tearing her hands to pieces on iron casting so you can keep the bookies and craphooters eating."

"Women's rights, Eddie," Charley said. "Hell, are they reactionary! 'Sides I reformed—"

Ed Tulane's head snapped up. "You're a liar. You been placing bets with old Tabby Harkness that runs the front elevator over in Steel. Tabby says you play every day."

"Leah's in the plant. Why not take a walk over t' hr department 'n' tell her 'bout me," Charley said derisively. "Don't forget I punch for cigarettes on the candyman's board too. But maybe better not tell that on me. Alec tells me you just fling away a nickel every day on that punchboard too. Alec even reserves that tab for you. I know, cause I asked for it. Just ain't fair of you, Eddie, reservin' that one. Perty name, too. Leah. . . ."

"Get away from me," Ed said tightly. "Get on away from me and shut your mouth. I don't want to listen to you. I don't want to look at you. I'm warning you—"

"Easy, Eddie. On m' way," Charley said. He sauntered toward the door. He stood in the opening to the alley leading across to the rolling mills, called back. Ed, I notice here recent y' getting cranky. Know what? Think y' need a woman, that's what. . . ."

Ed Tulane stood rigidly, his fists clenched. The door slammed, but in an instant opened again.

Charley yelled raucously. "Me and Leah come in early so's to go see Tabby Harkness. If y' followed the sport o' kings y'd see a nag down at Tropical paid a hunnerd ' four. I

had thirty riding, which means Tabby'll have t'ree grand an' a hundred an' twenty for me. How's that stack with y' Saturday and Sunday overtime dough?"

Charley Bole laughed, then was gone. Ed switched off his light, suddenly very tired. He heeled his hands on the edge, hoisted himself up and back onto the bench, reclined limply on a board slanted against the wall. He'd been keened and buoyant. Now he was leaden, with an overwhelming sense of hopelessness. He dreaded seven o'clock with the teeming, shrilling, the clank and drone and smashing overtones and staccatos, the dirt and sweat. He let his eyes close, wishing he could leave and go off somewhere that he could sleep and sleep and never have to think or to feel or to look at anyone. But instantly his eyes were open. Three quick, distinct sounds came from the darkness up front—and it was very dark, because the toolcrib bulb was out. The sounds had been: tinkling, a thumping against a bench, and the unmistakable sound of a small piece of iron striking the concrete floor.

ED TULANE sat forward rigidly. He grasped the switch of his own bench light, turned it on, angled the shade out. The faintest edge of light illuminated to the door up front, which opened onto an alley. For only a split second Ed saw a hand drawing the door closed from the outside. Ed's feet hit the floor resoundingly, raced to the alley door. He ran along the outside of the shop. Far ahead, at the head of the alley formed by the machine shop building and carpenter shop there was illumination from the windows of the foundry off to the right. Ed caught an indistinct view of the running figure. Then it disappeared around the corner of the carpentry building, headed for the foundry.

Ed increased his pace. Someone had thrown a small pellet of iron at that light, and he wanted to know why. Way he figured it must have been thrown from inside the shop—by the lockers. Otherwise it wouldn't have deflected to the bench, then the floor. If the thrower had aimed from the door to the alley, the iron would have probably struck the tool crib door glass. But it wouldn't have hit the bench after striking the light. Ed reached the corner, ran along the front of the carpentry building. Whoever it was had apparently got to the foundry, for he saw no one.

Too late he tried to break pace and duck. A two-foot length of pipe slammed at him as he reached the corner of the building. The iron smashed into his upper chest, sent the pain blazing through him. His hands clawed at the pipe, found a half grip, lost it. Instinctively he shielded his head. The next blow nearly broke his forearms. Ed swore sharply,

dove toward the shadowy figure wielding the pipe. Then the pipe slashed down, landed crushingly on his skull.

* * *

It was bright daylight when he awoke, and he recognized the plant's small emergency dormitory. His hand went to the top of his head, not because it hurt but because it felt like it wasn't there. Ed could see the little group in the dispensary which occupied the front of the medical building. In a moment someone saw him stirring, and pointed. One of the company nurses came in. Ed scarcely noticed her, for at her heels was Leah.

She wore overalls and short-sleeved white blouse, and her hair, except for a small black crescent on her forehead, was bound by red-check gingham tied in a pert bow. Her eyes were dark and her skin pale so that her brightly painted, pouty lips were doubtfully exciting. His own lips became dry. As she came closer Ed saw she'd been crying. It set his heart pounding, and he fairly squirmed for the nurse to be gone. When she left, Ed said:

"Aw, don't cry, Leah. If my dome was soft as that heart of yours it'd cost you forty cents extra—"

"Ed Tulane!" she cried. It was as though he'd hit her. "You can lay joking about a death benefit charge! *You*, Ed. I thought you was the grandest fella I ever met, and I told the police even that Ed Tulane wouldn't kill a fly."

Ed lay staring at her, his mouth bitter. Of course she hadn't been crying over him!

"What about the police?" he said tonelessly.

"Charley's been murdered. Oh, Ed!"

She turned away, crying aloud. Ed watched her helplessly, trying to digest the information. Then, in irritation, he noted a little audience gawking through the glass of the dispensary door. Old Tabby Harkness, freight elevator operator and sidetime bookie; Alec Freel, who ran the pushcart candy and tobacco route through the plant, a benefit society concession; and a scowling kewpie of a man in pearl gray suit and Homburg whom Ed had never seen.

"Leah," Ed said slowly. "The police think I killed Charley—account of you?"

She turned back, wiping her eyes. She nodded solemnly.

"I didn't," Ed said. "You can believe that. And I'm very sorry he's dead—I—well, I really am. When I found you'd married him again—but forget that. Leah, did he get the bet money from Tabby Harkness?"

"Was he betting?" Leah said. "I didn't know."

"Well, he said you and he were going to collect a big bet. Something like three thou-

sand," Ed said earnestly. "When was he killed?"

"They think about seven," Leah said. "I saw him last when we got to the plant—about six. The body was discovered around noon—it's nearly four now, Ed."

"Where? Where was he killed? How?"

"The—the back of his head was crushed," Leah said, shuddering slightly. "With a pipe or something. They found him in the penthouse of Tabby's elevator, Ed. And you say Tabby Harkness owed Charley—"

"Charley said. He might have been getting my goat," Ed said. He shifted from his position on one elbow to full sitting position. He sat looking at his shoes which seemed to swim around the floor for several seconds.

"You can go now lady. Stick around outside."

It was the fretful, round-faced man in gray. Ed looked up, drawing in a deep breath. He felt steadier.

"I'm Lieutenant Flitch of the police, Mr. Tulane. What happened to you?"

ED told the whole thing from the moment he'd punched his card at 6:12. Flitch sat across from him on a cot, nodding approval the whole while as though he'd never before listened to words quite so true. As Ed finished Flitch peered absorbedly at the points of his breast handkerchief.

"Three thousand and one hundred and twenty dollars," Flitch said, poked a round finger here and there along his handkerchief's edges, then looked up with an air of finality. "Quite a goodly sum for anyone but—heh heh—a defense worker. Reminds me of the ones they tell at the station about this guy who went to the electric chair for murder. Fella really hadn't done the murder. But he confessed account he was dying for a steak and only way he could get it was to be a condemned man where he could have whatever he wanted. Kinda funny. Say Ed, you read much?"

"Some," Ed answered. He felt hollow inside. Cops didn't go around with a line of travelling salesman chatter. This funny little guy was taking a purposely long road so Ed wouldn't know what he was getting at, he guessed.

"Detective stories," Flitch asked amiably. "Read them?"

"Yes."

"Don't it gripe you how the hero's always getting conked on the head?" Flitch laughed. "Say maybe the hero's all ready to end the case—when conk! Heh heh. But some I got to admire, like when a character gets shot at or maybe conked—then it turns out this character conked himself—and by gosh turns out to be the villain."

"I was hit. Knocked out," Ed said quickly.

"There's nothing funny about it, either. And let me tell you something. I don't like being made a fool of this way. . . ."

"Ed. Ed. I know you don't like being made a fool of," Flitch said. "What man does? Has his heart set on a girl. If he's a real man he gets plenty sore."

"I was sore. I admit that. I said it before," Ed cried. "Dammit, I didn't kill that man."

"Two best motives in the world are: Women—" Flitch said, paused. He stared at Ed, one eyebrow lifted. "Women and Money. You knew you'd be suspect *one*. You knew nobody else had cause to club Charles Bole viciously to death. The minute the red fury left you—after you'd spent that murderous fury mashing a man's skull—you saw your situation was hopeless—"

Flitch was on his feet now, face deep red, his chubby fists knotted till the knuckles were white.

"Hopeless! You were going to *burn*. You couldn't think. You never were smart, and now you couldn't think at all. You needed time. You hit yourself over the head, came out of it after awhile—though you pretended not to—and lay in this bed cooking up another good motive for the murder you committed over a woman—"

Flitch broke off, strode to the door of the dispensary.

"You—elevator man. You—candy man. Come in here. Also, Mrs. Bole, please—"

ED'S breath was coming fast. Flitch's assault had shaken him badly. He felt in his jumper for cigarettes. Then he saw his bill-fold, ring case and a badly wadded pack on the white steel table by the head of the bed. The cigarettes were torn and mangled.

"Alec," Ed said as the candy vendor entered back of Leah. "I need a fresh pack. You're not locked up yet are you?"

Alec Freel looked to the gray-clothed police lieutenant for approval. Lt. Flitch nodded, turned abruptly to big, gaunt Tabby Harkness. Tabby's long, seamed face was sickly. He scratched his neck, then dug his bony fingers into the iron-gray hair of his temple, ended by fiddling with the laces of the leather apron he wore over sleazy old overalls. He wasn't a very bright old man, Ed reflected. Always overloading his elevator and jerking his stops and starts which not only blew the fuses but weakened the support cables. He beetled his brows at Ed as an alternative to facing Flitch squarely.

"At me," Flitch said coldly. "Look at me, Tabbath Harkness. I'll give you five seconds to get your story changed to the truth. Otherwise I'm sending you up on a perjury charge, withholding evidence, and suspicion of murder."

Tabby's eyes shifted first to Leah who was staring fixedly at Flicht. At last he looked at the lieutenant.

"No change. No sir, lieutenant. Me an' Charley Bole and Alec Freer w-w-was only chewin' around. Along toward six-thirty. Talkin' about th-th' war. Them damn Nazis—"

"You don't book bets on the horses, that your story?" Flicht shot at him.

"Horses?" Tabby cried. "A book?"

Ed said disgustedly. "A hundred people will vouch that you take horse bets!"

"Well—yeah. See, lieutenant I live in a downtown hotel near a bookie, so now and then I take a bet in for some of the fellas here—them that's workin' hard for the war effort—"

"Where's the dough? The three thousand one hundred and twenty dollars Charles Bole was to have collected from you?" Flicht said.

Alec Freel reentered the dormitory, stepped around back of Harkness, nodded to Leah and moved quietly to Ed. He ripped open the cigarettes, then struck a match as Ed got a cigarette to his lips.

"Good," Ed said, inhaling. He looked at his fingers, saw that they trembled. "Thanks Alec. Ticket me for it—or maybe you owe me another nine packs. I win the carton today?"

Alec shook his head, drew a slip from his white jacket pocket. He studied the paper, the while stroking his mustache with his lower lip.

"Guy in the Annealing Room won it. Leah was—" Alec cut off, "Cripes, Ed. I forgot you—name Leah won."

"Tea later, boys," Flicht snapped. "Listen, Freel, what were you and Charley Bole and this man talking about at six-thirty this morning?"

"About Charley's marriage to Leah on Saturday. Of course Charley was doing the most talking." Alec said. "I couldn't stay long. . . . frankly I got the impression the pair of them had something private to discuss. So I came on up, got my trays loaded for the first run—"

"Private?" Flicht said softly, one eyebrow lifting. He nipped the center point of his breast handkerchief, watched Tabby Harkness from lowered lids. "Well?"

"You just thought it, Alec!" Harkness said, his voice strained. "All right—all right! Charley did bet and I paid that dough. I was scared to say. Only me knew about the dough and it wasn't found so I thought you'd think I took it—"

Leah moved over to the cot opposite Ed.

"Cigarette," she whispered.

"You knew your groom had won a big bet, didn't you, Mrs. Bole?" Flicht challenged.

"Yes," Leah said. She shook out the match-flame with which she'd been lighting.

Ed Tulane's eyes narrowed. "You told me

you didn't know," he said softly.

"How could I make you understand I'd married him again when I knew he'd never reformed?"

"If you loved him that much it wasn't necessary to make me understand anything." Ed said evenly.

"Ed, you were laying there wounded and helpless, and I could tell in your eyes I'd already hurt you enough," she said desperately. "Ed—look at me. Can't you see that I could have loved Charley but that you were—and are very important to me. Can't you see?"

Ed got unsteadily to his feet. "I see. Like a brother. Lieutenant, can I talk to you alone?"

ONCE on his feet Ed could move pretty well.

Flicht preceded him into one corner of the dispensary. "Still think I'm guilty?"

"What do you want?" Flicht parried.

"You ever consider there mightn't have been any money?"

"Now a mechanic is teaching me my job," Flicht said. "I think of everything. Harkness maybe didn't turn in the thirty dollar bet, and when the longshot won there was no money to pay off with. That your notion?"

"Yes," Ed said. Flicht's glance moved past his shoulder. Ed turned, saw Alec come through the door.

"Can I go, Lieutenant?" Alec asked. "I've got some bookwork. Tomorrow's the first and my accounts have to be straight. The Society meets, and—"

"How the ponies treating you, Freel?"

"All right. I play very little. Why?" Alec Freel answered easily.

"Why?" the lieutenant barked. "Why do you think? It's a fact, isn't it, that you bet at the same joint Tabby Harkness works for? And it's a fact you were there Saturday evening, and knew Tabby collected for some client at the shop. And it's a fact you been playing with the funds from that candy route, and today's your last chance to make up the shortage?"

"I place bets at Angelo's, yes. I was there Saturday evening. I seem, even, to recall seeing Tabby," Alec snapped, rubbed his mustache nervously. "But I lose no more than I can afford. My accounts here are in order."

"Pair of you get back in that dorm," Flicht ordered.

Flicht was gone for more than two hours. During that time a plainclothesman had been stationed there, so the Lieutenant apparently considered he had his suspects rounded up. One of them was the killer. Ed tried to get some rest, and to make sense of the attack on him. The purpose seemed to avoid identifica-

tion, which would explain breaking the light as well. But why had the person been hiding around the lockers? Had he known Charley would have money? Had he imagined Charley had already collected that money, and it could be found in his locker?

Lieutenant Flicht was battered and dejected when he re-entered the dormitory. There were smudges on his clothes. The Homburg's perfect crests had been crumpled, smoothed again.

"You're all free," he said. He wiped his neck and forehead, wadded the handkerchief into the breast pocket, sighed. "Cherchez la femme. Only we were thinking about the wrong one. Seems Bole had another kitten on the string—kitten with claws. Sought him out. . . . first demanded a showdown in the machine shop before Ed Tulane's arrival. Then tricked him into a rendezvous in the penthouse over Tabby's elevator."

Ed hung back as the other left the building.

"You're having us trailed. You didn't catch any murderer. You just hope to. How about the money?"

"O. K., wise guy. How about it? Where is it?" Flicht said.

"I can guess," Ed said. "But if I guess right—"

"Come on. Come on. You're no longer suspect. Leah Bole is. But what do you care—?"

Ed opened his lips, shut them without speaking.

Ten minutes later they stepped from the concrete penthouse containing Steel buildings rear elevator machinery. From the roof they could see the rows of foundry buildings to the north, their bright heat seeming remote in the early night. Ed was weak, and his head throbbled after the climb up the steel ladder from the fourth floor. But the wind was sharp and he kept pace with Flicht. The square structure of Tabby Harkness's elevator penthouse loomed ahead as they hurried over gravelled tar. It had seemed advisable to avoid a direct approach to the scene of the murder. Flicht's theory was that the killer would attempt to retrieve the hidden money. If Ed Tulane's guess at the hiding place, was right the three of them might meet.

The last half dozen paces were on tiptoe. Flicht bared his head, pressed his ear to the door for several seconds.

"Stand back," he said. "There's a whining in there—motors, that you can't hear in the wind."

The lieutenant drew a gun from an armpit holster. The door handle was on the right, so Flicht had to hold the weapon in his left. Ed stood a few feet behind as Flicht yanked the door wide. For a paralyzing instant he

stood framed in the light, then stepped over the ledge to the interior. Ed joined him quickly, glanced at the moving drum from which the steel-strand support cable unthreaded steadily. He mounted the raised cement platform in the center of the penthouse on which the big drum was mounted. Ed peered down through the slit.

The freight elevator, its floor occupied by a score of casting-filled steel barrels, was descending. But no one was on it.

"The elevator was started down from the controls here," Ed told Flicht excitedly. "He just left—"

Flicht was already thrusting one leg through the ladder opening cut out of one corner of the floor. Ed let the car run, his eyes avidly following the feeder guide's motion back and forth the length of the drum as steel cable unwound from the great spool. He saw that the car was at the first floor ceiling now. If his theory was right—Ed's breath caught. He saw the edge of what looked like oilcloth appear suddenly as another width of cable left the drum. The car had reached the first floor.

By the time it reached the sub-basement circuit breaker the folded oilcloth lay fully exposed, and wired lightly to the bottom layer of cables. Ed didn't touch it. That was Flicht's job. But there was no doubt in his mind that the protective packet contained the money. There'd be finger prints. He turned toward the ladder opening. And there he froze. Somehow, he'd known it would be like this.

ALEC FREEL'S upper torso was already above floor level. Ed tried to reach him, but Alec made the last three rungs swiftly. He stood straddled, one foot on the ladder, the other on the floor, pointed the gun at Ed's middle.

"Get over to one side, Tulane. I'm taking that dough."

Numbly, Ed moved out of the man's way. He realized Alec had been waiting for Flicht, maybe pulled him off the ladder, got the gun.

"Help yourself," Ed said. "Nothing out of my pocket."

"Get around other side of the drum where I can watch you," Alec snapped, motioning with the gun.

Ed went slowly to the other side, watched Alec begin to unwire the packet with one hand. The candy man kept touching his underlip to his mustache nervously, and his eyes darted from his work to Ed every other half second.

"Short with the Society, Alec? That why?" Ed asked, scarcely aware of what he was saying. Alec was shaky. Scared and dangerous.

"Yes. What the hell you suppose," he said. "Now leave me alone. I'd have made it up.

Only a thousand or so. So now I got me a real stake. I can disappear, change my name, get another job. Hell, easy. I ain't licked."

"You mean just for a little dough like that you committed murder—"

"Shut up, I said. I don't want to talk about it," Alec cried. His eyes were feverish, and his fingers clumsy as he worked with the wires. "I never intended to kill the b-----. I was nuts for dough. So I hit him—knocked him out, grabbed the dough. Then, my God, I look around and he's comin' up that ladder. If he only hadn't come to—if he' only hadn't of known it was me robbed him—"

Ed's eyes narrowed. Alec was babbling, hysterical. The gun wavered in excitement. Ed Tulane lunged, both hands grabbing for the gun. Alec sprawled over the round of the drum, losing his balance. He yanked the gun away. Ed's throat clamped, and his heart raced in frenzy. The gun swung down, got Ed's body in line. Ed rolled frantically to one side.

The roar of the first shot was deafening in that enclosure. Ed scrambled on hands and knees, trying to crouch out of range. A second shot. A third. Ed didn't know how many and he didn't know if he was hit or not. He thought he must be. There was no pain at all. Then he saw a drop of blood splash to the floor, absorb instantly. He glanced up shakily.

In terror he saw the gun snout, smoking now and acrid. It was swinging for another try. Alec was leaning over the top of the drum, bracing himself against it with his free hand. Ed Tulane leaped to his feet. In a flash he sent one hand streaking at the control box

mechanism. Unerringly, his finger flipped the "Up" handle. There was a clacking noise as magnetos slapped into contact, and the whine of motors. And, before the other could grasp what was happening, the drum began to revolve.

Alec Freel screamed with pain. Ed Tulane stopped the motors as the pistol thudded to the concrete. Alec lay over the drum in a faint. Dispassionately, Ed looked at the hand pinioned under a single strand of cable. The tons of pressure across that half-inch strip had crushed bone and flesh alike. Ed walked to the ladder, descended. He saw that his own wounded forearm was furrowed less than a quarter inch, when he rolled his sleeve. A scratch, really.

Lt. Fritch was half-reclined at the edge of a steel rack, a few paces from the ladder. With relief Ed heard him groan. Finally he sat up. Ed told him quickly as possible what the situation was, got to the stairs. But he was too weak to go down. He sat on the top step, leaned against the railing, looked out at the dim shapes of racked steel along the deserted floor. It was pleasant thinking how Leah had said how much he meant to her. . . .but not enough. Oddly, he didn't care. Charley Bole was gone, and there didn't seem any reason Ed couldn't have her. Maybe that was the answer. He'd been sort of obsessed because he couldn't have her.

Really, it was a sort of relief. He hadn't been able to appreciate other girls because of that bull-headedness. But no more! And when he found one he wanted she was going to know it. And fast! Ed could give Charley Bole credit, at least, for a couple of damn good lessons.



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A Novelette of Tense, Human Drama

By **DAY KEENE**

In Marty's Bar, Joe Herbert, alone, celebrated his fortieth birthday—forty wasted years of drudgery, and no hope in the future. . . . But he had his own idea of the kind of birthday cake he'd like. . . . With a flaming corpse as a candle!





He could see the blow start, but he couldn't avoid it. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Death Begins at Forty

LIFE had not turned out at all the way that Joe Herbert had thought that it would. He had dimly realized it for some time but on the night before his fortieth birthday, as he stood savoring his second shot of rye in Marty's bar, and wondering if he could afford a third, full realization burst like a hand grenade. He had not been smart. He had been dumb. With twenty years of hard work behind him, he had nothing to look forward to. The dreams he had dreamed—were dreams.

He fingered a third half dollar, listening to the waves of conversation that rippled up and down the bar. The lad on his left was boasting: ". . . so I puts a double saw-buck on his nose and the gee romps home at forty to one. For once my old lady. . ."

Two times four was eight. Eight hundred dollars. Almost as much as he made in three months of seventy-eight working days. Another voice whispered harshly:

"Sure it's crooked. So what? If the O.P.A. fines me the maximum five grand, I'll still be fifteen to the good."

There was a mumbled murmur of approval. Someone began to boast of a quick deal in

black market tires. Herbert considered the half dollar. Easy, quick money. That was the thing. Get it, no matter how. If you had money you were respected.

The old copy book maxims were wrong. If you were decent, you were a prude. If you were honest, you were a sucker. Might made right. Two and two were five. To him who was willing to steal was given.

He reviewed his own life briefly. He had been loyal to his firm. He had worked hard. An occasional drink was the extent of his dissipation. He didn't gamble. He had never taken a penny that he hadn't earned. Had it paid him? It had not. At forty he was still an underpaid, over-worked, three-hundred-dollar-a-month paymaster weighed down by a burden of debt that it would take him years to lift.

He flipped the coin in his palm. At twenty he had promised himself and May that someday he'd be a rich man. At forty, he was counting pennies. May had even suggested that morning that they call off the modest birthday party they had planned.

"What with prices the way they are, Joe. And with a possible second operation necessary in the Fall, well—"

May had left the sentence unfinished. She didn't need to finish it. He knew. She considered him a failure. He was.

Herbert studied his reflection in the back-bar mirror. He saw a lined-faced, middle-aged man with graying hair. He had no distinguishing features. There were hundreds like him on the streets. His name might as well have been Doakes as Herbert.

Time was when he had had dreams. Now he no longer had reason to hope. Young Harvey was a cinch to manage the new South American branch mill when the appointment was made tomorrow. He tried not to feel bitter, and could not. By all rights of seniority the job belonged to him. It had been the job he had worked toward. It would have meant a jump from thirty-six hundred a year to twelve thousand dollars. It would have meant security. It would have meant a good car, and a maid, and graceful living, and all of the other things of which he and May had once dreamed.

"Dreams!" He snorted the word aloud.

HE thanked God that he wasn't completely a fool. He had known what the collection that the office force had taken up that afternoon was for. They were buying a going away present for Harvey. He had seen Harvey wink at Miss Kelly as he had contributed his dollar. All that he could expect was twenty more years of work and a gold plated watch and a yellow slip in his pay envelope on the day that he was sixty.

He felt suddenly very lonely. It had been

different when Jerry was home. He'd had someone to talk to then, someone to fight for. Now even Jerry was gone. The official notice had arrived two months ago. They had sent his boy to war and killed him.

He had to talk to someone. He slapped the coin down on the bar and when Marty had brought the bar rye, confided, "It's my birthday tomorrow, Marty. Yes, sir, I'll be forty."

The bar owner hesitated briefly after he had refilled the glass. For a moment Herbert hoped that he was going to say that it was on the house. He didn't. He rang up the money, smiling, "Is that so, Mr. Herbert? Well, congratulations!"

He padded on down the bar to serve a black-jowled youth. Herbert raised the shot glass to his lips, and set it down untouched. For ten years, six nights a week, he had bought a drink at Marty's bar. He had spent a thousand dollars in the place. He had seen Marty buy hundreds of drinks. It was just that he did not matter. Outside of knowing his name, the man did not know he existed.

He was nothing, no one. He was a gray-haired little man in a shabby suit.

Herbert sipped the bead from his glass and calculated roughly the amount of money that he could have stolen via padded payrolls and juggled time-books. Over the period of years he could have stolen thousands. The head office trusted him. They knew that he hadn't brains enough to steal. He handled one hundred thousand dollars a month. No one checked on his figures. And he paid himself three hundred.

A maggot began to bore into his brain. He was forty. So what? He still had years of life ahead of him. He was a comparatively young man. Jerry didn't need him any more. May would be better off without him.

The maggot bored deeper. One hundred thousand dollars. A man, even a man of forty, could do a lot with that much money. The war was almost over. He could go to South America, China, France, lose himself in the confusion of the reconstruction period that was certain to follow the war.

He gulped his drink and paid for a fourth. The rye flowed warmly through his veins and gave him an illusion of youth as he stared at a scantily dressed blonde on a calendar back of the bar. Such girls did exist. A man with a hundred thousand dollars would but have to crook a finger.

He compared her mentally with his wife as he had seen her that morning with night cream still smeared on her face and a faded dressing gown wrapped around her aging body. The hot flame that once had fused them had long since burned low. The official confirmation of Jerry's death had extinguished it entirely. May would be better off without him.

His life had been a failure. His death could be a financial success. May could have her second operation and live well on his own and Jerry's insurance.

The palms of his hands felt hot and sweaty. He wiped them on his trousers. He had thought of this thing before. He had thought of it and had put it from his mind in horror. Now he considered it seriously. The plan was daring, yet simple and uncomplicated. It was merely a matter of stepping beyond the pale of decency forever, that and of finding the proper man, some bum on skid row who had little or nothing to live for.

He realized suddenly that he was premeditating murder and had to hold to the bar for support. Broken fragments of conversation pounded against his ears.

"...cleaned up six grand and a half." . . . "So I up and I says to the broad" . . . "once this war is over" . . . "nuts to the Administration. And don't give me that patriotic guff." . . . "laying off two thousand men" . . . "get the money. Get the money and" . . .

"How about it, sport? Have a drink with me?"

Herbert realized with a start that the black-jowled youth had moved down the bar to his elbow and was addressing him. At any other time he would have been grateful for the company. Now all he wanted was to be alone. He had to think this thing out.

He shook his head. "No. But thanks." He drank the drink before him, smiled, "You see, I've already had my quota."

He walked quietly from the bar. As he neared the door he heard the black-jowled youth ask Marty, "Who's the rabbit little gray-haired guy?"

"Mr. Herbert," Marty told him. "He's paymaster for the Rollins Mills."

"Yeah. That's what I thought," the youth said soberly.

ON the street, Herbert lighted a cigarette with fingers that shook slightly. Rabbit, was he? Well, maybe he was. But even a rabbit could kick and run. Get the money. That was all that counted.

He tooted his battered coupé from the curb and drove slowly toward the water-front, his slightly drink-inflamed mind trying to alibi and rationalize the thing that he was planning.

He had been with the mills for over twenty years. He had begun as an office boy. He knew every phase of the business. He was consulted fifty times a day by everyone from the superintendent of the crushing mill to the head of the sales department. The South American branch belonged to him. And they were going to give it to Harvey. The only recognition that had ever been made of his knowledge or service was an occasional pat

on the back from Old Man Rollins, and the annual Christmas bonus. And even the typists got that.

Tomorrow was payday. Why wait? Get the money. Money was all that counted. If you had money you were the law.

He began to plan concretely. Two months before the mill had cancelled its armored truck service over his protests. The Old Man had pointed out that it was an unnecessary expense. In twenty years, no one had ever attempted to steal the pay-roll. If it was stolen, the mill was insured. So last month and the month before, Herbert had been forced to carry the entire amount in a case tossed carelessly into the back of his coupe.

He checked his movements of the morrow. He would leave the bank at ten. He would drive directly to the home office, drop off ten thousand dollars with which to pay the office force, then drive twenty miles into the mountains to the mill where he would pay off personally. He would make the trip alone. His only protection would be a .38 caliber Colt in the glove compartment. Most of the highway was well traveled and patrolled. He seldom met a car in the five miles between the highway and the mill.

Three miles from the mill the road followed the ridge of a valley only one quarter of a mile from the inter-urban station that served the new Amalgamated Chemical plant. The morning shift changed at one. By sliding down the slope of the heavily wooded hill he could easily reach the station. Three thousand men and women on the off-shift fought for places on the inter-urban and the busses. No one would pay much attention to an undistinguished little gray-haired man. It would make small difference if they did. Joe Herbert would be dead, shot through the heart by bandits and left to be cremated to an almost unrecognizable crisp in his gasoline soaked coupé.

He checked the things that might go wrong and found that there were hundreds of them. He also found that he did not care. Getting the money was all that mattered. He was tired of being a sap. He was merely gambling a life that did not mean a thing to him against ninety thousand dollars.

He parked his car on skid row and sat twirling the heavy gold signet ring on his finger as he watched the flow of boozey derelicts from one cheap saloon to another. That one was too tall. That one was too thin. He wanted a gray haired man about five feet nine who weighed around one hundred and thirty-five pounds.

A half hour passed, an hour. He had almost given up hope when a mild-appearing, gray-haired little man weaved up the walk, his knees sagging slightly with each step that he took.

"You! Sport!" Herbert whistled him to the car.

The bum stared in the window vacuously. "Yeah—?"

Herbert stifled a qualm of compunction, asked him, "You want to earn a new suit of clothes and fifty dollars?"

"I'd like to," the man said simply.

Herbert scrawled a street address on his scratch pad and passed it through the window. "Meet me there at ten-thirty tomorrow morning."

The bum grinned. "Yeah. Sure. And you'll hand me fifty dollars. Pistachios to you, brother."

"I mean it," Herbert said. He took his wallet from his pocket, extracted a twenty-dollar bill, tore it in two and handed one half to the man. "When you meet me I'll give you the other half of the bill, three more tens, and a good suit of clothes beside."

The other man asked, suspiciously, "For doing what?"

His blood pounding in his temples, Herbert wanted to scream, "For dying!" He said instead, matter-of-fact, "It's a very confidential matter. I—I might even make it a hundred dollars."

The man tucked the torn half of the twenty and the street address into a ragged vest pocket. His mind was fogged with cheap whiskey. Life had beaten him down too far for him to question the source of manna. "Sure. Okay. I'll be there," he agreed.

CHAPTER TWO

Pull the Trigger

A COLD moon lighted the room. Long after his wife had gone to sleep Herbert lay thinking of Jerry. Jerry had been proud of him. He hadn't considered him a failure. He wondered what Jerry would think if he could know that his dad was about to shoot a man in cold blood and abscond with ninety thousand dollars.

May Herbert laughed in her sleep. Herbert turned on one elbow and studied her curiously. May wasn't herself at all. She had known that he was slightly high but it had seemed to amuse rather than annoy her. She had even kissed him good night, something that she hadn't done for months. On two or three occasions during the evening he had experienced a feeling that she was about to confide something in him. But whatever it was, the urge had passed.

She had told him flatly that there would be no birthday party. He scowled at the ceiling. As if that mattered now. By this time tomorrow night he would be one of two things. He would be on his way to the East Coast

with ninety thousand dollars, or he would be in Central Bureau charged with theft and murder.

He forced himself to close his eyes. For forty years he had been a sap. Tomorrow he would begin to live. Life began at forty. Get the money. That was all that mattered. With ninety thousand dollars in his bank-roll, people would respect him. They would know that he existed. He closed his eyes and planned. Toward morning he slept and dreamed that he was aboard an ocean liner swimming in the ship's pool with the beautiful calendar girl. But when he helped her up the ladder, laughing, and attempted to kiss her lips, her face wasn't pretty any more. It was the gray, vacuous face of the bum whom he intended to kill in the morning.

He woke up, shuddering, bathed in sweat. He did not try to go back to sleep. He did not dare.

* * * *

"Ninety-eight thousand, ninety-nine, one hundred thousand, two hundred dollars and eighty-four cents." The bank pay-roll cashier looked up smiling. "Check, Mr. Herbert?"

Herbert said that it did. He forced himself to light a cigarette before closing and locking the case. There must be nothing unusual about the morning for anyone to remember.

The cashier volunteered, "You know, I think it's a dirty trick, the mill dropping their armored truck service. There ought to be a law. It puts a hell of a load on you."

Herbert locked the case and said that he did not mind. As Old Rollins had pointed out, the pay-roll was insured. So was he, for that matter. But no one ever paid much attention to him. No crook would ever pick him as the type of man who would be carrying a hundred thousand dollars.

The clerk agreed, laughing. Herbert could have struck him. He was as dumb as he, himself, had been. He had access to thousands of dollars and he lived on two hundred a month.

He pressed the button and a guard opened the door of the pay-roll division and locked it carefully behind him. "You ought to have one of those bags with a chain that cuffs on your wrist," he told Herbert. "All of us guards have been talking about the risk you're taking since the mill cut out the armored truck service."

Herbert shrugged. It might be well to plant a thought for the man to remember. "Oh, I suppose that I'll get it some day," he agreed. "But it's a job. And if I ever do get stuck up, having the bag chained to my wrist wouldn't do much good. They'd probably cut off my arm."

He walked briskly through the crowded foyer of the bank. From force of habit, as he

reached the walk, he looked both up and down the walk. He saw no one who looked suspicious and crossed the walk to his coupé.

He tossed the bag on the ledge behind the seat and transferred his gun from his shoulder holster to the glove compartment. The first step had been taken. The money was in his possession.

HE locked the car doors, backed from the parking spot, and drove carefully, observing all lights, but scanning the corner crowds closely whenever he was stopped.

He wondered what May had in mind when she had kissed him goodbye that morning. She had called him Jo-Jo, a term of endearment that she had not used for years. Women were peculiar. A man could live with one for twenty years and still not understand her.

Thinking of May made him think of Jerry. Thinking of Jerry reminded him of a point that he had overlooked. He would somehow have to get a new draft card. He doubted that it would be difficult. When a man didn't care what they cost, he could get gas, and steaks, and tires, and anything else that he wanted.

In front of the home office he parked in the space reserved for him, transferred the gun back to his holster, unlocked the doors of the car, took the case from the ledge of the coupé and strode into the building.

Miss Kelly greeted him gaily. "Ah ha. Now walks the ghost."

Herbert forced himself to smile. "Not until five o'clock," he told her. He walked on into his office, took the earmarked money from the case and put it into his safe. He regretted the ten thousand but it could not be helped. The money had to be found in his safe after his body had been discovered.

Harvey put his head in the door as he slammed the safe shut and locked it. "How's the big shot this morning?" he grinned.

Herbert was tempted to smack the grin from his lips but restrained himself. He could not afford a display of temper. "I'm just fine," he said calmly. "And you?"

Harvey held a palm to his temple. "Don't even ask."

Herbert ignored him to sort his mail and he went away. Harvey would of course celebrate. He was the type. There was nothing of importance in the mail. He relocked the pay-roll case, dropped the key into his vest pocket and was preparing to leave the office when his phone rang. He ignored it. It was probably the old man and he was in no mood this morning to listen to feeble explanation as to why the board of directors had passed him by. To hell with old man Rollins.

As he crossed the front office, Miss Kelly asked, "Mr. Rollins contacted you, Mr. Herbert?"

He shook his head. "No. Why? Is the old man looking for me?"

She nodded brightly. "And how. I guess that he wants to break the bad news."

He looked around the office. The typists and the file clerks were staring at him strangely. Harvey grinned at him through his glass partition and thumbed his nose.

"It can wait until I get back," Herbert told Miss Kelly heavily. He walked blindly on out to his car. To hell with them. To hell with all of them. If the bum was waiting where he should be he was walking out of the office for the last time. If the bum failed him, he would wait another month and try again. He was going to South America all right. But not for the Rollins Mills.

He jerked his car savagely into traffic and kept just within the speed limit until he reached the corners of Temple and Vine. The shabby figure was waiting. Herbert opened the door of the car. "Get in."

His car was rolling again inside of fifteen seconds. He doubted that anyone had noticed the bum getting into his car. If they had, there was no special reason why they should remember it and connect it with a charred body in the mountains.

"What's your name?" he asked the man.

"Mack," the other man told him.

"You live here in town?"

Mack shook his head. "Naw." He hesitated, added, "I don't live no place special."

"That's fine, just fine," Herbert said sincerely.

The man smelled sour and unwashed. "You told me," he said uncertainly, "that you'd give me fifty dollars and a new suit of clothes."

Herbert jerked his head at the ledge of the coupé where a somewhat larger bag lay beside the pay roll case. "The clothes are in that suit case. You take the case and change your clothes in Harry's Baths. Leave your old clothes in the locker. But bring the case back to me. And make it snappy. I'll be waiting outside in the car."

"And then I get the fifty dollars?"

"Then you get the fifty dollars." He swung the car to the curb a quarter of a block from the bath house. "Get going. I want you back here in ten minutes."

He gave the man a quarter for a locker and watched him up the street. His knees weren't sagging now but he walked as if he was punch drunk.

"He'll never be missed. He'll be better off," Herbert tried to salve his conscience. "Two more months on skid row and they'd pick him out of some alley."

HE waited, sweat beading on his forehead. If anyone that he knew saw him now he would have to postpone the whole thing. Pay-

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SAYMAN SALVE

masters with ninety thousand dollars in their car weren't supposed to park on shabby side streets outside of Turkish baths.

Few people passed. He knew none of those who did. Few even glanced at the car. It was as nondescript as its owner.

Mack only took five minutes to dress in the underwear, socks, shirt, shoes, suit, and hat that Herbert had provided. He looked better but smelled as badly as before.

"I didn't take a bath," he told Herbert.

Herbert tossed the case back on the ledge and pointed the car for a cross street that angled out to the highway.

Mack was silent for blocks. At the edge of town he spoke. "About the fifty dollars, Mister—"

Herbert drove with his right hand as he took his wallet from his pocket and passed it across his body. "There it is. You can keep the wallet, too."

The man counted the money in silence, announced, "There's more than fifty dollars here. There are two twenties, two tens, and a five. And there's some papers, too."

"That's all right," Herbert told him. "Put it in your pocket." He twisted his signet ring from his finger and held it up for the man to see. "What's more, you can have this ring if you do exactly as I tell you to."

Mack peered at him suspiciously. "Wadda you want me to do?"

"You like the ring?"

The bum slid it onto one of his dirty fingers and rode admiring it. "It's a nice ring," he admitted. "But wadda I got to do?"

Herbert scowled at the winding highway. He was in no mood to concoct a story. The stage was set. He wanted it over with. Even if the police should be suspicious, there could be nothing to trap him now. An analysis of the charred body could only reveal his clothes, his wallet, his papers, and his ring.

"There's a pint in that side pocket next to you," he said. "Let's have a drink before I tell you."

The man uncorked the bottle and gulped a drink. "That's good whiskey," he admired Herbert's taste. He took a second drink and handed the bottle to Herbert. He wet his lips and passed it back.

"Go ahead. Help yourself. I have to keep my mind on my driving."

Mack rode nursing the bottle, content. No more mention was made of what Herbert wished him to do. By the time they had gone twelve miles the bottle was almost empty and Mack's head was nodding. Finally, he snored.

Herbert glanced at him sideways, then mopped the perspiration from his forehead. It was all over but the shooting. Now all that he

THIS IS MURDER, MR. HERBERT!

had to do was shoot the man, saturate the car with gasoline from the filled can in the rumble, and set the car afire.

Mack slid even lower in the seat. Herbert had reason to be pleased. Two miles from the gravel road winding up the mountain to the mill, he passed a State Patrol car. The trooper recognized him and waved.

Herbert tooted his horn in recognition. He had taken every trick so far. After the murder had been discovered, the patrolman would testify that he had passed the car and that Herbert had been alone. He could not possibly have seen his passenger. The bum's head was below the level of the window.

Herbert turned up the gravel road and slackened speed. He was on schedule. It was exactly twelve-thirty. He would reach the hollow at twelve forty-five. It would take him less than fifteen minutes to do what he had to do and walk the quarter of a mile down hill to mingle with the outgoing Amalgamated shift milling around the inter-urban station.

The car jolted on the rough pavement but Mack snored on. A mile up the road a mine truck passed and the driver waved as he recognized Herbert. That wasn't so good. He would testify he had seen Herbert, but he would also testify that he had passed no other cars on the road.

For a moment Herbert fought panic, then realized that he was being foolish. There were any number of wooded turn-outs on the road where a bandit car might be parked. Or, whoever robbed him might flag him down and escape in the same manner as he himself had planned.

He cut his ignition as he reached the ridge that led down into the valley. From here, he could see the road both ways for miles but his own car was hidden by trees. He pulled slightly off the road and set the handbrake. There were no other cars in sight. He must remember especially to soak Mack's hands in gasoline. They were the only possible source of identification. His teeth were his own. He had no dental chart.

He took the pay roll case from the ledge and set it in a clump of bushes on the down hill slope, then drew his gun from its holster and walked back to the car. This was it.

He tugged the sleeping man into a sitting position in back of the wheel, looked quickly up and down the road, then thrust the gun against his left side. His finger tensed on the trigger, relaxed. Sweat dripped down his cheeks. His whole body began to tremble. When his knees would no longer hold him, he sat down on the running board.

He had been a fool to think that he could do it. He was still a sucker, a sap. The money



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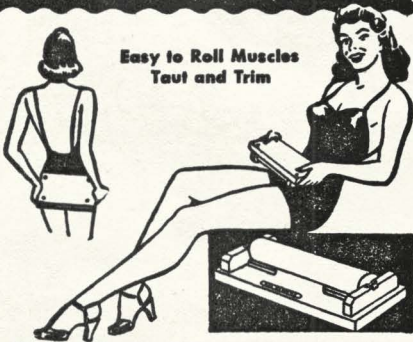
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DETECTIVE TALES

was his for the taking. But he would never take it. He had lived on the right side of the fence too long. All of his planning had gone for nothing. He could not pull the trigger.

CHAPTER THREE

Wanted!

A BLUE jay scolded in the thicket. An inter-urban trolley bell clanged impatiently. The change-shift siren blew at the Amalgamated Plant.

Herbert thought, aloud, "I must have been out of my mind."

He had a sudden desire to see May and take her in his arms, tell her that somehow, somehow, they'd make out. He had been as much of a fool to believe that he could leave her as he had been to believe that he could kill a man. She was a part of his life. After a man had reached forty, scantily clad blondes were fine, but only on calenders. He and May had had Jerry. Even in death he fused them beyond all possible separation.

The sound of a car motor brought him wearily to his feet. He dropped his gun back in its holster, pushed the drunken bum from the wheel and slid in beside him. He would have to drop Mack somewhere. He was welcome to the clothes and the money. All that he wanted were the papers in his wallet and his ring.

He released the handbrake and remembered the pay-roll. Before he could slide from in back of the wheel the car that he had heard drove up beside him and the black-jowled youth he had seen in Marty's the night before leveled a shot gun in his face.

"I'd keep my hands on the wheel, if I were you," he warned Herbert.

There were two more men in the car. Both of them got out. Both of them were armed. They came up one on each side of the coupé.

"Here we been waiting and waiting," the black-jowled youth told Herbert. "What detained you?" He asked one of the other men, "The payroll is in the car?"

The man looked at the leather case in which Herbert had carried the clothes for Mack. "Yair. At least there's a brown leather case on the ledge."

The youth nodded curtly. "That's it. But don't touch it, Maxie. We don't want to leave any prints on the car."

Herbert spoke for the first time. "You can't get away with this."

The black-jowled youth smiled thinly. "We'll risk it."

"How about this other guy, Pete?" the hood on the far side of the car demanded.

THIS IS MURDER, MR. HERBERT!

Pete cocked the shot gun. "Give."

"He—he's a friend of mine," Herbert told him. "And he's drunk."

Maxie said, impatiently. "Come on. Come on. Let's get going, Mango."

"Keep your pants on," Pete Mango told him. He ordered Herbert to bring the case and climb into the other car.

Herbert wanted to know why he should. Mango told him because he'd shoot him if he didn't, and asked if that was a good enough reason. Herbert said that it was. He took the empty leather case from the ledge and stepped out of the car. Maxie slid his gun from its holster and dropped it into one of his pockets.

"You bring the stew, Carlson," Mango ordered the third hood. "I hadn't figured on him so we'd better take him along until we find out where he fits in the picture."

Carlson dragged the bum from the car. He woke up, protesting and throwing his weight around.

"Clip him!" Mango said crisply.

Carlson struck him in back of the ear with the barrel of his gun and half-dragged, half-carried him to the larger car. "He stinks like skid row," he told Mango. "Now what?"

"Now run Herbert's car into the bushes a ways like he was trying to hide it. Then we get out of here."

Mango grinned at Herbert. "Catch on, chum?" He pointed down the slope to the inter-urban station where the off-shift Amalgamated workers were milling around an already crowded car. "Get the picture? After twenty years of faithful service, one of the Rollins Mills most trusted employees suddenly gets a bee in his pants and lights out with the payroll."

Herbert felt suddenly sick.

"Catch on?" Maxie nudged Herbert. "And while the cops are looking for you, we're sitting on top of the payroll. No shooting. No blood. Just brains."

Herbert's throat felt dry and constricted. He had been through this same thing once. This thing couldn't happen to him. He clutched the handle of the grip he was holding until the joints of his hands ached.

Carlson returned. He had driven the coupé off the road and twenty feet into the bushes. Unless one was looking for it, it was difficult to see. He stripped his driving gloves from his hands and pushed Herbert toward the sedan. "Climb in, brother, and let's roll."

Herbert shook his head. "I'll be damned if I will." He lashed out with his free hand at Mango's face—and a curtain of black rolled down as Carlson slugged him with the butt of his gun.

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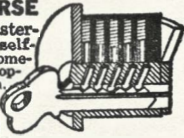
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DETECTIVE TALES

ANGRY hands were worrying at him, slapping his face. Then a douche of cold water struck him. Herbert struggled to sit up and Mango helped him.

"A wise guy, eh? Where's the payroll?"

His mind still fogged, Herbert stared at him stupidly.

Carlson suggested, "Give him a drink."

"I'll give him a drink," Mango said. Holding Herbert around the neck with one arm he rubbed his knuckles in his skull until the older man screamed with pain. "Now where's the payroll?" he repeated.

Herbert wet his lips. He was in what appeared to be a cheap hotel room. A dirty and cracked shade was drawn down over the only window. He knew that he was back in the city from the steady purr of traffic outside. Mack sat, sodden, on the bed reproving him with bleary eyes.

"A fine fix you got me in," he told Herbert. "These guys are gonna kill us." He reached for the whiskey bottle on the dresser and Carlson slapped his hand.

Maxie squatted down beside Herbert. "You heard Mango. Where's the dough?"

"I'm not saying," Herbert said. His voice sounded hoarse and cracked.

"Oh, yes, you are." Mango sounded confident. "We have ways of making you talk." He got up, walked over to the bed and cuffed him lightly. "What do you know about this, chum?"

The bum told the truth, concluding, "Then he gives me this wallet and his ring and says that after we have a few drinks he'll tell me what I gotta do. Then—well, I guess I kinda pass out."

Mango looked at Herbert with admiration in his eyes. "It looks like I had you wrong, chum. A sharper, eh? You were not only going to steal the payroll, you were going to leave a corpse for the cops to find. Sort of a torch exit, eh?" He strode across the room and kicked Herbert in the stomach. "Yes, sir. A high class dirty sharper and me figuring you for a mouse."

Herbert groveled on the floor in pain. He felt an odd sense of bodily detachment. The man who had planned the thing that Mango had just stated had brought this on himself. But that man had not been him. He would be damned if he'd give up the payroll. Not if it rotted in the bushes forever.

"Start talking, chum," Mango ordered.

"No." Herbert shook his head.

"Damn you for a stubborn mule!" Carlson made a swipe at him with his gun barrel and struck him across the temple. The last words that Herbert heard was Maxie complaining that the other man had struck him too hard.

THIS IS MURDER, MR. HERBERT!

WHEN he came to again the bright cracks in the torn shade had lessened and the volume of traffic had increased. That would be the rush hour traffic between six and six-thirty. He looked around the room. Mack was sleeping on the bed. The three hoods were playing cards and listening to a small radio on the dresser.

Carlson saw that his eyes were open and grinned, "I was afraid I'd killed you."

Mango said flatly, "You keep your hands off him this time." He picked a bottle and a glass from the card table and squatted down on the floor beside Herbert. "Look, chum. So we had you wrong. You're one of those little guys that look like a mouse, but you're tough. You can take it. But why make it hard on yourself?" He splashed whiskey into the tumbler and offered it to Herbert. He drank it gratefully. Mango continued, "We're tough, too. And you're in a bad spot, chum. Okay. So we can't break you. But we still can knock you off. And you don't want to die, do you?"

Herbert sat letting the warmth of the whiskey flood through him. This was one hell of a birthday, he thought. He knew what Mango was driving at. He wanted to make a deal. "How does it stand with the cops?" he asked.

"You're tagged, pal," Carlson grinned. "They've got out a five-state alarm. It seems that your boss don't trust you so much after all. He tips the State Patrol to keep an eye on you and when you don't show at the mine, they go look. A State Cop spotted your car twenty minutes after we left. They got all the highways and the piers and the depots blocked."

The radio buzzed and Carlson turned it up slightly. A police announcer droned: "Car 46. Car 46. Go to the corners of Bell and Maple. A man answering the description of Herbert is reported acting suspiciously. . . ."

Mango laughed. "Those cops. Always clowning. As if a lad who had just glammed ninety thousand bucks would hang around a street corner acting suspicious." He nodded at Herbert's empty glass. "How about another, pal?"

Herbert told him that he'd had plenty. The whiskey had failed to dull the pain in his stomach. His eyes were swollen to narrow slits. He touched the back of his head and fingers came away sticky with matted blood.

"You brought it on yourself, chum," Mango pointed out. "And we wouldn't want it to happen again, would we?"

Herbert asked him what his proposition was.

"You tell us where the dough is and we'll split fifty-fifty," Mango told him.



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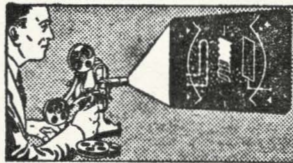
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DETECTIVE TALES

Herbert asked how he knew that they wouldn't shoot him as soon as he disclosed the hiding place of the money.

Mango admitted, "That's the chance that you're taking. But look, chum. We aren't greedy. We'll take forty-five grand for an afternoon's work and call it square."

"What have you got to lose?" Maxie pointed out. "The cops are wise to you. And after swiping ninety grand, you can't just go back and say you're sorry."

"Play smart, pal," Carlson advised him. "Like Maxie says, what have you got to lose?"

Mango bent his face to his. "How about it, Herbert?"

"You go to hell," Herbert told him.

Braced as he was against the wall, he could see the blow start but he couldn't avoid it. For the third time a black curtain descended.

CHAPTER FOUR

Mr. Herbert Gets Paid Off

THE bright cracks on the torn shade were gone entirely. The hum of traffic had stopped. Herbert judged that it must be eight o'clock. He opened his eyes and peered through their slits without moving.

Mack was snoring on the bed. Carlson was beating a tympanic solo on the table with his fingers. The radio was still tuned to police calls. Mango and Maxie were absent.

"I'd like a drink of water," he told Carlson.

The hoodlum grinned, without moving. "Oh, you're with us again." Herbert repeated his request and Carlson resumed his drumming on the table. "Nuts to you, brother. We're through handling you with gloves, see? And the boys have gone for the car. We're going to take you somewhere where we can really go to town."

Herbert sat up and leaned against the wall. He knew that he would talk in time. Human flesh could only stand so much.

There was a buzz preceding an announcement on the radio. The police announcer said tonelessly: "Cars 21 and 26. Cars 21 and 26. Go to the Sante Fe freight yards. Railroad detectives have cornered a man in a box car whom they believe may be Herbert. . . ."

Carlson was amused. "You're running the cops nuts, chum."

Herbert repeated his request for water. The hoodlum considered it a moment, then lowered the front rungs of his chair to the floor and filled a glass with lukewarm water from the tap. Herbert drew up his knees, the better to brace himself. This was the last chance that he would have.

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THIS IS MURDER, MR. HERBERT!

Carlson said. He bent over to hand him the glass of water. "Okay. Take it if you want it."

The man on the floor reached out a hand, then lashed out suddenly with his feet. Both heels caught Carlson squarely in the belly.

Carlson fell, rolled on his side in agony but managed to draw his gun from its holster. Moving unsteadily on his feet, Herbert snatched the whiskey bottle from the table and used it as a club.

Mack sat up on the bed at the sodden thud. "You—you've killed the guy."

HERBERT picked the dead man's gun from the floor. He uncorked the bottle, took a drink, then handed it to the frightened-eyed man on the bed. "Give me my wallet and my ring."

The bum whimpered, "You promised me—" "Keep the money," Herbert cut him short. He slid his wallet back into his pocket and put his ring on his finger.

The key was in the room door. He unlocked the door and studied the hall. It was a typical cheap hotel hallway.

"Scram," he ordered Mack.

The man went unprotesting down the hallway clutching the quart bottle to his chest.

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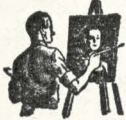
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DETECTIVE TALES

At the stairhead he paused to tilt the bottle to his lips. Herbert followed him slowly, shoving the gun in his pocket. No one tried to stop him. A youthful clerk was in back of the desk in the lobby. He looked at Herbert's battered face and asked him, "What the hell happened to you?"

Herbert walked through the lobby without replying. Mack had disappeared by the time that he reached the walk. There were few people on the street.

Herbert could do two things. He could pick up the money as he had originally intended to, or he could surrender to the first policeman whom he saw and face the music. It might mean a long prison sentence. The least that it could mean was the loss of his job. Even with restitution the bonding company would insist on making an example of him. Meanwhile there was Mango. He walked a few steps into the shadows and waited.

He did not have long to wait. The familiar black sedan pulled up to the curb. He stopped Mango with one foot on the sidewalk and the other still on the running board of the car.

"If I were you, I'd hold it right there," he told him.

Maxie rapped out a sharp oath. "It's Herbert. He's got away from Carlson."

"Oh, yeah?" Mango rounded the hood of the car from the far side and Herbert squeezed the trigger of Carlson's gun. The slug missed Maxie and shattered the windshield of the car. Somewhere up the block a woman screamed.

A flash of flame leaped from Mango's hand. Lead ricocheted whining from the walk at Herbert's feet. Mango was still trying for the brass ring. He did not want to kill him. He was trying to shoot him in the legs.

The woman was screaming louder now. A man was shouting, "Police!" Herbert moved out into the red pool formed by the neon sign of the hotel and Mango shot again. Herbert stumbled as his left leg gave way.

His gun barrel lifted slightly, Mango started determinedly up the walk toward Herbert. Herbert knelt on his sound knee, waiting.

"Don't be a damn fool," Mango cursed him. "Drop that gun or the next slug goes through your skull."

When he was ten feet away, Herbert pulled the trigger a second time. Mango stopped in the middle of a stride. His clenched left fist, knuckle out, lifted as if about to rap on an invisible door. Then the door opened suddenly and he pitched through it onto his face.

Maxie whipped the car in a sharp U turn and roared on up the street. Herbert continued to kneel, Mango's outstretched gun hand only inches from him.

THIS IS MURDER, MR. HERBERT!

The usual crowd began to form. A panting patrolman elbowed through it and up to Herbert. "What goes here?" he demanded.

Herbert handed him the gun. "My name," he told him, "is Herbert. I believe that you're looking for me."

From there on things became hazy.

When the mist began to clear, he was lying on a high hospital bed and May was trying not to cry. She kept chanting like one of the high school cheer leaders at the football games to which they had gone to watch Jerry play, "It's okay, Jo-Jo. It's okay. You're going to be all right."

"Yeah. Sure. I'm going to be fine," he said.

Her chant dissolved into tears. She buried her face on his chest. Through her hair he could see Old Man Rollins and Captain Hawkins of Central Bureau. He wondered how much they knew.

Herbert forced himself to listen to May. She was sobbing, "Why did this have to happen? It was going to be such a happy birthday for you, Jo-Jo. You see, Mr. Rollins told me last night. That's why I called off the party. All of the office force were going to come to the house and surprise you."

HE lay very still. 'Mr. Rollins told me last night.' He and not Harvey had gotten the South American branch. That was why the girls in the office had looked at him strangely. That was why Harvey had called him 'Big Shot', why the Old Man had wanted to see him. And he had thrown it away.

May continued, "And everyone's been sending presents to the house all day. There was even a half-case of rye from someone who signed himself Marty." She sat up and wiped her eyes. "The card read, 'Happy Birthday to a valued and respected customer.'"

He closed his eyes a moment, told her, "You step outside for a minute, May. I—I've got to talk to the old man—alone."

She repeated his request to Rollins and she and Hawkins left the room. The Old Man walked over to the bed.


"How much do you know?" Herbert asked.

The mill owner eyed him shrewdly. "There seem to be some discrepancies," he admitted. "Hawkins can't make up his mind whether you're a crook, a fool, or a hero. I can't either," he added dryly.

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DETECTIVE TALES

Herbert considered lying. Mango and Carlson were dead. It was unlikely that Mack or Maxie would ever show on the scene to dispute his word.

"No," he decided aloud. "I'll take what I have coming." He took a deep breath and told Rollins the whole story.

The Old Man was silent. "Well," he said. "I'll admit I've had this promotion in mind for some time. I thought that you were trustworthy." He spread his hands. "So I guess that's that."

"I guess so," Herbert agreed. "The one whom it's tough on is May."

Old Man Rollins' face creased in a smile. "I don't see why. I said that I wanted to tempt you. And you were tempted, weren't you?"

For a moment Herbert failed to understand him, then he asked, "You mean that you're going to give me the South American Branch?"

"Hell no!" the Old Man exploded.

"I'm sorry. I misunderstood you," Herbert admitted.

"You're damn right you did," the mill owner continued. "Hell. You're practically running the business right now. Why should I send you to South America? Young Harvey is going down there and I'm going with him to get him started. What in the name of blue blazes do you think that I've been grooming you for? Just as soon as you get out of here you step into my shoes as general manager."

He walked out of the room.

Herbert lay blinking at the ceiling. He thought of a lot of things including Jerry. Maybe Jerry would know some day. Maybe Jerry wasn't dead. Mistakes did happen. He had almost made a big one. Then for some reason he thought of Marty. Marty knew all of the quick money boys. He bought them drinks. But he'd sent Herbert a half-case of whiskey with a card that read: 'To a valued and respected customer'.

THE END

Classified Advertising

(Continued)

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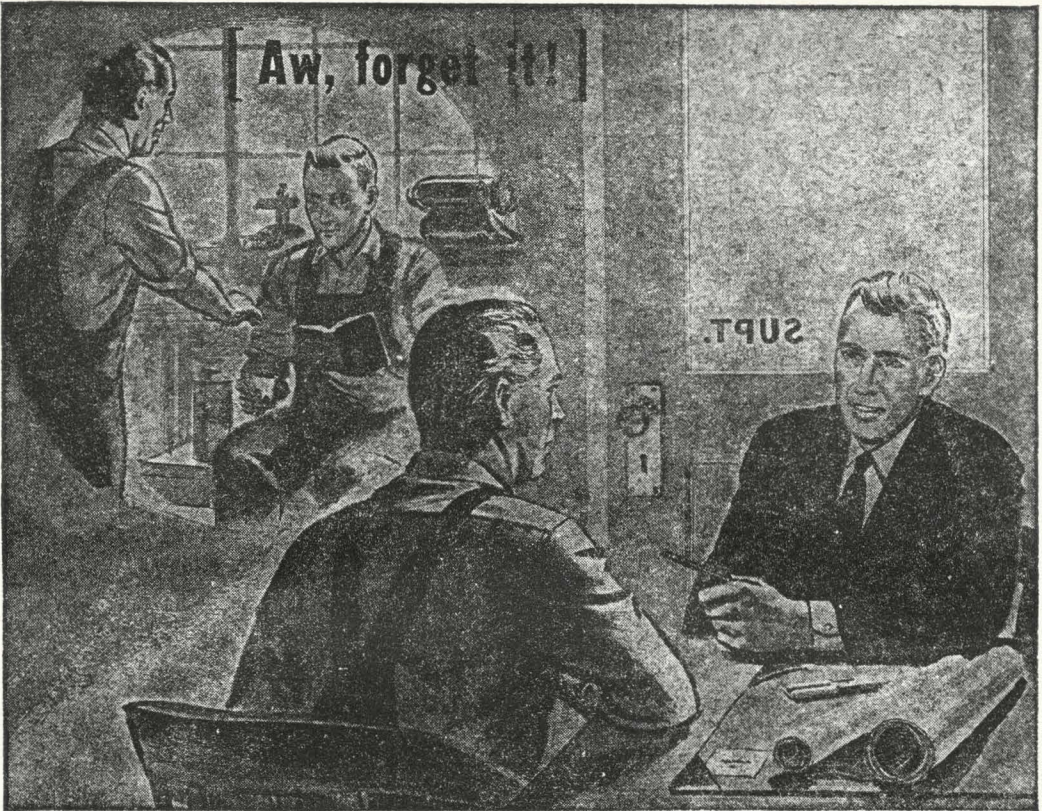
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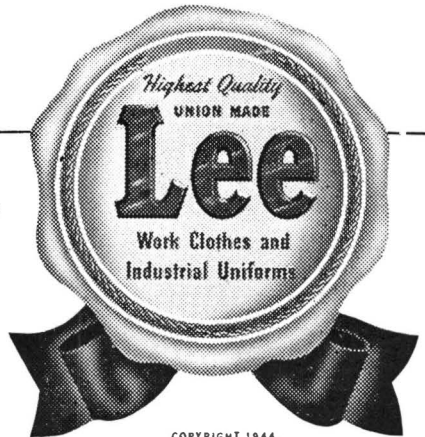


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