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## BLOOD-MONEY BABY

*A MEMORABLE CRIME NOVEL*

*by* **SHAD COLLINS**

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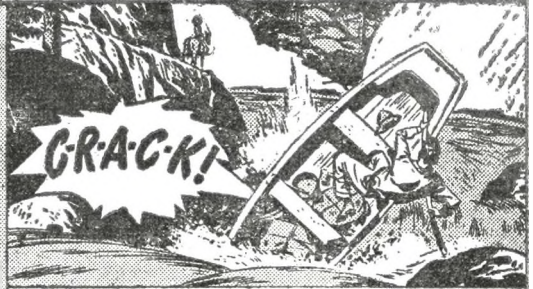
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VOL. THIRTY-SEVEN

NOVEMBER, 1947

NUMBER FOUR

*Two Spine-Chilling Murder Novels*

1. **BLOOD-MONEY BABY**.....*Shad Collins* 8  
—I called Sherry Blount, but it was my money and, when she shot me—my blood!
2. **S.R.O.—SLAYING ROOM ONLY!**.....*William R. Cox* 78  
—existed backstage when the actors started to become angels, via the dead man's route, and Dumb Dan Trout found himself listed on a killer's program as the star in his own funeral!

*Two Smashing Crime Novelettes*

3. **AN EYE OUT FOR DEATH**.....*Roderick Lull* 42  
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4. **HOMICIDE HOMEWORK**.....*Bruno Fisher* 66  
—made April Hale so proficient in her studies that she went out and gave a lethal lesson to a whole city police force!

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  7. **"LITTLE MAN, YOU'RE IN A JAM!"**.....*Jack Bradley* 52  
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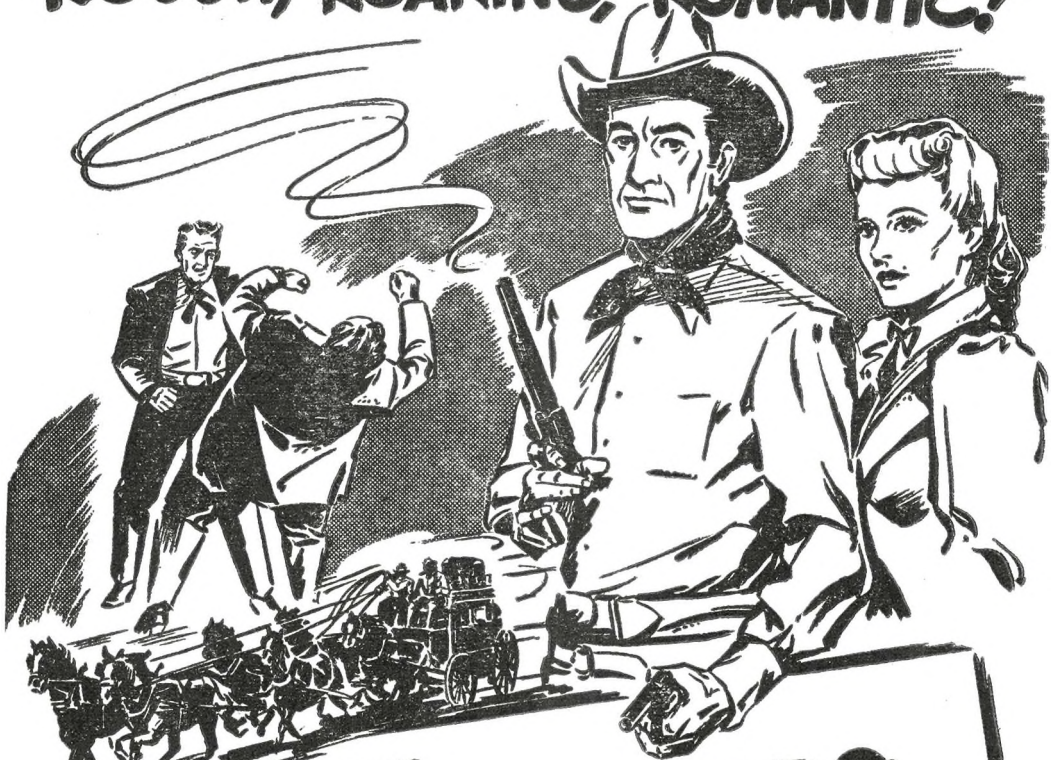
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# ● \$250,000 CORPSE ●

By CHESTER B. CONANT

ONE OF the most heinous types of crimes flourished after the Civil War, when well-organized gangs of ghouls preyed upon unprotected cemeteries and robbed graves of their grisly contents for sale to doctors and medical students. The grave-robbers were seldom molested by the police and received scant attention until the death of Alexander T. Stewart, the pioneer merchant prince.

Stewart, extremely industrious and excessively shrewd, began as a humble errand boy and amassed a huge fortune. He did business for cash only and defied competition. At the height of his commercial power he employed as clerks many former merchants whom he had driven out of business.

Undersized, thin, with coarse, reddish hair and sharp features, and slate-grey eyes of almost unbelievable coldness, Stewart died in 1876, worth thirty million dollars. He was buried in the churchyard of St. Marks-in-the-Bouwerie, at Second Avenue and Tenth Street.

Stewart's body had been lowered into the grave when rumors began to circulate that ghouls were planning to steal the corpse and hold it for ransom. But no actual attempt was made until the night of October 8, 1878, when the sexton discovered that the nameless slab had been clumsily lifted from the grass. However, nothing had been disturbed beneath the surface of the ground.

Henry Hilton, attorney for Mrs. Stewart, ordered that new locks be put on the churchyard gates and had the name slab removed to some ten feet southwest of the grave, where it was sunk into the ground to mislead the ghouls. The watchman from a nearby livery stable was hired to visit the churchyard every hour during the night and keep trespassers from the enclosure. As nothing further occurred, the guard was dismissed a month later.

Four days later, the assistant sexton, Frank Parker, was horrified, on entering the churchyard, to discover a great mound of earth upturned at the mouth of the Stewart vault. He went immediately for the sexton. They entered the vault and found that the body of the merchant had been stolen.

The Stewart vault was of brick, ten by fifteen feet and twelve feet deep. It had been covered over with three feet of earth. Dug in the very center of the yard, it was flanked on either side by the graves of two members of old New York families. The ghouls had ignored the decoy name slab and had gone straight to the grave. They had unscrewed the cover of a great cedar chest and cut through a lead coffin, forcing the casket which contained the body.

In addition to the corpse, the ghouls had also carried away the expensive knobs and name plate of the casket, and a piece of the velvet lining, cut out in a roughly triangular shape. A new coal shovel and a bull's-eye lantern were left behind, and the tracks of a cart were found near the eastern gate as further evidence of their visit.

A reward of twenty-five thousand dollars was offered in the morning newspapers for the return of the corpse and the arrest and conviction of the ghouls. Such a tremendous sensation was aroused by the crime throughout the East that, for months, amateur sleuths busily searched barns and out-houses, and examined the interiors of suspicious-looking carts and wagons. A score of new graves were opened and searched for the missing body.

A double guard was placed over the grave of Commodore Vanderbilt at New Dorp, Staten Island. Armed men patrolled cemeteries throughout the city.

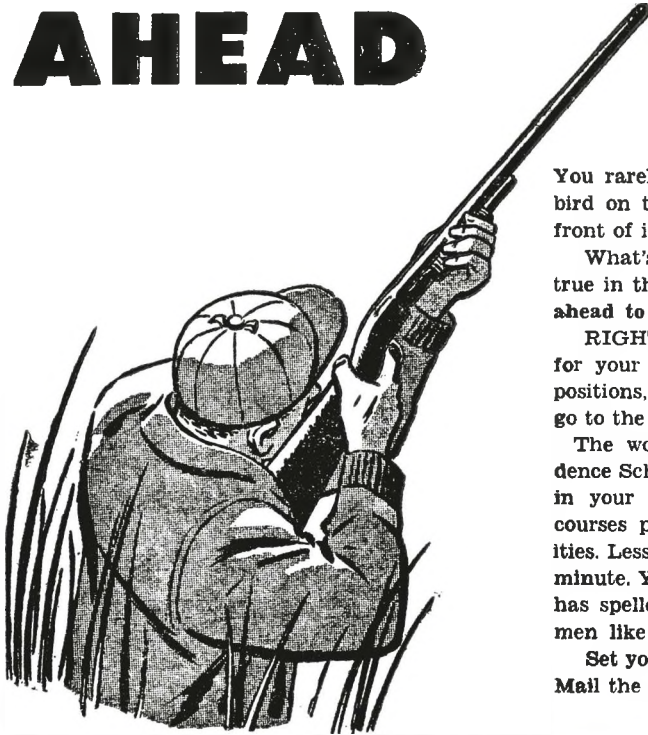
The police finally learned where the shovel and lantern had been purchased, but nothing further developed until the following January. General Patrick H. Jones, a lawyer who had formerly been postmaster, appeared before the police superintendent and displayed two of the silver handles from the Stewart casket, with a small strip of velvet which he had received by express from Canada. He also had several letters from a Henry G. Romaine, asking him to act as intermediary in arrangements for the return of the corpse. Romaine was asking two hundred and fifty thousand dollars in cash. The letters described the theft in great detail.

As requested by Romaine, negotiations were opened through the personal columns of the

*(Continued on page 98)*

*Maybe Alexander T. Stewart, merchant prince, was lucky that he was dead, when ghouls stole his mouldering body and held it for \$250,000 ransom!*

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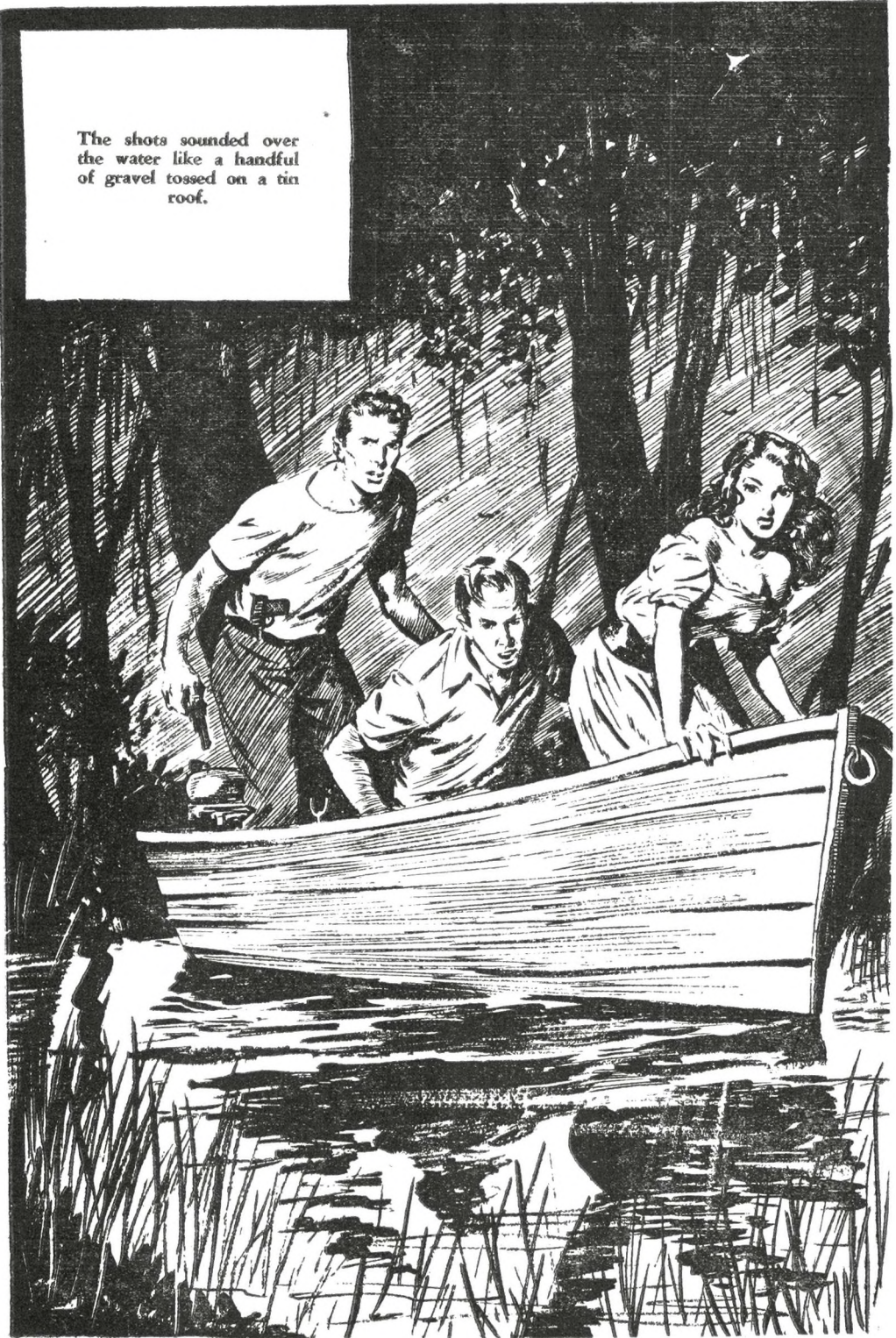
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The shots sounded over  
the water like a handful  
of gravel tossed on a tin  
roof.





# BLOOD-MONEY BABY

By SHAD COLLINS

*An Excitingly Realistic  
Murder Novel*

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Million-Dollar Deal

**I**T BEGAN in New Orleans because New Orleans is just the kind of place for a thing like that. An old, beat-up, down-at-the-heels, elegant, aristocratic, poverty-stricken, stinking, ugly and beautiful town, it squats in the middle of the Mississippi mud with a levee of Nineteenth Century myth on one side and the dyke of modern industrialism on the other; and it looses into the brightness of tropical air the decayed flavor of romance and the stench of exploitation. It is not so much a Southern American town as it is a kind of cosmopolitan outpost of the rest of the world stuck there inside the limits of the States, secure in its own kind of extra-terri-

*I can look back and see us as we were then, Sherry and Joe, like doomed butterflies circling around the bright twin fires of murder and passion, making huge, flitting shadows against the encompassing wall of time . . . shadows that grew in size as we drew nearer to the all-consuming inferno of death!*

torial immunity from the rest of the country.

You have Higgins shipyards on one side and on the other, the beautiful twisted iron-work and the shattered, rat-ridden cockroach-alley of the old French Quarter; and you have Tulane and the mansions of the rich, and then Calliope Street and the other streets named for the Muses which make up the Negro district, a slum that is an abomination unto the Lord.

And every place there are cemeteries where the past is lying in its marble tombs, which would be all fine and dandy except that, because of the river and the water level, they can't shove the stiff's under and forget them, but have to house them in mausoleums, brazen catafalques, cromlechs with trumpeting angels and seraphim. They rise up and shriek at you, these dolmens of modern man, as if the dead were as lively as the living.

That's partly the way New Orleans is. But it is also the kind of place where you can meet someone like Riff Wake or a girl like Minnie Gombé, who doesn't come into this story, or a girl like Sherry Blount, who does. It is a place where you can get offered a share in a million-dollar deal, as I was, and where you can turn up stone cold dead in the old French market if your enemy has got the price. It's like that.

Perhaps it's because of its past under the rackets of a half-dozen ruling classes: Spanish, French, American and Confederate, and then under Huey, and now all but the present one dead and shored up in those marble tombs and disintegrating slowly into the aura of romance upborne on the bright tropical air. So that people forget what crooks these men really were, and remember something as tenuous as a faint smell of lavender, and even the pirates Lafitte and Dominique You, who spilled the gore of many a good man, become stylized and prettified like the figures of an old-fashioned valentine.

Well, time hadn't had its way with Riff Wake yet. He wasn't any valentine figure then. He was just a hammered-down, defeated little thug who had never really recovered from Repeal. And never would, because that was the kind of a guy he was. I met him in Bryan's place and he offered me a million dollars. Bryan's used to be our joint in the old days. New Orleans was the hot point for the rum ships then, at least in the South, and that special kind of Scotch, cooked up out of mescal and hemp in the hot towns on the Mexican coast, used to come in there by the shipload. We used to meet the ship in the little fast boats and snake the stuff back into the swamps and the bayous on the first leg of the trip north. Later they got it fixed better, and the ships used to come straight up to the docks and unload into the trucks. For a while

I used to ride the lead-off car, me and Riff Wake and Quiet John Connors, with our pockets full of dough to pay off the cops and a couple of tommy guns to take care of heisters. I was a punk kid then, at the tail end of Prohibition, riding the fast cars and the fast women and the fast buck—and it seemed like the stuff then, the real McCoy.

The bottom fell out of it just about when I got in. Hard times set in for Riff and me and poor old Quiet John who went north and started knocking over banks and went up against the business end of a sawed-off shotgun on the Marysville job. I was out of it then and on the level. Riff lost his status as a rum runner and became a crook, and I was on the rocks, drifting around the country and unemployed. I went to sea for a while, toured South America on the beach and then Uncle had me for the Army. So fifteen years later I was back at Bryan's and the usual banana republic revolutionaries over in the corner were figuring out how to rescue their countries from the racketeers and the United Fruit and the boys who bow to the Yankee dollar.

I was sitting in Bryan's just because it was a bar, and bars are places to sit in. Or because I was sentimental and wanted to see it because of the old days. Or because I was now a working stiff with a job on a fancy yacht called the *Pink Lady*, and a working stiff needs a few shots at the end of the daily struggle. For any of these reasons I was at Bryan's. Not to see Riff, because when I came back to New Orleans and to Bryan's I hadn't heard of him in years. Not because I knew Sherry was there. Of course not.

SHE came out of the ladies' room and crossed over to a table down at the end of the room. She wore a mass of blue-black hair like a thundercloud over her head and her eyes were as black as lumps of coal in the snow, but that wasn't what got you. The first time I saw her, down on the dock, I thought that was what it was. It wasn't. She was about medium height and good-looking, but the main thing about her was something you couldn't put your finger on. Maybe she was just the kind of woman who was going to get fat later on, but now she wasn't fat. There was just an aura of incredible ripeness, as if she existed now at an apex of development; an aspect of complete and perfect repose which suggested that beyond this state of seeming completeness there was a new stage of development, powerful and contradictory, waiting for time to bring it into existence. It was like looking at a perfect plum, bathed in sunlight and with the dust of its ripeness on it, complete and final and waiting for the wind to release it and give it into the compost.

She reached her table and a man stood up

and seated her, a guy about thirty-five maybe, blond with a kind of golden blondness, and with the curly hair that looks as if it had been sculptured in marble. His face was like that, too, only more stylized. He was about six feet and handsome—and he knew it. His name was Blade, and I hated his guts. I hated him because of her. Her name was Sherry Blount. She was my boss and employer and my own true love. There are some contradictions there. Your boss can't be your own true love.

She saw me and waved and I got up and went over.

"You want to dance?" I asked her.

Blade looked up at me. His face was still as blank as a monument, but the eyes weren't like that. The eyes were mad. It made me feel good. I'd seen him plenty on the boat or around with Sherry when she didn't have some other guy. I guessed he had the inside track now, the lousy punk, or thought he did. Or maybe it was just that he thought the help should stay in its place. Sherry saw how it was with him, and I guess it amused her. She got up from the table and we got out into the stream and allowed ourselves to be pushed around.

She was a good dancer. I guess she could do anything good that girl. She felt just right in my arms like that, dancing. I knew for the hundredth time that she had the Indian sign on me, that she had me cold, just as I knew it that first day on the boat. There didn't seem anything I could do about it. Looking down across the small cliff of her face I could see that look of faint amusement. It beat me. It made me mad. She was dancing with me as if she still didn't know I was around. It made me want to hit her.

"Must be a new experience for you, dancing with the help," I said.

"You're a good dancer, Joe." She might as well have been talking about the weather. Then in that rough carny voice, "You don't want to try so hard."

"Stop talking like the chambermaid in a hook shop."

She laughed. "Don't rough me up, Joe. I'm not the kind of woman who likes them rough."

"Don't rough me up," I imitated her. "What you like is creeps like Blade. Is he the number one man now?"

"I'm the only number one."

"Yeah, you're number one, all right. So what does that make Blade? You getting ready to dump your loving husband? Blade must have come into the dough."

I couldn't get to her. She just put her head back and laughed, like someone stirring peaches and cream. I pulled her against me as hard as I could and put my mouth down close to her ear.

"You lousy tramp," I said.

She put one of her heels on my instep and pulled away a little. She wasn't even mad. I couldn't even do that to her. She still had that kind of poise that had nothing to do with hardness. She was complete in herself. She shook her head at me and I couldn't tell if the look she gave me was amused or a little sad. Pitying, maybe.

"Poor Cyrus Blount," she said. "All those women are bleeding him dry. And poor Johnny Blade with a family mansion and such beautiful manners and no money. And poor Joe Martin with his brown hair and his dirty tongue, all that six feet of lovin' man and no money."

"And poor Mrs. Sherry Blount, that phony no-good tramp with no money."

"That's right, baby," she said. "And no money. Now tell me that love is all that matters."

I didn't tell her anything, and she went right on as if she were making a speech: "Love. I can get that anywhere, baby. It's the money that talks." She wasn't even being cynical. She was patiently trying to make me understand.

"Okay," I said. "I'll get some and come knocking on your door."

That got her. "You can't knock loud enough," she said. "There isn't that much money. You think that's all that matters to me? You're crazy. If you were the guy I'd kick your door down with my bare feet and I wouldn't care if you were broke as a Cajun. Were you talking about love?"

And that was all the dancing for the night. She was a little ruffled now. You could see it in the way she walked, going back to her table. It made me feel good. I didn't even mind when Blade got up and seated her and gave me that deadpan look of his, like someone five hundred years dead who had had a good embalming job done on him.

**T**HE place was pretty filled up by then, and just as I was getting my gear together and preparing to take off, I spotted Riff at the bar and he saw me and came over. He had a look on his face like Hamlet seeing his father's ghost, and he waded across the floor as if he were stepping over the jumps in a steeplechase.

He stuck out a shaky hand and I took it. "For cripes' sake," he said. "It's Joe Martin. Hell, I ain't seen you in—in—must be ten years. I forgot there was such a guy."

"About fifteen years, Riff," I said. "How are they hanging with you?"

"Well, you know how it is." He gestured vaguely at the four sides of heaven. "Things never were so good after the old days. I can't complain, though. Tell you the truth,

things haven't been bad. Not bad at all."

Maybe. But he looked like a liar to me. He was sharpened up like a rusty tack. His clothes were crummy with that special crumminess of the petty chiseler, the creases laid out with a ruler and apparently as immune from the wilt of sweat and humidity as the corner of the Merchants' National Bank. It was more than that, though. He had lost every second hair, so that now his head looked as scraggly as cut-over timber land. In the old days he wasn't a bad-looking guy, too much eyes and too little chin, maybe, but not bad-looking. It was going now, though. The chin was back farther, as if the brick wall of the world had fallen on it, and the eyes were hot and sharp and desperate. Mr. Riff Wake was falling apart like an abandoned house, but he still had that special kind of life that goes on in ruins.

I said I was glad to know he was still topping them, and we talked for a while about the old days, and I gave him the history of the world vs. Joe Martin. "So now I'm working on a boat," I wound up, "which is owned by a drunk and busted used-to-be-millionaire named Cyrus Blount III, and his wife, Sherry, who looks like a high-class tramp and who was educated in a convent."

"It ain't like the old days," he said.

"We all have our troubles," I said profoundly. "You want a drink?"

"Don't mind if I do, Joe," he said.

We sat there a while, not saying anything, sipping our drinks. I could see Riff studying me out of the corners of his eyes.

"What you got on the books now?" he asked. "You got a touch with any of the boys here?"

"No. Not just no, but hell no. I don't want any."

"You got to live."

He was warming up to something and I just let him go, not answering and not even looking at him. The band had finished another set and left the stage and now the audience was taking a hand. An old boy with a paunch and slicked-back hair sat down at the piano, and a B girl with brassy hair crawled up on it, crossed her legs about midway to her shoulders and started to sing *Ain't Misbehavin'*.

I sat there waiting and watching Riff turning something over and over slowly in his mind, like a man studying some new kind of instrument, looking at one side and then the other, and then coming back to the first to see if maybe there was something he had missed. I let him worry over it and got us another drink. Whatever he had, it probably wouldn't interest me anyway, I figured. Riff was that kind of a guy. That was when he offered me the million.

He got around to it slow enough.

"You remember when we was with Big Mike?" he asked.

I nodded.

"You was pretty handy with the boats them days," he said. "You used to run the stuff up into the swamps, right?"

"Me and Quiet John and some more guys."

"Yeah. But now Quiet John is dead and most of the other guys too, maybe, or anyway they're all scattered now. Probably ain't a one of them left in town."

"You'd probably find a few if you hunted through the graveyards."

"Yeah. But that leaves you. Damn it, this was a lucky night for both of us, hey?"

I couldn't see that because all it had got me so far was a few touches about the old days and the chance to buy this shabby chiseler some drinks. But I let it go.

"How'd you like to make a million bucks, Joe?"

I picked up my cigarettes from the table and stuck the change in my pocket and started to get up. When they begin to talk like that, it's time to get out. They'll be trying to break up the joint next time.

"Wait a while," Riff was saying. "Wait a while, Joe. Sit down, Joe, and take it easy. Look, Joe, lemme show you—"

With one hand he was trying to shove me back into my chair and with the other he was pawing at his pocket, and he sounded as if he were getting ready to cry. I sat down again. He got whatever it was out of his pocket and sat there looking at me as if he wasn't sure even yet if he should show it. Then a kind of helplessness came over his face and he slumped back in the chair.

"I got to let you in on it," he said. "It's the only way I got. You won't let an old pal down, will you, Joe?"

"Don't give me that old pal baloney," I said. "You got a use for me or you think you have. Now let's put it on the line and see how it looks."

"Okay," he said. "I need a guy who can handle a boat, somebody who knows the back country. There's enough dough in it we can both get rich. You think I was kiddin' about the million, but it's on the level."

"Look," I said. "I don't know what this is. I know they're running perfume in now. Hop. Aliens. I don't want anything to do with it. Find yourself another boy."

He shook his head. "It ain't none of those things," he said. "It's as big as all them things. But it ain't outside the law."

"All right. Get to it."

**H**E PUSHED his hand across at me and spread something on the table. It was a piece of leather, old and beat-up with all the

blood and life gone out of it. It was covered with chicken tracks of some kind that looked as if they had been burned into it with the point of a nail. I looked at it closer and the chicken tracks began to take form, and it began to look like a school kid's picture of the drainage system of the Mississippi basin or maybe of the circulatory system of a frog. Off in one corner there was an X across what was either the aorta or the Yazoo. If I had seen one I had seen a hundred of them.

"For God's sake, Riff," I said, "you must have been hitting the pipe pretty hard to go for this. Every Cousin Jacques in the delta has one of those things, and they all lead direct to where Lafitte planted his jack. Somebody's always digging up a new map and I never heard of anyone making a nickel out of it."

"No?" he said looking sly. "They never looked in the right place. You know where this is?" He pointed at the map.

"It could be in Africa or Tibet for all I know."

"If you knew what bayou this was," he pointed to the map again, "could you read it then?"

"I might. If I knew the bayou and the country around it. And if this isn't too old. The country around in the swamps changes its shape every time there's high water."

"But not that much," he said comfortably. "If I can take you into the country this map is made from, can you work it out from there?"

"I might. It depends on how it's changed."

"That's all I want to know. I buy you a drink on that one."

"You better hold on a while," I said. "All this has just been talk. Suppose I could find the place. I'm not going back into the bayou and let myself be devoured by mosquitoes like some John who read a book and decided to go find the pirate's treasure."

He leaned back and started to purr. "That's just it," he said. "This ain't a bum steer. You think I'm the kind of guy what falls for that kind of stuff?"

I let that go by, and he leaned over confidentially. "This ain't any pirates' treasure, Joe. This is the stuff with the dead man's pitcher on it."

"Then how the hell did it get there?"

He sat back and got cunning again. "You'll never guess," he said. "You'll never guess in a million years."

"I'm not going to guess. You're going to tell me."

"Sure, Joe, I'm going to tell you."

But there was something else I wanted to know first. "Why ask me in on this? If you know where it is, why don't you go after it yourself?"

"I don't know the country, Joe. And I don't know how to travel. I don't know them swamps, and maybe it'll take two of us when we find it."

"That means there's somebody else. It isn't just waiting there to be dug up. There's somebody sitting on it."

"Maybe."

"That means we have to take it away from him?"

"That's probably the way it is, Joe."

"And if this guy doesn't want to let it go?"

He just sat there and looked at me and let me think about it. I did. The more I thought about it the less I liked it.

"I don't want to have to put anybody down."

"Hell, Joe, you was in the Army."

"That's different."

"Yeah? It's a million dollars different. Hell, you knock off guys you never even saw before, guys you got no beef with, and you do it for dimes and now you start talking like a punk." He was all sneer but his hands, and they were gathering up the map.

"Don't ride me, Riff," I said. "I don't like that kind of talk."

"Awright, Joe, forget it. I'll put it on the level. If I could get in there I'd work it alone. I ain't anxious to split the dough. But I can't get it out by myself. I know you from the old days and you ain't a rat. I could trust you. And the dough—hell, there's millions in it. . . ." I looked at him, and he stared back defiantly. "A million easy. I figure more. And just one old punk to take it away from and him with a price on him so it wouldn't even be murder."

"Who is this guy?"

"You'll come in if I give it to you straight?"

"Maybe I will and maybe not. Not if he has to be bumped."

"He don't have to be bumped if we work it right. He can't squeal to the law."

"Who is it?"

"You on the level with me, Joe?"

"Who is it, for cripes' sake?"

"It's—hell, you know the guy. It's the guy that got all the dough sacked away while we were doing the dirty work, plus what he got out of those Northern bank hauls when they knocked off Quiet John. It's Big Mike we're going after, Joe."

## CHAPTER TWO

### A Handy Place to Die

I MUST have looked at him as if he had just taken a live cottonmouth out of his pocket, and he sat there with a proud and simple-minded smile all down the front of his face.

"Big Mike is dead. He got sent up for a while and then—"

"Yeah. He got sent up a while after Quiet John got it. An easy rap. So he did six-seven years and got out. And when he got out he took it easy for a while. Only they wouldn't let him have it that way. The feds were working up a tax evasion racket—he knew that because he had pieced off somebody inside—and some of the tough boys on the other side of the law were trying to hijack him for his pile. And then one day you read in the papers about how Big Mike Malone, the king of the leggers, gets caught in a flophouse fire off Bughouse Square in Chi. That what you're thinking about?"

I nodded.

"That's what I thought, too, at the time," Riff said. "The papers took it big—you almost got to thinking Big Mike was a senator or something. Anyway, I thought it was on the level—why shouldn't I?—but it wasn't. The guy they buried as Big Mike was just some mission stiff like is always getting caught in one of those fires, or freezing to death in winter, or knocking himself off with too much smoke. What the hell, Big Mike just gave him a name. There was some razzle-dazzle about a watch which identified him. Remember that ticker he had with his initials in diamonds? That was it. Somebody stuck it in a stove for a couple minutes, I suppose, and then planted it on the stiff who was burned so much they couldn't make identification, anyway."

"What about the teeth?" I said.

"Yeah. Well, either they didn't have dope enough on Mike to check it or else they decided to let it go through that way, I don't know which."

"Why should the cops let it go through if they knew it was a phony?"

"Maybe they didn't know. Or if they did, maybe they figured it'd be easier to nail Big Mike if he thought he had got away with it. He was hiding out by that time. Maybe the cops wanted to play it both ways: If they find him it's a nine-days' wonder, and if they don't, and they don't crack that the stiff is not really Big Mike, well, then they're covered. Make sense?"

"It could," I said. "It sounds crazy, but it's the kind of a caper Big Mike would figure on."

"Yeah. Remember when he cracked that bank in Iowa and he had all his boys in cops' uniforms?"

"But why wouldn't he skip the country?"

"The war, for crapes' sake. You don't get out so easy with a war on, Joe. I figure that now, maybe, he's getting ready for the run-out."

"Why didn't he stay in Chi or head for

New York? Why in God's name crawl back in the swamps like that?"

"Too many boys know him. In Chi, now, some of the smart boys got adding it up and right away they figure maybe the stiff they helped bury isn't Mike. That's where I got the rumble on it. So I suppose there was a lot of looking around. I suppose that's what Mike expected. He sure knew human nature."

"He sure knew crooks' nature, anyway. How did you get in on it?"

"Well, like I say, I got this whisper in Chi and I get to beating it around. I try to figure where the guy would be. I can't get nowhere. And then one day it comes to me like a dream."

He waited, looking at me expectantly, but I didn't say anything. The whole thing was still like a dream as far as I was concerned, but it had me tied. It made too much sense. He waited and I waited. Then he took the map out and stroked it tenderly.

"I found this."

"Under a stone somewhere, I suppose."

"In my stuff. When Quiet John got hit, Gino, one of Mike's boys, sent me a bundle of his stuff. John and me was pals, and I guess he told them if he got it some time, they should send the stuff to me. The money though," he added bitterly, "all that jack he must have got as his cut in those jobs—there wasn't even a C-note in that stuff they sent, those thieving lice."

"What the hell," I said. "You've got no reason to gripe if they sent you a cool million."

"Sure. But they didn't know. They figured it was a hide-out; that's what Gino called it in the letter. A hide-out map. That's what I figured it was, too, and that's what it is. Mike's and Quiet John's hide-out. I would of thrown it out, but I never got around to it. And then when I get this whisper in Chi about Mike is maybe still alive, but where?—one day it comes to me like a dream, and I go through my stuff and there it is. So right away I come down here."

"And right away you run into me."

"It's a run of luck, Joe. But I been here a month. I figured I'd need a boat and a partner, and I ain't had no luck with either until you come along."

"Well," I said, "I'll buy it. You got a partner. Now all we need is a boat."

"We could steal one easy," he said.

"Maybe. But I don't like it that way. This has got to be a clean job all the way. No stealing boats. No shooting. Just a matter of expropriation."

"Expropriation. Yeah." He nodded solemnly and his eyes glazed over like he didn't know what he was agreeing to but was trying hard to get it. Then he brightened and nodded his head again.

"Expropriation," he said in a pleased voice. "Sure. We're just going out to bust a trust. Martin and Wake, trust busters."

That was one way of putting it.

**WE SAT** there for a while, shooting it. We were just finishing our last drink and were set to leave when this goon came over. He had been at the bar all the time, I suppose, but we hadn't noticed him. He had a pushed-in nose and tin ears, and I figured him for some broken-down pug until I noticed the way he stood, all loose and relaxed, and then I knew he had been a wrestler. He stood there like that, all two hundred pounds of him relaxed in front of the table, and spoke to Riff.

"The boss wanted to see you, Wake. I thought I told you the boss wanted you." He spoke softly and patiently as if he were explaining something to a child. His voice had a burr in it, like the Scotch.

Riff was scared. There wasn't any doubt about that. The blood went out of his face and his chin seemed to go back farther and his nose was a very delicate shade of blue.

"I don't want to see nobody," he said. "I mind my own business. Let other people mind theirs."

"That ain't any way to treat your friends," the wrestler said, shaking his head sadly. "I come to take you around. You can't treat your pals like that."

"I ain't going any place," Riff said, and I could see his thin right hand stiffen while his left started fiddling nervously with his lapel. I kicked him under the table and he relaxed a little.

"Why not go around, Riff?" I asked. "Maybe we should both go around." I started to get up.

"Not you, sonny," the big guy said. "You wasn't invited." But by that time I was up, and I had his left arm and Riff had his right and we were both swinging. I don't know if Riff hit him, but I know I almost broke my hand on his jaw. He went back and down, skidding on the polished square of dance floor like an All-American fullback riding into the end-zone on a muddy field, and we started out the side door. The big guy took out three of the dancers and made about five yards before a long-legged blonde stopped him. She had him tangled up nicely and was trying to slap his head off his shoulders to boot as we went out. Sherry in the corner was cheering them on like a coed on the fifty-yard line.

We went out of there fast, and down the narrow and twisted streets and then across the wide acres of Canal Street, and I still don't know what we were in such a hurry for. We were, though. On the other side of Canal we got a taxi and we rode around for a while, not going anywhere. Riff kept look-

ing back through the rear window as if he expected a witch on a broomstick, but there wasn't even a cop. Finally he relaxed and got a cigarette going. His hands were going too.

"All right," I said. "Let's have it. Who are those pals of yours and what are they so damn chummy about?"

"I don't know," he said. "I never saw the big guy before."

"Okay. You never saw him. Who'd he want to take you to see?"

"I don't know, Joe. I don't know."

"You're lying."

"No. No, I'm not lying."

"You're lying. That's what you brought me into this for. Because someone was trying to cut in."

"No. Look, Joe, I'll give it to you straight." He sat forward on the seat and turned toward me, his face a blur in the darkness of the cab. "This is the way it is. About a week ago some guy comes around and wants to take me around to have a talk with somebody. I don't know what it is. I give him a stall and then take off. That's the only time before tonight."

"You know who it is?"

"No." But he was lying. "I had some trouble with a guy a while back. It was over a bet—I couldn't cover it. I guess that's what it is." That was what he wanted to believe, but he couldn't.

"You're lying," I said again. "You brought me into this because you needed a rod man."

"No, Joe. Forget about it. I said I'd handle it and I will. All you got to do is handle the boat. I'll take care of this."

"You don't want to tell me who it is or why?"

"I'll handle this, Joe."

"Okay," I said. "You handle it then."

He leaned forward in the seat and gave an address to the cabby and five minutes later we pulled up in front of a house. It was just a house like any other on a street where all the houses were the same, four stories high, shuttered, with scrolled iron balconies.

"This is where I flop," Riff said. "You can take the cab back. Where'll I meet you tomorrow?"

"You'll meet me right here," I said. "I've got an investment in you now. I'm not taking any chances on any of your pals coming around to see you."

I paid off the cab driver and we went in. The hall smelled of that peculiar rooming house smell plus the smell of decay that was a part of the smell of the city and of the South. In the downstairs flat a radio was blasting away and a guy and some dame were blasting way at each other louder than the music but not as sweet. We went past a

couple of kids hugging the shadows under the stairs and up to the second floor. Riff got out a key and fumbled around at the door and got it open and we went in.

I was right behind him when he got the lights on and there in the center of the room was a tall, skinny grey guy who looked as if maybe he had escaped from the freak show of a circus. He had a slim gun in his hand with a long barrel on it and on the end of the barrel there was what looked like a chunk of pipe. It was maybe the longest gun I ever saw. A .22 with a silencer on it. A real businessman's gun, if murder is your business.

I saw that all at once and automatically my hands started to go up. I suppose Riff saw it the same way. His hands lifted but he wanted to argue.

"Wait," he said. "Wait, Gino—"

"You ready to come through, Wake?" the guy asked. He spoke in a hoarse whisper. He sounded like the villain in a burlesque skit or a tense moment on a radio thriller. I didn't know why he whispered, but I suppose that that was all the voice he had. "You better come through," he said, "or you'll be going to your own wake." Something that might have been a smile, but that was more like a neural twitch, agitated his gaunt parson's face.

"Let's talk this over," Riff said shakily.

"There's nothing to say," the guy whispered. It sounded as if he were pronouncing judgment on the world.

**I** DON'T know what happened then. Maybe Riff went after his gun. The poor little dope, he was so desperate, he needed so damn much to have this last chance, maybe he figured he'd gamble on it. Or maybe the guy with all the gun had figured it just that way, that there was nothing to say at all, and that left it up to the .22.

Anyway, there was the rapping noise that was the gun, two shots close together. I slashed my hand down along the wall and got the light switch and jumped, and there were two more raps that were meant for me. I heard the noise of Riff falling. He seemed to take a long time and make an awful racket for such a little guy. By then I was down on the floor with as much of me behind a chair as I could get and I was trying to hold my breath and figure out how I could get out of there.

He didn't know that I had no gun, I suppose. If he had known that, he'd have simply gone over and hunted for the light switch and found it and that would have ended the career of Joe Martin. I just lay there behind that chair and listened to the last bubbling breaths of poor little Riff Wake going into eternity with two .22 slugs in him. I wished I were

closer to the little guy. I needed his gun.

There wasn't a chance of getting there without Gino hearing me. It was dead still in that room. Through the walls I could hear the occasional pulse of the radio downstairs, and the sound, now and then, of the couple who were still quarreling. It was hot there in that apartment, but I wasn't hot. I was at dewpoint and could feel cold sweat collecting all over me. An outline of the open window across the room was a little lighter than the darkness. It was only a few feet away. I tried to set myself to jump for it, but I couldn't. It was like trying to dive from the high board. You flex your muscles and get set, and then you turn to mush. I couldn't make it.

Something like a shadow moved noiselessly across the faint outline of that window, and I knew that he had his shoes off and was stalking me. A board squeaked somewhere across the room. It was like spitting in an open wound. I got hold of the chair in front of me and lifted it slowly, praying there were no loose boards under foot to betray me. I got the chair up and threw it as hard as I could toward a corner of the room and jumped for the window.

It was a lucky mistake. I had hoped by throwing the chair into the corner he would turn the gun on it and give me a couple of seconds. I did better. He had got to the corner by that time and I must have thrown the chair into him. I heard a rasping whispered curse, and then the *rap rap* of the gun, and then I was through the window, going down like a fireman taking off for home. I landed like Satan in the burning pit, all spraddled out and mad as hell.

I was in a little walled backyard, but I didn't know about the wall until I put my head into it up to the shoulders. It rebuffed me. It threw me on my back and put fireworks in my head, and meanwhile the guy was at the window and the little gun was going *rap rap* at me. He was firing in bursts of two, and with a magazine load like those guns have, he could keep it up all night. I got my brains together again and got up and went over the wall with all possible speed. He was coming down the side of the house by then.

On the other side of the wall was the cemetery. I got into an alley between the tombs and settled down to run. I could hear him coming over the wall behind me, and I reversed my field and cut over at an angle. The seraphim on the tombs lifted their trumpets in fierce and silent protest. If he got me here it would be nice and neat. The keepers could just lock me away in one of those little stone houses.

After a little while I stopped running and waited. Back there maybe sixty yards, I could hear him. He knew by now that I didn't have



a gun so he wasn't being careful any more. I pulled back and went down another alley and lay down behind one of the marble slabs and waited.

It was a bad night. I don't know how long I lay there listening to the man with the gun hunting me out there among all the neutral dead. It's funny, but a graveyard isn't a silent place at all. I could still hear Gino once in a while out there, but mostly I heard the booming and squeaking and chirping of the insects and the frogs and the night birds. Over me the angels lifted their useless trumpets, and right under my nose was Jean Devereaux, 1841-1902, *Requiescat in Pace* and a little bronze plaque to set everyone straight at the last judgment. Jean Devereaux, merchant and philanthropist, founder of the Delta Savings Bank, creator of the Devereaux Foundlings Home, patron of the arts, exemplary citizen. It was all there on the little bronze plaque waiting for the resurrection. Jean Devereaux, *Requiescat In Pace*.

I was lying in the middle of the dead last century when everything was easy. *Requiescat In Pace*. It was a nice way to rest for Mr. Devereaux, the eminent banker and patron of the arts, who was lying now, a part of the ruins of time. He had lived in the easy days and had made his easy pile and built a foundlings' home to square himself with God. He had had it good both here and hereafter and he had never lain out on his belly in a cemetery in the middle of the night, like me, hunted down by a killer with a silenced gun who wanted to lay me down here in the hallowed ground, *in pace*, with a hole in my head, so I could never break out, so I could never lay hands on that golden fleece of Big Mike Malone that was lying up there somewhere in the mud of the bayous and that, if I had it, would let me break out and be free.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### What's a Murder Among Friends?

**A**FTER a while I didn't hear the guy out there any more. Then I saw the light come on for maybe thirty seconds back there in Riff's apartment and I knew that, like they say, the whispering guy had returned to the scene of his crime. I knew what he was there for, too, as soon as the light went on, and a few seconds later, when it went off, I knew there wasn't anything I could do about it, at least not now. I got out of there and went back down to the *Pink Lady*, black and deserted now. But I didn't go to bed. I went there for my gun.

I started looking for the guy. I wanted him. Partly it was Riff who had been my partner if not my friend, and partly it was

that I don't like to have somebody set me up for a clay pigeon. Mostly, though, it was the map. And I knew I had to work fast. When they found Riff I didn't want to be around. Cops don't care who they tag for a murder.

At first it had seemed like one of Riff's pipe dreams. Then it had seemed possible. And now I was certain that the X was the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Riff had called the gunman Gino, and from what he had said earlier, Gino was part of the old mob, the guy who sent him the map. So Gino must have got the whisper about Big Mike, too, and maybe one day, trying to figure it out, he had remembered the hide-out map and, just as with Riff, it had come to him like a dream just where to look. But first he needed the map.

So maybe the dough *was* there just like Riff thought.

It worked on me. It gives you a funny feeling to think you are right next to a fortune. All that money can buy. Like holding the dice on the fifth straight pass with your original lay doubled and redoubled and piled up there in front of you and only a flick of the wrist between you and a fortune. But this was surer than the dice, and this was the big dough, bankers' money. And there it was, and here you are, and the distance and the difficulties between are the difference between all the freedom and ease that money can buy or a life of living out of your hands, breaking your back like an honest man so that men like Jean Devereaux can get rich and endow a foundlings' home and *requiescat in pace*.

It worked on me, all right. I forgot about Big Mike right then and I didn't give a damn any longer what I might have to do to get the loot. I wanted to jump out of the trap. But the map was gone.

So I hunted for Gino that night without stopping to eat, sleep or cross myself. I must have made every bar in town before I did any good. There was a girl who had seen him a few night earlier and a couple of bartenders who had sold him some booze. None of them knew who he was, so I figured he had just blown into town a while ago. And blown out again, it looked like. It made me frantic, thinking about it, but I had to begin to get used to the idea that the map was gone, that Riff was gone and Gino was gone somewhere up the river, and that my chance was gone like something you forgot to do last year, lost in the dark of time.

So I gave up hunting Gino and, just as it happens sometimes, when you stop looking for a thing you find it. Only this time it found me.

It was down on the waterfront. I was only about three blocks from where the *Pink Lady* was tied up when a guy came out of the alley

behind me and put a gun in my back. He put me into the alley with my hands at half-mast and the sweat jumping out of my pores. I couldn't see who it was, but I expected it was Gino, that maybe he had got word from one of the joints where I had been looking for him and had decided maybe he better finish his night's work. My stomach felt as if I had eaten a sack of cement a teaspoonful at a time. Having seen Gino work I was scared he wouldn't waste any time talking it over.

With a gun in your back there isn't much you can do. If it's in your belly, maybe, but not when it's in your back. Of course you can make a lightning draw and shoot back under your arm. It's been done, but afterwards they always bury the guy who tried it with most of his backbone missing. So I let him take my gun.

"Turn around, you," the gunman said. It was the big guy who had been in Bryan's. It made me feel a little better. Anybody but Gino. So I turned around.

I wasn't fast enough or it was too dark. I got one hand on his gun while he was trying to stuff mine into his pocket and that gave me a clear shot at his chin. I missed. He clipped me with the gun and led me down the alley with my head ringing.

We went down along the docks another block and then out on the pier and onto a boat. It wasn't a very big boat and it was dirty—you could smell it before you got on deck. The big guy shoved me over to a midget companionway and we went down into a cabin about the size of a phone booth, and there was Gino. He was sitting against the wall, greyer than ever in this light, looking like the second thief on the cross. His long parson's face lighted up a little when I came in, and I saw that same tic which might have been a smile or might not. At least he didn't have that arm's-length gun in his hand.

"WELL, citizen," he said in that hoarse whisper. "Glad you could drop in."

I didn't say anything.

"Isn't he ornery?" he asked the big wrestler. Then to me again: "What's your name, Mac?"

When I didn't reply, he gave a weary nod to the big guy and said, "Flip him, Tim," and the big guy started going over me again, fished my wallet out and went through it.

"His name's Joe Martin," the big guy said. "Martin," the big guy whispered. "Martin. You must be the guy that was with Big Mike down here in the old days. That's how you knew Wake. That's good. I was kind of worried you might be with some of the local mob."

"Okay, Gino?" the big guy said.

"Good," Gino said. "You did good. Now start her up and let's get out in the river."

He got his big gun out then. He had it hung under his coat on a clip, the way they used to hang a sawed-off, the butt down and reversed. The big guy, Tim, went up the companionway.

"Where are we going?" I asked Gino.

"Not very far," he said. "Out in the river. I got to shoot you, boy, and I don't want your stiff floating up near my boat."

"What the hell's the sense of that? You got the map. What more do you want? You didn't even have to shoot Riff to get it, you lousy bum."

That little twitch of a smile flashed across his face again. "Sure I had to shoot him," he said. "Just like I got to shoot you. I got the map. But I don't want nobody on my trail up to Beauford. I don't want anybody behind here to turn the cops on me."

I heard the engine start, idling at first and then going up, and finally the easy feeling of movement, and I knew he had taken her out and that we were moving into the river. Inside myself I felt as cold as dead meat.

"Tough luck, Joe," Gino whispered. "You want to go up on deck now?"

I didn't answer. I just got up. I probably couldn't have said anything if I'd had anything to say. When you get scared, you get sick. I started up the few steps from the cabin with Gino right behind me. I knew it had to be now. Once we got on deck all he had to do was pull the trigger a couple of times and roll me over the side. So it was now or never.

I took the first step and whirled on him, chopping my hand at the gun barrel. It was luck for me it was so long. If he'd had a short gun he could have kept back against his body, I'd never have made it. I hit the end of the gun and knocked it aside, and while it was going *rap rap* at me I got a solid punch at Gino and he went down. He went out, too. The gun fell out of his hand and I grabbed it. I went over him fast, looking for that map, but I didn't find it on him and I didn't have time to look for the secret panel behind the Van Gogh which didn't hang on the wall. I went up the stairs fast.

Almost too fast. Tim was coming to investigate. He saw me and fired, and after the slapping sound of the little .22, his gun sounded like a cannon. He missed. I fired Gino's gun at him and missed, too, and then he was under cover of the cabin and I had my head below stairs. We swapped a couple more that way, and then I got him. He dropped and I heard the clatter of his gun and I swarmed up out of there. He had a hole in his neck under the Adam's apple and he was bleeding through it and trying to breathe through it at the same time.

Back toward shore I heard the sound of a police siren. It sounded like it was in my

ear and I started to sweat again. I jumped into the cockpit and turned off the engine. Then I took the .22, wiped off my fingerprints, and tossed it down into the cabin where Gino was. If the cops came out, Gino would have a hard time explaining how Tim got the slug in him. I could hear the siren of the police launch, closer now, as I went over the side into the river.

It was a bad half hour before I was where I wanted to be. I hate the water at night. You're really alone like that, out there in the middle of the moving darkness. It gives you the horrible feeling that the world is like that, a wide dark river rolling down to the gulf that would be the dark of time, with you on it and in it, upborne marvelously on the oil-slick and the garbage like a rat swimming in a sewer. And behind you is the man you have killed, because each of us is once a murderer, and you hear the blue wail of the police siren like a candy icicle stuck in your heart, and that is the guilt you carry, and you roll down, riding the darkness and the deep, past the marble tombs where the past is lying in its raftered ease, *in pace*, and past the sleeping sailors on the ships, the guiltless men who carry their lives in their hands. A bad half hour, and all your life it's like that.

**W**HEN I got to the *Pink Lady*, she was all dark, but I waited near the ladder at the stern, listening. I was quiet as a drunk in church, going up the ladder and along the deck. I might as well have had a brass band along, because when I got to my cabin after congratulating myself at making it without waking anyone, there she was.

She was sitting on the bed, looking very comfortable, smoking one of my cigarettes. I just stood there and looked at her. The water ran down my legs and onto the floor and made little puddles.

"Been swimming?" she asked lazily, shaking back that cloud of black hair.

"Sure," I said. "I do it every night."

"People usually take their clothes off first."

"I like to be different."

She nodded and lit a cigarette for me. It went soggy in my wet hands and after a couple of drags I put it out.

"I'm going to take a shower," I said.

"Fine," she said. "Fine."

I got a towel out of a drawer and a pair of dungarees. She was still sitting there looking lazy and amused. I took the things and went into the head. While I was taking the shower, I tried to figure out what she had come for. Then I gave that up and tried to figure out what I should do. If the cops got Gino and that gun, they might decide to fix him up for the shooting of both Riff and Tim. I hoped so, but I couldn't be sure. It came back to

what I had been thinking earlier, that I would have to blow out of town as fast as I could. I wished Sherry on the devil. I wanted her out of the way now. I wanted to gather up my stuff and go.

When I got through in the shower, I put the dungarees on. I looked at my head in the mirror. Under the shower I had got the oil and the blood off, and where Tim had hit me there were a couple of ugly bruises and a slight cut. I put some iodine on it and went back into the cabin.

"Now," Sherry said, "what's this business? You didn't fall off the dock."

"I went for a boat ride and had to swim home."

"On the level."

"On the level it's none of your damn business."

"All right," she said. "It's none of my business then."

I went over and got a cigarette and lighted it. She patted the bed beside her and I sat down. That was when she saw the lump I had over the left temple. She put her hands on it gently as if she thought maybe my skull was cracked like a dropped egg.

"Is this none of my business, too?"

"That's right," I said.

"All right, then. You want me to go?"

"If you would be so kind."

She got up and stood over me. She had a flaring black skirt on with pockets in it. She stuck her hands in her pockets and rocked back and forth on her heels.

"I thought you'd like to have me here," she said innocently.

"I don't like to have you put the needle in me," I said. "I've had enough of that from you."

"Is that what you thought?" she asked. She tried to look demure but she only succeeded in looking amused. "I kicked the door down, too, baby."

"Don't give me a bad time," I said.

"You're a fool, a damn fool," she said.

"I'm a fool then."

She leaned over and kissed me, fiercely, as if she were angry, and all the things I had been feeling for her seized hold of me and I felt as if I were breaking up. It was like drinking ether, or like being young again.

\* \* \*

Later, I told her about my troubles. About part of them, anyway. I didn't say anything about Riff, or about Big Mike, or about Gino or Tim or the money. I just told her I was in a jam and had to get out of town fast. It was something she seemed to understand. I guess whatever it was, she didn't figure it was very bad.

"You used to work here before the war," she asked.

"Yeah, I used to."

"You used to run liquor?"

"What gave you that idea?"

"A lot of them here, men with fishing boats, guys who work on some of the yachts—they used to do that."

"I guess that's right." If she wanted to think I was in bad with some of my former associates, let her think it. It was better than the real thing.

"Don't worry, honey," she said. "We'll get out of here. We've been talking of going up-river so long it might as well be now."

That would be crazy. That would be like putting myself in a trap.

"I think I better just drift out of here," I said.

"You *want* to go away?" she asked sharply.

"I don't want to go anywhere now," I said.

"Because of me?" she laughed softly.

"Because of everything."

"Because of me?"

"All right, then. Because of you."

"Why should that be so hard to say? You like me, don't you?"

"I like you all right," I said. If it had killed me, I had to admit it.

"It isn't so hard to say," she said.

"It doesn't change anything. I've still got to get away."

"Why don't you tell me what it is. It can't be so bad."

"No. I've just got to go."

She put her arm across me and kissed me lazily.

"You're coming up the river, aren't you? You aren't going away, are you?"

"No," I said finally. "No, I'm not going away."

But later, lying there in the dark and hearing the slow slap of the water on the hull and not being able to sleep, I knew I should get on a train or a bus while the going was good and get out of there. Or better yet, grab a ship and get out of the country. If they hadn't got Gino out there on the river, they might get to me soon enough. Or Gino could give them a tip.

Waiting there, staying on the *Pink Lady*, was like trying to relax in the electric chair. Why didn't I go then? Why didn't I take up my stuff and get out of there? I knew it was crazy, but I knew I was going to stay. Having Sherry made me happy in a way I had never been. I just wanted to keep it that way. It was crazy, I could see that. I could step away from myself and look back at me, Crazy Joe Martin, with his dumbstruck eyes all a-dazzle in a weather of happiness. When I stood outside like that, I knew it was no good, knowing my luck and the kind of people we were,

Sherry and I. But I couldn't stand out in the cold like that very long. I stepped back into the weather of happiness and became Crazy Joe Martin again and forgot about everything but Sherry. It was funny. We hadn't talked about each other at all, the way people do when they're crazy about each other.

\* \* \*

We got started early next morning. When Cyrus III came up with his decanter of Scotch we were miles up the river. He didn't even seem to notice we'd left the dock. As long as the liquor held out, he wouldn't care if we sailed into hell.

When Sherry came up, I told her the whole business. About Riff and Gino and the map. All of it. It hit her hard. For the first time I saw her excited. The laziness went out of her and that something I had sensed below the surface in her came through and it was hardness. She saw the whole thing better than I did.

"We can follow Gino from Beauford," she said. "Those river rats will know where he went. We won't need a map. We'll find him and hijack him. You'll have to kill him, Joe."

I felt a coldness coming into me. Her tone had been as casual as a pawnbroker's. She gave me a funny look.

"You're scared," she sneered.

"No," I said. "No." But I was. Not of Gino, but of deciding to drop him, deciding it in cold blood. That scared me, and I hated having Sherry suggest it. But we had to have money. I was broke. Sherry was broke. Even her rummy husband, Cyrus III, was broke. I had to have Sherry, so I had to have the money. When I began to look at it that way it was almost as simple as breathing.

It was a nice day on the river, all of it, but it didn't end nice. We anchored at dusk and when I went below, Cyrus had his ear in the radio, getting the news.

"So," he sneered, turning the switch. "You're a murderer. Sherry's tastes get queerer all the time."

"Don't ride that too hard," I said.

"Well," he shrugged, looking meanly out of his wet, yellowish eyes. "What's a murder among friends and lovers?"

I hit him and he went back across a table, upsetting a square decanter and spilling four dollars and sixty-five cents worth of good Scotch. I grabbed the decanter and swung it up. Blount squealed weakly. I put the decanter down and went up on deck. I was trembling because I had been so close to killing him.

Later, in the full dark, the two of them came out and walked back to the stern and I went down to get something to eat.

Somehow, Gino had managed to put me in the soup.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### All the Dead are Strangers

**A**FTER I got done, I went up on deck again and this time there was nobody there. It scared me and I made a quick run for the stern. The only thing left there was the Scotch decanter, tipped over and empty. A gasp, a kind of water-logged shout, came from in the river, and then I could see something bobbing out on the dark water. I kicked my shoes off and dived over. I came up and swam hard toward the place where I thought I had heard the sound. Then it came again, a little off to the left, and I cut over. I had expected it to be Blount, but it was both of them.

They were grown together like the roots of trees, and they were scared and fighting, pulling each other under. I got up to them and got hold of Blount and pulled him away. His face was a white blur, but in the weak light of the boat's riding lamps those wet tawny eyes were crazy with terror. He fought me as if he thought I was trying to drown him, getting his hands on my throat and almost taking me under. I broke the hold and hit him as hard as I could, under the circumstances. He quit fighting, and I got an arm under his chin. Sherry seemed to be doing all right. She was still afloat, anyway.

"Can you make it?" I called.

When she didn't answer, I decided she could, and started towing Blount in. I had a hard job hoisting him up on the deck, but I finally got him on my shoulder and grabbed hold of the ladder and pulled him up. I dropped him face down on deck in the light from the companionway. He looked like a six-day-old corpse. He was dead to the world, but breathing. Over his left temple, half-hidden by the dramatic dark of his hair, there was a nasty gash with blood coming from it.

I ran back to the stern and dived over again. Sherry was almost in to the side by then. I got hold of her and she went limp and let me tow her to the stern. I carried her up the ladder and put her beside Blount. Then I got some whisky and gave her a shot. She recovered fast enough, but Blount was harder. I got his jaws open and gave him a shot of the medicine. It didn't do any good. When a guy has been pickling himself in it for ten years, the shock value is all gone.

I picked him up and carried him down to the salon and by that time there were signs of life. When he did come out of it, it was sudden. The terror I had seen in his eyes out there in the river came back, and he gave a feeble little bleat and tried to get up. "She hit me," he said. "Sherry hit me."

"I hit you," I said. "You were trying to strangle me. I had to knock you out to pull you in."

"You tried to kill me," he gasped. "You and Sherry. You tried to drown me."

"Sure," I said disgustedly. "First I push you over and then I jump in after you. How do you think you got out of the river?"

"What happened?" he whispered.

"When I came up on deck I heard you out there and dived in. You were pulling Sherry under when I got to you. I socked you and hauled you out."

"You did?"

"That's what I said. Think you can get to your cabin?"

He tried, but he couldn't make it. The legs that had been like stilts were now like rubber. I got one of his arms over my shoulders and hauled him in and dropped him on the sack. "Thanks, Joe," he said. He didn't even ask me to get him some whisky. I guess he had got a real scare, all right. I had to do the same thing for Sherry. I carried her in and put her on the bed. She was all right now. She stretched and smiled as if she were just waking up, took my hand and rubbed it against her wet cheek.



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"I don't think I'd have got out of there without your helping me," she said.

"What the hell happened?"

"He fell over," she said. "You saw how drunk he got tonight. He fell right over the stern."

"And you dived over to help him."

"Yes. Give me a cigarette, darling."

I looked around that sleazy cabin and finally found a pack in a drawer of the desk. I lit them for us, but our hands were still wet and they crumbled apart.

"You should have yelled," I said, sitting down on the bed.

She nodded at me through the smoke, her eyes big and serious. Even now she was beautiful. Her hair looked like a tar road in the rain.

"I tried," she said. "Anyway, thanks, darling."

"You don't have to say that," I said. "If you had gone down out there—well, I wouldn't care what happened then."

"Wouldn't you, darling?" she asked. She pulled my head down and kissed me, and it was like the first time again. I forgot about earlier that evening when we had the fight over Gino.

"You better get a shower," I said. "I want to get some dry clothes on."

I didn't go down to my cabin, though. I went up on deck and back to the stern and found the whisky decanter, and brought it down into the salon. I looked at it and put it on the table. Then I got a bottle of Blount's liquor out of the cabinet and poured myself a big load of it and looked at the decanter some more. Finally I picked up the whisky and the decanter and took them both down to Sherry's cabin. I put them on the table, where they made a very interesting still life, and waited for her to come out of the shower.

She was wearing a white terrycloth robe, and I had to take another drink to keep my guts together. She was a little surprised to see me back with my clothes still dripping and forming little puddles on the floor.

"I came to get the straight of it," I said, "what happened up on deck?"

"What do you mean, Joe?"

"Blount, I mean. Did he fall off the stern, or did you crack him with the whisky decanter?"

"Are you crazy?"

"Look, Sherry, he's got a nasty cut on the back of his head and there's blood on this cut-glass blackjack you used. He didn't hit himself."

She got a glass and poured a drink and downed it. It was the first drink I ever saw her take. She put the empty glass down and picked up the decanter, turning it so she could see the blood on one corner.

"All right," she said. "I admit I hit him. He had his back turned and I just stunned him. He grabbed me when he was falling and pulled me over the side. He almost drowned me."

Maybe it was the way she said it, even more than what she said, that threw me. It was like a cold hand probing around in the darkness inside me. She spoke about it as calmly as if she were talking of the weather, and I could see coming back into her that same hardness I had noticed when we were talking about Gino. All that lush femininity went out of her and she was as hard as spring steel.

"They did a good job on you in that convent," I said. "Who was running it, one of the Borgias?"

Those big black eyes went over me, hot and light, like a pickpocket's hands. I think there was even a little pity in the look.

"We can't let him go," she said steadily. "He'll have the police after us. He has to go, like Gino."

It made sense, all right.

God, how it made sense. I even thought it was a little funny how something that made sense could also make me feel so sick and lousy.

"Don't, Sherry," I said. "I don't want you to dirty yourself thinking about it. I'll take care of everything."

"You don't give a damn!" she blazed. "You'd let him go, and take chances with the cops, with me!"

"I'll take care of it," I said. And then: "Because I love you." It was the first time I'd said it. I'd always wanted her, but love is just a word. Now that I had said it, I knew it was real and final and it made me feel terribly lonely.

"Do you?" I asked. "Do you, Sherry?"

She came to me and put her arms around my neck.

"You," she said.

Later on, though, I felt rotten again. I knew I wouldn't kill Cyrus. I would just have to blow the country and take Sherry along. I wished we had never heard of the money, that we were just a working stiff and his woman. But that goes haywire too, and anyway we weren't. I would have to double-cross Sherry. It was a bad beginning. Maybe that was why, even with her near me, I felt as lonely as the last man in the world, and it frightened me.

**WE GOT** going before daylight. I wanted to get to Beauford as soon as possible, locate Gino if he had got there, make the play and get out. It had to be fast. The cops might be just one jump behind me right now. I couldn't think about that.

Sherry was up on deck by seven o'clock looking more beautiful than she ever had. She

didn't seem worried by anything. She was tanned a little now and looked even more lush and sun-ripened than before. I wished we could just keep going up the river for the rest of our lives. Blount, when he came up, was surprisingly sober. He kept looking at me funny. I guess he still thought maybe I had put him over the side the night before.

We hit Beauford at noon and tied up at the dock. Beauford isn't very big, but for that part of the river it's a metropolis, and since it was noon, anyway, we didn't arouse very much curiosity. That was the way I wanted it. I went down the dock and tried to get some dope on Gino. I got a line on him from a red-neck in about ten minutes, and without working too hard, I found out where he had gone. I gave this spit-and-whittle guy the story that I was looking over the land for the prospects of rat trapping. He glanced at me skeptically and spanked a gob of tobacco juice down into the dust.

"Y'all ain't no trapper," he said with finality.

"I want to look the ground over and then maybe I'll rent some of it and hire trappers."

"Y'all have to see that money-grubbin', possum-eatin' son-of-a-such-and-such in N'Awlins to rent," he said mournfully. He cut another lick on the block of wood he held and squinted up at me.

"We just want to look the ground over first," I said.

"Hit ain't no use, friend. All the good land, hit's purely owned by Blair down in N'Awlins." He paused to spit. "Damn his coon-dawg, cotton-pickin' bee-hind," he added thoughtfully.

"We'll take a look," I said. "I had a friend who went back in just the other day. Maybe you saw him. Big tall guy. Kind of whispers when he talks."

"He were yere," he said. "Damn fool went over to Bayou Coupé, up India Creek, I heard. Damn fool. Hit ain't no rats over thar. All trapped out."

"Well, take it easy," I said.

He looked up from his seat on a packing box as if to tell me to save my breath. "Hit's purely a waste, yore goin'," he was saying as I left. "That Blair. Damn his money-grubbin', possum-eatin', coon-dawg, cotton-pickin', catfish—" He was still going as I passed out of hearing.

When I got back aboard, I went down to my room and got my other gun and a flashlight. I wished we had some mosquito netting, but there wasn't any, and I had to be satisfied with all the lotion I could find. When I had all the stuff I thought I needed, I went down to Sherry's cabin. She had changed into slacks and a shirt. Together we went to the galley and picked up a little food.

Blount was in the salon again with his bottle. "Look," I said. "We're going on a little expedition, all of us, and I want you to come along without any squawks." I showed him the gun I had. He just looked at it. "Just come along and don't try to give me a bad time," I said. He didn't even argue. He picked up the bottle of Scotch and he was all set to go, but he wasn't very happy.

We took the small boat and got over into the bayou and started working south, following the west shore. Once we got in the bayou proper we made good time, staying out away from the cypress and the water hyacinths that grew in the shallows. When we got to India Creek it was different. It was a deep, narrow, ink-black finger of water going back under the trees, under the Spanish moss, into the swamp interior. The creek twisted and backtracked on itself like an embezzler's testimony. We got into nets of water hyacinths two or three times and had to cut the spinner free. It was hot back there, too, and there were mosquitoes and once or twice we saw cottonmouths. The heat and the mosquitoes gave us bad tempers, but by afternoon we met a couple of trappers and got a line on Gino. They told us he had turned off on a branch a few miles up. We found it an hour later.

We kept hurrying but darkness caught us anyway. We could have gone on, using the flashlights, but I didn't want to advertise our coming, so we pulled in to the first spot of high ground, a hump about six inches above sea level, and decided to camp there for the night. We ate the food I had packed up, and the mosquitoes ate us, and nobody was happy. The lotion didn't help, as it never does, and at last we had to build a small smudge fire. It was while I was gathering more wood for it that Blount tried to get away. He just got in the boat and started to push off and Sherry started to shoot.

**T**HE first shot ripped through the opulent plush of the early dark like a bomb burst in a glass factory. I dropped the wood and started to run and three other shots came one after another before I could get to her and snatch the gun away. I hadn't even known she had one. Her face in the uncertain light was hard and ruthless and her eyes were black holes like the eyeless sockets of a skull. I could hear Blount whimpering in the boat, and I called to him but he didn't answer. He was lying flat on the bottom of the boat. My flashlight picked up three holes in the side of it, a nice triangle, all of them in close.

I got hold of Blount and lifted him out. He was still whimpering, his yellow eyes full of fear, but when I went over him I found he hadn't been hit at all. The first shot must have gone wild and then he jumped in the boat and

the other three had gone into the side. Sherry was still standing there. I could hear her panting breath, as if she had been running a long way, a way I had heard her before.

I went back and got the wood and put it on the fire. Blount had got as far away from us as he could and Sherry lay down on her coat the other side of the fire. I took a place between them and sat down. We didn't say anything. I could hear Blount whimper now and then. He was probably pretty sick, I guess. I was. I suppose Sherry was, too. That's the way we passed the night, three sick souls, and I suppose neither of them slept any more than I did.

She must have hated him terribly. It made me hate him, too, but not enough to kill, not since we were going away. What I hated most was that he could make her like this, hard and hateful and ruthless and a million miles away from me. The way she was now. The closer I got to the freedom of the birds, to love and money, the more trapped I was, the more things fell apart in my hands, the further away Sherry seemed. So that's the way we passed the dark night, sustained on a little shelf six inches above sea level, with ten thousand feet and a million years of the corruption of the continent under us, all of it drifting secretly and slowly down to the Gulf; hearing the sound of everything rotting away, the trees, the swamp-flowers and ourselves; looking up at the calm stars over us, a million miles apart from each other.

Morning finally came, weak and dirty light strained through the ground fog that had come in, like gaslight coming through your closed eyelids. None of us said anything during breakfast, and breakfast was only one cup of coffee apiece. Blount who had slept, if he had slept, as far away from us as he could get, looked lumpy and diseased from the mosquito bites. In a moment when he was away from us Sherry spoke to me.

"You tricked me, Joe," she said. "You're going to leave me with him. You tricked me."

"No," I said. "We'll get away, Sherry. We'll go as far away as we can."

"You tricked me, Joe." The stone-hard face and the hot eyes turned to me. She didn't look like Sherry at all any more, and the hopelessness of her words were contradicted by the beautiful ruthless features.

"No," I said. "No, Sherry." But there wasn't anything else I could say and even that was a lie.

We started up the creek again, rowing when we could and poling the rest of the time. I was still nagged by the idea that we might be going wrong, but an hour brought us around a bend and down to the open water I had remembered from the map. There was maybe two miles of it stretching ahead of us, maybe from a quar-

ter to a half-mile wide. Cypress knees stuck up out of it all over and there were reeds in the shallows and tall saw-grass beyond. We started getting the motor on again and while we worked on it we heard the shots. Over the dead water they came, a scattering of them like a handful of gravel tossed on a roof. While my heart turned over and the sweat jumped out on my forehead, a second burst skipped liked stones across the millpond water.

I looked at Sherry and I could see the fierce belief growing into her face. Blount turned his wet eyes to me, begging to know what it meant. I got the rope in the flywheel and spun it and she started right off.

In five minutes we were there. A rickety catwalk wharf came out forty yards over the stinking water. There was a boat tied up there with a motor like ours, and a large canoe with an outboard attachment. I shut off the motor a long way out and we nosed in quietly, going carefully until I was sure there was no one back on the shore. Then we went in and tied up and got going.

I checked the .38 I was carrying and jacked open Sherry's little automatic to be sure there was something in it. Then I stuck it in my belt and with the big gun in my hand I started up the path, going as easy as if I were walking on electric light bulbs in my bare feet. The path curved away through the grass and the trees like a wounded snake. It took me through a thicket and beyond it was the shack. It was as quiet as a morgue at midnight.

Behind me I could feel Sherry and hear the heavy frightened breathing of Blount. We stood there and looked at the house for a long time. A little smoke went up in the still air and was bleached colorless in the strong sunlight that had come with the lifting of the fog. Standing there, trying to X-ray the walls with my eyes, I began to feel bleached out, too, as if the sun and silence were bleeding me of dimensions and reality, as if I were as powerless as in a dream. The door of the place was ajar and there seemed to be something inside it. I couldn't make out what it was. It was down low, near the floor. It began to look like a face, like Gino's face, and I wondered if he were lying in there waiting. Then it dissolved and shifted and I looked away, but when I looked back it was there again, shapeless and meaningless.

I couldn't stand it any longer. I cocked the gun in my hand and started on a crouching run across the open, expecting the rattle of gunfire. None came. In a few seconds I was against the wall of the house. Sunlight flared and reflected on the window so I couldn't see inside. I went down in a crouch and crawled under the window, flattened myself against the wall again, and got to the door. I was jumpy as a hop-head on his second day in jail. It was



too quiet. There wasn't even a whisper of sound from the house except for the occasional creak of a board as the place breathed. It was harder waiting there than at the thicket. I picked up a pebble and tossed it in the door.

The sound racketed around in the place like a cast-iron bat gone crazy in a bell tower. Nothing stirred. I got Sherry's little gun out of my belt, kicked the door open and jumped inside.

**I**T WAS like being in a slaughterhouse. Gino was down on his side just inside the door with his fancy long-barrelled gun pressed to his middle. The gun and his hands were all covered with blood, and when I looked down I could see that he had had his guts all shot away.

Across from him was a young Negro girl lying all sprawled out as if she were sleeping. Just over her right temple there was a small discoloration, the kind you made when you were a kid by stabbing a sponge-rubber eraser with a lead pencil.

The door of the next room was open and I could see the legs of a man. I went through and there was Big Mike, down on his back with a tommy gun beside him and a briefcase in his hand. He looked a lot older than when I had last seen him, but then that was a long time ago, and he looked very, very tired. I thought he was dead, but he still had a little while to go. There was a little fob of blood on his shirt and his breathing was red and liquid.

I took the tommy gun and the briefcase to the kitchen and put them on the table with Gino's gun beside them. Then I broke open the locked briefcase and there it was, the

money. I didn't count it, but it was in bills, big ones, and the bills were in little bundles and there were a lot of them. I stood there with the freedom of the birds under my hands, the dream that never comes true, but I couldn't concentrate on it for the smell of death.

I went to the door and waved, and Sherry came across the yard on the run with Blount humping along behind her. I caught her on the porch and told her what was inside.

"The money?" she asked.

"It's there," I said. "I don't know how much."

She went in and Blount followed her. He looked at Gino and the girl and started to retch and then sat down in the stiff-backed chair beside the table with a look on his face like someone coming out of shock. I don't think Sherry even noticed the stiff. She went straight to the table and the briefcase. The briefcase reminded me of Big Mike and I went back to look at him. The breathing was even more difficult now and his pulse, when I took it, was as soft as butterfly wings. There wasn't anything to do for him.

There was a bed in the room and I put him on it. At the foot was an open trunk with some letters and papers in it. There was a big lock lying on the floor beside it. I didn't touch anything. I figured that was where Mike had kept the money. I wondered when he had spotted Gino. Maybe he had heard Gino's boat. Anyway, Gino had got the first shots in, dropping the girl and putting one into Mike but not hard enough. The old boy could still swing a chopper, and he put it on Gino and cut him in half. I went back to the other room. Blount was still in a daze and Sherry was put-

It's a Killer-Diller!

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ting the money back in Mike's briefcase. "Why the girl?" she asked coolly, pointing to the floor.

"Big Mike probably had her for the cooking and to bring food in. He wouldn't want to go into town himself."

"Where is he?"

"Big Mike? Dead in bed."

"We're through with it then?"

"All we've got to do is get clear."

"And him?" She nodded at Blount, who was still sitting in his private world looking out like a tired ghost through a dirty window.

"No," I said. "He can stay."

"Let him stay then," she said, and lifted the gun, Gino's gun, and fired. It got Blount at the bridge of the nose and made a plopping sound like hitting a gourd, and he went backward as if he had been leaning too far back and the chair had tipped.

It paralyzed me. I was trying to say, "Don't, Sherry," but my tongue was asleep and I just stood rooted there, hearing her say, "You tricked me," and the long length of gun swung in her hand, and I saw it buck in her hand, and the last thing I remembered was the cold stone of her face which no longer looked like her face, but which must have been one of the faces of the woman I had loved.

**I** SPENT a long time in the dark room of a private black-out after the police brought me back to New Orleans. They thought I would die, but they couldn't let me do that. After the delirium passed and I began to get well, it took me another month to explain it to myself. It shouldn't have taken so long, but then, I was crazy about Sherry. Or maybe just crazy. Because I should have known that to a woman like that, one who had had everything as a kid, lost it all when her old man went AWOL, and then married Blount for security—a woman like that will do a lot just to be sure of where she's at. She won't want to go across the world with a man with the danger of the cops always over her head.

Besides, as she said, I had tricked her. I hadn't killed Blount, and she knew then that she could never be sure of me, that there were things I wouldn't do for her. And maybe, after all, she loved Blade. I don't suppose so, really, because as she said once, love was not very important. But maybe, once she had all of Big Mike's money, she could afford it. Maybe that was it. Mainly though, I suppose, it was because, as she said, I had tricked her.

So she had turned Gino's gun on me. It turned on me and bucked in her hand and a small magnolia of flame bloomed at the muzzle. I was at the heart of that flower. She gave me the whole clip, and when the cops got out there two days later, after she had told

them her story, I was lying there with a row of button-holes across my chest and the buttons lost inside. They're still there, and that's why I was blacked out for almost two months and was expected to die, and, as the saying goes, to cheat justice. By that time they had justice in on it.

According to the story Sherry told, I had terrorized her and Blount into going up the river. I had held a gun on them and forced them to go inland with the intent of robbing Big Mike. She hadn't known why I was taking them back into the swamp, of course. She thought she and her husband were being kidnaped. But the cops found a few gees conveniently hidden in Mike's shack and that established my motive. They never did find the real money, the briefcase full of bills.

After she shot me I saw her only once and then in court. She was with Blade and that was when she nailed me to her cross of lies.

She was a new person then. All that softness and perfection, all that *becoming* which I had loved, was gone out of her, and the hardness and the ruthlessness were in their place.

When I had first met her, she had had potentialities of growing a soul. But that was gone now. I could see it in the hardness of her eyes, which were as cold as black winter water. She was damned—and she knew it. There was no hope for her, no hope at all—and she knew that, too. And maybe that was what she was taking out on me. Blade—he was nothing to her. He'd follow her around while she had the money, and after that there'd be someone else, and then someone after that. I could see in her future a whole host of men, but it wouldn't change anything. For me, there would be the electric chair, and after that, I don't know. But for her there was nothing, nothing at all, and she knew it, and it was killing her.

Seeing her made me feel very bad. Not angry, not as if she had betrayed me, but sad as if she were dead.

The Sherry I had loved was dead, and the Joe Martin that had loved her was dead, and there were two new people with the same bodies in their places. That time when we had been together back there in the dead months was far away. I could look back and see them, Sherry and Joe, and they were strangers. Especially the man, Joe Martin. I suppose that was why, when I was living that time back there, I sometimes had the feeling of unreality, of alienation. It was because she had created the Joe of that time out of her needs, just as her needs had created this new hard Sherry who was a stranger to me. There was no use going over that. It wouldn't matter soon, because all the dead are strangers.

THE END

# ODDITIES IN CRIME

By MAYAN and JAKOBSSON



← Did it ever occur to you what a fine target your favorite beat cop would make in his nice blue uniform, if some super-criminal ever got the notion to rid your city of law and order—by simply bumping off a goodly percentage of cops? Don't think it couldn't happen, because it did. In Akron, Ohio, about a decade ago, four patrolmen were shot down just like that—cluelessly, without motive, on successive days. Nobody knows to this day what might have happened if the underworld had been able to stand by its guns. Police didn't have a case until an anonymous phone tip directed them to look for a man with a scarred hand in New York. They found him, uncovered a five-man murder syndicate that was getting \$250 per head for all policemen killed, anywhere, any time, from an Akron vice ring!

There was one swindle for which George Washington → Parker, ace conman who died some years ago in the Sing Sing prison he once "sold" to an undertaker for \$30,000, never drew punishment. It happened when Joe the Gyp, a fellow felon, died. Visiting the remains at the funeral parlor, Parker noted his friend's shabby coffin, slyly switched Joe's tag to a very expensive box. Joe was buried in style, but Parker couldn't rest easy. He went back to the undertaker, paid for the fine coffin, sadly admitted, "I tried to do it the way poor Joe would have liked—but I never liked tag switching."



← When Mrs. L. Dansby was just a newcomer in Anson, Texas, Mrs. J. T. King, 81, befriended her. Consequently, when Mrs. King died and Mrs. Dansby offered to sing at her funeral, it was thought only fitting. So Mrs. Dansby sang, and movingly. Then, more in sorrow than in anger, she accused Mrs. King's children and heirs of poisoning the old lady. The subsequent investigation indicated poisoning—but indicated, too, that it was Mrs. Dansby who'd administered it! Her reason: she hoped to collect the inheritance if her benefactor's heirs were convicted. This nice little lady is now serving a life term.

Every once in a while somebody pops up to remind → us that lesser crimes than murder often invite the death penalty. In Jacksonville, Fla., two speeders were sentenced to sit for an hour in a wrecked car, in which five persons had been killed.

In Grand Rapids, Michigan, a boastful gent required police protection. The reason: he'd reported to police that a gunman had robbed him of \$75. The gunman in a letter to cops, swore to hunt him down unless he published a retraction, saying he'd had to split \$75 between pals, when the holdup had actually netted him only \$40.20!





When I came up, the boat lay between me and the bloody fire.

# BARGAIN WITH THE DEVIL

By TOM MARVIN

*It was a one-sided bargain the Lath made with me, that stubby pistol in his hand: He let me live—and I let him kill!*

THE ANGULAR shadow of a man's homburg hat floated across the garage doors as I was slipping the key into the lock that Sunday afternoon. I flinched, from surprise, and turned around.

"You're Maddox?" he asked, squinting at my sign on top of the garage. "You own this table water business?" He was a slat of a man in a galvanic blue suit, a rawboned six-three or four. His face was thin enough, even hawkish, for a homburg, and he talked with no more facial animation than a ventriloquist.

"Where's Devon road?" he said. He didn't pronounce it *Dev-on*, as we do in Campion;

he said *Dev-on*, as they say it in Chicago.

I motioned down the beach toward Swanktown, and he picked up his doggy tan suitcase. Watching him turn the corner, I wondered why a stranger would pass the Sunday strollers on Campion avenue and hike halfway down a cobblestoned alley just to ask me the way to Devon.

I went into the garage and loaded the truck to save myself time in the morning. Tanguay's alone took half a load on Mondays. Things were breaking fine; I had a my-way contract with the people who bottled the spring water, and in seven months I had built up a profitable route among the upper-crust families on the East Bay.

Mr. Ring's five packing cases stood in a corner and I debated whether to open one up and borrow a book to read. Mr. Ring wouldn't mind since he was giving the books away, anyway. But then my eye fell on the kicker, propped up on its cart.

If I cleaned it up a bit I could take a spin out to the breakwater. I opened the door for light and air and went to work.

**I** WAS wiping off my hands when the lath in the galvanic blue suit stepped into the garage and closed the door.

"I went that door open, bub," I said.

He sat his tan suitcase on my workbench and leaned against the door, hooking his suitcoat pockets. "And I want it closed, pal."

I threw my wad of waste on the floor and started for him, and then he slid his right hand out of his pocket just enough. "Let's be sociable" he said. "We've got five-six hours to spend together." With his left hand he tossed an envelope at my feet. "Open it, pal."

Inside was a slip of canary paper, with half of a thousand-dollar bill pasted to it with Scotch tape. The bill had been cut jaggedly, like a bolt of lightning, through the picture of Grover Cleveland. On the paper was printed in black ink: "*After 11 p.m. Don't harm dogs. 1000 Devon. On mantel draw. rm.*"

"You peddle table water to all them moneybags over east of here," the Lath said. "Who lives at 1000 Devon?"

"You got me, bub," I said.

The Lath zipped the stubby out of his pocket. "I got you good, Maddox!"

I looked at the gun and said, "Some people named Ring."

"Are they customers of yours?"

"No," I said. I tucked his envelope into my jacket pocket, but the Lath snapped his fingers, grinning. "Come on, pal. Give it here." I flipped the envelope at his shoes and he stooped for it without shifting his shrewd little eyes.

"What's that layout look like, Maddox? Can't tell from the outside, not with that brick wall around it."

I shrugged. What was the harm in that? "Old Man Ring has eight hundred feet on Devon road and eight hundred feet back on the beach. The grounds are crummy with sycamores and gardens and all that. The house must be a million years old. Twenty-six of the grandest rooms you ever saw. If you ever get to see them, bub."

The Lath grinned. "I'll get to."

So I grinned right back. "That twelve-foot brick wall on the three land sides says you don't. Also Mr. Ring's dogs. Two Alsatians."

"Sure wish Ring was a customer of yours. What's the idea of them dogs?"

"Why not? He's got a houseful of paintings, gems, sterling, ivory carvings, tapestries. A vault full of furs too since he's in the fur business. There's twelve thousand fine books in the library. Not counting—" I carefully looked away from Mr. Ring's packing cases and went over and sat on the workbench.

The Lath began to snoop around the garage peering at my kicker, the truck, the packing cases without actually taking his eyes off me. Suddenly he came over to the bench and slammed me on the head with his stubby. It batted me to the floor and I got a big stain of crankcase oil on my jacket.

"So Ring ain't your customer!" the Lath snarled. He let me have the stubby on the side of the head again.

"Those cases don't mean he's a customer," I yelled. "They're full of books he doesn't want any more. I hauled 'em down here as a brace to him and an Army truck from Fort Bruce is going to pick them up."

The Lath took a bar off the bench and pried loose a board on one of the cases. He struck a match and looked inside; then he pounded the board tight and tucked my pry-bar in his belt. "Okay," he grunted. He read the crayon marking on the box. O. O. Ring.

"That Ring," he said. "Double O Ring. I heard of him clear down in—Who lives there with him, Maddox?"

"Bud, his nephew. Bud Ring. And a few servants."

The Lath fished a deck of playing cards out of his pocket. "Casino?" he said. He stood at one end of the bench, near his tan suitcase, and made me stand about four feet down the side. He marked the score on the window sash. He couldn't add very well. In his own favor.

"Suppose we run the kicker up the bay," he said absently. "That should take a half-hour. Right? Then we come in from the lake side in the dark."

I had been trying not to think of that. I could say the kicker was on the fritz, and if he made me spin her anyway I could slip a wire. . . .

"I'll run her," the Lath said, grinning. "I'm an old kicker man."

Well, I could direct him into the wrong pier. Maybe cut into Simon Sweet's landing on this side of The Sycamores. Or take him beyond, into Miss Maude's boathouse. Except—then he might take it out on Simon Sweet or Miss Maude, whatever he was fixing to do. Simon Sweet might be able to handle this hood, at that.

The Lath covered big casino, watching me craftily. "I'll recognize the place, Maddox. Brick wall, you said, and Sycamores on the grounds."

No, there'd been no harm in describing 1000 Devon road. Not much!

"Which way is Sand Cut from here?" the Lath asked.

"North. About fifteen miles up the lake."

"I think I got cards and spades, Maddox. Let's knock off."

We sat on some empty cases until the sun faded. The Lath stepped to the window, studying the dusk, and then he turned and said "Now."

"But—but it's too early," I said. "The note said get there after eleven."

"Grab the kicker, pal. All of a sudden I'd like to get there *before* eleven."

Up the beach halfway to the jetty, some kids were having a marshmallow roast, but they were beyond yelling distance. We slid the boat into the bay, and the Lath set his tan suitcase on a thwart. He was an old kicker man, all right. We headed toward the soft lights of Swanktown, the kicker *put-putting* merrily, the breeze cool, the sky a vast scoop of black.

**C**ROUCHED in the bow, I spotted Beckley's by the purple light burning in their pagoda, and then I could distinguish each bayside estate as we passed about a quarter-mile offshore. The breakwater lay another quarter-mile to lakeside of us, but it was invisible in the night. We passed The Spires and Hartshorn's, and then as we drew abreast of Simon Sweet's anchorage I was tempted again.

I could signal the Lath into Sweet's, and then take my chances. Simon Sweet would have to take *his* chances along with me. He might even enjoy it; he was a hard-bitten gazabo. Once, he'd shot a prowler in the back of the head. There were a few Afghan hounds loose on his place, too, Simon Sweet being a dog-loving, horse-loving, gun-loving guy. If we slanted into Sweet's landing, the Lath would see one leg of that brick spite

wall separating Sweet's place from Double O Ring's, and maybe. . . .

But Sweet had no sycamores. And the Lath obviously was nobody's fool. Why monkey with a buzz-saw? Especially when I didn't know what he intended to do at The Sycamores. Or even what he aimed to do with me.

"How now, pal?" the Lath said.

I looked up with a start and realized it was too late. Already we were abreast of Mr. Ring's grounds. I flashed a hand toward the beach and the Lath cut the kicker. We glided along in the sudden silence, staring at the shore.

"That's 1000 Devon, Maddox? Mistakes cost money."

"No mistake," I said.

"Nice, big, old white house, I hear. With some pretty stone porches. Lovely, ain't they?" He motioned toward the oars. "Row, pal."

Dipping the oars I glanced behind me, sighting for The Sycamores' pier, and then it came over me what the hood was after.

"You're batty," I said. "Those furs are insured. The best dicks that money can hire would nail you quick, bub."

"What furs? Row, Maddox."

"You know what furs. It's been in the society sections all week. Mr. Ring gave a private exhibition this afternoon for his rich pals and their squaws. There's a half-million dollars worth of nice old skins in that nice, big old house."

"Pal, that ain't my trade. Now, pull!"

I started pulling. After a while the Lath chuckled. "You're a whacky jake, Maddox. You don't act like you give a damn one way or another. Ain't you getting a bang out of this, pal?"

"You must be thinking of somebody else," I said.

"You ain't even asked what I'm going to do here."

"What are you going to do, then?"

"And you ain't asked about you."

"What about me?"

The Lath rapped softly, but sharply, on the thwart, and I stopped rowing. We bobbed on the black water, watching Double O Ring's pier, the little white cabin cruiser alongside it and a man striding down from the house, carrying what looked like a chest. He dropped the chest into the cruiser and returned to the pier. I could distinguish Mr. Ring's paunchy silhouette.

Just as I dipped the oars we saw another man come strolling down the pier, and the Lath knocked again. When I saw that this man was wearing a white pull-over and smoking a pipe I gathered a chestful of air, ready to yell. But then I remembered the

stubby in the Lath's pocket and my pry-bar in his belt.

The gangly figure in the white pull-over looked down into the cabin cruiser, and then one of Mr. Ring's Alsatians padded down the pier, growling. The man turned and put a foot against the dog's rump and pushed him off the pier into the water. The Alsatian started swimming back, and the man walked after it, cussing the dog heartily.

"His nephew?" the Lath asked.

"Yes. Bud Ring."

At his nod, I pulled up to the pier and he set his tan suitcase on the wall and we climbed up after it. "Your jacket, Maddox," the Lath said. He put on some chamois gloves and took my pry-bar out of his belt and wiped it with my jacket. He tossed the jacket on the pier.

The wet Alsatian came padding slowly down the pier, growling deep in its belly, its eyes shining like two white-hot nickles. "Talk to him," the Lath said coolly.

I snapped my fingers and said, "Hans," and the growls stopped. The Alsatian still walked slowly, though. It barely got within reach, and then the Lath sank the pry-bar expertly between its ears. The dog dropped, and the Lath beat its head again.

"Now the other one, Maddox."

I was trembling like a man with a chill. "We'll both go to hell first," I said.

He brought the bloody bar down across my shoulders. I stumbled, half-blind with the pain in my back and the fire in my head. He motioned toward his tan suitcase and I picked it up numbly.

We met the other dog, Queenie, the instant we set foot on Mr. Ring's lawn. But I wouldn't talk to her. She didn't have a chance, anyway. She knew me, and that was the end of her—just knowing me, the table water man.

"Stick with me," the Lath said, wiping my pry-bar on the grass. "No farther than ten feet away, no closer than five." He shifted the bar to his left hand and dug out the stubby. "Where are the servants?"

They were on the north lawn, taking down some Chinese lanterns that apparently had been strung for Mr. Ring's society showing of his sables. The Lath herded me around to the west porch and forced the door with the bar. In the yellow light from a window he studied the bar and then, chuckling, flipped it end over end to the lawn. It stuck on its point. But he still had the stubby.

The floor of the west entrance was a gigantic black and white marble checkerboard. "Drawing room," the Lath whispered, nudging me. I carried his tan suitcase down the ballroom, a good sixty feet, with my shoulders throbbing every step of the way. When we reached the drawing room he glanced around

quickly and said, "Bring me that red and white thing on the mantel. The twisted one with the cover."

I was careful with the vase, because Mr. Ring had told me once that it was a Sevres. And then I stood there, sick and helpless and confused, as the Lath stuck his slim fingers into the vase and pulled out half of a thousand-dollar bill cut jagged, like lightning. My bewilderment amused him. He threw his tan suitcase on a brocaded loveseat and unstrapped it. Then he waggled the stubby at me impatiently and said, "You bother me, Maddox. Crawl in that fireplace and stand up."

The drawing room fireplace had a maroon mantel, porcelain or maybe marble. I crawled inside and stood up in a black pit. It was better than a straitjacket. I couldn't see what he was doing, or make a sudden move, yet he could busy himself without needing more than an occasional glance to make sure I was a good boy.

And then I thought wildly: *Don't leave me in here!*

For suddenly I knew what he was doing at the The Sycamores. I knew his trade. I knew the infamous purpose of that thousand-dollar bill cut jagged.

*What a hell of a fire this was going to make!*

**E**VERY tapestried, brocaded, carpeted inch of the drawing room was tinder. Tinder for the highly polished rosewoods and satinwoods, the silken hangings and pictures without price, beautiful things worth thousands for their age alone, but meaning just one thing to fire—food. Mr. Ring's drawing room was a costly furnace in the smartest gold and maroon decor, in the swankiest house in Swanktown. I got panicky and the backs of my knees softened and then. . . .

"Crawl out, Maddox," the Lath said.

I scrambled out like a chipmunk, expecting to see Mr. Ring's drawing room an inferno. But there were no flames, no acrid odors. Only a harsh and malevolent stillness. The Lath kicked his suitcase under the loveseat and we started the long trek across the ballroom floor. We heard a door open somewhere, and then he shoved me into an alcove and crowded in after me. I was within reach of him then, but my shoulders pained so furiously that I could hardly raise my arms. And the stubby was still in his slender hand.

Footsteps echoed in the ballroom, and then Bud Ring shuffled past the alcove. He was wearing the dirty white pull-over and dragging on his duedeon, looking as shiftless as if he were up in his beloved fishing shack on Breeze Point. We watched him reach the drawing room door, and then he stiffened.

I took a quick look over Bud's shoulder. The drawing room was a saffron sheet of fire.

"Nix!" the Lath warned me softly.

Bud didn't cry out. He wheeled, his face showing fear and even anger. Then he ran across the ballroom floor and bounded up the staircase.

"Let's get to the pier, Maddox," the Lath said coolly.

We made the west entrance hall. Upstairs I heard scuffling feet, a gabble of voices, Bud's and Mr. Ring's. More feet. A shout.

"Wait here," the Lath said. "And I mean wait!" Two at a time he scrambled up the staircase.

That's when I ran. I heard a shot, but I only lowered my head. Nothing touched me. I bolted around the house and saw a maid entering the service door with an armload of Chinese lanterns, and I yelled, "Fire!" She scampered into the kitchen like a fawn. I thought in surprise: What a chucklehead, bringing an armload of Chinese lanterns to a fire. Still, I was chuckleheaded myself. For I kept running aimlessly until I tripped and sprawled on the grass. I rolled over and looked helplessly at the body of Queenie, the Alsatian. But I couldn't push myself up. My arms just wouldn't hold my weight, and I could only crouch there foolishly, it seemed forever.

Then the Lath was standing over me, swearing softly.

"Maddox!" the Lath said. He wrapped his fingers in my hair and kicked me erect. "I ought to let you have it right here!" He booted me along the pier to my kicker and snapped, "Climb down."

"I can't," I said.

"Why not?"

"I can't use my arms."

"Why not?"

"That whack on my shoulders. I think they're broken. Or paralyzed. They numbed up on me in the house."

"Jump, then."

I almost lost my balance when I lit in the boat. My arms hung stiff and heavy, just dead weights. "Row," he said.

"I told you!" I cried. "I can't use them!"

He took the oars and pulled out into the bay. "Hurt bad, Maddox?"

"They don't hurt. I can't feel anything at all. Feels as if I didn't have any arms."

He chuckled.

"This is far enough," I said. "Now turn and start the kicker."

"A little farther, pal."

"It's far enough, I said!"

"Farther, pal."

"Turn!" I said. "Turn! Give me a fighting chance!"

"Farther, Maddox."

*Yes, sure, farther. Just a bit more. But not too far.*

Abruptly, he stopped rowing and swung the boat so I could see how far we had come from shore. I could judge it fine, by the light of the burning Sycamores. All the sky over Swanktown was bloody.

"Pretty, at that, ain't it" the Lath said, grinning. "I'll give you odds it was over-insured." He shook his head. "The guy didn't have a chance in there, Maddox. Not even as much as you're getting."

He dropped the oars and lunged at me. The stubby cracked me on the forehead and I went over the side into the bay.

I had to do everything with my feet. I went as deep as I could. And as quietly. And as far. Away from shore. When I came up, the boat lay between me and the bloody fire. He was sitting motionless, looking around him and probably listening hard. I sank again and burrowed toward the lake. Fellow born and bred on the bay is lucky; he knows how to handle himself in the drink, and he knows where the breakwater is.

I followed the mooring chain down to the steps and dragged myself up onto the wall of rocks. My left arm wouldn't rise unless I picked it up with my right. I remember hearing the kicker start up, and then I flopped into a crevice, wriggling around looking for the soft side of the rock. The sky over Swanktown was ruby. And that's the last I remembered.

**F**LYING spray woke me up around dawn.

First thing, I looked across the water at The Sycamores, and it made me sick. I couldn't help thinking: *Simon Sweet can buy his favorite address for a song now.* One Thousand Devon was just a handful of trees, a pier, a brick wall and some nice little old stone porches. The rest was ash and rubble, all those handsome possessions of Mr. Ring that many people coveted and I admired, although I didn't understand them. Some folks in Campion would be glad of that fire, the folks who hated anyone who owned more than they did. I wondered what Simon Sweet was thinking, looking down from his eyrie across that brick spite wall at The Sycamores in ashes. Simon Sweet, with the vanity of a ruthless man, had wanted that address for his own. One Thousand Devon. He had made his offer. Perhaps Mr. Ring wouldn't laugh at it now.

A man was rowing out from the Hebb Park pier, two cane poles jutting out over his dory, and I went down to the steps to meet him. "Are they biting, mister?" he said, handing up his poles and bait pail, his lunchbox and morning *Journal*. I glanced at



the headlines, and then the paper blew out of my hands into the bay.

"Sorry," I said, my teeth chattering.

"I already read it." The fisherman looked at my clothes. "Say, you fell in the drink? Where's your boat?"

"My wife rowed me out. Coming back later. And then I slipped off a piling with my pole and bait."

He fixed a hellgramite on his hook and lighted his pipe. "Man, the village sure had a wild night, hey?"

I wanted to talk about that newspaper. "What was that all about?" I said.

"You don't know?" My ignorance pleased him. "The Sycamores burned down. Arson. And Double O Ring was murdered. Shot in the head. Every cop in the Midwest is looking for the guy."

"I hope they nail him," I said bitterly. I watched the *Journal* floating shoreward. "A guy named Maddox, hey?"

"Maddix or Mannix. You know him?"

"I buy table water from him. Are they sure he did it?"

"Open and shut," the fisherman said. "This guy was peddling spring water to The Sycamores, see? And all the time he was stealing stuff and stashing it in his garage. They found a big boxful there."

"One box? I heard he had five cases of books."

"Books, my hat! He had a box of jewelry and furs and things like that. All hand-picked."

"Maddox didn't look like a crook," I said.

"Open and shut. Double O Ring caught him prowling the grounds last night. He shot Double O and set the house on fire. Got away in his kicker. They found it drifting off the jetty." The fisherman spat into the bay. "Open and shut. He dropped his crowbar on the lawn. It had his initials stamped on it. He dropped his jacket on the pier. Know what he used that crowbar for? To kill them two pedigree dogs."

He flipped his line and said sourly, "The heel. Killing them two pedigree dogs."

My teeth clacked like bones. "Will you lend me your dory?" I said. "I need some dry duds." He waved his hand and I went down to the steps. The first pull on the oars almost passed me out. The pain in my back shot up into the top of my skull, biting like ammonia fumes. But I made myself row, and it got better; the muscles loosened. Then I noticed I wasn't far from Mr. Ring's cabin cruiser. There was a .25 Colt in the flare compartment fitted into the port gunwale. I'd piloted him around the lake often enough to know that.

I lost one oar, as if by accident, and bumped it around until it bobbed against the cruiser. Nobody was aboard her, and there was no chest in sight either, such as the chest I'd seen Mr. Ring stow away the night before. I held onto the coaming while I fished for the oar, and then I pulled up the bay, feeling like a fly on a needle. I imagined a hundred eyes had seen me slip that Colt out of the flare compartment. Luckily, nobody but a few servants were astir that early.

At Hebb Park I beached the dory and walked up the slope, still wet with dew. At Sand Cut road an early-rising grocer was taking in his milk cases, and I ducked into a corn field and lay down. The pain in my skull still tasted like ammonia. It was a hard wall of agony to think through. All I could think of was: *Call it a day. The cops might believe you. After all, the chief buys table water from you.* The laugh did me good, but the weight of the Colt in my belt felt better.

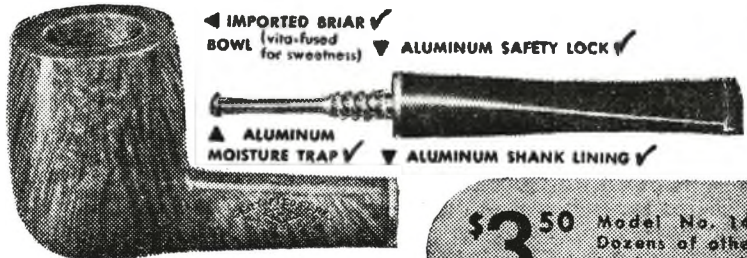
A tobacco truck passed the grocery heading toward Sand Cut. If things had been different, I'd be headed that way myself about now to leave half my load at Tanguay's . . .

*Sand Cut. . . The Lath had said: "Which way is Sand Cut from here?"*

*It's north, bub. Fifteen miles. And there's nothing there but Tanguay's resort. A lunch-room and twelve fishermen's cabins, where a man can relax after his day's work is done. . .*



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A bakery truck stopped at the grocery and I recognized the shrimpy figure of the driver as he carried a rack of pies inside. His name was Mel and we'd met a few times at Tanguay's. When he came out of the grocery and turned his truck around I scooted across the road and hitched on. The bakery truck had a narrow door in back and a jump step. Because of the bread cases it was almost impossible for him to see me from the seat.

The jolting helped to clear my head; I began to think through the ammonia. Starting with that picture of Grover Cleveland cut zig-zag, an infamous fee for arson. *Simon Sweet hadn't paid it.* Sweet hadn't set foot inside The Sycamores for years; he couldn't have left the other half of the bill in Mr. Ring's Sevres vase. *Bud Ring hadn't paid it.* The Lath's instructions were to avoid harming the dogs, but Bud didn't give a tinker's dam for those dogs, or any dogs, or anything but Bud Ring and his fishing shack up on Breeze Point.

So the answer was inescapable. Mr. Ring had bought his own fire.

Double O Ring had easy access to his own vase, and he had been fond of his Alsatians. And those packing cases clinched it. He had duped me into carting off for him some of his pet and most precious treasures, so he could collect insurance on them along with the rest of his art objects. . . .

The trunk veered into Tanguay's gravel road, and I hopped off into the ditch. Mel was out of the truck before it stopped rolling; he dashed into Tanguay's without carrying in the first rack of pies as he usually did. I hesitated, watching him; then I slipped down to the cabins.

**YOU COULD** tell where the real fishermen had slept; they were out on the lake and their bedding was airing. You could tell the vacant cabins; doors closed and shades up. But the doors of the end cabin were closed and the shades down.

I took the Colt out of my belt and gently cracked the rear door of the end cabin. Instantly a hairy fist holding a stubby shot out into my face. "Let it fall, Maddox," the Lath said. He picked the Colt off the stoop and motioned me inside.

He was wearing the trousers of his galvanic blue suit and a skivvy shirt; his feet were bare and the beard was darkening on his hawkish face. On the oilcloth of the kitchen table lay his chamois gloves; a pack of smokes, a couple tea cups and the morning *Journal*. "Paralyzed arms, hey?" he said. He shook his head, grinning. "You aren't such a whacky jake as I thought, are you?"

"No," I said.

"You think you know what's going on?"

"Yes."

"What's goin on, pal?"

"A man hired you to burn down a house at One Thousand Devon. He didn't tell you who he was or how to do it. He just left the other half of your fee inside to make sure you showed up. So you decided to snatch a delivery man who knew the grounds and was familiar with the dogs, to get you inside. You noticed my sign on the garage and you figured a table water man was a good bet to have customers in Swanktown."

"It was a good bet, pal."

"You didn't know it was Mr. Ring himself buying his own fire until you saw what was inside that packing case. You decided to go through with it, collect the other half of the grand and then shake down Mr. Ring. You killed him and pinned it on me. . . ."

"Whoa!" the Lath said. "Here's where I get off the bus. Why kill a guy you aim to shake down?"

"But you said in the kicker that you didn't give him a chance!"

"I said he didn't *have* a chance, pal."

"All right," I said desperately. "You killed him so you could get away with that stuff in my garage. And the stuff he had stashed in his cruiser, in that chest."

"Just some furs," the Lath said.

"See!" I cried. "A foolproof hijack. Everybody would think those things had burned. So there'd be no search for them. Or for you, either. I'd wash up on shore about Wednesday. No bullets in me, just a bruised back where I fell out of my kicker and hit a rock and drowned."

"Don't turn around!" Bud Ring said.

He stepped out of the cabin bedroom, holding a target pistol on the Lath's back. Bud squeezed the trigger, and the room filled with sound. The Lath grinned at me for the last time, and then he winked both eyes at once and the grin hardened forever. His chin hit the oilcloth and he fell on his back, the blood running down the fine hairs on his neck and soaking into the skivvy shirt.

I stood still as stone; I'd seen Bud Ring use that pistol before, sitting on the bluff at his fishing camp up on Breeze Point, plinking corked bottles as the waves flung them on the beach. . . .

The ammonia fumes fanned up in my head again, but this time I could think through. I even understood why there were two tea cups on the table. Bud had come out here to talk with the Lath, too. . . .

"Bud," I said. "Bud, whatever you're thinking—*stop!*" I knew what he was thinking. He'd say, *I caught them in this meet and they tried to shoot it out with me.* "Bud, you're too late. The sheriff knows you're

(Continued on page 94)

# DEAD HEADS ON DISPLAY

*No sportsman in the Orient could boast a finer trophy*

● *room than Fernand Jouvét, who mounted on his walls—* ●

*the heads of his friends!*

“AND THIS,” said the retired colonel, “is an unusual specimen of Rhinocerosus Indius or—heh, heh—Indian Rhinoceros. Lifelike, what?”

Fernand Jouvét frowned thoughtfully at the head of the stuffed beast that protruded ferociously from the wall of the Britisher’s den. It reminded him of something, but what? Oh, of course. The rhinoceros looked exactly like the sportsman who had shot him!

A faint, sardonic smile flickered across the man’s thin features as the amusing idea crossed his mind, but it was replaced almost immediately by an expression of moody discontent. In Paris, he was at home. In Berlin, London, Vienna, Rome he could manage very well. But here in Indo-China, there seemed to be absolutely no niche for a cultivated, educated Frenchman.

It seemed that here one’s social standing depended entirely on what kind and quantity of ferocious game one could point to on the wall. Talk at high noon or midnight was mostly about guns—bores, sights, barrels and what-not.

Even the charming Lady Marjorie, daughter of Sir Hugh Cummins, the tea king, clearly liked her double-barrelled shotgun better than the roses he had ordered all the way from Shanghai. The Frenchman smoothed his throbbing temples. What was this idiot saying?

“Oh, yes, I know a bit about guns,” he answered the colonel’s question, but he did not go on. That was his trouble—he knew entirely too much about guns.

It was in 1897, nearly two years before, that his family, once his trial was over, had hurriedly pulled diplomatic strings and had him exiled here. Dueling was still winked at by the authorities as a gentleman’s last recourse but when the youngest son of the Viscount Jouvét had killed three men in a year on the field of honor, the police had felt it necessary to investigate.

What they found was not good. Details were hushed up, but there was something, vague and yet horrifying, about each of the deaths. At any rate, Jouvét went on trial, not for his life, but for his sanity. That the finding of “normal and rational” was incorrect was soon proved.

Jouvét imagined himself the most irresistible of men. It was when he saw the obvious preference of the Lady Marjorie for a young man named Glen Curtis, who was attached to her father’s tea company, that his dangerous hate was kindled again. Young Curtis, it seemed, also hunted and had a game collection that rivaled the colonel’s. Marjorie often mentioned it admiringly.

The long, soggy, steamy, dank winter season closed down on the tropics, and the little European social colony on the banks of the muddy Tonkin River lost track of one another. No one ever went out or entertained in such abominable weather.

With the first rays of spring sunshine, it was the Frenchman, Fernand Jouvét, however, who opened the social season. He delivered each invitation with a personal call, saying in his charming way, “I want you to come and see *my* trophies! I’ll wager you’ve never seen any game like this before!”

Talk buzzed. Perhaps Jouvét had gone to Africa for the winter. Or into the interior.

Jouvét waited until all his guests were assembled. Then he led them into a room that had once been his library. Now it was a den, as British and oak-panelled as any of them. And mounted over the fireplace, in perfect imitation of the colonel’s rhinoceros, were his three gruesome, incredible trophies—the heads of the colonel, Sir Hugh, and his rival, young Curtis.

“Lifelike, what?” asked the insane Frenchman, grinning proudly.

Still amused at the stunning effect of his macabre crimes, Fernand Louis Jouvét heard his own death sentence in Paris on October 3, 1899. He was guillotined a month later.

● ● **By JIMMY NICHOLS** ● ●

# A FAVOR FOR CHARLIE

By TALMAGE POWELL

I FELT a lot better now. The cabin, set in a cleared place in the mountainside with some straggly corn growing in the rocky land around it, had been deserted. I guess the family had took a day off and gone to town in their flivver. I'd broke one of the little windows, which was barely big enough to squeeze through. I reckon it was stealing, but I helped myself to a bellyful of grub, a change of clothes—and a pistol that I stuck in

the waistband of my denim pants, and a carbine that I carried in the crook of my arm. I loaded a couple pockets with live ammo. I patted the carbine barrel and decided that if they got wind I was in this neck of the hills and cornered me, they'd better come shooting.

I got out of the cabin just before nightfall. I hoped the folks that owned the place would understand, somehow. I wouldn't have been stranded if the man I'd been traveling with



I watched him, and my finger got tight and cold on the trigger.

*Crackling, burning death waited for me in that quiet Georgia countryside. . . . But I had to go back for three reasons: To get Lucy, to get the money—and to kill my brother Charlie!*

hadn't hit me in my sleep and made off with everything I had. No matter how lonesome I was, I should have knowed better than to travel with a hill renegade. I admit that I was on the renegade trail myself, but I ain't that kind. I wouldn't hit a man in his sleep, and I take a bath, if I have to do it in an ice-cold creek, rubbing myself down with sand.

It was pitch-black now, and I looked out over the old Smoky Mountains and they were black shadows in the night, rough, ragged shadows, reaching as far as I could see. There was no stars, and no moon, and the black, thin air was heavier than usual tonight and damp, like it was going to rain tomorrow.

I came on down the mountainside, moving through underbrush and brambles, the trees making a roof over me. It had been more than six months since I'd come down this trail. Time for a lot to happen. Time for things to cool off. I was hoping people were thinking that I'd never come back to these hills, especially Sheriff Zack Courtney. But I'd been aiming to come back the whole time, for three things. To get Lucy. To get the money. To knock my brother Charlie's brains out.

I busted out of the timber line. The clouds parted some. Moonlight made the night a little less darker. I was at the edge of a section of low, rolling hills that stretched away in the night, sort of like a valley, with high mountains all around. I started down through a cabbage patch. Charlie and the old man had planted while I'd been gone. Just ahead of me, a rabbit went bouncing away in the night, and I heard a whippoorwill squawling off somewhere.

At the end of the cabbage rows, I squatted on my haunches and looked at the clump of trees where the house stood. I couldn't see the house because of the night and trees, but I knew it was there. I could see a flicker of light through the trees. It gave me a terrible feeling.

I moved over the sloping land at an angle to the house. A shadow came snuffling across the yard. It was the big, red hound. He began yelping like he was glad to see me. He reared up on me, his big paws chest high, trying to lick my face. I twisted my head and cracked him on the nose. He yipped softly, jumped down, slunk a few feet, and turned to look at me. I'd hurt his feelings more than his nose, but he was quiet now. The whole night was quiet. There wasn't any commotion at the house. After a while I went on across the hillside.

**I** SPOTTED the big, rotted stump in the dark. It had once been an oak a grown man would have trouble reaching around, but lightning had hit it, and Pa had sawed it down four winters ago. Now the stump was

all rotten inside, with a whole nest of ants around its dead roots. The ants didn't bother me when I dropped on my knees and began clawing out the soft dirt and rotted wood.

I started sweating. I felt the cold of the night knifing into me. I kept digging. Before long I had scooped out a good-sized hole under the north side of the stump. I knew I was already deeper than it had been, but I didn't find it, and kind of lost my head. I was cussing under my breath, sweat running down in my eyes, tearing at the dirt and rotted wood now like a crazy gopher.

It wasn't there.

Then a flashlight beam pinned me to the stump. The pistol was in my waistband, the carbine laying beside me. I left my hand drift toward the carbine, easy like, and turned my head slow.

I could just make out her face over the light. It looked like she was crying, and her old, grey head was bent.

"The money ain't there any more, Sam," she said, so soft I could barely hear her.

I stayed on my haunches and said, "Hello, Ma."

I listened to her holding the sobs back in her throat. Then she dropped the light and hauled me to my feet as if I was a bag of rags: She was just about chest high on me, but her arms were strong. She held me and cried for a minute, her fingernails nearly bringing blood out of my back.

"I didn't think anybody had seen me coming to the stump," I said.

"I heard the dog, and it came to me that it was you when nobody came to the house. I knew you'd be coming back for the money, Sam."

I knotted my hands at my sides. "Then you knew about the money. One of you found out, saw something the last day I was here that caused you to look around—until you scratched under the stump. I thought I had hid it pretty well. I thought I was safe, and when I found out different, I didn't have time to stick around and get the money."

She was crying in her throat. "Sam, why has it got to be like this? Why has it got to be a trip back in the night like some hill animal? Why—"

"You know why, Ma."

"Don't blame Charlie, Sam."

"What you expect me to do? I was safe. I was going to wait around until it wouldn't look funny for me to leave. Then I was going to take my money and go. But Charlie had to get his fingers in it. He had to ask around and find I hadn't been in town the night old man Honacker was killed. He had to keep at it until he got me in a corner. Then he stood there with his gun on me, telling me I'd killed old Ezra Honacker, asking me to turn myself

in. He really preached a sermon. He was so self-righteous it made me sick. What's he know of the way I feel? I tell you, Ma, a man has to get the things he wants one way or another. You struggle a lifetime and you see it's all coming to nothing and you get knotted up inside with a fire burning where your brain ought to be."

"A lifetime, Sam? What do you know of a lifetime? So young and desperate to be talking of a lifetime!"

"I had a lifetime here with you and Pa and Charlie." It felt like I had cuckle burrs in my throat. "One lifetime with Charlie is enough! If I had been any slower slugging him that night he had me cornered, Ma, I think he'd have shot me."

"He was thinking of your future, Sam, what it would be like if you kept running. All his life Charlie has worried about you, boy. You've cost him sleep. You've cost him money. Remember the good things he's done for you, Sam. Like the time he rode the mule through a blizzard for a doctor for you. He was the only living thing moving in the hills that night, son. He was the only one who could have got through—and forced the doctor to come back with him."

I swallowed a time or two. "What'd you have to come out here for, Ma? Whatever Charlie ever did for me, he undid it all when he put me on the spot for murder!"

"Murder. . . ." her voice cracked. "It's a harsh word for a mother to hear a son use. I'm glad Pa and Charlie went to town today. I hope they don't come back soon."

I was hoping that at least Charlie didn't—but only for her sake.

She picked up the flashlight, but didn't point it anywhere in particular, just let it make a cold, yellow spot on the ground.

"Ma, was it Charlie that found my money?"

She didn't say anything.

"What did he do with it, Ma,"

"He gave it to Sheriff Zack Courtney, in case old Ezra Honacker had any heirs anywhere."

"Then he really cooked me good!" The way I said it made her grab my arm quick and hard. She never spoke for a second, just stood there and held on to my arm.

Then she said, "It was the girl. She changed you, Sam. She was never any good. It must have pleased Satan the day she was born, a wild, greedy hussy. But you can't know her, Sam. No man could. No man ever knows a woman like her. She's all things to all men, Sam, no matter what the man is—as long as he seems to be able to give her something she wants."

"Let's leave Lucy out of this!"

"No, son." Her voice was old and so tired it ached. She turned and started walking up

the slope away from the house. The slow way she was moving along, I knew she expected me to follow her. I did. I followed her up the rise of the hill, and there at the hill top, I didn't see it at first. Then I did, straining my eyes in the night. It was the skeleton of a house somebody was building. It was in a good spot looking over the meadow, about a short quarter of a mile from where we were standing. It was in a stretch of land where a person could have a fine front yard all hemmed in with a white picket fence.

"Now you'll go, Sam, It'll break my heart—but go quick! The house is Charlie's. He's building it for Lucy."

Ma just didn't understand. To her, Charlie and me were still brothers. It couldn't be any other way to her. There was nothing here for me now—so I should go.

I stood looking at the half-done house, fighting the cold sick thing that came to life in my stomach. He'd put the mark on me for murder. He'd taken my money. He'd taken my girl. Maybe Charlie'd had his eye on Lucy for a long time. . . .

I heard Ma talking, her voice dim and far off, and I looked at her to make sure she was still standing there beside me.

"She's rotten to the core, Sam. But Charlie's like you, like every man she's ever met. He won't hear anything against her. He's blind and deaf and dumb. He's killing himself to get the house done. And that's only the beginning. She'll use him. She'll work him like a slave. She'll change him if she can, the way she changed you. But Charlie won't change. His heart will break, yes, but he won't change—and some day when she's got all she can out of him, he'll come to his house and she won't be there. She'll never be there again. . . ."

I turned around and hurried off down the hill. I guess Ma was watching me. I guess she thought I was getting out of there for good. I wasn't thinking. I was feeling like somebody had poured a dose of red poison down my throat. I cradled the carbine like a baby in my arm. I never had a gun feel so hungry in my hands before. . . .

**IT WAS** just after eight o'clock when I got to the Coggins place. Lamplight was flickering behind a couple or three windows in the old house. I saw the tired, stringy figure of Lucy's ma pass a window, heard a couple of kids yelling their heads off, and the old man cussing in streaks now and then. I didn't want any of them to see me, except Lucy, and I wondered how I was going to let her know I was out there. I waited for maybe half an hour, heard the old man bawl that the water was out, and watched the dark place where the back door opened on the hard, bare yard.

There was a commotion in there; then Lucy came out, swinging a wooden bucket back and forth like she'd like to throw it away.

I could see her pretty well in the moonlight. My throat got thick and tight. She had the kind of a figure that wears a cotton print dress like an extra layer of skin. Her hair looked like honey in the moonlight, waving down to her shoulders.

I moved around the edge of the yard toward the spring house. She never knew I was there until I stepped out of the shadows and touched her.

"Sam!"

I popped my hand over her mouth before the sound got too loud. I let the carbine drop, grabbed her arm, and pulled her over in the shadows of a thicket.

For just a second she struggled. Then she didn't, and I looked at her eyes there in the shadows and forgot everything except that she was alive and I was alive and we were standing here together.

Then I thought about Charlie. Seemed like Charlie was always around, one way or another, to spoil everything. "No noise," I said, and took my hand from her mouth. "Seems like you didn't waste any time when I got gone, Lucy."

"Oh, Sam. . . ."

"You'd better just talk. It's a pretty nice house he's building, ain't it?"

"Sam, you don't understand! Kiss me, Sam. It's been so long. . . ."

"The house," I said.

She started crying, and I thought of oak leaves when the wind is strong. She's lost her wooden bucket out there in the yard somewhere, and crying like that, she seemed so helpless and hurt it was like having a knife in my chest.

"It was Charlie, Sam. And the time you was gone—more than six whole months. I was going to wait, Sam, honest! When they told me you'd tried to rob old Ezra Honacker's lumber mill payroll and he'd almost caught you and you'd had to kill him—when they told me that, Sam, I hoped you'd take me with you. I didn't sleep much for three weeks, watching the yard after dark for some sign of you. Then I guessed I'd never see you again, that you didn't think enough of me to take me with you. It hurt, Sam. It made me want to hate you. But I couldn't do that. I could just go on remembering that I'd been slighted and trying to build up hate where there wasn't any."

"And Charlie?"

"He said you was never coming back, Sam. He said there was another woman you'd talked about. He told me all kinds of lies, Sam, said you'd just played me for a fool. He—wanted me, Sam."

"Keep talking, Lucy."

"He—he started seeing me. I hated him for what he'd done to you, Sam. I wanted to hurt him. Then I thought if I could manage to get him to say he was lying about that evidence against you, you'd be safe. I'd get him to say he'd fixed up that evidence himself to get you on the run, because he wanted me. Then I'd hunt you, Sam, and get you back."

"You'd never get Charlie to say a thing like that."

"But I thought I could, Sam! I thought I could get him to do anything!"

"Even build a house?"

"I wouldn't have married him, Sam! There's never been anybody but you and never will be! I was doing it for you, Sam!"

I wanted to believe her. I wanted to believe her so bad clammy sweat broke out all over my face. It was true. Everything she had said was true. But—I kept hearing Ma's voice when we had stood on the hill top.

Lucy was so close to me I could feel her breathing against my face. She was looking right in my eyes, and her teeth started chattering. "Sam!" she said, "Sam. . . ."

"Lucy, you'd better be telling me the truth."

She put her arms around my neck and sort of wilted against me, like she was weak all of sudden. She had the shakes bad. "I wouldn't lie to you, Sam!"

"Then we'll get out of here tonight."

"But money, Sam. . . ."

"I can get money. I can get more money than you ever heard of."

The shakes stopped then. But she didn't take her arms from around my neck. She looked up at me. "I know you can, Sam. I can feel your heart beating."

"You never mind about my heart right now. You just think what you've got to do. Get the water back in the house or they're going to start wondering. Then tell them you're sick and go to your room. Get what stuff you got to have together. Not much, we'll have to travel light. Slip out and meet me at the willow tree beside the creek on Pa's place. You know the spot. I'll try to make it by nine-thirty. But you wait until I get there. I'll be depending on you, Lucy. I love you—but if you cross me, I'll give you the same thing I gave Honacker."

"Kiss me, Sam."

When I got back to Pa's place, I knew him and Charlie had got home from town. I could see the truck parked up close to the house.

That was fine with me.

I could see a lighted window, too. It was open, and I heard voices, Ma's and Charlie's. I got cold up and down the middle of my back and my fingers got like thin pieces of steel. I moved up as close as I could to the window.

I saw Ma standing in there with tears run-

ning down her cheeks. Charlie was standing in front of her, his hands holding her shoulders. He had a pistol jammed in the pocket of his jacket, and he was dressed to go out. His hat lay on the center table beside him.

"... So they know he's headed this way, Ma," Charlie said. "Pa and I heard it in town. We got wind of it almost as soon as Sheriff Courtney."

It hit me then what had happened. That hill tramp had done it. That same one that hit me in my sleep and took my things, spare clothes, pistol and what money I had worked and saved in Atlanta while I'd been laying low. The renegade had got to thinking, got scared I'd track him down and have his hide. He hadn't knowed me, but he'd had a pretty good idea a man traveling the way I was was on the run. So he figured he'd be safer if I was in jail and had seen to it that Sheriff Courtney had got wind that I was in this part of the hills. The tramp could have got my name easy from the things in the duffel I'd been carrying.

Ma was crying harder now. "But you can't go, Charlie!"

"I've got to find him," Charlie said.

When he said that, I brought the carbine the rest of the way to my shoulder. I was standing in the light—right in line with him. Always, Charlie had spoiled things. Pinned murder on me. Stole my money. Tried to take my girl. Now he was hell-bent on hounding me to the ends of the earth.

**I** TRIED to swallow, but my mouth was too dry. It was like trying to swallow my tongue. I drew a fine bead on him, right in the middle of his right sideburn. My finger got tight and cold on the trigger.

"Men can be fools sometimes," Charlie was saying. "You got to understand that, Ma. You got to understand how I love him. From the time he was a little squirt in knee britches, he wasn't like the rest of us. He was smarter, and I was proud of him, Ma."

"Then he killed old man Honacker. I knew it the minute I heard Honacker was dead and remembered the way he'd looked that night when he'd slunk home. I was more scared than I'd ever been in my life, Ma."

My finger moved a little, went outside the trigger guard.

"I was so scared," Charlie said, "I went up behind the barn and got sick. He'd really played hell that time, but there was still a chance. In these hills a court has never been known to sentence a man to death if he walked in and made a clean break and told the whole thing and faced them to take what was coming to him."

"So I guess I was a fool. Maybe he ain't

the smart one. Maybe he's the vicious one. But he's my brother and these hills are going to turn into living hell for him when Courtney gets moving. There's nothing now but to help Sam get out. I've got to find him, help him."

Ma sank down in a chair. "You'll be making yourself a party to it, Charlie. Losing one boy is bad enough, but two..."

"I'll handle that," Charlie said. "As long as he wears the name, he's still a part of the family. We'll have to give him a fighting chance."

My face was wet, but it wasn't sweat now. Men can be fools, Charlie had said, and he was right. I had never understood, never understood at all. I lowered the rifle away from my shoulder.

"I'm glad you did that, son."

I twisted around. Pa was standing off there at the edge of the light spilling from the window. He had spoke very quiet. He'd had a pistol pointed at my belly...

I heard a door slam in the house, knew that Ma and Charlie had gone in another room. He'd be out here in a few minutes now.

Pa looked little and old, with his head snow white and sort of bowed. "We'll help you get out, Sam."

"No," I said. "No. There's just one thing I want now. I want it to be right for you and Ma and Charlie. I don't want any of you mixed up in this thing."

"You—"

"That's the only way I'll have it, Pa. You'll have to stop Charlie when he comes out, understand?"

He looked at me and it made a little of the cold go out of my insides.

"All right, Sam. The way you want it. Just move, boy. Move fast!"

I left him standing there. I headed for the creek and the big willow that spread out over the cold, clear water. I knew she had lied in her teeth. Charlie hadn't made a play for her. When I'd left, she'd started on the next man in line. It was as simple as that.

She was standing under the willow when I got there. I stood and looked at her a few seconds before she knew I was around. I could see she was excited by the way she walked up and down beside the gurgling creek.

I hated her, but I went to meet her. It was going to hurt Charlie for a while, but he'd find the right girl some day for that house he was building. And maybe he'd understand about me the way I understood now about him.

Because I was taking Lucy with me. It looked like a pretty dark road ahead, and she'd travel it every inch of the way.

It was the least favor I was in a position to do for a guy like Charlie.





DR. E.O. HEINRICH

# Master MANHUNTERS

by Ben Nelson & Stokie Allen



## TEST-TUBE SLEUTH

WITH THE AID OF MICROSCOPES, RETORTS AND A NIMBLE BRAIN DR. EDWARD O. HEINRICH, FAMOUS UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA CHEMICAL-LEGAL EXPERT, PERFORMED AMAZING FEATS WITHOUT LEAVING THE LABORATORY.



WHEN 3 BANDITS DYNAMITED AN EXPRESS AT OREGON'S SISKIYOU TUNNEL IN 1923, KILLING 4 TRAINMEN, POLICE SENT HIM A PAIR OF OVERALLS LEFT AT THE SCENE. AFTER A MINUTE EXAMINATION DR. HEINRICH REPORTED: "LOOK FOR A NEAT, LEFT-HANDED LUMBERJACK ABOUT 5' 8", CLEAN-SHAVEN BROWN-HAIRED, STOCKILY BUILT CALLED ROY D'AUTREMONT." ROY AND HIS BROTHER WERE CAUGHT!

FROM CHARRED BITS OF A BIBLE, AN EAR LOBE, 2 MISSING TEETH AND ACID BURNS ON THE SEARED CORPSE IN CHARLES HENRY SCHWARTZ'S EXPLOSION-WRECKED BERKELEY LABORATORY, HE EXPOSED THE MURDEROUS INSURANCE SWINDLER'S NEAR PERFECT CRIME--- AND NAMED THE VICTIM. A MEAN MANHUNTER WITH A TEST TUBE, DR. HEINRICH!



*The dice tables, roulette wheels, chuck-a-luck cages and the rest were bringing in money in a great green tide. . . . So I figured: Why spoil all that, just because my best friend had been murdered?*



I had my hand in the open middle drawer of the desk now, and I was watching Markoff closely.

# AN EYE OUT FOR DEATH

By RODERICK LULL



## CHAPTER ONE

### The Thirty Mile Club

I STOOD outside the Thirty Mile Club for ten or fifteen minutes before going in. It was a good looking place—California ranch-house architecture with well-kept gardens flanking it on either side. It was also remote. While I watched, three or four carloads of people drove up, parked in the lot at the rear, and went in. This was a Tuesday night, an off night, so apparently business was good. Maybe there was something in it for me after all, I thought. Then I crossed my fingers,

*Compelling  
Crime  
Novelette*

mentally. Every time I'd thought that lately I'd crapped out.

It was very pleasant inside. The lights were low and the fixtures good and simple. There was a little foyer with a hat-check booth, and deep chairs and sofas for people who didn't have reservations and had to wait. You went down a few steps to reach the dining room. I could see the little individual lights at the tables and hear a good orchestra playing softly. A tall young man with a white smile and an excellent dinner jacket came up to me and said, "Good evening, sir." He looked at my clothes briefly, and I knew he was wondering what the hell I was doing here in a business suit.

"I'd like to see Mr. Berringer." I said.

His smile went away and came back again, the way you flash a lamp on and off. "I'm afraid—" he began and paused. I saw his body come alert under his clothes. He was nicely put together.

I gave him Berry's note and watched him while he read it.

I knew that note by heart. It was in answer to one I'd written him, and it had come to me airmail special delivery. "Dear Jack: What we talked about in Manila that time goes if you're interested. I could use you. If you have any trouble when you get here just give this to the floor manager. Randolph Berringer."

I thought for a moment about the origins of the note. I'd known Berringer in Manila, where we both wound up after the war, a pair of junior officers waiting to get out. We'd become friends, and once Berry told me he had an interest in a night club. Then we became very close friends and one evening we got to talking about gambling. I told him I had been in the business once in Las Vegas, until a rough run of luck and a crooked partner had finished me. That was when he said he ran a gambling layout at his place.

He'd looked at me and grinned. He was a damned good-looking guy, dark, with beautiful shoulders and very little waist. "It's a pretty big layout," he said. "And it's on the level—just the regular percentage."

I said something or other.

"Drop me a line if you ever want a job. It's called the Thirty Mile Club. That's the way I got the money to start it, in a stud game. The other guy had three sevens. I had thirty miles of railroad, three tens."

"Some fun," I said.

So here I was now. I'd spent six months at jobs that weren't my kind of jobs. I was ready for anything that had some money in it without too much work. I'd written Berry before I got quite broke, and I had some good clothes. That was important; it put me in a better bargaining position. You don't offer

any old thing to a guy who looks prosperous and doesn't act too eager.

The floor manager folded the note neatly and gave it back to me. He said, "Just a minute, please. If you'd like to sit down—or the bar's over there, through the alcove."

"I'll wait here."

He was back in a couple of minutes and I followed him upstairs. A short, broad man was at the head of the stairs. He looked as if you'd have a bad time getting by if he was against it. The floor manager said, "It's all right, Johnson," and the big man smiled pleasantly and moved back to let me pass.

We went down the hall and into a large, dimly lighted office and Berry said, "Jack Morgan, sit down, take it off your feet, have a drink," all in a breath.

It was a handsome office—dark woodwork, walnut desk, plain, comfortable chairs, prints on off-white plaster walls—and Berry fitted it. He looked very good and extremely prosperous. He hadn't put on weight, and he still had those beautiful shoulders. Maybe, I thought, I'd come to the right place at last.

I said, "I see you've got your security out. Did you bring your field manuals back with you?"

"Oh, you mean Johnson. He's sort of first sergeant. You see, history's repeating itself. There are straws in the wind. Want to go to work?"

I was ready for that. I said, "The truth is, Berry, I've got several things in mind and I'm kind of looking around. You know." After all, he'd been as good a friend as I'd ever had, but he didn't have to know I had something less than eighty dollars left after taking the train out here.

"Sure," he said. "I know." His face was sober now. "I could use someone I can trust. I'd give him a good thing. The bad boys are in business again. Just like back in prohibition days, from what I've read about those times. Only people say they work a little smoother now. Anyway, it seems like a good idea to have Johnson around."

I said, "Give."

He spread his hands. "It's the old insurance racket. You know, they come around and they tell you it's mighty risky running this kind of a business these days but it's all fine if you buy their protection. So you cut them in and nothing happens to you. Or you don't cut them in and maybe something happens. The last holdout had a hell of a bad fire a couple of weeks ago. The one before that got pretty well banged up in a screwy looking hit-and-run accident. There's a lad named Markoff who'd interest you. He's intelligent, and he speaks beautiful English. The type has apparently improved since the dear old days in Cicero."

"And you haven't been cooperative," I said. "No."

He got a bottle and two glasses out of a drawer and we had a drink. He said, "My partner quit. He got nervous, and he's made plenty. My wife likes to see a good deal of me, strange as it may seem. I've got some very good boys here with me, but none of them are quite what I want. And they weren't in the Army with me. I never knew them the way you know people in the Army. You understand."

"Yes," I said. This was shaping up.

Berry said, "Have another, and I'll show you the place."

It was a nice layout. The gambling rooms, of which there were two, adjoined, and there was only one door—a thick one, which obviously had something in it besides wood. There were men here and there in nicely fitted dinner clothes who looked as if they meant to keep everything quiet and well-behaved and were capable of doing it. It was early yet, so there wasn't much play. I watched a fat man win two hundred dollars at blackjack, and a thin man lose three hundred at faro. There was a handful of five-dollar players at the dice table. The roulette wheel was idle.

Back in the office, Berry said, "You haven't seen much yet, and I don't want to push you, but if you're interested you're in."

I smiled at him. "Look, Berry," I said. "God knows I don't want to dicker with you, but I've got to choose between several things and I'd like to talk it over pretty thoroughly if you don't mind. I hoped you understand." That sounded fairly good, I thought. It sounded reasonable.

"Certainly," Berry said. "Well, here's what it amounts to!"

At eleven o'clock that night I said okay, and we shook hands and had a drink. Everything was pretty as a picture. I could afford to tip a waiter with that eighty bucks now.

**T**HE next day I started meeting people, everybody from the dealers to the hatcheck girl. There were a number of husky lads with indefinite duties who looked dependable. There was a tall, pretty girl of about twenty-four whose name, Mrs. Munson, seemed familiar. I mentioned that to Berry.

"She's Ted Munson's widow," he said. "He was damned careless about insurance. It just was luck that I happened to learn that. She's good to have here—sort of housekeeper. You know, she takes care of the little details a man overlooks."

I'd known Munson slightly in Manila. He'd been a good friend of Berry's. He'd survived the Pacific war from New Guinea to Luzon, then got himself knocked off by a truck. I said, "I see. The old soldier's home."

Berry looked irritated. "No. It's a real job. It might as well be Helen Munson as someone else."

Berry was a good guy, I thought again. I wondered why I hadn't come out here earlier. Only it never pays to be hasty.

One night he took me to his home for dinner and I met his wife. She was a handsome, brown-haired girl with a casual, cordial manner. She looked like someone who'd gone to a good women's college but hadn't been carried away by it. She seemed the right sort for Berry. I was alone with her for a while when he went out to mix the drinks.

She said, "Berry thinks a lot of you." She was looking very straight at me and I was looking straight back. "I hope you'll like working with him."

"I think I will," I said. That was the truth.

She laughed. "I don't want to seem stuffy, but you might as well know I hate the gambling. It doesn't fit Berry. It's not his sort of thing at all. It's—"

She was all good women's college now and it annoyed me. I said, "Gambling isn't for any particular kind of people. It's in your blood or it isn't, and it doesn't make any difference how you were raised or what you are or how much money you've got. I owned a place once in Las Vegas and I had a former Phi Beta Kappa Harvard professor working for me. His father was something terrific in banking in Boston. This guy shucked the works because he liked to watch the dice roll and the wheel turn."

"I know," she said, and looked at me, hard. "But it's not that way with Berry. He thinks you can fit a square peg into anything and make it fit, if you keep it square."

"Look," I said and laughed. "Don't fool around with those metaphors like that. It's dangerous."

"Not so dangerous as other things," she said, and didn't laugh. She looked worried.

Finally, I met Markoff. He came to call one afternoon when we were working on the books in the office. The intercom buzzed and Berry listened and said, "Send him up." He looked at me. "Markoff," he said, "the insurance salesman. He's in pain."

Markoff looked and dressed like a youngish vice-president of a good brokerage house. With him was a big man with indeterminate features. The big man was wearing a very conservative grey business suit, but looked as if he'd be happier in a bright number, with pants reaching halfway up the chest.

Berry introduced us: "Morgan is an old friend who's with me now. He knows about your proposition."

Markoff smiled at me. "I hope he's given you some good advice, Berringer," he said.

"No," Berry said. "That's still the answer."

No. And it won't change. Have a drink?"

"No thanks," Markoff said. "Let's not have things—unpleasant." He underlined the last word slightly. He looked relaxed, comfortable, in his chair. "It's bad for everyone."

Berry just shook his head.

Markoff made a small, annoyed gesture with his left hand. "Good-bye, Berringer," he said. "Sorry."

After they'd gone Berry looked at me. "Well?"

"Cute chap," I said. I felt uneasy—not scared, just uneasy. Why have things unpleasant when they can be pleasant? And profitable. I'd got my break. I wanted to keep it. I loved the Thirty Mile Club the way a bookie loves the races.

"Look, Berry," I said, talking slowly, knowing I had to be careful. "This place can stand the cut. But it can't stand trouble, the kind of big trouble he might make. It's worth thinking about."

He pushed his chair back and stood up. "The law says gambling is illegal, but I'm damned if anybody can say I'm in a racket. Or having any part of a racket. No. Frankly, I didn't think you'd feel that way, Jack."

"Forget it," I said. "You know about things here and I'm green. Next time he comes I'll tell him to go roll his hoop for you." I was sorry I'd mentioned it. But I just wasn't the crusader type. Not with the profits the place was making.

## CHAPTER TWO

### No Harm in Talking

I CAUGHT on to my job fast. It amounted to general manager. We had a good staff, and everything ran smoothly from kitchen to roulette wheel. The boys knew how to take care of the drunks and the people who were convinced that every card was marked and every die crammed with quicksilver. In those cases, we just gave the customers the cards and dice and told them to take them home for leisurely examination. I caught a new dealer stealing chips and giving them to a friend to cash in at the cage, and that pleased Berry. I was getting along, and I had a small start on a bank account. I bought a car and leased a nice little apartment with maid service. A few years of this and—it was a lovely prospect.

I asked Helen Munson to go to dinner with me and was turned down, but pleasantly. The third time I asked, she said yes. After that it became a habit.

She was nice to be with, the kind with a sixth sense about when to talk and when to be quiet. We used to go to a hotel she liked on the other side of town, where a string quar-

tette played all during the dinner hour. She had the softest voice and the gentlest eyes I'd ever seen, and it was good to sit there and feel prosperous and established, with a good-looking girl and the money to pay for anything on the menu without a strain. She was amusing, too. People would come and go, with me barely noticing them, and when they were out of sight she'd make quick little sketches of them on whatever was handy—the back of a menu or an old envelope. She was remarkably clever at pointing up the details of clothes and features that make individuals of people.

I asked where she'd developed that habit. I could have studied a person half an hour and not seen as much.

"Well," she said, "I wanted to be a commercial artist. I studied for it for years. You get in the habit of noticing things; its mechanical."

"Why'd you drop it?"

She was working on one of her little sketches, and she put her pencil down. "It dropped me," she said. "You have to be very good. I was only pretty good."

I was sorry I'd spoken of it. But I didn't think she had much to worry about. She was making nice money for a woman. She was doing all right. We all were.

One night we got to talking about Munson. She said suddenly, "You know, Jack, it may be a horrible thing to say, but it wasn't going to work. We were married three weeks after we met—because he was going to war, I guess, and because I was lonely and blue about my work. He was nice, and he was good, and it wasn't his fault—but it never would have worked."

"Why?"

"It's hard to explain. He was a kid, and he'd have always been one. He didn't have what it takes to make a man. He couldn't make up his mind about anything and go all the way through with it to the end. He was a nice kid, and he shouldn't have been killed. But—"

It sounded silly, and I let it go. That night I tried to kiss her for the first time. She pushed me away lightly and said, "No. Skip it, Jack. Please?"

"Tell me why it's no," I said.

She shook her head. "I don't know what kind of a person you are. The same way I didn't know what kind of a person Ted was when I married him. Burnt child fears the fire, I guess. I don't know exactly what any kind of a person is around here—except Berry."

That made me a little sore. "So it's Berry—"

"Oh, for heaven's sake." Her voice was sharp, and her eyes weren't kitten-gentle any more. I felt startled. "That's nonsense. I

work for Berry, and I like him because he knows exactly what he's doing. He's generous and he's kind and there's no deception in him. I know where I stand and he knows where he stands. Good-night, Jack."

I said I was sorry. Driving home, I knew my job wasn't enough now. I wanted Helen Munson, too. I wanted to get married and make a lot of money, big money, and be an important person. I wanted all that no matter what I had to do to assure it.

I didn't sleep well for fear I'd angered her. But she seemed the same as usual the next day—casual and pleasant, and as far away as two or three light years.

About that time you could see where Markoff was getting in a few licks. We had trouble with liquor and food deliveries, the kind of trouble you can't quite localize. Two good dealers quit for vague reasons. A woman made a scene in the dining room, shrieking that she'd found a cockroach in her salad. A couple of men raised holy hell in the gambling rooms one busy night, saying that the dealer was dealing seconds when he wanted to keep the top card for himself. A local paper with very unsavory connections made some cracks about the sinful doings at the Thirty Mile Club. Things like that.

Finally, Markoff came back. He came quietly into the office with his omnipresent friend, and they didn't sit down. He said, "Berringer, some of my customers are giving me trouble. They've heard about you not coming in. That kind of news going around makes it damned difficult for me. This is the last time I'm going to talk about it. Let's come to an agreement now." He sounded like the vice-president of a brokerage firm—with a difference. It would be hard to define the difference, but it was there. I had that cold feeling along the spine.

Berry just shook his head. Markoff didn't argue. He gave a quick little nod, put his hat on, took care to turn the brim down just right, and left.

They worked it nicely. They operated on the old, sure principle—if you want to get a man, get him in a crowd. Don't try to sneak up on him in a dark alley—there's too much danger of one observant person seeing you. The more witnesses, the weaker the evidence. No two people ever see the same thing.

Perhaps we were careless. Anyhow, we'd never figured they'd do what they did—at least, at this time. We'd planned on a repetition of the old Chicago pattern—a couple of sticks of dynamite under the steps, for instance. We'd taken precautions against that sort of thing.

It was a Saturday night, and we were jammed. Berry came down into the lobby, as he frequently did, to see that everything

was going all right. They timed it beautifully.

He'd been in the lobby maybe five minutes, talking to people he knew. I'd nodded to him and gone into the dining room to see who was there. I heard the shot.

Somebody bumped me hard when I turned, throwing me against a table. I learned afterwards that Johnson was a few feet away from Berry, but got caught the same way—off guard, and the wind knocked out of him. It took me part of a minute to get back to the lobby. People were milling about everywhere, with women screaming.

It took perhaps two minutes to get the lobby under control, and by that time plenty of people had taken off. Berry had died instantly, shot through the heart. I remember looking at him lying there and thinking we should have figured on this, and I remember feeling that maybe I was dreaming and that it hadn't really happened. But he looked terribly dead. I remember seeing Helen Munson standing at the foot of the stairs with her hand at her mouth. I remember thinking that whoever Markoff had hired to do the job would be making knots by now. I sent Johnson to call the police, and told everyone present that they'd have to remain for the moment.

I went over to Helen Munson and said, "Go sit down in the office. You don't have to stand here looking at him." She didn't move.

I wondered just for a second where this was going to leave me.

**A**FTER the funeral, Marg Berringer sent for me. She looked fifteen years older, but her manner hadn't changed. She said, "I don't want to talk about what's happened. I just want to say this. He liked you. He had faith in you. He left a note saying that if anything happened he wanted you to keep on running the place for me."

I waited for her to go on. That seemed to answer a question I'd kept asking myself. I didn't want to seem callous, or even to feel callous. But the place was important to all of us. You couldn't throw it away like an outworn hat.

"I want you to understand I'm not asking you to do it for the money. I hate the place now—it killed Berry. Never mind that. But if you keep it going, maybe you'll be able to find out who killed him. Maybe you'll be able to do something."

And maybe I'm Superman, I thought, but I stayed polite. I explained how difficult it was—no evidence, nothing, the killers probably six states away, and the guy behind it completely in the clear. It was the longest of long shots.

"I know," she said. "But—you'll try?"

I said yes. I said that business would be slow for a while but should come back. I

said I'd see what I could think up. What else could I say?

We reopened the following Saturday. We did next to nothing, but I'd expected that. I wondered when Markoff would be in to see me.

I was getting ready to go home when Helen Munson came into the office. Without speaking, she laid two sketches on the desk. They were the kind of thing she'd done when we ate at the hotel, but in somewhat greater detail. One was of a woman, the other of a man.

I said, "Very nice. You're improving. What do they mean?"

She looked at me for a long moment. She said, "The night Berry was killed I was on the stairs, coming down. I was almost at the bottom when it happened, moving slowly, because there were people coming up. Just before that, I saw this couple come in."

I saw where she was going. I said, "Look, Helen—"

"Don't interrupt. I think I'd seen them before—with some of Markoff's people. A lot of his outfit used to come here at first, before he made up his mind that Berry meant no when he said no. I can remember perfectly the way they looked—their features, all the details of their clothes, everything. They killed Berry."

I lighted a cigarette. She looked very pretty sitting there, all except her eyes, which were hard and angry and didn't look right with her kind of face. I knew how badly this had upset her—when I'd last asked her to have dinner with me she'd begged off, said she wasn't up to it yet, and I hadn't pressed her.

I said, "Helen, there were lots of people coming in. They come in a stream at that time on Saturday. And why would the killer bring a woman with him?"

"I think he would," she said. "It would help to keep him unnoticed—a single man would be conspicuous. It's a detail, the kind of detail a very thorough person would think of. Markoff's thorough. He's done too well not to be. He'd think of that, plan it."

I wanted to calm her down, get this lunacy out of her head without making her angry. There was a nice, very light scent she used, not the kind of thing that went with cops-and-robbers. I said, "Did you tell this to the police?"

"A little of it. But it wasn't all clear then. I've been doing nothing ever since but think about that moment. The police weren't impressed. They wouldn't be."

"No," I said. "They couldn't be. After all, what is it? You saw a couple come in, one couple out of scores. Berry is killed. You happen to remember how this couple looked, how they dressed. What does it add up to?"

I leaned toward her. She shifted away. "It's a hunch, if you want to call it that. I'll write their descriptions down. Give you the things the sketches don't show, like colors. You could find out if they really were associated with Markoff in any way. Find out who they are, where they lived. You can't tell what you might find out, might be able to do." She took hold of my arm, hard. "Will you?"

I thought about it. Once you start something like that, no matter how carefully you work it, you're starting something you can't see the end of. It could be the buildup to more trouble—to the complete ruin of the place. Then, there'd be nothing more for anybody. Not for Mrs. Berringer. Not for me. The police were working on the case. It was their business. Why should I go and stick my neck out?

I said, "Listen, Helen, can't you see the weaknesses in all this? It groans with them. These people are gone—God knows where. The whole matter's dead. We can't do anything for Berry now. We—"

She stood up. Her eyes were hot and her lips were tight against her teeth. "You don't want to bother, do you?" she said. "After all, you're doing all right. You're making money, you're running the place, you'll make more. As you say, he's dead. So forget him. And everything he did for you."

I said, "Damn it, Helen, I'm trying to use some sense. For the sake of all of us. You, among others. If I ever get hold of anything tangible I'll act. But this—"

She was at the door and it was opening slowly. "Prosperity to you," she said. "You'll do all right." Her voice was tired. "I'll be leaving the place. I'll give the usual notice now, so you can get someone else if you want."

Before I could get up she was gone.

I had a drink out of the desk bottle. I felt shaky, nervous. I remembered the sound the door made closing—a very final sound. She was gone and my damned fool pipe dreams were gone with her. Well, they hadn't made any sense anyway. But why couldn't women leave well enough alone? Why did they eternally try to make people over to fit unreasonable specifications?

I had another drink. It didn't taste well, and it didn't go down well.

I said aloud, "The hell with it. Forget it. She didn't want any part of you, anyway." My voice sounded hollow in the big empty office.

I looked at Helen's sketches, then pushed them into a drawer and locked it. I thought, trying to sound funny to myself, that they certainly made a wonderful souvenir of my brief relationship with Helen. I had a final drink and left. Driving home, I went out of



my way so I wouldn't have to pass the hotel where we used to have dinner together.

Markoff showed up a couple of days after that. He had his silent friend with him.

"Sorry about Berringer," he said conversationally.

"I saw your flowers at the funeral," I said. "Very nice."

He brushed the knees of his trousers. "I'll get to the point, Morgan. I understand you're running the place for Mrs. Berringer. And for yourself, of course."

"Yes."

"Let's talk business." He was smiling. But you felt the unexpressed threat.

"I've got Mrs. Berringer's interest to protect," I said. "It wouldn't do any harm to talk."

He smiled more warmly. He was a good-looking guy. He said, "I'd hoped you'd feel that way. I like reasonableness—on both sides. Now here's the way it shapes up. . . ."

When we'd finished talking he accepted a drink. "By the way," he said, "I'd like a reservation for tonight. For me and Joe here and a couple of girls. I like to patronize my friends."

"I'll tell the headwaiter," I said. "You'll get a good table."

He shook hands and went away. It was as if I was a good customer who'd just bought a load of his bonds.

I sat thinking for a while, telling myself I wasn't afraid of Markoff or anyone else. I told myself I was simply using my head. The good season was coming up. If you played it right, you could make a fast killing. For Marg Berringer. For me. If Helen wanted it the other way, it was her tough luck and I'd forget her. I'd forgotten a lot of other girls in my time. Playing along with Markoff gave you a very important kind of security in a world that was very realistic about such matters.

Late that afternoon a salesman called and let me have fifty cases of good Scotch for a reasonable price. Markoff aimed to please, I thought. Service with a smile.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Doubles for Death

**I** KEPT an eye on Markoff's party that night. It was quiet and inconspicuous. They ate, danced, saw the first floor show and went upstairs to the gambling rooms. Markoff was a careful player; he wasn't trying to win much and he'd never lose much. He was the big-time salesman patronizing a valued customer. I watched him win fifty dollars at the roulette table and return it with a small amount of interest at craps. When he left he

said he'd had a very pleasant time and would be back.

When I came to the place the next day Johnson was waiting for me in the office. I'd never paid much attention to him. I'd simply kept him on in the same job he had with Berry—that of personal bodyguard. He was always around, always watching. He could move with startling speed for a big man. I knew he brooded about Berry's death and felt in some part responsible. He rarely had anything to say.

But now he said, "I'd like to talk to you, Mr. Morgan."

"Shoot."

He leaned against the wall near my desk. His voice slurred words roughly. "I saw Markoff here last night. And yesterday afternoon. I'll be leaving you, Mr. Morgan."

It took me a moment to catch on. I looked up at him and thought I'd knock his teeth out, for luck. I thought it might be quite an undertaking.

I said, "What am I supposed to do? Act as if another president has died? I can get a dozen like you in an hour."

"Sure you can, Mr. Morgan," he said. "So that makes it okay with both of us."

I felt myself getting mad. I tried to push it back, but it wouldn't go. It was ridiculous, dangerous. It was the kind of thing you feel occasionally in war—the kind of thing that makes you take absurd chances. Only it was right and necessary in war, and it was all wrong now.

I said, "You think I'm a coward, Johnson. Right? Speak up."

"All the way, Mr. Morgan," he said. "All the wide way." His voice—for his voice—was soft.

I made myself think: Let them feel that way, all of them. I'm running this—I'm responsible, they aren't. It's my dough, my neck, my future. I'll replace the whole damned lot down to the bus boys and the money will keep rolling in. More money, because I'll be able to keep down expenses. . . .

But the trouble was it wasn't as simple as that. Maybe I was a coward. God knows I'd been scared plenty in my time. The bad thing was to be thought a coward, to be told you were coward. It had something to do with a childlike kind of vanity—the little boy standing up to the big boy and getting the hell beat out of him for nothing—and anybody with good sense would laugh it off. Anybody with good sense. I felt hot all over, and I felt the blood in my ears, and I knew I was losing my head, and there was nothing to be done about it. Like people who have a phobia that makes them jump off high places—not because they want to die, but because they can't help it, aren't strong enough to help it.

I said, trying to keep my voice level, "Okay, Johnson. We'll see. You're not quitting yet. Get the hell out of here and send Mrs. Munson in."

He looked at me a moment longer. "Yeah," he said, and went out.

I didn't even look at Helen when she came in and said, "You wanted me?" in her cool business-woman voice. I said, "Take those sketches and improve them if you can. Give me your written descriptions—everything down to the way they tied their shoelaces if you can remember that. Don't put in anything you're not sure of. Type them and make half a dozen carbons. When can I have them?"

"In two hours. I've got practically all that now."

"Get going then."

She said, "Do you mind telling me just what you're planning?"

"At the moment, I mind," I said. Who wouldn't mind a lot of talk about how they might be committing suicide?

I made some telephone calls. When she brought me the sketches and the descriptions there were six men in my office. I showed them the pictures and gave each one a copy of the description. I gave them instructions. They listened and smoked and drank short whiskies. Then they went away.

**T**HE office was tremendously empty after they'd gone. I was alone with the whole damned thing. I sat there smoking cigarettes until the air was blue and I had the start of a headache. I felt like a half-witted boy scout.

Five days later two of the men came back. I listened to them, then sent for Helen Munson.

I told her to sit down. I said, "Your people seem to be a Harry Kramer and a doll named Flora Bendix. At least, those were the names they used in this town. They knew Markoff—how well I don't know. They used to be seen around here off and on, mostly off. Maybe he used them for odd jobs and maybe he didn't. After all, lots of people know Markoff. Anyhow, they haven't been seen in these parts since Berry was killed. They may be in Europe for all I know."

She sat up. That cool, all-business look went out of her eyes. "But you can trace them. I've read about—"

I said, "Wait a minute. Maybe we could trace them. On the other hand, we're not the FBI. And if we found them it wouldn't buy a thing. You'd be laughed out of any police station, unless they held you for the psychiatrist. Anyhow, it doesn't matter. To go after them, even if we had a case, which we haven't, would be like destroying the gun that shot Berry. As futile as that. You've got to go to

the store where the gun first came from."

I waited a moment for that to sink in. I said, "Okay. Here's the next paragraph. The main idea in running these people down at all was to try to prove definitely that Markoff was back of it, wasn't it?"

She nodded.

"Right. Now comes the high-priced question. Are you sure enough, yet?"

She sat still and looked at me. She looked a long time, and I saw what might be indecision soften her face. Just a little. She said, "Well?"

"We've worked on the basis of your hunch so far. We've got something or other. I don't think we're dead sure what we've got. I'm trying to look at it from your point of view. I'm thinking that you're going to have to be sure beyond all question before you'll want to do—well, something drastic. I'll put it this way. You're morally sure Markoff was behind it. You're morally sure this lovely pair did the work for him. But I'm thinking that in the long pull just being morally sure might not be quite enough—that there might be some doubts you wouldn't like to have sitting around the house. That you've got to be dead certain sure. It's silly, but there it is. Am I thinking right?"

She looked at me for a long time again. She said, "Maybe I hadn't gone quite this far before. But you're thinking right."

I said, "Listen carefully some more. Now—if Markoff ordered the job, and these characters did it, have you ever thought that he probably saw them the night they got Berry? Saw them all dressed and ready to take off—just the way you saw them when they arrived here. You saw them so well you could draw pictures of them. Probably Markoff can't draw pictures, but it's a fair cinch he saw them the way you did, saw what they wore, the way they looked, and all the little details of their appearance would stick in his mind. He'd be giving them his final orders, making sure everything was clearly understood. He couldn't afford any mistakes at that point. After he'd finished, he'd have a nice clear picture of those two in his mind."

She looked thoughtful. She also looked damned beautiful to me, but I shoved that back and away. "I hadn't thought of it. What does it mean?"

I took a long breath. The hundred-foot dive into the little tank of water was at the take-off point. The over-age boy scout was doing his good deed. I said, "This is what it means. You wanted action, and now you're going to have action. Women have made a dope out of me before this, so it's right in character. I don't know whether I dreamed this business up to please you or to punish myself, but it doesn't matter. Listen. . . ."

When I finished she was pale, all but the eyes. She hadn't taken them off me for a second. She waited a long time. Then she said, "I—I'll do it. Whether it works or not."

"You know what's going to happen if it doesn't work. I'm picking Travis to work with you." Travis ran the gambling rooms. "Berry did him a couple of good turns, and you can trust him. He seems the right type."

She nodded. "He's the type," she repeated, like a child learning by rote. Her lips were working. She had lovely lips.

I said, "I'll talk to Travis now, then you can get together with him. You'll have to be ready on short notice. I don't know when the night will be."

"I'll be ready," she said. She stood up. She was still looking at me. Her eyes were bright,



I told Helen and Travis to get out and called the police.

but they didn't really see me, I thought. They just saw what I was planning. I buzzed the intercom for Travis, and she went quickly out of the office. She closed the door gently.

I spent the next four days wondering what I'd do in the future. But that would probably all be neatly taken care of for me. It had been a very nice thing while it had lasted. Another year of it even and—and the hell with that.

The fourth night, Markoff, his friend and two new girls came back to spend a pleasant evening. They made a reservation in the afternoon. I told Helen, Travis and Johnson and they didn't make any unnecessary conversation.

When Markoff and his party went upstairs to the games Johnson and I went into my office. It was semi-dark and very quiet and tremendously lonely. I called the gambling rooms and said to ask Mr. Markoff if he'd step in for a moment. I shut off the intercom and heard Johnson's chair squeak when he stretched.

Johnson said, "Nice business tonight." That was an unusual amount of talk for him.

I didn't answer. I pulled the middle right-hand drawer of the desk half open.

IT WAS a long wait. It was exactly twelve minutes by the desk clock from the time I'd called when Markoff and his friend arrived.

He was scowling. He said, "I hope we're not going to have any arguments. I like things to go smoothly."

"Sit down," I said. "I'd like to talk something over with you."

He sat down. His friend, very alert and observant now, sat down near Johnson. It was still for a moment. He said, "Well?"

"It's about Berringer," I said.

"What about Berringer? He's dead. That's finished."

I moved an ashtray on the desk. "Not quite," I said. "You see, Kramer and his girl friend weren't quite so dependable as you thought."

There was a flicker in his eyes. That was all.

I pushed a buzzer and nodded toward the door as it opened. I said, "Look."

I just had time to get a glimpse of Helen and Travis coming in. There was little light behind them, and little in the office. There was just enough to show them up fairly clearly without disclosing every detail of their features. It was better than I'd expected. The sketches she'd drawn and the descriptions she'd written had come to life completely.

I said, "They just couldn't bear to stay away from you." I had my hand in the open middle drawer of the desk now.

I saw Markoff's hand move, and I heard him say, "You dirty, double-crossing pair of—" Then he was turning away from them, turning toward me, fast, and I shot him in the left side of his chest at a range of about five feet. I shot him once more as he fell. I wondered, even as I pulled the trigger the second time, if Johnson was taking care of the friend.

Then it was very quiet. Travis and Helen Munson were standing by the door, looking at Markoff's body. I thought once more, with admiration, that she'd done a lovely job. A good girl, Helen. Markoff's friend was against a wall, and Johnson was facing him with a thin .32 automatic in his hand.

There was just one more thing to do before calling the police. That was to have a little quick talk with Markoff's friend. He was very reasonable and farseeing. After all, his boss was dead, and he liked living. It didn't take him any time at all to make up his mind.

I told Helen and Travis to get out and called the police. I put the .38 I'd used on the desk and waited.

The police weren't too bad about it. After

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# "LITTLE MAN, YOU'RE IN A JAM!"



Through the haze of gun-smoke, Jimmy saw Gregory's fat body fold and topple forward.

By **JACK BRADLEY**

●  
*—That's what the fat ex-shamus told Jimmy. "With sixty grand in hot ice, this is one time you're going to need a pal with a rod and an itchy finger. . . ."*  
●

**T**HE DAY started out about like any other day. Since it was his day off, he got up a little before nine o'clock, ate the hearty breakfast Molly had waiting for him, then pattered around the apartment for a few hours. Waxing a window that stuck, replacing a screw in the living room table, tacking down a bit of loose linoleum in the friendly little kitchen. All the little domestic chores he had come to love so much.

After a leisurely lunch, he stood by his kitchen window, staring contentedly at his tiny, back yard garden. It was good to be alive on a day like this. The old days of the big jobs and the grimy hide-outs and the long night drives seemed like something from another world. It was something from another

world, he told himself fiercely. Jimmy the Driver was dead. He was Jimmy Raines, a garage mechanic, a family man who lived in a two-family house in Brooklyn.

He turned away from the window and went out to do the day's shopping. On his way home, he stopped in at Malone's Bar and Grill for a beer—a mild-mannered, grey-haired, little family man of fifty, carrying a huge bag of groceries.

It was cool and quiet in Malone's after the baking heat of the day outside. Jimmy set his bag of groceries down at the end of the bar and drank his beer slowly, feeling the pleasant coolness steal through his whole body. He knew nearly all the customers at the bar and he nodded greetings to half a dozen friends and neighbors. Only one of the customers was a stranger. A big, quiet-faced man in a grey suit, standing down at the other end of the bar.

Jimmy fumbled in his pockets for cigarettes and, at once, Duke, the skinny, wizened-faced porter stepped forward. "Out of cigarettes, Mr. Raines?" he asked eagerly. "Can I get you a pack from the machine?"

Jimmy handed him a quarter and good-naturedly waved away the change. Like all the regulars in Malone's he knew how eagerly Duke waited a chance to grab those nickels. The skinny little porter was known throughout the neighborhood for his fantastic miserliness. One of the customers, Bert Harmon, the local hardware store owner, laughed loudly.

"The Duke's gettin' to be more of a nickel grabber every day," he said to Jimmy. "Never seen a guy like him. He took me home the other night when I was blind drunk and had over a hundred bucks on me. The Duke didn't touch my roll but when he got me home he seen a loose piece of brass pipe by the kitchen sink, and he damned near wrecked my joint trying to get it loose."

Jimmy joined in the laughter, finished his first beer and threw down another dime. But his thoughts were elsewhere. He was thinking that there was something vaguely familiar about the face of the quiet-faced stranger down at the other end of the bar. Big, genial Steve Malone, the proprietor, filled his glass and then leaned over the bar.

"Listen, Jimmy," he said in a low voice, "there's a big, fat sloppy-looking bum in the back booth that's been asking for you. He's a stranger to me, but I think I know what he wants. Did you see the papers this morning?" Malone's face had a worried look.

"No, I didn't, Mr. Malone," Jimmy said respectfully. He always spoke that way to Malone. Malone was a power in the neighborhood. Jimmy knew that he could never have gotten his present job if Malone hadn't sup-

plied him with a phony set of references that ignored his prison record.

"Well, step into my office before you go home," Malone said quickly. "And if this bum starts something, just give me the high sign and I'll take care of him."

"Oh, it's probably just one of the boys from the job wanting to put the bite on me for a couple of bucks," Jimmy said carelessly. He finished his beer and leisurely started toward the rear. The quiet-faced stranger in grey looked at him sharply as he passed.

**T**HE MAN in the back booth deserved every word of Malone's description. He weighed around two hundred and fifty and most of it was sloppy fat. His shirt was filthy, and his greasy, threadbare suit looked as if it had been slept in for weeks. Jimmy Raines knew the man at once although he had not seen him for years.

His name was Joe Gregory. Back in the early twenties, he had been a top-flight detective. Then he had been kicked off the Force for crookedness and had gone to work for a private agency. Gregory had brains, and nerve, too, and for a time he had done quite well. Then he had been caught blackmailing a customer, and after that there wasn't an agency in the country that would have him. He had drifted down and down until—the last Jimmy had heard of him—he was wearing the patrolman's uniform of a two-bit protective association.

He was drunk now, very drunk, but his hard, black eyes still looked up alertly as Jimmy Raines slid into the booth opposite him.

"Long time no see, Jimmy," he said thickly. "Have a drink?"

"No, thanks, Joe. Too early. What's on your mind?"

"Just wanted to show you something, Jimmy." Gregory pulled a newspaper out of his greasy coat pocket and spread it out on the table. His grimy fingers wavered uncertainly for a moment, then pointed to a two-column headline on the front page:

#### TEX MALLARD BREAKS JAIL!

Charles "Tex" Mallard, notorious bandit of the early twenties, escaped from the State Prison Farm last night with two other prisoners when a breakdown in the power plant plunged the Prison Farm buildings into darkness for nearly an hour.

Mallard was serving a life sentence for the daylight robbery of the Paramount Jewelry Company in 1922, a robbery from which he escaped with a bag containing nearly sixty thousand dollars worth of small stones. He was wounded while making his getaway but escaped because of the miraculous driving of his confederate, Jimmy the Driver. The pair was captured two days after the robbery,

but the stones were never found. It is believed that. . . .

Jimmy Raines didn't read the rest of it. He couldn't. The barroom was swirling around in a thick haze, and through that haze he was dimly aware of Joe Gregory's blubbery, dirty face pushing across the table toward his own.

"So what happens now, little man?" the fat ex-shamus was saying softly. "You won't drink with me because I'm a bum that was kicked off the Force, but I still know the score. I was still a big shot when you and Tex pulled that Paramount caper and I pulled every wire I could to get assigned to the case. I didn't make it, but I put in two weeks learning everything I could about you two guys. I don't think I averaged more than four hours sleep a night for them two weeks. And if I could only have pulled enough wires to get to either one of you guys for a couple of hours—alone—I'd have found where you stashed the rocks.

"Because you *do* know where they're stashed, Jimmy, and I know that you know. What's more, a lot of other guys know you know, too. The mobsters and grifters Tex used to hang out with. And they'll all be heading back this way as soon as they read this newspaper story. They'll be waiting for Tex to come to you. Waiting like a bunch of buzzards circling around over a dying bull that's trying to get home.

"Yes, and any one of those buzzards would plug you in a minute, Jimmy, just to get one look at that bag of rocks. A little bag with sixty grand in ice that could be peddled as easy as you'd peddle a flock of ten-dollar watches. This is one time you need a pal with a rod and a permit to use it. Little man, you're in a jam!"

A wave of white-hot fury pulsed through Jimmy's brain. He put the flat of his hand against the blubbery face and pushed hard.

"Get out of my sight, you drunken son!" he raged. "Get out and stay out!"

**H**E STUMBLED out of the booth toward Malone's cubbyhole of an office. As he turned to close the door, he saw Malone and the quiet-faced stranger reaching, together, into the booth, saw the stranger slam his fist into Gregory's face. A few minutes later, Malone came in, alone.

"I'm sorry that drunken bum had to be the one to break the news to you, Jimmy," he said quietly. "My brother, Paul, just now told me who he was. Paul's a detective downtown. He was a rookie cop when they arrested you and Tex Mallard."

"I thought there was something familiar about him, Mr. Malone." Jimmy's voice was dull and dry. He had that same weak feeling

he used to have after a big job was finished.

Big Steve Malone reached into a drawer of his desk and pulled out a bottle of bonded rye. Pouring two stiff drinks, he motioned Jimmy to a chair and sat there for a moment, looking at the little man almost embarrassedly.

"Look, Jimmy," he finally said, "when you and Molly first moved into this neighborhood. I gave you a set of references so you could get a job, and that was okay. You'd served your term and I figured you was on the level. I've given plenty of guys a hand when they needed one, so that's water under the bridge.

"But now that Tex Mallard's crashed out, things are different. Paul just now took Joe Gregory down to the station house. They can't hold him but they'll give him a workout and if he ties you into anything new, Paul's a cop first and my brother second. And in New York State, they can kill a tavern keeper's license for sneezing after hours. So—well—if you know anything, I think I got a right to know where I stand." Malone twisted his glass uncomfortably.

Jimmy said, "I don't know anything you don't know, Mr. Malone. They picked us up two days after the Paramount job and Tex got a life sentence because he had a long record and because he had planned the whole job. I got ten to twenty years because I was just a hired hand and because I wasn't carrying a gun. I never did carry a gun in those days. And Tex was honest enough to tell them the truth about that.

"I could have got off a lot easier, I suppose, if I'd told them where Tex stashed that bag of rocks. But, somehow, I just couldn't do that. I figured that was up to Tex. And, anyway, I didn't know—and still don't know—where the bag is stashed."

Malone looked at him sharply. "What!"

"It's the truth, Mr. Malone. I drove Tex out to a certain place that night, and he picked up the bag and left me for about fifteen or twenty minutes. He came back without the bag but I didn't ask him where he stashed it and he didn't offer to tell me. Not that he didn't trust me. He just knew that if we were nailed, the cops might give me a tough workout and I couldn't tell something I didn't know."

"I see. And what do you figure on doing now?"

"I'm not figuring on doing anything except getting up and going to work tomorrow morning," Jimmy said hotly. "I've worked hard to make a place for myself in this neighborhood and I'm not letting Tex Mallard or anybody else take it away from me. Tex knows where his rocks are and he doesn't need my help to get them. If he's fool enough to contact me, I'll tell him so. I left all that stuff behind me when I finished my stretch."

He got to his feet and stumbled out of the office. The sudden glare of light in the bar-room hurt his eyes and he felt weak and sick and terribly afraid. Duke came up and laid an anxious hand on his arm.

"You're as white as a sheet, Mr. Raines! Can I help you? Here, I'll carry your bag of groceries home."

The scrawny little porter grabbed up the bag and walked beside Jimmy up the pleasant, tree-lined street. Jimmy's eyes darted about sharply as he neared home. Already, he thought bitterly, he was acting and thinking like Jimmy the Driver.

He spotted them at once. Two men in a parked car, on the opposite side of the street, a little way down from his house. They did not look up from the paper they were holding as he passed, but he knew they were cops. Paul Malone had started working fast.

Jimmy hurried a little, as he came to the gate. Above everything else, he wanted to get home before Gregory or some of the others got to Molly. Even as he climbed the stoop, he heard the ringing of the telephone. He snatched the bag of groceries from Duke, handed the little porter a coin and rushed in. Molly was already answering the phone.

"But I tell you he really is out shopping," she was protesting. "If you'll leave your number I'll have him call you back when—Oh! Here he is now." Her face was a puzzled mask as she handed the phone to him.

"Hello, Jimmy!"

It was that same husky, vibrant voice. Jimmy felt himself go limp, and suddenly all of the things he had meant to say were forgotten and he could only stammer out a confused, "Why—uh—hello, Tex!"

"I reckon you know why I've come back, Jimmy. You got a car, now?"

"Yes, I've got a car. But, Tex, I'm all through with that stuff. I'm a married man now. So, listen—"

"No! *you* listen." That husky voice was suddenly as hard as nails. "I *know* you're married. And that's just why you're going to do what I tell you. If you get what I mean."

"Yeah. Yeah, I guess I know what you mean."

"That's better. Now get this because I'm only going to tell it once. Get in your car and drive to the place where we stashed those rocks. If you get there before I do, park the car out of sight and wait for me. Wait in the same place where you fixed up my leg that night. When you get there, give the same old signal we used to have. If you get there first, give the signal when you see me coming in. And don't forget it because I've got a nervous finger tonight, pal." He gave a hard, sharp laugh and hung up without waiting for Jimmy to answer.

Jimmy put the receiver down slowly. Molly was staring at him with stark misery in her eyes, and suddenly Jimmy realized just how much this woman had come to mean to him. She was a part of that pleasant, tree-lined street outside, a part of the friendly little kitchen, a part all of the things he had come to love so much. Somehow, Tex Mallard must have guessed this. That was why he could make his arrogant demands, certain that they would be obeyed.

"It's . . . him?" Molly asked slowly.

"Yeah. It's him all right. He's going to the farm to meet me."

"The farm?"

"Yeah." Jimmy Raines was staring dully at the wall. "It's an abandoned farm about fifty miles upstate. Tex bought it—under a phony name, of course—for a hide-out, way back in 1920. He left money with his old man to pay the taxes while he was in stir, and I don't think there's anybody else, except me, that knows about the place. That's where the rocks are stashed. A bagful of rocks that every mobster in the country wants to get his hands on."

Suddenly he laughed wildly. "That bag is the funniest screwiest thing about the whole damn mess. It's a sixty-nine-cent, imitation leatherette bag that wouldn't be allowed in a decent flopp joint on the Bowery. Tex bought it just for that Paramount Jewelry job and when he came jumping out of the store the catch on the damn thing snapped.

"We didn't have any string in the car to fix it, so when we got up to his farm he took off his gold watch chain, punched a couple of holes in the bag and tied it together with that. Then he went out and stashed it somewhere. His leg must have been hurting like hell with that slug in it, but I remember how we sat there and laughed about a sixty-nine-cent bag, with a twelve-dollar gold clasp and sixty grand worth of ice in it. Now I got to figure out what to do about that bag." He buried his face in his hands.

Molly Raines came over and put her hands on her husband's shoulders. "If you want to make a break for it, Jimmy," she said quietly, "I don't mind leaving tonight."

He shook his head at once. "It wouldn't work, Molly. You don't know Tex Mallard. He's not like other men. I remember how when we'd pull a big job he'd come leaping out and jump into the car beside me and it was—well—like when you walk past a huge dynamo and you feel all that power throbbing through your whole body. He'd find us wherever we went. No, whatever happens tonight, I have to see it through."

She bent down and kissed him swiftly, tenderly. "All right then, Jimmy. Just be careful. Please be careful, Jimmy."

**T**HE CAR was still parked across the street. It was dark now, but the two men still held their newspaper. Jimmy Raines grinned sourly. Cops hadn't changed a bit since 1922.

He walked up to the top floor, climbed a short ladder to a roof trap door and went out. He walked across the roofs to a big apartment house at the end of the block and there, as he had expected, found the roof door open. He went down the stairs to the lobby and out onto the street without meeting anyone. It was as simple as that.

His car was in the garage where he worked. The garage was closed but he had a key. He checked the old car with unhurried thoroughness, filled the tank and changed a worn rear tire. Then he drove slowly back to Malone's Bar and Grill. He made several turns on the way and was fairly sure he was not being tailed.

Duke, the porter, was setting out the ash barrels as Jimmy drove up. He parked in the vacant lot back of the bar, walked over to the little man and handed him a coin.

"Tell Mr. Malone I'd like to speak to him a moment, Duke. In his office."

He slipped in through the side entrance and waited until Malone came out and let him into the office. He faced the big tavern keeper quietly.

"Look, Mr. Malone, I'm going to try to get those rocks back tonight and I want you to do something for me."

"You going to try to bring Tex Mallard in?" Malone asked sharply.

"I don't know what I'm going to do, Mr. Malone, and that's the truth," Jimmy said wearily. "I've been thinking this thing over all afternoon and I still don't know what I'm going to do. All I can do is to pitch into this mess and then see what will happen. Here's what I want you to do.

"Get hold of your brother, Paul, and tell him I'm doing my best to get those rocks back. And ask him to come here and wait for me. If I have good luck I ought to be back before you close up."

"You want to borrow a gun, Jimmy?"

Jimmy smiled a little at that. "I never pulled a gun on anybody in my life, Mr. Malone. And I'm not fool enough to start by pulling one on Tex Mallard. No, you just get your brother over here and then forget about the whole thing."

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The wilting heat of the day still hung on, though there was a slight breeze now. Jimmy drove carefully, his eyes on the rear view mirror. Suddenly he swore aloud. A green coupe was idling along about a block behind him. And he had thought cops hadn't changed

since 1922! Those two in front of the house had been put there to be seen. He straightened himself alertly and began watching traffic lights. If he shook that green coupe it would be through skill alone. He had no delusions about the ten-year-old car he was driving.

He loitered along until the next red light. Then he spurted forward, missing a bus by inches, and made a sharp U turn. At the next corner, he made a turn and crowded the ancient car for all it would stand. He doubled back and forth for several blocks until he was sure he had shaken the tail. Then he cut over to the express highway. Just two hours later, he drove the old car into the front yard of Tex Mallard's farmhouse and parked.

He stepped out into the bright moonlight and gave a low whistle, the signal he and Tex had used in the old days. It was answered at once and he started walking toward the ancient farm house, keeping his hands in plain sight. He felt no excitement and no fear. He was merely in a hurry to get it over with. He pushed open the door.

Tex Mallard was sitting at a table in the front room. He was in his shirt sleeves, a heavy .45 in a shoulder holster, and Jimmy was shocked at the change in the man. This was no longer the dynamic Tex Mallard he had known. This was a broken shell of a man with dead white hair and a shriveled shell of a body. Only the eyes were the same. They were hard and alive and restless.

"Took you long enough to get here," he growled. "But I just now got here myself, so it's all right. The main thing is to get those rocks and then scam out of here. And I hope none of them's missing."

"If they are I haven't got them, Tex. I don't even know where you stashed them that night."

"They're out in the barn. Under a loose board in the first feed stall. Now let's go out and see if they're still there."

A hard, mocking voice back of them said, "Thanks, Tex. That was all I was waiting to hear."

Joe Gregory stepped out into the room. The big ex-shamus looked filthier than ever and there was a purplish bruise on his cheek but the .38 in his hand was as steady as a rock. Tex Mallard looked at Jimmy in disgust.

"I told you to make sure you weren't tailed."

Joe Gregory laughed harshly. "He wasn't tailed, Tex. I've been hanging around here all afternoon, ever since those bums at the station house got through horsing around with me. Why, I've known about this farm of yours for years. Took me six months of hanging around your old man to learn about it, but I learned. I meant to have those rocks and I—"



Suddenly Tex Mallard's shrunken body lurched forward in a wild, crazy dive at Gregory's knees and his hand streaked toward his shoulder holster as he dived. Gunfire crashed and racketed through the dusty room and through the haze of gunsmoke Jimmy saw the fat body of the ex-shamus fold up and topple forward. Then Tex Mallard's voice cut agonizedly through the cordite fumes.

"Jimmy! Hurry out and get those rocks. That louse got me through the shoulder and somebody must have heard those shots. We've got to get out of here in a hurry."

As if in a daze, Jimmy stumbled forward toward the door. There was moonlight coming in through the dusty window and it fell on the body of Joe Gregory. Jimmy turned his eyes away as he went out.

He found the loose board almost at once. After a brief search, he found a rusty, broken-handled shovel and finished prying it loose. Reaching under the feed bin, he pulled out a small object.

And there it was, dry and well-preserved for all its years, a sixty-nine-cent bag that half the hoods in the country were looking for. The cheap fabric of it was mildewed, but it was still strong enough to hold together. Even the gold chain that held the clasp together was not yet tarnished. He put it under his arm and started back toward the farmhouse. He was desperately trying to think of a way to say the things that must be said.

The room was very silent as he entered. Joe Gregory's fat body was still lying where it had fallen and, beyond it, he could see Tex Mallard dimly, sprawled across the table, his head on the rough boards. He didn't like the way Tex lay.

"You all right, Tex?" he called out as he entered. There was no answer.

Jimmy set the bag on the floor and hastily struck a match. In the first flare of the light, he saw that the whole back of Tex's head had been smashed in with one vicious blow. Almost at the same moment, he heard the faint creak of a board and started to whirl around. He barely had time to see the dim shape rushing forward, see the glint of the moonlight on metal, and then the moonlight was blotted out in a long, slow wave of darkness. . . .

**H**E FELT a wave of nausea when he came to again and his head hurt terribly. He sat up weakly on the dusty floor and looked around him. The bodies of Tex Mallard and Joe Gregory were lying in the same positions, and the sixty-nine-cent bag was lying on the floor a few feet away. It was yawning open, empty now, and he looked at it, trying to remember something.

There was a moment of haziness, and then the pieces, one by one, began to fall into place

and he knew the answers. He got to his feet and went into the kitchen, worked the rusted pump until it started flowing and then tried to wash the caked blood from his face and head. That was a mistake because it only started the bleeding again. It didn't matter, he thought dully.

He found his car outside, just as he had left it. He had expected to. He drove rapidly, now, forcing himself to keep all his attention on his driving. It would hurt too much to think of what he was going to have to do.

It was almost five o'clock when he drove up before Malone's Bar and Grill, but there was a light in Malone's office and when he knocked the big tavern keeper came to the door at once.

"Jimmy! You're hurt. You—"

Jimmy Raines shouldered past him, saw the grey-clad form of Malone's brother, Paul. "You get the rocks, Jimmy?" the big detective asked softly.

"Yes," Jimmy answered. "Or, at least, I know where to find them." He turned back



Steve Malone

to Steve Malone. "Is Duke in his room upstairs?"

"Duke? Why, yes, I guess so. I haven't seen him all night. Not since you left."

"I know you haven't," Jimmy told him wearily. "Come on, let's get this over with. I don't feel so good about it. The man was a friend of mine."

Steve Malone looked at him queerly for a moment, then turned and led them up a stairway to the furnished rooms above the bar. He went down the hall to a small room, Jimmy and Paul Malone following close behind him.

The wizened little porter opened the door at their first knock. He was fully dressed and he looked inquiringly at big Steve Malone.

"You looking for me, boss? I was just getting up to come down and clean up."

Jimmy Raines stepped into the dingy room ahead of the others. "Where are they, Duke?"

(Continued on page 96)

# DON'T MARRY MURDER!

MOM WAS ironing the lumbago out of Pop's back when I got home that evening. Pop was stretched out on the couch in the living room and Mom was using the electric iron gently, like I'd seen her do a half-hundred times when pop was down.

"Got it again, Pop?" I asked.

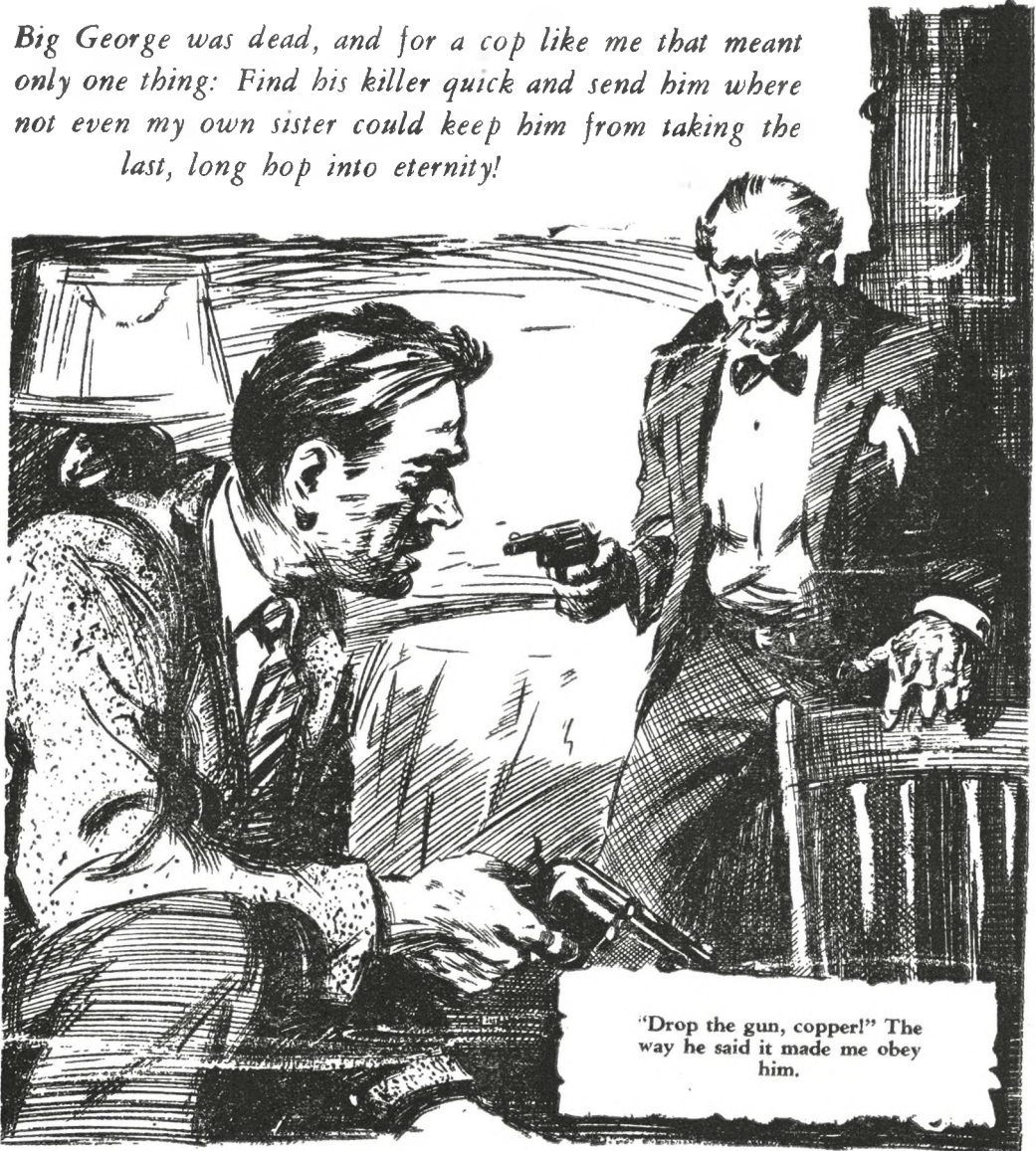
"All day," he grunted.

Mom said, "I'm glad his pension starts next year. This is no weather for a man your

By

**DON JAMES**

*Big George was dead, and for a cop like me that meant only one thing: Find his killer quick and send him where not even my own sister could keep him from taking the last, long hop into eternity!*



"Drop the gun, copper!" The way he said it made me obey him.

father's age to be walking around in."

"What d'you mean, my age?" he protested. "Because I've been walking a beat twenty-four years doesn't mean I'm an old man!"

Mom smiled at him and told me to get my dinner in the kitchen. She'd kept it warm for me. Pop looked over his shoulder at me. "Anything doing in Homicide?"

"Quiet," I said and headed for the kitchen, draping my coat over the back of a chair on the way.

Cathy was finishing the dishes. She was in her second year at junior college, and for my money she was the best looking co-ed in the city. There was ten years difference in our ages, but we were plenty close to one another.

"How's Detective McIntyre?" she grinned.

"Swell!" I gave her a quick squeeze. "Got some grub out here for me, Sis?"

"I'll get it for you. You're late again. I'll never marry a cop!"

"Don't tell that to Mary Lou."

She gave me an arch glance. "Oh? So it's that far along?"

"She's a nice gal. Date tonight?"

She nodded and put a plate before me.

"Someone I know?" I asked.

Her expression clouded for an instant. "I don't think so. His name's Pat Donnel. I haven't known him long."

If she saw my frown, she ignored it.

I said, "There's a Pat Donnel who works for Big George Perrin."

Suddenly there was defiance in Cathy's eyes. "He just keeps books for him," she said too hotly. "There's nothing wrong in that. Pat's an accountant."

I sat back in my chair and tried to smile.

"Look, Cathy, I'm not saying anything's wrong with Pat Donnel. Maybe he's okay. But just working for Big George mixes him up in about the hottest thing in town today. That name 'Perrin Amusement Company' doesn't mean a thing. Big George has run the rackets in town for years. You know it as well as I do. You've heard Pop cuss him plenty of times."

"That doesn't mean that Pat is—"

"What you don't know," I interrupted, "is that a grand jury is looking into Big George's business right now. There have been a few gang killings. Things are touchy around Perrin these days."

"Pat's just his accountant," she maintained firmly. "He hasn't anything to do with the rest of it."

I looked at her closely. "For just meeting the guy, you seem to know quite a bit about him."

Anger flared in her blue eyes. "That's none of your business, Ken McIntyre. And just because you're a detective, you don't have to

start your nosey strong-arm tactics on me!"

"Did Pat call them 'strong-arm'?" I asked quietly.

She glared at me, put the last of the dishes away and flounced out of the kitchen.

I picked up a fork and started my dinner. I was too worried to enjoy much of it.

MARY LOU and I went to a show, and it was after midnight when I got home. The house was dark and I went upstairs quietly so that I wouldn't awaken Mom and Pop.

Cathy's door was ajar and I looked in. She wasn't home yet. It was Friday night and she had no classes on Saturday, but I still didn't like her being out with Donnel after midnight. I got in bed and decided to stay awake until she got home. It was time that I gave her a little brotherly talk.

It was a good idea, but I went to sleep and the telephone ringing downstairs awakened me. I got up. It was about two o'clock.

Mom was in the hallway. I wondered if Cathy was home, but I didn't say anything about her to Mom. She looked worried enough as it was. Late telephone calls always frightened her.

"Kenny! What's wrong?" she asked nervously.

I gave her a reassuring grin. "Probably the wrong number. You'd better get back in bed and keep Pop's lumbago back warm."

"It always worries me when the phone rings so late."

"I know, Mom. I'll answer it, and you stop worrying."

I went downstairs. The telephone continued to ring. I picked it up and gave it a gruff "Hello."

"Ken?"

"Yes."

"Mike Sullivan. Come out to the Lava. It's a twenty-seven."

Lieutenant Mike Sullivan was my superior, and "twenty-seven" is our code for a homicide.

"Bad deal?" I asked. It must be important if he was getting his day men out of bed.

"It's Big George Perrin," Mike said. The line hummed for a few seconds as if he had something else to say and didn't know how to say it. I could feel the tension. Then he added, "Your kid sister, Cathy, is here. She's involved."

I tried to keep my voice steady. "Okay, Mike. Right away."

Gently, I cradled the telephone and took a deep breath.

From the head of the stairs, Mom called down to me. "Is it anything serious, Ken?"

"Mike Sullivan wants me on a case," I said. "Just routine. He's short-handed."

Mom said, "Oh," and I heard the relief in

her voice. I could hear her walk down the hallway and then her door closed.

I went back upstairs and dressed. Ten minutes later I was on my way to Carl Linter's suburban nightclub, the Lava.

\* \* \*

Mike had plenty of help. On the parking lot beside a low, lava rock wall by the building, a floodlight had been set up and the lab boys were at work. The light was centered directly upon the sprawling blotch that was Big George's body.

At the doorway to the club, two of our men were checking out patrons. At one side of the porch, two uniformed cops kept watch over Blackie Bartel, Barney Blair and Porky Meyers.

The important thing about them was the fact that Blackie Martel was rumored to be edging in on Big George's business. Blair and Meyers worked for him.

Near the door was short, then Carl Linter in a tuxedo. He wore a harried expression on his dark face as he tried to smile reassuringly at his departing guests.

I walked toward the floodlight, and Mike Sullivan saw me. Mike looks more like a cop than anyone I know. He came over and nodded toward one of the parked squad cars.

"Cathy's there with Danny Zizich."

"What happened, Mike?" I asked.

"Someone caved in the side of Big George's head with a hunk of lava rock."

I hoped my mouth wasn't too dry to let me speak the next question. I got it out. "You don't think Cathy . . . ?"

He shook his head. "She was in Donnel's car waiting for him. The lot attendant saw her. She and Donnel had come out. Big George came after them and called to Donnel. Donnel went back and he and Big George went over to the side of the building in the shadows. Donnel came out alone. Sammy Simpson, Big George's right-hand man, came out then and spotted Big George on the ground. He guessed what had happened and went after Donnel. Stopped him with a gun."

"Donnel bumped Big George?"

Mike shrugged. "Donnel and Cathy dropped in on Big George's party. Big George was high. Made some passes at Cathy. Donnel took a swing at him. Then Donnel and Cathy came out, and this happened. Donnel says he didn't do it. Says he told Big George to take his job and go to hell. But that's all."

I lit a cigarette. "Can I send Cathy home?"

"Yes. We'll try to keep her name out of it."

He turned and went back to the lab boys. I went to the squad car. Cathy was in the back seat. Danny nodded to me and got out of the car. "Be back in a minute, Ken," he said diplomatically.

I GOT in the back seat with Cathy. Her face was white and she looked scared to death, but her eyes were dry.

"Danny will drive you home," I said. "Be careful you don't wake Mom and Pop when you go in. They don't know about this. And stay inside. Don't talk with anyone until I see you again."

"All right, Ken," she whispered.

I put an arm around her and gave her a small hug. "It's a tough break," I said. "It isn't your fault. You couldn't know the guy would settle an argument with murder."

She pulled away from me. "He didn't, Ken."

"Take it easy, Cathy—"

"It all started because Big George began to make passes at me. Afterwards, when we came out, maybe Big George wanted to finish the fight that started in there, but Pat didn't kill him."

"Did you see it?"

"No. I just know that Pat wouldn't kill anyone that way."

I took one of her hands. "Listen, kid, if he's what you thought he was, he wouldn't have brought you to one of Big George's parties. That should tip you off that he's—"

"We only came because he had to get Big George's signature on some papers he had to mail at the post office tonight. We were just going to stay for a few moments."

I let that pass. A guy can think up excuses to get a girl to a party. "We'll talk about it in the morning," I said.

I got out of the car and called Danny. "Take her home. And don't make any noise in front of the house. Don't wake up the folks."

Danny nodded.

Cathy edged over and opened the car door.

"Ken, I know what you're trying to do. You want to keep my name out of the papers, to make Pat confess and get it over in a hurry with hardly any mention of me. But I'm going to testify for him and do everything I can to free him. He didn't do it. I don't care what it costs me if I can help him."

I smothered what I was about to say and just looked at her.

"That's right," she said softly. "I love him. And there's nothing you can do about it."

She closed the door. I nodded to Danny and they drove off.

"She'll get over it," I thought. "She'll have to get over it!"

Mike glanced at me when I joined the group.

"Anything?" I asked.

"No. The lava is too rough and sandy to hold prints. Not a damned thing but statements."

"Where's Donnel?"

"Inside. Back room."

"I'd like to talk with him alone."

He looked at me with keen eyes. "If we get a quick confession from him it will be easier to keep Cathy out of this mess."

"That's right. I can talk with him?"

"Go ahead."

I went into the night club and found the room. Two harness cops with him said they'd wait outside, and to yell if I needed help. I closed the door and looked at Donnel.

I knew him by sight, but I'd never really looked at him before. He got up from a chair and faced me.

He was young and not bad-looking. He had brown, close-trimmed hair, even features, grey eyes. We were about the same height and weight, just under six feet and around 170 pounds.

"I'm Cathy's brother," I said. "Ken McIntyre, Homicide Detail."

He nodded curtly, his eyes alert and cautious.

I said, "I'm going to ask some questions. I want answers."

"Okay."

"Before I ask them, let's get something straight. Maybe you think I owe you something because this started tonight when Big George made a pass at Cathy and you played Sir Galahad. That doesn't wash with me. Cathy wouldn't have been here to be insulted by Big George if you hadn't brought her."

He nodded without speaking.

I continued, "And I'm going to see to it that she doesn't get her name spread all over front pages in a long, sensational case."

He nodded again.

"So you might as well come clean," I said. "It will save a lot of trouble. You killed Big George. Right?"

"No."

"He called you back, you got in another beef with him—he was too big for you. The rock wall was there. You grabbed a hunk of lava and let him have it. Is that the way it happened?"

"No," he said again. His eyes didn't leave mine.

I let my eyes go over him slowly.

"You've heard how some cops work," I said softly. "I've never liked the rough stuff. I don't believe in it. But there are circumstances when a man has more than his principles at stake. When someone's happiness is in the balance."

He didn't say a thing. I got my gun out.

"I don't want to pistol-whip you," I said. "I don't want to do that to any man—and I never have. But you're going to tell me the truth or I'm going to half-kill you."

Carefully, he wet his lips with the tip of his tongue.

"Don't try it," he said. "If I had wanted to kill Big George I wouldn't have had to use the lava. I learned how to do it with only my hands on night patrols against the Japs. That was my job for four years on the government payroll. The G.I. payroll."

"I'm not interested. I'm only interested in who killed Big George, and you're going to tell me how you did it."

"Did Cathy say I killed him?"

"Leave her out of this. Just talk about you and Big George."

"I didn't kill him."

"You're lying."

He shook his head slowly. I made the first pass. The gun should have raked across his throat where it wouldn't show too much afterwards. It didn't. It came out of my hand. Fingers gripped my wrist and jerked me forward. Something clipped me across the jaw. That was all. It was very dark after that.

**M**IKE SULLIVAN was there when I came out of it. I tried to get up, but he pushed me back.

"You butched it," he said simply.

I shut my eyes until my head stopped whirling.

"Did he get away?" I finally asked.

"Through the window."

"My gun. Is it here?"

I opened my eyes. Mike shook his head. "He's got it," he said.

They let me up then, and Mike went out with me. We stopped at the door. Carl Linter wiped his forehead with a handkerchief.

"This will raise hell with my business, Lieutenant," he said.

Sullivan grunted. "What? The murder or losing your boss?"

"Partner," Linter corrected. "We were partners."

"Okay. It doesn't interest me." Mike walked on. I followed him to his car.

"Listen, Mike," I said. "I'm sorry. I really butched it, but I'll find him if I have to tear the city apart."

Mike's voice was short. "You're off the case," he said.

I stared at him. "Off the case? What do you mean?"

"Donnel got away."

"I know, but—"

"And he's your sister's boy friend."

He might as well have hit me with a crowbar. It took a few seconds for it to sink in.

"Wait a second, Mike," I said as softly as I could speak. "My old man has been a cop for twenty-four years. I've been one for eight. It's all I know. Are you saying that I sold you out because Cathy was running around with Donnel?"

Mike didn't answer, but his eyes were cold

and hard, and his jaw muscles were tight.

"Is that it?" I demanded.

"Look at it yourself," he said. "Could you expect me to keep you on the case? The newspaper boys will have a field day as it is. 'Detective lets sister's boyfriend escape.' That'll look good."

"You think I did it intentionally?"

"I'm only saying how it looks."

I brought my badge out of a pocket and dropped it on the ground in front of him.

"But before you pick it up," I said, "there's something else."

"Say it, McIntyre."

I hit him with all of my 170 pounds. He crashed back into the car and stayed there, rubbing his jaw. I watched him with clenched fists. After a moment he straightened up, stooped for the badge and put it in a coat pocket.

He got in the car and slipped behind the wheel. He drove away. I watched the car sweep into the highway and suddenly I felt as empty as a bottomless pit.

\* \* \*

The parking lot was almost deserted now. The lab boys had left. The body had been removed. It was dark around the spot where Big George had been killed. Inside the night club there was some activity as they prepared to close.

Mike Sullivan had my badge. I'd quit the force, but I still was a cop and I had more reason than ever to take Pat Donnel. I had every reason a man could have; and when I took him, there was going to be enough evidence to hang him. This was for keeps.

I got a flashlight from my car and went to the murder scene. I searched for ten minutes. There wasn't one chance in a thousand that I'd find anything the lab boys had missed, but I had to try.

I didn't find anything. I leaned against the rock wall and stared down at the chalked outline of Big George's body. The rock wall and the side of the building formed an "L" at the spot. Big George had fallen so that he was against the side of the building.

That didn't tell me anything. Nothing at the scene did. I lit a cigarette and tried to think out a plan of action to find Donnel.

In the club, lights began to go out. A back door slammed. Beside me an arm separated curtains and a hand snapped a window lock. Two men left the building and went to a car. They had the shuffling walk of waiters. The crew was leaving.

I went to the front door and walked in. Linter was talking with his head waiter. He gave me a tired smile.

"Worst night I ever put in," he volunteered.

The head waiter left and we sat at a table.

Linter wearily lit a cigarette and waited.

"How well do you know Donnel?" I asked.

Linter shrugged narrow shoulders. "Just in a business way."

"You told Sullivan that you and Big George were partners. Did Donnel do the accounting for this place?"

Linter nodded.

I said, "Donnel killed Big George."

"How else could it be? They had a scrap in here. Donnel and the girl left. Big George followed them. Sammy Simpson got worried about what might happen and went out. He was too late."

"You know Donnel got away from me?"

Linter nodded again. "Yeah. Tough break."

"Any idea where I can find him?"

"No. He lives at the Norton, but he probably won't go there."

"Did he have a car here?"

"A Chevy coupe. Dark blue. A '41, I think."

"So when he got out that window, he could circle to the parking lot, mix with your customers who were leaving and get to his car."

"I heard Sullivan figure it that way."

"What were Blackie Martel and his gang doing here?"

Linter's eyes became cautious. "It's a public place."

"Think there's a chance that Donnel is tied in with them?"

"You mean Donnel might have bumped Big George for Martel?"

"Something like that."

Linter carefully put out his cigarette. "I wouldn't know." He stood. "I got to finish closing. Anything more?"

I left the place. In my car I snapped on the radio, tuned to police calls and started toward town.

They were hot for Donnel. The license number of the Chevy came over. I made a mental note of it.

There was one source of information about Donnel that I had to check. Cathy. She would know his habits, where he might go, what he might do. More important, he might attempt to contact her. I hoped that Sullivan hadn't thought of it first.

The house was dark. I let myself in and tiptoed upstairs. I went straight to Cathy's room and opened the door. I flicked on a light. Her bed was empty. The dress she had worn was thrown over a chair. At her closet I looked at her clothes, trying to visualize her wardrobe. A grey suit she often wore was missing.

"What's going on here?"

Pop's voice was gruff behind me. He wore his old flannel bathrobe and his thin hair was tousled from sleep.

"Is mom asleep?" I asked.

"Yes, but I don't know how, with what's been going on."

I shut the door. "What's been happening, Pop?"

"I heard Cathy come in. About half an hour later someone hit a car horn in the alley. Cathy went downstairs. I was half asleep and thought she was after a drink. In about five minutes she came up and I was about asleep again when she went back down. Then a car backed around in the alley and drove away."

I swore softly and pop's lips became a thin line.

"What's happened?" he demanded.

I told him the whole story.

I had never seen him look so old. Finally he said, "It looks bad, Kenny, but I know you. You're a cop. You wouldn't let him go that way. But I don't know about slugging Mike. That's bad."

"It's immaterial now, Pop. The main thing is to find Cathy. That must have been Donnel in the alley, and Cathy's gone with him."

Pop passed a heavy hand over his jaw and I saw anguish in his eyes. "Kenny, if I thought a daughter of mine would—"

"Don't say it, Pop. Not about Cathy. We've got to find her. Get her back before Mike catches up with them. Cathy's just a kid. This guy Donnel could get a girl crazy about him. Don't blame her."

"Where would they go?" he asked hopelessly.

Suddenly we knew. We said it together. "The cabin."

Our fishing cabin was ten miles in the mountains, beside a trout stream. It was completely secluded. A perfect hide-out.

"You stay here," I snapped. "It's going to be tough on mom. Besides, you can stall Mike better than mom could. Tell him Cathy's sick—anything, until I get her back. I'll take the family car. I may need that back seat in the sedan for Donnel."

Quietly we went out to the garage. We stared at the blue coupe that had taken the place of the sedan.

"That wasn't one car you heard backing and turning," I said. "They switched cars. Donnel knew the coupe would be hot."

Pop didn't answer. His jaw line was as hard as a piece of granite.

I STARTED out for the cabin in my coupe, but I didn't get there. I drove through the quiet streets in pre-dawn light thinking how I would handle it. Donnel had my gun, but I'd borrowed Pop's and had it holstered under my arm, and I made up my mind to use it if there was no other way. I tried not to think what my killing Pat Donnel might do to Cathy. No matter what she felt for the guy, she couldn't marry a murderer.

I started out thinking all those things, but something else began to gnaw at my mind. It was what Donnel had said.

"If I had wanted to kill Big George I wouldn't have had to use the lava."

He hadn't been lying. I'd been trained to handle men, but he had taken care of me in a matter of seconds. And if he had been trained for night patrols against Japs, he was trained to kill with his hands.

I eased up on the gas and began to think about it. I thought about Cathy. She was young, but she was as smart as any girl I knew. She had what Pop called "character." Maybe I hadn't been looking at it enough from her side. Maybe she was right about Pat Donnel. Knowing Cathy, I knew that the only reason she would go with him would be



"You talk too damned much,"  
Blackie said.

her belief that he was innocent and her desire to help him prove it.

That was when I pulled to the side of the highway and stopped.

"They won't hide out if they're trying to prove that he's innocent," I told myself. "They'll be here in the city, working at it. That's why they needed the family car. They need transportation in a car that isn't hot."

If they had that kind of work to do, they'd probably start where a cop would start.

I turned around, sped across town and out toward the Lava. It was still dark enough for lights when I parked on a side road a quarter-mile from the place. I walked the rest of the way.

The family sedan was parked near the club. No one was in sight, but a light burned in a back room. A car was parked in the parking

lot. I crept close to the building, toward the lighted window.

A terror-stricken scream came from somewhere inside the building.

*Cathy!* I thought.

I couldn't go in through the lighted window. Someone with a gun might be waiting. I ran around the side of the building and found French doors. A handkerchief around my gun muffled some of the noise as I smashed a small pane. I reached in and turned a key.

I was in the main dining room. Somewhere in the other side of the building the scream came again and was stopped short. Something crashed against a wall and a man swore.

Halfway across the large room I stumbled over a chair in the dark.

Abruptly the lights came on. A tight voice said, "Hold it!"

One of Martel's men, Porky Meyers, stared at me with small, red-rimmed eyes. A gun looked too large for his pudgy hand. His other hand still hovered over a light switch.

"Drop the gun, copper!" The way he said it made me obey him.

A man staggered into the room, holding his face with fingers that dripped blood. I recognized Barney Blair's solid body.

He groped for a chair and sat down. Porky Meyers glanced at him. "Nose?" he asked briefly. Blair nodded and found a handkerchief in a pocket to mop his face. He called Donnel an unprintable name. Then he looked at me.

"Is he alone?" he asked Meyers.

"I think so."

"Hell! Don't you *know*?"

"No one else came in. There ain't any cars drove in."

"That dame's his sister," Blair said.

"What about Donnel? They need some help in there?"

Blair spat blood into his handkerchief. "It's all right. Martel knocked him cold with a gun. The dame's out, too. I had to clip her. That's when Donnel got loose and did this."

He got up and pulled a gun. He came over, picked up pop's gun from the floor and went back to the chair.

"Blackie'll be out in a minute," he said.

Porky still kept me covered. "What about Linter?"

"We got here just in time. Donnel had him down on the office floor using some of that judo stuff. Linter was squealing like a stuck pig. Spilling everything he knows."

"About Big George, too? Pinning the rap on himself and—"

"Shut up, Porky. We got a cop here."

"The boss will have to take care of him, Barney. He already knows too much."

"We don't know *what* he knows."

"He's here, ain't he? Ain't the girl his sister? She knows plenty. Blackie's *got* to do it."

"Yeah. Maybe you're right."

Blackie Martel came through the doorway from the hall and his eyes narrowed as he looked over the scene. Linter was behind him, talking rapidly in a pleading voice.

"But, Blackie! You know I wouldn't! I'm your pal. I wouldn't—"

Martel's voice was clipped. "You already did. I heard you spilling it all when we came in."

"I knew you were coming. I had to stall. He was going to kill me. I had to do something until you came. Sure. He knows I'm working with you, that I bumped Big George for you! But we can take care of him and the girl. The cops want him for it anyhow, and—"

Martel turned to face him. His right hand went out for Porky's gun and took it. He shoved its barrel into Linter's solar plexus.

"You talk too damned much," he said. He pulled the trigger. A look of astonishment came over Linter's face. He clutched at himself and then doubled and fell to the floor.

Martel turned around and looked at me. "You're McIntyre, a cop," he said flatly. "The dame's brother."

"That's right," Porky echoed.

Martel glanced at Blair. "We're in a jam, Barney. This damned thing has backfired." "We got an out, Blackie."

Martel nodded. "Just one out. Donnel and the girl know Linter bumped Big George and enough to send us all up for the rest of our lives. Now this cop has to get in the picture."

"Look, Blackie," Blair said heavily through phlegm and blood. "Let the cops wonder how it happened. They find a dead cop and the guy he's after and the cop's sister and Linter. Let them guess their own angles. We'll be clean."

"Guns, you dope. They have to find guns here."

"They can't trace Porky's. We use the cop's on Donnel. We use Porky's on the girl and the cop and leave it by Donnel. We take his gun. It's all wrapped up then. The cop bumps Donnel. Donnel bumps Linter, the dame and the cop. It adds up and comes out even. The cops figure Donnel went kill-crazy."

Martel's lips became straight.

"Okay," he said. "But I wish to God I'd never seen this place."

Porky suddenly yelled. Pat Donnel's approach had been noiseless. His hand slashed down on Martel's neck from the back.

Martel went down and Donnel started towards Blair. Blair's gun came up.

I went into a dive for him, knowing it was too late even as I left my feet.



**A** SHOT roared in the room. I hit Blair and we went to the floor in a crash. I slugged desperately. Suddenly I discovered that Blair's body was limp. I saw the stain of blood at his right shoulder. Hands grasped me and pulled me up.

"Take it easy," Mike Sullivan said. He turned and looked at Donnel. "How did Linter kill Big George?"

"Linter's office is where the rock wall joins the building. He was at the window when I told Big George to go to hell. I remembered later that the window was open. When I walked off, Linter only had to reach through the window, pick up a chunk of lava and kill Big George with it, pinning the rap on me." I remembered the hand locking that window.

Donnel said, "Martel was moving in on Big George and Linter was working with him. I didn't know any of it until Linter spilled what he knew to me. I was just an accountant for Big George."

"What tipped you off to question Linter?"

"Cathy and I were trying to prove my innocence. She said a good cop would start at the scene of the crime. We came here. We were very quiet, and while we looked for evidence, the light came on in Linter's office. Through the window we heard him make a phone call. He told someone that the cops were gone and to come out and they'd make some plans. He said, 'Now that we've got him out of the way, we'd better move fast and take over.' To me, that 'him' meant Big George. I went in and used some judo to make Linter talk. He did. Then Martel and his gang walked in. Cathy

and I put up a fight and were knocked out. I came out of it and heard Martel talking in the doorway. I guess you know the rest."

Mike nodded and glanced at me.

"How did you get here?" I asked him.

He gave me a tough look. "Your old man is too much of a cop to try to take the law in his own hands. He began to worry after you left for the cabin and called me. We started after you, but a prowl car found your parked car and radioed in. Routine. We turned back and got here just in time to miss Linter's murder, but through the open doorway we heard Martel say Linter had killed Big George, and listened to them make their plans. We waited until it was time to move in."

"Look, Mike—about what happened at your car. . . ."

Mike smiled thinly. "I'd have done what you did if someone accused me of selling out the department. Here's your badge."

Mike turned again to Donnel. "You know how to handle yourself, son. You're intelligent. You're marrying into a family of cops. We're taking on some rookies next month. How about it?"

"Better think twice, Pat," I grinned. "Cathy says she'll never marry a cop. They're always late for dinner." Abruptly I realized that I'd forgotten Cathy.

"Where is Cathy?" I snapped. "Is she all right?"

From the hallway, where I couldn't see her, Cathy spoke.

"I'm right here and as for what I think about marrying cops—you mind your own business, Ken McIntyre!"



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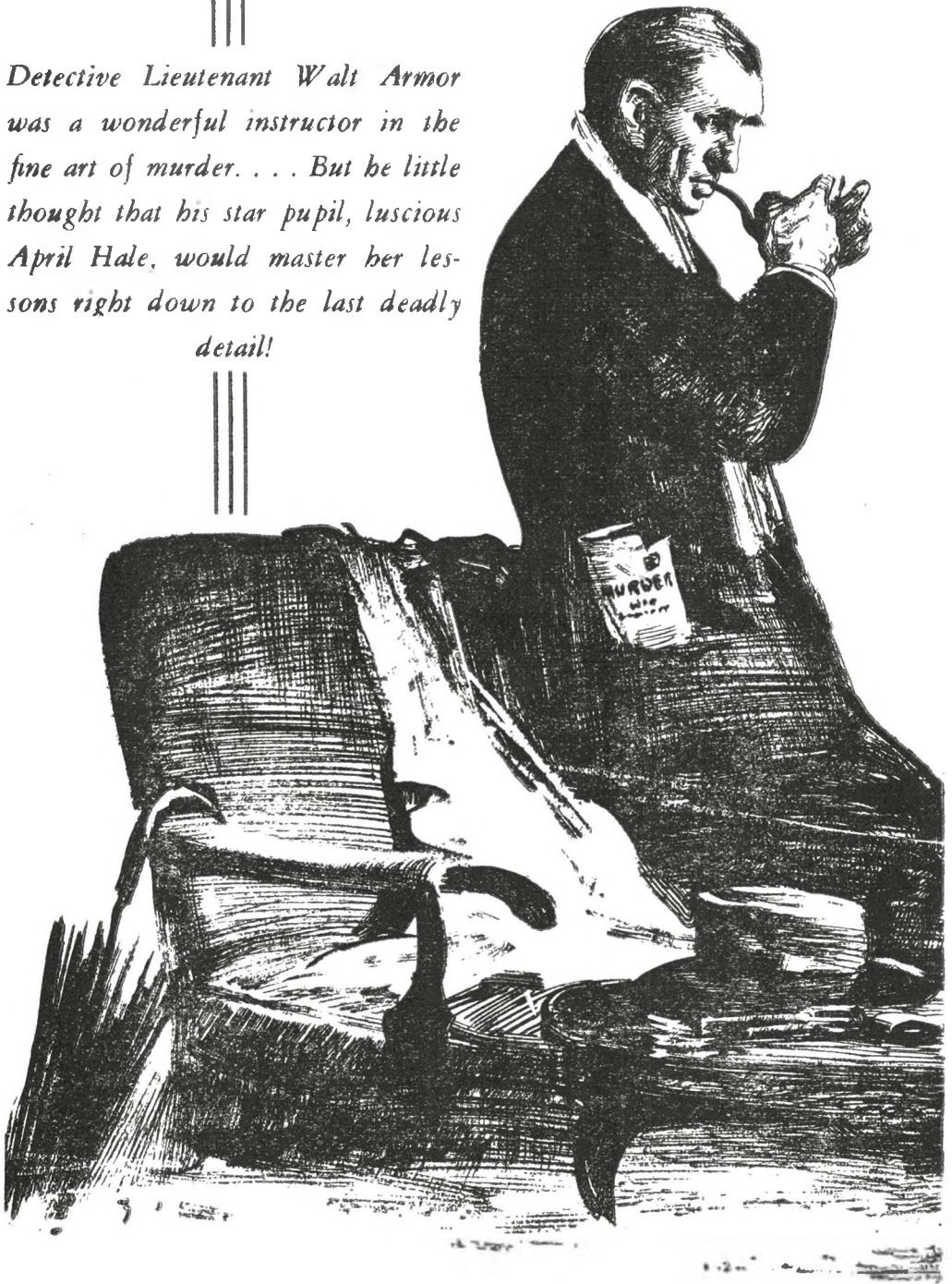
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*Detective Lieutenant Walt Armor was a wonderful instructor in the fine art of murder. . . . But he little thought that his star pupil, luscious April Hale, would master her lessons right down to the last deadly detail!*

|||



# HOMICIDE HOMEWORK

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Gracious Host

**W**ALT ARMOR slouched in the living room club chair, content in the delusion that he was settled for the evening with the reports of a hit-run investigation.

"Darling," Sally said, "April Hale's *Alas, a Corpse* is playing at the Palace tonight."

"Who's April Hale?" he muttered into a report.

"You know, the detective story writer. I saw you reading one of her books the other night."

"That one?" he said. "I never got past the first chapter. I'll have my crime at first hand, thanks."

"I'm sure," Sally said coldly, "that if any other woman asked you to take her to the

"I struggled desperately," she said after a deep breath, "but he was so much stronger. Then I remembered the gun in my dresser. . . ."



By  
**BRUNO FISHER**

movies tonight, you'd be eager enough."

She stood in front of his chair, her legs apart, her hands on her hips. She was slender and dark-eyed and had a smile that could turn She wasn't smiling now.

"Sweetheart," Walt Armor said reasonably, "the only other woman I ever took to the movies since I married you was your cousin from Dayton, and that was because you asked me to, and then you got sore because I did."

"You didn't have to let her drape herself all over you."

He put down the reports. "All right, we go to the movies," he sighed.

The manager of the Palace Theater was chopping tickets at the entrance. "A busman's holiday, eh, Lieutenant?" he said.

"Huh?" Armor said.

"What I mean," the manager explained, "is all day you solve real mysteries and at night you come here to see how the real experts do it on the screen. I bet this picture will stump you."

"Humph!" Armor said and tagged after Sally.

His seat was behind a bird. The bird squatted on a platform. He knew that the platform and the bird formed a hat because they were on top of a shock of blonde female hair. He couldn't see over the bird, so he had to keep looking around it.

Mickey Mouse was pretty good, but then the feature picture came on. It was about a gloomy house full of people who all looked as if they had fever and brooded at each other under dim lights. After a while somebody screamed and they all rushed into a room and found a murdered woman. Armor started to get sleepy.

Under the bird ahead there was a very nice neck. He liked the way the short blonde hairs curled at the nape. He studied the neck for a while and then took another look at the screen.

"Who's that lad telling the cops off?" he asked Sally.

"He's a private eye."

"A what?"

"A private detective."

"Think of that," he said. "What's he doing on the scene of a homicide? How come the cops let him in?"

"Darling, haven't you been following the picture? He's investigating the case for the man with the limp."

"What's the matter with the cops?" he said. "Aren't they supposed to earn their pay?"

The bird turned halfway. "Shh!" the woman under the bird said. She showed a very nice profile before she shifted it back toward the screen.

Armor made up his mind to concentrate on what was happening in the picture. A couple of more people were knocked off. There were more guns in people's hands than in the arsenal at headquarters. When folks weren't being shot at, they were being slugged, especially the lad who in the picture was called a private eye, which Armor had learned tonight meant a private detective. When the detective wasn't being slugged, he was being kissed by an assortment of luscious females.

"Do the women suspects in your cases act like that with you, Walt?" Sally asked him cooly.

"No, and they don't keep poking guns at me, either," he said.

He must have dozed off because when he looked again he had no idea what was going on. The truth was that he hadn't had much more idea before that.

"Hey," he said suddenly, "why's that cop wrapping that pistol in a handkerchief?"

"To preserve the fingerprints, darling," Sally explained. "That's the murder weapon."

"So why's he smudging them by wrapping them in a handkerchief?"

The bird turned. "Shh!" the woman under it said angrily.

Armor leaned close to Sally. "Not that there'll be prints on that gun," he whispered confidently.

But there were. A couple of fat ones. Armor decided that he could use a lad like that fingerprint expert on his squad.

"I hope," Sally said with sweet sarcasm, "that you're a better detective at your job than you are here."

He started to answer, but the bird turned completely around, and from under it a pair of human eyes glared at him and Sally. "Please be quiet and let me hear the picture!"

**A**RMOR kept quiet. He didn't even comment when there was that screwy business with ballistics. He caught a cat nap. Then Sally nudged him and the picture was over and they were going out.

"What I don't quite understand," Sally said when they were in the lobby, "is why he murdered them."

"What I don't understand," he said, "is how people who write that stuff get away with it."

A haughty voice said, "It will interest you to know that *Alas, a Corpse*, both as a book and a picture, was praised by the critics."

Walt Armor turned and saw the bird and the woman who went with it. The frost in her blue eyes didn't detract from the beauty of her face. She was a big woman—not fat, not oversized except where it helped. Voluptuous was the word for her.

"What do critics know about criminology?"

he said. "Or for that matter, the dope who wrote that picture?"

"I," she said, "am the dope who wrote the book and the movie treatment of *Alas, a Corpse*."

Sally's eyes got big. You're April Hale?"

"I am." Her facial muscles were eased the least bit by the awe in Sally's tone. "I haven't seen the picture since it was released. Frankly, I rather like it in spite of this gentleman's carping objections."

Armor decided that there was no point in arguing with a strange female in a theater lobby, especially not with his wife present. He was willing to let it go, but Sally wasn't. She rose indignantly to his defense.

"I'll have you know that my husband is Lieutenant Walter Armor of the homicide squad," she told April Hale. "When he says you don't know anything about criminology, he knows what he's talking about."

"A real flesh-and-blood detective!" April Hale exclaimed. All at once her face was soft, her eyes friendly, her voice intimate. "And a handsome one too!"

Armor squirmed. He wished she'd stop it—anyway, when his wife was standing next to him.

"I overheard what you said in the theater," April Hale went on. "Is it really wrong to wrap a gun in a handkerchief?"

"It's wrong to wrap in a cloth anything on which there may be fingerprints," he said. "That's the best way to smudge them. And there wouldn't have been prints on a hand gun. I've never come across any. To begin with, the corrugated surface doesn't take prints. Also, guns are usually covered with a thin film of oil, and as fingerprints are impressions formed by greasy body oils, there's no way to develop them from an oily surface."

"But it's done all the time," April Hale protested.

"In books and in moving pictures," he said. "Then there's the ballistics stuff in the picture. The guys looks at the wound and says a .32 slug did it. Nuts! The size of the wound means very little. Another thing. The bullet was fired from close range into the head, which means that it was flattened by the skull and probably other bones, but in the picture ballistics matches it up with a test bullet. It can't be done with what is sure to be only a misshapen hunk of lead."

April Hale listened with her mouth half-open. You fascinate me, Lieutenant. Was there anything else you objected to?"

"Well, no police commissioner would—"

He felt a tug at his arm. Sally obviously wasn't enjoying the conversation. She was working at being jealous of still another woman.

"It's late, darling," Sally said.

April Hale smiled. Her teeth were very white between very red lips. "I am delighted to have met you, Lieutenant Armor."

The tug on his arm became more persistent. He nodded good-bye to April Hale, and he and Sally left the theater.

On the way home they didn't mention the picture or the woman who had written it. But when they were back in their living room, Sally said furiously, "I don't like her."

"You don't like who?" Armor muttered, picking up the hit-run reports.

"That April Hale woman."

"I guess she's not much of a writer if she can't get her facts straight," he agreed. He absorbed himself in the report he'd left only half-read when Sally had dragged him off to the movies.

I don't care if she's the greatest writer in the world," Sally said. "I'd still resent the hungry way she looked at you."

"Hungry?"

"Stark hunger in her eyes," Sally said. "And the complete way she ignored me, as if she were alone with you."

He loved Sally dearly, but he wished she wouldn't make an issue whenever an attractive woman looked at him.

Listen—" he said and stopped, wondering if Sally had lost her mind.

She had jutted her hips and her eyes were rolling toward the ceiling. "And a handsome detective!" she cooed in what he guessed she intended as an imitation of April Hale. "'You fascinate me, Lieutenant!' " she cooed some more. Then with a snort she resumed a respectable posture. "I could kick that woman where she's even fatter than elsewhere."

"Aw, nuts!" Armor said disgustedly.

At that Sally flounced off to bed. And he wondered how whatever had happened, if anything, was his fault.

**A** COUPLE of days later Walt Armor was still up to his neck in the hit-run case. He was feeling pretty low about not getting anywhere with it when the phone on his desk buzzed.

"Lieutenant Armor?" a woman said. "This is April Hale."

Something inside of him quivered a little, as if he were a kid and this was his first phone call from a girl. He wondered if it was because of Sally's propaganda, which was having the opposite effect she'd intended.

"Hello," he said carefully and waited.

"Lieutenant, I know that this is an imposition, but I need professional advice on a book I'm writing. Would you mind?"

"Not at all," he said gallantly. "I'll be here at Headquarters for the next few hours."

"I was about to suggest a cocktail or two in my apartment," she cooed.

"Well, Miss Male—" Armor sparred for time to regain his emotional balance. "Is it Miss Hale or Mrs. Hale?"

"There is no Mr. Hale. I am sure, Lieutenant, that my apartment would be much cozier than your office."

He had no doubt that it would be. But his own family life was cozier still and he had no desire to break it up. The way Sally had reacted to April Hale the other night, about all she'd need would be to find out that he had visited her in her apartment.

He made his tone crisp. "If you'll come to Headquarters, I'll give you all the help I can."

"I mix pleasant cocktails, Lieutenant," she persisted, "and my apartment is very comfortable. If you can't make it today, I'll be free at any time tomorrow."

She was hardly subtle about it. If he'd ever been tempted, he wasn't now.

"Sorry, Miss Hale," he said. "I'll be glad to receive you at my office."

Her voice changed. It practically froze the wire. "Thank you, Lieutenant. Good-bye."

He hung up and went back to work.

The next day a banker fell or jumped—probably jumped because he was a banker—off the eleventh floor of the Midtown Building, and that kept Walt Armor busy until eight in the evening. He came home tired and hungry. His supper waiting for him was cold, but not as cold as Sally's kiss.

"Anything wrong, sweetheart" he asked her.

"What," she answered with a question, "can be wrong?"

He washed up and sat down at the table. Sally, who had already eaten, sat opposite him and stared at him until he threw down his fork.

"All right," he said, "let's have it."

Sally let him have it. "An hour ago a woman phoned you."

"Is that all?"

"When I said you weren't home, she refused to leave her name," Sally pointed out acidly. "Why would a woman refuse to tell a man's wife who she is if she has nothing to hide from his wife?"

"Could be she wanted to plead with me not to put the heat on her husband."

"Whose husband?"

"Any husband," he said. "Or maybe a son or a daughter or a friend who's in trouble with Homicide."

Not this woman," Sally declared. "Not with that ecstatic lilt in her voice when she said your name. And it seemed to me that I'd heard that voice before, though I'm not sure whom it belonged to."

Armor picked up his fork. When she saw that he wasn't going to make an argument of it, she went into the bedroom. She didn't come out until he had finished eating and was relaxing in the club chair with an evening paper. She was dressed in her snappy tweed suit.

"Going somewhere, sweetheart?" he said.

"You seem to have forgotten that tonight is my home bureau night." She stood looking at him as she pulled on her gloves. "Or did you forget? Is that why the woman phoned you?"

"Oh, hell!" he said.

Sally went as far as the door and stopped. He noted, as he did at least once a day, that she had a figure that couldn't be beaten. And a face, too, in spite of that tight look she had on it now.

"Are you sure you won't be lonely, darling, while I'm gone?" she said with mock sweetness.

He grunted savagely and dug his face into the paper. Sally left.

Two minutes later the doorbell rang. He jumped up, expecting that Sally had returned to say she was sorry for having acted like that without reason. But when he opened the door, it wasn't Sally.

"April Hale," he said, and stood there, staring.

"How long are you going to gawk at me like that, Lieutenant?" she said after a while. "Aren't you going to ask me in?"

Without a word he stepped aside. April Hale undulated past him, shed her coat, dropped it on a chair, draped herself on the couch, crossed a pair of very nice legs. Glumly he brooded down at her.

"You're hardly a gracious host, Lieutenant," April Hale said with a very red-mouthed smile.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Lesson in Murder

**S**HE LOOKED very good, but Walt Armor didn't give a damn about that. He hated to think of what would happen if Sally returned home suddenly.

"Earlier this evening you phoned here and wouldn't give my wife your name," he said grimly. "Then you waited outside on the chance that Sally would leave the house. When she did, you waited a couple of minutes and then came in."

She uttered a gay laugh. "You *are* a detective."

"What do you want?" he demanded.

"My dear Lieutenant, you were the one who pointed out my lack of knowledge concerning criminology and police procedure. I

need some information for my new book."

"Why couldn't you get it from me at my office?"

"It would be so crowded and noisy there." April Hale dug a pad and pencil out of her handbag, rested the pad on her uppermost knee, held the pencil poised. "I'm ready if you are," she said.

That business with pad and pencil put him at ease. He was a dope—a conceited dope at that. She had come here to work, not on him, but on what was a lot more important to her, a book.

He dropped into the club chair, a respectable fifteen feet from her crossed legs, and said, "Shoot the questions."

Yes, he told her, patterns left by the sweat pores of the skin were as definite and as different in all people as fingerprints. No, a lie detector test was not legal evidence, but a confession obtained as the result of the test was. Yes, there were more than the four major classifications in human blood; serologists have sub-classified almost five hundred. No, identification of a hit-run car through a piece of the headlight lens is no longer possible since cars changed to sealed beams. As for poisons that kill without leaving a trace in the body—

He smiled. "If such a poison were known, it wouldn't be made public."

"Does that mean that there is such a poison?"

"You'll have to ask a toxicologist," he evaded.

"And no doubt he'd refuse to tell me too." April Hale shrugged. "Nobody connected with the police will admit that there can be a perfect murder."

"Outside of stories there are plenty," he said, "if by perfect murder you mean getting away with it. The trouble with you writers is that you make your murders too complicated. The toughest murders to break are those where somebody is shot or stabbed or bludgeoned in a dark street with no witnesses."

She made a note of that and then frowned at what she had written. "But wouldn't you at once start looking for the people who had a motive for killing that particular person?"

"Sure. And then hope we can break them down. It usually works. Not many people have the nerves to hold out against a grilling."

April Hale chewed her pencil like a school girl who couldn't think of the right answer in an examination. "In this book I'm writing a woman determines to kill a man. She is shrewd and calculating. If you were that woman, with your experience as a detective, how would you go about it?"

"Easy," he said. "I'd kill the guy in my

own home and then call the police and say I did it."

"You're kidding me."

"No. Did you ever hear of the May Norden case in this city seven years ago? A woman with two children shot her husband? Her story was that she did it in self-defense, that he was trying to assault her."

"Her own husband?"

"Her own husband. And the jury freed her. She'd have had an even easier time if the victim had been any other man. People are funny. They're convinced that any man is capable of attacking a woman, especially if she's attractive, and almost always they'll take the woman's word for it."

She wrote that down. "The perfect murder," she mused.

"That's right, but only if nobody else is involved in the killing with her. If she has, say, a lover, and they want to get rid of the husband and knock him off, she wouldn't have a chance."

"Or if she kills him for money," she put in.

He waved that away. "Murder for financial gain is exclusively a male motive. Women murder because of fear or jealousy or hate or revenge."

She read what was on her pad and didn't like it. "Where would mystery and detection come into my story if I made her say she'd murdered the man because he'd tried to assault her?"

"You're the writer," he said, grinning.

April Hale rose to leave. "You've helped me a great deal, Lieutenant."

He snatched up her coat, held it for her, accompanied her to the door. "Any time you want more dope," he said gallantly, "get in touch with me."

"You've been very kind."

They shook hands and she left.

And that was that. Walt Armor grinned somewhat sheepishly as he returned to his chair and his newspaper. Sally had had her all wrong, and for a while, he had to admit, he had too.

But when Sally returned home from the meeting, he didn't mention April Hale's visit. That cold and distant mood was still on her, so he decided to let well enough alone and keep quiet.

The next morning she was still the same way. He left for work without being kissed. At Headquarters the hit-run case was beginning to move. From a smear of fender paint on the dead man's knuckles the laboratory determined the make and year of the car. The rest was plodding routine, sending men to every service station in the community. But he couldn't keep his mind on the job. He thought of Sally and he thought of April Hale, and he damned all women.

That evening, when he let himself into his house, a surprise awaited him. Sally flung her arms about his neck and kissed him as fervently as if he'd just returned from a long journey.

"Oh, darling," she said, "I was foolish to be jealous."

"Sure," he agreed heartily, holding her close. "You never had any reason to be."

"I know. I've been thinking it over all day. Please forgive me, darling."

He forgave her ardently.

The phone rang while they were eating. Sergeant Bill Parker said over the wire, "We got us a murder, Walt. A dame put a couple of .32 slugs into her boy friend's heart."

"Have you got her?"

"Got her? She called us herself. Handed me the gun when I came in. A swell-looking dame. A writer. A detective story writer of all things."

The pit of Armor's stomach went numb. "Is her name April Hale?"

"How did you guess, Walt?"

"She's a detective story writer living in this town."

"Lives in 334 Terrace Place," Parker said. "I'm calling from her apartment. You can take your time, Walt. The squad's here and Sam Biddle, and seeing she's confessed, there's not much for us to do anyway."

"I'll be right over," Armor said tonelessly.

Sally was standing at his side when he hung up. "What about April Hale?" she asked.

"She shot and killed a man."

"In self-defense?"

"What?" He looked dully at her. "I don't know."

But he knew.

He left without finishing his lamb chops. He had lost his taste for food.

**A**PRIL HALE'S two-room apartment was filled with cops. She sat girlishly on her legs on the couch, and a handkerchief was to her eyes. Her other hand held a quilted robe tightly across her considerable bosom. What Armor could see of her legs was bare.

Sam Biddle, an assistant district attorney, stood over her. He asked her something in a low tone and she shook her head. Then he saw Armor and said, "Hi, Walt."

She removed the handkerchief from her face and looked directly at Armor through tear-filmed eyes. Armor, for his part, gave no sign that he knew her.

"Where's the body?" he asked Sergeant Parker.

Parker led him into the bedroom—a frilly, feminine room. The man lay on a pale green rug alongside the bed. He wore grey slacks, a fuzzy tweed jacket, a brown wool shirt with a broad, knitted necktie. A very snappy dresser. Armor bent down and peered into the

dead face. But he didn't know the man. "Young and handsome," he muttered as he rose to his feet.

"Name's George Keefe," Parker said. "We don't know anything about him yet except what April Hale told us. She said she'd gone out with him a few times, and then tonight he came up here and tried to—"

"I'll let her tell it," Armor broke in.

He returned to the living room. Sam Biddle was nodding sympathetically as April Hale spoke up to him from the couch. "So I—" she said to Biddle and stopped when she saw Armor approach. She met his gaze squarely, but she didn't greet him by name or any other way.

"I'm Lieutenant Armor," he said stiffly. "Tell me what happened."

She said, "At about six tonight George Keefe called to take me to dinner. I'd gone out with him a few times before. He had always acted like a perfect gentleman. But tonight—" Her voice broke.

"Try to control yourself, Miss Hale," Biddle said kindly.

She blew her nose. "George arrived earlier than I had expected him. I went into my room to change my clothes. Suddenly the door opened and George came in. I was only wearing—well, I was considerably less than half-dressed." She opened her robe a trifle, not immodestly, but enough to demonstrate that she hadn't much on underneath. "Naturally I demanded that he leave. Instead he threw his arms about me. He—he—" She had trouble going on.

If she hadn't gone in for writing, she could have been a good dramatic actress, Armor thought bitterly.

"I struggled desperately," she said after a deep breath, "but he was so much stronger. Then I remembered my gun in the dresser. In my search for material for my books I sometimes go places where it is advisable to carry a gun for protection. As I strove to fight him off, I backed against the dresser. The drawer was partly open. I snatched out the gun."

"And it was loaded," Armor commented dryly.

She had all the answers. "I live alone, Lieutenant. A woman must have some protection." Her handkerchief returned to her eyes. "I was hardly aware of what I was doing. There was a kind of blackout through which I heard a dull roar or two, and then George was lying dead on the floor." Her voice became very low, very tired. "Then I put on this robe and phoned the police."

Armor swore inwardly. Last night she had made a sucker out of him, and she was still doing it.

He said, "Now I'll tell you what actually happened, Miss Hale. You invited George



Keefe to come into your bedroom. You held the gun behind you when he entered. You waited until he came close and then shot him twice in the heart. Then you took off your dress and put on that robe and called the police."

The room had become very quiet.

"No," April Hale said. "It happened exactly the way I told you."

Armor opened his mouth. Everybody in the room was looking at him. After a blast like that, the procedure was to try to break her down. He closed his mouth without saying anything. He turned from her and walked toward the door.

Sam Biddle and Sergeant Parker followed him. "Sure, it's possible, Walt," Biddle said. "But do you see anything to back it up?"

"Just a hunch," Armor muttered.

He glanced back at April Hale where she sat curled on the couch. Then he said to Sergeant Parker. "You can handle this, Bill," and went out.

His car was parked in front of the apartment building. He got behind the wheel and just sat.

Last night April Hale had learned from him how to get away with murder, and tonight she had followed the outline. That demonstrated premeditation beyond doubt—if he could prove it.

He couldn't. It would be only his word against hers. And at the trial she would have a lot more on her side than her word. She was shrewd, calculating; she had prepared the script in advance.

Probably she wouldn't deny that she had been in his house last night. The smart criminal sticks as close as possible to what may be verified. She would say that, yes, she had gone to his house because he had asked her. He had known that his wife would be out. He had made love to her. She had rejected him, a married man, and now he was making up this story about her.

Something like that. And as she said that and more at the trial, her fine legs would be crossed and she would weep and modestly keep her eyes lowered, and the jury would believe her because juries believe that any man is after an attractive woman. Or at least the jury would have a reasonable doubt.

As for himself, the defense attorney would make a fool of him on the stand. One of two things had to be true, the defense attorney would point out: he had brought another woman to his home while his wife was out and made love to her, or that he, a police lieutenant, had devoted himself to telling a woman how to murder somebody and get away with it. In either case, he would appear ridiculous. Chances were that he'd be shunted aside at the forthcoming promotion as captain.

But that wouldn't be the worst. There was Sally. If last night he had told her that April Hale had been at the house and why, she might have downed her jealousy enough to believe his version. But not now, after he had kept quiet about the visit. Certainly not if she heard about it at a trial. And he would lose her, too, which would, of course, be the hardest blow.

So he was stopped cold. By talking, he could come no nearer proving April Hale guilty of murder. She had planned it that way from the beginning.

After a while he roused himself. He drove home.

Sally was waiting for him at the door.

"Can you prove that she did it deliberately?" Sally asked eagerly.

He thought absently of the vindictiveness of women—how Sally, without knowing any details, wanted to see April Hale burn in the chair.

He tossed his hat on the table. "All we can prove is that she shot him, which isn't always a legal crime."

"I suppose," Sally said contemptuously, "that her story is that the man tried to assault her."

He frowned at her. "How do you know?"

"Well, I know that kind of woman."

The kind of woman, he thought, who plotted a murder as carefully as she plotted one of her books.

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Jealous Wife

**T**HE NEXT morning the hit-run case was wrapped up. Having determined the make and year of the car from the paint on the victim's knuckles, a couple of Armor's men found a garage mechanic who had repaired a car like that the day after the accident. The owner of the car was brought in for questioning, and within forty minutes Armor broke him down.

Now in the afternoon Armor had a signed confession on his desk. He had a message from the commissioner himself congratulating him on a job well done. Armor should have felt good. He didn't.

He sent for Sergeant Parker. "Anything new on the Keefe shooting?"

"Say, you didn't want me to stay on it, did you?" Parker protested. "April Hale admitted the shooting, so that leaves the rest up to the D.A.'s office. They're holding her, but the last I heard they weren't sure what they'd do. Anyway, any more investigation for the trial is up to the detectives in their own bureau."

"I don't need a lecture on jurisdiction,"

Armor said testily, slamming his drawer.

He left his office. He walked down two flights of stairs, entered a large outer office, went through one of the inner doors.

Assistant District Attorney Sam Biddle looked up from his desk. "Nice job on the hit-run investigation, Walt. The chief is out for a second degree rap."

Armor restrained a savage grunt. He tried to sound casual as he asked, "What are you going to do with April Hale?"

"I wish I knew." Biddle scowled at his desk. "I've had a couple of men digging into her life and George Keefe's. It didn't take them long to come up with several facts. Fact one: Keefe was more than just another lad who took April Hale out to dinner. During the last few months they were together a lot, and from all we can gather it was a pretty hot affair. Fact two: Keefe had the looks and personality to make the ladies fall for him. They did, and he didn't limit his love-making to April Hale. Fact three: Keefe was set to marry a rich and attractive lass named Fern Ettinger. April Hale's friends tell us that she was not too happy about it. Fact four: she shot him dead. Fact five—" Biddle shrugged.

"Fact five: it's premeditated murder," Armour said dryly.

"Except that it's no fact unless we can make a jury agree that it is," Biddle said. "She's already hired Alvin Clements to defend her. He doesn't lose cases, and this one is right up his alley. I don't look forward to trying it."

"But you will, Sam."

Biddle shrugged. "What else can we do? Up to a couple of hours ago I wasn't sure one way or another. Now that I've learned more about her and Keefe, I don't see where there's any choice but to get a first degree indictment. All the same, one will get you fifty she walks out of the trial as free as air."

Walt Armor made a noise in his throat.

His next stop was the city jail. April Hale hadn't yet been charged with anything; she was being held temporarily in a detention cell. She wore a snappy blue dress, tight in the right places, and her walk was springy when she entered the room with a matron.

"Lieutenant Armor, I believe?" she said with that red-lipped smile of hers. She sat down and crossed her legs. She looked at ease, practically at home.

Armor waited until the matron left. Then he said, "I suppose you couldn't stand that pretty boy, George Keefe, leaving you for another woman. If you couldn't have him, nobody would. There's nothing deadlier than a woman scorned. Only, generally they do their killing in a fit of passion. You were deliberate about it."

"Why, Lieutenant," April Hale said, "I've no idea what you're talking about?"

"At the same time you made a kind of grim game out of it," he went on stolidly. "Maybe it was conceit. I'd torn you down considerably in the movies when I took pot shots at your picture. You'd show me. You'd get me to tell you how to murder a man without suffering the consequences. A dangerous game, but exciting, too. And when the trial is over and you walk out of jail, the publicity won't hurt the sale of your books. You'll be a lot more famous than you'd ever hoped, which in your profession pays off in dollars and cents."

She didn't bother to argue. It wasn't necessary. He knew and she knew and nobody else knew.

"What'll your comeback be when I testify against you?" he said.

The smile was pasted to her lips. "I tried to shield you, Walt. I saw no reason why I should hurt your wife by dragging your name in. Of course, if you force me to, I'll have to admit that you were my lover."

Glumly he nodded. "I thought that would be it. That's why you refused to come to my office. Your apartment would have been best, but as I wouldn't come there, my own house was second best."

"I realize why you're talking like this, Walt, honey," she said, "and the world will realize too if you make me talk. Not until last night did you know that I had also been seeing George Keefe. Now you are making up this absurd story to get revenge on me. It's very unkind of you, Walt."

His fists opened and closed convulsively as he stood looking down at her. Perfectly self-possessed, she smiled up at him. He turned briskly, went to the door, called the matron to take her away.

**HIS DAY** at Headquarters was not yet over, but he hadn't the stomach to face his fellow policemen. He drove home. Sally was out. Without removing his hat, he dropped heavily into the club chair.

After a while he heard a key turn in the door. Sally entered with a bundle in each arm. She jumped a little when she turned her head and saw him.

"You startled me, darling," she said. "It's too early for you to be home."

Armor grunted and remained in the chair. It wasn't often that he forgot to kiss her.

She carried the bundles into the kitchen and then returned to the living room and, with her coat over an arm, stood surveying him. "What's the matter, darling?" she demanded. "Nothing."

"You might at least take your hat off."

Armor removed his hat and scaled it to-

ward the couch. It missed and fell to the floor. He let it stay there. Then he noticed a warm pressure against his side; Sally had perched herself on one arm of the chair.

"Is it April Hale who's bothering you?" she said.

Her fingers were in his hair. He loved her, but he wished that today she'd let him alone.

"That woman never meant a thing to me," he said angrily. "In fact, I'd like to see her burn in the chair."

"Because she tricked you," Sally murmured.

"She made the world's prize sucker out of—" He stopped. "How did you know?"

"Know what?"

He twisted his face toward hers. Their eyes were inches apart, and hers were a little frightened.

"Listen," he said hoarsely. "Last night when Sergeant Parker phoned me you knew her plea was self-defense before I had a chance to tell you. When I returned home later, you knew that her story was that a man had tried to assault her. Now you know that she tricked me."

She glanced away from him. "I guessed."

"No, you didn't." Fiercely his hand closed over her upper arm. "Did you go to the home bureau meeting that night?"

"The night April Hale was here with you?" Sally said in a small voice. Her slim body sagged against him as if in sudden weariness. "You see, I know she was here. I recognized her voice over the phone. And from the bedroom window I saw her standing across the street, waiting for me to leave. That's why I acted the way I did."

"And you left," he said incredulously, "knowing that she would come into this house as soon as you were gone?"

She buried her face in his shoulder. "I'm so ashamed. You remember the dictograph you brought home last week?"

"Sure." His nerves were all tied up. "We'd used it to get evidence on Harvey Martinson. I sent the records on to headquarters with Parker and put the machine in my car. That night, we were going out and I saw it was still in the car and brought it into the house and forgot about it."

"Well, when April Hale phoned, I hooked it up under the table in the hall. I plugged it in just before I went to the meeting. Darling, I realize it was a despicable thing to do, especially when I played the record back and heard that you'd done nothing to make me jealous. But don't you see, I had to prove to myself that there was no reason for jealousy."

He hardly heard her. The record?" he said. "Did you destroy it?"

"It's hidden in the cellar."

"Get it!" he roared happily.

Armor was as excited as a child with a new toy as he set up the dictograph. The record started turning, then the few words between him and Sally before she left, then silence again. He started to sweat.

On the record a doorbell rang. Then there was his voice saying, "*April Hale*," and then, after a pause, her voice was saying, "*How long are you going to gawk at me like that, Lieutenant?*"

As he stood listening with an arm about Sally's waist, it became harder and harder for him to breathe.

After a small eternity, there was the beginning of it, her words: "*In this book I'm writing a woman determines to kill a man. She is shrewd and calculating. If you were that woman, with your experience as a detective, how would you go about it?*"

The record was exhausted before she departed, but all the essentials were on it. Let her tell her story to a jury now; let her cross her legs and weep. It wouldn't mean a thing when this record was played, when her own words condemned her.

She had plotted her story carefully, but she had overlooked the jealousy of a wife.

"And I'll be a clever cop," he said aloud. "I had this dictograph in my house and I set it up to prove to my wife that I was behaving myself with April Hale. Maybe it will be a little embarrassing, but so what?"

Sally wasn't quite following him. She was boring her face into his chest. "Can you forgive me, darling? I'll promise never, never to be jealous."

He laughed. He held her close to him.

"Sweetheart, I love you," he said.

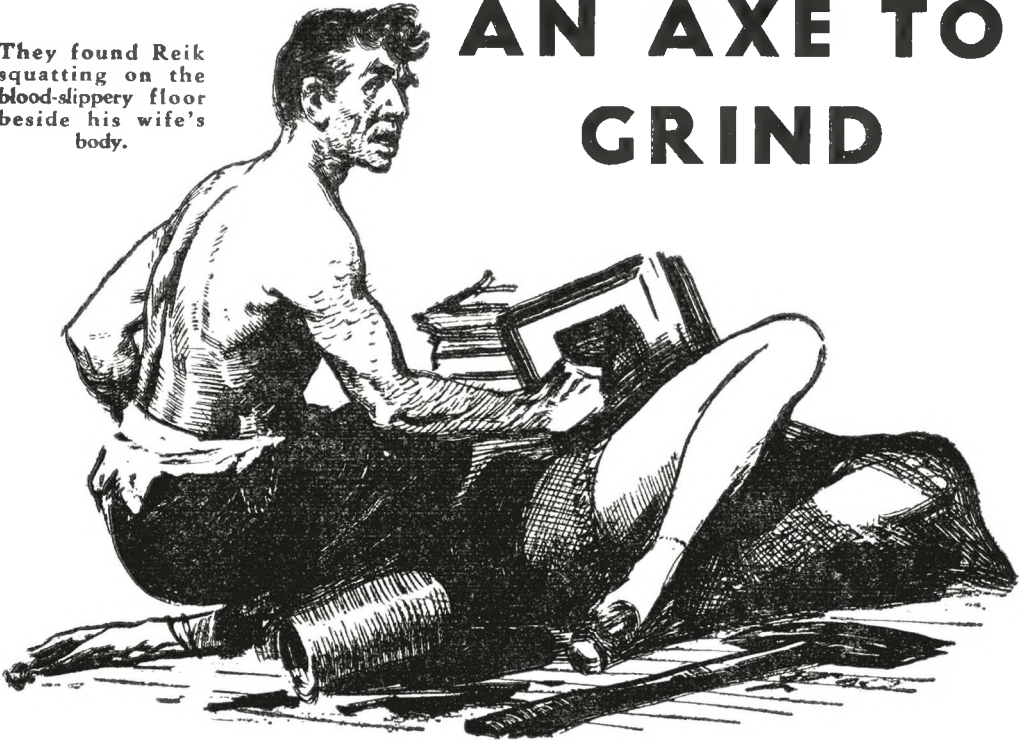
THE END

## A FAST RIDE DOWN MURDER ALLEY

Chills, thrills and goose-pimples are waiting for you at every corner when you hop aboard your December issue of *Detective Tales* for a hair-raising view of the latest in mayhem, manslaughter and murder. Featuring "Eyes Behind the Door" by G. T. Fleming-Roberts and "Fry Away, Kentucky Babe!" by Day Keene, plus other smashing yarns and features by such masters of fictional homicide as Russell Branch, Henry Norton, Parker Bonner and others. Don't miss it! Out October 24th!

They found Reik squatting on the blood-slippery floor beside his wife's body.

# AN AXE TO GRIND



By **CURT HAMLIN**

**I**T WAS an axe murder.

It happened about midnight Saturday in one of those drab, down-at-the-eaves houses on lower Front Street. A man named Reik chopped his wife about thirty times on the head and back. He began hacking away on the second floor, followed her as she stumbled blindly down a narrow flight of stairs, finally finished her in the kitchen. The neighbors heard screaming and called the police. They found Reik squatting on the blood-slippery floor beside his wife's body, struggling to pull the wedding ring from her finger.

He wouldn't tell why he'd done it, but he admitted the kill. A denial wouldn't have done him much good. The two of them were alone in the house. His fingerprints were on the handle of the axe, and he was wet with her blood. They had this boarder, Ebert, but he was down at the corner tavern when it happened, drinking beer. The police were hold-

ing him as a material witness. It didn't look as if there was much of a story in the case, but if there was, Ebert could tell it. The city desk sent me down to get an interview.

He wasn't a bad-looking guy. About thirty. Big shoulders and a flat belly and lean hips. Blond hair cut in a stiff, brushy crop. A calm face. The features were heavy and immobile. He only smiled once the whole time I was there. His eyes were expressionless. Looking inward, with their backs turned. When I introduced myself he nodded without particular interest. I sat down on the cell cot beside him. He was in shirt sleeves, and his feet were pushed into a worn pair of bedroom slippers. I told him what I wanted.

He said, "Like I told the cops, I don't know nothing. I wasn't there. Joe done it to her about twelve. I left at maybe half-past eleven."

"Why?"

"I told the cops. I went to bed, only I

*"He worked with that grindstone all day," Ebert said. "But I knew he wouldn't kill her while I was around—so I went out."*

couldn't sleep. I got dressed and went down for a beer. I guess you could say I got thirsty."

He said all this as though he'd told it before. Mechanically, with a flat inflection. I asked if that was all.

"Sure."

I waited. He wasn't the kind you could hurry. We sat close together, our shoulders almost touching. He smelled of sweat and sleep. After a little, when I thought he was ready, I asked how long he'd known the Reiks.

He said about four years. He said, "I lived with them for the last five-six months."

"I guess you thought you knew this Reik pretty well."

"Sure. As well as anybody."

"Only," I told him, "You didn't know him well enough to figure out in advance that he was going to murder his wife."

**I** WAS trying to needle him. It worked. His face moved, like a mask slipping sideways, showing something behind the corners. A smug satisfaction. He said, and he said it slowly and deliberately so that I couldn't possibly miss the point, "I knew Joe was going to give it to her a month ago."

I didn't look at him. That would have been a mistake. He'd have shut off like a closed water tap. I said, putting a lot of sarcasm into my voice, "Sure. Sure you did. Maybe you even know why he did it."

"You think I don't?" The smugness was thick now. Thick as butter on farm bread. He shifted himself on the cot, getting comfortable. He said, "Look. Joe Reik's this kind of a guy. He likes to play around with the girls some and have his fun. Only he wants his own woman to stay at home and do the cooking and scrub floors. If he finds she's letting some other guy get to her he goes crazy mad. So he bats her with an axe."

"She was playing around with another man?"

"Didn't I just tell you?"

"So somebody tipped him off. You, maybe?"

He shook his head. "It ain't for me to tell him."

"Then how'd he find out?"

Ebert said, "I guess he just figured it. Maybe she got to giggling too much to herself, or wearing her hair different, or buying a lot of new dresses. You know how a dame is when she gets to cheating. She wants to tell, but she can't, so she's got a lot of ways of getting the idea across that she thinks her husband can't figure out. Joe did."

"Did he know who the man was?"

"He didn't figure that far."

"But you did?"

"Sure." He picked at his front teeth, looked

at his thumb. He said, "Irma knew Joe was out to get her. A month ago. Like I did. That was her name. Irma."

"You told her?"

He said, "Nobody had to tell her. She knew like I knew. It was this night a month ago. I come home from work and Joe and Irma was out in the kitchen. Joe had a knife and he had Irma backed into a corner and he was holding this knife to her neck. I guess if he hadn't heard me come in he'd have done it to her right then. Only he heard me and he backed off and put the knife down on the drain-board. He giggled a little, and he said something like he was playing a game with her. Only he wasn't. He went upstairs for his hat and goes out and gets plastered. He didn't come home until two-three in the morning. I guess if he'd done that to you you'd've known he was out to get you, too."

I said I guessed I would.

"Sure you would."

I thought about it. The palms of my hands were too dry. They itched. After a while, I asked if this Irma was good-looking.

Ebert's heavy shoulders jerked non-committally. "Not bad."

"Is that the only other time he tried to kill her?"

"I was going to tell you," Ebert said. "About a week ago, at night, I come downstairs to go out to a show. Joe and Irma was in the front room. Irma was lying down on the davenport and Joe had his hands on her throat and he was choking her. Her face was getting black and her eyes was sticking out a good inch. When he saw me watching he pretended like he was giving her a rub. A massage. And then he let her up."

He paused then, stared down reflectively at his beefy hands. "It was yesterday he bought the axe."

"Yesterday?"

"Sure. Yesterday was a Saturday. Me and Joe don't work on Saturday. Joe went out in the morning and got this axe. He brought it up and showed it to me. Nice axe, too. Double-bitted. I rent this room on the second floor and Joe brought the axe up there and then he took it down in the basement to sharpen it. We could hear him all day, working at the grindstone. He must've got it nice and sharp. It took him long enough."

I said, only because I couldn't think of anything else to say, "He must have hit her thirty times with it."

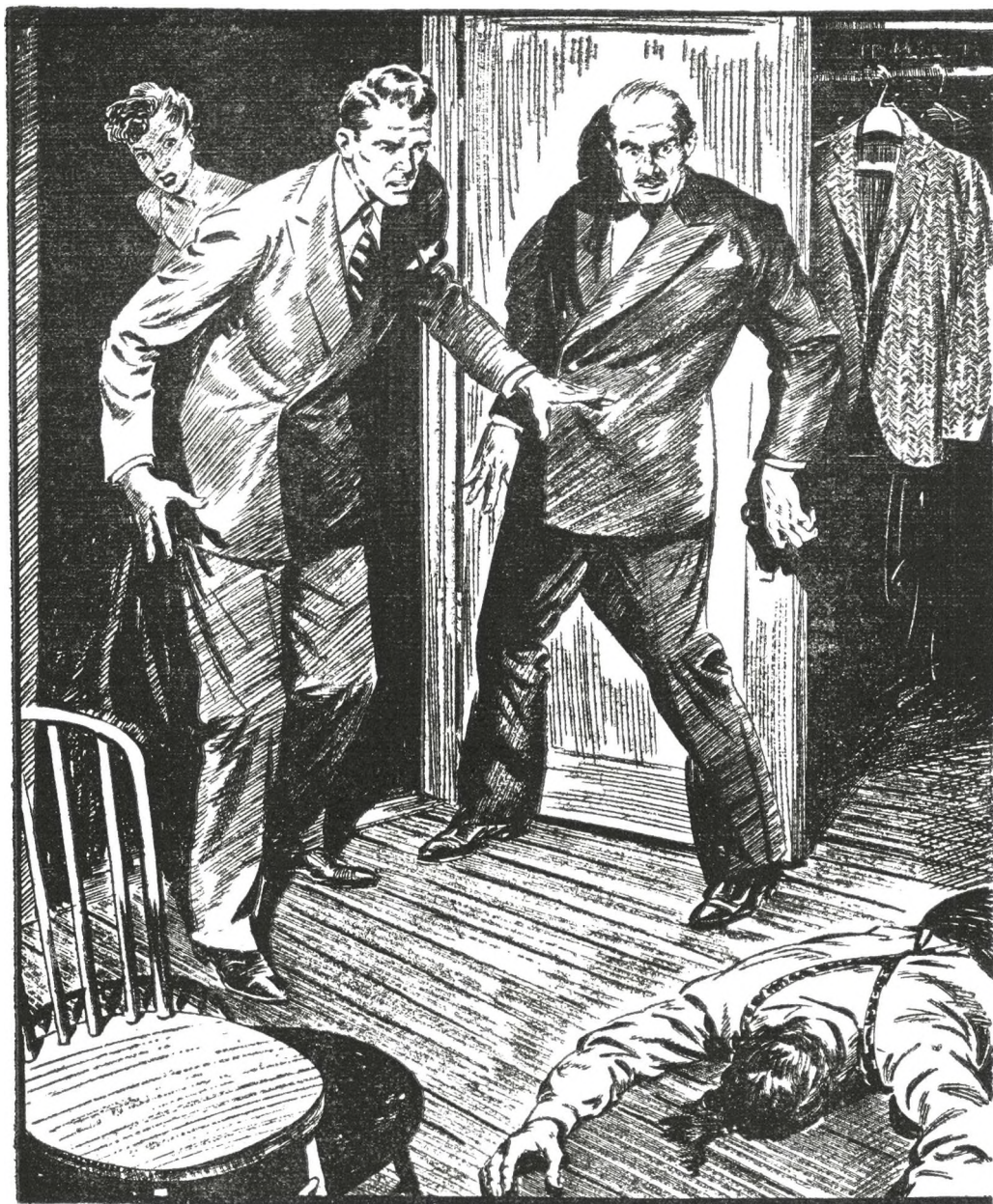
"That's what they tell me."

I waited.

Ebert said, "I figured I knew why he bought it."

I said it probably wasn't hard to figure. I took my handkerchief and wiped my face

*(Continued on page 97)*



The little producer opened the door fearfully and stepped  
aside.

*Every time Chancey opened his mouth, I shut him up with, "Another old-fashioned, Chancey." Which is just like me—talking when my ears should have been flapping . . . drinking when I should have been interviewing clients . . . and giving those lovelies backstage the double-O—while murder was being done!*



*A New "Dumb Dan"*

*Detective Novel*

**By**

**WILLIAM R. COX**

# S. R. O.— Slaying Room Only!

## CHAPTER ONE

### Backstage Blood-Bath

**D**AN PAID Chancey the twenty bucks and sat on a bar stool at the end of the bar, on the L, facing the interior of the joint. Chancey said, "No hurry about the jack, pal. Inna old days I useta carry a tab for a grand or more."

Dan Trout spread his big hands and said, "Old-fashioned for me, Chancey." Chancey had been in the rackets during Prohibition and was always talking about the old days. There was a girl down at the other end of the bar, and Dan was more interested in trying to remember where he had seen her.

She was an ash blonde, which was unusual enough, and she wore skillful make-up which concealed the thinness of her lips and accentuated her high cheekbones. A man came through the side door. It was raining and he wore a belted trench coat and a turned-down hat. He went directly to the girl and climbed a stool beside her. She looked frightened, but she was firm, answering a low-voiced demand of some sort, refusing.

The man ordered straight bourbon, drained it. He had regular, handsome features and wore his hair thick at the sides and in back. He was a heavy-set man, as tall as Dan. He turned back to the girl and his voice was a drone of threatening abuse. The words were indistinguishable, but there was no mistaking their intent.

The girl said, "I won't." Her thin mouth was tight beneath the lipstick.

The man drank another bourbon. Chancey, a portly little man, looked at Dan, then at his bungstarter. Chancey couldn't afford trouble, though, Dan knew.

The man said, "You'll do what I say because you have to. . . ." He reached out and grabbed the girl by the arm.

Dan slid down off the stool. He sauntered the length of the bar. He knew Chancey would get into trouble if something was not done, because Chancey was that way.

The girl looked at him over the man's shoulder. There was pain in her eyes, and

fear. Dan came closer, and the man said, "I'll show you. I'll show your whole damn family." He was a bit drunk. The two bourbons had evidently been dessert after a meal of bourbons.

Dan said, "Why don't you take it easy, fella?"

The man let go of the girl and wheeled. His handsome features writhed with anger. He said, "Get away from me, you tramp."

Dan said, "Come on, pal, leave the lady alone."

The girl said quickly, "Go away, please. I know him. It's all right."

Dan looked at Chancey, who shook his head. Dan said, "Listen, this is a respectable joint, see? You're lousing it up. If you want to beat the lady up, take her someplace else."

The man said, "Why, you simple son. . . ." He let go of the girl. He wheeled around with some agility and got off the stool. He fainted with his left, like a prize fighter, all showy motion and dipping shoulder, somewhat out of focus because of the trench coat and the drinks. He threw a right.

Dan let the right go over his head. Chancey ran around from behind the bar and opened the side door. The man tried to sink his left on Dan's bobbing head.

Dan threw his more or less famed left hook. It landed high, spinning the man. Dan walked in behind it and slugged with the left again. The man kept spinning toward the side door. Then he regained his balance and tried to clinch, a sure sign he was no barroom fighter.

Dan nudged him, hit him with two lefts and a right. The man was pretty tough, at that. He went out the door and Dan followed, planting a large foot against his behind. The man sprawled in the alley and it rained on them both. Dan wound up a big right, but the man suddenly broke and ran, staggering, his hands to his face. Dan let him run out of the alley and get away.

**B**ACK IN the bar, the girl said, "That man has a gun. You recognized him, of course?"

"Nope," said Dan. "I thought I ought to know you, though."

Chancey was behind the bar, polishing a glass, trying to be nonchalant, but his eyes were sparkling. He loved a fight.

The girl said, "You don't know him? Then you don't know me."

Her eyes slanted a little, like a cat's eyes, but she was very beautiful except for her mouth. She had a lean body, well upholstered. Dan grinned at her and said, "I could get to know you, but the hell with him."

She said, "Please—you were so good—do you think you could forget all about this? It

doesn't mean anything to you—just a kindness to a girl in a bar."

Dan said curiously, "Why shouldn't I forget it?"

"That's right," she said. "Why shouldn't you? Have a drink?"

"Old-fashioned," said Dan. He sat on the stool next to the girl. She ordered a stinger. They drank and she said nothing at all. The fear was still in her and she seemed to be brooding. Dan said, "So you won't talk, eh?"

"You sound like a detective," she said, and caught at her lower lip with white, even teeth which were, Dan decided, her best feature. She was an interesting-looking girl and her eyes were steady enough despite the fear.

Chancey coughed. Dan said, "Okay, I won't talk, either. Let's take another, shall we?"

"If I take one more I'll be stiff," she said. "I'd better go now."

He detected the reluctant note in her voice. There was something familiar about her voice, too, he thought. He said, "I'm supposed to be at the office, but Chancey's old fashioned are fascinatin'. Rack 'em up, Chancey."

It was four o'clock when he left. They had talked a little, after all, about everything but themselves. Some perverse instinct had kept Dan quiet about his business; the girl was a Sphinx. Yet she had charm, she spoke well, she was witty. He was beginning to like her very much when she rose and said abruptly, "This has been great and thanks again. You are a very good guy, Dan Whatever-your-name-may-be—and don't tell me." She was just a little drunk. She tapped his face with long, thin fingers. "Good-bye—and thank you very much."

She walked out and there was no use following her, he sensed. Chancey said, "Well, she was grateful, anyhow. That bum. I wanted t' conk him meself. Inna old days—"

Dan said, "Put it on the tab. See you later." He was late and he had to run around the corner to 42nd Street where his office was located in a building near the Daily News edifice.

He went up on the elevator, his head spinning just a little. He opened the door to the Carlson Agency and Betty Boulder was sitting at the reception desk and her blue eyes were flinty. She was blonde, beautiful and angry in equal proportions.

He said, "Had a little trouble with a guy. Had to bounce him around. There was some dame and this guy in Chancey's and—"

"Yes, and there was an important client—our first in weeks—sitting here, waiting for you. Only he left. Two hours was all he could wait!"

Dan said, "He'll come back if he waited two hours. This guy and this dame were pretty mysterious people. . . ."

Betty Boulder said, "Oliver Carlson left



this agency to you and to me. He meant to have it run the way he started it—on the level, with efficiency. If there was some way of breaking his will without dealing both of us out, I'd have you in court, you bum. Why . . . why . . . I don't even believe you ever played pro football."

Dan drew himself up to his even six feet of height. He said, "Izzat so?" He stalked across the reception room and into his large private office. He yanked open a drawer and snatched out a battered, limp scrapbook. He went back and slammed it down in front of Betty and yelled, "That does it! Now, damn it, you can read those clippin's. That'll show you who played with the Giants!"

She knocked the book aside so that it fell on the floor. She said, "The crooks in town don't read your clippings, why should I?"

He was in his chair, the door slammed behind him, the precious book clutched in his grasp before he remembered that he was not going to quarrel with Betty that day. He took two tickets from his pocket and stared at them. He flipped the inter-office communication buzzer and said cajolingly, and a trifle thickly, "Look, baby, I'm sorry. I got two ducats to *Dance Little Devils* for tonight—you know, the show you wanted to see, the Gary Nimbel show? How about it, darling?"

She said icily, "It so happens, dolt, that Gary Nimbel is the client who waited here two hours while you punched people in a bar."

"Well, okay," said Dan. "I'll go backstage between acts and see him!"

She said, "Abe Mawson would love that, with your breath. Abe sent him, and he waited like a gentleman while you got drunk as an ape."

Dan said, "Betty, I regret to tell you that you are in danger of being considered a shrew!"

"By you? A pleasure!"

"Ahhh," he snarled. He turned off the switch. He wished he could hate her. He wished she was married to Corbally, the Department detective.

If she were married he would not have to fight with her.

Then he remembered that if she were married he would not be able to admire daily the remarkable curves of her torso and limbs and the natural blonderness of her long-bobbed hair. He groaned. His life was not a merry one, he decided. If it had not been for Betty, always on his mind, he might have done better with the babe in Chancey's. He thought he would have done better, anyway. It helped him to think so.

**I**N HIS lonely seat, Dan watched *Dance Little Devils*. He put his hat on the vacant seat beside him. Abe had given him the tick-

ets, so he had not turned the other back. It gave him a melancholy satisfaction to know that one was wasted, that Betty really wanted to see the show. He had decided not to go backstage after all. Actors, he thought, were hysterical clients.

The show was either about to be a hit or was about to flop according to the paper you read. It had, of course, Gary Nimbel, the best eccentric dancer of his day and age. It had Mary Ann Laird and the third lead was Rick Locall, a baritone matinee idol. It had no plot and many tunes, some good, a few mediocre.

Nimbel was superb. He was on early to set the pace and he moved his feet like a male angel. A girl came out and sang to him, and he grinned and people loved him. Then another man came on and there was rivalry for the girl in the silly plot and still Nimbel moved ingratiatingly, always in motion, stealing every scene with his insouciance and geniality.

Dan sat and gaped. His eyes never went to Nimbel after the entrance of the man and girl. He stared at Mary Ann Laird and Rick Locall.

They were the couple of Chancey's afternoon fiesta. Laird was the ash blonde girl and she sang in a very good Broadway musical manner. Locall, the heavy-shouldered man, was sweet now, making advances to Mary Ann. Nimbel was the third side of the triangle.

Dan sat forward, almost falling off his seat. None of these people were starry-eyed youngsters. They were skilled, big-time players, tempered in the fires of show business. The production was very good—due to Abe Mawson, who had provided the tickets for Dan. Abe was a very smart little man with a big nose and a bigger heart. Abe could have been rich, but he wouldn't wear any man's collar and had trouble raising money. *Dance Little Devils* was his chance to get free, on his own, Dan knew.

Nimbel had money in the show and a racketeer named Buller was another angel; it was a mixed-up deal, Mawson had said. But it was a chance for them all to strike it rich.

Dan turned his attention back to the star. Gary Nimbel had the gay grin of a Happy Charlie, but Dan thought it was strained tonight. It was nothing definite, just a bit of strain, nothing which interfered with his performance, which was wonderful. But there was anxiety; there was probably fear. Dan watched.

Mary Ann Laird sang a high note and cracked. Locall, a trouper and mugger from away back, covered her, moving front and center, stealing the scene. Locall's baritone was not too good, Dan thought critically, but it was loud and the handsome man had the women oohing and aahing.

The first act finale was a sensation from the

moment the lights went down and intertwining spotlights of shimmering white streamed down on Nimbel in top hat and tails. The dancer swung a walking stick. He sang a few notes of a lilting love song, swinging the stick debonairly.

Then he danced. His feet were magic drumsticks beating out rhythm, lifting him through the air, then bringing him back to solid taps. The stick whipped about in flourishes that caught the white light and broke it into a million bits. The power of those swings showed the strength of the lean-bodied dancer, the amazing strength and timing of a trained athlete.

The first act ended. The cane dance had them buzzing in the lobby. The weaknesses of the plot were forgotten in memory of that superb figure and his fine performance. Dan decided that he could at least let this attractive man know he was present. He scribbled a note and sent it backstage, just giving his name and seat number.

The second act was pretty good. The third picked up. Locall was discomfited, Nimbel got Mary Ann, the audience seemed pleased.

There was some sort of break in the last act which puzzled Dan. A song was sung by a young fellow, and sung very well, but the lad seemed out of place. Locall did not take a curtain call. Even Nimbel's final acrobatic dance with the whole company behind him did not come off quite well enough. It was an Apache number, and Dan found himself wishing he were Nimbel and the girl was Betty, such an artistic lacing did Nimbel appear to give the girl. But he put that wish aside, knowing what would really happen if he tried to wallop Betty around. He would get his face pushed in.

An usher crept down the aisle at the finale and leaned over and said to Dan, "Mr. Nimbel would like to see you backstage at once, Mr. Trout."

Dan got up and went around to the door beside the lowest proscenium box. He found himself in the wings, almost onstage. The air of hysteria which prevailed struck him like a physical blow.

Abe Mawson, his big nose shiny, his brown eyes frightened, came running. He said, "Dan! Hell t' pay."

The production closed with a fanfare of music. Mawson's short legs twinkled, leading Dan between rows of dressing rooms off a small corridor. The little producer opened a door fearfully, stepped aside. He was sweating.

The dressing room was large, orderly, with the usual table, strong light, a chair or two, a wardrobe trunk on end, a large closet. There was one window, high, small, opening onto an air shaft.

RICK LOCALL'S heavy shoulders seemed burrowing into the floor. His head was down, and he was not a pretty sight. He was alongside the dressing table, where he had evidently been repairing make-up for the song he never sang, the song the young man had sung for him.

The base of his skull had been caved in. There was a welt across the back of his neck. It was a welt that could have been made by a stick, a walking stick. A man with strength, wielding a cane, could have broken Locall's skull with ease, Dan thought at once.

Dan said, "Who was offstage when this happened? The time'll be easy to figure."

"I haven't thought," groaned Mawson. "I am thinking only of my show."

Dan said, "I'll try to get Mike Corbally. He's off tonight, but maybe I can locate him. He's a good guy."

"If he could do anything!" Mawson begged. "You'll talk to Nimbel? He found this, you know. He's a great artist, Dan, he's all unstrung."

Dan stood, staring at the scene. If Corbally didn't get here, the cops might throw him out. They didn't like private eyes around murder cases. He wanted to remember all this. He had a photographic memory, fortunately. He liked to soak things up, then let them roll around in the hunch department which was his only strong point as a detective.

Abe said, "Dan, the awful thing is, this Locall, he was the weak spot. We got a hit, see, but he was a name and we took him and everything went wrong. He was such a louse, see? But he had a contract, run of the show. Nobody was happy. With him out, decent, maybe we make a million. With him in—maybe yes, maybe no. That is show business, Dan."

Dan said, "A motive, huh? You didn't do it, Abe?"

The little man whispered, "Dan, many a time I wished him dead. He was a stinker. But me, I couldn't kill a mcuse, even."

Dan said, "I heard he carried a gun. I want to know if it's on him, but I don't want to touch him before the cops get here."

Abe said, "You know that? Yeah, he carried one. All the time. Had a permit. He was in his own mind a toughie, you see?"

Dan said, "Call the cops. I'll try Mike."

"Already someone called them," Mawson said, wringing his hands. He had small, artistic hands with slender fingers.

There were unmistakable noises outside. A grey-hatted Homicide man named Barry came in. He said, "Trout, outside. How'd you get here?"

"I was sent for. I was in the audience," said Dan. Barry was old school and tough, he knew

"You got anything?" asked Barry.

"The guy seems dead," said Dan.

Barry snorted and went past Dan into the dressing room. Dan made for a wall phone near the stage door. He dialed furiously, throwing nickels into the phone as though there was a jackpot pay-off. He called every restaurant he knew, imagining that Corbally, on his night off, would be dining late with Betty Boulder. He grew red and frantic when his change ran out. He wheeled away, looking for more nickels.

A voice said, "Hunting something, pal?"

The show was over, the police had come in full force and were taking charge of things, not without some trouble, as the cast was large and show people notoriously are jittery. Dan started to brush by the man who had spoken, saying, "I'm in a hurry, bub."

He stopped dead two paces away, his chin on his shoulder, his eyes popping. He said, "Corbally!"

The detective, lean, smiling, said, "You getting smart, like shamuses in the movies? Sneakin' into murders ahead of me?"

Dan said, "You were at the show!"

"Betty wanted to see it," said Mike sardonically.

Dan said, "Barry's here. Look, Mike, I got a client—Nimbel."

Mike Corbally said, "You'd better scram. Go to your office. I'll send Nimbel over, if I can. Wait there until you hear from me. I'm giving you a break, Dan. That Barry hates shamuses."

Dan said, "It'll look bad for Nimbel. Break him loose, Mike. I think he's a great guy. . ."

"You think? A hell of a way for a detective to talk," said Mike. He waved and moved past Dan to head off the red-faced, puffing Barry.

Dan went through the door. He walked around front and saw Betty waiting for a cab, but decided to let her go home alone. He walked across to the office, cooling himself in the night air. He wished he knew more about the time element backstage. He wished he knew more about the people involved, but then he was lucky at that to have got into it with Mary Ann Laird in Chancey's—and what a coincidence that was.

He waited for the old night man who ran the elevator and pondered that coincidence. Nimbel had been waiting for him in his office while he had been clowning around with Locall and Laird. If anyone had meant to detain him, it was well known to everyone that Chancey's was his favorite afternoon bar.

He went upstairs and into his office, turning on all the lights. He found a bottle where he had hid it from Betty in the filing case he never used, and had a drink. At one o'clock there was a knock on the door. He opened it

carefully, and Gary Nimbel stood staring at him, his eyes shadowed and sunken in his gaunt face.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Educated Voice

**T**HERE was a second man with Nimbel. He was a bulky man in expensive clothing made by a Broadway tailor, too tight and too smart. The man glittered too much, and his smile was punctuated by a gold tooth.

Nimbel said almost timidly, "Mr. Trout? This is Dave Buller. He has a piece of the show and wanted to come along. He's had some—experience."

Dan said, "Yeah. I know about his—experiences."

Dave Buller chuckled. His voice was a very deep basso, hearty and assured. "Hiya, Trout? This is right down my alley, shamus. Murder. I seen murders, bud. Now I'm hirin' a private eye! Haw!"

"You haven't hired me," said Dan. "I'm working for Mr. Nimbel, if he wants me to."

"I certainly do," said Nimbel warmly. He sat down, a weary man in his late thirties. "Abe Mawson says you're honest and dogged and never give up."

Buller pulled out a note case, extracted large bills. He threw them on the desk and said, "Kale talks, shamus. You're paid, see?"

"I'm not taking your dough now," said Dan. There were quite a few hundreds and his hands itched, but Oliver Carlson had taught him caution.

"A mere ten gees, a mere bagatelle," said Buller in his big voice. "Just get my pal outa this, unnastan'? I shook him past tonight's deal. All you have to do is find the killer—find some killer, I don't care who. We need Gary inna show, see?"

Dan said, "Look, Buller. Pick up your dough and take a walk, will you? This is serious. I want to talk to Mr. Nimbel and your comedy ain't funny."

The big man's face froze, grew ferocious. He said, "Why you—" Then he drew a deep breath and the color receded from his jowls. He said, "Okay. So you're a smart shamus. Okay. I'll play ball your way. I ain't no freshman at this racket, Trout. Okay. You'll find out I ain't no mere wise guy." He stalked through the door and into the reception room.

Dan locked the door carefully and said, "He's a crook, Mr. Nimbel. He was in the Prohibition rackets. He rates a small drag downtown, but he's no good for you."

"He put ten thousand into the show," Nimbel said in his tired voice. "He keeps coming around—"

"Which girl in the show?" Dan asked.

"Well—not that. I've expected it, but it hasn't worked out," said Nimbel. "I think he just wants to show off. Trout, they think I killed Locall. With my cane."

Dan said, "I'll have to know things. What was between Locall and Miss Laird, for instance?"

Nimbel said, "It's a strange angle. Miss Laird seemed to like Locall, then she didn't. No one else did. But one time she was considering him, I think. She'd known him for years. It's difficult for me—"

Dan said, "What about the understudy who took Locall's part?"

"Young Troy? He's better than Locall," said Nimbel.

Dan said, "It's not a good enough motive, is it? Not just for a part in a show. Look, Nimbel, did anyone know you were coming to see me earlier today?"

"Well, I'd been getting these threats," said Nimbel. "On the telephone. Quite frightening, because the man has a cultured, educated voice. He politely insists that I will be killed. I thought it was a maniac, you know. But they were insistent, suave, sinister. So I talked about it to Abe, and he suggested I see you. Mary Ann was present—"

"Uh-huh," said Dan. "You got any enemies?"

"I'd hate to think so," said Nimbel painfully. His eyes were as honest as a—spaniel's, Dan decided. "This voice, it told me I was slipping, my performances were not good."

"Sounds as though someone was trying to wreck the show. Anything in that, do you think?"

Nimbel said, "But who? We're not hurting anyone by having a hit. If we have a hit—and with Locall out we *could* have one!" He sighed and added, "That's not nice, is it? I'm a bit mixed up, Trout."

Dan said, "What would you say if I told you Locall and Laird put on a charade in a bar to keep me from meeting you here today?"

Nimbel shook his head. He was very tired, Dan saw, and almost scared silly. But he said politely, "I don't know about Locall, but Mary Ann—well, I've proposed to her, you see."

"Just like the show, huh? You and Locall and Mary Ann—and now he's been killed."

"He was a bad man," said Nimbel simply. "Everyone hated him. But I can't imagine any of us killing him. And Mary Ann—why she always took his part. Said there must be good in him. . . ."

Dan said, "Women sometimes love rascals."

Nimbel said, "I must tell you—I have a rack of canes, of course. For the dance, if I break one. There were twelve. The police only found eleven. They think I killed Locall with the twelfth, did away with it."

"What else could they think?" Dan tapped the desk top, stared at Nimbel. He said, "But you didn't do it. I know. And you want me to find who did." The phone rang as though on cue and he answered it.

Corbally's voice said, "Dan . . . ? Your client there?"

"Yeah, and he's innocent," said Dan.

"Then he better get ready to explain away a cane hidden under his dressing gown in his closet, complete with blood and hair from Locall's noggin."

"I see," said Dan expressionlessly.

"Tell him to go home. I'll cover him downtown so that they don't give him the works," said Mike kindly. "It's a bit too dumb. Barry'll pinch him, but I'll be in there."

"Thanks, Mike," said Dan. "You're a pal. I'll get right to work."

He hung up. Nimbel said, "Bad news, eh?"

Dan said, "They found the murder weapon in your room. You go home and wait. Don't try to run, don't phone anyone, don't do anything but get your lawyer and go downtown."

"In my room?" Nimbel's face was ghastly. "I'm thinking about the play, not myself, Trout. All those people depending on me. . . ."

Dan said, "It won't be fun. I'll try to spring you for tomorrow night's show." That was bluff, but he had to bolster the sagging dancer. Nimbel had all the earmarks of a simple, nice guy.

They walked into the reception room and Buller was gone, which did not surprise Dan, although Nimbel appeared upset about it. They went down to the elevator in the hall and Dan pressed the button and said, "Keep your dauber up. I'll see Miss Laird, take care of everything."

Nimbel said sincerely, "I know you will. I'm so very glad Abe knew you. I think you're the kind of man I want on my side."

Dan shook the hand the great dancer offered. He felt very warm and good. The elevator came up and he watched Nimbel get on, with something akin to affection. He understood fully now how the lean man had won the hearts of millions with his gay grin and shy, engaging manner onstage. He was the same way offstage in his private life.

Dan turned and went back, head down, to the office. There were going to be many, many angles to this one, he felt. He decided to go home and sleep on it. He walked into the ante room where Betty Boulder held forth during the day and started across to get his hat from the inner office.

The lights went out. He cursed the switch that Betty had installed as a master control because he always left lights on and forced her to go all the way inside to turn them off before closing the office. He knew at once what had happened and his reflexes were swift.

He flung himself down on one knee. He felt the violent swish of a weapon which barely missed his skull. The figure which attacked him was a dim shape. Half-blinded by the sudden switch in lighting, Dan came up from his knees and launched himself forward. The stick in the hand of the attacker went up, came down again.

The blow landed on Dan's shoulders as he leaned away in a last moment reverse of his torso. He tried to come back to the attack, growling with pain. The figure melted away and a kick caught Dan's shin, knocking him backward.

He let himself go, flying through the door of his office. He bellied across his desk, remembering his gun. It was in the top drawer, but his hand was clammy and the butt slid from his grasp.

He cursed savagely, grabbing again, getting hold of the weapon. He slid off the desk, charging for the outer office, disdaining strategy. He held the gun waist high, ready to fire.

He knew at once he was alone. He threw the switch and light came on. He went through the empty office and into the hall. The elevator pointer was not moving, so he dashed for the stairs.

The enclosed, fireproof stairway was silent, there was no echoing footsteps going either way. Dan halted. He had to make a decision. There was a door above which led directly to the roof. If the attacker was a person of imagination. . . .

Dan rushed up onto the roof. He was out under the stars before he realized that a person of great imagination and intelligence would not place himself or herself upon a skyscraper roof, trapped up here without means of escape.

It was times like this that made Dan admit he was not too invincibly bright. He might have chased downstairs and gained enough on the attacker to make a catch in the lobby.

Or he might have run smack into an ambush, he consoled himself. He ached where the blow had caught him. He had been very lucky to escape serious injury or death. Had he not been aware that the office lights had to be thrown on by the master switch near the door to the hall, and therefore realized that the attack must come from behind, he would never have been able to duck that first lethal blow.

He went downstairs to his office. He got the Berns-Martin holster from his closet and strung the magnum revolver upside down inside his coat. He had never been a fancy gunman and this holster was his favorite, although he hated the bother of carrying a gun at all. He went home, sore and bruised and puzzled, and went to bed.

**I**N THE morning Betty was caustic. "You can't keep yourself out of the way of trouble. It's a wonder you didn't get killed, and maybe a pity. How much is Nimbel paying us and when? If he doesn't get electrocuted, that is. Then we'll get our usual fee. Nothing."

Dan said, "This business is making you calloused. You ought to quit. You ought to marry me and settle down."

"Settle down to really hating you?" she asked.

He went into his office and the telephone was ringing. He answered it and a large, rough voice blustered, "Listen, shamus, you're not so smart. Nimbel is in the gow. You gotta spring him, see? It should be a mere cinch to such a smart shamus as you."

Dan said, "Buller? Where'd you disappear to last night?"

"I went home, you dumb near-cop," boomed Buller. "Listen, I like this Nimbel, see? And I got a hunk o' the show. Okay, you're workin' fer him. I am too big a guy to hold grudges. I am leaving you some dough at Chancey's. You can take it or not, but if you take it, I want *action*. Get it?"

"Chancey's?"

"Natch, shamus. Everyone knows you hang out there," snapped Buller. "Stop hangin' out there. Do somethin'."

Dan hung up. He got his hat and said to Betty, "I'm going down to see what makes at the theater."

"Hanging around chorines now?" she asked bitterly.

He went out, wrapped in dignity, disdaining reply. He went down to the theater and the cop on the door let him in. Corbally had okayed him.

Mawson had the company on the stage and was trying to reassure them. He asserted flatly that Nimbel would make the night performance and all would be well. He was lying and he knew it, but the little fat man had his all in the show. Dan felt sorry for him.

Mary Ann Laird and Malvern Troy, Loll's understudy, stood apart from the others. Troy was young; he was fit and lean; and he had a familiar look to Dan. He profiled like a ham, but he had assurance, and Mawson and Nimbel had both said he was good. He held Mary Ann's arm and whispered in her ear.

The girl did not change expression. She was holding herself in very tightly, so that the muscles of her face were rigid. She did not look at Troy, but he kept hold of her arm and she leaned against him for support.

There was a slight commotion and Dave Buller came swaggering in. He pulled Dan aside and said, "I been to Chancey's. What's the score here?"

Dan said, "I just got here. What do you

think? Got any ideas on the subject?"

Buller whispered loudly, "Hell, Nimbel did it, all right. But we got to pin the beef on somebody else."

Dan said, "Nimbel didn't do it. But someone did, so let's work it out along those lines."

"No kid?" Buller looked surprised. "Nimble didn't bump him? Well, whatayaknow? Look, shamus, I know plenty angles. How about lemme help?"

Dan said, "Say, that's right. You were on the other side—reverse yourself and see what you can make of this."

"A hell of an idee," beamed the big man. His face was more sheep dog than bulldog, Dan decided. "Brother, I'm a detective! Some fun." He lowered his raucous whisper a tone. "I'll check with you at Chancey's. I bet I stir up plenny. Hell, I know angles, pal. It'll be a mere cinch."

Dan said, "Sure," and walked down to the dressing rooms. Corbally was in the corridor. He pulled the detective to one side and related the happenings of last night.

Corbally said, "Lemme see those bruises, pal." They went into the dressing room where the crime had been committed. Dan stripped to the waist. Corbally murmured, "I'll have the photog in and make a shot or two. We found a bruise on Locall. Someone slugged him twice. Looks like the first one might have killed him, but the second came so fast a bruise formed—which it would not on a stiff, of course. It looks like a hell of a lot like your shoulder."

Dan said, "Nimbel couldn't have hit me. I put him on the elevator myself. He ain't guilty, Mike."

Corbally said, "There were only his prints on the cane that had the blood and hair on it."

"Gloves," suggested Dan.

"Gloves would have smeared his prints if they were already on it. And he couldn't have used that bloody stick without knowin'."

Dan said, "He didn't do it, Mike."

"He could have. We checked the time. Between numbers they were both back here together. Nimbel wouldn't ever have his valet change him. Locall's valet and Nimbel's were both shooting craps. No one was in the corridor or in any of these rooms, so far as we can learn. Nimbel and Locall were rivals over Mary Ann Laird. . . . What about those threats Nimbel claims he received?"

"Did receive," corrected Dan. "Phone calls. A crank, maybe."

"Must have been. No one else back here would try to ruin the show by threatening Nimbel and killing Locall," said Corbally. "Too much at stake. Why cut your own throat to hurt someone else?"

Dan said, "I'm sorry, Mike, but the elimina-

tion of Locall wouldn't hurt the show. He had a contract, and he was lousy, and people hated him. Troy is better than he in the part."

"Yeah?" Corbally's eyes came alive. "Wouldn't hurt it, eh? How does that help your client?"

"It don't," said Dan miserably. "I'm just trying to help."

Corbally said, "Laird, the girl, used to do a cane dance in vaudeville. She's strong as an ox. But she'd have had to hurry to do this job. The time ain't just right. I'll have to check a lot of things, Dan. See you later."

**T**HE PHOTOGRAPHER came and took the picture. Dan put his shirt back on and was tying his tie when he saw Mary Ann Laird behind him in the doorway. He turned and looked at her. She was taut as a drumhead, but good looking, too.

She said, "You told them about Chancey's?"

"Why should I? I'm a private detective, not a cop."

"You cannot gain anything by not telling."

Dan slid into his coat. "I understand you did a cane dance in vaudeville. You're a strong girl, too."

"I wouldn't kill Rick," she said. "I couldn't."

"You could have," Dan said. "In a pinch."

"No. He was ugly to me . . . he was awful. It was terrible in Chancey's. He drank too much. I shouldn't have left without telling you who we were. It looks bad now, doesn't it?"

Dan said, "Everything looks bad."

"Rick was bad. All bad. I didn't think so once, but he was bad. He had me in a jam."

Dan said, "What kind of jam?"

"I can't tell you, and I hope they get the killer before—before someone else gets killed," she whispered. She was very good looking, he thought, and serious and frightened. "I hope—"

Dan said sharply, "If you told me everything you know, perhaps we could avoid that."

"I don't know anything more," the girl said listlessly. She stood in the open door of the dressing room staring at the chalked outline of the spot where Locall had been found. "Rick wasn't always bad. It was the liquor and gambling that made him unhappy and spoiled his disposition. The show *had* to be a hit, so that he could live as he was accustomed to living. Rick would do anything to keep the show going, believe me."

Dan said, "I see. You mean that whoever killed him didn't care about the show?"

"Oh, no," said the woman. "Mal can carry the part better. The show will be all right as long as Garv is in it. I mean that Rick

was not behind those phone calls Gary got. He couldn't have been. He hated Gary, but he wanted him in good shape for the show."

Dan said, "Maybe you're right."

"I know I'm right," shrugged the girl. She seemed to have lost interest in Dan. She turned and went to her dressing room, which was next to the one in which Dan stood. He waited and could hear her moving about. The partitions were not thick.

The killing of Locall must have been fairly noisy, he thought. Two blows whacking on a man would clatter a bit, and then there was the fallen chair. Not a lot of noise, but enough, he thought, to be heard in the dressing room next door. The woman scraped a chair on the floor as though in reply. Dan could hear it quite plainly.

He went out and walked around backstage. Mawson came from behind a piece of scenery. The little man's face was grey. He said, "You asked about relations among the people in the show yesterday. . . ."

"It's all right, Abe. I think I can figure them now," Dan told him. "What I want to know is how do you feel about Buller?"

"The big crook put up ten thousand dollars," said Abe grimly. "It was just what we needed. Since then he has been a busy guy, sticking his nose into everything backstage—but he hasn't actively done anything I could call wrong, you know?"

Dan said, "Did he hate Locall, too?"

"I don't think he noticed Locall one way or the other, except as a part of the show of which he had a piece," said Mawson. "Why should Buller want to kill anyone like Locall?"

"Hell, I didn't say he killed Locall," laughed Dan. "You're getting like all other people in murder cases. You think everyone is guilty until he is proved innocent."

Mawson said, "Dan, if Gary doesn't get out today, and we have to cancel tonight's show, like I say, a million bucks may go up the flue. This show can run forever, or it can fold. It ain't a sure-fire, even with Gary in, but the odds are it'll run if he dances. If he don't—foosh! Gone!"

Dan said, "Don't look now, but ain't that your man?"

The little director swung about. He turned pale, then pink. Gary Nimbel was walking through the stage door. Abe ran as quick as short legs could carry him to greet his star.

Dan looked at Nimbel's drawn face. The man looked more like a skull than ever. In his eyes there was a deep and abiding fear. He motioned to Dan to follow him into his dressing room and closed the door, leaving Mawson happy on the outside.

He said, "I went home to change, of course, when they turned me loose. I had another call.

This time a voice muffled to a whisper told me to look for an end—like Locall's. It said, 'You too will be beaten to death.' You can't imagine how sinister . . . horrible . . . it sounded, that whispering voice."

Dan said, "And you couldn't tell whether it was male or female, or anything else except a whisper?"

Nimbel's frown deepened. He said, "I can tell you this. It was an educated voice."

"I see what you mean," Dan said. So it was not Buller. He was aware of disappointment. He could fit Buller into it, he thought. But Buller was far from educated, even in whispers.

Nimbel said, "I—I thought it was a man. But now that you mention it, perhaps I was wrong. You can't tell, over the phone, damn it. . . ."

Dan said, "I'll leave you to dress for the show. I'll look around, Nimbel. Don't get too discouraged. Like I say, it's no fun, but the thing to do is to face it, fight it out and hope. I'll be nearby."

The dancer's face softened a bit and his smile came, the wide, appealing grin which millions of playgoers had seen and enjoyed. He said, "I'll do the best I can, old fellow. And thanks for being around."

Dan went out of the dressing room. A man at the end of the corridor was retreating rapidly, almost as if he had been listening at the door but had been warned by Dan's parting speech. It was Buller, all right. The big ex-racketeer was as nosy as a woman, Dan thought.

Buller turned the corner and Malvern Troy came down from his tiny dressing room in the flies. The man seemed to have grown a bit overnight, as though to fit his new responsibility. Mary Ann Laird, already in costume for the first act, came from someplace and took his arm, walking him to a secluded spot.

Dan slipped behind some scenery and tiptoed to a spot near where the two of them had their heads together. He leaned forward and somehow stepped on a wooden cleat. To his utmost horror the big piece of canvas tipped forward.

He put up his hands to stop it and stood there, balancing, trying to shove the painted scene back into place.

The woman's voice said coldly, "The sleuth is gumshoeing in our direction, darling. Perhaps we had better adjourn."

Dan maneuvered the unwieldy hunk of stuff back into place. He said coldly, "You may adjourn, Miss Laird. I'll speak with Troy, if he doesn't mind."

"This man is not a regular policeman," she warned the singer.

"No, he's just the guy who saved you from a going-over at the hands of Locall yesterday

afternoon," said Dan. "So now you're off me, eh?"

The girl turned and walked away without another word.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### The Show Must Go On!

**T**ROY finished earnestly, "I'd do anything to get the part—but I couldn't murder a cat. I was backstage, all right, and I could have gone in there and slugged him. If I had known he was ugly to Mary Ann, maybe I would have tried to punch his nose. But he could whip me—he was bigger, heavier and he could fight. I saw him fight."

"In a bar?" asked Dan.

"A place called Mulligan's," nodded Malvern. "He was drinking with Buller and a character came in and got tough and Rick tore into him. I was there with Mary Ann, in the back room. They never saw us."

Dan said, "Locall was drinking with Buller?"

"Oh, yes," said Troy. "They often crawled pubs together. Buller would tell old-time racketeer stories to Rick. They amused him."

Dan said, "You've been helpful. Thanks." He let the young man go off after Mary Ann Laird. The dark, slim girl who did the Apache dance with Nimbel came by at that moment and stared at Troy. Then she tossed her head and slid behind the scenery which Dan had almost upset and appeared to be wiping her eyes.

Dan shook his head. The conflicting emotions of this backstage life were baffling and complicated, and his head was beginning to ache. He had not taken a drink and he wondered if that was a mistake.

They were going to put on the show and everyone was keyed to the top pitch. Dan found himself eating a sandwich and sipping at milk through a straw and sharing the mounting excitement. It was like a first night, he supposed, the initial performance of a new play. Everyone would be watching the advent of Troy, speculating whether the young man would make good.

And the killer, Dan wondered, what would he be thinking? And hoping?

He distastefully finished the milk and put the bottle in a corner where other rubbish was piled. He started to turn away, wheeled back, his eye catching something bright. He bent and fished beneath a soiled strip of canvas, some bits of sandwich crusts, a pair of old dancing shoes and other stray garbage. He picked out a revolver.

He held it gingerly in the folds of his handkerchief, carrying it down the corridor where the dressing rooms were located. He stepped

into the room where Locall had been killed, pulled on the light over the mirror, a strong bulb which threw a bright white glare.

It must be the gun which no one had mentioned since the girl had referred to it in Chancey's. It must be Locall's gun. It was fully loaded.

But what was it doing in the rubbish heap? Who would be dumb enough to put Locall's gun there, and why did anyone take it?

The whole thing began to seem screwier than any murder case had a right to be, even a backstage murder. Dan tied his handkerchief around the trigger guard and dangled the gun behind the dressing table, where Corbally could find it when he came in. He pulled out the light and started for the door to the corridor.

Whoever it was had been in the closet all the time. The door swung and Dan felt the sweep of the bludgeon and again he ducked, going down on one knee. He had his gun now. He reached for it.

His coat was buttoned. He swore as the stick, or cane, or whatever it was, slashed against his sore shoulder. He dove, trying to grab the attacker by the knees, to get him down and smother the sweeping, slashing stick.

He missed and got a blow on the back of his head. His hat saved his skull for that time, but was knocked off. Bareheaded he felt naked, trying to come to grips with the shadowy form which banged and smashed at him.

He finally managed to undo his coat with fumbling fingers, but as he did so the attacking phantom drove home a solid smash to the side of his head. The magnum dropped into his hand as stars exploded inside his skull. He managed to trip the safety, though. He fired once, without aim, unable to see.

In the very act of closing to finish his man, the wielder of the stick ceased and wheeled like a bird taking flight. Dan's second bullet ploughed the wall as the door opened and closed swift as magic and the assailant was gone.

Dan opened his mouth to yell, but his vocal chords were paralyzed. He pushed the gun back into place and staggered to the door. He opened it and went into the hall and the people were streaming toward him. Blood ran from the cut over his ear.

There were too many people. They all screamed at him at once. The detective on duty said, "Damn it, Trout, why didn't you get him?" Abe Mawson was hollering for a doctor to attend his wounds. The dark girl fainted at sight of the blood and four people worked over her, getting in each other's way. Buller loomed, his voice booming, demanding to know who was there, and why. The cop came from the door and Dan shook himself,



recovering his wits as best he could in this din.

Corbally walked in, demanding to know why the door was unguarded. He took one look at Dan and got the crowd under control by staring at them and ordering the cops to disperse them. A doctor came and they patched Dan in Nimbel's dressing room.

**N**IMBEL and Mary Ann Laird were together when they found them, up in the flies on a stair landing. They came down and alibied each other. Dan sat, his head buzzing, and listened to Corbally interview them one by one. Curtain time was approaching and Corbally was getting nowhere. Nimbel applied his make-up and dressed himself in the white tie and tails of the opening number.

Dan got up, swaying a little and went to a sort of rack on the wall. The canes Nimbel used in his dance were hanging there. Dan said, "You said you had a dozen. The police have one. But there are only ten here."

Nimbel turned white beneath the rouge. He said, "Again?"

"It'll turn up. With my blood on it," Dan assured him.

Nimbel said, "This is getting—preposterous. Weird. Why should anyone want to kill you, Trout?"

Dan said, "Maybe because I found Locall's gun. Although that shouldn't be a reason."

Corbally said, "The gun? Where is it?"

Dan told him. Corbally plunged from the room and across the hall to Locall's dressing room. In a moment he was back. He was empty-handed.

Dan said, "Well—then it must have had prints on it. Someone took the gun away from Locall—maybe in a fight. This person then killed Locall with a heavy stick—"

"My walking stick," said Nimbel bitterly.

"With a heavy stick," Dan said persistently. "The gun was a nuisance, and this person had heard of latent prints. So it had to be ditched, and a rubbish heap in a corner was good enough, because it could be picked up later and thrown in the river—or at least wiped more carefully. But somehow it never got picked up, and you know what? It might hang this killer."

"We electrocute them, remember?" said Corbally sarcastically. "And I don't follow your reasoning."

"Well, I don't know about you," said Dan. "But I've been looking for a clever killer, with imagination and daring. A sort of superman who could slide up to my place and attack me when I got into the case, just to warn me to stay out. Because that attacker could have killed me in my office. I'm certain of that. It was just a warning. I thought this joker must be a very active, fearless, smart

cookie. Those telephone calls to Nimbel—I thought they must have a very deep meaning."

"And now?" asked Corbally politely.

"I'm beginning to think this killer is not so smart," said Dan. "And I know the police think it is harder to catch a dumb killer than a clever one, but I never agreed. . . ."

From the doorway an excited voice said, "Corbally! Come here, quick."

Nimbel said, "Trout, this is pretty awful isn't it?" He closed the door tight behind the departing detective. "Someone else is going to get killed. I feel it. And my canes—"

Dan said, "It wasn't so smart to hang that cane under your dressing robe. Hell, you wouldn't do that if you'd just killed a man with it, not without wiping it off. It just ain't natural. And it wasn't so smart to tackle me and not kill me, after he had committed one murder. . . ."

Nimbel said, "It's so damned confusing—the attack shifting to you. I had expected—"

"That you would be next?" Dan rubbed his aching head. "Watch yourself, Nimbel. I'll try to be around, but don't take chances, stay away from lonely dark places. . . ."

The door opened and Corbally came back into the room. He said, "Well, it's happened." His face was lined and worried.

Dan said tensely, "Happened?"

"While everyone was crowding around you—or almost everyone—the killer was getting ready to take another victim. When it broke up, he got Abe Mawson in a corner, behind some canvas scenery, and beat in his head. He used the cane missing from Nimbel's rack over there and left it alongside the victim this time."

Nimbel choked, "You—you don't believe it—that I did it, then?"

Corbally said, "I don't know. I don't think you did, but I don't know."

"Little Abe," Dan said under his breath.

"He was a pal. Why, I've known Abe for years. He was a great little guy."

"This killer is no respecter of persons," said Corbally. The detective was angry, an emotion he seldom permitted himself, Dan knew. "And the hell of it is he's around here somewhere right now and we can't finger him."

"Barry is questioning the people?" Dan asked.

"Yeah," said Corbally. "Barry's all right. He's a good cop. We'll get all the answers—and they won't do us any good. You'll have to make a statement, Dan."

"Sure," said Dan. "I know." He was trying desperately to recall who had been around him when he was bleeding in the hallway and who had left when the cops dispersed the group at Corbally's instigation. The whole thing was a blur. He wondered if he had to

rearrange his ideas about this killer, if the beating he had received was just to create a scene where the murderer could move with more freedom to take care of his next victim?

He wanted to discard that idea. He wanted to believe the killer was a mere opportunist, blundering from kill to kill. If this were true he would make a misstep and Dan could close in.

He wanted to close in with all his heart now. He thought of little Abe and his many kindnesses and cleverness and goodness. Anyone who would kill Abe Mawson was so lousy, Dan said to himself, that electrocution was too good for him.

He had plans of his own for this killer, once he had his sights on him. They did not include merciful, sudden death, either. He wondered now who among all the people involved had grudges against both Locall and Abe?

The only motives possible were the two which were so nearly akin, revenge or jealousy. There was no question of profit to the killer. But it did not seem reasonable that the murderer was either jealous of Abe or wanted revenge on the gentle little man.

Nimbel was standing, facing them. He said quietly, "I am deeply grieved over Abe Mawson. But he leaves a widow and two children. Is it possible that we could go on with the show? I know Abe didn't leave a big fortune—and unless we can keep the show going, none of us will be in a position to help his widow. . . ."

Corbally hesitated. Then he said gently, "I've no reason to stop your performance, Nimbel. The commissioner may think differently tomorrow. But if you can put it on tonight and we can clean it up by tomorrow, I don't think you need to lose a single show."

Nimbel said, "We can put it on, all right. We've sort of got to, you know." He tapped the silk hat gently athwart his brow and slid from the room.

"He couldn't have done it," said Dan.

"He could have," corrected Corbally. "Anyone could have caught Mawson behind that pile of scenery and whacked him once. It would only take a second to do it."

Dan said, "But he didn't." He grew silent beneath Corbally's sardonic gaze. They both knew that murders of this sort—for revenge or jealousy—were committed by all sorts of folks who would scorn to lie, or steal or perform other "dishonorable" acts.

**D**AVE BULLER was waiting. The show was on and the excitement was almost unendurable. The corpse had been removed. Detectives were underfoot everywhere, with Barry sharing responsibility with Corbally. The commissioner was in a rage and even the mayor had put in his oar about the inefficiency

of the police force. Buller, leaning against the wall in the hall which held the dressing rooms, spoke to Dan at great length.

"It's gotta be that little crumb, that Troy," he said. "If it ain't Nimbel, it's him. He's after the gal, Mary Ann Laird. Nimbel was after her to marry him. Locall had the inside track with her, an' that's one of the prime reasons he got bumped. I got it all figured out. Mawson? A mere pawn. Of Fate. Caught in the middle. Like maybe he seen Troy do it, or somethin'. Or Nimbel."

Dan said, "Make up your mind, sleuth. Was it Troy or Nimbel?"

"I ain't quite decided," said the big man solemnly. "I'm a mere beginner at this here game, y' know. But I got it narrowed down, ain't I?"

"Oh, sure," said Dan. He was trying to make his aching head think out a plan of action. He was almost positive that Nimbel needed protection. He had come to the conclusion somewhat reluctantly, that the killer did not care whether *Dance Little Devils* went on or not. Nimbel, he was sure, was in danger. He was endeavoring to think of a way to keep the dancer under surveillance and at the same time lay a trap for the killer. The trick was to keep Nimbel alive and stay alive himself while the murderer fell into said trap. He was having no luck with his scheming.

Buller said, "Now then, you gotta tell me what you got on this thing. Then we will put our heads together and merely figger it out. There is really nothin' to it."

Dan said, "That is very fine, except I haven't got anything."

Buller said, "You mean I done all this figgerin' while you ain't been doin' nothin' but gettin' your chowder head busted by some dope?"

"The dope you mention was the murderer," said Dan.

"You mean your head is harder than poor Locall's or Abe's?" Buller's heavy features registered deep disgust. "Trout, I heard you was dumb. For a while I thought maybe it was an exaggeration. But now I see the person who told me merely knew you!"

Dan said, "I'm afraid you're right, Buller. Why don't you crash around and deduct some more? You do it so well."

"Okay, I'll do it," said Buller. He moved off toward the wings and lounged there, staring at the already nervous actors until the stage manager shooed him from his spot. Then he prowled, ogling chorus girls, annoying the detectives. Barry grew choleric at sight of him, but as part owner of the show he rated being in on the scene. Also, he would be questioned with the others, Dan thought, after the performance.

Out front there was thunderous applause as Gary Nimbel completed the cane dance without a fumble. He rushed offstage, back to the dressing room, looking neither right nor left, to change into his Apache outfit. Troy hurried along in due time. The two of them were in their respective dressing rooms for the space of several moments—plenty of time for Nimbel to have killed Locall.

Sitting on an upended box, fingering the bandage on his head, Dan considered every aspect of the affair. From its real inception in Chancey's, it did not make much sense. Too many keys were missing.

He brooded, watching Mary Ann Laird come off and bustle into the corridor which housed the star dressing rooms. It was another moment before Nimbel came out and joined the dark girl who was his Apache partner.

Dave Buller lumbered by, peering right and left, like a comic opera detective. Malvern Troy came out of his dressing room and a moment later Mary Ann Laird appeared. Together they drifted to the wings, watching the Apache number, awaiting their turn to go on. They spoke to each other only in whispers.

Dan's head ached worse all the time. None of the mess made sense. He rested his back against the wall and closed his eyes. The canvas gave a bit where his skull touched it. But he could not sleep and anyway he needed to keep his eyes open, he told himself vigorously. He decided to phone Betty and tell her what went on. She would be worried about the progress of the case and their chance of collecting a fat fee.

He got up off the box. Where he had rested his head against the canvas was a round spot, a dimple in the material. He had almost got to the wall phone when there was a loud, whacking sound behind him. He turned, frowning. Dust was coming from the piece of scenery. The indentation made by his head had disappeared.

Someone had crept behind the canvas and hit it a terrible blow. The intent had been to crack Dan's skull. He rushed back to the spot and circled around the pile of scenery, his gun in his hand.

He should have fired without looking, he thought grimly. The magnum would have sent its bullet through any flimsy wood impediment. By the time he got to the place, no one was in sight.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Curtain-Call for the Corpse

**D**DAN STOOD in the wings and watched the last part of the show. Troy was doing fine. Of course it was Nimbel's show, and the

dancer was superb. He had the heart of a lion beneath his gentle exterior, Dan thought.

They finished and took their curtain calls. Dan waited, flat against the wall, watching. It was over at last and Nimbel seemed to wilt a little inside his white shirt and tie, but he kept his face under control, walking toward Dan. From backstage came a tremendous bellow.

Dan held himself in, shoved people aside, got to Nimbel. He held the star by the arm. "The hell with it. You stick with me. That's Buller yelling, the big slob."

"But he may have been attacked," Nimbel objected. "Who could it be? There are Mary Ann and Mal—"

Dan said, "Forget it. I'm looking after you. Those threats may be serious."

Nimbel said, "I don't want anyone hurt like poor Abe. . . ." His voice broke, but it was pity for Mawson, not himself, Dan knew.

Dan shrugged, "Well, let's see what happened to the big noise. But stay close to me, where I can see you."

They went around behind the backdrop. The big man was sitting on a box. He said, "I was merely taking a rest. I had my knob against this here canvas, see? Someone come up behind the thing and lemme have a whack. Looka the lump, will yuh? I'm practically moldered!"

There was a fantastic lump on his round head, all right. Dan examined it carefully and said, "You'd better stop playing shamus and go back to flirting with the show girls, Buller. You're being noticed by the killer."

Buller said, "Trout, this couldn't of been either Troy or Nimbel. They wasn't backstage at the time!"

"The girl was," said Dan. "She joined Troy right after you hollered."

"Laird? Say, she coulda done it, huh?"

Dan said, "You think about it a while, Buller. But I'd stay where people can see you. Like around the cops."

"Cops!" snorted Buller. "Me? I should look for perfection from cops? Me, who has merely, in his time, licked a ton of 'em?"

Nevertheless, he took a stand near the inquisitorial table and listened to Barry ask his questions. Dan sat on a chair to one side, making himself as small as possible, and also tuned in. He needed every crumb of information he could glean from that table.

Barry was tough, fair, relentless. The minutes turned into hours and the tension mounted as the cops sifted the entire personnel of the show past the interrogator. Corbally sat quiet and made notes until Barry got hoarse. Then Corbally took over.

It would be a day's job to sort all the answers and make sense of them. Barry and Corbally were trying to place everyone at the

exact time of Mawson's death, which they believed to be immediately after Dan was attacked. They had a clear picture of a skulker with one of Nimbel's canes lying in wait for Mawson—or somehow inveigling him back of the stack of scenery. They wanted to put a suspect in that picture through the testimony of the witnesses. They failed ignominiously—through no fault of their own that Dan could discern—but they failed.

Their methods were sound, and in the end the police usually got the proper man or woman. But this time they were slow.

Dan let the meager facts soak into his aching brain. After a while the jumble seemed to jell and a sort of idea appeared, like a single-cell amoeba. He held onto his skull with both hands, sweating it out. The last of the performers was being questioned when he moved.

\* \* \*

The corridor off which the dressing rooms led was dark and deserted. Dan slid along, turned the knob of the little chamber in which Locall had met his death. Working silently, he opened the door and eased inside.

The light was on full. The man bending over the dressing table wheeled, his face white as a ghost's shroud. It was Gary Nimbel.

Dan said calmly, "Looking for something, Mr. Nimbel?"

"Is—is anyone with you?" demanded the dancer. His lips trembled, then became firm. "The police?"

"No," said Dan. "I'm working for you, remember?"

Nimbel said, "I've got to find it. It's a letter. It was written by Mary Ann, do you understand? Years ago, when they were young. She was infatuated with Locall. The letter was very indiscreet—a youthful, fiery thing. He had been blackmailing us for some time, bleeding me."

Dan said, "If the police knew that, your goose would be cooked for fair. Get out of here and into your own dressing room."

"I tell you, I've got to find it," said Nimbel desperately. "I've got to free Mary Ann. She will lose her mind."

Dan said, "Free her for what? To marry Troy?"

"Troy? Malvern Troy?" Nimbel stared. Then he laughed without humor. "Oh, I forgot. You're not show business. Mal's her brother, you know. Their real name is Schultz."

Dan said faintly, "Oh. I see. Well, get out, anyway." He shoved the dancer through the door. "I'll look in here myself. A letter, eh? He was going to give it to the gossip columnists? That's scarcely motive for murder, at that, in my book. What harm could it do her?"

"She has a father who is a preacher," said Nimbel, protestingly departing. "And it would hurt her—and the show."

Dan closed the door with the last words ringing in his ears. "Hurt the show." Then Locall did not care if he hurt the show, and Abe Mawson's guess had been wrong. Locall could make more money as a blackmailer than a singer.

The phone calls were probably made to further unnerve Nimbel and make him easy prey for the blackmail set-up—if Locall had been making those calls. And the girl—she was dominated by Locall. That would explain the set-up in Chancey's, with the girl forced to aid in the act put on to keep Dan from his appointment with Nimbel.

But how far did this go? And how could a dead Locall cause the demise of poor Abe Mawson?

There was an obvious answer to that one. Dan skeptically examined the dressing table which Nimbel had indicated as the receptacle for blackmail papers. It seemed unlikely that the dead actor would have kept such things here. Yet Nimbel had been sure enough to risk discovery. . . .

The cops had searched the place thoroughly, therefore the letter would not be in plain view. It was necessary to take things apart, which the police would not approve. Dan gingerly picked up the make-up kit.

The thing had grease on it. As it slipped he frantically tried to catch it and only succeeded in knocking it to the floor. It was an old, worn kit, and dozens of pencils and stumps of grease paint flew all over the floor.

The leather cover gaped. Dan stared at it wordlessly, his mouth agape. Then he pounced, withdrawing the folded papers.

There was a compartment built in, all right. But in it were more than a letter; there was a sheaf of papers.

He saw Mary Ann's signature and spidery, girlish writing on a yellowing sheet and thrust it deep into his breast pocket. He eyed the other papers eagerly, even as he picked up the scattered debris from the case. He put them carefully on the edge of the dressing table.

He had his back turned to the big wardrobe. He felt the draft of an opening door first. Then he saw the shadow of the leaping figure. The man had been concealed in there even before Nimbel had entered the room. . . .

**D**AN had been beaten with sticks so often that he ached before the first blow landed. Then he was on his back, lashing out with his foot. His kick went home. The stick whirled into the corner.

The big figure came on, plunging at him. He tried to get out his gun, but the man was on him, seeking to throttle him before he could

get it out. He had to roll on the floor, and the gun slid away, out of reach.

Dave Buller's voice was thick with rage. "You driveling idiot, you blunder into things no sensible man could ever learn!"

Buller's voice was passionate, but it was not marred by accent or the terrible slang he was wont to use. Even as he fought for his life, Dan knew the truth.

The big ex-racketeer was strong as an ox. Dan struggled to get from beneath the weight of the heavy body, finally managed to get his knee up and shove himself two feet away. Buller promptly tried to gouge out his eye.

Dan twisted, heaved with his shoulders, got loose for a moment again. He straightened out pronged fingers. He jabbed them into the eyes of the attacking big man.

As Buller doubled up, blinded, Dan hit him with swinging punches which rode the bigger man toward the door. Propping him up with a left, Dan swung his hardest right. Buller crashed across the floor and against the door.

With the same motion, Buller reached inside his coat and drew a gun. Dan stood, victory snatched from his grasp, his mouth wide.

Buller said, "You thundering idiot, I've got to kill you and take my chances. Don't move!"

Dan let out a roar and charged, straight into the gun. He saw the stick slashing at him as Buller gambled to the last on getting his man without noise. Then Buller pulled the trigger of the gun right in Dan's face.

The gun snapped. It did not go off. The stick landed on Dan's back and it was loaded with lead, all right. No broomstick could hurt like that.

Dan's head hit the middle of the big man. The door behind them opened suddenly. Buller crashed backwards.

Corbally stuck out one foot. Buller went down over it like a felled ox. Before he could make another move Corbally had reached down with shiny handcuffs and neatly affixed them to his wrists.

Dan gasped, "He like to killed me . . . but he's your guy."

Corbally said, "I'd about come to that conclusion myself. But I didn't have anything. I didn't see how it could be anyone else—but hell, he has a piece of the show."

Dan picked up the papers off the table. He said, "This character always talked too fantastic. Worse than a guy from Hoboken. If you look at these documents, I think you'll find he comes of a good family. He was a known racketeer as Buller—but his real name is something else, a name every American would know."

He handed the papers to Corbally. Barry

came with two big flatties and formally arrested Buller, a slightly comical act.

Amidst the orderly confusion Dan escaped to Nimbel's dressing room. The actor seized the faded letter, thrust it onto an ash tray, burned it to nothing. Then he got out a check-book and wrote in it.

Dan glanced at the amount and said, "This is mighty generous of you, Nimbel. Er—the cops don't know about the letter or Miss Laird. Locall was trying to force her into his blackmail scheme by holding the letter over her. He needed someone to help him work on Buller, but I guess Buller wasn't the kind to let himself be blackmailed. So he killed Locall. And Abe Mawson must have learned something about Locall's blackmail plans—so he had to be put out of the way, too. Locall really started something. . . ."

Nimbel said, "Poor Rick . . . I knew him when he was a good fellow. . . ."

Dan said, "Yeah. . . ." He saw Mary Ann coming toward the dressing room. He said, "Well, so-long."

He went past the girl. Her face was soft and she was better looking than ever. She was, he decided, not so thin-lipped, after all.

He went on, and Betty Boulder floated back-stage. He said, "Hey, look! A thousand bucks from Nimbel! That's okay for two day's work and a few cuts and contusions, huh?"

She whipped the pink check from his hand. She said, "Very nice, very nice, Mr. Trout. Ah there, Mike . . . I see you've cleaned it up!" She went straight to Corbally.

Dan said, "Hey, I need some dough. . . ."

She did not even look at him. He went out and walked all the way to Chancey's, cursing himself for showing her the check before he got it cashed. He was too simple-minded to live, he mourned. He went into Chancey's and said, "I been beat up, swindled and diddled. I need a drink. Put it on my tab."

Chancey said, "Tab, is it? And you lousy with dough?"

Dan said, "I'm lousy, but without dough."

Chancey threw a packet of green bills on the bar. "This here is yours, pal. Dave Buller left it for you. That big faker. Him and his phony accent."

Dan said faintly, "You knew that all the time?"

"All the old-timers in the racket know it," said Chancey. "He come from a fine Boston fambly, that big four-flusher. Tryin' t' fool people. An' lemme tell yuh about the Matter-son killin' . . . boy, was he iver in on that!"

Dan said, "Make it a double old-fashioned with bourbon—and have one yourself." He prepared to listen, this time, as Chancey talked.

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## DETECTIVE TALES

(Continued from page 34)

here and he's coming after you. A pal of mine is bringing him, a bakery truck driver. He knows the whole story."

"What story, Maddox?" Bud asked hoarsely.

"That you knew your uncle had parked his valuables in my garage and in his cruiser. When you walked in on that fire you realized what was in the wind. You ran upstairs and threatened to expose him. But he couldn't shake down. He fought with you, and you killed him. The Lath saw you do it. So he switched his blackmail scheme from your uncle to you. He told you to hop out here this morning and see him. That's why he's dead now."

"Wait," Bud said. "Wait. You've been framed good for this, Maddox. And your only witness is dead."

Except for one thing. Bud. The packing cases you took from my garage, and the stuff from the cruiser. My pal knows where to find them."

"Where?" Bud croaked.

"In your fishing shack up on Breeze."

His face was as shiny as an onion. His gaze shifted from my face to the target pistol in his hand. I said quickly, "It won't do any good to plug me, Bud. Not with that stuff in your fishing shack."

Bud Ring stepped away from me. He walked backward through the door. He glanced up through the trees toward Tanguay's resort; then he wheeled and ran wildly down the hill.

I went to the door and glanced up through the trees toward the resort, and then I raised my hands as high as I could reach. A half-dozen grim-faced men were moving down on the cabin, Walter Tanguay in the lead, carrying a shotgun, and little Mel bringing up the rear. They halted at the corner of the cabin, and I said:

"It's Bud Ring. Bud is your man. He's half out of his head, running for his shack on Breeze Point. Get the sheriff started up there."

Little Mel's pale face was twitching like a bunny's. "You saw me on the jump step," I said.

He nodded. "How did you know, Maddox?"

"You ran into Tanguay's like your tail feathers were burning. You didn't carry in a bread case, like you always do." I figured it was safe to put my hands down, and I whacked little Mel on the back. "I'm going to buy you the biggest schooner of beer in Tanguay's. This is no time for table water, bub."

## AN EYE OUT FOR DEATH

(Continued from page 51)

all, they hadn't liked Markoff, not a bit. From their point of view, he was no loss to the county. It was self-defense—his own pal was ready to swear to that.

It was over as far as they were concerned in two days. When I got back to the place it was closed, of course, but there was a message from Marg Berringer. She wanted to see me.

She shook hands gravely when I walked into her house. "Thanks," she said. "That was mainly what I wanted to say. Thanks."

"Don't mention it," I said.

She gave me a small smile. "I want to close the place," she said. "At least, the gambling part of it."

"It's done, anyway," I said. "People don't like as much excitement as we put on with the floor show. And I've an idea the police would be a little too clumsy."

"Do whatever you can with the property," she said. "Whatever it is will suit me."

I said I'd do my best, and went back to the place. Helen Munson was alone in my office when I walked in.

She got up and came toward me. We met in the middle of the room. Her face was tired. Her lipstick wasn't quite straight—as if her hand had been shaky. She said, "Hello."

"Everything all right?"

"All right," I said. "The police are reasonably satisfied. Seeing it was Markoff. It's much easier if you pick the right people to shoot."

She nodded, looking past me. "I didn't—you didn't say you were planning to shoot him. I thought—I don't know what I thought. Maybe I just didn't think it through."

She was beautiful in spite of the crooked lipstick. I said, "You wanted things carried through to the end with no fuzzy edges left. Well, I aimed to please, in spite of the fact that the main reason I came here to start with was that it looked like a place where a very tired guy could get a little rest."

She said, "When a man like you starts that kind of resting, he's dead."

"All right, all right," I said. I grinned at her. "At that, I'd kind of forgotten how it feels to buck a mean job right through to the finish. It feels pretty good. This place needed a grand finale, anyway. It got one."

She looked at me. "It got a good one," she said. "I'm glad you did it that way."

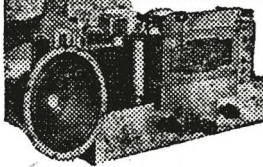
"Let's get out of here," I said. "I don't like the place. How about the hotel?"

"The hotel would be fine," she said. "It's nearly dinner time."

So we went to the hotel.

THE END

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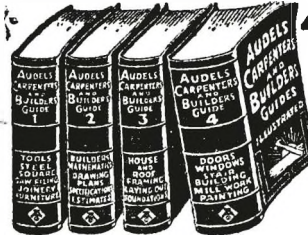
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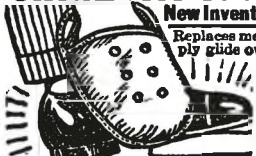
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## DETECTIVE TALES

(Continued from page 57)

he asked. “Don’t make it any worse by stalling. I feel bad enough about this already.”

The shabby little man stood there with his mouth open, and Jimmy felt a stab of pain in his heart at the terror that was rapidly rising in the eyes of this wretched little man.

“I knew it was you as soon as I came to back in the farmhouse and saw that empty bag,” he explained patiently. “That gold watch chain that held it together was gone and I knew that nobody but you would have bothered taking a lousy twelve-dollar watch chain when they had sixty grand in rocks in their hands. Then I began to remember other things.

“When you carried that bag of groceries home for me yesterday afternoon, you could have stood at the door and listened to me talking to Tex on the phone. Or it might have been that sometime when I was drunk and you helped me home, I talked too much. It doesn’t matter.

“When you heard me tell Steve Malone that I was going after those rocks you must have just about gone crazy thinking about them. A whole damn bag of them. So you sneaked into the trunk compartment of my car. I forgot to lock it when I changed tires before starting out. You rode out to the farm with me and after the fight, when I went out to the barn to get the rocks, you sneaked in and hit Tex with a wrench.

“Then I came back and you laid me out. After that you walked over half a mile down to the main highway to catch a bus because you couldn’t drive a car. It had to be you, Duke. So let’s have those damn rocks and get it over with.”

Paul Malone was already stepping past Jimmy, his wise cop’s eyes scanning the room. He went at once to the cheap pine bureau and began yanking open drawers. In a minute or two he had found them. They were in a paper bag, the kind Steve Malone used in sending out containers of beer, and when he dumped them out on the bed they sparkled like living things in the glare of the naked electric bulb.

Jimmy Raines gave them one short, disinterested glance and then turned to go home. More than anything else in the whole world, he wanted to get back to the sanctuary of that friendly little kitchen, where Molly would have a pot of hot coffee waiting for him. By the time he had turned into the pleasant, tree-lined street he had put the stones completely out of his mind. He was thinking that tomorrow he must put up a new shelf in the kitchen cupboard. He had been promising Molly to put in that shelf for over a week now.



## AN AXE TO GRIND

(Continued from page 77)

and rubbed my hands and put the handkerchief back in my pocket. I asked if he knew anything else.

"Not much else." He was polishing his slippers, first one and then the other, against the backs of his pant legs. He leaned over and studied them critically. They were old slippers, stained with white toothpaste spots and badly scuffed.

He said, "Last night, maybe a little after eleven, Irma come to my room. She was crying and shaking and so bad scared I could hardly understand what she was trying to tell me. She said Joe had this axe and he'd sharpened it and he was going to chop her up with it. She wanted me to do something. She come right in where I was in bed and told me. I don't know where Joe was. Maybe still down in the basement. I told her not to worry because Joe wouldn't do anything to her while I was in the house. He wouldn't've, either. Joe ain't so much for guts."

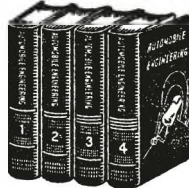
I said, and it was a long time before I could say anything because of the tightness in my throat, "But you went out. You got up and dressed and went out."

Ebert moved his big shoulders. "Sure. Like I told the cops."

Neither one of us spoke for a long time. A minute. I was sick at my stomach. My hands were shaking and I wanted something strong to drink. Something very strong. I offered him a cigarette. He pulled one from the pack, rolled it about idly between his thick fingers. I gave him a match. I said, "Of course, if you'd stayed, he might have killed you, too."

"There's that," Ebert said. He drew deeply on the cigarette, lay back across the cot, letting the smoke curl from the corners of his mouth. "Besides," he added, "I was damned tired of Irma."

It was then he smiled.



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## DETECTIVE TALES

(Continued from page 6)

New York *Herald*. After much haggling, the thief finally lowered his price to a hundred thousand dollars. Mrs. Stewart agreed to pay, but General Jones, who was conducting the negotiations, countered with an offer of twenty thousand. Romaine accepted, after laying down stringent conditions for the payment of the money and delivery of the body.


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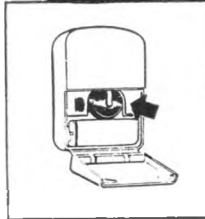
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