

25¢ THE **BIG 15 STORY** MAGAZINE  OCT.

DETECTIVE

15
STORIES

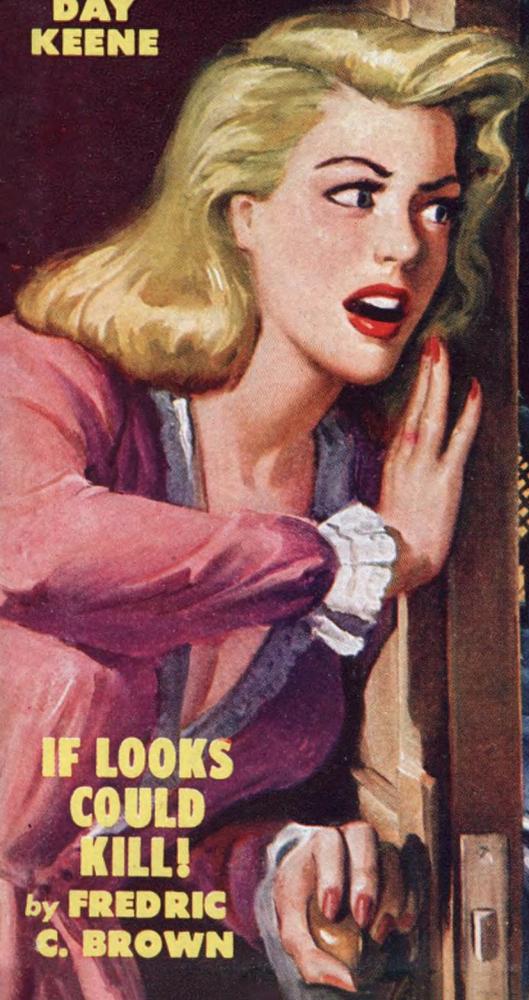
TALES

25
CENTS

**POOR LITTLE
MURDER-GIRL!**

by
**DAY
KEENE**

**HOLDEN
•
ALLAN
•
SPAIN**

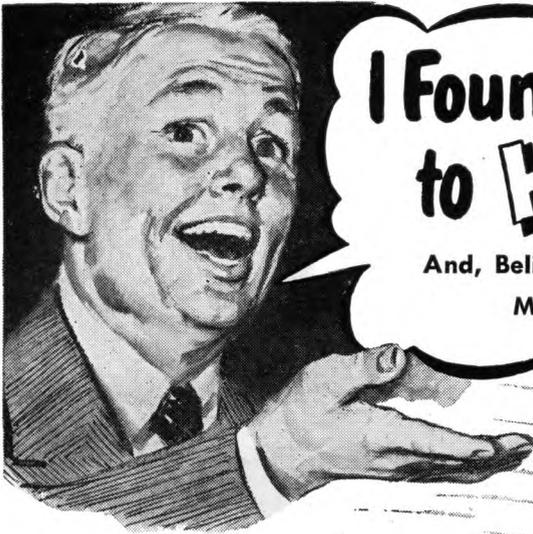


**IF LOOKS
COULD
KILL!**

by **FREDRIC
C. BROWN**

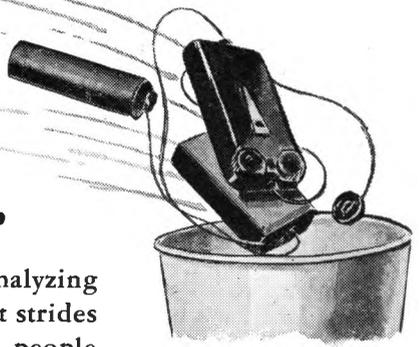


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10-25

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DETECTIVE

15
STORIES

TALES

25
CENTS

VOL. FORTY

OCTOBER, 1948

NUMBER THREE

Two Sensational Murder Novels

1. **POOR LITTLE MURDER-GIRL!**.....*Day Keene* 10
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Cover painting from Fredric C. Brown's story, "If Looks Could Kill!"

November Issue Published September 24th!

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AGAINST REPRINT FICTION

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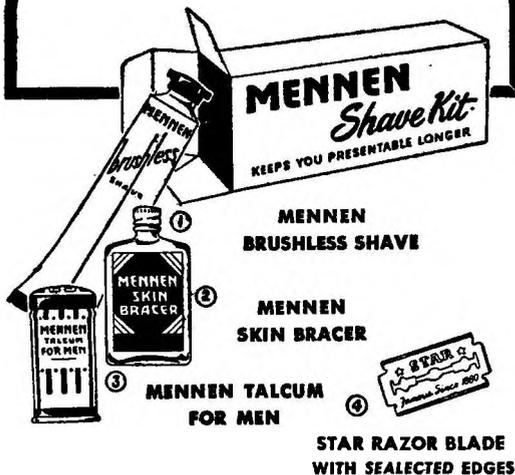
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A DOG'S
BEST
FRIEND

By
IAN MARTIN

Star of "Mystery Playhouse," MBS

Willie's larcenous employers made a great mistake when they hired him as a dognaper. . . . For Willie didn't fuss much over pedigrees—he just picked the friendliest mutts he could find.

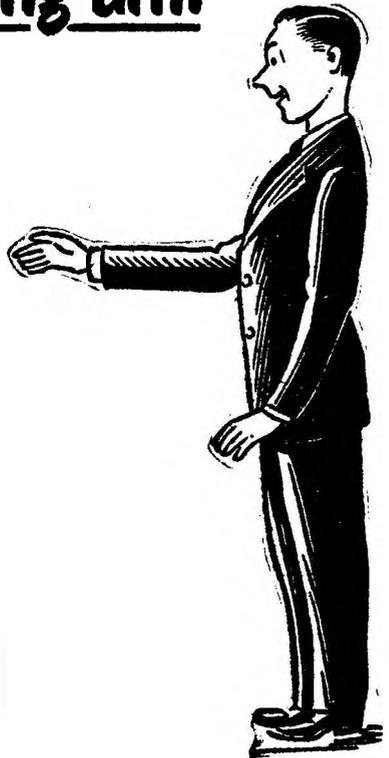
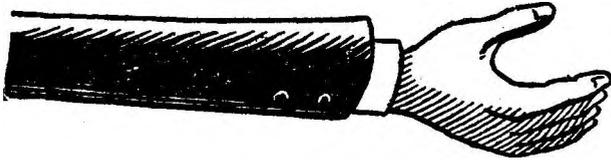
MEN who steal dogs are surely among the most despicable of criminals. It is not impossible to feel some sympathy for the desperate man who holds up a grocer in order to feed his own starving family. And all of us are occasionally conscious of guilty twinges of admiration for the daring and romantic jewel thief who robs a million-dollar heiress of a diamond bracelet she can certainly afford to lose. A dog thief, however, is somewhat akin to a kidnaper. His depredations leave children heart-broken and in tears while grim-faced parents hasten to post signs reading, "Please return brown cocker spaniel, child's pet, handsome reward, no questions asked."

In the autumn of 1915, a great many advertisements of that sort were appearing in the classified columns of publications distributed over the area of Cook County in Illinois. In two weeks six thefts occurred—a champion collie belonging to a congressman, two finely bred terriers, an imported wolfhound, a six-week-old Scotty pup and a water spaniel, total value close to \$5,000. Owners of pedigreed ani-

(Continued on page 8)

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WINCHESTER
TRADE-MARK
FLASHLIGHTS AND BATTERIES

DETECTIVE TALES

(Continued from page 6)

imals kept their dogs on leash and locked them in the house at night, and owners of non-pedigreed dogs did the same thing just in case the thieves should make a mistake.

Most worried, perhaps, was a young kennel owner named Brian Foley, who had ten expensive Irish terriers on hand. On a hunch, toward the end of November, he sat up one night, squatting in the shadows on his back steps facing the kennels, a shotgun lying across his lap. He saw an automobile cruise slowly into the street, park, and dim shadows slip through the watery moonlight. When the first of the trio laid a hand on the kennel gate, Foley fired a blast. The lead man dropped to the ground, the rest turned and ran. The kennel owner fired after the automobile, but it zigzagged wildly down the block.

Unhappily, the man Foley shot was dead when the police arrived. They identified him readily as a rogues' gallery graduate who had served a term in jail for doping horses at a racetrack in the East.

The chief of police saw the point at once. "The dead thief was their finger-man, as it were," he said. "He knew animals and loved them. He picked out the dogs and got them away without any barking or fuss. They'll have to get someone to take his place."

The chief was right. He understood both dogs and dog lovers for he had his own trained bloodhound.

For several months the raids ceased completely. Then they began again, but with a difference. This time, it was the mutts that disappeared, the expensive breeds left severely alone. But the stenographic confession of Willie Harrison tells the story of what happened to the gang after Foley had removed its dog expert.

"I heard this job was open—spotting dogs for a gang," the confession states. "I came down from St. Louis and they took me on. 'Go spot a dog that looks good to you,' they said, so I did. A nice pup it was, brown, with black spots and sort of bent legs. But they said it wasn't worth nothing and they got very mad. The next three times, the same thing.

A DOG'S BEST FRIEND

Nice dogs, but worthless, they told me. 'You don't know much about dogs,' they said, and I replied, 'I only know what I like. Them dogs look good to me and they was all very gentle.'

"'Never mind, get a pedigreed one, gentle or not,' was the order. Just then I see a lady walking a big ugly dog. 'See, a dog like that,' they told me. Well, I said right away I knew where there was a dog just like that and running loose at night, too."

The dog that Willie had in mind was the bloodhound belonging to the chief of police. The chief's trained bloodhound went along with Willie as though he had never known another master and when the chief discovered the loss the next morning he was livid with fury. He jumped into his car and drove toward a neighboring county seat where he intended to borrow another bloodhound and put the animal on the trail of the first. As he passed a deserted fishing cabin set well back in the trees along the river, he heard a familiar baying. He turned off the road and pulled up alongside the cabin, and there he discovered three of the thieves up in a tall chestnut tree with the bloodhound circling the base, growling warningly at the luckless men.

The thugs were swearing and shouting to Willie, who stood helplessly beside the animal.

"Shoot it! Shoot it!" they pleaded. Their own weapons had fallen to the ground in their upward scramble.

"I guess he don't like you fellows very much," Willie said. "You should've let me pick you another friendly little mutt!" Just then the chief drove into the clearing beside the tree.

As he conducted his captives to the jail-house, he asked Willie curiously, "Why didn't you shoot the dog?"

"What, shoot that fine dog?" Willie said in shocked accents. "That'd be a crime!"

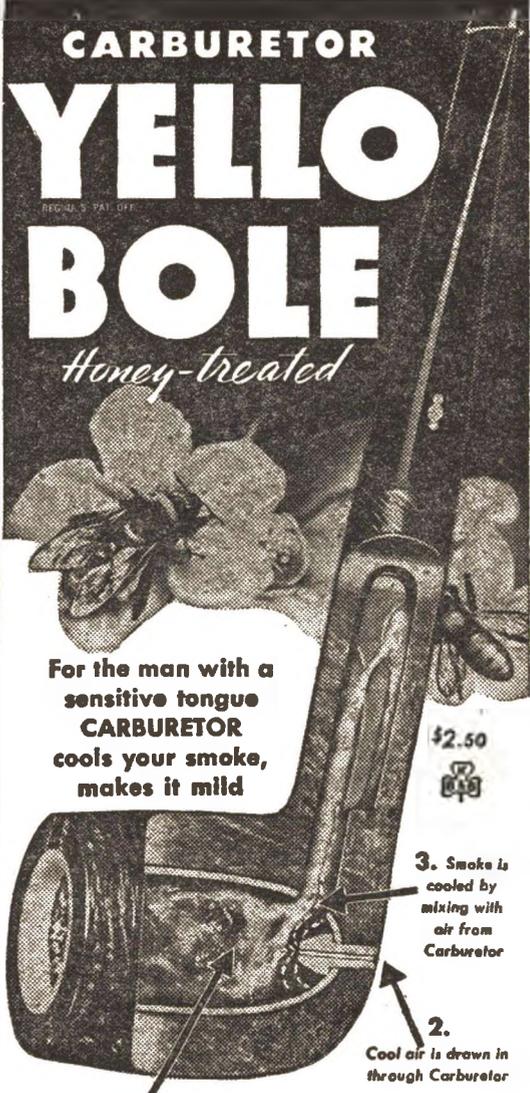
And that is the reason why clemency was recommended for Willie at the trial and why, during the seven years he spent in jail, he was allowed the special privilege of caring for the warden's wife's dachshund.

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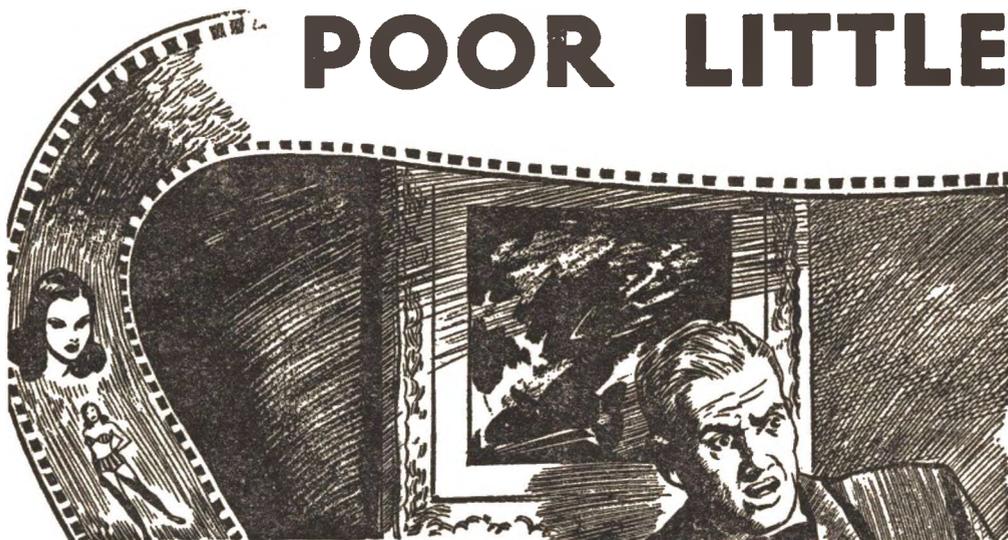


This picture of Honey Girl is displayed wherever Yello-Boles are sold.



Identify Yello-Bole pipes by the honey-seal in the bowl. It keeps the honey fresh.

POOR LITTLE



She wasn't his wife, and the kid wasn't his child . . . But what's a man to do, Stanton wanted to know, when everybody—the girl, the child and the corpse that had, most conveniently, joined the family party,—all point at him and yell, "Daddy!"?

CHAPTER ONE

End of the Party

THERE was nothing unusual about the night Shad Hanson died except, perhaps, the shooting star he chanced to observe from the terrace of his hillside home.

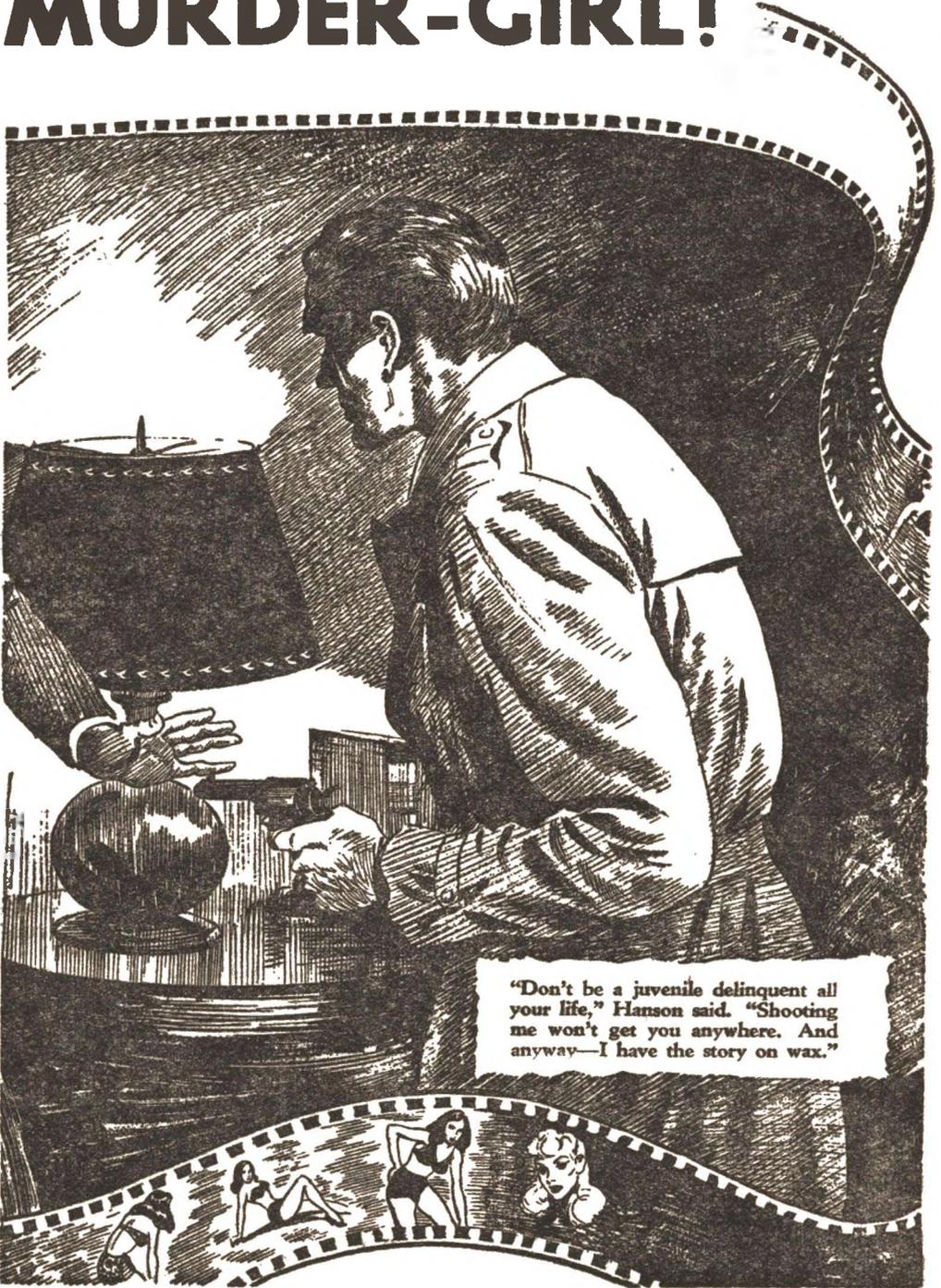
A man of considerable education, he knew it for what it was, a huge fragment of hot gaseous matter that some million light years ago had torn loose from some unnamed star perhaps twice as large as the earth and twenty-five trillion miles away.

He watched the brief stellar display, amused. The human race was funny. All over the world thousands of superstitious



By DAY KEENE

MURDER-GIRL!



"Don't be a juvenile delinquent all your life," Hanson said. "Shooting me won't get you anywhere. And anyway—I have the story on wax."

men and women seeing the fiery fragment would soberly inform one another that someone was going to die.

The fools.

At nine o'clock, wine-mellowed, his dinner fitting his waistcoat well, Hanson, rising from the table, ordered Sato to clear out and returned to the flagged terrace.

Built on a ledge gouged out of the sheer hillside, several miles distant from but overlooking the sea, the long, low ranch-type house seemed almost without support, suspended eerily in the sky.

That thin necklace of lights was Malibu Beach. That thicker cluster was Beverly Hills. Those still farther away were Hollywood, beyond them were the lights of Los Angeles proper. The terrace gave Hanson a feeling of power. Here there were stars both above and below him. It was a comfortable feeling. It was money in the bank. Stars had earned his living for years.

A middle-aged man of medium size with a freshly scrubbed complexion, his pink and white cheeks, blue eyes and flaxen hair gave him a benign appearance. In his case, appearance was deceptive.

Ostensibly a lawyer, he maintained a Hollywood office. He even kept office hours. But he hadn't appeared in a courtroom for years. He didn't have to. He knew where too many people, male and female, had spent their lost weekends. His was a nasty business but he was never troubled with his conscience. He had none. He had boasted openly along Vine Street that he would rather extort a dollar than earn an honest dime. "That way," he pointed out, "I'm ninety cents to the good. What's more, I don't have to declare it on my income tax."

Pleased with the night and himself, he fingered the locket in his pocket. His luck was holding. Of all the ethical lawyers in the state of California to whom she might have taken her case, the girl had come to him. He wondered how much he dared to ask for the information he possessed and, chuckling, realized there was no limit. The man didn't dare refuse him *anything* he asked.

He sauntered back into the living room to make certain the master recording of the dictaphone disks cut in his office was in place on the machine. It was. As an afterthought, purely as a precautionary

measure and not because he expected violence, he transferred a blue-steel revolver from a table drawer to the right hand pocket of his dinner jacket. Infrequently, very infrequently, sheep became hysterically violent before they realized their only choice was to allow themselves to be sheered.

SATO had been gone an hour when his expected caller arrived. Tall, bare-headed, both hands plunged deeply into the pockets of the slightly soiled trenchcoat that seemed to be uniform with Hollywood, he came briskly around the path leading from the front of the house. Then, seeing Hanson, he stopped well in the shadow of a wind-deformed live oak growing on the edge of the terrace.

"What are you trying to pull, Hanson?" he demanded. "Why should an English girl named Eve Shannon mean anything to me?"

"That's her maiden name," Hanson informed him.

"Even so."

Hanson shrugged, "You're here, aren't you?"

A moment of silence followed. The man under the oak took his hands from his pocket to light a cigarette. "Yeah. I'm here. You say she had a boy with her?"

The lawyer grinned. "A boy of six by the name of Robin. So called, I was told, for two reasons. One, Robin is a diminutive of Robert. Two, because he came in the spring."

The man under the oak swore softly. Taking a locket from his pocket Hanson dangled it by its chain. "You may recognize this, or at least the picture it contains."

Leaving the shelter of the tree, the other man took the locket in his fingers and studied the dime-sized picture.

Hanson retrieved the locket. "It is your picture?"

"You know it is. Now what's this about a dog?"

Hanson explained, "His name is Winston Churchill. He is, I believe, the British version of our Seeing-Eye dog."

His caller was incredulous. "Eve's blind?"

"That's right. Her optical nerves are paralyzed. She told me the technical term,

but it escapes me at the moment. It happened during one of the last buzz-bomb raids. She was, she told me, very fortunate to escape from the bombed building with your child."

"Shut up!" the younger man said savagely.

Hanson swung the locket by its chain. "Myself, I think she is being very reasonable. She doesn't ask a dime for herself, not even enough to pay for the operation she says might restore her sight. All she asks is her boy be raised as the son of a wealthy man."

"How did she find me?"

The lawyer's smile became a smirk. "She didn't. She 'chawnced on a wireless broadcahst,'" he tried to imitate the girl, "that not only informed me Robert was alive but was actively endeavoring to commit bigamy with Joy Parnell."

The younger man swore angrily. Then he did what he had come to do if it seemed feasible. He drew a pistol from his coat pocket and leveled it on Hanson's shirt front.

Hanson laughed at him. "Grow up. Don't be a juvenile delinquent all your life. Shooting me won't get you anywhere." He nodded at the platter on the turn-able. "I have the whole story on wax. And, disregarding that, even if I were out of your way, the girl can still identify you."

"How?"

"How?" Hanson laughed, "Why—" He stopped short, swallowing hard, the locket dangling from his fingers grown suddenly so heavy his arm could scarcely support it.

"Yes. How?" the other man asked quietly. "*How will she identify me? You told me yourself she is blind.*"

Hanson backed from him, terrified, fumbling too late for his own gun. Then as a cloud briefly obscured the moon a first, a second, a third black boutonniere blossomed on the lawyer's shirt front.

IN LONDON, the night was cold and filled with fog. Here, too, there was fog. The sea wasn't far away. But the American boys she had met hadn't been pulling her leg. California December was warm.

The stored-up hurt and loneliness and

recent anger of the past seven years had somewhat gone in that afternoon's exhausting interview with Mr. Hanson, and now Eve lay motionless, listening to the night sounds on the street, waiting for the phone to ring.

What a trusting little fool she had been at seventeen. "Mocambo, the Coconut Grove, Ciro's, Malibu Beach, Palm Springs. You'll see them all, baby," the bad bold wolf had promised. "Back there I have a big ranch, servants, cars, a swimming pool. And they'll all belong to you."

And she, like the little pig in the story, had believed him. She had allowed him to huff and puff and blow her defenses down. She had acted like a cheap little tramp. Well, perhaps not quite the same. There had been a war going on. She *thought* she was in love. And she *did* have her marriage certificate.

Mr. Hanson seemed to think it might be worth a pretty penny. She hoped so, for Robin's sake.

Now that she was actually in Los Angeles, it seemed incredible that she had been able to screw up nerve to do what she had done. It had taken a bit of doing, but from the moment she had heard the report on the wireless that Robert wasn't dead she had known she was going to do it. Robert wasn't dead. He had merely allowed her to think so, allowed her to cry her eyes out for a man who didn't care two snaps of his fingers for her.

For herself she wanted nothing. She had made that clear to Mr. Hanson. But now that Robin was six it was only fair his wealthy father at long last begin to support him in a manner to which he was as yet unaccustomed.

From the window, one arm around Winston Churchill's neck, Robin broke his, for him, long silence. "Mother, do you think that Roy Rogers might ride by on Trigger?"

Eve said she doubted he would at that hour.

"Oh." Robin saw the point. "He's prob'ly in his stable having tea." He wanted to know if horses did have tea.

Eve told him she thought horses only drank water.

Robin nodded. "Will we see a cowboy, mother? A real live cowboy riding a real

live horse? I'd so much like to see one."

Eve promised he would.

"And an Indian?"

She said she didn't know about an Indian. *Why didn't the phone ring?* It had been five hours since she had talked to Mr. Hanson. Then a new and frightening thought crept into her consciousness. What if Robert refused to see her? What if he denied Robin was his son?

Her nails bit into her palms but she refused to cry.

At the rate her money was melting it would be gone in two days. After giving Mr. Hanson the two hundred dollar retaining fee he had suggested as proper, she had less than forty dollars left.

Nor had she anything to pawn. Why didn't the phone ring? Mr. Hanson had promised to phone her as soon as he contacted Robert.

Sensing she was troubled, Winston Churchill left Robin and padded across the room to poke a cold, protective muzzle in her hand. The gesture quelled her rising panic. Old Faithful, front and center. 'We'll fight in the fields and in the streets and in the hills and all that sort of thing. If Robert thought she was the same little fool she had been at seventeen his head wasn't screwed on properly.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained. She would wait until ten o'clock. If neither Robert nor Mr. Hanson had phoned her by then she would contact Robert in person, now, tonight, if it took the last shilling of her small reserve. She hadn't traveled six thousand miles to be kept waiting in a hotel room she couldn't afford.

The eminent and wealthy Robert Stanton, late First Lieutenant of the United States Army Air Corps, would provide for his son, and amply, or she would raise so much bloody hell he would think he was back over Berlin with all of dead Goering's circus on his tail

A BIG BLOND MAN with the sad eyes of a kicked spaniel and a wisp of a mustache, Bob Stanton was a little drunk and quite unhappy, he didn't know just what about. He brought Joy the cocktail she had asked for and sat silent while she drank it, wondering why he threw parties. His guests didn't give a damn about him. He cared even less for them. They drank

his liquor, ate his food, borrowed his money. But if he were to go broke tomorrow not one of them would lend him a dime. Few of them had dimes to lend, with the exception of Joy, Lyle Ferris and perhaps Marty Manson.

He looked for Ferris in the crowd and couldn't find him.

Joy said, "You've had too much or too little to drink. Why don't we go for a drive?"

"I've been for a drive," he told her.

There was no use trying to explain his mood to Joy. She liked this sort of thing. Marriage to Joy would mean a constant round of parties between pictures. And as the wife of a three-thousand-dollar-a-week writer, she would get a chance to attend plenty of them.

Over at the pool a slim little extra girl with far too much to drink was posturing and teetering on the end of the high diving board to the accompaniment of much laughter.

Stanton wasn't amused. Rising from the garden bench he caught Hi Lo's attention. "Tell Marta to get that kid into the house. Pour some black coffee in her and then have Jimmy drive her into town."

"Right," Hi Lo nodded.

A full-blooded Sioux with degrees from Carlisle and Oxford and a United State's Infantry captain's commission behind him, the copper-complexioned giant had been Stanton's combination friend, secretary and paid companion for years.

Joy sipped her cocktail, looking at the girl posturing on the diving board. Her voice, when she spoke, was wistful. "She is very lovely—and young."

Joy's girdle, Stanton thought, was probably bothering her. She was a grand person. But there were a lot of miles on her. Marrying Joy would be like buying an expensive second-hand car. The motor was as good as ever, but the upholstery was beginning to show signs of wear.

Lili Manson, with Marty hovering at her side, stopped in front of the bench. Addicted to baby talk, Lili simpered, "Li'l ol' nas'y girl making a spectacle of herself."

"Disgusting," her husband added virtuously.

Stanton could take Marty Manson or he

could leave him alone. He preferred to leave him alone. A failure as a writer, an assistant director and a yes man before the war, Manson had risen in the three years since to full producer's stature. His marriage to Lili Merner had done that for him. Old J. V. Merner was Consolidated Pictures.

Manson wanted to know how the script Stanton was working on was coming.

"Swell," Stanton told him. "By dint of much mental labor I ground out two exclamation points yesterday and one this morning. What's more, I have a colossal idea for a comma."

Lili giggled, "You big ol' man with brains."

Manson shrugged as if to indicate his opinion of a producer stupid enough to entrust the writing of a picture co-starring Joy Parnell and Lyle Ferris to Stanton. It was common gossip around the studios that the two years Stanton had spent in a German prisoner of war camp had slightly addled his brains. He had lost all desire to make money.

Excusing himself on the pretext of getting two more drinks, Stanton took the long path through the garden to the bar in the rumpus room. He wished he knew what was wrong with him. He wished he had the nerve to tell Joy that while he admired her greatly he hadn't the least desire to marry her.

WHEN he reached the parking lot back of the rumpus room, Lyle Ferris was stepping out of his low-slung, expensive, foreign-made car. Stripping off the trenchcoat he was wearing over his dinner jacket, the actor wanted to know, "What's jumping, Bob?"

"The usual," Stanton told him. "A bunch of drunks." He liked Ferris. There was nothing phony about him. Like Pop-eye, he was what he was. A fairly recent Broadway importation with a good war record behind him, he had taken feminine Hollywood, including Joy Parnell, by storm.

Ferris said he was sorry he was late but he'd had a little business matter to attend to. "Male or female?" Stanton grinned.

"It wasn't neuter," the leading man assured him. "Is our fiancée here?"

Stanton told him he would find Joy at the pool, then watched Lyle's back move down the path. Lyle and Joy were well matched. Both of them were unscrupulous where their own happiness was concerned. He would bow out of the picture tonight and leave the field to Lyle. The hell with the whole works!

Happiness. That was what he was looking for. But he wouldn't find the answer to his problem in a bottle. You couldn't distill a bluebird.

He rounded the corner of the rumpus room and started in, only to stop mildly interested as a cab stopped in front of the massive main door of the house to discharge its passengers.

A slim-faced, Eton-jacketed little boy who looked like a fugitive from *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* was first. A huge Doberman pinscher was next. The last to leave the cab was a stunning, dark-haired girl who looked as if she might be the boy's sister. He wondered who they were and if they had the right address. The damndest people came to his parties.

Hi Lo strode out from the house to greet them, and Stanton chuckled as the boy's sharp eyes saw through Hi Lo's two-hundred-dollar dinner jacket to his hereditary clout and elk tooth necklace. "You are an Indian, a real live Indian," the boy accused.

"That's right," Hi Lo agreed. "Me heap big chief Hi Lo Jack." He turned to the girl in the smart traveling suit—and just then Leatic May, the columnist, spotted Stanton in the doorway of the rumpus room and dragged him inside and up to the bar.

She wanted to know how his romance with Joy was coming. Did he think Joy loved him more than she did Ferris? Would they live at the ranch after they were married or would he move into Joy's equally spacious Beverly Hills home?

Stanton said he didn't know to all three questions. A double rye lighting a fire in his stomach, he was beginning to question the wisdom of relinquishing Joy to Lyle Ferris. So their marriage didn't last. It would be fun while it did. He was pouring himself another double when Hi Lo whispered in his ear: "Eve's here."

"Who's here?"

"Eve."

The name didn't register in Stanton's mind. "Sorry. I don't know any Eve. Never heard of her."

Hi Lo said softly, "Don't be a complete heel."

Stanton protested. "I'm not being a heel. I just don't know any Eve. So Eve is here. Buy her a drink. Buy her two drinks. Tell her to go ahead and get stinking drunk."

"But you don't know her?"

"No."

Neither man realized their voices had risen until they were almost shouting. "So," Hi Lo demanded, "you don't know an English girl by the name of Eve Shannon?"

Angered, Stanton lifted the other man's hand off his shoulder. "No, I don't know any English girl by the name of Eve Shannon. And I don't particularly care to."

"Oh," Hi Lo said, "I see. That's the way you're going to play it, eh? Well, then, in my book you are a skunk and a louse unfit to associate with even a Main Street wino. You're just a damn dirty, rotten tramp!"

The silence that followed his pronouncement was complete except for the tinkling of the player piano. The drink clearing slightly from his head, Stanton said, "Now wait. *Un momento*, Hi Lo. What the hell is this all about?"

"You don't know an English girl by the name of Eve Shannon?"

"I do not."

The Indian slapped his face with the back of one big hand. "But you do know what this means?"

His face white with anger, Stanton doubled his fist and struck at the taunting copper mask.

Without moving his feet Hi Lo rolled with the punch. Then, driving a hard left into Stanton's stomach that bent the writer double, he straightened him again with a right to the point of the jaw. His face still expressionless, Hi Lo watched Stanton crumple to the floor. Then he informed the gaping curious, "He had that coming. Now all of you clear out. The party's over."

So saying, he walked quickly out of the rumpus room.

CHAPTER TWO

The Girl He Left Behind

WITH returning consciousness, Stanton became aware of faces staring down at him. Then he remembered what had happened. Hi Lo had turned mad and knocked him out. He was lying on the floor. Ignoring several outstretched hands, he got to his feet and walked unsteadily to the bar.

"Give," Leatrice demanded. "Who is Eve Shannon? Why are you a skunk and a louse? Why did Hi Lo slug you?"

Stanton felt his jaw. It was tender to the touch and swollen. "I don't know," he admitted truthfully. The whole evening had turned sour. He wanted to be alone. "Clear out, all of you," he ordered. "Get the hell off my ranch. And what's more, don't ever come back."

Leatrice lifted one eyebrow and went in search of Hi Lo. The others drifted out in couples and in animated little clusters to spread the news among the dancers in the garden and the swimmers in the pool that Bob Stanton and Hi Lo Jack had quarreled over some English girl named Eve Shannon and Hi Lo had punched Stanton unconscious.

Toying with an empty glass, Stanton watched them in the back-bar mirror. Their tongues were as busy as little hatchets. There would be a dozen versions of the story by morning, each one more distorted than its predecessor.

He wished he knew what it was all about. Who was this English girl named Eve over whom Hi Lo had chumped off? He hadn't known many girls during the short time he had been stationed in London, and then only casually. He couldn't even remember their names, but he was positive none of them had been named Eve.

The more he thought about it, the angrier he got. Who did Hi Lo think he was? He'd beat the big Indian to a pulp. If he couldn't do it with his fists, he could with a baseball bat.

Eddie, the second gardener, who doubled as rumpus room barman on party nights, touched his arm. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Stanton, but do you want me to close up the bar?"

Stanton nodded. "Yes. Close it up. Lock the door. And throw the key away."

"Yes, sir."

"And round up all the portable bars," Stanton added. "I want that crowd of rummies out of here. And the only way to chase them is to dry up their supply."

"Yes, sir."

He followed Eddie out of the rumpus room and stood on the graveled drive looking at the lighted living room windows. If he tried to talk to Hi Lo now he'd kill him. No one slugged Bob Stanton and got away with it. He'd better take time to cool off. It was time enough for them to have their talk after the crowd had gone.

On sudden impulse he turned down the unlighted path leading to the stables. Here the angry babble of his ejected guests was merely a whisper carried on a cool night wind heavy with the cloying fragrance of star jasmine and orange blossoms. Day and early evening had been warm, but night was cool. The fire he had attempted to kindle with whiskey had died out. Stopping in the tack room, Stanton took a soiled trenchcoat from a peg and slipped into it for warmth.

He saw nothing morally wrong in making money. But his success suddenly sour in his mouth, he wished his ranch and all his money were at the bottom of the ocean and he was back on the *Express* again, writing up Mr. and Mrs. John Dillwaddy's golden anniversary for sixty-five dollars a week. Well, maybe seventy-five.

Life had been simpler then. It was to become more complicated soon. A slight movement in front of Danny Deever's box stall slowed his pacing. Then the moonlight revealed the small boy he had seen getting out of the cab. Unaware he was not alone, his hands clasped behind his back, his legs spread for better balance, his neck thrust forward in interest, the small fugitive from *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* was regarding the big horse's head with a light in his eyes that bordered on worship.

"Like him?" Stanton asked.

Only slightly startled, Robin replied, "Oh, yes, sir. I trust there is no harm in my looking at him, sir? I mean at such close quarters."

Stanton looked at the child to see if he was being ribbed. He didn't seem to be. As big as a minute, with an intonation and a broad *A* decidedly British, the boy handled words like a Caltech professor. "No. Not at all," Stanton told him. "You like horses?"

"Very, very much," Robin assured him. He explained. "But while I have seen lots of them in the cinema this is the first real live horse that I've ever seen."

"Why don't you pet him?" Stanton suggested.

Robin was beside himself with joy. "Oh, might I? Might I give him some sugar? I saved mine from tea this evening just in case I might meet a horse."

STANTON passed a hand over his eyes. Everything happened to him. Only this wasn't happening. It couldn't.

Attracted by the timidly offered lump of sugar, Danny Deever lowered his head and nibbled it off of Robin's palm. Fairly quivering with glee, the boy raised the courage to stroke his nose. Amused, Stanton picked him up so he might better pet the high-arched neck and well-carried withers. "What's your name, son?"

"Robin."

"You're British, aren't you?"

"Oh, no, sir," Robin said promptly. "My mother is British but I am an American. My father was an American aviator, a first lieutenant in their Air Corps."

Stanton studied the smiling face in tardy suspicion. "Your mother's name wouldn't be Eve by any chance, would it?"

Robin was pleased. "Oh, yes, sir. Do you know her?" Fond of his new friend, he confided, "You see, I'm really not supposed to know about it. I'm too young. But there has been some misunderstanding between my mother and my father, a Mr. Robert Stanton, and we have come to thrash it out." He added proudly, "My father writes for the cinema and is reputed to be very wealthy. Do you chance to know him, sir?"

"I'm beginning to wonder," Stanton said dryly. This was a new approach to something, just what, he didn't know. From where he stood it smelled like an attempt at blackmail. "So your father is Robert Stanton, eh?"

"Yes, sir," Robin confided. He wasn't too certain. "I believe this is his ranch, sir." He hesitated. "But things were rather confused this evening. I had been asleep for an hour when mother asked me to dress again and we engaged a cab to come out here. Oh, I tell you, she was simply furious."

"She was, eh?"

"Oh, yes." Robin slipped one arm around the neck of his new friend. "You see she talked to a solicitor this afternoon and he promised to inform my father and he arrived from England. Naturally mother expected father to phone. But when no message reached our hotel by a late hour mother decided we'd come in person to tell him we were in this country."

"I see. And what sort of person is your mother?"

"A very fine person, sir. A really splendid person."

It was natural the boy would think so. From the one glimpse he'd had of her, the mysterious Eve *was* pretty. Stanton asked, "And as soon as you arrived you came out here all by yourself to see the horses?"

Robin shook his head. "No. Mr. Chief Hi Lo Jack brought me out." He confided, "Some people were drinking intoxicants at the house. I could tell by the way they were acting."

"And your mother—where is she?"

"A Miss Marta took charge of her, sir. Both she and Chief Hi Lo were shocked when they learned who we were."

"I can imagine." Still carrying Robin, Stanton started back up the path. "Come on. Let's you and I go to the house."

Robin wasn't too certain it was wise. "But Chief Hi Lo said—"

"Pooh-pooh for Chief Hi Lo."

There were a few stragglers in the garden but most of his guests were gone. Stanton checked the remaining cars in the parking lot. Ferris' custom-built job was still there, as was the Manson Cadillac and Leatrice's battered Cord. He was pleased they had refused to leave. He wanted witnesses to this.

Robin mustered the courage to ask, "Might I ask who you are, sir?"

Stanton considered his answer. Whatever this thing was, the boy was too young to be mixed up in it. There was no per-

centage or decency in frightening him. "Why—I live here," he said. "I have quite a bit to do with paying the bills."

"Oh." Robin brightened. "You're my father's major-domo. I *am* so pleased my father is wealthy. It's not a bit nice being poor."

"No," Stanton agreed. "It isn't."

He crossed to the covered rear loggia where Marta was standing in the kitchen doorway. Stanton didn't like the way she looked at him. He had seen her regard vermin with the same expression. She took Robin from his arms. "Two o'clock in the morning and a baby his age not yet in bed, after traveling so far to see his father." She glowered at Stanton as her Swiss indignation overwhelmed her. "Mein Gott! A father to deny his son. What yet is this world coming to? Perhaps it is better there should explode atomic bombs."

"Now just a minute, Marta," Stanton protested. "I—"

But Marta was no longer paying any attention to him. She had unbuttoned Robin's collar and was stripping off his coat. "Gives a cup of hot chocolate and bed for you, young man."

"Real chocolate, or coco like I had on the train?" Robin bargained hopefully.

Marta gave Stanton a dirty look. "Real chocolate. With marshmallow."

STANTON shifted from one foot to the other, feeling like a fool. Then, shrugging, he walked on down the long hall into the high-beamed sunken living room. Everyone else seemed to know it. He might as well get in on the story.

Marty Manson was sitting closest to the door. In the short interval since Stanton had seen him last, the producer had picked up quite a package. He rose as Stanton entered and gripped his arm as if to assure him he was standing by. Stanton could have struck him. He didn't want sympathy. He wanted an explanation.

Joy was standing with Ferris in front of a roaring log fire that one of the group had built. Her eyes were hard and accusing. "So there was a reason why Romeo lagged in his courtship. You weren't quite enough of a heel to marry me with another wife still living in

England. You're a real gentleman, aren't you."

Lyle Ferris took it up. "I ought to push your face in," he said. "I may attempt it yet. God knows I'm no angel. I've cut a pretty wide swath. But that is a single man's prerogative. And I can't begin to tell you the extent of my contempt for—"

"Please." The black-haired girl in the high wing chair beside the fire-place stood up. "This is, after all, my show. And I wish you would all clear out as Mr. Hi Lo requested. This is a personal matter between my boy's father and myself. And if my temper hadn't made such a bloody fool of me—"

"So you're Eve."

Stanton crossed the floor, and Winston Churchill, lying beside the wing chair, rose to form a barrier between the newcomer and his mistress.

"So you're Eve," Stanton repeated.

The girl turned her face toward the sound of his voice. "Don't you recognize me?" she asked wryly. "That is, perhaps, because I am seven years older and no end wiser. Hello, Bob. Or should I call you Lieutenant Stanton. Just how does a deserted wife greet her husband? You're a writer. You should know."

An angry retort on his lips, Stanton realized the significance of the dog. There was no sight in the girl's blue eyes. The knowledge made him very sad. He realized, too, that she was prettier by far than he had suspected when he had seen her at a distance.

Eve misinterpreted his silence. "I don't expect you to kiss me. If you do, I'll slap you."

"I . . . wouldn't think of kissing you," Stanton lied. "But I was wondering if we might better move into another room where we could discuss this—er—thing more privately."

She shook her head, and he watched her bobbing black curls, enchanted. "No. That was the way I meant it to be. But my temper spoiled that. I couldn't help it. I slopped over when I heard laughter and music and smelled perfume and good things to eat and drink and Robin told me there was a pool and people in evening dress were dancing in a garden." She wasn't asking for pity. She was merely

making a statement of what she felt.

"Life isn't very pleasant in England these days, you know. There were times when Robin didn't have enough to eat. And when I thought of how you had promised—" She stopped short, her eyes wet with angry tears. "But no matter. That's past." She wanted to know if Robin was in the room.

Stanton said he was not.

Eve continued. "I'm sorry I made a scene. And I apologize. But I couldn't help telling your Mr. Hi Lo I thought it was wrong for a man to allow his son to be deprived of the very necessities of life while he lived like a nabob."

Lili Manson giggled shrilly. "Him ol' nas'y bad mans Stanton."

"All this and you, too, Lili, is too much," Stanton told her. "Either gag your wife, Marty, or get her out of here. I don't give a damn if her old man is Consolidated Pictures."

Both of the Mansons gave him dirty looks.

His face concerned, Hi Lo entered the room through one of the huge French windows level with the lawn. "The boy isn't where I left him." He saw Stanton and glowered.

The writer felt his jaw. "Come in. Come right on in, Hi Lo. I chanced on Robin admiring Danny Deever and he is now in Marta's hands."

Hi Lo looked at the others in the room. "I thought I told you to clear out."

"Not a chance," Joy said. "No man, not even Robert Stanton, is going to make a fool of me. If what this girl has told us is true, Bob, I'll run you out of Hollywood if it is the last thing I do."

"Good luck," Stanton told her. "All right. If we must wash our soiled linen in public, let's be at it. Here's my story, Miss Shannon. I never saw you before in my life. Who put you up to this spot of blackmail?"

Her cheeks flaming, she said. "I'll thank you not to talk like that. I'd have told you of Robin before. But I thought you were dead. You were so officially listed."

"That's right. I was shot down over Bremen and spent most of the rest of the war in a German prisoner of war camp."

"You might have written when you

were released. That's the least you could do."

"Why should I have written?"

"Men usually write their wives, the woman whom they've sworn they love."

"Now look, honey," Stanton protested. He laid his hand on her arm and she slapped him.

"Stop calling me honey. And don't you dare touch me."

FERRIS took a step away from the fireplace. "Stop badgering that girl, Bob, or I'll push your face in. Haven't you any common decency?"

"No. It would seem I'm fresh out," Stanton admitted wearily. "Now get this. And get it straight, all of you. If this is a rib, it's been funny. Tell me when to laugh and I will. But if it isn't a rib, I'll be damned if I'll be blackmailed."

Leatrice said, "It is your contention then that Miss Shannon is attempting to blackmail you?"

"Oh, but I'm not," Eve protested. Tears trickled down her cheeks and she made no effort to wipe them away. She might have known it would be like this. If Robert hadn't cared enough to let her know he was still alive, it was only natural that he would deny her. He didn't want a dowdy little blind girl for a wife. He wanted the glamorous Joy Parnell. She should never have come in the first place. She had no proof of anything she said except her marriage license and Robin's birth certificate. And he could deny them, too, claim they were forgeries.

Stanton studied the face of the weeping girl. If she was putting on an act she was the best actress he had ever seen. And he had seen them all. Maybe he did know her. Maybe she was his wife. Maybe he had married her on a drunken spree.

He asked her, "Where were we married?"

Eve said promptly, "Lychester Chapel, Mayfair."

"On what date?"

"August 10th, 1941."

"I was sober?"

"You were sober."

Stanton considered the time element. It checked. He had been attached to the American Embassy in London in the summer of '41. He knew where Mayfair was.

The attempt at blackmail, if it was blackmail, was clever. Still he doubted the girl was on her own. Someone had put her up to this. She was too sweet a kid to have dreamed up the racket on her own.

"You were in London about that time," Ferris added weight to the girl's answers. "I know you were. I saw you there. That was before I went into the Army. I was doing a play with Madge Gare, and you and I got boiled at the Crillon Bar."

"Yes." Stanton recalled the incident. "That's right." He turned back to Eve. "Now tell me this, honey."

Eve wished he would stop calling her honey. She should hate him. She had every reason to hate him, but somehow she couldn't, perhaps because he was Robin's father.

"Now tell me this," Stanton repeated. "You have our alleged marriage license with my signature on it?"

"I have."

"The original, or a reasonable facsimile?"

"The original."

Her answer stumped him. He had expected her to say the original license had been lost. "And we lived together how long?"

The girl's sightless face lifted. "Please. Don't misunderstand me. I'm not asking for charity. I am not requesting you to support me. If your love for me was so short lived, it isn't fair you should. I don't want a penny from you."

God love the child, Stanton thought. She actually thought she was married to him.

Eve's chin lifted still higher. "My blindness makes no difference. You aren't responsible for that. We spent only a month together. But fortunately or unfortunately, however ones cares to view the matter, that month produced Robin." Her tone was wry. "Children are, after all, one of the main by-products of marriage. But *do* have this straight in your mind. For myself I ask nothing. And I told Attorney Hanson so this afternoon."

In the uneasy silence that followed her mention of the name, Stanton asked, "Hanson? You don't by any chance mean Shad Hanson, with offices in the Guarantee Building in Hollywood?"

Eve could feel the tension in the room.

CHAPTER THREE

The Voice in the Dictaphone

"Y-yes. That was his address. I asked the clerk at the hotel for the name of an attorney who would be familiar with theatrical folks and he recommended Attorney Hanson. I conferred with him this afternoon and he promised to contact you."

"But he didn't," Stanton said quietly.

"Are you positive of that, Stanton?"

Stanton swung to face the newcomer. A tall man with a big Roman nose that pointed his words like a judge's finger, Inspector Treech of the Hollywood Homicide Detail loomed large in the doorway of the door he had just opened. Behind him stood a half-dozen other men.

"Where do you come in on this, Treech?" Stanton wanted to know.

Leaving the doorway guarded by two of his detectives, Inspector Treech entered the living room. "Where Homicide usually comes in. After the body is found."

"The body?" Stanton asked.

Seated near the phone, Leatrice May lifted it from its cradle and dialed a number swiftly. The dial tones sounded unnaturally loud. Her nails biting cruelly into Lyle Ferris' forearm, Joy Parnell asked, "You say a body has been found. Whose body?"

"Shad's Hanson's," Inspector Treech said. He took the phone from Leatrice's fingers and returned it to its cradle. "Yes, at long last Shad is dead." Treech eyed the blind girl with interest. "And, dying, left behind him quite an interesting story. But if you hoped to get away with murder, Stanton, you should have taken the time to go down to his office and destroy the original dictaphone records of his conversation with your wife."

Stanton stared at him stupidly. It was, all in all, quite some evening. First a blind girl claimed to be his wife. Now he was being accused of murder. "You know," he told Inspector Treech soberly, "I always knew my schizophrenia would get me down some day. The other half of my split personality seems to have been raising hell."

No longer simpering and posturing, Lili Manson got to her feet. "Shad Hanson is dead?"

"Murdered," Treech said bluntly.

"Oh, dear God," Lili gasped. She turned as if to leave the room—and fainted in her husband's arms.

IT HAD been two. Then it was three. Now it was four. A mantel clock chimed the time distinctly. The fire in the fireplace had burned down. Someone had opened a window. There was a smell of morning in the air, of fresh, green, growing things. Still the nightmare continued. Her face white with strain, Eve sat perched on the edge of her chair. If it weren't for Robin she could wish that she was dead. She hadn't meant this to happen.

Across the room, Inspector Treech, calm, unhurried, deadly patient, polished a new facet of the case. "I'll tell you what I'll do, Stanton," he offered. "Hanson was a rat. His death is no great loss to the community. I myself found a gun in the dead man's pocket. And if you will admit you shot him so we can wind and hush this up, I can almost guarantee that the district attorney's office will accept a plea of self-defense. Hanson was blackmailing you. You went there to protest. He attempted to draw his gun and you shot him. How's that?"

Torn between two desires, one to punch Inspector Treech in the nose, the other to aid Eve in any way he could, Stanton considered his answer carefully. The girl wasn't pulling a fast one. It went deeper than attempted extortion. *Someone using his name had married her.*

"It sounds fine," Stanton said. "I can't find a flaw in your solution, excepting that it's all wet. I didn't kill Shad Hanson."

Treech was unruffled. "Don't give me that, Stanton." He explained, as to a child, "You were planning on marrying Miss Parnell. You knew a wife and child would upset your bridal cart. So when Hanson phoned you that your wife had arrived in this country but had been blinded during the last days of the war, you reasoned that with Hanson out of the way and the record he had made of their interview destroyed you could deny the girl was your wife. But you forget that Hanson always kept the original dictaphone disks of all of his interviews."

"Boy," Stanton admitted, "M. G. M. could use you. With your imagination

you'd be a wow as a writer of mystery pictures. Ray Chandler couldn't hold a Blue Dahlia to you."

Treech shrugged and returned to a well-traveled path. They had been over it a dozen times before. "But you do admit that at approximately the hour of the murder you went for a long drive, alone?"

"I do."

"With your ranch grounds filled with invited guests, some sixty or seventy people."

"That's right."

"Why?"

Stanton hadn't known why at the time. He did know now. He had been fed up with the whole picture-making business. Dozens of leading stars and high-priced writers and directors lived normal lives. But he was traveling with the other set, hard drinking, hard living moths, for whom life had no other meaning than a bottle or an affair. He wanted some substance to his life. He considered telling Treech the truth. But out of consideration for Joy, and knowing that Leatrice would syndicate everything being said, he shrugged. "I was merely exercising one of my inalienable rights, namely the pursuit of happiness. I wanted to go for a ride, and I did."

His evasion didn't help matters. Joy said coldly, "In other words you were fed up with me. You wanted your child-wife back. But you didn't want all of Hollywood to know you had been heel enough to allow her and your child to starve for the past six years while you were drawing down a three-thousand-dollar check each and every month."

"Now there's a new theory," Stanton admitted. He squatted on his haunches beside the girl in the wing chair. "Look, Eve."

"Yes?"

"Can you positively swear I am your husband?"

"If you are Robert Stanton, you are."

"Describe me."

She drew his picture from memory. "You are six feet tall. You weigh about thirteen stone. You have light hair and brown eyes. Also clean shaven."

Stanton fingered his mustache. Inspector Treech was amused. "You could grow one of those things in a week."

"That's right," Stanton admitted. "But Eve's description would fit a lot of men. Take Lyle there, for example. He's smooth shaven, brown eyed, light haired, six feet tall, and must weigh around one hundred and eighty pounds."

"Please," the leading man protested. "Don't try to pin your sins on me. I have enough of my own."

"I'm not trying to pin anything on anyone." Stanton's eyes traveled on to Marty Manson. The producer was glowering at his white-faced wife who broke into spells of weeping from time to time. Stanton wondered what tasty tidbit of scandal Hanson had been holding over Lili's head to make her faint as she had when she learned that Hanson was dead, and if she had been keeping it from Marty. Stanton decided she had. Lili seemed afraid of her husband. "Marty," he continued, "could answer the same description. I know two dozen men who could."

Manson shrugged and resumed scowling at his wife.

"If Eve could see me—" Stanton reconsidered what he had been about to say. The thing was a mess. If someone had used his name to marry her, and that seemed obvious, the truth would rebound on Robin. On the other hand, if he assumed the role of Eve's husband he hadn't a chance of beating the murder rap Inspector Treech was trying to pin on him. It was a peculiar situation. He was damned if he did. Eve and the boy were damned if he didn't.

INSPECTOR TREECH addressed himself to Eve. "This locket of which you told me, the one containing your husband's picture, the one you gave to Attorney Hanson as proof you were who you said. Would you describe it again?"

"Of course. It was round and gold and inexpensive, perfectly plain except for my initials."

"Was it a professional photograph? I mean, if it should become necessary to break down Stanton's refusal to admit you are his wife, can we send for the negative?"

Eve shook her head. "No. It was just a face cut from a snapshot I took of Robert. The film was lost with my other things when my lodgings in London were

bombed. I lost everything I had."

"Lieutenant Stanton was in uniform?"

"No. Mufti. Robert didn't wear his uniform except on duty. In fact, I never saw him in uniform. That was just before America entered the war and he said his uniform made him feel self-conscious, there being so few American officers in London at the time."

Hi Lo sat erect and looked at Stanton.

Stanton grinned wryly, "Relax, Hi Lo. Your apologies are accepted."

His face uncomprehending, Inspector Treech stared at them a moment, then turned to the dictaphone that two of his men had carried in from Stanton's study. The disk began to revolve. Eve's recorded voice filled the room.

"My name is Eve Stanton, Counselor. I'm from London, England. I have come to this country to ask my husband, Robert Stanton, the cinema writer and novelist, to take over the responsibility of his son's care and education. Until recently I was under the erroneous impression he was dead. And I would like to have you represent me in this matter. . . ."

Inspector Treech stopped the machine. "There are," he admitted, "still quite a few things about this case that aren't quite clear in my mind, Stanton, but I am very much afraid these disks are going to send you to the gas chamber."

"I thought," Stanton said, "that we had compromised on self-defense?"

Treech shrugged. "That was a proposition. And you don't seem inclined to play ball." He was a just man. "I could arrest you now. I am almost positive I could have you indicted on what evidence I have. But because Hanson was a rat whose death is a convenience to a number of people, and because of a few things that aren't yet quite clear in my mind, I'm going to wait a few hours before arresting you."

"The guilty man was given plenty of rope, eh?"

"Something like that. But you don't need to hang yourself. We'll find both the gun and the locket. You thought you were playing it smart. You did. Had you left that locket on Hanson with your picture in it, it would have been the same as a plea of guilty." The inspector laid a hand on Eve's shoulder. "For the last time,

Mrs. Stanton, you refuse to make a positive identification of your husband?"

"I can't."

"You should know his voice."

Eve intertwined her fingers in indecision. If she identified Robert as her husband, Inspector Treech would arrest him for Mr. Hanson's murder. And she couldn't do such a thing to Robin's father, no matter what he had done. Besides, she couldn't be certain. Strange doubts crept into her mind. *Was* the man they called Stanton her Robert? She pleaded, "I can't, Inspector. It has been almost seven years since I've heard his voice. Then we were together such a short time and I was so young and. . . confused."

"That's a new name for it," Joy said.

Stanton said, "Good girl." She was as loyal as she was pretty. And she had courage. In the morning he would have Dr. Schaeffer look at her eyes. If Schaeffer couldn't help her, perhaps some other specialist could. Money would be no object.

A CAR, moving fast, turned in the drive and braked in a crunching of gravel. A second, a third, a fourth, a fifth, and a sixth car turned in behind it. Winston Churchill got to his feet and looked inquiringly at the door. A moment later one of the detectives whom Inspector Treech had detailed to search the grounds and stable for the missing gun and locket, came in swearing. "Every damn reporter in Los Angeles just drove up out front," he reported. "I thought this was to be hush-hush until we made our arrest."

Treech looked accusingly at Leatrice May. She smiled back brightly over the lipstick she was applying. "The freedom of the press and all that sort of thing, Inspector. If the police department wanted to keep this hush-hush you shouldn't have allowed me to go to the bathroom. There's a phone there, you know."

Saunders of the U. P. backed by Kelly, a *Times* photographer, began to argue loudly with the detective guarding the door.

Ignoring Stanton completely, Joy drew her wrap around her shoulders. "I presume that means we are free to go. Would you see me home, Lyle?"

Ferris looked at Treech. The inspector

spread his hands in a futile gesture. "Go ahead. The whole thing is out now though God knows I did my best to keep it quiet."

The leading man licked his lips. "And Hanson's confidential records?"

"That's up to the district attorney's office."

Marty Manson got to his feet and assisted his wife to hers. He had to guide her to the door that led out through the rear loggia to the parking lot. Her eyes on the polished tile, Lili walked like a sleep walker.

"Don't take it so hard, Lili," Ferris kidded her. "Hanson had a little something on most of us, I guess. But even if the press smears his confidential files all over page one, for my part, I'm glad he's dead. And if Marty gets tough with you, remind him who your old man is."

Manson gave him a dirty look and moved on toward the door, only to be engulfed in a wave of reporters, male and female, as the U. P. man won his argument. Saunders immediately buttonholed Inspector Treech. Leatrice got busy on the phone. There was a blinding flash as a photographer shot his first picture, a picture of Joy Parnell and Ferris. Partially shielded by the high back of the wing chair, Stanton seized on the unobserved moment to kneel beside Eve and take one of her hands in his. "Now just take it easy, honey," he counseled. "Tell the truth. And don't worry about a thing. Everything is going to be just fine for you and Robin. I swear it." He touched the tips of her fingers to his hair, his eyes, his nose, his cheeks, his lips. "But play fair with me, honey. Please, so I can help you. *Am I the man you knew as Robert Stanton?*"

Her sightless eyes filled with tears. "I don't know," she sobbed quietly. "I don't know."

Stanton got to his feet to find Hi Lo standing beside him. "I'm sorry I hit you," Hi Lo said. "I might have known. As soon as she made that crack about mufti I knew it wasn't you. You were always proud of your uniform."

Stanton said, "Forget it."

The wave of reporters engulfed that corner of the room. Terse questions filled the air. A half-dozen cameras focused first on Eve, then swept on to Stanton.

Flash bulbs popping in his face, words whirling around his head, Stanton reached in his pockets for a cigarette, found he had none and picked up the discarded trench-coat he had been wearing when he had entered the room. There was an unopened package in one of the pockets. The cigarettes were still there. So was something else. To his startled fingers it felt small and round and smooth, and he could feel the initial engraved on one side. . . .

* * *

All was going splendidly. Astride of Danny Deever, with Roy Rogers on Trigger beside him, Robin was listening with rapt attention to Gene Autry singing *Ride, Ranger, Ride* when the Indians swooped down from the painted buttes and, in attempting to draw both of his sixguns at once, Robin knew a moment of terror as his arms refused to move.

Then he sleepily realized what had happened. Marta had tucked him in too tightly. He pulled his arms from under the covers and was preparing to remount when he saw the face over his bed.

Robin knew the man immediately. He had seen his face often enough in the locket his mother wore suspended from her neck by a chain. He lay waiting for him to speak. And he could jolly well speak first after the way he had treated mother. The least he could have done was to phone their hotel and say he was pleased they had come.

His sleep-drugged lids grew heavier. Perhaps he should speak first. He meant to. But before his lips could form words a very amazing thing happened. Roy Rogers, who had missed him, came galloping back one hundred miles an hour and Trigger, rearing on his hind legs, kicked sand in his eyes.

The man who was stooped over the bed shuddered. The life of a child was so fragile. A palm clamped across a mouth and nose and held there until a man counted one hundred. A quick twist of a small white throat. If only he could do it.

Blissfully unconscious that Death stood beside his bed, self-interest battling revulsion, Robin climbed up on Danny Deever's broad safe back again and jogged on happily toward the distant painted

mountains. But the mountains were far away.

CHAPTER FOUR

Lieutenant Jones' Back Room

THE BEDROOM was large. She could sense it. Wearing a pair of Stanton's silk pajamas, the legs and sleeves ending in huge rolls, Eve sat facing what she knew to be a dressing table mirror, wondering how many other women had used it.

Swish, swish, swish. That was the brush in her hair, wielded by Marta's capable hands. Drip, drip, drip. That was either rain or condensation in the gutters. London or Los Angeles, the sounds were all pretty much alike. Her thoughts turned to Robin then, and she asked Marta if he was covered.

Marta said he was. She finished brushing Eve's hair and her nimble fingers began to fashion the thick strands into braids. "The Frau Stanton has lovely hair," she complimented.

Eve patted one plump hand. "Thank you, Marta."

In the adjoining room Robin said, "Bang, bang," distinctly in his sleep.

"The little one," Marta beamed, "is dreaming." She finished the second braid and tied it securely with ribbon. "So. Now you, too, must into bed."

Eve asked her what time it was.

Consulting the watch she wore pinned over her ample bosom, Marta said it was twenty-five minutes after five. Guided by Winston Churchill, Eve crossed the room, stepped out of her borrowed mules and sat on the edge of the bed, her bare feet dangling. She wished she dared ask Marta to stay with her.

Seeing-Eye dogs were new to Marta. "The dog stays in or out, Frau Stanton?"

"In, please," Eve said meekly.

Then, that which she had been afraid might happen—did. Knuckles beat on the door of the room. "You in there, Marta?" Stanton called. "Is Eve decent?"

"Decent?" Eve repeated.

"He means are you dressed," Marta told her. As if reading the girl's mind she laid a hand on her shoulder. "Is nothing to be afraid of. Marta will stay."

The room door opened. Changed into a grey tweed suit, Hi Lo at his heels, Stanton walked directly to the bed. The pink and white of her face accentuated by the twin black braids that framed it, her rounded little body lost in the voluminous folds of her borrowed pajamas, the English girl who claimed to be his wife looked more like Robin's sister than his mother.

Stanton sat on the edge of the bed beside her. "Stop trembling. No one is going to hurt you. I know you are dead for sleep. But this can mean my neck unless we straighten it out." He pressed an object into her palm. "Can you tell me what this is?"

She said, "It feels like my locket." Her sensitive finger tips found the engraving. She could feel the E.S. distinctly. "It is my locket."

Hi Lo told her, "Bob found it in the pocket of his trenchcoat a few minutes after that newspaper gang arrived, minus the picture it contained when you turned it over to Hanson."

Marta wanted to know if the newsmen were gone and Hi Lo told her they had just gotten rid of the last one.

Eve asked Stanton if he had phoned Inspector Treech that he had found the locket.

"No," Stanton said. "He wouldn't believe my story. If Inspector Treech knew the locket was in my possession I would be inside of a cell in an hour and indicted for Hanson's murder before the day was over. Finding out who put it in my pocket is my job. I mean to find out. All I want you to do is identify it.

"It is my locket."

He bent her fingers over it. "Take care of it for me, will you, honey?" He hesitated briefly, added, "Now, there's one other little matter."

"Yes?"

"Out in the other room you told me that you have our original marriage license or registration or certificate, or whatever they call it in England."

"I have."

"Where is it?"

Eve hesitated. She wanted to believe in him. She wanted to trust him. But the paper was all she had to prove that she was married. The curate who married them was dead, killed in the same buzz-

bomb raid that had cost her eyesight. The witnesses had been strangers to her, a charwoman and a passing navy.

The pressure on her hand increased. "I'm not trying to pull a fast one. Believe me, honey."

If only he wouldn't call her honey, she thought. The word made her stomach do tricks. She must be, Eve decided, a very bad woman at heart. She could almost wish Marta and Hi Lo weren't in the room. Then maybe he would take her in his arms and kiss her.

STANTON continued. "What I am doing I am doing for the two of us. I think you are a grand kid. In fact, believe it or not, I am crazy about you. I want to help you all I can. But I can't help you if I'm in jail. And I'm free on borrowed time. Treach may decide to have me picked up and thrown behind bars any minute. And the only way we can clear this up is to find out who married you under my name."

"Our marriage registration will tell you that?"

Hi Lo said, "The signature should help. And there must be one."

"Of course there is," Eve said. "You'll find the certificate in an envelope in the pocket of my hat bag, along with my passport. The Hollywood Hotel, Room 420 A."

Stanton released her hand. "Thanks. Thanks a lot, honey." He rose from the bed. "Take good care of her, Marta. Hi Lo and I may not be back for some hours. Possibly not until tonight. But all of the gates leading into the grounds are locked and I will leave instructions with Eddie not to let anyone in but Dr. Schaeffer."

The housekeeper puzzled, "Dr. Schaeffer?"

"The Dr. Schaeffer," Stanton said. "A dub golfer to me but reputed to be quite an eye specialist. I just got him out of bed and while he cussed a bit about it, he said he would try to drive out here some time this morning."

Eve repeated the name. "Dr. Schaeffer. My doctor in London mentioned a doctor by that name. But he said he was frightfully expensive."

Stanton snapped his fingers. "When it

comes to wives of mine, money is no object." He stooped on sudden impulse and kissed Eve on the lips. "And that's what you are going to be if we ever get this mess straightened out. Now think that over while I'm gone."

The door snicked shut solidly behind him. Eve sat touching the lips he had kissed. She had wanted him to kiss her, and he had. And she liked it.

THERE was little traffic on the highway at this hour. Spotted in between long stretches of open country and walnut and orange groves, the little outlying towns, thirty miles distant from the city hall but still a part of Greater Los Angeles, were as yet yawning in the tardy winter dawn as the speeding wheels of Stanton's car ate up the decreasing miles. Past Studio City, traffic began to thicken and he was forced to lessen his speed.

"Who?" Hi Lo demanded. "Who slipped the locket in your pocket?"

Stanton shook his head. "I'm damned if I know. It could have been either Lyle or Marty. They were both in the room."

Hi Lo absolved both men and gave his reasons. Both men were fairly well known in their own identities, Ferris as an actor, Manson as a producer. And while Ferris self-admittedly had been in London at the time, he doubted if Manson had ever been out of the country. Given to boasting, the producer never spoke of his foreign travels.

"Then any of three newspaper men, Saunders, Wilcox and Davis. They were all war correspondents. I don't know they were in London, but they could have been. Leatrice balled up the detail there beautifully. If you want to include photographers, half of the Los Angeles fourth estate had access to my trenchcoat."

"It wasn't there before? I mean when you put on the coat in the tack room?"

"No. That is, I'm almost positive it wasn't. But if it was, any of thirty or forty lads at the party could have tagged me as his scapegoat."

Drumming on the ledge of the car door, Hi Lo wanted to know, "But why should anyone have married the girl in your name?"

Stanton sighed. "You have the college education. I had to set fire to the school

house to get out of eighth grade." He kept right on the freeway down Highland Avenue and turned right on Hollywood Boulevard. "Maybe he already had one wife. Maybe he wanted to pose as a big shot. Maybe he wanted to get me into trouble. He could have if Eve had gone to the military authorities and demanded a dependent's allotment. An officer and a gentleman just doesn't do such things. It says so in the book."

"You like her, don't you?"

"That," Stanton admitted, "is a master piece of understatement. You heard what I said before we left the house."

"What if Schaeffer can't help her eyes?"

"Let's not worry about that now. But even if he can't I ought to be able to compete with a Seeing-Eye dog, even one named Winston Churchill."

Stanton braked the car and backed into an open space at the curb across from the Hollywood Hotel. There were few cars and fewer pedestrians on the street. Hollywood Boulevard was grey with dawn and thick with fog. Neither man noticed as they crossed the street that a man lounging in front of the drugstore on the corner entered the store and made a phone call.

"Jones calling for instruction. Stanton and the big Indian have just shown up at the hotel."

His instructions received, he nodded to an early morning coffee drinker at the fountain. Out on the street again, they were joined by two other plainclothes men. Stanton and Hi Lo had disappeared into the hotel lobby.

Except for a bored night bell-captain who stood near the door wishing his relief would arrive, a porter adding fresh sand to the ash urns and the desk clerk, the lobby was deserted. The cigar stand and ticket counter were still dark, but a small lighted sign over one of the archways announced the coffee shop was open.

Their heels clicking on the freshly scrubbed tile, Stanton and Hi Lo crossed the lobby to the desk. "My name is Robert Stanton," Stanton told the clerk. "You have a Mrs. Robert Stanton and her son staying in 420 A. That is they were staying here. They moved out to my ranch last night." He took his wallet from his pocket. "I'd like to settle their bill and

collect their luggage. Let's get going."

The clerk glanced sideways at the headline of the morning paper that he had been reading. There hadn't been time for many details in the first edition, but thanks to Leatrice May's bathroom scoop an alert city editor had managed a flashy headline and subhead.

PROMINENT L.A. ATTORNEY MURDERED!

Attorney's Death Linked to Attempt by Robert Stanton, Movie Writer Engaged to Joy Parnell, to Conceal Fact He Is Father of Blind English Girl's Son.

Stanton swung the paper around so he could read it. "Tasty, eh? A good thing I'm not writing for radio. Not even that queen of the hucksters, Maw Perkins, would be able to square me with my sponsor."

HI LO read the few gory details. The few facts that were known had been so embellished by a clever rewrite man as to convey the impression that Stanton was already halfway to the gas chamber. Later editions would have the pellet dropping. It was the good old American newspaper custom of trying and convicting a man before he even went on trial. "Portia faces life," the big Indian said soberly.

Stanton extended his hand to the clerk. "All right, chum. Let's go. If you will give me Mrs. Stanton's key and tote up her bill while I'm upstairs I'll phone down for a bellboy when I'm ready."

The clerk laid the key on the counter and turned away without comment.

"See?" Stanton grinned at Hi Lo. "Already I'm poison. By the time the afternoon editions hit the street, who knows?" His smile remained but his voice was bitter. "I'll probably be the guy responsible for Pearl Harbor."

At the elevator bank Hi Lo asked him if he wanted him to accompany him to the room.

Stanton nodded at the nest of house phones. "No. Stay close to one of those and tip me if Inspector Treech or any of his squad show up. They'll probably claim I am trying to steal the luggage."

There was only one elevator running. A pretty girl just come on the day shift was operating it. As she opened the grill

door on the fourth floor she said, "You're Mr. Robert Stanton, aren't you, mister?"

Stanton said he was.

She said, "I read about what happened in the paper. And if there ever was a heel it was that Mr. Hanson. He used to check in here every other weekend or so."

420 A was a large front room with twin beds. The shades were drawn but, despite the fact that both windows were open, a strong smell of cigar smoke permeated the room, overpowering a fainter scent of jasmine. Stanton swore under his breath. He had dallied too long. Inspector Treech had beaten him to the room. The signature on Eve's marriage certificate was probably even now undergoing expert scrutiny at headquarters. But that, in itself, wasn't too bad. It wasn't his signature on the certificate. And Treech would give him every break that he had coming. Treech might be bull-headed but he was honest.

He looked around the littered room. Either Eve was very untidy, which didn't seem likely judging from the appearance of her person, or the police hadn't followed their usual routine of carefully repacking her bags after they had searched them. Intimate garments lay scattered on the bed in between heavy-ribbed black stockings and shorts and small undershirts that could only belong to Robin. All were pathetically shabby, as were the bags which had contained them. He sought for and found Eve's hat box. It was on the luggage rack near the open door of the bathroom.

Raising the lid, Stanton felt in the shirred pocket for the envelope of which Eve had spoken. The envelope was still in the pocket but he doubted it still contained her marriage certificate.

The room was grey with morning, but not enough light filtered under the drawn shades to permit the reading of fine print. The envelope in one hand, Stanton stooped to find the switch of the lamp on the table by the bed. It was his last conscious act for five minutes. Calm with cold desperation, the man whom he had trapped in the bathroom brought down the barrel of his gun on the back of Stanton's head.

Blind with pain, Stanton attempted to turn and grapple with his assailant, only

to be struck a second and a third time, even more savagely. He fell back across the bed and rolled off it to the floor.

Breathing heavily, the man who had slugged him tiptoed to the door and, cracking it open, looked down the hall. Four big men who could only be detectives were standing in front of the elevator bank. One of them noticed the cracked door and all started down the hall. In blind panic he closed the door, locked it and retreated to the window. There was no fire-escape but there was a narrow ornamental stone ledge just below the window. White with fear, he crawled onto the ledge and, clinging to the small rough surfaces of the building with his fingers, he walked the ledge to the next room. His luck, bad as it was in some respects, still held. The window of the adjoining room was open. The bed was unmade and empty.

Holding to the sill until he made certain the occupant of the room wasn't in the bathroom, he crawled in through the window and, lying on the floor, gasping for breath, heard a heavy pounding begin on the door of the room he had just quitted.

When he could breathe again he walked into the bathroom, took a piece of stiff paper from his pocket, tore it into minute scraps and flushed them down the drain.

Now he was almost safe. All that remained was the boy.

"**O**PEN UP! We know you're in there, Stanton!"

Lying on the floor between the beds, his tongue furred, his throat dry, his head throbbing like an iron lung, Stanton damned all whiskey, the men who made it and the fools who drank it. The fog lifted as abruptly as it had descended. He wasn't drunk. He was in Eve's room. Someone else was pounding on the door. Lifting his nose from the nest of clothes he had swept from the bed in his fall, he switched on the bed light and examined the contents of the envelope still in his hand.

It contained a passport properly visaed, Eve's and Robin's birth certificates, and a much-handled clipping from the London *Times* stating that First Lieutenant Robert Stanton, U. S. Army Air Corps, had

failed to return from a night bombing mission over Bremen and both the crew of the ship and Lieutenant Stanton were presumed to be dead as other members of the flight had seen the plane go down in flames.

The memory made his skin crawl. It hadn't been pleasant playing clay-pigeon. The pounding on the door increased in intensity. That would be one of Inspector Treech's men. The rap had authority.

"Come in, stupid," Stanton called. "The door's unlocked."

The door knob rattled. "The hell it is."

Still holding the envelope, Stanton opened the door. "I didn't lock it," he puzzled. "It must have been the guy who slugged me." He asked hopefully, "You got him?"

One of the plainclothes men took the envelope from Stanton's hand.

"It's not in there," Stanton complained. "I thought Inspector Treech had it. But now I'm not so certain. There was a man in the bathroom when I got here."

A plainclothes man looked in the empty bathroom. "Taking a bath no doubt. Why don't you big shots get wise to yourselves, Stanton? You may make a lot of dough but you're not above the law. Murder is murder whether you're making thirty or three thousand bucks a week."

Stanton recognized him as a Lieutenant Jones who had been at the house with Treech. Treech must want him badly to put a lieutenant on his tail. Jones looked through the papers in the envelope, then at Stanton. "Where is it? Where's the wedding certificate?"

"I haven't got it," Stanton said. He attempted to explain. "I had just taken the envelope from the hat box and was turning on a lamp when someone slugged me."

Jones raised the window shades and glanced down at the street four floors below. "Baloney. He must have had a helicopter parked outside the window if he did. He certainly didn't come past us in the hall. Maybe you better phone down to the lobby and give that big Indian of yours a chance to earn his merit badge by trying to tail a pixie."

Stanton wanted to know how they had gotten by Hi Lo.

"We didn't," Jones told him. "We

came in the back way and up the freight elevator. We've been laying for you for two hours. The inspector had a hunch you'd try to destroy that marriage certificate. That's why we left it where it was. One of you guys hold him while I frisk him."

He emptied Stanton's pockets on the bed. "All right. Where is it?" He sounded worried. "This was the inspector's idea but if I don't show back at the bureau with it, Treech is going to raise hell with me. 'We can't enter the girl's room without a warrant and take the license legally,' he tells me. 'But Stanton can, and will. And we'll take the license off him.' What did you do with it, Stanton? Tear it up and flush it down the drain when you saw us standing in the hall?"

Stanton said, "I told you it was gone when I looked in the envelope."

"Sure," the detective standing in the doorway of the bathroom jeered. "You told us. The pixie who was waiting in the orchid tile department swiped it and took off for Never-Never land in his helicopter. You writers. Tell me, how does it feel to have an imagination?"

Jones seemed undecided. "Well, the inspector said to bring you in with the marriage certificate on you. But now it's gone I'll have to use my own judgment, and common sense tells me we have a back room down at the bureau that is very conducive to talking. You might even get some idea for the next crime picture you write."

Stanton backed a step away from him. "No." He knew what a session in the back room would mean. Inspector Treech would book him for investigation. It would be at least forty-eight hours before he would be permitted to contact his attorney.

"Oh, but yes," Lieutenant Jones insisted.

Stanton backed still another step and felt the jamb of the open hall door hard against his back. He had written the scene perhaps fifty times, thinking each time as he wrote it what a fool a man in real life would be to attempt to escape from an armed officer of the law. But he hadn't forty-eight hours to waste. He had Eve to think of. A killer was on the loose. And Inspector Treech, thinking he was

the killer, would relax, or at least lessen the search.

"No. I'm sorry," he said. Then, before the other man realized his intention, Stanton punched him out of his way, slammed the door behind him to gain a second's time and raced for the stairs beside the elevator bank.

The pretty elevator girl was waiting with the grill door open. "You might as well ride as use the stairs," she called to him. "It's quicker. And I think a whole lot safer."

Stanton veered toward the cage as the first detective out of the room yelled, "Stop!" The detective held his fire briefly for fear of hitting the girl. Then it was too late to shoot. Stanton was inside the cage and the steel door had slammed shut.

The elevator girl grinned at Stanton. "This probably means my job and maybe a trip to the pokey. But it's worth it." She smoothed her skirt over a shapely thigh, "Like I told you before, Mr. Hanson had more hands than six men put together."

CHAPTER FIVE

The Man in the Locket

THERE was so much to see, so much to do. Robin had never dreamed any one place could contain so many exciting things. By nine o'clock Eddie was willing to swear his legs were too inches shorter and he had gained five pounds. He knew the seat of his pants was sore.

He stole a brief respite by begging a cup of coffee from Marta. "Not that I'm complaining, understand," he told her. "It's nice to have a kid around the place. It makes it kinda wholesome like." He sighed. "But since seven o'clock we've been for eight rides on Danny Deever looking for bad Indians who might just have happened to get through our outpost and are creeping up on the corral. We've built two forts out of packing cases. We've been swimming three times. We've picked up and et a bushel of oranges. We've cracked and et a bushel of walnuts. We've picked two bouquets for his mother. We've combed the hen house for eggs. We've fed the chickens until I'm afraid they're go-

ing to have the pip. And we've walked and we've walked and we've walked."

"Is good for you," Marta laughed.

Eddie wasn't so certain. "That could be. But I sure wish that Mr. Stanton or Hi Lo would get back."

His nose white against the kitchen screen, wearing a faded flannel shirt and turned-up dungarees left by some former married employee and washed and saved by the thifty Marta, Robin wanted to know, "When Eddie finishes his coffee, may he come out and play again, Marta? I see smoke signs in the hills and I think the Indians are about to attack."

Eddie groaned.

"Ja," Martha assured Robin. "Eddie is finished now." She made certain by taking his cup. "Oudt." She held a finger to her lips. "But shh when you're around the house. The motlier is still sleeping."

"I'm so pleased," Robin beamed. "It's been a frightful strain on her, you know, coming all this way." He tucked a trusting hand in the gardener's fist. "What shall we do, Eddie? Spy out the Indians on Danny Deever again, or creep up on them on foot?"

"Whatever you say, kid," Eddie sighed. "We'll do whatever you want to do just as long as you stay inside the fence. But remember over the fence is out. If you go outside one of the reporters will get you. And we wouldn't want that to happen, would we?"

Robin wasn't quite certain just what a reporter was but he agreed with Eddie emphatically. "Oh, no. We wouldn't want that to happen."

He wondered if reporters were anything like wolves. If so it might be a spot of fun to look through the stout woven wire fence at them if there chanced not to be any Indians. The day, so far, had been perfect. There was only one minor flaw. It wasn't a bit nice of his father not to come out and at least say good morning after they had traveled so far to see him.

SLUMPED in the back booth of a cheap Santa Monica lunch room, his hat brim pulled low over his eyes, Stanton felt like one of the shady characters in the many Grade B gangster scenarios he had ground out. "This is as far as we go together," he told Hi Lo. "Together we

are too easy to spot. You take the car. I'll use cabs. And the first thing I want you to do is to drive into L.A. and alert Ernie Goetz. If any lawyer can pry me out of this jam, he can. Give him any retainer he asks. And tell him to be ready at a moment's notice to try and spring me on a writ if I am picked up."

"Right."

Stanton tore the list of names he had written in half. "Then check on Wilcox, Davis, Flintmeyer and Hass. I know the first two were foreign correspondents but I don't know what theaters they covered. Find out if they were in London in August of '41 and all you can about their amorous habits.

"I'll check on Ferris and Marty Manson and Lou Saunders. Also Kelly the photographer. It has to be one of the guys who were in my living room." He thought a moment, added, "It can be that he will, but I doubt that Inspector Treech will put out a general radio pickup on me. That would mean a public arrest and a public booking. Also his neck if he's wrong. He is depending on a back room session to give him the club he needs. With Eve's marriage certificate and its forged signature destroyed, as it undoubtedly is by now, this thing could resolve itself into a Mexican standoff. Treech has nothing on which to ask for an indictment but alleged motive and circumstantial evidence. On the other hand, I can't prove the signature was forged."

Alone on the street a few minutes later, Stanton flagged down a cruising cab. "You don't happen to know me, do you?" he asked the driver.

The driver was apologetic. "Look, mister. Maybe I should. But I pick up so many faces, so many of them big shots, that—"

"Fine," Stanton said. He gave him the first address on his list. "18345 Ensenada Drive. That's over off Coldwater Canyon. Your best bet from here is to go down Sunset."

The driver was hurt. "Look, mister. I may not know you but I know my business. You pay the fare. I'll drive."

Ferris' house was low and white and modest. Despite the fabulous salary he earned, the star was known to be careful with his money. He employed only one

servant, a man named Tate who had been with him for years. In answer to Stanton's question the actor's man shook his head. "No, Mr. Ferris hasn't been home since yesterday evening some time, Mr. Stanton. But when he does come in I will tell him that you called."

Stanton said that wouldn't be necessary. He thought he knew where he could find Ferris. He thought a moment, asked, "But tell me this, Tate. How much money would it take to bribe you to give me a list of the names of the girls with whom Lyle had affairs in London?"

Tate was amused. "I'm afraid you haven't enough money to buy such a list, sir, nor I the time to write it." His smile faded. "But I can tell you this, Mr. Stanton. If it wasn't you who married this English girl, neither was it Mr. Ferris. He plays hard and he plays for keeps. But in the years I have been with him I have never known him to tell a lie or do a shabby thing."

That about summed up Stanton's own opinion of the actor. On the other hand, murder and the fear of its penalty was an insidious disease that ate, cancer-like, at a man's character and caused him to do things he would never do otherwise.

"Well, anyway, thanks," he told Tate.

The Manson home and grounds were far more elaborate. Every inch of the five-acre plot was expensively landscaped. The huge white-pillared Georgian-type house he had given his daughter and new son-in-law as a wedding present was reputed to have cost old J. V. Merner a quarter of a million dollars. He had spent far more bailing her out of other messes, mostly male, and probably considered the sum well spent to have her married and settled.

As his cab braked in the drive, Stanton saw Lili in one of the upper front windows, but a trim French maid in a perky cap and uniform informed him without qualifications that neither Mr. nor Mrs. Manson was at home.

Stanton pointed out Marty's Cadillac standing in the open car-port. He informed the maid he had seen Lili in a window. It was essential to talk to one or both of them. It might even be a matter of life or death. The information merely caused the maid to lapse into fluent

French, the gist of which was that neither Mr. nor Mrs. Manson was at home and even if they were at home neither would see anyone.

So saying, she closed the door politely but firmly in his face. Baffled, Stanton returned to the drive and looked up at the window in which he had seen Lili. There was no way he could force an entrance without creating a scene. And he couldn't afford a scene. One of the well-trained servants with whom the house was stocked would undoubtedly call the police. He moved Marty Manson down on his list. He would have to get at him some other way.

AT THE HOME of Joy Parnell he had to give his name at the gate, but he was admitted almost immediately and directed to the pool. The scene might have been a technicolor movie set. The lawn was a vivid green. The pool was blue. Tall date palms dwarfed the whole, and against a background of scarlet salvia and hibiscus Joy and Lyle were lounging in vividly colored deck chairs with a portable bar, well stocked with bottles, convenient to both chairs.

Ferris greeted him boisterously. "Hi, old man. I just ran over for a drink and an early morning swim. Why not strip down and join us?"

It was a tempting offer. He was tired. The water looked inviting. He would like a drink. Grinning, Stanton shook his head and sat in a chair near Joy. Her well-cared-for body was lovely in white bathing shorts and bra. He had been wrong about the girdle. "No, thanks," he answered Ferris. "I don't even think I'll have a drink. I am playing Eliza to a pack of ol' Massa' Treech's bloodhounds and I have to keep my head clear in case I come to ice." He took an ice cube from the container on the table and sucked it.

Joy studied his face. "There's not much use in trying to fool you, is there, Bob?"

"Not much," Stanton said. He patted the hand on the arm of her chair. "God bless you, my children, and all that. I doubt you will, but I hope you both will be very happy. I don't know any other two people I'd rather see it happen to."

Joy insisted on kissing him. Ferris shook his hand.

"Besides," Stanton added, "it appears that I already have one wife."

"I thought so last night," Joy admitted. "But I don't now. You wouldn't treat any woman that way; you couldn't, let alone a baby like that blind child. It's a frame-up of some kind, isn't it, Bob?"

"Of a very definite kind," he told her. "I don't suppose either of you saw anyone put anything in the pocket of my trenchcoat last night?"

Puzzled, both said they had not. "Put what in your pocket?" Joy asked.

"A small gold locket. A locket that once contained the only known picture of the man who married Eve, using my name."

Ferris said what he thought of such a trick. Eve wanted to know where the girl was. Stanton said she was at his ranch, then added doggedly, "What's more, she is going to stay there. Both she and the boy."

"Oh," said Joy. The tips of her claws unsheathed from force of habit. "She is very pretty. And so young."

Stanton laughed at her. It was pleasant sitting in the sun. It would be nice to have a drink or two and relax. But he knew he couldn't afford to. He got to his feet, then sat back down again and asked the actor, "I wonder if you would give me a straight answer to a possibly embarrassing question?"

Ferris said he would if he could.

Stanton worded the question as diplomatically as possible. "If," he began, "it should become necessary, can you prove where you were last night a half-hour either side of the time that Hanson was killed?"

"I can," Ferris said promptly. He looked at Joy. "Not knowing that between the two of us, Joy was going to choose me, I—"

The star held up a restraining hand. "Please. I'd rather not hear it." She smiled, and she was beautiful. "Remember? We started all over. We both were born again this morning."

Stanton got to his feet and kissed her. "You're people, Joy. I envy Lyle." He looked at his watch. It was noon. The morning was frittering away. The net was closing in on him with every passing minute. And he was accomplishing nothing.

Both Joy and Lyle walked him to his waiting cab.

The cab driver was goggle-eyed. "Say, that was Joy Parnell, wasn't it, bud?"

Stanton said it was and gave him Lou Saunders' address.

THE CARPET and the wood of the stairs in Saunders' house were commingled in a spongy pulp that gave under Stanton's feet. The hall was filled with the sour smell of stale beer rising from the bar on the ground floor and the odor of cooking things, most of them highly spiced. From one of the open transoms a young girl's voice cursed some man in Spanish, and a man cursed right back.

Saunders had lived in the building for years. He insisted it had character. "Besides, I never get bored," he pointed out. "When I grow tired of living my own life, all I have to do is open the transom."

The reporter was sleepy-eyed, smelled faintly of good whiskey and wore nothing but shorts. "What," he demanded, "do you want at this ungodly hour of day? Haven't they hung you yet?" He stepped aside ungraciously. "Well, you're here. Come in. You must want something. What worms are gnawing on your liver?"

"I didn't kill Hanson, Lou," Stanton said. He sat in a raddled, overstuffed chair and absently poked at the springs trying to escape from one arm. "Believe me, I didn't kill him."

The reporter was indignant. "What are you trying to do, make a liar out of me? Didn't you read my story in the ten o'clock edition?"

"No," Stanton admitted, "I didn't. Why? Did you pin it on me?"

Saunders lighted a cigarette and sat back on the unmade roll-away bed that was seldom rolled away. "Did I pin it on you? I practically have you in the gas chamber. Wait until you hear the pellet drop. Breath deep three times and say hello to Hanson."

Stanton studied the other man's face. He had never before realized the superficial resemblance possible among so many men. Saunders, too, was six feet tall, light complexioned, brown eyed, and must weigh around two hundred pounds. A brilliant, cynical man with some deep-rooted tragedy in his life, he viewed all

of humanity as copy. Nothing was sacred to him. Stanton came to the purpose of his call. "You were in London in August of '41, weren't you, Lou?"

The reporter poured himself a drink. "Nix. You're not shifting your sins over on my shoulders. You're not pinning this on me." He grinned. "Not that I wouldn't like to have been the father of her son. How come you let her cool off for six years, Bob?"

It was an effort for Stanton to keep his temper. "You have me all wrong, Lou. I never saw Eve before last night."

Saunders laughed where the cuff of his sleeve would have been if he had been wearing a shirt. "That's only one man's opinion." He poured himself another drink. "I wish I could offer you one, but this is really very bad whiskey. I doubt if your stomach could assimilate it. As I pointed out to Marty Manson one night when he was crying in his beer in a little Limehouse pub—"

Stanton broke in. "Marty was in London? In what year?"

For once Saunders wasn't glib. "In August of '41," he said thoughtfully. "That was before he married the Merner money. He was an assistant director with some fly-by-night outfit making a blood and intestines quickie and they came over to pick up some bombed ruins shots." He continued, talking to himself, "He was crying in his beer. He wanted to know why you and Ferris should be big shots, what you had he didn't have. And I told him—talent."

The reporter ran down like an unwound clock and sat staring at a faded spot on the carpet.

And there it was. A lot of things were suddenly clear to Stanton. He had been using his feet instead of his head. It *had* to be Marty Manson. During the whole of Inspector Treech's long questioning, Marty had scowled and nodded and grunted. But he hadn't spoken one word.

He hadn't dared to speak. Eve would have recognized his voice.

Stanton's mind raced on.

Nor had the marriage license been mentioned after the newsmen's arrival. The reporters hadn't known about it. It had to be Marty. Lili hadn't fainted because she feared that Hanson's records might reveal

some indiscretion on her part. She had known or sensed the truth. She had been afraid for—and of—Marty.

Saunders said, "And I call myself a newspaper man." He reached for his phone and it rang as he picked it up. "Saunders speaking," he said crisply into the mouthpiece. "Yes. Yes. Yes. Well, put it on the wire. What do you want me to do, crochet an epilogue on it?"

He hung up and looked at Stanton. "That was the lad I left haunting your gate. Dr. Schaeffer just left the place and when my lad slugged him for an interview, Schaeffer told him—quotes—Mrs. Stanton's chances for complete recovery of sight are excellent—with proper therapeutic treatment plus an operation to relieve the pressure now paralyzing her optic nerves. But it will be a gradual process. It may even take a year, or longer, for normal vision to be restored—unquote."

Eve was going to see again.

STANTON asked if he might use the phone and Saunders tapped the table. "A dime on the wood if you're calling North Hollywood, twenty cents if you're calling the Valley. I'm just a poor reporter. I don't write for pictures."

Laying a quarter on the table, Stanton gave the operator the number of his ranch. Eddie answered the phone. "Yeah. It's straight stuff, Mr. Stanton," he assured him. "We are all tickled pink about it, but if you want to speak to Mrs. Stanton I think you had better call back a little later. She is kinda having happy hysterics and Marta is letting her cry it out on her shoulder." He hesitated, added, "But if I might make a suggestion, Mr. Stanton. Why don't you forget the white pony for now and drive the boy home? You two are the first ones Mrs. Stanton wants to speak to after the doc gives her the good news and Marta and I are forced to tell her that neither of you are here at the moment."

Stanton gripped the phone so hard his hand ached. "White pony? Drive Robin home? What the hell are you talking about, Eddie? Robin isn't with me."

A moment of mutual puzzled silence followed. Then Eddie said, "He isn't with you, Mr. Stanton? But he has to be. You

were going to buy him a white pony on account of Danny Deever being too big for him to ride on alone."

Sick with growing apprehension, Stanton told Saunders, "Marty has the boy." In the phone again, "I haven't been within twenty miles of the ranch since Hi Lo and I left it at five o'clock this morning. Talk fast. What made you think he was with me?"

Eddie sounded as if he was about to weep. "He *said* he was going with you. We had been playing all morning, see, Mr. Stanton, building forts and swimming and riding on Danny Deever. And I am kinda tired out like. I am sitting under the big oak tree down in the lower pasture near the pump house hoping you or Mr. Hi Lo will show up pretty soon so I can go back to my own work and Robin is scouting through that sage and greasewood thicket near the dirt road for Indians when I hear a car pull up and stop. When it didn't pull on again I got to my feet to go see who it was and just then Robin shows up, grinning from ear to ear, and tells me you want him to go for a ride and look at a white pony you have seen. Then he pulls off again and a minute or so later I heard the car pull on but didn't think anything about it knowing he was safe with you."

"I wanted him to go look at a pony?"

"He said his father."

"You saw the car?"

"No, I didn't, Mr. Stanton. The road is sunken right there and you know how that thicket is."

Saunders slapped the table. "The locket. The picture in the locket. The boy naturally has seen the picture many times. And while his mother is blind, he isn't. *He knew his father when he saw him!*"

CHAPTER SIX

It's a Wise Child . . .

LATER, asked how he happened to think of the lodge at Lake Arrowhead, Stanton admitted he didn't know. He didn't. The five minutes following his phone conversation with Eddie were always confused in his mind.

He remembered phoning Inspector Treech and being very surprised when, instead of laughing at him, Treech thanked

him soberly for the information and promised he would put out an immediate general radio alert for Manson and the boy.

He remembered phoning Ernie Goetz and being told that Hi Lo had just returned to the lawyer's office with a report that cleared Wilcox, Davis and Flintmeyer. He remembered asking Hi Lo to drive out to the ranch and stay with Eve until the boy had been found.

Still more vividly, he remembered arguing with Lou Saunders that Marty wasn't all bad, that he couldn't do this last terrible thing. He also remembered reasoning that Marty wouldn't dare take the boy home because of Lili and the servants, nor would he dare remain in the Los Angeles area with living proof of murder in his car. He would head for some lonely spot. One of the loneliest spots Stanton knew of was the Manson lodge.

The lodge was above the Lake Arrowhead turn-off, set in a quarter of a mile from the highway on a private lane. The orange and olive groves and vineyards were far below them now in the early dusk. This was another world, a world majestic, towering pines. From the moment they left San Bernardino behind them and began the six-thousand-foot climb in Lou Saunders' souped-up Ford with the big *Press* sticker on the windshield, cold mountain air swirled around them, forced them to huddle lower in the car. Halfway there, rain started to pelt down on them, driving the other cars off the road until they were alone in the night, passing scarcely anyone else, and, as they approached the lodge, passing no one.

It was midnight when they came to the

narrow road that cut off the highway toward the lodge. Slowly they followed the winding, rain-obscured lane around a bend, almost rammed into Manson's big Cadillac. They had arrived.

Saunders wanted to know if Stanton had a gun. When Stanton said he hadn't the reporter got a tire iron from the rear of his car and carried it in his hand. For the first time in Saunders' life he was being a fool, and he knew it. He wasn't acting logically, and somehow the knowledge pleased him.

Their heads low against the whirling rain, they followed the path to the lodge. The living room windows were brightly lighted. A thin trickle of smoke rose from the massive chimney of the fireplace to be quickly snatched away by the wind.

"You take the back. I'll take the front," Stanton said. He slipped quietly across the wide porch to the door.

Through the four small panes of glass in the door he could see the interior of the room. Manson wasn't in it. Robin was. Shivering in his thin flannel shirt and turned-up dungarees, a blanket trailing behind him, the boy was attempting to warm his hands in the spluttering flames of the fireplace and trying manfully not to cry.

As Stanton watched him, he looked apprehensively at a closed door leading into what Stanton knew to be the rumpus room and bar. The front door was unlocked. Stanton opened it, walked in and, as Robin turned, laid one finger against his lips in warning.

Ignoring the warning in his relief, Robin dropped the blanket and ran across the room to him. "Oh, I am so glad you came. Please take me home to my mother.

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I really don't want a white pony. Danny Deever is quite sufficient."

The thin arms clasped Stanton's legs just as the door of the rumpus room opened. Marty Manson stood framed in it, a filled glass in one hand, an automatic pistol in the other. "It would be you," he said tonelessly. Without taking his eyes off Stanton he told Robin, "You go back to the fire and stay there." He motioned Stanton into the rumpus room with his gun. "You come in here."

Under the menace of the gun, stalling for time, Stanton did as he was ordered, leaving Saunders to get the boy out of the lodge.

"Now close the door," Manson ordered. He had been drinking but he wasn't drunk. "How did you find me?"

Stanton leaned one elbow on the bar. "I tried to put myself in your place. You couldn't do it, could you, Marty?"

The producer shook his head. "No. Hanson was one thing. You were another. But the boy was still a third. No. I couldn't do it. You came alone?"

"No."

"Inspector Treech is with you?"

Stanton told the truth. "No. Lou Saunders drove me up. But the police are looking for you. They know you have the boy."

"How? No one saw him get into my car?"

"No," Stanton agreed. "That's right. But when I hold Treech what I thought had happened, for some reason he believed me." More a vibration than a sound, he sensed Robin's voice lifted in inquiry, a sibilant answering *shh*, then the muffled *snick* of a closed door.

IF MANSON had heard it he made no sign. "Treech knew. I sensed it the other night. He isn't a fool, even if the rest of you are." His voice was bitter. "Treech knew all the time. At least, he suspected. I could tell by the way he looked at me. But he hadn't any proof. He was using you to get it for him. And there wouldn't have been any proof if I could have been a complete heel." He shuddered. "But I couldn't."

"Lili knows."

"She knows I killed Hanson. She knows he phoned me yesterday afternoon.

She knows that enroute to your party I left her parked in a bar for over half an hour while I took care of a little 'business.'" He poured a drink with his left hand. "Manson kills Hanson. I couldn't even pick out a guy to kill whose name stood out from mine. By the time the newspapers get through mangling this thing—" his lips twisted in a bitter smile—"my public won't even know which one of us is dead."

Looking at the gun in the other man's hand, Stanton computed his chances on successfully closing the gap between them. He decided it couldn't be done. As Manson had said, Robin was one thing. He was another. The producer would kill him cheerfully. He stalled for more time without much hope. "It was you who slugged me at the Hollywood?"

"It was."

"And you left that hotel room, how?"

Manson was pleased with Stanton. "Through the window. I did a human fly on a six-inch ledge to the adjoining room. If Inspector Treech had been there I wouldn't have gotten away with it. But Treech obviously hadn't confided in Lieutenant Jones. And Jones was so determined you were guilty he never even thought of looking in the next room."

He sighed. "It isn't fair. Other men do worse things than I did and it doesn't bounce back in their faces." He seemed anxious for Stanton to believe him. "I didn't know there was a child. I swear it, Bob. I thought it was just one of those things."

Stanton edged a step closer. "By why marry her in my name?"

Manson considered the question. "That was seven years ago. I was tired of being a nobody, a failure. I met Eve at a dance one night right after I had been talking to Lou and he'd told me the difference between you and Lyle and myself was that you both had talent. So when I met Eve I was sore. She made me angrier. She thought all Americans were big shots. What was I to tell her, that I was the errand boy for a fly-by-night movie outfit? No. I let her think I was a big shot. You were everything I wanted to be, successful, an officer and a gentleman. So I borrowed your name and reputation. You were a hero. I couldn't even get into the

Army and get myself decently killed because I had a punctured ear drum."

The pistol in his hand forgotten, Manson leaned his forehead on the back of the hand that held it. Despite what he had done to Eve, Stanton couldn't help but feel sorry for the man.

He moved another step closer to him. "Look, Marty. You're not entirely a heel. You've proven that. Why not put that gun in your pocket and come on down the hill with me. Nothing is damaged beyond repair. It was, after all, a form of self-defense. Hanson was blackmailing you. He attempted to draw the gun in his pocket and you shot him. You heard the proposition Inspector Treech offered me."

Manson lifted his head and shook it. "No. I like being a big shot." He waved his gun-hand at the expensive wood paneling. "I like to live in places like this. I like money and cars and servants. And even if I got off with a few years for killing Hanson, what do you think I'd have when I came out of prison? Nothing. I couldn't even get a job as an errand boy. Lili's father would see to that. You know it. And I'd deserve it." There followed a moment of silence. Then he asked, "You like Eve, don't you, Bob?"

"I do."

"And you like the boy?"

Manson motioned him from the room. "Then get on back down the hill and straighten things out for both of them as best you can. By the time you get back to the ranch Eve should be free to marry you."

Stanton began a protest. "But—"

Manson uncorked a bottle with his free hand and gulped a stiff drink from its neck. "Do as you're told and don't argue. Let me do one big thing. This is the story as I see it. I didn't kill Hanson because of Eve. She's really been your wife all the time. I killed Hanson because I'd had an affair with a Jane Doe and he threatened to tell Lili and her father unless I kicked through with twenty thousand dollars that I didn't have." He pulled the phone on the bar to him and made certain the line was open. "And shortly after you leave I intend to phone Inspector Treech and make just such a confession." He leveled his gun on Stanton's middle. "Now get the hell out of here before I

change my mind. I'm going to count to three and you'd better be gone before I finish. One . . . two . . ."

ROBIN watched enchanted as the big man on the edge of his bed rolled a brown paper cigarette with one hand. "That must be difficult to do. Do you think I could learn how, Chief Hi Lo?"

Hi Lo reminded him. "Remember? You're supposed to be trying to go to sleep."

"I am, really," Robin assured him. The day had been long and full. It was warm and cosy in his bed. Marta had stuffed him with good things. His mother had wept over him and hugged him until his ribs were sore. There was really no reason why he shouldn't sleep except for the loud voices on the other side of the wall separating the bedroom from the living room.

Hi Lo scowled at the wall as Inspector Treech's voice came through it. "Don't give me that, Stanton. So you didn't kill Hanson. I suspected as much from the start and I was using you as a catspaw. But neither you nor Manson can make me swallow a Jane Doe. Such a person never existed."

Saunders asked him, "How do you know? Are you God? If I am willing to kill the biggest story I ever had, what's your beef? The City of Los Angeles pays you a salary to keep the homicide rate at a norm and, failing that, to ferret out a killer. Well, you have him. At least you have his body. What more do you want, bananas on your corn flakes?"

His mother said something that Robin couldn't hear. He asked Hi Lo, "What's homicide?"

Hi Lo evaded the question. "You're not even trying to sleep."

"Oh, but I am." Robin closed his eyes, then promptly opened them again as the nice man who it seemed wasn't really his father's major domo, but his own true father, said:

"I think you sympathize with what we are trying to do, Treech, minimize this thing with as little heartache as possible. True the stigma of illegitimacy isn't as bad as it once was. But why does it have to show up at all? Marty did a big thing. Saunders is willing to kill his story. I

want to marry Eve. She is willing to marry me for the boy's sake. That's the way Marty wanted it. That was why he was willing to save the state the expense of a trial. Why not let it ride at that?"

Robin asked Hi Lo, "But if the nice Mr. Stanton is really my own father, why should he want to marry my mother again?"

"Oh, that other, that was in England," Hi Lo said.

Robin slid his hand under his pillow and brought out the small gold locket his mother had given him. Opening it, he studied the picture it contained. No matter what anyone said, it wasn't the same picture that had been in it before. He was positive—well, almost positive—of that. He decided to settle the matter once and for all. "Indians don't lie, do they, Hi Lo?"

"Never," Hi Lo said.

"Then raise your hand." Hi Lo did as he was requested. "Now swear that the nice Mr. Stanton is really and truly my own father and he loves both me and my mother."

"I swear it," Hi Lo swore. His face was expressionless.

"And the other man, the bad man who *said* he was my father and took me way up there on the mountain?" The memory wasn't pleasant. "I really didn't like that, Hi Lo. It was ever so cold and every time we passed another car he made me lie on the floor under a smelly old blanket. It wasn't pleasant."

Hi Lo brushed the hair out of Robin's eyes gently. "I can imagine. But you forget all about him now. You won't ever see him again."

Robin snuggled a cheek into his pillow. Maybe he was wrong. Maybe his memory had tricked him. Mother said the nice Mr. Robert Stanton was his father. The nice Mr. Stanton said so. Hi Lo said so. And everyone, at least everyone who went to the cinema, knew that good Indians never lied. He was pleased it had turned out this way.

His eyes grew gritty with sleep, then popped wide open again as a door slammed and the man who was a reporter but not at all like a wolf laughed heartily. "Well, I guess that fixed Treech's clock. I'll be

on my way now. But remember, Bob, if you want me for your best man I'll be glad to fly down to Las Vegas with you in the morning."

Stanton said he did want him to, very much.

Then his mother said, "You've been wonderful, Mr. Saunders. You've all been wonderful. And I'll never forget it—ever."

Robin didn't hear what went on after that, for Hi Lo came in and turned off the lamp by the bed. "You get to sleep now. And no fooling."

Robin bargained sleepily. "But you will leave the door open, just a little bit, won't you?"

"Just a little bit."

Hi Lo tiptoed across the floor and out the door and a deep silence settled on the room. Robin lay staring out the window at the sky. He had never seen so many stars before, nor had they ever seemed to hang so low. This was really a very nice place to be. Then the stars became confused with horses, and the horses in turn became confused with ducks and cows and chickens and mile-long swimming pools hanging in the sky. He was about to plunge in and swim up through the milky way with Eddie when he felt Winston Churchill's cold muzzle nuzzle his hand. Sleep receded instantly.

"You bad dog," Robin reproved him. "You know you shouldn't leave mother alone."

Climbing out of bed, he tugged the reluctant dog to the door of the bedroom, then stopped short in the hallway looking into the living room.

He might have known. Winston Churchill, as usual, knew what he was doing. Mother wasn't alone. Standing on her very tiptoes, her hands cupped on the back of his father's head, she was kissing his father, hard. And both of them seemed very pleased about it.

Trudging back to bed and snuggling Winston Churchill under the covers with him, Robin wondered sleepily if there were any bees on his father's farm. He hoped so. Then he would have everything—Danny Deever and chickens . . . and ducks . . . and . . . bees . . . and dogs. . .

DUCK BEHIND THAT EIGHT-BALL!



Giles reaches out with his cane and jerks the guy to him with the hook of it, while with his good foot he kicks the gun. It is quite a fracas.

This Giles is the handiest guy with a cue stick I ever see, and I admire how he can make a triple-bank shot But when he starts playing rotation, with a killer's skull for cue ball—gents, it is time to rack 'em up in the cemetery!

By NICK SPAIN

YOU RUN a pool hall long enough, you get so you can tell these things. The minute the guy walked in, I knew he was a dick. He said, "Fellow named Giles hang around here?"

I said, "Seems I've heard the name. What do you want him for?"

"They tell me he's here all the time."

"He comes in now and then," I said.
"I'll be back."

"Any time," I said, and watched him walk away. It didn't surprise me none. This Giles, he is all right if you care for that sort of guy—completely worthless and working at it full time. In the first place, he's a braggart of that worst kind, the kind that can make his boasts stick or else weasel out of them some way.

Take the time in '39 this Tiger Cline, he come down to Lake Mellow to train. The lake was still there, but that was the only thing that hadn't burnt down except an outdoor stage the Tiger was using to spar on. He stayed at the Garden City Inn, in town, and run out to Lake Mellow every morning and back and then run out again and worked a few rounds with what local talent he could get cheap. The Tiger was kind of a beat-up looking guy and no kid, but from his clippings he was a fair fighter.

Giles saw him in my pool hall one night. Giles was sitting around waiting for a fish, as usual, and he saw this Cline come in and shoot a couple of games of pool and go out.

"So," he said, "that's the jerk that's gonna fight Armstrong. I can beat that guy myself."

"Playin' pool?" somebody asked.

"Boxin'," Giles said.

"Boxin' oranges?" somebody asked him. We ain't strong for wit in Garden City.

Giles turned to the guy that made the crack. "I'll tell you what I'll do, wise guy," he said. "I'll play you a game of rotation and let you shoot offa the big end for a fin."

Now that's a hell of a handicap. If you ever played pool, you know. One guy starts shooting at the one ball and the other guy at the fifteen ball. It's three to one odds.

"Okay," this chump says. I forgot who he was. He got his fin up and Giles let him break the balls and then Giles beat him. This Giles shoots a hell of a cue. He gets the two fins out of the side pocket where they stuck them and he says, "I'll bet you the ten I can beat that Tiger Cline boxin'."

There ain't any question this guy was sore by then and I guess he figured that he'd fix Giles up. He didn't say nothin'

but he went out of the door and in about ten minutes he was back and he said to Giles, "I got it fixed for you. You get to work with the Tiger tomorrow afternoon."

"For five or ten?" Giles asks.

The guy gets kind of pale, he's that mad. He turns to me. "Al," he says, "will you cash me a check for a sawbuck?"

The guy probably didn't have no ten in the bank but with a check you can collect, generally. "Okay," I told him. I didn't like this Giles myself. I didn't like him good.

This kid scribbles me off a little lumber for ten and I give him the ten. "For ten," the guy says to Giles. "Get yours up."

Giles he started welching then. "Now what have I got to do?" he asks. "Go out there and knock a professional boxer kickin' that's trainin' to fight Lefty Armstrong in St. Louis next week?"

"You said for ten you could beat him," I said.

"Well," Giles said, "one round, how's that? I'll go out there and work one round with him and let the Tiger's manager figure who won." He gets the ten out and gets it up. Then he comes over to me and asks real respectful, "You don't mind if I walk Margie home, do you? It may be my last night on earth."

MARGIE, she's my step-daughter and she's twenty-one, only a couple of years younger than Giles, and of course what I say wouldn't change her mind a quarter's worth. That is, about Giles. She likes the guy or something and they kind of go together in spite of me. Margie runs the fountain and we close that down at ten though I run the poolhall till twelve. "She's twenty-one," I says, kind of surly. "And I'm twenty-three," he said. "Ain't it hell to be fifty?"

I wasn't but forty-nine at the time but—well, what the hell!

I got home at twelve-ten and run him out of the porch swing. "You better get your beauty sleep," I told him. "You got a date with some leather tomorrow. Right in the puss."

Margie says, "Giles, what in the world...?"

"I beat a chump out of five tonight," he says, "playin' rotation, and for a gag I told him I'd bet him the ten that I could

beat a guy named Tiger Cline boxin'."

"Who's Tiger Cline?" Margie asked.

"Oh," Giles says, "he's a never-was that's trainin' out at Mellow Lake to be beat up by Lefty Armstrong down in St. Louis next week."

"Giles," Margie said, "you make me sick. Why don't you get a job? I hope Tiger Cline beats your brains out."

"Aw, honey. . ."

"I hope he does. I hope he beats you—"

"Till you can't recognize me, honey? If that happens and you see some bloody hulk come into the pool hall tomorrow night and if he meows like a cat that'll be me."

"Go home," Margie says.

Giles, he gets up and goes on down the street, gay as a lark. And of course he crosses us all up. He must have gone down and talked to Cline and give him a great song and dance, because the next day we go out to Mellow Lake and Giles he takes off his shirt and puts on some boxin' shoes and they lace the big gloves on him and him and the Tiger start sparrin' around on the old stage that they have roped off for a ring. The Tiger stabs him four, five times and roughs him around in close, but Giles gets in some good solid licks and keeps his left hand out pretty good and he actually shakes the Tiger up toward the end of the round. He turns to the Tiger's manager.

"Who win that one?" he asks.

"I'd give you a shade," Tiger's manager said.

"Okay," Giles says, "lemme out of these mittens."

"But," the Tiger says, "you said last night you'd work three rounds if I—"

Giles has got the gloves off. "Give me the twenty," he says to me, and what else can I do?

He come in the pool hall that night meowing like a cat and he took Margie home but the next day he drewed I-A in the draft and we got rid of him shortly. That was the draft before the war. The draft for one year.

I didn't run him offa the porch the last night, because Margie was cryin'.

"She ain't got anybody but herself to blame," Giles says. "If she'd have wed me, I'd be safe as a church."

"What if I married you now?" Margie

asked. I felt pretty funny there for a minute.

"Why," Giles says, and his voice is even in the dark, "you'd be makin' a eighteen-carat mistake." He stops a minute. "Good-night, Al" he says to me. "I'll see you in the guardhouse." I go on in the house and Margie comes in pretty soon. We don't say nothing much to each other and she goes on to bed.

THAT all seems like a million years ago. Giles he gets back on leave a couple of times and he sees Margie when he's back and I keep on running the pool hall and Margie she keeps on running the soda fountain. I get one card from him. "Dear Al" he writes. "I have done so much K. P. that my fingers have got so stiff I probably couldn't make a froze combination in the corner pocket. However, I win fifty-five last night shooting dice. Did they let go on a blanket in the last war without no cup? Your, Giles."

That seems like five hundred thousand years ago, because Giles came in one day. Margie dashed around the counter and threw her arms around him and kissed him and I went up and shook him by the hand. To me he looked just the same but he had a limp in his walk and he carried a cane. He wasn't in uniform.

"How are you, Giles?" I said. "I'm glad to see you, kid."

"I'm glad to see you, Al," he said over Margie's shoulder. He hadn't let go of Margie.

"Giles, why didn't you write?" Margie said.

"I wrote every year," Giles said. "Anyway, you know me, solid as a rock."

I nodded toward his knee.

"I fought a short war," Giles said. "I got offa one of them landing boats and run up the beach and I kick a mine they had missed. Then they carried me down and put me on a boat and took me back to England."

"That the McCoy?" I ask him.

"Naw," he said. "Matter of fact, I was over there a coupla days and got me two medals for bein' brave and stuff, besides a Purple Heart."

I shrugged my shoulders. He'd be tellin' me something else if I asked him, I knew.

"I was in a hospital in England and a hospital in New York and in a hospital in Washington and then they give me the toss."

"Skip it," I said.

"How's the pigeon crop?" he asked.

"There's dough around," I said.

"Were you—did you get to be an officer?" Margie asks.

"I got to be a first class private a coupla times, only they busted me. But I was gainin' on 'em. I was a Corporal when I went over."

Well, he hung around and he was the first guy back in Garden City and he told 'em some wonderful lies, I guess. One day he'd got run over by a jeep, the next day he'd stormed a machine gun nest barehanded, or something. He had a lot of fun, I guess, and really, believe it or not, he hadn't changed. I know that it changes guys, but Giles, he wasn't changed. It took him about a week to get to shootin' his stick again and he was making pretty good money shootin' pool in ten days.

He walked Margie home every night though he didn't walk very good and it took him longer to get from the pool hall out to the house. I didn't like the guy. He could have gone to work for good money, even with that bum knee. I said something to him one time about it. He was knocking the balls around and waiting for a sucker.

"Everybody you know, pretty near," he said, "has got a knee that will bend one way. But me. . . why I'll just make you a little bet that I can bend mine the wrong way out to here," and he held his hand down. It made me kind of sick.

"Of course," he said, "it ain't so good for prayin' or shootin' craps. I done a lot of both in the Army, but then I ain't in the Army any more."

"I don't see what Margie sees in you," I said, and I must have sounded real sincere because he answered me.

"She sees my soul, Al, shinin' out of my limpid blue eyes. She also knows I'll always be for her, do I write her or not, and she furthermore knows I won't do nothing wrong."

"Just nothing," I says. "You don't have to stick that *wrong* on there."

He laughs and cuts a ball back into the

side pocket. He can make shots I never seen anybody else even try.

"If you don't do nothing wrong," I said, "what do you consider it is to lay around and hustle pool and play cards all day and all night?"

"The guy that runs the pool hall says it's wrong to play pool," he says.

I didn't say nothing more and pretty soon a foreman from one of the shops comes in and Giles beats him for sixteen bucks in a nice, smooth way. He don't wrench it out of him; he just beats him a little—just for all he's got with him and I'll swear he makes it look like he's just lucky.

IT GOES ON that way until about a month ago he limps over to the counter and talks to Margie a while and then he comes on back to where I'm brushing the farthest back table.

"Al," he says, "what you got against me? Really?"

"You ain't got a job," I tell him. "The war's been over a long time, but you don't act like you want to get a job. You're—you're just a adult delinquent."

"You mean like some of these kids around the cities runnin' around in hot cars, knockin' off joints and such?"

A couple of kids I don't recognize walk in the front and I go up to see what they want. First they want some cigarettes and then they want some liquor. I ain't got any cigarettes and I don't handle nothing but beer, of which I am out.

One of them reaches under his coat and he fishes out a gun that the front end of looks like you can crawl in it and turn around. He points it right at me. "That your heap settin' in front?" he asks.

I admit it is. Giles, he limps out. "Just what we was talking about," he says. "I ain't like these kids, at all, at all. I wouldn't be carryin' no gun like that around for all the tea in China."

"Gimme the key to the heap," this kid says and his eyes look funny, dilated, and I know he's hopped up. The other kid, about eighteen, he just stands there. He looks like he's about half drunk.

I start fishing for the keys and toss them over. "Help yourself, son," I says, kind of shaky. "It's insured."

"Get their dough," the kid with the

gun says. The dark complected one, the one that looks half crooked, he comes over and Giles and I, we hand them our money.

"You read about that daylight job down in St. Louis yesterday?" the kid with the gun asks. "We pulled that."

"He's tougher'n Dillinger," the dark complected one says. "Let's go."

"These guys will bleat soon as we get outta here," the one with the gun says. "Let's take the broad with us."

Giles goes pale and I see the sweat start on his brow and he moves up a little closer.

"Bud," he says, "I ain't got any folks and I'm kind of a tough guy myself, not like you all but kind of a underworld character and you don't want to take the girl with you. It'll just make you trouble. We'll let you go."

"You're some hero," Margie says from behind me, and I see one good thing coming from the setup. It shows Margie really what kind of a guy this Giles is, back from the wars or not.

"Honey, you want with one leg I should fight this guy and him with a gun in his hand that would blow a hole in me as big as your head?"

"Let's lam," the dark one says. "Come on, baby."

Giles, he gets closer to the guy. "I'm a real hero," he says and reaches in his pocket and he hauls out a medal and tosses it to the guy with the gun. "I win that in France, with ten million Jerries shootin' exclusively at me."

The kid looks at the medal, and Giles reaches out with his cane and jerks the kid to him with the crook of it around his neck and with his good foot he kicks the

gun and the dad-blasted thing goes off.

Giles' bad leg folds up under him like a accoridian, but he has got the hand that holds the gun in his two hands by then and he's got the kid down on top of him and the kid ain't got a chance. I grab up a cue ball and score on the dark complected one. I drop him cold and break out my plate glass window where I bank it off his head. Then I help Giles with the kid. Giles has like to bit his wrist off and the gun is layin' on the floor. I bust the kid over the head with it.

We get 'em tied up good before they come to and I go call the sheriff.

Giles gets up off the floor very shaky. "I hurt my knee," he says, but he is hobbling around on the floor looking for something and he finds it and drops it in his pocket. It's the medal.

"Lemme see the medal," I says.

"Al, don't be silly. I told you I was in France for three days and really was decorated before I was shot up."

"You've told me everything. Lemme see it."

But Giles, he is kind of white and moves over and leans against the counter. "As for you," he says to Margie, "I don't know whether I'll marry you or not. You seemed to prefer that I get a big chunk blowed out of me rather than taking a short motor ride with those two delinquents."

The sheriff comes up, wakin' everybody with his siren, and takes the kids away after much conversation and so on.

"There ain't much use lockin' up," I says, lookin' out at the crowd and my broken window, "but let's go home."

(Continued on page 129)

CAN YOUR SCALP PASS THE
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She steadied her hand and selected Pierre D'Valois as the first target. Her slim fingers took up the trigger slack.

MRS. BELCOURT DRAWS A BIER

By ALAN RITNER ANDERSON

Lovely Wanda Belcourt had everything worked out: Two corpses . . . an alibi for herself . . . and somebody to take the rap. How could she miss?

CHING, the Chinese houseboy, found Mrs. Belcourt out on the moonlit terrace necking with a phony French count who grandly called himself Louis Henri Jean Pierre D'Valois. Bowing, Ching said, "Dr. Orst, he call and say you phone sanitarium quick right away."

Wanda Belcourt languidly disengaged herself from D'Valois' ardent embrace. She was dreamy drunk. It showed in the glassiness of her pale blue eyes and the feverish redness of her cheeks. Voice savage, she said, "You stinking little rat! How many times do I have to tell you—"

"Excuse, please!" interrupted Ching impassively. "You say, Dr. Orst call, me tell you quick right away."

The name registered. Wanda Belcourt ran slim fingers through the glittering yellow curls of her upswept hair-do. The ruddiness faded from her cheeks and greyness spread out from the corners of her thin-lipped mouth.

"That's all!" she said jerkily.

Bowing, Ching backstepped into the house.

Pierre D'Valois' handsome face darkened with frustration and chagrin. He'd warmed Wanda Belcourt to the point where it would have been safe to ask for another hundred-dollar loan. Ching's announcement had destroyed the magic moment.

"What time is it?" she asked.

"Three," he replied sulkily after a glance at his wrist watch, added needlessly, "A.M."

In the faint moon glow, Mrs. Belcourt's eyes blazed with an unholy brightness. Her rapt, savage expression reminded D'Valois of a predatory animal after the kill. Shivering, he turned and glanced out across the formal gardens that sloped down to a young peach orchard.

"He's dead!" she cried, voice shrill with triumph.

"Who?"

"My husband. Why should Orst call at this hour if Larry hasn't died?" She hugged herself fiercely, said, "It's mine. All mine. The money, I mean."

D'Valois went cold with desperation. "If your husband is dead," he said, "you killed him."

There was a long, tense silence and far away they heard the hoot and rumble of a train. Wanda Belcourt stood ramrod-stiff and straight, and her eyes shaded from blue to indigo. Voice edged, she declared, "Larry was pronounced insane by a court of law. A judge committed him to the sanitarium on the advise of experts. However can that possibly make

me at all responsible for his death?"

D'Valois decided that it was the opportune time to deliver his Sunday punch. He said, "Your so-called cousin, Frank Heath, talks too much when he's drunk. I understand that temporary insanity can be induced by secretly feeding the victim certain drugs."

"How droll!" said Mrs. Belcourt. "Frank has such a vivid imagination."

Pierre D'Valois went damp with nervous sweat. He took a stab in the dark. "Your husband has only been in the sanitarium two weeks. Perhaps if someone demands an autopsy . . ." He left the unfinished statement hang in mid-air.

LITTLE flecks of blackness appeared in the pale blue of Wanda Belcourt's eyes, and her lips compressed into a thin, red line. In the moonlight the drops of sweat on her forehead looked like glass beads.

Seeing that the blow had scored, D'Valois bored in, said, "Look. I'm twenty-six. You're thirty-three. We can get married and establish a residence in California where property is split fifty-fifty when a couple gets a divorce."

Mrs. Belcourt moistened her cold lips with the tip of her tongue. The stiffness went out of her shoulders. "You may have something," she confessed.

"Think it over," D'Valois urged. "As your husband, I would see that Frank Heath didn't make too much of a nuisance of himself."

Wanda Belcourt gave him a frosty smile, turned and walked stiff-leggedly into the spacious hallway where her spiked heels sank noiselessly into the thick nap of the wine-colored carpet. Sound and fury rolled out of the music room. The party was getting rowdy. Her guests were in a pattern—writers who never wrote, artists who couldn't paint, actors and actresses who'd done no better than a high school play. As she passed the archway, she saw Frank Heath sitting in an easy chair sipping champagne. He was a dumpy little man, pale and flabby, but his bald skull glittered with a pink sheen. He was morosely drunk, and tears beaded his eyelashes.

She entered the library and sat down behind the black gloss of the ebony desk.

She said dramatically to the room at large, "Oh, no, Dr. Orst!" She repeated it until she was sure her voice held just the right note of shocked tragedy and anguished grief. She dialed the sanitarium. One of the male attendants answered. She dropped her voice down to nervous apprehension. "This is Mrs. Lawrence Belcourt. Let me speak to Dr. Orst!"

There was a click, then Dr. Orst's thick voice came on the line. "I have bad news," he said. "Very bad news."

She fought down her fierce exaltation. "So I surmised. I am prepared."

Dr. Orst took a deep, gusty breath. "Your husband escaped an hour ago."

There was a sudden surflike roaring in Wanda Belcourt's ears, and chills marched up her spine on spidery feet. She gripped the handset until her knuckles whitened. "No! No!" She heard herself say. "No! It's not possible. You told me—"

"It couldn't happen in a hundred years," interrupted Dr. Orst, speaking fast. "The gardner piled hay for a mulch against the outside wall of the main building. Your husband leaped from a third-floor window. The hay broke his fall. I'm in touch with the state police. Your husband was seen entering the woods that adjoin your estate. The police have posted a trooper at the gate. Your husband can't climb the wall that surrounds your place. So you are perfectly safe."

Mrs. Belcourt's panic abated, and her eyes slitted with sly cunning. "Keep me informed!" she ordered crisply and replaced the phone with a steady hand. She lit a cigarette, took a reflective inhale, then plumed the smoke ceilingward.

The sanitarium was less than a mile away. She had selected it to give the impression that she was a devoted wife who wanted her mentally sick husband as near to her as possible. Her restive eyes surveyed the room. She got up and went to the French doors that opened on a flagstone walk. They were locked. She unlatched a door and opened it out an inch. Then she pulled the blue drapes closed.

Back at the desk, she opened the center drawer and took out the .22 target pistol that was her husband's pride and joy.

Small arms were his hobby. There was a target range in the basement, one out-doors beside the miniature golf course. Wanda Belcourt had taken up pistol marksmanship with a ghoulish zest, seeing in it the opportunity to stage an accident that would make her a widow. Unfortunately, servants had always been present to care for weapons and targets.

The plan had blossomed in her brain so crystal clear, with details dovetailing so perfectly, that she had the illusion that she was about to enact a role in a well-rehearsed play. There was an oak door in the wall that surrounded the estate. The little-used entry was a quarter-mile from the main gate, just beyond a curve in the highway and opposite a gasoline service station that closed at midnight.

THERE was a tooled leather cigar box on the desk top. She emptied the cigars into the drawer, placed the pistol in the box, closed the lid and tucked the container under her left arm. She went out into the hallway just as Ching came out of the music room with an empty tray.

"Go to bed!" she ordered him, shouting to be heard above the tumult of the party.

Ching bowed and hurried back toward the kitchen. Pierre D'Valois came in from the terrace, smirking with triumph. He walked up to Mrs. Belcourt, gripped her bare shoulders and laid his cheek next to hers.

"Is he . . . ?"

"Signed, sealed and delivered," she said. "I'm going to the sanitarium. You stay here. Keep the party rolling hot and heavy. Don't tell a soul!"

D'Valois frowned, suggested, "Don't you think it better . . ."

"Shut up!" she snapped. "If you want a ride on the gravy train, do as you're told!"

He shrugged doubtfully, glanced at the leather box under her arm, then smiled broadly. "The will, I presume," he said. She didn't reply, so he turned and walked airily into the music room.

In her gay blue and ivory bedroom, Wanda Belcourt changed to a black suit and covered the white of her throat with a deep blue scarf. She transferred the pistol to her biggest handbag, added a

well-filled wallet, then got the key to the oak door from the pin tray on her vanity. Since the cigar container would be out of place in her bedroom, she filled it with handkerchiefs and put it on top of the dresser.

Ready to leave, she picked up the ivory phone on the bedside table and dialed the state police barracks.

"State police, Corporal Swale speaking," said a firm voice.

"This is Mrs. Lawrence Belcourt," she said. "I understand that my husband is hiding in Jessop's woods."

"He was seen going in there," Swale hedged. "We'll search the woods in the morning. In the meantime, I've posted a trooper at your gate. Your husband can't climb the wall, so you'll be perfectly safe."

"Are you sure he went into the woods?"

"Yes. A motorcycle patrolman spotted him."

"Thank you," she said, and hung up feeling warm and excited.

The kitchen was deserted. She left by the back porch and walked to the garage. Ghostly moonlight flooded the scene with a silvery radiance and towering shrubs cast elongated shadows. Heart hammering, she slipped behind the wheel of her black convertible. Even at that distance she could hear sounds of revelry from the music room.

The trooper at the gate was a robust young man very much on the alert. Eyes wary, he stopped six feet from the driver's side of the convertible.

"I'm Mrs. Belcourt," she explained with a red smile. "I'm going in town and stay at a hotel."

"You'd be all right," said the trooper. "Your husband can't climb the wall and I have this gate covered."

"I'll rest easier in a hotel room," she said, then asked idly, "What time is it?"

The trooper consulted his watch. "Five to four."

She gave him a tight nod of thanks and drove out on the highway. There wasn't a car in sight. She drove at a sedate 25 miles per hour and switched off the lights as soon as she rounded the curve. She eased the convertible across the concrete apron of the gas station and let it roll to a

stop behind the main service building. The concealment was better than she had hoped.

She wormed off her high-heeled slippers, then frowned. She should have remembered to bring along an extra pair of nylons. The soles of her stockings would be worn away by the time she got back. She sneaked to the south end of the building. The road was deserted. The pavement was hot beneath her feet.

The heavy oak door was partly concealed by vines. The lock turned easily with the pressure of the key, but the hinges grated chatteringly, and her heart started trip-hammering. She sneaked into the ground and left the door ajar. Then she tossed the key into a pool of water some ten feet from the gravel path. It struck with a soft splash and a tiny geyser.

"The faithful Ching," she whispered to herself. "As soon as he heard of his master's escape, he sneaked down and unlocked the door."

SHE MADE a complete circle around the house. The light in Ching's room above the kitchen was burning and she imagined that she saw his shadow on the wall. Indianlike, she approached the music room by rushing from shrub to shrub and keeping where the shadows were deepest. Both windows of the music room were open and a profusion of bushes along the outer wall offered excellent concealment. She crouched beneath a window. The ceiling fixture was off and floor lamps diffused a soft orange glow throughout the room. The radio was waging a losing battle with a group of brassy males voices trying to harmonize on *How Dry I Am*.

She had to lock her jaws to keep her teeth from chattering as she lifted her head and peeked over the sill. She was in luck. Pierre D'Valois was slumped in a chair near the window studying the glowing end of his cigar with the rapt, dreamy expression his face acquired when he sank into a pleasant speculation of money matters. Frank Heath sat on an end of a davenport with his feet cocked up on the coffee table. The red-headed girl next to him sat leaning over the coffee table trying unsuccessfully to build some

sort of a structure out of safety matches.

Wanda Belcourt got out the pistol and pumped a shell into the firing chamber. She steadied her hand and selected Pierre D'Valois as the first target. Her slim fingers took up the trigger slack.

The voices of the male chorus climbed up on a high note and hung there.

She fired. Magically, it seemed, Pierre D'Valois' forehead blossomed a red rose. The sharp thunder of the report had cut through the other noises in the room and some of the guests were staring around in bleary-eyed wonder. Frank Heath's pale face stood out like a beacon. The second shot caught him between the eyes, whipping his head back and jerking his arms. D'Valois was an inert heap on the floor.

Mrs. Belcourt faded back into the shadows. A woman's strident scream shattered the comparative silence of the night air. The singing ceased. Someone turned the radio off. The hushed calm was like the sudden silence after the fury of a thunder storm.

Frightened by the leather-lunged shrieks of the hysterical woman which could be heard by the trooper at the gate, Mrs. Belcourt lifted her skirt to her thighs and ran a zig-zag course between the shrubs and bushes of the garden. She reached the oak door panting for breath and tingling with apprehension. There were no soles left in her nylons and her feet were swollen and sore from rocks and gravel. She felt each foot anxiously, fearing a cut that would have left a blood spoor. But she'd suffered no cut, just bruises.

She reached the convertible without incident and slipped behind the wheel. Her swollen feet made her slippers painfully tight. Driving from the station, she waited until she saw an oncoming car in the distance before she turned on the lights. Halfway across the three-mile straightaway that crossed a swamp, she braked to an abrupt stop and hurled the pistol off to her right. It struck with a soft *plop* and in the glare from the headlights, she saw the weapon sink from sight in the muck.

She parked the car outside the main entrance of the hotel and grandly told the doorman to have it stored in the garage.

Safe within the privacy of the suite, Mrs. Belcourt undressed and sat on the edge of the bathtub soaking her aching feet. The hastily conceived plan had worked to perfection. In due time she would become either a widow or the wife of a man put away for life. Either way, she would come into possession of immense wealth, and with Pierre D'Valois and Frank Heath rotting in their graves, there would be no staggering blackmail payments to make.

She switched off the lights and climbed into bed. Faced with physical inactivity, her nerves tightened and worrying thoughts clouded her brain. The soleless stockings distressed her. Had the trooper at the gate run to the house after the double kill? Could Ching establish an air-tight alibi? She rallied, mentally rehearsed her story until she had it letter perfect.

THE police came at five. They phoned from the lobby and gave her plenty of time to dress. She needed it. Even so, the soleless stockings refused to drape her ankles neatly. She lighted a smoke because she handled a cigarette with graceful flourishes that captivated men and which would draw attention away from her ankles.

There were two detectives. One was tall and lean, had a sad grey face dominated by a jutting jaw. His companion was short and stocky. Contrary to expectations, both removed their hats.

The tall one said, "Your husband was captured an hour ago."

"Where?" she asked warily.

The tall man sighed, said, "I'm not going to drag this out and play cat and mouse. You can add. Your husband escaped from the sanitarium wearing a strait-jacket. He was captured wearing a strait-jacket. A man in a strait-jacket is on a par with a person with both arms cut off at the shoulders. Let's go, Mrs. Belcourt."

The words of Dr. Orst, Corporal Swale and the trooper at the gate marched through her memory on leaden feet. "Your husband can't climb the wall," they had all asserted with conviction. She should have asked why.

YOU CAN'T GET AWAY WITH MURDER!

By NELSON and GEER

DR. BUCHANAN'S INHERITANCE

In the course of his studies, Dr. Robert W. Buchanan came upon a bit of medical lore he believed, should necessity arise, would provide foolproof means to fortune. In 1877, with his wife and daughter, the young medico left his native Nova Scotia to conquer New York. By 1890 such was the state of his practice that he realized the time had come. Shortly, his wife disappeared, the doctor announcing she had run off with another man. A divorce followed. A few days later Buchanan took a neighbor to Newark where Mrs. Annie Sutherland, a wealthy widow, executed a will in the doctor's favor. This the neighbor and a Mr. Smith, business associate of the lady, witnessed.

In two days Mrs. Sutherland became Mrs. Buchanan. Despite his new affluence, the doctor was soon confiding to the neighbor that Annie wasn't all he'd expected. Her language. Her temper tantrums. Then more alarming confi-



dences followed. She was getting worse. He was afraid of her. With his groundwork thus laid, Buchanan gave Annie a walloping dose of morphine which he followed with his long-treasured gimmick, a few drops of belladonna in the eyes to counteract the tell-tale pin-point pupils induced by the narcotic. Then he called in Dr. B. C. McIntyre.

McIntyre noted the symptoms of morphia poisoning, examined Mrs. Buchanan's eyes closely, then, puzzled, diagnosed hysteria. When she grew worse he summoned Dr. H. P. Watson into consultation. Next day she died and the medicos signed the death certificate giving cerebral hemorrhage as the cause. Buchanan collected her



\$40,000 estate and departed for Nova Scotia well pleased with himself. But he hadn't counted on Mr. Smith, Annie's erstwhile associate, who, disgruntled, complained to a newspaper about Buchanan's ardent wooing of Annie long before his divorce.

Panicky at talk of an exhumation, Buchanan returned to New York, dropping hints that Annie had been a morphine addict. An autopsy revealed the narcotic in lethal quantity, which led to the obvious question: Why, if she had expired from a self-administered overdose, hadn't the pupils of her eyes shown the usual contraction? There they had him, and the too-clever doctor went to the electric chair.



IF LOOKS COULD KILL!

A Detective Tales
Cover Story

By
FREDRIC C. BROWN

Talk about laughing! Jim Greeley, ace novelty salesman, could get a laugh out of anything: light-up ties, hand buzzers, dribble glasses—anything But the funniest thing you'd want to see was the effect his best trick had on that cute little blonde, Marie Rhymer. She like to died!

THE BIG MAN in the flashy green suit stuck his big hand across the cigar counter. "Jim Greeley," he said. "Ace Novelty Company." The cigar dealer took the offered hand and then jerked convulsively as something inside it buzzed painfully against his own palm.

The big man's cheerful laughter boomed. "Our Joy Buzzer," he said, turning over his hand to expose the little metal contraption in his palm. "Changes a shake to a shock; one of the best numbers we got. A dilly, ain't it? Gimme four of those perfectos, the two-for-a-quarters. Thanks."

He put a half-dollar on the counter and then, concealing a grin, lighted one of the cigars while the dealer tried vainly to pick up the coin. Then, laughing, the big man put another—and ungimmicked—coin on the counter and pried up the first one with a tricky little knife on one end of his watch chain. He put it back in a special little box that went into his vest pocket. He said, "A new number—but a pretty good one. It's a good laugh, and—well, 'Anything for a Gag' is Ace's motto and me, I'm Ace's ace salesman."

The cigar dealer said, "I couldn't handle—"

"Not trying to sell you anything," the

big man said. "I just sell wholesale. But I get a kick out of showing off our merchandise. You ought to see some of it."

He blew a ring of cigar smoke and strolled on past the cigar counter to the hotel desk. "Double with bath," he told the clerk. "Got a reservation—Jim Greeley. Stuff's being sent over from the station, and my wife'll be here later."

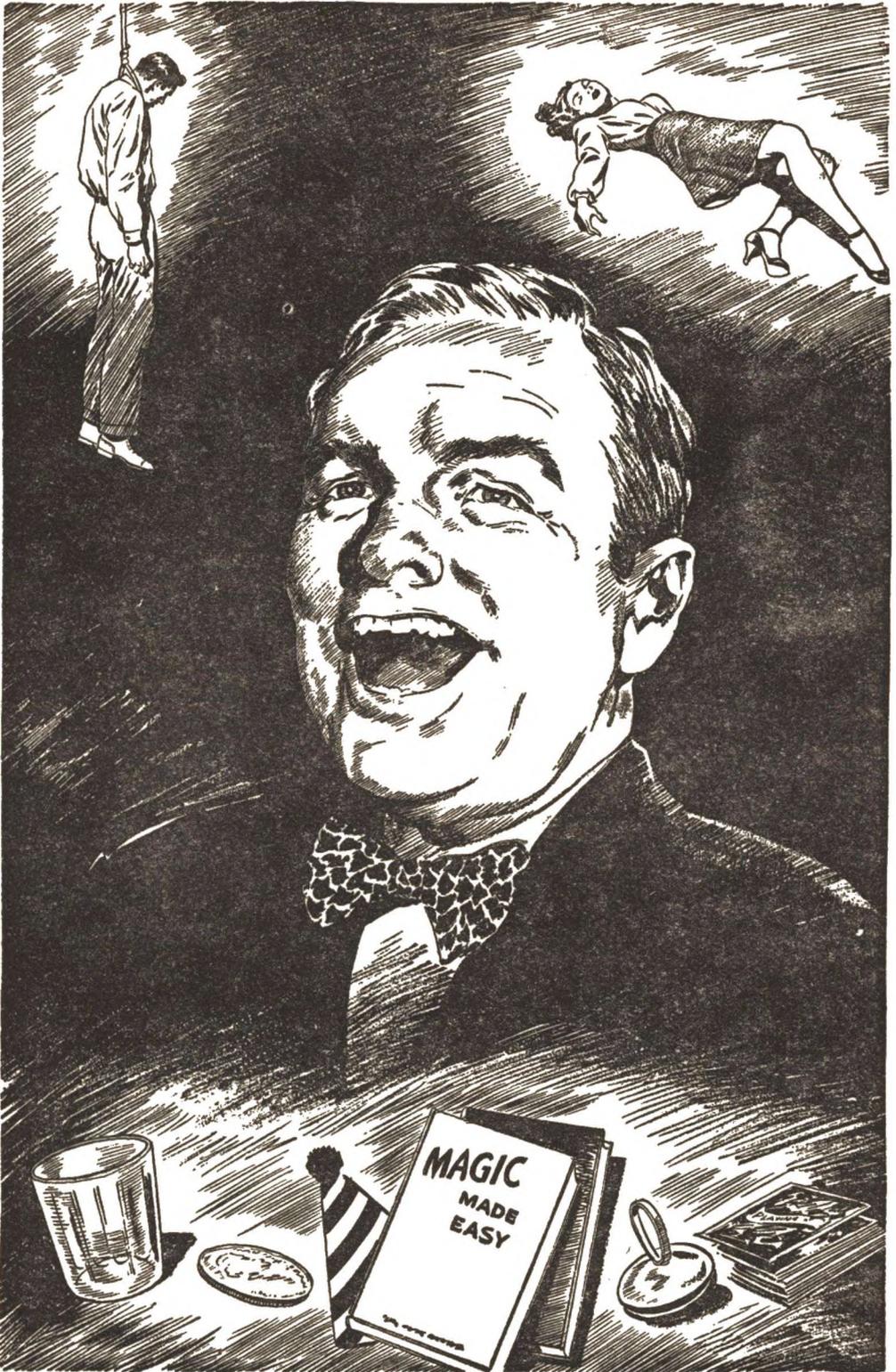
He took a fountain pen from his pocket, ignoring the one the clerk offered him, and signed the card. The ink was bright blue, but it was going to be a good joke on the clerk when, a little later, he tried to file that card and found it completely blank. And when he explained and wrote a new card it would be both a good laugh and good advertising for Ace Novelty.

"Leave the key in the box," he said. "I won't go up now. Where are the phones?"

He strolled to the row of phone booths to which the desk clerk directed him and dialed a number. A feminine voice answered.

"This is the police," he said gruffly. "We've had reports that you've been renting rooms for crooked boarders. Or were those only false roomers?"

"Jim! Oh, I'm so glad you're in town!"



"So'm I, sweetie. Is the coast clear, your husband away? Wait, don't tell me; you wouldn't have said what you just said if he'd been there, would you? What time does he get home?"

"Nine o'clock, Jim. You'll pick me up before then? I'll leave him a note I'm staying with my sister because she's sick."

"Swell, honey. What I hoped you'd say. Let's see; it's half past five. I'll be right around."

"Not that soon, Jim. I've got things to do, and I'm not dressed. Make it—not before eight o'clock. Between then and half past eight."

"Okay, honey. Eight it is. That'll give us time for a big evening, and I've already registered double."

"How'd you know I'd be able to get away?"

THE BIG MAN laughed. He said, "Then I'd have called one of the others in my little black book. Now don't get mad; I was only kidding. I'm calling from the hotel, but I haven't actually registered yet; I was only kidding. One thing I like about you, Marie, you got a sense of humor; you can take it. Anybody I like's got to have a sense of humor like I have."

"Anybody you like?"

"And anybody I love. To pieces. What's your husband like, Marie? Has he got a sense of humor?"

"A little. A crazy kind of one; not like yours. Got any new numbers in your line?"

"Some dillies. I'll show you. One of 'em's a trick camera that—well, I'll show you. And don't worry, honey. I remember you told me you got a tricky ticker and I won't pull any scary tricks on you. Won't scare you, honey; just the opposite."

"You big goof! Okay, Jim, not before eight o'clock now. But plenty before nine."

"With bells on, honey. Be seeing you."

He went out of the telephone booth singing *Tonight's My Night With Baby*, and straightened his snazzy necktie at a mirror in front of a pillar in the lobby. He ran an exploring palm across his face. Yes, needed a shave; it felt rough even if it didn't show. Well, plenty of time for that in two and a half hours.

He strolled over to where a bellboy

sat. He asked, "How late you on duty, son?"

"Till two-thirty, nine hours. I just came on."

"Good. How are rules here on likker. Get it any time?"

"Can't get bottle goods after nine o'clock. That is, well, sometimes you can, but it's taking a chance. Can't I get it for you sooner if you're going to want it?"

"Might as well." The big man took some bills out of his wallet. "Room 603. Put in a fifth of rye and two bottles of soda sometime before nine. I'll phone down for ice cubes when we want 'em. And listen, I want you to help me with a gag. Got any bedbugs or cockroaches?"

"Huh?"

The big man grinned. "Maybe you have and maybe you haven't, but look at these artificial ones. Ain't they beauties?" He took a pillbox from his pocket and opened it.

"Want to play a joke on my wife," he said. "And I won't be up in the room till she gets here. You take these and put 'em where they'll do the most good, see? I mean, peel back the covers and fill the bed with these little beauties. Don't they look like real ones? She'll really squeal when she sees 'em. Do you like gags, son?"

"Sure."

"I'll show you some good ones when you bring up the ice cubes later. I got a sample case full. Well, do a good job with those bedbugs."

He winked solemnly at the bellboy and sauntered across the lobby and out to the sidewalk.

He strolled into a tavern and ordered rye with a chaser. While the bartender was getting it he went over to the juke box and put a dime in, pushing two buttons. He came back grinning, and whistling *Got a Date With an Angel*. The juke box joined in—in the wrong key—with his whistling.

"You look happy," said the bartender. "Most guys come in here to tell their troubles."

"Haven't any troubles," said the big man. "Happier because I found an oldie on your juke box and it fits. Only the angel I got a date with's got a little devil

in her too, thank God. Real she devil, too.”

He put his hand across the bar. “Shake the hand of a happy man,” he said.

The buzzer in his palm buzzed and the bartender jumped.

The big man laughed. “Have a drink with me, pal,” he said, “and don’t get mad. I like practical jokes. I sell ‘em.”

The bartender grinned, but not too enthusiastically. He said, “You got the build for it all right. Okay, I’ll have a drink with you. Only just a second; there’s a hair in that chaser I gave you.” He emptied the glass and put it among the dirties, coming back with another one, this one of cut glass of intricate design.

“Nice try,” said the big man, “but I told you I *sell* the stuff; I know a dribble glass when I see one. Besides that’s an old model. Just one hole on a side and if you get your finger over it, it don’t dribble. See, like this. Happy days.”

The dribble glass didn’t dribble. The big man said, “I’ll buy us both another; I like a guy who can dish a joke out as well as take one.” He chuckled. “Try to dish one out, anyway. Pour us another and lemme tell you about some of the new stuff we’re gonna put out. New plastic called Skintex that—hey, I got a sample with me. Lookit.”

He took from his pocket a rolled-up object that unrolled itself, as he put it on the bar, into a startlingly life-like false face. The big man said, “Got it all over every kind of mask or false face on the market, even the expensive rubber ones. Fits so close it stays on practically of its own accord. But what’s really different about it is by gosh it looks so real you have to look twice and look close to see it ain’t the real McCoy. Gonna be an all-year-round seller for costume balls and stuff, and make a fortune every Halloween.”

“Sure looks real,” said the bartender.

“Bet your boots it does. Come in all kinds, it will. Got only a few actually in production now, though. This one’s the Fancy Dan model, good looking. Pour us two more, huh?”

He rolled up the mask and put it back into his pocket. The juke box had just ended the second number and he fed a quarter into it, again punching *Got a Date With an Angel*, but this time waiting to

whistle until the record had started, so he’d be in tune with it.

He changed it to patter when he got back to the bar. He said, “Got a date with an angel, all right. Little blonde, Marie Rhymer. A beauty. Purtiest gal in town. Here’s to ‘er.”

This time he forgot to put his finger over the hole in the dribble glass and got spots of water on his snazzy necktie. He looked down at them and roared with laughter. He ordered drinks for the house—not too expensive a procedure, as there was only one other customer and the bartender.

The other customer bought back and the big man bought another round. He showed them two new coin tricks—in one of which he balanced a quarter on the edge of a shot-glass after he’d let them examine both the glass and the coin, and he wouldn’t tell the bartender how that one was done until the bartender stood a round.

IT WAS after seven when he left the tavern. He wasn’t drunk, but he was feeling the drinks. He was really happy now. Ought to grab a bite to eat, he thought.

He looked around for a restaurant, a good one, and then decided no, maybe Marie would be expecting him to take her to dinner; he’d wait to eat until he was with her.

And so what if he got there early? He could wait, he could talk to her while she got ready.

He looked around for a taxi and saw none; he started walking briskly, again whistling *Tonight’s My Night With Baby*, which hadn’t, unfortunately, been on the juke box.

He walked briskly, whistling happily, into the gathering dusk. He was going to be early, but he didn’t want to stop for another drink; there’d be plenty of drinking later, and right now he felt just right.

It wasn’t until he was a block away that he remembered the shave he’d meant to get. He stopped and felt his face, and yes, he really needed one. Luck was with him too, because only a few doors back he’d passed a little hole-in-the-wall barber shop. He retraced his steps and found it

open. There was one barber and no customers.

He started in, then changed his mind and, grinning happily, went on to the area-way between that building and the next. He took the Skintex mask from his pocket and slipped it over his face; be a good gag to see what the barber would do if he sat down in the chair for a shave with that mask on. He was grinning so broadly he had trouble getting the mask on smoothly, until he straightened out his face.

He walked into the barber shop, hung his hat on the rack and sat down in the chair. His voice only a bit muffled by the flexible mask, he said, "Shave, please."

As the barber, who had taken his stand by the side of the chair, bent closer in incredulous amazement, the big man in the green suit couldn't hold in his laughter any longer. The mask slipped as his laughter boomed out. He took it off and held it out for examination. "Purty life-like, ain't it?" he asked when he could quit laughing.

"Sure is," said the little barber, admiringly. "Say, who makes those?"

"My company. Ace Novelty."

The barber said, "I'm with a group that puts on amateur theatricals. Say, we could use some of those—for comic roles mainly, if they come in comic faces. Do they?"

"They do. We're manufacturers and wholesalers, of course. But you'll be able to get them at Brachman & Minton's, here in town. I call on 'em tomorrow, and I'll load them up. How's about that shave, meanwhile. Got a date with an angel."

"Sure," said the little man. "Brachman & Minton. We buy most of our make-up and costumes there already. That's fine." He rinsed a towel under the hot water faucet, wrung it out. He put it over the big man's face and made lather in his shaving cup.

Under the hot towel the man in the green suit was humming *Got a Date With an Angel*. The barber took off the towel and applied the lather with deft strokes.

"Yep," said the big man, "got a date with an angel and I'm too damn early. Gimme the works—massage, anything you got. Wish I could look as handsome with

my real face as with that there mask—that's our Fancy Dan model, by the way. Y'oughta see some of the others. Well, you will if you go to Brachman & Minton's about a week from now. Take about that long before they get the merchandise after I take their order tomorrow."

"Yes, sir," said the barber. "You said the works? Massage *and* facial?" He stropped the razor, started its neat clean strokes.

"Why not? Got time. And tonight's my night with baby. *Some* number, pal. Page-boy blonde, built like you know what. Runs a rooming house not far from— Say, I got an idea. Good gag."

"What?"

"I'll fool 'er. I'll wear that Fancy Dan mask when I knock on the door and I'll make her think somebody *really* good-looking is calling on her. Maybe it'll be a let-down when she sees my homely mug when I take it off, but the gag'll be good. And I'll bet she won't be *too* disappointed when she sees it's good old Jim. Yep. I'll do that."

The big man chuckled in anticipation. "What time's it?" he asked. He was getting a little sleepy. The shave was over, and the kneading motion of the massage was soporific.

"Ten of eight."

"Good. Lots of time. Just so I get there well before nine. That's when— Say, did that mask really fool you when I walked in with it?"

"Sure did," the barber told him. "Until I bent over you after you sat down."

"Good. Then it'll fool Marie Rhymer when I go up to the door. Say, what's the name of your amatcher theatrical outfit? I'll tell Brachman you'll want some of the Skintex numbers."

"Just the Grove Avenue Social Center group. My name's Dane. Brachman knows me. Sure, tell him we'll take some."

Hot towels, cool creams, kneading fingers. The man in green dozed.

"Okay, mister," the barber said. "You're all set. Be a dollar sixty-five." He chuckled. "I even put your mask on so you're all set. Good luck."

THE BIG MAN sat up and glanced in the mirror. "Swell," he said. He stood up and took two singles out of his

wallet. "That's even now. G'night."

He put on his hat and went out. It was getting dark now and a glance at his wrist watch showed him it was almost eight-thirty, perfect timing.

He started humming again, back this time to *Tonight's My Night With Baby*.

He wanted to whistle, but he couldn't do that with the false face on. He stopped in front of the house and looked around before he went up the steps to the door. He chuckled a little as he took the *Vacancy* sign off the nail beside the door and held it as he pressed the button and heard the bell sound.

Only seconds passed before he heard her footsteps clicking to the door. It opened, and he bowed slightly. His voice muffled by the mask so she wouldn't recognize it, he said, "You haff—arroom, please?"

She was beautiful, all right, as beautiful as he remembered her from the last time he'd been in town a month before. She said hesitantly, "Why, yes, but I'm afraid I can't show it to you tonight. I'm expecting a friend and I'm late getting ready."

He made a jerky little bow. He said, "Vee, moddomm, I vill rrrreturrrn."

And then, jerking his chin forward to loosen the mask and pinching it loose at the forehead so it would come loose with his hat, he lifted hat and mask.

He grinned and started to say—well, it didn't matter what he'd started to say, because Marie Rhymer screamed and then dropped into a crumpled heap of purple silk and cream-colored flesh and blonde hair just inside the door.

Stunned, the big man dropped the sign he'd been holding and bent over her. He said, "Marie, honey, what—" and quickly stepped inside and closed the door. He bent down and—remembering something she'd said on the phone—put his hand over where her heart should be beating. *Should be*, but wasn't.

He got out of there quickly. With a wife and kid of his own back in Minneapolis, he couldn't be—Well, he got out.

Still stunned, he walked quickly out.

He came to the barber shop, and it was dark. He stopped in front of the door. The dark glass of the door, with a street light shining against it from across the way, was both transparent and a mirror. In it, he saw three things.

He saw, in the mirror part of the door, the face of horror that was his own face. Bright green, with careful expert shadowing that made it the face of a walking corpse, a ghoul with sunken eyes and cheeks and blue lips. The bright green face mirrored above the green suit and the snazzy red tie—

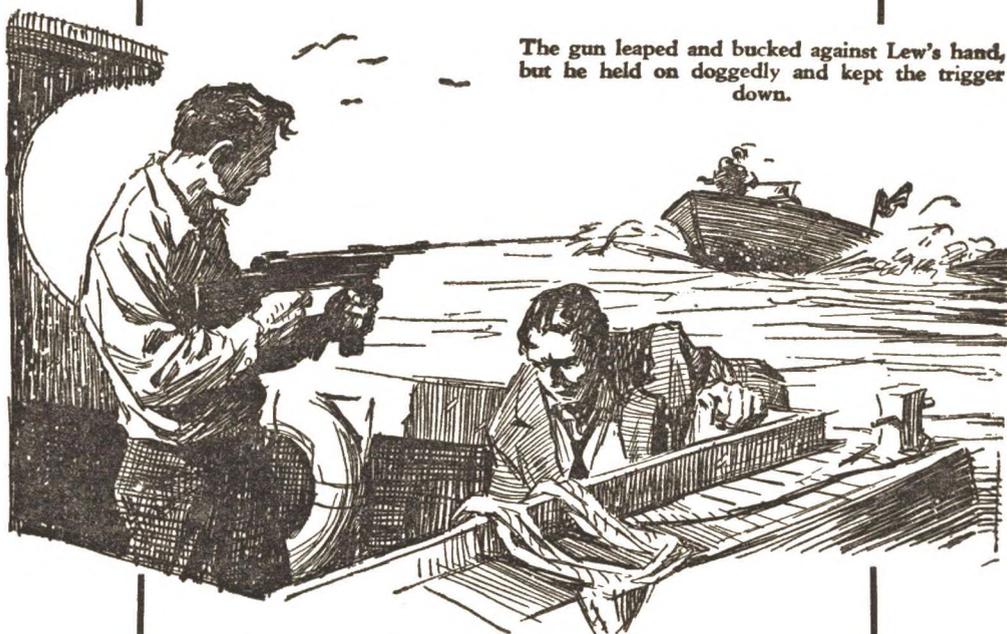
And the note, stuck against the inside of the glass of the barber shop door, written on white paper in green pencil:

CLOSED
Dane Rhymer

Marie Rhymer, Dane Rhymer, he thought dully. While *through* the glass, inside the dark barber shop, he could see it dimly—the white-clad figure of the little barber as it dangled from the chandelier and turned slowly, left to right, right to left, left to right. . . .



A FRIEND OF DAVY JONES'



The gun leaped and bucked against Lew's hand, but he held on doggedly and kept the trigger down.

By **DAN GORDON**

Marine Detective Lew Guyon learned two things at Millionaire's Cove: (1) That private eyes aren't immune to murder charges; and (2) that when speedboats are whizzing by at sixty miles an hour—you can't shoot what you can't see!

THE MORNING activity on the pier didn't bother Lew Guyon, but he awakened when someone stepped aboard the boat. His hand found the .45 beneath the pillow, released it as the legs came down the ladder. He said, "Enter, Angel. Stumble in, O Vision."

Sue Brandon said, "Go right on sleeping. Don't let *me* keep you awake."

Lew said, "It is as nothing, baby. I was

just getting up. Come on in, fairest lady."

"Just getting up," the girl repeated. The sweetness went out of her voice. "Listen, did or did not my father hire you to protect people here in the cove?"

"He did. And I did. I visited each yacht, all but tucked each chubby millionaire into his downy bed."

She nodded. "And right after you left they held up the *West Wind*. The women

lost their jewelry, and the men lost thousands of dollars."

Lew Guyon walked to the porthole, looked out at the water, at the flotilla of luxury craft riding easily on the placid surface of Millionaire's Cove. It wasn't absolutely necessary that he follow through on this job. Brandon had seemed like a nice guy, but this daughter of his was a menace. She had, he reflected, a pleasant voice when she used it pleasantly. But why wait around for that?

"Did I ever tell you," Lew said, "how I feel about millionaires?"

"No," Sue Brandon said, "but I'm dying to hear."

"Don't give a damn about 'em," said Lew. "Especially at this hour of the day." He found a roll of bills, kept two, shoved the balance toward her. "You owe me for a night's sleep. I tied up here an hour ago, after spending the night put-putting around this cove."

Sue Brandon ignored the money. "My father hired you. I didn't. Give it to him. And if you find it convenient to move your things ashore by this afternoon, I'd like to use my boat."

Lew touched his forehead and said, "Yes'm." The girl bit her lip, turned away and went up the ladder. Lew looked after her thoughtfully. He'd have to hang around for a day or two. Having sent the wire to Sammy Sultan, he'd have to wait for Sammy to tell him the job was off.

He had intended to feel quite well as he shaved and ate breakfast. He didn't. Maybe a stretch. Maybe a walk on the dock. . . .

THE FIRST THING he saw when he went topside was Sammy Sultan's schooner, Sea Maid, as she slid in beside the pier.

The olive-dark man standing aft by the wheel called aloud to Lew. "Hi, chum. They don't shoot you yet?"

"Not yet," Lew said. "How's Cuba?"

"Hot," said Sammy Sultan. "Cuba is very warm." He swung a leg over the schooner's rail, leaped and landed cat-like on the dock beside Lew Guyon. "Down there is too hot; up here is too cold."

"Hotter'n the gulf?"

"No," Sammy said. "No, not *that* hot."

"It was a good job."

"Yeah," said Sammy Sultan. "If the chump had lived to pay us it would have been an excellent job."

"Like the one we just lost."

"We?" said Sammy Sultan. "You work for Cipelli too? I wonder where he hears of me. Now I know. It is like old times. Here you are, and here I am. It is like that, eh?"

"No," Lew told him, chuckling. "It is not like that. Cipelli must have heard of your lily-white reputation. I was on the other side of this war—until this morning."

"So?" What happened?"

"Fired," Lew said shortly. "But let's not stand here. Get a bottle of your number one rum. There's not a barroom on the cove, but I know where to find a tea room."

The woman who ran the tea room wasn't too happy about the rum, but Sammy Sultan topped his brilliant smile with a crackling bill, and she went away and left them alone.

Lew poured an inch of rum in the bottom of Sammy's cup, took his own coffee straight. "This lad," Lew said, "this Cipelli. After he made his pile during prohibition, he settled down here to enjoy a life of exclusive ease with the other millionaires."

"It's nice," Sammy Sultan commented.

"If you like it, or can afford it. Apparently Cipelli can't. Or at least he can't any more. Coupla months ago, some gang began a series of sea-going stickups, knocking off the yachts at anchor. Brandon, the guy who hired me to stop it, wanted it done quietly. He felt that ringing in the law would give the place too much publicity."

"Reasonable," said Sammy Sultan. "Very reasonable. I never heard of Millionaire's Cove until Cipelli sent his man."

"They've kept it that way. Mostly old families who've had their moola for years. They can afford to pay to stop Cipelli without calling in the cops. Which is why I sent for you. The boys I have on the tug are tough enough for diving work, but they wouldn't stack with Cipelli's gang. Now, I dunno. I'd say Cipelli is going to make one big haul, shake down every yacht in the harbor, load everything aboard and ship it south with you."

Sammy Sultan said virtuously, "Me, I know nothing. I carry cargo for the man—as long as the price is right. Of course, I would rather work with you, but if you have no money. . ."

"I've got some," Lew Guyon said, "but I've got to give it back. Want to come along for the ride? We'll use Miss Brandon's boat."

"Young girl?" Sammy Sultan inquired, moving his eyes. "Pretty?"

"Yeah. But not your type. Strictly uptown."

"Good," said Sammy. "I been thinking of going into society."

"She talks," Lew said with some bitterness. "Has a yap like a tiger shark. Which is why I quit."

"So," said Sammy. "Well, it is regrettable. But no matter. You work with me for our friend Cipelli."

Lew grinned. "Cipelli wouldn't like that."

Sammy Sultan spread his hands expressively. "Who cares what he likes? Come on."

They walked back to the dock, and Lew looked out over the water at the fog bank rolling in from seaward, glancing sideways at Sammy Sultan. "Sammy, I ought to tell you. I've been legit since the war."

Sammy looked at him. "So? What's your racket?"

"Marine investigation. Anything that comes up. I'm a sea-going private dick."

Sammy Sultan seemed faintly embarrassed. "What the hell," he said. "You are my friend."

They dropped it there and began to discuss the old days, the rough days. Pearl fishing off Australia, the business in South America. They had taken their chances and mostly won and sometimes lost and tried again.

The fog was all around them by the time they reached the boat. Lew stepped into the cockpit and gunned the motor while Sammy threw off the lines. Sammy said, "You know where she lies?"

"I can find her." Lew eased the cabin cruiser away from the dock, and they went ghosting along through the fog in the general direction of Brandon's yacht. The mist, hurrying along close to the surface, enclosed the boat in a tiny pocket of visibility.

They were, Lew thought, about half-way out when Sammy Sultan touched his arm and said, "What—"

They both heard it, the sound of a shot, vague and directionless. Lew pulled the throttle back, allowing the engines to idle. Listening, they heard nothing but the slapping, hissing waves.

Then, with a roar of a high-powered engine, the other boat was upon them, flashing into view, skidding in a wild turn as the man at the wheel spotted the cabin cruiser. Lew saw Cipelli at the wheel, and beside him a thin, spidery little man he didn't know. He saw the thin man's arm come up, and together he and Sammy Sultan flung themselves to the deck.

The bullet, splintering the cockpit glass, made a high tinkling sound. The exhaust of the flying speedboat growled derisively as the boat vanished in the fog.

SAMMY SULTAN sat up, slipped his gun back into its shoulder holster. "Where do you keep it?"

"What?"

"The gun. What you think I want? Your address book?"

"Below," Lew said, "Under the bunk."

Sammy ducked below, returned with a sub-machine gun. He said: "They come back, Louie, my boy?"

"Maybe." Lew booted the stern around and sent the boat ahead slowly, at right angles to her original course. "The fat guy at the wheel," he told Sammy, "was Cipelli."

Sammy, his brows rising, said, "Careless, isn't he?"

Lew didn't answer. Instead, he cut the engine and reached for the chopper. Sammy Sultan handed it over, patted his ribs, and came up with a gun in his hand.

The boat had loomed suddenly out of the fog. It wasn't the one that had passed them. This boat was small, a runabout. It lay in the trough and rolled with the sea. The cockpit seemed empty.

When they were closer, Lew saw the man on the floorboards. They lowered their guns and boarded. "Brandon," Lew Guyon said.

"From the back," Sammy Sultan commented. "Close up."

"No fight," said Lew.

"No fight," Sammy Sultan agreed.

Lew looked down at the lean grey face. He had liked Brandon pretty well. "Dirty," he said. "Damned dirty."

Sammy said, "Easy," as the sound of another boat's engines came through the mist. Lew and Sammy leaped aboard the cruiser.

Lew cut his own engine, hoping he'd been quick enough. The sound they'd heard diminished, came closer again.

"Patrol boat," Sammy whispered.

"There isn't one."

"Don't tell me! I can smell cops a mile away. Let's breeze, Louis."

"And leave this guy to bleed to death?"

"They'll find him. Hurry!"

Lew nodded and brought the engine to thundering life. Sammy cast off from the smaller boat and the sleek cruiser went heeling and careening into the fog.

Looking back, Lew saw the shadow of a bow emerge from the mist. It looked like Cipelli's boat, but he couldn't be sure. The dim shape changed, became small and symmetrical as the other boat altered her course to give chase. Lew crowded the throttle and looked at Sammy Sultan.

"That guy'll bleed to death."

"Okay," Sammy said. "He'll bleed. If they catch us, we'll burn to death."

Lew said, "Hell, we didn't shoot Brandon."

"No? Suppose I'm the law. I hear you're running away in a pea-soup fog. You got a dead man behind, and Sammy Sultan for a passenger. Nice, baby?"

"Lovely," Lew said. Glancing back at the pursuing boat, he spun the wheel hard right, ran for a heavier fog bank broad on the starboard bow. "Just the same," he said, "we'll lose these tramps, go back and

patch up Brandon. I'll feel better then."

The whine of bullets forced them down in the boat. Behind them, they heard the unhealthy chatter of a machine gun. Lew brought the rudder amidships and the firing ceased as they ploughed into the fog bank. They headed back in a slow circle, found Brandon's boat on the nose.

"Nice maneuver," said Sammy, "but foolish."

"Save it," Lew told him. "Let's get this guy aboard."

They lifted Brandon aboard the cruiser and Sammy examined his wounds while Lew kicked the boat ahead. "Bad?" Lew asked without looking back.

"Pretty bad. Maybe he makes it, maybe not. What now?"

"We take him in?"

"And he dies on the way?"

Lew shrugged and altered his course as the sound of the other engine came faintly across the water.

They made it into the pier. Lew and Sammy remained with Brandon, and sent a boy to phone for a doctor and Brandon's daughter.

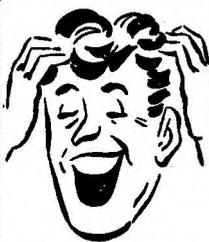
SUE BRANDON got there first. She knelt, silent and grief-stricken, beside her father. Lew, seeing the question in Sammy Sultan's eyes, nodded.

The doctor was coming aboard, but Sue Brandon ignored him. She looked at Lew Guyon and said very distinctly, "Why didn't you finish the job? I should have known when you quit that you'd sold out to the gang."

Vince Cipelli stood on the dock and said, "Who is it? Mr. Brandon? We thought we heard a shot."



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AS A KNOT?**



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Lew looked at the former gang boss, at the spidery man beside him. Cipelli moved his bulk to step down into the boat and Lew said sharply, "Stay off her."

"Is it your boat?" Cipelli asked gently.

"No. But I'm the guy don't want you aboard."

The spidery man crawled forward. "Now, buddy," he began.

"Here's the meat wagon," Sammy Sultan said hastily.

The ambulance stopped, its crew came with a stretcher and removed the still-unconscious Brandon. As the stretcher was handed up, Cipelli made another move to board the boat.

"Coming aboard," Cipelli said.

"Don't," Lew said quietly.

The spidery man moved his hand. Sammy Sultan's hand flickered briefly and a gun leaped into his fist. "You gentlemen," he murmured, "have more persistence than brains."

Lew said, "Thanks, Sammy." He glanced up at the ambulance. The men were closing the doors and Sue Brandon was watching the play on the boat. Lew called "I'd like that job back, Miss Brandon."

Wordlessly, she shook her head.

"I'll do it cheap. The service won't cost you at all."

She hesitated, then came to the edge of the dock, looked at him, and pressed the roll of bills into his hand. Then she ran for the ambulance, climbed in front with the driver.

Sammy Sultan leafed the few limp bills. "This isn't money," he said plaintively.

"No money," Lew agreed, "but a good job." He jerked a thumb at Cipelli. "You wouldn't work for Tubby, there—now, would you?"

"For a price," said Sammy Sultan, "I would work for Mr. Hoover. I mean Edgar, of course."

Lew smiled and said, "What about me? For a marker?"

"*Your* I.O.U.!" Sammy shook his head in sorrow. "Why I ever knew you is a mystery I cannot explain." Then, as Cipelli started forward again, "Shove off, my fat friend. And believe me, I hate to see you go. With you goes my last chance to make an honest dollar here in these putrid waters."

Lew watched Cipelli and the spidery man walk away. He kept his eyes on them absently, wondering if Brandon were to die, whether Cipelli would attempt to pin a murder rap on Sammy and himself to cover his own operations.

"Well?" Sammy Sultan said.

"What?" Lew answered vaguely.

"I would not interrupt your dreams, but I have a schooner tied up near here. I have just pulled a gun on the man I came to work for. I believe he will act like a substantial citizen and call the local cops. I also believe his boys will carry out his original plan and stick up these yachts tonight. If I am now not mistaken, I hear the sound of a siren. He has already phoned the constabulary. They are coming to take us in. Now. Can you do something?"

"I guess we'd better shove off," said Lew, cocking an ear at the siren.

"I guess," Sammy Sultan said.

The fog stayed with them as they left the pier. It was chilly and close to the surface. Sammy Sultan, below, brewed a pot of coffee, while Lew remained at the wheel. Staring intently ahead, he found the effect of the swirling vapor hypnotic. Then he made out the sail boat, the grey-white belly of the sail, the little curl of water at the bow. Lew rubbed his eyes, looked again, and flung the wheel hard right.

The cruiser heeled, and her stern, skidding, barely missed the sailing craft. Looking back, Lew made out two figures dimly outlined on her deck before the fog closed in again.

Sammy Sultan came up the ladder and said, "What the hell? I'm now wading in coffee."

"Couldn't help it, Sammy. Some fool out in a sailboat. We almost ran him down."

Grumbling, Sammy slid back down the ladder and returned with two cups of coffee. He handed one to Lew.

"Thanks, Sammy. I'm glad you came along."

"I'll mop it off the deck, then I wring the rag. Good, no? Where you headed?"

"All the way across. Our best move is to stay out of jail and clear of Cipelli until we can get your boys off the schooner. Next time we see Cipelli, he'll have more

hired help. Not just one underfed hood."

Zinging in from the starboard side, the bullet passed through the cockpit. Lew hurled himself to the right, scooped up the sub-machine gun and turned to face the boat that was bearing down upon them.

Too late. The other boat opened fire before Lew could bring his gun to bear. They flattened themselves on the deck and heard the lead burn the air, watched it splinter the woodwork. Lew raised his head and saw the speedboat rocket away.

Recognizing the spidery man, Lew was bringing his gun up when the other man fired first and caught him high in the shoulder. Lew gritted his teeth and clapped one hand to the wound. With the other, he picked up the gun. Then, turning, he saw Sammy Sultan. Sammy's face was contorted, his hands clamped tight on his belly. Sammy said, "How do you—" His voice trailed off.

Lew shifted his eyes to the curtain of fog. The roar of the boat came then.

Slowly, Lew squeezed the trigger. The gun leaped and bucked against his hand.

He saw the surprised expression on the thin little face, watched while the stream of lead ate into the bow of the oncoming craft. The roar of its engine died abruptly. Somebody let out a scream. Lew Guyon leaned against the rail, dropped his gun.

When he looked again, the fragile hull of the speedboat was slipping under the waves. Behind Lew, Sammy Sultan sat in a pool of blood. His face was very pale.

From the other side of the boat, there came a scraping sound. Lew saw the hand on the rail. He dragged himself to it, grasped it and leaned back, feeling the tearing strain in his shoulder. He gave a final tug, and the spidery man slid aboard and flopped like a fish on the deck. . . .

CROUCHED in a blanket on the starboard bunk, the spidery man looked like an Indian chief.

Sammy Sultan lay in the other bunk. He said faintly, "We get Cipelli?"

Spider said, "I guess he couldn't swim."

Lew's shoulder was hurting. His shoulder was hurting like hell. The bunks were full, and somebody had to take the boat in. . . . He grasped the edge of a bunk and hauled himself up off the deck. "Goin'

topside," he announced. He fought his way up the ladder, poked his head through the hatch and gratefully gulped the air—and saw the sailboat not fifty yards away.

An ancient and bearded Negro sat cross-legged on the bow.

"Here's one of them," the old man said. "Come look at him, Miss Brandon."

She came aboard and said, "You're wounded."

Lew started an airy wave. The pain interfered with the gesture, stopped the wave in mid-air. He said, "You ought to see the other fellow."

"Cipelli?"

Lew let his eyes go blank. "Never heard of him," he said. "Couple of guys below got in a fight. We were drinking and—you know how it is. How's your father?"

"Grand. He's going to be all right."

Lew nodded and staggered below. With the girl close behind him, he steadied himself against the door frame and looked at the spidery man. Lew said, "You got any more interest in this racket, or were you in it strictly for Cipelli?"

"For Cipelli," the man said, "and the dough."

"You sure drew a blank," he said.

"Not me. I never draw a blank. Cipelli floated a while, see?"

"Well?" said Sammy Sultan.

"Well what?"

"Come up with half."

Reluctantly, Spider pulled out a soaking roll. "All twenties," he said. He split the bundle in two, tossed one half to Sammy.

"Fine," said Sammy Sultan. "Now I don't hurt so bad. If we dropped you on the other shore, you think you could pull a fade?"

"*Could I?*" he breathed. "If anybody'd told me I'd come out of this with nothin' more than a headache—" He eyed Sammy Sultan searchingly. "You're a funny guy," he said.

Lew Guyon, watching Sammy, realized that the wounded man wasn't paying much attention. Sammy was staring at the girl, and the girl was looking at Sammy. Lew said, "A funny guy is right. To me he looks like a guy who will soon be settling down."

Sammy Sultan said very thoughtfully, "I got a clean record here."

PACKED HOUSE

By **ROBERT
ZACKS**



"They're packing the house on you, mister," I told him. "They're filling it with friends."

"This party is on the house," Stanhope announced . . . and his friends sat down to drink him out of house, home and more folding stuff than he could hope to make in a month of swindling Sundays!

I STARED at Mr. Stanhope, the office manager. I was burning but didn't dare show it. As he knew damn well. "I can't come," I said. "My wife and I have an appointment. With friends."

I promptly felt sick at the last remark. I hadn't intended any implications; my subconscious had intercepted my tongue and run it for a touchdown.

Mr. Stanhope lifted his eyebrows. "Ah," he said politely. "I see."

He nodded thoughtfully and went back to his desk. I began to sweat as I thought it over. After five minutes my legs got me

up and reluctantly took me over to Mr. Stanhope.

"I might be able to make it," I said, each word coming as hard as a pulled tooth. "If I can I will."

Mr. Stanhope nodded, didn't look at me, and kept writing.

The rest of the afternoon was an exhausted blur. At five o'clock I went home. Mary had a hot supper waiting. She was brushing her hair before the mirror.

"Listen, honey," I said sourly, "Stanhope invited us to attend an office get-together Wednesday night at some joint

called the Pink Palace Bar. It seems that Mr. Markham the big boss is going to be there and—"

Mary stopped combing her hair. She said indignantly, "But our date—"

"I tried to say no. You know how it is. You don't *have* to go, but if you're smart you show up. If Mr. Markham is coming. . . ."

"What's the occasion?" demanded Mary. Her face was flushed.

"No occasion," I muttered. "Just a get-together. I suppose Stanhope wants to show Markham how he keeps morale up."

"Was he insistent?" asked Mary hopefully.

I shook my head. "I'd better go," I said. Mary understood. She made a face.

It wasn't pleasant, phoning Mac and Ellen, our best friends, and telling them. Mac was nice about it, but I could tell he was as annoyed as the devil. We always had such wonderful times when we got together.

Over the phone Mac said, "Well, it's a pity. I just got that record player and two hundred dollars worth of records. From Beethoven to Josh White."

I groaned. That hurt. We both loved music.

I FELT pretty savage myself Wednesday night when Mary and I went down to the Pink Palace Bar. I'd never heard of the place, but then Brooklyn has thousands like it: ornate, brassy, dim with indirect lighting, a noisy jazz band blaring until you get a headache, and a dance floor so small it helped utter strangers get extremely acquainted. It was also out of the way, which didn't help my mood any.

Mr. Stanhope waved casually to us when we came in. I forced a smile back at him.

When we were seated at a regular table for two, Mary said doubtfully, "This doesn't look like a get-together. Every body's at separate tables."

"Stanhope probably wants the boss to himself," I growled.

The crowd was terrific, the heat oppressive, the ventilation poor and the service terrible. After a few moments of jazzy blaring by the band I took my hand away from my ear and saw Joe Halliday, the fellow who works next desk to me in

the office. He waved gloomily, came over and pulled up a chair.

"You get roped in too?" he asked.

"Yes," said Mary. Joe grunted and looked around.

"It sure doesn't look like the kind of place Mr. Markham would like," growled Joe. I looked at Mary and she was staring at me queerly. Mr. Markham was a nice, old, quiet guy. He had the tact and delicacy of the well-bred, educated man, and his tastes ran to literary and artistic things. He wasn't the night club type, and this joint was far from a night club.

I looked at my watch. It was well into the evening. No Mr. Markham yet and I was beginning to burn. So was Mary.

"I'll bet he doesn't come," said Mary.

She had crystallized the feelings we all had. Joe said, slowly, "Well, I don't get it. Unless Stanhope—"

He didn't get a chance to finish because Stanhope's bland face suddenly appeared above him smiling down at us.

"Having a good time, folks?" he asked. He was a little high, but under control yet.

"Just dandy," said Mary brightly. I said, politely, it was terrific.

"Where's Mr. Markham?" Joe asked bluntly.

Stanhope shrugged. "Well," he murmured, "I told him we'd be here. He wished us a good time. It would certainly be nice if he dropped in tonight."

There was a moment of stunned silence. Then Stanhope said smoothly, "By the way, this party tonight is on me. It won't cost you a dime. Just initial the check with my initials."

He smiled at us and nodded, then walked over to another table. We stared after him in stunned amazement. Joe recovered first.

"Well, what do you know about that?" he breathed. "I'll bet he's got a piece of this place. He's a pretty nice guy after all."

I got up slowly.

"Where are you going?" asked Mary. She was really mad, but controlling herself.

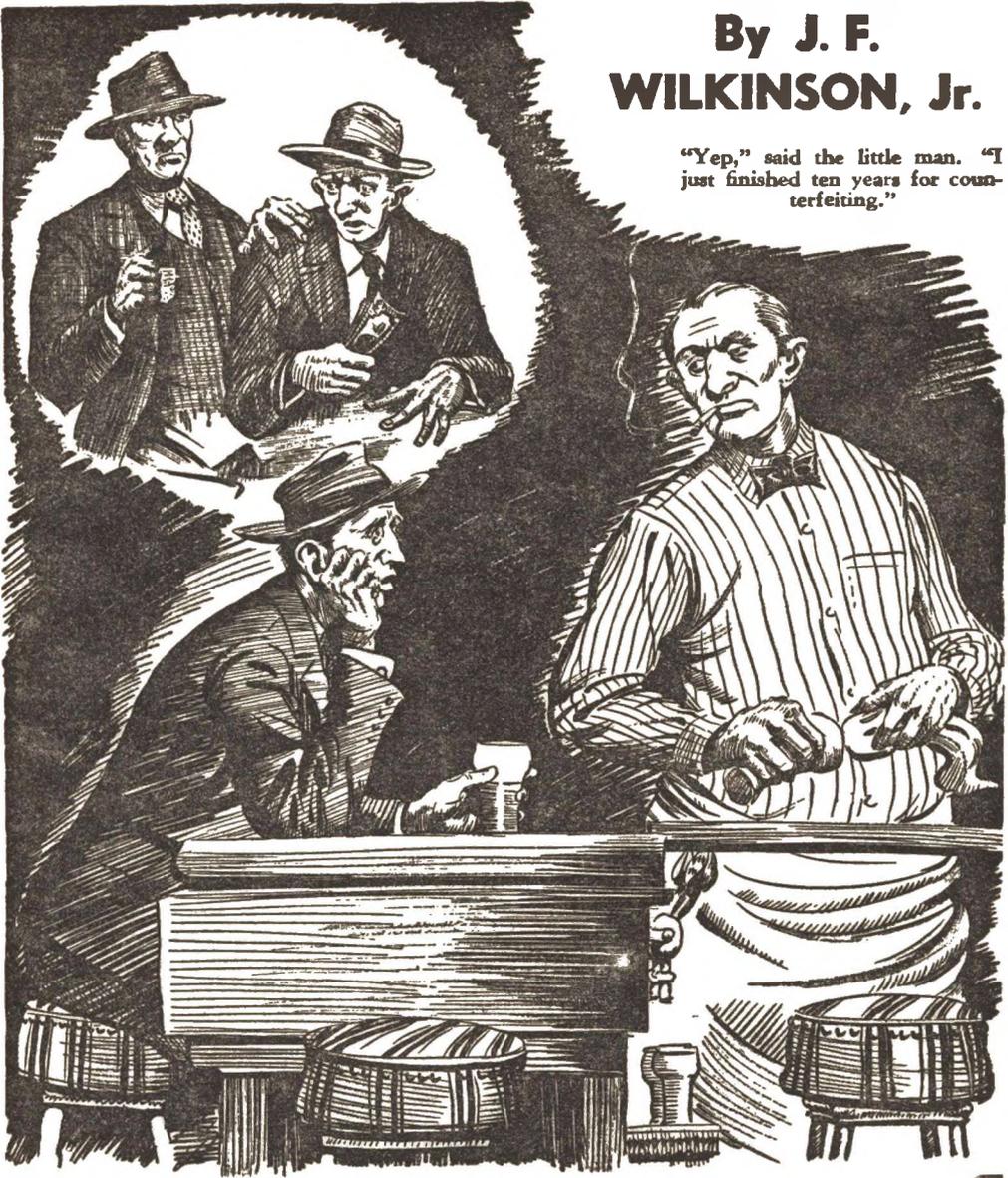
"To look for a man," I said.

As I walked away the pieces of the puzzle fell neatly into place. Intently my

(Continued on page 128)

By J. F.
WILKINSON, Jr.

"Yep," said the little man. "I just finished ten years for counterfeiting."



NOTHING BUT THE BEST!

Herewith the sad story of the unluckiest guy ever to set up shop in competition with the U.S. Mint . . . and turn out lettuce that would make Alexander Hamilton turn over on a ten-spot!

THE bartender was alone when the pale, little man entered the bar. He continued polishing the glass in his hand until the little man chose his barstool. Then he put the glass on the shelf behind him and said, "Yes?"

"Glass of beer," said the little man.

The bartender drew a glass of beer, scraped the foam from the top, put it be-

fore the little man and picked up the dime from the bar. The bartender returned to his glasses and the little man began sipping his beer.

After the bartender had polished seven glasses and the height of the beer had gone down an inch and a half, the little man looked up and spoke. "Know where I just been?"

The bartender studied the little man's pale face. "Hospital?"

"Ha!" said the little man and returned his attention to his beer. The bartender had been wearing an apron for fourteen years and was surprised by nothing. He started on his glasses again. After another inch of beer the little man looked up.

"I'll tell you where I been," he said. "I been in the pen."

The bartender glanced under the counter at his bung-starter to make sure it was there. "Yeah?"

"Yep," said the little man. "I just finished ten years for counterfeiting."

"Yeah?" repeated the bartender.

"It just goes to prove that you ain't got a chance for anything if you don't get the breaks," said the little man.

"Breaks?" asked the bartender. "What kind of breaks?"

"Any kind of breaks," said the little man. "I never had a break in my life. Back in the early thirties before I got sent up all I had was troubles, troubles, troubles. I had a wife and two kids to support and only half a job to do it with. How you going to support a family working two-three days a week?"

"I did," said the bartender.

"Well, I didn't even want to try it," said the little man. "I was an engraver when I worked, so I thought I'd try my hand at making phonies. When I first got the idea I took home enough tools, acid and plates from the plant to start a mint. After that I spent a month thinking about it. You know why guys get caught making phony money?"

"I don't know," said the bartender. "Guess they don't do a very good job of it."

"That's it," said the little man. "Most of them do a sloppy job. Not only that, they throw it around. Got to be big shots right away. I knew I could do a perfect

job and I also knew I didn't have to blow a lot of dough around. I could just do it easy-like.

"I got a new ten-spot in my pay one week, so I held that out to draw from—sort of a model. When I finally decided to do it, I worked. Worked ten or twelve hours a day when I wasn't working at the plant. I looked at that sawbuck so much I even dreamt about it. I worked like a dog and even then I threw the first set of plates away. The second set was perfect; J. Edgar Hoover himself would have thought they was okay."

"WHAT happened wrong?" asked the bartender.

"I'm getting to that," said the little man. "Wait a minute. When the plates were finished I got a hold of some heavy bond paper—you know, the stuff that banks wrote letters on. I took a fine-point pen and drew little red and blue lines all over it, little lines like you see on a bill. I printed two bills from one sheet of paper and I figured that was all I needed for a week. After I cut the bills out of the big piece of paper, I crumpled them up and let them soak in strong black coffee so they'd look like they'd been around. I tell you, you put one of mine side of that ten-dollar bill and no one could tell the difference."

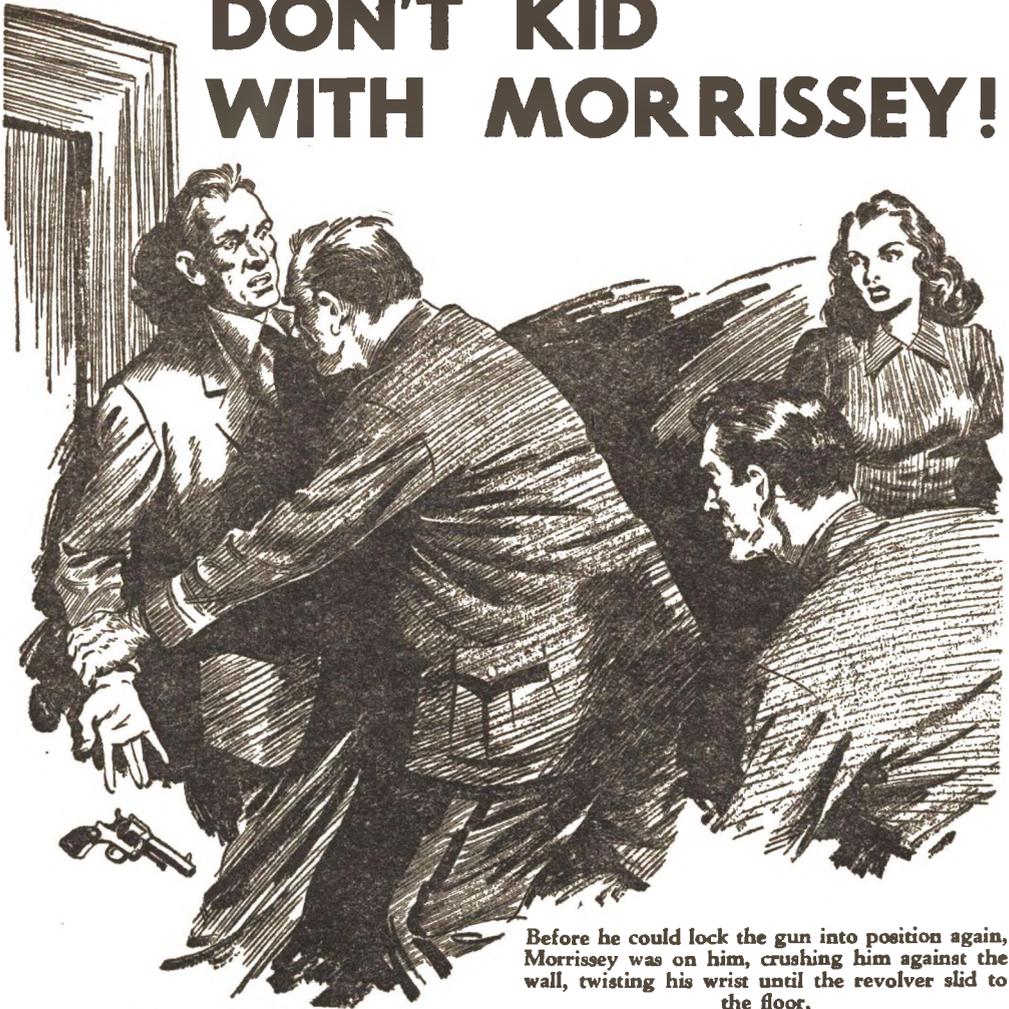
"Well, what happened wrong?" asked the bartender. "Where does the bad luck come in?"

"I'm getting to that," said the little man. "Let me finish my story. How about a head on this beer?" The bartender put five inches of beer in the glass, and the little man went on. "Like I said, I wasn't going to throw the money around and look suspicious so I didn't. I printed two bills a week and spent them both at the family grocery. After two weeks I thought I had the world by the tail. Then, the third week I went to the same grocery to dump the bills and the Feds collared me and I got ten years."

"But how did they pick you up?" asked the bartender. "You said your money was a perfect copy."

"That's the breaks I get," said the little man. "The ten-spot I copied from was a counterfeit."

DON'T KID WITH MORRISSEY!



Before he could lock the gun into position again, Morrissey was on him, crushing him against the wall, twisting his wrist until the revolver slid to the floor.

"I can keep my temper when someone is murdered," Chief Morrissey said. "But when someone starts tampering with my witnesses—gents, watch out!"

By PHILIP WECK

THE COP stuck his head in the door and said to Walt, "You're next, bud."

Walt got up stiffly and walked through the door and into the chief of detectives' office.

It was a dingy office, small, cramped, with an old-fashioned, roll-top desk in one corner and half a dozen straight-backed

chairs scattered around. The air was thick and close. It stank of perspiration and heavy, stale cigar smoke. It bore no trace of the faint, clinging perfume he knew so well—no trace at all of her presence, though she unquestionably had been there. "Where is she?" Walt asked.

The chief of detectives and the cop who had summoned Walt were the only others

in the office. The chief said, "Siddown."
 "Where is she?" said Walt. "Where is my wife? What have you done with her?"

"Look, fellow," said the chief, "if you want to find out, you'd better sit down." Walt sat down.

Across the desk from him was the chief, a fat, nearly bald man with small, piggish eyes and a hook nose. He breathed noisily and his fingernails were dirty. His name was Morrissey; the newspapers, Walt remembered, called him intrepid and incorruptible.

To his right sat the cop, notebook and pencil ready. He already had taken several pages of notes, Walt saw. Were some of them the statements of his wife?

"That's better," said the chief. "Name?"

"Look," said Walt, "you know what my name is. I want to get this thing straightened out and find my wife and take her home."

Morrissey said patiently, "We're trying to get it straightened out, fellow. Now just answer our questions and you'll save a lot of time and a lot of trouble. What's your full name?"

It was Walter D. Axmon, Walt said, and in response to other questions he said that he was thirty-four and the sales manager of the Mills Bearing Company. He lived at 29 Oak Lane, in the suburb of Plum Grove.

"Okay," said the chief. "Now you're the husband of Gloria Axmon; is that correct?"

"Yes."

"And you know the dead man, this Montrose Fulton of 25 Oak Lane?"

"He was a neighbor of mine," said Walt.

"And your wife—she knew him, too?"

"Of course," Walt said. "He was a neighbor, I told you."

"Did she know him in any other way—were you close friends?"

Walt said, "No. We were neighbors, that's all. She didn't like him very well."

THE CHIEF OF DETECTIVES took a cigar out of his pocket and unwrapped it. He kept his eyes on the cigar.

He said, "Did you get that, Ed?"

The police stenographer said, "Yeah.

He said, 'She don't like him very well.'"

"'She didn't like him very well,'" Morrissey corrected. "Not 'don't.'"

Then he said to Walt, "Okay, now. Your business took you out of town a lot, didn't it?"

"Yes," said Walt.

"Overnight?"

"Frequently."

"Any idea what your wife did those nights when you left her alone?"

Walt put his two hands on the edge of the chief's desk. He said, "I don't know quite what you're getting at, but I don't like it."

Morrissey said, "Read him that statement of Perry's, Ed."

The cop turned back a few pages of his notebook. Then he read:

"From the statement of Clinton Perry of 30 Oak Lane, Plum Grove. . . . 'It was about three o'clock, the morning of July 21st. I was driving down Route 21 when I recognized Fulton's car about a block in front of me. It's a cream-colored convertible, easy to spot. There was a woman with him. I followed them for a while and they came to the Del-Mar Tourist Court and they turned in and stopped there. Fulton was wearing a tux. The woman had a green dress on, without any sleeves, a formal. I recognized it; she had worn it to the country club dance only a week or so before. I went on home. About three in the morning I heard Fulton's car pull up across the street and I heard him say good-night to the woman. She was—'"

Walt jumped to his feet. "That's a damned lie!" he shouted.

The cop was out of his chair and around the desk before Walt could move. He pinioned Walt's arms, to his sides and forced him back into the chair. "Don't try none of that, bud," he said. "It don't pay."

Morrissey said, "Does your wife have a green evening dress, Axmon?"

"I refuse to answer that question," said Walt.

"Put that down, Ed," said the chief.

"Put it down; he refuses to answer the question. We can find it when we search the place."

"Search the place? Our house?"

"Yeah," said Morrissey. "Your house.

We'll get a warrant and make it legal; don't worry. This is murder, Axmon. Fulton was murdered, you know."

Walt said weakly, "But . . . but he died. It was the D. T's."

"That's what everybody thought," the chief said. "Everybody but his wife. You see, she didn't know him like the rest of you neighbors did. She didn't know he was a drunk; she only knew him a week when they got married, sudden-like. Is that right?"

"I—I don't know," Walt said. "There was something funny about it."

"You're damn right there," the chief replied. "Anyway, she didn't know he had the D. T's. So she called a doctor. And he didn't act like a man with the D. T's to the doctor. He had convulsions and he kept yelling about his feet and then he died. So the doctor asked for an autopsy, and it was strychnine. A nasty poison, Axmon."

"What's this got to do with my wife?"

Walt cemedanded.

"Read it to him, Ed," the chief said wearily.

Ed read from his notes:

"Report of Patrolman West: 'We took samples of the garbage and the medicine in the cabinet and the food that was in the ice-box and the pantry and the whiskey.' Report of Doctor R. N. Pauley, toxicologist: 'Garbage, negative. Medicine, negative. Milk, negative. Whiskey, positive. Twelve grains of strychnine. Two grains is more than a fatal dose.' Statement of Mrs. Maude Easton, mother-in-law of the deceased—"

Morrissey said, "Skip that one, Ed."

"Okay," Ed said as he turned another page.

"Statement of Mrs. Esther Fulton, widow of the deceased: 'I don't know where the whiskey came from. It was all mixed up. I went shopping yesterday and I met Mrs. Axmon, my next-door neighbor. She had her car and she gave me a lift home. Then she came over tonight and she brought the whiskey, wrapped up. She said she found it in the car and it wasn't hers and she thought I must have left it there when I took my groceries out. But I didn't buy any whiskey. I told her. She said she knew it wasn't hers. Monty was there and my mother and sister.

Monty said, "Okay, we'll take it." He opened it and he offered all of us a drink. But we didn't take any. He did. Then later, during the night—"

"That's enough, Ed," said Morrissey. "You get the drift now, Axmon?"

Walt said, "No. No, I don't. I don't get it at all. Why would Gloria—"

"Because," said the chief, "Fulton ran out on her. He picked up this other babe and married her. Your wife was jealous and—"

"It's a lie!" Walt yelled. He was on his feet again. "It's a damned lie!"

"It looks pretty good to me," said the chief. "You got anything further to say?"

"It's all a bunch of lies!" said Walt. "All of it!"

Morrissey looked at him coldly and said, "Show him out, Ed."

ON THE WALL of Bill Rance's office was a portrait of Walt Axmon. A photograph of Gloria and Walt Axmon stood in its frame on Bill Rance's desk. An enlarged snapshot of Gloria and Walt Axmon and Bill Rance hung from another wall.

Walt Axmon in person sat in the visitor's chair. Rance stood by the window. He was a tall, cadaverous man with brooding eyes.

He said, "This is terrible. It's horrible."

"You're a lawyer," said Walt Axmon. "Get her out."

"I can't." Rance turned around. "It's too late; the courts are closed now. Possibly I could get a writ in the morning. But why do they think she's guilty? What evidence do they have?"

"A trumped-up bunch of lies! It's the damndest, rottenest bunch of liars I've ever heard of, from that no-good tramp he married, to—"

"You mean Esther Easton, the hat-check girl?" asked Rance. "She seemed to be a nice kid."

"I didn't know you'd ever met her."

Rance said, "I—I really don't know her. I met her over the back fence at your house, just the night before last, while you were mixing the drinks at their wedding reception."

"Well," said Walt, "she's lying and her mother's lying and her sister's lying and

Perry—" He hesitated. "Perry's the foulest liar of the whole bunch."

"Let's go over it again," said Rance. "Let's get this whole thing straight. We've got to beat this charge somehow."

"Okay," said Walt. "Gloria was out shopping yesterday. She saw this Mrs. Fulton—this Esther Easton—and she gave her a ride home. Mrs. Fulton left a package in the car and last night Gloria brought the package back. It was a bottle of whiskey and Mrs. Fulton says it's the bottle that had poison in it."

"What about Perry?"

"Perry is the one who says Gloria was mixed up with Fulton. He says he saw them go into a tourist camp together about two in the morning a week ago. That's where the cops got the motive; they say Gloria got jealous when Fulton picked up the other girl and married her."

"Walt, where was Gloria that night?"

"She was at home! Where do you think?"

"Are you sure?"

"What the hell are you driving at?" Walt demanded.

"Maybe Perry isn't lying."

"Damn it!" said Walt. "You know Gloria almost as well as I do. You've been to dinner at our house every week and we've been away together. You know that she wouldn't play around with any man, much less this Fulton. You know she hates him."

"Yeah, that's true," said Rance. "But why should Perry tell that story? Is there any reason why he should lie about something like that?"

Walt Axmon rose and paced the floor.

"There has to be," he said. "I know he was lying. But why? Look. You know where those tourist courts are?"

"Sure, down along River Road."

"That's right. Perry is a high school teacher. What was he doing on the River Road at that time of night?"

"Maybe he was visiting somebody."

"On the River Road? It runs between the river and the cliffs, for forty miles. Nobody lives there. There's only one side road—the one that goes to your hunting lodge."

"Maybe he was just out for a ride."

"At three o'clock in the morning? No. He was there for a reason, and whatever

it was, it's connected with this—this lie he told about Gloria."

"It might be," said Rance. "It might be. The thing to do is find out why he was there. I'll get a private detective agency busy on it right away."

"Nuts," said Walt. "Let's go out and talk to him ourselves."

"I'd like to," Rance said slowly. "I'd sure like to. But that's tampering with a witness."

"We're not going to tamper with him. We're just going to talk to him."

"I could be disbarred, possibly," Rance said. "I don't know. . . ."

"Well, I'm going." Walt picked up his hat and walked toward the door.

Rance watched him with his eyes narrowed. He said, "It looks as if I'll have to go with you. To protect your interests. Wait till I call my hunting lodge and tell them I won't be out tonight."

THEY DROVE in Walt's car. Neither spoke as they fought their way through city traffic and into the suburbs.

Perry's home was a neat but small fieldstone and brick residence, set well back from the street. Perry answered the door himself and peered at them over the top of his glasses.

"Er—ah—come in," he said. "Come in. I, ah—"

He let the sentence die unfinished and stared at them and then stepped back from the door.

They followed him into the living room and stood there while he sank nervously into a chair.

He said, "Well, ah—gentlemen, I—"

"Look here, Perry," said Walt. "What the hell are you trying to pull? What kind of stuff is this you've been telling the cops?"

Perry was a small man, with a tiny face and eyes that loomed large and frightened from behind his spectacles. His hair was awry, his lips continually parted and his face twitched involuntarily.

He said, "I—I'm sorry. Really, I am."

"A lot of good that does!"

Perry sighed. "Yes. I know. But what can I do?"

"You can go to the police and retract that silly statement," said Rance.

"I can't retract it. It's the truth."

"It's a damn contemptible lie!" said Rance.

"It's the truth. Besides, what concern is it of yours?"

Bill Rance said, "What concern is it of mine? I'm Mrs. Axmon's attorney, for one thing. I'm her friend, for another. I know she was never out with Fulton or any other man."

"But I saw her. I tell you, I saw her. Oh, I'm not blaming her. It's that Fulton. he was a charming man, to the women. Even to the young women—the girls."

"Look," said Rance. "I've known Gloria Axmon since she was a—since before she was married. I've known Walt Axmon since I was a kid. He saved my life once, when we were boys. When we were older, after he was married, he and his wife fed me and they set me up in business. They—"

"That's entirely irrelevant," said Perry loftily.

"No, it isn't. I'm trying to tell you that I know Gloria Axmon and that I know what kind of a woman she is and that I know you're lying in your teeth."

"Wait a minute," said Walt Axmon. "This isn't going to get up anywhere. Tell me, Perry, what did you mean when you said Fulton was attractive to the young women?"

"Why—why, I meant that any woman might be swept away, any woman at all."

"Your daughter Marie—she's about twenty, isn't she?"

Perry's voice suddenly was low and quiet, and hopeless.

"She's nineteen," he said.

"What were you doing out on the River Road at three o'clock in the morning?" Walt asked. "How did you happen to hear what Fulton said, at five in the morning, when your house is a hundred yards back from the road?"

"I—ah, I—"

"You were following Fulton that night, weren't you, Perry? You were sitting up listening at your window, weren't you? Not because it was Gloria he was out with. Because it was your own daughter wasn't it, Perry? Because you thought he was mixed up with her and you wanted to find out. Isn't that it, Perry?"

"No!" said Perry. "No! I wasn't. It's not true!"

"Where is she now, Perry?"

Perry gestured wearily. "Upstairs."

Walt stepped to the foot of the stairs. "Marie!" he called. "Marie! Can you come down here a second?"

She came down into the living room, a young girl who was far too old for her years. A girl who had been weeping and whose eyes were disconsolate and bitter. She was attractive and full-figured, and with the bloom of health in her cheeks and the smile of youth on her lips she would have been fresh and eager and appealing. But the bloom was gone and the smile was gone and the face was gray.

She looked at the men, from one to the other, and she didn't greet them. She waited instead for them to speak.

Walt said, "Marie, it's about that dress you borrowed from Mrs. Axmon. The green evening gown. Could you get it for us, please?"

She turned and walked off.

Her father called after her, "Marie! Marie!" She stopped.

"Yes, father?"

He raised his hand, and then he let it drop. Quietly he said, "Get the dress, dear."

THEN she was gone, back up the stairs, and the two visitors sat and looked at Perry. After a moment he began to speak, in the disillusioned, empty, hollow voice of a man who is faced with the end, the very end, of his dreams.

"I can't believe it," he said. "I can't believe it."

They waited, and he went on.

"In the first place," he said, "my wife is dead. She has been dead for ten years. I've tried to raise Marie myself. It wasn't too difficult—the actual physical part of it, because of my hours as a teacher.

"But there was a lot more to it than the physical raising and taking care of her and seeing that she had clean clothes and that she was fed and nicely dressed. There was a lot more to it—a lot of times when a girl should have a mother and when a man just can't take that place.

"I thought I'd done a good job with Marie, until she was seventeen. Then—then something happened. It was the crowd she went with, I think. They weren't wild but they were too modern,

too sophisticated. Things happened, and Marie didn't tell me. I felt that she was slipping away from me. She went out, more than I wanted her to, more than I gave her permission to. I couldn't stop her. She'd come home with the smell of liquor on her breath and she'd laugh at me.

"There was one night, gentlemen, when I fell asleep waiting for her to come home, right here in this chair. I woke up and there she was, in front of me, with her hair all mussed and her face dirty and her clothes rumpled. She put her arms around me and she wept bitterly.

"I took her up to bed and I gave her a sedative and the next morning I asked her what had happened. But she wouldn't tell me. She wouldn't say a word.

"She was quieter then. She stayed home evenings. She worked around the house. She was frightened, hurt, bewildered.

"Then last spring something happened. She began to sing again and to pretty herself up and to laugh, and she wanted new clothes, lots of them. She went out, maybe once a week.

"I knew it was a man. I was glad at first. But he never came to our house. I tried to find out who he was. I asked her but she wouldn't tell me. I followed her. I spied on her. The only person I saw her talking to was Fulton.

"At first I thought he was just being neighborly. Then I was frightened. I knew what kind of a person he was. I knew what he would want with a girl as young and as charming and as fresh as Marie. But I wasn't sure. And the very thought of it drove me mad.

"I had to find out, don't you see? I had to. So I followed him. Night after night, when she would go out, I would follow him. I would lose him. His car was faster than mine.

"Then, that night in July, I followed him again. I lost him. I drove around for hours and hours, looking. I saw his car, finally, a long distance ahead. I followed it to the River Road. I almost caught up, and I saw him drive into that tourist court.

"Believe me, gentlemen, I didn't want to see him with Mrs. Axmon. I wanted to see him with any woman—any one at all—as long as it wasn't Marie. When I saw that green dress I was thankful, I was

happy. I didn't realize it would turn out so—so horribly."

He stopped speaking and the two men in the room with him were quiet for a long time.

Then Bill Rance said, "That night—did you see Marie leave the house?"

"No, I didn't," said Perry. "She left a note for me. I had a summer class at the university and I didn't get home until late."

"You didn't see what dress she had on?"

Perry said, "No. No, I didn't." He whispered the words.

They heard her coming down the stairs and they waited. She came in and handed the dress to Axmon. Then she turned and went out without a word.

Walt didn't hold the dress up or examine it in any way. It was green; that was enough.

Perry said, "I—I'm sorry."

They didn't answer, and Perry rose from his chair.

"Excuse me a moment," he said.

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He went out of the room, an old, old man. He went upstairs.

Walt Axmon said, "We shouldn't have done that. We would have found some other way."

"Nuts!" said Bill Rance. "He was sending Gloria to jail, wasn't he? Why should we care what happens to him?"

Walt said, "I wish I had known."

The doorbell rang, suddenly and startlingly.

They waited and no sound came from upstairs—no one up there made a move, apparently, to answer. The doorbell rang again.

"I'd better get it," said Walt.

It was Morrissey, the chief of detectives, fat, piggyish, his small eyes boring into Walt's. His uniformed secretary was with him.

Morrissey sighed heavily.

He took Walt by the arm and led him out onto the front stoop.

"Look," he said patiently, "I don't want to have trouble with you. I can keep my temper when someone is murdered, but when people start tampering with my witnesses—gents, watch out!"

"I'm not breaking any laws," said Walt.

"Read him what it says about tampering, Ed."

"Sure," said the secretary. "Wait till I get my handbook out."

He was reaching toward an inner pocket of his coat when they heard the shot.

It came from upstairs, from the back of the house.

They heard the shot, and then the thud of a body. And then the clatter of high heels running toward the shot and the scream, "Daddy! Daddy!"

THEY FOUND him in his bedroom, a severely masculine bedroom, stretched out on the floor with a bullet hole in his right temple and a gun in his right hand and his daughter huddled beside him, stroking his bloody face and sobbing hysterically.

He was dead. They picked her up and led her out of the room, and while they were trying to quiet her Rance came pounding up the stairs and found the note.

It was scrawled, barely legible, as if the man who had written it had been in a desperate, frantic hurry. It said:

"My daughter . . . I have tried, but I failed. . . . I killed Fulton. . . . Good-bye. . . ."

It was unsigned.

The coroner came and called it suicide, and a doctor administered sedatives to Marie Perry and a patrolman drove off with her for the home of relatives.

"Now," said Morrissey, when the patrolman and the girl had left, "let's go, you too."

"Where?" Rance demanded.

"Down to my office. I want statements from you."

"Are we under arrest?"

Morrissey sighed. "Get the bracelets out, Ed. This boy wants to wear em."

It was a short, quiet ride, with Ed, the police secretary, whistling under his breath and Morrissey cracking his knuckles absent-mindedly.

In the chief's office, Walt and Rance took seats.

"Ed," Morrissey said, "send someone after the two babes. Mrs. Fulton and Mrs. Axmon. And then get your notebook."

He plopped comfortably into his chair and in a minute Ed was beside him, notebook and pencils ready.

"Okay," Morrissey said to Walt, "what's your name?"

"Are we going into that again?"

"Yeah, we're going into it again. What's the name?"

Walt told him, then bit by bit he recounted the afternoon's scene at Perry's home—the father's story, Walt's sudden memory of what had happened to the green dress, the confession, the suicide.

Then it was Bill Rance's turn. Angrily he gave his name, his occupation, his address.

A commotion at the door stopped him. The door opened and a police matron came in with Gloria Axmon.

Walt leaped to his feet, but Rance moved faster. The lawyer was at her side, holding her hand.

"Gloria!" he said. "Are you all right? Did they mistreat you? Did they—"

She smiled wanly at him, but her eyes sought out Walt's. And then she sat down, poised and cool, as if she were entertaining in her own home.

"Let me get you a glass of water," said Rance. "Do you want a cigarette?"

"I'm all right, Bill," she said.

Chief Morrissey glared at her with his fat, pig-like eyes. Then he said, "See if the other one's here yet, Ed."

The other one was Esther Fulton, and Ed ushered her in. She was tall and big-boned, with dyed hair and a hard, glittering smile, and she took a seat as far from Gloria as possible.

"Now," said the chief, "let's get this whole thing straightened out. Everybody here know everybody else?"

No one spoke.

"Good Good. Now, Ed, you read that part from Mrs. Axmon's statement about how she found the bottle of whiskey."

Ed flipped through the pages of his notebook as the tension in the small, crowded office grew.

"Statement of Mrs. Gloria Axmon, neighbor of the deceased. 'I met Mrs. Fulton in the village that afternoon when she was shopping and I gave her a lift to her home. She put her bundles in the back seat. That evening I saw another package on the back seat and I thought she had left it there. I took it over to her. It was a bottle of whiskey. Mr. Fulton offered us a drink but I very seldom drink whiskey and Mrs. Fulton didn't want any and so he took a drink alone and. . .'"

"Is that correct, Mrs. Axmon?" the chief asked, interrupting. "Do you want to make any change in that statement?"

Gloria said, "No, I don't. That is entirely correct."

"Okay, how about you, Mrs. Fulton? Does it sound all right to you?"

"Sure," said Esther Fulton in a hard,

bitter voice. "Except that part about me leaving the bottle in her car. I didn't buy no whiskey. She brought it over herself. She killed him!"

"That's a lie!" shouted Bill Rance.

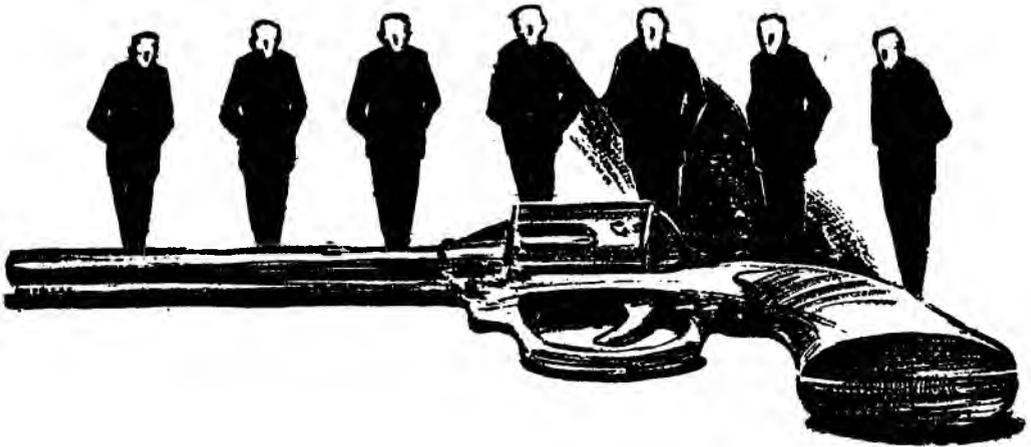
"Shut up!" said the chief. "Shut up or get out of here! What I'm trying to tell you is that it doesn't make any difference about that note Perry left. Mrs. Axmon is still the person who gave Fulton the bottle with the poison in it. Now, Ed, read 'em that part about tracing the whiskey. What Dunkelman found out this afternoon."

MORE PAGES riffled in the notebook with a slight hissing sound. Then Ed spoke again in his matter-of-fact, precise voice.

"Statement of Detective Sergeant Vince Dunkelman: 'The poisoned whiskey was Stone Mill Bond. The wholesaler in this city is Jones Brothers. We went to Jones Brothers and Mr. Bill Smith of Jones Brothers told us the only retailer in Plum Grove is the Dufour Liquor Company. We went to the Dufour Liquor Company and Mr. William Dufour said he had sold eight bottles of Stone Mill Bond this last month, to a Mr. Harry Samken of Main Street, a Mr. Johnson—Dufour doesn't know his last name—a sailor, Mrs. James Kelly of Plum Grove Avenue, Mrs. Walter Axmon, Mr. Peter—'"

"That's enough," the chief said. "How about it, Mrs. Axmon? Did you buy some of that whiskey?"

Gloria said, "Of course. That's the brand my husband uses. You'll find that



same bottle, unopened, in our home."

"Read 'em the statement about searching their house," Morrissey said.

Ed said, "I ain't had time to make a statement. But we didn't find no whiskey. No whiskey at all."

"I don't understand it," Gloria said.

From across the room Esther Fulton said clearly, "I do. I understand it perfectly."

"Shut up!" Morrissey glared at her. "You admit it looks bad for you, don't you, Mrs. Axmon?"

"Don't answer that," said Rance.

"Okay, okay," Morrissey cleared his throat. "Now if Mrs. Axmon's statement is true—"

"Of course it's true!"

"If Mrs. Axmon's statement is true, and Mrs. Fulton's is, too—"

Esther Fulton opened her mouth to speak, then closed it again.

"—there's one thing everybody here has overlooked. Somebody else planted that poisoned whiskey in the Axmon car. And he didn't know Fulton was going to drink it."

The office door opened again and a patrolman came in.

Morrissey sighed. "What do you want, Bill?"

"It's that Perry dame, chief. I was takin' her to her aunt's and she said she had something important to tell you, so I brought her back here."

"Okay, show her in."

"Now?" the patrolman asked. "With all these people here?"

"Sure."

Marie Perry walked in, her face still mottled and swollen, her lipstick smeared, her eyeballs tiny pinpoints from the soporific she had been given. She walked jerkily and she stopped just inside the doorway and looked at each of the people there.

"Siddown, Miss Perry," said the chief. "What did you want to tell me?"

But Marie Perry did not sit down. She did not look at the chief. Her glance, instead, was fastened on Esther Fulton.

"You!" she said. "You—"

"Now wait a minute," said Morrissey. "Take it easy."

"You tramp!" breathed Marie Perry. "You tricked him. You made him marry you. You thought you could get him for

yourself. But you were wrong. It would have been wrong to let him live with you. He had to die."

She walked slowly and jerkily toward Esther Fulton, across the length of the smoke-filled, stuffy office, like a puppet on a string. Her fingers were outstretched and her hands raised and her eyes tiny and dark and intense. Stunned, powerless to move, the others watched her.

"Now it's your turn," she said. "I'm going to kill you!"

From his chair, Walt Axmon watched, amazed and fascinated. He saw Morrissey sitting, crafty and silent. He saw Bill Rance crouched in another chair, his hand in his coat pocket.

He saw something else he had not seen before, suddenly and blindingly.

And he made his play.

He leaped across the office.

He hit Marie Perry just above the knees with a perfect block, bringing her tumbling to the floor. He rolled on top of her and the two shots, stark and ear-shattering, plunged over them and into the wall.

When he got to his feet the office was jammed with uniformed and plainclothes policemen. Marie Perry was out cold and Esther Fulton, her face pale, was sobbing. Bill Rance was pinioned in his chair, his revolver in the hands of a detective, his coat with a gaping, smoking black hole through the pocket.

GRADUALLY the confusion cleared. They sent Marie Perry to a hospital and gave Mrs. Fulton sedatives. Then they settled down to talk again, Morrissey and his secretary, the Axmons, now side by side, and Bill Rance, with Rance's gun on the chief's desk.

Rance said, "I've got a permit for that gun. I'll admit I shouldn't have shot at her, but she was going to kill someone else, just as she said she'd killed Fulton."

"How could she have killed Fulton?" Morrissey asked.

"She was there that night—at Fulton's reception. I saw her. She could have gone through the gate and put that whiskey in Walt's car."

"Kind of roundabout, wasn't it?"

"She had the motive, she practically confessed. What more do you want?"

Walt Axmon said quietly, "That isn't quite right, Bill."

"No," said Morrissey. "You left something out, Rance."

Shakily, Rance got to his feet. He leaned against Morrissey's desk.

"Yeah," he said. "I left something out."

Then he swept up his gun and leaped toward the door.

"You're damn right I left something out! And I'm going to take it out with me! Stand up, Gloria!"

Gloria said in a clear, even voice, "Put the gun away, Bill."

"Might as well," said Morrissey. "You can't make it, Rance. You'll never get out of here."

"I'm going, and I'm taking Gloria with me!"

"You were nuts about her all along, weren't you?" Morrissey asked. "You planted that whiskey because you wanted to kill Axmon here, instead of Fulton. I figured that as soon as you showed me the phony suicide note, Rance. No father would have written a note like that. He would have addressed it to his daughter." He smiled grimly.

"And on top of that, if either of the Perrys wanted to kill Fulton they certainly wouldn't have known that they could do it by leaving a bottle of poison in Axmon's car.

"But your plan backfired, Rance. Fulton died instead of Axmon. And when the woman you hoped would marry you, Gloria Axmon, was incriminated, you didn't know what to do. First you tried to use Perrys' suicide to fasten the blame on him; you wrote that phony note. Then, when that didn't work, you tried to kill the girl, right in front of me, thinking you could put the blame on her.

"Isn't that right, Rance?"

Bill Rance said, "Sure, that's right! I put the whiskey in Axmon's car the night of the wedding reception at the Fultons. Nobody noticed it until the following day; nobody even noticed that I'd stolen the bottle from Walt's sidebar. I wanted to kill Walt Axmon, not Fulton. I wanted to kill Axmon because I hated him!

"He saved my life once—and he never let me forget it. He sent me to school, he helped build up my practice, he married the girl I loved. And he knew it and he never let me forget it. He taunted me with it. So I planned to kill him, and I muffed it!

"But I'm not going to muff it now! I'm going to shoot him through the heart, and I'm going out of here with his wife and nobody's going to stop me because if they do, she'll die, too! Do you get it, you fat slob?"

"You're not going to shoot anybody with that gun tonight, Rance," Morrissey said. "It's unloaded. We took the bullets out of it when we got it away from you."

Bill Rance stared at him stupidly and then at the gun in his hand. His mouth gaped and he broke the gun, swinging the cylinder out.

Four bullets still were in that cylinder.

But Rance found it out too late. Before he could lock the gun into position again Morrissey was on him, crushing him back into the wall, twisting his wrist until the revolver slid harmlessly to the floor.

"A fat slob, am I?" the chief panted. "A fat slob?" He picked up the gun, walked back to his desk. "Before you lock him up, Ed, read him that section about respect for the law."



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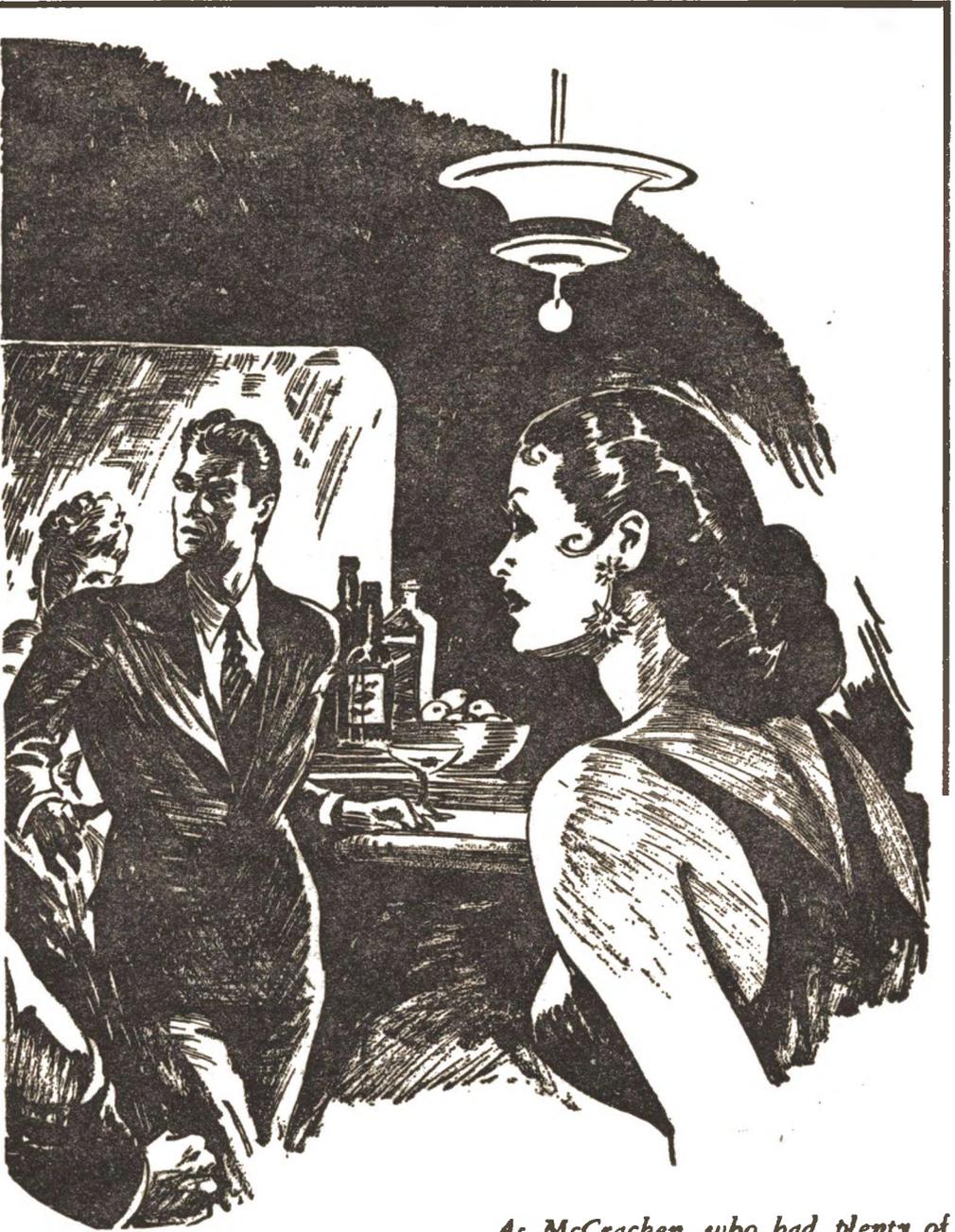
LADY IN RED

By LARRY HOLDEN



McCracken started his swing—but that was as far as he got. Somebody grabbed his arm, and something hit him on the back of the head.

Thrilling Crime-Detective Novelette



CHAPTER ONE

The Message

MCCRACKEN stopped at the newsstand on the corner to pick up a paper, and he glanced back down the street from the tail of his eye. The red beret with the frail blonde

As McCracken, who had plenty of experience in this thing, could tell you: When a thrill-mad society girl and a love-hungry little bo-peep start wrestling over a wife-killer—let the corpses fall where they may, because it's anybody's battle!

little girl under it was still a half-block behind. Right now she was standing before a hatter's window, seemingly absorbed by the summer display of men's panamas. She had followed him all the way from his office. He had spotted her the moment she had darted out of the drug store doorway. Not that he cared. If she wanted to follow him, let her. When she made up her mind, she'd talk to him—because that's all she was doing back there, trying to make up her mind. He'd seen this indecisive type before.

He turned in at the lunchroom and took a table facing the door instead of sitting at the counter, because he wanted to see what she'd do next. He saw her come up to the window and peer in, biting her lips. For a moment their eyes met and held. She flushed and her hand flew to her mouth. He grinned and beckoned to her with his crooked finger. Her jaw dropped and she looked ready to run; then her chin went up and she walked in.

McCracken pushed out the opposite chair with his foot and said, "Sit down and have a cup of coffee."

She flushed again under his calm scrutiny. She sat demurely with her eyes lowered, clutching her red plastic bag at her chest just at table level. She had filmy blonde hair, enormous dark blue eyes and a mouth so small and full that it looked almost puckered. It was very red, as red as her chewed fingernails, redder than the sport suit she was wearing.

"You're Mr. McCracken, aren't you?" she asked in a small, breathless voice, "I don't want any mistake about that."

"Your worries are over. I'm McCracken. Why didn't you come up to my office? I wouldn't have minded."

"You're laughing at me."

"Sure." The counterwoman brought over two coffees and winked at McCracken as he turned away. McCracken carelessly charged his cup with twice the amount of sugar he needed and said, "What's on your mind?"

THE GIRL'S HANDS dipped down under the table and he knew she was clutching her red bag more tightly. "You're a detective. You solve murders, don't you?" she asked intensely.

"I haven't yet, but I've made some

pretty good guesses about the business."

She looked disappointed.

"Most private detectives don't get murders to solve," he told her. "The cops grab them all. Did you have anything special in mind?"

"I wanted a murder solved."

He took a gulp of coffee and made a face. Too sweet, as usual. "I'll tell you, sugar," he said. "As much as I hate sending customers to the competition, if it's murder, I think you ought to let the cops have a whack at it first. There's a lot of professional jealousy goes on and they'd throw a fit. And another thing, they're better at it than I am. They've had more practice. Take a run over and see them. Some of them are pretty nice boys in a lousy sort of way."

"The police did have a chance at it. And I don't like to be made fun of!"

She flushed again, and he thought idly that she must have pretty loose blood, the way it kept bouncing up and down into her face. He wasn't taking her very seriously.

"What murder did you have in mind?" he asked.

She nodded at the newspaper in his pocket. "It's on the front page."

His eyebrows went up, but he took out the paper and unfolded it on the table. There was no murder on the front page. There was a big, black headline—**FARRELL FREED!**—and a lot of other stuff about the UN, Russia, a baby who had swallowed a fishhook and the weather.

"Farrell freed?" he asked.

A year before, young Farrell had been arrested for the murder of his equally young wife. Today the jury had acquitted him in the record time of thirty-five minutes.

Of course, if it hadn't been for Leo Martingale and Veronica Picot's millions, the kid would have been fried and buried months ago. Veronica Picot was the steel heiress with millions to play with and the whole world to play in. She had dramatically returned from South America, announced her belief in young Farrell's innocence and hired Leo to defend him. At that time she was the only one who did believe in his innocence, but by the time Leo got finished with that jury, the boy could have been Bluebeard and they would

still have pinned a medal on him. That's what Leo Martingale could do in a courtroom.

"That murder?" McCracken asked.

"Yes."

He wrinkled his nose and rubbed his hand across his chin. "What's your interest?" he asked curiously.

Her lids veiled her eyes for a moment. "I—I know Paul Farrell," she said in a low voice. Her mouth broke and her lips began to tremble. "He's going to marry that woman."

"Veronica Picot?" McCracken whistled. "Pretty soft for him."

"But he doesn't love her. He's only grateful. Because she hired that big lawyer for him. It's nothing but gratitude."

"Yeah. I can see that. I'd find it a little hard to love a girl with all that dough, too. What I mean to say is, I'd find it a little tough to keep my mind on love and out of the bank account. But *she* loves *him*, is that the idea?"

She looked up. Her enormous eyes blazed. "No!" she said with compressed fury. "No. She doesn't love him!"

She startled him out of his weary cynicism for a moment with her vehemence—but it was only for a moment.

"Then what is it with her—gratitude, too? Gratitude that he let her think him innocent and spend all that dough—"

"She doesn't think him innocent!"

He leaned back in his chair and put both hands limply on the table. "Sugar," he said, "you got me. My morbid interest is aroused. How do you know she doesn't think he's innocent?"

Her hands squirmed in her lap, but she leaned forward and kept those enormous eyes unwaveringly on his face.

"I talked to her. She was very evasive. But I know why she wants to marry him. She wants the thrill of being married to a murderer. She's always looking for new thrills, but there's never been one like this. She's never been married to a man who killed his own wife."

FASCINATED, he watched her little red mouth open and close, showing her small, milk-white teeth. When she finished he said, "Nuts."

"You don't think a woman would marry

a man because he's a real murderer?"

"No. And neither do you."

"What about all those letters Paul Farrell got when he was in jail? Hundreds of women wanted to marry him."

"Oh, those screwballs." He waved his hand, but he had the uneasy feeling that she had pinned him down. Veronica Picot, as everyone knew, was the prime screwball of the age. But he couldn't see her marrying a man she believed to be a murderer just for the thrill. No. That was like putting your head in a lion's mouth to see if he'd bite because you knew he would. Uh-uh. She'd get no satisfaction out of being right.

"Conceding your point for a minute," he said to get her off the subject. "Why shouldn't the guy marry her if he wants to?"

"Because he isn't a murderer, and when she finds out that he's just ordinary, every-day Paul Farrell, she'll ruin his life."

"Look, sugar. Just because Leo Martingale got the jury to acquit this guy doesn't mean he didn't bump his wife."

"Paul didn't kill her. She was killed by gangsters. She was a singer in a night club, wasn't she? Why didn't she wait for Paul to take her home that night? He always took her home. Because the gangsters took her away, that's why. They hit her over the head with an automobile jack and threw her in the woods. The night club where she worked was owned by Joe Rice, and everybody knows Joe Rice was a gangster."

"Kind of a crummy place for a gangster to own, wasn't it? If I remember, it was just a family tavern with a little entertainment. And she only sang there three nights a week to help pay the rent and buy some groceries."

"It was just the kind of place a gangster would own to cover up," she said darkly. Then, pleading, "Mr. McCracken, a lot of people still believe Paul killed his wife. I don't want—he can't go through life with that hanging over him. I want you to find the real murderer. I—I—" The words would come no longer and she just sat there looking at him with those big eyes, bleak and piteous.

He saw it now. The picture was pretty clear. During the trial the district attor-

ney had done his damndest to show that Paul Farrell had been interested in another woman, but he had never been able to find her or to get Farrell to admit there was one. But there she was, sitting across the table from him, fighting now to get her man back, because it was pretty obvious that she was head over heels with the guy.

She didn't give a damn about turning up the murderer. All she knew was that her man was going to marry another dame out of gratitude, and she wasn't going to let him. She was going to throw some gratitude of her own at his head. Veronica Picot had pulled the guy out of the electric chair by the seat of his pants, but she was going to be the one who cleared his fair name. She was right that a lot of people thought he would never have gotten off had it not been for the magic of Leo Martingale.

Suddenly McCracken felt very sorry for her. There was something wrong with a guy who'd kill his own wife for another dame, then kick her over for still another dame—something more than just murder being against the law. There was a guy he'd like to take a good stiff poke at. And maybe he would.

He reached out and patted her shoulder. "Okay, sugar," he said, "your worries are over. I'll go to work on it."

"How much will it cost me?"

Her return to a brisk, businesslike tone was so sudden that he blinked for a moment before he could answer. Then he just waved his hand.

"On the cuff," he said. He couldn't charge her for what was going to be a pleasure. "Y'see, I never worked on a murder, and I'd like the chance to see if I can do it. It wouldn't be fair to charge you."

She nodded as if it actually made sense. "What are you going to do first?" she asked.

He knew what she wanted. She wanted him to go to Farrell and tell him he was going to make him an honest man and that this little mouse was paying for it. That was where she was going to work on his gratitude. That was what she wanted.

"I think it would be wisest," he said gravely, "to talk to Mr. Farrell first."

She let out the breath she was holding.

"My name," she said, "is Jessie May Sayers."

Subtle. "Is there any message you'd like me to give him?" McCracken asked. He folded his fist under the table and gently touched the rocky knuckles with the fingertips of his left hand.

She lowered her eyes. "Just—just that I want him to be happy," she whispered.

"I'll add a little of my own," he said touching his knuckles again. "I'll spread it on thick."

CHAPTER TWO

Million-Dollar Baby

McCracken had a pretty fair idea where he'd find Paul Farrell. Veronica Picot had a suite in the Hotel St. Marks, which had been expensively planned to trap just the kind of dollars she'd be throwing around. But knowing where Farrell was, and getting in there were two different things. In the St. Marks you paid for privacy and you got it. If a private detective walked in and poked you in the snoot, you could deduct it from the bill. You couldn't blame the St. Marks for not wanting to deduct anything from their bills. That was how they made their living.

He walked into the crowded lobby, still without a plan in mind. Then he grinned. Why not keep it simple? If that didn't work, he would think of something else. He called over a bellboy.

"I'd like you to page Mr. Farrell," he said. A dollar bill changed hands. "I'm an old friend of his from night school. I hear he's—"

"Yes, *sir*," the bellboy said. "He sure is. Follow me, *sir*."

McCracken said, "Huh?" and, a little bewildered, followed the boy to the bank of express elevators.

The boy pressed the button for him, then stepped back as the elaborate bronze doors noiselessly opened.

"You'll find Mr. Farrell on the Aurora Roof," he said.

McCracken said, "I can hardly wait," and, wondering, stood fingering a cigarette as the elevator shot him roofward. There was something wrong. This was too easy. Or maybe Farrell *was* expecting

a friend from night school. What a surprise this was going to be.

The elevator operator opened the doors and murmured, "To your left, sir. You're a little late. It's been going on since three this afternoon."

"I just heard about it."

What the hell had been going on since three that afternoon? Oh, a party. He could hear it now. He should have expected that. Veronica Picot would do things up right. But he wasn't prepared for the party that smote him as he went through the big double doors at the end of the corridor.

There were hundreds of people there, all kinds. There was a dance band, but he couldn't see it and he could just about hear it. There were tables laden with food, and he could tell immediately where the bar was, for that was where the crowd was thickest.

But what he wasn't prepared for—though in a way he had been warned—was the big white wedding bell that hung from the ceiling in a cluster of orange blossoms and white satin ribbon. This wasn't just a celebration—it was a wedding.

He stood and blinked. The guy had been released at two o'clock, married at three. What had happened at four? He had an idea about that, too. Veronica Picot had waited a long time for this special thrill, and she wasn't especially the patient type, from all he had heard.

He didn't have any trouble picking her out, even in that milling mob. And it wasn't only because he had seen her picture in the papers. She would have stood out in a crowd of Lana Turners, Gene Tierneys and Gypsy Rose Lees.

She was tall, black haired and built on the same general lines as a seal. Right now she was wearing a severely tailored black suit and low-heeled brogans. Her black hair was pulled back tightly from her face and sort of tied at the nape of her neck. Legs wide, like a man, she stood in a circle of men, a drink in her hand, her head thrown back in laughter. She had the widest mouth McCracken had ever seen on a woman, yet it was not ugly. Her eyes were extremely long and thin, turned up at the ends. Her face fell sharply from high cheekbones to a pointed, dagger-like

chin. Her skin was very white and the very contrast made her mouth, especially when she was laughing, look somehow like an open wound, a wound that cut to the bone. Yet, again, she was not ugly. She had a kind of gruesome appeal—like suicide made attractive. From the way she threw back her head and laughed with her body, McCracken knew what kind of joke she was laughing at.

But he did not see Farrell beside her. He couldn't have missed Farrell. Farrell was six feet high, red headed and had the face of a shy athlete. McCracken made his way slowly down the room toward the bar, looking around at every step. People bounced into him and bounced off and he didn't give an inch. He was burning. More than ever he was going to enjoy shoving his fist right in the middle of Farrell's face. This party was a combination wake and circus.

Then he spied Farrell sitting in the window all by himself behind the bawdy masculine group that focused around Veronica Picot. Farrell was sitting with his elbows on his knes and his chin on the heels of his hands, staring moodily through the window.

When McCracken got close enough he could see the change the past year had made in Farrell. You couldn't call him a boy any more. His cheeks were gaunt and hungry, and something had deepened in his eyes. The din of the party could have been the noise coming from a forgotten radio for all the attention he paid to it—or to his brand new bride.

McCRACKEN glanced sideways at her again as he shouldered roughly past her group. She was smooth—there wasn't an angle on her—but macabre.

He stopped within three feet of Farrell and said, "Hello, Farrell."

Farrell turned and looked at him without interest. He said dully, "Hello," and started to turned back to the window.

"I got a little something for you from a friend of yours," McCracken said. "Do you want it now?"

Farrell looked at him again. "A friend? Sure."

McCracken let him get to his feet before he started his swing—but that was as far as he got. Somebody grabbed his arm and

shoved it up his back as high as his ears. Something hit him on the back of the head and somebody else socked him on the jaw. He went down like a man who had just had all that happen to him—hard. A heavy shoe caught him in the ribs. He lay helpless and gasping while a thick-bodied thug knelt on his stomach as heavily as he could and expertly ran accustomed hands over him, taking away his shoulder gun and his wallet.

He heard Veronica Picot's voice say eagerly, "What's going on? I want to see!"

The thug handed her the gun and the wallet. The gun did not interest her, but the wallet did.

"A private detective?" she said. "But why?" She looked down at McCracken, who had rolled on his side, groaning gulps of air back into his lungs. Her glance rose slowly to Paul Farrell, and a smile moved slowly the whole width of her wide mouth. "Did you take a poke at him, darling?" she asked with anticipation.

"Me?" He made a small, bewildered gesture. "No. He said he had something from a friend, then these men jumped on him."

"He was set to take a swing at Mr. Farrell, Miss Pic—Mrs. Farrell," the heavy thug said respectfully. "I seen him coming and I tipped the boys the wink. He looked like he had one of them fighting drunks on. He gave you a funny look and first I thought he was going to let you have it."

"Oh, a drunk." Her interest cooled. "Throw him out. No, wait a minute," she frowned at the wallet in her hand, "Maybe there's something behind this. Put him in the room. I want to talk to him."

"Want me to work on him, Mrs. Farrell? I'll get it out of him."

"I'll bet," she said drily. "I said I want to talk to him."

The thug said, "Yes, Miss Picot." Then, "Let's go, Dempsey." He reached down, hooked his thick fingers in McCracken's collar and jerked him to his feet with careless brutality. Two thugs marched him out of the room, twisting his arms high behind his back.

Except for a pain in his side where he had been kicked, he was all right now. He

didn't resist. It wouldn't have done any good anyway. They could have broken both his arms with an indifferent twist, and they looked like boys who'd had plenty of practice.

With weary discouragement, McCracken remembered something he should have remembered before this. Veronica Picot never went anywhere without her hand-picked strongarm squad. Twice she had been the near victim of an attempted snatch, but each time the ambitious kidnapers had been mowed down as coldly and efficiently as if they had been stood against a wall. These boys were guarding twenty million dollars and they took their work seriously.

They took him into a small room in which was a leather lounge chair and a writing desk. There was a small radio on the desk, but that was all there was in the room. They pushed him into the chair. One guard stood by the door and the other sat on the edge of the desk, swinging his leg. There was an air of cold implacability about them, and they were so much alike they might have been of the same family—heavy-bodied, muscular, with watchful yet expressionless faces. They felt no animosity toward him, but if Veronica Picot had lifted her finger they would have broken every bone in his body with cool, workmanlike detachment.

McCracken sighed. "I usually get along with people, but I can't seem to like you guys. I don't think you're human."

They paid no attention to him.

"In the old days," he went on, trying to goad them, "you'd have worked in the basement of some castle. You'd have had black hoods over your heads and you would have used red-hot pincers instead of brass knuckles. You'd have liked it. Easy work, good pay and no cops to worry about."

They didn't even bother sneering.

He gave it up, and a few minutes later Veronica Picot came striding into the room, wearing a pair of plastic-rimmed glasses, slanted to match her eyes.

She gave him a brief, clinical glance and said crisply, "You're not drunk."

"No. Never have been. I gave up drinking because liquor seemed to get in my stomach."

She received that with the same cold in-

difference that the bodyguards had taken his earlier sallies. Maybe, he thought, they had lived together so long that they were becoming alike, like married people. Veronica Picot had had bodyguards since the cradle. Maybe she had even teathed on their gun butts.

"What's your story?" Her voice was exasperatingly detached, like the voice of a doctor asking for symptoms.

His eyes gleamed. He'd needle her out of that. "All I was doing," he complained, "was taking a swing at a louse; then these monkeys jumped all over me."

"You didn't do it for fun. You're a private detective. Who paid you?"

"I'll tell you. He shifted comfortably in the chair and grinned up at her. "I'm prejudiced. I can see a guy killing his wife. If I'd had one, she would have been dead years ago. She'd have nagged me. I can even see a guy killing his wife because he and another broad want to practice a little biology. I'm open-minded, see? Maybe he and this second dame were in love or something. The world's just lousy with love. But when the guy double-crosses mouse number two because mouse number three has a little more moo, that's when I get prejudiced. If you'll call off your watchdogs, I'd still like to take a poke at him."

Her mouth thinned to the thickness of a razor gash. "So there was another girl, after all."

"Not much of a one," McCracken apologized. "Not as much as you, for instance. I'll bet the little red bag she was carrying would have been expensive at two-ninety-eight. And her mouth wasn't as big."

She wasn't being needled. She was even smiling a little. "She's a brave girl," she said mockingly. "A man who killed one woman because she was in the way could kill a second for the same reason. Did she think of that?"

MCCRACKEN'S cynicism didn't go that far. He stared at this sleek, chilling woman with horror. Little Jessie May Sayers had hit the nail right on the head when she said Veronica Picot had married Farrell *because* she thought him a murderer. Not even in spite of it. Because of it. What a honeymoon Farrell was going

to have. For a flickering moment McCracken felt a little sorry for him. That was going to be an experience, being loved by Dracula's sister. But this momentary sympathy was replaced by grim satisfaction.

"I'd like," he said, "to be the last to congratulate both of you on your marriage. Has your husband given you any visible token of his gratitude?"

That was the needle that got her. That really got her. Not even being married for her money—that burned. But only for a moment.

"You think it was merely gratitude?" she lifted her skirt above her knees; the three men might have been wooden Indians for all she cared. "I don't think so."

They were just legs, McCracken told himself, just legs—but he wasn't fooling anybody. Sleek and slim, they had an emotional impact that stopped his breath in his throat. She laughed in his reddened face and let her skirt fall.

He said harshly, "Enjoy your honeymoon while you can, sugar. It'll be a mess before I finish."

She laughed. "No, Mr. McCracken. You're thinking of exposing Paul as the murderer of his wife. I'm as intelligent as you are. I know what you're thinking. But he has already stood trial for that. He can't stand trial again, even if you turn up a roomful of evidence."

"Maybe not. But there's a guy in this town who always thought there was something wrong with that double-jeopardy clause. He owns a newspaper. He thinks if you can prove a guy a killer, he should be put out of the way to protect other people. If I proved Farrell a murderer, he'd splash it all over the front page, and he'd love it if you took him to court. Then he could really make a splash. He'd lose, but he's got enough dough. He'd make his point. And there are a hell of a lot of people, Miss Picot, who don't think much of three on a honeymoon—you, your husband and his wife's corpse."

Her red mouth seemed suddenly redder in her white, white face. She said metallically, "I could have you beaten up every day for the rest of your life and there wouldn't be a thing you could do about it."

"Scare me," he jeered. "Show me your legs again."

He knew it was coming, even before she turned jerkily to the two thugs and snapped, "Let him have it!"

He jumped up as the thug by the door walked deliberately toward him. The one on the desk paused to give the knob of the softly playing radio a twist. The music bellowed deafeningly. McCracken made a grab for Veronica, but she laughed and leaped back as the guards closed in on him from either side.

He was going to get it—the guard from the door had a blackjack looped around his wrist. The smart thing would have been to take it and go out fast to avoid punishment. But his anger flamed and he leaped at the one by the desk, swinging. He twisted, avoiding a kick to the abdomen, and connected twice, once across the bridge of the nose, smearing it, and once against the hardest jaw he had ever hit. The sight of the blood sent his own blood singing—but after that it was a nightmare, and his only satisfaction was that it took them a long time. The delicate writing desk was smashed and re-smashed and the radio with it, and even after that they fought, trampled and rolled in the debris. He remembered one shrill cry of agony, but he did not know by that time from whom it came. The last thing he actually remembered was Veronica Picot's shrill voice crying in mingled exasperation and eagerness:

"Oh, get out of the way, will you? I want to see, I want to see!"

CHAPTER THREE

Only the Beginning

HIS FIRST sensation on recovering consciousness was surprise that he was not dead. He was even able to move a little, though the pain exploded brilliantly from all points of the compass in his head. He could hear his own groans but didn't know he was making them. He could move his fingers and his toes and even take a breath without the splintered stab that meant broken ribs, but his whole face was numb. His tongue stirred and caught on the jagged stumps of teeth. He must have groaned again, for he heard a frightened whisper:

"Coming round? Try a little of this.

Can you open yer mouth? Can you see?"

Something smooth and cool was pushed against his lips, and he knew it was a bottle. Liquid spilled over his chin, into his mouth, down his throat. After a while strength began to seep into him. He pushed himself upright and it wrenched another groan from him. He was in the alley behind the hotel.

The shadow kneeling at his side whispered, "I'm a porter in there. I saw them bring you down. They said, forget the cops. Want another drink?"

McCracken nodded and the bottle was pressed gently again against his bruised mouth. This time the strength grew more rapidly. He took the bottle in his own hand and drank deeply.

The voice whispered in the same frightened tones, "I gotta go in before they catch me. Keep the bottle."

McCracken neither saw nor heard him go. He clutched the bottle to his chest and raised it to his lips for the fourth time. This time he could taste the bite of the raw whiskey, and he grimaced. Inch by inch, he raised himself to his feet and leaned, trembling, against the side of the building. He started down the alley, supporting himself against the rough bricks. Two more drinks and he was able to walk without staggering too badly. When he came to the street, he found that it was not only the darkness of the night, but also the fact that one eye was entirely closed and the other a puffy slit.

He had a feeling that he was being followed as he walked with painful slowness to his car. He could not see well enough to be sure, and he could not walk fast enough to get away. He finished the rest of the small bottle in the front seat of his car. It took quite an effort to get started, but once he was rolling he felt all right again.

He left the car on the street in front of his apartment. He didn't have the energy to put it in the garage and then walk the block back again. He was halfway up the concrete walk to the front door when the first shot rang out. It came from the thick rhododendron bushes to his right, for he could see the flash.

That was a shot, he thought dully. Then it flashed again at him. This time he threw himself to the left on the soft grass.

The gun cracked three times more, and he could hear the soft thuds as the bullets tore into the turf near his head. He wasn't frightened or even angry. He just wondered numbly how anyone could miss with all five at that range. With any kind of shooting at all, the full load should have been in him.

He moved cautiously, then rose to his knees. There were no more shots. He crawled to the side of the building and, still crouching, ran heavily down the walk to the janitor's entrance. He wrapped his hat over his fist, smashed the glass and let himself in.

The janitor came running and started angrily, "What the—" then stopped in full cry at the sight of McCracken's mutilated face. "Merciful God!" His grimy hand flew to his mouth.

McCracken grinned horribly and lurched past him. "You should see the other guys," he mumbled thickly. He wondered what they *did* look like.

He was at the head of the stairs before the janitor recovered and came running. "Mr. McCracken! Do you want I should get a doctor, Mr. McCracken?"

McCracken was feeling a little light-headed from both the beating and the unaccustomed liquor. He looked down over the handrail. "Sure," he said politely, "if you feel sick."

The janitor glowered, then turned and stamped back into the gloomy cave of the cellar, a frustrated Samaritan.

McCracken made sure his apartment door was locked behind him after he got inside. He went straight to the bathroom and filled the tub with water as hot as he could stand it. He had sat in it, soaking gratefully, for five minutes before he discovered that he had neglected to take off his shoes and socks. He snickered and let them stay on. What difference did it make now? He'd been going to send the socks to the laundry anyway.

A half-hour in the tub made all the difference in the world. He climbed out of it without feeling the need for a derrick. Then, just for a refresher, he stood for five seconds under the cold needle shower and pranced out whooshing. He wrapped the bath towel around him and started for the bedroom. He stopped halfway across

the living room and very carefully put down his foot.

There in the middle of the sofa, still wearing his hat and top coat, sat Paul Farrell. Farrell had a gun in his hand. He stared at the detective for the longest minute McCracken had ever endured, then raised the gun.

"I brought it back," he said. "I brought your wallet, too. Your apartment key was in it. That's how I got in." He reached forward and placed them on the coffee table. "I—" He paused and licked his lips. "I'm sorry for what happened back there. I didn't have anything to do with that. I didn't know they were going to do it."

"That so?"

"I wouldn't have let them do it."

"I guess not."

Very warily, McCracken was crossing the room, just throwing those answers out to hold Farrell's attention. When he was close enough, he snatched the gun from the low table. He jerked out the clip, then snapped it back into the butt. Not a shot had been fired. He sniffed the muzzle. It was clean, but it could have been swabbed with an oil rag. He backed across the room.

He said, "Be right back." He slipped into his bedroom and threw on a robe, not taking his eyes from the doorway. He didn't feel so defenseless with the robe on. With the towel it was either hold it up or stand naked. Farrell was still sitting in the middle of the sofa when he strode back into the other room. He looked haunted and weary. McCracken sat on the arm of a facing chair and watchfully lit a cigarette.

"Well, what brought you here?" he asked.

Farrell pointed listlessly to the wallet on the coffee table. "And I needed some air," he mumbled.

"On your wedding night?" McCracken said.

Farrell closed his eyes for a moment. "It's the reaction, I guess. I was in jail for a year, wondering all that time whether or not they'd find me guilty. Veronica's been swell but . . . I just wanted to be by myself for a while."

"You won't like it. It's worse when you're by yourself. That's when you'll

start seeing her face in front of you. You look as if you'd seen it already."

"Huh?"

"But maybe not," McCracken said thoughtfully. "You didn't see her face while you were giving it to her. She was clipped from the back."

Farrell sat up, staring. "You're crazy!" he said.

McCracken just grinned as he watched the perspiration form on Farrell's forehead. Farrell gripped the edge of the sofa with both hands.

"I didn't kill her," he said loudly.

"I know. I followed your trial in the newspapers. You loved her."

"I did love her! I didn't kill her!" Tears started down his face. "I didn't!"

Very convincing. That was the way he had looked on the stand when the district attorney had thundered his accusations. The newspapers had described it very accurately. Farrell wept as . . . and so forth. Pretty corny.

"Everybody knows I didn't kill her," Farrell said. "The jury acquitted me. . . ."

"Leo Martingale acquitted you," McCracken corrected him. "There's a difference." Then, viciously, "What about Jessie May Sayers?"

"Yes. Ask Jessie. She knows I couldn't have done it. She came to the trial today just to congratulate me. She's staying in the Hotel Clinton. Ask her."

His eagerness to be believed was almost pathetic, almost convincing. There was a look of suffering on his face as if, for a moment, he was reliving the worst moments of his trial, as if he were on trial again. Maybe he felt that way.

"Jessie May Sayers wants me to find the murderer of your wife," McCracken said. "I want you to laugh that one over. She's still nuts about you, in spite of the brushoff you gave her."

Farrell said, "Brushoff? But I didn't know—I mean, how do you know she's . . . nuts about me? She didn't say that."

"She didn't have to say it."

"But why should she be nuts about me? She worked in the library and I talked to her a lot, and once when my wife was visiting her family in Pennsylvania, I met Jessie downtown—by accident—and we went to the movies together, because that's where we were both

going anyway. I never knew that she—I mean, that she felt that way."

"Oh, brother," McCracken jeered, "what the district attorney could have done to you on the stand if he'd known about Jessie May Sayers!"

Farrell pounded the edge of the sofa. "I didn't kill my wife!" he cried. "I loved her and—" the rigidity went out of him and he whispered a little hopelessly—"and I still do, I guess. That's why I had to get away from the party for awhile."

McCracken jumped up and said angrily, "Get out of here. Go back to your wife. Ask her if she thinks you're guilty, because, brother, that's just what she thinks. She married you because she wanted to see what it felt like to be in the arms of a man who'd killed a woman."

"That's a lie!"

"Ask her."

"She saved me from the chair. She knows I'm innocent."

Farrell lurched to his feet, his face wild. At his sides his hands clenched and unclenched. He took a step and McCracken jerked the gun from his pocket, but Farrell was moving toward the door. He stumbled once over the edge of the throw rug, then was gone, leaving the door ajar behind him.

McCracken crossed the room swiftly. "I almost forgot," he shouted down the hall after the retreating footsteps. "Congratulations on your marriage."

He closed the door and this time slipped on the safety chain. He went straight into the kitchen and took down a still sealed bottle of rye from the top shelf of the closet. His hand was trembling a little as he poured himself a small shot. He raised the glass as if making a toast.

"And that's only the beginning," he said.

CHAPTER FOUR

Girl in Red

McCracken went to bed but he could not sleep. He turned on the radio, then got a stack of old newspapers and stared rereading the reports of the last week of Farrell's trial. There wasn't much there. The prosecution had never actually put Farrell even near the scene

where his wife lay dead with the back of her head beaten in. The police had never found the murder weapon, nor had they been able to saddle Farrell with a motive.

McCracken smiled grimly. He knew the motive, all right. He'd get Jessie May Sayers to open up little by little. He'd make Farrell's life a beautiful hell, and as for Veronica . . .

The radio seemed to pick the name right off his tongue, for the announcer was saying excitedly, ". . . the body of Veronica Picot, the steel heiress. She received a mysterious telephone call and left the wedding party shortly after. A blow on the head from a heavy instrument was the cause of death. Police are seeking her missing husband, Paul Farrell, acquitted only this afternoon of the murder of his first wife, whose death was caused by a similar blow. Farrell disappeared from the party shortly before his wife left and has not been seen since. For fuller details, read your local newspaper."

McCracken shouted, "What!" and grabbed for the dial, forgetting for a moment that it wasn't a telephone and would not repeat. He was out of bed with a leap. He snatched up the paper he had been reading and ran down the column until he found what he wanted.

. . . it was the unproved contention of the district attorney that Farrell was schizophrenic and would therefore have no remembrance of the crime he had committed. In this state, District Attorney Warren said, Farrell would have been quite capable of murdering anyone from whom he had received even a fancied injury. . . .

Schizophrenic. McCracken ran into the living room and grabbed his dictionary from the desk. Schizophrenia—a cleavage of the mental functions, associated with assumption by the affected person of a second personality. That's what he had thought. Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. If that were true, Farrell might be roaming the city looking for him right that minute. Looking for anyone, even little Jessie May Sayers. Farrell had certainly tried to get her out of his mind—and Farrell knew where she was staying. Farrell had given him the address—the Hotel Clinton. And Jessie May was the one who had actually, though not meaning to, set McCracken on his trail. There was certainly cause

for murder there. And he knew it.

McCracken scrambled into his clothes, cursing his own clumsiness. He cursed his car for not transporting him to the Clinton in the twinkling of an eye, and he cursed the clerk at the desk for staring at him as if he were a madman when he stormed across the lobby.

He snarled, "I want to see Miss Sayers and I want to see her right away. I'm a detective. She hired me. Call her and ask her. My name's McCracken."

He hadn't known until that moment why he hadn't called her on the phone himself, instead of chasing all the way across town, but he knew then. She was just the kind of nut who would have gone out looking for Farrell all by herself. She wouldn't think he did this one either. She'd think he was being persecuted again.

The clerk came back from the switchboard and said with smug satisfaction, "I'm sorry but Miss Sayers does not answer."

"What's her room number?"

"Well, really!"

"Damn it, she might be laying up there dead."

"D-Dead!" His hand groped under the counter for the buzzer that would summon the hotel detective.

A thin, discouraged-looking man came from the office at the far end of the desk, pulling on his coat.

"Show this gentleman to Miss Sayers' room." The clerk was getting some of his aplomb back, for he added condescendingly, "He thinks something may have happened to her."

Things just didn't happen in the Hotel Clinton. It was a family hotel.

McCracken and the detective rode to the third floor in the elevator, and the detective knocked sharply on her door and waited. Then he got out a bunch of keys and opened the door.

"I can get in dutch for this," he grumbled. He switched on the light.

JESSIE MAY SAYERS had been sitting in the dark by the window. She sprang up with a cry, and when she saw McCracken standing there, the cry deepened into a wail of fear and she took a step backward.

"Don't mind the face," he said quickly. "I got a little working-over. I just wanted to make sure you're okay."

"M-Mr. McCracken?" she faltered.

"Yeah. I can prove it too." He grinned a little painfully. "I'll be right back."

He took the hotel detective into the hall and slipped him a five. "I'm going to stay up here," he said. "If a tall, red-headed guy with a wild look in his eye comes into the lobby, grab him. He's wanted by the police. His name is Paul Farrell and he just knocked off his second wife. *Don't let him get up here.* I think he's going to make a try for this mouse."

"Why don't you get her out of here, then?"

"Because he might be waiting outside for just that."

"The cops could get her out."

"This guy's not in his right mind. He's crazy enough to make a try for her, cops or no cops."

"Bud," said the house detective drily, "I hope you know what you're doing." He gave Jessie's door a skeptical glance, then turned and walked down the hall. He didn't think McCracken was there for the usual, but it was hard to be sure. Dames fell for the funniest looking guys.

He'd drop back every fifteen minutes. Just to check.

McCracken went back into the room. Jessie May, composed again, was sitting in the lounge chair at the foot of the bed.

"You heard the radio?" he asked her. She shook her head, and he went on, "Veronica Picot was just knocked off."

"She's dead?"

"Yeah, dead. And the cops are looking for your boy friend."

"That's silly," she said calmly. "He didn't kill her. Paul never killed anybody."

"Well, it might have been an accident." He didn't want to get into another of those arguments with her. "He might have killed his first wife by accident, too." He couldn't help adding that.

"Now you *are* being silly. Nobody gets hit on the head by an automobile jack by accident."

"It might have slipped. Forget it, will you? Let me finish." He licked his lips. How was he going to put this and still keep out of that argument. "It's like this.

The police think that year Paul spent in jail did something to his mind. Nothing permanent. Nervous breakdown. Kind of split personality or something. . . ."

"Schizophrenia," she said. "That's silly, too."

"Let me finish. It isn't silly. It happens all the time. They're afraid he might turn on his friends. They just want me to keep an eye on you until they catch him. They want to—uh—take him to a doctor."

"Paul would never do anything to me," she said serenely. "He knows I have only his happiness at heart."

"Sure, sure—ordinarily, but damn it, I'm going to stay here for a while whether you like it or not!"

"I don't mind. It's only that you keep saying Paul killed that Veronica Picot. It was gangsters who hit her over the head. . . ."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah—with a baseball bat."

"No. An automobile jack. She was always going around with sinister people for the thrill. I'm glad she's dead. She would only have made Paul unhappy."

"I agree with every word you say," he said wearily. "Paul never killed anybody. You're the one he loves. . . ."

"He does. He may not know it yet, but he does. I'm the only one who has his happiness at heart."

"Fine. Now if you don't mind, I'm going to lie down on your bed. I feel a little groggy."

"I don't mind."

He took off his shoes and stretched out on the bed, propping up his head with the pillow. The ache in it was a dull and steady pulse. She sat quietly in the chair, picking absently at something on her red blouse. She had on a new outfit, skirt and blouse, but it was still red. She sure liked red. He lay there, dully watching her pick at her blouse. She picked up her little red bag and took out her handkerchief. She moistened a corner of it and rubbed carefully at her blouse. The handkerchief came away with a little red smear on it. She moistened another corner of the handkerchief and rubbed again. The dye came off on it again. Patiently she continued to rub, stopping every once in a while to blow down at her blouse. She seemed oblivious of his presence.

McCRACKEN found himself staring as the handkerchief continued to show those red smears. She was working on another part of her blouse now. Then all of a sudden he understood those red smears. He felt the perspiration start on his upper lip. If he hadn't been so groggy, he would have gotten it before.

He desperately tried to keep his voice even, for he did not want to alarm her now. "I might have to go some place in a hurry," he said. "Do you have a car?"

She looked up from her blouse and stopped rubbing for a moment. She nodded. "It's downstairs in the hotel garage." Then suspiciously, "You're not going after Paul, are you?"

"Not me. I know he didn't kill anybody. You convinced me of that."

"I'm glad. I wouldn't let you do anything that would make Paul unhappy."

"All I want to do is clear him with the police." He hoped she didn't notice the way he was sweating. "This car of your's—it's got tools in it, hasn't it? I mean," he added hastily, "if I'm going out to help Paul, I wouldn't want to get stuck with a flat tire."

"You won't get stuck." She smiled secretively. She bent over her blouse again, scrubbing industriously.

"This Joe Rice," he said—he wanted to keep her talking, "The one who owned that tavern where Paul's first wife worked.

I think he's the gangster who shot her."

"He didn't shoot her. He hit her with an automobile jack."

That's what he wanted to hear her say again. He wanted to be sure. The police didn't know what the woman had been hit with.

"Is that the way he killed Veronica Picot, too?" he asked.

She put her head on one side and considered this. "I think it was a different gangster who killed her," she said. "He killed her the same way."

"You've been in love with Paul a long time, haven't you?"

She nodded, smiling. She held her blouse away from her breasts and looked down at it. She found another spot and went to work on it.

"What kind of woman was his first wife?" McCracken asked, and his voice shook.

"She was very bad for Paul," she said, still rubbing. "He didn't like it that she was singing in that gangster's night club, and she was always trying to get him mixed up with her gangster friends. I think they wanted to get a hold over him. That's what they do, you know. And I think they *were* beginning to get a hold on him through his wife. I warned him. I didn't come right out and say it. I said, 'Isn't your wife afraid of getting mixed up with the underworld in that night club



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where she sings?" He laughed in an uneasy kind of way—you know?—and he said he guessed she could take care of herself. But he looked a little scared and right then and there I knew!" she raised her head and looked at McCracken. "As a matter of fact," she said serenely, "I called her on the telephone the very night she was killed."

He stifled his gasp. "You called her on the phone?"

"Yes. I had a right to." Her tiny mouth tightened primly. "I told her I loved Paul and that her getting mixed up with gangsters was making him very unhappy. I told her something was sure to happen. And it did," she added with satisfaction. She nodded as she wetted her handkerchief again.

McCracken could only stare at her with horror. So certain was she that he believed her gangster story, that she had calmly told him how and why she had killed Farrell's first wife. A telephone call. Veronica Picot, the radio had said, had also received a mysterious telephone call just before she was killed. That was how she had gotten Veronica away from those bodyguards. She had called her on the phone—after she had made up her mind to kill her.

"Your husband is in love with me," he could almost hear her saying. "I think we should talk this over."

He knew what dreadful persuasiveness she could use, even when she was lying. And what wife could resist a call like that? Even the sophisticated Veronica Picot had been startled when McCracken told her that Farrell had concealed the 'other woman' in the case. Her vanity alone would have sent her from that wedding party without her guards, to see what this woman looked like, if nothing else. She had gone striding from the hotel to meet her death in Jessie May's little car.

Someone knocked at the door and McCracken leaped from the bed. The house detective peered suspiciously into the room. McCracken took his arm and pushed him out into the hall.

"Listen," he whispered, "get the cops here as fast as you can. That dame's sitting in there with a blouse full of blood that she got when she knocked off Veronica Picot. She knocked off Far-

rell's first wife, too. Before they come up, tell them to look in her car. It's in the hotel garage, and in it they'll find the jack she did it with. Now for God's sake, hurry! I'm trying to keep her quiet. She's batty, and I don't know how long I'm going to be able to keep it up. I don't want to hurt her. Tell them not to scare her when they come in. I want them to get the same story I got. Now, *hurry!*"

The house detective said, "Brother!"

McCracken turned back to the room. His mouth went suddenly dry. She was standing at the foot of the bed and there was a small, nickel-plated revolver in her hand. She had it pointed unwaveringly at him.

"Who was that?" she demanded.

He laughed shakily. "Just the hotel clerk, Jessie. There—there was a phone call from Paul. He's on his way over."

"You're lying. Why didn't they put the call through to me?"

"Because you don't answer your phone. Remember? We called you tonight and you wouldn't answer. Remember, Jessie?"

Her eyes wavered.

"You don't want to kill me, Jessie," he said reproachfully, "I'm on your side. Think how bad you'd feel. You almost shot me once tonight by mistake."

"Well," she said, as if it were the most reasonable thing in the world, "I didn't know you were Paul's friend then."

"And Paul would feel terrible if you shot me. Just think," he said persuasively, "how wonderful it's going to be when you and Paul are married."

Her arm dropped to her side. She lifted her head. Her face was transfigured. "Yes," she breathed, "I think of it often. When we're married we're going to have a red house with red flowers and red drapes, and there's going to be a red rug in the living room. The fence in front of the house is going to be red. I like red. There's going to be a big red front door with a brass knocker. I thought of making that red, too, but brass is nice for contrast. In the kitchen there are going to be curtains with red polka dots and red linoleum—" her voice rose shrilly—"and red walls and red shades and red windows and red—"

He shivered.

THE END

ODDITIES IN CRIME

By MAYAN and JAKOBSSON



When Baron von Rintelen, of the German Espionage, came to the U.S.A. in 1917, he possessed unlimited funds with which to wreck the American war effort. With Teutonic lack of imagination, he tied up with neither a patriot nor a traitor, but with David Lamar, better known as the Wolf of Wall Street, considered by many the most successful swindler of modern times. Lamar eagerly sold, at fantastic sums, faked clippings of nonexistent sabotage in imaginary war plants to the German, claiming he had caused them himself as von Rintelen's agent. Just when the duped spy at last dreamt that he had licked America single-handed, the Kaiser's Empire collapsed, perhaps with some help from the money-mad Lamar. Congress investigated, ungratefully sent Lamar to jail.

Most futile bombing in the history of crime occurred in 1920 when somebody set out to get J. P. Morgan, the financier. A bomb was set off in the firm's Wall Street offices—and when the smoke cleared and debris settled down, 31 persons who had nothing whatever to do with J. P. Morgan had been blown clean off the face of the earth. Not even J. P.'s office boy had been injured—and nobody ever paid the slightest penalty for this strictly wanton mayhem!



When Louis Brau, of New York's Finest, went back home to Puerto Rico to take a job on the cops there, he brought along a few novel ideas. Assigned to a murder case, he discovered that the whole neighborhood of the victim had been terrified into silence by ghostly visitations. Brau promptly organized his own ghost troops, staged a few supernatural phenomena with such howling success that witnesses to the crime stormed the police station the next morning, babblingly eager to testify. The killer, Juan Avedo Torres, captured, convicted and punished, has given no trouble as a spook.

He stood five-six in his shoes, weighed around 150 lbs., without the score or so bullets he at various times carried under his hide. He was, by his own admission, "the world's greatest detective—no praver, more honest or efficient police officer ever wore a star or carried a club." He arrested, single-handedly nearly 20,000 desperate crooks and never killed a man. He used to take a simple delight in beating an evildoer into submission—and then riding him piggyback to the precinct. He operated in Chicago just before the turn of the century. His name was Detective Clifton Wooldridge—and, from all accounts, nobody's beat his record yet.





"I tell you it isn't loaded." Ded'ni was saying. "Get it over with, Ed."

GUN-GOSPELEER

By

JOHANAS L. BOUMA

To hell with his friends and his girl and especially this whistle-stop berg, thought Joe Fenton. . . . Because here's one guy who's going to live with a gun in his hand—and ride the tail of a .45-slug-powered express straight up to the big-time!

ED GLANZ, the new man Dedimi had called in to take part in the job, said, "Tomorrow night I don't like. Better if we take a few more days to look the place over."

Joe Fenton, sitting with Mel Webb on the edge of the bed in this Fresno hotel room, looked at Glanz, who was short and wide and too heavy across the shoulders for his grey, double-breasted coat.

A hood, he thought, and wondered why

Dedini had deemed it necessary to have an extra man.

"It's got to be tomorrow night for a good reason," Dedini said. "Right, boys?"

Mel Webb rubbed his thin hands together and nodded. Joe grunted softly and said, "You're the boss."

A quick smile touched Dedini's hard eyes. He was a slim man, blond and brainy, and very careful about planning their jobs. He said, "Right," in his clipped voice. "I'll tell you why it won't wait, Ed. It's a building and loan outfit, the kind that during the early thirties paid six percent on savings and went bust."

"Who didn't go bust?" Glanz asked in a gravel voice. Mel Webb gave a short laugh and was silent again.

"This one is located in the small town called Waterfort about fifteen miles down the line," Dedini said. "I was driving through one day and spotted it. They started in a small way, local stuff. They had a corner of an old building right in the middle of town, meanwhile putting up a building of their own that they'll be ready to move into in a few days. This is what happened: A couple of months back their lease ran out. The owner had another party wanted to move right in. Like I said, it's a small town, and this loan outfit, not finding another vacancy while their building was being finished, moved the whole business to a frame house a couple of blocks off the main drag.

Glanz said, "You're giving me a lot of stuff that doesn't mean anything. What's the setup? And is it worth the risk?"

"It's worth the risk," Dedini said. "They pay four percent, and it's a good bet that most of the farmers in the valley have dough in the place. After all, they've been making it during the past years."

"While the rest of us were fighting a war," Mel said bitterly.

Dedini grinned. "You've been doing all right. Joe'll give us the rest of it. He's a depositor in this bank. Okay, Joe."

Joe looked quickly at his big hands, hoping the nervousness he felt in his stomach didn't show in his eyes. He'd hooked up with Dedini after the war, and lately, three years and a dozen jobs later, the excitement had worn off, and there was only the worry and the wondering. Now he felt a quick run of shame for these

things he was going to say in a moment.

"We planned it—that is, Dedini planned it—over a month ago, so you don't have to worry about everything being all right. He drove me down here to Fresno and I hitched the fifteen miles into Waterfort. It was on a Sunday morning, and the plan was for me to get a job around town and look things over. . . ."

HE KEPT talking, saying the words that had to be said in order that they would understand and know what had to be done. Crowding the essential words past the thoughts that were so vivid and real in his mind.

It was Sunday morning and he was standing on the highway looking across the golden haze of the valley and seeing the green orchards and the fields of purple grapes, and in the distance the tall steeple of a church and the cluster of buildings that was Waterfort, and he had felt an aliveness that had almost made him forget why he was there.

The old truck had wheezed to a stop at the side of the road, and the lean, blue-eyed man with humor in his face had asked if he wanted a lift. The man, whose name was Potter, owned the big super market in Waterfort, and by the time they chugged down the main street Joe had hit him for a job. Potter had asked a few questions before nodding and stopping the truck in front of a frame bungalow where he said Ma Buford was needing a boarder.

"You had some luck there all right," Glanz said. He looked at Joe with his eyes narrowed a little. "What happened then?"

"The next Saturday I got paid and opened an account with this loan outfit." He pulled a paper from his pocket and walked with it to the table., "This'll give you a rough idea of the place."

Glanz flattened it on the table and they gathered around while Joe traced the plan with his index finger.

"There are two vacant lots on this side and then the street. On the other side there's one vacant lot and then a church and the preacher's house next door."

Glanz nodded. "How do you plan it?" he asked Dedini.

"Ten tomorrow night," Dedini said. "We crack the back door. There's a narrow alley back there and no houses for

two blocks. Mel drives us to within a block of the place. He comes around from the other end of the alley and parks behind the church. He'll be watching, and if anything comes he'll give a blast of the horn. When we're finished we carry the stuff to the car and get out of there."

"Tell me the setup inside," Glanz said.

"It's a five-room house," Joe said. "The safe is in the front room. They've turned that into their main office. Mary, who handles the accounts, has a desk in there. Mr. Charles, the manager, uses one of the bedrooms for his office. The rest of the rooms are vacant."

"Mary, eh?" Glanz said softly without raising his eyes from the paper. "All right, what kind of a box?"

Joe flushed, and Dedini said quickly, "According to Joe it's a relic. Drill a couple of holes in the door and you can rip it off. We got tools in the car."

Glanz leaned back in his chair. "Cops?" he asked.

"No worry there," Dedini said. "Two on night duty, but they won't be around. The church is holding a rally in the school auditorium on the other side of town. Half the population will be there, including the cops."

Glanz nodded slowly and thought it over. Then he looked at Joe and said, "You did a nice job, kid. What kind of a town is it?"

Joe said, "It's a good town."

It was the kind of town where you didn't have to be in your house to feel at home. He'd found that out the first week. Ma Buford had introduced him around, and the gang at the market had found out about his pitching arm. Potter's team was trying for the valley championship, but they needed a pitcher and Joe got the job. He'd worked the mound their last three games. They'd won, too, and afterwards there'd been parties to celebrate.

"You're taking a chance," Glanz said. "Every cop in the country will know who to look for."

"Not the way I planned it," Dedini said. "They trust Joe in that town. He's going to that rally and dance they're having. At a quarter to ten he takes off and meets us at the back door of the house. He gives us a hand and beats it back up there. Say he's gone forty minutes. In

that crowd they won't miss him. He hangs around town for another week and then gets a letter that his old lady is sick or something. So he packs up and meets us in Frisco."

Glanz's thick lips cracked in a grin. "That sounds okay." He got up and moved to the door. "I'll be here at nine tomorrow night," he told Dedini. He looked at Joe. "How are getting back tonight, kid?"

"On the bus," Joe said, and watched the door close behind Glanz's broad back.

Dedini said softly, "I'll have your .45 ready for you tomorrow night, Joe."

Joe turned, nodding. Dedini had decided in the beginning that it was better Joe didn't carry a gun with him. He said, "Mr. Buford's always fussing around straightening up my room, and if she found it—"

"I figured you be up against something like that," Dedini said. "I guess you'll be glad to get out of that one-horse town."

"I guess so," Joe said. "See you at ten sharp tomorrow night."

Mel's eyes shifted quickly to Dedini to Joe and down to the floor again.

"Right," Dedini said.

Joe told them good-night and walked down the back steps of the hotel to the alley. Once on the street he mixed with the sidewalk crowd and moved slowly toward the bus depot. The bus for Waterford and points south was leaving in ten minutes, and he bought his ticket and found a rear seat unoccupied.

HE TRIED to relax; he lit a cigarette and watched the people passing in and out of the station annex. After a while he found himself staring at the faint reflection of his face in the window.

"They trust him in that town," Dedini had said.

And why shouldn't they trust him? In looks he was like any of a hundred guys: dark curly hair and a face that didn't look older than his twenty-three years.

He'd be damn glad when this job was finished. He was taking a chance; Glanz had been right there, but then who didn't take his chances in this world? After all, he'd been taking them for a long time. Those months in Africa and Italy and France hadn't been a cinch.

He felt a little better, and he stared hard at his reflection, trying to bring back some of the toughness he'd felt when he first hooked up with Dedini. There was a smart guy who knew how to make an easy buck. None of this sucker stuff for him, thank you. This was a tough world, and a guy had to be tough to get along. A guy had to be a heller if he wanted what was coming to him. To hell with these farmers and their easy ways that got under a man's skin. All he needed was another five years with Dedini. . . .

The driver climbed in the bus and moved slowly down the aisle, counting the passengers. Another sucker with a happy grin on his face. The driver stopped.

"Joe Fenton, isn't it? Saw you pitch the other night. Nice arm. Potter's lucky to have you."

"Thanks," Joe grunted. He wanted suddenly to tell this guy what he thought of him.

The driver looked at his watch. "Been to a show?"

"Yeah," Joe said. His throat felt tight. "Pretty good picture," he added.

"Well, time to shove off. Good luck to you, kid."

"Thanks."

He leaned back in his seat and tried to relax. He wished Dedini hadn't picked him for this part of the job. Mel could've handled it. And then again, maybe he couldn't. There was something about Mel's face, something about his eyes that made people wary.

Maybe it was beginning to show on his face, too.

He flung his cigarette in the aisle and wondered why he felt this way. A sudden hot hate rushed through him. It was better that way. Let the suckers take the small-town fun, the slaps on the back, the silly little parties and the laughs. Their decency was faked, like everything else in this world. A guy had to be careful or he'd get into that same rut. To hell with all of them. Another week and he'd be rolling in dough, and then watch them cry on each others shoulder. And he'd be around laughing up his sleeve all the time. That was the payoff.

He hadn't liked the idea of staying around at first. But Dedini knew what he was doing. A guy couldn't leave the

same night a robbery was committed. Like Glanz had said, every cop in the country would be looking for him. That damn Glanz again. Something about the way he'd smiled that one time. There was a guy you had to watch. Well, Dedini had picked him, and Dedini was pretty careful about weighing a guy before letting him in on a good thing.

This was one town he'd never show his face after this was over. Good riddance. Ma Buford could fix a midnight snack for some other guy. Potter could pay the forty a week to the next man sucker enough to haul groceries to primping housewives. He wondered suddenly how the team would make out. And he wondered about Mary. . . .

Mary Phillips was her name, and he'd met her when he opened his account that first Saturday. She wasn't much to look at, not when you compared her with some of those classy Frisco dames. She was cute, though, and there was a warmth about her you didn't find often. He'd met her again when the team had its first party. Somehow or other they'd paired off. He'd walked her home that night and she'd asked him about going to church that next Sunday. He'd gone for laughs, he told himself. It hadn't been so bad at that.

There was something peaceful and serene about a Sunday in a small town that you didn't get in the cities. Or maybe it was the crowd he'd run with. Anyway it hadn't been too bad. Mary's mom had fixed a chicken dinner afterwards. The old man, with pink garters around his shirt sleeves to keep his cuffs out of the gravy, had done the carving. One thing, those country people knew how to put the grub on the table.

The driver called out the Waterfort stop and grinned a cheery good-night as Joe stepped from the bus. It was a nice night, soft, with a good clean smell to the air. Joe walked quickly down the street and went through the picket gate and up the steps of Ma Buford's house. She was still up; he wondered if she'd been waiting for him. Damn busybody.

"There's milk and pie in the kitchen for you, Joey." She had a soft, lined face, and her gray hair was tied in a knot at the back. "See a nice picture?"

Joe grunted and moved past her.

"Mary called, Joey."

He turned. "What about it?"

Ma Buford looked bewildered. Then she smiled. "Why—nothing I guess."

Joe frowned. "Okay. What'd she want?"

"She wondered if you were coming by to take her to the church rally."

"Yeah," Joe said. "I'll pick her up."

He went into the kitchen and found the pie and milk on the table. He sat down and ate quickly, thinking that Mary sure had her nerve. That was one more trouble with this small-town stuff. A guy had to be careful all the time or he'd get hooked for sure. Live in a four-room frame house and bring the forty bucks home every Saturday night. Kids under your feet and listening to the radio at night. Stew during the week and chicken on Sundays. Not for this boy. He'd be glad when this job was over.

HE THOUGHT about it all the next morning. Around eleven the rush started; it seemed as if every woman in town was buying stuff to make cakes or pies for the church rally. They were all talking about it. Well, they'd be talking about something else in the morning.

He hadn't noticed that he'd worked right through his lunch hour until Potter called him back to the office.

"You're working too hard, Joe," he grinned. "Save that pitching arm."

He handed a canvas sack across the desk.

"I've been too busy to run this down to the bank. Drop it off on your way to lunch, will you?"

"Sure," Joe said, and managed a grin. He hefted the bag. "Trust me?"

"If I didn't I wouldn't have given you a job," Potter said mildly.

Joe nodded slowly. "I guess not," he said and went out.

They closed up early that evening. Joe ran the big doors shut and hurried to his room. He showered and shaved quickly. As usual, Ma Buford had his underclothes and shirts folded neatly in the dresser drawers. He frowned when he looked in the closet. She'd had his suit cleaned and pressed. He'd really put on the dog tonight.

He dressed and rummaged through the drawer for his tie clasp before remembering that it was still in its box in his suitcase. He opened it, reached inside for the box and saw the loaded clip for his .45. He shoved it quickly in his pocket. Have to get rid of it tonight. Must have taken it out when he turned the automatic over to Dedini.

The rally was over by nine o'clock. They cleared the floor and the local five-piece band took their places on the stage and struck up a tune. Joe found himself dancing with Mary. They danced the next three, and it was only when they walked off the floor that he remembered and looked at his watch. Twenty minutes to ten. Time to make excuses.

"I want to talk to some of the boys about the game next week," he told her.

She looked up at him and smiled. "All right, Joe. I'll be right here." She touched his arm. "Having a good time?"

"Sure," he said and looked quickly away. "Swell."

"What's wrong, Joe?"

He ran his hand nervously through his hair. "What do you mean what's wrong?"

She laughed. "I don't know—you've been tense all evening. Haven't you noticed?"

"Forget it," he said and turned away.

He edged behind the crowd and slipped through the door, pausing there a minute to light a cigarette. Then he moved quickly down the steps of the auditorium and onto the dark and silent sidewalk. He increased his stride, then, and when he saw the shadow of the church steeple against the night sky his watch told him that he was on time.

He walked quietly past the front of the church and cut across the vacant lot to the rear of the loan company house. A slim figure broke from the shadows, whispered, "Joe?"

"Yeah. Everything okay?"

"Fine," Dedini whispered. "Ed's got the back door open already."

"Good," Joe said in a tight voice. "Let's go."

They went inside. Glanz was taking a heavy crowbar and drill from a gunnysack. Joe tried the door that separated this back room from the front office. It was locked.

Dedini said, "Let me at it." He snapped

the flashlight once on the lock and went to work. The door swung open and they saw the single bulb burning over the top of the safe. At one side was a desk and chair, and beyond, the wooden partition with its glass top where the customers added to their accounts. There was a waist-high swinging door at one end of the partition. There were no shades covering the windows.

"If we keep below the edge of the sill they'll never spot us," Dedini said. "Think you can handle it that way, Ed?"

"Sure," Glanz grunted. He'd taken off his coat, and now he went across the floor on his knees and placed the bit against the left corner of the safe's door.

Dedini said, "Get to the back door, Joe." He handed over the .45 automatic. "Take it easy with that thing."

Something alien rumbled in Joe's stomach. "I don't figure to use it. Is it loaded?"

Dedini waved him to the back door. "Yeah." His voice was almost a snarl. "Get back there!"

Joe ducked low, and at the door raised up and opened it a crack. It was black out there and very quiet. Crickets chirped in the weeds. Joe stood listening, the .45 in his hand. He smoothed his thumb around the base of the butt and looked down the alley where Mel would be parked behind the church. His fingers touched the cool cylindrical barrel, and he wondered if Dedini had pumped a bullet in the chamber. There wouldn't be any trouble, but a guy couldn't be sure.

HE WORKED the clip out of the butt with experienced fingers. He remembered doing it that same way one black winter night in a small Italian village. But tonight was for a different purpose, he thought grimly. He explored the clip with his fingers. It was empty. Damn Dedini! Suppose something should happen, and him standing there with an empty gun. He pulled the loaded clip from his pocket, glad that he hadn't thrown it away, and inserted it in place. He pumped a bullet into the chamber. It wasn't like Dedini to overlook—

He heard a whisper from the next room and the noise of the bit against metal stopped abruptly. And then he heard

something else: the faint click of a key turning a lock, and at the same time the single blast of a car horn. That would be Mel. Something was wrong, damn wrong. He felt his heart begin to pound, and there was pressure rising against his ribs. He swallowed and saw a shadow move down the alley and approach the door. He raised the automatic and then saw that it was Mel.

"Someone walked past the church," Mel said softly. "Whoever it was came up the front door."

Voices came from the next room. The pressure inside Joe made it hard for him to breathe. He said to Mel, "Come in here," and went across the back room and looked past the edge of the door.

He drew a sharp breath that hurt his dry throat. Mary was standing inside the front door, looking at the gun in Dedini's hand. Glanz was still on his knees in front of the safe.

Dedini said, "Back here, sister, and don't make a sound."

Joe watched her as she came through the swinging door.

"Sit at the desk," Dedini said.

She sat down; she said nothing.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Glanz growled and turned on his knees to face her.

She looked at Glanz for a long moment. "I came to work."

"Don't give me that," Glanz said. His face was red; a vein throbbed in his neck.

"Shut up and get at that box," Dedini snarled. "Don't worry about the dame."

Glanz looked at Dedini. "The hell I won't worry about the dame. Half the cops in this country got a picture of my mug. You think I'm gonna worry about her identifying me?"

"We'll take care of her," Dedini snapped.

"And right now." Glanz reached backwards and picked up the heavy crowbar. "She's going out of here in a basket, and I'm not doing another stitch until I'm sure of it."

Dedini swore. "Don't be a damn fool. We'll take her with us."

Glanz crawled toward the desk on his knees. "We will like hell! The less she knows the better off we are."

"Wait." Dedini's voice was a whisper.

"The kid. You haven't forgotten that?"

Glanz's eyes had gone flat and dark. He looked at the crowbar, then at Mary. "It's still my job," he said thickly.

Joe felt something rip his insides. They would kill Mary; they had no right to kill Mary. And then a door opened in the back of his mind and a voice said, "The kid? Remember?" and then the voice said, "He didn't want you to take the .45. He wanted it himself so he'd be sure it wasn't loaded. Remember, Joe? He brought a new man in because he knew you were cracking. They planned it this way, Joe. They never meant for you to leave this place tonight. Not alive."

He could feel Mel behind him, and Mel was pressing a hard object against his spine. Mel said, "Inside, Joe."

They went inside. Three faces stared at them, and Dedini swore again and said, "Who in the hell asked you to come in? What're you doing here, Mel?"

Mel explained. "I thought she was going on by," he said. "Then when she went up to the door I thought I'd better investigate." He nudged Joe across the room. "He heard what you said. I thought we'd better have it out before he started something."

"On your knees, the both of you," Dedini said tightly.

Joe felt his knees against the floor, and then Mel said, "Better get his gun."

That quick smile touched Dedini's eyes. "It's not loaded. Damn it, Ed, get on that box. That's why we're here."

Glanz shook his head stubbornly. "First the dame. Then I can work in peace."

"He's kill-happy," Mel said softly.

"You want something, too?" Glanz glowered.

"Hell," Dedini breathed, "if you got to do it, do it. We're wasting time."

FOR A MOMENT Joe felt as if all the strength had slipped from his body. He watched Glanz crawl around the desk and saw the nameless horror on Mary's face. And then she looked at Joe.

"Put your head on the desk, sister," Glanz said hoarsely. "It'll be easy as cracking a nut." He hefted the crowbar and brought it up behind his shoulder.

And then Joe spoke, and he was scarce-

ly aware that the words were really his.

"Drop that bar, Glanz."

Glanz turned his big head and looked at the .45 in Joe's hand. Mel, at the door, edged forward on his knees. He said, "Do you suppose—"

"I tell you it isn't loaded," Dedini said sharply. He was kneeling in front of the safe, and he said, "Get it over with."

Glanz shifted his shoulders, and at the same time Joe fired. And then he went flat on his face and yelled, "Get down, Mary," and fired a snap shot at Dedini's crouched body. A shot boomed across the room and he felt the sudden violent pain of the impact across his back. And then he knew that Mel had jumped behind the door, and he threw two slugs and saw the sudden splintered holes that followed his fire, and heard the sound of a body falling.

He was on his knees, looking for Dedini, when the slug took him high in the chest and slammed him back against the wall. He raised up on one elbow and focused his eyes until he saw Dedini crawling slowly toward the door. He raised the gun again and pumped the trigger until there was no more sound. And then Mary was at his side.

He saw her bending over him through the mist gathering and thickening with each passing second. He heard her far-away voice saying his name over and over, and he moved his lips and mumbled, "It's all right now. Don't worry, Mary. It's all right now. Call the cops. Call them, Mary."

"I called them," she said softly. "I called a doctor."

The mist was becoming very thick and very dark.

"Why did you come, Mary?"

"I knew something was wrong. I followed you. I thought you were alone."

"I was one of them."

"You were against them. In your heart you were against them."

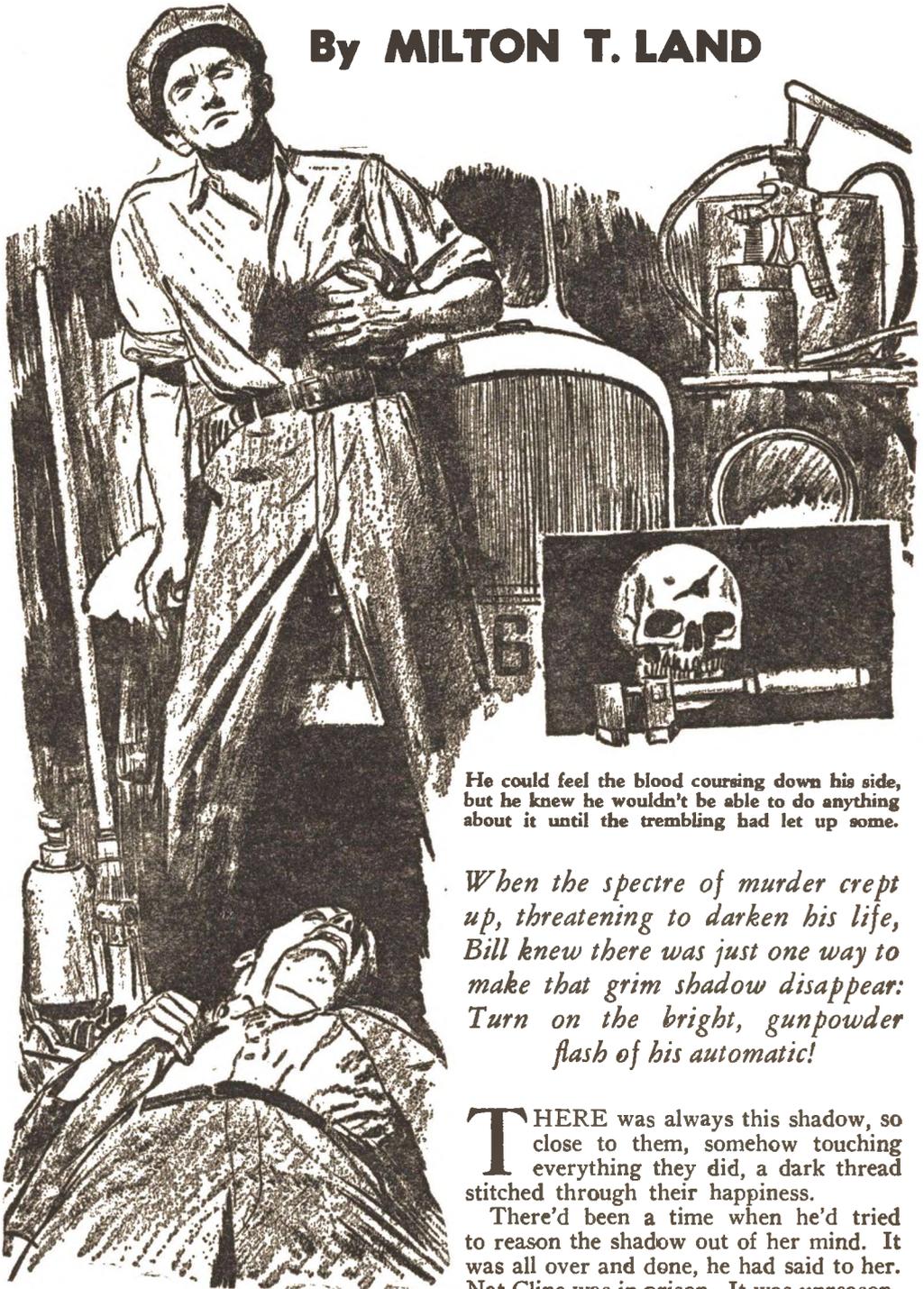
The mist wasn't mist any longer. It was a black cloud, pressing in on him, enfolding him, almost shutting out sound. But still, he could just make out her words.

"You'll be all right, Joe," she was saying. "Everything's going to be all right."

He believed it, too. "Sure," he murmured. "Sure."

THE DEADLY PAST

By MILTON T. LAND



He could feel the blood coursing down his side, but he knew he wouldn't be able to do anything about it until the trembling had let up some.

When the spectre of murder crept up, threatening to darken his life, Bill knew there was just one way to make that grim shadow disappear: Turn on the bright, gunpowder flash of his automatic!

THERE was always this shadow, so close to them, somehow touching everything they did, a dark thread stitched through their happiness.

There'd been a time when he'd tried to reason the shadow out of her mind. It was all over and done, he had said to her. Nat Cline was in prison. It was unreason-

able to let the memory of the past nibble away at the brightness of the present. And she had agreed with everything he had said. "Yes, Bill," she'd said in her quiet, liquid voice, "you're right! I won't worry about it, I won't worry anymore. . . ." But she couldn't open and close the door of her thoughts at will, the way maybe some people could. Everything mattered to Janet. No matter what her reason told her, the shadow was there, like black poison, seeping into everything they did . . .

* * *

The day had turned cold and grey, making the garage feel chill and damp. The garage was in a grubby section of town, wedged between a junkyard and an old warehouse. It was a one-man outfit, and the hours were long and the work hard. But it belonged to Bill Donaldson, and that made a difference.

He lowered the hood on old widow Pegram's ancient Chevvy, wiped his hands on a piece of waste and decided it was time to knock off for the day. He was hungry, and Janet had said roast beef for dinner.

He spread the piece of tarp on the seat and kicked the starter over. The old Chevvy came to life and purred like a kitten. Bill grinned and cut the ignition. Whatever else they did for you at the orphanage, they made you master of a trade, if you really wanted to learn it.

Bill whistled against the silence and went in the tiny cubicle to wash up. He felt a surging inside of him. He felt strong and as if he wanted to laugh these days. She wasn't remembering so much. Nat Cline had been gone for such a long time. The shadow was in her eyes less and less these days, and it made Bill so happy he wanted to stop people on the street and say something nice to them.

His whistling was tuneless, gay, as he scrubbed his mechanic's hands and nails with the stiff brush. Life was pretty wonderful, giving him Janet and little Steve. That was all he'd ever dreamed about in the orphanage. A home of his own, people to come home to. You didn't talk about those things. People took them for granted. Anybody who hadn't spent the

same bleak, barren years in the orphanage could never quite understand. . . .

THE SKY was vicious with the promise of a stormy night when Bill got home. He alighted from his bus at the corner, took the sidewalk in a hurry and turned in the walk of his small white cottage.

In the living room, he stopped short. Mary Clarkson, the teen-ager from next door, was sitting on the couch, feet curled under, looking up at Bill from a comic book.

"Oh, hello, Mr. Donaldson."

"Hello," Bill said. He sniffed. No smell of roast beef.

Mary stood up. "Mrs. Donaldson asked me to stay in the house with Stevie while she makes a phone call. Can I go now that you're home?"

"Sure," Bill said. "Sure."

Mary's bobby-sox twinkled out. Bill heard the patter of Steve's footsteps in the bedroom. He entered the short hallway just as Steve came from the bedroom. Steve was almost four, chubby, pink-cheeked, with tousled hair like wisps of silk.

"Hey, daddy! Bang, bang! I'm the Lone Ranger, and you're dead, daddy. Bang, bang!"

Bill stood numbed, with the cold darkness outside insinuating itself into the house. "Steve . . ." he whispered. "Give daddy the gun, son. . . ." The hackles on the back of his neck crawled as he reached and took the gun from the child's innocent hands. He stood there with the gun in his hand, a real gun with real live bullets in it. Relief roughened his voice to a raw edge. "You are never, never to touch this gun, Steve!"

Bill's tone and something in his face caused Stevie to pucker his lips and begin to cry.

Bill dropped to his knees before the child. He slipped the gun in his pocket. It was a small, flat automatic. He had bought the gun months ago during a burglar scare. He worked late lots of nights and hadn't wanted to think of Janet and Steve alone and unprotected in the house. But he'd always kept the gun in the top drawer of the chest of drawers in his and Janet's bedroom. He'd been very careful about that, to keep the gun up

high, far out of Stevie's possible reach.

"Stevie, where did you get the gun?"

"Mommy's pocket book," Stevie wept. He stood before Bill, a picture of small-boy contrition, and Bill crushed Stevie to him. He released the child and walked in the bedroom. Janet's purse lay open on the vanity. She had been out somewhere this afternoon, carrying a gun. . . .

Bill stood wondering, thinking. He heard the living room door open, close. He went out of the bedroom quickly, and there she was, standing with her back against the living room door.

She was slender and tall for a girl, with a piquant face and soft brown hair. "Mary told me you had come in, Bill. I—a phone call I had to make. . . ."

He saw that she was hanging on to her control. He saw the muscles twitching at the corner of her mouth, and the whiteness of her cheeks; and he saw that the shadow was back, deep and awful, in her brown eyes.

Something strange and evil came to life in the room. It was the shadow, almost like something tangible, flowing darkly to cloak the house. . . .

He had his arm around her, tilting her chin back with his other hand. "What is it, Janet?"

For a moment she didn't speak, gnawing at her lips. Then she shook; he felt the tremor rack her from head to toe. Her fingers clawed hard at his biceps and she buried her face against his chest. He felt his own body trembling with her sobs.

"It's Cline, Bill. . . . He—he was paroled. . . . After six years, he's back, here in Atlanta. . . ."

Bill held her close, and remembered. He wished he couldn't remember, in a way, but his thoughts ached back to six years ago.

THE PLACE had been Mrs. Billings' boarding house. Bill had seen the new boarder that night when he'd come down to dinner. She had sat across the table from him, and her eyes had held a stark, naked shadow. She hadn't been an easy person to get to know, but fat and happy Mrs. Billings had decided to take the girl under her wing. Mrs. Billings had a heart of gold and couldn't stand to see pain in any living creature. She must

have decided that the quiet girl needed to know a guy like Bill Donaldson.

After he'd got to know Janet, Bill learned things about her. She had come from some tiny, erosion-blasted farm downstate. Life must have been tough on those grubby acres. Her mother had died, and her father had remarried. That was all she'd ever stated, but Bill sensed a lot more about her.

He remembered the night she'd started talking in the little restaurant. It was very late; they had been dancing, and they'd taken a corner table in this place they passed, and Bill had ordered steaks.

It was the night he had asked her to marry him.

He had known when she'd looked up at him that she was going to try to tell him something. He'd said, "Just tell me yes, Janet. Whatever has happened before doesn't count. There has been no before, see?"

He had seen the gleam of tears in her eyes. And she had talked. She had poured it out as if it were poison that had made her ill too long. There was a man, she had said, by the name of Nat Cline. . . . She had been working in a restaurant when she'd come from the downstate farm, and this Nat Cline used to eat there. He seemed nice. He seemed like a businessman. To a green, foolish kid he seemed like a dream.

She had become Mrs. Nat Cline. She didn't know whether she loved him or not. She wasn't sure she even knew what love was. She had told Cline that. But he hadn't cared. He'd wanted only to own her. He had been crazy that way, wanting to own anything beautiful that struck his fancy. . . .

In less than a month after her marriage, she had learned the real nature of Cline's business, a big combine running booze into the dry areas of the Carolinas. She had wanted to leave then, and Cline had laughed and told her it would be the best method of suicide he knew—if she really wanted to die. Four weeks later Cline had killed a man, a stoolie he'd had to silence. He'd made one single mistake; he'd left a fingerprint at the scene of the crime. His lawyer had tried to make it self-defense, but Cline had drawn a sentence for manslaughter.

"It should have been first-degree murder," Janet had whispered to Bill that night in the restaurant, "but Nat Cline's lawyer was very smart. So now you see, Bill. You see why there can't be anything for us. Cline will never forget that I hated him, that I was once . . . his."

"Just tell me one thing, Janet. Do you think, now, you would recognize love?"

"Yes, I know I would now, Bill."

"And you love me?"

It had been in her eyes. And Bill Donaldson had married her less than a week later. Mrs. Billings had been very fat and happy at the ceremony. . . .

After that, time became a montage for Bill. An induction station, a uniform. Sore muscles and blistered feet during basic training. The Battle of the Bulge . . . and the letter finally reaching him, asking how it felt to be a pop and where were the cigars. . . .

SIX YEARS, Bill thought. And now it was the present again, a cold, stormy night and Janet was shivering in his arms and telling him that Nat Cline had been paroled and was back in Atlanta.

"He came by the house this afternoon, Bill. He said an old crony had heard I had remarried two or three months after my divorce. He went on over to the city hall. It was there in the records—your name and mine. Then a city directory gave him our address."

She moved away from Bill stiffly, sat on the edge of the couch, staring at the carpet. "He's crazy, Bill. Prison has made him worse. I know we'll never get out from under the shadow of Cline!"

Bill dropped down beside her, cradled her head against his shoulder. "Easy, Janet. Just tell me what he said and did."

"He said it should be cozy, all of us being old friends. He said why not let bygones be bygones—but I know he doesn't really feel that way. I was half crazy when he took his smirking face out of here. Bill, I—I got the gun. I was going to follow him. But I was afraid. I was afraid I couldn't scare him. He said he was registered at the Maybank. I tried to phone him there, but he wasn't in. I was going to tell him we were leaving town, that if he tried to follow us I would kill him!"

Bill wasn't hungry now; even roast beef wouldn't have tasted good, but he said with forced quiet, "Janet, don't you think we'd better have a little dinner?"

They tried to pretend that everything was the same; Janet cooked slices of ham, eggs and steaming hot biscuits. But the food tasted flat in Bill's mouth, and over all the house it seemed he could sense the rustle of the shadow's lowering wings. . . .

* * *

The Maybank hotel was just off Peachtree street, a squat, ugly brick building in the rain-swept street. Bill pulled his hat brim lower and crossed the street to the hotel entrance. He could feel the slow, hard thud of his heart against his ribs. Dinner had been two hours ago, and it still lay in curds in his stomach. The pretense had been no good. He'd finally told Janet that he had to go back to the garage and put a few finishing touches on the widow Pegram's Chevvy. Instead he had come here to the Maybank, and he could feel the cold, hard weight of the flat automatic still in his pocket.

A gust of wet wind ushered him into the old mustiness of the Maybank lobby. Slicker glistening, hat peppered with the fine rain, Bill crossed to the desk.

"Mr. Nat Cline's room?"

"Is he expecting you?"

"No." Bill hesitated, touched his tongue to his lips. "Just ring his room and tell him Mr. Donaldson is in the lobby. He'll see me."

Cline was in 203. He was standing in the doorway of his room when Bill got off the swaying, open-cage, antique elevator. Bill started down the corridor, looking at the man. The pale corridor light cast shadows over Cline's prison-pale face. He was tall and lean and looked as if he was possessed of a hard, cruel strength. His face was angular and might have been handsome except for the burning black eyes.

Cline waited until Bill was close to him. Then Cline looked Bill up and down and laughed in his face.

The laugh brought color up in Bill's cheeks. He said stiffly, "Cline?"

"Sure. You're the punk she married. Come in, Willy, come in."

For Janet's and Steve's sake, Bill reminded himself desperately, I don't want trouble. I can't have the pleasure of pushing his face to the back of his head. . . .

He entered the room. Cline closed the door. "Take a load off your feet, Willy. We might as well get to know one another. We're going to be chums. Yeah, real chums."

"I don't think we are," Bill said.

"That's a matter of opinion." Cline walked over to the dresser, picked up a bottle of whiskey that was there, poured himself a drink. "In fact, we might even make some profit together, chum. I heard you got a garage. I got exactly the right connections. I even got everything all fixed. Now all you got to do is repaint the cars late at night, change a few accessories and—"

"Hot cars? You're crazy! What makes you think I'd mess with hot cars?"

Cline's face hardened until it was a thing of white clay. "Get one thing straight right off, Donaldson. I'm broke. But I like dough. I like it quick and I like lots of it, and I'm going to get it like that. This kind of setup isn't dropped in a man's lap every day. I know—you came here to scare me off, but I don't scare. Janet could have told you that. Better forget that idea and talk out of the other side of your face."

Cline tossed the drink off. "Maybe there's something you don't know, Donaldson. . . ." Cline breathed softly, "I don't believe you do or you'd know why you're going to help me, chum. Janet was driving the murder car the night I killed the stoolie."

The words didn't make sense at first. Then the cold numbness crept over Bill and he thought for a moment he was going to be sick. Cline looked at his face and laughed.

"I guess," Cline said, "she never wanted to put that fact into words, not to you, not even to herself. But you see what it means, Donaldson? I never revealed her name at the trial because it wouldn't have helped me any. My lawyer even had the fear that her testimony might be harmful, so we left the identity of the murder car driver in doubt. The cops decided I'd driven the car myself. But now, Donaldson, I could spill it all. They'd

try her, you know that. But they couldn't try me again because I've served my time, and they can't try a man twice for the same crime in this country."

Bill's hand groped up. He passed his palm across his face. He wasn't conscious of movement, but he must have been stumbling away because Cline's laugh sounded behind him. Then the laugh faded as Cline closed the door. Janet had been right, Bill thought. Cline wouldn't scare. . . .

SHE WAS waiting in the living room when he walked out of the rain into the white cottage. She jumped up from the couch when he entered, and he noticed the dark circles of worry that had already grown under her eyes.

She managed somehow to get a smile on her lips. "How did the widow's car go, Bill? Finish the job?"

"No," he said, peeling out of his slicker. "I didn't quite finish the job."

"I've got sandwiches in the kitchen, Bill. And some fresh coffee."

"Sounds great," he said. "Stevie in bed?"

"Said his prayers and was visited by the sandman ages ago."

He followed her out to the kitchen. As she turned up the flame under the coffee, he touched her shoulders, turned her around.

"Janet, there's something I've wondered about, and now that Cline's back, I've got to know. Do you know who was really driving the murder car that night, Janet?"

He watched the color drain out of her face. It seemed like a long, slow process, and in the silence the rain outside was a malignant whisper.

"I—I was driving Cline's car that night, Bill. I—he asked me to take him downtown. On the way he said he wanted to stop a minute at a seedy little hotel. He went in. I waited. He came back out in five minutes or so, and we drove away. I didn't know he had just killed a man."

She stared at the black square of window, at the cold drops of rain beaded on it, with dry, burning eyes. Her voice was almost inaudible. "I was innocent, Bill. I swear that I was innocent. . . . I didn't know. . . . Later, I couldn't speak out be-

cause I was afraid Cline would twist my actions. I think he deliberately had me drive the car to give him a hold on me. And now that he's out . . ."

Bill felt her shiver under his hands. She dragged her gaze back to his, "I should have told you this before, Bill. But I didn't want you to have that much more worry brought on you. It's the only thing I didn't tell you."

"I believe you, Janet."

"But now . . . if he goes to the police . . ."

His eyes took on a slow change, like small fires were being lighted in their depths; his hands tightened on her shoulders. "Janet, we've been afraid long enough. What I'm going to ask will take nerve and belief in ourselves. It won't be easy or pleasant, and I don't like it because I have to ask you to carry the load. But I think Cline's shadow has haunted us long enough. Now sit down and I'll tell you where I've really been tonight, and I'll tell you the one way we can beat this deck that's stacked against us. . . ."

* * *

It was still drizzling that grey rain the next morning. Bill was late getting to the garage. As he unlocked it, he shook his head to clear some of that buzzing that came from losing sleep. He'd watched the grey dawn speckle the bedroom window that morning.

At nine-thirty, the widow Pegram came in, beamed over her Chevy, and drove it off. Bill crawled back under Harry Phillips' Ford. He had this overhaul, a ring job, a master cylinder overhaul and brake lining job waiting on him. If Cline hadn't showed up, he thought bitterly, he and Janet might have been able to put their heads together, go over the budget, and hire an extra mechanic, the way business was notching up.

He had the gasket loosened and the pan of the Ford just about ready to drop when he heard the scuff of a foot on the cracked concrete floor.

From under the Ford, Bill looked at the shoe, the trouser cuffs, and asked quietly, "Cline?"

"Yeah, chum. Roll your scooter from under there and we'll talk some business."

Bill came from under the Ford. He wiped his hands on waste and looked at Cline. Cline's suit didn't fit too well and looked like an old style, the shorter coats men had been wearing six-seven years ago.

Cline was looking about the garage with something akin to contempt on his face.

"Go ahead, Cline. Take a good, long look. You won't be seeing the inside of this place again."

Cline's eyes shimmered. "Look, chum, I thought we went over that last night."

"So did Janet and I, Cline. We know that if you ever run the first hot car through here you'll have us. We're stopping you before that. I'm going to throw you out of here, Cline, and if you don't like it go right ahead to the police and spill your brains. Tell them Janet was driving your car that night. We've decided to face it. We don't believe a jury in the country will convict her. You should have had a better hole card, Cline. Now get out!"

Bill picked up a heavy wrench and took two steps toward Cline.

Cline backed slowly. Bill could hear his gusty breathing in the silence. Deep in Cline's eyes sanity melted. A vein quivered on his forehead. Then he had stopped moving. He had a gun in his hand and soft laughter bubbled from his lips.

"Going noble, huh? Well, I don't like it, chum. Maybe you don't realize how it is with me. Look at this suit—the same rag I wore into prison! You think I'm going to live like that? But it's hard to get rolling again. The cops are watching me. The old pals mostly are gone or don't speak to me. I'm on the bottom with no way up—except this one way, this one connection. The setup is perfect, with your garage here. I won't run into another like it for a long time, and I'm not walking out on it now, chum. Let's see how noble you can get!" Cline breathed heavily. "You got a kid, ain't you? A sweet, innocent kid you wouldn't want any harm to come to. . . ." Cline dribbled laughter. "So my hole card wasn't strong enough. Well, chum, you just hadn't seen it, that's all!"

Bill's foot scraped across the concrete. Cline said, "Stand back, you fool!"

"When it's him or his kid, Cline, a

man's got no choice, not even an ordinary guy who isn't a hero."

"One more step, Donaldson . . ."

Bill lunged, striking at the gun. The gun cracked, and Bill felt a hot flame burn into his side. Cline was twisting, backing, swinging the gun up. This was it. This was the shot that would kill. Bill raised the wrench and hurled it through the air.

He saw it strike Cline, heard the soft crunch of breaking bones. Then he was swaying over Cline, looking down at him, and Bill knew that Cline was dead.

Bill stumbled back, half sprawling on the fender of the Ford. He couldn't move while he was trembling like this, he knew. He could feel the blood from Cline's bullet coursing down his side, but he'd have to stand quite still and hang on to himself until the trembling and reaction had eased up some.

THE TREMBLING was finally passing seconds later when he saw the door at the far end of the garage open. "Janet . . ."

"Oh, Bill, Bill! He came by the house, said he was coming here. Bill . . ." She saw Cline's body then. Bill heard her catch her breath. Then she was coming to him in a rush as she saw the blood. She was easing the heavy, greasy work shirt back, her hair brushing his cheek. He reached up to stroke her hair. "It's not bad, honey. I'm not that easy to kill."

"But Cline, Bill . . . what about Cline?"

Bill looked at Cline, and suddenly he felt a deep peace inside of himself. He knew what he had to do. He made his way toward the small office at the front of the garage, Janet begging him to relax, to rest—couldn't he see the blood?

In the office, he picked up the phone. His voice cracked just a little when he told the operator to give him police headquarters, but by the time a booming voice came over the wire to him, Bill's own voice was steady.

"This is William Donaldson, at Donaldson's garage. I just killed a man here. . . . What? Yes. His name was Nat Cline. You say you remember him? That's right, the ex-con. He . . . was once married to my wife. He was desperate for cash. We didn't have any, but he thought he could use us. It was kind of the old protection game turned around. He threatened my family, and when he saw I wouldn't take it lying down, I had to kill him in self-defense. What? Sure, you can bet I'll wait here. If you uncover the people he's seen since he got out of the pen, you might break a hot car ring wide open. What's that? Yes, I think you can pretty well see it's self-defense from the lay of the land here. Sure, I know I'll have to stand trial, but I'm not worried."

Bill cradled the phone and supported himself against the scarred desk where Janet came down once a week to straighten up the books. He met her tremulous smile with a grin of his own. Things began to look better.

"Oh, Bill . . ." she whispered. He felt her fingers gently pulling the denim shirt away from his side. He looked out the window. The rain had stopped. The sun was coming out. There were no shadows out there. He tilted her chin up, looked in her eyes. There were no shadows there, either.

No shadows anywhere, Bill thought, not any more. Shadows are absence of light. Where there is light and warmth there can never be shadows. . . .



TOO HOT TO HANDLE!

CHAPTER ONE

The Dead Can Wait

SAMMY stuck the train ticket in his pocket, put on his hat and mentally thumbed his nose at his office. He walked out into the reception room and paused at the desk of Miss Candy Warren.

"Honey," he told her, "as July turns into August and the good people of New York crawl out on fire escapes to spend the evening, think of me. I shall be in Maine where cool breezes blow and rich men, unlike Sammy, take vacations on yachts and drink gin and—"

"The hell with it." Candy was a girl of short words. Her hair was curly and black. She could add, subtract, write on a typewriter, tell lies on the phone and juggle a checkbook. She was pretty and un-kissed. Sammy kissed her; that was the way he felt today.

"Don't call me. I don't care what happens. And for him—" Sammy pulled a thumb toward the closed door marked Ralph Harwood—"keep him sober and don't, *don't* let him draw any advance."

"You've drawn it all yourself," she stated factually. "Good-bye."

He picked up his grip, then paused with the door half open. "You are pretty, Candy. You are young and simple and unspoiled. You should get married, Candy."

She looked at him for ten seconds. Her eyes were a nice shade of brown. Then a smile came across her lips. "I'm saving myself for a wonderful man like you," she said. "Good-bye."

Sammy went out whistling. Times Square was hot and sticky. It was four-thirty. Sammy pushed back his hat and waved for a cab. His face was lean. His



She screamed as Joe's gun roared from the doorway.

If all the men who had died trying to latch on to the manuscript of Duke Draper's scandal-mongering book were laid end to end, Sammy Payne figured, they'd probably make the finest row of corpses ever to invite a man to join them in the blood bath with: "Come on in—the slaughter's fine!"



*Gripping Novel
of Metropolitan
Mayhem*

**By
FRANCIS K.
ALLAN**

hair was dark and curly. He was tall and his suit had been pressed. A cab stopped and he got in.

"Do I look like a private detective to you, sir?" he inquired of the driver. "No, I do not. I resemble a gentleman. My shoes are polished. My trousers are creased. I had four martinis shortly ago. Let us drive toward Penn Station."

The driver grunted. He was hot and he didn't think it was funny.

Sammy's train left at five-forty. He stepped into a bar at the station and ordered another martini. He had another. "I will join you again in two weeks," he advised the bartender. "Meanwhile, remember that the wages of sin are pleasure. Good-afternoon." He found his train. "And where is the bar car located?" he asked the conductor.

That was the way Sammy felt, and he liked it. No telephones were going to ring at midnight. No fat men were going to want their fifth wives followed to hotels; no fat wives vice-versa. Mr. Ralph Harwood, his partner for whom Sammy had developed no affection whatever, would have to work for a change. And Candy . . . Sammy sighed. Candy was a lovely child. The train began to move.

Three hours later the telegram arrived:

RETURN INSTANTLY. TERRIFIC CASE IN LAP. CLIENT WANTS YOU. TAKE PLANE IMMEDIATELY. HARWOOD.

"Any answer?" the man asked.

"Yes." Sammy tore the telegram across. "Tell him his lap is big enough without mine."

IT WAS long after midnight when he left the train and took the bus to the tiny costal village of Tarblaine. The biggest thing there, save for the ocean, was the resort hotel, the Tarblaine Inn. It was a rambling wooden building, painted white and green, with sloping lawns and a meandering porch. Only a few lights were burning in the lobby when Sammy went in, and the ancient clerk was asleep.

Sammy woke him gently. "I'm Mr. Payne. I have a reservation."

The clerk shuddered into motion. "Uh. Um. Yep. 308. Yep. Telegram for you, too."

Sammy thrust it in his pocket and followed the creaking figure to the creaking elevator and to his room. It was just fine. Four windows and a cool breeze that lifted the mesh curtains, held them, then let them collapse silently. The bed was wide. The walls were clean. There was not a sound except the low music of the ocean on the rocks. Sammy went to sleep smiling.

He woke and the sun was shining. Everything was green and white and blue outside. There was laughter and the crisp sound of a tennis racket pinging against a ball. Also, there was a third telegram. Calmly Sammy folded it into his pocket with the second, unread, and ate a large breakfast. He went walking, then took a nap in one of the beach chairs in the sun.

When he woke it was five-thirty. Time, he reflected, to consider a couple of martinis.

In the bar he found a young lady with golden hair and legs and a soft voice. She was Marla Martin. He'd just arrived, hadn't he? You could usually tell by the suntan. So he was from New York, too? Oh, yes. She lived at the Rondo Hotel on Fifty-ninth. She was an actress—not the kind up in lights, but the kind in the little type at the bottom of the page. Oh, sure, it was a great life if you hated money. She would have another drink. In fact, she'd dance. Tell her about him. . . .

And then the waiter tapped Sammy on the shoulder. "Long distance call for you, Mr. Payne."

Sammy groaned and damned Ralph Harwood. He left Marla and picked up the telephone in the lobby. It wasn't Ralph. It was Candy. Her voice was low and tight.

"Sammy, believe me, I feel like a rat to do this. Hold your hat. Here it comes: Ralph Harwood is dead. He was shot to death about an hour ago. The police just phoned me and they'll probably phone you."

Sammy dropped his cigarette and bent over the phone. "He . . . yes. Yes, Candy. And what else? Tell me everything they said."

"That's all. Just that he'd been killed, shot, and the place was somewhere in Greenwich Village. I'd just gotten home when the phone rang. It's only six-thirty

now. He left the office about four. He didn't say where he was going or why. All I know, he'd been crazy to hear from you. That's all I know. I thought I better call."

"Yes, Candy, of course," Sammy said jerkily. "Who called you?" She didn't know the name. "You told them where to reach me?" he asked. She had. "Stay at home so I can call you," he said. "If anything else comes up, try to get me here before I leave." He hung up and lit another cigarette. He kept staring at the telephone, as if expecting it to ring. Then he shook his head slightly.

His feelings, he realized, were strangely flat and unemotional. He was not terribly sorry that Ralph was dead. He hadn't liked him, nor completely trusted him. Ralph had been clever, erratic and hard to depend upon. Sammy had discovered that. Jeanne, Ralph's wife, had discovered it too. He thought of her a moment, then remembered the telegrams. He opened them. They were repetitions of the first, urging him to return to New York instantly, but giving no detail of the 'terrific case that had dropped in his lap'.

Sammy shook his head again and walked back toward the bar.

"I decided I'd scared you away," Marla said. She took another look. "Did you get ptomaine out there?"

"I ate a lemon." He grinned. "Now I want a drink." When the waiter came, Sammy asked him when the next trains left. There was one at nine and one about eleven, but no more busses.

Marla looked at him oddly. "You're going back so soon?"

"Events beyond my control," he said. "Death and taxes hate vacations."

"I'm sorry." She sounded as though she really meant it. "If you must go, I can borrow the rattletrap they carry tools in around here. It almost runs."

"Maybe—" Sammy started. The tap came on his shoulder again. He rose. "This should be the one." It was. Lieutenant Davega was calling.

SAMMY knew Davega well enough. There was nothing new. Ralph had been killed instantly as he started up a narrow flight of stairs in a building on Seventh Avenue, near Twelfth Street.

He'd been shot from the head of the stairs. A photographer with a studio on the street floor had heard the shot and found the body.

Otherwise, the building had been empty. It wasn't much of a place: shabby, three stories. The top floor was a dance school, but it had folded last week and was empty. The second floor had a tailor and a one-horse publicity agency and two or three others: a greeting card guy and a place where they rented evening clothes. The street floor was a Chinese laundry and the photographer. The caretaker lived in the basement, but he wasn't home. But there were a couple of curious details—about Harwood, Lieutenant Davega said in his soft voice. He'd rather not discuss them over the phone. It was unfortunate and he hated to ask it, but . . .

"I know," Sammy said wearily, "and I'll take a train tonight. I'll be there in the morning. You've talked to Mrs. Harwood?"

"Of course. Why?" Davega asked. Sammy was instantly sorry he'd asked.

"I just wondered. I'll be there." He went slowly back to the bar. "It looks like you'll borrow the rattletrap that almost runs," he told Marla. "My partner was considerate enough to get himself killed. He just had a bad sense of timing."

"Killed?" Marla asked with a gasp.

"Don't be depressed. It's not a national tragedy." He looked at her golden-brown eyes. Marla was a very beautiful girl, he realized suddenly. She was nice; when people died, she didn't make cracks. So Sammy said, "I'm sorry. I come of insensitive stock and I never took music. Do you mind driving me?"

She shook her head. "I'd like to."

"I'll get my stuff and meet you here." He sighed. It was too bad all this had to happen.

The rattletrap was a pick-up truck. The shovels clattered in the back and the motor hissed in front. It was scarcely dark, but the moon was climbing over the trees and the sky was a pale grey-blue. Marla drove while Sammy sat silently and smoked and thought.

At the station she got out with him. "You don't need to wait," he said.

"It won't be long." They sat on a bench outside, and it wasn't long. "I'm

sorry," she said again. This time he knew she meant it.

"So am I, but—well, times are tough, they say." He grinned. Then slowly he put down his grip and took her in his arms. He kissed her. It seemed a long time since he had kissed a girl like this. "When you get back to New York, let's go somewhere some day," he said.

"I think so," she said softly. "I'll be there soon. Good-bye."

"Good-bye." He picked up his grip and turned toward the waiting train. Then he heard her call.

"Wait!" She ran toward him. "Who will it be when you call?"

"Who?" He blinked. "Oh. It will be Sammy Payne." They laughed together. Then the train began to move. Sammy got on, waved, and found an empty seat. He watched the moon climb over the highest trees, and finally he thought of Ralph Harwood.

CHAPTER TWO

Dead Man's Trophy

IT WAS still dark when Sammy took a cab to his walkup on East Forty-eighth. He started a pot of coffee and went into the bathroom to shave. Dulcie's door opened and she appeared wearing a robe, her blue eyes shining. "You didn't even get a tan," she observed.

"No. I didn't even get a tan."

She perched herself on the end of the tub and eyed him steadily.

"Isn't it terrible about Ralph?" Her tone remained pleasant.

"Yes. Go back to bed." Dulcie was twenty. She was Sammy's sister. He did not understand her, but he had a vague feeling that she was on her way to the devil. She did not move.

"I had a nice conversation with a detective named Davega," she said.

Sammy turned around. "And what," he asked, "did you tell Davega?"

"I told him I thought he was terribly attractive and I bet he could tango wonderfully. He liked that."

"What did you tell him, Dulcimer?" Sammy asked coldly.

"That was all, really. I didn't even mention the time I saw you kissing Jeanne

Harwood. I didn't tell him about the phone calls, either."

"What phone calls?"

"Ah, a man's been phoning for you since before midnight. He never would say who he was or what he wanted. He just said he'd try again. I imagine," she said, "it has something to do with the case, don't you?"

Sammy grunted and studied her warily. "Has anything else happened that I might need to know? Have you done anything?"

"I quit my job. I wrote them a letter and mailed it at two this morning. I am tired of being a stenographer," she said dreamily. "I want excitement and mystery. I am going to help you on the case."

"The hell you are," he said. "In fact, I think it's time you were on your way back to Tulsa."

She smiled at him kindly and yawned. "Don't be silly, dear boy." Sammy seized his razor savagely and began to shave. "Anyway," she murmured, "you need me."

At six-forty Sammy rang the bell at Candy's apartment. She looked at him bitterly. "Now I know they killed the wrong man. Don't ask me anything until I get some coffee."

He followed her into the kitchen and leaned against the wall. "May I smoke? What was this big case that Ralph kept yelling about?"

"I don't know. You went away on your lovely trip, then in walked this man who said he was Mr. Perkins—no first name or initials. He didn't look happy to be there. A thin, grey customer, very gentle and English and afraid to soil his gloves. First he asked for you, then settled for Harwood. They were still in Harwood's office when I came home at five-thirty." She poured a glass of tomato juice.

"Yesterday Harwood didn't appear until after lunch. He was all rush-and-pant: rubbing his hands together and pinching his tie and wanting to know why you weren't there. Then he got a call. The voice sounded like Perkins' and said it was Perkins'. Harwood jumped out the door and that was my last good-bye to Mr. Harwood. Now you know as much as I do. And it's not seven o'clock yet," she added.

"Did you tell Davega this?"

She nodded. "That's something else. He wanted a look in Harwood's desk. What could I do? So I sat there from ten until midnight while he looked around. Then he—"

Sammy groaned softly. "You should have called our lawyer, honey. Public detectives should never see what private detectives—"

"I am not smart, but I am steady," she interrupted. "From eight until nine, I looked around in the desks. I anticipated. I packed two carton boxes. I brought them home and they are in the laundry hamper. Now what were you starting to say?"

Sammy smiled. "I was starting to say, why don't you go back to sleep and stay as long as you want, even until ten o'clock."

"You melt me. One thing remains," she said as Sammy started toward the door. "Jeanne Harwood wants you to call her before you do anything—*anything*, she said."

"Thanks." When Sammy reached the street, a mist was falling. A dismal summer fog was curling through the streets, making blurs of the cabs and obscuring the tops of buildings. He rolled up his collar and thought of the Tarblaine Inn. Then he forgot the Inn.

A woman's voice rose in a sharp scream. Sammy started to turn. A gun roared somewhere in the veil of fog and Sammy took a sprawling face-down jump into the sidewalk. Footsteps tangled in wild flight and approach as people fled or rushed nearer in curiosity. Slowly Sammy stood up and wiped the mass of crumpled cigarette off his chin. One pants leg was ripped open. He picked up his hat and stared at it. The crowd stared at him nakedly.

"Did anybody see who had the fire-cracker?" he asked stonily.

Everybody chattered at once, but nobody knew. His nerves began to shake. He turned and stalked away from the avid eyes. In an automat he sat down and drank coffee, then ate breakfast while his muscles stopped shaking. Finally he called Jeanne Harwood.

"I've got to talk to you, Sam." Her voice was breathless and tight.

"Go ahead. What's the fret, Je-Je?"

It was a name that had started months before.

"Not over the phone. Can you come up here? Please, Sam."

"All right. All right, Je-Je."

JE-JE was slender. Her hair was long and black and her eyes were smoke-blue. When Sammy looked at her, he could think of no better word than exotic. She was the most difficult woman to forget that he'd ever known—and the most impossible to understand.

"I'm not thinking of Ralph. I'm thinking of what the police will think," she said nervously. She walked the room as she smoked. "God knows, I loathed him enough to do it. I—look at it! It's raining. I hate rain! Why does it have to—"

"Forget the rain. Stop cutting the rug and say what's on your mind, please. I've got to meet Davega."

"Or they may try to kill me—the ones who killed him. They may think he told me something. Oh, don't stand there and look so bland. Sam, what's the matter with you?"

"Nothing's the matter with me; Je-Je. I'm just trying to make sense and you're talking about the rain."

"Sometimes," she said, "you're like a robot. You just stand. You blink. You make motions. You don't *feel* at all. Listen, it was grotesque, Sam. He didn't get home until after midnight. He was drunk, but it was a different kind of drunk. This one was cunning and quiet and all eyes. He sat there on that couch and smiled at the rug, at the walls, at everything. Then once in a while he'd whisper, 'A hundred grand, at least.' When I spoke to him, he only smiled and rubbed his hand across his chin. Finally I went to bed. I don't know when he came to bed, but once I woke up to hear him whispering it in the dark, 'A hundred grand, at least.' That—that was the last thing I ever heard Ralph say, those words in the dark from the other bed." She mashed her cigarette down in the tray and lit another. She kept walking constantly.

"He was asleep when I got up yesterday. I went to town. He was gone when I came back in the afternoon. I never saw him after that. Those were the last words I heard, in the dark. He—my God, why

does it have to rain like this all—”

“Stop it! You’re giving it to me,” Sammy said. He walked to her and took her hands. They were cold. “Don’t look at the rain. Don’t think about what Ralph was saying. If you didn’t kill him, you didn’t kill him, and the police won’t bother you.” He paused. “Did you kill him?”

“No.” Her eyes were hunted. “I only wanted to,” she said quietly.

“Skip that part. Next, if you’re afraid, move to a hotel.” He looked at the torn place in his pants. “In fact, I think I would, Je-Je.” He looked at his watch. “I’ve got to go. Pack a few things and go to a hotel. Let me know where you are. This will blow over in a couple of days. Don’t worry.”

He kissed her. She opened her eyes and looked at him. “Something is the matter with you, Sam,” she said.

“Je-Je, you’re a fool. Nothing—” But she had turned and was walking away from him. He sighed and picked up his hat. “Let me know where you move to, and we’ll have a drink tonight. Things will be better then.”

LIUTENANT DAVEGA looked curiously at Sammy’s pants.

“It’s the New Look for the murder season,” Sammy explained. “It seems that somebody wants me, too.”

Davega smiled. He frequently smiled. His smile was slow and thoughtful. It deepened the hollows in his lean cheeks and communicated a glow to his black eyes, but the total effect was devoid of any trace of humor. Davega was not a funny man.

He leaned back and chewed his gum rhythmically. “Tell me about your vacation, Sammy,” he suggested.

“It was brief. Now, let’s get to the point: What’s the real reason you wanted to see me?”

“Who is this Mr. Perkins who came in and handed Harwood a case?”

“I don’t know,” Sammy said. “And I know absolutely nothing about the case.”

Davega smiled again. “I was afraid of that. What about this place on Seventh where Harwood was killed? Have you ever had any business there?” He read the address. Sammy shook his head. Davega chewed his gum and inspected his

lean hands and polished fingernails idly. “Did you ever see that before?” He nodded. On the corner of the desk lay a delicate bronze figure of a nude girl. It was small, no more than four inches long, but it was exquisitely fashioned.

Sammy shook his head. “Never.”

“It was in Harwood’s pocket when we got there. It’s an original Coachburn. He was an Englishman who made those things over a hundred years ago. Collectors buy them. This one, they tell me, is worth about two thousand dollars.”

“In that case it wasn’t Harwood’s,” Sammy said.

“But what was he doing with it?” Davega frowned and sighed. “And what about that?” He pointed to a tiny golden slipper, no longer than an inch. A diamond was set in the toe. Sammy picked it up. It had a small hole at the heel as though it had been designed to wear on a watch chain. It felt soft and heavy, as pure gold feels. There was no jeweler’s mark or identification on it. Sammy shook his head and put it back.

“That’s a stranger, too,” he said.

Davega smiled. “It’s worth perhaps three hundred. It must have been a custom job: we can’t find out where it came from. But that bronze figure is something else. Coachburn numbered his things. There on her foot, see: 545, J.C. Maybe we can trace it. I’d hoped you could save us the trouble.”

Sammy shook his head. “Sorry. You know more than I do.”

Davega sighed and looked out the window. “I keep wondering if maybe there *wasn’t* any Mr. Perkins and a case. I don’t know why I got that idea. How did you and Harwood get along?”

“No better than you and Harwood would have. And I was in Maine.”

“Oh, yes,” Davega recalled with mild surprise. “You were, anyway. I glanced around Harwood’s desk. Your secretary had cleaned house. She’s very capable. I wished she worked for me.”

“Make her an offer.”

Davega seemed not to hear. “And Mrs. Harwood—a very interesting woman. A beautiful woman, Sammy. Don’t you think so?”

“Oh, I do,” Sammy said. “I call her Je-Je, you know.”

Harwood glanced at him sourly. Abruptly he rose. He was, Sammy knew, very annoyed at the interview and couldn't put his finger on why.

"If you remember anything you haven't mentioned, let me know. And one last detail," he said as Sammy opened the door. "Ralph Harwood was murdered with your .32."

Sammy spun around. "What?"

"Somebody just happened to check and there we were." Davega smiled again. "Look around. Let us know where you find your gun."

Sammy swallowed twice and Davega kept smiling. The interview was much better suddenly. "Yes. I'll do that," Sammy said.

CHAPTER THREE

The Man Who Wouldn't Talk

HE TOOK a cab straight to his office, walked through the empty reception room and to the steel filing cabinet. He unlocked the bottom section, lifted the stack of manila file sections and stared at the place where his .32 revolver had been—but wasn't now.

He sat down and lit a cigarette. He had a key. Candy had a key. Ralph had had a key. He wondered if Ralph's key had been on him when he died. He rose and walked to the door of Ralph Harwood's office. He stood there looking doubtfully around the room.

"Sammy," he told himself, "I have an uneasy feeling."

Abruptly he sat down at Candy's desk and searched through the classified telephone directory until he found the number of the Victorian Antique Company on East Fifty-ninth. He asked for Mr. Pastor. Mr. Pastor recalled him immediately. A favor? Speak without hesitation!

Sammy spoke about the John Coachburn bronze nude, Number 545.

"Coachburn! Ah, exquisite craftsmanship," Pastor breathed. "I haven't handled one in years. But let me think. . . . Edmund Charles might know. Just let me call him and have a word, and I'll ring you back. At your office? Splendid."

Sammy lit another cigarette and

watched the traffic in Times Square. Not a minute passed before the phone rang. It was not Pastor.

The voice was low and very precise. "To whom am I speaking, please?"

"This is Sam Payne. Who's calling?"

"Mr. Payne, this is Mr. Perkins. Perhaps you don't know who I am. The truth is, I called at your office two days ago. I spoke with Mr. Harwood, and now I—I learn that Mr. Harwood has been killed." Sammy heard him swallowing hard. "I feel that I must confer with you, Mr. Payne," he said desperately.

"Nothing would please me more. When?" Sammy asked.

"That is the difficulty." Again he swallowed. "This affair, I'm afraid, is quite out of hand. Let me see. . . . Eleven o'clock, now. It will have to be after five, otherwise it becomes too badly obvious. Let us say five-thirty."

"Let's say it. Where?"

"Oh, dear." Sammy could almost hear Perkins' starched cuffs waiting. "Suppose you be in the lobby of the Chancellor Hotel in Murray Hill. I will come in. I'll have my cane with its silver head and my suit is grey. But, Mr. Payne, one thing is imperative, please understand: Under no conditions will you mention this matter to the police."

"I'll remember that. The Chancellor at five-thirty. And what—" But Mr. Perkins had hung up with a breathless sigh. As soon as Sammy replaced the receiver, the phone rang again. This time it was Pastor.

"I've chatted with Edmund Charles. He handles so much of that sort of thing. He keeps records. I want you to go right over and speak to him personally, Sammy, because there's something quite odd about his attitude on this item you mentioned. He knows something, Sammy, but he's reluctant to discuss it. I assured him you were ethical and mentioned what you did for me. I know Edmund and know he is honest to the core, but he doesn't want to discuss this. You go right over. It's just below here, on East Fifty-eighth." He gave the number. "I said you'd be there."

"Thanks," Sammy said.

He stopped by his apartment to change pants. Dulcie had gone somewhere and she'd left the radio on. She'd left a ciga-

rette burning, too, and now it was a neat cylinder of ash, nesting in the charred furrow atop the coffee table. Sammy damned her wearily and took off his pants.

THE ADDRESS of Edmund Charles was a small shop. The window was crowded with an antique silver service. Within, there was a velvety hush, scarcely altered by the chime-note of the door.

A plump man in his sixties appeared. He moved slowly and blinked often. "Yes?" he asked. His voice sounded exhausted. Sammy introduced himself and mentioned Pastor. A look of resignation filled Charles' face.

"But it is not my affair, as I told Pastor. I cannot help you."

"You can, but you don't want to," Sammy corrected. "Why not? I only want to know who owns the Coachburn 545. Is it publicity you're afraid of? You or the owner? If that's it, you're not making things better. The police will get around to you presently, and they grind louder than I do."

At the mention of the police, Charles' eyes suffered. "Boors."

"Sure. Now tell me who, and I'll forget where I learned."

Charles moaned hopelessly. "Very well. The affair was like this: A very good client of mine came to me. He is Jerome Wineman, the very successful theatrical producer, and he told me this, it was two years ago. He told me that his Coachman 545 had been stolen from his penthouse, and he asked me to be on the lookout, in case someone attempted to sell it. I passed the word along. Then, oh, a month later, Mr. Wineman returned and asked me to forget the affair totally. He was insistent that it never, never be mentioned. He was quite disturbed. In leaving, he thrust a hundred dollars upon me." Charles spread his plump hands. "That's all I know. I hope you will be discreet."

Sammy smiled. "Always. And thanks."

* * *

Seeing Jerome Wineman was a gradual matter. It started in the green reception room with the blonde receptionist and moved north, through the grey room and Miss Kirkley, who was brunette, and final-

ly to the pale gold room where Miss Dixon, a redhead, took a final blood-count.

"Mr. Wineman can give you nine minutes," she said finally.

Sammy went in. Mr. Wineman was sitting in the center of a small auditorium. The harsh daylight was shut away by closed drapes. A soft ivory light flowed across the ceiling, and Mr. Wineman chewed his cigar. He was short, broad and hairy. He even sat still in a hurry. He moved things. He squinted and peered.

"Sam Payne? Payne? I don't know you. Says here you're a private detective. I'm not buying anything. What do you want?"

Sammy's patience had ended halfway down the line. "What would you do about a Coachburn, if it was number 545?"

Wineman's hands came to rest. One brow went up and one went down. "What about it?"

"I'm asking you. Later the police will ask louder. Sometimes people in big offices with velvet drapes hate the old dirty-shirt police talk."

"The drapes are satin. This is summer. Sit down." Wineman's black eyes were wary. "What about the Coachburn?"

"It used to be yours. Maybe it still is. Or maybe not. Anyway, it is tangled up in a murder. So I repeat: Who do you want to talk to? Me or the boys in serge?"

Wineman moved his cigar around slowly between crooked teeth. "I don't own the Coachburn. Not any more," he said finally, wearily. "It was . . . removed from my apartment."

"And who did the removing?" Sammy asked.

"That is my business."

"You can't keep it exclusive when murder is in the play."

Wineman frowned ferociously. "It was taken by someone we all know. A character of importance and power. He is a— a kleptomaniac. I cannot afford to press the matter. That's all."

Sammy looked at him intently. "It's not what you can or can't do in the parlor, Wineman. This is murder. If you are reasonable, you'll want to sit down quietly in this office where the light is right and talk to me—or would you rather have your day with the police and get your digestion in worse shape than it is now?"

Jerome Wineman thought it over without pleasure. He studied Sammy's chin, his ears, his hands. Then he inspected the ash of his cigar. His buzzer sounded. He lifted the phone, listened a few moments, then said, "No. Make it blue. Blue or nothing." He hung up and rose.

"I'm busy," he said flatly. "When I have time, I'll think of what you said. When I make up my mind, I'll call you. That will be this evening at the earliest. That's all."

Sammy shrugged. Wineman didn't bluff fast.

As he went out through the grey room, feeling less than happy, a voice exclaimed, "Sammy!" He turned around and there was Marla Martin.

"You're following me and I love it. But what happened to Maine?"

She made a mysterious face toward Wineman's office. "It says he's casting a new musical. When I heard it, I ran all the way home. I—"

The brunette appeared. "Mr. Wineman is sorry, Miss Martin, but he's leaving the office for the afternoon. He'll see you in the morning after ten."

"Damn," said Marla politely. "Thanks loads."

Sammy took her arm. "We will step down and into the nearest bar. I am glad to see you. Life has not been happy in the city."

"No?" They went out to the elevator.

"I will tell you, but not until a drink." She was, Sammy realized, even more lovely in New York than in Maine. In the bar he told her. "In case I failed to explain, my income is made in a curious fashion. I am a private detective. In books they call us ops, to mention one. And then I had a partner and this is what happened to him. . . ." He told her and she listened, her golden-brown eyes shining. "So," he concluded. "My gun: that is distressing. Second, I was shot at: also distressing. And Wineman had an acute attack of silence when I asked him questions."

"It is worse than distressing. It is dangerous," she said. "But I want to show you something. Come with me." She was in a hurry. They went to her room-and-a-half in the Rondo Hotel on Fifty-ninth. Promptly she opened the top drawer of the

dresser, took out a small box, and dug into the contents. "When you say gold slipper, would you mean something like this?" She held out her hand.

SAMMY looked. He picked up the gold slipper and looked harder, and then he stared at Marla. "Except for the diamond, this is it. The one they found on Harwood had a diamond set in the toe. If—"

"You may sit down and listen fast," Marla told him. "These little trinkets were passed out to the cast of a charity revue that was put on a couple of Christmas Eves ago. Mine was for singing a song about how tough it was without a man. We all got 'em, just like this, except for one that was set with a diamond. That one went to the little man with the biggest tongue on Broadway. I mean Duke Draper. He was the M.C. of the show. And *he* got the one with the diamond. That I know, my friend, for I was sore about it, diamonds being what they are, and Duke being what he is."

Sammy sat down quick. "You wouldn't be just dreaming?"

"Nobody ever dreams about Duke Draper. They call it nightmares."

Sammy lit a cigarette and stared at the golden slipper. He knew what every other tabloid reader knew about Duke (Murmurs of Broadway) Draper. He knew the picture that headed the column. A picture of a small, fat, soft man with thick glasses and a bushy mane of black hair. He knew the column, and the coast-to-coast broadcasts: a sentimental and sweet, acid and violent, vindictive and gentle and furious. He knew, or had heard, that Draper made a half-million a year, that a sour line in his column could kill a show, close a revue, or send a crooner back to tending bar in Brooklyn. He knew that press agents got ulcers from Draper's column. He knew Draper's little slogan: 'Nothing is sacred, sweetheart.' He knew that Draper had a million acquaintances and probably not a friend in the world. Sammy knew those things.

"Are you thinking important thoughts?" Marla inquired.

He glanced up and smiled. "You have alerted my imagination. I think I will walk around Broadway and ask questions.

Later, I will buy you a very large bottle of champagne and help you drink it."

"Sammy," she said, "be careful. I am going to worry about you."

"Thank you, darling." He kissed her tenderly and departed. Once he reached the street, he moved fast. The more he played with the idea of Duke Draper, the more he liked it.

But Duke Draper was not available in his office at the Banner Building. Mr. Draper, they said, was on his vacation. That was all they could say. Perhaps Mr. Payne would care to call tomorrow and talk to Miss Betty North, Mr. Draper's girl Friday?

Sammy said he might. And if it was triple-important, where would Miss North be now?

"Perhaps in her suite at the Grayce Hotel. If not, you might catch her later in the Blue Mirror or Archie's or the Penguin Club," the lady said.

Sammy tried the Grayce Hotel. He got Betty North. Her voice was a mixture of gravel and cigarette. "Yeah?" she demanded. Sammy's ear shuddered.

"This is Sammy Payne. Payne. I'm a private detective."

"Good for you, son," she said. "My uncle is a brakeman."

Sammy hung up, shook his ear and took a cab to the Grayce on Madison Avenue. Betty North's suite was at the front on the ninth floor. It was full of cigarette smoke and portable typewriters. Betty was blonde, about forty, and no less than a hundred and eighty pounds. Her eyes had seen it all, and the traces were on her face. She was wearing black lounging pajamas and there were two pencils stuck in her hair.

"Don't tell me. You're Payne. Sit down while I finish something. If you want a drink, leave four bits on the sink." She returned to hammering the typewriter. The phone rang. She let it work a while, then answered, "Yeah?" She kept typing. "No. No. Naw! I was covering that stuff when he was leaning frisky words behind the barn. Tell him to get a new act, like swallowing fish. Uh." She hung up. "Everybody wants a plug. Everybody's got a new act like perfect." She turned around. "What's your pitch, Samuel?"

"Where is Duke Draper?"

"Vacation. No calls, no messages. I don't even know myself. He's resting the old ticker, it says. Honest."

Sammy believed her. "Does he own a tiny gold slipper with a diamond set in the toe?"

"Yeah. Got it from the Golden Slipper Revue, a charity blowout."

"Uh-huh. How about a bronze figure about so-by-so?" He measured. "A nude gal."

Betty North frowned. Her face looked like a wrestler's. "Could be. He's hell on little doo-dads. Whatnots and stuff. I never bothered to look twice. But why's all this asking, Samuel?"

Sammy regarded her for a long moment. "While starting up a flight of Greenwich Village stairs, my partner got himself murdered yesterday. In his pocket was the slipper and the nude. He'd just gotten himself a big case. I was away and don't know anything about it. I'm asking around."

Betty squinted curiously, then leaned back and lit a cigarette. "You wouldn't be kidding?" Sammy shook his head. Abruptly she reached for the phone and dialed. "Herbert? This is me. Did he have a bronze figure of a girl—an undressed gal, Herbert? . . . Take a look." She made a face at Sammy. "Duke's butler. Knows all, thinks nothing. Can't. He—what?" She turned back to the phone. "Oh, it was? Why? . . . Okay, Herbert." She hung up. "It was one of the things he took with him."

"He took that kind of stuff on a vacation?"

"That's what makes me listen to you, Samuel," she said thoughtfully. "A lot of what goes on is funny. You're a clean-living lad, so I'll tell you. Listen. Maybe six weeks ago Duke had a bad inning with his heart. Life was hell around here. Duke hates dying worse than anybody, mainly because he's going to leave so many people alive—people he hates, see? So everything's a merry-go-round around here."

"Then, all of a sudden, comes another attack and this time Duke makes up his mind. He's pulling out for a month, two, three. No messages, nothing. He's going to build himself up. I'm doing the col-

umn. Guest stars are handling his broadcasts. He just walked out and evaporated; not even the doc knows where. But that's Draper, so nobody bats their mascara. But the part that needles me is the little things: taking a suitcase full of junk, like that bronze dolly, for instance. And he took his busted-down swivel chair that he's had since Moses. He wouldn't write a ten-cent check if he wasn't sitting in that chair; it's his superstition. He took the portrait of his wife too. She died ages ago. She was the only person he ever gave two damns about. He took that.

"You see what I'm getting at, Samuel? If he was just going to rest and take it easy, what was the point in carrying a van-load of junk? Maybe he wanted his favorite stuff around him, but again . . . no. No, it doesn't fit."

"No. A very poor fit," Sammy agreed. He frowned. "And nobody around here knows where he is or where he went?"

Betty shook her head. Sammy got off the corner of the desk and wandered to the window. "People didn't love Draper," he mused.

"That was my impression from years of listening, even to myself."

Sammy looked at his watch. It was scarcely twenty minutes before he was due at the Chancellor to meet Mr. Perkins. He turned toward Betty. "I'm meeting a man at the Chancellor at five-thirty. If he knows, I'll let you know. Until then, don't put it in the column."

She nodded. Her hard, wise eyes were thoughtful and serious.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Guy Called Joe

IT WAS exactly five-thirty when Sammy reached the old Chancellor Hotel, just off Park Avenue below Grand Central Station. The lobby was still part of the 1890's; so were the bellhops. The elevator groaned gently in the shaft, and there was a scent of dusty velvet in the air. Sammy sat down where he could watch the main entrance.

In ten minutes the frail man with the silver-headed cane appeared. He was at least sixty. His throat was bony, his face

grey and worn. His suit was English cut and threadbare. He blinked uneasily in the gloom and looked as if he desperately wished to turn and flee. Sammy approached him.

"Mr. Perkins?" he asked quietly. "I'm Sam Payne."

"Oh. Oh, yes," the man gasped softly. His eyes were huge and brown and anxious. "You are so kind to meet me." He glanced around, then motioned. "I think we could talk more privately up on the mezzanine."

They went up the marble stairs and Perkins laid aside his gloves and homburg. The mezzanine was semi-dark and overlooked the gloomy lobby. Save for Sammy and Perkins, it was empty.

"I will explain swiftly. I cannot be away too long," Perkins began. "First, I have only recently come from my native England. I am a gentleman's gentleman. My last position, for twenty years, was with Lord Becton of Wilshire. He lately died. For some reason scarcely clear to me now, I came to this country. Adventure, perhaps." He smiled slightly. "I needed employment. I placed an advertisement in your papers." He drew a folded scrap of newspaper from his pocket. Sammy glanced at it.

Gentleman's gentleman, late of London, age 62, seeks position with gentleman of taste. Impeccable references, salary moderate, interview requested.

There was a box number. Sammy passed the clipping back. Perkins mopped his lip and continued. "This was just over a month ago. Among the answers was one which asked me to appear at a certain hotel in this city. The Gristoval near Washington Square. I went there, Mr. Payne, and was received by a curious gentleman. A small man, plump, of bushy dark hair and violent manner." Sammy felt his neck grow cold while he thought of Duke Draper. "He seemed most eccentric, this gentleman," Perkins continued. "He wished to know if I knew anyone in New York. I told him I did not. He asked if I were discreet. Naturally, I said yes. In consequence, I obtained the position at a pleasant salary. You follow me, Mr. Payne?" he asked.

"On the heels. Keep talking."

Perkins blinked and smiled vaguely. "Certainly. My duties were simple. The gentleman—his name, he said, was Smith—never left his room. He wrote incessantly at the typewriter. I brought him food and cared for his laundry. He seemed unwell. I read to him. But then—wait, I am forgetting one point: He kept his writing hidden. Then! Three days ago I returned from errands and there he was, in the bed—but dead, Mr. Payne! His throat was slit, I assure you."

Sammy bent forward. He had stopped breathing. "Go on. Then what?"

Perkins used his handkerchief again. "I was almost dismayed. Here I was—a stranger in this country. Here was my gentleman, obviously murdered. What should I do? The police? . . . Oh, dear. I thought. I worried. I sat there and couldn't move, couldn't think. Obviously, the notoriety of a murder would ruin my chances of satisfactory employment. Finally I pulled myself together. Then I began to think. The gentleman was always writing—always! It was the lifeblood of him. He hid his work. That was strange. Something was wrong. So I took the writing. I knew where he kept it—in the closet. I glanced through the pages. I was dismayed. It was material fit for blackmail. Accounts of infidelities, with places and names and times; details of drug addiction, of income tax evasion, of *everything!* I recognized some of the names—respectable people in this country. Mr. Smith had been writing a book of filth, of dirt and scandal, Mr. Payne! And sudden it came to me: *This man was not Mr. Smith!* But who was he? . . . I had to know!

"I took a Coachburn statuette: they are easily traced, and I thought I might be able to identify him through it. I took a watch-fob of curious design: a slipper of gold. I took the hundreds of pages of filth. I went to your office. I had read of you in the papers in England while Lord Bannister was trying to recover his pearls. You were gone. I spoke with Mr. Harwood and gave him everything. He told me to be calm, to go my way quietly, seek other employment, act as though nothing had happened. He would handle everything. He seemed very excited. So . . . I quickly found another position. But

now! Now, I learn that Mr. Harwood is dead. I am exceedingly distressed. Mr. Smith's body is in the Gristoval Hotel. I have a second key and—"

"Call for Mr. Samuel Payne! Call for Mr. Payne, please!" The dreary voice of an ancient bellhop rose from the well of the lobby. Sammy half rose, frowning.

"And the oddest item," Perkins continued breathlessly. "When I saw Mr. Harwood the second time—yesterday—he told me that the pages of writing had vanished."

"Vanished! From where?"

Perkins shook his head. The bellhop kept calling for Sammy. Sammy rose. "I better answer that. Only two or three people know I'm here, and they count. Stay put, Perkins." He turned and hurried down the stairs to the bellhop.

"The phone at the left, sir," the bellhop said. Sammy wedged himself into the booth and answered.

"Hello? Payne speaking. . . . Hello? . . . Hello?" The line hummed vacantly. He frowned and started to speak again. Suddenly the intuition seized him. He jerked the door open and bolted toward the stairs. He raced around the shadowy corridor toward the alcove where he had left Perkins. And there he met him.

Sammy skidded to a halt. Perkins was staggering toward him, his bony arms outstretched as if he were feeling his way in darkness. His face was formless in the shadows. A sound, moist and agonized, came from his throat. Sammy leaped forward and caught him as he fell.

"She—she—" Perkins gasped. He said no more. Slowly Sammy lowered him to the floor. Perkins was dead. The knife was buried to its hilt, between his shoulders.

Sammy choked, stiffened and stared down the corridor toward the alcove. He left the body and moved quietly to the alcove. His cigarette was still burning in the tray. Perkins' cane lay on the floor. The corridor continued its course into the shadows and returned in a circle to the stairs. The murderer was gone, of course. He had called from one of the lobby phones, watched, then slipped up, Sammy realized. Now he was gone and—no, not he! *She.* . . . Perkins had gasped only the one word: "*She.*"

SAMMY returned and took one last look at the frail figure of Perkins; then he glanced over the railing and down into the gloomy lobby. The solemn air of the 1890's lay undisturbed. This interlude on the mezzanine might be part of another world almost. But Sammy decided it wasn't going to be part of his world—not officially and right now, anyway.

Sam knelt down. In Perkins' pocket he found the Gristoval key.

He walked calmly down the stairs, across the lobby and out into the approaching twilight. One hundred feet from the Chancellor, Sammy stopped being calm. He got a cab to Washington Square.

The Gristoval Hotel was very plain and quiet. The fragile sound of ice and glasses echoed from the bar; the odor of food came from the grill. Sammy glanced again at the key. The number on the tag was 656. He sauntered to the stairs, looked back, then climbed swiftly. At the sixth floor he paused, listened at 656, then inserted the key.

The suite contained three rooms. It was hot. The air was stale, and there was another odor: the pungent odor of death in summer. Sammy found the body in the master bedroom. One glance and he knew immediately. This was the body of Duke Draper.

The curious assortment of knickknacks crowded the table and dresser top. Draper had been wearing only underwear and a robe. His body lay across the foot of the bed, face toward the ceiling, his fat hands frozen in a clawlike grasp, his mouth open. The death wound in his throat was bloated and discolored. The room was filled with the stench of death. Sammy backed out, polished the knob with his handkerchief, coughed and choked, and backed on toward the main door.

In this interlude his mind was merely a camera. He saw but he did not think. There was too much coming, too fast. Later, the thinking would come. . . . He closed the door, of the suite and moved silently toward the stairs. As he reached the landing of the second floor, he halted and started to draw back.

A man was lighting a cigarette. He

flipped the match toward the urn of sand and took a deep drag. He seemed not to notice Sammy. Sammy started on.

"Hey, pal," the man said idly. Sammy started to turn. He had one glimpse of the bony fist as it came looping toward his chin. He saw the glistening metal of the brass knuckles. Then the blow smashed his chin with a skull-lifting power. Sammy went down and out.

* * *

Presently, the harsh glare of light worried his eyes. He opened them and stared at an ivory ceiling where a chandelier sparkled. He moved and discovered he could move freely. His head ached but not as much as it should have. His jaw felt loose and rusty. His teeth hurt and the taste of blood was in his mouth. He sat up on the side of the bed.

The room was large and neat. It had the impersonality of a hotel room. Oddly, he grew aware for the first time that there was music. He stared across the room. The portable radio was playing cowboy music, and the man with the brass knuckles was stretched out in a deep chair. His calm grey eyes were fixed impassively on Sammy. Sammy looked at him.

He was tall and rawboned. His face was intelligent and hard. His hair was salt-and-pepper and curly. He looked, Sammy thought, as if he should be the cowboy in the song. There was a .32 revolver on the radio.

"Hurt much?" the man asked mildly.

"Not greatly, old chap," Sammy said. "Tell me about you."

"Hated to hit you, but you could of made a yell. If you want a drink, it's there. You see this gun. I don't want to use it, so let's keep this meeting quiet and friendly. Okay?"

"A splendid suggestion. Read me the minutes and we'll get into session."

"I'm Joe." He lit a cigarette. "I'm just a hired man on this job, but I've had experience. You could even say," he added with a grin, "that I've got standards. Okay. It's like this, Sammy: The guy I'm working for on this job came to me a couple of weeks ago. I'd heard of him; you'd know his name if I mentioned it, and you'd know he was no phony. He's

big and straight. He'd heard from a certain printer, after paying two grand for the talk, that Duke Draper was dying—no chance to live. And Draper was sore, thinking of the folks he hated who were going to be happy when he died. So he moved down here, privately, and started his memoirs. It was going to be a private printing, a limited edition of about five hundred copies, sent to all the folks he had a hate on. What it would do, like you know, is cause divorces, bankruptcies, even some high society suicide or shooting parties. A few people could go to prison if the stuff got printed, including the man who hired me. So it was pretty clear that we couldn't wait for Draper to die next month. He had to die fast. So he did, as you saw."

"You helped him on his way, I assume?"

JOE SMILED. "I wouldn't ask if I was you, Sammy. He just died early, let's say. But that's not the point. The point is this, Sammy: He was no good. He was a mean little so-and-so; he was going to raise hell. Now he's dead and the world is in better shape. One thing is wrong, however. His little stack of memoirs are still around." He blinked. "Nobody is sore at you, Sammy, and nobody's a rat in this. I've been instructed to offer you twenty thousand in cash for the immediate return of all the stuff. I've got the money now. To show I'm not working a double-talk, when you bring the stuff in, you can stand around and watch me burn it."

"Great! I like to know I'm dealing with good clean lads," Sammy snapped. "But for a choir boy, you're running up a hard score. I don't give a damn about Draper. I don't care much about Harwood, except as a technicality, but the little guy named Perkins is something else. What was the gravy in killing him?"

Joe blinked and his eyes seemed made of blue-grey ice. "I wouldn't know, Sammy. I didn't tag your partner, and I've been hunting Perkins, not trying to kill him."

"Oh, good! I believe you, and everything is jake! Tell me about the birds and roses!" Sammy got up and paced the room furiously. "And one minor detail,

I don't know anything about this little diary of jokes that Draper was writing."

Joe's lean cheeks flattened themselves derisively across his bones. "Don't try to raise the ante. Twenty grand is tops."

"Make it twenty million! I don't have the memoirs. Harwood had them—yes! Perkins told me that, but he also told me that Harwood lost them before he was killed."

Joe laughed wryly. "Who mentioned the birds and roses?" He lit another cigarette and his eyes were glinting. "I said before, this is the way I make my living. I know how and I do it good, Sammy. Up to a point, I've got standards. We'll pay twenty grand for the stuff; we won't pay a penny more, and if you don't cough it up, you won't need to sign any new leases or buy any new hats."

Sammy looked at him steadily. "You have a convincing way of putting things, Joe," he said, and meant it. "One thing I don't understand, yet: If we were going to deal like little gentlemen, why did you try to kill me this morning?"

Joe blinked. "Did I do that? No."

Sammy frowned. He had a strange feeling, listening to Joe, that the guy was telling the truth, that he meant what he said and would keep his promises. "Let's try it one more time," he said slowly. "You didn't take a pop at me this morning? You didn't kill Harwood? You didn't kill Perkins?"

"The answer is no, all around."

Sammy lit a cigarette and again he thought of Perkins' last word: *She*.

Someone—not a man—had killed him. . . .

"How long do I get to think about the twenty-grand proposition?"

"You can think all you want, but you've got to make up your mind now. After that, no tricky stuff. You've got the memoirs, anyway, so why stall?"

Sammy started to retort, then shrugged. "Have it your way. Twenty grand is still twenty grand, and I'm working for nothing anyway. I'll look around. When and if I know something, how do I find you?"

"Why, right here. Suite 554. We're still in the Gristoval Hotel," Joe said innocently. He rose and smiled. "You've been in the business. You know the rules.

No cops. No gossip about where bodies happen to be. No bum's-rush to get back in here with guns. This is strictly a business proposition, Sammy. "And," he said, "to keep it that way, I had to take insurance. You don't need to scream and foam, and nothing will go wrong, but your sis is my insurance, Sammy."

"What?" Sammy yelled. "Dulcie is—"

"In a quiet place in good company. Last I saw, she was eight bucks ahead at rummy. But take it easy on her account, Sammy." He smiled again. "Your hat's behind you. 'Bye, now."

CHAPTER FIVE

Poor Little Je-Je

BY THE TIME Sammy crossed the street and finished the first rye and water, he was beginning to realize that Joe was a competent citizen in his trade. Sammy felt cold. His neck felt stiff. His jaw and teeth hurt. He looked at the clock. It was not yet nine. The day seemed to have been going on forever.

"Harwood had the memoirs. He lost them," Sammy reminded himself. "Only Perkins, Harwood and a certain somebody knew he had them. Perkins was telling me and he got killed. Which might mean that the somebody wants to use the memoirs himself. *Herself*," he corrected wryly. He ordered another drink.

"So let us think. . . . *She* knew I was meeting Perkins at five-thirty at the Chancellor. *She* arrived and put in the red-herring phone call. Now, who knew I'd be there? . . . Betty North, yes. Marla Martin, yes. Nobody else in the world but Perkins." He stared into his drink and thought, first of Marla. He shook his head. That was out. No motive, no nothing. And anyway, not Marla.

Betty? . . . Betty. Hard, wise eyes. Not exactly a child-bride type. . . .

He used a third drink. Betty worried him. Finally he paid his bill and folded himself into the phone booth to call Candy.

"Oh, you!" she exclaimed. "Are you taking another vacation? It better be a long one, because people are wanting you. I mean Davega."

"Did he say why?"

"Only in passing. He mentioned a corpse named Perkins. Before he got to be a corpse, he was seen flitting around a lobby with you, and a bellhop remembers some phone business. In fact," and her voice turned serious. "Davega is kidding only a little, Sammy. He's restless."

"So am I," Sammy said uneasily. "Anything else?"

"Oh, on the social side, Jeanne Harwood has moved to Room 1280 at the Beacon Hotel, and would just *love* to talk with you immediately," Candy snapped. There was a silence, then Candy said slowly, "Sammy, I'm not being funny now. Things are bad. I know the police are hunting you. There's something wrong with Jeanne; I can tell from her voice. There's something wrong with me too. I am scared, Sammy."

"That makes two of us," he said frankly. "Don't let Davega push you. I'll be around or I'll call." He hung up, started to call Jeanne at the Beacon, then broke the connection and called Betty North's number. There was no answer. She might be in one of a thousand Broadway joints, Sammy realized. The only thing to do was wait until she got home.

He fed the coin back into the phone and called for Jeanne.

"You said you'd call me for a drink," she said in a pouting voice.

"I'm calling you now, and I want a drink. It'll have to be quiet."

"Has anything happened? I've waited all day, hoping you'd call. I even broke down and phoned Candy, and you know how we get along."

"Tell me about it some other time. Get room service to send up some rye. I'm only a couple of minutes away." He sighed. He didn't want to see Je-Je now. He just wanted a drink and a long talk with Betty North. Je-Je was something he remembered only dimly, from the days before he met Marla.

JE-JE'S eyes were tired and sleepless when she opened the door. She pushed back her hair and looked at him tensely.

"What is it, Sam? What's happened?"

"I'm just tired of walking away from corpses." He kissed her briefly and walked over to the coffee table to mix a drink.

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DETECTIVE TALES

"It's not just that," Je-Je said slowly. "You're different. You're angry with me."

"I'm tired. Tired, as in exhausted. I just want to sit, please."

Her dark eyes followed him relentlessly; then she began walking up and down the room. "I moved here because I was afraid, but I'm still afraid. I—look, it's starting to rain again. Why in hell—"

"Don't start that, for God's sake!" Sammy begged. "What's the matter with you. You were never this nervous before."

She turned on him furiously. "You never shouted at me before! You were sweet. You told me you loved me."

"Did I?" He sighed and mixed another drink. "Can't you sit down?"

"I can sit down, yes," she breathed. "I can sit down and smile and forget all about it. I can forget the things you used to say. I can forget how I used to beg for the day Ralph Harwood would be dead and gone. I can have a drink and forget it. I—"

"Je-Je, please, I hate hysterical women and you know it."

She choked and stood there, stiff, her fingers trembling at her sides, and in that naked moment Sammy saw deep to the core of her soul; he saw hate and yearning and something more. Something raw and desperate that he couldn't understand. And something in him sounded a warning; Je-Je was half crazy with fear, anxiety, something. . . .

"What are you staring at?" she breathed.

"You." He got up and smiled. "I'm sorry, lovely. I didn't know you had it this bad. Sit down here. Take it slow." He held her hand.

For a moment she was passive; then she jerked away. "No! You're just saying that! What are you thinking? Tell me, Sam!"

He started to answer, stopped, searched into the depths of her eyes again. Carefully, then, he turned away and mixed a drink. He was confused and he was trying furiously to think. Je-Je. . . . The way she looked. . . . The way she acted. . . . How had it been? How could it have been? Sammy tried to think. Ralph

TOO HOT TO HANDLE!

could have taken the memoirs home with him. And there Je-Je could have . . .

He straightened. When he faced her, her eyes were black. Her face was pale. She seemed not to breathe. She is afraid of something I may know, Sammy was thinking.

"Je-Je, I'm just tired," he said quietly. "I'm tired and I've got to make a couple of trips, as soon as I finish this drink." He wandered about the room and paused at the desk. "I've got a lead on Ralph's trouble. It had something to do with a gossip columnist." Deftly he slid the room key into his pocket while his back toward her. "When I finish, I'll feel better. You'll feel better," he went on, scarcely thinking of his words. Suddenly he had to get out. He had to test his intuition at once. He drained his drink and strode to the door. "This trip is very important. Wish me luck." Before she could answer, he stepped out into the corridor and closed the door.

He let one elevator go by, then took the second. In the lobby, he did a fast turn into a phone booth and closed the door just enough to conceal him and not trip the light. Thirty seconds passed; then he exhaled softly.

Je-Je appeared from an elevator, glanced frantically around the lobby, then rushed toward the exit. Sammy stepped into an elevator.

"Twelve," he said. His voice was dry and toneless.

He unlocked Je-Je's door and closed it behind him. He searched the desk, the closet. He moved into the bedroom and searched the dresser, the bedroom closet, the two bags on the floor. He prodded the bed carefully, stopped, prodded again, then rolled back the covers. Before he untied the string, he knew he had found it.

It was a fat manila envelope. He ripped off the string and pulled out the thick bundle of typing paper. The first paragraph to meet his eye began:

And as for Doris Carr Barton, otherwise known as the best-dressed woman in Manhattan, and sometime wife of Hamilton Barton of the financial clan, it is interesting to glance into the past, particularly where photos and affidavits are available. Those, little friends, are in my deposit box.



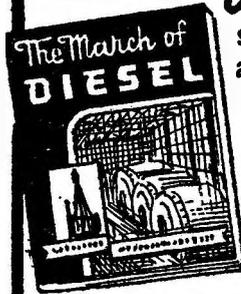
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DETECTIVE TALES

This little well-dressed socialite is listed in my box as the Dope and Drive Gal. It was in 1939 on a Westchester highway, with a purse full of heroin, that our Doris did hit and likewise kill, with her pretty convertible, a gentleman by the name of Lyman. You hadn't heard? . . . How odd. Perhaps it was because Doris also had a purse full of money. Thirty grand, in fact; paid the next day to Mrs. Lyman. And that is not all . . .

Slowly Sammy slid the pages back into the envelope. He stood there while full realization dawned upon him.

It was so easy. . . . Ralph had carried this home, excited, probably drunk. He had probably been thinking of blackmail, on his own hook. And Je-Je had started thinking too. Thinking . . . and continuing to hate her husband . . . and yearning to get rid of him. Then this. . . . And little Je-Je's mind had seen the unlimited profits in the blackmail. So she had gotten his—Sammy's—gun and eased Ralph into meeting her at the Greenwich Village address. There it had ended for Ralph. The rest . . .

SAMMY lit a cigarette and ran his fingers dismally through his hair. Je-Je must have followed him all day, he mused. Nerves had pushed her to try to kill him this morning; then her nerves had begun to crack. Murder was too new for Je-Je to handle smoothly. But she had handled Perkins easily. A little guy like Perkins wouldn't have suspected a woman. She'd wanted to kill him before he revealed the existence of the memoirs. She had failed, and here it was.

"Yes," he repeated vacantly. "Here it is. I wanted to find it. Now I've got it." But he was thinking, remembering the times when, not long ago, he had held Je-Je in his arms. He was still thinking of those times when he lifted the telephone and called the Gristoal Hotel, Suite 554. Joe's drab voice answered.

"This is Sam," he said. "I work fast."

"You've got it?" Joe's voice lifted slightly.

"I've got it. I'll be down. I just wanted to let you know. You can start my sister moving back into circulation. "I—" He stopped as a key rattled in the door. Just as he turned, the door opened and Je-Je

stood there. Her face was ashen. Her eyes were blazing. She was, Sammy realized, half insane. She choked. Her purse fell to her feet, and in her hand was a gun—his gun.

"Those papers! You lied when you said—" she screamed.

"Drop that gun, you fool," Sammy commanded. "Drop it!"

Instead, she started toward him. He slapped down the phone and backed away. He tried to remember all the approved ways of dealing with crazy women with loaded revolvers. He tried persuasion, in a hurry.

"Don't be dumb, Je-Je. What's the profit in killing me? Why don't we split the business?"

She stared at him scornfully. "I'm no fool. I don't trust you."

Her fingers shook on the gun and Sammy kept circling the room. Perspiration poured off his chin. "Since when did you stop trusting me? Why? Think of another angle: How much do you know about running a blackmail show? Nothing. You'll need help. Why not me?"

"You're just like Ralph," she choked. "For a while I thought you were different, but you're not. I could have killed you this morning, but I didn't. I . . . couldn't. I thought of the times and—and the things you'd said, and I didn't kill you. But now I hate you!"

She had stopped. She was standing in the middle of the room, and tears of rage streamed down her cheeks. Her eyes were wild and bright.

"It's the only chance I've ever had to get anywhere!" she wailed. "I've never had any money and nobody ever gave a damn about me but to kiss me and say good-bye. I don't care whether it's blackmail or not! It's money to me, and I don't care! I—"

"Sure, sure, I know, Je-Je," Sammy soothed. "I understand. Take it easy. Listen to what I—"

"Don't you touch me! I'll kill you! I am going to kill you, Sam," she whispered. "I'm going to kill you because you don't love me, that's why, and I know you don't."

"Je-Je, please be—"

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DETECTIVE TALES

"You don't love me! Nobody gives a damn about me and—"
 "Je-Je, you're sick. You don't know what you're saying." And it was true, Sammy knew. She had killed Ralph, and then she had cracked.

"Sam," she whispered, "I'm going to kill you right now. You've had it coming, Sam! I—"

"Je-Je, look! It's raining outside! Remember how you hate the rain?" he cried frantically. "Look at the rain!" For a split-second she obeyed. Sammy lunged for the gun. Je-Je was too quick. She spun back toward him with a sob and the gun kicked and roared. Sammy felt the pain slice through his hip. Je-Je, he thought with strange detachment, needed more practice. And she was about to get it. . . .

The gun leveled. Sammy closed his eyes and waited. The roar came from the door. Je-Je screamed. Sammy opened his eyes. Joe was standing in the doorway, a gun in his hand, his grey eyes utterly emotionless. And Je-Je was bending forward, both hands clenched against her stomach. The bloodstain was already seeping through her dress. Then Sammy's hip folded and he sat down rather awkwardly.

Joe kicked the door shut behind him and strode across the room. He wasn't wasting a motion or an instant. He grasped Je-Je's chin and straightened her up. He took a hard look, then released her, and she crumpled. He scooped up the manila envelope with the all important memoirs.

"She'll live until the cops bust in here and can listen to her talk. And the gals always talk before they die, Sammy," he said. He glanced at Sammy's hip. "That won't kill you; but it's nice you were phoning off a switchboard where I could trace the call. But Joe has got to be drifting. Your sis will be home before you are. The twenty grand will hit you later. Take it easy and remember me to the boys." He went out fast. Sammy made a vague, wordless sound and clutched at his hip. He wanted a cigarette. He wanted a drink. He wanted to take a nap. He looked at the room. It seemed to be getting dark. He heard sounds in the cor-

TOO HOT TO HANDLE!

ridor, but he was much too sleepy to listen long.

JOE knew his business. Je-Je lived until Davega arrived, and then she talked like a perfect lady who was taking a permanent trip. Sammy didn't get to listen. He was on his way to St. Walter's Hospital.

He heard it the next day from Davega in person, and Davega had the look of a man who hated to tell it. He stared at Sammy stonily as he talked, and Sammy listened with a sardonic smile.

"I'm not arguing that it was like she said. She was dying and she told the truth. Anyway, her prints were on the knife that killed the little guy named Perkins, so you're off the hook. I just don't see the miracle part. This stranger walking in, banging her to save your life, then waltzing off without even leaving his card."

Sammy grinned. "Sounds like a Robin Hood act, doesn't it?"

Davega didn't smile. "You wouldn't know him at all. That's what you said. Not at all?"

"Nope. Probably just a guy named Joe."

Davega growled shortly. "And another thing: We never could get the Harwood gal to admit she killed Duke Draper. She sang like a bird on everything but that, but there she shook her head. I don't understand."

Sammy kept grinning. "Maybe a guy named Joe did that job. You can never tell about guys named Joe."

Davega gave him a look of fury. "Go to hell!" He slammed the door as he walked out and Sammy sighed pleasantly. You couldn't teach a man who just wouldn't listen.

Eight days later, when he was moved home, the envelope was with his other mail. Inside were twenty one-thousand-dollar bills. They were very pretty and he enjoyed the feel of them. Marla came over and he enjoyed that too. That night it rained and he lay there, thinking of Je-Je who had hated the rain.

Poor little Je-Je. . . .
THE END



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PER

DETECTIVE TALES

(Continued from page 63)

eyes went over the joint looking for the fellow I knew would be there.

It wasn't hard to find him. He looked like I thought he'd look, anxious yet pleased, with a worried, calculating look as he watched the crowd. He wasn't drinking and he wasn't having fun, just watching. That's how I knew. He was middle-aged, pudgy, and I waited until I could get him alone because I didn't want anybody to see this.

Then, just to be sure, I said, "Why don't you join the fun?"

He smiled anxiously. "No, thanks," he said.

"Nice crowd," I said, feeling my way.

"Isn't it?" he said. He offered his hand. "My name is Raphaels. Jack Raphaels. You know—" he grinned sheepishly—"I'm thinking of buying this place. Been saving all my life to get a chance to be my own boss. This," he said, looking with satisfaction over the crowd, "looks like what I want."

"Is that so?" I said, giving it to him fast because a couple of men were anxiously coming toward us. "I was wondering why I got roped into coming here."

Raphaels stiffened. "You what?" he said sharply.

I told him straight and quick, with no holds barred. I finished just before the man came within hearing distance, with, "They're packing the house on you, mister, filling it with friends for a week or two to make business look good."

Then, with a polite smile, like I'd told a dirty joke, I drifted back to my table. I noticed Mr. Raphaels was smart enough to turn to the men with an agreeable look on his face.

"Who's that man?" asked Mary.

I didn't get a chance to answer because Stanhope was making the rounds of the tables again and had come to ours. He was now really high, giggly and getting silly.

"Having fun?" he asked gayly, wagging a reproving finger. "Aren't you glad you came?"

"I never had so much fun in all my life," I said happily, and I meant every word of it.

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DUCK BEHIND THAT EIGHT-BALL!

(Continued from page 43)

And Margie, my own step-daughter, she turns on me. "You come out with us, Giles," she says. "Al's been treatin' you like a dog for years, but I'm gonna tell him. We been married for four years and he's a hero, won those medals on the square. He was in France five days and—"

"Aw, honey," Giles says, "skip it." He turns to me. "You don't mind if I stay with you a few days, do you, Al? While I look around. I wasn't gonna tell you till I was settled and could support Margie in style."

WELL, that was a month ago and he's still here livin' at my house. Not that I mind much. I kinda got used to him after all of these years, and he and Margie are sure happy. . . .

Up till now. And now Giles walks in and the detective is right behind him. The dick says, "Your name Giles?"

Giles grins and says, "You called it, friend. You like snooker?"

"Some other time. Right now I'm due back in St. Louis. There's a man whose son was killed. He sent me down for you."

Giles says, "Yeah? What for?" And I look at him. He's the coolest guy in town, but I'm thinking of Margie and what to tell her. Whatever I thought of Giles, I never pegged him for this.

The detective slaps down a paper, pulls out a pen and says, "Sign. It's a matter of five yards reward for those punks you grabbed. Before they got down here, they pulled a daylight job in St. Louis, shot up half the town."

Giles looks down at the paper and says, "Tell the old boy to drop down some time. I'll play him a thousand or nothing. Sure you ain't got time for a game?"

I gave Giles a dirty look, and I guess he saw I meant it. I picked up the check, and Giles owned a piece of the pool hall.

Which didn't matter at all to him. But the detective allowed he could play one game, and that made Giles pretty happy. They went to the back table, and two hours later the shamus gave me a marker, and I lent him five to get home.



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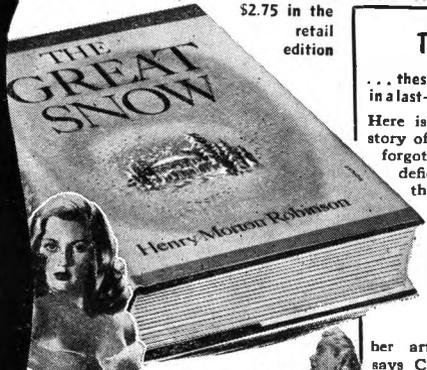


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